

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 830

FORT WAYNE, INDIANA

March 5, 1945

THE RUTLEDGE GHOST STALKS AGAIN

There appeared in the *Abraham Lincoln Quarterly*, for September 1944, an account of the discovery by Jay Monaghan of a news item written in 1862, referring to the traditional Lincoln-Rutledge romance. Mr. Monaghan used as the caption of his monograph, "New Light on the Lincoln-Rutledge Romance." It was with some degree of anticipation that one read the article, but interest waned upon failing to discover in the brief paragraph relating to the romance, any "new light" on the mooted question. Inasmuch as the *Quarterly* goes into the hands of Lincoln students who are able to properly evaluate historical sources, little more attention was given to what appeared to be relatively unimportant evidence bearing on the much debated Lincoln-Rutledge folklore.

The discovery of Monaghan took on a new aspect, however, when *The New York Times Book Review*, for February 11, 1945, presented a discussion of the same news item by Lloyd Lewis, with a somewhat more inclusive caption, "New Light on Lincoln's Only Romance." Not all the host of readers of the *Times* magazine featuring the article, are apt to weigh so carefully the claims of a writer, as the comparatively few students who enjoy the *Quarterly*.

The startling introductory statement announced that "The most important event in the field of Lincolniana across many years is the discovery that the Ann Rutledge 'myth' was a fact after all—that the story Lincoln's law partner, William H. Herndon, told in the first great Lincoln biography turns out to be the true one."

What is this so-called remarkable discovery relating to the Lincoln-Rutledge affair, which is going to reverse the thinking of that group of the Lincoln fraternity, who for years have known the story to be pure fiction? It has been frankly admitted by them that John Hill gave Herndon his first information about the traditional love affair sometime before June 12, 1865, thirty years after the courtship. The new discovery moves the date of this initial information back possibly three years to 1862, or, only twenty-seven years after the events in question happened. If this difference of three years has any bearing whatever on the mythical character of the romance, which has been called to mind more than a quarter of a century after the episode is said to have occurred, it is difficult to comprehend its significance.

John Hill, the author of the newly discovered item, was born in New Salem, in 1834, one year before the death of Ann Rutledge and he was only three years old when Lincoln left the town. It need not be emphasized that Hill was incapable at that early age of having acquired any personal knowledge of the romance, so it is evident that what he reported twenty-seven years later was merely hearsay evidence.

This same John Hill, upon reaching manhood, was actively opposed to Lincoln in the political campaign of 1860, and on July 24 of that year contributed a long article to the *Missouri Republican* attacking Lincoln's positions on slavery. A year and a half later on February 15, 1862, he published in his own newspaper, *The Menard Axis*, under the caption, "A Romance of Realty," a sordid story of Lincoln's early years at New Salem, about which he could have had no first-hand information, and which contained the paragraph mentioned as the remarkable discovery. The sketch is couched in language of ridicule and sarcasm with an apparent attempt to lampoon the President, and Hill summarized the body of the argument in this concluding paragraph.

"Who now would the reader suppose is this awkward youth—this dry goods clerk—this soldier—this keeper of a stallion—this grocery keeper—this bankrupt liquor merchant—this day laborer, infidel, writer, surveyor, love-sick swain, hog drover and legislator?"

Then with a dramatic climax Hill concluded, "He is none other than Abraham Lincoln, the President of the United States..." Lincoln may or may not have read this *Axis* review of his early days, but does any one think because the President allowed it to pass unnoticed that his silence confirmed the "love-sick swain" episode, and the other misrepresentations in the text of which there are a great many?

It is evident to any casual observer, who has read Hill's original contribution, that the title, "A Romance of Reality," had no specific reference to the brief paragraph about the "love-sick swain." Hill remarked, "1832 and 1862 what a contrast," and his "Romance of Reality" was in fact an account of the rise of Lincoln from a "hog drover" to the presidency. Lloyd Lewis, however, would feature the romance paragraph in the *Axis* article as the theme of the entire monograph by observing that: "Under the heading 'A Romance of Reality,' Editor Hill had in a long sketch of his friend and neighbor Lincoln set down the love story itself." Here follows the great discovery as Lewis copied the story of "an angelic young lady of New Salem to whom Lincoln became engaged."

"But that day was doomed never to arrive. Disease came upon this lovely beauty and she sickened and died. The youth had wrapped his heart with hers and this was more than he could bear. He saw her to her grave, and as the cold clods fell upon the coffin he sincerely wished that he too had been enclosed with it. Melancholy came upon him; he was changed and sad. His friends detected strange conduct and a flighty imagination. They placed him under guard for fear of his committing suicide. New circumstances changed his thoughts, and at length he partially forgot that which had for a time consumed his mind."

The fact that Hill was in correspondence with Herndon about the above romance earlier than the letter he wrote on June 12, 1865, less than two months after the assassination, should be known to every Lincoln student. This information has been available since the Herndon papers were published in book form in 1938 (page 273). Not only does the above letter from Hill to Herndon imply previous correspondence on the romance, but it carried enclosed the clipping of the very *Axis* story by Hill which Lewis now feels is of such tremendous importance. Hill noted, "Enclosed I send the printed slip. I published it in 1862."

But there is still another citation in the letter which eighty years ago mentioned the *Axis* article. It is this statement by Hill, "Mother informs me that when James Short arrives he will be able to give you more information than any or all the men in the county if his memory serves him well."

Uncle "Jimmy" Short arrived and what he and some other intimate friends had to say about the Lincoln-Rutledge romance follows:

James Short—"Knew nothing of love-making, much less an engagement." Beveridge I, 150p.

John McNamer—"Never heard any person say that Mr. Lincoln addressed Miss Ann Rutledge in terms of courtship." Beveridge I, 151-152pp.

Mary Owen—"I do not now recollect of ever hearing him (Abraham) mention her (Ann's) name." Lamon, 176p.

Joshua Speed—"The Rutledge story 'is all new' to me. Lamon, 244p.

In spite of these testimonials and a ponderance of evidence refuting the reliability of the romance, "The Rutledge Ghost Stalks Again."

For full discussion of the Ann Rutledge Myth, see *The Lincoln Kinsman*, number 35, May 1941.