

# LINCOLN LORE

Bulletin of the Lincoln National Life Foundation - - - - - Dr. Louis A. Warren, Editor  
Published each week by The Lincoln National Life Insurance Company, Fort Wayne, Indiana

Number 1073

FORT WAYNE, INDIANA

October 31, 1949

## LINCOLN'S BACKGROUND OF BORROWED BOOKS

Leonard Swett, who travelled on the eighth judicial circuit in Illinois with Lincoln, attempted to recall in later years statements Lincoln had made to him about the Indiana days. In one particular, especially, Swett must have indulged in some exaggeration, when he stated that Lincoln told him he had borrowed and read every book he could learn about within a radius of fifty miles. The outlying points within this radius would include New Harmony where Robert Owen's magnificent library was housed; Vincennes, the old territorial capital with many private collections of books; Corydon, the state capital; then reaching over into Kentucky as far as Hardinsburg, Hartford, and Henderson; and of course embracing Evansville, back on the Hoosier side of the river.

It is more likely that a twenty-five mile radius would take in practically all of the territory into which Lincoln might have reached out for books that would interest him. This somewhat narrower circle would embrace the Breckinridge library at Boonville, the Pitcher library at Rockport, other private collections in communities on both the Kentucky and Indiana sides of the Ohio river from a point east of where Cannelton, Indiana is now situated, down the river to Owensboro, Kentucky. Even within this somewhat restricted area there is little evidence except folklore and tradition that would support any frequent or periodical visits to the county seat communities of Rockport and Boonville for the purpose of borrowing books.

Some time ago the Lincoln National Life Foundation acquired at Austin, Texas several volumes bearing the bookplate of the Boonville, Indiana Breckinridge Family and dated early enough to have been in the library at Boonville when Lincoln is said to have visited it. However we would not wish to claim that Lincoln read these identical books or any books in the Breckinridge home. There is also some doubt about Lincoln having borrowed law books from Judge Pitcher at Rockport as has been alleged.

Ledgers recording the settlements of estates in Spencer County reveal that there were many available books in Spencer County when Lincoln was growing up. The inventory of the Daniel Grass estate made on July 16, 1836, six years after the Lincolns left, records "one book case" and also "10 books." The previous year Benjamin Romaine, a close neighbor of the Lincolns died and "1 dictionary" was listed in the Spencer County will book. Usually the reference in the inventories of different estates lists "parcel of books," "1 lot of books," and often the lists include a Bible, hymn book, testament, reader, etc.

However, there are certain volumes which Lincoln is known to have borrowed in the immediate vicinity of his home which greatly influenced him. We might expect that Lincoln would borrow books from the families living not far away and one should not get the impression that there were no books available within a circle of two or three miles. It was within this area where he secured many important volumes.

### WEEMS' WASHINGTON

As far as we can learn the first borrowed book which Lincoln acquired was Weems' *Life of Washington*, loaned to him by his first Indiana school teacher, Andrew Crawford. It appears as if Lincoln attended Crawford's school during the winter of 1820-1821 and Abe at that time would be about twelve years old. Lincoln made a speech at Trenton, New Jersey on February 21, 1861 in which he said, "May I be pardoned if, upon this occasion, I mention that away back in my childhood the earliest days of my being able to read, I got a hold of a small

book, such a one as few of the younger members have ever seen—Weems' *Life of Washington*." It is not known what became of this identical book which impressed him so deeply.

### RAMSAY'S WASHINGTON

Another book on Washington which Lincoln borrowed four or five years later is remembered because of the accident to the book while it was in Lincoln's possession. John Locke Scripps who interviewed Lincoln in preparation for the campaign biography in 1860 makes this statement:

"When he (Abraham Lincoln) was 14 or 15 years of age he learned that one Mr. Crawford, a distant neighbor had in his house Ramsay's *Life of Washington*—a book which he was told gave a fuller and better account of Washington and the Revolution than the volume (Weems') he had read with so much pleasure. He at once borrowed the book and devoured its contents. By some accident the volume was exposed to a shower and badly damaged. Young Lincoln had no money but he knew how to work. He went to Crawford and told him what had happened and expressed his readiness to work out the full value of the book. Crawford had a field of corn which had been stripped of the blades as high as the ear, preparatory to cutting off the top for winter fodder for his cattle. He expressed his willingness to square accounts if Lincoln would cut the tops from the field of corn. The offer was promptly accepted and after three days of hard labor the book was paid for and young Lincoln returned home, the proud possessor of another volume." This was Josiah Crawford a "near" not "distant" neighbor from whom Lincoln borrowed the book, not to be confused with the school teacher, Andrew Crawford.

### THE KENTUCKY PRECEPTOR

Apparently many books were available at Josiah Crawford's and the inventory of his estate revealed seven books in his possession, one listed as a "History of the World." The other book Lincoln is said to have borrowed from Josiah Crawford, which probably was returned undamaged, was *The Kentucky Preceptor*. It consists of a collection of writings "extracted from approved writers of different ages and countries." It was acquired by William Herndon either by gift or purchase from a member of the Crawford family and is now in the valuable collection of Oliver R. Barrett of Chicago.

### SCOTT'S LESSONS IN ELOCUTION

Another neighbor, David Turnham, who lived but a short distance to the north of the Lincoln home loaned at least two books to Lincoln which were valuable source books for Lincoln's future career. Scott's *Lessons in Elocution* is said to have been borrowed from Turnham although another source claims that this book was brought from Kentucky by Lincoln's stepmother, Sarah Bush Lincoln. There was a copy in the Bush family in Kentucky and its purchase is noted in the account book of the Blakley and Montgomery store at Elizabethtown. This book on elocution undoubtedly furnished the background for Lincoln's oratory.

### STATUTES OF INDIANA

The *Statutes of Indiana* also borrowed from David Turnham was an important source book. While there is no evidence that Lincoln ever kept the book at his home for any length of time he is said to have received from it his introduction to law. The identical book he used was presented by a grandson of David Turnham to William Herndon in 1866 and finally came into the possession of William Townsend of Lexington, Kentucky, well known student of Lincoln.