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COAST MAGAZINE

FALL 2023

SEVEN HEAVENLY NATIONAL PARKS

WASHINGTON STATE HIGHLIGHTS

LINCOLN'S ILLINOIS

USS ALABAMA BATTLESHIP
MEMORIAL PARK

FALL DESTINATIONS

Yuma Lakes Resort
Yuma, Arizona

Holiday Park Resort
Kelowna, British Columbia

Hideaway Ponds RV Resort
Gibson, Louisiana

LINCOLN'S ILLINOIS



LINCOLN'S ILLINOIS:

Following his Footsteps in Springfield and Alton

Story and Photos by Richard Varr

A teenage boy sits on a tree stump, his eyes staring blankly, deep in thought. He's clutching a book of "Aesop's Fables," perhaps imagining a life that awaits him beyond his log cabin home in a rustic setting. I walk up to the boy with his dark eyebrows and thick brown hair, getting a feeling that if I spoke to him, he would talk back.



Abraham Lincoln Presidential Museum depicts Lincoln as a young man.

"This young boy around ten years old in Indiana is taking a break during the day, reading for a few minutes and daydreaming about going out and exploring the world someday," says Christopher Wills, Communications Director with Springfield's Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum. "He did not like the life of chopping wood and raising corn. So, whenever he could, he was reading Aesop's Fables, the Bible, and trying to connect with a bigger world outside."

We're standing in front of the latex figurine of a young Lincoln, one of the many incredible life-like figures depicting the 16th President from childhood and his years in Springfield, to his final years in Washington. Lincoln spent his most formative and perhaps happiest times here, raising a family and working as a lawyer that had him traveling around Illinois. "Everything is very meticulously researched and placed," continues Wills. "One of the great things about this place is the way it lets you step into Lincoln's Life, to feel like you're surrounded by it and right there beside him."



Lincoln portrayed reading by the fireplace.

The museum's many artifacts include the skirt wife Mary Todd Lincoln was wearing when she was married, a doorplate and key from the Lincoln's Springfield home, and many of his letters from day-to-day business. Soldiers' uniforms and photos highlight the Civil War years, while the Slavery in America exhibit details the horror of how enslaved families were separated at auctions. Key historical documents stored inside the adjacent Presidential Library building include a signed copy of the Emancipation Proclamation and a handwritten copy of the Gettysburg Address – displayed only on a rotating basis to preserve them.

What I find most interesting, however, are the life-size dioramas of key moments in Lincoln's life and presidency depicting, for example, his kids frolicking in his Springfield law office, his cabinet discussing the Emancipation Proclamation, and a sullen Mary Lincoln grieving for her son Willie who died in the White House. Figurines of Lincoln and a finger-pointing Stephen A. Douglas re-imagine one of the famous 1858 debates to win an Illinois U.S. Senate seat. And there's the iconic scene of a young Lincoln reading by the fireplace.

Yet what captures my attention the most is the diorama of the President and Mary Lincoln at the Ford Theater with assassin John Wilkes Booth lurking in the background, and the animated

audio-visual theater presentation, “Ghosts of the Library,” telling Lincoln’s story with stunning hologram-like spirits.

Just a few blocks from the Presidential Library and Museum, I walk the same streets as Lincoln did outside his brown toned, two-story house within the Lincoln Home National Historic Site, a pedestrian area with 14 historic dwellings within several blocks. The Lincoln family lived there from 1844 until 1861.

“This is pretty close to what the house looked like when he was moving to Washington,” explains Interpretive Park Guide Linsey Hughes. The interior was recreated according to an 1861 newspaper illustration and includes around 50 original pieces of furniture and other objects, and similarly matched carpet and wallpaper. The parlor has Lincoln’s original chairs with woven horsehair upholstery and footrests. “This is where he was approached by delegates from Chicago in May 1860, officially to ask if he would like the chance to run for president,” explains Hughes.

Another highlight is an original “stereoscope,” a wooden box with eyeholes, making photos appear 3D. “That was Lincoln’s high-tech, state-of-the-art home entertainment system,” jokes Hughes, also noting the stairwell has the original wooden handrail. “It’s what Lincoln would use when he’s going up the stairs, so we like to say it’s the closest you can get to shake his hand nowadays.” His original corner desk sits upstairs in Lincoln’s bedroom. “We think it’s probably



where he wrote the House Divided Speech he gave here in Springfield,” continues Hughes, “and likely where he prepared for the debates with Douglas.”

The Lincoln Tomb in Oak Ridge Cemetery is where the President is buried along with his wife and three of their four sons. A grandiose granite monument topped with an obelisk and statues houses the burial vault, reached through passageways lined with Lincoln sculptures, one of them a small bronze replica of the sitting President within Washington’s Lincoln Memorial. Because of the tomb, Oak Ridge is the nation’s second-most-visited cemetery after Arlington National Cemetery in Virginia.

A half-hour drive from Springfield leads to Lincoln’s New Salem State Historic Site, an open-air museum representing the rural 1830s village where Lincoln lived in his 20s. Reconstructed log cabins include a tavern, general store, schoolhouse, carpenter shop, and more. While in New Salem, Lincoln served as a captain in





A log cabin in Lincoln's New Salem recreated village.



The Illinois State Military Museum in Springfield.

the Black Hawk War, became a lawyer and was elected to the Illinois State Legislature.

"We believe this is the turning point in his life," says historic site interpreter Jane Carrington. "He did all kinds of odd jobs to earn his keep. He's borrowing books and educating himself. By the time he leaves here in April 1837, he's a legislator and a lawyer and on his way to Springfield to go into practice."

Other Springfield sites worth a look include the Old State Capitol where Lincoln served as a state legislator and delivered his famous House Divided speech; the Lincoln Depot where he departed by train as President-Elect; and the Lincoln-Herndon Law Offices State Historic Site, now housing the Springfield Visitors Center. The Illinois State Military Museum includes an exhibit of Lincoln in the Black Hawk War. And the distinctive Bressmer-Baker House, a Lincoln-era Queen Ann-style Victorian manor, is a National Historic Landmark from 1853 with the only copper-topped turret in Springfield. Now a B&B, its parlors and bedrooms decorated with patterned wallpaper and antique furniture offer guests a feel for luxurious 19th-century living.



The Bressmer Baker House in Springfield.

ALTON'S CIVIL WAR TRAIL

Following Lincoln's footsteps in hilly Alton, Illinois, alongside the sprawling Mississippi River, leads to several historic dwellings and Civil War-era landmarks. I stand next to statues of a pensive Lincoln and a gesturing Stephen A. Douglas on the spot where the two politicians held the final of their seven 1858 debates for U.S. Senate. A plaque on the redbrick plaza reads that 6,000 spectators crammed the area to hear the great orators. Although Douglas won the election, the debates helped catapult Lincoln to national fame and to be elected president in 1860.

As a traveling lawyer, Lincoln met with clients at the Ryder Building, a two-story stand-alone storefront that's now a dessert café at 31 East Broadway, where he also gave a speech in 1840 praising Whig candidate and future president William Henry Harrison. While preparing for his debate, Lincoln set up his campaign headquarters at the colonial-style Franklin House at 208 State Street, what was then a hotel.



Statues of Lincoln and Douglas at the site of their 7th Debate.

A block away stands a crumbling wall of giant stones – all that remains of the Alton Prison. Decrepit conditions and overcrowding forced its closing in 1860, only to reopen two years later to jail mostly Confederate prisoners where more than 1,800 died from disease. The soldiers are buried in the Confederate Cemetery – a mass grave on a grassy hill in a quiet Alton neighborhood – where bronze tablets list their names at the foot of a 58-foot stone obelisk.

Alton was once the home of a Lincoln contemporary, Senator Lyman Trumbull, who helped write the 13th Amendment that abolished slavery. The whitewashed Trumbull Home is a private residence and a National Historic Landmark. The 110-foot Elijah Lovejoy Monument in the Alton City Cemetery pays tribute to the abolitionist killed by pro-slavery rioters storming his newspaper warehouse to destroy its printing presses.



And yet another monument to the Confederate prisoners who died stands on Smallpox Island. To get there, I drive across the Mississippi on the landmark double steel-framed, cable-stayed Clark Bridge. Formerly Sunflower Island at Missouri's shoreline, the island's name changed after a quarantine hospital opened to treat soldiers succumbing to smallpox.

ICONIC ROUTE 66 MEMORIBILIA

Neon signs once lit up the night along Route 66 in Springfield, iconic feature of the restaurants and hotels vital to motorists passing through. Many can still be seen at the Ace Sign Company, a museum within a working factory. "We're one of the few sign companies in the United States that has an operational neon plant to this day," says company CEO Todd Bringuet, a sixth-generation sign maker of his family business. "Neon is a dying art in many respects."

Yet, tucked to the sides and hanging high on the walls of the factory's production area are dozens of the signs with glowing neon bulbs and cartoon-like caricatures, including beer and coffee signs, motel names and others, three-fourths of them company originals. Ace recently renovated the Sunrise Donuts and Coffee Bar sign topped with yellow bulbs signifying a rising sun, once a popular Springfield stop.

Route 66 Motorheads Grill, Bar & Museum, housed in a former Stuckey's store off Interstate 55, combines owner Ron Metzger's love of cars, motorcycles, and the nostalgic landmarks of the famous highway. Neon beer and restaurant signs hang on the walls. "This town is full of racing cars



and Route 66 stuff,” he exclaims. At the bar, for example, the cut off trunk ends of three cars —a ‘55 Ford, ‘56 Buick and a ‘57 Chevy — are now topped with Coors and Miller Lite beer spigots. Motorcycles include a long handlebar replica of the bike driven by Peter Fonda in the movie Easy Rider, and an Abraham Lincoln tribute bike with large penny-like fixtures in the wheel spokes.

The recently opened Route History Museum and Souvenir Shop offers a different perspective on the highway’s history. “We tell the untold story of Black travelers along Route 66,” says museum co-owner Stacy Grundy. “It was a very different experience for them, as it was also the time of Jim Crow.” Just a block off the original Route 66 and within the cinderblock walls of a former Texaco gas station from 1946, the museum showcases how Black travelers could only dine and overnight in particular establishments and in certain towns. Exhibits include a detailed look at the so-called Negro Motorist Green Book, a guide to restaurants, hotels and private homes open to African Americans along Route 66 and beyond.

Route History now offers visitors a virtual experience by recreating how Green Book businesses helped four different travelers: a World War II veteran on a motorcycle, a Negro League Baseball player traveling in a bus, a blues singer with an entourage, and a family migrating from Mississippi to Chicago. “We’ve been able to do oral histories to get the stories of real people that lived during that time,” says Grundy.



African American Museum, Route History, shows a restaurant.

Other Route 66 standouts in Springfield include the Cozy Dog Drive In, serving its original battered and deep-fried hot dog on a stick since 1949. Mahan’s Filling Station with its classic gasoline pumps is an example of what a gas station looked like maybe 70 or so years ago, now part of Fulgenzi’s Pizza & Pasta restaurant. Another quirky establishment is one of the nation’s first drive-thru restaurants. Housed in an old train caboose, Maid-Rite has had pretty much the same menu since its founding in 1924, including its signature ground beef sandwich with onions and mustard served on a steamed bun, and often washed down with a mug of homemade root beer.

“It’s a tradition for Springfield,” says Sam Quaisi who has owned the business since 1986. “A lot of people bring their kids, and we tell them this is the sandwich your grandpa and grandma grew up with.” And what’s the story behind the restaurant’s name? A hungry delivery man coined it a century or so ago. “He said let me have one of the sandwiches,” explains Quaisi. “After he had it, he said ‘you guys made it right.’”

FOR MORE INFORMATION

<https://visitspringfieldillinois.com>
www.riversandroutesc.com (Alton, IL)



Cozy Dog Drive through sign.