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Restoring Lincoln's Country Retreat

Civil War President's 'Camp David' Will Open to Tourists and Scholars

Until several years ago, what may be the nation's most significant Abraham Lincoln site was an unheralded and slowly deteriorating treasure, known only to selected historians, a few members of the public and a handful of retired soldiers.

Finally, in 2000, the charming Gothic Revival cottage and surrounding 2.3 acres at 3700 N. Capitol St. in northwest Washington—Lincoln's country retreat during his presidency—were declared the President Lincoln and Soldiers' Home National Monument. That same year, the National Trust for Historic Preservation placed the cottage on its annual list of America's 11 Most Endangered Historic Places.

With a Save America's Treasures federal challenge grant of \$750,000, the project was off

and running, says the Trust's Sophia Lynn, project manager for the monument. The grant, federal budget appropriations and private donations are funding the exterior and interior restoration of Lincoln's seasonal home. Wagner Roofing was selected by general contractor J.S. Cornell & Son, Inc., of Philadelphia to restore the cottage roof (see sidebar).

"We think this is one of the most important historical sites being restored in America today," Richard L. Moe, president of the National Trust and a

major force in efforts to preserve the cottage, recently told *The Washington Post*. Moe's comments are reinforced by a 2003 Interior Department study. Although there are many other Lincoln sites, the study concluded that "there is no [other] historic site with direct personal ties to Lincoln that is dedicated to interpreting the Lincoln presidential years and legacy."

The Trust wants eventually to create a center of Lincoln

scholarship, with fellowships in partnership with local universities, according to William A. Dupont, AIA, the National Trust's Graham Gund Architect (an endowed position established in 1998). "We envision scholars-in-residence who use the monument as a home base



COURTESY OF THE LINCOLN MUSEUM, FORT WAYNE, IND. (#3993)

President Lincoln spent more than a quarter of his presidency at this cottage on the grounds of Soldiers' Home. This photo (ca. 1860s) is from Mrs. Lincoln's album.

Lincoln Slept Here ...

Restoring the home of a president involves not only an obligation to history but also a duty to “get it right” for future generations who will visit and learn from the site—particularly when the property has been declared a National Monument, the highest designation available to a U.S. historic building. How do the project’s managers ensure its integrity?

In the case of Lincoln Cottage, the answer is “layers of research,” says the Trust’s David Overholt. “Because of the significance of a presidential home and particularly the importance of President Lincoln, we have consulted with the most prominent consultants working in preservation in the United States.”



The core of the cottage was built in 1842 by banker George W. Riggs, Jr., according to design principles set down by A.J. Downing in his book, *Cottage Dwellings*. The structure was enlarged over the years, and today it stands as a large two-and-one-half story masonry building with a stucco exterior.

According to Overholt, original specifications for the Riggs section of the house were saved, but “they weren’t always followed.” The roof specs called for “slating to be done in the best manner and of the best Susquehanna slate.” In later years, the slate was removed and the roof shingled. “During the current restoration, we found frag-

ments of the original slate,” reports Lee Simon, Wagner’s project manager. “It turns out the original builders did not use Susquehanna, also known as Peach Bottom, slate.” Wagner identified Vermont Royal Purple slate as a close match to the original. To ensure authenticity, Hillier Architecture, of Washington, D.C., consulted with New York roofing expert Russel Watsky, Inc. That firm agreed with most of the redesign already worked out by Wagner and J.S. Cornell.

“I recommended Wagner to J.S. Cornell because Wagner has great craftsmen and can handle any kind of work,” says Stephen Ortado, owner of Historic Structures, which is co-venturing with J.S. Cornell as general contractor. Restoring the cottage roof is complex, he explains, because slate and metal work must be done concurrently, since both materials “connect” at the valleys where the roof slopes meet. Repairs where the second- and third-floor stucco walls adjoin the roof also have been challenging. “Wagner understands the mechanics of how things work, which is important in the formal process being used to ensure that everyone is doing what the architect wants,” notes Ortado. “This is a labor- and commitment-intensive job.”

“The Trust is delighted that J.S. Cornell chose Wagner for the roofing component of this restoration project,” says the Trust’s Sophia Lynn. “Wagner has enjoyed an excellent reputation and track record in the D.C. area for almost a century.”

Ultimately, restoring the Lincoln Cottage project is about more than buildings. “Our mission is U.S. history education,” says William Dupont, the National Trust architect who oversees the restoration. “The buildings are the support structure, the tangible remains of history—and we have to preserve them so future generations have the opportunity to interpret them. If the roof and gutters are in good shape, these buildings will be around for several more centuries. Part of my job is to serve clients who are not yet born, and I want to hand them something durable that they can sustain.”

Wagner Roofing is installing a new Vermont slate roof and a standing-seam, lead-coated copper roof on the cottage.



CAROL HIGHSMITH

while doing primary research at the Library of Congress, which houses Lincoln’s papers.”

According to Matthew Pinsker, author of the book, *Lincoln’s Sanctuary*, “most Americans, and even some scholars, are unaware that Lincoln maintained a wartime retreat from 1862 to 1864 at a cottage ... a few miles north of 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue.” Now that’s about to change, thanks to the initiative by the Armed Services Retirement Home, which approached the Trust in 1999 for help in preserving and restoring Lincoln’s seasonal residence.

“Think of Soldiers’ Home as an early Camp David,” says David C. Overholt, preservation projects director for the Trust. “After their son Willie died in February 1862, the Lincolns thought the cottage might provide a place of solitude where they could deal with their loss.” In June, the president moved his family from the White House to Soldiers’ Home for a

seasonal stay. Situated on the third-highest spot in the city, with an elevation of 330 feet, the Soldiers’ Home location was more healthful than the heat and humidity of downtown.

The First Family returned for June through November of 1863 and 1864, spending a total of 13 months, or more than a quarter of Lincoln’s presidency, at Soldiers’ Home. Each June, they packed up furniture and belongings and moved their household, including a few servants, to the country—and Lincoln commuted to the White House by horseback or carriage. Back at the cottage at the end of the day, according to Pinsker, the president would remove his boots and walk about in his slippers—carrying a large palm fan if the night was particularly warm. Away from the regimented routine of 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, Lincoln accompanied his wife on carriage rides through the neighborhood, devoured his favorite Shakespearean works and, with his

Letter From the Vice President

After 15 Years, Still Work to Do

Having just celebrated a landmark 90th anniversary at Wagner Roofing, it will be interesting to see what this next year, as well as the next 10 years, holds in store for us as a company and a country.

I am personally celebrating 15 years with the company. Truthfully, I never thought I would be here this long. Not because I thought we were going to “retire” or that Chuck and I would become sick of each other, but because I believed my work here would be done.

However, as anyone who has worked in any business knows, *the work is never done*. We have a constantly changing technical environment, personnel requirements, physical plant, insurance/worker’s comp



CHUCK WAGNER

requirements—and a long list of other responsibilities. It takes a lot of energy to keep up with this ever-changing world.

I believe running a company is very much like being a parent: *The job does not end*. When we were raising our four daughters, we believed that “if

they can just get through high school safely ...,” then, “if they can just graduate from college and find a job ...,” then, “if they can just find happiness ...” The “ifs” go on and on, but we are there every step of the way being as supportive as possible.

There are a lot of “ifs” in our company: “If we just get the new computer system up and running ...,” “if we can just keep our stable workforce ...,” “if we can just continue to find the right kind of work ...” I hope to be here until the company celebrates 100 years in business. Then, I really am going to retire.

Sincerely,

Sheila Wagner

Serving the Community

As a member of the metropolitan Washington, D.C., community since 1914, Wagner Roofing is committed to supporting worthwhile causes and activities that enhance our community.

Wagner is pleased to contribute goods, services and/or funds to these organizations:

- American Red Cross—
Tsunami Relief
- Injured Marine Semper Fi Fund
- Jelleff Boys and Girls Club
- Rebuilding Together—
Montgomery County
- Sixth & I Historic Synagogue
- Special Olympics

young son Tad, frequently enjoyed the camaraderie of the soldiers assigned to protect the president.

The cottage was not an escape from the realities of the Civil War. Dignitaries and other guests made the trip to Lincoln’s country house to meet with him. And as Overholt points out, 5,000 Civil War dead are buried in the military cemetery situated about 100 yards northeast of the cottage: “When Lincoln lived here, a steady stream of wagons bearing the Civil War dead would have passed by.”

Perhaps President Bill Clinton said it best at the July 7, 2000, ceremony at Soldiers’ Home, where he signed a proclamation naming the cottage a National Monument:

“Lincoln came to this cottage not to hide from war, but to confront its deepest meanings, to plumb its most difficult truths, to find the solace necessary to muster the strength and resolve to go on. It was here ... that President Lincoln completed a draft of the Emancipation Proclamation, which abolished slavery in the seceding states.”

Under an agreement with the Armed Forces Retirement Home that gives the National Trust the authority to restore, preserve and develop the site, the Trust has embarked on an ambitious capital project. It includes restoration and preservation of the cottage, renovation of the neighboring administration building as a visitors center and the design and fabrication of exhibits and inter-

pretive experiences for both locations. Educational programs are being developed, and landscape improvements are planned to help welcome the 20,000 individuals expected to visit the site each year.

“This is a multimillion dollar project,” says Lynn. “We need to raise \$6 million more for capital projects alone, and an endowment of at least \$13 million will be required to operate the site.”

The Trust hopes to have the cottage restored and open to visitors in time for the 2009 bicentennial celebration of Lincoln’s birth. But tourists will not find the typical historic house museum with period restoration and furniture. Instead, says Overholt, “We’ve been charged by Trust leadership to fill the

building with Lincoln’s powerful ideas. We hope we can challenge people to really think about contemporary issues because everything Lincoln was confronted with—race, equality, emancipation, unity, war—has relevance today.”

Dupont agrees: “At the cottage, we often say it’s not about the architecture, although it’s nice, and it’s not about how Lincoln lived—what he had for dinner or the silverware he used—although we’ll leave the authentic fabric in place for people to see as a backdrop for context to the story.” Instead, says Dupont, “what’s really important about this place, what makes it sing, is Lincoln himself, the stories of his life, Civil War Washington, slavery, emancipation.” ●



Sasha Bruce Youthworks, 701 Md. Ave., N.E., structural repairs due to fire damage, including cornice and painting



CHUCK WAGNER (4)

Smithsonian Arts & Industries Building, 900 Jefferson Dr., S.W., snow detection system



Woodward residence, 3027 Q St., N.W., Buckingham slate and copper roof

In the Works

Other Wagner jobs in progress or recently completed. To discuss or visit any of our projects, call Chuck or Sheila Wagner at 301/927/9030. Unless otherwise noted, all jobs featured are in Washington, D.C.

Dumbarton Oaks, 1703 32nd St., N.W., lead-coated copper roof on new library; modified bitumen roofs on Orangery and Pre-Columbian Museum

Folger Building, 725-15th St., N.W., interior remodeling: design and construction of walls, plumbing, electrical and cabinetry

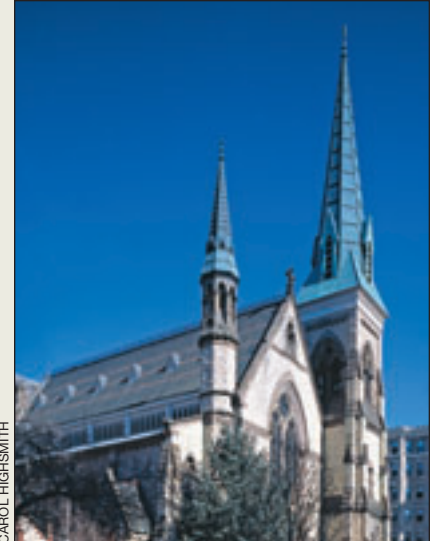
Congressional Country Club, 8500 River Rd., Bethesda, Md., modified bitumen roof on porte cochere; repair Spanish tile

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Church of the Ascension & St. Agnes, 1215 Mass. Ave., N.W., major structural repairs to redesign gutter system due to snow damage; replace cornice; restore cast-iron fencing and slate (detail photo below shows gray Buckingham and red Vermont slate in a scalloped pattern, with wrought-iron fence at ridge)



CAROL HIGHSMITH

Embassy of Cameroon, 2349 Mass. Ave., N.W., modified bitumen roof and skylights; shingle roof and lead-coated copper finials; major structural repairs to balcony



CHUCK WAGNER

Back When...



Plaid pants, long hair and cigarettes were all in style when Sheila Wagner and Frank Pietranton, of Pier Associates, took a break at a Property Management Association tradeshow in the mid-1970s. Note the slogan under the Wagner sign, "Roofers need love too."

Who We Are

Chuck Wagner, Sheila Wagner
Owners

Rhonda Jackson
Accounting Department

**John Ray, Lee Simon,
Jeff Wooldridge**
Estimators

Kenny Batten
Commercial Roofing Superintendent

Denise Berti
Project Manager/General Contracting

Barbara Demarest
Project Manager

Colleen Kennedy
Administrative Assistant

Dan Williams
Sheet Metal Superintendent

Adrienne Whyte
Service Department