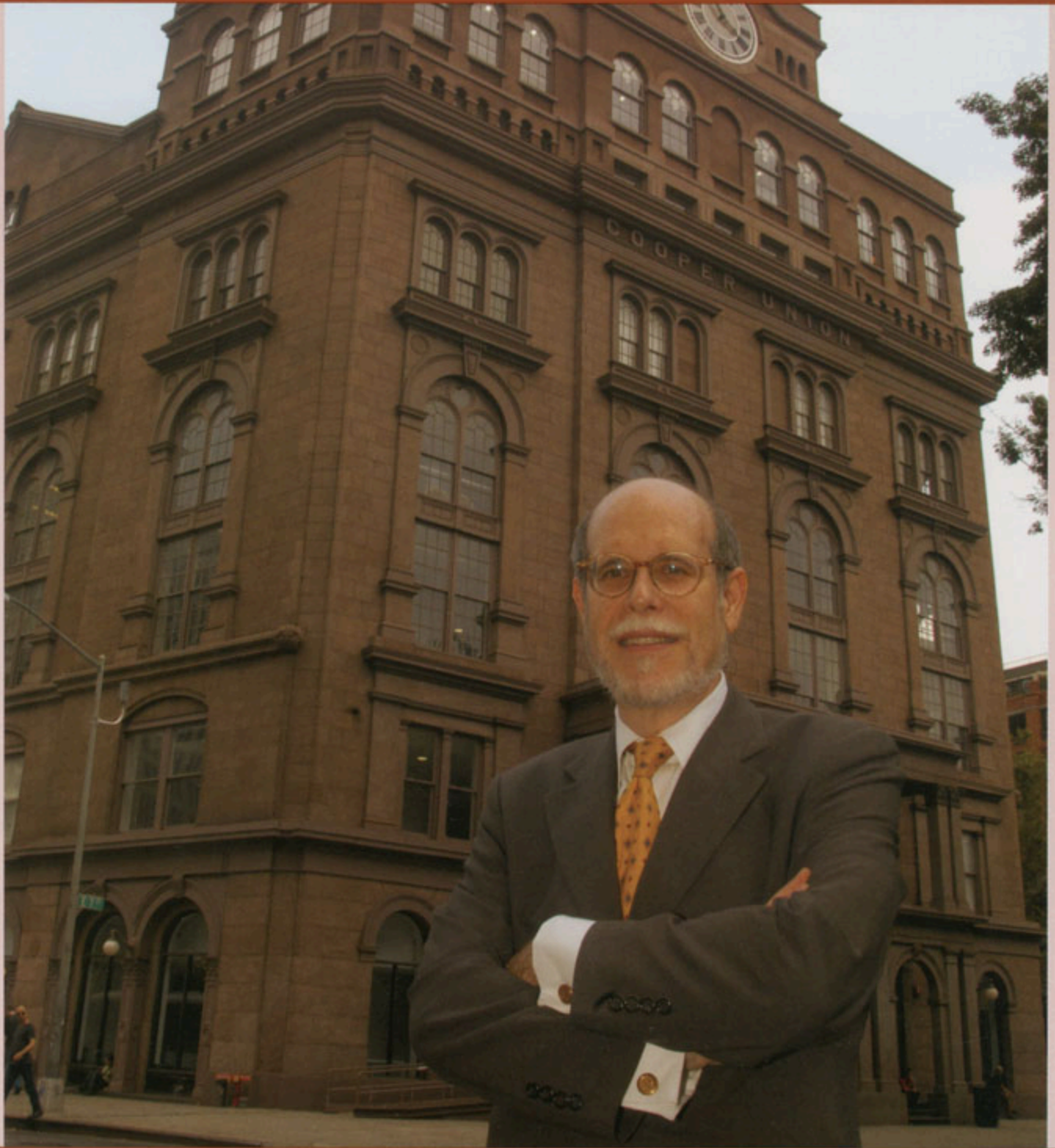


Lincoln Lore

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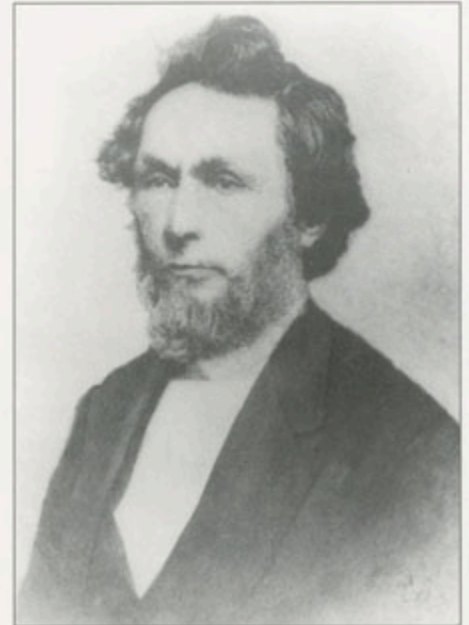
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Herndon's Dilemma: Abraham Lincoln and the Privacy Issue

By Douglas L. Wilson
R. Gerald McMurtry Lecture
The Lincoln Museum
Fort Wayne, IN
September 19, 1998

How much do we need to know about our great national heroes? Let me acknowledge at the outset that this is one of those innocent-sounding questions that, once we take hold of it, fairly bristles with difficulties. To begin with, we might reasonably ask: Do Americans still *have* great national heroes? I think we do. Many of us still have the traditional ones — George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Abraham Lincoln — but even Americans for whom such “dead white men” have lost their luster almost always have heroes of their own, such as Susan B. Anthony or Frederick Douglass or Crazy Horse. Changing the players, so to speak, doesn't necessarily change the game.



Lincoln's Law Partner William H. Herndon (TLM #1638)

From certain perspectives, it certainly seems that when it comes to our favorite subjects, we can never know enough about them. Of no one is this more true than Abraham Lincoln. The American public's fascination with Lincoln's life and political career is so intense as to sustain the exploration of virtually anything that purports to be new or newly interpreted information. Because Lincoln is widely regarded as the greatest of all Americans, and is thus part of our national identity, a substantial audience exists for the revelation of even the smallest anecdotes and most insignificant pieces of information. In a real sense, nothing about Lincoln is too minor or inconsequential to feed our insatiable appetite, so that we seemingly can never know enough about Abraham Lincoln.

But there is something more at issue here that needs to be considered. And that is that every age needs its own biographies of the great historical figures. The reason seems fairly clear, namely, that the questions each new age asks, the things

it urgently wants to know (and, we might add, wants to *believe*), are expressions of its own view of the world and are usually different from those of previous ages and generations. The case of Thomas Jefferson presents an instructive example. Until fairly recently, Jefferson's best and most conscientious biographers duly reported the accusation made by one of his political enemies that he had a sexual relationship with one of his own slaves, Sally Hemings, but gave it little or no credence. In 1970, the great Jefferson biographer Dumas Malone addressed this incident in the fourth volume of his magisterial biography by soberly reviewing the charges, which he found unsubstantiated, in a brief appendix. Only four years later, the historian Fawn Brodie published a biography that treated the relationship with Sally Hemings as a central and all-important fact in Jefferson's

On the Cover: Harold Holzer, author of *Cooper Union: The Speech that Made Abraham Lincoln President*, standing in front of the Cooper Union building in New York City. Photo by Don Pollard.

life. To the dismay of Malone and most of the other knowledgeable authorities on Jefferson's life, Brodie's treatment was not only seriously entertained but enthusiastically embraced by a large proportion of the American public. As a consequence, even before the release of the new DNA evidence that lends significant (though not conclusive) support to Brodie's thesis, there were two things that most Americans claimed to know about Thomas Jefferson: that he wrote the Declaration of Independence, and that he fathered several children by one of his slaves. It is surely a measure of our times that it is the first of these accepted truths, not the second, that is currently being challenged.¹

Without getting too deeply into the reasons behind this astonishing reversal, it seems clear that it originally came about not from the presentation of *new* evidence (such as DNA) but in large part from a willingness to entertain new interpretations of the *old* evidence. And that, of course, is not only the way it *should* be but the way it *must* be. However one might feel about Ms. Brodie's interpretation of what happened between Jefferson and Sally Hemings, there is little doubt that extramarital sex and miscegenation have taken on very different meanings in our own time, and it is inevitable that such a dramatic shift in values should cause us to consider events of the past in a different light. The danger is not that we will *see* the past differently from our predecessors, which is inevitable, but rather that we may be led to distort and falsify it. What was considered shameful and immoral in the past may now seem, given the circumstances, forgivably human, just as what might have been considered normal and unexceptional in the past may now appear reprehensible or wicked. But what we must guard against, I believe, is failing to properly gauge the gravity (in both senses of the word) of historical issues and behavior. When this happens, we are liable to trivialize or magnify or otherwise misjudge the events of the past and misconstrue their historical meanings.

No American historical figure is more familiar than Abraham Lincoln, and no one has had more of an impact on how we view his pre-presidential life and character than his law partner and biographer, William H. Herndon. And, we might add, no one has paid a higher price for his services to posterity. For reasons that have been widely discussed in the past few years, Herndon and his biographical efforts have been under a cloud of suspicion for a good portion of the twentieth century, but we are now coming to see how much of the criticism aimed at him has been misguided or misplaced and needs to be reconsidered.² It now appears that Lincoln scholarship, beginning about mid-century, became so preoccupied with Herndon's supposed weaknesses and shortcomings as a biographer that it lost sight of the magnitude and importance of his contribution. While he was far from an ideal biographer, he was an honest and a conscientious one, and the biographical resources he gathered and developed are simply indispensable to our knowledge of Lincoln.

William H. Herndon was very different from his partner. Outgoing and exuberant by nature, he was as communicative and unbuttoned as Abraham Lincoln was reserved and self-restrained. An avid reader and very much caught up in the philosophical currents of his time, particularly transcendentalism, Herndon was fervently idealistic and slipped readily into the role of reformer. In these respects, he was certainly the opposite of his law partner. He was

also, by comparison with Lincoln, something of a radical, and we know that Herndon sided with the abolitionists long before his law partner could see his way clear to stand with them politically.

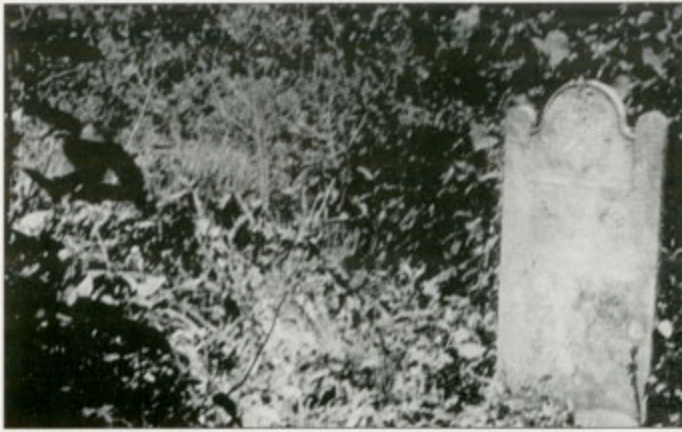
Herndon thought that by virtue of having been Lincoln's partner for sixteen years and having been in a prime position during that time to observe his behavior and habits of mind, he had known Lincoln better than anyone else. Lincoln's Springfield circle did not so much dispute this fact as regret it, for they did not regard Herndon as a suitable person to write the life of Abraham Lincoln. As a Springfield resident complained in 1866, Herndon was "a man sui generis" who was not entitled to be "a biographer of any other man than himself."³ It was not that Herndon wasn't truthful and honest, for he was; it wasn't that he was spiteful or envious toward Lincoln, for he was not. It was more that Herndon, because of his guileless and uninhibited nature, could not be trusted to present Lincoln's life tactfully and diplomatically, with due regard for the proprieties that the situation called for.

One gets a clear sense of this from the reports of the tribute paid to Lincoln by the Springfield bar shortly after his assassination. As Lincoln's partner, Herndon was designated to voice the sentiments of his fellow lawyers and to pay tribute to his qualities at the bar. After duly praising Lincoln's character and referring to his "uprightness, integrity, cordiality and kindness of heart, amenity of manner and his strict attention not only to the rights, but to the feelings of all," Herndon allowed in passing that Lincoln "was not as broadminded as some other men."⁴ This candid admission, offered in the midst of a ceremonial tribute, caused Lincoln's former partner and the leader of the Springfield bar, Stephen T. Logan, to rise and contradict Herndon on this point. Even though his audience must have known as well as Logan did that Herndon was not wrong, it was clearly the appropriateness rather than the substance of Herndon's remark that was really at issue.

There were, admittedly, other factors. Many of Lincoln's Springfield friends who had known him the longest — John T. Stuart, James H. Matheny, Milton Hay, William Butler, Ninian W. Edwards — had in varying degrees drifted away from Lincoln, both personally and politically, in the years leading up to his nomination. As young men, they had all been Whigs together, but the breakup of the Whig party in the 1850s put them on divergent paths. After his



Lincoln's First Law Office. Stuart and Lincoln, Springfield, IL — Hoffman's Row (TLM #2042)



“Original Grave of Ann Rutledge” Photograph by Hon. William H. Townsend (TLM #1587)

assassination they suddenly found themselves, in spite of their misgivings about his politics and their private jealousies and resentments, the guardians of Lincoln’s memory. They had all had a due regard for Lincoln’s astuteness as a lawyer and a politician, but much of what they knew about the personal life of the martyred president was, in these circumstances, problematical: his disreputable family background, his often messy domestic life and less than exemplary (and some thought *loveless*) marriage, his lack of interest in civic or humanitarian causes, his compulsion for dirty stories, and his long-standing religious skepticism. These were things that were seriously at odds with what the public wanted to believe, and it now became the patriotic duty of his oldest friends to minimize or remain silent on these and other embarrassing subjects, at least for the time being. Herndon frequently came up against this situation in his efforts to gather information about Lincoln. He told his collaborator, Jesse Weik, “You know that the People in this city do *not* like to talk much about Lincoln: they have no disposition to tell good things about him & when cornered the people here *in private* will willingly tell you Lincoln’s weak points — and damaging facts as they look at it. Lincoln outstript them and they *in secret* hate him.”⁵

By contrast, Herndon had always revered and idolized his law partner, had urged and approved his transition from the Whig to the Republican party, and his admiration only grew during Lincoln’s presidency. He believed emphatically that by emancipating the slaves and saving the union, Lincoln had been elevated to a position as one of the world’s great men. But unlike his more conventional townsmen, Herndon argued that Lincoln’s greatness could not be diminished by the truth, whatever it might prove to be. In fact, after investigating Lincoln’s life for a year and a half, he came to the conclusion that certain truths that would ordinarily be suppressed or explained away by a sympathetic nineteenth-century biographer were, in this case, *necessary* to the understanding of Lincoln’s greatness.

The prime example of Herndon’s doctrine of “necessary truth” was the issue of illegitimacy. From what Lincoln had told him directly, Herndon knew that his partner believed that his own mother, Nancy Hanks, was illegitimate. The informants Herndon corresponded with from Kentucky, where Lincoln had been born,

led him to believe that Lincoln himself was probably illegitimate, and Herndon began to see these circumstances as important facts contributing to the formation of Lincoln’s development and character. Herndon, who had a flair for the melodramatic, confided to a correspondent that Lincoln’s having to grow up with the shame of his origins was the “fiery furnace” in which his character had been formed and, in fact, was directly responsible for some of his finest human qualities. Herndon also believed that the irreligion and near atheism that were evident in Lincoln’s New Salem years were caused by his despair at the death of Ann Rutledge, an ordeal that Herndon believed had produced lasting effects on Lincoln’s mind and spirit. These were examples of “truths” that might not ordinarily be touched on in the biography of a great national hero, but insofar as they were indispensable to understanding the character of Lincoln’s greatness, Herndon thought of them as “necessary.” In a characteristic passage on this theme, he wrote: “Mr. Lincoln can stand unstaggeringly up beneath all *necessary* or other truths. Timid men would rob Mr Lincoln of his crown and cross ... through a suggestion of falsehood or the suppression of the *necessary* facts of a great man’s history.”⁶

To his credit, Herndon recognized that such disclosures, if they were to carry biographical weight, needed to be founded on very solid evidence, whereas what he had, at least in the matter of Lincoln’s questionable paternity, was little more than rumor, and rumor from informants he had never met. He was inclined to believe that there must be some measure of truth behind such persistent reports, and to resolve his doubts he decided he must go to Kentucky where he could look these informants in the eye. He told a correspondent: “I am going to Ky myself in the Spring. I want to see men’s & women’s faces when they talk about these matters. I want to read their motives &c.”⁷ An inability to make the journey to Kentucky for this purpose seems to have been an important reason why Herndon could not get his biography launched in 1867, as planned, and why it consequently languished for twenty years.

But he apparently had more than just the Kentucky testimony to contend with. He was conducting the first oral history of a great American hero and was finding out at first hand the difficulties of knowing how to interpret what people were telling him. He wrote to a correspondent in June 1866, “The trouble is very *very* great, I assure you. Thousands of floating rumors — assertions & theories &c. &c have to be hunted down — dug out — inspected — Criticised &c. &c. before I can write.”⁸ Herndon often spoke and wrote in exaggerated terms, but even allowing for Herndonian hyperbole, such exasperation would seem to go well beyond the tangle of stories about Lincoln’s paternity coming out of Kentucky, which suggests the existence of a wider array of “rumors — assertions and theories.” What, we may ask, could Herndon be referring to?

The most obvious subject of “rumors” running through Herndon’s extant informant testimony is a slim thread of anecdote and insinuation relating to Lincoln’s sexual behavior. Some of his New Salem friends implied that he had been sexually involved with women there, even suggesting he may have been the father of certain women’s children.⁹ Such gossip is hardly surprising about a bachelor in a pioneer village and may be no more significant than

Jack Armstrong's own standing joke that Lincoln had fathered one of his children. Armstrong's idea of fun, according to one mutual acquaintance, was to "plague" his friend relentlessly on this subject, which may simply have been Jack's way of acknowledging Lincoln's fondness for his wife, Hannah.¹⁰ A few examples survive of Lincoln's own stories of overnight encounters on the road with young women that, while probably based on real incidents, may well have been colored by the familiar genre of stories about travelers and "the farmer's daughter."¹¹

Given the time and place of Lincoln's young manhood, this all seems rather predictable and may tell us little beyond the fact that the young Lincoln was regarded as having, and no doubt did have, sexual appetites. Herndon made a point of telling his collaborator that Lincoln had strong passion for women, a judgment that is confirmed by no less a witness than Judge David Davis, who rode the circuit with him for years. But both Herndon and Davis testified that Lincoln had scruples about seduction and that his conscience "saved" many a woman.¹² Though he believed, with good reason, that Lincoln visited prostitutes as a bachelor, Herndon seems firm in his belief that his law partner avoided illicit sexual contact after marriage.¹³ All of these things appear in Herndon's own correspondence and in the archive of letters and interviews he called his "Lincoln Record," except for the stories about Lincoln's doubtful paternity, there is little evidence of really sensational gossip or serious speculation that needed sorting out. Where, if not in his collection of letters and interviews, were these "floating rumors" that Herndon was so concerned about?

It has long been known that Herndon did not put everything he was told into his "Lincoln Record," whose contents he had duplicated by a copyist in 1866 and stored in a bank vault for safe-keeping. Some things that did *not* appear in this compilation were recorded by Herndon in two little memorandum books. We first hear about them in late 1869 in Herndon's letters to Ward Hill Lamon, to whom he had just sold the copies he had made of his "Lincoln Record." Lamon was planning to use Herndon's material in a biography of Lincoln, but after he had a chance to look at the copies he had purchased, he wrote to Herndon and complained bitterly that he should have had the originals, that he couldn't be sure that the copies were accurate without comparing them to the originals. In spite of Herndon's earnest assurances that the copies were strictly accurate, Lamon harshly accused Herndon of bad faith. Herndon was in desperate financial straits and could not afford to have this lucrative transaction fall through. To placate Lamon, Herndon sent him a number of additional documents, including some in Lincoln's own hand, and he sweetened the deal by including something special: "I likewise send you two note books Containing some *secreat* and *private* things which I would let no other man have Even a sight at. These are not copied in your Record. Nor any part of them. Look over them and use what you wish."¹⁴ Perhaps having second thoughts about suggesting that Lamon actually use these sensitive materials, he wrote another letter two days later, referring to the "2 little memorandum books" and saying that they are to be held "secret & sacredly private."¹⁵

What was in the two little memorandum books? Certainly they must have contained the kind of information that Herndon considered highly confidential and presumably did not want generally

known, though sending the notebooks to Lamon scarcely seems consistent with this concern. Herndon eventually told his collaborator, Jesse W. Weik, something about the little books and referred to them in a letter many years later: "The little book of which you speak is now in Lamon's hands: he will not give it back to me: it was only loaned to him. I'll tell you all about it when I see you — can't risk the substance in a letter — too long and too much of it."¹⁶ Here it is clear that the material in the little book, or books, was too sensitive or sensational to write about in a letter.

So far as I have been able to discover, Herndon only identified two items that were in the little notebooks.¹⁷ The first reference is quite elliptical. In discussing the testimony about Lincoln's so-called "crazy spell" at the time of his breakup with Mary Todd, Herndon advised Lamon, "see Judge Logan's — in a little book I last sent you."¹⁸ This is quite opaque, but the other item we know more about, for he described its substance to his collaborator in a letter shortly before his death. "When I was in Greencastle in '87 I said to you that Lincoln had, when a mere boy, the Syphilis and now let me explain the matter in full which I have never done before. About the year 1835-6 Mr. Lincoln went to Beardstown and during a devilish passion had connection with a girl and caught the disease. Lincoln told me this and in a moment of folly I made a note of it in my mind and afterwards I transferred it as it were to a little memorandum book which I loaned to Lamon, not, as I should have done, erasing that note."¹⁹

Lamon, of course, had not put this episode into his biography, but Herndon went on to say that he was passing this information on to Weik because he was fearful that the little book would turn up at some time after his death and that the story would get out in a form suggesting that this incident occurred after Lincoln's marriage, rather than before. Herndon confessed to Weik, "The note spoken of in the memorandum book was a loose affair, and I never intended that the world should see or hear of it. I now wish and for years have wished that the note was blotted out or burned to ashes."²⁰

But Lamon, it turns out, was not Herndon's only worry. In the fall of 1866, just about the time he was preparing his famous lecture disclosing for the first time Lincoln's love for Ann Rutledge, Herndon offered the hospitality of his home to a traveling journalist and women's rights crusader from Boston, Caroline Healey Dall. A strong-minded and forthright woman, Dall had a sharp tongue and a crisp prose style, and she earned her living by lectur-



Globe Tavern, Springfield, IL. Abraham and Mary Lincoln lived here after their marriage. (TLM #3126)

ing, preaching, and writing. She had corresponded with Herndon previously, and she took pride in having earned the gratitude of Abraham Lincoln for supporting him in his bid for re-election in 1864, when he was being opposed by other women reformers, such as Elizabeth Cady Stanton. She had come to Springfield to deliver a lecture on Lincoln, and partly because of this, she evinced a great interest in the evidence about Lincoln that Herndon had collected. Staying in Herndon's home, Dall was given access to his "Lincoln Record." In discussing his notebook of sensitive material with his collaborator Weik in the letter cited above, he wrote: "Mrs. Dall did, I think, one day go to my private drawer and read part of the book, as I am informed —." In fact, he admitted, "It is probable that I let her see the book."²¹

Caroline Dall regularly kept a journal, which is now being edited by Helen R. Deese. But the portion of it relating to her trip to Springfield has long been missing. In giving her papers to the Massachusetts Historical Society, Dall held back this portion of her journal, along with some letters about the Springfield episode she had written to others and later retrieved. All these papers have been located by Ms. Deese in another library, where they were deposited a few years ago by Dall's descendants, so we are now able to read a record of her impressions. Her journal entries of this incident, one must observe, were reconstructed by Dall many years later from notes made at the time, and the original notes taken in Springfield at the time of her visit are still missing. In the reconstructed journal, Dall described her experience:

In the house with all the most precious relics of Abraham Lincoln. Just before breakfast Mr Herndon's son said to me, "I hear you are going to lecture on Abraham Lincoln. You wouldn't if you knew him as well as I do — Good people didn't think much of him before he went to Washington." When Mr Herndon came down — he showed me two bureaus — one filled with political — the other with private papers — "You may read all you choose —" he said as he went out — I came here to read a lecture on Lincoln, invited or authorised by Governor Ogleby — and it was to be given in the Legislative Hall.

When Mr Herndon came home to dinner — I had read enough to know that I could not give my lecture. I was reading slowly through the private and personal papers, and until the morning of the thirty first of Oct. [that is, two days later] I continued to read, never stopping — save for a little walk about town and my daily bath. Excitement forbade sleep... When I told Mr Herndon — that I had written to the Governor, that the posters must be taken down — & the advertisements withdrawn — he was startled. "I cannot stop you now" he said "but if I had known what would come of it, you should never have seen those papers."²²

One can hardly doubt that Caroline Dall had seen things in Herndon's materials that greatly shocked her, and her reconstructed notes suggest some of the things revealed in the papers she was reading. "Among the papers I examined ... are affidavits — from prostitutes, prize fighters and the very lowest human beings of all sorts. Herndon's object in gathering these together — has been to show Lincoln's essential integrity — in every — even the foulest circumstance of his life — but Good Heavens — rather than publish these, I would allow it to be doubted."²³

Herndon's letters and interviews that are known to us contain no affidavits or testimony of any kind from prostitutes or prizefighters, and it is possible that these characterizations are simply a function of Dall's overheated imagination, or faulty memory. There is no doubt that she got certain things wrong. And other assertions are simply not credible on their face, such as her claim to have read Lincoln's letters pleading for a release from his engagement to Mary Todd and her letters of refusal. How Herndon could have obtained such letters and why such a communicative man should observe total silence about such crucial information are circumstances impossible to imagine.

One of the strongest impressions Dall took away from Springfield was that she had seen papers that showed that Lincoln had retained lawyers in Virginia and Kentucky to find out who his father really was. She wrote in her journal:

When he was elected — he was determined if possible not to enter the White House — in the name of Lincoln — and saw no legal obstacle to another, if he could establish his right to it. He wrote to lawyers in Kentucky and Western Virginia — and told them what he wanted... The legal investigation showed that Lincoln was probably the son of a more educated man named Bloomfield.²⁴

The notion that Lincoln wanted to change his name after he was elected is so remote from any known evidence as to be utterly bizarre, and the business of corresponding about his forbears is almost certainly a mishmash of what she read in the letters of Herndon's Kentucky informants and what Herndon told her about Lincoln's correspondence with the Kentuckian, Samuel Haycraft, a local historian. Several years later, in response to a letter from Dall, Herndon wrote: "You are a little Mistaken in what you say in reference to Mr L's writing to any one wishing to Know who his Father was. Mr Haycraft of Ky wrote to Mr L wanting to Know who his — L[incoln]'s Mother was, suggesting that her name was So & So. Mr Lincoln wrote to Haycraft this — 'You are mistaken in My Mother' —"²⁵

But Dall stubbornly refused to accept this. The following year, when she told Herndon she was going to Virginia and Kentucky to investigate for herself, Herndon applauded her effort, saying "I am in great hopes you will find much new, & startling information." But he warned:

You are mistaken — friend — about one thing, and it is this — you seem to think that Mr Lincoln wrote to Haycraft for information about his birth — relations &c &c. Haycraft wrote to Mr Lincoln. Lincoln replied, saying — 'You are mistaken in my mother.' ... Lincoln Knew his parentage, birth — relations &c &c, and needed no information.²⁶

Dall's journal shows that she garbled and got many other things quite wrong, and this casts a shadow over all her reports of Herndon's materials. There can be little doubt, however, from the tenor of her account, that what truly shocked Caroline Dall was reading what she took to be clear evidence that Lincoln had been, as she would have put it, unchaste before his marriage and unfaithful afterwards. While still under the immediate effect of her

three-day immersion in Herndon's materials, in a letter written the day after she left Springfield to her confidant, Rev. James Freeman Clarke, she said: "All the lawyers on circuit, and more dissolute women than I could count, know A. L.'s profligacy — as regards women to be greater, than is common to married men, even here." She added for effect: "I remember that when I read Aristophanes, I was thankful that there were vices for which the English language had no name. I had not been in Springfield then!"²⁷

Nothing in Herndon's known letters and interviews would give rise to or remotely justify any such conclusions about the private life of Abraham Lincoln, leaving little doubt that she got this extraordinary impression from the notations in Herndon's little memorandum books. This would seem to be confirmed by the cautionary letter Herndon sent to Dall a few weeks after her visit.

*My wife tells me you read some of my memoranda, 'which is all right,' and yet I wish to say a word about it for your sake. Some facts in those little books need explanation — others are false — perverted & maliciously colored. Again — some of my conclusions, made at an Early day when I Commenced gathering facts, have since then changed, or been modified —: So if you want any particular idea you got from those memoranda Explained, denied &c, you had better write to me, Saying what you wish &c. &c; and if it is possible to do so I will Explain. You must remember that I am not responsible for what others say, and which I note down.*²⁸

What does all of this mean? It is, of course, very hard to say with any precision. One thing that seems clear, however, is that Herndon was far more discreet than his townsmen supposed, for he appears to have kept a separate set of books on the more sensitive and potentially scandalous allegations he collected about Lincoln. His description for Dall of the evidence in his memorandum books suggests that it was a mixed bag of material. It seems likely that it contained a heavy dose of the stories about Lincoln's "weak points" that Herndon told of being offered in private by Lincoln's acquaintances. But he makes clear to Dall that the material in the memorandum books would need very judicious sorting and qualification, with the pointed implication that it could not be safely evaluated or used by someone who did not know the people and situations involved. This is almost certainly why he did not have these memoranda copied, and it may also be why he decided, albeit under pressure and against his better judgment, to loan them to Ward Hill Lamon, who was another close friend of Lincoln and would presumably know how to judge such things. Dall's reaction, on the other hand, showed dramatically what kind of conclusions might be drawn from the indiscriminate acceptance of such "floating rumors" and "*secret and private things*," for she wrote confidently in her journal a few months later that she had definite knowledge of "the debauchery that stained all his [Lincoln's] life from Ann R[utledge]'s death — to the hour of his starting for Washington."²⁹

Herndon's cautious treatment of "floating rumors" does him credit, but it does not mean that the "*secret and private things*" he had collected reports on were all untrue. Herndon admitted that he simply ignored many things he was told that he didn't think credible, which could be taken as an indication that he regarded the

things he wrote down in his memorandum books as possible or probable truths. Certainly the only things from the memorandum books we have reference to were things Herndon seems to have accepted as true.³⁰ Thus we cannot simply write off the possibility that Herndon had collected plausible evidence that Abraham Lincoln engaged in the kind of illicit sexual behavior that would have shocked Caroline Dall. On the contrary, what this episode seems to tell us is that there were some sensational reports about Lincoln's private life given to Herndon that we have never seen. And since it is impossible to evaluate such reports without seeing them, we have no alternative but to reserve judgment.

This seems an appropriate point to return to the question posed earlier: do we really want to know all these things and do we *need* to know them? Are not such things, we may well ask, private and personal matters that have little or nothing to do with the historical role played by a great national hero? Theodore Roosevelt, in castigating the investigative reporters of his day, to whom he gave the name *muckrakers*, said: "Men with the muck-rake are often indispensable to the well-being of society, but only if they know when to stop raking the muck" ³¹ To appreciate our most notable men and women, do we really need to know everything? Herndon, who was admittedly an ardent theorist, argued that, in the case of a great national hero like Lincoln, we do. In a characteristically bold statement, he told his collaborator in 1887: "The purposes ... of writing the biography of a hero are to make him fully known to the reading world... all the facts of the hero should be told — the whole of his life should be stated, including the smallest facts — and including feelings — thoughts, determinations and deeds ... it is the religious duty of the biographer to state all the facts" ³²

This sweeping remark was cited by his highly critical biographer, David Donald, who observed: "Judging from his practice, Herndon meant that any reminiscence, idea or inference which he or anyone else might make was suitable material for a biography. Everything was grist for his mill." ³³ But here Donald's critical treatment offers perspective on Herndon's theorizing about all-inclusive biography, for Donald goes on to list from Herndon's letters examples of the heterogeneous mixture of things he told various correspondents about Lincoln: the activity of Lincoln's bowels, his being an ideal for America, his contracting syphilis, his nobility, his "terrible passion" for women, his flawless character, the vulgarity and nastiness of his anecdotes, and his Christ-like nobility. What this hodge-podge of the noble and the unedifying enables us to see is that, contrary to what might be inferred, the undifferentiated use of such details was not Herndon's practice as a biographer. Comparing the items on this list with the revelations in his published biography, it becomes clear that Herndon omitted the more earthy details and included only those that reflected positively on Lincoln. Everything may have been grist for his mill as a collector of information, and he may have been willing privately to pass on embarrassing and unflattering details to selected correspondents, but Herndon used more discrimination when it came to the presentation of the man in his published biography.

Herndon's dilemma was that he had propounded a theory of biography that he couldn't live up to; he wanted to tell the whole



Caroline Wells Healey Dall. Daguerreotype [by unknown photographer], circa 1854–1860. Photo #1.464, MHS. Courtesy of the Massachusetts Historical Society.

truth about Abraham Lincoln but couldn't find a way to do it. His philosophical conception of truth suggested that since Lincoln's greatness consisted of the sum total of his experience, it must be possible to "state all the facts" in such a way that even embarrassing and ordinarily discreditable facts would help reveal his transcendent nobility and greatness and thereby redound to his partner's benefit. But how to do this without making a mess of things and doing his friend's reputation more harm than good? Before he began writing, Herndon

seemed confident he could manage it, as when he told Dall in characteristic Herndonian style, "I know all and what is best for Mr L[incoln]. & the great Ever living universal head & heart. I shall do no one wrong but in the End literal & Enlarged Justice."³⁴ But twenty years later, when his biography was still waiting to be written, he admitted: "To tell the truth — the exact truth as you see it is a hard road to travel in this world when that truth runs square up against our ideas of what we think it ought to be."³⁵

Caroline Healey Dall was, in some ways, the perfect audience for Herndon's theorizing, for she understood and actually embraced Herndon's transcendental notions. After reading Herndon's secret memoranda, which truly shocked her puritanical sensibility, she soon found herself admiring Lincoln all the more. "I shall when I recover poise," she wrote her confidant, Rev. Clarke, "continue to think his life — the greatest miracle: God's own way — of stating the extremest republicanism. I have racked my brain in vain, for a single instance in History like it. And that he could ultimately rise to self conquest, ought to forbid the lowest wretch to despair. It is a better help in one sense than the life of Christ, for all *his* endowments were towards holiness."³⁶ Dall's hope that others would take inspiration from Lincoln's "self conquest" assumes, of course, that his supposed moral failings would have to be told as part of his story.

It is this assumption that explains her doubt, expressed in her journal, that Herndon was the right person for so difficult a task and her ultimate disappointment with his published biography. For Herndon did not include anything about what she called Lincoln's "debauchery," and he merely hinted at the ambiguity of Lincoln's origins. When the biography appeared, Dall wrote to complain that Herndon had not told the truth about Lincoln's paternity. He replied, "In your letter you state that Lincoln was an illegitimate and that I should have so stated. I did not think that the Conflicting Evidences before me justified the bold assertion in a book whatever my private opinion was. Had I been certain of the supposed fact I should have so asserted." Herndon went on to admit that he "may have softened Some things but," he added, "you will please remember that 20 or 25 years change our opinions of men — measures and policies."³⁷

Here, then, is at least a partial explanation for the discrepancy between Herndon's bold theory of biography and his temporizing performance — that he had moderated his earlier views of what were "necessary truths" in Lincoln's life and that he had come to insist upon a higher standard of proof for his published biography than for his private opinions.

Was Herndon here merely rationalizing his practice, or had he perhaps deliberately shown restraint out of respect for the privacy of the people involved? Or possibly both? He certainly withheld from his biography many embarrassing details that he believed to be true, as his informant materials and his own letters amply show. He repeated none of the stories touching on Lincoln's sexual behavior, and while he has been roundly criticized for portraying Mary Todd Lincoln unfavorably, he could easily have repeated stories that put her in an even more unflattering light.³⁸ In fact, if Dall may be believed, he had collected stories about Mary Lincoln's own infidelity, which he either disregarded or suppressed.³⁹

In these circumstances, it seems likely that privacy *was* an important issue for Herndon, perhaps even more so than propriety, of which he was no great champion. Finding no efficacious way to incorporate sensitive matters, he probably felt an obligation, as Lincoln's close friend, not to reveal things that showed him in an embarrassing light, or as Leonard Swett had put it, not to be "developing his weaknesses."⁴⁰ In addition, there is little doubt that by the time his biography was ready to come out, he wanted to avoid controversial disclosures that would hurt the popularity of his book. But if Herndon was more discreet than his contemporaries feared and deliberately withheld unseemly or embarrassing information about Lincoln, what does this say about his vaunted reputation for truthfulness? Actually, it says very little. As far as we know, he never knowingly published a falsehood about Lincoln. Donald, who was quite critical of Herndon, wrote: "There is not, to the present writer's knowledge, a single letter or other manuscript of Herndon's that reveals a desire or willingness to tell an untruth about Lincoln."⁴¹ There is no doubt Herndon suppressed information that he believed to be true but which would have been scandalous even to hint at in a nineteenth-century biography. But we should note that in doing so, Herndon was not dealing in falsehoods but was, in fact, doing what nearly everyone at that time regarded as his duty as Lincoln's friend and biographer.

I stress this last detail because it bears on the point I made earlier about judging and misjudging the past. What Herndon did in suppressing embarrassing allegations was considered right and proper in his time, the responsible thing to do, whereas the same act by a professional biographer in our own time would be reprehensible. A modern historian, even a very friendly and admiring one, is obliged to take a very different view of his subject's privacy, a right which is scarcely recognized by the rules of his profession. Even a biographer who doesn't believe certain allegations or doesn't think they are important nowadays would still be expected to deal with them. They could not simply be ignored.

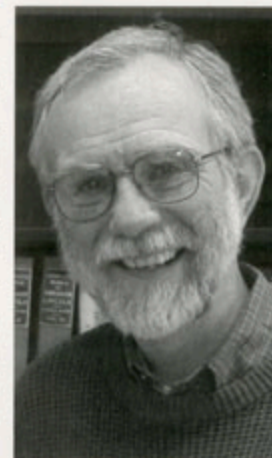
In a real sense, of course, it is not the historian but history itself that is the enemy of privacy. History, considered as the human imagination's irrepressible urge to engage the past, poses by definition a constant threat to all personal privacy. No better illus-

tration of this hard truth could be found than the famous story of Bess, the wife of President Harry S. Truman, who was discovered by her husband burning some letters he had written her. The alarmed President is supposed to have pleaded, "Think of history," and the wise Bess is said to have answered, "I have."⁴²

I want to conclude by suggesting that, in some sense, all who are fascinated by Abraham Lincoln face Herndon's dilemma. We want to know everything about him, but we don't want his image to be tarnished or his stature diminished. The experienced historian knows that these wishes are basically in conflict: that heroes and heroines are defined by their deeds, and that the more we know about their non-heroic doings, the less heroic our heroes and heroines appear. The recovery of Herndon's notebooks is, to use a Jeffersonian phrase, "among possible events." But even if they were found to contain allegations of the kind that Caroline Dall thought she found and that singed her sensitivities, and even if some of these carried the ring of truth, it seems doubtful that this would substantially affect our judgment of the historical Abraham

Lincoln and his standing as a great national hero. He was what he was, and he did what he did. The compromising stories Herndon collected did nothing to change his own view of Lincoln, and it seems highly unlikely that they would do very much to alter ours.

Professor Wilson is Co-director of the Lincoln Studies Center at Knox College and author of *Honor's Voice: The Transformation of Abraham Lincoln*. He and Rodney O. Davis have recently finished a new edition of *Herndon's Lincoln*, the first volume in a new series of books on Lincoln sources (University of Illinois Press). In addition, he is currently at work on *Lincoln's Sword*, a book which will examine Lincoln's presidential writing (Alfred A. Knopf).



Notes

- ¹ See Pauline Maier's contention that Jefferson's role in drafting what was essentially a committee report has been highly overrated in her book *American Scripture: Making the Declaration of Independence* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997).
- ² See, for example, the critique of the long-prevailing views of J. G. Randall in John Y. Simon, "Abraham Lincoln and Ann Rutledge," *Journal of the Abraham Lincoln Association*, 11 (1990), 13-33 and Douglas L. Wilson, "Abraham Lincoln, Ann Rutledge, and the Evidence of Herndon's Informants," *Lincoln Before Washington: New Perspectives on the Illinois Years* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997), 74-98. See also the reconsideration of Randall's strictures by his former student, David Herbert Donald in *Lincoln* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995), 608-09n. For a recent discussion of Herndon's contributions to Lincoln biography, see the introduction to Douglas L. Wilson and Rodney O. Davis, eds., *Herndon's Informants: Letters, Interviews, and Statements about Abraham Lincoln* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998), xv-xxiv.
- ³ A letter dated Jan. 25, 1867, clipped from the *Boston Advertiser*, cited by David Donald, *Lincoln's Herndon* (New York: Da Capo, 1989 [1948]), 233.
- ⁴ This incident is related in Donald, *Lincoln's Herndon*, 165-66.
- ⁵ William H. Herndon (hereafter WHH) to Jesse W. Weik, Feb. 10, 1886, Herndon-Weik Collection, Library of Congress.
- ⁶ WHH to Charles H. Hart, Nov. 26, 1866, Huntington Library; printed in Emanuel Hertz, ed., *The Hidden Lincoln* (New York: Viking Press, 1938), 41.
- ⁷ WHH to Caroline Healey Dall, Dec. 20, 1866, Dall Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society.
- ⁸ WHH to Charles H. Hart, June 29, 1866, Huntington Library; printed in Hertz, *The Hidden Lincoln*, 32-3.
- ⁹ See, for example, J. Rowan Herndon to WHH, July 3, 1865; Johnson Gaines Green (WHH interview), Oct. 5, 1866; Wilson and Davis, *Herndon's Informants*, 69, 365.
- ¹⁰ See James Taylor (WHH interview), [1865-66], Wilson and Davis, *Herndon's Informants*, 482.
- ¹¹ See James Short's surveying story related in N. W. Branson to WHH, Aug. 3, 1865, Wilson and Davis, *Herndon's Informants*, 90 and the encounter at Cottenbarger's related in WHH to Jesse W. Weik, January 5, 1889, in Hertz, *The Hidden Lincoln*, 233-34.
- ¹² See WHH to Jesse W. Weik, January 23, 1890, in Hertz, *The Hidden Lincoln*, 246-47 and David Davis (WHH interview), Sept. 20, 1866, Wilson and Davis, *Herndon's Informants*, 350.
- ¹³ For the basis of WHH's belief that AL visited prostitutes, see Joshua F. Speed (WHH interview), Wilson and Davis, *Herndon's Informants*, 719 and WHH to Jesse W. Weik, January, 1891, in Hertz, *The Hidden Lincoln*, 259-60. For his belief that AL avoided illicit contact after marriage, see WHH to Jesse W. Weik, January 23, 1890, in Hertz, *The Hidden Lincoln*, 246-47.
- ¹⁴ WHH to Ward Hill Lamon, Dec. 16, 1869, Lamon Papers, Huntington Library.
- ¹⁵ WHH to Ward Hill Lamon, Dec. 18, 1869, Lamon Papers, Huntington Library.
- ¹⁶ WHH to Jesse W. Weik, Feb. 9, 1887, Herndon-Weik Collection, Library of Congress; printed in Hertz, *The Hidden Lincoln*, 170.
- ¹⁷ Since this lecture was written, two additional items that Herndon identified as having been in his little notebooks have been noted. One is in the form of a memorandum, apparently written for Jesse W. Weik, labeled "No 2 / One of Lincoln's Stories," an off-color story about a little boy called Tommy and his cat. Herndon-Weik Collection, Reel, Exp. 2889-90. The other is a story about Mrs. Lincoln chasing her husband with a knife, printed in Wilson and Davis, *Herndon's Informants*, 722-23.
- ¹⁸ WHH to Ward Hill Lamon, Feb. 25, 1870, Huntington Library;

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printed in Hertz, *The Hidden Lincoln*, 65.

¹⁹ WHH to Jesse W. Weik, January, 1891, Herndon-Weik Collection, Library of Congress; printed in Hertz, ed., *The Hidden Lincoln*, 259.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ WHH to Jesse W. Weik, Feb. 9, 1887, Herndon-Weik Collection; printed in Hertz, *The Hidden Lincoln*, 170.

²² Caroline Healey Dall Journal, Dall Papers, Bryn Mawr Library.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ WHH to Caroline Healey Dall, January 24, 1873, Dall Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society.

²⁶ WHH to Caroline Healey Dall, March 19, 1874, *ibid.*

²⁷ Caroline Healey Dall to Rev. James Freeman Clarke, Nov. 1, 1866, Dall Papers, Bryn Mawr Library. This and another candid letter to Rev. Clarke, her minister, Dall retrieved from Clarke or his heirs and held them, with her Illinois journal, apart from the rest of her papers.

²⁸ WHH to Caroline Healey Dall, Nov. 30, 1866, Dall Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society.

²⁹ Caroline Healey Dall Journal, March 30, 1867, Massachusetts Historical Society.

³⁰ See notes 16-18 above.

³¹ Theodore Roosevelt, *Presidential Addresses and State Papers* (New York: The Review of Review Company, 1910), 5:716.

³² WHH to Weik, Jan. 10, 1887, cited in Donald, *Lincoln's Herndon*, 360.

³³ Donald, *Lincoln's Herndon*, 360.

³⁴ WHH to Caroline Healey Dall, Dec. 20, 1866, Dall Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society.

³⁵ WHH to Jesse W. Weik, Feb. 10, 1886, Herndon-Weik Collection, Library of Congress.

³⁶ Caroline Healey Dall to Rev. James Freeman Clarke, Nov. 1, 1866, Dall Papers, Bryn Mawr Library.

³⁷ WHH to Caroline Healey Dall, July 19, 1890, Dall Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society.

³⁸ He collected several stories about her physical abuse of her husband, for example.

³⁹ See Dall's journal, Massachusetts Historical Society, and her letter to Rev. James Freeman Clarke, Nov. 1, 1866, Bryn Mawr Library.

⁴⁰ Leonard Swett to WHH, February 14, 1866, Wilson and Davis, *Herndon's Informants*, 214.

⁴¹ Donald, *Lincoln's Herndon*, 347.

⁴² Recounted in Robert H. Ferrell, ed., *Dear Bess: The Letters from Harry to Bess Truman, 1910-1959* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1983), [vii], attributed to Margaret Truman.

Review of Harold Holzer's *Lincoln At Cooper Union: The Speech That Made Abraham Lincoln President*

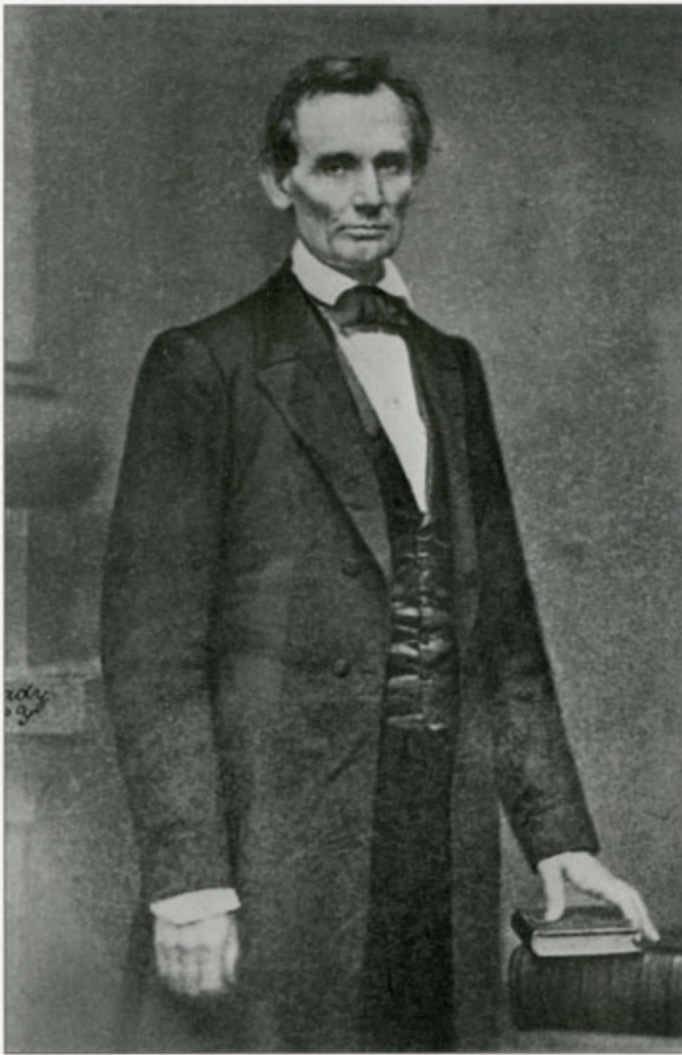
By Joseph R. Fornieri

Assistant Professor of Political Science at The Rochester Institute of Technology; Author of *Abraham Lincoln's Political Faith and the Language of Liberty: The Political Speeches and Writings of Abraham Lincoln*

Who better to write a book on Lincoln's Cooper Union Speech in Manhattan than the quintessential New Yorker himself, Harold Holzer, life-long resident of New York, Vice President for Communications and Marketing for the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and former public affairs specialist for Governor Mario Cuomo? Given the high-stakes of the Cooper Union Speech in either making or breaking Lincoln's candidacy for the Republican Party in the 1860 election, Holzer has appropriately subtitled his insightful work, "The Speech That Made Abraham Lincoln President." And he explains why that oft quoted expression about New York — "If you can make it there you can make it anywhere" — applied to Lincoln in 1860.

In its own time, Lincoln's Cooper Union Speech was recognized as a *tour de force* — a magisterial exposition of the Founders' views on slavery and a crucial moment that transformed him from a regional to a national figure. The *New York Tribune* declared, "No man ever before made such an impression of his first appeal to a New York audience." And an eyewitness reported, "He's the greatest man since St. Paul." Despite the greatness of this speech, it has not received the scholarly attention it deserves. What then accounts for this gap in the voluminous Lincoln literature? Holzer suggests that Cooper Union is less well known because of its intimidating length: it is ten times longer than the Second Inaugural, and twenty-eight times longer than the Gettysburg Address. For too long our familiarity with these latter speeches has overshadowed Cooper Union. No longer. In this superb book, Holzer sheds new light on the indispensable speech that made Lincoln President thereby recovering its greatness for our time. His engaging narrative furnishes the reader with a window into Lincoln the man and his times. Indeed, his well-crafted and accessible book will grip the scholar, general reader, and Lincoln aficionado alike.

Holzer begins the Cooper Union drama on October 15, 1859, with Lincoln's invitation to "the most pivotal public appearance of his career." A year earlier, Lincoln had earned national acclaim as the "Giant Killer" in his debates with Douglas. Though he lost the election for the Illinois Senate seat, he carried the antislavery struggle to Ohio where he stalked Douglas and stumped for the Republican Party, helping it to win the state by 17,000 votes. Upon his return to Springfield, Lincoln was exhilarated to find a telegram inviting him to speak at Henry Ward Beecher's Plymouth Church in Brooklyn, New York — "one of the nation's shrines to abolition-



Mathew Brady photograph of Abraham Lincoln in New York City (TLM #0-17)

ism," "Grand Central Station of the Underground Railroad." The event provided Lincoln with an opportunity to advance his ambition upon a national stage. Riding the wave of notoriety from his debates with Douglas and the recent electoral victories in Ohio, he would seize the occasion to make an indelible impression upon the sophisticated, "vote rich," Republican establishment in the East. In effect, Lincoln's performance at Cooper Union would represent an audition for the Presidency. With valid justification, then, Holzer contends that it was "the most important speech of Lincoln's life."

The story of Cooper Union is enmeshed in a "complex political web" of crisscrossing ambition and intrigue. Lincoln's invitation was part of an "elaborate ploy" engineered by a cabal of easterners to dump William Seward as the Republican nominee in 1860 and to replace him with Salmon P. Chase from Ohio. Though a moderate, Seward's incendiary rhetoric about a "higher law" than the Constitution and an "irrepressible conflict" between sections branded him as a radical. Politically savvy Republicans recognized that while Seward could win New York, he could not carry the nation. Fortuitously, the machination to dump Seward and to replace him with Chase had the unintended consequence of fur-

thering Lincoln's ambition to become the standard bearer of the Republican Party. As a moderate, antislavery, westerner who did not have a recent congressional record that could be used against him, Lincoln was perfectly poised to gather a broad coalition necessary to win the presidency.

Testifying to his law partner's painstaking research and meticulous preparation, William Herndon noted that no former endeavor "had cost Lincoln so much time and thought as this one." The Cooper Union speech reflects the combined art of a lawyer, politician and professor. In it, Lincoln brings to bear the entire force of his prodigious intellectual gifts to vindicate the political faith of the Founders against the heresy of popular sovereignty and slavery extension. In a heroic effort to ascertain the Founders' intentions on the matter, Lincoln devoted several months "poring over" all the relevant law and history books that he could lay his hand upon, including John Sanderson's *Biography of the Signers of the Declaration of Independence*, Jefferson's autobiography, *The Letters of George Washington*, the *Papers of James Madison* and Madison's notes on the *Debates in the Federal Convention*.

Before analyzing the text of the Cooper Union Speech itself, Holzer traces Lincoln's steps in 1860 New York, providing a snapshot of the city at this time, including the Barnum Museum, "the infamous Five Points," "wharf rats," prostitutes, and Broadway's "sixty-seven white marble buildings...." He describes the city in these colorful terms: "Competitive, brawling, noisy, dirty, frightening, expensive, awe-inspiring, revolting: New York in 1860 was simply the best place in America to get published, get rich, get lost, or get noticed." For reasons not fully known, the venue was changed from Plymouth Church in Brooklyn to Cooper Union in Manhattan.

Holzer's textual analysis of the rhetorical design of Cooper Union would alone justify purchasing the book. He reveals that the ninety-minute speech is divided into three sections: (1) a compelling historical overview of the Founders' intentions to restrict slavery in the territories; (2) a stirring address to southern people that took the rhetorical form of a *prosopopeia*, an argument directed against an absent person. In this section of the speech, Lincoln shrewdly reverses the charges of radicalism and sectionalism against the Republican Party, claiming that the proslavery forces are the actual radicals in their repudiation of the Founders' political faith; and (3) a rousing appeal to the Republican Party for moral resolution. When read carefully, as it deserves to be, Lincoln's argument at Cooper Union unfolds with the grace and elegance of a flawless geometric proof. Those who heard and read the speech were awestruck by its "sledge hammer logic" and its "strength of absolute simplicity."

Holzer rightfully points out the extent to which Cooper Union was formulated in response to Stephen A. Douglas's "Dividing Line" Speech — a "definitive defense of popular sovereignty" published by *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* in September of 1859. With the learned assistance of the renowned intellectual George Bancroft, Douglas attempted to show that popular sovereignty was representative of the Founders' views on slavery. In justifying his position, Douglas brazenly announced that, "Our fathers, when they framed the government under which we live, understood this question just as well, and even better than we do now."

Lincoln seized upon this phrase in the "Dividing Line Speech" and made it the "rhetorical spine" of Cooper Union. He derisively repeats it to reinforce his argument that the Founders intended something altogether different than popular sovereignty. Ever the consummate lawyer, in his speech, Lincoln cross-examines the founders, questioning them on the federal government's right to restrict slavery in the territories. After identifying the thirty-nine signers of the Constitution as "our fathers," a rhetorical allusion to the Lord's Prayer, Lincoln then considers their voting record on slavery. He shows that of the thirty-nine fathers who signed the Constitution, twenty-three left a clear voting record on the extension of slavery. Of these, twenty-one voted in favor of restricting slavery. And of the sixteen who left no clear voting record on the subject, Lincoln argues that fifteen of them had clear antislavery convictions on the subject. Lincoln's cross-examination of "our fathers" culminates with the tally: "thirty-six to three in favor of restricting slavery."

Further elucidating the context of the speech, Holzer reminds us that Lincoln's claim at Cooper Union that the Republican Party sought to conserve the practices and policies of the Founders should be understood in response to John Brown's Raid on October 16, 1859. Like Seward, Lincoln had used inflammatory rhetoric against slavery, most notably in his House Divided Speech, which Douglas cited during the debates as a radical abolitionist manifesto. Cooper Union thus provided him with a rare opportunity to remedy any lingering misperception that he was a radical and to establish his credentials as an anti-slavery moderate devoted to conserving the principles and the policies of the Founding Fathers. Cooper Union may thus be seen as the ideological glue that held the Republican Party together. The speech displays the prudent harmonization of moral principle under the rule of law.

Indeed, Lincoln's magisterial exposition of the Founders' intention to restrict slavery and to place it on a path of ultimate extinction at Cooper Union should be consulted by each new generation of Americans who would seek to ponder the anomalous status of slavery in the Constitution. Additionally, Cooper Union provides a devastating critique of Chief Justice Roger B. Taney's proslavery construction of the Constitution in *Dred Scott*. Directly contradicting Taney who asserted without foundation that "the right to property in a slave is distinctly and expressly affirmed in the Constitution," Lincoln quoted Madison at the convention who "thought it wrong to admit in the Constitution the idea that there could be property in men." Tragically, despite Lincoln's heroic effort in vindicating the Founders, the erroneous view stubbornly persists that the Constitution was a proslavery document committed to the nationalization of slavery.

In sum, *Lincoln at Cooper Union* is an outstanding guide to understanding the crucial speech that made Lincoln president. Throughout the book, Holzer paints a vivid picture of Lincoln's life and the life of the nation. He embellishes the drama of Cooper Union with fascinating details about Lincoln's train ride to New York, his oversight of the speech's publication, his shrewd decision to be photographed by Mathew Brady, his bewildering impression on the New York audience, his triumphant tour in New England, his visit with son Robert at Exeter, his subsequent imbroglio over the \$200.00 dollar honorarium, and his electoral trajectory. Holzer has beautifully captured the complex man and the aspiring statesman who peers out from Mathew Brady's famous photograph — emergent, resolute, grave. The noble visage in that portrait, soon to be ravaged by war, seems to reach into our hearts, beckoning the message of Cooper Union: "Let us have faith that RIGHT MAKES MIGHT and in that faith unto the end dare to do our duty as we understand it."

Author's Corner

By Harold Holzer

[Editor's note: This article is the second of a series of interviews with Lincoln authors and scholars. Mr. Holzer is answering questions about his newest book, *Cooper Union: The Speech That Made Abraham Lincoln President*. Published by Simon & Schuster, the book will be available Spring 2004.]

1. Some of our readers know the answer to this, but most don't: Why did you originally choose to specialize in Abraham Lincoln? It really began by chance, not choice. Our fifth grade class in New York was assigned to write one-page "biographies" of famous people, but each of us first had to pick his subject from the teacher's hat. I picked Lincoln, and went off to the school library, where I encountered Richard Nelson Current's classic, *The Lincoln Nobody Knows*. I was hooked; from that moment on, Lincoln was my abiding interest. Later, I was befriended by the Lincoln photograph specialist Stefan Lorant, after interviewing him in 1969 for a newspaper article on, of all things, Ted Kennedy's political future after Chappaquiddick. In part influenced by Lorant, I took an interest in iconography — engravings

and lithographs. I was still a youngster — but I received guidance and encouragement from unforgettable mentors. It was one of the early directors of The Lincoln Museum — then the Lincoln National Life Foundation — R. Gerald McMurtry, who first advised me to stop asking *him* for answers, and find some for myself. By the time I did, he was the editor of the *Lincoln Herald*, and invited me to write for his journal. That was 30 years ago this year. Ten years later, I teamed up with Mark Neely and Gabor Boritt and wrote the book, *The Lincoln Image*. That project launched my career as a writer of books about the Civil War era. But I suppose I was really "launched" by Mrs. Henrietta Janke at the Louis Pasteur Junior High School in Little Neck, Queens — or at least by the unseen hand that guided me to the slip of paper in her hat bearing the name of "Abraham Lincoln."

2. Why did you decide to write about Cooper Union? I had three reasons. First, I'm a born-and-bred New Yorker, a true and proud believer, I suppose, in the Kander & Ebb musical mantra that "if you can make it here, you'll make it anywhere."

So I've always had a deep interest in Lincoln's one and only New York speech (not counting his informal talks here when he was President-elect), and its extraordinary impact on his political ascent. Second, there seemed to be a gap in the literature: no scholarly study of the speech that arguably propelled Lincoln toward the White House. Of course, over the years one develops a certain degree of skepticism, so I also wanted very much to go back to the original sources to test the Cooper Union legend — that it was “the speech that made Lincoln President.” The third reason, I think, was one of golden opportunity, again providentially guided by chance. I happened to be sitting next to my future editor at Simon & Schuster, the amazing Alice Mayhew, at a Lincoln Forum dinner in November 2000. One of her authors — and one of my heroes — David Herbert Donald, was being honored that night. Over dessert, she told me that Ronald White's book on the Second Inaugural, *Lincoln's Greatest Speech*, was about to go to press. It was a natural sequel, she said, to her previous *Lincoln at Gettysburg* by Garry Wills. What was more, she added, she had just signed Allen Guelzo to write *Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation*. “It's become a series of books on Lincoln's great speeches and writings,” she said. And I instinctively answered: “Why not a book on Lincoln's Cooper Union address?” I must say, I'd never given such a book a thought. It was a genuine inspiration of the moment. Thank goodness for her answer: instead of asking me to pass the sugar, she said: “Send me a proposal.” Three-and-a-half years later, I'm proud to be joining those wonderful authors in Alice Mayhew's distinguished series.

2a. What exactly is Cooper Union today? In many ways, it has changed little since it opened in late 1859 and Lincoln appeared there a few months later. It looks the same, save for one extra story built at the top. As an institution, it remains a wonderful free college for deserving engineering and art students. The Great Hall auditorium looks much as it did in 1860, save for the fact that it is now horizontally, not vertically, arranged. And it is still the scene of community entertainments and political meetings. I was in the audience in 1977 for a memorable New York City mayoral debate (I was working for candidate Bella Abzug at the time, and soon to join the staff of the man who would defeat her in the first round of the primary, Mario Cuomo). More recently, Howard Dean appeared here to defend his “Confederate flag in the windshield” comments. It was not quite at the rhetorical level of Lincoln, but then again, nothing is. What is particularly heartening is that the Cooper Union neighborhood is improving every day. For decades, it was decaying, surrounded by an elevated railroad and flop houses. Now it's vibrant, hip, and exciting. There are bookstores, theaters, and restaurants nearby. The streets are crowded with students and visitors. The area exudes the same kind of energy it probably boasted when Lincoln visited there to speak 144 years ago.

3. Given the importance of that speech, why have many historians given it merely a cursory glance? I think the principal barrier is its daunting length. It is a challenging speech to read, much less to parse. To comprehend it requires a huge leap of imagination, back to the days when audiences expected hours of oratorical “entertainment” at their political rallies, debates, and meetings — part of a vanished political culture that flourished when Americans, even those living in bustling cities like New



Architect's drawing of Cooper Union at the time of Lincoln's address. *The Outlook*. February 8, 1922, p.222 (TLM #1592)

York, had nothing in particular to go home to except books by candlelight. No television, no sports, no radio: politics was the thing. Moreover, the speech is so unlike Lincoln's earlier and later addresses that it has defied analysis: it is really three speeches in one — a legal and historical brief, a peculiar but effective “warning” to the South; and a passionate anti-slavery rallying cry. Lincoln's earlier oratory is more fiery; his later speeches are more elegiac — not to mention briefer. Cooper Union is the dividing line between his established styles. Historians have either misinterpreted it, or given it a pass. But in all fairness, the new interest in book-length treatments of entire speeches began only recently, with Garry Wills' book on the Gettysburg Address. So the trend is a relatively new one.

4. What was your primary research source (private papers, books, archives, etc.)? What unexpected material did you find in your research? I relied heavily on memoirs and recollections by eyewitnesses, newspaper reports, and letters between Lincoln and those of his young New York hosts who became the editors of the annotated, pamphlet-sized reprint of the speech later in 1860. But I also determined to do something a bit different — again, of course, using primary sources. I wanted to demonstrate that there was no straight, unbroken line in Lincoln's focus between his invitation to New York and his arrival at Cooper Union a few months later. He remained simultaneously a busy lawyer, a problem-plagued Illinois politician, an aspiring lecturer, and a family man supporting a son away at school. The road to Cooper Union was paved with complications, digressions, and crises. This is how life really is, even for politicians — complex. But no one ever wrote about Cooper Union this way before. I suppose the most unexpected piece of material I found was a denunciation of the speech by a correspondent for a Southern newspaper. No one has, to the best of my knowledge, ever unearthed this wonderful condemnation before. I was also surprised — to put it mildly — to find proof from two different meteorological sources in New York that his hosts' long-accepted excuse for the empty seats that night was an invention. No, it did not snow that night. It was dry and warm.

5. Did you plan the book for a specific audience? I share historian Forrest McDonald's recently expressed belief in writing for an educated “general” audience. That's an overused adjective, but it reflects the spirit of writing not just for other historians, but

for the broader public that cares about Lincoln and his era. I try to be lively as well as scholarly; I wanted *Cooper Union* not only to provide a definitive analysis of the speech, but a narrative drive as pounding and inexorable as the train rides Lincoln took from Springfield east. My view is that historians have a responsibility to enlighten, and an opportunity to enchant readers. I don't know if I've come close to doing either, but I know that I tried. I came to have another, more specific readership in mind, too. When I started my research, I did not plan for the book to come out in the midst of the 2004 presidential election campaign, but as long as it has worked out that way, I think there might be another audience for *Lincoln at Cooper Union* as well: readers who want to know how candidates ran for the nation's highest office when the Republic was younger, and facing an even graver crisis than it faces today. As I hope the book will demonstrate, they did so with serious, well-researched presentations that did not underestimate the intelligence, curiosity, or concern of their audiences. They did not rely on sound bites and question-and-answer sessions masquerading as debates. Perhaps a candidate or two in the future will dare to address issues in depth again — as Lincoln did so successfully in 1860.

6. In U.S. history, can there be a comparison of the Cooper Union speech to any other given by a potential presidential candidate? I wish I had thought this through — or even contemplated the question for myself! — when I was writing the book. It's an excellent point. In the 20th century, however, one finds such great oratorical moments occurring at political conventions, not before them. In Lincoln's day, national candidates did not even attend the conventions; they were nothing like the grand stages they later became. So Roosevelt's great speech in 1932 comes to mind — promising "a new deal for the American people." If there are analogues to Lincoln's pre-convention "break-through" at Cooper Union, they may be Ronald Reagan's brilliant one liners: "I happen to be paying for this microphone," the line that elevated him above his challengers at a debate in 1980; and "are we better off today than we were four years ago," face to face with Jimmy Carter after the convention. The only great pre-nomination speech was probably Mario Cuomo's "City on the Hill" address at the San Francisco convention in the 1980s. But alas, he chose not to run.

7. What was the expectation of the audience before Lincoln's Cooper Union speech? There is not a doubt in my mind, after combing through all the memoirs, letters, and newspaper reports, that the Cooper Union audience expected Lincoln to come across as some sort of frontier freak — gesturing wildly, haranguing, and speaking with a quaint accent. The fact is, he *was* something of a gesturer in his pre-presidential days; never "sawing wood" with his hands, as William Herndon put it so quaintly — but occasionally dropping down almost to his knees, then shooting up to his full height, his hands outstretched, for effect. But there would be none of that in New York. Lincoln wisely held himself in check. His audience didn't expect a legal and historical defense of national authority over slavery extension, either. The sheer ingenuity of Lincoln's argument dazzled them — and the sly way he delivered it engrossed them. I think the modern way of describing the environment in which Lincoln spoke is one of "low expectations." That surely helped him, too. But it's

also interesting to note that the low expectations did not vanish instantly; as usual with Lincoln, it took four or five minutes on the podium before his accent — and he surely had a jarring one to Easterners — fell easily on the ears, and people got accustomed to his strange appearance. One finds the same recollections among New Yorkers and New Englanders who heard Lincoln deliver variations on the Cooper Union theme in the days after his New York speech: he startled audiences at the start. Then, when they got used to him, they fell entirely under his spell. Of course, modern readers need to keep in mind that these were not general audiences; they were Republican audiences, in an age of strict adherence to party. And, after all, many Republicans were pre-disposed to liking Lincoln. He had given the hated Senator Douglas a run for his money in the 1858 Senate race in Illinois, and he represented the West, whose votes Eastern Republicans knew were crucial to winning the White House in 1860.

8. Was there an immediate reaction to the speech after it was given? How long did it take for contemporaries to realize its importance? If you can believe one man — unfortunately we don't know who he was (he gave his reaction to journalist Noah Brooks, who published them without identifying his source) — Lincoln seemed "the greatest man since St. Paul" after his mesmerizing speech. I am convinced that the audience was thrilled by it — realized within minutes that it was hearing an epochal oration. One of his hosts stood up afterwards and predicted to the audience that it elevated Lincoln to the exalted status of William H. Seward and Salmon P. Chase among the chief aspirants to the Republican presidential nomination. Then, when the newspapers gave the speech huge coverage the following day, and published it as a little pamphlet in a matter of days, Republicans knew that a new national star was on the ascendant. The reputation of the speech was at peak level in the year 1860. It has dwindled since — unjustly, I think — first, because Lincoln went on to deliver even greater speeches at his inaugurals and at Gettysburg; and, second, because historians glibly began labeling it a "conservative" speech, an adjective I do not believe it deserves.

9. Did Lincoln realize the impact which this speech and this audience could have on his political career? I think he so understood from the moment he read the invitation to speak on the East Coast. He probably sensed that the opportunity was being arranged by Chase supporters in New York determined to de-rail Seward in his New York back yard. Nonetheless, he knew it was a great opportunity. That's why he devoted more time to it, according to law partner Herndon, than any speech that he had ever delivered. He did all his own research, writing, and rewriting tirelessly. Of course, he wrote it all in longhand. The physical challenge alone was daunting. It was a huge undertaking. And, yes, he surely understood its importance when he stepped on stage at Cooper Union — and when he stepped off. The audience response was, by most accounts, deafening. His hosts at a post-event dinner made it clear to him that he had triumphed. More tellingly, Lincoln did not go directly back to his hotel, and from there home. That very night, exhausted as he surely was, he traipsed up to the *New York Tribune's* press room to proof-read the speech himself before it was published. He did not want a word to be misprinted and, worse, misunderstood. He had worked far too hard on this address — and he knew how crucial it was to his future and the party's

and the country's. Further evidence that he knew this was his rhetorical zenith is that he went on to deliver modified versions of the speech in Rhode Island, New Hampshire, and Connecticut in the days to come. "Right Makes Might" did not become a rallying cry for Republicans by accident; Lincoln repeated it the way modern candidates shout, "bring it on," and "compassionate conservatism" with such numbing repetition. I argue in the book that Cooper Union and its variations in New England constituted not only Lincoln's first presidential campaign speech, but his last. He knew it would make him or break him. And when it made him, he didn't have to say another public word. White House candidates generally stayed on the back porch; Lincoln could let the pamphlets speak for him, and they did.

10. Did Lincoln have help on the speech or seek comments from others prior to presentation? Some of his law office cronies later testified that Lincoln read portions of the address to them aloud before departing for New York. This kind of thing was common practice for Lincoln. He was a man who needed to hear words out loud before digesting them — he even read newspapers aloud to himself, much to the annoyance of his colleagues. It stands to reason that he would have tested the speech, or at least sections of it, on his close friends and allies, although none in Springfield ever claimed to have influenced him. One legend that deserves to be permanently retired, however, is the old story — often repeated — that on his way to New York, Lincoln stopped over in Chicago and submitted his manuscript for comment to the editors of the *Press & Tribune*, which had just endorsed him for president. Not a grain of truth to it. Maybe that is why the imaginative editor who told this tall tale added that Lincoln accepted not one of their suggestions for improvement. But the fact is, Lincoln did not even stop in Chicago en route to New York. He took a different route altogether — through Fort Wayne, now home of The Lincoln Museum! Once in New York, Lincoln may have shown the manuscript to some of his hosts, probably because he was concerned that it would not suit a New York audience. (Until he arrived in New York, after all, he believed he would be speaking at a church in Brooklyn). In the end, Lincoln would be most unlikely to take more than small suggestions from strangers, however sympathetic they were on issues. Lincoln was not an insecure man. In fact, he had a rather strong sense, even then, that he knew best and that, as he wrote in that very speech, "right makes might."

10a. What about the famous "Cooper Union photograph." Was it as important to Lincoln's election as the speech? Absolutely. Its impact has not been exaggerated. But it *has* been misunderstood. The photograph itself was barely distributed at all during the 1860 campaign season. By all accounts, the technology that introduced so-called *cartes-de-visite*, the little photos mounted on cards for display in family albums, was not introduced until the following year. Brady's Cooper Union photo was, however, copied by countless printmakers, and their adaptations were ubiquitous — and influential. They romanticized Lincoln's appearance, softened his rough edges, and even improved his wardrobe. The picture squashed any lingering doubts about Lincoln's suitability for dignified high office. The photo and the speech — accomplished the same day, February 27, 1860 — proved a magical combination.

11. What Lincoln subject matter do you hope to explore in the future? I want very much to write my book about the life portraits of Lincoln. I've delayed it too long. The University of North Carolina Press has been unbelievably patient about this project, and I'm determined to get to it. UNC plans to publish it lavishly — which is just what the subject deserves. I'm actually glad I waited because there have been some interesting recent discoveries in the field. I also plan to do a little book on Lincoln and Thomas Jefferson, and hope also to bring out a newly edited version of the memoirs of Lincoln's clerk, William O. Stoddard. His granddaughter has asked me to produce an authorized edition, and I do want to fulfill her faith in me. I have some additional projects in press or about to go to press, and others under contract. For example, I was privileged recently to serve as historical advisor for Mario Cuomo's new book, entitled *Why Lincoln Matters*. I have known the former Governor for half my life — more than 27 years — and worked for his administration for eight. We also edited the book *Lincoln on Democracy* together in 1990, one of the most rewarding projects of my life. So this book was a wonderful reunion. Merely enjoying the opportunity to talk to — and sometimes joust with — him on a daily basis, bounce ideas back and forth, and enjoy the stimulation of his intellect, is high honor. I also have a new book exploring the Emancipation Proclamation in politics, memory, and imagery, co-authored with Edna Greene Medford and Frank J. Williams, due out, I hope, in early 2005. John Y. Simon and I will edit a third volume of Lincoln Forum papers for Fordham University Press. I hope to edit a collection of essays about the Battle of Hampton Roads sponsored by the Mariners' Museum in Newport News, Virginia, home of the remains of the *USS Monitor*. And I have a couple of young readers' books yet to do: one on Lincoln's Sons, another on William Seward, and yet another for The Metropolitan Museum of Art uniting great words from American literature with great paintings, sculpture, and photographs from our collections. I'm tired just thinking about it all. J. G. Randall once asked the famous question: "Has the Lincoln theme been exhausted?" Not even close — it's the historians who face exhaustion, not the subject. But if I don't "wink out," like Lincoln's New Salem grocery store, I'll get to everything — eventually.



Sam Waterston recreates the Cooper Union address May 5, 2004, from the podium where Lincoln delivered the original address in 1860. Harold Holzer — who introduced Waterston, assuming the role William Cullen Bryant performed in 1860, looks on. Photo by Don Pollard.



Sam Waterston and Harold Holzer present "Lincoln Seen and Heard" at the Library of Congress. Photo by Don Pollard.



Cooper Union building today. Photo by Don Pollard.

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