lincoln birthplace

This was once known as the Sinking Spring farm, named for a cool, clear spring. Until its death in 1976, the Boundary Oak, a landmark in early surveys, stood close to this spring and was the only living reminder of Abraham Lincoln's world as an infant. Above the Sinking Spring is a small plateau, once cleared for crops and once the site of a meager cabin. Here, on February 12, 1809, a great American President was born.

The Lincoln Family in Kentucky

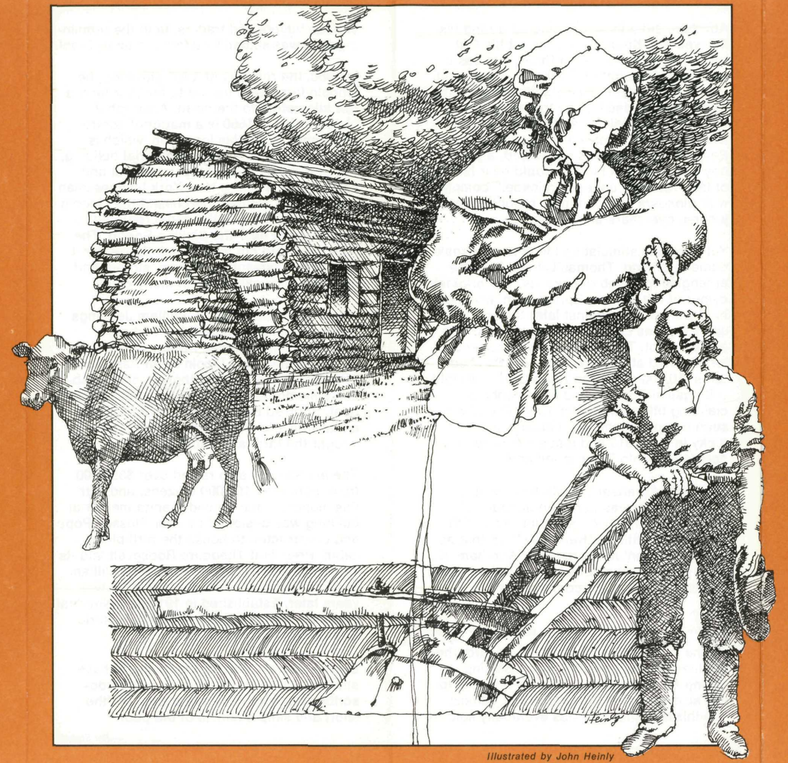
The ancestors of Abraham Lincoln took a long and winding route to Kentucky. This steady journey westward from generation to generation was characteristic of settlement patterns in the New World. In the mid-17th century, Samuel Lincoln left the west of England, crossed the Atlantic, and settled in Hingham, Mass. His descendants prospered and moved on to fertile land in New Jersey and Pennsylvania. In 1768, John Lincoln, with his wife and nine children, continued the family's drive southward and westward to Virginia, toward the American frontier.

One of "Virginia John's" sons, Abraham, reached the outer fringe of that frontier. He first settled on a promising farm in Virginia's Rockingham County. But by 1782, Abraham had sold his farm and with his wife Bersheba and their five young children had struck out for the Kentucky wilderness. Daniel Boone had blazed the first trail into this unknown region only seven years earlier. It was still a rough and uncharted territory, "the Dark and Bloody Ground," scene of Indian warfare, timbered mountain barriers, and rich inviting bottom lands.

Possibly as a result of Boone's own advice and urging, Abraham entered Kentucky through the famous break in the Appalachians known as Cumberland Gap. He built a homestead to the north, near the present site of Louisville and a short distance from a blockhouse fort called Hughes Station. Although such stations were not needed after the crushing defeat of the northwestern Indian tribes at Fallen Timbers in 1794, these outposts had stood as a haven for the earliest white settlers.

Abraham was not saved. In May of 1786, as he and his children worked in the newly planted spring fields, an Indian war party surprised them. Abraham was killed during the raid. Thomas, Abraham's son and the future father of a President, was then about 10 years old. He remained with the body of his father and was saved from death when a timely shot by one of his brothers killed the Indian who was approaching to take his father's scalp. This grisly series of events forced Bersheba and her children to move south to the Beech Fork of the Salt River, a more secure and populated area.

The tale of Abraham's murder took shape and was passed on through the family—a sharp reminder of past hardships. President Lincoln wrote in 1860 that the story of his grandfather's death was "the legend more strongly than all others imprinted upon my mind and memory."



Illustrated by John Heinly

Thomas Lincoln was a quiet and honest man, not shiftless but a bit restless, not primitive but by nature unrefined. He was stoutly built with coarse black hair, a round face, and a swarthy complexion. As a young man, Tom roamed up and down the growing State of Kentucky and fit in well with a developing frontier which could tolerate the buckskins and moccasins of the long hunters along with the short breeches and beaver hats of the new commercial classes. Like his neighbors and relatives, Thomas Lincoln believed in this society which, while fiercely individualistic, was tightly knit by the bonds of mutual necessity for survival.

After experience as a militiaman and as a general laborer in Kentucky, Tom spent a year farming with an uncle along the Watauga River in upper east Tennessee. He returned to central Kentucky in 1799 and settled in Elizabethtown a few years later. There he acquired a reputation as a carpenter, purchased a 93-hectare (230-acre) farm, and became a hard-working and industrious member of the community. He even once earned more than $100 by taking produce in a flatboat to New Orleans and returning by canoe. On June 12, 1806, Thomas used some of this money to marry a girl by the name of Nancy Hanks.

The image left by Nancy Hanks is blurred and uncertain. "Dim as the dream of a shifting mirage, her face and figure waver through the mists of time and rumor" is the way historian Albert J. Beveridge put it.

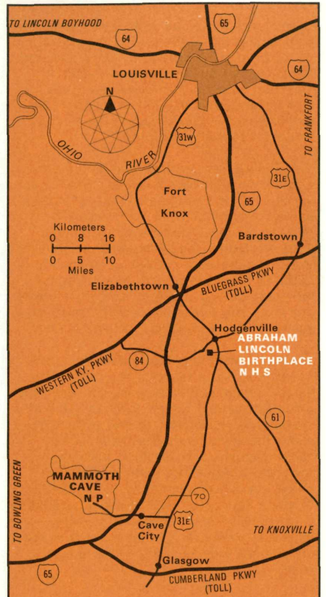
The Sinking Spring Farm

On December 12, 1808, Thomas Lincoln bought a farm, paying $200 cash for 121 hectares (300 acres) of stony land on the South Fork of Nolin River. The young couple had been married over two years and were living comfortably in Elizabethtown. Their first child, Sarah, was more than a year old, and Nancy was expecting another. A man in town had angered Tom by bringing suit against him for "a bad job of hewing." The Lincolns moved 23 kilometers (14 miles) southeast to their new farm.

The Sinking Spring farm, with its red clay and thick underbrush, was not noted for its fertility. It stood on the edge of the Barrens, a great tract of land 113 kilometers (70 miles) long and 97 kilometers (60 miles) wide, made treeless by Indian fires intended to aid hunting and to create open grazing lands for buffalo and other game. Yet the farm was located closer to Nancy's relatives, and it lay only five kilometers (three miles) south of Robert Hodgen's mill and tavern.

Thomas, Nancy, and their infant daughter moved into a one-room cabin near a large limestone spring of cool water for which the place was named. Larger families in the area lived in two or more log rooms, with a loft above the living room. But the Lincolns' cabin was simple: a dirt floor, a shingled roof, one window, one door, a small fireplace, and a low chimney made of straw and clay and hard wood. The tiny window square might have been covered with greased paper, an animal skin, or an old quilt to keep out summer insects and the cold winter wind.

The winter wore on, and Nancy neared the end of her pregnancy. As related by poet Carl Sandburg, the birth took place one Sunday morning and "welcomed into a world of battle and blood, of whispering dreams and wistful dust, a new child, a boy." The day was February 12, 1809. The boy was Abraham Lincoln, named for his grandfather.



Abraham Lincoln Birthplace National Historic Site

The park, located in central Kentucky, is administered by the National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior. The superintendent's address is Route 1, Hodgenville, KY 42748.

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The First Years

For the next two years, Thomas and Nancy Lincoln and their children lived the self-sufficient life of a typical frontier farm family. Their implements consisted of basic tools such as ax, froe, maul, wedge, and draw knife. Nancy cooked plain food—bread, corn, pork—in the large Dutch and clay ovens, the heavy iron pot, or the long-handled frying pan. Tom spent long hours following the "bull-tongue" plow and searching the woods with his rifle to feed the family. And they read the family Bible.

Unlike some of his neighbors on the South Fork of Nolin, Tom Lincoln owned no slaves. Everybody, however, possessed at least a good horse or mule and a milk cow. Nancy spent much of her time spinning and weaving "linsey-woolsey," a coarse fabric of wool and linen or cotton. Medicine came from native herbs, and sugar from "sweetening" made from maple sap or sorghum molasses. Thomas might have occasionally bought beef or candle tallow. Sassafras tea and pure spring water took the place of coffee or brandy.

Along with his parents, the baby Abraham experienced the pleasures of their homestead. He slept at night in the warm security of the little cabin and played in the afternoon shade of the great boundary oak.

Knob Creek and Beyond

As much as Thomas and Nancy enjoyed the life they had molded for themselves on the Sinking Spring farm, they decided to look for better land and moved before midsummer of 1811. The place they went to was on Knob Creek 16 kilometers (10 miles) to the northeast.

Abraham did a lot of growing up during his five years at Knob Creek. He got his first taste of formal education there, in a basic ABC school taught by Zachariah Riney and, later, Caleb Hazel. Most significant of all, he listened to stories told by travelers on the Louisville-Nashville road that ran directly in front of the Lincolns' cabin. As biographer Benjamin Thomas has suggested, a young boy like Abraham Lincoln could hear his fill of the "restless, eager cavalcade," complete with pioneers and peddlers, preachers and judges, overseers and slaves.

Yet even this stimulating life at Knob Creek came to an end. Thomas Lincoln became entangled in a web of lawsuits. The original owner of the Sinking Spring farm, who had held a small lien against later buyers, called upon Thomas Lincoln for repayment of the ancient debt. The heirs of another speculator who had at one time owned 4,000 hectares (10,000 acres) on Knob Creek brought suit against Thomas and his neighbors, claiming title to the initial tract. Faced with such complications, the Lincolns left Kentucky in late 1816 and made a new home across the Ohio River in Indiana.

President Abraham Lincoln later wrote: "This removal was partly on account of slavery, but chiefly on account of the difficulty of land titles in Kentucky." Be that as it may, the Kentucky era stood Abraham in good stead for the hardships and the honors that were destined to come his way.

The Farm, The Cabin, and The Park

As the years passed from 1816 onward, the original 121-hectare (300-acre) Sinking Spring Farm underwent changes normal to any sizeable tract of frontier land. Almost two-thirds of the farm was eventually sold to various buyers and traders, until the remaining core was settled by a family named Creal.

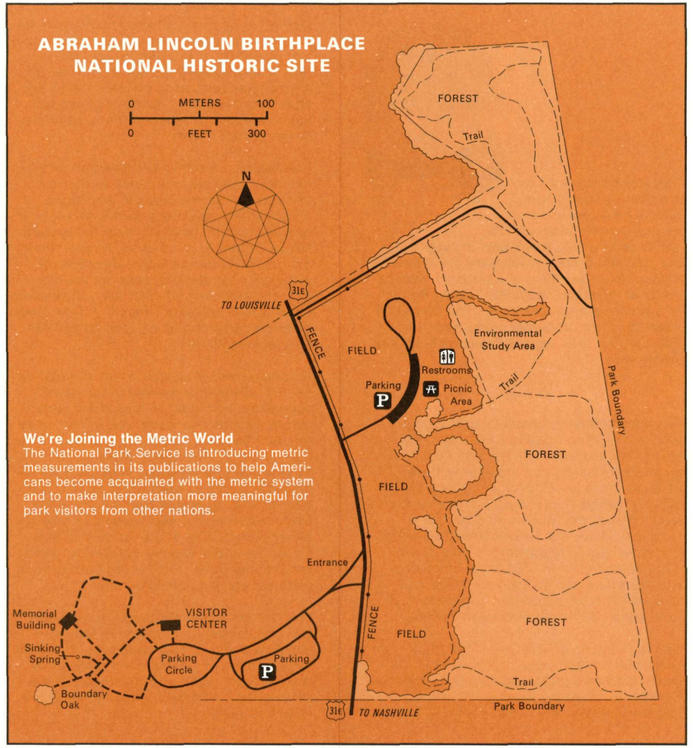
In 1860, the remains of a log cabin on the Lincoln farm were moved to another farm a few kilometers to the north. Although its history prior to 1860 is a matter of controversy and doubt, this log cabin, which is now displayed within the memorial building, became the subject of much interest and speculation. When a New York businessman named A. W. Dennett purchased the Lincoln farm in 1895, he had the cabin returned to its initial site near the Sinking Spring. The little cabin did not long remain there, for it was again dismantled, moved, stored, and re-erected for exhibition in many cities.

About 1900, Mark Twain, William Jennings Bryan, Samuel Gompers, Ida Tarbell, Charles Evans Hughes, Robert Collier, and others formed the Lincoln Farm Association to preserve Lincoln's birthplace and establish a memorial to the country's 16th President. Spurred by the publicity of the influential *Collier's Weekly*, the association bought the farm and cabin in 1906.

The association also raised over $350,000 from more than 100,000 citizens, and with this money, a marble and granite memorial building was designed by John Russell Pope and constructed to house the birthplace cabin. President Theodore Roosevelt laid its cornerstone in 1909, and President William Howard Taft dedicated the memorial two years later. Established in 1916 as a National Park, the area became a National Historic Site on September 8, 1959.

Such elaborate developments might have amused Abraham Lincoln, who once described his beginnings as a page in "the short and simple annals of the poor."

—*Jim Stokely*



We're Joining the Metric World

The National Park Service is introducing metric measurements in its publications to help Americans become acquainted with the metric system and to make interpretation more meaningful for park visitors from other nations.

About Your Visit

Abraham Lincoln Birthplace National Historic Site is about five kilometers (three miles) south of Hodgenville, Ky., on U.S. 31 E and Ky. 61. The site is open daily, except December 25. Uniformed interpreters are on hand at the visitor center to give information and directions. Groups may make advance arrangements for conducted tours. Picnic facilities and hiking trails are also provided. Camping is not permitted within the park, but camping facilities are nearby. An environmental study area is for school use.

Be cautious of traffic while crossing roads. Along trails watch for exposed roots and uneven ground. Poison ivy and briars are abundant in woodland, so stay on trails and keep alert. So others may enjoy what you have seen, leave all natural and historical features as you find them.

Administration

As the Nation's principal conservation agency, the Department of the Interior has responsibility for most of our nationally owned public lands and natural resources. This includes fostering the wisest use of our land and water resources, protecting our fish and wildlife, preserving the environmental and cultural values of our national parks and historical places, and providing for the enjoyment of life through outdoor recreation. The Department assesses our energy and mineral resources and works to assure that their development is in the best interests of all our people. The Department also has a major responsibility for American Indian reservation communities and for people who live in Island Territories under U.S. administration.

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior