

# Complicated Billy Herndon

By James Cornelius

One of the great Illinoisans of the 19th century was William Henry Herndon. He was born on Christmas Day, 1818 (3 weeks after Mary Todd was born), and died in 1891 a day after his teen son and namesake died. We know him because of Lincoln — but we know Lincoln because of him. Their tragedies are shared, yet distinct.

Here is some new unpleasantness. This image, from a private collection, reveals that Herndon had read at least some of the 112 pages of an objectionable pamphlet by Illinois College professor Jonathan Baldwin Turner. Herndon had studied for a year at that Jacksonville school, and was much influenced by Turner's anti-slavery views. The later 'separate races' view was held by a large number of scientists and non-scientists alike ca. 1840-1880: that God created whites, then Asians (including American Indians), then blacks. Lincoln borrowed an 1854 book on the topic to use *against* its thesis while defending a legal client. Herndon, we now see, owned and likely read Turner's *The Three Great Races of Men: Their Origin, Character, History, and Destiny, with Special Regard to the Present Condition and Future Destiny of the Black Race in the United States*. In 1861, Bailhache & Baker printed it; they also published

Springfield's Republican newspaper, the *Journal*; and Baker was an in-law of Mary Lincoln. Odds are that the pamphlet appeared after 11 February when the Lincolns left town. Probably Lincoln and Herndon never discussed it.

Herndon bought and read a lot of books — a lot. He went bankrupt in 1873 and sold 2,000 of them in Cincinnati, evidently including this one. He stayed up to date on the law, and on what early acquaintances of Lincoln thought about the Great Emancipator, and



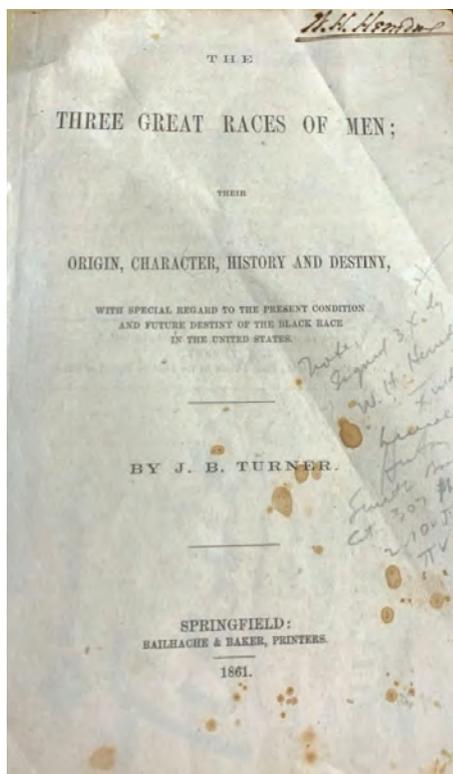
**William Henry Herndon, ca. 1860s. We should read what he wrote, but should we read what he read?**

on 'social thought,' including socialism, atheism, spiritualism, the evils of certain European monarchs ... anyway, those are topics of books he bought after 1873 with proceeds from that big sale. In 1855 he gave a lecture on temperance — only 2 copies of the resulting pamphlet are known today — and became an alcoholic, and quit, and started again.

Ninety percent of what we know about Lincoln before 1837 comes from the auspices of W. H. Herndon. He neglected his legal work from June 1865 in order to write to or interview people constantly. Another goodly chunk of Lincoln lore for 1837-60 is Herndonian. His letters have been published. Every student has used his oral histories.

If he read odd things, who can say 'I never do!' Can we assume that he believed all or most of what he read? Even the law changes, and can be objectionable. Yet *Herndon's Lincoln* has been in print almost continuously since 1889. Mostly it is good history, and some of it great history.

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**"Three Great Races of Men," pamphlet by J. B. Turner, courtesy of a private collector.**