

LINCOLN LORE

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THE SPRINGFIELD HOME OF THE LINCOLNS

One of the most valued treasures which the State of Illinois possesses is the Springfield home of Abraham Lincoln. The atmosphere of the Christmas season invites us to review in some detail the history of the house in which three of the Lincoln children were born, and where the early childhood days of all of the boys were spent.

The Dresser Cottage—1839

In 1839 Rev. Charles Dresser, minister of the Presbyterian Church at Springfield, purchased a house lot at the corner of Eighth and Jackson Streets. It had a frontage of fifty feet on Eighth Street and one hundred and fifty feet on Jackson. He erected on this lot a story-and-a-half frame cottage with at least two rooms on the second floor.

Lincoln Purchases Dresser Property—1844

January 7, 1844, Charles Dresser signed an agreement to sell his property to Abraham Lincoln for \$1,200, plus a shop opposite the public square valued at about \$300. On May 2, 1844, Charles Dresser and his wife deeded their home to Lincoln, who took possession.

The First Tenants—1848

About four years after the acquisition of the property, Lincoln served a term in Congress, and leased the home for one year to Cornelius Ludlum for \$90, reserving the use of "the north room upstairs" in which to store his furniture.

The Brick Fence—1850

In 1850, Lincoln decided to build a fence with a brick foundation, extending along the front of the house and also for a short distance along Jackson Street. He estimated it should be about fifty feet long and wrote to a local brick maker about furnishing the material necessary. In a memorandum prepared by Lincoln, on June 8, 1856, he stated that in June, 1855, he had been furnished bricks for the foundation of a fence, so it is not likely it was completed until this time. The tall wall and fence would have a tendency to make the low cottage appear to a disadvantage, and this may have been indirectly responsible for the improvements which were made about which there has been so much discussion.

Another Story Added—1856

The Illinois State Journal of January 6, 1857, listed the new building improvements made in Springfield during the year 1856. Among those noted was an "Addition to house on Eighth Street for A. Lincoln. Cost \$1,300. Hannan and Ragsdale, architects and builders."

The story that Mary Todd took the initiative in the improvement project and had the addition built unknown to Lincoln, while he was away on the circuit, lacks confirmation. If the major part of the work was done during his absence, it was probably started shortly after Mr. and Mrs. Lincoln sold two lots at Bloomington on April 12, 1856, for the sum of \$400. This may have prompted the addition, as it was just after this, in fact the following day, that Lincoln started on the long circuit which may not have brought him home until June 2, although there are three week-ends in which he might have made a trip to Springfield and been back on the circuit Monday morning.

At this time, also, a tree was planted in front of the remodeled house, which added much to the appearance of the home in later years. The growth of this tree has furnished a proper measuring rod for a chronological arrangement of the many pictures taken of the house.

The Home of the New President—1861

Upon the election of Lincoln to the presidency in 1860, next to the pictures of members of his family, a portrait of the home in which he lived had the greatest human interest. *Leslie's Weekly* for November 17, 1860, reproduced a picture of the dwelling and also gave a short description of the house as follows:

"The simple home of this American Statesman and President-Elect of the United States is situated on the corner of Eighth and Edward Streets, and here he has resided twenty years out of the three and twenty he has been a dweller in Springfield. It stands on a sort of platform of brickwork, and is two stories high, having two windows on each side of the door and five on the upper story. The side view shows that it has an extension and side entrance, with a receding stoop running the whole length of the extension. In the rear are the stables and barn. The edifice is painted of a pale chocolate color, and the window blinds are of deep green. The roof extends a little over the edges, like that of a Swiss cottage. The rooms are elegantly and comfortable furnished with strong, well-made furniture, made for use and not for show. On the front door is a black door plate, on which, in silvered Roman characters, is inscribed the magical name, A. Lincoln.

"Here dwells the great exponent of Republicanism and the victor of Stephen A. Douglas in 1858. It has no ornaments, no deftly-trimmed shrubberies, no marble vases; it is all in keeping with the man—plain, unpretending, comfortable and substantial."

Tenants from 1861 to 1877

Before the Lincolns left for Washington in 1861, they sold most of their furniture to T. Tilton, President of the Great Western Railroad, who had rented the house. The Tiltons remained there until 1869.

The next tenant was George H. Harlow, the Illinois Secretary of State. He and his family occupied the house for eight years. Dr. Wendlandt rented it about 1877; and three years later O. H. Oldroyd leased the property from Robert Lincoln.

The Oldroyd Occupancy—1880-1887

The coming to Springfield of Mr. Oldroyd was a very fortunate circumstance, and he immediately restored the house to something like its original form and opened it to the public as a museum. Here he displayed the valuable collection of Lincolniana which he had been gathering for twenty-five years or more.

After occupying the house for several years, Mr. Oldroyd interested Robert Lincoln in presenting the property to the State of Illinois for a museum. After Mr. Lincoln had been assured that the state wanted the property and the legislature had agreed in 1887 to take charge of it and maintain it, it was deeded to the state.

In Possession of the State—1887

After the state had acquired a title to the Lincoln home, Mr. Oldroyd was retained as the first official custodian, which office he held until 1892, when a change in administration caused his removal; and the valuable collection of Lincolniana, which he had been assembling for years, was moved to Washington and displayed in the house where Lincoln died. Other custodians have followed Mr. Oldroyd and contributed to the enjoyment of the thousands of visitors who have registered at the Lincoln home each year.

The House Restored

During the last decade there have been many improvements made about the place. A piece of property directly north of the Lincoln home was acquired and the old building thereon was razed. The interior of the house has been restored to approximately the same condition as it was when occupied by the Lincolns, and the general appearance has been greatly improved. It is gratifying to know that detailed drawings have been made and preserved by the state, which would make possible its duplication in case it were destroyed.