

Presidents Come Alive

by Jeff Ives

Technology brings past U.S. leaders into the present.



Baker Vail

George Washington and Abraham Lincoln are taking a step out of the history books. A class of fifth grade students from Rockledge Elementary School in Woodbridge, Virginia recently looked up in awe at a wax statue of General George Washington heroically mounted on his horse during the Revolutionary War (1775-1783). The students were visiting Washington's home in Mount Vernon, Virginia. Today, Mount Vernon includes a new museum about his life.

"It was cool!" 10-year-old Jack Eghtessad told *WR News*, describing the lifelike statue. "It didn't look fake."

At the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum in Springfield, Illinois, fifth graders from the city's Iles Elementary School gasped as Lincoln's ghost materialized, or appeared, before them in the museum's library. "I felt like I was really seeing Lincoln," exclaimed Samantha Mackey, 11.

High-Tech Washington

Modern museums are changing the way kids learn about presidents' lives. Recently, historians have taken a tip from Hollywood and boosted museums' special effects to the next level. The Mount Vernon museum has drawn in more than 90,000 visitors.

The new museum at Mount Vernon displays three wax statues of our country's first president. One replica, or reproduction, portrays Washington at age 19. Another statue shows him at age 45, leading the Continental Army during the Revolutionary War in the fight for independence from the British. The third shows Washington in 1789 at age 57, being sworn in as the first U.S. president. Experts used historical documents, paintings, and digital technology to hypothesize, or make an educated guess, about what Washington looked like at each age.

In the Revolutionary War Theater, a documentary depicts Washington's military life. As the film plays, the theater's seats rumble with the cannon fire of major battles. Artificial, or fake, snow even falls from the ceiling as the film shows Washington crossing the Delaware River in a sneak attack on British forces in 1776.

"The children are really mesmerized by the experience," says Mount Vernon's educational director, Ann Bay. "We are, in a way, definitely on the cutting edge. We were inspired by the Lincoln museum."

Lincoln Lives On

Springfield's Lincoln museum hired special-effects artists to renovate, or renew, its exhibits in 2005. The museum covers 40,000 square feet, which is twice the size of any other presidential museum. Today, that space is packed with life-size replicas of Lincoln and his family, interactive computer consoles, and the "ghost library," where images of Lincoln and other 19th-century figures are projected onto steam shooting from the floor. The Lincoln museum has averaged about 12,000 visitors a week since it reopened with the new features.

"The whole concept of the museum is to try to reach a younger audience that learns information differently," historian Thomas Schwartz told *WR News*. He says the special effects draw students into the museum's history. In one exhibit, visitors watch as an electronic ticker counts the more than 618,000 Americans who were killed while Lincoln was president during the Civil War (1861-1865). At the same time, they see Lincoln struggling to hold the country together.

In a different part of the museum, Lincoln is shown standing solemnly, or gravely, by the bedside of his dying 11-year-old son Willie in 1862. "These are real people that had real tragedy, real joy, and real emotion in their lives. People need to understand that," Schwartz says. He thinks special effects help get that point across to visitors.

Young Again

George Washington (1732-1799)

A re-creation of Washington at age 19 is one of the first glimpses Washington fans have ever had of the first U.S. president in his youth. Washington was born to wealthy Virginia landowners. Before becoming a soldier, Washington began his career as a land surveyor. He later joined the British army and fought against the French in the French and Indian War (1754-1763). He then went on to lead the Continental Army against the British in the Revolutionary War (1775-1783). In 1789, he was elected the first president of the United States.

Abraham Lincoln (1809-1865)

A museum replica shows how Lincoln had to educate himself. Unlike Washington, Lincoln could not afford to pay for school. Lincoln learned by reading any book he could get his hands on between doing his chores. His hard work paid off. He became a successful lawyer, and he was elected president in 1860. Lincoln's leadership held the country together during the Civil War between the states in the North and the South (1861-1865). During the war, he freed all U.S. slaves in the rebellious Confederate states with the Emancipation Proclamation of 1863. He was killed in office shortly after the war ended.

Name: _____ Date: _____

1. Where is George Washington's home?

- A. Washington, New Jersey
- B. Springfield, Illinois
- C. Mount Vernon, Virginia
- D. Washington, D.C.

2. How does the author describe the new presidential museums?

- A. as places that need more updates and improvements
- B. as being very educational but uninteresting
- C. as old-fashioned and still not with modern times
- D. as being on the cutting edge of technology

3. After reading the passage, what can you conclude about the kids who visited the presidential museums?

- A. They would have rather been at school.
- B. They didn't appreciate what they saw.
- C. They all want to become historians now.
- D. They had a great time and learned a lot.

4. Read this sentence from the passage:

"The children are really mesmerized by the experience," says Mount Vernon's educational director, Ann Bay."

In this sentence, the word **mesmerized** means

- A. confused
- B. fascinated
- C. annoyed
- D. challenged

5. Which statement best describes the main idea of this passage?

- A. Technology is changing the way kids learn about the past.
- B. Wax statues were created to look just like George Washington.
- C. Abraham Lincoln was a great president and role model.
- D. Most kids like going to see movies that have special effects.

6. According to the text, what is Springfield's Lincoln museum packed with?

7. How might the special effects have changed the museum experience? How do you know? Cite examples from the text to support your answer.

8. The question below is an incomplete sentence. Choose the word that best completes the sentence.

Historians have recently used technology _____ make museums more modern.

- A. and
- B. but
- C. to
- D. for

9. What did the Emancipation Proclamation declare?