PART ONE

Lincoln's Long Journey to the Soldiers' Home

CHAPTER 1

Beginnings

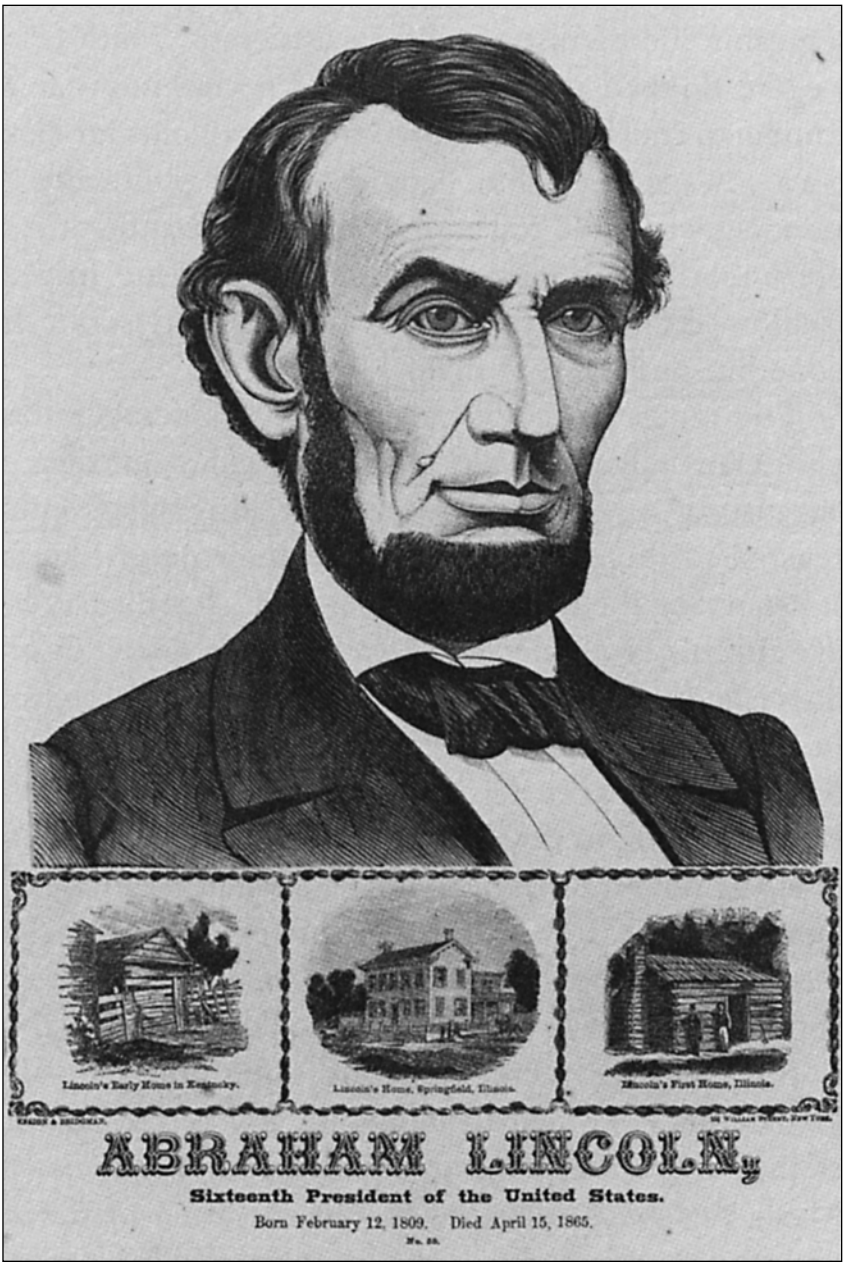
THE PICTURESQUE COUNTRY COTTAGE where tradition holds that the Lincolns stayed at the Soldiers' Home for the three seasons was surely the most comfortable, even fashionable, home Lincoln ever knew. With two floors of spacious, airy rooms and more on the third, the cottage was worlds apart from the cramped log cabins of Lincoln's miserable earlier years. As if those crude shelters weren't bad enough for a young man with Lincoln's drive and genius, after hacking their way in 1816 through thick forests to Little Pigeon Creek, Indiana, seven-year-old Lincoln, his father, Thomas, mother, Nancy, and older sister, Sarah, even lived for a time in what was called a "pole shelter" or "half-faced camp." William O. Stoddard, Lincoln's dashing third secretary in the White House, later offered a journalist's vivid, if imaginative, description: "It was a shed, log-walled on three sides, open on the south and roofed with riven slabs. It was about fourteen feet square with the 'fire-place' out on the ground on the open side. Its floor was the earth and it had neither window, door, nor chimney. It was the poorest home to which Nancy (Hanks) Lincoln's husband had brought her." Years later historian George Dangerfield embellished that description: "The sides and roof were covered with poles, branches, brush, dried grass, mud; chinks were stuffed where the wind or rain were trying to come through."

Thomas Lincoln managed to build a log cabin in time. A succession of these cabins has been re-created—and revered—all the way

from Kentucky through Indiana to Illinois. A massive temple now covers the tiny cabin at Sinking Springs Farm near Hodgenville, Kentucky, where Lincoln was born on February 12, 1809. Each of the fifty-six steps leading up to it is meant to represent a year in his life. It wasn't until he'd lived more than half those years that he escaped the humiliation widely associated in those days with such crude places.

Even though the Harrison-Tyler presidential campaign of 1840 had made log cabins somewhat respectable, however hypocritically (Harrison had been raised in a mansion), and though Lincoln had been railroaded at the 1860 nominating convention by some well-meaning supporters into endorsing what became a smashingly successful railsplitter image, the presidential hopeful dismissed his log-cabin years with a single line from Thomas Gray's elegy, "the short and simple annals of the poor." Paradoxically, the cabins move millions of people today as indispensable symbols of our faith in democratic government. They shore up our conviction—indestructible up to now, at least—that anyone in America can aspire to be anything one wishes, no matter how humble one's beginnings. Lincoln later explained this basic American ideal to some Union soldiers. "The purpose of the war," he told them, was that "each of you may have through this free government which we have enjoyed, an open field and fair chance for your industry, enterprise and intelligence." As for himself, Lincoln was confident enough in his ability and destiny to have taken to heart two other lines from Gray's elegy: he was determined not to become another "flower born to blush unseen and waste its sweetness on the desert air."

In some ways the Little Pigeon Creek cabin must have been an improvement on the half-faced camp where they had first lived, but the 1820 census of Spencer County, Indiana, gave some hint of how miserable the family's living conditions still must have been. The census recorded a total of eight people, including the future president, his father, his new stepmother, Sarah Bush Johnston (Nancy Hanks had died in 1818), and her children, all living in one three-hundred-sixty-square-foot room, just a few square feet larger than the squalid three-room tenements of New York's Lower East Side.



Lincoln had lived only in log cabins before he moved to Springfield, Illinois, in April 1837 at the age of twenty-eight. The house at Eighth and Jackson was the only home he ever owned.

These would be put up for maximum profit and minimum comfort during the Civil War to house the hordes of immigrants flooding into the city who were to make up about a quarter of Lincoln's Union Army.

Materially and emotionally, Sarah brought much to the cabin, and Lincoln loved her for all of it: her affection and understanding, her Bible, decent clothes rather than buckskins, beds, glazed windows, a door that really shut. Even in the White House, journalist Noah Brooks reported that Lincoln could still remember "how he lay in bed of a bitter, cold morning, listening for [Sarah's] footsteps rattling the slabs of the rough oaken floor as she came to arouse him from his pretended sleep."

That harsh existence changed radically once Lincoln got to Springfield, Illinois, where he arrived in April 1837, with two saddlebags to his name, a self-taught lawyer ready to start a practice. By the time he left Springfield for Washington as President-elect on a bleak February day in 1861, Lincoln and Mary Todd, his wife of nineteen years, and their three surviving children—Robert, Willie, and Tad—were living in one of the most respectable houses in town.

Lincoln had once said to a friend that "it isn't the best thing for a man . . . to build a house so much better than his neighbors." But by 1860 he had. We know now from the stunning discoveries of the Lincoln Legal Papers Project that he could well afford it. Lincoln may have started out as a poor country lawyer, but by 1860 he was one of the most prominent attorneys on the frontier, and even had been admitted to practice before the Illinois and United States supreme courts. His legal practice had provided most of the one thousand dollars he needed to buy a one-and-a-half-story Greek Revival cottage on the edge of the prairie in 1844, two years after he and Mary Todd married. A back-breaking load of cases, five thousand in all—from petty thefts to murder to corporate liability—tried in anything from crude log courtrooms to ornate federal court chambers, had enabled him and Mary to keep on enlarging the house until it had two full stories and five bedrooms. Fees as high as five thousand dollars for one case, but usually around fifty dollars, laid the financial base for their political and material ambitions.

For all that, their marriage paid a price. Lincoln's law practice took him away as much as twenty weeks each year. It was his only source of income, because he had chosen not to add to it by land or real estate speculation, as had many of his associates, or by farming, which he loathed. He told a friend, Joseph Gillespie, that he "had no capacity whatever for speculation and never attempted it."

After Lincoln's nomination on May 18, 1860, as the new Republican Party's candidate and the country's first presidential nominee born west of the Appalachians, politicians and the press swarmed to the house at Eighth and Jackson. The none-too-friendly *New York Herald* gave the house, and the Lincolns, good reviews:

> It is like the residence of an American gentleman in easy circumstances, and it is furnished in like manner . . . there is no aristocracy about it; but it is a comfortable, cozy home, in which it would seem that a man could enjoy life, surrounded by his family . . . the internal appointments of his house are plain but tasteful, and clearly show the impress of Mrs. Lincoln's hand, who is really an amiable and accomplished lady.

The *New York Evening Post* found Mr. Lincoln

> living in a handsome but not pretentious, double story house, with parlors on both sides neatly but not ostentatiously furnished. It was just such a dwelling as a majority of the well-to-do of those fine western towns occupy. Everything about it had a look of comfort and independence. The library, I remarked on passing, particularly, that I was pleased to see long rows of books, which told of scholarly tastes and culture of the family.

The *Utica Morning Herald* correspondent confessed that he had "an instinctive aversion to dogging the footsteps of distinguished men," and "nothing seemed more impossible than that I should ever . . . join the great mob of those who should pay [Lincoln] their respects." But he did, and was pleasantly surprised both by the house and the Lincolns.

> After you have been five minutes in his company you cease to think that he is either homely or awkward. You recognize in him a high-toned, unassuming, chivalrous-minded gentleman, fully posted

> in all the essential amenities of social life, and sustained by the infallible monitor of common sense.
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> As for Mary,
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> You would have known instantly that she who presided over that modest household was a true type of American lady. There were flowers upon the table; there were pictures upon the walls. The adornments were few, but chastely appropriate; everything was in its place, and ministered to the general effect. The hand of the domestic artist was everywhere visible. The thought that involuntarily blossomed into speech was, "What a pleasant home Abe Lincoln has."

These were valuable clues to what she would later try to do to make the Soldiers' Home just as pleasant for the family's summer stays. Mary had other motives in mind when she turned the White House from a dirty, tattered place that looked like a down-at-the-heels, third-rate hotel into a shining and elegant place that impressed even her many savage critics.