

A Brief History
of
LINCOLN CITY,
INDIANA





A commercial center developed around the railroad in Lincoln City. From right to left the buildings shown here are the European Hotel and Restaurant, the Gilbert Egbert saloon, the John McDaniel saloon, and the John Collier post office and lunch room.

Cover Photograph:
The second Lincoln City depot.

Every year, approximately one-quarter of a million visitors come to Lincoln Boyhood National Memorial. Few of them realize that as they walk the wooded trails and visit the Lincoln farm, they are walking in what was once a platted town, where homes, businesses, and a school once stood.

Lincoln City, Indiana, is one of many towns which developed from the network of railroads which criss-crossed the United States during the late nineteenth century. While these towns were similar, they each had a special person, feature or industry which made them unique. The uniqueness of Lincoln City is that it was laid out on land where the Thomas Lincoln family had lived from 1816 to 1830. It was where Abraham Lincoln lived from age seven to age twenty-one, and where his mother lies buried.

After the Lincolns departed for Illinois, the farm changed ownership frequently and was usually occupied by tenant farmers. The farm buildings decayed or were dismantled, and by the mid-1870s, nothing remained, not even a marker for Lincoln's mother's grave, which might have reminded a visitor that the sixteenth President of the United States had grown up in the area.

In November 1871, the original Thomas Lincoln farm and much of the surrounding land, including the grave of Nancy Hanks Lincoln, was purchased by Henry Lewis, John Shillito, Robert Mitchell and C.W. West. These four prominent businessmen of Cincinnati, Ohio, had purchased the land in hopes of making a commercial profit. These owners recorded a plat for a new town on their holdings with the Spencer County Recorder on April 23, 1872. The town was named Lincoln City for obvious reasons. The Post Office serving the town, however, was called Kercheval and was not changed to Lincoln City until William Bender (who became postmaster in 1881) successfully petitioned for the name change.

By May 20, 1874, a railroad had been completed from Rockport on the Ohio River, through Lincoln City, to the northern boundary of Spencer County. Soon the tracks continued northward and connected with a major east-west route at Huntingburg, Indiana. Before the end of the century, a spur of the railway was built from Lincoln City southeast to Cannelton and another branch terminating at Evansville connected with the Rockport line just south of Lincoln City. Lincoln City thus became one of the major railroad centers of southern Indiana.

In the early years of the railroad, the 17.3 mile trip from Lincoln City to Rockport took one hour and twenty-two minutes to complete. Rockport was the eighth stop on the trip. In December 1874, we know that a special Saturday round trip fare for such a trip was \$1.25. The line provided a means of transporting the products of the area to markets as well. The train carried coal, and a hogshead of tobacco could be shipped to Rockport for \$1.75. The first railroad depot in Lincoln City was located west of the tracks, but sometime after 1892, a new depot was constructed in the fork between the main line and the Cannelton branch. The railroad dug a fourteen acre reservoir and built a water tower to supply the steam engines of the day with water. The pond was also used as a recreational area for the town's residents.

With the railroad came people and commercial enterprises. Stores were soon opened to supply the needs of residents and railroad workers. William Bender in partnership with William Gaines, A. Jeff Rhodes, John Lipsey, Will Van Winkle, and John Meier were early store owners of Lincoln City. Hotels were built in the town to accommodate the railway travelers. Perhaps the most impressive of these was the European Hotel and Restaurant located directly east of the second depot. About 1914 the Standard Oil Company built a bulk oil station on the railway right-of-way to supply the needs of changing modes of transportation.

At one time Lincoln City had twelve scheduled passenger trains, one every 30 minutes, stopping at the depot. Restaurants and saloons were popular with the travelers on these

trains, and Lincoln City had its share. This was especially due to the local option laws of the pre-prohibition era. Many area communities chose to be "dry" while Lincoln City opted to be very "wet."

The first Lincoln City school was constructed in 1876. Then a large brick school was built around 1900, a few yards west of the site of the Lincoln Cabin. A young Abraham Lincoln probably never dreamed that seventy years after his departure, a railroad and a modern school would have been constructed within two hundred yards of the site of his frontier home. The school was moved once more after the State of Indiana acquired the area to create a memorial to the Lincoln family in 1929. This time a school building was constructed a quarter-mile to the northeast. As in many small towns in Indiana, the school was later closed as a result of school consolidation. However, in 1973, the four million dollar Heritage Hills High School was opened on the east side of Lincoln City to serve students of northern Spencer County.

While the Little Pigeon Baptist Church associated with the Lincoln era remained active south of the town limits, a United Brethren Church was organized in the town in the 1880s. For many years the building was located north of the Cannelton spur railroad on land once owned by the Lincolns. It too had to move with the development of the Nancy Hanks Lincoln Memorial; it was relocated just north of the Memorial grounds. This church later became the Lincoln Memorial United Methodist Church. The congregation disbanded and the building was dismantled in 1977 after the church property was purchased by the National Park Service.

Today little remains of what was once an active railroad town. The first blow to Lincoln City was a fire in 1911. Many of the commercial buildings, including the European Hotel were destroyed. Part of the town was rebuilt, but it never really recovered from the disaster. Later fires destroyed other business buildings, including the second railroad depot. A smaller depot was rebuilt after this fire.

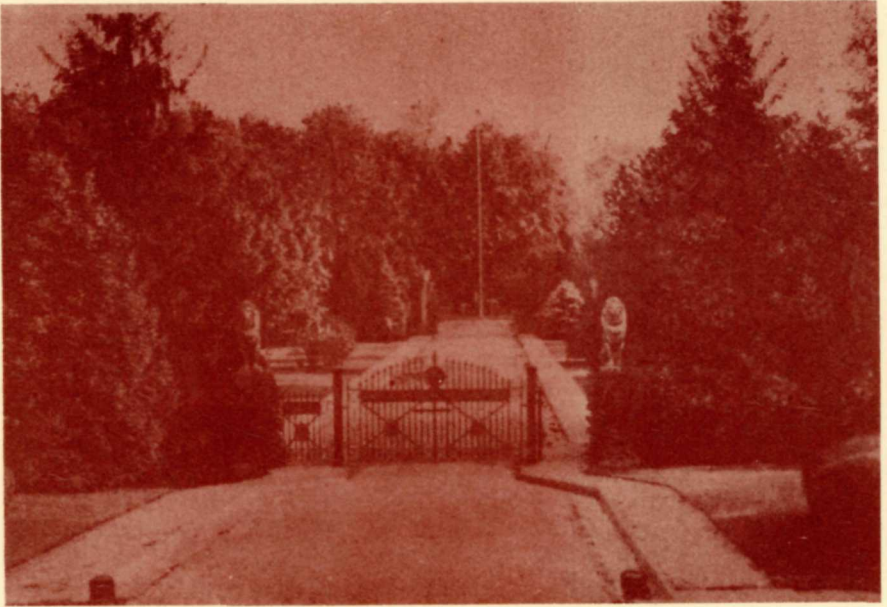
A second factor contributing to the demise of Lincoln City was the decline of rail passenger service. The date of the last such service to the town is not recorded, but by mid-century the passenger trains and the depot had vanished. Today the tracks are still used as part of the Norfolk and Southern line. Lincoln City serves as a switching area for freight trains.

It is ironic that a final reason for the decline of the town is the reason why it became unique originally — Abraham Lincoln had once lived there. As more people came to Lincoln City, more curiosity was displayed about Lincoln's Indiana years. There had been some early interest in marking the grave of Nancy Hanks Lincoln, but this was not accomplished until November 27, 1879. At this time the Cincinnati businessmen donated one-half acre of land around her grave to Spencer County to be preserved. This cemetery once again became active with a number of burials taking place in the late 1800s. As more interest was created in the cemetery area, the county purchased sixteen acres, all within the town limits, and a park was created. This park was very popular with area Sunday Schools for outings and with Civil War veterans for Grand Army of the Republic reunion encampments. In 1907 the Indiana General Assembly created a state-appointed board to look after the area, and in 1925 it transferred the property to the Indiana Department of Conservation. Frank C. Ball of Muncie, Indiana, purchased thirty acres of the town in 1929, including the cabin site and much of the Lincoln farm, and deeded it to the State. The state removed all houses and buildings and developed the area as the Nancy Hanks Lincoln State Memorial. The state subsequently deeded the land to the National Park Service in 1962 in order to establish Lincoln Boyhood National Memorial. The National Park Service, in two land acquisitions in the 1960s and 1970s, acquired much of the remaining town.

Today, Lincoln City retains its importance on the map of Indiana; not as a lively railroad town, but as the "address" for the parks, memorials, and attractions which commemorate Abraham Lincoln's Hoosier years. With the growing interest in these sites, the Lincoln City area should continue to be one of Indiana's most popular destinations.



This 1927 photograph shows the Lincoln City School and playground. The monument on the left is the Spencer County Monument placed on the Lincoln Cabin site in 1917. The steeple of the United Brethren Church can be seen in the distance.



The entrance to the park surrounding the grave of Nancy Hanks Lincoln as it appeared in the 1920s. This entrance was due north of the grave.

This brief history of Lincoln City was printed as part of "Hoosier Celebration '88 — a statewide program to celebrate the richness of Indiana's heritage and to work for a brighter future. Lincoln City has been designated an official Hoosier Celebration '88 Community.