

Another page in Lincoln's history

Chicago bookstore bears his name, spawned Civil War round-table groups

By James A. Percoco
SPECIAL TO THE WASHINGTON TIMES

Anyone who is really in the know about the Civil War or Lincoln knows about the Abraham Lincoln Book Shop in Chicago.

One can find the bookshop in its fifth Chicago location, 357 W. Chicago Ave., in the River North neighborhood on the Near North Side, nine blocks west of Michigan Avenue and the old water-pumping station that survived the Great Chicago Fire of 1871. It's one block west of the Chicago Transit Authority's Brown Line elevated train.

Opening the door, visitors enter a portal to a world far removed in time and space from the 21st century.

Opened in 1933 as the Home of Books, it was taken over and renamed in 1938 by Ralph G. Newman and frequented by Carl Sandburg and Lloyd Lewis, noted biographer of Ulysses S. Grant and William T. Sherman. Weaving a spell around Mr. Newman, the two writers, like the sirens whose songs tempted Odysseus, drew him into the world of Civil War America and Abraham Lincoln.

Dan Weinberg, the current proprietor, joined Mr. Newman as a partner in 1971. In 1984, Mr. Weinberg bought out Mr. Newman, continuing the bookshop's rich tradition and own brand of history.

Monthly gatherings

The shop's famous trademark hat-and-umbrella logo came from Mr. Sandburg. Harcourt Brace, which published Mr. Sandburg's Lincoln book "The Prairie Years," put out a small advertising pamphlet (aimed at bookstores) describing the work. The publisher asked Mr. Sandburg to provide an image to go along with it, and he came up with that hat and umbrella, representing Lincoln's circuit-riding days. Mr. Newman, needing a logo, secured Mr. Sandburg's permission to use it. "The rest," as they are fond of saying frequently at the Book Shop, "is history."

A quasi-historical site in its own right, the Abraham Lincoln Book Shop holds a singular place in Civil War memory. It is the cradle of the Civil War round-table movement. Mr. Newman's branch had Civil War aficionados meet monthly to converse among themselves and with writers, not unlike gatherings of the old Grand Army of the Republic.

Begun in 1942, Civil War round tables grew into an international phenomenon that continues to expand as a result of the unbelievable pull the Civil War and Abraham Lincoln have on the imaginations of people worldwide. Chapters in the United States are located both north and south of the Mason-Dixon Line.

Gallery of greats

One must ring the front doorbell of the turn-of-the-20th-century building with a modern glass front to gain entry into a shop that is more museum gallery than traditional business enterprise. A large black banner with white and yellow letters graces the outside of the shop; the name is lettered in white on the window. In the entrance alcove sits a bed that belonged to

one of the Lincoln boys. To the left of the bed, on a large pedestal, is a 4- to 5-foot plaster-cast Lincoln portrait bust by sculptor Avar Fairbanks.

All manner of paintings, lithographs and framed documents hang on the 14-foot-high painted plaster walls. Included among the gallery of greats are original photographs of "Buffalo Bill" Cody, George Armstrong Custer and Robert Anderson, the Union commander of Fort Sumter, each offset in a decorative frame, beneath which is the subject's signature or autograph.

An 1863 engraving by artist Alexander Ritchie based on Francis Bicknell Carpenter's "The First Reading of the Emancipation Proclamation" also graces the walls. Behind glass in a cabinet are bronze reductions of Paul Manship's "Lincoln the Hoosier Youth," a life mask of Lincoln by Leonard Volk and George Bissell's "Abraham Lincoln." (Bissell's original sculpture is in Edinburgh, Scotland, over the grave of Scots who fought for the Union cause during the Civil War.)

Numerous bronze and marble busts of Lincoln stare back from their perches. A bronze reduction of Daniel Chester French's seated "Lincoln" sits on a shelf. Accenting a corner is John Rogers' famous decorative tabletop parlor piece "The Council of War" — the triumvirate of Lincoln, Secretary of War Edwin M. Stanton and Gen. Ulysses S. Grant, unfortunately painted battleship gray.

A signed letter from President Theodore Roosevelt next to the signature of Mark Twain seemingly signed yesterday are under protective glass. Numerous authentic photographs of Lincoln, including a November 1863 image taken by Alexander Gardner, known as the Gettysburg Lincoln, ethereally watch over the shop.

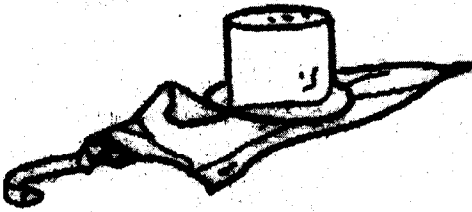
A 20th-century photograph and signature of Chief Justice Earl Warren augment those of Lincoln. How fitting to discover in a store named for the Great Emancipator an original item of the chief justice who handed down the 1954 Brown vs. Topeka Board of Education decision declaring unconstitutional the doctrine of separate but equal.

Cozy ambience

Three bays of handcrafted maple bookshelves flank the center aisle, from the two-toned burgundy-and-gray carpeted floor to the ceiling, complete with a browsing area in the rear. The shelves hold an assortment of rare books, first editions and a host of recent publications, though not all deal with Lincoln and the Civil War.

The full range of 19th-century American history can be found. Like a mini-Fort Knox, the shop protects rare books behind glass shutters. A rich, warm, old-time bookshop feeling combined with a museum-like atmosphere make for a cozy yet professional ambience.

For \$15,000, one can purchase, encased in a double-edged gilt frame, an entire document signed on June 1, 1863, by Lincoln, pardoning Jacob Varner of western Virginia of any crimes he may have committed. Here, in Lincoln's own handwriting, is the Lincoln of compassion. This "A. Lincoln" seems to float upward and out of



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the frame.

Varner, the father of 10 children, was pardoned as the evidence against him was suspect. This document brings to mind Lincoln's 1862 pardon of all but 33 Sioux Indians responsible for the Sioux Uprising in Minnesota. In an effort to ensure that only the guilty would be executed, Lincoln spelled out phonetically the name of each of the condemned. To ensure that no mistakes were made in the transcription of the names, Lincoln sat with a War Department telegraph officer as he submitted them across the telegraph wires.

Across from the Varner pardon is a document signed for his fellow Illinoisian, Elmer Ellsworth, an almost surrogate son who was shot and killed after removing a Confederate flag from the roof of a hotel in Alexandria. The document, dated in Lincoln's handwriting Nov. 19, 1860, reads: "Dear Sir, I take great pleasure in giving you my autograph. Your friend, A. Lincoln"

Expert appraisals

Known worldwide, the Abraham Lincoln Book Shop and the fully booted Mr. Weinberg sell all of these items on the international market. Mr. Weinberg is a first-generation American whose parents came to the United States in the early 1920s, his father from the Ukraine and his mother from Poland.

The firm has an international reputation as experts in the buying, selling, appraisal and authentication of historical, literary, artistic and museum properties. The Abraham Lincoln Book Shop Inc. has acted as a consultant in the assembling of some of the major collections in the United States, both public and private, representing them both privately and at auction.

The firm has conducted appraisals for libraries, museums, banks, insurance companies and private collections. Mr. Weinberg buys from Sotheby's and Christie's. An author and noted authority on Lincoln, Mr. Weinberg is a director of the Lincoln Forum and the Abraham Lincoln Association and is a member of the official advisory board to the federal Abraham Lincoln Bicentennial Committee.

All kinds of things

A relaxed and casual Mr. Weinberg likes to talk about his particular interests and what he buys and sells.

"One of the things that I find of interest is that Lincoln buffs often forget about the war, and military people seem to forget about Lincoln. I'm not sure that you can separate the two. However, my real interests are the market collectibles of the period and the commercial interests they engender today. I like to talk

to round tables, historical societies and schools about the material that comes into my hands."

He says with zeal, "Everything that comes to me I like to make come alive. We sell all kinds of things. I once had a table from the room in the McLean House where Lee surrendered to Grant. It had once been owned by Secretary of the Navy Gideon Welles and was the table on which Eli Parker, Grant's aide, wrote the terms of surrender.

"I also had in my possession once the original order to carry out the execution of the Lincoln conspirators, written by the hand of Edward Townsend, the assistant adjutant general; a photograph of the actual hanging; and the original photographs used to identify John Wilkes Booth and David Herold at the Garrett farm in Virginia."

An artifact he says he wishes he could get back is Lincoln's first elective signature, that of the Lincoln who had been elected by his friends to serve as captain of the militia during the Black Hawk War, signed, "A. Lincoln, Captain."

One object with which he will never part is a signature in which Lincoln has misspelled his name. "This proves," Mr. Weinberg says, "Lincoln was human and not a god."

Portrait busts

As Mr. Weinberg talks about Lincoln's image in public sculpture, one senses that the assorted Lincoln busts posed on a shelf behind him listen intently. These tabletop Lincolns appear to be holding audience. Some statues of Lincoln work better for him than others. "George Bissell's," he declares excitedly, "is my favorite."

Directly behind him is a copy of the head on a statue in Edinburgh; a duplicate stands in Claremont, Iowa. This portrait depicts Lincoln with sunken cheeks, dark recessed eyes cast in shadows, a stern and determined look on his face.

"I have a small reproduction of the standing figure. It makes Lincoln accessible. I also like the Avar Fairbanks plaster in front of the store. The Lincoln Savings and Loan Company of Berwin, Illinois, purchased the original marble. They are now defunct, and the marble was sold privately. I also really like the 'Four Ages of Lincoln,' located in Ford's Theatre."

Those portrait busts by Fairbanks convey the physical and inherent spiritual growth of the 16th president from his frontier youthfulness to his role as chief executive.

Mr. Weinberg finds Lincoln far more accessible than the Founding Fathers. "Lincoln's no like George Washington, who was a cold figure, yet important," he says. "People can see

Lincoln as one of us, who rose because of his inner genius, yet he remains one of us. He was not from aristocracy and did not become an aristocrat. People had access to him during the war, when he lived in the White House. He allows us in.

"When he was young, Lincoln would listen to adults talk and then go to his room and, as he said, 'Bound it north and south. Bound it east and west,' turning it over in his mind until he understood it and then [would] be able to impart it to others. The Gettysburg Address, for instance, is short and pithy, but it allows us to emot. We can understand the ideation of Lincoln and then emot with it."

Not a god

One of Mr. Weinberg's favorite Lincoln tales took place long after his passing.

"Sometimes before the collapse of the Soviet Union, I read an article in the New York Times where the Soviets conducted a poll among their citizenry as to who they thought were the top 100 most influential people in history. First on the list were the usual communist reprobates, Marx, Engels and Lenin.

"The first Westerner to show up was Lincoln at number 36. Number 35 had been a the between Jesus and [Nikita] Khrushchev. It's Lincoln's verbiage. His talk about freedom, liberty and anti-slavery reverberates with people, just as the Declaration of Independence did in France."

Regarding the more recent potshots by Lincoln debunkers, particularly Leron Bennett's book "Forced Into Glory: Abra-

ham Lincoln's White Dream," which argues that Lincoln was a white supremacist who did not have the interest of blacks at heart, Mr. Weinberg says: "I should not be censoring. That's not what we do in the book-dealer business. So I have sold it.

"However, I think Bennett twists history. He uses Lincoln's words against him. His interpretations are faulty in trying to place Lincoln into the 21st century. We can't place our values on him. Lincoln, I think, had feelings of equality for all mankind. That's not to say that Lincoln would have necessarily wanted his sister to marry a black man. His father, Tom, often gets a bad rap, but I think Lincoln developed his anti-slavery views from his father, whose Baptist church broke into two factions over the issue of slavery, Lincoln joining the faction that condemned slavery.

"Bennett is trying to run in a direction that has his own ax to grind, but I think he misreads history badly. I think Lincoln felt more equal to blacks than Andrew Johnson did. But Lincoln was not a god; that's why I own the misspelled Lincoln."

James A. Percoco, who teaches history at West Springfield High School in Fairfax County, is a history educator in residence at American University and a member of the advisory board to the Abraham Lincoln Bicentennial Commission. His forthcoming book, "My Summers With Lincoln: An Odyssey Through America's Monumental Mania With the Sixteenth President," will be published in February by Fordham University Press.

UPCOMING EVENTS

Maryland
Tuesday: The Baltimore Civil War Round Table will hear B. Franklin Cooling discuss "Counterparts: From the Fertile Soil to the Antietam" at 7:30 p.m. at the Baltimore Convention Center, 1001 E. Pratt St., Baltimore, Md. For more information, call 410/382-1447 or visit www.baltimorehistory.org.

Through June 30: The Heritage Foundation of Maryland (Karen Janans' adaptation for the stage of "The Killer Angels" by Michael Shaara, Thursday, Salisbury, Md.) is a multi-act in the Woods Cabin John Regional Park, 4400 Leesboro Rd., Potomac, Md. Tickets, adults, \$25-\$30; seniors, \$22-\$25; 18 and under, \$15-\$18. Additional information can be found on the company Web site: www.heritagefoundation.org or by phoning 301/276-6000.

June 16: Jason Grubb portrays a Union scout, demonstrating the area's topical practice of spy techniques and discussing the challenges faced by a spy for the Union. The event is held at the Sharpsburg and Keeseville in Antietam National Battlefield. Information: 301/895-1884.

Virginia
Tomorrow: Sons of Confederate Veterans Frank Stringfellow Camp No. 822 will hear Lynn West, president of the D.C. Division of the United Daughters of the Confederacy, speak on "Warrior's Experiences of Private Silas Hovey, Company of 2nd Kentucky Cavalry, Morgan's Raiders, Army of Tennessee" at American Legion Post 177, 3830 Oak St., Fairfax. Dinner at 6 p.m. for \$22. Seniors \$17. Speaker at 7 p.m. with suggested donation of \$5. Information and reservations: 703/633-0994 or www.stringfellowcamp.org.

Thursday: The Ball Run Civil War Round Table will hear Steve Hill speak on "Danger Between the Lines" at the Ball Run Regional Library, 1200 S. Central Ave., Centerville, Va. Free and open to the public. Information: 540/777-4702.

June 16: The Mosby Heritage Area Association presents "Cowboys, Outlaws and Corpses" 7:30 to 9:30 p.m. at the Ball Run Regional Library. The event will be held in the area during the Civil War. For more information, contact the Mosby Heritage Area Group in and around the mill. Free. Information and tickets: www.mosbyheritage.org or 540/687-8381.

Information and reservations: 703/633-0994 or www.stringfellowcamp.org.