Did Abraham Lincoln Sleep with His Bodyguard? 
Another Look at the Evidence

MARTIN P. JOHNSON

Probably the most controversial—certainly the most newsworthy—issue in Lincoln studies today is the question of whether Lincoln was "gay" or had sexual relations with some of his male companions. That discussion began to simmer in the popular media in the mid-1990s but has been given greater credence and focus by the posthumous publication of C. A. Tripp’s book, The Intimate World of Abraham Lincoln.1 Whatever one thinks of the merits of the discussion, it is important to forthrightly confront questions about Lincoln’s sexuality because this is an issue that threatens to become highly divisive within the world of Lincolnists and highly misleading for the larger culture. Discussion of the topic in the popular press and on the Internet has not engaged the evidence in a meaningful way but has tended to repeat the same accusations and denials. Instead, this is precisely the kind of issue that Lincolnists should approach in a scholarly and thoughtful manner before inaccurate stories and unsupported conclusions become so widespread that they cannot be corrected.

Tripp has performed the valuable service of bringing together in one place a great deal of evidence and information, all of which for the sake of analysis may be placed in one of two categories. There is what might be called circumstantial evidence: that as a young man Lincoln allegedly lacked interest in eligible women, or that he allegedly began puberty at an unusually early age, which Tripp argues is correlated to homosexuality in adult men. On its own, this circumstantial evidence could never convince a skeptic, though it can perhaps add depth and texture to the discussion of the second category of evidence, which might be called the direct evidence: that Lincoln is known to have slept in the same bed with a number men, including the closest friend of his young adulthood, Joshua Speed. Lincoln’s relationships with Speed and other men in Illinois with whom he shared a bed have


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long been known and incorporated into the literature. The episode of bed-sharing that has recently caught the public eye, however, and that even has given pause to esteemed Lincolnists like David Donald, is the scene depicted in two sources that Lincoln, while president, slept with one of his bodyguards when Mary Lincoln was not at home.

The story may be quickly summarized. During the summer and autumn of 1862, Lincoln and his family lived much of the time at the “Summer White House,” a cottage at the Soldiers’ Home just outside the city limits of the capital. Beginning on September 7 the guard there, and later at the Executive Mansion, included Company K of the 150th Pennsylvania Regiment, part of the so-called “Bucktail Brigade.” From October 20 to November 27 Lincoln was alone in Washington, Mary and Tad having gone on an extended trip to Boston and New York, in part to visit Robert at Harvard.

It was during this time, on November 16, 1862, that Virginia Woodbury Fox wrote in her diary: “Tish says, there is a Bucktail Soldier here devoted to the President, drives with him, & when Mrs L. is not home, sleeps with him.' What stuff!”

By birth and marriage Virginia Woodbury Fox was well connected to important and influential political and military circles. She was the daughter of a former secretary of the treasury, the wife of First Assistant Secretary of the Navy Gustavus V. Fox, and was related by marriage to the redoubtable Blair family with whom, judging from her letters and diary, she was in almost daily contact. Tripp asserts

2. “It is hard to know what to make of all this,” Donald writes in “We are Lincoln Men”: Abraham Lincoln and His Friends (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2003), 143.


4. Diary of Virginia Woodbury Fox, 16 November 1862, Levi Woodbury Papers, Library of Congress. The original does indeed have three quotation marks. Tripp, Intimate World, 1, does not capitalize “Soldier” nor use the ampersand, has “Mrs L.” instead of “Mrs L.,” and does not have the quote mark after “sleeps with him.” Pinsker’s partial quote, Lincoln’s Sanctuary, 215 n. 38, cites the entry more correctly but omits the comma before the ampersand. Pinsker also avoids the problem of the three quotation marks by breaking the citation into two passages, as does David Donald, “We are Lincoln Men,” 141, whose citation silently changes some capitalization, omits the ampersand, and has “Mrs. L.”

5. The Woodbury papers and the Blair papers at the Library of Congress present a wealth of details about the family. See also the genealogy of the family written by Virginia’s brother, Charles L. Woodbury, Genealogical sketches of the Woodbury family, its inter-marriages and connections (Manchester, N.H.: J. B. Clarke, 1904), and two sources for connections to the Blairs: Minnie Blanche Reynolds, Genealogy, Blair family (Binghamton, N.Y.: Crocker Printing, 1918) and Roberdeau Buchanan, Blair family (Washington, D.C. [1906]).
that “Tish,” Fox’s source for the Derickson story, was Letitia McKeen, whom Tripp described as a Washington socialite and daughter of an admiral. I could identify no such person, and it may be instead that Tish was actually Letitia Hannah McKeen, who was the daughter of a mid-level Treasury Department clerk but the great-granddaughter of an illustrious signer of the Declaration of Independence and the niece of “Commodore” William Wister McKeen. She was also a near contemporary of Virginia Fox, having been born about 1820, and, like Fox, was closely linked by birth and marriage to many naval officers, political figures, and other notables. In any case, Fox’s diary presents information that was circulating among the most highly regarded and established circles of society in wartime Washington. While some have described this tale as a rumor, similar information found in a letter or diary written by a man would likely not be dismissed so lightly. The diary of George Templeton Strong, for example, is cited throughout Civil War historiography with no denigrating qualifiers, not to mention the diaries of Gideon Welles, Salmon Chase, and many others. Fox’s evidence may be hearsay, but it needs to stand or fall on its merits, not because it is mere “gossip” recorded by a woman.

The second source for the story that Lincoln slept with Derickson is Thomas Chamberlin, an officer of the regiment that guarded Lincoln. Chamberlin wrote in his 1895 book, *History of the One Hundred and Fiftieth Regiment Pennsylvania Volunteers, Second Regiment, Bucktail Brigade*, that among the officers in the regiment, “Captain Derickson, in particular, advanced so far in the President’s confidence and esteem that, in Mrs. Lincoln’s absence, he frequently spent the night at his cottage, sleeping in the same bed with him, and—it is said—making use of His Excellency’s night-shirt!”

Two elements explain the power of these reports and why they have so shaken the Lincoln world. First, the two sources appear to be independent, which is normally taken as a strong argument in favor of reliability. Second, they relate to a time and to circumstances when there would seemingly have been little need for Lincoln to

6. Donald, “*We are Lincoln Men*”, 1, also refers to McKeen as a “Washington socialite,” though it is not clear whether he was following Tripp in this, as in other parts of his account. I would like to thank John Morris at gunboatempires.com, who devotes a webpage to McKeen genealogy and who was a great help with these issues. See also Roberdeau Buchanan, *Genealogy of the McKeen family of Pennsylvania* (Lancaster, Pa.: Inquirer Printing, 1890), who notes that Letitia’s father, Samuel Miles McKeen, who died in 1868, began working as clerk at the Treasury Department in 1817.

7. Chamberlin, *History of the One Hundred and Fiftieth Regiment*, 41. Tripp omits the commas after “esteem that” and “absence” and has a small “h” in “His Excellency’s.”
share a bed, unlike the well-known episodes of bunking together from Lincoln’s younger days. These two accounts, then, provide the best evidence that the mature Lincoln may have had sexual relations with male companions. And if Lincoln had such relations as a mature man, this would suggest that his relations with Speed and the others mentioned by Tripp were also of a sexual nature. While it might be possible to dismiss as relatively insignificant any homosexual conduct by Lincoln as a young man on the Illinois frontier, a pattern of such activity across the decades would mean that our entire vision of the man would have to be revised, if only because of the myriad deceptions this would have entailed by a man who is still known, after all, as Honest Abe. The Derickson story, then, is crucial for recasting Lincoln’s nature as gay or bisexual. This is why Tripp began his book with the two reports of the Derickson story by Fox and Chamberlin and why virtually all the media reports have cited these sources as compelling evidence that Lincoln was bisexual or gay.

Like Dante’s _Inferno_, the Lincoln world has many shades and circles, but it seems fair to say that from media reports, the Internet, and conference conversations, at this early point the majority of opinion is highly skeptical of Tripp’s assertions. Yet, so recent is Tripp’s book that few Lincolnists have had the chance, or perhaps the inclination, to present a sustained response in print. Matthew Pinsker has emphasized that there was no doubt a “special relationship” between Lincoln and Derickson but argues that it was not sexual. David Donald agrees, explaining the unusual bond between the men by noting that “for Lincoln, this was the loneliest period of the war.” Jean Baker is perhaps the most respected Lincolnist to accept a fully sexual dimension to the men’s friendship, while Charles Strozier has strongly argued against any homosexual aspects of their relationship. The illustrious Lincolnists who participated in a symposium on Tripp’s book at the Claremont Institute all rejected Tripp’s argument, but while several denied that Lincoln and Speed were lovers, they did not mention the Derickson story. Others accepted the evidence that the men slept together but

8. Tripp provides an illuminating discussion of the various reactions to his argument, _Intimate World_, 4ff.
9. Pinsker, _Lincoln’s Sanctuary_, 85; Donald, “We are Lincoln Men,” 144. These books pre-date Tripp’s, but both authors had seen drafts of the key pages.
denied that this entailed any homosexual activity. There seems little chance of a conclusive end to this debate so long as it is confined to interpreting the meaning of the two key accounts depicting Lincoln and Derickson in the same bed.

Lincoln’s relationship with Derickson should be viewed not simply as an interpretive question but also as a problem subject to the test of evidence. And a careful look at the two sources suggests that they are neither as authoritative nor independent as they appear at first sight:

Fox: “Tish says, ‘there is a Bucktail soldier here
Chamberlin: “Captain Derickson, in particular,
Fox: devoted to the President, drives with him, and
Chamberlin: advanced so far in the President’s confidence and esteem that,
Fox: when Mrs. L is not home,
Chamberlin: in Mrs. Lincoln’s absence,
Fox: sleeps with him.’
Chamberlin: he frequently spent the night at his cottage, sleeping in the same bed with him,
Fox: What stuff!’”
Chamberlin: and—it is said—making use of His Excellency’s night-shirt!”

The order of topics in these five phrases is remarkably similar. First, both accounts begin with a phrase identifying the soldier in question; both then present a phrase on the emotional bond between the two men; third, both mention that Mary is not present; fourth, both state that the men slept together; and fifth, both conclude with a kind of editorial comment ending with an exclamation mark. Both reports also contain a source phrase indicating that their evidence is hearsay, Fox by noting “Tish says,” and Chamberlin by “it is said.” Several differences are also apparent: Fox states that the two men rode together in a carriage, while Chamberlin mentions a nightshirt; in Fox’s diary, it is Derickson who is devoted to Lincoln, while Chamberlin’s history

mentions Lincoln’s feelings toward Derickson. Yet, when one considers the virtually unlimited ways this information could have been presented, there is a remarkable congruity between these two quite different sources, one a contemporary private diary, the other a public history written thirty years later. The most likely explanation is that the two accounts are not independent but are in fact related. In that case, there are two possibilities: either Chamberlin knew of the Fox diary, or the two sources share the same source.

Given that the Levi Woodbury family papers containing Fox’s diary did not enter the Library of Congress until 1903 at the earliest, it seems unlikely that Chamberlin could have consulted them as a source for his history, which judging from internal evidence was written in the 1890s and was first published in 1895.12 None of the extended Woodbury/Fox clan has obvious connections to the 150th Regiment, so there is no clear reason that Chamberlin would consult the papers even had he known of their existence. Nor do any other sources available to Chamberlin reveal a familiarity with the materials in the Fox diary.13 On first glance, the use of an exclamation mark by both Fox and Chamberlin might appear to support the thesis that Chamberlin consulted and copied Fox’s diary, but this creates the seemingly insurmountable problem of where Chamberlin acquired the nightshirt detail and Derickson’s name. Both Chamberlin and Fox liberally sprinkled exclamation marks throughout their accounts; the similar punctuation is evidently a coincidence.

Chamberlin and Fox, then, very likely relied upon the same source material, which in both cases was an oral source, someone who told the same story in much the same way across thirty years. Fox herself tells us the source of her information, the elusive “Tish,” but Chamberlin is more circumspect, providing no source for this passage beyond “it is said.” Chamberlin’s phrasing seems to indicate an oral source, however, and if we read his account closely, a possible source does emerge. In Chamberlin’s regimental history, the Derickson story occurs in the middle of a passage in which Chamberlin describes some of the ways the 150th interacted with Lincoln, including Chamberlin’s own eyewitness account of seeing Lincoln riding about in an open carriage and talking with some of the guards. In this passage, imme-

13. As Tripp points out, Margaret Leech, in Reveille in Washington (New York: Harper & Bros., 1941), was the first to use this story from Fox’s diary. Leech evidently did not know of Chamberlin’s account.
diately before and after presenting the Derickson story, Chamberlin prominently mentioned Captain Henry W. Crotzer, in some cases providing information that only the captain could have supplied. In the sentence introducing the Derickson story, Chamberlin first noted that, “Captains Derickson and Crotzer were shortly on a footing of such marked friendship with him [Lincoln], that they were often summoned to the dinner or breakfast at the Presidential board.” Then occurs the key sentence beginning, “Captain Derickson, in particular, advanced so far in the President’s confidence and esteem. . . .” Immediately after the Derickson story, Chamberlin wrote that, “Of their service at the Soldier’s Home, one of the most pleasing recollections of Captain Crotzer and his men is of the unvarying kindness of Mrs. Lincoln. . . .” then added in the next sentence, “Nor can they forget their first Sunday in the camp. . . .” Then, in next paragraph, Chamberlin told of a conversation between Lincoln and Crotzer with no others mentioned as being present, making Crotzer the likely source. In this passage, as throughout Chamberlin’s book, the tone and phrasing suggests that Chamberlin was relying upon recent sources—an oral source in this case—not upon notes from the past. Crotzer in 1863 would have been about forty years old. In 1850, at least, he was married and had one daughter.\textsuperscript{14} Crotzer is listed in Chamberlin’s 1905 edition as having died on July 31, 1898, and so he would have been able to contribute to the first edition of 1895.\textsuperscript{15} Because the Derickson story is organically embedded in this stream of information connected to Crotzer, it may be that Crotzer is Chamberlin’s source for the whole passage.

And what of the source for the Fox/Tish version? “Tish” certainly did not have firsthand knowledge that Derickson and Lincoln were sleeping together, as Fox’s derisive comment, “What stuff!” suggests. While the three quotation marks in the passage are confusing, had Tish been the one to utter “What stuff!” as part of her story, it is unlikely that Fox would have prefaced the passage with “Tish says,” a phrasing that suggests Tish vouched for or believed the tale. Had Tish’s information been firsthand, however, there would have been no “What stuff!” comment, no matter who uttered it, because according to dictionaries of the day, that comment could only mean “what worthless junk!” not “what great gossip!” as it might at a later date. Tish’s information, then, likely came from the small army of servants, clerks, soldiers, officers, and administrators that surrounded Lincoln at virtually all times of the day and night.

\textsuperscript{14} 1850 U. S. Census accessed through Ancestry.com.
\textsuperscript{15} Chamberlin, History of the One Hundred and Fiftieth Regiment, 42–43.
Among this ever-changing entourage at the time in question was, of course, Henry W. Crotzer, who from this reading of Chamberlin’s account is first in line among possible sources for the Derickson story. And Fox’s diary supports this nomination as the star witness. Consider, for example, the emphasis upon Derickson in Fox’s account: Derickson is “devoted to” the president; Derickson “drives with him”; Derickson “sleeps with him.” The tale as told by Fox is highly focused upon Derickson’s feelings and actions, which suggests that it was a tale originally told by a peer of Derickson’s, someone closer to him, in any case, than to Lincoln, who is in this telling a seemingly passive object of devotion whose feelings and independence of action are not even considered. If it was not Crotzer who is the first source for this story, it was at least somebody in a similar situation, somebody who was associated with Derickson and who knew (or thought he knew) Derickson’s feelings and actions. One has only to reverse the identities so that it is Lincoln who is devoted to Derickson, Lincoln who drives with Derickson, Lincoln who sleeps with Derickson, to see how different the source would have to have been for the alternative phrasing to make sense. John Hay or John Nicolay would have told the same story from an entirely different perspective, for example.

This reasoning pointing to Crotzer or somebody like him as the key source for Fox/Tish also applies to Chamberlin’s account, in which, again, it is Derickson who “frequently spent the night at his cottage”; Derickson who is depicted as “sleeping in the same bed with him”; Derickson who is said to have been “making use” of Lincoln’s nightshirt. Chamberlin’s account shows some interest in Lincoln’s emotional state, but the passage is still rendered in such a way that it is Derickson who is the agent of the verb, that is, Derickson is still the focus of attention: it is “Captain Derickson” who has “advanced so far in the President’s confidence and esteem.” In both of the sources, which reveal so many other similarities, the original source was most likely somebody, maybe even Crotzer, who was on the outside of Lincoln’s inner circle but on the inside of Derickson’s. Tripp’s title, in this sense, might better have been *The Intimate World of David Derickson*. Even if Crotzer himself did not speak directly with Tish, the story Fox told, and the story told by Chamberlin, most likely derived from the same similarly placed source who told the story the same way in 1863 as he (or she) did in 1895. Alternatively, Chamberlin might have based his account on notes taken at the time (again from the same source), but this seems less likely given his use of the present tense in the phrase “it is said” and the other indications that Chamberlin was relying upon oral recollections and other evidence collected in the 1890s for much of his history.
Even if Chamberlin’s account was not based upon Crotzer’s recollections, the information presented is so detailed and precise that it clearly derives from a source very close to the events. It may well be only one step removed from the episode, while the story repeated by Tish, even if ultimately derived from Crotzer or some other eyewitness, may have passed through several intermediaries before it found its way into Fox’s diary. This supposition is powerfully supported when considering the nature of the unique information presented by each of the sources, for it is the later regimental history that contains key details that would suggest a direct relationship to the source, not the contemporary diary. Fox’s diary, for example, tells of Lincoln and Derickson driving about in a carriage, a public act that could be seen by virtually anyone. Chamberlin (based upon Crotzer?) depicts Derickson in the presidential nightshirt, a much more intimate detail, one that originally would only have been available to those with close ties to the presidential household or the camp of the 150th. Similarly, Fox’s diary only mentions the visible corps markings of the unnamed “Bucktail soldier,” which in the common meaning of the word “soldier” at the time would tend to indicate a private or common soldier; Derickson, of course, was an officer. Chamberlin, in contrast, gives us the exact name of the individual. Finally, Fox does not give a clear indication of the location of Lincoln’s bed-sharing, but Chamberlin clearly states that it occurred at the Soldier’s Home cottage. In general, historians would favor a contemporary source over a later source, but contemporary sources, like later accounts, are also subject to distortion, exaggeration, and inaccuracy. In this case, the content of the later source is much richer and more informative. Both accounts take us into Lincoln’s residence and his sleeping arrangements, but in very important and specific ways Chamberlin’s history, even thirty years removed, provides a more intimate, textured, and detailed encounter with the event than Fox’s contemporary diary, most likely because Chamberlin’s account is derived more directly from the original source, who may well have been Captain Henry W. Crotzer.

Seeing the Chamberlin version as closer to the original source, despite its distance from the event in time, sets the entire episode in a different light. While Chamberlin’s account betrays no sense that Lincoln and Derickson were up to anything indecent, the “What stuff!” comment in the Fox diary suggests that had the story been considered to be true, it would indeed have been scandalous. Fox’s diary, then, could support the contention that if Lincoln and Derickson were sleeping together, they would also be assumed to be having sex. But if Fox’s information had been passed from person to person in a long chain of
transmission, it is quite possible that the story’s potentially sensational aspects grew in the telling. A tale about a close friendship between two men that originally had no sexual innuendo attached to it could thus take on shadings and meanings that were not originally part of the original telling. In any event, because Chamberlin’s account is probably closer to the source, its innocuous version should be given more weight than Fox’s possibly scandalized version.

It is also important to note that Fox makes no overt comment about sexuality. The phrase “sleeps with” certainly could have a sexual connotation at the time, as when Walt Whitman routinely used the term “slept with” when describing his relations with the men he brought home after his wartime rambles through New York City and Washington, D.C. But the phrasing of Fox’s diary suggests that Derickson and Lincoln sleeping together was information on a par with their driving together. Both pieces of information are given the same emphasis and importance, even if their sleeping arrangements are qualified by the news that it was only while Mrs. Lincoln was away. The “What stuff!” comment might be a reference to some other aspect of the story ignored by our modern sensibilities, for example, the spectacle of a “soldier” sleeping with, driving with, and being “devoted to” the commander in chief.

This element is even more marked in Chamberlin’s history. Chamberlin’s account does not indicate that Lincoln and Derickson sleeping together was scandalous, merely that it is notable. But stories of soldiers sleeping together and using a comrade’s coat or other clothing were common during the Civil War. What Chamberlin found notable enough to deserve both a qualification (“it is said”) and an exclamation mark is that Derickson wore Lincoln’s nightshirt. For Chamberlin the level of intimacy was indicated by the captain’s use of “His Excellency’s” garment, not that the men shared a bed. Chamberlin’s source (Crotzer?) told the story to illustrate the great friendship between the men despite their differences in rank and standing, a point emphasized by Chamberlin’s referring to Lincoln as “His Excellency” in the key phrase. Chamberlin’s “it is said” and exclamation mark signal that in the eyes of Chamberlin and his source, Lincoln and Derickson’s friendship had overcome the line marking class, status, or rank, but not that Lincoln and Derickson had transgressed a sexual barrier. This does not prove that there were no sexual relations between the men.

17. Pinsker makes this same point in Lincoln’s Sanctuary, 84.
but it does suggest that those in a position to know—Chamberlin and his source—did not have any knowledge of such relations, and probably did not even consider the possibility. If Chamberlin’s account is considered to be the more reliable version of the episode, then, the possibly salacious or scandalous aspects of the “What stuff!” comment in Fox’s diary recede in importance.

This understanding of the two accounts and their sources dissipates much of the impact of the Derickson story. First, the sources are not fully independent in that they both show strong links to a common source, perhaps Crotzer or someone else in the regiment. This is not to say Derickson and Lincoln did not sleep together, only that we need to make a determination of that question with the understanding that Fox and Derickson may well have received their information from the same informant. That is an important point for assessing the reliability of the Derickson episode because this one informant must be weighed against the many other sources close to Lincoln or the 150th at this time that do not mention any irregular sleeping arrangements.  

18. Henry Shippen Huidekoper, Derickson’s superior, left an account that establishes only that Lincoln and Derickson were friends.  

19. By the time of Huidekoper’s first inspection visit to the camp of the 150th, “Captain Derickson was already on good terms with Mr. Lincoln, had already breakfasted with him two mornings, and had ridden to the White House one morning seated beside the President.” “In fact,” Huidekoper continued, “the captain was then rapidly approaching that degree of intimacy on his part with Lincoln, which some months later, the latter, while talking to me, had reference to, when with a twinkle in his eye, he said, ‘the captain and I are getting quite thick.’” Huidekoper’s first inspection was probably sometime during the first week or two after Co. K had arrived in Washington and taken up its post at the Soldiers’ Home late on Sunday, September 7. If we take “some months later” to mean at least two months, then Lincoln’s comment about being “quite thick” with Derickson would likely date from a time after Mary had returned from her trip and the family had returned to the Executive Mansion, which would preclude any bedsharing by Lincoln and Derickson. Lincoln’s comment, then, cannot be taken as a veiled confession. H. S. Huidekoper, “On Guard at the White House,” copy of an unattributed magazine article under the heading “The Living Lincoln: Centenary Tributes” in the Bissett-Witherspoon Lincoln Collection, Washington State University Library, Pullman, Washington; I would like to thank Cheryl Genselman, Manuscripts Librarian, for providing this article.
his duties with the 150th, visited the camp of Co. K “each day” from late September through October 22, 1862, but he offers no direct testimony on the matter of whether they slept together. Derickson himself published in 1888 an account of his friendship with Lincoln but said nothing of any bedsharing and gave no indication of an irregular relationship, despite Tripp’s best efforts to portray Derickson’s memoir as an elaborate seduction scene. Finally, Derickson’s son, Charles, who was also in the 150th, later wrote that while delivering a message one night he saw Lincoln in bed with Mary, but he said nothing about the sleeping habits of his father. All this would suggest that if Lincoln and Derickson did sleep together, it may have been a singular or uncommon occurrence dictated by some unusual circumstance rather than a regular part of Lincoln’s routine during the month or more that Mary was away, as the common source for the Chamberlin and Fox versions suggests.

Second, as Pinsker, Donald, and others have concluded, the two key sources provide only slight foundation for concluding that if Lincoln and Derickson did sleep together, they were also having sexual relations. Despite its tone to modern ears, that “What Stuff!” comment in Fox’s diary suggests that whoever was responsible for that remark did not think so, and Chamberlin and his source had rank and status in mind, not sex, when noting the unusual intimacy between the two men. Nor is there other evidence of anything more than a friendship between the men. Lincoln brought Derickson with him on his famous trip to Fredericksburg to meet with McClellan in early October 1862, but he also brought several other friends and acquaintances along, including Ozias Hatch and Ward Lamon, none of whom wrote of any unusual behavior between Lincoln and Derickson. In a note of November 1, 1862, Lincoln intervened to keep Derickson and the 150th as his guard company when there was some question the unit would be transferred, but this hardly seems proof of a romantic entanglement.

Moreover, the two known letters from Derickson to Lincoln after

21. Pinsker, Lincoln’s Sanctuary, 107, citing the Ida Tarbell papers at Allegheny College, Pennsylvania. This account suggests that stories of Lincoln and Mary having separate bedrooms may be exaggerated or true only sporadically.
1862 argue against such an entanglement. In April 1862 Derickson was appointed, no doubt with Lincoln’s help, the provost marshal for his home district in Pennsylvania, a position for which he was well qualified, having been an assistant U. S. marshal there before the war. In June, Derickson informed Lincoln with pride that he had been unanimously elected to be a delegate to the Baltimore convention that would nominate Lincoln for re-election, “for which compliment I am indebted to the fact that I was known to be your warm friend more than my own personal popularity.” Derickson added that “It would give me much pleasure to be present and vote for your renomination,” but then explained that he could not attend and would send a substitute instead. This does not seem to be the action of one longing for a reunion. Derickson added, “Please remember me kindly to your family,” a remark that seems inexplicable if Derickson and Lincoln had been lovers while Mary was away the previous fall, for in that case the comment could only be read as a biting reminder of Lincoln’s infidelity. Derickson’s polite comment also demonstrates that Derickson knew Mary and Tad, which belies the secretive image of the Lincoln-Derickson relationship suggested by the common Chamberlin and Fox source.

Derickson wrote a second letter to Lincoln in September 1864 about a scheme he had become involved in to recruit Confederate POWs for the Union army as a way to fill the service quota for his district. Secretary of War Stanton had balked at the plan, but Lincoln overrode his objections. With the election only months away, Derickson astutely emphasized the political benefits of the plan in the crucial state, which would be selecting nearly a quarter of the electors needed for victory. “Nothing could have been done,” Derickson wrote of Lincoln’s decision, “that would have produced a better state of feeling in our midst.” The impersonal first person plural “our” and the emphasis upon politics gives no grounds for assuming anything more than a friendship between the two. Indeed, Lincoln is not known to have responded to either letter.

With that, Derickson fades back into oblivion, where he would have remained had Chamberlin (relying on Crotzer?) not mentioned his use of Lincoln’s nightshirt. It makes an interesting story, but not for the reasons Tripp alleges. The similarities in phrasing, vocabulary, content, and structure between the two accounts of Lincoln sleeping with

Derickson argue strongly that the two sources are not independent, but rather that they both rely on a common source. Internal evidence points to Henry W. Crotzer as the best candidate. Furthermore, and counterintuitively, the contemporary source—Fox’s diary that appears so scandalized by the tale—should be given less weight in this matter than Chamberlin’s more detailed, more precise, and much more nonchalant history written thirty years later. Finally, this one source—not two independent sources—must be weighed against an overwhelming mass of contemporary and later eyewitness testimony that breathes not a word of scandal. Questions and innuendo about Lincoln’s relations with his male bed companions in early Springfield will never cease, but there is quite enough to interest us about the sixteenth president without transforming the Derickson story into a defining episode in the life of Lincoln.