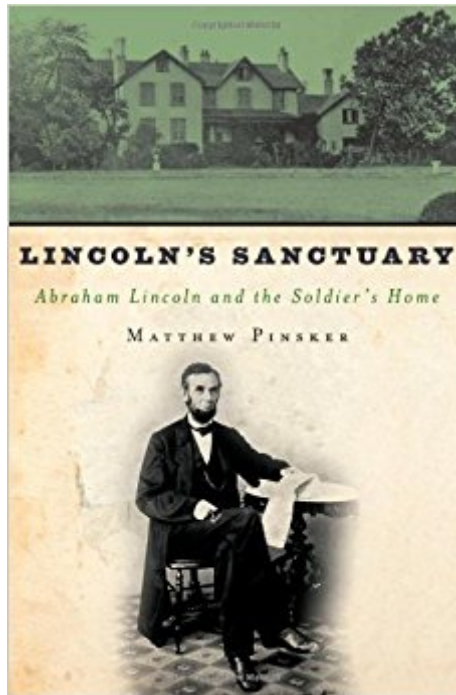


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# Lincoln's Sanctuary: Abraham Lincoln And The Soldiers' Home



## Synopsis

After the heartbreaking death of his son Willie, Abraham Lincoln and his family fled the gloom that hung over the White House, moving into a small cottage in Washington, D.C., on the grounds of the Soldiers' Home, a residence for disabled military veterans. In Lincoln's Sanctuary, historian Matthew Pinsker offers a fascinating portrait of Lincoln's stay in this cottage and tells the story of the president's remarkable growth as a national leader and a private man. Lincoln lived at the Soldiers' Home for a quarter of his presidency, and for nearly half of the critical year of 1862, but most Americans (including many scholars) have not heard of the place. Indeed, this is the first volume to specifically connect this early "summer White House" to key wartime developments, including the Emancipation Proclamation, the firing of McClellan, the evolution of Lincoln's "Father Abraham" image, the election of 1864, and the assassination conspiracy. Through a series of striking vignettes, the reader discovers a more accessible Lincoln, demonstrating what one visitor to the Soldiers' Home described as his remarkable "elasticity of spirits." At his secluded cottage, the president complained to his closest aides, recited poetry to his friends, reconnected with his wife and family, conducted secret meetings with his political enemies, and narrowly avoided assassination attempts. Perhaps most important, he forged key friendships that helped renew his flagging spirits. The cottage became a refuge from the pressures of the White House, a place of tranquility where Lincoln could refresh his mind. Based on research in rarely tapped sources, especially the letters and memoirs of people who lived or worked at the Soldiers' Home, Lincoln's Sanctuary offers the unexpected--a completely fresh view of Abraham Lincoln--through the window of a place that helped shape his presidency.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Lincoln spent more than one quarter of his presidency (all the fair weather months of 1862, '63 and '64) living not at the White House, but in a modest cottage on the grounds of the Soldiers' Home, a residence for disabled veterans just outside the capital in Maryland. Drawing on previously obscure manuscript resources-including the letters of soldiers assigned to guard Lincoln at his retreat-Dickinson College historian Pinsker does a first-rate job of illuminating this previously little-known slice of Lincoln's life. Here we have Lincoln with his guard down and his coat tossed over the back of a couch. He and his son Tad (Willie was dead by this time, and older son Robert visited only rarely) shared meals and stories with the soldiers bivouacked about the grounds. Company K Sgt. Charles Derickson recalled that Lincoln used to enjoy coming over to the soldiers' camp for a cup of "army coffee" and a "plate of beans." At one point, when the troops received defective socks, their complaints got the president's attention; a corrupt federal contractor wound up in prison. In addition to providing up-close-and-personal views of the soldiers' "friendly father Abraham," Pinsker also gives vivid accounts of the various moments in Lincoln's public life that occurred at or involved the Soldiers' Home, such as the writing of the Emancipation Proclamation and the firing of McClellan. All told, this account comprises that most rare of things: a book that actually adds to the Lincoln literature, telling us stories we haven't heard before. Copyright 2003 Reed Business Information, Inc.

A three-mile horse ride from the White House, the Soldiers' Home (an asylum for disabled veterans) was the Lincoln family's summer retreat. Historian Pinsker here builds a chronicle of the happenings at the Soldiers' Home from the testimony of about 75 people who memorialized their interactions with Lincoln there, including, Pinsker says, a guard whose letters have not been used by previous Lincoln scholars. Although his presentation is indeed on the scholarly side, it does afford an intimate portrait of Lincoln, down to his fondness for padding around in slippers. Writing soberly, Pinsker allows such details to speak for themselves, and most interesting for general readers, they reveal Lincoln's lackadaisical attitude toward his security arrangements. Parallel to quotidian affairs at the Soldiers' Home, Pinsker delves into greater matters that unfolded there, such as Lincoln's receipt of military news or his evolution toward emancipation. Ostensibly for an academic audience, Pinsker's study nevertheless exhibits hooks for the enduring popular interest in every aspect of Lincoln's life.

George Riggs had a cottage built in Washington City just a few miles north of the capital on a hill in the peaceful countryside in 1842. Riggs was a prominent banker at the time and had a desire for a retreat where he could escape the hustle and bustle of busy Washington. Today that cottage is known as President Lincoln's Cottage at the Soldiers' Home Museum and has been open to the public since 2008. Riggs sold the estate to the federal government in 1851 and a home for veteran soldiers was founded. It was to be used as an asylum for disabled veterans. As fate would have it there was to be more to the estate than its intended purpose. During the mid-nineteenth century the grounds that contained the cottage were considered to be "in the country". Today it is in the heart of northeast Washington, DC just off North Capital Street. President Abraham Lincoln would spend three summers at the cottage and would pen the Emancipation Proclamation while in residence there. Lincoln entered the White House under the cloud of secession and war. Seven states had seceded from the Union. He even had to sneak his way into his new residence after rumors of assassination attempts surfaced in Baltimore. He needed a place to get away to before he even walked through the front door of the White House. Lincoln's first year as president was an eventful one and not in a good way. The Union Army had been repulsed at Bull Run just outside Manassas Junction and military prospects did not look too favorable at that time. Lincoln spent the first summer of his presidency at the White House busily dealing with military matters as well as meeting with the throng of office seekers and would be profiteers. The following February Lincoln lost his favorite son Willie to typhoid fever. The White House became a very sad place for Lincoln's wife Mary and that summer and they decided to spend time away from the office and move out to the country at the Soldier's Home. President and Mrs. Lincoln had ridden out to the home during the first few months of his presidency and thought that it was an ideal place to spend the humid Washington summers. They may also have been influenced by former President Buchanan who spent time there. Matthew Pinsker, an Associate Professor of History and Pohanka Chair of US Civil War History at Dickinson College, has taken a detailed view of Lincoln's time at the Soldier's Home and has provided a lens through which the reader can view the personal and professional life of the 16th President of the United States. *Lincoln's Sanctuary: Abraham Lincoln and the Soldier's Home* is a very well researched monograph that makes excellent use of diaries and letters from those surrounding the former President to give the reader a bird's eye view into life there during the summers of 1862, 1863, and 1864. Pinsker opens the book with an entry from Walt Whitman's *Specimen Days* where he describes seeing the President on his way to the White House from the

Soldiers Home in August 1863. "I see the President almost every day. I saw him this morning about 8 o'clock coming in to business." (p. 1) Whitman said of the President "that there was a deep latent sadness evident in his eyes". (p. 1) It was a common sight to see the President riding to and from his summer residence. During the start of the summer of 1862 Lincoln would ride alone to and from the White House. This changed with the possibility of an assault on the Capital by confederate forces whom up to this point had been getting the better of the Union Army in the field. "At the end of the first week of September, General James Wadsworth, the military governor of the District of Columbia, dispatched two companies from a Pennsylvania Regiment to guard the cottage. He also ordered members of the 11th New York Cavalry, which had been stationed in Washington, to accompany the president on his daily commute." (p. 56) None of this particularly suited Lincoln. He rather enjoyed the peace and solitude of the rides back and forth to the White House but he was understanding of the military necessity of the new entourage. It is from this very action that Pinsker gains the majority of his source material. The soldiers assigned to protect the president proved to be very willing correspondents and through their letters home we can gain insight to what Lincoln spent his time doing at the Soldier's home. Private Willard Cutter of the 150th Pennsylvania Regiment was one such soldier who wrote to his recently widowed mother once a week. Cutter in particular makes an interesting source. His letters are heartfelt and he displays no agenda in his writing. There are several other such sources that provide a treasure trove of information for Pinsker to use while writing of the president and how he conducted his daily personal and professional life at the Soldier's home. There were conversations with high ranking officials as well as powerful civilians at the Soldier's Home concerning leadership of the military and emancipation. Pinsker concludes that Lincoln penned the Emancipation Proclamation while in residence at his summer retreat. There are also tales of Lincoln's family life. Mary and their youngest son, Tad, spent a portion of summers visiting Vermont and other northeastern states leaving the president alone. Lincoln developed a relationship with his guards and became especially attached to Captain David Derickson. Captain Derickson would share meals with the president as well as spend the night at the cottage. Secretary of War Edwin Stanton also took up residence on the grounds of the Soldier's home during summers. He, like Lincoln, had recently lost a child to illness and the two developed a bond and a strong working relationship while away from the city. Lincoln would also visit the contraband camp located near the Soldier's home. This may have helped evolve his thinking of gradual vs. immediate emancipation. Mary Dines, an escaped slave, served as the Lincolns cook during their summers and when interviewed after the war said that Lincoln had visited the camps on several occasions and brought Mary on a few occasions. Dines said that Lincoln was moved to tears

during one visit where he witnessed the former slaves singing their traditional songs. In *Lincoln's Sanctuary: Abraham Lincoln and the Soldiers' Home* Pinsker has focused on a slice of Lincoln history that had yet to be fully reported. Considering that Lincoln spent over a quarter of his presidency there it is surprising it has taken this long. Pinsker does a good job of utilizing the letters and diaries from those who spent time at the soldiers home to give the reader a glimpse into Lincoln's personal life and how he conducted his affairs. For those who wondered how did Lincoln and Stanton become close this book lets us know that it was at the Soldiers' home. Pinsker's prose is very easy to read and follows the Lincoln presidency chronologically. He makes generous use of quotes from the soldiers who were charged with protecting Lincoln and offers an insight into what they thought about their Commander in Chief. He also makes use of diaries and letters from prominent people at the time and what their impressions of working with Lincoln were. This book would be a welcome addition to the library of any fan of Lincoln, civil war buff, or presidential historian.

*Lincoln's Sanctuary* was recommended to me by one of my favorite professors of history, Aaron Sheehan-Dean, whose field is the Civil War. I'm glad he recommended it. Not only does Pinsker show us a side of Lincoln we don't often see -- away from the White House, though still beset with concerns for the fate of the country -- but he also gives us a lesson in how history is researched and written. All through the book are commentaries on difficulties in research, bits about how a historian selects (yes, we do select), organizes, and approaches his or her material. It's a wonderful course in boots-on-the-ground history. Lovers of American history, followers of Abraham Lincoln, history students, Civil War buffs -- there is a great deal in this book for all.

In each of the years he served as President of the United States (minus the 11 southern states which seceded launching the Civil War!) President Abraham Lincoln, his wife Mary and family would journey to the Soldiers Retirement Home about 4 miles from the White House. Son Robert would visit on his trips home from Harvard. Youngest Lincoln son Tad enjoyed the Soldiers' Home where he had a menagerie of pets; got to know the guard troops from Pennsylvania, New York and Ohio stationed there. Wife Mary was often vacationing in New England or shopping in New York. In this atmosphere Lincoln enjoyed the camaraderie of soldiers; received visitors and enjoyed the company of Secretary of War Edwin M. Stanton living in a nearby cottage. It was in this location that the President agonized over his decision to issue the Emancipation Proclamation; decided to fire George B. McClellan and help plan the 1864 presidential campaign. Every day Lincoln would

ride a horse to the White House surrounded by mounted cavalryman. His wife Mary fell from her carriage in July, 1863 while traveling to the home. She was seriously injured. Pinsker tells us of plots against Lincoln's life. He may have even been fired upon by an unknown assassin according to a soldier who reported this incident in his postwar memoirs. Matthew Pinsker has written an outstanding book adding to our knowledge of the heretofore little known Lincoln residence at the Soldiers Home. The Home is now a National Landmark and is being renovated and opened for the public. One can imagine how awed poet Walt Whitman was as he saw Lincoln on his daily ride from the White House to the Soldiers Home. Pinsker draws on a vast array of first person accounts, letters, memoirs and can be complimented on adding to our knowledge of the Lincoln presidency. The book is well illustrated with maps and is an outstanding addition to anyone interested in the Civil War and the Lincoln presidency. Well recommended!

While Pinsker has a tendency to stray from the point on occasion, his research and support for those points is excellent. Learned a lot about Lincoln from his factual approach. Would recommend to all Civil War buffs.

My gosh, a view into a part of Lincoln's life that is expertly told portraying the "human" Lincoln. During a Washington tour on the early 1970s to the Soldier's Home, we stopped near the Riggs Cottage. The tour guide said his talk but as I looked at an upstairs window. I swear I saw Mrs. Lincoln peak through the curtain at us. I still have that remembrance and feeling some 45 years later! Maybe she did?

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