

# Elizabeth Keckley & the Mary Todd Lincoln Quilt

BY SUSAN WILDEMUTH

Each quilt has a history, a unique story to tell, and 19th-century African-American quilts are no exception.

Unfortunately, detailed written accounts of the background and history of many of these quilts and the quiltmakers who created them are few and far between. The majority of information we do have about these wonderful works of art has been verbally passed down, transmitted through stories from generation to generation.

If you like quilts and quilt lore as much as I do, come along, and I will introduce you to Elizabeth Keckley, dressmaker to Mary Todd Lincoln, and to a quilt, reportedly made from scraps of the former first lady's clothes, lovingly referred to over the years as the *Mary Todd Lincoln Quilt*.

## Elizabeth Hobbs Keckley

Born into slavery near Dinwiddie Courthouse in Virginia, Elizabeth "Lizzie" Hobbs began working at

the age of 4. Her first duty was to rock the cradle and keep the flies from pestering one of the younger children of her owners, Col. and Mrs. Armistead Burwell. If she performed this task to Mrs. Burwell's specifications, it would be her passport out of a life in the cotton fields and into the plantation house where she would be able to work alongside her mother, Agnes Hobbs, who did the majority of the sewing and cooking for the Burwell family.

Because they did not have any slaves of their own, 14-year-old Elizabeth was separated from her mother and "loaned out" as a chore girl to the wife of her master's oldest son, the Reverend Robert Burwell, who lived in North Carolina. Elizabeth and her son George, whose Caucasian father was a neighbor of the Burwells, would eventually be sent

back to Virginia, where she was reunited with her mother at the home of another of Armistead Burwell's children, Hugh and Anne (Burwell) Garland.

Times were so hard for the Garlands in Virginia that Hugh decided to move his entire family, including Elizabeth, her son and mother to St. Louis, but the Garland family did not fare much better there. Things got so bad, Mr. Garland talked of loaning out Agnes to neighbors to supplement their income, but Elizabeth was appalled by the thought of her aging mother working and being at the mercy of strangers. After careful thought, she came up with a plan. Elizabeth stated later in her book, *Behind the Scenes: Thirty Years a Slave, and Four Years in the White House*, "I would rather work my fingers to the bone, bend over my sewing till the film of blindness gathered in my



eyes, even beg from street to street. I told Mr. Garland so, and he gave me permission to see what I could do."

What Elizabeth did was pick up her needle and try her hand at earning a living as a dressmaker or "modiste." It did not take her long to gain an excellent reputation as a seamstress among the wealthy and influential families in St. Louis. In so doing, she managed to support 17 people for over two years with her needlework skills, including the family of her impoverished white owners.

During this period of her

life, she met and married James Keckley in the Garland family parlor, and her thoughts turned more and more in the direction of obtaining freedom for herself and her son. In her work

as a dressmaker, Elizabeth and her son crossed the Mississippi River by river ferry from Missouri (a slave state) into Illinois (a free state) on several occasions to deliver orders to her customers. The easiest way for her to obtain their freedom would have been for them to simply stay in the state of Illinois on one of these excursions, but she did not want to gain their freedom in this manner.

Without signed legal documents from her former owners to back up her

claims of freedom, she and George would be considered fugitive slaves in some states. Elizabeth would settle for nothing less than the opportunity to purchase their freedom and be legally free in all states.

Thanks to the help of some of her dressmaking clients and Elizabeth's own needlework skills, she was able to purchase their freedom from the Garland family for the sum of \$1,200.

The next few years brought many changes to Elizabeth's life. She and

James Keckley separated. George obtained the education denied his mother, eventually attending college at Wilberforce University before enlisting as a white man in the U.S. Army when the Civil War broke out. Before the war between the states, Elizabeth found herself in Washington, D.C., with dressmaking clients by the name of Mrs. (Lt.) Robert E. Lee and Mrs. (Sen.) Jefferson Davis. And thanks to an introduction by Mrs. (Gen.) John McClean, Elizabeth Hobbs Keckley



A closeup of the quilt shows the detail of one block. Photograph courtesy of The Kent State University Museum.



Elizabeth Keckley's *Mary Todd Lincoln Quilt*, property of The Kent State University Museum. Gift of Ross Trump in memory of his mother, Helen Watts Trump. KSUM 1994. Photograph courtesy of The Kent State University Museum.

was about to gain entrance to the White House “through the front door” to meet the first lady of the United States, Mary Todd Lincoln.

The inauguration of Abraham Lincoln as President of the United States was fast approaching and his wife, Mary Todd Lincoln, was in a bit of a pickle due to a coffee stain on the dress she had planned to wear to the event. Needing another dress in a hurry she turned to one of her Washington acquaintances, Mrs. John McClean, and asked her the name of her dressmaker. The general’s wife answered, “Lizzie Keckley” and Mrs. Lincoln asked for an introduction.

On a Tuesday morning, at 8 o’clock, Elizabeth Keckley crossed the threshold of the White House for the first time and was ushered into a waiting room where she discovered three other talented seamstresses waiting for an interview with Mrs. Lincoln. Her heart fell. Elizabeth was sure that she, a former slave, didn’t have a chance. She was the last of the dressmakers to be interviewed by Mrs. Lincoln, but in the end Mrs. Lincoln choose Elizabeth to be her new dressmaker.

What started as a employer-employee relationship would turn into a friendship. A unique bond was formed between these two women, which grew and evolved through the death of their sons, Abraham Lincoln’s first four years at



the White House, dozens of dresses created for personal and public events, Abraham Lincoln’s assassination, and Mrs. Lincoln’s financial and public-image woes after her husband’s death. It lasted right up to the publication of Elizabeth Keckley’s book entitled *Behind the Scenes: Thirty Years a Slave and Four Years in the White House*, the book that was meant to help ease some of Mrs. Lincoln’s public-image woes. However, as Elizabeth stated regretfully in 1901, “I never received a dollar from the publication of that book. It made some enemies for me who should have always been my friends.”

Mary Todd Lincoln had

once confided to her husband, “If it had not been for Lizzie Keckley, I do not know what I would have done.” However, after some of her personal correspondence with Elizabeth was included unedited in the book without Elizabeth Keckley’s knowledge or permission, Mary Todd Lincoln refused to speak to her after it was published.

Despite the silence between them, Elizabeth would remain devoted to the former first lady for the remainder of her life. It is said that when Elizabeth passed away on May 26, 1907, at the Home for Destitute Women and Children in Washington,

D.C., an incarnation of an institution she had helped organize in earlier years, Mary Todd Lincoln’s picture was found among her personal things.

## The Quilt

Elizabeth Keckley grew up in a time of frugality and was the type of person who did not throw anything away. It is well documented that she was a saver and collector of artifacts which held personal significance to her. She was given the right-hand glove worn by President Lincoln at his first public reception after his second inaugural, the comb and brush Elizabeth used to comb Mr. Lincoln’s hair, the President’s cloak, Mary Lincoln’s bonnet worn on the night of the President’s assassination, and Mr. Lincoln’s overshoes. All these items were personal mementos from her years at the White House and were later donated to benefit Wilberforce University, an African-American college her son had attended before the war.

There is documented proof that Elizabeth Keckley did save fabric pieces from gowns she created for Mrs. Lincoln. Like the items listed above, several of those pieces were donated to the Wilberforce University in Ohio.

According to the verbal lore surrounding this quilt, Elizabeth did use some of her stash of fabric scraps,

material left over from Mrs. Lincoln's gowns, and incorporated them into what is known today as the *Mary Todd Lincoln Quilt*.

The 86" x 81" quilt contains a variety of pieced, appliquéd and embroidered silks, with a touch of velvet for good measure. It is embellished with red fringe and 3-D red tassels that gravitate outward from each corner. The design of the quilt, along with the types of materials used, including the padding, are consistent with those used during the Civil War period, which dates the quilt between 1860 and 1880.

The center panel of the quilt shows an eagle with olive branches, an American flag, and the word "Liberty" embroidered on the fabric,

which is consistent with a quilt created and designed with a first lady in mind.

Elizabeth Keckley's *Mary Todd Lincoln Quilt* came out of private storage and into the public's eye via Abraham Lincoln's son Robert, around the time Ruth Finley was gathering quilt stories and writing *Old Patchwork Quilts and the Women Who Made Them*. This quilt, complete with an affidavit verifying its provenance, next came to Ross Trump of Medina, Ohio, from Mrs. Finley, and today resides in the permanent collection of the Kent State University Museum, Kent, Ohio, a gift from Mr. Trump in memory of his mother, Helen Watts Trump.

This quilt, so rich in verbal history, is a work of art and a tribute to an excellent needlewoman, who by race, humble beginnings and gender was not sup-

posed to be a success story. Instead, Elizabeth Hobbs Keckley showed the world just what a woman can accomplish when she sets her mind to it. **QW**

## Bibliography

**Benberry, Cuesta.** "Always There: The African-American Presence in American Quilts." Louisville, Ky.: Kentucky Quilt Project, 1992.

**Ferrero, Pat, Elaine Hedges and Julie Silber.** "Hearts and Hands—The Influence of Women and Quilts on American Society." San Francisco, Calif.: *Quilt Digest*, 1987.

**Fry, Gladys-Marie.** *Stitched From the Soul: Slave Quilts From the Antebellum South*. New York: Dutton Studio Books, 1990.

**Keckley, Elizabeth.** *Behind the Scenes*. Chicago, Ill.: R.R. Donnelley and Sons, 1998.

**Kiracofe, Roderick.** *The American Quilt*. New York: Clarkson Potter Inc., 1993.

**Lane, Jennifer.** "The Quilts That Mrs. Keckley Made." *Ohio Antiques Review* February 1981.

**Williams, Jessica.** "Elizabeth Keckley (1818–1907)." Retrieved from the Internet.

"Women in History—Elizabeth Keckley." Retrieved from the Internet.