

History at Last Unveils Lincoln's First Love

By Earl B. Searcy

(Compiler of the Unwritten Incidents in the Life of Lincoln.)

A WREATH of flowers has been officially placed on the grave of little Ann Rutledge at Oakland, Illinois. By this act, the story of Abe Lincoln's first and tragic love is officially adopted as an important period in the great statesman's career.

The romantic real-life drama that was staged at the little pioneer town of New Salem where Abe Lincoln's great love was shattered by the time-worn eternal triangle, another man in the case, was responsible no doubt for the political genius that awakened in the gaunt, country youth immediately after. From the day little Ann was laid away to rest, Abe Lincoln concentrated on politics. And the result of the early tragedy that forced the sorrowing country lad into the softening influence of intensive study, eventually placed him in history as one of the greatest characters the world has ever known.

The New Salem of yore, whose environment was responsible for many of the great President's worthy characteristics that served him later on, is to be revived by "The Old Salem League" as its members call themselves. Logs have been donated by the citizens and the rebuilding of the pioneer town, just as it stood when Lincoln lived, is well under way.

Back in the early Spring of 1831, a man by the name of Denton Offutt, known for his spirit of adventure and clever merchandising, set forth from his home village of New Salem, founded three years before, to the hills of central Illinois. He intended to search the countryside for a crew of men competent to man a flat-bottom boat loaded with provisions for the long trip from Beardstown, the river port to New Orleans. Offutt went to Springfield, then a thriving village twenty miles southeast of New Salem, where he had heard that Dennis Hanks, a master boatswain, had just moved north from Kentucky.

One evening, after a long day's travel, Offutt came upon a small cabin back in the hills. Outside its rugged door there sat a brawny, seafaring captain, unmistakable by his weathered appearance. By his side, whittling a stick of wood and whistling a merry tune, there loomed a tall, gaunt youth, in rough boots and khaki trousers. "Howdy, Cap," greeted Denton Offutt, in his friendly way.

"Howdy, neighbor. Come on up and have a seat." Dennis Hanks is said to have replied, in the hospitable spirit of the day. Offutt came up and sat down beside the old captain.

"I'll tell you what I'm planning," he began, when the older man had lighted up their pipes and settled back for a chat. "I'm a figurin' to run one of my boats down the Mississippi. We start in a few days and I want a man who know the Sagamoas tides well. They tell me about these parts, pard, that you're the man. And I'm askin' you what your terms may be."

He agreed to take along his step-son and his nephew as deck-hands. Then the tall, lean youth who had been sitting cross-legged on the little rough-hewn stool, listening intently to the conversation, stood up and stretched.

"Suits me right," Uncle Dennis," he youth smiled enthusiastically. Dennis Hanks introduced his nephew. The boy was Abraham Lincoln.

Hanks and the two boys were to launch the expedition; then if all went well, Hanks would leave at St. Louis, while the boys would pilot the craft down the Mississippi to their southern destination.

Slow days down the Sagamoas followed. Everything went well until the boat reached the foot of the hills at the top of which there stretched back the little village of New Salem.

"All hands on deck!" Captain Hanks called out suddenly one morning. The captain tugged at the wheel frantically, but the current rushed them on a dam that lay just ahead.

"Jump!" Captain Hanks shouted. But neither of the boys moved. The boat crashed suddenly into the dam and lay, a limp and broken wreck. The townspeople flocked to the river bank at once.

No one could venture near the wreck. The stern began to settle below the water-line, while the bow mounted higher and higher in the air. The cargo began gradually to slip backwards toward the lowered stern, but the men clinging to the boat, working rapidly to save the cargo.

In the little crowd on shore was an eighteen-year-old village belle. Her blue eyes were concentrated on the lanky youth who worked desperately, whittling plugs only to have them pop from the holes under the pressure of the rapid water. Suddenly, from the beckoning crowd on shore, her small voice rose in a desperate plea.



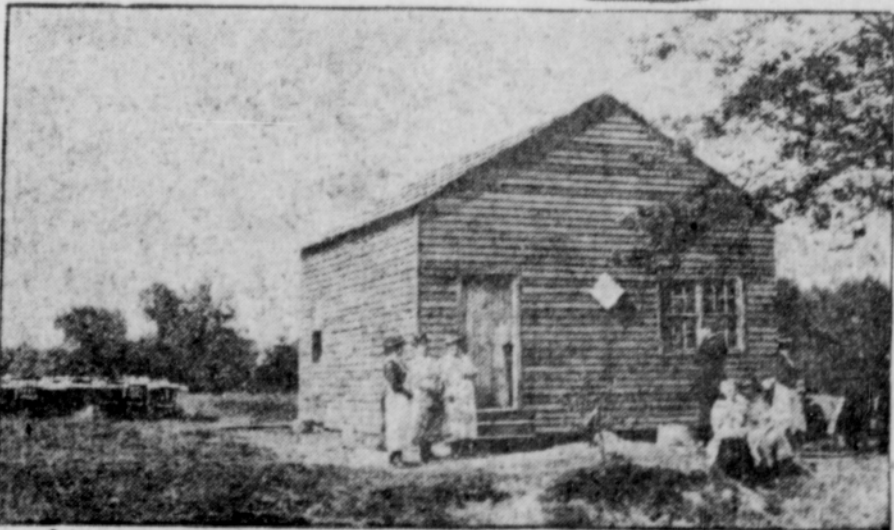
Abraham Lincoln in 1848, from a Daguerreotype Owned by His Son, Hon. Robert T. Lincoln, and Undoubtedly President Lincoln's First Photograph.

"Won't you men please—please let her go? Won't you please come in?" she cried again and again.

Abe looked up. Something in the beseeching expression of the girl's eyes tugged at his judgment. In a moment, when she had stretched out her slim young hands to him in a gesture of despair, the gentle village folks on shore found Abe tugging at his Uncle's coat.

The old man looked around. The tall, homely, angular lad of twenty-two, acknowledging the spirit of the girl on shore, took command of the situation.

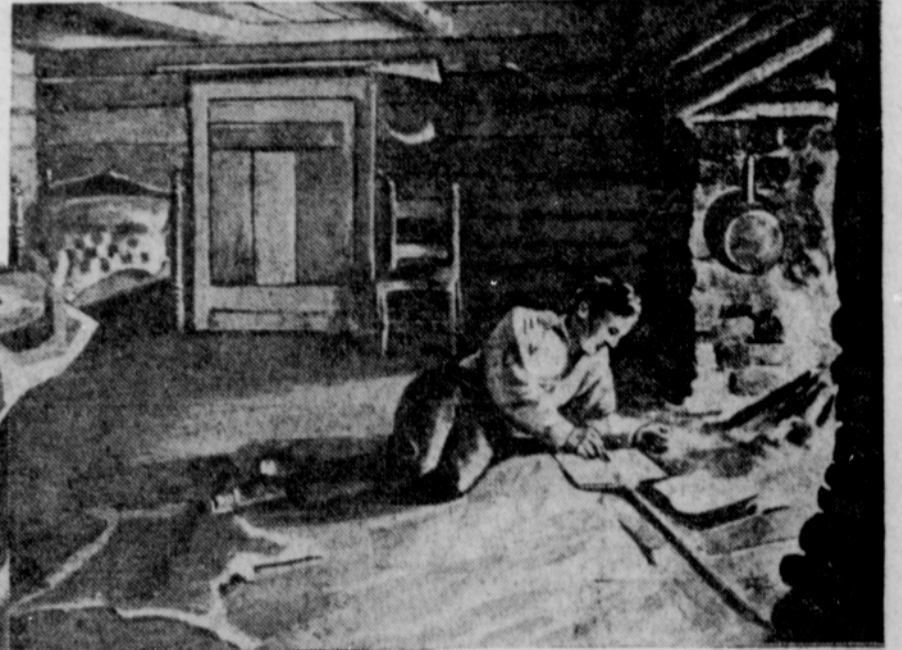
He called at once for an auger. While the villagers scampered eagerly away for



The Lincoln and Berry Grocery Store as Reproduced in the Lincoln Memorial Park. It Was the Only Building in the Village of New Salem That Was Not of Log Construction. The Photograph Was Made on the Dedication Day, May 19, 1921.



A Wreath Tenderly Laid on the Grave of Pretty Ann Rutledge Makes Official the Story of the Girl Who Almost Broke Young Abe's Heart



Lincoln Studying Before the Log Fire.

With his debonair Eastern manner and the light gaiety of his personality, he had completely won over the affections of the small town girl. Ann had promised to marry him. Then came the day when McNeill was called back home to his people in the East. He bade farewell to little Ann, promising to return in a few weeks when he had re-established his mother and father financially.

Ann waited patiently. McNeill's letters became fewer and fewer. She had found the real love of her life, Abraham Lincoln; but she had given her sacred promise to another man, and, until she heard from him and made a clean break, she would not tell Abe she loved him.

In 1833 Lincoln sold out his half interest in the store to his partner, Berry, and went back to Springfield. At this time, perhaps because of his legal knowledge he had been studying law at night—or because destiny could not be thwarted, his ambitions began to run toward politics. He had tried for the Illinois legislature in 1831 and had been defeated. He tried it again in 1834 and, because of his growing popularity, was elected. And so, in December, 1834, Lincoln prepared to go to Vandalia, then the capital for the session.

In the Spring of the following year the great love could no longer be stifled. Lincoln journeyed again to Salem and there found that Ann had gone away to a finishing school at Jacksonville. And he settled down in the little village, becoming postmaster at the general store and doing surveying on the side.

Ann returned from school for the holidays. And Abe was at the coach to meet her. With dancing eyes and faintly colored cheeks, she let the wiry youth lift her down and into the sleigh that carried them both back to the old site of their first love, Rutledge Inn.

Abe once again told Ann of his love for her. And realizing now that McNeill would scarcely return to claim the promise she had given him, Ann became engaged to Abraham Lincoln.

The youth seemed to go ahead under her noble inspiration in leaps and bounds. The following year, Abraham was again elected to the legislature and served with marked credit, becoming leader in the House of Representatives. It was in this session, 1836-37, that the State capital, largely through Lincoln's influence, was moved from Vandalia to Springfield.

His homecoming from the House was a triumphant one, and Major John T. Stuart asked him to come into his law office at Springfield as partner. He returned once more to New Salem to take his bride back with him.

The tragic news of McNeill's sudden return threw the town into a panic. Ann was in conscience bound to keep her promise. But with her love so completely given to Abraham Lincoln, she was torn between the two forces. Gradually the color began to fade from her cheeks and her eyes lost their sparkle. Ann was going into a decline.

She died before she found it possible to become the bride of the man she so truly loved. Abraham Lincoln was broken-hearted.

The blow affected his entire career. For months he could do nothing. But there came gradually the healing influence of time and, coupled, with his manly will, he brought himself out of the shadows of his sorrow and began to concentrate on his work, exclusive of all social life. From then on he moved steadily toward the Presidency.

At the dedication of Lincoln's former home at Salem, Illinois, as a State property, this Summer, there were present several men and women who had known him back in the '30s. They laid many garlands about the door through which they had seen him stalk some seventy years ago. One wreath was left over.

Then one pioneer of ninety whispered to an equally old settler, who smiled, then nodded, then brushed away a tear—and they solemnly went to the little cemetery nearby and laid it on the grave of the girl Lincoln had loved.

dash him a smile that set the country lad's heart pounding.

That picture Abe carried with him for the remainder of the long journey. In the pocket of his khaki shirt, he had tucked a small bit of calico and lace, Ann's kerchief.

At last they reached New Orleans. Captain Hanks as well as the boys was glad the trip down was over. Uncle Dennis and his stepson came back to the boat one evening before expected.

And there they came upon Abe fingering the calico and the lace kerchief Ann had given him as a little keepsake. Uncle Hank knew then what had been troubling Abe. And to bring back the boy to his light spirit of old, they decided to load promptly and make their way back North with Offutt's new cargo.

At New Salem Abe left his uncle's employ. He wound his way up the hillside to the quaint old Rutledge Inn, his few belongings packed in a kit slung over his shoulder. Before he had been in the town twenty-four hours, he had obtained his first position as grocery clerk in the general store run by Denton Offutt.

Lincoln pressed his suit for Ann's hand. He had come to know the merchandising business as it was run those days, and when he purchased a share in the new town store and raised the sign of "Lincoln and Berry" above its entrance, the boy clerk who had come to be known as "honest Abe" decided to speak.

Back in the old garden behind the Rutledge Inn one Summer's evening, Abe made his plea to the little girl who had so completely captivated his heart. But Ann, showing in her soft eyes the love she reciprocated, only shook her head sadly and said she could not marry Abe. It was not until months later when Abe was seated outside the general store one evening he found out the reason of Ann's refusal. Two of the old village gossips were talking.

"That's a shame," remarked one of them, "the dog gone whelp ought to be horse-whipped for holding a girl like Rutledge's daughter to her promise. That McNeill feller'll never come back."

Abe was all interest at once. And bit by bit, it came to him that Ann was engaged to another man. He went to her right away and talked out his feelings. And Ann, realizing she loved the country boy with a love that was all powerful, told him of the engagement that had kept her from giving him her heart completely.

Three years before, she explained, an adventurous prospector had come to town,

Reproduction of a Steel Engraving From a Painting of Ann Rutledge, in the Possession of An Illinois Historical Society.

it, he supervised the unloading of the boat's provisions at the end of the dam. Then he hurriedly cut another wooden plug, and when the auger was brought out to him, bored a hole in the bow. The boat had begun to settle now. But Abe's inspiration was a good one. The water gradually began to drain away through the hole. He plugged up the hole securely and, as if the higher hand that brought the two youths together at this time, dominated another fate, the boat slipped over the dam, and Abe was able to bring it successfully to shore. The girl had waited on shore. She made her way through the crowd to him and shyly offered the bashful boy her hand.

"Father says he wants your party to come up and stay at our place to-night," the girl explained, "we run the Rutledge Inn, you know."

It was there Abe Lincoln found his first boyhood love.

© 1921, International Feature Service, Inc. Great Britain: Richard Rogers Ltd.