

## Comments of Norman Hellmers on ALA Cottage Proposal

The Abraham Lincoln Association proposes to construct a replica of the six-room house that Abraham and Mary Lincoln purchased in 1844, but lived in for only two years before enlarging it in 1846. At that time, the Lincolns added a bedroom and pantry on the first floor giving them an eight-room home, in which they lived until 1856. The house was then modified again, raising the second floor to its full height and making other changes, creating the house in which they lived until moving to Washington, DC, in 1861.

Again, especially to be kept in mind as one reviews the ALA's proposal prepared by Michael Burlingame is that the Lincolns only lived in the original cottage for two years (1844-1846). In 1846, the house had eight rooms. For the years between 1844 and 1852, the house never had more than four people living there (the Lincolns and two sons).

Any statements (and there are a number) that infer that the Lincolns lived in the 1844 six-room cottage for more than two years are falsehoods.

### Comments on Proposal for Creating a Replica of Lincoln's Springfield Cottage by Michael Burlingame

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#### National Significance of Lincoln's Springfield Cottage

This section of the proposal attempts to make the case that a Lincoln cottage replica would have national significance. It is not successful. Rather than evaluating significance on the basis of long-established criteria (none of which are mentioned), it is merely a retelling of part of the Lincoln story. Such a replica would not have state or local significance, and it certainly would not have national significance.

The document claims that the "Cottage Project will illustrate vividly how Lincoln 'improved his economic and social condition.'" There is no explanation as to how this would be accomplished. Since the 1856 modifications were evidently paid for with funds Mary Lincoln had received from her prosperous father, this enlargement does not say anything about how Lincoln improved his economic condition, except that he married into money.

Note falsehood: By 1856, the cottage was **eight rooms** and was not "a six-room abode." This resulted from the 1846 modification.

The proposal, referring to the cottage, says: "That expansion [1856] symbolized the rise of the forty-seven year old man. . . ." (As noted above, it does no such thing.) To the extent that the story of the enlargement of the house should be communicated, it is already being told on Ranger-conducted tours of the Lincoln Home itself and in exhibits in the Harriet Dean House. Additionally, the size of one's house has nothing to do with one's rise in life.

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Regarding what visitors see in the Lincoln Home, the proposal says: "But to some extent, visitors are misled by what they see." Park Rangers who give tours of the Home routinely explain to visitors how the Home that they see today started out as a smaller house and was enlarged over time. They are not "misled."

In that same paragraph, the proposal, regarding the proposed cottage, refers to "what life was like for that family during the preceding twelve years, when their quarters were far more cramped."

The proposal refers to “how little space each member of the family had within the narrow confines of the Cottage.”

The proposal also says: “The pressure-cooker atmosphere created by its tight quarters doubtless exacerbated family tensions.”

The above statements are all gross exaggerations, apparently intended to justify the cottage project. They also all infer that the replica 1844 cottage is the size of the house where the Lincolns lived for those twelve years. These inferences are all false.

For the vast majority of the twelve years referred to, the family consisted of the two parents and two (later three) young sons. This **eight-room house** [not six, emphasis added], which had a parlor, a sitting room, a downstairs bedroom for the parents, a kitchen, a pantry, and three bedrooms in the half-story upstairs for the boys and a maid, was in no way “cramped,” did not have “narrow confines,” and was not a “pressure-cooker atmosphere” created by “tight quarters.” Michael Burlingame said that the “tight quarters doubtless exacerbated family tensions.” He gives no evidence for this “doubtless” assumption.

Michael Burlingame says: “. . . visitors will wonder how **so many people** [emphasis added] could comfortably live together in the Cottage.” (He is referring to the six-room 1844 cottage, a false premise.) Using the phrase “so many people” is a fabrication presumably intended to gin up support for the project. As already noted, for the majority of their twelve years of residence in the cottage, the family consisted of two parents and two young sons. These four people cannot honestly be referred to as “so many people.”

Also, by not including the bedroom addition, visitors would in fact be given a false impression of the size of the cottage for its years from 1846 to 1856. Understanding how many people lived in the house in those years cannot be done without consideration of the downstairs bedroom. The ALA’s constructing just the original cottage (ignoring the bedroom addition) and then telling visitors that this is the size of the house that the Lincoln family lived in for twelve years is simply a falsehood.

Perhaps most importantly, Burlingame displays a classist attitude in his conclusion about visitor reaction to the size of the cottage. A replica eight-room cottage, especially if furnished, would not be seen by a large number of visitors as cramped, narrow confines, or tight quarters. Many visitors, especially from modest circumstances, would find the cottage larger in size and more commodious than where they live. Are Park Rangers supposed to tell these visitors that the Lincoln family of four could not “comfortably live together” in this eight-room house? Most visitors would find such an explanation patently absurd.

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### **Suitability**

This suitability section completely ignores the National Park Service’s criteria for historical areas. Among the factors not addressed are:

- The cottage replica would not have national significance.
- The cottage would not represent a cultural theme that is not already adequately represented in the National Park System.
- The cottage would not possess integrity (it would be a replica and would not be in its original location).
- There are other criteria that are not addressed.

In the Suitability section, the “cramped domestic environment” canard is again repeated, as is the statement that the expansion of a “humble Cottage to the spacious Home” exemplify

Lincoln's "growth." As noted earlier, the "spacious Home" was the result of Mary Lincoln's family wealth, and, in this case, had nothing to do with Lincoln's personal economic "growth."

Again, saying that the original cottage represents the house "that the Lincoln family experienced from 1844 to 1856" is simply a falsehood.

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### **Feasibility**

This feasibility section does not address weighing all of the values and public needs included in the proposal. Saying that the ALA can purchase a piece of property that can accommodate the cottage replica and listing a few possible uses is an insufficient analysis.

### **Necessity of Direct National Park Service Management**

Burlingame claims that the National Park Service "has long considered it desirable to expand the park into the block south of its current location." He provides no sources for this. [I can personally guarantee that this was not the case prior to 2003 when my tenure at Lincoln Home ended.] The only addition desired by the NPS is included in its General Management Plan (GMP), which includes the possible addition to the park of the half block bounded by Edwards, Ninth, and Cook Streets and the alley between Eighth and Ninth Streets. The acquisition would address operational and management issues.

Although given the opportunity in the GMP comment process, **no one** [emphasis added] suggested adding a site for a replica cottage or the addition of the Elijah Iles House. As a first step toward its goal, the ALA could have requested that the National Park service consider a Boundary Expansion Study or a GMP Amendment. As in so much of this project, the ALA did not do its homework.

### **Summary**

This entire cottage replica proposal is premised on Michael Burlingame's opinion that the Lincoln Home in its earlier, 1844 form communicates two ideas:

1. That the fact that Lincoln could afford a cottage that was later enlarged demonstrates the right to rise. As Burlingame notes, the 1856 enlargement to its present form was paid for by Mary's father. So much for the right to rise justification.
2. That the six-room cottage was "cramped," had "narrow confines," and was "tight quarters." However, this is false, since only Abraham and Mary Lincoln and their son Robert were the only people to live in the 1844 cottage for the two years of the family's occupancy.

No amount of exaggeration related to the bogus concept of "look what a little house the Lincoln family had to live in" can justify its addition to Lincoln Home National Historic Site.

Comments of Norman Hellmers  
September 6, 2021