



THE OLD LINER



This Building Hosted Lincoln's Inaugural Ball and Displayed the Declaration of Independence. Today, It's Home to Two World-Class Art Museums

The Old Patent Office Building now houses the Smithsonian American Art Museum and the National Portrait Gallery. A new exhibition spotlights the structure's rich history of encouraging innovation



A circa 1846 photo of the Patent Office Building Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division

Meilan Solly, Senior Associate Digital Editor, History, Smithsonian Magazine, June 25, 2026

On Valentine's Day in 1860, a Massachusetts woman named Henrietta Green Batty obtained a patent for an unusual invention: a "spring egg cup" that ejected the shell after the user finished eating a boiled egg. Outfitted with elastic springs, the device would enable diners to enjoy their breakfast "with unsoiled hands, with much greater convenience and without being exposed to the annoying heat of the egg,"

the 35-year-old mother of three wrote in her patent application.

To secure her patent, Batty provided a written description of the egg cup, paid a \$30 fee, and submitted both a drawing and a scale model of the device. Officials at the United States Patent Office then reviewed the application, issuing a letters patent that identified Batty as "the original and first inventor or discoverer of the said egg cup."

More than a century and a half later, Batty's letters patent is going on view in the same building where it was once issued. Located in downtown Washington, D.C., the Old Patent Office Building is now a historic landmark that houses two Smithsonian museums: the National Portrait Gallery (NPG) and the Smithsonian American Art Museum (SAAM). Batty's invention is a highlight of "The Spirit of Invention: Patent Office and Patentees," a new NPG exhibition that revisits the building's early history, with a focus on how the site fostered ingenuity in the still-young nation.



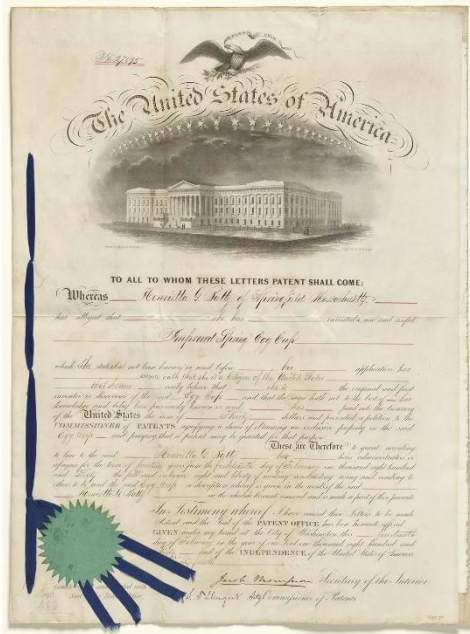
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Andrews, who developed dirigible airships in the 1860s.

Need to know: Abraham Lincoln's patent

- In March 1849, Lincoln—who had just left office as congressman representing Illinois—applied to patent a device for “buoying vessels over shoals” by attaching “adjustable buoyant air chambers” to the sides of a boat.
- The model that Lincoln commissioned to accompany his application is housed in the collections of the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History.



An 1860 letters patent for a "spring egg cup" NPG

“The ability to patent inventions has long been a catalyst for innovation in the United States,” curator Ann Shumard says in a statement. Without the protections afforded by patents, Shumard tells *Smithsonian* magazine, “you would not have had the incentive needed for individuals to produce inventions that would ultimately serve the public.”

“The Spirit of Invention” relays the story of American creativity through photographs, artworks and artifacts from the gallery’s collections. Andrew Jackson, the president who authorized the Patent Office Building’s construction in 1836, and Abraham Lincoln, the only U.S. president to hold a patent, are both represented by watercolor portraits. Also on view are daguerreotypes of 19th-century innovators, including Samuel Morse, inventor of the telegraph, and Solomon

In addition to these portraits, the exhibition features images that trace the Patent Office Building’s evolution. Built in stages between 1836 and 1867, the structure was influenced by the architecture of ancient Greece, a style that “was very much in vogue at the time,” Shumard says. Unlike the Romanesque U.S. Capitol, whose design evoked “the oligarchic republic of Cato and Cicero,” the Patent Office Building’s Parthenon-inspired layout “saluted the grassroots democracy of ancient Greece—a vision more in keeping with Jackson’s own political ideals,” historian Adam Goodheart wrote for *Smithsonian* in 2006.

Patent Office employees moved into the still-unfinished building’s south wing in 1840. Much of the rest of the structure housed “a perpetual exhibition of the progress and improvement of the arts” in the U.S., wrote Henry Ellsworth, the nation’s



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first commissioner of patents, in a letter that same year.

Across 63 display cases, the exhibition space showcased patent models, scientific specimens from the 1838 Wilkes Expedition to the Pacific Ocean, European art acquired by local collector John Varden, objects brought back from Japan by Commodore Matthew Perry and national treasures that would soon join the collections of the Smithsonian Institution, among other artifacts. The Declaration of Independence resided in the Patent Office Building for 35 years; the tent where George Washington planned his strategy during the American Revolution also made an appearance.

At the exhibition's height in the 1850s, more than 100,000 people visited annually, making the Patent Office Building one of the capital's most popular tourist attractions. The space "was not only a site where the Patent Office examiners were reviewing patent applications," Shumard says, but also, "in a sense, a museum. ... It was inspiring for people to be able to come and see tangible evidence of the inventiveness" of their fellow Americans.



Patent models on view in the Patent Office Building during the Civil War Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division

Clara Barton, founder of the American Red Cross, worked as a Patent Office clerk during this pivotal era in the federal agency's history. Hired in 1854, she received a salary of \$1,400 a year, making her "the first woman ever to be hired to a regular position in the U.S. government with work and wages equal to that of a man," former patent examiner Kenneth W. Dobyns writes in *The Patent Office Pony*.

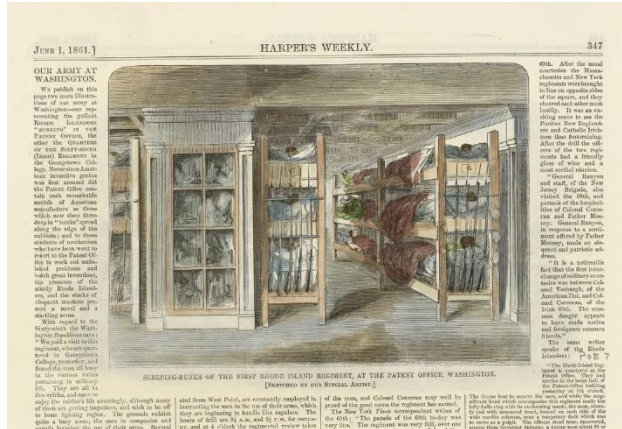
Barton's male colleagues bullied her relentlessly, blowing smoke from their cigars into her face and spitting tobacco juice at her. Despite this harassment, Barton remained unfazed, telling a friend that "any blow that they could slanderously aim at me in *these* days would make about as much impression upon me a[s] a slingshot would upon the hide of a shark."

During the Civil War, Barton balanced her duties as a temporary clerk (her full-time



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position was eliminated in 1857, but she was rehired on a part-time basis between 1860 and 1865) with her advocacy on behalf of wounded soldiers. Nicknamed the “angel of the battlefield,” Barton witnessed the brutal reality of war both on the front lines and at her place of employment.



An illustration of soldiers from the First Rhode Island Infantry Regiment sleeping in bunks in the Patent Office Building NPG

In 1861, members of the First Rhode Island Infantry Regiment were billeted in the Patent Office Building’s west wing. Later in the conflict, the building also served as a military hospital—a role that brought it to the attention of another famous figure, the poet and journalist Walt Whitman.

Like Barton, Whitman cared for sick and injured soldiers, playing games with the young men and reading to them aloud. As Whitman later wrote in [his diary](#), the hospital beds scattered among “ponderous glass cases crowded with models in miniature of every kind of utensil, machine or invention” made for a “strange, solemn and, with all its features of suffering and death, a sort of fascinating sight.”



Toward the end of the Civil War, the Patent Office Building hosted Lincoln’s [second inaugural ball](#)—“the single most dramatic historic event to take place” within its walls, [Charles J. Robertson](#), former deputy director of SAAM, writes in [Temple of Invention](#). Held just five and a half weeks before [Lincoln’s assassination](#) on April 14, 1865, [the ball](#) boasted an [extravagant menu](#) of oyster and terrapin stew, lobster, pheasant, quail, and cakes and tarts galore.

Some 4,000 people attended the celebration, but for at least one guest, it served mainly as a reminder of the war’s toll. “Tonight, beautiful women, perfumes, the violins’ sweetness, the polka and the waltz,”

Whitman wrote for the [New York Times](#), “but then, the amputation, the blue face, the groan, the glassy eye of the dying, the clotted rag, the odor of the old wounds and blood, and many a mother’s son amid strangers, passing away untended.”



An 1869 engraving of Patent Office examiners at work NPG

After the war’s end, the Patent Office received an influx of applications. In 1867



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alone, examiners issued 13,015 patents—far more than the 10,000 the office had issued over the first 46 years of its existence, between 1790 and 1836. An 1869 engraving on view in “The Spirit of Invention” testifies to this period of immense productivity, showing some of the Patent Office’s roughly 320 employees combing through drawers as they evaluate the surge in submissions.

The Patent Office had moved to the new building in the aftermath of a December 1836 fire at its former home, Blodgett’s Hotel. The inferno destroyed the specifications and scale models for nearly 10,000 patents. Months prior, Jackson had unwittingly anticipated the tragedy when he authorized the construction of a new purpose-built, “fireproof building.” To meet this requirement, architect Robert Mills, whose portrait is featured in the exhibition, “devised an innovative system of masonry vaulting that elegantly spanned interior spaces without the aid of wood or iron,” Goodheart wrote in 2006.

Thomas U. Walter, the architect who succeeded Mills as head of the building project in 1851, strongly criticized this approach, implementing his own system of iron-reinforced vaulting in the north and west wings. Ultimately, however, Mills’ system proved to be most effective.



A circa 1851 daguerreotype of architect Robert Mills and his wife, Elizabeth Barnwell Smith Mills NPG

When a blaze broke out in the building on September 24, 1877, the flames engulfed the roofs and ceilings of Walter’s wings, which collapsed into the exhibition halls below. Mills’ south and east wings escaped largely unscathed, but Walter’s “were severely damaged and had to be basically gutted and rebuilt,” Shumard says.

Although the financial losses inflicted by the 1877 fire were significantly higher than those associated with the 1836 inferno, “the information loss was only partial,” Dobyns writes in *The Patent Office Pony*. Some drawings and models were destroyed, but these inventions could still be reconstructed from their original written descriptions. “No patents were totally lost,” according to Dobyns.

The Patent Office remained in its historic home until 1932, when the agency



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moved into the Department of Commerce's newly constructed headquarters. The Civil Service Commission assumed control of the building, subjecting this "noble edifice" to "abuses and 'modernization,'" as Robertson puts it in *Temple of Invention*.

Workers installed fluorescent lighting, laid linoleum over the marble floors and painted the walls "institutional green." When the commission vacated the site in 1953, a congressman suggested razing the building. His proposed replacement? "That great monument of the American 1950s: a parking lot," Marc Pachter, then-director of the Portrait Gallery, told *Smithsonian* in 2006.



An 1862 tintype of inventor Thaddeus S.C. Lowe NPG

Luckily, President Dwight D. Eisenhower intervened. The effort to save the structure was "an early example of the push for historic preservation, which was really just beginning in the mid-1950s," Shumard says. From there, Congress transferred possession of the building to the Smithsonian, which opened its dual art museums in 1968, after extensive



renovations. (A third exhibition space, the Archives of American Art's Lawrence A. Fleischman Gallery, debuted on the building's first floor in 2006.)

Fifty-eight years after SAAM (then known as the National Collection of Fine Arts) and NPG first welcomed visitors, "The Spirit of Invention" invites the public to reconsider the structure's storied place in American history. From a portrait of Seth Boyden, an inventor who perfected the process for crafting malleable cast iron, to a photograph of Peter Cooper, whose work as a glue manufacturer inadvertently gave rise to the sweet treat Jell-O, the exhibition underscores the Patent Office Building's role in fostering innovation across the centuries.

"At every stage of its development, this was intended to be a building of the future," Pachter told *Smithsonian* in 2006. "It was meant to be organic, optimistic, exuberant."

"The Spirit of Invention: Patent Office and Patentees" is on view at the Smithsonian's National Portrait Gallery from June 26, 2026, to June 6, 2027.

Editor's note, June 25, 2026: This article has been updated to clarify the extent of the damage inflicted by the 1877 fire.

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America at 250: The Revolutionary Spark
A Smithsonian magazine special report
At a Pivotal Moment of the Civil War, Frederick Douglass Delivered a Speech That Reframed What Was at Stake if Slavery Stood



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In “The Mission of the War,” America’s incomparable orator helped turn public sentiment in favor of the Union and Abraham Lincoln, beginning the process of “national regeneration”

David W. Blight, Illustration by Sam Green, Smithsonian Mag., Summer 2026



Illustration by Sam Green

In the cold early months of the election year 1864, the abolitionist Frederick Douglass wrote a speech called “The Mission of the War” and took it on the road, delivering it dozens of times in towns and churches to which he’d been invited across the Northern states. The speech was one of Douglass’ rhetorical masterpieces in a 50-year career as perhaps America’s pre-eminent orator. In this pivotal moment of the Civil War, Douglass crafted a work that served several purposes. A partisan election campaign address on behalf of Abraham Lincoln and a war propaganda speech to boost Northern morale, it was also a bid to redefine the conflict. The speech forcefully called for an “abolition war” that would transform the country forever, insisting that moral ends transcended policy imperatives. And finally, it offered a Bible-inspired, apocalyptic vision of history as sometimes

requiring violent rendings and regenerations. For Douglass, all was at stake in 1864: whether the American experiment would survive and—even more crucial—whether and how slavery would truly be destroyed and a new country forged from its ashes.

Douglass performed his “Mission” speech in the vein of Jeremiah, the Hebrew prophet he most closely emulated. Douglass heeded God’s admonition to Jeremiah: “I have this day set thee over the nations and over the kingdoms, to root out and to pull down ... to build, and to plant.” According to Douglass, the Civil War was a “potent teacher,” its “lessons” written in “characters of blood.” For the former slave, the struggle was a holy war, a fight against “naked barbarism” on behalf of a “nobler and grander” cause than the world had ever seen. Raining down poignant metaphors and flowing refrains, Douglass personified “slavery” 14 times in one paragraph and warned against a “slaveholding peace” and against complacency in the coming election. “Let but the little finger of slavery get back into this Union,” he declared, “and in one year you shall see its whole body again upon our backs.”

The speech appealed to his listeners’ moral hearts. It also marked a new political role for Douglass. No longer casting himself as a reformer or the mere voice of conscience, he was now a radical patriot arguing for revolution. “The most hopeful fact of the hour,” Douglass announced, “is that we are now in a salutary school—the school of affliction. If sharp and signal retribution,



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long-protracted, wide-sweeping and overwhelming, can teach a great nation respect for the long-despised claims of justice, surely we shall be taught now and for all time to come.” This was history presented as bloody, bitter instruction—an unfolding tragedy, in which catharsis, Douglass said, offered real hope.

That winter and summer, neither side was assured victory, and the loss of life had reached a scale no one had foreseen. Lincoln stood for re-election to the presidency in what was the first-ever general election conducted by a republic during a civil war. He would be opposed by the Democrat George B. McClellan, the former commanding general whom Lincoln had fired in great controversy after the Battle of Antietam in 1862. Since his Emancipation Proclamation of January 1, 1863, Lincoln and the Republicans had been stamped by Democrats as the dangerous party of Black freedom and equality. Democrats ran the most racist campaign on record to that time. They called Lincoln “Abraham Africanus I” and even invented the word “miscegenation” to argue that electing Republicans would, somehow, codify forced interracial marriage.

That August, Lincoln invited Douglass to the White House. The president needed the most important African American leader on his side at a moment of dire crisis, when he believed he might lose the election. He asked the radical abolitionist if he should back away from the emancipation policy in response to Northern public opinion, to

which Douglass, as Lincoln expected, delivered an emphatic “No!” Astonishingly, Lincoln also asked Douglass to organize an effort to funnel as many slaves as possible out of the upper South before Election Day in November, in case McClellan and the Democrats won, thwarting emancipation forever.

Douglass returned to his home in Rochester, New York, and began to recruit agents for the border state liberation scheme. But he was, in effect, saved by events. On September 2, just days after the Democratic National Convention in Chicago nominated McClellan, news spread across the country that Atlanta had fallen to General William Tecumseh Sherman after a long siege. Confederates’ rising hopes plummeted, and many war-weary Northerners suddenly saw victory on the horizon. With morale boosted, Lincoln was re-elected with 55 percent of the popular vote, and the policy of emancipation was reaffirmed even by Union troops, who, in a massive and unprecedented “soldier vote,” cast 76 percent of their ballots for the Republican. The school of affliction, though, was hardly over. The war still had to be prosecuted to its haunting end, and the long and turbulent aftermath of Reconstruction lay ahead.

In his extraordinary speech, which undoubtedly helped turn public sentiment, Douglass had announced that the “mission of this war is national regeneration.” The address ended with a peroration that prefigured Martin Luther King Jr.’s in his “I Have a Dream” speech 99 years later. If



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remaking the United States on the doctrine of equality before the law could be “accomplished,” Douglass proclaimed, “our glory as a nation will be complete, our peace will flow like a river, and our foundations will be the everlasting rocks.”

Did you know? Frederick Douglass' sons fought for the Union

- After Douglass campaigned for Black enlistment in the Union Army, helping recruit Black troops, two of his sons, Lewis Henry and Charles Remond, served in Massachusetts' 54th Infantry Regiment.
- Lewis became a sergeant major and was wounded in the Second Battle of Fort Wagner, less than six months before Douglass debuted his “Mission of the War” speech.
- The widely publicized bravery of the 54th Massachusetts Infantry Regiment served Douglass and others as a powerful proof of the courage and resourcefulness of Black soldiers, and Douglass drew on this credibility as he argued for the fuller integration of non-white enlistees.
- A third son, Frederick Jr., helped his father recruit Black soldiers.

Feats That Fostered Freedom for All

Bold, inventive abolitionists changed minds and saved families by organizing
by Taryn White



Wikipedia; Library and Archives Canada / C-029977; LOC

William Still

Born in 1821, Still inherited abolitionism from his parents. In 1844, he moved to Philadelphia and eventually began working at the Pennsylvania Anti-Slavery Society. As chairman of the Vigilance Committee, he assisted hundreds of freedom seekers—raising funds, coordinating journeys—and helped finance several of Harriet Tubman's missions to the South. He recorded stories from nearly 1,000 of those he'd aided, helping families find loved ones. (Still found his own long-lost brother when the latter visited the society after buying his own freedom.) He shared his records in 1872's *The Underground Railroad*, still a vital resource for historians.

Mary Ann Shadd Cary

A pioneering figure in education, law and civil rights, Cary was born in Wilmington, Delaware, in 1823 and founded multiple schools to advance Black education. After the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, Cary moved to Canada. She was the first Black woman in North America to edit and publish a newspaper, the *Provincial*



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Freeman. She returned to the United States after the start of the Civil War to recruit Black soldiers for the Union Army. In 1869, she enrolled in Howard University and later became one of the first Black women in the U.S. to earn a law degree.

Angelina Grimké Weld

Born in 1805, Weld grew up in Charleston, South Carolina; her parents were enslavers, and she witnessed the brutality of slavery up close. She moved to Philadelphia in 1829 and published “An Appeal to Christian Women of the South” in 1836, urging her readers to oppose slavery. Less than two years later, she became the first woman to speak before a legislative body in the U.S., presenting 20,000 antislavery petitions at the Massachusetts State House in Boston. In her powerful address, Weld drew on her family history: “I stand before you as a repentant slaveholder. ... I owe it to the suffering slave, and to the deluded master, to my country and the world, to do all that I can to overturn a system of complicated crimes.”

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Victory at Manassas! Prince William Digital Gateway Project Dead After Developer Drops Appeal **After several high-profile defeats in lower courts, developer QTS quietly drops its appeal in support of a massive data center campus adjacent to Manassas National Battlefield Park**

Jared Herr, American Battlefield Trust,
July 2, 2026

(Manassas, Va.) — In a major win for the Manassas Battlefield, and the wider historic preservation movement, the years-long fight to halt a colossal data center complex adjacent to Manassas National Battlefield Park has ended in victory. Data center developer QTS dropped its appeal to the Virginia Supreme Court, effectively ending the project threatening the historic landscape of Prince William County. The announcement comes just two days before America celebrates its 250th birthday, on July 4, 2026.



Manassas National Battlefield Park, Va. Buddy Secor

“This is a banner day for the historic preservation community. Our decision to fight an enormous and inappropriate data center project threatening one of America’s most hallowed historic places has been completely vindicated,” said American Battlefield Trust President David Duncan. “I am grateful for the stalwart determination of all who stood with us to ensure these deep-pocketed data center developers did not succeed with their plans to construct dozens of data centers next to a beloved national park and historic treasure.”



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The American Battlefield Trust, Oak Valley Homeowners Association and local residents filed lawsuits against Prince William County and the two data center developers, Compass and QTS, challenging the rushed and unlawful Board of Supervisors vote to make way for what would have been the largest data center complex in the world.

“Since they opted to appeal, we have known QTS was prolonging the inevitable,” said attorney Chap Petersen, who represents the Trust and local residents in the lawsuit. “Truth and accountability prevailed today, and I am incredibly proud of these clients for their perseverance these two and a half years.”

On March 31, the Virginia Court of Appeals unanimously agreed with a lower court that the county’s consideration of the data center rezonings was fundamentally flawed, voiding the rezonings. The Prince William County Board of Supervisors publicly withdrew its defense by a unanimous vote on April 14, just two weeks later, after squandering nearly \$2 million in taxpayer dollars for legal expenses to defend its actions. Compass also declined further appeal. Until today, QTS had opted to push forward with the lawsuit.



Manassas Battlefield by Rob Shenk | Data center image courtesy of Tim Aubry / Greenpeace

The Trust and its allies were supported by six leading national and regional conservation organizations with more than 1 million combined members and supporters through multiple *amicus curiae* briefs in favor of the lawsuits. Those briefs emphasized that the project “would inevitably lead to the irreversible and irreparable desecration of hallowed ground and the despoiling of the natural and cultural resources” in Prince William County.

While a new rezoning for the project could be pursued, Virginian communities that once embraced data centers have had a change of heart, now that impacts are better understood. The rising groundswell of opposition to these large-scale proposals has garnered local, national and international attention. A recent poll conducted by *The Washington Post* and George Mason University found that only 33% of Virginians would support a data center being built in their community, down from 69% as recently as 2023.



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Duncan also remarked: “Now that the Prince William Digital Gateway is no more, we look forward to working with the county, the preservation community, and local residents and landowners to find a conservation-friendly solution that will protect Manassas National Battlefield Park and other natural and cultural resources along the historic Pageland Lane corridor.”



Second Manassas Battlefield, Prince William County, Va. Melissa A. Winn

The Prince William Digital Gateway — with 37 proposed data center buildings, roughly the equivalent of 144 Walmart Supercenters — would have required 14 on-site electrical substations for operation. These data centers were expected to consume up to 9 gigawatts of electricity, enough to power over 2 million homes, and to stretch miles of high voltage transmission lines over the hallowed battlegrounds and the private homes of Prince William County.

Manassas National Battlefield Park commemorates two critical battles of the American Civil War, the Battles of First and Second Manassas (often referred to as First and Second Bull Run). Together, the two battles resulted in nearly 27,000 casualties.



While the presence of a national park demonstrates the significance of these battles, important historical events occurred beyond its modern boundaries, some of which were slated to be the site of the Prince William Digital Gateway. Additionally, the proposed complex threatens the remains of those who fell and were laid to rest in unknown, unmarked graves.

The American Battlefield Trust is dedicated to preserving America’s hallowed battlegrounds and educating the public about what happened there and why it matters today. The nonprofit, nonpartisan organization has protected more than 62,000 acres associated with the Revolutionary War, War of 1812 and Civil War across 160 sites in 25 states, including 387 acres at Manassas. Learn more at www.battlefields.org.

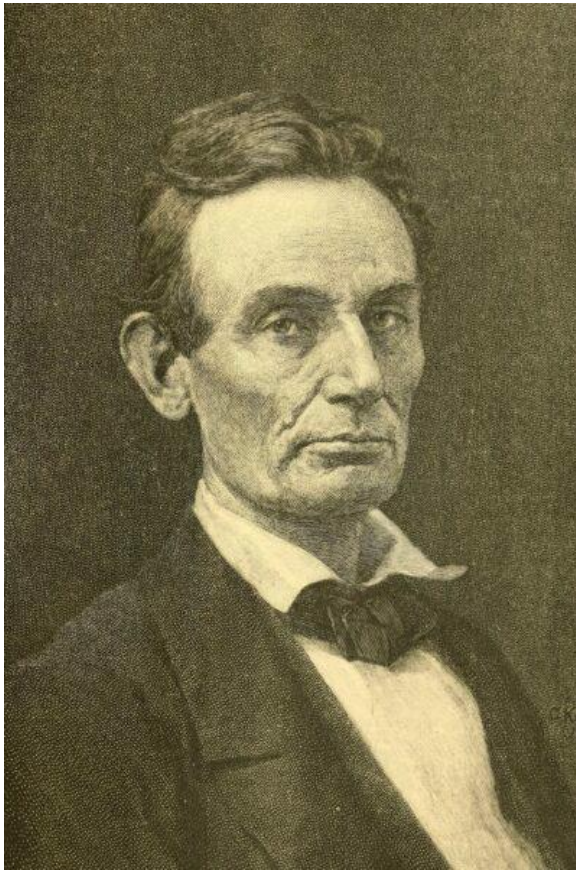
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Abraham Lincoln, Reluctant Revolutionary

BY: Aaron Sheehan-Dean,
Department:: America 250, Civil War
Monitor, Posted: 7/6/26



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Library of Congress Abraham Lincoln

Abraham Lincoln did not run for president of the United States to lead a revolution. Like many antebellum Americans, he believed the Founding Fathers had created something uniquely valuable in 1776, what he called “the last best hope of earth.” Nonetheless, in testing that proposition, the Civil War wrought a revolution in American governance. Using federal military power and extra-constitutional change, Lincoln’s presidency ended slavery in the country and inaugurated what historians now call the Second American Republic. While leading these transformations, Lincoln repeatedly invoked the founding era in his rhetoric. To borrow a concept from historian Gregory Downs, Lincoln “whitewashed” the Civil

War, concealing its radicalism by arguing that wartime changes renovated rather than replaced the democratic order created by the founders. Does it matter that Lincoln never intended to lead a second American revolution? I think it does. Lincoln’s reluctance was shared by a majority of white northerners and that helps explain why so many continuities persisted in American life despite the revolutionary changes wrought by the conflict.

Lincoln was not deliberately deceiving the public. He revered the “fathers” (as he called them) and his wartime speeches genuinely and persuasively connected the changes of the 1860s with those of the 1770s and ’80s. Lincoln’s most important effort in this respect came in the speech that many people use to identify the start of the Second Republic—the Gettysburg Address. The “new birth of freedom” that Lincoln promised on that cold November day in 1863 is today mostly interpreted as a deliberate shift in federal practice. No longer would the national government defer to states on the question of slavery (and much else besides) and in ending this most important institution it committed the United States to full civic freedom. Returning to the text, we see that Lincoln explained this new birth not as a radical departure from tradition but as a perfection of the original (First) American Republic. He began that most important speech by identifying the work of the founders to create “a new nation, conceived in liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.” That is to say, the original nation, which



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Lincoln dated to 1776 (“four score and seven years ago”), already contained the bedrock upon which the 13th Amendment would rest.



Boston Public Library William Lloyd Garrison

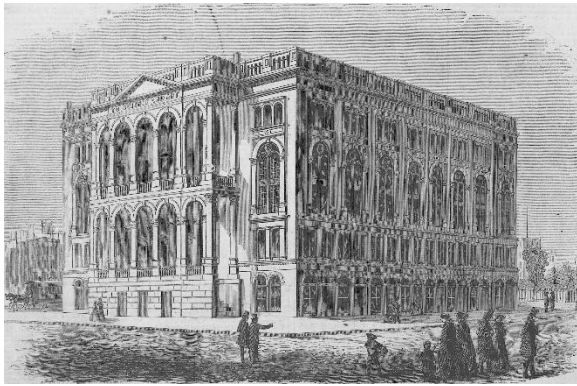
Many abolitionists had long contended that the First Republic, built on the constitution of 1789, was fatally compromised. William Lloyd Garrison, America’s leading white abolitionist, had publicly burned a copy of the U.S. Constitution in 1853, pronouncing it “a covenant with death, and an agreement with Hell.” Garrison regarded the original Constitution as fundamentally pro-slavery and beyond redemption because of that quality. As the war proceeded, abolitionists led the way in calling for a longer and more destructive war. They recognized the vulnerability of slavery to the expanded power of the federal government in wartime

and few worried about legal contradictions or inconsistencies. When Union general Benjamin Butler issued his famous “Contraband Order” in May 1861—in which escaped slaves were classified as “contraband of war,” thereby releasing the army from any requirement to return them to bondage per the terms of the Fugitive Slave Act—abolitionists applauded the move even though it was based on a legal acknowledgement of enslaved people as property. Lincoln allowed the order to stand, but he infuriated radicals in his party by moving slowly against slavery. In doing so, he followed his own definition of conservatism: “adherence to the old and tried, against the new and untried.”

Even before he took office and waded into the perils of commanding troops and negotiating the North’s fractious wartime politics, Lincoln showed his reverence for the Founding Fathers. In 1860, while vying for nomination as the Republican candidate for president, Lincoln delivered an address at New York’s Cooper Union. This was no casual speech. Lincoln spent months researching the founders and the founding and crafted one of his clearest expositions about the relationship between the American past and its perilous present.



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Harper's Weekly

New York's Cooper Union

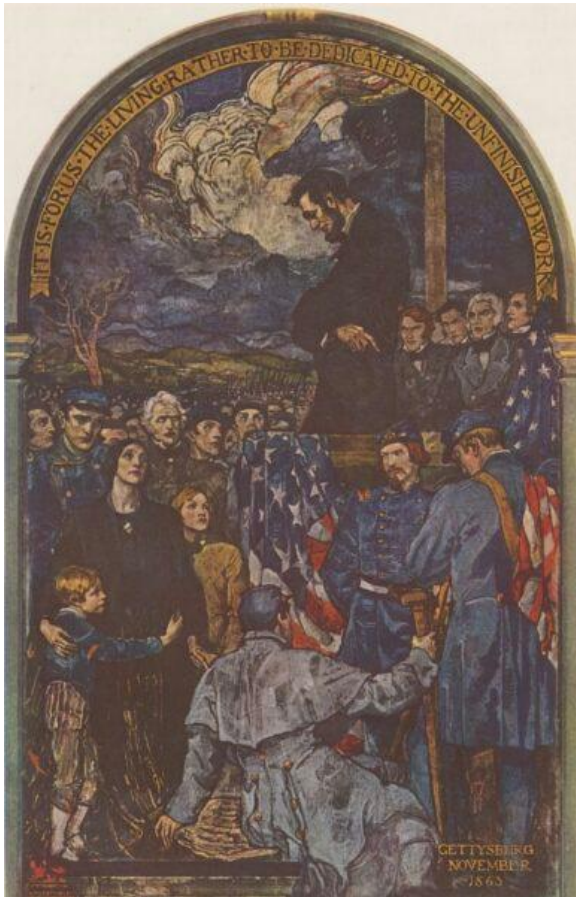
Lincoln's stated goal was to determine the attitudes of the 39 men who signed the Constitution in 1789 on the question of whether the federal government could regulate slavery in federal territories. He did this by identifying votes in support of the Northwest Ordinance cast on different versions of the law by the signers. Of these 39 men, 21 supported federal regulation of slavery in the territories. These 21 constitute what Lincoln called "a clear majority." The logic in this adjectival clause (repeated twice in his short speech) contains a crucial insight into Lincoln's understanding of the kind of government the founders had created: a majoritarian democracy. This was the process that Lincoln valued above all, even the specific outcomes created by the founders. Like other northerners, including his Illinois nemesis Stephen Douglas, Lincoln identified the defining nature of American democracy in its majoritarianism. Political minorities merited protection (Lincoln the Whig took this position most of his life), but a simple majority should determine policy and practice.

This faith in majoritarian democracy is what buttressed Lincoln's calm assessment of

America as a "house divided" in his famous 1858 speech to the Illinois Republican Convention after he had been nominated to run for Senate. Lincoln did not expect the nation to remain divided. The free population of the North (22 million people in 1860) outnumbered the free population of the South (5½ million) by a factor of four. Lincoln's patience to wait out the slow end of slavery reflected both his racial prejudice and his political conservatism. As a white man from a state that prohibited free people of color from settling in it, he could hold the human cost of decades more slavery at arm's length. Even with this fatal concession, Lincoln, like most Republicans, believed that by geographically curtailing slavery the whole system would eventually expire, in one famous abolitionist metaphor, like the trapped scorpion that would sting itself to death.



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Anne S.K. Brown Military Collection

A postwar depiction of Abraham Lincoln delivering the Gettysburg Address. Lincoln's faith in majoritarian democracy reemerged in the closing lines of the Gettysburg Address. He hoped that the Civil War would renew and revitalize a "government of the people, by the people, for the people." That government—the gift of the founders—already existed and proved strong enough to preserve the Union and end slavery. In Lincoln's optimistic gloss, the Civil War, by building on the work of the founders rather than replacing it, imperfectly expanded an already imperfect democracy. But Lincoln's prewar faith that slavery would end through established constitutional channels was misplaced. Instead, he

oversaw wartime emancipation and pressured a U.S. Congress with only northern representatives to pass the 13th Amendment. After his death, his successor, President Andrew Johnson, used military occupation to compel southern states to ratify the amendment, an outcome Lincoln could have foreseen. The final stages of this revolution came with the passage of the 14th and 15th Amendments to the Constitution and the reconstruction of southern state governments into biracial democracies. The extra-constitutional nature of this process was, as even Republicans acknowledged, a signal change in American practice. How did Lincoln square the reality of revolutionary change with his professed loyalty to the Founding Fathers' vision? For one thing, Lincoln did not regard the founders as infallible. In his Cooper Union speech, Lincoln clarified that his commitment to the ideas of the founders did not obligate him to all their conclusions. "I do not mean to say we are bound to follow implicitly in whatever our fathers did. To do so, would be to discard all the lights of current experience—to reject all progress—all improvement. What I do say is, that if we would supplant the opinions and policy of our fathers in any case, we should do so upon evidence so conclusive, and argument so clear, that even their great authority, fairly considered and weighed, cannot stand." The vigor with which Confederates fought to establish an independent slave republic provided the evidence and the argument for why Lincoln accepted the revolutionary changes of the conflict. In doing so, Lincoln violated his own preference to navigate by



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the wisdom of the founders, but by positioning himself in light of current experience and embracing progress and improvement he ensured a transition from the first to the Second American Republic. Today, in 2026, with 250 years of national life behind us, we can see both the continuities that Lincoln evoked and the discontinuities that the war created.

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The Andersonville Diary of Charles Wesley Homsher

Robert S. Davis | July 6, 2026 | Blue and Gray Education Society



Prisoners at Andersonville | NPS

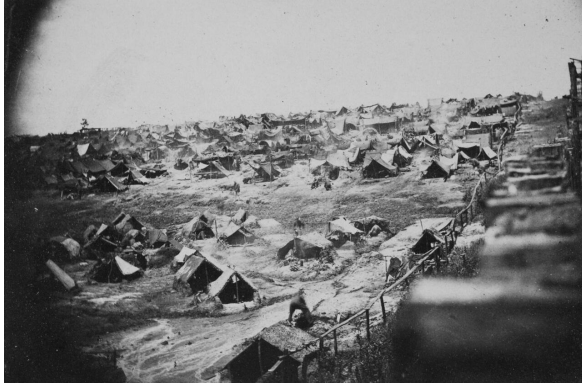
The 5th Indiana Cavalry (90th Indiana Infantry) met an inglorious end. Over the course of the Civil War, the regiment fought and campaigned hard in twenty-two engagements against such Confederate notables as John Morgan and Nathan Bedford Forrest. On July 30–31, 1864, during the Stoneman Raid in central Georgia, it was ordered to hold Sunshine Church at all costs against General Joseph Wheeler's cavalry.

Surrounded and cut off, the 5th Indiana was surrendered. The 440 men who did not escape were sent to the infamous Camp Sumter prison at Andersonville, Georgia. Although they were supposed to be exchanged in September, General William T. Sherman's failure to provide enough Confederate prisoners for exchange sent hundreds of them back to Andersonville instead.

Many diaries and memoirs survive from the Civil War prison experience, including that of Charles Wesley Homsher (February 27, 1839–September 23, 1893), a member of Company H, 5th Indiana Cavalry. Born in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, Homsher left behind a vivid account of captivity. Excerpts from his diary are preserved among the 3.6 million items in the collections of the U.S. Army Heritage and Education Center in Carlisle, Pennsylvania, whose holdings document the experiences of both Union and Confederate soldiers. A transcript is in the Library of Congress.



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Andersonville Prison during the Civil War | NPS

Homsher wrote that he and his fellow prisoners first marched four miles to confinement in a mule pen before being forced some twenty miles through the Clinton battlefield to Macon, surviving on whatever hardtack they had saved and ears of raw corn. In Macon, women lined the streets to jeer at the prisoners, while Confederate guards stripped them of anything valuable despite the terms of their surrender.

At Andersonville, Homsher wrote of getting by. The rations were insect-infested corn, meat, and peas, cooked in a makeshift pot fashioned from a piece of hammered tin and borrowed from a fellow prisoner. They robbed the dead of clothes, traded with the guards, and used the names of dead comrades to get extra rations.

Homsher and his comrades were later told they were finally being exchanged. Instead, they were transferred to Camp Lawton in Millen, Georgia, only to be sent back to Andersonville. When the war ended, they traveled by train to Savannah, then to Lake City, Florida. From there, they marched to

nearby Jacksonville, Florida, where Homsher wrote of receiving food, clothing, and soap before taking a bath in the St. Johns River. He was officially paroled on April 28, 1865. Survivors took a ship to Annapolis, Maryland, then to Camp Chase, Ohio, and finally home.

One in every four soldiers of the 5th Indiana Cavalry captured at Sunshine Church did not survive captivity.

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Confederates in Pennsylvania

Douglas R. Cubbison | June 29, 2026 | Blue and Gray Education Society



"Old West," a part of Dickinson College, Carlisle, Pennsylvania, between 1861 and 1874 | Library of Congress

Dickinson College, located in Carlisle, Pennsylvania, was chartered on September 9, 1783, making it the first college founded after the formation of the United States. It is one of three liberal arts colleges to have graduated both a U.S. president and a chief justice of the U.S. Supreme Court—President James Buchanan (Class of 1809) and Chief Justice Roger B. Taney (Class of 1795).



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As Confederate General Robert E. Lee and his Army of Northern Virginia approached their high-water mark in Pennsylvania during the summer of 1863, the lead corps of General Richard S. Ewell arrived at Carlisle, Cumberland County, Pennsylvania. Within the vanguard of the corps were soldiers from General George P. Doles's Georgia Brigade. These Confederates marched into Carlisle and camped at Dickinson College's West and East Halls, as well as on the college Green, from June 27 to June 29, 1863. West Hall became the brigade's hospital, and soldiers were also quartered in the college chapel. These Southern infantrymen moved on toward Harrisburg, but they would not be the last Confederates to visit Dickinson College.

Late in the afternoon of Wednesday, July 1, 1863, Confederate Major General J.E.B. Stuart and part of his cavalry corps, searching for Lee's army, approached Carlisle. By then, a full Federal militia brigade, commanded by General William F. Smith and supported by Pennsylvania and New York militia regiments, occupied the town.



West Hall, Dickinson College | Douglas R. Cubbison



West Hall, Dickinson College Chapel and Civil War Hospital, today's Memorial Hall | Douglas R. Cubbison



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Stuart sent an officer with a white flag, demanding that Smith either evacuate the town or remove the women and children. Smith replied that he had already done the latter and refused to surrender. Stuart then ordered an attack, and a significant skirmish ensued in downtown Carlisle from sunset to midnight, with Stuart's horse artillery firing from a ridge into town.

That night, Stuart broke off the action after learning of Lee's engagement several miles south of Carlisle. He quickly ordered his cavalry to ride for Gettysburg.

The skirmish resulted in two Confederates killed, 12 Federal wounded, and 20 civilians wounded. Once again, Dickinson College's West Hall became a hospital—this time for the Federals. Interestingly, among Stuart's cavalymen that day was the colonel of the 9th Virginia Cavalry, an 1838 graduate of Dickinson College.

Before the Civil War, the student body at Dickinson College was almost evenly divided between students from the North and South. In 1861, as the students chose sides, many signed a remembrance book and offered a few words to their classmates before parting ways.

There would be one more visit to Dickinson College by Confederate soldiers.

On July 4, a small detachment of Confederate cavalymen, traveling under a white flag, arrived carrying documents showing their paroles as prisoners captured

at Gettysburg and ordering them to Carlisle. After a miserable 32-mile march through mud and pouring rain with nothing to eat, they camped at Dickinson College's West and East Halls before being moved to Harrisburg shortly afterward. At about the same time, more than 1,000 Federal soldiers—many of them wounded during the July 1 fighting at Gettysburg—also arrived in Carlisle.

In 1929, the college renovated the chapel, redesigned it, and renamed it Memorial Hall. Today, Memorial Hall houses the Office of the Provost and is used for a variety of college functions and social events.

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