

# The Lincolns—A Kentucky Family



By ELMO SCOTT WATSON

**T**HERE is many a paradox in American history, but none is more curious than this: In the years of 1861 to 1865, when the North was arrayed against the South, a Southerner was the commander in chief of the Northern forces. For Abraham Lincoln was a native of a Southern state, Kentucky. More than that, his wife was a Southerner, and that fact undoubtedly not only profoundly influenced his career but it shaped American history as well.

There is an "if" in American history, too, and one of the most interesting is this: If Abraham Lincoln had not married Mary Todd of Lexington, Ky., it is possible that he would never have been President of the United States, and thereby be called upon to lead the armed strength of the nation against his own people. When the Republican party in 1860 was considering possible candidates for the Presidential nomination, their choice upon Lincoln depended partly upon the fact that he was a conservative in regard to the "dominant question" of slavery. This conservatism brought to him the powerful support of the Border states' delegates who believed that he possessed a sympathetic understanding of their problem and could deal with it better than any other candidate before the convention.

He had this sympathetic understanding because his marriage to Mary Todd gave him an opportunity to see both sides of the question. It was in Lexington, in the heart of the largest slave-holding section of Kentucky, that Lincoln saw at close range the more favorable patriarchal elements of the institution. His father-in-law owned slaves, cared for them well and made a resolution, which he always kept, never to sell a slave and thus risk bringing suffering to a human being who had a claim, through faithful service, to his affection. In the home of the Todds and of their friends he saw negro slaves, well-fed, well-housed and kindly treated—the institution of slavery at its best.

But there in the chivalrous and romantic Blue Grass region, Lincoln also saw slavery at its worst. Some of the masters there abused their slaves; only a short distance from where Mary Todd was born stood a notorious slave prison; and in Chesapeake, the market square of Lexington, scarcely a day passed without seeing the public sale of black men and women.

More than that, in the town of Lexington there was a miniature reproduction of the tempest which was rocking the nation—the slavery dispute. It was on the borderland and in it were pro-slavery and anti-slavery factions, both strong. The leader of the most radical pro-slavery men was Robert Wickliffe, father of two of Mary Todd's girlhood chums and the husband of her father's cousin. Leaders among the anti-slavery men were Robert J. Breckenridge and Cassius M. Clay, both personal and political friends of his father-in-law. So when Lincoln made his famous "house-divided-against-itself" speech, he could have pointed to the homes of dozens of families in or near Lexington, Ky., as concrete examples of his symbol.

It is such facts as these that William H. Townsend, a citizen of Lexington, has brought out in an important study of Lincoln—the book, "Lincoln and His Wife's Home Town," published recently by the Bobbs-Merrill company. In the preface Mr. Townsend says: "The name of Abraham Lincoln is forever associated with slavery in the United States. Biographers have traced the gradual development of Lincoln's views on the subject from his first public utterance in the Illinois legislature down to the Emancipation Proclamation twenty-five years later.

1. Mary Todd Lincoln. From a photograph taken during the early part of Lincoln's administration.  
2. Lincoln in 1848. From an old daguerrotype, the earliest known portrait of Lincoln.  
3. Mary Ann Todd. A portrait made about the time of her marriage to Lincoln.

The sources, however, from which his convictions on the great issue largely sprung, have not been hitherto revealed. It is the purpose of this book to show Lincoln's personal contacts with slavery which gave him a first-hand knowledge of the "peculiar institution" that he could have acquired in no other way.

Lincoln and Mary Todd were married in 1842 and soon afterwards Lincoln was elected to congress, his first appearance upon the national stage, a position which brought him into more direct contact with the all-important question was so soon to be shaking the nation to its depths. Of the importance to Lincoln's political future of his marriage, Mr. Townsend writes: "So it happened that the little wife who went to live with Lincoln at the modest Globe Tavern (in Washington), through her girlhood experiences in Lexington, was peculiarly fitted to share in the great task which would make the man she married immortal. She had been taught every phase of the great question, which finally came to be nearest his heart, by the very man whom her husband regarded with the most admiration (Henry Clay).

"It may have been that gentle Ann Rutledge, or portly, complacent Mary Owens, or youthful, light-hearted Sarah Rickard would have endowed the tall Sycamore of the Sangamon with a richer measure of marital bliss, but never did a young wife bring to a husband, interested in statecraft and anxious for perfection, such wealth of first-hand information on a grave, moral and political subject—such fruits of intimate association with great public men of her day as did Mary Todd to Abraham Lincoln."

One of these great public men was John C. Breckenridge, a childhood friend of Mary Todd Lincoln in Lexington, later a United States senator, vice president when Buchanan was President and the candidate of the pro-slavery Democrats in the fateful campaign of 1860. One of the most dramatic incidents in Mr. Townsend's book is the story of how it fell to the lot of this friend of Mary Todd's girlhood to declare the election of her husband to the Presidency. He tells the story as follows:

On February 13, 1861, the two houses of congress met in joint session to count the electoral votes for President of the United States. . . . For days rumors had flown thick and fast that Vice President Breckenridge would refuse to announce the election of Lincoln and thus give the signal for the seizure of Washington by the overwhelming number of southern sympathizers within its gates. General Scott had directed that no person should be admitted to the Capitol building except senators, representatives, government employees and those who had tickets signed by the speaker of the house or the presiding officer of the senate. Armed

guards were stationed at every entrance to enforce this order.

Shortly after noon the senators filed into the house chamber, and took their seats in a semicircle arranged for them in front of the speaker's desk. The presiding officer was conducted to his chair, and tells took their places at the clerk's table. Vice President Breckenridge then arose and in a calm, firm voice, announced that the two houses were assembled to count the electoral votes for President and Vice President of the United States.

"It is my duty," he said, "to open the certificates of election in the presence of the houses, and I now proceed to the performance of that duty."

No one knew the gravity of the occasion better than the chairman. None realized more than he that fully three-fourths of those who sat beneath the vaulted dome were armed to the teeth, and that the slightest spark might touch off a shocking conflagration. But those who expected John C. Breckenridge to stultify his high office by a conspiracy to overthrow the government did not know the man. Firmly believing the triumph of the Republican party to be a menace to the South, he would shortly return his commission as senator to his constituents in Kentucky, forsaking fame and fortune under the Stars and Bars. But today he was presiding officer of the federal senate, and Jupiter never ruled a council of Olympus with a firmer hand.

A southern member arose, but the chairman anticipated him. "Except questions of order, no motions can be entertained," he declared.

The senator stated that he wished to raise a point of order. "Is the count of the electoral vote to proceed under menace?" he shouted. "Shall members be required to perform a Constitutional duty before the Janizaries of General Scott are withdrawn from the hall?"

"The point of order is not sustained," ruled Breckenridge emphatically, as he directed the count to proceed.

Slowly, one after another, the long sealed envelopes containing the votes of the various states were opened. "Maine for Lincoln" was followed by a slight ripple of applause. "South Carolina for Breckenridge" was lost in an outburst of hand-clapping, quickly and sternly suppressed by the presiding officer. Then, in a breathless silence and with profound attention on the part of all present, John C. Breckenridge arose from his seat, standing erect, the most dignified and imposing person in that presence.

"Abraham Lincoln," he announced with a distinctness that carried his mellow voice to the most distant corner of the gallery, "having received a majority of the whole number of electoral votes, is duly elected President of the United States for the four years beginning on the fourth of March, 1861."

How the Civil war touched personally this southern family, the Lincolns, who occupied the northern White House during those four eventful years, is shown in another incident told by Mr. Townsend. Mary Todd had a half-sister named Emille, and she married Ben Hardin Helm, a Lexington boy who was graduated from West Point shortly before the opening of the Civil war and cast his fortunes with the Confederacy.

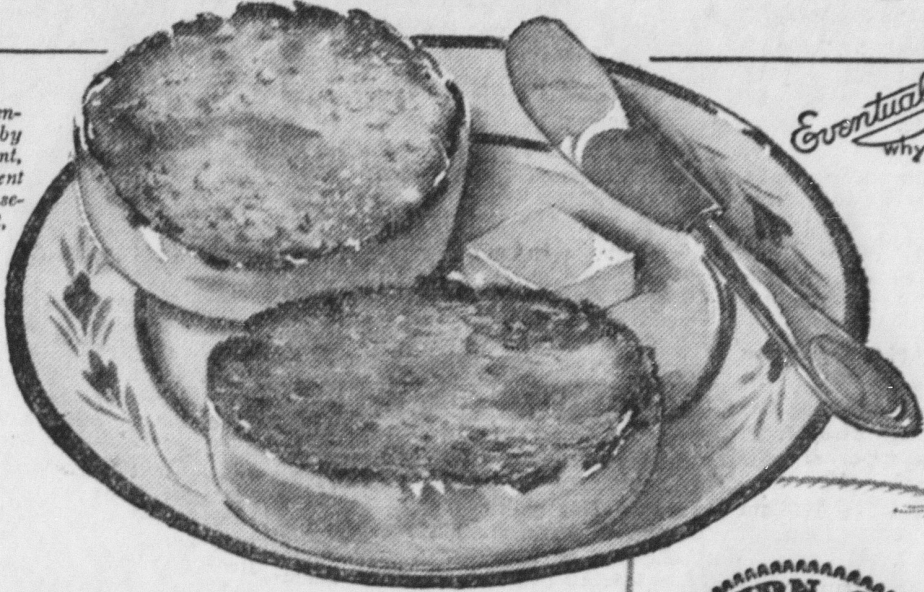
The aftermath is told in these words of Judge David Davis:

"I never saw Mr. Lincoln more moved than when he heard of the death of his young brother-in-law, Ben Hardin Helm, only thirty-two years old, at Chickamauga. I called to see him about four o'clock on the 23d of September. I found him in the greatest grief. 'Davis,' said he, 'I feel as David of old did when he was told of the death of Absalom. I saw how grief-stricken he was, so I closed the door and left him alone.'"

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