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Grand Opening of Lincoln and Civil War Exhibition Launches Series of Events

Songs of the Civil War and an examination of Lincoln’s legacy debut the grand opening and month-long series of events

September 26, 2014 | Jill Rodrigues ‘05

BRISTOL, R.I. – A month-long academic and cultural commemoration of Abraham Lincoln and the Civil War era kicked off this week with a renowned Lincoln scholar’s dissection of the unprecedented Constitutional issues that emerged during the rebellion, a serenade of traditional and spiritual songs, and public viewing of a national library exhibit.

At the Tuesday grand opening of Lincoln: The Constitution and the Civil War on display in the University Library through Oct. 31, visitors explored the traveling exhibition examining the difficult decisions President Lincoln made in governing a nation divided by war. One of only 200 libraries to host the exhibit organized by the National Constitution Center and American Library Association, with a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities, executing its installation required a joint effort of library and facilities staff.

Trucked in by tractor-trailer to the center of campus, the exhibition arrived last week in assorted pieces inside 13 rolling cases containing 54 sequentially numbered graphic panels rolled in plastic sleeves, aluminum pop-up frames, crossbars and magnetic strips. Library staff members selected the best location within the Mary Teft White Cultural Center to create a natural flow for viewing the
five illustrated displays, and facilities staff positioned and constructed the frames, securing the
graphic panels with magnetic strips – a two-hour installation of an exhibition whose parts weighed a
total of 758 pounds.

At the grand opening, guests strolled among the beautifully rendered, curved 8-foot-tall panels,
pausing to learn about Lincoln before he became president, to read his elegant first inaugural
address, and how he interpreted the Constitution to deal with the issues of slavery, secession and
civil liberties – the latter serving as the focus of the first lecture in a series of events complimenting
the exhibition.

Retired R.I. Supreme Court Justice Frank J. Williams offered his view of Lincoln as “an astute politician
with political courage” who lent his head and his heart to resolving the national crisis while
confronted with strong opposition from his chief judicial counterpart in the U.S. Supreme Court.
Noting this conflict between executive and judiciary powers as “an issue that doesn’t go away,”
Williams asserted that Lincoln understood what was at stake when interpreting his Constitutional
authority to administer the war more than his challenger Chief Justice Roger Taney.

“One of Lincoln’s greatest attributes as a leader is an ability to see the big picture, and that ability
allowed him to act pragmatically,” Williams said. “There was no precedent to guide the president
on how to constitutionally address civil war. It would be hard to label President Lincoln’s actions as
unreasonable, with danger to the government imminent and Congress not in session (to enact
resolutions).”

Among the varied offerings celebrating the exhibition, the RWU Chorus treated patrons to songs
from the Civil War era. Beginning with a few classic American songs, the chorus also performed a
stirring and chilling rendition of African-American spiritual, “Wade in the Water” – a song created by
slaves with the hidden message of escaping through streams to wash away footprints and scents,
explained chorus director Jonathan Richter.