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Downtown Springfield tour takes in sites significant to Abe and Mary's relationship

Adam Curran gathers 14 visitors in Union Square Park and promises he'll tell them "a story about love."

That story takes shape as guides Curran and Trevor Thompson lead the visitors around downtown Springfield, stopping and engaging them at sites that shaped the relationship between a gangly, rough kind of man named Abraham Lincoln and a genteel woman from a large and wealthy Southern family, Mary Todd.

The Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum on Tuesdays this summer is offering a new way to explore historic Springfield and learn about the unlikely romance between Abe and Mary.

The "Abe & Mary: Quite Contrary" free walking tour takes visitors to seven stops in downtown Springfield that were significant to the story of Lincoln and Todd courting, breaking up, reuniting, and finally marrying and having four children.

About a year ago, Clare Thorpe, coordinator of the library and museum's 10th anniversary celebration, was looking for something special to do in the summer. A walking tour was proposed, and Thompson and Currant started doing research and firming up their material after having it backed up by the museum's researchers and their bosses.

"We started out thinking about doing something just of Mary Todd," Curran said. "Then we realized this adds so much more complexity to the story."

The tours are offered at 10 a.m. and 1:30 p.m. every Tuesday through August and begin at the museum, 212 N. Sixth St. The walk covers about 1 1/2 miles and takes about an hour. The tours started with little publicity about three weeks ago.

Those who take the tour are urged to wear comfortable shoes, bring water and dress appropriately for the weather.

"There is a stretch that can be brutal in the afternoon when the sun is out," Thompson said. "We've had some rain, but it just cooled things down and didn't really get anybody wet."

Highlights

The tour's first stop is the current location of the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and the location of the home of Simeon and Eliza Francis. Francis was editor of the Sangamo Journal, a newspaper to which both Lincoln and Todd contributed letters — under pseudonyms — supporting their political causes.

The Francis home became a secret meeting place for the couple after they met at a cotillion in 1839 and took a liking to each other, much to the chagrin of Todd's sister, Elizabeth Edwards.

From there it goes to Chatterton's Jewelry Store on Fifth Street, now the location of Marly's Pub. Lincoln bought Mary's wedding ring there.

Another stop is the site of the Globe Tavern, a rooming house where the couple lived for about two years in an 8-by-14 foot room they rented for $4 a week. Their son Robert was born there. The site now is a parking lot on the north side of Adams Street between Fourth and Third streets.

After that, Thompson and Curran, both site interpreters for the library and museum, take the visitors to another parking lot on Fourth Street just north of the downtown post office. There a cottage once stood that was rented by the Lincolns for about six months. Mary's father, Robert Smith Todd, visited there from Lexington, Kentucky, and may have helped the young family with a down payment on a home at Eighth and Jackson streets, the only home they ever owned.

Intertwined

Jim and Alice Rutherford of Indianapolis were interested enough in the Lincoln Home National Historic Site that they planned to return there for a neighborhood tour scheduled by the National Park Service later in the morning.

"The guides are very knowledgeable," Alice Rutherford said of the library and museum tour. "It's a shame that so many of the buildings are no longer there."

Thompson said that while on the tour, other Lincoln-related sites are recommended to the visitors, but many are closed on Tuesdays.

Curran wears a microphone, and Thompson explained that's because the sites Curran narrates are the noisier downtown sites. That point is punctuated by a couple of passing freight trains, a bus or two, and the occasional truck with loud mufflers.

The Lincoln Home site and the current location of the First Presbyterian Church, where Mary's funeral was held in July 1882 after her death at age 63, are the final stops on the tour.

At that funeral, the Rev. James A. Reed described Abraham and Mary as two pine trees that grew with their roots intertwined. When one died, the other slowly wasted away.

"Despite their different upbringings, they shared many similarities," Curran said. "They both loved politics, they loved poetry, and they loved learning."

Angela Houk of Milwaukee, who came to Springfield with her grandmother, Betty Ignasiak, "to see the Land of Lincoln," said they saw the tour on the museum's website and registered.

"I learned some information I didn't know about Abraham and Mary's family," Houk said. "I was taken aback by all the suffering the family went through.

"It was all very interesting," she said, "and it was nice to walk around the city."

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Want to go?

The "Abe & Mary: Quite Contrary" tours are at 10 a.m. and 1:30 p.m. on Tuesdays through August and begin at the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum. The tours cover about 1 1/2 miles, take about an hour and are free. Reservations are available at presidentlincoln.illinois.gov; click on the "Abe & Mary: Quite Contrary" button.

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