

# LINCOLN LORE

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## NANCY HANKS, HER EARLY YEARS

While a newly born infant is the center of attraction in a nativity scene, the mother also merits some degree of attention. Usually a story relating to the child Abraham receives the emphasis in the *Lincoln Lore* bulletin issued preliminary to the anniversary of his natal day. However, it seems more appropriate this February to feature the early years of Nancy Hanks Lincoln, the mother who gave him birth. While all Lincoln students should commend Irving Stone for his fair treatment of Lincoln's wife, it is to be regretted that he chose to defame Lincoln's mother. It is a strange use of sources indeed which prompted the author to completely reject Herndon's portrait of Mary Lincoln, but to accept Herndon's equally abusive characterization of Nancy Lincoln.

Abraham Lincoln first introduces us to his mother in an autobiographical sketch in which he mentions the place of his father's birth and then with respect to his mother wrote: "She also was born in Virginia." In a letter to Samuel Haycraft of Elizabethtown, Lincoln wrote about the identity of his mother in these words: "Her maiden name was Nancy Hanks." The lack of direct information about the early life of Nancy makes it necessary to approach her early years indirectly through the relatives of her mother, Lucy Shipley Hanks, the widow of James Hanks. Lucy had four sisters: Rachel who married Richard Berry, Naomi who married Robert Mitchell, Ann who married David McCord, and Margrate who married first, Robert Sloan and second, Matthew Armstrong. All migrated to Kentucky except Matthew and Margrate Armstrong and their family. They remained in the Catawba River country in North Carolina where they all settled after leaving Virginia. Just when the widow Lucy Shipley Hanks and her daughter, Nancy, came to Kentucky is undetermined.

The story of the Kentucky migration of some of the cognate families has been preserved in these words: "In the fall of 1790, eight families, while emigrating from North Carolina to the inhospitable wilds of Kentucky were attacked by the Indians twenty-five or thirty miles southeast of Crab Orchard. Mrs. Naomi Mitchell, one of the party, was tomahawked in the fight and died soon afterwards from her wounds. . . . Her daughter, Sarah Mitchell, was taken prisoner at the time by the Indians and remained a prisoner for five years, until Wayne's treaty with the Indians in 1795 at Greenville, Ohio." A sad sequel to this story was the death by drowning of Robert Mitchell, father of Sarah, while searching for Sarah shortly after her disappearance.

A personal letter in the Durrett collection at the University of Chicago written contemporary with that early day makes possible documentary support for the story. It was written by Mary, widow of Robert Mitchell, to Isaac Shelby on May 1, 1793. Excerpts from this letter follow.

"My request is in behalf of my grandchild who was taken prisoner by the Indians in the wilderness last fall two years, her name is Sally S. Mitchell, daughter of Robert Mitchell, deceased. As you have frequent opportunity of writing Governor Blunt I beg of you to mention the matter to him as he once promised to use his best endeavor to gain intelligence of her. Request him to write to you whether he has ever found anything certain about her or where she is. . . . I am now old and very frail and cannot rest contented without trying every method in my power for her redemption from captivity. I hope you will assist me all you can which favor will be thankfully acknowledged by

Your most obed. and hum'l servant  
Mary Mitchell."

Kentucky came into the union as a state in 1792 and Isaac Shelby was the first governor. Previous to his administration William Blount had been serving as governor of the territory south of the Ohio River. Whether or not Gov. Shelby was instrumental in having Sarah Shipley Mitchell returned we are unable to determine but his term of office did not expire until the fall of 1795. One tradition has it that Sarah Shipley Mitchell was released under the Anthony Wayne treaty with the Indians at Greenville, Ohio on Aug. 3, 1795 and at this time Gov. Shelby was still in office. One tradition claims that Sarah's name appeared in a list of prisoners held by the Indians and that she was brought back to her people by her brother. Most of the time she is said to have been held in Canada. When Sarah was captured in the fall of 1790 she was but eleven years old and by the time of her release in 1795 she would have been sixteen.

It will be recalled that when Abraham Lincoln, the grandfather of the President, was massacred by the Indians in 1786 at Hughes Station, that his widow moved her family of five children to the Beech Fork community in Washington County, Ky. Less than a mile away was the home of Richard Berry, uncle of Nancy Hanks, and her guardian with whom she was living. We get the first glimpse of her through the reminiscence of Sarah Shipley Mitchell, who upon her release from captivity, came to live in this same household in 1795. Sarah was then sixteen years of age and if the entry in the Lincoln Bible is correct, Nancy was eleven at this time, five years younger than her cousin.

Many interesting traditions have come down through the descendants of Sarah Shipley Mitchell about her association with the cousin Nancy. One granddaughter of Sarah states that Sarah and Nancy "were as intimate as sisters." Still another relative claimed, "Sarah Mitchell and Nancy Hanks were first cousins, both orphans, and were reared and educated by their uncle Richard Berry. These two girls grew up together, attended the same church together, went to school together, and became known as sister-cousins."

Uncle Richard Berry in whose home they lived listed for taxation as early as 1792 two slaves, ten horses, thirty-four cattle. He passed away in 1798 and specifies certain negroes and horses to be left to his wife and children. This item is of special interest: "I leave to my beloved wife Rachel Berry the mare colt Pleasure, etc." There was named in the appraisal of this estate a negro woman Nan and another Hannah, both appraised at 60 pounds. Some of the named horses were: Blue Skin, Lofty, Rosy and Cherriot. Mordecai Lincoln, brother of Thomas, was one of the appraisers. It was the oldest son of Uncle Richard Berry named Richard, Jr., who signed the marriage bond of Nancy Hanks as her guardian and her bridesmaid was Sarah Mitchell Thompson, her girlhood associate and constant companion.

Sarah was married to John Thompson in 1800 and she named her first daughter Nancy after her cousin. Nancy Hanks married Thomas Lincoln in 1806 and named her first daughter Sarah, after her cousin Sarah Shipley Mitchell Thompson who was her bridesmaid. There was a large number of young people in the Beech Fork community and there were many intermarriages between the Berrys, Barlows, Mitchells, Lincolns, Brumfields and Thompsons. It is generally accepted that Thomas Lincoln and Nancy Hanks grew up together in the same neighborhood and were childhood sweethearts. The Richard Berry cabin in which they were married has been preserved at Harrodsburg, Kentucky.