

On the road: Kentucky

Lincoln's birthplace is impressive in its simplicity

Besides the site in Hodgenville, visitors can see Knob Creek Farm, where Lincoln lived as a boy.



The Memorial Building at the Abraham Lincoln Birthplace National Historic Site houses the log cabin believed to be the one in which Lincoln was born.



If you go

Getting there: Hodgenville can be reached by taking Interstate 64 east to Louisville and going south for 40 miles on I-65 to Elizabethtown (where there are ample accommodations). From there, go 10 miles southeast on Route 61 to Hodgenville. Both the Lincoln Birthplace and Knob Creek sites are free of charge.

PHOTOS BY MIKE TSICHLIS

By Mike Tschlis
Special to the Post-Dispatch

Abraham Lincoln rarely talked in public about his early life, which he once said could be condensed into a single sentence: "The short and simple annals of the poor." It was a story of humble beginnings transcended by hard work and frontier values that Lincoln himself cultivated on his way to the presidency of the United States.

Lincoln's story begins near Hodgenville, a small town in central Kentucky incorporated in 1818 at the site of the mill of Robert Hodgen, an early settler. To this day, descendants of the town's founders live there.

It was several miles south of Hodgen's Mill that Thomas and Nancy Hanks Lincoln settled in 1808. Moving from nearby Elizabethtown, the couple lived in a tiny log cabin on 348 acres of rocky farmland known as Sinking Spring Farm, named for the stream that runs through the property and provided the family with water. The Lincolns already had a 1-year-old daughter, and in two months Nancy would give birth to their first son.

While the site of Lincoln's birth is a few miles outside present-day Hodgenville, the town has passionately embraced its famous son. Occupying a prominent place in the town square is a 7-foot bronze statue of a mature Lincoln, seated in his familiar pensive pose. The statue was created by sculptor Adolph Weinmann, a student of Augustus St. Gaudens, and dedicated in 1909 for the centennial of Lincoln's birth.

Behind the statue in the town square is the Lincoln Museum. Its two-level exhibit area features various displays of Lincoln-era memorabilia. Most of the first floor is a walk-through area with authentically re-created wax-figure dioramas depicting 12 notable scenes from

the president's life, including his cabin days in Kentucky, the signing of the Emancipation Proclamation and the box at Ford's Theater, where he was assassinated. Tours take about an hour and are well worth the time. The cost of admission is \$3 for adults and \$1.50 for children.

A sacred civic shrine

A few miles south of Hodgenville on U.S. Route 31-E is the Abraham Lincoln Birthplace National Historic Site, where the family lived for the first two years of Lincoln's life. Operated by the National Park Service, the visitors center is a spartan affair, with a small gift shop and only a handful of exhibits. A film about Lincoln's Kentucky years is shown every 20 minutes in a small theater. Reverently narrated by the late actor Burgess Meredith, the video is imbued with spiritual overtones, reflective both of Lincoln's religious upbringing as well as the almost messianic character of the president known as the savior of the Union.

Despite frequent references to Lincoln's humble origins, the site of his birth is far from modest. Sitting majestically atop a wooded knoll is a neoclassical granite and marble monument worthy of a spot in the nation's capital. The memorial, built with money raised by a private group that included Mark Twain, William Jennings Bryan and Samuel Gompers, was completed two years after Theodore Roosevelt laid the cornerstone in 1909.

Visitors can get to it by ascending 56 steps, each representing a year in the president's life. Those with small children or with disabilities can travel along a gently sloping wooden ramp that stretches through a forested area to the back of the memorial.

The memorial building encas-



es a log cabin purported to be the one the Lincolns lived in while at Sinking Spring, although no documentation exists to support this claim. It is as simple and austere as the legendary tales of Lincoln's origins would lead one to believe. Lighting inside the monument is dim, so the cabin doesn't photograph well (flash cameras are not allowed), but this doesn't stop a visitor steeped in Lincoln lore to take a walk around the tiny domicile and gawk in wonder.

Other attractions at the site include a short pathway to Sinking Spring, as well as a nearby oak tree stump once used while the Lincolns lived there to mark



ABOVE: The Lincolns lived for five years at Knob Creek, a few miles outside of Hodgenville, Ky. This replica cabin was built in 1931. LEFT: A 7-foot bronze statue of Abraham Lincoln stands in the town square in Hodgenville.

the property boundary. A well-stocked, privately owned antiques and souvenir shop is situated adjacent to the birthplace site and is operated by a local Lincoln historian.

First memories: Knob Creek

"My earliest recollection," Lincoln once said, "is of the Knob Creek Place." Running into problems with the title to his land, in 1811 Thomas Lincoln moved his family 10 miles northeast from Sinking Spring to a 230-acre farm on Knob Creek, situated in a picturesque valley surrounded by steep, rugged hills. It was there that young Abraham planted pumpkin seeds with his father, attended his first school and witnessed the birth and untimely death of his only brother at the age of 2.

The five years the family lived at Knob Creek likely left profound impressions on the future president. Although the family owned no slaves and be-

longed to an anti-slavery church, it is almost certain that the Great Emancipator witnessed the oppression of slavery for the first time while living in the area. It was there, too,

that the young boy had a close brush with death, nearly drowning in the farm's swollen creek. He was pulled to safety by his young friend and schoolmate, Austin Gallahor. But Lincoln's life story moved on. Badgered once again by land-title issues, the Lincolns in 1816 left Kentucky and settled in southern Indiana, where the boy would grow into manhood.

The Knob Creek property was acquired by the National Park Service in 2001 and is now under development. A small replica cabin closely based on the type the Lincolns lived in stands near the roadway, although visitors are kept a good 20 feet away until the structure can be restored and opened for viewing. Meanwhile, visitors are allowed to roam the grounds of the farm and take in the same natural scenery that a special 6-year-old boy did almost two centuries ago.

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