

September 28, 2009

An open letter to the officials and residents (past and present) of Lincoln and Logan County

Twenty-first Century Treasure from the Gold Mine of the Lincoln Heritage

Local legend says that in 1853 Abraham Lincoln humorously cautioned the founders of Lincoln, IL, that nothing named Lincoln ever amounted to much. And ever since then, the town has tried to prove him wrong. Presently, reports in the local media suggest that more businesses are opening than closing, but at the same time civic leaders brainstorm for a vision to guide future growth and development in Lincoln and Logan County. Reports I read about Mayor Snyder's commendable "economic summit" cite the Lincoln heritage as a strength of the area, but as of now I see no discussion of how to transform this heritage into opportunities for progress. This proposal offers some ideas.

The local Abraham Lincoln heritage includes historic sites and exhibits, the Lincoln Heritage Museum at Lincoln College, historical publications, celebrations, festivals, re-enactments, statues and other art, and the legacy of public service. Much of this heritage has been helpful in attracting visitors, but tourist dollars are not the only advantage. This Lincoln heritage has also been a source of civic pride that binds citizens into a good community, and this advantage is immeasurable and invaluable in today's world. Let me emphasize that this Lincoln heritage continues to afford a golden opportunity that can be further developed to serve all of these purposes.

Ironically, neither the first Lincoln namesake city nor the county has ever created an ongoing organization whose exclusive purpose is to advance the local Lincoln heritage. This heritage offers too much potential to strengthen the area's economic and social development for local governments to give it active support only on special anniversaries that occur every 25, 50, or 100 years.

I thus urge the city of Lincoln to establish a standing First Lincoln Namesake City Heritage Commission (and if successful, it could be extended and renamed to include county involvement, as explained later). The purpose of such a commission would be to expand, perpetuate, and promote this remarkable, local Lincoln heritage, including Abe's public service legacy. Commission members could be drawn from the local institutions of higher learning, public and private schools, Main Street Lincoln, the Abraham Lincoln National Railsplitting Association, the Lincoln-Logan County Tourism Bureau, the Chamber of Commerce, the Logan County Genealogical and Historical Society, and the Postville Courthouse Historic Site.

Two immediate projects would be to finish the promised plan to erect the historical marker for Abe's 1858 rally and speech--ideally a free-standing marker co-sponsored by the Illinois State Historical Society--, and to organize a drive to erect the proposed bronze statue of Mr. Lincoln on the west lawn of the Logan County Courthouse to commemorate that occasion. Lincoln is the only central Illinois city among a half dozen with a unique tie to Abe that does not have a bronze statue to commemorate that connection. Even such smaller communities than Lincoln as Clinton, Metamora, and Pittsfield have bronze Lincoln statues to commemorate his

ties to those places. People will park and get out of their cars to see and take pictures of such a statue; and people who walk will also shop and eat. The statue project alone would be worth forming the proposed commission.

Another project of this commission could be re-inventing the city's Heritage Days as a biennial, two-day festival the first weekend in July that could dramatize and promote Abe's unique legal and political activities in Postville and Lincoln. The challenge would be to retain the best from past Heritage Days and add new activities that would avoid overlapping with the great Railsplitter Festival. Both events could complement and advertise one another.

Historical re-enactment that entertains, educates, and inspires would be the key to re-inventing Heritage Days; and a theatrical group, perhaps called the Lincoln Heritage Players, could be formed with actors, writers, musicians, and directors to perform this event. (Yes, the talent is there.) The theme of the first day would be Lincoln, the lawyer. There are enough legendary anecdotes about Lincoln locally that they could be woven into a well-plotted skit sequence beginning in Postville Park, where the action could involve the frontier, free-style wrestling that took place in that setting. A resource person could be professional wrestler Dan Gable. He has been involved in re-enacting the famous wrestling match between Abe and Jack Armstrong at New Salem. Wrestling matches always draw an audience. The Postville pageant could then move to the lawn of the Postville Courthouse replica. There, the action could focus on two legendary cases in which Mr. Lincoln had to defend guilty clients. The action then moves to Centennial Park downtown for a christening re-enactment skit in which all of the participants have spoken parts. All skits would include humor and period music.

The theme of the second day would be Lincoln, the politician; and the highlight would be a re-enactment of Abe's 1858 political rally and speech on the Logan County Courthouse lawn. The first re-enactment of the Abe rally and speech last October captured Lincoln's humor and some of his most important words on liberty and human rights. The event was quite successful, and could get better and better with more folks in period costume and such additions as cannon blasts and brass bands as in the original event. A re-invented Heritage Days could be called the First Lincoln Namesake City Heritage Festival.

With the success of this city commission, it could be expanded and renamed as a joint city-county commission that would sponsor similar Lincoln heritage festivals in such other Logan County communities with ties to Abe as Atlanta and Mt. Pulaski. All of these festivals would make Logan County the Abraham Lincoln Festival Capital of the World--a powerful branding that could attract national media and significant publicity.

An ongoing, organized city-county commitment to developing their combined Lincoln heritage would help young people better understand local, state, and national history--and the way contemporary local government works--; and citizens of all ages would have opportunities for community service. More people from area businesses, schools, institutions of higher learning, and service organizations could be enlisted to accomplish these goals and projects.

The gold that would result from expanding the area's Lincoln heritage would be increased community engagement and pride as well as tourism. A stronger branding of the city and county

with their Lincoln heritage could have a positive influence on those looking for a place to relocate, retire, or start a business.

This proposal's ideas are ambitious, but let us remember that Lincoln the man was famous for his ambition to gain approval based on public service, including what he called "internal improvements." Noble aspiration is part of the Lincoln heritage. Of course, we also inherit the greater Lincoln legacy of dedication to the cause of American unity. The first Lincoln namesake city and Logan County have the resourceful people who could work together to make an effective commission, accomplish these projects, and create others as well to keep this great heritage alive for future generations.

Surely Abe would be proud of the city and county for honoring and adapting his heritage as effective public policy that inspires and unites their citizens to achieve an expanded and better community.

"Living History" article about historical re-enactment:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Living_history

The Lincoln heritage of Lincoln, IL, at <http://www.geocities.com/findinglincolnillinois/>

Abe bronze statue proposal (published in local media last fall):

<http://www.geocities.com/findinglincolnillinois/bicentennial/AbeNamesakeCityStatueProposal.pdf>

Sincerely,

D. Leigh Henson, Ph.D.

Professor emeritus of English

Missouri State University, Springfield

dlhenson@missouristate.edu

<http://english.missouristate.edu/faculty/henson.html>

Native Lincolnite and honorary member of the Abraham Lincoln Bicentennial Commission of Lincoln, Illinois: <http://www.geocities.com/findinglincolnillinois/abes200th-lincolnil.html>