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History holds special place for Lincoln

By Harriet Daniels

Two hundred years after his birth and 144 years after his death, Abraham Lincoln holds a special place in American culture and history.

One of the most revered leaders in American history, political leaders often try to emulate him and historians have devoted thousands of pages to chronicling his life and legacy.

President Barack Obama paid tribute to Lincoln when, at his inauguration last month, Obama took the oath of office using the same Bible that was used by the Civil War-era president during his swearing-in ceremony.

In preparation for the bicentennial of his birthday today, new coins bearing Lincoln's image are in circulation.

And students at his namesake school in Gainesville, Lincoln Middle School, will witness the local unveiling of a commemorative Lincoln stamp.

It's just a sampling of the many activities planned around the country in honor of Lincoln in coming weeks - which include tonight's public reopening of Ford's Theatre, where Lincoln was assassinated on April 14, 1865.

Florida is getting in on the action, too, with a month of events scheduled in Orlando, a Lincoln essay contest hosted by the Governor's Office, and a traveling Lincoln exhibit at Nova Southeastern University in Fort Lauderdale.

In a phone interview on Wednesday, noted presidential historian and biographer Doris Kearns Goodwin said there are two main reasons the fascination with Lincoln remains so intense.

"First he led the country through a great time of crisis, with ending a war, ending slavery and saving the union," Goodwin said. "And beyond that, there is something about his life story that Americans seem to identify with ... his mother died when he was 9, his sister died, then his fiance died ... and the number of times he failed before he succeeded points to someone who was willing to keep trying."

She said Obama has embraced Lincoln and looked to him as a mentor.

Goodwin's book "Team of Rivals: The Political Genius of Abraham Lincoln" is a New York Times best seller.

Goodwin said by reading history, a president can learn a lot from the ones who went before, which also shows how much Obama values Lincoln.

Phillip Stone, president of the Lincoln Society of Virginia and president of Bridgewater College in Bridgewater, Va., was a recent guest speaker at an event in Orlando commemorating Lincoln's birth.

To mark the bicentennial today, Stone, whose family owns the property where Lincoln's ancestors first settled in Virginia, will talk about Lincoln, Obama and the presidency. Stone said while there is a list of similarities between Lincoln and Obama - both being lawyers, state legislators and having little federal experience - "both dealt with colossal crisis."

Stone said every president since 1865 has quoted Lincoln, but Obama seems to have studied Lincoln and identifies with his good qualities.

"And that's new and special. It's not like he's saying he is Lincoln, but he has an appreciation of Lincoln, who was not perfect."

If Obama continues to use Lincoln as a mentor or role model, Stone believes he has the potential to be a great president.

Sean Patrick Adams, associate history professor at the University of Florida, said like the stock market, a president's stock seems to rise and fall but Lincoln's always tends to rise in times of crisis, like now.

He considers Lincoln a non-partisan hero and points to an article by Henry Louis Gates which describes Lincoln's popularity as timeless.

Historically, Adams believes Washington and Lincoln are perhaps the two most glorified presidents, with more books written about Lincoln than any other president.

"Lincoln's become so famous and well known it's almost a gloss over anything negative," Adams said.

Add to that over two centuries of history and there will be a tendency for comparisons to other presidents.

Dave Price, associate professor of history and political science at Santa Fe College, agrees that historians usually rank Lincoln in the No. 1 or No. 2 spot of presidents doing an admirable job under adverse circumstances. He said it leaves to wonder what more could he have done had he lived.

As for today's students, he believes FDR is more relevant, "who comes across as someone we need to be studying given the economic crisis we are in."

Tom Rider, co-owner of Goerings Book Store in Gainesville, said books on Lincoln are in high demand normally, not just now to mark the bicentennial.

"Interest in Lincoln is right up there with the Civil War, World War I and II and the Colonial period of most popular subjects," Rider said. "And Obama did a lot to remind us of Lincoln by using the same Bible."