

“Ever True and Loyal:” Mary Todd Lincoln as a Kentuckian

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One day in the winter of 1860-61, as her husband prepared to assume the presidency and face the impending disintegration of the United States, Mary Todd Lincoln received a package. Sent by express from South Carolina, the epicenter of Southern secessionism, it contained a painting of Abraham Lincoln. In this portrait, the president elect was tied in a noose, tarred and feathered, with chains around his feet. Her reaction to this unwanted gift remains unrecorded, but as the *Steubenville Daily Herald* noted, “comment is unnecessary.” The intended message could not have been clearer, for the Lincolns had come to represent all that white Southerners loathed and resented.¹

Though she held no office and had publicly expressed few opinions on the issues, Mary Lincoln could not escape the political whirlwind that consumed her husband, his party, and the entire nation. The delivery of the portrait symbolized the strange position she now occupied: this daughter of a slaveholding Kentucky family was now the public face, along with her Kentucky-born husband, of the Northern cause. As she soon discovered, however, she had nowhere to turn for acceptance, as Northerners also regarded her with growing suspicion. Mary Lincoln was a woman of two worlds, and she never entirely fit within either one. Her defiance of Victorian gender norms, her insistence on being seen and heard, and her dogged desire to be involved in her husband’s rise to greatness ensured that no matter where she resided, she would encounter resistance and stir scandal.

She was not, however, simply a shiftless wanderer. Mary Lincoln had roots, and those roots remained planted in Kentucky soil. Her upbringing in Lexington

¹ Reported in *The National Republican*, Feb. 6, 1861.

heavily influenced the rest of her life. Her status as a Kentuckian and her experiences with slavery colored her opinions, relationships, and public image. The complexity of Mary Lincoln's life reflects the duality of the state in which she spent her first 21 years. The characteristics that defined her public image – the reaction to loss, the search for fulfillment, the unbridgeable divide between loyalty to family and loyalty to country– were shaped on the Kentucky frontier. In order fully to appreciate the life and importance of Mary Lincoln, one must approach her as a Kentuckian, according her relationship with the state a central place in her life. Seen through this lens, her public and private struggles take on fresh meaning, as do the conflicts that characterized antebellum and Civil War Kentucky.

The first step in understanding Mary Lincoln as a Kentuckian is understanding the uniquely Kentuckian family and city into which she was born. Unlike her husband, born in a cabin on remote farmland, Mary Todd entered a world as sophisticated and full of opportunity as one could likely find west of the Appalachian Mountains. Lexington in the early nineteenth century was the “Athens of the West,” hosting the world-class Transylvania University, teeming with ambitious lawyers and others looking to make themselves in the open, mobile West.²

Lexington was also teeming with slaves. Growing up in one of the West's major slave trading posts, Mary surely saw many black men and women sold into bondage. Precisely what impact this early exposure to slavery had on her remains uncertain, but given her penchant for intense emotional reactions, what images she

² Katherine Helm, *The True Story of Mary, Wife of Lincoln* (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1928), 18.

saw likely stayed with her long after she had departed for the North and informed her distaste for the institution. Slavery could also be found closer to home. In her childhood, Mary had a particularly close relationship with Mammy Sally, who became a consistent, comforting presence in young Mary's tumultuous and lonely childhood. Biographer Jean W. Baker partially attributes Mary's later preoccupation with "spiritual visitations" of the dead to comfort the living to Mammy Sally's influence.³ She also experienced some of the antislavery spirit that existed in Lexington. The Todds had a warm relationship with Henry Clay, the most notable Kentuckian of the age and a Whig slaveholder who branded the institution "evil."⁴ His cousin Cassius later became a more forceful voice against slavery. Mary's father, Robert Smith Todd, fiercely denied being any sort of emancipationist but did want to control the slave trade and, like Clay, supported slave colonization. Mary's stepmother, Elizabeth Humphreys, came from an antislavery family. Elizabeth's mother freed her slaves upon her death.⁵ Finally, Mary evidently knew of the assistance Mammy provided to runaway slaves.⁶

In the harsh world of early Kentucky, frontier politics became a central fact of life as settlers attempted to organize themselves and amass influence within the union. Prominent families such as Mary's could hardly ignore the call of politics. The Todds were ardent Whigs, an affiliation that strongly influenced Mary Lincoln's

³ Jean W. Baker, *Mary Todd Lincoln: A Biography* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1987), 66.

⁴ Henry Clay to the Electors of Fayette County, April 16, 1798, in *The Papers of Henry Clay, Volume I: The Rising Statesman, 1797-1814*, ed. James F. Hopkins (Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky Press, 1959), 6.

⁵ Baker, *Mary Todd Lincoln*, 70.

⁶ Helm, *Mary, Wife of Lincoln*, 40.

politics. She held a particular affinity for family friend Clay, a man whose complex views on slavery in many ways mirrored those espoused by Mary. Like the Great Compromiser, she expressed distaste for slavery even as she personally benefitted from it.⁷ As a teenage girl during the presidential campaign of 1832, which pitted Clay against his archrival, Democratic President Andrew Jackson, Mary viciously attacked Jackson and defended her friend against local partisans.⁸ These experiences lent Mary a taste for rough-and-tumble politics that served her and her husband well as the nation's divisions grew even more toxic. Her precise influence upon her husband's political actions is impossible to know, but her lifelong love of politics came at an early age, and when she met Abraham Lincoln she eagerly attached herself to a man she believed was bound for greatness.⁹

Mary retained her interest in politics long after she left Kentucky. She cheered the 1840 election of Whig William Henry Harrison and indicated support for Millard Fillmore's Know Nothings in 1856, even as her husband forged an identity as a "Fremont man" in the new Republican Party. She attributed her support of Fillmore to the "Southern feeling" of her heart and to her approval of his previous term in office, but it seems to have stemmed in part from anti-immigrant bias. As slavery was illegal in Illinois, the Lincolns, like many families, employed the services of Irish women. Mary despised the "Wild Irish" and suggested that slaveholding Kentuckians were lucky not to have their company. This privately expressed display of political independence from her husband did not set the tone for their political

⁷ Helm, *Mary, Wife of Lincoln*, 128.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 42.

⁹ Baker, *Mary Todd Lincoln*, 324.

future; as slavery tore apart the Whigs in the 1850s, Mary easily migrated along with her husband to the Republicans, in whose loyalty she remained for the rest of her life. This marked a permanent political break with her home state, in which the Democrats became the dominant party.¹⁰

Mary found Washington a hostile environment, and her Kentucky roots supplied no small part of the fuel for the disapproval that swirled around her. Whatever personal or political troubles awaited her in Washington, however, did not seem evident during the 1860 campaign. A local newspaper correspondent in Springfield, commenting to the *Washington Evening Star*, demonstrated her sterling reputation in that city, contrasting Abraham Lincoln's lanky awkwardness with Mary Lincoln's "lady-like courtesy and polish." Referencing her Kentucky roots with apparent approval, the reporter praised the former Lexingtonian's "liberal and refined education" and strong observance of the Presbyterian faith.¹¹

The love affair with the press did not survive the journey east, however. Mary gained a reputation aptly summarized by the *New York Sunday Mercury* some years after her tenure as First Lady: "unfit for the position...ignorant, ambitious, and superstitious...felt that she was "born to greatness," but too indolent to prepare for it...inordinate vanity..." Notably, her image as an unrefined, and possibly disloyal, Southerner became a favorite line of attack. Mary was "reared and nursed by a negress, and was full of all that belief in destiny which marked the Southern negro, while at the same time she was ambitious as the most aspiring white...a butterfly of

¹⁰ Helm, *Mary, Wife of Lincoln*, 124-125.

¹¹ *Washington Evening Star*, May 25, 1860.

fashion, without the grace or elegance of the butterfly.”¹² The mere association with slaves in her youth made Mary suspect among some in Northern society, as she was branded with the most unflattering stereotypes of two races. She also fell under suspicion of being a Confederate sympathizer, an accusation that also caused Abraham Lincoln some political headaches among more ardent abolitionists. Despite the frequency of the charge, this appears to have been based on nothing but her Southern birth, her family’s loyalties, and a healthy dose of spite on the part of the rumormongers.¹³

In fact, Mary remained strongly loyal to the Union and later insisted that she urged her husband on a more radical course during the war.¹⁴ Although her commitment to the Northern cause never wavered, Mary’s views on slavery took a more complex character. Her attitudes toward race, slavery, and emancipation are revealed in the offense she took whenever her husband’s Democratic political enemies attempted to associate him with abolitionism, as Stephen Douglas attempted to do during the two men’s famous debates. Her view of blacks and whites as fundamentally unequal placed her well within the white Northern mainstream of the age, even among opponents of slavery.¹⁵

While her opinions on slavery remained muddled and contradictory, Mary’s warm affinity for her home state never subsided. Like her husband, she keenly

¹² Printed in *Hopkinsville South Kentuckian*, November 23, 1880.

¹³ Elizabeth Keckley, *Behind the Scenes, or, Thirty Years a Slave and Four Years in the White House* (London: Partridge and Oakey, 1868), 135; Brian Dirck, “Mary Lincoln, Race, and Slavery,” in *The Mary Lincoln Enigma*, eds. Frank J. Williams and Michael Burkholder (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 2012), 48.

¹⁴ Keckley, *Behind the Scenes*, 342.

¹⁵ Helm, *Mary, Wife of Lincoln*, 124.

understood Kentucky's importance to the Union cause, and the Lincolns followed events and political opinion within the state with unusual closeness.¹⁶ Her sentiments toward the state are most strikingly revealed in an 1861 letter to Colonel John Fry of Boyle County, a loyal Union fighter whom Abraham Lincoln pronounced a "good and brave man." Along with the letter, Mary sent from the War Department a sabre and two navy revolvers, which she hoped would "be used in the defense of national sovereignty upon the soil of Kentucky." She continued,

Though some years have passed since I left my native State, I have never ceased to contemplate her progress in happiness and prosperity with sentiments of fond and filial pride. In every effort of industrial energy, in every enterprise of honor and valor my heart has been with her. And I rejoice in the consciousness that, at this time when the institutions to whose fostering care we owe all we have of happiness and glory are rudely assailed by ungrateful and paricidal hands, the State of Kentucky, ever true and loyal, furnishes to the insulted flag of the Union a guard of her best and bravest sons.¹⁷

This letter rhetorically placed Kentucky on the side of the Union, a future that remained uncertain in June 1861, but Mary and Abraham Lincoln felt determined that their home state should remain a bulwark against the Confederacy. The harsh language used to describe the rebels contrasted with the loving depiction of Kentucky to demonstrate that Mary still recognized her home state's loyalty, despite her own family's treason. Kentucky had not been kind to its Republican native son in the 1860 presidential election, delivering less than 1% of its vote to Abraham Lincoln, but Mary's wish for the state's continued loyalty remained fulfilled. The unusual mix of slavery and unionism that prevailed in Kentucky, combined with

¹⁶ Helm, *Mary, Wife of Lincoln*, 160.

¹⁷ Mary Todd Lincoln to John Fry, June 20, 1861, in *Mary Todd Lincoln: Her Life and Letters*, eds. Justin G. Turner and Linda Levitt Turner (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1972), 91.

Northern military occupation, proved sufficient to keep the commonwealth with the Union through the war's conclusion.¹⁸

Despite her loyalty to the Union, Mary continued proudly to refer to herself and her husband as Kentuckians even as the secession crisis and the war tore the country into two. She saw the Bluegrass State as the political battleground it was, and she strongly advocated for the state to remain loyal to the Union. Where her relatives saw their Southern, Kentuckian status as being inseparable from the Confederate cause, Mary apparently had little trouble resting her heritage alongside her sectional loyalties, which of course belonged to the North. This did not mean, however, that outside observers had no trouble with her stance. Her effort to straddle the Mason-Dixon Line, combined with the general hostility with which Washington society looked upon her, resulted in an assault from all sides on Mary's loyalties. That she could hardly be held responsible for being born into a Southern family did not pacify angry Unionists, who lashed out at this supposed Confederate sympathizer with four brothers serving in grey.¹⁹

Mary did not entirely cut herself off from her family during the war. In one well-known incident, Mary's sister Emilie Todd Helm, who had recently lost her husband to the war at Chickamauga, crossed Union lines and went to the White House despite her refusal to pledge her allegiance to the United States. Abraham Lincoln made the exception, and Emilie's presence evidently comforted the bereaved Mary, still reeling from the loss of her son, Willie. Their sectional

¹⁸ Lowell H. Harrison and James C. Klotter, *A New History of Kentucky* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1997), 185.

¹⁹ Baker, *Mary Todd Lincoln*, 180.

differences, however, dominated, and Emilie soon resumed her journey back to Kentucky. The episode reveals both Abraham Lincoln's enduring fondness for the Todds as well as the fact that Mary had not entirely forsaken her disloyal family. The pair never met again, however, confirming that any warm feelings that remained for her family were overridden by the destruction and alienation of the Civil War.²⁰

In retrospect, Emilie's brief visit seems like an aberration, for growing estrangement from her family marked Mary's White House years. There is strong evidence that as the war progressed, Mary's views on slavery and the union became more radical, and here her relationship with her home state becomes more complicated. While Kentucky moved closer to the South after the war, Mary Lincoln became more confidently outspoken in her Northern opinions. She never denounced her home state, but she distanced herself more forcefully from the Southern, proslavery cause than she had done previously. She also more forcefully separated herself from her Confederate family, perhaps reflecting her personal as well as political alienation from her old clan. When Mary's confidant Elizabeth Keckley informed her of the death of her brother, Confederate Captain Alexander Todd, Keckley recounted Mary's cold dismissal of his passing: "...He made his choice long ago. He decided against my husband, and through him against me...I see no special reason why I should bitterly mourn his death." Keckley also recalled Mary's reasoning that the rebels would have killed her husband at the first opportunity, and probably her as well; why should she retain any affinity for such people?

²⁰ Angela Elder Esco, "Emilie Todd Helm and Mary Todd Lincoln (1836-1930; 1818-1882): 'We Weep Over Our Dead Together,'" in *Kentucky Women: Their Lives and Times*, eds. Melissa A. McEuen and Thomas H. Appleton, Jr. (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2015), 89.

Perhaps the horrific noose portrait crossed her mind as she arrived at this conclusion. At any rate, as the war divided the country, it became clear that Mary placed her husband and her country above any loyalty to the family of her birth, but she never displayed the same vitriol toward proslavery Kentucky.²¹

Writing to Keckley in 1867, Mary responded angrily and quite defensively to news from her friend Frederick Douglass that the *Chicago Tribune* continued to litigate her loyalties. Here she reacted to the familiar invocation of her brothers' Confederate service by distancing herself both from them ("If [the writers] had been friendly with me they might have said they were the *half* brothers of Mrs. L.") and from her Southern roots, pointing out that she had left Kentucky "at an early age" and thus had always felt affinity for the North.²² References to her home state seem to grow less frequent in her later letters. Though this may be due in part to her retirement from politics and her alienation from her family, it seems that for Mary, as for numerous Americans, the Civil War had been a radicalizing moment. Historian Brian Dirck attributes this transformation in part to Mary's "black and white" psychology, in which she wholeheartedly embraced those she loved but also ruthlessly turned her back on those who wronged her. The dark side of this stark duality encompassed her family as well as the Confederacy as a whole once it became clear that she and her relatives stood on opposite sides of the sectional divide.²³

²¹ Keckley, *Behind the Scenes*, 135-136

²² Mary Todd Lincoln to Elizabeth Keckley, October 29, 1867, in Turner and Turner, *Her Life and Letters*, 447.

²³ Dirck, "Mary Lincoln, Race, and Slavery," in Williams and Burkhimer, *Enigma*, 50.

Mary's early contact with slaves and slavery opponents in Lexington surely fostered a capacity for sympathy to blacks that later blossomed into a somewhat more enlightened racial attitude. The possible softening of Mary's racism and her stronger commitment to the North may have also been influenced by her adult relationships with black Americans. Though she retained many condescending nineteenth century racial attitudes, during and after the war she increasingly expressed sympathy for "the oppressed colored race," as she described them to Charles Sumner in 1864.²⁴ In addition to her friendship with Douglass, later in life Mary grew especially close to Keckley. The former slave became one of her closest confidants and associates during and after the war. Keckley, who had purchased her freedom from an evidently brutal master, came to Mary in Washington as a seamstress, but she soon became her most trusted friend.²⁵

In the years after her husband's assassination, Mary retreated from the world of political affairs. Most of her last two decades were consumed with personal grief, open public controversy, progressive alienation from her surviving son Robert, and the deterioration of her mental and emotional states. Indeed, her personal life had always been marked by loss and tragedy. Even here, in the most intimate yet most infamous aspect of Mary Todd Lincoln's persona, one can spot the influence of Kentucky on her life. Indeed, any study of Mary as a Kentuckian should remain incomplete if it did not account for the tragedy that repeatedly visited her, for her

²⁴ Quoted in Turner and Turner, *Her Life and Letters*, 146. Mary's friendship with the staunch abolitionist Sumner may also have played a role in her growth on these matters.

²⁵ Turner and Turner, *Her Life and Letters*, 112-113.

early experiences likely prepared her to respond to later misfortune in the ways that she did.

As white settlers first flooded into present-day Kentucky in the 1770s, the dejected Cherokee chief Dragging Canoe famously predicted that the land would become a dark and “bloody ground,” settled only at a great cost of life.²⁶ Dragging Canoe’s warning became a colloquial nickname for Kentucky because subsequent years proved him correct. The hardship and struggle he foresaw came to pass for masses of Kentuckians. Death, disease, and loss frequently visited early Kentucky, and they spared no city or social class. Mary’s mother died giving birth when Mary was six years old. Her father remarried, but Mary and her stepmother never grew close, and with her father frequently away on business, Mary seldom found the emotional gratification she needed. Perhaps the structure and circumstances of Mary’s early life left her with an emptiness that she found impossible to fill. The later loss of two sons and a husband only increased the sense of abandonment that she acquired in Kentucky.²⁷

In a sense, one could conceive of Mary Todd Lincoln as Kentucky personified. Born into a state that insisted upon slavery and union simultaneously, she bore Kentucky’s contradictions upon her body, in her intellect, and in her spirit. Her Southern drawl and manner, her famously opulent dress, her espousal of white supremacist racial views: these qualities rested uneasily alongside her relentless devotion to the Union cause, her dislike of slavery, and the unsentimental way in which she dealt with her rebel family. Her high educational attainment and skill

²⁶ Harrison and Klotter, *New History of Kentucky*, 26.

²⁷ Baker, *Mary Todd Lincoln*, 24.

with words did not prevent snobbish Yankees from denigrating her as an unsophisticated, “negress”-raised Southerner. Likewise, her roots did not shield her from the same Southern venom directed at her husband. The course of her political and social conscience diverged from the course Kentucky took after the war, but the seeds of her revulsion toward slavery may have been sewn in the scenes of brutality that characterized slaveholding Lexington. Her personal life, too, bore Kentucky’s mark. Death and loneliness affected countless Kentuckians, and Mary’s early tragedies produced an emotional void she struggled the rest of her days to fill. She lived many places in her life, but however far she roamed, Mary Todd Lincoln took a piece of Kentucky with her.

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