

Judge Joseph Holt's house touching hearts across Kentucky

Judge Joseph Holt, the most famous native of Breckinridge County, was a man of the 19th century who prompted President James Buchanan, a Democrat, and then President Abraham Lincoln, a Republican, to appoint him to prominent posts in their administrations. Holt had a career as a prominent lawyer who served as Commissioner of Patents (1857), Postmaster General (1859), Secretary of War (1860) under President James Buchanan. He achieved national prominence serving in the administration of President Abraham Lincoln, who appointed him the nation's first Judge Advocate General (JAG), a position he held from 1862 to 1875. His most memorable role as JAG came following the assassination of President Lincoln, when he presided over the trial of the Lincoln assassination conspirators. Yet his career ended in controversy and left him intentionally forgotten. He died 19 years after his resignation.

Holt was born in Breckinridge County in 1807 and grew up on a farm that was part of an original land grant to his grandfather, Captain Richard Stephens, for his service in the Revolutionary War. The farmstead continues to be known as Holt Bottoms, and drivers along KY 144 today are struck by the large Italianate home with impressive detailing and cast iron porch that seems to come out of nowhere in this rural landscape.

Like Holt, a forgotten man, his house had been forgotten and abandoned for more than 40 years. As the State Historian, Dr. James C. Klotter, has stated, "Holt deserves better than history has given him."

But today a new interest has been rekindled, and the county and a group of dedicated local volunteers have stepped forward to make sure both are remembered.

The home was purchased by Breckinridge County Fiscal Court in December 2008 through a \$158,000 Kentucky Lincoln Bicentennial Preservation Grant, and the site's preservation and restoration has been named a Legacy Project of the Kentucky Abraham Lincoln Bicentennial Commission. To assist fiscal court with long-term rehabilitation, a steering committee meets quarterly and the Friends of the Holt House has been organized as a nonprofit committee of the Breckinridge County Historical Society to help organize fundraising and coordinate volunteer efforts. The house and grounds have been cleared and rehabilitation work will soon be underway made possible by a \$150,000 Save America's Treasures grant.

How unique that 2011 is also the beginning of the anniversary of 150 years when the Civil War began, during which time Judge Holt served President Lincoln as JAG. Americans have had the opportunity to witness Robert Redford's movie *The Conspirator* released nationwide on April 15, 2011, where Joseph Holt is portrayed by actor Danny Huston as the prosecuting judge of the Lincoln conspiracy trial.

Now visitors have the chance to revisit history during the **3rd Annual Holt House Community Day** sponsored by the Friends of the Holt House and the Breckinridge

County Fiscal Court, from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. (C.D.T.) Saturday, September 24. The Holt House is located north of Hardinsburg on KY 144, six miles from the intersection with U.S. 60 east of Cloverport.

Activities will include period music, the Kentucky Historical Society History Mobile featuring a display about President Lincoln; a portrayal of Judge Joseph Holt by Hardin County Circuit Judge Kelly M. Easton; guided and self-guided tours; a history of the trees (morning only); the Kentucky Home Guard Band (afternoon); the 9th Michigan Infantry; Larry and Mary Elliott portraying President Abraham Lincoln and Mary Todd Lincoln; re-enactor Mark Ford, a Civil War drummer; Judy Pierce, Western Kentucky University Professor and Civil War storyteller; and a book signing of *Lincoln's Advocate: The Life of Judge Joseph Holt* by local author Susan Dyer.

A military honor guard under the direction of Colonel Robert Cotell from the Judge Advocate's Office at Fort Knox will perform a wreath-laying at 11 a.m. at Judge Holt's grave, located in the family cemetery next to the house. A brass quintet and drummer will perform from Fort Knox.

Throughout the day visitors can tour the beautiful grounds surrounding the historic home listed on the National Register of Historic Places as nationally significant in history, politics, and architecture.

Want to become a volunteer for the Judge Joseph Holt House or make a donation? For information, email friendsofholthouse@gmail.com, call (270) 756-0268 or (270) 756-2573, or visit www.heritage.ky.gov/partnerships/holthouse.htm for more about the project.