

SCULPTURE AND PUBLIC HISTORY:

My Summer With Lincoln

by James A. Percoco

History Teacher, West Springfield High School
Fairfax County, Virginia

This story began many years ago when I was a young child. At that time my family lived in Silver Spring, Maryland and we used to make numerous excursions to the National Mall in Washington, D.C. (a two-mile stretch of green space and associated national memorials between the U.S. Capitol Building and the Lincoln Memorial and considered by most to be the most sacred soil of the country). I have some vivid memories of those jaunts and I think that the Mall was, in a way, one of my childhood playgrounds. But there is one visit that stands out among all the others. One summer night in the early 1960s my family went to hear the United States Marine Band play along the banks of the Potomac River. In my mind's eye, I can still see the water shimmering on the Potomac and remember the white outdoor shell under which the band played. As part of that evening we visited **Daniel Chester French's** sculpture of *Abraham Lincoln*, seated inside the grand space designed by architect **Henry Bacon**. My father remembers that, as he carried me down the long steps of the *Lincoln Memorial*, I looked back over my shoulder and waved, saying, "Bye-Bye Lincoln." I think it is fitting that, all these years later, somehow my path again crosses that of monumental Mr. Lincoln.



Jim Percoco

We now move to 1964. I am a bit older and in Catholic grade school in New York. It is pre-Vatican II (the sweeping reforms instituted in the Roman Catholic Church in the early 1960s), and my school and our church are replete with statuary. There is one statue that is ubiquitous in all the books I read and in many posters hung by the Sisters of Charity on the walls of the classrooms – **Michelangelo's Pietá**. When the New York World's Fair opened in 1964 and the Vatican announced plans to open a pavilion that would display the *Pietá*, I was overjoyed. On my first visit to the World's Fair I insisted that the first site we visit must be the Vatican Pavilion. I can still recall, quite vividly, being on the moving walkway that carried visitors into a midnight blue room, with twinkling white lights, and being swept

away by the beauty of Michelangelo's marble masterpiece. I rode that walkway many times, just to see, again and again, that masterpiece. In 1972 when a disturbed visitor to the Vatican took a hammer to the *Pietá*, I grieved.

It is safe to say that these two anecdotes meant that sculpture, particularly monumental sculpture, would play a role in my life. In the intervening years when I visited battlefields, monuments always grabbed my attention. Even one night in the late 1960s, in Boston, passing **Saint-Gaudens' Shaw Memorial**, then streaked with a green corrosion and stained patina, the bronze **Robert Gould Shaw** and his soldiers of the Massachusetts 54th Infantry silently spoke to me. At that moment I had a sense that sculpture and my life were meant to be entwined.

Since 1988 I have presented many public sculptures as companions in the classroom. I believe they help teachers tell the story of the past. I have no formal training as an art historian, and most of what I have learned has come through a 15-year collaborative working relationship with **Michael Richman**, the editor of the *Daniel Chester French Papers* and a leading free-lance historian and writer on American Public Monuments. In 1989 I received an *Independent Study Summer Fellowship Award* from the **National Endowment for the Humanities** and the **Council for Basic Education**. Richman was my mentor. Over the years he has taught me how to more than appreciate sculpture, and to understand its aesthetics and how these pieces work.

In the summer of 2002, I received the best grant possible, my wife's permission to spend some time on the road and to pull together everything I'd learned since 1989 and apply it in a way that I had never done before. This academic adventure would certainly put a different spin on the age-old September teacher question, "So? What did you do with your summer vacation?"

I will admit that there was more than just an academic aspect to my agenda. I was in deep need of rejuvenation. Living in post-9/11 America, I was beginning to feel, in the classroom, as if my world was being

swamped by popular culture. My students seemed only to be interested in the latest episode of *Survivor* or some other "reality" TV program. Everywhere I turned I saw the faces of an array of celebrities endlessly recounting their shallow lifestyles. The sloppy attire of many male students and the increasingly revealing clothes of many female students made me feel uncomfortable. Language in the school hallway seemed to have sunk to a new low. In preparing my lessons, I felt as if I were being pulled more and more to a crowd that aspired to the lowest common denominator. On top of all this it seemed like the vise-grip of teacher accountability was closing tighter and tighter.

My well was running dry. I longed to find a sense of integrity and I thought *Honest Abe* could help. I somehow wanted to reaffirm my commitment to high ideals by staring squarely into the face of someone who tried to make a nation fulfill its ideals. Rather than sit and read books, I preferred to read the landscape to see what the many Lincoln statues could say to me. And I wanted to find out what others think about Lincoln in America today. This would be my informal survey about Lincoln and American memory. Etched in stone above French's nineteen-foot tall figure of Lincoln are the words of art critic **Royal Cortissoz**, "*In This Temple As In The Hearts Of The People For Whom He Saved The Union The Memory of Abraham Lincoln Is Enshrined Forever.*" In this country, remembering Mr. Lincoln has become almost a cottage industry.

According to a recent survey of the *Inventory of American Sculpture* there are more than 600 memorials to American presidents across the United States; 216 of these outdoor statues and monuments are of Abraham Lincoln. Not surprisingly, there are only three statues of Lincoln in states of the former Confederacy. Ironically, Richmond, Virginia, recently received *Abraham Lincoln* whether they liked it or not. A bronze statue of Lincoln and his son Tad, commemorating their April 1865 visit to the defeated Confederate capitol, was unveiled at the new *National Park Service Visitors Center for Richmond National Battlefield Park*. (The unveiling took place on April 1, 2003, amidst a demonstration against the statue led by some descendants of Confederate veterans who claimed a statue of Lincoln in Richmond was a slap in the face to brave southern boys who died defending their homeland.) Even Alaska and Hawaii have statues of Lincoln. As you can well imagine, there are 41 statues of Lincoln in Illinois, with more planned to be unveiled there between now and 2009, the *Bicentennial of Lincoln's birth*.

Of this large number of Lincoln statues only nine incorporate African American figures as part of the sculptural design or ensemble. This is ironic given that Lincoln is often called the *Great Emancipator*.

So which statues to pick? I decided to frame my visits and learn about Lincoln by plotting his physical and mental growth. I chose statues that are considered outstanding works of art, because I believe that great art inspires—I know it inspires me.



Jim Percoco at Lorado Zadoc Taft's "Lincoln the Lawyer," in Urbana, IL.

I wanted to understand these statues from an artistic and aesthetic perspective, as well as to recognize their value as historical objects that in their own way help us to interpret the past and provide a context to the meaning and place of Lincoln's memory in American culture. I wanted to ask about these statues: *Are these true representations of the real Lincoln, or are they the creative work of various artists and their interpretations of the man, shaping a particular kind of collective national memory?* Here was the heart of my intellectual quest.

Keeping me companion on my journey was **Carl Sandburg's** epic biography of **Lincoln on Books-On-Tape**. During my trip I met and interviewed a variety of people: from tourists who were gathered like pigeons around these sculptures, to Lincoln scholars, including the Chief Justice of the Rhode Island Supreme Court, who bought his first of many Lincoln busts and statues with his lunch money when he was thirteen; from sculptors, to archivists; from souvenir shop owners to a 21st Century Herodotus, a 95-year-old proprietor of a private historical and genealogical society in a small backwater community of southern Illinois. All of these people shared with me their impressions of the 16th President as I continued to form my own view of this most fascinating American.

At the beginning of my adventure I felt a bit like Frank Capra's protagonist Jefferson Smith, the quintessential everyman, in the classic film, *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*. If you recall, Smith, when he first arrives in Washington visits the monuments and ends up at the *Lincoln Memorial*. He is swept away by the grandeur of it all, later telling folks that *Lincoln is bigger than life just waiting for you to come up those stairs*. As we approach the climax in the film a dejected and disillusioned Smith is about to leave Washington rather than fight the "realities of Washington politics." But before he leaves he returns to the *Lincoln Memorial*, and there finds some solace and inspiration. He decides to stay and resolves to take on the corrupt Senators who are running the show in the U.S. Capitol. Perhaps Lincoln would inspire me in the same way.

Why Lincoln? Why not choose George Washington? His character certainly is one that lends itself to inspiration. Why not Thomas Jefferson? Why not look at his writings and take from them some comfort? I chose Lincoln for a variety of reasons.

One reason is that there are photographs of the man. Records indicate that Lincoln posed for close to 140 photographs. Of that number 130 survive for us to study. Even with that visual documentation one of his private secretaries, John Nicolay once said, "*Lincoln's features were the despair of every artist who undertook his portrait ... They put into their pictures the large, rugged features, and strong prominent lines; they made measurements to obtain exact proportions; they 'petrified' some single look, but the picture remained hard and cold. ... Graphic art was powerless before a face that moved through a thousand delicate gradations of line and contour, light and shade, sparkle of the eye and curve of the lip, in the long gamut of expression from grave to gay and back again... to that serious, far-away look with prophetic intuitions beheld the awful panorama of war, and heard the cry of oppression and suffering. There are many pictures of Lincoln; there is no portrait of him.*" I think some sculptors have achieved what portrait canvas artists could not capture.

Most people either love or hate Lincoln. I once gave a workshop at a conference for Virginia Independent Schools on my *Lincoln Legacy Project*. Afterward I was approached by a teacher who was offended by my presentation. He told me that there was no way he could teach about Lincoln as I did because many of his students or their families were members of the *United Daughters of the Confederacy* or the *Sons of Confederate Veterans*. Some African Americans I have spoken to don't necessarily see Lincoln as the *Great Emancipator*, arguing that Lincoln was a racist and used blacks for his own political ends. These thoughts are articulated in the book, **Forced Into Glory: Abraham Lincoln's White Dream** by Lerone Bennett, a book that created a great stir amongst Lincoln admirers. On another occasion a parent of one of my students took issue with me over Lincoln, claiming that Lincoln was a dictator, usurped the Constitution, and forced federal policies on people who had chosen to

leave the Union. Books among the Lincoln literature have titles such as, **The Lincoln Nobody Knows**, **Abraham Lincoln: The Man Behind The Myth**, and **The Lincoln Enigma**, and the range of opinions they represent fascinated me. As Lincoln-biographer **David Herbert Donald** in his book, **Lincoln Reconsidered**, says, "*perhaps the secret of Lincoln's continuing vogue is his essential ambiguity. He can be cited on all sides of all questions.*"

Part of me was attracted to Lincoln's spirituality. He was a man, some argue, who was a skeptic. Although raised in a somewhat Calvinistic Presbyterian faith, as an adult Lincoln adhered to no formal religion – yet wrote and delivered the most spiritual speeches of all our Presidents.

I am hardly alone in being fascinated by Lincoln; he is a popular president. Consider the robotic Lincolns, brought to life by the Walt Disney Company in both California and Orlando, at the "*Mr. Lincoln Show*" and "*The Hall of Presidents*." Why didn't Disney have Franklin Pierce or even Woodrow Wilson speak to us? I wanted to try to understand what it is about Lincoln that draws people to him. Is he really the "*soul of America*" as one dedication speaker mused at a Lincoln statue unveiling? Is he the *Great Emancipator*? Is he the *rail-splitter*? The *prairie lawyer* who was also a teller of anecdotes? What about Lincoln's depression? Where does that piece of the puzzle fit? I hoped that by spending the summer with Lincoln's statue images, I could gain some insights into these questions.

The sculptor gets one shot. He or she captures for all time, in one creation, the embodiment of the figure whose story the sculptor is trying to tell.

understand what it is about Lincoln that draws people to him. Is he really the "*soul of America*" as one dedication speaker mused at a Lincoln statue unveiling? Is he the *Great Emancipator*? Is he the *rail-splitter*? The *prairie lawyer* who was also a teller of anecdotes? What about Lincoln's depression? Where does that piece of the puzzle fit? I hoped that by spending the summer with Lincoln's statue images, I could gain some insights into these questions.

Why Statues?

Historians and biographers get hundreds of pages to tell their stories. The sculptor gets one shot. He or she captures for all time, in one creation, the embodiment of the figure whose story the sculptor is trying to tell. At their best, memorials are instructive and some are much better than others.

Like a good student I did my homework. Before trekking out I immersed myself in several Lincoln biographies. For months, I read almost exclusively Lincoln literature, poring over the various interpretations and perspectives offered by different biographers and historians. **Dan Weinberg**, proprietor of the *Abraham Lincoln Bookshop* in Chicago told me that there have been more than 10,000 books and monographs written about Lincoln since his death. He is not only the most sculpted American on the landscape, but also the most written-about American.

So with a headful of Lincoln literature I set off to get an eye-ful of Lincoln sculpture. I hoped that the visual images would expand the mental visions I had been absorbing. Of all the Lincolns I looked at that summer, I think that there are four sculptural images of Lincoln as President that offer us a particular attitude and vision related to the 16th President:

- **Thomas Ball's 1876 *Emancipation Group*** in Washington, D.C.;
- **Augustus Saint-Gaudens 1887 *Standing Lincoln* or *Lincoln the Man*** in Chicago;
- **John Gutzon Borglum's 1911 *Seated Lincoln*** in Newark, New Jersey
- **Daniel Chester French's 1922 *Lincoln the President***, seated inside architect **Henry Bacon's *Lincoln Memorial*** on the Mall in Washington, D.C.

Arguably these four rank within the top ten Lincoln sculptures in the nation.

The Emancipation Group

In Washington, D.C., separated by three miles and what today is about a ten minute drive, sit two sculptures of Lincoln, French's and **Thomas Ball's *Emancipation Group***. It is an odd juxtaposition, in that both works celebrate the same man yet are remarkably different in tone and feel. In 1876, only eleven years after Lincoln's assassination, Ball received a commission to sculpt what would become America's first great monument to the fallen President. The Western Sanitary Commission awarded the contract to Ball, but the \$16,242 needed for the bronze casting came solely from the pockets of African-American freedmen and members of the United States Colored Troops. It is of no small significance that the first important Lincoln statue to be erected in the country was paid for by blacks. **Charlotte Scott**, a freed-woman from Virginia, offered the first \$5.00 of her free earnings to, "make a monument for *Masa Lincoln*." Ironically she gave this small installment to her former master, **Dr. William P. Rucker**, a Union loyalist from Virginia who had been involved with the Sanitary Commission. Congress appropriated \$3,000.00 for the pedestal and Thomas Ball went to work in his Italian studio.



The Emancipation Group

The statue was posed in what was a conventional and acceptable attitude for the times. Lincoln is depicted as the *Great Emancipator* almost as if he is blessing the slave, who in his right hand holds a broken shackle, as he rises to take his place as a man. Interestingly, accounts of Lincoln's April 1865 visit to Richmond, the capital of the defeated Confederacy, recall that as Lincoln moved through the charred streets many former slaves got down on their knees as Lincoln passed, in posture of homage and supplication. Lincoln would have none of that and asked those who displayed such behavior to rise up off their knees.

In Ball's statue, Lincoln's right hand rests on a podium, upon which surface is a medallion bearing the likeness of George Washington. In that hand he holds a scrolled copy of the *Emancipation Proclamation*. Tradition holds that the last African American returned to the South under the *Fugitive Slave Act*, **Archer Alexander**, modeled the figure of the freed slave. Ball chose other symbolic devices, such as a broken whip on the rear of the memorial, to demonstrate the death of slavery. All aspects of the aesthetic arrangements of the work convey an awkward sense of formality in contrast to the modes of today. No sculptor today would create what to us is an anachronism. Even the keynote speaker at the dedication, **Frederick Douglass**, chided the Lincoln who "viewed from the genuine abolition ground... seemed tardy, cold, dull and indifferent." However, continuing Douglass offered, "But measuring him by the sentiment of his country, a sentiment he was bound as a statesman to consult, he was swift, zealous, radical, and determined... now the judgment is that infinite wisdom has seldom sent any man into the world better fitted for his mission... And so today we have done good work for our race. In doing honor to our friend and liberator, we have been doing the highest honor to ourselves." Douglass recognized the place of Lincoln in the history of his people and the debt that convention of the late nineteenth century dictated that the black community owed Lincoln. It is clear from his dedicatory remarks that Douglass saw that the African-American legacy, and its subsequent successes, would for many years come to be tied to that of the martyred President.

More than any other monument to Lincoln in the United States, Ball's *Emancipation Group* evokes an image of "Father Abraham." Only today is that image being placed aside as scholars take another approach to Lincoln. That notwithstanding, Ball's work was so successful that the City of Boston contracted for a duplicate cast, and many small reduction pieces brought the sculptor a handsome sum.

Standing Lincoln or Lincoln the Man

On a cold, rainy Saturday, October 22, 1887, 10,000 people gathered not too far from the shores of Lake Michigan in Chicago to watch **Abraham Lincoln**, son of **Robert Todd Lincoln**, and grandson of **Abraham Lincoln**, the President, pull the chord which removed the bunting from **Augustus Saint-Gaudens'** heroic interpretation of *Lincoln: The Man*. Those in the throng were witnesses to the unveiling of America's first true destination monument, a kind of civic memorial that invites the viewer to participate in the story that has been presented. Here Saint-Gaudens, in collaboration with his friend, the architect **Stanford White**, had created a monumental structure that not only invoked the memory of Lincoln as Chief Executive, but also created a space where one can rest and pause in thought on the subject at hand.

Saint-Gaudens did not have to compete for this prize. His grand success of a monument in New York City's Madison Square Park, to *Admiral David Glasgow Farragut*, in 1880, had earned him an immediate reputation as America's foremost civic sculptor. The work of *Farragut* involved collaboration with architect White, as would later the *Lincoln*. *Farragut* was the first of some twenty joint commissions for the pair.

Eli Bates, a wealthy resident of Chicago had bequeathed \$40,000 to the city for erection of a suitable monument to Lincoln. The trustees of his estate granted the award to Saint-Gaudens. The sculptor labored on the figure for close to three years, mostly in his summer studio in Cornish, New Hampshire. Saint-Gaudens had located to the Connecticut River Valley because a good friend of his had told him that this was, "the land of Lincoln shaped men." A local farmer from nearby Windsor, Vermont served as the model for Lincoln's six foot four inch frame. For Lincoln's facial features and hands, Saint-Gaudens relied almost exclusively on presidential photographs and **Leonard Volk's** life mask and hand casts taken in 1860. To gain additional insight into Lincoln, Saint-Gaudens pored over Lincoln's speeches, his writings, and numerous biographies and monographs of the Illinois politician turned Chief Executive.

Lincoln was not unknown to the sculptor. In 1861, the teenage Saint-Gaudens had seen the President-elect during his visit to New York City, as Lincoln made his way

to his first inauguration. Four years later, the future sculptor would file twice past Lincoln's body as it lay in state in New York's City Hall on his funeral trip to Springfield, Illinois.

Trained at the *Ecole des Beaux-Arts*, Saint-Gaudens wanted to create an ennobling Lincoln that reflected his democratic spirit which would move beyond the mythology of *The Rail-Splitter*. Years after his *Lincoln* had been unveiled, Saint-Gaudens told one of his nieces, "I never thought of Lincoln as ugly." In this particular image of Lincoln one can truly appreciate the artist's sentiment. Like all of Saint-Gaudens' great works, this sculpture is a psychological study that engages the viewer and asks one to give pause and consider Lincoln's greatness.

The pose of Lincoln is exceptional. Lincoln appears to be rising from a symbolic chair of state, which is a stroke of genius as it provides a sense of volume and monumental quality to the work from a great distance. As one nears the figure the chair of state appears to recede as the posture and position of Lincoln's head grabs your attention. Lincoln's head is bowed as if he is pondering for a moment before he begins to speak. His left hand clasps the lapel of his jacket, striking a pose that I suspect was copied by actor **Raymond Massey** for the stage play and film *Abe Lincoln in Illinois*. Lincoln's right hand is tucked into the small of his back sublimely balancing the droop of his head. This piece does not reflect any particular time or place in Lincoln's Presidency, rather it reflects the depth of Lincoln's persona throughout his four years and one month in office. Immediately people in the art world knew Saint-Gaudens had created a masterpiece. Upon reflection, Saint-Gaudens' good friend, **Richard Watson Gilder**, Art Editor of *The Century Magazine*, claimed to have influenced the sculptor's decision to slightly droop Lincoln's head, "I remember when I got Saint-Gaudens to alter the statue and give it the contemplative look it now has," Gilder said. In the January 1896 issue of *The Chautauquan* sculptor and art historian **Lorado Taft** argued, "It does not seem like bronze: There is something very human or shall I say – superhuman about it. One stands before it and feel himself in the presence of America's soul."

When the sculpture was dedicated in 1887, the keynote speaker at the unveiling was **Leonard Swett**, a good friend of Lincoln's who had served with him on the 8th Judicial Circuit on the Illinois prairie. In his remarks he addressed Lincoln's tactics as a politician, his ability of self-reliance, his belief in God as the Supreme Ruler of the world, as well as his faith in the *Declaration of Independence* as the underpinning of America and his own perfect standard of political truth.



Jim Percoco at Saint-Gaudens "Standing Lincoln."

One can feel this when seated on **Stanford White's** exedra which frames the sculpture and provides the contemplative space for visitors to sit and either reflect on Lincoln, his life, and meaning in America today or simply to relax and cool off under the shade of the trees which have grown around the monument in the intervening years.

This is a great statue and monument in the very best definitions of the words. There is a presence and energy that resonates from the bronze Lincoln. One is inspired and renewed by considering the measure of one's life against that of the 16th President, knowing that often times on our particular journey there are moments when we must rise to the occasion, whatever that be, pause to consider our course of action and then act. Standing before the grand and eloquent in posture of this Lincoln, one senses the reality of the man and the moment. The fact that Saint-Gaudens worked painstakingly to get the wrinkles in Lincoln's trousers just right, makes it feel as though he has caught, and frozen in stone, a real moment of Lincoln's life. However, it was not an American, but rather an Englishman who captured, perhaps what is most salient about this statue, and Lincoln in general. On another rainy day in July 1920 a duplicate of the Saint-Gaudens *Standing Lincoln* was unveiled in London in Parliament Square. On accepting this statue as a gift from the United States to Great Britain, Prime Minister **David Lloyd George** said, "In his life he was a great American. He no longer is so. He is one of those giant figures, of whom there are very few in history, who lose their nationality in death. They are no longer Greek or Hebrew, English or American; they belong to mankind."

Borglum's Seated Lincoln

If Saint-Gaudens got it right with his monumental majesty in Chicago, then **John Gutzon Borglum**, a sculptor who possessed an ego almost as large as his presidential heads on Mount Rushmore, gave us a glimpse into a different side of Lincoln's personality. His 1911 work, located in **Newark, New Jersey**, outside the **Essex County Courthouse** is a softer, gentler image, than the Saint-Gaudens, but it is equally moving. Despite Borglum's tendency to bombast, he had sensitivity in art and his subject matter saying once that an artist is "simply a man whose heart beats a little quicker than those of the rest of you. It is because he gathers a little more of the struggles, of pathos, of sweetness, of desires, that come to a man during the twenty-four hours; and he must express it, he must write it, he must sing it, he must paint it, he must model it." The purpose of art, Borglum believed, was "to drop a plumb line into the depths of life, to find thereby the great emotions that are common to all mankind, and to express them so that all mankind will understand the expression." Borglum more than achieved this with his *Seated Lincoln*, which is sometimes referred to as *Lincoln of Gethsemane*. In Newark we con-

front a Lincoln that we can approach and sit next to. This is a Lincoln who personally bore the burden of the Civil War to the very marrow of his bones. Again, it is a portrait statue that does not reflect a specific moment in time, but rather one that asks the visitor to be compassionate towards Lincoln. One could easily imagine this being the Lincoln who grieved after the loss of his surrogate son, **Elmer Ellsworth**, an early Union martyr, or on dealing with the news of the death of his good friend, **Ned Baker**, killed at the *Battle of Balls Bluff*. It might even



Borglum's "Seated Lincoln"

be the Lincoln who upon learning the news about **General Joseph Hooker** and the Army of the Potomac being routed in May 1863 at Chancellorsville, saying, "My God. What will the country say?" This Lincoln is filled with pathos and heavy emotion. He sits almost as if he is out of breath or just released a heavy sigh. On the day that I visited it seemed to me as if this Lincoln could have used a friend.

Borglum said, "Lincoln often wandered into the Garden of Gethsemane and always alone." As to the expression on Lincoln's face the sculptor said, "His mind is engrossed with the vast responsibilities that have weighed him down. He alone knew their magnitude; he alone knew the strength he must have to support them and hold himself erect." And so we have an unassuming Lincoln, a Lincoln of real flesh and blood. When former President **Theodore Roosevelt** first saw this Lincoln he exclaimed, "This doesn't look like a monument at all." Borglum replied that Roosevelt's remark was the greatest compliment he could receive on the work. **Robert Todd Lincoln**, who was never too far from weighing in on his father as portrayed in art is reported to have commented, "This is the sculpture on which the little hoodlum children would climb." Indeed many children have climbed and played on this statue. It is a parent photographer's dream. Despite the strain on Lincoln's face the sculpture is rather inviting, creating a space where folks can sit and pose next to the President and feel comfortable. This Lincoln probably would enjoy children romping on his frame. Given just such an opportunity, the Lincoln we see here probably would have gotten down on his knees and played with the hoodlum children.

The City of Newark is rightfully proud of this gift from Union Army veteran **Amos H. Van Horn**, who made good as a furniture dealer. Before dying Van Horn left \$25,000 to the city to erect this statue. **Charles Cummings**, Curator of the **Newark Historical Society**, told me that on one occasion an elderly woman who had been raised in Newark returned for a visit and asked to be driven by Borglum's *Lincoln*. As they drove past the

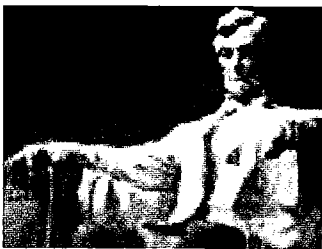
statue, she rolled down the window of the car, leaned out and blew kisses in *Lincoln's* direction calling out, "Oh Abie. Oh Abie. I love you." Perhaps she had been one of those hoodlum children who had climbed over this *Lincoln*. Nevertheless, this statue had resonated with her at an early age and one can fondly wish that this Abraham Lincoln heard her.

The Lincoln Memorial

Now we return full circle to where this journey began at the foot of **Daniel Chester French's** *Lincoln* inside what is arguably the greatest public space in the United States, *The Lincoln Memorial*. French and his architect friend, **Henry Bacon** labored over a long eleven years to see the fruits of their labor and vision completed. Here *Lincoln, the War President* sits, flanked by two of his greatest speeches, the *Gettysburg Address* and his *Second Inaugural Address*. On many occasions I have returned to this memorial and have been struck by the quiet that enfolds the chamber. Have you ever noticed how out of breath you are when you get to the top of the steps? Perhaps Bacon intended visitors to be tired, as many are forced to catch their breath in the shadow of *Lincoln*. It is almost as if, in laboring to ascend the steps of the Memorial, one is following the long, arduous journey of *Lincoln*.

Again, it is the face and the hands that draw attention.

French, although a self-taught sculptor, used the Volk life mask and hand casts to model his *Lincoln*, as had sculptors before him. We see a compassionate *Lincoln*, but also a *Lincoln* filled with a mighty resolve. Unlike you or me, this *Lincoln*, because he is in marble, can do something that no human can physically do, and that is retain one side of the body in tension while the other is relaxed. French adroitly does this by using *Lincoln's*



Lincoln's hands.

hands to demonstrate his character. His right hand rests on the edge of the chair of state and is open, reflecting *Lincoln's* flexibility and compassion; while his left hand, also resting on the edge of the chair, is clenched, signifying his single minded will at preserving the Union.

"What I wanted to convey," wrote French, "was the mental and physical strength of the great war President and his confidence in his ability to carry the thing through to a successful finish. If any of this 'gets over,' I think it is probably as much due to the whole pose of the figure and particularly to the action of the hands as to the expression of the face."

Modeled in part on the *Temple of Zeus* in Olympia, the *Lincoln Memorial* is in a way the American *Parthenon*. Seated on that man-made knoll it is not unlike the *Acropolis*, that looks out over Athens, but here it is the Mall in Washington, D.C., and here *Lincoln*, composed of twenty-nine two-ton separate blocks of Georgia marble holds council with other American greats such as George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and Franklin D. Roosevelt. Countless others are honored with their presence on America's most sacred ground. It is interesting to consider that, when looking out across the Mall from the top of the steps of the *Lincoln Memorial*, you are looking at re-

On May 30, 1922, when the Lincoln Memorial was dedicated, the African American guests invited to attend the ceremonies were segregated and directed to sit in a separate area at the rear of the invited dignitaries.

claimed tidal flats. The ghost of "Uncle" Joe Cannon of the U.S. House of Representatives would be surprised because, when he walked the earth as a mortal, he once said, "So long as I live, I'll never let a memorial to Abraham Lincoln be erected on that goddamn swamp."

On May 30, 1922, when the *Lincoln Memorial* was dedicated, the African American guests invited to attend the ceremonies were segregated and directed to sit in a separate area at the rear of the invited dignitaries. Offended, many of them left. I am sure that *Lincoln*, given the personal, spiritual, and moral growth he made between 1860 and 1865, would have offered a wry comment on this sad state of affairs. Ironies like this abound in the stories that revolve around the public sculptures of *Lincoln*.

Finally, the statue in the *Lincoln Memorial* inspires. **John Steinbeck**, in 1966 brought his son to Washington, D.C. and, like the fictional Jefferson Smith, ended up at the *Lincoln Memorial*. In a letter to President Lyndon Johnson, Steinbeck recounts this story, that after his son had spent some time gazing at *Lincoln*, he turned to his father and said, "Oh! Lord; We had better be great." At the end of *my* summer with *Lincoln*, I could do nothing less than concur with the younger Steinbeck.

Sculpture and Public History

Like any event or person we study, we bring all of our biases – our likes and dislikes, our comforts and discom-

forts, as well as our personal beliefs. I will be the first to admit that I went out looking for a particular kind of Lincoln. A Lincoln that I could look up to, admire. A Lincoln who would give me solace and help me to understand myself in a world different from his, but no less complicated. To be sure I found that. But I also discovered something else. During my journey I kept putting off, intellectually as well as emotionally, the fact that Lincoln was murdered. Some consider Lincoln an American *Moses*, as he never got to cross over to the promised-land. The more I came to know Lincoln, the more I did not want to face up to the awful truth that he was assassinated. All these monuments clearly convey that this was a great American and human being, but if you did not know the end of the narrative of Lincoln's life, you would never be able to tell from the monuments that he was killed for who he was. None of the monuments I studied articulate this sad fact. So, what does that say about Lincoln, and what does that say about those who spent their lives ensuring that Lincoln's memory would never be forgotten, and what does it say about us? What it says, I believe, is that it was Lincoln's life and the way he lived it that is most important, not the way he died. He would have been no less worthy of memorial statues had he died peacefully in his sleep on his 100th birthday.

In the end, I think the reason that there are so many marble and bronze figures of Lincoln is because his life, as depicted in the many monuments I visited, reinforces the quintessential American dream that anyone can make good. That, like Lincoln, we can pull ourselves up by our bootstraps and make something of our lives that is enduring. Lincoln believed that the United States was the last best hope of earth, because he came to see America as the one place where people could go as far as natural talent could take them. He spent much of his life trying to fulfill that notion at the altar of hard work in his effort to succeed. There is great comfort in that.

In a secular society that professes no state religion, these monuments to Lincoln are the places where we can worship the values we hold dear. It is no surprise that in our current war on terror the image of Lincoln and his words are often invoked almost as if he is the deity, in human form that can help us to see our way through a difficult time. In a way these statues, monuments, and memorials to Lincoln and others, who have shaped our society, reflect our cultural "religion;" a "religion" of practiced iconography, holding up for the masses, in tangible ways, an example of the best of American virtues. We need these monuments to remind us of the values that we, as a society, hold in common. With that knowledge we may better understand the direction in which we ought to be headed. ☺

James Percoco teaches applied history and U.S. History at West Springfield High School in Fairfax County, Virginia. He was on the USA Today All-USA Teacher Team in 1998, was the Walt Disney Social Studies Teacher of the Year in 1993, and was presented with the James Harvey Robinson Prize by The American Historical Association in 2000. Jim has been an educational consultant for the National Archives, the National Gallery of Art, and the National Park Service. He is author of two books: A Passion for the Past: Creative Teaching of U.S. History (Heinemann, 1998, ISBN: 0-325-00061-1); and Divided We Stand: Teaching About Conflict in U.S. History (Heinemann, 2001, ISBN: 0-325-00329-7). Jim is a long-time member of NCHE, has been a presenter at many NCHE conferences and colloquia, and has served on the NCHE Board of Trustees since 1998.