President Lincoln’s Cottage:
A Case Study

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On February 19, 2008, President Lincoln’s Cottage (PLC), a historic house museum located in Washington D.C., opened to the public for the first time. The Cottage is three miles away from the White House, in the northwest section of D.C., and was the summer residence of President Lincoln for three years. It is located on the campus of what is now called the Armed Forces Retirement Home, an institution that has existed there since 1851. Other presidents stayed at this Gothic Revival style Cottage, but it was Lincoln who spent the most time there – thirteen months, or one-quarter, of his presidency. For many reasons President Lincoln and his family chose this Cottage to be a sanctuary from both the White House and hectic downtown Washington. Yet while Lincoln was at this retreat he never could, nor did he want to, fully escape from the War and the other difficulties that had devoured America. While there are numerous Lincoln sites around the country, PLC is significant, “…for its direct personal and intellectual ties to the Lincoln presidential years.”\(^1\) It is the only easily accessible site within Washington D.C. that can focus purely on Lincoln’s presidency and give a glimpse into his daily life while in Office. This general case study does not intend to examine all sides of the museum and its creation; rather it will focus solely on the curatorial aspect – the uniqueness of the museum’s exhibits (which include the house tour), the planning process for those exhibits, and the issues that arose during their development. The actual preservation and restoration work done on the Cottage and the Visitor Education Center (VEC) was exceptional and fascinating in its own right, but that will not be highlighted here.

\(^1\) National Trust for Historic Preservation, “Proposal to the National Endowment for the Humanities for an Implementation Grant to Support Fabrication of Exhibits & Interpretation at the Lincoln Cottage Washington D.C.” (Washington D.C., 2005), 6.
The site is similar to other historic house museums in the way that the Cottage is the most significant part of the visitor experience; by walking through it visitors learn about Lincoln and what he faced while living there. Yet, PLC is a non-traditional museum in terms of its interpretation. Unlike other traditional historic house museums, such as Hillwood Estate, Museum & Gardens or Thomas Jefferson’s Monticello, PLC is not fully furnished to re-create how it would have looked when Lincoln was living there; objects are not the highlight of the Cottage tour. Visitors are not seeing Lincoln-owned objects or items original to the house. The one hour guided tour that visitors get throughout two floors of the Cottage focuses on Lincoln’s ideas and what he was confronting as a war-time president, even at his retreat. The Museum does have a small permanent collection, but those objects are all kept at the VEC and none of them help to interpret the Cottage itself.

While furnishings are clearly not a focus of the interpretation, the rooms are not empty. The first floor is the area where effort has been made to evoke the Lincoln era; all rooms there have some sort of period furnishings, and two rooms are significantly restored. The second floor functions more as exhibit space; though one room has some objects, not enough is known to talk about what the rooms would have looked like. It was very important to PLC that conjecture be kept to an absolute minimum. The objects that are displayed were specifically chosen because while they are historically accurate (period pieces), they also enhance the visitor experience. Tables can be touched; chairs (except for a few delicate pieces) can be sat in. Because of the few furnishings, the restoration work, the stories told, and the fact that the Cottage itself and many of its architectural elements are original to Lincoln, guests can imagine Lincoln in the space.
The power of the experience is that one can be in the same space that Lincoln inhabited as president while also learning about the major ideological concepts and issues that were important to him and his presidency. The goal of PLC is to give visitors a personal connection with and insight into Lincoln the man and Lincoln the president.

PLC uses three different methods to accomplish this tall order—multimedia technology, dialogue with the visitors, and storytelling. Interpreters tell many stories about Lincoln throughout the tour, stories that center on his (and his family’s) time at the Cottage. Besides describing events that took place there, the stories lead to discussions on larger ideas—such as the American Dream, freedom, or Lincoln as Commander-in-Chief. Visitors are asked open-ended questions throughout the tour and are encouraged to become part of the conversation that the interpreter is working to establish.

Audiovisual tools, the most distinctive interpretive technique at PLC, are a part of the entire tour. Since visitors are not seeing first hand objects authentic to the storyline, it is the media that allows them to be exposed to such things. Multimedia usage is becoming more popular in museums; while found in such places as the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library & Museum and the National Constitution Center, rarely is it a part of a historic house museum experience. Many people in the museum field predicted that technology would vastly improve the way a collection database is created and utilized. Little thought, or credit, has been given to how certain technology can fill a collection’s traditional role— to bring history alive for the visitor and to educate them about their world.

Three rooms in the Cottage have either a large, flat-screen television or projectors that show images depicting Lincoln, his contemporaries, war-time Washington, and
documents important to his presidency. Quotations from either Lincoln or his contemporaries are heard both in conjunction with the images or, in some rooms, on their own. Only one room, the intimate, restored, first floor library, has no audiovisual component. Throughout the tour the interpreter has a remote that controls all of the media. Each piece of the media (both audio and visual) is divided into sections, so the interpreter has to press a button to keep it going. Having this control means the interpreter has the freedom to lead the tour; the media only supports what he/she is saying. It also allows the interpreter to adapt the tour to a specific audience and gives time for visitors to involve themselves either through questions or comments. As PLC wants visitors to have an intimate, more personal experience than other sites often give (only twenty people are allowed on a tour), flexibility with a potentially impersonal method (the media) is crucial. As the Director of PLC, Frank Milligan, sees it, this distinctive tour gives visitors one of the best immersive storytelling experiences that can be found in an American museum.

PLC also has the VEC where visitors can buy tickets for the house tour, use the restroom, purchase items in the gift shop, and look at exhibits. The exhibits in the VEC are more traditional, yet like the Cottage they incorporate multimedia and don’t have original objects displayed. In three permanent exhibit rooms large panels, that use reproduced images, repeat many of the topics that are discussed on the Cottage tour. Two short videos – one animated, the other with interviewed historians – are shown on a loop in two of the exhibit galleries. The other video that is played in the VEC is shown to visitors in a separate room before they begin their tour of the Cottage; it sets the stage for what they will be learning about in the Cottage over the next hour. There is also a small
space, located behind the center permanent exhibit gallery, designated for temporary special exhibits. Lastly, in a room across from the gift shop there is a large table that has interactive computers where visitors can explore some of Lincoln’s toughest decisions. By clicking on images things such as quotations, documents, maps, and photographs pop up; visitors can come to understand not only why Lincoln made certain decisions, but also what the opinions of those around him were.

Besides the interpretation, which is described above, another aspect of PLC that makes it different from other historic house museums is that it ignores the widely-held belief that the basis of a museum is its collection; that this is its reasons for existing.² This is not to say all other historic house museums focus solely on their objects, yet for most their collection, decorative arts in general, is an important part of their interpretation and the reason they are open as a museum. Usually there is a clear understanding of how the house was historically decorated, and the objects there (original or not) are meant to fully reproduce that look. This is not so for PLC. While visitors there are being exposed to traditional museum objects – photographs, documents, drawings – they are seeing them through the use of technology.

Finally, having objects in the house, such as chairs and tables, that visitors can sit on and touch is unique for a historic house museum. While these furnishings are not part of the permanent collection, as they are not one-of-a-kind, exceptionally valuable objects, they are owned by PLC. They are taken care of as best as possible, but they are not treated with the same standard of care as an object in the permanent collection is. Historian Sherry Butcher-Younghans has pointed out that it’s not just the collecting but

the preserving of those objects collected that is the primary function of a museum.\textsuperscript{3} Even with the donors of the furnishings/objects being told that their donations to PLC would be used by visitors, the idea of visitors having full access to almost all of them is somewhat controversial. The irony is that while the lack of a true collection is what makes PLC unique, it’s not supposed to be something that the visitors spend much time thinking about.

With no traditional collection, yet having a site that almost every historian and museum professional would agree is worthy of interpretation, how did PLC become the museum that it is today? The National Trust for Historic Preservation is the organization that maintains and administers PLC; they spent seven years coming up with an innovative, exciting plan for both the site and its interpretation. The National Trust declared PLC one of their top eleven endangered American historic sites in June 2000. One month later President Clinton proclaimed the Cottage, and the 2.3 acres surrounding it, to be a National Monument; that designation is second only to a site being declared a National Park. From that moment on the National Trust worked to open the Cottage to the public. Because of the fact that the site is a National Monument, and therefore qualifies for Section 106 review, the National Trust had to consult with the National Park Service and the D.C. State Historic Preservation Office on the exterior restoration of the Cottage. The Armed Forced Retirement Home was also an important advisory party on the preservation work; the entire project could not have been done without their cooperation (since they own the Cottage and the land, the National Trust leases the site from them). The National Trust had co-operative or programmatic agreements with all three of the above mentioned organizations.

While there were numerous staff members from the National Trust headquarters working on PLC, such as Jim Vaughan, Vice President for Stewardship Sites, and the various people who held the title of Director of Interpretation and Education throughout the seven year process, employees hired for this project specifically were very few. Sophia Lynn began right away as the Project Manager; acting as the site administrator, she led PLC through its foundation. Others would be added slowly. The first things that needed to be done were studies so that the National Trust would know what it was working with, both in terms of the site’s historical significance and the condition of the Cottage itself. By September 2000, they had contracted historian Matthew Pinsker to research and write a monograph on the Cottage. They had also hired Hillier Architecture to produce a Pre-Design Study Report on the interior and exterior of the Cottage. These two reports would be crucial in determining both how the Cottage would be interpreted and what the major themes of the site would be. Pinsker’s work, a book entitled *Lincoln’s Sanctuary: Abraham Lincoln and the Soldiers’ Home* that would soon be published, laid out how significant the Cottage was to understanding Lincoln’s presidency. The Pre-Design Report showed that while not all rooms could accurately be restored to the 1860s period, some could. Working from research done by their own firm and from material gathered in a previous Historic Structures Report, Hillier Architecture provided an overview of the Cottage’s (exterior and interior) existing conditions and its historical and architectural significance. It also stated what and where historic finishes had already been uncovered. These two investigations were the first that provided the National Trust a firm basis for the possibilities of the site.
Richard Moe, President of the National Trust, mandated to his staff that the visitor experience at PLC needed to be “transformative.” Those working on the project knew that meant they would need to rely on numerous contractors throughout the development phase. Both for the preservation of the building and the creation of the interpretive plan, outside professionals were used throughout the entire seven year process. Nailing down how the Cottage would be presented to the visitors was the number one priority. The first significant interpretive planning sessions occurred in February and March of 2001. Some of the non-National Trust, paid participants of these sessions were: Lonnie Bunch (then Director of the Chicago Historical Society), Barbara Franco (then Executive Director of The Historical Society of Washington, DC), Bill Tramposch (then Vice President of Collections & Museums for S.P.N.E.A), Ruth Abram (President of the Lower East Side Tenement Museum), Doug Wilson (history professor and Lincoln scholar), and Clem Price (history professor). Before these planning sessions took place certain staff members at the National Trust had talked and, “…agreed that we’d look at non-traditional ways to interpret the Cottage precisely to avoid making another historic house museum.”

Already the idea was to think outside the box; this was something that Jim Vaughan insisted on. With that in mind, the discussions in the February and March meetings centered on the site’s major themes and topics, possible target audiences, restoration of the Cottage, and interpretation methods. The four techniques highlighted, which all ended up being used in the tour in some fashion, were: theatrical, concentric circles, dialogue, and mixed/multiple methods. Concepts such as the struggle for freedom, sanctuary, and authenticity were discussed. Everyone felt that certain features of the Cottage should be restored (i.e. windows, trim, doors), yet there was non consensus on.

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4 Sophia Lynn, e-mail message to Hillier Architecture staff, October 10, 2000.
as to which rooms should be restored. Like the National Trust employees, the outside participants all felt that PLC was an exciting opportunity to do something different. It was after these brainstorming sessions that the National Trust decided to organize a small group of consultants who could advise them throughout the interpretive planning process. The professionals specifically listed above, along with others who were brought on later, became part of the Interpretive Advisory Committee.

The next major step in the development process was to hire an exhibit design firm that could turn the ideas, stories, and interpretive techniques into one coherent interpretive plan for the Cottage. By the end of 2001 Vincent Ciulla Designs, Inc. was contracted by the National Trust. From then on they would be included in almost every interpretive planning meeting; National Trust staff would work with them endlessly to ensure that they understood what type of experience they were expected to design. This was a task that proved to be challenging. During a two-day July 2002 planning session that the National Trust staff had with the Interpretive Advisory Committee more ideas were suggested on what PLC could be. While more storylines, issues, and specific interpretive techniques were discussed, probably the most significant idea to come out of these meetings was that the visitors to PLC should be intellectually and emotionally engaged with their Cottage experience. Having mere panels hanging on walls would not cut it; most likely many different interpretive methods would need to be utilized.

It is because of that agreed upon idea that the first interpretive plan created by Ciulla Designs was somewhat poorly received by many of those involved. As laid out in that October 2002 interpretive plan, the interpreter leads the tour in only three rooms; the other rooms have interactive computer stations and exhibit panels that visitors experience
on their own. Stories are told and furnishings are present, yet it is a timeline, which runs on both floors of the Cottage that is the main way of disseminating knowledge to the visitors. Even though an effort is made to engage all of the senses, the Cottage’s sense of place, a theme thought to be important from the very beginning, did not come across. While the number of visitors allowed on a tour was noted as only being ten to twelve, Ciulla Designs did not produce an intimate experience; the plan described interpretation methods that would make it hard for visitors to make personal connections. This is exactly what the National Trust didn’t want. This initial disconnect between the National Trust and Ciulla Designs seems almost inevitable looking back on it now, as there was no place Ciulla Designs could look to for an example and there was input coming from many different people.

Interpretive plan drafts that followed did a much better of job of incorporating the objectives that the National Trust had for the site. They included much more interpreter involvement – interactive computer stations were no longer in the Cottage, the words of both Lincoln and his contemporaries became increasingly central to the tour. Certain rooms would be partially restored because information was available to do it accurately. While certain elements such as tour flow and the location of the VEC would later change, by 2005 Ciulla Designs had put together an interpretive plan that the National Trust could use as a strong foundation and adjust as necessary.

What is clear from these interpretive drafts is that multimedia, the use of technology in general, was never a focus of the interpretation, even though it was suggested early on. Not until Bill Tramposch created the first tour script, in the winter of 2006, was there a written plan that used audio and visual media to quite significantly
support the interpreters and the themes of the Cottage. It was Frank Milligan, who became Director of the site in October 2005, who felt strongly that audio and visual media should become a large part of the interpretation. From his past experience in developing new museums (and museum additions), specifically at the Nantucket Historical Association, he felt that balancing highly skilled interpreters with multimedia could give visitors to PLC the experience that the National Trust was looking for. As long as interpreters only used the media to reinforce what they are saying, the media would be an effective way to make both the history and the ideas come alive. As Erin Carlson Mast, Site Administrator/Curator of PLC, has pointed out, “We developed the content first – our storyline. Methods came second. Never once did we put method in front of content.” While thoughts on interpretive techniques changed throughout the planning process – interactive computer stations, reproduction props, exhibit panels, timelines, and period furnishings were all discussed – the major themes remained a constant. The Cottage as a sanctuary, Lincoln as President, Lincoln’s personal beliefs, emancipation – through whatever methods, these topics would be central to the tour. The Interpretive Advisory Committee continued to make recommendations on the interpretive plan, as well as on the VEC exhibits, throughout 2006. Formative evaluations done in 2006 also helped PLC staff determine what other changes needed to be made before the site’s opening. By the beginning of 2007 the interpretive plan was in place.

Attention could not just be focused on the interpretive plan; other work had to be done to prepare the site for opening. One of the first non-interpretive plan projects was to get the PLC website created, which meant a contractor needed to be hired and that person needed to be provided with content. Having a website that was updated somewhat

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5 Erin Carlson Mast, email message to author, October 31, 2008.
regularly was a great way for the public to be informed on the progress, be educated
about the site, and get excited for the opening. Before Ciulla Designs was hired to create
the Cottage’s interpretative plan, the National Trust contracted with a web design firm.
Throughout 2002 audience research was done, not only by breaking down Washington
D.C.’s demographics (especially in the neighborhood surrounding the Cottage) but also
by having Randi Korn Associates perform focus group research. This was done not only
to understand who the targeted audience groups should be, but also to understand what
the public would be looking for and wanting in a site like this one.

Also, as the Cottage is not the only part of the visitor experience, the VEC, which
introduces visitors to the site, demanded attention as well. Once the interpretative plan
for the Cottage was settled designing the VEC exhibit panels, and those exhibits in
general, became easier, since they followed the same themes. Staff worked with outside
firms to create the permanent exhibits, the three short videos that would be played in the
VEC, and the interactive computer program on Lincoln’s toughest decisions. This was
the last large piece of the puzzle, specific planning for the VEC didn’t start until 2005
(which is understandable seeing as different buildings were under consideration for its
use).

The VEC exhibits, as well as the media in the Cottage, point out the unique role
that those in charge of the exhibits had. Erin Carlson Mast began working at PLC in May
of 2003; though she did not officially become the Curator until the summer of 2007, from
2004 on she was the closest person the site had to a curator. During that time she was
dealing with issues of content, exhibit development, and the planning process in general.
In this role Erin was not dealing with actual objects and how the exhibits can highlight
them, rather she was finding images that could be reproduced in media or on panels and cataloguing them. Not having a collection gave Erin, and others, the freedom to pick the fill-in (namely furnishings and images) that worked best for the interpretation of the site. This freedom often times made decisions harder. In many ways, if the National Trust had decided PLC was going to be just another house museum the development of the site would have been easier.

While this project was seen by almost everyone involved as an exciting opportunity to create something that had never been done before, there were a lot of challenges along the way. One was the common non-profit problem of trying to fundraise during the post-September 11th economic recession. More specific to PLC, the biggest challenge seems to have been achieving a balance between preserving the Cottage and interpreting the Cottage. The Cottage itself is the site’s most important “object”; it’s crucial in defining the experience that visitors will walk away with. Yet as a historically significant building, care must be made to ensure that building fabric is not unnecessarily disturbed. There was a preservation philosophy that was created for PLC; many elements of the interpretive plan challenged this set viewpoint. In fact a copy of this preservation philosophy was re-circulated to certain National Trust staff and outside consultants by Dave Overholt, Preservation Projects Director for PLC, and Bill Dupont, Chief Architect of the National Trust, after they had reviewed the June 2006 Concept Study which explored possibilities for the Cottage’s lighting and A/V media usage. The preservationists were concerned that not only would modern equipment disrupt the building fabric, but the authenticity of the Cottage would be compromised. Bill Dupont specifically questioned the need for numerous LCD screens, projectors, and speakers; in a
letter to Jim Vaughan he wrote, “The building is a vessel for the exhibit, but it also our primary artifact.”6 The idea that visitors can relate to Lincoln because of the Cottage itself was always important during the site’s development, so the introduction of such modern elements into the Cottage seems to have initially surprised and dismayed a few of those involved. In the end it was agreed that LCD screens would be free standing and equipment would be placed in areas where the least amount of impact would be felt to the building.

Other areas of concern for the preservationists were the Cottage’s lighting and climate management. In both cases David Overholt and Bill Dupont had the same concerns that they had with the A/V equipment – modern lighting and climate management would negatively affect the structure and the visitor experience. They felt, and the preservation philosophy supported this point, that as much as possible both elements should only be used as they would have been in Lincoln’s time. This would maintain the historic ambience. In this case those in charge of the interpretation weren’t just concerned about the tour itself, but also with the comfort and safety of the visitors. This is why recessed lights, non-historic lighting levels, and air-conditioning, for example, were thought to be necessary. As Frank Milligan believed, if they were asking people to take an hour long tour that focuses on intellectual history they needed to be kind enough to give their guests air conditioning on a hot, humid day. Visitors can’t get the full impact of their visit unless they feel comfortable. Once again, through much debate a middle ground was established – recessed lights were kept at a minimum, heat/air conditioning was zoned, and the lighting system was designed so that brighter lights would come on only as visitors moved from room to room. It was also decided that

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no images would be mounted to the walls and that certain technology, such as a P.A.

system, would not be utilized. Compromises were always reached, yet these decisions
did make the entire process more difficult.

The tension between preservation and interpretation was made more of an issue
because of the lack of one consistent person in charge of the project. Looking back, Erin
Carlson Mast noticed that not having a steady leader meant that it took a while for
decisions to be made, and therefore the process was not as effective as it could have been.
Especially considering the innovative interpretive plan, not having someone establish a
consensus early on meant that planning was dragged out unnecessarily. During these
crucial early stages there were many people giving input and many people making
decisions. Certain staff members at the National Trust headquarters were quite involved,
Sophia Lynn had her duty as Project Manager and, before Frank Milligan, the first site
director that was hired lasted only six months. Frank Milligan noticed this when he
began at PLC; one of his first impressions was that there was no momentum to the project
(on the interpretation/exhibit development side). Momentum towards the opening is
exactly what a consistent leader would have been providing. With the development of a
new museum being such a demanding, stressful process, having a consistent person in
charge makes everything easier for the rest of the staff.

While the success of PLC cannot yet be determined, as the site has only been
open for ten months, the initial response from the public looks favorable. As of
December 2008 there have been just over 24,500 visitors to the Cottage, and this number
does not include everyone who has been to the site, just the ones who have bought tickets
for the Cottage tour. The latest survey results shows that out of the 805 PLC visitors who
responded to the National Trust’s post-visit e-mail questionnaire, eighty-four percent
strongly agreed that the Cottage tour was informative, enjoyable, and that they learned
something new on it. While not everyone completely enjoys their experience, almost all
seem to appreciate the unique approach of the interpretation. People leave the Cottage
thinking; whether it’s Lincoln’s beliefs, the Civil War, the preservation of the Cottage,
visitors are left with many things to contemplate.

As Richard Moe would remind the PLC staff, the reason Lincoln is so extensively
celebrated and examined by the public is because of what he managed to accomplish
during his presidency. A place this special, the only Lincoln residence that interprets his
time in Office, deserves interpretation that is distinct. Almost all who worked on the
site’s creation were energized by the opportunity they had, the freedom to make the
visitor experience different from anything else. They knew there was a possibility they
could fail in their attempt, but that was a risk they were willing to take. Erin Carlson
Mast noted, “There are other sites that are partially furnished or unfurnished (Drayton
Hall, Seneca Falls), use media (Benjamin Franklin home in London), emphasize a
conversational approach (Tenement Museum). However, as far as I know, we’re the only
site that uses a blend of all these methods – and makes it available to ALL
VISITORS…” While this type of interpretive plan would not work for every site, the
importance of PLC, as a historic house museum, is that it demonstrates to the museum
field and the public in general what is possible. Historic house museums don’t have to
stick to the traditional methods of interpretation, methods that are often not the most
effective. PLC is a twenty-first century museum that shows what the future of the

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7 Alison Mitchell, e-mail message to author, December 11, 2008
8 Erin Carlson Mast, e-mail message to author, December 8, 2008.
museum field could hold; hopefully from it other museums will be inspired to create other kinds of innovative, thought-provoking interpretation and exhibits.
Bibliography


President Lincoln’s Cottage Archives, Washington D.C., 2000-2007


Appendix A: Timeline of President Lincoln’s Cottage

February 20, 1985 – Historic Structures Report is done on Anderson Cottage by Geier Brown Renfrow Architects.

August 1985 – Study for Restoration of Anderson Cottage is done by Geier Brown Renfrow.

June 2000 – NTHP lists PLC as one of America’s 11 Most Endangered Historic Places.

2000 – NTHP and AFRH enter into a Cooperative Agreement whereby the NTHP assumes a role in stewardship of PLC.

July 7, 2000 – President Clinton designates PLC (and the 2.3 acres that surround it) as a National Monument.

August 2000 – NTHP contracts historian Matthew Pinsker to write a monograph about Lincoln and the Cottage.

September 2000 – NTHP contracts Hillier Architecture to do a Pre-Design Study Report on the interior and exterior of PLC.

October 3, 2000 – NTHP meeting with at least Sophia Lynn (Project Manager), Jim Vaughan (VP for Stewardship of Historic Sites), and Susan Schreiber (Dir. of Interpretation and Education) to begin the conversation on the development of PLC.

By October 10, 2000 – NTHP conceives PLC as a unique house museum. Sophia Lynn, responding to a press release draft of Hillier’s, e-mails Hillier saying, “On the 3rd I think we all agreed that we’d look at non-traditional ways to interpret the Cottage precisely to avoid making another historic house museum.”

January 31, 2001 – Hillier Architecture completes their Pre-Design Study Report (though it is update periodically over the next couple years).

February 16, 2001 – Interpretive planning session. Participants include: Lonnie Bunch, Mark Howell, Susan Schreiber, Erye Wentworth, Barbara Charles, March Pachter, Gary Scott, Doug Wilson, Ross Randall, Bitsy Waters, Jim Vaughan, Sophia Lynn, Bill DuPont.
March 2, 2001 – Interpretive planning session. Participants include: same NTHP staff, Bill Tramposch, Barbara Franco, Tom Frye, Bill Pretzer, Selma Thomas, Vinnie Ciulla, Clem Price, Harold Holzer, Ruth Abram. At both this session and the 2/16/01 session interpretive methods, major themes, and furnishing methods are all discussed.

June 2001 – NTHP contracts with Anne Ralls Web Design for the PLC website (firm was still being used as of May 2005).

By September 13, 2001 – NTHP decides to use Vincent Ciulla Designs, Inc. to prepare an interpretation plan for PLC. They are contracted by the end of the year.

By July 2002 – NTHP contracts Hillier Architecture to do the architectural/engineering work on the exterior of PLC.

July 9-11, 2002 – Exhibit Design Workshop with the Interpretive Advisory Committee, NTHP staff, and Ciulla Designs staff. Some of things discussed are:
- what Lincoln’s big ideas were (there was lots of brainstorming!)
- the major themes that can be discussed at PLC: the Big Ideas, It Happened Here, Ordinary/Extraordinary Man, Transformation
- interpretation of servants/servants space
- interpretation of Lincoln family domestic life
- handicap access
- interpreting PLC as “a day in life of AL”
- using séance as part of tour experience

Jim Vaughan doesn’t just want panels hanging in a room – he wants a variety of techniques used. Media is briefly mentioned, but is not the focus. He emphasizes the use of theatrics.

August 2002 – Visitor demographics research (concentrating on D.C. community) is being done (by NTHP staff).


October 17, 2002 – First draft of the interpretive plan ready for comment/review.

Oct./Nov. 2002 – Interpretive Advisory Committee members send in comments on the interpretive plan draft. Many seem to be unhappy with lack of intimacy, the impersonal-ness (as they had all previously suggested this be a personal, engaged experience). They don’t like the timeline or the use of cartes de viste with computer stations. The exhibits are interactive, but there is much less guided tour and more individual mode.
November 2002 – Focus group research is done by interviewing both teachers and history museum visitors in D.C.

November 6-7, 2002 – Second Exhibit Design Workshop where attendants talk about the first draft of the interpretative plan (which was supposed to incorporate ideas generated at the July 2002 meeting). Some of their comments are:
  • surprise that the interpretation plan describes a visitor experience that lacks a personal/emotional connection. This is what they all talked about in July 2002 – visitors getting unique insight into AL - but this doesn’t come across in the draft they have seen of the tour (b/c of the guide not moderating most of it, use of interactive stations, use of timeline).
  • possibly mixing historic images with contemporary ones
  • Bill Tramposch says “Once the soul of the experience is defined, then the techniques of approach can be figured out.”
  • should there be voter registration at the site?

2003- NPS publishes their Special Resource Study that reviews management alternatives for PLC. NTHP has already assumed stewardship responsibility at this point, so the chief debate becomes whether or not to become an affiliated site of the NPS. (As of 2009, the site is not affiliated with the NPS.)

May 2003 – Erin Carlson (later Erin Carlson Mast) is hired as Project Assistant at PLC. She assists Sophia Lynn who is the Project Manager.


September 2003 – Matthew Pinsker’s monograph is published. This book is an important foundation for the tour and exhibits.

February 4-5, 2004 – Authenticity Committee meets. This is their chance to influence conservation plan for PLC interior. The purpose is to analyze how the overall goal of providing a transformative educational experience can be achieved through building conservation strategies.

Winter/Spring 2004 – Erin Carlson becomes the Program Coordinator. She now deals with more curatorial issues – web content, interpretive planning, exhibit development, etc. By this time PLC has a Director (Peter Carmichael), but he leaves in the summer of 2004.
September 2004 – Heritage Landscapes completes a Historic Landscape Report & Preservation Treatment Plan for PLC.

December 2004 – NTHP completes a Strategic Plan for PLC for 2004-07. PLC’s historical background, mission, values, vision, internal mandates, SWOT analysis, short term goals, and long term goals are included.

December 7, 2004 – Another draft of the interpretive plan is ready for comment/review.

2005 – NTHP contracts Hillier Architecture for architectural/engineering services for VEC and interior of PLC.

February 3, 2005 – NTHP submits proposal to NEH for a grant that would support the fabrication of exhibits and interpretation.

April 27, 2005 – NTHP, AFRH, and DC SHPO sign a Programmatic Agreement that stipulates the review process for the preservation plans/work. It says: the Sec. of the Interior standards will be used, Peer Advisory Committee will be formed (with DC SHPO involved), and that the NTHP agrees to allow the exterior restoration plans to be reviewed by the AFRH and DC SHPO. The agreement is good for 5 years.

Summer 2005 – Erin Carlson becomes Manager of Exhibit Development and Information Resources. She is handling the growing collection of: images (mostly reproductions catalogued for exhibit use), archaeology, and architectural fragments, also the very small PLC Collection. She is also coordinating loans for upcoming special exhibits and the website launch.


September 21, 2005 – Ciulla Designs completes the interpretative plan.

September 2005 – NTHP contracts Bill Tramposch to write a model tour script.

September 22, 2005 – Interpretation workshop with out-of-the-box people (poet, dancer, storyteller, actor/performer). Similar meetings occur earlier in the year. Some of their recommendations are:

• use of open-ended questions
• costumed guide who interprets in first person in period rooms, regular guide in exhibit spaces
• having visitors leave their mark on the site by allowing them to write postings or leave photos, etc. (all consultants agreed on this)
Sept./Oct. 2005 – NTHP contracts The Christman Co. to provide construction management and services for: rehabilitation of VEC, preservation of PLC interior, and improvements to surrounding landscape.

October 2005 – The three scholarly articles written by Matthew Pinsker and Jennifer Fleischner are done. These provide the basis for the VEC exhibits.

October 2005 – Frank Milligan, Ph.D, is hired as Director of PLC.

2006 – NTHP contracts MFM Design to design and install VEC exhibits and interpretation materials.

January 2006 – Gail Winkler, Ph.D. furnishings consultant (sub-contractor for Hillier), gets her scope of services for the Furnishings Plan. They want her to: recommend treatments for 1st floor, research history of structure/room occupancy/room use/placement of furniture/furnishings for rms. 101-107, give cost estimates and sources, review any architectural/electrical/lighting plans.

February 24, 2006 – Bill Tramposch’s tour script is finished. It is then modified, refined, and developed by NTHP staff. It includes:
- tour time (50 min)
- tour group size (10-15)
- use of technology/media
- tour not being object driven (idea driven instead)

February 3, 2006 – Door Hardware Treatment Plan is presented by Hillier Architecture.

March 7, 2006 – Erin Carlson sends Hillier Group and The Christman Co. a memo stating that the heat/air producing elements will be zoned, since that is part of the authenticity of the public experience

March 7, 2006 – Around now the tour route is re-done. It is changed from starting in the Library to starting in the Dining Room.

Spring 2006 – Jill Sanderson, Curator of Education, is hired.

By April 2006 – Planning is underway for Visitor Orientation Theater (electrical, structural, architectural needs; A/V equipment)

April 2006 – Gail Winkler finishes the Furnishings Plan.

May 11, 2006 – NTHP contracts with Novation to create PLC media. Due to capacity issues, Novation is only used for the preliminary study through Fall 2006.
Summer 2006 – People, Places, and Design create formative evaluations, administered by PLC staff and interns.

June 2006 – Attempts by staff to make modern A/V equipment blend in better (installing LCD screens behind one way glass mirrors, having ceiling mounted gasoliers with modern light…)

June 5, 2006 – Novation presents NTHP a Concept Study on lighting and audiovisual/media control needs (includes budget estimates, timeline, and ideas on use).

June 13, 2006 – Bill DuPont (NTHP Chief Architect) writes Jim Vaughan a letter emphasizing that there should be minimum use of modern A/V equipment and minimum disturbance to the building fabric. He says: monitors should not be above mantels, should we even have monitors?, projection ok, don’t have PA system or microphones, use wireless as much as possible. He is most concerned that there needs to be a clear process for making decisions.

June 14-15, 2006 – Interpretive Advisory Committee meeting. The group gets walk through of Cottage experience (a mock tour), discusses it, discusses the goals of the tour, gets walk through of exhibit rooms/media gallery, and are shown a draft of the tour script. Some of their suggestions are:

• emphasizing what is special about the Cottage
• putting things into context
• tying the storyline and anecdotes together
• adding more about Mary Todd Lincoln
• more emotion and inspiration (people should be crying)

June 23, 2006 – Recessed lights other than focus-lights and safety-lights are eliminated, period lighting is carried throughout the tour route, (for the most part), no dozen wall mounted images in Emancipation Room, no PA system, NTHP wants all modern equipment to have clean, modern look and be free standing when possible to clearly delineate what is period and what is modern.

July 25, 2006 – NTHP meets with Luce Group to discuss the goals of the tour, how lighting can supports these goals, and the challenges present.

By October 20, 2006 – NTHP selects VideoArt Productions to create A/V media for PLC. The company gets started right away.

October 25, 2006 – NTHP contracts with Luce Group for lighting system. Their job is to: aim/adjust lighting fixtures, direct programming of control system, coordinate integration with A/V systems, and create lighting design/specs for all tour rooms.
By October 26, 2006 – NTHP contracts with ESI for the lighting, audio and media equipment.

November 2006 – Interpretive Advisors are consulted on most recent tour matrix and VEC exhibit script drafts.

Nov. 2006 – NTHP contracts with VideoArt Productions (for A/V media PLC work).

December 4, 2006 – Luce Group gives Final Design Submittal to Erin. This document includes light placement, types of lights, power loads, specs, etc.

January 2007 – Voice auditions are held for the PLC media. Staff will go through several rounds of auditions before finding a voice that satisfies the needs of the program.

January 2007 – George Rogers, Director of Development, is hired.

January 2007 – NTHP contracts Peter Waddell to make life-size cutouts of Lincoln, Elizabeth Keckley, and Sen. Browning with Abraham Lincoln. These will all be placed in the VEC.

January 3, 2007 – NTHP contracts William Woodward to create a large mural that will be located in the VEC, depicting various scenes at the Soldiers’ Home from Lincoln’s time.

January 25, 2007 – NTHP contracts Cortina Productions to create media exhibits in the VEC (2 programs shown on a loop and VOT video).

February 28, 2007 – NTHP contracts with VideoArt Productions to create the interactive program “Lincoln’s Toughest Decisions.” The program is described as an individual and group way of exploring the issues, while getting to look at documents/maps/photos.

March 19, 2007 – NTHP contracts with Jack Burden Associates (company co-owned by Matthew Pinsker) for research consultation on “Lincoln’s Toughest Decisions.”

March 30, 2007 – NTHP contracts William Woodward to create four 18”x24” drawings (which will be used in the Cottage media).

April 25, 2007 – Matthew Pinsker and Edna Greene Medford, Howard University Professor, are interviewed for one of the VEC media programs.

Summer 2007 – Erin Carlson Mast becomes Curator & Site Administrator after Sophia Lynn leaves, assuming oversight of contracts and financials.
By July 24, 2007 – There is a tour program sequence – mapping together of tour, A/V media content and lighting cues (exact number of scenes and cues are listed).

August 2007 – PLC launches its first blog, which includes articles on history, interpretation, methodology, events, and education, among other issues.

September 2007 – First group of interpreters are hired.

October 10, 2007 – Final cut of media (from VideoArt Productions) arrives at PLC.

By October 16, 2007 – Erin Mast is making decisions on font choices/sizes for quotations that are placed on walls on the 2nd floor of the Cottage, an interpretive method that was a very late addition to the program, prompted by a request from senior management at NTHP to add Lincoln’s own words to the program in a way that supplemented the quotes conveyed by interpreters and AV media.

September 2007 – The exhibits in the VEC (including the interactive program “Lincoln’s Toughest Decisions”) are installed.

December 2007 – Erin Mast launches the 2nd version of the President Lincoln’s Cottage website launches prior to the grand opening. The new website provides the same depth of historical information, but now features information specifically targeted toward potential visitors.

Dec 07 – Feb 08 – “Soft Opening”. Various constituents (museum professionals, friends of NTHP staff) are being given official tours of the Cottage. Their comments on their experience lead to small changes in the tour.

February 18, 2008 – Grand Opening Ceremony.

February 19, 2008 – PLC is open to the public!