“One of the Best Women I Ever Knew”: Abraham Lincoln and Rebecca Pomeroy

ERIKA HOLST

Of all the burdens that Abraham Lincoln bore in his tragic life, perhaps the hardest was the death of his favorite son, Willie, in February 1862. With the cares of war weighing heavily upon him, Lincoln’s custom was to turn to his family, especially his children, for rare and precious moments of levity and distraction. But Willie’s death from typhoid fever on February 20 left his domestic haven in shambles just as surely as the war was leaving the Union in shambles. A devastated Lincoln was left to look after his other small son, Tad, who was also fighting typhoid, and his heartbroken wife, who lacked the strength to leave her room, all while steering the ship of state through the rough waters of war.

Into this dark and unhappy period in Abraham Lincoln’s life came Rebecca Pomeroy, an army nurse dispatched by Dorothea Dix to take care of Mary Lincoln in her grief and Tad Lincoln in his illness. Although Lincoln was not officially in Pomeroy’s charge, the tender-hearted nurse provided comfort and encouragement to the president, drawing on her own steadfast faith and experience with tragedy. In return, the Lincolns took an active interest in Pomeroy, her son, and her work at the Columbia College Hospital. Although history has largely overlooked Pomeroy and minimized the degree of her intimacy with the Lincolns, evidence of the special nature of their relationship is illuminated by a collection of documents in the possession of the Winthrop Public Library in Winthrop, Massachusetts, which includes a letter by the president and Pomeroy’s wartime diary. Drawing on these documents, as well as an early biography, a picture emerges of how Rebecca Pomeroy, now all but forgotten in Lincoln’s story, became an integral part of Lincoln’s personal life during the Civil War as he struggled to find meaning in tragedy—both his own and the nation’s.

As a child in Chelsea, Massachusetts, the girl who would one day remove minie balls from wounded soldiers and share carriage rides...
with the president of the United States could scarcely have fathomed where her life would take her. Rebecca Rossignol was the daughter of a sea captain who died when she was ten years old, bringing on lean times for Rebecca, her mother, and four siblings. At age nineteen she married Daniel F. Pomeroy, an upholsterer, with whom she had three children: George, born in 1839; William, born in 1841; and Clara, born in 1848. The 1850s proved to be a difficult decade for Pomeroy. Her husband, an asthmatic, was weakened to the point where he required his wife’s constant care. Her son William died in 1856, the same year her son George went to sea. Daughter Clara died in 1857, and Rebecca’s husband finally succumbed in 1860.1

Pomeroy drifted through life for the next year and a half, feeble and heartsick. Her son George returned home, only to leave again to enlist in the volunteer army when the Civil War broke out. Alone in the world, with nothing holding her to Chelsea, she felt inspired to become an army nurse and wrote to Dorothea Dix, the Union army’s superintendent of female nurses, offering her services. To her surprise, Dix answered immediately and requested that Pomeroy come to Washington. Upon arriving, Pomeroy worked briefly at Georgetown Hospital before being deployed to Columbia College Hospital.2

At the new post Pomeroy was placed in charge of a ward of soldiers. Most of her charges during the early days of the war had been felled by disease rather than bullets; as she noted in an October 12, 1861, letter to her sister, “Many of our patients are dying of typhoid. Their tongues are black and their breath is extremely offensive.” Though the work was difficult and ceaseless, Pomeroy nevertheless felt “very happy in mind, still have hold of my Savior’s hand, and believe he has yet a great work for me to do.”3

Five months later Pomeroy would be called to care for another boy stricken with typhoid, although he was not a soldier. Lincoln’s two youngest sons, Willie, age eleven, and Tad, age eight, had fallen ill in the early days of February 1862. The source of their illness was most likely the polluted water from the Potomac that was piped into the White House. Lincoln and Mary cared for the boys during their illness, keeping anxious watch over their sickbeds. A newly discovered document written by Abraham Lincoln indicates that Dorothea Dix offered the services of a nurse, probably Pomeroy, prior to Willie’s

2. Anna L. Boyden, Echoes from Hospital and White House: A Record of Mrs. Rebecca R. Pomeroy’s Experience in War-Times (Boston: D. Lothrop, 1884), 11–19.
death. The note, written on February 19, thanks Dix for her inquiry and states “they do not, just now, need the nurse, but will preserve Miss Dix’s note, and call on her if occasion hereafter shall require.”4

Willie died at 5 p.m. the next day, and two days after that, with Tad still ailing and Mary inconsolable, Lincoln decided to accept Dix’s offer of a nurse to care for the family. Despite misgivings over leaving her charges at Columbia College Hospital, many of whom were gravely ill, Pomeroy agreed to Dix’s request to attend to the Lincoln family.5 In a diary entry of February 22, 1864, Pomeroy noted that it was “two years since I first went to the White House with Miss Dix to look after Taddy, who was very sick with typhoid fever, and Willie dead in the house.”6

Pomeroy cared intensively for Tad for several days, as he was not declared out of mortal danger until February 267 and continued to be ill well into March. His aunt Elizabeth Edwards wrote on March 1 that “Tad is still feeble, can merely walk a few steps,”8 and on March 10 his father wrote him a check for $5 to be cashed “when he is well enough to permit.”9 Mary Lincoln, too, was incapacitated—the severity of her grief prevented her from leaving her room for several weeks. As late as May, Mary wrote in a letter to her old Springfield neighbor that “your very welcome letter was received two weeks since, and my sadness & ill health have alone prevented my replying to it—We have met with so overwhelming an affliction in the death of our beloved Willie . . . that I am so completely unnerved, that I can scarcely command myself to write.”10

During this time Pomeroy was not the only caregiver in the White House. Elizabeth Keckley, Mary’s seamstress and confidante, looked after her, as did Mary Jane Welles, wife of Secretary of the Navy Gideon Welles, and Eliza Browning, wife of Illinois senator Orville Hickman Browning. Elizabeth Edwards, Mary’s sister, was also summoned from

4. Abraham Lincoln to Dorothea Dix, February 19, 1862, Samuel Finley Breese Morse Papers; Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University.
6. Rebecca Pomeroy Diary, February 22, 1864, Rebecca Pomeroy Collection.
9. Check of Abraham Lincoln to Thomas Lincoln, March 10, 1862, Papers of Abraham Lincoln, document 202706.
Springfield to keep Mary company. While these four provided emotional support to Mrs. Lincoln, Pomeroy and at least two other women were called in to administer Tad’s medicine according to doctors’ orders and to watch at his bedside. As a professional nurse, Pomeroy did not register on the social radars of the Lincolns’ intimate friends—her name does not appear anywhere in the letters written by Elizabeth Edwards during her stay at the White House, nor in the diary of Orville Browning, who, with his wife, spent many hours by Tad’s sickbed after Willie’s death.

If the Lincolns’ friends saw her (or saw through her) as merely “the help,” the Lincolns themselves, by contrast, were taken with Pomeroy, particularly the president. Later she would recall that Lincoln asked her repeatedly to describe her own tragic tale of losing two children and a husband and how she eventually came to find peace through God. In a letter of March 11, 1862, she wrote to a friend, “Dear Mrs. F., how mysteriously God works. Two years since, in the seclusion of my little home, I was encouraging my husband to have confidence in God when the time of our separation should come, and now it was given me to tell Mr. Lincoln in my poor, weak way how wonderfully the Lord had sustained me and brought me out of darkness into light. I bade him take courage in this his time of trial, when God was preparing him to stand firm in duty for the salvation of his country. I shall never forget how the tears coursed down his cheeks as I spoke of God’s love in affliction, and I besought him to cast his burden upon him. He told me on parting that he enjoyed my visits, to come often, and he would see me home.”

Pomeroy was earnest in her desire that the president should turn to God in his time of need. Whether Lincoln ever did embrace Christianity in any conventional sense is a matter of unending debate, though not for lack of trying on Pomeroy’s part. In her diary she pasted (one imagines with some satisfaction) a newspaper clipping relating the president’s speech to a visiting delegation of the Synod of the Baltimore Old School Presbyterians, which included the following: “I have often wished that I was a more devout man than I am; nevertheless, amid the greatest difficulties of my administration, when I could not see any other resort, I would place my whole reliance to God, knowing that all would go well, and that He would decide for the right.”

Mary Lincoln, too, seemed fascinated by Pomeroy’s forbearance

13. Rebecca Pomeroy Diary, November 2, 1863.
in the face of difficulty. On March 11 Pomeroy wrote, “Mrs. Lincoln secludes herself from all society, and I was alone with her most of the day in her room. When I told her of my trials and afflictions, and above all, of God’s dealings with me, she could not understand how I could be so happy under it all, and bursting into tears, said she wished she could feel so too.”

When Elizabeth Edwards was called back to Springfield, Lincoln arranged with Dorothea Dix to have Pomeroy, who had since returned to her hospital duties, sent back to the Lincolns to keep Mary company. Mary always had a needy streak, and it came out in full force in the midst of personal difficulties. Her sister Elizabeth wrote home to her daughter during Mary’s bereavement, “She feels since her trouble that she cannot again be alone,” and, a week later, “Aunt Mary is nervous and dependent upon the companionship of someone.” Indeed, when Pomeroy took her place as Mary’s new companion, she noted that “Mrs. Lincoln is very anxious for me to stay here all summer; but if I cannot, always to come here for rest. Everything is done for my comfort, and I go to ride with them every day.”

A little later she wrote, “Mrs. Lincoln is very anxious that I should leave the hospital and make my home with her, but I do not know what a day may bring forth, and I do not encourage her in the least. I am happy here in doing my duty by those brave men, and would not change places with Mrs. Lincoln for all her honors. She suffers from depression of spirits, but I do think if she would only come here and look at the poor soldiers occasionally it would be better for her.” As it turned out, Mary would follow this suggestion later on, when her strength had returned.

The Lincolns deeply appreciated Pomeroy’s ministrations to them in their time of need and sought ways to repay her kindness. Although she did not request any personal favors, Pomeroy did rely on the president’s goodwill for the benefit of her son George, as well as her other “boys,” the soldiers she tended in the hospital.

George, at that time, was enlisted in the volunteer army, presumably as a private, though he desired a commission in the regular army. When Pomeroy mentioned this to Lincoln, he was eager to oblige her. A letter from Pomeroy to her son on May 16, 1862, illustrates not only Lincoln’s desire to help Pomeroy, but also her intimacy with the Lincoln family—indeed, the letter was written on Executive Man-

16. Quoted in Boyden, 73.
sion stationery. It began, “I have been talking to the President at the Breakfast table, about that Lieutenancy, and he asked me your height, age, &c, and he then told me that Mr. Stanton Secretary of War had decided not to take any more Volunteers to put in the Regular Army, as it created such unkind feelings towards those who had the office, and then again those left behind were feeling Jealous. But he told me if you was in sound health, and weighed 140, perfectly well in Phisical strength and some inches over five feet and you felt that you wanted to join the Regular Army, and I requested it, for the President is very particular, he would see what could be done for you to oblige me.”

Pomeroy asked her son to think the matter over, and in the wake of his affirmation that he did, indeed, want a commission, the president moved to oblige her. In a revealing letter of July 15 to Secretary of War Edwin M. Stanton, Lincoln wrote: “This young man—George K. Pomeroy—is the son of one of the best women I ever knew—a widow who has lost all her other children, and has cheerfully given this one to the war, and devotes herself exclusively to nursing our sick and wounded soldiers. I wish to do something for him, and, even, to strain a point for that object. I wish you would see him, and give him a second Lieutenancy in the regular Army, in the first vacancy not already promised.” The request was heeded, and on July 19, George was commissioned a second lieutenant in the Third Regiment of Infantry.

On July 29, Lincoln’s private secretary John Hay wrote Pomeroy, saying, “The President desires me to ask you the correct address of your son Lieut Geo. K. Pomeroy. He desires to send him his commission, in the United States Army.” George apparently served his country well, for on July 1, 1864, he was promoted to first lieutenant.

Pomeroy, always looking for ways to raise the spirits of her sick and wounded boys at the hospital, gratefully accepted the help of both Lincolns to accomplish this end. Both Mary and the president took an active interest in the hospitalized soldiers, visiting them and sending flowers and fruit to cheer them. On March 27, 1862, Pomeroy wrote that “Mrs. Lincoln gave me pictures for my ward, photographs of Willie and Tad, and also several dollars’ worth of pot plants for my bay

18. Rebecca Pomeroy to George K. Pomeroy, May 16, 1862, Rebecca Pomeroy Collection.
window, fruit, and other luxuries for the boys. The President ordered carriage and horses to accompany me to the College.” These visits would continue sporadically throughout the course of the war. In May 1864, as intense fighting in Virginia brought a flood of wounded soldiers into Washington’s hospitals, the Lincolns made two visits to Columbia College. On May 13 Pomeroy noted in her diary that “In the evening the President and wife rode up to the College and left some very beautiful flowers for our wounded boys to look at which brought tears from many as they thought of home.” On May 17 she recorded, “Mrs. Lincoln came to the Hosp. and enquired of Dr. Carlyle about me. Did not come on my ward, but walked through the tents. Brought some beautiful flowers.”

Perhaps the most memorable instance of Lincoln visiting the troops occurred on Sunday, May 18, 1862. As Pomeroy recalled in her biography, Lincoln took special pains to offer kindness, saying “Mrs. Pomeroy, I want to do something for you; what shall it be? Be perfectly free to tell me what you want most, and if it is in my power, you shall have it,” to which the startled woman replied, “If Mr. Lincoln would only come to Columbia College and see my boys, how much good it would do them!” Lincoln readily agreed. He took with him Senator Orville Browning, who recorded the incident in his diary: “At 3 P M the President sent for me, and he and I rode out to the Hospital at Columbia College—Went all through it, and shook hands with and talked to all the sick and wounded.”

In a letter written at the time, Pomeroy related the scene: “I was in my room at the time, and the surgeon in charge came and told me that the President would like to see me. As I went to the door, lo and behold! A great company of gentlemen were waiting for me to introduce them to His Excellency. I was taken by surprise and did the honors of introducing him to all the surgeons, stewards, cadets, and the gentlemen that followed, as well as the nurses. Then the Surgeon-General invited me to do escort duty to the President, by going all through the hospital, which I did, and then went out into the tents and performed the duty there. The soldiers were called out by the officers, arranged in a straight line, and Mr. Lincoln, in his unpretentious way, with his hat off, shook hands with each one, asking his name and the name of his regiment and company. Such a scene will never be effaced from the

22. Quoted in Boyden, 60.
23. Rebecca Pomeroy Diary, May 17, 1862.
24. Quoted in Boyden, 93–94.
memory of the soldiers as the lame, halt and withered came straggling into line at the unexpected beat of the drum.”

Pomeroy even took the controversial step of introducing Lincoln to the hospital’s African-American kitchen staff. Though several officers later expressed their disgust with Pomeroy’s egalitarianism, Lincoln reportedly greeted the help kindly, grasping their hands and asking their names.

The incident was commemorated in verse dated May 18, 1862, by a friend of Pomeroy’s, Mrs. E. J. Russell: “A blessing on our President / Who came to see us all, / Best blessings on his care worn face / Is echoed from each hall. / Yes blessings on our President, / From the over-worn & weary, / The desolate & comfortless, / To whom the earth is dreary. / A blessing on his home & store, / Comes from the soldier hoary, / And from the man in middle life / The young man in his glory. / To evry man, in evry words, / From fourth to lower story, / He gave the word of kind regard, / The ‘rebel’ with the ‘tory.’ / A welcome had to all he gave, / Of every clime and nation, / The sable son, from off the wreck, / The ‘daughter’ from the kitchen. / Blessings from the young & old, / ‘the nurse’ hears without number, / As wrapping in the blanket folds, / They sink in peaceful slumber.” The poem is addressed to Mrs. R. R. Pomroy “through whom we received the honor of a visit from our President.”

Rebecca Pomeroy’s relationship with the Lincoln family would continue throughout the war. Though months might pass without their seeing each other, as matters of state concerned Lincoln and sick and wounded soldiers filled Pomeroy’s time at the hospital, the Lincolns continued to visit or send gifts to the hospital and to request Pomeroy’s presence at the White House in times of need. When Mary Lincoln was injured in a carriage accident in July 1863, Lincoln sent for Pomeroy, who stayed by Mary’s bedside for three weeks. In October 1864, Lincoln received several threatening letters, and an anxious Mary sent for Pomeroy once more. Pomeroy agreed to go to the family, though only for “a short time, as I cannot be spared longer.” This may have been the last time she saw them, though they were never far from her thoughts. At the beginning of April she wrote, “My soul is in the Lincoln family, and why I am so distressed for them all God only knows. Sometimes I think God has put this heavy burden upon me for some wise purpose best
known to himself. My heart cries out to God in behalf of Mrs. Lincoln and our dear, good President. I feel that I can pray for him hourly.”30

Lincoln’s assassination on April 14 ended the warm relationship between the woman he called “one of the best he ever knew” and the man she called “my dear friend, the President.”31 Pomeroy would return to Chelsea, Massachusetts, where she founded a home for indigent women and quietly lived out the rest of her days. History would soon largely forget this woman, and she would become no more than a footnote in the story of Lincoln’s presidency. In reality, however, she was a dear and trusted friend and confidant to both Lincolns, one who gave them strength through their darkest hours.

30. Quoted in Boyden, 246.
31. Rebecca Pomeroy to Mrs. F, May 2, 1865, quoted in Boyden, 248.