

# LINCOLN LORE

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## LINCOLN IN VINCENNES — 1830

A restoration of the first printing plant in Indiana Territory has just been completed at Vincennes and on August 1 it will be accepted by the Conservation Department of Indiana as one of the state's historical sites. The structure is a replica of the Elihu Stout printing establishment which stood on what is now First Street between Buntin and Broadway during the years 1820 and 1845. Tradition claims that Abraham Lincoln enroute with the family to Illinois, visited this newspaper office.

The memorial is constructed of hand hewn beams which had been salvaged from the old Francis Vigo home. This gives the building the antique appearance of pioneer days and helps to create the atmosphere of a century and a quarter ago. It contains an old Ramage press, similar to the one used by the Vincennes printer, his original composing stones and other furniture known to have been in possession of Mr. Stout. Over the fireplace hangs the well known painting by Albert T. Reed depicting Lincoln at twenty-one visiting the office.

Objective historians have usually shied away from the recording of reported incidents which seem to lack documentary support and which are based largely on suppositional or hearsay evidence. While there is no question but what the Stout printing establishment was in operation at Vincennes when Abraham passed through there on the 1830 migration from Indiana to Illinois, there has been some reluctance to accept in full the tradition of Lincoln's visit to the printing shop, without more favorable source material. Possibly an incentive at least for Lincoln to visit the printing house of Elihu Stout might be found in the youth's reading habits.

John Locke Scripps, for whom Lincoln prepared an autobiographical sketch, personally interviewed the presidential nominee and wrote a campaign biography about him. The author stated that very early in life Lincoln read "Franklin's Autobiography, Weems' Washington and Riley's Narrative" and continued "over the two former the boy lingered with wrapt delight." Lincoln corrected some erroneous statements in the book but left the above quotation standing. The fact that Lincoln was intrigued with the story of Franklin the printer and his early experiences as a publisher, may have some bearing on the interest Lincoln is said to have shown in the Elihu Stout press at Vincennes. Some of Franklin's experiences gleaned from an edition similar to the one Lincoln used are presented.

When Ben was 12 years old in 1717 his brother returned from England with a press and equipment for a printing office. The small boy was made an apprentice to him to learn the trade and became interested in his new vocation. Ben's brother began the publishing of a newspaper in Boston about 1720 which he called the *New England Courant*. Ben not only helped to set the type, run the press, but he also delivered the papers to the subscribers. One other function, however, he liked much better than these duties—he was occasionally allowed to compose some copy.

Some political articles which were published in the *New England Courant* caused the elder of the two Franklins to be imprisoned by the assembly for a period during which interval the paper was published under the name of Benjamin Franklin. Difficulties with his brother caused Ben to leave Boston for New York where he

hoped to gain employment under the famous printer, William Bradford. Bradford had no opening for him but advised Ben that his son at Philadelphia was in need of a printer.

The elder Bradford was already in Philadelphia visiting his son, Andrew, when Ben arrived and learned that young Bradford had already secured a helper. There was another print shop in the city where the boy found employment but the equipment of the proprietor consisted only of "an old damaged press and a small case of worn out English letters."

By the time young Franklin was seventeen years of age he was encouraged to open a printing establishment for himself and under some misgivings as to financial backing went to England to secure the equipment. He was disappointed about the funds which were not forthcoming but he remained there about a year working at his trade.

Franklin returned to America with a merchant who gave him employment as he states "took leave, therefore, as I believed forever, of printing." When he was twenty-one, urged by his brother-in-law he returned to his early profession and secured a position with his former employer, Keimer of Philadelphia. The father of one of Franklin's associates at Keimer's, named Meredith, offered to set the two young men up in the printing business for themselves. Abraham Lincoln's vivid recollection of the making of his first dollar on the Ohio River almost parallels Franklin's experience, who recalls the earnings from his first customer in these words, "Coming so seasonably gave me more pleasure than any sum I had since gained."

Franklin launched out as a publisher by purchasing from Keimer the newspaper he had been printing which gave Franklin opportunity to display his literary attainments. Inasmuch as his partner contributed little to the business in labor or management in 1727 he acquired the entire ownership of the establishment and opened a stationery store connected with it. Franklin's stories about the menial tasks he performed such as "wheeling in a wheel-barrow the paper purchased at the warehouses" to his shop, was good reading for any boy.

It is at this point that the *Franklin Autobiography* reviewed by Lincoln in his early Indiana days comes to a close, although subsequent years of the adult Franklin were appended by an early biographer. It is a fair deduction after reading the *Franklin Autobiography* that Lincoln was keenly interested in the struggle of young Franklin to become a printer. That fact alone would arouse Abe's interest in the printing press.

It is accepted generally that Lincoln as a youth read every book he could lay his hands on and we have positive evidence that he also read the newspaper published by Elihu Stout. When the official dedication of this shrine takes place in October it is hoped that the influence which the life of Franklin the Printer contributed to the literary development of Lincoln will not be overlooked. A desire to see a printing press in operation and especially the one on which the *Western Sun and General Advertiser* was printed might be all that was necessary to direct Abraham Lincoln to the door of Elihu Stout's shop.