

February 19, 2013 Tuesday

ABE'S HAT NOT AUTHENTICATED;

Questions remain about whether Lincoln owned it

By Dave McKinney

Springfield bureau chief

SPRINGFIELD - An appraisal used to justify the $23 million purchase of a major batch of Lincoln artifacts didn't investigate whether one of the collection's most important pieces - a stovepipe hat that purportedly belonged to the 16th president - actually was authentic.

Questions about the hat's provenance, first reported last year by the Chicago Sun-Times, have led to calls for DNA testing and the public release of the 2007 appraisal by a bloc of members on the state historic panel that oversees the Lincoln presidential museum, where the hat was recently put on a six-month display.

The $6.5 million hat is part of a major assortment of Lincoln memorabilia purchased by the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library Foundation in 2007 from California Lincoln collector Louise Taper. She sits on the foundation's board, but she recused herself from voting to purchase her own collection.

For three months, the foundation ignored a request from members of the Illinois Historic Preservation Agency board, which oversees the presidential museum, to see the financial analysis by New York appraiser Seth Kaller.

The foundation, which is raising money to pay for the Taper Collection and ultimately intends to transfer it to the museum's control, released Kaller's appraisal after a stormy meeting of the Historic Preservation Agency board last week.

That's when a bid to test the hat for Lincoln's DNA surfaced amid allegations of a "credibility gap" confronting the Lincoln museum for not clearly establishing how, when or even if Lincoln gave the hat to a southern Illinois farmer in the late 1850s or early 1860s.

"Kaller's task was to appraise the value of the collection, not to authenticate each item," according to a statement from the Lincoln presidential museum that accompanied the appraisal.

The agency made the report public six minutes before the close of business Friday, a time of diminished public interest and scrutiny going into the three-day Presidents Day weekend.

But members who had pressed for the appraisal's release and had hoped it would silence questions about the hat's authenticity were disappointed by what they saw in Kaller's report.

"I'm not sure I found enough information on the hat to make me more comfortable about it and whether it was indeed owned by Lincoln or worth $6.5 million," said Shirley Portwood, a retired Southern Illinois University history professor and member of the state Historic Preservation Agency board.

In his report, Kaller steered clear of delving into the hat's provenance but said it was "generally accepted" then as the only Lincoln hat still in private hands. He also said he inspected a separate appraisal provided by Taper - one that the foundation did not release last Friday.

"The items in this collection have already been inspected and authenticated," Kaller wrote. "The Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum has indicated that, based on prior in-depth research, it is comfortable with the provenance and descriptions provided. I have therefore made my valuations based on accepting the provenance information provided to me at the start of this project."

His report used the auction prices of other Lincoln relics and even such disparate items as Mark McGwire's 70th home run baseball; an Eric Clapton guitar; a replica of the Starship Enterprise from the "Star Trek" television series, and an imitation of Princess Diana's wedding dress as benchmarks to come up with the value for the entire Taper collection.

Kaller did not respond to an email seeking comment Monday.

"The [hat's] provenance is not clarified with this appraisal," said Tony Leone, another Historic Preservation Agency board member who had pressed the foundation to release its appraisal. "Accepting this really questions an IHPA board member's fiduciary responsibility."

The Chicago Sun-Times last year raised questions about the hat's background because the museum's explanation of where it came from doesn't square with a 57-year-old affidavit describing its ownership trail.