

"Lincoln and Herndon" — One Flight Up

Mr. Lincoln met Herndon for the first time, to become interested in him, at Speed's drygoods store, over which Lincoln roomed with Mr. Speed when he first came to Springfield to enter into partnership with Major Stuart in law practice. For a portion of that time Mr. Herndon also shared that upper room with both his employer and future law-partner. Friendly relations began there, destined to continue and deepen through future years. Some little mention of the moulding influences around the life of William H. Herndon, previous to this and on up to the time this partnership began, seems desirable in several ways before considering him in his relations as partner of Mr. Lincoln.

Unlike Mr. Lincoln, Mr. Herndon had been reared in a home of wealth, with the best opportunities for early tuition which the schools of Springfield then afforded. He had never felt the privations and grinds of poverty amid squalid surroundings on the country frontier, as had Mr. Lincoln. He was, through childhood and youth, the favorite son, and his father's plans for his education were liberal. Having finished the courses of schools in Springfield, his father sent him to Illinois College at Jacksonville.

This college was then in control of the Yale Band of professors who had come west to establish, if possible, a new Yale College, plus greater liberality of thought in both religion and politics. In this college, under the personal instruction of such professors as Beecher, Sturtevant, Turner, Adams, Post, Dr. Jones and others, young Herndon began his college life. He had told me in private conversation of these most enjoyable years in his life there, of the wider world opened by his advanced text books -- of the inspiration and ambition aroused in his mind by the excellent college library, and especially the personality of his professors, and the deep impress which their scholarship

Henry B. Rankin File

and political principles made on his life then, as well as ever after. The time spent there was, he said, a perpetual romance; but its ending, so unexpected and sudden in its coming, made those years seem a dreamland when he looked back to them. A boy's will may be the wind's will, but the thoughts and principles planted in young manhood are long, long ones. In Young Herndon's case they were passed on and, in some degree, helped mould a nation's executive.

Young Herndon was more than half through college when the Alton riot occurred, with the throwing of the abolition newspaper press and material into the Mississippi river; and the murder of its editor, Lovejoy, that took place November 7, 1837. Great excitement followed throughout the country. This brought the Illinois College professors and a number of the students body and a few citizens of Jacksonville to the front with the war cry of the Revolution on their lips. Jacksonville was then one of the active stations on the Abolition Underground Railway that secretly passed runaway slaves on to Canada.

A public meeting on the campus was announced at chapel, to be held that afternoon. The college bell chimed the call on time and a crowd assembled on the campus. Several professors and citizens addressed the assembly in short impromptu speeches. The people, mostly southern in their political ties, were turbulent, and outside the college influences, sympathized with, or condoned, the action of the Alton mob. The meeting was promising to end in a row. At this critical moment the young student, Herndon, made his way towards the front and on to the platform. The student, Herndon, made his way towards the front and <sup>to</sup> on the platform. The student body caught the excitement, and seeing Herndon speaking privately with President Beecher, on the platform, they raised the college yell, and shouts for "Herndon", "Herndon" -- "The son of a Democrat. Let us hear what this 'son of a gun' can say!" Beecher, already appalled by the noisy crowd on the campus, without finding exactly what the young

student proposed to say, in his perplexity told young Herndon to speak if he chose.

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How long Herndon held the crowd <sup>A</sup> could never learn -- no one counted time. But several who were there agree in the account narrated in later years, of the remarkable speech made, and the degree of quiet the assembly received it with. His appeal was a surprisingly moderate one, asking for a free press on free soil at least, and voiced decidedly, yet skillfully, for the attention of an adverse audience, the principles of freedom taught by the Illinois professors and that should be maintained in all free states and territories. The student crowd began cheering, hisses and cat calls became less, and as he closed he was picked up by his college mates and borne off the campus on the shoulders of his fellow students, and the whole affair came to an end as a sort of College Hill pyrotechnics.

A local paper had a short, but witty, write-up from the college student standpoint of the event; and by some means this and an enlarged verbal account of young Herndon's part in this "anti-slavery" meeting, as it was called, came to the notice of his father at Springfield, the Hon. A. G. Herndon, who, with Mr. Lincoln, was of the "long nine" members in the Illinois legislature who secured the State Capital for Springfield. He saw at once that his favorite son William had imbibed the horrible political heresies of Professors Beeches, Turner, and their associates -- in plain words, that he had become what these professors called a "Free Soiler," but the fond parent called "Abolitionist" -- not to add here the abundant and expressive epithets the Hon. Archie G. Herndon was so competent to prefix when excited and discussing politics.

Your William got peremptory orders by the first mail to pack his

goods, pay all bills and return home. This he promptly did, and on arriving, the fond but indignant parent informed the youthful student that he would have none of this in his house and name; that unless he renounced this horrid abolitionism and all his d-d abolition associates, and come back to the fold of the true and undefiled Democratic party for good, he would have no more of him in college or out of college; nor should ever have any further financial assistance from thenceforward. Father and son were of the same unbending, independent and impulsive temperments, and discussion only widened the distance between them about the principles and parties in issue.

The father was too late; seed of liberty had been well planted. The free-soil principles had too deep a root in the warm young heart of the enthusiastic son. He was immovable. Ever after, on all occasions, through good and evil report, every throb of his heart, and all the energy and force of his active temperament, kept time with the advance of free-soil sentiment throughout the nation until the final consummation was reached.

Young Herndon left home, bereft of all ties there save the mother's, on whom it became a habit of his to call daily or salute as he passed by. To meet first expenses, he began clerking in Speed's store. In the back part of this store-room was a huge fireplace. This, after business and office hours, became a ~~business~~ meeting place for circles of business and professional and political subjects were discussed, often until the small hours of morning. Mingling with such company, the young clerk did not drift from his studious habits nor long remain a drygood clerk. He was soon reading in a law office, and more zealous as a student there than he had ever been at college studies. He was admitted to the bar in due time, and settled down to office work and such court practice as his early merits began to attract clients for.

Thus William H. Herndon had worked up to a day when, to his great surprise, Mr. Lincoln -- who had just withdrawn from his partnership with Judge Logan -- walked into his office and proffered a partnership in their law practice. To Mr. Herndon's modest, but sincere, disclaimer about his youth and lack of experience in the law, Mr. Lincoln would not listen, but closed all by saying, "If you can trust me, Billy, I can trust you!" That was their partnership pact. They had then been intimately acquainted for five years. For nearly seventeen years after this trust was sacredly kept in loyalty to each other, mutual and untarnished.

The little sign of "Lincoln and Herndon" was hung out of the narrow stairway entrance up to their office, and was removed only when, after twenty-two years, the bullet of the pro-slavery assassin, Booth, closed the firm, and the senior partner passed beyond his strenuous life, where -- in the touching works of Stanton, the War Secretary, who stood beside him at the last moment --

"He belonged to the ages!"

*Absorbing Knowledge From Other People*

Mr. Lincoln's readings during the partnerships with Stuart and Logan were principally confined to law, with only an occasional diversion in History or essays by writers of the early Elizabethan period that were favorites with Mr. Stuart. None of the latter ever appealed to Mr. Lincoln strongly. Thus it happened that, during these two partnerships, aside from his law duties, and consulting authorities and precedents connected with their clients' cases, Mr. Lincoln did scarcely any general reading, and his leisure hours were usually spent in conversational enjoyments where his friends were accustomed most to congregate. Professional engagements were less exacting at this period than now, and offices, banks and stores were meeting places in a social way of congenial friends during the day and evenings, quite different from those of the present day.

In this respect, Mr. Lincoln's habits began to change after his partnership with Mr. Herndon. The latter had become a regular reader of State Library books, and this he had supplemented by purchases of many of the best books written in later years. At the time of which I write, Herndon's

chief extravagance was buying books. It was said to me by the principal bookseller in Springfield, sometime before the Fremont campaign, that Mr. Herndon read, every year, more new books (aside from all his law readings), in history pedagogy, medicine, theology and general literature, than all the teachers, doctors and ministers in Springfield put together -- which was probably correct.

Another marked characteristic of Mr. Herndon's -- aside from his ability as a Lawyer -- was the rapidity with which he could go through a book and master its essentials, and, after laying it aside, could thereafter, on a few moments reflection, give a digest or rehearsal of its contents, admirably condensed, and sometimes more interesting than the author(s). He had cultivated this faculty for years and, at this period, it had become a habit with him, and one he greatly enjoyed when with congenial friends.

This way of getting the contents of books suited Mr. Lincoln much better than his own reading of most books. No public man since Socrates ever enjoyed more thoroughly, or used more successfully, the art of getting from question-asking conversations, most of the information he desired on any subject that was interesting to him. There has been no little discussion, in later years, about some one's absurd statement, "That Mr. Lincoln never read any book through himself," and Herndon's off-hand phrase, intended only to emphasize Lincoln's ability as a thinker, viz; "Abraham Lincoln read less and thought more than any other man in his generation." Superlatives and extreme generalizations were never more faulty than when used to define characteristics and mental make-up of so unusual and original a man as Lincoln. These statements in some degree have coloring from this habit obtained after he and Mr. Herndon became partners. Before that, Mr. Lincoln had read, and read most thoroughly, quite a variety and no small number of the best books. He said as much of many books he referred me to and spoke of having read them before he came to Springfield.

His marriage was another most controlling circumstance in the literary and intellectual life of Mr. Lincoln. Mrs. Lincoln, while a resident of Springfield before and after her marriage, impressed all who were acquainted with her with the accurate literary taste she had acquired by education and general readings -- especially in history, poetry and fiction. She stimulated Mr. Lincoln's ambition politically, and at the same time had, by her brilliancy as a conversationalist and appreciation of all that was best in literature, and in the books which they mutually enjoyed in their home, been a forceful helpmate in Mr. Lincoln's intellectual life. She was a good writer of verse, strong sentences and a better critic to correct anything submitted to her revision. She delighted to entertain her family and friends by reading aloud evenings. Above all, she had the most constant and enduring faith in Mr. Lincoln's political future, and tired, by every means in the range of her unusual inspiring and vigorous personality, to assist her husband in season and, as some friends thought, out of season, when she saw Mr. Lincoln's own ambition began to flag. With those who were less intimate and knew less of her character, and the personal home life of Mr. and Mrs. Lincoln's, ~~xxxxxx~~ this officiousness on her part was often misconstrued.

Mr. Herndon's books and his constant additions to them became of increasing interest to Mr. Lincoln. They opened to him, for the first, the new wide ~~intertextat~~ modern world of science, political history and philosophy, as well as literature. Then the growing State Library became an attraction to him. There he met many kindred spirits whose conversational interests became almost daily pastimes with him, in a new atmosphere that mingled politics with science and literature. This State Library attraction was greatly increased by the charming personality of Hon/ Newton Bateman, then State Superintendent of Public Instruction, whose offices adjoined the law office of Lincoln and Herndon, and there Mr/ Lincoln began to be found nearly as often as at this own office.

In those important years, these intimacies harmoniously continued with literary and political friends coming and going, meeting at the State Library and privately at the office, with literary and political discussions between friends and partners. Not that Mr. Lincoln cared equally for all the literary fares his friends and the junior partner found in their readings, or Mrs. Lincoln shared with him at their home. The partner, at least, soon saw what his senior would be most interested in, and these he brought forth as Lincoln's request or mood called for them. Often at the end of an office day he would remark, "Billy, what book have you worth while to take home to-night?" Or he would already have one, got at the State Library during the day, and stowed ~~xxxx~~ <sup>in</sup> on his hat, so he would be sure to take it up when starting home. No part of Mr. Lincoln's life has suffered in history more from false coloring and belittling sensationalism, than that of the years he lived in Springfield; and especially is this so as regards the mental and literary parts therein.

*Around the Office Table With Lincoln*

While I knew Lincoln in office life then, -- every new book that appeared on the table had his attention and was taken up by him on entering, to glance through more or less thoroughly. I can say the same of the books in Bateman's office adjoining the law office. Walt Whitman's "Leaves of Grass," then just published, I recall as one of the few poetic ones that interested him, and which, after reading aloud a dozen or more pages, in his amusing way, he took home with him -- but brought it back the next morning, laying it on Bateman's table and remarking in a grim way that he "had barely saved it from being purified in fire by the women."

Readers of this day hardly comprehend the shock Whitman's first book gave the public. Lincoln from the first appreciated Whitman's peculiar poetry.

It was exceptional for Mr. Lincoln to read aloud, anything but a newspaper extract. Only books that had a peculiar and unusual charm for him in their ideas, or form of expression, tempted him to do so while in the office,

and this when the office family, only, were present. It was quite usual and expected by us at that time, when he would become absorbed in reading some favorite author, as Burns's poems or one of Shakespeare's play, for him to begin reading aloud if some choice character, or principle had appealed to him and he would then continue on to the end of the act, - and sometimes, to the end of the play, or poem.

When Walt Whitman's "Leaves of Grass" was first published it was placed on the office table by Herndon. It had been read by several of us and one day of leisure, discussions hot and extreme had sprung up about its poetic merit, between office students and Herndon, in which Dr. Bateman had entered from his adjoining office to engage in with us.

Later, quite a surprise occurred when we found the Whitman poetry and our discussions had been engaging Mr. Lincoln's silent attention - After the rest of us had finished our criticisms of some peculiar verses and Whitman in general, as well as of each others literary taste and morals in particular, and had resumed usual duties or departed; - Mr. Lincoln, who during the criticisms, had been apparently in the unapproachable depths of one of his glum moods of meditative silence, &- referred to elsewhere- took up "Leaves of Grass" for his first reading of it. After half an hour, or more devoted to it he turned back to the first pages, and to our general surprise, began reading aloud.

Other office work by us was discontinued while he read with sympathetic emphasis verse after verse. His rendering opened a charm of new life in Whitman's versification. Save for a few comments on some broad allusions that Lincoln suggested could have been veiled, ~~frankness~~ or better, left out, - he commended the new poet's verses for their virility, freshness and unconventional sentiments and unique forms of expression, and claimed that Whitman showed promise for a new school of poetry.

It was at his request that the book was left by Herndon on the office table. Time and again, when Mr. Lincoln came in, or was leaving, he would pick it up as if to glance at only a moment, - but instead would often settle down in a chair, and at these times, never leave it without reading aloud some verses, or pages that he fancied. His view points of the poetry differed from any brought out in the office discussions. He foretold correctly the estimate the future would place on Whitman's poems, - and that "Leaves of Grass" would be followed by other and greater work.