sold transcriptions of his collected materials, which he referred to as his “Lincoln Record,” to Lincoln’s friend Ward Hill Lamon and deferred his biography indefinitely.  

Although he continued, in the years that followed, to supply information about Abraham Lincoln to a great variety of correspondents, occasionally being drawn into public controversy, Herndon did not seriously resume his own biographical investigations until the mid-1880s, when he entered into a collaboration with one of his correspondents, Jesse W. Weik. Weik was a native of Greencastle, Indiana, who had boldly written Herndon for a Lincoln autograph in 1875, the year he graduated from college. The two met in 1882 when Weik was assigned to Springfield as a government pension agent, and a friendship developed between the aging law partner of Lincoln and the aspiring young writer, who was an admirer of both. Just before Weik returned to Indiana in 1885, the two men began a collaboration to produce a biography for which Herndon would supply most of the documentation and opinion and Weik would do most of the writing.

Herndon began sending Weik a torrent of letters in late 1885, putting down on an almost daily basis incidents and anecdotes about Lincoln as they came to mind. To fill out his picture and clarify some issues, he went back to interviewing some of his old informants and located some new ones as well. Weik also conducted interviews and corresponded with people who had known Lincoln, even traveling to Kentucky for this purpose, something Herndon had never managed to do. From the surviving originals of the letters and interviews Herndon had assembled in the 1860s (some had been lost), from dozens of additional letters and draft material on Lincoln sent by Herndon, and from new letters and interviews, Weik crafted the text of the biography that was published in 1889 as Herndon’s Lincoln: The True Story of a Great Life. Herndon died in 1891, but not before helping to prepare a revised edition of the biography, with new material, that appeared in 1892.

Most of the testimony assembled in this process by Herndon and Weik relates to Lincoln’s life before he became president. They collected accounts of Lincoln’s boyhood in Kentucky, his growing to manhood in Indiana, his six years in and around the village of New Salem, his domestic life in Springfield, his career as a practicing politician and officeholder, and his professional life as a successful circuit and state supreme court lawyer. This testimony came not just from a handful of like-minded people but from more than 250 widely differing informants: political allies and adversaries, fellow lawyers and judges, relatives and in-laws, clients and cronies, women to whom he proposed marriage, longtime comrades and erstwhile friends. As this listing suggests, the information imparted is not confined to political and public affairs but relates to the whole spectrum of his pre-presidential life and character.

16. See Donald, 250–53.
17. The story of the Herndon-Weik collaboration is told in detail in ibid., 296–321.