



LIHO 9329

The Road to Lincoln

“Handsome, but not pretentious . . . neatly but not ostentatiously furnished . . .” Those were the words of a reporter from the *New York Evening Post* describing Abraham Lincoln’s Springfield, Illinois, home in 1860. The man the reporter saw that day, and the place where he lived, reveal Lincoln as he really was—ambitious and hard-working, but very down to earth. It’s hard to imagine a legend as just a regular guy, but visitors to that same home today, now the Lincoln Home National Historic Site, get that sense through the artifacts of his daily life—the mahogany veneered horsehair rocker he relaxed in at the end of the day, his pigeon-holed writing desk, even the khaki-colored box cushion he sat on when traveling. “This is where he was preparing for all of the wonderful things he did in

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Washington,” says Susan Haake, curator for the site. “He didn’t just show up there.” For many, the idea of Abraham Lincoln conjures up images of a little boy growing up in a one-room cabin or a gangly, somber-faced 55-year-old sitting in the Oval Office, struggling to hold the nation together. What people probably don’t often think about are the in-between years in Springfield, raising a family and laying the foundations for his path to the presidency. As the city’s website boasts, it’s the “home of Abraham Lincoln,” where resides the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum, his old law office, and even his account ledger on display in a downtown bank. To celebrate the 200th anniversary of the president’s birth, thousands are touring the Quaker brown Greek Revival structure to get a glimpse of his life with Mary Todd Lincoln and their four sons. But with many of the site’s 1,200 exhibited objects—and a virtual house tour—now in a new online exhibit produced by the National Park Service Museum Management Program in collaboration with the site, anyone can get an inside look. He was born in Kentucky in 1809 and spent most of his formative years in Indiana, before the Lincoln family moved to Decatur, Illinois, in 1830. From there he relocated to the riverside town of New Salem, where he held a variety of odd jobs, studied law, and was elected to the Illinois General Assembly as a member of the Whig Party. In 1837, after

LEFT: Commemorative ribbons were popular in the years after the assassination. RIGHT: A replica of the life-sized bust that Leonard Volk, a Chicago sculptor, designed in 1860.



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getting his law degree, he moved 20 miles away to Springfield to join the law firm of John T. Stuart as a junior partner—the same year the city became the state capital, a decision for which Lincoln was largely responsible. “It was the place to be,” says Harold Holzer, a noted Lincoln historian and co-chairman of the Abraham Lincoln Bicentennial Commission. “It was a bustling, growing city filled with lawyers and politicians; the seat of government, a fine place to raise a family, and a perfect place from which to launch a national political career.” But despite being busy with legislation and clients, Lincoln’s first years in the city were probably rather lonely. He periodically suffered from depression (which plagued him all his life), and hadn’t met Mary yet. After they wed in 1842, the couple lived in a boarding house their first year before purchasing the corner lot at Eighth and Jackson Street for \$1,200 in 1844. Originally a simple white one and a half-story cottage, Lincoln expanded it to a two-story to accommodate a family of five.

Today the house, managed by the National Park Service since 1972 and one of six park units associated with Lincoln, looks just as it did in his time, right down to the tree out front, replaced every few years to match the height of the specimen in a photo taken when the family still lived there. Because of the hundreds, if not thousands, of photos taken of the house from as far back as the 1860s, it’s no mystery what it has looked like over the years, and several historic photos in the web exhibit serve as eyewitnesses to its changes. In addition to Lin-

BEFORE LINCOLN GREW A BEARD, EVERY DAY STARTED WITH A SHAVE IN FRONT OF HIS ORNATE OVAL WALL MIRROR.

coln’s house, 15 neighboring structures have been restored and the pebble-covered streets blocked off from traffic. “It transports you back in time,” says Philip B. Kunhardt, Lincoln historian and author of the newly published *Looking for Lincoln*.

Much in the house today—restored to its 1860 appearance both inside and out—was not owned by the Lincolns. Only about 50 artifacts are tied to the family. Haake says they sold or gave away many belongings before moving, and the rest they took along. A neighboring family, who rented the house and bought many of its items, later lost them in the Great Chicago Fire of 1871. The house does boast some prized furniture placed in storage, but almost everything else is either a replica or authentic to the era. One clue to how the Lincolns decorated is a set of illustrations of several rooms done for Frank Leslie’s *Illustrated Newspaper* shortly after the presidential election.

Mary designed the decor in a fashion called “harmony through contrast,” based on opposing colors and patterns, with the front parlor’s floral maroon carpet a foil for light floral wallpaper and orange curtains. “It was the style at the time,” says Haake. The web exhibit features both a current photo and a Frank Leslie drawing of the parlor, considered the nicest room in the house, for entertaining guests.

It was where, on May 19, 1860, members from the Republican National Convention asked Lincoln to run for president. Scattered about is a mix of furniture styles.

While Mary later developed a habit of overspending, the home in Springfield was modest yet elegant. “She wanted the house to look fashionable, but she also had a practical streak,” Haake says, pointing to the suite of mahogany horsehair furniture. “It looked nice, but it was long-lasting.” It had to be with young boys running around and frequent visits from politicians and friends. Three of Mary’s sisters lived in town, so there was always family dropping by. Several chairs are scattered around the 14-room house. One of the more distinctive is a circa 1840 hall chair that the site’s staff have dubbed the Q-bert chair because of its 3-D pattern of multi-colored velvet blocks.

The Lincolns sometimes hosted as many as 150 to 200 guests, but when they weren’t entertaining it was everyday middle-class living, illustrated by objects such as Mary’s sewing gadgets and the children’s toys like marbles and wooden alphabet blocks. Lincoln was often not at home, visiting courthouses along the Eighth Judicial Circuit or at his office a few blocks away. But he was very much a family man. Before Lincoln grew a beard, every day started with a shave in front of his ornate oval wall mirror. Then he tended to household tasks such as milking the cow and fetching firewood. Lincoln loved spending time with his children Robert, Edward,



LEFT: Lincoln shaved in this mirror every morning before an 11-year-old girl suggested a beard would help his looks for the presidential election. Women would persuade their husbands to vote for him, she wrote. **ABOVE:** The front parlor, for entertaining guests, was the nicest room in house, where on May 19, 1860, Republican National Convention members asked Lincoln to run for president.

Willie, and Tad. Both parents doted on their sons, sharing a lenient style, unusual for the times, of letting the boys run around with little discipline. Some complained that they were spoiled, but no one could say they weren't loved. "Love is the chain whereby to lock a child to its parents," was Lincoln's philosophy. They had some of the neighborhood's most interesting toys, such as a wooden stereoscope that showed 3-D photographs of far off locales like Niagara Falls and the Taj Mahal. Friends liked visiting because there was always the possibility of a cookie or donut from Mary. Sadly, only Robert, the oldest child, lived to adulthood. Possibly the hardest year of the president's life in Springfield was 1850, when his second son, Edward, died at the age of three—an experience he would relive again in 1862, while at the White House, when 11-year-old Willie died. His fourth son, Tad, died six years after the assassination.

When asked if Lincoln had any hobbies, Mary replied "cats." He was a tremendous animal lover. The web exhibit features a photo of



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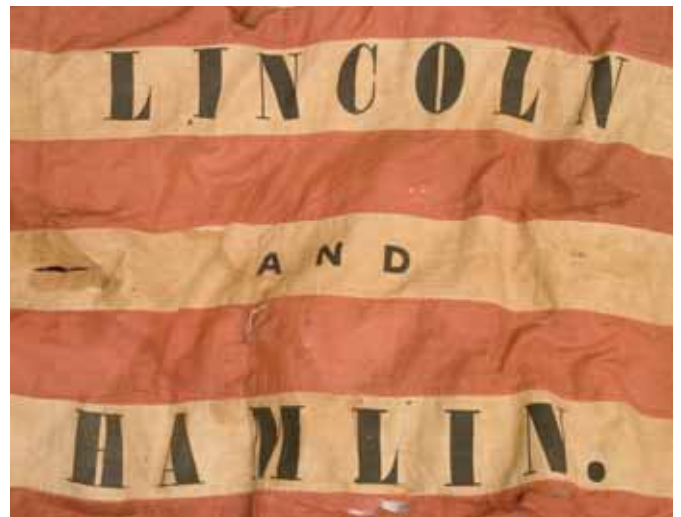
the family's flop-eared mutt, Fido. Afraid the journey to Washington would be too much for him, the Lincolns left Fido behind with a neighbor, along with a sofa for his exclusive use. Historian Doris Kearns Goodwin says Lincoln was "uncommonly tenderhearted." He once returned half a mile to free a pig stuck in the mud that he had passed. He possessed enormous empathy, unable to stand suffering, human or otherwise. The quality was one of his strongest traits in the White House. "One of the secrets of his presidency was his ability to connect to other people," Kunhardt says. He had regular visiting hours as president; anyone could go see him. His transparency turned opponents like Frederick Douglass into supporters. "You couldn't meet him in person and not experience his authenticity and decency," Kunhardt says.

Many of the artifacts merely create a context, suggesting how people lived in the Victorian age. The elegant brass candelabums in the back parlor weren't just for decoration, but a necessity for light. The necklace and stick pin displayed in Mary's bedroom (she and Lin-

coln had separate rooms) are fine examples of hair jewelry popular in the 1800s. Mary was one of the most fashion-forward first ladies, long before Jackie O or Michelle Obama.

Extremely intelligent, Mary could be friendly and quite charming. However, owing to her mood swings, temper, and frivolous spending, she wasn't very well liked. In later years, she was temporarily institutionalized for insanity, although many historians doubt that she was truly insane. Her marriage remains one of the most debated in presidential history. Did he love her, and if so, why? Did she love him? In her youth, she had vowed to marry a future president; was she only interested in him because of his promising career?

"I think theirs was a typical marriage with ups and downs," says Jason Emerson, author of *The Madness of Mary Lincoln* and a former ranger at the Lincoln Home National Historic Site. "A lot of people forget that Lincoln wasn't a model husband either," he adds, pointing out his tendency to spend long hours away working. At first



glance, the two didn't have much in common. He had an impoverished childhood; she was the daughter of a wealthy Kentucky banker and grew up in a slave-owning household. She had twelve years of formal education while he was mostly self-taught. Her family did not approve of the marriage because he lacked the means to keep her in

ABOVE LEFT: The family's beloved Fido in the first photo of a presidential dog, taken shortly before the Lincolns left for Washington, leaving him with neighbors. **ABOVE:** Hand-sewn campaign banner, with reversed American flag, from the 1860 presidential election. **RIGHT:** Stand for serving Mary's famous white cake, which Lincoln said was the best thing he ever ate.



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an upper-class lifestyle. When they did get married, basic household duties like cooking and cleaning were completely alien to her.

But she wholeheartedly embraced her role as a wife and later, mother. Lincoln loved her white cake with almonds, a dessert Mary often served on a glass cake stand shown in the virtual exhibit. The recipe—created by a famed French baker who once visited her hometown of Lexington—is still sought out today. Despite her southern family’s devotion to the Confederacy, Mary possessed a deep affinity for both the Union and the abolitionist movement, although it estranged her from relatives.

And she was one of Lincoln’s most ardent supporters in the presidential run. After he learned the election results at a Springfield telegraph office, he quickly left for home. “There is a little woman at our house who is probably more interested in this dispatch than I am,” was his response to well-wishers. “She was a great encourager and reinforced his sense of self-worth,” Emerson says. One of the notable

What might he have accomplished? Even 200 years later, it is still a mystery. Although looking at the breadth of research on the man, one has to wonder how that could be. It has been said that only Jesus, Shakespeare, and the Virgin Mary have had more biographies published about them. Carl Sandburg wrote an epic six-volume set on the man in the 1920s and ’30s, and new tomes are still being written—many, even today, telling stories still untold. In *The Physical Lincoln*, John Soto suggests that the president was dying of a rare genetic cancer. Emerson’s new book, *Lincoln the Inventor*, explores the patent holder who invented a device to buoy vessels over shoals. Emerson, who has spent hours poring over some of the original documentation of Lincoln’s life, says many writers just haven’t dug deep enough. “The subject of Lincoln hasn’t been exhausted yet,” he says.

Perhaps for future Lincoln authors, the Lincoln Home National Historic Site will serve as a source of inspiration, as it has for others. In 1952, former Illinois governor Adlai Stevenson, then a presiden-

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items from the presidential campaign is a hand-sewn circa 1860 Lincoln and Hamlin election banner. Designed as a U.S. flag, it stood as a call for unity in a nation divided. For the Lincolns, it also signaled the end of their time in Springfield. The couple invited 700 people to their farewell gala. It’s not hard to imagine Mary resting in her splat back rocking chair afterwards, tired feet perched on her embroidered footstool. Some of Lincoln’s last words to the city were uttered in a farewell speech at the train depot on the gray February morning in 1861 when he left, unknowingly, forever: “My friends, no one, not in my situation, can appreciate my feeling of sadness at this parting. To this place, and the kindness of these people, I owe everything.” Would he have returned? “It is hard to know,” Holzer says. “He told some friends he would, but promised his wife he wouldn’t—but I think he loved it while he lived there.”

While the Lincoln centennial led to the minting of the Lincoln penny and the building of the Lincoln Memorial, the bicentennial is raising the question of Lincoln’s “unfinished work”—the Gettysburg Address, one of his most famous speeches. He asked his audience not to think the casualties of the Civil War had been in vain, and challenged them to continue the work “which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced . . . It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us . . . that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom—and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.”



tial nominee, got into the house one evening to meditate in Lincoln’s mahogany veneered horsehair rocker. He later told a friend he felt “a deep calm.”

contact points **web** NPS Online Exhibit and Teaching with Museum Collections Lesson Plan www.nps.gov/history/museum/exhibits/liho/index.html
NPS Lincoln Bicentennial Site www.nps.gov/pub.aff/lincoln200/overview.html
Lincoln Bicentennial Site www.lincoln200.gov Illinois Lincoln Bicentennial Site www.lincoln200.net

LEFT: A circa 1840 high-backed hall chair with upholstery comprised of 31 different velvets in a distinctive tumbling block pattern. The Lincolns gave it away when they moved to Washington. **ABOVE LEFT:** These empire-style dining chairs are part of a favorite suite of horsehair furniture the family saved in storage before moving. They feature mahogany veneer and shield-shaped removable seats. **ABOVE:** A low rocker with flowers carved into the top rail and a plush rose-colored seat.