

Home for a Lincoln

The summer home of Lincoln's successful eldest son, Hildene is now a restored Vermont showplace and civic center that almost pays its own way

by Nancy M. Lee



HELEN DUNN; INSET: COURTESY OF HILDENE

When Robert Todd Lincoln (seen at right at age eighty) retired from a distinguished career as an attorney, statesman, and corporation president, he moved to Hildene (above), his Vermont summer home. Today the graceful 1905 mansion and its extensive surrounding estate—including twenty-five buildings and more than four hundred acres—have been restored and opened to the public.

The mile-long tree-lined driveway begins at a stone-pillared entrance, curves gently uphill, and sweeps under a porticoed façade. The Georgian Revival mansion commands superb views of the Green Mountains to the east and Equinox Mountain and the Taconic Range to the west. Stables, greenhouse, barns, even an observatory and a small schoolhouse lie scattered around the rest of the estate—all legacies of the Robert Todd Lincoln family, who owned and occupied the property for seventy years.



This is Hildene, in Manchester, Vermont, the long-time summer home of the President's son. Less sumptuous and imposing than the stately houses of, say, Newport, Hildene nonetheless possesses its own grace and dignity. As preservation architect Maximilian L. Ferro said when he first saw the place several years ago, "It is a very grand house in a heavenly setting, particularly well wedded to nature."

Hildene at that time was rather shabby. Now, thanks to the combined efforts of professionals such as Ferro and a small army of volunteers, it is a New England showplace that draws tens of thousands of tourists each year. It is also a thriving and self-supporting enterprise—a community center that plays host to symphony concerts, polo matches, and even marriage ceremonies. Says Executive Director David C. Sheldon, with pardonable pride, "We're one of the few historic houses that can just about make it on earned income alone."

Robert Todd Lincoln, eldest and only surviving son of Abraham Lincoln, surmounted crushing family



ALL PHOTOS ELLIE THOMPSON EXCEPT WHERE NOTED



NANCY M. LEE

The single most challenging (and expensive) project in Hildene's two-year restoration was the refurbishing of the 1908 player organ. The instrument was first dismantled, cleaned, and then stored all over the house (including the parlor, above). Professional restorer Larry Nevin, seen below lying beneath the double keyboard, worked for seven months to repair and reassemble it. Artist Sheila Foster (left below) volunteered for another painstaking task—repainting the scenic wallpaper in the dining room.



BOTH: MICHAEL LUTCH

burdens to become one of the most respected and prosperous men of the late-nineteenth century. As a lawyer, secretary of war, minister to Great Britain, and then president of the Pullman's Palace Car Company, Lincoln was seldom out of the public eye. His law partner, Edward Swift Isham, owned a summer home in Manchester. Lincoln often visited the Ishams and became so fond of the area that in 1902 he bought four hundred twelve acres there. He named the property Hildene (for "hill" and the Gaelic word for "dale") and hired the Boston architectural firm of Shepley, Rutan, and Coolidge to design a summer home for him.

The result was a twenty-four-room, eight-fireplace mansion to which, each year in May, the Lincoln family traveled from Washington in a private railway car. Lincoln equipped the place not only as an estate

but also as a farm: For a number of years he raised dairy cattle. He died at Hildene in 1926.

The estate then passed to a succession of Lincoln women: his wife, Mary Harlan Lincoln; his eldest daughter, Mary Lincoln Isham; and finally, in 1938, his granddaughter Mary "Peggy" Lincoln Beckwith, who lived there year-round until her death in 1975. Peggy Beckwith was accomplished in the arts, loved wildlife and nature, and flew her own open-cockpit plane, which she kept at a landing strip on the estate. Living far more casually than her grandfather had, Peggy worked to improve the farm; particularly during World War II, she milked cows and performed many of the other chores herself. She had a great fondness for animals and once adopted two orphaned baby raccoons, which she trained to climb a tree to reach the upstairs sitting room. Those odd denizens lived there happily for a number of years.

Peggy Beckwith was devoted to the Christian Science Church, and at her death the church inherited the estate. The legacy was accompanied by her expressed hope that it would be administered as a memorial to her mother and grandparents—leaving the church the option of selling if the memorial proved impractical. The church had difficulty administering such a large property, and after a year and a half of legal negotiations (and an anonymous donation of \$200,000 toward the purchase price), title was transferred to the newly incorporated Friends of Hildene. The trustees and staff, joined by volunteers, began to raise funds, plan for refurbishment or restoration, catalogue the items found in the various buildings, and work on the gardens and nature trails—all in preparation for the opening of Hildene to the public on July 4, 1979. "The problem was not going to be attracting visitors," recalls Dave Sheldon, "but gearing up in time to handle the tourist traffic."

The main house and grounds were opened in September, 1978, to test public interest in the historic estate. Visitors found a home that, albeit down at heels in places, was warm and very attractive. They saw a formal entrance hall containing a player pipe organ; a dark-paneled parlor; an ornately decorated dining room; Robert Lincoln's first-floor library, bedroom, and bath; six additional bedrooms, four baths, and enough servants' rooms to indicate the ease with which the wealthy lived early in this century. The Friends of Hildene trustees noted with pleasure that during the twenty-seven days of prerestoration visits, nearly two thousand people took the organized tours, and many of them offered enthusiastic comments. According to Sheldon, "We were confident that Hildene would in a very short time establish itself as a major port of call for the thousands of visitors who come to Manchester during tourist seasons."

The trustees launched a campaign to raise \$76,000 for restoration of the main house and formal gardens and conversion of the carriage barn to a permanent visitors' center, gift shop, and museum. By mid-April, 1979, two thirds of the funds had been secured,

some from foundations and government grants but most from businesses and individuals in Manchester and the vicinity.

Enter Maximilian Ferro as restoration architect. Ferro, a professor of restoration studies, heads a Natick, Massachusetts, firm known as the Preservation Partnership. When he arrived to begin his first detailed study, he recalls, "I was astonished at what the volunteers had already found. Cataloguing the contents of boxes and trunks in the attic, they had discovered a complete set of the original blueprints and specifications, photographs of each room taken shortly after the house was finished—and one roll of fresh wallpaper for each papered room."

Perhaps the principal problem faced by Ferro and Dave Sheldon was how to divide Hildene between its two long-term occupants and dominant forces, Robert Todd Lincoln and Peggy Beckwith. "We solved it rather simply," Sheldon says, "by restoring the first floor to Robert's time and the second to Peggy's." Because Peggy's tenure spanned five decades, the restorationists had to select a specific period on which to focus. They chose the forties and decorated an entire second-floor room with appropriate artifacts, including Peggy's collection of Bing Crosby recordings. Also in the room are her parachute and representative pieces of her painting and sculpture.

Hildene posed several small mysteries of the sort common to historic restorations. One involved the open porch on the west end of the house; Ferro decided that Lincoln had converted the porch to enclosed rooms, upstairs and down, after the original architects' photos were taken. A second mystery centered on the color of the walls in the main hallway. Dirty beige in our time, they turned out to have been a two-tone but virtually noncontrasting combination of creamy ivory and grayish white.

The first fund-raising effort allowed Ferro to complete about half the work he deemed necessary, including refinishing floors, painting and wallpapering the first floor (with the exception of the parlor, where he had difficulty matching the rose-colored grasscloth), plastering the main hall and dining room, and refurbishing the lighting fixtures.

The most difficult wallpaper restoration involved the scenic appliqué-type paper in the formal dining

Where the Mighty Fall

Although he did not accompany his parents to the theater on the April evening when his father was shot in 1865 (as the nineteenth-century composite lithograph at right would indicate), Robert Todd Lincoln was at the bedside when Abraham Lincoln died the next day. Thus began a disquieting association with presidential assassinations that haunted Lincoln's life. In 1881 he was walking through the Washington

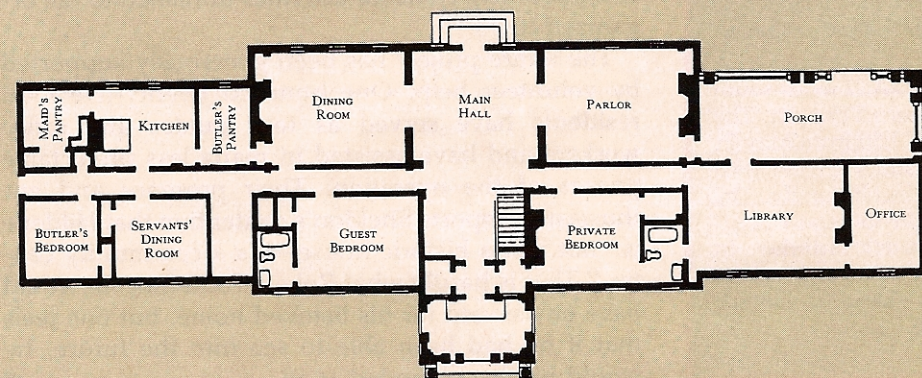


railroad station with James A. Garfield when Garfield was shot. Twenty years later, in 1901, Lincoln was stepping off a train in Buffalo, New York, just as an anarchist shot William McKinley, who was at a nearby reception. In each case Lincoln was on the scene within minutes. By a final curious twist of fate, when Robert Todd Lincoln died in 1926, his grave in Arlington was placed near the site where John F. Kennedy, the fourth President to be assassinated, would be buried.

room. It was composed of three layers—a base layer and a second and third applied layers—depicting sky, mountains and meadows, and trees and shrubs, respectively. Sheila Foster, an artist living in the Manchester area, is hand painting the wallpaper to restore its original color and condition.

The original photographs, when combined with the memory of the project electrician, who in his teens had worked at Hildene as a gardener, helped solve another puzzle about the house: how the main hall had been lighted. The photos depicted wall sconces, and Pete Brooks, the electrician, remembered seeing them; he carefully opened the paneling to find the wiring in place. When volunteers found the sconces in the attic, they were remounted.

Meticulous searching and cataloguing turned up many such memorabilia. Now on display in the main house and carriage barn (which contains the Visitors' Center) are books signed by Mary Todd Lincoln, the President's wife, and the novelist Thomas Hardy; a sample of crewel embroidery for a bedspread worked by Mrs. Lincoln; pieces from china sets used by the



Of Hildene's twenty-four rooms, fifteen are now open to the public. Because several generations used the house, the curators have restored the first floor to Robert Todd Lincoln's era and the second to the 1940's and 1950's, when his granddaughter Peggy Lincoln Beckwith lived there. As he grew older, Lincoln used the suite of rooms on the first floor almost exclusively—bedroom, library, and office. Almost as many rooms were designed for the use of the servants as for the Lincoln family.



Hildene's main hall (left below) features an 1890 Tiffany tall-case clock and an imposing center stair-case. Matching spindled cabinets on the landing house about a thousand pipes of the restored Aeolian player organ. Furnished with Victorian pieces belonging to Mrs. Lincoln's family, the parlor (center) is paneled with poplar, which the thrifty Robert Todd Lincoln had stained to resemble mahogany. The first-floor guest room (right) welcomed many famous visitors, including William Howard Taft, who vacationed there for a week in October, 1912, just before losing the presidential election.

