The Funerals of Abraham Lincoln

Abraham Lincoln has been a popular topic for scholars to research and discuss since before he was first inaugurated in 1860. Starting his life off as a lower class farm boy, he was forced to prove himself, both physically and intellectually, multiple times throughout his life. Once he became a known image in the public eye he was heavily scrutinized for his sloppy attire, lack of communication with his advisors, and his ways of carrying out policies. Some southerners saw him as a tyrant or as the devil while some northerners viewed him as a hero in a time of crisis. No matter what conflicting opinions people held of him during his life, there is no doubt that he accomplished a great feat, keeping the United States unified during a time of extreme conflict. His assassination however, came as a shock to both followers and antagonists of Lincoln and what followed after his assassination was more of a fanfare or parade than the type of funeral we would think of today. Therefore I posed the question that many scholars have also chosen to scrutinize; ‘what happened during this almost month long procession and what were the reactions of the people, both northerners and southerners, concerning Lincoln’s assassination and funeral procession?’

It is important to understand that during the nineteenth century, death was viewed very differently than it is today. Death was viewed with a curiosity and mysticism rather than melancholically. Some of the classic literature today like Frankenstein echoed the interests and fascination with death during this time. Death was not something to be afraid of. It was an institution that occurred to everyone at some point. At this time, death was “not only
comprehensible but instructive, redemptive, and glorious.”¹ There was also a ‘good death’ that all aspired to experience. This ‘good death’ consisted of being able

“to die in the fullness of age in the arms of family and friends. Nestled at home, the dying person could confront the transcendent importance of death and utter last words that would reveal not only the disposition of their soul but also serve as a spiritual lesson to those who attended the death. The corpse would then be cared for by relatives and buried with respect.”²

Death and funerals were not something to get over as quickly as possible as is often done in our culture today. They were a process to be drawn out, a celebration of life, and a time to bring the family together. The funeral of Abraham Lincoln was no exception. His funeral officially began April 21st, 1865 in Washington D.C. and did not end until his body reached his hometown of Springfield, Il on May 3rd, 1865. As seen in the programme³, Lincoln’s funeral procession was advertised like a fair was coming to town rather than the body of a beloved president. The number of people in attendance filled up the streets of each town along the trail as seen in the picture from the funeral procession’s stop in New York City.⁴ Death in the nineteenth century was treated as a good thing, not to be feared. People took advantage of funerals to honor life and enjoy their own rather than focus on the sadness.


² Ibid 18-19


Opinions concerning Lincoln and his death differed within each region just as much as they differed between the North and the South. Ellen Renshaw House, an inhabitant of Eastern Tennessee Savannah, Georgia born, held the stereotypical opinions often associated with the South. She was a rebel sympathizer and had no qualms about letting this be known. After Lincoln’s assassination she is quoted in her diary to say, “The report we heard yesterday of Old Abe’s being killed in Washington is true, and the best of it is that his murderer has escaped. Seward’s son was killed the same night in attempting to defend his father. What a pity the father escaped.” She was ecstatic that John Wilkes Booth had escaped and felt the South had taken back some of their dignity through the death of Lincoln and believed the Confederate States of America would soon be recognized as a legitimate state. Not far away from Ellen Renshaw House, the Charleston Courier stated a very different perspective on the topic of Lincoln’s assassination. According to the sentiments detailed in the Charleston Courier, the people of Charleston were overcome with melancholy and the entire town went into mourning by closing stores, draping pillars in black, and lowering the Nation Flag to half mast. The sentiments shown in the Courier are often overlooked when studying the Civil War to be replaced by the negative sentiments of the radical confederates of the time. Neither sentiment was less important than the other. Each had a different rationale behind it, which the believers strongly stood behind. Not everyone in the Union was unified in agreement with Lincoln or the Civil War overall. Southern sympathizers in the North were the ones who kept Booth hidden for so long. This became evident to me through my research and the differences in opinions found throughout both the North and the South.

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The funeral procession of Abraham Lincoln started in Washington DC on April 21st and stopped in ten different cities throughout the Union before reaching Lincoln’s final resting place in his hometown of Springfield, IL on May 3rd. The path of his funeral went from Washington DC to Baltimore, MD, to Harrisburg, PA, to Philadelphia, PA, to New York City, NY, to Albany, NY, to Buffalo, NY, to Cleveland, OH, to Columbus, OH, to Indianapolis, IN, to Chicago, IL, and finally stopping in Springfield, IL. The funeral car itself was a sight to behold.\textsuperscript{6} Constructed by Mr. B. P. Lamerson, the car was “of a deep chocolate color, the panels relieved with a delicate tracery of small pure white lines, the car would seem almost specially designed for its present use. There [were] twelve windows with plate glass panes on each side, and the entire exterior of the car [was] of the richest character.”\textsuperscript{7} The funeral car had been created for Lincoln’s use by Lamerson, but was not intended for his own funeral. This funeral procession was the hearse’s first use and was unexpectedly used for Lincoln’s own funeral.

The obsequies in Buffalo, NY are an example of how obsequies in all the other towns along the funeral trail occurred. At each stop along the trail, attendees were required to wear a badge that had Lincoln on it to symbolize the mourning occurring. The badges differed from person to person but typically had a picture of Lincoln on ribbons.\textsuperscript{8} Streets along the procession “became thronged with people of all classes and ages, till it seemed as if the population of the city had turned out \textit{en masse}.”\textsuperscript{9} The train through Buffalo lasted “one hour and five minutes in

\textsuperscript{9} Box, Henry W. 41
passing a given point, and was about two miles and a half in length.” Each city along the route obviously had their own style, but the order of events did not much differ. Things ran smoothly because they followed a programme.

The train’s departure from each town was one of sorrow but pride at the same time. For the citizens of Buffalo, they “acquitted themselves with high honor on this sorrowful occasion, and the part taken by them on the memorable 27th of April, 1865, will be recorded and mentioned to their credit for a century to come.” Each person involved in the proceedings was on their best behavior and did their best to honor their job as well as Abraham Lincoln. It was said about many groups involved that they ‘never looked better than that day.’

Lincoln’s death undoubtedly affected people all over the United States both supporters and non-supporters. Reports from newspapers around the country such as the Commercial Advertiser not only shined a light on the opinions of those during this time but were able to foreshadow his lasting impact on Americans for centuries to come. Abraham Lincoln, as noted in the Commercial Advertiser was “promoted to the sublime rank of The American Martyr.” His death could have been viewed as more detrimental than it was viewed but instead people chose to use this historical contingency to enact change. Lincoln’s death encouraged the people of the United States to persevere and finish the job he was working so diligently to accomplish. The obsession with him, his accomplishments, and his death has transcended his time and continues today.

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10 Ibid 42
11 Ibid 64
12 Ibid 9