This year marks the 200th anniversary of Abraham Lincoln’s birth and Springfield, Illinois, has a full calendar of events planned in Abe’s honor. In addition to being the state capital, Springfield is Lincoln’s hometown, with a multitude of historic sites to explore as well as the fabulous new Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum.

It was here that Lincoln served in the legislature, opened a law firm, met and married Mary Todd, raised a family, won a seat in the U.S. Congress, was elected our 16th president and finally was laid to rest. Most of the sites marking his life have been made wheelchair accessible so that all visitors can follow in Lincoln’s footsteps.

The city now has a new favorite son, President Barack Obama. He, too, got his start in elected office in Springfield, serving almost a decade in the State Senate. On December 10, 2007, he launched his presidential campaign from the steps of the Old State Capitol where Lincoln delivered his famous “House Divided” speech. Visitors can follow in President Obama’s footsteps, as well, and take a guided tour of the new State Capitol and observe the Senate in action from its accessible gallery.

ARTS IN THE HEARTLAND
With a population of just 117,000 and a compact, well-groomed city center, Springfield has a small-town feel. The pace is slow, and the people helpful and friendly. This is America’s heartland and a place, as Obama put it, “where North, South, East, and West come together.” Drive a few miles in any direction and you’re suddenly in farm country. At the same time, however, because this is the state capital, Springfield has a vibrant arts scene and a wealth of cultural institutions. Venues for the performing arts include Sangamon Auditorium, Hoogland Center for the Arts, and The Muni, which stages open-air musicals by Lake Springfield. For fine arts lovers, the Springfield Art Association and Prairie Art Alliance mount shows throughout the year. Even the most sophisticated visitor will find lots to see and do.

FAMILY ATTRACTIONS
Kids love the Lincoln story and openly enjoy the Lincoln Home and the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Museum, with its colorful exhibits, lifelike figures, and amazing holographs. The accessibility of the latter is state-of-the-art for sensory disabilities as well as physical. When the seats shake during explosions in the theater presentations, platforms under the wheelchair spaces also vibrate for the full effect.

The Illinois State Museum has wonderful natural history exhibits, with lots of opportunity for hands-on learning, while the museum’s exhibitions of fine, decorative, and folk arts please adults as well. Also popular are the Henson Robinson Zoo and Kicks Family Entertain-
ment Center. Route 66, which runs right through Springfield, draws kids of all ages to such nostalgic attractions as Shea’s Gas Station Museum, the Cozy Dog Drive In—“The Home of the Famous Dog on the Stick”—and the Route 66 Twin Drive In, where two screens show double features all summer. By far the biggest family event in Springfield is the Illinois State Fair, held each August and offering a seemingly endless number of agricultural based exhibits and demonstrations, concerts, and carnival rides.

Springfield’s affordability also helps make it a great family destination. Some of the city’s most accessible lodgings, like the Microtel Inn, are also the least expensive, and there are good restaurants in every price range. In addition, many of the historic sites are either free or ask just a modest donation.

**GOTTA HAVE PARK**

The city’s Park District is dedicated to making its facilities inclusive and even offers adaptive carts at its four golf courses. There are accessible boating facilities and a fishing pier on Lake Springfield, and several paved bike trails lead to neighboring communities. A favorite among locals is the Washington Park Botanic Garden and nearby Thomas Rees Memorial Carillon, the site each June of an International Carillon Festival. Although the tower’s elevator is too small for wheelchairs, others with limited mobility can soar above the trees for a great view over the park and city. Washington Park is hilly but one can park at different locations to access its most scenic spots including a 350-foot boardwalk along a lagoon.

The latest district project is Southwind Park, a universally accessible, year-round facility for children of all abilities that will offer a wide range of educational and recreational activities. Scheduled to open in 2010, Southwind will eventually house the city’s first children’s museum as well. Creating this unique park is a goal that the community has warmly embraced, with much of the funding coming from private sources.
A must for nature lovers is the Lincoln Memorial Garden and Nature Center on the northwest shore of Lake Springfield, which boasts more than six miles of trails, including an accessible prairie trail. The terrain here is level, so even unimproved pathways may be manageable by wheelchair in dry weather. In fall the foliage here and in Washington Park is spectacular. In all seasons this garden offers a trip back in time, to the way the woods and prairie looked when Lincoln was a rail-splitter.

IN LINCOLN’S FOOTSTEPS

Both the Illinois Historic Preservation Agency (IHPA) and the National Park Service deserve credit for providing wheelchair access in an unobtrusive way at the various Lincoln sites they manage. Lincoln’s Home, for example, has a lift at the rear entrance that is recessed into the ground and all but unnoticeable. One does have to enter through the kitchen, but in this case it’s one of the best parts of the tour. Wooden sidewalks and curb ramps in Lincoln’s neighborhood are a bit uneven but do contribute to the area’s historic charm.

Access to the Old State Capitol is via an elevator located in a small, attractive brick structure on the south side of the plaza. Once underground you cross the parking garage and then take another elevator up into the famous structure. For the Lincoln-Herndon Law Offices, another site managed by the IHPA, visitors who cannot climb steps enter through the Tinsley Dry Goods Store next door and either take a ramp to the ground floor level of the building or an elevator to the upper floor law offices. Accessible restrooms are located in the store. Lincoln’s Tomb, also managed by IHPA, has level access, and the entry plaza has recently been resurfaced.

Even New Salem, the pioneer village where Lincoln lived from 1831-37, is manageable by wheelchair. Located 20 miles northwest of Springfield, New Salem boasts an accessible visitor center, outdoor theatre with integrated wheelchair seating, accessible pathways, and ramped access to a few of the rustic cabins, including Lincoln’s second general store. At the others, interpreters in period dress bring out artifacts and answer questions. New Salem also has a gift shop, snack bar, and accessible campground. This, too, is an IHPA property.

Other historic homes in Springfield that have a Lincoln connection include the Elijah Iles House, where he visited and played cards with Mr. Iles, Springfield’s first merchant. Moved to its current site in 2004, the property’s grand reopening was blockaded by the local disability community. As a result it now has reserved parking, a ramp, and a lift at the rear entrance. Edwards Place, the oldest house in Springfield on its original foundation, was in Lincoln’s time the center of the city’s political and social life. It is now owned by the Springfield Art Association, with access through their galleries. Here one can see the authentic “Lincoln Courting Couch” from the period before the Lincoln’s marriage.

Springfield is small enough that one can reach most downtown attractions without a vehicle. Well-maintained streets and sidewalks with good curb cuts make getting around easy for everyone. One great way to explore Springfield’s history is on a walking tour. Springfield Walks offers a variety of theme tours, all of which are accessible to participants in wheelchairs, except for the Haunted Dead Walk. Tickets are available at Tinsley Dry Goods, which also sells day passes for Springfield Trolley Tours. This hop-on, hop-off service makes stops at 10 attractions including some outside the city center, such as Lincoln’s Tomb. The trolleys are lift-equipped.

SPRINGFIELD DETAILS

Springfield’s hotels and motels are clustered in the northeast near the State Fairgrounds, southeast near Lake Springfield, and southwest near the main shopping malls, as well as downtown. None are further than 20 minutes from the city center. The two largest and most upscale properties, which host most conferences, are the Hilton Springfield downtown near the Convention Center and the Crowne Plaza in the southeast. A number of suite and extended-stay hotels are available, as well as a few bed and breakfasts. In general accessibility is good, with newer properties more likely to have the best access. Staybridge Suites, for example, has attractive, roomy wheelchair suites with a roll-in shower and even an adapted kitchen. It’s also far enough from major roadways to allow restful sleep.

Springfield Sites

Springfield Convention & Visitors Bureau
www.visit-springfieldillinois.com

Illinois Route 66 Heritage Project
www.illinoisroute66.org

Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum
www.alplm.org

New Salem State Historic Site
www.LincolnsNewSalem.com

Illinois State Fair 2009
www.agr.state.il.us/isf/

Southwind Park
www.southwindpark.org

Springfield Park District
www.springfieldparks.org
Springfield is Lincoln’s hometown, with a multitude of historic sites to explore.”
While the various hotel zones have a good variety of accessible chain restaurants, the best places to eat are mostly downtown. Maldaner’s, Augie’s Front Burner, and Saputo’s are local favorites, along with Fritz’s Wagon Wheel and Mariah’s in the southwest. The Feed Store packs in a crowd at lunchtime for its great soups, sandwiches, and salads. It’s got a prime location facing the Old Capitol with another popular restaurant, Robbie’s, just next door. The latter features live music, as does a fun, artsy café around the corner on South 6th Street, Trout Lily Café. Café Andiamo, on the same block, makes a mean cappuccino. Foodies will also want to stop by the Old Capitol Farmer’s Market, held Wednesday and Saturday mornings from May to October.

With St. Louis only 80 miles away and Chicago less than 200, many visitors choose to fly into these major cities and then drive to Springfield. One can also fly directly into Capitol Airport, only 20 minutes from downtown. All the major rental car companies have facilities in Springfield. The city also has an Amtrak station just two blocks from the Old State Capitol and a Greyhound bus terminal.

**COMING SOON...AN ACCESS GUIDE**

By this fall, Springfield will have its first-ever access guide. The city obviously has a lot to offer visitors, including those with disabilities. *Easy Access Springfield* will make trip planning simpler for older travelers, as well. Like its predecessor, *Easy Access Chicago*, this new guide is being created by Open Doors Organization under a grant from the Illinois Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity.

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**Available packages and destinations**

- **Bermuda/Caribbean Cruise:** a 9-night cruise that departs from Cape Liberty Port, NJ
- **Alaska Cruise:** a 7-night cruise that departs from Seattle, WA
- **Canada/New England Cruise:** a 9-night cruise that departs from Cape Liberty Port, NJ
- **Las Vegas:** a 4-night land and air package at the Treasure Island
- **Resort Orlando:** a 3-night land and air package at the Ritz Carlton
- **San Francisco:** a 4-night land and air package at the Clift