

Benjamin Lincoln House is one of Hingham's historic gems

By Sarah Dewey and Arlyn Vogelmann/ Special To The Journal
Thursday, December 15, 2005

Featured house:

- General Benjamin Lincoln House
- Date Built: Prior to 1667, with major additions: 1715 and 1790. Entrance enlarged in 1853.
- Location: 181 North Street, Hingham
- Current Owners: Rose Woodard, Franklin Beveridge
- Lincoln Historic District, established 1966. Also a National Historic Register landmark property

As is typical with many of Hingham's antique homes, the General Benjamin Lincoln House evolved over an extended period of time that encompassed multiple styles and many changes in the way people lived. The house was originally a very modest dwelling, appropriate in scale and detail for a family making a living as a cooper and maltster. Thomas Lincoln (Benjamin's great, great grandfather) started the structure in 1637 and then a later structure, now the oldest two rooms in the house, the early kitchen and the "borning" room were built prior to 1667. These rooms are beautifully detailed with wainscoting and paneled walls and are kept as close to 'period correct' as possible - there is no electricity in the borning room!

In 1715 the house was enlarged at the west end of the original house and took on an "L" configuration. The present dining room is included in this addition. In 1790, the General added the grand center stair hall and parlor. This final configuration of the house has a total of eight stairways connecting the spaces throughout, and there are a total of seven bedrooms on the second floor. The general and his wife, Mary Cushing, had 11 children. The last (1790) additions brought the structure to its present rectangular shape. Seven bays wide and two bays deep, the main facade has a balanced Georgian appearance.

The interior of the house has grandeur worthy of General Lincoln. It seems in keeping with his national stature, and perhaps his broad figure, that the formal entry is of grand proportions and detail. The front door leading to the stair hall is nearly four feet wide. The height of the ceilings, the profiles of the mantles and wainscoting are formal and beautifully built. Sitting in the formal parlor, one can imagine attending an elegant gathering in the Lincoln home. Rose Woodard, 11th generation of Lincoln family descendant, recently found a letter written by one of the Lincoln women in the 1890s reminiscing about Thanksgiving dinner preparations during her childhood. The letter speaks of the turkey being roasted on a spit in the hearth "in a Tin Kitchen". She remembers baking pies with her mother and of sledding down the front yard to the fence by the road.

The interior finishes and materials are finely crafted and upgraded for this period house. Blue delft tiles face the fireplace of the front parlor, probably added in the early 1800s. The house has wide board wood floors throughout. There are Lincoln furnishings from many generations. General Lincoln's papers and correspondence are in the Massachusetts Historical Society as well as the original portrait by Col. H. Sargent. A copy of it hangs in the Hingham Town Hall. His sword is in the Smithsonian and even a piece of house furniture is now in Washington in a reception room of the Department of State. But with all this, the house is as pleasant for today's living and entertaining as it was during the 1700 and 1800s.

Original owners

The Lincoln family was one of the original families that settled Hingham. Thomas Lincoln, a cooper, built the original structure in 1637 and the early parts of the present house prior to 1667. The Benjamin Lincoln house has been in the possession of the same family for 12 generations, more than 300 years.

General Benjamin Lincoln Benjamin Lincoln (b. Jan. 24, 1733, d. May 9, 1810) was one of America's important but perhaps least known Revolutionary War generals. He was a prosperous farmer who left the comfort of his Hingham home to join in the struggle for independence. He has been frequently described as a "citizen-soldier" who served as George Washington's second-in-command at Yorktown and as secretary of war from 1781 to 1783.

Lincoln started his military career as part of the colony's militia. After the Declaration of Independence in 1776, the Massachusetts legislature appointed Lincoln to lead the state's forces with the rank of major general, and to later lead the new recruits when they became part of the Continental Army. He served with distinction in the battles of Bennington and Saratoga where he was wounded. He was given command of the Southern Department. During the campaigns in the south he learned his strengths and weaknesses as well as how much and how little support from the Continental Congress he could rely upon. Partly resulting from his decisions as well as a lack of outside support, he allowed the British to box him in the city of Charleston, South Carolina, and was forced to surrender after the siege (1780). Exchanged, he joined Washington's army in time to participate in Cornwallis' defeat at Yorktown. As Washington's second in command, he accepted the British surrender from Cornwallis' second in command, Brig. Gen. Charles O'Hara.

Lincoln left active field duty after Yorktown, and he served as Secretary of War of the Continental Congress from 1781-1783. After a brief and financially disastrous period, he commanded the Massachusetts troops sent to end Shay's Rebellion. Later, he worked for the ratification of the Constitution in Massachusetts and served for one year as lieutenant governor. Later, he was appointed Collector of the Port of Boston. In addition to his military career, Lincoln was quite active in Hingham's town politics and served as Hingham's elected Town Clerk/ Administrator and as Justice of the Peace.

When he died, on May 9, 1810, the bells of Boston tolled for an hour. Among his pallbearers was the second President, his close friend and neighbor John Adams. Lincoln had put as much effort into the winning of independence as any man. He had campaigned in every part of the United States, from the far north around Saratoga, to the deepest south. The only blemish on his military record was the siege of Charleston, and even there his reputation emerged largely unscathed. His skills as an organizer played a major role in the success of the march to Yorktown, and in the aftermath of that victory his diplomatic skills helped to keep the army together until peace was confirmed. We are honored to have Benjamin Lincoln as one of Hingham's most notable citizens.