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In his own words: Exhibit examines Abraham Lincoln's development on key mid-1800s issues

An exhibit that looks at Abraham Lincoln's greatest words and how they helped end slavery in America will open Saturday in the Illinois Gallery of the [Abraham Lincoln Presidential Museum](#).

More than 120 documents and artifacts related to Lincoln and his biggest speeches will be displayed through Feb. 28, 2016, in "Undying Words: Lincoln 1858-1865."

"Undying Words" is part of the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum's [celebration of its 10th birthday](#). The exhibition also commemorates the 150th anniversary of the Civil War's end and Lincoln's death.

Mounted in cooperation with the [Chicago History Museum](#), "Undying Words" focuses on Lincoln's changing views through five of his speeches: the "House Divided" speech of 1858; his First Inaugural Address, 1861; the Gettysburg Address, 1863; Second Inaugural Address, 1865; and his final speech, on reconstruction, given three days before his assassination April 15, 1865.

Three fragile key documents displayed will be removed at different times and replaced by a facsimile or illustration:

- * A handwritten copy of the Gettysburg Address, displayed until Jan. 20
- * A signed copy of the Emancipation Proclamation (declaring slaves free), displayed until Feb. 16
- * A signed copy of the 13th Amendment abolishing slavery, displayed until March 16.

"If people can get in here, the sooner the better, they'll have the chance to see all three of them live," said James Cornelius, curator of the presidential library's Lincoln Collection. He curated "Undying Words" with Olivia Mahoney, senior curator at the Chicago History Museum.

Changing thoughts

The exhibition will help visitors understand what Lincoln was trying to accomplish with each speech, what was going on in the world around him and what impact his words ultimately had on the nation.

For example, the exhibition shows that the beliefs Lincoln held in 1858 at the time he was running for the Senate against Stephen Douglas changed quickly once the Civil War began, Cornelius said.

"Contributions of African-Americans, whether as slaves escaping bondage or as people helping the Union in the ways they could in the early part of the war, did require that the Lincoln administration formally acknowledge that. And that is a big part of the emancipation policy, both the justice of it and the contribution to the war part of it," Cornelius said.

Lincoln's beliefs evolved as he continued his rethinking of the constitutional rights of African-Americans. He began putting the need for blacks to have the vote and education into his thoughts, and in a couple of written documents, Cornelius said.

"It was his last speech on reconstruction where he says it in public for the first time," Cornelius said. "It's not one of his most famous speeches, but it's why John Wilkes Booth killed him ... because Lincoln said giving the vote to some African-Americans was the right thing to do, (it) would be the policy of the administration."

In a seven-year span, Lincoln went from thinking that blacks and whites couldn't live together in this country to including the formal administration policy of voting rights and access to education for blacks, Cornelius said.

Tangible illustrations

Artifacts in the exhibition will help illustrate Lincoln's thought process.

Visitors to the exhibit will first see information about the slavery debate, which is why Lincoln is famous, Cornelius said. The Chicago History Museum loaned original artifacts owned and used by slaves to "start that part of the conversation of Lincoln's position against the spread of slavery," Cornelius said.

"This is in some ways an exhibit that works on two different levels. The really cool things we're borrowing from the Chicago History Museum are the biggest items," Cornelius said.

Among the items from the Chicago History Museum:

- * An 8-foot-tall portrait oil painting of Lincoln as a rail-splitter
- * The carriage that Lincoln and his wife Mary Lincoln used in Washington, and that Mary used in Chicago as a widow
- * A large painting of Lincoln riding through Richmond, Virginia, two days after Richmond fell to Gen. Ulysses S. Grant's forces, with crowds of blacks and whites cheering him
- * Lincoln's death bed.

The goal of displaying Lincoln's artifacts, documents and speeches is to illustrate the evolution of Lincoln's ideas on equality, from taking a personal stand against slavery to helping develop a national majority that favored permanently ending slavery and preserving the Union as a free republic, according to a press release.

An 88-page, full-color catalog will accompany the exhibition. It will be available for \$9.99 at the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Museum Store.

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The bed upon which President Abraham Lincoln died in 1865.