“Not Even Wrong”:
Herndon and His Informants

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The great theoretical physicist Wolfgang Pauli excelled at demanding exactitude in thought and written expression. His dislike for poorly reasoned papers or obtuse writing that obscured meaning was famously noted by his colleagues. Often, theoretical papers were so densely written that it was impossible to prove or disprove their premise. Rudolf Peierls, a friend and colleague of Pauli, remembered showing Pauli a paper written by a young physicist. Pauli read the paper and expressed his frustration to Peierls by stating, “It is not even wrong.” To a large degree, Pauli’s phrase captures the long, colorful, and continuing debate over William H. Herndon and the information he collected. How historians have selectively used Herndon’s interviews about Lincoln is best captured by Jean Baker’s claim that Herndon is “every Lincoln scholar’s reserve army-available to make a point when he agrees with whatever conclusion we wish to establish, but having been so often discredited, easily dismissed when we disagree.” If one looks beyond historians for advice, another astrophysicist, Carl Sagan quipped, “Extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence.”

Herndon, like fashion, has had extended periods of popularity followed by long periods of neglect. We are currently in an appreciation phase resulting from the prodigious research, careful editing, and scholarship of Rodney Davis and Douglas Wilson. Through their publication of a scholarly edition of Herndon’s research materials, generally referred to by the short title Herndon’s Informants, Herndon’s findings have been made readily assessable to a wide audience of academics and writers. It has become an indispensable reference work for any basic Lincoln library. In providing transcriptions of Herndon’s

almost indecipherable hand, the problem of access is solved but other problems remain.2

The traditional understanding of the Herndon problem is threefold. First is the problem of memory and recollected facts. Second is how writers have responded to Herndon’s motives for seeking recollections. The final issue is the attempts to establish criteria for sifting the wheat from the chaff in Herndon’s letters, interviews, and statements about Abraham Lincoln. Ultimately, this last problem dovetails with the first: is memory alone a reliable primary source or does it require independent verification by a contemporary document or artifact? It is worth examining each of these areas briefly before asking the obvious question of what comes next.

Like any good lawyer—and Herndon was certainly an accomplished one—he sought out the facts. At first confident he could write a portrait of Abraham Lincoln based on his own decades-long relationship, Herndon soon discovered that there was more to his friend and colleague than met the eye. Writing to Josiah G. Holland, a reporter and early Lincoln biographer, Herndon asserted, “I have ‘been down’ to Menard County where Mr. L first landed and where he first made his home in old Sangamon. . . . From such an investigation—from records—from friends-old deeds & surveys &c &c I am satisfied, in Connection with my own Knowledge of Mr. L for 30 years, that Mr Ls whole Early life remains to be written.” Herndon was not the first writer to seek out information and recollections about the sixteenth president. William Dean Howells employed a young lawyer, James Quay Howard, to talk to Lincoln’s associates and gather information for a popular 1860 campaign biography. Howard’s notes for Howells are at the Library of Congress and were transcribed and published in David Mearns’s The Lincoln Papers. An author for young adults, William Makepeace Thayer, claimed to have interviewed numerous family members and friends from Lincoln’s early life for an 1863 published biography, The Pioneer Boy and How He Became President. Seeking to protect the identity and confidentiality of what was related in those interviews, Thayer frequently presented information without specifying sources, and invented dialogue for Lincoln and his friends based on the claims of his sources. The location of these interviews and notes remains a mystery. Josiah G. Holland provided yet another collection of interviews about Lincoln. Released in the aftermath of Lincoln’s assassination,

Holland’s biography portrayed Lincoln as a martyr to freedom with all the virtues of a good Christian. Such plaster saint portraits angered Herndon. No good could come from presenting a false front when contradicting facts could be readily obtained. As Herndon wrote to a young law student and admirer, Charles Henry Hart, “I know human nature, hide a mouse in a crack, and shade it, and it will in the minds of men-grow and expand into an Elephant.”3

If the light shed by honest facts was the best dispeller of shadowy myths, Herndon also knew that he had a difficult task in obtaining facts-flattering and sordid alike-to present a true portrait of Lincoln. Herndon justified his approach, claiming, “Sacred lies will not protect us. Hence as Mr Lincoln’s friend I propose to sink and cut a counter mine.” He continued, “I propose to throw overboard in other words all things now & avoid the whale & the shark. . . . Suppose all these things-Lincoln’s faults magnified by time through a want of the exact truth at the right moment-mankind in time & during the ages would magnify them out to immense dimensions and pray—who would be at fault-. . . Lincoln’s friends or who? Why Lincoln’s friends, who know the truth & told it not. Mr Lincoln has bitter enemies-bitter deeply & thoroughly malicious ones and they are I know biding their time. I propose to cut and clip that by telling how all things are, so that no future lie will have any Effect on mankind.”4 As a fellow soldier with Lincoln in the fierce Illinois political battles, Herndon knew that political animosities were long-lived and score settling could erupt at any moment. The Civil War only underscored the political divide. Better to place the liabilities of Lincoln’s past in plain sight and put the best face on the most indelicate facts.

Herndon cannot be faulted for what he did not know about historical research methodology. In the United States, the first PhD in history was not awarded until 1876. Most of the early historians were trained in the German methods best exemplified by Leopold von


4. Herndon to Hickman, December 6, 1866, quoted in Donald, Lincoln’s Herndon, 216.
Ranke. Henry Adams, one of the first in the United States to earn a doctorate in history, steeped himself in the primary sources of the time by reading letters, public documents, court records, newspapers, and other source materials and employing professional historical methods to portray the past with “objective truth.”\(^5\) Because later professional historians followed patterns of discovering historical truth similar to the way lawyers argue for legal truths, we can assume Herndon understood and employed many of the same basic approaches in his research. Herndon examined court cases that he and Lincoln argued, often replacing original documents in the case file in Lincoln’s hand with a “true” copy in Herndon’s hand. He frequently cites newspaper entries, although the number of sources he consulted, how systematic he was in examining titles, and how complete the newspapers runs available to him were remain unknown. Also unclear is the extent to which he consulted public data such as tax records, land deeds, county commissioner records, and the minutes of the various boards and commissions on which Lincoln served. Thus it is possible that Herndon often had better research intentions than results.

If Herndon realized that his own knowledge of Lincoln was insufficient to write the kind of biography he thought was required, he also began to question those things he thought he knew. In the Herndon-Weik biography of Lincoln, Herndon described his recollection of the appearance of the steamboat *Talisman* on the Sangamon River at Bogue’s Mill. An inquisitive teenager at the time, Herndon later recalled, “I remember the occasion well, for two reasons: It was my first sight of a steamboat, and also the first time I ever saw Mr. Lincoln—although I never became acquainted with him till his second race for the Legislature in 1834.”\(^6\) But Herndon’s later doubts about this incident never made it into the biography. In a letter to Jesse Weik, his collaborator, Herndon questioned his memory. Herndon cautioned, “Be sure that Lincoln came all the way up to Bogue’s Mill. It seems to me that he did and that, I at the time, saw Lincoln... If L came up to Buges Mill I saw Lincoln & if he did not then I did not see him.”\(^7\) Was this simply a case of Herndon being overly cautious or does it point to the larger problem of using memory as a primary source?

Previous assumptions likened memory to a photographic snapshot of a unique event. Like all photographic images, the print fades over

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time, the image becomes less distinct, and the details become blurred. This snapshot metaphor seemed useful, since we all have seen how time ravages individual memory. We may remember where we were when we heard that President Kennedy was shot but have no memory of our whereabouts during the attempted assassination of President Reagan. Moreover, if details may become fuzzy, the basic outlines and elements of the picture remain, explaining the reluctance to abandon the use of memory as a tool for understanding the past. The diligent historian has merely to carefully examine the recollection to get to the essential truth wrapped in the mist of unclear or mistaken details.

But memory is not like an old photograph. It is neither the searing of events into brain cells nor the imprinting of a logical sequence of facts. Memory, as recent scientific investigation has shown, is much more malleable and random, making it an ongoing creative exercise. Memory is not stored but constantly being created. As the psychologist Daniel L. Schacter explains, “We now know that we do not record our experiences the way a camera records them. Our memories work differently. We extract key elements from our experiences and store them. We then re-create or reconstruct our experiences rather than retrieve copies of them. Sometimes, in the process of reconstructing we add on feelings, beliefs, or even knowledge we obtained after the experience. In other words, we bias our memories of the past by attributing to them emotion or knowledge we acquired after the event.” Elizabeth Loftus has convincingly shown in countless courtrooms the unreliability of eyewitness testimony, especially in criminal cases. It is no surprise that DNA evidence is now the standard for proving guilt or innocence over eyewitness accounts, which almost always are undermined by raising doubt. Intelligence experts are also aware of the problem of memory and try to debrief field agents within twenty-four hours of a mission. This is an attempt to get agents to provide random details of things they saw rather than have the agents offer a filtering of facts to explain why something happened.8

If memory is not retrieved but constantly being created from new information acquired by the brain, one can readily imagine the problems. As psychologist Charles Fernyhough reminds us, “The reconstructive nature of memory can make it unreliable. The information from which an autobiographical memory is constructed may be more

or less accurately stored, but it needs to be integrated according to the demands of the present moment, and errors and distortions can creep in at every stage. The end results may be vivid and convincing, but vividness does not guarantee accuracy. A coherent story about the past can sometimes only be won at the expense of the memory’s correspondence to reality.” Taking the disparate elements in our brain and fashioning a coherent narrative or story helps in the process of remembering. But it is impossible to filter out the present in the process. It is also impossible to prevent other unrelated information acquired since the time of the original event from becoming part of the memory. Moreover, the stories or narratives we create to help us remember are too linear, as Nassim Nicholas Taleb reminds us: “Life is more, a lot more, labyrinthine than shown in our memory—our minds are in the business of turning history into something smooth and linear, which makes us underestimate randomness.” In short, memory as expressed in individual recollections is much more complicated than historians have heretofore imagined. It is not, by itself, sufficient as a reliable source for documenting the past.

The initial objection to Herndon’s recollections and those of his informants was not based on questions about the accuracy of memory. Rather, the private nature of the claims being made public through memory became the source of complaint. Herndon’s early public lectures on Lincoln were well received until he delivered the infamous fourth lecture, “Abraham Lincoln. Miss Ann Rutledge. New Salem. Pioneering, and THE Poem.” Claiming that “Abraham Lincoln loved Miss Ann Rutledge with all his soul, mind and strength,” Herndon used Lincoln’s sorrow at the death of Ann Rutledge to explain why Lincoln never loved another woman. As David Donald argues, “Hernond was intent on placing his countermines; he was going to put Mrs. Lincoln’s domestic difficulties right in the eyes of the world.” In doing so, Herndon did not calculate the backlash. The Springfield newspapers did not carry notice of the address, and many of his associates thought he crossed the line of propriety in speculating on Lincoln’s love life.10

Attempting to sink a countermine of his own, Robert Lincoln, eldest son of the late president, traveled to Springfield in early December 1866 to call on Herndon. In subsequent correspondence it is clear that Robert was trying to discern whether Herndon planned on us-

ing his lecture in the larger biography of his father. Most people saw
the lecture as an attack on Mary Lincoln, and Robert hoped to con-
vince Herndon that in spite of his good intentions, Herndon should
reconsider his lecture. As Robert urged in a letter to Herndon, “All I
asked is that nothing may be published by you, which after careful
consideration will seem apt to cause pain to my father’s family, which
I am sure you do not wish to do.” Invoking history, Robert warned
that Herndon choose his words carefully, “for once done there is no
undoing.”

Had Herndon been more industrious in getting his biography of
Lincoln published in the immediate aftermath of his controversial
lecture, he would have written a best seller. But a series of events seem-
ingly conspired against Lincoln’s law partner. As Herndon’s interest
in his law practice diminished, Charles Zane, his law partner, left in
1868, establishing his own firm. Herndon’s father, Archer Herndon,
died in 1867, leaving William Herndon six hundred acres along the
Sangamon River. Drawn to the idea of becoming a gentleman farmer
similar to George Washington or Thomas Jefferson, Herndon directed
all his energy toward this new endeavor. Herndon loved the idea of
farming but never realized the amount of labor and capital required
to make a farm successful. In the end, Herndon was deficient in both
areas. Reverting to his deep thirst for liquor only made matters worse.
Needing an influx of quick capital, Herndon consented to sell his
Lincoln research notes for four thousand dollars to another legal as-
associate, Ward Hill Lamon.

Much has been written about the scandalous publication of Lamon’s
*Life of Abraham Lincoln from Birth to His Inauguration as President.*
Lacking the literary talent and the ability of sustained concentration needed
for writing, Lamon enlisted the skills of Chauncey Black to ghostwrite
the biography. Black was the son of Jeremiah S. Black, a prominent
Democrat who served as President James Buchanan’s attorney gen-
eral. The historian Merrill Peterson aptly points out what promised to be
a significant Lincoln biography was “the product of a curious troika:
Herndon, Black, and Lamon.” The biography often used materials
that Herndon has asked Lamon to eliminate from the final text. “For
the first time the stories about which Herndon had been gossiping for
years in his ‘indirect language,’” according to David Donald, “were

11. Thomas F. Schwartz, “I Have Never Had Any Doubt of Your Good Intentions’:
William Henry Herndon and Ward Hill Lamon as Described in Correspondence from
the Robert T. Lincoln Letterpress Volumes,” *Journal of the Abraham Lincoln Association*,
14 (Winter 1993), 35–54, letter of Lincoln to Herndon, December 13, 1866, on page 38.
12. Herndon’s woes are nicely summarized by Donald, *Lincoln’s Herndon*, 258.
now revealed in their ugly nakedness—the illegitimacy of Lincoln’s mother, Lincoln’s ‘infidel book,’ the jilting of Mary Todd, domestic difficulties in the Lincoln household, Lincoln’s ‘shrewd game’ in deceiving preachers by pretending to be a Christian. Throughout the emphasis was on Lincoln the schemer and the politician, cunning, ambitious, unprincipled.”

Lamon’s *Life of Abraham Lincoln* was neither a critical nor a financial success. Robert Lincoln quietly sent copies to a number of his late father’s close associates to have them indicate errors in both fact and interpretation that he kept as reference. The book was so thoroughly discredited by its clumsy use of Herndon’s source materials that other associates close to Lincoln who were writing their own biographies of the sixteenth president steered clear of Herndon’s material. To a large degree, these studies focused on Lincoln’s presidency, an area in which Herndon’s materials are deficient. John Nicolay and John Hay’s monumental ten-volume biography became a conscious effort to avoid recollection and base their findings on official documents and correspondence. Even Herndon’s attempt to portray the inner psychology of Lincoln with coauthor Jesse Weik met a fate similar to that of Lamon’s book.

The uneasy collaboration between Herndon and Weik in producing *Herndon’s Lincoln* has been well documented. It is not the book Herndon would have written about his law partner but one that he allowed Weik to write for him. Having taken possession of Herndon’s original archive of interviews, Weik often resorted to using the transcriptions in Lamon’s biography because the scrawl of the originals was too difficult to read. After Herndon’s death on March 18, 1891, Weik controlled the use of the Herndon archive and restricted access except in the case of Indiana senator Albert J. Beveridge, who was working on a biography of Lincoln. Beveridge would complete two volumes, getting Lincoln through the 1858 debates, before his own death prevented the project from covering Lincoln’s presidency.

If Victorian sensibilities that fomented the opprobrium surrounding Lamon’s use of the Herndon materials seemed to fade in the twentieth century, new considerations challenged the uncritical use of informant materials. These issues came in the form of the professionalization of


Lincoln studies led by Paul M. Angle, executive secretary of the Abraham Lincoln Association, and James Garfield Randall at the University of Illinois. Both acknowledged that Herndon’s own recollections, as well as those he collected from others, were important assemblages of information for Lincoln studies. They also were painfully aware of the misinformation and questionable content. Recollected sources were not equal to documents recording information in real time. Could some general guidelines be established for researchers in evaluating the use of informant recollections?

Angle willingly admitted that the veracity of some of the information could be tested against independent evidence. But so much of it was beyond such proofs. As Angle rhetorically asked, “How, for instance, can one prove or disprove that Lincoln told Herndon that his mother was an illegitimate child?” Yet Angle believed that Herndon “was certainly not a liar,” and only on rare occasions would Herndon knowingly distort a fact. Herndon’s penchant for analysis and the use of his intuitive perception contributed to statements whose only proof is that Herndon believed he knew Lincoln well enough to divine his thoughts and motivations. In spite of various caveats, Angle offered the following guideline for use of Herndon’s own recollections: “In short, when Herndon relates a fact as of his own observation, it may generally be accepted without question; when his account is based on the observations and recollections of others, the possibility of error must be acknowledged; when what he writes is obviously the result of inference-of ‘guessing’—it had best be tested by independent evidence, or, if independent evidence is not available, common sense.”

James Garfield Randall, more than any other individual, made Lincoln studies an acceptable research field within the academy. His own writings on Lincoln set an early standard for excellence, and the many graduate students he mentored went on to equally distinguished professional careers. Randall’s wife, Ruth Painter Randall, was a prolific writer in her own right, publishing the first comprehensive biography of Mary Todd Lincoln. Undoubtedly a collaborative effort, the lengthy appendix in volume 2 of *Lincoln the President* reviews the evidence advancing the romance between Abraham Lincoln and Ann Rutledge. Like Angle, Randall believed “The historian must use reminiscence, but he must do so critically. Even close-up evidence is fallible. When it comes through the mists of many years,” Randall continued, “some of it may be true, but a careful writer will check it with known facts.

Contradictory reminiscences leave doubt as to what is to be believed; unsupported memories are in themselves insufficient proof; statements induced under suggestion, or psychological stimulus, as were some of the stories about Lincoln and Ann, call especially for careful appraisal. If reminiscences are gathered, but only part of them used, that again is a problem.” Randall concluded, “When faulty memories are admitted the resulting product becomes something other than history; it is no longer to be presented as a genuine record.”

Using the Angle-Randall standards for evaluating Herndon and his informant recollections, David Herbert Donald, perhaps Randall’s most distinguished student, wrote what remains an important and insightful biography of William H. Herndon. Never denying Herndon’s importance to our understanding of Lincoln, Donald was critical of evidence gleaned from recollections. This seminal book largely reminded historians of the problems of memory and redirected attention to less problematic sources such as original letters and public documents. Writing at the time the Abraham Lincoln Association was undertaking the compilation of all of Lincoln’s writings, historians were drawn to new troves of manuscript materials with the opening of the Lincoln Papers at the Library of Congress in 1947 and with the publication of *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln* in 1953.

It would be wrong to suggest that Herndon disappeared from Lincoln scholarship during this period. If anything, recollections were avoided unless they could be verified through other independent sources, a rule that follows the standard established by Angle and Randall. This approach was vigorously questioned by John Y. Simon in a seminal 1990 article. Claiming that the determination of history is not a criminal trial in which facts must be proven “beyond a reasonable doubt,” Simon suggests that recollections offer a “preponderance of evidence” to secure their validity in historical research. Douglas L. Wilson expanded on Simon’s premise in reexamining recollected material. Offering six criteria-likelihood that the reported information is valid; preponderance of evidence amidst conflicting interpretations; specificity of details; reputation and reliability of the informant; known prejudices of the informant; and whether the informant was in a position to know what happened-Wilson hoped to sift through the mountains of Herndon’s notes to find usable facts that were being ignored because of the stigma of faulty memory. He added the following caveat: “None of these criteria should be understood as definitive.

Unlikely things do happen. Preponderant testimony can be mistaken. Specificity does not guarantee accuracy. Prejudiced informants can be right. And reputable informants, alas, can be wrong. It bears repeating that in the case of Lincoln’s early life, one does not have the luxury of working with only the most reliable forms of evidence. We are compelled by the nature of the situation to find ways of working with what is at hand.” Adding his endorsement in the use of recollected materials, Michael Burlingame cautioned historians to “stop treating it as if it were high-level nuclear waste.”

Less enthusiastic about the promise of recollected testimony, Don E. Fehrenbacher and his wife, Virginia, published a seminal study, *Recollected Words of Abraham Lincoln*. Assembling a vast compendium of remembered Lincoln utterances from his family, friends, associates, and acquaintances, the Fehrenbachers created criteria to evaluate each recollection: criteria largely adopted by Douglas Wilson. An “A” grade was given to an event recorded the same day it occurred or within days of when Lincoln’s words were spoken. Those entries receiving a “B” qualified as “an indirect quotation recorded contemporaneously.” All the lower grades indicate recollections recorded well after the fact. Most of the entries received grades of “C” or below, attesting to the problem of memory. Because memory is so unreliable, the Fehrenbachers caution, “Every recollective quotation thus constitutes a unique problem in historical method.”

As historians began to reinterpret Lincoln’s inner life with recollected sources, arguments were advanced to accept the Lincoln-Ann Rutledge romance as fact and embrace a widespread use of all recollected sources. Even David Donald succumbed, albeit briefly and with qualifications, to accept the Ann Rutledge romance in his bestselling biography of Lincoln. Yet a backlash was already occurring.

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Dr. Clarence A. Tripp and, later, Lewis Gannett, on examining the recollected testimony for the Lincoln-Rutledge romance, found too many contradictions in the statements to accept it as an actual event. After reading Tripp’s article, David Donald felt confident to assume his original position doubting the credibility of the romance. Reflecting in 2003 on how his views about Herndon changed since his 1948 biographical study, Donald mused, “I was very young when I wrote it and was readily persuaded by Herndon’s claim of great intimacy with Lincoln. Now-over half a century later-I have grown much more skeptical.”

Two dubious claims are advanced by those advocating wider use of recollected material: first, that as an early form of oral history, recollections are credible; and second, that Lincoln’s early life is lacking sufficient primary sources, leaving recollections to bear the evidentiary burden. But recollection is not oral history, at least not the kind practiced today. Modern oral history has strict controls governing interview questions and transcription. Herndon followed nothing as demanding as today’s requirements in either conducting his interviews or providing verbatim or even real-time transcriptions. The second claim is demonstrably false. Just as Herndon failed to exhaust the primary sources available to him, modern scholars are just as negligent. In fact, the period before Lincoln became president is the next great opportunity for Lincoln studies with some very promising projects under way. The Lincoln Legal Papers helped historians overcome the problem of access by assembling the most extensive set of Lincoln’s legal practice that is searchable online. The information in this collection has yet to be extensively mined. The Papers of Abraham Lincoln will provide historians access to a much larger set of documents than the original Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln, which provided transcriptions of only drafts of Lincoln’s speeches, his printed public utterances, and his responses to letters. Not published was the incoming correspondence, which often contains important information. And perhaps the greatest oversight in all Lincoln studies is the important archeological findings at Lincoln’s New Salem in the course of the past few decades.

Much is made of the clear and reliable memory of “Aunt” Louisa Clary, who lived in New Salem as a child and later provided detailed testimony as to the placement of the cabins in the reconstructed vil-

lage. Thomas Reep, a local historian of New Salem, asked Louisa how she could remember details so clearly, and she replied, “In all these years my mind has kept the picture fresh by frequently having it recalled to me.” Douglas Wilson seizes on this and deduces, “For many of Herndon’s informants, and for much of their testimony about Lincoln as a young man, keeping the picture fresh by frequently having it recalled to them would seem a more apt characterization than Randall’s ‘dim and misty with the years.’” Had this statement been informed with the archaeology that was being conducted at the same time of his informant research, Wilson would have discovered that Randall was right about Aunt Louisa Clary’s memory.21

Not only is the re-created main street of New Salem in the wrong location, misplacing many of the rebuilt structures, but also large portions of New Salem are not even shown on maps based on recollections, especially those with significance to Lincoln’s early life. Robert Mazrim’s extensive writings on the archaeology of New Salem convincingly demonstrate how early recollections placed much of the 1930 restoration of the village on the wrong path and in the wrong locations. Local opposition and resentment toward the archaeological work of Joseph Booton, which undermined work local residents had already completed, account for many of the compromises in re-creating New Salem. Booton knew that the re-created Rutledge Tavern was built on the site of the home of one of New Salem’s founders, John Cameron, and that the real Rutledge Tavern was at the busy crossroads of the original New Salem, which was an empty lot in the replicated village. Booton recorded information about the Rutledge Tavern cellar he discovered, and then refilled the cellar, leaving a fully restored log tavern atop a cellar belonging to John Cameron. No one thought it odd that the restored village lacked the residence of one of its founders.22

One of the most significant findings at New Salem resulted in the reexamination of a sheriff’s note concerning the seizure of Lincoln’s


personal property. Most published accounts describing the confiscation of Lincoln’s personal property by the sheriff and its later sale at public auction usually based the story on the recollection of “Uncle” Jimmy Short, a friend of Lincoln. But the actual legal document of the sale has long been available to researchers. When I first became interested in Lincoln’s personal finances, especially the question of his early debts, I noticed that one of the crucial aspects of the story that Short does not recount are the items removed from the sale, these being a house and half interest in lots 16 and 17. Since Lincoln was never known to own a home in New Salem, I convinced myself that the word was probably “horse” written badly. But there was no way to account for Lincoln’s ownership of property, especially when the 1829 plat of New Salem reflects surveyed lots only up to 13.23

The problems were resolved with a combination of forensic graphology, collaborating legal documents, recollections, and archaeology. Consulting with John Lupton, formerly the assistant director of The Papers of Abraham Lincoln, I confirmed that the word was indeed “house,” not “horse.” Legal action in Indiana against Denton Offutt indicated the depositions of Abraham Lincoln would be taken in his “house” at New Salem. Charles Maltby’s recollections include a claim that he clerked in Offutt’s store with Abraham Lincoln and that they both purchased a warehouse next to it, where the Clary grocery now stands. Archeologists believe that Clary’s grocery is misplaced. If global-positioning-system software is used to superimpose the 1829 plat of New Salem on the bluff with Offutt’s store on lot 14, there is enough room to continue extending lots to account for lots 16 and 17. The archaeology also shows clear signs of commercial activity that date to the early 1830s, when Lincoln was clerking for Offutt and later working with Maltby. One of the great surprises was discovering an extensive brick-making operation.24

23. See James Short to William Herndon, July 7, 1865, in Davis and Wilson, Herndon’s Informants, 72–75; the actual case is Van Bergen v. Greene, Lincoln and Berry, the file of which I consulted when it was part of the Lincoln Collection at the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum; now it is housed with the Papers of Abraham Lincoln. The initial discussion of this episode can be found in Thomas F. Schwartz, “Finding the Missing Link: A Promissory Note and the Lost Town of Pappsville,” Bulletin of the 55th Annual Meeting of the Lincoln Fellowship of Wisconsin 51 (1995).

24. The legal action of George Warburton v Denton Offutt was filed in Knox County, Indiana, in 1833. A notice to take deposition filed on August 16, 1834, contains the following: “The Ptff will take notice that on Monday the 25 instant at the house [emphasis added] of Abraham Lincoln in New Salem, Sangamon County, Illinois, between the hours of 10 a.m. and 6 p.m. of the said day, the depositions of Bolingreen Esquire, Abraham Lincoln, William Green and Charles Mobley, will be taken by the
This information is entirely missing from recollections and suggests that Lincoln owned property as late as 1835, as well as owning a structure that could be used as a residence. Whether Lincoln actually used it for that purpose or as Robert Mazrim surmises, “appears to reflect primarily storekeeping activity,” it is an important corrective to the portrait of Lincoln presented in recollections. This is the missing step in Herndon’s research on Lincoln’s early life, as well as recent accounts that almost exclusively rely on recollections to understand the early Lincoln. Herndon intended to exhaust all primary documentary sources available to him on all aspects of Lincoln’s life. Clearly his search for informant material diverted his attention, and he never looked back.25

Recently discovered rules and membership lists of the Jockey Club in Petersburg, Illinois, illustrate how recovered primary sources can offer better context for recollections. Discovered in a ledger book, the rules and membership documents reflect an active horseracing organization near Lincoln’s New Salem village. The activity was important enough to create formal rules and membership. New Salem resident Robert Rutledge claimed, “in all matters of dispute about horse-racing or any of the popular pastimes of the day, Mr. Lincoln’s Judgment was final to all, in that region of country. People relied implicitly upon his honesty, integrity, and impartiality.” The organization placed notices in the Sangamo Journal about their meetings and race results. With prize money listed at $185 for the winner of the first day, $185 purse for the winner of the second day, and $100 for the winner of the third day, one can see why a person of impeccable integrity was required to judge these races.26


26. The ledger and rules of the Illinois Jockey Club of Petersburg, Illinois, may be found in the Lincoln Collection, Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library; Robert B. Rutledge to William Herndon, [ca. November 1, 1866] in Davis and Wilson, Herndon’s Informants, 386; and race results in Sangamo Journal, September 17, 1836, 2-7.
Relying on recollections, historians have always assumed Huron was one of Lincoln’s paper towns, meaning that Lincoln’s plat is the only evidence of the town’s existence. Lincoln surveyed and certified his plat of Huron on May 21, 1836. Located along the Sangamon River in Sandridge Township, Menard County, the village was part of the explosion of towns created in Illinois during the feverish land speculation in 1836. Establishing a town was an activity bordering on alchemy: there was no sure formula for success. Promoters exaggerated the natural features and potential infrastructure, always claiming the town was in a most advantageous spot and held great financial promise. Unlike many towns being surveyed and promoted at this time, Huron actually lived up to many of its claims. It was on the state road between Springfield and Lewistown, with Miller’s Ferry available to cross the Sangamon River. Miller’s Ferry also boasted a post office until August 1834. The nine proprietors of Huron comprised a formidable group of leading political insiders from both the Democratic and Whig ranks, many with substantial financial interest, such as James A. Adams, Ninian Wirt Edwards, Stephen Trigg Logan, John Todd Stuart, and Samuel Hubbel Treat. The proposed Beardstown and Sangamon Canal company would have a direct financial impact on the town had it been built.27

The first inkling I had to reconsider Huron as an actual place of settlement was the donation to the Lincoln Collection at the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library of a petition to the Sangamon County Commissioners Court requesting the creation of an election precinct in the Town of Huron. Containing twenty-two signatures of families familiar to Lincoln students-Watkins, Armstrong, Short, Clary, and Alley-this document indicates settlement. Examination of newspapers revealed an advertisement in the Sangamo Journal on December 10, 1836, seeking a blacksmith for Huron. But the conclusive evidence was walking the fields where Huron stood with archaeologist Robert Mazrim. Unearthed fragments of glass mugs typical of taverns of the 1830s were plentiful, along with shards of dishware, iron pots, and glass fragments of liquor bottles littering the site. One can easily surmise that the tavern not only served clientele who traveled the state road between Springfield and Lewistown but also operated as something similar to the 1830s version of a time-share, where prospective clients could visit the site and be treated to a generous supply of food and

drink. A June 1836 newspaper advertisement announced that a free barbecue would take place on site, suggesting that inducements of food and drink were effective incentives for attracting potential buyers.28

The existence of Huron as an actual settlement is interesting, but how does it affect our understanding of Lincoln? When one looks carefully at Lincoln’s economic behavior, the existence of Huron underscores Lincoln’s actions in purchasing land along the Sangamon River near the town, the only property he ever purchased except for the Springfield home. The overwhelming theme of the aforementioned examples is Lincoln’s quest for economic security. Unlike the majority of recollections casting Lincoln as reveling in an impoverished bohemian lifestyle, the documentary record shows a young man on the make. With his tireless efforts to get ahead, Lincoln sought to establish a financial security his father never realized.

Herndon’s methodology cannot be considered oral history as currently practiced. This conflation of the recollection with oral history is common in some discussions of Herndon’s informants. That careful historians, however, continue to grapple with how to respond to this material is seen in the numerous commonsense approaches for evaluating recollections. These attempts to find usable information from remembered facts run counter to scientific research that increasingly casts doubt on memory’s reliability. Unlike previous understandings of memory, that the brain stored a fixed impression of an event, the current belief is that the brain must constantly create and re-create a narrative of an event. The brain continues to use information it gathers afterward to create the memory of the event. As such, it is impossible to know whether an informant recollection is something witnessed first-hand, something described or acquired by another party, something invented, or even a bit of all of these. This discrepancy is not the result of ill will or prejudice. It is simply how the brain operates in processing information. No commonsense criterion can untangle all the variables of informant memory without relying on primary sources independent of the recollection. This is why informant materials without corroborating primary sources will always be “not even wrong.”

The frequent claim that Lincoln’s early life cannot be written without heavy reliance on recollections becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy

28. Petition is in the Lincoln Collection, Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum; Sangamo Journal, December 10, 1836, 2:6; the walk in the field where Huron stood occurred with Robert Mazrim in the fall of 2004; barbecue announcement in Sangamo Journal, June 25, 1836, 3:1.
without a serious attempt to identify and exhaust documentary and archaeological evidence. With major historical documentary editing projects on Lincoln’s life still incomplete, these research avenues continue to yield rich rewards. The use of material culture and the archeology of Lincoln’s early life are only now being explored. As new documents and archeological findings add to our knowledge of Abraham Lincoln’s early life, they also provide additional tools to analyze and evaluate informant narratives. It will be with new primary sources rather than commonsense criteria that historians uncover usable memories from Herndon’s informants.