



Mrs. Lincoln and Mrs. Keckly: The Remarkable Story of the Friendship Between a First Lady and a Former Slave

Jennifer Fleischner

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A vibrant social history set against the backdrop of the Antebellum south and the Civil War that recreates the lives and friendship of two exceptional women: First Lady Mary Todd Lincoln and her mulatto dressmaker, Elizabeth Keckly.

“I consider you my best living friend,” Mary Lincoln wrote to Elizabeth Keckly in 1867, and indeed theirs was a close, if tumultuous, relationship. Born into slavery, mulatto Elizabeth Keckly was Mary Lincoln’s dressmaker, confidante, and mainstay during the difficult years that the Lincolns occupied the White House and the early years of Mary’s widowhood. But she was a fascinating woman in her own right, independent and already well-established as the dressmaker to the Washington elite when she was first hired by Mary Lincoln upon her arrival in the nation’s capital. Lizzy had bought her freedom in 1855 and come to Washington determined to make a life for herself as a free black, and she soon had Washington correspondents reporting that “stately carriages stand before her door, whose haughty owners sit before Lizzy docile as lambs while she tells them what to wear.” Mary Lincoln had hired Lizzy in part because she was considered a “high society” seamstress and Mary, an outsider in Washington’s social circles, was desperate for social cachet. With her husband struggling to keep the nation together, Mary turned increasingly to her seamstress for companionship, support, and advice—and over the course of those trying years, Lizzy Keckly became her confidante and closest friend.

With *Mrs. Lincoln and Mrs. Keckly*, pioneering historian Jennifer Fleischner allows us to glimpse the intimate dynamics of this unusual friendship for the first time, and traces the pivotal events that enabled these two women—one born to be a mistress, the other to be a slave—to forge such an unlikely bond at a time when relations between blacks and whites were tearing the nation apart. Beginning with their respective childhoods in the slaveholding states of Virginia and Kentucky, their story takes us through the years of tragic Civil War, the assassination of Abraham Lincoln, and the early Reconstruction period. An author in her own right, Keckly wrote one of the most detailed biographies of Mary Lincoln ever published, and though it led to a bitter feud between the friends, it is one of the many rich resources that have enhanced Fleischner’s trove of original findings.

A remarkable, riveting work of scholarship that reveals the legacy of slavery and sheds new light on the Lincoln White House, *Mrs. Lincoln and Mrs. Keckly* brings to life a mesmerizing, intimate aspect of Civil War history, and underscores the inseparability of black and white in our nation’s heritage.

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Colin Rousey:

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