

# LINCOLN BOYHOOD



**National Memorial • Indiana**

## ON THIS INDIANA FARM ABRAHAM LINCOLN GREW FROM YOUTH INTO MANHOOD

In the fall of 1816 a compact, dark-haired frontiersman toiled along a narrow trace leading through the dense forest of southern Indiana. Sixteen miles from the Ohio, he came upon a scattering of dwellings lying just south of Little Pigeon Creek, in a region of towering hardwoods, plentiful game, and good water. Choosing a quarter-section (160 acres) of Government-surveyed land for a homestead, he marked the corners with brush piles and notched the largest trees. Then he set out on the long trek back to his farm in Kentucky to settle his affairs and bring his family to their new wilderness home.

For Thomas Lincoln—once a wandering laborer but now a carpenter and backwoods farmer—Indiana offered a fresh start. Here a man might own good soil, free of title disputes and the taint of slavery. Three times previously he had lost land in Kentucky because of title flaws, and others had claimed the fruits of his labor. Moreover, settlers were crowding in and slavery and the slave controversy were on the increase in his neighborhood. So he turned his eyes across the Ohio, to vast, new lands which held the promise of a better life.

Thomas Lincoln had worked hard at homesteading since he had married young Nancy Hanks in a small Kentucky crossroads named Beech Fork in 1806. They made their first home in Elizabethtown, a restless frontier village where Thomas worked as a carpenter and owned property. Sarah, their first child, was born here in 1807. Then a year and a half later the Lincolns moved south to settle on a newly purchased farm along the South Fork of Nolin Creek, near Hodgen's mill.

Father, mother, and daughter reached the farm in mid-winter, shortly before the second child was due. Working quickly on a hill above a clear spring, Thomas built a crude, one-room log cabin with a dirt floor, a stick-and-clay chimney, and a single window. Here on a Sunday morning, February 12, 1809, in circumstances as primitive and unpromising as they were typical, a son was born to Nancy and Thomas Lincoln. They named him Abraham after his grandfather.

The Lincolns lived at this farm for only some 2 years. It was barren, unyielding ground, and when a dispute arose over title to the land, Thomas again moved his family, this time to a new farm of 230 acres along the bottom lands of Knob Creek.

Here was far more inviting country. The Lincoln place lay just within the hill region, and farm clearings with their little cabins dotted the fertile valleys. Corn grew high, and the forest gave abundantly.

Within a year or two, Nancy gave birth to another son, Thomas, who lived only long enough to receive his father's name. This was the last child born to the couple, and little Abraham retained only the dimmest recollection of the infant. But other impressions of his life here remained vivid. He remembered an old stone fort and a great poplar that stood along the family route to the gristmill. He remembered his boyhood companions and carrying water to the cabin and a vast rain that washed away pumpkin seeds that he had so carefully planted the day before. Once he caught a fish and gave



it to a passing soldier; another time he fell into the creek and was barely pulled out in time. And he never forgot the names of his first teachers—Zachariah Riney, a Catholic, and Caleb Hazel, an avowed opponent of slavery—whose A.B.C. schools he attended for a few months.

For 5 years Thomas Lincoln farmed his land on Knob Creek, paying his bills, performing his public duties, and supporting his family as well as other men of his station in life. The increase of slavery bothered him. Yet it was not slavery that drove him from Kentucky, but land titles. In 1816 the heirs of an earlier landowner brought an ejectment suit against him and nine of his neighbors, claiming prior rights to the land. That fall, while the suit was still pending in court, he made up his mind to move to Indiana where he could hold his land without fear. When Thomas returned from his scouting trip, he gathered all their possessions and the family started for the river crossing. It was December and Abraham was 7. Abraham later remembered the trip to the farm site as one of the hardest experiences of his life. After crossing the Ohio at Thompson's ferry and following an old wagon road for 12 miles, they had to hack out the last distance through dense underbrush. It was now early winter. With the help of neighbors Thomas cleared a spot on high ground and put up a log cabin, finishing it within several weeks. Then came an incident that left a deep mark on the young boy: A few days before Abraham's eighth birthday, a flock of wild turkeys approached the cabin. Standing inside, he fired his father's rifle through a crack and dropped one. "He has never since," he wrote many years later, "pulled a trigger on any larger game."

The family lived mostly on game and bartered corn and pork that first winter, until Thomas could clear enough ground for his first crop. Abraham was large for his age, and his father put an ax into his hands at once. Year by year they hacked away at the forest, eventually bringing under cultivation some 40 acres of corn, wheat, and oats. They also kept sheep, hogs, and a few cattle. Almost a year passed before Thomas entered the title to his farm. In October 1817 with one crop in, he rode 60 miles to the land office in Vincennes and deposited \$16 on two tracts of 80 acres each. Two months later he paid \$64 more, bringing the amount to one-fourth of the total price of \$320. (Not until 1827 would he completely pay for his land. He did it then by relinquishing the east 80 acres as payment for the west 80, a common practice of the day. He also owned 20 acres that adjoined the west 80.)

That fall some of Nancy's kinfolks joined the Lincolns. Driven out of Kentucky by a similar ejectment suit, Thomas and Elizabeth Sparrow—her uncle and aunt—with their 18-year-old nephew Dennis Hanks, followed the Lincolns into Indiana and moved into a rough shelter on the farm until they could find land and settle. Their coming cheered Nancy and gave young Abe a companion and Thomas another workhand. Within a year both Sparrows lay dead, victims of the dread "milk sickness" that swept through southwestern Indiana in the late summer of 1818. No doctors lived nearby, and there were no remedies in any case. Thomas fashioned two coffins and laid them

away on a wooded knoll a quarter of a mile south of the cabin. A few days later Nancy caught the disease and died on October 5, 1818, after a week of fever. Once more Thomas hammered together a coffin, and once more he trudged through the woods to the knoll, where without ceremony he buried his wife alongside the Sparrows. Abraham was only 9 and Sarah only 11. "She knew she was going to die," related Dennis Hanks years later, "and called up the children to her dying side and told them to be good & kind to their father—to one another and to the world. . . ."

Nancy Hanks Lincoln lived and died according to the ways of the frontier, known only to her family and a few neighbors. The details of her ancestry, her appearance, the kind of wife and mother she was—these and other facts still remain obscure. Those who knew her spoke long afterwards of her good sense and affectionate and deeply religious nature. There is no reason to doubt these judgments, nor that with her death the family fortunes slipped to their lowest ebb.

Young Sarah now took over the household chores, while Thomas and the boys hunted and tended to the farming. As the months stretched on, the four sank into a rough, haphazard existence. When Thomas could no longer stand the loneliness, he journeyed back to Kentucky for another wife, and found her in Sarah Bush Johnston, a widow with three children.

On December 2, 1819, they were married in Elizabethtown. After loading a four-horse wagon with her goods—pots, pans, blankets, a feather bed, a bureau, and books, which seemed like plenty compared to their lot in Indiana—he drove them back to the farm on Little Pigeon Creek.

Thomas had chosen well. The cheerful and orderly Sarah proved to be a kind stepmother, raising Abraham and Sarah as her own. Under her guidance the two families merged easily, and Thomas went to work with new energy, repairing the crowded cabin and clearing more land for crops.

Abraham was 11 now, a dark-complexioned, rawboned farm boy growing rapidly. From his companions he have a picture of a healthy, good-humored, obliging youth with a love of talking and of being content to talk. He had his share of mischief, but he seems to have absorbed the best side of the frontier while rejecting the worst. He became expert with the ax and worked alongside his father in the fields and the carpentry shop. Often his father sent him to the mill to grind the family grist. (Two years earlier, at Noah Gordon's horse mill a mile south of the Lincoln cabin, he was kicked in the head and knocked senseless, "apparently killed for a time" in his words.) Occasionally he was hired out to work for others. Yet he never cared for manual labor.

What he did care for was words and ideas and books. In Indiana, as in Kentucky, his schooling came "by littles." During the winter of 1819-20 he attended Andrew Crawford's subscription school held in an unwhim log cabin a mile south of the Lincoln cabin. Stern but capable, Crawford taught not only the elements of reading, writing, and arithmetic but also etiquette, or "manners" as they called it. Two years later James Swaney opened a school on a farm 4 miles distant, but Abraham went for only a few weeks and got little out of it.





On his 15th year he attended Azel Dorsey's school. Dorsey was well-trained, and under him Abraham probably received his best instruction. Years later Dorsey could still remember the boy as "marked for the diligence and eagerness with which he pursued his studies, [he] came to the log-chamber schoolhouse arrayed in buck skin clothes, a raccoon-skin cap, and provided with an old arithmetic." A few scraps of his schoolwork survive, among them several pages of figures and some doggerel that runs:

"Abraham Light, my friend and pen  
he will be good but god knows When."  
Altogether, he spent less than a year in school.

"There was absolutely nothing to excite ambition for education," he declared later of his schooling in Indiana. Still, there gradually emerged a love of reading and a passion for knowledge that lasted a lifetime. He mastered the familiar classics of his day: *The Bible*, *Aesop's Fables*, *The Pilgrim's Progress*, *Robinson Crusoe*, *Franklin's Autobiography*, and a score of others. Once he borrowed Ramsay's *Life of Washington* from Josiah Crawford, a neighbor, let the rain ruin it, and had to repay him by stripping corn for two days. When he was 11, he read *Panorama of Washington*. Forty years standing before the New Jersey Legislature as President-elect of the United States, he recalled Weems' heroic tales:

"Away back in my childhood, the earliest days of my being able to read, I got hold of a small book. . . . Weems's *Life of Washington*. I remember all the accounts there given of the battle fields and struggles for the liberties of the country, and none fixed themselves upon my imagination so deeply as the struggles here in Trenton, New Jersey. The crossing of the river; the contest with the Hessians; the great hardships endured at that time, all fixed themselves on my memory more than any single revolutionary event."

There were other influences as well. The boy had a good memory, and a ready wit. Laying aside his work, he would often entertain friends with jests and imitations of politicians and preachers, the big men in his community. And at Gentry's store, down the road a mile and a half, he and Dennis Hanks passed long hours in talk and storytelling.

The part that religion played in his life during these years is less easy to gauge. In 1821 his father supervised construction of a new meetinghouse for Little Pigeon Baptist Church, the chief exponent of enthusiastic Protestantism—and Abe probably worked with him. Two years later both parents joined the church, Thomas by letter and Sarah "by experience." That year Abe served as sexton, which required his attendance whenever the church was open. He never joined, as his sister did just before her marriage, but on the frontier, young, unmarried persons rarely undertook church membership.

Abe first glimpsed a wider world when he went to work at 16 on the farm of James Taylor on the banks of the Ohio. For \$6 a month he plowed, split rails, slaughtered hogs, and operated Taylor's ferry across the mouth of Anderson River. The life of a keelboatman made no appeal to him—"it was the roughest work a young man could be made to do," he said later—but it exposed him to the vast pageant of people and boats passing constantly along the Ohio.

While working here Abe earned the first money that belonged to him rather than to his parents. In his spare time he built a scow to take passengers out to steamers on the Ohio. One day he rowed out two men and placed them on board with their trunks. To his astonishment each tossed down a silver half-dollar. "I could scarcely credit," he said, "that I, poor boy, had earned a dollar in less than a day." His ferrying stint led to a dispute with the Dill brothers, who ran a ferry on the Kentucky side of the river. Charging that Lincoln infringed ferry rights granted them by their State, they hailed him before Samuel Pate, a Kentucky justice of the peace. Pate dismissed the case when the boy pointed out that he had not taken anyone across the river but only to the middle.

By his 19th year Abe had reached his full growth. Six feet, four inches tall and weighing over 200 pounds, he stood out in any gathering. He could wrestle with the best, and witnesses reported that he could

hoist a weight or drive a ox deeper than any man around. He was ready when the chance came to take his first long journey. James Gentry, the richest man in the community, hired Abe to accompany his son Allen to New Orleans in a flatboat loaded with produce. Down the Ohio they floated and into the Mississippi, lolling the time away in talk, watching the passing river traffic, and working the poles to avoid snares and sandbars. The only incident occurred along the Louisiana coast. While tied up along shore one night, an armed band of Negroes bent on plunder stole on board and attacked the sleeping boatmen. In a wild fight the two youths drove them off, cut cable, and drifted on downriver. At New Orleans they sold their cargo and the flatboat and rode a steamer back home. For his 3 month's work Abe earned \$24.

Back in Indiana, Abe must have contrasted the rich, bustling spectacle of New Orleans with the routine of farm life. He returned to his familiar chores of plowing, cutting timber, and helping with carpentry. He clerked for a while at Gentry's store, and he read more than ever. When court was held in nearby towns, Abe would attend and—some said—take notes. It was during this period that he borrowed from his good friend David Turnham the *Revised Laws of Indiana*, the only lawbook he is known to have read before leaving the State.

Sometime in late 1829 the Lincolns decided to quit Indiana for the fertile prairies of Illinois. A year earlier John Hanks, a cousin of Nancy, had moved to Macon County in central Illinois. Now he was sending back glowing reports of the opportunities on the rich, easily cultivated prairie. Thomas needed little persuasion. In 14 years he had wrung only a modest living from his acres. The family also feared a new outbreak of the "milk sickness."

Preparations began in September. Returning to Elizabethtown, Ky., Thomas and Sarah sold her last property there, a house and lot inherited from her first husband. In December the Little Pigeon church granted them a "letter of Dismission," recalled it upon receiving a complaint from another member, then restored it after a meeting which "settled the difficulty," probably a doctrinal one. Thomas is found next in mid-February serving on a committee to straighten out another dispute between members, suggesting that by then he was once more back in good standing. It was his last act as a citizen of the Little Pigeon community. Just a week later, on February 20, 1830, he sold his west 80 acres to Charles Grigsby for \$125. There is also a tradition that Thomas traded his 20-acre tract for a horse—a fair price in those days—and sold to David Turnham all his stock and grain, "about 100 hogs and 4 or 5 hundred bushels of corn."

Piling all their goods into three wagons, the Lincoln family—now grown to 13 persons—pulled slowly away from the homestead, picked up the road to Vincennes about 4 miles north, and plodded steadily toward Illinois. It was March 1, 1830. At one of the wagons, goading the ox team on, sat Abraham Lincoln, just turned 21. On March 6 the caravan crossed the Wabash, flooded by spring rains. Within the month they came at last to John Hanks' place on the north bank of the Sangamon River, 8 miles west of Decatur. Abraham Lincoln, product of the Kentucky hills and Indiana forests, had reached the prairie country that would claim his next 30 years.



**ABOUT YOUR VISIT**—The entrance to Lincoln Boyhood National Memorial lies just north of the intersection of Ind. 162 and 345. The nearest town is Dale, 4 miles north. The memorial preserves the site of the Thomas Lincoln farm and the burial place of Nancy Hanks Lincoln. Trails lead through the woods to the site of the Lincoln home and the cemetery. The park staff will help acquaint you with the memorial and the story of Abraham Lincoln's youth in Indiana. **ADMINISTRATION**—Lincoln Boyhood National Memorial is administered by the National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior. The National Park System, of which this memorial is a unit, is dedicated to conserving the great natural, historical, and recreational places of the United States for the benefit and enjoyment of all the people. A superintendent, whose address is Lincoln City, Ind. 47552, is in immediate charge. **THE DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR**—the Nation's principal natural resource agency—has a special obligation to assure that our expendable resources are conserved, that our renewable resources are managed to produce optimum benefits, and that all resources contribute to the progress and prosperity of the United States, now and in the future.

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