



Lincoln Lore

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MARY TODD LINCOLN (1818-1882)

At 8:15 on the evening of July 16 a hundred years ago, Mary Todd Lincoln died in Springfield, Illinois. Since her return from Pau, France, in 1880, she had been living with her sister and brother-in-law, Elizabeth and Ninian Wirt Edwards. Declining health rather than a desire to end her self-imposed exile abroad had caused Mrs. Lincoln to come back to Springfield. Since her husband's assassination, Mary had said repeatedly that Springfield held too many memories.

Though she had taken no exercise for a long time, Mrs. Lincoln was able with assistance to move about her room until the afternoon before her last day. Plagued with boils, diabetes, and probably other illnesses as well, Mary's health had not been good for years, but her death came as a surprise. It was reported that she was planning a trip to the seashore to restore her health. She had refused to see a physician for some time, but after her collapse on the afternoon of the fifteenth, she consented to see the Edwardses' family doctor, T. W. Dresser.

There was nothing Dr. Dresser could do, and Mary realized that her end was near. She did not express any concern about the future or leave any dying message. Or perhaps it would be better to say, she had been leaving her dying message in letters and conversations since 1865: she wanted to be free of earth's sorrows and to be reunited with her husband and children in the next world. Late on the evening of the fifteenth, she lost the ability to speak and answered questions by blinking her eyes. At 1 a.m. on the sixteenth, she lapsed into a coma. She died without any signs of pain.

Mrs. Lincoln's only surviving son, Robert Todd Lincoln, was serving as Secretary of War in Washington. Informed by telegraph that his mother was failing, he received hourly messages on her condition. He arrived in Springfield Tuesday morning, July 18. The funeral was the next day.

Mrs. Lincoln's body lay on view in a casket in the Edwardses' north double parlor. She had married Abraham Lincoln on the same spot some forty years before. Her hands were visible in the casket, and reporters noticed her wedding ring.

The casket was closed at the house and taken to the First Presbyterian Church, which was thronged with mourners. All business in Springfield halted at this point. Shelby M. Cullom, Judge Samuel H. Treat, Milton Hay, James C. Conkling, Colonel John Williams, General John A. McClernand, J. A. Jones, J. S. Bradford, and Jacob Bunn placed the coffin at the foot of the altar.

Most of the pallbearers' names are familiar to Lincoln students. Shelby Cullom became a political associate of Lincoln's after the 1856 Presidential election when Cullom joined the Republican party. In 1864 he defeated Lincoln's old law partner, John Todd Stuart, in a race for the United States House of Representatives. At the time of Mrs. Lincoln's funeral, he was Governor of Illinois.

Samuel H. Treat was Judge of the United States District Court for the Southern District of Illinois. Abraham Lincoln had argued many cases before him. Milton Hay had studied law in the Stuart and Lincoln office. By the time of Mrs. Lincoln's funeral, he had retired from a successful practice.

James Cook Conkling was the friend of longest standing among Mrs. Lincoln's pallbearers. In 1841 Conkling had married Mercy Ann Levering, one of Mary's closest friends. He was a political ally of Lincoln's, close enough for the President to entrust him with reading an important public letter on administration policy to a Union mass meeting in Springfield in 1863. Conkling was a successful lawyer.

John Williams was a Springfield merchant and banker, active in Republican politics, who had accompanied President Lincoln's remains from Washington to Springfield in 1865. John A. McClernand was one of three Democrats among the pallbearers. His association with Lincoln dated only from the Civil War when Lincoln made him a general as part of his policy of giving military appointments (and those only) to members of both parties.

John S. Bradford, also a Democrat, had been a neighbor of the Lincolns' and had run the store where they bought their books and stationery. Jacob Bunn,



*From the Louis A. Warren
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FIGURE 1. The last photograph of Mrs. Lincoln.

Springfield grocer and banker, was among the few pallbearers who had at least as close a relationship with Mrs. Lincoln as with her husband. After Mary was released from an insane asylum in 1875, he managed her estate, sending her the income from it while she resided in Europe. J. A. Jones has not been identified.

The church was elaborately decorated. Between the casket and the altar stood a representation in flowers of the "Pearly Gates Ajar," three feet high. Visible through the arch of the gates was a bust of Abraham Lincoln. To modern taste the symbols might seem a little heavy-handed, but it can at least be said that this was an accurate reflection of Mrs. Lincoln's views. There was a floral cross, five feet high, and a floral pillow given by the citizens of Springfield. Carnations formed the shape of an open book on which "Mary Lincoln" was written in forget-me-nots. At the foot of her coffin was a broken column on which a representation of a snow white dove was perched.

The Reverend R. O. Post of Springfield's First Congregational Church began the service by reading a scriptural passage and a prayer. The choir sang "Nearer My God to Thee." Mrs. Lincoln had apparently expressed a desire to have no eulogy, and the Reverend James A. Reed, pastor of the First Presbyterian Church, dwelt in his sermon on an analogy with two pines he had seen standing side by side in the Allegheny Mountains. They had grown up so closely together that their roots were intertwined and their trunks appeared almost joined at the base. One had been blasted by a storm and died, and in a few years the companion tree wasted away and died as well. Reed thought Abraham's and Mary's lives were very like those of the two pine trees. John Wilkes Booth's bullet killed her as surely as it did her husband. Her life after April 15, 1865, was only a living death.

At the end of the sermon, the Reverend T. A. Parker of the First Methodist Church read a prayer. The coffin, followed by a long procession of carriages, was taken to Oak Ridge Cemetery. Reed said a brief prayer in the vestibule of the Lincoln Tomb.

Like her husband, Mary became the subject of myth almost immediately. Jane Grey Swisshelm, a feminist reformer and journalist who had met Mary Todd Lincoln in Washington during the Civil War, hastened to write a letter to the *Chicago Tribune*, eulogizing her old friend. Mrs. Swisshelm (now single; she was divorced from Mr. Swisshelm) wrote an interesting and not altogether inaccurate letter. "I never knew a woman," she said, "who more completely merged herself in her husband"—a judgment with which most modern writers would be in complete agree-

ment. Such was not the reigning interpretation among the first generation of Lincoln biographers. Ward Hill Lamon, whose *Life of Abraham Lincoln* appeared in Mary's lifetime, and William H. Herndon, whose famous biography of his law partner would be published seven years after her funeral, depicted Lincoln's marriage as a trial of conflict and woe.

Mrs. Swisshelm bent over backwards to defend Mrs. Lincoln. That was hardly inappropriate for a eulogy, of course, and it did lead her to a very interesting defense of Mrs. Lincoln's taste for finery in clothing. That had been the object of some criticism from those who thought a wartime White House should appear more Spartan and self-sacrificing. Mrs. Swisshelm insisted that Mary would gladly have joined a society against using foreign



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FIGURE 2. Mrs. Lincoln as fashion plate: was finery her patriotic duty?

dress goods during the war. There were various movements among women during the Civil War to eschew finery and especially foreign-made finery in order to save money better spent for patriotic purposes. Lincoln and Secretary of the Treasury Salmon P. Chase opposed Mrs. Lincoln's participation, however, because the government needed the tariff revenue from imported goods to support the war effort. Their making the "wearing of rich clothing a patriotic duty" coincided with Mary's inclinations anyway: hence all the finery.

Two other points made by Mrs. Swisshelm were to reverberate through the Lincoln literature for a century. Mrs. Lincoln, she wrote, "was the inspiration of her husband's political career." Although Lamon spoke in a vague way of Mary's ambition as a goad to Abraham's career, Herndon was to argue quite a different thesis. To be sure, Herndon mentioned Mrs. Lincoln's ambition, but he saw the marriage as such a disastrous match that he could hardly attribute any happy consequence to it in a direct way, least of all, Lincoln's rise to the Presidency. He did, however, suggest a backhanded way in which Mary had an influence on that career: Lincoln's home life was so wretched that he tended steadily to his career rather than go home and spend time with his wife. That was probably nonsense, but Herndon was certainly correct in another judgment on his famous law partner. "His ambition was a little engine that knew no rest," Herndon said. He knew, in this case from firsthand experience, that Lincoln needed no external goad to success.

Mrs. Swisshelm was wrong, and her error was to have effects quite different from what she intended. She pointed to Mary's role with feminist pride. Later, a more sentimental public which preferred to see its political heroes as ambitionless statues, would *blame* Mary for the sin of ambition. Lincoln, they would say, had no such fault, but his wife did and drove him, a reluctant and self-effacing man, to realms of power he never lusted after himself.

Jane Grey Swisshelm had been an ardent antislavery advocate, by her own admission often critical of President Lincoln for moving too slowly against slavery. Her letter on Mary Todd Lincoln stated boldly: "In statesmanship she was farther-sighted than he [Lincoln]—was more radically opposed to slavery, and urged him to Emancipation, as a matter of right, long before he saw it as a matter of necessity." This judgment, too, was almost certainly wrong, but it has had remarkable staying power and has been given considerable prominence by those modern writers bent on reviving Mary Todd Lincoln's reputation.

The problem with the Mary Todd Lincoln-as-radical thesis, if it may be called that, is not that it misrepresents her views so much as it misrepresents their influence. The fact of the matter is that Mary's political views were so shallow and her political instincts so worthless that she had no discernible *political* influence on her husband. It is quite true that she voiced enthusiastic praise of the Emancipation Proclamation, especially when speaking to Charles Sumner, but did she ever criticize the policies of the Lincoln administration? No, and she did not influence them before the fact, either. When Lincoln was working for John C. Frémont's election in 1856, his wife was writing to a friend that she was too Southern at heart and had too much trouble with Irish servant girls to support anyone but Millard Fillmore. Fillmore was running against the ardently antislavery Frémont as both the Whig and anti-immigrant Know-Nothing candidate. Her views had no influence then, and there is not one iota of evidence to support the view that they were influential in 1862.

In the chapter about Mrs. Lincoln's growing antislavery views in Ruth Painter Randall's *Mary Lincoln: Biography of a Marriage*, Mrs. Randall quotes Mrs. Swisshelm at some length. Yet the chapter does not cite a single Mary Todd Lincoln letter written *before* Lincoln's decision to issue the Emancipation Proclamation. Because she "merged herself in her husband," as Mrs. Swisshelm saw, Mary liked her husband's proclamation, but it was *his* proclamation. It probably would not have mattered to American history had Mrs. Lincoln retained her old

Southern feeling and disliked the Emancipation Proclamation. She disliked and distrusted William H. Seward too, but Lincoln kept him on as Secretary of State throughout his administration.

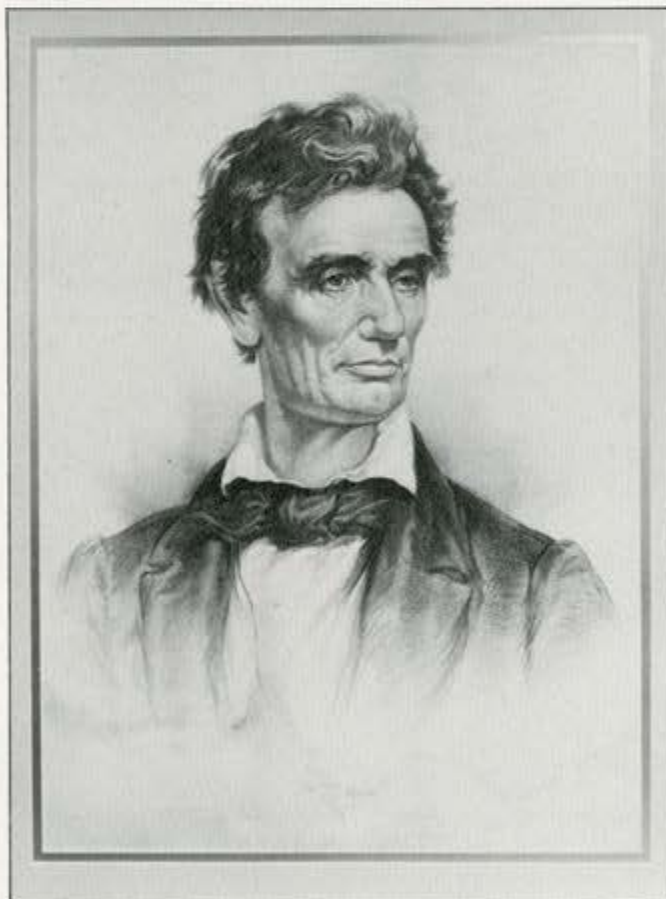
Mary Todd Lincoln should not be made the scapegoat for Lincoln's human passions, like political ambition; nor should she be credited with her husband's accomplishments, like the Emancipation Proclamation. She should be remembered as a woman who married brilliantly and who, by merging her life in her husband's, thereby touched greatness herself. After Lincoln died, greatness departed her life. Jane Grey Swisshelm knew that too. She knew that Mrs. Lincoln's life after 1865 was wretched and that Mary wanted nothing as much as she wanted to leave it behind. So Mrs. Swisshelm greeted news of her old friend's death as "sad, glad tidings."

THE PRINT THAT NEVER WAS

"If entirely agreeable to you, we should be glad of the privilege and opportunity to engrave your likeness on steel—with a view to publication of the same. . . ." So began a letter from A. H. Ritchie & Co. written to Abraham Lincoln on June 28, 1860. To interest the busy Republican Presidential nominee in their proposition, they criticized their competition:

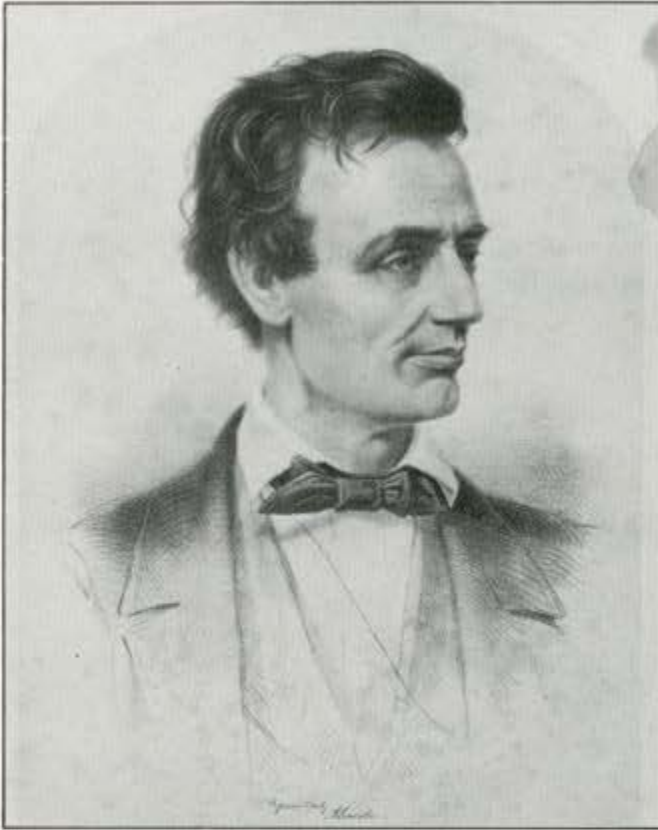
We notice that the likeness made by Mr Hicks and that by Mr Barry are both to be reproduced on stone & in the *lithographic* form. You are undoubtedly aware that a *steel plate engraving* is very much better & more desirable than a lithograph—By the first named process, is secured not only a higher degree of finish, & greater vigor & character, but much better artistic effect—

Ritchie & Co. proposed a bust portrait, about 16 by 12 inches in size.



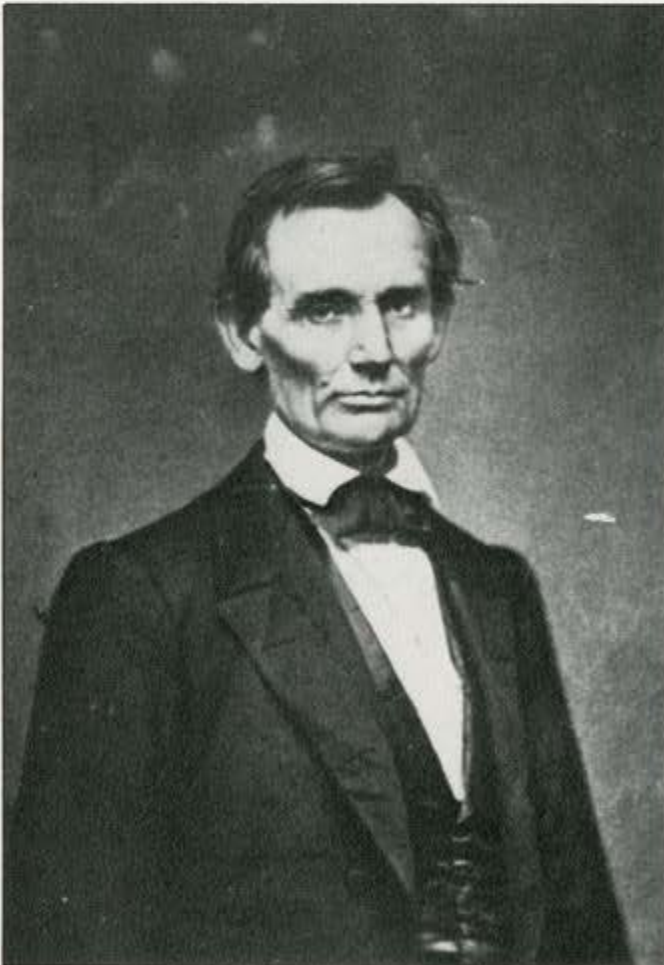
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FIGURE 3. Lithograph of the Charles A. Barry portrait.



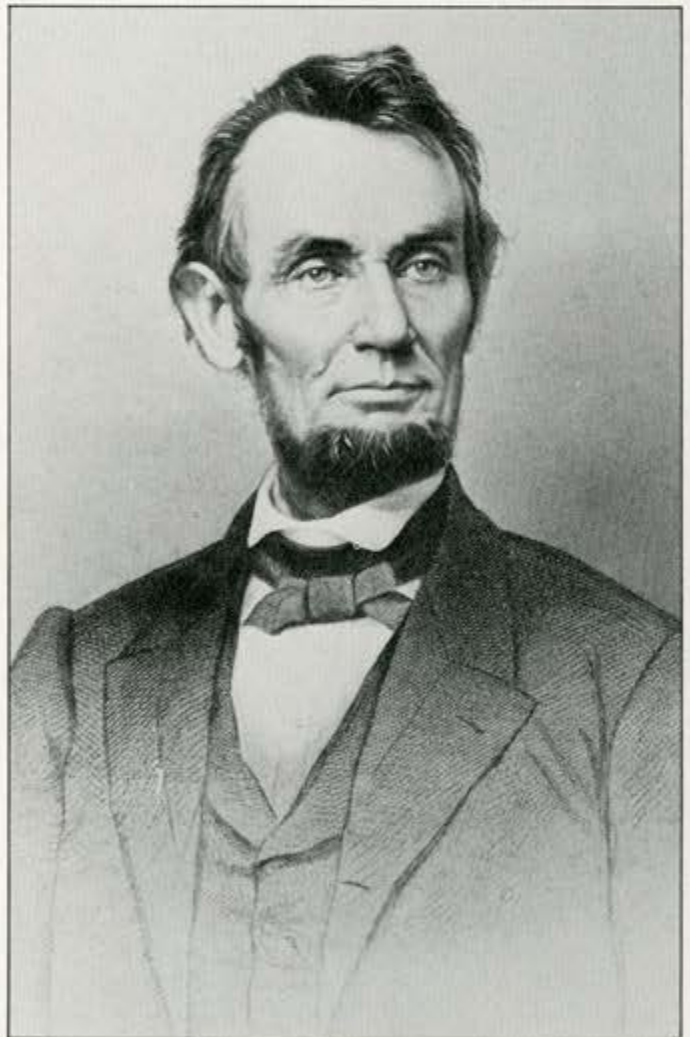
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FIGURE 4. Lithograph of the Thomas Hicks portrait.



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FIGURE 5. The Cooper Institute photograph, already much caricatured by June, 1860.



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FIGURE 6. Ritchie finally produced a large engraving for Lincoln's second Presidential campaign.

The engravers' problem was the lack of a model on which to base their print. "We would use [Mathew] Brady's Photographic likeness," they told Lincoln, "were it not that it has been already extensively copied & caricatured & we wish something different." They were referring to the so-called Cooper Institute photograph, taken by Brady on February 27, 1860, the day of Lincoln's famous Cooper Institute Speech. Astonishingly, that likeness already seemed common less than a month and a half after Lincoln's nomination.

The letter asked Lincoln to "get an Ambrotype or a Daguerreotype taken by one of the best operators as near you as may be convenient." The engravers enclosed instructions for the photographer and a handsome sample of their work. They also cited as references D. Appleton & Co., Booksellers & Publishers, and C. A. Dana of the *New York Tribune*. They would "guarantee that no improper use will be made of the likeness you may have sent to us."

Lincoln missed his opportunity to have the distinguished firm spread his likeness far and wide, and Ritchie & Co. missed their opportunity to cash in on the demand for portraits of the little-known Republican candidate. For some reason Lincoln did not or could not do what they wished, and the engraving company had to content itself with publishing prints of Lincoln long after he became President.

Ritchie & Co., nevertheless, did well with Lincoln's image. After his assassination they published an expensive deathbed scene and the enormously popular "First Reading of the Emancipation Proclamation before the Cabinet."