

LINCOLN LORE

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THE PERSECUTION OF MARY LINCOLN

The national press services released on March 8 through the newspapers of America a defamatory story about Mary Lincoln based on some ridiculous conclusions drawn from letters the President's wife had written to Abram Wakeman, Postmaster, and later Port Surveyor, of New York City. So the vicious attacks on the character of Mrs. Lincoln continue, regardless of the efforts on the part of many students to encourage an objective biographical study of this refined and highly educated woman.

Dorothy Thompson, famous columnist, in a timely essay on The Lincoln Papers states: "A whole school of historians has arisen which interprets history from the snakes eye view of the gossip columnist." Nothing but "a snakes eye view" could have caused the reporter commenting on the letters of the President's wife to Wakeman to draw the conclusion that there was a romance between the two.

Contributing to the human interest in the story was the fabulous price put on the value of the eight letters by one of America's best known autograph appraisers who claimed "the collection may be worth \$100,000 in historical value." Certainly he did not offer that much for them. The late Thomas A. Madigan some years ago priced at the sum of \$250 a letter Mary Lincoln wrote to James Gordon Bennett, of much greater historical significance than any of the letters described in the above collection. Running through catalogues giving the quoted prices of Mary Lincoln letters it does not appear that they would average over \$40.

Life magazine, which gave a full page feature to the story in its issue of March 19, was apparently impressed by the reputed monetary value of the letters as this caption was used: "\$1 Fee Turns Up A \$100,000 Find." The *Life* story actually mentions but six, instead of eight, letters which raises the value of each letter to \$16,666.66%.

The great-granddaughter of Abram Wakeman who discovered the letters in the old Wakeman home at Hudson Falls, New York, contributes the gossip element to the story by stating that her mother once told her of seeing a letter from Mrs. Lincoln to Wakeman which said, "I have taken your excellent advice and decided not to leave my husband while he is in the White House." The letter containing this statement, whatever it may mean, is not in the collection.

One of the news stories carries as a caption "Mary Todd Lincoln's letters hint love for President's aide" based on a statement in the article that "the letters contained evidence of a romance between Mrs. Lincoln and Wakeman." There was some doubt evidenced, however, that the above mentioned romance could be confirmed by the letters "only after a possible wrangle among historians."

Although the contents of one letter was withheld, the following quotation was taken from correspondence dated Feb. 20, 1865: "I write hurriedly today and will not attempt to discuss so unnecessary a subject as one so very far beneath our thoughts."

Quotations from only two of the eight letters were used so we may assume that with the exception of the one letter withheld nothing of a personal nature appeared in the other letters passing between these individuals. The two quotations from one of the letters submitted in the article refer mostly to patronage and one paragraph in Mrs. Lincoln wrote:

"If any information was given Mr. W. it emanated from E. himself and those whom he had entertained with his vile falsehoods. Coupling a lady's name with one whom I have never conversed and not placed on even the footing of one of our doormen is indeed a farce."

The *Washington Star* on January 19, 1930 featured a story on the discovery of a letter written by Mary Lincoln to Abram Wakeman on March 20, 1865, shortly after the last letter mentioned above. The correspondence was then in possession of Mrs. Robert F. Crump who had acquired the letter about 1910 from "A. Wakeman of New York City, a son of the man to whom Mary Lincoln addressed the document."

The *Washington* feature article not only used a picture of Mrs. Crump, the owner, but also exhibited a facsimile of the first page of the letter. The salutation is rather a formal one for correspondence between two people said to be involved in a love affair. The letter is copied verbatim.

"Washington, March 20th (1865)

"Hon. Mr. Wakeman.

"My Dear Sir:

"I find in my drawer a rather pleasant photograph of my little Taddie, yet not so good as one of Mr. L. I take the liberty of enclosing it to you; it may interest your children.

"The papers appear to think it is one of M. L.'s 'last jokes,' the offer made to Mr. B. Lest he might consider that it was intended as a jest, please, do not fail to express my regrets to him. You will understand—even give W. to understand, that I regret that Mr. B. did not accept.

"We are having charming weather & I am most happy to say, that my blessed Husband's health has much improved. We went to the Opera on Saturday eve.; Mr. Sumner accompanied us & we had a very gay little time. Mr. L., when he throws off his heavy manner, as he often does, can make himself very, very agreeable. Last evening he again joined our little coterie, & tomorrow eve we all go again to hear 'Robin Adair,' sung in 'La dame Blanche,' by Habelmann.

"This is always the pleasant time to me in W. Spring-time, some few of the most pleasant Senators' families remain until June & all ceremony with each other is laid aside.

"Mr. L. most probably goes down to the front (entree) this week & wishes me to accompany him. I gladly seize on any change that will benefit him.

"I write, as usual, in great haste.

"Very truly, your friend,

"M. L."

The "Mr. B." mentioned in this letter is undoubtedly James Gordon Bennett whom Lincoln had offered the important ministry to France which was declined by Bennett in a letter written to the President on March 6, 1865, and the "Mr. W." noted, is unquestionably Thurlow Weed.

The contents of this letter should stop all this nonsense which has been given such wide circulation, not only in the press but in *Life* magazine as well, about any suspicion that Mary Todd Lincoln was not true to her husband.