

# Reclaiming history

*Susan Dyer's determination helps save Breckinridge mansion of judge in Lincoln assassination trial*

BYRON CRAWFORD



Susan Dyer spent more than a decade working to save the Holt House in Breckinridge County. She says she "couldn't stand the thought" of losing the house. Photo by Tim Gossett.

"What a hero she is," says Mark Dennen, executive director, Kentucky Heritage Council

Never underestimate the power of one determined woman.

Susan Dyer of Breckinridge County has a long thank-you list of those who have helped her save an endangered mansion linked to Abraham Lincoln.

But one person on the list, LaRue County Judge Executive Tommy Turner, co-chair of the Kentucky Lincoln Bicentennial Commission, declares that Dyer was the driving force.

"I guarantee you it would never have happened without Susan pushing it," Turner says. "She has talked to everyone from the White House on down...and has spent countless hours and countless dollars, I'm sure, out of her own pocket, to make this come about."

Dyer's nearly impossible dream began in 1997 when she and her husband, Eddie, stopped in front of the abandoned Judge Joseph Holt mansion in rural Breckinridge County while on a Sunday afternoon drive.

"As I stood there and gazed upon this beautiful home, I could feel the sadness of the home, and I knew there was much history surrounding the place," Dyer says. "I just felt the history needed to be reclaimed and retold."

Holt, a former secretary of war, having been appointed by Lincoln as the nation's first judge advocate general, was the judge in the Lincoln assassination trial.

Attempts by others to save the massive Holt residence had failed, but Dyer, a retired middle-school social studies

teacher and member of Meade County RECC, knew she must try.

She researched Holt's life and his friendship with Lincoln. She held meetings in her home and around the community to raise awareness, and she began writing a book, *Lincoln's Advocate—The Life of Judge Joseph Holt* (Acclaim Press). She attended Lincoln Bicentennial Commission meetings as a volunteer, listening, learning, and sharing the story of the house.

Finally, in 2008—after more than a decade of painstaking work by Dyer and many others—the Holt House and 19.3 acres were purchased for \$158,000 by the Breckinridge fiscal court, through a Kentucky Heritage Council grant funded by the Kentucky Lincoln Bicentennial Commission.

"I couldn't stand the thought of the house being gone, with only a sign left saying, 'This is where the Joseph Holt house used to be,'" Dyer says. "If someone said, 'No,' I was just a nice lady and went to someone else."

Studies are under way to plan a future use for the home. **KL**

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