

Daily News-Record

February 13, 2009

At 200, Lincoln's Going Strong Biggest Crowd Ever Shows Up For County Birthday Observance

JENNY JONES, Daily News-Record

HARRISONBURG - At 200 years old, Abraham Lincoln is a man who seems to get more popular with age. The interest in Lincoln was evident Thursday, when the largest crowd ever, about 200 people, gathered on a blustery afternoon for the 34th annual Lincoln Day Ceremony.

As it is every year, the ceremony was held on Lincoln's birthday at the Lincoln Cemetery, six miles north of Harrisonburg on U.S. 42, adjacent to the Lincoln Homestead.

Lincoln historian and Bridgewater College President Phillip Stone gave his annual address honoring the 16th president at the cemetery, where several of Lincoln's relatives are buried. This year, Stone's address was titled "Lincoln, Obama and the American Presidency."

The ceremony was one of two public events held Thursday during which Stone shared facts about Lincoln. Stone, a member of The Lincoln Forum, gave a talk at Eastern Mennonite High School earlier in the day called "Why Lincoln Is Important."

Talking About Honest Abe

During both events, Stone talked about Lincoln's connections to Rockingham County and discussed the characteristics that, he says, made Lincoln an effective president.

In 1768, Lincoln's grandparents moved from Pennsylvania to the Lincoln Homestead in Rockingham County, where the president's father, Thomas Lincoln, was born.

While the Lincolns eventually moved to Kentucky, where Abraham was born in 1809, Lincoln was interested in his Virginia ancestry. This is apparent because Lincoln wrote at least two letters, which still exist, to his cousin David in Rockingham County about their relation, Stone said.

"We have a lot of connections here," said Stone, founder of the Lincoln Society of Virginia. "A lot of relatives remained here."

Among Lincoln's honorable characteristics were his honesty, determination and willingness to stand up for what he believed to be right, Stone said.

"He was so tenacious, so determined to save the Union, he was willing to go through this awful war," Stone said. "The Union was an experiment of self-governing. ... In Lincoln's day, there was no other example of it."

Stone also recognized Lincoln's role in the emancipation of the slaves, saying that the man known as "The Great Emancipator" deserves the title because he established the basis for equal rights.

"He always thought slavery was wrong," Stone said. "He said he could not remember a time he didn't hate slavery."

Lincoln-Obama Parallels

After looking at Lincoln's ancestry and his work, Stone talked about Lincoln and President Obama, who often quotes the 16th president.

Stone pointed out many similarities between the two men, including the fact that both were lawyers and politicians from Illinois and both appointed their political rivals to be secretary of state.

"Both entered the White House relatively unknown, inexperienced in national and foreign matters and facing a crisis of gigantic proportions," said Stone in a prepared statement.

At the cemetery, Stone pointed out that many presidents have quoted Lincoln but that it will take someone with Lincoln's integrity to be as great a leader.

"If President Obama sees that essence of Abe Lincoln and models that grander vision," he will be a success, Stone said. Lincoln "set a model not just for presidents but for the rest of us [as well]."

Margaret Renalds Witmer, 75, who lived in the Lincoln Homestead when she was a girl, said she was thrilled to attend Thursday's talks honoring Lincoln.

"I especially wanted to come today just because it was the 200th anniversary," said Witmer, an Ohio resident who drove 500 miles for the event. "This is great."

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