

## REMEMBERING ABRAHAM LINCOLN 125 YEARS LATER

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Abraham Lincoln is perhaps the most mythologized figure in American history. In the years following his death, the nation's ongoing memory of him assumed two rather distinct images: the historic Lincoln (lawyer, politician, president, husband, and father), and the larger-than-life Lincoln, the mythic presidential god, the democratic ideal tragically slain at the dawn of national peace. Several sites honoring Lincoln exclusively are now in the national park system; and a brief survey reveals how each reflects the historical or the mythical images of Lincoln.

Three of the Lincoln sites present a straightforward historical portrayal of the man. At the Lincoln Home, in Springfield, IL, one learns details of his legal and political career and his family life. After the assassination, such details were seen in an heroic perspective which served well the mythic Lincoln imagery: the shrewd, yet compassionate prairie lawyer—the railsplitter-turned prophet who foresaw the moral and political implications of slavery.

At Ford's Theatre, in Washington, interpretation focuses on the historic Lincoln—accounts of his attending the theater, the assassination itself, and Booth's escape. Not apparent at Ford's Theatre is the mythic Lincoln imagery—even though the assassination became a touchstone: martyrdom provided much of the emotional power of the ensuing mythic perceptions of Lincoln.

The Petersen House, across the street from Ford's Theatre, is similarly presented through

a straight historical approach. One learns of the night's events—the intense drama and the frantic activities of other individuals while Lincoln himself lay unconscious, then quietly died in the morning.

Not evident here are elements of the mythic Lincoln associated with his dying. The assassination seemed cataclysmic to those present; and, in the moments following Lincoln's death, Secretary of War Edwin M. Stanton made the famous pronouncement that now Lincoln "belongs to the ages." In effect this was the first suggestion of the deification of Lincoln—a symbolic transition from the historical to the mythical perceptions of the man.

By contrast at three other sites impressive memorial structures openly reflect earlier perceptions of the mythic, larger-than-life Lincoln. At the Lincoln Birthplace, in Kentucky, stands a Greek temple, built of pink granite and marble in the early 20th century. The "traditional" Lincoln birthplace cabin is enshrined within the temple, clearly a tribute to a god-like president. (More recent research has shown that the cabin is not authentic.) Other religious relics at this site include the remains of a "sacred" tree and spring. Yet interpretation of the birthplace is generally matter-of-fact, dealing with the historic Lincoln and his family.

In Indiana, the Lincoln Boyhood Home (once a true shrine to which annual "pilgrimages" were made) strongly reflects the deification of Lincoln. The site's landscaping is designed in the shape of a cross; at the memorial building are the "Lincoln Chapel" and a sculpture depicting a robed Lincoln ascending toward the heavens. Nearby is the Trail of the Twelve Stones—a striking analogy to the Stations of the Cross. Along this trail are stones taken from sites associated with Lincoln.

While the religious symbols here express earlier perceptions of the mythic Lincoln, interpretation of the site generally does not deal with the mythical aspects. Rather it dwells on the historic Lincoln, mostly his boyhood years in frontier Indiana.

Finally, the Lincoln Memorial, in Washington, is the artistic and architectural apex of America's many tributes to Lincoln. Dedicated in 1922, the heroic-sized statue of the brooding, compassionate Father Abraham enshrined in a large, white-marble temple is unequivocal in its portrayal of the mythic, deified Lincoln. Nevertheless, the interpretation mainly focuses on construction of the memorial, avoiding any substantive explanation of the mythic Lincoln image.

On the memorial's interior walls are inscriptions of the Gettysburg Address and Lin-

coln's 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. He became so mythologized that the myth itself has become historically significant. Although diminished somewhat today, the symbolic Lincoln has played an important and influential role in the past 125 years.

Myth is often derived from history—in a sense it is the other side of the coin, a different perception of the same events. National park areas certainly represent both sides of the coin, but the Service seems more comfortable with historical details and has yet to fully come to terms with the mythic Father Abraham.