"Overwhelming Evidence" of a Lincoln-Ann Rutledge Romance?: Reexamining Rutledge Family Reminiscences

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There has been a persistent tradition that Ann Rutledge was the great love of Abraham Lincoln’s life. When she died tragically young, Lincoln, himself only in his mid-twenties, reportedly never fully recovered; hence, his famous melancholy. The tale’s theme of doomed high romance, with an undercurrent disparaging of Lincoln’s marriage, riveted the public.¹ Accounts of Lincoln’s life in the decades after his death featured the romance.² By the late 1920s, however, some scholars

1. See David Donald, Lincoln’s Herndon (New York: Knopf, 1948), 229–38, for a vivid account of reaction to William H. Herndon’s November 1866 lecture on Lincoln and Ann Rutledge, which launched the Rutledge legend. Many newspaper writers condemned the lecture, not because they thought Herndon had his facts wrong, but because they saw it as an unseemly exposé of Lincoln’s private life. Herndon’s characterization of Ann Rutledge as Lincoln’s great love, and his claim that Lincoln never loved another, were viewed as a mean-spirited attack on Mary Todd Lincoln. The controversy was front-page news for many months after the lecture hit the press in America and abroad.

2. The nineteenth-century Lincoln biography that most sustained Herndon’s Ann Rutledge lecture was Herndon’s own biography (written with Jesse W. Weik), the indispensable Herndon’s Lincoln: The True Story of a Great Life (1889; reprint, Da Capo Press, New York, 1983), 105–15. However, Ward Hill Lamon’s The Life of Abraham Lincoln: From His Birth to His Inauguration As President (Boston: James R. Osgood, 1872) echoed much of Herndon’s Rutledge lecture, which gave the legend an early boost (see especially page 171). The “official” biography, by Lincoln’s White House secretaries, John Nicolay and John Hay, Abraham Lincoln: A History, 10 vols. (New York: Century, 1891), 1: 191–92, devotes just a few sentences to the legend. Robert Todd Lincoln, Abraham’s son, closely supervised the production of this work; it is surprising, given the embarrassment that the legend brought to Robert’s mother, that Ann Rutledge made any appearance at all in it. Ten years later, in 1902, Nicolay published an abridged version of the biography, A Short Life of Abraham Lincoln (New York: Century, 1902), 54, in which the legend is given a somewhat lengthier treatment, which suggests that Nicolay thought that Herndon’s
began to take a dim view of what they saw as a maudlin distortion.\(^3\)

James G. Randall, the preeminent Lincolnist of his time, in 1945 delivered the final blows. With a brilliant and celebrated essay, “Sifting the Ann Rutledge Evidence,” he genteelly hacked the legend to death.\(^4\) Ann lived on in the popular imagination.\(^5\) But from Randall’s verdict forward, the legend was banished from the academy.

Nevertheless, over the last decade of the twentieth century, Ann Rutledge made a scholarly comeback.\(^6\) As the 1990s progressed the romance appeared in increasing numbers of serious articles and books on Lincoln’s early life, not as a “legend,” but as a major event for which there was “overwhelming evidence.”\(^7\) This evidence, however, has account had a basis in fact. For other Ann Rutledge reverberations in Lincoln literature—this is not an exhaustive list—see Henry C. Whitney, \textit{Life of Lincoln}\ (New York: Baker & Taylor, 1906); Henry B. Rankin, \textit{Personal Recollections of Abraham Lincoln}\ (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1916); Thomas P. Reep, \textit{Lincoln at New Salem}\ (Petersburg, Ill.: Old Salem Lincoln League, 1927); William E. Barton, \textit{The Women Lincoln Loved}\ (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1927); Albert J. Beveridge, \textit{Abraham Lincoln, 1809–1858}, 2 vols. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1928); Carl Sandburg, \textit{Abraham Lincoln: The Prairie Years}\ (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1940).


5. A spate of movies and television programs depicted Lincoln’s relationship with Ann Rutledge as high romance, including a 1952 CBS series, \textit{Abraham Lincoln—the Early Years: The End and the Beginning}, in which Joanne Woodward played Ann. However, the Ann Rutledge story has apparently been fading from popular consciousness over the past several decades. See Barry Schwartz’s article in this issue.


7. In \textit{Lincoln before Washington}, Wilson used the word “overwhelming” or “overwhelmingly” five times to describe the pro-legend evidence he discerned, on pages 83, 88, 89, 137, and even in the index on page 189, under “Rutledge, Ann”: “informant’s [sic] agreement about love affair with AL overwhelming, 83[.]”
been available to scholars for a very long time.\(^8\) No new evidence has appeared to augment what was available to Randall and other legend skeptics. Did the skeptics misinterpret the evidence? The opinion here is, no, they did not.

While assisting the late Dr. C. A. Tripp with research for his study of Lincoln’s personality and sexuality,\(^9\) I had occasion to examine closely the Rutledge legend. Tripp focused on the question of Lincoln’s “grief” following Ann’s death and on the reliability of the memories of Lincoln’s New Salem-era friend, Isaac Cogdal, who provided the one seemingly definitive item of testimony affirming a Lincoln-Ann romance.\(^10\) The focus here, however, is on a small subset of reminiscences about Lincoln and Ann from New Salem-era people who personally knew both parties: the recorded memories of members of the Rutledge family. Legend revivalists accord great importance to their testimony. As prominent revivalist Douglas L. Wilson put it: the Rutledges had an “opportunity to know.” Indeed, both Wilson and John Y. Simon have argued that until Ann died, almost no one outside of the Rutledge family had any inkling of an Ann-Lincoln romance.\(^11\) And in fact, there is only one non-Rutledge witness who provided specific anecdotes about a romance. These came, however, from an

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8. The Library of Congress made the Herndon-Weik Collection available to scholars in 1945.


individual who was born just two years before Ann died. It therefore
would seem to be the case that, if reliable eyewitness testimony about
a courtship and engagement is to be found, it must necessarily come
from members of the Rutledge family.

But What, Exactly, Did the Rutledges Know?

Credit for what is known about what the Rutledges knew goes to
Lincoln’s longtime law partner, William H. Herndon, a key figure in
Lincoln historiography. Following the assassination, Herndon zeal-
ously tracked down people with personal knowledge of Lincoln’s
early life to get statements from them. He accumulated a huge mass
of documents, now mostly housed at the Library of Congress in the
Herndon-Weik Collection. The collection is Herndon’s permanent
claim to fame: his legacy gives biography of the early Lincoln its
main foundation.

But Herndon has another, rather more controversial, claim to fame,
for it was he who launched the Rutledge legend. There is no need or
space here to describe the histrionic way he did it, except to say that he
made waves—big ones—which did not quiet until Randall temporar-
ily killed off the legend in 1945. The important point is that Randall
and others were also gunning for Herndon’s reputation, and with it,
far bigger game: the entire tradition of amateur, reminiscence-based
history. The “personal,” the “subjective” became suspect; respectable
history required verifiability, which meant public, impersonal, docu-
mented facts. It meant academic history. The best of it was very good.
But the treasure trove that was Herndon was consigned to a vault.

A barely penetrable vault, at that, for only the most dogged scholars
could decipher the fading documents. A microfilm record was made,
but it, too, is hard to read. In 1998, however, the publication of Her-
don’s Informants—a carefully prepared transcription of all the known

12. The individual in question was Elizabeth Herndon Bell, daughter of Mentor
Graham. Quite apart from the fact that she was a very small child when Ann Rutledge
died, her testimony appears to be unreliable in the extreme. See Douglas L. Wilson and
Rodney O. Davis, eds., Herndon’s Informants: Letters, Interviews, and Statements about

13. Herndon launched the Rutledge legend with a lecture delivered at Springfield,
Illinois, November 16, 1866: “Abraham Lincoln, Miss Ann Rutledge, New Salem, Pio-
neering, & the Poem: Lecture Delivered in the Old Sangamon County Court House,
November, 1866.” Original broadside in Henry Horner Lincoln Collection, Abraham
Lincoln Presidential Library, Springfield, Illinois. The entire text of the lecture was
printed and distributed by Herndon. The broadside was what made a sensation in
newspapers and journals; the audience of the lecture was not large.
statements, interviews, and letters about Lincoln that Herndon had gathered—made the collection easily accessible.\textsuperscript{14} Douglas L. Wilson, the aforementioned Rutledge-legend revivalist, and Rodney O. Davis edited \textit{Herndon's Informants}. A work of inestimable value, it has transformed scholarly studies of the pre-presidential Lincoln. Moreover, it is the most prominent monument to a sea change in how Lincoln history is done: the rehabilitation of reminiscence-based evidence.\textsuperscript{15}

An advocate of oral history, or history based on reminiscence, Wilson found in the Ann Rutledge controversy a way to make the case that personal memories, even of events very distant in time, offer perspectives that historians must take seriously. Wilson charged that Randall, with “Sifting the Ann Rutledge Evidence,” wrongly disparaged what Herndon’s informants remembered about Lincoln and Ann. “James G. Randall’s most pervasive contention,” Wilson wrote, “is that the testimony of Herndon’s informants is dubious because it is subject to the notorious fallibility of human memory.”\textsuperscript{16} Wilson then cited comments from one “Aunt” Louisa Clary, who as a child had lived in New Salem. Much later in life Louisa impressed a Lincoln researcher, Thomas P. Reep, with her seemingly near-photographic memory of the layout of the village, which by then had nearly vanished due to economic failure, abandonment, and the ravages of nature. Reep asked Louisa, “How in the world is it you can remember these things and locate these places so closely. . . ?” Louisa replied, in part: “In all these years my mind has kept the picture fresh by frequently having it recalled to me.” She was referring to reminiscences she had heard from family and friends about the olden days in New Salem. Wilson noted: “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.’”\textsuperscript{17}

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{14}Wilson and Davis, \textit{Herndon’s Informants}.
  \item \textsuperscript{15}Scholarly interest in the “inner” Lincoln has soared in recent years, which in part accounts for the rehabilitation of Lincoln reminiscence: without anecdotal evidence it is hard to get very far on the subject of Lincoln’s personality. A prominent example of this school of scholarship is Michael Burlingame, \textit{The Inner World of Abraham Lincoln} (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994).
  \item \textsuperscript{16}Wilson, \textit{Lincoln before Washington}, 31. See the related discussion in Wilson, \textit{Honor’s Voice}, 6–7.
  \item \textsuperscript{17}Wilson, \textit{Lincoln before Washington}, 33. In a highly informative review essay on Wilson’s work, Richard S. Taylor, chief of historical research and interpretation in the Historic Sites Division of the Illinois Historic Preservation Agency, quotes Wilson: ‘Aunt Louisa’s ‘experience,’ says Wilson, seems to have been like that of ‘most.’ Well, if that is true, ‘most’ old settlers may have gotten it wrong, since it is now believed that she mislocated several buildings and part of the road.” Richard S. Taylor, “Telling Lincoln’s Story,” \textit{Journal of the Abraham Lincoln Association} 21 (Summer 2000): 44–68. The quote is on page 56.
\end{itemize}
Randall had characterized the Rutledge family’s memories of Lincoln-Ann as “dim and misty with the years.” He was not talking about the Lincoln-Ann memories of ex-New Salemites in general, although his argument makes it plain that “dim and misty” applies to a big chunk of that testimony as well. But it should be emphasized that Randall was referring specifically to Rutledge testimony, a fact that Wilson noted elsewhere. Thus Wilson suggested—unmistakably—that the Rutledges “kept the picture fresh” when it came to Lincoln and Ann. Wilson also argued that this picture suggests very strongly that Lincoln and Ann not only were in love, but were actually engaged to be married.

It must be acknowledged that Wilson’s comments about the retention of memory—via repeated reminiscence among family and friends over the years—point to something quite important. It gets to the heart of why Herndon’s inquiries are so valuable. Strewn throughout Herndon’s Informants are numerous vivid vignettes of life in New Salem and Springfield that, were it not for an oral tradition of conserving memories, would not have survived, greatly impoverishing our knowledge of the early Lincoln. And in fact, one of the real gems of Lincoln testimony came from Robert B. Rutledge, Ann’s younger brother. There can be little doubt that a main reason Robert could summon up this testimony is that he had frequently heard and told stories about Lincoln.

**But with Regard to Lincoln and Ann and Romance,**

**Did the Rutledges Keep the Picture Fresh?**

Robert B. Rutledge served as the Rutledge family spokesman to Herndon on matters Lincoln. He consulted his mother, Mary, and his older brother, John M., before writing Herndon to report the family’s testimony. The consultation apparently yielded indirect testimony from another brother, David, who had died in 1842. In a follow-up letter Robert relayed to Herndon information he received from J. McGrady Rutledge (Ann’s first cousin). Herndon also exchanged letters with

23. Ibid., 408–9.

None of the Rutledges—not one—offered a specific memory of Lincoln courting Ann. They all affirmed that a courtship took place, and with the exception of Mrs. William Rutledge, they all directly or indirectly affirmed that Lincoln and Ann were, in fact, engaged to be married. But none offered eyewitness images of them holding hands, exchanging tender glances, strolling through glades, or otherwise in any way behaving like a couple in love. Thus from the outset one must wonder how the Rutledge family “kept the picture fresh.” There is no picture. The screen is blank!

Moreover, only three Rutledges claimed, or were said to have claimed, that they had personal knowledge of a romance. Jasper was born after Ann died, so in his case personal knowledge was not possible. But had a romance occurred, all of the others would presumably have had an “opportunity to know,” to use Wilson’s term, and therefore be able to claim to know. But the claims that were made, such as they are, came only from David Rutledge (long since dead when Herndon was collecting testimonies), J. McGrady Rutledge, and Mrs. William Rutledge.

Wilson has asserted that Robert Rutledge learned about the romance and the engagement from Ann herself. If true, this would mean that Robert had personal knowledge of the romance. But if Ann ever even once uttered the name “Abe” (or “Abraham” or “Lincoln”) to brother Robert, no trace of it is to be found in Herndon’s Informants, or anywhere else. Robert—the family spokesman—not only offered zero

24. Ibid., 394, 401–2, 423.
26. Ibid., 237.
27. Ibid., 607–8.
28. Since Robert did not quote his mother, Mary, or his brother, John M., we cannot know with certainty that either one actually affirmed an engagement, or indeed whether either had anything at all to say about a romance. However, Robert told Herndon that he would have to consult both Mary and John to give an accurate account. If Mary or John had not affirmed an engagement, presumably Robert would have reported it to Herndon. Thus one assumes that they backed the engagement story. However, in his total of three letters to Herndon, John did not mention an Ann romance with or engagement to Lincoln. He also did not mention his mother. See Wilson and Davis, Herndon’s Informants, 394, 401, 423.
29. Wilson, Lincoln before Washington, 84.
personal memories of lovebird action between Lincoln and Ann, he also did not report having had any conversation with Ann about it.\(^{30}\) It is, then, hard to know on what basis Wilson made his assertion.

**What Is There To the Claims of David Rutledge, J. McGrady Rutledge, and Mrs. William Rutledge Regarding Their Personal Knowledge of a Romance between Lincoln and Ann?**

David’s claim was reported secondhand by his brother Robert. After Robert consulted his mother and brother John, he wrote Herndon a long letter on or about November 1, 1866.\(^{31}\) It is here that he provided marvelously bright pictures of New Salem and Lincoln’s place in it: evocations of Lincoln laboring free of charge, addressing public audiences, telling jokes, performing acts of kindness, running for office, demonstrating strength, conducting himself honorably while acting as a second for a friend in a duel, wrestling, and other activities. Robert, who was twelve to sixteen years of age at the time, indicates that he personally witnessed at least some of these familiar Lincoln pastimes. He closed his letter with this: “I have seen him frequently take a barrel of whiskey by the chimes and lift it up to his face as if to drink out of the bung-hole. This feat he could accomplish with the greatest ease. I never saw him taste or drink a drop of any kind of spirituous liquors[.]”\(^{32}\) It is clear that Lincoln made quite a memorable impression on young Robert Rutledge.

Fairly deep into the letter, Robert turned to the subject of Ann. He began with an account of Ann’s engagement to marry one John McNamar, a colorful sub-drama of Ann’s alleged relationship with Lincoln. McNamar was a prosperous New Salem merchant—and a friend of Lincoln’s—who had courted Ann, secured an engagement, then went back East to tend to family matters. For a time he wrote Ann letters, then stopped. To all appearances he had left her in the lurch. Enter the opportunistic Lincoln. According to Robert:

> In the mean time Mr Lincoln paid his addresses to Ann, continued his visits and attentions regularly and those resulted in an


\(^{32}\) Ibid., 387.
engagement to marry, conditional to an honorable release from the contract with McNamar. 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.

Mr Lincoln lived in the village, McNamar did not return and in August 1835 Ann sickened and died. The effect upon 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.33

This is the totality of what Robert had to say to Herndon about Lincoln and Ann in this long and otherwise detail-packed letter. Note that the only cited witness is the dead David. There are no specific romance memories from Ann’s mother, none from brother John, and as noted, none from Robert. Indeed, no specific memories from any living Rutledge. Yet, if Lincoln had courted Ann during regular visits to the Rutledge home and eventually won her over, and if this had been a courtship conducted in the shadow of Ann’s missing fiancé, who, of all the living family members in 1866, would presumably have been most able to supply facts about this domestic drama? Ann’s mother, of course.34 An elder brother might also be supposed to have known something, not to mention Robert, who at the time of Ann’s death was a teenager. But instead of citing the living, Robert cited a brother who had died twenty-four years before Robert wrote to Herndon. Randall’s phrase “dim and misty” comes sharply to mind.

Note also that the only element of Robert’s romance account with any zing to it is the description of Lincoln’s reaction to Ann’s death: His “extraordinary emotions were regarded as strong evidence of the existence of the tenderest relations between himself and the deceased.”35

33. Ibid., 383.
34. Ann’s mother, Mary Ann Rutledge, died in Iowa on December 26, 1878, at the age of 91. She had apparently gone blind some twelve years before, about the time that her son Robert consulted her about Lincoln. Her son John M. lived with her or near her; one presumes that Robert queried his mother through John. There is no indication that Mary Ann at the time was mentally infirm. Indeed, a Lincoln researcher, Jane E. Hamand, lamented that after Lincoln’s death no “biographers sought to extract from her the touching and tragical story to which the world is entitled and which she alone could reveal.” If she revealed anything to her family-spokesman son Robert, Robert did not identify her as a source. Jane E. Hamand, compiler of “Memories of the Rutledge Family of New Salem, Illinois” for the Decatur Lincoln Memorial Collection, 1921, 1–3, Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library.
35. Wilson and Davis, Herndon’s Informants, 383.
Regarded by Whom As Strong Evidence?

The record shows that Rutledge family recollections of Lincoln and Ann did not include personal knowledge of notable Lincoln grief. Nancy Rutledge Prewitt, Ann’s younger sister, told a newspaper correspondent in 1899: “It has been said that Mr. Lincoln was insane for a year after Annie’s death, with grief. I do not remember as to that…. I have read that they did not dare to allow him to have a razor or knife at that time, but I never heard any of our family say so, and they were intimate friends with him as long as he was there. There are so many things in the papers that are not true.”

Indeed, in correspondence with Herndon shortly after the letter discussed above, Robert Rutledge twice specifically disavowed having witnessed Lincoln grieve. The first disavowal: “[Do you] get the condition of Mr Lincoln’s mental Suffering and Condition [after Ann’s death] truthfully? I cannot answer this question from personal knowledge, but from what I have learned from others at the time, you are substantially correct.” The 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.” In other words, Robert learned of Lincoln’s grief from hearsay. If there had been romance, would not Lincoln have shared his grief with the family of the dead beloved?

A larger question arises. If, in a lengthy, thoughtful, detail-packed letter the contents of which were assembled and vetted by Rutledge family members, the family spokesman did not cite a specific memory of even one living family member about a love affair, but did cite events that no one in the family seems to have witnessed, and moreover characterized those events as “strong evidence of the tenderest relations” between Lincoln and Ann, what does this say about the Rutledges as witnesses of a romance? To put it finer: Why did Robert Rutledge’s account of an intimate family episode rely on memories of people outside of the family for “strong evidence,” instead of on the

36. Margaret Flindt, “Lincoln as a Lover,” *Inter Ocean*, interview conducted in Fairfield, Iowa, February 10, 1899, page 5 of a photocopy of a transcript of the original in the Jane Hamand compilation, Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library. On the same page Flindt quotes Nancy Prewitt as saying of Lincoln and Ann, “No one could have seen them together and not be convinced that they loved each other truly.” But the only specific activity Nancy reported about them concerned the repair of a bed that Lincoln and one of Ann’s older brothers, who apparently shared the bed with Lincoln, had broken the night before during “a romp and scuffle” (2). A theme recurs: Everybody had vivid specific memories about Lincoln, but not about a Lincoln-Ann courtship.


38. Ibid., 497.
memories of living Rutledges? As was (and is) the case with many other believers in the Ann Rutledge legend, it appears that Robert Rutledge’s most compelling evidence for a romance depended on a deductive leap from Lincoln’s grief.\(^{39}\) Yet he himself did not witness grief. One begins to suspect that the Rutledges did not, in fact, witness a romance.

Enter J. McGrady Rutledge, the second of the three Rutledges who claimed to have personal knowledge of a romance. In a letter dated November 21, 1866, written shortly after the letter just discussed, Robert informed Herndon that he had received a letter from J. McGrady, “a cousin about her [Ann’s] age & who was in her confidence.” Robert then quoted McGrady: “Ann told me once in coming from a Camp Meeting on Rock creek, that engagements made too far a head sometimes failed, that one had 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[.]”\(^{40}\)

Apart from a statement by Mrs. William Rutledge, soon to be discussed, this is the first personal recollection that Herndon obtained from a living Rutledge about Lincoln and Ann. It’s also the last, except for a Herndon interview with McGrady many years later, in March 1887. Herndon asked McGrady: “Do You know any thing Concerning the Courtship and Engagement of Abraham Lincoln and Ann Rutledge[.] If so state fully Concerning the same[.]” This is McGrady’s reply in full:

Well I had an Oppertunity to Know and I do Know the facts. Abraham Lincoln and Ann Rutledge were engaged to be mar- ried. 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.\(^{41}\)

McGrady’s command of the facts here is shaky on one obvious count: Lincoln didn’t move to Springfield to further his career in law until 1837, well after Ann died. But the most striking thing about this testimony is, once again, the lack of concrete detail.

\(^{39}\) Lincoln’s apparent grief following Ann’s death is the one aspect of the Rutledge legend for which there is vivid eyewitness testimony. Dr. Tripp thoroughly deals with this issue in *The Intimate World of Abraham Lincoln*. Space limitations prevent discussion of it here.\(^{40}\) Wilson and Davis, *Herndon’s Informants*, 409.\(^{41}\) Ibid., 608.
On to the third and final Rutledge who claimed personal knowledge of a romance. In March 1866 G. U. Miles, Herndon’s father-in-law and surrogate investigator, interviewed three former residents of New Salem: Mrs. Bowling Green, Mrs. William Rutledge, and Mrs. Parthena Hill. Mrs. Green told Miles that Lincoln was a “regular suitor” of Ann for two or three years before she died, and that Lincoln took her death “verry hard,” so much so that some observers thought he would “become impared.” Miles then turned to Mrs. William Rutledge: “Mrs Wm Rutledge who resides in Petersburg and did reside in the neighbourhood at the time of Said courtship and who is an Aunt to Said Ann Rutledge & acquainted with the parties & all the circumstances of the prolonged courtship coroberates all the above [Mrs. Green’s testimony.] Except She thinks that Ann if She had lived would have married McNamer or rather She thinks Ann liked him a little the best though McNamer had ben absent in Ohio for Near two years at the time of her death though they corrspended by letter.”

“Would have married McNamer or rather She thinks Ann liked him a little the best” is not an endorsement of an Abe-Ann romance. No mention of an engagement, either. It’s worth noting that Mrs. Green also qualified her comments on courtship: “She [Ann] had a nother Bow by the name of John McNamer who She thought as much of as She did of Lincoln to appearances[.]”

In Light of Her Statement, One Wonders: Who, Exactly, Was Mrs. William Rutledge?

One of the nice things about Herndon’s Informants is that it contains a “Register of Informants” with succinct biographical profiles that include noteworthy relationships between the informants. Mrs. William Rutledge, however, does not appear in the register. In the index, Wilson and Davis identify her as “Elizabeth,” and describe her simply as “Ann’s aunt.” It is true that Mrs. William Rutledge was the wife of the brother of Ann’s father, James Rutledge. But primary-source evidence shows that, in fact, she actually was named Susannah Cameron Rutledge, not “Elizabeth.” By virtue of the fact that her mother

42. Ibid., 237.
43. Ibid., 236.
44. Ibid., 819.
and Ann’s mother were sisters, Susannah was Ann’s—and Robert Rutledge’s—first cousin as well as aunt by marriage.\(^{46}\) None of this signifies much, except that it raises the question of why Robert apparently did not include Susannah in his family consultations, for she clearly had known Ann very well the entirety of Ann’s life.

What is significant: Susannah Cameron Rutledge was also the mother of J. McGrady Rutledge.\(^{47}\) This fact is nowhere mentioned in *Herndon’s Informants*.

It will be recalled that Susannah and J. McGrady were the only living Rutledges who told Herndon that they had personal knowledge of Ann’s relationship with Lincoln. Yet this mother-son duo had very different things to say about that relationship. J. McGrady affirmed, albeit with remarkable terseness, that Ann and Lincoln were engaged to be married. Susannah thought that Ann, had she lived, would have married McNamar. This in a nutshell is the grand total of what Herndon got from the two living Rutledges who actually claimed “to know.”

Did J. McGrady and his mother discuss or perhaps even argue about which one of them had the correct version of Lincoln and Ann? This will almost certainly never be known. But one thing is very clear indeed: J. McGrady and Susannah Rutledge did not keep “the picture fresh by frequently having it recalled to” them. Neither did their kin-folk. The only “pictures” the Rutledge family gave Herndon about Lincoln and Ann—David’s, J. McGrady’s, and Susannah’s—cannot be characterized as “fresh” without doing violence to the English language. From what Herndon has passed down to us in *Herndon’s Informants*, it is very hard to imagine that the Rutledge family—prior to Herndon’s Rutledge lecture, which made the legend a nationally famous melodrama—sat around fireplaces late into the night recalling to each other the nuances of Lincoln’s love for Ann.

The foregoing addresses only a portion of the case made by legend revivalists for Lincoln-Ann romance and engagement. Wilson, John Evangelist Walsh, and others also cite the testimony of many non-Rutledge New Salem residents who either knew both parties or had heard about them. To fully review that testimony would require an article perhaps twice the length of this one. Suffice it to say that, under close scrutiny, the non-Rutledge testimony stands up little better than does the Rutledge testimony. David Donald, after noting that 1998’s

\(^{46}\) Susannah Cameron Rutledge’s mother, Nancy Miller Cameron, and Ann’s mother, Mary Ann Miller Rutledge, were daughters of John Miller.

Herndon’s Informants “has made it possible more easily and systematically to examine all the testimony that Herndon collected” on the legend, writes in his new book, “We Are Lincoln Men”: “Looked at anew, it [the testimony] is impressive for its contradictions. Members of the Rutledge family were certain that there had been a firm engagement between Lincoln and their sister; Mrs. Abell, who may have been Lincoln’s closest confidant in New Salem, professed to know nothing about a love affair, though she testified to Lincoln’s genuine grief at Ann’s death.” Donald is tactful in the pages he devotes to explaining why he no longer accepts the legend. But it seems clear that he is backing away from a major embarrassment.

Nearly sixty years after James G. Randall delivered a seeming coup de grâce to the Ann Rutledge legend, the legend may be nearing a second death.