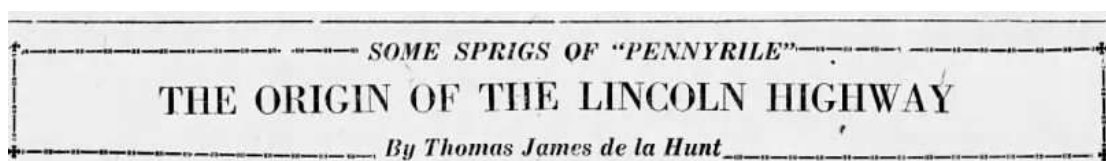


The Origin of the Lincoln Highway



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That some sprigs of Kentucky “Pennyryle” should be gathered in the Indiana “Pocket” is not surprising, after all. The activity of regional research work carried on during two years past by the Southwestern Indiana Historical Society (five of whose counties are washed by the Ohio river) has quite naturally served to awaken a realizing sense of the community of much interesting history belonging to Kentucky and Indiana alike.

No other two of the Border States were ever bound together by links of such peculiar intimacy during the earliest generations. With fraternal devotion from being joint heirs of a Virginia heritage, Kentucky’s valiant sons poured in numbers across the beautiful Ohio whenever necessary to protect the scattered trading posts in the Indiana forests, or to punish the devastating Indians tormenting her pioneers.

From George Rogers Clark at Fort Sackville in 1779 to Joseph Daviess at Tippecanoe in 1811, Indiana’s rollcall of Kentucky heroes is a long one, to which the name of many a county in the Hoosier State gives grateful and eloquent testimony.

And since “That one who breaks the way with tears. Many shall follow with a song.” so with passing years business affiliations became closer, exchange of trade more valuable and constant inter-marriages strengthened all with happier ties of family kinship.

Notwithstanding the terms of the Ordinance of 1787 which excluded shivery from the “Territory Northwest of the Ohio,” such provision was largely a concession to those New Englanders who could not be interested in any colony where slaveholding was tolerated, and the “Ohio Company” which founded Marietta in 1788 was composed of Massachusetts Abolitionists.

Farther down the river, however, a different sentiment prevailed among the pioneers coming from below Mason-and-Dixon’s Line. Those emigrants who owned slaves brought them along in a perfectly matter-of-fact manner with their other goods and , whether they intended settling on the Kentucky or the Indiana shore.

No valuable end is now to be served by discussion of an issue long ago settled yet accepted authorities admit that when Indiana Territory was organized in 1800 the sentiment of its people was not opposed to slavery. Governor Harrison presided over a convention at Vincennes in 1802 which unanimously passed a petition praying Congress to suspend the prohibition of slavery in the

new jurisdiction. Yet John Randolph of Roanoke (himself, the owner of 300 slaves) reported unfavorably to this, as chairman of the House committee which took the plea under consideration.

Up to the actual admission of the state in 1816, no straightford policy was maintained on the point. Under a territorial enactment adopted from the Virginia Code, masters bringing in slaves made a 'contract' with them winch was salable, by which means slaves were held, bought or sold in Indiana just as in Kentucky. As late as 1810, census reports showed 237 slaves m the territory.

It was, then, after Indiana had "come in free" that Thomas Lincoln concluded that Kentucky was no country for a poor man and that he would seek new fortunes in the new commonwealth. The fever of westard emigration was epidemic and reached Hodgenville. Listening to enthusiastic descriptions of rich unoccupied lands near the new settlements in Perry county, Indiana the Lincolns had neither valuable possessions nor cherished associations to restrain their impulse to move.

Not only feasible seemed the enterprise, but reasonably cheap, through Thomas Lincoln's skill as a journeyman carpenter. Building for himself, therefore, a small flatboat in the autumn of 1816, he launched it the mouth of Knob Creek, half a mile from his cabin on the waters of Rolling Fork. Aided by the current, he made the voyage down this stream into Salt river, following it until it emptied into the Ohio, thence along that course to Thompson's Ferry, near Troy, then the county seat of Perry county and a trading point of some importance.

A day's journey on foot took him 16 miles northwestward into the wilderness now the well-cultivated farms of Spencer county, where he found a location suiting him, not far from Little Pigeon creek. Coming back to Troy, he sold his boat, with what remained of the four hundred gallons of whiskey he had brought along as a speculation and leaving his kit of tools in a settler's care recrossed the river and trudged back to his Kentucky home to bring his wife, Nancy Hanks Lincoln, with their two children, Sarah, aged nine, and Abraham, aged seven.

This, then, was the real beginning of the "Lincoln Highway" as projected to follow the route taken by Abraham Lincoln from his Kentucky birthplace; across Indiana, the state of his boyhood; into Illinois, his permanent home after attaining maturity. The journey to Indiana was made with the assistance of two horses, used for riding by the mother and children, and to carry their humble equipment for camping every night.

From point to point in a straight line the distance covered ere reaching the river is about 50 miles, but it was probably doubled by the very few roads it was then possible to follow. As to the counties traversed in this Kentucky pilgrimage there is no room for such doubt or fierce controversy as agitated southwestern Indiana over the next lap of the journey into Illinois, taken about 1827-28.

Hardin county immediately adjoins Breckenridge, which then extended clear to Daviess county and a very early post-road led from Elizabethtown to Owensboro, passing through the old town of Hardinsburg, founded 1780.

This was beyond doubt the primitive pathway which guided Thomas Lincoln toward Indiana. Just where he turned aside from it toward the Ohio may be difficult to determine, but that traveled for at least a dozen miles across what is now Hancock county cannot be questioned. In no other way could he have reached the ferry crossing to Troy, where he borrowed from Francis Posey the son of Governor Posey, a surveyor who had laid out the village) a wagon for the final 16 miles leading to the land he had chosen.

This road above all the many others similarly christened must ever be, to all having a genuine acquaintance with history, a genuine “Lincoln Memorial Highway “ the associations of its route linking Kentucky with Indiana, and its crossing the Ohio will always bring back recollections of the days when Abraham Lincoln himself — a tall, sinewy country lad — plied the ferryman’s oar at the mouth of Anderson creek, now Perry county’s western boundary

A mile or two below, on the Hancock county bank of the river, there stands – or was still standing a few years ago – a dwelling of hewn logs built in 1825, and later weatherboarded over, in one of those rooms Abraham Lincoln plead his first case before any bar, defending himself for unwitting violation of the licensed ferry privileges held by the Dill brothers – John and Leonard. The cause was argued before Esquire Samuel Pate, an early magistrate of Breckenridge (Hancock) county, who died in 1849 unsuspecting the height to which Lincoln would rise. In 1913 the last survivor of his 13 children gave the details as handed down in the Pate family to a young Lewisport journalist, Cleburne E. Gregory of Lewisport.

The Sunday Courier-Journal of February 16, 1913, published an entertaining account of the whole affair, with pictures of Anderson Creek at its mouth, where Lincoln acted as ferryman in the employ of James Taylor, of Troy; and of the old house four miles above Lewisport, where the trial took place .

Thus in “The Pennyrile,” somewhere near 1827 was delivered the first public speech ever made by him whose Gettysburg address has become an immortal classic of American literature.



Thomas James De la Hunt, Jr. (November 9, 1866 – July 3, 1933) was an American newspaper columnist, writer, and historian. He served as president and secretary of the Southwestern Indiana Historical Society for a number of years. He was well known for his writings concerning the area of Indiana known as "the Pocket" and was considered an authority on the history of southern Indiana.

