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The Strange Case Of The Lincoln Boyhood National Memorial

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By Richard West Sellars ([users/richard-west-sellars](#)) on June 17th, 2014

*Editor's note: The following is the second half of an article on the significance of religious symbolism at the Lincoln Boyhood National Memorial (<http://www.nps.gov/libo>) in Indiana, symbolism that the National Park Service has largely overlooked. The author, Richard Sellars, was a historian for the National Park Service for three decades. He is the author of *Preserving Nature in the National Parks: A History* (Yale University Press, 1997, 2009).*

Arrival of the first National Park Service superintendent in 1963 marked a major turning point in the memorial's history, as the new management quickly shifted emphasis to a more pedestrian memory of Abraham Lincoln and to attracting, entertaining, and educating the public. A striking example of the Service's priorities came very soon, when the park created a "living-history" farmstead to depict daily activities on the Lincoln family farm. The living-history project included transporting to the park an old log cabin—a stand-in for any long-disappeared Lincoln family dwelling (and probably the cabin that Senator Kennedy visited in 1968). But next, park managers decided that a portion of the Trail of Twelve Stones intruded on their newly developed living-history farm scene, and removed a number of the stones to storage, thereby reducing the trail's symbolic value.

Similarly, showing little concern for the huge landscaped cross, the new managers neglected maintenance of the trees and other plants, allowing the original design to become indistinct. 14

Park managers further diminished the Christian references by renaming the Abraham Lincoln Chapel the "Abraham Lincoln Hall," even though its interior design and furnishings very clearly resemble a chapel. I see no way that it could be mistaken for anything else—even its designer referred to it as a chapel. And wedding services continue to be held there. Perhaps inadvertently—but nevertheless revealing—a recently published National Park Service booklet, entitled *Abraham Lincoln: A Living Legacy*, refers to "pews" as part of the chapel's furnishings. At times, park visitors still call it a chapel, or the "Lincoln Chapel"—designations I have heard beginning with my first visit there. 15

These efforts to diminish the Christian references could be reversed easily and with little cost, but such is not the case with the extensive alterations made to the long, single-story stone cloister. Early National Park Service superintendents converted the cloister's curving, open-air walkway into a fully enclosed space by sealing the openings with tinted glass. The Service made even greater changes along the apex of the cloister's semicircular walkway: In addition to enclosing this area, it substantially widened the walkway to accommodate administrative offices, a theater, educational exhibits, visitor reception desk, book and souvenir sales, storage, and restrooms. With the cloister, the Park Service allowed management's space needs to trump the integrity of the park's chief memorial structure honoring Abraham Lincoln.

Of all its manipulations at the boyhood memorial, the Service revealed its greatest indifference toward the Christian references with this conversion of the cloister to accommodate ordinary management and administrative activities. Today, the Park Service routinely refers to the cloister (a designation dating from the 1930s) as a "memorial visitor center." Somewhat like referring to the Lincoln Chapel as the Lincoln Hall, this re-designation further erased the Christian connection. In converting the cloister the Service did not alter the bas-relief limestone sculpture depicting Lincoln's apotheosis, but overall, it substantially diminished the cloister's traditional Christian aspects.

Through such actions as physical alterations, neglect, nomenclature changes, and omission from park literature and education programs, the Service obscured the religious symbols. It left little opportunity for visitors to gain an understanding of—or even awareness of—the boyhood memorial park's veneration of Lincoln through Christian symbols that reflect the American public's exceptionally high esteem for the martyred Civil War president.

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." 16

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. 17 It has been my observation in more recent decades that pre-existing memorial structures in National Park Service areas are almost always preserved. And current (2006) Park Service official management policies state that such structures "will not be altered, relocated, obscured, or removed..." 18 Surely this restriction—especially regarding the obscuring of park features—applies to almost the entire assemblage of memorial features that had once comprised the boyhood memorial's primary attractions.

In the 1980s, a new Park Service superintendent made an effort to restore two of the altered symbolic features to their original appearance by having the stones returned to their proper location on the Trail of Twelve Stones, and by initiating restoration of the neglected landscaped cross. The trail restoration soon succeeded; restoration of the cross was completed only a few years ago. 19 Still, the meaning and intent of these religious features remains unaddressed in the park's interpretive programs.

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The many changes made by the Service at the memorial since the 1960s 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 farmstead has become a popular favorite. 20

One of the most compelling figures in American history, Lincoln had common, hardscrabble origins and an open acceptance of that aspect of his life—which together, from his time to ours, have contributed to his accessibility in the public mind. Yet I don't believe the living-history farm, 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 ambitions required literacy and book learning. Biographer Douglas L. Wilson has stated flatly that Lincoln had read so much "because he had decided very early that he didn't want to be a farmer." 21

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Recently commenting in a scholarly journal on the purpose of the Christian features, the park's current chief of interpretation and resource management acknowledged the boyhood memorial's "religious atmosphere created by the park's physical form," and noted the "cruciform arrangement" of the alley. 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. 22

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 deified, 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, even his deification—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?

14 For manipulation of the commemorative features, see Jill M. York, "Friendly Trees," 41-58, and attached memorandum, 1-4; McEnaney "A Noble Avenue," 4, online at: http://www.nps.gov/history/history/online_books/libo/noble_avenue_clr.pdf (http://www.nps.gov/history/history/online_books/libo/noble_avenue_clr.pdf) (accessed, March 29, 2014); phone conversation with former superintendent Norman D. Hellmers, December 12, 2012.

15 O'Bright, "There I Grew Up...A History of the Administration," online at: http://www.nps.gov/history/history/online_books/libo/adhi/adhi1.htm (http://www.nps.gov/history/history/online_books/libo/adhi/adhi1.htm), chapter 3 and Appendix E (no pagination; accessed February 23, 2013); National Park Service, Living Legacy, photographs of chapel on 60-61; see reference to "pews" on 61, 72).

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

17 On first decade, see: O'Bright, "A History of the Administration," chapter 7 (no pagination), online at: http://www.nps.gov/history/history/online_books/libo/adhi/adhi1.htm (http://www.nps.gov/history/history/online_books/libo/adhi/adhi1.htm) (accessed March 29, 2014)

18 National Park Service, "Management Policies" (2006), Preexisting Commemorative Works, 9.6.4, Page 141 <http://www.nps.gov/policy/mp2006.pdf> (<http://www.nps.gov/policy/mp2006.pdf>) (accessed May 29, 2014)

19 McEnaney, "A Noble Avenue," 35; phone conversation with former superintendent Norman D. Hellmers, December 14, 2012.

20 For living history farm interpretation, see: O'Bright, "There I Grew Up...A History of the Administration," chapter 9 (no pagination), online at: http://www.nps.gov/history/history/online_books/libo/adhi/adhi1.htm (http://www.nps.gov/history/history/online_books/libo/adhi/adhi1.htm) (accessed January 31, 2014)

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

22 Capps, "Interpreting Lincoln," 330; online at <http://webapp1.dlib.indiana.edu/imh/view.do?docId=VAA4025-105-4-a03> (<http://webapp1.dlib.indiana.edu/imh/view.do?docId=VAA4025-105-4-a03>) (accessed February 14, 2014); McEnaney, "A Noble Avenue," 12; online at: http://www.nps.gov/history/history/online_books/libo/noble_avenue_clr.pdf (http://www.nps.gov/history/history/online_books/libo/noble_avenue_clr.pdf) (accessed May 12, 2014).

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