New Year’s Day 1841: A Puzzling Triptych

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Abraham Lincoln’s reference to “the fatal first of Jany. ‘41,” made in a letter nearly fifteen months later to Joshua Speed, continues to intrigue us. Collectively biographers have treated his reference as a puzzling triptych. First, what happened on New Year’s Day? Second, what precipitated Lincoln’s bout with depression during the following weeks? Third, whom was Lincoln thinking about when he wrote to Speed on March 27, 1842? There has not been agreement on any of these questions for some time. A main reason for the divergence has been the easy accessibility of an extraordinarily rich collection of testimony collected by William Herndon after the assassination of Lincoln. Retrospective documents in three publications by Douglas L. Wilson and Rodney Davis affect our interpretation of almost every aspect of Lincoln’s life.1 And Wilson himself has made the most influential deconstruction of Lincoln’s reference in two major studies.2

The deconstruction offered here makes use of the invaluable works of Wilson and Davis but places at the forefront of interpretation records contemporary with Lincoln’s remark. The result is dramatically different from accounts that have predominated over the past quarter century. Here the central player is not Joshua Speed but Mary Todd. As a consequence, Todd’s premarital character is rescued from the distortions that some of Herndon’s witnesses projected onto her because of


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her later trials. In 1840–42 Miss Todd was not the person she would become as Mrs. Lincoln after losing a son in 1850, three weeks before his fourth birthday, a second son at age eleven in 1862, her husband of twenty-three years in April 1865, and a third son at age eighteen in 1871.\(^3\) The young woman Lincoln courted was self-assured and independent-minded. Indeed, she was a highly attractive potential partner, as demonstrated by her numerous suitors, who did face a limited field of nubile females.\(^4\) These factors should be weighted on her behalf in understanding Lincoln’s angst-laden phrase.

Wilson suggests that stressful experiences in November and December 1841 contributed to the “emotional breakdown” Lincoln suffered in January. He campaigned hard for William Henry Harrison only to have the Whig presidential candidate lose Illinois but win the national election. The result left Lincoln drained. Then on the last day of the special session of the legislature he and a couple of other Whigs jumped out a window to deny a quorum to the Democratic majority that had locked the chamber door. Press reports made him a “laughingstock,” and he was painfully humiliated.\(^5\) Wilson is persuasive that these events added to Lincoln’s vulnerability regarding vicissitudes in his romantic life. He believes, however, that the essence of Lincoln’s predicament was that he became infatuated with another woman, Matilda Edwards, and felt unbearable guilt when he decided to break off his engagement to Mary Todd, probably at some point in December. As to the fatal first reference, he concludes “there is no evidence of anything unusual happening in Lincoln’s life on January 1.”\(^6\) Instead Wilson postulates that since Speed sold his business on that day, Lincoln may have been referring to something in his friend’s life, possibly involving a woman. Charles Strozier accepts January 1, 1841, as an important date for Lincoln but shifts the reason to Speed’s completing the sale of his store on that day in preparation for his

3. On the impact of these losses as well as the death of Mary Todd’s father in 1849, see Charles B. Strozier, *Lincoln’s Quest for Union: Public and Private Meanings* (New York: Basic Books, 1982), 85–86. Strozier adds to her psychological decline the effects of gynecological disease after 1853 (88).


6. Ibid., 234.
return to Kentucky. He believes that Lincoln’s “fatal first” reference “captured his doomed sense at losing Speed.”

Speed married Fanny Henning on February 15, 1842, and on the very next day informed Lincoln that he and Fanny were “no more twain, but one flesh.” Strozier calls this aptly “the consummation letter.” Both Speed and Lincoln, as the latter’s numerous letters prior to the wedding imply, had been nervous about being able to have sexual intercourse with a bride. Both were probably virgins before Speed wed. On March 27, after receiving another letter testifying to Speed’s happiness, Lincoln claimed news of his friend’s nuptial bliss “gave me more pleasure, than the total sum of all I have enjoyed since that fatal first of Jany. ’41.” It would have been unseemly if his reference had been either to a crisis Speed had had with another woman on “that fatal first”, as Wilson suggests, or Lincoln’s personal disappointment at Speed’s selling his business, as Strozier surmises. The next sentence makes clear that Lincoln was thinking about his own relationship to a woman, not to Speed. “Since then, it seems to me I should have been entirely happy, but for the never-absent idea, that there is one still unhappy whom I have contributed to make so.” Why did Speed’s marital happiness so please him? If Speed could triumph in his marriage bed so could he! The main theme, then, of the whole paragraph in which “the fatal first” appears is Speed’s unexpected happiness with his marriage and Lincoln’s continued grappling with his own feelings about having contributed to Todd’s unhappiness on the day that the possibility of their marrying ended.

That Lincoln would boil down his terminated romance with Todd to a crisis on a particular date was in keeping with his pattern of transmuting an incident, be it a test of strength, someone’s death, a breakup with a woman, a memorial (Gettysburg), or a proclamation (Emancipation), into a dramatic moment in his life or, as president, a transcendent one in the life of the nation. In his first year on his own at New Salem, for example, he accepted a challenge to wrestle Jack Armstrong, the local strong boy. He not only held his own but

7. Strozier, Your Friend Forever, 120. Strozier introduced this thesis in Lincoln’s Quest for Union, 44.
8. Strozier, Your Friend Forever, 185–86.
10. Wilson, Honor’s Voice, 257; Strozier, Your Friend Forever, 119–120.
displayed good humor at his rival’s not fighting fair. As a consequence he became so popular that his first law partner claimed the match was “the turning point in Lincoln’s life.”12 Lincoln thereafter was known as a powerful man who was trustworthy and good-natured.

Similarly the best-documented facet of Lincoln’s romance with Ann Rutledge was his response to her death on August 25, 1835. There is no contemporary record of their relationship while she lived, only accounts unearthed by Herndon after both parties died. Significantly his “informants” most vividly recalled Lincoln’s reaction to her death. One of her brothers, in fact, deduced that Lincoln must have had strong feelings for Ann because of his visible grief. Lincoln was notoriously inexpressive in the company of women, and none of the witnesses contacted by Herndon related an example of Lincoln’s love for Ann except within the context of his mourning her loss. As Lewis Gannett has written, neither Ann’s brothers nor cousins “offered a specific memory of Lincoln courting Ann. . . . none offered eyewitness images of them holding hands, exchanging tender glances, strolling through glades, or otherwise in any way behaving like a couple in love.”13 Although Gannett questions the authenticity of the romance, it seems clear that what motivated Herndon to claim that Ann was Lincoln’s great love was learning that his friend was “shocked-shattered by Miss Ann Rutledge’s death.”14 Lincoln did not hide his grief; rather he wore it as a shroud to the loss he suffered on that day.15

The most significant moment for Lincoln in his next courtship occurred when he saw for the first time in three years the woman he had pledged to marry. He initially met Mary Owens in October 1833 when she visited her married sister, Elizabeth Abell.16 At the time, Lincoln was involved with Ann Rutledge. A year after her death, Mrs. Abell, who had witnessed Lincoln’s despair over Ann, told him she was visiting her family in Kentucky and would return with her


15. See also the testimony of Ann’s fiancé, John McNamar. Astonishingly no one ever told him that Lincoln had wooed Ann during his prolonged absence, only “that Lincoln was very much grieved at her Death.” John McNamar to G. U. Miles, May 5, 1866, Wilson and Davis, Herndon’s Informants, 252–53.

sister Mary if he would marry her. Why Lincoln agreed is unclear. He consented to a match with someone he barely knew, had not seen in three years, and for whom he acknowledged no feeling of affection, let alone love. His reasoning that she was intelligent and agreeable and that he could find “no good objection” evoked the kind of prudential marital consideration that scholars associate with parental influence rather than participant control. Further, it was the kind of rationale that one was more apt to expect from a woman eager to marry because of familial and social pressure than a man for whom Jacksonian society provided no comparable pressure or reward. Bachelorhood, as Stephen Douglas’s meteoric rise was demonstrating, was no longer a bar to political advancement.

That Lincoln wanted to marry was clear. That he had a strong libido and wanted to have sex with a woman is apparent. When he indicated to Elizabeth Abell that he was prepared to marry her sister, his memory of Owens from three years past must have been satisfactory


19. Michael Burlingame concludes that Lincoln had “a robust sexuality” before and after marriage. Abraham Lincoln, 1:200. Richard N. Current, The Lincoln Nobody Knows (New York: Hill and Wang, 1958), 32–33, noted that while Herndon believed he had a strong drive, Lincoln had been portrayed also as being “undersexed.” Although Current took no position, there is no reason to believe that Lincoln had a below-average sexual desire. A recent study of 1,749 women and 1,410 men aged eighteen to fifty-nine in the United States revealed that only 15 percent of all the men, about half the percentage of women, had “low sexual desire.” Surprisingly, the variation across age groups was not dramatically different: 14 percent of men aged eighteen to twenty-nine and 13 percent of those thirty to thirty-nine “lacked interest in sex.” E. O. Laumann, A. Paik, and R. C. Rose, “Sexual Dysfunction in the United States: Prevalence and Predictors,” Journal of the American Medical Association 281, no. 13 (February 10, 1999), 537–44, particularly 540, table 2.
enough for him to imagine a carnal relationship. When she arrived in November 1836, however, Lincoln’s passion for her was not aroused. At their reunion he must have had a difficult time hiding his disappointment. Eighteen months later he confided to another married female friend how he had viewed Owens: “she now appeared a fair match for Falstaff” marred by “a want of teeth, weather-beaten appearance in general” and looked a lot older than she said she was.\(^{20}\) Even if this description was intended to be satiric, it was too vicious not to reflect his dismay at how unattractive Mary Owens struck him in comparison to his remembered image of her. In none of his letters to her did he offer a favorable word about her looks, only a single compliment about her mind.\(^{21}\) Although he continued the relationship for more than a year, he could not overcome his lack of attraction to her from the instant he saw her in the fall of 1836.

Lincoln magnified the wrestling match with Jack Armstrong, the death of Ann Rutledge, and the reappearance of Mary Owens into dramatic personal moments. The Armstrong match gave him stature. His grief over Rutledge gained him sympathy and a reputation for a being man of passion despite his reticence in the company of single women. His negative reaction to Owens’s reappearance reaffirmed his desire to marry someone he could lust after. The experience left him emotionally ripe for the alluring, marriageable women he would meet at the home of Ninian and Elizabeth Edwards.

That Lincoln would meet Mary Todd was inevitable because of links between him and her relations in Springfield. Todd came there in October 1839 for an extended stay with her oldest sister Elizabeth, wife of Ninian Edwards, whose spacious brick home on Aristocracy Hill was a gathering place for the elite of the new capital.\(^{22}\) Lincoln and Edwards had worked together in the legislature to make Springfield the capital. Todd’s first cousin was Lincoln’s law partner, John Todd Stuart, whose father had presided over the marriage ceremony of Elizabeth and Ninian in Kentucky seven years earlier.\(^ {23}\) Mary Todd arrived before the first session of the legislature ever held in Springfield. The

\(^{20}\) Lincoln to Mrs. Orville H. Browning, April 1, 1838, CWAL 1:117–19.

\(^{21}\) Lincoln to Mary S. Owens, December 13, 1836, May 7, 1837, August 16, 1837. He wrote on May 7, 1837, “I know you are capable of thinking correctly on any subject.” Ibid., 54–55, 78–79, 94–95, quote on 78.


Edwardses hosted weekly soirées to which Democrats were invited along with Whigs. Pretty, bright, and a bit flirtatious, Todd, turning twenty-one, became a target of eligible bachelors like Lincoln, Stephen Douglas, and Speed.

Todd’s acquaintance with Lincoln in the winter of 1839–40 is certain. How their relationship evolved the following summer, fall, and winter, however, is at issue. Did they reach an understanding to marry? Were they engaged? Did Lincoln either in December or on January 1, 1841, initiate disengagement?

The extant documents from 1840–42 tell a story different from the hindsight of informants in 1865–66 and later that were necessarily colored by awareness of a Lincoln-Todd breakup, Lincoln’s despair, and their eventual marriage. The records coincident with the courtship deserve greater weight than retrospective ones. The contemporary sources include correspondence between Lincoln and Speed, Todd and Mercy Levering, and Mercy and James Conkling.

Todd’s three letters to Mercy Levering in July 1840, December 1840, and June 1841 reveal a young woman substantially different from the portrait that emerges from witnesses some twenty-five to forty-five years later. The Mary Lincoln who lost three sons and her husband was not the same confident, flirtatious young woman Lincoln courted. Her reputation for a mercurial temperament and petulant outbursts is at odds with the sangfroid and equanimity manifested in her only extant letters before her marriage. What she became as Mrs. Lincoln, however, has shaped images of what she had been as Mary Todd. For example, an older, still influential study of her personality found no direct information about Todd’s early childhood, but inferred from her indulgent parenting that she herself must have been reared without discipline or restraint. If the same logic were applied to her husband’s


25. No one contributed more to a critical portrait of Mary Lincoln than Herndon; yet he did acknowledge, “This woman was once a brilliant one, but what a sad sight to see her in any year after 1862.” Herndon to Jesse W. Weik (Springfield, Ill.), January 8, 1886, Wilson and Davis, Herndon on Lincoln, 190. See also Douglas L. Wilson, “W. H. Herndon and Mary Todd Lincoln,” in The Mary Lincoln Enigma: Historians on America’s Most Controversial First Lady, edited by Frank J. Williams and Michael Burkhimer (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2012), 112–39.

“notoriously permissive” parenting, Lincoln’s childhood would be described similarly. Yet descriptions of his upbringing usually stress the strict, conflicting rule of his father. Mary grew up in a blended family with fourteen surviving children. Robert Todd’s crowded household and frequent absences are sometimes associated with his children being reared without much supervision or control. Mary’s mother died when she was seven, in July 1825. Her father remarried sixteen months later, and Mary’s relationship with her stepmother usually has been treated as stressful, although Stacy McDermott has recently denied there is “hard evidence” to substantiate this tradition. What stands out in her biography is the influence of education on Todd’s development.

The schooling she received was exceptional for girls. While her father strongly advocated female education, none of her sisters seems to have received the amount of schooling provided to Todd from age eight to seventeen. It is significant that her father did not send her to the same academy her older sisters attended because of its reputed lack of discipline. The new Ward’s Academy, where Todd went daily for nine months every year from age eight to thirteen, demanded diligence, self-control, and steadiness of purpose. Todd was a stellar student. She arose early to memorize verse before breakfast, walked a good distance to and from school in good weather and bad, proved a quick study in class, and did domestic chores at night. She excelled enough at Ward’s to impress her father afterward to send her to a boarding school from thirteen to seventeen. Away from her family’s noisy household except on weekends, she mastered French and became a devoted reader. In sum, a decade of schooling cultivated a genteel young woman who necessarily developed self-discipline and self-confidence. Further, her father had recognized her qualities and

27. Winkle, Young Eagle, 282.
30. McDermott, Mary Lincoln, 22.
31. Clinton, Mrs. Lincoln, 15.
32. For the schooling of Mary Todd, see McDermott, Mary Lincoln, 23–29; Jean Baker, Mary Todd Lincoln: A Biography (New York: W. W. Norton, 1987), 37–45; Kenneth J. Winkle, “‘An Unladylike Profession’: Mary Lincoln’s Preparation for Greatness,” in Williams and Burkhimer, Mary Lincoln Enigma, 90–91; Clinton, Mrs. Lincoln, 15–16.
singly her out among his daughters for this extra schooling. Although in her fifties she would remember her childhood as “desolate,” as a young woman she knew her father highly valued her.33

Her letters to Mercy Levering reflected the poise and levelheadedness derived from her schooling and her father’s esteem. She also was pretty, and it is understandable why Lincoln was drawn to her. Her feelings about Lincoln in 1840–41 are most reliably gleaned from her correspondence with Levering. Todd wrote her both before and after the famous breakup. To interpret the letters correctly we need to bear in mind that the two friends were soul sisters in their early twenties. Both men and women lived in a sex-segregated world wherein they shared their deepest feelings with same-sex friends without repercussions but interacted with the opposite sex most often in controlled settings wherein conversation and behavior were subject to convention.34

Todd and Levering were next-door neighbors in Springfield, where each stayed at a married sibling’s home after arriving in late 1839. Levering was a year older. Both were intensely interested in politics, and both enjoyed the company of men, particularly politicians. During her first summer in Springfield Levering became engaged to James C. Conkling, an 1836 Princeton graduate who had recently opened a law practice in the Illinois capital. He was six years younger than Lincoln but knew him well and soon became a good friend. The correspondence between Conkling and Levering when she returned to her home in Baltimore supplement the letters from Todd to Levering regarding the Todd-Lincoln relationship.35

Todd and Levering shared with each other feelings and thoughts they did not reveal to others. Todd’s letters to Levering indicate that they could be effusive with each other in a style they did not display to

33. Mary Todd Lincoln to Eliza Stuart Steele, May [23], 1871, Justin G. Turner and Linda L. Turner, eds., Mary Todd Lincoln: Her Life and Letters (New York, 1972), 588. For a different view of Mary’s relationship to her father, see Clinton, Mrs. Lincoln, 9, 67, 85; Burlingame, Abraham Lincoln, 1:177–78, 796 (n. 71), where he notes Mary’s letters do not speak of her parents or stepmother. Stephen Berry, “There’s Something about Mary,” 14–35, treats Mary’s desire to be highly valued as a lifelong theme.


35. On Todd and Levering, see McDermott, Mary Lincoln, 40–41; Baker, Mary Todd Lincoln, 80–81. Whereas their relationship appears to have been closest before each married, the long friendship between Conkling and Lincoln would be tested but proven durable during the White House years. Burlingame, Abraham Lincoln, 2:54, 87, 234, 560–61, 568–69.
suitors. Both, in fact, had a certain coolness that attracted young men. Levering obviously loved Conkling and would accept his proposal to marry, but her letters to him display composure and restraint. She addresses him, “Dear James,” and signs off, “Your ever affectionate Mercy.” Furthermore, his absence did not keep her from “social parties” in Baltimore, although, she claimed, it would have afforded her “the greatest pleasure to accompany him” to these events.36 Similarly Todd’s only expression of deep emotion was in her feelings toward her dearest friend. While visiting an uncle in Missouri during the summer of 1840, Todd wrote to Levering, who she knew was about to leave Springfield for Baltimore, “[T]ell me all—every thing, you know the deep interest I feel for you . . . how desolate I shall feel on returning to Springfield without you, your kind & cheering presence has beguiled many a lonely hour of its length.” Todd wrote about a Missouri beau, “an agreeable lawyer & grandson of Patrick Henry—what an honor . . . . I wish you could see him, the most perfect original I had ever met. . . . Uncle and others think, he surpasses his noble ancestor in talents, yet Merce I love him not, & my hand will never be given, where my heart is not.”37

What these words indicate is that their friendship involved telling each other about their romances in detail as well as divulging their deepest feelings. Were Todd to have held back how she felt about a beau she would have betrayed Levering’s trust and jeopardized the friendship that she so valued. In short, we need to read her premarital correspondence with Levering at the surface level: What she wrote is what she meant. Why compose long letters to her “Dearest Mercy” without venting her emotional attachments or disappointments? Her only self-censorship was occasionally to avoid writing names of male suitors, but that was probably to guard against a lost letter falling into the wrong hands. She would have violated their relationship had she disguised her feelings about a beau. She was demonstrative only in her affection for Levering. Indeed, in July 1840 her feelings for Levering were obviously much stronger than they were for any man. We can infer, then, from her July letter that she was neither engaged nor even involved with anyone.

36. Mercy Levering to James C. Conkling, December 7, 1840 (Baltimore), Conkling Family Papers, box 1, folder 1, Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library, Springfield, Ill. (henceforth ALPL).

37. Mary Todd to Mercy Ann Levering (Columbia, Mo.), July 23, 1840, Turner and Turner, Mary Todd Lincoln, 14–19. For Mary’s stay in Missouri, ibid., 12.
The next letter she penned to Levering, who was then in Baltimore, was written the week before Christmas in 1840. From this letter alone it is impossible to detect more than a casual relationship between her and Lincoln. Todd was profusely apologetic for not replying to a letter from Levering weeks earlier, but she was occupied with “sewing, necessary for winter comfort,” and a busy social scene brightened by the arrival of Matilda Edwards, Ninian’s eighteen-year-old niece; “a lovelier girl I never saw.” Matilda has attracted “a concourse of beaux & company round us” to the degree that Todd guiltily admitted “we have too much of such useless commodities.” She then noted that Joshua Speed’s “ever changing heart” was being offered to Matilda. She proceeded to describe the clothes of Speed, Lincoln, and Edwin Webb among the veteran beaux and comments that some of “the new recruits” are “gifted” and all “interesting.” She added that James Conkling had “given up all, when deprived of his ‘own particular star.’”

This coverage of the men in their social orbit, now enlivened by Matilda, reflects the perception and sentiments of a young woman who believed she herself was not “the particular star” of anyone as Levering was to Conkling, bore no resentment at all toward her new housemate, and observed the behavior and dress of beaux without the emotional investment she had in her relationship with her “ever dear Mercy.” This certainly was not someone about to be married or who felt herself to be engaged to anyone. This letter, like the earlier one in July, came from someone who enjoyed the company of amorous men more than she thought she should but did not take any of their overtures too seriously. While she was not as dazzling as Matilda, she knew she could hold her own in their circle and felt no jealousy.

If Todd had been even close to an engagement, why would she not at least hint to her best friend that she and Lincoln had something going between them, whether her being his “particular star” or an understanding to marry? Had they broken it off already, she surely would have said something about it instead of only making a passing comment about his dress. She was not likely to hide from Levering an “emotional crisis” over Lincoln, as the editors of her letters would have it? Douglas Wilson correctly concludes that Todd’s July letter to

38. Mary Todd to Mercy Ann Levering (Springfield, Ill.), ca. December (15?), 1840, Turner and Turner, *Mary Todd Lincoln*, 19–22. Dating this letter by the Turners is based on Mary’s statement that the entourage would go to Jacksonville “next week.” They left Christmas Eve. See also a generally more strictly edited version in McDermott, *Mary Lincoln*, 163–66, which follows the letter in posting the month, but no day. Whereas the Turners italicize, McDermott underlines as did letter writers.
Levering “said nothing about a Springfield romance” and therefore “effectively rules out a serious attachment or engagement before that time.”39 So too her December letter could not have been more casual in mentioning Lincoln’s dress and a planned excursion to Jacksonville on which she would join Matilda, Edwin Webb, Lincoln, and “two or three others.”

Mary Todd’s twenty-second birthday was December 13. Levering’s birthday was November 21, and on December 7 she wrote to thank her fiancé for his “birthday present . . . the perusal of which afforded the greatest pleasure.”40 There is no record or recollection by anyone that Lincoln similarly gave Todd a birthday gift around then. Her letter to Levering makes no mention of a gift. Had Todd and Lincoln been forthcoming, like Levering and Conkling, a gift should have been forthcoming and mentioned by someone. Or we might expect a reference to it in the correspondence between Conkling and Levering.

When Levering went home she sought her parents’ approval of Conkling even though she was old enough not to require it. 41 Although Mary Todd also was old enough not to need parental consent, it is likely that she would have followed her best friend’s path and sought the consent of her father, especially since her sister Elizabeth did not consider Lincoln to be suitable. No contemporary or retrospective source mentions Todd consulting with her family in Lexington about an engagement.

The planned excursion that Todd referenced in her letter to Levering was to Jacksonville for Christmas. The entourage included Mary, Matilda, and five members of the legislature. They left on Thursday, Christmas Eve, and the men definitely returned in time for the next full day of the legislature on Tuesday, December 29.42 The possibility

40. Mercy Levering to James C. Conkling, December 7, 1840 (Baltimore), Conkling Family Papers, box 1, folder 1, typescript, ALPL. Mercy’s birth year was 1817, but she claimed in this letter that she had just turned twenty-two. John Levering, Levering Family: History and Genealogy (Indianapolis: Wm. B. Burford, Printer for Levering Historical Association, 1897), 195, gives her birth date as November 21, 1817. Oak Ridge Cemetery, Springfield, Illinois, #45, gives her birth date as November, 1817. http://www.oakridgecemetary.org/tour.html.
41. James C. Conkling to Mercy Levering, September 21, 1840 (Springfield), Conkling Family Papers, box 1, folder 1, ALPL. After she informed James, he wrote of his great pleasure at learning “that our engagement had met the approbation of your parents . . . [although] we are yet personally strangers.” I want to thank James Cornelius for facilitating my access to various collections at the ALPL. The staff there could not have been more gracious or helpful.
that the women stayed in Jacksonville past New Year’s has been raised because of the December 29 postmark of a letter written by Matilda’s father to her brother in which he wrote, “They will return on Monday. We miss them very much.”43 This suggestion is pegged to the letter being written on the day before (Monday, December 28) or the same day it was brought to the post office in Springfield, an assumption that is reasonable for today but less likely in the 1840s when daily delivery was not yet a way of life. Cyrus Edwards in all likelihood penned the letter over the long Christmas weekend when he most missed the company of his daughter and her friends but did not post it until the following Tuesday. Such a lag between writing and mailing was normal.44 Letters were often long and took up more than one day to complete. As a student of the postal system at the time writes, “Receiving a letter was, for most Americans, an event rather than a feature of ordinary experience.”45

Perhaps of greater consequence in locating Mary and Matilda in Springfield was the importance of January 1 in the lives of single young women. New Year’s was a special day in Springfield as it was across the country then, although not an official holiday that shut government or private business.46 The first day was for house parties and visiting, unless it fell on a Sunday. The custom of “trotting from house to house” was traditional in New York.47 In Cleveland “many calls were made, civilities exchanged” and there were various festivities.48 It was particularly important to unmarried women and their suitors. According to the Washington National Intelligencer, “men go to see their lady-loves. . . . Every woman in the city has a draft on her acquaintance due the first of January.”49 The Chicago Tribune observed, “New Year’s day is the great holyday of the year. Every lady is at home and in full toilet to receive the visits of the gentlemen of her acquaintance, all of whom are expected to call, and whoever neglects

43. Wilson, Honor’s Voice, 233; Miller, Lincoln and His World: Prairie Politician, 456.
44. Not untypical was a letter written by Oliver Callaghan to his brother in 1833. He drafted the letter in late July and posted it in early August. David M. Henkin, The Postal Age: The Emergence of Modern Communications in Nineteenth-Century America (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 2006), 20.
45. Henkin, Postal Age, 17.
46. The Illinois State Register (ISR) took no notice of the day, and the House of Representatives had a normal session. ISR, January 1, 1841; Journal of the House of Representatives of the Twelfth General Assembly, 171–73.
to do so puts himself beyond the pale of invitations for the coming season while a general amnesty is proclaimed for past negligences, and those who have been delinquent for the year have only to call and be forgiven.50

With their home at the pinnacle of social life in Springfield, Ninian and Elizabeth Edwards would not have missed hosting this annual rite or have tolerated their houseguests, Mary and Matilda, missing it because of an excursion to Jacksonville. And after journeying to Jacksonville with five legislators, including at least two would-be suitors of Todd, it is unimaginable that she and the coquettish Matilda would have missed out on the social day of the year. So what happened between Lincoln and Todd?

The only contemporary reference to January 1 was Lincoln’s in his March 25, 1842, letter to Speed. Every other account of that day was retrospective. The most influential comments have been Speed’s. The first relates to the timing of a breakup between Todd and Lincoln. The second describes what supposedly happened. In each case, Speed’s reconstruction has to be reconsidered and balanced against contemporary sources. The key dimension of Speed’s version is the role he assigns to Lincoln in initiating a breakup. Following Speed’s lead, biographers generally vary on Lincoln’s motivation, not his agency. This view is at odds with the contemporary evidence. In 1840–42 Mary Todd was much stronger at handling men than Lincoln was at dealing with women. He simply was no match for her. Not only was she the stronger person, but as a young woman she also had all the leverage. The imbalanced sex ratio in Illinois, especially during the legislative season in Springfield, itself explains why Matilda Edwards had more than twenty suitors and Todd, while not as pursued, had a field of admirers to choose among.51 Furthermore she was raised in a culture wherein genteel women were expected to have the upper hand in courtship. As Anya Jabour finds, most southern belles enjoyed “collecting (and rejecting) beaux” and preferred to prolong their courtship years while some dominance over men was accepted. Why rush into the subordination and responsibilities that came with marriage?52 Southern women tended to enjoy the pleasures of society, the fun of various social events, and the overtures of young men. Marriage

50. Chicago Tribune, January 7, 1853, 1.
51. See note 2 above.
meant bearing children, the dangers of which they knew. Todd, after all, lost her mother to childbirth.

In 1865–66 Speed related a story about the breakup in an interview with Herndon, who soon implied that he learned about it on his own. Speed claimed that after falling for Matilda Edwards, Lincoln decided to write a letter to Todd breaking off their relationship and informing her that he did not love her. After reading the letter Speed persuaded Lincoln to not send it but see her in person. He did and reported to Speed what transpired. Matilda was in the house, because Lincoln said that when he broke it off with Todd she could see that he loved the other. She was upset; therefore, he “drew her down on his Knee—Kissed her—& parted.” After she “released him,” Lincoln was filled with remorse, became suicidal, and eventually married her “for honor.” What a bizarre, incredible story Speed wove! It has appealed to many from Herndon to scholars today because it elevates Lincoln as an honorable man while it demeans Todd for being crushed and requiring consolation.

The problem with Speed’s story begins with his timing. Speed dated the tête-à-tête “during the Special session of the Ills legislature in 1840.” The special session ran from November 23 to December 5, followed only two days later by the regular session. Had the breakup occurred before the regular session, it is inconceivable that Todd’s mid-December letter to Levering would have wholly ignored it or that Lincoln would have been in the entourage that accompanied Mary and Matilda to Jacksonville over Christmas. Moreover, Speed was never a member of the state legislature and was unlikely to remember the difference between the special and regular sessions twenty-five years later. The special session of 1840 was not unusual. There was one in each of Lincoln’s four terms. They had become so frequent that

53. Wilson and Douglas, *Herndon’s Informants*, 475; Herndon to Ward Hill Lamon, February 24, 1870, Wilson and Davis, *Herndon on Lincoln*, 86. Noting that he, Speed, and Lincoln lived in the same house for two or three years, Herndon told Lamon that he learned many of the facts about Lincoln’s three romances by himself.


55. *Journal of the House of Representatives of the Twelfth General Assembly, State of Illinois*, 80. I am grateful to Rodney Davis for information regarding the special session of 1840–41 and to Douglas Wilson for putting me in touch with him. Wilson, *Lincoln before Washington*, 112, concedes that Speed “could have confused” the two sessions but believes Speed was correct because the timing fits in with other circumstantial evidence Wilson cites.

56. These sessions are covered separately in Miller, *Lincoln and His World: Prairie Politician*. 
the *Illinois State Register* referred to the 1840–41 one not as a special session but rather as the “second session.” In view of the mere one-day break between sessions in December and the regularity of those designated “special,” we should question the time frame of Speed’s twenty-five-year-old recollection.

Todd was almost certainly in Springfield on January 1, and that is when the contretemps between her and Lincoln occurred. Did it happen as Speed relayed it? His tale is improbable. Todd’s letters to Mercy Levering, combined with Lincoln’s contemporary letters to his best friends, Stuart and Speed, do not confirm the Speed-Herndon narrative. Todd before and after the “fatal first” episode revealed nothing about the affair, such as it was, at various moments. The woman who was writing to her best friend was experiencing neither excitement about an engagement nor, after the breakup, distress at being jilted. She would become known for her directness, for not obfuscating her feelings. She especially would not deceive her closest friend to whom she professed the most affection. In June 1841 she explained her long delay in writing Mercy to not wanting to send a dull letter and acknowledged having had “sad spirit” but not because of a lost lover. Rather she writes that the spring having “been of *interminable* length, after my gay companions of last winter departed, I was left much to the solitude of my own thoughts, and some *lingering regrets* over the past, which time can alone overshadow with its healing balm.” This was an admission of loneliness, not of heartache. She may have had some “lingering regrets” over the split with Lincoln, but she was not suffering from their failure to marry. The person she missed most, however, was Levering. Then comes the sentence that is most salient. Levering had written her with the mistaken impression that Todd and a widower—probably Edwin Webb—as Todd wrote, “were *dearer* to each other than friends . . . the knowing world have coupled our names together for months past, merely through folly

57. *Illinois State Register*, November 27, December, 11, 1840. The legislature itself referred to the earlier session as “the last session.” Accordingly, the *Sangamo Journal* covered the adjournment of the first session and opening of the second session without reference to a “special session.” “Illinois Legislature,” *Sangamo Journal*, December 11, 1840. Anyone following the proceedings in newspapers would have had to read very carefully to differentiate between the session that adjourned on Saturday, December 5, and the one that was “organized” on Monday, December 7. Accordingly, Richard L. Miller treats the legislative term as consisting of a single session that convened two weeks earlier at the governor’s direction, although he is aware of the official division. *Lincoln and His World: Prairie Politician*, 408, 413.
& belief of another [probably Lincoln], who strangely imagined we were attached to each other.”

That Lincoln was the one “who strangely imagined we [Todd and Webb] were attached to each other” should be central to how we interpret what happened on the “fatal first.” Lincoln was, by his own account at the time as well as the testimony of others, reeling after the encounter and did not recover for several weeks. What happened? First, let us examine his love for Matilda Edwards. That he was attracted to her after falling for Todd is plausible. Speed also fell under her spell, as did numerous young men. What is significant, is that while she spurned others she had no idea how Lincoln felt about her. She averred to her sister-in-law that “he never mentioned Such a Subject to me: he never even Stooped to pay me a Compliment.”

Lincoln’s “love” for Matilda appears to have been akin to a schoolboy crush on a girl that a shy teenager would hold without ever revealing his passion to her. At the same time he might have a close friendship with another girl that he could imagine was something more than it actually was. He was too inhibited or shy to forge a fulfilling relationship. In the case of Matilda, who was the object of multiple suitors, Lincoln’s nonverbal cues may have been too subtle for her or Mary to decode. He may have sat next to her while their group was together—he never saw her alone—probably to make Todd jealous, but to no avail.

The story told by Speed (and Ninian Edwards) was that Lincoln went to the Edwards home on January 1 and told Todd that he wanted to be freed from their engagement because he did not love her. She somehow inferred that he had fallen for her much-pursued housemate, Matilda, and she released him. If this tale were true, Lincoln should have felt relief, not despair. Even if he felt some guilt over

60. For a brief but comprehensive review of the documents suggesting Lincoln’s love for Matilda, see Michael Burlingame, “At 31, Lincoln Falls for Matilda, 18,” *For the People: A Newsletter of the Abraham Lincoln Association* 17, no. 3 (Fall 2015), 1–2.
doing a disservice to Todd, it is hard to imagine that it would have led to the suicidal watch of some friends or even his own expressions of suffering. Relief leavened by a touch of guilt would have been his reaction if he did not want to marry her. After all, what he did to Mary Todd was not nearly as bad as what he had done to Mary Owens, whom he had agreed to marry promptly if she traveled from her home in Kentucky to New Salem, Illinois. He had left her in the lurch and even joked about her after she remained for some eighteen months before returning to Kentucky. Why should separating from Todd make him so overwhelmed by guilt?

If, however, he initiated a breakup because he resented Todd’s flirtation with another suitor and she, in turn, was offended and told him to leave, then the termination of their courtship might well have led to his despair and would have been much more in tune with her reaction. He would have felt like a fool for having caused the split and then become more and more upset in the following days when he blamed himself for having acted on his suspicions of her being faithless to him. For her part, she did not feel that she had betrayed him; she liked him but took umbrage at his having the nerve to presume they had an understanding that precluded her seeing other men. Whatever his intention in confronting her that fateful day, she turned the tables on him.

Pride would then have made it difficult if not impossible for Lincoln to try to repair the breach. He had misjudged their relationship, expressed his annoyance at her flirtations with others, and asked to be freed from an obligation she did not think they had. No wonder he left with intense self-recrimination and depression. Three weeks after January 1, he wrote two letters to his law partner in Washington. In the first he excused himself for his brevity but he still did not have “sufficient composure to write a long letter.” He noted being treated by a physician because of “making a most discreditable exhibition of myself in the way of hypochondriasm.” In the next letter he still could not encapsulate local news for Stuart because he was “now the most miserable man living. . . . To remain as I am is impossible; I must die or be better, it appears to me.”

Had Lincoln forced the breach with Todd and felt intense guilt over not treating her honorably, all he had to do was offer to marry her. He certainly was much more attracted to her than he had been to Mary

63. Miller, *Lincoln and His World*, 451, keenly concludes that the “main evidence” for the engagement “are claims that it terminated.” The same conclusion can be made for the Lincoln-Rutledge romance.

Owens whom he had pledged himself to marry. It is apparent, however, that Todd was not about to stop her flirtations because she did not think she had an obligation to do so, whatever he fabricated. He must have been mortified at not only making her angry but at having miscalculated how far their relationship had actually progressed.

How did Todd feel about Lincoln and the breakup? Her modern biographers have characterized her reaction to the breakup that Lincoln precipitated as disconsolate. Catherine Clinton says she was “brokenhearted,” Jean Baker has her “suffering” but neither depressed nor bitter, and Ruth P. Randall acknowledges that she held up much better than Lincoln but became sad, lonely, and “anxious to have the engagement renewed.” Nothing Todd wrote at the time or recalled for others later backs this analysis, which rests mainly on the interpretation that Lincoln and his closest friend, Speed, successfully spun. Stacy McDermott acknowledges, “With limited evidence, we will never know for sure,” but finds “most plausible” the explanation that Todd released Lincoln after he expressed doubts.65 Kenneth Winkle concludes that their parting was mutual because neither was ready for marriage.66

If the contemporary letters are given primacy, however, we are led to conclude that Lincoln badly gauged his situation with Todd, who left him in a broken state on New Year’s. As James Conkling wrote three weeks later regarding his friend, “Poor L. how are the mighty fallen!” He described Lincoln after emerging from a week in bed as “reduced and emaciated in appearance” and unable “to speak above a whisper.” Conkling knew him well enough to say that Lincoln would not admit it, but “[s]urely tis the worst of pain to love and not be loved again.”68 Lincoln preferred to have Speed and others think he was smitten with Matilda than admit that Todd was not prepared to be his “particular star.” It was Todd who inflicted the pain of not loving him enough to stop seeing other men.

She undoubtedly enjoyed being wooed by him and others. She may well have favored him as a marriage prospect despite the reservations of her sister and brother-in-law.69 She was not heads over heels in love with him at this point, for she could not have shown such coolness

65. Clinton, Mrs. Lincoln, 53; Baker, Mary Todd Lincoln, 91; Ruth P. Randall, Mary Lincoln: Biography of a Marriage (Boston: Little, Brown, 1953), 49.
66. McDermott, Mary Lincoln, 46.
68. James C. Conkling to Mercy Levering, January 21, 1841, Conkling Family Papers, box 1, folder 1, ALPL.
69. Randall argues that the opposition of Ninian and Elizabeth Edwards to Lincoln as a prospect for Mary was due to their “class consciousness.” Randall, Mary Lincoln, 40–42.
in her letters to Levering and been so closed-mouthed about their relationship if she had been. Her letters to Levering are the most direct, reliable guides to her feelings. She loved her female friend and also loved being in the social whirl in Springfield. If Lincoln could not handle her flirtations with other men before they were wed, that was his problem and he could leave. There were plenty of fish in her sea, and she made sure he knew it. By her own admission, after the separation she entertained Webb enough times to have the tongues of others clacking about them.

The biggest fish in the sea, however, was Stephen Douglas. Todd’s feelings for Douglas are better documented than his for her. Herndon described Todd as walking on the street “arm-in-arm” with Douglas past Lincoln in order to fire his passion for her.\(^1\) Knowing how much Lincoln resented the “Democratic giant’s” political rise, it would have been in keeping with Todd’s coolness to link herself to Douglas in public so Lincoln would learn about it or see them himself in the months following the first of January.\(^2\) Although Douglas was reputed to be a man about town, his career and his political friends (all male) preoccupied him through his twenties. If Herndon’s assumption that Todd dallied with Douglas mainly to make Lincoln jealous has merit, one wonders whether Douglas fostered the appearance of an affair simply to irritate his Whig adversary. Being a bachelor was no longer an obstacle to seeking any office, and the main prize for Douglas at this time was the next highest office, not a wife.\(^3\)

While she enjoyed playing the field, Todd obviously favored Lincoln enough to miss his attentions. Her letter to Levering in June 1841 made that clear. She regretted not seeing him “in the gay world for months” and hoped he would resume his place in society. She of course knew the cause of his retreat and playfully referenced it. Joshua Speed’s “worthy friend deems me unworthy of notice.”\(^4\) This was a woman who liked Lincoln, enjoyed her hold on him, and hoped he would get in the game again. But he would not be able to dictate the rules. They would not reconnect, however, for more than another year and a half.

That we have to infer so much about the Lincoln-Todd courtship suggests much about the ambivalence that characterized their

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\(^{1}\) Wilson and Davis, \textit{Herndon’s Lincoln}, 135.


relationship. When Lincoln began his law practice in Springfield, John T. Stuart was engaged to Virginia Nash and sent her letters that poured out his passion for her. Lincoln could not have been unaware of how intense his partner’s love was for the woman he would marry in October 1837. Lincoln certainly did not feel the same way about Mary Owens, and he would not be able to express himself in a similar fashion to Mary Todd. As in the case of his despair over Ann Rutledge’s death, his madness following the breakup with Todd is the strongest evidence of his feelings for her. For her part, Todd must have learned from Levering how expressive James Conkling was, as reflected in the letters he wrote her. Lincoln’s restraint was in stark contrast to the tender offerings Todd’s best friend received.

Lincoln struggled so with his feelings toward the women he courted that he had difficulty being frank with them, honest with himself, or straightforward in what he confided to friends. For example, on the same day that he saw Mary Owens for the last time, Lincoln wrote her a letter saying he worried that she might be “mistaken in regard to what my real feelings towards you are.” If he knew for sure that she understood how he felt he would not bother her with this letter, but he wanted to do right by all women, especially her. And while he did not want her to think that he desired to end their “acquaintance,” he wanted their relationship to depend entirely on what she desired, and if she felt that it would not “contribute” to her happiness but continued it only out of a sense of obligation to him, he released her from that bond. This torturous letter must have made Owens realize that he would have approached their marriage with a sense of duty similar to what he brought to a law case. She knew it was time for her to return to Kentucky. He would later tell a close friend to whom he admitted how Owens’s corpulence repelled him that in the end he thought he “was really a little in love with her.”

Lincoln brought this pattern of ambivalence to his courtship and breakup with Mary Todd. Over time he may have convinced himself that his major concern was for her happiness rather than his own. In his March 1842 letter he told Speed that believing Todd was still

74. John Todd Stuart to Mary Virginia Nash, July 10, 1837, and August 11, 1837, ALPL, SC 3157.
75. James C. Conkling to Mercy Ann Levering (Springfield), September 21, 1840; October 24, 1840; January 24, 1841. On October 24 he closed a newsy letter by noting how he missed her “figure at the porch or window” when he approached the gate of the house where she lived. “The house appears like some temple deserted by its presiding genius.” Conkling Family Papers, box 1, folder 1, ALPL.
unhappy “kills my soul” and that he was pleased to learn of her outing with a group to Jacksonville. Really? He, not she, had displayed suicidal despair after the breakup. It was he who referred to the day of the split as “that fatal first.” He had had no direct contact with Todd since that day. Speed may have considered the letter as proof of his friend’s honorableness, but the evidence points to a measure of Lincoln’s disingenuousness or self-delusion in his expressed sentiment.

While the historical record regarding the breakup between Mary Todd and Abraham Lincoln is sufficient to support differing and lengthy interpretations, information relating to their reconciliation and wedding is so scant that any description must primarily emphasize how little we know. Several months after his “fatal first” letter, Lincoln renewed his courtship of Mary Todd. Their reunion was so secretive that there is not a single contemporary record of it or of their surprise wedding on November 4, 1842. While the historical record regarding the breakup between Mary Todd and Abraham Lincoln is sufficient to support differing and lengthy interpretations, information relating to their reconciliation and wedding is so scant that any description must primarily emphasize how little we know. Several months after his “fatal first” letter, Lincoln renewed his courtship of Mary Todd. Their reunion was so secretive that there is not a single contemporary record of it or of their surprise wedding on November 4, 1842. Biographers reconstruct the Todd-Lincoln reconciliation and nuptials entirely from reminiscences more than two decades later.

Remembering wedding anniversaries was an established custom. For example, the new British magazine *Punch* satirized “the model husband” as “keeping the wedding anniversary punctually.” A New Hampshire newspaper referenced “the anniversary of our wedding day.” Southern elite women generally remembered it as the most

78. The secretive, hurried wedding has raised suspicion that Todd may have lured Lincoln into impregnating her during their revived courtship. Wayne C. Temple, *Abraham Lincoln: From Skeptic to Prophet* (Mahomet, Ill.: Mayhaven, 1995), 27; Miller, *Lincoln and His World*, 532. Clinton, *Mrs. Lincoln*, 348 (n. 60), disputes the thesis that Todd may have “blackmailed” Lincoln into marrying her by seducing him in the fall of 1842. Robert Todd Lincoln was born August 1, 1843, or 270 days after the wedding. A recent study of gestation length sponsored by the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences involves 125 singleton births to predominantly white women who were nonsmokers and not obese. The authors assume that conception occurs within twenty-four hours of ovulation. They find that the median length between ovulation and birth was 268 days and the range could extend to 284 days. Among key factors lengthening gestation were age and weight. If Mary Todd’s plumpness contributed to a delay, her youth would have been offsetting. The youngest cohort in the study (23–25 years) experienced the shortest median length of 264 days (Table II). Mary was five weeks shy of her twenty-fourth birthday when she married. In short, Robert Lincoln’s birth date by itself supports either a pre- or postmarital conception. A. M. Jukic, D. D. Baird, C. R. Weinberg, D. R. McConnaughey, and A. J. Wilcox, “Length of Human Pregnancy and Contributors to Its Natural Variation,” *Human Reproduction* 28, no. 10 (2013), 2848–55. I am grateful to Ann Marie Jukic for forwarding a copy of this article to me.


80. “Select Tales,” *Dover Gazette and Strafford Advertiser* (Dover, New Hampshire), August 26, 1843.
important day of their lives.81 The Lincolns, however, do not appear to have celebrated November 4. Whenever it fell on the first Tuesday in November, Abraham tried to be in Springfield for the election. Otherwise he often remained elsewhere on the circuit or campaigning.82

In contrast, the Lincolns could not easily forget January 1, 1841. Lincoln must have been reminded of his January 1 travail annually because in Springfield, as across the country, it remained a special day marked by parties and special events.83 On the day before the fifth anniversary of their breakup Lincoln bought books by woman authors on cooking and housekeeping as gifts for Mary, along with lampshades and groceries.84 Buying a present for one’s wife must have been a fairly unique act to commemorate an unusual, unforgettable New Year’s Day. One wonders how they referred to it when they arrived in the White House and hosted the customary New Year’s Day reception at the Executive Mansion from 1862 to 1864. The event had to be postponed a day in 1865 when New Year’s fell on a Sunday.

How did each recall their New Year’s Day confrontation after years of marriage? Mary shaped the story of their courtship along a line that was consistent with the letters she had written at the time to Mercy Levering. She enjoyed emphasizing Abraham’s jealousy of Douglas, who rose to great prominence before her husband did. Herndon reported that a Lincoln relation who lived with the couple for a brief time after their marriage said that Mary confided in her that she had loved Douglas and had been engaged to him.85 Similarly, twenty years later Elizabeth Keckley, who served as couturier and confidante to Mrs. Lincoln for her four years in the White House, revealed that in Springfield Mary had had “a half-dozen gentlemen biting at the hook she had baited” but that she “smiled more sweetly” on Douglas,

82. November 4, 1850; November 4, 1854; November 4, 1856; November 4, 1860. Only on Sunday, November 4, 1860, were guests at their home for tea to celebrate the upcoming presidential election; http://www.thelincolnl.org/Calendar.
84. *The Lincoln Log*, December 31, 1846. Lincoln usually made an end-of-the-year deposit at Robert Irwin’s general store and bank or had his account adjusted by Irwin. See entries for December 31, 1842; December 30, 1843; December 31, 1844; and December 31, 1845.
85. Wilson and Davis, *Herndon’s Lincoln*, 135; idem, *Herndon’s Informants*, 646. The informant was Harriet Hanks, the daughter of Lincoln’s stepsister. Jesse Weik interviewed her using her married name, Harriet A. Chapman, in 1886–87. Clinton argues some of these “family memories” regarding Douglas were “exaggerated.” Clinton, *Mrs. Lincoln*, 49.
who first proposed marriage, and Lincoln.\textsuperscript{86} That Mary not only used Douglas to make her favorite beau jealous but also used him to get under her husband’s skin at various points of their marriage, including the presidency, is credible. Neither Hanks nor Keckley made the story of Mary’s feelings about Douglas from whole cloth. We can assume both women were led to their conclusions from remarks Mary made to them in the spirit of what she had written to Mercy Levering. The First Lady’s dance and conversations with Senator Douglas at the Inaugural Ball in 1861 no doubt fired recollections of their courtship days that may have rekindled her sense of flirtation and desire to tease her husband a bit in the White House.\textsuperscript{87}

In contrast to Mary’s self-serving reconstruction of their courtship, we can be certain that Lincoln never compromised her by telling Herndon or anyone else after their wedding that he had tried to end their relationship or that he had been pressured into marrying her, as one attendee later claimed.\textsuperscript{88} That would have been dishonorable and inconsistent with his exchange of vows with his wife. It is inconceivable that Lincoln, who kept his most intimate feelings to himself, would have confided to any friend after November 4, 1842, that he had had misgivings about his marriage. Had he known that after his death Herndon would claim in a public lecture that he had loved only Ann Rutledge, Lincoln would have severed their partnership and friendship. Never would he have disparaged his spouse. It is worth

\textsuperscript{86} Elizabeth Keckley, \textit{Behind the Scenes, or Thirty Years a Slave, and Four Years in the White House} (New York: G. W. Carleton, 1868), 101. Keckley has not always received the respect she deserves. Randall, for example, states that the book by Keckley, “Mrs. Lincoln’s colored seamstress,” was “ghostwritten” and thus she cautions readers to be wary when using it. Randall, \textit{Mary Lincoln}, 39. This reflects the skepticism that greeted the work when it was first published and after it was reprinted in the early twentieth century. In fact, recent scholarship points to Keckley’s authorship and reliability. On the skepticism toward and authenticity of her book, see Sara Edelstein, “Elizabeth Hobbs Keckley (1818–1907),” \textit{Legacy} 29, no. 1 (2012), 148–59. She assesses Keckley’s “significance as a writer” and offers a critical approach to her one work. Edelstein notes “before and during the Civil War, Keckley occupied an exceptional role as a White House insider” (149). Unlike other authors of slave narratives, her focus was on the reputation of Mary Lincoln, which she sought to correct from harsh judgments. I am grateful to Professor Edelstein for an e-mail (February 10, 2014) stating that Keckley’s authorship “is the prevailing view in American literary scholarship.” Keckley had learned to read and write as a slave girl and, as a free woman, set up a successful dressmaking business in St. Louis and then Washington, where she met the First Lady. Jennifer Fleischner, \textit{Mrs. Lincoln and Mrs. Keckly} (New York, 2003), 44, 186–87, 200–201. On her writing letters and her White House memoir, ibid., 313, 315.

\textsuperscript{87} Quitt, \textit{Stephen A. Douglas}, 177.

\textsuperscript{88} James H. Matheny (1866) in Wilson and Davis, \textit{Herndon’s Informants}, 251.
emphasizing that he never breathed a word about Ann Rutledge to Herndon, who discovered the romance only after Lincoln died.\textsuperscript{89}

In sum, while several accounts of the courtship attribute Lincoln’s breakdown to his sense of honor after breaking up with Todd, he deserves much more credit for how he treated both the breakup and the wedding over the years of their marriage. He never rehashed the story of their beginnings to undercut his wife, although he could not have been oblivious to her self-serving narrative in which she featured his jealousy toward Douglas. She may have had the upper hand when they courted and handled their split with more aplomb than he, but in the long run she proved to be less honorable than her husband, who never recounted to anyone else what happened either on New Year’s Day 1841 or on November 4, 1842. During their marriage, just as he deferred to her in the domestic sphere, he let her view about the fatal first remain uncontested.\textsuperscript{90} Before he wed, a main theme in Lincoln’s romantic relationships had been his ambivalence, wavering between engagement and disengagement. Whereas Mary Lincoln lost a measure of the coolness and self-assuredness she had possessed as a sought-after young woman living in her married sister’s home, Abraham gained in his household with her the satisfaction of a steadfast commitment to a woman, a bond that he had yearned for without attainment for so long. He never lost his underlying contentment with his wife, even as she became somewhat erratic in their later years. He could not prevent his friends, however, from putting out different versions of their courtship as Herndon’s informants after he died, but certainly would not have approved of their discrediting her account or demeaning her place in his affections. His voice never dishonored his wife.\textsuperscript{91}

\textsuperscript{89} Wilson, “William H. Herndon and Mary Todd Lincoln,” 119.

\textsuperscript{90} On the Lincolns’ gendered separation of spheres inside and outside their home, see Winkle, \textit{Abraham and Mary Lincoln}, 61–64.

\textsuperscript{91} Missing from Herndon’s collection is testimony from the person who knew Mary Todd’s mind and heart best in 1841, her friend Mercy Levering Conkling. Curiously neither she nor her husband contributed to the \textit{Herndon Record}, except for a letter regarding the Emancipation Proclamation that Lincoln in 1863 sent to Conkling, who forwarded a copy to Jesse Weik in 1889. Wilson and Davis, \textit{Herndon’s Informants}, 672. The Conklings remained friends with the Lincolns through their Springfield years together. How close Mercy and Mary remained after their respective marriages, however, is unclear. After the presidential election of 1860, Mercy wrote to her son, “[M]any that were friends before have no acquaintance with each other.” Mercy L. Conkling to Clinton Conkling, December 3, 1860, Conkling Family Papers, box 1, folder 14, Clinton L. Conkling Correspondence, ALPL. The Lincolns may have invited the Conklings to the inauguration, for Mercy informed her disappointed son the week before that event that his father had declined to go to Washington because of the press of business. Mercy Conkling to Clinton Conkling, op. cit., February 27, 1861. Their son had hoped to join them in Baltimore. Clinton Conkling to Mercy Conkling, op. cit., March 3, 1861.