SJR
The State Journal-Register

By John Reynolds, Staff Writer

Print Page

April 19. 2015 7:25PM

# Abraham Lincoln Presidential Museum celebrates 10 years

Emma Van Dyke snpas a picture of her grandchildren who were posing with Abraham and Mary Lincoln presenters at the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Museum's 10th anniversary celebration Sunday, April 19, 2015. Van Dyke is wearing the stove pipe hat she collected the day the museum opened ten years ago. Rich Saal/The State Journal-Register

Just before the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Museum opened in April 2005, retired Springfield English teacher Barbara Archer went around the building and read all of the text that accompanied the new exhibits.

She was one of the volunteers at the new museum, and her keen eyes did find some errors.

"I read every text throughout the museum and told them where the mistakes were," Archer said. "Anything that was serious, they changed. Some of the mistakes still haven't been changed."

Ten years later, Archer is still volunteering at the museum.

She was helping on Sunday with the 10th anniversary of the museum's grand opening. Admission to the downtown site was free, and visitors were taking advantage of the opportunity. More than 5,200 people visited the museum Sunday, topping the previous record of 4,740 visitors, which was set when free admission was offered on opening day.

"I think it's wonderful to watch all of these people streaming in here," U.S. Senator Dick Durbin said. "This museum breathed life into downtown Springfield. Before it was built, there was a real serious question about the future of downtown. I think it has created activity, hotel activity and restaurant activity, that has made a difference in the economy."

**3.7 million visitors in 10 years**

The grand opening of the museum on April 19, 2005, drew President George Bush to Springfield. Durbin was on hand with Illinois' other senator, Barack Obama.

Since the grand opening, about 3.7 million people have visited the museum. That's about 1.3 million more than the original 10-year attendance estimate.

Chris Wills, spokesman for the Illinois Historic Preservation Agency, said there are a lot of reasons why the museum has drawn so many visitors over the years.

"It's a wonderful museum that tells the Lincoln story in a way that other places don't, and because the Lincoln story is so fascinating," Wills said. "The man contributed so much to America, and his personal story of rising from nothing, enduring tragedy, of being assassinated, is just gripping."

During Sunday's 10th anniversary celebration, museum officials introduced the new MyLincoln website, which has additional Lincoln documents and photographs to supplement the museum's collection. People who want more information on something they saw at the museum can access the information via a smartphone or tablet.

A $50,000 donation from AT&T helped pay for the new website other digital and electronic initiatives.

"We literally have thousands upon thousands of photographs and documents that are in our vaults and stacks that are never going to be put on display because there's not enough room," Wills said. "The museum is really designed to whet people's appetite. It's not a museum that offers tons of facts and figures. It offers more of the outline of the story, and then we hope people will want to research more."

The new website is at mylincoln.org.

Durbin, a Springfield resident, said neither the state nor the federal government has had the resources to keep up with new technology at the museum over the past decade. He added that he's grateful AT&T and other donors stepped forward.

"I hope that in years to come we will be able to invest a little more in the technology that really makes (the museum) different and appealing," Durbin said. "But I'm proud that this has come to Mr. Lincoln's hometown. I think it has made it a much better place, a much better experience for families to learn about Lincoln."

**Presidential museum alive**

One of the people taking advantage of the free admission Sunday was Christina Ayers of Springfield. She was at the museum with her 2-year-old son.

"So far, it's really interesting. I haven't been here before," Ayers said. "It's very informative. I like how the history is brought to life with the images."

Over the years, Archer has helped a lot of people navigate the museum.

"It's been a wonderful experience," Archer said of her decade of volunteering. "I love taking the students through. I listen to them to find out what they are interested in rather than feed them a lot of information they don't care about."

During her years with the Springfield School District, Archer taught at the middle school and high school level. She spent the last 12 years of her career at Springfield High School.

Archer said the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Museum is unique, and she's not surprised so many people have visited over the years.

"So many museums are dead. They think of artifacts, literature and books. We have that. Much of that is what is stored away," Archer said. "But this tells the story so people can see it. They can see what it looked like, and they can see what he looked like."

*— Contact John Reynolds: john.reynolds@sj-r.com, 788-1524, twitter.com/JohnReynoldsSJR.*