

# Locating The Lincoln Boundary Oak For Posterity

by Vic McCauley and Frank Fowler



The Boundary Oak Stump.

**B**eginning at a large white oak 13 poles above the Sinking Spring or Rock Spring, running thence N 9 1/2 E, 310 poles to ...." This was the beginning of the description of a tract of land of Thomas Lincoln, father of Abraham Lincoln.

Abraham Lincoln, 16th President of the United States, was, to use his words, born "in the most humble walks of life," on February 12, 1809, in a log cabin about three miles south of Hodgen's Mill on what was known as the Sinking Spring Farm in Hardin (now Larue) County, Kentucky. Until he was seven, the family lived in a picturesque spot on Knob Creek about eight miles from his birthplace. Throughout his life, Lincoln fondly recalled memories of his Kentucky home, including the "boundary oak" that stood less

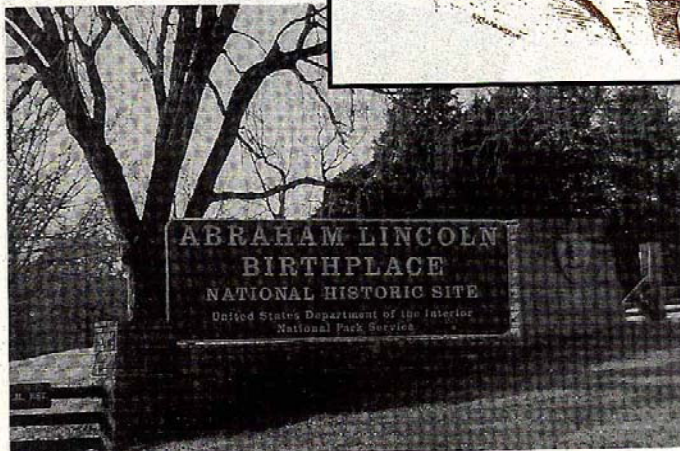
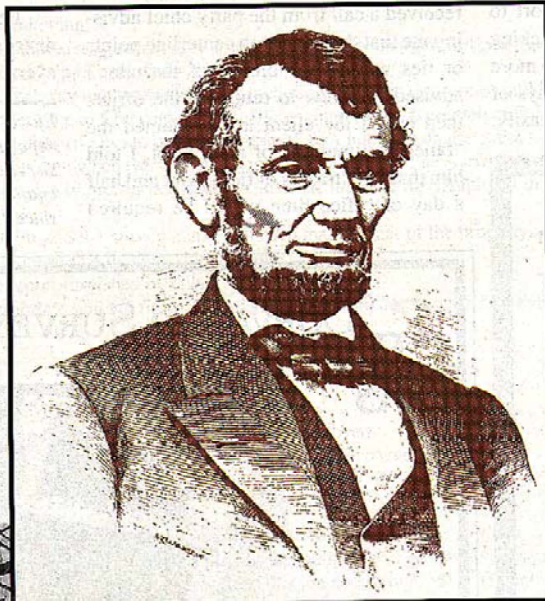
than 150 yards from the cabin where he was born, and which his father pointed out as marking the boundary of his land.

Legend has it that a boundary dispute

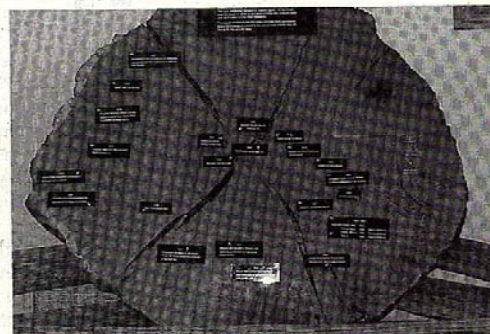
was at least part of the reason for the family's migration to Indiana.

The exact location of the oak was recorded about 20 years later when, on December 4, 1837, Hardin County Deputy Surveyor John Duncan began a survey (to settle a controversy) at a large "White Oak, thirteen poles above the Sinking or Rock Spring." Hence the oak tree that helped mark Abraham's birthplace was put on record in an official survey—the first known documentation of the "Boundary Oak."

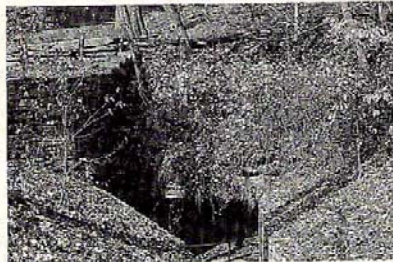
President William Howard Taft dedicated the Lincoln birthplace site as a national memorial in 1911. By that time, however, the Lincoln cabin had already been disassembled and moved around the country for display. Many rumors still exist concerning the authenticity of the cabin, but the Boundary Oak remained, undaunted amidst the turmoil. In 1933, the National Park Service



The entrance to the Abraham Lincoln Birthplace, National Historical Site, near Hodgenville, Kentucky.



Cross-section of the Boundary Oak on display at the site.



The "Sinking or Rock Spring."



An informational plaque.



Survey disk.

took over management of the site, which it still maintains. Each year, nearly 250,000 visitors pay homage to Lincoln at the park.

The Boundary Oak stood as a living link to Lincoln until its death in 1976 at an estimated age of 195. At the time of its death, it was nearly six feet in diameter, stood 90 feet tall and spread its crown 115 feet across. Its remains were placed in storage in 1986, but brought out in 1990 because of continued decline in the condition of its wood. A cross section from its trunk remains on display at the site.

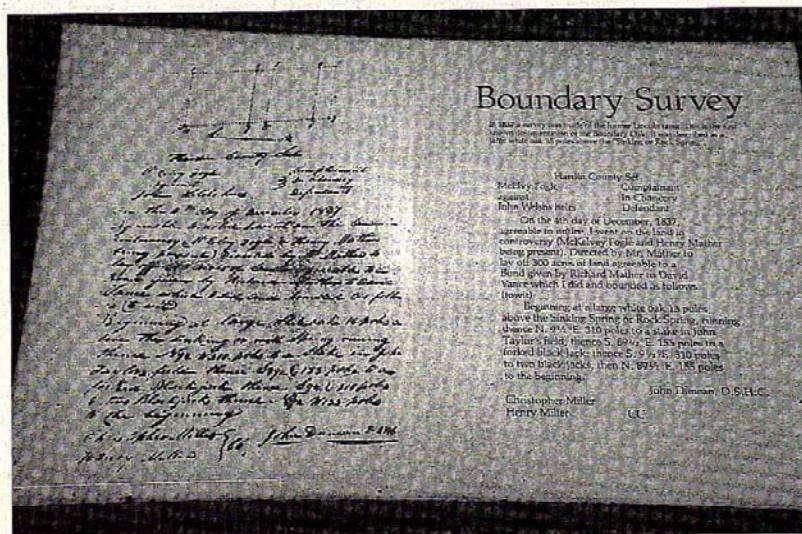
The tree's stump still marks the original location, but Park Manager Carolyn Link, concerned about advancing decay, decided she wanted to somehow preserve the tree's exact location. Researching park records, she discovered that a local surveyor, Ed Pence, had monumented the park boundary in 1970, and had used the

Boundary Oak to establish one of the lines. Link contacted him and explained the problem.

Pence, a member of The Kentucky Association of Professional Surveyors (KAPS), contacted Frank Fowler, who is chairman of the association's local Falls of the Ohio Chapter. Fowler, who is with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers' Louisville District, said he would be happy to help organize the project. A GPS surveyor with the Corps, Fowler obtained authorization to use the Corps' receivers. Beginning last October, Fowler and Bobby Lambert, another Corps member, started the GPS survey while Pence, Jim Krauth, Steve Hibbs, Vic McCauley and Ray Leigh began solar observations and traversing to the stump. Once the exact position (NAD 83) of the stump was determined, Fowler contacted Berntsen International, Inc., which donated

the disk used to monument the stump. The official dedication took place on February 12 as part of Kentucky's bicentennial celebration and the KAPS 25th Anniversary, and as a tribute to the 133rd anniversary of President Lincoln's birth. Participating dignitaries included Charles Tapley, NSPS past president; David Atwell, NSPS Area 3 director; Al Matherly, NSPS governor from Kentucky; John Harper, member of the Kentucky House of Representatives; Jim Riney, KAPS president; Vic McCauley, KAPS president-elect; Peggy Fortney, chair of the Falls of the Ohio Chapter, and Carolyn Link and Gary Talley of the National Park Service.

The purpose of the survey was to perpetuate the exact location of the Boundary Oak, which might otherwise have been lost due to rotting of the stump. Since it is tied to the National Network of Geodetic Control, the position of the oak will always be known, regardless of what happens to the area. The surveyors who participated in the project felt that they were contributing to the preservation of an important national monument. Just as it did when it was young and strong, the Boundary Oak will provide future generations with a concrete link to the birthplace of one of our nation's most treasured figures. PS



The 1837 Boundary Survey performed by John Duncan, Deputy Surveyor, Hardin County, Kentucky.

Vic McCauley is a registered surveyor employed with H.E. Rudy Engineers of Louisville, Kentucky, and is 1992 president of the Kentucky Association of Professional Surveyors. Frank Fowler is a registered surveyor employed with the Louisville District Army Corps of Engineers, is past chairman of the Falls of the Ohio chapter of KAPS, and is on the Board of Directors of the Kentucky Association of Professional Surveyors.