

LINCOLN LORE

Bulletin of the Lincoln National Life Foundation - - - - Dr. Louis A. Warren, Editor
Published each week by The Lincoln National Life Insurance Company, Fort Wayne, Indiana

Number 653

FORT WAYNE, INDIANA

October 13, 1941

HERNDON AS A CONTEMPORARY TOWNSMAN KNEW HIM

The mammoth scrap book which Jesse M. Weik made while he was collaborating with William Herndon on the famous Lincoln volumes, has recently come into the possession of the Lincoln National Life Foundation. It not only contains the famous broadside on "Abraham Lincoln, Miss Ann Rutledge, New Salem, Pioneering and the Poem," but also a copy of the syndicated article by Mr. Weik, "The Real Lincoln" in its original form, one of the rarest of all Lincoln items.

One of the most illuminating sections of the book is a series of reviews of *The Herndon Lincoln* and comments on the writings of Herndon preliminary to the Lamon publication, known as the Herndon lectures. There is one excerpt especially which allows one to judge what Springfield was thinking about Herndon's literary contributions on Abraham Lincoln.

Milton Hay, a leading citizen of Springfield and a contemporary of Abraham Lincoln, was interviewed by "Gath," a news correspondent, who wrote out his interview for his *New York Letters* and it was later published in *The Illinois State Journal* for September 1, 1883.

Mr. Hay was one of the outstanding attorneys of Illinois, and Henry A. Converse of the Sangamon County Bar said of him, "Milton Hay knew men and he would not tolerate for a moment a fraud, a sluggard or a dullard. Mr. Hay could choose where he pleased and he demanded and drew to him men worth while." It would seem that the testimonial of such a judge of men would offer dependable evidence as to how William Herndon rated among the people with whom he lived. The following testimony is Mr. Hay's opinion as copied verbatim from the *Journal*:

"Said I (Gath) to Mr. Hay: 'Has not Mr. Herndon disseminated a great many views as Mr. Lincoln's which are merely his own theories and vagaries?'"

"Yes; that is the belief that Lincoln's friends have. You see Herndon was a man that Lincoln picked up. He was a poor, forlorn fellow, who got on the right side of Lincoln, and that was one of Lincoln's abounding traits, that if any person moved his sympathies he would go to their relief. It was Herndon's poverty and hard luck that made Lincoln take to him. Now, you must remember that Mr. Lincoln had but little practice in the city of Springfield. He went on what is called the circuits, following the judges around the counties. It was not of much consequence for him to have an office in Springfield. He took Herndon into partnership, and put him in the office at Springfield to build up a local practice if he could, under the name of the firm of Lincoln & Herndon. He did not give any of the depth of his intimacy or character to Mr. Herndon. He was tolerant and kind to him, but he did not go there to pour out his soul and communicate his thoughts.

"Said I: 'Mr. Hay, did not Herndon have some grievance against Lincoln?'"

"Yes; there is just where you find so many statements underrating Lincoln from that source. After Lincoln became President, Herndon went to Washington City and asked for some office. I do not recollect what it is, if I ever did know. Lincoln wanted to do something for Herndon, but not to give him anything which would expose his weakness in the public service. It probably gave him more concern than it was worth to find some spot that Herndon could adorn. When he settled on what he would give him, Herndon, whose expectations had been raised very high, became dissatisfied and returned to Springfield, and was very sour on Lincoln. After Lincoln died he said that he had buried his grievances, but he

continued to collect and contribute matter to Lincoln's biography which is of very little substantial character. In short, about the only great thing that ever happened to Herndon was being taken up by Lincoln."

The fact that the *Illinois State Journal* placed before its readers so important an interview with respect to Mr. Herndon's early contributions to Lincolniana should almost demand that there be made available the same individual's reaction towards the three volume publication known as *The Herndon Lincoln*.

At the time the Herndon volume was being widely discussed, Milton Hay received a letter from Thomas Vennum to whom he replied as follows:

"Springfield, Ills. Jan. 26th, 1892

"Hon. Thos. Vennum:

"Your letter of the 24th. inst. in regard to that *queer* production 'Herndon's Life of Lincoln' came duly to hand and but for a spell of the grip would have answered sooner.

"Herndon was a peculiar kind of 'crank' and his work is regarded here as deserving of but little credit by those who were acquainted with both Lincoln and Herndon. Although professing to have been gotten up with friendly intentions towards Lincoln, such professed good intentions are not credited. Herndon had a sort of loose connection with Lincoln as a partner in local business of this country, and after Lincoln's election as the understanding is here he went to Washington as an applicant for some place and was disappointed—He returned home soured and *sore headed* and thereafter active with the Democrats.

"Immediately upon Lincoln's death, he proclaimed himself as the only living man who knew all about Lincoln, and assumed that he had been Lincoln's *conscience keeper*, and that he was the man who had made him what he was, and particularly that Lincoln had confided to him secrets known to nobody else.

"It is not believed that any such confidence had existed—Much of the narrative contained in the Book is known to be erroneous here, and he states the matter as though he was personally acquainted with the facts, it has impaired credence in whatever he has stated as being only within his own knowledge.

"The general opinion of the Book seems to have been to magnify disproportionately those acts of Mr. Lincoln's life which Mr. Lincoln himself outgrew and would have wished his friends to forget. As illustrations of this we may take the undue prominence given to his rather ridiculous love *scrapes* as told by Herndon but of which much is known to be misstated and exaggerated—also the Shields Duel affair—About this latter affair Mr. Lincoln in after life was rather sore. I was present on one occasion when one of the participants of the affair was in Mr. Lincoln's office trying to rehearse the particulars of that affair to which Mr. Lincoln seemed much disinclined. After that person left Mr. Lincoln remarked to me "that man is trying to revive his memory of a matter that I am trying to forget."

"The story of Lincoln having told Herndon that his Mother was a bastard is wholly discredited by everybody who knew Lincoln, as well as much of other matter in the Book alleged to have been derived from conversations with Lincoln.

"I think I have fairly given the criticism made here by those best acquainted with both Lincoln and Herndon.

"I was much gratified to hear from you and I have a pleasant recollection of our old acquaintance.

Yours truly,

M. Hay (Signed)"