

JAMES SWANEY
(teacher)

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DRAWER 4 EDUCATION

Abraham Lincoln and Education

James Swaney

Excerpts from newspapers and other
sources

From the files of the
Lincoln Financial Foundation Collection

THE first public man I ever interviewed was John A. Johnson son of a poor widow, who made his way up from dire poverty to become Minnesota's youngest governor.

He spoke of a man, whose name I have long since forgotten. "That man loaned me books, when I was clerking in a country drug-store," said the Governor. "He encouraged me to read; he paid my subscription at the library. To him, more than any other, I owe whatever I am."

Recently I ran across this sentence in a life of Lincoln:

"Abraham Lincoln attended school in Indiana. His first teacher was Andrew Crawford, his second a man named Sweeney; his third was Azel W. Dorsey."

A man named Sweeney. Was he a good teacher? Did he ever sit with young Abraham in front of the fire at night and talk? Did he suspect at all the power that was hidden in that tall, gaunt

frame? Who was Sweeney, anyway? Just one of the forgotten millions.

What a countless army they are, the unknowns of history, the Sweeneys!

Who was the owner of the Garden of Gethsemane, where Jesus of Nazareth loved to retire for peace and rest? Some rich man of friendly interest and open heart, some Sweeney.

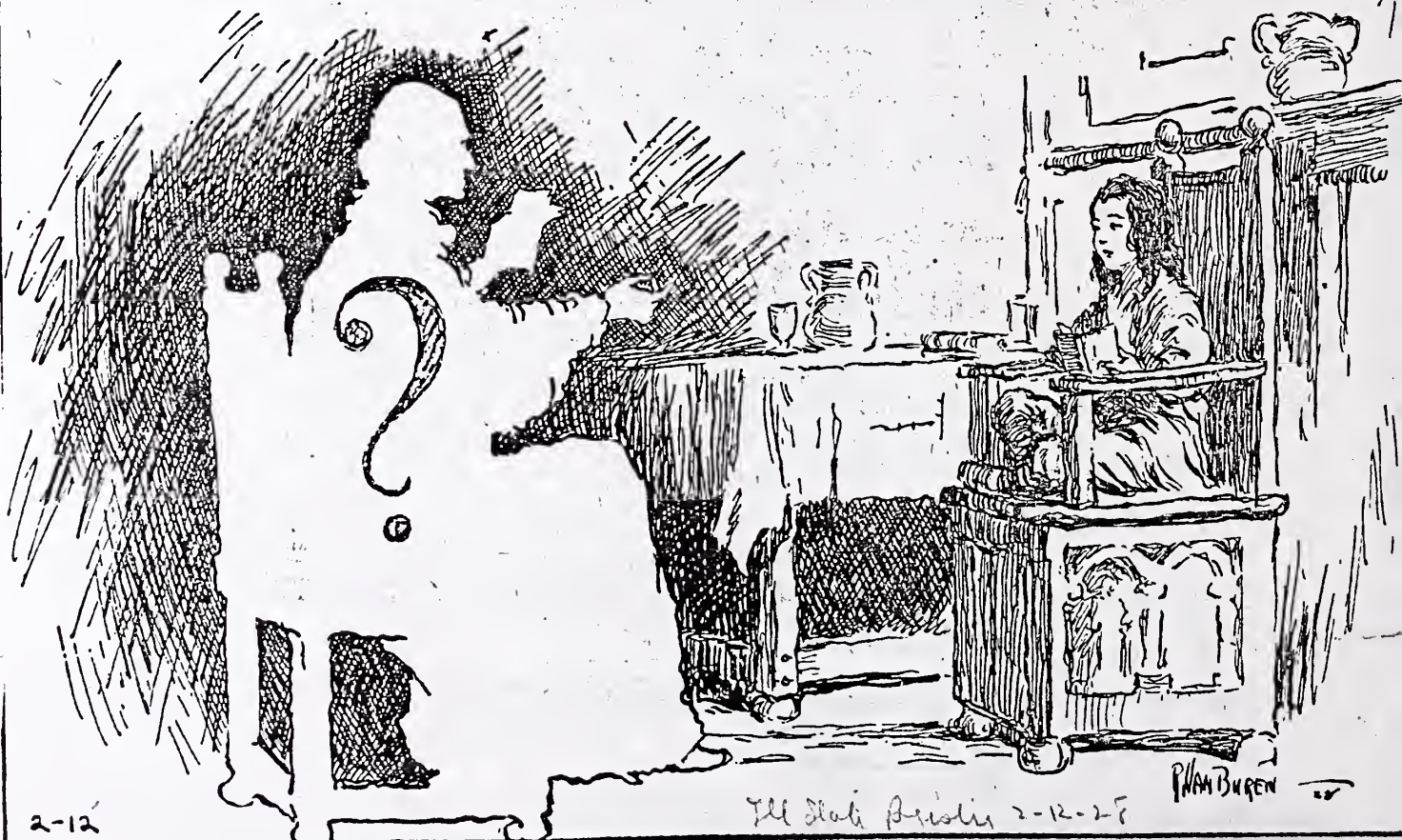
Who was the mother of Socrates? What underpaid teacher taught Shakespeare to read? What overworked country doctor tended Joan of Arc?

Sweeneys---all Sweeneys.

So interwoven are the threads of human life that no single contact is trivial. In our most casual moments we entertain angels; around the humblest of us are the influences that touch eternity.

The world will never know our names, but it cannot do without us. We carry on, we Sweeneys.

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LINCOLN'S LOST SCHOOL-MASTER

One of the characters closely associated with Abraham Lincoln during his youth, and whose first name Lincoln, himself, had not been able to recall, is now presented for the first time in the person of his second Hoosier school master. When Lincoln prepared his autobiography for Scripps he named his Indiana school teachers as follows: Andrew Crawford, ————Swaney and Azel W. Dorsey.

The name Swaney has often been confused with Sweeney and it is sometimes so spelled in the public records. There is no question, however, but that the correct spelling was Swaney. The given name, which the President had forgotten, is usually left blank in most biographies.

Old citizens, who have been interviewed, have suggested three different names, Nelson, Wesley, and John as the given name of Swaney. The late Senator Beveridge, in his recent work, says the name of this school teacher was William Sweeney, but his authority for this information is not valid.

For several years I have been on the lookout for some document which might give a clue to this unknown pedagogue. Recently I was rewarded by finding in the Warwick County, Indiana, Courthouse, a public record which I am quite sure, refers to the Swaney mentioned by Lincoln.

The record in question is a guardian's bond, which not only gives us the name and age of Swaney but presents the coincidence that Azel W. Dorsey, another school teacher of Lincoln's, was his guardian. A copy of the document follows:

October 20, 1817, at Darlington.

Azel W. Dorsey appeared in court with James Swaney and Charlotte Swaney, orphan children of Michal Swaney, Dec. and being appointed guardian of said children and on application to the court that the said James of the age of 17 and ½ years bound to him for and during the term of four years and six months upon the following conditions: The said boy is to have at the expiration of the said service a horse, saddle and bridle to be worth seventy dollars and learn him to read, write and cypher through the single rule of three and furnish him with good wearing apparel and a

good decent suit of clothes at the expiration of his said apprenticeship; and the said Charlott at the age of fourteen years and six months is also bound out to the said Dorsey for and during the term of three years and six months from the date hereon on the following conditions as the said Azel W. Dorsey agrees to learn her to read and write a legible hand and find her meat, drink washing and lodging and also find her good decent wearing apparel suitable to the seasons and a good feather bed and furniture at the expiration of her said servitude and one decent suit of clothes at the expiration of three years and six months aforesaid and it is further ordered by the court that the said Dorsey enter bond in the clerk's office in the sum of \$1000 with William Ross security for his true and faithful performance aforesaid.

The fact that there seems to be but one early family by the name of Swaney in Spencer County, contemporaneous to the Lincoln's, is strong evidence that we have the school teacher mentioned in the record above. It will be noted that Michael Swaney, the pioneer, was dead by 1817, so that he could not have been confused with the Swaney who taught Lincoln.

James Swaney was born in the year 1800. After four years of apprenticeship, spent under the direction of Dorsey, he remained, evidently, in the home of his benefactor and while residing there taught school. We have evidence that Swaney became the teacher of Lincoln not earlier than 1822 and not later than 1825. He was, therefore, during this period, between the ages of 22 and 25 and but nine years older than Lincoln himself. He was the only teacher Lincoln ever had whose age was anywhere near his own.

Swaney's preparation is set forth in the court record, which states that Dorsey should "Learn him to read, write and cypher through the single rule of three." This bears out Lincoln's own testimony as to the qualifications of his early teachers. Swaney had at least a horse and a fairly good suit of clothes at the expiration of his apprenticeship in the fall of 1821, but there is no evidence that his father had left him an estate in which he shared.

Shortly after Swaney taught the school Lincoln attended in Spencer County, he married Sarah Jane Cranon (or Cranmore). This wedding took place on December 18, 1825, and is recorded in the Spencer County marriage register. He was then twenty-five years old. His sister Charlott was but 18 when she was united in marriage to Charles Myers on January 19, 1821.

In the Spencer County census for the year 1830, both James Swaney and his wife are listed as being between

20 and 30 years of age. They also had one child, a boy, who was under five years of age. The census shows that at this time they were living at Rockport, the county seat of Spencer County.

It is very likely that the John Swaney whose name appears on the petition for a resurveying of the town of Gentryville, near where the Lincoln's lived, was the same five year old son of James Swaney listed in the aforesaid census. He has undoubtedly been confused with his father James as the school teacher of Lincoln.

Of the three men who taught Lincoln in Southern Indiana, Swaney seems to have been the only one who continued to make his residence there. Spencer County deed books show him to have been in possession of two quarter-sections of land in 1830, one in Section four, Township seven, Range one; the other in Section sixteen, Township six, Range one.

While Lincoln is said to have mentioned Swaney many times in later years none of these reminiscences seem to have been preserved in a form which makes them dependable.

Most biographers have followed the story of Lincoln's schooling as told by Lamon in his life of Lincoln. He states that the Swaney school was the last one which Lincoln attended in Indiana. This is in disagreement with Lincoln's own testimony. A reminiscence of John Hoskins appears to be about the only accurate description of the school.

"To get there he had to travel four and a half miles; and this going back and forth so great a distance occupied entirely too much of his time. His attendance was therefore only at odd times, and was speedily broken off altogether. The schoolhouse was much like the other one near the Pigeon Creek meeting-house, except that it had two chimneys instead of one . . . 'Here,' says John Hoskins, the son of the settler who had 'blazed out' the trail for Tom Lincoln, 'we would chose up, and spell as in old times every Friday night.' Hoskins himself tore down 'the old schoolhouse' long since, and built a stable with the logs."

I find that John Hoskins entered land in Spencer County as early as September 2, 1818. This property was in Jackson Township Section twenty-three. If this was the land on which the school stood the distance Abraham Lincoln had to walk to reach it has not been exaggerated. It is two miles from the Lincoln home to Gentryville and Hoskins' place is at least two and one-half miles to the south.

Nicholay and Hay conclude that Lincoln had been attending this school but a short time when his father feeling that there was too much waste of time took him out and put him to work. It is not likely that Abraham Lincoln was much the wiser from his brief contact with James Swaney.





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