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## The Romance of Thomas Lincoln and Nancy Hanks\*

By LOUIS A. WARREN

A wedding which caused a court of justice to postpone its sessions for a whole day in order that judge, lawyers, and litigants might attend the ceremony and wedding festivities, should be of sufficient importance to invite an inquiry about the romance so auspiciously crowned.

So much has been written, however, about the very humble surroundings of the parents of Abraham Lincoln, that any attempt at this late day to weave a bit of romance into the drab and often repulsive story might disqualify the effort as valueless from the viewpoint of the historian. If the narrative be based on duly authorized public records, one should not begrudge the little dash of color which may appear in this new portrait, recalling the romance of Thomas Lincoln and Nancy Hanks.

Through the central part of Washington County, Kentucky, Beech Fork, a tributary of Salt River, makes a gigantic horseshoe as it meanders through the hills and sets apart a section of the country known as Beechland. There came into this territory in the late fall of 1786, a widow whose husband, Abraham Lincoln, a few months before had been massacred by the Indians near Louisville. She brought with her an orphaned brood comprising three sons and two daughters. Her youngest son, Thomas, was then but ten years of age.

Closely associated with the widow's husband in his Kentucky land ventures was Hananiah Lincoln, a cousin of the pioneer Abraham. It was his presence in the Beechland community, apparently, which caused the widow, so far removed

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from her Virginia relatives, to establish herself on Lincoln Run, a branch of Beech Fork.

Another widow by the name of Lucy Hanks settled about twenty-five miles from the Beechland neighborhood as early as 1789. She had one child, a girl not more than five years of age. The Widow Hanks soon remarried, however, and began rearing a new family. It was probably some time after this second marriage of her mother that the daughter, Nancy Hanks, went to live with her Uncle Richard and Aunt Rachel Berry. They lived in the Beechland section, about a mile from the Widow Lincoln.

Nancy Hanks was fortunate indeed in finding such a congenial home as she must have had with her aunt and uncle. Her cousins, Richard and John Berry had probably married before she came to live with the Berry family, but two other cousins, Francis and Edward, were still living at home. It is not likely that in this home there was much drudgery to fall to the lot of Nancy Hanks, as there were two negro women, Nan and her daughter, Hannah, who must have acted as the family servants.

In 1798, when Nancy was about thirteen years of age, her Uncle Richard Berry died. From his will and the settlement of the estate we learn something about the furnishings of the home in which Nancy Hanks lived. There were at least three feather beds and furniture to go with them; seven chairs; a table; a cupboard; two spinning wheels; and all of the kitchen ware (including a Dutch oven) which one would expect to find in a pioneer home.<sup>1</sup>

It is interesting to note that in the appraisal list of the estate the name of each horse is given. We are wondering if Nancy Hanks did not have the pleasure of naming some of them, a privilege often granted to children. There were "Blue-skin," "Lofty," "Cherriot," and a sorrel filly named "Rosy." Possibly the Kentucky thoroughbred that Nancy most often rode was a mare called "Cold Pleasure," which Richard Berry willed to his widow. There was also more than a dozen head of cattle listed—a large herd for that early day. Mordecai Lincoln, oldest son of the Widow Lincoln, was one of the appraisers of the estate.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Washington County, Kentucky, Court, Will Book A, 134.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 427.

Two years after his father's death, Francis Berry married and went to live on a tract of land which had been cut off from the old home place.<sup>3</sup> Edward, however, remained with his mother, and we have every reason to believe that Nancy Hanks continued to live with her Aunt Rachel. On the tax list of Washington County for the year 1800 the name of Rachel Berry appears. She designated that one son was living with her.<sup>4</sup>

During five years of her girlhood days, Nancy had the companionship of another cousin, Sarah Mitchell, who was also an orphan girl. Sarah's mother had been massacred by Indians while the family was on its way to Kentucky, and Sarah was captured and taken by the red men to their Indian village. She was not liberated until 1795, at the time of Wayne's Greenville Treaty. Thereafter she is said to have been taken into the Richard Berry home where she remained until the death of the pioneer and most likely until the time of her marriage in 1800. Tradition has it that, although Sarah was somewhat older than Nancy Hanks, Nancy taught her the art of spinning and assisted her in again adapting herself to the customs of white people from whom she had been separated since her capture.

The Widow Berry died in 1804, and just where Nancy Hanks lived during the next two years is problematical. One tradition has it that she remained in the old Richard Berry home, while another holds that she went to live with her cousin Francis Berry. Richard Berry, Jr., had also built a home on the original Berry plantation, so it is possible that Nancy may have spent some time in as many as three Berry cabins.

While Nancy was growing to womanhood, there lived about a mile away, a youth by the name of Thomas Lincoln. Most of the boys in the community were obliged to do manual labor, and Thomas Lincoln was no exception to this rule. Possibly he had to work harder than many of the neighbor boys inasmuch as his father was dead. In 1795 he enlisted in the militia, as revealed by the public records, for the purpose of protecting the boundaries of Washington County against the Indians.<sup>5</sup> He was a member of the Guard of the Fourth Regiment. Inasmuch as the company was increased

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<sup>3</sup> Washington County, Kentucky, Court, Marriage Register.

<sup>4</sup> Washington County, Kentucky, Court, Commission Book, 1800.

<sup>5</sup> Chicago University, Durrett Collection, Chronological Files, 1799.

from five to twelve men during his service, it appears that some real Indian fighting was experienced by this young soldier. He had witnessed the killing of his father; and undoubtedly he had heard Sarah Mitchell tell of the attack made by the Indians near Crab Orchard, Kentucky, in which her mother lost her life and in which she herself was captured. With this background we may conclude that Thomas would have no love for the red man.

When Lincoln became of age, he began to strike out for himself. Although he may have considered Washington County as his home and lived with his widowed mother at intervals, he is found in many different parts of the country during the rest of the time the family lived on Beech Fork. In 1797 he is listed on the Hardin County tax report as a white male, 21 years old.<sup>6</sup> He had gone, apparently to live for a time with his father's cousin, Hananiah Lincoln. He worked for several months during this year helping Samuel Haycraft build a mill and raceway at Elizabethtown. From there he went to visit his Uncle Isaac Lincoln in Tennessee and worked for him for a season. Later he became associated again with his father's cousin, Hananiah, in Cumberland County, Kentucky, not far from the home of his Uncle Isaac.

In 1801 and 1802 certain events occurred in Washington County which must have set Thomas Lincoln to thinking about his own matrimonial prospects. A series of weddings in the community, including three in the widow Lincoln's family undoubtedly directed the attentions of Thomas to Nancy Hanks, who was now nearing the age of sixteen. Josiah Lincoln, a brother of Thomas, married "Caty" Barlow; his sister, Mary, married Ralph Crume; and even the baby of the family, his younger sister, Ann, was married to William Brumfield. This last mentioned wedding united the Lincolns and Berrys, as they both married into the Brumfield family. Both the Lincolns and the Berrys married into the Barlow family also. A year before the Lincoln family weddings, Sarah Mitchell, cousin and companion of Nancy Hanks, married John Thompson.<sup>7</sup>

Something stirred up Thomas Lincoln at this time, and he set out to make a home for himself. His first step was the purchase of a farm in Hardin County, in 1803, for 100 pounds

<sup>6</sup> Kentucky State Historical Society, Hardin County, Tax Book.

<sup>7</sup> Washington County, Kentucky, Court, Marriage Register. Dr. Stith Thompson of Indiana University is a descendant of John and Sarah Mitchell Thompson.

"cash in hand paid."<sup>8</sup> He received several fees for guarding prisoners, for acting as patrolman, and for serving in other capacities which enabled him to accumulate some ready cash. While he had now removed with his mother and two of his married sisters to Hardin County and had established himself at Elizabethtown as a cabinet maker, he was not prevented from occasionally riding back to Washington County to visit his brothers and also Miss Nancy Hanks.

What Washington County girl would not have envied Nancy Hanks when Thomas Lincoln came to call on her? A soldier who had fought against the Indians; a cabinet maker by trade; a holder of minor political appointments; the owner of a good farm; a young man who had seen something of the country; and from every indication a man of integrity and honor who would be eligible for consideration among the best young ladies of the countryside.

We must not think of Thomas Lincoln as an uncouth swain who wore unbecoming clothes and rode a moth-eaten horse. In fact, Thomas must have been quite a dandy for those days. In 1805 he bought a hat from an Elizabethtown merchant for which he paid \$8.75, a pair of suspenders costing \$2.19, and other items to show that the rest of his apparel was in keeping with these purchases. Throughout the years 1804 and 1805, he carried a substantial credit to his account with Elizabethtown merchants.<sup>9</sup>

The climax of Thomas Lincoln's economic adventures occurred in 1806 when he was engaged during March and April by Bleakly and Montgomery, Elizabethtown storekeepers, to go to New Orleans with merchandise. By May 1 he had returned, and on May 16 he is credited on the day book of the firm with these two items expressed in English pounds:

Going to New Orleans .....	16.10
Gold .....	13.14.7½
Total .....	30.24.7½

Although the pound may have been exchanged somewhat at a discount, this trip must have netted him about \$150.00.

Immediately after his return from New Orleans, Thomas Lincoln began preparing for his wedding. We are able to give an itemized account of some of his purchases on two certain days in the month of May, 1806:

<sup>8</sup> Hardin County, Kentucky, Circuit Court, Deed Book B, 255.

<sup>9</sup> Photostatic copies of original records in Lincoln National Life Foundation files.

May 16, 1806	Pounds	Shillings	Pence
5 yards of linen at 3		15	0
2 yards of cloth	3	12	0
1¾ yds. jeans		11	10
1½ yds. Brown Holland		4	6
¼ yd. Scarlet cloth		15	0
3 sticks of twist		2	2
3 skeins of twist		2	3
3 doz. buttons		13	3
3½ yds. Cassimere	2	12	3
2 yds. tape			9
1 doz. buttons		1	6
9 doz. buttons		16	2
2 yds. Brown Holland		1	4
6 skeins thread			6
May 20, 1806			
3 yds. coating	3	4	3
1½ yds. brown holland		4	9
1¼ yds. red flannel		7	6
1⅔ doz. buttons		6	3
2 skeins of silk		1	6
1 stick of twist		0	9
2 skeins of thread			6

The day book also shows that Lincoln drew, on his store credit, the sum of \$112.70 cash, undoubtedly used in further preparations for the wedding. He continued to make purchases at the store throughout the month and until June 4. On June 2 he bought a new bridle for his horse.<sup>10</sup>

With such extensive preparations being made on the part of Thomas for the wedding we cannot think that Nancy was idle. A sketch comes down to us through a grand-daughter of the companion and cousin of Nancy Hanks, Sarah Mitchell, which is probably a true picture of Nancy's industry:

Sarah Mitchell was the pupil of Nancy Hanks in learning to spin flax, the latter being adept in that now lost art. It was the custom in those days to have spinning parties, on which occasion the wheels of the ladies were carried to the house designated, to which the competitors, distaff in hand, came ready for the work of the day. At a given hour the wheels were put in motion, and the flimsy fibre took the form of firmly lengthened strands in their mystic hands. Tradition says that Nancy Hanks generally bore the palm, her spools yielding the longest and finest thread.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> *Louisville Courier*, February 20, 1874. See for story by Mrs. C. S. H. Vawter.

Although it is doubtful whether a trustworthy description of Nancy Hanks at the time of her wedding is available, there is a sketch portraying her in later years, from which we have eliminated certain statements about her appearance which would not be true to her earlier years. Possibly the following picture may give some idea of how she looked:

A slender symmetrical woman, of medium stature, a brunette with dark hair, regular features and soft, sparkling hazel eyes. Tenderly bred she might have been beautiful. . . . By her family she was considered something wonderful. John Hanks spoke of her "high, intellectual forehead" which he considered but the proper seat of faculties like hers.<sup>12</sup>

From many sources comes the information that she was well educated for that day, as were all of her cousins and other kinfolk in Washington County. Original manuscripts written by the Berrys, Mitchells, and others, are still extant. One biographical sketch of Nancy Hanks, which was approved by no less an authority than Abraham Lincoln himself, states that she was "a ready reader" and read the Bible to him (Abraham) habitually.<sup>13</sup> Nancy's cousin, John Berry, oldest son of Richard Berry, Sr., died in 1795 and the settlement of his estate reveals that his two daughters, Peggy and Rachel, were being educated in a subscription school.<sup>14</sup>

There are records which confirm that there was literature in the homes where Nancy lived and visited. Joann Brumfield, cousin of Nancy, bought a Bible in the year 1800,<sup>15</sup> paying for it the sum of one pound, four shillings, and sixpence. Francis Berry, in 1804, purchased a dictionary for sixteen shillings, the only book sold at the sale he was attending.<sup>16</sup> We may feel sure that the bride to be of Thomas Lincoln was not an illiterate.

With the arrangements for the wedding about completed, Thomas Lincoln had one more important task to perform. It was necessary that he should go to the clerk of the county where his prospective bride resided and give a bond affirming that there was no lawful cause to obstruct the contemplated wedding. This he did on Monday, June 10, and Richard Berry, cousin of the bride, as guardian of Nancy Hanks, signed the

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<sup>12</sup> Ward H. Lamon, *The Life of Abraham Lincoln*, 11.

<sup>13</sup> John L. Scripps, *Life of Abraham Lincoln*, 2.

<sup>14</sup> Mercer County, Kentucky, Court, Will Book 2, 273.

<sup>15</sup> Washington County, Kentucky, Court, Will Book 1, 128.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 325.

bond with him. Upon the signing of such a bond the clerk would issue a license to marry.<sup>17</sup>

On the same day it is possible that he also saw the Rev. Jesse Head and asked him to perform the wedding ceremony. We have evidence that the preacher was in the Washington County Court House on that day, as he signed a court order in the suit of Williams vs. Meagan, bearing the date June 10, 1806.<sup>18</sup>

With all of the preliminaries for the wedding completed by the families of both bride and groom we are now ready to look in upon the wedding which was the happy climax to this courtship of the Widow Lincoln's youngest son and the niece of pioneer Richard Berry.

On occasions when the writer visited in Washington County, Kentucky, he heard traditions about the court being adjourned for the day, that the judge and lawyers might attend the wedding. Such a story, however, did not seem to fit in very well with the background usually built up for the parents of Abraham Lincoln.

Recent discoveries have revealed that these young people did have connections among the outstanding citizens of Washington County which would make their marriage of interest to a large group of people. Furthermore, the writer has discovered documentary evidence that the Circuit Court was convened in the Washington County Court House during the day immediately preceding and the day immediately following the wedding. The court did meet on Monday, June 9, Tuesday, June 10, and Wednesday, June 11. On the day of the wedding, Thursday, June 12, however, no sessions were held, all suits being postponed until Friday, the 13th, when the court was in session again.<sup>19</sup>

Of course, there is no entry which states that the court dismissed on Thursday, June 12, on account of the wedding, but these facts may be observed: Richard Berry, guardian of Nancy Hanks, and several other relatives of the bride, had business in the court or were serving on juries. Furthermore, Mordecai Lincoln, brother of the groom, was defendant in two cases called for June 12, the wedding day: Elias Davidson vs. Mordecai

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<sup>17</sup> Washington County, Kentucky, Court, Marriage Bonds, 1806.

<sup>18</sup> Washington County, Kentucky, Circuit Court Papers, Judgments, 1806.

<sup>19</sup> Washington County, Kentucky, Circuit Court, Order Book B, 26.



Lincoln and John Caldwell vs. Mordecai Lincoln.<sup>20</sup> Jesse Head, the minister chosen to perform the ceremony, was also a magistrate, and the records show that he, likewise, had business in the Circuit Court on this day. It looks very much as if the old tradition about the court being closed on account of the wedding has been substantiated.

With a wedding of sufficient importance to stop the wheels of justice, another tradition referring to it which has always seemed to lack the authenticity to give it a favorable acceptance by historians now assumes the role of an historical document. Christopher C. Graham, who claimed to have been present at the wedding, gave the following account of what took place:

I saw Nancy Hanks Lincoln at her wedding, a fresh-looking girl, I should say over twenty. Tom was a respectable mechanic and could choose . . . . I was at the infare, too. . . . We had bear-meat; venison, wild turkey and ducks; eggs, wild and tame; maple sugar, swung on a string, to bite off for coffee or whiskey; syrup in big gourds, peach and honey; a sheep that the two families barbecued whole over coals of wood burned in a pit, and covered with green boughs to keep the juices in; and a race for the whiskey bottle.<sup>21</sup>

While there is no way of learning with any degree of certainty just who attended the wedding, these guests, all related to the bride, were probably there: Lucy Shipley [Hanks] Sparrow, mother of the bride, and her husband, Henry Sparrow; Richard Berry, Jr., cousin and guardian of Nancy Hanks, who undoubtedly gave the bride away, and his wife Polly Ewing Berry; Sarah Mitchell Thompson, cousin of Nancy, who most likely stood up with her, and John Thompson, husband of Sarah; Francis Berry, cousin, and his wife, Betsy Brazelton Berry; Edward Berry, cousin; Joanna Berry Mitchell, cousin; James Mitchell, cousin, and his wife, Betsy Brumfield Mitchell; Daniel Mitchell, cousin, and his wife, Jane Berry Mitchell, also a cousin; Ann Mitchell [Berry] Deathan, cousin, and her two daughters, Peggy and Rachel Berry. There was, of course, also a group of Hankses present, including several uncles and aunts and Hanks cousins too numerous to mention.

The chief place of honor among the groom's relatives, would be given to the Widow Bersheba Lincoln, mother of the

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> Quoted in Ida M. Tarbell, *The Early Life of Abraham Lincoln*, 235.

groom; then would follow the two brothers, Mordecai and Josiah, with their wives, Mary Mudd Lincoln and Caty Barlow Lincoln, respectively. One of these brothers probably acted as best man. The two sisters, Mary and Ann, would be present with their husbands, Ralph Crume and William Brumfield, respectively. The intermarriages of the brothers and sisters of Thomas with prominent families in the Beechland community would make a large number of "in-laws" eligible to attend. One fact about this wedding is certain; it did not lack for guests who were in some way related to the young couple, to say nothing of neighbors who would attend.

The old Berry cabin in which the wedding of Thomas Lincoln and Nancy Hanks is said by tradition to have taken place is still preserved. In 1911 it was moved from its original site in Beechland, in Washington County, to a plot of ground adjacent to the Pioneer Cemetery at Harrodsburg, Kentucky.

On June 12, 1931, the one hundred twenty-fifth anniversary of the wedding, this historic cabin was enshrined within a beautiful and appropriate structure in the form of a brick church following an architectural design of the old Lulbegrud Church which was erected in Kentucky in 1799. This shrine, made possible by the generosity of Mrs. Edmund Burk Ball of Muncie, Indiana, stands as a memorial to a pioneer wedding of more than usual importance which sealed a romance of the pioneer days and joined together the parents of Abraham Lincoln.