

## Preface

This work makes available for the first time all the known letters, interviews, and statements about Abraham Lincoln collected by his law partner, William H. Herndon. It includes those items collected by Jesse W. Weik while working as Herndon's collaborator, but it does not include the very extensive array of documents that contain Herndon's own personal recollections of Lincoln, a body of material that would probably be at least as large as the present one.

Herndon's purpose in making this collection was to gather material for a biography of Lincoln, but a very substantial portion thereof could not be accommodated in the book that was finally published in 1889. Some of the material was thought to be inappropriate for a Victorian biography; some of it was deemed to be in error or doubtful or otherwise at odds with the portrait presented; and some was doubtless considered redundant, superfluous, or of little importance. But the passage of time inevitably alters the basis of such judgments, so that questions of what is appropriate, doubtful, or unimportant must always recur. Weik drew heavily on the unused material in his own book *The Real Lincoln* (1922), and Albert J. Beveridge made massive use of Herndon's informant material, before it became available to scholars in general, in his authoritative biography *Abraham Lincoln, 1809–1858* (1928). Yet in spite of its recognized standing as “the basic source for Abraham Lincoln's early years,”<sup>1</sup> Herndon's collection has never been presented in its entirety—until now.

The nature and extent of Herndon's project and the character of the testimony contained in the documents he collected have been the subject of considerable discussion and controversy. While the editors have their own views on these disputed issues, some of which are touched on in the introduction, the present work is not offered as a brief for a particular assessment of Herndon and his informants but rather is concerned with solving the problem of access. Full access to the documents in Herndon's archive has proved so problematic as to preclude wide exposure to the documents and a thorough exploitation of their contents. Not only are the collections difficult to navigate and the documents hard to read, but the original collection has been scattered and part of it lost. To maximize access and to enhance the reader's ability to understand and evaluate the testimony are therefore the major aims of this edition. Accordingly, this work includes, in addition to all the known texts, editorial annotation of certain matters that may cause readers

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1. David Herbert Donald, *Lincoln* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995), 603.