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Story of $6.5M Lincoln hat brims with intrigue

By Dave McKinney

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SPRINGFIELD - For the next six months, the presidential museum honoring Abraham Lincoln wants visitors to believe one thing when they see the iconic $6.5 million beaver-fur stovepipe hat put on display this past week.

The hat was his. Really.

To mark Lincoln's 204th birthday, the museum is bringing the hat out of storage for the first time since the Chicago Sun-Times last April questioned the prized showpiece's authenticity and for the first time disclosed holes in its provenance.

But not even the slightest doubt is reflected on the sign now attached to the hat's display case. The placard that went up with the hat Wednesday explains its background in eight sentences, noting that only three of Lincoln's famous stovepipe hats are known to exist: "2 silk ones from his last days of life, and this."

"There's no deception at all," said Chris Wills, a spokesman for the museum.

What isn't mentioned is any reference to the fact the state can't prove whether it truly belonged to Honest Abe.

One nationally recognized expert in historical artifacts and a Republican state senator with family ties to a close Lincoln associate both told the Sun-Times Friday they think the museum should give visitors the unvarnished truth about what one termed the hat's "murky" past.

"I think the label should at least say 'purportedly worn by Lincoln,'" said Wes Cowan, co-host of the PBS-TV show "History Detectives" and an expert in historical artifacts and owner of a Cincinnati auction house.

"I think they should tell museum visitors, 'Look, there are a number of different stories about this hat, and here they are. Could this have been one of his hats? Here's what we know. We tried to find out, but we can't ever say for sure,'" said Cowan, who also made clear he isn't saying the hat is a fake.

What is known is the hat bears the mark of a Springfield hatmaker from whom Lincoln was known to have purchased hats, and it is Lincoln's hat size.

But from there, its story hits bumps. The hat has been described alternately as one Lincoln wore and gave away in Washington, D.C., to farmer William Waller during the Civil War - the version a Waller relative laid out in a 54-year-old affadavit - and, more recently, as one that Lincoln turned over to Waller as a token of appreciation after an 1858 debate in southern Illinois with Stephen Douglas.

Lincoln wasn't known to give away his hats, and no evidence has been unearthed that placed William Waller in Washington, D.C., after Lincoln was elected president. Further, after his election, Lincoln never returned to Illinois.

Wills said those kinds of details normally wouldn't accompany one of the museum's important relics when it goes on display.

"The museum is comfortable that the authenticity has been established," Wills said.

Last year, Cowan called the hat's provenance "squishy," and the museum's curator, James Cornelius, acknowledged that "something of a historic liberty" had been taken in determining that Lincoln must have given Waller the hat in 1858.

That explanation runs counter to the first written documentation on the hat from August 1958, when Carbondale resident Clara Waller signed an affidavit that said her father-in-law, William Waller, obtained the hat from Lincoln "during the Civil War in Washington" and, upon Waller's death, it was passed on to her husband, Elbert Waller.

The hat remained in Waller's family until 1958, when James Hickey, then head of the Illinois State Historical Library and overseer of the state's Lincoln artifacts, purchased it for an undisclosed price for himself.

The hat changed hands again in 1990, when Lincoln collector Louise Taper bought it from Hickey. She, in turn, parted with it in 2007, selling it to the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library Foundation.

State Sen. Kirk Dillard (R-Hinsdale), shares the view that more detailed information about what he called the hat's "murky" provenance needs to be displayed.

Dillard's wife is the great-great granddaughter of former Illinois Gov. Richard Oglesby, who was the eulogizer at Lincoln's funeral.

"I have great confidence that that hat did belong to Abraham Lincoln," said Dillard. "But like a religious site in the Middle East, you need to know the full story so you can draw your own conclusions."