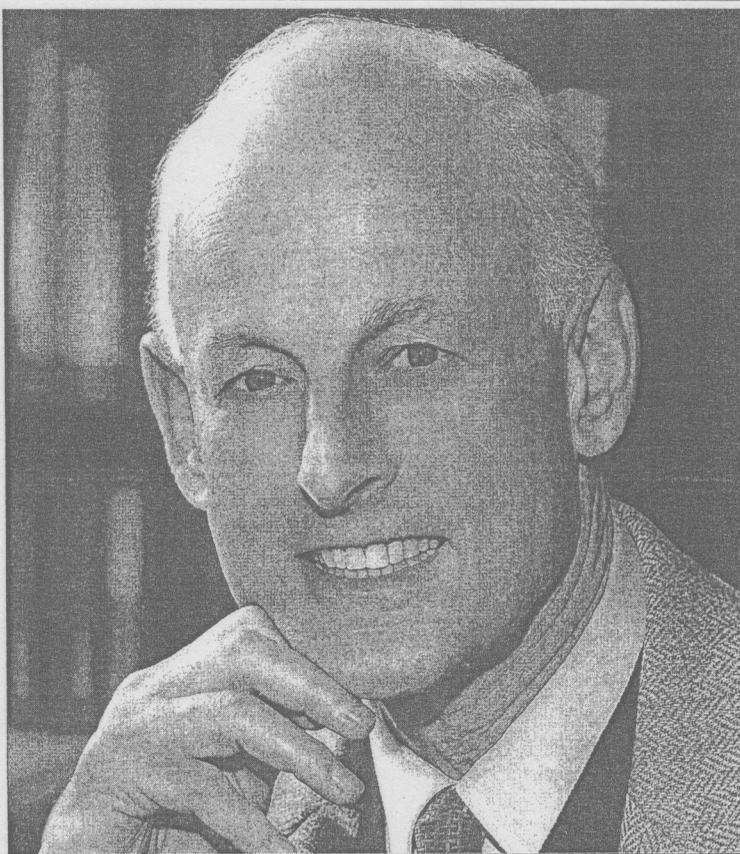


Thursday, July 24, 2008

Vol. 13, No. 30



Exploring Lincoln

Local author focuses on President's 1854 speech

By Ken Borsuk
Staff Reporter

When people think of the great speeches by Abraham Lincoln, they tend to focus on the Gettysburg Address or the "House divided against itself cannot stand" remarks. But Greenwich resident Lewis Lehrman contends that the roots of the drive of the man who became the Great Emancipator can be traced to years before then.

In his new book, *Lincoln at Peoria*, Mr. Lehrman focuses on a speech Mr. Lincoln gave on Oct. 16, 1854, in Peoria, Ill., one that might be obscure to non-historians, given that it was made when Mr. Lincoln was an attorney and a private citizen, and before he re-entered politics. But Mr. Lehrman contends that in the more than three-hour monologue, which consisted of more than 17,000 words, the then-future President showed the strength of character and moral resolve that made him what people say was one of the country's greatest leaders.

"This was a very decisive speech," Mr. Lehrman told the *Post*. "The speech contains most of the great ideas we associate with Lincoln. While it's not as well known as the Gettysburg Address, the second inaugural speech or others, you can see the themes in those speeches here when he was still a private citizen. You see the same themes and arguments and logic that came to be associated with President Lincoln. He links slavery here with the Declaration of Independence and the ideal that all men are created equal."

Mr. Lincoln's speech was given as a response to a speech given by Illinois Sen. Steven Douglas about the Kansas-Nebraska Act, which repealed a prohibition on slavery in the Kansas-Nebraska territory. The act, which Mr. Douglas sponsored, permitted the settlers in the territory, following the repeal, to choose whether they wanted slavery or not.

The prohibition of slavery was a key component of 1820's Missouri Compromise.

An opponent of the spread of slavery, Mr. Lincoln spoke out in Peoria on the same day as Mr. Douglas's speech praising the act, out of concern the act set the precedent to move slavery into all American territories, perhaps even into the "free states."

"Lincoln gave a magnificent history of the origins

and development of slavery in the United States," Mr. Lehrman said. "He argued about the intentions of our founding fathers in creating the Declaration of Independence and contended that they wanted slavery put in the course of ultimate extinction."

A lifelong student of history, Mr. Lehrman said he believes this speech is critical to understanding Mr. Lincoln. This is the first speech he gave specifically linking the need to end slavery with the words of the Declaration of Independence, an argument later used to argue for emancipation. Historians have noted the importance of the speech, but outside of that circle, there isn't much awareness.

"This is so important in Mr. Lincoln's campaign against slavery that I felt it deserved a full treatment," Mr. Lehrman said. "Studying this speech is crucial to understanding the last decade of his life and how the 13th Amendment abolishing slavery came to be."

Lincoln at Peoria has been 20 years in the making

for Mr. Lehrman, who used evenings and weekends to work on it. The book not only details the speech, but also explores the events leading up to it and the impact that resulted from it. The detailed research Mr. Lehrman did wasn't easy, but he said it meant a lot to do it because of the importance of Mr. Lincoln and what he accomplished.

Mr. Lehrman dedicates the book to his wife, children, grandchildren and generations to come, and asks that Mr. Lincoln be a "trusted guide" for them. He told the *Post* he would urge anyone to read one of the better Lincoln biographies and be "edified and inspired by his life."

"He was a virtually self-taught man who proved himself a great scholar and constitutional interpreter," Mr. Lehrman said of Mr. Lincoln, who had less than 12 months' formal education. "He was a true genius and the moral conduct he exhibited under the most difficult of circumstances should be part of the American dream for anyone who aspires to be the best they can be as an American."

Already the author of a book on economic and monetary history, this is Mr. Lehrman's first book about American history, a longtime passion. Mr. Lehrman is chairman of the private investment firm L.E. Lehrman and Co. but was once a history teacher, serving as both a Carnegie Teaching Fellow at Yale University and a Woodrow Wilson Fellow at Harvard University. As managing partner of the Gilder Lehrman Collection, he and his partner have the largest collection of privately owned American historical documents, including letters written by George Washington, Thomas Jefferson and Mr. Lincoln. Mr. Lehrman and Richard Gilder also oversee the Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History.

Mr. Lehrman credits the teachers he had growing up in Pennsylvania near the Gettysburg battlefield with inspiring his interest in history. While he said he doesn't consider himself a scholar, his book is receiving positive reviews from noted historians such as Doris Kearns Goodwin and James McPherson.

"It's very fulfilling to see others appreciate the book, especially scholars who have spent a lifetime studying the subject," Mr. Lehrman said.

■ kborsuk@greenwich-post.com

