

LINCOLN LORE

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THE PETERSEN HOUSE

The house standing at 516, formerly numbered 453, Tenth Street Northwest in Washington has become one of the nation's most impressive shrines. Here Abraham Lincoln passed away in a room smaller than the cabin room in which he was born.

Immediately after the President was shot by the assassin Booth at Ford's Theatre on the night of April 14, 1865, Dr. Charles Taft examined the prostrate body of Lincoln and ordered it removed to the nearest bed. Dr. Taft states that in directing those carrying the body he observed upon reaching the street a man standing on the porch of a house just opposite the theatre. "To that house I directed my steps," he said, "and was pleased to find a neat bedroom at the end of the hall, without going upstairs. The single bed was pulled out from the corner of the room and the dying President laid upon it diagonally, his extreme length not admitting any other position."

The house to which the body of the unconscious Lincoln was taken was occupied by the family of Mr. W. Petersen, and the dwelling has since become known as the Petersen House. The building, a three-story brick with a "light" basement which virtually made it a four-story building, was under construction when Abraham Lincoln was in Congress in 1849.

Mr. Petersen evidently became offended because his home had been called a tenement house by some of the news reporters, and he had this impression corrected by Leslie's weekly which commended, "Mr. Petersen's house in which the President died is one of the most respectable houses in Washington and not a tenement house . . . It is one of the highest of its class."

There were several roomers in the house, however, and the room where the body of the President was taken was rented by William T. Clark. Four other men were inmates of the home as indicated by this interesting excerpt from Leslie's paper of April 29, 1865:

"Artistic Accuracy"

"We present to our readers below conclusive and unsolicited evidence of the accuracy of our engraving of the scene at the deathbed of President Lincoln:

Washington, D. C., 453 10th Street,
Sunday, April 16, 1865.

"We, the undersigned, inmates of No. 453 10th street, Washington, D. C., the house in which President Abraham Lincoln died, and being present at the time of his death, do hereby certify that the sketches taken by Mr. Albert Berghaus, Artist for *Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*, are correct.

HENRY ULKE,
JULIUS ULKE,
W. PETERSEN,

THOS. PROCTOR,
WM. T. CLARK,
H. S. SAFFORD."

To the artist Berghaus we are indebted for a minute description of the death chamber:

"The room in which the President died is in the rear part of the building, and at the end of the main hall, from which rises a stairway. The walls are covered with a brownish paper, figured with a white design. Its dimen-

sions are about ten by fifteen feet. Some engravings and a photograph hang upon the walls. The engravings were copies of the 'Village Blacksmith,' and Herring's 'Stable and Barnyard Scenes.' The photograph was one taken from an engraved copy of Rosa Bonheur's 'Horse Fair.' The only furniture in the room was a bureau covered with crochet, a table, eight or nine plain chairs, and the bed upon which Mr. Lincoln lay when his spirit took its flight. The bedstead was a low walnut, with headboard from two to three feet high. The floor was carpeted with Brussels, considerably worn. Everything on the bed was stained with the blood of the Chief Magistrate of the nation."

One wonders why a much larger bedroom just in back of the parlor was not used in preference to the hall bedroom as it contained a bed, but Dr. Taft's comment and a citation by Mr. Oldroyd may answer the question. Apparently the bed in the large room was not made up, while Dr. Taft refers to Clark's room as "a neat bedroom."

A letter which William Clark wrote to his sister Ida four days after the assassination has been preserved and reveals some interesting side lights on this last host to the martyred President:

"Dear Sister Ida:

"Today the funeral of Mr. Lincoln takes place . . . Hundreds daily call at the house to gain admission to my room. I was engaged nearly all Sunday with one of Frank Leslie's special artists, aiding him in making a complete drawing of the last moments of Mr. Lincoln, as I know the position of everyone present. He succeeded in executing a fine sketch, which will appear in their paper. He wished to mention the names of all pictures in the room, particularly the photograph of yourself, Clara, and Nannie; but I told him he must not do that, as they were members of my family, and I did not wish them to be made so public. He also urged me to give him my picture, or at least allow him to take my sketch, but I could not see that either. Everybody has a great desire to obtain some memento from my room, so that whoever comes in has to be closely watched for fear they will steal something. I have a lock of Mr. Lincoln's hair, which I have had neatly framed; also a piece of linen with a portion of his brain. The pillow and case upon which he lay when he died, and nearly all his wearing apparel, I intend to send to Robert Lincoln as soon as the funeral is over as I consider him the most justly entitled to them. The same mattress is on my bed, and the same coverlid covers me nightly that covered him while dying . . .

"Your affec. brother,
"Willie."

Sixteen years later the house was in possession of Louis Schade, and the room in which Lincoln died became the playroom for Mr. Schade's children. The memorial association of the District of Columbia leased the house and it was opened as a museum on October 17, 1893. It is now the property of the government and its restoration has been directed so as to create the surroundings as they appeared on the night of Lincoln's death.

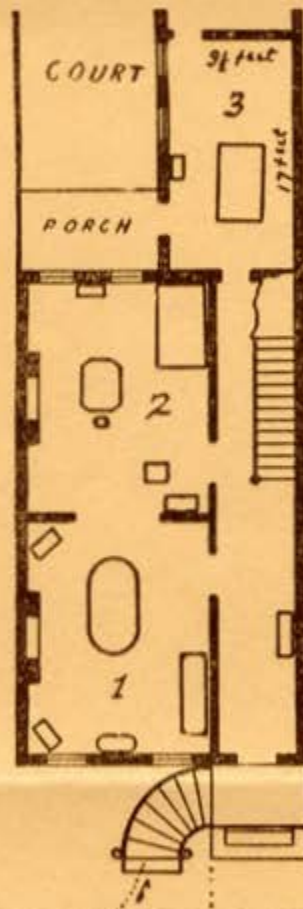


DIAGRAM OF THAT PART OF HOUSE UTILIZED ON FATAL NIGHT.

1. Front parlor occupied by Mrs. Lincoln.
2. Back parlor occupied by Secretary Stanton for the preliminary examination of witnesses.
3. Hall bedroom in which the President died.