The Strange Case Of The Lincoln Boyhood National Memorial

Lincoln Boyhood National Memorial

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The religious symbols are there, but obscured and-or ignored, as if they had no meaning of any particular value. Inquiries I made repeatedly about this policy have prompted only vague responses or outright denial. One former park employee I talked with by phone even denied the memorial’s Christian aspects, telling me that those features “just happened that way.”

Most of the Service’s manipulations took place during the decade-long tenure of the first two superintendents, well before statutorily based protection of noteworthy structures in national parks had begun to be seriously implemented throughout the park system. It has been my observation in more recent decades that pre-existing memorial features in National Park Service areas are almost always preserved. And current [2006] Park Service officials management policies state that such structures “will not be altered, relocated, obscured, or removed.”

The many changes made by the Service at the memorial since the 1930s have greatly altered the way in which Abraham Lincoln is portrayed and explained to the visiting public. The living-history farm site—the park’s most prominent education attraction—now includes virtually an entire farmstead: the log cabin, plus fences, outbuildings, gardens, fields, and even livestock. In peak season, park staff in period costumes work the land, mind the cabin, and tend the animals while explaining to visitors early 19th century farm life and its influence on Lincoln. Partly justified by the desire to reach out to children (for instance, the making of corn-cob dolls has at times been featured), the living-history farmsted has become a popular favorite.

One of the most compelling figures in American history, Lincoln had common, hardships origins and an open acceptance of that aspect of his life—towgether, from his time to ours, have contributed to his accessibility in the public mind. “If I don’t believe the life-stewarding, spruced up and sanitized well beyond what Lincoln experienced, contributes to a better understanding of the man and his meaning to the American public. Having seen many Park Service living-history presentations, I have, with few exceptions, not been able to shake the impression that they tend to be entertaining, but rarely probe deep enough to increase the public’s comprehension of the historical meaning and importance of a person or place.

Furthermore, the living-history farm gives an overall impression of a kind of bucolic fantasy—even though farming’s influence on Lincoln was to teach him that he wanted no more farming. By the time he left Indiana for Illinois he had had enough of the unrelenting toil. Although he labored hard, some Indiana neighbors believed Lincoln spent too much time with books when he should have been working. But his emerging ambition required literary and book learning. Biographer Douglas L. Wilson has stated that Lincoln had read so much “because he had decided very early that he didn’t want to be a farmer.”

Recently commending in a scholarly journal on the purpose of the Christian features, the park’s current chief of interpretation and recreation managemen acknowledged the boyhood memorial’s “religious atmosphere created by the park’s physical form,” and noted the “churchform arrangement” of the alve. He
also recognized the “strong spiritual imagery and solemn atmosphere that Olmsted deemed necessary for best presenting the story of Lincoln in Indiana.” As well, an earlier cultural landscape report commissioned by the Park Service plainly recognized the religious aspects of the boyhood memorial.

Nevertheless, park management persists with its traditional approach: the living-history farm, along with educational exhibits, park literature, ranger programs, and a fifteen-minute film, which comprise the bulk of the Service’s interpretation of Lincoln’s Indiana years.

For more than a half-century the National Park Service has ignored the opportunity to engage the public with the defiled, mythical Abraham Lincoln through addressing such matters as how the park’s Christian symbols are, in effect, an attempt to come to terms with the loss of Lincoln, sanctify the meaning of his life, and assert his salvation—in essence, to interpret how the symbols reflect the Great Emancipator’s enduring status in American civil religion.

The obscured religious features are much more than mere ghosts from a deeply patriotic past, as Lincoln’s veneration is truly an ongoing phenomenon, particularly strong today during the Civil War sesquicentennial.

And there is no end in sight. It seems altogether fitting and proper to restore into clear focus the memorial’s Christian symbols: They connect directly to the mythical, folkloric Father Abraham, who once labored hard, educated himself, and grew into maturity on this Indiana farmland. Why obscure the park’s very symbols that collectively tell us Lincoln belongs to the ages?

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16 RWS, phone conversation with a former park employee, December 12, 2012.


21 Douglas L. Wilson, Honor’s Voice, 54-58; 103-104; quote on page 58.


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