

1818-1907

Elizabeth Keckley

Born as a slave in Dinwiddie County, Virginia, Elizabeth Keckley gained renown as a seamstress, author, and philanthropist. Drawing upon her earnings as a seamstress, Keckley (sometimes spelled "Keckly") was able to purchase her freedom from slavery in 1855. After her arrival in Washington, D.C. in 1860, her skills as a dressmaker quickly resulted in commissions from several of the city's leading women, including Varina Davis, the wife Jefferson Davis.

On March 5, 1861, the day following the inauguration of Abraham Lincoln as U.S. president, Mary Todd Lincoln hired Elizabeth Keckley as her personal seamstress. This position and her close relationship with the first lady provided Keckley with a unique perspective on domestic life within the Lincoln White House and life in the U.S. capital city.



Concerned with the welfare of recently freed slaves who flooded into Washington during the Civil War, in 1862 Keckley founded the Contraband Relief Association, which offered food, clothing, and shelter to the most destitute segments of the African American population. Keckley was able to recruit support for the association from figures such as Frederick Douglass, Wendell Phillips, and President and Mrs. Lincoln.

Though they came from wildly the different backgrounds, Keckley and Mrs. Lincoln shared many of the same personal tragedies. Both lost a son within the span of a year—Keckley's son James was killed in the Civil War in 1861, and Lincoln's son Willie died from sickness in 1862—and they also grieved together following Abraham Lincoln's assassination. But while she once called her seamstress "my best living friend," Lincoln later severed the relationship in 1868 after Keckley published a revealing book about her time in the White House. Following the war, Elizabeth Keckley published her memoir *Behind the Scenes, or, Thirty Years a Slave, and Four Years in the White House* (1868). Though the book was intended to offer a sympathetic view of Mary Todd Lincoln, it was not well received because of a widespread belief that it violated the privacy of the former first lady.

Despite Keckley's efforts to reconcile, the two never spoke again.

Sources

The Civil War in America, Biographies: Elizabeth Keckley, [loc.gov](https://www.loc.gov)

7 Historical Odd Couples, by Evan Andrews, [history.com](https://www.history.com)

ELIZABETH KECKLEY DRESS DESIGNS



Figure 1: Striped and floral Mary Lincoln dress, attributed to Keckley, significantly altered from original design. Smithsonian National Museum of American History.



Figure 2: Elizabeth Keckley (American, 1818-1907). Mary Todd Lincoln's gown, ca. 1862. Wool. Chicago: Chicago History Museum, CHM ICHI-066126. Source: CHM



Figure 3: Mary Lincoln's purple velvet skirt and daytime bodice, believed to have been made by African-American dressmaker Elizabeth Keckley. The first lady wore the gown during the Washington winter social season in 1861–62. National Museum of American History.