

Lincoln and Leavenworth By Sister Rosemary Kolich

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An historically important – but much overlooked – event that took place in Kansas in December of 1859 was Abraham Lincoln’s visit to Leavenworth where he gave his first presidential campaign speech. Stop number 11 – Lincoln at the Planters – on the Wayside walking tour in Leavenworth, recounts Lincoln’s visit.

“On this site once stood the most famous and magnificent hotel between St. Louis and San Francisco – the Planters. The Planters, a fine four-story brick building with one hundred guestrooms, opened for business in December 1856.

Abraham Lincoln visited Leavenworth from the 3rd to the 7th of December 1859. He was not yet president and had just bested Stephen Douglas in their famous debates. He was a national figure, considered by some as a possible vice president.

He had been invited to speak at the Republican Party National Convention and wanted to try out his ideas for that speech on the people. He made brief stops elsewhere in Northeast Kansas that were well received, but rather sparsely attended. Leavenworth, however, had prepared a grand reception.

Lincoln spoke at Leavenworth’s famous Stockton Hall on December 3rd to an overflowing crowd. He said the Republican Party sought to maintain its policy of not interfering with slavery in the South but prohibiting its extension into new territories. He urged his listeners not to use violence as John Brown had just done, but to triumph through the ballot box.

Two months later Lincoln made his famous Cooper’s Union Address at the Republican Convention in New York City – the speech that won him the nomination for President. When the text was printed in the newspapers, those who had heard him speak in Leavenworth were surprised to find it was basically the same speech he had given here (in Leavenworth). Thus, Lincoln’s visit to Leavenworth was an important part of a campaign which led to the White House and his singular place in American history.”

Lincoln never returned to Kansas but during his presidency, when asked if he would advise individuals to go West, said: “If I went West, I think I would go to Kansas - to Leavenworth.”

Today, the University of Saint Mary in Leavenworth honors President Abraham Lincoln and his impact on America with a special collection in his memory. In 1970, Dr. Bernard H. Hall, a lecturer, author, and collector of Lincoln memorabilia and artifacts for over 40 years, was looking for a place to donate his Lincoln collection. Mindful of Lincoln’s visit to Leavenworth in 1859, he reached out to Saint Mary. Dr. Hall wished for his collection to be in Leavenworth, hoping that it would become “a shrine to a great man” and “a memorial to the incomparable Abraham Lincoln.”

Dr. Hall’s Lincoln Collection contains more than 10,000 items. Notables include:

- one of the 14 known original copies of the 13th Amendment to the Constitution;
- one of only two known letters written by Mrs. Lincoln and co-signed by Lincoln;
- one of Lincoln’s last messages to his wife via a telegram from General Ulysses S. Grant’s headquarters in City Point, Virginia, dated April 2, 1865 – just 12 days before Lincoln’s assassination;

- and a lock of hair purportedly taken from Lincoln's head at the time of his death.

Dr. Hall's Lincoln Collection is housed in the LeBeau Special Collections on the Saint Mary campus.

Saint Mary was founded by the Sisters of Charity of Leavenworth, a band of religious Sisters who came to Leavenworth to care for orphans, to teach children, and to heal the sick. The Sisters arrived on November 11, 1858, just a year prior to Lincoln's visit, so shared Dr. Hall's enthusiasm for the ties between Lincoln and Leavenworth.

Inspired by Lincoln's visit and Dr. Hall's donation, the University hosts a Lincoln Lecture annually on Presidents' Day. The public is welcome to attend.

This transcript of "Lincoln and Leavenworth" is part of the Humanities Kansas Humanities Hotline, a series of bite-sized micropresentations about Kansas stories – both serious and light-hearted – that are researched and presented by experts across the state. Humanities Hotline topics change monthly. For more information about Humanities Kansas and the Humanities Hotline, visit humanitieskansas.org or call 1-888-416-2018.