



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

By Matthew Pinsker

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**Lincoln's Sanctuary: Abraham Lincoln and the Soldiers' Home** By Matthew Pinsker

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.

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## Lincoln's Sanctuary: Abraham Lincoln and the Soldiers' Home By Matthew Pinsker Bibliography

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### Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

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.

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From [Booklist](#)

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. *Gilbert Taylor*

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Review

"That most rare of things: a book that actually adds to the Lincoln literature, telling us stories we haven't heard before."--*Publishers Weekly*

"A marvelous book, brimming with new information about the public and private lives of the Civil War president. The author tells a compelling story, based on thorough and impeccable research."--Michael F. Bishop, *Washington Post Book World*

"Pinsker's important and fascinating book tells for the first time the story of Lincoln's summer White House, where so many of the major decisions of the Civil War were made. His research has been indefatigable, and Pinsker's findings will be new even to Lincoln specialists."--David Herbert Donald, Harvard University, and Pulitzer Prize-winning author of *Lincoln*

"Exhaustively researched, elegantly written.... A treasure that no Lincoln or Civil War student can afford to overlook. It offers not only a fine history of the house itself, but also a startling view of Lincoln's little-known life as a commuter president.... *Lincoln's Sanctuary* compels us to reconsider historic events that we have long assumed unfolded at the White House. Pinsker's prodigious accomplishment demands that we redefine Lincoln's milieu. Thanks to this wholly original work, we may never be able to look at the Lincoln presidency in quite the same way."--*Civil War Times Illustrated*

"An uncommonly original look at Lincoln during the war years.... Through Pinsker's probing inquiry into sources heretofore surprisingly underused, the ever elusive private Lincoln comes into new light. A book for our time and for all libraries."--*Library Journal*

"Pinsker not only shows all of Lincoln's faces, but he also does an impressive job of connecting the emotional side of the president to his political experience. By showing the complex interplay of Lincoln's private and public lives, Pinkser has beautifully recreated the inner life of the Soldiers' Home." --Peter S. Carmichael, University of California at Greensboro, *Civil War History*

"Matthew Pinsker's *Lincoln's Sanctuary* is an outstanding contribution to our understanding of the sixteenth president. Not only does it deepen our knowledge of Lincoln and of the Soldiers' Home, the retreat where he tried to relax; this readable volume offers new insights into wartime Washington and the fighting of the Civil War."--Jean H. Baker, Goucher College, author of *Mary Todd Lincoln: A Biography*

"This is an impressive work by Pinsker. It is remarkably well-researched, and he writes with clarity and grace. Pinsker shows us that the Soldiers' Home was a 'personal center' for Lincoln, and that the place had a special 'spirit' in his story as President. That 'spirit' is, of course, a family story, and Pinsker tells it well."--David W. Blight, Yale University, author of *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory*

"A welcome addition to the ever-growing bibliography of Lincoln studies."--*Washington Times*

## **Users Review**

### **From reader reviews:**

**Pamela Pinkham:**

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