

A Lincoln Site in New York: The Lincoln Depot Museum in Peekskill

by Rob Kaplan

Abraham Lincoln is known to have visited, or at least passed through, the New York City area six times—in 1848, 1857, 1860, 1861, 1862, and 1865. His first visit of any significance was in February 1860, when he came East at the invitation of Henry Ward Beecher and spoke at Cooper Union, a speech that is considered to have been instrumental in making Lincoln a viable candidate for the Republican nomination for president. Some of the buildings Lincoln visited during his several trips to the area are still standing, including Plymouth Church in Brooklyn, St. Paul's Church on Broadway in Manhattan, and of course Cooper Union, but their primary significance has little to do with Lincoln's visits. There is, however, one place in the area which, although regrettably little known, is commemorated by a museum dedicated to it—the Lincoln Depot Museum in Peekskill, just about fifty miles up the Hudson River from New York City.

It was at two o'clock on the chilly afternoon of February 19, 1861, that the special train carrying the president-elect pulled into the Hudson River Railroad station in Peekskill. Since leaving Springfield on February 11th, the train had traveled more than 1,000 miles, making nearly 80 stops along the way. Leaving Albany that morning at 7:45, it had stopped at Troy, Hudson, Rhinebeck, Poughkeepsie, and Fishkill before arriving in Peekskill. The original schedule hadn't called for a stop in Westchester County—the train was supposed to go all the way through to New York City, and then on to Trenton, Philadelphia, Harrisburg, and Baltimore before arriving in the nation's capital for Lincoln's inauguration.

However, Judge William Nelson, a former colleague of the president-elect's from their days together in Congress, had asked if the train might make a stop in his hometown of Peekskill. And no doubt aware that he would need all the political capital he could gather, Lincoln had agreed. When Lincoln stepped off the train, as had been true all along the route, there was a substantial delegation of local dignitaries to greet him. Perhaps more interesting, however, is that even though Peekskill's population, as reported in the previous year's census, was only 3,560, according to an article in the *Highland Democrat*, the local newspaper, "a large assemblage, about 1,500 or thereabouts was gathered, all quiet, orderly and curiously expectant" to hear what the president-elect had to say. And, as were all of the speeches Lincoln made during that inaugural trip, this one was short, simple, and hopeful.

"Ladies and gentlemen," Lincoln said, "I have but a moment to stand before you to listen to and return your kind greeting. I thank you for this reception, and for the pleasant manner in which it is tendered to me by our mutual friends. I will say in a single sentence, in regard to the difficulties that lie before me and our beloved country, that if I can only be as generously and unanimously sustained as the demonstrations I have witnessed indicate I shall be, I shall not fail; but without your sustaining hands I am sure that neither I nor any other man can hope to surmount these difficulties. I trust in the course I shall pursue I shall be sustained not only by the party that elected me, but by the patriotic people of the whole country."

Once he finished speaking, Lincoln got back aboard the train and continued on his way to Washington, arriving in the nation's capital on February 23rd. More than 150 years later, on October 18, 2014, the Lincoln Depot Museum, the 3,000-square-foot freight and passenger rail depot where Lincoln spoke that

cold February day, was opened to the public. Its purpose was to "illuminate and celebrate Lincoln's relationship to New York and to New Yorkers before and during the Civil War," as well as to "explore, remember, and educate audiences about the place that our local history played on the national stage." Located on the east bank of the Hudson River, a short walk from Metro-North's

Peekskill station, the museum was created with the help of then-New York State Governor George Pataki (a former mayor of Peekskill), who provided a state grant to restore the building, and County Legislator John G. Testa (the then-current mayor of Peekskill), who led a volunteer board of directors to incorporate the Lincoln Depot Foundation in 2007.

The museum's primary exhibit, "New York and Abraham Lincoln: The Indispensable Relationship," shows how Peekskill, the Hudson Valley, and New York State in general contributed to Lincoln's—and the Union's—success during the Civil War. As such, it contains hundreds of historical items from a variety of sources including the museum's own collection as well as artifacts on loan from other local institutions, among them the Peekskill Museum and the Field Library. A substantial number of items are also on loan from the collection of Brian D. Caplan, director of the Lincoln Depot Foundation. In addition, the museum provides information about local figures of the time, such as Chauncey Depew (at one time a United States Senator from New York), and local organizations, like the Peekskill Military Academy.

Four years after that first visit to Peekskill, Lincoln was there again. In April 1865, the special funeral train carrying the president's body from Washington back to Springfield followed the same route the inaugural train had taken in 1861. At a few minutes past 5:00 PM on April 25th, again according to the *Highland Democrat*, "The train stopped about ten minutes at the depot, and was witnessed with uncovered heads and solemn faces, and sorrowful hearts by the multitude. ...a solemnity never before experienced in Peekskill hung like a thick cloud over the place...and the solemn hour was generally observed as an expression of sorrow at the terrible calamity and the nation's loss."

Now, more than a century and a half later, not only does the Lincoln Depot Museum provide an opportunity to stand where Lincoln stood, it is also, in the words of Lincoln Group of New York President Paul Ellis-Graham, "a superb little museum," and one definitely worth visiting.

The Lincoln Depot Museum is located at 10 South Water Street in Peekskill, New York 10566, and the phone number is 914-402-4318. The museum can be reached from New York City by car, as well as by train from Grand Central Terminal, in about an hour. Open Saturdays and Sundays from April through November, the museum also presents numerous events during the year, including lectures by noted historians, musical performances, and films. More information is available on the museum's website—www.lincolndepotmuseum.org and on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. ~

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