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Address of Thomas Hart Benton--At the Dedication Ceremonies of Lincoln University Upon Presentation of the Abraham Lincoln Mural

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(Vertical File)

Benton, Thomas Hart

Address of Thomas Hart Benton-At the Dedication Ceremonies
of Lincoln University Upon Presentation
of the Abraham Lincoln Mural

Sunday, May 15, 1955

Some three years ago Doctor Scruggs and Rabbi Mayerberg came to my house in Kansas City and suggested that I paint a portrait of Abraham Lincoln for Lincoln University. I agreed to try it. Little by little, however, as I reviewed the life of Lincoln and studied his photographic record, I began to move away from the idea of a portrait toward that of a symbolic representation. I say that I could not make a Lincoln portrait which would be satisfactory to me from any of the photographs which had been taken of him. My ideas of Lincoln could not be tied to momentary aspects.

Lincoln is for me, as he must also be for the rest of you gathered, here more than a man who, by his strength of character and judgement, impressed himself upon a convulsive period of our history. He is the symbol of something even greater than his place in the clash of events. He has come to stand for a universal and eternal impulse of the human soul, valid not only in a grim period of our own history but valid in all period of all history. That's the impulse to be free, free not only from some particular bondage, but from all bondage, from all tyranny, from all injustice, and from all the inherited misfortunes that an historical fate may have imposed, or that some doctrinal fanaticism may try to

impose.

The Lincoln you see here pictured has no existence in record. He is a Lincoln I have made. He is an imaginary composite not only of record, but of ideas and of intuitions. What you see is my concept of Lincoln as the symbol of the freedom impulse--and as the symbol also of the social and legal implementation of that impulse.

Behind Lincoln I have shown the beginnings of Lincoln University. About a soldiers' campfire men who have been given freedom get a start in the knowledge that will help to sustain it.

As Lincoln himself represents the urge to freedom and the legal right to exercise it, so Lincoln University has represented what is necessary to direct that urge and hold its gains. Freedom may be won by violence, but it cannot be maintained without knowledge.

In the foreground of my picture I have tried to suggest how knowledge engages new minds in the quest of knowledge--how the values of knowledge, once acquired, are continually replanted.

When I was about half through my work on this project,

the Supreme Court of the United States made a decision. The decision will, in time, no doubt change the character of Lincoln University. It will not, however, change the fact that the University has played its historic part in the great upward struggle toward universal freedom with President Abraham Lincoln has come to symbolize for us. No matter what changes may occur in the future, I am giving this picture in memory of the Lincoln University that has been and to the Lincoln University that now is, on this day. Dr. Scruggs, here is your legal title--and if anyone ever asks you why I gave it, tell them it was simply because I wanted to.