

LESSON 2: WHAT DO HISTORIANS SAY ABOUT MARY LINCOLN?

GRADE LEVEL: 7-8

WWW.PRESIDENTLINCOLN.ORG

Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum

INTRODUCTION

Historians have long differed in their opinion of Mary Todd Lincoln. From sympathetic to vindictive in their treatment of Mrs. Lincoln, historians have presented a consistently muddled portrait of the First Lady, leaving us with almost as many questions as answers about her life, her health, her temperament and her affections. In this exercise, students will review a number of excerpts from famous Lincoln scholars, including biographers of Mary and personal friends of the sixteenth president. In doing so, they will gain an understanding of how historians can influence our views of an historical figure and that while some facts are carved in stone others are still open to interpretation.

PROCEDURE

1. As a class review the “Views of Mary Lincoln” handout.
2. Pass out the “Historians & Mary Lincoln” handouts (one per student or one per group of students). Have students review the historian’s writings on Mary Lincoln and answer the questions at the bottom of the handout. Have each student or group present their findings to the class.
3. As a class discuss the following:
 - Did you find consensus amongst the historians’ portrayals of Mary? If so, what was that consensus?
 - Were there conflicting views among the historians? If so, how many categories or schools of thought did you find in the opinions they had of Mary Lincoln?
4. Create a graph on the board showing the categories and the historians who fall into each. Sample categories might include: sympathetic, unsympathetic, neutral, biased, etc.
5. Which historian do you think was the most accurate in their depiction of Mary and why? Support your argument. As a class vote on your answers. Did one historian’s view score more votes? Why?
6. In your classroom journal record your thoughts on the following writing prompts:
 - What does this exercise reveal about history in general?

Objectives

- Identify at least two conflicting accounts of Mary Lincoln by professional historians and scholars.
- Learn the importance of using multiple sources to arrive at an understanding of a subject.
- Look for and recognize possible bias in an historical account.
- Use critical thinking skills to evaluate multiple sources and formulate their own opinion on Mary Lincoln.



MATERIALS

- Are historians always objective?
- Just because it’s written in a book, is it right?
- Can historians always be trusted to present the “facts”? Do some historians lie? Do they distort the truth for their own purposes? Or do they write the truth as they see it?
- Can we really know all the facts?
- How can our understanding of these issues affect our understanding of history?

- “Views of Mary Lincoln” Handout (in Lesson 1: Couple of Contrasts)
- “Historians & Mary Lincoln” Handouts (in this lesson plan)

EXTENSION:

Choose one of the historians studied and write an essay either supporting or refuting their view of Mary Lincoln. Use further research and source material to support your argument.





JEAN BAKER

Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum

Mary Todd Lincoln: A Biography. 1987

Mary Lincoln was assigned her role when, during wartime, she tried to transform the White House into a palace. Then, as widow and thrice-bereaved mother, she violated the nineteenth-century rules of submission to the decrees of Providence. She cried too long and too hard, and in between, she pressed Congress, with unladylike implacability, for money. She retold the horror of Lincoln's assassination too often, and when no one listened anymore, she abandoned the United States for Europe....She refused this assignment of quiet suffering when the family she idolized was destroyed. As a result, she was transformed into the most notorious of shrews, her faults magnified, her virtues forgotten, her neuroses unobserved, and her very sanity questioned.

Jean H. Baker's biography of Mary Todd Lincoln is considered to be the first gendered biography of Mary. Baker is the author of other books on the Civil War Period, and most, recently, The Stevensons: A Biography of an American Family. She is professor of History at Goucher College.

HISTORIAN #1

WWW.PRESIDENTLINCOLN.ORG

- What one word best describes the author's opinion of Mary Todd Lincoln?

- Describe any bias you found in this historian's perspective of Mary Todd Lincoln.
- Do you agree with this author's account of Mary Todd Lincoln? Why or why not? Explain.



STEPHEN B. OATES

Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum

With Malice Toward None: A Life of Abraham Lincoln. 1977

To her, poverty was a form of death, a strangling void which deprived her of all her material values—her love of beautiful things, her desperate need to wear fashionable clothes and to receive compliments about her appearance. In truth, once the Lincolns enjoyed financial security, Mary spent lavishly on herself, her family, and her home. Yet her spending sprees left her guilt-stricken and afraid....To compensate, she would become as parsimonious as a miser, haggling over prices for incidental things. Then she would turn around and go off on another shopping binge, only to fret about poverty again. It became a recurring syndrome for Mary, who, even during Lincoln's most lucrative years, was certain they were on the brink of privation.

Stephen B. Oates is a professional biographer and historian. He is the author of 16 books. Oates was a consultant and "talking head" in Ken Burns's Civil War series on PBS, and is a recipient of the Nevins-Freeman Award of the Chicago Civil War Round Table for lifetime achievement in the field of Civil War Studies. He currently teaches at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. His work on Lincoln provoked controversy when he was accused of plagiarism, a charge he adamantly denies.

HISTORIAN #2

WWW.PRESIDENTLINCOLN.ORG

- What one word best describes the author's opinion of Mary Todd Lincoln?

- Describe any bias you found in this historian's perspective of Mary Todd Lincoln.
- Do you agree with this author's account of Mary Todd Lincoln? Why or why not? Explain.



HISTORIAN #3

WWW.PRESIDENTLINCOLN.ORG

RUTH PAINTER RANDALL

Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum

Mary Lincoln: Biography of a Marriage. 1953

Mary Lincoln needed a new trial before the court of historical investigation, that in view of much new material and new means of checking on some of the old "evidence" which has been accepted, judgment should be appealed... As far as lie within my power, I have tried to restore, from tested historical material, the personality of Mary Lincoln. In treating her various qualities, desirable and undesirable, one runs into a vicious circle. Because her failings have been overstated, a biographer has to deal with that distortion to clear the subject of what is false.... But the distilled essence of the great agony which was surging over the country was in the heart of the sick and broken widow. She too had received a wound that was fatal, though it would be long years before she could die. Two lives had crashed that day. Lincoln's struggle was soon over; his mystic ship was safe in harbor; it was Mary's ship, crippled, that must sail on and on into mist, darkness, and storm.

Ruth Painter Randall married James G. Randall the author of Lincoln The President. She collaborated with him in two of its chapters. It was this collaboration that prompted her to write Mary's biography.

- What one word best describes the author's opinion of Mary Todd Lincoln?

- Describe any bias you found in this historian's perspective of Mary Todd Lincoln.
- Do you agree with this author's account of Mary Todd Lincoln? Why or why not? Explain.



HISTORIAN #4

WWW.PRESIDENTLINCOLN.ORG

JENNIFER FLEISCHNER

Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum

Mrs. Lincoln and Mrs. Keckly. 2003

Mary had ambitions both political and marital. For a woman, it was obvious that they would have to be combined, but this was a fate she never questioned. For Mary, politics and love were similar in their appeal....All she could do at this stage in the game was to keep her eye out for eligible men....That Mary Todd could charm when she wished is indisputable, her social graces being as much her father's legacy as her temper and uncertain moods. The caustic remarks that wounded could also titillate and amuse when confided to an intimate third party. Even targets of her sarcasm acknowledged she was a "keen observer of human nature, an excellent judge of it, none better." Letters from this time reveal a satirical eye and a storyteller's flare. Her boldness and impulsiveness could be attractive as well.

The recipient of a one-year Mellon Faculty Fellowship in Afro-American studies at Harvard, she is currently Chair of the English Department at Adelphi University in Garden City, New York.

- What one word best describes the author's opinion of Mary Todd Lincoln?

- Describe any bias you found in this historian's perspective of Mary Todd Lincoln.
- Do you agree with this author's account of Mary Todd Lincoln? Why or why not? Explain.



HISTORIAN #5

WWW.PRESIDENTLINCOLN.ORG

BENJAMIN THOMAS

Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum

Abraham Lincoln. 1952

[Mary] came to the White House with a better education and a richer social background than many of the ladies who preceded her. But Washington “cliff dwellers,” aghast at the thought of an upstart Western couple replacing the courtly Buchanan and his gracious niece, Harriet Lane, as leaders of the capital social hierarchy, had determined to boycott her. To this tight, aristocratic clique of wealthy residents, with their Southern Democratic sympathies, the “black Republican” woman of Kentucky birth and breeding was a traitor to her class. Rumors that Mrs. Lincoln was not only a traitor but a spy were taken with sufficient seriousness to be discussed by a Congressional investigating committee.

Benjamin P. Thomas devoted most of his life to the study of Lincoln. He served as executive secretary of the Abraham Lincoln Association in Springfield, Illinois. He also wrote Lincoln’s New Salem, and five other books. This biography of Lincoln is still considered the standard.

- What one word best describes the author’s opinion of Mary Todd Lincoln?
-

- Describe any bias you found in this historian’s perspective of Mary Todd Lincoln.
- Do you agree with this author’s account of Mary Todd Lincoln? Why or why not? Explain.



HISTORIAN #6

WWW.PRESIDENTLINCOLN.ORG

PHILLIP PALUDEN

Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum

The Presidency of Abraham Lincoln. 1994

[Lincoln’s Secretary of War, Edwin] Stanton, on at least two occasions, scolded Mary Lincoln for trying to use her position to secure favors.

[Lincoln’s Secretary of State, William] Seward cultivated Lincoln in small ways too. He gave the Lincolns a pair of kittens when they moved into the White House and, in part because he loved children, Seward played with Lincoln’s sons as often as he could. None of this impressed Mary Lincoln, who did not like the secretary, but it pleased the president very much.

Phillip Paludan was the Naomi B. Lynn Distinguished Professor of Lincoln Studies at the University of Illinois, Springfield. He was author of several books on Lincoln and is considered a notable presidential scholar. These two references above are the only ones given to Mary in his recent book cited

- What one word best describes the author’s opinion of Mary Todd Lincoln?
-

- Describe any bias you found in this historian’s perspective of Mary Todd Lincoln.
- Do you agree with this author’s account of Mary Todd Lincoln? Why or why not? Explain.



HISTORIAN #7

CARL SANDBURG

WWW.PRESIDENTLINCOLN.ORG

Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum

Mary Lincoln: Wife and Widow. 1932

The ten years between 1865 and 1875 were desperate for poor Mary Todd Lincoln... Letter after letter poured from her in which she cried life was too heavy for her, the burning too fierce. Part of it was the acting of a frustrated and furious woman trying to impose her will on a United States Congress which for years resisted her efforts towards a pension. Most of her crying out loud, publicly and privately, however, ran back to the pressure of tongs of fate that clamped tighter and tighter in the lobes of her brain. She was, as her physician and friend later declared, the victim of a cerebral disease...The impression was definite now in many circles that Mary Todd Lincoln was mentally unsound, was a pathological case requiring attention, treatment, at least retirement from affairs which would bring her in any way before the public.

Carl August Sandburg was an American poet, historian, novelist, balladeer, and folklorist born in Galesburg, Illinois. His biography of Lincoln, Abraham Lincoln: The Prairie Years (1926) was followed by Abraham Lincoln: The War Years (1939) for which he received the Pulitzer Prize in history.

- What one word best describes the author's opinion of Mary Todd Lincoln?

- Describe any bias you found in this historian's perspective of Mary Todd Lincoln.
- Do you agree with this author's account of Mary Todd Lincoln? Why or why not? Explain.



HISTORIAN #8

WILLIAM H. HERNDON

WWW.PRESIDENTLINCOLN.ORG

Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum

Herndon's Lincoln. 1889

[Mary] was a young woman of strong, passionate nature and quick temper...Ordinarily she was affable and even charming in her manners; but when offended or antagonized, her agreeable qualities instantly disappeared beneath a wave of stinging satire or sarcastic bitterness, and her entire better nature was submerged...in everything she was the exact reverse of Lincoln...To me it has always seemed plain that Mr. Lincoln married Mary Todd to save his honor, and in doing that he sacrificed his domestic peace...he knew he did not love her, but he had promised to marry her!...He chose [honor], and with it years of self-torture, sacrificial pangs, and the loss forever of a happy home. With Miss Todd a different motive, but one equally unfortunate...in him she saw position in society, prominence in the world, and the grandest social distinction. By that means her ambition would be satisfied...

William H. Herndon aspired to write a faithful portrait of his friend and law partner, Abraham Lincoln, based upon his own observations and upon hundreds of letters and interviews he had compiled for the purpose.

- What one word best describes the author's opinion of Mary Todd Lincoln?

- Describe any bias you found in this historian's perspective of Mary Todd Lincoln.
- Do you agree with this author's account of Mary Todd Lincoln? Why or why not? Explain.



HISTORIAN #9

DAVID HERBERT DONALD

WWW.PRESIDENTLINCOLN.ORG

Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum

Lincoln. 1995

Lincoln...probably had no idea how hard his wife had to labor. She had to cook, clean, and scrub. She had to pump the water...keep the wood fire going in the kitchen stove and, during much of the year, in the living room fireplace. Though Lincoln had his suits made...she had to sew all her own clothes, as well as those of her children. Her purchases at John Irwin & Company, the Springfield general store, included needles, buttons, thread, muslin, calico, cambric, whalebones, and corset lace. And, above, all she had to pay close attention to her babies....Despite the money her father gave to her, she only occasionally had assistance in any of these chores....More often she had an Irish-born maid – one of the “wild Irish,” as she called them – but she thought they were undependable and lazy, and she quarreled with them all.

David Herbert Donald is a Pulitzer Prize winning author and the Charles Warren Professor Emeritus of American History and American Civilization at Harvard University. An authority on the Civil War and Reconstruction, his biography of Charles Sumner received the 1960 Pulitzer Prize.

- What one word best describes the author’s opinion of Mary Todd Lincoln?

- Describe any bias you found in this historian’s perspective of Mary Todd Lincoln.
- Do you agree with this author’s account of Mary Todd Lincoln? Why or why not? Explain.



HISTORIAN #10

DORIS KEARNS GOODWIN

WWW.PRESIDENTLINCOLN.ORG

Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum

Team of Rivals. 2005

For all their differences, the couple had much in common...Beyond their love of poetry and politics, [they] had both lost their mothers at an early age...Mary’s loss was aggravated by her father’s remarriage...From the moment her stepmother moved in, Mary later recalled, her childhood turned ‘desolate.’...This estrangement, combined with a family history of mental instability and a tendency toward severe migraines, produced in Mary what one friend describes as ‘an emotional temperament...’ She could be affectionate, generous, and optimistic one day; vengeful, depressed, and irritable the next...In either mood, she needed attention, something the self-contained Lincoln was not always able to provide. As their courtship proceeded, the very qualities that had first attracted the couple to each other may have become the sources of conflict.

Doris Kearns Goodwin won the Pulitzer Prize in history for No Ordinary Time. She is also the author of the bestselling Wait Till Next Year, The Fitzgeralds and the Kennedys, and Lyndon Johnson and the American Dream.

- What one word best describes the author’s opinion of Mary Todd Lincoln?

- Describe any bias you found in this historian’s perspective of Mary Todd Lincoln.
- Do you agree with this author’s account of Mary Todd Lincoln? Why or why not? Explain.