

„The Short and Simple Annals of the Poor“: Abraham Lincoln’s Childhood by John Fladhammer

On January 20, 2009, Barack Obama took the oath of office as 44th President of the United States with his hand on the Bible that Abraham Lincoln used for his inauguration.ⁱ Did the President pay tribute to an earlier adopted son of Illinois who rose from oblivion to win the nomination of his party and the election to the presidency? Did the President celebrate the memory of the man who ended slavery? Did Obama use the “bully pulpit” of his presidency to remind Americans that he, like Lincoln, is taking office in a time of crisis?

All of this may be true, but it doesn’t entirely explain the 44th president’s fascination with Lincoln. The two Illinoisans have much in common. Both were close to their mother but had difficulties with the respective father. Both were, to a certain extent, outsiders in their America. Both men were lawyers who taught themselves to become great orators. The charge was levelled at candidate Lincoln in 1860 and Obama 148 years later that they lacked experience. Both came into office determined to deal with the serious issues of the day, problems that previous administrations had neglected.

Who then was Abraham Lincoln? To answer that question we must examine his origins.

When asked about his youth by John L. Scripps about his youth in 1859, Lincoln used a line from Gray’s Elogy: “‘The short and simple annals of the poor.’ That’s my life and that’s all you or any one else can make of it.”ⁱⁱ Typically, Lincoln claimed indifference towards his own past. The details of his early life were gained shortly after his death by interviewers who tracked down Lincoln’s surviving relatives, friends and acquaintances. The picture we gain from this material, much of it published in the biography written by William Herndon, Lincoln’s former partner, illuminates the development of his distinctive personality. We are also given insights into an important aspect of America’s past – life on the frontier.

Abraham Lincoln was born in a one-room log cabin on his father’s farm near Hogdenville, Kentucky on February 12, 1809. Young Abraham was the second child of the family, Sarah having been born two years earlier.

Thomas Lincoln, Abraham’s father, was a man of the Kentucky frontier. He was born in Rockingham County, Virginia in 1778 and joined his parents in the trek through the Cumberland Gap to the new lands west of the mountains. The Lincolns were in Kentucky early, and it was only a matter of time before Abraham, Thomas’ father, had vast land holdings there.

Then came trouble. Kentucky, known as the Dark and Bloody Ground, was the scene of constant warfare between the American settlers and the Shawnee and their British patrons.

In 1786, while Abraham and his three sons were working in a cornfield, when a war party attacked. Abraham was killed immediately. Thomas’ life was saved only due to the marksmanship of his brother, Mordecai.ⁱⁱⁱ

ⁱ “Obama Family Honors Lincoln at Memorial,” *Newsmax.com*, January 11, 2009

ⁱⁱ Gray, Thomas (1716-1771), “Elogy Written in a Country Churchyard” (1751).

ⁱⁱⁱ Donald, David Herbert, *Lincoln*, New York 1995, p. 21.

This death of Abraham meant that Thomas was condemned to the life of a restless squatter. At that time, Kentucky had Virginia law, which mandated that the oldest son should inherit all the holdings of the father (the law of primogeniture). Mordecai Lincoln would have his father's land and, in due course, would become a wealthy breeder of race horses in Washington County, Kentucky.^{iv}

Thomas was not only left with neither land nor money but never had the opportunity to learn to read or write. Abraham Lincoln, the future president, remembered that his father "never did more in the way of writing than to bunglingly sign his own name."^v

Abraham Lincoln would have difficulties with his father in years to come, but he certainly inherited important characteristics from Thomas. Like his father, he would grow up to be simple, unpretentious, honest and an excellent story teller. There was one important sentiment that father and son shared.

Thomas disliked slavery. Kentucky became a slave state in 1792, but there were many Kentuckians who were either ambivalent or hostile towards the "peculiar institution," as slavery became known later in the century. Thomas' sentiments were not based on a particular sympathy for the slave, but, as we shall see, on religious belief, as well as fears for his resentment that, as a poor white, he was forced to compete with the cheap labor of the slave. This attitude may have been more prevalent in the antebellum South than most outsiders thought at the time. In 1857, a North Carolinian, Hinton Rowan Helper, published a study on how slavery condemned poor Southern whites to a life of poverty and backwardness. This book, *The Impending Crisis of the South and How to Meet It* was banned in most Southern states, which suggests that the planter class felt the book a genuine threat. It may have been read surreptitiously and was distributed by the Republican Party in 1860.

Abraham Lincoln would have problems with the institution of slavery, but it would be many years before he could articulate them. Unlike his father, he based his arguments on the principle enshrined in the Declaration of Independence that "all men are created equal". In one of his debates with Stephan Douglas in 1858, Lincoln compared slavery with the divine right of kings: "you work and toil and earn bread and I'll eat it."^{vi} What for Thomas had been an economic issue gradually became a legal and moral one for his son.

Thomas Lincoln, as shiftless and untutored as he was, did have the respect of his community. He served in the local militia and was called up for jury duty at least once. His meagre income as a farmer was supplemented by what he could earn doing odd jobs or carpentry for his neighbors. Thomas was primarily a farmer. He owned a small farm in Elizabethtown, Kentucky when he married Nancy Hanks and the couple had their first child, Sarah, there. Three years later, just before Abraham's birth, Thomas bought a second holding, the Sinking Spring Farm, a tract noted for its spring issuing from inside a cave. Here the child that would become the 16th president was born.

^{iv} *Ibid.*, p. 21

^v Goodwin, Doris Kearns, *Team of Rivals: the Political Genius of Abraham Lincoln*, New York, 2005, p. 47.

^{vi} Lincoln's reply to Douglas, Alton, Illinois. October 15, 1858.

Who was Lincoln's mother and why do researchers still have a difficult time separating fact from fiction concerning her short life?

Nancy Hanks, like Thomas Lincoln, was of Virginia stock.^{vii} Although Lincoln told his friend and biographer William Herdon that "all that I am or hope ever to be I get from my mother. God bless her"^{viii}, he never made it a point to look into her past. Herdon tells us that the Hankses had a reputation as "illiterate and superstitious poor whites".^{ix} Indeed, Lincoln is said to have believed that his mother was born out of wedlock.

Whatever the case, Nancy seems to have been an excellent mother. Nancy's cousin Dennis Hanks remembered that (she) "read the good Bible to (Abe) – taught him to read and to spell – taught him sweetness & benevolence as well."^x Lincoln's "angel mother" (as he called her) was said to have been of average height. Like her husband (and many other frontier women at that time), she could not write and had to sign her name with a big "X". Despite this, she seems to have been an intelligent woman.

What kind of child was young Abe? Dennis Hanks later related that "Abe was a good boy, an affectionate one – a boy who loved his parents and was obedient to their every wish."^{xi} He could, however, be "uncomfortably inquisitive."

All was not well, however. By 1811, Thomas Lincoln had come to the realization that the Sinking Spring farm was not paying off. He sold it and bought a new farm at Knob Creek, ten miles away. At Knob Creek, young Abraham remembered working in the "big field" where Thomas raised corn. He also remembered how a rain storm in the hills caused a flash flood that swept across his father's newly-seeded cornfield, presumably destroying the crop.^{xii}

It was also in Knob Creek that Lincoln attended school, a so-called A.B.C. school that was located two miles from the cabin. Of one of the teachers, Caleb Hazel, it was said that he "could perhaps teach spelling, reading and indifferent writing and perhaps could cipher to the rule of three."^{xiii} By the time Lincoln left Kentucky in 1816, he had probably learned the alphabet but not much more than that.

Thomas decided to leave Kentucky in 1816 and take his family to the new state of Indiana. Indiana, north of the Ohio River, had been part of the Northwest Territory, a vast tract between the Ohio River and the Great Lakes and the Mississippi, which the new republic had won from Britain in the War of Independence. In 1787, in an attempt to organize the process required for a territory to become a state, the Confederation Congress passed the Northwest Ordinance. This legislation stipulated as well that there should be no slavery in the territory.^{xiv} Did Thomas Lincoln leave Kentucky to escape slavery?

^{vii} William M. Herdon in his classic *Life of Lincoln* writes that Nancy's name was Sarah and attributes this to the fact that the page of the family Bible was missing.

^{viii} Kearns, p. 17.

^{ix} William M. Herdon, *Life of Lincoln*, New York, 1961, p. 56.

^x Kearns, p. 47,

^{xi} Herdon, p. 65.

^{xii} Donald, p. 23.

^{xiii} *Ibid.*, p. 23.

^{xiv} The Northwest Territory would become the states of Ohio, Indiana, Michigan, Illinois, Wisconsin and part of Minnesota.

Possibly. Thomas and Nancy had joined the Separate Baptist Church, a confession whose members rejected profanity, swearing, gossip, horse racing, dancing – and slavery.^{xv}

Herndon, however, doubted this, citing census statistics that Lincoln's Hardin County, Kentucky had only about fifty slaves at the time.^{xvi} Thomas Lincoln seems to have been generally fed up with his poverty in Kentucky and the constant strife involving title to his land. Knob Creek farm, where the Lincolns were living at the time, was the subject of a suit brought by residents of another state on the basis of prior ownership. Thomas Lincoln, having neither the money nor the inclination for a protracted court battle, decided to seek land in the wilderness of Indiana.

He built a flatboat in the fall of 1816 to get himself, his tools and a number of barrels of whisky first to the Ohio River and then across it to the Indiana shore. The Ohio at this point is a wide river with eddies and currents that would have been difficult for a single man steering an ungainly flatboat with its bulky cargo to negotiate. Thomas' craft capsized in the middle of the Ohio, sending his cargo to the bottom. He salvaged what he could and proceeded to the Indiana shore. There he deposited his belongings with a local farmer and set off inland to find a farm.

Thomas found one that suited him on Pigeon Creek in what is now Spencer County; he marked it as his claim and set back to Kentucky to fetch his family and the rest of his belongings and take them to Indiana.

Before leaving his claim on Pigeon Creek, Thomas had built a small "half-faced camp", a three-sided windowless cabin of about five square meters and without a wooden floor. The family would live in these primitive quarters until, shortly after their arrival from Kentucky, At that time, Thomas and members of seven neighboring families erected a cabin. As it was the middle of winter, the work could not be finished: log cabins had to be chinked with a mixture of clay and grass; this was impossible in winter when the soil was frozen.

Thomas had chosen his land well. His farm was in what John Scripps called "unbroken forest".^{xvii} In comparison, Kentucky must have seemed civilized and settled to the small family. When he was an adult, Abraham Lincoln wrote a bit of doggerel on the early years in Indiana.

When my father first settled here,
'T'was then the frontier line:
The panther's scream, filled night with fear
And bears preyed on the swine.

As it was winter, the family had to live off the land while working long hours clearing underbrush and trees for the next year's corn crop. This meant hunting, something that young Abe was not very good at.

^{xv} *Ibid.*, p. 24.

^{xvi} Herndon, p. 60.

^{xvii} *Ibid.*, page 62.

Dennis Hanks told Herndon the story of how in the winter of 1817 a flock of wild turkeys approached the family's cabin. Eight-year-old Abraham was inside the cabin and grabbed a rifle and fired at the birds through a chink between the logs. He killed the turkey which presumably ended on the family's dinner table, but felt such remorse about deed that he would never hunt again.

Things seemed to be going well. After a year in Indiana, Thomas had his first crops. The land proved so good that he made the 60-mile journey to Vincennes, the location of the nearest land office, to make a down payment on two additional 80-acre tracts adjoining his farm.

Nancy was more at home as well. It certainly helped that Thomas and Betsy, Sparrow, her relatives from Kentucky, joined the Lincolns on Pigeon Creek, taking up residence in the half-faced camp. They brought with them the good-natured and talkative Dennis Hanks who would later be an invaluable assistant to Thomas on the farm.

Then things began to go wrong. In 1818, young Abraham was kicked in the head by a horse and was thought to be dead. The boy could not speak for several hours but would recover fully. As bad as this accident was, worse was yet to come.

In the fall of 1818, the Lincolns and Sparrows fell victim to what was called "the milk-sick," a common plague on the frontier. Today known as brucellosis, the disease causes high fever, chills and sweats. Brucella bacteria is found in infected cattle, goats or sheep and can infect humans who drink the milk or eat the cheese from the diseased animal.^{xviii}

The Sparrows fell ill in February 1818; both were dead within days. Thomas Lincoln constructed the coffins, and the little community took the two to their rest in a small hill near the farm.

Meanwhile, Nancy had caught the fever. She suffered for a week, each day growing weaker. Shortly before her death, she called Sarah and Abe, to her bedside and told them to "be good to one another."^{xix}

Nancy Hanks Lincoln died on October 5, 1818.

The death of his mother reinforced Lincoln's melancholy. As Doris Kearns Goodwin States, Lincoln's bouts these dark moods was not clinical depression, but it would become the "flipside" of Lincoln's complex personality.^{xx} There would be the jovial Lincoln, entertaining groups of friends and colleagues with one funny story after another. The other Lincoln would be pensive and morose, seemingly depressed by tragedies of the day.

In 1840, already a young lawyer in Springfield, Lincoln would remember his Indiana years in a poem.^{xxi}

^{xviii} The disease-causing agents would not be isolated until 1887 when a British army doctor, David Bruce, found the bacteria in the spleen of a soldier who had died of the infection. The disease is always transmitted from animals to humans, never from one human to another. The only practical way of preventing outbreaks is to isolate and kill the infected animals.

^{xix} Herndon, p. 66.

^{xx} Goodwin, page 57.

^{xxi} Donald, page 27.

My childhood home I see again.
And sadden with the view;
And still, as mem'ries crowd the brain,
There's pleasure in it too..

I range the fields with pensive tread,
And pace the hollow rooms,
And feel (companion of the dead)
I'm living in the tombs.

This odd little poetic fragment illustrates important elements of Lincoln's persona. One is that he uses the written word to deal with his loss. Years later, he would use the English language as few other chief executives have to inspire the nation in the depths of its worst war.

The little poem illustrates the sadness and loss that young Abe Lincoln must have experienced ("hollow rooms", "companions of the dead", "tombs"). We are left wondering about the last line of the first stanza ("there's pleasure in it too"). What pleasure.

We should not forget that Lincoln's America was that of Edgar Allan Poe. Lincoln, who would grow up to enjoy poetry, must have been familiar with the British and American literature of the Romantic era.

As tragic of Nancy Hanks Lincoln's death may have been for young Abe, the death of a parent from one disease or another was a common occurrence in the early 19th century. Medical care even in cities like New York or Boston was rudimentary.

For the Lincolns, of course, there was no recourse to medical help; the nearest doctor was 35 miles away and there were no towns in the vicinity. If you fell ill, you either recovered on your own or died.

Quickly realizing that he needed a new wife and mother for the children, Thomas returned to Kentucky in late November and, on December 1, 1818, proposed marriage to Sarah Bush, and old friend and the widow of the Hardin County jailer. According to Herndon, Thomas said, "Miss Johnston, I have no wife and you no husband. I came a-purpose to marry you. I knowed you from a gal and you knowed me from a boy. I have no time to lose; and if you're willin', let it be done straight off."^{xxii} She was willing, and the pair set off for Kentucky with Sarah's household effects carefully packed in the wagon of Thomas' brother-in-law.

When Thomas, Sarah and Sarah's three children from her first marriage arrived at the Pigeon Creek farm, she found Sarah, Abe and Dennis Hanks dirty and hungry.

As Dennis Hanks remembered, "she soaked - rubbed and washed the children clean."^{xxiii}

Then the house had to be fixed up. Dennis was given the job of splitting logs to provide a wooden floor. Presumably then Sarah's furniture could be moved in. Then a door and a window was constructed and beds were made. Thomas, who was a skilled carpenter, began

^{xxii} Herndon, pp. 67-68.

^{xxiii} Donald, p. 28.

making tables and chairs. For the first time, young Abe would experience life with spoons and forks, feather bedding and a spinning wheel.

Sarah Lincoln's greatest contribution to her stepson's development was her love for him (which he reciprocated) and a recognition of his intelligence. Although Thomas' new wife was unable to read and write herself, she valued education. Thomas, too, agreed that his children to learn how to read and cipher (do arithmetic).

Many years later, Sarah Bush Lincoln said that she had "induced" her husband to allow Abe to read at home as well as at the school the boy was attending.^{xxiv}

Thomas was not particularly happy about this but acceded to his wife's desire.

"He must understand everything," Sarah said of her stepson. "He would then repeat it over to himself again and again."^{xxv}

At the age of 10, Abe attended a subscription school (the parents had to pay the teacher in cash or produce) run and taught by Andrew Crawford, who was also the justice of the peace. Crawford's was a "blab" school, where the children recited their lessons out loud and were corrected by the teacher. As one of the pupils later said of Crawford, "he tried to learn us manners"^{xxvi}

Crawford quit after one three-month term, and the Lincoln children began attending James Swaney's school, which was four miles from the farm. Many years later, Lincoln told Herndon that the aggregate of all his formal education was something under a year.

It is remarkable that a person with so few months of schooling could become the greatest orator to have occupied the White House.

With rudimentary education and the support of his stepmother, Abe would become an avid reader. There were few books besides the Bible in the household. What the family didn't have, he borrowed. One story has it that he walked sixteen miles to the home of Josiah Crawford, a wealthy farmer, to borrow Crawford's *Life of George Washington* by Parson Weems. The book was damaged in the rain, and Abe had to go to Crawford and confess this to Crawford to confess. The farmer's penalty as two days' work in his cornfield, which Abe dutifully accomplished. Presumably, he learned to be more careful about the books that he borrowed from "Old Blue Nose," as he called Crawford.

Lincoln's first contact with the law was a copy of the *Statutes of Indiana*, which he borrowed from a friend. Herndon says he "devoured" the book, but we cannot know whether this made him decide to be a lawyer.^{xxvii} Later, in Illinois, he would prepare himself for the bar by reading law works including Blackstone's *Commentaries*.

In the early 19th century, young men in America prepared for the law by serving a kind of apprenticeship in an attorney's office. As to Lincoln, his poverty and lack of standing in society prohibited this. He had to teach himself.

^{xxiv} Herndon, p. 72.

^{xxv} Donald p. 29.

^{xxvi} *Ibid.*, page 29.

^{xxvii} Herndon, p. 78.

The teenaged Lincoln was taller and stronger than most of his compatriots. He was gregarious, often entertaining friends and acquaintances with stories and jokes. Some thought him lazy because of his passion for reading (you don't read on a farm if there are other chores to be done). Some like his stepmother recognized his intelligence and did their best to further it, but most thought it odd that he go off by himself and spend time reading.

Three events between 1828 and 1830 mark the end of Lincoln's youth. The first was the death of his sister, Sarah Lincoln Grigsby, who died in childbirth when young Abe was 19. Sarah's death was a blow to Abraham, who was close to Sarah, but, more important, it resulted in the end of an important friendship. Abe blamed his brother-in-law, Aaron Grigsby, for not consulting a doctor in time to save Sarah. The Grigsbys were an important family in the little Pigeon Creek community, and Abe Lincoln's friendship with them ended with Sarah's death. This must have been an extremely important issue for young Lincoln. We know from the history of his presidency that Lincoln was extremely forgiving, generally unwilling to punish or even criticize members of his cabinet or generals for any but the most serious infractions.

More important than the break with the Grigsby family, Lincoln's relations with his father were souring. By 1828, Thomas was "feeling his age", as one would say today. He was blind in one eye. Dennis Hanks, his invaluable helpmate on the farm after Nancy's death, was married and had a farm of his own about a mile from Thomas' place. Abe's help on the farm was more important than ever.

While Thomas Lincoln was tolerant of Abe's desire to improve his mind, his priority was not the young man's leaning but running the farm. There may be many reasons that we can never know for the young man's disenchantment with his father and, for that matter, Pigeon Creek.

Lincoln, increasingly alienated from his father and bored by his life on Pigeon Creek, wandered around the county, mostly on his own, participating in corn shucking and log rolling as well as other social events that combined work and play. But he remained bored.

He thought of escaping, the nearby Ohio being the means of doing so. He actually did travel to New Orleans in a flatboat in 1828 to sell meat and the grain crop of James Gentry, his employer. Although the trip to what was one of the biggest cities in the country must have been an adventure, Abe later said or wrote little about it.

The end of the Lincolns' Pigeon Creek years came in 1830, when the milk sick broke out again in the little community. Thomas decided to move to Macon County, Illinois, where John Hanks, one of Nancy's relatives, lived. Now 21, Abe felt obliged to help his father make the move westward but made up his mind to after they had reached their destination.

Thomas, Sarah and Abe would settle in Decatur, Illinois, then a tiny cluster of log cabins in the southern Illinois prairie.

Later that year in front of Renshaw's store in Decatur, Abraham Lincoln would give his first political speech, a plea for Henry Clay's American System.^{xxviii} Young Abe would soon settle in the nearby community of New Salem, where he would try his hand at

^{xxviii} Henry Clay of Kentucky, a leading member of the Whig Party, believed that

shopkeeping, surveying, serving as a postmaster and leading the local militia in the Blackhawk war. There he would begin studying the law.

What does this remarkable story teach us? Lincoln overcame the poverty and isolation of his youth mainly by reading and studying any book that he could find. He must have been intelligent and extremely disciplined. One can only imagine what he would have accomplished if he'd had the benefit of formal schooling and higher education at one of the leading universities of the day. What is important, however, is that he made the best of what he had.

Lincoln was ever willing to learn, to study new facts and to listen to those around him for their opinions. As president, he chose a cabinet consisting of a bipartisan group of some of the leading political figures of the day. He would solicit their opinions on any important matter and then ruminate on the correct course.

Lincoln's legal training would be honed in New Salem and Springfield. Many of his character traits, his mood swings, fatalism, compassion and tolerance, date back to those difficult years in Kentucky and Indiana.

There is one other aspect of this story that is important. The setting is that of the American frontier. The role of the frontier in forming the United States has been disputed by historians for more than a century. Few, however, would disagree that, while frontier life could be filled with "adventure", it was more often than not one of deprivation and loneliness, much as that of the Lincolns.

It did teach self-reliance and that no man was inherently better than any other man. Most important of all, however, it allowed the unschooled son of a poor farmer to rise to rise to the highest office in the land, and that on his own merits. There is something very American in that.

"internal improvements" (roads, canals) should be built. The Whigs stood in opposition to Andrew Jackson and the Democrats.