
Lincoln tomb caretakers reel from negative critique, budget cuts on assassination anniversary

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Caretakers of Abraham Lincoln's tomb are on the defensive over an unflattering critique in National Geographic magazine and looming budget cuts that could threaten management of the historic site, even as they commemorate the 150th anniversary of the U.S. Civil War president's assassination.

The timing of a ceremony Wednesday to mark his death is awkward because Illinois — the state that calls itself the "Land of Lincoln" because he spent much of his life there before becoming president — faces a financial crisis. Gov. Bruce Rauner has proposed eliminating the state Historic Preservation Agency that manages sites including the tomb as it currently exists. He would roll the agency into another department.

What's more, the popular tourist site was pilloried in this month's issue of National Geographic magazine as having "all the historical character of an office lobby."

Recounting the route of Lincoln's funeral train to Springfield, Illinois, for burial, historian Adam Goodheart describes the tomb as "a disappointment" and reconstructed in "incongruous Art Deco style."

"It's strange to think that there is a place where Lincoln still physically exists in the world, let alone that it's a place like this," writes Goodheart, who is director for Washington College's Center for the American Experience in Maryland. Goodheart's publicist didn't immediately return a request for comment.

The hours and days the Lincoln tomb is open have been reduced, and it's staffed with fewer employees since state lawmakers last year cut \$1.1 million funding for sites in the Springfield area.

On Tuesday — the 150th anniversary of John Wilkes Booth's shooting of Lincoln, although the president was pronounced dead the following day — Joan Boatz and a group of former bridge club friends found the tomb's iron door locked, despite a sign saying the site should be open at that time. Chris Wills, spokesman for the Historic Preservation Agency, said the correct times when the site is open are posted on its website.

Supporters of how Lincoln's final resting place is presented to the public said the National Geographic portrayal was unfair.

"The author of the piece is certainly entitled to feel underwhelmed by the tomb's interior, but I think it's safe to say he's in the minority," Wills said.

According to the State Historic Preservation Agency, the tomb and its receiving vault have seen more than \$2.5 million in recent repairs and renovations, leaving it in what Wills describes as "excellent physical condition." The tomb's interior plaster and paint, and bronze and marble construction were renovated last year, and its interior lighting was upgraded for approximately \$730,000.

The state is currently working on waterproofing the receiving vault, repairing the stone structure's interior, and landscaping to direct water away from the vault, a roughly \$390,000 project.

Lincoln's tomb was designed by Vermont sculptor Larkin Mead, who won a national contest. It was dedicated by President Ulysses S. Grant in 1874.

Originally built on what historians describe as an "inadequate foundation," it was reconstructed first in 1899, and then again in 1930 to give the public access to the interior burial chamber.

Today, the tomb, a circular structure topped with an obelisk, has its interior sheathed in alternating black and tan marble and is trimmed with bronze. Hallways stretch on either side of a rotunda to the family burial chamber, where Lincoln lies below an inscription "Now He belongs to the ages."

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- See more at: <http://www.timescolonist.com/news/lincoln-tomb-caretakers-reel-from-negative-critique-budget-cuts-on-assassination-anniversary-1.1824009#sthash.ElvGkl3G.dpuf>
