



Lincoln Lore

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Lincoln's Visit to Kentucky - 1841

No incident in Abraham Lincoln's life was more enjoyable perhaps than his visit in the Speed home at "Farmington" near Louisville, Kentucky, in August and September, 1841. Following his turbulent love affair with Mary Todd, he needed a change of scene. Breaking his engagement with the aristocratic daughter of Robert Smith Todd of Lexington, Kentucky, on January 1st, 1841, Lincoln experienced an emotional crisis and suffered acute mental anguish.

In a letter to John T. Stuart, dated January 23rd, 1841, Lincoln in reference to the "fatal first of January" stated that "I am now the most miserable man living. If what I feel were equally distributed to the whole human family, there would not be one cheerful face on the earth. . . . I fear I shall be unable to attend to any business here, and a change of scene might help me." Apparently, Mary

was also miserable, as she wrote Mercy Levering (June 17, 1841) that Lincoln "deems me unworthy of notice, as I have not met him in the gay world for months . . . I would that the case were different, that he would once more resume his station in Society."

Lincoln made a verbal promise to his very close friend, Joshua Fry Speed, that he would pay him a visit; and on June 20th Lincoln wrote him that "I stick to my promise to come to Louisville." Lincoln and Speed began their close friendship on April 15, 1837, the day Lincoln arrived in Springfield with the avowed purpose of establishing himself as a lawyer.

Speed was the second son of Judge John Speed and Lucy Gilmer Fry Speed. Going west to make his fortune, he and other partners, under the firm name of James Bell & Company, opened a general store in Springfield.



Photograph secured from Historic Homes Foundation, Inc., 3033 Bardstown Road, Louisville, Kentucky
Farmington

Built by Judge John Speed, from plans drawn by Thomas Jefferson, in 1809-1810. Here, Lincoln visited for several weeks during the months of August and September, 1841.

Lincoln, a prospective customer, went into the business establishment to make a purchase of bedding. The two Kentuckians struck up an immediate friendship, and Lincoln accepted Speed's invitation to share the room he occupied over the store.

Speed's business career in Springfield was interrupted in 1840 by the death of his father, and he was called back to Louisville to help his mother run the family plantation.

With the adjournment of the Sangamon Circuit Court on August 11, 1841, Lincoln made plans to travel to Louisville. The exact date of his departure is unknown, but it may have been the date of the court's adjournment. If Lincoln left Springfield on August 11th, he probably arrived in Louisville on August 18th.

Undoubtedly for the first time Lincoln, then thirty-one years of age, had the experience of living in the quiet luxury of a fine plantation home. The Federal style Speed home of fourteen rooms, called "Farmington," was built on the 1500 acre tract in 1809-1810 by skilled local workmen, although it is claimed by some that workmen were brought from Philadelphia to do the joiner work. The original deed to the property, signed by Patrick Henry, Governor of Virginia, is dated 1780. The builder, Judge John Speed, married Lucy Gilmer Fry in 1808, and it is believed that they lived with two little daughters (by Judge Speed's former wife) in a cabin on the plantation while the house was under construction.

The parents of Joshua had come with their families from Virginia to Kentucky as children. Lucy's parents were Joshua and Peachy Walker Fry. Both the Speed and Fry families had close ties with Thomas Jefferson, and perhaps this family connection led the Speeds to select a Jeffersonian design for their home. In the Coolidge collection of Jefferson papers at the Massachusetts Historical Society in Boston, are the floor plans for Farmington, designed by the nation's Third President. A close study of the plans indicates that few liberties were taken by the builders employed by Judge Speed. It is interesting to point out that the original Farmington was located at Charlottesville, Virginia, the home of the uncle of Lucy Gilmer Fry. The uncle was a close friend of Thomas Jefferson, and it is believed that it was through him that the plans for Farmington in Louisville were secured.

Lincoln, it is believed, occupied the big front room on the left side of the spacious hall. If he was discerning, he noticed that the rooms of the home were quite large with

high ceilings (14 feet on the first floor), deep casements and tall windows. The woodwork, casements and floors were made of the finest hardwood. Then, too, there is exquisite handwork in the house, with its reeded doorways, delicate fanlights, beautiful cabinets and interesting Adamesque mantels. Upon entering Farmington, Lincoln was likely impressed with the long driveway lined with locust and walnut trees, with the splendid mansion set back a quarter of a mile from the Bardstown Pike. In the rear of the house was a family burying ground, a stone barn, blacksmith shop, springhouse, slave quarters and other buildings.

If Lincoln had known that Farmington was designed by Jefferson, he would perhaps have been interested in the two octagonal rooms set back in the central area of the house, and the fanlights over interior as well as exterior doors. A rococo mantel in one of the octagonal rooms is of great interest because of the decorative motifs inspired by the American and French revolutions. Undoubtedly, one of the most interesting features of the home is the secret stairway, which is narrow and steep. Hidden between the main hall and the ground floor, it provided an escape in case of an Indian attack. Ruined walls resembling a small fort, only a few yards south of the house, indicate that at one time there must have been a connecting tunnel from the big house to the fort.

The house has a long history. Here ten children were born to John and Lucy Speed. Some of them grew up to become distinguished citizens. The Speeds entertained many visitors and relatives. One visitor, a German musician named Anton Heinrich, remained at Farmington for one year. However, one of the most fascinating stories about Farmington is an account of the company of volunteers for the War of 1812 who enjoyed the hospitality of the Speeds and went away loaded with choice provisions.

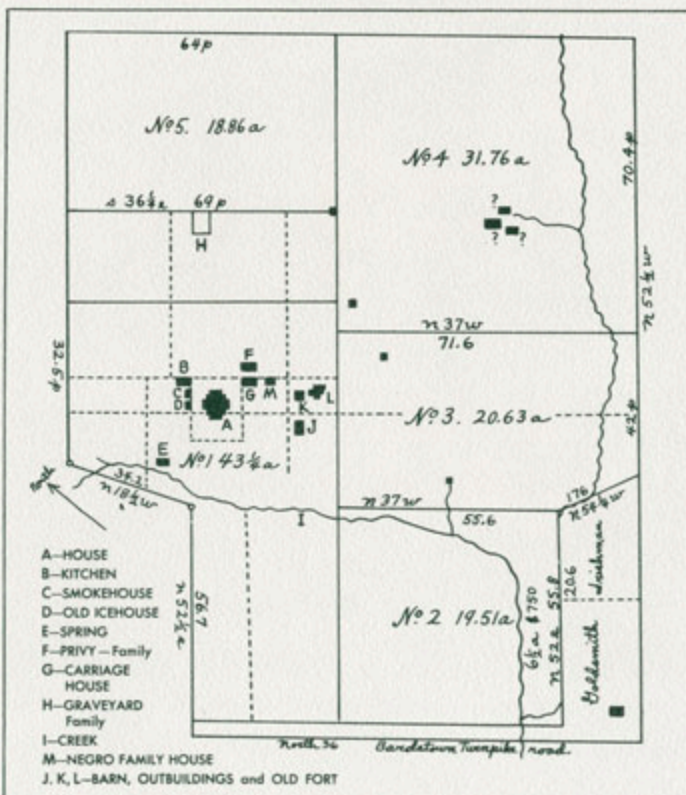
Upon Lincoln's arrival at Farmington, he was assigned a servant to attend to his personal needs. This servant was chosen from among seventy-odd slaves on the plantation. Lincoln was provided also with a riding horse for his exclusive use. According to Robert L. Kincaid, author of the brochure, "Joshua Fry Speed — Lincoln's Most Intimate Friend" (1943), Lincoln "tramped the fields with Joshua; he took long rides into the country; he had pleasant chats with gentle, philosophic and motherly Mrs. Speed. He romped with Mary, Speed's older half-sister, and once in a playful mood shut her up in a room to prevent her as he said, 'from committing assault and battery upon me.' He occasionally made trips to Louisville where he spent many delightful hours with James Speed, Joshua's brother who was a rising young lawyer, and read many of his books. Once he had the painful experience of going to a dentist in Louisville who made a futile effort at a tooth extraction. Of all the good things he had to eat, nothing was more enjoyed than 'the dishes of peaches and cream' which the Speeds so bountifully supplied."

While visiting with his friend's brother, little did either man realize that twenty-three years later, on December 1, 1864, Lincoln would appoint James Speed to be Attorney General.

Twenty-six year old Joshua (he would be 27 on November 14, 1841) was also having romantic problems. His fiancée, Fanny Henning, (Lincoln called her "black-eyed Fanny") lived with her uncle, John Williamson, on a farm nearby, and Lincoln often accompanied the young suitor to the Williamson home with the avowed purpose of engaging the uncle in conversation so that Joshua could "ply his truth." The strategy worked and young Joshua and Fanny became engaged.

In fact, the Speed-Henning romance afforded Lincoln the opportunity of making his first visit to Lexington. Proof of this trip is to be found in a letter Lincoln wrote to Speed on January (3?), 1842 in which he said: "... did you not go and take me all the way to Lexington and back, for no other purpose but to get to see her again. . . ?" After Lincoln's marriage to Mary Todd, he visited his wife's home town on two other occasions in 1847 and 1849.

One cannot help but wonder if Lincoln, while a guest at Farmington, discussed with Speed the scenes of his childhood in adjoining Hardin County (Larue County was not formed until 1843) and perhaps gave some thought to a visit of his birthplace on the South Fork of Nolin River and the Knob Creek farm which he vaguely remembered. Of course, there is no record of such a visit, which, if he



Copy of old map of Farmington



From the Frederick H. Meserve Collection
Joshua Fry Speed

This photograph of Lincoln's life-long friend was made in the Mathew Brady Studio, Washington, D. C. about 1862.

had made, would no doubt have been referred to quite often when he was later concerned with the compiling of his presidential campaign autobiography.

Lincoln came to Farmington to rest and recuperate from his attack of hypochondria occasioned by his break with Mary Todd. Speed must have told his family about Lincoln's legal and political accomplishments in Illinois, but if any mention was made of his hypochondriaism, perhaps only Mrs. Speed was taken into her son's confidence. Undoubtedly, Mrs. Speed suspected Lincoln's distress over his disastrous love affair because of his recurrent melancholy moods, and she presented her guest with an Oxford Bible which she recommended as the "best cure for the Blues." Years later on October 3, 1861 Lincoln would send Mrs. Speed, by Joshua who was visiting in Washington, his photograph with the inscription, "For Mrs. Lucy G. Speed from whose pious hand I accepted the present of an Oxford Bible twenty years ago."

During Lincoln's visit at Farmington his host suffered a minor illness; however, this did not prevent Joshua's plan to return to Springfield with Lincoln to wind up his business affairs and collect some delinquent accounts. About September 7th the two young men took the steamboat *Lebanon* enroute for St. Louis. The journey was without incident except for occasional navigational delays and the sight of some dozen Negro slaves being taken South.

There is every reason to believe that while these young friends visited and traveled together, they talked about their love affairs. Lincoln constantly insisted both verbally and later by letter that Speed should marry "black eyed" Fanny. On the other hand Speed was of the opinion that the needless anxiety arising out of the "fatal first of January" should be ended with a reconciliation between Lincoln and Mary.

Arriving in St. Louis about September 14th, the travelers made a two-day stage coach journey to Springfield. Lincoln was under a compulsion to get back to his legal practice, and Fall Court opened at Tazewell on September 16th. The stage probably arrived in Springfield late in the afternoon of September 15th. Once they arrived in the Illinois Capital the two friends saw little of each other, but for awhile they would engage in a lively correspondence.

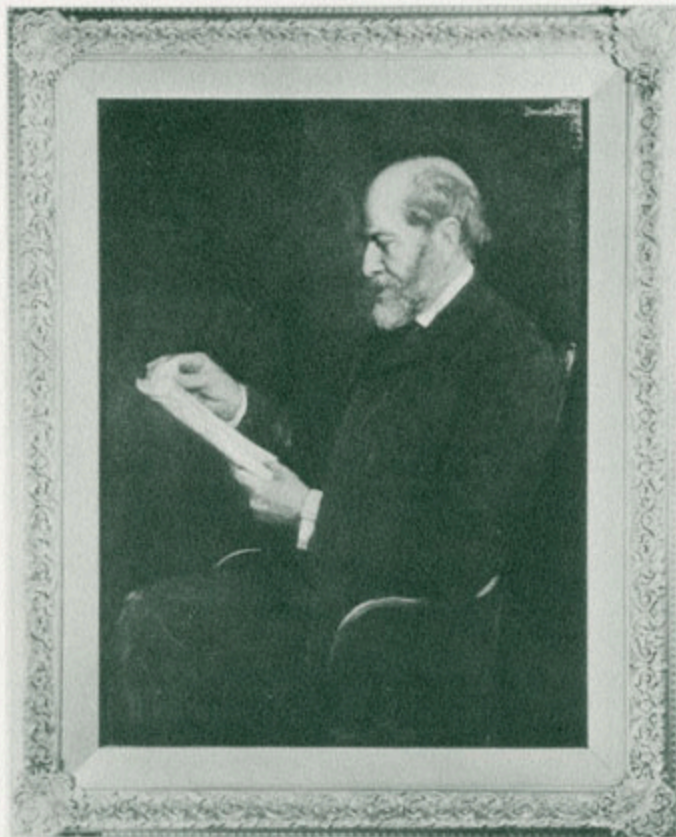
After the first of the year, having completed his business transactions, (as an attorney, Lincoln would spend several years attempting to collect some of these debts) Speed returned to Kentucky and his fiancée; and, after some further persuasion by Lincoln through correspondence, he married Fanny on February 15, 1842. Thanking Lincoln for playing the role of match-maker, Speed surely strengthened Lincoln's decision to marry Mary, which nuptials were performed on November 4, 1842.

A summary of some of the events of Lincoln's visit to Farmington, and his activities after leaving Kentucky, may best be revealed by his bread-and-butter letter addressed to Mary Speed and written at Bloomington, Illinois on September 27, 1841, within two weeks after his return to Illinois. This original letter was presented to the Library of Congress by the late Philip Speed Tuley:

"My Friend: Having resolved to write to some of your mother's family, and not having the express permission of any one of them [to] do so, I have had some little difficulty in determining on which to inflict the task of reading what I now feel must be a most dull and silly letter; but when I remembered that you and I were something of cronies while I was at Farmington, and that, while there, I once was under the necessity of shutting you up in a room to prevent your committing an assault and battery upon me, I instantly decided that you should be the devoted one.

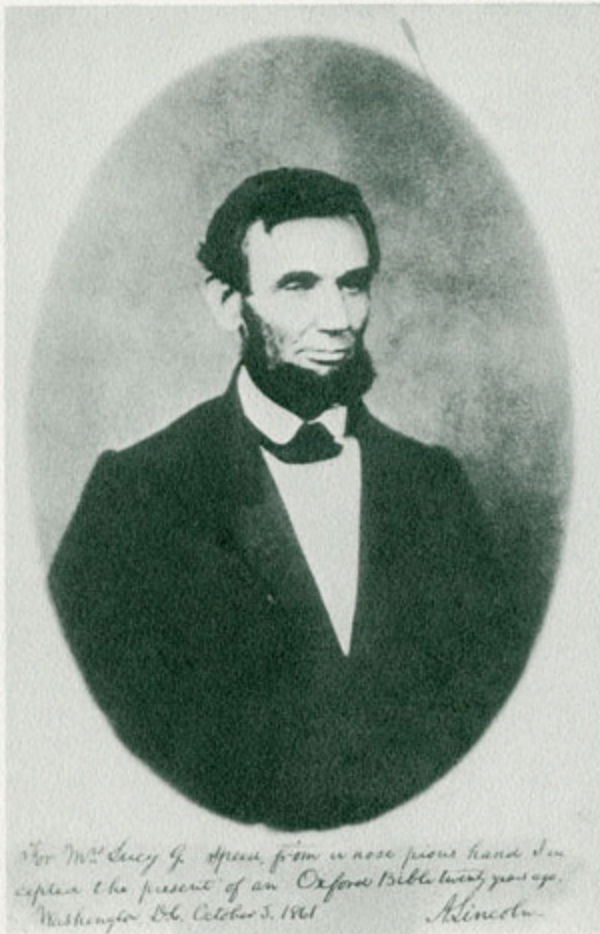
"I assume that you have not heard from Joshua & myself since we left, because I think it doubtful whether he has written.

"You remember there was some uneasiness about Joshua's health when we left. That little indisposition of his turned out to be nothing serious; and it was pretty nearly forgotten when we reached Springfield. We got on board the Steam Boat *Lebanon*, in the locks of the Canal about 12. o'clock, M. of the day we left, and reached St. Louis the next Monday at 8 P.M. Nothing of interest happened during the passage, except the vexatious delays occasioned by the sand bars be thought interesting. By the way, a fine example was presented on board the boat for contemplating the



From the J. B. Speed Memorial Museum, Louisville, Ky.
James Speed

Lincoln appointed James Speed Attorney General on December 1, 1864. This portrait was painted by Benoni Irwin.



From the J. B. Speed Memorial Museum, Louisville, Kentucky

This photograph (0.55) bearing Lincoln's inscription to Mrs. Lucy G. Speed was probably taken of the President sometime between March 1, 1861 and June 30, 1861. The photographer is unknown.

effect of condition upon human happiness. A gentleman had purchased twelve negroes in different parts of Kentucky and was taking them to a farm in the South. They were chained six and six together. A small iron clevis was around the left wrist of each, and this fastened to the main chain by a shorter one at a convenient distance from, the others; so that the negroes were strung together precisely like so many fish upon a trot-line. In this condition they were being separated forever from the scenes of their childhood, their friends, their fathers and mothers, and brothers and sisters, and many of them, from their wives and children, and going into perpetual slavery where the lash of the master is proverbially more ruthless and unrelenting than any other where; and yet amid all these distressing circumstances, as we would think them, they were the most cheerful and apparently happy creatures on board. One, whose offence for which he had been sold was an over-fondness for his wife, played the fiddle almost continually; and the others danced, sung, cracked jokes, and played various games with cards from day to day. How true it is that 'God tempers the wind to the shorn lamb,' or in other words, that He renders the worst of human conditions tolerable, while He permits the best, to be nothing better than tolerable.

"To return to the narrative. When we reached Springfield, I staid but one day when I started on this tedious circuit where I now am. Do you remember my going to the city while I was in Kentucky, to have a tooth extracted, and making a failure of it? Well, that same old tooth got to paining me so much, that about a week since I had it torn out, bringing with it a bit of the jawbone; the consequence of which is that my mouth is now so sore that I can neither talk, nor eat. I am literally 'subsisting on savoury remembrances'—that

is, being unable to eat, I am living upon the remembrance of the delicious dishes of peaches and cream we used to have at your house.

"When we left, Miss Fanny Henning was owing you a visit, as I understood. Has she paid it yet? If she has, are you not convinced that she is one of the sweetest girls in the world? There is but one thing about her, so far as I could perceive, that I would have otherwise than as it is. That is something of a tendency to melancholly. This, let it be observed, is a misfortune not a fault. Give her an assurance of my verry highest regard, when you see her.

"Is little Siss Eliza Davis [likely the two-year-old daughter of Joshua's younger sister Susan Speed Davis; however, Mary's own younger sister, also a child of John Speed's first wife, was also named Eliza Davis Speed.] at your house yet? If she is kiss her 'o'er and o'er again' for me.

"Tell your mother that I have not got her 'present' [Oxford Bible] with me; but that I intend to read it regularly when I return home. I doubt not that it is really, as she says, the best cure for the 'Blues' could one but take it according to the truth.

"Give my respects to all your sisters, including 'Aunt Emma', [Emma Keats who married Joshua's younger brother Philip, a daughter of George Keats, a brother of the poet John Keats] and brothers. Tell Mrs. Peay [Mrs. Peachy Walker Speed, wife of Austin Peay, Joshua's older sister], of whose happy face I shall long retain a pleasant remembrance, that I have been trying to think of a name for her homestead, but as yet, can not satisfy myself with one. I shall be verry happy to receive a line from you, soon after you receive this; and, in case you choose to favour me with one, address it to Charleston, Coles Co. Ills as I shall be there about the time to receive it. Your sincere friend A. Lincoln"

One cannot help but wonder why, during the ensuing years before Lincoln was elected to the Presidency, the Lincolns and Speeds did not visit one another. Mary read some of Speed's letters to her husband and oftentimes sent her regards to Mrs. Speed. On August 24, 1855 Lincoln wrote his friend and among other things mentioned that "Mary will probably pass a day or two in Louisville in October." Was she invited to Farmington? We will probably never know because the Speed letters to Lincoln have not been discovered. However, the Lincolns and the Speeds did visit on one occasion in Chicago in late November of 1860, when the President-elect and his running mate Hannibal Hamlin met in that city for a conference and to receive distinguished guests. Acting upon Lincoln's invitation with the suggestion that Mrs. Speed accompany him, Lincoln's old friend considered this a command as much as a gesture of friendship, and responded. Mary and Fanny, it appears, enjoyed a brief visit together.

Joshua Speed remained a life-long friend of Lincoln, although he declined a position in the Cabinet. He differed with the President on the question of the extension of slavery and was not in favor of abolition by decree. Nevertheless, Speed was loyal and helped keep Kentucky in the Union. He was of great assistance to Lincoln in establishing an armed force in his state in opposition to the Confederate cause. Up to the date of Lincoln's death, these two old friends kept in communication with each other. Speed occasionally called on Lincoln in the White House, when they must have reminisced about the happy weeks they spent at Farmington in August and September of 1841.

Today Farmington has been restored to its original condition by the Historic Homes Foundation, Inc. of Louisville, Kentucky. All the furnishings are American and English antiques made prior to 1820. The Foundation acquired the property in 1957 and the formal opening to the public was in April, 1959. When the home was first built it was six miles distant from the small city of Louisville. Now, the city extends south far enough to incorporate the Speed estate. Today the home is located at a junction of two highways, just off the intersection of Bardstown Road and Watterson Expressway. Farmington is open every day except Mondays, Christmas and New Year's Day. The hours are from 10 A.M. to 4:30 P.M. Sundays 1:30 P.M. to 4:30 P.M.