

# Lincoln's "Angel Mother" and His Surrogate Fathers

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Lincoln's striking view of his angelic mother, which was itself a nineteenth-century meme about idealized maternal figures, reflected the high opinion of her held by all those who knew Nancy Hanks Lincoln. She was kind and gentle, they said, and seemed to agree with Lincoln's own view of her. Those who knew her also stressed that she was "smart" and "intellectual." Six weeks after Abraham's assassination, when John Hanks (Nancy's first cousin) sat down with William Herndon's research assistant John Miles, Hanks told him that Nancy Lincoln "had a clear intellectual mind." In the following year, interviewed this time by Herndon himself, Hanks was more emphatic: "She was beyond all doubt an intellectual woman." Another first cousin, Dennis Hanks, described Nancy's mental acuity as "keen—shrewd—smart & I do say highly intellectual by nature." After Nat Grigsby, whose brother married Sarah (Sally) Lincoln, described Sally, Lincoln's sister, as "an intellectual & intelligent woman," he added, "not so much as her mother." Another long-time Indiana neighbor close to the family, William Woods, who sat up with Nancy during her last illness, described her as "very smart, intelligent and intellectual."<sup>1</sup>

As an intellectual woman without colleagues, Nancy was seen by her son as "sensitive and somewhat sad." Herndon said she was "Badly and roughly raised."<sup>2</sup> Nancy somehow learned to read but

1. Douglas L. Wilson and Rodney O. Davis, *Herndon's Informants: Letters, Interviews, and Statements about Abraham Lincoln* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999) (hereafter cited as *HI*), John Hanks's statement to John Miles, May 25, 1865, *HI*, 5; John Hanks interview with Herndon, n.d., *HI*, 454; Dennis Hanks to Herndon, June 13, 1865, *HI*, 37; Nathaniel Grigsby to Herndon, September 12, 1865, *HI*, 113; William Woods's statement to Herndon, September 15, 1865, *HI*, 124.

2. Herndon to Jesse Weik, January 19, 1886, Douglas L. Wilson and Rodney O. Davis, eds., *Herndon on Lincoln: Letters* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2016), 203–4 (hereafter cited as *HOL: Letters*). Dennis Hanks reported that "Lincoln's mother [Nancy] learned him to read the Bible." See Dennis Hanks's statement to Herndon, June 13, 1865, *HI*, 35–43.

left no writing behind. Readers who could not write were common at that time on the frontier. Even in the South, some enslaved persons learned to read but almost never to write (Frederick Douglass was a marked exception in this regard). Pedagogy at the time, unlike today, undertook to teach reading before writing, so that if Nancy had some exposure to school, she could well have learned to read without continuing long enough to become fully literate.

All of that has Carl Sandburg paint a scene of Nancy reading the Bible to young Lincoln.<sup>3</sup> That scene is not impossible. At the very least, this smart woman would have absorbed the oral culture of her environment that was based so thoroughly on Biblical stories. Given all the testimony about her being an intellectual, her ability to read the Bible and share its stories with her talented son could have derived from an extraordinary memory. He in turn had something close to a photographic memory, easily evoking familiar but also obscure biblical and poetic references in his speeches and ranking with Jefferson in eloquence.<sup>4</sup> All of Lincoln's great and memorable prose was written to be read aloud.

Nancy Lincoln's tangled heritage has become somewhat clearer in recent scholarship. It seems that she was in fact the illegitimate child of an unmarried teenaged mother, Lucy Hanks. Lucy's father, Joseph Hanks, served as an overseer on two Virginia plantations from 1776 until January 1782. One plantation was owned by a Griffin Fauntleroy and the other by a Richard Beale.<sup>5</sup> Each owned approximately forty slaves, and, though it remains speculation, it could be that either of these men, or a son of one of them, or possibly some other white man on the plantation such as an overseer, fathered Nancy Hanks.<sup>6</sup>

One reasonable theory is that Nancy's mother, Lucy, was sixteen or seventeen years old when she got pregnant, and most scholars

3. Carl Sandburg, *Abraham Lincoln: The Prairie Years*, 2 vols. (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1926), 1:26.

4. Elton Trueblood, *Abraham Lincoln: Theologian of American Anguish* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973); reissued by HarperOne, 2012, with subtitle *Lessons in Spiritual Leadership*.

5. Paul H. Verduin, "New Evidence Suggests Lincoln's Mother Born in Richmond County, Virginia, Giving Credence to Planter-Grandfather Legend," *Northern Neck of Virginia Historical Magazine* 38 (December 1988), 4354-89.

6. After six years of painstaking research, Christopher Challender Child summarized the many disputes succinctly in "The Maternal Ancestry of Abraham Lincoln," *New England Ancestors*, 4 (Winter 2003), 25.

give Nancy's birthdate as February 5, 1784.<sup>7</sup> In the period immediately preceding her birth, Joseph Hanks shuttled between a home under construction in what is now Mineral County, West Virginia, and another plantation where he worked in Richmond County, Virginia. By this interpretation, Joseph Hanks may have been away when the unknown planter or his son or overseer took advantage of the teenage Lucy and got her pregnant.<sup>8</sup> Paul Verduin, however, argues that Nancy's true birth year was a year or two earlier. Verduin inferred from Joseph Hanks's 1782 decision to uproot himself and to resettle his large family in the west that notoriety or shame emanated from his oldest daughter's pregnancy outside of marriage.<sup>9</sup>

In any event, the peripatetic Joseph Hanks moved to Rolling Fork, Kentucky, by the late 1780s.<sup>10</sup> By then, or more likely much earlier, Lucy Hanks had turned to her parents to care for her baby. She was herself still a child, perhaps disgraced, and in any case without the means to raise Nancy. Her parents took in the baby with apparent grace. Nancy's early years were thus stable and spent in the family of her grandparents. In the home of Joseph Hanks and his wife, Nancy joined ten older children, some already adults, who were her aunts and uncles. When Nancy was nine, however, she lost her aged grandfather, and her life was once again turned upside down. After the estate was divided, the children scattered, and Nancy, virtually by default, was returned to her mother. Lucy Hanks was by then married

7. Lincoln family Bible entries made circa 1851 by Abraham Lincoln, in Roy P. Basler et al., eds., *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, 9 vols. (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1953), 1:94 (hereafter cited as *CW*) are of interest on point. They include reference, in context of a marriage date of June 12, 1806, to "Nancy Hanks who was born February 5th 1784." By contrast, the gravestone set in place in Indiana in 1879 by Hanks relatives stated, "Nancy Hanks Lincoln, Mother of President Lincoln, Died October 5, A.D. 1818, Aged 35 years." To be consistent with an age of thirty-five on October 5, 1818, Nancy Hanks's birth would have occurred at some point between the late fall of 1782 and early fall of 1783. (The degree of certainty behind Lincoln's entries of his parents' birthdates, i.e., greater for his father than for his mother, is evidenced by his calculation that Thomas Lincoln died on "January 17 [1851] aged 73 years & 11 days," while no parallel calculation appears after "Nancy Lincoln wife of Thos. Lincoln, died October 5th. 1818." *CW*, 2:95.

8. Herndon to Ward Hill Lamon, March 6, 1870, *HOL: Letters*, 100.

9. Verduin, "New Evidence," 6n.

10. Louis A. Warren, *Lincoln's Parentage and Childhood: A History of the Kentucky Lincolns Supported by Documentary Evidence* (New York: Century, 1926), 62, cites positive evidence of the Hanks family's residence in Kentucky as of November 24, 1789, but assigns their Kentucky arrival to the period 1785–1789.

to Henry Sparrow, with whom she had several children whose birth dates were not recorded.<sup>11</sup>

Nancy entered a busy household in which her mother, Lucy, then twenty-six years old, may have harbored some ambivalence toward the baby she abandoned at birth, not to mention the possibility that her new husband resented suddenly having to raise this girl who was not his biological offspring. For whatever reason, the arrangement of Nancy living with her mother and stepfather didn't work out. Nancy was therefore entrusted to her Aunt Elizabeth, who was a Sparrow (the two sisters, Lucy and Elizabeth, had married brothers, Henry and Thomas Sparrow).

Nancy was then eleven or twelve years old. She seemed to be well cared for by the Sparrows, though she spent significant time with Richard Berry and his wife, Rachel, who were neighbors. Nancy befriended the Berrys' niece, Sarah Mitchell, a teenager who had been captured by Indians at an early age. After Sarah was freed by treaty in 1795, she went to live with her maternal aunt, Rachel Berry. Nancy Hanks was soon hired or apprenticed to serve as teacher for Sarah Mitchell, who had forgotten her English. It seems that Nancy also taught Sarah how to weave linen, a craft at which Nancy was proficient. The girls bonded, since both were effectively orphans, as Nancy was estranged from her mother and never knew her father, while Sarah's parents were deceased. As Nancy taught Sarah English and weaving, the two became close and intimate friends. It is striking that Sarah Mitchell named her daughter Nancy and that Nancy named her daughter Sarah.<sup>12</sup>

Nancy's life was again disrupted at fifteen or sixteen when she took up permanent residence with the Berrys. Aunt Elizabeth Sparrow had taken on raising yet another illegitimate Hanks child, infant Dennis (Friend) Hanks. Perhaps it wasn't that great a change for Nancy, as she might have been living with the Berrys already part-time. In any event, every indication is that Nancy was happy in her new household. The Berrys lived in a comfortably large double, hewn-log cabin, and Richard Berry, himself no blood relative (although his wife was), cared for Nancy and served dutifully as her surrogate father.<sup>13</sup> He

11. See the family tree (based on Verduin's research) in the appendix of *HI*, 780–81.

12. Warren, *Lincoln's Parentage*, 63–68. Warren estimated Sarah Mitchell's age to be three years younger than Nancy. Because, however, she had married while with the tribe, she may have been older. Obviously deeming that tribal marriage void, Sarah Mitchell at nineteen (or twenty-one?) became Sarah Mitchell Thompson in 1800.

13. Raymond Warren, *The Prairie President: Living Through the Years With Lincoln, 1809–1861* (1930; New York: Kessinger Publishing, 2004), 6.

even became her unofficial guardian. Nancy lived with the Berrys until her marriage to Thomas Lincoln in June 1806, when Nancy had Berry sign her marriage certificate, which she was not required to do because she had already turned twenty-one.<sup>14</sup>

Lincoln remained intrigued by his maternal grandfather at both a conscious and unconscious level. His mother Nancy fed his fascination. She made sure to talk to her son in detail about his brilliant grandfather, a rich and prominent “Virginia planter” she never knew. Dennis Hanks, who lived with the Lincolns when orphaned, recalled Nancy telling her son that his blood was “as good as Washington’s,” and as a result, according to Hanks, boosting Lincoln’s confidence that he could make something of himself.<sup>15</sup> It is worth noting that Lincoln’s musings about his unknown but distinguished Virginia planter grandfather contrasted with his diligent search for more details about his namesake and paternal grandfather. That Abraham Lincoln was killed in his own cornfield by “rogue Indians.” Thomas Lincoln’s brother Mordecai, though only fourteen years of age, managed to kill one of the attackers.<sup>16</sup> This horrific event pushed Mordecai into lifelong racism and indiscriminate acts of revenge.<sup>17</sup> Lincoln pursued the family history of his paternal grandfather when he was in Congress in 1848. In his first month in Washington, Lincoln sent out at least four letters that have survived, inquiring about his paternal grandfather, Abraham Lincoln. Replies confirmed the bare facts that he already knew.<sup>18</sup>

The texts of these four letters and other relevant materials are gathered as an appendix to Thomas G. Cannon’s “Lincoln’s Genealogical Quest, 1848–1865.”<sup>19</sup> Cannon, insofar as he treats Lincoln’s interest in his paternal ancestry, does so comprehensively. One might defer

14. Warren, *The Prairie President*, 6. See also Ralph Gary, *Following in Lincoln’s Footsteps* (New York: Carroll & Graf Publishers, 2001), 207–9.

15. Eleanor Atkinson, *The Boyhood of Lincoln* (New York: Doubleday, Page & Co., 1908), 35 (based on the last interview given by Dennis Hanks, age ninety).

16. Abraham Lincoln to Jesse Lincoln, April 1, 1854, CW, 2:217. According to Lincoln, “the story of his [i.e., grandfather Abraham Lincoln] death by the Indians, and of Uncle Mordecai, then fourteen years old, killing one of the Indians, is the legend more strongly than [most prominent of] all others imprinted upon my mind and memory.”

17. Mordecai Lincoln was known for killing Indians. William H. Herndon and Jesse Weik, *Herndon’s Lincoln*, ed. Douglas L. Wilson and Rodney O. Davis (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2006), 20.

18. Lincoln to Solomon Lincoln, March 6, 1848, CW, 1:455; Lincoln to David Lincoln, March 24, 1848, CW 1:459; Lincoln to Solomon Lincoln, March 24, 1848, CW, 1:459; Lincoln to David Lincoln, April 2, 1848, CW, 1:461.

19. Thomas G. Cannon, “Lincoln’s Genealogical Quest, 1848–1865,” *Journal of the Abraham Lincoln Association*, 44 (Fall 2023):1–17.

to it as definitive on that point. The article errs, however, in asserting that Lincoln felt himself to be "the exceptional child of unexceptional parents" (citing Michael Burlingame).<sup>20</sup> This statement ignores the influence of Lincoln's quite exceptional mother, to whom he said that he owed everything.

Lincoln's relationship with his father was more complicated. The scholarly view of Thomas Lincoln has varied considerably in the last 150 years or so and in recent decades has taken some peculiar twists and turns. Those who admire the crusty old farmer have long sought to rescue Thomas from what they regard as the calumny of William Herndon's oral history and his 1889 biography of Lincoln. Louis A. Warren, for example, in 1926, wrote that "we must now bury the traditional Thomas Lincoln in the 'stagnant, putrid pool' discovered by William Herndon, and introduce to future biographers the historical Thomas Lincoln of Hardin County."<sup>21</sup> Paul Angle in his 1930 edition of the Herndon biography felt obliged to insert an entire paragraph on the "real" Thomas Lincoln following Herndon's disparaging description.<sup>22</sup>

Thomas Lincoln was in fact respected in the various communities in which he lived. He helped construct local churches, among other activities. He "didn't drink an' cuss none," according to Dennis Hanks, and was a sober and hardworking carpenter and farmer. Thomas also attracted two outstanding women as wives to whom he was devoted; was a strong and a good wrestler; noted for being a story teller; and had a wry sense of humor. Lincoln even named his fourth son Thomas, which at the very least suggests a deep connection with his father. William Barton noted that, "some of the qualities which made Abraham Lincoln great, his patientce, his good humor, his kindness, his love of fun, he interited from his father."<sup>23</sup>

Those views of the "real" Thomas Lincoln have been echoed and amplified by Richard Hart (d. 2022), a lawyer in Springfield, who put

20. Cannon, "Lincoln's Genealogical Quest, 1848-1865," 2, citing Michael Burlingame, *Abraham Lincoln: A Life*, 2 vols. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008), 1:1-3.

21. Warren, *Lincoln's Parentage and Childhood*, 38; Herndon and Weik, *Herndon's Lincoln*, 13; Benjamin Thomas, *Abraham Lincoln: A Biography* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1952), 5.

22. William H. Herndon and Jesse W. Weik, *Life of Lincoln*, ed. Paul M. Angle (Cleveland: World Publishing, 1930), 1-2.

23. Herndon, A Visit to the Lincoln Farm, September 14, 1865, Emanuel Hertz, *The Hidden Lincoln: From the Letters and Papers of William H. Herndon* (New York: Blue Ribbon Books, 1940), 359; Dennis Hanks to William Herndon, June 13, 1865, *HL*, 35-43; William E. Barton, *The Life of Abraham Lincoln*, 2 vols. (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1929), 1:83.

together a modest book with images of some lovely carpentry pieces that he argues were made by Thomas. Hart gives his book the rather grandiose title of *The Collected Works of Thomas Lincoln: Carpenter and Cabinet Maker*. Hart worked assiduously to gather the evidence for the provenance of these high-quality items, though inevitably he relies on some shaky sources in the oral history that makes his argument not entirely convincing. He also assembled the text of nearly all known facts about Thomas. At the very least, Hart shows that Thomas had skill as a carpenter, even if not quite the master craftsman he portrays. Hart also argues in general that Thomas Lincoln was an admirable and talented man on many fronts, and that it does nothing in our admiration for Lincoln to tarnish Thomas.<sup>24</sup>

Those who disparage Thomas have always been noisier and have tended to dominate the Lincoln literature. That theme began with Herndon, of course, who was keen to gather evidence in his oral history of all kinds of toxic views of Thomas, especially somewhat wild stories of his sexual inadequacy and/or sterility. Thomas was, in this “evidence,” lazy and without ambition, a “piddler, always doing but doing nothing great,” “roving and shiftless,” “proverbially slow of movement, mentally and physically,” and “careless, inert and dull” (all from Herndon’s book based on the oral history). The underlying problem, Herndon felt, was “due to the fact of fixing.” Herndon believed that Thomas had castrated himself, had one testicle the size of a pea, or two testicles the size of peas, or had mumps that, in the colorful nineteenth-century phrase, “went down on him.”<sup>25</sup>

More recently, Michael Burlingame (who has influenced Sidney Blumenthal, another Lincoln biographer) pushes this notion of disparagement to conclude that Lincoln hated his father because of the supposed mistreatment of him as a boy and adolescent. Burlingame assembled all the examples from the oral history of Thomas’s meanness to his son, including the story that Thomas “slashed” young Lincoln for ignoring his work and scorned his reading.<sup>26</sup> The issue was supposedly having to turn over wages to his father that left him

24. Richard Hart, *The Collected Works of Thomas Lincoln: Carpenter and Cabinet Maker* (Springfield, Ill.: Pigeon Creek Series, 2019).

25. Nathaniel Grigsby, Interview, September 12, 1865, *HI*, 113; Herndon and Weik, *Herndon’s Lincoln*, 20; Herndon to Ward Hill Lamon, February 25, 1870, in *HOL: Letters*, 84. Note also Charles Friend to Herndon, July 31, 1889, *HI*, 673–74; Herndon, *Opinion of Men*, September 6, 1887, Hertz, *Hidden Lincoln*, 393–94.

26. Burlingame, *Abraham Lincoln*, 1:10–11; Sidney Blumenthal, *The Political Life of Abraham Lincoln: A Self-Made Man, 1809–1849* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2016), 1–20, the first volume of an expected five-volume study.

full of rage. But there is no evidence Lincoln felt such rage, and in fact he never actually complained at all. Besides, it was the law that a boy before his maturity must turn over any earnings to his father. Lincoln, it seems, did that without complaint.

To drive more nails into the coffin, Burlingame also reads the testimony of a neighbor, William Wood, from Herndon's oral history to say that Lincoln didn't just want to leave home at nineteen, which was a quite natural inclination, but felt the need to run away. And both Burlingame and Blumenthal make a big deal of the highly questionable testimony of John Roll from half a century later that Lincoln once said of his childhood that he "used to be a slave." In fact, Burlingame, in a feat of creative nonfiction, remarkably claims to know Lincoln's feelings in the matter: "Abraham felt as if he were a chattel on a Southern plantation."<sup>27</sup> Lincoln supposedly made his comment that he "used to be a slave" in a speech in Springfield in the 1850s, though the source is open to question. The great Lincoln historian Don E. Fehrenbacher, with his wife Virginia, spent decades poring over second- and third-hand retrospective comments about Lincoln and worked out a system for evaluating these often, if not usually, spurious sources. The Roll comments received a D from the Fehrenbachers, or just above utterly useless.<sup>28</sup> But even if we can believe Roll and Lincoln did say it, the point was clearly to connect with a freed black man he recognized in the audience as an acquaintance, not to say something important about his own childhood. The comment, if valid, says much more about Lincoln's politics in the 1850s, as well as his generous personality, than about his relationship with his father, Thomas Lincoln.

It is important to understand what Thomas Lincoln was all about, and we need to consider the hard evidence from all this work on him. The voluble Dennis Hanks, Nancy's illegitimate cousin with whom Abraham lived from the age of ten, has what is probably the best last word:

When Nancy married Tom he was workin' in a carpenter shop in Liztown [Elizabethtown]. It wasn't Tom's fault he couldn't make a livin' by his trade. Thar was scacely any money in that kentry. Every man had to do his own tinkerin', an' keep everlasting'ly at work to git enough to eat. So Tom tuk up some land. It was

27. John Roll, "Reminiscences of John Roll," *Chicago Times-Herald*, August 25, 1895, cited in Burlingame, *Abraham Lincoln*, 1:42.

28. See Don E. Fehrenbacher and Virginia Fehrenbacher, *Recollected Words of Abraham Lincoln* (Stanford, Cal.: Stanford University Press, 1996), 383.



mighty ornery land, but it was the best Tom could git, when he hadn't much to trade fur it. Pore? we was all pore, them days, but the Lincolns was porer than anybody.<sup>29</sup>

In other words, Thomas's identity was as a carpenter, but it proved impossible to make a living at it on the frontier of America, so he drifted into farming, which was not his chosen vocation and at which he seemed not particularly competent. Hanks added, "Tom was popylar, an' he could lick a bully if he had to. He j'ist couldn't git ahead, somehow."<sup>30</sup> There was something pathetic about Thomas Lincoln, and it makes no sense to dismiss as irrelevant the reports in the oral history that denigrate him as a man, nor can we ignore his downward mobility, especially after he moved to Illinois in 1830.

Here things get complicated if what matters is not the real or actual Thomas but the *image* of Thomas that existed in the mind of his remarkable son. The psychoanalyst Erik Erikson argued persuasively that a man—and he means a man, not all humans—to make himself whole and complete, to master his world of desire, to realize his dreams, must account for his relationship with his father.<sup>31</sup> Such an accounting proved challenging for Abraham Lincoln.

For young Lincoln, the descriptors that we would use to describe his view of Thomas are those of disappointment and shame. For example, Lincoln characterized his father as dull and something of a fool for being illiterate. In his 1860 autobiography, Lincoln said of Thomas that he was a "wandering laboring boy" who grew up "literally without an education. He never did more in the way of writing than to bunglingly sign his own name."<sup>32</sup> Once ensconced in his upper-middle-class life in Springfield, Lincoln seldom visited Thomas in Charleston, a mere 90 miles away *and* on the law circuit he rode twice a year. When Lincoln did stop by, it seemed only to see his adored stepmother, Sarah. Lincoln did not invite Thomas or any of his kin to his wedding, never invited them to enter his house (one cousin served briefly as a maid), and never introduced them to his wife or children (two of whom were born before Thomas died in 1851). Lincoln occasionally sent money or assigned a note to Thomas and the clan of seventeen gathered near Charleston, but he reacted with disgust and sarcasm in 1848 when Thomas reached out through John D. Johnston for \$20

29. Atkinson, *The Boyhood of Lincoln*, 10.

30. Atkinson, *The Boyhood of Lincoln*, 11–12.

31. Erik Erikson, *Gandhi's Truth: On the Origins of Militant Nonviolence* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1969), 123.

32. Lincoln, *Autobiography* Written for John L. Scripps, ca. June 1860, *CW*, 4:61.

because he faced losing his house. Lincoln gave Thomas the money but without any generosity of spirit. It was not Lincoln's finest hour.<sup>33</sup>

Lincoln experienced his father as a constant and profound disappointment but not because of forced labor or harassment and certainly not because of harsh discipline. The whippings that Burlingame makes so much about are not the point. Such treatment was common on the frontier, and there is no real evidence they left a lasting imprint on Lincoln's character (he was hardly meek, beaten down, or traumatized as a man, traits one would look for as some of the lasting effects of violent whippings as a boy). What did matter is that Lincoln seemed to feel that Thomas was inadequate and unworthy of the task of serving as the fatherly source of idealized greatness for his own soaring ambitions. Such feelings tell us much more about Lincoln than the real Thomas. It could well be that Herndon intuited or heard directly from his law partner the nature of these feelings that Lincoln harbored about Thomas. That may well have shaped the way Herndon gathered evidence in his oral history, serving as Lincoln's unconscious delegate, channeling Lincoln's disdain into seemingly objective testimony.

Once—but not twice—Lincoln rushed to be at the old man's side as he lay dying. Told in 1849 that Thomas was "very anxious to see you before he dies" and his "cries for you" are "truly heart rendering," Lincoln dropped everything and visited to find Thomas fine and recovering from a cold. He left quickly, probably assuming the clan was merely trying to get money from him. Two years later, again told that Thomas was dying and wanted to see him, he wrote back to his stepbrother, who had written on behalf of Thomas, begging off from visiting. He offered two flimsy excuses about being busy and Mary being sick, while spouting platitudes ("He [God] notes the fall of a sparrow," referring to a line in the Gospel of Matthew and a line from Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, "and numbers the hairs of our heads; and He will not forget the dying man, who puts his trust in Him."<sup>34</sup> Then Lincoln's real feelings came out: "Say to him [that is, to Thomas] that if we could meet now, it is doubtful whether it would not be more painful than pleasant." But—painful for whom? Lincoln then failed to attend his father's funeral and spent the rest of his life muttering

33. Lincoln to Thomas Lincoln and John D. Johnston, December 24, 1848, *CW*, 2:15–17.

34. Lincoln's remark about "the fall of a sparrow" unavoidably evoked the deaths of his Sparrow relatives. A neighbor who referred to Lincoln's mother as "Nancy Sparrow" stated that "her & her uncle & aunt Thos & Elizabeth Sparrow . . . all died about the same time and were buried side by side." A. H. Chapman, Statement, before September 8, 1865, *HI*, 97. In other words, they "fell" or died at the same time.

occasionally about buying a grave marker (as Mary would write) but never managing to complete the task. It was left to some residents of Coles County in 1880.<sup>35</sup>

The stories Lincoln's mother, Nancy, told her son about his distinguished "Virginny blood" in him seems to have had a dramatic effect on Lincoln's sense of self. It is of course true that those stories may have reflected her fantasies that became his own. But historical actuality and psychological reality are not always congruent. In his fertile imagination, Lincoln transcended his defective father and cast his identity in relation to idealized others, most especially the nation's founders.<sup>36</sup> As surrogate fathers in a psychological sense, the founders came to represent the integrity and authenticity so lacking in Lincoln's own sense of Thomas. The "fathers," those revered but distant others who created the nation and wrote stirring documents of freedom, filled a void in Lincoln's self. And there are larger meanings. Lincoln's emotional and intellectual investment in these fathers was to prove a creative, healing force in a time of national breakdown.

Neither in the buggy ride with Herndon nor at any other time did Lincoln name his maternal grandfather. But the evidence does suggest that Nancy's knowledge—or fantasy—that she was the daughter of a distinguished Virginia planter helped consolidate her identity through years of insecurity and abandonment by her mother. Nancy held onto this image of an unnamed Virginia gentleman who was her biological father. That image she clearly shared with her son, who came to believe all his noteworthy traits—his power of analysis, logic, mental activity, and ambition—came from this unknown but well-bred Virginia planter. The substitution of the idealized fathers for the shameful image of Thomas that Lincoln harbored showed in his first major speech, the so-called Lyceum Speech, when he expressed what can be called his political philosophy. In it Lincoln categorized these ancestors as instructive "living history" lessons.

35. Richard Lawrence Miller, *Lincoln and His World—Vol. 3: The Rise to National Prominence, 1843–1853* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland & Co., 2011), 236; Lincoln to John D. Johnston, January 12, 1851, *CW*, 2:96–97; Charles H. Coleman, *Abraham Lincoln and Coles County* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Scarecrow, 1955), 139; Justin G. Turner and Linda Levitt Turner, *Mary Todd Lincoln: Her Life and Letters* (New York: Knopf, 1972), 464–65; Ward Hill Lamon, *The Life of Abraham Lincoln: From His Birth to His Inauguration as President* (Boston: James R. Osgood, 1872), 463.

36. Richard Brookhiser, *Founders' Son: A Life of Abraham Lincoln* (New York: Basic Books, 2014), documents Lincoln's identification with the Founders but lacks the psychological perspective of this article.

Lincoln addressed the Young Men's Lyceum in Springfield in January 1838.<sup>37</sup> He spoke three months after a mob attack on Elijah P. Lovejoy (an abolitionist printer who had relocated from St. Louis to Alton, Illinois), who was fatally shot during the attack. Without directly speaking of Lovejoy's death, Lincoln addressed "outrages by mobs" as a general pattern that deeply disturbed him. This land, he said, occupies the "fairest portion of the earth" and is blessed with great expanse, fertile soil, and "salubrity" of climate. We also enjoy a system of unique and treasured political institutions capable of securing our liberties. The "fathers" nobly toiled to create those institutions and leave us with these "fundamental blessings." Those fathers were "hardy, brave, and patriotic" and bequeathed to us a legacy, a "political edifice of liberty and equal rights." Our task is to transmit that edifice to future generations "undecayed by the lapse of time" and untorn by usurpation. But those liberties are threatened.

One thing we do not need to fear, he claimed (notwithstanding the War of 1812), was invasion from abroad. The oceans that bracket the country secure us from such threats.

All the armies of Europe, Asia and Africa combined, with all the treasure of the earth (our own excepted) in their military chest; with a Buonaparte for a commander, could not by force, take a drink from the Ohio, or make a track on the Blue Ridge, in a trial of a thousand years.

What we do need to fear, however, is the "mobocratic spirit" that is abroad in the land. There is an increasing disregard for the law and a disposition to substitute "wild and furious passions" for sober judgment of the courts. "Savage mobs" carry out violence. And it was a problem throughout the country, in north and south, east and west, equally pervasive in slaveholding areas as in non-slaveholding states.<sup>38</sup>

This "mobocratic spirit" weakens our attachment to the rule of law, argued Lincoln. We must reverse that process. "Let every American," he said, "every lover of liberty . . . swear by the blood of the Revolution" never to violate the laws of the land and to honor and preserve the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. To

37. Lincoln, Address Before the Young Men's Lyceum of Springfield, Illinois, January 27, 1838, *CW*, 1:108–15.

38. Lincoln lamented that outrages by mobs had become routine and were "common to the whole country." *CW*, 1:109. On mobbing in the antebellum era, see David Grimsted, *American Mobbing, 1828–1861: Toward Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).

fail in that effort would be to “trample on the blood of his father.” Correspondingly, prevention was a family affair: In order to reverse the mobocratic spirit, reverence for the laws should be breathed by every American mother to the “lispng babe” on her lap, and written in schoolbooks and almanacs, as well as preached from the pulpit, and proclaimed from legislative halls. Let it become, in short, the “political religion” of the nation. “They”—those fathers who created our treasured institutions—“were the pillars of the temple of liberty.” Now they have crumbled, and the temple will fall unless we, their descendants, “supply their places with other pillars, hewn from the solid quarry of sober reason.” We must revere especially the name of Washington and not “desecrate” his memory or awaken him from sleep, Lincoln told his listeners; we must preserve the “proud fabric of freedom” handed down to us by the fathers.

In the speech, Lincoln personalized the founders as “the fathers.” This trope was common enough but had particular meaning for Lincoln. “At the close of that struggle, nearly every adult male had been a participator in some of its scenes. The consequence was, that of those scenes, in the form of a husband, a father, a son or a brother, a living history was to be found in every family.<sup>39</sup> By “every” family, Lincoln encompassed his own.

After 1838, he expanded and expounded on this theme. He continued to insist that he followed the lessons of the “fathers.” It became a common theme in his political thought. Lincoln took pains to argue that the founding documents by “our fathers” set a standard which must be preserved, or the country risked dissolution. His contribution at that time to the political thought of the country was to make the Declaration of Independence a co-equal founding document with the Constitution. They could not be read separately, he argued. At the time, many disdained the Constitution for its clear protection of slavery. An abolitionist like William Lloyd Garrison burned a copy of the Constitution—an “agreemen with Hell”—at a July 4th celebration. Without props or enacted drama, Lincoln’s point was that we live in an imperfect world tolerating what he—and the fathers—always regarded as the “evil” of slavery while they established political institutions necessary to accomplish equality by eradicating slavery over time. At the Cooper Institute in New York in 1860, Lincoln concluded with just this remarkable idea about the founders and slavery: “As those fathers marked it [slavery], so let it be again marked, as an evil not to be extended, but to be tolerated and protected only because of

39. CW, 1:115.

and so far as its actual presence among us makes that toleration and protection a necessity."<sup>40</sup> What Lincoln avoids is the contradiction between his idealization of the founders and the fact that all the major figures he most admired themselves owned slaves and protected it in the Constitution.

Lincoln's election and the sudden disintegration of the nation forced him to recalibrate psychologically his relation to the founders and his idealized fathers. That change is clearly present in his speech at the depot in Springfield on February 11, 1861, as he left on his twelve-day train trip to Washington for his inauguration. By then all states of the Deep South had seceded and a separate country created with its own pro-slavery constitution. The Confederate States of America put forth as its president Jefferson Davis, elected two days before, who would leave the next day from his plantation in Mississippi for his own inauguration in the temporary capital, Montgomery, Alabama. That image of the two presidents traveling at the same time along parallel routes to their respective inaugurations presaged the violence that would soon engulf the land.

Lincoln was keenly aware that the crisis at hand burdened him with an extraordinary responsibility. He understood the level of that responsibility to be akin to that shouldered by his greatly admired and idealized surrogate fathers. He was now their equal. Standing at the back of the train in a drizzling rain, Lincoln spoke with emotion to friends and neighbors with whom he had lived for twenty-five years, where he had married and his children were born, and where one was buried. "I now leave," he said, "not knowing when, or whether ever, I may return." At that point in his sentence, he added an important final phrase: "with a task before me greater than that which rested upon Washington."<sup>41</sup> He no longer looked *up* at Washington. He looked him in the eye.

In a number of speeches throughout the next four years, President Lincoln navigated this new psychological terrain. The first Inaugural explored in detail his sense of the sacred union created by the founders. It was, he solemnly maintained, one that simply could not be broken if Americans were touched by the better angels of their nature.<sup>42</sup> At Gettysburg, Lincoln likewise argued that the fathers "brought forth,

40. Lincoln, Address at Cooper Institute, New York City, February 27, 1860, *CW*, 3:535. On Garrison and the Constitution, see Paul Finkelman, "Garrison's Constitution: The Covenant with Death and How It Was Made," *Prologue*, 32 (Winter 2000): 230–245.

41. Lincoln, Farewell Address at Springfield, Illinois, February 11, 1861, *CW*, 4:190.

42. Lincoln, First Inaugural Address—Final Text, March 4, 1861, *CW*, 4:271.

upon this continent, a new nation, conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal." That proposition, he said, was now being tested as he stood on the site of a great battlefield. He urged his fellow countrymen to resolve that these deaths were not in vain and that the war would instead lead to "a new birth of freedom," and that "government of the people, by the people, for the people," would not "perish from the earth."<sup>43</sup>

By the end of the war, however, with victory assured and slavery abolished, Lincoln made his final psychological adjustment of his relationship with the fathers. He had succeeded in a task greater than Washington had faced. Accordingly, in his Second Inaugural Address—perhaps his greatest speech—he turned from some preliminary ideas to the core issue: What was the Almighty's purpose in bringing the war.<sup>44</sup>

His long answer exploring that question, before his peroration specific to the war's end, was as much personal as it was public as he interpreted God's purpose:

Woe unto the world because of offences! for it must needs be that offences come; but woe to that man by whom the offence cometh!" If we shall suppose that American Slavery is one of those offences which, in the providence of God, must needs come, but which, having continued through His appointed time, He now wills to remove, and that He gives to both North and South, this terrible war, as the woe due to those by whom the offence came, shall we discern therein any departure from those divine attributes which the believers in a Living God always ascribe to him? Fondly do we hope—fervently do we pray—that this mighty scourge of war may speedily pass away. Yet, if God wills that it continue, until all the wealth piled up by the bond-man's two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil shall be sunk, and until every drop of blood drawn with the lash, shall be paid by

43. Lincoln, Address Delivered at the Dedication of the Cemetery at Gettysburg, November 19, 1863, *CW*, 7:23.

44. Lincoln, Second Inaugural Address, March 4, 1865, *CW*, 8:332–333. Lincoln's Second Inaugural has attracted some important recent scholarship. Noteworthy books include Ronald C. White, *Lincoln's Greatest Speech: The Second Inaugural* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2002), James Tackach, *Lincoln's Moral Vision: The Second Inaugural* (University Press of Mississippi, 2002), Jack E. Levin, *Malice Toward None: Abraham Lincoln's Second Inaugural* (New York: Threshold Editions, 2014), and Edward Achorn, *Every Drop of Blood: The Momentous Second Inaugural of Abraham Lincoln* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2020).

another drawn with the sword, as said three thousand years ago, so still it must be said, "the judgments of the Lord, are true and righteous altogether."<sup>45</sup>

With the war at an end and a great victory at hand, Lincoln's gaze drifted upward. Now no man, but only God, could supply the meaning of human existence.

45. Lincoln, Second Inaugural Address, March 4, 1865, CW, 8:333.