

April 15, 2012 Sunday

LINCOLN MYSTERY;

Was famous stovepipe hat really Honest Abe's?

By Dave McKinney

Springfield bureau chief

SPRINGFIELD - It bears the floral stamp of an 1850s-era Springfield hatmaker. It remained in the possession of the same southern Illinois family for a century. And it fits a head about 22 inches in circumference - the same as Abraham Lincoln's hat size.

But did this iconic, beaver-fur stovepipe hat really once have a place atop the head of Honest Abe?

For the first time, the people who run the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum in Springfield - who have long proclaimed the hat was Lincoln's and continue to insist that - are admitting they can't pin down how, more than 150 years ago, a farmer acquired the stovepipe hat.

That missing detail has injected an unexpected air of doubt about the authenticity of one of the museum's prized showpieces, a historic icon valued at $6.5 million that's a cornerstone in the museum's fund-raising pitches and that, until now, has had a provenance once thought to be indisputable.

"In a court of law, there are different levels of assurance," said James Cornelius, curator of the museum's Lincoln Collection. "The Scottish legal system has guilty, not guilty and not proven. We elected in this country not to take that third option, in which the presumption of guilt is kind of heavy. I guess, if you want to be pushy about the hat question, you'd have to judge it in the not-proven category of Scottish law because it cannot be proven or disproven."

That acknowledgment, in response to inquiries from the Chicago Sun-Times, follows the February disclosure that a portrait of Mary Todd Lincoln donated to the state by the Lincoln family, which has hung in the Executive Mansion for decades, was a fraud.

No one is claiming the hat is a fake. It remained in the possession of the family of farmer William Waller until 1958. That's when James Hickey, then head of the Illinois State Historical Library and overseer of the state's Lincoln artifacts, bought it for himself in a move that today would almost assuredly spark conflict-of-interest questions.

The hat changed hands again in 1990, when Lincoln collector Louise Taper bought it from Hickey for an undisclosed price. She, in turn, parted with it in 2007, selling it to the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library Foundation as part of a $23 million haul of Lincoln memorabilia in 2007. The purchase was proclaimed a coup for the museum.

The museum won't say how much the hat cost but, for the first time, it has produced a 2007 appraisal valuing it at $6.5 million.

The foundation is raising money to repay the city of Springfield, which issued taxpayer-financed bonds used to buy the Taper collection.

The hat has been described alternately as one Lincoln wore during the Civil War and, more recently, one that he gave away after an 1858 debate in southern Illinois with Stephen Douglas.

If one of those scenarios is true, the other can't be. But that doesn't mean the hat is a fraud, said Wes Cowan, co-host of the PBS-TV show "History Detectives" and an expert in historical artifacts who owns a Cincinnati auction house.

"The fact that there is this longstanding tradition and that it clearly came from a hatmaker in Springfield - that's interesting. But, beyond that, it gets squishy. What you really want to see was a newspaper article from . . . whenever the debate was: 'Candidate Lincoln gives local farmer his beaver top hat.' That's what you want to find. That's the sort of chain of custody you want. Without that unbroken chain of custody, it becomes very difficult to prove any of this. It may be. It may not be."

The story of the hat was first written in August 1958, when Carbondale resident Clara Waller signed an affidavit in which she said her father-in-law, William Waller, obtained the hat from Lincoln "during the Civil War in Washington" and, upon Waller's death, it was passed on to her husband, Elbert Waller. William Waller had been a Democrat in the 1850s but incurred his neighbors' wrath by bucking the region's pro-slavery mind-set by backing Lincoln, a Republican, in his 1858 U.S. Senate bid against Democrat Stephen Douglas, according to Cornelius.

Attached to Clara Waller's affidavit is a handwritten statement from the late John W. Allen, a history professor at Southern Illinois University-Carbondale, who said he had been told the "same" story about the hat by Elbert Waller and was "inclined to give it full credence."

The hat was sent on loan for a large Illinois State Historical Library exhibit in Taiwan in 1988. It later appeared in 1993 and 1994 in San Marino, Calif., and in Chicago during a high-profile tour of major Lincoln artifacts known as "The Last Best Hope of Earth: Abraham Lincoln and the Promise of America." The hat was described in a catalog co-authored by former Illinois state historian Thomas Schwartz as one that Lincoln "wore . . . during the Civil War."

But that claim - and Clara Waller's story - has a big hole: No evidence has been unearthed that places William Waller in Washington, D.C., after Lincoln was elected president. And Lincoln never returned to Illinois before he was assassinated.

Cornelius, who has been in his post since 2007, said he was told by Schwartz before he moved on to head the Herbert Hoover Presidential Library that William Waller instead must have gotten the hat from Lincoln during his Sept. 15, 1858, debate with Douglas in Downstate Jonesboro.

Schwartz declined an interview request, referring questions to the Lincoln museum.

"I guess you'd say we've taken something of a historic liberty in re-dating it to a much more plausible time and place," Cornelius said of the hat. But that contradicts the Weller affidavit - which had never been made public until a Chicago Sun-Times reporter asked to see it.

Lincoln, who did give gifts to friends and admirers, wasn't known to have given away any of his hats, Cornelius said. There also are no newspaper stories from the 1858 debate, photographs or letters between Lincoln and William Waller to corroborate the hat changing hands that day in southern Illinois.

"What does he do for a hat in [September] when he gives away a hat? That's my only problem with the story - the logic part," said Harold Holzer, a Lincoln expert who is a senior vice president at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City.

Still, Holzer thinks there is a "strong likelihood" the hat belonged to Lincoln, based on the hat size and its tie to the Springfield hatmaker, where Lincoln was known to buy hats. But Holzer said the museum should redouble its efforts to pin down the hat's origin.

Further evidence that validates the hat is that it was held in the same family for a century and scooped up by Hickey and later Taper, two of the pre-eminent collectors of Lincoln memorabilia, Cornelius said.

"Not only did the Waller family believe it and have it, Louise Taper believed it and had it after Jim Hickey believed it and had it," he said.

"There's nothing to indicate to us that it's not what we've inherited."

Cowan, the PBS host, doesn't think the Lincoln museum was duped, but he encourages it to present both scenarios when the hat is next exhibited. When displayed previously at the museum, it has been linked to William Waller, but the uncertainty over how Waller got it has been sidestepped.

"I think the issue that I would bring up over and over and over again is that there is no unbroken chain of custody, that the facts as they are known surrounding the top hat are compelling, but, ultimately, they can never be proven," Cowan said.