

Historic Southern Indiana

Lincoln Institute, 2004

Pebbles or Diamonds: How Do We Know What We Know About Lincoln in Indiana?

By William E. Bartlet

There is an old parable that tells us:

One night, in ancient time, three horsemen were riding across a desert. As they crossed the dry bed of a river, out of the darkness a voice called, "Halt!" They obeyed. The voice then told them to dismount, pick up a handful of pebbles, put the pebbles in their pockets and remount. They again obeyed. The voice then said, "You have done as I commanded. Tomorrow at sunup you will both be glad and sorry." Mystified the horsemen rode on.

When the sun rose, they reached into their pockets and found that a miracle had happened. The pebbles had been transformed into diamonds, rubies, and other precious stones. They remembered the warning. They were glad and sorry—glad that they had taken some, and sorry that they had not taken more . . .

There is no record that Abraham Lincoln ever heard this story, but if he had I think he would have enjoyed it. There are countless ways to interpret this parable. But today it seems to me that it has a message pertinent to the study of Abraham Lincoln's life in Indiana. We are glad that there are pebbles from the time --records and personal accounts-- that shed light on the topic, but we are sad that more of what became jewels of information were not collected.

The parable does not tell us what the horsemen did with the jewels collected, but this presents another challenge in dealing with Lincoln's Indiana years – that being how do we interpret the limited information we have.

As always in writing history, historians and Lincoln enthusiasts have come to different conclusions. The most accepted work on the period is the almost 50-year old work of Louis Warren entitled *Lincoln's Youth: The Indiana Years Seven to Twenty-One*. Incidentally, I have always felt this site should be called Lincoln Youth rather than

Historic Southern Indiana

Lincoln Institute, 2004

Lincoln Boyhood National Memorial. Warren, a minister by profession, devoted much of his life to researching and documenting first the Kentucky years, and then the Indiana years of Lincoln. His work is by far the most detailed account of the Indiana period, but as Michael Burkheimer in his recent work *100 Essential Lincoln Books*

Lincoln's years in Indiana were probably the toughest in his life and not at all like the romantic picture Warren attempts to paint in his book.

The problem is not the facts but his interpretation. The tone of the book does not admit to the privations that were common on the Indiana frontier. Lincoln held no romantic view of his childhood there.^[1]

Similar criticism is leveled at the earlier work of journalist Ida Tarbell, who also spent time researching the early years. Her 1900 two-volume work *Life of Abraham Lincoln* has been called a "mid-Victorian attempt to fumigate Lincoln."^[2] Others, such as former Indiana Senator Albert J. Beveridge, in his 1928 work, provide a much more sober view of the period.^[3]

These authors, and many more, are basically using the same sources of information—or back to the parable—the same pebbles that become jewels. So what are they?

The first pebbles that become jewels in the study of the Indiana years of Lincoln are a few contemporary documents. Unfortunately, the Hoosier paper trail is short.

In the General Land Office records in the National Archives, the Vincennes Land Office records in the Indiana State Archives, and a reference in a Spencer County Deed Book, we can piece together the story of Thomas Lincoln's land holdings in Indiana.^[4] We discover that Thomas Lincoln was a typical early Indiana resident who was able to eventually acquire clear title to 80 acres of government land and an additional 20 acres obtained from a neighbor, despite weathering difficult economic times in the 1820s.

Another jewel, which was unknown to scholars for years, is the Little Pigeon Baptist Church Minute Book. This homemade book documents not only the history of the Lincoln family church—all members but Abraham—but also gives insight to the language, spelling, and cultural mores of the area during the Lincolns stay in the state. Ida Tarbell appears to have first discovered it during her visit in 1922 and later wrote of it:

In the fall of 1922 I first had my hands on the ancient book in which the minutes of the church's business meetings were set down from its organization in 1816 on into the thirties. It is a precious document to a book lover, its big sheets, probably 24 x 9 inches

Historic Southern Indiana

Lincoln Institute, 2004

in size, being bound in a homemade cowhide cover from which the hair has been almost entirely worn.^[5]

The members of the church realized the value of the book and guarded it carefully until 1943, when it was sold for \$1000. The pastor at the time said, "The members of this church are growing old and they wish to see their church home in good condition before they pass away."^[6] Eventually the book made its way to the Illinois Historical Library in Springfield.

The jewels of the contemporary documents that shine the brightest are the comments made by Lincoln himself. A few pages of the copybook or sum book he made while attending school in Indiana survive. Not only do we see his early handwriting and mathematical figuring in these, but also some of his early humor. For example he almost appears to know the significance of these when he wrote:

Abraham Lincoln is my name
And with my pen I wrote the same
I wrote in both hast and speed
And left it here for fools to read.^[7]

After a campaign visit to his old Indiana neighborhood in 1844, he writes more poetry that is published in an Illinois newspaper. In the introductory letter he wrote, "That part of the country is, within itself, as unpoetical as any spot of the earth; but still, seeing it and its objects and inhabitants aroused feelings in me which were certainly poetry; though whether my expression of those feelings is poetry is quite another question."^[8] He says:

My childhood home I see again,
And sadden with the view;
And still, as memory crowds my brain,
There's pleasure in it too.

And finishes that section with:

I range the fields with pensive tread.
And pace the hollow rooms,
And feel (companion of the dead)
I'm living in the tombs^[9]

He also describes a bear hunt he remembered and writes of his childhood friend Mathew Gentry, of whom he says, "At the age of nineteen he unaccountably became furiously mad, from which condition he gradually settled down into harmless insanity.

Historic Southern Indiana

Lincoln Institute, 2004

When . . . I visited my old home in the fall of 1844, I found him still lingering in this wretched condition.”^[10]

In two separate autobiographical statements written for the 1860 campaign, Lincoln gives the very basic details of his Indiana years.^[11] From these documents we learn that the Lincolns left Kentucky for Indiana partly on account of slavery, but chiefly because of difficulty Thomas Lincoln was having with the antiquated “metes and bounds” system of land survey. Lincoln relates the difficulty of clearing land for a homestead in a wilderness full of wild animals. He relates his desire for knowledge in a community with few educational opportunities. The sadness caused by the deaths of his mother and sister is alluded to, as is the excitement of a flatboat trip to New Orleans.

While these documents provide a skeletal understanding of the Indiana years, we must view the crown jewels of personal interviews made after Lincoln’s assassination to flesh out the years.

The crown jewel of Lincoln’s Indiana years is the work of his law partner William Herndon. When Herndon started his project to learn all he could about his now dead partner’s life, he knew little of the Indiana days. Lincoln had told some Hoosier stories over the years and probably had given Herndon a general idea of where he had lived. But Herndon desired to talk to the people who really knew Lincoln—not only in Illinois—but also in Kentucky and Indiana. Lincoln historian Charles Strozier has called the result one of the first oral history projects in America^[12]

He first began to learn about the Indiana years from Dennis Hanks—Lincoln’s cousin who lived with the Lincolns for many years and married one of Abraham’s stepsisters. Later he talked with Lincoln’s stepmother Sarah Bush Johnston and other Lincoln relatives living in Illinois. The day-to-day information obtained in these interviews is invaluable in understanding the youthful Lincoln.

On June 5, 1865, Herndon wrote a letter to “some good Union lawyer” in Rockport. The letter was given to James W. Wartmann, who responded on June 8 with the promise to get contacts for Herndon. By the end of July, Wartmann provided some anecdotes and the names of people who provided the stories.^[13] In September Herndon visited Spencer County to personally gather the information and view the sites of Lincoln’s youth.

Herndon’s guide was Lincoln’s old friend Nathaniel Grigsby. Grigsby was two years younger than Lincoln and gave Herndon first hand accounts of Lincoln’s family, schooling and character at the time. I suspect Herndon was not surprised by Grigsby’s description of the early interests and character of the man who had died of an assassin’s bullet less than six months earlier. Grigsby said:

Historic Southern Indiana

Lincoln Institute, 2004

His mind & the Ambition of the man soared above us. He naturally assumed the leadership of the boys—He read & thoroughly read his books whilst we played --. Hence he was above us and became our guide and leader & in this position he never failed to be the leader. He was Kind –jocular – witty –wise –honest – just – human full of integrity – Energy -- & acting. When he appeared in Company the boys would gather & cluster around him to hear him talk. He made fun & cracked jokes making all happy, but the jokes & fun were at no mans Expense – He wounded no mans feelings.^[14]

The last comment is interesting in light of the fact that the Grigsby family was the focus of one of Lincoln’s biting but witty poems called the” Chronicles of Reuben” and which the Grigsby family found offensive at the time and people in the community still remembered in 1865.

Grigsby also provided information that only a contemporary could. Such as:

We wore buckskin pants – and linsey woolsey hunting coat to school. This was our school dress – our Sunday dress and Every day dress. Mr. Lincoln was long & tall and like the balance of us he wore low shoes – short socks, wool being scarce –between the shoe and sock & britches—made of buckskin there was bare & naked 6 or more inches of Abe Lincoln shin bone.^[15]

Other friends spoke to Herndon of additional school experiences, and they all reinforced Grigsby’s assessment of Lincoln’s studious and curious nature as well as his ability to entertain them. Herndon also talked with William Wood and Elizabeth Crawford—of Lincoln’s parent’s generation, and learned of the political and religious climate at the time, as well as the carpentry abilities of Thomas Lincoln. Others discussed the importance of William Jones on the young man. Herndon remained in correspondence with many of his Indiana informants as more questions developed in his research.

But Herndon did not just record what he heard, but also what he saw. He describes the roads, the trees, Nancy Hanks Lincoln’s gravesite, the Little Pigeon Baptist Church area, and the old Lincoln farm itself.

The only negative comments came from John Romine who said: “I say Abe was awful lazy: he would laugh & talk and crack jokes & tell stories all the time, didn’t love work but did dearly love his pay.”^[16] This raises an important consideration—how reliable are these comments? Or if return to our parable the questions is: Are all of these jewels or, are some simple pebbles?

First we must remember that Herndon was asking for information from at least 35 years earlier. That would be like us remembering events before 1969. This also was shortly after the end of the Civil War and the assassination of Lincoln. Few would be willing to

Historic Southern Indiana

Lincoln Institute, 2004

speak in negative terms about the martyred President, and many of the Lincoln myths had already been created. In addition, Herndon was obviously seeking those who had favorable comments by his addressing the letter to “a good Union lawyer.” Finally, for some – like Dennis Hanks—it was an opportunity to become part of history by making them an important part of Abraham Lincoln’s life.

That having been said, we cannot understate the importance of Herndon’s work. All of the interviews and correspondence are now available thanks to the work of Douglas Wilson and Rodney Davis of Knox College. Their book, *Herndon’s Informants: Letters, Interviews, and Statements about Abraham Lincoln*, is an annotation of Herndon’s material. “Douglas Wilson has recently asserted that without William Herndon we would be largely in the dark about Lincoln’s early life even well into the 1830s, for without Herndon’s material there is precious little else.” (Rodney Davis adds) “One can only agree. However much Herndon has been accused of mythmaking, with only partial justification at the most, without his success in discovering Spencer County residents who were willing to talk and write to him about these vitally formative years in the life of Abraham Lincoln, we would be poor indeed.”^[17]

There were others who talked with the old neighbors over the next 40 years. I feel three deserve mention here.

The first is Boonville native and very successful Indianapolis businessman William Fortune. Fortune wrote a Warrick County history as a teenager and came to the attention of Civil War General James C. Veatch of Rockport. According to Fortune, “ He [Veatch] said there were still living a number of people who had known the Lincoln family, and he proposed that I go with him to visit a number of these survivors then living in Spencer County. I very eagerly accepted the proposal and together in October 1881, we spent some days driving about in Spencer County interviewing these survivors.”^[18] Unfortunately, except for a speech years later and a few notes, he did not do much with the results.

Another is Rev. J. Edward Murr, a Methodist minister, who became acquainted with residents in the area starting in 1892. Murr felt the Indiana period had not received appropriate attention. In his words,

To undertake at this late day the task of correcting the perspective of the Lincoln admirers by focusing attention upon his youth is an exceedingly difficult one, and ordinarily would prove discouraging, but since it is believed that sufficient data is at hand to substantiate the claim, the task has been undertaken with a view at least of supplementing the work of recognized authorities in this field, as well as rendering tardy justice to Lincoln’s youth.^[19]

Historic Southern Indiana

Lincoln Institute, 2004

His work was published in three installments in the *Indiana Magazine of History* in 1917 and 1918. Murr probably had the closest relationship with the old residents of any of the interviewers and gives a good view of day-to-day life in the Little Pigeon Community.

Finally, there is the Vincennes teacher Anna O'Flynn. Actually much of Ida Tarbell's early work came from O'Flynn—although she is referenced only as A. Hoosier. Before her 1895 and 1896 visits to Spencer County, O'Flynn corresponded with General Veatch. In a letter dated March 14, 1894 he informs her "All these people or nearly all have passed away." And goes on with a warning:

"Beware of trusting to the stories of roving newspaper correspondents. Everyone of this class who passes Lincoln station on the Rockport Rail Road must send to his paper some thing about Lincoln. The train generally stops 15 or 20 minutes. The . . . Correspondent rushes out and finds in the nearest whiskey shop a crowd of old "soakers" who are ready at a word to tell many things about Lincoln that no one else even knew."

"I have read many of these productions and corrected some of them, but have not seen one single truthful account coming from such a source."^[20]

By the early 20th Century, no one remained who personally remembered the Lincolns—just the next generation who heard many of the stories but had not experienced them. Much of the family history of the community was collected as part of the Southwestern Indiana Historical Society's Lincoln Inquiry. This work under the leadership of Evansville lawyer John E. Iglehart from 1920 to 1927, gives a sense of who the Lincoln neighbors were. Spencer County resident Bess V. Ehrmann published some of the accounts in her 1938 book *The Missing Chapter in the Life of Abraham Lincoln* and in a booklet on Lincoln and his neighbors.

So what is the significance of all this to we educators? I think it presents us with the opportunity to not only teach about Abraham Lincoln's life from age 7 to 21, but to help students understand the nature of history. By exposing students to historical documents and contemporary accounts they are forced to weigh the information and make the interpretations to see the real picture. As biographers readily admit, the Indiana evidence is ". . . almost wholly reminiscent and obtained after a lapse of years, . . . sometimes unreliable and often contradictory."^[21] But isn't that true of much history? Using this material will force students to decide which pieces of evidence are pebbles and which are "the diamonds, rubies, and precious stones" of the Indiana Lincoln story.

^[1] Michael Burkheimer, *100 Essential Lincoln Books* (Nashville, 2003), 147-149.

Historic Southern Indiana

Lincoln Institute, 2004

[2] John Braeman, "Albert J. Beveridge and Demythologizing Lincoln." *Journal of the Abraham Lincoln Association*, Volume 25, Number 2 (Summer 2004), 7. This is a quote from Albert Beveridge.

[3] Ibid. See also Mark E. Neely, Jr, "Indiana" *The Abraham Lincoln Encyclopedia* (1982), 160.

[4] William E. Bartelt, "The Land Dealings of Spencer County Indiana Pioneer Thomas Lincoln," *Indiana Magazine of History*, LXXXVII (September 1991), 211-223.

[5] Ida M. Tarbell, *In The Footsteps of the Lincolns* (New York, 1924), 141-142.

[6] Bess V. Ehrmann, "Old Pigeon Creek Minute Book Sold", *Lincoln Herald* (December 1943), 25-26, 28.

[7] *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, comp. Roy P. Baler (8 vols., New Brunswick, N.J., 1953), I, 1.

[8] *Collected Works*, I, 378.

[9] *Collected Works*, I, 378-379.

[10] *Collected Works*, I, 384-385. For the complete poem see pages 366-370, 384-389.

[11] Abraham Lincoln to Jesse Fell, Enclosing Autobiography, December 20, 1859, in *The Collected Works* III, 511-12; Autobiography written for John L. Scripps, (June, 1860), IV., 60-67.

[12] Rodney O. Davis, "William Herndon's Indiana Oral History Project, 1865" *Indiana Magazine of History*, LXXXIX (June, 1993), 136. This article provides an excellent overview of Herndon's visit to Indiana.

[13] Douglas L. Wilson and Rodney O. Davis, editors, *Herndon's Informants: Letters, Interviews, and Statements about Abraham Lincoln* (Chicago, 1998), 29, 47, 78-80. The complete interviews, descriptions, and later correspondence can be found in this work.

[14] Wilson and Davis, 114.

[15] Wilson and Davis, 113.

[16] Wilson and Davis, 118.

Historic Southern Indiana

Lincoln Institute, 2004

^[17] Rodney O. Davis, 146.

^[18] Bess V. Ehrmann, *The Missing Chapter in the Life of Abraham Lincoln*, (Chicago, 1938) 69-70.

^[19] J. Edward Murr, "Lincoln in Indiana," *Indiana Magazine of History*, XIII (December 1917), 327.

^[20] "Lincoln Collections – Anna O'Flynn" file in the history files of Lincoln Boyhood National Memorial.

^[21] Benjamin Thomas, *Portrait For Posterity*, (New Burnswick:1947), 251.