

Judge Holt, you're on: Late lawyer added as character in film

Stories from the Heartland

By John Friedlein

Monday, March 14, 2011 at 5:45 am (*Updated: March 15, 1:12 pm*)

Judge Joseph Holt is in the limelight these days, thanks in part to the dogged efforts of a former teacher from Harned.

The late Elizabethtown lawyer – who prosecuted Abraham Lincoln’s assassins – is a character in “The Conspirator,” a soon-to-be-released movie directed by Robert Redford.

Holt wasn’t in the movie at first, said Susan Dyer, who is spearheading an effort to save his dilapidated mansion. Back when Dyer found this out, she unsuccessfully tried to ask Redford why Holt was missing and sent him newspaper clippings, information about the house and a copy of her book, “Lincoln’s Advocate: The Life and Times of Judge Joseph Holt.” The judge’s assistant was in the movie, after all.

Then, for whatever reason, Holt’s character was added in post-production, Dyer said.

The movie – which focuses on the plight of accused conspirator Mary Surratt – will be released nationwide on April 15, the date Lincoln was assassinated.

As the Army’s judge advocate general, Holt presided over the trial.

Dyer said a retired JAG officer who coached actor Danny Huston on how to portray Holt asked her if she would be the speaker for the annual George S. Prugh Lecture in Military Legal History in Charlottesville, Va. The April 27 event will be at the Judge Advocate General’s Legal Center and School.

And yes, Dyer plans to mention the effort to save the three-story Holt house, which sits along Ky. 144 near Stephensport.

“This is going to be the challenge, probably, of my life,” she said of the speaking engagement. “I’m a humble lady.”

The more people who know about the house, though, the more it helps with her preservation effort.

It all started in 1997 when, during a country drive stopover, she walked around the grounds and felt moved to save the brick home. Built in the 1850s, it had fallen into disrepair after sitting vacant for years alongside Ky. 144. Through a team effort, the restoration project has received grants including a federal one for \$150,000. Fundraising efforts continue; Dyer expects work to cost more than \$1 million. Renovations funded by the federal grant likely will start this summer.

The Holt house opens to the community the fourth Saturday of September. The public can tour the grounds anytime.

The community is pitching in to help with the restoration. For instance, students at the Breckinridge County Area Technology Center are putting together a Holt house web site which soon will be up and running, Dyer said.

On a larger stage, “The Conspirator” also will raise awareness of the judge.

John Friedlein can be reached at (270) 505-1746 or jfriedlein@thenewsenterprise.com. His Stories from the Heartland column appears in Monday editions of The News-Enterprise.

Article available online at <http://www.thenewsenterprise.com/content/judge-holt-youre-late-lawyer-added-character-film>