

Lincoln's 'Shroud of Turin'

City museum torn on DNA request.

By Edward Colimore
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One hundred and forty-four years ago tomorrow, Abraham Lincoln was watching a play at Ford's Theatre in Washington when John Wilkes Booth slipped into the president's box and shot him.

Lincoln died the next morning, and now his blood and brain matter - on part of a pillowcase at a Philadelphia museum - are being sought for DNA testing that may definitely solve a medical mystery.

Was the 16th president dying of cancer at the time of the assassination?

John Sotos, a cardiologist, an author, and a consultant for the television series *House*, wants to test the artifact to confirm what eyewitness accounts and 130 period images already tell him: Lincoln had a rare genetic cancer syndrome called multiple endocrine neoplasia type 2B (MEN2B).

But Sotos' request has stirred an ethical and scientific debate on the board of directors of the Grand Army of the Republic Museum and Library, an off-the-beaten-path Civil War institution in the city's Frankford section.

Should the museum grant permission for the testing and enjoy the spotlight when the results are announced?

Or should it reject Sotos' request, avoid damaging the artifact, and honor the wishes of Robert Todd Lincoln to leave his father in peace?

The answers will come at a museum board meeting, likely to be held May 5, during a time of heightened interest in Lincoln. This year is the bicentennial of his birth.

"This is the Shroud of Turin of Civil War history," said Andy Waskie, a board member, a Philadelphia historian, and an assistant professor of language and history at Temple University. "We are guardians in trusteeship of this extraordinarily important artifact.

"On the basis of pure science, the testing is of interest. We have not eliminated it as an option . . . but we want more information."

The board turned to biologist and Civil War buff Gary Grove for advice.

The question in the DNA debate "is not whether we can do the testing but whether we should do it," said Grove, a Middletown resident who is vice president of research and development at cyberDERM, a Broomall firm that tests skin-care products.

In his book *The Physical Lincoln*, Sotos, of Palo Alto, Calif., notes that "he is history's tallest president, at 6 feet, 33/4 inches. He was strong, and a good wrestler. He grew a beard to disguise his ugliness."

The book shows how a diagnostician analyzes feet, hands, lips, neck, heart, and other parts of the body to conclude that Lincoln had MEN2B.

Lincoln "suffered from a very rare genetic disorder that affected him, literally, from toe to skull," Sotos wrote. "The physical Lincoln was just as rare as the mental Lincoln."

Sotos, a rare-disease hobbyist, said he was unavailable for interviews and was opposed to publicity about the testing. "The museum has not agreed to anything, and no testing is scheduled," he wrote in an e-mail, adding later that "DNA testing is a proven method of answering historical questions."

"In the case of Abraham Lincoln, it has the potential to do more, by expanding clinical knowledge of a rare and most serious medical condition."

Sotos and other researchers have long examined images and life masks showing the president's traits, including his armspan-to-height ratio, thin build, abnormally shaped chest, skin color, hair texture, and gray eyes. They also have studied accounts of Lincoln's unsteady gait and other body movements.

In the 1960s, Grove said, some speculated that the president had Marfan syndrome, a genetic disorder of the connective tissue. People with Marfan are usually tall, with long limbs and long, thin fingers.

"This 'diagnosis' was, in part, based on a 7-year-old Marfan patient that was an eighth-generation descendant of Mordecai Lincoln, the great-great-grandfather of the president," Grove added.

In the 1990s, attention turned to DNA testing as a way of confirming Marfan's. But the National Museum of Health and Medicine in Washington turned down a request for testing on its own bloodstained artifacts, saying DNA science was not sufficiently advanced, Grove said.

Other researchers studied 11 generations descended from the grandparents of Lincoln and found that a third of the descendants had some form of a genetic defect called spinocerebellar ataxia, Grove said.

The president's genetic makeup has also been of interest to the Enloe family, which believes Lincoln was the illegitimate son of Abraham Enloe of North Carolina - and not of Thomas Lincoln. The family has not been asked to provide DNA.

"Genetic analysis of Lincoln's DNA is the best and maybe the only way to provide indisputable proof to settle these arguments," said Grove, who will advise the divided museum board. "Three or four threads would probably be sufficient."

The bloodstained pillowcase fragment is framed, under glass, and on display at the GAR Museum and Library. It was donated by a man on the staff of the U.S. surgeon general who treated the president after he was shot.

Eric Schmincke, president of the board of directors, said he was not in favor of the testing, adding that "we have to look at the moral and ethical issues."

Lincoln, he said, "is no longer alive and can't defend himself. It would not harm me if we did not test it."

The last known wishes of the Lincoln family - to leave the president alone - came in 1876 after a group of Chicago counterfeiters tried to steal his remains from his memorial in Springfield, Ill., and seek a ransom for \$200,000 along with the release of an imprisoned cohort. They were unsuccessful; Lincoln's coffin was later encased in steel and concrete to prevent further theft attempts.

That left artifacts from the assassination as the only source of DNA.

Schmincke said he would vote on the issue only if the eight other board members split, 4-4.

"The man did his time," he said. "He was a phenomenal president. Why do we have to stir the pot?"