

The Many Faces of Mary Todd Lincoln

Perhaps one of the most examined first ladies, Mary Todd Lincoln was born into a prominent Kentucky family. Mary was attractive, intelligent and witty, but she was troubled by severe insecurity and suffered bouts of depression.

Life as first lady, however, was not easy for Mary. The death of her son Willie to typhoid fever, led her depression to worsen. She was also the target of unceasing criticism. With the Civil War on, her family's ties to the Confederacy led many to call her a traitor and even led to a congressional investigation. When she held White House receptions, she was criticized for her inappropriate frivolity during a national crisis. If she chose not to host social functions, she was attacked for adding to the dark mood of the day.

After her husband was assassinated, Mary's behavior became increasingly erratic. Mary developed symptoms of paranoia. She was terrified of being destitute and kept her money and securities stitched into her coat, and even trying to sell her clothes from the White House years to New York dealers.

Throughout her life Mary maintained her sense of style, her personal pride and her charitable acts.

Examine the following documents to discover the many facets of Mary Todd Lincoln.

Letter from Mary Todd Lincoln, September 17, 1853

My Dear Mrs. Black --

Mrs. Remann sent me word to day, that your husband was here, & would leave in the morning for St. Louis. May I trouble you to undertake the purchase of a white fur hat, for a boy of 6 months, I presume ere this, the fall styles have been received, I should like white trimmings & white feather, if you find any to your taste, of the prettiest quality. Would you be kind enough also, to have me a drawn satin bonnet made of this brown, lined with white, I have some small brown feathers for the outside, also inside trimming, which I suppose is not necessary to send down, please have it made to *your* taste, if fine black lace, will be used this fall, perhaps *that* would be pretty with it, for the outside. I can put the feathers & flowers inside my self. I send you a string for the size of the hat, -- if I am not too troublesome, may I have them about the first of October? I should think a pretty hat, would cost about four dollars, but if more, I do not object, as it will *last all* my boys.

We would be much pleased to see you in Springfield, it appears a long time, since you left. Will you excuse this hasty scrawl & believe me yours truly

Mary Lincoln

Using the preceding letter answer the following questions:

1. What does this letter tells you about Mary's sense of style? Provide specific evidence.
2. What evidence do you find that tells you Mary was concerned with household finances?
3. Why would Mary be this concerned with hats for herself and her children?

Letter from Mary Todd Lincoln to Hannah Shearer, January 1, 1860

My Dear Friend,

For some time past, I have intended writing you, but each day has brought its own separate calls, causing a delay, which has been unintentional. I have only a few moments, now at my disposal, it is quite late in the evening & tomorrow I must rise early, as it is *receiving* day. How I wish you were with us. The weather is *intensely* cold, and our winter, has been rather quiet. Gov & Mrs. Matteson, give a large entertainment on Wednesday evening, Mr L -- *gives me* permission to go, but declines, the honor himself. I should like to go, but *may probably* pass the evening at home. Since I last wrote you, I have passed a week very pleasantly in St Louis. You know I have four *own* cousins, who keep house in the city, & live very pleasantly. Yet my time by especial invitation was passed at my Cousin Judge [John C.] Richardson's. They live in a very handsome house, four stories, plenty of room, & some Kentucky *darkies*, to wait on them.

Whilst there, Julia Dean Hayne, [33] had a benefit, our Springfield Ned Taylor [34] (who is passing the winter in St Louis) came up & we all went together. Ten years ago, about the time of her debut, I saw her in Washington, she has failed greatly since then. Perhaps you are aware, that Mrs. McClernand accompanied her Husband this winter. [35] I never saw persons *so elated* in my life. Poor woman, she cannot feel comfortable away from home, with her poor health. I saw your sister Mrs. P[arrish] a few days since, she is so good a woman, I love her very much. I need not assure you, that I [p. 19] am writing under, unpleasant circumstances. Such a pen, may you never handle *such another*, boys *disposed* to be noisy. Speaking of *boys*, Willie's [ninth] birthday came off on the 21st of Dec. and as I had long promised him a *celebration*, it duly came off. Some 50 or 60 boys & girls attended the gala, you may believe I have come to the conclusion, that they are nonsensical affairs. [36] However, I wish your boys, had been in their midst. Do, like a dear friend, begin the New Year well, & answer this scrawl, so soon as you receive it. Knowing, I will not have an hour, at my disposal for some days I *venture* to send it. With kind regards to the Dr. & the boys, I remain your attached friend,

Mary Lincoln

Let the *flames*, receive this, so soon as read.

Using the preceding letter answer the following questions.

1. What evidence do you find that Mary was extremely interested in local events?
2. What do you learn about the relationship between Mary and Abe Lincoln?
3. Why would Mary include the phrase "let the flames receive this so soon as read" at the bottom of this letter?
4. What does this letter tell you about Mary's life at this time?

Letter from Mary Todd Lincoln to Noah Brooks, May 11, 1866

Noah Brooks, Esq.

My dear Sir:

A few days since I received a very sad letter, from poor Mrs. [Anson G.] Henry -- in which she vividly portrays her great desolation and dependence upon others, for every earthly comfort. I am induced to enclose you the *Nevada Claims* & also a *petroleum* claim, hoping you may be able to secure a purchaser for them, in which case, I will most cheerfully, give Mrs. Henry, some of the proceeds. I am aware, that I am taxing your kindness very greatly, yet the remembrance of your great esteem, for my beloved husband & Dr. Henry, would excuse the intrusion upon you. I wish you were not, so far removed from us -- *true* friends, in *these* overwhelming days of affliction, I find to be very rare. I find myself clinging more tenderly, to the memory, of those, who if *not* so remote, would be more friendly. I hope, you will be able to visit Mrs. Henry, the coming summer. I sometimes, in my wildness & grief, am tempted to believe, that it is some *terrible terrible* dream, and that my idolized husband -- will return to me. Poor Dr. Henry, he, who wept so truly & freely with us, in our great misfortune, how, soon he, was called to join the beloved one, who had so recently "gone before." In my great sorrow, how often I have prayed [p. 49] for death -- to end, my great misery. My sons are well & a great comfort to me. I have another and *the right* Nevada Claim -- with "Mary," instead of "Frances," upon it, which I will send you, in the event -- of your being able to dispose of it. Robert, & Taddie, remember you, very kindly. I hope you will write to us, more frequently. I am well aware of the deep sympathy, you feel for us -- and the great affection & confidence, my husband, cherished for you, draws you, very near to us. With apologies, for troubling you, as I am now doing, I remain, always

Sincerely, your friend

Mary Lincoln

Using the preceding letter, answer the following questions.

1. Why does Mary write this letter to her attorney?
2. What evidence do you find of her charitable nature?
3. Compare this action to that in the letter to Hannah Shearer? Is there any contradiction?

Letter to Noah Brooks, Esqr.

Chicago. Dec 16th. 1865.

Noah Brooks Esq.

My dear Sir:

Several weeks have elapsed since your last letter, was received -- and I thank you kindly, for your friendship, & sympathy for us, in our overwhelming bereavement. How inscrutable are the ways of Providence! *So soon*, after our terrible calamity, poor Dr H. [1] who so freely sorrowed with us, should be *so* unexpectedly called to rejoin, his great & good friend, [2] who, had just "passed before." Such is life & the shorter the race, the happier, for some, of *us*.

I hope some person, will be appointed, in the place, of "Frank Hen[r]y," [3] a loyal man, who will be required to [p. 47] share, the small profits, of the office with his poor, afflicted Widow. For, without doubt, she requires, *such* assistance.

I received, the sum of \$400, in gold -- from the gentleman, you mentioned, which I acknowledged in writing. Have you ever heard, any thing about it? You spoke, of sending, the other amount, of over \$2,000 in gold -- in November -- as it has not yet arrived, I presume there has been some detention. I scarcely think Congress, will give us more than the *first year's* salary. Genl. Grant, has been recently presented, with his third magnificent mansion, within the last eighteen months, the last one, one of the Dougla[s]'s houses. All this, is strange inconsistency. My little Taddie, is very much indisposed, with a bad cold - - and I write you, in great haste. My husband, was so earnest a friend of yours, that we will always remember you, with the kindest feelings & will always, be pleased to hear from you.

Your friend truly

Mary Lincoln

Using the preceding letter, answer the following questions.

1. What was the purpose of this letter?
2. What comparisons did Mary make in presenting her claim for a pension?
3. Mary was not given a widow's pension after her husband had been assassinated. Summarize her feelings about this government action.