



# Lincoln Lore

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## TWO NEW LINCOLN SITES . . . MAYBE

America's continuing interest in Abraham Lincoln is a phenomenon most evident on a broadly popular level. There may well be less research in progress on Lincoln manuscripts and books than there was two or three decades ago. Real action is taking place, however, where masses of Americans look increasingly for their contacts with history, at historical sites. The National Park Service initiated a long-range program to improve the Lincoln home site in Springfield, Illinois, some years back. There is a large project under way to upgrade the interpretative material at other Lincoln sites in

Illinois as well. A new site in Kentucky was dedicated just this year, and people in Vermont, of all places, are at work to save another Lincoln-related historical site.

The newest addition is the Mary Todd Lincoln House in Lexington, Kentucky, dedicated on June ninth of this year. Like all such events, this dedication was the result of considerable struggle over a substantial period in the past. More than seven years ago, Mrs. Louis B. Nunn, wife of the governor of Kentucky at that time, visited the historic brick house in which Mary Todd spent her girlhood years. The wives of the



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FIGURE 1. The Mary Todd Lincoln house on Main Street in Lexington, Kentucky.

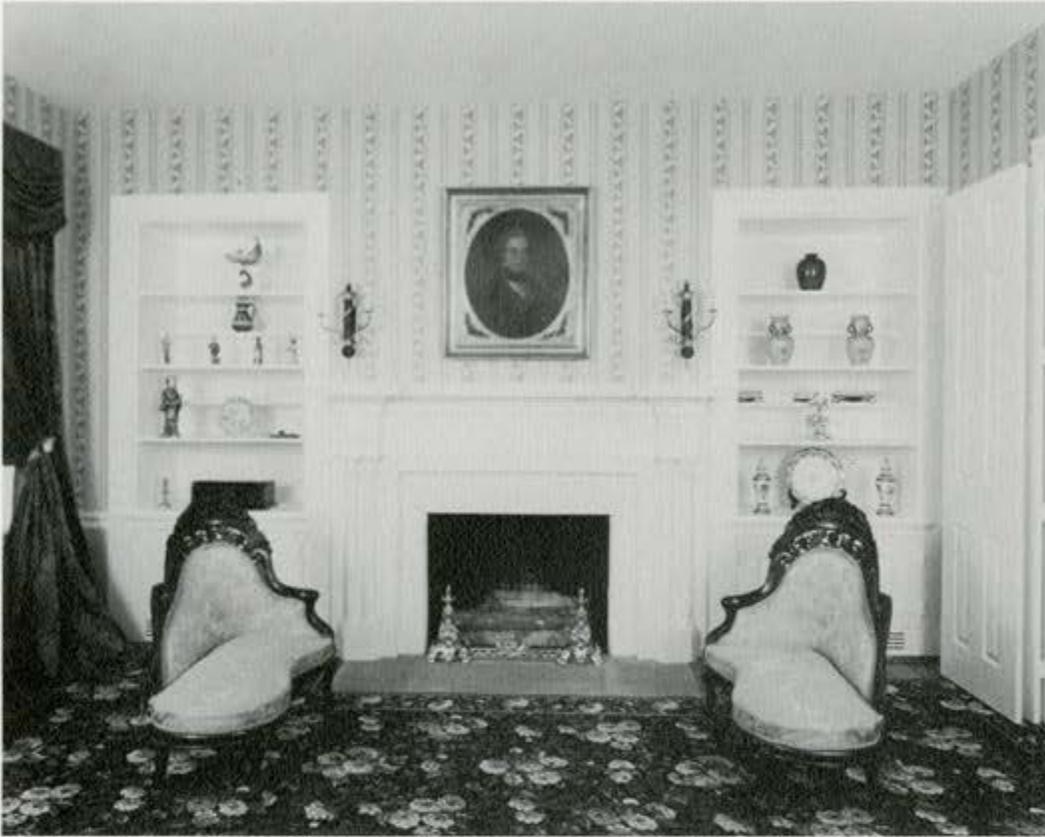


FIGURE 2. Much of the Todd home is restored to the period 1832 - 1849, the time of Robert Smith Todd's residence there. This parlor contains the painted portrait of Robert Smith Todd. The couches are copies of furniture used by Mary Todd and Abraham Lincoln in the White House.

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governors of Indiana and Illinois were coming for a visit and had expressed an interest in seeing the house. Mrs. Nunn was shocked to find that the Todd home was a tumbledown warehouse for plumbing supplies.

The house had survived many close calls in the past. As early as 1921, civic and historical groups in Lexington showed interest in using the house for a museum. After a year's efforts, however, the only accomplishment was the placement of a tablet on the outside of the building describing its history. Occasional newspaper articles on the sad plight of the house sparked little interest. A proposal to use it for commercial pur-

poses in 1932 did prompt a protest from a black church across the street. Louis A. Warren, the first editor of *Lincoln Lore*, made several attempts in the 1940s to interest Lexington citizens in converting the home into an historic site, but in 1946, the house was nearly razed to make room for a gas station.

The home was a victim of forces of which we have only recently become aware. Before the era of woman's liberation, it was not easy to arouse enthusiasm for a *girlhood* home. Indeed, the Kentucky Mansions Preservation Foundation touts the home as "the first shrine to honor an American First Lady." C. Frank Dunn, a local Lexington historian who was

FIGURE 3. The master bedroom in the Todd house is furnished with pieces made in Winchester, Kentucky, in the early part of the nineteenth century. Knowledge of the type of carpet used in the room came from the 1849 inventory of the Robert Smith Todd estate.



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interested in saving the house in 1949, wrote Louis Warren to tell him that it would never work to save the home "to glorify womanhood." It could only succeed as an essentially Lincoln-related memorial.

Dunn pointed to other problems. He did not feel that any prominent woman in Lexington would lead a campaign to save the Todd house. For one thing, the home was a notorious house of ill fame in some of the years after it passed out of Todd family hands. For another, most of the leaders of Lexington society were Confederate descendants. Despite the fact that the state did not secede, Lincoln's policies on race drove Kentucky sentiment into the camp of the Solid South after the war was over, and there that sentiment remained as late as 1949. A further problem was the extremely poor condition of the house. At that time, it seemed "utterly impossible to restore the place."

The Todd home went through the various stages of decay that properties on the slide go through. The original family left, and the occupants became people without a permanent home. From a rooming house, it became a place where people went just for an evening. From a saloon, it became a place occupied more by objects than people, a used-furniture store. At last, it became a place occupied only by objects, a warehouse.

Mrs. Nunn organized the Kentucky Mansions Preservation Foundation in 1969 to renovate the Executive Mansion in Frankfort. The organization restored White Hall, the home of Lincoln's minister to Russia, antislavery maverick Cassius M. Clay. The Foundation also took an interest in the Todd home, but the conversion of that home to a public historic site would not be accomplished without a final struggle.

The Kentucky Federation of Women's Clubs raised \$26,500, the appraised value of the house. Governor Nunn provided \$100,000 in state money from a contingency fund. The Department of Housing and Urban Development included the block on which the Todd home was situated in a Lexington urban renewal tract. In 1971, the Commonwealth of Kentucky bought the tract, but a long legal battle ensued. The owners contested the state's ability to condemn the property on the basis of the value of that piece of property alone without considering its value in conjunction with surrounding properties. In 1973, the Kentucky Court of Appeals upheld a Fayette Circuit Court ruling that the state could condemn the property without considering the value of the adjacent property.

Actual restoration of the property could not begin until 1976. Governor Julian Carroll's administration provided \$465,000 to restore the house and purchase furnishings. The governor and his wife also made unused Executive Mansion furniture available for use in the Todd home. The feat was at last accomplished.

The house was built in the first decade of the nineteenth century. Robert Smith Todd purchased the house in 1832, when his daughter Mary was already fourteen years old. She lived in the home until she left for Springfield in 1839; her father lived there until his death in 1849. While he lived in the house, Robert Todd was clerk of the Kentucky House of Representatives, was elected to the Kentucky Senate, and was president of the Lexington branch of the Bank of Kentucky. The family gained substantial income from a grocery establishment.

Of course, the original furnishings of the Todd home have not survived. When Robert Todd died in 1849, his estate was offered for sale and was scattered far and wide. The inventory of the estate made for that sale survives, however, and from that inventory it was possible to make an educated guess at the furnishings of the house. The twenty-room brick house contains a rare portrait of Robert Todd and draperies copied from a surviving swatch from the original parlor. The home is open to visitors from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m., Tuesday through Saturday, and from 1 p.m. to 4 p.m., Sunday.

The name of Robert Todd figures prominently in the struggle which is presently going on to save Hildene, a mansion in Manchester, Vermont. It was the home of Robert Todd Lincoln, the only son of Abraham and Mary Todd Lincoln to live to maturity. Robert first visited Manchester on a vacation to escape the heat of a Washington summer during the Civil War. He visited the area repeatedly after the war and was especially fond of the summer home his law partner, Edward Swift Isham, kept in the area. In 1902, now wealthy and successful, Robert Todd Lincoln purchased several hundred acres in Manchester. In 1904, Hildene was built and remained in the family's hands until the death of Robert's granddaughter, Mary Lincoln Beckwith, in 1975. Her will left the 412-acre estate to the Christian Science Church with the wish that it be preserved as a memorial to her grandparents. However, the will contains an escape clause allowing the church to

sell the estate if it is "impractical" to run the estate as an historical memorial.

The position of the Christian Science Church is simple. They consider themselves, according to Mr. Carl B. Rechner, Real Estate Consultant at the Christian Science Center in Boston, a "small but international church." They are not equipped to run historical memorials, and that is an enterprise which does not particularly fit their mainly religious objectives. They wish to follow the spirit of the will and will sell the property to any group which will operate the property as a memorial to the Lincolns. However, the property was appraised at \$612,000, and no group which wishes to operate the home as an historic property has that kind of money. Mr. Rechner said that the church offered to sell for \$400,000 and to "make terms" that would ease even that burden, but their offer has not been taken. They have been offered, \$200,000, which they refused. They feel that, if no group prepared to manage the property as a memorial offers to buy it for a reasonable price, that they are then free to sell to any other buyer for the next best use.

The Friends of Hildene, Inc., a group of over one hundred Manchester citizens anxious to save the mansion for historical purposes, is long on sentiment for the project and, understandably, short on funds. One major gift, says FOH president Robert Schmid, allowed them to make the \$200,000 offer. Since negotiations to close the gap between that and the church's figure have broken down, that offer has been withdrawn. The Friends of Hildene think that they have an excellent chance to save the estate through the courts. "News from the Friends of Hildene," a bulletin published by the organization, stated their case this way in April:

The FOH stand, buttressed by legal precedent and authority, is that the Church has not shown — and has made no good faith effort to establish — that to run Hildene as directed in the Will would be "impractical." Therefore,



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FIGURE 4. Robert Todd Lincoln's portrait in the dining room of Hildene.

having failed to establish "impracticality," the Church is not free to sell the estate except to a buyer who will honor Miss Beckwith's memorial concept. In FOH's view "impracticality" *might* have been argued if the Beckwith Will had left no money to the Church as operating capital for the maintenance of a Hildene memorial. But the Will provides a specific fund of \$425,000, as an endowment for this memorial purpose as well as "all the rest, residue, and remainder" of the estate after taxes and expenses have been paid. Thus, with . . . working capital and with full title to the land and buildings, . . . the Church must present convincing evidence — which has not been forthcoming — that it is "impractical" to maintain Hildene as a memorial.

The \$425,000 endowment was a fund set aside in Miss Beckwith's will for her servants. The servants are all deceased now, and in that contingency the money and the "rest and residue" of the estate after settlement were to go to the operation of the memorial. Mr. Schmid estimates the amount available for this purpose now at \$780,000 in cash, stocks, and bonds. A court fight is in the offing, the Church petitioning the courts for permission to sell Hildene on the open market and the Friends of Hildene "determined to prevent, by all legal means, the diversion of these resources from their intended purpose."

Hildene has been nominated for inclusion on the National Register of Historic Places by the Vermont State Division for Historic Preservation, which described it as a "magnificent example of Georgian revival architecture." Miss Kathryn Welch, planning officer for the Boston regional office of the National Trust for Historic Preservation noted:

The estate contains a multiplicity of artifacts, memorabilia, and archival materials, which would be of historical significance. Resources such as the papers and correspondence of Robert Todd Lincoln and the Lincoln-Beckwith families as well as the collection of artifacts should be evaluated for their content and significance relative to U.S. history, the history of the Lincoln-Beckwith family, and the more local history of the estate and the town of Manchester.

The home is in good physical condition, and Mr. Schmid says that the furnishings in the home are mostly the ones Robert Todd Lincoln acquired for it. Miss Beckwith, known locally as "Peg," lived in the house as it had been set up by her grand-

father. She bought very few furnishings herself. Some of the furnishings, however, go to Robert Todd Lincoln Beckwith, Miss Beckwith's brother, and he is currently distributing some of the items. Friends of Hildene have contacted him, however, and he has apparently agreed to leave certain very important pieces, like the grandfather clock, in the home.

When I asked Mr. Rechner for a description of the Church's position, he gave me in essence the position I described as the Church's above. He did not mention the endowment fund on which the Friends of Hildene place so much emphasis. Wanting to clarify the matter, I called the Church's associate counsel, Mr. Philip Hunt. He expressed some reluctance to discuss a matter of litigation at first, but he did consent to discuss the will a bit. The "so-called endowment" fund is "in there," he said, as a trust which was never set up because all the potential beneficiaries were deceased before they could benefit from it. Mr. Hunt's position is that, "endowment" fund or no, the whole question hinges on "the degree of discretion" Miss Beckwith desired the directors of the Church to have. The courts, he said, will look at the critical words in the will, which state that in the event the directors should determine the historical memorial purpose impractical, they could use the property to further the ends of religion as taught by Mary Baker Eddy. The will states that it is Miss Beckwith's "desire," but she does "not direct" that it be used for the historical purpose. She could have directed them to do so and left the property to someone else in the event that they did not wish to do so. The courts will have to interpret whether it is entirely up to the directors of the Church to decide the question of practicality. In the meantime, Lincoln enthusiasts will have to wait and watch anxiously or hope that some benefactor can close the gap between the Church's price for the property and the funds raised by the Friends of Hildene.

*Editor's Note:* Readers of the credits for photographs in recent issues will have noted the appearance of the Louis A. Warren Lincoln Library and Museum. This is the new name for the Lincoln National Life Foundation. A future issue will deal with the renaming of the Foundation in honor of its first director and with the move of the facility to brand new quarters.

M. E. N., Jr.



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FIGURE 5. Main entrance of Hildene.