

Abraham Lincoln

Born: February 12, 1809

Birthplace: Sinking Spring Farm near Hodgenville, Kentucky

In 1864 Lincoln claimed to be “naturally anti-slavery,” adding, “I can not remember when I did not so think and feel so.”

Abraham Lincoln was a Kentuckian by birth. The Knobs country of Kentucky, his friends and neighbors, his first teachers, and his earliest religious teachings shaped his childhood and the man he became. Although Abraham Lincoln left the Commonwealth while still a boy, native Kentuckians played important, often times pivotal, roles in his upbringing, his education, his romantic life, his professional life, and his political life.

Abraham Lincoln almost certainly encountered slavery while living at Knob Creek as a young child. In 1811, when Lincoln was two years old, this portion of Kentucky was part of Hardin County. At the time there were 1,007 slaves in Hardin County, compared to 1,627 white males who were sixteen years or older. Five years later, when the Lincoln family moved from Kentucky, the owner of nearby Atherton’s Ferry owned eight slaves.

Historians are just beginning to learn about the history of slavery in this area. In addition to the presence of slaves on some neighboring farms, the Old Cumberland Trail (today U. S. Hwy. 31E) ran directly beside the Lincoln family farm. It was a main route between Louisville, Kentucky and Nashville, Tennessee. Some historians believe it was one of the overland routes slave dealers used to transport enslaved African-Americans from Kentucky to slave markets further south.

Lincoln’s parents, Thomas and Nancy, attended the Little Mount Church, which is believed to have been formed by antislavery advocates in 1810, and may have been part of a much larger antislavery movement within the Baptist churches of Kentucky, beginning in the 1790s. Lincoln later recalled that his father’s decision to move the family from Kentucky to Indiana was partly due to slavery.

Lincoln’s parents also instilled something of their views about slavery into young Abraham. South Fork Baptist Church, believed to be the first church

established in what is now LaRue County, was founded in 1782 about two miles from the Sinking Spring Farm. The congregation's founder and his successor, Rev. William Downs, were strongly anti-slavery, but much of the congregation was not. Many of the members, who opposed slavery, including Thomas and Nancy Lincoln, left the congregation in 1808. After Downs was found "to be in disorder" and the congregation voted "not to invite him to preach" for his anti-slavery views, he helped organize the Little Mount Baptist Church about three miles north of Hodgenville. Both Thomas and Nancy Lincoln were active members of the congregation. The Rev. Davis Elkin also served as pastor for the congregation. Like Downs, he was a strong advocate of emancipation. Both of these men visited the Lincoln home at Knob Creek.

The extent of Lincoln's direct contact with slavery in these early years remains unknown. The years Abraham Lincoln spent at the Knob Creek farm were typical of boys on the frontier. His early years were spent in play. When old enough, he was expected to help with what chores he was capable of, such as fetching wood and carrying water. He later recalled planting pumpkins in the "big field" of seven acres near the creek. He learned that farming could be a precarious way to make a living when a heavy rain in the knobs sent rivers of water down the hills to wash away not only the corn but the valuable topsoil as well. With few neighbors, his sister Sarah was his closest companion and playmate. On the neighboring farm was a boy nearly four years older than Abraham, Austin Gollaher, who sometimes joined Abe in play.

One of the most important events of the Knob Creek years was Abraham's introduction to education. He and Sarah attended school for brief periods in 1815 and 1816, when Abe was six and seven years old. The little log schoolhouse was located about two miles north of the Lincoln home, near the banks of Knob Creek on the main road connecting the settlements of Louisville and Nashville. The school was a subscription school, the parents of each student paying a small sum to the teacher. It is worth noting that Thomas Lincoln was affluent enough to be able to afford to send his children to school, and that he and Nancy considered education important enough to send both their daughter and son.

Like most schools of the time, it was a "blab school." The students learned their lessons by reciting them out loud and in unison. Lincoln probably learned the alphabet and may have been able to read a little when he left

Kentucky. His first teacher was Zachariah Riney, whose family had settled in the Bardstown area sometime before 1795. The second was Caleb Hazel, a surveyor and distiller who lived on the farm adjacent to the Lincoln's and who was related to the Hanks family through marriage. Hazel may have taught young Abraham penmanship and contributed to his interest in reading. While it is uncertain just how much Lincoln learned from Zachariah Riney and Caleb Hazel, it is certain that in one of the 1860 biographical sketches that Lincoln proofed before its publication, he did not quarrel with the statement that he "acquired the alphabet and other rudiments of education" during his childhood in Kentucky.

Sources: National Park Service
Kentucky Historical Society
Hardin County Tax Roles
Abraham Lincoln: A Living Legacy