The importance of these documents is beyond dispute. Though many biographers wrote about Abraham Lincoln before and in the years immediately following his death, none carried their investigations to the lengths that Herndon did. Indeed, Albert J. Beveridge wrote that he could not recall “another case in history where, immediately after the death of a great personage, the facts of his personal life were collected so carefully, thoroughly and impartially by a lifelong friend and intimate professional associate, as the facts about Lincoln were gathered by William H. Herndon.” 18 Even Herndon’s biographer, David Donald, who had serious reservations about the testimony Herndon collected, acknowledged its special value: “It is doubtful whether any other biographer of his day had equal opportunities to gather these invaluable reminiscences; certainly no one else collected anything of comparable significance. Without the statements of Dennis Hanks, Mrs. Thomas Lincoln, David Davis, Joseph Gillespie, James Gurley, and a score of others—all given at Herndon’s urgent solicitation—our knowledge of Lincoln would be incomparably poorer.” 19

From the time it was first assembled, Herndon’s informant archive has been recognized as valuable. Ward Hill Lamon contracted with Herndon in 1869 to pay $4,000 for the transcriptions made by John G. Springer. 20 These materials, which were used as the basis for Lamon’s ghostwritten life of Lincoln, published in 1872, are now part of the extensive Lincoln holdings in the Huntington Library in San Marino, California, and consist of transcriptions of virtually everything Herndon had collected up to the end of November 1866. The letters, interviews, and statements on Lincoln obtained from people who knew him constitute the heart of the archive, but what is not usually recognized is that the collection contains much more. Working in Herndon’s office during the fall of 1866, Springer transcribed the welter of material that Herndon had amassed, including census data, population figures, resolutions in the legislature, reports on banks and internal improvements, information on early newspapers, court records, and legal documents. From old newspapers Herndon had Springer copy into his “Lincoln Record” articles and editorials, texts of Lincoln’s early speeches, accounts of legislative sessions, articles relating to Lincoln’s near duel with James Shields, items on his political activities and his debates with Stephen A. Douglas, and reports of his nomination for the presidency. The transcription of a speech Lincoln made in January 1841 resulted in the preservation of a primary source that would otherwise have been lost, since all issues of the newspaper from which Springer copied it have disappeared. 21

The Springer transcriptions are eloquent testimony to the diligence and magnitude of Herndon’s labors, and, though copies, they are useful in many ways to

20. Ibid., 252.
21. See CW1:227–28. Had other rare issues of early Illinois newspapers suffered a similar fate, such things as Lincoln’s speech to the Young Men’s Lyceum, his temperance address, his Clay eulogy, and his speech before the Scott Club would still survive in Springer’s transcripts.