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The Promises and Pitfalls of Reminiscences as Historical Documents: A Case in Point

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The Promises and Pitfalls of Reminiscences as Historical Documents: A Case in Point

Daniel W. Stowell

How did Abraham Lincoln get an acquittal for his client Duff Armstrong, on trial for his life in a murder case in 1858? His co-counsel and a prosecution attorney remembered that it was Lincoln’s eloquent closing argument that recounted how the accused’s parents had been kind to Lincoln when he was a young man, alone and without friends. Another co-counsel was certain that Lincoln’s carefully worded jury instructions paved the way for Armstrong’s acquittal. The judge recalled that it was a doctor’s expert testimony that a blow to the back of the victim’s head by someone other than Armstrong was the cause of death. Two jurors recollected that Lincoln’s use of an almanac to discredit the key prosecution witness’s testimony was the deciding factor. The deputy sheriff insisted that Lincoln had used an almanac from 1853 (altered to read 1857), and that this fraud was the critical piece of evidence. All of these contradictions—and more—appear in a series of reminiscences prepared as soon as seven years and as late as seventy years after the case of People v. Armstrong.

One of the many challenges historical documentary editors face is selecting from among thousands of documents those that best represent a larger corpus of documentary evidence. Certain types of documents complicate this process even further. Reminiscences by participants in or observers of specific historical events are among these complicated source materials. Often recorded years or decades after the events they describe, these reminiscences can be colored by nostalgia, influenced by other people’s accounts of the same event, and refracted through their later attitudes toward the participants. Reminiscences are frequently distorted by the sheer passage of time, clouded by poor memories, and imperfectly recorded by interviewers.

Despite their flaws, reminiscences often offer windows into aspects of the past that lie outside the more official documentary record. The slave narra-
tives collected by the Works Progress Administration in the 1930s, for example, provided a different perspective on American slavery from the vantage point of enslaved African Americans that had been lacking in the records of antebellum plantations and in slaveowners' personal and family papers.\(^1\)

How then should a documentary editor of Lincoln sources approach reminiscent material? This question became central for the editors of the Papers of Abraham Lincoln when we confronted the case of *People v. Armstrong*. The general contours of the case are evident from the surviving court documents, but a large set of reminiscent material fills in many details of the circumstances of the alleged murder and of the trial. Near some whiskey wagons at the outskirts of a Methodist camp meeting in Mason County, Illinois, on the night of 29 August 1857, both James H. Norris and William Duff Armstrong got into fights with James Preston Metzker. Allegedly, one man hit Metzker with a stick of wood, and the other hit him with a slingshot, a homemade weapon for close combat consisting of a lead ball wrapped in leather and attached to a flexible strap. After these altercations, Metzker slept through the night near the campground. The following morning, he clambered onto his horse, left the camp meeting, and went to a nearby friend's house. He died two days later. The Mason County sheriff arrested Norris and Armstrong, and the state's attorney indicted both men for the murder of Metzker. When the Mason County Circuit Court convened in November 1857, Norris went to trial. A jury found him guilty of the lesser charge of manslaughter and sentenced him to eight years of hard labor in the Illinois State Penitentiary. Armstrong successfully appealed for a change of venue to nearby Cass County.\(^2\)

In the meantime, Hannah Armstrong, Duff Armstrong's mother, appealed to Abraham Lincoln to represent her son. Hannah Armstrong and her husband Jack Armstrong had befriended Lincoln when he was a rather directionless young man in New Salem, Illinois, in the 1830s. When the case came up in the Cass County Circuit Court later in November 1857, Lincoln and other attorneys unsuccessfully argued for bail for Armstrong. The court

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\(^2\)Indictment, November 1857; Affidavit for Change of Venue, 5 November 1857, both in case file, Cass County Circuit Court, Cass County Courthouse, Virginia, IL; Judgment, 5 November 1857, Circuit Court Record B, 272–73, Mason County Circuit Court, Mason County Courthouse, Havana, IL.
Reproduction of a slungshot, the weapon Armstrong allegedly used against Metzker.

Courtesy of the Papers of Abraham Lincoln

Hannah Armstrong (1811–90).

Courtesy of the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum
Springfield, Illinois

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continued Armstrong's case until the spring of 1858 to await the transfer of the records in the case from Mason County, and Armstrong remained in jail. Armstrong's case came to trial on 7 May 1858, in the Cass County Circuit Court in Beardstown, Illinois. Lincoln joined William Walker and Caleb J. Dilworth in representing Armstrong. State's attorney Hugh Fullerton, assisted by J. Henry Shaw, presented the case for the state, which included the testimony of Charles Allen. Allen testified that, aided by the light of the moon high in the sky, he saw both Norris and Armstrong strike Metzker. Lincoln examined witnesses for the defense, including Dr. Charles Parker, a physician, who testified that the blow Norris delivered to the back of Metzker's head could also have caused the injury to the front of his skull. Nelson Watkins testified that the slungshot that Armstrong allegedly used was his and had been in his possession throughout the night. Lincoln also cross-examined some of the prosecution's witnesses, including Charles Allen. To discredit Allen's testimony, Lincoln entered an almanac into evidence that demonstrated that at the time of the alleged fight between Armstrong and Metzker, the moon had been low in the sky and within one hour of setting. Lincoln concluded his defense of Armstrong with an impassioned plea for his innocence and a stirring tribute to his parents who had aided a young Lincoln twenty-five years earlier. The jury quickly returned a verdict of "Not Guilty," and Armstrong was free. Lincoln charged no fee for his legal services and told Hannah Armstrong that he was happy to help in partial repayment for the kindness he had received from the Armstrongs when he lived in New Salem. Critics soon charged Lincoln with either altering the almanac or introducing an almanac of a different year to gain the acquittal, and the charge seems to have surfaced both in Lincoln's 1858 contest against Stephen A. Douglas for a seat in the United States Senate, and in his 1860 presidential campaign.

For biographers, the drama of a trial where a man's life was at stake was irresistible. Lincoln's personal relationship with the family of the accused, the dramatic nature of the testimony, and the withering cross-examination using scientific evidence all contributed to give the trial importance in Lincoln biography far beyond the individual fate of Duff Armstrong. From

Order, 19 November 1857, Circuit Court Record C, 153; Order, 21 November 1857, Circuit Court Record C, 159, both in Cass County Circuit Court, Cass County Courthouse.
Cass County Courthouse in Beardstown, Illinois, where the trial of Duff Armstrong took place in May 1858.

Courtesy of the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum, Springfield, Illinois
Shortly after Lincoln’s death, biographers wanted to know more about this life-and-death courtroom drama, and they sought out the memories of anyone who had been present.\(^4\)

Reminiscences have played a prominent role in the historical study of Lincoln for at least two reasons. First, this tendency to rely on such sources stems in part from the sheer volume of reminiscences about Lincoln. As the savior of the Union and the great emancipator, Lincoln became the touchstone of the war for many Americans, and people described their interactions with and observations of him in published and unpublished memoirs. Second, the enhanced role of reminiscences in retelling the life of Lincoln stemmed from the actions of his third law partner, William H. Herndon. As early as the summer of 1865, Herndon began collecting stories, anecdotes, and memories from many of Lincoln’s Illinois friends and neighbors.\(^5\) He wrote letters to and interviewed those who had known Lincoln and assembled their responses and his notes in preparation for writing a biography. Herndon eventually sold many of his notes to fellow Illinois attorney, Ward Hill Lamon, who in 1872, with the writing assistance of Chauncey Black, produced *The Life of Abraham Lincoln from His Birth to His Inauguration as President*. Herndon later published his own biography in 1889 entitled *Herndon’s Lincoln: The True Story of a Great Life*. Most of the reminiscent material Herndon collected is now in the Herndon-Weik Collection at the Library of Congress. Every substantial biography of Lincoln since these early biographies by his contemporaries and friends has made extensive use of Herndon’s and other reminiscent material.\(^6\)

Thirty years after Herndon collected the memories of those who knew Lincoln, journalist and later muckraker Ida M. Tarbell wrote a series of biographical essays about Lincoln for *McClure’s Magazine*.\(^7\) For assistance with source material, she turned to J. McCan Davis, a newspaper reporter and

\(^4\)Edward Eggleston even made a version of the trial the dramatic climax of his novel, *The Graysons: A Story of Illinois*, in 1887. Fifty years later, director John Ford and writer Lamar Trotti took even greater liberties with the story as the central focus of their 1939 motion picture *Young Mr. Lincoln*, starring Henry Fonda in the title role.


\(^7\)*McClure’s Magazine* published Tarbell’s articles on Abraham Lincoln’s life to 1858 between November 1895 and November 1896. A second series of articles, chronicling Lincoln’s life from 1858 to 1865, appeared from December 1898 to September 1899.
attorney who lived in Springfield, Illinois. Davis solicited letters from some people who had known Lincoln, and he interviewed others. Davis transcribed these letters and reminiscences on a typewriter, occasionally adding his own thoughts, and mailed the typescripts to Tarbell. Those typescripts have survived in the Ida M. Tarbell Collection at Allegheny College in Meadville, Pennsylvania.

Throughout the first decades of the twentieth century, an ever-dwindling number of people who knew Lincoln continued to offer their memories of the martyred president to curious newspaper reporters, historians, and family members. Through these successive waves of reminiscences, the case of People v. Armstrong remained a perennial source of interest, and it is perhaps the most written-about case from the thousands in Lincoln’s law practice. Of course, scholarly and popular historians have challenged and questioned the details of individual reminiscences, and the perceived reliability of these sources as a group has risen and fallen among Lincoln scholars at different times over the past century and a quarter. Nevertheless, no major biographer or scholar has dismissed them entirely.

Case Selection

The editorial staff of the Lincoln Legal Papers (now Series I of the Papers of Abraham Lincoln) began work on a selective edition of Abraham Lincoln’s law practice even before the publication of The Law Practice of Abraham Lincoln: Complete Documentary Edition in February 2000. In December of 1999, the editors began the complex process of choosing some fifty cases out of a pool of 5,173 in the comprehensive electronic edition that would fairly represent the nature, breadth, and importance of Lincoln’s quarter-century legal career. Statistical representativeness was never the primary objective of this process; if it were, more than two-thirds of the selective edition would have been filled with a variety of debt collection cases. Lincoln and his partners represented clients in more than 3,050 cases involving the collection of debts, from bankruptcy and foreclosure of mortgage to collecting overdue promissory notes and store debts.

After several months of intensive study and extensive debate, the six editors involved chose forty-nine cases, supplemented by six topical or chronological chapters, as those that best captured Lincoln’s most interesting,
William Duff Armstrong (1833–99)
Courtesy of the Abraham Lincoln
Presidential Library and Museum
Springfield, Illinois
important, or representative cases. The case of People v. Armstrong was controversial from the beginning, in part because there were two or three other murder trials that would have made excellent choices as well. Furthermore, Lincoln and his partners were involved in fewer than three hundred criminal cases, only 5.6 percent of their total caseload. Lincoln was a defense attorney in only twenty-six murder trials, so it was difficult to justify including even one murder trial, much less more than one, when we were trying to demonstrate the breadth of subject matter in Lincoln’s cases.

The 1859 murder case of People v. Harrison had its own uniquely interesting features. Most importantly, it was one of only three cases for which we had anything approaching a modern court transcript, complete with attorneys’ questions and witnesses’ answers. The other two cases with transcripts were highly publicized federal trials with large economic interests at stake. Newspapers in Chicago and other cities reported these trials extensively. People v. Harrison, in contrast, was a murder trial in a county circuit court, and we had a handwritten transcript of the proceedings. We could not pass up this window into the antebellum courtroom.

The 1853 case of People v. Loe, also a murder trial, was intriguing for other reasons. Lincoln authored five of the documents in the case, including valuable notes on the testimony that he wrote down while the trial was underway. The documentary evidence for this case was largely intact, and the story was compelling, complete with a conviction on the lesser charge of manslaughter and an appeal to the governor for a pardon that was endorsed by Lincoln.

Some of the project editors believed that both People v. Harrison and People v. Loe were better choices for inclusion in the selective book edition than was People v. Armstrong. Of course, it was impossible to justify even two, much less three, murder cases from a statistical standpoint. Murder cases constituted less than 1 percent of Lincoln’s caseload. Furthermore, several generations of historians had researched and written about this case. What more could be said? Other editors believed that it would be a mistake to exclude what is arguably Lincoln’s single most famous legal case from an authoritative, though highly selective, edition of his legal papers.

Ultimately, the editorial staff concluded that although the three murder cases were redundant in terms of the legal subject matter, they rested on three very different evidentiary bases—People v. Loe on the standard legal documents filed in most court cases, supplemented by Lincoln’s notes about the testimony; People v. Harrison on a virtually unique handwritten verbatim tran-
script of the trial; and People v. Armstrong on a set of imperfect, incomplete, and contradictory reminiscences, written years or even decades later. We editors swallowed hard and made the controversial decision, at least in our corner of the universe, to include all three murder cases among the forty-nine chosen for the selective edition. In the summer of 2002, I began work on the case of People v. Armstrong.

Document Selection

When I first selected documents from the case of People v. Armstrong, I was myself ambivalent about how to treat the many reminiscences in the surviving documentation about this case. The official case file was not short on documents. The Law Practice of Abraham Lincoln: Complete Documentary Edition includes sixty-eight documents from the court files, five short contemporary newspaper articles, and eight handwritten reminiscences from the case of People v. Armstrong. However, several of the documents included in the Complete Documentary Edition were from the separate but related trial of James H. Norris, William Duff Armstrong’s co-defendant in the indictment, in the Mason County Circuit Court. Apparently, the Mason County Circuit Court clerk sent the entire file, including the record of Norris’s trial, to the Cass County Circuit Court when Armstrong’s lawyers successfully appealed for a change of venue, and the records of both Norris’s and Armstrong’s trials have been intertwined ever since. Of the sixty-eight court documents, eleven are routine subpoenas for witnesses, and another twenty-two are witness affidavits, stating simply that a particular witness appeared in court to testify. They neither declare whether the potential witness did testify nor offer any information about what the witness said.

When I distributed a proposed list of documents to my colleagues, there was general agreement among the editorial staff about which documents from the case file to transcribe. The indictment, a motion to quash the indictment, the affidavit for a change of venue, both the state’s attorney’s instructions to the jury and Lincoln’s instructions to the jury (the only document in his handwriting), and the final order providing the jury verdict were all natural choices and went through uncontested.

The editors were more divided about the inclusion of an 1859 letter from James H. Norris to Lincoln. More than one year after Lincoln won Armstrong’s acquittal, Norris wrote to Lincoln to ask his assistance in obtaining a new trial.9 There is no evidence that Lincoln aided Norris or even

replied to his letter. Some editors found this letter to be beyond the scope of the Armstrong case story, but most believed that it was an important addition to the case that tied up the Norris subplot. That decision would have implications later when we discussed which reminiscences to include.

Consensus broke down completely when we began to discuss the inclusion of reminiscences. Some editors found them unreliable as a class. Written down from seven to more than three score and ten years later, they were all shaped and perhaps warped by Lincoln's subsequent election to the presidency and political martyrdom. Many individuals wanted to emphasize their relationship to Lincoln during his lifetime, and that motive could distort, consciously or unconsciously, the memories of reminiscers. Some editors were concerned that the sheer volume of reminiscences would overwhelm the court documents and obscure the nature of the case. Others found the contradictions among the reminiscences too egregious and some of the literary excesses both painful to read and worthless as historical source material. The other editors and I discussed the options at length and finally decided that I should cast a wider net for reminiscences before deciding which ones to include.

We also asked ourselves what would be lost in this case, if we included no reminiscences. The answer was more than we initially thought. Without the reminiscences, there would be no mention of the almanac Lincoln used to discredit the prosecution's main witness or how he used it. That the jury took only one ballot and a short time to acquit and that Lincoln had made an emotional appeal on Armstrong's behalf based on his admiration for the accused man's parents would be lost. Gone too would be details of the evening fight at the camp meeting, Hannah Armstrong's appeal for Lincoln's help, and Lincoln's refusal of payment from her for obtaining the acquittal.

After additional research, I was able to identify two dozen reminiscences, the reminiscer's relationship to the case, and the date of the reminiscence. The reminiscences fell into three distinct time periods.
First Round of Reminiscences (1865–1866):

William Walker to William H. Herndon defendant attorney 3 June 1865
J. Henry Shaw to William H. Herndon prosecuting attorney 22 August 1866
William Walker to William H. Herndon defendant attorney 27 August 1866
J. Henry Shaw to William H. Herndon prosecuting attorney 5 September 1866
William Walker to William H. Herndon defendant attorney 8 September 1866
William Walker to William H. Herndon defendant attorney 15 September 1866
Herndon’s Notes of Interview with judge c. 1866
Hannah Armstrong
Herndon’s Notes of Interview with James Harriott c. 1866

Second Round of Reminiscences (1896–1897):

John Husted to J. McCan Davis deputy sheriff 12 May 1896
John T. Brady to J. McCan Davis juror 12 May 1896
Reminiscence of Milton Logan to juror 12 May 1896
S. G. Goldthwaite 12 May 1896
William Walker to J. McCan Davis defendant attorney 15 May 1896
Caleb J. Dilworth to J. McCan Davis defendant attorney 18 May 1896
John T. Brady to J. McCan Davis juror 23 May 1896
(extract)
Caleb J. Dilworth to J. McCan Davis defendant attorney 5 June 1896
Davis’s Notes of Interview with William A. Douglas witness 1896
Davis’s Notes of Interview with sheriff 1896
James A. Dick (synopsis)
Reminiscence of William Armstrong to defendant 1896
J. McCan Davis
Abram Bergen to the Kansas attorney 1897
State Bar Association
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reminiscence of John T. Brady to</th>
<th>juror</th>
<th>1909</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>James N. Gridley</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reminiscence of John Armstrong</td>
<td>brother of defendant</td>
<td>1912</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reminiscence of Asbury P. Armstrong to Randall Plunkett</td>
<td>brother of defendant</td>
<td>30 November 1914</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reminiscence of William H. Weaver</td>
<td>audience</td>
<td>12 February 1927</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reminiscence of Eliza Armstrong Smith</td>
<td>sister of defendant</td>
<td>1930</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Faced with at least two dozen reminiscences by sixteen different individuals, the editors had to develop criteria for including some reminiscences and excluding others. The most fundamental question was whether we should present (1) only a representative sample of reminiscences, or (2) only those we thought to be reliable, or (3) nearly all of the reminiscences unless they were too fragmentary or repetitive to justify using limited space in print to include them.

After much discussion and some dissent, we decided to include as many reminiscences as possible to provide readers with as full a documentary record as possible within the limitations imposed by a print edition. In this manner, the case presentation of *People v. Armstrong* could be authoritative, giving voice to competing and contradictory memories of the events, without trying to be definitive. Once we had decided to be reasonably inclusive, there remained the task of developing criteria by which to exclude some reminiscences, especially those with marginal or no value. Our first criterion was to exclude the reminiscences of anyone not actually present at the trial. This test excluded only the reminiscence of Eliza Armstrong Smith, Duff Armstrong’s sister, and John Armstrong, Duff Armstrong’s brother, both of whom had been at home during the trial and learned of it only from other family members. Next, we decided to leave out the rest of the third round of reminiscences as being too far removed in time to be of much value. John Brady’s 1909 reminiscence to James N. Gridley appeared as fragments in the latter’s 1910 article on the trial and largely repeated Brady’s reminiscence to J. McCan Davis thirteen years earlier. The reminiscence by Asbury
Armstrong in the second decade of the twentieth century largely retells the family lore about the relationship between Lincoln and his parents. William H. Weaver’s reminiscence in 1927 took place nearly seventy years after the trial, and we have no contemporary confirmation that he even attended the trial.

Perhaps more controversial was the decision to exclude a brief extract from a letter by John T. Brady from 23 May 1896 and another short letter by Caleb J. Dilworth on 5 June 1896. The two-paragraph extract from Brady’s letter declared that the trial lasted for five days, but we know from contemporary sources, confirmed by other reminiscences, that the entire trial occurred on a single day. The one-paragraph letter from Dilworth was a follow-up to his more substantial letter of 18 May 1896, and simply dismissed the theory that Lincoln had used a forged almanac to discredit the key prosecution witness.

The most controversial exclusion was that of Abram Bergen’s reminiscence in the form of a speech before the Kansas State Bar Association in 1897. In fact, this reminiscence passed initial document selection. At the next review stage, where we examined all of the transcriptions and the case editor’s plan for annotation, some of my colleagues objected to Bergen’s flowery language in praising Lincoln. For example, Bergen deplored allegations that Lincoln had won Duff Armstrong’s acquittal by fraud. “It is contrary to nature, impossible, absurd,” Bergen said. “As well say that the sun ceased to radiate heat or light. It would have stamped as the rashest fool one whom even his detractors always pronounced most prudent and most cautious. Such an act would have made Mr. Lincoln so ashamed of himself that never again would he have taken any pleasure in recognizing himself as a man, much less as a lawyer.” The majority were willing to overlook Bergen’s literary excesses to consider the reminiscence in the context of the final draft. Although Bergen was not an attorney in the case, contemporary sources substantiated his claim to have been in the court during that term.

In the review of the final draft, three editors objected strongly to including Bergen’s reminiscence, noting that the excessive length of the reminiscence “detracts from rather than adds to the story” and that his reminiscence was largely “verbose apologetics” aimed at protecting Lincoln’s integrity. Not all historians agreed with this assessment. In 1928, historian and Senator Albert J. Beveridge wrote, “That now celebrated trial has been minutely


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Portrait of Abraham Lincoln taken in Beardstown on 7 May 1858, the day he won Duff Armstrong's acquittal.
Courtesy of the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum, Springfield, Illinois
described by several persons who took part in it or were present and their accounts do not vary greatly in the main features. Perhaps Mr. Bergen's narrative is the most trustworthy since it was the first trial he attended after his admission to the bar.\(^{11}\) However, in response to the objections of several of my colleagues, we removed Bergen's reminiscence from the final draft of the case presentation chapter.

In conducting research to annotate the 1859 letter from James H. Norris to Lincoln, I discovered a document that did not fit neatly into any category. In February 1863, Norris wrote directly to the governor seeking a pardon for the remainder of his sentence. Five months later, William Walker, the attorney who had represented both Norris and Armstrong, wrote to the governor and offered a detailed explanation of how the testimony of the principal witness against both men (Charles Allen) had been discredited in Armstrong's trial.\(^{12}\) This letter, with interesting detail about both the incident and the subsequent trials, is a sort of early reminiscence about the trial. Written only five years after the trial by one of the key participants, it offers the earliest remembered account of the trial. More importantly, it was written before Lincoln's assassination colored all memories of him. After discussing this document and its merits, the editorial staff decided to include it in the case presentation chapter as a bridge between the court documents and the reminiscences collected by biographers after Lincoln's death.

**Annotation**

How much to annotate a particular document is one of a documentary editor's most persistent quandaries. Which individuals, organizations, places, and events mentioned in the document need to be identified and to what extent? How should one treat literary and historical references? What basic knowledge should the editor expect the reader to bring to the documents? In addition to these questions we must ask of all documents, reminiscent materials present additional challenges. Should the editor indicate when a reminiscer's memory is demonstrably wrong, based on documents from the time of the events described? For example, if the informant got a date wrong, should the editor provide the proper date in a note?


What if a reminiscer got something right? At first glance, it seems unreasonable to annotate statements that he or she stated accurately. However, if the author of a reminiscence remembered some facts incorrectly, and the editor notes those statements while making no comment about those details that she or he got right, the reader may understandably assume that this person is an unreliable witness to the historical events described. On the other hand, noting every correct statement would overwhelm the document with annotation.

When multiple reminiscences about a single event exist, as in the case of People \textit{v.} Armstrong, should the editor try to reconcile the varied and often conflicting memories by identifying those points about which the witnesses agree and those about which they disagree? Should the editor try to determine which reminiscers are accurate (or more accurate) and those who are less so?

After wrestling with these issues for some time, the editors of the Lincoln Legal Papers chose to annotate those statements that could be proven inaccurate by documents contemporary to the event. When a juror, for example, thought that the trial was in September, I reminded the reader in a note that the trial was in May of 1858. Occasionally, I also confirmed with such documents that a particular reminiscer “got it right” about a certain point. For example, J. Henry Shaw wrote to William H. Herndon about two cases in which he participated with Lincoln at the same terms of court as the Armstrong case. The details he recalled were, for the most part, accurate. In notes, I provided a brief summary of each of these cases, a divorce case in which Lincoln worked with Shaw and a chancery case in which Lincoln opposed Shaw. The accuracy of Shaw’s memories on these points gives more credibility to his memories of the Armstrong trial.

More often, we could not determine who was right about certain aspects of the camp meeting fights or the trial of Duff Armstrong. For example, the sheriff later thought that the almanac Lincoln presented in evidence was a \textit{Goudy’s Almanac}, which was published in Springfield, Illinois. Two of the jurors later recalled that it had been a \textit{Jayne’s Almanac}, which was published in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Although I located copies of both almanacs and included what they predicted about the position of the moon on the night of 29 August 1857, I could not determine which memory, if either, was accurate. We did not cross-reference each deviation among those who wrote or gave oral testimony about these events. One of Lincoln’s co-counsel thought the jury were “old gray-headed men,” none of whom were less than
thirty-five years old; a witness remembered them as young men, with an average age of about twenty-three.\textsuperscript{13} One juror recalled that they took less than an hour to reach their verdict; another juror remembered that they deliberated for five or six hours. Some believed that Lincoln had used a forged almanac; others were certain that he had not. One even believed that there had been two almanacs, and that Lincoln was guilty of no deceit. Some remembered that Lincoln’s use of the almanac to discredit Allen assured Armstrong’s acquittal. Others insisted that the medical evidence was conclusive, and still others found Lincoln’s impassioned and eloquent closing speech the key to the outcome. As editors and historians, we can never resolve all of these contradictions with the documents available or with any others likely ever to be found.

How, then, should a documentary editor approach such source material? The editorial staff of the Lincoln Legal Papers, when faced with two dozen competing reminiscences, chose to be as inclusive as reasonably possible, within the confines of a printed edition. We decided to present sixteen reminiscences by eleven different individuals involved in or present at the trial. We did not attempt to resolve their inconsistencies, but we did note where they were right or wrong about some fact that could be demonstrated by contemporary documentation.

Reminiscences often provide glimpses of historical figures unavailable in official institutional records or in correspondence. They are also frequently distorted by the passage of time between their composition and the events they describe. When there are several reminiscences about a single historical event, as there are for the case of \textit{People v. Armstrong}, they can be inconsistent and even downright contradictory. Despite their flaws, these reminiscences enrich and enliven the historical record. The official legal record of the Armstrong case does not mention an almanac, much less the controversy that arose over it later. It does not provide even a hint about Lincoln’s cross-examination of a key prosecution witness or his impassioned closing argument. It offers no summary of testimony, nor does it reveal that Hannah Armstrong asked Lincoln to represent her son.

While we did not and cannot answer every question that this case raises, including the fundamental one of whether Armstrong was guilty of murder, we as editors did see an opportunity in this case to present competing voices in a manner that should be instructive to scholars and students alike. The

\textsuperscript{13}The average age of ten jurors that I could locate in the census was twenty-eight. The only one who was over thirty-five years of age was the foreman, who was thirty-eight.
The case of People v. Armstrong demonstrates the difficulty of using reminiscent material to reconstruct a narrative of an event in the past. Just as importantly, however, this case illustrates how our historical documentary record would be impoverished in many particulars without these reminiscences.

Page for August 1857 from Goudy's Springfield Farmers' Almanac and Repository of Useful Knowledge for the Year 1857 (Springfield, IL: Caleb Birchall, 1857), 11, showing moonset on the night of 29 August as 12:06 a.m. on Sunday, 30 August.