



The Insanity File: The Case of Mary Todd Lincoln

Mark E. Neely Jr., R. Gerald McMurtry

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In 1875 Robert Todd Lincoln caused his mother, Mary Todd Lincoln, to be committed to an insane asylum. Based on newly discovered manuscript materials, this book seeks to explain how and why.

In these documents—marked by Robert Todd Lincoln as the "MTL Insanity File"—exists the only definitive record of the tragic story of Mary Todd Lincoln's insanity trial. The book that results from these letters and documents addresses several areas of controversy in the life of the widow of Abraham Lincoln: the extent of her illness, the fairness of her trial, and the motives of those who had her committed for treatment. Related issues include the status of women under the law as well as the legal and medical treatment of insanity.

Speculating on the reasons for her mental condition, the authors note that Mrs. Lincoln suffered an extraordinary amount of tragedy in a relatively few years. Three of her four sons died very young, and Abraham Lincoln was assassinated. After the death of her son Willie she maintained a darkly rigorous mourning for nearly three years, prompting the president to warn her that excessive woe might force him to send her to "that large white house on the hill yonder," the government hospital for the insane.

Mrs. Lincoln also suffered anxiety about money, charting an exceptionally erratic financial course. She had spent lavishly during her husband's presidency and at his death found herself deeply in debt. She had purchased trunkfuls of drapes to hang over phantom windows. 84 pairs of kid gloves in less than a month, and \$3,200 worth of jewelry in the three months preceding Lincoln's assassination. She followed the same erratic course for the rest of her life, creating in herself a tremendous anxiety. She occasionally feared that people were trying to kill her, and in 1873 she told her doctor that an Indian spirit was removing wires from her eyes and bones from her cheeks.

Her son assembled an army of lawyers and medical experts who would swear in court that Mrs. Lincoln was insane. The jury found her insane and in need of treatment in an asylum. Whether the verdict was correct or not, the trial made Mary Lincoln desperate. Within hours of the verdict she would attempt suicide. In a few months she would contemplate murder. Since then every aspect of the trial has been criticized—from the defense attorney to the laws in force at the time. Neely and McMurtry deal with the trial, the commitment of Mary Todd Lincoln, her release, and her second trial. An appendix features letters and fragments by Mrs. Lincoln from the "Insanity File." The book is illustrated by 25 photographs.

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