



Elizabeth Hobbs Keckley



I was thunderstruck, and tried to think if I had been remiss in anything. I could not recollect of doing anything to deserve punishment, and with surprise exclaimed: "Whip me, Mr. Bingham! What for?"

"No matter," he replied, "I am going to whip you, so take down your dress this instant. "

Recollect, I was eighteen years of age, was a woman fully developed, and yet this man coolly bade me take down my dress. I drew myself up proudly, firmly, and said: "No, Mr. Bingham, I shall not take down my dress before you. Moreover, you shall not whip me unless you prove the stronger. Nobody has a right to whip me but my own master, and nobody shall do so if I can prevent it."

— Behind the Scenes, Or, Thirty Years A Slave and Four Years in the White House



Quick Facts

- * 1818-1907
- * Seamstress and dressmaker for Mary Todd Lincoln
- * Wrote about her time in the White House in her memoir

Biography

Best known as Mary Todd Lincoln’s dressmaker and confidante, Elizabeth Keckley was much more. Born a slave in 1818 to George and Agnes Hobbs, Keckley was a skilled seamstress who used her skills to buy her freedom in 1855 at the age of thirty-seven. At the same time, she also bought the freedom of her only child, George, who would later die as a soldier in the Union Army. George’s father was a friend of the family that owned her and a local plantation owner, who as Keckley laments in Behind the Scenes, “had base designs upon me” (p.39). Over a four-year period, he sexually abused Keckley until she became pregnant.

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Biography continued

Elizabeth Keckley was married once, to James Keckley in 1852, although it soon proved to be an unhappy and disappointing match. He lied to her about being a free man and proved to be an alcoholic unable to support his family. The marriage ended when she left him eight years later.

Over the year, Keckley worked as a seamstress for women from a number of elite southern and northern families, such as the wives of Jefferson Davis, Stephen Douglass and, of course, Abraham Lincoln. Elizabeth Keckley was an uncommon woman who challenged the predominant stereotypes prevalent in the nineteenth century. She founded a school for young black girls in 1863, was president and founder of the First Black Contraband Relief Organization, and represented Wilberforce University at the 1893 Columbian World's Exhibition in Chicago. The event celebrated the 400th anniversary of Christopher Columbus' discovery of America.

Without a doubt, Elizabeth Keckley would have been lost to history if she had not written *Behind the Scenes, Or, Thirty Years A Slave and Four Years in the White House*. The book was the first personal account of life in the White House. It revealed the close relationship she formed with Mary Todd Lincoln, as a friend and confidante, and intimate details surrounding the assassination of President Lincoln.

The publication of the book in 1868 brought the wrath of Robert Lincoln, the oldest son of the late president and estrangement from her friend Mary Todd Lincoln. Robert Lincoln waged a successful campaign to have the book recalled and withdrawn from publication. She was also criticized roundly by the press and the general public, who found exception with the fact that a woman of color could presume a friendship with a white woman, notwithstanding the wife of President Lincoln.

In her final years, Keckley moved from Ohio, where she worked from 1892 until 1898 as a sewing instructor at Wilberforce University, back to Washington, DC. She lived at the Home for Destitute Women and Children, a home she helped establish, and survived on a monthly stipend of \$12 as the mother of a son who served in the Union Army. Elizabeth Keckley died in 1907 at the age of 88 of a paralytic stroke.



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Selected Bibliography

Works by the author

Behind the Scenes, Or, Thirty Years A Slave, and Four Years in the White House (Carleton and Company, 1868).

Works about the author

Rutberg, Becky. *Mary Lincoln's Dressmaker: Elizabeth Keckley's Remarkable Rise from Slave to White House Confidante* (Walker and Company, 1995).

