

The Religious Environment of Lincoln's Youth

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The religious environment to which Abraham Lincoln was subject as a youth has never been adequately explored. The minute book of the Little Pigeon Baptist Church, although repeatedly examined by biographers, has yielded very little. It is concerned for the most part with purely routine matters such as inquiries into the peace of the church, acceptance and dismissal of members, and the recording of contributions of various sorts. Now and then a vote on policy is mentioned, or a matter of discipline raised. Except for the appearance of the Lincoln name at a half dozen or so places, it differs in no important particular from scores of similar records of kindred churches of the period that are available. It is, in fact, less significant than many that the writer has examined. The document acquires meaning only in proportion to one's understanding of the general situation prevailing among the Regular Baptist churches of Kentucky and Indiana of the time. The discovery of the manuscript minute book of the Little Pigeon Association of United Baptists, however, affords a valuable key for relating the Lincoln church to the larger religious context.¹

The fact that the local church was of the Regular Baptist variety while the Association of which it was a member carried the name United Baptist requires a word of explanation. Almost all of the early Baptist churches west of the mountains accepted the conventional adaptation of the Calvinistic Philadelphia Confession, dating from 1765, practically the only formulated creed available to them. They were generally known as Regular Baptist churches, which often meant little more than that they were of the usual sort. Another tradition was also present, however, stemming from the so-called Separate Baptists of Virginia and North Carolina. This was to the effect that no creed should be allowed to assume tyrannical control over an individual's conscience,

¹ The contents of this article are based on the material contained in a history of the Baptists of Indiana, a study as yet unpublished. The Minute-Book of the Church is entrusted to the custody of the clerk of the Little Pigeon Church, which organization survives in a feeble way as a Primitive Baptist Church. It is difficult of access. The Associational record is accessible in the Library of Franklin College, Franklin, Indiana, along with a large collection of similar documents of the period.

especially with respect to the doctrine of predestination. A compromise agreement between the Regular and Separate Baptists of Kentucky was arrived at in 1801 permitting such an escape from strict credal interpretation, on which occasion the name "United Baptist" was employed. Such was the designation of the Little Pigeon Association, although the churches composing it were mostly Regular. The new designation was used more commonly in Kentucky than in Indiana, but the tradition was the same on both sides of the Ohio River.²

The immediate antecedents of the Baptist community of Little Pigeon Creek were to be found in the churches of the Salem and Goshen Associations of Kentucky, located in the vicinity of Thomas Lincoln's early home.³ The Little Mount Church, from which Thomas Lincoln brought his letter of membership to Little Pigeon in 1823, was in the Salem Association. Elder William Downs, who preached the funeral of the infant Tommy Lincoln just before the family migrated to Indiana, was a brother of Elder Thomas Downs, one of the two visiting brethren who organized the new church on Pigeon Creek in 1816.⁴ It is safe, therefore, to assume that conditions obtaining generally among Kentucky Baptists applied to Little Pigeon Church also.

Several significant institutional practices and social prejudices prevailed among the Kentucky brethren. These had originated in the persecutions suffered by their forebears at the hands of the Anglican hierarchy in Virginia and North Carolina before the Revolutionary War. The early Kentucky Baptists were, for one thing, belligerently democratic. They insisted upon the absolute freedom of the local congregation from every sort of outside control, whether political or ecclesiastical. Equally deep-seated was their profound distrust for a professionally-trained and salaried ministry. They

² William W. Sweet, *Religion on the American Frontier, the Baptists* (New York, 1930), 22-26; John J. Spencer, *A History of the Kentucky Baptists* (2 vols., Cincinnati, 1886), I, 167-177, 200-212. The Little Pigeon Association appears to be the only body of the kind in Indiana to use the name "United Baptists."

³ Little Pigeon Association Minutes for 1821. Directly across the Ohio River from the Indiana counties of Perry and Spencer was the area of the Goshen Association, the churches of which were members of the Salem Association until 1817. The relations between the Goshen and Little Pigeon associations were intimate.

⁴ Spencer, *op. cit.*, I, 50, 110, 163-166, 227, 546, 580; *ibid.*, II, 571-572.

flatly refused to "hire" their own pastors for wages, although congregations were willing to contribute to the needs of their ministers. All of their elders were untutored. Formal education was considered both dangerous to piety and superfluous as far as preaching was concerned. They reasoned that if God called a man to preach, He would also fill his mouth. It was therefore presumptuous in the extreme to insist that one called to preach must be educated with the wisdom of men.⁵ Spontaneous utterances were to them more suggestive of the working of the Spirit than were prepared sermons. Under this arrangement pastors must perforce be local or neighboring residents who labored during the week exactly as did the men who sat in the pews.

For several years after its organization the Little Pigeon Church was in a struggling stage without a meeting house or a regular pastor. When Nancy Hanks Lincoln died in 1818, for example, there was no preacher available at the place to conduct the funeral. A meeting house was finally built in 1822. When Thomas Lincoln united with the Little Pigeon Church in June, 1823, it had only forty-seven members. The roll was not above sixty persons in 1830.⁶

The regular monthly business meetings of the church were not without general interest. The practice in all Baptist churches followed the same pattern. All business was transacted on Saturday. The primary routine consideration was the inquiry into the peace of the church. At about half of the meetings, complaints would be raised. The jurisdiction of the church over public offenses involving the violation of the *mores* of the community and over private differences between members as well had to be acknowledged on pain of exclusion. It was especially commendable, of course, for offenders to bring accusation against themselves for disorderly conduct and to beg forgiveness of the church. Otherwise the church functioned as a court according to well established rules of procedure.⁷ This frontier Consistory was

⁵ Wesley M. Gewehr, *The Great Awakening in Virginia, 1740-1790* (Durham, N.C., 1930), 1-18, 173-177; Sweet, *op. cit.*, 36-39, 423, 429. The entire annual budget of a church frequently amounted to about fifteen dollars.

⁶ Little Pigeon Association Minutes for 1823 and 1830.

⁷ Special committees usually investigated unacknowledged accusations. For private differences, "Gospel steps," as set forth in Matthew, XVIII, had to be taken before the matter could be brought before the church. It was considered highly disgraceful for Christian brethren to take matters to law.

Puritanical and no doubt gossip-mongering at times, but it usually commanded respect. Cases arising were, of course, always interesting to the curious. Thomas Lincoln himself was involved in at least two such episodes. The community was coarse and crude, but the fundamental demands of honesty, sobriety, and sexual morality were sturdily insisted upon here as in other congregations.

After the business was attended to, the pastor and other elders who might chance to be present took turns in addressing the congregation either by exposition of Scripture or by moral exhortation. The meeting lasted throughout the greater part of the day. Those who came from a distance were "put up" for the night at some near-by cabin. Sunday was devoted exclusively to devotional services, the meeting closing early enough to allow everyone to reach home before dark. On rare occasions when an exceptional interest seemed to be aroused and conditions seemed to warrant it, the meeting might be "protracted" into the following week. Such occasions for Little Pigeon Church were apparently not frequent. The monthly church gathering was an important social affair, affording abundant opportunity for casual talk of crops and politics, for gossip among the women, and for courting among the young folks. Quantities of raw turnips and apples were consumed in season. That young Abe Lincoln attended many such meetings is highly probable.⁸

The Lincolns obviously did not play a leading rôle in the church. Tom Lincoln was nevertheless recognized as an orderly member, and assumed his share of the duties of the body. He served for three years as trustee, and contributed corn and other recorded items on occasion to defray expenses. He probably helped organize the neighboring Gilead Church.⁹ Abe's step-mother, Sarah Johnson Lincoln,

⁸ Scores of contemporaneous church records examined attest these facts. See also William E. Barton, *The Women Lincoln Loved* (Indianapolis, 1927), 112-113; William H. Herndon and Jesse W. Weik, *The History and Personal Recollections of Abraham Lincoln* (3 vols., Chicago, 1889), I, 63-64, 426. (This work was reprinted a few years ago at Springfield, Illinois, by the Herndon's Lincoln Publishing Company, just as in the original, suppressed edition of three volumes. In succeeding references it will be cited as *Herndon's Lincoln*); John G. Nicolay and John Hay, *Abraham Lincoln* (10 vols., New York, 1890), I, 32-33.

⁹ The Little Pigeon Church Minutes do not verify this last item. See Barton, *op. cit.*, 112-113; Roscoe Kiper, *Lincoln in Indiana* (—, 1929), 9-10.

joined the church by letter in 1824 and Abe's sister Sarah was received by baptism in 1826¹⁰

In comparison with the Lincolns the Grigsby family was more prominently active. Reuben Grigsby, with whom Abe in particular was in a state of near feud after the death of his sister Sarah Lincoln Grigsby in 1827, was twice selected as the official messenger of the church to the annual Association in the late twenties. It would be difficult to imagine, in this connection, how the unrepentant author of the "Chronicles of Reuben" could have been an acceptable candidate for membership in a church where the Grigsbys had any influence.

The last experience which Tom Lincoln had with the Little Pigeon Church was a hang-over from the Grigsby feud. The church letters which were granted Tom and Sarah Lincoln, in November, 1829, were temporarily recalled in the following January, when Nancy Grigsby complained that she was not satisfied with brother and sister Lincoln. The charges were examined by a private council and the letters were promptly restored. Perhaps as an expression of confidence and as a sort of compensation for thus having been spitefully embarrassed, Thomas Lincoln was then given the satisfaction of acting as chairman of a board of five referees who reported adversely on a charge raised by the same troublesome Nancy against another member of the church.¹¹

What were Abe's relations with the church can only be surmised. That he was directly subject to the religious influences of his Indiana environment may be safely assumed. The style of both his public utterances and his prose diction attest his close familiarity with the Scriptures. There is every reason, furthermore, to believe that Abe attended with some degree of regularity the services held in the family church located less than a mile from the Lincoln cabin. The usual sermon which he could have heard there probably did not compete seriously in interest with the books and papers which were his constant companions during his free time. The topics of interest in the Little Pigeon church must have been to him somewhat stuffy and confining as compared with the affairs of the world outside.

¹⁰ Little Pigeon Church Minutes for 1823 (June), 1824 and 1826; *Herndon's Lincoln*, I, 28.

¹¹ Little Pigeon Church Minutes, Nov., 1829, to Feb., 1830; Barton, *op. cit.*, 109-110.

The supposed widening estrangement which developed between Abe and his stolid unimaginative father during the late twenties, may well be taken as a measure of the youth's lack of sympathy for current religious views. Such a conclusion is supported by facts given below concerning the inter-relation of religion and politics in the community.¹² Abe was too easy-going to quarrel openly with his father over religion, but he could not repress his droll sense of humor. Reliable tradition says that at the age of fifteen he was especially fond of repeating the sermons that the preachers gave and mimicking their peculiar intonations and gestures.¹³

When attention is turned from the church records to that of the Little Pigeon Association, new perspectives appear in the situation. The annual Associational meetings were affairs of some importance. The sessions were invariably held in the late summer or early fall, when roads were more generally passable and work slack. They usually extended through two or three days, and might be "protracted" further. Here assembled the messengers that were sent by the dozen or so member Baptist churches located within a radius of fifteen or twenty miles. Fraternal delegates from other Associations came longer distances. Associations had no power to coerce individual churches. The primary purpose was that of mutual encouragement and fellowship, but not infrequently they pondered serious questions of general policy. The prominence of the church attended by the Lincolns in the Association is reflected in the similarity of name, and in the fact that it was organized at the home of Elder Young Lamar of that church in 1821. A number of the sessions of the Association during the eighteen-twenties were held at the Lincoln church, and Charles Harper, another pastor of that church, was repeatedly chosen moderator. That Abe attended some of the sessions of the body is entirely possible, but whether he did or not, the affairs of concern in the Association throw much light on the character of his family church.

One of the questions that agitated the Association in the late 'twenties was referred to as "alien immersion." The

¹² Charles W. Moores, "Abraham Lincoln, Lawyer," *Indiana Historical Society Publications*, VII, 483-486; *Herndon's Lincoln*, I, 34, 44, 62, 63; Barton, *op. cit.*, 105-106; Albert J. Beveridge, *Abraham Lincoln* (2 vols., Boston, 1928), I, 65-69.

¹³ *Ibid.*, I, 71-72, 95-96; Carl Sandburg, *Abraham Lincoln, The Prairie Years* (New York, 1926), 7-8, 42, 59.

problem developed because of the presence of other types of immersionist bodies in the vicinity.¹⁴ The contention was made that baptism by immersion was not valid if performed by an administrator who entertained heterodox opinions, or who himself had not been properly baptized. The principle would seem to suggest the necessity of an unbroken succession of properly qualified administrators of the ordinance back to John the Baptist himself. The exclusive character of such a position is obvious. Repeated warnings appear in the minutes of the Association concerning the danger of laxity in this matter. The body explicitly ruled on one occasion that immersion at the hands of a Dunkard (Dunker), or any other unorthodox Baptist preacher was unacceptable. Pastor Charles Harper of the Little Pigeon Church was the leader of the conservative party that passed this ruling¹⁵

By far the most serious problem which agitated the Association, however, was whether or not to countenance the new system of missionary benevolences which the New England Baptists were sponsoring. It became a subject of controversy in 1823, and continued as a perennial problem. The missionary organization had been started in the previous decade in response to the appeal of Adoniram Judson from Burma. It was broadly progressive in character, including such innovations as temperance propaganda, education for ministers, Sunday schools, Indian missions, Bible and tract distribution. Administering the program was a central executive board resident in New England selected by a Triennial Convention made up of representatives of churches and individuals contributing as much as one hundred dollars annually to their funds. Every Baptist church and Association in the Ohio valley was urged to open correspondence with the Convention. Where an opportunity could be found, local "mite societies" were organized to solicit funds. Salaried agents toured the more populous areas.¹⁶

¹⁴ Little Pigeon Association minutes for 1828-1831.

¹⁵ *Ibid.* Within the memory of the writer of this article, the issue of alien immersion has been a matter of concern to Missionary Baptist churches in a county adjoining Spencer County.

¹⁶ Peter G. Mode, *The Frontier Spirit in American Christianity* (New York, 1923), 15-40; Benajah H. Carroll, *Genesis of American Anti-Missionism* (Louisville, 1902); Minutes of Laughery, Coffee Creek, and Silver Creek associations for 1818-1822. The Triennial Convention and later the Massachusetts Missionary Society assisted the mission of Isaac McCoy of the Maria Creek Church (near Vincennes) to the Indians of Indiana and Michigan. John F. Cady, "Isaac McCoy's

Nothing could have been better designed to arouse the hostility and suspicion of the Baptists of the Ohio valley, than the so-called benevolent enterprise, especially when pushed without due regard for the prejudices and susceptibilities of the people. The vast majority of the churches would have none of the missionary system. In the first place, there was, of course, no Scriptural authorization for such conventions and societies. Many became convinced, furthermore, that it was a nefarious scheme to usurp the liberties of Baptist churches by setting up an ecclesiastical hierarchy based upon a money-contributing representation.¹⁷

Current economic and political factors also played into the hands of the opposition to missions. The panic of 1819 left the prices of western staples at a very low level, and the distress was generally attributed to the influence on the federal government of the aristocratic money-power centering in the East. Andrew Jackson became the champion of western discontent on this issue during the late twenties. After Jackson's defeat at the hands of J. Q. Adams in the balloting for the Presidency in 1825 by the House of Representatives, the attack of the western leader was directed particularly against New England. This happened to be the principal place of origin and support of Baptist Missionary Societies. Jackson's personality was compelling and dynamic. To his followers, he became the champion of the people who toiled as over against that privileged group, including scholars and professional clergymen as well as capitalists, who did not have to work with their hands.¹⁸ The new champion found an enthusiastic following within the Baptist sect of southern Indiana.

It is possible to discern a close inter-relationship between Jacksonianism as a political movement and the anti-mission agitation. The political issues allegedly facing the country were measurably personified in the current caricature of

Mission to the Indians of Indiana and Michigan," *Indiana History Bulletin* (Feb., 1939), XVI, 100-113. Societies to raise funds carried various names in addition to "Mite Societies," such as "Female Societies," "Young People's Societies," and "Cent Societies."

¹⁷ Sweet, *op. cit.*, 58-622; John Taylor, *Thoughts on Missions* (n.p., 1820).

¹⁸ Logan Esarey, *A History of Indiana* (2 vols., Indianapolis, 1915, 1918), I, 284-285, 338-340; Beveridge, *op. cit.*, I, 96-99; Sandburg, *op. cit.*, 52. With no state organization behind him, Jackson received a plurality in Indiana in 1824. From 1824 to 1828, Jackson's popularity in Indiana advanced like a tidal wave.

"graceless" and lazy young graduates from the New England seminaries who proposed to make a profession of the Christian ministry and to ask church folk to support them without working. The implied disparagement of the qualifications of the unlettered and horny-handed preachers of the western country by those who insisted upon the need of ministerial education was made unbearable by the supposed indecency with which the missionary promoters preyed upon the piety of simple folk in order to collect their own salaries. Numerous voices of varying theological opinions throughout the Ohio valley declared that money and priestly lust for power were the sole foundations of the missionary system. The New England Baptists, it was alleged, were setting up an ecclesiastical hierarchy over the Baptist denomination which in the end would undermine the liberties of the entire nation. A reflection of this point of view is found in a temperance speech which Lincoln delivered in 1842. On that occasion, he attributed the scanty progress which that movement had made in its early phases to the fact that the first champions of the cause had been preachers and hired agents whom the people suspected of desiring to accomplish the union of church and state.¹⁹

The controversy was heatedly joined throughout the Kentucky and Indiana churches for two decades. Missionary agents were denounced as "blood-sucking leeches," as masters of infamous "Yankee sophistry." Opponents asked what religion had to do anyway with the colonization of the Indians, with education, and with temperance. Where could anyone find authority for the motley horde of societies and executive boards that presumed to usurp control over the divinely established churches of Christ and to contravene the leadership of the Holy Spirit in religious affairs? John Taylor of Kentucky wrote that he "smelled the New England rat" in the enterprise from the very first.²⁰

¹⁹ *Early Speeches of Abraham Lincoln* (New York, 1907), 73-74. The Baptist preacher mentioned by Beveridge (*op. cit.*, I, 324-330) as the one to whom Abe delivered his youthful article on temperance, a Rev. Aaron Farmer, is not mentioned in local records. He may have served as a traveling agent for a time. A preacher (and farmer) by this name was the second husband of Gertrude Denslow (daughter of Chapman Denslow). Her first husband was John Smith Miller. See Hugh Th. Miller, "Chapman Denslow and His Family," *Indiana Magazine of History* (Dec., 1940), XXXVI, 361.

²⁰ Taylor, *op. cit.*; Alexander Campbell, *The Christian Baptist, 1821-1830*; *Autobiography of Elder Wilson Thompson* (Greenfield,

From 1823 to 1828, the problem of the policy to be pursued with regard to missionary benevolences dwarfed all other considerations in the sessions of the Little Pigeon Association. Almost no one proposed that they should cooperate actively with the missionary enterprise. The question was rather whether they should dare countenance the program indirectly by corresponding with the missionary agencies as requested or even with neighboring Baptist bodies who did do so. At the session held at the Little Pigeon Church in 1823 the matter was referred back to the eleven member churches for their consideration. Led by pastor Charles Harper, the Little Pigeon Creek Church emphatically condemned the proposal to correspond with the Mission Board. When a vote was taken by the Association in the following year, the Lincoln church was in a majority of seven to four against the proposition. Harper himself was elected as the next moderator of the Association.²¹

The controversy was raised to fever pitch in 1825. On this occasion the Associational gathering, meeting at Bethel church, was visited by one Daniel Parker of Illinois, who was perhaps the most extreme opponent of the missionary program in the western country. Parker was making a tour of the Indiana Associations at the time in a deliberate effort to arouse hostility against the missionary movement.²²

Parker's immediate purpose had a history behind it. He came as a fraternal delegate from the neighboring Wabash District Association, which included churches on both banks of the lower Wabash river. As such, he could exercise the right to speak in the meetings of the Little Pigeon Association. In 1820, the Wabash District Association had excluded the Maria Creek Church, of which missionary Isaac McCoy had formerly been the pastor, because that church persisted in giving aid to McCoy's missionary work among the Indians. Within a few years, the excluded church took the lead in the organization of the new Union Associa-

Indiana, 1857); David Benedict, *A General History of the Baptist Denomination in America* (New York, 1858), 864-865.

²¹ Little Pigeon Association Minutes for 1823 and 1824.

²² During this tour, he held a debate with the Rev. John Peck at the session of the White River Association in Indiana. Peck was the first missionary sent by the Board of the Triennial Convention to the Old Northwest. He did the most of his work in Illinois. No less than seven Baptist Associations in Indiana fell under Parker's control at one time or another.

tion, extending north of Vincennes, which was one of the very few avowedly missionary Associations to be found in all of Indiana. This Union Association was a particular object of Parker's attack.

Parker was an interesting character. Although diminutive in person and uncouth in appearance, he was nevertheless a clever partisan leader who knew how to appeal directly to the prejudices of his hearers. He combined a degree of natural brilliance with a flair for oratorical utterance. Back in 1820, he had published an abusive pamphlet setting forth his objections to the missionary program. The principal argument was based on his peculiar Manichean doctrine of the two seeds. Two seeds, he said, the one Divine and the other Satanic, had been implanted in the human spirit at the time of the fall of man. The eternal fate of any particular person depended upon which of these two seeds germinated within his soul. God's children would be saved and those of the Devil irrevocably lost, and no amount of missionary activity could alter their fate one way or the other. Any officious attempt on the part of missionaries to interfere with God's plan of election he shamelessly likened to the action of a lustful person seeking to aid a neighbor's wife to acquire a much-desired heir. Parker was a rabid Jacksonian Democrat and, at the time of his first visit to Little Pigeon Association, was occupying a seat in the Illinois Legislature.²³ That the curiosity of the younger Lincoln would have been attracted toward such a figure is only a little less probable than that they would have disagreed violently in point of view.

With the coöperation of Moderator Harper, Parker seems to have carried all before him on his first visit to the Little Pigeon community. The Association not only reaffirmed its previous decision in regard to the general Mission Board, but also refused to enter into fraternal relations with the Union Association. But the trouble had just begun. The extreme predestinarian doctrines of Parker offended many of the more liberal traditions of the United Baptists and the next four or five sessions were stormy ones for the Association. In the annual meeting of 1826, for example, with Parker again present, the body reversed its action of the previous year by opening correspondence with the Union Association.

²³ *Baptist Memorial and Monthly Chronicle*, 1842, 107; Spencer, *op. cit.*, II, 575-578; Carroll, *op. cit.*, 88-89, 108-123, 193.

Parker was highly indignant and stalked out before regular adjournment time. In 1827, the conservative party within the Association, led again by Charles Harper as moderator, recovered control. This time they voted to sever relations with Union Association "in Consequence of their Connection with the domestic Mission Society of Massachusetts." The pendulum swung the other way at the meeting in 1828, though Parker appeared for a third time before the Association. So great had grown the opposition to him personally by this time that the Little Pigeon body severed their connections with the Wabash District Association as well, an action which automatically abolished Parker's right to visit them as a fraternal delegate and to speak at their sessions. Only thus was his officious meddling in their affairs finally eliminated. The anti-mission policy of the Association nevertheless remained in force for more than a decade after that date.²⁴

Meanwhile a new issue of controversy appeared. The old Separate Baptist tradition re-asserted itself in the proposal that formulated creeds should be set aside and the Bible as a whole be taken as a guide of faith. Alexander Campbell and his *Christian Baptist* led the agitation on this point. Although almost as hostile as was Parker to the missionary program, Campbell opposed it on institutional grounds alone. He definitely rejected the predestinarian arguments of the Parkerites and the Regular Baptists. Thus it developed that those who refused to affirm the doctrine in question were accused by the Regulars of being Campbellites.

This new problem came before the Little Pigeon Association in 1829, with the sessions held at the Little Pigeon Church. Some neighboring churches, still under Parker's influence, demanded that the body discipline a particular individual for declaring publicly that the doctrine of predestination came from hell and would go back to hell along with those who preached it. The Association avoided controversy by claiming lack of jurisdiction on the ground that the statement had not been made in its own sessions. One of the

²⁴ Little Pigeon Association Minutes for 1825-28, 1832, and 1840. The acceptance of a missionary program was finally eliminated as a bar to fellowship in the Association by a close vote in 1840. Thereupon, about half of the churches broke away, including Little Pigeon Church, forming the Little Zion Association of Primitive Baptists. Four or five of these churches still survive in a dying condition, Little Pigeon among them.

strongest churches broke away as a result of this refusal to take action. In the following year it was voted to investigate the charge that the Union Association had turned Campbellite. So disturbing had these various outside influences become by 1831 that the Association finally severed all correspondence whatsoever with neighboring Baptist bodies, even including the parent Kentucky Associations. Thus did the Baptists along Little Pigeon Creek seek to preserve their harmony by isolating themselves from all outside connections.²⁵

In reference to the question of the likelihood of Abe Lincoln's contacts with the affairs of the Association, a few facts may be gleaned from the records. In the first place, two of the most crucial sessions of the Association were held at Little Pigeon Church near his home, those of 1823 and 1829. In the second place, Pastor Charles Harper of his family church was very active throughout the controversy. Finally, it is very probable that Tom Lincoln agreed fully with his pastor in opposing the missionary system. At any rate, Abe's complete lack of enthusiasm for such religious bickering is not difficult to understand. He declared on a later occasion that he had been frequently angered as a boy when his elders failed to discuss their religious questions in terms simple enough for a boy to grasp.²⁶

The growing youth was making contacts during this same period with a steadily widening circle of interests. Before he left Indiana, he had broken away from the political tenets of his father and had become an ardent admirer of Henry Clay.²⁷ Abe's most intimate friends during this period, such as Colonel Jones, David Turnham and William Wood, likewise became Whigs. During the summers of 1826 and 1827, Abe worked along the Ohio River, then an important avenue of commerce both in goods and in ideas. Robert Owen's communistic experiment at New Harmony no doubt came to his attention. He became very much interested in the possibilities of canal transportation throughout the western states. He heard one Dr. McMurtrie deliver an attack upon the liquor traffic, and he himself composed an article

²⁵ Little Pigeon Association Minutes for 1928-1831.

²⁶ Moores, "Abraham Lincoln, Lawyer," *loc. cit.*, 483-486.

²⁷ Sandburg, *op. cit.*, 52. A short stanza written by Abe is given by Sandburg. It suggests that the sixteen year old youth may have favored Jackson in 1825.

on temperance. It was after he returned from his flatboat trip to New Orleans, in 1828, that Abe doubtless heard the repercussions, perhaps witnessed the event itself, of the expulsion of Daniel Parker from the local Baptist Association.²⁸ There is every reason to assume that his shift of political allegiance during these years was accompanied by a corresponding development in his religious thinking.

When Abe Lincoln assumed his complete freedom in Illinois, he gave full vent to his pent-up revolt against the religious regimen which had been more or less endured while under his father's roof. He took a turn at reading Tom Paine, and went so far in his denial of current orthodoxy as to alarm his closest friends. With the passing of time, of course, he became less sophomoric in the airing of his views, but he never consented to give his assent to the doctrine of eternal punishment. Abandoning the conventional modes of religious thinking, Lincoln learned to express his faith in terms of general laws made operative by a Creator.²⁹ His assumption was that "Divine and Human justice have a common measure," and he proposed to devote himself to law and politics in an effort to arrive at a defensible concept of right and truth."³⁰ Whatever conclusions he reached on such matters as temperance and slavery, thereafter, were based not on deliberate deductions from religious premises, but on the results of personal observation and reflection on what he read in law and elsewhere.³¹

The facts seem to indicate, in spite of what is set forth above, that Lincoln never entirely outgrew the religious influences of his boyhood. Much that he had seen in the faith of his parents and friends was undeniably genuine. Although lacking in capacity for conventional piety, Lincoln himself was not an irreligious man. His mind retained certain elements of harmless superstition, accompanied by faith in a kind of fatalism or supernatural guidance not wholly unlike the predestinarian tenets of Elder Harper of the Little Pigeon Church. Herndon says that Lincoln was fond of quoting the words: "There's a divinity that shapes our ends, rough-

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 45-51; Beveridge, *op. cit.*, 96-99.

²⁹ *Herndon's Lincoln*, III, 439-441; Beveridge, *op. cit.*, I, 338-340.

³⁰ Barton, *op. cit.*, 49-50.

³¹ Sandburg, *op. cit.*, 42. Sandburg tells how as a boy, Abe pondered the question raised in the *Kentucky Preceptor* as to whether the Indian or the Negro had the greater reason to complain.

hew them how we will." In various crises, this factor seems to have lent his character an element of self-confidence and stability.³² When a group of Chicago clergymen during the early part of the Civil War demanded that the President take immediate action to effect emancipation of the slaves, Lincoln is reported to have replied as follows:

I hope that it will not be irreverent for me to say that if it is probable that God would reveal his will to others on a point so connected with my duty, it might be supposed that he would reveal it directly to me. . . . Whatever shall appear to be God's will, I shall do.³³

Lincoln retained certain negative carry-overs from his boyhood experience as well. The church of his youth had been too void of perspective, too much concerned with futile theological bickerings to be able to contain the inquiring spirit of the young man. Religious considerations seemed to lead into narrower and ever more exclusive channels. On the other hand, public affairs afforded a road to horizons which extended far beyond the fringe of low-lying clay hills of Spencer county. To those who are seriously interested in Lincoln's attitude toward the churches of his day, the following statement from him will probably be the most satisfying:

I have never united myself to any church, because I have found difficulty in giving my assent, without mental reservation, to the long complicated statements of Christian doctrines which characterize their Articles of Belief and Confessions of Faith. When any church will inscribe over its altar, as its sole qualification for membership, . . . the saviour's condensed statement of both Law and Gospel, 'Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and thy neighbor as thyself,' that church will I join with all my heart and with all my soul.³⁴

³² *Herndon's Lincoln*, III, 436-441.

³³ Sandburg, *op. cit.*, 187-184; Nicolay and Hay, *op. cit.*, I, 339.

³⁴ *Speeches and Presidential Addresses of Abraham Lincoln, 1859-1865*, 273.