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genetics & genealogy

Testing a Theory: Were Abraham Lincoln and Robert E. Lee Related?

In January 1929, over a million Americans opened their copies of *Good Housekeeping* magazine to an article by Rev. William E. Barton (1861–1930) entitled “Abraham Lincoln Was a Lee.”¹ The article referred to Barton as “the foremost living authority on Lincoln,” which was probably true. Barton claimed that President Abraham Lincoln and General Robert E. Lee were cousins through a common ancestor, Colonel Richard Lee. Barton expanded his claim later that year in his book *The Lineage of Lincoln*, devoting an entire chapter to the alleged relationship.²

Barton’s *Good Housekeeping* article attempted to show that Lincoln was a descendant of Colonel Lee and his wife Anne Constable through Lincoln’s ancestor William Lee (?–by 1717). Barton claimed that William Lee was the grandson of Richard Lee through an unknown son. The article displayed a pedigree chart showing the descent of President Lincoln and General Lee from Richard Lee; in Lincoln’s line, Barton identified the son of Richard Lee with a question mark.³

Although Barton lacked any evidence linking William Lee to a son of Richard Lee, he announced “It is my confident belief that the family of Lees from which Abraham Lincoln was descended was the same family from which Robert E. Lee was descended, both men being descendants of old Col. Richard Lee.” Barton made this claim even though just a few lines earlier he had admitted, “No record that as yet has been discovered enables us to disentangle

. . . William Lee . . . and so justify us in declaring whose son he was.”⁴

In support of Barton

Since 1929, Barton’s claim has been accepted and repeated by others as if it were a proven fact. Some go even further than Barton by identifying which son of Richard Lee was the father of Lincoln’s ancestor William Lee.

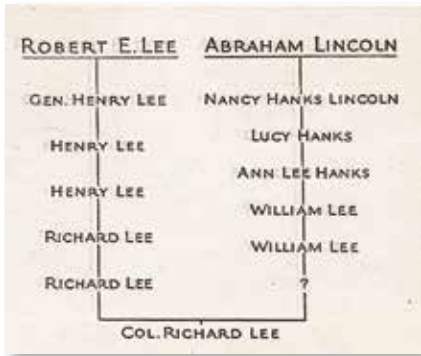
In her 1977 genealogy, *A Weaving*, Clara Funai reported that “several people in different parts of the United States, who are descended from this same William Lee, have written me that he is the son of Hancock Lee and his wife Mary Kendall Lee, and Hancock Lee is the son of Richard Lee, the emigrant. . . . If this be the fact, we would not only be able to trace our family line back to England, but also to claim kinship with the renowned [*sic*] Robert E. Lee. What more could one want!”⁵ In 1985, Mary Taylor Brewer stated in *From Log Cabins to the White House* that Lincoln’s ancestor William Lee was the grandson of Richard Lee through Richard’s son William, but did not cite any sources.⁶

Refuting Barton

In 1930, a year after Barton’s article appeared, historian Lyon Gardiner Tyler published the first refutation of Barton’s theory. Tyler, son of President John Tyler and former president of the College of William and Mary, was also the founder and editor of the *William and Mary Quarterly*. Now a scholarly journal of early American history and culture, the publication then focused

heavily on Virginia genealogy. Tyler ridiculed the “absurdity of the Rev. Barton’s claim of a descent of Abraham Lincoln from Colonel Richard Lee.” Tyler especially upbraided Barton for including the pedigree chart showing William Lee as a grandson of Richard Lee with “nothing but the wildest conjecture to sustain his view.”⁷

Over a half century later, Lincoln scholar and researcher Paul H. Verduin—often recognized as the compiler of the most complete pedigree for Lincoln’s Hanks ancestors—affirmed



that Lincoln’s ancestor “William Lee was no relation to the aristocratic Lees of Stratford Hall, or any of the other prominent Lee families of Virginia.”⁸ Christopher C. Child of NEHGS noted that Barton “tried, without evidence, to connect these Lee . . . families with the forebears of Confederate General Robert E. Lee.”⁹

General Lee’s patrilineal ancestry

In 1895, Edmund Jennings Lee published *Lee of Virginia, 1642–1892*, considered by many to be the best genealogical source for descendants of the immigrant Col. Richard Lee. Reprinted several times, the book’s editions since 1983 have included an additions and corrections section compiled by the Society of the Lees of Virginia.¹⁰ (Organized in 1921, the

society is open to any person who can provide documentation to prove a descent from Col. Richard Lee and Anne Constable by connecting to a descendant in the most current edition of *The Lees of Virginia*.)

Robert E. Lee’s descent from Richard Lee and Anne Constable is listed in the book. He was the son of Revolutionary War General Henry “Light-Horse Harry” Lee and Anne Hill Carter, grandson of Col. Henry Lee and Lucy Grymes, and great-grandson of Henry Lee and Mary Bland. This first Henry Lee was the son of Richard Lee and Letitia Corbin, and the grandson of the immigrant Richard Lee.

The chart (left) and magazine spread (below) are from William E. Barton’s January 1929 article in *Good Housekeeping*.

Abraham Lincoln WAS a Lee

But was he of the Lee? Were there two opposing Forces really most living Authority has almost Proved

By William E. Barton

Let us remember his name and that he was alive and happy on May 12, 1771, when his grandfather signed the Declaration of Independence. His father had died thirty years before, and he himself had children, as we shall presently see.

And now let us examine the country in which all this occurred.

The northern end of the "northern neck" of Virginia, occupying a space of about thirty-five miles from northwest to northeast and with an average width of not more than fifteen miles between the Rappahannock and the Potomac, gave to the nation more famous men than any other spot of equal area in the United States. There lived the Carters, the Fendleys, the Carsons, the Montneys, the Taylors, the Jennings, the Womersleys, the Lees, and the Washingtons. The community was a remarkable one, and, having to this day no railroad and being kept in by deep and wide tidal rivers, it had its share of travel by boat or by mule through the woods. To an unusual extent its inhabitants knew their neighbors, and every one was related to every one else on the same level. It is much more than a possibility that our old friend Elizabeth Taylor met and conversed with Mary Ball Washington when little George was born in 1731. The Balls lived immediately and in the neighborhood immediately from the Taylors. They all knew each other. For a time they were all in the same parish, and, when later the parish was divided, the same minister conducted services in both parishes, performed all the marriages, and baptized all the babies.

The first Lee in America of whom we have any record had settled across from the "northern neck" on the peninsula formed by the Rappahannock on the north and the York River on the south. He was named Richard, of a worthy family in Virginia, second best, vigorous spirit, and

big, and, because this narrative must be in good part a matter of documentary evidence, it must proceed in order and dignified sequence. There has been something enough. This is a plain and careful tale, including the characters in the order of their appearance, the certain ones first—Elizabeth Taylor of Richmond County, Virginia, who accepted her married name when the Virginia Taylors were all Taylors, and before William Taylor changed his name and that of his descendants to Taylor. The date is May 12, 1771, and on that spring day Elizabeth Taylor, weak in body but of perfect mind and memory, thanks to the act of signing her will. She must have been nearly sixty years old when she attached her signature to that important document, and her daughters, Dorothy Crowder and Sarah Eliza, were, comparatively old ladies. Both were widows, and Dorothy had lost her husband, the first William Lee, in 1737, and the second, Richard Lee, in 1742. To these two daughters Elizabeth Taylor left her clothing, with the provision that it should be equally divided and that Dorothy should have first choice. The estate was equally divided, and the daughters had already been provided for. Only one grandson was mentioned in the will, George Douglas, old Elizabeth Taylor had at least four. That one grandson was William Lee, son of Dorothy by her first

husband. Let us remember his name and that he was alive and happy on May 12, 1771, when his grandfather signed the Declaration of Independence. His father had died thirty years before, and he himself had children, as we shall presently see.

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General Lee's DNA

The Lee DNA Genealogy Project of Virginia collected Y-DNA results from Lee males with unbroken patrilineal lines back to their earliest proven Lee ancestor. Out of hundreds of Y-DNA tests submitted to the project while Clinton Lee was its coordinator—a period of over ten years—only three lines successfully connected to the immigrant Col. Richard Lee.¹¹ With the assistance of Clinton Lee, Y-DNA results for two of the descendants of Richard Lee were made available to test Barton's claim. Both descendants were members of the Society of the Lees of Virginia.

The first DNA donor was a patrilineal descendant of Hancock Lee, son of Colonel Lee. The second was a patrilineal descendant of Charles Carter Lee, brother of Gen. Robert E. Lee. Both descendants took a 43-marker Y-DNA test through Relative Genetics (now AncestryDNA). Their resulting haplotypes matched, with 42 of 43 markers an exact match. Their haplogroup was I1a.

President Lincoln's Lee ancestry

For over a century, the parentage of Abraham Lincoln's mother Nancy Hanks was a mystery; it was only recently resolved through DNA evidence.¹² But even prior to this resolution most historians and genealogists seemed to agree that Nancy Hanks was the granddaughter of Joseph and Ann "Nanny" (Lee) Hanks. This relationship was confirmed by Abraham Lincoln himself in his June 1860 autobiographical notes, which included a mention of his mother's first cousin John Hanks.¹³ John was the grandson of Joseph and Ann (Lee) Hanks through their son William Hanks and his wife Elizabeth Hall.¹⁴

Ann (Lee) Hanks, grandmother of Nancy Hanks, was the daughter of William Lee (and an unknown wife) and granddaughter of William and Dorothy (Taylor?) Lee. Ann (Lee) Hanks is mentioned in the will of her great-grandmother Elizabeth Taylor, mother of Dorothy. Elizabeth refers to Ann as "my great granddaughter Ann



Lee daughter of my grandson Wm Lee.”¹⁵ In 1769 Ann's husband Joseph Hanks is listed in the final accounting of the estate of her father William Lee, who died in 1764: “To Joseph Hanks for his Legacy bequeathed his Wife by Elizabeth Taylor Decd.”¹⁶

This documentary evidence supports Abraham Lincoln's descent from William and Dorothy Lee, with no indication of a connection to the immigrant Richard Lee. As noted earlier, Barton himself admitted, “[T]here is apparently no way of finding out . . . the name of the father of that William Lee.” No supporting evidence has been found since Barton made that statement.

President Lincoln's DNA

In 2011, an article by Judy Kellar Fox in the *National Genealogical Society Quarterly* opened the door to finally resolving this issue.¹⁷ She presented Y-DNA evidence for three lines of descent from William and Dorothy (Taylor?) Lee through their sons William and Charles.

Since President Lincoln's great-great-grandfather William Lee,

father of Ann (Lee) Hanks, was a documented son of William and Dorothy, the Y-DNA results presented in Fox's article could be compared with the results of Richard Lee's documented patrilineal descendants to assess Barton's claim.

Two of the descents in Judy Fox's article were from patrilineal descendants of William and Dorothy's son Charles Lee. When the descendants took a 37-marker Y-DNA test from Family Tree DNA, their haplotypes matched exactly. Their tests also revealed an unsuspected match to a patrilineal descendant of William and Dorothy's son William Lee. However, this third person's 46-marker Y-DNA test was administered by a different company, Relative Genetics. To verify the third match, one of the Charles Lee descendants took the same 46-marker test from Relative Genetics. The result was another perfect match, proving that all three participants were descendants of brothers William and Charles Lee, sons of William and Dorothy Lee. Their haplogroup is R1b.

Conclusion

Lincoln's Lee family line is haplogroup R1b, while General Lee's family line is I1a. Not only did the haplotypes between the two Lee families not match, neither did the broader haplogroups. Since the two Lee families belong to different haplogroups, at a minimum any common ancestor would have lived thousands of years ago. Both documentary and DNA evidence has proved that President Abraham Lincoln's ancestor William Lee, husband of Dorothy, was not a grandson of General Robert E. Lee's ancestor Col. Richard Lee. In this case, as in many others, when documentary evidence is lacking, DNA evidence can often fill in the gaps and bring the truth to light. ♦

I am grateful to Clinton Lee and Nancy Royce whose help made this article possible. I am also grateful to those who contributed their Y-DNA so that this mystery could be solved.

NOTES

- ¹ N. W. Ayers and Sons *Directory of Newspapers and Periodicals* (Philadelphia: N. W. Ayers and Son), 1930, accessed on microfilm at the Newberry Library, Chicago; and William E. Barton, "Abraham Lincoln was a Lee," *Good Housekeeping*, January 1929, 20–21, 194, 196, 199.
- ² William E. Barton, *The Lineage of Lincoln* (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1929), 196–211.
- ³ Barton, "Abraham Lincoln was a Lee," [note 2], 20.
- ⁴ *Ibid.*, 199.
- ⁵ Clara McLaughlin Funai, *A Weaving* (Lynchburg, Va.: The J. P. Bell Company, 1977), 22.
- ⁶ Mary Taylor Brewer, *From Log Cabins to the White House: A History of the Taylor Family* (Wootton, Ky.: M.T. Brewer, 1985), 275–76.
- ⁷ Lyon Gardiner Tyler, *Barton and the Lineage of Lincoln: Claim that Lincoln Was Related to Lee Refuted*, 2nd ed. (Holdcraft, Va.: 1930), 7–8. Viewed on Archive.org.
- ⁸ Paul H. Verduin, "New Evidence Suggests Lincoln's Mother Born in Richmond County, Virginia," *Northern Neck of Virginia Historical Magazine*, 38 (December 1988): 4355. This article also discusses six candidates for Lincoln's maternal grandfather, including Elisha Lingan Hall, nephew of Richard Henry Lee and Francis Lightfoot Lee, both signers

- of the Declaration of Independence, and grandsons of Richard Lee and Letitia Corbin. See Christopher C. Child, "The Hanks DNA Study: I Was Wrong!," *American Ancestors* 17, no. 3 (Fall 2016): 55–57, for a brief summary of Hall's Lee ancestors.
- ⁹ Christopher Challenger Child, "The Maternal Ancestry of Abraham Lincoln: The Origins of Nancy (Hanks) Lincoln, A Study in Appalachian Genealogy," *New England Ancestors* 4, no. 1 (Winter 2003): 55 (note 13). Viewed on AmericanAncestors.org.
 - ¹⁰ Edmund Jennings Lee, *Lee of Virginia, 1642–1892: Biographical and Genealogical Sketches of the Descendants of Colonel Richard Lee* (Philadelphia: the author, 1895; repr., Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing Co., 1983).
 - ¹¹ Mike Gruss, "You're Related to Robert E. Lee? What a Coincidence . . .," *The Virginia Pilot*, March 28, 2009, (pilotonline.com/life/columns/article_bcaccacae9-8731-5c6d-8c88-6680d1241754.html; accessed 12/03/2020).
 - ¹² Suzanne W. Hallstrom, et. al., "Nancy Hanks Lincoln mtDNA Study—Unlocking the Secrets of Abraham Lincoln's Maternal Ancestry," *Hanks DNA Project*, (familytreedna.com/groups/hanks-dna-project/about/news; accessed 12/03/2020).
 - ¹³ Abraham Lincoln, *Autobiographical notes possibly written for John L. Scripps*, June 1860. Holograph manuscript. Robert Todd Lincoln Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, 8.
 - ¹⁴ Douglas L. Wilson and Rodney O. Davis, *Herndon's Informants: Letters, Interviews, and Statements about Abraham Lincoln* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1998), 779.
 - ¹⁵ Richmond Co., Virginia, Will Book 5: 531–32, Elizabeth Taylor, dated 11 May and proved 7 September 1747; FHL microfilm 33,677, item 3.
 - ¹⁶ Richmond Co., Virginia, Account Book 1:547, William Lee, dated 3 April 1769; FHL microfilm 33,679.
 - ¹⁷ Judy Kellar Fox, "Documents and DNA Identify a Little-Known Lee Family in Virginia," *National Genealogical Society Quarterly*, 99, no. 2 (2011): 85–96.

