



News Release

52-11
April 11, 2011

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Original Mary Lincoln dress to be displayed Mother's Day weekend at Presidential Museum

Chocolate-smearred letter written by Willie Lincoln also featured in the Museum's Treasures Gallery

SPRINGFIELD – An original dress worn by Mary Lincoln and a chocolate-smearred letter written by one of the Lincolns' sons will provide a special treat for visitors to the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Museum during Mother's Day weekend, May 6 – 8.

Mary Lincoln wore her "Strawberry Dress" during her first portrait as First Lady at Matthew Brady's New York photography studio in May 1861, so its display on Mother's Day weekend will be the 150th anniversary of that photo session. The dress may be seen in the Presidential Museum's Blue Room exhibit, which features reproductions of ball gowns worn by Washington socialites in 1861. An enlarged copy of the Brady photo may be seen next to the Strawberry Dress. This will be the first time the fragile artifact has been displayed since 1985, when it was exhibited at the Old State Capitol State Historic Site in Springfield.

Mary's dress is made of black taffeta delicately embroidered with scattered clusters of leaves and strawberries in shades of red and lavender and smaller sprigs in green and gold. Parts of the dress are faded from being on display during the mid-20th century. The very full sleeves are edged with narrow bands of pleated purple and green silk, and the collar is of white lace. Although largely machine made, the dress was likely fitted or amended by Mary's African American seamstress and confidante Elizabeth Keckly, whom Mary first met the day after her husband's March 1861 inauguration. The dress will be displayed just a few feet from the Mary Lincoln and Elizabeth Keckly figures in the Museum's Blue Room.

Strawberry parties were a major social event in Springfield, Illinois and elsewhere in the mid-1800s. Participants would ride out of town to the strawberry patches in May to pick the ripe

berries and have a picnic. Abraham and Mary Lincoln participated in several of these parties, hosting one of them, and the custom was the likely inspiration for her Strawberry Dress. The dress was donated in 1963 to the Illinois State Historical Library, the forerunner of the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum (ALPLM), by Alvin S. Keys of Springfield, a descendant of Levi O. Todd, Mary's older brother.

Another special item on display in the Museum's Treasures Gallery is the earliest known letter written by then eight-year-old Willie Lincoln. Its recipient kept the letter in a box with some chocolates, which permanently stained it. It reads:

Springfield April 1859

Dear Friend

I will write you a few lines to let you know how I am getting along I am pretty well The roads are drying up It is Sunday and a pleasant day I have not any more to say so I must bring my letter to an end

Wm W Lincoln
The end

The friend's name was discovered only this year: He was Edward Rathbun, Jr., who lived across Eighth Street from the Lincolns for a year before his family moved to Pennsylvania in March 1859. Willie apparently sat down and wrote this letter while Mary Lincoln was writing to Edward's mother. Edward soon got a new little brother, whom his parents christened William Lincoln.

William Wallace "Willie" Lincoln, reportedly his father Abraham's favorite child, died of illness on February 20, 1862 in the White House at the age of eleven. He was the second Lincoln child to die, and his demise devastated the Lincoln family. When Edward Rathbun died in 1864, Mary Lincoln commiserated with his mother, writing to her for what proved to be the last time. From the time of Willie's death, and increasingly after Willie's friend's death, Mary Lincoln existed in a perpetual state of mourning and growing emotional disarray, while Abraham would sit in Willie's room alone and weep. Another son, Thomas "Tad" Lincoln, died in 1871. Only the eldest son, Robert, lived to be an adult, dying in 1926.

The 'chocolate letter' passed into the possession of Edward's niece, who sent it to Chicago collector Charles Gunther in 1901. The Historical Library (now the ALPLM) acquired it in 1978. It remains as a happy, and now colorful, remembrance of friendly mothers and sons.

For more information about programs and exhibits at the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum, visit www.presidentlincoln.org.

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