

Was Mary Todd Lincoln Mentally Ill?

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The one thing everyone seems to know about Abraham Lincoln's wife is that she suffered from mental illness. Rumors spread through Civil War era Washington that the Mrs. Lincoln was insane, and her reputation for mental instability persists to the present day.

But are those rumors even true?

The simple answer is that we don't know with any medical certainty. She was never diagnosed by anyone with a modern understanding of psychiatry. However, ample evidence exists of Mary Lincoln's eccentric behavior, which, in her own day, was generally attributed to "madness" or "insanity."

Her marriage to Abraham Lincoln often appeared difficult or troubled, and there were incidents of Lincoln gently complaining to others about things she had said or done.

It is true that Mary Lincoln's actions, as reported by newspapers, often invited criticism from the public. She was known to spend money extravagantly, and she was often ridiculed for perceived haughtiness. And, public perception of her was greatly influenced by the fact that she was actually put on trial in Chicago, a decade after Lincoln's assassination, and judged to be insane.

She was placed in an institution for three months, though she was able to bring legal action and reverse the court's decision. From today's vantage point, it's honestly impossible to assess her true mental condition. It has often been pointed out that traits she exhibited may have simply indicated eccentric behavior, poor judgment, or the effects of a very stressful life, not actual mental illness.

The Personality of Mary Todd Lincoln

There are many accounts of Mary Todd Lincoln having been difficult to deal with, exhibiting personality traits that, in today's world, would probably be called "a sense of entitlement."

She had grown up the daughter of a prosperous Kentucky banker and received a very good education. And after moving to Springfield, Illinois, where she met Abraham Lincoln, she was often perceived as a snob.

Her friendship and eventual romance with Lincoln seemed nearly inexplicable, as he came from very humble circumstances.

By most accounts, she exerted a civilizing influence on Lincoln, teaching him proper manners, and essentially making him into a more polite and cultured person than might be expected from his frontier roots. But their marriage, according to some accounts, had problems.

In one story told by those who had known them in Illinois, the Lincolns were at home one night and Mary asked her husband to add logs to the fire. He was reading, and didn't do what she asked

fast enough. She reportedly became angry enough to toss a piece of firewood at him, striking him in the face, which led to him appearing in public the next day with a bandage on his nose.

There are other stories about her showing flashes of anger, one time even chasing him up the street outside the house after an argument. But the stories about her anger were often told by those who did not care for her, including Lincoln's longtime law partner, William Herndon.

One very public display of Mary Lincoln's temper occurred in March 1865, when the Lincolns had traveled to Virginia for a military review near the end of the Civil War. Mary Lincoln became offended by the youthful wife of a Union general and became enraged. As Union officers looked on, Mary Lincoln berated her husband, who stoically tried to calm her.

Stress Endured as Lincoln's Wife

Marriage to Abraham Lincoln could not have been easy. During much of their marriage, Lincoln was focused on his law practice, which often meant he was "riding the circuit," leaving home for stretches of time to practice law in various towns around Illinois.

Mary was at home in Springfield, raising their boys. So their marriage probably had some amount of stress.

And tragedy struck the Lincoln family early, when their second son, Eddie, died at the age of three in 1850. (They had four sons, Robert, Eddie, Willie, and Tad.)

When Lincoln became more prominent as a politician, especially at the time of the Lincoln-Douglas Debates, or following the landmark speech at Cooper Union, the fame that came with success became problematic.

Mary Lincoln's penchant for extravagant shopping became an issue even before his inauguration. And after the Civil War began, and many Americans were facing grave problems, her shopping jaunts to New York City were viewed as scandalous.

When Willie Lincoln, age 11, died in the White House in early 1862, Mary Lincoln went into a profound and exaggerated period of mourning. At one point Lincoln supposedly told her that if she didn't snap out of it she would have to be put in an asylum.

Mary Lincoln's dabbling with spiritualism became more pronounced after Willie's death, and she held séances in the White House, apparently in an attempt to contact her dead son's spirit. Lincoln indulged her interest, but some people viewed it as a sign of insanity.

The Insanity Trial

The assassination of Lincoln devastated his wife, which was hardly surprising. She had been sitting next to him at Ford's Theatre when John Wilkes Booth came up behind them and shot Lincoln in the back of the head. In the period following her husband's murder she was inconsolable. She closeted herself in the White House for weeks, and created an awkward situation as the new president, Andrew Johnson could not move in. In the following years she never seemed to recover from the trauma.

For years after Lincoln's death she dressed in widow's black. But she received little sympathy from the American public, as her free spending ways continued. She was known to buy dresses and other items she didn't need, and bad publicity followed her. A scheme to sell valuable dresses and furs fell through and created public embarrassment.

Abraham Lincoln had indulged his wife's behavior, but their oldest son, Robert Todd Lincoln, did not share his father's patience. Offended by what he considered his mother's embarrassing behavior, he arranged to have her put on trial and charged with being insane.

Mary Todd Lincoln was convicted in a peculiar trial held in Chicago on May 19, 1875, a little more than ten years after her husband's death. After being surprised at her residence that morning by two detectives she was hurried off to court. She was given no opportunity to prepare any defense.

Following testimony about her behavior from various witnesses, the jury concluded "Mary Lincoln is insane, and is a fit person to be in a hospital for the insane."

After three months in a sanitarium in Illinois, she was released. And in court actions a year later she successfully had the judgment against her reversed. But she never really recovered from the stigma of her own son instigating a trial at which she was declared insane.

Mary Todd Lincoln spent the final years of her life as a virtual recluse. She seldom left the house where she lived in Springfield, Illinois, and died on July 16, 1882.