

Abraham Lincoln Visits Brookfield History buffs love library historical program.

By [Betty Horton](#) | July 12, 2011



Photos: Credit Betty Horton (4)

Abraham Lincoln came alive at the [Brookfield Library](#) last Friday night. In an hour-long program called “Simply Lincoln,” Howard Wright delivered a superb, highly informative narration of Lincoln’s speeches and stories and of the dilemmas he faced during the years before the Civil War through the fall of 1863.

Introduced by librarian Katherine Van Leeuwen, Wright stepped into the room: a tall, dark-haired man in black top hat, trimmed beard and sideburns, vest and bow tie, top coat and gold watch chain. Speaking as Lincoln, he began: “I appear before you for a little while for you to see me, and for me to see you.”

Lincoln had a limited education, Wright said. For a long time the only book Lincoln read was the *Bible*, but he also knew *Aesop’s Fables*, *Pilgrims’s Progress* and the writings of George Washington. Lincoln was a great storyteller, Wright added, and a measure of his greatness was that his stories made a point.

Wright spoke of Lincoln’s political rise in the Whig Party, the election he lost and the ones he won, spending eight years in the Illinois State Legislature. In 1846 he ran for Illinois Representative to the U.S. Congress and debated with his Democrat opponent, Stephen A. Douglas, on seven separate occasions. Lincoln won the seat.

Ten years later, he helped to organize the new Republican Party in Illinois. During those years, slavery was a growing issue, and Lincoln faced the dilemma of resolving the controversies surrounding it.

As Lincoln, Wright told a story, stating that: “If I saw a snake in the road, I would kill it. If I saw a snake in the same bed with my children, I would hesitate to kill it; for fear of harming my children. But if I were putting my little children into a brand new bed, I would not put snakes in there with them.” The beds, of course, were the new territories at dispute, and the snake a metaphor for slavery.

Lincoln’s election — the Presidential candidate of the new Republican Party — was considered unlikely. As President, he faced a darkening situation. A month after his inauguration, Confederate artillery fired on Fort Sumter in Charleston Harbor.

Wright spoke of Lincoln’s wartime frustration with General McClellan, who built a magnificent Union army but refused to fight any battles. Lincoln acknowledged that McClellan was a great organizer but added that he was like a piano tuner who could tune a piano to perfection but could not play it to its fullest

extent. Lincoln appointed General Grant to replace McClellan and refused to replace Grant despite his defeat at Shiloh.

Interspersed throughout his narration, Wright read 11 direct quotes, including Lincoln's comment on the Dred Scott decision, 1858; an excerpt from his Cooper Union Address, 1860; the conclusion of his First Inaugural Address, 1861; the conclusion of his Annual Message to Congress, 1862; excerpts from the Emancipation Proclamation, 1863; and the complete Gettysburg Address, 1863.

In conclusion, Wright observed that opposition to slavery was a common thread in Lincoln's writings, but he shifted his point of view because he had to keep so many diverse groups together. Lincoln's stated objective, Wright said, was to save the Union, and his personal wish was that all men could be free.

He asked if there were any questions. Several hands went up.

One man asked, in view of Lincoln's lack of formal education, how did he get so successful? Wright replied that Lincoln's father was a great story-teller, and young Abe grew up telling stories as well. Lincoln was an avid reader and once said, "My best friend is anyone who would lend me a book." He was a very, very smart man, Wright added; he studied Euclidian math and his sentence structure was often Elizabethan, in passive voice.

In response to a question about Lincoln's religion, Wright said that he believed in God and Jesus, but he did not believe in resurrection nor that Jesus was a god.

A woman asked about Lincoln's relationship with Mary Todd. As a circuit lawyer, Wright responded, Lincoln was away a lot, and she had a difficult life.

Someone asked if Lincoln's legacy would have been different if he hadn't been assassinated. "Yes," Wright replied, "and race relations would have been different — such a tragedy." The reason Lincoln was shot, he explained, was the inclusion in the new constitution of a provision giving Negroes the right to vote.

Wright received a standing ovation from the audience of some 50 people, including a few children, and many waited to speak with him afterwards, keeping him an hour longer.

Asked what he does in his other life, Wright replied that he teaches science and environmental studies at Renbrook, an independent school in West Hartford.

"I'm a science teacher," he said, "but I love history. We're not talking about frothy, frilly stuff. We're talking about meaty stuff. It's really refreshing."

Wright is a member of the Association of Lincoln Presenters, an organization dedicated to the serious interpretation of Abraham Lincoln. He has been giving his Lincoln talks for seven years. In 2008, Gov. Jodi Rell appointed him as co-chair of the Connecticut Abraham Lincoln Bicentennial Commission with Lincoln scholar Michael Burlingame. In 2009, the two men presented their "1860 Lincoln Tour" in the five Connecticut cities that Lincoln visited shortly after his Cooper Union address in New York City.