



Tours of the cottage will begin at the Robert H. Smith Visitor Education Center, a 1905 Beaux-Arts building that underwent a green restoration.

# New Directions

## for the old retreat

With its Lincoln Cottage project, the National Trust puts environmental principles to work.

BY KIM A. O'CONNELL

PHOTOGRAPHY BY ROBERT C. LAUTMAN

**O**n an August night in 1864, not far from the White House, a Union guard heard the unmistakable report of a rifle shot. The anxiety in Washington during the Civil War had reached a heightened pitch, with Confederate plots to kidnap or kill Abraham Lincoln on the rise. The guard, stationed at the Soldiers' Home, a military asylum

for disabled veterans, soon spotted the gunman's intended target: Lincoln, hatless, hurtling along on his horse toward a cottage on the property. When the guard later recovered the president's hat, he found a bullet hole through the crown.

Perhaps more remarkable than Lincoln's brush with death was that he often risked such misfortune by making the three-mile commute, by horseback or carriage, from the White House to the Soldiers' Home. There, Lincoln had established a wartime retreat for his family in a splendid 34-room Gothic revival cottage. Built in 1842 for George Washington Riggs, a prominent banker, it became one of several living quarters at the Soldiers' Home in the 1850s after Riggs sold the property to the government. Each year from 1862 through 1864, the Lincolns spent the summer and most of the



fall at the cottage. Located at one of the highest points in the city, it commanded a view of the Capitol and had a more temperate climate than the swamp-bottom downtown. "We will ride into the city every day," Mary Lincoln wrote to a friend, "& can be as secluded, as we please."

For the president, the cottage offered an intimate setting away from the bustle of Pennsylvania Avenue. Sitting in the cottage's drawing room or library, Lincoln met with Union officers, politicians, foreign nationals, and old friends, engaging candid conversations that may not have been possible at the White House. On his commutes, he spoke with soldiers returning from the front, gleaned unalloyed information that he couldn't get from his generals. On the quiet cottage grounds, he revised drafts of the document that would become the Emancipation



Clockwise from left: President Lincoln's Cottage, newly restored; the cottage c. 1891; a c. 1863 photo from the Todd family album. Opposite, clockwise from top left: the wood-paneled library; the drawing room has double-hung windows and shutters; almost all of the windows have shutters, for passive control of heat and light; the durable slate roof; other historic cottage features.

Proclamation, saw the horrors of the war in the increasingly frequent burials in the nearby graveyard, and planned his 1864 reelection campaign.

"Lincoln's challenge as a national leader was unprecedented," writes historian Matthew Pinsker in *Lincoln's Sanctuary: Abraham Lincoln and the Soldiers' Home*. "In that era of grave crisis, he naturally sought support within his private life to help sustain his public duty. The Soldiers' Home offered a sanctuary where he could work out this vital struggle."

Now, after a seven-year preservation effort, Lincoln Cottage will reopen to the public as a National Trust historic site on February 18—fittingly, Presidents Day. The Trust and the Armed Forces Retirement Home (as the Soldiers' Home is now called) joined together to preserve and restore both the cottage and an adjacent 1905 Beaux-Arts building, the former administrative offices for the Soldiers' Home that will become the Robert H. Smith Visitor Education Center. The work began soon after President Bill Clinton named the house a national monument in 2000.

The project advances the idea that historic preservation can

be on the cutting edge of sustainability: The visitors center will be the first National Trust site to be certified under the Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) rating system, developed by the U.S. Green Building Council to encourage environmentally sound building practices.

"Preservation is at the forefront of the sustainable architecture movement," says David Overholt, the preservation projects director at Lincoln Cottage. The restoration of the cottage and visitors center not only relied on new green technology, he says, but will also help educate the public about the sustainable features of good, traditional architecture.

**When the Trust embarked** on the Lincoln Cottage project in 2000, the LEED system was still in its infancy and there were few examples of the application of sustainable design principles to historic preservation. But many preservationists had long known, at least intuitively, that reusing old buildings was environmentally beneficial. "We thought we should practice what we preach," says Richard Moe, president of the National Trust, who envisions that many future





The Robert H. Smith Visitor Education Center is expected to earn a LEED silver rating.

Trust sites will be LEED-certified. “We hope the visitors center will be an example to stewards of other historic buildings across the country.”

William A. Dupont, the former Graham Gund Architect of the National Trust, helped lead a design study that proved LEED certification was possible for the visitors center, and that the more exacting restoration at Lincoln Cottage could also incorporate some green features. Dupont and other Trust leaders assembled a team of architects, engineers, contractors, and LEED professionals to develop a master plan for restoring the two buildings. The Trust received a \$1 million contribution from United Technologies Corporation, a Save America’s Treasures grant, and other donations for the project.

“To make a difference with sustainability, we feel that you can’t only focus on new buildings,” says Andrea Doane, director of community affairs and corporate giving for United Technologies, which has supported environmental sustainability through corporate donations and with energy and water conservation in its own buildings. “So many cities are old,

and within the larger category of existing buildings, historic buildings pose an even greater challenge. We liked the fact that the Trust was going for LEED certification, which was an ambitious goal worth pursuing.”

Seeking a LEED rating for the visitors center was not straightforward, however, in part because the U.S. Green Building Council did not yet have standards for historic structures. So the National Trust used the LEED guidelines for new construction and major renovations. The visitors center earned credits in all the major categories: sustainable sites (which includes maximizing open space and promoting density and alternative transportation), water efficiency, energy efficiency, materials, indoor air quality, and innovation and design.

First and foremost, the design team disturbed very little of the historic building’s exterior core and shell. Inside, the structure’s elegant bones—particularly its central skylight and second-floor arcades—remain prominent, even though the architects, to create gallery space, moved a wall and added a partition (easily removable if the building’s use changes in the future).

Most of the green features will not be obvious to visitors, demonstrating that sustainability need not detract from a building’s historic character. New carpeting, wood, countertops, partitions, and flooring all contain recycled content, and most emit only low levels of volatile organic compounds. Updated energy-efficient heating and air-conditioning systems—manufactured by United Technologies—were installed and are projected to save up to 40 percent on power costs over the life of the building. Low-flow fixtures in the bathrooms reduce indoor water use. Even the beautiful vanity countertops are made of recycled glass.

Outside, vegetated bioswales, which capture rainwater and filter it slowly into the ground, and permeable pavement have virtually eliminated stormwater runoff from the property. Awnings were reconstructed based on historical photographs and can be adjusted to provide shade or let in more light and heat. In addition, all construction waste was sorted for recycling.

Once the paperwork is filed,

the visitors center is expected to earn a LEED silver rating under the four-level certification system (certified, silver, gold, platinum), a remarkable achievement for a historic building in a program that focuses mainly on new construction. “We’ve shown that LEED is flexible enough to allow you to get a high level of sustainability,” says Gavin Gardi, a LEED accredited professional with the Christman Co. who led the cottage’s certification process, “no matter what kind of building you have.”

Lincoln Cottage was restored to its 1862 appearance using durable materials—slate, lead-coated copper, and decay-resistant wood—that are expected to limit the expense, energy, and waste of frequent replacement. The décor will be sparse, in part because the National Trust considers the house to be the primary artifact and no Lincoln-era objects were preserved there over the years, but also because of its chief green feature: a passive ventilation system that draws in outside air, which would have wreaked havoc on original Lincoln artifacts.

“We’re providing heat and air-conditioning as necessary, but for the most part the cottage was restored to be as green as it

was originally, with working windows, working exterior and interior shutters, and cross-ventilation that can be controlled just through housekeeping,” Overholt says. Even on a 90-degree summer day, the prevailing breeze makes the cottage remarkably comfortable, and one can see why the Lincolns enjoyed staying there.

“This site is so tremendously significant for the country,” says Lincoln Cottage Director Frank Milligan, “that it demanded that we take the blinders off when it came to how we restored and interpreted it. Visitors are not going to walk along a roped pathway in a room and look at furniture. Here, they will sit and think and interact.”

Tours will begin at the visitors center, where a copy of the Emancipation Proclamation will be displayed, as well as exhibits on such subjects as wartime Washington, Lincoln’s presidency, and the history of the Soldiers’ Home. In one room, visitors will sit around a large wooden table similar to the one used by Lincoln’s Cabinet, where an interactive computer program will allow them to assume the role of a Cabinet member and debate emancipation. At the cottage, visitors in guided groups of 15 will walk through the rooms, where they can sit at a facsimile of Lincoln’s desk (commissioned by the Trust), or view a stack of his favorite books in the library. Without the distraction of fully decorated rooms, visitors will be free to ponder how the site might have informed Lincoln’s views on emancipation and the war.

“Historians might build engaging narratives out of their evidence in order to help readers imagine the past,” Matthew Pinsker writes, “but for many the inspiration of a place stands unmatched. Visitors cannot see the president any longer, but they certainly can see where he walked and lived. They can pass the gravestones that he passed in the summer before his journey to Gettysburg, or they can trot up and down the stairs where his oversized slippers once shuffled.”

Among the many Lincoln-related sites, the cottage may be the only place where one can take the full measure of the man as he confronted a nation divided. The White House remains a functioning office; Ford’s Theatre interprets the act of an assassin. But at the cottage, we visit a place where Lincoln, his family and books nearby, had the mental clarity necessary to encourage the nation to bind up its wounds, ensuring its survival.

Lincoln visited the cottage for the last time on April 13, 1865. His face pale and drawn, he must have imagined how pleasant it would be to spend the coming summer there, with the war over, the slaves freed, and the Union whole again. Perhaps the tension in his shoulders had begun to ease. He and Mary even had plans to see a comedy at Ford’s Theatre the next night. For one moment at the cottage, a moment much too brief, all was well.

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