Mary Lincoln and Elizabeth Keckly: Friendship despite Adversity

There are two important names in history that are often either besmirched or unknown. The names belong to two women, one white and one black: they are former First Lady of the United States, Mary Lincoln and former slave, Elizabeth Keckly. “History has not been kind to Mary Lincoln, but it has neglected Elizabeth Keckly altogether” (Fleischner 319). While there is a strong juxtaposition between the lives of these two remarkable women, there is no denying the bond and friendship they established during one of the most controversial periods in American history, the Civil War.

This paper will attempt to revive both their stories and place emphasis on the significance of them. Context will be provided to equip the audience with information regarding the history and circumstances contributing to the relationship between Mary Lincoln and Elizabeth Keckly. Learning the story of their friendship, especially during the current state of racial unrest and adversity in America, could help to alleviate negative feelings associated with the discussion of the most conspicuous issues at the core of the Civil War, race and slavery.

Before racial slavery was established in the mid to late 17th century, race relations between whites and blacks were for the most part quite flexible and boundaries were quite ambiguous. When Africans first arrived to America in 1619, a system for slavery did not exist. Africans labored alongside indentured servants. The population of indentured servants was comprised only of white, Europeans; they were promised land in exchange for their fulfillment of time sensitive contracts which guaranteed their assistance in the development of the first
permanent settlement of Jamestown, Virginia. European powers were initially reluctant to settle the terms of finished contracts between indentured servants and land owners because it translated to a loss of labor and land settlements. Tensions eventually rose and indentured servants, also known as the giddy multitude, demanded settlement of the terms of their contracts. Since it was impossible for imported Africans to be indentured servants, a shift in race relations was critical in distinguishing those who were owed land from those who could be forced into free labor for the rest of their natural lives (DePalma, “Origins of Slavery”).

African slave labor became an integral factor in the growth of the American economy. It wasn’t until centuries later that slavery was abolished by a President who believed that slave labor diminished opportunities for poor whites to improve their circumstances. Regardless of the authentic reasons for the abolishment of slavery, it was by its very nature an act of moral integrity; an act that also came at a bloody cost (DePalma, “Civil War”). While Abraham Lincoln is responsible for officially ending slavery, it can be said that his wife could have helped to improve race relations in America following the end of slavery and the Civil War.

Mary Ann Todd was born on December 13, 1818 (“Biography”) to a prominent, upper-class family of slave owners in Lexington, Kentucky (Fleischner 16-19). She was born accustomed to a privileged lifestyle and having servants. Mary found more of a maternal figure in Aunt Sally than she did with any other female figure in her life. Aunt Sally was the family’s “mammy” or household slave and caretaker (Fleischner 51). Because of her loving and loyal bond with Aunt Sally, Mary became an early sympathizer of slaves; although members of her family owned slaves, they were not opposed to emancipation (Fleischner 55).

When Mary was seven years old, her beloved mother Eliza Parker died due to complications following the birth of her youngest brother George (Fleischner 20-22). Shortly
following the death of Mary’s mother, her father, Robert Todd Smith remarried before Mary had even turned eight years old (Fleischner 48). Robert was an established Kentucky politician and lawyer; he was also an apprentice and friend of Henry Clay. Although Mary was afforded the finest education and many luxuries, household tension between Mary, her siblings and their stepmother Betsey Todd can be attributed to Mary’s description of her childhood as “desolate” (Black).

Finally, when Mary was twenty-one years old she moved to Springfield, Illinois with her oldest sister Elizabeth, who married Ninian Edwards. Elizabeth and her husband were among the elite of Springfield. Two years prior to moving, Mary first met Abraham Lincoln during a weekly gathering hosted by her sister and brother-in-law in 1837. Lincoln came from humble beginnings, but he was fiercely ambitious and often associated with the elite. There was initial opposition to a union between Lincoln and Mary because her family believed that she was too good for him. However, they eventually gave their blessings and the couple wed in the home of Ninian and Elizabeth on November 4, 1842 (“Lincoln Lore”).

In her younger days and prior to meeting Lincoln, Mary prophetically once said that “her husband would be President of the United States” (Fleischner 58). Between 1843 and 1853, Mary and Lincoln gave birth to four sons: Robert, William, Tad, and Edward who died in 1850, approximately one month shy of his fourth birthday (“Mary Todd”). While Lincoln was not financially able to support the lifestyle that Mary had been accustomed to, she never left his side and remained faithful of his abilities to advance himself in society. However, her desires for materialistic possessions and a life among the social elite were deeply rooted and not diminished by a lack of finances (Black).
Mary’s loyalty to Lincoln proved to be worthwhile and fulfilled her prophecy; he was elected President on November 6, 1860 and was inaugurated into office on March 4, 1861. Prior to winning the presidency, however, Lincoln had established himself as a politician; the family had lived in Washington, DC in 1847 when Lincoln was elected into the United States House of Representatives (“Lincoln Chronology”). Thus, Mary had an early glimpse into the social and fashion scene for the women of the capital; as wife of the President, she figured that expectations for her to have the best appearance were extremely high. Therefore, she wasted no time seeking a modiste, or dress maker, upon arriving to her new home as First Lady of the United States (Keckley).

Elizabeth “Lizzy” Hobbs was born into slavery, February of 1818 in Dinwiddie County, Virginia (Fleischner 28-29). Her birth increased property value for her mother Agnes Hobbs’ owner, Armistead Burwell, who was also her biological father (Fleischner 65). Laws regarding miscegenation, and perhaps the fact that he was a married man, forbid Burwell to publicly claim parental rights of Elizabeth. However, her mother’s marriage to another slave by the name of George Pleasant Hobbs granted her a tangible male figure whom she could regard as her father. George was only with the family a short period of time before they were separated, but he remained devoted to both Lizzy and Agnes through letters (Fleischner 29).

Elizabeth recalls that at the tender age of four, her earliest slave duties entailed caring for her master’s new born baby, who was also named Elizabeth. Keckly recalls being repeatedly told by the Burwell family that she would never amount to anything following the day she accidently dropped Elizabeth on the floor. In her autobiography, Keckly does not express bitterness regarding her labor as a slave. Rather, she believed that being a slave taught her an early and “important lesson of self-reliance” (Keckley).
Around the age of seven, Lizzy witnessed the “sale of a human being” for the first time in her life; it was the separation of a young boy from his mother (Keckley). Seven years later at the age of fourteen, Elizabeth was loaned to Master Burwell’s oldest son, Robert Burwell, a young Presbyterian minister who had recently married. Robert’s wife, Anna Burwell, came from a poor family and seemed to be “desirous to wreak vengeance on” Elizabeth (Keckley).

At the age of eighteen, Elizabeth moved with Robert and Anna Burwell from Virginia to Hillsborough, NC where Robert “took charge of a church” (Keckley). Hereafter, Elizabeth recalled the darkest memories of her slave past. The Burwell’s were financially deprived; in an effort to earn a sufficient income, their home doubled as The Burwell Academy for Young Ladies (“Burwell School Historic Site”). Elizabeth recalled doing the work of three slaves and being treated very coldly by Mrs. Burwell, who ruled the house for the most part. Mrs. Burwell was not an easy person to get along with; as a matter of fact, both Robert’s mother and sister had expressed that she was a difficult woman (Fleischner 67). She kept a diary which revealed her own innermost struggles; her frustrations and unhappiness with her own life were often outwardly asserted towards Elizabeth.

Mrs. Burwell regarded Elizabeth as a proud slave and made several attempts to break her pride. Without any particular reason, she summoned a local school master, Mr. William Bingham, to whip Elizabeth. Mr. Bingham attempted to break Elizabeth’s pride on three occasions. Following the first attempt, she persistently questioned Master Robert Burwell on the cause for the beating and he struck her with a chair out of frustration. Because Elizabeth suppressed her tears and expressed opposition to the first beating, approximately one week later, Mr. Bingham was summoned in yet another attempt to break her pride. However, Elizabeth remained firm and even bit his finger in attempt to avoid the harsh beating. On Mr. Bingham’s
third attempt to beat Elizabeth, she recalls that he became “exhausted with his efforts, … burst into tears, and declared that it would be a sin to beat [her] any more …; he asked [her] forgiveness, and afterwards was an altered man. He was never known to strike one of his servants from that day forward” (Keckley).

Mrs. Burwell was dissatisfied that Elizabeth had both managed to carry on following her brutal beatings and bring Mr. Bingham to his conscience. As the unofficial leader of the home, Anna began to influence Mr. Burwell to carry out the beatings that Mr. Bingham had ceased to perform. It is likely that Mr. Burwell, often regarded as mild-mannered and passive, felt a greater sense of masculinity when beating Elizabeth at the pleasure of his wife. Strangely enough, however, Mrs. Burwell, whom Elizabeth regarded as “cold [and] jealous-hearted,” (Keckley) began to take pity upon her and pleaded with Robert for the torture to end; he too apologized and promised to never beat her again. Thereafter, Elizabeth took pride in learning that the torture she experienced at the hands of the Burwells gave them a bad reputation in the Hillsborough community (Keckley).

Around the age of 21, Elizabeth became a mother against her own will and gave birth to a son whom she named George after her beloved [step] father. In her autobiography she vaguely describes the acts of sexual force that had been imposed upon her and chose to “spare the world [her perpetrator’s] name” (Keckley). Research revealed that her perpetrator was Alexander McKenzie Kirkland, brother-in-law of Thomas Ruffin who was from Hillsborough and had served as Chief Justice in the State Supreme Court during the antebellum era (Fleischner 84-85). Elizabeth stated that her rape was not a subject that she cared to speak of because it had caused her a great deal of pain. Having been born into slavery herself, Lizzy strongly opposed slave women giving birth to children because it robbed them of their innocence and forced them to
share the burden of the dreaded slave fate. Although she did not wish to bring her son into the world, she cared for and loved him deeply (Keckley).

The Burwell’s returned Elizabeth and her son George to Virginia where they joined her mother Agnes to serve Minister Burwell’s youngest sister, Ann and her husband Hugh Garland. Hillsborough, a small town, was rampant with gossip and the last thing Minister Burwell needed were rumors that he had impregnated his slave under the nose of his authoritarian wife. The Garland’s eventually relocated to St. Louis and Elizabeth found her calling as a dressmaker out of desperation and necessity. The Garland’s were also financially deprived and had proposed selling out her mother’s services to earn income. Elizabeth expressed opposition to the proposal due to her mother’s age and requested that she be sent to work instead (Keckley).

Elizabeth honed her craft as a dressmaker and over the years established an impressive reputation among the St. Louis elite. The network she gained through her clientele helped her to raise the $1,200 she needed to emancipate both herself and her son; on June 27th, 1855 Elizabeth and George were officially free. In the interim of her freedom, Lizzy married and divorced, James Keckley, who lied about being a freed man and became a burden to her. Lizzy eventually relocated to Washington, D.C. in hopes to fulfill her desire “to work for the ladies of the White House” (Keckley). After experiencing barriers remaining in D.C. as a freed woman, Lizzy once again relied upon her connections for assistance which helped her to establish herself as the modiste to Washington’s elite; “Mrs. Senator [Jefferson] Davis [was] one of [her] best patrons” (Keckley).

Lizzy’s prominent connections seemed to have never failed her. The day Mary Lincoln arrived in Washington, D.C, she took notice to a dress Keckly made for one of her D.C. patrons. The patron referred Keckly to Mary and she was hired on the spot. Of course it also gave Mrs.
Lincoln great pleasure to learn that Keckly had worked for the fashionable Mrs. Varina Davis, wife of the future president of the Confederacy (Fleischner 191). On March 5, 1861, Keckly’s desire to work for women of the White House had been more than fulfilled and she was now the official modiste to the First Lady of the United States.

Mary Lincoln and Elizabeth were white and black counterparts, both born in the year 1818; the implications of slavery could be attributed to major distinctions occurring at similar points of their lives. Mary grew up as a privileged child accustomed to having servants yet lacked parental affection; Lizzy spent most of her life with her mother, but was born into servitude. Around the age of seven, Mary lost her mother and shortly after gained a step mother she did not care for; Lizzy was likely traumatized with witnessing the sale of a slave and the separation of a child from his mother. While Mary was in Illinois being courted by a future President around the age of twenty one; Lizzy was being raped and bore the child of her perpetrator. While the fate of these two women was altogether uncertain, unusual, and dissimilar, there is no denying the fact that neither was a stranger to the face of adversity.

There were many speculations that Mrs. Lincoln was “ignorant and vulgar”, which were proven true to an extent and often manifested by her lavish credit purchases during the Civil War. Mary hired Lizzy under the agreement that she would labor at a discounted rate; she could not afford the prices Lizzy was accustomed to charging her more prominent clientele. Although Lizzy agreed to work at a discounted rate, their first transaction exposed Mary’s potentially irrational and demanding demeanor. There was ample time for Mary to be dressed for the event which she needed her first dress, however, because Lizzy had not arrived on her terms she expressed that she was “bitterly disappointed” and felt “deceived” (Keckley). Mary had to be convinced to proceed with attending the event by relatives, but attempted to blame Lizzy for not
being on time if she were not to attend. It can be said that Lizzy’s experience in Hillsborough, North Carolina as a slave to the Burwell’s likely prepared her for employment with women of Mary’s caliber. Her ability to handle the situation with grace helped to ease tension caused by the situation.

Although the relationship began on rocky terms, both women were brought closer by mutual devastation associated with experiencing the loss of a child. Lizzy’s loyalty to Mary encouraged a shift in their relationship from employer and employee to friends. On February 20, 1862, Mary’s son William “Willie” Lincoln died at age 11 (“Lincoln Chronology”); upon being employed less than one year, Lizzy witnessed the Lincoln’s grief. Prior to Willie’s death, Lizzy who had only been hired as Mrs. Lincoln’s modiste, had been trusted and did not hesitate to sit near his bedside in his final moments of life. While working for Mrs. Lincoln, Lizzy had also lost her only son George, who died in Missouri while fighting in the Civil War. Upon learning of George’s death, Mrs. Lincoln, having lost another child prior to William, could sympathize and attempted to console Lizzy with a heartfelt letter (Keckly). In exposing their vulnerabilities and bereavements to one another for similar reasons, the two women were able to form an undeniable bond.

The Lincoln’s were private people, but Lizzy had proven that she could be trusted and they “often” discussed private information “in [her] presence” (Keckley). Lizzy was a White House insider, which was an often envied and sought after position. She was exposed to the uncensored opinions of the First Lady and the President regarding official matters and politicians. Lizzy had also gained influence with the couple. For example, it was Elizabeth Keckly who made it possible for African-American abolitionist Sojourner Truth to meet with the President after her own attempt had failed (“Notable Visitors”). In addition to being trusted,
Lizzy also had the moral and financial support of the First Lady and President when she became President of a non-profit organization she founded called the Contraband Relief Association (“Contrabands & Freedmen”). The organization was comparative to a social services agency for newly freed African-Americans seeking refuge in Washington, DC (“Living Contraband”). Lizzy could be considered privileged since she did not endure the same plight as the slaves she helped. However, she certainly never forgot to pay forward the assistance she received in obtaining her own freedom.

Lizzy was always inclined to assist her friend, the First Lady, even in matters that the President himself was not privy to. Mary’s affection and deep rooted desire for the finer things in life eventually became her downfall; she had confessed to Lizzy that she had “contracted large debts, of which [Lincoln knew] nothing [about], and [would have been] unable to pay if he [was] defeated [in the second presidential election]” (Keckley). However, there is evidence to suggest that it was not beneath Mary to keep Lincoln in the dark about her extravagant purchases and debts as she had successfully done so in the past.

In 1848, approximately one year after the family had initially moved to Washington, D.C., Lincoln sent Mary and their children back to Illinois because he felt that she was a hindrance in his ability to serve in the U.S. House of Representatives (“Lincoln Chronology”). Following her departure, Lincoln wrote to Mary on July 2, 1848 to confirm a debt that she likely acquired during her short time in Washington, which had been brought to his attention. In the letter Lincoln wrote:

“Last wednesday, P. H. Hood & Co, dunned me for a little bill of $5.38 cents, and Walter Harper & Co, another for $8.50 cents, for goods which they say you bought. I hesitated to pay them, because my recollection is that you told me when you went away, there was
nothing left unpaid. Mention in your next letter whether they are right” (Letter to Mary Todd Lincoln).

It is unclear how Mary managed to resolve the matter, however, it had obviously not affected their marriage, nor his love for her although it troubled him. These debts were small in comparison to the debts, which she later confessed to Lizzy. It can be regarded either fortunate or unfortunate that Lincoln had not learned of Mary’s debts prior to his death in April of 1865.

Mary confessed to Lizzy that if Lincoln had been elected a second term, her plan to resolve the debts would have come at the expense of “[t]he Republican politicians” (Keckley). Mary felt that they were responsible and obligated to “pay [her] debts” since they had acquired wealth from her husband’s “patronage” (Keckley). Unfortunately for Mary, however, the sudden death of her husband sabotaged her plans and she was forced to vacate the White House shortly after. In a state of grief and with less than a handful of people she could trust, Mary wanted nothing more than for her “best and kindest friend” Lizzy to join her as she returned to Chicago, Illinois (Keckley).

In March of 1865, Lizzy proved to be a true friend and briefly ceased her business to assist Mary with making the transition from First Lady in the White House to widower of the west. Lizzy stayed with Mary for three months prior to returning to Washington to resume her business. In the meantime, Mary and Lizzy remained in contact and continued to write to one another. In March of 1867, Mary wrote to Lizzy that life became unbearably difficult for her in Chicago as a result of her debts:

"I have not the means," … "to meet the expenses of even a first-class boarding-house, and must sell out and secure cheap rooms at some place in the country. It will not be startling news to you, my dear Lizzie, to learn that I must sell a portion of my wardrobe
to add to my resources, so as to enable me to live decently, for you remember what I told you in Washington, as well as what you understood before you left me here in Chicago. I cannot live on $1,700 a year, and as I have many costly things which I shall never wear, I might as well turn them into money, and thus add to my income, and make my circumstances easier. It is humiliating to be placed in such a position, but, as I am in the position, I must extricate myself as best I can. Now, Lizzie, I want to ask a favor of you. It is imperative that I should do something for my relief, and I want you to meet me in New York, between the 30th of August and the 5th of September next, to assist me in disposing of a portion of my wardrobe” (Keckley).

In September of 1867, Lizzy closed her business in Washington and traveled to New York to once again assist her friend.

Mary attempted to remain incognito to spare herself the embarrassment of her debts being made public, however, her attempt failed when a broker recognized her identity. Thereafter, the news soared through media outlets who spared Mrs. Lincoln no sympathies (Keckley). With her back against the wall, Mary’s true friend made one final and costly attempt to help absolve her of financial insecurity and embarrassment.

In 1868, without Mary’s knowledge, Keckly wrote and published a book titled Behind the Scenes, or, Thirty years a Slave, and Four Years in the White House (Keckley). It was an autobiography that provided detailed, honest accounts regarding both her life and the highly speculated life of the Lincoln’s; her intent was to use the proceeds from the book to help Mary settle her debts. However, the book cost Lizzy the trust of many of her clients and most importantly, her best friend Mary who was upset by the publication of the book. Lizzy had also provided the publishers with their private correspondences, solely for the purposes of
establishing context, but they were included in the publishing against her will. The New York Times referred to her book as a “gross [violation] of confidence” (Sorisio). One outlet went as far as making a parody of the book titled, *Behind the Seams; by a Nigger Woman Who Took in Work from Mrs. Lincoln and Mrs. Davis* (Sorisio). Lincoln’s abrupt death ceased plans for reconstruction following the emancipation of slaves and the parody is indicative of tensions between newly freed slaves and whites.

The book became quite a sensation and added to Mary’s grief and embarrassment; in the same year it was published, Mary left the United States to live in Germany until 1871. In 1875, her oldest son, Robert Lincoln used the courts to have his ailing, traumatized, and grief stricken mother admitted into an insane asylum in Batavia, Illinois (“Lincoln Chronology”). Following the death of Willie in 1862, President Lincoln had also threatened her with similar action which was also revealed in Keckly’s book (Keckley). On July 16, 1882, Mary Lincoln died in the home of her sister Elizabeth where she had married Abraham Lincoln in 1842 (Fleischner 322). Around the time of Mary’s death, Lizzy found work training African-Americans and freedwomen to become seamstresses. However, she could never restore her business success following Mrs. Lincoln’s scandal; “[s]he spent her final years in the National Home for Destitute Colored Women and Children, an institution [in Washington, D.C.] founded during the [Civil War] partly with funds contributed by Lizzy’s contraband association” (Fleischner 323). It is possible that Mary had come to realize the sacrifices that Lizzy made for her and her true intentions to assist her at all costs. In Keckly’s later life she revealed to friends that Mary alluded to forgive her prior to her death (Fleischner 324). Elizabeth Keckly died in 1907.

As race relations currently appear to regress, discussing matters such as race and slavery can be sensitive subjects. Often such discussions are laden with information which illustrate a
story of white superiority and the inferiority and dehumanization of slaves. Stories like Elizabeth’s and Mary’s are overshadowed by those of segregation, which was most customary for the time. It is unclear whether or not Mary and Lizzy actually ever had a chance to reconcile or restore their friendship, but their story demonstrates that bonds as strong as friendship are and were attainable despite adversity and regardless of race. Additionally, even prior to meeting one another, they both benefitted from the kindness and generosity of both blacks and whites. The friendship between Lizzy and Mary had the potential to impact the nation and inspire improvements of race relations. Hopefully sharing their story today can help to restore the same unity and solidarity that once existed between two women, one white and one black.
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