

Presidents' Day ceremony held in Edinburgh

On Presidents' Day on Monday, the White House Historical Association and the U.S. Consulate General Edinburgh honoured the history of Abraham Lincoln and the meaningful leadership his statue at the Old Calton Cemetery represents, in a wreath laying ceremony.

Jack Hillmeyer, US Consul General in Edinburgh, led the ceremony next to the 19th century statue alongside The Rt Hon Lord Provost of Edinburgh, Robert Aldridge, Cabinet Secretary for the Constitution, External Affairs and Culture, Angus Robertson, Alice Rourke and Tom Hughes who represented the John Paul Jones Cottage Museum at Arbigland, near Kirkbean in Dumfriesshire, Cllr Amy McNeese-Mechan and Stewart McLaurin, president of the White House Historical Association based in Washington DC.



Tom Hughes from the John Paul Jones Cottage Museum, Stewart McLaurin President of the White House Historical Association, The Rt Hon Lord Provost of the City of Edinburgh, Robert Aldridge, The US Consul General in Edinburgh, Jack Hillmeyer, Angus Robertson, Cabinet Secretary for the Constitution, External Affairs and Culture, Alice Rourke of the John Paul Jones Museum and Cllr Amy McNeese-Mechan who is a native of Illinois. All were attending a wreath laying ceremony honouring Presidents' Day in Old Calton Cemetery where there is a statue of Abraham Lincoln PHOTO ©2023 The Edinburgh Reporter

The US Consul-General said: "We owe Stewart McLaurin and the White House Historical Association a debt of gratitude for starting this wonderful, now annual tradition. "Four score and seven years ago". Many Americans will know those words. They mark the start of Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg address that he delivered as President at the official dedication of the Soldiers National Cemetery in Gettysburg Pennsylvania 160 years ago in 1863. The Battle of Gettysburg was one of the costliest of the American Civil War. More than 7,000 soldiers lost their lives. The Civil War remains the deadliest war in

American history with upwards of 750,000 soldiers killed. But out of that ruinous war came something virtuous and that is the abolition of slavery in the United States.

“Last week I was fortunate to visit the town of Hawick. I took part in a ceremony remembering the great abolitionist Frederick Douglass, and a speech that he gave there rallying support for anti-slavery causes in 1846. The speech itself was just one of many that he made around Scotland that year. He wrote movingly of his admiration for the Scottish nation and the sense of freedom that he felt during his travels here. It was a poignant moment for meant highlighted once again the shared ideals at the heart of both the US and Scotland.”

Built in 1893, the Abraham Lincoln statue commemorates the Scots who fought on behalf of the Union during the American Civil War.

The Consul General continued: “It is unclear why the six men memorialised on this monument made that journey across the pond to take up arms in the US Civil War for the Union side, but I can only imagine that it was driven by a commitment to freedom, justice and equality embodied by President Lincoln, virtues common to to Scots, and observed by Douglass on his visit to Scotland. Lincoln is remembered as one of our greatest presidents. The Presidents’ Day holiday was originally introduced in part as a nationwide means to mark his birthday. Today we take time to honour all those who served as Presidents of the US.”



Honouring Presidents' Day in Old Calton Cemetery where there is a statue of Abraham Lincoln PHOTO ©2023 The Edinburgh Reporter

The Consul General was able to inform the audience that President Biden had just landed in Ukraine to “give support to the Ukrainians in that horrible war which is marking its one year anniversary this week”.

Mr Hillmeyer continued: “This monument helps symbolise one of the deep and profound connections between the US and Scotland and reminds us that our closest friendship even extends to the battlefield.”

The Rt Hon Lord Provost warmly welcomed everyone to the small gathering to mark Presidents Day. He said: “It is particularly appropriate this year since our city just last year recognised and apologised for the hurt caused by our part in the slave trade and colonialism. We have now embarked on a process of trying to make good as best we can the hurt that has been caused by slavery.”

He mentioned the many instances of the “very long held complex and culturally rich relationship” between the US and Edinburgh such as the visit by Benjamin Franklin to David Hume in 1771 during the Scottish Enlightenment, the philanthropist Andrew Carnegie who in the 1880s offered £50,000 to the city to seed its first public lending library – the Central Library – where the words above the door read ‘Let There Be Light’. He also explained that during the festival last year many US musicians took part including the Philadelphia Orchestra, Herbie Hancock, and the US Air Force Drill team who “enthralled us all” at the Tattoo.

The Cabinet Secretary, Angus Robertson, spoke of his 20-year-long friendship with Stewart McLaurin and praised him saying: “When he’s back in the United States, he does so much to foster and support the connections between Scotland and the United States of America. And so he’s been recognised as a Global Scot.”

He continued: “There is little more that is as fitting as this

I think, Stewart, as a legacy, because you have started something which will endure. Not only are we marking a remarkable American president, we are remembering a very important moment in the history of the United States of America, where sadly, force of arms was necessary to ensure that all who live in the United States of America might be free.”

Mr Robertson said: “We recognise the six young Scots who left these shores to travel to the United States to fight in the American Civil War, but we shouldn’t overlook literally the tens of thousands of Scots who were already living in the United States of America who bore arms between 1861 and 1865.”

Tom Hughes of the John Paul Jones Museum explained that Jones came to be known as the Father of the American Navy. Mr Hughes said: “Here was a Scot who found himself an identity, found himself a place where he belonged, and it was in America. It was a different war – the war for Independence. He had been a master on a slave ship and we are still living with the results of this centuries later. We now try to tell the whole story at the museum.”

Cllr Amy McNeese-Mechan admitted she had been brought up in the land of Lincoln, although she has now spent more time out of the US than in the country. She also revealed she had attended an Abraham Lincoln school of which there are many right across the globe. The sixteenth president also left his name on many streets. The men commemorated by this monument weren’t the victims of of injustice, they weren’t slaves. But they read about this plight of black people in chains in the American South and they took action. They left their homes and families to risk their lives for those oppressed.”

This now annual tradition began only last year when the Association worked with the U.S. Consulate in Edinburgh to lay a wreath at the Lincoln statue.

This year, wreaths were being placed at presidential statues and monuments in the United States and in 21 other countries in an expanded global tradition led by the White House Historical Association.



The Rt Hon Lord Provost of the City of Edinburgh, Robert Aldridge, and Stewart McLaurin, President of the White House Historical Association, both honouring Presidents' Day in Old Calton Cemetery where there is a statue of Abraham Lincoln
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Tom Hughes from the John Paul Jones Cottage Museum, Stewart McLaurin President of the White House Historical Association, The Rt Hon Lord Provost of the City of Edinburgh, Robert Aldridge, The US Consul General in Edinburgh, Jack Hillmeyer, Angus Robertson, Cabinet Secretary for the Constitution, External Affairs and Culture, Alice Rourke of the John Paul Jones Museum and Cllr Amy McNeese-Mechan who is a native of Illinois all honouring Presidents' Day in Old Calton Cemetery where there is a statue of Abraham Lincoln PHOTO ©2023 The Edinburgh Reporter