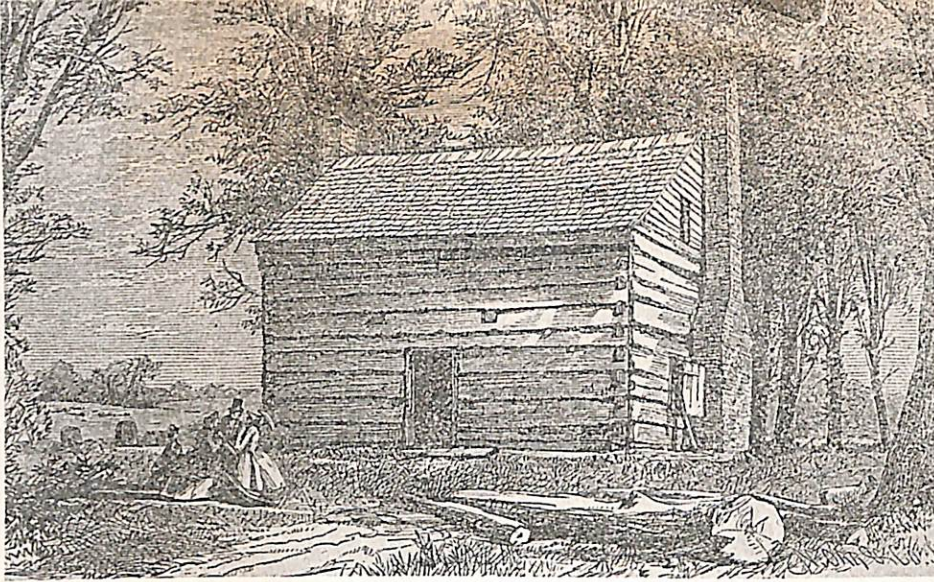


by Charles Ludwig

# Abe



LITTLE PIGEON BAPTIST CHURCH,  
Where the Lincolns worshiped in Spencer County.

**D**UE to the presidential campaign of 1860, the world knows that Abraham Lincoln put in time as a rail splitter. Few people realize, however, that in his youth Abe also helped his father construct a church building and was its janitor during his teens. This fully documented fact squeezed itself into history in a most curious way. Here is the story.

A few months before the Lincoln family moved from Kentucky to Pigeon Creek, Indiana, in 1816, some interested people met in a cabin to organize a church. Fortunately, their minute book has been preserved. In it we can read, in the poor spelling of the frontier, the results of their gathering:

"Saturday June 8 1816 the Baptist Church of Jesus Christ known by the name of Pigeon Church Warrick County Indeanne Territory was Constituted by Brother John Weldon & Thomas Downs . . ."

Following this, the names of the first thirteen members, all of whom had joined by letter, were listed.

Since there was no church building, the tiny congregation met in the various homes of the community. Their worship continued like this until March 13, 1819. Then, inspired by David Elkins, who had been invited by nine-year-old Abe to preach his mother's funeral, they met to discuss plans for a building.

No definite decisions were made at this time, because the congregation could not agree on the location

of the new project. The minutes of the meeting indicated that a decision was postponed until there could be more "oneness of mind concerning the seat."

Later, a committee of five was assigned to find a suitable site. Then, on December 11, 1819, the congregation ratified the committee's decision. The new meetinghouse would be built at "Brother Gordon's."

Finally, on Abe's eleventh birthday, February 12, 1820, the plans for the building were accepted. Not everyone, however, was satisfied. By September 9, it was agreed to change the plans. Things simmered on until March 10 of the following year. At this time, the congregation appointed a committee of five and gave them final authority to get the building erected.

The new plans called for a building "30 x 26 feet, hewed logs, 8 feet in the under story and 6 feet above the joists." These plans were probably altered, for a description of the building has been preserved:

"The church, which stood one mile west of what is now Lincoln City, was built of logs, with a stick and mud chimney. It was a long, narrow building one and a half stories high, having a very large fireplace on one side of the building, with a pulpit made of rough hewed boards. It had a window (with no glass, but heavy wooden shutters immediately behind it) at one end of the structure, and a ladder leading to the upper story where the people who

came great distances might stay over night. Split logs, with wooden pegs for legs, and a puncheon floor, were also features of the church, the logs of which were sold and used in the building of a barn."

Tom Lincoln was chosen to be the "boss carpenter," even though he was not a member of the congregation. No one really knows why he had not joined until this time. It may be because the church he attended in Kentucky, and where he had been baptized, was a Separate Baptist church, with less of an emphasis on creed than the Pigeon Creek church.

Tradition says that Abe helped cut down the trees that his father whipsawed into boards for the structure. He was large for his age and had already demonstrated his power with an ax. Working with Tom and seeing a building go up as a result of his labors was a great joy.

The story of his employment as janitor has come to us through a letter written by Caleb A. Obenshain, pastor of the First Baptist Church in Dewey, Oklahoma. The letter was first published on January 22, 1909, in the *Kansas City Journal*.

"In the year 1866, while a teacher in Rockport Academy in the southern part of Indiana, I was invited by the Methodist presiding elder to attend and assist him in conducting a quarterly meeting to be held in Gentryville, Indiana. The meeting was near where Mr. Lincoln's mother lies buried. We visited the grave. . . . We then visited . . . an old log Baptist church, not then in use, but where my guide told me the Lincoln family had formerly worshipped.

"While in the old church, I climbed up into the loft to familiarize myself with the building and discovered in a crevice between two of the upper