

Mary Todd Lincoln on life after the White House, 1870

Introduction

Mary Todd Lincoln's years in the White House were a combination of triumph and tragedy. Never fully accepted by the public and vilified by the press for overspending, her tenure as First Lady was unstable at best. After the death of the Lincolns' twelve-year-old son, Willie, in 1862, the assassination of President Lincoln shattered his wife's already fragile state. To compound the matter, Mary was held personally liable for the debts she and the President had incurred for improvements to the White House. While battling for her widow's pension, she traveled to Germany in 1868 for her health and to escape her many creditors. Left almost penniless and both mentally and physically ill in February 1870, she poured out her troubles and petitioned James Orne for money. Orne was a prominent Philadelphia Republican married to a good friend of Mary's.

In this letter from Frankfurt am Main, written on mourning stationery, Mrs. Lincoln complained of an inflammation of the spine "brought on," according to her doctor, "by great mental suffering." She admitted her destitution: "I am not able to have a waiting woman & I suffer greatly often . . . With my small means, I can only lodge in second class boarding houses, the horror & humiliation of the situation to me, surpasses any thing you can imagine." She called Lincoln "the Cruelly Martyred President" and lamented, "While all others have been so richly rewarded - the loved wife, of the man, who died in his country's service has been left to shed the tears of bitterness & live in poverty - broken hearted." She asked Orne to use his influence to settle her affairs so that she could improve her dire situation. Mrs. Lincoln finally received her pension later in 1870 and returned to America in 1871. She was briefly committed to an asylum and died in 1882.

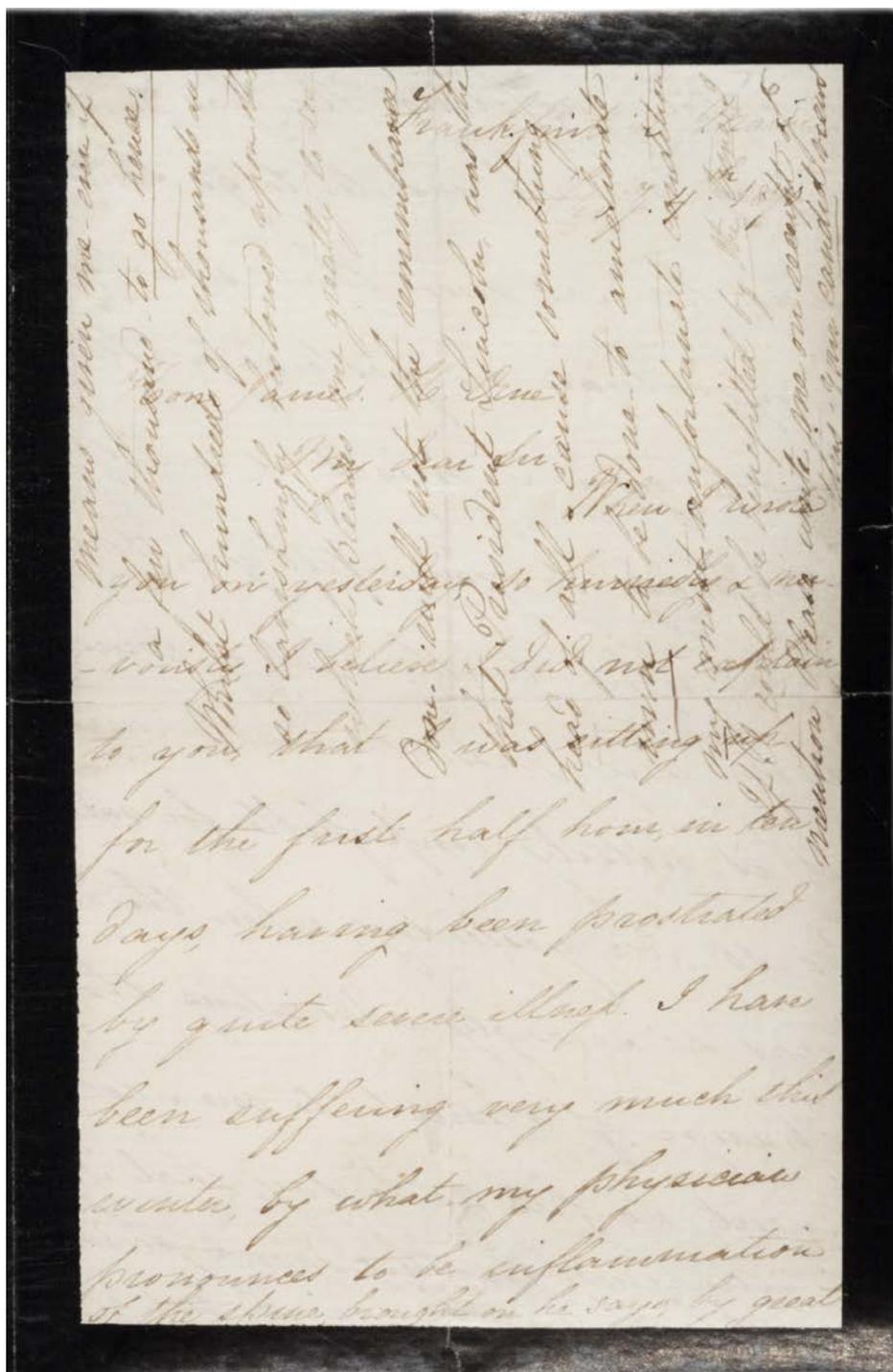
Questions for Discussion

Read the document introduction and transcript and apply your knowledge of American history in order to answer these questions.

1. What did Mary Todd Lincoln mean when she wrote about her "unfortunate" condition?
2. Why were some Americans unsympathetic toward the situation faced by the widow of Abraham Lincoln?
3. Research benefits that are provided currently to the spouse of a deceased president.

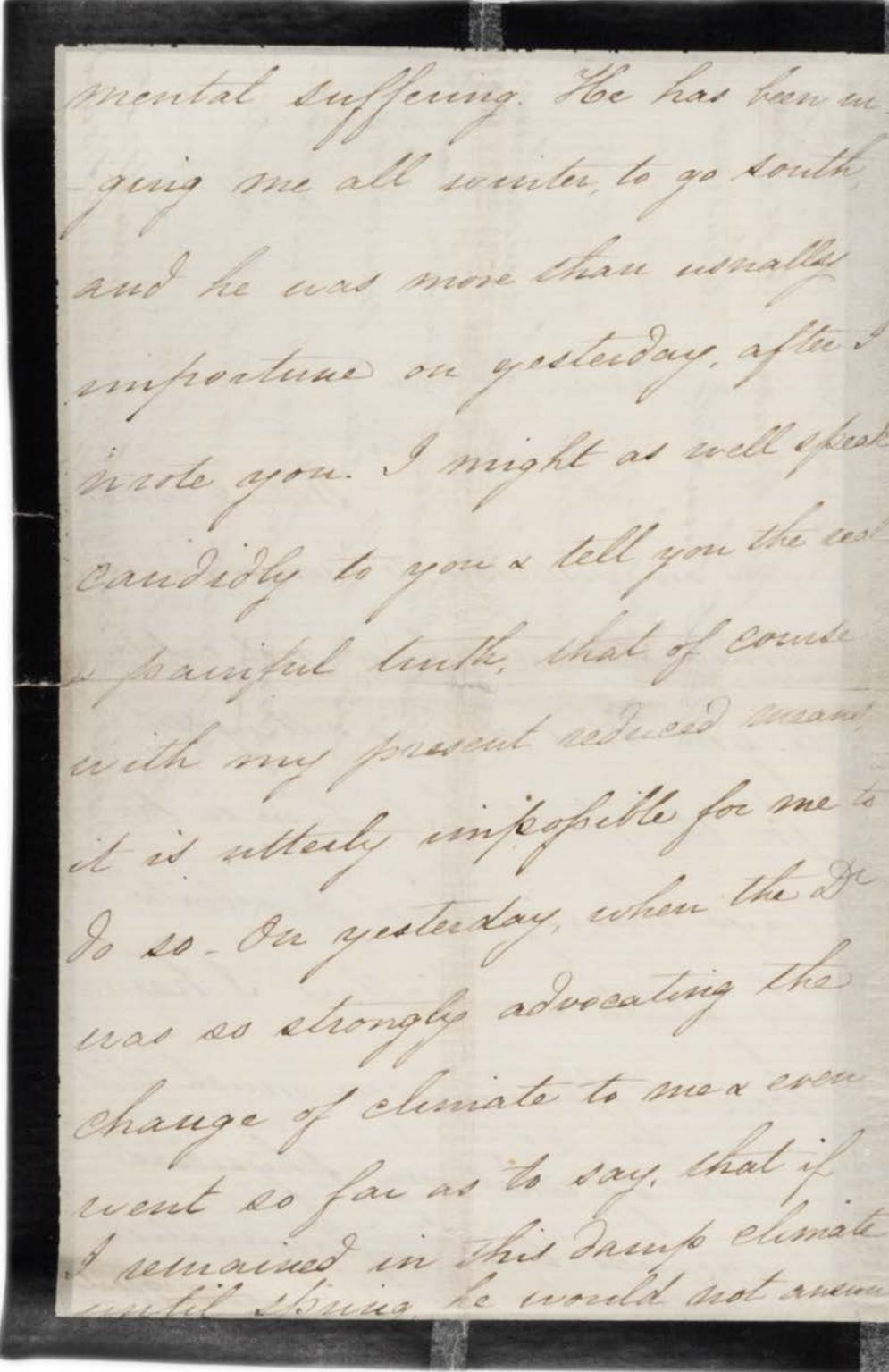
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Image



Mary Todd Lincoln to James Orne, February 4, 1870. (Gilder Lehrman Institute, GLC03651 p.1)

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mental suffering. He has been sug-
-ging me all winter, to go south,
and he was more than usually
importunate on yesterday, after I
wrote you. I might as well speak
candidly to you & tell you the real
painful truth, that of course
with my present reduced means,
it is utterly impossible for me to
do so. On yesterday, when the Dr
was so strongly advocating the
change of climate to me & even
went so far as to say, that if
I remained in this damp climate
until spring he would not answer

Mary Todd Lincoln to James Orne, February 4, 1870. (Gilder Lehrman Institute, GLC03651 p.2)

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for the consequences, and I might
 then be unable to walk. As it is,
 for the last three weeks, the pain
 in my back, is such, that
 I am unable to move only from
 chair to chair. I am not able
 to have a waiting woman, & I
 suffer greatly often, for the least
 attention. With my small means,
 I can only lodge in second class
 boarding houses, the horror &
 humiliation of the situation
 to me, surpasses any thing you
 can imagine. I had to suggest
 on yesterday to the Dr. that travel
 was very expensive, and his reply,

Mary Todd Lincoln to James Orne, February 4, 1870. (Gilder Lehrman Institute, GLC03651 p.3)

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kept me awake, most of the past
 night. In the most respectful
 & solemn manner he said, "Madam,
 the whole of Germany, is watching
 with the greatest solicitude, to see
 the wife of the great & good man,
 rendered more comfortable & pleased
 in the position, by her country,
 which of right belongs to her
 as his widow." I give you, dear
 Mr Orne, the very words. Do you
 wonder, that I wish to make
 my escape, from such surveillance
 -ance, as it involves, the country
 so beloved by us all - & subject
 it to criticism, if justice is denied
 me - for the whole world acknowledges

Mary Todd Lincoln to James Orne, February 4, 1870. (Gilder Lehrman Institute, GLC03651 p.4)

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the unparalleled⁵ services of my
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 dearly beloved. And yet you, with
 your great, good heart will ac-
 knowledge, that so far as the
 Cruelly Martyred President
 is concerned - those services
 have been unrewarded. His
 family, was very precious in
 his sight & could my husband
 see me placed - as stern - hard
necessity forces me to be. even
 the chain of His Heavenly
promise - would be dispelled. while
all others - have been so richly
 rewarded - the loved wife, of the
 man, who died in his country's
 service have been left to shed the tears of
 bitterness & live in poverty - broken hearts

Mary Todd Lincoln to James Orne, February 4, 1870. (Gilder Lehrman Institute, GLC03651 p.5)

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I am going to speak very plainly with
 you. I want by the first of March,
 for fear the words of the physicians, may
 be fearfully realised - to get away from
 here - to a milder climate, place my-
 self in the hands of a Medical Man
 who can relieve my great bodily
 pain - All this, I cannot do without
 the ~~money~~ we have so many noble
 hearted men in our loved land, who
 will I am sure, no longer see me,
 bearing in addition to my unceas-
 ing sorrow, so much mortification
 of spirit. I live in a room without
 a carpet, when in former years, I
 would not have placed a servant, yet
 with continual sickness, preying upon
 me. My expenses have been great. Through
 your great influence, cannot you have me
 by the 1st of March? I have my affairs here
 settled, &

Mary Todd Lincoln to James Orne, February 4, 1870. (Gilder Lehrman Institute, GLC03651 p.6)

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Transcript

Frankfurt A Main

Feb^y. 4th. 1870

Hon James H. Orne

My dear Sir

When I wrote you on yesterday so hurriedly & nervously, I believe I did not explain to you, that I was sitting up for the first half hour, in ten days, having been prostrated by quite severe illness. I have been suffering very much this winter, by what my physician pronounces to be inflammation of the spine, brought on he says, by great [2] mental suffering. He has been engaging me all winter, to go south, and he was more than usually importune on yesterday, after I wrote you. I might as well speak candidly to you & tell you the real & painful truth, that of course with my present reduced means, it is utterly impossible for me to do so. On yesterday, when the D^r was so strongly advocating the change of climate to me & even went so far as to say, that if I remained in this damp climate until spring, he would not answer [3] for the consequences, and I might then be unable to walk. As it is, for the last three weeks, the burning pain in my back, is such, that I am unable to move only from chair to chair. I am not able to have a waiting woman & I suffer greatly often, for the least attention. With my small means, I can only lodge in second class boarding houses, the horror & humiliation of the situation to me, surpasses any thing you can imagine. I had to suggest on yesterday to the D^r that traveling was very expensive, and his reply, [4] kept me awake, most of the past night. In the most respectful & solemn manner he said, "Madam the whole of Germany, is watching with the greatest solicitude, to see the wife of the great & good man, rendered more comfortable & placed in the position, by her country, which of right belongs to her – as his widow." I give you, dear M^r Orne, the very words – do you wonder, that I wish to make my escape, from such surveillance, as it involves, the country, so beloved by us all – & subjects it to criticism – if justice is denied me – for the whole world acknowledges [5] the unparalleled services of my dearly beloved. And yet you, with your great, good heart will acknowledge, that so far as the Cruelly Martyred President is concerned – those services have been unrewarded. His family, was very precious in his sight & could my husband see me placed – as stern – hard necessity forces me to be – even the charm of His Heavenly house – would be dispelled. While all others – have been so richly rewarded – the

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loved wife, of the man, who died in his country's [*inserted: service*] has been left to shed the tears of bitterness & live in poverty – broken hearted [6] I am going to speak very plainly with you. I want by the first of March – for fear the words of the physician, may be fearfully realized [*inserted: that I will be unable to walk*] – to get away from here – to a milder climate & place myself in the hands of a Medical Man who can relieve my great bodily pain – All this, I cannot do without the [*strikeout*] [*inserted: money*]. We have so many noble hearted men in our loved land – who will I am sure, no longer see me, hearing in addition to my overwhelming sorrow – so much mortification of spirit – I live in a room without a carpet, where in former years, I would not have placed a servant, yet with continual sickness, preying upon me. My expenses have been great. Through your great influence, cannot you have me by the 1st of March [*inserted: means to*] have my affairs here settled, & [*written on top of page 1:*] means given me even if a few thousand to go home. Whilst hundreds of thousands are so lavishly bestowed upon others which pleases me greatly to see done, will not the remembrance that President Lincoln, was the head of all & cause something more to be done to ameliorate my most unfortunate condition. If I could be benefitted by the [*illegible*] mention Please write me on receipt of this – your candid views [are greatly appreciated.]

[*written on top of page 3:*] You will kindly consider this letter private save for the eyes of a few of your particular friends,

M.

Please address care

Phillip, Nicoll, Schmidt

Frankfurt A Main