

January 28, 2013 Monday

Keep it under your hat

Editorial:

Have you got family?

If so, then chances are, you've got at least one old family story that you don't question too closely because it might turn out not to be true. It's much more fun just to believe you're descended from royalty or whatever.

But serious historians don't do that. They would never accept family lore as factual history without checking it out completely, letting the chips fall where they may.

Except, apparently, in Springfield, where standards of scholarship may be more relaxed.

As Dave McKinney of the Sun-Times reported Sunday, the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum has begun exhibiting a stovepipe hat that the museum claims - without a word of doubt - was owned by Lincoln. But as McKinney revealed last April, the museum can't prove it.

The only evidence Lincoln owned the hat is an 1958 affidavit from a woman who says her father-in-law, William Waller, obtained the hat from the president "during the Civil War in Washington."

Unfortunately for family lore and the Lincoln Museum, there is no evidence Waller was even in Washington then.

But, gee, let's not tell the tourists.