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Phillip Stone celebrates Lincoln's 200th birthday

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LACEY SPRING — Repeating the tradition he has practiced for more than 30 years, Phillip Stone will make his annual pilgrimage today to a small cemetery in Rockingham County.

There, he will pay homage to his childhood hero — Abraham Lincoln — by hosting a ceremony and delivering a speech at the Lincoln Homestead Cemetery, the final resting place for many of the 16th president's ancestors. Although Stone, who is a Lincoln Scholar and president of Bridgewater College, has honored Lincoln's birthday many times before at the site, he said this year brings extra excitement and interest to the event.

"This being the bicentennial of his birth is huge, and there really hasn't been this kind of anticipation of celebrating a president's birth before," he said. "I think there is just so much respect for him from the general public and historians, not to mention the parallels with President Obama, with both of them being from Illinois and with all of Obama's references to Lincoln."

Stone said he will begin his address, as he always does, by retelling the history of Lincoln's ties to the region that were formed in the 1700s when Lincoln's great-grandparents moved to Rockingham County. When Stone realized that many people were unaware of this family history or that five generations of Lincolns are buried at the cemetery, he said he wanted to do something to help educate the public.

"When I was learning about all of Lincoln's background, a friend of mine and I thought it would be a shame if we didn't do something to make people more aware of these connections," he said. "So for the last 33 years, I go there, make a little speech and we have a celebration on the anniversary of his birth. Some years we've had more than 100 people attend, other years, when the weather is bad, it is just me and my Saint Bernard."

The event, which is endorsed by the Abraham Lincoln Bicentennial Committee, is one of many across the nation that will celebrate the milestone today. Stone said it is important for people to remember what Lincoln did for the nation by reunifying the country and ending slavery.

"I think the typical story we all hear as children about Lincoln is basically correct," Stone said. "He saved the union."

Stone typically follows his history lesson with a speech on a specific theme, such as slavery, Lincoln's marriage or his law practice. This year, Stone said he will focus on how Obama's rise to the presidency relates to Lincoln's, and how the 44th president can emulate the 16th in terms of executing policy and political strategy.

"In order for Obama to be a great president, he has to do more than just quoting Lincoln, because that's something every other president has also done," he said.