

# THE U.S. CAPITOL HISTORICAL SOCIETY REACHES FIFTY

## PART I

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### FRED SCHWENDEL AND THE FOUNDING OF THE UNITED STATES CAPITOL HISTORICAL SOCIETY

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*By Jeffrey Hearn*

**B**Y THE TIME FRED SCHWENDEL arrived on Capitol Hill in 1955 as a freshman member of the U. S. House of Representatives from Iowa, he had already worn a great many hats in the course of a life filled with interesting experiences and interesting people. He was a joiner, a ready volunteer, and a tireless booster. He was an entrepreneur and a promoter. He loved his country and he loved its history, his passion for each inseparable from the other. And all this helped prepare him for the role he would eventually play as the driving force behind the founding of the United States Capitol Historical Society in 1962.

#### **HORATIO ALGER ON THE MIDDLE BORDER**

THE SON OF IMMIGRANT PARENTS, Schwengel was born in 1906 and raised in a German Baptist farming community in north central Iowa, near Sheffield, in Franklin County, surrounded by a large extended

family and neighbors who had come to America from a farming community in northwest Germany not many years before. With only German spoken at home, and church services delivered in German as well, he rarely heard the English language spoken as a young child, and did not learn to speak English himself until he began to attend school at the nearby one-room schoolhouse.

Many of the most important lessons he learned were taught at home, however, at the kitchen table, by his father. "Often," Schwengel would recall, "he would talk to the family about how fortunate he was that he came to America so we could be born in this great country. He talked about being involved." His father applied for citizenship immediately after he arrived in the United States, and passed the exam as soon as he could take it. "He was as proud as he could be to be a citizen. He told us about that very often."

Staying in school long enough to get a high school education was not always easy

when a big, strong son could be of great assistance at home on a small family farm, but Schwengel continued to pursue his education, often at great sacrifice, and graduated from high school in 1926. He had proven to be a talented athlete by this time; his exploits as a literal one-man track team earned him multiple college scholarship offers. At Northeast Missouri State Teachers College he excelled at both football and track and field, and, in addition to his classes and the jobs he worked to help pay his way through school, he helped found a college fraternity, joined the dramatic society and the history club, and dabbled in campus politics.

Graduating from college in 1930 with the storm clouds of the Great Depression looming on the horizon, he landed a job as a high school teacher and athletic coach in tiny Shelbina, Missouri. While there he discovered a talented schoolgirl athlete in a nearby town and developed her into a world record-setting discus thrower who delivered a silver medal-winning perform-

*Fred Schwengel (back row, second from right) in a family photograph with his brothers Carl, Harrold, Herbert, Forrest, sister Helene, and his mother Margaret and father Gerhardt.*



ance at the 1932 Olympic Games in Los Angeles. His own teams at the high school also outperformed expectations, and his coaching success made it possible for him to move on after two years to a bigger job with the school district back in his college town of Kirksville, Missouri. There, in addition to getting married to his college sweetheart Ethel Cassidy and beginning a family, Schwengel kept busy with a never-ending whirl of civic, religious, fraternal, and political activities.

He was active in his church, and launched a breakfast Sunday school program in 1933 for local newsboys that attracted Kansas City and St. Louis newspapermen to town to write about it. He served as "Dad" for the local Masonic DeMolay youth chapter and as an officer in their statewide athletic association. As a charter member of a new business and professional men's club in Kirksville he sponsored a recreational playground program. He served his college fraternity as its national president for four years in the

early 1930s and continued on after that as national secretary for many more years.

When the Young Republicans organized in the county in 1936, Schwengel became a township president. He attended that year's Republican National Convention in Cleveland, and then went to presidential nominee Alf Landon's acceptance speech in Topeka, Kansas, where he tracked down the chairman of the congressional campaign committee and persuaded him to make a financial contribution to the campaign of a candidate back in Missouri that party leaders in Washington considered a lost cause. With that money to work with, the race became a competitive one and Schwengel only narrowly missed an opportunity to go to Washington, D.C. as his candidate's congressional aide. His summers were filled with temporary jobs while school was out, graduate courses at the University of Iowa, and Missouri National Guard duty.

In addition to all this, by 1937 he was serving as the district president of the state

high school coaches association and had been promoted to supervisor for physical instruction for the entire school district. That same year, as director of the annual May festival, an event involving 1,300 school children, he integrated the festival for the first time by having children from the segregated black schools participate alongside the white children.

It was a busy life he met with boundless enthusiasm and a seemingly endless supply of energy. But with a growing family to support in hard times, when a small-town teacher's salary could only stretch so far, Schwengel eventually decided it was time to leave the teaching profession and look for better opportunities elsewhere.

In 1937 he moved to Davenport, Iowa to begin a new career in the insurance business. There he worked hard to establish himself in his new profession, eventually becoming his company's general agent for the region, and once again plunged into a wide variety of activities, just as he had in Kirksville. He remained active in his



*A natural athlete, Fred Schwengel excelled in football and track at the Teachers College in Kirksville, Missouri (now Truman State University).*

PICKLER MEMORIAL LIBRARY, TRUMAN STATE UNIVERSITY (ALL)

church and played an important role in interfaith activities in the community. He became more deeply involved at the Masonic Temple than ever before and also joined the Moose lodge. He joined the Junior Chamber of Commerce, became president of the Davenport chapter, and then went on to win election statewide as president of the Iowa Jaycees. And somehow he found the time to lend a hand when needed to the local Red Cross, the Community Chest, and the Boy Scouts as well.

Schwengel was also devoting more time than ever to politics. As president of the Scott County Young Republicans, he helped breathe new life into the local GOP after the New Deal had dealt Old Guard Republicans a losing hand in Davenport. He ran unsuccessfully for alderman in 1940, but four years later was persuaded to run for state representative and won, going on to serve five terms in the Iowa General Assembly before an opportunity to run for an open seat in Congress presented itself in 1954. By then eyeing a run for state governor, Schwengel needed to be persuaded to shift direction and make the

run for Congress, but in the end he entered the race for Iowa's First District and won.

Alongside all these different activities and interests, however, there was one more that had been becoming an ever larger part of his life through the years: a love of history, and, in particular, a passionate interest in Abraham Lincoln. Indeed, it is fair to say that by the time he took the oath of office as a Member of Congress, in addition to everything else, Fred Schwengel was not only an ardent "Lincoln nut" and history buff, he was well on his way to becoming an amateur historian himself.

## DISCOVERING HISTORY

THE BEGINNINGS of Schwengel's interest in history go back at least as far as his college days, when he found himself on a road trip with the football team one morning in Kansas City with some time to kill before the team had to get back on the bus. He happened upon a used bookstore with a box of books out front and a sign that read "Help yourself for a dime." A biography of

Abraham Lincoln caught his eye, and, having just heard an interesting lecture about Lincoln in his political science class, he decided to buy the book. Once he started reading it he found that he could not put it down.

Soon after, Carl Sandburg, who had published *Abraham Lincoln: The Prairie Years* just two years before in 1926, came to town to speak at a teachers meeting. Encouraged by a professor to attend the talk, Schwengel went and was able to meet Sandburg. He mentioned that he had just bought a Lincoln book himself, written by a fellow named J. G. Holland. Sandburg told him that the Holland book was a good book, one of the best ever written about Lincoln. "Hang onto that book," Schwengel recalled him saying. "It will be worth more than a dime someday." And then Sandburg suggested that if he had an interest in history, he would find Lincoln to be an interesting subject and he might want to get some more books on Lincoln and keep reading about him.

Another chance meeting four years later, this time with a future president of the United States, would further stimulate

Schwengel's growing interest in history. In 1934 Harry Truman, then running for U.S. senator, came to Kirksville to speak at a meeting at the Masonic Temple; Schwengel was in charge of refreshments. Truman's host for the evening was Dr. Willis Bray, a dean at the college. "Brother Schwengel," Bray told Truman, was a historian. Truman grabbed Brother Schwengel by the coat, repeated some of the things he'd said in his speech, and then said "You gotta know your history, young man, if you want to be a good citizen." Like Sandburg's suggestion regarding Lincoln, it was advice Schwengel would take to heart and remember for the rest of his life.

In Davenport, Schwengel soon met Judge James Bollinger. Bollinger was a history buff and Lincoln collector. In fact, he had the largest collection of Lincolniana in the state of Iowa, and every year he traveled to Springfield, Illinois with a carload of friends from Iowa to attend the annual Abraham Lincoln Association banquet celebrating Lincoln's birthday, where he would routinely host an elaborate dinner of his own the night before, followed by a reception back at his hotel room. Schwengel was invited by Bollinger to come along to Springfield with him as his guest and thereby met many of the leading Lincoln aficionados of the day. He became friends with Ralph Newman, for instance, who had opened the Abraham Lincoln Book Shop in Chicago just a few years before and would be a founder of the first Civil War Round Table in 1940. Schwengel was also able to renew his acquaintance with Sandburg in Springfield one year, and let him know that he had taken his advice and begun to add many a Lincoln volume to his bookshelves alongside "the Holland book."

Judge Bollinger was also responsible for getting Schwengel started on a long career as a public speaker by arranging to have him give a patriotic address on Flag Day for the local Women's Relief Corps

auxiliary to the Grand Army of the Republic, the Civil War veterans group, something he would go on to do annually for many years to come. Schwengel was also active alongside Bollinger in Davenport's History Roundtable, where he served as the club archivist, saving copies of the papers that were delivered by guest

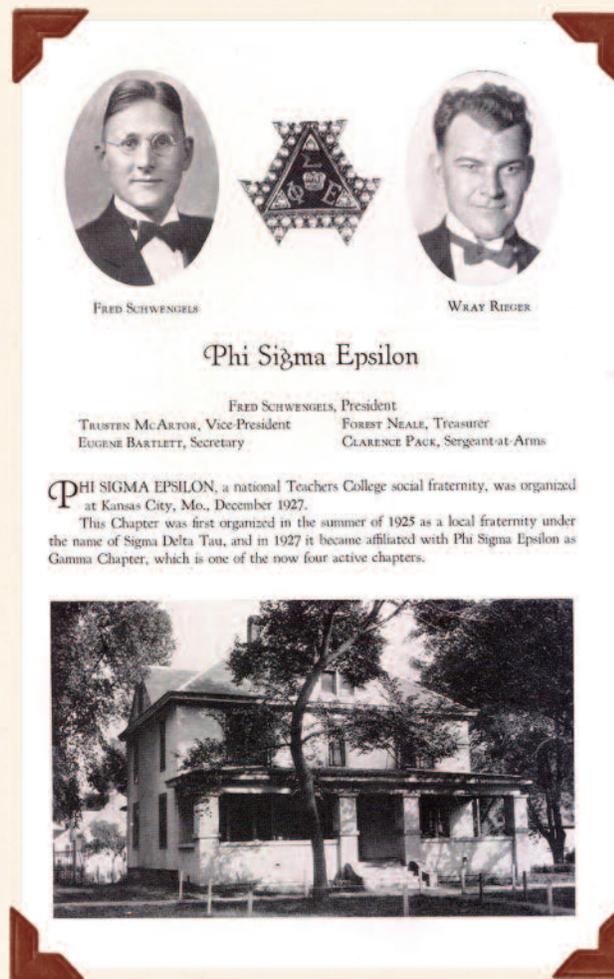
Sanitary Commission during the Civil War who took up the cause of soldier's orphans, and later became the first president of the Women's Christian Temperance Union—with the intention of one day writing a book about her.

By the late 1940s, Schwengel's interest in history increasingly intersected with his

work as a legislator in the Iowa General Assembly. When the organizers of the Herbert Hoover Birthplace Society came to the state legislature looking for help in acquiring land for a park at the Hoover boyhood home in West Branch, Iowa, it was Schwengel who wrote the legislation that secured the funding. He also authored a bill that renamed the Iowa State Orphan's Home in Davenport the Annie Wittenmyer Home, in honor of the woman he was fast becoming an authority on.

The idea for a study of the life of Wittenmyer had been suggested to him by the State Historical Society of Iowa (SHSI). He became friends with a research associate there, William

Petersen, and, according to one source, it was Schwengel, an increasingly influential member of the state legislature, whom Petersen worked with as much as any other as he attempted to "pack" the SHSI's Board of Curators with members who would look favorably upon his promotion to supervisor of the society, which indeed did occur in 1947.



***A natural leader, Fred Schwengel was president of his college fraternity, Phi Sigma Epsilon.***

speakers through the years. He got his first taste of what it was like to be a historian himself by writing and publishing a short history of the Masons in Davenport. And his book collecting began to grow beyond an interest in just Lincoln to include books on women in the Civil War. By 1945 he had begun researching the life of Annie Wittenmyer—a member of the Iowa State



*Schwengel also served on the student council. Note that in these images from his collegiate days, his name was spelled "Schwengels." At some point, he dropped the final "s."*

## CONSENSUS HISTORY ON THE PRAIRIE

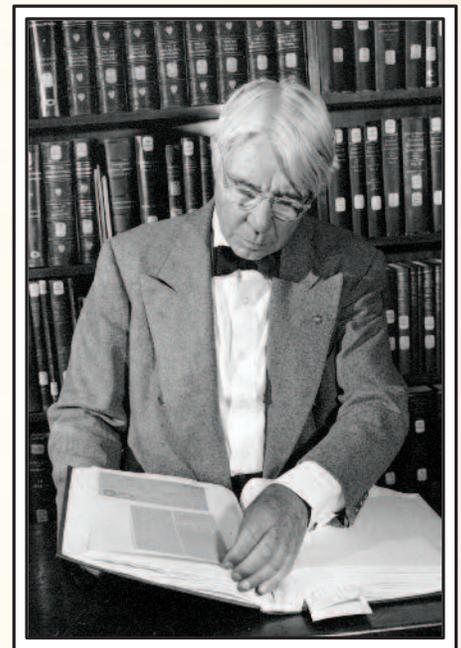
These post-war years were a time when many academic historians were abandoning the interpretive approach of earlier "progressive" historians, who had emphasized the theme of conflict in American history. In the progressive historians' place emerged a "consensus" school of historians who were more interested in what Americans had in common than what divided them, in enduring accomplishments, instead of a recurring battle between the forces of reform and the forces of reaction. It was a way of thinking about the past that encouraged a more celebratory, patriotic approach to the nation's history, very different from the reform-oriented approach it superseded within the discipline, especially when wedded to a focus on good old-fashioned storytelling at a time when many academic historians increasingly thought of their work not as one of the humanities, but as a variety of social science.

Allan Nevins, a two-time Pulitzer Prize-

winning biographer then working on *Ordeal of the Union*, his eight-volume history of the Civil War, was the leading exemplar of this more accessible, narrative approach to history writing at mid-century. Though a professor of history at Columbia University, Nevins was a journalist by training and more concerned with reaching a broad popular audience than engaging in an arcane scholarly conversation with other professional historians. According to Nevins biographer Gerald L. Fetner,

Nevins used narrative not only to tell a story but to propound moral lessons. It was not his inclination to deal in intellectual concepts or theories, like many academic scholars. He preferred emphasizing practical notions about the importance of national unity, principled leadership, liberal politics, enlightened journalism, the social responsibility of business and industry, and scientific and technical progress that added to the cultural improvement of humanity.

In 1939, Nevins and other similarly inclined historians founded the Society of American Historians (SAH) to promote "literary distinction in the writing of history and biography." *American Heritage* magazine, launched in 1954 with Pulitzer Prize-winning Civil War historian and former journalist Bruce Catton at its helm, was sponsored in part by the SAH and dedicated to bringing "good historical writing to the largest possible audience." This was history for history buffs, for amateur enthusiasts, not the "dry-as-dust" (Nevins' term) product of academicians, and Nevins, Catton, *American Heritage*, and the like were all riding high in the 1950s, being eminently more suitable for consumption by a growing middle-class in a time of increasing affluence and Cold War-fueled demands for political consensus than anything that would have been found on the cutting edge of the scholarly world.



*Meeting the American poet and Lincoln biographer Carl Sandburg in 1928 had a profound impact on Schwengel's interest in American history and Abraham Lincoln. In this photograph from a later time in his life, Sandburg is seen examining the Lincoln Papers.*

CARL SANDBURG HOME NATIONAL HISTORIC SITE, NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

This was also the kind of history that Schwengel loved, and in Iowa he found something very similar being practiced by the state historical society. William Petersen's own approach to history, and to running a historical society, was very much in tune with the times. He was noted for his interest in making history accessible to a popular audience, in part through the SHSI publication *Palimpsest*. Originally designed for use by history teachers and their students, Petersen sought to attract a broader readership with editorial changes to the magazine such as the inclusion of a greatly expanded number of illustrations and by organizing each month's issue around a common theme. He was also a skilled promoter of the society and succeeded at growing its membership through such activities as his popular steamboat trips on the Mississippi River. "Steamboat Bill," as he was widely known, was an important early scholar of Upper Mississippi River studies and he not only provided members with an enjoyable afternoon on the Mississippi, he regaled his guests with tales of the river and afforded them an opportunity to hobnob with public figures such as his good friend, up-and-coming State Representative Fred Schwengel. By 1960 Petersen's State Historical Society of Iowa had enrolled more members than the historical societies of Illinois, New York, California, and Texas combined, and Schwengel had a ringside seat from the beginning that enabled him to see exactly how Steamboat Bill did it.



HARRY S. TRUMAN LIBRARY AND MUSEUM

*As a young teacher in Kirksville, Schwengel met Harry Truman, then campaigning for the Senate in Missouri. Although Schwengel was a Republican and Truman a Democrat, they shared a passion for history.*

## MR. SCHWENDEL GOES TO WASHINGTON

ONCE IN WASHINGTON, Schwengel's interest in Lincoln and the history of the Civil War soon led him to a new circle of friends who shared his passionate interest in the past. A couple of weeks after he was sworn in as a member of Congress, an item on Schwengel appeared in Drew Pearson's syndicated column *Washington Merry-Go-Round* that described him as "an admirer of Abraham Lincoln and an authority, from his school-teaching days, on the history of the Civil War." Immediately afterwards Schwengel received a visit from Victor Birely, a D.C. investment banker and past president of the Lincoln Group of the District of Columbia, who signed him up as a member of the group. He wrote Ralph Newman to ask whom he should contact

in order to join the D.C. Civil War Round Table. And before that first month in office was out he was on a first name basis with David Mearns, chief of the Manuscript Division of the Library of Congress and noted Lincoln scholar, and was already peppering him with queries related to Abraham Lincoln, the Civil War, Annie Wittenmyer, and other historical matters.

He also wasted no time in beginning to explore the seemingly endless historical attractions the area offered. In a letter that spring to a friend back home he said

On the weekends, we go out and see the sights; we have been traveling around quite a bit—Mt. Vernon, Fredericksburg, Manassas, Richmond, Annapolis, Baltimore, and then, of course, seeing a lot of things in Washington, D.C. You are right—this city is full of

history, and in that respect, I am having the time of my life.

In time Schwengel would begin to find his way to historical nooks and crannies far off the beaten path. At the Capitol he found his way down a manhole into a lost corner of the sub-basement and discovered ovens that had been used to bake bread during the Civil War. He counted the number of steps up to the Capitol

Lincoln's birthday, or in Ford's Theatre on the anniversary of Lincoln's death, or at the Battleground National Cemetery in Washington, D.C. on Memorial Day. He continued giving his annual Flag Day addresses for the Women's Relief Corps, only now he gave them on the steps of the Capitol. He spoke at Valley Forge on "Washington, Lafayette, Truth and Liberty" and on the House floor he reminded his colleagues of the 200th anniversary of

tives and Related Events Since 1857." At the conclusion of Schwengel's presentation, his colleague, Rep. Paul Cunningham of Iowa, observed

I have known for some time that the gentleman has been greatly interested all of his life in the history of America. As a citizen of the state of Iowa, he did much in the way of research about our country. He has made speeches to many great organizations all across the United States as well as his home State about the history of this great land and this great Government of ours. So I was really not surprised when the gentleman came to Congress to find him turn his attention to one of the greatest things about our country, the Capitol, these buildings, and the background of them.

New members rarely get noticed in Congress, unless it is for the wrong reasons. The conventional advice has always been that one should keep a low profile, learn the ropes, pay one's dues, and bide one's time. It was best to be a workhorse, not a show horse. But Fred Schwengel had begun to carve out an unusual niche for himself. He played by the rules in his committee work, and within his party caucus, but the past was a policy realm where the usual rules did not always apply in quite the same way. Others who were interested in history were generally happy to have another join their ranks. History provided Schwengel with a means to be both a workhorse and a bit of a show horse at the same time, and it would allow him to gain influence in a sphere that was important to him at a speed the seniority system would never have allowed in any other part of his work as a congressman.



*As an insurance businessman in Davenport, Iowa, Schwengel became active in a variety of civic and political organizations, including the Jaycees, whose meetings must have been entertaining to judge from the fellow at Fred's right elbow.*

dome, and the number of columns holding up the upper portion of the dome, to see if popular lore checked out. (It did not.) He discovered there was a cavernous space below the Lincoln Memorial that had been left empty when construction had been completed and began promoting the idea of establishing an enormous Lincoln museum there.

He could also be found giving speeches to the Iowa General Assembly on

British Gen. Braddock's defeat near Fort Duquesne, a "defeat that gave the colonists confidence to rise up and throw off the shackles of colonialism" and as such, an event worthy of annual remembrance.

Early in his second term, in recognition that it was the 100th year that the House of Representatives had met in the same Chamber, he took to the House floor for an hour one day to present a "Brief Story of the House of Representa-

## THE CIVIL WARS

AS SCHWENDEL WAS BEGINNING his new job as a Member of Congress and immersing himself in the history he found all around him in his spare time, one thing, more than any other, was on the minds of those in the history community he was associated with: the coming centennial of the Civil War.

By the mid-1950s, popular interest in the Civil War was reaching new heights. As automobile tourism grew in the post-war years, the Civil War battlefields in the National Park System attracted more visitors than ever. Battle reenactment groups like the North-South Skirmish Association organized and sought to bring the military history of the war back to life. Chicago's Civil War Round Table discussion group spread to dozens of new cities, and Ralph Newman established the Civil War Book Club in 1955 to help the growing audience for such books find their way to the best of them. And a variety of efforts were underway by 1955-56 to ensure that a fitting observance of the centennial of the war would take place.

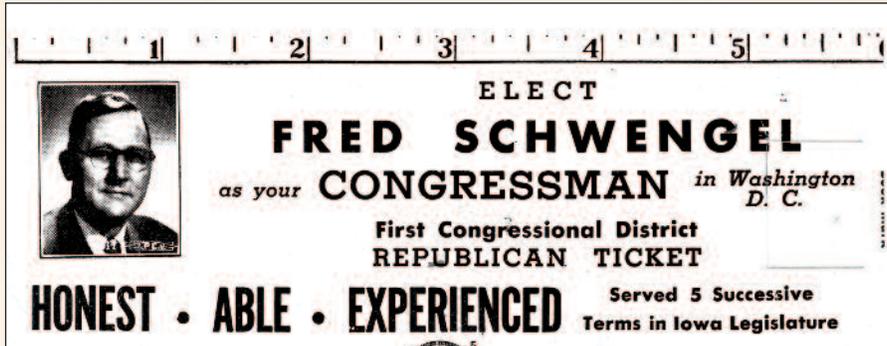
In 1953, the Civil War Centennial Association had been organized by leading members of the original Civil War Round Table, such as Newman and Sandburg, and historians of the Civil War, such as Nevins and Catton. Devoted to the idea of bringing good history to a wide audience, the approach to the commemoration they began lobbying for in 1955 envisioned it as an educational event, a grand national seminar on the history of the war, open to more than just academics, but still dignified and scholarly, hosted by an appropriate university, and privately funded.

At the same time, the National Park Service was developing a ten-year plan for capital improvements—Mission 66—to meet the growing demands that were

being placed on the nation's parks, and by June 1956 the thinking at the National Park Service was that what was needed for the Civil War centennial was a federally-funded commission, ideally located within the Department of Interior, that would

the Civil War centennial were introduced in the House in early 1957, but only two received serious consideration. In February, Rep. William Tuck introduced a resolution to establish a Civil War Centennial Commission that had been drafted by

U.S. CAPITOL HISTORICAL SOCIETY FILE PHOTOGRAPH (BOTH)



*After serving a decade in the Iowa legislature, Schwengel ran for election to the United States Congress in 1954. Ever practical, he campaigned using literature such as this combination ruler and bookmark.*

coordinate the event in a manner consistent with their Mission 66 agenda, which is to say, in a manner that would encourage tourism to historic sites such as the Civil War battlefields in their care.

A similar approach was adopted by the D. C. Civil War Round Table, which established a special committee in August 1956 to pursue the idea of organizing an official centennial agency. They unveiled a plan a few months later for a federally-funded commission that would serve as the chief promoter and coordinator of a more decentralized commemoration than the one sought by the Civil War Centennial Association. By reaching out to civic, patriotic and historical societies, as well as the business community, to encourage the organization of state and local centennial groups across the country, their plan would produce a more elaborate and multifaceted event that would be more like a national history pageant than a national seminar, as entertaining as it was educational, and as good for business as anything else.

A series of joint resolutions concerning

members of the D. C. Civil War Round Table and a National Park Service staffer, and at the last second, just as hearings were about to be held by the House Judiciary Committee on the legislation. Schwengel introduced a resolution embodying the approach favored by the Civil War Centennial Association. The final version of the legislation, which Schwengel helped shape into its final form, amended Tuck's resolution to incorporate a variation on the Schwengel/Civil War Centennial Association call for a National Assembly of Historians and was signed into law on September 7, 1957.

Schwengel received an appointment to the commission, as did historians and Civil War Centennial Association members Bruce Catton and Bell Wiley, historian and Chicago Civil War Round Table member Avery Craven, and Lincoln scholar David Mearns, representing the Library of Congress, but they occupied a minority position of a sort on a commission dominated by members of the D. C. Civil War Round Table—Chairman Ulysses S. Grant III, Vice Chairman

William Tuck, Executive Director Karl Betts, and Assistant Executive Director Pat Jones—and their agenda. Schwengel's primary role in the beginning was to serve

Schwengel's congressional office, a resolution was adopted urging the creation of a United States Abraham Lincoln Sesquicentennial Commission for the purpose of

July, and, finally, with only a few days left in the session before adjournment, a resolution calling for the creation of the commission passed both the Senate and



*As chairman of the congressional committee on the observance of the sesquicentennial of Lincoln's birth in 1959, Schwengel was master of ceremonies at the dinner held at the Statler Hilton Hotel in Washington, D.C. at which President Eisenhower spoke.*

as chairman of the commission's Legislative Committee, which would monitor legislation of interest to, and draft legislation on behalf of, the commission.

## ABE, CARL, SAM, AND FRED

AS PREPARATIONS FOR THE Civil War centennial were being made, a related project was developing in the local Lincoln community—the promotion of a nationwide celebration of the 150th anniversary of Abraham Lincoln's birth—and Fred Schwengel was right in the middle of the planning for this event as well.

Schwengel was already serving on the Board of Governors of the Lincoln Group of D.C., alongside Victor Birely, the past president who had invited him to join the group just two years before, and David Mearns. In February 1957 he was elected first vice-president of the Lincoln Group, and at the April meeting of the board of governors and executive committee, held one evening in

organizing, planning, and carrying out an appropriate nationwide observance of Lincoln's birth in 1959.

A special committee was appointed to act as a liaison between the Lincoln Group and any official organization which might be set up to promote the observance, and the leaders of the committee began working with Schwengel and Rep. Leo Allen to draft a joint resolution that could be introduced in Congress. A resolution calling for the establishment of the commission was introduced in both the Senate and the House in early June, and four more similar resolutions were subsequently introduced, including one by Schwengel himself, while the Lincoln Group set to work lobbying Members of Congress to get behind the idea of a Lincoln Sesquicentennial Commission and encouraging members of the Lincoln community across the nation to ask their representatives to support the legislation as well. Hearings were scheduled for the end of

the House, and on September 2, 1957 was signed into law.

Schwengel was not appointed to the Lincoln Sesquicentennial Commission; the active members chosen from Congress were all from the Lincoln-associated states of Kentucky, Indiana, and Illinois. He would, however, be made an Honorary Member of the commission, and he introduced the legislation calling for a joint session of Congress to honor Lincoln on the anniversary of his birth. He was then named a member of the Joint Committee of Arrangements that was subsequently established to organize the event, the only member of the committee not from a state that Lincoln had been born, raised, or lived in. When the Joint Committee met, Schwengel was chosen to serve as its chairman, in spite of the fact that he was a member of the minority, a Republican in a Congress controlled by the Democrats. This rare honor came as a surprise to him, and to understand how it came about it is necessary to mention Schwengel's role in

the controversy over the proposed extension of the east front of the Capitol, which was coming to a head at the same time.

The idea of adding an extension to the east front of the Capitol had been around since the Civil War, and a detailed proposal for how to do it had been on the table for over fifty years, but there had always been opposition to the idea, and the debate between the two sides had never been resolved. In 1955, however, the Democrats regained control of the House and Sam Rayburn, who supported the idea of an east front extension, once again became Speaker. The Legislative Reorganization Act of 1946 had led to a need for new committee hearing rooms and additional office space for congressional staff. At the same time, the sandstone exterior of the Capitol was not aging well. It was worn, and covered in 36 layers of paint. Pieces of stone and concrete from previous repair work, sometimes very large pieces, were breaking off and falling to the ground below. Rayburn believed the extension was an answer to both problems and decided it was time for the debate to end and action to be taken.

Rayburn, working in the House, and Majority Leader Lyndon Johnson, working in the Senate, saw to it that the Legislative Appropriations Act of 1956 included five million dollars to “provide for the extension, reconstruction, and replacement of the Central Portion of the United States Capitol.” But while action was now being taken, the debate did not end. Alarmed at what they believed to be drastic and unnecessary plans for change to the Capitol, the American Institute of Architects, joined by historic and patriotic societies wishing to preserve a site of such historical significance, actively opposed the changes that were underway. And likeminded members of Congress introduced several bills seeking to put a stop to the planned extension. Fred Schwengel was the author of one of those bills.

As he would later explain from the House floor

Since I have been here, and because of my special interest in history, it has been an unusual and great pleasure and thrilling experience to explore and study the rich history of this the world’s greatest and finest symbol of freedom and liberty—our Capitol. The Capitol of these United States. So, when this discussion of the Capitol extension project started, I had more than a casual interest in it. And like so many I responded to the strong sentiment that is evident in so many places against extension.

Wishing to learn as much as he could to enable himself to better defend his position, he undertook a personal inspection of the central portion of the Capitol to see for himself just what condition it was in. He spent several weeks researching the history of the construction of the Capitol, with special attention paid to the kinds of changes that had been made to the building through the years. And what he learned as a result of his inspection tours and research convinced him of something. He was wrong.

Schwengel went to see Rep. Ben Jensen, a senior Republican from Iowa who served as a mentor to Schwengel when he first arrived in Congress, explained the situation to him, and asked what he should do. Jensen suggested he arrange to speak during Special Order one day when the House would be mostly empty, go on record regarding how he was wrong about the issue, and ask unanimous consent to have his bill withdrawn. The day Schwengel spoke, there were only a dozen members or so present, but instead of keeping it short, he made the most of the hour he had been given, not only explaining in detail how he had come to

change his mind about the matter, but going on at even greater length to “present the case to indicate the urgency and need of immediate consideration and immediate action” on the legislation authorizing the east front extension that Rayburn had pushed through in 1955.

When he was finished, Rayburn asked him to yield the floor and then proceeded to make news by taking the opportunity to complain about the manner in which he had been made “the whipping boy, in a way, on this thing” by the opponents of the extension. He also sent a page over to Schwengel with a note that read “When you get through with your remarks you see me in my office,” and there, in the Speaker’s office afterwards, Schwengel would recall, “[Rayburn] made a great to-do about my ‘statesmanship’ and so on, and we became great friends.”

That August, as the last potential legislative roadblock to the extension was voted down in the Senate, Schwengel took the floor in the House to attempt to set the record straight one more time in light of the American Institute of Architects’ vote to reaffirm their opposition to the extension at their annual convention the month before and to demand that the AIA apologize to Rayburn for making him “the brunt of their attack.”

Just days later, Schwengel’s bill calling for the Joint Session for the Lincoln Sesquicentennial was signed into law. He went to see Rayburn about it and was told that since he was the author of the bill, he ought to get the members of the committee together and get it organized. Being a member of the minority, he was not so sure he should be the one calling the meeting, but “[Rayburn] said, ‘You do what I tell you, don’t you?’ with a glint in his eye,” so Schwengel called the meeting.

Now, it was a Democratic Congress, and I assumed the chairman of the committee would be a Democrat.



But, when the members met in my office, Vance Hartke nominated me for the chairman. I said, "There must be other nominations." But there were none, so I was elected by acclamation.

I said to Sen. Hartke afterwards, "How come you nominated me? This is a Democratic Congress."

Hartke replied: "I know enough about this place to know that you do what Sam Rayburn tells you. And Sam Rayburn asked that you be the chairman."

It was a kindness that Schwengel was soon able to repay. The committee invited Carl Sandburg to speak at the joint session and he delivered an especially moving address. Afterwards, Schwengel escorted Sandburg to the Speaker's office. As they entered the room, Schwengel felt

*Schwengel also chaired the congressional committee for the centennial of Lincoln's First Inaugural in 1961, which included this reenactment. Schwengel can be seen just to the right of the second post from the right. Carl Sandburg gave a memorable speech on this occasion to a joint session of Congress in the House Chamber.*

a tug at his elbow. It was Rayburn. "Young man," he said, "this is the most dramatic time in my experience in this place, and your resolution made it possible. I thank you."

A bond had been formed between Rayburn and Schwengel. On Saturday mornings Rayburn would often eat breakfast at the Capitol, and Schwengel, who also headed for Capitol Hill many a Saturday morning when he was in town so that he could spend time in the Library of Congress studying Lincoln, would often see Rayburn at breakfast and be waved over to join the Speaker at his table. "I would spend hours with him,

talking about his experiences, about his reminiscences, his counsel and advice."

They also talked about an idea that was increasingly on Schwengel's mind: the need for a historical society devoted to the U. S. Capitol. It was a conversation Schwengel was having with others by 1959, too, starting with Stephen V. Feeley, a Capitol Hill staffer who, while still a newspaper correspondent, had published *The Story of the Capitol* in 1957, a history of the building that was in some ways similar to *We, the People*, the best-selling guide that the USCHS would later publish. "By damn, let's do something about it!"



*Following the reorganization of the Civil War Centennial Commission, President Kennedy greeted the commission members, including Schwengel, at the White House.*

Schwengel recalled Rayburn saying when they talked about the idea. For the moment, however, the historical society remained an idea whose time had not yet come.

## THE GATHERING STORM

IN THE MEANWHILE, the anniversary of the Civil War continued to draw nearer. And though much of the work of the Civil War Centennial Commission was concerned with organizing a commemoration that would give a back seat to the activities that Schwengel and the professional historians on the commission believed were most important, in January 1959 a Committee on Historical Activities was added by Commission Chairman Grant, composed of the members who most favored a dignified, and scholarly, commemoration: Wiley (Chair), Craven, Mearns, and Schwengel. This allowed them some latitude to work within the commission to accomplish their goals for the centennial, but their frustration with the direction the commission, and thereby the centennial, was taking continued to grow nevertheless.

Outside of the commission, in Congress, Schwengel took inspiration from the success of the Joint Session celebrating Lincoln's Sesquicentennial and arranged for two hours to be set aside in the House on May 18, 1960 to commemorate the 100th anniversary of the nomination of Abraham Lincoln as a candidate for president. Schwengel and several other Members took the floor, seeking "to use this House and take advantage of every opportunity to recall our heritage and the great blessings that have been ours because we were fortunate to have such men in the crucial times in our history," as he put it. In his own opening remarks on the day of the anniversary, Schwengel spoke of the lessons the study of history could impart, echoing the advice he had received so many years before from Harry Truman.

I know of nothing that the people of our country need more than an intelligent and understanding patriotism.

I believe that the study of history can be not only the most effective teacher of patriotism, but maybe the only teacher of real patriotism.

... the more we know about the struggles of our Nation, the great men who initiated great ideas and led it, and the better we understand the principles that sustain its people in periods of crises, the deeper will be our feeling for our country.

With 1960 being an election year, he hoped to "to discover what lessons the canvass for 1860 may impart to all of us, whatever our allegiance, 100 years later as we approach another critical, another climactic campaign."

The subsequent anniversary of Lincoln's first inaugural would provide Schwengel with an even larger stage from which to articulate the belief that the Civil War centennial should be approached in a sober and thoughtful manner as an opportunity to reflect upon and learn from a tragic, but important, time in our nation's history. As had been the case with the Joint Session of Congress for the Lincoln Sesquicentennial, the original idea had not been his, but he would take the lead in organizing the event within Congress and in large measure make it his own.

The idea of reenacting Lincoln's first inaugural had originally been presented to the D.C. Civil War Round Table by Paul Sedgwick in 1957. When the D.C. Civil War Centennial Commission was established in 1958, Sedgwick became chairman, a Lincoln Inaugural Centennial Committee was established, and the next two years were spent laying the groundwork for the reenactment. Sedgwick announced their plans in October 1960. On March 4, 1961, there was to be a parade up Pennsylvania Avenue to the Capitol, leading to an address before a joint session of Congress and a reenactment of the inauguration ceremony, with actor Raymond Massey delivering Lincoln's inaugural address. This would be followed by a luncheon and commemorative

program at the historic Willard Hotel and then a costume inaugural ball that evening. A reenactment composed of “parades and pageantry outdoing the actual event 100 years earlier,” said the Washington Post, as it reported on Sedgwick’s announcement.

Just days before the Kennedy Inauguration was to take place, Schwengel introduced a joint resolution calling for the creation of a Joint Committee on Arrangements for the Lincoln Inaugural reenactment, and the project became a collaboration between the national Civil

but this was going to require an act of Congress and their efforts to this end were going nowhere fast. Then, plans for the joint session of Congress were abandoned, as was the idea of holding an inaugural ball. Raymond Massey’s participation fell through, too. In fact, Speaker Rayburn was not at all convinced that there was enough time for the Capitol portion of the proceedings to be organized and suggested that they abandon the commemoration of the first inaugural and focus instead on planning a reenactment of Lincoln’s second

inaugural because it suggested that some angels were better than others, the legislation finally passed the House on February 23d and the Senate on February 24th. With no time to waste, Schwengel convened a meeting of the still unofficial joint committee and staff in his office the next day, a Saturday, and it was not until March 1st, three days before the event was to take place, that the bill—the first signed by President Kennedy—would become law.

In the rush of those last few weeks, Paul Sedgwick’s Lincoln Inaugural reenactment turned into Fred Schwengel’s Lincoln Inaugural reenactment. Once again, Schwengel was not only named a member of the Joint Committee on Arrangements, the only member not from Lincoln’s Kentucky, Indiana, or Illinois, but also chosen to be the committee’s chairman. The committee staff was composed almost entirely of friends of his from the Lincoln community. The Joint Committee did not adopt Sedgwick’s suggested program at the Capitol (which he felt “should not be prolonged”), nor did it accept his offer to serve as the master of ceremonies there, and, as Sedgwick would point out to Schwengel when the report of the committee was being prepared for publication, he “was omitted from all of the official photographs, pictures and candid shots—those taken at the Capitol, later at the White House and elsewhere.”

Schwengel himself would serve as master of ceremonies and use the opportunity to stress the idea that:

This experience, if properly understood and commemorated, can do much in our day to help us along our difficult way as we prepare ourselves to contend with the struggles of our day.

On a pillar to the entrance of the Archives Building here in the District of Columbia are inscribed these words:

“The heritage of the past is the



***Founding members of the U.S. Capitol Historical Society met in the summer of 1962 to determine the Society’s purpose and elect its officers. From left to right, Fred Schwengel, Sen. Carl Hayden, and Victor Birely sign the organization’s statement of purpose.***

War Centennial Commission, the D.C. Civil War Centennial Commission, and the Lincoln Group of D.C. (where Schwengel was serving as president). It was not immediately clear, however, that they were going to be able to pull it off. First, Schwengel and Sen. Paul Douglas of Illinois attempted to keep the speaker’s platform and radio-television and photographers’ stand from the Kennedy Inaugural from being torn down, so they could be used for the Lincoln Inaugural reenactment as well,

inaugural in four years. With only a few weeks left in which to pull the event together, it looked as if it was not going to work out.

But Schwengel would not give up. After a dispute in the House Rules Committee, where Chairman Howard Smith, a southern Democrat, complained about the number of “whereas” clauses used in the joint resolution, and went on to suggest that a reference to “the better angels of our nature” (a quote from Lincoln himself) was

seed that brings forth the harvest of the future.”

There is no place in our heritage from which we can take more or better kernels of wisdom and example to plant in the hearts of people now with better prospects for good results in the future than from the life and experience of our most American—American Abraham Lincoln.

Celebration vs. commemoration. Parades and pageantry vs. dignified reflection upon the lessons to be learned. The divide that existed in the Civil War Centennial Commission between the differing approaches to the centennial proposed by the D.C. Civil War Round Table and the Civil War Centennial Association had never gone away. It had only grown larger. And it was about to become worse.

## THE CIVIL WARS, REVISITED

THE CONTENDING FACTIONS within the Civil War Centennial Commission had one thing in common. They shared the orthodox nationalist interpretation of the Civil War that saw it as a sad and painful, but ultimately positive, unifying national experience. The divisively partisan postwar understanding of what the war was about had faded with the end of Reconstruction and the passing from the national scene of the radical Republicans and others who were intent upon “waving the bloody shirt” to gain political advantage. In time, veterans of the conflict would begin to hold joint reunions on their former fields of battle, blue and grey alike accepting that each had fought honorably for a cause they sincerely believed in. Similarly, the dominant view of the war that had emerged by the end of the nineteenth century among historians made room for southern as well as

northern perspectives, and emphasized the manner in which the war had unified the nation and laid the foundation for its future greatness. The lessons everyone at the Civil War Centennial Commission expected to be drawn from the commemoration, therefore, were the lessons that consensus history had to teach.

But not everyone took the same lessons away from the War. In the white South, a belief in the “Lost Cause” of the Confederacy endured, fueling sectional pride at the expense of national unity while the rest of the country largely looked the other way. The African-American community retained a counter-memory of its own regarding the meaning of the war as well, but in Cold War America, and especially in the Jim Crow South (or, for that matter, within the profession of history), such dissenting voices were not welcome and were largely ignored, or worse. And one result of the decentralized approach to the organization of the commemoration of the war favored by those in power on the commission was that the Civil War some chose to commemorate was not quite the Civil War the commission thought it was commemorating.

Sometimes the differences were merely matters of emphasis that bothered some on the commission more than others. To Schwengel and the professional historians, the celebratory, festive air that many events took on suggested an insufficiently serious response to the meaning of the war, and so even when they themselves were personally involved in historical reenactments, such as the commemoration of Lincoln’s first inaugural, for instance, they sought to ensure that the events were more than merely entertaining historical pageants. But other times it was not simply a question of whether people were having too much fun to learn from a commemorative event; it was a question of what they were learning. In the still segregated South it was a fundamentally segregated centennial, where

what was often being commemorated, if not celebrated, was not the Civil War exactly, but the Confederacy. And the state centennial commissions of the North were not really any more integrated than those in the South. It was difficult to find an African-American member anywhere; there were only two in the entire country. Not that this concerned those in charge of the national commission, however. Commission Vice Chairman (and Executive Committee Chairman) William Tuck and Assistant Executive Director Pat Jones were both committed segregationists. And as historian Robert J. Cook has put it, “[a]s well as being ideologically predisposed toward white southern concerns over race, [the Commission Chairman, Gen.] Grant and [Executive Director Karl] Betts believed they were indebted to the powerful southern Democrats in Congress” who controlled their annual appropriation.

But alongside the planning and organizing for the Civil War centennial had come *Brown v. Board of Education*, the Montgomery bus boycott, and the sit-ins at segregated lunch counters in the South. The center, whether in the form of the orthodox nationalist interpretation of the Civil War or contemporary thought regarding the state of the nation, could not hold in the face of growing tensions over race relations. The civil rights movement was finding its voice. Conflict was about to give the lie to consensus. And the Civil War Centennial Commission, and Fred Schwengel, would, for a time, find themselves right in the middle of that conflict.

The commission’s national assembly for 1961 was to be held in April in Charleston, South Carolina, during the anniversary of the attack on Fort Sumter, which signaled the beginning of the war. Accommodations were still segregated there, and the New Jersey delegation, which included an African-American member, made an issue of it, threatening to lead a boycott of the



*The founding members posed for a group photograph following the signing of the Society's founding document.*

meeting. The meeting was moved to the Charleston Naval Base, but then an inflammatory speech brought the luncheon banquet to an abrupt end when the New Jersey delegation demanded to be allowed to respond, and Grant refused their request and declared the banquet adjourned. The next day Charleston celebrated the centennial with a parade, a reenactment of the final negotiations between the commander of Fort Sumter and the Confederates who were poised to begin shelling, and an elaborate fireworks display. But for the commission, the fireworks had only just begun.

The Charleston meeting brought nothing but bad press in its wake, much of it raising doubts about the wisdom of the centennial itself. In Congress moves were made to cut the commission's appropriation by three-quarters, but Schwengel and others managed to stave off the attempt. Wiley, Schwengel and Mearns came to the conclusion that the ultimate source of the troubles the commission was facing was their "staff problem," by which they meant Executive Director Betts; "too much emphasis on celebrations and reenactments—too much Hollywood," Schwengel

would later say, and not enough emphasis on "development of interest in the history of the Civil War."

## A CHANGE IN COMMAND

WITHIN WEEKS OF THE Charleston debacle Wiley and Schwengel were pressing Grant for a special meeting of the commission to address the situation, but getting nowhere. Their desire for a change in leadership received a boost in July when William Tuck resigned and Schwengel became vice chairman of the commission, but they would have to force their special meeting to demand Betts' removal by submitting a petition signed by commission members that Grant could not legally ignore. At the end of August the commission met in executive session. Betts was forced out, but Gen. Grant and another Betts loyalist, Adm. Stuart Ingersoll, who had succeeded Tuck as chairman of the executive committee, resigned as well and followed him out the door. In his parting shot to the press, Betts would sum up the divide within the commission from his

point of view. The limited funds available to the commission "prohibited the employment of scholars to brood and muse on our premises." Instead, the commission had "approached the centennial celebration from a businessman's standpoint," he said. "I think the centennial was good for the American economy. It was good for tourism and business."

As vice chairman, Schwengel stepped in to serve as interim chairman for a few months, and he had his hands full trying to keep the commission from falling apart in the wake of all the discontent that had been generated around the Charleston meeting. A joint meeting between the national commission and representatives of the state commissions was scheduled for January in hopes that a clearing of the air would calm things down, and a committee was formed to begin the search for a new executive director. Schwengel also got the ball rolling for an observance of the centennial of the Emancipation Proclamation in 1962 that the national commission would take the lead in organizing. But when President Kennedy appointed Allen Nevins to the

commission and he came on board as the new chairman in December, Schwengel was more than happy to hand over the gavel. At the same time, James I. Roberson, Jr., editor of the journal *Civil War History*, was hired as executive director and Bell Wiley became chairman of the executive committee. The professional historians were no longer in the minority on the Civil War Centennial Commission; they were now in charge.

Schwengel would continue to take the lead on legislative matters, such as arranging to have the architect of the United States made a member of the commission, or monitoring the progress of the commission's annual appropriation, but after Nevins' arrival he was once again just a member of the team. He did continue to be centrally involved in the planning for the Emancipation Proclamation centennial however, and he even came up with a project of his own related to the centennial to work on.

As a freshman member of Congress in 1955 Schwengel had noticed that a piece had been broken off of Vinnie Ream's 1871 statue of Lincoln in the Capitol rotunda; that missing piece was the Emancipation Proclamation that Lincoln was supposed to be holding in his right hand. He began searching "in all the recesses and the store-rooms and all the other likely places where such a piece might be found," but he never found it. So, with the centennial of the Emancipation Proclamation now approaching, he decided it was time to get the statue repaired. He wrote the chairman of the House Administration Committee's Subcommittee of the Library, who had jurisdiction over such matters, and asked him to take the necessary steps to repair the damage. He also wrote the Italian ambassador to see if his government might provide a piece of the same Carrara marble that had been used in the original sculpture for use in the repair. The Library Subcommittee chairman signed on to the project,

## ORGANIZATION MEETING OF THE UNITED STATES CAPITOL HISTORICAL SOCIETY



**A**T A MEETING held in the Capitol of the United States on the morning of the thirty-first day of July, nineteen hundred and sixty-two, the following persons were present and participated in the organization of the United States Capitol Historical Society for the purpose of:

**E**NCOURAGING an understanding by the People of the founding, growth and significance of the Capitol of the United States of America as a tangible symbol of their representative form of government;

**T**O UNDERTAKE research into the history of the Congress and Capitol and to promote the discussion, publication and dissemination of the results of such studies;

**T**O FOSTER and increase an informed patriotism of the land in the study of this living memorial to the Founders of this Nation and the continuing thread of principles as exemplified by their successors.



*The Society's statement of purpose bearing the signatures of the founders set forth the organization's guiding philosophy.*

the architect of the Capitol found the money to pay for it, and less than three months after Schwengel had made the original request, the Vinnie Ream statue received its second official unveiling in an elaborate ceremony in the rotunda, where, according to the *Washington Post*, "Schwengel ... received nearly as many laudatory words from his Congressional colleagues as did the 16th president."

## AN IDEA WHOSE TIME HAD COME

BY 1962, THEN, FRED Schwengel had watched a friend take charge of a state historical society and make it grow and had presided over a smaller one himself and helped it do the same. He had gotten to know the leading Lincoln scholars and

some of the most celebrated historians of the day. He had moved swiftly to the center of historical activity in the Congress, immersed himself in the history of the Capitol, come to be thought of as an authority on it, and spent a few years thinking seriously about the need for a historical society devoted to it. But when the final spur to action came that motivated him to set in motion the founding of just such a society, ironically, it did not come from Capitol Hill. It came from the other end of Pennsylvania Avenue.

Jacqueline Kennedy made it her mission as First Lady to turn the White House into a virtual museum, in which the interiors would be filled with historically appropriate furnishings of the highest possible quality. A Fine Arts Committee was appointed to help acquire desired items and raise the funds needed to pay for them, an Advisory Committee composed of leading scholars in the decorative arts was recruited to add further expertise to the enterprise, and a curator was hired at the White House who would be responsible for the collection. The White House Historical Association was founded at this time as well, and set to work producing a first-rate history and guidebook for the White House in association with the National Geographic Society. Through the course of the "redecorating" the press reported on every antique shopping trip, every carpet purchase, every rearrangement of the paintings on the walls. And the First Lady herself led the nation on a tour of the restored White House in a television program that was broadcast in February 1962.

Among those taking note of developments at the White House were Members of Congress who understood that there was a need to be doing the same thing at the Capitol. The Old Senate Chamber was in sad shape after years of use for every-

thing from conference committee meetings to cocktail parties, and the Old Supreme Court Chamber below it had been subdivided into office space for committee staff. Senator John Stennis had introduced legislation in 1961 calling for an historic restoration of the spaces, but it failed to gain traction. While there had once been a curator at the Capitol, the position had been left vacant for a generation, and things had a way of disappearing when there was no one minding the store. According to Sen. Mike Mansfield,

The distinguished First Lady has set an example in enhancing the historic significance of the White House which is worthy of emulation. The Capitol also houses a collection of art and antiquities of priceless historic value. There are rooms, paintings, statues, furniture and other objects in this building which bear witness to the dramatic story of the Nation from the earliest days.

This heritage of the Capitol has long been abused and neglected. The collection of art and antiquities has not been adequately safeguarded, maintained, and exhibited. This is not said in any derogatory sense with respect to those who have had responsibilities in connection with the collection. The real problem is that we have paid too little attention to this irreplaceable asset.

In an attempt to remedy the problem, Mansfield introduced legislation calling for the establishment of a Capitol Commission on Art and Antiquities and the hiring of a curator for the Capitol on June 6, 1962; it passed the Senate on July 18th.

In the meantime, the White House

Historical Association had published *The White House: A Historic Guide*. It went on sale on the Fourth of July at the East Wing of the White House and people lined up to buy it. One of those waiting in line was Fred Schwengel. As Nash Castro of the White House Historical Association would later recall,

Schwengel came through there and bought a whole basketful of the books, and said, "I'd like to talk to you." And I said, "Well, any time, Mr. Schwengel." The next Monday he was in my office. He took up my whole morning wanting to know how we did this and so forth.

## GETTING ORGANIZED

ON WEDNESDAY, JULY 11, 1962, Schwengel sent out letters inviting "a few interested persons," or their representatives, to a breakfast meeting the following Tuesday, July 17th, in former Speaker Joe Martin's dining room (F18), "to consider the formation of a United States Capitol Heritage Institution or Society." He had, he said, "been exploring this idea with people who have a kindred interest in conjunction with my interest with the historical aspects of the Capitol." But "additional impetus has been given to the further exploration of this idea since the recent publication by the White House Historical Association." He believed that "a comparable publication on the Capitol would meet with a similar public response," and it might even surpass it. He went on to say

I do not view our efforts to be limited purely to the history of the Capitol and its environs but rather to bring to the people of the United States, without cost to taxpayers, in graphic form a dramatic presentation for use by all of the media of

communications not only the historical side of the Capitol Hill area but to provide an understanding and realization of the great labor which goes on in their behalf in these hallowed halls.

Fourteen people attended that first organizational meeting on July 17th. Some of them were members of Congress, such as Sen. Carl Hayden, Rep. Marguerite Stitt Church, and Schwengel. Others were Hill staffers: John A. Jackson, executive secretary to Sen. Leverett Saltonstall; John Holton, legislative counsel to Speaker John McCormack; Charles Baird, executive secretary to Rep. Charles Hallack; Steve Feeley, clerk to the Subcommittee on Public Buildings and Grounds of the House Public Works Committee; and Schwengel's secretary Sylvia Salato. Members of the local historical community included David Mearns, chief of the Manuscript Division, Library of Congress; Richard H. Howland, head curator, Department of Civil History, Smithsonian Institution; Lillian Kessell, head of Research and Information Division, Architect of the Capitol's Office; John Crane, historian and author; and Victor Birely, collector and vice chairman of the Executive Committee of the Lincoln Sesquicentennial Committee. Also in attendance were Arthur Hansen, general counsel, American Newspaper Publishers Association; and Melvin M. Payne, executive vice president and secretary of the National Geographic Society, who had been centrally involved with the production of the White House Historical Association's guidebook.

In his opening statement, Schwengel said that the story of the Capitol, "its construction and meaning, has not been noted as it could or should have been," and even the story of what has happened there, though in the history books, "needs telling with feeling." He added:



*Schwengel presented Melvin Payne of the National Geographic Society with his membership certificate in the U.S. Capitol Historical Society. Payne would be instrumental in gaining the assistance of NGS in publishing the *We, the People* guidebook to the Capitol that became the Society's first project; its sales put the new organization on a strong fiscal foundation.*

It seems to me that the millions of people, adult and youth, who come here need somehow to be helped while they are here to catch something of the fire that burned in the hearts of those who walked and talked in these halls—Jefferson, Adams, Clay, Webster, Lincoln, Rayburn and all the rest. True lovers of liberty they were. They put cautious and firm action with reasoned conviction to protect and promote ideals.

It seems to me that we must try to do better job of educating our people on these things. This can be done with publications, producing films, better identification of pictures and statues and through organized effort. The development of a wider and more avid interest in

this place we proudly call our Capitol will be good for America.

There was some discussion of what legal form the organization might take, and what its membership structure might be like. Howland proposed that the name be the United States Capitol Historical Society and this was unanimously approved. Hayden was asked to become honorary chairman and accepted. Finally, a steering committee was established, with Schwengel as chairman, to come up with suggestions regarding the permanent form of the organization, its officer structure, and objectives and purpose.

The Steering Committee met a week later in the Senate Dining Room. Schwengel, Birely, Church, Hansen, Howland, Jackson, Kessel, Mearns, Payne, and Salato were joined by Walter



*Schwengel, Sen. Hubert Humphrey (also a vice president of the Society), and Melvin Payne posed for the camera while examining the first edition of the We, the People guidebook.*

Rundell of the American Historical Association and John Stewart of the American Political Science Association. Press coverage was noted and membership possibilities and officer structure were discussed, as was the purpose and scope of the organization. A subcommittee was appointed to draft a statement on purpose and scope and met the next morning to hammer it out; a membership committee met two days after that.

The second meeting of the United States Historical Society took place on July 31st, with thirty-five people in attendance. A letter from President Kennedy was read, in which he stated "such a group can do much to research and provide information on the historical background and traditions of the legislative branch of our government," and wished it every success. There was a report on the first meeting for those who had not been there, and reports from the committees on questions such as the

proposed Articles of Incorporation, Statement of Purpose and Objectives, and membership, and discussion followed. Schwengel was empowered to appoint committees on Constitution and By-Laws, Plans and Programs, and Nomination of Officers, and to appoint a temporary secretary and treasurer. Finally, Mel Payne presented a scroll that had been made up for all present to sign, with Honorary Chairman Hayden being the first, and National Geographic Society photographers on hand to document the scene.

There was one other development that became apparent by the time of the July 28th meeting. Whereas on July 17th, the day before the Mansfield legislation passed the Senate and was sent to the House for consideration, Schwengel anticipated "working closely" in the future with the proposed Capitol Commission and curator, in the reporting on the Society's July 31st meeting, the Capitol Commission was described as the

"Senate rival organization," and it was said, "[a] spokesman for the CHS" now says it might appoint its own curator," which was an idea that had indeed been raised at the meeting. And the fact that "Schwengel's CHS" would be privately funded, while the "Senate favored one" would be funded by the government was cited as "a major difference between the two historical groups."

It would appear that Schwengel had come to the conclusion that the two ideas, first thought to be complementary, were now in direct competition with each other. They did not have to be. There could easily have been a division of labor that allowed them to coexist, just as the White House Historical Association coexisted with the White House Fine Arts Committees and Office of the Curator. But a turf war had broken out around Mansfield's legislation and Schwengel seems to have decided he had to take sides. Mansfield's Capitol Commission on Arts and Antiquities

proved to be dead on arrival in the House Administration Committee. Chairman Omar Burluson did not like it. "Some members," he was quoted as saying, "feel it is something of an intrusion on the legislative branch itself to have some outsider come in here and tell us where to hang pictures." So Burluson was not going to consider it. Speaker McCormick was reported to be against it as well. So was the architect of the Capitol. According to former Senate Historian Richard Baker, Schwengel had allied himself with Florian Thayne of the Architect's office in opposition to the idea of a Capitol Commission and curator, both thinking that they were doing just fine without one, and the House leadership, by now accustomed to listening to Schwengel's advice on history matters, "said 'no thanks' to Senator Mansfield's proposal."

Still, organizational work on the Society kept moving forward at a blistering pace. Articles of Incorporation in the District of Columbia were signed on August 8th, and at the third meeting of the Society, on August 19th, with forty-seven people in attendance, a constitution was adopted and officers were chosen. Schwengel was elected president; Payne, Church, Sen. Hubert Humphrey, Allen Nevins, and Carl Haverlin were chosen vice-presidents. Kessell was elected secretary, and Birely, treasurer. Groundwork began to be laid for a major promotional effort and fundraising efforts were discussed, as well as the projects that the Society was looking to take on. A documentary about the Capitol was a possibility (Schwengel reported that "several major television networks" were interested in producing a program like the First Lady's tour of the White House in which a tour of the Capitol would be featured), but first and foremost on the agenda was the publication of a Capitol guidebook similar to the one that had been published for the White House.

## FIRST STEPS

THE INITIAL PLAN of action was to get a grant of money from somewhere, hire staff, undertake a membership drive on Capitol Hill and beyond, and use the money from those founding memberships to launch the publications program. For the moment, however, there were more plans than action. The rush of business in Congress at the end of the session left Schwengel with little time to devote to the Society, and then he headed home to campaign for reelection. Society Vice President Payne was delegated to act in his place on any Society matters requiring immediate attention until his return in January.

In December, just in time for Christmas, Payne wrote Schwengel with unexpectedly good news.

So convinced is [the National Geographic Society] Board of the noble purposes of your Society and the potential it has for great public service that, at its meeting of December 6th, the Board enthusiastically and unanimously voted a grant of \$10,000 to provide funds for the critical early phase of your Society, to establish it on a sound basis for its planned broader operations, and to "get it off the ground" in the direction of its lofty and idealistic aims.

By February, work was beginning in earnest on the guidebook. Lonnelle Aikman, a staff writer for *National Geographic*, would write the text for the book as well as an article for the magazine that would help publicize the book. Schwengel not only led her on a tour of the Capitol the likes of which few have ever seen, he also made his personal library available to her to help with the research

and met with her regularly to work on the manuscript.

Outside of the guidebook project, however, there was little progress being made. Writing to Society members in late August, Schwengel would apologize for the "delay in keeping you as well informed as we would like, which has been due to the lack of funds, office facilities, and staff, which problems are acute at this time." Moreover, deadlines were approaching that would have to be met if the guidebook were to be published in time to take advantage of the enormous sales Christmas would be certain to bring, and the Society still had not landed the foundation grant it would need to be able to pay for the publication of the book. There was a risk that publication would have to be postponed. With time running out, Melville Bell Grosvenor of the National Geographic Society made a decision. To ensure publication in time for Christmas, the National Geographic would advance the Society an interest-free loan sufficient to cover the costs of publication that could be paid back later, as the sales of the book generated income for the Society. And if the book fizzled and the Society was unable to pay back the loan, the National Geographic Society would suggest to its Board of Trustees that the loan be considered a grant to the Society "in view of the historical significance of the book and its contribution to geographic knowledge."

The extraordinary depth of National Geographic's commitment to the Society would ensure that *We, the People* would be published on time, and it proved to be an immediate success. Before long, not only had the loan been repaid, but the Society had enough money coming in that it could begin to look towards the future with confidence. The United States Capitol History Society had survived its wobbly first steps and was finally on sure footing, ready to begin making some history of its own.