A Question Of Relevance

The Case Of Lincoln Boyhood National Memorial

Michael A. Capps

ABSTRACT: Lincoln Boyhood National Memorial is an example of one memorial site that has successfully managed to retain relevance for nearly one hundred years by adapting to changes in scholarship and the expectations of its visitors. Initially created as a purely commemorative site, it has evolved into one where visitors can actively engage with the Lincoln story. By embracing an interpretive approach to managing the site, the National Park Service has been able to add an educational component to the experience of visiting the memorial that complements its commemorative nature. These efforts demonstrate how a memorial site can evolve and remain relevant for future generations while honoring the wishes of past ones.

KEY WORDS: Lincoln, commemoration, memorial, memory

How a society chooses to remember and commemorate its past says as much about it and its collective memory as it does about the events and people memorialized. Memorials are a product of the time in which they are created and reflect the values of their creators. But what happens to those memorials when the times change? Do changing expectations of a site mean radical changes must be made? Does the memorial remain relevant for new generations? If so, what does that look like and how is it accomplished? Lincoln Boyhood National Memorial is an example of one memorial site that has successfully managed to retain relevance for nearly one hundred years by adapting to changes in scholarship and the expectations of its visitors. Initially created as a purely commemorative site, it has evolved into one where visitors can actively engage with the Lincoln story as well. By embracing an interpretive approach to managing the site, the National Park Service has been able to add an educational component to the experience of visiting the memorial that complements its commemorative nature. These efforts demonstrate how a memorial site can evolve and remain relevant for future generations while honoring the wishes of past ones. As Pierre Nora put it, “lieux de memoire (sites of memory) only exist because of their capacity for metamorphosis, an endless recycling of...
their meaning and an unpredictable proliferation of their ramifications.” Lincoln Boyhood National Memorial is a manifestation of that very idea.

Examining how the development and interpretation of Lincoln Boyhood National Memorial has evolved demonstrates the changing ways the public has approached history in general and Abraham Lincoln in particular. Since his death at the hands of an assassin in 1865, the last casualty of a terrible conflict, Lincoln has become an almost mythological figure in American history and for over one hundred and fifty years we have collectively struggled to know and honor the man who saved the Union, freed the slaves, and seemingly offered himself as a sacrifice in the cause of liberty and democracy. In addition to the thousands of books, articles, dissertations, and remembrances that have been written by professional and amateur alike, statues have been erected, parks have been created and memorial edifices have been built to preserve our collective memory of him. For some, preserving that memory has been enough, but others have sought a more active engagement with history. Lincoln Boyhood National Memorial provides an opportunity to look at how both approaches have been taken and how they are ultimately complementary to one another.

Memory places, that is, sites that preserve our collective memory, have their own histories. As historian James Loewen puts it, they don’t just represent the past, they have their own stories and, in fact represent three, not just two, temporal moments. He suggests that “One is its manifest narrative—the event or person heralded in its text or artwork.” The second, he argues, is “the story of its erection or preservation. The images on our monuments and the language on our markers reflect the attitudes and ideas of the time when Americans put them up.” And finally, he identifies a “third age that comes into play whenever one visits a historic site—the visitor’s own era.” Lincoln Boyhood National Memorial is a prime example of how this happens at one site.

Examining how the Lincoln site in Indiana has managed to remain relevant in the face of changing values and societal trends illustrates evolving expectations of how people in the United States choose to present their history. Originally conceived and developed during a period when memorial edifices were considered the most appropriate means of honoring Abraham Lincoln and commemoration was considered of paramount importance, the site has experienced new generations that have come to expect more direct engagement with their historic places. Changes in interpretive approach, most notably the employment of living history, have had a substantial impact on the site and how it is viewed by the public. Lincoln Boyhood National Memorial is an interesting example of how ideas of memorialization have evolved over time.

2 James Loewen, Lies Across America (New York: Touchstone, 1999), 36, 40.
Indiana’s Lincoln Memorial: Creation and Early Development, 1897–1959

Following the departure of Thomas Lincoln and his family for Illinois in 1830, the Indiana farm that Thomas had built was sold several times and divided up. Others occupied the cabin he had started in 1829 and the location of the grave of his first wife, Nancy, was virtually forgotten. But following their son Abraham Lincoln’s death in 1865, interest in his Indiana homesite was revived.

In April 1865, some residents of the nearby town of Elizabeth, later to be known as Dale, went to the Lincoln farm area and posed for pictures in front of what was reputed to be the 1829 cabin. In June or July of that year, artist John Rowbotham visited the site and made a drawing of what he claimed was the Lincoln cabin. In a letter to William Herndon, Rowbotham described the gravesite: “Mr. Lincoln’s mother died here and is buried on the summit of a thickly wooded hill about a quarter of a mile from the . . . house.”

He also stated that there was no marker or stone to mark the grave. In September 1865, Herndon visited the farmsite himself and talked with local residents as he gathered information for his biography of the late president. He described the gravesite as “almost indistinguishable; it has sunk down, leaving a kind of hollow. There is no fence around the graveyard and no . . . headboard to mark where she lies.”

In 1868, a Civil War veteran named William Q. Corbin visited the boyhood home of his former commander-in-chief. Corbin was dismayed by the unkempt appearance of Nancy Hanks Lincoln’s gravesite and wrote, “Oh! Nation of the generous brave, Be this your shame, And let this grave without a name No Longer thus neglected be, Beneath this forest tree.” His poem, published in the Rockport Journal in November 1868, was among the first known public accounts of the grave’s condition.

In response to Corbin’s poem, several Gentryville businessmen met on December 24, 1869, to discuss erecting a suitable marker. Although nothing came of the meeting, interest in marking the gravesite continued into the 1870s with an 1874 article in the Evansville Daily Journal questioning, “Why is this grave so neglected? Why is it not suitably . . . and appropriately monumented?”

Despite this concern, in 1875 it was again noted that the site was in poor condition and again a meeting was called to arrange for a marker. But, as with the previous one, nothing materialized. Although none of these early efforts were successful, a steady drumbeat continued for the idea of marking Nancy’s grave. Additional newspaper articles in

---

7 Letter from John Chrisney to the editor of Rockport Republican-Journal, April 21, 1875; Reminiscences of Elijah Hackleman, 1875, Park History Files.
1874 noted that “The grave . . . is unmarked even by a mound” and “Nothing marks this sacred spot but the sunken ground.”

In 1869, a Rockport businessman by the name of Joseph D. Armstrong had erected a two-foot tall marker with Nancy Hanks Lincoln’s name inscribed on it at the site but by 1879, this marker had disappeared and the site was again overgrown with vegetation and almost inaccessible. A newspaper article reporting the neglect prompted Peter E. Studebaker, second vice-president of the Studebaker Carriage Company, to contact Rockport postmaster L. S. Gilkey with instructions to buy the best tombstone available for $50 and place it anonymously on the site. Another $50, solicited from the area residents, paid for an iron fence around the grave.

At the same time this stone was being acquired and prepared, several Cincinnati businessmen were developing Lincoln City. This community, built because of the railroad, was to have a great impact on the Lincoln boyhood home site. Fortunately, a local resident convinced the developers to donate the half-acre surrounding the gravesite “to the commissioners of Spencer County and to their successors forever in trust for the people of the United States.” This was the origin of the park around the grave of Nancy Hanks Lincoln. In June 1880, a ten-man commission was organized to maintain the site and solicit the funds for the iron fence to enclose the grave.

Preservation efforts such as these were similar to undertakings associated with other former American presidents, such as the effort to preserve George Washington’s home at Mount Vernon and Andrew Jackson’s home, The Hermitage. These movements were part of a larger search for national identity taking place in the United States, with Americans focusing on the deeds of great leaders for inspiration. The establishment of historical associations was among the first manifestations of this process. These organizations took the lead in deciding which sites were worthy of preservation and how they should be interpreted. Equally important was the idea that sites associated with military and political figures should be treated as shrines or icons. The initial efforts to preserve the Nancy Hanks Lincoln site clearly fall within this period of preservation theory.

8 Rockport Republican, May 27, 1874 and Evansville Daily Journal, June 2, 1874, Park History Files.
9 Mrs. Mina Armstrong Cook to Paul Brown, Executive Secretary, Indiana Lincoln Union, April 30, 1927, Park History Files.
10 South Bend Daily Tribune, July 25, 1879. Studebaker gave his account of donating the money for the headstone in a letter to Indiana Governor James A. Mount, “I caused a modest slab to be placed over the grave . . . so that the spot . . . was appropriately marked.” Studebaker to Mount, June 11, 1897, Park History Files.
The Indiana effort, however, proved to be sporadic. In 1897, the Nancy Hanks Lincoln Memorial Association was formed for the purposes of soliciting funds for maintenance of Lincoln’s mother’s gravesite and for promoting an Indiana memorial to the Lincolns. In 1907, the state of Indiana established a Board of Commissioners to maintain the gravesite and the surrounding sixteen acres that had been acquired. In 1909, the state cleared the park of dead trees, erected a fence, including an elaborate entrance gate, and built a road from the highway to the gravesite. The entryway featured life-size lions at the highway entrance, with eagles perched on columns south of the lions, closer to the gravesite. Large stone urns were placed along the roadway to the cemetery.  

It was a design very much in keeping with the prevailing romantic vision of rural cemeteries based on English landscape gardening and was intended to provide sanctuary, solitude, quiet, adornment, and beauty. It was common, in the early twentieth century, especially on Sundays, for full families to picnic in cemeteries “taking long walks in the peaceful setting, thinking about the past and the future, and keeping a little bit of history alive for themselves” and the Nancy Hanks Lincoln Memorial Park fulfilled that need for Lincoln City area residents.

Indiana celebrated its centennial in December 1916. Part of the centennial programs was an effort to identify locations important to the state’s history. In 1917, Spencer County’s centennial commission requested the assistance of older residents of the county in determining the exact location of Thomas Lincoln’s cabin. Twenty such residents assembled on the historic property and pointed to a site they believed to be correct. A marker was erected on the site on April 28, 1917.

Following identification of the cabin site, interest in the historic Lincoln property increased. Various newspaper editorials lamented the fact that Indiana did not have a proper state memorial to Abraham Lincoln. One man who held this viewpoint was Colonel Richard Lieber, director of the state Department of Conservation. The state park movement was very strong in the 1920s and Lieber hoped to develop an impressive system of scenically beautiful and historically significant parks. A Lincoln memorial fit in perfectly with his plan. His support proved to be an important factor in the eventual establishment of the Nancy Hanks Lincoln State Memorial and Lincoln State Park.

In 1926, Lieber gained assistance in his efforts when the Indiana Lincoln Union (ILU), a group of private citizens, was formed. The goal of the ILU was to coordinate the work of the various patriotic organizations that had shown an interest in the project and to “propose that the people of our state, in mighty unison, rear

14 Paul V. Brown, The Indiana Lincoln Memorial in Spencer County, Indiana (1938), 11–16.
16 Rockport Journal, March 16, 1917; Statement of John J. Brown, Director, Indiana Highway Commission Relative to the Marking of the Site of the Lincoln Cabin in Spencer County, January 4, 1932, Park History Files.
17 Letter to Elizabeth B. Foulke from Paul V. Brown, June 12, 1928; Lincoln Memorial Park, 1931 pamphlet, Park History Files.
a national shrine which . . . will express both our deathless devotion as well as our indefinite gratitude to the soul of the great departed and his Mother.”

Lieber was selected to serve as chairman of the Executive Committee. One of the first recommendations of the ILU was that the state hire the noted landscape architect, Frederick Law Olmsted Jr., to prepare preliminary designs for the memorial.

Decisions about how to develop the site during this period (1897–1944), were influenced by several factors, each of which affected how the story of Lincoln’s youth was interpreted at the site. One of these was the high esteem with which Lincoln was held. By the time of the twentieth century, the elevation of Lincoln to the pantheon of American heroes was complete. He was the Preserver of the Union, the Great Emancipator, the author of the Gettysburg Address, the Martyred President. In short, he had become a larger than life figure and anything and anyplace associated with his life took on a significance that often led to efforts to preserve them as memorials. That was certainly true of his Indiana homesite. Surely such a spot was worthy of preservation and commemoration.

Lending even more significance to the site was the fact that it contained the grave of Nancy Hanks Lincoln, the mother who tragically didn’t live to see her son’s greatness, but who (so the reasoning went) doubtless contributed much to his eventual success. It was a theme that had emerged early in Lincoln historiography. Biographers proclaimed that Nancy Hanks was a “whole-hearted Christian,” “a woman of marked natural abilities,” of “strong mental powers and deep-toned piety,”—in short “a remarkable woman.”

Josiah Holland, in his Life of Abraham Lincoln, had declared “A great man never drew his infant life from a purer or more womanly bosom than her own; and Mr. Lincoln always looked back to her with unspeakable affection.”

This line of thinking also dovetailed nicely with the “cult of domesticity,” a legacy of the Victorian Era, which placed great importance on the impact of a mother’s influence on her children’s lives. Lincoln’s oft-quoted statement about his “angel mother” did much to validate this view of Nancy Hanks Lincoln.

Governor Ed Jackson, in an open letter in 1927, proclaimed, “To Indiana belongs the privilege of caring for the grave of Nancy Hanks Lincoln . . . and we should dedicate ourselves to the duty of erecting on the grounds where she lived and died

---

18 Yearbook of the State of Indiana, 1927.
21 A central tenet of the cult of domesticity was that women were responsible for the moral education of their children. Domestic writings and sermons popularized this idea. Nancy Hanks Lincoln was said to have called her children to her side as she lay dying and instructed them "to be good and kind to their father, to one another and to the world." Many of the oral histories gathered in the late nineteenth century describe her as "a woman of great good sense and morality." Although these accounts are not always entirely accurate in describing Nancy’s contributions to Abraham’s life (teaching him to read for example), they do serve as examples of the sanctification of Nancy Hanks Lincoln.
a monument of our appreciation.” Clearly, preserving her gravesite in a properly honorable way was of utmost importance to the early park planners and advocates and guided their development of the site into a memorial, which subsequently shaped how it, and this time in Lincoln’s life, were interpreted.

However, not everyone agreed completely with that interpretation. Members of the Southwestern Indiana Historical Society had launched a “Lincoln Inquiry” which located the sources of Lincoln’s greatness in the collective environment of the frontier rather than his singular mother. They called upon the ILU to expand its memorial proposal to include “a somewhat broader phase so as to cover the subject of Pioneerhood and Frontier life of Abraham Lincoln in Indiana.” They even garnered support from noted frontier historian Frederick Jackson Turner who declared that the memorial “must take full account of the place of the frontier” because “Lincoln represented what was best in frontier qualities.” It was a difference in interpretation that would be revisited in later years.

In spite of the Lincoln Inquiry’s objections, the ILU forged ahead with its plans to create a memorial to Lincoln and his mother and in the process created a site that embodied the convergence of landscape architecture, tourism and state pride, and federal Depression-era work programs. For the development of the landscape design, they turned to Frederick Law Olmsted Jr., son of the famous architect of New York’s Central Park, and a noted landscape architect in his own right. Recognizing that Lincoln had spent such a formative time of his life in the area, Olmsted was convinced that the commemorative nature of the development should reflect the importance of the site. As a first step, he set guidelines for simplifying the area surrounding the grave and the cabin sites. He termed these areas “the Sanctuary,” and declared that they “should be freed of every petty, distracting, alien, self-asserting object.” This included the removal of “cast iron gates with their gilded concrete lions, the bits of gardenesque lawn with exotic shrubs and conifer, and the general ‘slicking up’ of the remnant of second growth woodland around the grave into the semblance of a town picnic grove or

23 Keith Erekson maintains that the image of Nancy Hanks Lincoln as a pioneer mother and the development of a site commemorating her were a result of Hoosier politicians’ desire to repair the state’s reputation in the wake of Ku Klux Klan scandals that had reached all the way to the governor’s office; it was the state’s attempt at civic redemption. Erekson, Everybody’s History: Indiana’s Lincoln Inquiry and the Quest to Reclaim a President’s Past (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2012) 106–33.
25 Throughout his career, Olmsted Jr. worked on large scale planning, regional development, and resource conservation projects. Most notably, he participated as an active member of the MacMillian Commission which created a plan for the nation’s capitol in 1902, drafted a large portion of the 1916 National Park Service Organic Act, played a major role in planning for Yosemite Valley, and in 1929, completed a statewide park survey in California. Philip Regal and Nancy Volkman, Landscapes in History: Design and Planning in the Western Tradition (New York: Von Nostrand Reinhold, 1993), 552, 557, 561, 608; Linda Flint McClelland, Building the National Parks: Historic Landscape Design and Construction (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), 12.
a conventional ‘landscape cemetery.’ The object was to make “it easy and natural for... people... to be stimulated to their own inspiring thoughts and emotions about Lincoln.”

Olmsted visited Lincoln City in March 1927 to review the site and then again in May to present his ideas. He conceived of a memorial of strength and simplicity, sentiment and reason. He wanted the memorial to remain simple, so as not to overwhelm the “familiar associations” of the area with the Lincolns. But he did not want to just restore the area to its natural condition either. He wanted to create a formal memorial landscape with an allee that extended from a plaza to the south of the gravesite up toward the wooded knoll where Nancy Hanks Lincoln was buried. This arrangement established a strong spiritual imagery and solemn atmosphere for presenting the story of Lincoln’s experiences in Indiana. It also reflected the veneration of Lincoln that was common in early twentieth century America. His story was the quintessential “rags-to-riches, log cabin to White House American myth.” Such veneration had previously been enshrined at the Birthplace site in Kentucky and at the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, DC. In the Lincoln City site, there was an opportunity for Indiana to stake its claim to the great man. Olmsted Jr.’s ideas were enthusiastically received.

With Olmsted’s preliminary design, the ILU began its campaign to raise funds for development of the park. A New York advertising firm was hired to handle newspaper publicity and more than 200,000 letters were sent to Indiana citizens and institutions soliciting support for the memorial. Encouraged by the response to this campaign, the state purchased several additional acres in the Lincoln City area in the late 1920s. The park project received a major boost in 1929, when Frank C. Ball of Muncie, Indiana, purchased approximately twenty-nine acres of the historic Thomas Lincoln farm, then donated the land to the state.

The language used by ILU officials reinforced the religious context created by the physical form of the memorial. Much of the committee’s literature generated for fundraising purposes spoke of Nancy Hanks Lincoln as the “sainted Mother,” referred to her grave as “sacred soil,” and described visits as “pilgrimages.” A 1941 promotional article described the union’s intentions: “We are erecting here a shrine

26 Written report from Frederick Law Olmsted to Colonel Richard Lieber and the Indiana Lincoln Union, March 24, 1927, Park History Files.


30 Richard Lieber, Chairman, Executive Committee, Indiana Lincoln Union to Anne Studebaker Carlisle, President, Indiana Lincoln Union, reprinted in Yearbook of the State of Indiana for the Year 1929, 254–55, Park History Files.

to Motherhood and to the family hearthstone. We are memorializing democracy and religion.”

The formality of the Olmsted plan made evident the ILU’s intention to commemorate the Lincolns and celebrate their Indiana roots without re-creating their pioneer farm. Led by Lieber, who felt that such an approach was inappropriate, the ILU strove instead to reflect “Hoosier” values through straightforward design using familiar construction methods and native plants and materials. Although Olmsted agreed that it was impossible to accurately reconstruct the Lincoln farm, he did propose restoring part of the native forested landscape to form the backdrop for the formal design. A re-created forest would symbolize the primeval conditions that the pioneer struggled against, and was “the only one of the now vanished features of the place characteristic of Lincoln’s time which can be reproduced without sham or falsehood.”

Although not included in Olmsted’s original design concept, the development of what came to be known as the cabin site memorial was consistent with that desire to create something that would properly commemorate the Lincoln experience in Indiana. After deciding that it would be inappropriate to construct a replica of the Lincoln cabin, the state hired architect Thomas Hibben, a native of Indiana, to design a suitable monument to mark the site. Hibben planned a bronze casting in the shape of the historic cabin sill and hearth, to be surrounded by a stone wall. The area was also to be formally landscaped. The goal was “to mark the cabin site in such permanent means that knowledge of its location may not be lost to history and in such manner as to indicate the sacredness of the spot. The log sill is chosen as appropriate to mark the outline of the cabin; the hearth and fireplace are chosen because they have been, since time immemorial, the altar of the home, the center around which all life moved. The entire purpose of the design is intended to be a symbol of the hearth and home of the Lincoln family.”

While work was underway on the cabin site memorial, J. I. Holcomb, president of the Indiana Lincoln Union, suggested another major design feature for the commemorative landscape. He thought it would be of “interest to have a collection of stones from the various points of Lincoln interest” along a wooded trail to interpret Lincoln’s life. The trail would also include stone benches and tablets describing the stones’ origins. ILU members and others began acquiring stones immediately and by 1934 it was completed. A promotional piece described the trail by stating, “Each shrine will be especially landscaped to emphasize its historical significance.”

32 “Outdoor Indiana” Indiana Department of Conservation, July 1962, Park History Files.
33 Frederick Law Olmsted to Indiana Lincoln Union, March 17, 1927, Park History Files, Lincoln Boyhood National Memorial.
34 Ibid.
36 “Stones Taken From Scenes Vitally Linked with the Life of Lincoln Made Into Shrines at Nancy Hanks Park,” Evansville Courier and Journal, January 1, 1933, Park History Files; Letter from Paul Brown to Louis Warren, October 8, 1931, Park History Files.

A Question Of Relevance 109
Although the Trail of Twelve Stones was not part of Olmsted’s plan, it provided a significant physical and allegorical link between the cabin and the gravesite. By connecting Lincoln’s childhood home to his mother’s grave, the theme of pilgrimage was continued. The trail symbolized the visitors’ journey during which they could learn about and reflect upon the different stages of Lincoln’s life, and also represented the sad story of his childhood: the passage from innocence into maturity upon the death of his mother and his eventual sacrifice for the nation.37 Here visitors could walk the same ground that had been “pressed for fourteen years by the bare feet of Abraham Lincoln.”38

With the placement of the casting, the first phase of the memorial’s development was complete and the state moved on to the second, that of constructing a memorial building and further modifying the landscape. The location of the building had been a subject of debate for a number of years. Lieber was opposed to placing it near the gravesite because he was afraid that it would “crush the very object of our veneration: that unpretentious little grave holding the body and the enigma of Nancy Hanks Lincoln.”39 Having consulted with Olmsted on the issue, Lieber reported to the ILU that “Buildings in that location would disrupt the reveries or contemplations of those who come to visit that little hallowed spot.”40 Finally, in 1938, the Department of Conservation and the ILU decided to place the structure south of the plaza, away from the gravesite, so it would not detract from that significant location.

An early proposal by Thomas Hibben, who had designed the bronze cabin site memorial, included a structure with four square courts totaling 200 square feet surrounding a 150-foot-tall tower housing a large pipe organ. The courts were to be connected with cloisters decorated with frescoes and sculptures; the tower would be painted with murals. There would be restrooms in the building and even a small restaurant for the convenience of visitors. Interestingly, Hibben described it as “a simple and direct structure, expressing in its form all that we may of the man Lincoln.” In his mind, the memorial was “such a monument as may be made in the same simple truth of structure and grandeur of scale as was the character of Lincoln.”41 The proposal was generally well received by the public, but some members of the Department of Conservation and the ILU were uncomfortable with the design, fearing that its magnificence would “interfere with the spirit of the place.”42 Olmsted also felt the plan was wrong and the ILU ultimately rejected the proposal.

37 McEnaney, A Noble Avenue, 22.
38 From comments of Governor Henry Schricker made upon the occasion of the laying of the cornerstone of the Memorial Building in 1944. Richard Bishop and Indiana Lincoln Union, The Nancy Hanks Lincoln Memorial (Lincoln State Park, 1944), 61.
39 Lieber to Olmsted, June 13, 1938, Park History Files.
40 Lieber to J. I. Holcomb, December 13, 1938, Park History Files.
41 Indiana Lincoln Union promotional literature, Park History Files.
42 Lieber to Olmsted, June 10, 1938, Park History Files.
Instead, Olmsted suggested a matched pair of structures on either side of the allee at its south end that would create a portal through which visitors could pass to begin their journey up to the grave. A semicircular wall connecting the two structures would also create a “court of honor” between the two wings. His proposal was accepted and the ILU hired National Park Service architect Richard Bishop to finalize the design and supervise the construction of the memorial building.43

Bishop’s goal in implementing the conceptual plan was to create a building that suggested the best design and construction practices of Lincoln’s day, and “expressed the qualities of simplicity, strength and dignity that are invariably associated with Lincoln’s character.”44 Heavily influenced by the commemorative nature of the park, as exemplified by the cabin site memorial, the memorial landscape and the treatment of the cemetery area, Bishop summed up his thoughts on the memorial building in this way, “Whatever is built should be a forthright expression of honesty, simplicity and dignity, qualities that we associate with Lincoln and his mother.”45

As part of the plan for the cloister, Bishop included five sculptured panels, separated by four large openings. The panels would represent Lincoln’s life in Kentucky, Indiana, Illinois, and Washington, with the fifth representing the deceased president’s significance to all Americans. Above the panels and the doorways, passages from Lincoln’s speeches would be carved in stone.46

With its completion, the development of the Nancy Hanks Lincoln Memorial, as conceived by the ILU, was essentially complete. What had been created was a site that was heavily commemorative in nature. This was the place where visitors could “remember” the early life of a great American. Its designers and developers had believed that to simply be in this place where Abraham Lincoln had grown up was enough to inspire reverence and respect for the man and his mother. That guiding principle consequently influenced the style of the development and set the tone for how the Indiana chapter of the Lincoln story would be interpreted for a number of years.

Interestingly, Olmsted, in a letter to Lieber in 1927, had declared how important he felt it was that “these simple familiar associations speak for themselves to future generations, and to subordinate in this place any desire that we of today may have to impress those future generations with what we think about Lincoln.” Indiana, he said, had “a right to take pride in expressing the honor which it feels for Lincoln’s memory” by creating a memorial, but that this site “which speaks directly from the grave where he buried his mother and from the vacant site of his early home is the

43 Report submitted by Frederick Law Olmsted to Richard Leiber, February 7, 1939, 16, Park History Files.
44 Bishop to Indiana Department of Conservation, June 28, 1939, Park History Files.
45 Architect’s Report to the Indiana Lincoln Union, January 20, 1941, Park History Files; Bishop to Leiber, January 25, 1940, quoted in Bishop, Nancy Hanks Lincoln Memorial, 16–17.
last place in which to express that pride in any self-assertive way that might thrust our 20th century ideas between posterity and the significance of the place itself.”

His vision, which was concurred in by Lieber, the ILU, and Richard Bishop, was that the only way to properly honor Lincoln and to guard against the imposition of any twentieth century ideas was to develop a memorial site to commemorate the great man’s time in Indiana. Ironically, the very notion of a memorial was itself a twentieth century idea influenced by the stature which Lincoln had attained as an American historical figure and exemplified by such other sites as the Lincoln Memorial (1922) and Mount Rushmore (1937). The development of the Nancy Hanks Lincoln Memorial Park was yet another manifestation of the way in which Lincoln’s life was interpreted in the 1930s and 1940s.

Though the actual physical development of the site ended with the completion of the memorial building, the tone of the interpretation, set by Olmsted, Lieber and others in their effort to commemorate, remained the same throughout the remainder of the time the site was managed by the state. A brochure for Nancy Hanks Lincoln Memorial, c. 1950s, continued to refer to the site as a “National Shrine . . . erected as a tribute to Nancy Hanks Lincoln and her illustrious son.”

With completion of the memorial building, the development of the Nancy Hanks Lincoln Memorial was essentially complete. Life for the next twenty years was relatively quiet. Occasional public meetings were held in the halls and an annual Lincoln Day procession to the gravesite was held each year, but, for the most part, visitation was low. The biggest event took place in mid-May 1959, when the Spencer Sesquicentennial Commission, the Indiana Lincoln Sesquicentennial Commission and the Indiana Lincoln Foundation sponsored a statewide Boy Scout campout at the Lincoln State Park. One of the activities included a parade that passed a reviewing stand set up in front of the Nancy Hanks Memorial. Following the parade many in the crowd of fifty-thousand visited the grave and cabin sites.

But in spite of the low visitation, Olmsted Jr., Lieber, and the ILU had created an important site that represented not only the nation’s respect for Abraham Lincoln but was also a symbol of the emerging interest in America’s scenic and historic places as economic commodities. Such sites were considered “sacred places of a nation or people . . . In a pluralistic society they provided points of mythic and national unity.” According to Edward Linenthal, who studies memorial landscapes, we approach historic sites and memorials “not only as vestiges of the past . . . but also as shrines, as temples of veneration.” “Americans,” he asserts, “enact ongoing ritual relations between the living and the dead that form . . . an

47 Olmsted to Lieber, March 24, 1927, Park History Files.
48 Indiana Department of Conservation brochure, 1950, Park History Files.
important part of a national patriotic faith.” 51 Indiana’s Lincoln memorial commemorates both the nation’s loss of a revered leader and a more personal ritual of loss: Lincoln’s loss of his mother. Furthermore, development of the site was emblematic of the larger state park movement that had begun in the country in the 1920s.

By the late 1950s, however, there was talk of transferring the memorial to the federal government and making a national park of it. In 1959, Senator Vance Hartke, of Evansville, introduced a bill into the Congress that authorized the National Park Service (NPS) to conduct a feasibility study. Although the study did not recommend against it, it did not endorse the idea either. NPS officials believed that, while important, the site lacked a sufficient degree of historical integrity to make it of national significance, citing the uncertainty of the exact locations of the gravesite and cabin site as particular areas of concern. They also believed that the state was doing an adequate job of preserving and maintaining the site. 52 Nevertheless, local businessman William Koch became convinced it was a good idea and worked with Congressman Winfield K. Denton to introduce legislation proposing the establishment of an NPS unit at Lincoln City. When the state endorsed the proposal and offered to donate the two hundred acres containing the cabin site, the gravesite, and the memorial building, the legislation passed easily. President John F. Kennedy signed the act authorizing the establishment of Lincoln Boyhood National Memorial on February 19, 1962. On July 10, 1962, in a ceremony in front of the memorial building, the transfer was formally made and Indiana’s first authorized unit of the National Park System was dedicated. 53

An Era of Change: Lincoln Boyhood National Memorial and NPS Development

With its transfer to the National Park Service, the focus of the park began to change. Designed and developed primarily as a commemorative site, the park had given very little effort to interpret the Lincoln story. But the NPS, with its emphasis on education and visitor services, believed that the traditionally commemorative nature of the site did not provide enough opportunities for engagement. It was not enough for the site to be a place for visitors to just “remember” or “reflect.” It needed to be the place where they learned about Abraham Lincoln’s life in Indiana and what effect that had had on his later life.

This emphasis on interpretation at NPS sites had grown out of the agency’s increasing involvement with historic sites as the system expanded in the early

52 Field Study by Regional Chief of National Park System Planning, August 26, 1960, Park History Files; Acting Chief Historian to Regional Director, May 14, 1959, Park History Files; Assistant Secretary of the Interior to Chairman, Subcommittee on the Department of the Interior, House of Representatives, September 29, 1959, Park History Files.
twentieth century. Unlike the large natural areas that could be enjoyed aesthetically by most visitors without further explanation, park managers believed that historic sites needed to be interpreted so that visitors could understand and properly appreciate their significance. One of the service’s first historians explained that while preservation was the first obligation the agency had upon accepting responsibility for a historic site, the “most important phase is interpretation, and preservation and development are valuable in proportion to their contribution to this phase.” Likewise, a park superintendent, in discussing the reasons for which historic sites were preserved, explained that, “For the average visitor it is necessary to compress the event into a comprehensive whole, and if possible to color and dramatize it to create interest and make lasting impressions.” Verne E. Chatelain, the agency’s first chief historian, declared that communicating history to the public via historic site interpretation was the first priority, stating that “historical activity is primarily not a research program but an educational program in the broader sense.” He went on to say that “the task is to breathe the breath of life into American history for those to whom it has been a dull recital of meaningless facts—to recreate for the average citizen something of the color, the pageantry, and the dignity of our national past.” Finally, the responsibility of the service to educate its visitors was officially mandated by the Historic Sites Act of 1935 which said, in part, that the National Park Service was to “develop an educational program and service for the purpose of making available to the public facts and information pertaining to American historic . . . sites . . . and properties of national significance.”

At Lincoln Boyhood, the interpretive effort took several forms. To begin with, the cloister of the memorial building was enclosed and an addition housing a museum and an auditorium was built on to the south side. Proper respect continued to be paid to the gravesite, but the story was expanded beyond just the influence of Nancy on her son’s life to include the entire experience of growing up on the frontier. The new museum highlighted such aspects as life on a frontier farm and the difficulty of obtaining a formal education. Exhibits also featured

56 Memorandum from Superintendent John R. White to Director, December 6, 1941, History Division, National Park Service, Washington, DC.
information about the Little Pigeon Creek community in which Abraham had grown up. In 1968, the film “Here I Grew Up” premiered in the park’s auditorium and presented a somewhat simple story of a boy growing up in a humble place who went on to achieve great things. Additionally, park staff initiated television programs and presented community programs intended to inform the public of the new interpretive direction.59

Interestingly, this shift away from the more commemorative nature of the site to emphasize such topics as the frontier and community life and their impact on a young Lincoln brought the interpretive story more in line with the thinking of the Lincoln Inquiry from the early twentieth century. This was partially due to the growth of the field of Lincoln historiography. Whereas most of the early work on Lincoln had been very hagiographic in nature and had seemed intent on portraying him in iconic terms, by the 1940s and 1950s a more scholarly approach had resulted in an effort to better understand the man by thoroughly examining all aspects of his life including his youth in Indiana. In 1959, Louis A. Warren, who had cut his teeth in Lincoln’s studies by ferreting out previously unknown details of Lincoln’s life in Kentucky, published his study of Lincoln’s Indiana years in Lincoln’s Youth. Although falling short of any startling new discoveries, the book did perform a useful service in bringing together all that was known and counteracted previous negative portrayals of the period.60 It became the standard reference work for park personnel.

Perhaps the most significant development in the evolution of the interpretation of the site came, at least in part, as a result of a shift in how Americans had begun to view their history by the late 1960s. More emphasis was being placed on the “common” man. People were, generally speaking, less satisfied to simply “remember.” They wanted to know what life was actually like for the average person, and what it was like for “great Americans,” such as Lincoln, before he became “great.”61 Americans began to expect that their historic sites would have an educational component and one way in which this new interest manifested itself was in the development of “living history farms.”62 The idea was to create, or re-create, places where history could be told in an engaging manner. Living history was considered a good way to make “history come alive,” especially at sites like


60 One example was the persistent portrayal of Thomas Lincoln as a shiftless ne’er do well in spite of evidence to the contrary. Many authors continued to support the erroneous notion that Lincoln could only have risen to such heights of greatness if he had overcome such a burdensome past. But that is the danger of dealing in superlatives—it blunts the impact of normal occurrences in life to shape a person’s character and personality. Lincoln is no less great if he comes from a middle-class family.


Lincoln Boyhood where few, if any, actual resources remained. Such programs, it was hoped, would foster a more comprehensive understanding of the site’s historical significance. It was also in keeping a previous finding that had emerged during the Mission 66 planning effort: “people are showing an ever increasing preference for life-size reconstructions in the places they visit.”63

In 1965, Marion Clawson, the director of the Land Use and Management Program of the organization Resources for the Future in Washington DC, proposed that the government establish a system of twenty-five to fifty actual, operating, living historical farms representing the major regions and periods in American history. These farms, he believed, should be “as accurate as it is possible to make them” and “the critical aspect . . . is that each be operating.” Furthermore, “public visits to these living farms would naturally be encouraged” which would necessitate that they be “interpreted.”64

In 1966, the National Park Service became involved in this effort when it began working with the Department of Agriculture and the Smithsonian Institution in a joint venture to establish a nationwide system of farms. NPS Director George Hartzog called the living historical farm program “entirely consistent with our emphasis on trying to interpret the peaceful and inspirationally creative contributions of this country in the field of history, to complement the great emphasis that has been placed so far on birthplaces and battlefields.” He directed a group of NPS officials to identify NPS areas that would be appropriate for such operations. Lincoln Boyhood National Memorial was one of those recommended and following a visit to the park in 1968, Hartzog agreed. The living farm at Lincoln Boyhood National Memorial received high priority when Rep. Winfield K. Denton, chairman of the House of Representatives subcommittee handling Park Service appropriations, sought to boost tourism to that site in his congressional district. Hartzog responded with alacrity, and Edwin C. Bearss, the service’s most prolific research historian, was assigned in late 1966 to compile historical data for the development. Superintendent Albert W. Banton Jr. moved swiftly to incorporate Bearss’s findings on the ground. The November 1968 edition of the NPS Interpreters Newsletter reported that a new park had been created at Lincoln Boyhood. “Previously, the emphasis was on monumental memorialization totally divorced from the life Lincoln led there. Now we have a cabin and outbuildings and crops and animals and a fine idea of the environment in which the nation’s most illustrious son grew up.”65

Shifting the interpretive emphasis to the living historical farm represented a major move away from the commemorative. This move to deemphasize the

commemorative aspects of the park was officially stated in the 1970 version of the park’s interpretive planning document which called for the “removal of the unsightly retaining wall from around the . . . cabin site memorial” because it was “a definite intrusion on the Living Historical Farm as park development moves from the formal memorialization of the site to a more educational use.” Removal of the wall, it was felt, would minimize the intrusive aspects of the memorial. The same document also stated that the Trail of Twelve Stones had been moved off of the farm. 66 Clearly, the farm was seen as the primary means of interpreting the Indiana Lincoln story.

The development of the farm also coincided with a new, and increasing, emphasis on environmental awareness throughout the country and in particular, within the national parks, in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Special environmental awareness programs were developed and the Indiana Lincoln story was told as one of pioneer families living off the land and in harmony with nature. The Interpretive Prospectus of 1970 stated “The main theme depicts self-sufficiency and man in his environment. Everything the Lincolns used was either totally consumed or recycled—nothing was wasted. The Lincolns derived their living from the land and forest around them.” 67

There was disagreement with this view, however, among some interpretive planners, who expressed their concerns with the “tendency to shift the focus of interpretation away from Lincoln and his boyhood at the site to a more generalized attempt to portray a 19th century frontier lifestyle.” 68 In addition they stated that “the historical record challenges the . . . claim of the Lincoln farm’s ‘self- sufficiency.’” 69 In fact, this idyllic view was at odds with the reality that the Lincolns and other pioneers had worked hard to “tame the wilderness” and to establish communities that were economically tied to the more settled areas to the east. Activities such as hunting and using animal skins for clothes were replaced as quickly as possible by farming and purchasing manufactured goods.

In spite of these concerns, the living history farm soon became an extremely popular feature of the park and was for many years the centerpiece of the park’s interpretive efforts. Additional seasonal employees were hired to staff it during the spring and summer, more livestock was purchased, and the area under cultivation gradually increased. As the years passed, little was done with the other interpretive media, in spite of an assessment by NPS interpretive planners in the 1980s that called for the updating of the movie and the museum exhibits. Limited funds and a continued emphasis on living history, however, meant that these projects were not implemented for many years. By the 1990s, the park was still showing the 1968

67 Ibid.
68 Acting Chief, Cultural Resources to Assistant Director, Planning and Development, October 25, 1977, Park History Files.
69 Chief, Division of Interpretation and Visitor Services to Assistant Director, Planning and Development, October 17, 1977, Park History Files.
movie and still had the 1966 museum exhibits in place. The park brochure had not been revised since 1972, and its emphasis was almost exclusively on the farm operation. Pioneer skills demonstrations continued to be very popular but did not always have direct relevance to the Lincoln story.

With a renewed commitment to the overall interpretive effort and with the benefit of funding made possible by user fees, the park entered the twenty-first century by beginning the process of restoring a sense of balance in the program. In late 2001, a new movie titled “Forging Greatness” premiered. Telling the Lincoln story as comprehensively as possible and using the farm as a backdrop, it also called attention to the other features of the park such as the cabin site memorial and the Trail of Twelve Stones as being equally important to the visitors’ experience. A new park brochure presented the park as multifaceted with the farm, the interpretive media, and the commemorative features as parts of a whole. In January 2006, a complete rehabilitation of the museum resulted in displays that not only tell the Indiana Lincoln story, but that also try to make some of the connections between his time here and his later life, and, for the first time, the efforts to preserve the site and create a park are acknowledged and recognized as being a vital part of the story. On one wall in the museum a display entitled “An Indiana Memorial” pays tribute to the work of the early park developers and their vision of the site as a memorial.

The park has also sought to appeal to a variety of audiences. For those interested in a scholarly approach to Lincoln, speaker series have been held featuring historians and authors who have done the latest research in the ever-growing field of Lincoln studies. In 2010 and 2016 Lincoln Boyhood joined other Lincoln sites in hosting the annual Lincoln Colloquium, a national conference at which scholars, including some Pulitzer Prize winners, present historical insights concerning Lincoln.70 The colloquium is envisioned as part of a “Great Conversation” (“colloquium” comes from Latin and signifies “conversation”) regarding Lincoln and his place in American history. The attendees are a lively mix of amateurs and professionals, Lincoln buffs and academics, collectors and the curious.

For the visiting public, the park staff presents a variety of interpretive programs including some specifically tailored to meet the interests of children. Efforts to reach school children have been a particular interest. Each year, park ranger led programs are presented to approximately four-to-five thousand second, third and fourth graders who visit the park on field trips. The Junior Ranger program has been a hugely popular success by affording children an opportunity to learn about Lincoln and the park by completing a number of activities. Upon completion of their Junior Ranger booklet, they receive a certificate and a badge. Other materials have been developed and made available to schoolteachers to enhance the educational goals of the park. Traveling trunks containing materials and items from all

70 Founded in 1986 and first sponsored by the Lincoln Home National Historic Site, the Colloquium now rotates among six locations: The Lincoln Studies Center at Knox College in Galesburg, Illinois; the Indiana Historical Society in Indianapolis; the Lincoln Home NHS; the Chicago History Museum; The Allen County Public Library in Fort Wayne, Indiana; and Lincoln Boyhood NM.
three primary NPS Lincoln related sites are sent to schools and two online lesson plans have been developed as part of the National Register of Historic Places “Teaching with Historic Places” program. One lesson plan is specifically about the creation of the park as a commemorative site.

Special events have also been conducted in an effort to expand the park’s interpretive message. “A Visit with the Ghosts of Christmas Past” featured a series of vignettes acted out by park staff and portrayed Christmas observances, or the lack thereof, during various periods of time. “Death in a One Room Log Cabin” used the living historical farm as a background tableau for a program about the dangers of frontier life and the impact of the death of his mother on a young Abraham Lincoln. Other programs have re-created the wedding of Thomas Lincoln and Sarah Bush Johnston and featured interpreters portraying Abraham and Mary Lincoln. New technology has been embraced through such mediums as cell phone tours, social media, and interactive displays. Traditions have been honored by continuing annual Lincoln Day observances and special anniversaries such as the Lincoln Bicentennial in 2009 have provided opportunities to reach beyond the park’s boundaries to engage wider audiences through the publication of a Lincoln parks guidebook and articles in scholarly journals. Partnering with other organizations has led to such events as a park screening of Steven Spielberg’s Lincoln simultaneously with its theatrical release and the display of traveling exhibits from the Smithsonian Institution, the Library of Congress, and the Indiana Historical Society. In 2017 and 2018, the park hosted a “Fiesta in the Park” event in an effort to reach out to the underserved Hispanic population in the area. By providing a variety of interpretive experiences, park staff has worked to keep the park relevant and meaningful to as many people as possible. Visitor surveys conducted between 2000 and 2017 reveal the changes made have been received very positively, particularly the new movie, the change of content in the museum exhibits, and the addition of the Junior Ranger and other children’s programs.

Most of the changes in the interpretive program over the past twenty-five years at Lincoln Boyhood NM have been due to the dedicated efforts of the park’s interpretive staff to make the program interesting and relevant for visitors. Although some of the changes have been reflective of recommendations and action items in such studies as Imperiled Promise: The State of History in the National Park Service and the planning document, A Call to Action: Preparing for a Second Century of Stewardship and Engagement, it has been primarily a grassroots effort.

Visitor surveys have been conducted annually in the park since 1998. Visitor satisfaction with the park facilities and programs has steadily risen from the 70 percent range to the mid to upper 80 percent range.

Visitor surveys have been conducted annually in the park since 1998. Visitor satisfaction with the park facilities and programs has steadily risen from the 70 percent range to the mid to upper 80 percent range.

at the park level. It is also emblematic of how change comes about in many small parks with dedicated staffs.

An Enduring Image, An Enduring Memorial

Although the interpretive changes implemented by the NPS have proven to be popular with the visiting public, they alone do not account for the enduring relevance of Lincoln Boyhood National Memorial. In the final analysis, it is Lincoln himself who has made the site significant, even as our collective perception of him has changed over time. Sociologist Barry Schwartz argues that Lincoln’s prestige in the latter half of the twentieth century was diminished by a shifting in the way people viewed him and other previously highly admired historical figures. This change, he concludes, was the result of “the fading of the concept of greatness itself.”74 Whereas previous generations had seen Lincoln as the Savior of the Union, the towering genius who had epitomized greatness and altered history’s course, later generations constitute what Schwartz characterizes as “a post-heroic era that modifies the legacy of earlier generations, rejects their representative men without replacing them and makes their symbolic forms and beliefs appear strange and out of place.”75 Lincoln’s presidential greatness rating subsequently fell from 62 percent in 1956 to 40 percent in 1991.

In spite of this diminution of Lincoln’s prestige, Schwartz maintains that Lincoln remains relevant because he continues to mean something to nearly everyone. The meanings may be different for different people. Some see him as an egalitarian who believed that emancipation was the first step to full racial equality; others as a typical mid-nineteenth century racist who was more intent on saving the Union than he was in freeing the slaves or integrating them into white society. Although at opposite ends of the spectrum, both opinions demonstrate that Lincoln, and what it is thought that he stands for, can still stimulate people’s thinking and arouse their passions.

The reasons for visiting Lincoln sites have been remarkably consistent throughout the years. A review by the author of visitor surveys conducted at Lincoln Boyhood between 2001 and 2017 reveal that Lincoln and sites associated with him continue to have relevance for those seeking a connection with and inspiration from the past.76 Citing such attributes as integrity and morality as evidence of Lincoln’s greatness, many visitors also commented on the humility of his upbringing and on the power of being in the place where he grew up. Many referred to Lincoln as “our greatest president” and felt that “Anything connected to Lincoln

76 The surveys have been conducted each summer since 1998. Four hundred visitor survey cards are distributed randomly by park staff over the course of a month, typically June. The answers cited were in response to the question, “In your opinion, what is the national significance of this park?”
has great national significance.” There was a belief that being in the place where Lincoln grew up was a key to understanding him. Visitors’ comments included statements such as: “It was wondrous to walk where Lincoln walked.” “It was fascinating to stand where such an important historical figure once stood.” “It’s an honor to walk on the land where he once did.” “It is vital that we preserve all that relates to Lincoln, one of our most important Presidents, especially the hallowed grounds on which he lived.” But more than just visiting the site and walking where Lincoln walked, visitors appeared to be seeking a better understanding of him and the influences that played a part in shaping his personality and character. Several saw his rise from humble beginnings as evidence of the opportunity available in America, as in the following statements. “Preserving and teaching the humble beginnings of such a significant historical figure as Lincoln is inspiring to young people—anything’s possible.” “It is an idea that Americans hold very dear, that someone with humble beginnings can do great things.” Still others noted that the site is important because it provides an opportunity for people to learn about, and be inspired by, Lincoln’s values, particularly what they termed his morality. As they stated, the homesite is “the place where Lincoln’s mind, morals, and personality was formed.” Others remarked, “the park gives insight into the force that shaped Lincoln into the man that he was.” “Through Lincoln we can learn how to build character.” “Good insight as to how Lincoln obtained his moral character.” “Lincoln changed this nation. The park gives a feel of what shaped his morality, which in turn made this nation a better place.” One comment even referred to him as a “moral lighthouse.” Some visitors also believed, somewhat nostalgically, that Lincoln represented a kind of integrity that was lacking in modern leadership. As one remarked, “Lincoln needs to be remembered as a great man and President with morals that need to be our example.” One commented in 2005, “George Bush should visit to remind him who a president is and what a president does.” Another asserted, “we would be an improved society if we all were blessed with Abe’s honesty, integrity and respect for our fellow man.” Finally, another commonly expressed sentiment was that the park was significant because it offered an alternative, and maybe a corrective, approach to the study of Lincoln. Visitors noted, “I enjoyed the history not commonly portrayed in American classrooms.” “I’m so grateful that we Americans have places like this to visit so that we can teach our children to embrace our history.” “It is important to remember... Lincoln. Revisionists are trying to change history. This park helps put events in proper perspective.” Ultimately the park was seen as having value because “It signifies our veneration of Lincoln.”

77 The analysis of the visitor comments was done by the author and was not necessarily subject to a rigid methodology. Review of the comments did reveal some commonalities which I have tried to point out as evidence of the enduring relevance of Abraham Lincoln. There is certainly need of further, in-depth visitor surveys that would delve deeper into how their visit to Lincoln Boyhood NM subsequently influenced their impressions of Lincoln.
It is that enduring admiration of Abraham Lincoln, in spite of all of the “acids of postmodernity,”78 that has helped Lincoln Boyhood National Memorial to retain relevance. Although every generation has handed down to the next an image of Lincoln that is different from the one it received, every new Lincoln is distinguishable by the same “essential elements” that distinguished the old Lincolns. These “essential elements” define the continuity of his image. The millions who continue to admire Lincoln, seek information about him, and visit his shrines are reacting against the erosion of the past and of tradition.79

The creators of the park and the managers and visitors since have all had their own worldviews that have affected how they approached the memorial. But it is the inherent quality of Lincoln and what he represents that has continued to make this memorial site relevant to changing generations. Visitors are seeking meaning for themselves in the image of Lincoln. During the early years of the memorial, they were looking for the heroic image of the Great Emancipator and Savior of the Union—the towering historic figure who was worthy of memorial edifices and shrines. Commemoration of such a man was deemed a worthwhile endeavor and being in his “presence” by visiting such a site was a pilgrimage worth making. Later generations—somewhat disenchanted with heroic images—sought out a more common man who managed to rise above the challenges of his early life to achieve a success and stature that was still admirable. Each Lincoln can be found at Lincoln Boyhood National Memorial. The interpretive effort enhances the commemorative atmosphere by helping visitors understand how and why the park was created and also provides opportunities for visitors to actively engage with the Lincoln story through interpretive programs, media and the experience of the living history farm.

The story of the evolution of Lincoln Boyhood National Memorial is indicative of how each version of history is reflected through the prism of the time in which it is being told. Early development of the park was focused on commemoration and reflection; later generations wanted engagement and interpretation. For present and future caretakers of this particular site, it is incumbent to acknowledge and try to meet both needs and, to some extent, to try to anticipate what future needs might be. It is only by helping visitors to find in the site relevance for themselves that support for its preservation can be gained. Visitors connect to the tangible resource of this site in whatever way is most meaningful for them, just as they do to the intangible resource that is Abraham Lincoln. Each seeks their own meanings. The process is ongoing.

* * *

79 Ibid., 92.
Michael A. Capps has been a National Park Service employee for thirty-seven years, twenty-six of them at Lincoln Boyhood National Memorial where he is the Chief of Interpretation and Resource Management. During his tenure at Lincoln Boyhood, he has developed a keen interest in the story of the park's establishment and development over the years and has become convinced that it represents an important period within the history of the preservation movement when the creation of memorial edifices and landscapes was an important expression of the nation's respect and reverence for Abraham Lincoln.