Letter: Frederick L. Olmsted to Ida M. Tarbell, May 11, 1927

Olmsted, Frederick L.

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11th May, 1927

Miss Ida Tarbell,
120 East 19th Street,
New York City.

My dear Miss Tarbell:

I take the liberty of enclosing a copy of a letter I am sending to Judge Iglehart which I think may interest you.

Very truly yours,

F. L. Olmsted

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11th May, 1927.


My dear Judge Iglehart:

As suggested by you, I will indicate in this letter more definitely than I could in our hurried conversation on May 7th the sort of information I am seeking as to the physical environment of Lincoln when he lived in Spencer County.

My letter of March 24th last to Col. Lieber, which you have seen, sets forth my ideas about the physical treatment of the land around the Lincoln cabin site and the grave of Lincoln's mother. I append hereto certain extracts from that letter relating to those portions of the land which in my opinion should be treated as a natural and historic sanctuary, distinct and apart from any monumental features that may be devised and constructed to express the importance which we of today attach to what lies within the enclosure, of which these monumental features will mark the entrance.

Before the white man came to what is now Indiana, the region is known to have been occupied in the main by a type of forest technically designated by botanists and foresters by the broad term "The Eastern Hardwood Forest". (See, for example, "The Naturalist's Guide to the Americas", compiled by the Ecological Society of America, 1926). Of the character and composition of that forest, of the
kinds and proportions of its trees and shrubs and lesser vegetation and their distribution, of the innumerable details which in the aggregate made it what it was—which made it look as it did to those who beheld it in the early days of the settlement of Indiana—much has been recorded by scientific observers in many parts of the region over which that type of forest is known to have extended. I can obtain access to much of this information through general technical, botanical and silvicultural literature.

But in addition it will be helpful in the task before us if we can obtain more specifically local information of two sorts in regard to the physical environment of Lincoln's boyhood in Spencer County.

One sort of information relates to the local natural flora, the kinds of trees and shrubs and herbaceous plants which grew and which did not grow in this vicinity, as recorded by local observers at any time and in any way that gives the record evidential value; and relates also to cognate local observations as to soils and soil conditions, geological conditions, the character of the minor streams and swamps, and even of the local fauna and of the mode of life of the Indians and of the occurrence of forest fires in pre-pioneering days as affecting the natural conditions.

The other sort of information, related much more closely to the "Lincoln Inquiry" which your Society has undertaken, concerns any records, however fragmentary or casual or incidental, of personal impressions and recollections which can help future generations to form a truthful picture of the physical conditions which surrounded and largely influenced the life of the pioneers of Spencer County, and especially those which influenced the life of the Lincolns and their near neighbors.
The efforts of your society have apparently been directed, rightly enough, to the search for information as to the personal characteristics of the people who may reasonably be supposed to have had an influence on the development of Lincoln's mind and character during the formative years when he lived in Indiana. But the character and habits of those people and of Lincoln himself were, of course, profoundly influenced by the details of their physical environment — by what the country was like when they came there, by what they saw around them year by year, by what the physical conditions of the time and place compelled them or induced them to do from day to day, as woodsmen, as farmers, as craftsmen, as home-makers, in short as pioneers in Spencer County in the first third of the Nineteenth Century in contrast with pioneers in New England or Virginia at an earlier date or the people of any maturer community.

Such intimate and specific, even though fragmentary, glimpses of the daily life and physical surroundings of a few individuals as are given in regard to the "New Settlement" of Quakers in Indiana by James Baldwin in "The Days of My Youth" are no less illuminating historically than such summarized records of the achievements and character of many notable persons in any community, such as your society has been gathering. But however that may be, it is certain that fragments of information of this detailed character from old letters and journals and reminiscences, from old periodical files, etc., should be distinctly helpful to us in guiding nature toward the gradual restoration of the land around the Lincoln cabin site and along the route of the "Barefoot Trail" to Gentryville to conditions approximating those which Lincoln knew and which in their own way directly influenced him as he grew to manhood.

I am sending an extra copy of this letter and enclosure direct to Mrs. Ehrman.

Sincerely yours,

(Signed) F. L. OLMESTED.

Written on train by
Mr. Olmsted. Typed and forwarded from Brookline
in his absence.
EXTRACT FROM LETTER OF MARCH 24TH, 1927
TO COL. RICHARD LIBER FROM F. L. OLIVER

Dear Sir:

I have attempted to set forth in the following my present ideas about the Nancy Hanks Lincoln Memorial.

The controlling factor in the situation is the intimate association of this piece of land with certain events in the early life of Lincoln—an association capable in itself, if other ideas are not intruded, of arousing in any thoughtful and informed person ideas concerning Lincoln as deeply moving as any that can come to him.

This makes it a prime duty to let those simple familiar associations speak for themselves to future generations, and to subordinate in this place any desire that we of today may have to impress those future generations with what we think about Lincoln.

Indiana has a right to take pride in expressing the honor which it feels for Lincoln's memory by the creation of monumental works as great, as notable, and as strikingly impressive as the greatest artists of our time can make them. But of all places this spot—which speaks directly for itself of Lincoln's first great sorrow, which speaks directly from the grave where he buried his mother and from the vacant site of his early home—is the last place in which to express that pride in any self-assertive way that might thrust our twentieth century ideas between posterity and the significance of the place itself.

When we deal with things that have a great spiritual message of their own, apart from the expression which we may add to them, it behooves us to be humbly self-subordinating lest we thrust a personal, local or other extraneous expression, which time may prove to be unworthy, between future generations and a priceless thing much greater than ourselves.
There are two spots of peculiar sentimental interest; the grave of Lincoln's mother in the hill-top graveyard of the settlement of pioneers, to which, as a boy, stricken by his first great grief, he helped to draw her body on a mule-sled that sad October day so long ago; and the site of the cabin on the nearby lower knoll where that grief came to him. No local traces and no other definite knowledge about the cabin and its then surroundings remain, beyond the record that an old settler who had known the cabin as the Lincoln's once pointed out where it had stood, and that the hearth stone was there uncovered by digging as he had predicted, and a monument was set to mark the place. Even the hearth stone was presently removed. Nothing remains but a geographical point on a gentle knoll with a southeast exposure such as a pioneering settler in this region would be apt to choose for his cabin.

What makes the place significant and fit to kindle this imagination is the bare historic fact that here, on a little clearing in the midst of primeval forest, the young Lincoln lived and labored, here loved and lost his mother, here wrought out the early steps in the forging of a mighty soul.

It would be sheer impudence to intrude on the now bare site of that historic fact, so pregnant with meaning to anyone possessed of any imagination, either an artist's expression of his own ideas about Lincoln, or any sham of "realistic" stage scenery purporting to reproduce what Lincoln's boyhood home was like. Nothing but a bald and simple marker of the spot is reasonably conceivable. It should rise, I believe, from such a turf as in this climate naturally tends to cover the ground of an old clearing that is kept free from the advance of brush and forest, as by grazing of animals or mowing. But around the clearing which need make no pretense of following the wholly unknown lines of the original clearing, there are many reasons for deliberately attempting to let nature gradually recreate, as she will in the course of years if given half a chance, a forest substantially identical with that which certainly surrounded the Lincoln cabin in its early days. For one thing a broad belt of enclosing tree foliage is essential to secure privacy for the Sanctuary and shut off sight of the
obviously discordant present and future buildings and activities outside. But, more than that, the forest is the only one of the now vanished physical features of the place characteristic of Lincoln's time which can be reproduced without sham or falsehood substantially as it was in his boyhood, because the natural conditions which produced the original forest are still operative, and for all we can see will be operative for centuries hence, with little if any change, if man's interference therewith be guarded against. With protection from fire and other abnormal destructive agents, a forest comes as near to the ideal of perpetual existence, through new life springing from old, as anything known to man in this changing world. From the point of view of a given generation of mankind, the reestablishment of a forest where it has been destroyed may seem like a slow business, but anyone who considers that this Lincoln Sanctuary is to endure for countless centuries and who has seen such a venerable, magnificent and natural-seeming forest as that which was artificially planted a couple of centuries ago at Het Bosch in the Hague, or even the results of a single lifetime in some planted forests in America, will I think be willing to accept with prophetic confidence the long look ahead toward converting the entire Sanctuary into something closely approximating a primeval forest entirely surrounding the clearing of Lincoln's cabin.

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Very truly yours,

(signed) Frederick Law Olmsted.