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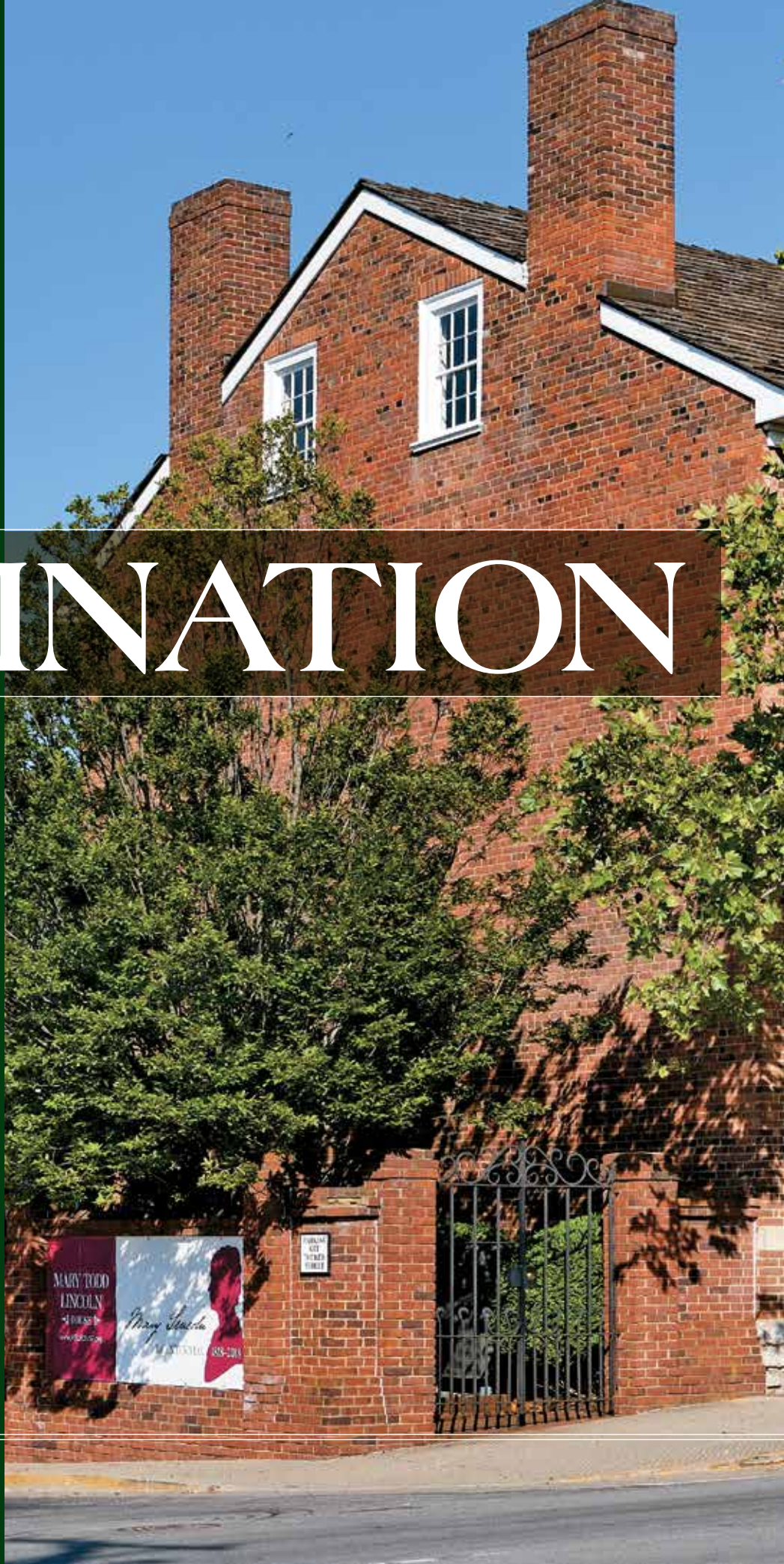
# FIRST LADY OF FASCINATION



The Mary Todd  
Lincoln House  
brings to life the  
remarkable story  
of one of the nation's  
most intriguing and  
controversial  
first ladies

By William Bowden

Photos By Joseph Rey Au





The Mary Todd Lincoln House enjoys added attention this year as 2018 marks the 200th anniversary of the former first lady's birth.



A

n exquisitely decorated silver cup is lovingly displayed in a glass case in the children’s room of the Mary Todd Lincoln House. A family acquaintance gave it to Mary and Abraham Lincoln’s son Tad, in sympathy for the loss of his older brother Willie while the family was living in the White House.

It’s easy to imagine Mary over the years cherishing this poignant memento of the death of her 11-year-old son. From the vantage point of history, it’s also easy to see how this charming cup could symbolize both the beauty and elegance of Mary’s material life and the tragic events she endured, including the premature deaths of three of her four sons.

Artifacts and family heirlooms such as this are seen throughout the restored house museum on West Main Street in downtown Lexington. They help to preserve and interpret the compelling, sometimes controversial, but always fascinating life of Mary Todd Lincoln.

When it opened in 1977, the house became the nation’s first historic site dedicated to a first lady. Mary Todd had lived there for seven years (1832-39), growing from age 13 to 20 while enjoying the refined lifestyle

Above, a family acquaintance gave this beautifully decorated silver cup to Thomas “Tad” Lincoln (right photo) in sympathy for the loss of his older brother William “Willie” Lincoln (left photo). Mary Todd Lincoln endured many tragedies during her tenure as first lady.



COURTESY OF THE MARY TODD LINCOLN HOUSE



GREAT  
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Mary Todd Lincoln's father, Robert, and stepmother, Betsy, shared the master bedroom.

## IF YOU GO

### Mary Todd Lincoln House

578 West Main Street  
Free parking directly behind the house.

Docent-led hourly public tours March 15-Nov. 30  
Monday-Saturday – 10 a.m.-3 p.m. (last tour at  
3 p.m.)

**Price:** \$15 adults, students (6-18) \$5, children under  
6 free, two-for-one for active duty military

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inherent to a wealthy and influential family. But the entire panoply of her life, from childhood through wife and first lady to President Lincoln and then mourning widow, is retold there. Historical items, documents, photographs, portraits, and original and period furnishings, along with insightful narrative from docents, bring her story to life for approximately 14,000 visitors from around the world each year.

### Mary's Lexington upbringing

Mary Todd was born in 1818, the fourth of seven children of Robert Smith Todd and his first wife, Elizabeth Parker, who died when Mary was 6 years old. Both the Todd and Parker families went back several generations in Lexington and were instrumental in helping to settle the town. Robert was a politician and successful businessman, serving as clerk of the state House of Representatives for more than 20 years, state senator for one term, and president of the Lexington branch of the Bank of Kentucky, among other endeavors.

"Mary came from a very prominent background in Lexington," said Gwen Thompson, executive director of the Mary Todd Lincoln House. "In addition to his political and business interests, her father was a founding trustee of Second Presbyterian Church and a trustee at Transylvania University. So the Todd family was literally involved in every area that helped the community grow and prosper."

## RESCUED FROM RUIN



Gwen Thompson, executive director of the Mary Todd Lincoln House

Robert's political connections meant that luminaries such as statesman Henry Clay were guests in the home, giving young Mary an early introduction to the world of politics. She had about 10 years of formal education, exceptional for the time. She attended Dr. John Ward's Academy, as well as Mentelle's for Young Ladies, an intellectually rigorous school run by French immigrant Charlotte Mentelle, which was operated as a boarding school during the week.

Given the status and wealth of her family and the advantages she enjoyed, it would be natural to see Mary's childhood in Lexington as an essentially happy one. There is truth in that, but historians cite suspicions about a contentious relationship with her stepmother, Robert's second wife, Elizabeth "Betsy" Humphreys, as a chilling factor. Robert and Betsy went on to add nine more children to the Todd brood; the possibility of sibling rivalries between the two sets of offspring might also have caused friction.

And then there was the brutal, dehumanizing specter of slavery, which surrounded Mary. Over the years, the

The Mary Todd Lincoln House was constructed as an inn and tavern in 1806, then underwent a crazy-quilt pattern of remodeling and uses for the better part of two centuries before being reborn in 1977 as a beautifully restored house museum.

Over the decades the structure served as an elegant residence for the Todd family (1832-49), a boarding house, a brothel where famed madam Belle Brezing learned her trade, a café, a grocery store, and a hardware store. Sometime after the Civil War its clean Georgian architecture was gussied up with Italianate flourishes, since removed. At one point in the 1940s, part of its front wall was ripped out for a glass storefront and a very large advertising billboard was painted on the west wall.

Somewhere inside this mangled and deteriorating building, one of the oldest structures in Lexington, was a stately townhouse waiting to be rescued. Enter Beula C. Nunn, first lady to Kentucky Gov. Louie B. Nunn. In 1968 she became the founder and first chairwoman of the Kentucky Mansions Preservation Foundation. She oversaw the foundation's restoration of the house, which began after the Commonwealth of Kentucky acquired the property in 1970. The home's Beula C. Nunn Garden was dedicated in 1996 to commemorate her role in saving the property.

The foundation operates the house museum today as a private, nonprofit corporation that receives no regular federal, state, or local government support, deriving its revenue from admissions, museum store sales, and membership dues.

Among those most grateful for the salvation of the house is Mary Quinn Ramer, president of VisitLEX.

"I think it's tremendous that there was the foresight and vision to restore this house and create a real gem for the community," she said.

"We have many visitors to Lexington who are interested in our heritage tourism. The Mary Todd Lincoln House is one of our outstanding examples of history well preserved and interpreted."

## HAPPY BIRTHDAY, MARY

This year marks the 200th anniversary of Mary Todd Lincoln's birth in 1818. Special events have taken place throughout the year, and a few remain on the calendar:

**Oct. 16:** "First Lady of Controversy" talk, Frazier History Museum, Louisville

**Sundays in October:** "House Divided" Lexington Cemetery Walking Tours

**Nov. 2:** Bicentennial Symposium, University of Kentucky

**Dec. 13:** Mary's Bicentennial Birthday Bash, Mary Todd Lincoln House  
Visit [www.mtlhouse.org](http://www.mtlhouse.org) for details.

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In 1948 the front wall of what is now the family parlor in the Mary Todd Lincoln House had been ripped out and replaced with a storefront for the T. A. Scully restaurant. The rest of the house was being rented out as rooms and apartments.



During Mary Todd Lincoln's girlhood a prized flower garden adorned the back of the property. A portion remains today as the Beula C. Nunn Garden. Right, a writing desk contains a miniature of Charlotte Mentelle, who helped educate the future first lady.

Todd household owned an average of five slaves who helped to enable the family's standard of living as they did the brunt of cleaning, cooking, gardening, and child-care. And she certainly would have witnessed slaves in chains on the sidewalks of Lexington, which had become one of the nation's most active slave-trading centers.

### Leaving Lexington

Mary left Lexington in 1839 to visit her older married sister, Elizabeth Todd Edwards, in Springfield, Illinois. It was there she met the young lawyer who would change her life in profound ways. Abraham Lincoln and Mary Todd were married in 1842; from then until 1860, Mary's primary roles became wife, household manager, and mother to four sons.

With Abraham's election to the presidency, Mary took on the role of first lady with enthusiasm, but controversy and tragedy marked her days in the White House. With the coming of the Civil War,



A setting of the Todd family china is displayed in a glass case in the dining room.

Mary's loyalties to the nation were questioned. Even though six Todd siblings supported the Union, eight supported the Confederacy through marriage or military service. Southerners, meanwhile,

accused her of betraying her upbringing by marrying a Yankee. It was, indeed, a house divided.

The ultimate personal tragedy in Mary's life came on the evening of April 14, 1865, at Ford's Theatre when her husband, sitting in the box seats with her, was assassinated.

Mary survived her husband by 17 years. A central controversy in these later years concerned her mental health. In 1875, at the instigation of her only surviving child, Robert, she was confined against her will for three months in an asylum in Batavia, Illinois. A year later a jury determined she was "restored to reason." After living independently in Europe, she eventually returned to her sister Elizabeth's house in Springfield, where she died in July 1882.

### Touring Mary's home

Today's visitor to the Mary Todd Lincoln House comes upon an attractive red brick two-story home that has been



A Meissen porcelain compote owned by Mary Todd Lincoln is pictured along with fancy decanters that attest to the Todds' refined tastes. The Lincolns visited Mary's girlhood home for three weeks in 1847, but it is uncertain which bedroom they used.

a fixture in downtown Lexington for 212 years. The symmetrical front presents two decorative stone stringers running the entire width of the house. The main portion of the structure is an approximate square, with an ell projecting from the rear on the west side.

The overall style reflects the values of late-Georgian architecture, with its emphasis on symmetry and proportion, and restrained ornamentation on the exterior.

"Everything is straight lines; no Palladian doors or windows," said Jonathan Coleman, curator and assistant director of the house museum. "The stone stringers across the front are rare decorative touches. I think this lack of embellishment tends to focus attention on the stories that are told here rather than on the house's appearance."

The house sat on three city lots when Mary lived here, giving ample room for a prized flower garden, still represented by a garden in the back. There were also an outdoor kitchen, wash house, smokehouse, slave quarters, stables, and a carriage house, none of which survive.

A court-ordered estate sale upon Robert Todd's death in 1849 scattered many of the



The Todds entertained prominent friends in the formal parlor. An 1864 portrait of Mary Todd Lincoln by Daniel Huntington graces the mantel.

house's contents, and numerous remodelings over the decades robbed the building of some of its original infrastructure. Curating the house today is a mixture of recovering as many original items as possible while also using period pieces and sourcing period items such as mantels from other houses to restore the basic structure.

As visitors cross the threshold and enter the house, the bustle and noise of modern-day Lexington fade away, and they are back in the genteel environment that the

future first lady experienced. Soft carpets partially cover gleaming original Kentucky ash floors, while high ceilings and spacious rooms make for an elegant setting. Red silk damask curtains, patterned after the originals, which the museum possesses, are seen throughout the first floor.

Abraham Lincoln experienced this gracious style for himself during a three-week visit in 1847 when the Lincoln family was on its way to Washington for the beginning of his only term in the U.S. House

of Representatives. An original cherry banister on the stairwell gives visitors the chance to touch something Abraham and Mary would have touched. The delicate starburst carvings on the side of the stairs are the most ornate original interior decoration.

Both Todd and Lincoln family furnishings, along with many period pieces, plus patterned rugs and wallpaper, create a feast for the eyes throughout the 14-room dwelling. The dining room, among the first that visitors see, is resplendent, featuring a long table set with blue-and-white china and silverware, highlighted by large silver candelabras from the Lincolns' White House years. In a display case is a lovely Meissen porcelain compote that belonged to Mary, along with place settings of the Todds' china. This entire tableau is emblematic of the family's social life that helped prepare Mary for her later role as hostess in the White House.

The double parlor that runs from front to back on the east side is where the Todds entertained their many guests. A striking portrait of Mary, done by the artist Daniel Huntington in 1864, dominates the front parlor. Prominently displayed is the impressive china, with a gold eagle in the center, Mary used in the White House.

Upstairs, the master bedroom includes Robert's barrel desk and a canopied bed, as well as a mantel that is believed to be original. A front bedroom features a desk that might have been used by Mary, along with her Meissen porcelain perfume jars. In the guest bedroom is an original playbill advertising *Our American Cousin*, the play the Lincolns were viewing on the night of the assassination.

The one-hour guided tour ends in a room that is now the museum store, but that also preserves a brick fireplace and oven with metal doors, which were revealed after a layer of plaster was scraped away. "One of the little surprises that

turned up during the restoration," Coleman said.

### A jewel for Lexington

The Kentucky Historical Society, of course, has a vested interest in seeing historical gems such as the Mary Todd Lincoln House rescued from oblivion. Scott Alvey, executive director of the society, believes an admirable quality of this particular restoration was the grassroots support that saw the Lexington community come together to save an important part of its history.

And not just any history.

"When it opened in 1977 as the nation's first historic site dedicated to a first lady, it made a statement for the growing importance of women's history," Alvey said. "And the woman honored held such prominence at a critical time in the nation's history."

The staff and docents at the home refrain from offering final judgments on the more controversial and potentially dark aspects of Mary's later life, such as her mental state in 1875 or her views on slavery. Indeed, books have been written on some of these topics. Rather, they present a rich story with many revealing details and encourage visitors to contemplate for themselves the various judgments of history in the light of what she endured.

As the museum this year celebrates the 200th anniversary of Mary's birth in 1818, Coleman believes the interest in her extraordinary story is stronger than ever.

"There is a reason why Mary Todd Lincoln is still so captivating today," he said, "and that's because her life touches on many universal concepts. Family, love, tragedy, death. It's a complex tale of an intriguing woman who had a front-row seat on an incredibly important period of time in our nation's history. The house is the stage we set to tell the story of one of America's most fascinating first ladies." **KM**



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