

LINCOLN LORE

Bulletin of the Lincoln National Foundation - - - - - Dr. Louis A. Warren, Editor
Published each week by The Lincoln National Life Insurance Company, Fort Wayne, Indiana

Number 1390

FORT WAYNE, INDIANA

November 28, 1955

WAS THOMAS LINCOLN A VAGABOND?

Although the exact dates of the Lincoln family migration from Kentucky to Indiana are not known, it was during the season of the year some where between Thanksgiving and Christmas 1816, about the time the Hoosier territory came into the Union. This crossing of state lines and change of residence, also the removal of the family group to Illinois later on, has contributed to the widely accepted but erroneous tradition that Thomas Lincoln was a restless individual, continually on the move—a sort of a vagabond. One biographer has expressed the supposed roaming qualities of Thomas in this fashion:

"He had the wandering foot, and looking for other locations for a home was his hobby. He found many, too, in different parts of Kentucky and Tennessee and Indiana, and was forever threatening to move."

One comment which Abraham Lincoln made about his father's boyhood days has been so misconstrued that it seems to confirm the above erroneous conclusion. In the autobiography prepared for Scripps, Lincoln states: "Thomas, the youngest son, by the early death of his father and the very narrow circumstances of his mother, even in childhood was a wandering laboring boy." Abraham then relates this incident which seems to support this assertion: "Before he was grown he passed one year as a hired hand with his Uncle Isaac on Watauga a branch of the Holston River."

Thomas Lincoln's name appears with regularity on the available commissioner's books of Washington County, Kentucky. Here his mother lived from the time he was sixteen until 1797 when he is listed in Hardin County at Elizabethtown as "a white male twenty-one or over." He was working at that time for Samuel Haycraft helping to build a mill. He was soon back in Washington County, however, apparently living with his mother for the next five years which the commissioner's books reveal. In 1803, however, he purchased a farm not far from Elizabethtown upon which he is supposed to have settled his mother with his sister Nancy and her husband, William Brumfield. Opposite Thomas Lincoln's name on the Washington County commissioner's book for 1803 is the notation "gone to Hardin."

It is true that as a young man Thomas made a flatboat trip to New Orleans but he was not seeking a new home. His purchase was to make money so that he might set up a home of his own and he was successful in making thirty pounds in gold on the trip. With this money he began preparations for his wedding and a few weeks later he and his bride, Nancy Hanks Lincoln, went to keeping house in Elizabethtown, apparently, until he could find a farm on which they might live. Two years later he bought a tract of land about a dozen miles from Elizabethtown where their second child but first son named Abraham, was born in the following February.

With the acquisition of this property consisting of 300 acres there was included a famous spring. Here Thomas ran into his first difficulty with Kentucky land titles and discovered that there was a lein on this property which he was led to understand had been all or nearly all taken care of. Not wishing to assume further obligations for that tract he purchased another farm on Knob Creek.

Here again he ran into difficulties with land titles and Lincoln and nine of his neighbors had an ejection suit brought against them by the Middleton heirs of Philadelphia. It was apparent to Thomas Lincoln that it would take considerable money to fight the case which, however, was eventually settled in favor of the defendants. In the meantime, Thomas had moved his family to Indiana as his son Abraham has written: "Chiefly on account of difficulty with land titles."

When the family reached Indiana they built a substantial cabin in which they lived for fourteen years without moving, although "milk sickness had caused many deaths in the community including Abraham's mother and two of her relatives. When Abraham Lincoln became twenty-one years of age he could not remember having moved but once and that was when they came to Indiana when he was seven years old. The family did move once in Kentucky when Abe was but two years old but of course he could not recall that incident. Furthermore, Thomas Lincoln was never a tenant but always a freeholder and during the twenty-one years Lincoln lived in his father's home they were never renters. In fact when Lincoln had occasion to refer to the Indiana residence of his father he called it "the old homestead."

There is no indication that either Thomas Lincoln or his son were advocates for the migration to Illinois in 1830 when Abraham was twenty-one. If we may depend upon the testimonies of the family of Thomas Lincoln's second wife, Sarah Johnston Lincoln, we may conclude that the Johnston inlaws were primarily responsible for the removal. Sarah's two daughters had married and their husbands were anxious to get away from the recurrence of milk sickness in Indiana. The girls' mother did not wish to be separated from her daughters so the three families moved together to Illinois.

The prevalence of malaria in the Sangamon River country where the Lincolns settled and the "winter of the deep snow" which followed were responsible for the proposal of the Lincoln family and in-laws to return to Indiana in the spring. They had gone as far as Coles County when friends who had settled there persuaded them to remain. There was much moving about and purchasing of land during the next six years, all in what is now Pleasant Grove township in Coles County and probably this moving about has been used to support the vagabond theory.

Thomas Lincoln was now sixty years old and it is not likely at that age he was looking about for new places to locate. Again it is apparent that the Johnston clan offered the motivating influences for this shifting about. The family group finally became settled at Gooseneck Prairie in 1837 and Thomas Lincoln abided in this home until the time of his death in 1851. He remained on this same home site for fourteen years the same length of time he occupied the Indiana cabin.

It would appear as if these two undisturbed residences, each extending for fourteen years, which accounted for twenty-eight years of his married life should nullify the claims that the father of President Lincoln was a vagabond.