

# Lincoln Douglas Symposium

## Remembers Day



## Lincoln 'took off the gloves'

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Quincy, February 3, 2008 – One of the most important events in Quincy's history was also one of the key events in Abraham Lincoln's political career.

Lincoln's seven debates with Stephen Douglas while the two were campaigning for the U.S. Senate in 1858 resulted in victory for Douglas. But the national attention from the debates catapulted Lincoln to the presidency two years later. And none of the debates was more important to Lincoln than the one that took place in Quincy on Oct. 13, 1858, claims Quincy University professor David Costigan.

Costigan was one of the featured speakers at Saturday's Lincoln-Douglas debate symposium at John Wood Community College. About 300 people heard presentations from more than 16 speakers on topics related to the debate, slavery, politics and Lincoln and Douglas, who took their debates to seven Illinois cities 150 years ago this fall.

Quincy's Washington Park was the site of the sixth debate, and Costigan calls it "the turning point" for Lincoln for a number of reasons.

Through the first five debates — held in Ottawa, Freeport, Jonesboro, Charleston and Galesburg — Lincoln was often on the defensive. After all, Costigan said, he was going up against the sharp-tongued Douglas who "was generally recognized as the most powerful and influential member of the United States Congress."

But during the Quincy debate — after apparently heeding the advice of Iowa Gov. James W. Grimes to be more aggressive — "Lincoln took off the gloves," Costigan said.

It was during the Quincy debate that Lincoln began trumpeting his views "that slavery must eventually die in order for the United States to live up to its founding values and be the example to the world of a just and moral society," Costigan said.

Lincoln then took the same message to the final debate city, Alton. In the end, Costigan said, Lincoln lost the Senate race. "But in defeat," he said, "his star was in the ascendancy" and Lincoln was propelled to first-rank political stature on the national scene.

"Without the Lincoln-Douglas debates, there would have been no President Lincoln," Costigan said.

"And one can surmise that without the Quincy debate, and his new initiatives, the impact of the debates would have been far less dramatic. What transpired in Washington Park on Oct. 13, 1858, was certainly the most important event in Quincy history. But also it played a vital role in the story of Abraham Lincoln." Quincy's Lincoln Bicentennial Commission sponsored the eight-hour symposium to kick off the 150th anniversary celebration of the debates. More activities will be held later this year and in 2009 when Quincy and the nation celebrate the 200th anniversary of Lincoln's birth.

"This is going to be a spectacular two years for all of us," said Quincy Mayor John Spring, who attended Saturday's event.

Iris Nelson, chairman of the symposium, said about 60 of the people attending the symposium were school teachers who will take what they learned back to their classrooms to help students better understand the significance of the debates.

Among the teachers on hand were a contingent from Quincy's Blessed Sacrament School. Third grade teacher Judy Summers and technology instructor Ann Knuffman, who also works with Title I students in

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reading and math, agreed the conference will help them make the debates come alive for students.

"There's a lot that teachers can do — especially in a political year — to cause students to get a notion that history is a value," Knuffman said.

Quincy resident Lynne Gelston said the symposium helped her gain a better appreciation for what the debate meant for Quincy and for Lincoln.

"I think this is fabulous," she said.

One highlight of the day's activities included a keynote address by Vernon Burton, a University of Illinois distinguished teacher/scholar and author of the book "The Age of Lincoln." Burton provided an overview of the political, cultural and religious climate that enveloped the country before and after Lincoln appeared on the national stage.

He said Lincoln's keen understanding of politics and religion helped him maneuver the country through the turmoil of the Civil War. "I'll argue that Abraham Lincoln was not only the greatest president but I think he was probably the greatest theologian of the 19th century," Burton said.

Quincy resident Reg Ankrom, an ardent student of Lincoln and Douglas, focused his talk on the political career of Douglas, who lived in Quincy from 1841 to 1847. He said Douglas and Lincoln were "bitter enemies politically" after the debates but nonetheless remained friends until Douglas died in 1861.

Phil Germann entertained one group with some colorful stories about the debate in Washington Park, where thousands of people attended the festivities while the candidates spoke from an elevated platform.

"A few minor disasters delayed the proceedings," Germann said. "First a railing gave way along the stage, sending dignitaries and a large bench crashing to the ground. Then another bench set up in front of the platform for the benefit of the ladies collapsed under their combined weight, and several of the day's victims had to be assisted from the area."

Quincy artist Ruth Ann Snowden gave a presentation on the works on renowned sculptor Lorado Taft, who created the monument in Washington Park commemorating the Quincy debate.

Snowden said the Quincy sculpture doesn't provide much, if any, credit for Taft's creative efforts. However, Chuck Radel of Quincy's Lincoln Bicentennial Commission said some additional recognition will be given to Taft when renovations of the monument site are unveiled in October.

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