



Elizabeth Keckley

BEHIND THE SCENES, or, Thirty Years a Slave, and Four Years in the White House

1868

EXCERPTS: Dressmaker to Mary Todd Lincoln

Elizabeth Keckley was born as a slave in Virginia about 1818. As a young woman she moved to St. Louis with a new owner and learned the skills of a seamstress and dressmaker. By 1855 she had amassed enough money through profits and loans to purchase her freedom for \$1200. In 1860 she moved to Washington, DC, and soon developed an elite clientele among the women of the nation's capital, including Mrs. Jefferson Davis. During the Lincolns' years in the White House (1861-1865), Keckley served as dressmaker and personal maid to First Lady Mary Todd Lincoln.



I left St. Louis in the spring of 1860, taking the [train] cars direct for Baltimore, where I stopped six weeks, attempting to realize a sum of money by forming classes of young colored women, and teaching them my system of cutting and fitting dresses. The scheme was not successful, for after six weeks of labor and vexation, I left Baltimore with scarcely money enough to pay my fare to Washington. Arriving in the capital, I sought and obtained work at two dollars and a half per day. However, as I was notified that I could only remain in the city ten days without obtaining a license to do so, such being the law, and as I did not know whom to apply for assistance, I was sorely troubled. I also had to have some one vouch to the authorities that I was a free woman. My means were too scanty, and my profession too precarious to warrant my purchasing license. In my perplexity I called on a lady for whom I was sewing, Miss Ringold, a member of Gen. Mason's family, from Virginia. I stated my case, and she kindly volunteered to render me all the assistance in her power. She called on Mayor Burritt with me, and Miss Ringold succeeded in making an arrangement for me to remain in Washington without paying the sum required for a license . . . I rented apartments in a good locality, and soon had a good run of custom.

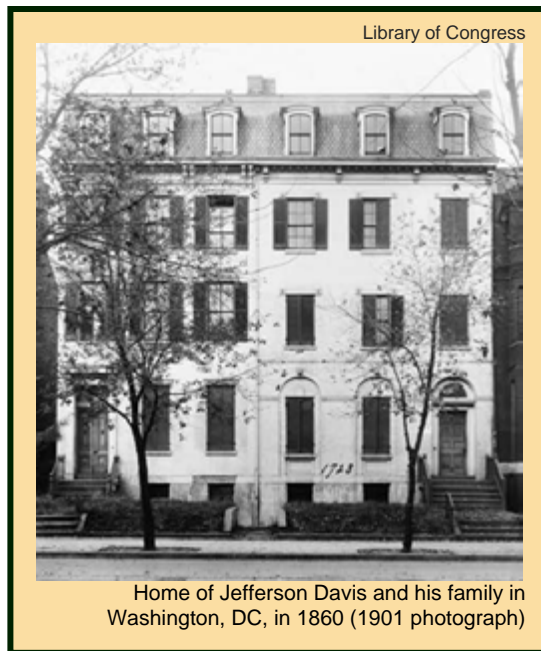
The summer passed, winter came, and I was still in Washington. Mrs. Davis, wife of Senator Jefferson Davis, came from the South in November of 1860, with her husband. Learning that Mrs. Davis wanted a modiste [dressmaker], I presented myself, and was employed by her on the recommendation of one of my patrons and her intimate friend, Mrs. Captain Hetsill. I went to the house to work, but finding that they were such late risers, and as I had to fit many dresses on Mrs. Davis, I told her that I should prefer giving half the day to her, working the other in my own room for some of my other lady patrons. Mrs. D. consented to the proposition, and it was arranged that I should come to her own house every day after 12 M. It was the winter before the breaking out of that fierce and bloody war between the two sections of the country; and as Mr. Davis occupied a leading position, his house was the resort of politicians and statesmen from the South. Almost every night, as I learned from the servants and other members of the family, secret meetings were held at the house; and some of these meetings were protracted to a very late hour. The prospects of war were freely discussed in my presence by Mr. and Mrs.

Davis and their friends. The holidays were approaching, and Mrs. Davis kept me busy in manufacturing articles of dress for herself and children. . . .

Mrs. Jefferson Davis asked Keckley to move back to the South with them and work as her dressmaker. Keckley considered the offer but decided, with war approaching, "to cast my lot among the people of the North."

I parted with Mrs. Davis kindly, half promising to join her in the South if further deliberation should induce me to change my views. A few weeks before she left Washington I made two chintz wrappers for her. She said that she must give up expensive dressing for a while; and that she, with the Southern people, now that war was imminent, must learn to practise lessons of economy. She left some fine needle-work in my hands, which I finished, and forwarded to her at Montgomery, Alabama, in the month of June, through the assistance of Mrs. Emory, one of her oldest and best friends.

Since bidding them good-bye at Washington, early in the year 1860, I have never met any of the Davis family. Years of excitement, years of bloodshed, and hundreds of thousands of graves intervene between the months I spent in the family and now. The years have brought many changes; and in view of these terrible changes even I, who was once a slave, who have been punished with the cruel lash, who have experienced the heart and soul tortures of a slave's life, can say to Mr. Jefferson Davis, "Peace! you have suffered! Go in peace." . . .



EVER since arriving in Washington I had a great desire to work for the ladies of the White House, and to accomplish this end I was ready to make almost any sacrifice consistent with propriety. Work came in slowly, and I was beginning to feel very much embarrassed, for I did not know how I was to meet the bills staring me in the face. It is true, the bills were small, but then they were formidable to me, who had little or nothing to pay them with.

While in this situation I called at the Ringolds, where I met Mrs. Captain Lee. Mrs. L. was in a state bordering on excitement, as the great event of the season, the dinner-party given in honor of the Prince of Wales [heir to the throne of England], was soon to come off, and she must have a dress suitable for the occasion. The silk had been purchased, but a dress-maker had not yet been found. Miss Ringold recommended me, and I received the order to make the dress. . . The dress was done in time, and it gave complete satisfaction. Mrs. Lee attracted great attention at the dinner-party, and her elegant dress proved a good card for me. I received numerous orders, and was relieved from all pecuniary embarrassments.

One of my patrons was Mrs. Gen. McClean, a daughter of Gen. Sumner. One day when I was very busy, Mrs. McC. drove up to my apartments, came in where I was engaged with my needle, and in her emphatic way said:

"Lizzie, I am invited to dine at Willard's on next Sunday, and positively I have not a dress fit to wear on the occasion. I have just purchased material, and you must commence work on it right away."

"But Mrs. McClean," I replied, "I have more work now promised than I can do. It is impossible for me to make a dress for you to wear on Sunday next."

"Pshaw! Nothing is impossible. I must have the dress made by Sunday"; and she spoke with some impatience.

"I am sorry," I began, but she interrupted me.

“Now don’t say no again. I tell you that you must make the dress. I have often heard you say that you would like to work for the ladies of the White House. Well, I have it in my power to obtain you this privilege. I know Mrs. Lincoln well, and you shall make a dress for her provided you finish mine in time to wear at dinner on Sunday.”

“The inducement was the best that could have been offered. I would undertake the dress if I should have to sit up all night — every night, to make my pledge good. I sent out and employed assistants, and, after much worry and trouble, the dress was completed to the satisfaction of Mrs. McClean. It appears that Mrs. Lincoln had upset a cup of coffee on the dress she designed wearing on the evening of the reception after the inauguration of Abraham Lincoln as President of the United States, which rendered it necessary that she should have a new one for the occasion. On asking Mrs. McClean who her dress-maker was, that lady promptly informed her,

“Lizzie Keckley.”

“Lizzie Keckley? The name is familiar to me. She used to work for some of my lady friends in St. Louis, and they spoke well of her. Can you recommend her to me?”

“With confidence. Shall I send her to you?”

“If you please. I shall feel under many obligations for your kindness.” . . .

On March 5, 1861, the day after Lincoln’s first inauguration, Elizabeth Keckley arrived at the White House for her interview with Mary Todd Lincoln.

Tuesday morning, at eight o’clock, I crossed the threshold of the White House for the first time. I was shown into a waiting-room, and informed that Mrs. Lincoln was at breakfast. In the waiting-room I found no less than three mantua [gown]-makers waiting for an interview with the wife of the new President. It seems that Mrs. Lincoln had told several of her lady friends that she had urgent need for a dress-maker, and that each of these friends had sent her mantua-maker to the White House. Hope fell at once. With so many rivals for the position sought after, I regarded my chances for success as extremely doubtful. I was the last one summoned to Mrs. Lincoln’s presence. All the others had a hearing, and were dismissed. I went up-stairs timidly, and entering the room with nervous step, discovered the wife of the President standing by a window, looking out, and engaged in lively conversation with a lady, Mrs. Grimsly, as I afterwards learned. Mrs. L. came forward, and greeted me warmly.

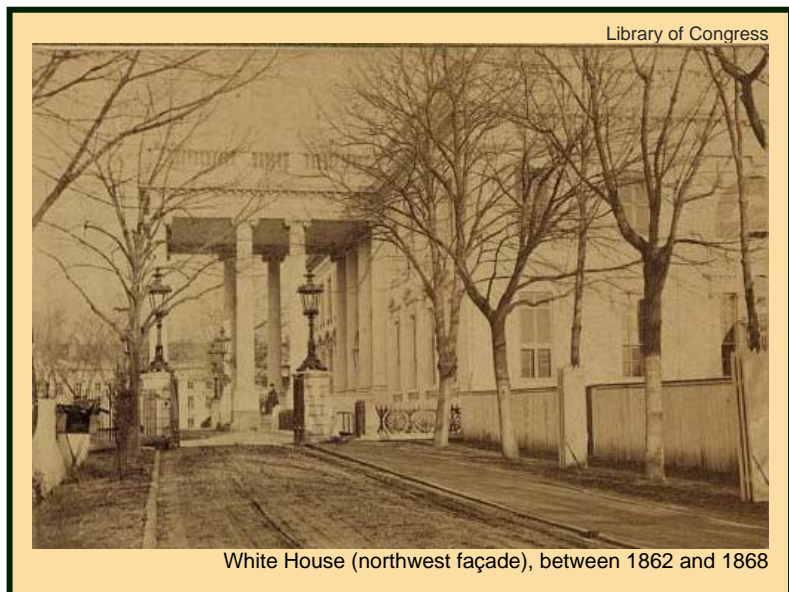
“You have come at last. Mrs. Keckley, who have you worked for in the city?”

“Among others, Mrs. Senator Davis has been one of my best patrons,” was my reply.

“Mrs. Davis! So you have worked for her, have you? Of course you gave satisfaction; so far, good. Can you do my work?”

“Yes, Mrs. Lincoln. Will you have much work for me to do?”

“That, Mrs. Keckley, will depend altogether upon your prices. I trust that your terms are reasonable. I cannot afford to be extravagant. We are just from the West [Illinois], and are poor. If you do not charge



too much, I shall be able to give you all my work.”

“I do not think there will be any difficulty about charges, Mrs. Lincoln; my terms are reasonable.”

“Well, if you will work cheap, you shall have plenty to do. I can’t afford to pay big prices, so I frankly tell you so in the beginning.”

The terms were satisfactorily arranged, and I measured Mrs. Lincoln, took the dress with me, a bright rose-colored moire [wavy lustrous finish]-antique, and returned the next day to fit it on her. A number of ladies were in the room, all making preparations for the levee [formal reception] to come off on Friday night. These ladies, I learned, were relatives of Mrs. L.’s, — Mrs. Edwards and Mrs. Kellogg, her own sisters, and Elizabeth Edwards and Julia Baker, her nieces. Mrs. Lincoln this morning was dressed in a cashmere wrapper, quilted down the front; and she wore a simple head-dress. The other ladies wore morning robes.

I was hard at work on the dress, when I was informed that the levee had been postponed from Friday night till Tuesday night. This, of course, gave me more time to complete my task. Mrs. Lincoln sent for me, and suggested some alteration in style, which was made. She also requested that I make a waist of blue watered silk for Mrs. Grimsly, as work on the dress would not require all my time.

Tuesday evening came, and I had taken the last stitches on the dress. I folded it and carried it to the White House, with the waist for Mrs. Grimsly. When I went up-stairs, I found the ladies in a terrible state of excitement. Mrs. Lincoln was protesting that she could not go down, for the reason that she had nothing to wear.

“Mrs. Keckley, you have disappointed me — deceived me. Why do you bring my dress at this late hour?”

“Because I have just finished it, and I thought I should be in time.”

“But you are not in time, Mrs. Keckley; you have bitterly disappointed me. I have no time now to dress, and, what is more, I will not dress, and go down-stairs.”

“I am sorry if I have disappointed you, Mrs. Lincoln, for I intended to be in time. Will you let me dress you? I can have you ready in a few minutes.”

“No, I won’t be dressed. I will stay in my room. Mr. Lincoln can go down with the other ladies.”

“But there is plenty of time for you to dress, Mary,” joined in Mrs. Grimsly and Mrs. Edwards. “Let Mrs. Keckley assist you, and she will soon have you ready.”

Thus urged, she consented. I dressed her hair, and arranged the dress on her. It fitted nicely, and she was pleased. Mr. Lincoln came in, threw himself on the sofa, laughed with Willie and little Tad, and then commenced



pulling on his gloves, quoting poetry all the while.

“You seem to be in a poetical mood to-night,” said his wife.

“Yes, mother, these are poetical times,” was his pleasant reply. “I declare, you look charming in that dress. Mrs. Keckley has met with great success.” And then he proceeded to compliment the other ladies.

Mrs. Lincoln looked elegant in her rose-colored moire-antique. She wore a pearl necklace, pearl ear-rings, pearl bracelets, and red roses in her hair. Mrs. Baker was dressed in lemon-colored silk; Mrs. Kellogg in a drab silk, ashes of rose; Mrs. Edwards in a brown and black silk; Miss Edwards in crimson, and Mrs. Grimsly in blue watered silk. Just before starting down-stairs, Mrs. Lincoln’s lace handkerchief was the object of search. It had been displaced by Tad, who was mischievous, and hard to restrain. The handkerchief found, all became serene. Mrs. Lincoln took the President’s arm, and with smiling face led the train below. I was surprised at her grace and composure. I had heard so much, in current and malicious report, of her low life, of her ignorance and vulgarity, that I expected to see her embarrassed on this occasion. Report, I soon saw, was wrong. No queen, accustomed to the usages of royalty all her life, could have comported herself with more calmness and dignity than did the wife of the President. She was confident and self-possessed, and confidence always gives grace.

This levee was a brilliant one, and the only one of the season. I became the regular modiste [dressmaker] of Mrs. Lincoln. I made fifteen or sixteen dresses for her during the spring and early part of the summer, when she left Washington; spending the hot weather at Saratoga, Long Branch, and other places. In the mean time I was employed by Mrs. Senator Douglas, one of the loveliest ladies that I ever met, Mrs. Secretary Wells, Mrs. Secretary Stanton, and others. Mrs. Douglas always dressed in deep mourning, with excellent taste, and several of the leading ladies of Washington society were extremely jealous of her superior attractions. . . .

On April 14, 1865, five weeks after his second inauguration and five days after Lee’s surrender at Appomattox, Lincoln was assassinated in Washington, DC. Elizabeth Keckley accompanied Mrs. Lincoln and her children on their return to Illinois, soon returning to Washington. In her 1868 memoir, Keckley included personal information about Mrs. Lincoln, especially her spending habits and extensive debt (some due to the lavish gowns she ordered from Keckley). “If I have betrayed confidence in anything I have published,” wrote Keckley in her preface, “it has been to place Mrs. Lincoln in a better light before the world.” Mrs. Lincoln did not accept Keckley’s explanation and ended their friendship. Robert Lincoln, the Lincolns’ first son, blocked further publication of the memoir, which was not reprinted until the early 1900s. Little is known about Keckley’s life in the decades after the war. In 1907 she died in Washington, DC, in an institution she had helped found in 1863, the National Home for Destitute Colored Women and Children.



Mary Todd Lincoln as First Lady in gowns likely designed and sewn by Elizabeth Keckley, the mourning gown below probably made for Mrs. Lincoln after the death of her son Willie in 1863 of typhoid fever

