The “Troubles in Kansas” clippings

Newspaper cuttings from Lincoln-Herndon law office discovered

By David M. Webster

Examination of old books can be fun. It can be educational. And, every once in a while, it can lead to discoveries that just might be significant.

An Illinois family has for very many years owned a book published in 1856, titled The Report of the Special Committee to Investigate the Troubles in Kansas. The Special Committee referred to in the title was constituted that year by the U.S. House of Representatives, 34th Congress of the United States.

A mammoth volume, over 1200 pages in length, the book is a detailed examination of just how well the concept of “popular sovereignty” was working out in one of the territories of the United States. Popular sovereignty became an issue after repeal of the Missouri Compromise in 1854, upon enactment of Kansas-Nebraska Act.

Knowing how the government and fundamental laws of the Territory of Kansas were initially decided upon was something that was very valuable to Abraham Lincoln. For example, two years later, in 1858, he sought to unseat a principal author of the Kansas-Nebraska Act, Illinois’s senior United States Senator, Stephen A. Douglas. Their battle that year occupies a very high place in the pantheon of America’s most significant political campaigns.

What is interesting about the particular volume of The Special Report described above is that it was at one time the property of William H. Herndon. Herndon, of course, was Abraham Lincoln’s law partner when the book was published, as he had been for the preceding twelve years, and would remain for nearly five years more.

Of greater interest still is that the book contains approximately 160 newspaper clippings from the mid-1850s that in all likelihood were clipped from newspapers by Herndon and stored in the pages of the Special Report. (The clippings are being scanned to make them more readily available for research.)

There is no absolute evidence that the 1850s newspaper articles that became the clippings were designated for clipping (or for that matter clipped) by Herndon or Lincoln. Similarly, there is no obvious evidence that the clippings were read or subsequently used by either Lincoln or Herndon. However, it is known that both Lincoln and Herndon were avid consumers of newspapers. As Kenneth I. Winkle puts it in his highly-regarded account of the pre-presidential life of The Young Eagle:

Enscounced in their law office in Springfield, Lincoln and his partner, William Herndon, assiduously collected and scanned newspapers and periodicals from all over the country to keep an eye on events and opinions taking shape in America’s different regions. Herndon remembered Lincoln as a constant newspaper reader, preferring western and southern periodicals.

“He was a careful and patient reader of newspapers,” Herndon recalled, “the Sangamon Journal—published at Springfield, St. Louis Republican, and Cincinnati Gazette being usually within his reach.”

Similarly, according to Ronald C. White, Jr., in A. Lincoln: “Both Lincoln and Herndon read newspapers insatiably. After returning from Washington, Lincoln subscribed to the New York Tribune, Horace Greeley’s influential national newspaper; Washington’s National Intelligencer, the great Whig newspaper; and the Chicago Tribune, founded in 1847, which advocated a Whig and Free Soil opinion on slavery. Herndon encouraged Lincoln to subscribe to several leading antislavery papers as well, including the Anti-Slavery Standard, the official weekly newspaper of the American Anti-Slavery Society; and the National Era, a weekly abolitionist paper published out of Washington.”


Given Lincoln and Herndon’s interest in newspapers, might the clippings—located in a book owned by Herndon that was kept in the Lincoln-Herndon law office—provide useful information about what they read?

An interesting example relates to a speech Lincoln gave at a Republican Banquet in Chicago on December 10, 1856. He said:

“The late Presidential election was a struggle, by one party, to discard that central idea, and to substitute for it the opposite idea that slavery is right, in the abstract, the workings of which, as a central idea, may be the perpetuation of human slavery, and its extension to all...”

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In one of the clippings, from an as-yet unidentified newspaper, appears the following:

The True Issue. From the Richmond, Va., Inquirer, Buchanan.

We must show that African slavery is a moral, religious, natural, and probably, in the general, a necessary institution of society. This is the only line of argument that will enable Southern democrats to maintain the doctrines of state equality and slavery extension. For if slavery be not a legitimate, useful, moral, and expedient institution, we cannot, without reproach of conscience and the blush of shame, seek to extend it, or assert our equality with those states having no such institution.

It was common in the 1870s for newspapers in one section of the country to reprint articles that had first appeared in newspapers published in a different section. The clipping is almost certainly an example of this, although the newspaper from which it was clipped appears to have misspelled "Enquirer," the actual title of the widely-known Richmond, Virginia newspaper from that period. (White states that: "The Richmond Enquirer set the standard in Southern journalism and had become a leading voice in the surge toward secession." White also states that Lincoln and Herndon had begun subscribing to the Inquirer, not long after Lincoln had returned from his term in Congress in 1849. Ronald C. White, Jr. A. Lincoln. Random House: New York: 2009, p. 169.)

Thus, Lincoln in late December 1856 denounced the phrase "State equality," as it had been invented and used by the Richmond Enquirer during the immediately prior year. The clipping cites an example of such usage, by that newspaper. The game now becomes trying to discover the paper from which the clipping came, its date, and whether there is any basis for positing that Lincoln may have seen the term for the first time in the clipping found in one of William Herndon's books.

Determining whether the content of any of the clippings is reflected in the thinking of either man should be far easier to determine in today's world of searchable online databases. Databases can be searched to see the extent to which any of the facts, ideas, and analyses in the clippings were drawn upon by either man in subsequent years.

That words from a particular clipping can be found in later writings of either man does not prove that Lincoln or Herndon "discovered" those words in any particular clipping. But such would be a possibility.

As for identifying the source newspapers when digitized resources are unavailing, it should prove helpful that the clippings, for the most part, have content on both sides. More reference in an advertisement on the back side of a clipping to "Chicago" or "St. Louis" will not necessarily mean that the newspaper itself was published in either of those cities. More often, the research will likely require matching such things as the layout, typeface, and columnar organization of samples (from known examples of specific newspapers) with the limited examples of such things that are identifiable in the clippings. But the reward should be well worth the effort.

Obviously, it would go way too far to say that men such as Lincoln and Herndon were somehow the product of what they read in the newspapers. But what they were interested in reading—and particularly what they were interested in enough to clip and save—almost has to be a good indicator of the intellectual, legal, and political topics that they found to be most appealing, intriguing, and worthwhile. And that kind of information is at the heart of biography.

David M. Webster is a member of the board of directors of the Society. Persons interested in learning more about the clippings, as more information about them becomes available, can reach him at DavidMacWebster@comcast.net.
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On the cover:

“Redbuds in Bloom at Lincoln Memorial Garden, Springfield, Illinois,” photo by Virginia Scott. Several more of Virginia’s photos are included in this issue of Illinois Heritage.

To our readers:

The winter of 2016-2017 will be history soon, but it hasn’t measured up to the “winter of the deep snow.” That mythical snowfall lasted from December to February and buried most of Illinois and its inhabitants for several weeks in 1831.

Not so this year. On Washington’s Birthday, February 22, a day when we are usually bundled, layered, and bootied up for winter, I visited our friends in Woodstock, Illinois, and marveled at temperatures in the high sixties, and saw postal carriers in shorts and short-sleeved shirts delivering the mail. Record highs were set all over the state. But what, alas, does it forebode for the summer and fall of 2017?

As usual, we’re hopeful. The March-April issue of Illinois Heritage looks ahead to spring and features the beautiful photographs of ISHS member Virginia Scott, whose image of Lincoln Memorial Garden adorns our cover. We also look to the past in John Hallwas’s “Forgotten Voices,” which profiles Cairo-author Maud Mayne, whose reminiscences of that deep southern Illinois town in the 1890s gave us one of our best descriptions of life in Egypt during the Gilded Age.

This issue also introduces you to the slate of new ISHS officers, directors, and advisers who are up for election at the 2017 Annual Meeting on Saturday, April 22, in Springfield. Take a few moments to get to know them better. The Annual Meeting and Annual Awards recognition coincide with this year’s Illinois History Symposium, “1917, Year of Turmoil: War and Suffrage” (April 20-22), an outstanding public program featuring more than 25 presentations on Illinois in that critical year. Registration information is included in this issue on page 28. We’d love to have you join us at Lincoln Land Community College for the college’s 50th anniversary celebration; LLCC is located just across Shepherd Road from ISHS headquarters. The symposium and annual meeting promise to be a grand event! Come and share your Heritage!

William Furry
Executive Director