

**DENTON OFFUTT**  
**EMPLOYER and FRIEND**  
**of**  
**L I N C O L N**  
**at**  
**NEW SALEM**

The author, James S. Offutt, (whose great, great grandfather was the brother of Denton's father Samuel) prepared this article on the relationship of Offutt and Lincoln at the "turning point" in young Lincoln's life.



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DENTON OFFUTT AND LINCOLN AT NEW SALEM

By birth Abraham Lincoln was a Kentuckian and Kentuckians were to play important roles in his life - his stepbrother's guidance in his tender years - Denton Offutt's help as he started a new life at New Salem - Henry Clay as his political idol - Mary Todd as his wife - Cassius Marcellus Clay as his political supporter and friend. Offutt was nearly forgotten in the deepening shadows of the past until William Townsend wrote "Lincoln and the Blue Grass." In this book Townsend gave hitherto unpublished information on Denton. It is an authoritative, well written book of historical importance covering the influence of Kentucky and Kentuckians on Lincoln.

Benjamin P. Thomas, probably the most authoritative historian of the New Salem period, says "he (Lincoln) came to New Salem an airless pioneer youth; he left with an aroused ambition" (1) Ralph Newman, in the introduction of Thomas' book, calls the time at New Salem "the turning point" in Lincoln's life. The man responsible for Lincoln's coming to New Salem was Denton Offutt, whose birthplace and boyhood home was eight miles southeast of Lexington, Kentucky. William Townsend calls him "The Little Trader from Hickman Creek."

When they first met in the Spring of 1831 both were young men. Lincoln was twenty two years old and Denton Offutt was about twenty five years old. (Denton's exact birth date has not been established, but it was between 1803 and 1807) (2)

What kind of person was young Denton Offutt in 1831 when he first met young Lincoln? Who was this Kentuckian, who was acknowledged to be the first to "discover" Lincoln and who had such a prophetic vision about Lincoln's future? How did his background differ from Lincoln's?

Historians of the New Salem period vary in their appraisals of Denton. There seems to be mystique about this restless, energetic, persistently ambitious man. In the face of adversity, he has been described as a "young man in a hurry" to make his way in the world and make money out of opportunities he felt existed in trade on the frontier. But in so much of a hurry he failed to continue his education as other members of the family had done. Yet he greatly admired the highly educated, especially his brother Azra. This brash young man, - short, quick tempered, loving life and liquor, fastidious in manner and dress, seeking his fortune with a substantial inheritance from his father's estate in his pocket, traveled from Kentucky to the Illinois frontier in search of a dream to set up a river trade with New Orleans by drawing on the products of the rich land of Central Illinois. There he was to meet Abraham Lincoln.

Denton's father was Samuel Offutt. He was born October 2, 1751 and died January 25, 1827. His wife was Elizabeth Ray, who was born in 1761 and died February 21, 1831. They were married in Maryland by the famous Rev. "Cabin John" Threlkeld on October 22, 1778. Samuel, his wife and family left Maryland in 1801 and came by oxcart through the Cumberland Gap and the Wilderness Road to the Blue Grass area of Kentucky. With resources in hand from the sale of property in Maryland, he purchased a large tract of fertile land on Hickman Creek near a spring which still survives. A farm he sold before he left Maryland was called "Final Conclusion". He built a "comfortable two story residence" and furnished it with heirlooms brought on his initial trip to Kentucky and subsequent trips to Maryland. Townsend describes Samuel as a "man whose education was above average in central Kentucky. He wrote a good hand, kept his accounts neatly, and figured accurately. A firm advocate of schools, he built a schoolhouse on his own land fronting Tate's Creek Pike for the benefit of his own children and those of other families of the neighborhood. For many generations the Offutt family had been breeders of fine horses, and it was not long before Samuel had one of the best stock farms in the Bluegrass. In addition to horses he raised mules, sheep, cattle and hogs, sending large cargoes of livestock each year down the Ohio and Mississippi to Natchez and New Orleans." (H)

Denton's family had deep roots in early Maryland, going back to colonist William Offutt of Prince George County. William married Mary Brock about 1697. She was a member of an early family with large land holdings. William became a landed patriarch. At the time of his death in 1734 he owned nearly 6,000 acres of land in the Potomac Falls area, part of which is now Georgetown, D. C. He sired eleven children - three girls and eight boys. His son William II, married Jane Joyce and their son, William III, married Elizabeth Magruder. Samuel, Denton's father, was their oldest son. Elizabeth Magruder, Denton's grandmother, was a descendant of Alexander Magruder and Ninian Beall. Both were prominent Scotsmen in early Maryland history. Both were Jacobites who had fought against Cromwell. William was closely associated with his neighbor, Ninian Beall. Beall was prominent in early Maryland history. He established the first Presbyterian church in Maryland and William served on the first board of that church. (5)

What manner of man was twenty-two year old Abraham Lincoln in 1831 when he first met Denton Offutt? Lincoln's life up to this time was a contrast to Denton's. Until this time he had been virtually a prisoner of the wilderness frontier.

As did many others, Lincoln endured the struggle for survival through the long winters, the never-ending labor to secure food and shelter. The men aged early from hard manual labor. The confinement of restricted quarters and hard work caused many of the women to suffer from "cabin fever". Death from disease and child birth came too frequently. Only the strong and determined survived. The vigorous life coarsened some and strengthened others. There were those who, facing such an existence, became self righteous, narrow religious bigots while others became unruly ruffians, respecting neither law or property.

By 1831 the frontier country was developing villages and towns. Hardly any could be called cities. The fertility of the land, the wealth of the forests and the labor of the people did provide the basis for building a better life. But Lincoln, at the time he came to New Salem had not shared in much of this change. To survive he had stayed close to his father and never got very far away, except for his quick trip with young Gentry to New Orleans and short journeys on the rivers and streams.

Probably his rapport with his stepmother, Sally Johnston, kept him with the family until he met Offutt. She was a great influence on his life after he was ten years old until he left home at age twenty-two. His father Thomas had married her after Nancy Hanks died. Lincoln, in his autobiography written in June 1860, says very little of his mother, who died when he was 9 years old; but of his stepmother he says, "She proved to be a good and kind mother". Tarbell says of Sally Johnston "She was a woman of energy, thrift and gentleness and taught the children habits of cleanliness and comfort."<sup>(6)</sup> She brought a better home life and love to motherless Abraham. And what is probably more important, she encouraged him to learn, in contrast to his illiterate father's low regard for "book larning".

However, this is not to discredit his mother, Nancy Hanks. She is reputed to have taken great pains to teach her children what she knew about the Bible, told them fairy tales and country legends. She did the best she could and must have laid some of the foundations of good character in her infant child.



Unlike the kind words for his stepmother, Lincoln showed little warmth of feeling for his father, Thomas Lincoln. However, he expressed some sympathy when he said of his father:- "Thomas was the youngest son ..... by the early death of his father and very narrow circumstances of his mother, even in childhood was a wandering laboring boy and grew up literally without education. He never did more in the the way of writing than to bunglingly sign his own name." However, credit must be given to Thomas for teaching "Abe" carpentry which he was to use in building the flatboat for Offutt.

There seems to be one central theme in Lincoln's life -"struggle!" The struggle of his early years must have left its mark, and may explain the melancholy he suffered from time to time for most of his life.

Nothing seemed to come easy to him. The struggle with poverty, with clearing the forests, "plowing and harvesting". He had an axe put into his hands at once (in his eighth year) and from that time until his twenty-third year, he was almost constantly handling that "most useful instrument."

Lincoln had moved with his father and stepmother from Kentucky to Indiana and then in 1830 to Illinois,

where the family had settled 10 miles west of Decatur in Macon County. Abraham was 21 and had started to shift for himself; but, as Tarbell notes, "he had no trade, no profession, no spot of land, no patron, no influence. Two things recommended him - he was strong and he was a good fellow."<sup>(7)</sup> He lacked even a suit of respectable clothes and split rails for the cloth for a pair of trousers. "Standing six feet four he could outlift, outwork any man." Lincoln at this period described himself as "a piece of floating driftwood." In later life, he referred to himself when he came to New Salem to begin his job with Offutt as "a friendless, uneducated penniless boy."

In the early Winter of 1831 Denton Offutt had come to the Springfield area. Enquiring for an experienced flatboat man, he heard of John Hanks and sought him out. Hanks recommended "Abe" and Johnston, Lincoln's step-brother, to work with him on the flatboat. Offutt hired them at \$12 per month plus return to St. Louis. Offutt, using the proceeds of his share of his father's estate, planned to take a cargo of livestock and produce to New Orleans.

The flatboat took four weeks to build. About the middle of April 1831 it was loaded and the trip to New Orleans began. A few miles down the Sangamon River a mill-dam had been constructed at the village of New Salem. The loaded flatboat, with its crew of Offutt, Johnston, Hanks and Lincoln aboard, stuck on the mill dam for nearly twenty four hours. Denton Offutt's venture was in jeopardy unless the flatboat could be released. The villagers came to witness the operation and noticed the big fellow, after the cargo had been unloaded, working on a plan to get the boat over the mill-dam. Lincoln's plan was successful and the crowd was impressed with Lincoln's resourcefulness and ingenuity.

During this short stay at New Salem, Offutt had the opportunity to see the town and felt it would be a good loading point for flatboats carrying crops and livestock to New Orleans and other river markets. Offutt determined to return and establish himself at New Salem when he came back from New Orleans. Thus did a mill-dam become the link between Offutt, Lincoln and New Salem and became reason for later immortalizing and preserving this frontier village.

The trip to New Orleans was, so far as we know, completed without any further significant incident. The impact on young Lincoln of the month spent in New Orleans disposing of the cargo must have been tremendous. Benjamin Franklin's son-in-law, Richard Bache, graphically describes the New Orleans scene as he saw it in 1834:-

"This is one of the most wonderful places in the world. A survey of the river shows as far as can be seen, - flatboats from every point of the Mississippi River, laden with flour, corn, meats, live stock, cattle, hogs, horses, mules, etc. Some full with Negroes, some with 'Old Monongahela' whisky. Along the whole line are the owners of flat boats trading with the citizens, merchants and shop keepers. And then such crowds especially along the levee which is opposite the market house." (8)

In 1830 Josiah Condon, a Londoner, gave his impression:

"The first object that presents itself is the dirty and uncouth backwoods flatboat. Hams, ears of corn, apples, whiskey barrels, are strewn upon it, or attached to poles to direct the attention of the buyers. Close by are the rather more decent keel boats with cotton, furs, whiskey and flour. Next, the elegant steamboat, which in its hissing and repeated sounds, announces its arrival and departure; sending forth immense columns of black smoke that form into long clouds above the city. Further are all the smaller merchant vessels, the sloops and the schooners from Havana, Vera Cruz, Tampico; then the brigs and lastly the elegant ships, appearing like a forest of masts." (8)

The description of the flatboatmen was not very flattering, as Didimus writes:-

".....strong, hardy, rough and uncouth, savage, wild and lawless ..... six feet tall, with broad shoulders and breast fatless but well strung and muscular. Their posture stooped and their hair long and shaggy which falls disheveled about their ears. Their feet and hands are very large. Their eyes are swollen, red and watery, due to their prolonged exposure to the weather. Their eyelashes are scant and their eyebrows long, thin and shaggy. Their mouths large and their noses large and prominent, having a 'warm whiskey hue'. They wear a large felt hat a la slouche with an immense brim, from which the rains of heaven have long since extracted the glue. It looks for all the world like an old lady's cap ruffle on a Sunday morning. They wore a linsey-woolsey jacket with short sleeves and trousers of stout Kentucky jeans."

"They were the first frontier men of the trans Appalachian migration. They settled along the Ohio and Tennessee rivers and their tributaries. They opened up a new territory in the primeval forests and along the unchartered streams or rivers. They were allured by the wide open spaces of a new frontier. They were the pioneers who contributed so much to the development of the great Middle West." (9)

Until he was employed by Denton Offutt, Lincoln had never had the assurance of a steady job. Early in their acquaintance, Lincoln recognized Offutt had the resources, the vision and the will to establish a trading business. Thereafter Lincoln exerted himself to gain Offutt's confidence and to help him carry out his business plans. Likewise, Offutt, early in their acquaintance, recognized the value of Lincoln to his interests. Both believed in the expanding future of the New Salem area, based on trading and transport.

Offutt decided to employ this bright, strong young man as the manager of a store he planned to open at New Salem. With his inherited resources and the profit from the cargo sold in New Orleans he employed Lincoln to return to New Salem, build, open and manage a general store as soon as the supplies Offutt purchased in St. Louis were delivered. On July 8, 1831<sup>(10)</sup> Offutt paid \$5.00 for a "retail merchandise license" and renewed it for another \$5.00 fee on December 6, 1831. Soon after, Offutt leased the mill, put Lincoln in charge and hired Greene as Lincoln's helper. Offutt expected to use the store as a base of operating his trading activities, leaving Lincoln to manage the store and mill and supervise Greene.

Both envisioned traffic on the Sangamon as the basis for their success. Offutt saw himself as chief executive and Lincoln (to use modern organizational thinking) as his Vice President of Operations. Once the store was established, Offutt praised Lincoln to everyone. Tarbell's statement, "Offutt even declared the country over that "Abe" knew more than any man in the United States, and that some day he would be President<sup>(11)</sup> was more prophetic than anyone would admit at the time.

Until he met Offutt, Lincoln supported himself by hard labor. The job in Offutt's store was a relief from manual labor, and gave Lincoln the time and place to develop his mind and the opportunity to broaden his people-to-people experiences. Here he started the study of grammar, here he gained the respect of the "Clary Grove boys" after the wrestling match with Armstrong promoted by Offutt. Friends developed while he worked in Offutt's store later would support Lincoln's early political aspirations.

Offutt put more and more responsibility for the store and mill on Lincoln while he pursued trading and other ventures throughout the countryside.

On March 26, 1832 and April 21, 1832 Lincoln gave receipts signing them "A. Lincoln for D. Offutt." The originals of these appear between pages 42 and 43 in Townsend's "Lincoln and the Blue Grass". The following ad in the Sangamon Journal of March 8, 1832 indicates Offutt's effort to establish a substantial enterprise.

"Denton Offutt informs the farmers of Sangamon and Morgan Co. he will have by last of March 3,000-4,000 bushels of seed corn at New Salem which he proposes to sell \$1.00/bu. He would also have a quantity of cottonseed from Tennessee. Subscription will immediately open for seed corn and subscribers will have preference." (10)

Offutt's store was built near the river and the mill. Offutt, like many others, believed the Sangamon River would be an artery of trade and his store, being the closest to the river, therefore would prosper more than the stores nearer the center of the town. Navigation on the Sangamon proved to be difficult because of wide variation in water levels in different seasons, unpredictable dangers from fallen trees and silting due to erosion from newly cultivated land.

Furthermore the difficulties of trade in an undeveloped frontier, due to poor communication, monetary and credit problems, uncertainty of market prices made success of any business venture uncertain. There were already several stores in New Salem when Offutt opened his store. Obviously too many for a settlement of 25 families unless the town became a trading center for a larger area. New Salem could have grown and prospered if navigation of the Sangamon had materialized.

The business realities of trying to develop a successful enterprise were closing in on Offutt. The ill-fated journey of the steamboat Talisman trying to come from Cincinnati to New Salem sealed any hope of successful navigation on the Sangamon.

His plans, once enthusiastically encouraged by people of the area, collapsed. By the Spring of 1832, he



found himself overextended and the store and mill, for lack of customers, was "petering out", as Lincoln put it. The frontier entrepreneur had exhausted his capital and as things went wrong, he found himself deserted and broke. The store was turned over to his creditors with Lincoln handling the liquidation. It was the best Denton could do and there is no record to confirm misdeeds or diversion of assets. It appears he turned the store over to Lincoln to liquidate, returned the mill to Cameron and departed from New Salem to build a new life.

Some have claimed Offutt left creditors unpaid and that court action was taken against him. A search was made to check what records show. The only records were located with the help of James T. Hickey in the Lincoln Library of the Illinois Historical Society in Springfield, Illinois. They are as follows:-

NOTES ON COURT RECORDS AT HIST. SOC.

- Sept. 13, 1831 - Denton Offutt with Glasscock as surety gave a note for \$110 to William Porter for 60 days at 60% interest in presence of Virgil Hickox. Porter assigned the note to W. H. Brown.
- May 24, 1832 - William Porter as agent for Wm. Brown made affidavit that Glasscock has no property in Sangamon County and Offutt has gone, but has some personal property in the County.

September term 1832 of circuit Court

Brown sues Offutt for payment of note. Summons stated Offutt has gone to parts unknown. Offutt was to appear September 17, 1832 to satisfy note for \$110 plus 60% interest. There is no further action except for a notation on the original note - "satisfied in full". Hickey feels Lincoln may have been involved as part of note was torn away.

Based on these records, it would appear the assets Offutt left behind were sufficient to satisfy even a 60% usurious note. One can only speculate why this one court action was taken unless there was property available which those in possession of the property did not want to release to repay this note. The notation on the note, "satisfied in full" surely clears Offutt.

When the call for men to fight Black Hawk and a company was formed, the respect and affection Lincoln had developed with his fellow men won him, by a vote in the field, the command as captain. Lincoln, commenting on this in his third-person autobiography written in later life, says he was elected "to his own surprise" and adds, "He says he has not since had any success in life which gave him so much satisfaction." Lincoln had achieved his first step toward a career which eventually led to the Presidency.

Lincoln, after serving from April to July 1832, returned to New Salem and lived there until he left for Springfield in 1837. New Salem declined as Petersburg grew and "by 1840 New Salem had ceased to exist." (12)

The following comments of well known and recognized historians of Lincoln's early life should help complete the historical profile of young Denton Offutt's relationship to young Abraham Lincoln. (See note)

Paul Angle, one of the great Lincoln scholars, says:

"At the head of these varied enterprises was Offutt, the most progressive man by all odds in the village. He was certainly an odd character, if we accept the judgment of his contemporaries. By some he is given the character of a clear-headed, brisk man of affairs. By others he is variously described as 'wild, noisy, and reckless,' or 'windy', rattle-brained, unsteady, and improvident.' Despite the unenviable traits ascribed to him he was good at heart and a generous friend of Lincoln." (13)

Barton's "Life of Abraham Lincoln", in the chapter

"The Driftwood and the Dam" has this to say:-

"There came a sad day when Offutt had to confess that he could not meet his bills."

"Doubtless his competitors and other wise men of New Salem were ready to affirm that they had felt sure all the time that Offutt was too much of a braggart to be a good business man. Offutt's name after his downfall was held in little regard in New Salem. In the day of his glory it might have stood against all competitors, but after his failure there were none so poor to do him reverence. But Lincoln parted from him in real sorrow. Whatever losses others had suffered through trusting him, Lincoln knew that Offutt had "rendered him a lasting service. He had given Lincoln a larger vision of life and inspired him with a new confidence in his own powers."(14)

Note: (The underlined portions of the following quotations were not underlined by the original authors but were done by author of this article.)

William Townsend, whose scholarly and beautifully written book, "Lincoln and the Blue Grass" tells of Denton's leaving New Salem in this poignant paragraph:-

"While others had sustained losses in his commercial ventures which perhaps, had been launched too optimistically, but always in good faith, he had suffered more than any of them, having lost every dollar of his savings and all of his inheritance. Yet Offutt was sad that some of those who had once so enthusiastically proclaimed him a veritable captain of finance, now spoke harshly of him, calling him, in the words of Uncle Jimmy Short, 'a wild, reckless, harum-scarum kind of man.' Lincoln, of course, was not one of these. Indeed, it would have made Offutt happy to know what perhaps he never knew, that in future years, when Lincoln came to write his own autobiographical sketch, he would not fail to mention gratefully the name of the man who first gave him a larger vision of life and confidence in himself. ....Yet unwittingly, as Abraham Lincoln's first sponsor, he had already achieved a modest but inevitable immortality."(15)

Henry Clay Whitney, on page 86 of "Lincoln - The Citizen" wrote one of the favorable appraisals of Offutt at New Salem:-

"Let us not disdain this wild product of frontier civilization, however, for we should cherish and honor any agency in the evolution of Abraham Lincoln. Offutt was his generous friend and gave him his first start in life. Through his agency, Lincoln was transplanted from the sombre wilderness of Hanks's neighborhood to the more progressive conditions and more congenial surroundings of New Salem - his first living in an aggregate community. As a merchant's clerk in New Salem he had an abundance of leisure. Lincoln spent much time in reading and studying."

Benjamin F. Thomas, eminent historian and author of

"Lincoln's New Salem" writes:-

"A strange combination, Offutt was enterprising and enthusiastic, but also boastful and vain. 'He talked too much with his mouth.' He was dreamy, impractical, too fond of drink. In a sense, however, he was the discoverer of Lincoln."(16)

The most critical comment is Reep's in his "Lincoln at New Salem":-

"About this time, it became apparent to Lincoln that Offutt was nearing the end of his career as a merchant. He appears to have had other interests at other places, a sort of 'Captain of Finance', and spread his resources so thinly that he failed, and, gathering together such funds as he could lay his hands on, fled the country, leaving his creditors to make what they could from the stock left. These creditors attached his stock of goods and in due course secured executions in attachment and sold them. During the legal proceedings necessary before a sale could be had, Lincoln, by agreement of the creditors, was left in charge of the store and sold such goods as he could, accounting to them for the proceeds."(17)

Reep is believed to be in error as the only court action was to collect \$110 note referred to on page 16.

Writing about Denton, William Herndon, Lincoln's law partner and confidant, says:

"He (Offutt) was certainly an odd character, if we accept the judgment of his contemporaries. By some he is given the character of a clear-headed, brisk man of affairs. By others he is variously described as 'wild, noisy, and reckless', or 'windy, rattlebrained, unsteady, and improvident.' Despite the unenviable traits ascribed to him, he was good at heart and a generous friend of Lincoln." (18)

Denton's life was not finished when he left New Salem in 1832. He returned to Kentucky to work for his brothers Otho and Sam, both well established farmers with prosperous livestock operations. With the death of Otho and Sam moving to Missouri, Denton started on a career of training horses, especially demonstrating his ability to tame and break horses at fairs and special shows. Since childhood he possessed a marvelous power over animals and this became his livelihood. With the help of a ghostwriter, he published a small booklet of 120 pages, "A New and Complete System of Teaching the Horse on Phrenological Principles" Appleton's Queen City Press, Cincinnati, 1848). He was indignant when another plagiarized his book and gained unearned recognition. Armed with recommendations from Henry Clay and other important people, he travelled far and wide - even going to England. In 1860, reputedly dying of consumption, he wrote Lincoln asking for a job. His was a wandering life devoid of family and friends. His grand plans failed but he carried on, remembering "Abe" as he gained fame and distinction.

In spite of his faults, Denton Offutt deserves to be remembered by all who revere Lincoln's memory as Lincoln's employer and true friend at a crucial point in young Lincoln's life.

### BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

1. Benjamin Thomas - "Lincoln's New Salem" p. 6.
2. Family record of Martha B. Cheek.
3. Wm. Townsend, "Lincoln and the Blue Grass", p. 32.
4. Ibid., p. 31.
5. Family records of author.
6. Tarbell, "Life of Lincoln, p. 21.
7. Ibid., p. 49.
8. Albert A. Fossier, "New Orleans - The Glamorous Period", 1800-1840, p. 26.
9. Ibid., p. 33.
10. Illinois Historical Society Records.
11. Ida Tarbell, "Life of Lincoln", p. 66.
12. Benjamin Thomas, "Lincoln's New Salem", p. 57.
13. Paul Angle, "The Lincoln Reader", p. 41.
14. Barton, p. 167, 168.
15. Wm. Townsend, "Lincoln and the Blue Grass, p. 44.
16. Benjamin Thomas, "Lincoln's New Salem", p. 61.
17. Reep, p. 33.
18. Herndon, p. 81.

