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Lincoln's Courtships: A Reflection of his Social Growth

By *Erika Rozinek*

In the myth and memory of American culture, Abraham Lincoln is not remembered as a ladies' man or a man who sought intimate relationships with women. Biographers dubiously record his relationship with Ann Rutledge, make light of his involvement with Mary Owens, and then interpret his courtship and marriage to Mary Todd. The overall opinion seems to be that Lincoln was too ambitious, too involved with politics, or too much of a "man's man" to trouble with women during his early years in Illinois. However, much evidence exists to indicate that Lincoln actively sought relationships with numerous women prior to his marriage. Furthermore, his experience with each of the women he courted charts his development socially, even as he was rising politically and professionally. Starting out as a young man rumored to have fathered children illegitimately in New Salem, Lincoln emerged as the husband of one of Springfield's most educated, attractive, and aristocratic woman.

Lincoln first came to Illinois in 1830 when he was 21 years old. I will be focusing on his involvement with women after his arrival in Illinois, while de-emphasizing those fragments and rumors from his Indiana years due to their lack of substantiation and also to Lincoln's youth. By August, 1831, Lincoln had left his father in Coles County, Illinois, for independence in New Salem. It was here that Lincoln would be transformed from a bashful boy who avoided contact with girls to a man who was linked in various ways to several different women.

The testimony of Lincoln's friends and relatives in Indiana seems to indicate that Lincoln showed little interest in girls (Wilson 109). His stepmother remarked to William Herndon that Lincoln "was not very fond of girls as he seemed to me" (S. Lincoln 108). Another neighbor observed that Lincoln "did not go much with the girls . . . didn't like girls much -

too frivolous" (Gentry 131). However, as this same friend also remarked that Lincoln "didn't like crowds," perhaps this aversion to girls can be viewed as general boyhood shyness. Certainly, Lincoln grew comfortable with talking to crowds later in life. At any rate, it would be unwise to classify Lincoln's lifelong attitude towards women based on the testimony of those who knew him only until his 21st year.

Substantial evidence suggests Lincoln grew out of his boyhood reticence around women when he came to live in New Salem. A few friends from his early days in New Salem did record that Lincoln was subdued in their presence, such as A.Y. Ellis, who felt that Lincoln was "a Verry shy Man of Ladies" (Ellis 170). For the most part, however, New Salem gossip concerning Lincoln centered not on his aversion to women, but rather on his rumored sexual involvement with local women. James Taylor reported to Herndon that "Jack Armstrong used to plague Abe a great deal about his—Abe's son, which he had by Mrs. Armstrong; it was a joke—plagued Abe terribly" (Taylor 482). This was doubtlessly no more than a joke; Lincoln would not have become sexually involved with the wife of his good friend. Nevertheless, the joke must have been based on some affection or perhaps attraction between Lincoln and Mrs. Armstrong, showing that Lincoln was not entirely repelled by (or repellent to) women.

The Armstrong child was not the only one rumored to be fathered by Lincoln. According to New Salem neighbor J. Rowan Herndon, Mrs. Abell, with whom Lincoln resided sometimes in New Salem, "has a dauter that is thought to Be Lincolns Child thay favor very much" (Herndon 69). Another New Salem resident's "Wife had a child—father uncertain—supposed to be Duncan's - or Lincoln's" (Green 365). In a community which had a population of 125 at its peak, Lincoln was rumored to have fathered three children by three different women. This does not suggest an unnatural aversion to women. Even if all three rumors were indeed false, the fact that tongues were set to wagging in the first place shows that Lincoln spent enough time with women to be rendered suspicious of sexual interactions with them. Lincoln may have been shy or reserved around women, but clearly this restrained manner was not to an extreme, or else Lincoln would not have been named in connection with so many pregnancies. Perhaps the most accurate observation of Lincoln's feelings toward women comes from J. Rowan Herndon, who said that "thay [women] all liked him and [he] liked them as well" (Herndon 69). Already, then, we observe that Lincoln had developed enough socially to shed his youthful shyness and become more familiar with women.

Lincoln apparently had his hands full with women during his time in New Salem. All the speculated fathering of children went on prior to 1834 through 1836, the time frame when he commenced his first significant love relationship. After this time, most New Salem contemporaries agree that Lincoln was romantically involved with a young woman named Ann Rutledge. Although New Salem residents give different accounts of the exact year in which Lincoln began courting Ann, they probably became acquainted during his first year in the village when Lincoln boarded with the Rutledges (Wilson 116). Between this time and Ann's death in 1835, she and Lincoln fell in love and planned to marry.

Once characterized as uninterested and awkward around women, Lincoln was an attentive and loving suitor. Far from avoiding the company of women, Lincoln made the trip of several miles and "paid his addresses to Ann, continued his visits and attentions regularly and those resulted in an engagement to marry," according to Ann's brother (Rutledge 383).

Another New Salem friend by the name of Benjamin F. Irwin shed light on the depth of Lincoln's feelings when he remarked that Lincoln was "wofully in Love with a Remarkable handsome young Lady by the Name of Rutledge" (Irwin 325). Lincoln's love for Ann and his desire to marry her was hampered only by the fact that she was engaged to another man. This suitor, John McNamar, had traveled east to settle his family's accounts in 1833 or 1834, shortly after his engagement to Ann. His correspondence with her dwindled over the following years he remained absent. Finally, Ann wrote to him to obtain release so she could marry Lincoln instead (Rutledge 383). Thus, Lincoln had won Ann's hand over that of a successful local businessman. It was quite a triumph, as Ann was very popular and highly regarded in New Salem. One neighbor described her thus:

This young lady was a woman of Exquisite beauty, but her intellect was quick—Sharp— deep & philosophic as well as brilliant. She had a gentle & kind a heart as an angel—full of love—kindless—sympathy. She was beloved by evry body and evry body respected and lov'd her—so sweet & angelic was she. Her Character was more than good: it was positively noted throughout the County. (Green 21)

Lincoln, who had come to New Salem as a "drifter" only a few short years before, who failed in the business of storekeeping twice, and who had yet to settle on a profession, had won the belle of the county. This was a reflection of his rising social status, which in turn may have sprung from

his recent election to the state legislature and personal popularity among the townspeople.

Ann Rutledge died on August 25, 1835, at the age of 22. She was Lincoln's fiancée and first love; Lincoln was deeply affected by her death. Some supposed that Ann's death had a profound and life-altering effect on Lincoln. Henry McHenry commented that "As to the condition of Lincoln's Mind after the death of Miss R. after that Event he seemed quite *changed*, he seemed *Retired*, & loved *Solitude*, he seemed wrapped in *profound thought*, *indifferent*, to transpiring events, had but Little to say..." (McHenry 155). However, Lincoln was not altered so much that he did not seek marriage with other women later on.

From the time of Ann's death until Lincoln's eventual move to Springfield, he applied himself to studying law in an effort to pass the bar exam and become a lawyer. For a time he boarded with the Abells. In 1836, Mrs. Abell's sister Mary Owens showed up for an extended visit. Lincoln had first become acquainted with her three years earlier, and upon her return, a relationship was formed. Lincoln related the start of this courtship in a letter to his friend Mrs. Browning:

It was, then, in the autumn of 1836 that a married lady of my acquaintance and who was a great friend of mine, being about to pay a visit to her father and other relatives in Kentucky, proposed to me that on her return she would bring a sister of hers with her on the condition that I would engage to become her brother-in-law with all convenient dispatch. I, of course, accepted the proposal, for you know I could not have done otherwise, had I really been averse to it; but privately, between you and me I was most confoundedly well pleased with the project. (A. Lincoln 117)

This letter has often been dismissed as almost completely facetious. However, the bulk of his description of the courtship seems based in fact, with some exaggeration for humorous effect. Since Lincoln was accurate in describing the facts of this courtship, it stands to reason that he was also being forthright about his emotions. The humor of the letter comes from Lincoln's characteristically self-deprecating style. Being such, Lincoln did not have to fabricate feelings to deprecate, but instead could use his own.

When looking at this letter as an accurate statement of his feelings (barring some embellishment for comic value), we are offered a glimpse of a Lincoln who longed for the companionship of a woman. At any rate, he

desired it enough to agree to marry a woman that he knew only casually and had not seen for three years. While it is not realistic to suggest that Lincoln harbored lingering feelings of love or affection for Mary during her three-year absence, we can reasonably suppose that Lincoln was open to the idea of falling in love, or, at the very least, to making a commitment to a woman. This may have come from the simple desire for companionship, or from the desire for the social boost that marrying an educated and well-mannered lady would provide. However, Lincoln goes on to explain that he was “displeased” with Mary’s appearance and the courtship in general. The fact that she later rejected Lincoln’s numerous proposals (grudgingly offered, according to him) makes Lincoln’s displeasure in her seem more like sour grapes than true repulsion.

During their courtship, Lincoln wrote Mary a series of letters in which his feelings and level of commitment seem to vacillate. In one instance, he told her that “I should be much happier with you than the way I am, provided I saw no signs of discontent in you,” and that “I have already decided,” presumably on the subject of marriage (A. Lincoln 78). In the next line he told her that “My opinion is you had better not do it [marry him]” (78). Another letter is similarly indistinct:

What I do wish is that our further acquaintance shall depend on yourself. If such further acquaintance would contribute nothing to your happiness, I am sure it would not to mine. If you feel yourself in any degree bound to me, I am now willing to release you, provided you wish it; while, on the other hand, I am willing and even anxious to bind you faster if I can be convinced that it will in any considerable degree add to your happiness. (A. Lincoln 94)

Many scholars have interpreted these letters to Mary, in conjunction with the humorous one to Mrs. Browning, as evidence that Lincoln did not care for Mary, felt stifled by their relationship, and sought a way to honorably release himself from any commitment to marry her. I propose a different interpretation. We know from Lincoln’s own hand that he was willing “*and even anxious*” to bind Mary to marriage. We know that he proposed to her several times, and that each time he was rejected (A. Lincoln 119). Mary herself asserted that “his heart and hand were at my disposal” (M. Vineyard 256). However, she felt Lincoln was “deficient in those little links which make up the great chain of a woman’s happiness” (256). At the heart of the matter, Lincoln, by his own admission, was “really a little in love

with her," while Mary's "feelings were not sufficiently enlisted to have the matter consummated" (A. Lincoln 119; M. Vineyard 256). Lincoln was pursuing her, while Mary was not interested in him. This being the case, we can read Lincoln's efforts to release Mary not as a way of disentangling himself from an unwanted commitment, but rather as a way of asking for reassurance that she wanted to be committed to him. By all accounts, Mary never sought any kind of marital promise from Lincoln. Lincoln's letters to her reveal that she was lax in her correspondence to him, "I am still mad about that old letter," and that Lincoln was unsure of her feelings toward him: "you can now . . . dismiss your thoughts (if you ever had any) from me..." (A. Lincoln 54; 94). Lincoln must have sensed this lack of interest and worried over it.

By taking into account Mary's lukewarm behavior toward Lincoln, we can see the uncertainty and anxiety that comes through in his letters to her. He felt that she was not very interested in him, so he began to cast about for reasons why. He wrote to her that a life with him meant that she would be poor without means of hiding her poverty. He asked, significantly, "Do you believe you could bear that patiently?" (A. Lincoln 78). It seems as though he is presenting her with all his faults up front, so that if she would reject him, as he sensed that she would, he would have a reason for her action. He could console himself with the notion that she rejected the life of poverty she would lead, rather than *him*. As he began to lose hope of any interest on her part, he offered her release from any commitment. This was not because he did not want to marry her; rather, it was because he sensed that she did not want him (which, in fact, she did not). He wanted to either gain assurance that she wanted him or to reject her before she could reject him.

Mary did reject him. Lincoln must have felt sharply his deficiencies as a suitor and potential husband. He had tried for the hand of an educated lady, and she had refused him based on elements of his character that she found lacking. He was a shy, unsure young man, new to Springfield, who had never been refused by a woman before. After Mary rejected him for the last time and their acquaintance dwindled away, Lincoln wrote his satirical letter to Mrs. Browning. The sentiment that comes through in this letter is not malice or superiority, but rather the bitter and hurt feelings that come when one has loved and not been loved in return. Lincoln tried to assuage his hurt pride by ridiculing Mary's appearance and imagining that he, in fact, did not want her. This behavior is characteristic of the man

who would go on to make ample use of anonymous newspaper letters to diminish his political opponents.

Between 1838 and 1840, Lincoln started paying particular attention to another young woman named Sarah Rickard. Sarah's sister Elizabeth was married to Lincoln's friend William Butler, with whom Lincoln boarded during the late 1830s (Wilson & Davis 739). He met Sarah while boarding with the Butlers, when she was ten or twelve years old. He befriended the girl and took her to various entertainments in Springfield; as Sarah recalled, "when I arrived at the age of 16 he became more attentive to me" (Barret 665). Sarah liked Lincoln well enough, but she regarded him more as a brother than as a suitor. When Lincoln proposed to Sarah in the winter of 1840 and 41, she refused him, explaining later that "I was young only 16 years old and had not thought much about matrimony."¹ She also reflected that "his peculiar manner and his General deportment would not be likely to fascinate a young girl just entering the society world" (665).

Thus, Lincoln had again been "flung . . . high & dry" (Lightfoot 639). Twice he had courted women with a mind to matrimony, and twice he had been refused. Both times the lady in question cited certain flaws in Lincoln's manner towards women that made him unattractive as a spouse. Socially insecure to begin with, these refusals must have made Lincoln even less confident. By this point, it could not have escaped his attention that he was lacking in certain social graces that were necessary to charm eligible young ladies. Still, he clearly desired the companionship of a female. Time after time, he paid his clumsy attentions, bringing up matrimony to each of the women whom he had courted in his life. It seems as though Lincoln had grown politically and professionally faster than he had grown socially. By 1840, he had served several terms in the state legislature. He was established in the practice of law as the junior partner to one of the most prominent lawyers in the state. Still, the only woman who ever agreed to have him had been a tavernkeeper's daughter from his days in New Salem village. His personal success could not make up for his lack of social polish with the genteel women of education and breeding who captured Lincoln's affections during his early Springfield days.

Yet, Lincoln had the capacity for this social growth. His formative years lacked any education on the manners of polite society, but this did not mean that Lincoln could not pick them up as he hovered on the edges of Springfield's social elite. During the late 1830s, he achieved sufficient professional stature to be invited to the Edwards' home. At first, Ninian

Edwards felt that Lincoln was “a mighty Rough man” and “did not think—if brought home to him he would do what was right” (Edwards 446). However, Lincoln must have behaved well enough to earn more invitations, as he “was at Edwds house for 4 years—Every Sunday” (446). It was at the Edwards’ house that Lincoln first became acquainted with Mary Todd.

Newly arrived at her sister’s house from Kentucky, Mary was part of the powerful and prestigious Todd family. She was born in Lexington and “was educated there [by] a fine french scholar & considered bright & witty by her friends” (Helm 694). She was quite the belle of Springfield’s young society, and soon captured Lincoln’s admiration. Mary’s sister Elizabeth Edwards recalled that “Mr Lincoln Commenced Seeing Mary... the winter of 1839 & 40” (Edwards 443). She recalled that “I have happened in the room where they were sitting often & often and Mary led the Conversation—Lincoln would listen & gaze on her as if drawn by some Superior power, irresistibly so” (443).

The details of Lincoln’s love life began to grow increasingly complicated. In January of 1841, Lincoln suffered a major fit of depression. In the words of his future brother-in-law, Ninian Edwards, he “went Crazy as a *Loon*.” Joshua Speed elaborated that Lincoln’s friends “had to remove razors from his room—had to take away all Knives and other such dangerous things” (Speed 475). Several causes have been proposed for this depression. Elizabeth Edwards implied that Lincoln and Mary were engaged and that Lincoln broke off the engagement, either in a fit of lunacy or because Mary was flirting with Stephen Douglas (Edwards 444). Joshua Speed believed that Lincoln went crazy because he felt he had violated his honor in refusing to marry Mary, because he loved another (Speed 475).

Douglas Wilson, in his biography *Honor’s Voice*, doubts an engagement at this time existed at all between Lincoln and Mary (Wilson 230). Here I also put forth the suggestion that Lincoln may have become agitated over the complications in his love life. The backwoods-born lawyer who had consistently failed to become engaged since his first love died was now seeing Mary Todd and Sarah Rickard, and was possibly in love with a third woman.

Matilda Edwards, niece of Ninian Edwards, arrived in Springfield November, 1840 (Wilson 223). Several of her Springfield contemporaries recall that Lincoln had strong feelings for Matilda. Orville Browning explained that “Mr. Lincoln became very much attached to her (Miss Matilda Edwards) and finally fell desperately in love with her and proposed to her, but she rejected him” (Browning 1). Joshua Speed asserted that

"Lincoln did love Miss Edwards" (Speed 475). There is conjecture as to whether Matilda was ever aware of Lincoln's affections for her, but the existence of these affections for her is common in the testimony of several of their contemporaries.² Both Browning and Speed felt that Lincoln's depression of January 1841 "resulted entirely from the situation he thus got himself into—he was engaged to Miss Todd, and in love with Miss Edwards, and his conscience troubled him dreadfully for the supposed injustice he had done, and the supposed violation of his word which he had committed" (Browning 1). The truth about this course of events will probably never be definitely ascertained, but the evidence suggests that Lincoln's depression resulted in some way from his involvement with Mary Todd and his feelings for another woman.

Among the speculation that surrounds Lincoln's love life during 1840 and 1841, several key facts exist. Sarah Rickard refused Lincoln. Lincoln was troubled by his affections for Matilda. This might have been because of the injustice this caused Mary, or possibly because his best friend Joshua Speed was also in love with Matilda (Wilson & Davis 771). Whatever the case, Matilda showed no interest in Lincoln, as she was "something of a coquette" (Browning 2). Thus, Mary Todd stands out as the only woman in Springfield who showed any interest in Lincoln and who returned his affections.

This may help to explain why Lincoln eventually married Mary Todd. Of the four women he proposed to, Mary came from the best family, had the best education, and moved in the most prominent societal circles. She was also the only one who accepted him and lived to marry him. Whatever the circumstances of their eventual marriage in 1842, whether Lincoln truly loved her or felt obligated to marry her, the fact remains that Mary presented a rare opportunity for Lincoln to marry at all. She was the only one who would overlook Lincoln's lack of social polish and consent to become his wife. Lincoln, on the other hand, could benefit from securing the hand of one of the city's most eligible belles; with the hand of this society woman, the oft-rejected suitor could finally win the hand of society as well. Lincoln was no longer the man whose social awkwardness prevented him from wooing any of the city's desirable women. He had proven that he was attractive to someone, that he did possess qualities endearing to a woman, and that he could be as successful socially as he could be politically and professionally.

Lincoln's love life represents a facet of his growth as a person. The fact

that he desired and tried to maintain an active love life is indisputable. From the time he arrived in New Salem at the age of 21, Lincoln's name has been linked to that of one woman after another. The reports of his earliest sexual experiences are nothing but speculation, as are the suggestions that he fathered various children in the village. However, they serve to prove that Lincoln was closely associated with the women of New Salem, and he was not bashful or afraid of women as previously supposed. Lincoln's courtship of Ann Rutledge marked the start of his search for a lifelong companion. Had Ann lived, he would have succeeded and been married to a lovely but unsophisticated country girl. Ann's death sent Lincoln to search elsewhere for a wife. He pursued and was refused by Mary Owens, "a young lady of beauty and intelligence and vivacity [who] had many admirers" (N. Vineyard 601). This rejection must have stung, for it emphasized that Lincoln was deficient in social graces that were necessary to win a genteel lady. Lincoln tried again, with Sarah Rickard, but was again rejected because of his "peculiar manner" (Barret 665). Although he apparently cared deeply for Matilda Edwards, Lincoln never made his feelings plain to her, perhaps out of fear of a third rejection. Eventually, Lincoln married the only living woman who would have him: pretty, aristocratic, educated Mary Todd. In marrying Mary, Lincoln may not have been following his heart, but he was asserting that he had become socially accepted enough to win the hand of the belle of polite society. In doing so, Lincoln had seized the opportunity to rise socially, as he concurrently rose politically and professionally.

NOTES

¹ Barret, 3 August 1888. Sarah described Lincoln's proposal to her this way: ". . .as was his costum he brings quotations from the Bible how but Sarah will become Abraham's wife."

² Elizabeth Edwards. Elizabeth Edwards reported that Matilda was ignorant of Lincoln's affections. Matilda said to Elizabeth, "On my word he never mentioned Such a Subject to me: he never even Stooped to pay me a Compliment."

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