



Planning now to secure Lincoln's legacy forever

This article appeared in The State Journal-Register on March 10, 2018

Tourism is an important industry for Illinois, and particularly Sangamon County.

It's no secret that Abraham Lincoln is the main driver for the nearly \$436 million in travel impact in Sangamon County alone in 2016, according to a study done by the Illinois Bureau of Tourism. But across Illinois, Lincoln left a legacy in communities all across the state, and that's where Looking for Lincoln seeks to bring all of those landmarks together.

Underneath the Old State Capitol, sits the offices of the non-profit organization Looking for Lincoln. It's smack dab in the middle of the Capitol's foundation, an appropriate metaphor of how the organization brings all of the Lincoln landmarks together for the vitally important business of tourism in central Illinois.

"Really, what we do is we work with communities in the 42 counties that each have their own Lincoln story to tell – it's their story, their heritage," said Sarah Watson, executive director of Looking for Lincoln.

"That is a huge, primary role for us to be able to say to the travelling public, here's where you can go on your way in, on your way out (of Springfield)."

Watson knows firsthand the importance of preserving history. That's why in 2013, the Looking for Lincoln board of directors worked with the Community Foundation to set up an organizational endowment, a type of fund that directly benefits the non-profit that established it. With the Community Foundation handling the administrative and investment responsibilities, it allows the organization to focus on pursuing its mission rather than managing an endowment fund.

For Watson and Looking for Lincoln, the fund is a tool that they want to have for long-term sustainability. She fundraises for programs to go along with the federal funding they receive, but knows times change. The organization's fourth book that guides tourists through Lincoln sites and scheduled to be released in fall 2018, documents the current house museums in the heritage area. The criteria to make the book include the home still being around today and open to the public – a feat considering that more than 150 years have passed since Lincoln's death.

Looking to keep these house museums and legacies intact for another 150 years and longer, Watson said the endowment is there in case the federal revenue stops sometime, even if it's decades, down the road.



“The idea is that we want to be good stewards of the resources that we have,” Watson said. “We are trying to carry on this legacy for future generations, and this is one of those ways to help preserve the opportunity to do so.”

Watson knows the importance of making best use of funds for a non-profit, and she’s thrilled at the return on investment over the last five years.

“These are not our dollars. These are dollars that belong to the public and for the public good. There’s a huge responsibility to storing those funds,” Watson said.

“The Community Foundation has been that vehicle through which we’ve been able to earn and get a good return on investment, and know that our investment is being wisely managed, under good leadership, and accessible if we need it.”

Looking for Lincoln has published three books, along with the 263 blue storyboard exhibits in downtown areas around the state. They help tie the story of the 16th president together and give tourists a cohesive roadmap of where to go. It’s a significant driver to the economy – according to their economic impact study in 2017, the organization generated \$258.6 million in economic impact in central Illinois.

This year, Looking for Lincoln is celebrating ten years of becoming one of 49 national Heritage Areas in the United States this year. Look for upcoming information on their Facebook page or at lookingforlincoln.com

For more information about the Community Foundation and organizational endowments, call 217.789.4431 or visit CFL.org.