

Saving the Davidson Barn

When I run into my Peoria friends, I sometimes ask them – tongue firmly in cheek – ‘How are all of your Lincoln sites in Peoria?’ I know there aren’t any, anymore, but I like to irritate, nonetheless, as I am pretty much irritated no end by the loss of so much of our history, especially through the short-sighted loss of historic buildings.

Lincoln visited many houses in Peoria; he might have had his photograph taken in a studio there, and of course, he gave his nationally famous “Peoria Speech” at the old courthouse in 1854 when he declared his opposition to slavery and the Kansas-Nebraska Act.

All of these Peoria buildings and locations Lincoln visited are lost. None in Peoria have been preserved -- not one.

There are several fine museums and many relics preserved and maintained by the Peoria Historical Society and others, but where are the Lincoln sites?

Woodford County, where I live and work, is rich in Lincoln history, and we have been very fortunate in having many citizens who have done much to preserve Lincoln history in the Metamora Courthouse State Historic Site, the Metamora Square where Lincoln played horseshoes and mediated conflicts outside of court, and where the bronze statues of lawyer Lincoln and his last client in Woodford County, Melissa Goings, are portrayed, locations on the Eureka College Campus, and where a few other private sites are located – including the Caleb Davidson Barn in rural Eureka, where Lincoln kept his horse while representing and winning a cattle rustling case for the Davidsons in court, also in 1854.

The barn was built by Caleb Davidson into a bank on his property in rural Walnut Grove – later Eureka – in 1838-1839 – making it one of the oldest structures still standing in Woodford County, today.

Davidson, an early settler in this area, became a successful farmer, but he was also a devout member of the Disciples of Christ and offered his barn for worship services to the Eureka Christian Church. Davidson and the church were early supporters and founders of the Walnut Grove Academy, later named Eureka College.

Eureka College actually owned the barn from 1930 to 1958. It is privately owned, currently, and could be torn down soon, if it cannot be moved and repurposed.

The great–great–great-grandson of Caleb Davidson, Steve Colburn, is a tall, Lincolnesque, Eureka native and retired engineer, who nearly single handedly for the last decade has been trying to save this historic barn. Steve is the president of Barnstorming Inc. which is a not-for-profit 501(c)3 corporation that is dedicated to preserving the barn, so that it might live on to provide a variety of uses, such as: a museum, a community cultural arts center, a chapel, a tourist site, a permanent home for the Woodford County Historical Society, and a place of educational opportunities for the Eureka and Woodford communities in an historic setting. But, where and how can this be achieved?

The barn currently sits on private property NW of Mount Zion Road in rural Eureka; it must be removed sometime in 2014, or it – like so many other historic buildings – will be lost forever!

Steve and a handful of friends and supporters – this writer being one – have put in much time to save what is there and come up with a plan for its continued use. With enough money, of course, one could do anything. Maybe with enough money, the courthouse where Lincoln gave the “Peoria Speech” could have been saved. But, short-sighted planning destroyed that potential historic landmark.

We must do better than that to preserve this barn – a real piece of Woodford County and Eureka history. Steve Colburn and Barnstorming Inc. need your help.

Please talk about it, and discuss it with your friends. Contact Steve at scolburn@mtco.com, if you have questions or comments. Board meetings are open to the public and will be announced for anyone who would like to attend.

Though now seventy-three years of age, Steve can be seen walking the peak of the barn’s roof to move tarps that will protect the structure until it can be moved. But, Steve cannot do it all himself.

Let’s help this dedicated man save this historic barn. Let us not think back to the time we had the opportunity to preserve this relic, and we just let it slip by – just another landmark lost.

Mr. Jean Myers
Member, Woodford County Historical Society
Member, Barnstorming Incorporated