

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 1206

FORT WAYNE, INDIANA

MAY 19, 1952

THE ANN RUTLEDGE MYTH

Many students of history have maintained for several years that the story of any romance between Abraham Lincoln and Ann Rutledge is pure fiction. An important witness now comes to the support of this view in the person of Mary Todd Lincoln, wife of the President, whose written testimony states, "I shall remain firm in my conviction that Ann Rutledge is a myth—for in all his (her husband's) confidential communications such a romantic name was never breathed." The above statement appears in a letter written by Mary Todd to David Davis on March 4, 1867—discovered in the papers of the recipient, the executor of the President's estate. It has been surmised for a long time that when access was gained to the Davis papers valuable historical data would be available. Willard L. King of Chicago was the literary sleuth who made public the treasure.

The newly released information not only gives us Mrs. Lincoln's opinion about the authenticity of the supposed romance but also reveals that she had read William Herndon's address on the subject. Herndon, the creator of the myth, first delivered his lecture on "Abraham Lincoln. Miss Ann Rutledge. New Salem. Pioneering, and the Poem." on the night of Friday, November 16, 1866 at the Sangamon County Court House. The attendance was small and the newspaper comment was unfavorable. Mr. Herndon, had the manuscript printed in broadside form and it is one of the scarce items of Lincolniana which the Foundation has been fortunate to secure.

The printed copy of the Herndon lecture apparently was before Mrs. Lincoln when she wrote. She called Judge Davis' attention to an alleged statement by her husband with reference to Ann's grave: "Mr. Lincoln has stated that his heart sad and broken was buried there." Mrs. Lincoln's reaction to this spurious quotation is found in these words: "Nor did his (Mr. Lincoln's) life or his joyous laugh lead me to suppose his heart was in an unfortunate woman's grave but in the proper place with his loved wife and children."

Mrs. Lincoln was incorrect in calling Ann Rutledge a mythical character but there is an abundance of proof to support the implication that such a romance as Herndon published was purely mythical and should be treated as fiction. Ann did have a romance at New Salem with John McNamar and there is evidence that they would have married had she lived. Lincoln had sort of a romance at New Salem, also, at about the same time, with Mary Owen. Herndon apparently changed girls on Lincoln in his piece of glorified fiction and used some incidents, greatly exaggerated, from both romances, as well as episodes which occurred in the romance of Lincoln and Mary Todd some time later.

Mrs. Lincoln's statement that her husband never mentioned the name of Ann Rutledge in her presence or hinted at an early love affair with such a girl supplements some testimonials of the same nature by friends of Lincoln who most certainly would have known if the courtship as purported ever did take place. Their statements confirm the purely mythical character of any such romance as Herndon presented.

John McNamar, to whom Ann Rutledge was engaged, and in whose home at Sand Ridge, 7 miles from New Salem she was living with her parents when she passed away, claimed that if Ann had survived they would have been married. McNamar had a marker placed on the

grave of Ann Rutledge and when interviewed about her in later years stated that, "I never heard any person say that Mr. Lincoln addressed Miss Ann Rutledge in terms of courtship neither her own family nor my acquaintance otherwise." Is it possible that no one told him that when he was away Ann and Lincoln had become engaged if such were the case?

James Short was one of Lincoln's closest friends during the New Salem days and bid in a horse and some surveying instruments for Abe when he was about to lose them at a commissioners sale. The Rutledges lived near Short at Sand Ridge and he had a close acquaintance with them while Abe was supposed to be doing his courting out there. Mr. Short admitted: "I did not know of any engagement or tender passages between Mr. L. and Miss R. at the time." Is it possible such endearment as is alleged could have escaped his notice?

Joshua Speed without question was Lincoln's closest male companion during the early Springfield days when they roomed together. In the correspondence that passed between them after Speed had moved to Kentucky and Lincoln had broken his engagement with Mary Todd there were numerous occasions when romances were mentioned in the correspondence which would invite a reference to Ann Rutledge. Herndon admitted that Lincoln never told Speed about Ann. Shortly after Herndon published the broadside featuring the romance he sent a copy to Speed who replied, "It is all new to me."

Mary Owen from Kentucky, who on two occasions visited her married sister in New Salem, is one of our most important witnesses. During her first sojourn at the time when Lincoln was supposed to be engaged to Ann Rutledge, Lincoln was often in the company of Mary. After she returned home and during the time when Lincoln was still supposed to be engaged to Ann he told Mary Owen's sister if she would bring Mary back he would marry her. Mary came back after Ann died and if Lincoln had buried his heart in the grave of Ann Rutledge he soon rescued it and presented it to Mary Owen, but she turned him down. Mary was interviewed in later years and made this written statement: "I do not now recollect of ever hearing him (Lincoln) mention her (Ann Rutledge's) name." It is a fair supposition that a young lady who received a proposal of marriage would learn something of the suitor's former love affairs, especially if one of his romances ended in a tragic death of the bride to be about a year before.

Matthew S. Marsh "a particular friend" of Lincoln who resided at New Salem wrote a letter to his brother on Sept. 17, 1835, twenty-three days after the death of Ann Rutledge. At this time, according to Herndon, Lincoln is supposed to have been on the verge of insanity over the death of Ann. Marsh mentions Lincoln, however, in a manner which completely nullifies any such mental condition as Herndon describes.

With all of these witnesses in agreement with the conclusions of Mary Todd about the mythical character of the widely accepted romance, objective students of the life of Abraham Lincoln are justified in calling the story that connects the name of Abraham Lincoln with Ann Rutledge, just pure fiction.

Note—For the origin of the Lincoln-Rutledge story and the contention that Lincoln would have denied the tradition in 1862 if it were not true, see Lincoln Lore No. 840 "The Rutledge Ghost Stalks Again."