

Remembering Abraham Lincoln: History and Myth

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ABRAHAM LINCOLN IS PERHAPS THE MOST MYTHOLOGIZED FIGURE in American history. In the years following his death, the nation's memory of him assumed two rather distinct images: on one hand, the historic Lincoln—husband and father, lawyer, politician, and president; and on the other, the larger-than-life Lincoln—the mythic presidential god, the democratic ideal tragically sacrificed at the dawn of national peace. Other than such tributes as town, street, and highway names and the five-dollar bill, one important means of remembering Lincoln has been to set aside sites commemorating various stages of his life. Besides those historic places administered by state, local, or private interests, several sites honoring Lincoln exclusively are now in the National Park System. A brief survey of the national park units reveals how each reflects the historical or the mythical images of Lincoln.

Three of the Lincoln sites present a generally straightforward historical portrayal of the man. At the Lincoln Home, in Springfield, Illinois, one learns details of his legal and political careers and his friendships and family life. Not much in evidence here are the mythic, larger-than-life images of Abraham Lincoln.

At Ford's Theatre, in Washington, interpretation also focuses on the historic Lincoln—accounts of his attending the theater, the assassination itself, and Booth's escape—obviously a very brief period in Lincoln's life. Although the assassination served as a catalyst, with martyrdom providing much of the emotional power of the ensuing mythic perceptions of Lincoln, only recently has interpretation at Ford's

Theatre dealt to any extent at all with the mythic Lincoln imagery.

The Petersen House, across the street from Ford's Theatre, is presented through a straight historical approach. One learns of the night's events—the intense drama and the frantic activities of friends and associates while Lincoln lay unconscious, then died quietly the next morning.

Barely evident here are elements of the mythic Lincoln associated with his death. The assassination was cataclysmic to those present (as well as to much of the nation itself); and, allegedly, in the moments following Lincoln's death, came the famous statement attributed to Secretary of War Edwin M. Stanton, that now Lincoln "belongs to the ages." At least in retrospect this statement served as a kind of prelude—a sym-

bolic transition, ultimately leading to the mythical perceptions of the man.



In marked contrast to places emphasizing the historic person, three other sites feature impressive memorials which openly suggest the heroic Lincoln, the civic god who saved the Union, then gave his own life. They tell us more about the nation's veneration of Lincoln than about the historic individual himself.

On a hill on what was once the Thomas Lincoln farm, near Hodgenville, Kentucky, stands an imposing granite and marble temple built in the early 20th century in a classical Greek design. Within this temple is enshrined a one-room log cabin, the "traditional" Abraham Lincoln birthplace cabin. In the decades after the assassination, the birthplace farm became a sacred, hallowed site for many Americans, who in time purchased this land and erected the temple—clearly a tribute to a god-like president, the nation's savior born in humble circumstances.

The purported birthplace cabin has an unusual history. Years after the assassination, it was shipped around the country to be exhibited at numerous fairs, intermittently stored here and there, and then placed in the newly built temple a few years after the centennial of Lincoln's birth. However, detailed scholarly research has since shown that the enshrined cabin is very likely not the actual structure in which Lincoln was born—the logs are probably not the same. What is more, in order to fit the architect's design of the temple's interior space, two to three feet of the length of the cabin were sawed off so it would fit inside the temple. Thus, with these complications, the hallowed qualities of the structure may be somewhat diminished.

There is, moreover, some evidence suggesting that during storage between exhibits, the logs of the Lincoln cabin may have gotten mixed in with logs from the Jefferson Davis birthplace cabin—as both structures were at times exhibited at the same fairs. If true, this certainly would confuse the matter of hallowedness—a situation even more confounding if *neither* cabin is authentic, which indeed may be the case. In any event, the Abraham Lincoln birthplace cabin and the temple stand as symbols venerating a president and the potential of the common person—an affirmation that any one of us may aspire to the nation's highest office.

Other features at the birthplace include the remains of a venerated spring and tree, with which the young Abraham may have had direct contact (even though his family left this farm when he was only two years old). The spring, recessed into the hillside, has been landscaped with native stone and resembles a grotto. A stone bench invites contemplation at the spring. Nearby, is the preserved stump of the ancient and revered "Boundary Oak," which had to be cut down in the 1980s due to disease. Not far from the stump, a young white oak tree, apparent descendant of the Boundary Oak, is carefully nurtured as the designated successor.



The Lincoln Boyhood National Memorial, in southern Indiana, site of his home from 1816 to 1830, even more strongly reflects the deification of Lincoln. The site's overall landscaping, based on a design by Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr., is in the shape of a cross. Located at the top of the cross is a semicircular memorial building (ca. 1943) with, on one end, the "Lincoln Chapel," and, on the other, a memorial room honoring Nancy Hanks Lincoln, the president's sainted mother. As originally

constructed, the chapel and memorial room were connected by a long covered walkway, known as the "cloister."

In bas-relief on the front of the cloister are sculpted limestone panels depicting major periods of Lincoln's life—the Kentucky, Indiana, Illinois, and Washington years. The central panel includes the famous pronouncement, "And now he belongs to the ages." This panel also graphically depicts the apotheosis—the emergence of the new American saint—a robed Lincoln ascending toward the heavens.

Along the main axis of the landscaped cross is located the grave of Nancy Hanks Lincoln. It was the mother's unmarked grave—and not specifically the site of the president's boyhood home—that first attracted people to this place in the years after the assassination. In 1872 a permanent marker was placed at the grave. Ultimately, this site became a hallowed shrine to which annual Lincoln Day pilgrimages were made.

Of all the Lincoln sites, it is here, in the woods of southern Indiana, that the mother has received special veneration—at times as great as that given her martyred son—a reverence that suggests a parallel to the adoration of the Virgin Mary. For years this entire memorial park was in fact named in honor of Nancy Hanks Lincoln. But in 1962 the memorial's designation was officially changed to "Lincoln Boyhood," reflecting a decreased emphasis on the mother, in favor of the son.

Leading from near the mother's grave toward the site where the Lincoln cabin is believed to have once stood is the Trail of Twelve Stones—a striking analogy to the Stations of the Cross. Along the trail are stones taken from sites associated with Lincoln, for instance a stone from Gettysburg Battlefield and another from the White House. Recessed areas

along the trail allow for quiet contemplation.

The trail leads to a bronze casting (done in Munich, Germany, in the mid-1930s) of the sill logs and hearth stones of a typical 19th century pioneer cabin such as the Lincolns might have had. This monument is another reminder of Abraham Lincoln's humble origins, and it stands at the opposite end of the landscaped cross from the bas-relief depiction of his life and apotheosis.

The Boyhood Memorial is replete with religious symbolism. But over the years, National Park Service managers of this shrine allowed changes to some of the symbolic features. The cross-shaped landscape design was de-emphasized and not maintained in a recognizable way, and six of the stones were relocated along the trail.

In addition, the memorial building was partially converted for office and interpretive use. This included changing the cloister from a covered walkway into a fully enclosed space, with an exhibit area, theater, administrative offices, and restrooms added to the rear of the building. More than any other alteration at the boyhood site, this 1960s conversion of the cloister—from what was solely a memorial structure (built in heart-felt reverence by the people of Indiana) to a largely administrative building—revealed the National Park Service's astonishing lack of understanding of this site and its various symbolic components. Altogether it is a glaring example of mismanagement of a memorialized historic site.

In the last decade, however, in recognition of the value once placed on these symbols, more enlightened Park Service managers returned the stones and restored the landscaping to honor Olmsted's original design. Only the memorial building remains substantially altered from the appearance and function originally intended by the Indiana Lincoln Union and the State of Indiana, which together built the structure.



Overall, after some restoration at the Boyhood Home, the icons at both the Birthplace and the Boyhood Home are largely intact, except for the cloister. These artifacts express the reverential attitudes which earlier generations of Americans held for Abraham Lincoln. Nevertheless, at both sites the interpretation (through films, exhibits, brochures, etc.) veers away from a direct, substantive encounter with the mythic Lincoln, and instead concentrates on the historic Lincoln—mostly the experiences of his family in frontier Kentucky and Indiana.

This focus on the historic Lincoln is particularly evident at the Boyhood Home, with the interpretive efforts centered around a log cabin moved from elsewhere in Indiana and placed near the foot of the landscaped cross, not far from the bronze casting. Truly a very old structure, the cabin (along with its associated outbuildings) is used to present a living history interpretation of farm life during Lincoln's time. In the late 1960s this attempt at historical realism was introduced into a landscape of otherwise largely symbolic features (features which at that time were being either purposely altered or largely neglected).

Today's public may be much less comfortable than earlier generations with the overtly worshipful aspects of the birthplace and boyhood sites. The history of the "real" Lincoln seems preferred to the psychological and historical realities of the mythic Lincoln. Under these circumstances, the monumental religious features of the Birthplace and Boyhood Home may appear rather anachronistic, and may not be readily understood by the contemporary visitor. Indeed, to an unwary traveler the first glimpse of the stately granite and marble Birthplace tem-

ple in the backwoods of Kentucky may come as a shock.



On the other hand, in Washington, the Lincoln Memorial—which stems from the same general era of veneration as the icons at the birthplace and boyhood sites—gives evidence that the symbolic strength of the mythic Lincoln very much endures. Crowning the west end of the Mall, the Memorial is the artistic and architectural apex of America's many tributes to the Civil War president. Completed in 1922, the heroic statue of the brooding, compassionate Father Abraham enshrined in a white-marble temple is unequivocal in its portrayal of the deified Lincoln. It is today the most noted repository of the public's memory of Lincoln. Here more than anywhere else, the mythic Lincoln image sustains much of its old power—God the Father, the deity enthroned.

Nevertheless, in a small exhibit room to one side of the Memorial's stairway, National Park Service interpretation of the site has traditionally focused on such matters as construction of the building—the "marvels of engineering" approach (size, weight, etc.)—avoiding any engagement with the mythic Lincoln image. Only recently, an exhibit was installed which discusses to some extent the public image of Lincoln, as well as use of the Memorial for civil rights and related kinds of gatherings—a use fostered and nurtured by the Memorial's symbolic power.

Overall, at all three sites portraying the mythic Lincoln the National Park Service has felt far more comfortable with routine historical detail. While it is in charge of sites exemplifying the complex civic religion surrounding Lincoln, the Park Service is moving only very slowly toward a better understanding of the mythic Father Abraham.

On the interior walls of the Lincoln Memorial are inscriptions of the Gettysburg Address and the Second Inaugural Address. Lincoln's very ability to understand and to articulate eloquently the meaning of the historic events engulfing his generation in turn contributed to his being elevated beyond ordinary history and into mythic status. Myth is often derived from history—in a sense it is the other side of the coin, a different perception of the same events. In the years since his death, Lincoln became so mythologized

that the myth itself has become historically important.

Normally, biographies of Abraham Lincoln end with his assassination. But a full understanding of Lincoln must go beyond that. Afterward, his mythic image emerged as a vivid, heroic persona, growing in scope and complexity until, regardless of any shortcomings Lincoln may actually have had, he became a kind of moral standard, a symbol of virtue, justice, and decency that has affected generations of Americans.

