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LINCOLNS AND LAFOLLETES

Were They Kinsfolk?

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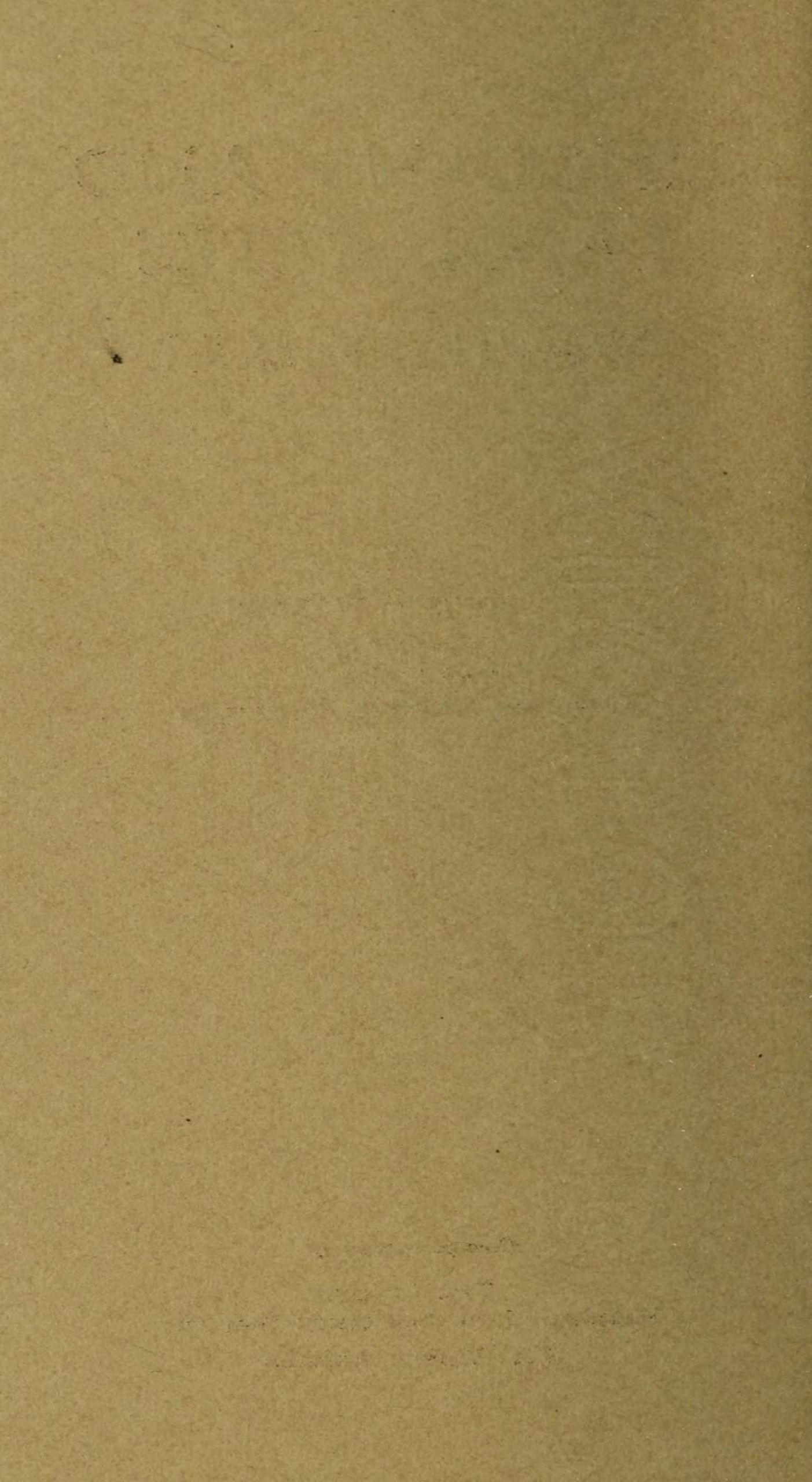
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LINCOLNS AND LAFOLLETTES

Were They Kinsfolk?

Abraham Lincoln and Robert M. LaFollette had many characteristics in common which were also to be found in other statesmen who grew up in what was known as "The Old Northwest."

Writing about his first day in Washington, LaFollette says: "Before breakfast I went to Lincoln Park and stood with bowed head before Ball's statue of Lincoln." In after years he remarked that he had never forgotten the sensation of that moment.

How much more pronounced that sensation would have been if LaFollette had known that his own grandfather and the father of Abraham Lincoln were close neighbors, during the Kentucky days, and possibly related to each other through marriage.

While making researches in Kentucky, the editor of Lincoln Lore came across a coincident that is of more than passing interest. From the early court records of Hardin County it was discovered that the Lincoln and LaFollette families were both driven from the same original land survey by the same ejectment suit.

In the month of January, 1815, ten families who had settled on a ten thousand acre tract of land on Knob Creek in what was then Hardin County, now LaRue, found themselves in litigation over their land titles. Suit

had been brought against them by the heirs of Thomas Middleton of Philadelphia, who claimed a prior right to the land. Among the men who had been made defendants in this suit were Thomas Lincoln, Jesse LaFollette, and Isaac LaFollette. Jesse LaFollette was the grandfather of Robert M. LaFollette.

It was decided by the court to make the Thomas Lincoln case a test case and it was to be tried first. On the first day of January, 1815, Lincoln received a New Year's gift in the form of a document which read like this:

"Mr. Thomas Lincoln, Tenant in Possession. You will perceive by the foregoing declaration in ejectment that I am sued for the premises mentioned or some part of them they being in your possession to which I have no claim or title. If therefore you have any claim thereto and intend to defend it you must appear at the court house at Elizabethtown on the first day of our next March term of the Hardin Circuit Court and make your defense otherwise I shall suffer judgment to pass against me by default and you will be turned out of possession. Your loving friend Richard Roe."

When the ten defendants met at Elizabethtown and talked over the plans for fighting the case, there were two of the number, Thomas Lincoln and Jesse LaFollette, who were not very enthusiastic, evidently, in going into a long period of litigation. The father of Abraham Lincoln and the grandfather of Robert M. LaFollette were through for all time with Kentucky land holdings and long before

this Middleton ejectment suit was settled both men had moved their families to Indiana.

The Lincolns settled in what was then Perry County, Indiana, and the LaFollettes located in the adjacent county of Harrison. Both families eventually moved farther west, the Lincolns to Illinois and the LaFollettes to Wisconsin.

It is possible that there is a closer relation between these two families than the community contact. The grandmother of Abraham Lincoln and the grandmother of Robert M. LaFollette on the maternal side were both Lees, if it can be maintained that Nancy Hanks Lincoln was the child of either a son or a daughter of the Joseph Hanks who married Nancy Lee.

Jesse LaFollette, grandfather of Robert M. LaFollette, married Mary (Polly) Lee, January 25, 1808, in Hardin County. A brother of Jesse, Uzal LaFollette, was already married to a Nancy Lee, and Jesse's oldest sister, Mary LaFollette, was the wife of John Lee. It is not difficult to associate the Lees with the LaFollettes.

It is also possible to show that this same Lee family into which the LaFollettes had married were closely associated with Joseph Hanks, who had married a Nancy Lee and who was a close neighbor of the LaFollettes.

On February 28, 1787, a John Lee sold to Joseph Hanks one hundred and fifty acres of land, a part of the same tract on which Lee was then living. Joseph Hanks died on this same farm in 1793. The John Lee from whom Hanks had purchased the property

had passed away in 1788, and Elizabeth Lee, probably his widow, was made executor of the estate. Joseph Barnett, the original owner of both the Lee and Hanks farms, gave a note to John Lee Jr., in 1794 which was witnessed by Charles Lee and William Hanks. William was a son of Joseph Hanks.

Charles Lee died in 1796 and Joseph LaFollette, father of Jesse, and great grandfather of Robert M. LaFollette, was appointed one of the appraisers of his estate. The original settlements of the Lees, Hankses and LaFollettes, and later the home of Thomas and Nancy Hanks Lincoln, were in the Knob Creek community, embracing parts of the old Nelson and Hardin counties. It would appear that there was some relation at least between John Lee and Nancy Lee Hanks, and we are positive that the descendants of John Lee married into the LaFollette family.

It is a pure assumption, however, to claim that this Lee family was related to the family of Robert E. Lee, although long before Mr. E. Carter Delano discovered the interesting records of Joseph Hanks in Richmond County, Virginia, which were given such wide publicity by the late Dr. Barton, the relatives of Nancy Hanks were claiming this relationship.

Inasmuch as an illustrious man will immediately be claimed by every family bearing the same name, the writer did not pay much attention to the claim in some Hanks letters in his possession, that the president's mother was a relative of Robert E. Lee. He was interested in observing

however, that the descendants of Joseph Hanks agreed that his wife was a Lee.

On February 25, 1895, Mrs. M. A. Wilson, of Cannon City, Colorado, a great grand - daughter of Joseph Hanks, wrote a letter to Mrs. Caroline Hanks Hitchcock of Cambridge, Massachusetts, from which this excerpt is taken:

“The mother of Joseph Hanks (son of Joseph Hanks Sr., already mentioned) was a Lucy Lee of Virginia, a relative of Robert E. Lee.”

On this same subject Mrs. Wilson wrote Mrs. Hitchcock again on March 13 of the same year, after having interviewed one of the older members of the family:

“But about the given name of the mother of Joseph Hanks (Jr.) she is not certain, having obtained that information recently from my father’s sister. He told her himself that his mother was a Lee but she does not remember whether he said the name was Nancy or Lucy.”

This correspondence took place nearly thirty-five years before the recent discovery of the Richmond County records by Mr. Delano.

The most difficult task, however, in connecting the grandmother of Abraham Lincoln and the grandmother of Robert M. LaFollette is the lack of positive evidence about the identity of the parents of Nancy Hanks Lincoln. Abraham Lincoln did say that the descendants of this Joseph Hanks were his cousins, which would seem to be the closest approach to the problem which can be made at this time.

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