

Remarks for ALBC Mother's Day Speech
Lincoln's Boyhood National Memorial, Sunday, May 11, 2008
By Joan L. Flinspach

Thank you for that kind introduction, Bill. I also thank Congressman Hill, Governor Daniels, our Indiana legislators; members of the federal ALBC and Eileen Machevich, Executive Director of the ALBC; the Indiana Abraham Lincoln Bicentennial Commissioners and Chairwoman, Connie Nass; Ms. Kirk, Anchor for News25; our host, Randy Wester, and Phyllis Ellin from the NPS; the members of the "Think Lincoln" Spencer County planning committee, other dignitaries, special guests, and all of you in the audience for being a part of this wonderful celebration.

I want to start my remarks with the caveat that I have not had the privilege of being a mother, so I cannot speak to you today from that point of view. Nor can I evaluate Nancy Hanks Lincoln or Sarah Bush Johnston Lincoln's roles as Abraham Lincoln's mothers. I can, however, share with you some characteristics demonstrated by Lincoln's mother and stepmother that he, in turn, manifested in his own lifetime. Was he his mothers' son?

Due to difficulties with clear land titles and a dislike of slavery, Thomas Lincoln moved his family from KY to the IN frontier in 1816. They left KY after the harvest late in the year. The Lincolns took up residence in a temporary 3-sided shelter. Thomas built a fire on the fourth side to warm and protect the family. The ground was frozen, prohibiting the production of chinking, so even though neighbors helped Thomas build a cabin, the gaps between the logs admitted the discomforts of wind, snow, sleet, and rain during that early winter.

Drawing from Glenda Riley's description of women's work in her article, *Women on the American Frontier*,¹ in a typical Indiana day, Nancy Hanks Lincoln would have risen before her children awakened, shaken the snow from her blankets, stoked the fire, and cooked breakfast, baking the bread that she had mixed and left on the warm hearth to rise overnight. While breakfast cooked, she would milk the cow. She called the children and her husband to breakfast, which they ate from wooden plates and possibly with wooden utensils. After washing the dishes, she used the cold wash water to clean other surfaces in the cabin, but not the floor because it was dirt. While cleaning, she would have sent the children out to gather eggs. Nancy would shake out the bed ticking and perhaps restuff it with fresh corn husks before making the bed. If she had had a rough night, it might be necessary to comb out the fur covering from the bed to remove the ticks and lice.

On wash day, she would heat water, rub the clothes and bed linens with soap, and scrub them before rinsing and hanging them inside the cabin to dry, hoping that the dripping water would not form too much ice on the dirt floor. After doing the laundry, she would begin lunch—perhaps a stew of wild game with gravy made from bear grease, flour, and raw cow's milk. When the children returned from gathering eggs, Nancy might have them churn butter, while she dipped candles. In the spring, she would take the ashes she had stored from periodically cleaning out the fireplace and combine them with leftover cooking grease to make soap. If she had enough candles and soap, she might go with the children to find a bee tree for honey—a frontier replacement for sugar.

Another spring task was planting a garden. When not watering or weeding it, Nancy would take the children berry hunting. They picked more than the family could

eat in the summer and preserved the excess fruit for the winter. She and the children harvested and stored the extra garden crops--beans, corn, potatoes, carrots, and herbs.

This is not to say that Thomas Lincoln wasn't hard at work. He girdled trees, cut brush, broke ground, planted a crop, harvested the grain, fed the livestock, hunted, butchered, and skinned wild animals. Abe would have joined his father in some of these activities soon after the family moved to Indiana. Work usually reserved for men, tended to end with daylight, although since Thomas was a carpenter, he could have made some of his furniture in the evenings.

Nancy's work continued regardless of the time of day. After cooking dinner and washing the dishes, she would read to the children. At least once a week, she would heat water for the children to bathe, whether they needed it or not. After putting them to bed, she would spin flax, weave it into cloth, cut the cloth, and sew clothes. She might also take a hide that her husband had tanned, and make it into buckskins, worn in the winter. Using store-bought or home spun yarn, she would knit socks, mittens, gloves, mufflers and other clothing. When not making new clothes, she would mend the old ones.

Isolation was a perennial hardship on the frontier. When Nancy's relatives, the Sparrows and Dennis Hanks, arrived in Indiana, the Lincolns acquired the fellowship of family and neighbors. Soon after their arrival, however, the Sparrows grew ill with "milk sickness." Nancy nursed them, but the white snakeroot weed, eaten by the cows, and unknowingly passed to humans through cows' milk, had poisoned them. Nancy also drank cows' milk and became critically infirm, dying on October 5th, 1818. Thomas Lincoln, and according to some sources, his son, Abe, made the coffins and buried the dead. The painful realities of the frontier had hit home.

Settlers from “back home” brought news with them when they arrived. This might be how Thomas Lincoln stayed informed of happenings in Elizabethtown, KY. He returned there approximately a year after Nancy’s death to seek a new wife and a mother for his children. He knew before he left KY that a friend of his, Sarah Bush Johnston, had become a widow. Learning that she was still alone with her three small children, he proposed that they make a life together and she agreed. They married; he paid her bills, loaded up her belongings and she and her children moved to IN.

When Sarah Bush Johnston Lincoln arrived at the family homestead, she immediately began to make changes. With her encouragement Thomas added a log floor, a window, a loft where the boys slept, and a completed roof. Materially she brought with her a real bed frame, a table and chairs, a walnut bureau and metal silverware! As David Donald has cited, perhaps, the most important gift she gave Thomas’ children was a love equal to that which she showed her own children.² This equity in love and support endeared his stepmother to Abraham Lincoln. She backed his desire to learn. She urged him to read and write—skills that eventually took him far from the IN frontier.

So what characteristics do we see in Nancy Lincoln and Sarah Lincoln that AL later exhibited in his life? Let’s start by looking at Nancy. In her short lifetime she moved 4 times with her husband and family. Each time they moved farther from civilization and deeper into the unknown. She exemplified strength by fearlessly facing the frontier. Lincoln faced a frontier of a different kind when he left Springfield as President-Elect—his frontier was a divided country and the fear of Civil War.³ He knew the risks he was taking with his own and the nation’s future. In saying farewell to his

Springfield friends he stated, “I now leave, not knowing when, or whether ever, I may return, with a task before me greater than that which rested upon Washington.”⁴

Nancy also demonstrated diligence. She showed her children hard work vs. telling them about it. In preparing notes for a lecture on the law, AL urged this practice. “The leading rule for the lawyer, as for the man of every other calling, is diligence. Leave nothing for to-morrow which can be done to-day.”⁵

What characteristics did Sarah Lincoln show her blended family that AL later displayed himself? Perhaps one of the most important values she illustrated to Abraham Lincoln was impartiality. She accepted and treated him and his sister with just as much love and care as she gave to her own children. During his presidency, AL received Frederick Douglass, the first African-American White House guest. Douglas stated that in “Lincoln’s ‘company I was never in any way reminded of my humble origin, or of my unpopular color.’”⁶

Some of William Herndon’s informants recalled Sarah’s sense of humor. Reinforced by Thomas Lincoln’s joking and storytelling ability, Abe saw the difference his parents’ humor made in an otherwise bleak life. From many sources we learn that Thomas performed his humor usually with an audience of friends and family. Lincoln began many of his cabinet meetings with the recitation of a funny story, a performance to set a congenial tone, but, like his stepmother, he also exhibited a personal humor. In an exchange of telegrams between him, his wife, Mary Todd Lincoln, and his son, Tad, Mary writes, “We reached here [New York] in safety. Hope you are well. Please send me by mail to-day a check for \$50 directed to me, care Mr. Warren Leland, Metropolitan Hotel, Tad says [,] are the goats well[?].” Lincoln’s telegraphic response was, “The draft

will go to you. Tell Tad the goats and father are very well—especially the goats. A. Lincoln.”⁷

Perhaps the greatest quality that either or possibly, both of his mothers endowed AL with was that of vision. On her deathbed, Nancy Hanks Lincoln urged her children to be “kind to their father—to one another and to the world.”⁸ To think of the world at large as she lay dying in a lone cabin on the Indiana frontier manifests true vision. On August 22, 1864 Lincoln addressed the 166th Ohio Regiment, speaking as he had at Gettysburg with a vision of our nation’s future in mind. He said, “I happen temporarily to occupy this big White House. I am a living witness that any one of your children may look to come here as my father’s child has.” He reminded these predominantly young soldiers that, “we should perpetuate for our children’s children this great and free government,”⁹ With the leadership of African-Americans such as Frederick Douglass, with the legal instruments of the Emancipation Proclamation and the 13th Amendment to the Constitution, and with the support of the majority of the people of this country, Abraham Lincoln preserved his vision of freedom and put us on the road to greater democracy.

As families gather across this nation today to give thanks to the mothers of our sons and daughters, it seems so appropriate to pay tribute to Nancy Hanks Lincoln and Sarah Bush Johnston Lincoln. By mothering Abraham Lincoln, they raised a son who gave his life to preserve and enhance all of ours. Please rise and join me in honoring these women.

¹ Glenda Riley, *Women on the American Frontier*, The Forum Series (St. Louis: Forum Press, 1977).

² David Donald, *Lincoln* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995). 27-8.

³ *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, ed. Roy P. Basler, vol. 4 (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1953), 262-271.

⁴ *CW*, 4:190-191.

⁵ *CW*, 2:81-82.

⁶ Mark E. Neely, Jr., *The Abraham Lincoln Encyclopedia*, (New York: Da Capo Press, 1982), 89.

⁷ CW, 7:320.

⁸ Donald, *Lincoln*, 26.

⁹ CW, 7:512.