

"The Discourse We All Need So Seriously"

An Evening of Reflection at the Lincoln Cottage

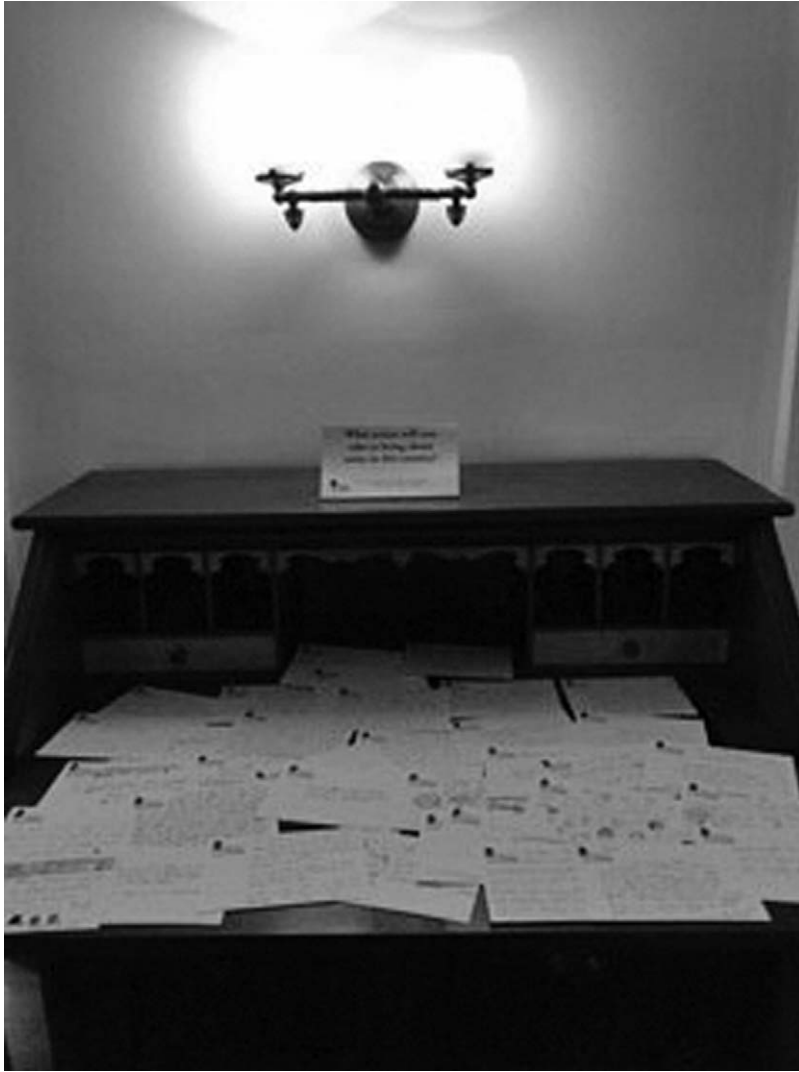
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ABSTRACT: On the evening after the 2016 presidential election, President Lincoln's Cottage, a historic site and museum in Washington, DC, opened its doors for an Evening of Reflection. The Cottage has made a habit of rapidly responding to issues facing its community, and the event on November 9 would not have been possible, nor would it have been successful, if not for years of community building and public outreach through exhibits, programs, and online engagement. As a result, when community members needed a place to which to turn in a time of national division, they came to the Cottage.

KEY WORDS: reflection, election, Abraham Lincoln, community, rapid-response programs

On November 9, 2016, President Lincoln's Cottage, a historic site and museum located in Northwest Washington, DC, kept its doors open late, its lights illuminating an otherwise dark and stormy night. The staff had decided to extend the Cottage's hours that evening so that community members could use this house as Lincoln had—as a place for peaceful reflection to figure out how to reunite a deeply divided country. In the months leading up to the 2016 presidential election, the Cottage staff had considered various ways to respond to community need—regardless of the outcome of the election. On the morning after the election, the team determined that leaving our lights on for those who needed a meaningful place to reflect on and consider their civic responsibilities was one way we could help foster unity in our divided nation. While this decision may seem reactionary or even a bit risky, our community did not view our opening the site for an Evening of Reflection the day after the election as a political statement, but as a natural outlet for expression. This event would neither have been possible nor successful if not for the trust we built in the communities we serve through exhibits, programs, and online engagement over eight years in operation. Responding to community needs has become a habit; when the 2016 campaign got heated, we were ready.

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Visitor comment cards on President Lincoln's desk. (Photo courtesy of President Lincoln's Cottage)

At President Lincoln's Cottage, a nonprofit organization on federal property and the only national monument in the country that does not receive federal operating support, the public can experience the history of Abraham Lincoln's public and private life in a place where he lived and worked for over a quarter of his presidency. While in residence at the Cottage, Lincoln visited with wounded soldiers, spent time with self-emancipated men, women, and children, and developed the Emancipation Proclamation. The human cost of the Civil War surrounded him, undoubtedly impacted his thinking, and strengthened his resolve to challenge the status quo. The Cottage served as a home for Lincoln, a retreat where he could develop his brave ideas. We believe the world still needs a home

for brave ideas and are committed to being that place. Today, our mission is to reveal the true Lincoln and continue the fight for freedom. Through innovative guided tours, exhibits, and programs, we use Lincoln's example to inspire visitors to find their own path to greatness. We preserve this place as an authentic, tangible connection to the past and a beacon of hope for all who take up Lincoln's unfinished work.

At President Lincoln's Cottage, we actively share authority with our visitors and partners by paying attention to the way they are impacted by contemporary issues and by doing what we can to respond to their needs. At the same time, we are not here to reinforce what people know, but to encourage them to think more deeply about the past and to apply its lessons to today. Failure to establish this community dialogue can lead to mixed reactions when responding to issues currently facing a community. Foundational to this approach is understanding who your community is. At President Lincoln's Cottage, we define our community in a number of different ways. Our immediate community is the Armed Forces Retirement Home and the approximately five hundred veterans who call the site home. Just outside the gates of this property, we are surrounded by neighbors who live in Petworth. In the nearly ten years since the Cottage has been open to the public, this neighborhood of Northwest Washington, DC, has transitioned into one of DC's most sought-after areas for singles and young families, due in large part to the affordability of real estate in the surrounding area. The Cottage also boasts a growing number of DC-area, national, and international visitors who participate in our programs either online or in person. Thus, our community is diverse, and so are our strategies for reaching them. We do not take a one-size-fits-all approach to programming, especially when it comes to rapidly responding to contemporary issues. Further, while some issues to which we have responded have universal impact, others do not touch each of our communities in the same way. Because our community is layered, diverse, and constantly changing, staying in sync with them is vitally important and requires constant care and attention.

The Cottage is and always has been a political site. It has been home to—or a refuge for—several sitting presidents; Abraham Lincoln ran for political office while living here. It also has served as a gathering place where their political allies and adversaries debated the contentious issues that have divided our nation. This part of the site's history is something that the Cottage has embraced through guided tours and programming from the very beginning. In fact, one of the earliest education programs we developed was *Running for Reelection*, an interactive program that examined Abraham Lincoln's bid for reelection in 1864 through multiple perspectives. When former President Barack Obama ran for reelection in 2012, the Cottage offered a special tour and guided experience that encouraged visitors to think critically about the United States' civic process and apply the lessons of the past to the challenges facing our nation at that moment in time. Our community has come to see us as a resource and, in time of political uncertainty, looks to us to help them understand the historical parallels to our current situation. As a result,

the lead-up to the 2016 election provided us yet another opportunity to engage audiences in political conversations using Lincoln's own words.

These conversations in the months prior to the election set the groundwork for our November 9 open house, though we had yet to realize that we would need to open our doors that evening. Beginning in the summer of 2016, we partnered with DC Improv on a three-part comedy series held in the Drawing Room of the Cottage. This partnership drew on an existing relationship with the comedy club, which had previously interviewed the Cottage's executive director, Erin Carlson Mast, for its podcast series on the funniest presidents. DC Improv's creative marketing director, Chris White, is a firm believer that Lincoln was the funniest president and welcomed an opportunity to explore that further through unique programming. The series addressed themes such as immigration and racism and came out of a collectively expressed need for laughter during a very tense campaign season. The program was tied to Lincoln's well-documented consumption of satire and appreciation of the medium as both a pressure release and source of searing commentary. Cottage staff felt very strongly that we should not censor the comedians, so the series was not without criticisms, in spite of warnings and disclaimers about offensive language. And yet, some of the most critical guests came back for the next two installments of the series. Overall, guests viewed the program as innovative and responsive to a community need.

In September 2016, we responded to the overarching distrust of "otherness" that seemed to permeate our society. During our annual Family Day program—which draws hundreds of community families to the site each year—the Cottage hosted UNITY, an interactive public art project designed in response to the negativity displayed in contemporary American politics to promote the common threads that unite us all. UNITY is made up of thirty-two posts, each of which displays a label or identifier such as "I'm a veteran," "I'm homeless," or "I identify as LGBTQ." Participants are invited to take a spool of yarn attached to a center post and wind the yarn around any of the thirty-two posts with which they identify. During Family Day, hundreds of adults and children from our surrounding community created an extraordinary web that underscored our interconnectedness. During a time when so much of the political rhetoric was centered on that which divides us as a people, this was a stunning reminder of all the ways we can come together.

One unique aspect of the way Americans have remembered Abraham Lincoln is that members of both major political parties claim him as their own. During the bitter campaign season, Cottage staff noticed an uptick in references made to Lincoln and the Civil War by politicians, journalists, and on the Internet. Some of these references were based in fact, while others were bent to meet the specific agenda of the group disseminating it. The Cottage leveraged its social media platforms, which are an extension of our on-site programming, to share factual references to Lincoln that were directly connected to the particular rhetoric of the moment. We launched a marketing campaign via Facebook and Twitter to share Lincoln's own words—void of bias. Each post was created to be easily shareable



President Lincoln's Cottage. (Photo courtesy of President Lincoln's Cottage)

and consisted of a quote regarding elections or the democratic process, including, for example:

May our children and our children's children to a thousand generations,
continue to enjoy the benefits conferred upon us by a united country.

The ballot is stronger than the bullet.

Now that the election is over, may not all, having a common interest, reunite
in a common effort, to save our common country.

In addition to the quotes, we included the President Lincoln's Cottage logo and two hashtags: #LincolnWisdom and #Electionday2016. For a relatively small site, this campaign had a big impact and reached thousands of people.

On November 9, 2016, we recognized our community needed something else entirely, and because we had spent months, even years, laying the groundwork, we were confident that the Cottage could provide the place for the quiet or the conversation they were looking for. Weeks before Election Day, Cottage staff began talking about how we might commemorate the result of the election, no matter the outcome. With careful consideration, we determined that we could ready ourselves by establishing a framework for the type of program we thought would be valuable,

but that we could not make a final decision until we knew how the community would respond to the election results. We decided to take those remaining weeks and listen to their questions, pay attention to local blogs, and talk to visitors to the site about how they were feeling before determining the type of program we would do. The uncertainty of what we might offer was both frightening and freeing—frightening because we are so accustomed to planning and promoting programs well in advance and always have a good sense of who will attend, but freeing because we knew we were making our best effort to directly respond to a community need in real time. After listening, reading, and observing what our community and our staff needed, we decided to keep the Cottage open late for several hours to be available to the public as a place of secular, nonpartisan reflection, a place to gather peacefully and reflect quietly on what we can do to bring about greater unity in this country. Staff mobilized quickly the morning after the election to get a message out across our social media platforms, which once again used Lincoln’s words to provide context for the evening. Our messaging stated:

We recognize that people are expressing a need to come together, peacefully, when we are a House Divided. As a National Monument, where Lincoln came to deal with epic division and chaos in our country, we are committed to providing a secular place of reflection and serving as your beacon of hope. Our lights are on for you. All of you.

This message spread quickly across social media and caught the attention of local and national media outlets. A leading local blog featured our Evening of Reflection alongside two prominent organizations in the city, both places of worship that also planned to remain open that evening. The Cottage was listed as the “secular” place for reflection. What was perhaps a bit surprising was the response of a major news outlet that reached out for comments about the program from our executive director but then indicated it would not include our event in the piece it was writing when it learned we planned to host a program regardless of the outcome of the election. Its interest was primarily in seeing how organizations were protesting the election results; because we demonstrated that our event was an empathetic response versus a reaction or a new strategy, we didn’t meet the criteria of the piece.

The program itself was simple in its design and execution but, as we learned from visitors who attended, extraordinarily rich in meaning. Staff took very seriously the symbolism of being a beacon of hope, and so, in driving rain, we illuminated the front walk to the Cottage with dozens of lanterns. We provided hot cider and cookies to help make people feel comfortable in that setting, and to guide conversation, we projected the same Lincoln quotes we used as part of our virtual marketing campaign in rooms throughout the house. We had staff and a few community members on hand to offer informal facilitated reflection if that was desired, but primarily we left visitors to use the space as they needed to. As a culminating exercise, we invited guests to respond to a single question and leave

their responses on the desk in the room where Abraham Lincoln developed his ideas around the Emancipation Proclamation. Visitors' responses to the question "What action will you take to bring about unity in this country?" were both urgent and insightful and included the following reflections:

Love locally. I may not have a national stage but I have a voice among my friends and those around me. I'll make a difference where I stand.

To make this country safer for all who seek to call it home.

I will continue to work to bring diverse people together, to humanize one to the other, to find shared values, and work to understand each other's needs.

It's important to reflect on the inequities on all sides, perceived and experienced, that have led us as a nation to this point in our history.

I will be a bridge-builder.

In the end, on short notice and in pouring rain, well over one hundred adults and children, neighbors, loyal Cottage followers, and people who had never visited the site before came together to process, to reflect, and to act. Although it's unsurprising that some online followers who are less familiar with our work saw this as a partisan political move, those who participated were quick to dispel that notion. Perhaps the most poignant note we received after the event was from a DC public school teacher who wrote, "I spent the morning comforting my students, whose futures in this country are uncertain. I am deeply grateful to have had those moments last night at the Cottage with a warm cup of cider. Thank you for opening this home for us and allowing for the discourse we all need so seriously."

Museums and historic sites are known for many things—but empathetic, rapid response to pressing issues facing our communities does not typically top the list. In a field that springs into action at the slightest threat to its collections, why have historic sites determined that it is okay to ignore one of their greatest assets—the people they serve—during moments of local or national uncertainty? Are sites too mired in the exhibit or program planning process that we cannot allow ourselves to deviate from it? Do sites not have the right people on our boards to support our organizations in this type of decision? Or, are sites so afraid of failing that they just do not try? As an organization that has embraced this type of response as critical to its mission, President Lincoln's Cottage demonstrates that there are answers to these questions—it just takes time and effort to cultivate the trust necessary to respond to them effectively. Our efforts were grounded in years of community building and public outreach, all of which gave us the ability to sense when our community needed to laugh, needed to cry, or just needed a moment. The community trusted us to be that place of reflection and hope because we had spent years nurturing that trust and inspiration.

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Callie Hawkins is the director of programming at President Lincoln's Cottage in Washington, DC. A staff member since 2009, Callie is responsible for strengthening the organizations' programmatic impact through the development of nationally recognized initiatives including tours, exhibits, student and teacher offerings, and programs for the general public. Callie has spearheaded projects that won national and international recognition, including awards from the American Association for State and Local History, American Alliance of Museums, and the 2016 Presidential Award for Extraordinary Efforts to Combat Trafficking in Persons for Students Opposing Slavery, a youth education program for high school students dedicated to raising awareness about modern slavery. Callie has a BA in English from Clemson University and an MA in American studies from the College of William and Mary.