

Elizabeth Keckley (1818-1907)

Elizabeth Hobbs Keckley, known to friends and family as Lizzy, was a former slave and successful modiste. An example of resilience, pride, and ingenuity, she is best known for being the seamstress, personal dresser, and confidant to First Lady Mary Todd Lincoln. Keckley chronicled her rise from house slave to prominent business woman in her autobiography *Behind the Scenes: Or Thirty Years a Slave, and Four Years in the White House*. The work has garnered acclaim as a valuable source concerning the intimate details of the Lincoln family.

Keckley was born in 1818 in Virginia to Agnes and George Pleasant Hobbs. Later in her life Keckley learned that the master Armistead Burwell was her biological father. At an early age Keckley experienced the brutality of slavery. At age four she was given charge over the Burwell's infant. On one occasion Keckley accidentally dropped the baby and as a consequence was severely beaten. That was her first memory of being beaten but would not be the last. In 1832 Armistead Burwell loaned Keckley, who was fourteen years old, to his eldest son Robert Burwell, a Presbyterian minister. Because Robert could not afford slaves, Keckley performed the work of three servants. In 1835 Robert accepted a church position in Hillsborough, North Carolina. Keckley's stay in Hillsborough was marked with brutal treatment. In addition to working for the Burwells, she also worked for William Bingham, a next door neighbor. Keckley described Bingham as a hard, cruel man. Keckley tried to defend herself against Bingham's beatings but was unsuccessful. The unexplained brutality from Bingham occurred on two more occasions before he stopped and declared it a sin to beat her any more. During the attacks by Bingham, Keckley remained resolute. She held her screams inside as not to reveal the pain she experienced. Keckley also received unwanted attention from Alexander Kirkland, a prominent white man of Hillsborough. For four years Keckley was forced into a relationship with Kirkland, which resulted in the birth of her only child, a son born in 1838. She named her son George in honor of her slave father George Hobbs.

In 1842 Keckley came under the control of Hugh Garland and his wife Anne, daughter of Armistead Burwell. Her time with the Garland family marked a new direction for her life. She married James Keckley, but the two eventually separated. Even though her marriage was unhappy, she gained success as a seamstress, dressing some of the most well established ladies of St. Louis. She was eventually able to purchase her and her son's freedom for \$1200.

As a freed woman, Keckley expanded her horizons and left St. Louis for Baltimore, Maryland. She began a school to teach sewing and pattern making to young colored women; however, this was an unsuccessful endeavor. She then moved to Washington D.C. to seek out opportunities as a dressmaker. It was in Washington D.C. that she gained prominence as a sought after modiste and built a network of notable clients, which included Varina Davis, wife of Senator Jefferson Davis; Adele Cutts Douglas, wife of Senator Stephen Douglas; and Mary Todd Lincoln, who employed Keckley as her seamstress and personal dresser. Keckley and Mrs. Lincoln quickly became close friends. Her inner strength and optimistic personality helped the First Lady cope with the loss of her son and husband.

Keckley also experienced the effects of the American Civil War. She mourned the death of her son, who was killed in the battle of Wilson's Creek in 1861. She was also touched by the number of former slaves entering Washington D.C. in search of refuge and assistance. To help these former slaves find housing, clothing, and medical care, she organized the Contraband Relief Association.

In 1868 she published her autobiography *Behind the Scenes*. She hoped to give the funds from the book's publication to Mrs. Lincoln who was experiencing financial difficulties. Part slave narrative and part Lincoln family biography, the book contained unedited letters between Keckley and Mrs. Lincoln and provided an intimate portrait of the Lincoln family. Robert Lincoln, Mrs. Lincoln's son, was offended and had the book suppressed. Mrs. Lincoln was angered that the work revealed her correspondence with Keckley. The relationship between the two women was never the same.

In 1892, Keckley joined the faculty of Wilberforce University as a sewing instructor. After a year she resigned due to ill health. Toward the end of her life she moved into the National Home for Destitute Colored Women and Children, an institution created in part by the Contraband Relief Association. She died at age 89 on May 26, 1907.

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See Also:

Further Reading

Chiaverini, Jennifer. 2013. *Mrs. Lincoln's Dressmaker*. New York: Dutton.

Rutberg, Becky. 1995. *Mary Lincoln's Dressmaker: Elizabeth Keckley's Remarkable Rise from Slave to White House Confidante*. New York: Walker & Co.