Debate with a twist
Knox students' exhibit about the people who were there

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GALESBURG — Louisa Abbot walked a short distance to Knox College's Old Main to see Abraham Lincoln and Stephen Douglas debate in 1858, and she was one of the lucky ones.

"Louisa Abbot," a composite character played by Knox College junior Sara Patterson of Geneseo, would have been a student at Knox Academy when the two state politicians rolled into town as part of their campaigns for state senate. More than 10,000 people, some traveling great distances, turned out for the event nearly 150 years ago.

The debate site was re-created Tuesday morning in the Ford Center for the Fine Arts by 15 Knox history students as a final project for assistant professor of history Catherine Denial’s "Museums, Monuments and Memory" course, an upper-division history class designed to give students a more hands-on taste of chronicling the past. "A lot of history majors go into careers in museums or archives management," Denial said. "I wanted to have something where they could experience that in college."

So, she proposed a final project which would give her students the chance to research and design an exhibit about the historic debates, putting them in charge of all aspects of the design and logistical planning.

Denial said she envisioned a more "traditional" exhibit with display boards and artifacts, but her students had a different idea.

"Just talking about what Lincoln and Douglas talked about is kind of boring. It’s been done before," Patterson said. The students' exhibit was "more about the people who were there, why they were there."

Each student researched a person or type of person who would have been at the debates and prepared a profile which helped them to re-create the feel of the debates. Some portrayed real people, such as "Matilda Lanphere," played by sophomore Margaret Spiegel of Kewanee.

Matilda was the wife of George Lanphere, the first Knox County judge. Spiegel researched George Lanphere’s life for her project, but "didn’t want to play a man," so she decided to dress as his wife.

But the show-stealer of the exhibit was a 30-foot-wide, seven-foot-tall model of the window in Old Main, where Lincoln had to exit the building because the door was blocked by the debate platform. The model gave attendees the opportunity to follow in the footsteps of the president, allowing them the chance to interact with history.

"It was a very good learning experience," Spiegel said of researching and putting together the exhibit. Students learned about “all of the aspects that nobody really knows about when they go to a museum."

The exhibit will make a return twice in the fall — once on Oct. 11 for the Lincoln Colloquium to celebrate the sesquicentennial, and again on Nov. 1 for the college’s homecoming weekend.