

ly informed you that it was my intention to write & publish the *subjective* Mr Lincoln — “The inner life” of Mr L.” What he meant by this Herndon went on to explain in his inimitable style: “I am writing Mr L’s life — a short little thing — giving him in his passions — appetites — & affections — perceptions — memories — judgements — understanding — will, acting under & by motions, just as he lived, breathed — ate & laughed in this world, clothed in flesh & sinew — bone & nerve.”³

This sounds ambitious, if not grandly presumptuous, but Herndon thought his close association with the fallen president in the practice of law had given him an opportunity to observe Lincoln’s mind and personality that was afforded no one else. Nor was he alone in his thinking, for his correspondents frequently pointed this out. What may have been the first letter he received on the subject of his proposed biography began: “I am glad you design giving us something about Lincoln. Your long acquaintance and close association with him must have given you a clearer insight into his character than other men obtained.”⁴ The remark of a lawyer and congressman from Menard County, and the son of one of Lincoln’s former New Salem neighbors, is fairly typical: “Your long association with Mr Lincoln in business — in the same office, your knowledge of his opinions expressed on the various subjects political religious social &c which came up in his daily conversation with you during that time & your personal acquaintance with his early associates enables you above all others to give a true & faithful story of his life.”⁵

But Herndon was apparently not content to retail his own impressions where Lincoln’s early life was concerned. He seems to have had a passion for getting at what he called “the facts,” which is presumably what led him to embark at once upon a series of inquiries, not just in Illinois, but in Kentucky, where Lincoln had been born, and southwestern Indiana, where he grew up. When Herndon set out at the end of May on his first fact-finding trip to Menard County, his announced object was to search “for *the facts & truths* of Lincoln’s life — not fictions — not fables — not floating rumors, but *facts — solid facts & well attested truths*.”⁶

It is distinctly ironic that many of the “facts” that Herndon found so “solid” and “well attested” would one day be regarded as the “fictions” and “fables” he was trying to supplant, for Herndon was already reacting to the public’s growing tendency to mythologize his former partner. He began purposefully and energetically to compile information for an account that would expose to the world not a sainted martyr but the real man. The excited letter he wrote to Holland upon his return suggests that he was unprepared for what he had found: “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*.”⁷

3. WHH to Josiah G. Holland, May 26, 1865, Holland Papers, NYPL.

4. John L. Scripps to WHH, May 9, 1865 (\$1).

5. T. W. McNeely to WHH, Nov. 28, 1866 (\$313).

6. WHH to Josiah G. Holland, June 8, 1865, Holland Papers, NYPL.

7. *Ibid.*