

U.S. Soldier's Home & Lincoln

It's typical for the president to get away from the White House from time to time, but how many presidents relocated to a U.S. Soldier's Home or lived on the grounds of a military cemetery? Some of our earlier presidents had homes in close proximity to the Capitol, which made trips home practical, even without the means we have today. But what did our early presidents do when they were not from the area? President Lincoln's escape from the White House was not a ranch or beach house, but rather a simple cottage located on the grounds of the U.S. Soldier's Home, three miles north of the Capitol. It subsequently became known as President Lincoln's Cottage'. The house and its accompanying 200 acres were donated to the federal government in 1851, by local bank owner George Washington Riggs Jr., for the purpose of establishing the nation's first Soldier's Home, and it remains in service to our Veterans today.

"We think that at Lincoln's inaugural dinner, President Buchanan tipped him off to the fact that the Soldiers' Home was a great place to spend the summers in Washington, D.C.," said Erin Mast, the director at President Lincoln's Cottage. The pre air-conditioning era presidents often relocated during the hot summer months. However, due to the outbreak of the Civil War, it wasn't until 1862 that President Lincoln and his family spent their first summer at the residence. At first, the cottage may have seemed to be the perfect refuge from the White House and the perils of wartime decision-making. But, in reality, it was far from relaxing. As Mast puts it, "In coming out to the cottage, Lincoln was actually bringing himself closer to the war and the human cost of war." The U.S. Soldier's Home cared for nearly 200 disabled Veterans from the War of 1812 and the Mexican-American War. Lincoln saw the consequences of his decisions firsthand every time he interacted with the Veterans, who were also his neighbors.



President's Cottage Front (Now) and back (Then)

The cottage is also adjacent to the first designated national cemetery. Lincoln could literally watch out his back windows as the soldiers he had put into battle were buried. There were sometimes as many as 40 burials a day. "There are several stories of Lincoln walking through that cemetery at night, during the day, and people seeing that he was visibly moved by seeing these burials of these young men who fought and

died for their country,” Mast said. Lincoln knew firsthand of the tolls that the Civil War had on the country. He lived right next to the evidence.

The President’s Cottage is located three miles northeast of the White House. While Lincoln was living there he would commute daily to the White House, War Department or Capitol. Mast said, “Some scholars have called Lincoln the nation’s first commuter because he made that 45-minute commute each way, and that’s very similar to what a lot of Washingtonians have to deal with today.” He would take Rhode Island Avenue to Vermont Avenue to get to the White House, a route which at the time didn’t go through the best areas of Washington, D.C. But, Lincoln felt that the commute connected him to the common plights of the nation. He would ride past contraband camps that were basically refugee camps used by newly-freed men, women and children. There are also many references from District residents who routinely exchanged greetings with the president on his daily commute. One such resident was the poet Walt Whitman. Whitman wrote of the president’s demeanor in which, over time, he saw deeper sadness and stress, a product of a war-time presidency.

Local residents became familiar with Lincoln’s commute and that became a problem. There are even a few sources that indicate Lincoln was nearly assassinated during his commute. “He received letters warning him that people who had bad intentions were following his movements on that commute route,” Mast said. One evening the soldiers who were guarding the cottage heard gunfire to the south. “His guards ended up riding down the road where he was and they find his hat with a bullet hole through the brim,” Mast said. Lincoln told one guard, Private John W. Nichols, that the shooter was a “foolish gunner,” and that he was not to tell anyone of the incident. Lincoln even joked about the episode with a close friend. Lincoln constantly ignored his staff’s requests to allow for an increased military escort. He knew that should his staff or family be made aware of the details of this incident such requests would become tougher to deny.



Thunder, a horse from DC Police Dept, strikes a pose with Lincoln and his horse at President Lincoln's Cottage!

Washington, D.C., is just 90 miles from Richmond, Va., the capital of the Confederacy. This put the nation’s capital and Lincoln within proximity to the front lines for much of the Civil War. In the summer of 1864, Confederate forces attacked Fort Stevens, which was part of the capital’s defenses. The fort is

located just a mile and a half north of the cottage. Lincoln and his family were evacuated from the cottage to the safety of White House. But the temptation to see the battle firsthand was too much for Lincoln. He promptly left his family and rode out to Fort Stevens. As he is standing on the revetments of the fort, Mast said, “The person next to him is shot in the arm. And a soldier yells out to Lincoln, ‘get down, you fool, or you’ll have your head knocked off.’” The close call did not faze the president. The next day he returned to the fort, this time with his wife.

Many soldiers wrote about Lincoln in their journals or diaries. They saw him as a father or an uncle figure, often referring to him as “Uncle Abe” to each other. These feelings of affection were mutual. Lincoln was very aware that the soldiers were there in part to protect him and his family, and he appreciated that peace of mind. His family also appreciated the soldiers assigned to the guard detail, specifically Tad Lincoln. Tad’s brother and closest playmate William Lincoln died in 1862 of typhoid fever. This void was quickly filled by the soldiers. “They really formed kind of an extended family unit,” Mast said. President Lincoln enjoyed a sense of camaraderie with the soldiers and Veterans. He would often eat breakfast with his guard detail in the cottage and was even known to ask one to play checkers with him. Interestingly, even though the soldiers assigned to guard him had a close and personal relationship with their commander-in-chief, he still was known to be unpredictable. “We know that on several occasions Lincoln would get up and take off for downtown on his horse before the soldiers were up, so then they were put in the awkward position of having to mount up and quickly ride after President Lincoln,” Mast said.



Lincoln's Legacy to the VA

These experiences had a profound influence on Lincoln’s policy. In fact, he was living at the cottage just a few weeks before he delivered the Gettysburg Address. In that famous speech, Lincoln said, “The world will little note, nor long remember what we say here.” Little did he know that it would be his words that paved the way for Veteran services in the centuries to come? A’s motto, “To care for him who shall have borne the battle and for his widow, and his orphan” is taken directly from the president’s second inaugural address.

In 2000, President Clinton declared the cottage a national monument. “He called it the President Lincoln and Soldiers’ Home National Monument,” Mast said. A fitting title due to the fact that the Soldiers’ Home was operational before it was Lincoln’s Cottage and remains in operation today. This meant that Veterans living at the Soldiers’ Home would play an important role in the history preservation process. They had already been preserving the history by passing down the oral accounts of the cottage to each other. This is a remarkable source considering that the oral history could have originated with the

actual Veterans who interacted with Lincoln. Some Veterans at the Soldiers' Home were even giving their family and friends makeshift tours of Lincoln's Cottage. The cottage also served as the Soldiers' Home's social club for some time, complete with a portrait of Lincoln above the bar. "In some of those historic photos that we've seen through our research, Lincoln's portrait is hanging above the beds in the dorm," Mast said.



Mary Lincoln hosted her last reception here on 11 May 1865

It's very clear that the residents of the Soldiers' Home always knew the importance of the cottage and held Lincoln in high regards. In 1992 Congress combined the U.S. Soldiers' Home and the U.S. Naval Home into the Armed Forces Retirement Home. Today, there are more than 500 Veterans who live on the campus. The Soldiers' Home may have changed names or buildings over the years, but it continues to serve Veterans in the same way that it did long before it had any presidential neighbors. To learn more about Lincoln's cottage go to <http://lincolncottage.org>

[Source: Vantage Point | Tim Hudak | 12 Mar 2014 ++]