

Terrorized African-Americans Found Their Champion in Civil War Hero Robert Smalls

The formerly enslaved South Carolinian declared that whites had killed 53,000 African-Americans, but few took the explosive claim seriously—until now

By Douglas Egerton, photography by Lisa Elmaleh
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Robert Smalls, memorialized in a bust at Beaufort's Tabernacle Baptist Church, was sent to work in Charleston at age 12 after he started defying the strictures of slavery. (Lisa Elmaleh)

In May 1862, an enslaved man named Robert Smalls won renown by stealing the *Planter*, the Confederate military transport on which he served as a pilot. On a night when the ship's three white officers defied standing orders and left the vessel in the care of its crew, all slaves, Smalls guided it out of its slip in Charleston Harbor and picked up his wife, their two young children and other crewmen's families at a rendezvous on the Cooper River. Flying the South Carolina state flag and the Stars and Bars, he steered past several armed Confederate checkpoints and out to the open sea, where he exchanged his two flags for a simple white one—a

gesture of surrender to a Union ship on blockade duty. In all, he delivered 16 enslaved persons to freedom.

After serving the Union cause as a pilot for the rest of the Civil War, he returned to South Carolina, opened a general store that catered to the needs of freedmen, bought his deceased master's mansion in Beaufort and edited the *Beaufort Southern Standard*. He soon dived into politics as a loyal Republican. In 1868, he was a delegate to the South Carolina convention charged with writing a new state constitution, which guaranteed freedmen the right to vote and their children the promise of free public education.

The Wars of Reconstruction: The Brief, Violent History of America's Most Progressive Era

By 1870, just five years after Confederate surrender and thirteen years after the Dred Scott decision ruled blacks ineligible for citizenship, Congressional action had ended slavery and given the vote to black men.

Over the next three decades, Smalls served South Carolina in both houses of its legislature and in the U.S. House of Representatives. In 1895, he was once again a delegate to the state constitutional convention—except this time, he was hoping to defend the freedmen's right to vote against efforts by white South Carolina Democrats to quash it. Although Smalls had learned to read only in adulthood, he was a feared debater, and at age 56 the burly war hero remained an imposing figure. When he rose to speak at the State Capitol in Columbia, the chamber fell silent.

The “negro was here to stay,” Smalls thundered, “and it was to the interests of the white man to see that he got all of his

rights.” He supported his argument with data: tables and figures designed to demonstrate the economic and political clout of his state’s 600,000 black citizens (a slight majority of a total population of 1.1 million). In South Carolina alone, he observed, “the negroes pay tax on \$12,500,000 worth of property,” citing the most recent census. He argued for adopting a combined “property and educational qualification” for voting, but that was a bluff: Many white farmers had lost their property during the war, and he knew that wealthy white Democrats could never sell such a proposal to their poorer constituents.

Smalls then advanced a startling claim: “Since the reconstruction times, 53,000 negroes have been killed in the South.”



Sm

alls bought his ex-master’s mansion in Beaufort when it was put up for sale for back taxes in the 1860s. It remained in his family until 1953. (Lisa Elmaleh)

Fifty-three thousand dead is a staggering number—more than all the dead, wounded and missing at the Battle of Gettysburg. Even spread over the 30 years that had elapsed since Appomattox, that would be an average of 1,766 murders each year, or almost five each day, across the 11 former Confederate states.

When I first read Smalls’ speech while researching political violence in the years after the Civil War, I was stunned. Most estimates of postwar killings of African-Americans amount to about 4,000 public lynchings committed between 1877 and 1968. But what about those who were assassinated or disappeared *before* 1877, the year Reconstruction began to decline? How did Smalls arrive at that figure? Perhaps he simply invented it to capture the nation’s attention or to appeal to the sympathy of moderate Southern whites. But this figure, like others in his oration, was precise. He could have said “about fifty thousand” or even “more than fifty thousand,” but he didn’t. Was his number even plausible? Could it be verified? As far as I could tell, no historian had tried.

The answer matters because it captures a shifting understanding of what brought the nation’s first meaningful campaign for racial equality to a halt. Too often, the central question about the postwar period is why Reconstruction failed, which implies that the process itself was flawed in ways that contributed to its own demise. But Smalls’ death toll, if even close to accurate, adds substantial weight to the idea that Reconstruction was overthrown—by unremitting clandestine violence.

To evaluate his number, I combed through sources that would have been available to him. I quickly learned one thing: Those sources lack basic information, such as victims’ last names, making it unlikely that anyone will be able to establish a precise number of people targeted for assassination by Southern whites. Gradually, though, I came to another conclusion: Those sources clearly demonstrate that white Democrats, an electoral minority in every Southern state after the war, engaged in racial terrorism to restore the prewar social order. Despite the

imprecision in the records, I found Smalls' figure to be entirely plausible.



In 1874, Smalls won election to the U.S. House—where he used this desk—with 80 percent of the vote. In 1878, voter intimidation cut his share to 29 percent. (Lisa Elmaleh)

In recent years, a number of important books have chronicled the upheaval that followed the Military Reconstruction Act of 1867. That law, passed by a Congress that Republicans dominated, required the former Confederate states to adopt constitutions that recognized black citizenship, including the rights to vote and to sit on juries. In response, Confederate veterans founded the Ku Klux Klan, with the former Confederate general Nathan Bedford Forrest as its national leader. Because Klansmen operated in their home counties, they knew which local black activists to target for intimidation or assassination. Typical was the case of Benjamin F. Randolph, a South Carolina state senator and a delegate to the state's 1868 constitutional convention: While campaigning for Republican candidates that October, he was shot down by three white men at a train station in broad daylight. No one ever pursued or even identified the gunmen.

Congress responded to such attacks with the Ku Klux Klan Act, which President Ulysses S. Grant signed into law in April 1871. After Klansmen murdered two more black

legislators in South Carolina, Grant exercised his powers under the act to declare martial law and suspend the writ of habeas corpus in nine counties in the state. As federal troops made arrests in scores of attacks, Grant's attorney general, Amos Akerman, went to South Carolina to oversee the prosecutions, which were conducted in federal courts and before interracial juries. The Justice Department obtained 168 convictions, and Akerman's informants estimated that as many as 2,000 vigilantes had fled the state rather than face arrest. "Peace has come to many places as never before," Frederick Douglass exulted. "The scourging and slaughter of our people have so far ceased."

But the aging abolitionist was overly optimistic. In crushing the Klan, Akerman inadvertently decentralized white vigilantism. Thanks to the Klan Act, black citizens were protected by federal marshals at the polls and Army patrols in urban areas. But elsewhere, lone assassins and small gangs still preyed on the Republican leaders of the reconstructed state governments and the African-American citizens they tried to protect. Scholarly attention, understandably, has tended to focus on large-scale atrocities, such as the Colfax Massacre of 1873, in which a white mob torched a Louisiana courthouse and gunned down at least 62 African-Americans as they tried to flee the flames. But those atrocities, horrific though they were, accounted for several hundred deaths at most.

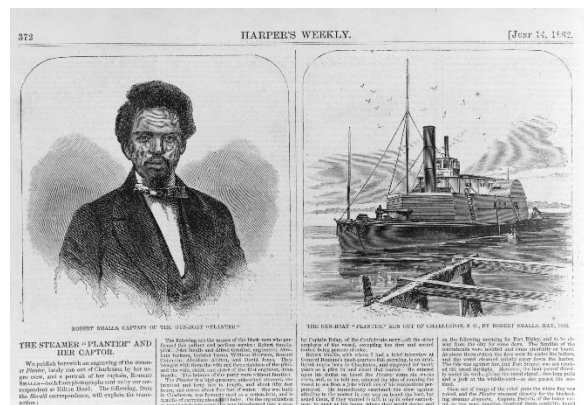


caufort, like many Southern communities, prizes its majestic live oaks as a symbol of strength. (Lisa Elmaleh)

Which brings us back to Robert Smalls' assertion of 53,000 African-Americans murdered. Unhappily, little survives of his personal papers, so they don't provide much help in determining how he arrived at that number. But other sources do.

One is Blanche K. Bruce. A former Virginia bondman, he attended Oberlin College and served in the Mississippi State Senate. In 1875, the same year Smalls began representing South Carolina in the House, Bruce arrived in Washington as a U.S. senator for Mississippi. At the time, he was the only black U.S. senator, and African-Americans across the country regarded him as their spokesman. People peppered him with news regarding racial violence. "Tell them in Congress how Howard Banks & his poor little Boy were brutally murdered here and how one of our preachers was shot down," someone wrote from Vicksburg, Mississippi. Bruce's correspondence, which fills nine boxes at Howard University's library, is rife with such reports. Although Smalls was one of only seven black congressmen in 1875, his wartime service made him the most famous of the group. Undoubtedly, he too received bulletins on violence from around the country.

As a congressman, Smalls also had access to the extensive regional reports from officers assigned to the Freedmen's Bureau, the federal agency that helped former slaves and impoverished Southern whites obtain food, land, education and labor contracts from 1865 to 1872. In hundreds of bound volumes, innumerable letters documented attacks on black and white teachers employed by the bureau, and during election seasons the reports from the field contained almost nothing but accounts of violence.



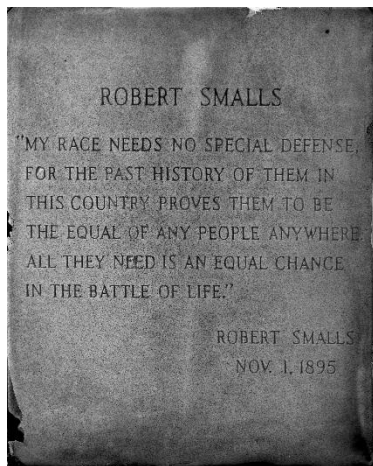
Harper's Weekly reports on "The Steamer 'Planter' and Her Captor," June 14, 1862 (Library of Congress Prints and photographs division)

In Grenada, Mississippi, for example, J.B. Blanding, a 25-year-old Army officer and bureau agent, was shot three times in the head while out for an evening stroll in 1866. The next morning, as Blanding lay dying, "a committee of citizens" paid a call on his captain to warn him "that the teachers must leave, and that if he himself did not leave he would be killed next."

When an Atlanta-based activist named Walker journeyed into the countryside during the fall of 1868, "a party of white men" surrounded a house where he was spending the night and threatened to torch it unless he came with them. Vowing to "deliver himself and trust to the Lord," Walker did so. He was found the next day

“with two bullet holes in his breast.” Two days before the election, another Georgia-based bureau agent informed his superiors that he knew of “five freedmen who have been murdered for political opinion within the last two weeks.”

Just weeks before that in Alabama, “a gang of men disguised” broke into the home of freedman Moses Hughes. When they couldn’t find Hughes, who had crawled up the chimney, they shot his wife “through the Brain & left her dead.” The “plain truth,” the agent reported, “is the Rebellion is flourishing in these parts.”



A plaque below the bust of Smalls at Tabernacle Baptist Church is inscribed with the proposition he defended throughout his post-Civil War career. (Lisa Elmaleh)

The black press is a third possible source for Smalls’ tabulations (though not Smalls’ own paper; I could locate no print run of the *Beaufort Southern Standard*). Almost from the moment the Crescent City fell to Union gunboats in April 1862, Louis Charles Roudanez began publishing the *New Orleans Tribune*. After the Confederate surrender three years later, black newspapers appeared in almost every Southern town. As Roudanez and other black editors documented white-on-black violence, Democrats retaliated. In Opelousas,

Louisiana, they demolished the office of the pro-Republican *Progress*, lynched its French-born editor and, according to the black-owned *San Francisco Elevator*, shot as many as “one hundred negroes.” The *Tribune* also highlighted the calculus of terror, noting that ministers and other community leaders were high-value targets. Southern “Democrats wanted to get those recognized leaders out of the way,” one black editor said. “If they could not scare him out, then they would kill him.” The press, like the Freedmen’s Bureau reports, documented an epidemic of bloody oppression.

This wave of terror continued into the 1870s, and even visited Smalls’ doorstep. In 1876, some rice planters threatened to “tie him up and give him 150 lashes on his big fat ass” as he tried to settle a labor strike by black rice workers. He struck a deal anyway. On Election Day that year—“a carnival of bloodshed and violence,” Smalls said—he narrowly won re-election to the U.S. House. But then the state’s Democrats, now ascendant, challenged the result and accused him of taking a \$5,000 bribe during his days in the State Senate. While the case proceeded—he was tried and convicted, but then pardoned in 1879—Smalls retained his seat in the House. But he lost it in the 1878 elections. By then the state’s white supremacist Democrats had retaken control of the government.



The grounds of the Robert Smalls House in Beaufort. (Lisa Elmaleh)

This time, there was no federal intervention. An economic depression in 1873 had turned the nation's attention to financial matters. Northerners may have tired of reading about violence in the South. As federal troops were sent to fight the escalating wars on the Great Plains, their presence in the South declined from an 1867 peak of 12,000 to only 2,800 in the summer of 1876. By then Southerners were demanding that even those troops depart; that demand became moot when Rutherford B. Hayes agreed to withdraw them as part of the deal that settled that November's disputed presidential election.

The dilution of black power continued. In 1880, Smalls lost his House seat with only 40 percent of the vote—but after he presented evidence that African-American turnout had been suppressed through intimidation, the House voted to seat him instead of his opponent. After he won two more contentious, contested elections, he lost his seat to William Elliott, a Democrat and former Confederate officer. "Elections are all in the hands of the Democrats," he told a reporter in 1886.



A view of the wetlands down the street from the Robert Smalls House. (Lisa Elmaleh)

As a reward for party service, President Benjamin Harrison appointed Smalls collector for the Port of Beaufort. Five years later, as one of South Carolina's constitutional delegates, Smalls proclaimed his hope that "when our work is done that we have made as good a constitution as the one we are doing away with."

He hoped in vain. The new constitution required that voters own at least \$300 worth of property, pass a literacy test and be able to answer questions about any provision in the document. It disenfranchised most African-Americans and laid the basis for Jim Crow segregation in South Carolina. There and elsewhere, democracy was subverted, and the human toll, however inexact, was enormous.

This article is a selection from the September issue of Smithsonian magazine

Douglas Egerton is a professor of history and the author of five books, including *The Wars of Reconstruction*.

Lisa Elmaleh is a West Virginia-based photographer who uses techniques from the 19th century.

Before the Civil War, Congress Was a Hotbed of Violence

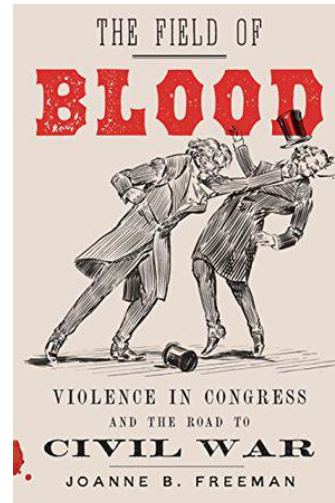
A new book from historian Joanne Freeman chronicles the viciousness with which elected officials treated each other



Southern Chivalry – Argument versus Club's, John L. Magee (Wikicommons)
By [Anna Diamond](#)
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Scuffles seem to break out in parliaments and legislatures around the world. The last few years saw a brawl in [Taiwan](#), a face-punch in [Ukraine](#) and a mass fight in [South Africa](#).

The floor of the U.S. Congress is home today to plenty of verbal abuse and name-calling, but rarely sees anything physical. In her new book, *Field of Blood*, Joanne B. Freeman, Yale professor of history and American studies, finds that violence used to be the norm in the Capitol, almost two centuries ago, when fists flew, pistols were drawn and the threat of violence was all pervasive. She writes, “The antebellum Congress had its admirable moments, but it wasn’t an assembly of demigods. It was a human institution with very human failings.”



The Field of Blood: Violence in Congress and the Road to Civil War

In *The Field of Blood*, Joanne B. Freeman recovers the long-lost story of physical violence on the floor of the U.S. Congress.

Bearing witness to those failings was Benjamin Brown French, a New Hampshire lawyer and editor who worked in Washington in the lead up to the Civil War. During his four decades in the nation’s capital, he crossed paths with presidents, learned the inner-workings of politics and journaled almost daily about the violence and tension he saw there. Freeman mined French’s work to provide an insider’s perspective on an increasingly contentious Congress.

Freeman’s book [*Field of Blood: Violence in Congress and the Road to Civil War*](#) (Farrar, Straus and Giroux) is out on September 11. She spoke with *Smithsonian* about what antebellum Congress was really like.

Who is our guide to Washington in your book?

Benjamin Brown French came to Washington in 1830 and died there in 1870. And the entire time he was there, he was essentially either in Congress as a clerk or

surrounded by Congressmen. So he was the ideal eyewitness for the world of the antebellum Congress. And in his diaries and in his letters to his brothers and sister, he has a gripping, you-are-there way of understanding the culture and climate.

At the beginning of my book, he's a very collegial fellow. People liked him, all parties, North and South. And by the end, he goes out to buy a gun in case he needs to shoot some Southerners. My question for the book was: How does a person begin thinking, "I love my country. I shall do anything for the Union. I like everyone. Everyone likes me," to "I better carry a gun in case some Southerners do something risky on the street to me"?

You write that he always seemed to be at the right place at the right time. What were some of the things that he witnessed?

There was an assassination attempt against President Andrew Jackson that French saw happen. John Quincy Adams has a stroke after his presidency, when he's serving in the House. He's pulled off the floor into a room off of the House, and French is there by his side holding his hand.

Most striking of all, when President Lincoln is assassinated, French is in the middle of it. By that point, he's in charge of, in essence, security in Washington. So he's running around trying to close buildings. He stands by Lincoln's side after he dies, while waiting for people to come and deal with the body. It's remarkable the degree to which [events that] we would consider the smash-bang highlight moments of this period, French doesn't necessarily play a central role in any of them. But he saw them, and even better, he wrote about them.

What was Congress like in the decades leading up to the Civil War?

The paintings from the time show senators in black frocks debating, their fingers thrust into the air in emphasis. But in truth, Congress was a violent place. That was in part because the nation was violent, too. There were riots in cities over immigration and fighting on the frontier over Native American land. The system of slavery was grounded in violence. It was not a kind era.

A lot of people have heard of [the caning of Charles Sumner in the Senate chamber in 1856](#), but you found many more examples.

I found roughly 70 violent incidents in the 30 years before the Civil War—and very often the incidents featured a Southerner trying to intimidate a Northerner into compliance. It's all hidden between the lines in the Congressional record; it might say "the conversation became unpleasantly personal." That meant duel challenges, shoving, pulling guns and knives. In 1858, South Carolina representative Laurence Keitt started trouble with Pennsylvania's Galusha Grow. It turned into a mass brawl between Southerners and Northerners in the House.

How did voters feel about the violence?

That changes over time, which isn't surprising. And it wasn't the same for everyone. There were certain people who were elected to Congress because they played rough. That's why their constituents sent them there, to play rough, to defend their interests with gusto. And that included sometimes threats and even also sometimes fists or weapons.

People knew who they were electing to Congress, and they did it for a reason. The most striking example of that is, over time, increasingly confrontational Northerners get sent to Congress.



Joanne Freeman (Beowulf Sheehan)

What role did the press play in the violence?

Over time, it played a more central role as things like the railroad, the telegraph, the steam powered printing press, and new ways of creating paper—there are all of these technological innovations that make the press bigger and faster and further reaching between the 1830s and the Civil War.

What starts out as a pretty small press community, in which Congressmen knew who was sitting in the House and Senate recording things and often went and corrected the record, changes to all kinds of people from all over the country reporting in Congress, relying on the telegraph to be able to send their messages home. And Congressmen don't have control of that spin. The press begins to play a more central, obvious role.

Do you think this atmosphere helped push the country toward war?

It fueled the progression. Southerners came to see Northerners as weak, because they put

up with the bullying. And if you're a Northerner in Congress, how do you say, "I'm up for a compromise"? You're going to look like a coward. The press played up the fighting, creating an endless loop of anger. This wasn't just about goofy guys in Washington—what goes on in Congress reflects the state of the nation.

When writing the book, did you see similarities or differences to the tension in our contemporary Congress? Could this type of physical violence occur in Congress today?

I have no idea whether it could happen in the modern Congress. Partly because who knows what's going to happen about anything at this point. To get to the point, in modern day, where you have physical violence, that would suggest such an extreme division on such a high level between people, that they can't even really see themselves as playing on the same team at all. That would be meaningful and really worrying, I would say.

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Looking Back: The father of battlefield medicine

Katie West. Observer-Reporter. Sep 16, 2018



Courtesy of the descendants of Dr. Jonathan Letterman. Dr. Letterman with patient

Those who have traveled the Civil War battlefield sites have undoubtedly heard the stories of horrific injuries sustained by soldiers.

You would have been told about soldiers lying on the battlefield calling out and waiting for someone to carry them to safety. Sometimes it was days that they would wait.

Many soldiers, who might have been saved if gotten to quickly, would die where they fell due to dehydration or exposure. Most likely you have heard the stories of soldiers being given a shot of whiskey and a bullet to bite on as they had limbs amputated. Or been told of those limbs then being thrown outside the medical tent onto an ever-growing mountain of body parts.

These stories paint a very grim picture of surgery during the Civil War. One surgeon during this period, upon beginning his service in the Army of the Potomac, also saw these conditions and made it his mission to develop a solution to the problem.

Dr. Jonathan Letterman was born in Canonsburg on December 11, 1824. His

father was a prominent surgeon in the area and made sure his son received a proper education during his childhood.

Letterman would go on to attend Jefferson College, graduating in 1845. Shortly after graduation, Letterman entered Jefferson Medical College in Philadelphia.

He decided to pursue a career as a military surgeon and entered the Army immediately following his graduation from medical school in 1849. Serving as an assistant surgeon in the Army Medical Department, he would take part in several military campaigns against Native American tribes throughout the country over the next 10 years.

With the outbreak of the Civil War, Letterman was assigned to the Army of the Potomac as a surgeon, but by June 1862 had been promoted to medical director of the Army of the Potomac.

Following the battle of Second Manassas, Letterman was appalled by the fact that it took more than eight days to fully remove the wounded from the battlefield. He saw issues not only with organization, but also the efficiency of the medical department.

One of the first changes Letterman implemented was the organization of a separate ambulance corps.

Before Letterman took over, it was the responsibility of the soldiers fighting to remove their own wounded comrades from the battlefield and get them to the nearest aid station or hospital. This method resulted in a high casualty rate, which was unacceptable to Letterman.

He instituted a separate ambulance corps made up of officers and enlisted men to

remove the wounded from the battlefield using two- or four-wheeled carts. This newly developed ambulance corps laid the groundwork for the ambulance services used in the modern Army.

Letterman's methods were tested during the Battle of Antietam, where the new ambulance corps removed more than 23,000 wounded soldiers, both Confederate and Union, from the battlefield within 24 hours.

Letterman would expand on this by developing a more detailed evacuation system. First, there would be a field dressing station near the fighting that could apply dressing.

Letterman's second change was locating a field hospital in a nearby barn or house where further treatment or emergency surgery could be performed; it was in these settings that "triage" procedures became instituted.

Lastly, Letterman called for establishing regional hospitals that were away from the battlefields that could provide long-term treatment. This system was tested at the Battles of Fredericksburg and Gettysburg. In both instances, Letterman's system was a success – accounting for several thousands soldiers' lives being saved that previously would have been lost.

In March 1864, the U.S. Congress adopted Letterman's system as official practice for the Army.

In December of that year, Letterman resigned from the Army and moved with his wife, Mary Lee, to San Francisco. There, he would serve as coroner until his death.

Mary passed in 1867, and following her death, Letterman would suffer from several

illnesses and bouts of depression. He followed Mary Lee in death March 15, 1872. He was buried in Arlington Cemetery with the following inscription on his gravestone: A man "who brought order and efficiency in to the Medical Service and who was the originator of modern methods of medical organization in armies."

Letterman's legacy lived on long after his death when the Army named the hospital at the Presidio in San Francisco the Letterman General Hospital.

The hospital came under the ownership of the National Park Service when the site was decommissioned by the Army. The building itself was demolished in 2002, and in 2005, Lucasfilm opened the Letterman Digital Arts Center on the site of the former hospital.

Katie West is the former curator for Washington County Historical Society.

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September 16 - 18, 1862

The Battle of Antietam
Sharpsburg. American Battlefield Trust



On September 16, 1862, Maj. Gen. George B. McClellan and his Union Army of the Potomac confronted Robert E. Lee's Army of Northern Virginia at Sharpsburg, Maryland. At dawn on September 17, Maj. General Joseph Hooker's Union corps mounted a powerful assault on Lee's left

flank that began the Battle of Antietam, and the single bloodiest day in American military history. Repeated Union attacks, and equally vicious Confederate counterattacks, swept back and forth across Miller's cornfield and the West Woods. Despite the great Union numerical advantage, Stonewall Jackson's forces near the Dunker Church would hold their ground this bloody morning. Meanwhile, towards the center of the battlefield, Union assaults against the Sunken Road would pierce the Confederate center after a terrible struggle for this key defensive position. Unfortunately for the Union army this temporal advantage in the center was not followed up with further advances.

Late in the day, Maj. General Ambrose Burnside's corps pushed across a bullet-strewn stone bridge over Antietam Creek and with some difficulty managed to imperil the Confederate right. At a crucial moment, A.P. Hill's division arrived from Harpers Ferry, and counterattacked, driving back Burnside and saving the day for the Army of Northern Virginia. Despite being outnumbered two-to-one, Lee committed his entire force at the Battle of Antietam, while McClellan sent in less than three-quarters of his Federal force. McClellan's piecemeal approach to the battle failed to fully leverage his superior numbers and allowed Lee to shift forces from threat to threat. During the night, both armies tended to their wounded and consolidated their lines. In spite of crippling casualties, Lee continued to skirmish with McClellan on the 18th, while removing his wounded south of the Potomac. McClellan, much to the chagrin of Abraham Lincoln, did not vigorously pursue the wounded Confederate army. While the Battle of Antietam is considered a draw from a military point of view, Abraham Lincoln and the Union claimed victory. This hard-fought battle, which

drove Lee's forces from Maryland, would give Lincoln the "victory" that he needed before delivering the Emancipation Proclamation — a document that would forever change the geopolitical course of the American Civil War.

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Gone Fishing: Troops on both sides used improvised tackle to catch fish and supplement their army rations

By Brian E. Stamm

DECEMBER 2018 • CIVIL WAR TIMES
MAGAZINE

The sea and its creatures were of course familiar subjects for most Rhode Island soldiers. It wasn't surprising, therefore, that the Ocean State boys of the 2nd Rhode Island Cavalry chose to pass the time with a little "fishing" as they sailed through the Gulf of Mexico to New Orleans in the summer of 1863. Captain William Stevens, of Company C, recalled that his fellow troopers decided to alleviate their boredom during the voyage by tying chunks of meat to strings and throwing the lines over the side of their transport ship, hoping to entice sharks to bite and perhaps grab on for a ride. For the accidental sport fisherman, the pastime would prove unsuccessful. Stevens, however, couldn't help lament that several of the regiment's horses had died during the voyage and were thrown overboard. The unfortunate beasts, he noted, provided a veritable "feast" for the finned predators who then had little appetite for the offered bait.

While Stevens and his comrades, attached to the 19th Corps in the Department of the Gulf, tempted fate with sharks to break the boredom, other soldiers during the war would fish to supplement sometimes meager

and unappetizing rations, and it was a common activity among troops in both armies. They did so in camp and on the march by using a variety of ad hoc fishing devices. One soldier advocated the



Better Than Salt Pork: A Union soldier takes advantage of a lull in the war to add fish to the dinner menu. (Forbes, Edwin Austin (1839-95)/Virginia Historical Society, Richmond, Virginia, USA/Bridgeman Images)

use of a “light tapered pole” or stick on which the line would be tied. Another improvised and used a thin piece of wood shaped like an “hour glass,” about 4- by 1½-inches in size, to make a handfishing tool. A slight concave at both ends allowed the hook and line to be wrapped for carrying. If one of these could not be had, a small stick made a suitable substitute. All the soldier had to do was obtain a hook, some kind of fishing line and bait, and the battle for a wily trout, catfish, or other edible species would begin.

Hooks came in various sizes depending on the type or size of fish desired. Small hooks about a half-inch long were used for trout and other small fish, with larger hooks up to 3 inches long for large freshwater game fish

and those of the saltwater variety. Made from a piece of curved stiff wire, one end would be flattened or stamped into a “spade” shape, where the line was tied, and the other end contained a barbed sharpened tip.

Confederate Lieutenant Frank Robertson of Maj. Gen. J.E.B. Stuart’s staff would write home to his wife requesting fishing hooks and lines, if she could find them. In one letter, he drew the specific sizes of hooks he needed that could be used for trout, sunfish, and small catfish. On the Gettysburg battlefield, along Willoughby Run, one enterprising soldier left behind a bent sewing needle used for a hook along with other angling items.

Store-bought fishing lines of the era varied. Typical manufactured lines were made from braided horsehair, braided silk, or a combination of both, which was preferable and more durable. Soldiers in the field would sometimes substitute heavy thread or small cord in case regular line was not available. Commercial floats or “bobbers,” were also available and could be made from any piece of wood, cork, or even sections of dried corncob. The float was then tied on the line above the hook, the distance depending on the depth of the water. Sinkers or weights to send the bait to the bottom and for ease of casting into a stream or body of water were sometimes fashioned by splitting open Minié balls or other lead bullets. Once the bullet was separated, it could be crimped around the line at the desired spot.

Northern soldiers in the field had better access to manufactured fishing items than their Southern counterparts. Newspapers published in the North between 1862 and 1865 ran numerous fishing advertisements, while Southern newspaper ads for fishing tackle during that period were virtually

nonexistent. Southern papers, in fact, would not have advertisements for tackle again until after the war.

Bait mostly came in the form of worms or sometimes, according to Lieutenant John Blue of the 17th Virginia Cavalry, “crickets and bugs” were used to tempt fish. Blue had been part of a mountain company near his home of Romney in western Virginia early in the war and described how he and fellow soldiers fished in mountain streams to supplement their rations. Later in the war, they would cast lines into the headwaters of the Gauley River in Greenbrier County for “trout of which the mountain streams seemed to be alive.”

Other soldiers would substitute whatever was readily available to them. In *The National Tribune*, a newspaper dedicated to soldier submissions after the war, a story featured fictional Private Si Klegg of Company Q, 97th Illinois, who participated in William T. Sherman’s 1864 March to the Sea. Klegg described how he saw a member of his company using “just a hook and line and a piece of pork for bait” to go after catfish. Even though this was a fictional account, Klegg’s adventures were based on actual events.



Angler Thaddeus Norris. (Courtesy of The American Museum of Fly Fishing)

Fishing in Wartime

Thaddeus Norris published *The American Anglers Book* in 1864. Though the book was probably not part of a typical Northern or Southern soldier’s reading material, *Anglers Book* was an indication of how fishing was taking hold as a recreational pursuit for a larger segment of the American population, even as the Civil War continued to grind on. Norris offered advice on how to build and use fishing tackle as well as what techniques were needed to catch both fresh- and saltwater fish. The work even explained the art of fish breeding to the common angler. Norris would further explain that the everyday angler needed a rod, preferably 12 feet in length, the handle made from ash with a hickory, bamboo, or lancewood rod tapered to a metal ring tip with loose ring “eyelets” spaced along its length. Fitted with a metal reel, produced by William Billingham or several other American and foreign makers, the rod could be broken down into two pieces. —**B.E.S.**

Other soldiers also wrote about their attempts and successes while fishing and eating what they caught. While encamped near Beverly, W.Va., along Seneca Creek—known for its abundant population of trout—the 10th West Virginia’s 13-year-old drummer Ransom T. Powell described how he and his comrades did their “best towards depopulating it.” While stationed in Alexandria, Va., J.E. Cutler of the 29th Maine Infantry would write of a huge catfish caught by one of his comrades in the Potomac River that had to be “shared with a friend from the 29th Wisconsin.” The Maine boys, however, were ordered on picket duty, so Cutler and his messmates were unable to sample the fresh catch.

On February 5, 1863, Private Edward O. Austin of the 171st Pennsylvania Militia,

writing from the New Bern, N.C., area to his hometown newspaper the Potter Journal, cited the “warm weather” and how “The men are occasionally fishing in the river catching eels and catfish.”



Fresh Seafood: Union troops from Florida’s Fort Pickens surf fish from Santa Rosa Island in 1861. One Yank has simply tied a line to a stake driven into the beach, and strains as he hauls in another catch. (Heritage Auctions, Dallas)

Catfish, trout, and eels were not the only types of fish soldiers would catch. Other species of fish and water-dwelling creatures would be sought after for both sport and food. E.B. Lufkin of the 13th Maine wrote after the war of being stationed near Lake Pontchartrain in New Orleans and watching fellow company member Jerry Osgood catching a “garfish” more than 5 feet long. Lufkin described the fish as being shaped “much like a pickerel and mottled in the same way but of a different color.” He went on to explain that he and his cohorts were afraid to bathe in the lake as the gar were said to grow 10–12 feet in length, making them more feared than even the local alligators. Corporal Charles Wasage of the 47th New York Infantry recalled that when his unit was stationed on Ossabaw Island at the mouth of the Ogeechee River in Georgia,

the men would catch and eat sea turtles that “answered us for fresh beef.”

Alfred Wilson and Mark Wood of the 21st Ohio, two of the raiders who hijacked the Confederate locomotive General during the Great Locomotive Chase in April 1862, experienced similar good fortune. The two were captured in the raid and sent to a Rebel prison near Chattanooga, Tenn. They were able to escape and commandeer a small boat, however, and set out along the Chattahoochee River, intending to follow it to Columbus, Ga., where Union ships would hopefully be waiting.

After several weeks of subsisting on pumpkin, roots, and raw corn, they came upon some fishing hooks and lines in an empty cabin. Soon they were eating raw catfish, which Wilson described as “palatable.” The escapees eventually reached Columbus where they met up with the Union fleet, but the experience had left both unfit for service. Wilson later said that the acquisition of the fishing paraphernalia had saved his and his partner’s lives.

But fishing for pure survival was the exception to the rule. Most of the soldiers, blue and gray, who baited a hook did so as a way to pass spare time and add variety to their diets. And, as they intently watched their bobbers, fishing helped them take their mind off war’s hardships and kindle memories of quieter days at the town pond or along the stream that ran through their family farm.



William Billinghamurst's patented fly reel.
(Courtesy of Ron Gast, Luresnreels.com)

Fly Reels and Rapid Fire

In 1859, William Billinghamurst manufactured what many to consider to be the first American-patented flyfishing reel. The brass reels were designed to mount on the sides of their rods and were delicate and light to provide the balance needed when precisely casting a small fly lure into a quick-moving trout stream. The Rochester, N.Y., native's main talent, however, was gunsmithing, and he was particularly adept at producing repeating rifles.

In 1861, he teamed with former apprentice Josephus Requa to make one of the first practical machine guns, the Billinghamurst-Requa Volley Gun. The weapon consisted of 25 breechloading barrels, which used specialized brass cartridges that could be fired by a single percussion cap. The inventors claimed the .52-caliber barrels, mounted side by side, could spew out up to 175 shots per minute. Billinghamurst demonstrated the gun for President Lincoln and was granted a patent for the weapon on September 16, 1862. He was unable, however, to reel in a coveted federal contract during the Civil War for his invention.

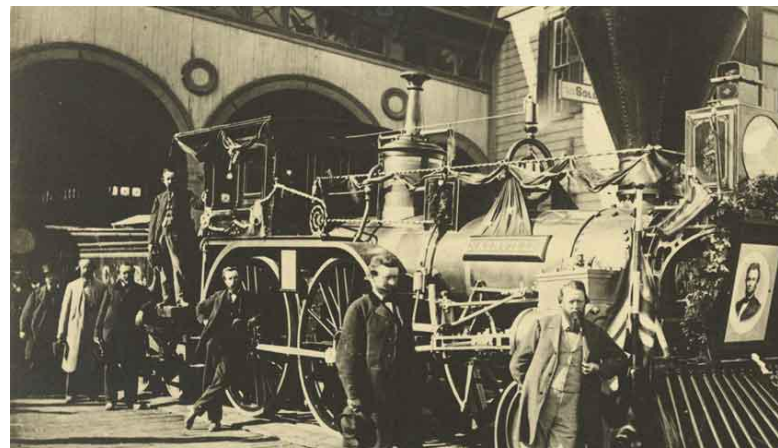
Approximately 50 volley guns were still produced for about \$500 each, and some were deployed by Federal troops against Fort Wagner during the siege of Charleston, S.C. A few Army of the James' batteries used them in the trenches outside of Richmond and Petersburg in 1864. —D.B.S.



"Street Sweeper" Troops of the 18th New York Independent Battery pose in Rochester, N.Y., with one of the Volley Guns they purchased in 1862. The 18th took the weapons to Louisiana, but a shortage of their cartridge ammunition hindered their use. (Cowan's Auctions)

Brian E. Stamm, a retired corrections officer based in Bellefonte, Pa., is currently researching the 2nd Pennsylvania Cavalry.

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Serious Duty: The handsome locomotive “Nashville” of the Cleveland, Columbus & Cincinnati Railroad is decorated with black mourning drape and a picture of Abraham Lincoln. The engine pulled the funeral train from Cleveland to Columbus, Ohio.

1,700 Miles of Mourners: Abraham Lincoln’s funeral train traveled across seven states

By Wendy J. Sotos

OCTOBER 2018 • CIVIL WAR TIMES
MAGAZINE

“I kept on until I arrived at the East Room...before me was a catafalque on which was a form wrapped in funeral vestments. Around it were stationed soldiers...there was a throng of people...weeping pitifully. ‘Who is dead in the White House?’ I demanded... ‘The President...killed by an assassin...’ A loud burst of grief...woke me from my dream.”
—*Abraham Lincoln, recounting a dream shortly before his assassination in 1865.*

Because of the telegraph, news of President Abraham Lincoln’s shooting on April 14, 1865, and death on the 15th spread quickly, and the country—both in the North and South—was in shock. The nation and government turned to Secretary of War Edwin Stanton, who agreed to run the nation until Vice President Andrew Johnson was sworn in. He met with an assembly from Illinois that pleaded Lincoln be laid to rest in Springfield, his “adopted home” in the first state to recognize his “greatness.” Stanton then appointed a Committee of Arrangements (made up of Illinois citizens) to determine the transportation of President Lincoln’s remains from Washington, D.C., to their final resting place.

Distraught, Mary Todd Lincoln also turned to Stanton and the nation for her husband’s burial. Her only request was that Willie Lincoln, who had died in the White House in 1862, at the age of 12, be disinterred and make the trip home with his father and be buried beside him.

George Harrington, assistant secretary of the Treasury, was in charge of the funeral preparations, commencing with the building of the catafalque—a raised platform on which a deceased person lies in state. In disregard to expense, Commissioner of Public Buildings Benjamin B. French designed the catafalque and erected it in the East Room of the White House.

As foreshadowed in his dream, Lincoln lay in state in the East Room of the presidential mansion until the official funeral ceremony for family and government officials. Among those attending the service were the president’s personal cavalry escort; the leaders of the Northern Army and Navy—Lt. Gen. Ulysses S. Grant and Admiral David Farragut; members of the Cabinet and Supreme Court; President Johnson; and former Vice President Hannibal Hamlin. Mary Lincoln and Secretary of State William Seward, convalescing from an attempted assassination also on April 14, were absent.

At the conclusion of the April 19 funeral, Lincoln left the White House for the final time.

Simultaneously throughout the country, both North and South, 25 million mourners would hear sermons about Lincoln delivered by local ministers.

The Veteran Reserve Corps, composed of men who were no longer physically able to serve in front line positions, served as the

official pallbearers for Lincoln's coffin until it reached its final resting place. The soldiers lifted the flag-draped casket and placed it on a horse-drawn caisson. Arranged by Lincoln's confidant Ward Hill Lamon, the slain president's last procession was led by white horses and a detachment of United States Colored Troops. It proceeded up Pennsylvania Avenue to the Capitol "amidst the tolling bells and the firing of minute guns." A riderless horse followed the casket with boots reversed in the stirrups. This was the first presidential funeral to feature such a horse, and it came to symbolize a warrior who would never ride again. The coffin was carried up the steps of the Capitol, beneath the very spot where six weeks earlier Lincoln had delivered his notable and inspiring Second Inaugural Address. Upon arrival at the Capitol, a brief service was given. Then Lincoln belonged to the people. He was the first president to lie in state at the Rotunda.

On April 21, at 7 a.m., an honor guard escorted Lincoln's and Willie's coffins to the train station. At approximately 12:30 p.m., the nine-car train pulled out, never traveling above 20 miles per hour to lend dignity to the mournful journey to Springfield.



A New Nation: A crowd of soldiers and civilians, both black and white, lines Pennsylvania Avenue in Washington, D.C.,

to watch President Lincoln's casket pass. (Library of Congress)

Washington

On Friday, April 21, 1865, the Lincoln Special—as the train was known—draped in black garland and accompanied by an honor guard, left the Baltimore & Ohio Railroad depot in Washington, D.C., bound for Baltimore, 38 miles away. It was preceded by a pilot engine, to ensure the track was clear and to announce the arrival of Lincoln's train. Both engines had portraits of Lincoln attached to their cowcatchers.



Baltimore

At Baltimore, a steady rain fell as approximately 10,000 people paid their respects to Lincoln's body at the Merchant Exchange Building during a three-hour public viewing.



First Stop in the Keystone State: Lincoln's funeral train idles in the Pennsylvania Railroad station in Harrisburg. (MG-218, The General Photograph Collection/Courtesy of Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission, Pennsylvania State Archives)



The clerk's desk and the speaker's stand at the Pennsylvania state house are draped in black in preparation for the arrival of the president's coffin. (C. Burnite Picture History/Newscom)

Harrisburg

A violent thunderstorm canceled the funeral procession in the Pennsylvania capital on April 21, and Lincoln was carried to the state house for an evening viewing. A viewing also took place the next morning. About 25,000 people saw the coffin in Harrisburg, and a crowd of 40,000 watched the hearse carried back to the depot.



Declaration of Grief: Lincoln's horse-drawn casket could barely make its way from the train station to Independence Hall through the crowds that choked Philadelphia's Broad Street. (Library of Congress)

Philadelphia

More than 30,000 mourners viewed the president's body in the east wing of Independence Hall, where the Declaration of Independence had been signed. The first night's viewing was by invitation only, and as the special guests departed, mourners were already gathering for the public viewing. For some, the wait lasted up to five hours.



Sad Acceptance: Although a large portion of New York City's residents had Southern sympathies during the war, the banner and mourning decorations on City Hall show a public united in sorrow. (Courtesy of the

George Eastman Museum, Gift of Frederick Hill Merserve)

New York City

The clock at the train station in Jersey City, N.J., had been stopped at 7:20 a.m.—the approximate time of Lincoln’s death—but the train arrived on schedule at 10 a.m. Monday, April 24. The coffin was transported by ferry across the Hudson River to New York City and brought to City Hall. Viewing began at 1 p.m., and more than 50,000 people lined up to catch a glimpse of Lincoln’s remains. For four hours the next afternoon, 16 horses pulled a majestic 14-foot-long car carrying the coffin through the streets, as 75,000 citizens marched solemnly behind. Windows along the route were rented for viewing at up to \$100 a person, and 6-year-old Theodore Roosevelt watched with his grandfather from one of those windows near Union Square.



Another Viewing Ends: Mourners endured a hot sun—and, as in many other cities along the route, gangs of aggressive pickpockets—as six horses pulled Lincoln’s body back to Buffalo’s train station. (Picture History/Newscom)

Albany

As the train made its way up the Hudson River Valley to Albany, 141 miles from New York City, torches and lanterns lighted the train tracks. Entire populations of small towns gathered, no matter what the hour, to say goodbye and sing to their beloved president as his train rolled past. After arriving in Albany, the coffin was moved to the state house for public viewing, where locals offered their last respects. The next morning, newspapers brought word that assassin John Wilkes Booth had been tracked down and killed on April 26.

Buffalo

In Buffalo, the coffin was transported to St. James Hall on a catafalque drawn by six white horses in black harnesses. Former President Millard Fillmore and future President Grover Cleveland were among 100,000 mourners to file past the coffin. Unlike the previous stops, no formal procession took place since the city had already conducted a mock funeral and procession on April 19, not then knowing Buffalo was to be a scheduled stop.

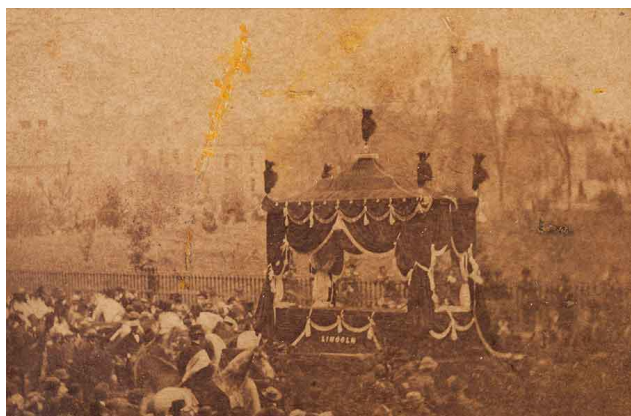


Six White Horses: The image above of Lincoln’s coffin in Cleveland’s Monument Square provides a good view of the six handsome horses with black harnesses that pulled Lincoln’s coffin in most of the cities

along the route. Cleveland had the pavilion built expressly to help residents pay their respects to Lincoln. (From the Lincoln Financial Foundation Collection, Courtesy of the Allen County Public Library and Indiana State Museum)

Cleveland

When Lincoln's coffin arrived in Cleveland on April 28, it had been a full week since the Lincoln Special had bid farewell to Washington. It was carried from the Euclid Street Station to Public Square, and the outdoor venue allowed Cleveland's leaders to erect a viewing pavilion. Despite torrents of rain, 180 mourners per minute filed past President Lincoln's body. A visitor who had attended every funeral thus far claimed that the one in Cleveland was "by far the most magnificent." Much like the small towns on the way to Albany, those across Ohio also presented heartfelt and poignant scenes. Recalled one newspaper account: "The flow of bonfires, torches and lanterns was common...people turned out en masse...heads uncovered and with saddened faces, gazing with awe upon the train...most of the coach and sleeping car lamps were extinguished, but the funeral car was fully lit...piercing the night as it passed by."



Unique Tributes: At Columbus, the usual throngs greeted Lincoln's casket. (Picture History/Newscom)



The city's catafalque was unique, however, and battle flags were added to the typical black drape that decorated City Hall. (Heritage Auctions, Dallas)



Heavy Traffic: In Indianapolis, an estimated 155 people per minute passed by Lincoln's casket during the public viewing period. (From the Lincoln Financial Foundation Collection, Courtesy of the Allen County Public Library and Indiana State Museum)

Columbus

In Columbus, the train pulled in promptly at 7:30 a.m. on Saturday, April 29. As was now customary, the coffin was taken off the train for a procession and public viewing. The viewing in Columbus was at the rotunda

inside the state capitol. The catafalque differed from all the others on the journey in that it lacked both columns and a canopy. Instead of lying in black velvet, it sank into a bed of flowers and low moss. In addition, carpet covered the floor to deaden the “shuffling and clicking of leather shoes.” By evening, the train had departed Ohio, headed for Indianapolis.

Indianapolis

Torrential rain doused the Lincoln Special upon its arrival in Indianapolis, forcing government officials to cancel a scheduled procession and devote the entire day of April 30 to a viewing at the Indiana State House. Late in the evening the train left for Chicago.



‘A Martyr for Justice’: On May 1, Lincoln’s hearse, accompanied by a procession of “young ladies in white,” passed beneath an arch across Chicago’s 12th Street. Among tributes on the arch were “First in Peace,” “Noble Soul,” and “A Martyr for Justice.” (Library of Congress)

Chicago

On May 18, 1860, Lincoln was in Chicago when he won the nomination for president. When his body returned nearly five years later, Chicago’s farewell was comparable in

size, length, and grandeur to New York City’s. The procession along packed streets wove around Chicago’s most prominent buildings, arriving at the courthouse four hours later. At 6 p.m. the doors were opened to the public for viewing throughout the night and the following day. Approximately 7,000 people passed by the coffin per hour. At 8 p.m., by the light of 3,000 torches, eight black horses drew the hearse back to the depot.



Back Home: The funeral procession in Springfield passed by Lincoln’s home, where friends and associates of the family were paying their respects. (Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library & Museum)



(Library of Congress)

Springfield

On May 4, the nation’s 16th president would finally be laid to rest in his beloved hometown. The previous day, he had lain in

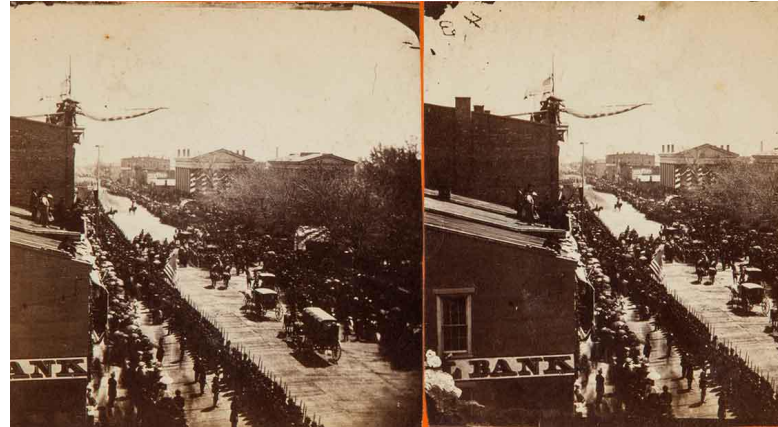
state in the same state house room where he had recited his immortal “House Divided” speech in June 1858. Shortly before 10 a.m., the doors were opened for public viewing. Others gathered at the president’s home, where his horse, Old Bob, and his dog, Fido, had been brought from Washington.



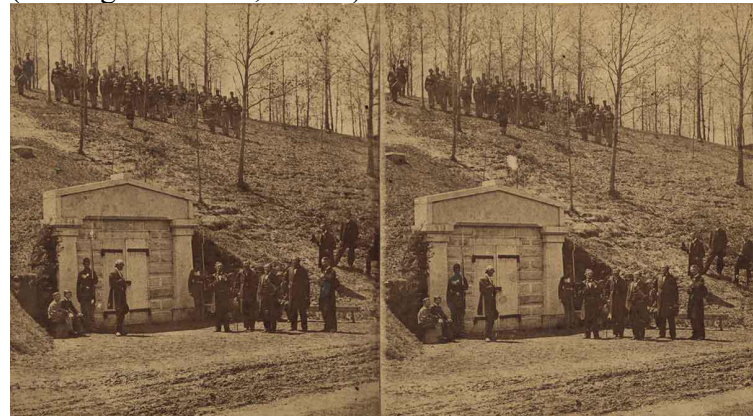
(Library of Congress)

For the funeral, the city of St. Louis lent Springfield the exquisite hearse (above), finished in gold, silver, and crystal. Major General Joseph Hooker led the final procession to Oak Ridge Cemetery, where Lincoln’s coffin would be placed on a marble slab inside the tomb, along with that of his deceased son Willie.

Lincoln’s eldest son, Robert, and his cousin John Hanks represented the president’s family. (Mary, back in Washington, D.C., was still too distraught to attend.) Bishop Simpson delivered an eloquent funeral address and the Rev. Dr. P.D. Gurley read the benediction. At the end of the service, the tomb’s iron gates and heavy wooden doors were locked, with Robert given the keys.



(Heritage Auctions, Dallas)



Solemn Tribute: Abraham Lincoln’s funeral train procession left Washington, D.C., on April 21, 1865, arriving on May 2 at its final destination of Springfield, Ill.—where Lincoln would be buried alongside his deceased son, Willie. The train, the so-called Lincoln Special, followed essentially in reverse the route that Lincoln had traveled in February 1861 from Springfield to Washington for his first inauguration. Included stops on the somber 1,700-mile-long trip home, were the capital cities of six of the seven states traversed. (From the Lincoln Financial Foundation Collection, Courtesy of the Allen County Public Library and Indiana State Museum)

“I am leaving you on an errand of national importance, attended, as you are aware, with considerable difficulties,” President-elect Abraham Lincoln told a zealous crowd on February 12, 1861, as he prepared to leave his adopted home state of Illinois by train,

en route to his first inauguration in Washington, D.C. “Let us believe, as some poet expressed it, ‘Behind the cloud the sun is shining still.’ I bid you an affectionate farewell.” For the next four years, Lincoln did all he could do to keep a fractured nation together, tormented that nearly 700,000 soldiers on both sides of the Mason-Dixon Line would die in the process. Lincoln would never return alive to Illinois or his hometown of Springfield, slain by an assassin’s bullet on April 15, 1865. Throughout the 11-day funeral procession by train back to Springfield, where Lincoln was to be buried, clouds and rain were a constant reminder of the occasion’s solemnity for hordes of mourners along the way. But behind those clouds and rain, the sun did shine. There was hope at least that the United States, once on the verge of being torn in two, could begin to heal.