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CSI: ABRAHAM LINCOLN;

Split on DNA test for stovepipe hat

By Dave McKinney

Springfield bureau chief

SPRINGFIELD - Citing a "credibility gap," members of a state historic panel that oversees the Abraham Lincoln presidential museum pressed Wednesday for DNA testing to determine if an iconic stovepipe hat actually ever belonged to the beloved president.

The request drew an angry reaction from the museum curator, who snapped that the controversy is "a dead issue."

The full seven-member panel didn't vote, with its chairman, Sunny Fischer, questioning the need for testing but leaving open the possibility the matter could get a more thorough airing when the board next meets in June.

"I really think we have a credibility gap with this hat," said Tony Leone, a member of the state Historic Preservation Agency Board, who wants the hat tested by the Illinois State Police's forensic lab in a bid to establish whether it really was Lincoln's.

The Chicago Sun-Times last year raised questions about the $6.5 million stovepipe hat's background because the museum's explanation of where it came from conflicts substantially with a 57-year-old affidavit describing its ownership trail.

The museum maintains Lincoln gave the hat as a token of thanks to a southern Illinois farmer at an 1858 debate with Stephen Douglas, but a descendent of that farmer claimed in a 1958 affidavit that her father-in-law got it from Lincoln "during the Civil War in Washington."

Beyond family lore, no evidence exists that the farmer, William Waller, ever made the long trip to the nation's capital, and Lincoln never returned to Illinois after becoming president. Nor is there any evidence - such as a newspaper clipping, a letter, diary entry or photograph - to prove a handoff occurred at the 1858 debate.

The hat, which bears the mark of a Springfield hat maker and is Lincoln's size, was part of a $23 million collection the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library Foundation acquired in 2007 from Lincoln collector Louise Taper, who also sits on the foundation's board.

"I haven't heard an explanation that fully satisfies me about the provenance of the hat. I'm sure somebody can explain it beautifully, but I just haven't heard it," said board member Shirley Portwood, a retired Southern Illinois University history professor who said she was troubled by the "large gap" in the hat's history and believes DNA testing is in order.