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New exhibit at presidential museum blends Lincoln's words, objects

Each time Leonard Heumann reads the part of the Gettysburg Address where Abraham Lincoln mentioned what the world "will little note, nor long remember," he's blown away.

Heumann, a 73-year-old retired professor from the University of Illinois who lives in Champaign, joined dozens of visitors at the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum on Saturday for the public opening of a new exhibit, "Undying Words: Lincoln 1858-65." The exhibit, which blends documents and artifacts compiled by the Springfield facility and the Chicago History Museum, will run through 2015 and showcases five of Lincoln's most important public speeches in honor of the 150th anniversary of his assassination in 1865.

The presidential library and museum also will mark its 10th anniversary in 2015.

Heumann said the new exhibit does a good job blending Lincoln's words with related artifacts.

Visitors can see the simple black carriage Lincoln bought and used while president, the ink well he dipped his pen in when he drafted his first inaugural address, a handwritten note he sent to Gen. Ulysses S. Grant near the end of the Civil War, blood-stained white gloves he had in his left coat pocket the night John Wilkes Booth shot him in Ford's Theater, and the bed the president was laid upon after receiving the injury that would end his life.

Heumann said Lincoln's presidency reflected his attempt to understand the people of a fractured nation.

"All of his work very clearly is trying to bring people together, to get and keep one country," he said. "I think what's always amazed me is that was quite a long time ago and there are still so many people who are so ignorant and so prejudiced."

Another visitor, Paul Rife, 61, of El Dorado Hills, California, had never been to a presidential library before.

But he has been to the Lincoln Memorial in Washington. He was just a teenager during that visit in 1967, but he said that stop was the most moving part of the trip for him.

"It still gets to me," he said. "So I really appreciate (this exhibit). This is wonderful."

"We generally have the rosy picture that's painted in our schoolbooks, but really it was brutal," he added. "To me it was really an extension, more detail and more depth over what we see in the other exhibits."

James Cornelius, the museum's curator, told the exhibit's first attendees to "look for the beauty of the materials that have somehow been saved from Lincoln's own life and from those around him."

Chicago History Museum curator Olivia Mahoney said the exhibit is an exploration of Lincoln's ideas about slavery and how those ideas changed as the Civil War raged on.

"We explore this inner transformation through five key speeches that Lincoln delivered between 1858 and 1865," Mahoney said.

The speeches include the "House Divided" speech Lincoln gave in Springfield in 1858, his first inaugural address in 1861, the Gettysburg Address in 1863, his second inaugural address in 1865, and the speech he gave outlining the reconstruction of the South just days before he died.

"By studying these speeches, you do see how Lincoln had really grown in his understanding. You see this dramatic change in his views toward slavery," Mahoney said. "It's a very compelling story."

Want to go?

What: "Undying Words: Lincoln 1858-65"

Where: Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum, 212 N. Sixth St., Springfield

When: Through Feb. 28, 2016

Cost: Free with regular admission

More information: bit.ly/lincolnundyingwords

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The bed upon which President Abraham Lincoln died in 1865.