

STEPHEN A. DOUGLAS SYMPOSIUM

# Lincoln ‘speaks’ of his friend

Presentation highlights respect  
Two Illinois political giants had  
For each other

By **DEBORAH GERTZ HUSAR**  
Herald-Whig Staff Writer

Abraham Lincoln walked onto the stage at Quincy University’s North Campus and began speaking about Stephen A. Douglas, not as a political rival but as a close friend.

“He was the slightest man there ever was in Illinois, my good friend,” said Lincoln, portrayed by George Buss of Freeport.

Lincoln challenged the better-known Douglas to a series of debates, with the pair peppering each other with questions and comments.

“At one of those debates, he said I was being two-faced. I said, ‘Senator, if I had two faces, why would I choose this one?’” Lincoln said. “He had such a way with words in those days. He could start out with a horse chestnut and end up being a chestnut horse and folks would ride along with that.

“They’d say there’s our little giant.”

The “Little Giant” was the focus of Saturday’s Stephen A. Douglas Symposium: From Quincy to Congress sponsored by the Quincy Lincoln Bicentennial Commission to highlight, in part, the friendship of the two political giants that spanned more than two decades.

Like most of the people at the symposium, Kathy Zimmerman of Pittsfield just wanted to learn more about Douglas, who visited her town several times.

“I didn’t realize Douglas had come from meager means or that it was so easy to get a law license at the time,” she said. “I knew he was in Winchester, but I didn’t realize he was in Meredosia.”

Quincyan Jerry Ohnemus, a history buff, learned that Douglas was kind of a rabble-rouser of the time. Learning more about the man who was a judge, a congressman, a senator and a presidential nominee “makes people aware of what went on in those days and that period of time,” he said.

“People tend to think of U.S. history in terms of presidents, but at the time of Douglas, the legislative branch was really predominant,” said QU professor emeritus David Costigan, a symposium presenter. “The most powerful of the legislators during Douglas’ period was Douglas himself. He possessed a great deal of power. He got a lot done.”

Quincy, where Douglas lived from 1841 to 1847, played an important role in the political life of the man also known as the “steam engine in britches.”

“Quincy was where Douglas launched his political career. My guess is that most people don’t know that,” Ankrom said.

“If Douglas had not come to Quincy

“They were strong political opponents, but they really had no rancor toward their opponents,” symposium chair Reg Ankrom said. “They know one another well. They both courted Mary Todd at about the same time.”

Douglas – with his love of drinking, cursing and cigars – proved too uncivilized for Mary Todd who said she might marry a future president and did by choosing Lincoln.

“It’s been Lincoln this, Lincoln that. . . Lincoln, Lincoln, Lincoln,” said Douglas, taking the stage after Lincoln and portrayed by Gary DeClue, chairman of the humanities department for John Wood Community College.

“We talk about the Lincoln-Douglas Debates. I thought of them as the Douglas-Lincoln Debates. If it wasn’t for me, Mr. Lincoln never would have attained his stature. If it wasn’t for me, he would have remained a very good trial lawyer.”

where he was first elected to Congress, there may not have been a Kansas-Nebraska Act. There may not have been Lincoln coming back into politics, the debates of 1858 and Lincoln rising to the presidency,” he said. “What we’re hoping to do is educate people to the fact Quincy played a major role not only in Lincoln’s life, but in Douglas’ life and in the country’s life.”

Douglas is often overlooked in Illinois with its strong focus on Lincoln. “There’s no Douglas birthday. You never get off school for Douglas,” said Jim Mentesti, president of the Great River Economic Development Foundation.

People often were critical of Douglas, and as portrayed by DeClue, he was quick to admit his critics were right.

He was ostentatious, but “what would you do if you were 5 (feet) 4 (inches tall)? I had no choice. Sometimes I had to jump in order to be seen,” he said. “I was always in a hurry. I had things to do.”

Quincy Mayor John Spring appreciates the efforts to bring history and knowledge to the community tied to the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the great debate. “So much of what we have learned from Lincoln and Douglas is relevant today,” Spring said.

Quincyan Dan Reed claims a more personal connection to Douglas, thanks to his great-grandfather Maurice Kelly who was a parade marshal for Douglas and went onto a political career of his own. “It’s important people know who Stephen Douglas was and what he did,” Reed said. “He was a mover and a shaker.”

—*dhusar@whig.com/221-3379*