

LINCOLN LORE

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SERVANTS IN THE WHITE HOUSE

One who has believed all of the reports current about the severity of Mrs. Lincoln's treatment of her servants will be surprised to learn that there were very few changes in the personnel of the White House force during the administration. While it is impossible to gather information at this late date about some of the servants occupying minor positions, the reminiscences of some known to have been retained for a long period are of interest.

William H. Tisdall—Orderly

Served from September, 1862, to October, 1864.

Tisdall has left many interesting reminiscences of Mr. Lincoln, among them the following one showing the President's personal interest in his servants:

"Mr. Lincoln partly turned in his saddle and told me to come up and ride beside him.

"We rode on in the soft night air, past darkened houses, past occasional street lights burning feebly, with the stars far, far overhead.

"To my surprise, President Lincoln commenced to talk soon after I had come abreast of him.

"How old are you?" he inquired.

"Nineteen last March, sir."

"Is your mother living?" he continued.

"Yes, sir."

"Do you send money to her regularly?"

"He went on in this strain for several minutes, telling me what it means for a mother to have a good son, and the tragedy a mother lives who has a son that is not trustworthy and loving When he had finished his kindly inquiries and comment Mr. Lincoln again lapsed into silence, and so we rode on, striking into High street to Halleck's house."

Rebecca R. Pomroy—Nurse

Attended Mrs. Lincoln and Thomas on several occasions and may well be called the White House nurse of the Lincolns.

This incident related by Mrs. Pomroy occurred when she was being returned from the White House to the Hospital by Mr. Lincoln who had ordered the carriage and accompanied her:

"There had been a severe shower the night before, and on going up Fourteenth street the horses became unmanageable, while the carriage got fast in the mud. Mr. Lincoln told the driver to hold one horse, while the footman held the other, till he could get out. He succeeded in finding three large stones, and, with his pantaloons stripped to his knees, and boots covered with mud, he laid the stones down and bore his weight upon them. On coming to the carriage he said, 'Now, Mrs. Pomroy, if you will please put your feet just as I tell you, you can reach the sidewalk in safety.' Taking hold of her hand, he helped her to the sidewalk, then looking up, he said, 'All through life, be sure and put your feet in the right place, and then stand firm.' After the carriage was righted, the President looked at his muddy boots in a laughing way, saying, 'I have always heard of Washington mud, and now I shall take home some as a sample.'"

Charles Forbes—Footman

Personal attendant from 1861, until assassination of the President.

It is doubtful if there was a servant more closely associated with the Lincoln family than Charles Forbes. In 1894, Robert Lincoln wrote, "He was a personal servant at the White House in my father's time and earned unusual esteem by his fidelity and competence."

Through the kindness of Mrs. Richmond Francis Dillard of Blackstone, Virginia, who is in possession of many valuable gifts made by the widow of the President to Mr. Forbes we are able to present part of a letter written by Mrs. Lincoln to Forbes on August 5, 1865:

Near Chicago, Aug. 5th, '65.

My friend Charles,

Your letter was received some two weeks since. I have been unable to reply to it sooner, in consequence of quite severe illness To me, Charles, the world, henceforth, is as nothing. I do not desire to live long under no circumstances whatever without my husband. I miss his extreme devotion to myself and sons every moment. When my life closes it will be to me a most pleasant exchange, for I am willing to go any hour our Maker calls me hence.

. . . . God has blessed me certainly in my sons, if by the removal of my husband, he has made me the most miserable of women. Life is to me a torment, instead of a blessing, yet for the sake of those who are left, I must submit to remain. The years will not be many ere I am reunited to my idolized husband.

. . . . Where is Cuthbert? Write all the news. Go and see Lizzie Keckley for me.

Write soon.

Your friend as ever,

M. L.

Mrs. Elizabeth Keckley—Colored Seamstress

Served Mrs. Lincoln as her seamstress during the entire administration of President Lincoln.

Upon being interviewed on one occasion, Elizabeth Keckley paid this tribute to Abraham Lincoln:

"He was as kind and considerate in his treatment of me as he was of any of the white people about the White House They say that servants do not reverence their masters because they know their weaknesses, as the rest of the world cannot know them. But no servant failed to respect and revere that grand man of God, and man of the common people. His life was pure He was always ready for death, and I knew him so well that I have always felt that death was welcome to him when it came."

Other Servants

On one occasion when Mrs. Lincoln was in New England visiting her son, Robert, Mr. Lincoln wrote the following lines to his wife: "Mrs. Cuthbert and Aunt Mary want to move to the White House because it has grown so cold at Soldier's Home. Shall they?"

These two faithful servants were also old standbys of the family and it is to be regretted that so little information is available about them. Of course there should not be left out "Old Edwards," the doorkeeper.