

# LINCOLN LORE

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## LINCOLN'S EARLY POLITICAL CONTACTS WITH HERNDON

The entrance into the field of Lincoln research by several meticulous historians has caused many conjectural statements originating with William Herndon to be challenged. Especially are those conclusions under scrutiny where Lincoln's law partner, ten years his junior, posed as a political guide and mentor for his illustrious associate, or assumed the role of a critique of his partner's attitude towards the electorate. The fact that Lincoln's political interests were fundamental in his rise to fame demands that they should be approached objectively. A discussion on "Lincoln's Early Political Contacts with Herndon" might serve as an introductory number to a series of monographs in that field.

John T. Stuart and Stephen T. Logan, the two lawyers associated with Lincoln preliminary to the Herndon affiliation, received from their successor little but contempt, although they were men of legal training and recognized leaders of ability in the community. Herndon presents them in a very unfavorable light in their relationship with Lincoln.

It was Stuart who had encouraged Lincoln to study law, loaned him books and then took him, as a novice, into partnership. We might call Lincoln, Stuart's protege in the profession of law and possibly in early politics as well. But Herndon in a letter to Jesse M. Weik written on December 23, 1885 stated that "Stuart in his heart hated Lincoln."

In his once famous biography Herndon gives an account of how Lincoln's partnership with Logan was culminated. He states they were both politically minded and "could not dwell harmoniously together in the same office." Then Herndon concludes that "after numerous acrimonious passages took place between them" Lincoln came "rushing up into my quarters and advised me that he had determined to sever partnership with Logan." Herndon continues the narrative about the origin of the new law firm with the statement said to have been made by Lincoln: "Billy! I can trust you if you can trust me." The impression is left with the reader that Lincoln could not trust Logan and possibly Stuart is also implied. Paul Angle in a footnote of the reprinted Herndon work states that these stories about a Logan-Lincoln misunderstanding "were without foundation." However, there may have been a political background for the forming of the Lincoln-Herndon partnership.

David Donald in his book entitled *Lincoln's Herndon* compiles a half dozen reasons which have been proposed as to why this particular well known law firm was formed. The consensus seems to have been that it was not Herndon's legal ability that attracted Lincoln to him as the partnership was established in the fall of 1844 and Herndon did not receive a license to practice law until December 7 of that year, neither did he have money, prestige, nor a college education. There is one of several other possible motives on the part of Lincoln for inviting Herndon to join him which we have never seen advanced but which might be added to those already suggested.

Abraham Lincoln had married on November 4, 1842 Mary Todd, a daughter of Robert, president of the Bank of Kentucky. Lincoln wrote to his friend Alden Hull that he would like to represent the seventh district in Congress. The newly married Lincoln made rather an active canvass to secure the support of the Sanga-

mon County delegation at the district Whig convention but was defeated by Edward Baker.

A few months after his marriage Lincoln wrote a long letter to Martin S. Morris, on March 26, 1843, which he began in this fashion: "It is truly gratifying to me to learn that while the people of Sangamon have cast me off, my old friends of Menard who have known me longest and best of any, still retain their confidence in me. It would astonish if not amuse, the older citizens of your county who twelve years ago knew me a stranger, friendless, uneducated, penniless boy, working on a flat boat—at ten dollars per month to learn that I have been put down here as the candidate of pride, wealth, and aristocratic family distinction. Yet so chiefly it was."

Here Lincoln set forth the primary reason why he felt he had suffered his first set back in a rather successful series of political contests. When he married Mary Todd he married into the aristocracy. His present law partner Logan was related to her as was also his earlier partner Stuart. Mary's sister had married into the distinguished Edwards family. Apparently it did not take Lincoln very long to observe that his political career was at an end if he were to number both his domestic and business associates among the elite. Certainly he would not for political expediency divorce his wife whom he loved but he could change his business relations.

The return of Logan's son from college to become associated with his father in the practice of law opened the way for Lincoln's withdrawal. William Herndon who had been reading law in the Logan-Lincoln office was free from the so called taint of aristocracy, in fact as one commentator put it there was a very wide social gulf between the Herndon and Todd constituencies. This fact may have contributed more than any other one thing, from Lincoln's viewpoint, to make Herndon eligible as a business connection. That the people of Springfield were surprised that Lincoln had chosen a character of the Herndon type as a business partner is a matter of record.

Herndon was asked on one occasion why Lincoln had taken him into partnership to which Herndon replied, "I don't know and no one else does." But Lincoln knew and must have had a reason for it which he did not care to discuss with any one, especially not with Herndon and possibly not with his wife. One thing is certain, when the partnership with Herndon was formed it did not contribute to Lincoln's social standing and as far as his business associates were concerned he had cut loose from the aristocratic element. This may have been one of Lincoln's most unique political coups, and it again made him an available candidate for the people at large.

Certainly Herndon could have had nothing to do with Abraham Lincoln's political success preliminary to the forming of their partnership in the fall of 1844. Lincoln completed his fourth biennial term in the Illinois Legislature in 1842, two years earlier than this. The rotation agreement in the 1843 Whig convention which put Lincoln on the track for the 1846 election would take Herndon pretty much out of the picture until Lincoln arrived in Congress.\*

\*A later issue of *Lincoln Lore* will review Herndon's first actual political contact with Lincoln which took the form of Herndon's complaint, controversy and a ridiculous prophecy.