Lincoln's Hat

by Lynne Belluscio

The Historical Society's fall trip to Manchester, Vermont included a visit to Hildene, the summer home of Abraham Lincoln's son, Robert Todd Lincoln.

Hildene was built in 1906, and is a grand home of the Gilded Age. Robert was the only child of Abraham Lincoln to survive to adulthood. He was a wealthy lawyer from Chicago, who became the president of the Pullman Company which manufactured sleeping cars for the railroad.

After the last Lincoln family descendant died, the Friends of Hildene purchased the estate in 1978, and began the long process of restoration. Hildene includes the large home, a spectacular formal garden, a working farm, a restored 1903 Pullman Palace sleeping car, and an education center.

On the second floor of the home, is an interesting exhibit about Abraham Lincoln. On display is a stovepipe hat worn by Lincoln. According to most sources, it is one of only three existing Lincoln hats. One hat is exhibited in Washington, D.C. at the Smithsonian and the third hat is exhibited in Springfield, Illinois.

The Smithsonian hat was worn by Lincoln on April 14, 1865, at Ford's Theater, the night he was assassinated. Lincoln acquired the hat from J.Y. Davis, a Washington hat maker. After the death of Lincoln's son, Willie, he added a black silk mourning band. No one knows when Lincoln bought the hat or how often he wore it.

After his assassination, the hat was preserved by the War Department, with other materials left at Ford's Theatre. With permission from Mary Todd Lincoln, the hat was given to the Patent Office, which in 1867, transferred it to the Smithsonian. Joseph Henry, the Secretary of the Smithsonian, ordered his staff not to exhibit the hat "under any circumstances, and not to mention the matter to any one, on account of there being so much excitement at the time."

It was placed in a basement storage room and the public never saw it again until 1893, when it was exhibited by the Lincoln Memorial Association. Today, the Smithsonian's "hat" is one of the most valued American icons.

The authenticity of the Springfield hat has been challenged. It was made in Springfield in the 1850s. It belonged to William Waller, a farmer in the area. "According to a 1958 affidavit by his daughter-in-law, Clara Waller, Lincoln gave Waller the hat in Washington, D.C., during the Civil War. The hat is Lincoln's size and was made by his favorite Springfield hatter. But there is no evidence William Waller was in Washington in 1858 and no explanation for why Lincoln might have given him the hat.

Adding to the muddle, the state's official historian in 2007 decided - based on nothing, really - that Lincoln gave Waller the hat after an 1858 Lincoln/Douglas debate in Jonesboro." The hat stayed in the possession of the farmer's family until 1958.

Then James Hickey, then head of the Illinois State Historical Library and overseer of the state's Lincoln artifacts, bought it for himself. The newspaper said such a move today "would almost assuredly spark conflict-of-interest questions."

Lincoln collector Louise Taper bought it from Hickey in 1990 for an undisclosed price. Then she sold it, in 2007 to the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library Foundation as part of a $23 million deal for Lincoln memorabilia. The foundation then began raising money to repay the city of Springfield, which issued taxpayer-financed bonds to buy the collection." Several years ago, there was a suggestion that a DNA sample be tested to prove that the Springfield hat was indeed worn by Lincoln. The DNA test was never completed.

There is another "Lincoln hat" in a museum in Ft. Collins, Colorado. But its origins are even more suspect. Apparently there was a collection of stuff donated by Mr. and Mrs. Bolivar Tedmon, and their Lincoln hat might be an example of "this is a hat just like the one worn by Abraham Lincoln." We have a "Lincoln hat" at LeRoy House. It was never worn by Lincoln, but it is a stovepipe hat, which was the style preferred by the President.