

Lincoln's Sanctuary: Abraham Lincoln and the Soldiers' Home

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Review

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Pinsker, Matthew *Lincoln's Sanctuary: Abraham Lincoln and the Soldiers' Home*. Oxford University Press, \$30.00 ISBN 195162064

The other West Wing:

Lincoln and his ranch

Thematic studies on President Abraham Lincoln are legion. Physically, they cover everything from his hair, to his hands, to his feet. A few even attempt to diagnose the diseases, real or imagined, he is said to have contracted. The more ideological studies explain Lincoln's religion, his humanity, and legal and political philosophy. More recent monographs focus on such illusive subjects as Lincoln's virtues, his friends, and his honor. At this moment there are six new books, recently published or in preparation, on the Lincoln Assassination, and at least as many more on the Lincoln Presidency. So it comes as no surprise to see an entire volume devoted to the time the Lincoln family spend at the Anderson Cottage on the grounds of the Soldiers Home in Washington. It is no secret, however, that the author, Matthew Pinsker, did not approach the subject entirely on his own. Anderson Cottage, which was recently placed under the control of the National Trust for Historic Preservation, is undergoing extensive restoration. Although its future use has not been fully determined, it doubtless will be open to visitors, and **Lincoln's Sanctuary** was commissioned by the National Trust as part of this historical initiative.

That said, the volume serves its purpose well. New Lincoln readers will find it both entertaining and educational. Not only did the Lincoln family spend more time at Anderson Cottage than is generally assumed, which incidentally is well documented, but the rural setting seems to have put the President into a more creative mood. Professor Pinsker makes a strong though circumstantial case for the Emancipation Proclamation having been drafted at Anderson Cottage.

Professor Pinsker is an excellent researcher, and he writes exceptionally well. His diligent hunt for primary materials turned up a valuable though little known cache of letters by one of Lincoln's soldier guards. The cottage was a welcome and much needed retreat from the intense atmosphere at the White House, and Mary Lincoln seems to have gained at least some relief from her deep grief over the loss of her son Willie in February 1862.

One perhaps unavoidable problem with **Lincoln's Sanctuary** and similar monographs is that there is not enough original material to maintain the focus on the subject, i.e., the Lincoln family at Anderson Cottage. To flesh out the story, the author is forced to retell numerous tangentially connected events in the life of the President that are all too familiar, such as the problems Lincoln encountered with the several reluctant or inept commanders of the Army of the Potomac, particularly General George B. McClellan. Seasoned Lincoln readers will feel a slight frustration with such large blocks of familiar text and doubtless find themselves skimming the pages in search of the next illuminating piece of information. A moderately priced pamphlet available to future visitors at the restored cottage might have been more in order.

John R. Sellers is historical specialist for the Civil War and Reconstruction periods in the Library of Congress manuscript division. His publications include Civil War Manuscripts: A Guide to Collections in the Manuscript Division of the Library of Congress and Maps and Charts of North America and the West Indies.