

Origins

~ Lincoln's ancestors ~ Thomas Lincoln in New Orleans ~ Lincoln's Kentucky birth and childhood ~ Indiana boyhood ~ Lincoln and the Ohio River ~ A traumatic end and a new beginning

When asked in 1859 to describe his early years, Republican presidential nominee Abraham Lincoln diffidently quoted Thomas Gray's "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard" by responding, "The short and simple annals of the poor."¹ Extraordinary as Lincoln came to be, the annals of his youth generally typified the experience of many, perhaps most, white American males in the trans-Appalachian West of the early nineteenth century. For most of his life, Lincoln's American experience was not particularly exceptional or unusual. The same may be said of Lincoln's ancestors.

Little more did Lincoln know of his mother's ancestry than she came from "a family of the name of Hanks. . . ."² Heitman presents a genealogical challenge because of its intergenerational proclivity to ascribe the same five or so Christian names to its scores of offspring. Her matrilineal progenitor was Adam Shipley, who arrived in Maryland from England in 1668. Shipley's descendants over the next century made their way to Virginia; one, Lucy, married a man named James Hanks. The couple, uneducated farmers of modest means, migrated with the Appalachians to Kentucky around 1780. At least eight children named Nancy Hanks were born in ensuing years. One, possibly conceived out of wedlock with a Virginia planter and born around 1784, would become the mother of a president.³

More is known of Lincoln's paternal side. It traces to Samuel Lincoln,

1. Walter Hall Lamon, *Recollections of Abraham Lincoln, 1847-1865*, ed. Dorothy Lamon Teillard (Chicago, IL: A. C. McClurg and Company, 1895), 9.

2. Abraham Lincoln to Jesse W. Fell, December 20, 1859, in *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, ed. Roy P. Basler (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1953), 3:1.

3. David Herbert Donald, *Lincoln* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995), 19-21; Louis A. Warren, *Lincoln's Young Indiana Years: 1816 to Twenty-One, 1816-1830* (Indianapolis: Indiana Historical Society Press, 1975; reprinted 2002), 6. The story of Nancy Hanks' illegitimate birth allegedly derives from Lincoln himself, as told to his law partner and future biographer William H. Herndon. See Don E. Fehrenbacher and Virginia Fehrenbacher, *Recollected Words of Abraham Lincoln* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1996), 240-41.

a seventeen-year-old weaver from Norfolk, England, who immigrated to Hingham, Massachusetts, in 1637. Samuel succeeded as a trader, founded a church, and produced eleven offspring—one named Mordecai, typical of the traditional Christian names favored by the devout family. One of Mordecai's sons, born in 1686 and also christened with that biblical appellation, grew wealthy as an ironmaster and landowner in Pennsylvania. The young Mordecai Lincoln achieved (in part through marriage) elite status in the political, social, and economic realms of colonial American society. Some family members were Quakers. Mordecai's son John, born in 1716, brought the Lincoln name and impressive wherewithal westward to Virginia's Shenandoah Valley, where in 1768 he established a farm in what later became Rockingham County.

John's son Abraham came to own over two hundred acres, and could have set down Lincoln family roots in that rich Virginia soil. But—as was the case for many ambitious Virginians in this era, the lure of greater fortune in lands to the west proved too tempting to pass up. Reports from distant kin Daniel Boone about fertile soil and lush forest in Kentucky helped convince the Lincolns to uproot and head there. During 1780–81, as the Revolutionary War raged in the East, Abraham Lincoln sold his respectable Virginia holding and led his wife and five children over the Appalachians.⁴ Among his sons was Thomas Lincoln, born in 1776 or 1778.

The early 1780s was the prime time for such passage. Daniel Boone's recent blazing of the Wilderness Road enabled American families such as the Lincolns to traverse the Cumberland Gap. Subsequent road expansion invited more emigration. Intensifying pressure on Native Americans and a growing network of frontier forts brought, from the white perspective, some measure of security to the region. New laws supposedly brought some level of stability to Kentucky's notoriously erratic land titles. It is no coincidence that both the Hanks and Lincoln families independently migrated to Kentucky around 1780—the same year that three hundred “large family boats” navigated down the Ohio River to where the Great Falls impeded navigation, thus occasioning the foundation and incorporation of Louisville.⁵ Within a few years, the Lincolns owned thousands of acres of fertile Kentucky soil, roughly twenty miles east of Louisville. Their prospects looked bright.

4. Donald, *Lincoln*, 19–21.

5. John G. Nicolay and John Hay, *Abraham Lincoln: A History* (New York: Century Co., 1890), 1:15.

Then, in May 1786, a tragic incident radically altered the family's destiny. In the words of the future president, "My paternal grandfather, Abraham Lincoln, was killed by indians, not in battle, but by stealth, when he was labouring to open a farm in the forest" with sons Mordecai, Josiah, and Thomas. The two older boys ran for aid while the bewildered Thomas, eight or ten years old, remained with his slain father. Mordecai returned with a musket just in time to kill the Native American and attempted to make off with the boy. Josiah soon arrived with reinforcements from a nearby fort to chase off the attackers. The episode reveals the tensions and violence on the Kentucky frontier.

Suddenly without a breadwinner, the Lincolns saw their prospects wither. They were eventually forced to move and disperse. Worse yet, little of the homogenized in this Virginia-controlled region of Kentucky meant that the eldest son Mordecai alone would inherit most of Abraham's estate. Blessed additionally with intelligence and wit, Mordecai Lincoln would become an illustrious citizen, landowner, and racehorse breeder. "Uncle Mordecai run off with all the talents of the family," Lincoln once chortled. "I called a latter-day historian, 'He had also, to effect, run off with all the money.'"⁸

Mordecai's youngest brother Thomas, lacking a father, an inheritance, and an education, suffered particularly with the family's descent. Working odd jobs with his jack-of-all-trades background skills, he would come to know the proverbial "short and simple annals of the poor." Yet Thomas Lincoln also proved steadfast, reliable, ethical, and amiable to a degree often denied him in history. One acquaintance described Thomas, whose surname was often spelled "Linkhorn," as a

hale, hearty-looking man, of medium height, heavy and square-built, rather clumsy in his gait, had a kind-looking face, was a moderately good house carpenter. . . . quite illiterate . . . regarded as a very honest man.⁹

These qualities helped Thomas gain, by the dawn of the new century,

6. Lincoln to Fell, December 20, 1857, *Collected Works*, 3:511

7. Nicolay and Hay, *Abraham Lincoln*, 1:2.

8. Donald, *Lincoln*, 21–2.

9. Recollection of Capt. Samuel Haycraft, in "Lincoln's Birthplace: Some Incidents and Facts Never before Published," *San Francisco Bulletin* 37 no. 85 (January 16, 1874): 4.

good standing and ready work in the village of Elizabethtown. It also earned him and a partner named Isaac Bush the trust of two Elizabethtown storekeepers, Robert Bleakley and William Montgomery, to build and guide a flatboat down to New Orleans to vend produce. Store records show that on February 18, 1806, Thomas Lincoln sold to Bleakley and Montgomery “2400 pounds of pork at 15 pence and 494 pounds of beef at 15 pence” for which his account was credited “21 pounds, 17 shillings and 11 pence.”¹⁰ Bleakley and Montgomery’s records also indicate a sale to Thomas of a saw, plane, file, auger, and adze—tools needed for flatboat and house construction—and a credit to Isaac Bush’s account for the construction of a flatboat at West Point.¹¹ From the *embarcadura* (Spanish for boat launch) of that time Ohio River settlements located at the Salt River confluence and so named because it once (1796) formed the westernmost point of American civilization, Bush and Lincoln commenced their journey to New Orleans. Their exact departure date from West Point is not determinable, nor is the question of whether those 2,894 pounds of meat constituted the cargo. We do know that a Bleakley and Montgomery ledger entry dated May 16, 1806, reads “Thomas Lincoln going to Orleans £16.10^s [16 pounds, 10 shillings], followed by a line reading “gold, £13.14.7½ [13 pounds, 14 shillings, 7½ pence], indicating that Thomas was back in Elizabethtown by that date. Based on this documentary evidence, historian Louis A. Warren estimated a departure date around March 1 and a return by May 1.¹²

Does this nine-week period allow enough time to float 1,300 miles downriver, transact business in New Orleans, and return on horseback, foot, or by slow-moving keelboat (not being before the advent of the steamboat)? A typical flatboat launched near West Point took about five days to float down the Ohio, followed by three to four weeks on the Mississippi to New Orleans.¹³ A full moon on March 4 would have allowed Lincoln and Bush to travel nocturnally (risky, but not impossible) for part

10. Warren, *Lincoln's Youth*, 5, 17.

11. Donald E. McClure, *Two Centuries of Elizabethtown and Hardin County* (Elizabethtown, KY: The Hardin County Historical, 1971), as quoted by Maria Campbell Brent and Joseph E. Brent, *Lincoln, Kentucky & Kentuckians: A Cultural Resource Inventory of Sites in Kentucky Associated with President Abraham Lincoln* (Frankfort, KY: Historical Confederation of Kentucky and the Kentucky Abraham Lincoln Bicentennial Commission, 2005), 4.

12. Warren, *Lincoln's Youth*, 5, 21.

13. Zadok Cramer, *The Navigator, or the Traders' Useful Guide in Navigating the Monongahela, Allegheny, Ohio, and Mississippi Rivers* (Pittsburgh: Zadok Cramer, 1806), 125. See also page 37 of the 1814 edition.

of the downriver journey.¹⁴ Assuming no delays, they might have landed in New Orleans, transacted business, departed immediately, rode by horse or keelboat back to Natchez (one to two weeks), then continued 600 miles on the Natchez Trace on horseback to Kentucky. Thirty miles being typical daily progress, this leg would have taken around three weeks.¹⁵ This timeline puts Lincoln and Bush on a tight schedule to fit within the March–May window, although it is not without documented precedent. One Westerner of the same region in the era claimed the return trip took him one month:

I left New Orleans about the 10th of May, and arrived home on the 1st day of June [1810]. . . . In traveling home I passed through many Cheyenne and Chickasaw tribes of Indians . . . walk[ing] about eight hundred miles, swimming across streams, wading through swamps, and sleeping in the open air on the ground.¹⁶

Lincoln and Bush undoubtedly suffered similar conditions. Perhaps they left immediately after the February 18 ledger transaction and returned just before the May 16 entry, allowing twelve weeks for the journey. Wharfinger reports in New Orleans, unfortunately do not clarify the voyage's timing: the City Council mandated on March 21, 1806 that the Collector of Levee Dues keep records of flatboat arrivals, but the Collector did not comply with the new rule until April—too late by a few weeks to capture a Kentuckian flatboat crew that was definitely back home on May 16.¹⁷ U.S. Customs Service officials at the Port of New Orleans may have recorded Thomas' arrival in their manifests (which logged the flatboat's

14. U.S. Naval Observatory Astronomical Applications Department, "Phases of the Moon," <http://aa.usno.navy.mil/data/docs/MoonPhase.php> (accessed October 14, 2008).

15. Occasional visitor reported logging thirty miles per day on horseback through the wilds of Mississippi. A pedestrian could cover fifteen to twenty-five miles per day on rural roads and trails, depending on age, strength, and conditions. As cited by Herman Freudenberger and Jonathan M. Fritchett, "The Domestic United States Slave Trade: New Evidence," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 21, no. 3 (Winter 1991): 472.

16. Isaac Naylor, "Judge Isaac Naylor, 1790–1873: An Autobiography," *Indiana Magazine of History* 4, no. 3 (September 1907): 26.

17. The Collector of Levee Dues recorded many flatboats not by their captain's surname, but by the names given to the boats. In any case, no Bush or Lincoln appears in the April 1806 ledger. Wharfinger Reports, Microfilm #7500 QN420, 1806, New Orleans Collector of Levee Dues—Registers of Flatboats, Boats, Rafts, and Steamboats in the Port of New Orleans.

name, captain, crew, and cargo (plus the Marine Hospital tax paid), but those intriguing documents only survive for the month of May 1807.¹⁸ Newspaper reports of the wharfinger's records also fall short: the semi-weekly *Louisiana Gazette's* "Ship News" column documented numerous "Kentucky Boats" or "flats" arriving at New Orleans during late winter and early spring 1806, but none specifically originating from West Point or Elizabethtown, nor affiliated with the surname Lincoln. The newspaper listed a number of flatboats by vessel name and state of origin, rather than owner and city, so perhaps the Bush-Lincoln expedition lies among these entries. More likely, the *Gazette* simply missed it, as its "Ship News" column did not comprehensively cover flatboat arrivals.¹⁹

Thomas Lincoln may have made multiple flatboat trips to New Orleans from Kentucky and later from Indiana, according to reminiscences recorded in 1865 by a distant relative named Augustus H. Chapman:

Thus Lincoln Made Several trips down the River while he lived in Ind taking flat Boats Loaded with Produce, principally Corn, from these trips he realized but little profit simply turning what he raised on his Farm into cash, he sold one entire load on a credit & never realized a cent for the same, he also tooke 2 trips Down the river with flat Boats while he lived in Ky walking all the way from New Orleans to his home in Ky[.]²⁰

Later in the same letter, Chapman refined his memories. Referring to Thomas Lincoln, he wrote that

while he resided in Ky he made two trips down the Ohio & Miss Rivers to New Orleans with one Isaac Bush. Th[e]y wa[lked] the entire distance across th[e] country from New Orleans b[ack] to their homes in Ky.²¹

18. Survey of Federal Archives in Louisiana, Division of Professional and Service Projects, Works Projects Administration, *Flatboats on the Mississippi in 1807* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1940).

19. Survey by author of "Ship News" columns, *Louisiana Gazette*, February through May 1806. The February 21 edition listed a pilot named Bush (written "Bufh" in the orthography of the day) arriving fromatchez on a flatboat named Polly.

20. A. H. Chapman to William C. Herndon, September 8, 1865, in ed. Douglas L. Wilson and Rodney O. Davis, *Herndon's Informants: Letters, Interviews, and Statements About Abraham Lincoln* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1998), 100.

21. *Ibid.*, 102.

Another relative provided additional insights into this question. “Did Ever Thomas Lincoln send any produce to Neworleans?” wrote the relative in response to a written query in 1866; “Not from Indiana,” he replied; Thomas “Jest I used a Not for his own use[;] he Did Not Send any produce to any other place.”²²

Thomas Lincoln’s exposure to the untamed Lower Mississippi Valley and New Orleans opened up numerous historical questions. What did he experience? What stories—and Thomas Lincoln was a noted storyteller—did he later share with his son? Did he show Abe how to build and guide a flatboat, and to blink off with firsthand knowledge of the journey and destination? And what of slavery?—what did he witness in New Orleans, and did it inform his position on the institution, his later decision to move to Indiana, or what he taught his children? Thomas Lincoln’s flight to New Orleans imparts, at the very least, a cultural dimension—a passing—how?—of knowledge from father to son—to Abraham Lincoln’s journeys decades later.

The revealing Bleakley Montgomery store ledger shows Thomas making more purchases in late May 1806, this time for domestic items such as cloth and sewing sundries. They were in preparation for his June 12 wedding to an old family acquaintance, twenty-two-year-old Nancy Hanks. Historical characterizations of Nancy lack the range and depth of those ascribed, rightly or wrongly, to her husband. They are also notably contradictory. An 1896 narrative history, perhaps inclined to romanticize the mother of a martyred president, described Nancy Hanks as “a fair and delicate woman, who could read and write, who had ideas of refinement, and a desire to get more from life than fortune allotted her. . . .”²³ A family acquaintance remembered her quite differently as “rather low-set, heavy-built woman, without education . . . on a par with the ordinary class or circle in which she moved.”²⁴ A contemporary of her youth had yet another recollection, remembering Nancy as “one of the most athletic women in Kentucky, [who] could throw most of the men who ever put her powers to the test.”²⁵ A neighbor who attended Thomas

22. Dennis F. Hanks to William H. Herndon, January 26, 1866, in *Herndon’s Informants*, 176.

23. Ida Minerva Tarver and John Merton Davis, *The Early Life of Abraham Lincoln: Containing Many Unpublished Documents and Unpublished Reminiscences of Lincoln’s Early Friends* (New York and London: Scribner’s, 1896), 37.

24. Recollection of Capt. Samuel Haycraft, in “Lincoln’s Childhood,” *San Francisco Bulletin*, 4.

25. Usher Linder, as quoted in Douglas L. Wilson, *Honor’s Voice: The Transformation of*

and Nancy's wedding described the bride simply as a "fresh-looking girl, I should say over twenty. . . . The "infare" (feast) that followed the wedding apparently made a greater impression on him, as he described it with impressive detail:

We had bear-meat . . . venison; wild turkey and ducks; eggs, wild and tame, so common that you could buy them at two bits a bundle; maple syrup, swung on a string, to bite off for coffee or whiskey; soup in big gourds; peach and-honey; a sheep that the two families barbecued whole over coals of woods burned in a pit, and covered with green boughs to keep the juices in, and a race for the whiskey bottle.²⁶

Thomas and Nancy Lincoln initially settled in Elizabethtown, where their first child, Sarah, arrived on February 10, 1807. Nancy became pregnant again in May 1808. A few months later, Thomas purchased for two hundred dollars a 300-acre farm near Hodgen's Mill (later Hodgenville) in Hardin County. He guided his expectant wife and infant daughter to the new homestead, located along Nolin Creek, fifteen miles southwest of Elizabethtown. A local man later described the area's landscape and explained the origin of the farm's name, Sinking Spring:

[T]he country round about is rather level, that is no hills of note but in many places Small Basins (as they are called here) which render the face of the country uneven & disagreeable to work for farming[;] in these little Sinks or basins, ponds [form,] which in many cases answer valuable purposes to the farmer for Stock. . . . Altogether the place is rather pretty. . . .²⁷

The Lincolns' abode on the rocky and karst topography of Sinking Spring typified that "of the poor Western pioneer—a one-roomed cabin with a large outside chimney, no windows, and only a rude floor."²⁸ There, on Sunday, February 12, 1809, the couple's second child was born. They christened him Abraham in honor of his murdered grandfather. Infant Abraham and sister Sarah would have scant memories of their Kentucky home, because questionable land titles and poor soils soon forced their

Abraham Lincoln (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1998), 27.

26. Tarbell and Davis, *Early Life of Lincoln*, 40.

27. E. R. Burba to William H. Herndon, May 25, 1866, in *Herndon's Informants*, 257.

28. Tarbell and Davis, *Early Life of Lincoln*, 42.

father to look elsewhere to raise his family. In 1811, the family relocated eight miles to the northeast, along Knob Creek.

Knob Creek drained a more rugged landscape than Nolin Creek, one punctuated by a series of wooded “knobs” rising with forty-degree slopes to summits over 200 feet above the streambed. Lincoln’s cousin described the countryside as

not only—knobs—as a piece of land could be . . . tall & peaky hills [that] stood up against the sky . . . around . . . with deep hollows—ravines [covered with] chest trees . . . as thick as trees could grow . . .²⁹

Though this narrow valley ran the Old Cumberland Trail, which connected Bardtown, Kentucky, with Nashville, Tennessee. Among these high hills and deep gorges,” as Lincoln described the landscape, lay a slightly broader bottomland—a hollow—in which a nameless stream joined Knob Creek. Upon three fertile fields covering 228 acres near this confluence, the Lincoln family settled.³¹

“My earliest recollection,” wrote Lincoln later in life, “is of the Knob Creek place.”³² As a toddler, he imbibed Knob Creek’s waters, bathed in its pools, caught its creatures, and played in its mud. His grieving mother might have washed in its current the lifeless body of Abe’s baby brother Thomas, who lived but days beyond his birth in 1811 and lies today in the Redmon family cemetery on a nearby hillside. Knob Creek once nearly claimed Abe’s life, and playmate Austin Gollaher were chasing partridges when Abe, probably around six, slipped on a log and plunged in the creek’s rain-swollen waters. Austin pulled him ashore and shook the gasping child until Knob Creek water spilled from his mouth and breathing resumed. “I would rather see [Austin] than any man living,” Lincoln would say during his presidency.³³

29. Interview, Dennis F. Hanks, by William F. Herndon, June 13, 1860, in *Herndon's Informants*, 38.

30. Lincoln later wrote, “[w]e resided on Knob-creek, on the road from Bardstown Ky. to Nashville Tenn. at a point three, or three and a half miles South of South-West of Wharton's ferry on the Rolling Fork.” Abraham Lincoln, “Autobiography Written for John L. Scripps,” June 1860, *Collected Works*, 4:61.

31. Wayne Whipple, *The Story of Young Abraham Lincoln* (Philadelphia: Henry Altemus Company, 1915), 34.

32. Abraham Lincoln to Samuel H. Craft, June 4, 1860, in *Collected Works*, 4:70; Warren, *Lincoln's Youth*, 11.

33. Recollection of Austin Gollaher, as quoted in Tarbell and Davis, *Early Life of Lincoln*, 43–44. The latter quote appears on the historic sign titled “Lincoln’s Playmate,”

"The place on Knob Creek," wrote Lincoln later in life, "I remember very well. . . ." He and Sarah and Abe learned the alphabet from their mother, and attended a nearby "subscription school" for their first lessons.³⁴ The region's rugged topography once taught Abe a lesson in hydrology. "Sometimes when there came a big rain in the hills," he reminisced,

the water would come down through the gorges and spread all over the farm. [Once, we] planted the corn in what we called the big field, it contained seven acres—and I dropped [two pumpkin seeds] [in] every other hill and every other row. The next Sunday morning there came a big rain in the hills. It did not rain a drop in the valley, but the water coming down through the gorges washed ground, corn, pumpkin seeds, and all clean off the field.³⁵

East the Lincoln homestead, the creek flowed out of the hills and into the flatlands of the Rolling Fork. Atherton's Ferry, thirty miles northeast of the homestead, allowed travelers to cross that stream. Its waters thence joined the Salt River, which emptied into the Ohio River; 300 miles downstream, they joined the Mississippi, and 1,300 miles later, intermixed with the sea.³⁶ Economy, social order, and life in whole among the wooded hollows of the Lincoln homestead and throughout the region—flowed upon these streams and rivers, or arose on account of them. Towns and villages formed where rivers merged, disembogued, or impeded travel. Atherton's Ferry, for example, gained the name Athertonville on account of the people who needed to cross the Rolling Fork there. The confluence of the Salt River with the Ohio River became West Point where Thomas Lincoln set out on a flatboat for New Orleans. The rocks impeding navigation in the Ohio gave rise to the city of Louisville. Waterways, quite simply, constituted the basic infrastructure of the trans-Appalachian West.

Rivers, roads, towns, ferries, mills, and springs exposed the Lincolns to the new American society, constituting itself in the space of displaced natives and felled forests. Peopled disproportionately by Virginians, it was

marking Gollaher's grave in the Pleasant Grove Baptist Church Cemetery near Knob Creek in Kentucky.

34. Abraham Lincoln to Samuel Hays, June 4, 1860, in *Collected Works*, 4:70; Warren, *Lincoln's Youth*, 11.

35. As recollected by J. J. Wiggins in conversation with Lincoln on June 5, 1864, in Fehrenbacher and Fehrenbacher, *Recollected Words of Lincoln*, 56.

36. Ward H. Lamon, *The Life of Abraham Lincoln, From His Birth to His Inauguration as President* (Boston: James R. Osgood and Company, 1872), 14.

a decidedly Southern society: the four counties surrounding the Lincoln homestead contained more than 41,000 residents in 1810, of whom more than one in six was enslaved. Their own county of Hardin was home to 1,007 slaves, compared to 1,017 adult white males.³⁷ Travelers, oftentimes with a coffle of slaves in tow, passed regularly in front of the Lincoln cabin trekking the Old Cumberland Trail. The sight troubled Thomas Lincoln and more than a few of his neighbors, for while most were culturally Southern, they generally thought of themselves as Westerners and debated slavery rigorously. In 1808, for example, the South Fork Baptist Church, located two miles from Sinking Spring, saw fifteen members depart "on account of slavery." Ill feelings among the congregants forced the church to close in 1809, when Abe was born. The Lincolns themselves joined the Separate Baptist congregation of the Little Mount Church, in which an anti-slavery sentiment prevailed.³⁸

Legal problems added to Thomas' disenchantment with Kentucky. Every additional settler made Kentucky less a frontier and more a structured and regulated society. The land claims of the pioneer era, based on irregular metes-and-bounds surveys in the British tradition, became by the early 1800s increasingly overlapping, confusing, and legally contested. Unfair title to the Sinking Spring farm pushed Thomas to move his family to Knob Creek in 1811, but a lawsuit over the matter persisted in 1813—only to be followed two years later by another legal dispute regarding the Knob Creek property. Eight years struggling with contested land titles had reduced Thomas' total claim of 816 acres to a mere 200 acres, which he later had to sell at a loss for the same reason.³⁹

Exasperated, Thomas Lincoln cast his eyes across the Ohio River Valley. Anglo-Americans began arriving into those Indiana Territory lands only recently, following the defeat of the British in the War of 1812 and the forced exile of their Native American allies farther westward. The federal government encouraged the trend: President Madison on May 1, 1816, announced that Indiana Territory lands would be sold to the highest bidder. Better yet, from Thomas Lincoln's perspective, these lands were surveyed systematically according to the Land Ordinance of 1785, and owners were said to be titled clearly. Adding to Indiana's appeal was

37. Computed by author based on county-level populations from the U.S. Census of 1810, as digitized by the National Historical Geographic Information System of the University of Minnesota.

38. Warren, *Lincoln's Youth*, 13.

39. Louis A. Warren, *Lincoln's Parentage and Childhood* (New York and London: Century Company, 1926), 110–21, and *Lincoln's Youth*, 13.

the Ordinance of 1787, which expressly forbade slavery and involuntary servitude in the Northwest Territory. Word that the region would soon join the Union as a free state confirmed the conventional wisdom that slavery would never cross the Ohio. Many other Kentuckians and westward-bound Americans loved the Indiana side of the Ohio River Valley for settlement in the 1820s; the Lincolns' experience, once again, followed larger trends.⁴⁰

Setting out in 1830 to investigate Indiana, Thomas Lincoln built a crude flatboat on the Rolling Fork and floated down the Salt and Ohio rivers. The great artery proved too much for the improvised craft, capsizing it and costing him in some possessions. Upon landing at Thompson's Ferry (hundred miles downriver, where Anderson Creek meets the Ohio near present-day Troy), he ventured sixteen miles inland and identified a parcel of forest at the confluence of Little Pigeon and Big Pigeon creeks, in the Hancock Township of Perry County near Gentryville. He promptly erected a temporary "half-faced camp" of unpeeled logs, fourteen feet square and open on one side. The land demarcated but not yet legally his, Thomas then trekked back to Kentucky to get leave Nancy, Sarah, and Abe. Given his recent river experience, he decided to lead the family by horse-and-wagon to the new site. Only a few, costly, dear possessions were packed up; rural furniture was more easily built anew than transported. The nearly two-week trip over a hundred terrestrial miles gave young Abe his first view of a great river, the Ohio, and his first trip across it, on Hugh Thompson's ferry.⁴² Once in Indiana, the journey became downright arduous, at some points requiring axes to be felled one by one for the party to advance. Finally they arrived at their homestead.

Lincoln later explained his father's decision to leave Kentucky. "[We]

40. Joseph H. Barrett, *Life of Abraham Lincoln: Presenting His Early History, Political Career, and Speeches* (New York: Moore, Van Nostrand & Baldwin, 1865), 22–24; Warren, *Lincoln's Youth*, 13–15.

41. One historian questioned this generally accepted story and suggested Thomas Lincoln took a land route on this prospecting trip. R. Gerald McMurry, "The Lincoln Migration from Kentucky to Indiana," *Indiana Magazine of History* 33, no. 4 (December 1937): 388–91.

42. Josiah Gilbert Holland, *The Life of Abraham Lincoln* (Springfield, MA: Gurdon Bill, 1866), 25–26; Whipple, *Story of Young Lincoln*, 37–39; William H. Herndon and Jesse William Weik, *Herndon's Lincoln: The True Story of a Great Life* (Chicago, New York, and San Francisco: Belford, Clarke & Company, 1891), 1:20.

removed to what is now Spencer County Indiana, in the autumn of 1816 . . . partly on account of slaves; but chiefly on account of the difficulty in land titles in Ky.⁴³ Biographer William Dean Howells offered a more verbose version of Lincoln's characteristically succinct explanation, but because Lincoln had edited Howells' work and let his words stand unedited, they are worth quoting:

Already the evil influences of slavery were beginning to be felt by the poor and the non-slaveholders. . . . But the emigration of Thomas Lincoln is, we believe, to be chiefly attributed to the insecurity of the right by which he held his Kentucky land; for, in those days, land-titles were rather more uncertain than in other human affairs.⁴⁴

A twentieth-century historian interpreted three additional factors at work in Thomas Lincoln's decision: the migratory tendencies of his ancestors, the influence of distant kin who previously made a move across the Ohio, and the opportunity presented by the opening of the Indiana Territory.

Indiana's side of the Ohio River Valley exhibited a similar topography, ecology, and climate as the Kentucky side. But it was less populated and more wild, as Lincoln himself recalled poetically years later: "When first my father settled here . . . was then the frontiers, the Panther's scream, filled the night with fear, And bears preyed on the swine. . . ."⁴⁵ Lincoln's less-lyrical cousin Dennis Hanks described circa-1816 southern Indiana in his orthographically rustic vernacular:

I will just say to you that it was the Brush [brushiest] Cuntry that I have Ever Seen . . . all Kinds of Undergroth Spice wo[o]ld Wild privy Shewmee Dogwood grape vines matted to gether So that as the old Saying goes you could Drive a Pitcher Knife up to the handle in it. Bares and wile Cows Deer turkyes Squirles Rabbits &c[.]⁴⁶

43. Lincoln, "Autobiography," June 1860, in *Collected Works*, 4:61–62.

44. William Dean Howells, *Life of Abraham Lincoln*, facsimile edition of campaign biography corrected by the hand of Abraham Lincoln (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1960), 21.

45. Louis A. Warren, ed., "Factors Contributing to the 1816 Inland Migration," *Lincoln Lore: Bulletin of the Lincoln National Life Foundation*, no. 657 (November 10, 1941).

46. Lincoln, in *Collected Works*, 1:386.

47. Dennis F. Hanks to William H. Herndon, March 22, 1866, in *Herndon's Informants*, 235.

Indiana joined the Union only a few weeks after the Lincolns' autumn 1816 arrival, as a free state despite its decidedly Kentuckian cultural influence, and as the first new state since Louisiana in 1812. The nineteenth state benefitted from the orthogonal American Public Land Survey, a cadastral system far superior to the old English metes-and-bounds method that had long "cursed" eastern and central Kentucky "with defective land titles."⁴⁸ Demographically, Indiana counted far fewer blacks than Kentucky: only five African Americans lived in the Lincolns' Spencer County in 1820, compared to 1,877 whites, whereas their old Kentucky county of Hardin contained 1,409 blacks and 9,009 whites.⁴⁹ If Thomas Lincoln indeed migrated to Indiana to flee insect bites and slavery, he acted wisely on both accounts. Indiana's ruling a few years later to declare all substantial waterways as "public highways" and fine those who obstructed them, made the move an even better decision, as it fostered flatboat commerce with New Orleans—a key element to economic development.⁵⁰

Father and son proceeded to clear the landscape of walnut, hick, oak, elm, maple, and an undergrowth of dog-wood, sumac, and wild grapevine, which abounded in "bear, deer, turkey, and other wild game." Old friends and kin from Kentucky joined the family, assisting with chores and enabling the Lincolns to build a larger cabin of hewn logs. Lincoln later insinuated that the new cabin was finished and occupied "a few days before the completion of [my] eighth year" in early February 1817.⁵¹ In October of that year Thomas ventured to the Land Office in Vincennes to begin payment on his quarter-section (160-acre) claim—the southwestern quadrant of Section 32, Township 4, south of Range 5 West—under the so-called two-dollar-an-acre law. On that title-secured land, the extended Lincoln clan would plant corn and wheat; raise hogs, sheep, and cattle; and hunt game at the numerous settlements.⁵²

Abe would spend the balance of his boyhood at this Indiana home-

48. Howard, *Life of Abraham Lincoln*, 25. The two differing surveying systems affect the landscape to this day, with Indiana exhibiting more orthogonal lines in its county boundaries and land parcels, and Kentucky having more convoluted delineations.

49. Computed by author based on county-level populations from the U.S. Census of 1820, as digitized by the National Historical Geographic Information System of the University of Minnesota.

50. "William P. Dole, Fish Valley Merchant and Flatboatman," ed. Donald F. Carmony, *Indiana Magazine of History* 67, no. 4 (December 1971): 335.

51. Lincoln, "Autobiography," June 1860, in *Collected Works*, 4:62; Warren, *Lincoln's Youth*, 21–23.

52. Herndon and Weik, *Herndon's Lincoln*, 1:21–22; Carl Sandburg, *Abraham Lincoln: The Prairie Years and The War Years* (New York: Dell Publishing Company, 1954), 32.

stead. “There was an unbroken wilderness there then” he would tell an audience in 1859, “and [there] an axe was put in [my] hand; and with the trees and logs and grubs [I] fought until [my] twentieth year. . . .”⁵³ A cousin recalled how, in the soils of his father’s farm, Abe “and I worked bare footed—scrubbed it—plowed—mowed & cradled together—plowed Corn—gathered it & shucked Corn. . . .”⁵⁴ Farm work, school, chores, play, and worship filled his boyhood days, while fireside stories read out his nights—stories told by Thomas and other elders, usually of Native Americans, of pirates, of hunting exploits and animal attacks, or frontier times. Surely Thomas talked of his 1807 flatboat trip to New Orleans, which marked Lincoln’s only visit to a major city and the apogee of his life’s travels.

An Indian, too, Abe “grew up to his present enormous height of six feet and four inches, a stature reached by his late sons and manifested disproportionately in his legs.”⁵⁵ A later account helped etch Lincoln into American cultural memory: the iconic physicality of Lincoln—the ill-fitting cotton osnaburg shirt, the famous ax, the strength, the stoic determination—at this stage of life:

He learned to use the ax and to hold the plough. He became inured to all the duties of seed-time and harvest. [He drove] his father’s team in the field, or from the woods with a heavy draught, or on the rough path to the mill, the store, or the river landing. He was especially . . . adept at felling trees, and acquired a muscular strength in which he was equaled by few. . . .

A vigorous constitution, and a cheerful, unrepining disposition [allowed him] to derive enjoyment from the severest lot. The “necessity of labor,” which is with demagogues mere hollow cant, became to him a true and appreciated reality.⁵⁷

Abe in these years began to exhibit an intrinsic intellectual nature set against his rustic backwoods rearing. Rustic indeed: “There were some schools, so called,” he acknowledged, “but no qualification I ever re-

⁵³ Abraham Lincoln, “Speech at Indianapolis, Indiana, September 11, 1859,” in *Collected Works*, 3:463.

⁵⁴ Interview, John F. Parks by William J. Herndon, 1865–1866, in *Herndon’s Informants*, 455.

⁵⁵ Warren, *Lincoln’s Youth*, 34–42.

⁵⁶ Lincoln, “Speech at Indianapolis,” in *Collected Works*, 3:463.

⁵⁷ Joseph H. Barrett, *Life of Abraham Lincoln, Presenting His Early History, Political Career, and Speeches* (New York: Moore, Wiltach & Baldwin, 1865), 24–25.

quired of a teacher. There was absolutely nothing to excite ambition for education. . . . A stranger—supposed to understand latin, happened to sojourn in the neighborhood, he was looked upon as a wizzard.”⁵⁸ Abe himself gained admiration for his early mastery of reading and writing, skills he gained in Kentucky and refined in Indiana. He became the town scribe—“the best penman in the Neighborhood.”⁵⁹ Wrote one biographer, “[l]etter writing by an illiterate living on the frontier was an accomplishment, but for a lad of seven years almost unbelievable. . . . [what] psychologists would call a gifted child.”⁶⁰ The lad also harbored a sensitivity to all living things that defies the stereotype of backwoods Westerners of this era. One might suppose, for example, that his recollection of shooting a wild turkey through a crack in the cabin wall might serve to showcase his character and manliness. Quite the opposite: apparently troubled by the creature’s violent demise, Abe “never since pulled a finger on any larger game.”⁶¹ People close to Abe later recalled how he “preached against Cruelty to animals, Contending that an ants life was to us, as sweet as ours to us.”⁶² He was deemed sufficiently responsible at age fourteen to be appointed sexton for the Little Pigeon Church, where his father served as trustee and his family worshipped on the Sabbath.⁶³

Inquisitive and thoughtful, Abe hungered for information on the world he did not know and sought explanation for the world he did. He exploited his rudimentary “ABC school” education to the fullest by mastering “*readin, writin and cipherin*, to the Rule of Three,” and “read Every book he could lay his hands on—Mastered it,” as one neighbor put it.⁶⁴ His reading formed something of a nightly after-work ritual, as one cousin recalled: “he would go to the Cupboard—Snatch a piece of Corn bread—take down a book—Sit down on a chair—Cock his legs up as high as his head and read. . . .”⁶⁵ He read *Robinson Crusoe*, those themes of long trips,

58. Lincoln to Fell, December 20, 1859, in *Collected Works*, 3:511.

59. Statement, Joseph C. Richardson, for William H. Herndon, 1865–1866, in *Herndon's Informants*, 473.

60. Warren, *Lincoln's Youth*, 25.

61. Lincoln, “Autobiography,” June 1860, in *Collected Works*, 4:62.

62. Interview, Matilda Johnston Moore, by William H. Herndon, September 8, 1865, *Herndon's Informants*, 109.

63. Warren, *Lincoln's Youth*, 121–22.

64. Interview, John S. Hougland, by William H. Herndon, September 17, 1865, in *Herndon's Informants*, 130; Lincoln to Fell, December 20, 1859, in *Collected Works*, 3:511.

65. Interview, John Hanks, by William H. Herndon, 1865–1866, in *Herndon's Informants*, 455.

great rivers, natives, and exotic destinations were not altogether alien to Western experience. His repeated readings of *Aesop's Fables* may have inculcated in his mind the lesson, "A kingdom divided against itself cannot stand."⁶⁶ Another favorite book was *The Arabian Nights*, which Abe "lay on his stomach by the fire, and read out loud" to his kin. (Apparently unfamiliar with the basic premise of literary fiction, one of Abe's listeners dismissed the book as "a pack of lies." "Mighty fine lies," Abe responded.⁶⁷) Reading William Griffith Shaw's 1821 *History of the United States*, which climaxes with the 1815 American rout of the British at Chalmette, presented Abe with details about New Orleans and Louisiana (probably for the first time), as well as on fellow Westerner and future president Maj. Gen. Andrew Jackson.⁶⁸ His reading of M. L. Weems' *Life of George Washington* so impressed the twelve-year-old that, forty years later, he recounted its impact on him passionately to an audience of senators. Indiana would also provide the bulk of Abe's schoolhouse education, which totaled five terms between Kentucky and Indiana (one aggregate year, typical for a boy in that era). "I have not been to school since," wrote Lincoln in 1859; "The little advance I now have [regarding] education, I have picked up from time to time under the pressure of necessity."⁶⁹ Abe's mental acumen by all accounts matched his social and physical vigor, a pairing one admirer described as "a profound correspondence between his peculiar genius and the pioneer culture in which he grew."⁷⁰ Every inquisitive moment was matched with an impish one, every thoughtful interlude, a funny one; every display of honesty and ethics, one of mischief and prank. Among the twenty tattered scraps of his Indiana school notebook—the earliest surviving document penned in Lincoln's own hand—are the playful verses of a daydreaming schoolboy.

Abraham Lincoln is my nam[e]
And with my pen I write the same

66. As quoted by Donald, *Lincoln*, 31.

67. Warren, *Lincoln's Youth*, 68–70.

68. F. Lauriston Bullard, "Abe Goes East of the River," *Lincoln Herald: A Magazine of Education and Lincolniana* 30, no. 1 (February 1948): 2; William Griffith Shaw, *History of the United States: From Their First Settlement to the Colonies . . .* (Philadelphia: Benjamin Warner, 1821), 255–59.

69. "Story of Lincoln's Struggles as a Boy in Indiana and How He Developed Himself," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, February 22, 1909, p. 11, c. 5.

70. Lincoln to Fell, December 20, 1859, in *Collected Works*, 511; Warren, *Lincoln's Youth*, 136.

71. Arnold Gesell, "Introduction," in Warren's *Lincoln's Youth*, xxi.

wrote in both a hast[e] and speed
and left it here for fools to read.

Many biographers trace Lincoln's later greatness to these seemingly halcyon Indiana years, when the lad first began to rise above (figuratively and literally) his humble surroundings. But, of course, communities of all types throughout history have spawned their share of gifted sons and sent them off into the world. Most end up leading the decent and productive lives of ordinary people; a precious few, like Lincoln, achieve immortality. To reach stature greatness in the young Abe's boyhood vignettes is to ignore the multitudes of similar moments experienced by nameless counterparts elsewhere. Abe Lincoln indeed started in Indiana to distinguish himself from his cohort, but *normal* would more adequately describe the individual for many years to come.

To constitute the Indiana years as "halcyon" is also somewhat selective. They brought nearly as much tragedy as joy. The kinfolk died in 1818 of milk sickness, the mysterious trans-Appalachian plague caused by imbibing the milk of cows that ingested the toxic tremetol from white snake root plants. Their deaths left the orphaned teenager Dennis Hanks in the care of the Lincolns. Shortly thereafter, on October 5, 1818, Abe's own mother succumbed to the same poisoning. Nine-year-old Abe helped build her coffin and bury her in the Indiana earth. From a family that once numbered five, only three Lincolns survived, and that number nearly dropped to two when, in 1819, Abe himself, in his own words, "was kicked by a horse, and apparently killed for a time."⁷²

Now a widower with children to raise, Thomas allowed one difficult year to pass before trekking to Elizabethtown, Kentucky, to approach an old family friend, Sarah ("Sally") Bush Johnson, about the prospect of marriage. That Sally was the sister of Isaac Bush, Thomas' crewmate during his 1805 journey to New Orleans, illustrates how flatboat trips served to forge social bonds. Sally, like Thomas, had also recently lost her spouse, and found herself alone with three young children. Matrilineal in this era reflecting more pragmatism than romance, it would not have been viewed as brash or presumptuous for a widower in Thomas' situation to propose to an old friend's widowed sister in equally dire straits. Realizing the union was in everyone's best interest, thirty-one-year-old Sally agreed,

72. Lincoln, in *Collected Works*, 1:1.

73. Lincoln, "Autobiography," June 1860, in *Collected Works*, 4:62; Warren, *Lincoln's Youth*, 53–55.

on December 2, 1816, to marry Thomas and raise their children together. The five then set out for the Indiana homestead to unite with Sarah and Abe, plus their recently orphaned cousin Dennis Hanks, who was already sharing the cabin.

It must have been a strange experience for Thomas to remarry in the same place and replicate his 1816 Kentucky-to-Indiana migration with an entirely new family. Upon arrival at Pigeon Creek, the Lincoln household, previously numbering three, suddenly grew to eight. Three boys (twenty-one-year-old Dennis Hanks, eleven-year-old Abe, and ten-year-old John D. Johnston), three girls (thirteen-year-old Sarah Elizabeth Johnston, twelve-year-old Sarah Lincoln, and ten-year-old Matilda Johnston), and parents Sally and Thomas, aged thirty-two and forty-two, all squeezed into a tiny one-room log cabin.⁷⁴

So too grew Indiana's side of the Ohio River Valley. The isolated Pigeon Creek area, nearly empty even of Native Americans at the dawn of the century, gained by 1820 fifteen families with eighty-three children living within two miles of the Lincolns. Population density, measured around three families per square mile in the 1820s, and increased steadily. Near the Lincolns were the Carters, the Carys, the Wrights, the Whitmans, the Grigsbys, the Hardins, and the Crawfords, among others. Most, like them, were Anglo-Saxon Baptists recently emigrated from Kentucky and engaged primarily in farming. More people meant more social, economic, and administrative interaction, more visiting and traveling, and better transportation infrastructure. Trails multiplied and widened into roads, some of which connected the Lincoln homestead with the river port of Evansville. Ferries commenced operation wherever roads met rivers, and often spawned spontaneous settlements that grew into towns. Stage lines began operating on main arteries by the 1820s. Presses started cranking out newspapers—sixteen were published in Indiana in the 1820s—and mail flowed to and from a network of post offices. Roads led southward to the river towns of Rockport and Troy, where Anderson Creek discharged into the Ohio and revolutionary new vessels, powered by steam, occasionally stopped. The sea, long smoking contraptions delivered merchandise, carried off cargo, and brought visitors, including prominent men such as the Marquis de Lafayette during his celebrated 1825 tour of

74. Warren, *Lincoln's Youth*, 71.

75. *Ibid.*, 98–102.

76. "Lincoln's Struggles as a Boy," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, February 28, 1909, p. 11; Warren, *Lincoln's Youth*, 168.

the Western states. At the mouth of Anderson Creek “the Lincolns are frequently found during this period,” and “on this great highway”—the Ohio River—“Lincoln came in touch with the outside world.”⁷⁷

There on the banks of the Ohio, Abe began to show the initiative and independence that come with maturation. Skilled in axing down and splitting trees, and aware that steamboats required a steady diet of cordwood to keep their boilers hot, Abe and two others set out in August 1826 chopping wood and exchanging it for merchandise. The enterprise exposed him to the world of river travel, craft, and culture, and their associated opportunities and characters. Here began Abraham Lincoln’s river years, an era that would last less than a decade but deeply influence the rest of his life. The Ohio River brought to Abe’s attention series and estuaries from which the historian described as that “strange and exotic city at the mouth of the Mississippi.” It also brought him to the attention of James Taylor, owner of a packinghouse and ferry in nearby Troy. Taylor hired Abe at six dollars a month to operate a ferry across the Ohio, a job that required the seventeen-year-old to board with the Taylor family. During this employment, which lasted six to nine months, Abe plowed land, sowed corn, and slaughtered hogs.⁷⁸ For the first time in Abe’s life, home and kin lay behind him and the rest of the world stood in front of him. Wrote Carl Sandburg of Lincoln’s Ohio River employ,

[h]ere Abe saw steamboats, strikers of flatboats loaded with farm produce, other boats with cargoes from manufacturing centers, [h]ouseboats, arks, sleds, flatboats with small cabins in which families . . . floated toward their new homesteads. . . . Here was the life flow of a main artery of American civilization, at a vivid time of growth.⁷⁹

Taylor’s packinghouse stocked pork, beef, venison, bear and other meats for export to New Orleans, and exposed Abe to the flatboat trade.⁸⁰ The environment inspired him to try his budding carpentry skills by building

77. John E. Iglehart, “The Coming of the English to Indiana in 1817 and Their Neighbors,” *Indiana Magazine of History* 15, no. 2 (June 1919): 142; J. Edward Murr, “Lincoln in Indiana,” *Indiana Magazine of History* 14, no. 1 (March 1918): 141.

78. Interview, Green B. Taylor, by William H. Herndon, September 16, 1865, in *Herndon’s Informants*, 129–130; Warren, *Lincoln’s Youth*, 144–145, 175.

79. Sandburg, *Prairie Years and The War Years*, 45.

80. Warren, *Lincoln’s Youth*, 147.

a boat of his own. Lincoln later recounted to his presidential cabinet a memory from these Ohio River days:

I was standing at the steamboat landing contemplating my new boat and wondering how I might improve it when a steamer approached coming down the river. At the same time two passengers . . . wished to be taken out to the packet with their baggage. They looked among the boats singled out mine, and asked me to scull them to the boat. Sometime prior to this I had constructed a small boat in which I planned to carry some produce with which had been gathered chiefly by my own exertion. We were poor, and in these days people down South who did not own slaves were reckoned as scrubs. When I was requested to scull these men out to the steamer, I gladly did so and after seeing them and their trunks on board and the steamer making ready to depart, I called out to the men: "You have forgotten to pay me." They at once each threw a half dollar in the bottom of the boat in which I was standing.

You gentlemen may think it was a very small matter and in the light of things now transpiring it was, but I assure you it was one of the most important incidents in my life. I could scarcely believe my eyes. It was difficult for me to realize that I, a poor boy, had earned a dollar in less than a day. The world seemed wider and fairer before me. I was a more hopeful and confident being from that time.⁸¹

Various versions of the "first dollar" story appear in the literature, because Lincoln told the anecdote to a group and individuals remembered it differently. All relate the same basic story of the money earned, but differ on important river-related details, as shown in this excerpted version:

. . . I was about eighteen years of age. I belonged, you know, to what they call down South, the 'scrubs,' people who do not own slaves are nobody there. But we had succeeded in raising, chiefly by my labor, sufficient produce, as I thought, to justify me in taking it down the river to sell. After much persuasion, I got the consent of mother to do so and constructed a little flatboat, large enough to take a barrel or two of things that we had gathered, with myself and little bundle, down to New Orleans. A steamer was coming down the river. . . .⁸²

81. As quoted by Murr, "Lincoln in Indiana," 149.

82. Henry J. Raymond, *The Life and Public Services of Abraham Lincoln . . . Together with*

This version later reads, “I was contemplating my new flatboat, and wondering whether I could make it stronger or improve it in any particular way. . . .”

A third version, heard by engineer and Civil War officer Egbert L. Viele during an 1862 outing with Lincoln, has eighteen-year-old Abe hitching a ride on another man’s flatboat to sell whiskey and tobacco in New Orleans. While tied up one evening, Lincoln negotiated passage to transport two men on the bank to intercept and board a midstream steamboat, thus making his first dollar. While Viele’s retelling imparts interesting detail about the flatboat experience (and seems to imply that Lincoln made it all the way to New Orleans), it ranks as the least reliable of the “first dollar” stories because it contradicts Lincoln’s own best memories on numerous levels and erroneously has Lincoln “living in Kentucky” at the time.⁸³

At the risk of reading too much into a second-hand account of a nearly-forty-year-old memory, the “first dollar” recollection sheds light on young Lincoln’s relationship with rivers. We learn that the teenager engaged in flatboat-building on a crude and small scale but with a desire to improve his design. He probably learned carpentry at home, having “inherited from his father . . . some skill in the use of tools [to build] a flat-bottomed rowboat. . . .”⁸⁴ We also hear for the first time Lincoln’s vision to “carry some produce South,” geographically to New Orleans, an experience also shared by his father. (Note, however, that Abe, according to the above version, sought approval from his mother for said journey.) Abe’s claim that the produce “had been gathered chiefly by my own exertions,” or alternatively “raised, chiefly by my labor,” leaves open whether he himself concentrated such a load—a rather Herculean task—or merely collected it from other farmers. We also hear sensitivity about his family’s humble circumstances relative to the ample therewithal of slave owners. It is curious that Lincoln seemed to cast his environment as one slaveholding South, even though he had lived in free Indiana for eight years by this time. Finally, the weight Lincoln ascribes to the memory of his first

His Late Papers . . . (New York: Derby and Miner, 1865), 754.

83. As recollecting by Egbert L. Viele, in Fehrenbacher and Fehrenbacher, *Recollected Words of Lincoln*, 453–4. Viele recounted a similar version of this story in a *New York Tribune* editorial picked up by a Massachusetts paper; see “Lincoln Not a Flatboatman: His Trip Down the Mississippi to New Orleans to Sell a Barrel of Whiskey and a Case of Tobacco,” *Springfield Republican*, March 12, 1895, p. 1.

84. William E. Barton, “The Girl Across the River: Lincoln’s Friend at Court,” *Dearborn Independent*, January 8, 1927, 21.

dollar earned (“I assure you it was one of the most important incidents in my life”) provide insight as to what he considered to be the formative moments of his youth.

The anecdote also speaks to the important role New Orleans played vicariously in the economies of Ohio River Valley communities. As distant and foreign as it may have been, the great Southern metropolis was nevertheless intricately linked with places such as bucolic Spencer County, serving as a destination for most exports and a source of many imports and currency. “When [Indiana] pioneers spoke of ‘going to town,’ they meant to New Orleans,” recalled one veteran of the era;

Not a few of our early statesmen came here from Louisiana, and much early business was transacted at New Orleans. It was our early market, and hence by much Mexican silver was brought to Indiana. Strange as it may seem, the Mexican dollar constituted the larger part of the coin of the pioneer. . . .⁸⁵

Culture traveled with economy, in both directions. Said one aging Hoosier, “I can remember the flatboats that went from here with produce to ‘Orleans.’” When one particular flatboatman returned to Indiana, “he brought with him the first oranges and cocoanuts that ever came to Indianapolis. . . . [O]n his return from ‘Orleans’ he took delight in [showing] little children . . . his stock of tropical fruit and to gladden their child-hearts with present.”⁸⁶

Lincoln’s circa-1826 encounters with the world of rivers and flatboats may explain an interesting but almost certainly apocryphal story concerning that the seventeen-year-old actually carried out the envisioned voyage down the Mississippi at that time. Indiana researcher J. Edward Miller first heard it from William Forsythe and Jefferson Ray Jr. in an 1892 interview.⁸⁷ Forsythe, in his elder years, recalled that Abe, having recently harvested and cured two hogsheds of tobacco, negotiated with flatboat-builder James Jefferson Ray (father of the 1892 informant) to help him “at the oar.” Ray carried his load to New Orleans and paid Abe the difference to some residents, including Ray’s son and at least one contemporary historian, reported with confidence that the ensuing journey constituted

85. George R. Wilson, “George H. Rains: His Day and Generation,” *Indiana Magazine of History* 18, no. 1 (March 1922): 27.

86. Calvin Fletcher, “Early Indianapolis: The Fletcher Papers—Third Installment,” *Indiana Magazine of History* 2, no. 1 (March 1906): 130.

87. Francis Marion Van Natter, *Lincoln’s Boyhood: A Chronicle of His Indiana Years* (Washington, D.C.: Public Affairs Press, 1963), 198, footnote #15 to Chapter 4.

Lincoln's first flatboat voyage to New Orleans, two years prior to that which is almost universally accepted.⁸⁸ In another version, expounded by Indiana researcher Francis Marion Van Natter, their destination is Memphis.⁸⁹ That nascent Tennessee city, however, comprised all of a few dozen houses and a hundred or so residents in 1826, an unlikely target for a long-distance delivery of a crop that could be grown locally. No other evidence corroborates the 1826 story; Forsythe and Ray themselves are the sole sources. Lincoln himself contradicted it when he stated that he was "nineteen [when] he made his first trip upon a flat-boat to New Orleans," clearly implying it occurred in 1828 and not 1826.⁹⁰ Surely Lincoln would have made some reference to an 1826 voyage to Memphis or New Orleans as his "first trip upon a flat-boat," if in fact it happened. Forsythe's recollection may simply reflect an elderly man confusing countless flatboat escapings and goings with the hazy memories of that one particular summer, when the future president labored and toiled on the Troy ferry.

The memory of another river experience in this era, related by distant relative Augustus H. Chapman in 1865, appears at first to be more convincing. In the year 1827," Chapman wrote,

A Lincoln & h[is] Brother John D Johnston went together to Louisville Ky to try & get work & earn some money, th[e]y obtained work on their arrivall there on the Louisville & Portland Canall & when through work there were paid off in silver Dollars. This is the first silver dollars Lincoln ever had or owned in his own & of it he was very proud.⁹¹

Did Lincoln indeed help dig the Louisville and Portland Canal? What weakens Chapman's otherwise confident recollection is that no other source corroborates this rather major experience for a young country boy on the brink of adulthood. The job would have represented his farthest trip from home (125 river miles) longest time away from family largest town visited (Louisville), possibly his first lengthy steamboat ride, and first role in a nationally significant project, the circumventing of the Great Falls of the Ohio, which is what the Louisville and Portland Canal even-

88. Murr, "Lincoln in Indiana," 18–19.

89. Van Natter, *Lincoln's Boyhood*, 46–47. See also J. Edward Murr, "Life of Abraham Lincoln," as excerpted by Bess V. Elkington, *The Missing Chapters in the Life of Abraham Lincoln* (Chicago: Walter M. Hill, 1909), 86. In this source, Murr acknowledges that his hypothesis "has received no credence and has been disallowed."

90. Lincoln, "Autobiography," June 1860, in *Collected Works*, 62.

91. Chapman to Herndon, September 8, 1865, in *Herndon's Informants*, 100–101.

tually accomplished. So why did Lincoln himself never mention the experience, particularly during the many speeches he would deliver on internal improvements? That the recollection ends on a “first dollar” note invites suspicion that Chapman may have confused parts of Lincoln’s own “first dollar” story.

One might surmise that Lincoln’s circa 1826–27 river experiences would open him toward a career as a riverboat clerk or captain.⁹² Instead, they gave him his first experience arguing a court case—his own. As recounted earlier, Abraham would occasionally “scull” passengers from the Indiana bank to midstream steamboats. This service earned the reproach of two Kentucky brothers who held licenses to run a ferry service on the other side of the river. One day, they called out to Abe and led him in paddling over to the Kentucky side where they confronted him. Barely chewing fisticuffs, the brothers had Abe arrested and brought to Kentucky court on the charge of operating a ferry without a license. Lincoln argued effectively that while the Kentucky license allowed the Kentuckians to “get passengers across the river” into Indiana, it did not expressly forbid others “to convey a passenger from the Indiana bank to the deck of a passing steamer.”⁹³ Impressed with Abe’s honesty and argumentative acumen, the squire dismissed the case.

Lincoln, exhilarated with his newly discovered talent, grew fascinated by legal processes. He attended court in Troy whenever he could and read Indiana legal tomes thoroughly. Troy’s post office received a steady stream of regional newspapers, of which “Abe was a Constant reader,” recalled his stepmother; “I am sure of this for the years of 1827–28–29–30. The name of the Louisville Journal seems to sound like one. Abe read histories, papers—and other books. . . .”⁹⁴ Thus broadened Lincoln’s horizons of the banks of the Ohio. Rivers would faithfully employ Abe for the new few years, but the Troy ferry incident would plant in him the seed for a career in law, and later one in politics.

Most accounts of the Lincolns’ 1820s domestic life live in an atmosphere of warmth and happiness, despite a houseful of complex and potentially combustible stepfamily relationships. Another Hanks relative, John, added to that mix in 1823, expanding the household to nine members.

92. “When I was a boy, wrote Mark Twain in 1883, “there was but one permanent ambition among my comrades in our village. . . . to be a steamboatman.” Samuel L. Clemens, *Life on the Mississippi* (New York: Harcourt & Row, 1958), 28.

93. Barton, “Girl Across the River,” *Dearborn Independent* (January 8, 1927), 3–22.

94. Interview, Sarah Bush Lincoln, by William H. Herndon, September 8, 1865, in *Herndon’s Informants*, 107.

Villager Aaron Grigsby then joined the family in August 1826 when he married Abe's only surviving full-blood sibling, nineteen-year-old Sarah. The couple moved into their own cabin in anticipation of their firstborn in late 1827.

The optimism and hope that came with the new year did not last long. On January 27, 1828, complications at childbirth took the lives of both Sarah and infant. The death of his sister devastated Abraham; the expectant uncle instead became an only child. That Aaron Grigsby, in Lincoln's view, dilly-dallied instead of seeking medical attention for his wife, spawned a lasting resentment between the two families. A few weeks later Abraham turned nineteen—no longer a child, neither by age nor by the challenges of life. He handled his grief with periods of depression and despondency," according to one historian.⁹⁵ Yet the introspective young man included steadfast vigor, trustworthiness, and intelligence. Those qualities brought him to the attention of James Gentry, Pigeon Creek's leading citizen.

James Gentry traced a personal history similar to that of Thomas Lincoln, ten years his senior. Both were born in the South (Lincoln in Virginia, Gentry in North Carolina). Both migrated to Kentucky in their youth and married three years apart (1806 and 1809, respectively). Both moved to Spencer County, Indiana—in 1816 and 1818. Both lived so many young men of the West had: guided flatboats to New Orleans—Thomas at least once, Gentry several times. They differed, however, in matters of finance and ambition. Peter off to begin with, James Gentry acquired one thousand acres of land (to Thomas' 160), and soon prospered through farming, a store, and a river landing. The landing operated at the foot of the Ohio River bluffs on which the village of Rockport sat, about seventeen river miles below Troy. Gentry's successes resonated locally, making his clan the community's leading family and inspiring the name of the town. The older children of Gentry's brood of eight—including son Abe—all knew Abe very well; one, Hannal, reputedly had a schoolhouse crumb on him.⁹⁶ James Gentry is said to have "frequently employed the tall young Abe to assist him on his farm." Abe, for his part, "was in [the Gentry] home a great part of his youth, [and] could not help but be inspired and helped by the Gentry family, their standards of living, their home comforts and

95. Warren, *Lincoln's Youth*, 174.

96. *Ibid.*, 134, 157.

their conversation.” Abe enjoyed lingering at the Gentry Store, which also served as a post office as well as a source of newspapers, political discussion, and civic engagement. The cerebral Abraham found more intellectual stimulation with the Gentrys than the Landlins—and particularly with James, more so than his father.

Like many storeowners in the region, James Gentry often bartered merchandise in exchange for the agricultural produce of his cash-croved customers. When stockpiles reached a certain level, he arranged a cargo-load to sell in New Orleans for hard currency, usually with the help of his sons. Early in 1828 Gentry decided it was time for such a trip. His son Allen, with one New Orleans voyage already under his belt, could captain the vessel, but he needed a reliable “bow hand—working the forenoon⁹⁷”—with a hearty constitution and a good head, to join him. Later in the year, at his son’s suggestion or (more likely) his own judgment, forty-year-old James Gentry offered nineteen-year-old Abraham Lincoln a job to assist twenty-one-year-old Allen Gentry in guiding a flatboat to New Orleans to sell produce, for a salary of “\$8.00 per month—from the time of starting to the returning home, plus the fare for] his way back on a [steam] boat.”⁹⁸ James might have had a second motive—hiring the level-headed Abe to keep an eye on Allen.

With the recent memory of his deceased sister and the constant lure of the river, Abe needed little arm-twisting to accept. His new job would offer, in the estimation of one historian, “the most exciting and important experience of Abe’s Indiana years.”¹⁰⁰ The trip, and the destination, would also mark the geographical and cultural apogee of his life, and influence his intellectual fiber in significant ways.

97. Ehrmann, *Missing Chapter*, 6, 7.

98. Interview, Nathaniel Grigsby, with William H. Herndon, September 12, 1865, in *Herndon’s Informants*, 114.

99. *Ibid.*, 114.

100. Warren, *Lincoln’s Youth*, 175.