

LINCOLN LORE

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HERNDON'S CONTEMPORARIES QUESTION HIS INTEGRITY

There has been reprinted recently two Lincoln books, both of which have a foreword and annotations by Paul M. Angle. One is the well known *Herndon's Life of Lincoln* by William H. Herndon and Jesse W. Weik, the other *Abraham Lincoln By Some Men Who Knew Him* by Isaac N. Phillips.

Inasmuch as this last mentioned book first came from the press forty years ago, interest is renewed in the original compiler who was at that time Reporter of Decisions, Illinois Supreme Court. The Lincoln National Life Foundation has preserved in its archives correspondence which passed between Mr. Phillips and Judge Daniel Fish of Minneapolis at the time the book was being made ready for the printers. It is a coincident that the chief topic of interest which engaged the attention of these correspondents was the validity of the conclusions drawn in the other above mentioned Herndon volume, especially as they related to the character of Lincoln's wife and the alleged statements he is said to have made about the paternity of his mother.

Referring to this last mentioned question Phillips wrote Fish on April 17, 1909: "The personal testimony of Herndon as to what Lincoln told him once when riding in a buggy between Springfield and Petersburg is likely to be accepted by biographers as the truth. . . . Persons who know nothing about the man will read his book and naturally say to themselves: 'Here is a man who is wholly devoted to the memory of Lincoln; he used to be Lincoln's law partner; of course he is a reliable man or Lincoln would not have had him for a partner; his personal testimony as to what Lincoln told him is not to be questioned.' That is the sticking place and nobody yet has had the courage to tell the truth about old Bill Herndon."

In this same letter to Judge Fish, Phillips revealed some first-hand evidence about the integrity of William Herndon, the defamer of both Lincoln's wife and his mother and also the author of the statement that the President came "from a stagnant putrid pool" set forth verbatim in the introduction of the Herndon-Weik work. Here is another coincident, the first witness introduced in the Phillips correspondence was John W. Bunn, one of the contributors to Phillips' volume. Mr. Angle in the foreword to the Phillips book refers to John W. Bunn, as a man of "knowledge and good sense" and includes him in the group of authors which he designates as "worthy men." Phillips informed Judge Fish:

"Only yesterday John W. Bunn of Springfield, as good and true a man as ever lived, told me that Herndon's father apropos of some escapade of his son William, said that William was the biggest liar on earth; that he would rather lie than tell the truth; that he had another son, whom he named; that was the soul of truthfulness and honor, and he did not know why William should make lying a regular business."

It was this same John W. Bunn whom Phillips asked to prepare a reminiscence of Lincoln for the compilation he was then preparing as already mentioned. In the letter asking Bunn for some statements about Lincoln Phillips wrote: "You are not a man who is disposed to state doubtful things or to try to exaggerate your own knowledge of or association with, Mr. Lincoln. Others have been less modest."

Also in the letter to Judge Fish on April 17, 1909 Phillips relates that on one occasion he was visiting his old law partner Governor Fifer at Springfield and recalling the incident states: "The venerable Milton Hay was at the mansion, as he often was of an evening, his house being just across the street. Milton Hay was a veritable Old Roman. He was an uncle of the late John Hay. I talked with Milton Hay concerning the work that was soon to be issued (Herndon's). I said to him, 'Mr. Hay, will Herndon's book be reliable, can we trust what he says?' The old man did not immediately answer me but went on talking for a few minutes. Then he turned to me and said with emphasis: 'Mr. Phillips, I can answer your question: Herndon's book will not be reliable.'"

In this same letter to Judge Fish with these statements by John Bunn and Milton Hay in mind Phillips drew these conclusions:

"When he (Herndon) came to write his life of Lincoln, in collaboration with Jesse Weik, the question of Lincoln's own paternity had been forever settled by the finding of the marriage certificates and its record in another county. Old Herndon could not now proceed any further on this particular branch of the subject, but, being a liar, it did not trouble his conscience any to make up the story of the buggy ride to Petersburg, and Lincoln's remarkable statement to him about the paternity of Lincoln's mother—a statement that I believe Lincoln would no more have made to such a man as Herndon than he would have stuck his head in the fire."

Further and possibly more timely in the light of the changing attitude towards the wife of Lincoln, Phillips, in the letter of April 17, makes this statement.

"He (Herndon) had scores to settle with Mrs. Lincoln and with Mrs. Lincoln's family in Springfield. None of them would have recognized Herndon socially any more than they would have recognized a tramp dog, and this will help to account for what Herndon has said about the tantrums of Mrs. Lincoln and the gloom into which these things threw Lincoln."

It is quite clear in this letter that Phillips anticipated a question Judge Fish would surely submit, so he wrote.

"But, it will be asked, what motive could Herndon have had for telling a lie to the detriment and disgrace of the mother of his long-time partner? That is where the sticking point is. I have a theory which is long, but I will state some of it. During Lincoln's administration Herndon was angry because Lincoln had not given him an office. What Lincoln really did for him was to go over to Richard Yates, the new governor, and tell Yates that if he would keep Billy in the office of commissioner of the State bank, he (Lincoln) would give Yates an office under the administration for some friend of his twice as good as the one Billy held. Yates told Bunn this, and told him also that Lincoln said he could not put Billy in any office."

Daniel Fish replied to Isaac N. Phillips in a letter dated April 22, 1909. From his rather lengthy letter but one sentence in the form of a question put by Judge Fish is here presented:

"If what you report of him (Herndon) can be clearly established, why isn't it the pious duty of some of your Illinoisians to serve him up?"