Herndon's astonishment was undoubtedly genuine. He thought he had known his law partner well, so well that he was prepared to write his subjective, inner life. And since he also knew personally many of the Menard County residents he had interviewed, he was apparently amazed to discover from their stories of Lincoln in New Salem that he had actually known very little about his great partner’s formative years. This seems to have intensified his zeal for discovery, for he proceeded to generate a whirlwind of investigative activity. In the early summer of 1865, he sent out scores of letters to people who had known Lincoln, he interviewed knowledgeable friends and associates who were closer at hand, and he systematically established contacts for the purpose of gathering information in far-off places such as Kentucky, Indiana, and even Virginia. Within a few months, in addition to his prolific correspondence and local interviewing in the Springfield area, Herndon had traveled to Chicago to interview Lincoln’s cousins, John and Dennis Hanks; to Coles County, Illinois, to interview Lincoln’s stepmother and other relatives; and to southwest Indiana, where he interviewed many of Lincoln’s boyhood friends and neighbors.

Neglecting his law practice and other responsibilities, Herndon kept up this strenuous pace of investigation for nearly two years. When he was unable to go himself, he sent others to secure testimony. To help track down witnesses and check out leads in Menard County, his most productive venue, he enlisted the aid of his father-in-law, G. U. Miles. In one letter Herndon wrote: “It is said in one of Mr Lincoln’s biographies that he attended a debating society in New Salem? Was there such a society & did Lincoln ever speak in it? Get all the facts & write to me. It is said that Mr Lincoln when elected to the Legislature in 1834—36 — & 1838 walked to Vandalia afoot? Is this true? Get all the facts — See Carman — Bails and others.” Miles performed many such errands, though he apparently had reservations about Herndon’s prying so deeply into private matters. Reporting on his efforts in Herndon’s behalf in the investigation of Lincoln’s love affair with Ann Rutledge, Miles wrote: “the above statements I think you may rely on but if you Should undertake to write a history of my life after I am dead I dont want you to inquire So close into my Early courtships as you do of Mr Lincoln.”

The more Herndon corresponded and interviewed, the more surprising things he learned; and the more he learned, the more he became convinced that he had uncovered important information about Lincoln’s early life that bore significantly on the formation of his character, and thus on his later accomplishments. If what his informants were telling him was true, the man whom a grieving nation was rapidly raising to sainthood had actually been born of doubtful parentage; he had been subject to deep and even tragic disappointments in love; he had been subject to bouts of mental derangement and had been suicidal on more than one occasion; he had been a rank unbeliever in religion and had openly ridiculed the

8. See, for example, the testimony solicited by John Miles (§3), Erastus Wright (§16), and J. W. Wartmann (§62).
9. WHH to G. U. Miles, Dec. 1, 1865, HW.