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The Parents of Abraham Lincoln

An Address by
WILLIAM E. BARTON

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of Abraham Lincoln," etc.*

Delivered at the grave of Thomas Lincoln, Goose Nest
Prairie, near Janesville, Illinois,
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THE CELEBRATION AT SHILOH

Shiloh Church, which adjoins the cemetery where Thomas Lincoln and Sarah Bush Lincoln are buried, was recently remodeled and its facilities were enlarged. A service of rededication was held, and a memorial window was dedicated to the memory of Thomas and Sarah Lincoln. Shortly after this rededication, a notable Lincoln celebration was held, and attended by people from the neighborhood and from several adjacent towns. A number of people were present who had personally known Thomas Lincoln, and many who had known his widow. The speaker of the day was Dr. William E. Barton, who delivered two addresses, one on "The Greatness of Abraham Lincoln" and the other on "The Parents of Abraham Lincoln." The church was packed to its capacity for the morning address. This was followed by a picnic dinner, and reunion of old friends. The afternoon meeting was held out of doors, in the cemetery. Dr. Barton delivered his address standing beside the graves of Thomas and Sarah Lincoln.

The Parents of Abraham Lincoln

Three mighty forces go to the making of any man. First is that mysterious element of personality wherein every man differs from every other man. No two men, even though born of the same parents and reared in the same surroundings, prove to be wholly similar. No two leaves upon the tree, no two blades of grass, no two thumb-prints of the human hand, no two brains, no two characters are precisely alike. The second of the forces which make us what we are is heredity. Every man is what he is partly because of what his parents, his grandparents and his remote ancestors were. The third of these forces is environment. Every man's life is shaped by the influence of other lives, by soil, climate, and other conditions surrounding him. The life of Abraham Lincoln was what it was partly because of his successive environments, partly because of his inheritance, and partly because of his own personality. It is fitting that we should consider today something of his inheritance through his father, Thomas Lincoln, his mother, Nancy Hanks, and the subsequent influence upon him of his devoted step-mother, Sarah Bush Johnson, the second wife of Thomas Lincoln.

It is surprising that so little reliable work has been done in this field. On the death of Abraham Lincoln no member of the Lincoln family was present at his funeral save his widow, Mary Todd Lincoln, and her two surviving sons, Robert and Thomas. Although most of the Todds were Confederates, there were Todd relatives at the funeral, but no Lincoln. There has been but little opportunity to learn to what extent Abraham Lincoln was a Lincoln. His own contact with the Lincoln family was exceedingly meager.

This we know, however, that Abraham Lincoln was thoroughly a Lincoln. We know enough of the Lincoln family traits to assure ourselves that however great the contrast between him and either of his parents, he had an important heritage from both. While Thomas Lincoln never could have been as great a man as his son, and while Nancy Hanks never contemplated the possibility of herself becoming a notable woman, each of these two gave something important to the making of Lincoln. The picture of Nancy Hanks, which has come down to us, is vague in its outline and elusive in its definition. But Lincoln himself said of his mother that she was a woman of strong

mind and character and that from her he inherited his power of analysis and his logical mind. Thomas Lincoln died before his son became famous, and he was held in no very high regard by Lincoln's earlier biographers; but in proportion as we come to know the Lincolns, and to be able to form some judgment of the character of Thomas Lincoln, we find him to have been indispensable in the heredity of his great son.

No one of us can spare any one of his ancestors. There is no way in which we can short-circuit the line of descent so as to cut out the obscurest and least interesting of them. Each one of them, male and female, is indispensable in his or her own generation; and had the place of any one man or any one woman among them been taken by any other man or woman in that generation, we should not be what now we are.

We have to reckon with Abraham Lincoln as he was; and it is in some respects a minor question how he came to be what he was; but this we know, that his personality was a strange compound of diverse elements, some of them inherited from his paternal and some from his maternal lines, and that he needed all of them to be Abraham Lincoln.

So much of error has been printed as truth, it may be well to give a few dates and other biographical data.

First of all, the dates given on the tombstone of Thomas Lincoln, I am confident, are correct, and not those furnished in some of the biographies. He was born in Rockingham County, Virginia, January 7, 1778, and he died January 15, 1851. He was the youngest of three sons, and next to the youngest of five children of Abraham and Bathsheba Lincoln. His father was not twice married; the five children were all children of one mother, who removed to Kentucky with her husband in 1782, and long survived him. Abraham Lincoln the elder was killed by Indians in May, 1786, and not in 1784, as is usually stated. Thomas Lincoln learned the carpenter's trade. He was probably not a very skilled carpenter, but he was competent to do the kind of work which the frontier required.

Nancy Hanks, first wife of Thomas Lincoln, and mother of the President, was born in Virginia in 1783; removed with her family to Kentucky in early childhood; was married to Thomas Lincoln by Rev. Jesse Head on Beech Fork, in Washington County, on June 12, 1806. With her husband and children she removed to Indiana in 1816, and she died October 5, 1818.

Sarah or Sally Bush, second wife of Thomas Lincoln, lived in Elizabethtown, Kentucky, and married, first, Daniel Johnston, by whom she had three children, John D., Sarah and Matilda. After the death of her first husband, she married Thomas Lincoln December 2, 1819. She was a good mother, both to her own children and to the two children of Thomas Lincoln, Sarah and Abraham. She died April 10, 1869, and is buried here beside her husband. Her influence upon the life of Abraham Lincoln was wholly good. He held her in honor, and she cherished his memory with a beautiful and truly motherly affection.

Standing here today by the grave of Thomas Lincoln, and that of his second wife, Sally Bush, the second mother of Abraham Lincoln, we have to remind ourselves that there is much need of revision of popular knowledge, or what passes for knowledge, concerning Lincoln's parents. His step-mother survived him, and lived to be interviewed by the earlier biographers. She was able to bear her testimony that Abraham was always a good boy and never spoke to her a cross word, and that she loved him as her own son. But Thomas and Nancy Lincoln died long before Abraham, and there is much error commonly accepted as truth in the literature concerning both of them.

It is often alleged that the name of Thomas Lincoln was not Lincoln but Linkhorn. Various authors have declared that this branch of the family never wrote the name as Lincoln until Abraham Lincoln himself obtained sufficient education to settle the spelling. As recent a writer as Norman Hapgood says of Thomas Lincoln, or Linkhorn, "His name was under the circumstances unstable, but in Indiana it showed a general drift toward Lickern, away from the favorite Kentucky form of Linkhorn, settling its present spelling many years later in Illinois." Mr. Hapgood is wrong in this and in much besides. In the backwoods, not only the name of Lincoln but most other names were mispronounced and misspelled, but I have not found one single instance of its being misspelled by a member of the family. Thomas Lincoln and Thomas Lincoln's father Abraham and Thomas Lincoln's uncle Thomas, for whom he was named, and his grandfather and his great-grandfather all signed their names Lincoln.

It is often alleged and commonly believed that Thomas Lincoln was taught to read and write by his first wife, Nancy Hanks. On the contrary, he signed his name before he was married. We have reason to believe that Nancy Hanks did write, but in the only document that has

been discovered executed by these two, Thomas Lincoln signed his name and Nancy made her mark. It is true that Thomas Lincoln's education was very meager. As his famous son said of him, he was able "bunglingly to write his own name" and that was all. But that was something of a distinction in a time when so many men in contemporary life and with like advantages signed their names with a cross.

It is often alleged that Thomas Lincoln was cheated out of his inheritance by his two older brothers, Mordecai and Josiah, Mordecai taking the whole property by right of primogeniture and distributing a minor portion to Josiah by leaving Thomas entirely unprovided for. On the contrary, it appears that Mordecai as heir-at-law of his father represented honorably the interests of the whole family. Soon after Thomas Lincoln became of age he was able to buy an improved farm and to pay for it in cash. The money presumably had come to him through the settlement of his father's estate.

Very nearly everything that has been written about Thomas Lincoln's three farms in Kentucky is wrong. The historians and biographers, even the best of them, have the three hopelessly mixed up, and hardly anything that they tell about them is authentic.

It is commonly asserted that Thomas Lincoln and his first wife, Nancy Hanks, were first cousins, she being the daughter of Joseph and Nancy Shipley Hanks, and he the son of Abraham and Mary Shipley Lincoln, and that Nancy was brought up by a third of the five Shipley sisters, her dear Aunt Lucy, wife of Richard Berry. Thomas Lincoln and Nancy Hanks were not cousins; we might even go the Hibernian length of saying that "neither of them were cousins." Her mother was not Nancy Shipley and his mother was not Mary Shipley, and her Aunt Lucy was not Aunt Lucy, but was named Rachel and there was no proof that she was Nancy's aunt.

It is commonly asserted that Thomas Lincoln was virtually a pauper, and pathetic stories are told of the extreme poverty of himself and wife at the time of the birth of Abraham. The Lincoln family was poor, even as poverty is judged in the backwoods; but there exist records of certain purchases made by Thomas Lincoln of articles for the home, showing that even in those primitive days in the backwoods of Kentucky the discomfort was not quite so great nor the poverty so wretched as has been described.

Authors have seemed to feel the necessity of going to

one or two extremes in their description of the early life of Lincoln. Either they idealize it, so that there is no real poverty, or they exaggerate conditions of squalor to utter wretchedness. Neither is quite true.

It is often affirmed that Thomas Lincoln owned no live stock, and had to borrow horses with which to make his migration from Kentucky. On the contrary, Thomas Lincoln owned a horse before he was of age, and during his married life, as shown by authentic and contemporary lists, he always had at least one horse and commonly more than one. There is evidence that he was something of a horse-breeder. At one time he owned a stallion and several mares. He also owned cattle.

It is often affirmed that Thomas Lincoln was a kind of religious vagrant, having no settled religious life but drifting in a derelict way into one sect after another and being brought into church membership through the influence of his second wife. On the contrary, Thomas Lincoln was a member of the church in Kentucky, where Nancy Hanks also appears to have been a member, and when he joined the church in Indiana with his second wife, Sarah Bush Lincoln, he joined by letter and she by experience. He was a church member before she was. He was an official member of the church, sometimes acting as moderator, sometimes as referee in matters of arbitration between church members, sometimes as delegate to other churches.

Thomas Lincoln was an easy-going man, without ambition, and he cannot be called industrious. But he was friendly, honest, neighborly, and, judged by the standards of his day, temperate. He won the hearts of two good women. The first of these was Nancy Hanks, a chaste young woman, who bequeathed to her son fine qualities of character, temperament, disposition and power of mental grasp; while he bequeathed a genial disposition, sound good sense, a love of story-telling, and those companionable qualities which meant so much to the life of Abraham Lincoln. The other was Sarah Bush Lincoln, who made Thomas a loving and faithful wife and Abraham a devoted mother. In her younger years she was alert, active, industrious and all her life she was a true and sincere Christian woman. Much pity has been wasted upon her for having married Thomas Lincoln. There is no evidence that she felt the need of such pity; nor is it any libel upon her first husband to say that her second marriage brought her quite as much happiness as the first.

Of the vast quantities of literature that have been pro-

duced concerning Thomas Lincoln and his two marriages, not quite all is false, but more than half of it is in great need of revision, and some is utter trash. The parents of Lincoln were undistinguished, but they were good people, and neither Lincoln nor we have any occasion to be ashamed of them. There is of course a marked contrast between their obscurity and his immortal fame, but except for them we should never have had him. They helped to make him the man he was.

We hold in lasting honor the memory of Abraham Lincoln. We are in no danger of honoring him more highly than he deserves. He is worthy of all our devotion. But just now we are remembering these humble folk, his parents, his father, his mother and his step-mother. They were a part of the common stuff of American life in that period of movement and of new settlement, with nothing to distinguish them above their neighbors, save this, only, that from their home went forth into the world a mighty leader of mankind. We could not have expected that any such son as Abraham Lincoln should have gone forth from their cabin, but we have no reason to be surprised that such was the case. In their veins flowed good, sturdy, clean American blood. They were honest, virtuous, sober people. They were sincere and religious. With little education, they had good sense and good native ability. They contributed the qualities which were essential to the heredity and early environment of the man who was to save this nation and to make it forever free. Let us honor today the honest, sturdy pioneers of whom they were fair average examples. Let us be glad that from homes as humble as theirs and descended from families as little known to fame as theirs had been, so great a man could go forth. For this is one chief hope of American life, that our leaders are to be made out of the stuff of our common manhood. From fathers and mothers as simple and unpretentious as Thomas Lincoln and Nancy Hanks, from homes as poor as that of Thomas Lincoln and Sally Bush, are to go forth men of learning and power. These are in large measure the hope of America, and increasingly are they to be the hope of the world.

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