

Toy Soldiers in the White House

James H. Hillestad recounts Abraham Lincoln's association with toy soldiers

Writing articles for *The Standard* is always challenging. One hopes to break new ground and contribute something "lesser known." This is why the articles are captioned *Footnotes to History*.

The Norman Rockwell Museum

Along the way, a bit of serendipity helps, as when my wife Carol and I visited the Norman Rockwell museum in Stockbridge, Massachusetts. There, hanging among many moving, iconic paintings of American life, was a stirring full-length portrait of our 16th President.



Chesterwood

And just down the road was Chesterwood — the home and studio of the celebrated sculptor, Daniel Chester French. It was French who, in 1922, designed the statue of Lincoln that looks out on us from the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C.

Coincident with these new-to-me "discoveries," W.Britain produced a handsome figure of Lincoln. So, following the call, I embarked on researching the relationship of Lincoln and his son Tad with toy soldiers.

The Lincoln Family

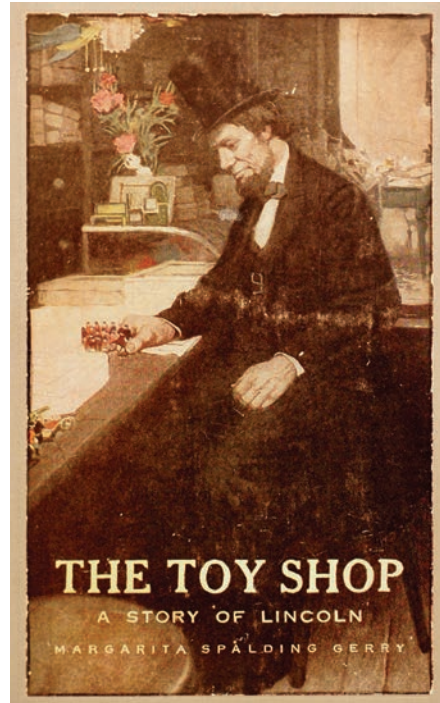
Abraham and Mary Lincoln had four sons: Robert, Edward, William "Willie" and Thomas "Tad." Edward died in 1850 at the age of four. When the Lincolns moved into the White House in 1861, Robert was at Harvard University, leaving Willie and Tad to entertain their father.

The boys had a tendency to create havoc. They had a fort on the roof of the White House, from which they would throw sandbags and water

balloons at people who had come to see the President.

Tad and Toy Soldiers

Lincoln was a loving and indulgent father. He bought the boys whatever their hearts desired. It was not an uncommon sight to



see President Lincoln and Tad strolling down Pennsylvania Avenue, hand-in-hand, to visit the Joseph Stuntz Toy and Candy Shop. A veteran of the Napoleonic wars, Stuntz was famous for his wooden toy soldiers, which he hand carved and painted at his shop.

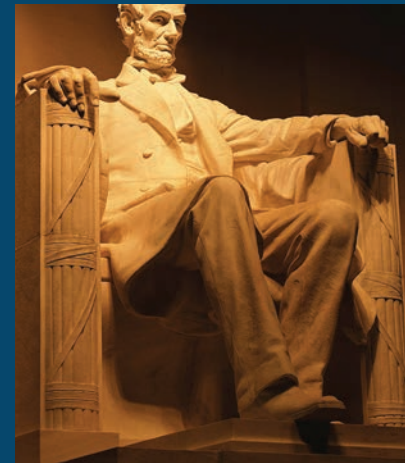
Tad used the soldiers to populate his battle scenes and would charge his friends and White House staff a penny a piece to view his orchestrated displays.

For an evocative read, I heartily recommend to you *The Toy Shop – A Story of Lincoln*, by Margarita Spaulding Gerry. Published in 1908, though only 50 pages long, it captures in parable form Abraham Lincoln's deep love for his son, and how toy soldiers were an important part of their relationship. ■



A Lincoln Myth Dispelled

Learning of my research on Lincoln, a friend shared the story that sculptor Daniel Chester French coded Lincoln's initials into the positions of his hands, using American Sign Language. In this telling, Lincoln's curled left hand formed the letter "A," and his relaxed right hand formed an "L" in ASL.



The underpinning of this position is French's association with the first school for the deaf in America.

Though it makes a good story, the truth is more straightforward, as described on the website of the National Park Service, which oversees the Memorial. To guide his design, French used actual molds of Lincoln's hands that had been cast in 1860. The closed left hand represents the power and determination of Lincoln's character, contrasted with the open right hand representing his compassion and openness. Nevertheless, art being art, every viewer will form his or her own impression!

My thanks to the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and to the Lincoln Financial Foundation for their guidance in writing this article.

LEFT TOP

Abraham Lincoln by Norman Rockwell, painted in 1962

LEFT BOTTOM

President Lincoln No.10055

CENTER

The Toy Shop, by Margarita Spaulding Gerry

CENTER BOTTOM

Tad Lincoln's toy soldiers, courtesy of the Indiana State Museum and Historic Sites

ABOVE

David Chester French's Lincoln statue in the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D. C.