

First Ladies of America



Intelligent, witty, attractive and educated, Mary Todd Lincoln had all of the attributes to be a successful first lady in the eyes of history. Unfortunately, her mercurial temperament, combined with personal tragedy and the national crisis of the Civil War, made her White House years some of the most difficult of her life.

Born in 1818 in Lexington, Ky., to Robert Smith Todd and Eliza Parker Todd, Mary Lincoln grew up in well-to-do but chaotic circumstances. She was the fourth of seven children, and after her mother died, her father remarried and had nine more children by his new wife.

Mrs. Lincoln received a quality education for a woman of her time, attending the Shelby Female Academy and later Mentelle's Academy, a local finishing school.

Mrs. Lincoln's education also included the political talk that flourished at home among her father's influential and politically active friends. By the time she met and married Abraham Lincoln in 1842, she was comfortable with politics and would later play a role in his political career.

In the early years of her marriage, Mrs. Lincoln raised her family while her husband built an Illinois law practice and served as a U.S. Congressman. When he received the Republican nomination for president, the outspoken Mrs. Lincoln took a leading role in his campaign, accompanying him on the road and giving her own interviews to journalists.

Despite her joy when he won the election, she was at heart insecure about becoming first lady; she worried about her family's image as "Westerners," fearing that Washington society would not find them sophisticated enough.

As a result, Mrs. Lincoln overcompensated and drew criticism. She dressed expensively and redecorated the White House, accumulating thousands of dollars in debt. Additionally, she was accused of being a Southern

sympathizer because several of her brothers were fighting for the Confederacy.

Nothing could have been further from the truth, however. A firm supporter of the Union and an ardent abolitionist, Mrs. Lincoln's work to end slavery was her great unrecognized achievement as first lady.

She unobtrusively raised funds for abolitionist causes, and she was the first president's wife to invite African Americans to the White House as guests of her family.

Still, Mrs. Lincoln's contributions were overshadowed by the many other problems that plagued her. Suffering from debilitating mood swings and headaches, she was bedridden for days at a time.

Personal tragedy did not help her tenuous emotional state. When the Lincoln's son, Willie, died from typhoid fever, Mrs. Lincoln was overcome with grief to the point she was accused of wallowing in her pain. Throughout it all, her husband, though often exasperated, remained loyal and continued to seek his wife's input on political and other important matters.

There was to be no happy ending for the Lincolns, though. After the president's assassination on April 14, 1865, Mrs. Lincoln's life continued in a downward spiral. In 1871, the death of her son, Tad, crushed her. In 1875, convinced that his mother was mentally unstable, her oldest son, Robert, had her committed to a mental institution.

Mrs. Lincoln eventually secured her own release, but she lived the remainder of her life in poor health. When she died on July 16, 1882, in Springfield, Ill., she became one of the most tragic figures of a first lady that the country had known.

Abraham Lincoln Administration, 1861-1865

Mary Todd Lincoln

Born: December 13, 1818, in Lexington, Kentucky

Education: Shelby Female Academy and Mentelle's Academy, Lexington, Kentucky

Marriage: 1842 to Abraham Lincoln

Children: Robert Todd (1843-1926); Edward Baker (1846-50);

William Wallace (1850-62); Thomas "Tad" (1853-71)

Died: July 16, 1882, in Springfield, Ill.

