

The Adventures of Lincoln's Corpse



Abraham Lincoln was one of the most celebrated and mysterious presidents in the history of the United States. His assassination sent the nation into mourning, and was followed by a two week funeral tour, by train car, across the northern states. But Lincoln's body did not find peace or rest at the end of this procession. Everyone from thieves to politicians tried to take control of the corpse — even decades after it was finally buried.

Here is the macabre tale of the journeys taken by Lincoln's corpse over the decades before 1901, when at last it came to rest in a ten foot block made of cement and steel.

Funeral Tour

After the assassination of Lincoln on April 15th, his body went through an extensive embalming process before embarking on a two week, sixteen-hundred mile tour via train on April 21, 1865. Lincoln did not make the tour alone, as the body of his young son William Wallace Lincoln accompanied him. Willy had died of typhoid fever at the age of 11 and had been buried in the D.C. area since 1862.

The tour gave the country a final chance to mourn one of its most beloved (and youngest) presidents, with the train making a snake-like tour winding through over four hundred train stations along the way, including stops in Philadelphia and New York City, before arriving at the Oak Ridge Cemetery in Springfield, Illinois on May 3rd, 1865.

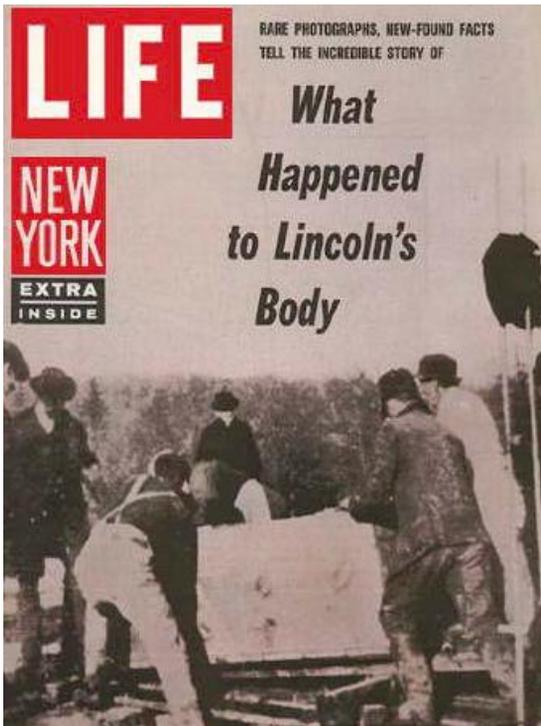
An extensive schedule of public viewings coincided with the train's journey, with Lincoln's body on display for 10 to 12 hours during most days of the railroad journey. This method allowed hundreds of thousands to mourn the fallen Lincoln during the two week traveling funeral. Unfortunately, by the time the train reached its stop at New York City Lincoln's body (kept in a special funeral car) had begun to decay and show a significant change in skin tone. This concerned many viewers that his corpse would not make it through the remainder of the tour. Luckily, Lincoln's body would hold out until it reached it's final destination in Illinois.

Snatching Lincoln's body

Lincoln's body resides in a tomb at Oak Ridge Cemetery in Springfield, Illinois, per the decision of Mary Todd Lincoln, but not without several disturbances. On November 7th 1876, a busy presidential election night, a band of counterfeiters attempted to exhume the corpse of Abraham Lincoln. They wanted to hold it for ransom in return for \$200,000 (a little over \$4 million today) and the release of Benjamin Boyd, a crafty, but imprisoned, engraver of counterfeit bills.

The group of counterfeiters-turned-grave robbers entered Lincoln's tomb and removed the marble lid covering the coffin, but did not succeed in moving the coffin more than a few feet before an undercover Secret Service officer (who had infiltrated the grave robbers' group) tipped off local law enforcement who were lying in wait at Oak Ridge Cemetery. Ironically, Lincoln had created the Secret Service at the end of the Civil War (1865) to combat counterfeiting, with the organization's range extending to presidential security in 1901 after the assassination of President William McKinley.

Several of the grave robbers escaped, but once captured, they received modest one-year sentences in Joliet State Prison. Lincoln's coffin traveled to a number of secret locations in the following years, with the coffin opened to confirm that Lincoln's body remained inside twice between 1876 and 1887.



The 1901 viewing of Lincoln's Body

The grave robbing attempt along with the deterioration of Lincoln's tomb led to his remains being moved to a temporary site, with Lincoln and his wife interred in a newly constructed tomb in 1901.

Lincoln's eldest son, Robert Todd Lincoln, suggested surrounding his father's coffin in a ten foot steel cage and covering the coffin in cement in order to seal his body and prevent anyone from moving it in the future. This idea had come from the burial of George Pullman (inventor of the Pullman sleeping car). Robert had been in charge of Pullman's burial and had feared that the railroad tycoon's body could be desecrated in future labor disputes with workers

Finally, on September 26, 1901, all was ready. Because of the permanency of this burial, a discussion arose among those present as to whether the coffin should be opened. Some people argued that the remains should be identified due to rumors around the

country that Mr. Lincoln's remains were no longer in the box. Other people thought that opening the coffin would be a violation of privacy. In the end, it was decided to open the coffin one last time.

Two plumbers chiseled an oblong piece out of the top of the lead-lined coffin. The piece these two men cut out was just over Mr. Lincoln's head and shoulders. When the casket was opened, a harsh, choking smell arose out of the darkness. Twenty-three people slowly walked forward and peered down. Mr. Lincoln's features were totally recognizable. His face had a melancholy expression, but his black chin whiskers hadn't changed at all. The wart on his cheek and the coarse black hair were obvious characteristics of Mr. Lincoln's. The biggest change was that his eyebrows had vanished. The president was wearing the same suit he wore at his second inauguration, but it was covered with a yellow mold. Additionally there were some bits of red fabric on his suit (possibly the remnants of an American flag buried with Mr. Lincoln). All 23 people were unanimous in their agreement that the remains were indeed those of Abraham Lincoln.

Lincoln's body, along with that of his wife and their three youngest sons, now lies in the Lincoln Tomb in Springfield, Illinois. A 1930 renovation of the Lincoln Tomb created more room for visitors, as the tomb became one of the United States first historic tourist attractions. Lincoln's body moved 17 times on the way to its final resting place at Lincoln Tomb, but ten feet of cement and steel ensures that it will take a lot of time and effort to ever move (or view) the body again.



- 1) How many miles did Lincoln's funeral tour cover from Washington, D.C. to Springfield?
- 2) After leaving Washington, D.C., how many cities did Lincoln's funeral tour travel stop in before its arrival at Springfield? (Use the map to help you)
- 3) The funeral tour from Washington, D.C. to Springfield took 2 weeks. Approximately how many miles per day did Lincoln's train car cover on the tour? (Round your answer to the nearest whole number)
- 4) Who accompanied Mr. Lincoln's corpse on the train car for the funeral tour?
- 5) What had begun to happen to Mr. Lincoln's corpse by the time they reached New York?
- 6) What important event was going on when the counterfeiters decided to exhume Lincoln's corpse and hold it for ransom?
- 7) What was the ransom that the counterfeiters planned to ask for to return Lincoln?
- 8) Why did the plan fail?
- 9) Why had Lincoln created the Secret Service in 1865? What led to the Secret Service being put in charge of presidential security? (2 points)
- 10) What situation had Robert Todd Lincoln been involved in that gave him the idea of encasing his father's coffin in steel and cement?
- 11) Why did some people feel it was important to view Mr. Lincoln's remains before he was permanently buried in steel and cement?
- 12) Who is now buried with Lincoln in his tomb at Oak Ridge Cemetery in Springfield, Illinois?