

LINCOLN LORE

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THE MOTHER OF LINCOLN'S CHILDREN

Undue emphasis placed upon Abraham Lincoln's interest in Ann Rutledge, which could not have amounted to much more than a few months' courtship, has obscured more or less the fact that for twenty-three years Lincoln was the devoted husband of Mary Todd.

Mary Todd Lincoln, wife of Abraham Lincoln, first became a mother on August 1, 1843, when Robert Todd Lincoln was born. Within the next ten years three more sons came to bless the Lincoln-Todd union. The boys were named Edward, William, and Thomas, respectively.

Motherly Care

Mrs. Lincoln was a successful mother of babies and brought her four infants safely through the difficult first two and one-half years at a time when at least twenty-five per cent of the small children failed to survive.

In the Fall of 1847, when Mrs. Lincoln accompanied her husband, the new Whig congressman from Illinois, to Washington, via Lexington, Kentucky, Mrs. Lincoln's old home, there were two boys, one four years old and the youngest a little over a year and a half. It is not strange that a mother with two small children in a boarding house at the nation's capitol would find much that was inconvenient; and, after remaining through the winter she returned to Lexington, Kentucky, in the spring.

Many interesting letters passed between Mr. and Mrs. Lincoln at this time which reveal the motherly interest Mrs. Lincoln had in her children. In one instance she is asking Abraham to try and find some plaid stockings for "Eddy's dear little feet." At another time she writes about clothes for the children which might save her a few stitches. She kept Lincoln posted about the health of the children and once wrote, "I feel wearied and tired enough to know that this is Saturday night, our babies are asleep."

The First Bereavement

Mary Todd Lincoln returned to her small cottage home in Springfield after her husband's term in Congress, and here she made nearly all of her own and the children's clothes and did most of the house work.

The first deep bereavement in the Lincoln home occurred with the death of the youngest child, Edward, at four years of age, as related in a letter to John D. Johnston, written by Mr. Lincoln on February 23, 1850:

"As you make no mention of it, I suppose you had not learned that we lost our little boy. He was sick fifteen days, and died in the morning of the first day of this month. It was not our first, but our second child. We miss him very much."

This was the first great sorrow in a long series of tragedies which visited Mrs. Lincoln throughout the rest of her life.

The Home Builder

The very same year of Edward's death Mother Lincoln presented her husband, just four days before Christmas, with another boy whom they named William Wallace, and three years later still another son, Thomas, better known as Tad, was born.

Mr. and Mrs. Lincoln lived in a humble story-and-a-half house in Springfield for twelve years, and in 1856 they decided to make a second story out of the garret rooms. It is alleged that the pride of Mrs. Lincoln was responsible for this improvement, but it is more likely that the mother instinct, which felt the need of larger quarters for her growing boys, was the real cause for the enlargement of the old home. Robert Lincoln was now thirteen years old and would need a room of his own, and there were two other boys, Willie six years of age and Thomas three. By this time Mrs. Lincoln needed help and her husband could afford it, so a larger house was necessary.

Religious Interests

Somehow it has come to be generally accepted that the mother in the home should have the oversight of the religious training of her children, and in this Mrs. Lincoln was a true mother. When the family left for Washington in 1861 Mrs. Lincoln wrote back to a friend this request:

"I had intended requesting Mr. Melvin to have given me a promise, that on our return to Springfield we could be able to secure our particular pew to which I was very much attached and which we occupied some ten years. May I hope that he will be able to do so."

There is every evidence that Mrs. Lincoln continued her interest in the church after reaching Washington, and the pew occupied by the Lincolns in the New York Avenue Presbyterian Church has become a memorial to the religious inclinations of the Lincoln family.

The White House Matron

When Mrs. Lincoln arrived in Washington as the mistress of the White House, her family of children consisted of Robert age eighteen, William age eleven, and Thomas age eight. Robert was away at school during the school terms. Much has been said about the lack of discipline which Mrs. Lincoln exercised over her children, but from her husband's remarks it appears that she did not spare the rod on occasions when she felt it should be used.

This matron of the White House has been so severely criticised by everybody in general and the public in particular that it may seem strange to discover any of the motherly instincts still finding expression in her life. Called by her own people in the South a traitor and by the people of the North a spy, she was in no frame of mind to withstand the crushing blow of the death of her boy William.

The Distracted Mother

The following account from a Washington paper gives us a picture of the disquieted mother just before the death of this son:

"The White House levee on Tuesday will be omitted on account of the illness of the second son of the President . . . who has been lying dangerously ill of bilious fever for the last three days. Mrs. Lincoln has not left his bedside since Wednesday night and fears are entertained for her health."

The fears expressed about the health of Mrs. Lincoln were well grounded; and it is now accepted generally that after the death of Willie Lincoln, on February 20, 1862, less than a year from the time the family reached Washington, the mother of the lost child became mentally disarranged. In other words Mrs. Lincoln should not be held responsible for the peculiar things she did during the White House days from 1862 on to the tragic death of her husband which drove her into a still more serious collapse.

The Widow

It is difficult to account for the attitude of the public towards Mrs. Lincoln in the days following the President's death, when it must have been evident to all that she was not responsible for what she said or did. After the death of her son, Thomas, she was placed in an asylum; and her days were ended in a darkened room in Springfield, Illinois, where she had gone to spend the remaining years of her life after having been released from the institution where she had been confined.

The mother of Abraham Lincoln's children deserves a more exalted place in history than has been accorded her; and at a time when the sons and daughters of men are honoring motherhood, Mary Todd Lincoln should not be forgotten.