



Abraham Lincoln is buried in a tomb in Springfield's Oak Ridge Cemetery, along with his wife and three of their sons.

Looking for Lincoln

Grown-ups can have just as much fun in Springfield these days as 8th-graders

STORY AND PHOTOS BY KATHERINE RODEGHIER
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SPRINGFIELD, Ill. — “Pat, don’t ...” Too late. The alarm rang just as my friend was about to touch first lady Mary Lincoln’s dress. But no worries, security officers didn’t rush over to escort us from the building. Embarrassed, we continued to make our way through the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Museum mindful that some of the exhibits, like the hoop skirt that had caught our attention, seemed so in the moment that we’d forgotten they were artifacts.

We spent three hours in the museum, our first stop on our ladies getaway to the state capital. It only whetted our appetites to learn more about the 16th president.

I had not visited Springfield since my eighth-grade class trip and had a foggy recollection of Lincoln’s home and tomb, the remainder of my on-site education evaporating during a boisterous school bus ride home with fellow tweens hopped up on hormones. Nearly two generations later, my two gal pals and I are more subdued, with an approach to learning more akin to book club discussions over a glass of wine — or two.

Education and entertainment

The Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum opened in 2005 in two side-by-side buildings, quickly becoming one of the nation’s most-visited institutions devoted to the life of a U.S. president. The library, packed with documents and artifacts, serves as a free resource for historians and scholars. We gravitated to the museum next door where creative exhibits entertain as well as inform.

Two shows, “Lincoln’s Eyes” and “Ghosts of the Library,” use special effects and holograms, Disney-style, to tell Lincoln’s story. School kids on a field trip seemed to especially enjoy the eerie images. I poked my head into Mrs. Lincoln’s Attic, the museum’s dedicated children’s area, and made a mental note to bring my grandsons someday.

A gallery devoted to the 1860 presidential election that put Abe in the White House imagines how today’s television news programs and paid political ads might present the issues of Lincoln’s day. In another exhibit, I was moved by a diorama depicting the Battle of Gettysburg. An electronic counter added up the casualties in the Civil War, from the first conflict to surrender, the numbers rapidly spiraling upward to horrifying effect.

A replica of the log cabin where Lincoln spent his boyhood living with as many as seven people conveys his humble roots. Outside, a figure of young Abe poses on a rock, eyes gazing across the museum rotunda toward a model of his future home, the White House.

Artifacts from that future are put on rotating display in the

Treasures Gallery: Abe’s stovepipe hat, a handwritten copy of his Gettysburg Address, the quill pen he used to sign the Emancipation Proclamation, the gloves, stained with blood, he’d tucked into his coat pocket on the night he was assassinated. (A special exhibit in honor of the state’s bicentennial, “From Illinois to the White House: Lincoln, Grant, Reagan, Obama,” runs through Dec. 31.)

We saw more Lincoln artifacts, albeit fake ones, across the street inside Union Station. The 1898 Romanesque Revival railway depot with majestic clock tower no longer serves passengers; it functions as an extension of the museum. Oscar-winning sets, props and costumes from Steven Spielberg’s 2012 movie “Lincoln” make up the “Lincoln: History to Hollywood” exhibit displayed here in an open-ended run.

Only home he owned

We got a sense of Lincoln’s family life in Springfield at the Lincoln Home National Historic Site. Tours are given first-come, first-served. While waiting our turn, we watched one of several films on Lincoln’s life shown in the visitor center and traced his footsteps on a model of Springfield as it appeared in his day.

The Lincolns spent 17 years in the only house Abe ever owned, enlarging it several times to accommodate their growing family of four boys. The 12-room Greek Revival has been restored to its appearance in 1860 when Lincoln won the presidency and prepared to move to Washington, D.C., never to return. Eldest son Robert inherited the house and sold it to the state for \$1 after he was outraged to learn his tenant there was giving tours and charging admission. Now the home is part of the U.S. National Park Service, and rangers lead tours — which Robert insisted always be free — and point out some of the many original furnishings.

We walked through the couple’s separate bedrooms, the kitchen where Mary cooked and the formal parlor where children were not allowed. The boys played in the sitting room, and Lincoln sprawled on the floor with them because the chairs were uncomfortably low for his



Stained glass brightens the dome inside the Illinois State Capitol.



The minute I saw the bronze bust outside the Lincoln Tomb, I was transported to those eighth-grade days when we took turns rubbing Lincoln’s nose for good luck. The years have made it glow only brighter.

the legislature, argued cases before the Illinois Supreme Court and delivered his famous speech declaring “a house divided against itself cannot stand.”

Instead, we made our way to the Illinois State Capitol where our friend Mary arranged for us to meet one of our state representatives and join a free guided tour. A mixture of French Renaissance Revival and Second Empire architecture, the capitol resembles a modified Latin cross topped by a soaring dome set with stained glass. Though the first legislative session here began in 1877, long after Lincoln, he’s not forgotten. Statues of Abe and his political rival Stephen A. Douglas face the atrium on the second floor, and portraits of the pair hang in the Illinois House chamber.

Mary wisely planned our visit around the legislative session, so we could see our representatives in action. As we entered the capitol, we made our way past a large group of protesters shouting about a women’s rights issue on the agenda. We inched our way to the gallery above the House floor to catch some of the debate. At least some of our reps were debating. Others were looking at laptops, staring off in space, even dozing. Several were absent.

The scene brought to mind a saying I’d heard long ago — a quote about two things you don’t want to see being made: laws and sausage. I imagine Lincoln hearing it, tilting back his stovepipe hat and enjoying a good guffaw.

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Mary Lincoln’s dress at the Abraham Lincoln presidential museum.

6-foot-4-inch frame. Upstairs, a window in a child’s bedroom opens onto a flat roof. During the 1860 election campaign, some of Lincoln’s sons stood on the roof yelling for passers-by to vote for their dad, stopping only when neighbors complained. Our ranger guide told us the Lincolns employed a “hired girl” to help wrangle the rambunctious boys and went through 17 helpers before departing for D.C.

Laid to rest

The minute I saw the bronze bust outside the Lincoln Tomb, I was transported to those eighth-grade days when we took turns rubbing Lincoln’s nose for good



The kitchen at the Lincoln House has a cast-iron cookstove.

luck. The years have made it glow only brighter.

The tomb by sculptor Larkin Mead sits atop a hill in Oak Ridge Cemetery, its obelisk rising 117 feet. Inside the marble and bronze interior stand reproductions of Lincoln statues and excerpts of his speeches. A cenotaph rests above his burial vault 10 feet below. Mary also lies in the tomb along with three of the Lincolns’ sons. Robert, the only son to live to adulthood, is buried at Arlington National Cemetery.

After his death, Lincoln’s body was returned to Springfield by train and lay in state at what is now the Old State Capitol. We ran out of time before we could tour this building, where he served in