

Remarks by Gary T. Johnson, President, Chicago History Museum,

at the celebration of Independence Day, July 4, 2008

(following the reading of the Declaration of Independence)

“We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal....”

Every year, I offer a comment on some of the words we have just heard. This year, the choice is easy: “that all men are created equal....” Why? Because when we gather next year, a year-long Bicentennial celebration of Abraham Lincoln’s birth will be underway at the Chicago History Museum. It’s time to get ready for Lincoln.

The Declaration of Independence formed the bedrock of Lincoln’s political faith. Again and again, he returned to the Declaration and to its proposition that all men are created equal.” Following the Dred Scott decision, he marked back, with regret, to a time when our Declaration of Independence was held sacred by all, and thought to include all.”

We are reminded, however, that when it came to slavery, Lincoln’s vision of equality was one that evolved. There were those who took a stand on abolition before Lincoln did, including a group of abolitionists right here in Chicago. Recent scholarship emphasizes the importance of Lincoln’s contacts with former slave and abolitionist leader, Frederick Douglass. Over time, contacts with Douglass helped Lincoln to give life to the aspirations of the Declaration.

But also remember this. As one of the experts on the Chicago abolitionists, Thomas Campbell, has observed, “On the question of slavery, Lincoln took measured steps—but they all moved in one direction.”

So this is the resolution that I propose for all of us for the 2009 Lincoln Bicentennial year: That in learning more about Lincoln, we also reflect on what it means to say in our own life and our own time, that **all** are created equal.

Thank you.