

THE ADDICTION
OF
MARY TODD
LINCOLN

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Contents

| | |
|---|-------------------|
| Introduction | <i>i</i> |
| A Chronology of Mary Todd Lincoln's Life | viii |
| Mary Todd Lincoln | ix |
| <i>I: What We Know about Mary Todd Lincoln</i> | <i>1</i> |
| Growing Up | 1 |
| Wife and Mother | 7 |
| Widowhood | 30 |
| <i>II: Opiate Addiction in the Nineteenth Century</i> | <i>55</i> |
| Availability of Opiates | 56 |
| Characteristics of Addicts | 60 |
| Prevailing Attitudes toward Addiction | 67 |
| Methods of Treatment | 74 |
| Stories of Individual Addicts | 81 |
| <i>III: The Addiction of Mary Todd Lincoln</i> | <i>95</i> |
| Did She Have a Destructive Relationship with Mood Altering Drugs? | 98 |
| Was She Genetically Vulnerable to Chemical Addiction? | 103 |
| What Mood-Changing Chemicals Did She Have Access To? | 108 |
| In What Ways Did She Behave Like an Addict? | 120 |
| What Treatment Would Have Been Available to Her? | 147 |
| To Sum Up | 150 |
| <i>Appendix: What We Now Know about Chemical Addiction</i> | <i>157</i> |
| What Is Chemical Addiction? | 159 |
| Who Is Most in Danger? | 163 |
| What Drugs Are Dangerous to Them? | 165 |
| How Do the Victims Behave? | 167 |
| What Treatment Is Available to Them? | 170 |
| <i>Bibliography</i> | <i>173</i> |

The evil spirit of the drug
hides its strength and touches
the doomed one gently until
it has made its grasp sure,
then claws protrude from
that soft hand and clutch
the captive with a grip which [s]he
can have little hope of breaking.

—an unnamed addict, 1881,
quoted by H. Wayne Morgan
in *Yesterday's Addicts*, 1974

Introduction

You probably know a Mary Todd Lincoln. A person in pain. A person in pain who goes to the doctor and then goes home and takes the prescribed medication whenever necessary to relieve the pain. And at first it works wonderfully. After a while, however, the dosage must be increased. And increased again. This person does not know about his or her genetic vulnerability to addiction, does not even think about addiction as relevant. All that matters is finding some measure, any measure, of relief from that pain. After all, what could possibly be wrong with relieving pain?

Yet sometimes it goes all wrong. Sometimes the pain gets destroyed but so does everything else.

The destruction began in Mary Todd Lincoln, wife of Abraham, long before she became our nation's First Lady. The destruction was slow and steady, its progress inexorable, like that of a deadly green worm eating away inside her brain. She's gone now. Her agony ended long ago, but perhaps we can learn from her suffering. Perhaps from the distance of 125 years we can look back and see a pattern that she and her family and friends could not see because it was so close and so confusing and so terrible. Mary Todd Lincoln was, after all, a wise and generous woman, and I think she would want us to know her story in the hope that some of us will not be doomed to repeat it. For there are among us still many Mary Todd Lincolns.

Let's go back. Several able tellers have told the story of the life of Mary Todd Lincoln, born into the rich and famous

Todd family, mother of four sons, wife of our Civil War President, Abraham.

Her cousin, Katherine Helm, first tried to tell the world that Mary was not nearly so difficult and peculiar and weird as the Chicago newspapers tried to make her sound. Helm told many real and touching anecdotes of their happy childhood days together. Like the time they wanted to look sophisticated and wear hoop skirts when they went to church, but had no hoops, so made their own lop-sided ones out of willow branches. It was painstaking and futile work, but they had fun.

Then Carl Sandburg, devoted to the memory of Abraham Lincoln, wanted to tell the world that anybody as wonderful as Abraham must surely have had excellent taste in a wife. Sandburg described Mary as a lovely lady and a good wife, at least at first. The fact that she became a bit crazy now and then was certainly no fault of Abraham's, according to Sandburg.

In the 1950s a respectful biographer and careful researcher, Ruth Painter Randall, wrote a meticulous story of Mary's life, the story of a loving mother, a loving wife, whose life was beset with trouble.

The Turners too, historians who gathered together Mary's existing letters, were sympathetic to Mary, who found herself in the national limelight at a tragic time. They wondered why we have built a marble temple for her husband yet still dismiss his wife as "a shrew, a spendthrift, a madwoman" (Turner 4).

More recently, the perceptive historian, Jean Baker, vividly described the tumultuous times Mary lived in and delicately suggested that Mary's troubles were psychological. Jason Emerson followed up on this explanation by describing Mary Todd Lincoln as suffering from bipolar disorder.

There is one problem, however, with each of these caring summaries of Mary Todd Lincoln's life. None of them explains the huge and awful thing that her son Robert did to his mother. Whatever made him feel he had to resort to such drastic action?

It happened in Chicago, in the year 1875, when Mary was 56 years old:¹

She waited. She waited before she opened the door because she was afraid. For it seemed she lived in constant danger now, even though the war was over. Her murdered husband was already being called, "The Great One," while she, the former First Lady, the wife who had always faithfully supported him, they were calling crazy. They. If only they would leave her alone.

That insistent knocking. Those stupid people. She tried to be always vigilant, but this time her hair was not combed, her dress was not clean. She was not expecting visitors, at least she did not think she was. But whoever was knocking, what would they think when she, looking like a common servant, opened the door herself? The old panic pushed in her throat.

"Mrs. Lincoln," began this man, whom she had known for many years, "you are under arrest. Come with me, for they are waiting for you in court. Your insanity trial will begin in one hour."

He seemed so business-like, almost as if he were telling her that her roof needed some minor repairs. Yet she didn't own a roof any more, and this man was not acting like an old friend, but like still another new enemy. Ever so politely, he threatened to use force, if necessary, to take her to this public trial, which her first-born son

¹ Italicized passages are my attempts to imagine or reconstruct certain scenes as they might have happened.

had so carefully arranged for her. Mary Todd Lincoln went.

The President's wife, crazy? Mrs. Abraham Lincoln, arrested? And all of this arranged by her son? Yes. Her trial had been carefully planned. The judge and jury and 17 witnesses were already there waiting for her. Her son Robert was there too, of course. Her only living child, Robert Todd Lincoln, was 32, married, the father of two small children, and already a prominent and respected lawyer in Chicago.

Mary listened impassively as the witnesses recounted her erratic behavior during the recent months that she had been living in a Chicago hotel. Some of the witnesses were hotel workers, who testified that she was sometimes terrified of imaginary things, that she sometimes heard noises that no one else could hear. Other witnesses, local merchants, testified that she shopped compulsively, buying large quantities of things, like lace curtains, that she could not possibly use. Robert himself testified that although she had always been kind to him, she had been irresponsible and unpredictable since his father's murder—especially about money. For her own safety, he felt she must be restrained. And five eminent doctors testified that Mary Todd Lincoln, whom they had not recently examined, was of unsound mind.

She was insane, they all said, and legally it was so decreed. Which meant that they kept her under guard, took away control of her money, and committed her to an insane asylum. It was the nicest insane asylum they could find, but still she would be a captive there. Quite alone. She was publicly humiliated as the nation's newspapers screamed that Mrs. Abraham Lincoln was a lunatic.

This story from our national family history we perhaps do not care to remember. But it is true. Lovely, intelligent,

charming Mary Todd from the rich, aristocratic and powerful Todds of Lexington, Kentucky, married that nice nobody, Abraham. They eventually had four sons, and Abraham became president and she was a good wife and a good mother and a good First Lady. Then one day she was called crazy and locked up in a lunatic asylum.

A controversy raged. Some well-meaning people thought that Mary Todd Lincoln was wrongfully incarcerated; other well-meaning people believed that at last she would receive treatment for her illness, whatever that was. At any rate, she behaved herself in the asylum for four months, and one year later, just when the newspapers had almost forgotten her, the lawyers got together again and declared her sane once more. Although legally sane, she was an ill and broken woman who wandered around Europe for a few years and then came back to her sister's home in Illinois to die.

This story of Mary Todd Lincoln's insanity trial has been well told several times before, but it seems that we have trouble remembering her story. Perhaps because her story still raises many disturbing questions. Was she really of sound mind? Why did Robert arrange such a rigged and public trial for his mother? How had such a wife as Mary, struggling with illness, affected her famous husband? And where exactly is that sometimes wobbly line between two labels, sane and insane?

Mary. Perhaps she wouldn't mind our calling her that. Mary, Mary, quite contrary. Now, she would mind that. Was she contrary? Many people have thought she was. Many historians have, straining to be charitable, pronounced her so. You see, historians seem always willing to talk about her nice husband—indeed they want to talk about that American icon—so it is hard to avoid at least a discreet mention of his perhaps contrary wife.

The historians try to be kind, really they do, but what do you say about a woman who inspired so many conflicting opinions? One of her neighbors loved her, another one hated her. One servant respected her, another one quit in disgust. One cousin described her as generous, another as stingy. One White House employee found her capable and kind, another, helpless and rude. The adjectives range in the extremes. As through the years the Lincoln name became increasingly golden, many, many people remembered Mary. Still, most of the memories are contradictory.

Remembering, after all, is a hazardous business. Imagine a journalist today trying to flesh out a person who had suddenly come under the public eye:

“Excuse me, sir, I’m from the newspaper, and I was just wondering what you might remember about a person you went to school with, an Elaine Wigglesworth?”

“Who?”

“Elaine, Elaine Wigglesworth. Many people have heard of her now, of course, but I wonder if you remember anything about her back when you were classmates in the second grade?”

“Oh, yes. She was a good friend of mine. A lovely girl. I thought the world of Elaine.”

“So you would say, then, that there was no sign of deranged behavior back then?”

“Deranged behavior? Of course, not. She was perfectly normal, a charming girl.”

“In other words, sir, when you were second graders together you noticed nothing at all about Elaine which would indicate that she was capable of murdering a busload of school children on their way home from kindergarten?”

“She did that?”

“Thirty-seven dead, from the bomb she planted, and nine terribly injured.”

“Well, now that I think about it, Elaine Wigglesworth wasn’t very well liked by the other kids. She argued constantly with the other girls. And she didn’t talk to the rest of us. And once, I remember very clearly, she copied from me when we were having a spelling test. The teacher was always having to punish her. Yes, we all knew she was headed for trouble.”

And so it was, perhaps, for Mary Todd Lincoln. “Mary who? Oh, yes, I remember when. . .”

Most people being remembered, however, through the filter of collective memory, come out pretty much one way or another, good or bad. Mary Todd Lincoln’s father, for example, has gone down in history as an upright, able man. Similarly, the stories that have come down to us about Abraham are positive. All the adjectives are good. The same is true of their son Robert, who lived to be much older than either of his parents. He is still usually described as intelligent, prominent, capable, responsible, private, and honest.

Then there is Mary. Mary Todd Lincoln was sometimes serene, but other times hysterical; sometimes charming and interested, but other times nasty and self-absorbed; sometimes poised, sometimes paranoid. She was, in a word, unpredictable, at least in the public part of her life. Kind historians call her an enigma.

But if we look at Mary Todd Lincoln more closely, I think we can understand her a little better. I think we need to understand her better, for, although more than a hundred years have passed between us, she was very much like many of us today. She was an addict. And as her addiction illness, which sometimes looked like craziness, worsened, the effect

on her husband, who now belongs to all of us, was enormous. We must try to understand that too.

After many years of working in the field of chemical addiction, I am drawn to Mary. Any woman in our addiction therapy groups would immediately feel a kinship with her. She acts like an addict, she sounds like an addict, and she comes from a family rampant with addiction. Any recovering addict, like me, would welcome her into the room, and would feel in an instant sisterhood with her. We would understand, by sympathetic instinct, what she must have gone through, even though some of the actual hard evidence of her addiction may have disappeared from the historical record.

A Chronology of Mary Todd Lincoln's Life

Mary Todd Lincoln's life spanned from 1818 to 1882. Her 63 years included three major periods: 1) her youth, 2) her time as wife and mother, and 3) her widowhood.

Until the age of 24, Mary was the third daughter, and probably the most accomplished, of six surviving children born to Robert and Eliza Parker Todd in Lexington, Kentucky. The Todds and Parkers had been founding families in Lexington, and Mary grew up in the household of one of the richest, most prominent families in town. The Todds were the Kennedys of Kentucky.

During the second phase of her life, Mary Todd Lincoln was, in her own mind, primarily a devoted wife and mother. She married Abraham Lincoln when she was 24. Their marriage ended 23 years later when he was killed in Washington, D.C. They had four sons, two of whom died before their father did. Mary and her family spent most of this period in Springfield, Illinois, but during the last four

years she was our First Lady in the White House. Throughout this time, Mary's migraine headaches plagued her. Also throughout this time, she, who was raised by slaves, remained openly opposed to slavery.

A widow at the age of 47, she spent the last 16 years of her life restlessly moving around and coping with many troubles: health, legal, and money troubles, but also relationship troubles. Spiritually, she became weary. At age 63, she died in her sister Elizabeth's home in Springfield, Illinois.

Generally speaking, Mary Todd Lincoln's biographers agree that the first phase of her life was a mostly positive time, that the last phase was a mostly negative time, and that the phase in the middle was a time full of contradictions. Let us now look at a more detailed chronology of her life. This chronology will help us see the big picture of her life and also identify the turning points where her difficulties deepened.

Mary Todd Lincoln

- 1818 Born in December, Lexington, Kentucky.
- 1825 Mary's mother died at age 31, leaving Mary's father Robert and six young children under 12: Elizabeth, Frances, Mary (age six), Levi, Ann, and infant George Rogers Clark Todd.
- 1826 Mary acquired a stepmother, Betsey Humphreys Todd. Betsey and Mary's father Robert then had nine more children within 15 years.
- 1827 At age 8 Mary went to school.

- 1832 Mary's sister Elizabeth married well (a bright young lawyer, son of the Illinois governor) and moved to Springfield, Illinois. Mary began attending a French school in Lexington.
- 1837 Mary spent some time in Springfield with her sister Elizabeth, whose house was a social center for the frontier city.
- 1839 At age 21, Mary moved to Elizabeth's home in Springfield and began a relationship with Abraham Lincoln, a young lawyer with neither wealth nor connections. Mary's sister and her prominent husband did not approve of this relationship. They thought Mary could do better.
- 1841 In January Abraham broke off his relationship with Mary.
- 1842 In the summer Mary and Abraham were reconciled and eventually married. They had very little money, so they lived frugally in a boarding house in Springfield. Mary learned about life without servants or slaves to care for her.
- 1843 Their son Robert Todd Lincoln was born. Mary Todd Lincoln was 24, and Abraham was 34.
- 1846 Their second son, Eddie was born. Abraham was a circuit lawyer, spending much time traveling far from home. Abraham was elected to represent Illinois in the U. S. Congress.
- 1847 The Lincoln family (Robert was four and Eddie, one and a half) moved to Washington, where they lived in a boarding house.

- 1848-49 For much of this time Mary and the boys boarded in Springfield while Abraham was in Washington, but eventually they were all settled once again in Springfield.
- 1850 Eddie died in February, at age four. Robert was seven. Then Willie was born in December, when Mary was 32.
- 1853 Tad was born.
- 1855 Abraham lost the race for U. S. Senate.
- 1856 Mary remodeled their house while her husband was away.
- 1858 Abraham lost Senate race again.
- 1859 Robert went to Harvard.
- 1860 Abraham elected President of United States.
- 1861 Lincoln family moved to Washington D.C., again, but this time not to a crowded boarding house. Mary, the new First Lady, was 42. She had her first carriage accident.
- 1862 Willie died.
- 1863 Mary had her second carriage accident.
- 1864 Robert graduated from college. Abraham was elected to a second term as President.

- 1865 Robert was appointed to Grant's staff in army. War ended. Abraham was killed in April, leaving Mary, age 46; Robert, 22; and Tad, 12.
- 1867 Used clothes sale.
- 1868 Robert married Mary Harlan. Mary and Tad went to Germany to live. *Behind the Scenes* was published by Elizabeth Keckley.
- 1869 Robert's first child, Mary, was born.
- 1871 Mary and Tad returned to U.S. and stayed at first with Robert. Tad died. Then Mary began her wandering years. The Great Fire swept Chicago.
- 1872 Robert's family went to Europe. Robert hired Mrs. Fitzgerald to be a nurse/companion for Mary.
- 1873 Robert's second child, Abraham, was born.
- 1875 Mary was in Florida for a while. The insanity trial was held in Chicago in May; Mary was declared insane and sent to Bellevue Sanatorium in Batavia, Illinois, where she stayed almost four months. Robert's third child, Jessie, was born in November.
- 1876 Mary declared legally sane in June. She left for France and another period of wandering.
- 1879 She fell and injured her back.
- 1880 She fell again on a stairway, then again on a boat. Mary came back to the U.S. She had not written to Robert while she was in Europe.

- 1881 Robert became Secretary of War. Robert and his daughter Mary visited Mary in Springfield for a sort of reconciliation.
- 1882 In July Mary died in Elizabeth's house in Springfield at age 63.

I: What We Know about Mary Todd Lincoln

Within this framework of the major events of her life, we are now ready to examine what we can be pretty sure we know about Mary Todd Lincoln as a person. Was she always an enigma? Were there signs of her “insanity” in her early years? When and in what ways did the green worm of addiction begin gnawing at her brain?

Let us look at each of the three parts of her life as carefully as we can. We will listen to her biographers, of course, but whenever possible we will listen very carefully to Mary’s own words. About each of the three major periods of her life, her growing up, her wife and mother time, and her widowhood, we will try to answer four basic questions:

1. How did she look?
2. How did she feel?
3. How did she behave?
4. What things did she value most?

Growing Up

Mary spent most of this important first part of her life in Lexington, Kentucky, with her large, privileged family. She was born into luxury and prestige:

She came into the kind of home where there was a fan-shaped window above the entrance, the gleam of silver on

the sideboard, and rich furnishings reflected in gold-framed mirrors. There were dainty clothes, the gentle brown hands of a Negro “mammy” to receive her, and an imposing circle of relatives to exclaim over the new baby. (Randall 20)

This was the tone of the first part of Mary Todd Lincoln’s life, including the years in Springfield at her sister Elizabeth’s house. During these fortunate years as child, student, and socialite, Mary “had few conflicts and almost no responsibilities” (Evans 108). She seems to have been reasonably happy.

Our sources of information about her during this time include very few of her own words, for we have only three of her letters. Among her biographers, however, there is almost complete agreement about the young Mary’s auspicious beginnings.

How did she look?

Mary Todd consistently appeared healthy, attractive, pretty, and well-dressed.

How did she feel?

Apparently she felt good most of the time. There is no mention of sickness or of any physical problems that got in her way. Although she lived through a cholera epidemic as a child, she did not get the disease. Writing in 1932, W. A. Evans mentions that she had headaches since the age of 20, and Abraham implies that she had headaches sometimes when he first met her, but there is no indication that these

headaches interfered with her busy life during her first 20 years. Perhaps her headaches had begun earlier, and perhaps the medicine she took for them worked better then. We cannot be sure.

How did she behave?

The people who knew Mary best saw her as intelligent, humorous, sociable, and self-confident.

Mary made no attempt to disguise her intelligence. An excellent student, she went to school much longer than most girls did. She had a good memory, a talent for acting, a love of reading, and an interest in politics. She soon became fluent in French. Mary also became a good letter writer and a good conversationalist (both highly prized accomplishments in her society). Mary also found her a shrewd judge of character, “far above the average quality as regards capacity for observation, for ability to read and in other ways acquire information, and for analysis” (Evans 301).

Mary had a good sense of humor, and her early letters show her ability to laugh at herself as well as others. Her cousin told a story of Mary’s about Old Sol, a down-and-out, alcoholic white man who had been sold to a black woman:

“Oh, Elizabeth, I am so ashamed of myself! Just to think, two years ago I was laughing at him, laughing at his funny old clothes, laughing because he, a white man, had been publicly sold as a vagabond to an old negro woman for thirty cents. Oh, I was an unspeakable little beast,” wept Mary. “I cannot forgive myself, but”—smiling at me through her tears—“it was a lucky bargain for the old darkey.” (Helm 51)

People described young Mary as sociable, charming, lively, and interested in the activities of people around her. She was also an excellent dancer. And it was good that she excelled at these social skills, for as a young, unmarried woman, she was expected to find a husband. Indeed, she had many suitors, but, for her time, she did not marry until relatively late.

One of the reasons she was discriminating in her choice of husband was that she was apparently very self-confident. As a child she was often a leader, and as a young woman of 21 she was brave to start a new life in frontier Springfield. There a handsome, talented young lawyer, the grandson of Patrick Henry, courted her, but she wrote to her friend about him:

“I love him not, & my hand will never be given, when my heart is not.” (Turner 18)

Mary acted as if she knew her own mind and was quite comfortable with it. When she did finally marry, she pleased herself, but not her family. She was the only one of the Todd daughters to

show some daring in her choice of husband. In the teeth of family opposition, she married Abraham Lincoln, a penniless young lawyer born in the backwoods and largely self-taught, in whom she, almost alone at first, saw greatness. (Turner 4)

Mary had full confidence in her choice.

What things did she value most?

It would seem that Mary valued her appearance and the traditional woman's role of wife and mother. In the people she loved and admired, however, it seems that she valued substance more than appearance, placing particular value on intellect, culture, and friendship.

As a child Mary told her cousin Elizabeth that when she grew up she would be perfectly satisfied with herself if she could be just like her Grandmother Humphreys (her stepmother's mother). According to her cousin, Mary meant that their grandmother was "exquisite in dress and mind and manner, the quintessence of all the elegance, virtue, and culture which Mary hoped to emulate" (Helm 34).

Throughout this first period of her life, Mary did enjoy being well-dressed. No doubt she worked hard to be exquisite in dress and manner, for such elegance would have also helped her attract a husband, a necessary part of becoming a wife and mother.

To be exquisite in mind, however, was perhaps a less universal goal for a society woman in early nineteenth-century America. Mary valued intellect in herself and in others. She read in both English and French, she kept up with politics, and she loved discussing her political views:

By the age of fourteen she was a fiery little Whig, who could not think of enough dreadful things to say about Andrew Jackson. (Turner 7)

Another political issue on which she had a strong opinion was slavery. Although she grew up lovingly cared for by some loyal slaves in the Todd household, she came to think of slavery as morally wrong. Although she had benefitted from it, she spoke out against it. Her cousin quotes Mary as

saying, “It’s all wrong... this selling human beings into slavery” (Helm 51). Although this conclusion about slavery seems obvious now, it took great courage for Mary, a southern aristocrat, to stand up for what she believed in those volatile times.

And finally, it seems that Mary valued very highly her relationships with a few important people in her life—people such as her two older sisters and a few female friends. She nurtured these friendships, as we see in her correspondence with her friend Mercy Levering, whom she met in Springfield in 1839, and then wrote to when Mercy moved back to Baltimore. She seemed to cultivate connections with people, not because they were important or potentially useful to her, but because she genuinely liked them.

What we have learned.

Among Mary Todd Lincoln’s biographers, most agree with Ruth Painter Randall that Mary’s growing up was relatively untroubled, that there was no hint of the erratic behavior that was to develop later on. Only Jean Baker implies that the loss of Mary’s mother (when Mary was six) may have scarred her for life. This speculation, however, is merely that. She lost her mother, yes, but her warm relationships with her father, her Grandmother Parker, the slave Mammy, and her older sister Elizabeth all remained and continued to nourish her.

Indeed, if we did not know about Mary Todd Lincoln’s later craziness, it would never occur to us to expect it. In the three existing letters that Mary wrote during her first 24 years, she sounds busy and happy. There is no trace of self-pity, no hint that she felt mistreated or unlucky. In two letters written much later she did refer to her childhood in

what could be interpreted as a resentful way: her “early home was truly at a boarding school” (Turner 447), and her “desolate childhood” (Turner 588), but both these letters were written during a terribly difficult time of her life (1867 and 1871) when she was bitter about almost everything and lashing out at everyone. We simply have no facts to explain either of these comments.

During the first third of her life, then, Mary Todd Lincoln appeared to be healthy and attractive. There is no reason to believe that she did not feel as well as she looked. She behaved in accordance with her high social position and advanced education. It would appear that in herself she valued most her appearance and her future role as wife and mother, but that beyond herself she valued most intellect, culture, and friendship. This first third of Mary Todd Lincoln’s life was for her primarily a positive time.

Wife and Mother

This part of Mary Todd Lincoln’s life was the most public part. If we have seen a picture of her, it is most likely from this period. If we have an idea about what sort of person she was, it is most likely because we have read or heard something that she did or said during this time of her life. It was during this time that Mary Todd Lincoln both fulfilled her fondest dreams and suffered her most terrible losses. It was during this time that the craziness started, that the glaring contradictions began to accumulate. Yet throughout these 23 years, even when presiding in the White House, Mary Todd Lincoln was above all a wife and mother.

Few people noticed when Mary Todd married someone “beneath” her, someone without property or pedigree. Yet later when her husband was murdered, an entire nation watched her mourn. By the time her husband died, she had

already lost two of her four children also. And she had lived through the Civil War in which she had loved ones fighting and dying on both sides. She began this period of her life in a boarding house in obscure but friendly Springfield, Illinois, and ended it in the White House in the more cosmopolitan, more dangerous Washington, D.C. This was, for Mary Todd Lincoln, a time of extremes.

How did she look?

She looked good. For most of this period Mary Todd Lincoln appeared healthy. She was pregnant four times and had four safe deliveries. Although she put on some weight, she did not become “bloated,” as she put it, until later on. And as the Lincoln’s social standing improved, so did Mary’s wardrobe, enabling her always to look elegant in public.

A woman who as a child knew Mary Todd Lincoln recalled that:

Mrs. Lincoln was a very good looking woman, and had very pretty manners. I can remember how beautifully she looked with a lavender and white parasol, and clothes and gloves and everything to match. (Goltz 50)

Even William Herndon, Abraham Lincoln’s controversial law partner in Springfield, described Mary, whom he never liked, as “one of the belles of the town.” He grudgingly admitted that she was “handsome and vivacious, affable and even charming in her manners” (Randall 120).

When Mary, a newcomer to Washington, became First Lady, most observers were favorably impressed. In 1860, a New York reporter described the comely Mrs. Lincoln who would, he predicted, adorn the White House: