

### A NEW BIRTH OF FREEDOM: STUDYING THE LIFE OF LINCOLN Abraham Lincoln at 200: A Bicentennial Survey

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## Feature Essay

Spring 2009

**Williams, Frank J.** *A NEW BIRTH OF FREEDOM: STUDYING THE LIFE OF LINCOLN Abraham Lincoln at 200: A Bicentennial Survey.*

No president has such a hold on our minds as Abraham Lincoln. He lived at the dawn of photography, and his pine cone face made a haunting picture. He was the best writer in all American politics, and his words are even more powerful than his images. His greatest trial, the Civil War, was the nation's greatest trial, and the race problem that caused it is still with us today. His death by murder gave his life a poignant and violent climax, and allows us to play the always-fascinating game of "what if?"

Abraham Lincoln did great things, greater than anything done by Theodore Roosevelt or Franklin Roosevelt. He freed the slaves and saved the Union, and because he saved the Union he was able to free the slaves. Beyond this, however, our extraordinary interest in him, and esteem for him, has to do with what he said and how he said it. And much of this had to do with the Union – what it was and why it was worth saving.

He saved it by fighting and winning the war, of course. But his initial step in this was the decision to go to war – not a popular decision, and certainly not an easy one. His predecessor, the incompetent James Buchanan, believed that the states had no right to secede from the Union, but that there was nothing he could do about it if they did. Thus, by the time Lincoln took office, seven Southern states had seceded, and nothing had been done about it. Led by South Carolina, they claimed to be doing only what the original colonies had done in 1776. To oppose them might bring on the war, and Buchanan had no stomach for this.

Lincoln knew that the time had come when the only way to save the Union was to go to war. But could he say so and retain the support of the people who had voted for him? For abolitionists, slavery was a sin, and the slaveholders sinners. But their leading spokesman, William Lloyd Garrison, was no friend of the Union. He said the Constitution was "a covenant with death and an

agreement with hell." During the Fort Sumter crisis, Garrison said "all Union saving efforts are simply idiotic."

It is not by chance that one of Lincoln's best speeches was delivered on a battlefield on the occasion of dedicating a cemetery for those who fought, died, and were buried there. We remember: Lincoln said that the brave men, living and dead, who struggled on this ground, this battlefield, had "consecrated" it better than he or anyone else could. Their cause was great and noble. We also remember Lincoln saying that their work was "unfinished," and that we, the living, should "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, by and for the people "shall not perish from the earth."

We remember everything he said. And we remember it because he took great pains to say things beautifully.

We also remember his second inaugural address, especially the concluding paragraph – the poignant beauty of it:

With malice toward none; with charity for all; with firmness in the right, as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in; to bind up the nation's wounds; to care for him who shall have borne the battle, and for his widow, and his orphan – to do all which may achieve and cherish a just, and a lasting peace, among ourselves, and with all nations.

Six weeks later he was murdered. We say that a man can be known by the company he keeps. A nation can be known and judged by its heroes whom it honors above all others. We pay ourselves the greatest compliment when we say that Abraham Lincoln is that man for us. So, we celebrate the bicentennial of his birth with fanfare and reverence. After 200 years, he still looks good.

In 1922, H. L. Mencken was told by a publisher "there are four kinds of books that never, under any circumstances, lose money in the United States – first, detective stories; secondly, novels in which the heroine is forcibly debauched by the hero; thirdly, volumes on spiritualism, occultism and other such claptrap; and fourthly, books on Lincoln."

Times change. So do profits and losses at publishing houses – but not, apparently, when you are talking about books about Abraham Lincoln. An

epochal American event – his 200th birthday – is being marked by an inundation of new Lincoln books the likes of which few of us have ever seen. Here are some of the 100 books published in the last two years – at the rate of one a week.

*Angels and Ages: A Short Book About Darwin, Lincoln and Modern Life* by Adam Gopnik (Knopf). What happened February 12, 1809, that changed the world wasn't merely the birth, in a log cabin on Nolin Creek in Kentucky, of Abraham Lincoln. In one of those incredible happenstances that either validate astrology or the miracles of coincidence, on the same day half a world away on an English country estate was born Charles Darwin, whose theory of evolution would transform scientific thought just as Lincoln's presidency would transform all ideas about democracy. Adam Gopnik has brilliantly taken it upon himself to "connect the dots" in the larger picture of the famously bearded giants given to the world on February 12, 1809.

*The Lincoln Anthology: Great Writers on His Life and Legacy from 1860 to Now* edited by Harold Holzer (Library of America). This is one of the best books in the Lincoln flood and one of the best ever from the invaluable Library of America. In its near-1,000 pages is a treasure trove of words about Abraham Lincoln – not just from American sources from Emerson to E.L. Doctorow but from foreigners like Karl Marx, Winston Churchill, Henrik Ibsen, Victor Hugo, Bram Stoker, Leo Tolstoy and H. G. Wells, too.

An ailing Tolstoy, quoted by Count S. Staklberg, said of Lincoln: "of all the great national heroes and statesmen of history, Lincoln is the only real giant. Alexander, Frederick the Great, Caesar, Napoleon, Gladstone and even Washington stand in greatness of character, in depth of feeling and in certain moral power far behind Lincoln."

In April 1865, soon after Abraham Lincoln's assassination, Ralph Waldo Emerson eulogized the recently slain President as "thoroughly American – a quite native, aboriginal man, as an acorn from an oak, no aping of foreigners, no frivolous accomplishments." Seventeen years later, Walt Whitman lauded Lincoln as the American among Americans, "his times, his death – great as any, any age – belong altogether to our own."

Most of the writers agree with Holzer that Lincoln, while complex and self-contradictory, "has remained nothing less than the ideal American hero: the self-made Everyman." He considers Lincoln's "legacy of extraordinary

resonance and universality."

A leading Lincoln scholar, Holzer arranges the excerpts chronologically, from William Cullen Bryant's *Introduction of Abraham Lincoln at Cooper Union* (1860), to E. L. Doctorow's novel *The March* (2005). The authors include the famous and the obscure – newspapermen, humorists, biographers, essayists, novelists, memoirists, poets, playwrights, historians, clergymen and statesmen.

In a brief epilogue, Holzer features Barack Obama, whose identification with Lincoln brings the story up to February 2007. Announcing his presidential candidacy in Illinois, Obama invoked Lincoln's memory, reminding his audience that "the life of a tall, gangly, self-made Springfield lawyer tells us that a different future is possible."

*The Portable Abraham Lincoln*, edited by Andrew Delbanco (Penguin), is an essential American book, to be enjoyed along with *The Lincoln Anthology's* offering of other voices on the subject of Lincoln. Said Edmund Wilson of Lincoln, the writer: "his own style was cunning in its cadences, exact in its choice of words, and yet also instinctive and natural; and it was inseparable from his personality in all its manifestations." All the obvious choices are here, but see also Lincoln's 1864 draft of a letter to ardent unionist Isaac M. Schermerhorn who invited Lincoln to a "Union Mass Meeting" in Buffalo. Agree to armistice, Lincoln writes, and "the insurgents would be in peaceful possession of all that has been struggled for." Therefore, no armistice.

"So much mythology, and so much iconography, and so many books!" remarks Fred Kaplan, of the City University of New York's Queens College, whose own contribution, *Lincoln: The Biography of a Writer*, (HarperCollins), is the first close study of how crucial Lincoln's vast reading and writing were to his political ascent.

Still warm off the presses are books about Lincoln's struggles with race, with his marriage, and with his melancholia; about his law practice; and about his creation of the role of commander in chief. Even the influence of the Scottish poet Robert Burns on the young Lincoln and the surprising parallels in their lives get an airing. (*Abraham Lincoln and Robert Burns: Connected Lives and Legends* by Ferenc Szasz Southern Illinois University Press.) All that, and one major new biography plus three mini-biographies.

Much of the new work goes down well-trodden trails. Take Lincoln's epochal 1858 debates about slavery with Senator Stephen A. Douglas of Illinois. In a new edition of the encounters, *The Lincoln-Douglas Debates* (University of Illinois Press), Rodney O. Davis and Douglas L. Wilson, directors of the Lincoln Studies Center at Knox College, in Galesburg, Illinois, do more than any predecessors to reconcile conflicting accounts from rival newspapers. Allen Guelzo's *Lincoln and Douglas: The Debates That Defined America* (Simon and Schuster) describes the times and critical issues of the day and the debates.

Douglas kept his seat but Lincoln gained national prominence, leading to an invitation to speak in New York to the eastern Republican establishment. The effect of his speech at the Cooper Union in New York moved him to the forefront of candidates for the Republican nomination for the presidency.

Other fine-detailed discoveries are yielding immediate returns. James Oakes in *The Radical and the Republican: Frederick Douglass, Abraham Lincoln, and the Triumph of Antislavery Politics* (W.W. Norton) shows that two little-noted speeches by Frederick Douglass reveal that he was more sympathetic than previously thought toward Lincoln's cautious inching toward support for some black suffrage. Douglass would remember in 1876, when asked to reflect on Lincoln's legacy: "Though Mr. Lincoln shared the prejudices of his white fellow-countrymen against the Negro, it is hardly necessary to say that in his heart of hearts he loathed and hated slavery."

Landmark biographers of Lincoln are many: Carl Sandburg (1926, 1939), James G. Randall (1945-55), Benjamin P. Thomas (1952), Stephen B. Oates (1977), and David Herbert Donald (1995), to name just five. In any case, biographers can hardly shirk inspecting Lincoln's mind when so much of his revolutionary contribution to American life stemmed from his moral sensibilities. For its nuanced view of such key aspects of Lincoln's leadership, Ronald C. White Jr.'s new *A. Lincoln: A Biography* (Random House) has been praised expansively. White's work is lengthy at 797 pages, but its deft writing will appeal to academic and general readers alike. (It appeared on the March 1 and 8, 2009 *New York Times* bestseller list.)

George E. McGovern, former U.S. Senator and Ph.D. historian knows something about presidential leadership. In *Abraham Lincoln* (Times), a compact portrait, he assesses Lincoln's greatness in terms of his ability to use his humble origins, empathy, keen sense of justice, and faith in American democracy to

become a master lawyer, party leader and commander in chief. James M. McPherson's *Abraham Lincoln* (Oxford), also concise, gives a rich and perceptive biography of a Lincoln influenced by union and freedom.

Lincoln's long career in law has become more visible thanks to the first part of an enormous project, *The Papers of Abraham Lincoln*, undertaken by the Illinois Historic Preservation Agency. The University of Illinois Press published the papers from Lincoln's legal practice on DVD in 2000, *The Law Practice of Abraham Lincoln: Complete Documentary Edition* edited by Martha L. Benner and Cullom Davis, and the state agency later put them into a searchable online database. In 2008, the University of Virginia Press published a four-volume boxed set of selected Lincoln court cases edited by Daniel W. Stowell and others.

The Illinois Historic Preservation Agency, in pursuing its documentation project, has dispatched a team of researchers to pour over every likely repository in the county. In about 2013, the agency will issue papers covering Lincoln's birth to his inauguration, and by about 2020 it will release his presidential papers – not just everything he wrote, but also everything of any importance that was written to him. The project is already casting light on details of Lincoln's legacy, such as his presidential governing of the District of Columbia. Still, the record and scholarship on the 16th President are already so vast, can we expect such delving to bring in major revisions of the Lincoln story?

Along with much documentary work has come new stock-taking of controversies of recent decades. What kind of religious person was Lincoln? (More than Washington and Jefferson, who were essentially deists.) Was he a racist? (A pragmatist who presided over a war he did not want but which "created the conditions that allowed him to write the emancipation proclamation," says Kaplan.) Was he gay? (Unlikely, despite much speculation during the 1990s.) Was his wife, Mary Todd Lincoln, as horrid as their marriage was horrible? (Increasingly, clearly, yes, no and maybe.)

Narrowly tailored studies abound in the new literature. Harold Holzer, co-chairman of the U.S. Abraham Lincoln Bicentennial Commission, is winning praise for a fresh take on Lincoln's activities between his election and inauguration. Holzer makes a compelling case that the President-elect was no ditherer, but rather shrewd and principled as he waged war to prevent Southern secession and end slavery in *Lincoln President Elect: Abraham Lincoln and the*

*Great Secession Winter 1860-1861* (Simon & Schuster).

Of new interest is *Lincoln's Men: The President and His Private Secretaries*, by Daniel Mark Epstein (HarperCollins). Of the three secretaries to serve during Lincoln's presidency, the best-known is John Hay, who later became a successful diplomat and businessman. In crisp and occasionally wry prose, Epstein shows how Lincoln was seen by those closer to him than anyone outside his immediate family.

Lincoln's attitude toward African-Americans is still parsed and contested. Many believe the epithet of "Great Emancipator" is well-earned, but some consider him essentially racist. In a thoughtful introduction to *Lincoln on Race and Slavery* (Princeton), Henry Louis Gates, Jr. details the steady evolution of Lincoln's thinking, from his early opposition to slavery on economic rather than humanitarian grounds to arguing, in the last speech of his life, that at least some black men should have the right to vote.

At first glance, *Abraham Lincoln: Great American Historians on our Sixteenth President* (Public Affairs) seems little more than the cobbled-together interviews from C-SPAN. But it boasts wonderful little treasures, including the laments of iconoclasts like Lerone Bennett Jr. and Thomas DiLorenzo about getting stiff-armed by the pro-Lincoln establishment. Taken together, such commentary becomes a virtual biography of Abraham Lincoln.

The legacy of Abraham Lincoln is measured in both deeds and words. The 16th President was a regular sound-bite machine, uttering such memorable words as "with malice toward none and charity for all," and "that government of the people, by the people, for the people shall not perish from the earth."

In the new collection *In Lincoln's Hand*, edited by Joshua Wolf Shenk and Harold Holzer (Bantam), a panel of writers, artists – even all our past presidents – were each assigned one of Lincoln's original manuscripts and asked to write a commentary. The manuscripts show how Lincoln used common language to reach a broader audience; the comments show how such words have influenced men and women of letters and power alike.

Recently published is *The Lincolns, Portrait of a Marriage* (Ballantine Books), by Daniel Mark Epstein. Epstein provides a fresh look at the Lincolns's marriage, portraying it as more loving than have other writers.

The story of Mary Todd Lincoln after the assassination is a tragic one. There has been no letup of works on her eccentricities and her later commitment to an institution by her son Robert. A recent account is Jason Emerson's *The Madness of Mary Lincoln* (Southern Illinois University Press).

While in New Salem, Lincoln began to study law on his own. He passed the Illinois bar examination in 1836 and left to work as a lawyer in Springfield. Over the next 24 years, primarily through his work on the eighth Illinois judicial circuit, he became one of the most respected attorneys in central Illinois. Much of Lincoln's approach to his later actions as President of the United States was grounded in his hands-on experience with the law. *Lincoln the Lawyer* by Brian Dirck (University of Illinois Press) gives a realistic view of what it was like to be a lawyer in Illinois at this time. And Mark Steiner, in *An Honest Calling: The Law Practice of Abraham Lincoln*, (Northern Illinois University Press), tells us that Lincoln the lawyer was "busy, busy," and supported alternative dispute resolution before that term was invented.

Lincoln's dealings with the Supreme Court were important, since he needed the Court's approval to uphold many of the actions he took to hold the nation together during the Civil War. Brian McGinty analyzed his relations with the Court in detail in *Lincoln and the Court* (Harvard University Press).

Has any wartime leader ever spent so much time thinking about the sacrifices of the dead and their meaning? Two new books describing Lincoln's role as commander in chief are James McPherson's *Tried By War: Abraham Lincoln as Commander in Chief* (Oxford) and Craig L. Symonds's *Lincoln and His Admirals* (Oxford) – both of whom share this year's Lincoln Prize.

The best description of the administrative acumen of the President is found in Doris Kearns Goodwin's *Team of Rivals* (Simon & Schuster). This is a superb biography of Lincoln and his major cabinet members. Most members of the Lincoln administration have earned biographies of their own as well.

The most important, controversial, and far-reaching document issued by President Lincoln was the Emancipation Proclamation. Burrus Carnahan's *Act of Justice: Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation and the Law of War* (University Press of Kentucky) and Brian Dirck's edited collection *Lincoln Emancipated* (Northern Illinois University) gave fair, up-to-date reviews of Lincoln's attitudes

toward race. An offshoot of Lincoln's moral approach to slavery has been an upsurge in interest in Lincoln's overall approach to religion, resulting in several recent books, including Michael Burkholder's *Lincoln's Christianity* (Westholme).

Shortly after the surrender of General Robert E. Lee ended the Civil War, President Lincoln was tragically assassinated. New books have appeared and will continue to appear covering the events and implications of the murder. An excellent overall view of the deed may be found in Anthony S. Pitch's "*They Have Killed Papa Dead!*" *The Road to Ford's Theatre, Abraham Lincoln's Murder, and the Rage of Vengeance* for Steerforth Press. Most books on the assassination deal with John Wilkes Booth and his co-conspirators, their pursuit and capture as in James L. Swanson's terrific read for young people, *Chasing Lincoln's Killer* (Scholastic). In another documentation project, the University of Illinois Press, in 2009, published the evidence gathered for the Lincoln assassination trials, much of which the court never viewed. *The Lincoln Assassination: The Evidence*, edited by William C. Edwards and Edward Steers.

Several scholars have recently compiled books on Lincoln's writings and unique way of expressing his thoughts. Examples include books by Douglas L. Wilson, *Lincoln's Sword: The Presidency and the Power of Words* (Knopf), and Ronald C. White, Jr.'s *The Eloquent President: A Portrait of Lincoln through His Words* (Random House).

Lincoln's Gettysburg Address and his second inaugural address have also received particular attention. Gabor Borrit's *The Gettysburg Gospel: The Lincoln Speech That Nobody Knows* (Simon & Schuster) is a definitive appraisal of the speech and its impact. Ron White does the same for Lincoln's second inaugural address in *Lincoln's Greatest Speech* (Simon & Schuster).

Librarians should also be aware of the recent availability of Lincoln's speeches and letters in electronic format. The Library of Congress has long had the largest collection of Lincoln's writings, and has published fragments from them over the years. Recently, the Library of Congress National Digital Library Program and the Manuscript Division announced the released of their Abraham Lincoln Papers in digital format at *Abraham Lincoln: A Resource Guide* ([www.loc.gov/rr/program/bib/presidents/lincoln/external.html](http://www.loc.gov/rr/program/bib/presidents/lincoln/external.html)).

More has been written about Abraham Lincoln than any other American historical figure – over 16,000 books and pamphlets, but no one is deterred from adding to the flood of information about our 16th and greatest President. One reason is that his personal story – the rise from poverty to power – is quintessentially American, and he as much as anyone embodied the national myth of the self-made man. Another is that the political story – his opposition to the Mexican War, his famous debates with Stephen A. Douglas, his election to the presidency and his leadership during the Civil War – revolves around an issue ever close to the surface of national life: race. Add to these the recent election of a president who consciously evokes Lincoln’s image and example, and the timing seems auspicious.

In 1922 Robert R. Moton, Booker T. Washington’s successor at Tuskegee Institute, drafted a speech on behalf of blacks for the dedication of Washington’s Lincoln Memorial, warning that the memorial would remain “but a hollow mockery, a symbol of hypocrisy, unless we together can make real the principles for which Lincoln died. Though the Memorial Commission ultimately forced Moton to excise his sharp words, his speech nevertheless ended with a cry for “equal justice and equal opportunity for all.” The election of President Obama and his words at the Capitol arguably bring this quest to fruition.

In a Lincoln Bicentennial Celebration held at the Capitol on February 12, President Barack Obama paid his respects to a man he said “made America’s story possible.” Obama, who has spoken frequently about how Lincoln inspires him, has praised the 16th President as a transcendent figure who came to “represent so much of who we are as a people and so much of what we aspire to be.”

Obama, who, on January 20, was sworn as America’s 44th President on the same Bible used at his 1861 inauguration by his idol, often invokes Lincoln and has said he takes heart in confronting the current daunting challenges from the example set by his hero. President Obama said: “What Lincoln never forgot, not even in the midst of civil war, was that despite all that divides us – north and south, black and white – we were, at the heart, one nation and one people, sharing a bond as Americans that could bend but would not break . . . I feel great gratitude to this singular figure who in so many ways made my own story possible, and in so many ways made America’s story possible.”

In the closing statement, Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi said: "Let us take our lead from Lincoln. Abraham Lincoln knew that the preservation of the union was a fight for the ideals of the Declaration of Independence. As he said 'At stake was not just the future of our nation, but the future of people throughout the world'."

"Before this year-long celebration ends, we will see major conferences on Lincoln from Springfield to South Florida, to Oxford and Belfast, and from Howard University to Harvard," said Senator Dick Durbin, the dean of lawmakers of the Illinois delegation. Devotees like Durbin love pointing out that in all of recorded history, only Jesus Christ has been the subject of more books.

Not that there wasn't any controversy surrounding Lincoln. "He became a figure that transcended human experience, but was a very controversial figure, criticized for his positions on slavery," said historian Marc Miccozzi, a former director of the National Museum of Health and Medicine, where some Lincoln artifacts are on display.

But part of Lincoln's appeal comes from the fact that he embodies the American myth that anyone, however humble their beginnings, can ultimately attain the highest office in the land. What historian Gabor Boritt has called, "the right to rise." Born and raised in poverty in Kentucky wilderness, he became a Mississippi River boat ferryman, country lawyer, and later Illinois legislator. Yes, the man about whom so many scholars have spilled ink, penned only a thin two-page autobiography when asked to write about himself. "There is not much of it, for the reason, I suppose, that there is not much of me," said Lincoln, a picture of unsurpassed modesty.

Pulitzer Prize-winner Doris Kearns Goodwin, Harold Holzer, and Matthew Pinsky were the historians who conducted a live, online "teach-in" about Abraham Lincoln on February 12. The program has been archived at [www.history.com/lincoln/](http://www.history.com/lincoln/) and at [www.abrahamlincoln200.org](http://www.abrahamlincoln200.org).

Americans can't get enough of Lincoln – especially now, having elected an African American President in the midst of an economic crisis. They can't stop arguing about what made Lincoln great, what he would have done if he had not been assassinated six weeks into his second term, what he would do if he were alive today. Each year, millions of visitors mount the steps of The Lincoln Memorial, gaze at the statue of this American Zeus and read his immortal words,

carved into the walls.

Yet, on his 200th birthday, the monolithic, mythic Lincoln – the barefoot boy who studied by candlelight and became “honest Abe,” “the rail splitter” – is fragmented into an array of competing and contrasting Lincolns. Some are verifiable, others theoretical, few wholly compatible with the Lincoln of sainted memory.

To Catherine Clinton, author of a new biography of Lincoln’s wife, Mary, (*Mrs. Lincoln*, HarperCollins), this evolution is inevitable, given the interest in his life. “How can we not learn new things about Lincoln?” she asks. “We’re all going to find new Lincolns.”

Although for years Lincoln and George Washington ran neck and neck when historians ranked the greatest presidents, lately Lincoln seems to be pulling ahead; he was No. 1 in a *London Times* survey in 2008. A *USA Today*/Gallup Poll taken February 7 and 8 ranked only Ronald Reagan and John Kennedy ahead of Lincoln among presidents Americans consider the greatest.

On Presidents Day 2009, C-SPAN released the results of its second Historians Survey of Presidential Leadership, for which a cross-selection of 65 presidential historians ranked the 43 former occupants of the White House on ten attributes of leadership. As in C-SPAN’s first such survey, released in 2000, Abraham Lincoln received top ranking from the historians. George Washington placed second, while spots three through five were held by Franklin D. Roosevelt, Theodore Roosevelt, and Harry Truman.

“We’re back where we started: He is a great man,” says Lewis E. Lehrman, a former Republican candidate for governor of New York and author of a new book on Lincoln’s anti-slavery speech of 1854 (*Lincoln at Peoria*, Stackpole Books).

This new Lincoln seems to be more nuanced and complex than the one to whom The Lincoln Memorial was dedicated in 1922 and whom Americans have encountered in school, on television, and at the movies.

Lincoln, he of the scraggly beard, skinny build, wrinkled brow and rhetorical radiance, has surely also inspired more artists than any other American president. He has been immortalized in every medium, from copper to

cardboard. He shows up in song lyrics ("With the thoughts I'd be thinkin', I could be another Lincoln, if I only had a brain," warbles the film "The Wizard of Oz"). He's the subject of powerful novels and incisive biographies. In the 1994 *Lincoln in American Memory* (Oxford), Merrill D. Peterson traced the way Lincoln's image – that craggy profile with its tousled hair and heavy brow – has graced everything from car dealerships to mattress ads. And much has found its way into the culture in the fifteen years since.

Abraham Lincoln is almost as hot as Barack Obama. With an exhibition at the Smithsonian celebrating the 200th year of his birth, the American president was the subject of three new television documentaries.

The story of John Wilkes Booth's assassination of Lincoln and his subsequent attempted escape was told on February 9, in vivid detail in a new episode of *American Experience: The Assassination of Abraham Lincoln*. Narrated by Oscar-winning actor Chris Cooper, the 90-minute documentary traces how Confederate sympathizer Booth was so angered by Lincoln's reelection in 1864 that he first plotted to have the President kidnapped at Ford's Theatre. When that plot fizzled, he came up with the plan that he thought would make him a hero to Confederates who felt demoralized when Lincoln ended slavery.

The documentary movingly reports on the Lincoln deathwatch in a house across the street from Ford's Theatre and his 12-day journey home from Washington, to Illinois, where he was buried. It was the reverse of the train trip he took when he was first elected. Even as Andrew Johnson was sworn in as Lincoln's successor, many blacks feared that the Emancipation Proclamation would be revoked and that their freedom would end.

In *Looking for Lincoln*, on PBS, February 11, Harvard professor Henry Louis Gates, Jr. addressed many of the controversies surrounding Abraham Lincoln – race, religion, politics, and depression – interpreting evidence from those who knew him and scholars who study him today.

The History Channel took a different approach to the Lincoln legacy in *Stealing Lincoln's Body* on February 16. In 1876, 11 years after Lincoln's assassination, a band of Chicago counterfeiters plotted to steal Lincoln's body and hold it for ransom. Their plan was to demand \$200,000 and the release of the gang's master engraver, who was in prison in Illinois.

The Secret Service infiltrated the gang with an informer. It also set in motion a cringe-inducing chain of events in which a group of self-appointed guardians took it upon themselves to protect Lincoln's remains by any means necessary. This strange story of Lincoln at unrest reveals how important this man was to so many, and our reluctance, too, to let such a beloved and visionary leader go.

On the eve of his greatest address, Lincoln was the guest of David Wills, a wealthy 32-year-old lawyer who bore the burden of coordinating the town's recovery from the three-day Battle of Gettysburg and spearheaded the Soldiers' National Cemetery. The house where Wills lived from 1859 until his death in 1894 is now the latest addition to Gettysburg National Military Park in partnership with Main Street Gettysbu