

The Lincolns In Context

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First Parish in Hingham/Old Ship

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Students of history often engage in rancorous debates about what is called the great man theory, which holds that historical events happen because a great man steps into a role to make them happen. It was associated with the Scottish historian and philosopher Thomas Carlyle, but it's still being debated. We are coming in a week to honor our 16th US President, Abraham Lincoln, who is considered by many to be the greatest President we have had in our history. And we are fortunate to be thinking of him in an institution which is older than he is but touches his family genealogy at two points.

Of course I know that many of you listening to this sermon are more familiar with its history than I am. I have been pointed to some solid history by Max Nobisch at the Hingham Historical Society but any mistakes that I make are mine alone. If you find some mistakes, let's talk after the service.

The church I served as interim before I came here was the First Church in Boston, which has also been called First and Second in Back Bay. It was founded by John Winthrop and about 700 mostly Puritan settlers who came from England on a fleet of ships led by the Arbella in 1630, to form the Massachusetts Bay Colony. It was Winthrop who put into words the Puritan vision of a new society, a City on a Hill which would recreate the religious world that Jesus intended. They took that seriously in the Massachusetts Bay colony,

Many of the Puritans who came with that first group had been practicing their religion in a county in eastern England called Lincolnshire. So when they found a suitable place to settle on the Shawmut Peninsula on the Massachusetts coast, they named the place after one of the principal towns of that county, Boston. Those first settlers hadn't come for the climate or the economic opportunity, but because the English Church had started making life miserable for Puritans again.

There soon followed other groups after Winthrop's group, such as the group that came in 1637. Like the Winthrop group, this group came from East Anglia, many from the village of Hingham in the county of Norfolk. The ship they came on was called John and Dorothy. One of them was named Samuel Lincoln. Samuel was only fifteen years old when he made the voyage.

But unlike the Boston emigrants, Samuel was not emigrating to America because of religious persecution. He had a wealthy grandfather, but the grandfather decided to disinherit his children by his first wife and leave all his money to his third wife. Samuel was forced to adopt a trade: he apprenticed himself as a weaver to one Frances Lawes of Norwich. In 1637, Lawes and his family emigrated to Massachusetts, and Samuel went with them. Samuel's older brother Thomas, also a weaver, had emigrated in 1635. Samuel landed in Charlestown, but soon joined his brother in the new town of Hingham, named after the origin place of many of the settlers there. Because there are so many people in the genealogy with the same or similar names, the Thomas Lincoln who settled in Hingham MA is referred to as the weaver, and Samuel Lincoln is also referred to as the weaver or the emigrant.

Despite being twice married, Thomas the weaver had no children, and on his death he willed a considerable estate to Samuel and Samuel's children.

In the Wikipedia entry for Samuel Lincoln it is said that he helped build the Old Ship (though it wasn't called that until much later). Samuel Lincoln did not die until 1690, so it is possible that he was at the raising of this structure in 1681.

Why did they come? Some came to escape religious persecution, but many came because their cousins came. As a recent history has it "Family was a key factor, as the trickle-in of Lincolns suggests. Nicholas Jacob brought with him to Charlestown in 1633 his cousin Thomas Lincoln, a weaver, and after two years in Watertown, Thomas chose to move to Hingham. His brother Samuel decided to join him in 1637 after four years in Salem. Thomas, a miller, came in 1635 and so did Thomas, a cooper. Thomas, a husbandman (farmer) and his brother Stephen did not arrive until 1638"

But all the Lincolns mentioned just now were not enough to get the new Hingham recognized as a town. You may remember what I said last week: to incorporate a town, you needed a meeting house and a minister. Rev. Peter Hobart , thirty years old, was prevailed on by relatives in 1635 to settle in Higham.

We have therefore an abundant representation of Lincolns at the beginning of Hingham, MA, which is not surprising since the county just to the north of Norfolk, England is named Lincolnshire. There is surprising clarity about the genealogy. We know that President Lincoln was a seventh generation descendant of Samuel Lincoln the emigrant from Hingham, England. We know that Samuel's mother's family tree, the Gilmans of Exeter New Hampshire also contained many notables, including a signer of the US Constitution.

Most of the family names were Biblical, and they recycled them across generations: the males in line from Samuel to President Abraham would have the following names: Samuel, Mordecai, Mordecai, John, Abraham, Thomas and Abraham (President).

We moderns say, "so what? That only proves that these old families stuck to Biblical names. It doesn't say much about the people behind these names." That is true. There are several books in the Bible which start with genealogies, what students who are new to the Bible soon take to calling the "begats." To a modern mind, it is nonsensical to place such weight on one's ancestors, but to the ancient author, this lineage is what constitutes the bond between the present and the past.

Particularly, the Torah sets forth the stories by which it is claimed that a special relationship exists between God and the descendants of the Biblical Abraham. So the recital of genealogies in the sacred texts is a sort of proof of the existence of this divine covenant.

Covenant theology is not restricted to the Jews. It was lifted from the Hebrew Bible by the Puritans, among others and it became a dominant theme in the New England Way, the combination of sacred and secular government that the Puritans set up. It's a very important mind-set.

We don't look at a genealogy with the same eyes that ancient people did. There are genealogies online which we can consult and if we know

exactly who we are looking for we can find that person's immediate family. But if we are in search of recreation or enlightenment, we might be disappointed in a list of names that seems to have nothing more useful to our lives than names in a phone book or database.

Who in this crowd of names stands out? Let me give examples of Lincolns from Hingham who performed public service. They are listed in a Wikipedia entry entitled "Lincoln family," and only when you reach the end of the third entry is the fact disclosed that all three are descended from Samuel Lincoln, the original emigrant from Hingham to Hingham MA, and the line which includes President Abraham.

In this line is Levi Lincoln, Sr. who was born in 1749 in Hingham to Enoch and Rachel (Fearing) Lincoln. He was a lawyer who practiced in Worcester, briefly a member of Congress, but who most notably served as Thomas Jefferson's Attorney General and in that office played a key role in the case of Marbury vs. Madison. That's the case which gives rise to the very important American practice of judicial review, a crucial component of the rule of law. For it gives courts the right to review the constitutionality of laws and to strike down any provision found to be unconstitutional. After serving as Attorney General, Levi Sr. was elected Lieutenant Governor of Massachusetts in 1807, but failed to win the governorship the next year and retired from politics. He died in 1820.

Levi Lincoln, Jr. (1782-1868) was the son of Levi Sr, but was born in Worcester instead of Hingham because that was where his parents lived. He was a lawyer like his father and was elected Governor of Massachusetts and served from 1825 to 1834, which makes him the governor with the longest consecutive terms in the history of the Commonwealth. He also served in the US House of Representatives from 1835 to 1841.

Levi Lincoln's younger brother was Enoch Lincoln (1788-1829), also born in Worcester, also a lawyer, served as a congressman from Massachusetts and from Maine. Maine, as you may know, was a part of Massachusetts which was later recognized as a separate state, so Enoch could change from one state to another without moving. He also served as Governor of Maine from 1827 to his death in 1829.

But the Lincoln from Hingham who acquired the most fame prior to President Abraham was clearly General Benjamin Lincoln (1733-1810), who distinguished himself in military service during the American Revolution and received the surrender sword offered by the British at Yorktown. He also served as Secretary at War for the Confederation Congress under the Articles of Confederation and Perpetual Union, before the Constitution brought our US Government into being.

General Lincoln was born in Hingham in 1733, the sixth child and first son of Col. Benjamin Lincoln. Of the early Hingham Lincolns settlers, this branch is descended from Thomas Lincoln the cooper. It has no direct ties to President Abraham Lincoln.

A few moments ago, Mike Dwyer read an excerpt from the opening chapter of a biography of General Lincoln, and I was struck by a couple of turns of phrase in that passage. "Of the many influences that shaped the life and character of Benjamin Lincoln, none proved so profound as the trinity of town, church and family." As you follow General Lincoln's military career through the hardships of the Revolutionary War, he keeps yearning to return to Hingham. The authors describe Hingham society of the time as a place where "Men and women were tied by bonds of obligation or kinship or by covenant with one another."

Bing! There is that word "covenant," again. The author of this secular biography of a secular man comes back to this theological term which was basic to his mind-set. After distinguishing himself and getting wounded in the foot in the northern actions of the Revolution, General Lincoln was asked to take command of the Continental Army in the south.

Once he assumed command, he experienced a great disconnect. Congress and the civil authorities in the Carolinas and Georgia expected the Continental Army to keep the British at bay, but were not willing to provide the troops to do the job or institute a draft to get more, and the South Carolina white populace ardently opposed another proposal put forth by the Continental army, to recruit or use slaves somehow to help the war effort.

Frustrated, General Lincoln tried to understand why these locals wouldn't turn out to fight for independence as the New Englanders had, and why a draft was even being considered. "The principal objection to a draft,

General Lincoln wrote, 'is that it would too materially interfere with the rights of the citizen' Yet when a man contracts with another and fails to fulfill his obligation, his property becomes forfeit and he is imprisoned until he makes good his debt. All this against his consent. 'But no one contends that because it is distressing, it is therefore not to be binding. The only inquiry is whether the covenant has been made, and whether it has not been broken.'

Now this is a use of the word covenant in a purely secular context, but it has religious or at least moral overtones. "By joining in the political separation from Great Britain and the creation of new states, Lincoln insisted, all Americans had contracted with one another to see the war through to a successful conclusion. The contract was now due, and distressing or not, a citizen's obligation was to serve.

Lincoln went on to say there were two sets of obligations here: "Besides this contract, which seems to be of a more private nature, the covenant the people entered into as one of the United States is not only indissoluble except by mutual consent, but their obligation to support the Union indispensable."

The interesting thing here is that the reluctance of the civil authorities in the Carolinas to send troops adequate to defend Savannah and Charleston was a foretaste of the rebellion that Abraham Lincoln was dealing with 70 years later.

I suspect that General Lincoln may have gotten some of his ideas on covenant while sitting in this very building. I expect he was a member here during the last years of Ebenezer Gay and possibly through the Henry Ware years. After Henry Ware, in the first decade of the nineteenth century, there came an upheaval in the First Parish when a minister named Richardson was called. Questions were raised of his personal propriety and also questions of the new theology that came to be called Unitarian. In the ensuing trouble. Mr. Richardson survived the attempt to dismiss him but a lot of the church, including General Lincoln, went down the street and started what is now called New North church. It was right across the street from General Lincoln's house, and it later became a hotbed of abolitionist agitation,

There are many fascinating byways to investigate in this history which we don't have time to do this morning. Let me pass on with a few words about the most famous descendant of the Hingham Lincoln clan. His legacy to us is this nation we live in. If you compare America before the Civil War with it after the war, it's almost like two different nations. The war eliminated formal slavery, but not the economic subjugation and oppression of African Americans.

Abraham Lincoln was born 215 years ago next Friday. It is said that his favorite riddle was this: if you call a tail a leg, how many legs does a dog have? The answer is four, because calling a tail a leg doesn't make it one.

Lincoln was one of the finest lawyers this country ever produced, and he was well familiar with the many ways people have of bending truth. He was also a championship wrestler.

We have talked about prior generations of Lincolns with this church. As far as we know, Abraham Lincoln belonged to no church, and had no connection with Hingham except his ancestry. But among all our Presidents down to our present one, he grappled most publicly with real religious questions. He was a crafty and subtle writer and astute politician, and it is hard to guess his real theological leanings, but Garry Wills, who wrote a book on the Gettysburg Address, concluded that Lincoln was most accurately described as a transcendentalist. His law partner, William Herndon, read the transcendentalists and was fond of quoting our own Unitarian forebear Theodore Parker, as Lincoln used Parker's phrase of government "of the people, by the people, and for the people" to close out his oration at Gettysburg. Theodore Parker belonged to the second generation of transcendentalists.

The transcendentalists were philosophical idealists. They know that a statement like "all men are created equal" is an ideal which will always be realized imperfectly in the real world. We have fallen short and will continue to fall short of its full promise. But the ideal, once stated, has a power of its own, a power which brought on a terrible swift sword, which set brother against brother and buried the flower of a generation in graveyards throughout the south. It was a terrible price to pay, but it rid the nation of the practice of slavery, if not of its long moral stain.

In his address at Gettysburg, Abraham Lincoln articulated a new American Creed which set our sights high. It was a moment of which any Lincolns, any liberals, any Hinghamites, any Americans can be proud, and it holds up a standard for each of us to aspire to: to make his words true. We have not brought into being the country of which Lincoln spoke, but we are trying in a million ways to do just that.

Amen.