

LINCOLN LORE

Bulletin of the Lincoln National Life Foundation - - - - - Dr. Louis A. Warren, Editor
Published each week by The Lincoln National Life Insurance Company, Fort Wayne, Indiana

Number 838

FORT WAYNE, INDIANA

April 30, 1945

DOLLY TODD MADISON VS. MARY TODD LINCOLN

There appeared in the *Boston Journal* for December 2, 1863, this brief reference to Mrs. Lincoln by the famous columnist Ben Perley Poore:

"I am sure that since the time that Mrs. Madison presided at the White House, it has not been graced by a lady so well fitted by nature and by education to dispense its hospitalities as is Mrs. Lincoln."

Dr. William A. Evans, who has become recognized as possibly our best present-day authority on the life of Mary Todd Lincoln, made the following statement in an address before the Fort Wayne Woman's Club, on September 21, 1931:

"She (Mrs. Lincoln) was thoroughly educated and trained in polite society. No better educated woman entered the White House in the first hundred years of the presidency. She was a linguist, a super-conversationalist, a good writer—a woman of wit, mental quickness, most entertaining and of great charm."

These two testimonials, appearing in newspapers with an interval of nearly sixty years separating them, invite the challenge implied by the caption of this monograph. It is a strange coincidence that at one time both of these women bore the name of Todd. Dorothy Payne had married as her first husband, John Todd, and was a widow at the time she became the wife of James Madison. Mary Todd, who married Abraham Lincoln, was the daughter of Robert Todd, of Lexington, Kentucky.

Although Dolly dropped her Todd name when she became Mrs. Madison, yet by virtue of the fact that her sister married Judge Thomas Todd, of Kentucky, she continued to have a keen interest in the Todd family, as a letter written to her by Thomas Todd in 1817 reveals. Possibly the Todds with whom she was so closely associated also had inherited some of the characteristics that were observed in Mary Todd's branch of the family, notably, a display of temper.

The collection of rare manuscripts in the library of the Lincoln National Life Foundation contains a poem in autograph, entitled, "Temper," signed by Dolly Madison, which would appear to be her own composition. It is without date, but written after her second marriage. Can it be that this woman was paying a tribute in verse to this Todd family heirloom?

Temper! Thy powers more magical
Than that which graced of old Amphion's lyre,
Can savage hearts with wondrous spell enthrall;
Can clear suspicions with gladdening fire;
Can chain in rosy bonds impetuous ire;
Can melt the ice bound heart of cold disdain;
Can dying love with vital breath inspire;
From every passion pluck the cancerous pain
And seeming still to yield, lead captive all the train.

D. P. Madison.

This verse of Dolly's might well be dedicated to Mary, but Mary herself could write poetry, and one bit of verse she prepared may have been somewhat responsible for her marriage to Mr. Lincoln.

Both Mrs. Madison and Mrs. Lincoln first went to live in Washington as the wives of young Congressmen. After Mr. Madison passed away his wife took up her residence in the city in a house built by her husband, at the corner of H St. North, and Madison Place. She was still residing there, an old lady of eighty years of age, when Mrs. Lincoln went to Washington to live in 1847. Although it is not likely that Mary ever met Mrs. Madison, she must have had pointed out to her the home of President Madison's widow.

Possibly in social graces Mrs. Madison would carry off the prize in this contest for highest honors among the ladies of the White House during the first century of the Nation's existence. Lafayette once paid this compliment to Dolly.

"I have visited all the courts of Europe, and most positively, I never have seen any Duchess, Princess, or Queen, whose manner, with equal dignity, blended equal sweetness. As I have seen her moving through admiring crowds, pleasing all, by making all pleased with themselves, yet looking superior to all, I often have exclaimed, 'She moves a goddess, and she looks a queen.'"

One of Mrs. Madison's biographers has given us this interesting sketch of the woman who was once garbed in the attire of a strict Quaker:

"Mrs. Madison departed far from the ways of the Quakers in her style of living and dressing, for she wore the gayest, most elaborate and costly garments she could buy in Paris and New York, and when she rode she used a chariot costing \$1,500, drawn by four horses handsomely caparisoned. Her special hobby was turbans, headdresses, and jewelry. The turbans she wore constantly all her life. They were made of finest materials matching her dresses, and cost her at the rate of \$1,000 a year. Another extravagance was her footwear. Gold and silver slippers elaborately beaded and buckled were the rule for evening wear, and like the turbans, they came from Paris. . . . Still another costly fancy was her love for jewels, of which she had a large variety, sometimes wearing great earrings of amethysts hung in chains in the shape of the letter M, and necklace, bracelets, etc., to match."

In the eyes of the women of America in 1861 the beautiful gowns and jewelry worn by Mary Todd were deplorable, but equally expensive garments and trinkets worn by Dolly Madison fifty years earlier were adorable. Mrs. Madison was but thirty-seven years old when she first entered the White House, while Mrs. Lincoln was forty-three.

After Mrs. Trumbull, wife of Senator Lyman Trumbull, arrived in Washington in 1855, she wrote a letter to one of her friends in Springfield, Illinois, in which she commented on Mary Lincoln, never suspecting that Mrs. Lincoln would some day occupy the White House. She wrote: "I have seen a great many prominent women since I came here but I have not met anyone as pretty a talker as Mary Lincoln."

While Mrs. Madison may have excelled in personal appearance, Mrs. Lincoln was very much her superior intellectually. A former Harvard University professor, who was acquainted with the schools for young women in Lexington, Kentucky, thought "the system of education pursued here (Lexington) much better than that in New England." This comment was made in 1832 at the time Mary was attending in the city, a select school for young ladies where the French language was used in conversation. Mary spoke French fluently and the White House book list for 1864 suggests that she was still keeping up her interest in French.

It is generally acknowledged by Mrs. Madison's biographers that she "was not a learned woman," had very little formal education and cared little for intellectual pursuits. One of these authors has observed: "She had the elements of the feminine education of that day, but little more, and she never had the time or the desire to educate herself in the field of books."

Both Mrs. James Madison and Mrs. Abraham Lincoln were wives of two term Presidents and both were the wives of war Presidents. Both observed the city of Washington under enemy attack and Mrs. Madison was driven from the White House when the British set fire to it in 1815.

Some day when the real Mary Lincoln becomes better known to American women, they may feel that the contest for supremacy among the women of the White House, during the first century of the Nation's history, may be much closer than they have been willing to admit.