

LINCOLN LORE

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COLORED PEOPLE WHO SERVED THE LINCOLNS

They Knew Lincoln is a sort of Who's Who among colored people associated as servants with Mr. and Mrs. Lincoln. The author of the book, Dr. John E. Washington, also a member of the negro race, has become a servant to all of us in tracing the interesting contacts which his people made with the Emancipator and his wife.

*William Slade
Confidential Messenger*

Slade seemed to have been in charge of all of the colored help at the White House, he bought the food and many times planned the menu for small numbers of guests the Lincolns may have been entertaining. He often served as valet to Mr. Lincoln and made himself generally useful about the White House. Slade's wife was named Josephine, and there were three children, Katherine, Andrew and Jessie. Slade accompanied Lincoln to Gettysburg and Judge Wills in his statement about Mr. Lincoln's visit in his home at this time mentions the negro servant, William. Slade made his will on March 5, 1865, a few weeks before Lincoln died and he passed away on March 16, 1868.

*Rosetta Wells
Seamstress*

Rosetta did the plain serving at the White House, taking care of the bed clothes and such darning and mending as was necessary. She spoke highly of Mrs. Lincoln, with respect to her attitude toward the servants, and was especially complimentary of Mr. Lincoln, remarking that, "He treated his servants like people."

*Cornelia Mitchell
Cook*

Cornelia was cook at the White House when the Lincolns arrived and as might be expected, she was retained as she was noted for her savory dishes. She was from an old southern family which, of course, would please Mrs. Lincoln, who had not always been fortunate in finding servants of Cornelia's type out in the Illinois country.

*Peter Brown
Butler*

Peter Brown was another one of the servants of the White House who came there during the Buchanan administration, and remained through the Lincoln regime. One of the impressive facts about the colored servants at the Executive Mansion is that they usually made a lifetime job of it. Peter had a son named Robert, who also did some work as a lad for the Lincolns.

*William Johnson
Valet*

William Johnson, as far as we know was the only colored person who Lincoln brought on from Springfield to work in the White House. The old colored help in the White House were of light complexion but Johnson was a very dark-skinned man and the rest of the servants made it so uncomfortable for Johnson that Mr. Lincoln was obliged to find another place for him. Johnson went to work for Lincoln in Springfield, Illinois, in March 1860, but on March 16, 1861, the President wrote this letter to one of his cabinet members:

"Hon. Gideon Welles:

"Dear Sir: The bearer (William) is a servant who has been with me sometime and in whom I have confidence as to his integrity and faithfulness. He wishes to enter your service. The difference of color between him and the other servants is the cause of our separation. If you can give him employment you will confer a favor on

"Yours truly,
"A. Lincoln"

Although apparently not successful in finding a place in the Navy Department he was employed by the Treasury Department and he died in service on January 28, 1864. Mr. Lincoln's great kindness to this colored man is revealed in several authentic notes mentioning him, discovered by Dr. Washington. It was undoubtedly William who was sick with the smallpox, whom a newspaper correspondent refers to in a story about the President taking charge of the laborer's salary and making such disposition of it as the invalid Johnson advised.

*Solomon Johnson
Barber*

Solomon was the successor of William Johnson and was also recommended by President Lincoln to fill William's position in the Treasury Department. He became the barber of Mr. Lincoln, attending to this task along with his treasury job. It is stated that he was the first colored man ever appointed to a clerkship in any of the government departments. Solomon was born in Petersburg, Virginia, in 1842 and died in Washington, November 24, 1885.

*Elizabeth Keckley
Modiste*

The most interesting character described by Dr. Washington in his book is Elizabeth Keckley, modiste for Mrs. Lincoln. Mrs. Keckley was born in Virginia in 1818, the only child of a slave of light complexion, named Agnes. When Elizabeth was eighteen years old she was presented by her owner to his friend Alexander Kirkland, a white man by whom she had an only child according to her own testimony. Elizabeth Keckley's line of descent made her at least three-fourths white. She was an excellent seamstress and when in St. Louis she and her son became the slaves of Anne P. Garland. From her Mrs. Keckley purchased her freedom and also the freedom of her only son George, who was almost white. This promissory note indicates the transaction:

"I promise to give Lizzie and her son George their freedom on the payment of \$1200. Anne P. Garland, June 27, 1855."

It was in the spring of 1860 that Mrs. Keckley moved to Baltimore and six weeks later went to Washington to make her home. When the Lincolns arrived a year later, Mrs. Keckley was recommended to Mrs. Lincoln as a seamstress. Mrs. Keckley's son George, who was in Wilberforce University, left college to enter in the war as "a white" and was killed in the battle of Lexington, Missouri.

After the death of the President Mrs. Keckley still kept in touch with Mrs. Lincoln and acted as an adviser in Mrs. Lincoln's attempt to sell many of her possessions, at which time several letters passed between them.

By far the most important discovery made by Dr. Washington is identification of the man who assisted Elizabeth Keckley in the much discussed book "Behind the Scenes," which bears her name as author. The evidence that James Redpath was the leading literary genius who collaborated with Elizabeth Keckley in her sensational book is proved beyond a question of a doubt.

Mrs. Keckley was very much provoked when the publishers published the personal correspondence which passed between Mrs. Lincoln and her as she understood the personal letters were not to be printed.

Mrs. Keckley continued her sewing until 1892 when she went to Wilberforce University to teach domestic art. She lived until May 24, 1907, when she passed away in the city of Washington, leaving her few possessions to the "National Association for the Relief of Destitute Colored Women and Children."