Acts of Remembrance: 
Mary Todd Lincoln and 
Her Husband’s Memory

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When Abraham Lincoln fell victim to an assassin’s bullet in April 1865, his wife found her world turned upside down. The assassination transformed Mary Todd Lincoln from the first lady of the United States into the first widow of a slain U.S. president. Mrs. Lincoln was devastated; her husband had been the center of her emotional life since their wedding in 1842. However, the heavy burden of grief did not completely shatter her spirit. Regarding herself as the rightful guardian of President Lincoln’s memory, she found the strength to defend her slain husband’s image through private letters, though she seldom took public stands. She protected his wishes concerning a final resting place and monitored memorial efforts. In addition, Mrs. Lincoln tried to use the nation’s collective memory of the martyred sixteenth president for her own financial benefit, seeking money from Congress, Republican politicians, and wealthy citizens to acknowledge President Lincoln’s service to his country and the many personal favors he had performed. Mrs. Lincoln’s efforts to control and capitalize on her husband’s collective memory paralleled those of other prominent widows of her day. Because of her less favorable public image, less visible actions, and greater competition from others associated with her husband, Mrs. Lincoln’s endeavors proved less successful than those of the other widows. Nevertheless, the former first lady did achieve some of her goals.

Historian David W. Blight has defined collective memory as an image of the past that a group or groups will construct “for self-understanding and to win power in an ever-changing present.” Blight states that collective memory, which is often linked with patriotism, becomes integral to identity and may be contested. In the case of Abraham Lincoln, Mary Lincoln sought to capitalize on the patriotic components of the collective memory surrounding the martyred president. Furthermore, she conceived of her
identity as inextricably intertwined with her husband’s, therefore entitling her to a place alongside him in collective memory. Mary Lincoln’s vision of her husband competed with those promoted by other individuals and groups, such as William H. Herndon and the Springfield-based National Lincoln Monument Association. Her words and actions reveal much about her self-understanding and efforts to win power for herself and for her concept of her husband’s memory.1

After Lincoln’s assassination, his widow buried herself in mourning garb for the rest of her life. Although many Victorians observed long, ritualized mourning periods, Mrs. Lincoln’s more than seventeen years in black far exceeded the two-and-a-half-year custom for widows. She would not let herself, or the public, forget her status or that of her husband. In the words of historian Jean H. Baker, “She was not just any widow; she was Abraham Lincoln’s survivor.” Her grief was no doubt sincere, but she took it to such extremes that others found it difficult to empathize with her. Her letters melodramatically and repeatedly recalled her great loss and pain. For example, Mrs. Lincoln implied that she suffered more severely than the numerous other widows and orphans of the Civil War era, writing, “As you may suppose, no family ever felt their bereavement, more than we do. My heart is indeed broken, and without my beloved husband, I do not wish to live. Life, is indeed a heavy burden, & I do not care how soon, I am called hence.” Nearly five years later, she wrote to a female friend, “Your life [is] so filled with love and happiness, whilst I alas am but a weary exile. Without my beloved husband’s presence, the world is filled with gloom and dreariness for me.” Clearly, Mrs. Lincoln found it difficult to lift the shroud of memory and move on with her life, and she almost seemed to resent that other people could move on with theirs. She continually reminded others of the great man whom she and the world had lost.2

For the remainder of her life Mrs. Lincoln claimed to long for privacy. But she took a number of actions that kept her in the

public eye. One very public situation involved Abraham Lincoln’s resting place, perhaps the ultimate symbol of memory. While the president’s widow lay prostrate with grief in the White House for five weeks, too upset to plan—or even attend—the funeral, a group of prominent men in Springfield, Illinois, took steps to have the fallen president buried in the center of that city where he had risen to fame. Unknown to Mrs. Lincoln, the plan had the approval of the Lincolns’ eldest son, Robert, and one of Mrs. Lincoln’s cousins. However, the widow insisted that during a conversation shortly before his assassination, her husband had expressed the desire to be buried in a quiet rural cemetery. Furthermore, the Springfield group’s plans would prevent the burial of Mrs. Lincoln or their children alongside him. And—although this may have been the furthest thing from Mrs. Lincoln’s mind—others pointed out that a “man of the people” such as Abraham Lincoln belonged in a homey country cemetery, surrounded by his old neighbors, rather than a solitary tomb in the middle of a crowded and dirty city.  

When she learned of the monument association’s plan, Mrs. Lincoln found the strength amid her crushing bereavement to order a halt to construction of the nearly completed vault. She saw it as her sacred duty to carry out her husband’s last wishes. Her response outraged many in Springfield, who cherished Abraham Lincoln as their own and wanted him laid to rest in grand style. The former first lady, however, described their plans as “ostentatious.” The association conceded to the president’s burial in Oak Ridge Cemetery, which then lay in the suburbs, but the group planned a separate monument for the central-city site. This idea angered Mrs. Lincoln, too, and she threatened to move her husband’s body to Chicago or Washington, D.C., if plans for a separate monument went forward. Jesse W. Fell, a longtime Lincoln political associate, wrote to the monument association that in the opinion of many people, Lincoln’s body and the monument belonged together, and divorcing them would constitute an insult. Mrs. Lincoln seemed to share his opinion, writing to Illinois Governor Richard J. Oglesby, who presided over the association, “My wish to have the Monument, placed over my Husband’s remains, will meet the approval of the whole civi-


4. Randall, *Biography of a Marriage*, 347–48; Van Der Heuvel, *Crowns of Thorns,
lized world.” The first lady’s threats to move the president’s body elsewhere confused the public, making it difficult for the association to collect donations. In the end, the association yielded to Mrs. Lincoln’s demands, and today the majestic monument guards the Lincoln family remains at Oak Ridge Cemetery.  

As work progressed on the monument, Mrs. Lincoln maintained a keen interest. In an 1866 letter, she expressed concern that the Springfield monument association might be mishandling public contributions. She occasionally corresponded with committee member Jesse K. Dubois, seeking updates on the design. She also asked her cousin John Todd Stuart for progress reports, trusting him to ensure that the monument association upheld her wishes. In 1871, while touring Europe, Mrs. Lincoln visited the Florence, Italy, studio of sculptor Larkin Mead, who had won the right to undertake the monument’s design. The former first lady also paid at least two visits to Oak Ridge Cemetery to view the work as it took shape. Understandably, this prominent memorial became a matter of great concern, and she hoped the final product would stand as a fitting monument to President Lincoln’s greatness.  

Mrs. Lincoln’s battle with Springfield dignitaries partly explains why she did not soon return to that city after her husband’s death. Other reasons included the haunting memories associated with the Lincolns’ former home, and her husband’s possible wish to live elsewhere after completing his presidential term. However, it seems that Mrs. Lincoln could not bear to sell the Springfield house, although she could not afford to maintain another because of tremendous personal debts, which stemmed from her penchant for shopping and the unlimited credit that merchants extended to the first lady, only to revoke it after she lost that title. She lived in a

182; Turner and Turner, Life and Letters, 240; Mary Todd Lincoln to Simon Cameron, April 6, 1866, transcript, vertical file, Illinois State Historical Library, Springfield, Ill.; Randall, Biography of a Marriage, 348; Van Der Heuvel, Crowns of Thorns, 182; Jesse W. Fell to S. M. Cullom, June 1, 1865, Hatch Papers; Mary Todd Lincoln to Richard J. Oglesby, June 11, 1865, in Turner and Turner, Life and Letters, 245; Jesse W. Fell to S. M. Cullom, June 1, 1865, Hatch papers; vote tally showing that on June 14, 1865, the monument association accepted Mrs. Lincoln’s demands by a vote of 8–7, Hatch Papers.  


6. Van Der Heuvel, Crowns of Thorns, 184, 187; Randall, Biography of a Marriage,
succession of boardinghouses, initially in Chicago, where Abraham
Lincoln was nominated for the presidency in 1860 and where, she
claimed, he had considered practicing law after his term ended. In
her letters, Mrs. Lincoln lamented the meager boardinghouse ex-
istence that the widow of the idolized Abraham Lincoln endured.
She denounced the American public for lacking gratitude toward a
heroic and martyred president. Mrs. Lincoln wrote in 1867, “I feel
assured his watchful, loving eyes are always watching over us, and
he is fully aware of the wrong and injustice permitted his family
by a country he lost his life in protecting.”

Mrs. Lincoln expressed particular anger toward Republican
politicians who had achieved wealth and prominence in President
Lincoln’s administration. She believed that they should save her
from her financial troubles, since they owed much of their suc-
cess to her husband. In an era when married women were seen as
little more than extensions of their husbands, she considered these
Republicans indebted to her as well. That attitude was evident at
least as far back as 1864, when she reportedly told her friend and
dressmaker Elizabeth Keckley: “The Republican politicians must
pay my debts. Hundreds of them are getting immensely rich off the
patronage of my husband, and it is but fair that they should help
me out of my embarrassment. I will make a demand of them, and
when I tell them the facts they cannot refuse to advance whatever
money I require.” Despite Mrs. Lincoln’s 1864 strategy, she still
faced thousands of dollars in debts at the time of her husband’s
assassination.

It is understandable that Mrs. Lincoln believed she deserved
special treatment and gratitude from the American public, and
especially from certain Republican politicians. After all, her hus-
bond had paid the ultimate price for the nation as a whole and
had enriched these Republicans in particular. In his absence, the
debts owed President Lincoln naturally seemed to transfer to his
widow, especially in this age when a married woman’s identity,
for all intents and purposes, fused with her husband’s. Moreover,
Mary Lincoln was the mother of the Great Emancipator’s children
in addition to his former companion, comforter, and political advi-

348. Mrs. Lincoln briefly purchased a house in Chicago in the 1860s, but she could
not afford to maintain it (see Note 20); Ross, The President’s Wife, 250; Mary Todd
Lincoln to Elizabeth Keckley, November 15, 1867, in Elizabeth Keckley, Behind the
8. Baker, Mary Todd Lincoln, 262; Merrill Peterson, Lincoln in American Memory
(New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 50; Van Der Heuvel, Crowns of Thorns,
Should not all this count for something?

Furthermore, during this time period, widows of great men commonly received financial support from politicians and public fund drives. One example that Mrs. Lincoln witnessed (with some envy) involved the family of Lincoln’s secretary of war, Edwin M. Stanton. In addition, living heroes, such as General Ulysses S. Grant, enjoyed rich rewards. But no such rewards honored Abraham Lincoln, though in Mrs. Lincoln’s opinion, the slain president had been the greatest hero of all.

Toward the end of 1865, feeling financially desperate as well as entitled, Mrs. Lincoln lobbied Congress for President’s Lincoln’s remaining salary for his entire four-year term, an amount totaling nearly $100,000. However, on December 21, 1865, Congress followed the precedent set when William Henry Harrison and Zachary Taylor died in office, and the widow received only the remainder of one year’s salary: about $22,000. Mrs. Lincoln reacted with bitter disappointment, insulted that the great martyr was placed on a par with two presidents who had died of illness after much shorter periods in office. Shortly before the vote, Mrs. Lincoln had written to a congressman that those urging “the Harrison precedent” were “false friends” because “it would be an improper example—Perhaps, never in history will such a case, again occur as ours—therefore there is no parallel—to our case.”

After the vote, Mrs. Lincoln wrote to the treasurer of a fund for her assistance that “in return for the sacrifices my great and noble husband made, both in his life and in his death the paltry first year’s salary is offered us; under the circumstances, such injustice has been done us as calls the blush to any true, loyal heart.” Mrs. Lincoln later declared to Keckley: “If Congress, or the Nation, had given me the four years’ salary, I should have been able to live as the widow of the great President Lincoln should, with sufficient means to give liberally to all benevolent objects, and at my death should have left at least half of it to the freedmen, for the liberty of whom his precious sacred life was sacrificed.” She added that $22,000 was a “petty sum…an insufficient return for Congress to make me, and allowed to its meagerness by men who traduced and vilified the loved wife of the great man who made them, and


9. Mary Todd Lincoln to Benjamin B. Sherman, December 26, 1865, in Turner and Turner, Life and Letters, 313; Mary Todd Lincoln to Elizabeth Keckley, November 15, 1867, in Keckley, Behind the Scenes, 349, 352.
from whom they amassed great fortunes—for [Thurlow] Weed, and [William] Seward, and [New York Times editor Henry J.] R[aymond] did this last. And yet, all this was permitted by an American people, who owed their remaining a nation to my husband!”

Mrs. Lincoln felt that she had been duped out of her just deserts by politicians and a public who failed to appreciate her status as not just the widow of a great man, but his “loved” widow. She believed this status entitled her to respect as well as compensation.

Mrs. Lincoln had enlisted her son’s former tutor, Alexander Williamson, to try to influence members of Congress on the salary question. She also directed him to settle her debts and seek donations from wealthy men such as William B. Astor and Cornelius Vanderbilt. Her numerous, forceful letters to Williamson—sixty-four in two years—included minute details about whom he should talk to, whom he should avoid, and what he should say. For instance, in November 1865, she instructed: “I pray, do not go [near] Seward about my business—keep him out of my affairs. Do be quiet & cautious—about mentioning, this business to anyone, save parties concerned—See [Thomas] Stackpole & have him settle it…. Do not approach [Isaac] Newton or [Simeon] Draper, about my affairs.”

Later that month, she wrote, “I again enclose you a line, urging you, not to take any assurance for granted, without having it down, in black & white…. Do not write notes, to them, but go & insist & get the written promises.” One might think that Mrs. Lincoln, not Williamson, was the tutor by trade. Still, it must have been frustrating to rely on another to carry out such important business. Mrs. Lincoln may not have engaged in such transactions herself because such behavior would have seemed “unwomanly.” Moreover, her intense grief surely would have hampered her ability to undertake the necessary travels and calls.

Mrs. Lincoln may have found it difficult to achieve stability throughout her life, especially after her husband’s death. Historian Michael Burlingame has suggested that Mary Lincoln had bipolar disorder, also known as manic-depression, and her words and actions—including her outbursts of temper and her shop-


14. Mary Todd Lincoln to Alexander Williamson, November 26, 1865, in Ibid.,
ping sprees—support that theory. If she did have bipolar disorder, then her behavior should be viewed in a new light, for she was at the mercy of a fickle chemical imbalance that had not yet been identified by doctors. Bipolar disorder may offer at least a partial explanation for the intense anxiety about money that drove Mrs. Lincoln to pursue it with such tenacity, and to her irritability with people, including Williamson, who tried to help her.\textsuperscript{12}

Williamson could raise little sympathy, or money, for Mrs. Lincoln. The former first lady had never been popular, due to her sharp tongue, financial extravagance, “unwomanly” interest in politics, and Confederate half-siblings. Many also believed that she had inherited enough wealth to live comfortably, so she did not need any charity. However, the president’s estate was slow to settle because the executor, Supreme Court Justice David Davis, had turned his attention toward important national matters. When it did settle, Mrs. Lincoln received only an income of about $1,500 to $1,800 per year—not nearly enough to maintain a house, much less cover her thousands of dollars in debts. In light of these circumstances, and considering women’s limited ability to earn money during the nineteenth century, Mrs. Lincoln’s intense anxiety about finances is understandable, especially if she suffered from bipolar disorder.\textsuperscript{13}

In her letters to Williamson, Mrs. Lincoln’s frustration sometimes boiled over in vicious language regarding his fund-raising difficulties; she thought the men he had approached showed ingratitude for Lincoln’s accomplishments by refusing to open their wallets or forgive her debts. She wrote sarcastically, “This is a grateful Republic, to allow me, with all my heavy sorrows—to suffer thus!”\textsuperscript{14}

Although distracted by money matters, Mrs. Lincoln continued to monitor the newspaper articles and biographies about her husband that first began to appear at the end of 1865. She read many newspapers, and “no mention of the late President or of herself escaped her notice.” In November 1865, Mrs. Lincoln borrowed a copy of a book titled \textit{The Life and Public Services of Abraham Lincoln}, written by \textit{New York Times} editor Henry J. Raymond, a future congressman who would later incur the widow’s wrath. She wrote to painter

\textsuperscript{286.}

\textsuperscript{15.Ibid., 267; Mary Todd Lincoln to Francis Bicknell Carpenter, November 15, 1865, in Ibid., 284; Mary Todd Lincoln to Josiah G. Holland, December 4, 1865, in Ibid., 292, 293, 294.}

\textsuperscript{16.Mary Todd Lincoln to Alexander Williamson, January 26, 1866, in Ibid., 330, 324.}
Francis Bicknell Carpenter that she had described Raymond’s book as “the most correct history, of...[Abraham Lincoln] that has been written.” Mrs. Lincoln also praised The Life of Abraham Lincoln, written by historian and Massachusetts newspaper editor Josiah G. Holland, who had sent the former first lady a complimentary copy. She wrote to Holland, “I find the statements, in most instances, so very correct, that I feel quite surprised, as to the extent of your minute information.” However, Mrs. Lincoln regretted Holland’s description of a duel that her husband had nearly fought with a rival in Springfield in 1842. She also pointed out some perceived errors, such as conversations that may have been invented or exaggerated by people who claimed they had encountered the president. Regarding one such conversation, Mrs. Lincoln wrote that “it was not his nature, to commit his griefs and religious feeling so fully to words & that with an entire stranger. Even, between ourselves, when our deep & touching sorrows, were one & the same, his expressions were few.” Mrs. Lincoln also took issue with Holland’s description of the president’s occasional outbursts of anger on the job: “I cannot understand, how strangely his temper, could be at so complete a variance, from what it always was, in the home circle. There, he was always, so gentle and kind.” On the whole, however, the former first lady claimed that reading Holland’s book gave her “great satisfaction.”

In January 1866, Mrs. Lincoln learned that President Andrew Johnson had received a substantial congressional appropriation to refurbish the White House. In a letter to Williamson, Mrs. Lincoln declared that the appropriation money “should have been mine.” Hoping to receive more money from Congress, she asked her well-connected friend Sally Orne—sister of a Pennsylvania congressman and wife of a wealthy Philadelphia carpet manufacturer—to approach several representatives on her behalf. The idea of an increased congressional award, however, apparently bore no fruit at this time.

Mrs. Lincoln harbored extremely bitter feelings toward Andrew Johnson, and not just because of the appropriation. She characterized him as detestable and racist, the complete opposite of her husband and an insult to everything Abraham Lincoln had stood for.

17. Mary Todd Lincoln to Charles Sumner, April 2, 1866, in Ibid., 348; Ibid., April 10, 1866, in Ibid., 356.
18. Ibid., September 10, 1866, 386, 387.
19. Mary Todd Lincoln to Simon Cameron, April 21, 1866, in Ibid., 358; Ibid., June 16, 1866, 370.
20. Mary Todd Lincoln to Leonard Swett, November 27, 1866, in Ibid., 396; Mary
She lamented that Johnson was undermining President Lincoln’s accomplishments; in her eyes, he threatened her husband’s legacy. Mrs. Lincoln wrote to her friend Charles Sumner, the antislavery senator from Massachusetts, that Johnson was “faithless & unscrupulous . . . he is endeavouring to ignore all the good, that has been accomplished and returning the slave, into his bondage.” Later, she referred to the Senate’s decision to override Johnson’s veto of the Civil Rights bill in April 1866: “The decree, has gone forth, that all men are free and all the perfidious acts, of Johnson and his unprincipled partisans cannot eradicate, the seal, that has been placed on the ‘Emancipation Proclamation.’ It is a rich and precious legacy, for my sons.” While taking pleasure in the Senate’s preservation of this legacy, she expressed “great indignation” at men who claimed “Johnson—is carrying out President Lincoln’s policy.”

In September 1866, Mrs. Lincoln expressed her hatred for Johnson by arranging a rare journey to Springfield while Johnson visited Chicago—a none-too-subtle snub. After Mrs. Lincoln left the Illinois capital, Johnson and his party traveled to Springfield and paid a visit to Lincoln’s grave. She wrote to Sumner, “The most painful thought to me, in my great sorrow is that the party desecrated my beloved husband’s resting place,” adding that Johnson’s visit to the gravesite “added another pang to my Gethsemane of woes.”

Meanwhile, Mrs. Lincoln felt increasingly desperate in the face of her mountain of debts. Learning that Simon Cameron of Pennsylvania—who was also campaigning for the Senate—had launched a fund-raising drive in her honor, she sent him a stream of repetitive, anxious letters seeking updates. In the letters, Mrs. Lincoln emphasized her unhappiness, as well as how devastated Abraham Lincoln would be if he could see his wife’s predicament: “Before warm weather—I am anxious—to be removed—into a house of our own…. Even if you have not, been able to secure all the sum, you desired to raise, a portion or half of it—at this time—would be gratefully received… as we are without a home—and we are most unpleasantly situated, at a boarding house—Little did my beloved husband—ever suppose that those so very very dear to him—would be left thus.” For the same reasons that had doomed Williamson’s endeavors—Mrs. Lincoln’s temper, the rumors of disloyalty because of her Rebel relatives, and so forth—this latest
fund drive achieved little success, even when Cameron appealed to Abraham Lincoln’s old friends. As Cameron’s efforts floundered, she denounced men who refused to contribute despite “ow[ing] everything to my husband…. These are the especial persons, who would most willingly, see Wife & sons—of their benefactor, eating the bread of poverty & humiliation—if they could.”

In addition to seeking Cameron’s help, Mrs. Lincoln peppered her husband’s friend Leonard Swett with letters asking him to solicit money from his friends. As Swett, too, encountered difficulties, she snapped, “Can the Country be so forgetful, to my beloved husband’s memory?” Mrs. Lincoln declared that she still could not afford to maintain a house “suitable” to her “station.” As if to deflect potential charges of arrogance, she stated, “I am endeavour- ing in every act—to carry out, what I believe, would have been, my idolized husband’s wishes.” Thus, she claimed that she did not seek comfort for her own sake, but to honor Abraham Lincoln’s memory by living in a fitting manner, one that would please him in the afterlife.

Mrs. Lincoln reacted more positively to Francis Bicknell Carpenter’s portrait of the Lincoln family. On Christmas Day 1866, she wrote to Carpenter, “Thank you, for the most perfect likeness of my beloved husband, that I have ever seen, the resemblance is so accurate, that it will require far more calmness than I can now command, to have it continually placed before me.” She further expressed her gratitude by sending Carpenter one of President Lincoln’s canes.

Mrs. Lincoln also accepted a medal presented by the Committee of the French Democracy to honor Abraham Lincoln’s commitment to republican values. She had expressed concern that the French medal would never find its way into her hands. In July 1866, she asked Alexander Williamson to inquire about the medal’s status, fearing that William Seward, or President Lincoln’s former secretaries John Hay and John Nicolay, “could stop its reaching me…. They

21. *Mary Todd Lincoln to Francis Bicknell Carpenter, December 25, 1866,* in Turner and Turner, *Life and Letters*, 403, 404. Less than a year later, however, Carpenter had earned Mary Lincoln’s wrath by writing an article that she claimed contained “false statements” (*Mary Todd Lincoln to Henry C. Deming, December 16, 1867,* in *Ibid.*, 463). In a striking change from her earlier words of appreciation, she complained to Representative H. C. Deming of Connecticut—who had given an 1865 speech about Lincoln’s character—that Carpenter “is a second edition of Mr. L.’s crazy drinking law partner, Herndon, endeavouring to write himself into notice, leaving truth, far, far, in the distance…. To think of this stranger, silly adventurer, daring to write a work, entitled, ‘The inner life of Abraham Lincoln.’” * (Mary Todd Lincoln to Henry
are a great set of scamps.” However, the medal, which had collected subscriptions from some forty-thousand French citizens, did reach the widow Lincoln after all, and she wrote to the committee in early January 1867: “So grand a testimonial to the memory of my husband, given in honor of his services in the cause of liberty, by those who labor in the same great cause in another land, is deeply affecting.” The presentation of the medal to President Lincoln’s widow indicates that the French public apparently considered her the rightful custodian of her husband’s memory. The committee did not present the medal to such symbols of republicanism as the new U.S. president or Congress; the panel specifically chose Mrs. Lincoln as the proper recipient.  

A much less positive development occurred when Abraham Lincoln’s former law partner William H. Herndon lectured in late 1866 that the Lincolns had a loveless marriage. Herndon claimed Mr. Lincoln’s true love was Ann Rutledge, who had died when both were very young, a number of years before Mr. Lincoln had met his future wife. Upon learning of Herndon’s words in early 1867, Mrs. Lincoln maintained a public silence. Privately, Herndon’s statements hurt the widow deeply. According to Elizabeth Keckley, “Mrs. Lincoln felt shocked that one who pretended to be the friend of her dead husband should deliberately seek to blacken his memory. Mr. Lincoln was far too honest a man to marry a woman that he did not love.” In her personal letters, Mrs. Lincoln denied Herndon’s allegations, describing her husband’s deep devotion toward her. In venomous scrawls, she called Herndon a “dirty dog” and declared “that if W. H.—utters another word—and is not silent with his infamous falsehoods in the future, his life is not worth, living for—I have friends, if his low soul thought that my great affliction—had left me without them….In the future, he may

C. Deming, December 16, 1867, in Ibid., 464.)
22. Mary Todd Lincoln to Alexander Williamson, July 21, 1866, in Ibid., 376; Mary Todd Lincoln to the Committee of the French Democracy, January 3, 1867, in Ibid., 404.
23. Ibid., 411, 267–68; Keckley, Behind the Scenes, 235; Mary Todd Lincoln to David Davis, March 6, 1867, David Davis Papers.
25. Baker, Mary Todd Lincoln, 269; Randall, Biography of a Marriage, 365; Turner and Turner, Life and Letters, 414; Peterson, Lincoln in Memory, 52; Mary Todd Lincoln to David Davis, March 4, 1867, David Davis Papers; Turner and Turner, Life and Letters, 411.
26. Mary Todd Lincoln to David Davis, March 4, 1867, David Davis Papers.
well say, *his prayers.*”

From Mrs. Lincoln’s point of view, the Herndon lectures not only threatened Abraham Lincoln’s image, they attacked her own sacred memory of her husband. Nearly a year before the Ann Rutledge controversy Mary Lincoln had written to a friend, “It was always music in my ears, both before & after our marriage, when my husband, told me, that I was the only one, he had ever thought of, or cared for. It will solace me to the grave.” Now Herndon was trying to rob her of this vital solace, as well as undermine her public identity as the Great Emancipator’s soul mate—the very identity she relied upon to seek favors from Congress and others. Moreover, the widow Lincoln had come to recall her husband as a superhuman figure. Her repeated use of words such as “immortal,” “martyr,” and “sainted” wrapped his memory in a Christlike mantle, similar to the deified image that others cultivated shortly after the assassination. Herndon threatened to undermine the process of President Lincoln’s transcendence of criticism and rise to virtual sainthood in the collective memory of at least most northern Americans.

Mrs. Lincoln begged David Davis to ask Herndon to stop lecturing on the subject of her husband’s love life. But Herndon persisted, and his stories about Abraham Lincoln’s supposed “domestic hell” captured the popular imagination. The lawyer’s authoritative, persuasive manner, which he had carefully crafted in the courtroom, gave him an air of credibility. Ironically, Herndon’s lectures may have improved Abraham Lincoln’s image in a roundabout way by evoking sympathy for him. In the words of historian Merrill Peterson, “he must have been a saint to survive” Mary Lincoln. Nevertheless, Herndon’s theories raise questions about their complete historical accuracy. Aside from Mrs. Lincoln’s insistence that her husband never spoke the name of Ann Rutledge in her presence, “not even in [Abraham Lincoln’s] intimate correspondence with [good friend] Joshua Speed is there so much as a veiled reference to Ann.” Rutledge’s former fiancé also denied that anything beyond friendship had existed between her and the future president. In the end, though emotionally shaken, Mrs. Lincoln held firmly to her faith in her husband, going so far as to believe, incorrectly, that the very existence of a woman named Ann Rutledge was “a myth.”

Mrs. Lincoln summed up her attitude toward Herndon by re-

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28. Mary Todd Lincoln to Alphonso Dunn, March 18, 1867, in Ibid., 417; Ibid., 416. One cannot help but wonder, given Mary’s pattern of extreme jealousy concerning her husband, whether Ream’s youth and the fact that Lincoln had reportedly enjoyed visiting with her contributed to her distaste for the sculptress. Mary Todd
marking: “This is the return for all my husband’s kindness to this miserable man! Out of pity he took him into his office, when he was almost a hopeless inebriate and although he was only a drudge, in the place, he is very forgetful of his position and assumes, a confidential capacity towards—Mr. Lincoln.”

In Mrs. Lincoln’s opinion, Herndon was attempting to use his history with her husband for his own gain, and he had no right to do so—unlike the president’s widow. As historians Justin and Linda Levitt Turner point out, Mrs. Lincoln felt that as his wife of twenty-three years, “[only] she could claim to be an authority on the character of Abraham Lincoln.”

In the midst of this traumatic experience, Mrs. Lincoln learned that sculptress Vinnie Ream sought to borrow the clothing that President Lincoln wore on the night of the assassination. The former first lady had given the clothing to a White House servant, Alphonso Dunn, and she hinted that he should not lend the clothes (“I feel as I gave them to you—I can dictate a little about them”), though she left the final decision in his hands. Mrs. Lincoln cautioned Dunn that Ream was “an unknown person, who by much forwardness & unladylike persistence, obtained permission to execute a statue of my husband, the late President. From her inexperience, I judge she will be unable to do this, in a faithful manner.” However, Mrs. Lincoln’s attitude toward Ream had apparently softened by early April, when she wrote Dunn that although Ream was a “stranger to me and mine—and I expect very inexperienced in her work . . . I trust very sincerely, she may succeed.” As it turned out, Ream did succeed in producing a bust that earned high praise upon its unveiling in 1871.

Later in 1867, Mrs. Lincoln’s focus returned to her money troubles. She tried to raise funds by selling her used clothing and other items in New York City under an assumed name. However, a shrewd broker and his partner, W. H. Brady and S. C. Keyes, discovered her identity. Promising to raise $100,000 in a matter of weeks, these “tenth-rate Barnums” (as Turner and Turner describe them) took advantage of Mrs. Lincoln’s anxiety about money, con-
vincing her to participate in a blackmail plot against several prominent Republican politicians, many of whom had been helped by the Lincoln administration. Brady and Keyes told her to write several letters, backdated and set in Chicago, describing her desperate financial circumstances. The brokers would then show the letters to the Republican politicians, threatening to make them public and embarrass the party unless the politicians helped Mary Lincoln pay off her debts. In the letters, the former first lady complained that her “noble husband did so much” for those politicians, but they showed ingratitude to his memory by turning a deaf ear to his widow. Trying to elicit sympathy, she wrote, “I am passing through a very painful ordeal, which the country, in remembrance of my noble and devoted husband, should have spared me.” She implicitly criticized the politicians for failing to recognize her “feelings and pecuniary comforts . . . in the midst of my overwhelming bereavement.” The scheme extracted no money. Mrs. Lincoln’s letters were published, and the politicians savaged her in the newspapers. Mary Lincoln’s attempt to use her husband’s party connection for her own gain had backfired miserably. 29

Deeply stung, Mary fired back against the politicians in her letters. She wrote to Keckley, “It appears as if the fiends had let loose, for the Republican papers are tearing me to pieces…. If I had committed murder in every city in this blessed Union, I could not be more traduced.” Later, she declared, “I never failed to urge my husband to be an extreme Republican, and now, in the day of my trouble, you see how this very party is trying to work against me.” Though privately she blasted the politicians, she maintained a public silence: “I did not feel it necessary to raise my weak woman’s voice against the persecutions that have assailed me emanating from the tongues of such men as Weed & Co. I have felt that their

to W. H. Brady, September 25, 1867, in Keckley, Behind the Scenes, 293, 292; Randall, Biography of a Marriage, 369–70; Van Der Heuvel, Crowns of Thorns, 193.

30. Mary Todd Lincoln to Elizabeth Keckley, October 9, 1867, in Keckley, Behind the Scenes, 335; Ibid., October 29, 1867, 342; Ibid., November 15, 1867, 350.

31. Van Der Heuvel, Crowns of Thorns, 196; Keckley, Behind the Scenes, 295.

32. Mary Todd Lincoln to Elizabeth Keckley, October 8, 1867, in Keckley, Behind the Scenes, 334; Ibid., October 13, 1867, 337–38.


34. Ibid., 472; Mary Todd Lincoln to Rhoda White, May 2, 1868, in Ibid., 472. Mary’s passage to Europe was financed by New York banker Joseph Seligman, who, in the words of the Turners, “wished to perform a service in memory of the late President” (Ibid., 483f).
infamous false lives was a sufficient vindication of my character. They have never forgiven me for standing between my pure and noble husband and themselves, when, for their own vile purposes, they would have led him into error. All this the country knows, and why should I dwell longer on it?"30

The proceeds of Mrs. Lincoln’s “Old Clothes Sale,” meanwhile, did not even cover the commission she owed Brady & Co. Only a few dresses sold, purchased by secondhand dealers for meager prices. In our time, with first ladies’ gowns enjoying prominent display space in the Smithsonian and clothing worn by Princess Diana selling for staggering prices, Mrs. Lincoln’s sale might have reaped great rewards. However, in her day, the public judged her sale worthy of ridicule.31

Mrs. Lincoln believed that the criticism by Republican politicians had hampered interest in her clothing. She wrote to Keckley, “The politicians, knowing they have deprived me of my just rights, would prefer to see me starve, rather than dispose of my things.” She later wondered: “Was there ever such cruel newspaper abuse lavished upon an unoffending woman as has been showered upon my devoted head? . . . Every other day, for the past week, I have had a chill, brought on by excitement and suffering of mind…. I feel assured that the Republicans, who, to cover up their own perfidy and neglect, have used every villainous falsehood in their power to injure me—I fear they have more than succeeded, but if their day of reckoning does not come in this world, it will surely in the next.”32

Meanwhile, by late 1867, Mrs. Lincoln apparently had grown disenchanted with Williamson because of his lack of success in raising funds and reducing her debts. Cordially—but uncharacteristically laconically—she claimed that her doctor had advised her to read and write as little as possible, so she might not be in touch in the future. This seems a thin excuse, considering that her flow of letters to other people continued unabated.33

In 1868 Mrs. Lincoln faced another public humiliation, sparked by one of the least likely people: her close friend Elizabeth Keckley. The dressmaker published her memoirs, Behind the Scenes, which detailed her background as a slave and revealed private incidents

35. Baker, Mary Todd Lincoln, 300; Congressional Globe, 41st Cong., 2nd sess., 1870, 4540–42.
36. Mary Todd Lincoln to Nathaniel P. Banks, December 4, 1868, in Turner and Turner, Life and Letters, 492; Mary Todd Lincoln to United States Senate, December 1868, in Ibid., 493; Baker, Mary Todd Lincoln, 298, 297; Mary Todd Lincoln to Sally Orne, November 14, 1869, in Turner and Turner, Life and Letters, 525.
and conversations from the Lincolns’ White House days. The book included Mrs. Lincoln’s letters to Keckley, which were not entirely flattering to the former first lady, though edited to remove the most “sensitive” portions. Mary Lincoln did not explicitly react to the book’s publication, even in her personal correspondence. Keckley’s description of Mrs. Lincoln’s emotional and financial problems certainly must have embarrassed the former first lady. It must have seemed like an extreme violation of privacy to have words between herself and her husband repeated in print, and Keckley’s depiction of such scenes as Mr. Lincoln’s tearful grief after the death of their son Willie must have struck her as an intrusion upon the dead. After *Behind the Scenes*, Mrs. Lincoln referred only once to Keckley in her letters, calling her simply “the colored historian.” Meanwhile Mrs. Lincoln fled with her youngest son to Europe. Although she cited a number of other reasons for the move, such as better educational opportunities for her son and a decreased cost of living, the Keckley scandal likely played a major role in the move.34

While in Europe, Mrs. Lincoln prepared for another financial crusade. Although her efforts to capitalize on the Lincoln name had failed miserably in her endeavors involving Williamson and the old clothes sale, the former first lady again tried to make use of her husband’s memory. This time, she sought a pension from Congress with the help of old friend Charles Sumner, who introduced the plan in the Senate. This effort, which began in late 1868, turned into a long, anxious battle. Mrs. Lincoln’s own unpopularity, and the fact that some politicians did not consider Abraham Lincoln a true veteran, caused much initial resistance. Though some had already enshrined the sixteenth president as a great hero, controversy continued to surround Lincoln, who had faced much opposition from northern Democrats and radical Republicans (to say nothing of Southerners) during his administration.35

Mrs. Lincoln’s nature did not allow her to patiently sit by. She jumped into the fight wholeheartedly, sending impassioned letters to national lawmakers. She wrote to Nathaniel P. Banks of Massachusetts (a curious correspondent, for she had privately denounced him in the past): “Surely the remembrance of my martyred husband

38. Van Der Heuvel, *Crowns of Thorns*, 188, 201; Mary Todd Lincoln to David Davis, December 15, 1868, in Turner and Turner, *Life and Letters*, 498; Mary Todd Lincoln to Sally Orne, January 13, 1870, in Ibid., 542; Mary Todd Lincoln to Rhoda White, May 23, 1871, in Ibid., 589; Mary Todd Lincoln to James H. Orne, May 28, 1870, in
will cause [Congress] to remember his widow in her ill health and sorrow!” Mrs. Lincoln also composed an official petition to Congress, reminding the lawmakers of her husband’s unparalleled service to his country, how his “life was sacrificed to his country’s service,” and how his wife deserved to “live in a style becoming to the widow of the Chief Magistrate of a great nation.” In addition, Mrs. Lincoln asked friends to lobby lawmakers on her behalf, and she advised them on what to say. For example, Boston spiritualist Obediah Wheelock wrote a twenty-nine-page letter to Sumner in which he argued that Mrs. Lincoln had advised the president, so she had helped save the Union and therefore deserved some reward. Sounding much like Mary Lincoln, Wheelock declared that President Lincoln would be embarrassed if he could witness his wife’s poverty. Mrs. Lincoln’s well-connected friend Sally Orne also lobbied on her behalf. Mary Lincoln felt so “very nervous” and “agitated” that it virtually incapacitated her, and she continually pressed Orne for updates that might ease her excruciating anxiety.36

Mrs. Lincoln’s champions in Congress reiterated her rhetoric, reminding their fellow lawmakers and the general public of Abraham Lincoln’s magical accomplishments. It would have seemed supremely ungrateful for Congress to deny his widow a pension, according to their arguments. Other lawmakers spoke out against the measure, often criticizing Mary Lincoln’s behavior. Finally, in July 1870, Mrs. Lincoln received a $3,000–per-year pension for the president’s service as commander in chief. The bill passed along partisan lines, which suggests that the Republicans saw it as a grudging memorial to their favorite son Abraham Lincoln, not necessarily as a measure they desired on his widow’s behalf. The split also suggests Democratic hesitancy to embrace President Lincoln as an icon.37

After finally winning the pension battle, Mrs. Lincoln still did not feel completely satisfied. She had hoped for $5,000 per year, so the $3,000 sum came as a disappointment. She still could not afford to maintain a house, a fact that had embittered her greatly as she watched war hero Ulysses S. Grant receive three homes and a library as gifts. She believed the public unfairly neglected her, com-

36. Ibid., 561; Mary Todd Lincoln to Sally Orne, February 11, 1870, in Ibid., 547.
37. Mary Todd Lincoln to James Smith, June 8, 1870, in Ibid., 567; June 22, 1870, in Ibid., 568; Ibid, 568, 569.
39. Mary Todd Lincoln to James Smith, June 8, 1870, in Ibid., 567; June 22, 1870, in Ibid., 568; Ibid, 568, 569.
40. Van Der Heuvel, Crowns of Thorns, 204. The Lamon book was ghostwritten by Chauncey Black, who apparently did not think very highly of Lincoln. Mary Todd Lincoln to James H. Knowlton, August 3, 1872, in Turner and Turner, Life and Letters, 598–99.
pared with the attention and support it showered on Grant. “My husband, was Commander in Chief & directed every move Grant ever made,” she had bitterly (if somewhat inaccurately) written to David Davis during her pension battle, as talk circulated of boosting Grant’s presidential salary to $100,000 per year—four times what President Lincoln had received. Later in the pension fight, she complained to Orne that Grant had received an appropriation to refurbish the White House, “whilst the wife of the great Chief-tain, whose life was sacrificed for his country & made the present occupant of the house, is living in an uncarpeted apartment—often lying ill in bed, without a menial to hand her a cup of cold water!” After winning the pension, she continued to harbor bitterness toward Grant: “My husband, did the great work of the war, but Grant, had all the pecuniary compensation.” Mrs. Lincoln also expressed outrage when families of other renowned servants of the Union, such as Edwin M. Stanton, received considerably more financial assistance than she could attract. She felt that her husband “was above all others, in the great work of the War,” and therefore she believed herself entitled to more aid than anyone else. Somehow, too, the fact that Stanton had died after an illness, which allowed him to at least say goodbye—a luxury Abraham Lincoln never had—magnified Mrs. Lincoln’s resentment.

Shortly before the pension matter reached resolution, Mrs. Lincoln had faced a further test, learning that her old enemy William Herndon had described her husband as a religious nonbeliever. In a letter to her former minister James Smith, she emphatically denied Herndon’s charges: “A man, who never took the name of his maker in vain, who always read his Bible diligently, who never failed to rely on God’s promises & looked up to him for protection, surely such a man as this, could not have been a disbeliever, or any other but what he was, a true Christian gentleman.” Mrs. Lincoln later declared that whenever she thought of “that wretched Herndon & all his falsehoods, and villanies, I believe I am truly deprived of my reason, almost.” However, she advised Smith not to publish a proposed article denouncing “that renowned scamp & humbug”

42. Ross, *The President’s Wife*, 270; Randall, *Biography of a Marriage*, 384; Turner and Turner, *Life and Letters*, 292; see, for example, the work of Mary P. Ryan, Shirley Yee, Jean Fagan Yellin, and Nancy Cott.
44. Mary Todd Lincoln to Lewis Baker, August 29, 1880, in Ibid., 702, 705.
unless Herndon again spoke against Lincoln’s faith; she did not want to endanger her pension drive by magnifying any scandals. Mrs. Lincoln directed the minister to show her the article before its publication, should the situation come to that. Once again, she asserted herself as the rightful guardian of Abraham Lincoln’s memory, claiming the right to approve what others, even an old friend, would say about him.39

In 1872, to add further insult and injury, a book by Ward Hill Lamon, partly based on Herndon’s notes, repeated the old allegations of an unhappy marriage and Abraham Lincoln’s lack of religious conviction. It also raised questions about the legitimacy of Mr. Lincoln’s birth and that of his mother. Mrs. Lincoln maintained a public silence about the Lamon book, although she poured forth a great deal of rage in her private letters. She called the book “the infamous publication,” declaring: “The vile, unprincipled and debased character of the author, are sufficient guarantees, of the truthfulness of his wicked assertions. The life of my pure, noble minded, devoted husband, requires no vindication, and one would only lower themselves, and lose their own self respect, were the attempt made to reply to the vile slanders, sent out from this book. I have not seen it, nor should not allow it, to be brought into my presence.”40

Mary Lincoln did speak out the following year, when Herndon, in a lecture, repeated the claims of possible illegitimacy and her husband’s lack of religious sentiment. He quoted Mrs. Lincoln herself as saying that her husband was not a “technical Christian.” Herndon took her words out of context; what she actually said was that although Abraham Lincoln did not formally belong to any one church, he had tremendous faith in the Bible. Mrs. Lincoln was stunned and hurt beyond belief to have her own words twisted against her husband. In the Illinois State Journal, she denied having such a conversation with Herndon, “as stated by him.” This ambiguous statement could be interpreted as a denial of having talked to Herndon at all, so Herndon seized the chance to call Mary Lincoln a liar. He had his notes from their interview published in the newspapers, and the former first lady emerged with no cred-

47.Ibid, xix, 196. See also Shirley A. Leckie, Elizabeth Bacon Custer and the Making
Thus, like his love life, Abraham Lincoln’s religion became the subject of myth, speculation, and debate, and distortions of the truth remain fixed in many people’s minds. If Mary Lincoln had mounted a more spirited public defense on these two issues and had not dismissed Herndon and Lamon as “small barking dogs,” perhaps such distortions would not have become so ingrained in the public memory. Justin and Linda Levitt Turner have argued that Mrs. Lincoln could not publicly defend herself or her husband against abuse, due to the proprieties of genteel Victorian womanhood. The ideology of “separate spheres” dictated that women of Mrs. Lincoln’s time should avoid the male-dominated public world. However, the fact that other prominent widows of her era lectured and wrote books defending their husbands’ lives and careers, and that Mary Lincoln herself publicly disputed Herndon’s quotations about her husband’s religion, suggest that a woman could take a public stand when the “domestic” issue of a husband’s reputation was at stake. Similarly, scholars have shown that a number of nineteenth-century women became involved in public causes related to “morality,” such as abolitionism and temperance. Because of the perceived role of females as “nurturers,” society accepted some amount of activism by women, as long as they did not deviate too far from that nurturing role. These women activists (especially abolitionists) sometimes drew criticism, but evidently not enough to entirely dissuade them.

The claims of Herndon and Lamon may have contributed to the collapse of an emotionally vulnerable woman who had been further weakened by the death of a third son in 1871. Perhaps in part because of the book, lectures, and surrounding controversy, Mrs. Lincoln began hallucinating and experiencing delusions—symptoms that a person with bipolar disorder may exhibit during the manic phase of the illness. Her surviving son, Robert, initiated the legal proceedings that led to her commitment to a mental institution in 1875. It would have been a humiliating ordeal for a woman as proud as Mary Lincoln, former first lady of the United States, to carry the stigmatizing label of “insane.” She only remained at the institution for a few months before the courts determined she

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50. Leckie, Elizabeth Custer, xx–xi; Gordon, General Pickett, 4, 172.
51. Leckie, Elizabeth Custer, xxi, 236.
had regained her sanity. However, she remained bitterly estranged from Robert Lincoln for years.\(^43\)

Shortly after her release from the institution, Mrs. Lincoln returned to Europe for several years. As she prepared to re-enter the United States in 1880, she argued that she should not have to pay customs duties: “My good husband, certainly did sufficiently, for his country, that I should be exempted, from this painful ordeal.” Mary Lincoln asked her brother-in-law Ninian Edwards to exert his influence on her behalf. However, he must not have succeeded, since her relatives later remarked that Mrs. Lincoln had stitched together foreign fabrics in the shape of dresses in order to dupe customs officials and avoid duties.\(^44\)

In 1882, the last year of her life, Congress increased Mary Lincoln’s pension from $3,000 to $5,000 per year and granted her a $15,000 donation. Congress took this step because the widow of President James Garfield had received an annual pension of $5,000 after his assassination in 1881. It seemed only fair to extend equal treatment to Abraham Lincoln’s widow, and the proposal met with little resistance. Ever insecure, however, before the bill’s passage Mrs. Lincoln marshaled her fighting resources, enlisting the Rev. Noyes Miner to approach powerful men on her behalf. Although nearly blind and partially paralyzed, she possessed enough strength of spirit to give detailed instructions about “just which congressmen could be trusted”—reminiscent of the days when she employed Alexander Williamson to settle her debts. The always far-reaching Mary Lincoln sought a pension of $10,000 per year, so the extra $2,000 that Congress ultimately granted her struck her as a “paltry sum.” Regardless, her death in July 1882 rendered the issue moot.\(^45\)

During the postwar period, Mary Lincoln was joined by several other widows who sought to glorify their prominent husbands and perhaps earn a profit by invoking their illustrious names. For example, after the death of Confederate General Stonewall Jackson in 1863, his wife, Mary Anna, visibly contributed to her husband’s legend by sanctioning biographies, publicly denouncing a novel that portrayed her husband in a manner she did not like, and writing her own account of his life. By marketing herself so forcefully as Mrs. Stonewall Jackson, in the opinion of one historian, “she wrote herself into his story, ensuring that she, too, would be remembered.”\(^46\)
Similarly, Elizabeth Custer, widow of George Armstrong Custer, defended his reputation by lecturing, writing books, and memorializing her husband at every turn. According to one historian, “[She] discovered a measure of her own independence and autonomy by promoting a man and creating a myth.” Her books were even used as the basis for a children’s textbook “that would teach patriotism and ‘lessons in manliness.’”

Much like Mrs. Custer, Confederate General George Pickett’s widow, LaSalle, defended her husband’s military career. His name had become linked with an infamous “charge” at Gettysburg, and his controversial orders to hang some Confederate deserters in North Carolina had sullied his image. In her writings, LaSalle Pickett portrayed her husband as a strong, popular, heroic commander; she ignored his 1864 nervous breakdown, as well as the North Carolina incident. In addition to writing a number of books, poems, and stories (some of which included apparently falsified and plagiarized material), she spent her five decades of widowhood participating in lecture tours and other public events.

The wife of Confederate President Jefferson Davis, Varina, was another “professional widow” who supported herself through speeches and writings honoring her notorious husband. She went so far as to change her name to Varina Jefferson Davis or V. Jefferson Davis—a step that even the deeply bereaved Mrs. Lincoln did not take. Similar to Mary Lincoln’s monitoring of the monument for Oak Ridge Cemetery, Varina Davis closely supervised the creation of a statue that would commemorate her husband. For her own funeral, she arranged full military honors, a final reminder of the lofty place she believed her husband held in history. Again, even Mary Lincoln, for all her pride, did not go that far.

While some of Mrs. Lincoln’s actions fit the pattern illustrated by Mrs. Davis and other notable widows of the era—seeking to gain financially from her marriage to a major public figure and to defend
his image—she was less successful than other widows. Perhaps this is because she enjoyed less popularity than Elizabeth Custer and LaSalle Pickett, who, unlike Mary Lincoln, had cultivated images as ideal submissive, charming wives. Their favorable images helped protect Mrs. Custer and Mrs. Pickett from dissenting opinions, at least during their lifetimes, because such attacks would have seemed unchivalrous. Perhaps because Mrs. Lincoln did not conduct herself as a “proper female,” in the opinions of some people, and was not well liked, she enjoyed no such immunity from those, such as Herndon, whose portrayals of Abraham Lincoln differed from her own.50

In addition, although the other widows worked as powerful individuals, Mary Lincoln tended to act through other people. She usually preferred others to write newspaper articles defending President Lincoln and herself, and to approach powerful men concerning her political and financial affairs. She did not give lectures or write books about her experiences, although doing so could have earned her enormous financial security and improved her image considerably, in addition to promoting her own vision of her husband. Perhaps her emotional fragility prevented her from taking the more public course charted by the other widows, for defending her husband could prove quite “arduous” for a Victorian woman. When Mrs. Custer wrote a biography of her husband, she found it a very difficult task: mentally, physically, and emotionally. Someone as emotionally vulnerable as Mary Lincoln may have found it impossible to consider going through such turmoil. Moreover, she may have considered public activities beneath her.51

It is unfortunate that she did not conduct herself in a more public manner. Although Mary Lincoln was a woman of forceful words and ideas, she confined the vast majority of them to private letters. Therefore, when she or her husband fell victim to public scandal or ridicule, her side of the story often lacked effective dissemination. Granted, she directed others’ rebuttals, but the public did not necessarily know this, so her apparent silence may have raised questions.

Painful as her life became after she lost her beloved husband, Mary Lincoln did not silently weep away her widowhood. She took active steps to protect and use her husband’s memory. Some
of her actions could be viewed as overly zealous and others as not strenuous enough. Sometimes her efforts even backfired. But overall, Mary Todd Lincoln played a role in defending the collective memory of Abraham Lincoln, and she managed to benefit from his memory herself.