

LINCOLN LORE

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THOMAS LINCOLN-NANCY HANKS NUPTIALS, DATE AND PLACE

Students of the Civil War period are already becoming anniversary conscious due to the centennial observances of important episodes in the life of Abraham Lincoln which will continue unabated for a decade. This atmosphere places us in a proper mood to recognize the sesquicentennial of the marriage of Thomas Lincoln and Nancy Hanks which occurred on June 12, 1806, in Washington County, Kentucky. On the one hundred and twenty-fifth anniversary of the wedding of the parents of the President, the original cabin in which they were married was removed to Harrodsburg, Kentucky. Here it was enshrined in a beautiful structure, built in the form of a church which will protect the ancient cabin from the elements and other destructive forces.

Lincoln prepared an autobiographical sketch for John Locke Scripps in 1860 stating that Thomas Lincoln "having reached his twenty-eighth year, he married Nancy Hanks—mother of the present subject—in the year 1806." Campaign biographers in both 1860 and 1864 used this statement as the source of their information about the important wedding but no month, day or place for the nuptials was available. Early biographers of the President also adopted the 1806 year as set forth in the Scripps memorandum.

One of the campaign biographies of 1860 published by Follett, Foster and Company of Columbus, Ohio stated with reference to Thomas Lincoln "at twenty-eight he married Lucy Hanks and settled in Hardin County." Abraham Lincoln took occasion to correct this book and scratched out the name "Lucy" and replaced it with the correct name "Nancy".

The statement about the marriage of Lincoln's parents in 1806 and the implication at least that they were legally married was accepted generally until 1772, seven years after the President's death. Chauncy F. Black at this time, using as a source the William Herndon papers acquired by Ward H. Lamon, states in the biography bearing Lamon's name, that: "of the Nancy Hanks marriage there exists no evidence but that of mutual acknowledgment and cohabitation." This observation presents the earliest attempt to challenge the information on this subject submitted by Lincoln.

This comment about the marital status of Lincoln's parents appearing in the Lamon volume was one of the contributing factors which mitigated against the acceptance of the book by the public and the contemplated second volume never appeared. While a few subsequent biographies were less explicit about the wedding of Lincoln's parents because of this attack, the version as related by Lincoln in the autobiography for Scripps was most usually accepted.

This attack on the morals of Lincoln's parents and the veracity of the President himself, in stating that his parents were married in 1806, awakened relatives of Lincoln and students of his life to the necessity of discovering documentary sources for the Lincoln wedding story.

Robert Lincoln, the only surviving son of the President, immediately got busy and on July 26, 1873 John J. Nicolay then visiting with the president's son wrote to Kentucky about a wedding of a certain Nancy Hanks that took place in Hardin County. This inquiry proved fruitless as a mistake was made in the identity of this Nancy Hanks. She was married to a man named Levi Hall.

There appeared in the *Louisville Commercial* after the appearance of the Lamon book an article which supported the alleged common-law relationship of Lincoln's parents. This statement was observed by Mrs. Charlotte Spear Hobart Vawter whose grandmother, Sarah Shipley Mitchell, was a first cousin of Nancy Hanks. She wrote a letter which appeared in the *Louisville Courier* of February 20, 1874 in which she stated that she was teaching school in Springfield, Kentucky in 1860 when Lincoln was nominated for the presidency. At this time she visited a Mrs. Litsey who gave her a description of the wedding which she attended of the nominee's parents, Thomas Lincoln and Nancy Hanks. Mrs. Vawter then noted: "The official record of this marriage will probably be found in Springfield (Ky.)" Mrs. Vawter was in Springfield again in 1897 and stated in a letter now before the editor of *Lincoln Lore*: "I visited Kentucky and urged my uncle Mitchell Thompson to have the old court house searched for the papers. At a later date Thompson did go to Mr. Brooker, clerk of Washington County, Springfield the county seat, and have the search made which resulted in the finding of the papers."

However, as late as 1879 Charles G. Leland who published his biography of Abraham Lincoln in London at this time states that "in 1806 he (Thomas Lincoln) lived at Elizabethtown, Kentucky where in the same year and place he married Nancy Hanks: the exact date of the marriage is unknown." This is the first attempt of a biographer to locate the place where the parents were married but it is in error as the wedding did not take place at Elizabethtown.

The earliest author to announce the correct place of marriage and the name of the clergyman performing the ceremony was Isaac N. Arnold in his biography of Lincoln published in 1885. He stated "They were married by the Rev. Jesse Head a Methodist Clergyman, near Springfield, Kentucky." Arnold was misinformed about the date however, as he states they were married on September 23, 1806. This error was caused by copying from the list of marriages performed by Rev. Head, the marriage date of the couple following the names of Thomas Lincoln and Nancy Hanks. Several biographers made this same blunder.

When Nicolay and Hay prepared the first chapter of their ten volume monumental history, which first appeared in the *Century Magazine* for November 1886, they exhibited in print for the first time the marriage returns of Rev. Jesse Head which settled forever the controversy over the marriage of Lincoln's parents. The marriage bond issued two days earlier and acquired by the prospective bridegroom was also discovered. This document not only carried a signature of Thomas Lincoln but also of Richard Berry who signed as "guardian" of Nancy Hanks. Since the exhibit of the legal papers the marriage of Thomas Lincoln and Nancy Hanks which took place at Beechland, six miles north of Springfield in Washington County, Kentucky on June 12, 1806 has never been questioned.

Mrs. Vawter more than any one else was responsible for invalidating William Herndon's charge that Lincoln's parents lived together out of wedlock. Herndon also claimed that Nancy Hanks herself was an illegitimate child. If Lincoln students would accept Mrs. Vawter's clear and direct statement about the Shipley ancestry of Lincoln's mother, they would also discard just as readily the above accusation about the mother of Nancy Hanks.