


VENERICAL DISEASE

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HEALTH



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Abraham Lincoln's Health

Venereal Disease

Excerpts from newspapers and other
sources

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HONOR'S VOICE



*The Transformation of
Abraham Lincoln*

Douglas L. Wilson

DOUGLAS L. WILSON



Alfred A. Knopf / New York / 1998

of Wilson's story, the pocketknife hardly being a notorious means of self-destruction. Nonetheless, Wilson is a credible informant, and his testimony is the earliest evidence of something that would later become a commonplace with Lincoln's closest friends: that he habitually masked a deep-seated melancholy with a show of fun and frivolity.⁶⁴ What the detail of the pocketknife may suggest is that Lincoln was keeping himself constantly aware of the consequences of yielding to his recurrent depression and was already devising deliberate strategies to cope with his mental condition. Not carrying a pocketknife, something that virtually everyone else did and that Lincoln would do later, may have functioned more as a temporary reminder that it was possible to resist depression and regain emotional equilibrium than as a way of avoiding self-inflicted injury.



HERNDON'S THEORY that the death of Ann Rutledge was the cause of Lincoln's lifelong melancholy may have had great appeal in the nineteenth century, but it now appears simplistic and hopelessly overdrawn. Nonetheless, the developments surrounding Ann's death did bring into biographical view for the first time something that would thereafter be a universally attested part of Lincoln's personality and emotional makeup: a marked susceptibility to melancholy.

But life, in the fall of 1835, went on. Devastating as the experience of bereavement had been, Lincoln eventually got his debilitating depression under control and went back to his law studies. In December he returned to his seat in the legislature, where he took an increasingly active part. He entered energetically into a scheme to promote a navigable canal along the Sangamon River that would effectively connect his home region with Beardstown on the Illinois River, working in the legislature to get a charter for a development company and even buying some shares in it himself. When he returned from the legislature in January, he went back to surveying, completing a plat of Petersburg, which some of his neighbors were already promoting as the seat of a new county. By summer he had laid out the prospective towns of Huron and Albany, the first of which was located at what was to be the terminus of the Beardstown canal.

It may have been on one of these surveying excursions that the basis was laid for a story that James Short passed on to Herndon, telling him he could "have the benefit of [the story] . . . even if your

readers cannot." Lincoln, according to Short, used to tell this story on himself:

Once, when Mr L was surveying, he was put to bed in the same room with two girls, the head of his bed being next to the foot of the girls' bed. In the night he commenced tickling the feet of one of the girls with his fingers. As she seemed to enjoy it as much as he did he then tickled a little higher up; and as he would tickle higher the girl would shove down lower and the higher he tickled the lower she moved. Mr L would tell the story with evident enjoyment. He never told how the thing ended.⁶⁵

The story, whose authenticity as a Lincoln yarn we have little reason to doubt, represents a sexual encounter as essentially playful, certainly not as straightforward seduction, much less as romance. In this strictly male-audience story, the focus is not on the conclusion, which is left deliberately vague, but on the unexpected response of the woman, who consciously encourages the young surveyor and apparently seeks a more and more "dangerous" sexual involvement. From his conduct in New Salem, it seems clear that Lincoln did not want to be known as a pursuer or seducer of women, as his friends Short and Bill Greene to some extent were. But he was nonetheless, according to Herndon and others, a man with strong sexual drives, and most outlets for these drives, such as seduction and prostitution, involved moral transgressions. We have virtually no evidence of Lincoln's sexual experience up to this time, but one of the attractions of marriage to Ann Rutledge for the twenty-six-year-old Lincoln had surely been the prospect of finding an honorable outlet for his appetites.

Herndon apparently asked many of his New Salem informants if Lincoln had been involved with "bad women," and the answer, not surprisingly, was universally negative.⁶⁶ Herndon had a reason for asking. Lincoln had once told him about an incident with a woman in Beardstown in which he thought he had contracted syphilis. Herndon wrote the following account of the matter to his collaborator, Jesse W. Weik, nearly two years after their biography appeared. "When I was in Green-castle in '87 I said to you that Lincoln had, *woben a mere boy*, the syphilis and now let me Explain the Matter in full which I have never done before. About the year 1835 - 6 Mr. Lincoln went to Beardstown and during a devilish passion had Connection with a girl and Caught the disease."⁶⁷

Herndon is not clear about whether he got the date of the incident

from Lincoln or fixed the date himself on the basis of his own researches, but the Beardstown location would fit the period under discussion very well. As indicated earlier, in the months following Ann's death Lincoln became deeply involved in the promotion of the Beardstown canal, helping to gain a charter for the developer, investing in it himself, platting a town at its terminus, and even purchasing forty-seven acres of government land nearby. The chief promoter of this venture was the Beardstown entrepreneur Francis Arenz, a fellow Whig who had published Lincoln's political pieces in his newspaper,⁶⁸ and it is a virtual certainty that Lincoln would have been in Beardstown to confer with Arenz during this period. Coming some months after the death of Ann Rutledge and some months before his courtship of Mary Owens, the period of involvement in the Beardstown canal would be a likely time for this incident to have taken place.

But did it, indeed, take place? Though Herndon was considered a truthful person, and the scholars who have investigated his veracity are agreed that what he testifies to of his own knowledge is reliable, this story has been widely treated as an exception. In fact, this letter has been cited as evidence of Herndon's malice toward Lincoln, of his recklessness or disregard for the truth, or as the height of irresponsibility in a friend and biographer. But these charges do nothing like justice to what Herndon actually said (quoted above) or the context in which he said it. Herndon told Weik that he wrote a note to himself about what Lincoln told him in a little memorandum book, which he unwisely loaned to Ward Hill Lamon.⁶⁹ Lamon never returned the little book, and Herndon worried that it might turn up after his own death and inadvertently give rise to the false notion that Lincoln had been unfaithful to his wife as a married man. "I now wish & for years have wished that the note was blotted out or burned to ashes. I write this to you fearing that at some future time the note – a loose thing as to date, place and circumstances, will Come to light and be misunderstood. Lincoln was a man of terribly strong passions, but was true as steel to his wife during his whole marriage life: his honor, as Judge Davis, has said saved many a woman & it is most Emphatically true as I Know." Writing a few months before his death, Herndon told Weik, "I write this to you to Explain the whole matter for the future if it should become necessary to do so. I deeply regret my part of the affair in Every particular."⁷⁰ In these circumstances, it hardly seems appropriate to

accuse Herndon of bad faith, of planting a discreditable story, or, worse, of making the whole thing up.

Lincoln's confessing to Herndon that he contracted syphilis as a result of a misadventure in Beardstown doesn't necessarily mean he actually had the disease. **As others have shown, fear of syphilis was common in the nineteenth century,** and the aspiring and self-reforming young Abraham Lincoln, the ex-flatboatman and hog drover trying to gain respectability, would seem a prime candidate for just such a fear.⁷¹ Another consideration is that if he thought he might have this highly communicable disease, it would almost certainly affect his attitude toward sexual contact with other women and, more particularly, toward the prospect of marriage. In this respect, his well-documented courtship of Mary Owens beginning in the fall of 1836 would seem to count against the likelihood that he thought at the time he had syphilis. But the details of that courtship, which are unusually revealing of Lincoln's behavior and state of mind, could also suggest something like the opposite.



HERNDON LEARNED of Lincoln's romantic involvement with Mary Owens early in his investigations and eventually collected several accounts from former New Salem residents. This perfectly parallels his discovery of the Ann Rutledge story, but there was an important difference. Mary Owens was still alive, and Herndon not only received testimony from former neighbors and from relatives who had talked the matter over with her recently but actually corresponded with her himself. And after persistent pleading, he persuaded the lady, now Mrs. Mary Vineyard of Weston, Missouri, to allow him to copy the letters Lincoln had sent her during their courtship.

L. M. ("Nult") Greene, who had married the daughter of Mary's sister Elizabeth Abell, described the general circumstances for Herndon:

Miss Owens came to Ills in Oct 1833 on a visit of about 4 weeks During this visit Mr Lincoln became acquainted with her but not intimately as I think. Then she came to Ills again on the day of the Presidential 1836 I was at the Election & saw her pass through New Salem She remained in the neighborhood till April 1838 – She was tall & portly weighed in 1836 about 180 lbs at this time she was 29 or 30 years of age – had large blue eyes with the finest trimmings I ever

Q. Wasn't the source of Abraham Lincoln's great sadness the venereal disease that he caught as a young man and which he spread to his wife and children? I can understand why that fact is omitted from the American history books, but isn't it true?—Rupert F., Dallas, Tex.

A. William Herndon, Lincoln's law partner who knew him as well as any man, writes in his book "Lincoln: The True Story of a Great Life": "About the year 1835-36, Mr. Lincoln went to Beardstown and during a devilish passion had connection with a girl and caught the disease. Lincoln told me this..."

Eventually Lincoln was supposedly cured of the disease by Dr. Daniel Drake of Cincinnati. But Herndon suspected that Lincoln might not have been cured completely and later infected his wife, Mary Todd, and—through her—three of his sons, who died early. "Poor boys," Herndon wrote, "they are dead now and gone. I should like to know one thing, and that is: What caused the death of these children? I have an opinion, which I shall never state to anyone." His opinion, of course, was that syphilis was the cause, and Herndon was responsible for first raising the question about the disease.

Q. Before Jane Pauley became a TV commentator, what was her relationship with handsome John Lindsay, former mayor of New York City?—V. Livingston, Pensacola, Fla.

A. In 1972 when she was 22, Jane Pauley was a lowly campaign worker for John Lindsay, who had a short-lived hope of running for the Presidency on the Democratic ticket. Pauley married Doonesbury cartoonist Garry Trudeau in June 1980.



John Lindsay and onetime supporter Jane Pauley
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