

# LINCOLN LORE

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## MARY LINCOLN "FRAMED"

Ruth Painter Randall has achieved with one forcible concise sentence what most of us, who share her viewpoint with respect to the real Mary Todd Lincoln, have been laboring for years to accomplish with our extended and documented monographs. Tranquil students of Abraham Lincoln have been shaken out of their complacency with reference to the status of the President's wife by the startling but well supported assertion of Mrs. Randall that "In a sense Mary Lincoln has been 'framed'."

The author supplements this assertion by figuratively pointing her finger at William H. Herndon whom she calls Mrs. Lincoln's "devil's advocate." She states that it was his book on Lincoln published in 1889 "that set Mary Lincoln before the world as an ill-tempered shrew who made her husband's life miserable."

Mrs. Randall's contribution, "Mary Lincoln: Judgment Appealed," appears in the September 1949 issue of the *Abraham Lincoln Quarterly*. The editors of the publication should be complimented on opening their columns to a discussion of this type, which challenges the very foundations of the Mary Lincoln story. Indirectly the monograph questions the dependability of other phases of Lincoln history which have come from Herndon's "Vast scrap basket of second hand or hearsay 'evidence' and small town gossip which has passed through the distortion of Herndon's peculiar psychoanalysis," as Mrs. Randall puts it.

Mary Todd's acquaintance with Abraham Lincoln brought her into four distinct social and domestic relationships with him: first as his betrothed; then his wife; later the first lady of the land; and finally his widow. In no one of these various roles was Mary Lincoln spared the malicious and the acrimonious attacks by Lincoln's law partner, William Herndon. These verbal assaults were not made while Mr. Lincoln lived, but after death had made it impossible for him to defend the woman who contributed so much to his advancement.

The framing of Mary Todd by William Herndon began, as far as we can learn, shortly after his address on "Abraham Lincoln, New Salem, Ann Rutledge . . ." which was delivered in Springfield, Ill. on November 16, 1866. The argument of the lecture opens with the statement that "Lincoln loved Ann Rutledge better than his own life." This thesis is followed by a fabulous piece of fiction which became known as the Lincoln-Rutledge romance concocted by Mr. Herndon out of gossip mainly picked up in Menard and Sangamon counties and his own imagination.

Four days after the famous lecture was delivered Herndon, still under the spell of his own creative effort, wrote to Isaac N. Arnold of Chicago: "Lincoln told his wife he did not love her, and did love another . . . and did so before he was married to her, she was cognizant of the fact that Lincoln loved another." The invention of the fake wedding seen by Herndon in which he claimed Lincoln failed to show up leaving Mary at the altar caused Herndon to conclude that Mary may have loved Lincoln up to this time but then "Love fled at the approach of revenge." The actual Lincoln-Todd nuptials according to Herndon was a loveless wedding.

Possibly the framing of Mrs. Lincoln as a wife and mother is the most abusive role in which Mr. Herndon appears. She was the mother of four sons, one dying in infancy at four years, another in the White House at 12 years of age, and a third in Chicago after her husband's assassination. Herndon raised this question in a letter to his friend and co-author Jesse M. Weik, "I should like to know one thing and that is: what caused the death of these children. I have an opinion which I will never state to anyone. I know a good deal of the Lincoln family and too much of Mrs. Lincoln. I wish I did not know as much of her as I do; she was a tigress."

Mrs. Lincoln as wife of the President Elect, and later the first lady of the land, did not escape the framing tendency of Herndon. As a background to Lincoln's famous Farewell Address at Springfield on the morning of his departure for Washington, Herndon reaches into his "scrap basket" and after sufficient processing sends a story to his collaborator, Mr. Weik, which originated with a man "who is a gentleman and can be relied on." According to Herndon a man had bribed Mary with a diamond brooch to secure an appointment from Mr. Lincoln and Lincoln refused to concede. A friend of the applicant was sent the morning of the departure for Washington to the home of Lincoln to consummate the bargain and found "Mrs. Lincoln in a hysterical fit." One version states that "Mrs. Lincoln was lying on the floor quite beside herself." Lincoln is supposed to have told the visitor, "She will not let me go until I promise an office for one of her friends." Of course Herndon should have known that Lincoln was not at his home that morning but at the hotel, which he and his wife left at 7:30 A. M. for the depot, although Mrs. Lincoln did not accompany him on the train. But such details as where the Lincolns were living and who went on the train were not so important to Herndon as the diamond brooch story.

Possibly the most unforgivable phase of all the framing of Mary Lincoln is the fact that it actually occurred after she became a widow. On Christmas Eve 1866, six weeks after Herndon delivered his lecture on Lincoln and Ann Rutledge, Robert Lincoln wrote a letter to Mr. Herndon in which he said, "I infer from your letter, but I hope it is not so, that it is your purpose to make some considerable mention of my mother in your work—I say I hope it is not so, because in the first place it would not be pleasant for her or for any woman to be made public property of in that way." It is the opinion of Mr. David C. Mearns who published part of this letter in his two volume work on *The Lincoln Papers* that Robert Lincoln "probably concurred with the doctors, who held that part of his mother's trouble was attributed to Herndon's lectures."

Again we bow to Ruth Painter Randall and the editors of the *Abraham Lincoln Quarterly* for this cooperative effort to see justice done to the memory of Abraham Lincoln's wife.