

LINCOLN AND LIQUOR

By

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ABRAHAM LINCOLN, DEFENDANT
LINCOLN AND HIS WIFE'S HOME TOWN
LINCOLN, THE LITIGANT

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PREFACE

THE name of Abraham Lincoln has become a synonym for conservative, farsighted statesmanship, keen sagacity in practical politics, and rugged personal integrity. Vital problems of government which deeply agitate the public mind, especially if moral issues are thought to be involved, hardly ever fail to evoke the query, "What would Lincoln do?" During the past twelve months this question was frequently asked as the various states voted on the Eighteenth Amendment. Members of the House of Representatives discussed it pointedly on the floor of the National Congress.

Now that federal prohibition has been repealed, power to regulate the liquor traffic is again vested in the several states. Wets and drys are already recruiting their ranks for bitter legislative battles, and both sides, mindful of the magic of his name, claim Lincoln.

Would he favor state-wide prohibition, or would he endorse the view of those who contend that temperance is a personal matter which can not be enforced by legislation? Was Lincoln a total abstainer, a prohibitionist, and a lecturer against the evils of strong drink, or was he a user of liquor, a saloonkeeper in his early manhood, and a foe of reform who denounced prohibition as a "species of intemperance within itself"?

Recent research among old newspaper files, musty court records, archives of the Illinois Legislature almost a century old, and the priceless though little known Herndon-Lamon manuscripts in the Huntington Library at San Marino, California, sheds new light upon the highly controversial subject of Lincoln's personal habits, his attitude toward the liquor problem of his own day, and the environment and association which doubtless influenced his views and actions.

In the laborious task of assembling the source material for this book, it has been my fortune to have had not only the efficient aid of various public institutions, but also the intelligent coöperation and kindly interest of many individual friends. Among the former, I desire to thank the Henry E. Huntington Library, Library of Congress, Chicago Historical Society, Illinois State Historical Society, Union Theological Seminary of New York, Garrett Biblical Institution of Evanston, Illinois, Abraham Lincoln Association, New York Public Library, and John Hay Memorial Library of Brown University. As to the latter, I must first express my deep gratitude to Mr. Paul M. Angle, of Springfield, Illinois, and Mr. David C. Mearns, of Washington, D. C., through whose tireless research many important records have been discovered. It is not too much to say that without their generous assistance this study would hardly have been possible.

My thanks and appreciation are also due to Mr. Emanuel Hertz and Miss Ida M. Tarbell, of New York,

Dr. Louis A. Warren, of Ft. Wayne, Indiana; Mr. Carl Sandburg and Mr. Oliver R. Barrett of Chicago, Illinois; Mr. Thomas P. Reep and Mr. Henry E. Pond, of Petersburg, Illinois; Dr. Howard O. Russell, of Westerville, Ohio; Mr. John W. Starr, Jr., of Millersburg, Pennsylvania; Mr. Charles T. White, of Brooklyn, New York; Mr. Clint Clay Tilton, of Danville, Illinois; Dr. Benjamin P. Thomas, of Springfield, Illinois; Mr. Thomas I. Starr, of Detroit, Michigan; Dr. Milton H. Shutes, of Oakland, California; Mr. John T. Vance, of Washington, D. C.; Mr. Charles T. Baker, of Grand View, Indiana; Judge James W. Bollinger, of Davenport, Iowa; Miss Esther C. Cushman, of Providence, Rhode Island; Judge O. M. Mather, of Hodgenville, Kentucky; Mr. Malcolm Bayley, of Louisville, Kentucky, and especially my companions on many historical excursions, Mr. Charles R. Staples, Mr. J. Winston Coleman, Dr. Frank L. McVey, President of the University of Kentucky; Dr. Thomas D. Clark, Dr. John S. Chambers, Dr. Claude W. Trapp, and Major Samuel M. Wilson, of Lexington, Kentucky. Miss Ethel Duncan has rendered most efficient service in typing and preparing the manuscript for publication.

While it is indeed a pleasure to acknowledge the help that has come to me from so many sources, the responsibility for the use of all material, the sifting and weighing of evidence, and the conclusions expressed in these pages must be mine alone. It is quite possible that some

of those to whom I am indebted may not entirely agree with everything I have said, and I have a very high respect for the sincerity of their opinions.

The writing of history in certain aspects is not unlike the working of a jig-saw puzzle. One must take the pieces as he finds them. He is not at liberty to change their size or shape, and the picture is not complete until each piece has been put in its own proper place. When one has made a faithful effort to do this, without bias or any attempt to support preconceived theory, he should be able to abide the result with at least a fair degree of equanimity.

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28 Mentelle Park,
Lexington, Kentucky.

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CHAPTER I

KENTUCKY CHILDHOOD

ON a raw, sleety January evening, two handsome young men, elegantly attired in black satin smallclothes with knee buckles of artistic design, ruffled shirts, silk stockings and gay-colored brocaded waistcoats, sat at a cardtable before a crackling fire of hickory wood in an upstairs room of McLean's Tavern at Bardstown, Kentucky. One was John Rowan, lawyer, later jurist, Congressman and United States Senator. The other was Dr. James Chambers, son-in-law of Judge Benjamin Sebastian, of the Kentucky Court of Appeals, the most promising young physician in the state.

They had just come up from the tap-room, where Rowan had ordered mugs to be filled with a potent brew, and, turning to those present, had hospitably "asked help to drink it." The "gallon of strong beer" which he and his friend Chambers had drunk before arriving at the Tavern had given them a "zest for more."

The game of "vigutun" which they were playing had not progressed far, however, before Rowan and the Doctor became involved in a heated argument "as to which understood some of the dead languages the best."

Rowan, with bibulous gravity, declared that the Doctor was not competent to dispute with him on such

subjects. Chambers emphatically retorted that he was vastly Rowan's superior in classical scholarship.

"I'll be damned if you are," replied Rowan.

"I'll be damned if I'm not," exclaimed Chambers.

"You are a damned liar," shouted Rowan.

According to an observer: "Each asserted his superiority with warmth and acrimony, both being intoxicated. Mr. Rowan appeared more so, for when blows ensued, Mr. Rowan struck the wall of the chimney as often, or perhaps oftener, than he struck the Doctor."

Through the intervention of friends, the belligerent linguists were quickly separated, but next day Chambers challenged Rowan to a duel. Again friends attempted to "accommodate" the difficulty, but without avail, and, shortly after dawn on the morning of February 3rd, 1801, as a dense fog was lifting along the Beech Fork near Jacob Yoder's plantation, the two masters of the dead languages rode out of the woods, dismounted, removed their greatcoats, wheeled and fired at ten paces, and Dr. Chambers fell mortally wounded with a pistol ball in his body under the left arm.¹

The Kentucky of Abraham Lincoln's childhood was a brawling, whisky drinking, horse racing, card playing region that amazed early travelers to the western coun-

¹ This incident occurred only a few miles from Abraham Lincoln's birthplace. For accounts by seconds and eye witnesses see "The Palladium," a newspaper published at Frankfort, Kentucky, March 10, May 12, 1801. George M. Bibb, later United States Senator and Secretary of the Treasury under Tyler, was Rowan's second.

try. "They are nearly all natives of Virginia," observed the Frenchman, M. Michaux. "With them a passion for gaming and spiritous liquors is carried to excess, which frequently terminates in quarrels degrading to human nature. If a traveler happens to pass by, his horse is appreciated, if he stops, he is presented with a glass of whisky."²

In the Bluegrass region, the center of culture in the western country, encounters between gentlemen were usually attended by the most punctilious observance of the "code," but the backwoodsmen, drunk or sober, scorned such pompous formalities.

When Timothy Flint visited Kentucky in 1818, he noted in his *Journal*: "Fights are characterized by the most savage ferocity, gouging, or putting out the antagonist's eyes by thrusting the thumbs in the sockets, is a part of the *modus operandi*. Kicking and biting are also ordinary means used in combat. I have seen several fingers that have been mutilated, also several noses and ears which have been bitten off by this canine mode of fighting."³

And Flint's horrified fellow traveler, F. Cuming, wrote back to London: "They fight for the most trifling provocations, or even sometimes without any, but merely to try each other's prowess, which they are fond of vaunting of. Their hands, teeth, knees, head and feet are their weapons, not only boxing with their fists, but

² Michaux, 194.

³ Flint in Thwaites, IX, 138.

also tearing, kicking, scratching, biting, gouging each other's eyes out by a dexterous use of a thumb and finger, and doing their utmost to kill each other, even when rolling over one another on the ground."⁴

Dennis Hanks relates such an incident concerning Abraham Lincoln's father, which occurred "at a gathering in Hardinsburg, Ky." It seems, according to Hanks, that a certain local citizen "was reputed and cracked up as the best man in Breckinridge County." Thomas Lincoln, however, who "though not a fleshy man," was "knit so compact that it was difficult to find or feel a rib in his body," had friends and neighbors from the "Barrens" of Hardin County who disputed the claims of the champion and his supporters.

"It was agreed to and they both consented to a fair fight," says Hanks. "They soon stript and went at it, and Thomas Lincoln whipped him in less than two minutes without getting a scratch." And this, too, in spite of the fact that Lincoln was always "good humored, sociable and never appeared to be offended."⁵

But not all public gatherings in those early glamorous years of the nineteenth century were marred by truculence or tragedy. Frequently at race meetings, shooting matches, militia musters, barbecues and other pioneer festivities, good liquor and good humor were present in great abundance, memories of hilarious

⁴ Cuming's "Tour to the West," Thwaites, IV, 137.

⁵ Hanks' Chicago statement, June 8, 1865. "No one else ever tried his manhood in a personal combat." Hanks' second Chicago statement. Herndon-Lamon MSS.

political banquets—Kentucky River catfish, mutton chops, wild turkey, venison, hickory-smoked ham, sweet potatoes and pumpkin pies, eloquent speeches; claret, brandy and mellow whisky—were fondly cherished long after the snow of many winters had cooled the blood and bleached the hair of the merry participants.

One of these never-to-be-forgotten occasions was in the autumn of 1809, when the Legislature chose Henry Clay, hardly thirty-three years of age, to represent Kentucky in the Senate of the United States.

That evening the young statesman was tendered a dinner at Frankfort, and, many years later, one who was present recalled that "Gallant Harry of the West," after "the bottle had circulated until a late hour, announced his intention of finishing off the entertainment by a grand Terpsichorean performance on the table, which he accordingly did, executing a *pas seul* from head to foot of the dining table, sixty feet in length, amidst the loud applause of his companions and to a crashing accompaniment of shivered glass and china, for which expensive music he next morning paid, without demur, a bill of \$120.00."⁶

The widespread use of alcoholic liquors in Kentucky made the manufacture of ardent spirits one of the earliest and most important industries in the state.⁷

⁶ Little, 38.

⁷ A traveler who visited in Lexington in 1809 noted "two brew houses" that "make as good beer as can be got in the United States," and seven distilleries. Cuming, 164.

"Bourbon" whisky, a delicately proportioned mash of Indian corn, rye and malt, mixed with pure sparkling limestone water, carefully cooked over a slow burning fire, and distilled through heavy copper "worms" into oaken barrels, charred on the inside, and then ricked high in well ventilated warehouses to be aged by the soft, warm, sweet-scented winds of a dozen languorous summers, was a delicious, exhilarating beverage fit to tickle the palate of a king.

Apple and peach brandies were also in large demand. The fruit, when dead ripe, was thrown into large wooden troughs and pounded with heavy pestles until reduced to pulp. Large powerful screw presses then squeezed the juice into vats of blue ash, where, after fermenting from six to twelve hours, according to the weather, it was ready for distillation.

With liquor drinking so generally prevalent among all classes of pioneer society, one would not expect to find easy-going, lethargic Thomas Lincoln a tee-totaler.⁸

Occasionally he worked at a still house, and one adjoined the birthplace of his famous son, but he used liquor very moderately, and, for his day, was counted a temperate man.⁹ The time-stained store ledgers of Bleakley & Montgomery, at Elizabethtown, Kentucky, contain occasional items, such as, "Thomas Lincoln—

⁸ "Thomas Lincoln was no drunkard, neither was he a total abstainer." Barton, I, 112.

⁹ "Thomas Lincoln was temperate in his habits, never was intoxicated in his life." Hanks' Chicago Statement, June 8, 1865. Herndon-Lamon MSS.

one pint of whiskey—21c,” but they are few and far between when compared to similar entries for other customers.

So much, however, can not be said for the uncle of Abraham's father, who was also named Thomas. This prosperous kinsman, frequently mentioned by Lincoln in his correspondence of later years, owned a fertile farm, cultivated by his slaves, up in the Bluegrass region, where, according to his own description, he also “operated a very good & well fixed distillery” on South Elkhorn Creek, near Lexington.

In 1810, his wife, Elizabeth, sued him for the recovery of certain property under a separation agreement which recited that “the said Elizabeth hath come to a final determination to reside with her husband no longer.” Her bill of complaint alleged that “the said Thomas hath been very abusive to his said wife, & has twice kicked her with his feet & once thrown a chair at her, and gives her very repeatedly the most abusive language.”¹⁰

The response that Thomas filed is in contrite but somewhat guarded terms. It alleges that “the said Lincoln with truth can say that whatever of his conduct towards her that may have savoured of either injustice or cruelty, has proceeded either from a deranged mind or casual intemperance & intoxication, and while he with the deepest remorse laments & acknowledges these

¹⁰ Thomas Lincoln v. John O'Nan, Elizabeth Lincoln, et al, March 31, 1810, file 215, Fayette Circuit Court.

errors of his own life, it has been the misfortune of his wife to have her errors also." In further defence, he states that on one occasion his wife "actually approached to strike him with a chair & was about to strike him when he repelled the blow by striking her."¹¹

When the case came to trial on December 13, 1810, one of Mrs. Lincoln's witnesses, Peter Warfield, admitted that she was "in the habit of frequent intoxication" and that he had "frequently seen her in that state," but expressed the opinion that it was "generally believed in the neighborhood that Mrs. Lincoln's intemperance proceeded from the bad conduct of her husband."

Evidently the infuriated Thomas, after court adjourned, laid violent hands upon the truthful Peter, because Warfield next morning filed a suit against Lincoln for assault and battery, stating that on the previous day "Thomas Lincoln did with feet and fists commit an assault upon the said plaintiff & him, the said Pltff, then & there did beat, wound & evilly treat so that his life was despaired of greatly."¹²

In after years, when Abraham Lincoln lounged about the courthouse on visits to his wife's home town, and, as he wrote Jesse Lincoln, "heard the older people speak of Uncle Thomas and his family," and perhaps read the dust laden records in the office of the Circuit Clerk, it must have been apparent to him that mutual indulgence

¹¹ Thomas Lincoln v. John O'Nan, Elizabeth Lincoln, et al, March 31, 1810, file 227, Fayette Circuit Court.

¹² Peter Warfield v. Thomas Lincoln, Dec. 14, 1810, file 227, Fayette Circuit Court.

to excess in the mellow juice of Kentucky corn had been a vital factor in the marital unhappiness of Thomas and Elizabeth Lincoln.¹³

Abraham's Uncle Mordecai, his father's oldest brother, whom he says he "often saw," was also a heavy drinker, and so was his son "Young Mord." The elder Mordecai moved to Hancock County, Illinois, and one stormy December day in 1830, unable to longer breast the blizzard, Uncle Mord dismounted from his horse, lay wearily down in a snowdrift to sleep off his liquor, and never awoke.¹⁴

Abraham Lincoln had no recollection of his birthplace, the rude cabin by the Sinking Spring on Nolin Creek. When he was two years old his father moved across Muldraugh's Hill to a fertile little farm in the bottom lands of picturesque Knob Creek, and here the Lincolns lived until they moved to Indiana when Abraham was almost eight years old.

This new home was on the old Cumberland Road, the main highway between Louisville and Nashville, and the hustle and bustle along this important thoroughfare afforded contacts with the outside world, in sharp contrast with the isolation of "The Barrens" of Nolin Creek. Caleb Hazel, the closest neighbor of the Lincolns, and Abraham's second school-teacher, kept an "ordi-

¹³ Apparently Thomas Lincoln never reformed nor regained his former prosperity. An execution issued against him July 3, 1815, was returned by the sheriff marked "No property found." Execution Book D, 215, Fayette Circuit Court.

¹⁴ Barton's "Lineage of Lincoln," 103-4-14.

nary," and on one occasion was indicted in the Hardin Circuit Court for "retailing spiritous liquors by the small without a license."¹⁵ Peter Atherton, the Knob Creek ferryman, sold whisky also, and in 1814 was arrested for the same offense.¹⁶ Two miles down the road from the Lincoln home, and within sight of the school that Abraham attended, was a distillery which in time became the largest liquor manufacturing plant in the world.¹⁷ Every mill site, cross roads, and other public place had its "ordinary" or "groggery," where peach brandy, apple jack and whisky could be had at low cost.

Liquor drinking was by no means uncommon among the clergy. William Downs, probably the first preacher Abraham ever heard, who baptized Thomas Lincoln in Knob Creek, was "indolent, slovenly, and self-indulgent and, while pastor of the Little Mount Church which the Lincolns attended, was summoned before the congregation to answer a charge of being intoxicated."¹⁸

David Elkin, another pastor of the same church, who, according to tradition, preached the funeral of Lincoln's mother, is said to have had his reputation "sullied in his later years, perhaps from too free use of strong drink."¹⁹

Rather frequently, Thomas Lincoln rode to Elizabethtown, and now and then he took his young son with

¹⁵ Warren, 214. ¹⁶ Ibid, 168. ¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Spencer, Historian of "Kentucky Baptists," in Warren, 244. "His moral character was so defective that he exercised little influence for good."

¹⁹ Spencer, in Warren, 246. Dennis Hanks says that Elkin was "an old Ky. friend" of the Lincolns.