Dedication
To the math and science geeks
in my home who love this history geek
and have gone to more museums
than they ever wanted

Acknowledgement
To the women of the past who have written letters, kept diaries, and allowed their stories to be found and retold. As a historian, my goal is to share the voice and experiences of these women. In this essay, my goal is to bring the domestic voice of Mary Lincoln as the wife of a politician to the reader.

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I cannot say thank you or I love you enough to Roger and my children for their support while I have gone back to school and have embarked on projects such as this which go beyond the classroom.
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Chapter 1

Introduction

Women in the United States could not vote or hold an elected public office until passage of the Nineteenth Amendment in 1920; therefore, women in nineteenth century America could not participate directly in the political process. Instead, middle and upper-middle class white women found indirect ways to influence American politics, often as an extension of their roles as homemakers, wives and mothers.¹ When Frenchman Alexis de Tocqueville visited the United States in the 1830s, he observed this role for women: “the mother plays an important role as the inculcator of democratic values in her young.”² As historian Linda Kerber has described, a nineteenth century wife and mother found that “her political task was accomplished within the confines of her family. The model republican woman was a mother.”³ One of the roles that nineteenth century society allowed to women was to exert their power in the home to make sure their husbands were taken care of properly and their children, especially boys, were raised to have morals fitting with the doctrine of society.

It is my contention that middle and upper class white women affected politics by bringing politicians and politics into their home through a variety of social gatherings ranging from dinners to open houses to balls. The women who had the greatest opportunity to participate in this form of politics were relatives of politicians, where politics was the family business. In order

to explore this perspective, I have studied the experience of one woman, Mary Lincoln as the daughter and wife of politicians. The homemaking duties Mary Lincoln performed were vital to Abraham Lincoln’s political career, as Richard Bushman wrote, “Lincoln’s rise from a log cabin to a modest parlor house became part of his appealing life story.”⁴ Abraham Lincoln’s success as a politician would be difficult to imagine without the work of his wife.

As the wife of President Abraham Lincoln, Mary Lincoln was First Lady between 1861 and 1865. The role of First Lady, the quintessential hostess, involved planning appropriate entertainments, wearing clothing of a certain style, using manners, and having a home full of refined items.⁵ The White House served as both a home and a public place where political activities occurred on a regular basis. As Jean Baker wrote, “it is not just that the public spaces of the White House—the great rooms of the downstairs—provide a stage for political leaders to meet and share ideas. Besides the expected discussions about policy and partisanship, sympathetic exchanges…occur in a congenial, unifying atmosphere.”⁶ Mary Lincoln understood her role as hostess as providing the opportunity for political exchange to occur in private spaces.

Following a brief discussion of the historical literature about Mary Lincoln, this essay will examine how her life experiences in Lexington, Kentucky, and Springfield, Illinois, influenced the decisions she made in Washington. Mary Lincoln (née Todd) was born into a wealthy family, but married a man born into poverty who had to work hard to move up the economic and social ladder. Through most of her life, Mary Lincoln accepted her domestic role as daughter, wife and mother. Her forays into public life extended primarily to political entertainments in her home including her experiences as a young woman in Lexington, the wife of a Whig politician in Springfield, and as First Lady in Washington. Mary Lincoln used her

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domestic role to engage in entertaining in the private spaces where she and Abraham lived. Although Mary Lincoln served as a political hostess in Springfield, her legacy has been tied to the political entertaining she engaged in as First Lady.\(^7\)

Following a brief historiography of the best known literature about Mary Lincoln, this essay will examine how her life experiences as a political hostess influenced the decisions she made in Washington. The life experiences of Mary Lincoln in Lexington and Springfield offer insight into her decision making. As well as considering the background of Mary Lincoln before her role as First Lady, it is important to consider the historical time frame in which she made certain decisions. Mary Lincoln’s education and life experiences began in Lexington with her birth in 1818 and continued as a new wife in Springfield with her marriage in 1842 until she embarked on her role as First Lady in Washington. These experiences are vital to understanding Mary Lincoln's expectations and the choices she made as First Lady.

**Mary Lincoln in History**

The first biographical account about Mary Lincoln and her marriage to Abraham Lincoln, still referenced to this day, was a compilation of interviews completed by William Herndon shortly after Abraham Lincoln’s assassination. All these interviews and documents were compiled and published in 1889 with the latest version a 1990s compilation by Douglas L. Wilson and Rodney O. Davis titled *Herndon’s Informants*. Herndon’s speeches along with interviews and letters he compiled after Abraham Lincoln’s assassination set the historical tone for how Mary Lincoln was, and still is, viewed by many people. The contentious relationship

\(^7\)After her marriage, Mary Todd followed Victorian customs and did not use her maiden name. Therefore, references to Mary Lincoln after her marriage to Abraham Lincoln will not use the Todd name. This is a conscientious decision out of respect to Mary Lincoln who referred to herself as Mary Lincoln, Mrs. Lincoln, Mrs. Abraham Lincoln, etc.
between Herndon and Mary Lincoln left a negative impression of her that has been difficult, if not impossible, to erase.\(^8\)

Following Herndon’s book and the backlash against Mary Lincoln, her niece, Katherine Helm, wrote *The True Story of Mary Wife of Lincoln* in 1928. This book was written as the only authorized biography of the Lincoln family who provided Helm with access to “family diaries, letters and documents, and was, in fact, the only author with whom the Lincoln family cooperated.”\(^9\) The original book, according to Jean Baker, was out of print for over fifty years, and there is information in the book that some historians dispute. The availability of primary source material to Helm at the time this book was written makes this secondary source valuable to the study of Mary Lincoln; however, since this book was authorized by the family there is reason to be cautious regarding all the facts.

William A. Evans, a doctor and historian, was the first health commissioner of Chicago in 1907. Evans wrote a biography about Mary Lincoln originally published in 1932 entitled *Mrs. Abraham Lincoln A Study of Her Personality and Her Influence on Lincoln*. This biography was written at a time when both Abraham and Mary Lincoln’s relatives were alive and able to provide primary source information. At the time Evans wrote his book, he stated that:

> The biographies of Abraham Lincoln are uneven in their treatment of Mrs. Lincoln. Some do not mention her and others barely do; while, at the other extreme, the biographies of Herndon and those based on Herndon furnish the corner-stone on which rests the present-day opinion of Mrs. Lincoln.\(^10\)

Evans argued that Mary Lincoln’s story has been misrepresented because of the original biography by Herndon, and the goal of his book was to provide a balanced look at Mary Lincoln.

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Lincoln’s life story. Mary Lincoln scholar Jason Emerson wrote recently in a reissued edition that Evans’ work is balanced and comprehensive unlike other books that have either tried to apologize for her behavior, paint Mary Lincoln as a feminist or continue to vilify her. The scholarship in Evans book should not be overlooked or dismissed when considering the life of Mary Lincoln.

Another book, published in 1953, by Ruth Painter Randall entitled *Mary Lincoln Biography of a Marriage*, looked at Mary Lincoln’s role as First Lady as one that:

brought to her position as White House hostess fine qualifications: the birth and rearing of a gentlewoman, an excellent cultural education, a bright, quick, responsive mind, the charm of a vital and joyous personality, a conscientious desire to help her husband by fulfilling her duties, and the love of social life that stems from a genuine interest in people and events. That she was not acquainted with the superficial sophistications of Washington society was important only to that society itself, but the said society was extremely vocal about the matter.

Randall’s biography painted the Lincoln marriage as a union of equality where both Abraham and Mary married for love and helped each other. Mary performed her domestic duties because she chose and wanted to be a traditional wife and mother, but she also wanted to help her husband’s career in the private space of their home in which she had control.

Two books of recent scholarship that are frequently referenced are Jean Baker’s *Mary Todd Lincoln*, updated in 2008, and Catherine Clinton’s *Mrs. Lincoln A Life*, published in 2009. Both books provide different views of Mary Lincoln’s life; however, both authors argue that Mary Lincoln had political aspirations. In contrast to these works, I argue here that Mary Lincoln did not have ambitions of her own and was comfortable in her role of a politician’s wife as defined during the Victorian era in which she lived.

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Baker’s feels Mary Lincoln “was a victim battered by personal adversity and trapped by destructive conventions of Victorian domesticity.”\textsuperscript{13} Baker goes on to say that “while taking charge of home, raising her sons, and reconstructing her husband, Mary Lincoln trespassed into the male sphere of politics, and this intrusion became the most notable feature of her marriage.”\textsuperscript{14} Mary Lincoln chose to follow Victorian customs of maintaining a home and caring for her children and husband. Although Mary Lincoln married a politician, this does not, as Baker suggested, make Mary Lincoln a part of the male political atmosphere. Mary Lincoln’s upbringing of wealth and family political connections could have afforded her the opportunity to participate in unconventional activities such as the fight for women’s rights. She chose, not only a husband from a different station in life, but a traditional domestic role of wife and mother. The fact that political entertaining was a part of the private space of the home brought Mary Lincoln, as well as other political wives, into the political arena; however, that did not make her a politician nor define her marriage.

Clinton acknowledged Mary Lincoln’s traditional role stating, “Mary Lincoln was a formidable nineteenth-century role model…she invested her talents and energies in her marriage and her family, like most women of her era.”\textsuperscript{15} The role of wife and mother is one Mary, according to the National First Ladies Library, stated herself saying, “I do not belong to the public; my character is wholly domestic, and the public have nothing to do with it.”\textsuperscript{16} Mary Lincoln, although desiring a husband of political ambition, did not desire to break Victorian customs and enter politics outside the realm that the role women of political husbands played

\textsuperscript{13}\textsuperscript{}Baker, \textit{Mary Todd Lincoln}, xxii-xxiii. \\
\textsuperscript{14}\textsuperscript{}Baker, \textit{Mary Todd Lincoln}, 133. \\
\textsuperscript{15}\textsuperscript{}Catherine Clinton, \textit{Mrs. Lincoln A Life} (New York: Harper, 2009), 4. Catherine Clinton’s book is the most recent scholarship that is problematic due to a lack of citations. Clinton’s book offers stories that have been discredited by other scholars of earlier literature as well as new stories without a source. \\
\textsuperscript{16}\textsuperscript{}National First Ladies Library, http://www.firstladies.org/biographies/
during the nineteenth century. I would argue that while Mary Lincoln was well-educated and encouraged Abraham Lincoln’s political career, she did not, as Clinton stated, step “outside the conventions to which she was expected to conform.” The traditional role of a politician’s wife was to be responsible for social activities through private entertaining which Mary Lincoln provided. This role was not outside the convention of the nineteenth century politician’s wife especially since she embraced the caretaking of her home and children.

Mary Lincoln served as a wife, mother, and political hostess in the same manner other Victorian upper class women did during the nineteenth century, and she used their home and societal connections to enhance Abraham Lincoln’s political career rather than create one of her own. Mary Lincoln, like other political wives, was able to control what happened in the private space of their homes. When Mary Lincoln became First Lady, she no longer controlled much of the entertaining within her home, now the White House. To consider Mary Lincoln’s role as a political hostess only in her role as First Lady is to define her life too narrowly.

Chapter 2

19th Century Entertaining In the Home

The idea of the Republican Mother was endorsed by Thomas Jefferson as he hosted small dinner parties at round tables for members of the same political ideology. Jefferson did not agree with women participating in politics as he had witnessed in Paris, and he did not want men and women to mix in social settings. Since Jefferson was not married, he turned to Dolley Madison, the wife of James Madison, who was serving as Jefferson’s Secretary of State, as his hostess in the White House. Catherine Allgor wrote that “Republican theory prohibited women from using social events for political purposes, but Jefferson’s domestic-public mix not only accommodated female guests but even depended on them.” Allgor continued, “his dinner parties promoted accord and hid political uses under a cover of sociability.” The dinner parties hosted by Jefferson and later Presidents became models for women of middle and upper class society who fulfilled their roles as wives and mothers by hosting social parties for politicians.

The Dining Room

Not only did the parlor have a special function in the home, the dining room also involved a distinctive set of rules for entertaining. Natalie Kapetanios Meir wrote that in the nineteenth century many social instruction books were published, and “these dining handbooks provide a systematic account of the most minute details for both attending and hosting a dinner party, including such information as how to work the invitations, decorating the table, ordering the courses or arranging guests according to precedence.” Although social rules for dining were targeted to the upper class, as more families moved into the middle class, such as Mary and

20Allgor, Parlor Politics, 30.  
Abraham Lincoln, and hosted political social gatherings, adherence to these rules was expected. The etiquette for arriving at a dinner party was to make sure your carriage arrived within five minutes of the starting time after which your hat would be taken and then ten minutes later dinner would be announced. Once dinner was announced, the master of the house would escort the woman of the highest rank that was not his wife to the table.22

One of the changes occurring in the nineteenth century was the change in serving modes from service à la francaise to service à la russe. Service à la francaise had all the food placed on the table at one time and was passed from one guest to another. Service à la russe involved the food being offered to each guest by a servant. Meir explained that Anne Cobbett wrote The English Housekeeper in 1835, and described a proper dinner as having candles and vases in the center of the table. At the end of the table would be two soups followed by two fish dishes with the sauces served to each person individually. The butler would serve wine as well as “all joints of meat, beef, mutton, venison, veal, lamb, hams, and tongues” which would be carved by the butler according to Cobbett. The soup and fish were removed and “poultry, made dishes, and dressed vegetables” were served with the third course Cobbett wrote consisting of “game, omelets, pastry, and confectionary.”23 The large number of dishes and courses showed that attending a dinner party was a long affair which would have provided guests an opportunity to talk politics before retiring to the parlor.

The Parlor

During the early nineteenth century, etiquette books and magazines such as Godey’s Lady’s Book wrote about appropriate décor and use of a parlor. As Sally McMurry explored in her essay, homemaking books told housewives how to clean and furnish their parlor with items

22Meir, “‘A Fashionable Dinner Is Arranged as Follows’: Victorian Dining Taxonomies,” 140-141.
23Meir, “‘A Fashionable Dinner Is Arranged as Follows’: Victorian Dining Taxonomies,” 136-137.
such as “books, fancywork, pictures, musical instruments, small sculptures, and other ‘objects of
taste’ were arranged casually around the room’s focus, a center table.”\textsuperscript{24} Not only were parlors
architecturally planned into the home, such a room would have been considered the best room in
the home. McMurry wrote that parlors were used for “tea ceremonies, clergymen’s calls,
weddings, and funerals.”\textsuperscript{25} A parlor denoted middle class status and was used for various
functions in urban settings.

Parlors served both public and private functions for families. As McMurry wrote,
“private family rituals held in the parlor reinforced ideas of symbolic family solidarity,
continuity, and patriarchy. The social aspect of the parlor, evident on other occasions, featured
female hegemony, social entertainment, and the display of feminine accomplishments.”\textsuperscript{26}
Families who had more than one parlor would keep these areas separate and have the formal
parlor for public entertaining and have a family sitting or living room which was much more
informal. During the day, visitors were received into the parlor; whereas, in the evening,
according to McMurry, “courting scenes (special in-stances of calling) were set in the parlor.
Evening parties also occurred there, sometimes in elegant double parlors. The parlor also
witnessed musical events, which served both to entertain guests and to display the
accomplishments of the young lady players.”\textsuperscript{27}

Mary Anna Randolph Custis was the daughter of George Washington Parke Custis,
grandson of Martha Washington and her first husband Daniel Parke Custis, and Mary Lee
Fitzhugh. Mary Custis was born October 1, 1808. She was raised at Arlington with slaves,

\textsuperscript{24}Sally McMurry, “City Parlor, Country Sitting Room Rural Vernacular Design and the American Parlor, 1840-
\textsuperscript{25}McMurry, “City Parlor, Country Sitting Room,” 262.
\textsuperscript{26}McMurry, “City Parlor, Country Sitting Room,” 265.
\textsuperscript{27}McMurry, “City Parlor, Country Sitting Room,” 266.
festivals celebrating George Washington, education and travel. Mary married Robert E. Lee on June 30, 1831, in a grand affair that involved slave musicians, nights of dancing, and drinking from the china punch bowl that once belonged to George Washington. On September 1, 1852, Lee was appointed superintendent of the United States Military Academy in West Point, New York. For their new home, “the Lees had bought in Baltimore a new set of red velvet parlor furniture, which included two settees, a lady and matching side chairs. These, along with their older furniture from Arlington and the Lee and Custis silver and china, enabled the family to entertain in a manner become the superintendent.” As the superintendent, Lee was expected entertain dignitaries, visitors and cadets. One Christmas Mary “hosted a ‘little party’ of about thirty cadets and the young ladies who lived at the Point.” At this small gathering, Mary served a supper consisting of “cold turkey, ham, olio, stewed oysters, pheasants, lemonade, ice cream, jellies, and cakes.” Lee considered his appointment as superintendent a political one which required Mary to serve as a hostess for various events. Although Mary had been raised in a home with slaves, the social experiences in her parents’ home offered her the knowledge of the role as a hostess she was required to fulfill as the superintendent’s wife.

Varina Howell, daughter of William and Margaret Howell and born May 7, 1826, in Natchez, Mississippi, came from a line of military veterans and a socially prominent family. Jefferson Davis, a politician from Mississippi, was eighteen years older than Varina Howell and also came from a socially prominent family. Jefferson Davis and Varina Howell were married on February 26, 1845, in the Howell home. Carol Berkin wrote, “two bridesmaids were summoned, and a wedding dinner was prepared. Varina...wore a simple white embroidered India muslim

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dress trimmed with lace.”\textsuperscript{32} When Varina joined Davis in Washington, they rented a home with some other Southern Senate families. The families took their meals at a hotel in a private dining room, and Varina was pleased that she had a nice parlor where she had a piano and could offer music as entertainment. She wrote to her mother about the parties and dinners she attended.\textsuperscript{33} After Jefferson Davis resigned from the Senate in 1850, he and Varina returned to Mississippi to a home that had “white marble mantels in the parlor and dining room” which were considered extravagant by her brother-in-law Joe Davis.\textsuperscript{34} While in Mississippi, Varina and Jefferson entertained “army officers, cabinet members, and members of Congress” while also being a friend of the president.\textsuperscript{35} On February 10, 1861, Jefferson Davis was elected President of the Confederacy. As the First Lady of the Confederacy, Varina “hosted large receptions and intimate breakfast parties” in the Confederate White House in the early years of the Civil War.\textsuperscript{36} Varina chose to host receptions to keep morale up during the Civil War.

Julia Dent, the daughter of Colonel Frederick and Ellen Dent was born January 26, 1826, grew up in the family home of White Haven in St. Louis, Missouri. Her childhood home had slave labor, orchards, gardens and time filled with fishing and riding.\textsuperscript{37} August 22, 1848, Julia Dent and Ulysses S. Grant wed at White Haven in a small gathering. According to Berkin, “she chose a bridal gown of India mull muslin…but Caroline O’Fallon, who had introduced Julia to St. Louis society…arrived…with an elegant dress of watered silk and a veil of white tulle.” Berkin continued that Julia had three bridesmaids, including her sister, and following the

\textsuperscript{32}Carol Berkin, \textit{Civil War Wives The Life & Times of Angelina Grimke Weld, Varina Howell Davis and Julia Dent Grant} (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2009), 115. Note the spelling of “muslim” is from the book and probably a misspelling of “muslin” since the reference to Indian muslin is correctly spelled earlier in the book.
\textsuperscript{33}Berkin, \textit{Civil War Wives}, 135.
\textsuperscript{34}Berkin, \textit{Civil War Wives}, 141.
\textsuperscript{35}Berkin, \textit{Civil War Wives}, 144.
\textsuperscript{36}Berkin, \textit{Civil War Wives}, 168.
\textsuperscript{37}Berkin, \textit{Civil War Wives}, 223.
ceremony “the guests were treated to ices, fruits, and a wedding cake.” 38 Although Julia Grant came from a family of social significance, her married life was much less extravagant. It was not until after the Civil War that the Grants lived in an extravagant home of their own in Washington and were host to many dinner parties and receptions. 39 When Ulysses was elected President, entertaining in the White House changed while the Grants also went out to private homes for receptions and parties. 40 Inside the White House Julia hired new servants, purchased new rugs and drapes, established new rules for the staff and insisted on a dress code of white gloves and dress suits. She was aware of the mores of Washington society, and as Berkin wrote that while Ulysses’s “favorite meal remained rare roast beef, boiled hominy, and wheat bread, he presided over better fare when dinner guests were present.” 41 Julia made the social mores of Washington society a part of the White House when the public could observe the behavior of their family or staff.

The rules of entertaining, whether in a dining room or a parlor, were made for upper class families which allowed the justification for servants or slaves. Having a set of rules also provided an opportunity for upper class women to form cliques and develop prejudices regarding women outside their social circle. Unlike Julia Grant, Mary Lincoln, as First Lady, and Varina Davis, a Senator’s wife, were never integrated within Washington society. Beyond the ability to throw an appropriate party, women were expected to have wealth and a feminine quality with a preference for female gossip rather than academic discussions with men. 42 Mary Lincoln, Mary Lee, Varina Davis and Julia Grant were educated women who served as hostesses in political entertaining.

41 Berkin, *Civil War Wives*, 281.
42 Berkin, *Civil War Wives*, 143.
positions for their husbands; however, the response to their efforts was mixed for a variety of reasons.
Chapter 3

Lexington, Kentucky

Mary Lincoln was born Mary Ann Todd, in December 1818, to Robert S. and Eliza Todd in Lexington, Kentucky. Since Robert was a politician, banker and businessman, Mary was raised in an affluent home where political entertaining regularly occurred with Whig politicians like Henry Clay exposing Mary from an early age to politics in the private space of her father’s home.\textsuperscript{43} She also visited the homes of other politicians. Three of these homes are now part of the Kentucky Mansion Preservation Foundation (KMPF). The KMPF has assisted in the restoration of Mary’s childhood home known as the Mary Todd Lincoln House (hereinafter referred to as the Todd Home); Ashland, the home of Henry Clay; and White Hall, the home of Cassius Clay.\textsuperscript{44} The Todd Home, Ashland, and White Hall form the basis of private space social entertaining that Mary Todd was exposed to as a young girl.

Todd Home

The Todd Home was purchased when Mary Todd was ten years old, and while the grounds have changed, the house has been restored to reflect how she would have experienced

\textsuperscript{43} Jean H. Baker, \textit{Mary Todd Lincoln A Biography} (New York: W. W. Norton, 2008), 60.
\textsuperscript{44} The Todd Home is owned by the Commonwealth of Kentucky, but operated and maintained by the KMPF. “Kentucky Mansion Preservation Foundation,” http://mtlhouse.org/kmpf.html. Although the museum is named the Mary Todd Lincoln House, this home was owned by her father Robert S. Todd. To avoid confusion with the home owned in Springfield, Illinois, by Abraham and Mary Lincoln and the home in Lexington, the museum in Lexington will be referred to as the Todd Home.

Ashland received funds from the KMPF to help restore Ashland; however, Ashland is owned and maintained by the Henry Clay Memorial Foundation. “The Henry Clay Foundation,” http://henryclay.org/?page_id=387.

White Hall is owned and managed by the Commonwealth of Kentucky. The White Hall-Clermont Foundation is responsible for events and promoting the estate. White Hall provides the following history about the residence, “Revolutionary War veteran General Green Clay first built his home Clermont in 1798-99. His son Cassius M. Clay went on to rebuild around the original structure in the 1860s and renamed the house White Hall. The house remained in the Clay family until 1968 when family members donated the home to the state of Kentucky. The state then purchased 13.5 of the original 2000 acres that surrounded the mansion. After much renovation and preservation the home was opened to the public as a state historic site in 1971.” White Hall-Clermont Foundation, http://www.whitehallclermontfoundation.org/index.html. I had the opportunity to visit and have a personal two hour tour of the home and other buildings on the estate by the curator Lashé Mullins.
life there. According to historian Catherine Clinton, the Todd Home was a “large double-brick house with a wide hall in the center…large formal flower gardens, as well as stables. Elkhorn Creek ran through the property, and a small conservatory stood to the left of the house.”

William Evans, in his biography of Mary Lincoln, documents several dinners that Henry Clay attended there while in Lexington (see Appendix A). There is no evidence as to whether Mary was in attendance at any of these events; however, she would have been aware of her father dining with Henry Clay. Katherine Helm wrote that at the age of thirteen Mary discussed her dislike for Andrew Jackson with Henry Clay at a dinner in the Todd Home.

The Todd Home had three public spaces consisting of a family sitting room, a formal parlor, and a dining room. This is where entertaining took place. When a visitor arrives at the home today, the family sitting room is on the right with the dining room also to the right behind the family sitting room. To the left of the entrance is the formal parlor which can be divided into two parlors where the men and women each used separate rooms. A visit to the Todd Home in 2012-2013 does not offer an exact replica of everything in the home; however, the inventory list from 1849 when Robert Todd passed away provides an idea of what was in the home. The museum displays period pieces (not necessarily those that belonged to Robert Todd). The museum also displays items from Mary and Abraham Lincoln’s life. This blending of collections provides a way for visitors to look at items Mary Lincoln owned as an adult and consider if the item had any connection to her childhood.

In the inventory of R. S. Todd dated September 12, 1849, a listing of “Four Rods with two white and four red Curtains fine ea. $5”. The family sitting room curtains, as shown in Figure 1, are a replica as those used by the Todds. A piece of the fabric was found and replicated

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47 Inventory of Estate of R. S. Todd deceased taken in his House in the City of Lexington KY on the 12th Sept. 1849.
for the curtains.\textsuperscript{48} The home inventory also included a Brussels carpet and a one rug listed for the parlors. The dining room of the Todd Home, at the time of Robert Todd’s death, had several sets of china, several dozen Damask napkins, sets of silverware, various types of glassware and decanters. The inventory also notes various pieces as “fancy.”\textsuperscript{49} Reading the list of items on the inventory, it is obvious that the Todd family made a considerable investment in these items. The large number of items of glassware and silverware, far in excess of the number of inhabitants, suggests their use in entertaining. Looking at the fireplaces in Figures 1-4, it is worth noting that each room had a fireplace that was as much a part of the décor as was used to keep the house warm. In the family room and the women’s section of the formal parlor are two Meissen porcelain pieces from Germany owned by Mary Lincoln. The only piece pictured is on the table in Figure 1 and is in the family sitting room showing a small bowl at the top with a little boy and girl at the base. In the section of the formal parlor where the women would gather, there is a china tea set (Figure 3). The location of many items is not indicated; however, the importance of education can be implied in that “One hundred & twenty six vols Family Library in Setting Room ea. 20c.” as well as books in the private spaces of the home.\textsuperscript{50}

Mary Todd was educated for ten years which was longer than most women and many men in the nineteenth century. Just prior to turning eight years old, Mary entered Dr. Ward’s school that educated both girls and boys. Dr. Ward was an Episcopalian rector who, according to Evans, based his academic studies “in the fundamentals – reading, writing, and arithmetic – and in discipline that was puritanical.”\textsuperscript{51} Evans wrote that the best Lexington families attended Ward’s and for six years Mary learned the foundation of her education. In 1832, Mary entered

\textsuperscript{48}Information given on the tour of the Mary Todd Lincoln Museum, April 11, 2012.
\textsuperscript{49}\textit{Inventory of Estate of R. S. Todd deceased taken in his House in the City of Lexington KY on the 12th Sept. 1849.}
\textsuperscript{50}\textit{Inventory of Estate of R. S. Todd deceased taken in his House in the City of Lexington KY on the 12th Sept. 1849.}
\textsuperscript{51}William A. Evans, \textit{Mrs. Abraham Lincoln A Study of Her Personality and Her Influence on Lincoln} (Carbondale: Southern Illinois Press, 2010), 84.
Madame Mentelle’s school, which cost $120 per year and was located at Rose Hill, across from Ashland. She lived at the boarding school during the week and came home on the weekends. Evans stated that “Madame Mentelle taught the girls society manners…dancing, singing, conversation, letter-writing – all - the social graces – were in the curriculum and made a part of the daily habit.” Mary learned and appreciated the lessons taught at Mentelles because later in life she was a prolific letter writer and enjoying dancing. Another aspect of the social graces Mentelle’s focused on was learning French and French literature. The French Mary learned at Mentelle’s benefitted her in later years when she was able to communicate with Prince Napoleon on visit to Washington during the Civil War. After years at Mentelle’s, Mary returned to Ward’s from 1837 to 1839. Whether Mary was a student or an apprentice teacher has been debated among scholars. There is not any information to determine what Mary did at Ward’s except that she was present at the school.

Integral parts of Mary’s education were the social graces that included proper attire. Since Mary’s mother died when she was six, her influence of proper attire probably came from various people. Her grandmother Elizabeth Parker who was the matriarch of the family was not happy when Mary’s father remarried Mary’s stepmother, Elizabeth “Betsy” Humphreys. Both Betsy and her step-grandmother Mary Brown Humphreys were women of society who would influence various social graces during Mary’s formative years. Elizabeth Parker, her grandmother on her mother’s side, known as Widow Parker, had purchased and lived next door to the original home where Mary was born. According to Baker, Widow Parker was “comfort[able] during her half century of widowhood.” The relationship between Mary and

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52 Clinton, *Mrs. Lincoln A Life*, 16-17.  
Widow Parker is described by Jean Baker as a “protector, giving to this granddaughter (and to none of the other Todd sisters) presents and small sums of money for clothing.”\(^{56}\) While Baker wrote that Widow Parker had other responsibilities which forced Mary to turn to her step-grandmother as a central character in her life. The fact that Mary was given money for clothing meant that it was, if not said, it was implied, that clothing was important. Although Mary and her step-mother did not have a warm relationship, Betsy Todd did have an influence on Mary and how clothing made a statement in society. Mary and her cousin Elizabeth wanted to wear hoopskirts; however, these were not allowed for girls their age. Therefore, the girls made their own hoopskirts out of willow reeds. When the girls attempted to leave the house unnoticed to go to church in their hoopskirts, Betsy caught them and made them change clothes, and, supposedly, repeated the story often to the horror of Mary.\(^{57}\) Mary has been described as loving fashion from a young age, and if she was continually humiliated by her step-mother for making a fashion faux pas, then this would have impacted her understanding on the importance of clothing as a member of middle and upper class society.

At some point growing up, Mary Todd began to comprehend the connection of consumerism, quality items and high society. In her hometown of Lexington, according to Baker, the newspapers ran advertisements about fashion and the city was home to “eight seamstresses, three mantua makers, [and] four milliners.”\(^{58}\) The clothing industry had an excellent market when in February 1824 a new cotton factory with yarn spun by William Oldham from England opened.\(^{59}\) Mary’s step-grandmother, Mary Brown Humphreys, had “Old World charm, [spoke]...

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\(^{58}\) Baker, *Mary Todd Lincoln*, 59. A mantua is a loose fitting garment worn especially in the 17\(^{th}\) and 18\(^{th}\) centuries.

\(^{59}\) Evans, *Mrs. Abraham Lincoln*, 97.
French fluently and [remained] stylish and fashionable, even at an advanced age.”⁶⁰ With Mary attending Mentelle’s and Mrs. Humphreys speaking French, the influence of French fashion and its importance could not have gone unnoticed.

**Ashland and White Hall**

Although the Todd family lived in a substantial home, Mary saw other, more extravagant homes that provided a foundation as to her understanding of how politicians lived. Katherine Helm, niece of Mary Todd, wrote about Mary having dinner at Ashland with Henry Clay, his wife and other guests (Figure 5).⁶¹ The boarding school Mary attended, administered by Monsieur and Madame Mentelle, was located near Ashland where the girls at Mentelle’s school would “act in French plays, dance in the parlor while Madame played the fiddle, and promenade down the Lilac Walk that led to Henry Clay’s Ashland.”⁶² Ashland is a large estate comprised of many buildings. When Ashland was built, it was one of the largest homes in Lexington. A visitor to Ashland today will see the footprint of Henry Clay’s original home; however, the building is new and was modernized throughout the years by various owners. When Ashland became a historical building, various furnishings of Henry Clay have been reclaimed and are on display.

Ashland was built for a large family and was different from other homes in the area because it was not dark and plain. When the home was rebuilt the original thirteen and half-foot ceilings were kept along with the extra tall door frames. As a person enters Ashland, the grand entrance is an octagonal shape with a study to the left. According to Ashland, “the Drawing Room, the most formal room of the house, is where guests gathered for conversation and music. Displayed here are Clay family pieces from different generations.”⁶³ In the dining room, the

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⁶²Baker, *Mary Todd Lincoln*, 44.  
elaborate furnishings and fine china, as shown in Figure 5, are similar in the type of table setting and atmosphere Mary would have been accustomed to in her home as shown in Figure 4. The dining room at Ashland also has a decorative fireplace like the one in the Todd Home.

Mary Todd was a friend of Mary Jane Warfield; therefore, it can be assumed that she was a guest at White Hall when her sister Elizabeth was a bridesmaid for Cassius Clay and Mary Jane Warfield (Figures 6, 7, 8). Cassius Clay was the son of General Green Clay and Sally Lewis. Green Clay was a first cousin to Henry Clay and at his death was considered one of the wealthiest men in Kentucky. When Cassius Clay inherited White Hall, he added onto the house giving it an Italian feeling. The types of furnishings are not shown from when Cassius and Mary Jane married; however, the Clay family was an upper class family so it can be assumed that at the wedding Mary would have seen china and furnishings representative of items in the Todd Home of either equal or possibly higher quality. White Hall is a much larger home than the Todd Home which can be observed in the size of the drawing room (Figure 8) and the dining room (Figure 7). The height of the ceilings is much higher than the Todd Home and the size of both of these rooms are much larger than the rooms in the Todd Home. Both of these rooms, like at Ashland and the Todd Home, have decorative fireplaces. The occasion of a wedding probably would have had the family using their finest china and glassware which Mary participated.

Mary Lincoln grew up in Lexington as part of its upper class. Her education and social connections rested on her father’s family, business, and politics. Because of her family status, Mary lived in a home where important people were entertained with books and items of fine

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64Helm, *The True Story of Mary, Wife of Lincoln*, 30. Clinton states, “Mary watched as her married sister, Elizabeth Todd Edwards, served as bridesmaid to Mary Jane Warfield as she walked down the aisle to marry Cassius Clay.” (Clinton, *Mrs. Lincoln A Life*, 30.) A source for Clinton’s statement is not given which is why it is not used in this paper; however, Baker quotes Cassius Clay in her book that Mary and Elizabeth would come with Mary Jane to secretly meet Cassius (Baker, *Mary Todd Lincoln*, 50). The fact that Mary was friends with Mary Jane, it can be assumed that she attended their wedding even though weddings were smaller events in 1832.
quality. In addition, Mary visited other homes with similar material items and witnessed how politicians gathered in each other’s homes. The understanding of how political entertaining occurred in private spaces provided Mary a foundation for her next stage of life as a wife in Springfield to an aspiring politician.

Mary Todd received more than a formal education in social mores in Lexington. She gained knowledge through personal experience having the opportunity to participate in social situations with political wives such as Lucretia Clay, wife of Henry Clay, and Sally Clay, wife of General Green Clay and mother of Cassius Clay. Observing events hosted by her father in their home and in events at other venues provided Mary knowledge of how the wife of a politician would be expected to maintain her household. This knowledge is what Mary carried with her as she traveled to Springfield to begin her search for a suitable husband with political ambitions.
Chapter 4

Springfield, Illinois

Governor Ninian Edwards was “the most influential man in Illinois” who had come to Illinois from Kentucky. His son, Ninian W. Edwards married Elizabeth Todd, oldest sister of Mary Todd, on February 29, 1832. According to William Evans, the newly married Elizabeth Edwards left Lexington for Springfield in 1833 as both the wife and hostess of her politically ambitious husband, but also the hostess of the Governor’s mansion although there are not any specific accounts in Mary Lincoln literature. In contrast to Lexington, Springfield had a population of less than 2,000 people, when Mary Todd made her first visit, and many of them had come to Springfield from Kentucky. The summer of 1837 saw the Capitol cornerstone being laid and wagons moving around town as well as to and from the Edwards home. The streets were unpaved and there was not a sewage system or public water supply. As Catherine Clinton wrote, Springfield had a “brick courthouse and market, the town held six churches (two Presbyterian, two Baptist, one Methodist, and one Episcopalian), an academy (Springfield High, with $200 tuition per year), four hotels, a large brick tavern and the town jail.” In addition, Clinton stated there were “twenty dry-goods stores, six grocers, four drugstores, two clothing stores, and…one bookstore” along with two newspapers and numerous lawyers.

Although there is not a description of the home of Ninian and Elizabeth Edwards, it is known that the home was a two-story brick home on what was known as Aristocracy Hill where

the elite families of Springfield lived.\textsuperscript{70} Mary moved to Springfield in 1839 to live with her sister Elizabeth and brother-in-law Ninian Edwards. One social gathering given by Elizabeth Todd Edwards was attended by over one hundred people as Mary Todd wrote to her friend Mercy Levering in December 1840.\textsuperscript{71} Since Mary Todd’s brother-in-law was a politician, these parties were another exposure Mary had to political entertaining in the sphere of private spaces. According to Helm, the Edwards family held a New Year’s Day celebration every year that included family and political friends such as Stephen Douglas and Abraham Lincoln.\textsuperscript{72} In Springfield, Mary met and married Abraham Lincoln on November 4, 1842.\textsuperscript{73} It was in Springfield where she began her duties as a politician’s wife and by the mid-1850s Mary Lincoln was hosting large receptions both for women in the neighborhood and large crowds in the private space of her home.\textsuperscript{74}

Following their wedding, Abraham and Mary Lincoln moved into the Globe Tavern. After their first son Robert Todd Lincoln was born, they moved to “a four-room frame cottage on South Fourth Street. The cottage has not survived, but in the pre-Civil war period it was standard housing for the families of Springfield’s clerks, artisans, and mechanics who could afford, like the Lincoln’s, a rent of $100 a year.”\textsuperscript{75} As a young couple, moving from the boarding house to a rental home was a step up socially because Mary could not entertain at the Globe Tavern. Although the Lincolns were connected to the Edwards as family, their inclusion in the political social circle was limited, if not excluded during their stay in the Globe Tavern.

\textsuperscript{70}Clinton, Mrs. Lincoln A Life, 44.
\textsuperscript{72}Helm, The True Story of Mary, Wife of Lincoln, 88-89.
\textsuperscript{73}Baker, Mary Todd Lincoln, 97.
\textsuperscript{74}Baker, Mary Todd Lincoln, 113.
\textsuperscript{75}Baker, Mary Todd Lincoln, 103.
The first, and only, home purchased by the Lincolns occurred after Mary Lincoln’s father visited Springfield following the birth of Robert Todd Lincoln. Robert Todd gave Mary a $25 gold piece and “deeded eighty acres of land in Illinois…[and] promised a yearly sum that amount to $1,100 before his death six years later.”76 This generosity by Robert Todd was not given to his other daughters. This assistance by Robert Todd allowed the Lincolns to purchase “a one-story five-room cottage with a loft, some outbuildings, and an eighth of an acre of land, at the corner of Eighth and Jackson.” The home was purchased from Episcopalian minister Rev. Charles Dresser for $1,200 and a piece of property worth $300.77 The financial aid given to the Lincolns provided them more than a home – it gave them a position in society which was necessary for Abraham’s career.

There is not a significant amount of information about what Mary Lincoln did during the early years of marriage to Abraham when they moved to their home. Although Mary had help at different times in Springfield, as a housewife during the mid-1800s, Mary would have been responsible for child rearing, cooking, cleaning, and sewing. It has been written by several historians that Mary was a baker and her white cake recipe was circulated among the family.78 According to Baker, Mary cooked “cheap local game, such as woodchucks, pheasants, and prairie chickens” as well as would “roast coffee, make calf’s-foot jelly, preserve fruit, and prepare cheese.” As a baker, Mary baked “puddings, cakes, candies and cookies.”79

The sale of property given to the Lincolns by Robert Todd, allowed Mary Lincoln to make improvements to their home in 1856. Mary spent $1,300 and had the upstairs completed making the home look like a “Greek Revival style, with four new bedrooms upstairs…and a back

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76Baker, Mary Todd Lincoln, 103.
77Baker, Mary Todd Lincoln, 103.
78Baker, Mary Todd Lincoln, 110-111; Clinton, Mrs. Lincoln A Life, 72.
79Baker, Mary Todd Lincoln, 111.
stairway.” (Figure 8) The first floor had a dining room, kitchen, hallway down the center with a
parlor on each side of the hall.\(^8^0\) The addition to their home allowed for more entertaining
options with the double parlor like the parlor she grew up with in Lexington. The formal parlor,
as shown in Figures 10 and 11, was a space the Lincolns used for entertaining and not where the
family spent time together. The family parlor, as shown in Figures 13 and 14, was where the
family gathered to play games and spend time together.

Historians agreed that the Lincolns hosted numerous dinners, teas and receptions.
Entertaining, according to Issac Arnold, was a regular occurrence in the Lincoln home where
people from out-of-town were welcome in their home. Dinners were served to a small group and
evening parties were open to larger groups. Arnold, as recorded by Baker, recalled a table
consisting of ‘rare Kentucky dishes and in season was loaded with venison, wild turkeys, prairie
chickens and quail and other game.’\(^8^1\) One type of party Mary hosted was her strawberry party.\(^8^2\)
According to Baker, she would serve “tea and cakes and strawberries in season.” In February
1857, Mary Lincoln wrote Emilie Todd Helm that she had recently hosted a party for 500 people,
but due to the weather and another party hosted by Colonel Warren only 300 attended.\(^8^3\) Mary
used her domestic skills to entertain large and small gatherings in their home.

Following Abraham Lincoln’s nomination and election as President, Mary Lincoln
experienced how private spaces and public spaces become blurred for the First Family. As Jean
Baker wrote, in 1860 the Republican National Committee traveled to Springfield where Mary
Lincoln hosted a political gathering for all the people who came to town which provided her the
opportunity to serve as a gracious hostess. This reception also served as the beginning of

\(^{8^0}\) Baker, *Mary Todd Lincoln*, 116.
\(^{8^1}\) Baker, *Mary Todd Lincoln*, 112.
\(^{8^2}\) Baker, *Mary Todd Lincoln*, 112.
\(^{8^3}\) Lincoln to Helm, February 16, 1857, 48.
conflict between her and John Nicolay, one of Abraham’s personal secretaries. The division between public and private entertaining was just beginning for Mary Lincoln as John Nicolay wrote that following the presidential nomination in Chicago, he came to the Lincolns’ home and “found that Mrs. L. had spread out a lunch with champagne and liquors &c. I tell you I made her hustle those liquors out of there mighty fast” from the reception. While Mary took charge of the entertaining in her private home, she quickly found out that as a First Lady her political entertaining was now subject to criticism and change from someone else.

Before the Lincolns left for Washington, Mary Lincoln hosted her first official reception as the wife of the President-elect in Springfield. The reception was held February 6, 1861, and family, friends and neighbors were greeted by both Abraham and Mary Lincoln from 7 p.m. until midnight. According to the Missouri Democrat, thousands of people came to the Lincoln home and Mary was wearing ‘a beautiful full train, white moiré-antique silk, with a small French lace collar.’ Refreshments, if any, served were not described; however, it is significant to note that Mary’s family was in attendance because they were not supporters of Abraham during the election. At this reception Mary would have been able to infer a social and political statement to her family that she and Abraham were as politically significant, if not more, than they had been in Springfield.

Although Mary Lincoln moved from the larger city of Lexington to the smaller town of Springfield, she used the skills she learned at home and in school to create a home where social and political entertaining occurred. After Mary and Abraham purchased their first home, they participated in the social aspect of politics by entertaining in their home by hosting receptions,

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84 Baker, Mary Todd Lincoln, 114.  
86 Donna McCreary, Fashionable First Lady The Victorian Wardrobe of Mary Lincoln (Charlestown, IN: Lincoln Presentations, 2007), 24-25.
teas and dinners. The political entertaining culminated in their Springfield home with their final reception before leaving for Washington to embark on their lives in the White House.
Chapter 5

Washington

When the capital of the United States moved from Philadelphia to Washington in 1801, the city was isolated and did not have the cosmopolitan amenities socialites would have expected. In 1800, socialite Margaret Bayard Smith came to Washington with her husband as a newlywed and a supporter of Thomas Jefferson. Many people came and went from Washington; however, as Catherine Allgor wrote, “Margaret Bayard Smith…was consistently there…by the 1840s a core of long-time residents made up a political and social elite in Washington…both her continued presence and social position assured Bayard Smith a front-row seat at all the events of the day.”87 When Congress was in session, the social elite following their evening meal would visit homes to “drink tea and spend the evening talking politics.”88 As early as 1789, Thomas Jefferson noted how political discussions were occurring in drawing rooms and levees of private homes which Jefferson felt was an elitist type of society. George Washington attempted to make himself available to all the people by hosting “an official weekly presidential reception, to be held on Tuesdays.” In addition, Martha Washington held her own levees on Fridays; however, these events were more informal, held in the dining room and included both men and women.89

Washington politics were entrenched in political entertaining to the point that when Varina and Jefferson Davis arrived in Washington, they noted how “groups of like-minded politicians and their families who took their meals together” which left a small window of opportunity for Varina to meet and discuss politics because her husband wanted to work rather

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88 Allgor, Parlor Politics, 9.
89 Allgor, Parlor Politics, 18-19.
than attend social events. Carol Berkin wrote how Varina realized Jefferson was making a
political mistake by not socializing with his colleagues who attended dinners, receptions and
parties. Later in Davis’s political career, he was considered “aloof and rigid” because he avoided
social activities in both Washington and Richmond. It was Varina who understood the
importance of interaction through social function to have a successful political career in
Washington.

The role and expectation of political wives in Washington in the 1860s varied according
to social and governmental protocol which limited the role of First Lady beyond being a
welcoming hostess and making limited decisions. Although Mary Lincoln had observed private
political entertaining in her father’s home and served as hostess in Springfield in her private
home, the protocol and demands of political entertaining in a public space were vastly different.
It can be assumed that Mary Lincoln as First Lady expected to take charge of social affairs and
serve as hostess of the highest political office in Washington. Upon arrival in Washington, Mary
Lincoln soon learned that White House protocol, which President Lincoln demanded would be
followed, impacted the duties Mary assumed she would have as First Lady. Conflict ensued
between Mary and John Nicolay when Mary attempted take charge outside her protocol role of
First Lady. In addition, Mary felt Washington society should call on her as First Lady; whereas,
Washington society expected her to call on them first. The strain of protocol and the expectations
from different people laid a foundation of tension between Washington society and the Lincolns.

The White House in 1861 was an open public building which made finding a balance
between private, personal space and public space a delicate balancing act not always

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90 Carol Berkins, Civil War Wives The Life & Times of Angelina Grimke Weld, Varina Howell Davis and Julia Dent
Grant (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2009), 123.
91 Berkins, Civil War Wives, 123.
92 The capital of the United States of America in 1860 was referred to as Washington City. For clarity purposes, I
will use the term Washington throughout this paper to refer to the capital currently named Washington, D.C.
accomplished with decorum. As Jean Baker wrote, “believing the White House their own property, the sovereign people enjoyed roving about its downstairs reception rooms, inspecting and sometimes snipping off material from the presidential curtains for souvenirs.” The White House was part of twenty-two wooded acres that included orchards, stables, gardens, outhouses, a conservatory and other buildings. When the Lincolns moved into the White House it had thirty-one rooms with “broken furniture, peeling wallpaper, and tawdry decorations unacceptable in a Springfield cottage.” The Red Room was where the Lincolns would receive private callers had furniture which was forty years old from the Madison era. For the amount of entertaining required by the Lincolns, Mary found “only ten matching place settings in the White House china collection.” Mary Lincoln was determined to have the White House, the home of the President of the United States, viewed as strong against the newly formed Confederacy. Mary traveled to New York several times to purchase carpets, china and crystal. The china, now known as the Lincoln China, has become one of the most used sets of china throughout history (Figure 15). On the first floor is the East Room which served as a drawing room; however, due to the war, soldiers used it as barracks.

Mary Lincoln excelled as a hostess in her Springfield home hosting dinners, receptions and teas. Her background and entertaining experience offered her, in theory, an eager opportunity to take charge of social engagements at the White House. What was unexpected by Mary Lincoln was the matter of protocol expected by Washington society and reluctantly followed by her husband which delegated preparations and a majority of the work for social engagement to President Lincoln’s secretary John Nicolay. Not only did Mary Lincoln lose one

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97 Clinton, *Mrs. Lincoln A Life*, 130.
of the domestic duties she enjoyed, but she lost it to a young man who was disrespectful to her.

It has been written that Abraham Lincoln considered Nicolay like a son; it could be argued that Nicolay used his position only for political gain. Nicolay’s personal diary referred to Lincoln as the “Ancient” and “Old Tyrant” which are not terms of endearment for a person who would have reciprocal feelings toward a man who considered you a son.

William Seward sent over protocol information from the State Department regarding the proper clothing requirements for Lincoln. Although he didn’t like it, Lincoln followed the protocol. Part of this protocol was the use of Lincoln’s secretary to take care of items such as invitations, flowers, etc. for White House events. According to Peter Schifando and J. Jonathan Joseph, the Lincoln White House followed a more restrictive set of protocol rules than modern administrations. The authors stated that men preceded women in the receiving lines, entry to the State Dining Room was done by diplomatic rank, to rise from the dining table before President Lincoln was considered rude, and carriages were lined up to pick up guests in order of rank.98

Another protocol that restricted Mary Lincoln involved the events she was not allowed to attend. As a woman who enjoyed socializing, as First Lady she was restricted from attending certain events outside the White House.99 A wedding was attended by her cousin Elizabeth Grimsley as the President’s escort which Mary probably expected would be her role. It was noted that there were dinners Mary was excluded from in which Nicolay and her cousin attended. How could Mary have not felt alienated from society as well as demoralized since Nicolay was attending functions and he demonizes her?

Moving to the White House was a transition for many First Ladies; however, the Civil War brought more intensive scrutiny on White House activities and the First Lady then previous

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administrations. Harriet Lane, the niece of President Buchanan, was the hostess of the White House and was endeared by Washington society just as Salmon Chase’s daughter, Kate Chase, was well liked and considered part of the Washington inner circle. As Catherine Allgor wrote, “urban societies familiar to the new Washingtonian used standards of money, breeding, family background, or personal character in determining who was to be included or shunned. In Washington City, merely official status entitled the holder of a particular office to the place in society assigned to that office.” As Peg Lamphier wrote:

> The exodus of southerners in 1861 created a social void filled by new elites like Mary Todd Lincoln, who may not have been popular but whose position as the First Lady indisputably made her the head of capital society. After Willie Lincoln’s death from typhoid fever in early 1862, the mourning Mrs. Lincoln may have remained the titular head of Washington society, but Kate reigned as its sovereign queen. In response to the rigors of war, social activities in the capital became increasingly frenetic, featuring more teas, receptions, and balls each successive years.

As noted by Lamphier, following the death of Willie Lincoln, social activities at the White House changed due to mourning by Abraham and Mary Lincoln. Because of the death of Willie, the social activities at the White House will only focus on events prior to his death. Although details of each party are not available, the date of noted events and what Mary wore is given in Appendix A.

> The White House Inauguration took place on March 4, 1861. According to Catherine Clinton, “the invitational inaugural ball was held in a large tent dubbed the White Muslin Palace of Aladdin, where five thousand were on hand to inspect and rub shoulders with the First Couple.” Mary wore a blue silk dress and jewelry made of diamonds and pearls.

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100 Allgor, *Parlor Politics*, 68.
101 Peg A. Lamphier, *Kate Chase and William Sprague Politics and Gender in a Civil War Marriage* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2003), 49.
102 Clinton, *Mrs. Lincoln A Life*, 125.
In June of 1861 the Lincoln’s hosted a diplomatic dinner for the diplomatic corps and several members of his cabinet. According to the Chicago Tribune “it was in many respects the most brilliant affair of the sort that has ever taken place at the Executive Mansion.” The article continued to state that Mary Lincoln took out the artificial flowers and the Blue Room was decorated with fresh flowers as well as wreaths on the chandeliers from the conservatory on the grounds. The dinner served was not mentioned; however, it was stated that it was served in “good taste and good judgment” by Mary. This dinner hosted Ministers from eleven different countries including many of their wives, members of the military and the cabinet. It is impossible to know how much Mary was involved in the planning although she is given credit for the flowers and the type of service according to the newspaper. The fact that Mary could garner a positive response from the Chicago Tribune, one of her harshest critics, showed that she knew how to perform as a hostess in a political entertaining situation.103

The dinner party for Prince Napoleon held August 3, 1861, was held for twenty-six people who were received in the parlor decorated with fresh flowers and then moved into the dining room. The tables in the dining room were decorated with fresh cut flowers in crystal vases with “the coat of arms of the United States” on them. The New York Herald reported that this state dinner was the most tasteful in the last ten years. For this two hour dinner, the newspaper also reported that other state dinners had been prepared by restaurants, but Mr. Lincoln insisted that the food be prepared at the White House. At this dinner the Marine Band played and Mary wore a white dress, was seated next to the Prince and spoke French.104 Mary showed her ability to perform the role of hostess as reported by the positive reporting of this state dinner.

104“The President’s Dinner Party,” The New York Herald, August 5, 1861; Clinton, Mrs. Lincoln A Life, 200.
Although Mary Lincoln had witnessed political entertaining while she was a young girl and she was an elegant politician’s wife in Springfield, she was unable to overcome Washington society that judged her and Abraham. Mary was subjected to rumors that she was a Confederate spy, was beat by Abraham when he was drunk, did not love her husband and was going to elope with a Russian. Mary was considered heartless toward the troops because of the dinners and balls she gave during the war.\textsuperscript{105} Mary had her moments of excess with regard to shopping and decorating the White House; however, her understanding of her role as First Lady was to present the White House as a proper home for the President. Mary also took her role as hostess seriously by taking an interest in who was invited to events and changing certain events since she was limited in what she was able to control in the public space. Mary’s interest in political entertaining was part of her understanding of her duty as a political wife.

Mary Lincoln was raised in a political home where she was given a formal education and would have had more opportunities than most women of her era. If Mary had wanted to travel, further her education or become a political activist, she would have been in a better position than most women. As a well-read, educated woman, Mary would have been aware of women such as Mary Livermore, a journalist and women’s rights activist; Elizabeth Cady Stanton, a social activist, abolitionist, and women’s rights activist; and Myra Bradwell, a publisher, political activist and attorney. If Mary Lincoln had wanted to be involved in politics, she would have been aware of women she could have emulated. In conclusion, Mary Lincoln had the opportunity to choose the course of her life and she chose to move from Lexington to Springfield. She also chose to marry a man of her choosing rather than a man her family would have picked for her. She also chose to be a wife and mother. Mary Lincoln embraced her role as a political wife and

\textsuperscript{105} William A. Evans, \textit{Mrs. Abraham Lincoln A Study of Her Personality and Her Influence on Lincoln} (Carbondale: Southern Illinois Press, 2010), 183.
mother using her knowledge of how a political wife ran her household to be the best she could be under the circumstances of death and war.
Appendix A

Social Engagements

Lexington, Kentucky

Evans writes that Lexington did not have a society column; however, various social functions were noted in the local papers which provide evidence that Robert S. Todd, as a prominent member of society, had opportunities to attend various functions.

July 13, 1820 ‘A public dinner for Mr. Clay.’

May 25, 1825 ‘A sumptuous dinner was served Henry Clay at Maysville, at which Lafayette was toasted.’

July 4, 1829 ‘Dinner to Henry Clay ‘by citizens of Lexington and old friends.’’

February 29, 1832 ‘Married in this city, Ninian W. Edwards, of Illinois, to Miss Elizabeth Todd, daughter of Robert Todd, Esqr.’

October 23, 1837 ‘Marriage of Thomas H. Clay to Miss Mary Mentelle.’

June 6, 1828 The Kentucky Gazette reported that Henry Clay went to Philadelphia for medical reasons, but also had dinner with friends.

July 11, 1835 Dinner for Gov. Poindexter in Lexington

Springfield, Illinois

February 16, 1857 The party for 500 people in which 300 showed up.

1860 Republican National Committee Nomination Party

February 6, 1861 Reception for friends and family before leaving Springfield

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107 “Mr. Clay’s Baltimore Speech,” Kentucky Gazette, June 6, 1828.


**White House**

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<tr>
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<td>March 8, 1861</td>
<td>First White House Reception</td>
<td>Antique Rose Watered Silk Gown</td>
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<td>May 9, 1861</td>
<td>Military Reception</td>
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<td>June 1861</td>
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<td>August 3, 1861</td>
<td>Prince Napoleon Reception</td>
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<td>White House Reception</td>
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Bibliography

Abraham and Mary Lincoln


Culture and Society


