M. Angle and James G. Randall, forcefully called into question the reliability of both Herndon and the evidence given by his informants. Because Herndon's evidence is highly subjective and typically was taken down many years after the events in question, nearly all of this testimony, these critics insisted, is sufficiently susceptible to the fallibility of human memory and other contingencies as to be unreliable as historical evidence.

Taking up the critique of Herndon's efforts, his biographer, David Donald, outlined some of the practical difficulties: “To collect historical data through oral interviews, though sometimes necessary, is always hazardous. The reminiscences of a graybearded grandfather have to be guided or they are likely to become incoherent rambling. Yet in controlling an interview, it is very difficult not to influence the informant. To ask some questions is to suggest the answers desired.” These caveats were reinforced by evidence that Herndon did not always write down what was offered to him and that he often had to put down later what he was told. “I did not take down in writing 100th part of what I heard men and women say,” Herndon told Weik, “they talked too fast for me, not being a stenographer — Some I conversed with on the roads and other places and had no chance. Things which I did not deem of importance I paid not much attention to, but now I regret it, as I have often wanted the very things that I rejected.”

Such considerations seriously dampened confidence in Herndon's informant testimony for succeeding generations of Lincoln scholars. Some went so far as to regard Herndon as hopelessly biased and unscrupulous in his handling of evidence, but the principal concern was the quality and reliability of testimony so heavily based on memory. Randall's judgment of the Ann Rutledge testimony in 1945 would prove the prevailing sentiment:

The historian must use reminiscence, but he must do so critically. Even close-up evidence is fallible. When it comes through the mists of many years some of it may be true, but a careful writer will check it with known facts. Contradictory reminiscences leave doubt as to what is to be believed; unsupported memories are in themselves insufficient as proof; statements induced under suggestion, or psychological stimulus, as were some of the stories about Lincoln and Ann, call especially for careful appraisal. . . . When faulty memories are admitted the resulting product becomes something other than history; it is no longer to be presented as a genuine record.

The import for Herndon's evidence was clear: testimony that cannot be confirmed by known facts and reminiscence that is in conflict with other testimony need not be admitted to the historical record. Such a judgment, as intended, effectively

27. Donald, 195.
28. WHH to JWW, Dec. 13, 1888, HW.