



Scholar unearths new past about Abraham Lincoln

Author of 2-volume book speaks at Knox College

By Annie Zak

The Register-Mail

Posted Mar 26, 2010 @ 10:20 AM

GALESBURG — Michael Burlingame says President Abraham Lincoln's famous "Letter to Mrs. Bixby" may not have been written by Lincoln after all. The Lincoln scholar spoke Thursday at Knox College about his most recent publication, a two-volume biography, "Abraham Lincoln: A Life." The book was the 2010 winner of the Abraham Lincoln Book Prize.

In his talk titled "What New Can Be Said About Abraham Lincoln?" Burlingame focused on the difficulties in finding information on Lincoln that has not already been uncovered and published.

"It's easy to find letters that Lincoln wrote or received," said Burlingame. "What's really valuable and hard to find are letters about him. You have to do a lot of sifting through gravel, but if you're willing to do that, you find a lot of information."

Burlingame attended Princeton University for his undergraduate degree and Johns Hopkins University for his graduate studies. During the summer between his junior and senior years at Princeton, one of his professors landed him a job working in the manuscript division at the Library of Congress.

There, he found many letters containing information about Lincoln that had never been researched before. His interest in the topic skyrocketed.

"I grew up in Washington and went to the Abraham Lincoln memorial often ... I think that predisposed me to be a Lincoln scholar," he said.

He said it is not enough for him to try to order books that have already been written.

"You really have to go all around the country," he said.

One of the most important recent discoveries he made through his research for the book is that the "Letter to Mrs. Bixby" was possibly not written by Lincoln at all but by his assistant at the time, John Hay.

Burlingame found a scrapbook that Hay had kept of all his work, and when he found the Bixby letter in it, he realized that perhaps it was there because it was written by Hay and not Lincoln. Burlingame also did research to discover that the letter was more stylistically likely to be written by Hay.

"I published an article saying Lincoln did not write it. It's amazing how many people will not accept this conclusion," said Burlingame.

He also said it is still an authentic letter even if it was written by Hay and signed by Lincoln.

Burlingame was one of the original members of the Board of Advisers for the Lincoln Studies Center at Knox College and is still one of its members today.

The full version of his book, "Abraham Lincoln: A Life," can be found on the Lincoln Studies Center Web site at www.knox.edu/lincolnstudies.xml. The print version has been greatly edited to leave out several footnotes. Even so, it weighs 10 pounds and is 2,000 pages long.

"It's recently come out on Kindle," said Burlingame. "If you drop a Kindle on your foot, you won't have to go to the hospital."

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Shouldn't an article about a letter to Mrs. Bixby tell us who she is, why Lincoln was writing to her, and what was in the letter that makes it 'famous'?

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