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Appraiser questioned $6.5 million Lincoln hat; state officials warned before they bought it

By Dave McKinney

Springfield bureau chief

SPRINGFIELD - Two months before a major haul of Abraham Lincoln artifacts was purchased on behalf of the state, a New York appraiser raised questions about the authenticity of a $6.5 million stovepipe hat that purportedly belonged to the 16th president, newly released state records show.

That new disclosure represents the first evidence that state authorities were warned they might be on historically shaky ground with the hat before it was bought in 2007 from California collector Louise Taper as part of a $23 million acquisition of Lincoln items.

It also appears to further undercut assertions from the Lincoln presidential museum that there is "just not any question" about the hat's provenance as the institution maintained in January when the hat was put on display without any recognition of its iffy past.

Taper’s collection, which included a large cache of Lincoln memorabilia and a smattering of other prizes such as a $40,000 dress worn by Marilyn Monroe, was acquired in May 2007 by a nonprofit foundation headed then by former Gov. Jim Edgar.

The foundation's next most powerful member was its secretary, Julie Cellini, wife of now-imprisoned GOP powerbroker William Cellini, who was convicted of shaking down a Hollywood producer and investment mogul for a $1.5 million contribution to former Gov. Rod Blagojevich.

Taper sat on the foundation board when her collection was purchased, but she abstained from the vote to buy her artifacts.

In March 2007, two months before Taper's collection was bought, a White Plains, N.Y., appraiser laid out a series of questions about the authenticity of the hat, a clock that purportedly once belonged to Lincoln's law office and a theater fan Mary Todd Lincoln had with her on the night of Lincoln's assassination, according to Illinois Historic Preservation Agency records obtained by the Chicago Sun-Times through a Freedom of Information Act request.

"Of all the hats purported to have been owned by Lincoln, why is this one of the three accepted ones?" appraiser Seth Kaller asked in an email to then-State Historian Tom Schwartz and Taper.

Kaller, who had been hired by the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library Foundation to assess the value of Taper's collection, urged Schwartz and Taper to "proactively answer questions that will most likely be asked" about the authenticity of three major items in her collection.

"Who is William Waller, and why and when did Lincoln give him the hat?" Kaller asked, referring to a southern Illinois farmer who purportedly received the hat as a gift from the 16th president.

That's a question the presidential museum has not been able to convincingly answer to this day.

Last year, the Chicago Sun-Times first unearthed conflicts about the hat's provenance that have triggered calls by some members of the Illinois Historic Preservation Agency board to seek DNA testing of the hat to prove it really was Lincoln's.

Neither Kaller nor Schwartz returned phone calls seeking comment about the March 15, 2007, email, and Taper has not returned messages left at her California office.

But an agency spokesman Friday described the appraiser's language merely as a precaution to museum officials to be prepared for questions about the hat and other artifacts in Taper's collection - not an indictment of their authenticity.

"As with the hat, the clock and fan have been bought, sold and examined over the years by some of the nation's top experts on Lincoln artifacts. Their authenticity has never been challenged," said Chris Wills, a State Historic Preservation Agency spokesman.

"Kaller's e-mail points out that reporters might have detailed questions about the history of these three major artifacts, and he offers a few examples of those questions. He suggested the Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum be prepared to answer them," he said. "The [museum] had that information readily available for anyone who wanted it."

In the dozens of documents the museum released to the Sun-Times, the agency never directly answered Kaller's provenance questions head-on.

With the hat, the museum believes Lincoln gave it to William Waller after an 1858 debate with Stephen Douglas in Jonesboro, Ill., near where Waller, a Democrat-turned-Lincoln supporter, owned farmland.

But that account doesn't square with a 1958 affidavit from Waller's daughter-in-law, Clara Waller, who said her father-in-law got the hat from Lincoln during a visit to Washington, D.C., during the Civil War.

Schwartz initially accepted that account and wrote in 1994 that the hat was one Lincoln "wore . . . during the Civil War." That description was in a catalog of exhibits for a popular traveling Lincoln show that included the hat and was titled "The Last Best Hope of Earth: Abraham Lincoln and the Promise of America."

However, no newspaper clippings, photographs, White House visitor records or correspondence to or from Lincoln exist to corroborate the family lore or how Schwartz described the hat.

So Schwartz took the "historic liberty in re-dating it to a much more plausible time and place" - the 1858 debate, James Cornelius, curator of the museum's Lincoln collection, told the Chicago Sun-Times in an interview last year.

Similarly, outside of Clara Waller's century-old account, no evidence exists that places William Waller at the debate or that Lincoln gave away his hat, a gesture some historians dispute.

The only facts that point to Lincoln possibly owning the hat is that it is his size and that it bears the stamp of a popular Springfield hat maker from whom Lincoln was known to purchase hats.

Dan Weinberg, owner of the Abraham Lincoln Book Shop in Chicago, said Kaller's questions should have been a warning to the foundation and to state officials to look more closely at the hat's provenance before buying it.

"It was, to an extent, a red flag," Weinberg told the Sun-Times. "They should have been more circumspect."

Likewise, Historic Preservation Agency board member Shirley Portwood, a retired SIU history professor, said the memo shows Kaller "anticipates questions" about the hat's provenance, "but he doesn't provide the answers."

Portwood has expressed doubts about the hat's authenticity.

Kaller's email, she said, makes her "even more convinced there is a problem."