



The Thomas Lincoln–Nancy Hanks Marriage: Legal or Common Law?

Lincoln seems always to have stressed the great modesty of his family origins. W. H. Herndon and others expressed a low opinion of his family, which made his accomplishments seem all the more remarkable.

Some early biographers expressed doubts about the legitimacy of his parents' marriage. These doubts were fueled by the absence of any supporting evidence in Hardin County. Ward H. Lamon in his *Life of*

Lincoln (1872) denied the legality of the marriage. In 1873, Robert Lincoln enlisted the help of former presidential secretary John Nicolay to research the matter. This search was unsuccessful because the focus was Hardin County.

Within a few years, however, the issue was definitely resolved. There are several different accounts of the discovery of the marriage bond and the statement of presiding minister Jesse Head. Louis A. Warren, who studied the Lincoln family meticulously, credits Charlotte Vawter from Massachusetts, whose mother was a first cousin of Nancy Hanks, for being instrumental in the discovery. Mrs. Vawter was in Kentucky in 1859-60, and she claims to have always suspected that the relevant evidence would be discovered in Washington County. She claims to have encouraged her uncle, Mitchell Thompson, to search in the Washington County Courthouse. With the help of the county clerk W. F. Brooker, the search was conducted and the discovery made. Mrs. Vawter did not, however, provide an exact date.

An article in the *New York Tribune* of January 25, 1879, mentions the discovery, which it credits to Springfield, Kentucky, attorney R. J. Browne. Mr. Booker issued a statement vouching for the existence of the marriage documents on December 17, 1878.

So although some of the details are still not completely clear, the important fact is certain—Thomas Lincoln and Nancy Hanks were legally married by Jesse Head at Beechland, near Springfield in Washington County, on June 12, 1806.

Ironically, ongoing research on Lincoln's family has vindicated it in a number of ways, perhaps to a greater extent than Lincoln himself would have believed possible.

Marriage bond of Thomas Lincoln and Nancy Hanks, June 12, 1806
Courtesy of the Washington County Courthouse, Springfield, Kentucky