

Land of Lincoln – A Bicentennial Pilgrimage



By Graceann Macleod

I grew up on stories of Abraham Lincoln, and he is constantly intriguing to me. He was an extraordinarily complex man; imperfect (as all humans are) and placed in History at a time of climactic change. I leave it to the biographers to discuss Lincoln's merits and shortcomings, and could read about him for the rest of my life without getting through the stack of books devoted to him. My goal here is to talk specifically about visiting Springfield, Illinois – the city that was his home for the happiest and most peaceful part of his adult life. Lincoln is celebrating his 200th Birthday in 2009, and as you can imagine, sites with a tie to the 16th President are pulling out all the stops in order to offer interesting interpretive programs in commemoration. Springfield is no exception.

A Little Bit of History

Lincoln moved to Springfield in 1837, the same year that he was admitted to the Bar. In 1842, he married Mary Todd, and it was here, in the only house that Lincoln ever owned, that their four sons were born. Abraham Lincoln departed Springfield in February 1861 in order to take his place as the 16th President of the United States. Due to John Wilkes Booth, he would never see his home city, the place he “owed everything,” again.

The Presidential Library and Museum

Our first stop was the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum. New to the City, this is a fitting tribute to the man and his life, with constantly-changing exhibits covering the life and times of Lincoln and his family. The idea is to give visitors of all ages a Lincoln “experience” using modern technology and historic artifacts. There were multi-media presentations galore, but what fascinated me most were the hand-written copy of the Gettysburg Address, the evening gloves that Lincoln was carrying on April 14, 1865, and the pen used to sign the Emancipation Proclamation. There is a great deal here for the young folk, too. An exhibit called Mrs. Lincoln's Attic gives kids an opportunity to play with a model of the Lincoln Home, try on clothes and perform chores from the 1800s, and play with reproductions of historic toys.

We attended several multi-media presentations which were compelling, not only from a performance standpoint but from the perspective of “how did they do that?” The most impressive was entitled “Ghosts of the Library,” featuring special holographic images and “ghosts” to illustrate why the study of Lincoln history and artifacts is so important. It was clearly geared to younger members of the audience, but I freely admit that I was enthralled and I am **long** past the age of school trips.

Also on the site is the Presidential Library. The Library maintains the world's largest collection of Lincoln-related documents, artifacts and books. Visitors are welcome whether they are studying Lincoln or their own Illinois family history.

The Lincoln Home National Historic Site

Very near the Presidential Library and Museum is the ever-growing complex, now truly a neighborhood, with Abraham Lincoln's home as its centerpiece. The Lincoln home, restored to its 1860 appearance, shows what life was like for Lincoln as a husband, father, and politician. The tours are conducted by National Park Service Park Rangers and are, astonishingly, free of charge.



We were able to tour other exhibits in the complex on a self-guided basis, and quite enjoyed visiting the Arnold House and its “If These Walls Could Talk: Saving an Old House” installation, which shows the preservation and restoration process of a historic house. Restoration is certainly no job for the faint-hearted.

We began and ended our tour at the Visitor Center, which contained several artifacts and an informative film, and in general was a friendly, informative spot to have a quiet conversation with the Rangers.

Tomb of an American Martyr

Though there are many other locations of note in and around Springfield that we would have loved to visit (the Old Courthouse, New Salem, the Lincoln & Herndon Law Offices, to name just three), there simply wasn't time to do it all. We made sure, however, to leave ample room in our schedule to visit the most moving of the Lincoln sites, the tomb at Oak Ridge Cemetery. Laid to rest here are the President, along with his wife and three of his four sons (the eldest, Robert, is at Arlington National Cemetery). As you might suspect, this is a beautiful and peaceful place, with quiet and solitude that belies the stories of threats to hold Lincoln's remains for ransom. For the safety and sanctity of the President's final resting

place, Robert Lincoln requested that his father be disinterred and reburied under ten feet of concrete in 1901.



In a fairly reflective mood, we made our way back to the car and bid a reluctant farewell to Springfield, Illinois. I can see why Lincoln found such contentment here. We met lovely, warm, welcoming people, saw many interesting things, and are looking forward to visiting again.

Recommended Websites:

- Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum: http://www.alplm.org/intro_0a_content.html
- Lincoln Home National Historic Site <http://www.nps.gov/liho/>
- Lincoln Tomb – Oak Ridge Cemetery <http://showcase.netins.net/web/creative/lincoln/sites/tomb.htm>

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