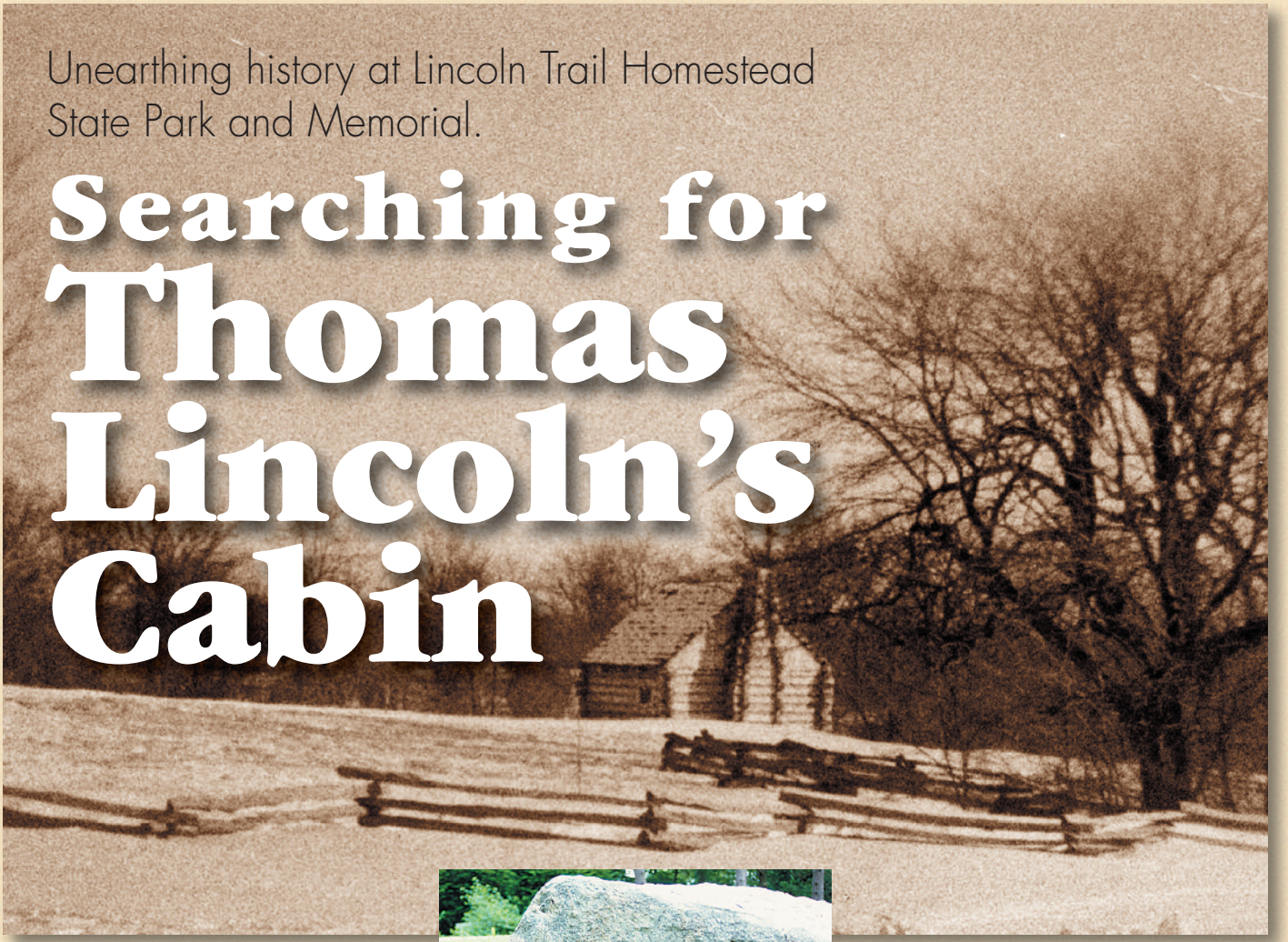
Unearthing history at Lincoln Trail Homestead State Park and Memorial.

Searching for Thomas Lincoln's Cabin



Story By Floyd Mansberger

Lincoln Trail Homestead State Park and Memorial, a small park located west of Decatur along the north shore of the Sangamon River, commemorates the location of the Thomas Lincoln family's initial settlement in Illinois.

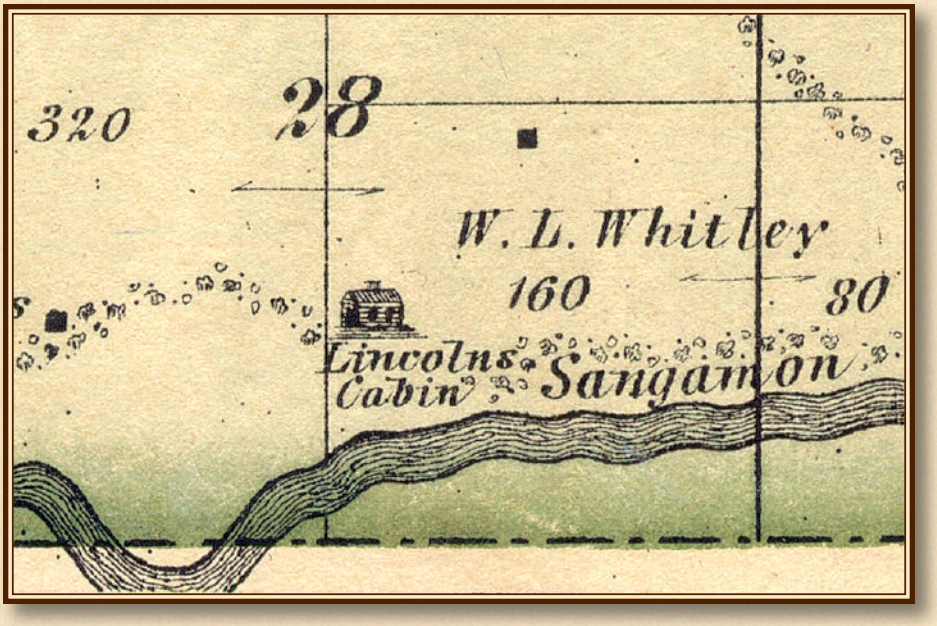
(Photo by Kathy Andrews.)

Today, a plaque at Lincoln Trail Homestead State Park and Memorial near Decatur marks one potential site of the Lincoln family's log cabin. A replica of the original cabin (above) was destroyed by fire in 1990.

In March 1830, the Lincoln family—which included 21-year-old Abraham—relocated from southern Indiana and settled at a location along the north bank of the Sangamon River. At this location, the family constructed a rather primitive log house and cleared, planted and fenced in a few acres of corn, planning to make this their home. Unfortunately, it was a rough year for the Lincoln family, who suffered from the ague (malaria) and experienced one of the worst winters documented for central Illinois (often referred to as the Winter of the Deep Snow, 1830-31). The following spring, the family packed up and moved farther south—re-settling in rural Coles County (the current location of the Lincoln Log Cabin State Historic Site near Lerna). At that time, the young Lincoln left his family, settling at New Salem and later Springfield—and eventually became president of the United States.

The exact location of Thomas Lincoln's Macon County cabin has been debated for more than 100 years. Two monuments document potential locations, but questions remain.

In June 1860, John L. Scripps of the Chicago Press and Tribune, wrote a third-person autobiography of Abraham Lincoln. In part, this autobiography stated the following regarding the president's brief stay in Macon County.

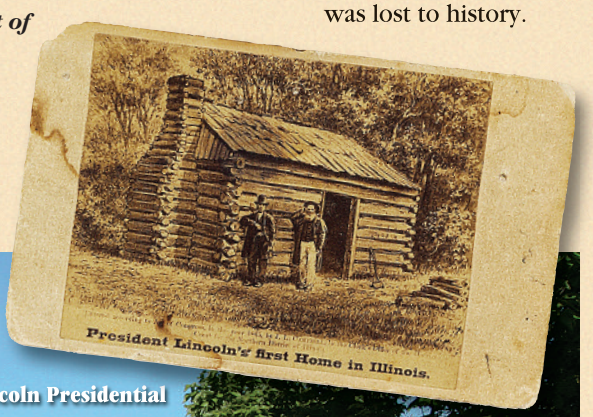


Detail from Atlas of Macon County, Illinois (Warner and Beers 1874). The "Lincoln Cabin" is depicted as being located on the SE1/4 of the section at this date. By this time, the Whitley mill apparently had been abandoned.

March 1, 1830, Abraham having just completed his twenty-first year, his father and family, with the families of the two daughters and sons-in-law of his stepmother, left the old homestead in Indiana and came to Illinois. Their mode of conveyance was wagons drawn by ox-teams, and Abraham drove one of the teams. They reached the county of Macon, and stopped there some time within the same month of March. His father and family settled a new place on the north side of the Sangamon River, at the junction of the timberland and prairie, about ten miles westerly from Decatur. Here they built a log cabin, into which they removed, and made sufficient of rails to fence ten acres of ground, fenced and broke the ground, and raised a crop of sown corn upon it the same year.

Little is known about the cabin's history from the time the Lincoln family left it in 1831 until the mid 1860s. During those years, the cabin was simply one of thousands of mundane log structures dotting the central Illinois landscape. But that quickly changed.

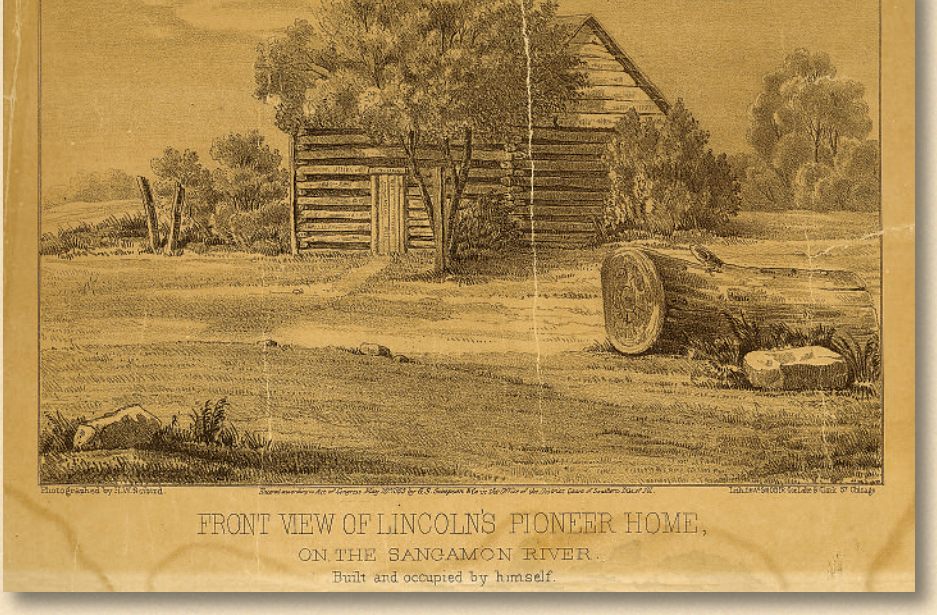
Upon the assassination of Lincoln in April 1865, the cabin became an icon associated with the martyred president's early life. Shortly after Lincoln's death, John Hanks and his brother dismantled the cabin and took it on tour, with exhibitions across the eastern United States, including Chicago, Boston, New York and probably Philadelphia. And then, the cabin was lost to history.



Cabinet card or large carte-de-visite view of "President Lincoln's first Home in Illinois" (Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum). This heavily re-worked lithographic image is labeled "Entered according to Act of Congress in the year 1865, by J. L. Campbell, in the Clerk's Office of the District Court of the Northern District of Illinois." Dennis Hanks (left) and John Hanks (right) are standing in front of the cabin.

Sangamon River

(Photo by Kathy Andrews.)



Lithographic image of the "Front View of Lincoln's Pioneer Home, On the Sangamon River. Built and occupied by himself." This lithograph was prepared by Charles Shober ("cor Lake & Clark St. Chicago") from a photograph taken by H. W. Scibird. The fine print on the lithograph notes that the image was "entered according to Act of Congress May 16th 1865 by G. S. Simpson & Co. in the Office of the District Court of Southern Dist. Of Ill." (Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum, Springfield, Illinois).

The exact location of the Lincoln family's Macon County homestead has been a topic of discussion for well over 100 years, with multiple locations touted as the actual site of the cabin's location.

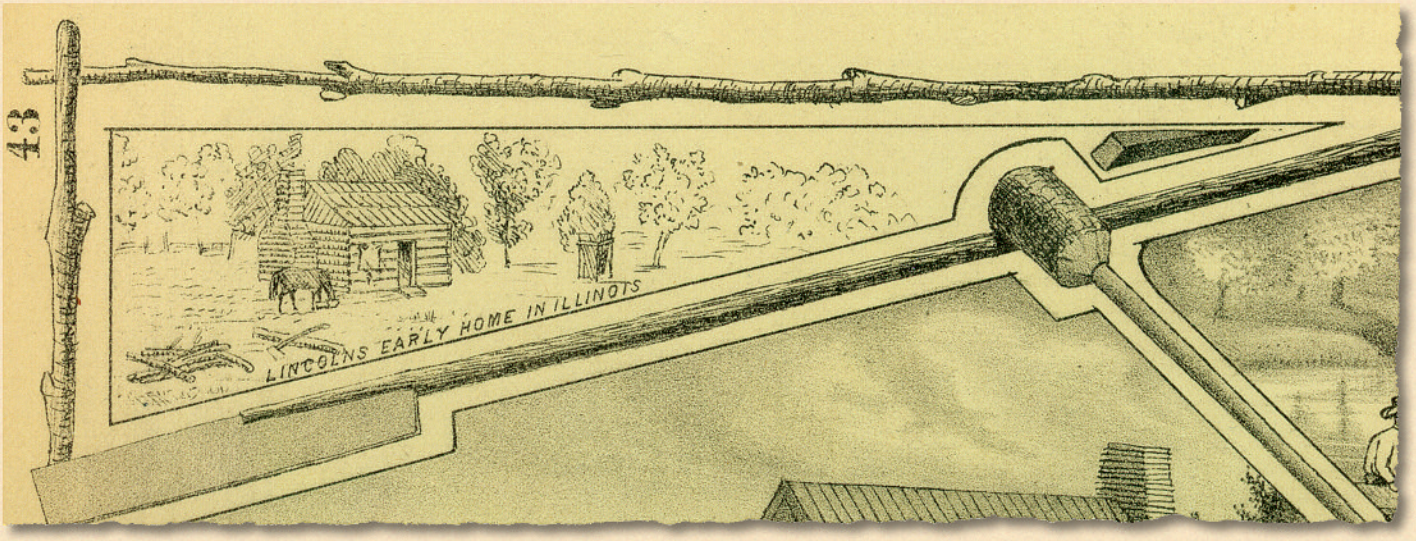
In 1904, the Daughters of the American Revolution commemorated a site just outside of the current park. For many years thereafter, debate raged as to whether this was the proper location, or if a second location—purchased by the state in 1938 to become the Lincoln Trail Homestead State Park and Memorial—was the most likely candidate.

Archaeological investigations conducted at the state-owned site in the early 1940s, by a trained professional archaeologist in the employ of the state, concluded that this was, indeed, the location of the Lincoln cabin. In the mid 1950s, the state constructed a monument at the park and, in the mid 1970s in anticipation of the U.S. Bicentennial, a replica cabin was constructed. That cabin, which was not the most authentic of reconstructions, was destroyed by fire in 1990.

Although a great variety of information is available regarding the original Lincoln family cabin, it has never been properly presented—and critically reviewed—within a single document. As this year marks the 200th anniversary of Lincoln's birth, and with renewed interest in Lincoln's past, the City of Decatur has been studying the possibility of partnering with the state to again reconstruct the Lincoln cabin on state land. In an effort to better understand the history of the cabin in hopes of developing plans for the eventual reconstruction of that historic structure, the city contracted with historic specialists Massie, Massie and Associates Architects and Fever River Research, both of Springfield.

Over the past several months, all available documents relating to the Lincoln family cabin—several 1860s images of the cabin, 19th century plats and atlases, published county histories and a variety of 19th and 20th century newspaper accounts and correspondence—were scrutinized in an effort to better understand the history of the site, the original location of the cabin and potential appearance of that structure. The subsequent report summarized the limited information available regarding the cabin's size, floor plan, elevations and construction details, but, unfortunately,

View of "Lincoln's Early Home in Illinois"—as depicted in 1874 Menard County plat (Warner and Beers 1874)—This image represents a very good depiction of the early style of cabin used by the first generation of settlers in Illinois, and is an excellent model for any future reconstructions.



At a glance

Lincoln Trail Homestead State Memorial, 705 Spitler Park Drive, Mt. Zion, IL 62549
Telephone: (217) 864-3121
Web site: www.dnr.state.il.us/lands/Landmgt/parks/r3/linctrl.htm

Lincoln Log Cabin, 400 S. Lincoln Highway Road, P.O. Box 100, Lerna, IL 62440
Telephone: (217) 345-1845
Web site: www.illinoishistory.gov/hs/lincoln_log.htm
Hours: Seasonal; contact site manager for information

Lincoln's New Salem, 155588 History Lane, Petersburg, IL 62675
Telephone: (217) 632-4000
Web site: www.illinoishistory.gov/hs/new_salem.htm
Hours: Wed.-Sun. 9 a.m.-5 p.m.

this analysis did not shed any light on the cabin's original location.

In an effort to verify the location, an archaeological survey was conducted within the Lincoln Trail Homestead State Park and Memorial in that area identified by the earlier researchers. A fairly large scatter of 19th century brick was documented, but few other artifacts were located. Distinctively absent were artifacts typically associated with short-term domestic sites, such as ceramic and glass tablewares.

Does this archaeological site represent remains from the early Lincoln cabin? It seems unlikely that the scatter of brick was created by the construction, occupation and subsequent demolition of the Lincoln cabin.

The original cabin would have been constructed without the use of brick, however, brick may have been used with possible later modifications from 1830 through 1865. The replacement of the original mud-and-stick chimney would, no doubt, have consisted of the use of brick, but the size of the brick scatter and the volume of the brick present is too large and dense to represent the Lincoln cabin even with later modifications—and it lacks household artifacts associated with a domestic site.

So, what does this archaeological site represent? The artifact scatter is reminiscent of a short-term industrial component, such as that which may have been associated with the nearby Whitley mill, an 1840s water-powered structure.

Little is known about the exact location and character of the Whitley mill. The 1865 county plat appears to document the mill on the north bank of the river, presumably overlooking the physical remains of a timber-cribbed dam which remains visible in the riverbed during periods of low water. Whether this brick represents physical remains of the mill structure is unknown.

Another possibility is that the brick was associated with management of the nearby Whitley farm, also established in the 1840s. A wide variety of late 19th century agricultural activities are documented within this area on a recently discovered 1912 farm survey plat, including a cattle-dipping tank, wind pump, water tank and a 20 foot by 30 foot concrete floor. More than likely, the bricks previously identified as the Lincoln cabin site were associated with the agricultural activities identified on the 1912 map.

A recent archaeological survey suggests that the artifacts located within the park may be remains of the Whitley mill or farm, not the Lincoln cabin.

So, where was the original Lincoln cabin located?

The current research raises some serious questions about the cabin having been located within the grounds of the Lincoln Trail Homestead State Park and Memorial. Nonetheless, it seems likely that the Lincoln cabin was in close proximity to this location.

Hopefully, one day the original location of this cabin will be identified.

Floyd Mansberger is the owner of Fever River Research, Inc. in Springfield. The author appreciates the research contributions of Richard Marley, director of Engineering and Infrastructure, City of Decatur, Kim Bauer, director of the Lincoln Heritage Project, City of Decatur and Dr. Hal Hassen, DNR cultural resource coordinator.

(Photos by Kathy Andrews.)