Butler Funeral Homes president Chris Butler looks through ledgers kept by the Boardman-Smith Funeral Home on Wednesday in Springfield. Boardman-Smith, which was founded in 1848, handled the funeral arrangements for Mary Todd Lincoln. Butler Funeral Homes acquired Boardman-Smith last year. RICH SAAL/THE STATE JOURNAL-REGISTER

1882 expense ledger surfaces with funeral home merger

An itemized list of expenses thought to be from the 1882 funeral of Mary Todd Lincoln in Springfield has resurfaced following the merger last year of two of the city’s oldest funeral homes. The list handed down with more than a century’s worth of funeral home expense ledgers includes neatly handwritten costs ranging from $225 for a black-cloth, silk-lined casket with gold-engraved plate to $1.50 for crepe and ribbon. “Laying and preserving” services cost $25, and a horse-drawn hearse with four attendants was $15. Total costs came to $278.85.

Butler Funeral Homes of Springfield acquired stacks of the fragile ledgers — including page 232 from the July 1882 ledger listing services provided to the Lincoln family — through the buyout last year of Boardman-Smith Funeral Home. Butler and Boardman-Smith are among the oldest continuously

SEE LINCOLN, P7 Mary Todd Lincoln died in Springfield.
operating funeral homes in the state. The forerunner of Butler Funeral Homes opened in 1893, and the forerunner of Boardman-Smith was founded in 1848.

"It was one of the attractions for us, the Lincoln history," said Butler Funeral Homes president Chris Butler.

A final piece of renovation work begun after last year's acquisition of Boardman-Smith includes creation of a Lincoln Room where the Mary Todd Lincoln ledger entry will be displayed under glass with other documents tied to Springfield's funeral history. Among the other items are a pair of funeral biers thought to have ties to the Lincoln family, but that has not been verified, said Butler.

Butler said Boardman-Smith employees had taken care to store and label dozens of expense ledgers dating to the mid-1800s in the basement of the funeral home at 800 South Grand Ave. W.

Plans are to complete the Lincoln Room this summer, said Butler.

Untold stories

Almost as fascinating as the "Mrs. Mary Lincoln" entry for Wednesday, July 19, 1882, said Butler, are entries that reflect the life and death of everyday Springfield families from the 1800s.

"I'd love to know their stories," said Butler. "That family lost all of those children, or 'wow,' it's the 1800s and this person lived to be in their 90s."

Boardman-Smith ties to the Lincoln family run deep, according to documents at the Sangamon Valley Collection and a business history compiled by Boardman-Smith.

John Hutchison founded the forerunner, Hutchison Mortuary Co., in 1848. As was customary at the time, Hutchison also was a cabinetmaker. Thomas C. Smith acquired the business sometime after the Civil War. The funeral home remained in the Smith family for two generations, according to the company history, before Smith family stepsons, Julian and Robert Boardman, purchased the business.

Boardman-Smith at one time was marketed as "The Lincoln Funeral Home." A company history indicates the funeral home was called on to assist with the transfer and preparation of President's Lincoln's body after his assassination in April 1865. The earliest known connection was in 1850 when John Hutchison assisted with the burial of 3-year-old Edward "Eddie" Lincoln in Hutchison Cemetery, now the site of Springfield High School. The cemetery was closed by city ordinance in 1874, and most of the bodies were exhumed and moved to Oak Ridge Cemetery.

The Springfield School District constructed a
school on the site in 1917.

‘Joys and sorrows’

While not on the scale of Abraham Lincoln’s funeral in 1865, the death and funeral of Mary Todd Lincoln in the summer of 1882 was a national event. Mary Todd, aged 55, died on July 16 at the Springfield home of her sister, Elizabeth Edwards.

“The citizens of Springfield, the home and resting place of Abraham Lincoln, whose name has become canonized in the hearts of liberty lovers all over the world, and who will be gratefully remembered as long as free government continues to be appreciated by mankind,” The Illinois State Journal reported, “have learned with profound sorrow of the death of Mary Todd Lincoln, his wife, and mother of his only surviving son.

“She bore his name, was caretaker of his triumphs, joys and sorrows,” the forerunner of the State Journal-Register reported. “She witnessed his assassination and received a shock from which she never recovered.”

Business did go on in July 1882. Just below a front-page notice that Springfield postal service had been suspended for the funeral ran ads for “Dressed Chickens” at Connelly & Co.’s, and “Cheaper cheaper cheaper teas, soap and canned fruit” at O.B. Saunders & Co.

Newspaper accounts of the burial in Oak Ridge Cemetery on July 19, 1882 — the funeral was held at First Presbyterian Church — refer to the horse-drawn hearse, floral arrangements, the pallbearers and a long list of dignitaries, including Robert Lincoln. The only surviving Lincoln son was serving as secretary of war in the Garfield administration in 1882.

Lives revealed

Funeral records are among some of the most revealing documents for historical figures such as the Lincoln family, said Samuel Wheeler, research historian at the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum.

“It’s important for us to remember these were living, breathing people,” said Wheeler, who viewed copies of the Mary Todd Lincoln funeral expenses. “Documents such as these help bring them to life.”

Curtis Mann, who manages the Sangamon Valley Collection at Lincoln Library, said he was aware of the Boardman-Smith documents but that little had been heard of the ledgers for years.

“They knew they had them, but it was just a matter of what to do with them,” said Mann. “It is great that they’re doing this.”

Valerie Gugala is with Mary Lincoln’s Coterie, a group of historians and Civil War-era re-enactors who gather each year at the Lincoln Tomb on the anniversary of Mary Todd Lincoln’s death. Gugala said the group is dedicated to keeping alive the true character of the controversial first lady.

“It’s easy to be overshadowed by the president, and she would have wanted it that way. She saw herself as a wife and a mother,” said Gugala. “She was very misunderstood, and there are still a lot of misconceptions about her.”

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