Nancy Hanks

Who was Nancy Hanks? Poor Nancy has become a bone between two schools of historical writers, both of them honest enough and both of them quite bigoted in their position.

The first bases its case on a conversation that Mr. Herndon says he had with Lincoln some time in the 50's, and which he first divulged when he came to write his Life of Lincoln, published nearly forty years after the conversation, in 1890. According to this conversation, Lincoln told him that his mother was the illegitimate daughter of one Lucy Hanks and a well bred Virginia farmer or planter.

When, after Lincoln's death, Mr. Herndon began to gather material for his Life, he interviewed repeatedly a man at that time between 65 and 70 years of age, known as Denis Hanks. Denis called himself a cousin of Nancy Hanks, and has contended that Lincoln's mother's name was Lucy Hanks, that her father was unknown and that Lucy Hanks later had married a Sparrow.

Unfortunately for Denis' testimony, it, as Lehman who availed himself of it in the life which he wrote and published some 18 years before Mr. Herndon's Life, says, was pitifully weak under cross examination.

Moreover, Denis contradicted himself flatly later - see letter written to Schackelford in 1888.

That Lincoln himself did not know exactly who his mother was, seems to be certain. He evidently did not like to talk about her. I have a letter written by Barrett in 1896 - one of the ablest of Lincoln's biographers, a man who was in office in Washington and who had Mr. Lincoln's help in the work that he was doing on his life - in which he says that he once asked the President about his mother, and he said that she was born in Virginia and had come into Kentucky with some of his people.

Digital Image, 2009. The Ida M. Tarbell Collection, 1890-1944, Allegheny College Pelletier Library

something cruel & almost treasonable in
Mrs Mc Kinley until civil War-
to make despicable ~~Copperhead appeal~~ —
effort in publication a-
a mean -
bitterness of spirit - hatred -
after war -

Mr H. says Mr L explained his non-publication
not necessary - Can be explained by
L. hatred - L. hypo
Mr L. knew letter of the L. family.
did not know Read from the same L
one had published in Mass —
in Mass — in
did not need to get rid of his
family in effigy - had
he not explained L. in his speeches
in person seems to have assumed
I do not find that Mr H. ever gathered
& evidence of any kind of the
many H. in 22 - Talbert Mary -
~~see~~ many papers
made more substantial Thomas Dixon

see 3 -
letter Talbert -

Digital Image, 2009. The Ida M. Tarbell Collection, 1890-1944, Allegheny College Pelletier Library

This of course is in line with the tradition that repeatedly crops up that the Hanks came into Kentucky in the same migrating group that Abraham Lincoln, Thomas' father did. The probability is that they came into Virginia in the same group that John Lincoln, Abraham's grat-grandfather came, for a John Hanks lived not far from Mordecai Lincoln in Berks County, and he is believed to have gone into the Shenandoah Valley about the time that John did.

Nothing unlikely in this tradition. So far as we have any documents they make altogether probable what Lincoln had said. But this is all tradition. Where she came from and where Mr. Lincoln thought she came from andwhere Mr. Lincoln thought she came from. Very likely it was all tradition with him, who her mother was - tradition gathered from his companion, Denis Hanks, always a garrulous and common mind.

Now, what is there to offset this? Well, there is this. There are certain documents, and the schoolof writers who take exception to the words that Mr. Herndon put into Lincoln's mouth and to Denis Hanks, which he used to back him up, base their contention on thesedocuments. It is a curious thing that Mr. Herndon did not in the careful research which he made and had made in the records of Kentucky find the marriage license, bond and marriage return which later research developed. They were there when he claims to have been working there. But he overlooked them. If he had had these, he would have known from documents that the Nancy Hanks that Tom Lincoln married was not a protegé of Sparrow's family, as Denis claims, but had a legal, recognized guardian, one Richard Berry. If he had searched for Hanks in the records instead of in the mouth of Denis Hanks, he would have found that they had something to say about a Nancy Hanks at least. He would have found in Bardstown a will of one Joseph Hanks, in which he names one after another - presumably in the order of their ages -

Digital Images, 2011. The Ida M. Tarbell Collection, 1890-1944, Allegheny College Pelletier Library.

a few years a member of the family
circle in and living for several
in Ky Carrie was still published
in Ky by
J Tull.

Was born in a M. H. Was she the one
T. L. married at Beechmont at the
home of R. B. in June 1906 — Was
the [illegible] reporter mentioned in will
in any way connected with N. Club
any reason known as one of News —
What see —
Most unfortunate circumstance while the
Jr See Tull

eight children, the youngest of which was a Nancy. Then the question becomes, was this Nancy recognized by Joseph in his will, the Nancy whose guardian was Richard Berry--the girl that it is certain Tom Lincoln married? Was she this Nancy? Or was she a Nancy that came from we know not whence, as Mr. Herndon would have us believe?

What is the collateral proof that the second school can muster? The main part ot if it this. This Nancy of the will had a brother William, who moved into Spencer County about the same time that Nancy Lincoln did. This Nancy of the will had a nephew John, and one of the latter companions of Nancy Lincoln was a John who called himself a cousin of Dennis and who later, like his father Williams, went to Indiana. This Nancy of the will had a brother Joseph, who later lived in Elizabethtown, Ky., and was a carpenter and cabinet maker, and moved to Spencer County about the time that Nancy Lincoln did, and who later, after her death, moved to Illinois, finally settling near Quincy, Ill. He had a big family, and Mr. Lincoln used to go to see him, and always, Joseph Hanks, so his children and grandchildren repeatedly have told, used to talk about his sister Nancy - Lincoln's mother - her sweetness, her goodness.

In my own correspondence of 25 years ago, when I was working on this problem, I have a letter from Mrs. Hanks of Florence, Colo. Her husband was a son of this Joseph, and she certainly regarded her father-in-law as Nancy Hank's brother.

Then again, this Nancy of the will, had a sister by the name of Elizabeth, who married a Hall, and who, with three children, joined Nancy Lincoln in Spencer County, Ind., dying about the same time that Nancy died of the terrible malarial disease, the "milk sick"

The Hall children that were left behind always regarded

Digital Image, 2009. The Ida M. Tarbell Collection, 1890-1944, Allegheny College Pelletier Library

Nancy Hanks as their aunt, which she of course could not have been under the Denis Hanks' interpretation. This looks to me like pretty good collateral proof that the Nancy of the will and the Nancy who married Tom Lincoln were one and the same person. And if that be true, there can be no question of illegitimacy so far as she is concerned.

But there is other collateral testimony to the regularity of her birth, and that is through the Berrys. According to the best tradition - nothing documentary, so far as I know - the wife of Joseph Hanks, who made the will, was a Nancy Shipley. The wife of Richard Berry, who became the guardian of Joseph's youngest daughter after his death, was a Lucy Shipley, and the two were sisters. What more natural than that she should have gone into the family.

Moreover, the traditions of the Berrys and their descendants, the Thompsons and the Currys - all good families - in Washington County, was that Richard Berry's wife and Mrs. Joseph Hanks were sisters, and it was because of that relation that the Richard Berry guardianship over Nancy Hanks came about, and that this Nancy Hanks is certainly the one that married Thomas Lincoln. There are not, however, any documents to prove it, so far as I know, the Shipley connection. The claim for it, however, is certainly quite as well based as the Denis Hanks claim that Nancy Hanks was the daughter of a Lucy Hanks that came from nobody knows where.

As the case of Nancy Hanks Lincoln now stands, those interested must base their conclusion on the evidence. There is no satisfactory proof either way. My own feeling has always been that Mr. Herndon's conclusion was unsoundly based. I am not willing

Digital Image, 2009. The Ida M. Tarbell Collection, 1890-1944, Allegheny College Pelletier Library

to accept Denis Hanks as a competent witness. He was too old at the time the testimony was taken, too garrulous. Recollections of family matters taken years after the event, from the mouth of an untrained man, are never safe. The recollections of even trained people of that age on matters that have not been called to their attention for a long period, as in this case of the Lincoln ancestry, cannot be allowed to stand an hour in face of a document.

As for Mr. Lincoln's part in the whole affair, if he told Mr. Herndon what he is said to have told him and told an early biographer, one Mr. Scrip, can, I think, best be characterized as fear that it might be true. What we must not forget in considering the case is that it was some 80 years after Nancy Hank's birth before anybody began seriously to concern themselves with the matter. Until Mr. Barrett, Mr. Herndon, Mr. Lehman and others - began their investigations, Mr. Barret before and the others after the President's death, the question had never come up. And, as we have seen, no research then was made in the documents. The commonly accepted theory was that Tom Lincoln was a no-account, and it was natural to conclude that only a woman who was a no-account would have married him.

Moreover, Kentucky, Indiana and Illinois soon became saturated with the fantastic stories of Lincoln's parentage, denying that Tom Lincoln was the father. It was a quick inference then, since there were so many rumors, that Nancy must have been a light chracter. The worst was accepted as it was accepted about Tom and as it was accepted about the mythical father. The worst is still accepted by many in the name of truth.

Digital Images, 2011. The Ida M. Tarbell Collection, 1890-1944, Allegheny College Pelletier Library.

About 1826 Joseph Hanks wrote his family

Personally I have always felt that the strongest direct word of mouth testimony that we have as to Nancy's parentage came through the Joseph Hanks family. This Joseph Hanks, who certainly was the Joseph Hanks of the will, the carpenter who lived in Elizabethtown and who in 1810 married a Mary Young - the records of all this are in existence - moved later into Illinois and settled near Quincy, Adams Co., on the Mississippi River. There his children and several grandchildren grew up, and in that neighborhood were reared. These children and grandchildren have always claimed that they had again and again heard their father (and grandfather) speak of Nancy Hanks as his sister, that he talked of her sweetness and gentleness, and that he was particularly fond of Abraham Lincoln and treasured his occasional visits.

heard this told to him when he called nephew

One of these sons, Jacob V. Hanks, moved to Colorado, dying there in 1895. His widow wrote me at the time that she had in her possession an old daguerreotype of Joseph and Mary Hanks, taken in Illinois in 1835, and she sent me a copy of it. She also wrote me that she was an Adams, the daughter of a Green Adams of Newburyport, Mass., and first cousin of John Quincy Adams, the President; that she was raised near Elizabethtown, Kr., and married Jacob V. Hanks in 1835.

She claimed that what I had written was correct, with one exception, that John Hanks was the son of William Hanks, a brother of Joseph Hanks. This would make him not a cousin of Nancy Hanks but a nephew.

Later, one of Mrs. Hanks' sons, a grandson of Joseph Hanks, J. M. Hanks, the superintendent of schools in Fremont County, Colorado, wrote me, corroborating the relationship between his grandfather Joseph and Nancy Hanks, his grandaunt.

Backed by this testimony, which seems to me to come

Digital Image, 2009. The Ida M. Tarbell Collection, 1890-1944, Allegheny College Pelletier Library

According to these descendants of Joseph Hawks the Lennon ~~family~~ visited in Quincy sometimes once or twice a year. Joseph's farm was sold and the old cabin was torn down & the logs carefully ~~saved~~ kept in Kentucky & part of his workbench & Thomas and Nancy Hawks' cabin mill & Thomas Lennon's log cabin were stored & still kept together in Elizabethtown, Ky.

In 1896 a daughter-in-law of Joseph Hawks' wrote a ~~letter~~ paper for the McClure Magazine ~~and~~ ~~sent~~ ~~it~~ ~~to~~ Quincy & never saw it after Colorado

One of the grandsons of Joseph Hawks interested in establishing the ~~location~~ ~~of~~ ~~his~~ cabin & ~~the~~ ~~mill~~ ~~of~~ Nancy Hawks' parents visited Quincy & the cabin & mill & ~~the~~ ~~old~~ ~~cabin~~ ~~was~~ ~~a~~ particulars ~~minutely~~ minutely. The mill was a grandson of Joseph Hawks with whom I was in correspondence ~~for~~ ~~years~~ ago years - ~~he~~ J. H. Hawks at the time ~~was~~ Superintendent of Public Schools of Fremont County

from substantial and trustworthy people as direct descendants of the family, I feel that it is safe to publish the picture of Joseph and Mary Hanks and declare them to be the brother and sister-in-law of Nancy Hanks Lincoln, the mother of President Lincoln.

Certainly, if we must choose between their direct and clear statements and the confused and contradictory statements of Denis Hanks, there can be little hesitation. Denis' satisfaction in proclaiming himself a bastard is something like the boyish pride in having a hand covered with warts. The fact that he was well over 65 years of age before he attempted to "recollect", the well known difficulty of even well educated people remembering after that length of time the details of family relationship, the fact that both Lehman and Herndon have recorded his contradition of his testimony, the fact that as late as 1888 he wrote the distinguished Chicago genealogist, Samuel Schakford, upsetting all that he had told Mr. Herndon - all of these things strung together make his evidence very doubtful.

As for Mr. Herndon's story that Mr. Lincoln told him with definiteness that his mother was the illegitimate child of Lucy Hanks, I have always questioned it. When Mr. Herndon first published that statement, nearly 40 years had elapsed since the reputed conversation. Mr. Herndon's notes show that he was very much out of patience with Denis for having withdrawn the statement, or what he thought was the statement. It is a question whether Mr. Herndon's mind at this period was ever quite clear, that he was ever quite capable of testing and weighing testimony. A brilliant, lovable, undisciplined person, his habit of drink after Mr. Lincoln's death - there is no question that he materially injured his powers. He gave up his practice finally in Springfield, and it was with the despairing cry, "I

Digital Image, 2009. The Ida M. Tarbell Collection, 1890-1944, Allegheny College Pelletier Library