

# Symposium keynoter drew closer to Lincoln in research



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**By Edward Husar**

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Vernon Burton's take on Abraham Lincoln changed over the years as he kept studying, teaching and writing about the nation's 16th president.

The University of Illinois distinguished teacher and scholar, who spent several years authoring the book "The Age of Lincoln," understands the risk of uncovering the faults and foibles of any person being studied in depth: All that information can tend to diminish a hero's greatness.

But that wasn't the case with Lincoln.

If anything, Burton said, "I came to appreciate him even more and more — and that's very rare."

Burton said the more he learned about Lincoln from his years of research, the more he came to see "the humanity, the compassion, the greatness, the ability to grow and to stretch" that characterized the man who helped guide the nation through a divisive Civil War.

Burton will share some of his perceptions while giving the keynote address at "The Turning Point: Quincy's Lincoln-Douglas Debate Symposium" slated for Feb. 2 at John Wood Community College.

The symposium will kick off a two-year celebration of Lincoln's life and his contributions to the history of Illinois and the nation. The year 2008 marks the 150th anniversary of the famed Lincoln-Douglas Debates in Illinois, while 2009 will be celebrated nationally for the 200th anniversary of Lincoln's birth.

Quincy's Abraham Lincoln Bicentennial Commission is sponsoring the symposium, scheduled for 8 a.m. to 3 p.m. in the college's Orr Auditorium. The registration deadline is Jan. 15.

The event will feature presentations on a range of topics related to the seven Illinois debates between Lincoln and Stephen A. Douglas while the two were campaigning for the U.S. Senate in 1858. Lincoln lost to Douglas in that campaign, but the debates thrust him into the national spotlight and ultimately led to his presidential election two years later.

Burton not only will give the keynote address, but he also will lead a workshop for educators on how to bring Lincoln-related studies into their classrooms, particularly by using online sources.

Burton used the Internet a great deal for scholarly research in the course of writing "The Age of Lincoln," which came out in 2007 and won the Chicago Tribune's Heartland Prize for non-fiction.

The book focuses on the five decades surrounding Lincoln's presidency, roughly from the 1840s to the 1890s. It offers background on the cultural, political and religious atmosphere during the period Lincoln ascended to the presidency and the reconstruction period that followed the Civil War.

"What I have done is used Abraham Lincoln as a fulcrum to understand this extraordinary period of history," said Burton, a professor of history, American studies and sociology at the U of I's Champaign-Urbana campus.

One conclusion he reached in the book is that Lincoln's greatest achievement was not the emancipation of slaves but the establishment of personal rights protected by the rule of law — with personal freedom being just one of those rights.

"He enshrined the very principle of personal liberty protected by a body of law," Burton said.

Burton said Lincoln, as a lawyer, had a deep appreciation for the importance of laws to ensure all people are treated fairly. But during the course of practicing the law — and trying to help disadvantaged families as best he could — he came to

realize that not all people had equal access to the law for economic reasons. This helped perpetuate his belief that the nation's laws should equally protect the rights of all people, including slaves.

Burton said the Lincoln-Douglas Debates gave Lincoln a national forum to state his views on the issues of slavery, race and personal liberty. Burton said the debates had an "extraordinary" impact on Lincoln's rise as a national political figure.

"This is what made it possible for Lincoln to become president," Burton said.

"This is what brought him into national prominence. It cannot be understated how important they were. The nation focused upon these debates."

The debates took place during an era in which "the Midwest was extraordinarily racist," Burton said.

"You must remember that Stephen Douglas was arguing for white supremacy, and Lincoln was debating against that — standing against white supremacy."

Burton said once Lincoln was elected to the presidency, he used great skills as a politician and statesman to preside over one of the most tumultuous periods in American history. In the end, democracy won out, and Lincoln became revered for his efforts.

Burton said he's glad to see Quincy hosting an educational symposium that will give people a chance to learn more about the debates and the impact they had on America.

"It's magnificent," he said. "Our history is so important. One of the things I think Lincoln would probably agree on with me is if we don't have a sense of history, how is our democracy going to work?"

"I still think that liberty and democracy are fragile things. It's only been a little bit over 150 years since Lincoln saved the Union. That's not a long time in the history of the world for a democracy like this to work."

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## ORVILLE VERNON BURTON

Orville Vernon Burton, author of "The Age of Lincoln," will be the keynote speaker at the Lincoln-Douglas Debate Symposium Feb. 2 at John Wood Community College.

Burton is a professor of history, American studies and sociology at the University of Illinois' Champaign-Urbana campus, where he also has the title of university distinguished teacher/scholar. In addition, Burton is director of the Institute for Computing in Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences at the U of I.

Burton has written more than 100 articles on assorted history-related topics. He also has authored or edited 14 books, including "In My Father's House Are Many Mansions: Family and Community in Edgefield, South Carolina," which earned him a Pulitzer Prize nomination.

Burton is a renowned teacher. In 1999 he received the U.S. Research and Doctoral University Professor of the Year award from the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. In 2004 he received the American Historical Association's Eugene Asher Distinguished Teaching Prize. He was a Pew National Fellow Carnegie Scholar in 2000-2001. He also has won numerous teaching awards from the U of I.

Burton is a native of Royston, Ga. He graduated from Furman University and received his Ph.D. in American history from Princeton University.

Copies of his latest book, "The Age of Lincoln," are available in Quincy at the Osage Orangerie next to the John Wood Mansion. Burton will be signing copies of the book during the symposium.

## SYMPOSIUM TOPICS AND SPEAKERS

The following individual sessions will be offered at Quincy's Lincoln-Douglas Debate symposium:

- \* "Stephen A. Douglas: Preserver of the Union," by Reg Ankrom of Quincy.
- \* "A Nation Adjusting: 'The Great Persuader,' 'Old Dick' and the 'Crisis of 1850,'" by Steve Schneider of Chicago.

- \* "The Fateful Kansas-Nebraska Act: A Party Abandoned, a New Party Formed, and Quincy Politicians Intimately Involved," by David Costigan of Quincy University.
- \* "Rail Splitter in a Hurry: The Ambition and Purpose of a Prairie Politician," by Rob Mellon of Quincy High School.
- \* "Three for Freedom: The Misadventures of the Starry-eyed Abolitionists from Quincy in Missouri," by Terrell Dempsey of Quincy.
- \* "Blowing in the Wind: The American Consciousness," by Joe Messina of Quincy University and Scott Giltner of Culver-Stockton College.
- \* "Moral Evil Sanctioned by God: Southern Evangelicals and the Problem of Slavery in Antebellum America," by John Ayabe of Quincy University.
- \* "Illinois Abolitionists and the Crisis of the 1850s," by Justin Coffey of Quincy University.
- \* "Raccoons and Politicians: The Tri-States Gather for the 6th Debate," by Phil Germann of Quincy.
- \* "Burnout: The Private Lincoln and the Pressure of Hardball Politics," by Iris Nelson of Quincy.
- \* "River City Confrontation: Lincoln and Douglas at the Quincy Debate," by Larry Balsamo of Western Illinois University.
- \* "Front Lines of History: The Pre-Civil War Press," by Joe Conover of Quincy.
- \* "Bringing the Age of Lincoln into the Classroom: A Teacher Workshop," by Vernon Burton of the University of Illinois at Champaign-Urbana.
- \* "Point/Counterpoint: The Words of Lincoln and Douglas on Key Issues of the Quincy Debate," by Gary DeClue of John Wood Community College and Jack Inghram of Quincy.
- \* "Among the Oldest Arts, Storytelling: One Slave's Voice," by Mett Morris and Paul Schwartzkopf, both of Quincy.
- \* "Lorado Taft Beautifies Quincy with Sculpture: October 13, 1936," by Ruth Ann Snowden of Quincy.

FIND OUT MORE

More information about "The Turning Point: Quincy's Lincoln-Douglas Debate Symposium" — including a detailed brochure and a registration form — is available from the following Web site: [www.lincolndouglasquincydebate.com/](http://www.lincolndouglasquincydebate.com/)

Forms also are available at the Quincy Convention and Visitors Bureau, the Quincy Area Chamber of Commerce, Quincy University, John Wood Community College and Quincy City Hall. The registration deadline is Feb. 15.

More information also is available by calling 228-4515 or by sending e-mail to [TheTurningPoint2008@yahoo.com](mailto:TheTurningPoint2008@yahoo.com).