

1818-1882

Mary Todd Lincoln

Mary Ann Todd Lincoln was the wife of the 16th President of the United States, Abraham Lincoln. She served as First Lady from 1861 until his assassination in 1865 at Ford's Theatre.

As a girlhood companion remembered her, Mary Todd was vivacious and impulsive, with an interesting personality—but “she now and then could not restrain a witty, sarcastic speech that cut deeper than she intended....” A young lawyer summed her up in 1840: “the very creature of excitement.” All of these attributes marked her life, bringing her both happiness and tragedy.

Daughter of Eliza Parker and Robert Smith Todd, pioneer settlers of Kentucky, Mary lost her mother before the age of seven. Her father remarried; and Mary remembered her childhood as “desolate” although she belonged to the aristocracy of Lexington, with high-spirited social life and a sound private education.



Just 5 feet 2 inches at maturity, Mary had clear blue eyes, long lashes, light-brown hair with glints of bronze, and a lovely complexion. She danced gracefully, she loved finery, and her crisp intelligence polished the wiles of a Southern coquette.

Nearly 21, she went to Springfield, Illinois, to live with her sister Mrs. Ninian Edwards. Here she met Abraham Lincoln—in his own words, “a poor nobody then.” Three years later, after a stormy courtship and broken engagement, they were married. Though opposites in background and temperament, they were united by an enduring love—by Mary’s confidence in her husband’s ability and his gentle consideration of her excitable ways.

Their years in Springfield brought hard work, a family of boys, and reduced circumstances to the pleasure-loving girl who had never felt responsibility before. Lincoln’s single term in Congress, for 1847-1849, gave Mary and the boys a winter in Washington, but scant opportunity for social life. Finally, her unwavering faith in her husband won ample justification with his election as President in 1860.

Though her position fulfilled her high social ambitions, Mrs. Lincoln’s years in the White House mingled misery with triumph. An orgy of spending stirred resentful comment. While the Civil War dragged on, Southerners scorned her as a traitor to her birth, and citizens loyal to the Union suspected her of treason. When she entertained, critics accused her of unpatriotic

extravagance. When, utterly distraught, she curtailed her entertaining after her son Willie's death in 1862, they accused her of shirking her social duties.

Yet Lincoln, watching her put her guests at ease during a White House reception, could say happily: "My wife is as handsome as when she was a girl, and I...fell in love with her; and what is more, I have never fallen out."

Her husband's assassination in 1865 shattered Mary Todd Lincoln. The next 17 years held nothing but sorrow. With her son "Tad" she traveled abroad in search of health, tortured by distorted ideas of her financial situation. After Tad died in 1871, she slipped into a world of illusion where poverty and murder pursued her.

A misunderstood and tragic figure, she passed away in 1882 at her sister's home in Springfield—the same house from which she had walked as the bride of Abraham Lincoln, 40 years before.

Source

Mary Todd Lincoln, whitehouse.gov. Taken from "The First Ladies of the United States of America," by Allida Black. Copyright 2009 by the White House Historical Association.