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Lincoln's Logs

By RICHARD WEST SELLARS

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By all accounts, Abraham Lincoln's birth on Feb. 12, 1809, occurred under unremarkable circumstances. Though never an official federal holiday, it falls close to George Washington's, the official occasion marked by Presidents' Day.

But the story of the cabin in which Lincoln was born has been anything but ordinary: it is a historical maze of profit-seeking and truth-seeking, cross-pollination with Confederate relics, uninformed commemoration and bureaucratic entrenchment.

Today, the log cabin that some identified as Lincoln's birthplace can be found at the crest of a low hill on land once farmed by his father, Thomas Lincoln, near present-day Hodgenville, Ky. It is enclosed in an imposing neo-Classical temple, built of granite and marble. In the early 20th century, devoted admirers of the martyred president established the Lincoln Farm Association, which bought the farm and erected the temple to enshrine the cabin. This site was conveyed to the federal government — the War Department — in 1916, and then to the National Park Service by a 1933 executive order of President Franklin D. Roosevelt. It is now known as the Abraham Lincoln Birthplace National Historical Park.



Library of Congress

Logs from Lincoln's cabin being moved from Long Island to Kentucky.

But from the first, some local residents doubted that the cabin was the president's actual birthplace – as did some nationally prominent figures, including the president's only surviving son, Robert Todd Lincoln, who called the cabin a "fraud." When the National Park Service inherited the birthplace park, it rather quickly accepted the building as authentic.

The controversy didn't die, but the case for the cabin as Lincoln's birthplace gained a powerful new ally: driven by a bureaucratic imperative to possess the True Cross, the Park Service persisted for decades in supporting its authenticity, even after one of the service's own researchers, in 1949, strongly endorsed arguments against such claims.

The curious case of the birthplace cabin stems from its murky history, which fails to provide any hard evidence that the original cabin had survived, even up to the time of Lincoln's presidential election in 1860.

In 1811, when Lincoln was just over 2 years old, the family left the birthplace farm due to an uncertain title to the property. They settled about 10 miles away, along Knob Creek — the earliest home that Lincoln could remember later in life. No one paid any attention to the Lincoln birthplace until he became a truly national figure, about a half-century later.

Some who visited the farm in 1860 — and again in 1865 following Lincoln's assassination — reported finding foundation stones but no old cabin, evidence that was buttressed by a number of local residents who doubted it was still standing. To them, Lincoln's birthplace cabin had ceased to exist. Case closed?

Hardly. In the mid-1890s, Alfred Dennett, an entrepreneur and promoter, purchased the former Lincoln farm, hoping to attract pilgrims and turn a profit from the mass adoration of the martyred president. To enhance his investment, he bought a log cabin off nearby land and exhibited it on the Lincoln farm as a historic relic.

However, in 1897, with the remoteness of the farm making Dennett's venture unprofitable, he moved the cabin to Nashville to show at the Tennessee Centennial Exposition. He also purchased a second log cabin to exhibit in Nashville, one purported to be the birth cabin of none other than Jefferson Davis, president of the Confederacy. (Davis was born in Kentucky less than a year earlier than Lincoln and about 100 miles to the southwest).

Dennett then leased both cabins to other promoters, who exhibited them in New York City and Buffalo, in carnival settings of the kind that made P.T. Barnum famous. Between exhibits, the two cabins were dismantled so the logs could be stored before shipment to the next showing. In the process, the logs got mixed together. What is more, the owners soon combined the logs into one cabin, and briefly referred to it as the "Lincoln and Davis Cabin," which made little sense outside sheer sensationalism. At the turn of the century, the logs were placed in extended storage on Long Island.

In the early 20th century, and apparently unaware of the Davis logs, the newly created Lincoln Farm Association traced the cabin to its storage on Long Island. It purchased all of the (disassembled) logs and soon built the neo-Classical temple to house the cabin on the old

Thomas Lincoln farm, which it also had purchased. But with the Davis logs having increased the cabin's size, it proved too large to install in the temple and leave adequate space for sightseers' ease of movement around the relic. Seeking a quick and easy solution, the architect removed enough logs to reduce both the width and length of the cabin by a few feet.

The association had made its own investigation of the cabin's history and accepted its authenticity. But the association failed to heed highly credible testimony from a local county judge who was born on the Lincoln farm in 1836, had later come into ownership of a portion of the farm, and had sold the land to Dennett in 1895. The judge flatly denied that the cabin Dennett moved from a neighboring farm and the association later purchased had ever belonged to the Lincoln family. Yet, installed in the temple, the cabin began its drift toward presumed authenticity.

When the National Park Service took over after Roosevelt's 1933 order, it soon made its decision not to tamper with the accepted story. Only in September 1948 did the cabin's authenticity finally come under serious public questioning when, in a front-page Washington Post article, the Lincoln scholar Roy Hays declared the cabin a "hoax." This negative publicity prompted the service's first in-depth look into the matter, undertaken by Benjamin Davis, the park's historian. Avoiding the word "hoax," Davis nevertheless concurred with the gist of the Washington Post article, stating that the evidence against the cabin's authenticity was "overwhelming."

In response the park changed course, but only slightly, when it began describing the cabin as the "traditional" birthplace. This imprecise modifier left things vague and open to the likelihood that a visitor still would accept the cabin as the True Cross. Yet it became the park's accepted solution.

In the mid-1980s, through the mere chance of misrouted Park Service mail, the Davis report reached the desk of another service historian (and previous Disunion contributor), Dwight Pitcaithley, in the Service's Boston office. Though the Boston office has no authority over parks in Kentucky, on his own time Pitcaithley began researching the case, and presented his findings in 1991 – though they were not published until 2001 (by which point Pitcaithley had become the National Park Service's chief historian, based in Washington). He had arrived at conclusions similar to those of Benjamin Davis in 1949: it was a virtual certainty that the cabin was not the original.

Still, the book remained open. In 2004 the park sponsored a tree-ring analysis of the logs by the University of Tennessee. Although the heavily weathered condition of the logs precluded good samples, a few provided data suggesting they dated only as far back as 1848 – when Lincoln was already representing Illinois in Congress.

Based on the overwhelming evidence, the park soon dropped reference to the "traditional birthplace cabin," and began referring to it as the "symbolic" cabin. It also prepared a new brochure and wayside exhibits for visitors, one of which states: "Because its early history is obscure, there is no documentation to support the authenticity of the cabin." A flyer given to visitors discusses the history of the cabin, including the increasing doubts through the years about its authenticity and the findings of the recent tree-ring study.

With the National Park Service having responsibility for the nation's "First Cabin," its decision to present the home as "symbolic" may well have been the best choice — a gentle denial, far less blunt than Robert Todd Lincoln's opinion. Maybe, after all, the land itself, the hill where Father Abraham was born, is more important than the cabin anyway. And maybe the persistent existence of the myth is itself an endearing, unintended tribute to the kinds of yarns and tall tales that Abraham Lincoln loved to swap, propping his booted feet near the wood-fire's blaze and laughing with friends.

Sources: Roy Hays, "Is the Lincoln Birthplace Cabin Authentic?," The Abraham Lincoln Quarterly, September 1948 and "'Birthplace Cabin in Lincoln Shrine Declared a Hoax," The Washington Post, Sept. 19, 1948; Dwight T. Pitcaithley, "Abraham Lincoln's Birthplace Cabin: The Making of an American Icon," in Paul A. Shackel, ed., "Myth, Memory, and the Making of the American Landscape"; Benjamin H. Davis, "Report of Research on the Traditional Abraham Lincoln Birthplace Cabin," (typescript, February 15, 1949, copy courtesy of Abraham Lincoln National Historical Park); Dwight T. Pitcaithley and Sandy Brue, "Abraham Lincoln's Birthplace Cabin: A Rebuttal — Keep Your Eye on the Logs," Ancestral News, Winter 2009.



Richard West Sellars is a retired National Park Service historian and author of "Preserving Nature in the National Parks: A History."