

# lincoln boyhood

**Thomas Lincoln's Farm**  
Farming was the way of life for almost all Americans in the early 19th century, and for those on the frontier it was necessary for survival. Thomas Lincoln and his son, Abraham, came from a long line of farming frontiersmen whose methods varied little from those of other pioneers moving west. This diagram and the descriptive passages will give you an idea of the kinds of crops the Lincolns grew, how they raised them, and how their farm was laid out.

## Corn

The easiest plant to care for and the best producer on a new farm was corn. It could be planted among the stumps of a cleared field in unplowed earth and cultivated with a hoe. The first spring the Lincolns were in Indiana they put in 2.5 hectares (6 acres) of corn in an "18 inches and under" clearing. Such a clearing got its name because every tree 18 inches and under in diameter was cut down and the rest left standing to be killed by "girdling"—cutting the bark all the way around to prevent the sap from rising. The corn the Lincolns raised grew to heights of 5 to 6 meters (15 to 18 feet). Today's hybrid varieties have sacrificed height for larger and more ears. Beans and pumpkins were planted in the corn rows so they could climb on the corn stalks. The small wildlife and birds were a constant menace to the corn from the time it was planted until it was harvested; squirrels had no competitor for the title of chief menace. What they didn't get was shucked and stored in corn cribs for use in the winter.

## Rails

The Lincolns probably used fences to keep animals out rather than in. That is, fences protected growing crops while the livestock was either hobbled or tethered in the meadow. Hogs often ran wild in the woods, eating nuts and growing fat, a tempting treat for a bear or wildcat. White ash, oak, chestnut, poplar, and walnut made the best rails. Cut in the winter while the sap was down, the tree was halved, quartered, and split into as

## Vegetable Garden

Besides raising crops, every frontier family kept a vegetable garden. The most common vegetable was the potato, and occasionally it was the only one served. Potatoes had another use: they were baked and given to children to carry on cold winter mornings to keep their hands warm. Turnips were also common and

sometimes were planted in the fields after the flax had been pulled. Gourds made useful containers, serving as bottles, pans, ladles, and funnels. Huge gourds were used to store seed for the next year's planting, for rats, mice, and squirrels could not chew through the tough shell. Most family gardens also included beans, cucumbers, melons, asparagus, cabbage, onions, broom-corn for making brooms, and herbs for preserv-

many rails as was possible. The heartwood was cut out and used as the ground rail since it would resist rot much longer than "sap wood." Laying the ground rail was the most difficult part of building a fence, but once this was done, the rest went up with ease. Gates in a split rail fence were simple—just bars that were let down, or rails that slid back to allow livestock or a wagon to pass through. A legal fence was said to be "horse high, bull strong, and pig tight: high enough so a horse could not jump over it, and tight enough so a pig could not squeeze through it."

## Oats

The Lincolns never raised as much oats as they did wheat or corn. The plant did not grow well in the hot, humid climate of southern Indiana and ended up as animal feed.

## Cotton

Like flax, cotton was raised for home use only, for southern Indiana could not compete with the large cotton-raising areas further south. A small patch usually sufficed one family's needs.

atives. Pumpkin was as popular with the farm animals as it was with the people. It was stewed, fried, eaten raw, and made into molasses and pies. Pumpkin leather, a great favorite with children, was small dried strips of pumpkin rolled into balls. Tomatoes generally were believed to be poisonous. The women customarily tended the garden between their many household chores.

## Flax

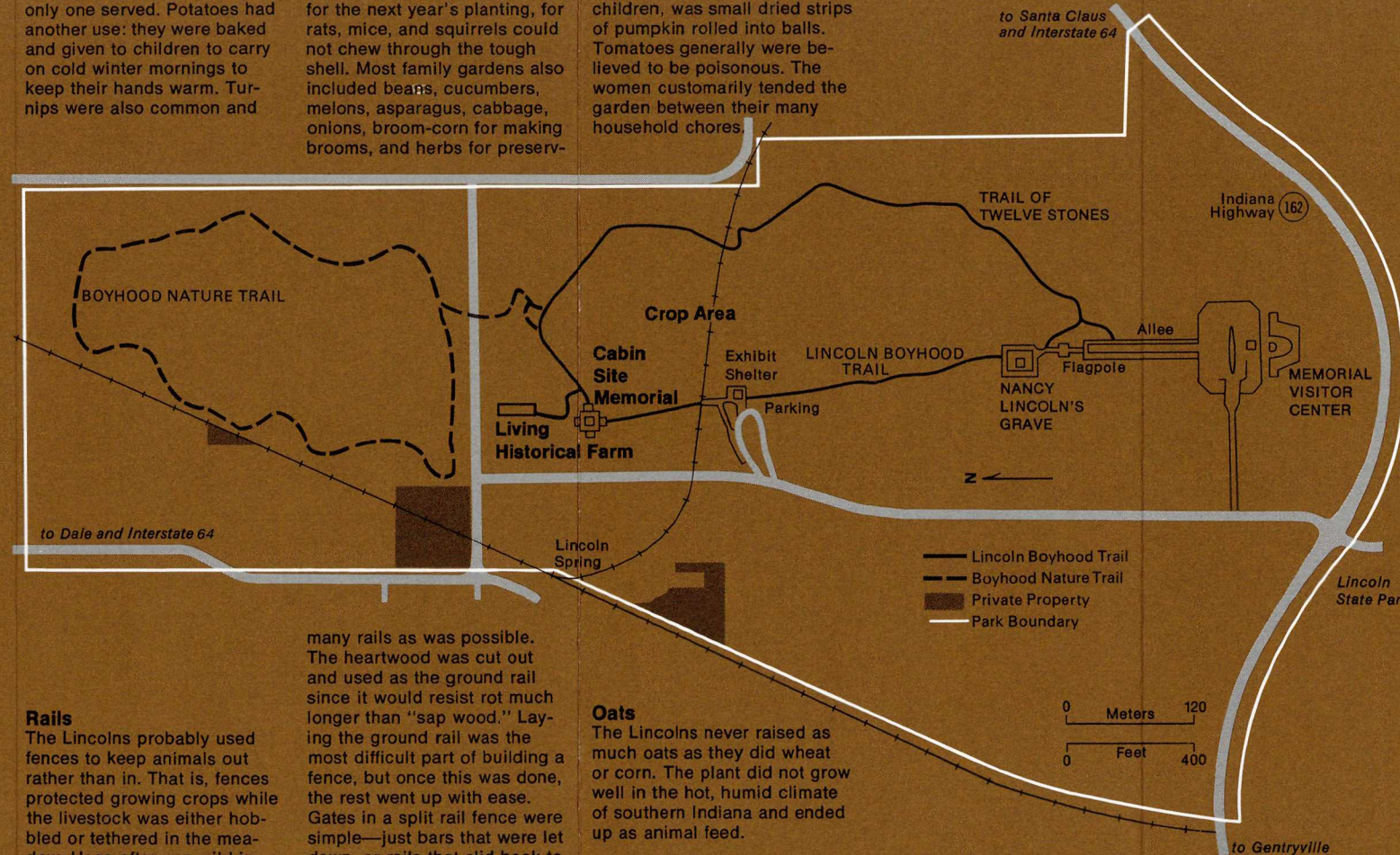
The Lincolns, like everyone else in the area, grew flax for making linen at home. Tradition dictated that the seed be sown on Good Friday. When

ripe, in late summer, the flax was pulled up by the roots, spread out to dry, and stored for later use. In the fall it was put out to soak and rot in the rains, thereby breaking down the plant fibers that were pulled through various-sized hackles to separate the coarse tow from the usable fibers. They were next spun into thread and woven into cloth. Wool or cotton was often woven together with the linen to make linsey-woolsey, a tough, sturdy fabric that could stand the rigors of wear on the farm.

in enough to produce a good flour grain. In the days when the Lincolns were farming here, it took about half the time to work the same amount of land for wheat as it did for corn, mainly because the cultivating and harvesting were so different. But corn was still the preferred crop because of the many uses that it could be put to—feed for man and beast and an ingredient for making whiskey—and wheat had to be taken to a miller to be ground. Before it could be milled, the wheat grain was threshed with a flail, two sticks joined at one end with a leather thong, and then swung over the head and whacked against the cut grain to break the hulls. Then it was winnowed—tossed into the air so that the lighter husks would blow away while the heavier grain fell to the ground. Then it was ready for milling.

## Wheat

Few farmers in southern Indiana raised wheat for market, but they usually sowed enough for their own use. As it was, they had to wait 7 to 10 years for the "new soil" to be broken



## 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.

## Administration

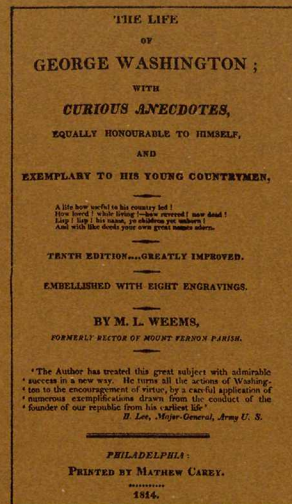
Lincoln Boyhood National Memorial is administered by the National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior. The park is on Ind. 162, 3.2 kilometers (2 miles) east of Gentryville and 6.5 kilometers (4 miles) south of Dale, Ind. It is open daily 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. year round. The park is closed January 1 and December 25. A superintendent, whose address is Lincoln City, IN 47552, is in immediate charge.

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**National Park Service**  
**U.S. DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR**

## For Your Safety

Please stay on established trails. Insect bites, poison ivy, and even an occasional snake may cause you unnecessary discomfort. Look both ways before crossing any roadway. Drivers be alert for hikers and the handicapped.



When Lincoln was 11 years old, he read Parson Weems' then-popular *Life of George Washington*. This is the title page of an early edition of the book.

### The Lincolns in Indiana

In the fall of 1816 a compact, dark-haired frontiersman toiled along a narrow trace through the dense forest of southern Indiana. Twenty-six kilometers (16 miles) west of the Ohio River he came upon a scattering of dwellings just south of Little Pigeon Creek, in a region of towering hardwoods, plentiful game, and good water. He chose a quarter section (65 hectares/160 acres) of government-surveyed land for a homesite.

For Thomas Lincoln, carpenter and farmer, Indiana offered the hope and promise of a better life, a fresh start. Here a man might own good soil free of title disputes and the taint of slavery. Three times previously, once before his marriage, he had lost land in Kentucky because of title flaws.

In 1806 Thomas Lincoln had married Nancy Hanks near Elizabethtown, Ky. There he worked

hard as a carpenter and there, their first child, Sarah, was born. A year and a half later the Lincolns moved about 24 kilometers (15 miles) south to a farm on Nolin Creek. On February 12, 1809, a son was born; they named him Abraham for his grandfather.

When a dispute arose over the land title two years later, Thomas again moved his family. This time to 94 hectares (230 acres) along the bottom lands of Knob Creek, where young Abraham attended his first school. Within a year or two Nancy bore another son, Thomas, who lived only long enough to receive his father's name.

In 1816 the heirs of an earlier landowner brought an ejectment suit against Thomas Lincoln and nine of his neighbors, claiming prior rights to the land. That fall Lincoln made up his mind to move to Indiana where he could hold his land without fear of losing it. In December the family packed up their belongings and started for the Ohio River at Andersons Ferry. After crossing the river, they followed a wagon road for 19 kilometers (12 miles). The remaining distance to the land which Lincoln had previously laid claim to had to be hacked out by hand. Though Abraham was only 7 years old, he later remembered the trip to Little Pigeon Creek as one of the hardest experiences of his life.

It was now early winter and some kind of housing had to be quickly put up. With the help of neighbors, Thomas cleared a spot on high ground and erected a cabin, finishing it within several weeks. That first winter the family lived mostly on wild game and on what they had brought with them from Kentucky. Abraham was large for his age, and was able to help his father clear the land. In October 1817, Thomas rode 97 kilometers (60 miles) to the land office in Vincennes and deposited \$16 on two tracts of 32½ hectares (80 acres) each. Two months later he paid \$64 more.

Not until 1827 would he completely pay for his land. He did it then by relinquishing the east tract as payment for the west, a common practice of the day. He also purchased an adjoining 8 hectares (20 acres).

In the fall of 1818 Nancy Lincoln died as "Milksick" struck the Little Pigeon Creek settlement. We now know that "Milksick" is poisoning caused by the white snakeroot. It has been called puking fever, sick stomach, the sloes, and the trembles. Illness develops when a person eats the butter or drinks the milk of an animal that has eaten the plant. The illness was most common in dry years when cows wandered from poor pastures into the woods in search of food. In man the symptoms are loss of appetite, listlessness, weakness, vague pains, muscle stiffness, vomiting, abdominal discomfort, severe constipation, bad breath, and finally coma. Recovery is slow and may never be complete. But more often an attack is fatal. And so it was for Nancy Hanks Lincoln. On October 5, 1818, she died. Thomas hammered together a rough wooden coffin and the family buried wife and mother on a wooded knoll south of the cabin. Abraham was only 9 and Sarah 11.



Poisonous snakeroot

It must have been a hard blow for the children. Sarah now had to take over all the household chores. Dennis Hanks, an 18-year-old cousin whose parents also had died from milk sickness, lived with them now. This meant extra work but it also meant that Thomas had another pair of hands to help clear the land. But his

wife's absence was painful. Finally, Thomas could not take the loneliness any longer. In November of 1819, he journeyed back to Kentucky in search of a new wife. He found her in Sarah Bush Johnston, a widow with three children. On December 2, 1819, they were married in Elizabethtown, Ky. Thomas had chosen well, for the cheerful and orderly Sarah proved to be a kind stepmother who reared Abraham and Sarah as her own. Under her guidance the two families became one and Thomas went to work with new energy clearing the land for more crops and repairing and improving the crowded cabin.

During the winter when Abraham was 11 he attended Andrew Crawford's subscription school. Two years later he attended, infrequently, a school taught by James Swaney. Then in his 15th year, he attended Azel Dorsey's school. Dorsey was well trained, and under his direction Abraham probably received his best education. Many years later Dorsey could still remember the boy as "marked for the diligence and eagerness with which he pursued his studies, [he] came to the log-cabin school-house arrayed in buckskin clothes, a raccoon-skin cap and provided with an old arithmetic." A few scraps of his schoolwork survived. Among them were several pages of figures and a folk couplet that read:

*Abraham Lincoln, his hand and pen  
he will be good but God knows when.*

"There was absolutely nothing to excite ambition for education," he said later of his schooling in Indiana. Still, there emerged a love of reading and a curiosity for knowledge that lasted a lifetime. The *Bible*, *Aesop's Fables*, *Pilgrim's Progress*, *Robinson Crusoe*, Franklin's *Autobiography*, the classics of the day, were the books he mastered. The boy had a good memory and a ready wit. Laying aside his work, he would often entertain friends with jokes and imitations of politicians and preachers—the pillars of the community. And down the



Sarah Bush Johnston Lincoln, 1788-1869

road at Gentry's store he and Dennis Hanks passed long hours trading stories or just talking.

By his 19th year Abe had reached his full growth—193 centimeters (6'4") and weighing more than 91 kilograms (200 pounds), he stood out in any gathering. He could wrestle with the best, and local people remembered that he could hoist more weight and drive an ax deeper than any man around.

In late 1828 James Gentry, the richest man in the community, hired Abe to accompany his son Allen to New Orleans in a flatboat loaded with produce. Down the Ohio they floated and into the Mississippi, passing the time in talk, watching the river traffic, and working the poles to avoid sandbars. At New Orleans they sold

their cargo and the flatboat and rode a steamboat back home. For his 3 months' work Abe earned \$24.

Sometime in mid-1829 the Lincolns decided to quit Indiana for the fertile prairies of Illinois. In 14 years Thomas Lincoln had wrung only a modest living from his land. The family also feared a new outbreak of the milk sickness. Preparations began in September. Returning to Elizabethtown, Ky., Thomas and Sarah sold her last property there. On February 20, 1830, he sold 32½ hectares (80 acres) in Indiana to Charles Grigsby for \$125. There is also a tradition that Thomas traded his 8-hectare (20-acre) tract for a horse—a fair price in those days—and sold to David Turnham all his stock and grain, "about 100 hogs and 4 or 5 hundred bushels of corn."

Piling all their goods into three wagons, the Lincoln family pulled slowly away from the homestead, picked up the road to Vincennes about 6½ kilometers (4 miles) north, and plodded steadily toward Illinois. On March 6 the caravan crossed the Wabash, and within the month they came to the north bank of the Sangamon River 13 kilometers (8 miles) west of Decatur. Abraham Lincoln, product of the Kentucky hills and Indiana forests, had reached the prairie country that would claim his next 30 years.



Little Pigeon Baptist Church