

Lesson Plan: Abraham Lincoln and the Soldiers’ Home: Privacy & Access to the President
Time Frame: One block (90 minutes)
Age: High School, primarily Juniors and Seniors

Overview:

Students will assess the historical evidence that argues Lincoln’s residing at the Soldiers’ Home (now known as the President Lincoln’s Cottage) had an impact on his presidency. Students will also analyze the accessibility of Lincoln during his time as President.

Materials:

- Walt Whitman’s diary entry “Abraham Lincoln,” No. 45 (August 12, 1863), *Specimen Days*
- Lincoln’s Sanctuary: Abraham Lincoln and the Soldiers’ Home by Matthew Pinsker
- Website of President Lincoln’s Cottage <http://www.lincolncottage.org/>
- A wartime image of the Soldiers’ Home and its adjacent cottages, published by popular printmaker Charles Magnus, Library of Congress
- Visual of President Lincoln’s Cottage, modern day
- Floor plan of President Lincoln’s Cottage

Aim/Essential Question:

What impact did living at the Soldiers’ Home have on Lincoln as President?

Background Information:

During the Civil War, President Lincoln and his family resided seasonally (June – November 1862-64) at the Soldiers’ Home in Washington, DC. Founded in 1851 as a home for retired and disabled veterans of American wars, the Soldiers’ Home stood on 250 acres atop the third highest area in the District of Columbia. Like President Buchanan before him, Lincoln enjoyed the cool breezes and refreshing peace of the Soldiers’ Home just over three miles north of downtown. But unlike his predecessor, Lincoln could not escape the Civil War and his burden of leadership even at this seasonal retreat. Some historians have argued that despite this or perhaps because of it, Lincoln’s residence at the Soldiers’ Home had a major impact on his presidency.

Objectives:

1. Students will be able to understand the argument that his residence at the Soldiers’ Home had an impact on Lincoln’s presidency
2. Students will be able to assess the strengths and weaknesses of these arguments.
3. Students will be able to demonstrate their opinion as to the impact of the Soldiers’ Home.

Motivation:

Have students think about their home. Have them create a picture in their head and/or write down words that come to mind. Discuss their answers as a class and ask them if they would like to have a place to go to that acted as a retreat when things got stressful and where they could work in peace. Does their house act like that right now? Discuss the impact this would have on them and if any of them have such a place.

Procedures:

1. Have students read Walt Whitman's diary entry (Appendix A) and fill in the discussion sheet (Appendix B).
2. Have students visit the President Lincoln's Cottage website. They should read the "Overview" and the three "History" sections (Lincoln, Soldiers' Home and Civil War D.C.) Students can either use individual laptops or the website can be projected by the teacher on a screen to discuss as a class. Hand out Soldiers' Home Worksheet for student to fill in as they view the website (Appendix C).
3. Have students read the description of the Soldiers' Home and sketch an outline of the grounds on a piece of paper (Appendix D). They should also label where the Lincolns stayed. When they finish, show them the drawings of the Soldiers' Home and have them comment and compare to theirs (Appendix E).
4. Have students read the quotes from Pinsker's book and answer the questions in small groups (Appendix F). Discuss as a class.
5. Discuss with students how easy it is to see the President today. How does a person get into the White House? How does someone schedule a meeting with the President? Then have them read the quotes from Pinsker that describe how accessible presidents were in the 1800s and how accessible Lincoln himself was while president in D.C. (Appendix G).
6. Have students write a final summary of their opinion about how residing at the Soldiers' Home impacted Lincoln. Summary Questions listed below may be used or they could discuss what they learned and whether they agree that residing at the Soldiers' Home had an effect on Lincoln and his presidency. Discuss as a class.

Summary Questions:

1. Why do you think Lincoln spent so much time at the Soldiers' Home despite the fact that he could stay at the White House more conveniently?
2. What was it about the Soldiers' Home that Lincoln liked so much?
3. How do you think Lincoln staying at the Soldiers' Home affected the public's perception of him? What about his colleagues?
4. Why do you think that not very many people have heard of Lincoln spending so much time at the Soldiers' Home?
5. Is it possible that the daily drive in and out of the city could have given Lincoln more time to mull over his thoughts and visually see what the war was doing to those around him? Discuss.

Application Questions:

1. Should historians consider other factors more in a person's life such as where they resided or their personal habits?
2. What other sources could be analyzed to learn more about Lincoln and the Soldiers' Home?
3. Is it possible now for a President to be more accessible to the public? If so, how? If not, why not?
4. Should a president today be more accessible to the public? Would this change how people view the president?

Appendix A

August 12th.—I SEE the President almost every day, as I happen to live where he passes to or from his lodgings out of town. He never sleeps at the White House during the hot season, but has quarters at a healthy location some three miles north of the city, the Soldiers' home, a United States military establishment. I saw him this morning about 8 1/2 coming in to business, riding on Vermont avenue, near L street. He always has a company of twenty-five or thirty cavalry, with sabres drawn and held upright over their shoulders. They say this guard was against his personal wish, but he let his counselors have their way. The party makes no great show in uniform or horses. Mr. Lincoln on the saddle generally rides a good-sized, easy-going gray horse, is dress'd in plain black, somewhat rusty and dusty, wears a black stiff hat, and looks about as ordinary in attire, &c., as the commonest man. A lieutenant, with yellow straps, rides at his left, and following behind, two by two, come the cavalry men, in their yellow-striped jackets. They are generally going at a slow trot, as that is the pace set them by the one they wait upon. The sabres and accoutrements clank, and the entirely unornamental cortège as it trots towards Lafayette square arouses no sensation, only some curious stranger stops and gazes. I see very plainly ABRAHAM LINCOLN'S dark brown face, with the deep-cut lines, the eyes, always to me with a deep latent sadness in the expression. We have got so that we exchange bows, and very cordial ones. Sometimes the President goes and comes in an open barouche. The cavalry always accompany him, with drawn sabres. Often I notice as he goes out evenings—and sometimes in the morning, when he returns early—he turns off and halts at the large and handsome residence of the Secretary of War, on K street, and holds conference there. If in his barouche, I can see from my window he does not alight, but sits in his vehicle, and Mr. Stanton comes out to attend him. Sometimes one of his sons, a boy of ten or twelve, accompanies him, riding at his right on a pony. Earlier in the summer I occasionally saw the President and his wife, toward the latter part of the afternoon, out in a barouche, on a pleasure ride through the city. Mrs. Lincoln was dress'd in complete black, with a long crape veil. The equipage is of the plainest kind, only two horses, and they nothing extra. They pass'd me once very close, and I saw the President in the face fully, as they were moving slowly, and his look, though abstracted, happen'd to be directed steadily in my eye. He bow'd and smiled, but far beneath his smile I noticed well the expression I have alluded to. None of the artists or pictures has caught the deep, though subtle and indirect expression of this man's face. There is something else there. One of the great portrait painters of two or three centuries ago is needed.

-Walt Whitman, "Abraham Lincoln"
No. 45 (August 12, 1863), *Specimen Days*

Appendix B

Discussion Questions for Walt Whitman's "Abraham Lincoln"

- 1. What is your reaction to this writing?**
- 2. What things in the entry had you heard about Lincoln before?**
- 3. What things surprised you about this description of Lincoln and his family?**
- 4. Does Lincoln travel in a way you would expect a President to travel? Why or why not?**

-How does the President travel today?
- 5. Do you think Lincoln traveling about like this had an impact on the people who saw him?**
- 6. How do you think an average citizen would have felt seeing the President and possibly his family traveling in Washington, D.C.?**

-What about slaves or former slaves who were taking refuge in D.C.?
- 7. What sounds do you hear described in the letter?**
- 8. Why do you think Whitman described this in his diary in such detail?**

Appendix C

The Soldiers' Home

1. Go to President Lincoln's Cottage website: <http://www.lincolncottage.org/>
2. Read the Welcome Page and the quote from the visitor --*J. Bly, 2009*.
 - a. What do you think of this quote?

3. Have you ever heard of President Lincoln's Cottage (formerly known as the Soldiers' Home) before? If so, how? If not, why not?

4. Click on the "About" button at the top of the page. Read the "Overview" and list 5 things you think are important.

5. Click on the "History" button and read the main page as well as the three sections (Lincoln, Soldiers' Home, and Civil War D.C.).
 - a. What do you think of the quote by — Lieutenant George C. Ashmun, officer of the Union Light Guard?

 - b. What about the one by - *Noah Brooks, journalist, July 4, 1863?*

 - c. How does the quote by — *Mary Clemmer Ames, Washington resident during the Civil War*, add to your understanding of what it was like during the War?

 - d. What was the Soldiers' Home originally for?

6. James Buchanan was the first president to reside at the Soldiers' Home and he was probably the one who recommended it to Lincoln. How does this add or detract to the argument that the Soldiers' Home was a retreat for Lincoln and affected his presidency?

7. What is your impression of the Soldiers' Home so far?

Appendix D

Directions: Use the following descriptions of the grounds of the Soldiers' Home to sketch an outline of the grounds and buildings. Make sure to label where the Lincolns resided.

“There were five principal buildings clustered together at one corner of the grounds; an imposing main hall for approximately 150 residents, or inmates as they were then called, and four rustic but still elegant domiciles scattered nearby. Local banker George W. Riggs, Jr., the previous owner of the property, had built the largest of these cottages in the early 1840s to serve as his family’s “country” residence. With attractive gables, a stucco-covered brick exterior, and a prominent porch, the country home was designed in the English Gothic Revival style...the government had built two of the other cottages, called Quarters 1 and 2, in the mid-1850s, at the same time that they constructed the Scott Hall, the main edifice named after General in Chief Winfield Scott...The other building, known as the Corlisle Cottage, was situated slightly apart from the others in a more secluded grove.”

“Following their arrival, the Lincolns apparently decided that unlike President Buchanan, they would displace the acting governor of the Home, who was then occupying the former Riggs country residence. Situated directly next to the asylum, the Riggs home was comfortable but offered constant reminders about the painful stakes of military conflict. Crippled veterans regularly filled the nearby paths. One side of the elegant cottage now also faced a national military cemetery, hastily dedicated after the defeat at Bull Run and, by the summer of 1862, full of fresh graves.”

-Quotes from Matthew Pinsker’s Lincoln’s Sanctuary: Abraham Lincoln and the Soldiers’ Home, pages 2-5

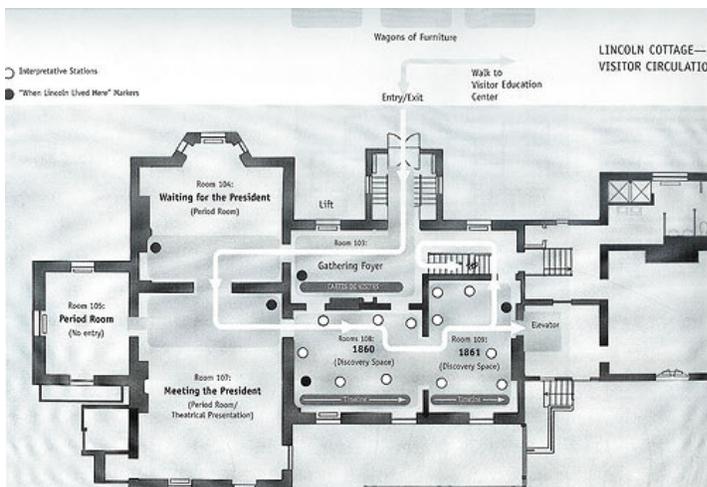
Appendix E



A wartime image of the Soldiers' Home (far right) and its adjacent cottages, published by popular printmaker Charles Magnus. Library of Congress.



President Lincoln's Cottage, modern day.



Floor plan of President Lincoln's Cottage.

Appendix F

Directions: Read the following excerpts from Matthew Pinsker's book Lincoln's Sanctuary: Abraham Lincoln and the Soldiers' Home in which he argues the importance of the Soldiers' Home. Answer the questions below.

1. "Altogether, President Lincoln lived at the Soldiers' Home for about thirteen out of his forty-nine months in office. For most of that period, his wife and youngest son Tad were with him, though Mary Lincoln traveled outside of Washington frequently." Page 5
 - a. Does the fact the Lincoln spent one fourth of his presidency at the Soldiers' Home strengthen Pinsker's argument that it had an impact on his presidency? Why or why not?

2. "The story of the Soldiers' Home frames Lincoln's entire presidential experience. He first rode out to the retreat a few days after his inauguration. He last returned on the day before he was killed." Page 13
 - a. How does this impact your view?

3. "Even more critically, he lived at this retreat during some of the key periods of the conflict, such as when he developed his emancipation policy in 1862 or maneuvered successfully toward reelection in 1864." Page 13
 - a. Do you think having a place to retreat to influenced these major decisions? If so, how? If not, justify your answer.

4. "It is impossible to specify an exact number of visitors who spent such evenings at the Soldiers' Home cottage. There were probably hundreds who passed through the parlor during the first family's three seasons in residence, with a core group of about a dozen regulars and an unknown number of overnight guests. This book contains stories or insights from about seventy-five of these visitors." Page 11
 - a. Since there are no official records, Pinsker has to rely on other personal recollections. Does this help or hurt his argument? Is seventy-five people a good number to rely on? Why or why not?

5. "They were Union generals and lower-ranking officers, cabinet members and mid-level political appointees, journalists and old Illinois friends, congressmen and their wives, Washington socialites, and foreign dignitaries. Most were friends, but some were strangers." Pages 11-12

- a. How does the variety of people who visited the Soldiers’ Home affect Pinsker’s argument and how does it affect your views?

Appendix G

Accessibility of the President

Directions: Read the quotes below and discuss in a group, how easy it was for an average person to either see Lincoln around Washington, D.C. or meet with him.

- **“Lincoln’s office was on the second floor of the White House, along the southern side of the building. Here even greater crowds spilled out into the hallways and down the stairs. The wartime president had only a handful of aides to help him manage his affairs. The result was inevitably chaotic, a situation only exacerbated by Lincoln’s peculiar style of conducting business. ‘Sometimes there would be a crowd of senators and members of Congress waiting their turn,’ remembered Illinois congressman Isaac Arnold. ‘While thus waiting, the loud ringing laugh of Mr. Lincoln – in which he would be joined by those inside, but which was rather provoking to those outside – would be heard by the waiting and impatient crowd.’”
-Pinsker, page 9**
- **“Nothing seemed to alleviate the delays. ‘The House remained full of people nearly all day,’ reported aide John Hay, noting that at lunchtime the president ‘had to literally run the gantlet through the crowds who filled the corridors.’” –Pinsker, 9**
- **“During his first summer at the Soldiers’ Home, Lincoln often rode without any escort, but after some nervous consultations among friends, political advisers, Union military commanders, and his anxious wife, the president was compelled to accept at least some minimal show of protection.” -Pinsker, 5**
- **“President Lincoln invariably removed his boots when entering the cottage and walked around in his slippers. When it was particularly hot, he also carried a large palm-leaf fan to help circulate the air. The image he presented to visitors was casual – a rumpled, often tired country gentleman preparing for bed.” -Pinsker, 11**
- **“Although the president was known for his storytelling, recollections by guests at the cottage suggest that he was more likely to turn to his favorite poets or dramatists when he was outside the office and not trying to make a political point or neutralize an unwanted request. There were evenings full of the famous anecdotes and even some sentimental ballads, but they appeared to be less common. The Lincoln parlor generally embodied a dignified nineteenth-century ideal.” -Pinsker, 10**