

The trials of Mary Lincoln

“Behind every great man is a great woman.”

By Mark W. Sorensen

Donna D. McCreary is an award-winning Mary Lincoln presenter and Lincoln family historian. Her latest book, *Mary Lincoln Demystified: Frequently Asked Questions about Abraham’s Wife* (SIU Press, 2022), is a very well-researched, straightforward volume that examines all known documentation about Mary’s life in a clear and concise manner. Her almanac-like book offers a review and evaluation of many of the past narratives written about Mary, and it induced me to share some of these with the readers of *Illinois Heritage*.

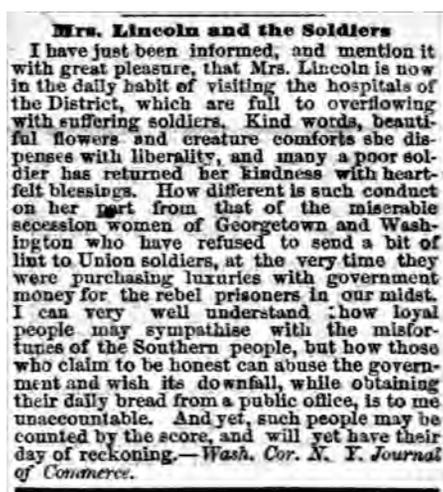
The basics of Mary Todd’s life are that she was born into a wealthy slave-holding family in Lexington, Kentucky, on December 13, 1818 (nine years after Abraham Lincoln’s birth to a poor family in the same state). Her mother died when she was young; she received an excellent education away from home in finishing schools; followed her sisters to Springfield, Illinois, in search of a proper husband; married Abraham Lincoln on November 4, 1842, when she was 23 years old; bore four sons and managed a household in Springfield for 19 years while her husband was often away for extended periods of time practicing law, serving in Congress, and on political campaigns for himself or others. One could say that her early trials and tribulations consisted of often feeling abandoned, the death of her mother, being unwanted by her stepmother, the death of her father, and later, in 1850, the death of a young son.

When Lincoln was elected President, Mary faced the daunting challenges of being viewed as both a former Southern Belle and a Western state rube. When the Civil War started, her loyalty to the Union was questioned by some Republicans as was her lack of sympathy over the deaths of her rebelling relatives by her kin. She was criticized for spending too



Restored image of Mary Lincoln from an 1846 Daguerreotype taken by Nicholas H. Shepherd in Springfield, IL.

much money decorating the dilapidated White House as well as shopping for fine personal apparel and hosting grand entertainments in the midst of a war.



Chicago Tribune, June 20, 1862, page 2, from the Washington Correspondent of the N.Y. Journal of Commerce, a Democratic-leaning paper.

Despite the fact that son Willie Lincoln died in the White House on February 20, 1862, the still-grieving Mary spent time that summer and later giving comfort to wounded Union soldiers in area hospitals and supporting the Union war effort. Then the ultimate trauma occurred on April 14, 1865, as she sat next to her husband at Ford’s Theatre when he was shot in the head.

After the assassination of her husband, Mary was immediately criticized for resisting the desires of the all-male National Lincoln Monument Association who wanted to bury Lincoln on the grounds of what later became the current Illinois State Capitol and not at Oak Ridge Cemetery, and then for taking too long to leave the White House. Mary soon settled in Chicago for about three years. She constantly worried about money for herself and son Tad and so attempted to sell parts of her personal wardrobe and jewelry. Perhaps thinking that she could create some sympathy and understanding for the plight of Mrs. Lincoln, Mary’s Washington dress-maker, dresser, and confidante, the former enslaved and sexually abused



Mary Lincoln in formal White House ball gown in an 1861 photograph by Mathew Brady.

Elizabeth Keckly, shared private information with a publisher which resulted in early 1868 with the insider “tell all” book *Behind the Scenes, or Thirty Years a Slave and Four Years in the White House*. The book instead brought scorn and shame on Keckly for violating Victorian standards of personal secrecy and embarrassment for Mary and her eldest son, attorney Robert Todd Lincoln. However, according to author McCreary, “*Despite the outrage at its publication, and the criticism bestowed upon Keckly for writing the book, it remains to this day one of the better sources for Mary’s time in the White House and the first couple of years of her widowhood.*”

To escape constant public scrutiny Mary took her 15-year-old son Tad (Thomas) to Europe in October 1868 and remained there until April 1871. But life got no easier for Mrs. Lincoln after she returned to America, as she soon became distraught at the death of Tad in Chicago on July 15 of that year and then developed an absolute dread of fire after living through the October 1871 Great Chicago Fire and its aftermath. Her eldest son Robert — along with many others who knew her well — became so concerned about her health, erratic behaviors, and financial dealings that on May 19, 1875, he petitioned the court in Cook County to have his mother declared mentally ill. This followed a week of examination by six doctors, and discussion among a

MRS. LINCOLN.

—

The Widow of the Martyred President Adjudged Insane in the County Court.

—

One of the Saddest Spectacles Ever Witnessed in a Court-room in This City.

—

Eminent Medical Men Pronounce Her to be of Unsound Mind and Incapable of Self-Care.

—

The Dread Affliction Owes Its Origin to the Assassination of the Lamented President.

—

She Will be Removed To-day to a Private Asylum at Batavia, Ill.

The Inter-Ocean, Chicago – May 20, 1875, page 1.

dozen family and friends that she was a danger to herself. During the trial, having heard from 18 witnesses, (Mary declined to speak) a jury of 12 men quickly found her insane, and Robert had her committed to the private Bellevue Place sanitarium in Batavia, Illinois. However, with the assistance of James and Myra Bradwell, she was released on September 11 and allowed to stay with her sister Elizabeth Edwards in the Springfield home where Mary and Abraham had been married. (A “*compilation of every possible primary source on the subject*” of Mary’s first and second insanity trials can be found in *Mary Lincoln’s Insanity Case: A Documentary History* by Jason Emerson, U of I Press, 2012 - including the possibility that one or more of her medications caused some of her erratic behavior along with stress from the recent anniversaries of the deaths of her husband and sons.)

A second jury trial held on June 15, 1876, determined that Mary was now sane and able to conduct her own affairs without Robert controlling her finances. For the next three and a half years Mary lived abroad and was estranged from son Robert. As her health failed, she came back to Springfield and finally reconciled with Robert before her death there on July 16, 1882, at the age of 63. She rests today near her husband inside the Lincoln Tomb in Oak Ridge Cemetery. At the time of her death and for many years later the popular perception was that Mary Lincoln had severe mental issues. In the opinion of James Cornelius and other Lincoln scholars, new and recently found evidence greatly strengthens that view. Typical of her obituary stories was a statement from the July 18, 1882, *Bloomington Daily Pantagraph* about her “*Lamentable Infirmitie*s” that explained “*Many eccentricities marked Mrs. Lincoln’s later years, but these are the results of the impairments of her mind.*”

After Mary’s death, Robert Lincoln wanted little to do with making the intimate details of either parents’ life public and it was thought that he destroyed any evidence of these details. He did however give his blessing to a book by his mother’s half-niece Katherine Helm when in 1928 she

MRS. LINCOLN'S FUNERAL

—

Particulars of Her Life and Character--The Pitiful Story of Her Lamentable Infirmities.

—

She Was Once a Reigning Belle--The Loving Wife--A Good Mother--Her Weight of Woe.

—

SPRINGFIELD, Ill., July 17.—The arrangements for Mrs. Lincoln's funeral, subject to the approval of Secretary Lincoln upon his arrival, are that it will take place at 10 a. m. Wednesday, from the First Presbyterian church, the remains to be deposited in the vault under the Lincoln monument, with those of the other members of the family.

Bloomington Daily Pantagraph, Tuesday, July 18, 1882

published *The True Story of Mary, Wife of Lincoln*. While one New York book critic thought her poorly written but interesting use of family documents was valuable history, K.H. Allan of the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* opined that this family history was pap, as “*Mary Todd Lincoln still remains an enigma, shrouded in an impenetrable veil of vicious maligning and too sugary adulation.*”

In the 1970s Illinois historian James T. Hickey found batches of Lincoln family papers in Robert Lincoln’s Vermont mansion. Records labeled as the “MTL Insanity File” were made available to researchers and resulted in the publication of *The Insanity Files: The Case of Mary Todd Lincoln* in 1986 by Mark E. Neely, Jr., and R. Gerald McMurtry, and *Mary Todd Lincoln: A Biography* in 1987 by Jean H. Baker. Then in 2005, independent historian Jason Emerson discovered a batch of letters to and from Mary Lincoln during the time of her first insanity trial. From these and other new resources he produced *The Madness of Mary Lincoln* in 2007 and claimed that for the first time there was a much clearer picture of Mary. He explained that his book “*chases away the shadows of innuendo, conjecture, and bias that have long shrouded the general perception of Mary’s post-assassination life and permits us to see her, not as a pathetic, ranting lunatic*

with wild eyes and unkempt hair, but as a sympathetic figure sitting alone in a darkened room, whose intellect and emotions were overwhelmed by mental illness and whose life was so tragically marred by pain and loss.”

The interest in the Lincoln family has not waned. The Association of Lincoln Presenters was created in 1990 with the slogan “We are ready, willing and Abe L” to present in a town near you. This national group recently consisted of 92 Abraham and 37 Mary associates. Its annual meetings are held around the country and those in Illinois have been in Springfield, Charleston, Vandalia, Alton, Decatur, and Freeport. Their next convention will be making historic headlines in Springfield during April 13-16, 2023. Information about the group can be found online at Lincolnpresenters.com.

Mark W. Sorensen is the Official Macon County Historian in Decatur, IL, and wishes to thank Lincoln scholar James Cornelius for his assistance with this article.



Mary Lincoln presenter Kathleen Jensen of Harristown, Illinois, interacted with sculptor John McClarey’s statue of Lincoln’s “Vision for a Greater Illinois” statue at the Macon County Historical Museum in April 2012.



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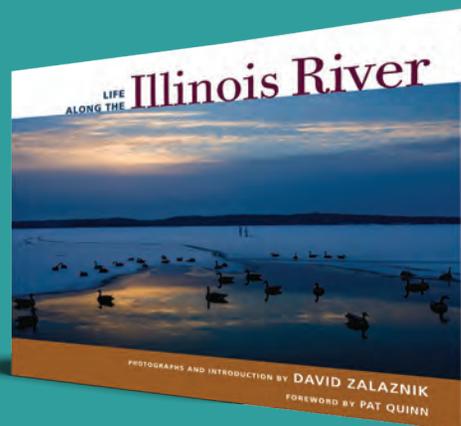
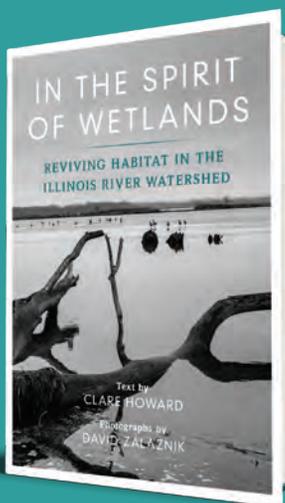
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