

# Looking for Lincoln: Alton becomes gateway to history

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**ALTON** - Alton has become one of six communities acting as gateways to the **Looking for Lincoln National Heritage Area**, which consists of 42 counties across the state.

The designation was given to the city at city hall Wednesday morning through the dedication of signage directing travelers to the heritage site from the interstates across the state. The one dedicated Wednesday is one of 12, which will direct people to historical communities with ties to **Abraham Lincoln**, including Alton. The sign was received by representatives of the city, state, and visitors' bureau.

**Illinois Senator Bill Haine (D-Alton)** said the dedication was great.

"I think it's great," he said. "Alton is just drenched in this history from both the pre-Civil War and Civil War eras."

Haine continued to give the small crowd assembled in the lobby of **Alton City Hall** a small lesson of some of that history. He discussed Lincoln as well as slain abolitionist **Elijah P. Lovejoy**. He also spoke of **Senator Lyman Trumbell**, who hailed from Alton and penned the 13th, 14th and 15th amendments.

"Alton was a crucible of conflict over the issue of slavery," he said.

Haine also spoke of the first abolitionist society in Illinois being formed in **Upper Alton** in the 1830s and 1840s. He spoke about women from that area delivering pies to Union troops heading south, which earned its nickname "**Pie Town**." He also mentioned Alton having both a Confederate and a Union cemetery.

Ultimately, Haine tied these historical anecdotes to Lincoln, who was at the forefront of slavery and the Civil War. In a certain October 158 years ago, Lincoln and **Stephen Douglas** had a debate regarding slavery on the steps of the Alton City Hall. Haine also mentioned Lincoln's career prior to politics as a lawyer bringing him to Alton.

"Lincoln came here as a lawyer several times," Haine said. "Alton had a city court with an original jurisdiction in all cases except for treason and murder. Lincoln appeared here often."

Haine closed by commending Alton for its ability to maintain balance through economic downturns and controversies throughout the different historical eras.

Looking for **Lincoln National Heritage Site Executive Director Sarah Watson** said one of her organization's goals was to help that balance through both celebrating history and encouraging economic growth in the communities within the 42-county heritage site.

"The main part of our mission to help communities in the area tell the story of Lincoln," Watson said. "It's special to have a community as a gateway, which is both good to tourism and very aware of their history. It's also a very beautiful city."



Watson said Alton will welcome people "Looking for Lincoln" from the heritage area's southern and western borders. She said she was happy to work with a community with a very good convention and visitors' bureau.

**Alton Convention and Visitors' Bureau (CVB) Executive Director Brett Stawar** introduced the speakers at the event. He said the city's partnership with Looking for Lincoln started in 1998, before he was a part of the Alton CVB. Since Stawar joined the Alton CVB in 2004, he said he has worked with them for several projects, including the 2008 Lincoln-Douglas Debate sesquicentennial anniversary.

"We've continued with that plan after that," Stawar said. "We worked on the Lincoln and Civil War trails through the city. We're also continuing to work on our Looking for Lincoln app, which connects 10 sites across the area."

**Alton Mayor Brant Walker** received both the signage and a special hat from Watson on behalf of the Looking for Lincoln Heritage Site. He said the Lincoln-Douglas debate helped change the course of the entire world.

"Alton will be a gateway for Looking for Lincoln Heritage Area," Walker said. "We will be able to start here and follow Lincoln's footsteps across the state. We're blessed to have the history that we do."