

LINCOLN LORE

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MARY LINCOLN'S KENTUCKY HOME

The editor of Lincoln Lore recently received a letter from the secretary of the Detroit Lincoln Group commenting on the probable demolition of the Mary Todd Lincoln Kentucky Home at Lexington. In this letter he states "the house is about to be razed to make room for a gas station. Five or six thousand dollars would save it." He further comments, "I am bringing up the matter in our group and trying to start something in the way of a fund to save the situation. Don't you feel that it would be a worthy project if all groups might get together and do something about saving this landmark?"

Mary Todd was not born in the house at 574 West Main Street, Lexington, but lived there from early childhood until she moved to Springfield, Illinois, in 1839 to make her home with her sister, Mrs. Edwards. Although the building has been somewhat disfigured by the setting apart of some space on the first floor for a store room, the building could yet be restored to its original form.

Twenty-five years ago the Chicago Evening Post displayed a picture of the Todd home supplemented with this statement: "A group of public-spirited citizens of Lexington is planning to purchase the old structure and use it as a museum for Lincoln relics owned in Lexington and as a memorial to her."

Later in 1921 the Washington Star referring to the same project stated "An option has been obtained on the property and civic and historical clubs have become interested in the purchase, either by local subscription or a nation-wide appeal."

In January, 1922, the Illinois State Register carried a story about the anticipated memorial stating that "several of the civic clubs of Lexington among them the Rotary, Kiwanis, Lions, Pyramid and Optimist Clubs have newly adopted resolutions favoring the purchase and the conversion of the home into a historic shrine and museum."

Nothing ever came of these projects with the possible exception that they may have encouraged the Pyramid Club of Lexington to place a tablet on the outside wall of the building giving a brief sketch of the structure's history.

An article by J. Frank Dunn appearing in the Lexington Herald for January 30, 1936, again called attention to the neglected condition of the structure as the store room of the building was then vacant. Mr. Dunn observed "what doubtless would be preserved as a national shrine if located elsewhere, instead of being an abandoned grocery and a public boarding house, stands on West Main Street in Lexington to remind busy Lexingtonians of other delinquency—The Mary Todd House."

On several different occasions the writer has attempted to renew interest in the project by preparing mographs and by arranging for interviews and public addresses in

Lexington. In 1939 Mrs. Golden was in possession of the building and she was advised to charge a small entrance admission and utilize the store room as an antique and souvenir shop until such a time as she might be able to interest historical groups in purchasing the house.

About 1932 there was some new activity evident in the memorial property and an option on the house was again secured but the price was prohibitive so the matter was dropped. The house was later sold at a nominal figure to a man who wished to use it for commercial purposes which brought a protest from the colored church on the opposite corner. The church stands on the same lot for which Abraham and Mary Todd Lincoln and others conveyed the property to the grantee on June 18, 1856, to settle the estate of Robert S. Todd.

Another visit to Lexington in March, 1942, allowed the writer to make a public appeal to a luncheon club group and to interview members of the Chamber of Commerce with respect to the importance of preserving the Todd House. A group of women became interested in the project at this time and received a more reasonable proposition from the owner than had been submitted to former groups, allowing a period of five years to pay for it. Later in the same year when the 100th anniversary of the wedding date of Abraham Lincoln and Mary Todd drew near the writer prepared a manuscript on the Lincoln-Todd wedding which was printed in the Lexington Leader for November 1, 1942.

This article may have been partly responsible one month later for the purchase of the property by Sterling D. Coke who according to information from J. Frank Dunn, "would preserve it to be made an historical shrine after the war." On January 7, 1943, the editor of Lincoln Lore wrote a letter to Mr. Coke congratulating him on the fine accomplishment of preserving the house in which Kentucky's most famous woman lived.

As late as 1944 the writer again visiting Lexington, both in public and in private emphasized the importance of preserving the building and attempted to get a personal interview with Mr. Coke about the status of the project, but he was absent from the city so not available.

Now comes the letter already mentioned, from Mr. Heber of Detroit who has returned from Lexington with information from Mr. William H. Townsend, a well known Lincoln student of that city, stating that it now appears as if the Todd home is to be sacrificed to make room for a filling station. If any further organized effort to save the property is to be made it must be done at once. Even now the building may be in the process of being razed, but it has passed successfully through so many crises one hopes that even yet there is time to save the structure for memorial purposes.

Note. "See the June, 1946, issue of the Filson Club Quarterly for an article on the education of Mary Todd Lincoln and the cultured atmosphere she was able to create in her Springfield home."