



The Soldiers' Home: A Long Road to Sanctuary

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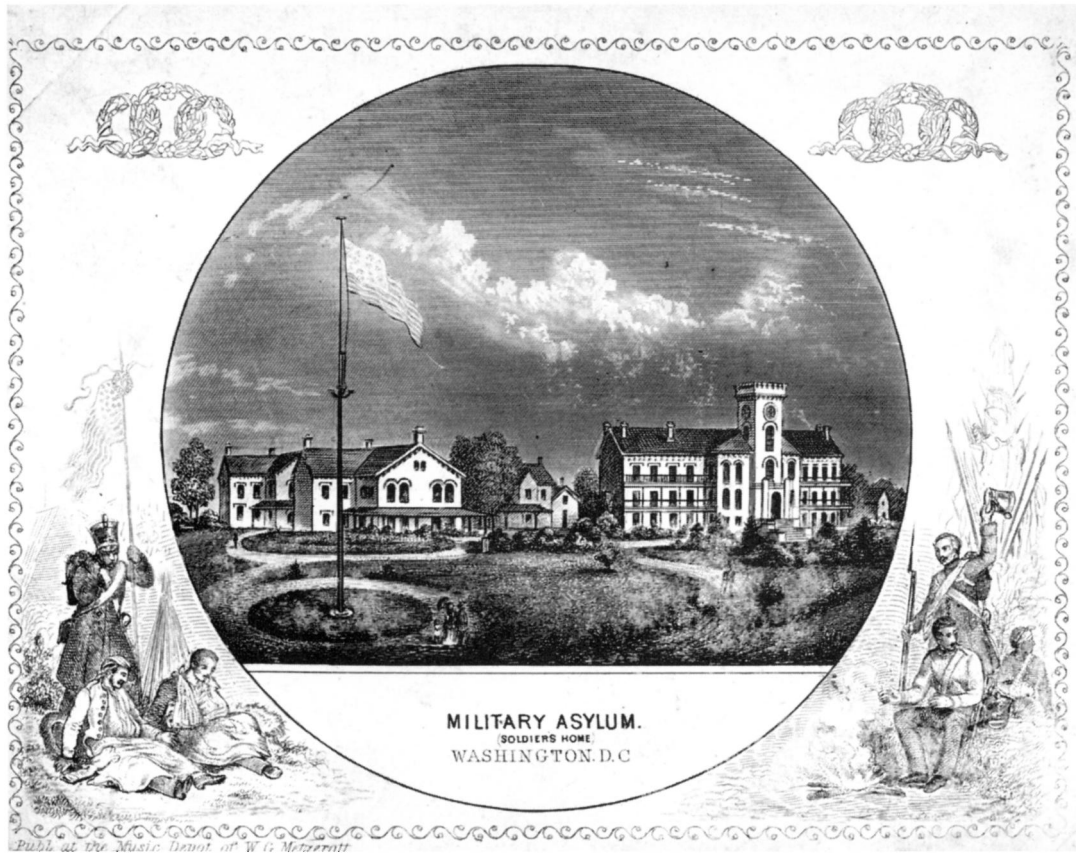
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The government bought the Riggs country estate in 1851 and by 1857 had built additional cottages and the main residence hall for the Soldiers' Home. Except where noted, all illustrations are from the collections of HSW.

The Soldiers' Home

A Long Road to Sanctuary

by Matthew Pinsker

There is a wonderfully embarrassing note in Abraham Lincoln's papers from a Methodist minister who had failed to show up for an appointment at the president's summer residence. "Man proposes," John McClintock began nervously, "but God disposes." He proceeded to assure the president that he had left Willard's Hotel in the city with plenty of time to arrive for an eight o'clock "engagement" at the nearby Soldiers' Home, the Washington-area retirement compound for military veterans where the president and his family were then staying for the season. The driver, "it seems," either "did not know the way, or else was drunk." "He brought us up at Fort Stevens, & when the guard there showed us the need of retreating," McClintock wrote, "his next move was on Fort Slocum!" The minister concluded that once it had reached ten o'clock, he simply could not "intrude" upon the president. He asked if he

could come out to the Soldiers' Home at eight o'clock that evening instead.¹

The record remains silent on whether McClintock, a prominent anti-slavery Methodist and former Dickinson College professor, ever made it out to the presidential retreat, but the mix up illustrates something quite familiar about the Soldiers' Home. It was, and remains, an elusive place. Several of Lincoln's friends and visitors commented on their difficulties finding the destination. "Our driver missed the way," recalled Leonard Swett, an old colleague from Illinois, "passing by the Home into the forest below." Swett claimed that his entourage didn't make it out of the "labyrinth" until nearly two o'clock in the morning. Only about three and a half miles from the Executive Mansion, the Soldiers' Home grounds were then in a rural and isolated part of the District of Columbia. The roads were quite bad and often full of undesirable figures. Presidential aide John Hay noted in his diary that he was once forced to ride home from the retreat "in the dark amid a party of drunken gamblers & har-

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lots." When Mary Lincoln suffered a carriage accident in the summer of 1863, her husband finally complained that the roads near the Soldiers' Home "ought to be repaired."² Today, the rural character of the area has been utterly transformed into an urban maze, but the surrounding streets remain in a state of uneven repair and visitors continue to complain about their difficulties in finding the place now known as the Armed Forces Retirement Home.

Yet once inside, visitors find the grounds of the nation's oldest continually operated veterans' facility almost luxuriously tranquil. Despite nearly a thousand current residents, pockets of perpetual construction, and the sights and sounds of the surrounding Washington, D.C., neighborhoods, there is an unexpected stillness that has the power to transport the modern observer back to an earlier, quieter era. The Home's nearly 300 acres contain some arresting surprises. There is the cottage that once housed Abraham Lincoln and his family, remarkably well preserved and looking practically the same as it did in the 1860s. There are other homes and imposing buildings from the nineteenth century and a somber national military cemetery just across the fence line that was the precursor to Arlington National Cemetery. Visitors can walk from the Lincoln Cottage along one of the District's highest and most beautiful elevations. Here is the place where the wartime president himself once strolled. On this bucolic hillside, the Great Emancipator contemplated the future of the war while glimpsing what was then the unfinished Capitol Dome in the hazy distance. The Capitol is still visible, but now thankfully complete. The connection to the nation's past could scarcely seem more alive.

Nonetheless, this profound sense of discovery only deepens as one learns more about the rich and complicated history of the place. The Soldiers' Home was decades in the making and then very nearly abandoned before the Lincolns arrived. Their presence enriched the place but did not actually save it. That honor belongs to the Civil War itself, which created enough disabled veterans not only to fill the Home in Washington, but also, sadly, to create the need for a vast network of national and state-sponsored soldiers'

homes across the country. Still, despite the hard sacrifices of the men (and, later, women) who populated this distinguished retirement community, the future of the institution has almost always seemed to be in jeopardy. Perpetual management problems, an ever-growing city, and fluctuations in the demographics of the nation's veterans have placed nearly continuous challenges on the aging community. As President Lincoln once did, veterans have found a sense of peace at the former Soldiers' Home, but their road to sanctuary has been longer and more difficult than most visitors would imagine.

Government-supported care for crippled or handicapped veterans in the United States was painfully inadequate during the years before the Civil War. The Continental Congress had authorized pensions for Revolutionary War soldiers, though actual payments, which were originally left to the states, often proved unreliable. Congress then made several attempts to address the needs of retired, disabled or impoverished soldiers in the years of the early republic, but there was remarkably little comprehensive support for struggling ex-soldiers. In 1811, the federal government approved plans for the construction of a Naval Home for Disabled and Decrepit Officers in Philadelphia, but that institution (which was the first in the nation to offer direct medical care for veterans) did not open its doors until 1833. That same year the government tried, belatedly, to improve its services for former soldiers by consolidating authority for handling veterans' matters in the Bureau of Pensions (a forerunner of the current Department of Veterans Affairs). Nevertheless, even after these innovations in the 1830s, unlucky army veterans, no matter how great their sacrifice for the nation, were compelled to rely largely on the goodwill of their families and communities if they proved unable to care for themselves.³

This uneven system of support provoked complaints from nineteenth-century American soldiers, who compared their government's scattershot programs unfavorably to the more comprehensive efforts of various European countries. There was the famous *Hotel des Invalides* in Paris, a pioneering institution built by Louis XIV



Launt Thompson's statue of Gen. Winfield B. Scott was placed on Scott's Hill in 1873 to commemorate his role in founding the Soldiers' Home.

for his crippled veterans in 1670 and expanded significantly during the Napoleonic era. The English, under Charles II, had originally followed the *Invalides* example with the construction of the Royal Hospital at Chelsea beginning in 1682. Both the *Hotel des Invalides* and Chelsea Hospital were frequently cited as models by U.S. army officers and Department of War officials seeking institutional support and better medical care for veterans. Yet traditional American disdain for standing armies and their needy veterans compelled most legislators to resist such developments for the United States.⁴

In November 1827, Secretary of War James Barbour made the first official recommendation for the creation of an "Army Asylum" in his annual message to the president. He invoked the various European models and warned that surviving veterans of the American Revolution often faced "distressing" conditions. His report

prompted a response from Pennsylvania Congressman William Ramsey, who shortly afterwards introduced a resolution that called for the creation of just such an asylum—naturally, within his own district. Ramsey's idea was to convert the old (and essentially abandoned) Army barracks at Carlisle into a suitable veterans' retirement facility. After some debate over how to fund the endeavor and where best to construct it, the Committee on Military Affairs approved the idea of establishing a fund, but subsequently tabled the proposal. Nothing further developed.⁵

This cycle of War Department proposal and congressional obstruction continued intermittently and without any resolution over the next two decades. There were proposals, internal reports, and various types of deliberations on the matter in 1833, 1837, 1840, 1841, 1844, 1845, 1846, 1848 (twice), and 1849 before Congress finally approved the creation of a "Military Asy-

lum” in 1851. During that extended period, the level of frustration from the professional military and its supporters was palpable. Secretary of War Lewis Cass warned Congress in 1833 that it was essentially allowing a lost generation of veterans to haunt the young republic. “In our service as presently organized,” he wrote:

a soldier can be retained only as long as his physical powers are sufficient to enable him to perform the duties required of him. When his constitution fails, unless it is the result of disabilities incurred in the line of his duty, he is discharged without any provision for his support, and generally, from the habits of his life, without the disposition and too often, the power to labor, and without means of support. He is then thrown on the charity of the community after devoting the best of his life to the service of his country.⁶

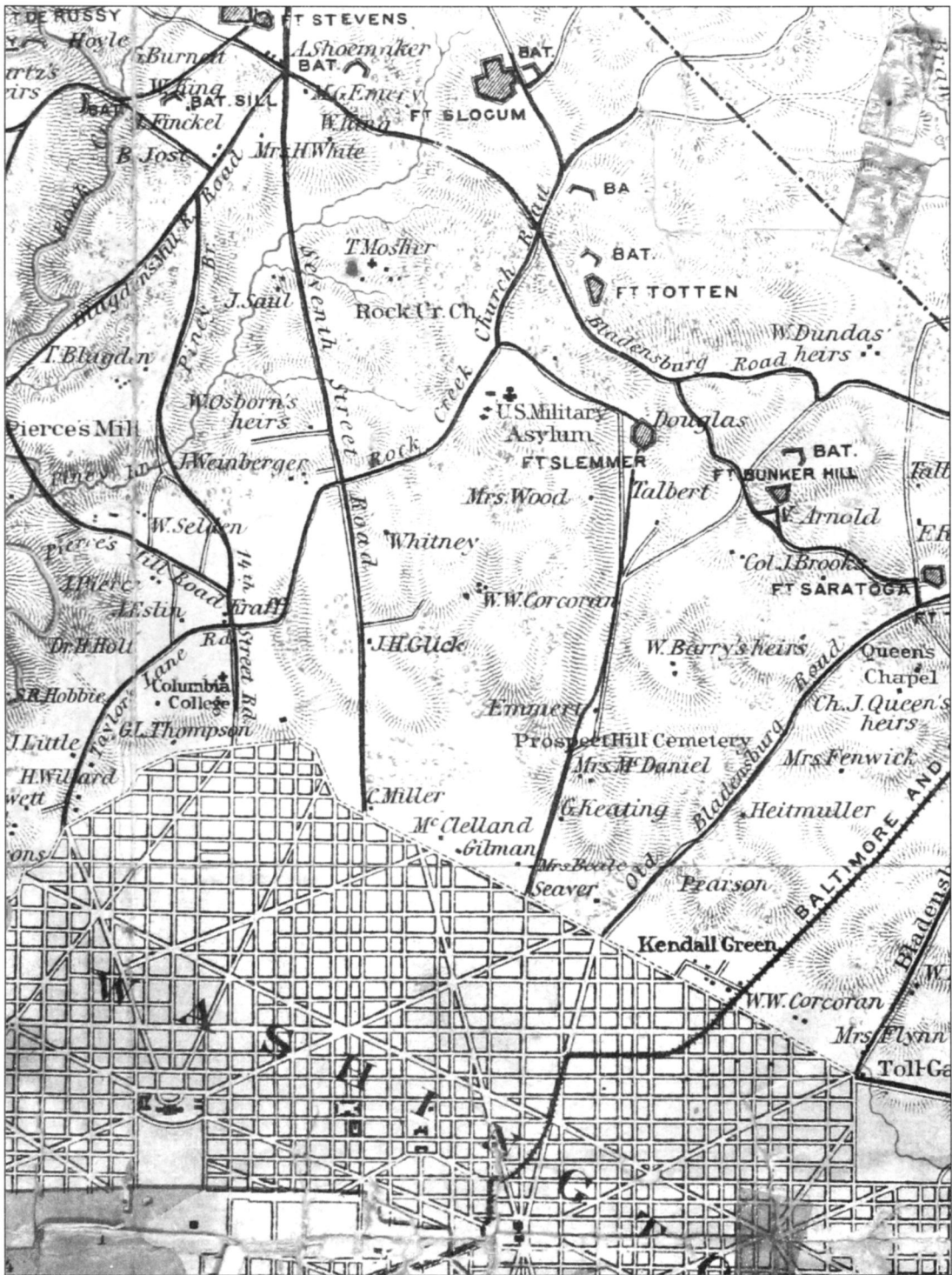
In 1840, the Kentucky-born Army officer Robert Anderson (later famous as commander of Fort Sumter at its surrender) suddenly became a fierce advocate for what he termed the “Soldiers’ Retreat.” The son of a Revolutionary War veteran himself, he had become appalled by the condition of the veterans he encountered. “The soldier now knows,” he wrote in a sharp letter addressed to friend John Reynolds, the former governor of Illinois, “that, when he is worn out in service, destroyed in constitution, and unfitted, by his habits, for embarking in a new pursuit, he must be discharged, and thrown, an outcast, upon society.” Anderson warned bitterly that the veteran who “has no home” only “resorts to the bottle, and dies a drunkard, or becomes a burden on the parish where he may be.”⁷ Anderson convinced Rep. James Monroe, a first-time New York congressman, fellow veteran of the Black Hawk War, and nephew of the former president of the same name, to introduce an asylum bill in 1841, one of the several failed proposals during the subsequent decade.

Anderson’s passion for the project drove a good deal of the public debate during the 1840s. His efforts drew the sympathetic attention of the *New York Military Magazine* in an important November

1841 column entitled “Asylum for Soldiers.” “It is a shame,” the journal complained, “that no such institution has been before provided for the faithful defenders of our country.” The *Delta Daily* of New Orleans noted on March 12, 1848, that the “establishment of institutions similar to those of Chelsea, in England, and of *Les Invalides*, in France would go far” to remove “these disgraceful stains upon the character of our Government.” A Cincinnati newspaper observed two months later that it was “strange that an army should have existed so long in our country without this necessary adjunct.”⁸

Anderson’s lobbying efforts might have continued to meet with defeat, however, but the Mexican War (1846–48) significantly altered the political calculus in Washington. In 1847, Gen. Winfield Scott and the U.S. Army captured Mexico City, and, following centuries of military tradition, they “levied a contribution upon the inhabitants” of \$150,000 “in lieu of pillage.” What was unique about this action, however, was what Scott then did with the money. Over the objections of the Secretary of War, he deposited \$100,000 into an account at the Bank of America, with a terse note ordering the bankers to place all of the funds “to the credit of the Army Asylum, subject to the order of Congress.” In a subsequent letter, Scott defended his unilateral actions, arguing that the “sum” was “in small part, the price of the American blood so gallantly shed” during the victory over Mexico.⁹

The new martial spirit evinced during the conflict with Mexico helped rekindle congressional support for the flagging proposal and allowed General Scott to continue his brazen disregard for the War Department. Scott, who would be the Whig presidential candidate in 1852, benefited particularly from the support of Sen. Jefferson Davis, a Democrat from Mississippi, who fought War Department efforts to seize the funds and introduced the bill that finally won congressional approval on March 3, 1851. The Davis legislation (SB 392) established the long overdue “Military Asylum,” and passed by a remarkably one-sided vote considering the legislation’s contested history (Senate, 40 to 5; House, 122 to 33). Yet the bill was rooted in the past, borrowing several con-



Lincoln's usual route to the Soldiers' Home was via Rhode Island Avenue, Seventh Street Road, and Rock Creek Church Road, a trip of about three miles.

cepts from earlier proposals, especially from Robert Anderson's efforts. The new asylum was supposed to welcome all enlisted regular-army veterans of 20 or more years of service who sought admission as well as any disabled veterans of the regular or volunteer forces, with certain exceptions provided for deserters and those convicted of felonies. The institution was to have its own small governance structure at each site that it might occupy (a governor, deputy governor and secretary/treasurer—all army officers). Those officers reported to a large Board of Commissioners created from the highest ranking officers in the army. Finally, on the always controversial issue of funding, Congress authorized the use of Scott's prize money, and provided for the future financing of the operation through a combination of fines and forfeitures and by the regular deduction of 25 cents per month from the pay of every non-commissioned officer and private in the regular army. This unique funding arrangement has allowed subsequent generations of Soldiers' Home residents to proudly claim that no taxpayer dollars were required for the creation, or maintenance, of their "independent" federal institution.¹⁰

The army high command moved quickly to establish the long-sought asylum, initially planning to build institutions at four different locations—Washington, D.C.; Harrodsburg, Kentucky; New Orleans, Louisiana; and East Pascagoula, Mississippi. The only branch that survived the decade, however, was the site in the District of Columbia. After some internal wrangling, the location selected for the D.C. Asylum was placed at the former country estate of semi-retired banker George W. Riggs, Jr. The federal government bought the Riggs estate for a little more than \$58,000 in the autumn of 1851.¹¹

During the 1840s, Riggs had been part of the fast-growing commercial banking firm of Corcoran & Riggs. His senior partner, the suave William W. Corcoran, was a politically connected Democrat who engineered the firm's quick expansion. Riggs celebrated their early success by purchasing about 200 acres of farmland in the northwestern section of the District (near Rock Creek), principally from the Agg family, who remained nearby on adjacent land. In 1842, Riggs hired carpenter

William H. Degges to build a fashionable home for his growing family at the northern end of his new property. Degges used a design from noted landscape designer Andrew Jackson Downing's recently published *Cottage Residences* (1842). The design for the English or Rural Gothic style cottage called for natural simplicity along the two-story, gabled exterior and a host of modern conveniences for the interior, including dumbwaiters, gaslights, and indoor water closets. It was a fashionable statement from a rising young banker then still only in his early thirties. Proud of his accomplishments, Riggs grandly named his new country residence "Corn Rigs," using "rigs," the Scottish word for furrows or fields.¹²

According to the official history of the bank, Riggs became increasingly ambivalent about the money he was earning and anxious over the relentless risk-taking of his ambitious partner. In 1848, he started to wind down his interest in the firm and re-focus on his family, which now included wife Janet and five little girls. His half-brother took over most of his managerial responsibilities. Riggs seemed happy. "I shall have my whole time," he wrote in one letter, "to devote to my family and my little farm." Then the following year, his youngest daughter, Mary Griffith Riggs, died at the age of two, following some unexplained convulsions. Her mother was then pregnant with their sixth child, a son. Within two years, the grieving family returned to live in the city, and Riggs began to immerse himself in banking once again. Presumably anxious to shed the sad memories of his lost daughter, he also sold his once prized "little farm" to the government.¹³

The Washington Military Asylum admitted its first three veterans in 1851 even before the government had arranged for the purchase of the Riggs property. They lived briefly at the Washington Arsenal before being transferred to the banker's former country home in 1852. Altogether, 46 veterans arrived by the end of that year, many housed in the former Riggs cottage but others, presumably, in adjacent cottages or tents. To alleviate the housing shortage, the Board of Commissioners authorized construction of a new main hall intended to accommodate up to 250 mem-

bers. They also approved plans for two other large cottages (Quarters 1 and 2) near the former Riggs cottage to provide on-site housing for additional officers. They assigned Lt. Barton Alexander of the Army Corps of Engineers to spearhead all of the construction.

Everything seemed to be moving forward in promising fashion, but progress slowed. Concerns developed about cost overruns and delays in the schedule. Then chief architect Alexander was called away for another assignment. The main building did not open until 1857, a delay mitigated by the fact that for most of the decade the number of inmates, as they were then called, usually never rose above one hundred.

The troubled state of morale at the Asylum impeded admissions. In 1858, Sen. John Hale, a Republican from New Hampshire, moved to abolish the institution, because, he informed his colleagues, he had been practically bombarded by complaints from the unhappy veterans.

Since the attention of the Senate has been called to this subject, I can say with perfect truth that not a day has gone over my head, not even Sunday, that some old cripple on his crutches, or some lame or infirm old soldier, has not been to me, as I had moved in this matter, with complaints of the manner in which they are treated in this institution.¹⁴

Hale's public comments led to an exhaustive but generally inconclusive investigation. The tension took its toll on the officers in charge, however, and from 1858 to 1864 there was no formal governor of the Soldiers' Home. Col. Thomas Alexander, the deputy governor, served throughout this period as the acting head of the institution.

Despite Senator Hale's persistent skepticism, the Congress declined to take action on his measure. Instead, during the War Department appropriations process in 1859, congressmen attempted to reform some of the original Asylum legislation. The new rules reduced the size of the Board of Commissioners to a more manageable body of three officers. They also required that members surrender their pensions upon admis-

sion, providing extra income for the institution. Consequently, Congress was also able to lower the monthly pay deduction for active army personnel from 25 cents to 12½ cents. Perhaps most important, and seemingly out of a desire to improve the bad image of the institution, Congress also adopted a new name for the Military Asylum. For the rest of the nineteenth century (and most of the twentieth), the community would be known as the Soldiers' Home, and the inmates would finally be called residents.

The opening of the new main hall in June 1857 helped the Soldiers' Home in several ways. The imposing granite structure with its tall clock tower gave a powerful focus to the grounds and provided valuable extra space that alleviated at least some of the morale problems. Significantly, the transfer of residents from the Riggs cottage to the new hall, coupled with the construction of the two additional cottages called Quarters 1 and 2, and the existence of another, older nearby residence called Corlisle Cottage, presented the Board of Commissioners with a unique goodwill opportunity. In the summer of 1857, they began a tradition of inviting the president and the secretary of war to spend at least part of the hotter season in residence on their grounds in one of the vacant cottages. It turns out that George Riggs had chosen his country estate quite wisely. The Soldiers' Home was situated on one of the District's highest and most picturesque elevations. There were cool breezes and plenty of shade. In particular, the trio of newer cottages, with their various amenities, spacious rooms and broad verandas, had enticing features that offered abundant comfort, especially for the mid-nineteenth century. James Buchanan, the president who first accepted the Board's offer in 1857, lavished praise on the place that became his regular summer residence. "I sleep much better now," Buchanan wrote his niece in October 1858 from the Executive Mansion, "but not near so well as at the Soldiers' Home."¹⁵

The tradition of using the Soldiers' Home as a presidential retreat may be the beleaguered Buchanan's most positive legacy for his successor. While there is no record of him actually advising Abraham Lincoln to take advantage of



"We are truly delighted with this retreat," Mary Lincoln wrote in 1862.

the nearby cottages, within a week after meeting Buchanan at the 1861 inauguration, Mary Lincoln and her husband rode out to inspect the grounds. During the second month of the new administration, a local newspaper reported that the Lincolns and their young family of three boys, ages 17, 10, and 8, did intend to occupy the same "charming spot" as President Buchanan had done during his summers in Washington. Of course, the war intruded and Commander-in-Chief Lincoln delayed these plans, but the family ultimately arrived in mid-June 1862 for a long season in residence. There was a poignant reason why Lincoln finally decided to ignore the ongoing war and make a custom of the seasonal presidential retreat to the Soldiers' Home. The Lincolns' middle son, Willie, had died in February after an illness (probably typhus), leaving the family, which had already lost one infant son in the 1850s, wracked by grief. Mary Lincoln sadly labeled the spring of 1862 as "this time of our sor-

row." Thus, there was a kind of sad, poetic frame for the former Riggs estate. A banker and his family abandoned the place after the death of their child, allowing a president and his family to find some much-needed solace following the death of theirs.

The Lincolns enjoyed their new home and allowed the retreat to help them renew their lives. The president initially used the new location as a way to shorten his workday and to alleviate some of the relentless pressure from the crowds at the Executive Mansion. He came to enjoy the rhythms of his new status as a daily commuter, even after September 1862 when the War Department convinced him to accept an obtrusive cavalry escort that poet and local resident Walt Whitman caustically observed made "no great show in uniform or horses." One reason for the president's preference for riding by carriage or on horseback back and forth from the Soldiers' Home to the Executive Mansion was that it enabled him

to encounter the people, sites, and sounds of the District. Wartime hospitals, "contraband" camps for escaped slaves, churches, and farms dotted the roadsides near the Soldiers' Home. The journey helped liberate him from what he called the "iron cage" of the Executive Mansion. Lincoln also seemed to relish inviting guests to the summer retreat for casual gatherings and, sometimes, for discreet political reasons. The diary of Sen. Orville Browning, a Republican from Illinois and a close friend of the family, recounted several significant encounters during that first summer alone; a wide range of meetings with business leaders, political figures, and social acquaintances that established a diverse pattern which lasted each successive season at the Soldiers' Home. Here Lincoln was able to indulge his penchant for telling stories and for reading aloud from poets and playwrights. Browning's diary, for instance, paints a vivid scene in late June 1862 of the embattled president reciting a satirical poem by Fitz-Greene Halleck while seated on the steps of his cottage porch and with impatient visitors waiting inside. Later guests would leave awed by Lincoln's wonderful "elasticity of spirits," impressed by his sober logic but also by his entertaining sense of humor and talent for mimicry. At the Soldiers' Home, the president came alive in a way that proved impossible at the Executive Mansion. By mid-summer 1862, Mary Lincoln sounded almost ebullient in some of her letters. "We are truly delighted, with this retreat," she wrote, "the drives & walks around here are delightful, & each day brings its visitors."¹⁶

By the Civil War, the bucolic reputation of the Soldiers' Home grounds, the growing presidential connection, and a newly constructed national cemetery across the road attracted attention from Washington society. The institution and its grounds became a favorite destination for local residents interested in a quiet afternoon carriage ride. The Board of Commissioners allowed the grounds to be kept open to the public, and neither presidents Buchanan nor Lincoln, at first, employed any security to prevent general access to his retreat. Rebecca Pomroy, a wartime nurse, recorded one typical visit in a letter to a friend:

On Tuesday last [sometime in August 1862] I had a pleasant ride with some Washington friends. We went first to the Soldiers' Home, a place owned by [the] government, containing three hundred acres, on which are five stone houses, and a larger one for the aged and crippled soldiers who have fought their country's battles, and have settled down quietly till the Great Captain calls them up higher. We rode round the President's country seat, which is one of the five houses, and from there to the graveyard; a more sorrowful sight I have never seen.

Aldace Walker, a Union soldier from Vermont, described his casual Sunday excursion through the grounds with quite similar observations in a letter to his father:

This afternoon [Sunday, October 5, 1862] we rode over to Fort Totten in an empty government wagon, and visited the Soldier's Home, some two miles from here. This is a splendid granite building, with beautiful grounds, for the residence of soldiers who have grown old in the service. They can claim it, I believe, after twenty years of service. There are many there—respectable looking, cleanly old men; but they pass away very fast, and the graveyard is one of the strangest parts of the place. Thousands even of bodies are there, constantly shifting as friends claim and remove them. President Lincoln has his residence in an elegant, but not at all extravagant, cottage, within the enclosure. He was not at home to-night.

Less sophisticated visitors seemed even more impressed. Pvt. Willard Cutter, a young soldier from western Pennsylvania, simply noted in a letter to his mother that "the Soldiers Home is the nicest place I ever seen."¹⁷

As the observations from Pomroy and Walker suggest, the nearby national cemetery proved to be a compelling attraction all by itself. The cemetery opened on August 1, 1861, and was designed to provide a permanent resting place for residents of the Home and for other veterans who desired military burial. The sudden influx of dead soldiers in the aftermath of the war's early battles soon

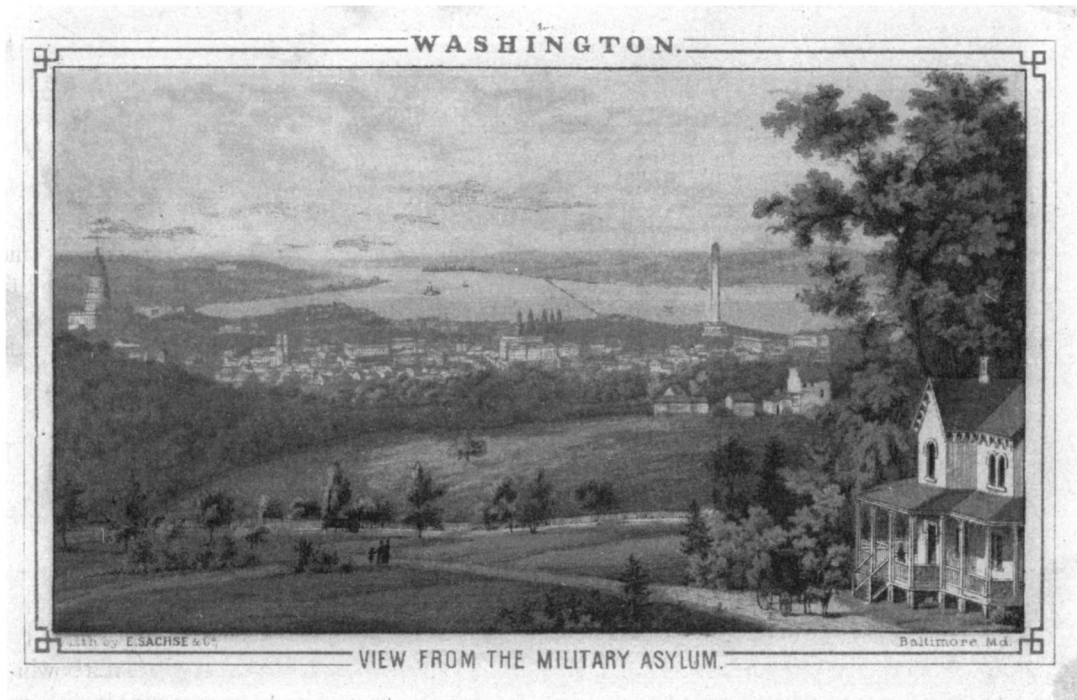
overwhelmed this original intent, turning the Soldiers' Home cemetery into a temporary graveyard for Union dead. Many soldiers' families removed their loved ones from the cemetery for reburial closer to home. Their actions wreaked havoc on the area and created what Walker had delicately described as "one of the strangest parts of the place"—the "constantly shifting" corpses. As the war dragged on, however, others viewed the situation far less charitably. An army quartermaster's report in 1864 blasted the "miserable condition of the cemetery in the vicinity of the Old Soldiers' Home" and noted that most visitors had "frequent complaints" about the "headboards obliterated by exposure" and the "hollows containing vast pools of water." According to the War Department, the Soldiers' Home cemetery received nearly 6,000 interments during the period when it served as a primary national military cemetery (August 1, 1861 to May 13, 1864). Out of these, over 2,500 were later exhumed and "Taken by Friends." It was the transformation of Robert E. Lee's wife's Arlington estate into a new, larger national cemetery in 1864 that finally allowed for the closing of the Soldiers' Home cemetery to any additional wartime casualties.¹⁸

Yet most residents of the Soldiers' Home still anticipated that their final resting place would lie across the road at the much maligned cemetery. Sadly, many had little else to look forward to. These years were difficult ones for the residents. Many had severe medical disabilities in an age when treatment for such problems was primitive. Ideas about how to structure "retirement" were also quite limited. Almost half of the home's nearly 200 residents left during the course of the Civil War. Some joined the fight or reunited with family. But many fled out of boredom or despair. Those who remained were often addicted to alcohol. The official records from the wartime period repeatedly cite problems with "incorrigible" or "habitual" drunkards. There were a number of fights. One younger soldier stationed at the home to guard the president's family reported that he witnessed two of the older residents kicking each other, commenting cheerfully that one of them was "stone blind." The attending surgeon

informed the Board of Commissioners that while he believed that "4/5s" of the residents were "good and excellent men," there were "others so bad as to put to shame a penitentiary convict."¹⁹

The surgeon, Dr. Benjamin King, might well have been correct about the ratio of "good" to "bad" men at the wartime Soldiers' Home, but it is difficult in retrospect to see how any of them could have been content. The men were required to wear hot, uncomfortable uniforms and were treated much like regular soldiers despite their obvious disabilities. The acting governor, Colonel Alexander, had to fight the Board in the late 1850s to get approval for even the most minimal expenditures on behalf of the residents and their desire for leisure activities. There was grudging agreement to purchase a handful of newspapers and magazines, such as the *New York Herald Tribune*, *Harper's Weekly*, the *Baltimore Sun*, the *Washington Evening Star*, and the *Charleston Courier*, but the Board resisted all efforts to construct a bowling alley or create a "smoking room." It took until 1869 for the Board even to authorize purchases of any board games for the residents. (They selected Fox-and-Geese, a popular cross-shaped peg game). For most of the 1850s and 1860s, it was work that offered the principal outlet for those residents who were healthy enough to contribute. The Soldiers' Home maintained a small farm and some members received extra pay for performing various chores, such as milking the cows. In 1862, the Board actually ordered the residents to do all the work required at the Home, cut the extra pay, and temporarily ended what had been a small but popular tobacco allowance for members.²⁰

To modern observers, the mid-nineteenth-century regime at the Soldiers' Home sounds unnecessarily harsh, but most contemporary visitors, with the exception of certain politicians from Capitol Hill, went away impressed. A group of women from California who came to the Soldiers' Home to see Abraham Lincoln in 1864 enjoyed a tour of the facility from a "jolly-faced, wooden-legged conductor" while they waited for their interview with the president. One of them later described what they witnessed in colorful terms for the *San Francisco Bulletin*:



E. Sachse & Company's ca. 1861 view of Washington from the "Military Asylum" or Soldiers' Home was probably prompted by its use by President Buchanan.

It is quite a study to wander through the abiding place of a hundred and fifty men who have spent years of their lives in active service, and know that until they change it for the shady graveyard on the hillside that stretches daily before their eyes, they shall have no other. They necessarily live much in the past, to aid in recalling which they have covered the whitewashed walls around their beds with highly colored scenes of action they have seen and had a share in, and glaring pictures of their favorite commanders—the heroes of their day. With such reminders, and under the soothing influence of a long pipe, they spend their leisure in the pretty summer houses that dot the grounds in front; or in the winter weather while away the hours around a mammoth stove that stands in the center of the bare but cleanly arched space that forms the upper story of the establishment, furnished only with hickory arm-chairs and an indefinite quantity of spittoons.²¹

Unfortunately, the opinion of the one contemporary whose reflections might prove the most revealing—President Lincoln—remains unknown. Though his actions betray a man utterly comfortable in his country surroundings, there is little in his writings that testifies to his impressions of the Soldiers' Home or its residents. In one letter, Lincoln described Colonel Alexander, the acting head of the institution, as "very agreeable," suggesting a friendship, but there is practically nothing else. Nor is there much direct evidence from the residents about Lincoln. In 1885, *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* contained a very brief recollection from a veteran about the Lincoln era at the home. He claimed only that the president "used to walk about in these paths" and that "he was very kind and familiar to us all."²²

Mary Lincoln, however, was effusive in her comments. In several letters, she documented her affection for the retreat and for the sanctuary it provided during the "time of our sorrow." The



In 2000, Anderson Cottage was renamed Lincoln Cottage and its preservation undertaken by the National Trust for Historic Preservation. Photo courtesy, Pictometry International Corp.

family spent each summer from 1862 until 1864 at one of the cottages on the Soldiers' Home grounds, and husband and wife often visited the place during their occasional afternoon carriage rides in other seasons. For Mary Lincoln, the Soldiers' Home thus became synonymous with family and hope. "How dearly I loved the 'Soldiers' Home,'" the First Lady wrote just four months after her husband's murder, "& how little I supposed, one year since, that I should be so far removed from it, broken hearted, and praying for death, to remove me, from a life, so full of agony."²³

Despite a premature report by the *New York Times* in May 1865, Andrew Johnson and his family chose not to spend any time after the close of the Civil War in the now famous presidential retreat. Neither did Ulysses Grant, whose wife apparently preferred New Jersey. However, Rutherford B. Hayes happily renewed the Buchanan's and Lincoln's summer custom in the late 1870s. In his diary, Hayes called the Soldiers'

Home "an agreeable abode," where he could easily rise before 6 a.m. to enjoy his "morning walks." He noted with pride that his wife Lucy was popular with the residents. He recorded a comment from a veteran named "Old Joseph" who had assured visitors that "the old soldiers love and worship her," claiming that she was "so human—not cold, or lofty with them." Hayes found himself intrigued by some of the older veterans, reporting in July 1879 that he spent one of his early morning walks interviewing a resident named Sergeant Gaines about his dramatic experiences during the War of 1812.²⁴

James Garfield and his wife Lucretia planned to relocate to the Soldiers' Home in late spring 1881 after she suffered a bout of malaria that was generally blamed on poor ventilation at the Executive Mansion. In April, the Board of Commissioners recorded that the president had accepted their invitation to use a cottage during the summer, and in June the *Washington Post* reported that the cottage was being refurbished

for the Garfields and that "Mrs. Garfield would be sufficiently recovered to be removed there by Thursday next." Nevertheless, when President Garfield was shot on July 2, 1881, the First Lady was instead convalescing in a New Jersey resort and had to be rushed to Washington.²⁵

Garfield's successor, Chester Arthur, enjoyed the Soldiers' Home during the hotter seasons. He also spent most of the winter of 1882–83 living in the former Riggs cottage while the Executive Mansion was being renovated. The institution's treasurer reported that during a subsequent summer visit the president enjoyed milk from the Soldiers' Home dairy (purchased at the rate of eight cents per quart), and an item in *Harper's Weekly* speculated playfully that the always fashionable Arthur would probably want to relish some fishing:

President Arthur has quitted the White House for the season, and is staying at that convenient resort for Presidents, the Soldiers' Home. Nearly all of the many rumors as to where he will spend the heated term agree that he will do more or less fishing. An interesting line of inquiry would be whether the President's special fondness for casting a fly has resulted in making that sport more sought after than it used to be.

Arthur became the last of four nineteenth-century presidents (Buchanan, Lincoln, Hayes and Arthur) known to use the Soldiers' Home as a retreat.²⁶ Undoubtedly, part of the reason for the reluctance of subsequent presidents to stay there grew out of considerations for the ever-expanding resident population. The Board of Commissioners had been concerned enough about potential disruptions to the residents that they put President Garfield's invitation to an unprecedented vote in 1881. It, nonetheless, received unanimous consent.²⁷

In 1888, the number of residents exceeded 1,000 for the first time. In order to accommodate the Home's growing population, the Board of Commissioners authorized several new buildings. The first on-site chapel opened in 1870. Barnes Hospital was completed in 1876 on the site of the old Corlisle Cottage. The main building, renamed

for Winfield Scott, underwent several expansions and renovations. The Sheridan Building first went up in 1885. The Board of Commissioners also expanded the grounds by purchasing several adjacent lots, including the nearly 300-acre Harewood estate, once owned by William Corcoran. Finally, the Board made significant changes to the home's governance practices. In 1879, the Supreme Court ruled that the home could not compel members to surrender their pensions, and in 1883, Congress revised many of the original rules of the Soldiers' Home that had been put in place in 1851 and 1859. The main goal of the 1883 legislation was to improve fiscal accountability—once again after a hostile congressional investigation revealed embarrassing irregularities, such as commission members receiving free produce from the institution's farm.²⁸

The dramatic alterations to the home's grounds in the second half of the nineteenth century were matched by an equally significant transformation in the demographics of the residents. Although immigrant enlistment never exceeded one quarter of the Union Army during the 1850s and 1860s, as many as two-thirds of the home's residents were foreign-born, with the Irish making up the largest contingent, about one-third, followed by a significant number of Germans (one-sixth) and then a smattering from various other European states. Disabled immigrant veterans filled the home in disproportionate numbers because, often cut off from extended family, they were the ones most in need of institutional care in the Home's first decades. According to the home's official history, the overwhelming influx of Union veterans after the Civil War remade the ethnic alignments and placed native-born residents into the majority by the 1890s.²⁹

Daily life for the late-nineteenth-century residents of the Soldiers' Home also changed significantly from the restricted regime of the wartime era. The Board of Commissioners finally began construction of a series of leisure outlets in 1877, including a bowling alley, billiards room, an expanded library, and various other recreational programs. An article from the *Washington Evening Star* in 1883 portrayed the residents as generally contented, though this was still before

completion of bowling alley or billiards room. The paper's correspondent noted that in the mornings in front of the former Riggs cottage, a designated reader would read aloud the morning newspapers to "an audience of old soldiers seated around, smoking their pipes." By the end of the 1880s, the Riggs cottage, no longer used by presidents, increasingly served as a focal point of social activities. In 1889, the Board of Commissioners agreed to rename the residence "Anderson Cottage" to honor the persistent efforts of Col. Robert Anderson to establish the Home.

Although the twentieth century witnessed more changes in structure, membership, and governance, three developments stand out more than any others. In deference to the changing technology of warfare, the Soldiers' Home received a new name after World War II, the U.S. Soldiers' and Airmen's Home. Then, during the mid-1950s, the Home accepted its first female residents. Before long, about two dozen former Women's Air Corps veterans (WACs) from World War II were assigned to live in the Anderson Cottage. Their numbers continued to grow in subsequent decades. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the other great social development of the modern era occurred in 1963 when the Soldiers' and Airmen's Home agreed to end what had been a de facto policy that segregated black residents in their own dormitory. Thus, one hundred years after Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation—a policy he developed while residing at the Soldiers' Home—the institution finally began living up to the promise that his offer of freedom had implied.³⁰

During the early 1970s, officials at the Soldiers' Home began to come to terms with the Lincoln legacy in other ways. The Anderson Cottage, always closely associated with the Lincoln family, had been in constant use in the years since they had resided there, serving as everything from presidential retreat to social center to female dormitory to band house to office space. In 1973,

the Anderson Cottage received recognition as a national landmark. Then, during the 1980s and 1990s, personnel and residents at the Soldiers' Home lobbied for more ambitious preservation efforts to finally secure and share the Lincoln legacy with a wider public. Eventually, their efforts drew the attention of the National Trust for Historic Preservation, whose president, Richard Moe, succeeded in securing the support of First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton. In July 2000, Pres. William Clinton declared the Lincoln Cottage a national monument—protecting it from further use and allowing the National Trust to move ahead with plans to restore the former Riggs residence and open it to limited public tours. "There is fragile, vital history in this house," President Clinton declared, "Today we come to reclaim it, to preserve it, and to make it live again."³¹

The decision to restore the Lincoln Cottage did not mean the end of the newly designated Armed Forces Retirement Home (renamed in 2001). Though the institution has struggled since the end of the Cold War with declining enrollment and financial setbacks, it still endures. In 2005, the Washington facility actually grew in size dramatically when it opened its doors to residents of the Gulfport, Mississippi, veterans' facility in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. Yet, there has been significant controversy in recent years over various efforts to modernize and economize while still improving the care. Still controversy is nothing new to the Soldiers' Home. Over the years the institution has always managed to combine great turmoil with profound tranquility. Columnist and local historian John Clagett Proctor, writing for the *Evening Star* in the 1930s, explained to his readers that for the "average Washingtonian" the Soldiers' Home "means a place of great beauty and charm, a place where one can drive over 10 miles of macadam roads and rest his soul the whole way." That statement is still true today and will probably remain so for years, if not generations, to come.³²

◆ NOTES ◆

1. John McClintock to Abraham Lincoln, no date, Abraham Lincoln Papers, Series 1: General Correspondence, image 39701-39702, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress.

2. Leonard Swett, "Conspiracies of the Rebellion," *North American Review* 144 (Feb. 1887): 187–88; Hay diary entry, Saturday, July 25, 1863, in Michael Burlingame and John R. Ettliger, eds., *Inside Lincoln's White House: The Complete Civil War Diary of John Hay* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1997), 67–68; Memorandum, July 17, 1863, Roy P. Basler, ed., *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln: First Supplement, 1832–1865* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1990 ed.), 194.

3. "History of the Department of Veterans Affairs," U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, <http://www1.va.gov/opa/feature/history/history1.asp> (accessed Aug. 8, 2006); Robert Louis Clark, Lee A. Craig, and Jack W. Wilson, *A History of Public Sector Pensions in the United States* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), 125–27.

4. See Eba Anderson Lawton, ed., *History of the Soldiers' Home, Washington, D.C.* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1914) and Patrick J. Kelly, *Creating a National Home: Building the Veterans' Welfare State, 1860–1900* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997).

5. Paul R. Goode, *The United States Soldiers' Home: A History of its First Hundred Years* (Richmond, Va.: William Byrd Press, 1957), 8–9.

6. Goode, *Soldiers' Home*, 10.

7. Lawton, *History of the Soldiers' Home*, pp. 32–33.

8. *Ibid.*, 10, 13, 23.

9. Winfield Scott to Secretary of War, Nov. 3, 1849, quoted in Goode, *Soldiers Home*, 20–23.

10. Goode, *Soldiers' Home*, 24–26.

11. *Ibid.*, 42.

12. Matthew Pinsker, *Lincoln's Sanctuary: Abraham Lincoln and the Soldiers' Home* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 128; Roland T. Carr, *32 President's Square: Part 1 of a Two-Part Narrative of the Riggs Bank and Its Founders* (Washington, D.C.: Acropolis Books, 1980), 66–67.

13. Carr, *President's Square*, 99, 104, 110.

14. Quoted in Pinsker, *Lincoln's Sanctuary*, 172.

15. James Buchanan to Harriet Lane, Oct. 15, 1858, reprinted in George Ticknor Curtis, *Life of James Buchanan: Fifteenth President of the United States*, vol. 2 (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1883), 241.

16. Quoted in Pinsker, *Lincoln's Sanctuary*, 34–35, 48, 161.

17. Quotations appear from the following sources: Rebecca Pomroy to unidentified person, Washington, Aug. 1862, quoted in Anna L. Boyden, ed., *War Reminiscences: A Record of Mrs. Rebecca R. Pomroy's Experience in Wartimes* (Boston: D. Lothrop, 1884), 105; Aldace F. Walker to Father, Fort Massachusetts, Oct. 5, 1862, transcripts available from Fort Ward Museum Library, Alexandria, Va.; Willard A. Cutter to Elizabeth Cutter, Soldiers' Home, Sept. 10, [1862], Willard A. Cutter Papers, Allegheny College, Meadville, Pa.

18. Quartermaster Annual Report, Fiscal Year 1863–64, filed Nov. 3, 1864, in *Official Records of the War of the Rebellion*, series 3, vol. 4, 892, 903. Note that the 1864 annual report also lists the racial breakdown of the interments: white, 5,447; black, 529.

19. See Pinsker, *Lincoln's Sanctuary*, 169–71 and Goode, *Soldiers' Home*, 70–71.

20. Goode, *Soldiers' Home*, 7, 91.

21. Quoted in Milton H. Shutes, *Lincoln and California* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1943), 255.

22. Quoted in Pinsker, *Lincoln's Sanctuary*, 169, 172.

23. Mary Lincoln to Elizabeth Blair Lee, Aug. 25, 1865, in Justin G. Turner and Linda Levitt Turner, eds., *Mary Todd Lincoln: Her Life and Letters* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1972), 94.

24. *New York Times*, May 25, 1865. The Hayes diary is available online at <http://www.ohiohistory.org/online-doc/hayes/index.cfm>. The entries quoted come from (in order of presentation): Aug. 2, 1877; May 28, 1879; and July 10, 1879.

25. *Washington Post*, June 1, 1881.

26. See Goode, *Soldiers' Home*, 112, for the detail about the milk; *Harper's Weekly*, June 23, 1883.

27. Goode, *Soldiers' Home*, 112.

28. *Ibid.*, 105, 111, 122.

29. See Pinsker, *Lincoln's Sanctuary*, 172–73 and Goode, *Soldiers' Home*, 136–37.

30. Goode, *Soldiers' Home*, 238–9. Pinsker, *Lincoln's Sanctuary*, 186.

31. *Atlanta Journal Constitution*, July 8, 2000, 4A.

32. John Clagett Proctor, "Historic Landmarks of the Soldiers' Home," *Evening Star*, undated, Soldiers' Home files, United States Armed Forces Retirement Home, Washington, D.C. See also John Clagett Proctor, *Proctor's Washington and Environs, Written for the Washington Sunday Star (1928–1949)* (Washington, D.C.: Published by the author, 1949).