Exhibit details odd history of laying Lincoln to rest

by Pete Sherman

On July 3, 1876, a St. Louis-based gang of counterfeiters planned to steal Abraham Lincoln's body and hold it for $200,000 ransom and the release of one of their partners, who was in prison for engraving counterfeit plates.

That scheme was never carried out, thanks to a prostitute who tipped off authorities after one of the ringleaders paid her a visit and began bragging about it. Another botched attempt was made a few months later. This time, two of the robbers were caught and sentenced to a year in jail.

UNSETTLED ABE - John Malinak works to complete the exhibit 'Tales From the Crypt: A History of the Lincoln Tomb at the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum in Springfield, Ill. CNS Photo by T.J. Salsman. LINCOLN HISTORY - Here are some of the tools used by thieves in their attempt to rob Lincoln's grave. They are on display at the new Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum in Springfield, Ill. CNS Photo by T.J. Salsman.The story is one of several colorful episodes in the drawn-out saga of establishing Lincoln's final resting place, or places. His body has been moved at least 10 times.

The saga is now presented in elaborate detail at the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Museum in Springfield, Ill. The exhibit, which takes up about 200 feet of wall space, is called "Tales from the Crypt: A History of the Lincoln Tomb." It runs through March 25 and is open to all paid visitors to the museum.

Shortly after Lincoln was assassinated, a group of 13 people, primarily Illinoisans with connections to Lincoln, formed the National Lincoln Monument Association.

"There was this sense that there was going to be an immediate outpouring of support," said state historian Thomas Schwartz, who wrote much of the exhibit's text. Money did come in, including from Sunday schools and soldiers, particularly black regiments. But donations slowed to a crawl by the end of 1866, when the association had raised only $75,000 of the $250,000 goal it set. Through the following years, it relied on state appropriations and a few prominent donors for the rest.

There were other problems. Lincoln's widow, Mary, wanted him buried in a natural setting, much like the Oak Ridge Cemetery on the north end of Springfield - the Lincolns probably attended the groundbreaking there in 1860. But association members preferred other tomb sites, such as the site of the current state Capitol. Mary won only after threatening to take Lincoln's body to Chicago or Washington's crypt in the U.S. Capitol.

William Snyder, director of the presidential museum's programs, brought in several documents from the Lincoln Presidential Library, some of which had to be carefully restored by library conservators, to supplement the story.

Monument association memos and votes taken on the 37 suggested tomb designs testify to both the thought and the bickering behind the whole process, which really didn't end until the 1930s, when Gov. Louis Emmerson appropriated $175,000 to fix structural problems.

Incidentally, the exhibit informs us someone once tried to steal Washington's body from its tomb in Mount Vernon, Va. The thief, a physician, actually made off with a skull and some bones. Not Washington's, though.

Exhibit details odd history of laying Lincoln to rest by Pete Sherman