The Lincoln Landscape
Looking for Lincoln’s Philadelphia: A Personal Journey from Washington Square to Independence Hall

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When I visit Philadelphia, Washington Square draws me back again and again. It is my secret treasure in the midst of a crowded city. I discovered the park at Sixth and Walnut streets more than thirty years ago when my student’s budget permitted only long walks on quiet days. Very few tourists know the significance of the park, and it remains undisturbed by the long lines of visitors just a few blocks away.

During the Revolutionary War, Washington Square was a potter’s field, and more than a thousand of George Washington’s soldiers are buried there. The memorial known as the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier of the American Revolution also lies within the park. There is a statue of George Washington, an eternal flame, and a large, gray monument that is inscribed: “Freedom is a light for which many men have died in darkness.” At the base of the monument is a sarcophagus, and carved on its lid are the words, “Beneath this stone rests a soldier of Washington’s army who died to give you liberty.”

The last time I was there was two weeks after September 11, 2001. A bouquet of red roses and several candles lay atop the coffin. People sat on benches near the monument. Some were meditating, some were crying. Along with the flowers and candles, they brought respect and gratitude for the Unknown Soldier’s sacrifice. Washington Square is a sacred place.

Invariably when I visit that tomb, my thoughts turn to the Declaration of Independence. The Unknown Soldier surely died in the struggles around Philadelphia, most likely during 1777 or 1778, at a time when the Declaration’s vision of liberty, equality, and
inalienable rights echoed down Philadelphia’s streets, rolled over the land, and inspired a people. I choose to believe that the soldier died fighting for the Declaration’s promise of freedom, and I want to stand once more in the room where the Declaration was signed in 1776. I am lost in thought as I walk northeast toward Independence Hall.

I have known Independence Hall for most of my adult life. More than thirty years ago, I simply walked up to the main door, opened the latch, and walked in. The Liberty Bell stood in the tower stairhall near the south door, and a park ranger was available for questions. The last time I was there, in 2002, I waited in line for almost three-quarters of an hour in the new visitors’ center to get the free but required tickets, more time in line to go through the security check, and then again inside the secured enclosure for the start of my assigned tour. The Liberty Bell was across the street, in its own pavilion, with its own visitors’ line. Times had changed!

Nowadays, the National Park Service focuses its tours on events that occurred at Independence Hall from approximately 1775 to 1800, the period of greatest importance to the revolution and a fledgling nation. This landmark certainly has witnessed its share of American history—Pennsylvania colonial and state government, the Second Continental Congress, the Declaration of Independence, and the Constitutional Convention of 1787. Those of us interested in Abraham Lincoln also know that the Declaration of Independence and Independence Hall were very important to him, and therefore to our nation, during the American Civil War. Yet in more than twenty visits to Independence Hall, I have never heard a guide mention Lincoln’s name. But I think about him often as I visit the birthplace of American independence, and perhaps because of this, Lincoln and the Unknown Soldier of the American Revolution have become inextricably bound together in my mind. I have come to believe that both men were inspired by the Declaration of Independence—and that both died so that others might live in liberty.

Lincoln first saw Independence Hall during his 1848 visit to Philadelphia as an unofficial observer to the Whig National Convention. “In my anxiety for the result,” he wrote, “I was led to attend the Philadelphia convention.” Lincoln probably traveled to the city in the company of other Whig congressmen who were also Zachary Taylor supporters, and no doubt found a room in a boardinghouse or hotel with his friends. The convention met at

3. Hoch, Lincoln Trail, 44.
the Chinese Museum Building at Ninth and Sansom streets. On Friday, June 9, 1848, the delegates rejected 1844 candidate Henry Clay and settled on General Zachary Taylor, the hero of the war in Mexico, and on vice-presidential candidate Millard Fillmore, comptroller for New York. That evening convention delegates massed in Independence Square Park, the grassy area immediately south of Independence Hall between Chestnut and Walnut streets, for a campaign rally that party leaders called a ratification meeting. Almost certainly Lincoln attended.

That night must have been alive with excitement for the thirty-nine-year-old, first-term congressman. The Whig party had constructed three speakers’ stands for the rally. The main one stood outside and above Independence Hall’s south entrance. The platform, lined with eighteen large glass lamps, stood twenty feet high. Bunting decorated the wooden structure, and an eagle centered at the front held the names Taylor and Fillmore in its beak. A banner, “Democratic Whig Nomination—Zachary Taylor for President—Millard Fillmore for Vice President of the United States,” glowed above the stand when supporters lit lamps behind a huge transparency. During the evening, six speakers spoke from the main stand. Fourteen speakers occupied two other stands built at opposite corners of the square, one at Fifth and Walnut streets and the other at Sixth and Walnut. Two more wooden platforms held lights, flags, and bunting. Lamps fastened to strips of wood ran between several trees and provided additional illumination.

The June 10, 1848, Cummings’ Evening Telegraphic Bulletin reported the previous night’s scene. “It is now half-past eight o’clock, the yard is full—every street presents a moving mass of human beings—music comes from every quarter—tremendous cheers from the State House yard rend the air, and fairly strip the foliage from the trees—cannon are fired at intervals from the main staging—the boys following suit, are firing off crackers a la Fourth of July—cheer after cheer ascends for old Rough and Ready, Palo Alto, Buena Vista…three Drummond lights are just started, two facing the north and one the south, their rays passing over the immense multitude, induce applause.”

Perhaps on his walks through the city that week, Lincoln passed the Graff house on the southwest corner of Seventh and Market streets where Thomas Jefferson wrote portions of the Declaration of Independence. But surely Abraham Lincoln saw the exterior of Independence Hall on the night of the Whig ratification meeting,

if not on one of the previous evenings of the convention. Construction of the building began in 1732 based on a plan usually credited to assembly speaker Andrew Hamilton. His design of Independence Hall (as well as the design of George Washington’s Mount Vernon) was probably inspired by the work of Italian Renaissance architect Andrea Palladio. It featured a central building connected by roofed piazzas to smaller outbuildings on two sides.¹ A brick tower with wooden steeple was added in the period 1750 to 1753, but was renovated with a slightly different design in 1828. The City of Philadelphia owned the building during Lincoln’s 1848 visit, having purchased the structure from the state in 1816 for $70,000.⁵ Lincoln said later that he was not permitted inside Independence Hall in 1848.⁶ The room in which the Declaration of Independence was signed—and converted to a shrine during the American Continental Army hero Lafayette’s 1824 visit—was not open.

But Lincoln’s interest in Philadelphia was politics. He arrived in Congress as a supporter of slaveholder Henry Clay but soon suspected that it was not possible to elect Clay to the presidency. The Illinoisan gradually became an active supporter of Louisiana plantation owner Zachary Taylor. After the nomination, Illinois’ only Whig congressman, nicknamed the Lone Star of Illinois by several delegates, left Philadelphia in the company of friends on Saturday, June 10, 1848, bound for a campaign rally in Wilmington, Delaware, and then Washington, D.C.

Over the next few years Lincoln’s focus began to change, almost imperceptibly at first. Perhaps the visit to Independence Hall catalyzed his study of the Declaration of Independence, or perhaps Lincoln had an opportunity to study Henry Clay’s views on liberty. Four years after the Philadelphia convention, Clay died, and Lincoln made his first long public statement on liberty and equality. On July 6, 1852, Abraham Lincoln eulogized his political idol in the Hall of Representatives in Springfield, Illinois. Lincoln claimed that “Mr. Clay’s predominant sentiment, from first to last, was a deep devotion to the cause of human liberty.” Clay, said Lincoln, believed that “the world’s best hope depended on the continued Union of the States.” Lincoln decried “An increasing number of men, who, for the sake of perpetuating slavery, are beginning to assail and to ridicule the white man’s charter of freedom—the declaration that

⁶. Collected Works, 4: 244.
⁷. Ibid., 2: 126, 130–1.
‘all men are created free and equal.’ So far as I have learned, the first American, of any note, to do or attempt this, was the late John C. Calhoun.”

In the same eulogy, Lincoln responded to men like Calhoun by quoting portions of an 1827 Henry Clay speech to the American Colonization Society (Clay was a co-founder in 1816 and became its president in 1836). “If they would repress all tendencies towards liberty, and ultimate emancipation, they must do more than put down the benevolent efforts of this society. They must go back to the era of our liberty and independence, and muzzle the cannon which thunders its annual joyous return.… They must blow out the moral lights around us, and extinguish that greatest torch of all which America presents to a benighted world—pointing the way to their rights, their liberties, and their happiness.”

Two years later the passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act lit a fire in Lincoln’s belly, and from 1854 onward the preamble of the Declaration of Independence became his battle cry. Beginning in 1854 with speeches against the congressional act sponsored by Stephen A. Douglas, through the Lincoln-Douglas debates of 1858, and continuing on to his inauguration, Lincoln hammered away at slavery with the words of Thomas Jefferson. In attempting to explain the new Lincoln, some writers suggested that he simply took up the Whig political strategy that was directed against the Southern Democrats’ attack on the Declaration of Independence. Others said that it was Lincoln’s study of congressional debate on the Kansas-Nebraska Act that moved the Declaration to the forefront of his thought.

At Peoria on October 16, 1854, Lincoln said that the nation began with a declaration that all men are created equal. “Now from that beginning we have run down to the other declaration, that for some men to enslave others is a ‘sacred right of self government.’ These principles can not stand together. They are as opposite as God and mammon; and whoever holds to the one, must despise the other.” A United States senator from Indiana had called the Declaration of Independence “a self-evident lie.” Lincoln exclaimed, “If it had been said in old Independence Hall, seventy-eight years ago, the very door-keeper would have throttled the man, and thrust him

11. Ibid., 2: 405–6.
into the street.”

But Lincoln was also the product of an era different from ours, and a politician whose concept of racial equality reflected his culture. He struggled to explain the words of the Declaration of Independence to himself and to his audience. At Springfield, Illinois, on June 26, 1857, Lincoln said that the Declaration’s authors intended to include all men; however, “They did not mean to say all were equal in color, size, intellect, moral developments, or social capacity. They defined . . . in what respects they did consider all men created equal—equal in “certain inalienable rights, among which are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.”

Lincoln joined Clay and others in the belief that the Declaration’s promise of liberty struck a chord in the hearts of people from many nations. When Lincoln spoke at Chicago on July 10, 1858, he talked of America’s immigrants who had arrived after the Revolution. Lincoln believed that the words, “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal,” was the “father of all moral principle . . . that links the hearts of patriotic and liberty-loving men together . . . as long as the love of freedom exists in the minds of men throughout the world.”

Lincoln won the presidency in 1860 running on a Republican party platform that supported the Declaration of Independence. In January 1861 he committed several of his thoughts to paper for later consideration. The president-elect wrote that the Constitution and Union were not the primary cause of America’s great prosperity. “There is something back of these, entwining itself more closely about the human heart . . . the principle of ‘Liberty to all’—the principle that clears the path for all—gives hope to all—and, by consequence, enterprise, and industry to all. The expression of that principle in our Declaration of Independence, was most happy, and fortunate.” The linking of liberty, hope, enterprise, and industry was consistent with Lincoln’s Whig upbringing.

In February 1861 in the midst of national crisis and death threats, the president-elect traveled east from Springfield, Illinois, on his way to Washington, D. C., and inauguration. His inaugural train arrived in Philadelphia at 3:45 p.m. on Thursday, February 21, 1861, at the Kensington Station of the Philadelphia and Trenton Railroad. Nearly one hundred thousand people turned out on that cold Feb-
ruary day to welcome their newly elected leader as he rode three miles in an open barouche from the rail depot to the Continental Hotel. Lincoln and his welcoming procession reached their destination on the southeast corner of Ninth and Chestnut streets, only three blocks east of Independence Hall, just after 5 p.m.\textsuperscript{14}

In 1861 the Continental Hotel was one of the finest hotels in the United States. Opened one year earlier, the Italianate hotel could house one thousand guests in its seven hundred rooms. It boasted an elevator, a freestanding stairway from the lobby to the second floor, and a 165-foot second-floor promenade that opened to a second-floor balcony. Lobby, shops, private rooms, and dining rooms occupied the first two floors. Clearly Philadelphians expected the man born in a log cabin to stay in surroundings appropriate to his new station in life.

Immediately after his arrival at the hotel, Lincoln and Alexander Henry, the mayor of Philadelphia, appeared on the hotel balcony to address the crowd that filled the street below. The mayor officially welcomed the president-elect to the city. One newspaper later reported that as Lincoln responded, he held his hat in front of him with both hands and that from time to time he elbowed the onlookers who overflowed on the balcony in order to maintain his place. Lincoln spoke of Independence Hall and the Declaration of Independence. “I shall do nothing inconsistent with the teachings of those holy and most sacred walls…. All my political warfare has been in favor of the teachings coming forth from that sacred hall. May my right hand forget its cunning and my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth, if ever I prove false to those teachings.”\textsuperscript{15} That evening at the Continental Hotel, Allan Pinkerton and Frederick W. Seward separately informed Lincoln that men in Baltimore were waiting to kill him.

The next morning on Washington’s Birthday, February 22, 1861, Lincoln and his seven-year-old son, Tad, mounted an open carriage and rode three blocks to Independence Hall. Scott’s Legion, a group of Mexican War veterans, escorted father and son. At 7 a.m., after more than nine years of rhetoric heavily laced with the words of the Declaration of Independence, Lincoln entered the Assembly Room of Independence Hall for the first time.

The room was a patriotic shrine that had been redecorated by the city in 1854 and 1855. The Liberty Bell sat in the corner on an

\textsuperscript{19} Ibid., 4: 244–5.
\textsuperscript{20} Ibid., 4: 438.
\textsuperscript{21} Ibid., 5: 537.
octagonal pedestal that was decorated with flags, columns, and the names of the signers of the Declaration of Independence. William Rush’s sculpture of George Washington stood near the center of the east wall flanked by portraits of William Penn and Lafayette. A chair possibly used by John Hancock during the signing of the Declaration and a step allegedly used for the first reading of the Declaration of Independence stood along the outer walls.  

After welcoming remarks by the president of the select council, Lincoln was expected to address the waiting council members. Surely he was exhausted by the past eleven days of travel—the crowds, the pushing, the shoving, and the chaos. And his right hand was swollen and partially dysfunctional from shaking so many hands. Only eight hours earlier, he had learned of a plot to assassinate him, and in the interval, he had less than seven hours of sleep. He had not known that he would be called upon to speak inside the Hall. His speech was extemporaneous but based on years of oratory and thought. His voice was low and barely audible.  

I am filled with deep emotion at finding myself standing here in the place where were collected together the wisdom, the patriotism, the devotion to principle, from which sprang the institutions under which we live…. All the political sentiments I entertain have been drawn…from the sentiments which originated, and were given to the world from this hall in which we stand. I have never had a feeling politically that did not spring from the sentiments embodied in the Declaration of Independence. I have often pondered over the dangers which were incurred by the men who assembled here and adopted that Declaration of Independence—I have pondered over the toils that were endured by the officers and soldiers of the army, who achieved that Independence. I have often inquired of myself, what great principle or idea it was that kept this Confederacy so long together. It was not the mere matter of the separation of the colonies from the mother land; but something in that Declaration giving liberty, not alone to the people of this country, but hope to the world for all future time…. If this country cannot be saved without giving up that principle—I was about to say I would rather be assassinated on this spot than to surrender it…. My friends, this is a wholly unprepared speech. I did not expect to be called upon to say a word when I came here—I supposed I was merely to do something towards raising a flag.

22. Ibid., 2: 126.  
24. Philadelphia Inquirer, April 24, 1865.
I may, therefore, have said something indiscreet, but I have said nothing but what I am willing to live by, and, in the pleasure of Almighty God, die by.  

The president-elect walked out of Independence Hall through the Chestnut Street door into the overcast day. He ascended a six-foot-high wooden platform and faced the dense crowd. Lincoln stood in his overcoat, bareheaded, holding his top hat in his good, left hand, while Tad Lincoln fidgeted on the edge of the platform to his left. Abraham Lincoln briefly addressed the crowd and raised a new thirty-four-star flag in honor of the admission of Kansas to the Union. (Some Philadelphians said that the flag was a last-minute affair and had the wrong number of stars). As the flag rose above the Hall’s eves, it caught a stiff breeze and flew taut in the wind.

Later that day at the state capitol building in Harrisburg, Lincoln told the Pennsylvania General Assembly that the success of the flag-raising ceremony that morning in Philadelphia augured well for the Union. “When, according to the arrangement, the cord was pulled and it flaunted gloriously to the wind without an accident, in the bright flowing sunshine of the morning, I could not help hoping that there was in the entire success of that beautiful ceremony at least something of an omen of what is to come.”

Ten days later, Lincoln became the sixteenth president of the United States. His expressions of reverence for the Declaration of Independence continued throughout his years in power. On his first July 4th in office, Lincoln took the high ground in his message to Congress. He faulted the Confederacy for omitting “all men are created equal” in their declarations of independence and for substituting in the Confederate Constitution, “We, the deputies of the sovereign and independent States,” for the beginning of the preamble of the United States Constitution, “We the People.” He asked, “Why this deliberate pressing out of view, the rights of men, and the authority of the people? This is essentially a People’s contest. On the side of the Union, it is a struggle for maintaining in the world, that form, and substance of government, whose leading object is, to elevate the condition of men—to lift artificial weights from all shoulders—to clear the paths of laudable pursuit for all—to afford all, an unfettered start, and a fair chance, in the race of life. Yielding to partial, and temporary departure, from necessity, this is the leading object of the government for whose existence we contend.” He thus defined what, as he saw it, the war was about.

25. Ibid.
During Lincoln’s presidency, the preservation of the Union was foremost in his mind. On December 1, 1862, in his annual message, Lincoln told Congress, “We shall nobly save, or meanly lose, the last best, hope of earth.”21 The phrase was reminiscent of Lincoln’s words in 1852, when he described Henry Clay’s beliefs. Clay, said Lincoln, “loved his country partly because it was his own country, but mostly because it was a free country; and he burned with a zeal for its advancement, prosperity and glory, because he saw in such, the advancement, prosperity and glory, of human liberty, human right and human nature.”22 Lincoln and Clay believed that the Union’s preservation was a prerequisite to the advancement of human liberty and equality throughout the nation and the world.

In November 1863 at Gettysburg, Lincoln gave the world his meditation on the destiny of a free people bound together in the pursuit of life, liberty, and happiness. Years of thought went into that moment, and the sixteenth president came back to the Declaration of Independence: “Fourscore and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent, a new nation, conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal. Now we are engaged in a great civil war, testing whether that nation, or any nation so conceived and so dedicated, may long endure.” The President recommitted the nation to John Locke and Thomas Jefferson’s revolutionary concept that governments derive their power from the people. “That we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain—that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom—and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.” It was a defining moment for Lincoln and the nation.

In April 1865 Abraham Lincoln appeared at Independence Hall a final time, albeit in death. His funeral train arrived at the Broad and Prime streets station (the northwest corner of Broad and Washington) just before 5 p.m. on Saturday evening, April 22, 1865. The procession wound through the streets of Philadelphia until it reached the Walnut Street gate of Independence Square Park at 8 p.m. Sixty red, white, and blue calcium lights illuminated the area. An orchestra played funeral dirges from the Hall’s steeple as muffled bells tolled throughout the city and minute guns boomed nine blocks away on Broad Street. After the catafalque came to a halt, the sergeants’ honor guard carried the casket over the gravel walk to the south

27. Chicago Tribune, April 25, 1865.
entrance of Independence Hall. More than nine hundred members of the Union League of Philadelphia lined the walk on both sides. The white-gloved men, dressed in black with mourning bands on their arms, removed their hats. Some cried; some swore vengeance on the South.\textsuperscript{23} The despair was overwhelming.

In the Assembly Room where the Declaration of Independence had been signed eighty-eight years earlier, Lincoln’s body lay in state amidst candelabra, flowers, black mourning drapes, and wreaths. One of the cards on a wreath spoke of Lincoln’s dream that he had mentioned at his last cabinet meeting one week earlier, on April 14, 1865. Lincoln interpreted his dream as an omen that great news would soon come. The card said, “Before any great national event I have always had the same dream. I had it the other night. It is of a ship sailing rapidly.”\textsuperscript{24} And in a symbolic gesture, Philadelphians placed the Liberty Bell at Lincoln’s head so that all who passed by could read its inscription, “Proclaim Liberty throughout all the land, unto all the inhabitants thereof.”\textsuperscript{25}

Local newspapers noted that in that very same room in which Lincoln lay in state, he had pledged his life to the promise of liberty found in the Declaration, and they reprinted the text of his February 22, 1861, speech with its stunning conclusion: “If this country cannot be saved without giving up that principle. . . . I would rather be assassinated . . . .”\textsuperscript{26}

From 10 p.m. until midnight on April 22 there was a private viewing for guests of the mayor and city councils. On Sunday, April 23, public viewing began at 6 a.m. Workmen had constructed wooden steps up and down two of the Hall’s Chestnut Street windows to allow the maximum number of people to enter. Two lines that at times totaled three miles in length entered the Assembly Room through the open windows, followed wooden railings to different sides of the casket, and then exited the room by using the temporary steps up and down two of the Walnut Street windows. Just prior to midnight on April 23, seventy-five Union soldiers with leg amputations and crutches were placed at the head of the line. One hundred-fifty soldiers brought from local military hospitals by horse-drawn ambulances followed.\textsuperscript{27} Viewing continued until 1:17 a.m. on Monday, April 24, when the Chestnut Street windows closed. In twenty-one hours, an estimated 120,000 to 144,000 mourn-
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ers had passed by Lincoln’s casket. After the embalmer cleaned and dusted Lincoln’s face, the sad procession departed Independence Hall for the Kensington station of the Philadelphia and Trenton Railroad at 2:30 a.m. The train left at 4 a.m., and Lincoln was gone from Philadelphia forever.

Now more than one hundred and thirty years later, I walk the streets from Washington Square to Independence Hall, and I see very little evidence that Abraham Lincoln was ever there. There are a few plaques—one at the entrance of the hotel that stands on the site of the Continental Hotel, one in the sidewalk on the Chestnut Street side of Independence Hall—nothing more. But am I looking in the right place, at the right thing? Perhaps I should look at the people as they pass by—at their lives, liberty, and happiness. I wonder how many of us really understand the effect that Lincoln’s reverence for the Declaration of Independence and Independence Hall has on our lives even today. Who can say how radically different America or the world would be had Abraham Lincoln never lived?

Today I stand in Independence Hall with others of my time, watching the shadows cross the room where our Founding Fathers signed the Declaration of Independence. I see the desks, the chairs, and the pens. I think of the Founding Fathers, and I think of Abraham Lincoln. Here in Independence Hall he pledged his life to our nation and to the promise of liberty that Thomas Jefferson penned into the Declaration of Independence. Here Lincoln, the old Henry Clay Whig, told us that this promise extended not alone to ourselves but to all of earth’s people, for all time. Here Philadelphians memorialized Lincoln’s life: “Proclaim Liberty throughout all the land, unto all the inhabitants thereof.” I study the faces of the young and the old as they stand with me inside the Assembly Room. I look in their eyes. The vision of liberty and equality, for which Lincoln and the Revolutionary War soldier died so long ago, remains with us still.