



**of**  
**Vampires & Patriots**  
Designing a **Secret History**

by François Audouy, Production Designer





“Get back in the house, sir!” barked the cop with a 9mm handgun gripped low at her waist, its barrel pointed at the steps between us.

**Previous pages:** An illustration of the exterior of Adam’s plantation by Concept Artist Manuel Plank-Jorge and Concept Illustrator Fabian Lacey shows the sinister mansion overwhelmed by creepy serpentine oak trees. **Above:** Lincoln’s boyhood cabin as illustrated by Concept Artist Rodolfo Damaggio. **Below:** The finished set for the exterior of the cabin, built up against the forested divide of a wild frontier.

Stunned, I quickly shut the front door to my rental house and carefully looked out the window to the street. It was 4:30 AM. The cop was a ghostly silhouette in the predawn light. Shadows of my neighborhood’s giant oak trees cast spider-web patterns across the dark street. My still blurry eyes struggled to focus as I made out the dark shapes of additional armed ghosts—two to my right and two to my left, a fifty-foot gap between them. Two cruisers sat waiting in silence. Lights off. I would be stuck there for two hours, and would learn the cops were on the hunt for a robbery suspect who had earlier shot at police.

That was the beginning of day one of principal photography, on my first film as a Production Designer—late for work in a city where surprises and ghosts would greet me at every turn.

### **The Beginning**

*Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter* is based on the 2010 novel by Seth Grahame-Smith—an epic mixing of history, fable and fantasy. The book was written in the style of a presidential biography, based on a secret diary Lincoln supposedly kept and updated throughout his life, and was bequeathed to the author by an ancient vampire named Henry Sturges. Evident from the title, the story reveals the secret history of our sixteenth president—that he was in fact also a hunter of vampires, living in a world where an underground society of vampires threatened to destroy America.

The story begins with Lincoln as a young boy growing up on the American frontier of 1822, when he loses his mother to a vampire named Jack Barts. As a result, young Lincoln swears lifelong vengeance, and ten years later is discovered by Henry Sturges, who transforms him from a common man with revenge in his heart, to the most feared vampire hunter in the land. Lincoln adopts his trusted axe as the tool of this dark trade, hiding it inside his signature black coat, and dispatches vampires, one by one, as instructed by his new mentor. Then when he’s elected president, Lincoln leads the charge into the Civil War as a means of averting a systematic takeover of America by power-hungry vampire hordes.

The film, directed by Timur Bekmambetov and produced by Tim Burton and Jim Lemley, came together quickly, when 20th Century Fox beat other studios to the rights to the film after being impressed





by a meticulously prepared pitch which included the screenplay, pitch-vis, concept art, a budget, shooting schedule, and finally, Tim Burton's stamp of approval and confidence that it would result in success. It was during early conversations that Timur and I agreed the look of the film would be grounded in a convincing reality. We knew we were already asking the audience to take a giant leap of faith with the conceit behind this story, and we didn't want an overt stylization to distract from the weight of the narrative.

From the get-go, it was also critically important that the film remain loyal to the character of Lincoln, as the story was so tightly interwoven with historical facts. We wanted the film to not only be an entertaining genre film, but also be grounded on a firm foundation of historical truth. I set for myself the lofty goal of somehow connecting with the spirit of Lincoln, and remaining true to his incredible history. To this end, one of the first tasks for me was to become a Lincoln expert in short order. Grahame-Smith's novel was a great point of departure as it provided so much detail within the text, but I needed more so I submerged myself into every historic website and text I could find, and then set off to find some experts. Surprisingly, I had unbridled support from the Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum in Springfield, Illinois, and also from the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C. Both were completely on board with what we were trying to do with the film, giving me an invaluable hot line to the world's greatest Lincoln scholars.

### The Team

With the research process percolating, I set out to assemble the core crew. To supervise the Art Department, I brought aboard Beat Frutiger, who was a fellow Art Director on *Transformers*, and I also hired local Art Director Mara LaPere-Schloop. I was overjoyed when Cheryl Carasik agreed to decorate the film. I have known Cheryl for fifteen years, since I met her on my first Art Department job: 1996's *Men in Black*. Cheryl has decorated a host of other films set in the 19th century and she immediately understood the scale of the job ahead of her. But this one would prove even more challenging, with its much smaller resources, much shorter prep and distant location in New Orleans.

Before the ink was dry on her deal memo, a week before Thanksgiving, Cheryl made a beeline to the

**Above: The cabin at night, drawn by Rodolfo Damaggio. Below: The interior of the cabin was built on stage, with a custom backing by JC Backings in Culver City.**





**Top:** For this illustration establishing Springfield in the 1840s, Illustrator Manuel Plank-Jorge painted over a Google Earth view of the present-day city, and referred to bird's-eye drawings from the period depicting the density and style of buildings. Above: This early illustration by Manuel Plank-Jorge was painted over a location photograph to sell the location as a key setting for the film.

prop houses in Hollywood. To make the schedule, she knew she would need to get trucks on the road to New Orleans in early January. Working feverishly through the holidays, Cheryl succeeded in packing five trucks of set dressing and sent them on their way. This became the foundation of her creative arsenal, to which she continued to add throughout the prep.

The next key department head hired was property master Guillaume Delouche. Guillaume was ideal for this project, with his background as an armorer on historical films as well as his experience working on distant locations. The script presented enormous challenges, requiring hundreds of

hand-props and weapons from the 18th and 19th centuries. It featured all the major events of Lincoln's life, covering six decades, the Civil War, and also flashbacks showing the 18th century back-story of Henry Sturges.

Guillaume's strategy for the movie was inspired. It centered on creating a prop fabrication shop on location in New Orleans. He knew we didn't have the budget to ship everything from Los Angeles and rent it all for the duration of the five-month shoot. The result of this constraint provided us with complete control of the look and historic accuracy of the props, and also saved millions in rental fees. Guillaume hired some tremendous craftsmen for his team. These included Frank House, a Kentucky firearms maker whose custom antique rifles are works of art with a five-year waiting list, as well as Frank's wife Lally, an artist specializing in creating embroidered leatherwork inspired by traditional Native American designs using naturally dyed porcupine quills and rare albino moose hair collected by the Alaskan Inuit. Frank House was charged with building the key prop in the film—Lincoln's trusty axe—that had the unique ability to transform into a gun when required. Amazingly, the prop was built for real, and functioned practically.

As the assembled design team launched into action, scouting for the dozens of locations began in earnest. New Orleans provided tremendous value



to the film since so many locations from the 18th and 19th centuries remain intact and in excellent condition.

### The Log Cabin

The shooting schedule started with the most iconic of places: Lincoln's boyhood log cabin. The script called for a remote homestead surrounded by miles of forest that would act as a familiar, albeit foreboding, playground for ten-year-old Abraham and his friends. A pastoral setting on the North shore of Lake Pontchartrain provided the right look, but also plagued the crew with its restrictive muddy access. Even so, the construction crew managed to assemble the cabin they had pre-built in the shop. Days of meticulous hand work were required to

split and age the faux-cedar logs and provide their weathered character. Again, research proved to be invaluable. The Lincoln family actually lived in five different cabins, but there were no records of their exact architecture, only reconstructions based on accounts and descriptions.

To add realism, the farm was detailed with a livestock pen, a chicken coop, a winter vegetable garden, a well and a working smokehouse. When the set was opened at dawn on Day 1, Beat Frutiger had aromatic smoke from pork bellies wafting through the site. Dozens of cut tree trunks lining the wall of the adjacent forest told the story of the cabin, built by hand from surrounding resources.

**Top: Lincoln's bachelor apartment was built into the partially renovated floor above Speed's Store, on location in New Orleans, as illustrated by Manuel Plank-Jorge. Below left: The production shut down a city block in the Warehouse District of New Orleans, for two weeks of continuous shooting. A 1940s' era building was entirely re-clad with foam CNC-cut cornices and balconies, signage and storefronts to create Springfield in the 1840s. The hand-painted signage was based on period research from Springfield and worked up by Graphic Designer Zach Fannin.**





**Top:** This illustration of Barts Shipping Company by Manuel Plank-Jorge was digitally painted over a photograph of the location on a bayou of Lake Pontchartrain. Above: The finished set was redressed for two time periods. Once the crew was made aware that a burrow of an eight-foot alligator with young hatchlings lay just beyond the trees, they stayed very close to the set.

### **The Old Vampire**

After shooting this first set, the company moved to the narrow streets of New Orleans' famous French Quarter for Henry Sturges' house. I found an ideal location: a well-preserved, character-rich Greek revival manor from 1841. The floors of the house had never been refinished and reflected the rich patina of the original cypress. The ornamental plaster moldings and medallions were all original and richly detailed, but the entire two-story interior had to be repainted since most of the walls

had been ruined by gaudy faux finishes. Only one room retained its original Venetian-style plaster, and it provided a cue to the painters to match the historic texture. Two entire floors of the property, courtyard and rear slave quarters were a massive set dressing job for Cheryl. The entire place needed to be a completely immersive world since the camera would eventually wander through every room. The challenge was to evoke decades of the back-story which Timur and I had created for the character of Henry. He was a 200-year-old immortal vampire, a bohemian world traveler, scholar and collector of curiosities. We knew the dressing had to be just right, since it alone would introduce Henry to the audience as Lincoln wandered through the rooms of the house after awakening in a strange bed.

In the rear slave quarters, we built out a weapons workshop, which was a sort of bat cave for Henry to offer up a plethora of potential weapons to his new student. Of course, Lincoln chooses the familiar axe he sees embedded in a stump in the courtyard.

Then the shooting company traveled back to the pine forests of the north lake shore for a training sequence where Abe learns the dark arts of vampire hunting from Henry. These skills included slicing through a foot-thick tree with a single stroke of the axe, a special effect that was achieved in-camera by the ingenuity of special effects supervisor Matt Kutcher.



### The Streets

After weeks of constant moving from location to location throughout the Crescent City, it came time to settle down for six days of continuous shooting in our version of downtown Springfield. This was achieved by taking over a busy block of Church Street in the warehouse district for two months. One side of the block was completely convincing for the period; the other side, however, was about sixty years newer than its proper time. This disconnect was solved by cladding over windows, building seven storefronts and installing five hundred feet of sculpted fascia and cornice to the top of the most offensive buildings.

The interior of the general store belonging to Lincoln's real-life friend, Joshua Speed, was built into the storefronts and Lincoln's first apartment was created in the vacant space on the floor above the store. The store itself became a 360° world filled with period-specific products in the appropriate color palette, some with graphics designed by in-house Graphic Designer Zach Fannin and others sourced by Cheryl's graphic librarian, shopper and miracle worker, Wendy Weaver.

Lincoln's small studio apartment was inspired by the under-construction space discovered above this location. Timur and I decided it would be fun if Lincoln's room was a makeshift space that



was under construction—a work in progress like Lincoln's life itself. The cedar lath walls and unfinished quality of the space created a surprising context for Lincoln's new life.

### The River Boat Dock

With the crew settled in the downtown Springfield set, the Art Department had its work cut out for it back on the north shore of Lake Pontchartrain. This time, the set was Barts Shipping Company, a sprawling warehouse structure and dock built from the ground up on a sleepy tree-rimmed

**Top: This illustration of Speed's General Store by Manuel Plank-Jorge was painted over a quick SketchUp® view to provide accurate scale and correct camera lens. Above: The interior of the general store was meticulously detailed by set decorator Cheryl Carasik, with custom-manufactured products appropriate for the 1840s.**





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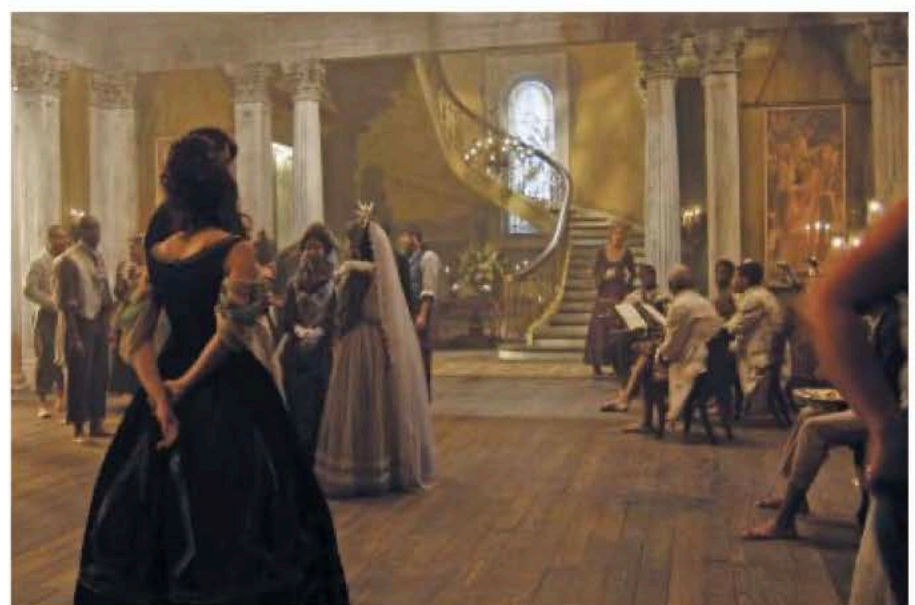
**Above: The frescoed ceiling of Adam's plantation was added with visual effects, based on an illustration by Rodolfo Damaggio. The vampires dropping from above were shot against a green screen. Below, left and right: The interior set for Adam's plantation was inspired by the magnificent Belle Grove Plantation, which once fronted nine miles of the Mississippi River north of New Orleans before it fell into disrepair and was destroyed by fire. All the sets paintings and tapestries were printed in-house, from digital files licensed from European museums.**

bayou. Initially, the site seemed perfect...except for that problem with the alligators, including one particularly stubborn female that eventually birthed five little snappers in the woods a few hundred feet from the set. Another unpleasant surprise came when unseasonably intense storms pushed the waters of Lake Pontchartrain up into the arm of our bayou, raising the water level about eighteen inches. The dock was designed for a water level that would stay put. Overall, though, the site worked beautifully. Barts was another set that could be shot unrestrained in all directions, providing an immersive realism for the actors.

### **The Plantation**

Next, it was time to head to the western boundary of New Orleans' sixty-mile shooting zone, to the

grounds of two sister plantations along River Road, which hugs the banks of the Mississippi. At Evergreen Plantation, the rows of twenty-two original slave quarters remain untouched in silent witness to history, beneath a tunnel of magnificent ancient oaks, with miles of sugar cane fields beyond. Shooting at the site of unspeakable sins and tragedy was a haunting experience for the crew. A quarter mile from the slave quarters, we built a window unit for Adam's plantation; the interior would be built on stage. It was indeed a mysterious place. One day the set painters were surprised by a five-foot python (a snake not indigenous to this continent) falling onto the set from the trees above.



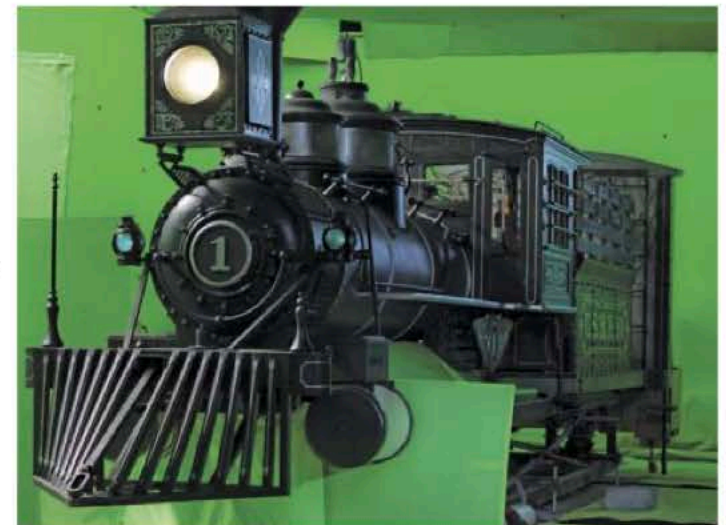


Adam's plantation would be home to the film's arch villain—the most ancient of vampires and the most evil. For the design of this set, I drew inspiration from Belle Grove Plantation, which was a grand and elaborate Italianate-style home, and one of the largest mansions ever built in the South. Sadly, the property was destroyed by fire in 1952. I was intrigued by the idea of bringing this mansion back from the dead, and became obsessed with the details of its architecture, tracking down pages of architectural details and even acquiring original molds for the plaster capitols.

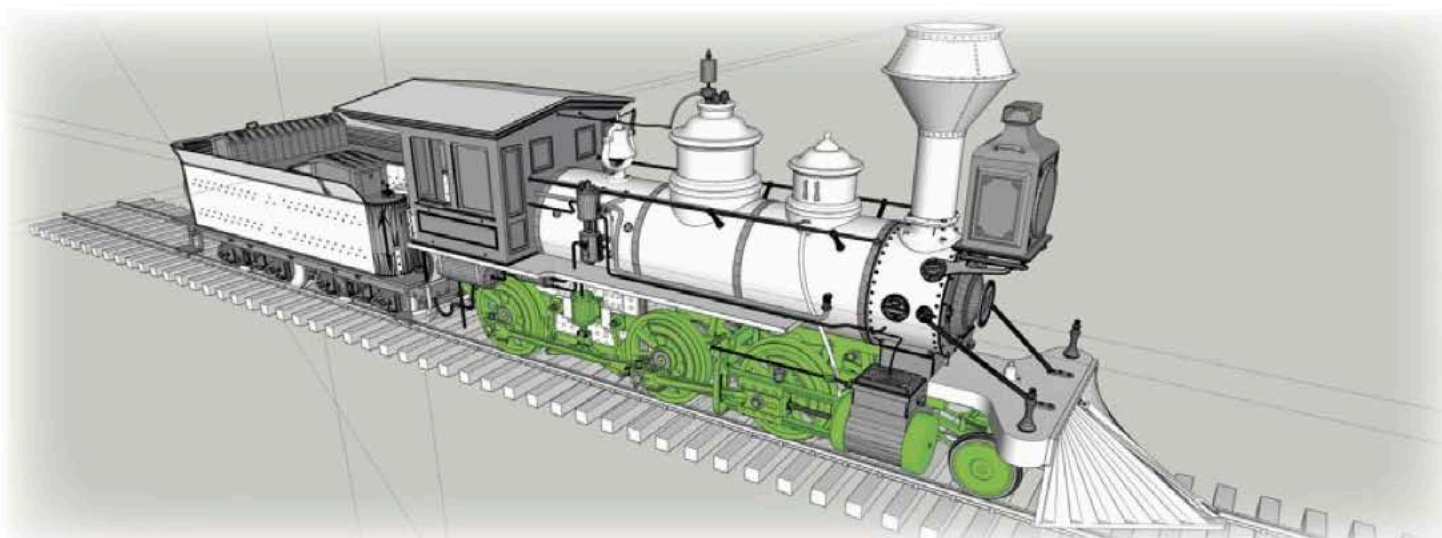
The neighboring Whitney Plantation provided a historically appropriate church where Lincoln would seek refuge in its attic (staged in a nearby barn), among the huddling masses of slaves hiding from trackers. Whitney was a place with its own ghosts, and the owner had uncovered unmarked graves

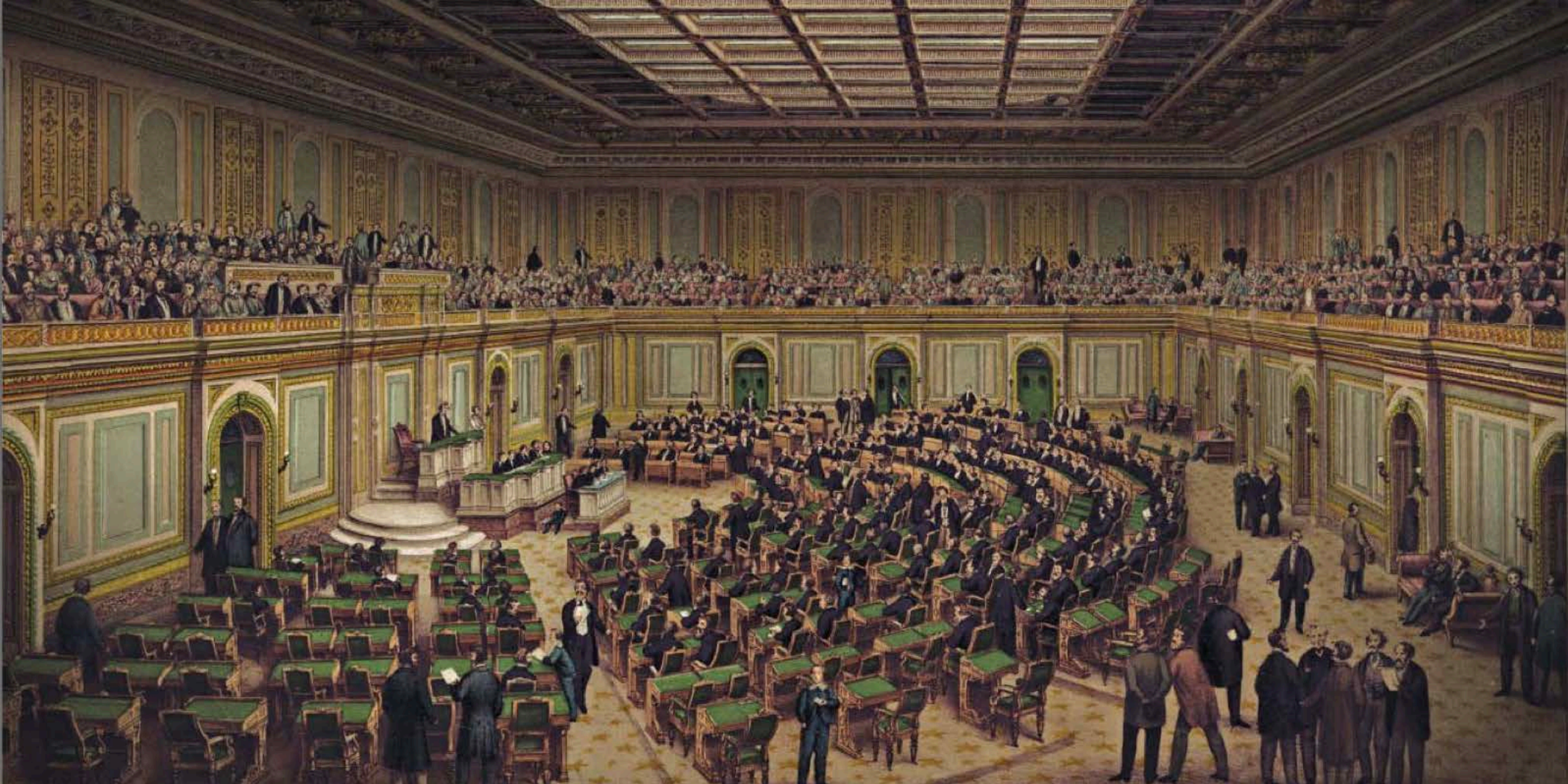
of hundreds of child slaves, and had erected a monument to their forgotten names.

The mustachioed groundskeeper at Whitney was a leather-faced Southerner, with a Smith & Wesson tucked tightly in the back of his jeans. Turns out some of the neighbors didn't care for the honoring of the ghosts of the past. He also provided some welcome advice regarding cottonmouth snakes that plagued the swampy grounds of the place: "If y'all smell cucumbers, y'all better just run," was the warning, a sure sign you were about to tread on a cottonmouth



**Top: This illustration by Rodolfo Damaggio helped determine the initial scale and lighting of the burning trestle bridge and Lincoln's train of silver ammunition. Above: The train was shot on stage, with a motion base built to tilt the train to 35° to simulate the angle of a crumbling trestle bridge. Art Director A. Todd Holland managed the finicky construction of the locomotive, tender and boxcars. Left: Set Designer Richard Reynolds created this digital 3D model of the silver train.**





**Above: An antique ink drawing of the chambers of the House of Representatives from around 1860 was re-lighted and sweetened in Photoshop®. It served as the basis for a matte painting in the film. Below: Part of the House of Representatives chamber was built on stage.**

whose venom was lethal. We spent our prep questioning the constant phantom smells of cucumbers in the high grasses all around the set.

### **The Battlefield**

It was time to tackle the Civil War and Gettysburg. For this, we partnered with local Civil War reenactors to not only restage battles, but also to erect both Union and Confederate campsites. The re-enactors all brought their own gear, which was a great addition to the tents provided by the set dressing and props departments. This was augmented by Guillaume's mountain of militaria, including cannons, munitions, and tents. When it was time for the Gettysburg Address, the weather gods provided a dramatic cumulus backdrop. A chill shot up my spine as actor Benjamin Walker

spoke Lincoln's famous soliloquy across the field of extras. The illusion was uncanny.

Location work drew mercifully to a close and the company moved to stage, or more accurately, moved to warehouse. Soundstages were not available to us because of budgetary constraints, so to save money production moved into a warehouse that weeks before had stored bulk coffee. The smell of unroasted beans remained in the air for weeks.

On stage, we shot out the Lincoln cabin, with a custom transligh backing produced by JC Backings in Culver City. They also provided two giant translighs of immense oak trees at night for Adam's plantation. For the plantation interior, I imagined a place that was humid and sultry, with sweating walls and slowly decaying plaster—a place whose decomposition was somehow being accelerated by the evil living under its roof. The exterior would be a matte painting showing the giant oaks wrapping their limbs through the porticos in a malevolent embrace. Above the sixteen-foot walls would be CGI set extension and a detailed fresco-covered coved ceiling, where vampires would spring from the camouflage of the fresco's figures. Illustrator Rodolfo Damaggio, working remotely in Los Angeles from photographic reference, painted the fresco in Photoshop®. We licensed all the artwork and tapestries on Adam's walls and printed the pieces with our in-house printer on substrates that were then aged by scenic painters. These craftsmen also





painted a decaying mural behind the ballroom's serpentine staircase.

One final stage challenge was constructing a magnificent train locomotive and cars that would be mounted on custom bases to simulate the motion and pitch of a collapsing trestle bridge. To create the engine and boxcars, I followed engineering plans found in a train builder's encyclopedia from 1888.

After the stage work was complete, the production ended its schedule with the White House interiors and the Illinois Statehouse Representatives Hall, all shot inside historic Gallier Hall, which was the former New Orleans City Hall built in 1845. For the White House dining room, I created faux wainscoting using lightweight foam molding which was installed with double-faced tape as no nails were allowed in the historic structure. Above this, the painters installed reproduction Zuber wallpaper, which was assembled and up-rezed in Photoshop from hundreds of photographs I took from a room in the Old Governors Mansion in Baton Rouge. As luck would have it, the Zuber wallpaper in Baton Rouge matches the wallpaper in the Diplomatic Reception Room of the White House, first printed in 1834. Finally, a custom wall stencil was created for the Executive Office, hand-painted in gold, and designed to set off the wall-to-wall Victorian carpeting sourced by Cheryl.

Working on *Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter* was a wonderful experience. For my first stint as Production Designer, I couldn't have asked for a more engaging, creatively satisfying project. With Timur Bekmambetov at the helm, and with the diligent support and tireless efforts of a hard-working team, the production evolved and concluded as one infused with superb historical detail, a dynamic backdrop that truly helped bring this story to life. Ultimately, if I had to choose a single word to sum up what we were all able to accomplish with the film's Production Design, I would have to acknowledge one of the character traits Mr. Lincoln was best known for: Honesty. **ADG**

**Above: The White House Executive Office featured reproductions of the actual paintings which decorated Lincoln's office, and a hand-stenciled wall pattern based on written descriptions of the pattern used there. A small wooden-block toy castle lies at the feet of Lincoln's desk, where his son Willie would play. Below: The White House dining room (the Diplomatic Reception Room today) was built on location in New Orleans' Gallier Hall. The Zuber wallpaper was re-created by Graphic Designer Zach Fannin, stitching together hundreds of photos from the same pattern in the old Governor's Mansion in Baton Rouge. It was printed in Los Angeles by Astek Wallcoverings.**

