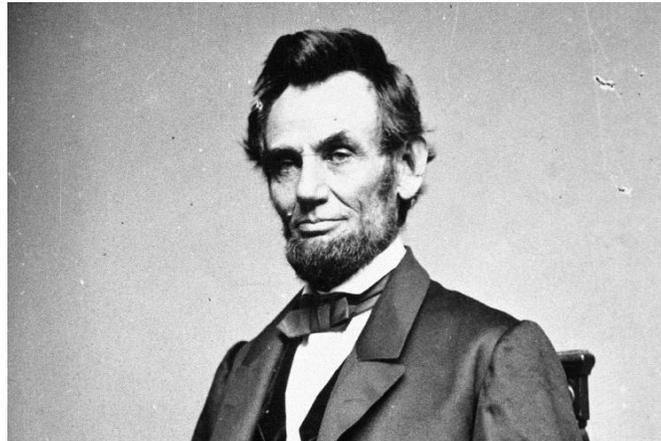


GREENFIELD RECORDER

My Turn: Our unfinished Civil War



• ABRAHAM LINCOLN

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The last person shot during the war between our North and South was the warrior- turned- architect-of-peace, Abraham Lincoln. There have been more than 4,000 known deaths related to that conflict since 1865, most now commemorated at Montgomery, Alabama’s Legacy Museum. It is a site everyone should experience.

For World War I, the shooting stopped with an armistice Nov. 11, 1918, but the “conflict” in Europe didn’t really end until May, 1945. In our Civil War, overwhelmed in Georgia by Gen. Sherman and in Virginia by Gen. Grant, Confederate Army Commanding Gen. Robert E. Lee was obliged to surrender. The fundamental cause of the war — White supremacy — has never been seriously addressed. Absent justice in resolution of such human conflicts, there can be no peace.

In 1828, 19-year-old Abraham Lincoln was engaged shipping lumber by flatboat from Indiana to New Orleans. There he witnessed dealings at a slave market. It was 30 years later, amid his Whig campaign against Democratic Sen. Stephen A. Douglas that he observed, “As I would not be a slave, so I would not be a master. This expresses my idea of democracy.”

It has been observed that had Lincoln not pursued the presidency he would be remembered as a great speaker and writer. Though he lost this Senate election, he’d been the master in debates with Douglas. Lincoln focused on the latter’s 1854 creation of the Kansas-Nebraska Act. That legislation allowed residents of these new territories to decide whether or not theirs would become slave states. In response, and in that same year, the Republican Party was established, not to oppose slavery, but to challenge increase in the number and power of slave states. Lincoln declared, “a house divided against itself cannot stand.”

With Lincoln the Republican's 1860 nominee opposed by three others, the South assumed slavery's future threatened. Before Lincoln was even sworn in, 11 states seceded from the Union.

President Lincoln conducted a lawyerly war against the South, not to end slavery — because the Constitution allowed it — but because the Constitution did not permit states to withdraw from the Union. Leading abolitionists Frederick Douglas, Harriet Tubman, William Lloyd Garrison, and others hoped slavery would end. Emancipation proved to be an unforeseen outcome of the war.

In his Second Inaugural Address, when the outcome of the fighting seemed clear, Lincoln was brief. He noted the powerful economic gain from slavery, that is, that slavery itself had been the cause of the war.

He concluded with the terms of peace he would offer the South. “With malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in, to bind up the nation's wounds, to care for him who shall have borne the battle and for his widow and his orphan, to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations.”

His own ambivalence about what was to become of the freed slaves — these mostly darker skinned persons — proved a most profound dilemma. Then deeply ingrained, the slaveholder's self-serving myth that Africans were inferior and needed to be looked after, was re-enforced by the Founder's Constitution counting them three-fifths persons.

So engrained was assumed White supremacy, Lincoln should not be faulted for contemplating then-current proposals to dispose of freed slaves through shipment back to Africa, or a colony created in the West.

Out of mind entirely until 1864, the expression “White supremacy” did not exist or appear in discourse. It was, quite simply, a European-based assumption. It was the rationale upon which White men embarked in the 11th century on the Christian Crusades and established colonies in the Americas, Africa and Asia. It was the unconscious baggage every White immigrant brought as a settler to the American continents.

White supremacists regard as enemies those who are ethnically different — Native Americans, Africans, Arabs, Jews, Asians, native people of Australia, New Zealand, or Pacific Islands. Anti-Semitism was popular and acted upon for centuries throughout Europe, but Adolph Hitler took this a step further — a policy of killing all of the Jews in Europe. The Slavic people of Eastern Europe, considered inferior, would be eradicated to make living space for Aryan German settlers.

Adherents to belief in White supremacy turned to pseudo-science but failed to find proof of their claims. American eugenics studies proved useful only to Hitler.

Charlemont resident Carl Doerner is an author and historian currently at work on a re-examination of and challenge to the “American narrative.” Part 2 of this essay will be offered in April.