

## Introduction

Facts are said to be the building blocks of history. For those living in an age where virtually everyone leaves a paper trail through government agencies, public schools, and local newspapers, documentation of the rudimentary facts of life is taken for granted, and the challenge of reconstructing the past is presumed to lie principally, if not exclusively, in the selection and interpretation of factual evidence. But for Abraham Lincoln's early life, documentary records and verifiable facts are difficult to come by, and the serious student is forced to come to terms with something more challenging and mercurial: the personal testimony and recollections of those who knew him. The present work brings to publication the richest and most extensive collection of such material.

How this collection came into being, what it contains, and why it is only now being published in a scholarly edition is a complicated story that began soon after the assassination of President Lincoln in mid-April 1865. It involves the character and career of what has been called "one of the first extensive oral history projects in American history,"<sup>1</sup> an effort which began as part of an attempt to write a more personal and revealing kind of biography but which succeeded in raising a cloud of controversy that has never receded. The motives of the persons involved, the competence of the witnesses, and the reliability of the testimony are issues that still swirl in the winds of debate. There is no disagreement, however, that at the center of the story—and the controversy—stands William H. Herndon.



Within a few weeks of the assassination of President Lincoln in April 1865, Herndon conceived the idea to write something about his old friend. The two men had been closely associated as partners in the Springfield firm of Lincoln and Herndon since 1843 and had known each other for several years before that. When Herndon tried out his literary aspirations on certain knowledgeable friends, they encouraged him to capitalize on his intimate personal knowledge of Lincoln's career.<sup>2</sup> But Herndon seems to have decided very early that what he wanted to offer to the world was something other than a memoir. On May 26 he wrote to the prospective biographer Josiah G. Holland: "When you were in my office I casual-

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1. Charles B. Strozier, *Lincoln's Quest for Union: Public and Private Meanings* (New York: Basic Books, 1981), xvi.

2. See the letters of John L. Scripps (§1) and Horace White (§32).