

Historic Southern Indiana

Lincoln Institute, 2006

Living on the Frontier Line: The Society and Politics of the Early Midwest

By Nicole Etcheson

As an adult, Abraham Lincoln remembered his Indiana home in poetry:

“When first my father settled here,
‘Twas then the frontier line:
The panther’s scream, filled night with fear
And bears preyed on the swine.”

The frontier, according to Frederick Jackson Turner’s classic formulation, meant an area where white population was small.

The 1820 census, which recorded the presence of Thomas Lincoln’s family in Spencer County, Indiana, found 1,844 people in the county. That is about four to five people per square mile, more than Turner’s definition of a frontier being two or fewer people per square mile but definitely not heavily settled. By 1840, there were 6,304 people, a tremendous increase, although at only sixteen or seventeen people per square mile there was plenty of growing room left.

Lincoln’s biographer David Donald refers to the Lincoln family’s “desperate loneliness,” an experience of isolation common on the frontier. The Midwestern frontier was settled in open-country settlements—isolated farms spread over relatively large geographical areas.

People on this frontier did not live in villages, although there would be a central town to which they came for market and community activities such as church or school or politics. Little Pigeon Creek had such a village. James Gentry established a store in the woods where three roads met that became Gentryville. It, along with a church, became the center of the community.

Typically, within a ten-year period about 2/3rds of the residents would be new migrants.

Historic Southern Indiana

Lincoln Institute, 2006

Out-migrants were usually those who did not own land: squatters, tenants, and renters. Families tended to stay; individuals to move on. Persistent families tended to have large kin networks. Kin often migrated together.

When the Lincoln family went to Indiana, many of Nancy Hanks's relatives settled around them. When they left for Illinois, again the Hanks kin had preceded them and staked out a claim for Thomas Lincoln in Macon county. Dennis Hanks, Nancy's cousin, and his family went with the Lincolns.

These pioneers practiced self-sufficient farming which included communal work such as barn raisings, shared harvesting and butchering. David Donald assumes that Thomas Lincoln built his first cabin in Indiana with help from the other seven families in the neighborhood. Settlers also exchanged labor, tools, and goods outside the buying and selling of the market. Thomas Lincoln sold Abraham's labor to other farmers in return for goods. Settlers often did not sell on the market, particularly when transportation systems were primitive in the early days, because the worth of farm products was less than the transportation costs.

Allen Guelzo says Thomas Lincoln was a typical subsistence farmer: the family raised crops, tanned their own leather, made their own clothes, and kept stock for meat as well as hunting. They sold only enough on the market to buy some luxuries such as sugar and coffee.

Guelzo, like many other biographers, tells the story of how two men asked the young Abraham to row them out into the Ohio River to catch a steamboat. They paid Lincoln by throwing two silver half dollars onto the floor of his boat. Decades later, Lincoln remembered his surprise, "I could scarcely credit that I, a poor boy, had earned a dollar in less than a day. . . The world seemed wider and fairer before me."

Guelzo commented, "Abraham Lincoln had met the cash economy."

Others have been more complimentary to Thomas Lincoln, saying that his success as a farmer compared favorably to others on the Indiana frontier. He sold 100 hogs before leaving for Illinois and produced a surplus of 500 bushels of corn. And farming was a secondary occupation to his carpentry work.

The Lincoln family was living a Midwestern ideal of family farms, open-country neighborhoods, increasing production for the market.

The Lincoln's frontier was a southern one, although not the frontier of cotton. Cotton so profitable after the War of 1812 that slaveowners moved to the Southwest, not the Northwest.

Historic Southern Indiana

Lincoln Institute, 2006

But non-slaveowning southerners often migrated north of the Ohio River. The 1850 census is the first U.S. census that tells us the population's place of birth. For Indiana, the 1850 census shows that 1% of the population was born in New England, 18% was born in the South (mostly upper South rather than lower South), 7% was born in New York or Pennsylvania, and 67% was born in the Old Northwestern states of Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois. That portion obscures the southern influence because most of the 67% would be children of Kentuckians or Virginians. In fact, the Lincolns and most of their neighbors in Spencer County came from Kentucky and lived on an Upland Southern-dominated frontier.

The southern nature of the Lincolns' frontier has implications particularly for race. The 1830 census, the year Lincoln would have been 21, found 14 free blacks in the county's population, less than 1% of the population. Given that there is enormous speculation about Lincoln's attitudes about race, it's interesting to note that he wouldn't have had much exposure to African Americans.

Certainly, he grew up in a society that was very racist. Kentuckians and Virginians who came to Indiana often did not want slavery. But they also did not want blacks either and resented Northerners who used slavery to condemn the South. They often felt they had to accept compromises over slavery in order to preserve the Union.

Many white Midwesterners believed in black inferiority and used that belief to justify denying African Americans equal rights. They felt that granting blacks equality would be "degrading" to whites; were convinced that if blacks were treated as equals, intermarriage would result; and feared that if blacks were treated equally, more would come to the state.

During the Civil War, Frederick Douglass commented that Lincoln put him at ease more quickly than any other great man he had met. Douglass considered this remarkable given that Lincoln came from a black law state, a state such as Illinois or Indiana that had prohibitions on black migration.

Despite Douglass's later statement that Lincoln was the white man's president and Lerone Bennett's argument that Lincoln was racist, Douglass's comment is just one of many possible stories that give the sense that Lincoln transcended the racism of his environment.

The Midwestern political culture was influenced by Southerners. Among Southerners, willingness to fight was proof of manhood. Frontier fighting could be brutal, including matches in which opponents bit off ears and noses or used long thumbnails to gouge

Historic Southern Indiana

Lincoln Institute, 2006

out an eye. According to one legend, the nickname Hoosier came from this southern frontier fighting. It claims that a newcomer to an Indiana tavern spotted an ear on the floor and asked, "Who's ear," which over time became corrupted into "Hoosier." More genteel Southerners dueled. The South is a culture of honor in which public reputation is paramount. So if a man is insulted, he has to publicly repudiate that with a fight or, if more upper class, a duel.

Northerners lived in a culture of shame which is more internal. It doesn't matter what others think as long as the individual knows that he has acted in a worthy fashion. New Englanders John Adams and John Quincy Adams actually feared that public approbation meant they had acted badly.

Abraham Lincoln engaged in wrestling matches, as Doug Wilson has studied, and even came close to fighting a duel. In the early 1840s, Lincoln wrote some anonymous newspaper letters that ridiculed another politician, James Shields, who challenged Lincoln to a duel. As the challenged party, Lincoln had the choice of weapons and he chose broadswords. David Donald argues Lincoln took this seriously, practiced and had selected broadswords because he had experience with them in the Black Hawk War and because he had a longer reach than the shorter Shields. As often happens with duels, friends interceded to resolve the dispute and no duel was fought. Later Lincoln seemed ashamed of it. During the Civil War, he asked an army officer who mentioned it, to never speak of it again.

The political issues of the period Lincoln spent in Indiana were often those of the frontier. Lincoln's boyhood in Indiana saw the emergence of the second party system in which the key issues were those of economic development. As a Whig, Lincoln was a proponent of Henry Clay's (another Westerner's) American system of federal money for internal improvements, a protective tariff and a national bank. Whigs such as Lincoln and Clay believed such an investment would benefit the entire community. Democrats argued that government involvement would lead to benefits for some, the wealthy and connected, at the expense of the many. But even western Democrats sometimes broke ranks with the main party in favor of internal improvements.

The Lincolns had famously experienced the hardships imposed by bad roads when they crossed the Ohio River into Indiana. They had to chop their way through the brush. The road was twenty-yards wide with the big trees cut down to a height of 2-3 feet and, in the center of the road, stumps cut down further to let wagon axles pass. Lincoln's first political speech was about the need for improvements on the Sangamon River.

Lincoln became more associated, of course, with the sectional issue of slavery. As a Northerner, Lincoln shared resentment of the 3/5ths compromise, included in the

Historic Southern Indiana

Lincoln Institute, 2006

Constitution, by which every five slaves counted as three people for purposes of representation in Congress.

Northerners did not express resentment so much at the extra power the 3/5ths compromise gave the South in Congress and the electoral college. (Historians have now examined how Thomas Jefferson would never have been president without it and the extra voting power it gave white South). Northerners in the nineteenth century complained more about how counting some slaves devalued the voting power of northern whites. They referred to Northerners as being 3/5ths of a man because of the compromise.

Lincoln also articulated what might be called the Legend of the Northwest Ordinance. The legend said that the reason Indiana and the other states that formed from the Northwest Territory did not become slave was because the Ordinance had prohibited slavery. The real reason Indiana did not become slave is that cotton's profitability after the War of 1812 directed the migration of slaves and slaveowners into the cotton-growing regions of the Southwest.

But by time of Civil War, anti-slavery Northwesterners saw Article 6 of the Northwest Ordinance as the enlightened policy that had secured freedom in the Northwestern states. Lincoln asked an Ohio audience in 1859 why Kentucky was a slave state and its neighbors in the Northwest Territory not. He argued it was not because of climate or soil, because these were much alike. Rather Kentucky was a slave state because "there was no law of any sort keeping [slavery] out of Kentucky while the Ordinance of '87 kept it out of" the Northwest. This Legend of the Northwest Ordinance was just one expression of the free labor ideal as described by Eric Foner. Northerners believed that society without slaves is preferable to that with slaves.

Abraham Lincoln both believed in the free labor ideal and later his life offered a famous example of its perfections: that one can be born poor, work hard, start out as a hired laborer, but acquire property and a farm or a profession, and eventually middle class status.

Our discussion of the free labor ideal, however, takes us beyond the southern-dominated frontier of Lincoln's youth.

Indiana in 1840 was still a frontier and Abraham Lincoln, having grown up on that frontier as well as those of Kentucky and Illinois, always retained the characteristics of the frontier: his Hoosier accent, his telling of funny (sometimes crude or dirty) stories, his rustic manners and difficulty with proper grooming that easterners would note when he ran for president. But Lincoln's frontier origins would serve him well in American

Historic Southern Indiana

Lincoln Institute, 2006

politics. He was presented politically as the “rail splitter” and his common origins have been held up for generations of Americans as proof that anyone can become president.

Selected Sources:

Roy P. Basler, ed., *The Collected works of Abraham Lincoln* (8 vols., New Brunswick, 1953).

Lerone Bennett, *Forced into Glory: Abraham Lincoln’s White Dream* (Chicago, 2000).

Eric Foner, *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men: The Ideology of the Republican Party before the Civil War* (New York, 1995).

David Herbert Donald, *Lincoln* (New York, 1995).

Nicole Etcheson, *The Emerging Midwest: Upland Southerners and the Political Culture of the Old Northwest, 1787-1861* (Bloomington, 1996).

Allen C. Guelzo, *Abraham Lincoln: Redeemer President* (Grand Rapids, 1999).

Steven Hahn and Jonathan Prude, *The Countryside in the Age of Capitalist Transformation: Essays in the Social History of Rural America* (Chapel Hill, 1985).

Frederick Jackson Turner, “The Significance of the Frontier in American History” (<http://www.library.csi.cuny.edu/dept/history/lavender/frontierthesis.html>).

United States Census, Spencer County, 1820, 1830, 1840 (<http://fisher.lib.virginia.edu/collections/stats/histcensus/>).

Garry Wills, “Negro President”: *Jefferson and the Slave Power* (Boston, 2003).

Douglas L. Wilson, *Honor’s Voice: The Transformation of Abraham Lincoln* (New York, 1998).