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10-23
(June 1941)

UNITED STATES
DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

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ABRAHAM LINCOLN NATIONAL HISTORICAL PARK

FILE NO.
HISTORY DIVISION
RESEARCH

THE TRADITIONAL BIRTHPLACE CABIN

By:
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THE TRADITIONAL BIRTHPLACE CABIN

Louis A. Warren

Three presidents of the United States, Theodore Roosevelt, William Howard Taft and Woodrow Wilson, participated in ceremonies which culminated finally in the dedication of the Abraham Lincoln National Historical Park. The log cabin associated with Lincoln's birth enshrined in the memorial structure, from the very beginning of the enterprise has been the treasure around which the plans for the development of the project has eminated.

An attack on the authenticity of this cabin has caused the United States Department of the Interior, through the agency of the National Park Service, to review the data on which the genuineness of the cabin is supported. Three Lincoln students, of whom the writer happens to be one, have been invited to present their reactions to three monographs dealing with the question: 1. Abraham Lincoln National Historical Park issued by the National Park Service in 1947, 2. The Abraham Lincoln Quarterly for September 1948 published by the Abraham Lincoln Association, and 3. Report of Research on the Traditional Abraham Lincoln Birthplace Cabin by Benjamin H. Davis, and dated February 15, 1949.

The publication issued by the National Park Service describing the log house is quite explicit in stating that it is "the traditional birthplace cabin." No effort is made to leave the impression that the dwelling is an exact replica of the domicile in which Abraham Lincoln

was born. However, there has been what appears to be a well grounded tradition that some of the logs used in the construction of the present house originally were part of the cabin home of Thomas Lincoln, father of the President.

The contribution by Mr. Roy Hays under the caption "Is the Lincoln Birthplace Cabin Authentic" appearing in the quarterly already mentioned is the primary cause for reviewing the evidence referring to the genuineness of the famous relic. Mr. Hays states unreservedly that the cabin "is a fraud," and in a letter written on January 11, 1950, now before the writer, states, "The motto of our anti-fake cabin organization is: 'Let's get it out of there,'" referring of course to the cabin enshrined at Hodgenville.

There are many students of Abraham Lincoln who feel that the evidence presented by Mr. Hays is not sufficiently incontestable to warrant such a drastic and revolutionary procedure as he suggests. For nearly thirty years the cabin has made a positive inspirational contribution to an ever increasing number of pilgrims who pay homage at this American shrine. Before accepting Mr. Hays' conclusion, that a fraud has been perpetuated on the public, there should be unimpeachable evidence that early observers identifying the cabin as the one in which Lincoln was born were engaged in a swindle or positively mistaken in the identity of the cabin.

The monograph by Mr. Hays utilizes thirty of the thirty-seven pages in his argument to trace the history of the logs from

the time they were acquired by A. W. Dennett in 1895 until they were returned to the Lincoln farm in 1909. Mr. Hays admits that at least some of the logs "came to rest in the structure now in the memorial." Inasmuch as this conclusion is all that is implied by the National Park Service, apparently thirty pages of Mr. Hays' thesis are irrelevant to the question of the cabin's authenticity.

The emphasis which Mr. Hays places on the importance of John B. Rowbotham's visit to the farm after Lincoln's death in 1865 when he found no cabin there is also valueless in the light of further discoveries. It is now positively known that the Lincoln birthplace cabin had been removed as early as the Summer of 1860, as related in a letter written by R. W. Wintersmith to Dr. J. B. McKeehan on October 2, 1860. Of course, if it is shown beyond the question of a doubt that there was no cabin there as early as 1860, the same statement about its absence on any later date would be superfluous. The letter of Mr. Wintersmith is made exhibit A in this discussion.

The statement of Rowbotham's made in 1865 did not nullify the Rodman version of the removal of the cabin or any other transfer of the logs which may have occurred during Lincoln's administration. The Wintersmith correspondence, however, eliminates any transfer of the cabin logs during President Lincoln's administration. It does support the Lafayette Wilson testimony made in 1906 in which he stated under oath: "In the year 1860, in the month of March, I moved the

logs from the Lincoln cabin to the farm now occupied by John A. Davenport." (See Davis, PP. 12, 13.)

The fact that Thomas Lincoln lived in a log cabin near the Rock Spring has never been questioned and that there was an occupied cabin standing there as late as January 1, 1857 can be shown by duly authorized records. Thomas H. Thomas sold to Henry H. Horne on September 27, 1852, the acres surrounding the cabin "including the spring where the said Horne now lives." (Larue County Deed Book, II, p. 493)

The following year Horne sold the property to Royal P. Hankla. An endorsement on the Hankla bond signed by Joseph Harrison dated August 27, 1856 reveals that the same piece of property was consigned to Richard A. Creal and William F. Creal. Harrison in the endorsement refers to the land "on which I live" and possession was to be given January 1, 1857.

It might be shown through the various transfers of the farm and litigation through which it passed that the Lincoln cabin tract was continuously occupied from the time Thomas Lincoln removed in 1811 until Joseph Harrison gave possession in 1857. If we can accept Lafayette Wilson's testimony that he moved the cabin in 1860, and relying on our knowledge that it was inhabited until three years before, we might conclude that the logs were sufficiently sound for reconstruction purposes. (Larue County Ky. Deed Book III, p. 297)

Abraham Lincoln first came into national prominence in

1856 when he received 110 votes as a candidate for the vice-presidency in the first Republican Convention. Two years later he was again given national recognition by his debates with Stephen A. Douglas. By the close of the following year he had attracted much attention in political circles as a possible candidate for one of the two major offices at the 1860 convention. His speech at Cooper Institute in February 1860 and his nomination at Chicago for the Presidency in May made him the most talked about man in the nation. Some of these facts must have been known to the old neighbors of his father, Thomas Lincoln, who lived for fifteen years in the Kentucky environs of Abraham Lincoln's birthplace.

How long before Lincoln's nomination in May 1860 the cabin where he was born began to attract special attention we are unable to learn. That an early interest was manifested among the neighbors of his father is evident from many available sources. These 1860 reactions towards the probable birthplace are undoubtedly the sources of traditions remembered forty years later when reminiscences were put in the form of affidavits.

There are four facts pertinent to this investigation which would probably be accepted by all who are interested in this controversy including Mr. Hays:

1. There was an occupied log cabin standing by the spring as late as 1857.

2. This same log house was removed previously to the summer of 1860 to the property which later came into possession of John A. Davenport.

3. The Davenport structure was sold to A. W. Dennett in 1895.

4. Some of the logs now in the enshrined cabin were in the house acquired by Dennett.

The acceptance of these assertions, and it is not known that they have ever been successfully refuted, leaves but one decisive question to be answered, namely: Did the logs removed from the Lincoln farm previous to the summer of 1860 come from the cabin in which Abraham Lincoln was born? This same question confronted the writer in 1926 when he published his Lincoln's Parentage and Childhood and he concluded, "Tradition alone can answer that question and it gives both a positive and a negative answer." Even now we will be largely dependent on tradition for our conclusions.

The first step taken by the National Park Service to test the validity of the charges against the authenticity of the cabin was the appointment of Benjamin H. Davis, Historical Aide, to gather data relevant to the question. We have already had occa sion to refer to this document of 39 typewritten pages made available by the Interior Department. It is to be regretted that Mr. Davis was not in possession of the Wintersmith correspondence which does in a dozen lines what he takes most of argument to confirm, namely that the cabin was not moved at the time, and for sentiments, expressed in the Rodman tradition.

Mr. Davis concludes: "Since it now appears that the Rodman tradition has no provable or plausible basis, the National Park Service will be forced to alter its interpretative program at Abraham Lincoln National Historical Park ... Any story at this late date based on a tradition with little supporting evidence

would fail completely as a nucleus for an interpretive program." (Davis, p. 39). It would appear from this conclusion that Mr. Davis confirms the findings of Mr. Hays and possibly would be in favor of the removal of the cabin. This reaction should make it more imperative to review the Hays argument.

The tradition on which Mr. Hays largely relies to support his contention that the cabin is a fraud was published as far back as 1909 in a book entitled Footprints of Abraham Lincoln by J. T. Hobson. Jacob S. Brothers, the informant of Mr. Hobson, in an interview copied down by Mr. Hobson and signed by Mr. Brothers stated that the birthplace cabin in which he is supposed to have lived as a small boy "was torn down, and, to my knowledge the logs were burned for fire wood." The story long familiar to Lincoln students must have been given consideration by the committee of famous historians selected in 1910 to vote on the genuineness of the cabin: Professors Albert B. Hart of Harvard, George B. Adams of Yale, Frederick J. Turner of Wisconsin, and the famous Lincoln biographer, Ida M. Tarbell. Apparently they rejected the same story that Mr. Hays now would have accepted as they voted in favor of the cabin's acceptance.

The age of Jacob S. Brothers, the informant, at the time he was interviewed by Mr. Hobson is not stated by Mr. Hays but he is known to have been eighty-four years old when his reminiscences were recorded. The writer had occasion to examine in detail in Lincoln Lore No. 1016 the testimony of Brothers, who was very indefinite about the identification

of the three cabins which he remembered. This issue of Lincoln Lore is attached to this report as exhibit B.

Over against the reminiscences of Brothers we have the tradition of Mrs. Zerelda Jane Goff, a mother-in-law of Mr. J. A. Davenport, to whose ground the cabin was moved from the birthplace site. She was eighty-six years old when she made her testimony and had the great advantage over her contemporary, Mr. Brothers, as far as the refreshing of her memory is concerned, in that she continued to reside in the immediate community. She went to live near-by the Lincoln cabin when she was eleven years old and remained near the Lincoln farm all her life. She states, "I have spent many a day when a mere child playing about the Spring, and the Lincoln Cabin. It was known by all the older residents that the Lincoln cabin stood on the hill to the right of the spring."

It has been accepted generally that one of the women who waited on Mrs. Lincoln at the time of the birth of Abraham was Mary Enlow. Margaret Walters, a daughter of this Mary Enlow at the time of Lincoln's birth was a young married woman twenty years old and claimed to have been with her mother at the time of the birth of Abraham. About the beginning of the Civil War this same Margaret Walters went with Judge Creal to the Rock spring and "she pointed out to him the exact site of the Lincoln Cabin (which had been previously moved to another farm near-by)". (Mather, Six Generations of Larue and Allied Families, p. 159)

Mr. Hays and Mr. Davis place much emphasis on the testimonial of John C. Creal and his mother who did not move into the community until 1830, nineteen years after the Lincolns left. John C. Creal was not born until 1836, twenty-seven years after Lincoln's birth. Both must have been dependent on hearsay evidence. Why these two witnesses should be such dependable authorities surpassing equally intelligent people who did live there at the time Lincoln was born is not easily understood. It is evident that Mrs. Creal was not in agreement with other witnesses as to where the cabin originally stood and her son undoubtedly received his information on the subject from her. (Davis, p. 30)

Some time previous to August 29, 1895 attention was called to the historical value of a log structure then standing on land in possession of J. A. Davenport of Larue County, Kentucky. Tradition pointed out and, it was almost unanimously accepted, by the citizens of that community that the Davenport building moved from the Spring in 1860 contained the logs that constituted the original log cabin on which Abraham Lincoln was born. Numerous testimonials were available about the moving of this structure. Among them a statement made to the writer by Richard W. Creal. He told me that as a small boy he saw the logs moved and in many conversations with him, while I lived at Hodgenville, he never hinted that the logs transferred from the spot near-by the Spring to the land known as the Davenport Farm were other than the logs of the original Lincoln cabin.

There was unanimity of opinion without a dissenting voice as far as I can learn that the Davenport cabin contained the logs that originally stood at Sinking Spring or Rock Spring about one mile away. The tradition had become so well established that some land surrounding the Spring had been acquired and the representative of the purchaser then present at Hodgenville, Ky. received a telegram in August 1895 instructing him "to have built at once a log cabin on the Lincoln Farm, exactly where stood the cabin in which Lincoln was born, and the cabin is to be built out of the identical logs that were in the original cabin." (Davis, p. 1)

It is difficult for the writer to conclude that the old citizens who testified as to the authenticity of the rebuilt birthplace structure on the Davenport farm were parties to a swindle or perjured themselves in their affidavits relating to the original structure. They may have been mistaken but the eighty-six year old Jacob S. Brothers also may have been mistaken. While the Wintersmith letter annulled certain statements appearing in the Rodman tradition it does not seem that the failure to support a certain phase of the reminiscence should invalidate the testimonials of all other affiants who associated the birthplace cabin with the Davenport logs. The authenticity of the cabin does not rest entirely on the confirmation of the Rodman tradition. It is admitted by all concerned that some of the logs in the present enshrined cabin were once part of the Davenport cabin, and that the logs which comprised the Davenport cabin once stood by the Spring. It does

not appear to this reviewer that additional evidence of sufficient importance has been presented to prove that no logs in the present structure can be associated with the original birthplace cabin of Abraham Lincoln.

Exhibit A.

Elizabethtown, Ky., Oct. 2d, 1860.

Dr. J. B. McKeehan, Cincinnati.

Dear Sir:-I send you, today, by Adams' express, a set of canes, cut off the birth-place of Abraham Lincoln, in Larken County, formerly this county, (Hardin). I cut them myself last summer to send to some of my Republican friends in the free States. You can certainly recommend them as coming from off of his birth-place, as I cut them myself. They were sent to me at Louisville, but got misplaced, nd I have just recovered them.

The long-plumb stick was cut from the very place in the house where the bed stood when he was born. The house has been removed.

I don't know that it would be of any advantage to write any political news from here. WE COULD GET A LARGE VOTE HERE IF WE voted by ballot, or we had any show.

Although I was raised here I see I have lost a good deal of my custom in my business; but I can not sell my vote and active principles for a few copper cents. God speed "Honest Old Abe's" election, which I consider certain.

I would be pleased to hear from you and documents. I wish you to present my friend, W. S. M. Barret, of the firm of Tylor & Barret, willow and woodenware merchants of your city, one of the canes for me with my respects. Respectfully,

R. WINTERSMITH,
Elector for the Fifth Congressional
District of Kentucky

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