



# MRS. LINCOLN GOES SHOPPING



BY CATHERINE CLINTON

**It was no secret that Mary Lincoln loved to shop and that Manhattan was her favorite marketplace. But in 1867, when she decided to sell instead of buy, the wheels came off the engine of her plans—and her life.**

For any woman in nineteenth-century America with a hankering for fashion and style, Manhattan was the top destination, with two-thirds of all the imported goods in the nation flowing through its port.

Merchants like Charles Lewis Tiffany (who had parlayed his father's dry goods store into a thriving business) declared their establishments more than stores: they were temples of cultural consumerism. An area near City Hall became the envy of any American city: Tiffany's at 550 Broadway, Lord and Taylor's at Grand Street, and A.T. Stewart's at Broadway and Chambers Street. Margaret Getchell at Mr. Macy's expanded emporium became an expert trendsetter for the next generation of female buyers. So how could the First Lady-to-be, Mary Lincoln, resist such an array of offerings?

Mary's first wartime trips to New York in 1861 provoked a torrent of bad publicity.

The cost of her new Haviland china dinner

service, for example, became the talk of towns up and down the Eastern seaboard. It was certainly out of step with the times, since patriotic propaganda emphasized sacrifice. Yet an observer confessed that "extravagance is the besetting sin of New York society."

Following the loss of her eleven-year-old son Willie in February 1862, Mrs. Lincoln went into mourning. When she made a trip to New York in July, she only bought a few books—and she visited a clinic run by the New England Relief Association one day and Park Hospital the next. She returned to Washington to devote herself to White House duties and to volunteering at soldiers' bedsides. But any positive press she garnered for her good works could not dispel the cloud of criticism that seemed to follow her. Social arbiter Mary Clemmer Ames complained of Mrs. Lincoln's shopping sprees: "While her sister women scraped lint...the wife of the President of the United States spent her time rolling to and fro

Ms Lincoln





*Mary Lincoln allowed the public exhibition of her dresses, furs, and jewelry hoping to attract buyers to help pay off her debts.*

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between Washington and New York, intent on extravagant purchases for herself and the White House."

Mary's 1864 Manhattan excursions came at a most inauspicious time. As the *New York Times* reported austerity campaigns, society women were pledging not to use imported fabrics for the duration of the war. A few days later, Washington ladies copied their Manhattan sisters and organized a patriotic society, the "Ladies' National Covenant," which promised to reduce the consumption of foreign luxuries. These developments seemed a direct rebuke of Mrs. Lincoln's personal extravagance. (She showed remarkable resilience when she claimed her shopping would bolster the import-export market and was part of a plan to reassure European nations about the American economy.)

#### **A Scheme to Cover Debts**

During the two years following her husband's assassination,

Mrs. Lincoln retreated dramatically from her former haunts, especially New York's commercial establishments. She fled the East and settled in Chicago, where she tried to survive in severe economic circumstances. Her debts to shopkeepers were steep (over \$25,000, which was equal to her husband's annual salary). Her husband's estate (rumored to be roughly \$75,000) was also tied up for months, which stretched into years.

By the fall of 1867, Mary's vulnerability and financial insecurity led her to make another even more dramatic escape—back to Manhattan. But this time she was hoping to sell, not buy. After holding off her creditors, Mary decided to try to raise some cash by ridding herself of unwanted clothing, perhaps with encouragement from Elizabeth Keckly, who had been her dressmaker, dresser, and confidante while Mary was in the White House. Keckly had helped her pack up her more than four-score trunks when

Mary had exited Washington and had vowed to spend the rest of her life swathed in black.

When Keckly visited the Widow Lincoln during the 1865 Christmas season, she mentioned that she had seen a robe that she had sewn for another client on display at a charity fair. Perhaps this planted a seed, and Mary imagined her own fashionable goods might raise equal interest and donations. Whatever the inspiration, Mary wrote to her dear friend, "Lizzie, I want to ask a favor of you. It is imperative that I should do something for my relief, and I want you to meet me in New York, between 30th and the 5th of September next, to assist me in disposing of a portion of my wardrobe." Mary promised financial assistance to Keckly for her help—down the road. She also asked Keckly to book rooms for the two of them under the name of "Mrs. Clarke," a pseudonym Mary had employed frequently during the Civil War.

Mary arrived in New York on September 17. When Elizabeth arrived the next day, she found her former employer in a stew. Even though Mary had registered at the St. Denis Hotel as "Mrs. Clarke," she had been recognized—her name scrawled all over her trunks was a dead giveaway. The two women—one black, one white—were not allowed rooms on the same floor, nor could they eat together in the dining room.

Mrs. Lincoln had visited a

diamond broker the day before, but despite her use of a pseudonym her identity had been discovered when a piece of engraved jewelry betrayed her. She claimed she had pulled the merchant's name, W.H. Brady, out of a directory. Yet this gentleman also happened to be a staunch Republican who had volunteered assistance for the president's widow. This suited Mary, especially when he moved both women into rooms at the Union Place Hotel and advanced Mary \$600 to cover her New York expenses.

### A Nefarious Plan Backfires

Brady and his partner, Samuel Keyes, hoped to exploit the president's name for their own benefit. Brady argued that advertising the Lincoln name to promote a sale would ensure a bigger take, claiming that "[t]he people will not permit the widow of Abraham Lincoln to suffer." Mary had longed to hear this sentiment, and when he dangled his anticipation of \$100,000 in front of her, Mary fell into the trap. Brady and Keyes then proposed a far-fetched strategy involving backdated letters and threats of exposure.

First, Brady suggested that prominent New Yorkers would be willing to advance Mrs. Lincoln money rather than have the world discover she was compelled to sell her wardrobe. Then he persuaded her to hint that she had held onto correspondence compro-

ming those involved with wartime graft. This whiff of blackmail, he promised, would coax wealthy Manhattan backers to open their wallets if charity failed.

Elizabeth and Mary invited second-hand clothing dealers to their hotel to inspect Mary's wardrobe for sale. Both women then prowled shops on Seventh Avenue, hoping to trade old clothes for new greenbacks. Between Brady's shenanigans and these hit-or-miss attempts to barter away goods, gossip began to circulate about this mystery woman wrapped in widow's weeds who was peddling her wardrobe.

By the first week of October, with her borrowed funds nearly depleted, Mrs. Lincoln gave in to Brady's request to allow public exhibition of the clothes. At the same time, he wanted to publish copies of those supposedly damning private letters in the *New York World*—letters that he had coached Mary to write. Whether she consented to this ploy, or whether Brady simply supplied these letters on his own, is unknown, but the first of the stories about her desperate circumstances appeared in print on October 7, 1867 and provoked a torrent of ridicule.

Mary's clothes, on display in Brady's showroom at 609 Broadway, caused a burst of sensational headlines. Even more stressful, the publicity did not create any commercial interest. She decided to flee and leave Elizabeth Keckly

behind to clean up the mess.

Of the many mistakes Mary made during this period, perhaps none was so foolish as to cross New York machine politician Thurlow Weed. When the Widow Lincoln had sneaked into Manhattan, she was no match for the political kingpin or his cronies. This powerful Republican guard ruled with an iron fist on his home turf, and his hardened backroom operators were perfectly willing to swat down Mary's feeble attempts to play them. To the glee of the Democrats, Weed's *Commercial Advertiser* recycled reports of padded White House accounts and looted public rooms, and pronounced, "Mrs. Lincoln invites and justifies animadversion upon herself."

Mary's journey back to Chicago was a foretaste of horrors to come. The Widow Lincoln's "Old Clothes Sale" was discussed openly by strangers on the train as they read about it in the papers (presumably they had no idea who Mrs. Lincoln was, hidden under veils). Two men seated next to her even discussed whether or not the former First Lady might be able to raise enough cash to provide a decent burial for herself.

In the dining car, Mary ran into an old friend, Charles Sumner, who turned "pale as the tablecloth" when he recognized her. Sumner took pity on her and brought her a cup of tea before bowing out. She tossed the tea out the window before dissolving into

tears over the indignity to which she had been reduced.

In Chicago, Mary was confronted by her son, Robert, who she reported "came up last evening like a maniac...almost threatening his life." Robert Lincoln was apoplectic for good reason. While he was trying to live quietly and climb the ladder at his Chicago law firm, his mother was splashing into headlines nationwide.

### A Public Spectacle

The public spectacle of Mrs. Lincoln's complaints in print was a terrible breach of Victorian conduct. It was acceptable for men to fight her battles for her, but she was required to remain mute on the sidelines. Letters by her own hand appearing in print were a criminal breach of etiquette, and the press attacks were more brutal than her bleakest days at the White House. The *Rochester Democrat* complained, "Mrs. Lincoln, the widow of the murdered President, has made an exhibition of herself..." A Kentucky paper exhorted, "Will not somebody, for very shame sake, go and take away those dry-goods the widow of the late Lamented persists in exposing for sale in a Broadway shop window?" A Springfield, Massachusetts journal complained that Mary was a "dreadful woman" who forced "her repugnant individuality before the world."

In her rented rooms in Chicago, Mary was wounded

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and scorched by the venom engulfing her. She understood the political nature of these attacks, but could not believe the scope of the vendetta. On October 9 she wrote, "If I had committed murder in every city in this *blessed Union*, I could not be more traduced." She sent off daily bulletins to Elizabeth Keckly and claimed she would not waste any more tears about all the "cruel falsehoods." Yet while trying to backpedal out of the quagmire, she sprinkled around a few untruths: she wrote that she had no idea how her letters had ended up in print.

During this period, Mary's personality began to disintegrate. She had gamely confronted New York financiers, but found the game

cost too much. She had left her faithful friend Elizabeth Keckly behind to take care of business, but her financial affairs had dissolved into chaos. She ended up sending Brady a check for the misadventure that had not only failed to make a profit, but had cost her both financially and emotionally.

Robert Lincoln continued to be mortified, and wrote to his fiancée Mary Harlan, "The simple truth, which I cannot tell to anyone not personally interested, is that my mother is on one subject not mentally responsible." Robert knew what his mother had been hiding for much of her adult life: that she felt compelled to hoard and spend in cycles of indulgence and regret. No matter how much she was told she was in fine shape, she continued to see herself as deprived—and to toss aside reason and judgment to decorate and bejewel herself or her homes. After she had slaked her thirst for finery, she would then become horrified by what she had done, yet the cycle always repeated itself.

### New York as Solace

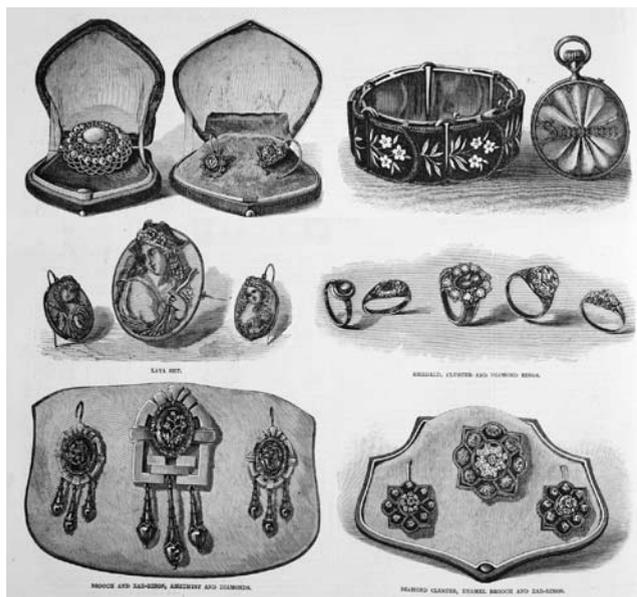
Mary had a manic need to justify herself, which only increased with age. She complained to her former ally Alexander Williamson, "Those who swindled *our Government*, in war times, are the ones who most deprecate my movements." She even complained about her firstborn, suggesting that

Robert was only pushing for the settlement of his father's affairs out of spite, "to cross my purposes."

The "Old Clothes Scandal" became a cruel interlude between her husband's assassination in 1865 and her involuntary confinement, at Robert's instigation, to an Illinois asylum in 1875. She would visit New York again more than once after her exile in Paris from 1876 to 1881, making the long journey from Springfield, Illinois, where she lived with her sister. On these excursions she would cruise the aisles of America's top marketplace and seek out the best Manhattan clinics in an attempt to improve her health. She tried a course of treatments at Dr. Sayre's establishment on West 26th Street. But the Turkish baths and other recommended cures failed to restore her, and each time she would leave the city disappointed.

Mary Lincoln died peacefully in the summer of 1882. She left behind sixty trunks full of clothing and household goods, as well as those sentimental items that had become her trademark: fans, gloves, jewelry. This hoard of goods testified to her tenacious need to hang onto things, as people disappeared with such tragic regularity from her long and difficult life. ■

*An annotated version of this article appears at [www.nysarchivestrust.org](http://www.nysarchivestrust.org)*



*The October 26, 1867 edition of Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper carried detailed drawings of the jewelry Mary Lincoln was selling, describing the pieces to be of "exquisite workmanship" and creating a "furore among our metropolitan ladies."*