

Cranford and Abraham Lincoln

By Steven Glazer

February 12 is the 202nd anniversary of the birth of Abraham Lincoln, our sixteenth president, who guided our nation through the transformative events of the Civil War. Although Lincoln spent little time in New Jersey—never sleeping even a single night in our state—he nevertheless directly touched the lives of many of Cranford’s own citizens. And residents of our town directly touched Lincoln’s life, too.

One resident, William P. Westervelt, helped foil the first assassination plot against President-elect Lincoln as he made his way in February 1861 to Washington for his first inauguration. Westervelt secretly cut the telegraph lines into Baltimore, preventing news of Lincoln’s arrival by train from reaching would-be assassins lying in wait there. Westervelt died at his Springfield Avenue residence in 1900, largely forgotten.

Three Cranford townsmen were members of the first full-strength regiment to arrive in Washington and relieve the beleaguered city, as well as President Lincoln, after the president's call for volunteers when Confederate artillery fired on Fort Sumter in Charleston Harbor. The three men -- including Henry Phillips of North Union Avenue, where the museum of the Cranford Historical Society is now located --were among those personally saluted by Lincoln as they marched past the White House on April 25, 1861.



Another future Cranford resident, James Turnbull of Walnut Avenue, was said to have shaken President Lincoln's hand after his regiment fought at Bull Run, the first major battle of the Civil War. A major landowner and developer of Cranford, Henry R. Heath, was at the head of the line to shake Lincoln's hand as he greeted the first Union prisoners to be exchanged in the early days of the war. Heath had spent four months near death in Richmond's infamous prisons before a formal exchange was obtained by Lincoln.

A prominent clergyman in Cranford, Rev. William H. Roberts of the town's First Presbyterian Church, attended Sunday church services in Washington with Lincoln. Rev. Roberts would be cited frequently in later years for his firsthand accounts of the Lincolns' wartime religious practices.

An attorney who later settled on Madison Avenue in town, La Roy S. Gove, attended Harvard College with the president's eldest son, Robert Todd. When the Lincolns went to Cambridge, Massachusetts, in early summer of 1864, they attended the college's commencement ceremonies and watched the two friends receive their diplomas.

And when President Lincoln and his wife attended a play at Ford's Theatre in Washington during the evening of Good Friday, April 14, 1865, a future town justice of Cranford, Wesley R. Batchelder, was there, too. Years after President Lincoln was assassinated that night, Judge Batchelder of Holly Street would speak in Cranford of the terrible events he had witnessed. James Turnbull, whose hand was shaken by Lincoln in the first months of the war, later served in the honor guard that stood over the martyred president's body as it lay in state at New York's City Hall.

Henry Heath, the Cranford developer who had been personally greeted by Lincoln after nearly dying in a Rebel prison, commemorated his wartime Commander in Chief by chairing the committee that erected the first overseas monument to him. In a driving rain in Edinburgh, Scotland, on August 21, 1893, Heath dedicated the bronze statue, *Lincoln Freeing a Slave*, to the memory of fallen Scottish-American soldiers. To this day, the statue remains the only foreign memorial to the men who fought and gave their lives in our country's Civil War.