



# Lincoln Lore

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Ruth E. Cook, Editorial Assistant. Published each month by the  
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## LOUIS AUSTIN WARREN (April 23, 1885 — June 22, 1983)

Louis Austin Warren's achievements were many and varied, from scholarship to horticulture, from journalism to religion, from library administration to popular oratory. Readers of *Lincoln Lore* know him primarily for his scholarship and library administration, and this tribute will focus closely on those two aspects of his long and full life. And since many readers are familiar with his work in the last three decades, the focus here will be on his early work.

Just as Abraham Lincoln had unlikely origins for a President of the United States, Louis Warren's origins did not appear to promise a life of scholarship. He was born in Holden, Massachusetts, on April 23, 1885, the son of an iron foundryman and a devoutly religious mother. His father, struggling to get his family ahead in the world, made and sold brass flower boxes in his spare time. The work poisoned and killed him when Louis was only twelve years old.

The boy quit school and worked some fifty-five hours a week at a grocery store to help support his mother and younger brother. The brother proved to be indifferent to education; so when he got a job, the boys agreed that Louis should get a college degree. The problem was that he had never been to high school. That circumstance dictated his choice of college, Transylvania University, far away in Lexington, Kentucky,

because it had also a preparatory academy where he could get a high school certificate. Louis arrived in Kentucky with forty dollars in his pocket. He graduated from high school when he was twenty-seven years old.

As a college student, Warren founded the university newspaper. He showed a characteristic flair not only for journalism but for practical finance by deciding to accept advertising in the paper. He graduated with a Bachelor of Theology Degree in

1916. That same year he married Ellen Augusta Moore (1888-1966), who would eventually bear him five children, two girls and three boys.

Both Mr. and Mrs. Warren were ordained Disciples of Christ ministers. She often supplied his pulpit while he was away.

To this point in Warren's life, Abraham Lincoln was nothing more than one of the many names from his textbooks. Fate began to link Warren and Lincoln when the young minister assumed his first pastorate — in Hodgenville, Kentucky, the birthplace of Abraham Lincoln.

During World War I the editor of the local newspaper, the *Larue County Herald*, was drafted. He begged Warren to save his paper for him by editing it in his absence. With the permission of the church's board, Warren assumed the duties. Naturally, the editor of the Hodgenville newspaper was asked many questions

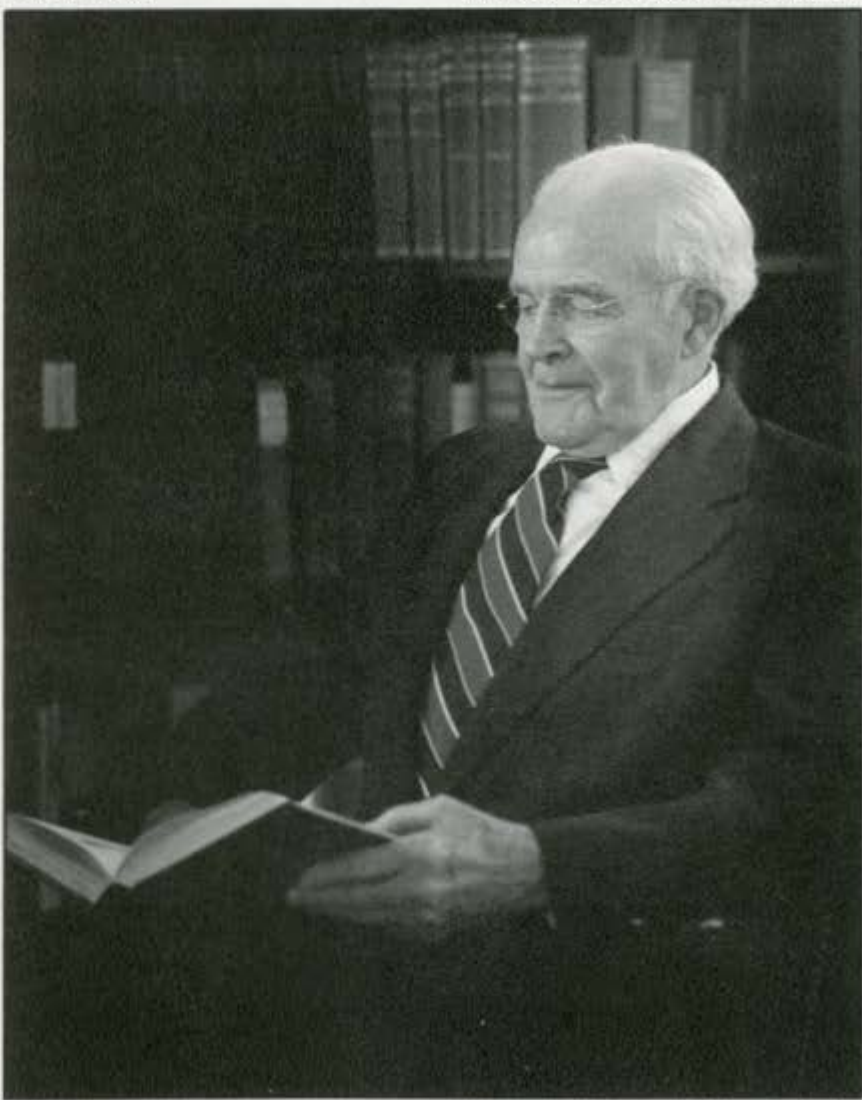


FIGURE 1. Louis A. Warren in 1978.

Stedman Studios, Inc.

about Abraham Lincoln, and Warren did not like the answers usually given them. He was a Massachusetts Republican. Kentucky, as historian Holman Hamilton so aptly put it, joined the Confederacy in 1865. Despite its being Lincoln's birthplace, local residents regarded their most famous citizen with anything but reverence. Talk of "poor white trash" and even bastardy was common. Warren decided to see whether such tales were true by looking for the public records in the local courthouse.

When Louis Warren stalked into that courthouse to set all those Southerners straight about Abraham Lincoln, he was helping to begin a small and a quiet revolution, for not many historians were getting their history from the sorts of documents one finds in a courthouse — wills, deeds, surveys, and tax lists. As he began to find exciting things, numerous documents mentioning Abraham Lincoln's closest relatives which had never before been uncovered, Warren felt a need to reach out to experienced writers for advice.

He began to write to William E. Barton, who was also a clergyman with a keen interest in Lincoln. The following is typical of Barton's early replies:

The matter of the county records interests me . . . By all means gather this material. It is of great value. Whether it will pay to publish it, no one can tell in advance. It may be that your only reward will be the rendering of a service to future historians. On the other hand, you may find it will pay at least the cost of gathering. I would gladly have paid any reasonable sum while my two books already published were under way for any added scrap of pertinent information.

My book "The Soul of Abraham Lincoln" sells and will sell well. "The Paternity of Lincoln" I expect will pay expenses. I do not expect any adequate return for the enormous labor in it. But the material is there for all the future.

I believe you will have real satisfaction in gathering this material, and if I can be of help to you in its publication I



From the Louis A. Warren  
Lincoln Library and Museum

FIGURE 2. William E. Barton at Knob Creek, Kentucky. Warren probably took the photograph.



From the Louis A. Warren  
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FIGURE 3. Albert J. Beveridge.

shall be very glad.

You are so situated as to gather this, and it may be that no one else who can do it and appreciates the importance of it will be where he can render this service for many years to come.

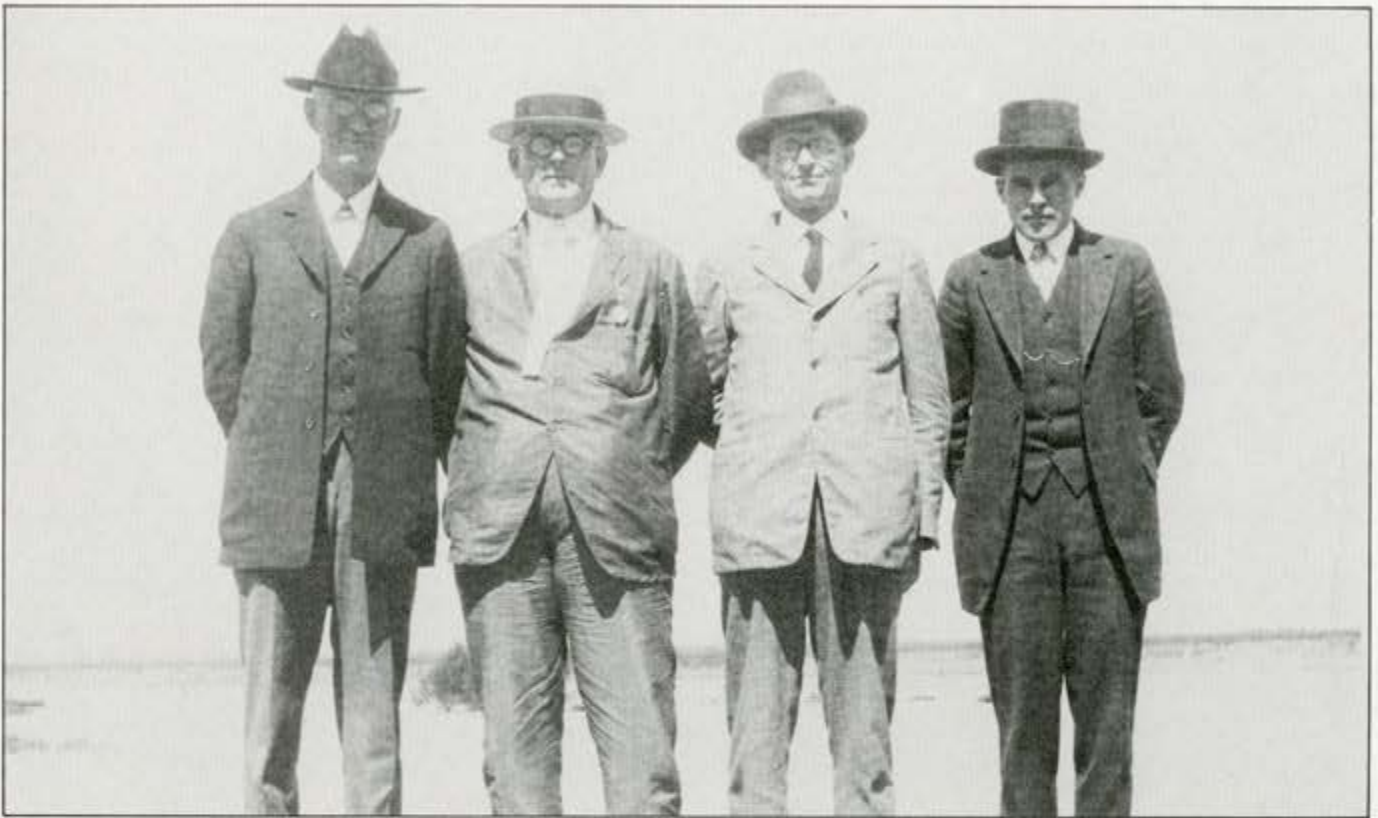
About two weeks later, Barton was telling the younger minister, "I do not suppose you are likely to gain any financial reward adequate for the labor that is involved in this work. Your reward will be the consciousness that you have added to the world's knowledge at the point of deep and permanent interest." Barton also thought Warren was "doing well not to say much about this work. It will be time enough to tell of it after you find just what material you have and determine what use you yourself may wish to make of it." But, of course, he was telling Barton about it.

In 1921, after Warren and Barton travelled around Kentucky together a bit, Warren flatly refused to accept any financial aid from Barton in his quest of the Lincoln documents. "I hope it will not appear as selfish on my part, if I seem unwilling to divide the honor of these discoveries with others." Warren was beginning to see possible trouble on the horizon:

Your books have been of great value to me in my research work, as they must be to all who read them, and it is because of this fact, and a real desire on my part to be of what assistance I may in your "Life of Lincoln", which I hope and believe will be the most authentic Lincoln Biography ever written, that I have been willing to turn over to you all the findings of my work here, without a single exception.

. . . In releasing the manuscripts to you I did so without any hesitancy whatever, as I have the utmost confidence that they will not be used in any public way whatever until the publication of my book. I feel also that you will not use these manuscripts as leaders to a further search on your own behalf in the territory in Kentucky which I am trying to cover, and the fact that you are already writing your chapter on the "Lincoln's in Kentucky" would suggest that you had gathered your material on that subject.

Barton's reply was only moderately reassuring. The Kentucky chapter was half finished, and he would duly credit Warren's work. However, Barton "in 1919 . . . wrote a little book 'In Lincoln's Kentucky.'" He "wrote it not with any idea that it was



*From the Louis A. Warren  
Lincoln Library and Museum*

**FIGURE 4. Warren (right) and three unidentified men near New Harmony, Indiana.**

complete or with any thought of immediate publication, but only to crystalize the facts as I then had them." He might pick it up again.

Despite the inevitable awkwardness and tension between two historians interested in writing on the same aspects of the same subject, Warren continued to send Barton numerous fresh references to Kentucky courthouse documents about the Lincoln and Hanks families. It was an arrangement fraught with potential for trouble, but Warren continued it because he felt somewhat insecure intellectually and needed Barton's assurances of the significance of his work as well as the stimulation of discussion of common historical and genealogical problems by letter and in occasional personal visits. When Barton, on a visit to Louisville in 1922, released some information to the press about the location of the farm of Abraham Lincoln's grandfather — information which Barton confirmed in the Filson Club's collections in Louisville, following a lead given him by Warren — the younger minister told "Mr. Barton" that this violated their agreement. Barton *had* used Warren's work "as leaders to a further research" on his "own behalf." Warren was miffed:

You will recognize Mr. Barton that if my book is to be of value it will necessarily contain new material, this may not be true of your own work. You will also recognize that you do not need any further com[m]endation to the public as an authority, on Abraham Lincoln, my success as a student of Lincoln will largely depend on receiving recognition for just such data as has been released over your name.

These unhappy incidents serve well to show the considerable difficulties under which Warren labored in his earliest years as a Lincoln student. He did not have an education quite equal to the task he wanted to take on, and he therefore felt compelled to cooperate with the better established authority, Barton. He was too busy with, by 1922, a wife, two children, and a pastorate to do his research faster and write his book so that Barton could no longer threaten it. Four other researchers, like Barton himself, recognized the great value and originality of Warren's research, inspired by the simple notion to accept nothing on authority or tradition but to have always documentary evidence. Barton and at least one of the others offered him money for his data, but they would not (and, in all fairness, perhaps could not) offer him the wider recognition as a Lincoln authority which he craved.

Warren did have two assets, however, which were in the end to protect his work and allow him to reach the public. First, he alone was on the site. Barton was paralyzed by his residence in northern Illinois and ultimately dependent on the work of trusting correspondents like Warren. Barton could never manage more than two or three days in the courthouse. Second, Warren had energy combined with patience. He wanted to find everything available in the area on Lincoln's youth and ancestry, and he was not stampeded into releasing partial findings which might have spoiled the final impact of his work. He told Barton that he had "no inclination to enter into a controversy" and had to admit that part of the problem with the release of the Filson Club information in Louisville stemmed from his failure to meet Barton there as planned. Five weeks earlier Warren had sprained his knee. He sprained it again two weeks later, was on crutches for more than a week, and was still using a cane. Hence, he missed the trip to Louisville.

The fact of the matter is that Barton and Warren needed each other. Warren had the documents, but Barton had knowledge and better access to the wider world. Warren's early pastorates, it should be remembered, were in very small and very provincial places, and his educational background had not stressed history by any means. Remarkably, when Warren went to Columbus, Ohio, in April of 1922 to attend the congress of the Disciples of Christ, he "had access to the Lyman-Lincoln collection. This is the first time," he told Barton, "I have ever had the privilege of reviewing any considerable number of Lincoln volumes."

Warren was thorough and dedicated. He wanted to wait to publish his book until he had scoured the courthouses of all the relevant Kentucky counties. Research often called for physical stamina. In the spring of 1922, Warren explored one of the early sites on which Thomas Lincoln lived:

I made the trip to the Mill Creek farm and the Mill Creek Cemetery last week. It was a long tiresom[e] trip as I was alone and had to walk much of the way, however it was very profitable. I left here at 6 A.M. and had an auto carry me to a point 10 miles north of Elizabethtown on the Dixie Highway. From that Point I walked 3 1/2 miles to the old Mill Creek Cemetery, returned 3 1/2 miles to the junction of the road that led towards the Mill Creek Farm. The distance to the Mill Creek farm was 6 miles over a road, much of the distance only

traveled on foot or on horseback. Loosing my way two or three times added at least 2 miles more to the distance. The Mill Creek farm is about 2 miles from the road that leads to Shepherdsville. I telephoned to Elizabethtown for a gitney to meet me at a point eight miles out on this road. I was pretty lame the next day after the sixteen mile walk.

Another brief research trip, squeezed in when pastoral duties allowed, reveals the trials of scholarship for one who was not a university professor or a man of independent means. One Thursday in 1922, Warren travelled from Hodgenville to Springfield, Kentucky, about twenty-five miles away, arriving there at eleven in the morning. He then worked in the courthouse until nine at night, taking a break only to eat the lunch Mrs. Warren packed for him. The next morning a fellow researcher picked Warren up at eight, and they went to Harrodsburg over the old Wilderness Road. They worked in the courthouse there in the morning, visited some sites, including Jesse Head's grave, and went to Lebanon via Perryville. From Perryville Warren took the train to Hodgenville. He arrived home at midnight.

Waldo Lincoln was about ready to publish his *History of the Lincoln Family* in 1922, further complicating the competition for the Kentucky documents Warren unearthed (almost literally — he often gauged the originality of his research by how much dust he waded through in the courthouse to get his references). Barton and Warren essentially entered into a pact only to give Waldo Lincoln enough information to keep him from making mistakes in his genealogy. They guarded the sources of the information that would be necessary for their own books. Waldo Lincoln, as Warren admitted to Barton in characteristic tone, was "very much dissatisfied with both your attitude and my own."

By October 1922 Warren knew that he would be moving to Morganfield, Kentucky. He had earlier thought the move would be to Louisville, but the pastorate there for some reason failed to materialize. Shortly thereafter, he met Ida Tarbell, who was keenly interested in his documents and who suggested that he publish them in *McClure's Magazine*, with which she had a close connection, or in *Collier's*. Barton, it should be noted, for all his encouraging talk, had never said a word to Warren about places of publication for the younger man's work, and Barton, who was a famous and tested writer, was as well situated as Miss Tarbell to do so. Warren, isolated and unknown, needed advice and connections.

Early in 1923, as Warren's explorations of other county courthouses began to turn up nothing related to Lincoln, he decided to bring his search for public records to a close and to work on his book. But the church duties at Morganfield were greater than those of his previous pastorate, and in the summer he spent ten weeks in evangelistic meetings. By the spring of 1924, however, Warren had made considerable progress and was by then sure that the book could not be confined to one volume.

Also by the spring of 1924, as Warren put it, Senator Beveridge was "very much on my trail." Albert Beveridge was also at work on a monumental Lincoln book. The Indianapolis politician-turned-historian was also exceedingly well connected socially. He told his friend W. C. Bobbs (of the Indianapolis publishing firm of Bobbs-Merrill) about Warren's manuscript, and Beveridge wrote his own publisher, Houghton-Mifflin, about Warren's book. Of course, he too wanted information from Warren.

Some of the information that Warren and Barton were keeping between themselves had leaked out to Beveridge by now, namely the proof of ownership of Thomas Lincoln's farms in Kentucky. The source proved to be O. M. Mather, a Hodgenville attorney. A sobered Warren told Barton:

I secured his [Mather's] services as an attorney in which it was necessary to give him all the data available about the farm and I emphasized the necessity of keeping the fact secret, but I have learned some mighty good lessons thus early in my life about releasing even to an attorney facts that should not be disclosed. He said he did not think it would do any harm to tell the senator about it as his book would not be published for eight years. This will not prevent him however from writing articles [,] delivering addresses, and publishing condensed discussions on Lincoln's life, in which I am sure he will feel at perfect liberty to disclose any data he may have in hand.

Warren did not say, incidentally, what matter involving the Lincoln records required the services of a lawyer.

The more worldly wise Warren noticed a rather significant difference in his relationship with Beveridge from his relationship with Barton. He told the latter rather pointedly:

I have had one brief interview with Mr. Beveridge, about twenty minutes in length I should say. I have also forwarded to him at his direct request a chronology of Thomas Lincoln's life which was a bare outline and gave no details as to the items mentioned. This is as far as I have gone in my relation with him. He has been very gracious however for these slight favors, and has opened a way for me for the publication of my book for which I am grateful.

To be continued next issue



From the Louis A. Warren  
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FIGURE 5. Warren with Ida Tarbell in 1932.