

When Lincoln Spent the Night in Town

Up until the time of the Twentieth Amendment to the Constitution, an elected President had to wait until March to take on his new duties as leader of the United States. So it was in February 1861 that the special train carrying Abraham Lincoln and his entourage traveled east from Springfield, Illinois, to the inaugural ceremonies in Washington, D.C. On February 14, Lincoln disembarked in Allegheny City (today's North Side) and crossed the Allegheny River by carriage into Pittsburgh. When he arrived at the Monongahela House Hotel on Smithfield Street, General James Negley and his local militia were there to control the enthusiastic throng.

On the following morning, Lincoln addressed a crowd estimated at ten thousand from the hotel balcony. Soon thereafter the Washington Infantry, led by Pittsburgh's Captain Thomas A. Rowley, accompanied the presidential party back to the Allegheny City depot for the remaining part of Lincoln's journey to Washington, and into history.

Lincoln's train departure from the city that day was



Soldiers and Sailors Museum's re-created Lincoln Room from the Monongahela House in the current "Lincoln's Pittsburgh Address" exhibit.

commemorated by a stunning stained-glass window in the city's Smithfield Church, which was built in 1927 (the current successor to several other churches at the site dating back to 1782). But for a more intimate association with Lincoln's Pittsburgh stay, one can do no better than a visit to his Monongahela House "room." This new re-creation is currently on display at Soldiers and Sailors Military Museum and Memorial, a magnificent 1910 Greco-Roman-style building sponsored by Civil War veterans. The museum houses one of the nation's finest permanent collections of Civil War artifacts—including Clark Mills's eerie white "death mask" of the President (actually taken some months before his assassination) and an 1860 bronze bust—Lincoln's first portrait—by Leonard Volk.

After the president-elect's 1861 stay, his room was preserved and became a trumpeted feature of the Monongahela House for many years, until it was torn down in 1935. The Rococo-Renaissance walnut bed and other historic furnishings from that room are part of the Soldiers and Sailors "Lincoln's Pittsburgh Address" exhibit. One of the many photographs on the exhibit's gallery walls shows the hotel's officially designated Lincoln Room (with the bed), circa 1920s. Other photos depict Lincoln's entourage. The aforementioned James Negley, a Pittsburgh native and Mexican War veteran and a familiar name even today in the area, was in command of the military contingent during Lincoln's visit. Also pictured are Allan Pinkerton, of the notable nineteenth-century detective agency, and Ward H. Lamon, both responsible for guarding the president-elect.

Equally fascinating are the wall photos of people associated with the Monongahela House itself—a luxurious structure that from the 1840s to the 1930s attracted the famous and the powerful. Mark Twain, Edwin Booth, the Prince of Wales, "Buffalo Bill" Cody, Henry Ward Beecher, and ten U.S. Presidents all stayed here; in fact, one can't help noticing a strange curse in operation, since three of our assassinated Presidents (Lincoln, Garfield, and McKinley) were guests at the Monongahela.

How did Lincoln's historic room come to be finally re-created at Soldiers and Sailors? After 1959, the artifacts were stored away by Allegheny County. "Then for decades they were lost. A researcher in 1999 ran across the information about the furnishings and asked the county about them," says Michael Kraus, the museum's curator. "This caused the county to look at their antique assets in different places, but they never found them. Sometime in 2006, they were accidentally rediscovered. They took the bed to Heinz History Center and reassembled it and compared it with contemporary photographs. Undeniably it was the Lincoln bed that came from the Monongahela House."

Luckily, the Lincoln Room is back again in full view at the Soldiers and Sailors Museum (4141 Fifth Avenue; 412-621-4253)—and will be there for a considerably longer time than the sixteenth President's own brief but memorable stay at Pittsburgh's most opulent hotel. □

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