The Howard Family Legacy at the Knob Creek Farm

KEITH A. SCULLE

The place on Knob Creek, mentioned by Mr. Read, I remember very well; but I was not born there. As my parents have told me, I was born on Nolin, very much nearer Hodgen’s-Mill than the Knob Creek place is. My earliest recollection, however, is of the Knob Creek place.

Abraham Lincoln

Abraham Lincoln penned those words in a June 4, 1860, letter to Samuel Haycraft, the circuit clerk in Elizabethtown, Kentucky. The Knob Creek Farm was also the subject of a conversation between Dr. Jesse Rodman and Abraham Lincoln. Rodman, a resident of Hodgenville, recounted a description of the Knob Creek Farm as Lincoln had described it to him during a visit with the president in the White House in 1863.1 Ida Tarbell recorded Rodman’s recollection in her biography of the president published in 1900. There is no doubt about Lincoln’s connection to Knob Creek, a 228-acre farm site occupied by the Lincoln family between 1811 and 1816. Thomas Lincoln unsuccessfully attempted to purchase the farm in 1815. More than a century later, in 1931, the Howard family reconstructed Lincoln’s boyhood home and for seventy years administered the site before it was sold to a local group and then transferred to the National Park Service in 2002. The story of the site merits inclusion in the growing literature on historic preservation and tourism.2

Lincoln’s stature rose among most Americans in the fifty years following his death. Artists, sculptors, poets, writers, and eventually motion-picture makers sought to understand him, and though their work reflected varying degrees of historical accuracy, they nonetheless enshrined him. Historic sites and memorials to Lincoln also contributed powerfully to the public memory of him as places like the Lincoln Birthplace Memorial at Hodgenville (1909), New Salem near Springfield (1918), and the Lincoln Memorial at Washington, D.C. (1922), became recommended tourist stops. Publications reached a flood tide in the few years before and after 1930, according to Merrill Peterson, and purchase of New Salem by the State of Illinois in 1931 and the subsequent Depression-era development of the re-created village added the element of historic preservation.

But the Lincoln Boyhood Home is often missing from the assemblage of notable Lincoln sites. Peterson’s virtual omission of the farm from his fine overview of who created—and how they created—the remembered Lincoln throughout American history illustrates that tendency. And, where Peterson reports that the boyhood cabin at Knob Creek heightened the confusion of those picking among several local cabins for Lincoln’s true birthplace cabin at the Hodgenville memorial, he may have relied on spurious claims that the boyhood cabin survived to the early twentieth century.

Hattie Howell Howard (Figure 1) taught her children and grandchildren the local Lincoln lore and energized their talents for managing and sustaining the reconstructed Knob Creek Farm. Hattie was born in Ball Hollow in 1886, approximately ten miles east of Knob Creek Farm. Her brother, Jim Howell, was a prosperous Hodgenville businessman, whose enthusiasm for Lincoln prompted him in 1928 to build the Nancy Lincoln Inn—a gift shop and restaurant with picnic grounds

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adjacent to the Lincoln Birthplace Memorial, which was designated Abraham Lincoln National Park in 1916. Four log tourist cabins beside the inn provided some of the few overnight lodgings for tourists in an area, and Howell designed them so that lodgers might experience the area as Lincoln might have. The cabins were situated so that occupants could look across the parking grounds onto the springs that provided the first water for the infant Lincoln and just beyond to the memorial enclosing his birthplace cabin.\(^5\) Hattie’s marriage in 1908 to Chester Howard, a financially successful merchant and holder of several public offices in Howardstown, afforded her opportunities to strengthen the Lincoln presence on the local landscape. Refusing her brother’s offer of a partnership in the Nancy Lincoln Inn, Hattie persuaded her husband to buy a 308-acre parcel including the 228-acre site of the former Knob Creek Farm in 1928. “She wanted her own [Lincoln] place,” one granddaughter recalled from her many visits with “Mamaw.”\(^6\) Hattie and Chester moved into an existing farm house on the east side of the road across from the site where she and Chester later built a re-creation of what they called the Lincoln Boyhood Home.


The region around the original Knob Creek Farm, including Hodgenville and New Haven, was ripe for those who wanted to delve into the factual details of Lincoln’s boyhood and divine the origins of his legendary personality, intellect, and moral stature. Local tradition abounded with stories of the youthful Lincoln. In 1886 former neighbor Austin Gollaher, for example, told how at eight years old he had saved the three-year-old Lincoln from drowning in Knob Creek. Some have since dismissed this claim as apocryphal. But others still repeat the story—orally and in print—as though it is true. In New Haven, John J. Barry edited the *Rolling Fork Echo*, named for the river of which Knob Creek was a tributary, and he routinely carried articles about Lincoln that helped fan local enthusiasm for Lincoln. Others searched not only for the scenes of Lincoln’s boyhood but for the material culture associated with him. As late as 1922 and 1919 respectively, Barry and E. W. Creal, who edited the *Larue County News*, for example, asserted that the “blab school” Lincoln attended in Athertonville still stood. Barry’s assiduous reconnaissance of the landscape turned up perhaps his most famous claim—the 1934 discovery of the grave of Abraham’s brother, Thomas, under the headstone incised “T. L.” in the Redmon graveyard between New Haven and Hodgenville.

More than any single individual, Louis A. Warren ignited the Knob Creek Farm-Hodgenville regional interest in Lincoln in the 1920s and 1930s. Editor of the *Larue County Herald* beginning in 1919, Warren, who was also a Christian minister, felt deeply about Hodgenville, calling it the “cradle of Lincoln.” His move to the Hardin County seat in Elizabethtown in 1921 permitted him to search the archives of the Hardin County Courthouse. Dedicated to the best historiographical trends of his time, both amateur and professional, Warren eschewed oral accounts in favor of rigorously examined documents. William E. Barton, also a minister, and Albert Beveridge, a politician, were researching their own biographies of Lincoln in the 1920s, and the

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8. Ibid.
9. For example, see the Curt Teich and Company folder of postcards “Abraham Lincoln in Kentucky,” published in 1949. At the time the folder was published, Teich was among the nation’s foremost postcard manufacturers in the United States; see Mark Werther and Lorenzo Mott, *Linen Postcards: Images of the American Dream* (Wayne, Penn.: Sentinel Publishing, 2002), 13–14, 38.
10. “Victim of Heart Attack Monday,” [1937?] clipping about Barry from unidentified newspaper, in possession of Mary Brooks Howard; Wimsett interview.
12. “Victim of Heart Attack Monday.”

In the academy Rankianism, named for its founder Leopold von Ranke, reigned. Practitioners of Rankianism sought to reconstruct history \textit{wie es eigentlich gewesen}, or history as it actually happened, by examining documents from the time of the event. Ranke sought to strip away falsehoods or partial truths from oral traditions in the search for a certain and knowable past.\footnote{14. It is inaccurate to characterize Ranke as the father of scientific history; his writing made room for human values as well as fact. Among the useful insights into his work, especially see Leopold von Ranke, \textit{The Theory and Practice of History: Leopold von Ranke}, edited and with an introduction by Georg G. Iggers and Konrad von Moltke (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1973).} Warren similarly believed that Lincoln legends had perverted the record. The files of the Hodgenville newspaper provided “many interesting specimens of folklore relative to the Lincoln and Hanks families.” He soon concluded that “such questions as those of Lincoln’s paternity, his birth place, his childhood environment, were dependent entirely on the memories of old citizens.”

Warren set out to mine courthouse archives for the authentic Lincoln.\footnote{15. Warren, \textit{Lincoln’s Parentage and Childhood}, vii.} The process led him to more than thirty Kentucky courthouses, and he published the results seven years later in \textit{Lincoln’s Parentage and Childhood: A History of the Kentucky Lincolns Supported by Documentary Evidence}. Warren’s findings are regarded rather highly within the context of his time and training. Although not a historian by education, Warren nonetheless was in the forefront of those in search of the historical Lincoln. One result of his research was the supplanting of the oral tradition of Lincoln’s father as a shiftless frontiersman with proofs of his solid financial accomplishments.\footnote{16. John David Smith, “The Contributions of Louis A. Warren to Lincoln Scholarship,” \textit{Lincoln Herald} 80 (Summer 1978): 95; “Louis Austin Warren,” \textit{Lincoln Lore}, no. 1734, 3.}

For all his hardheaded objectivity, Warren nevertheless introduced his own imagination into the historical record. He echoed the geographical determinism of Frederick Jackson Turner, who a generation before had attributed the origins of American democracy to several
centuries of subduing the frontier. Warren did not explain the genesis of Lincoln’s democratic principles in terms of his childhood on the frontier, but he believed in a strong connection between the qualities of the Kentucky landscape and the man’s resulting virtues. It was not the birthplace outside Hodgenville that molded the character of Lincoln the infant. “A healthy location, pure water, nourishing food for mother and child”—these advantages of the land plus human agency—“the proper attention for the baby,” made it a good birthplace. Knob Creek Farm provided more than the basics: its rank as “the most picturesque of the three home-sites that Thomas and Nancy had occupied” offered evidence of the Lincoln family’s gradual social betterment. “The knobs of mountainous proportions, with their steep inclines to the creek-bed below, offered all that nature could provide to challenge the adventurous spirit of a growing boy.” Outside the Lincolns’ cabin “the nursery was under the broad elms . . . the bath-room, the clear running creek.” The summer dining room in a lean-to was the only manmade feature Warren valorized in the list of features at the Knob Creek farm. He concluded that “it would be difficult to find in all the pioneer country a region that invited young life to grow tall like the timber in the valley.” Warren did not underestimate “the good influence of his [Abraham’s] parents,” but in the same sentence he returned again to the land’s ennobling physical features: “We should register the inspiration of the mountain-like knobs that towered over the cabin roof, and the beautiful scenery that must have [emphasis added] quickened the latent impulses of the youth as he spent his play-days along the banks of Knob Creek.” Warren stated unequivocal conclusions based on the early-twentieth-century landscape he could experience firsthand, just as he did from the century-old courthouse documents that he analyzed to reconstruct the past. Unbothered by the possibility that the yield of natural resources may have changed over a century,

19. Ibid.
20. Ibid., 133.
21. Ibid.
22. Ibid., 135.
he bolstered his claim that the family’s improving fortunes were due to the agriculturally rich Knob Creek bottoms. “Not only will these fertile tracts produce corn and clover, but the best alfalfa crop that the writer has ever seen in Kentucky [emphasis added] was on one of these tracts that once comprised a part of the Lincoln Knob Creek Farm.”

Later, in *Lincoln’s Parentage and Childhood* he stated: “We have reason to believe that . . . the stock which he [Thomas] kept would compare favorably with his neighbors’, increasing from year to year.”

Here is an assertion lacking documentary proof, an unexpected claim from the scientifically oriented Warren.

Warren rooted his knowledge of the past partly in what he saw in the present, making the past a realm to be sensed as much as to be analyzed. He urged people out onto the landscape, not only to see memorials that celebrated a concluded past, but to recapture a past that endured into the present. Observing the Knob Creek Farm bottoms’ “very productive” and “high agricultural value” in 1922, he published those words—nearly similar to his words in *Lincoln’s Parentage*—in a travel guide he entitled “Louisville Lincoln Loop: A Day’s Tour in ‘Old Kentucky.’” Seeing the site of the Knob Creek Farm during the period he researched *Lincoln’s Parentage and Childhood*, Warren insisted that “anybody who has visited the Knob Creek Farm will immediately recognize the accuracy of the president’s description of the farm more than fifty years after he had left the place.”

Rodman’s claim of Lincoln’s recollection of planting pumpkin seeds on the Knob Creek fields while other boys planted corn, only to see a rain on the knobs wash their work away when it rushed into the valley, stimulated Warren’s conflation of the past with the present. “On the last visit I made to the place I took a photograph of a boy about fourteen years old planting corn in this same field, and the above story was called to mind.”

The past was a lived experience in Warren’s mind.

Warren’s narrative skills and recognized standing as a Lincoln scholar made him a formidable presence when he visited the Knob Creek Farm-Hodgenville region. He published his groundbreaking *Lincoln’s Parentage and Childhood* two years before the Howards purchased the Knob Creek Farm and moved across the road from the fields that Warren understood and wrote about as though they were

23. Ibid., 116.
24. Ibid., 114.
27. Ibid., 144.
in the present. Warren and Hattie likely developed a strong comradery based on Lincoln during Warren’s numerous visits at the farm site²⁸ (Figure 2). She was persuaded that the Knob Creek site was more historic than the farm of his birth and the first two years of his life because Knob Creek Farm was the first of the two places Lincoln remembered.²⁹ In Lincoln’s Parentage and Childhood, Warren concluded that the farm “was the first home that Abraham remembered and the home which exerted the greatest influence on his young life”³⁰—a declaration virtually tantamount to Hattie’s assessment. No evidence exists to claim or suggest that Hattie took this lesson from Warren, but their rank-ordering of the two Kentucky homes is identical. Louis Warren and Hattie Howard certainly shared a strong sense of the

Figure 2. Pictured left to right ca. 1937: Grace Hagen, a friend of Mildred Howard; Mildred Howard, a daughter of Hattie Howell Howard; Louis Warren; Louise Hagen, sister of Grace Hagen; and Robert Thompson, who reconstructed the Lincoln Cabin in view behind the group. Photo courtesy Pearl Howard and John Young Howard.

²⁹. Pearl Howard (Paul Howard’s wife), telephone interview with author, September 17, 2003.
farm’s living past. Perhaps it furthered her plans to reconstruct the boyhood cabin.

Warren stood simultaneously at the peak of his early career, having, on the merits of his publication in 1926, earned the praise of both newsmen and professional historians. The Lincoln National Life Insurance Company invited him to Fort Wayne, Indiana, to establish a memorial to Lincoln. In 1928, the same year the Howards purchased Knob Creek Farm, Warren founded the Lincoln Historical Research Foundation for the life insurance company, and a year later began publishing a weekly sheet entitled *Lincoln Lore*, which was designed to make it easy for newspaper editors to clip sections and reprint them. Warren’s factual news service helped fulfill his mission to widely disseminate historically accurate information about Lincoln. A person appreciative of learning, Hattie had good reason to esteem the man whom at least one of Hattie’s grandchildren still refers to as “Dr. Warren.” Hattie, however, required no influence from him in their shared hope that Knob Creek Farm might one day become a nationally renowned shrine.

Hattie enjoyed considerable advantages. Her husband was the propertyied and prosperous descendant of a family that proudly traced its lineage to England. Howard ancestors had immigrated to Maryland and, then in the late eighteenth century, to Kentucky. Chester’s ancestors founded Howardstown in 1833. During Prohibition, Howardstown profited from bootlegging, and one of Chester’s sons recalled fourteen customers who hauled large quantities of moonshine from the local distillers. Chester’s store, housed in an imposing two-and-one-half-story building of weatheredboarded frame erected in 1899, sold malts, sugars, and the grains ground in Bardstown that distillers hauled by wagon to Howardstown. In addition to family funds that his wife channeled toward Knob Creek Farm, she brought her intellectual talents.

33. Milburn Howard Jr., interview.
Educated through grade school in a rough rural setting, Hattie owned a library during her married years and read avidly throughout her life. She was raised a Baptist, converted to Catholicism following her marriage, and read the Bible regularly. Poetry especially impressed her, and she routinely repeated favorite verses relevant to things she saw. With little gifts of money, she encouraged her grandchildren to read poetry. She demonstrated throughout her life, long after she placed Knob Creek Farm in operation, a keen interest in current events and communication in general.37

In 1932, two years after moving into the farmhouse across Highway 31E from the Knob Creek Farm site, Hattie guided the reconstruction of the Lincoln boyhood cabin. Hattie sought out Robert “Uncle Bob” Thompson, a ninety-five-year-old neighbor who attested that he had lived his entire life in the area, that his parents had attended school with Lincoln, and who, most importantly, knew the boyhood cabin intimately. In a statement that Hattie arranged to be typed and signed in New Haven, October 3, 1934, Thompson declared: “I well remember the Lincoln cabin. It was a one room cabin with a fireplace in it. I have played in it many times when I was a child, and I was about thirty years old before it was torn down.”38 Given Thompson’s birthday on December 18, 1841, that meant that the cabin had not existed since the late 1860s or early 1870s. He recalled that after it was no longer used as a house, it had been a corn crib around which pigs fed. Additionally, Hattie told one of her grandchildren that a flood destroyed the structure and that the remains were burned.39

Hattie shared the popular conviction that tangible remains of historic places could be persuasive forces for the general good. To the best of her capacities, she aimed at creating an accurate reconstruction of the boyhood home, which would help to complete a set of sites by which contemporary travelers could track the Lincoln family’s route from Kentucky, through Indiana, to Illinois. She was present-minded in this effort to fit a reconstructed Knob Creek Farm into the Lincoln’s path of migration. However, there is no evidence of any political or social agenda in her plans, unlike the plans of others who have fortified the memory of Lincoln.40 She likely shared the common

37. Wimsett interview; Milburn Howard Jr. interview; Judy Osbourne (granddaughter of Hattie and Chester Howard), telephone interview with author, September 13, 2003.
38. Robert Thompson, “To Whom It May Concern,” New Haven, Kentucky, October 3, 1934. Xerographic copy in possession of Mary Brooks Howard. Location of the original is unknown.
39. Wimsett interview.
40. Peterson, Lincoln in American Memory, 45.
belief that historic sites can trigger a fuller appreciation of the past than published materials alone because the tangibility of sites enables them to touch a wider range of human senses than does abstraction. Historic sites can unleash emotive power.  

Stopping short of faith in a fully recoverable past, she appreciated the possibility of flawed memory and that people who observed the past might not accurately recall what they saw when they tried to apply it to the present landscape; for she was amused by the antics of the people she trusted to identify the historical position of the Lincoln cabin on her property in 1932. She recalled “Uncle Bob” and John Barry, who had also seen the original cabin, pacing the site independently in solemn contemplation before indicating the site where they believed the cabin had stood. After Hattie satisfied the locational aspect of her authenticity quest, she settled for a cabin believed similar to the Lincolns’ and contemporary with their occupancy—a single-pen log cabin surviving on the Gollaher family property about one mile from the Lincoln’s Boyhood Home site. It was moved to Knob Creek Farm where “Uncle Bob” oversaw its re-chinking and the filling of interstices with a red earth available only from the Hodgenville area because, he insisted, that was the type to use. Application of this red earth from distant Hodgenville probably represents a departure from historical accuracy because the need for reaplication after heavy rains would have made its use impractical.

Chester, although not especially concerned with the local Lincoln traditions and sites, wanted to please his wife who did appreciate them. In this sense, the reconstructed farm was rooted in a strong marriage. He seemed untroubled by the laughter of some who thought it foolish that the reconstruction of the cabin precluded farming a prime

41. It would be groundless to claim more for Hattie’s reasons to memorialize Lincoln’s boyhood at Knob Creek Farm, but recent historical scholarship has begun to unlock the psychological capacities for historic sites’ highly charged emotive appeal. Since the erosion of popular faith in public institutions after the 1960s, Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen (The Presence of the Past: Popular Uses of History in American Life [New York: Columbia University Press, 1998]) have ferreted out from conversations with historically interested people outside the academy that they sought historical explanations from people “who mattered the most to them, and they often pursued the past in ways that drew in family and friends” (21). A grandmother like Hattie would be among such authorities.

42. Wimsett interview.


44. John Young Howard (son of Pearl Howard), interview with author in Bardstown, Kentucky, September 4, 2003.
farm site. He and Hattie also refused access to city water lines on the site because it would have encouraged adjacent development, contrary to their preference for saving the site’s remote ambiance.

Chester nonetheless opportunistically entered the farm into a business adjunct. Travelers stopping at the cabin occasionally said they would have enjoyed refreshments there. After a local builder offered an unsatisfactory design, Chester designed the Lincoln Tavern immediately south of the cabin and oversaw the felling of nearby timber for its construction. Built in a stylized log-cabin design, the tavern was too large in mass (one-and-one-half stories) and dissimilar to the details of nineteenth-century log buildings (hollow-core concrete-block foundation and concrete chinking) to simulate an historical building (Figure 3). Yet it represented an imaginative effort that combined a profit-making enterprise with an appearance not incongruous to the scene. Chester began preparations for this building in late 1931, but it did not open until late 1933.

Figure 3. Early postcard view of the Lincoln Tavern interior. From the author’s collection.

45. Osbourne interview.
46. John Young Howard interview.
47. Hodgenville (Ky.) Herald-News, October 1, 1931, 8; ibid., December 3, 1931, 1; Rolling Fork (Ky.) Echo, July 13, 1933, cited in “Lincoln Boyhood Home,” National Register of Historic Places, sec. 8, p. 4.
Highway 31E on the extreme southeastern edge of the original Knob Creek Farm brought automobile traffic streaming immediately next to the Howard site (Figure 4). The federal highway designation 31E was but the latest of names for a highway system antedating automobiles. Louis Warren eagerly pointed out that the road past Knob Creek Farm, especially busy during the War of 1812 when the Lincolns lived beside it, further proved that their son Abraham was no wilderness bumpkin.48 In 1821 the Kentucky legislature voted aid to the road, then known as the Bardstown and Green River Turnpike, which was a link in the longer Louisville and Nashville Turnpike.49 With the advent of automobile tourism to the Lincoln memorial at Hodgenville, local business boosters founded the Central Lincoln Road, and about 1911 they issued a publication declaring their grandiose intention: “The purpose of the Association is to aid, assist and encourage the

reconstruction of the great historic highway leading from Louisville to the Lincoln Home, Mammoth Cave, Nashville and points in the South, and to make it a part of a great interstate highway from the [Great] Lakes to the Gulf coast.”  

The Jackson Highway organization, operating both within and outside Kentucky’s borders, superceded the Central Lincoln Road group; its director switched to direct the new group in 1915. Most of the out-of-state traffic south bypassed this route, instead taking the Dixie Highway south from Louisville to Elizabethtown and the primary destination of the Lincoln memorial outside Hodgenville. Federal aid helped finance more durable roads in the 1920s so that a gravel road, designated 31E in 1926 according to a national trunk system, was completed from Louisville to Nashville past Knob Creek Farm when the Howards opened it in 1932. Throughout that year, the Lincoln Trail Commission, whose project of identifying the exact route the Lincolns took from Knob Creek Farm, through Indiana, and to Illinois had begun in World War I, busily completed its work in hopes of snaring automobile tourists on the new highways. The transnational highway that perhaps seemed ambitious in 1911 had been realized in twenty years. Still, only a modest income could be anticipated from the automobile tourists passing the Knob Creek Farm because Highway 31E was “off the beaten path” compared with 31W along the former Dixie Highway.

Shifting economic opportunities made Knob Creek Farm an expeditious for Chester and Hattie’s children during the Depression. After the Howards’ son Paul graduated from the University of Kentucky in 1932, he lived at home with his parents across the highway from the farm and oversaw it. When Prohibition’s end in 1933 rendered unnecessary Chester’s business in Howardstown and he planned to retire, he opened a general store in 1935 in New Haven with Paul as a partner. Paul’s wife, whom he married in 1936, recalls the scar Paul received from a fight at the Lincoln Tavern during his time as its manager. The threat of violence and the lucrative opportunity at New Haven spurred Paul to give the farm’s management to another Howard.

53. Herald-News, October 29, 1931, 1
54. Ibid., March 12, 1931, 1; Ibid., December 3, 1931, 1 and 8; Peterson, Lincoln in American Memory, 265.
The Howard Family Legacy at the Knob Creek Farm

Knob Creek Farm was a closely guarded Howard family possession, its management descending through Chester and Hattie’s children, their spouses, and a grandchild—with one exception: in 1940 husband and wife Earl W. and Nell Everly managed it. Helen Howard, Chester and Hattie’s oldest daughter, managed the site after she married Kirby Peake, and for the longest period, over two tenures between 1935 and 1949 (Figure 5). The Peakes’ two sons were born and raised at the site. During the Howard family’s seventy-year ownership, all the managers, except Paul, occupied the living quarters on the second floor of the Lincoln Tavern. Milburn, the Howards’ second oldest son,

56. Ibid., September 17, 2003; Herald-News, April 18, 1940, 1; April 10, 1941, 1.
lived on site on two occasions, once for an opportunity to live apart from his parents while Paul managed the site, and again when he returned for a year after military academy graduation to manage the site. Chester and Hattie’s youngest son, Fred, began managing the site in 1950, and after his marriage to Mary Brooks (the family calls her Brooks) Williams in June of that year, the couple ran the site. Fred augmented their income as president of the Kentucky Popcorn Association, as manager of Marcum’s general store, and, in his last few years, as an insurance agent. Brooks managed the site while he was away and assumed full responsibility after his death in 1980. After she sold the site to a group of Howard family members in 1986, her son Fabian was the on-site manager until the Preservation of Lincoln’s Kentucky Heritage, Inc., a local group, acquired it in 2001, preparatory to the National Park Service’s acquisition in 2002. For some of the younger Howard managers, their work earned them a living at the start of their adult lives. It was a parental munificence, just as were the properties Chester and Hattie willed to their children. Yet all also labored at Knob Creek Farm as stewards of a cherished family responsibility.

From 1934 to 1942 the site earned a healthy income from a nightclub, complete with dancing and liquor, housed in the Lincoln Tavern (Figures 6 and 7). Paul, a recent graduate of the University of Kentucky, started the club, hiring the University of Kentucky band for the first night because it was the only band he knew. Paul’s successors hired various bands and singers, most often from the immediate area but occasionally some with a regional reputation. Every Saturday night, the only night entertainment was regularly offered, the tavern was packed. Local people and those from as far away as adjacent Green and Hardin counties attended. Officers from Fort Knox, lawyers, and doctors often mixed in the crowds. The crowd never became boisterous. Much of the crowd was alerted by postcard invitations sent each Monday and by word of mouth, although advertising tacked onto poles at strategic locations in towns helped broadcast the news. The sheriff of LaRue County and a deputy sheriff from Bardstown

57. Pearl Howard interview, September 17, 2003; Milburn Howard Jr. interview.
59. Milburn Howard Jr. interview.
60. Jack Beam (worked at the Knob Creek Farm, 1942–1946), interview in Bardstown, Kentucky, with author, September 4, 2003; Pearl Howard interview, September 4, 2003.
61. Beam interview.
worked off-duty on alternating Saturdays to discourage the occasional disagreement from getting out of hand. Their presence alone seemed to dampen wayward instincts. The doors opened between 8:30 and 8:45 p.m. Dancing began at 9:00 p.m. and ended sharply at 1:00 a.m. when the doors also closed. The season extended from late April to late October, and sporadic articles in the Hodgenville newspaper indicate that a dance band was featured on the season’s opening night and on Halloween, Thanksgiving, and Christmas. The tavern earned such a good reputation for wholesome entertainment that high-school students came after school to dance to the juke-box music. Milk shakes, soft drinks, and sandwiches were available. On Sunday mornings following church, older people came to meet friends and converse. Bottled liquor was sold during the day. Few competitors existed at first, and those in search of fun in a legal setting believed the Lincoln Tavern was “the place to be.”

Figure 6. An interior view of the Lincoln Tavern, probably made in the 1940s. Photo courtesy Mary Brooks Howard.

63. *Herald-News*, April 18, 1935, 1; October 24, 1940, 1; November 24, 1937, 1; December 24, 1940, 1.
64. Pearl Howard interview, September 4, 2003.
66. Other area nightclubs at the time included the White Tavern (*Herald-News*, October 22, 1936, 4), the Dew Drop Inn (*Herald-News*, October 8, 1936, 4), and the Yellow
During the years the nightclub functioned, its popularity eclipsed, but did not block, Knob Creek Farm’s attractiveness to historically minded tourists. Visiting dignitaries and intellectuals preferred to hold their events at the Lincoln Birthplace Memorial at Hodgenville, and that city’s newspaper, although it printed news and advertising about the boyhood home, indicated it was not on celebrity itineraries. President Roosevelt, for example, gave an impromptu speech at the birthplace during the presidential campaign of 1936. In 1940 about “forty authorities on Lincolniana,” among them Louis Warren, who were tracing the Lincoln family’s path from eastern Kentucky to Springfield, Illinois, stopped at the birthplace and at the president’s statue in Hodgenville.67 Neither tour group apparently paused at Knob Creek Farm. The Howards’ historical interests persisted nonetheless. Helen Peake recalls that on early tours, tickets were purchased in the tavern before a short talk in the adjacent cabin.68 Occasionally, inter-
esti ed tourists went to see the creek from which Gollaher claimed to have saved the young Abraham from drowning.69

History became more important than entertainment at the site in the late 1940s. When LaRue County went “dry” in November 1942, far fewer people attended the occasional dances at the tavern; by default, the once secondary historical program became the primary program.70 In 1949 the Peakes convinced planners of the Lincoln birthday celebration in Hodgenville to include a luncheon at their site in the schedule of events.71 Although Fred and Brooks held Saturday night dances during the first year of the management, “The dances,” said Brooks, “no longer were profitable and tourism had grown to the place we felt we could economically make the change. We had also become very uncomfortable combining the two things; we felt the Lincoln site was too important to compromise in any way.”72 After the nightclub was no longer part of the site, Fred and Brooks worked hard to develop the historical interest. Fred furnished the cabin and tavern with historical artifacts, mostly from LaRue and coterminous Nelson counties, some of them with money from Hattie. Brooks remembered the collection including a slave trap, a large arrowhead collection, general Americana, and guns, tools, and household artifacts of the Lincoln era. They came from auctions, shops, and people who came to the site knowing Fred’s and Brooks’s interest.73 Fred and Brooks were solicitous of Warren’s knowledge during his trips to the site, and they regularly inquired of him what might be done to enhance the site’s historical features. He dictated the text of a sign that combined the texts noted in the first paragraph of this paper. Fred fashioned a board bearing Warren’s signature with the information and hung it in the tavern. The husband and wife also drew on Warren’s books and his Lincoln Lore, Ida Tarbell’s Lincoln biography, and the Abraham Lincoln Library and Museum’s Lincoln Herald periodical to increase the fund of knowledge by which tourists were introduced to the site. In 1958 they facilitated the site’s inclusion in the reenacted trip of the Lincoln family from Hodgenville to Indiana, which began the sesquicentennial celebration of Abraham’s birth the following year.74

71. Ibid., February 10, 1949, 1.
73. Ibid., September 25, 2003.
74. Ibid., August 19, 2003; Herald-News, October 16, 1958, 1; October 30, 1958, 1
Souvenirs in the gift shop “came from everywhere,” Brooks recalled. The inventory of the few locally made souvenirs included miniature log cabins. The store carried Kentucky handicrafts after they boomed in popularity beginning in the 1970s. A great number of hand-painted stoneware items from a company in Louisville was sold.

Although the site was the focus of some re-enactments, actors in period costume never appeared on site during the Howards’ seventy-year tenure. Fred and Brooks Howard, however, added to the previous format of factual recitation with questions and answers. Brooks recalled: “No, we did not really try to create a sense of going back but we did ask them [the visitors] to use their imaginations about four people living in the 16’ x 18’ cabin and among other things thinking of the Lincolns taking the baby Thomas to the Redmon cemetery across the road and up the hill. We would also talk about his two terms of school while they lived there. Yes, we did want them to know the facts and get a sense of the times. We tried to accomplish this through the tour and through the information on the brochure.”

In 1952 Stanley Kubrick, director of the Ford Foundation’s five-part movie biography, *Mr. Lincoln*, filmed extensively on site, obviously finding advantage to educate in the landscape. He used the Knob Creek site for young Abraham’s life both there and in Indiana because Kubrick believed the latter looked enough like the home area along Knob Creek to let it double. A rare record of the landscape’s evocative power was made by a news reporter twenty-three years after he camped at the site with his Boy Scout troop in 1963: “I will personally never forget the feeling that I had at 11 years of age . . . My youthful imagination made it easy to mingle my boyhood spirit with that of Lincoln’s. In my mind’s eye I could almost see the young Lincoln wandering through the beauty of the surrounding woods and share the pastoral ecstasy that all young boys feel in such surroundings.”

Howard family dedication to the site extended to the Howard grandchildren in the mid-1950s and early 1960s. One of them remembered times on site when he was five and six years old. In various combinations during the summers in their grade- and high-school

76. Ibid., August 19, 2003.
80. Milburn Howard Jr. interview.
years, several grandchildren worked at the site. During this period the grandchildren forged their unbreakable bond with Hattie and from her learned their regard for Lincoln and knowledge of Lincoln lore. The family reached out to Emmanuel “Manuel” McGill, whose father, Joe, had earlier worked at the site. Manuel, who was “a little slow,” was a ticket-taker at the cabin. His presence also provided against theft of the artifacts. Hattie “babied” him in general ways, and Fred secured a birth certificate for him so that he might purchase a motor scooter of which he was particularly fond. Recalling their elders’ displays of humor at the site and their relationships with Hattie, one summarized the experience succinctly for them: “We kinda grew up on the Knob Creek Farm.”

Family members found the site congenial for various reasons. The wedding shower for Paul’s wife was hosted at the tavern, and she hosted a tea for friends there in 1950. The Howards and other families picnicked on the grounds, finding it a cool and shaded spot. Boy Scouts began using it in 1942 as a midway point on the thirty-two-and-a-half-mile hike along the Lincoln Heritage Trail from Elizabethtown to Hodgenville. They routinely slept free of charge on the floor of the cabin at the end of the first day and, on the second day, trekked to Thomas Lincoln’s grave before going to the Lincoln birthplace outside Hodgenville. One evening in 1949, the Boy Scouts hosted a public viewing of a film on the entire length of the Lincoln Trail and its sites between Hodgenville and Springfield, Illinois. May 29 to 31, 1959, witnessed the culmination of scouting events at the site when an estimated four to five thousand Boy Scouts from across the nation gathered there to camp, hike, and participate in other activities. Four years later, the Boy Scouts also assembled the site’s second most attended event when they celebrated the Gettysburg Address centennial over the Memorial Day weekend.

81. Osbourne interview.
82. Wimsett interview; Louisville Times, June 3, 1971, A3.
83. Wimsett interview.
84. Herald-News, August 27, 1936, 1; Kentucky Standard, undated clipping in Pearl Howard’s possession.
85. Pearl Howard interview, September 4, 2003; Beam interview.
Out of the Howard family’s identification with Knob Creek Farm grew the dedication to its perpetuation as an historic site. Fred inherited the site after Chester’s and Hattie’s deaths, but Fred’s death in 1980 placed a hardship on Brooks’ capacities to care for and adequately promote the site.\textsuperscript{89} In 1981 nomination of the site to the National Register of Historic Places failed because it lacked buildings from the period of its declared significance, Lincoln’s boyhood.\textsuperscript{90} Brooks felt constrained to sell the site, her affection for it notwithstanding.\textsuperscript{91} She felt the sense of purpose about the site acutely: “There was never a mission statement put in writing but we all understood what it was. Mrs. [Hattie] Howard made sure everyone knew we were to preserve the site, interpret Lincoln’s early life and someday get it in the National Park system. Along the way we all loved the place and it was very difficult for the family to part with it.”\textsuperscript{92} Brooks tried unsuccessfully to sell the site in 1981, shortly after Fred’s death, and sale loomed again by late 1985. A mere 16,283 paid to see the site in 1985; whereas, an estimated 300,000 visited the nearby federally managed birthplace.\textsuperscript{93} Grandsons Julian and Milburn agreed at the family’s Christmastime gathering to rally family members for a collective purchase of the site. The Howards purchased the site at auction on January 11, 1986, with family spokesman Julian stating emphatically, “We wanted to make sure it stayed in the family.”\textsuperscript{94}

As the fifteen-member Lincoln Boyhood Home, Inc., the Howards set out “to continue operating the tourist attraction essentially as it has been . . .”\textsuperscript{95} Outhouses were built of logs from one of the spouse’s family land.\textsuperscript{96} A pavilion was put up for those wishing to rent space. Picnics occurred every Sunday.\textsuperscript{97} All of the incorporators performed specialized work; one was president, one secretary, one was head of personnel, and several were in charge of maintenance and grounds. At least on the occasion of one journalist’s visit, a thirteen-year-old

\textsuperscript{89.} \textit{Kentucky Standard,} January 13, 1986, A2.  
\textsuperscript{90.} Gloria Mills (National Register Program Coordinator) to Nicky L. Durham (National Register of Historic Places nomination author for the Knob Creek Farm), February 4, 1981. Letter in possession of the Kentucky Heritage Commission, Frankfort, Ky.  
\textsuperscript{91.} \textit{LaRue County Herald News} (Hodgenville, Ky.), January 2, 1986, 1.  
\textsuperscript{92.} Mary Brooks Howard, letter to author, August 19, 2003.  
\textsuperscript{93.} \textit{Louisville (Ky.) Courier-Journal}, January 12, 1986, 1.  
\textsuperscript{94.} \textit{LaRue County Herald News}, January 16, 1986, 1; Milburn Howard Jr. interview.  
\textsuperscript{95.} \textit{Elizabethtown (Ky.) News-Enterprise}, January 12, 1986, 1: \textit{Antique Week/Tri-State Trader}, Feb. 24, 1986, 12B.  
\textsuperscript{96.} Wimsett interview.  
\textsuperscript{97.} Fabian Howard interview.
son of one of the owners worked as an interpreter.98 Women working in the gift shop, however, most often gave tours. Two years after taking occupancy, the corporation successfully listed the site in the National Register of Historic Places, not for the Lincoln association, but because of its contribution to the history of tourism99 (Figure 8).

Based on information from Louis Warren’s and John Barry’s writings, records checked at Elizabethtown and Bardstown,100 and recollections of Hattie’s words, Lois Wimsett, a granddaughter, created a five-and-a-half-page handwritten script (and a shorter version with bracketed information considered less essential), both of which could be committed to memory or used to provide information for an improvised response based on the nature of the audience. It hewed closely to what had become a sort of standard information set about the Lincoln’s experience on site. This “core” version recited, for example, the Lincolns’ years of occupation, Thomas Jr.’s death, Gollaher saving Abraham from drowning, the Lincolns’ life beside a busy highway, and Knob Creek being Abraham’s “earliest recollection.” A six-page appendix, “Odds and Ends,” ranged beyond the usual facts of the Lincolns’ experience on site to touch on such topics as slavery, the food probably eaten, and the contemporary site’s trees and wildflowers. This was the “Adult Cabin Tour.” A “Children’s Cabin Tour” sheet of two typewritten pages abridged the adult version.101 Thus, tours had become scripted and improvisation probably less common. Some visitors coming as detractors of Lincoln and probing about his views on slavery, for example, heard interpreters prepared to tell who among Lincoln’s neighbors was a slave holder.102

The gift shop stocked perhaps a wider range of items after 1986 than before. Items with various cabin motifs, trinkets made from the Lincoln penny, and coonskin caps had not been reported earlier but were part of the inventory after 1986.103 Items made in Kentucky continued in great demand, as they had toward the end of Brooks’s management. Especially popular was a line of pottery made in Louisville and another made in Berea, Kentucky, added since 1986.104

99. Fabian Howard interview.
100. Osbourne interview.
101. “Adult Cabin Tour” and “Children’s Cabin Tour,” Lincoln’s Boyhood Home site scripts in the possession of Judy Osbourne.
103. John Young Howard interview.
104. Demar interview.
Figure 8. The brochure for Abraham Lincoln’s Boyhood Home links the Knob Creek Farm to the well-established tourist trade through references to the site’s status as a Kentucky Landmark, as well as its inclusion in the National Register of Historic Places and the Lincoln Heritage Trail. Brochure courtesy Judy Osburne.
Business was good. Although the Howards knew attendance at the birthplace continued to outstrip their boyhood site, it ran to an estimated thirty to forty thousand annually (records were not kept). Reverence for Hattie’s memory and her faith in the site’s historic importance sustained the corporation. Four of the original fourteen dropped out due to strained finances, but the remainder were able to steadfastly cling to the family undertaking. Discussions did occur about the possibility of closing the gift shop and building a lodge in its place, but granddaughter Lois Wimsett said humorously that they were afraid “Hattie and Chester would disown us.” But the corporation endured, and the site remained almost as it had been reconstructed. Judy Osbourne explained her own determination in moving terms: “There is no relation with the林colns and the Howards but, it’s kinda funny, because when you grow up with a grandparent that has had the affection that she had for Lincoln, you . . . just felt that connection. Like you knew him. She thought that she knew him. You knew she didn’t.” Osbourne’s words echo what historians have only recently begun to understand: that what authoritative family members say and what is learned at historic sites is more commonly persuasive with people than scholarly literature.

Yet the key question remained: how best to ensure the site’s survival? “Probably the biggest thing we were going to run into,” said corporate president and grandson Fabian Howard, is that “we didn’t have anybody to take it over.” The incorporators refused an offer from Philip R. Jonsson, a philanthropist interested in history education, and Judy Potts, an author of children’s books who had visited the site while writing a book, because they believed the site might be lost when Jonsson and Potts died. Not profit, but perpetuity: that was the Howards’ mission. “The financial part of it, we would have kept that up. That was no problem. We just didn’t have anywhere to go with it. We were at the end of our hope.” Fabian Howard’s succinct summary explains the reason why the Howards believed conveyance to the National Park Service their best option. Restive even about that option because it meant the site would pass out of the Howards’ descent, Judy Osbourne stated well the confusing necessity: “When you have something you really value, you do want to share it, but it’s
hard to turn loose. So this has a bittersweet side to it.” Ultimately, Gary Talley, a ranger at the National Park Service’s birthplace, was instrumental in convincing the family that the National Park Service would make the best custodian. His compassion for the Howards’ plight and his understanding of the site’s significance made his view persuasive. The site’s ceremonial transition to the park service occurred on February 12, 2002, following the Howards’ sale of the site for $1 million to the locally based Preservation of Lincoln’s Kentucky Heritage and the park service’s assumption of the site’s management in November 2001.

* * *

Abraham Lincoln’s memory of his boyhood on Knob Creek Farm had the potential for powerful effect. Among those convinced of his significance, it offered an opportunity for understanding the earliest stages of his character development. After 1909 the birthplace outside Hodgenville became the paramount shrine of his infancy and childhood because the memorial stimulated visitors to converge upon a physical point of origin. A visitor seeing the Knob Creek site and believing it was relatively unchanged from Lincoln’s time was on the threshold of personal empathy. Some people felt this communication through reverie in varying degrees and some not at all. For the scholarly Louis Warren and for Hattie Howard, founder of the Knob Creek Farm reconstructed historic site, this feeling of communication with Lincoln, not an exclusively intellectual understanding of him, sustained a compelling level of conviction.

Hattie’s intense faith about the site’s importance and a past recoverable through materials remains and geographic setting—its landscape—have most consistently determined its history. She entrusted the cabin’s reconstruction to two people who had seen the original, thus testifying to the realization of a tangible past. Nightclub entertainment in a new building was allied symbiotically with the hallowed historic site for slightly more than a decade after Knob Creek’s reconstitution. The income from drinking and dancing at the Lincoln Tavern made it an acceptable expedient for supporting the landscape’s historical work. When the tavern was converted into a gift shop and refreshment counter, giving visitors reason to linger at the site, the income continued to make possible the site’s educational work. The

111. Osbourne interview.
112. Osbourne interview; Fabian Howard interview; Wimsett interview; Milburn Howard Jr. interview.
113. LaRue County Herald News, Supplement, October 2, 2002, 28.
insertion of a pavilion and log restrooms introduced the final physical departures from the historical landscape, but, again, to fulfill the larger purpose. Hattie’s deep convictions about this work blended with her grandmotherly manner to inspire similar beliefs in Howard family successors. They loyally perpetuated and, finally, by assisting in the National Park Service’s acquisition of the site, achieved Hattie’s mission to foster a public appreciation akin to hers.

Acknowledgment

The author is indebted to those who responded to the interviews that provide this paper’s intimate detail. Several members of the Howard family kindly loaned primary documents, including photographs, from their personal collections. Pearl Howard’s gathering of those sources from several family members greatly facilitated the author’s work. Entrées to the Howard family began with Mary Brooks Howard, who was introduced to me by Carl Howell Jr. L. Martin Perry of the Kentucky Heritage Council generously furnished the National Register of Historic Places nomination form for the “Lincoln Boyhood Home.”