Article: Lincoln's Family Tree is Still a Mystery

Tarbell, Ida M.
Dr. Louis Warren's article on Lincoln's Political Background has an analysis of early speech and influences in New Salem; also a still better analysis of the political influences in southern Indiana.

**Lincoln's Family Tree Is Still a Mystery**


If the theme of Mr. Warren's careful and documentary—but charmed—volume is true, then Abraham Lincoln's entire life was shadowed by a distressing delusion. 

Lincoln believed, and on one or more occasions confided to intimates, that his mother, Nancy Hanks Lincoln, was the illegitimate daughter of Lucy Hanks and a rich Virginia planter, and he believed that from this unknown maternal grandfather he had derived his unusual mental abilities.

Lincoln knew that he came of good stock on the paternal side and that this line could be traced beyond his Pennsylvania grandfather, Abraham Lincoln. He did not doubt that his father and mother, Nancy, were duly married, and the difficulty in tracing the marriage certificate (how many of us on our fiftieth birthday could produce our parents' marriage certificate?) did not worry him. But what little he knew of the maternal background did not encourage him to investigate further, not, it may be surmised, because he was ashamed of grandmother Lucy's pre-marital romance, but because of the world's unthinking reaction to it.

The fact that his grandmother Lucy had been loved—and deserted—by an unknown landowner, as we have said, known and admitted by the Great Emancipator. Herndon, Ward H. Lamon and other early biographers corroborate the fact; John Hay, of course, glossed it over in the formal Nicolay and Hay biography. Recently Dr. William E. Barton, one of the foremost modern Lincoln biographers, wove a pretty romance around this affair of Lucy with the unknown man of station; and though Dr. Barton admits that much of the detail is guesswork, yet it is based on a fact admitted by the majority of investigators.

In the present volume Mr. Warren joins the opposite school, that of Mrs. Caroline Hanks Hitchcock, who many years ago decided that there was no illegitimacy in the Hanks family. This conclusion, diametrically opposed to the Herndon school of information, was based on her finding in Nelson County, Kentucky, many years ago, the will of a certain Joseph Hanks, who mentions a wife, Nancy, five sons and three daughters, the youngest also named Nancy. The last named Mrs. Hitchcock claims to have been the President's mother.

Mr. Warren was at one time editor of The Larue County Herald, published at Hodgenville, Ky. We have been told that he was one of Dr. Barton's assistant investigators and later started on his own behalf. He states that an unprejudiced examination of county records led him to his present position. The important feature to our mind is, What did Lincoln himself believe? He may have been mistaken. He may have harbored throughout life a forlorn delusion. He may have had a more strictly orthodox inheritance than he himself knew or believed he could prove; but that does not alter the gloomy belief which hung over him and deepened that uncertain melancholy which, in the words of Herndon, at times dripped from him "like a fog."