The Ann Rutledge Story: Case Closed?

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The Ann Rutledge story endures as one of the most piquant sagas in Abraham Lincoln historiography. William H. Herndon, Lincoln’s law partner, brought it to national attention after the assassination when he scandalized a grieving public with the claim that Rutledge, not Mary Todd, had been Lincoln’s great love.1 Aware that history was congealing around the martyr in a way that could distort the truth of his life, Herndon launched an investigation into Lincoln’s early years. It produced the greatest body of testimony about young Lincoln ever assembled.2 But Herndon’s bombshell, the tale of a village belle whose untimely death forever scarred the future president, introduced a controversy that persists to this day.

The theme of doomed romance made the story a hit in popular culture.3 Most biographers took it seriously until the 1920s, when a new breed of professional historian questioned it on the grounds that Herndon’s evidence, derived from reminiscences of decades-old events concerning the tiny hamlet of New Salem, Illinois, more resembled folklore than fact.4 By the mid-1940s the academy had jetisoned the story.5 It lay dormant until 1990, when two distinguished

1. William H. Herndon, “Abraham Lincoln; Miss Ann Rutledge; New Salem; Pioneering; & The Poem.” A lecture delivered in Springfield, Illinois, November 16, 1866, reprinted from the original broadside (H. E. Barker: Springfield, Ill., 1910). Herndon mailed copies of the lecture to various newspapers before he delivered it; many printed it. For an engrossing account of the intense public reaction, see David Herbert Donald, Lincoln’s Herndon (New York: Knopf, 1948), 229–38.


5. James G. Randall with the assistance of his wife, Ruth P. Randall, seemingly de-
scholars, John Y. Simon and Douglas L. Wilson, separately published articles critical of the Rutledge ejection. Wilson pressed his case with particular tenacity, arguing that Herndon’s portrayal of Abraham’s love for Ann rests not on folklore, but on “overwhelmingly” consistent informant testimony.

Simon and Wilson quickly restored the story to scholarly respectability. The impact of their work is itself a remarkable story, one deserving of scrutiny as a case study in the practice of oral history. It is rarely noted, for example, that these scholars make quite different interpretations in their revisionist readings of the evidence. Simon argues that Lincoln’s romantic love for Rutledge was such that he suffered a nervous collapse after she died, but he stops short of claiming that Rutledge reciprocated Lincoln’s feelings. Wilson goes further, arguing that Lincoln-Rutledge relations developed into a mutual romance replete with a marriage agreement. The contrast highlights issues in the handling of reminiscence. How does the historian evaluate storytelling accuracy about events of the distant past?

The focus here is on Wilson’s interpretation and its influence. Seemingly overnight, Ann Rutledge returned to the academy as Lincoln’s first love and fiancée, as perhaps the most important figure of his early adulthood. It was largely a bloodless coup. Enough time had passed that few scholars had a stake in maintaining the story. A notable


exception was David Herbert Donald, who had launched his career as research assistant to James G. Randall, premier Lincolnist of the mid-twentieth century and the most systematic critic of Herndon’s Rutledge account. Donald’s first book, a biography of Herndon, wittily amplified his mentor’s views. Yet even he came to concede, albeit without enthusiasm, that Simon and Wilson were probably right about Lincoln’s romantic love for Rutledge. In time Donald would again change his mind.

Few scholars critically examined the “overwhelming” testimony Wilson cites. Twenty years after he first published on Lincoln and Rutledge, his scholarship remains largely unchallenged. One might conclude that Wilson’s interpretation is unassailable. Michael Burlingame, for example, has addressed it in terms of settled fact, as have several other Lincolnists over the better part of the last two decades.

The following is a dissent.

I

Wilson cites twenty-four New Salem-era informants who expressed opinions about Lincoln’s relationship with Ann Rutledge. He totes up the opinions in the format of a “poll,” giving each informant a “vote” on three questions: “Did Lincoln love or court Ann Rutledge?” “Did Lincoln grieve excessively at her death?” “Did Lincoln and Ann have an understanding about marriage?” Wilson certifies a landslide consensus that Lincoln did indeed affiance with Rutledge in the course of a romance that tragically sundered with her death, driving Lincoln if not to the brink of madness, then at least into dire depression. Wilson doesn’t dwell on the fact that many of the testimonies are terse and

10. Donald, Lincoln’s Herndon.
vague, with few corroborative details. But he concedes that some of the informants either had not yet been born or were small children when Rutledge died, and that some of the other informants had also acquired their opinions from hearsay, not from personal knowledge. Their “votes,” Wilson notes, carry diminished “probative” weight. But he has a corrective. He claims that five informants learned about the romance directly from either Rutledge or Lincoln and thus qualify as expert witnesses whose weightier testimonies compensate for those based on indirect knowledge.

Questions about Wilson’s approach immediately crop up. A poll with two classes of voters, the semi-expert and the expert—one counting less than the other toward the final result—cannot yield the kind of findings Wilson claims. Meaningful numerical tallies require equally weighted votes. Wilson explicitly acknowledges this but nevertheless trumpets the margins he extracts. Did Lincoln love Rutledge? Twenty-two informants said yes, zero said no, two had no opinion. Did Lincoln “grieve excessively” at Rutledge’s death? Seventeen said yes, zero said no, seven had no opinion. Did Lincoln and Rutledge have an understanding about marriage? Seventeen said yes, two said no, five had no opinion. At first glance these are landslides indeed. But if they derive to some extent from “voters” with suspect qualifications, how impressive are they really?

Other preliminary comments are in order. A number of New Salem-era informants who expressed opinions about Rutledge and Lincoln don’t appear on the roll call: Daniel Burner, Jason Duncan, George Spears, and John McNamar. Burner told an interviewer in 1895, “Talking about girls, I want to say there is no truth in the story about Lincoln being engaged to Ann Rutledge.” One surmises for Burner a “no” on

15. “It is obvious that some of these were not testifying from firsthand knowledge. John Hill, for example, was not yet born when Ann died, and Lizzie Herndon Bell was only a small child. Others, such as B. F. Irwin, T. W. McNeely, and William Bennett, testified only about what they had heard from others.” Wilson, Lincoln Before Washington, 81.

16. “This tally of the opinions of Herndon’s informants, decisive as it appears, gives equal weight to each informant and does nothing to help sort out those whose testimony is the most probative. . . . But there are at least five witnesses who received information about the love affair between Ann Rutledge and Abraham Lincoln from a prime source—the principals themselves.” Ibid., 84.

17. This discussion addresses poll question #1 as, “Did Lincoln love Ann Rutledge?” The “or court” is omitted in the interests of brevity. Wilson makes no references to the possibility that Lincoln may have courted Rutledge without also loving her.

marriage agreement, and “no opinions” on love and grief. Duncan told Herndon that Lincoln “had great partiality for Miss Ann Rutledge” but didn’t mention grief and noted that Ann was engaged to another man; this looks like a “yes” on love, a “no opinion” on grief, and a “no” on marriage agreement. Spears, referring to Herndon’s Rutledge lecture, said simply, “as to Mr. Lincoln’s crazy spell [“excessive grief” for Rutledge] I do not recollect.” Three “no opinions” for Spears? McNamar played a big role in the Rutledge story; more about him in a bit. Had Wilson included him, he would in this estimation have “voted no” on all three questions. It scarcely matters. As will be seen, more serious issues raise doubts about Wilson’s poll. But the exclusion without rationale of such a key informant as McNamar suggests an arbitrary approach to evidence.

Also significant are the implications of informants who have no impact on Wilson’s study simply because they didn’t comment about Lincoln and Rutledge. Hannah Armstrong especially comes to mind. It’s worth quoting Herndon’s instructions to an assistant about the questioning of Armstrong, a quote Wilson himself supplies: “If you ever see Mrs Armstrong please get out of her all the facts in reference to Mr. Lincoln’s life when in Menard [County]—what he did—what he said—when he said it where he said it—before whom—How he lived—his manners—customs—habits—sports, frolics—fun—his sadness—his wit; his humor. What he read—when he read it—How he read—and what and who he loved. etc. etc. And in short all she may know about him in mind—heart—soul—body.”

Two things are apparent in this passage. First, Herndon favored a relentless investigative style. Second, he suspected that Hannah Armstrong knew a bit about Lincoln’s life. The wife of the roustabout Jack Armstrong, whom Lincoln famously wrestled early in his New Salem days, Hannah cooked for Lincoln and mended his clothes while he tended to her baby. Her earthy sense of humor no doubt appealed to

20. Jason Duncan, letter to Herndon, Herndon’s Informants, 541.
22. John McNamar to George Miles, May 5, 1866: “I never heard an[y] person say that Mr Lincon addressed Miss Ann Rutledge in terms of courtship neither her own family nor my acquaintances otherwise[.]” Ibid., 253. On December 1, 1866, McNamar wrote to Herndon directly, “With regard to the crazy Spell of Mr Lincoln, I had never heard of it Before. . . .” Ibid., 493.
him; one can easily imagine them enjoying a companionable friendship. Under interrogation, Herndon-style, Hannah Armstrong said not a word about Ann Rutledge.

Such considerations suggest that the poll approach has limitations. In fact, the entire “voting” premise is suspect. The concession that “some” testimony derives from hearsay enormously understates the actual case. “Votes” made on the basis of hearsay are inconsistent with the “voting” of eyewitnesses. The claim that five informants’ direct knowledge of a romance from Lincoln or Rutledge compensates for hearsay is questionable. In two instances this claim goes beyond the realm of the questionable.

Another issue concerns testimony from the Rutledge family about Ann Rutledge, Lincoln, and grief. Elsewhere, compelling testimony suggests that what some informants perceived as Lincoln’s grief stemmed to a large degree from aspects of his life unrelated to Ann Rutledge; Wilson acknowledges that testimony but does not address it fully. In the end, perceptions of Lincoln’s grief emerge as quite a mysterious affair indeed.

II

As noted, Wilson asserts that five informants learned about the romance directly from one of the principals. It follows that the remaining nineteen received their information by other means. It might be supposed that they learned of the romance because they personally observed Lincoln courting Rutledge and her reciprocation. A question for those well versed in Lincoln lore: Does a reliable courtship vignette come to mind? Probably not, one would guess.

The testimony shows that none of the informants reported a specific firsthand memory of courtship, with one very unlikely exception. Lizzie H. Bell, daughter of New Salem schoolmaster Mentor Graham, told of a quilting bee at which Lincoln “sat beside [Ann] and whispered words of love into her ear[.]” This so excited Ann that her sewing grew frantic with “long irregular stitches[.]” Bell was

24. Hannah Armstrong fed Lincoln: Herndon’s Informants, 525. Earthy sense of humor (Armstrong to Herndon): “A few days before Mr Lincoln left for Washington I went to see him—was a widow—the boys got up a story on me that I went to get to sleep with Abe &c—. I replied to the Joke that it was not every woman who had the good fortune & high honor of sleeping with a President. This stopt the sport—cut it short.” Ibid., 527.

25. No word from Hannah Armstrong about Ann Rutledge, ibid., 525-27.

26. Lizzie Bell, quilting bee, ibid., 591.
born in 1833, Rutledge died in August, 1835. By her own admission Bell could not reliably remember this incident. The setting is improbable; Lincoln, ill at ease in the company of unattached women, avoided occasions such as quilting bees. This story cannot be taken seriously and the point here bears reiteration. Bell’s fanciful tale is the only item of testimony from New Salem and environs, including every last member of the Rutledge family itself, that qualifies even remotely as a specific firsthand memory of Lincoln courting Rutledge.

This may come as a surprise to some, given the certitude with which Wilson makes his romance case. It is appropriate to point out that John Y. Simon, in his own Rutledge rehabilitation, identifies no specific recollections of a courtship. Also germane is David Donald’s judgment about the absence of specific courtship stories.

27. Lizzie Bell: “I was a simple child in 1835–6 and don’t Know much of my own knowledge only heard people talk,” ibid., 605. Born in 1833: “Register of Informants,” Elizabeth Bell entry, ibid., 740.
28. The issue of Lincoln avoiding unattached women is discussed below.
29. As Michael Burlingame puts it, “Few details of that courtship survive.” Abraham Lincoln: A Life, 99. This is an understatement. The number of specific occasions that Lincoln and Ann Rutledge were recalled to have been seen together are exceedingly few. Her younger sister, Nancy Cameron Rutledge Prewitt, told of helping Ann and Abe fix a bed at the Rutledge tavern in New Salem that he and one of Ann’s brothers had broken during a “romp and scuffle” the night before. See Margaret Flindt, “Lincoln as a Lover. His Courtship of Ann Rutledge of New Salem in 1835,” Chicago Inter-Ocean, interview conducted with Nancy Rutledge Prewitt in Fairfield, Iowa, February 10, 1899, page 3 of a typescript transcript of the original article in the Jane Hamand compilation for the Decatur Lincoln Memorial Collection (November 1921), now at the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library. In this interview (page 5) Nancy Prewitt stated, “No one could have seen them together and not be convinced that they loved each other truly.” But the only specific activity Nancy Prewitt reported concerned the repair of the bed. Nancy recalled Lincoln paying respects to the dying Ann: “I can never forget how sad and broken-hearted Lincoln looked when he came out of the room from the last interview with Annie. No one knows what was said at that meeting, for they were alone together.” Another younger sister of Ann’s, Sarah Rutledge Saunders, also recalled seeing Lincoln pay final respects: “[W]hen Lincoln went into the sick room where Ann lay, the others retired. A few minutes later Lincoln came from the room with bowed head and seemed to me at the time to be crying. Soon after this Ann died.” Quoted in John Evangelist Walsh, The Shadows Rise: Abraham Lincoln and the Ann Rutledge Legend (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 137–38, from a letter from Sarah Rutledge Saunders to George Hambrecht, March 18, 1922. These moving statements signify nothing at all about courtship or marriage engagement; they do not indicate “unusual” or “excessive” grief.
31. Donald writes: “Apart from one highly dubious anecdote about a quilting bee, there are no stories about the courtship, which, because of Ann’s ambiguous relation-
A question arises: How, then, did informants remember this love story?

Wilson supplies a perspective. Ann Rutledge, he explains, felt obliged to limit to her family news about the engagement to Lincoln. Her difficulty owed to her engagement to another man, John McNamar (who is not mentioned in Wilson’s poll). McNamar had left town to tend to business back East and failed to return in a timely fashion, raising doubts about the sincerity of his marital intentions. In the midst of this uncertainty, so the story goes, Rutledge and Lincoln fell for each other and planned to marry. Given Ann’s commitment to McNamar, propriety required that they keep their plans quiet. It’s a strange story, with the kind of strangeness that almost seems plausible, except that one wonders how Lincoln justified going after a girl affianced to a man with whom he’d had friendly relations. (Indeed, Lincoln resumed friendly relations with McNamar when the latter, in a startling twist, rode back into New Salem just weeks after Ann Rutledge’s death.) At any rate the story neatly explains why Rutledge and Lincoln revealed their secret to only five confidants and why personal memories of the romance are in such short supply. The courtship, Wilson asserts, was clandestine. Hence, “Few outside the Rutledge family, if any, knew about the understanding between Lincoln and Ann until after her death.”

This puts a different light on Wilson’s concession that “some” informants learned about the romance via hearsay. If almost all learned of it only after Ann died—which is to say, indirectly—then almost all of the testimony Wilson cites came secondhand.

Wilson tacitly acknowledges the point with comments about the testimony of informant James Short. In July 1865 Short wrote to Herndon: “After my marriage, the Rutledges lived about half a mile from me [six or so miles north of New Salem]. Mr L. came over to see me &

32. McNamar to George Miles, May, 1866: “[W]hen I left there was no rivalry between him [Lincoln] and myself on that score on the contrary I had every reason to consider him my Personal friend[.]” Herndon’s Informants, 252. Lincoln’s friendliness with McNamar after McNamar returned to New Salem, from the same letter to Miles: “I arrived here only a few weeks after her [Ann Rutledge’s] Death[,] I saw and conversed with Mr Lincon[,] I thought he had lost some of his former vivacity. . . . he wrote a deed for me which I still hold and prize not only for the Land it conveyed but as a valued Memento[,]” McNamar recalled that many years later Lincoln spoke at Petersburg, not far from long-defunct New Salem. Afterward Lincoln greeted old friends, including McNamar, with “a Cordial Shake of the hand” and addressed McNamar “by name.” Ibid., 259.

33. “Few outside the family, if any, knew”: Wilson, Lincoln Before Washington, 83.
them every day or two. I did not know of any engagement or tender passages between Mr L and Miss R at the time.[.] But after her death, which happened in 34 or 35, he seemed to be so much affected and grieved so hardly that I then supposed there must have been something of the kind.”

As a Rutledge neighbor who often saw Lincoln, Short was better situated than most of the community to know about Lincoln’s relations with the Rutledge family. Yet he’d had no inkling of anything afoot between Lincoln and Ann. His opinion came in retrospect and by deduction: “I then supposed there must have been something of the kind.” It’s noteworthy that Short didn’t cite conversation with Ann’s parents or siblings as the source of his knowledge. Apparently, they never discussed a love affair between Ann and their good mutual friend. The probable reasons for this will be discussed later.

Of Short’s certainty of a romance based solely on Lincoln’s behavior after Rutledge died, Wilson remarks: “James Short was probably typical of the close friends for whom Lincoln’s extraordinary bereavement was a revelation.” Wilson gives a veiled nod to the larger reality that no one reliably claimed actually to have witnessed a romance.

The testimony of the “expert five”—the informants Wilson claims learned of a romance directly from Lincoln or Rutledge—thus becomes vastly more important. However, they too told not one story about a romance. Direct communications from Lincoln or Rutledge notwithstanding, nothing specific in their testimony indicates they witnessed an actual courtship, let alone a romance evolving into a marriage agreement.

One wonders how Wilson purports to find overwhelming evidence in a poll in which two of the three questions concern a subject that none of the polled personally witnessed. It might be asked: So what if no one witnessed the romance? Didn’t everyone find out after Ann died? In fact, that attitude is implicit in Wilson’s argument. But it does of course matter that no one supplied credible memories. It matters that this romance was clandestine to the point of invisibility, for the obvious reason that the main issue at stake is whether or not it actually happened.

34. James Short, “something of the kind,” ibid., 73.
35. In the spring of 1836 the widowed Mary Ann Rutledge moved to Iowa with her children. This limited the time frame in which James Short could have learned from Ann Rutledge’s family about a romance after the death of Ann Rutledge. Still, it is striking that Short reported no conversations with the Rutledge family about Ann and Lincoln.
36. Lincoln’s grief a “revelation”: Wilson, Lincoln Before Washington, 83.
Another question now intrudes. How did an invisible romance make such an impression? The answer is that it didn’t. Something else left an impression. What was the source of Lincoln’s “excessive grief” after Rutledge’s death? Unlike the alleged romance itself, Lincoln’s behavior after Rutledge’s death caught the attention of a number of eyewitnesses. Their testimony leaves no doubt that during this time Lincoln experienced a serious crisis.

But was it, in fact, a crisis of lost romance?

Wilson argues that consistent replies to the poll’s three questions provide persuasive evidence. However, consistency is only one measure of testimony. Just as important is its source. The foregoing indicates that Wilson’s affirmative tallies on the poll’s love and marriage-agreement questions, consistent though they may seem, do not derive from firsthand testimony. This shifts the grounds upon which one may reasonably argue for the existence of a romance. In order to make that argument, one must show that the grief testimony by itself provides persuasive evidence.

To put it more succinctly: apart from the five experts’ testimony, accounts of Lincoln’s grief constitute the only specific firsthand evidence on the table.

Three new questions now arise. How much of the grief testimony is firsthand? How consistent is it? Does it support the conclusion that Lincoln’s behavior was that of a man tragically bereft of his lover?

III

The poll’s grief tally includes a total of nine informants who claimed firsthand knowledge of Lincoln’s behavior after Ann Rutledge’s death.37

Wilson assigns “no opinion” votes to seven informants who simply didn’t mention Lincoln having had a reaction to Rutledge’s death.38 He

37. In discussing James Randall’s critique of the Rutledge evidence, Wilson states: “[T]he combined testimony of more than a dozen eyewitnesses cannot convince him that Lincoln’s grief was unusual.” Wilson, ibid., 91. Wilson’s reference to “more than a dozen eyewitnesses” of “unusual” Lincoln grief is open to question. This critique’s identification of a total of nine grief eyewitnesses begins with the twenty-four informants Wilson puts to the test in his poll. From that number, seven informants with “no opinion” on grief have been subtracted, and eight informants whose knowledge of grief was limited to hearsay have also been subtracted. The “no opinion” number cannot be disputed; the hearsay number is a matter of judgment.

38. The seven informants who expressed “no opinion” on—that is, simply didn’t mention—Lincoln’s grief, are Esther Bale, Lizzie Bell, William Bennett, Caleb Carman, J. Rowan Herndon, Henry Hohimer, and James Rutledge.
doesn’t discuss this; he apparently considers “no opinion” a neutral stance without implications. Yet, all of these informants “voted yes” on love, and five “voted yes” on marriage agreement.39

More troublesome are “yes” votes on grief Wilson gives to eight informants either born too late to witness events at the time, or whose statements make it plain they’d only heard stories of grief from others. They, too, did not witness Lincoln’s behavior after Rutledge died. These informants are Hardin Bale, Lynn Greene, John Hill, Benjamin Irwin, John Jones, T. W. McNeely, John Rutledge, and Robert Rutledge. As already noted, Wilson is not shy about invoking hearsay. In this context the hearsay issue is significant because, with the exception of McNeely, all of these informants “voted yes” on marriage agreement.40

Like the five with “no opinion,” they affirmed a romance without personal knowledge of Lincoln’s behavior at the time.

On the grief question generally, “no opinion” votes and votes based on hearsay combine to total fifteen out of twenty-four informants polled. From the start, almost two-thirds of the grief vote may be considered a less-than-solid foundation from which to conclude that Lincoln’s crisis supports the reality of a romance.

The remaining nine informants claimed they saw Lincoln grieve, and

39. The five informants with “no opinion” on grief who “voted yes” on marriage are William Bennett, Caleb Carman, J. Rowan Herndon, Henry Hohimer, and James Rutledge. Caleb Carman indirectly gave an opinion on grief: “I saw Mr James Short about this matter he says it is not so about Lincolns Refuseing to Eat on the account of the death of Miss Rutledg—” Herndon’s Informants, 430.

40. The seven informants with only hearsay knowledge of Lincoln’s grief who “voted yes” on marriage are Hardin Bale, Lynn Greene, John Hill, Benjamin Irwin, John Jones, John Rutledge, and Robert Rutledge. The grounds for identifying their grief knowledge as hearsay are: Hardin Bale: “It was said . . . .” Ibid., 13. Lynn Greene: “I regret very much that I cannot give you the information you desire[.]” Greene explained that he was away at school much of the time Lincoln lived in New Salem. He affirmed that Lincoln took Rutledge’s death “very hard indeed” but gave no indication he himself saw it. Ibid., 80. John Hill was born in 1839, four years after Rutledge died. Benjamin Irwin: “some of his friends thought . . . .” Ibid., 325; “he was thought to be partially crazy . . . .” Ibid., 353. John Jones: “During her [Rutledge’s] last illness he [Lincoln] visited her sick chamber and on his return stopped at my house. It was very evident that he was much distressed. I was not surprised when it was rumored subsequently that his reason was in danger.” Ibid., 387. Jones’ claim that he saw Lincoln in a state of distress after visiting the ill Ann Rutledge does not indicate “unusual” or “excessive” grief. Jones only heard of such grief because “it was rumored[ . . . ]” John Rutledge, Ann’s elder brother, in three letters to Herndon (ibid., 394, 401–2, 423) mentioned Ann only once (423) and made no mention of Lincoln’s reaction to her death. His brother, Robert, family spokesman to Herndon, mentioned no family knowledge of any kind about Lincoln’s state of mind after Ann Rutledge died. Robert Rutledge twice specifically disavowed personal knowledge of Lincoln’s reaction to Ann’s death; ibid., 408, 497.
there is no reason to doubt it. Their testimony is thus more “probative,” to borrow the term, than that of those who reported “no opinion” or hearsay. In other words, their opinions matter.

Wilson’s assertions with regard to consistency here encounter serious trouble. Although these nine eyewitnesses all agreed that Lincoln grieved for Rutledge, they disagreed sharply about a marriage agreement. This becomes apparent, after a bit of scrutiny, in Wilson’s own vote tallies. He gives five of these informants “yes” votes on the marriage-agreement question. He gives the remaining four either a “no opinion” or a “no” on that question. This five-to-four split hardly reflects consistent opinion.

The nearly even split points to the poll’s main flaw, that questionable testimony skews its results. Considered separately, the tallies for the poll’s grief and marriage questions present seeming consistency and numerical authority. Considered together with questionable “voting” removed from the grief tally, another story emerges. It doesn’t matter that informants with “no opinion” about grief affirmed a romance, or that informants with hearsay knowledge of grief affirmed a romance. What matters at the moment for an evaluation of the argument that Lincoln’s crisis substantiates a romance, are the opinions of self-described grief eyewitnesses who did not affirm a romance.

The eyewitnesses who did not affirm a romance are James Short, Elizabeth Abell, Henry McHenry, and Susannah (Mrs. William) Rutledge. The eyewitnesses who affirmed a romance are Parthena Hill, William Greene, Isaac Cogdal, Mentor Graham, and Nancy Green. Let us consider the naysayers first.

Short, just discussed, said with some diffidence that he had “supposed there must have been something of the kind.” Wilson thus assigns him a “yes” on the love question. Herndon recorded no other

41. The nine informants who claimed firsthand knowledge of Lincoln’s grief are Elizabeth Abell, Isaac Cogdal, Mentor Graham, Nancy Green, William Greene, Parthena Hill, Henry McHenry, James Short, and Susannah Rutledge.


43. Ann’s aunt, Susannah Cameron Rutledge, was married to William Rutledge, a brother of Ann’s father, James. She is listed incorrectly in the *Herndon’s Informants* index as “Rutledge, Elizabeth (Mrs. William).” Susannah’s mother, Nancy Miller Cameron, and Ann’s mother, Mary Ann Miller Rutledge, were sisters, the daughters of John Miller. Thus, Susannah Rutledge in addition to being Ann’s aunt by marriage was also her blood first cousin. See Gannett, “‘Overwhelming Evidence,’” 39–40.
comments from Short on the subject. As already noted, Short didn’t learn of a romance from his Rutledge neighbors, the most logical means by which he might have formed a definite opinion; that he didn’t raises issues yet to be explored. Wilson sensibly gives Short a “no opinion” on marriage agreement. It’s evident he knew nothing about a romance or an engagement.44

Elizabeth Abell esteemed Lincoln and took an interest in his prospects.45 She wrote to Herndon in early 1867: “[T]he courtship between him [Lincoln] and Miss Rutledge I can say but little this much I do know he was staying with us at the time of her death it was a great shock to him and I never seen a man mourn for a companion more than he did for her[,] he made a remark one day when it was raining that he could not bare the idea of its raining on her Grave[,] [T]hat was the time the community said he was crazy[,] he was not crazy but he was very disponding a long time[.] I Think that was in the year 34 or 35[.]”46

Abell suggested that Rutledge’s death affected Lincoln in a serious way. For example, the detail about rain on Rutledge’s grave is striking. Abell’s claim that Lincoln was staying with her and her husband, Dr. Bennett Abell, at the time of Rutledge’s death, gives credibility to her remark that although “the community said he was crazy[,] he was not crazy[,]” It’s worth noting that the Abells were near neighbors of Bowling and Nancy Green just north of New Salem.47


46. Elizabeth Abell testimony, Herndon’s Informants, 556–57.

47. Abells close neighbors of Greens: Johnson G. Greene told Herndon in an interview, probably in 1866, a story about Lincoln’s relations with Abell’s sister, Mary Owens. It concerned a walk from the Greens’ home to the Abells’. The Abells lived about a mile north of New Salem on top of a bluff; the Greens lived at the bottom of the bluff. Johnson Greene recalled the distance between the two as, “Say 100 ft & pretty Steep.” Ibid., 530–31.
Green claimed (and two other informants concurred) that her husband brought Lincoln to the safety and comfort of their home during his crisis after Ann Rutledge died. It is highly likely that Elizabeth Abell saw quite a lot of Lincoln during this period and that her report that Lincoln was “not crazy” was therefore based on extensive personal observation.

Abell testified that Lincoln was morose for “a long time.” But she didn’t conclude that Lincoln had suffered a suitor’s or a fiancé’s loss. He mourned a “companion,” not his intended wife. In 1836, the year after that of Rutledge’s death, Abell attempted to steer Lincoln into marrying her sister, Mary Owens. Abell’s concern for Lincoln’s matrimonial fortunes suggests she kept an eye on his potentially amorous relations with women. Ann Rutledge did not register as a possibility. Wilson gives Abell a “no opinion” on both love and marriage agreement.

Henry McHenry’s testimony accords with Abell’s. He affirmed from firsthand observation that Lincoln’s behavior indicated dramatic grief for Rutledge, but he didn’t deduce romantic love or a marriage plan. Wilson gives him “no opinions” on those questions. Another aspect of what McHenry had to say deserves particular attention. He claimed that Lincoln had for some time suffered the consequences of overzealous and debilitating devotion to book study.

In March 1866, George U. Miles—Herndon’s father-in-law and one of Herndon’s investigators—interviewed Susannah Rutledge (Ann’s aunt) and two other informants, Nancy Green and Parthena Hill. Miles recorded Green’s testimony first; she reported that Lincoln courted Rutledge, was devastated when she died, and would have married her had she not died (however, Green’s marriage position is ambiguous, as will be seen). Ann’s aunt “corroborated” Green’s account but dissented on a key point. Susannah Rutledge opined that Ann, had she lived, would in fact have married John McNamar. Wilson gives her a flat “no” vote on marriage agreement.

49. “Companion” in this context is here taken to mean a friend, not a lover or love interest. Standoffish with eligible women, Lincoln formed friendships with a number of “taken” women; Ann Rutledge’s engagement to John McNamar perhaps permitted a closer friendship between her and Lincoln than had she been unattached.
51. Henry McHenry testimony, Herndon’s Informants, 155–56; 534.
52. Nancy Green testimony, ibid., 236.
53. Susannah Rutledge testimony, ibid., 237.
Wilson assigns James Short and Susannah Rutledge “yes” votes on the love question. In this view that interpretation isn’t clear-cut. Short offered a vague surmise. Susannah Rutledge seconded another informant’s statement, which she followed up with the opinion that Ann intended to wed the man who had been her fiancé of some duration.

To reiterate, the forgoing is inconsistent with the testimony of eyewitnesses who affirmed a romance. What of those informants? Parthena Hill also spoke to Miles: “She thinks as Mrs Green that Lincoln would have got her [Rutledge] had she lived & it was generally so assumed.” But circa March 1887, more than twenty years later, Hill told Herndon: “I think that if McNamar had got back from NY before Ann’s death that she would have married McNamar—I saw McNamar unload his furniture on arriving from NY. This is my honest opinion—[.]”

In a letter to the journalist Ida M. Tarbell dated February 6, 1896, Parthena Hill’s son, John Hill, quoted a letter from his mother that discussed this subject: “I always thought Ann would have married him, if she had lived.” The “him” referred to McNamar.

Hill completely contradicted herself. Wilson nonetheless gives her a “yes” vote on marriage agreement. He acknowledges the flip-flop in a footnote, not in the main body of his text. Do nuances in Hill’s testimony help to explain why she believed that Rutledge intended to marry Lincoln? Indeed. As with all of the testimony, nuances proliferate in every direction. In this case, Hill added the detail that, in her opinion, “Lincoln took advantage of McNamars absence—courted Ann—got her confidence &c[.]” But Lincoln’s scheme would have come to naught if only Ann could have seen McNamar’s furniture. All would then have been well between her and the fiancé whose place Lincoln had usurped. A problem with Wilson’s poll is that it is too rigid an instrument to capture such details. A worse problem is that when one examines such details, the more dubious the poll becomes. One might conclude from Hill’s three “yes” votes that she believed in a genuine romance. That conclusion clearly is preposterous.

William Greene presents an interesting case. Herndon did not consider Greene, also known as “Slicky Bill,” trustworthy; he gave by

54. Parthena Hill testimony, ibid., 237.
56. In this letter Parthena Hill also discussed McNamar unloading his furniture in New Salem shortly after Ann Rutledge died. Quoted in Walsh, The Shadows Rise, 167.
far the most imaginative testimony of all the informants. Where others waned anemic in their descriptions, Greene waxed perfervid. Consider his portrait of Ann Rutledge, made in a May 1865 interview with Herndon: “This young lady was a woman of Exquisite beauty, but her intellect was quick—Sharp—deep & philosophic as well as brilliant. She had a gentle & kind a heart as an ang[e]l—full of love—kind[n]ess—sympathy.”

Descriptions of Rutledge stress her amiability and lovability, her practical, modest but robust temperament, and beauty. She was also a bit rotund, plain of dress, and decidedly not an intellectual. Greene clearly enjoyed the drama of exaggeration; David Donald suggests that his was a novelistic imagination in the florid style of his times. True enough. But although Greene must be regarded with a degree of doubt, his testimony cannot be labeled pure invention: “Mr Lincolns friends after this sudden death of one whom his soul & heart dearly & lovd were Compelled to keep watch and ward over Mr Lincoln, he being from the sudden shock somewhat temporarily deranged. We watched during storms—fogs—damp gloomy weather Mr Lincoln for fear of an accident. He said, ‘I can never be reconcile[d] to have the snow—rains & storms to beat on her grave.’

With this passage Greene mentioned two notable elements of the Rutledge story. His depiction of Lincoln as a struggling soul in need


60. William Greene on Ann Rutledge, Herndon’s Informants, 21.

61. Parthena Hill, whose husband had courted Rutledge, perhaps underestimated her physical charms when she said, “Ann Rutledge had a brown hair—heavy set[,]” Ibid., 604. Lynn McNulty Greene described her as “of medium height plump & round in form weighed 150 lbs[.]” Ibid., 250. “[F]ace rather round,” said Mentor Graham. “[W]eigh about 120–130—hearty & vigorous.” Ibid., 242. Esther Bale, however, called her “slim.” Ibid., 527. John McNamar said, “Miss Ann was a gentle Amiable Maiden without any of the airs of your city Belles but winsome and Comly withal a blond in complection with golden hair, ‘cherry red Lips & a bonny Blue eye[,]” Ibid., 253. James Short said, “Miss R was a good looking, smart, lively girl, a good house keeper, with a moderate education, and without any of the so called accomplishments.” Ibid., 73. “[W]asn’t as smart as Miss Owens by a heap,” said Caleb Carman. Ibid., 374.

62. Donald, Lincoln’s Herndon, 186.

63. William Greene, rain on Rutledge grave, Herndon’s Informants, 21.
of rescue does not stand alone. Nancy Green sketched the same scenario. Greene’s quotation of Lincoln expressing dismay about rain on Rutledge’s grave also appears elsewhere. More than a year later, as already noted, Elizabeth Abell would similarly quote Lincoln. Greene can be faulted for embellishment; Abell cannot. It’s hard to doubt that Lincoln rued rain on that grave. These haunting images—of rescue, of rain—will be addressed.

The other informants who claimed to have witnessed Lincoln’s grief and affirmed a romance are Isaac Cogdal, Mentor Graham, and Nancy Green. They are also among the informants to whom, Wilson contends, Lincoln or Rutledge gave privileged information about marital plans. It’s now time to address those alleged confidants.

IV

[T]here are at least five witnesses who received information about the love affair between Ann Rutledge and Abraham Lincoln from a prime source—the principals themselves.

Douglas L. Wilson

Wilson asserts that Lincoln or Rutledge informed Isaac Cogdal, Mentor Graham, Nancy Green, James Rutledge, and Robert Rutledge about a romance. Cogdal, Graham, and James Rutledge did indeed claim to have had such conversations. However, Nancy Green and Robert Rutledge did not. Wilson provides no documentation to support the notion that Green or Robert Rutledge learned of a love affair from one of the principals; he simply claims that they did. This requires some discussion. But first, a few comments on Cogdal and Graham.

In an interview with Herndon conducted in 1865 or 1866, Isaac Cogdal quoted Lincoln on his relations with Ann Rutledge. He was the sole informant to do so, and he had another distinction as well: Cogdal drew on memories just a few years old. The testimony of all the others concerned events close to three decades or more in their pasts.

Cogdal claimed that president-elect Lincoln called him into his Springfield office in late 1860 or early 1861 “to enquire about old times and old acquaintances.” After a bit of reminiscence Cogdal “dare[d]” to ask Lincoln a personal question: “Abe is it true that you fell in love with & courted Ann Rutledge[?]” In Cogdal’s account, Lincoln affirmed that he had. Cogdal persisted: “Is it true . . . that you

64. “At least five witnesses,” Douglas Wilson, Lincoln Before Washington, 84.
ran a little wild about the matter[?]” According to Cogdal Lincoln replied: “I did really—I run off the track: it was my first. I loved the woman dearly & sacredly: she was a handsome girl—would have made a good loving wife—was natural & quite intellectual, though not highly Educated—I did honestly—and truly love the girl & think often—often of her now.”66

Much has been written about this passage. James G. Randall pronounced it “unLincolnian,” as did C. A. Tripp, who via computer comparison found the vocabulary (“sacredly” in particular) and syntax completely uncharacteristic of Lincoln.67 It is possible, however, that Cogdal paraphrased what he recollected, attributing to Lincoln his own manner of speaking without substantially altering the content.

What skeptics find most unlikely about Cogdal’s claim concerns Lincoln’s reserve when discussing the personal. Why would he abandon the instincts of a lifetime and open up about the excruciatingly personal on this occasion? Wilson points to the “context” of Lincoln’s invitation to talk about “old times”; Lincoln himself had accorded Cogdal a “rare opportunity[.]” Wilson’s exact meaning here eludes this reader.68 Simon suggests that, at a turning point of Lincoln’s life, it’s plausible that he might have been more disposed than usual to reflect about his early days.69 Perhaps. But I think there’s a simpler explanation: Cogdal’s claim is unique and therefore improbable. No one else on record ever claimed to have heard Lincoln reminisce about Ann Rutledge.

In terms of turning points, in 1841 and 1842 Lincoln and his friend Joshua Speed agonized with each other over unknowns they faced in contemplating marriage.70 If ever Lincoln had reason to recall an

66. Ibid., 440.
68. Wilson, Lincoln Before Washington, 87. Wilson appears to suggest that Lincoln had created a “context” within which Cogdal felt he had permission to ask highly personal questions that he otherwise would not have dared to pose. But this simply recasts the basic question. What motivated Lincoln to create such a context?
69. Simon suggests that Lincoln may have felt more candid than usual about personal matters because he faced a major turning point of his life. “Lincoln might not have answered [Cogdal] before his last winter in Illinois, a time when he visited his father’s grave, neglected for a decade, and left Springfield saying ‘all the strange, chequered past seems to crowd now upon my mind.’” “Abraham Lincoln and Ann Rutledge,” 24–26.
early romance, Speed would seem a likely interlocutor. But Speed wrote to Herndon about Herndon’s Rutledge lecture, “It is all new to me.” Yet, Cogdal reported Lincoln confessing that Rutledge “was my first.” Lincoln didn’t draw on that initiation to encourage Speed during their time of matrimonial anxiety. One might guess that the trauma of losing Rutledge cauterized the comfort of fond memories. How then could Lincoln have described her to Cogdal in such placid terms as, “would have made a good loving wife”? Nuances proliferate. They do not add up.

In another interview conducted at about the same time, Cogdal told Herndon: “It is my opinion that if Mr Lincoln was craz[y] it [was] only technically so—and not radically & substantially so. We used to say [to Lincoln]—you were Crazy about Ann Rutledge. He then was reading Blackstone—read hard—day & night—terribly hard—did love Ann Rutledge for he told me so—was terribly melancholy—moody.”

This passage gives one pause. Why on earth would Cogdal and others say to Lincoln, “[Y]ou were crazy about Ann Rutledge”? It seems rather goading. It implies a certain mystification, as in, “Would you please explain yourself about Ann Rutledge?” The line of inquiry Cogdal claimed to have put to the president-elect suggests curiosity-seeking confirmation. “Abe is it true that you fell in love with . . . ?” “Is it true . . . that you ran a little wild . . . ?” A possibility comes to mind. Did Cogdal fabricate the conversation in order to take credit for solving a mystery that had long baffled those who’d known Lincoln in New Salem? Admittedly, this is conjecture.

However, it points to a lack of certainty about what had transpired in 1835. Some of Lincoln’s friends cited factors apart from Ann Rutledge. Cogdal himself, when remarking that he saw Lincoln as “terribly melancholy,” in the same sentence noted that Lincoln was at the time reading “hard—day & night—terribly hard.” Henry McHenry also conjoined the two observations, as will be seen.

Mentor Graham did as well. He told Herndon in May 1865 that overexertion with studies and the death of Rutledge combined to bring on Lincoln’s 1835 crisis: “[H]e was studious—so much so that he somewhat injured his health and Constitution. The Continued

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71. Joshua Speed, “It is all new to me,” Herndon’s Informants, 431.
thought & study of the man Caused—with the death of one whom he dearly & sincerely loved, a momentary—only partial & momentary derangement.”73 For the moment it suffices to note that Cogdal, McHenry, and Graham, when speaking of Lincoln’s state of mind after Rutledge died, acknowledged that issues in addition to grief figured in their perceptions of it.

A year later Graham said more: “Lincoln and she [Rutledge] was Engaged—Lincoln told me so—She intimated to me the same. He Lincoln told Me he felt like Committing Suicide often, but I told him God higher purpose—He told me he thought so somehow—couldn’t tell how—[.]”74

Graham was the father of Lizzie Bell, discussed above as the sole eyewitness storyteller of Lincoln-Rutledge romance. Herndon describes them both as follows: “Daughter of Mentor Graham, both father & daughter—cranky—flighty—at times nearly non co[m]pus mentis—but good & honest.” Herndon provided an additional, more concise description: “Mentor Graham and Mrs Bell his daughter flighty—cranky.”75

It is of course conceivable that a “flighty” and “cranky” informant can also be a credible informant, especially if he’s “good & honest.” One cannot completely dismiss Graham’s claims that Lincoln suffered semi-derangement out of grief for Rutledge and that both Lincoln and Rutledge told (or “intimated to”) him about an engagement. Graham’s mention that Lincoln confessed to feeling suicidal likewise stands out; however, he did not link it specifically to Rutledge’s death.76 But it’s striking that Graham, given the significance of the topics and also the thoroughness of Herndon’s interrogatory style, made his claims so extremely tersely. Why didn’t Herndon elicit more details? Perhaps because Graham had no more details. In any case, Graham remembered abstractions, not a biographical account. The “yes” votes Wilson gives him on love and marriage agreement technically bear scrutiny. They are in no sense overwhelming.

Nancy Green testified that her husband, Justice of the Peace Bowling Green, cared for Lincoln during his crisis after Ann Rutledge’s death.

73. Mentor Graham on Lincoln, studies, Ann Rutledge, ibid., 11.
74. Mentor Graham on engagement, suicide, ibid., 243.
75. Herndon on Mentor Graham and Lizzie Bell, ibid., 605n, 606n.
76. Wilson quotes Graham as having said, “Lincoln and [Ann] was Engaged—Lincoln told me so—She intimated to me the same: He Lincoln told me that he felt like committing Suicide after.” Lincoln Before Washington, 86. The word “after,” which suggests Lincoln meant that he felt suicidal after Rutledge died and because of that death, seems to be a mistranscription of “often,” which is the rendering in Herndon’s Informants, 243.
She thus spoke with some authority. From the interviews in March 1866, which also included Susannah Rutledge and Parthena Hill: “Mrs Bolin Green Says . . . that Lincoln took her death verry hard so much so that some thought his mind would become impared & in fear of it (her husband Bolin Green went to Salem after Lincoln brought him to his house and kept him a week or two & succeeded in cheering him Lincoln up though he was quite molencoly for months[.] She Misses Nancy Green thinks they [Lincoln and Rutledge] would have ben married had She Miss Rutledge not have died & probably would have ben married long before her death had it not have ben that She had a nother Bow by the name of John McNamer, who she thought as much of as She did of Lincoln to appearances[.]”77

Lincoln regarded Bowling Green with great affection and respect, as a father figure according to some accounts.78 Nancy Green’s claim that he went to the village to take charge of Lincoln because some worried about his state of mind, in the view here is probably true.79 William Greene, as seen, also claimed that Lincoln required an intervention on the part of friends to rescue him from crisis.

As to the poll’s love and marriage-agreement questions, Nancy Green testified less clearly. She thought that Lincoln and Rutledge would have pursued a romance if John McNamar hadn’t stood in the way. But her opinion that Rutledge “thought as much of [McNamar] as She did of Lincoln to appearances” suggests that Rutledge hadn’t fully decided. How did Green know that Rutledge would have married Lincoln? One recalls the opinions of her fellow interviewees on the same issue. Susannah Rutledge declared for McNamar. Parthena Hill in time also ended up declaring for McNamar.

There is another aspect of Nancy Green’s testimony of some note, concerning Lincoln’s relations with Mary Owens, the sister of Elizabeth Abell whom Abell attempted to steer Lincoln into marrying. Nancy Green recalled that, not long before Ann Rutledge died, Mary Owens became “miffed” with Lincoln because he had spent “about three

77. Nancy Green on Lincoln and Rutledge, Lincoln’s Informants, 236.
79. In another account, Henry B. Rankin relied on the authority of his mother, Arminda Rogers Rankin, who knew Ann Rutledge, to claim that a doctor named John Allen, a friend of Lincoln’s, “prevailed on Lincoln to go out to the quiet home of Bowling Greene [sic] and remain there under his medical attention and in Mrs. Greene’s [sic] care[.]” Henry B. Rankin, Personal Recollections of Abraham Lincoln (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1916), 81. Many Lincolnists find Rankin an unreliable source. But his identification of the home of Bowling and Nancy Green as Lincoln’s refuge during his crisis in late summer, 1835, does corroborate Nancy Green in this important respect.
weeks” north of New Salem on a surveying job in the vicinity of the Rutledge home. In consequence, “Lincoln never went to See her [Mary Owens] any more.” Green apparently recollected that Owens was offended that Lincoln paid greater attention to Ann Rutledge than to her, and that it brought Lincoln’s courtship of Owens to an end.80

Mary Owens Vineyard (her married name later in life) informed Herndon in a letter written in May 1866, “As it regards Miss Rutledge: I cannot tell you anything. She having died pervious [sic] to my acquaintance with Mr. Lincoln, and I do not now recollect of ever hearing him mention her name.” In fact, Mary Owens first met Lincoln in October 1833, when she came to stay with her sister at the Abell home about a mile north of New Salem.81 Ann Rutledge died just less than two years later. Lincoln saw Owens socially during this visit, and she seems to have somewhat impressed him. Evidently, Ann Rutledge made no impression at all on Owens.

In November 1836 Mary Owens returned to New Salem.82 Lincoln courted her with almost comic ineptitude; she on occasion found his attentions, or the lack of them, exasperating.83 Nancy Green probably was remembering one of these episodes in her description of Mary Owens as “miffed.” But by this time, of course, Ann Rutledge had been dead for more than a year.

If Nancy Green mistakenly recalled a romantic rivalry between Mary Owens and Ann Rutledge over Lincoln, how reliably did she remember the supposed McNamar-Rutledge-Lincoln courtship triangle?

Out of all this Wilson conjures the supposition that Lincoln, perhaps during his convalescence at the Greens’ told Nancy Green about his love for Ann Rutledge: “Another witness whose knowledge of the Ann Rutledge affair may be presumed to have come from Lincoln himself was Nancy Green[.]”84

One must ask: How so? Green didn’t quote Lincoln on the subject,
or on any other subject. One assumes that if Lincoln had told her about a romance with Rutledge, Green would have said so forthrightly. Green didn’t. She, Susannah Rutledge, and Parthena Hill reminisced to Herndon’s man about events of the distant past. Issues of discretion did not fully apply, as amply evidenced by the candor of what was said. The interviewer—operating under Herndon’s strict instructions—wanted to get to the bottom of this mystery. Given all of that, is it plausible that Green failed to mention words from Lincoln that would have settled the mystery? Wilson’s conception of what “may be presumed” lacks any apparent evidentiary basis.

Two more informants await consideration, James and Robert Rutledge.

V

He slept not, he ate not, joyed not. This he did until his body became emaciated and weak, and gave way. His mind wandered from its throne. In his imagination he muttered words to her he loved. His mind, his reason, somewhat dethroned, walked out of itself along the uncolumned air, and kissed and embraced the shadows and illusions of the heated brain.

William H. Herndon

His extraordinary emotions were regarded as strong evidence of the existence of the tenderest relations between himself and the deceased.

Robert B. Rutledge

In November 1866 Herndon mailed his Rutledge lecture to Ann’s brother, Robert Rutledge, who had by this time had adopted the role of family spokesman to Herndon. In the lecture (excerpt above) Herndon claimed that Ann’s death sent Lincoln to the edge of mad-

85. Parthena Hill was reluctant to discuss Mary Owens Vineyard with George Miles because Vineyard was still living. These interviews were conducted with mature women who had no apparent reason not to speak candidly about the deceased Ann Rutledge and Abraham Lincoln. Herndon’s Informants, 236–37.

86. Herndon’s investigator, George Miles, appended to this interview a note to Herndon indicative of the lengths to which Herndon had urged him to go in gathering information: “The above statements I think you may rely on but if you Should undertake to write a history of my life after I am dead I dont want you to inquire So close into my Early courtships as you do of Mr Lincolns.” Ibid., 237.

87. Herndon, “Abraham Lincoln; Miss Ann Rutledge; New Salem; Pioneering; & The Poem,” 57.


89. In a letter to Herndon dated August 5, 1866, Robert Rutledge wrote, “I will have to consult our Family Record, My Mother and elder Brother” about family recollections.
ness. Robert Rutledge replied to Herndon with minor corrections. He pronounced the lecture “bold manly and substantially true.”

Herndon pressed Robert on the issue of Lincoln’s state of mind after Ann died. Robert replied twice, in both letters disavowing personal knowledge. In his first disavowal he repeated Herndon’s question: “[Do you, Herndon,] get the condition of Mr Lincoln’s mental Suffering and Condition [after Ann’s death] truthfully?” Robert explained, “I cannot answer this question from personal knowledge, but from what I have learned from others at the time, you are substantially correct[.]” Robert’s second disavowal: “I cannot say whether Mr Lincoln was radically a changed man, after the event [Ann’s death], of which you speak or not, as I saw little of him after the time[.]”

Robert Rutledge made it clear that he had no firsthand knowledge of Lincoln’s reaction to Ann’s death. The closer one reads his nine letters to Herndon, the more one appreciates that he relayed the family perspective with conscientious modesty. He didn’t revel in linking his sister to the greatest man of the age. He scrupulously laid out what the family did know and what they did not know, an effort all the more impressive because Robert ultimately made it plain that the family knew almost nothing.

What did they know? As with every other informant (except Lizzie Bell), the Rutledges reported no eyewitness stories about a courtship, about a romance. This perhaps explains why their neighbor James Short never received confirmation from them that Lincoln had courted Ann and secured her promise to marry him. Judging from the evidence, Short’s friends had very little to say.

As to a romance, Robert reported no personal knowledge of his own. Wilson’s claim notwithstanding, he cited no discussions between himself and his sister about her relations with Lincoln, or for that matter, on any other subject. That Wilson is mistaken is evident in Robert’s

concerning Lincoln. Robert proceeded to do so but never specifically attributed to either his mother, Mary Ann Rutledge, or to his older brother, John Miller Rutledge, any particulars of reminiscence on any subject. Robert did, however, forward to Herndon information from his first cousin, James McGrady Rutledge. Mysteriously, Robert seems never to have consulted James McGrady’s mother, Susannah Cameron Rutledge, who was Robert’s first cousin as well as aunt by marriage. In his nine letters to Herndon he made no mention of her. As noted above, Susannah expressed opinions germane to Lincoln’s relationship with Ann Rutledge; ibid., 237.

90. Robert Rutledge on Herndon’s Rutledge lecture, ibid., 402.
91. Robert Rutledge’s witness-of-grief disavowal #1, ibid., 408.
92. Robert Rutledge’s witness-of-grief disavowal #2, ibid., 497.
nine letters of testimony to Herndon—which, thanks in great measure to Wilson himself, are easily accessible and can be checked.\textsuperscript{93}

Robert consulted his mother, Mary Rutledge, and his brother, John Rutledge.\textsuperscript{94} They, too, reported no personal knowledge that Robert identified as specifically theirs. But one of them, it’s not clear which, recalled that a long-dead brother, David Rutledge, had at some point mentioned remarks from Ann about an engagement to Lincoln.\textsuperscript{95} Shortly thereafter Robert heard from a first cousin, James Rutledge. James provided Robert with his first and only serious item of family testimony in support of a romance: “In this I am corroborated by James Mc Rutledge a cousin about her age & who was in her confidence, he say in a letter just received, ‘Ann told me once in coming from a Camp Meeting on Rock creek, that engagements made too far a head sometimes failed, (meaning her engagement with McNamar)[.] Ann gave me to understand, that as soon as certain studies were completed she and Lincoln would be married[.]”\textsuperscript{96}

Many years later, circa March 1887, Herndon interviewed James Rutledge, who stated: “Abraham Lincoln and Ann Rutledge were Engaged to be married. He came down and was with her during her last sickness and burial. Lincoln was Studying Law at Springfield Ill. Ann Rutledge Concented to wait a year for their Marriage after their Engagement until Abraham Lincoln was Admitted to the bar. and Ann Rutledge died within the year.”\textsuperscript{97}

\textsuperscript{94} Ibid., 265.
\textsuperscript{95} David Rutledge died in 1842. James Rutledge Saunders, compiler, “The Rutledge Family of New Salem, Illinois,” 2, Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library, Springfield, Illinois. Robert Rutledge mentioned David to Herndon twice. In a letter written circa November 1, 1866, he wrote, “There is no kind of doubt as to the existence of this engagement[,] David Rutledge urged Ann to consummate it, but she refused until such time as she could see McNamar—inform him of the change in her feelings, and seek an honorable release.” Herndon’s Informants, 383. In a letter to Herndon dated November 18, 1866, Robert wrote, “Mr Lincoln courted Ann, resulting in a second engagement, not conditional as my language would seem to indicate but absolute, She however in the conversation referred to by me, between her & David Rutledge [who] urged the propriety of seeing McNamar, inform him of the change in her feelings & seek an honorable releas, before consummating the engagement with Mr L. by Marriage[.]” Ibid., 402–03. It is noteworthy that Robert, in attributing to immediate family members information about his sister and Lincoln, could only cite recollections of comments made by a long-deceased brother. It is not known who among the family remembered what David had had to say. A guess suggests their mother.
\textsuperscript{96} Robert Rutledge on James McGrady Rutledge, ibid., 409.
\textsuperscript{97} James McGrady Rutledge to Herndon, ibid., 608.
Two things are notable in this testimony. First, there is its extreme terseness. Second, James Rutledge had nothing to say about Lincoln’s grief for Ann.

James’s mother was Susannah Rutledge.98 As already discussed, she testified that Ann would have married John McNamar. James and Susannah were the sole living Rutledges who claimed personal knowledge of relations between Ann and Lincoln. Their contradictory—inconsistent, one may say—understandings, combined with the family’s absence of memories about a courtship, hardly affirm a romance.

Did James Rutledge simply lie? While there is of course no way to know, the guess here is that he probably did recall a talk with Ann about McNamar, studies, and Lincoln. If so, what of it? James cited nothing else to verify Ann’s expectation that she and Lincoln would marry. A single conversation constitutes slender testimony from one individual. It is all that Herndon extracted from the living members of an entire family.

Robert related his more detailed recollections to Herndon in a letter that also contains this passage about the aftermath of Ann’s death, partially quoted above: “The effect on Mr Lincoln’s mind was terrible; he became plunged in despair, and many of his friends feared that reason would desert her throne. His extraordinary emotions were regarded as strong evidence of the existence of the tenderest relations between himself and the deceased.”99

Here, Robert relied entirely on hearsay; his clarifications to Herndon about his lack of knowledge of Lincoln’s mental state after Ann’s death almost painfully spell that out. Why did the family spokesman cite non-family claims to provide “strong evidence” of Lincoln’s love for Ann? As seen, the Rutledges had no strong evidence of their own. One senses that Robert well knew this. He composed his letters carefully. What he did manage to collect from the family he conveyed in a flat tone lacking the éclat of “extraordinary emotions,” the sentimental conviction of “tenderest relations.”100

For Robert as for others, it came down to Lincoln proving his love for Ann by seeming to have lost his mind. Robert didn’t witness that desertion of the throne. One can hardly blame him for citing it any-
way. After all, people in town seemed to have believed it. But this is Robert’s unfortunate coda. With few insights of his own, he directed Herndon to a village furor over Lincoln’s sanity.

There is a more fundamental point. If the Rutledge spokesman invoked what the family hadn’t witnessed—the grief story—to sustain what the family also hadn’t witnessed—the romance story—how much of a house of cards supports those stories?

VI

[Lincoln] was fearfully wrought up on her death—My Father had to lock him up & keep guard over him for some two weeks I think, for fear he might Commit Suicide—The whole village engaged in trying to quiet him & reconcile him to the loss.

John Hill101

Samuel Hill, mentioned as one of those who interceded in the interest of Lincoln’s safety, was dead by the time of Herndon’s investigations, but his son John informed Herndon of it and spelled it out explicitly for Ida Tarbell many years later.]

Douglas L. Wilson102

The nine eyewitnesses provided few details about Lincoln’s behavior after Ann Rutledge died. Nancy Green and Elizabeth Abell said that he was melancholic for a long time. Mentor Graham, William Greene, and Isaac Cogdal said that he seemed temporarily semi-deranged. William Greene and Elizabeth Abell quoted him decrying rain on Rutledge’s grave. Mentor Graham mentioned that Lincoln confided thoughts of suicide but did not explicitly link this to Rutledge. William Greene and Nancy Green testified that he behaved in such a way that friends feared he might come to harm, which obliged those friends to take steps to safeguard his safety; in effect, to rescue him. What sort of behavior required a rescue? Neither Greene nor Green gave specifics.

James Short’s sole comment was, “he seemed to be so much affected and grieved so hardly. . . .” Parthena Hill and Susannah Rutledge provided no descriptions of their own. They seconded Nancy Green’s statement that “Lincoln took her death verry hard so much so that some thought his mind would become impared[.]”

These descriptions invite too wide a range of interpretation to yield a clear picture of Lincoln’s distress. That is, they leave much to the

102. Ibid., 121.
imagination; which, in a nutshell, is the fundamental problem with the Rutledge story.

Only one eyewitness, Henry McHenry, testified in some detail about Lincoln’s manifestations of distress. He wrote to Herndon in January 1866: “As to the condition of Lincoln’s Mind after the death of Miss R. after that Event he seemed quite changed, he seemed Retired, & loved Solitude, he seemed wrapped in profound thought, indifferent, to transpiring Events, had but little to say, but would take his gun and wander off in the woods by him self, away from the association of even those he most esteemed, this gloom seemed to deepen for some time, so as to give anxiety to his friends in regard to his Mind[].” McHenry added: “But various opinions obtained as to the Cause of his change, some thought it was an increased application to his Law studies, Others that it was deep anguish of Soul (as he was all soul) over the loss of Miss R, My opinion is, & was, that it was from the Latter cause[].”

Diminished sociability, preference for solitude, deepening gloom: McHenry linked these changes to Lincoln’s loss of Rutledge. He did, however, mention that “some” observers linked the changes to excessive absorption in study. In fact, more than two years before Rutledge died, McHenry himself had noticed an alarming connection between Lincoln’s health and his learning regimen. Thomas P. Reep, a New Salem chronicler, recalled that “Henry McHenry, who married Nancy Armstrong, ‘Jack’s’ sister, and was one of the Clary’s Grove friends of Lincoln, in speaking of this period of Lincoln’s life, always declared that Lincoln’s excessive application in his effort to master surveying had the same effect upon him physically as a bad spree of a couple of weeks usually had on other men. Lincoln became so hollow-cheeked, red-eyed and ragged looking generally that his friends were worried, fearing a mental breakdown, and expostulated with him about it.”

Lincoln studied both surveying and law “in 1832 or 3,” according to McHenry. In a separate statement McHenry told Herndon: “[D]uring the latter part of the year 1832—or the first part of 1833 he studied surveying and went at surveying practically during the same year. . . . He still Continued reading law at the same time: he read so much—was so studious—took so little physical exercise—was so laborious in this studies that he became Emaciated & his best friends were afraid that he would craze himself—make himself derange[d] from his habits of study which were incessant.”

103. Henry McHenry, Herndon’s Informants, 156.
104. Reep, Abe Lincoln and the Frontier Folk of New Salem, 89.
105. Herndon’s Informants, 534.
106. McHenry: Lincoln learned surveying in 1832 or 1833, ibid., 14.
McHenry’s testimony indicates that Lincoln had approached physical and emotional collapse well before the summer of 1835. His crisis at that time thus could not have come as a total surprise to observant friends. But Wilson sees it as a first: “While there were many previous signs of the young Lincoln’s tenderness and sensitivity, his deportment in the wake of Ann’s death is the first known indication of a serious emotional vulnerability.”

One could object that “a serious emotional vulnerability” applies to psychological issues, not to overwork. If both can lead to “mental breakdown” or a “deranged” state, the distinction disappears. In any case it’s arguable that Lincoln’s fraught striving for self-improvement reflected the prime emotional vulnerability to which Joshua Speed notably referred in connection with Lincoln’s crisis of 1840–1841, the worry “that he had done nothing to make any human being remember that he had lived.”

Wilson acknowledges McHenry’s comments but dismisses them with this comment: “[N]one of the informants testified that Lincoln’s distraction at the time of Ann’s death was caused solely by his studies.” That is true. It is also true that no informant claimed that it was caused solely by the death of Ann Rutledge. Indeed, as seen, Cogdal, Graham, and McHenry, when discussing Lincoln’s reaction to her death, all in the same breath mentioned the strain of his studies.

In short, what little is known about the specifics of Lincoln’s behavior in the late summer of 1835 was foreshadowed as early as 1833. At both times Lincoln behaved in such a manner that friends feared “a mental breakdown.” They “expostulated with him about it.” They worried he would “craze himself—make himself derange[d].” McHenry’s physical descriptions—“hollow-cheeked, red-eyed, and ragged-looking”—exceeded in specificity anything said of Lincoln’s demeanor after Rutledge died.


108. Joshua Speed on Lincoln and emotional vulnerability, ibid., 197. Milton H. Shutes discusses the link in Lincoln between depression and career prospects when Lincoln lost his first bid for a seat in the state legislature: “This first political reverse, added to his problem of making a livelihood, became a source of depression to him and a worry to his friends. This is apparently the first of many periods of mental depression so familiar to students of Lincolniana.” *Lincoln and the Doctors* (New York: Pioneer Press, 1933), 12. Shutes cites the testimony of Dr. Jason Duncan, who mentioned to Herndon (in a letter written in late 1866 or early 1867) that after Lincoln bought his first law books, “he determined to make the profession of law his pursuit. [A]t this time he was greatly embarrassed in financial matters at times seemed rather dispondent[.]” Ibid., 540.

This raises a rather basic question. How did any of the informants have reason to think that they knew that Lincoln’s travails derived from the loss of Ann Rutledge? Lincoln himself provided only one clue, his comments about rain. No one claimed that he otherwise mentioned Rutledge even once in the aftermath of her death. We know from Robert Rutledge that Lincoln saw little or nothing of Ann’s family during that time. He apparently did not attend the burial; had he done so, one must assume that Robert himself would have remembered it, or at the least would have elicited memories from his mother, elder brother, or sisters. Cousin James told Herndon that Lincoln “was with her during her last illness and burial.” But James also recalled that Lincoln was studying law in Springfield. To be sure, Lincoln was studying and even, after a fashion, practicing law. But he hadn’t yet made the move to Springfield.

Considerations such as these deserve some thought not because there are grounds to doubt that Lincoln very much cared for Ann Rutledge. Elizabeth Abell alone made it clear that he did. But the fascinating thing about testimony concerning the Rutledge story, as already noted, is that any effort to produce from it a coherent picture requires a great deal of reading between the lines.

Fantastical stories bloomed. Consider Herndon’s claim that Lincoln “ate not, joyed not” until “his body became emaciated and weak, and gave way.” Only Henry McHenry testified that Lincoln suffered emaciation. He referred not to Lincoln’s grief, but to his over-absorption with study more than two years before.

Another example concerns the rescue theme. John Hill, son of Parthena and Samuel Hill, was born in 1839, four years after Rutledge died. Hill grew up hearing his parents’ version, or versions, of the story. In February 1862 he published an article in the Menard Axis, a newspaper politically unsympathetic toward the sitting president, in which he described Lincoln as distraught over the death.

110. Three informants who gave testimony about Lincoln’s reaction to Rutledge’s death lived in the Sand Ridge area some six or seven miles north of New Salem where the Rutledge family also lived. That these informants were Rutledge neighbors is of note when considering the question of Ann Rutledge’s funeral, if indeed one was held, her interment, and the question of Lincoln’s presence at the interment. None of these informants mentioned a funeral, the interment, or Lincoln’s presence. The informants, with sources for the fact that they were Rutledge neighbors: James Short, Herndon’s Informants, 73; John Jones, ibid., 387; Henry McHenry, in Walsh, The Shadows Rise, 71.

111. Caleb Carman’s comment on Lincoln and eating warrants repetition: “i saw Mr James Short about this matter he says it is not so about Lincolns Refusing to Eat on the account of the death of Miss Rutledg[.].” Herndon’s Informants, 430.

of an unnamed beloved: “He saw her to her grave, and as the cold clods fell upon the coffin, he sincerely wished that he too had been enclosed within it. . . . His friends detected strange conduct and a flighty imagination.—They placed him under guard for fear of his committing suicide.”

Hill here exceeded the drama of the rescue testimony that Herndon later received from William Greene and Nancy Green. Greene recollected that friends of Lincoln’s “watched” him “for fear of an accident.” Green told of her husband fetching Lincoln to the refuge of their home. Hill, however, spoke of putting Lincoln “under guard.”

Three years later, in May 1865, informant Hardin Bale told Herndon: “It was said that after the death of Miss Rutledge & because of it, Lincoln was locked up by his friends—Saml Hill and others, to prevent derangement or suicide—so hard did he take her death.” Note the, “It was said.” Bale offered a startling twist. Samuel Hill “and others” made a kind of citizens’ arrest: a Lincoln lockup.

By 1896 John Hill was writing to the journalist Ida M. Tarbell that Lincoln “was fearfully wrought up on her death—My Father had to lock him up & keep guard over him for some two weeks I think, for fear he might Commit Suicide—The whole village engaged in trying to quiet him & reconcile him to the loss.” The whole village? A grand total of nine informants claimed personal knowledge of Lincoln’s grief, of whom only two, William Greene and Nancy Green, claimed association with a Lincoln rescue. In his revised account for Tarbell, Hill elevated his father to director of an ad hoc asylum, with all New Salem aware of the inmate’s dire condition and supplying comfort.

Wilson provides the quote from John Hill’s letter to Tarbell. He takes Hill’s account at face value: “Samuel Hill, mentioned as one of those who interceded in the interest of Lincoln’s safety, was dead by the time of Herndon’s investigations, but his son John informed Herndon of it and spelled it out explicitly for Ida Tarbell many years later[.]”

Wilson points to a reason for finding the scenario credible. Hardin Bale had, after all, heard of Samuel Hill’s involvement. From whom? Perhaps from the elder Hill himself, who happened to have been a business partner of Bale’s. At the time of his 1865 interview with

116. Ibid., 121.
117. Ibid., 342, note 51.
118. Herndon’s Informants, “Register of Informants,” Hardin Bale entry, 739.
Herndon, Bale resided in Petersburg, Illinois, not far from the site of then-defunct New Salem. Perhaps he’d read the younger Hill’s article in the *Menard Axis*. So much the better, one might conclude. John Hill preserved a family tradition of his father leading a village-wide rescue of Abraham Lincoln. Bale, an old family associate, corroborated that tradition.

The story presents a seemingly tidy package, but it unravels under examination. Where was Parthena Hill, Samuel Hill’s wife, in the midst of it all? She didn’t mention a Hill-directed lockup when she, Nancy Green, and Susannah Rutledge reminisced to Herndon’s investigator—in Petersburg, as it happened—in March 1866. On that occasion she corroborated without demurral Nancy Green’s telling of her own husband Bowling’s more modest rescue mission. It’s hard to imagine Parthena allowing Nancy, in effect, to deny Samuel credit for bringing Lincoln to his senses. If there had been a Hill family tradition concerning a Lincoln lockup, Parthena Hill did not point to it.

For that matter, why didn’t William Greene, who testified that he personally kept watch over Lincoln, remember such a remarkable turn of events? If the loquacious Slicky Bill had known of anything resembling a two-week *incarceration* of a suicidal Lincoln, his commemoration would surely have been even more histrionic. Indeed, all who knew Lincoln couldn’t possibly have failed to hear of it and distinctly remember it: Parthena Hill herself, Nancy Green, Susannah Rutledge, Elizabeth Abell, James Short, Henry McHenry, Isaac Cogdal, and Mentor Graham, all of whom claimed firsthand knowledge of Lincoln’s grief. None mentioned Samuel Hill’s intervention.

Even John Hill, a purveyor of secondhand opinion—of necessity given his birth several years after Rutledge’s death—has something of interest to say. In the June 6, 1865, letter to Herndon in which he enclosed a clipping of his *Menard Axis* story, he included a sentence that ranks as one of the more arresting in Rutledge testimony: “Lincoln bore up under it very well until some days afterwards a heavy rain fell, which unnerved him and—(the balance you know).”119

How did John Hill hear of this? The literature provides no clue. But the specificity of Hill’s statement about rain and Lincoln’s reaction to it so strongly comports with testimony from William Greene and Elizabeth Abell that it seems likely that his source had some familiarity with Lincoln’s troubles in late summer 1835.

VII

Spring and summer of 1835 was the hottest ever known in Illinois: from the first of March to the middle of July it rained almost every day, and the whole country was literally covered with water. When the rain ceased, the weather became excessively hot and continued so until sometime in August. About the 10th of August, the people began to get sick—lasted until October 1st—a number terminated fatally. Twelve practicing physicians in Springfield [population 1500] were continually engaged almost day and night.

Lorenzo D. Matheny

Another version of the Lincoln-rescue theme, supplied by Henry B. Rankin, corroborates Nancy Green’s claim that her husband cared for Lincoln at their home. According to Rankin, Lincoln reached the safety of the Bowling Greens’ at the direction of a doctor named John Allen, who “took both professional and personal charge of Lincoln” because Lincoln had himself fallen seriously ill with malaria. Dr. Allen, in Rankin’s account, persuaded Lincoln “to go out to the quiet home of Bowling Greene [sic] and remain there under his medical attention and in Mrs. Greene’s [sic] care to administer the prescribed courses of medicine, until he should pass three consecutive weeks free from chills.”

There is a huge problem with this account of Lincoln’s stay at the Greens’: Nancy Green made no reference to Lincoln being physically ill. This helps to explain why few scholars since Milton Shutes published on Lincoln in 1957 have entertained even the possibility that the “crazy spell” had a malarial cast. An exception is C. A. Tripp. The view here is that Tripp (and his assistant) paid insufficient attention to the absence of firsthand testimony that Lincoln suffered from the chills and fevers characteristic of malaria. But Tripp pointed out some-


121. Nancy Green undoubtedly also helped to care for Lincoln. Wifely deference perhaps accounts for her phrasing on the subject: her husband “went to Salem after Lincoln brought him to his house and kept him a week or two & succeeded in cheering him Lincoln up though he was quite melancholy for months.” Herndon’s Informants, 236.


thing missing, at least in terms of details, from recent histories: that Lincoln’s community suffered direly from epidemics of disease.124

All who lived in the Sangamon Valley and beyond had good reason to regard rain with a degree of horror. Torrential rains of that spring and summer had combined with unusual heat to spread not only malaria but also the deadlier typhoid. The conditions bred mosquitoes and contaminated drinking water, the respective vectors of those diseases. People of the time did not know that this caused what they called “bilious fever” or “brain fever.” But Lorenzo Matheny’s medical dissertation, apparently published in 1836, linked the unusual weather with the outbreak of sickness.125

Typhoid probably killed Ann Rutledge. Hers wasn’t the only waterlogged grave; so too were those of several other New Salem-area victims. Sewage overflowed from latrines, spawning a horrific profusion of flies. Mud, vomit, diarrhea fouled most dwelling places. Scores of desperately ill people required attention, which in Rankin’s account Lincoln himself heroically helped to provide until his own collapse.

For a man whose friends had perceived him as near a breaking point, it must have been a very hard time whether or not he had also contracted malaria. Lincoln literature has for the most part sidestepped this issue in considering his state of mind after Ann Rutledge died. Even Joshua Wolf Shenk, in his deeply researched study of Lincoln’s “melancholy,” or propensity to depression, accords only one paragraph to the subject.126 This is a bit odd. Rankin’s vivid depiction of Lincoln’s malaria, of Dr. John Allen’s treatment of it, of Bowling and Nancy Green providing a sanctuary for Lincoln’s physical healing, all may be questionable.127 But Lorenzo Matheny’s depiction of “twelve practicing physicians” in nearby Springfield, population 1,500, “continually engaged almost day and night,” carries authority. Moreover, Shutes cites a letter written by a New Salem man, Matthew Marsh, in mid September 1835. “In New Salem,” writes Shutes, referring to comments Marsh made, “there were not enough well

125. Shutes identifies Lorenzo Matheny’s study as follows: “Quoting from a doctoral dissertation on fever in the Sangamon Valley in 1836.” It’s not entirely clear if 1836 refers to the date of publication. Lincoln’s Emotional Life, 45.
126. Shenk, Lincoln’s Melancholy, 18.
127. Shutes cited “two second-hand reporters of Lincolns malarial infection,” Josephine Chandler and Henry Rankin’s mother, Arminda Rogers Rankin. “Rankin as a law student in and about the Lincoln-Herndon law office, knew the older Lincoln; his mother and especially his grandfather, knew the young Lincoln.” Lincoln’s Emotional Life, 46.
people to care for the sick."

At the least Rankin was right about the general medical situation in New Salem and environs. Lincoln undoubtedly rose to the occasion, as Rankin has it. This perhaps helps to explain his crisis. It’s plausible that after more than two years of pushing himself raw with studies, Lincoln in these circumstances reached his limits and suffered a collapse. “Collapse,” however, is a fuzzy term. Can something more specific be said about what actually happened, and in particular, about the mental component? Probably not, if one seeks answers with guaranteed accuracy. Take Lincoln’s rain statements, his only known references to Rutledge’s death. Perhaps because they stand alone, much has been read into them. William Greene, for example, portrayed Lincoln’s concern for Rutledge’s grave as grief so intense it verged on madness.

Elizabeth Abell more calmly testified that Lincoln “made a remark one day when it was raining that he could not bare the idea of its raining on her Grave.” Can we know with confidence what this sentence means? John Hill claimed that Lincoln “held up very well” until “some days” after Rutledge’s death, when “a heavy rain fell.” If Hill’s source was right, is Lincoln’s delayed reaction significant? Maybe it is. C. A. Tripp, for one, observes that it scarcely suggests “the instant response of a brokenhearted lover.”

That Lincoln suffered at the least an emotional crisis is beyond dispute. The issue is what to name it. What some New Salemites called a “crazy spell” and what Wilson calls “excessive grief,” Joshua Shenk terms a “major depressive episode.” A hallmark of such episodes is that their origins defy easy understanding. Small side events often pull the trigger, as both Shenk and Tripp note in their very different studies of Lincoln’s mental life. If Shenk’s term applies, any number of factors apart from Ann Rutledge might have set Lincoln off, even something so ordinary as pouring rain.

Still, it’s possible that the rain statements did express a lover’s cri de coeur. But given the rest of the evidence, is it probable? Nothing else in the eyewitness descriptions provides a tangible link between Lincoln’s distress and the death of Ann Rutledge. For example, we have no reliable reports of Lincoln ever actually visiting her grave.

Wilson is circumspect with inferences he makes about the rain/

128. Ibid., 46.
129. Tripp, Intimate World, 79.
130. Shenk, Lincoln’s Melancholy, 21.
His concept of excessive grief nonetheless colors the Rutledge story with a sense of romantic high drama. Like Greene’s image of a grief-wracked Lincoln obsessed with her grave, it puts the focus on a lover’s loss. That focus is questionable. Here’s a good place to remember that Elizabeth Abell, one of only two firsthand sources on the subject of Lincoln, rain, and the grave, told Herndon that she knew nothing about a courtship.

Does Shenk’s identification of a severe depressive episode do a better diagnostic job than Wilson’s excessive grief? In one fundamental way, Shenk’s view seems more reasonable. It doesn’t insert a preconception of what happened.

VIII

Lincoln behaved strangely and alarmed his friends. Naturally, they sought an explanation. Henry McHenry had observed Lincoln behaving in an alarming fashion for more than two years; he told Herndon that he and others had attributed it to excessive study. Then Ann Rutledge died, at a time when many others were grievously ill, some also to the point of death, wreaking havoc in a tiny community, and Lincoln’s behavior became even more alarming. A number of eyewitnesses concluded that it expressed grief for the loss of a lover. A number of other eyewitnesses did not. Perhaps the main question comes down to this: Which camp seems more credible?

The most obvious difference between the two points of view concerns a willingness to jump to conclusions. The Rutledge story is sufficiently sketchy that, to make a coherent picture of it, one must attempt to fill in the blanks.

All history presents a problem with evidence. But not all history is entirely a reconstruction from personal reminiscences, as is the case with the Rutledge story. No contemporary documents attest to a romance; the name Ann Rutledge doesn’t appear in Lincoln’s Collected Works. With the sole exception of Isaac Cogdal, informants drew on memories at least thirty years old. This is oral history at its purest, and as such, it’s perhaps illustrative of the genre’s challenges.

A digression is in order. As David Donald, C. A. Tripp, and Douglas Wilson have all noted, young Lincoln avoided the company of unat-

132. Wilson does not make much of Lincoln’s rain/grave statements. He refers to Elizabeth Abell’s quote as evidence simply of an “emotional fixation.” Honor’s Voice, 120.
tached women. But Lincoln felt comfortable forming bonds with attached women, ones who posed no threat of amorous entanglement. In New Salem he made such friendships with Hannah Armstrong, Elizabeth Abell, and others, and arguably with Ann Rutledge as well.

It wasn’t the traditional pattern for a rough-hewn young man. Not surprisingly, some of the townsfolk got to talking. The underlying question, no doubt never expressed in so many words: “What’s this fellow doing with our married ladies?” For example, Hannah Armstrong’s husband Jack mercilessly teased Lincoln with the notion that Lincoln was having sex with Hannah. “It was a joke[,]” informant James Taylor told Herndon in an interview conducted in 1865 or 1866. Jack Armstrong “plagued Abe terribly” with the ribald accusation that Lincoln had fathered one of Hannah’s children.

How did Jack Armstrong come up with such a joke? Lincoln spent time with Hannah at her home, enjoyed her company, and also enjoyed tending to her children. Perhaps this puzzled Jack. Why would a man savor that kind of companionship? In jest, apparently, Jack Armstrong jumped to a risqué conclusion.

A similar issue attended perceptions of Lincoln’s friendship with Elizabeth Abell, at whose cabin, atop a bluff a mile north of New Salem, he also spent much time “in a sort of home intimacy,” according to informant William Butler. Another informant, J. Rowan Herndon, in 1865 wrote to his cousin, Lincoln law-partner Herndon, that Abell “has a dauber that is thought to Be Lincoln's Child thay favor very much[.]”

Ann Rutledge wasn’t married, but she was engaged to John Mc-

133. Lincoln ill at ease with unattached women: see Tripp, Intimate World, 72–74; Donald, Lincoln, 55; Donald, “We Are Lincoln Men,” 24; Wilson, Honor’s Voice, 109–10; Burlingame, Abraham Lincoln: A Life, 97–98.
134. Lincoln formed bonds with “taken” women: see Donald, “We Are Lincoln Men,” 24: “It is clear that in his New Salem days Lincoln’s attachments were to older, married, and hence unavailable, women. He needed a mother more than he needed a wife.” Michael Burlingame likewise sees Lincoln’s friendships with women, including Hannah Armstrong, as a matter of “surrogate mothers.” Abraham Lincoln: A Life, 98, 100. Wilson offers a sensitive discussion of Lincoln’s relationships with older women. Honor’s Voice, 110–12. He suggests that “the older married women whose company he sought played an important role in his quest for identity and self-definition.” Ibid., 112.
135. James Taylor on Jack Armstrong teasing Lincoln, Herndon’s Informants, 482.
137. J. Rowan Herndon on Lincoln fathering a child of Elizabeth Abell’s, Herndon’s Informants, 69.
Namar. From the standpoint of the community, she, like Armstrong and Abell, was a taken woman.

It’s unlikely that Lincoln seduced any of New Salem’s matrons. Yet, despite no evidence for it, some locals harbored the idea. Five locals, self-described witnesses of Lincoln’s behavior after Ann Rutledge died, came to a similar conclusion about Lincoln and young Ann. As has been seen, that conclusion in various ways required quite a jump. But evidently, it was a jump not terribly hard to make in Lincoln’s New Salem.

Consider the five who emerge as the sole pro-romance firsthand witnesses. Parthena Hill revealed late in life that she had “always believed” that Rutledge, had she lived, would have married John McNamar, not Lincoln. Isaac Cogdal claimed that at a private meeting with the president-elect, Lincoln spoke freely about his love for Rutledge. To cite C. A. Tripp, whose opinion on this matter David Donald approvingly quoted, Cogdal’s testimony “reeks of fraud.”

Nancy Green mistakenly recalled a romantic rivalry between Ann Rutledge and Mary Owens over Lincoln, which calls into question the accuracy of her memory of a romantic triangle involving Lincoln, Rutledge, and McNamar. Given Green’s probable role as a caretaker of Lincoln’s, her testimony is important. But it lacks any detail about his condition, and most notably, it contains no specifics about Lincoln’s grief for Rutledge.

Mentor Graham combined hints that he knew a great deal with statements of such abstract brevity, that this reader cannot help but wonder if he knew anything at all.

Then there was William Greene, a font of effulgent detail, who with Elizabeth Abell gave the firsthand testimonies about Lincoln’s reaction to rain on the grave. Unlike Abell, Greene dined out for decades on that story, embellishing it all the while. Consider the account he related to Ida Tarbell for her 1896 Lincoln biography: “One stormy night he [Lincoln] was sitting beside William Greene, his head bowed on his hand, while tears trickled through his fingers; his friend begged him to control his sorrow, to try to forget. ‘I cannot,’ moaned Lincoln; ‘the thought of the snow and rain on her grave fills me with indescribable grief.’” Greene apparently suggested to Tarbell that his commiserations with a tearful Lincoln extended well beyond the warm months of August and September. But no one has argued that Lincoln’s crisis

lasted into snow season. Did Lincoln flinch at the prospect of snow assaulting the grave? That seems farfetched—as does Greene’s extraordinarily purplish account of Lincoln’s romance with Rutledge.

These informants jumped to all manner of conclusion. Hill at different times saw both Lincoln and McNamar as Rutledge’s preferred husband. Cogdal didn’t merely jump, he appears to have invented. Nancy Green hallucinated not one but two love triangles. Graham blurted out sweeping conclusions with virtually nothing to back them up. Greene goosed his stories with Victorian melodrama.

What of the four eyewitnesses who didn’t make the leap to a romance conclusion? Elizabeth Abell testified that Lincoln was staying at her home when Rutledge died, and we know that the Bowling Greens’ home, the probable site of Lincoln’s recovery, stood near Abell’s. It’s probable that she saw a lot of Lincoln throughout his crisis. She liked him enough that she nudged him toward marrying her sister. She came from a rich and educated Kentucky family, and she apparently shared her learning with knowledge-hungry Lincoln (a combination that Lincoln later found helpful twice again). Abell’s blank take on a Rutledge courtship, and her comment that Lincoln “wasn’t crazy,” are important items of evidence from a source close to Lincoln.

James Short was a Rutledge-family friend and near neighbor, and a good friend of Lincoln’s. He reported frequent contact with both parties but no inkling of a romance from either one. After Ann died, Lincoln’s apparent grief led Short to suppose that “there must have been something of the kind.” Neither the Rutledges nor Lincoln, insofar as the record shows, ever confirmed to Short his supposition.

Henry McHenry attentively observed Lincoln over a period of years. He described physical and mental symptoms of Lincoln’s crisis in greater detail and with more empathy than any other informant. Noteworthy is that McHenry dated Lincoln’s decline from early 1833, more than two years before Ann Rutledge died.

Susannah Rutledge, Ann’s aunt by marriage and first cousin by blood, stated that Ann, if she had lived, would have married John McNamar.

How does it all stack up? A welter of inconsistent testimony has produced two opposing camps, what we might call the romance boosters versus the romance agnostics. One concludes that of the two, the agnostics testified far more persuasively. Douglas Wilson’s affirmative case for the Ann Rutledge story is not, perhaps, a settled matter.

140. Abell’s relative worldliness and willingness to share it are perhaps prototypical of what Lincoln came to value in Joshua Speed and Mary Todd.
IX

To close, a word about pitfalls in the handling of reminiscent evidence. Oral history derives from storytelling and from memories of storytelling, and thus reflects, more so than, say, archeology, whatever partialities the storytellers may have had. A corollary is that the most charismatic voices might not be the most accurate. One rather homely lesson comes to mind: the extraction of conclusions from ambiguous reminiscent material is a tricky business for storytellers of all stripes, including historians. One should be wary of the stories that oneself wants to hear.