SUSAN SWAIN: Born in 1818 in Lexington, Kentucky, Mary Todd grew up in a slaveholding family, yet lived to see her husband, Abraham Lincoln, issue the Emancipation Proclamation 45 years later.

A mother of four sons, she witnessed the deaths of three of those four sons, as well as her own husband's assassination. Though her life was filled with tragedy, as Lincoln's political partner, she also relished in their success.

As we focus on the Civil War years, one of the defining moments in our country's history, a look at the life and times of Mary Todd Lincoln, one of the most complex first ladies ever to live in the White House.

Thanks for being with us for C-SPAN's continuing series on "First Ladies: Influence and Image.” Tonight, as we look at Mary Todd Lincoln, we invite two of our academic advisers, our history advisors for the whole series to be our guests for this program.

Let me introduce you to Rosalyn Terborg-Penn. She is a history professor emeritus at Morgan State University. Richard Norton Smith, our other guest tonight and at our table again, is the director of five presidential libraries, including the Abraham Lincoln Library in Springfield, Illinois, and a presidential biographer. Thanks to both of you for being here.

Mary Todd Lincoln is – and this is a question for both, we'll start with Richard – is often viewed in broad strokes, bouts of depression, criticism of her lavish spending, an overly indulgent mother. But if you look at a more nuanced picture, what do you see?

RICHARD NORTON SMITH, DIRECTOR, ABRAHAM LINCOLN LIBRARY: Oh, boy. Well, that's why we need 90 minutes to begin to get at the nuances. She matters immensely. You know, Lincoln has been called the great American story, and she is an integral part of that great American story.

In the nutshell, Steven Spielberg doesn't make movies about Julia Tyler, you know, or Louisa Adams. Mary Todd Lincoln remains 150 years later someone who is symbolically divisive, perhaps. To some people, she's a heroine. To many people, she's a victim. But she's a surprisingly contemporary figure, as well.

ROSALYN TERBORG-PENN: I like her because she's so complex. And I say I like her. I go through Elizabeth Keckley to get to Mary Todd Lincoln.

SWAIN: And who is Elizabeth Keckley?

TERBORG-PENN: She was her dressmaker and her companion, and didn't live at the White House, but spent a good deal of time there.

SWAIN: And an African-American?

TERBORG-PENN: Yes, formerly enslaved who purchased her own freedom and was interviewed, along with three or four other women, to become the first lady's seamstress, or modiste, as they call it. She made the most beautiful dresses for her.
SWAIN: So what do you learn about Mary Lincoln through Elizabeth Keckley's eyes?

TERBORG-PENN: Well, her - I don't know if you'd call it her narrative or her book, "Behind the Scenes," gives you a very concrete sketch of the relationship she had with her for four years. And just reading what Elizabeth Keckley tells you gives you an idea of how complex, how hurt, how victimized she was.

SMITH: It's certainly fair to say it's the most empathetic portrait we have of Mary.

TERBORG-PENN: Yes, it is.

SWAIN: Well, we're going to plunge into the White House years, as we begin our nuanced image of Mary Lincoln. And as we do this, we all call her Mary Todd, but if I look behind you at our wall of first ladies' signatures, she signed her name "Mary Lincoln." Where did the Mary Todd Lincoln reference come? Is that modern or did she use it?

TERBORG-PENN: Yes, it was modern. She didn't, from what I understand.

SMITH: Right.

SWAIN: So this is an 20th Century invention?

SMITH: Of course, you know, and Lincoln famously said - mocking the pretensions of his wife's family that God only needed one D and the Todds of Kentucky needed two.

TERBORG-PENN: Yes, I've heard that.

SMITH: She probably laughed the first thousand times she heard that joke. But, you know, you can just imagine these two. He's 6'4. She's 5'2", if that. And he had a habit of introducing themselves as the long and the short of it, another joke she probably endured more than enjoyed.

SWAIN: Well, I want to tell you at the outset here, these programs work because they're interactive. In a little while, we'll be getting to your phone calls and we'll put the phone numbers on the screen. And in the interim, if you have a question for us via Facebook, you can go to C-SPAN's Facebook page or you can tweet us with a question or comment. Make sure you use the hashtag #firstladies.

So 1860, as the election is won, let's take a brief look at what the country looked like. At that point, there were 31 million people in 33 states, although 11 states were to break off soon thereafter to form the Confederate States of America. That was a 36.6 percent growth since the 1850 census. The country's continuing to grow at an enormous pace. 3.9 million slaves in the country, 12.7 percent of the population, and the largest cities in the country, New York City, Philadelphia, Brooklyn, and Baltimore. That was the country that Abraham Lincoln inherited in the election in 1850.

So they arrive at the White House. Set the scene for us about the 1860 election and how tumultuous the politics were as the Lincolns arrived.

SMITH: Well, the political process had broken down. There were four parties that ran in 1860. The Democratic Party, which have been the one truly national political organization, split into Northern and Southern wings, divided over the issue of slavery.

Stephen Douglas, Lincoln's long-time rival - and, indeed, apparently at one point romantic rival for Mary's hand – is the Democratic nominee from the North. Vice President John Breckinridge is the Southern Democratic candidate. The old Whig Party, remember, they had disappeared in the middle
of the decade, they nominated someone named John Bell from Tennessee on a kind of middle-of-the-road "support the Constitution" platform.

And then that left this new party, the Republicans, which were defined as being anti-slavery, but not radically anti-slavery. They were not abolitionist; they were all about containing the spread of slavery. And Lincoln won with just under 40 percent of the vote. And the sheer news of his election, as you say, led seven Southern states almost immediately to secede.

SWAIN: The White House that the first lady inherited had been the domain of Harriet Lane, who was much beloved in Washington, really admired for her social skills even as the country was fracturing. So what was the city's view of the new first lady, Mary Lincoln, as she came to the White House?

TERBORG-PENN: Well, historian Catherine Clinton, one of her biographers, says in reality that she broke the elite Virginia scheme of things and that many of the congressional wives and some of the women who were very important during the Virginia times were resentful.

And they lampooned them. They lampooned Lincoln, and they lampooned her. And the sad thing is that she was a very intelligent, very highly educated woman from a good family, in terms of what you consider wealthy good families, but they treated her very badly.

I think the other thing that might have hit her – and I don't know if anybody has talked about it – is Washington was a swamp, disease-ridden...

SMITH: In many ways.

TERBORG-PENN: Yes. When I came to Washington, it was mosquito-ridden, and that wasn't 150 years ago. So I'm sure she had a difficult time dealing with that, plus she complained about how drab and dirty and – not dirty necessarily, but worn and drab the White House itself was. Some of the furniture was back to the days of Dolley Madison. So she had a lot to worry about.

SMITH: And that's important, because if you think of the repercussions of this woman who's arriving from Kentucky, referred to as the Republican Queen, mocked by people who really don't know her, who are willing to assume the worse about these backwards Lincolns, that puts a real chip on her shoulder, in a sense, even before she arrives in the capital, and it may begin to help to explain some of her preoccupation with fixing up the White House, for example, that has become part of her legend.

SWAIN: And in adorning herself, we have a quote for her about – from herself that – her rationale for why she spent so much money on her own attire. Here's what she wrote: "I must dress myself in costly materials. The people scrutinize every article that I wear with critical curiosity. The very fact of having grown up in the West subjects me to more searching observation. To keep up appearances, I must have money, more than Mr. Lincoln can spare for me."

TERBORG-PENN: But what is interesting is when she interviews Elizabeth Keckley, she says, "How much are you going to charge for your dresses, because I can't afford to pay you a great deal?" And she – and Keckley says, "Well, I will be reasonable." And they came to an agreement.

Now, my theory is she wanted a lot of dresses, but she couldn't afford to pay lavishly for a lot of dresses. So on her budget, she was able to get what she wanted because Keckley agreed not to overcharge her, and maybe that's one of the reasons she got the job.

SWAIN: Paint a portrait of what life was like in the Lincoln White House as a family living there and for the public using the space. What was it like in those days?
SMITH: Well, first of all, it was astonishingly open to the public. It is hard to believe, in the middle of the great Civil War that is raging, that twice every week the president would throw open his office, people could line up as long as they could wait for what he called his public opinion badge. For most of them, they were job interviewers. And, you know, Mrs. Lincoln, the children, they sort of finesse themselves around all of these folks.

There were the two boys at the beginning, of course, Willie, who was 10 years old when they arrived – in Washington, and his younger brother, Tad, his older brother, Robert Todd, had gone off to Harvard, and, of course, they'd had a fourth brother, who they'd lost years earlier in Springfield.

Mrs. Lincoln walked upon the White House very much as a symbol of this nation and took very seriously her responsibilities not only as a hostess, but as the woman responsible for the appearance of the house. And, remember, this is a time when the country is literally coming apart of the seams, so the symbolic value of America's house is perhaps even greater, just like the president's order that the half-finished dome of the Capitol is going to be completed. And in some ways, she took the same view of the White House.

SWAIN: A number of years ago, this network produced a documentary on the White House and we visited the Lincoln Bedroom. We're going to show you a clip from that documentary next to see the kind of spending that Mary Lincoln did on the furniture of the White House.

(BEGIN VIDEO CLIP)

NARRATOR: The bed dates back to 1861, bought by Mary Todd Lincoln as part of her White House refurbishing. It's eight feet long, six feet wide, made of curved rosewood.

LAURA BUSH, FORMER FIRST LADY: Mary Todd Lincoln draped the Lincoln bed with the purple and gold and fringe and lace, really high Victorian decorating. And we did have later photographs, not contemporary with Lincoln, but the bed still dressed the way she had dressed it. And so we did that again.

NARRATOR: It is this bed, bought by Mary Lincoln, and probably the most well-known piece of historic furniture in the house, that holds the key to understanding the Lincoln family's time here.

HISTORIAN: The famous bed, it was one of Mary Lincoln's many extravagant purchases as she began a campaign when she got here to redecorate this entire building.

WILLIAM SEALE, AUTHOR, "THE PRESIDENT'S HOUSE": They held the bill back forever so Lincoln wouldn't see it, because she spent so much money. And he saw it, and he flew into a rage and said it would stink in the nostrils of the American people. While our soldiers needed blankets, she was buying flub-dubs for that damned old house.

HISTORIAN: The epical thing about this bed is that it is where, in February 1862, Lincoln's middle son Willie died after a bout with typhoid fever. After that, Mary would never go into Willie's room again. She never looked at the bed again.

SEALE: She never was able to absorb the son's death, Willie's death, in the White House. And Lincoln finally said to her once, he took her to the window and he let her look across the river at St. Elizabeth's, the mental hospital. And he said, "Mother, if you don't get a hold of yourself, you're going to have to be put there. You know, now's the time to absorb it."

SMITH: The president by contrast would hole up in Willie's room, often on a Thursday, which is the day of the week he died, just to grieve. How the Lincolns handled their grief goes to how we see them
today. In the case of Mary, it really unhinged her. It was the final blow. In a curious sort of way, the war melded the disparate elements of Lincoln's personality and his grief, his sense of loss over Willie somehow morphed into a nation's sense of loss, the sense of loss in millions of homes throughout the union.

(END VIDEO CLIP)

TERBORG-PENN: I have a different interpretation about this so-called extravagant spending on the White House. Congress allotted her $20,000. Four years later, they allotted $125,000 for refurbishing.

SWAIN: So she didn't have enough money to spend?

TERBORG-PENN: Well, let's put it this way. How could she have spent so much if they only allocated $20,000? Did she do it all on that one bed?

SMITH: And the fact is, she actually over spent the $20,000 by about $6,000. It's not a huge...

TERBORG-PENN: A lot, right.

SMITH: ... amount.

SWAIN: But there was a war raging. So the politics of it.

SMITH: There was a war – it's become part of the legend.

TERBORG-PENN: That's part of the...

SMITH: It's part of the Mary Lincoln legend.

TERBORG-PENN: And the myth. And the myth. Because that's a myth.

SMITH: This woman, out of control, shopaholic, you know...

SWAIN: On her grief over the son's death in the White House, a political aspect to that, too. How did the country react to her extended mourning when there were so many sons of mothers dying on the battlefield, both North and South?

SMITH: Well – and that's true. She basically disappeared for over a year. Her social life as first lady ended for over a year. She gave orders, for example, for the Marine band to stop playing their concerts on the White House grounds. Then it was suggested, well, perhaps they could be moved to Lafayette Park. She said, no, she – her grief was too great.

She indulged herself even beyond the standards of the day when – well, her compatriot was Queen Victoria, who would spend in some ways the rest of her life grieving over the lost of Prince Albert.

SWAIN: What finally brought her out of her grief?

TERBORG-PENN: I think it's hard to determine, because she was continually being vilified. And maybe it was when her son, Robert, who was really a disappointment in the long run, had her incarcerated, in essence, sent to a mental institution, she – I think she woke up then and decided, "I'm going to get out of here.” And she fought very hard, and she was able to mobilize support to get her out of the mental institution.
SMITH: But I don't think she ever really recovered from the loss of Willie. I mean, I do think, you know...

TERBORG-PENN: But it's not just Willie. It's the loss of Edward, it's then the loss of Willie, it's then the loss of her husband, and then Tad...

SMITH: You can go back at the beginning...

TERBORG-PENN: And then Tad died.

SMITH: ... she lost her mother at age six.

TERBORG-PENN: Yes.

SMITH: And then was afflicted with the classic wicked stepmother syndrome, which is what sent her to Springfield in the first place. This is a woman whose life is shadowed by loss.

SWAIN: Well, let me move from the personal Mary Lincoln to the political Mary Lincoln and have you both tell me a bit about her, how well she served as a political partner to the president. I want to go to Elizabeth Keckley's book, because she writes of Mary Lincoln, "Her intuition about the sincerity of individuals was more accurate than that of her husband. Did Lincoln listen to her observations? Was she a good helpmate in that regard?"

TERBORG-PENN: I think she was. I think she tried to advise him, but some of his advisers didn't really want her to be interfering. And that was definitely the case when he was dying and they took her from the room and wouldn't let her in to mourn as he died, which was a traditional thing in her culture. The wife stays with the husband until he dies. They robbed her of that. I think they were threatened by her sense of significance.

SWAIN: Gary Robinson asks on Twitter, did Mary Lincoln create enemies out of social rivals? And if so, who was her main antagonist?

SMITH: Well, let's say, she had a number of rivals. Kate Chase, the daughter of Secretary of the Treasury Salmon Chase, who made no secret about his lust to replace Lincoln in the White House. And Kate was quite the belle of the ball, and I think it's safe to say Mrs. Lincoln had no great love lost for Kate.

But, you know, again, part of the legend, and it's accurate, the stories of her accompanying the president to the field, battlefield, near the end of the war, the sight of a General Edward Ord's wife riding alongside the president, she lost it. She – you know, the reason the Grants did not go to Ford's Theater was because Julia Grant did not want to risk having another confrontation with this very unpleasant woman, as far as she knew.

SWAIN: And what did the White House staff think of her?

TERBORG-PENN: Well, they liked her. Only four of the staff remained when they came to the White House, when the Lincolns came to the White House. They brought in new staff, primarily freed blacks, who really worked very well with her.

And from what I could gather, those who were interviewed talked about her in a very positive way. She got along very well with them because they were the ones who basically helped to raise her after her real mother died, her birthmother died, when she was coming up in Kentucky.

SWAIN: Well, Nicolay and Hay in the White House, Lincoln's two personal secretaries...
SMITH: Right.

SWAIN: ... didn't always use the best descriptions of her.

SMITH: No, they were, you know, young men who had their own reasons to resent, and vice versa. You know, they dubbed them – she was Hellcat and he was the Tycoon. That was the nickname by which the secretaries referred to them, in his case with great affection, I think in her case probably less so.

SWAIN: Dave Murdock on Twitter, outside of Washington, what was the perception of the first family? Do we know?

SMITH: That's a great question. Again, I think if you read the press of the day, and there's certainly – there was a considerable amount of criticism. Unfortunately, you know, if she had been in some ways more press-conscious, we know now how much time she spent visiting soldiers in hospitals, writing letters for soldiers who were unable to write themselves, taking fruit and other gifts, and yet she never took reporters along with her. If she had been a little bit more, in a sense, PR conscious, who knows what it might have done on her historical record.

TERBORG-PENN: But then when she went on her trip north, the press followed her. They went into every store she went into.

SMITH: But that's what they reported.

TERBORG-PENN: That's what they reported, those kinds of things.

SMITH: Yes.

SWAIN: First caller is Ron watching us in Everett, Washington. Ron, you're on. Go ahead, please.

CALLER: Yes, hello. As you've indicated, there continues to be great controversy among historians and biographers over the Lincoln marriage. The first school about it is that initially presented in a biography co-authored by Lincoln's law partner, Herndon, William Herndon, based on his post-assassination interviews with a multitude of Lincoln's pre-presidential Midwest friends, relatives, colleagues, neighbors, servants, et cetera, many of whom reinforced his view that Mary Todd was a domestic hell on Earth whose frequent outbursts included numerous broomstick attacks and multiple instances of thrown objects, including a piece of firewood that resulted in her battered husband sustaining a broken nose.

The second school followed the tradition of Ruth Painter Randall, who presented the marriage as an appealing love story. This school reflected deep skepticism over the veracity of Herndon's informants, distantly recollected testimony, but was evasive about the super-abundant evidence to the contrary from both the pre-presidential and presidential periods.

In the past two decades, Lincoln scholars have given more credence to Herndon's informants' recollected oral and written testimony. And this is culminated in Michael Burlingame's massive 2008 two-volume biography of Lincoln.

SWAIN: So, Ron, are you going with – just in the interest of time, you want to know which view our guests think is more correct?

CALLER: Yes. Well, yes, this is my – one more thing I want to add here. In a review of the biography by James McPherson, he criticized Burlingame's relentless hostility towards Lincoln, Mary
Lincoln, which he said marred the narrative by quoting almost every negative portrayal and not offering any of the countervailing evidence in biographies.

So my question is, what is your guest historians' assessment of Burlingame's depiction of Mary Lincoln? And also, what is their assessment of the motion picture, the recent motion picture's portrayal of her?

SWAIN: Great. Thank you so much for the call. Are you familiar with Burlingame's assessment?

SMITH: Yes. I think it is safe to say that Michael is rather hostile to Mary and has certainly amassed a great deal of evidence to support his view.

What I find really fascinating is, just as in the Roosevelt camp, there are literally Eleanor and Franklin people. They are very much Abraham and Mary people. They are people who literally will not sit on the same stage at scholarly symposia, they are so committed to one or the other. That's how passionate, you know, these historians feel.

SWAIN: But Abraham seemed to be committed to Mary.

SMITH: And you know what? In some ways, that's the ultimate test.

TERBORG-PENN: Let me ask your caller...

SWAIN: He's not there anymore, so just a response.

TERBORG-PENN: Oh, he's not. OK. I just wonder if he has read Catherine Clinton's biography of Mrs. Lincoln, where she engages Clarendon – Herndon, rather.

And you have to really look at the reasons why people write biographies or books. And Herndon was angry with Lincoln and then later took it out on Mary. I mean, that's the way I – from what I've heard about it – I haven't read about the book, but from what I could see, that you have to look at the motive behind the book.

SWAIN: He also asked what you both thought of the most modern portrayal, and that is in the new Spielberg movie, the "Lincoln" movie.

TERBORG-PENN: OK.

SMITH: I thought it was wonderful, and it was wonderful precisely because it transcends all of these camps.

TERBORG-PENN: All of that.

SMITH: It's, to me, the most lifelike portrayal, not only of Mary, but of that marriage that I've ever seen.

SWAIN: You agree?

TERBORG-PENN: Oh, I agreed, I agreed.

SWAIN: A quote from Mary Lincoln about her own view in the public perception. She writes, "I seem to be the scapegoat for both North and the South." And we're going to show you next another video. One of her refuges here in Washington was a summer cottage not very far from the Capitol or the White House itself called the Soldiers' Home. We're going to visit that next.
ERIN CARLSON MAST, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, PRESIDENT LINCOLN'S COTTAGE:
President Lincoln's cottage was a seasonal home for the Lincoln family. And Mary Lincoln really pushed for the move out here to the Soldiers' Home, because she saw it as a place for her family to have more privacy than what they had down at the White House.

We're in the Mary Lincoln Room, which is not part of our typical interpretative experience at the cottage. But we call it the Mary Lincoln room because when the Lincolns were living out here in the summer of 1863, Mary Lincoln is involved in a pretty serious carriage accident. Some scholars believe that the carriage had been tampered with and that this was actually an early assassination attempt on Lincoln.

When Mary Lincoln suffers that carriage accident – and what happens is that the driver seat separates a little bit from the carriage and the horses are startled and take off – and Mary Lincoln has to leap out of the carriage in order to save herself. She suffers a head injury.

After she's in the accident, she's treated, we believe, down at the White House, but then in – after she's been treated, she comes out here to the Soldiers' Home to make her recovery. And we believe that she did that here in the Mary Lincoln Room. Not only is it the most isolated of the bedrooms on the second floor, but it's the only one that has windows on three different walls, allowing for better cross-breezes to make her recovery more comfortable.

But in 1862, there's also the imperative of having a more private place to mourn and to grieve after the death of their son, Willie. Willie Lincoln passed away in February of 1862, and Mary Lincoln was going about the traditional cultural and social expectations of a woman in mourning and felt like she couldn't do this effectively down at the White House. And so for her, there was a family and a personal imperative to come out here to the Soldiers' Home to have a place to grieve the loss of her son.

One of the best-documented events that actually took place here at the Soldiers' Home is a séance that was hosted out here after the death of Willie Lincoln, and Noah Brooks writes about that account in his diary.

Lincoln on one – at least one occasion felt that Mary Lincoln was being taken advantage of and that she might be subject to blackmail. And he asked for some of his colleagues and friends to check out the situation, see if they could figure out what the so-called medium was actually doing and figure out how he was able to make the noises that he was claiming were spirits.

And so Noah Brooks is present at this particular séance here at the Soldiers' Home and recounts the noises that they were all hearing and then the fact that, when the lights turned on, you know, they had grabbed the person's hand and were able to prove that he was a fraud.

Based on the historical record, it does not seem that Mary was aware that she was being defrauded in this way. And in fact, after it's revealed that this man was a fake, she's quite embarrassed by it, and there's an attempt to sort of conceal and cover up the incident.

Whenever Mary Lincoln writes about this place to friends, she always talks about how dearly she loved the place or how much she was looking forward to coming out here. I think she really saw it as fulfilling her dream of what her family would experience when they were in Washington, D.C. So even though it was still a place where death and the war were surrounding them, it also gave them at least a little bit of respite from the chaos of downtown Washington, D.C.
SWAIN: The Soldiers' Home is available for public tours. And if you get to Washington, D.C., put it on your list, it's one of those out-of-the-way spots that's really quite a time capsule of an important period of history.

Now, you were visibly wanting to react to the spiritualism of the séance.

SMITH: Well, no, actually, I was going to say, you know, the carriage accident, this is – in some ways, the Lincoln presidency in miniature, because we don't know. There was a school of thought that says Mary's condition, whatever it was, worsened after that...

TERBORG-PENN: Probably.

SMITH: ... very severe head injury than she experienced. The date is significant. It was the 2nd of July, 1863, which is the second day of the battle of Gettysburg. Needless to say, the president's attention is focused elsewhere. He was not in a situation – when, well, for Gettysburg and Vicksburg reaching a climax – to pay as much attention to his wife as he might have otherwise.

SWAIN: There is speculation that the carriage accident was an attempted assassination. And one part of their history that we didn't tell about is on their initial trip to Washington after the election, there was a documented assassination attempt that the Pinkerton service saved them from on the train in Baltimore. I'm asking this just to say there was a constant threat on the lives of these people, so that stress, as well, we should take into account.

TERBORG-PENN: Oh, I agree. She was living with all of that, plus the confusion of war. I mean, it was a horrible time to be in the White House, I would think.

SWAIN: The administration is filled – we're in the midst of a five-year 150th marking of the Civil War events, and so we couldn't capture on one screen all of the tumultuous and significant events of the administration. But here are a few of them. 1861, the Civil War begins, of course. In 1863, they issue the Emancipation Proclamation and, as Richard Norton Smith said, deliver the Gettysburg Address.

In 1865, the 13th Amendment abolishing slavery is proposed to the states, and that was what was captured in the "Lincoln" movie we just spoke about. And on April 9th, at Appomattox Courthouse in Virginia, the Confederate Army surrenders. That's the book ends of the Lincoln administration.

So a question about Mary during this time period. How did she comport herself? You mentioned her unannounced visit to military hospitals. As the wife of a president in the midst of war, for both of you, how did she comport herself?

SMITH: Well, that goes to the heart of the controversy...

TERBORG-PENN: Yes.

SMITH: ... because, you know, there is a significant body of evidence that calls into question some of her conduct. For example, she was surrounded by people who very clearly were there to take advantage of her. I'll give you one example. There was a character – well, and she needed money. You can never forget the fact from the day she arrived there she needed money.

SWAIN: Why did she need money so much?
SMITH: She needed money because she had spent – for example, at one point, she was $27,000 in debt to her dressmakers. And so the president had to be re-elected, because if he was re-elected, she could keep those bills at bay. If he wasn't re-elected, you know, who knew what might happen?

And that is quite apart from, for example, the money she was spending, the public funds she was spending on the White House proper. So there were always people around her who were eager to serve their own interests by appearing to serve hers.

I'll give you one example. There was a character – shady character named Henry Wikoff, known as the Chevalier, who was with the New York Herald. And he somehow befriended Mrs. Lincoln, and lo and behold, the president's annual message to Congress in December 1861 appeared in the New York Herald the same day it went to Congress.

And, anyway, you get the picture. There was no shortage of people like the Chevalier who were eager to either line their own pockets or serve their own interests. And I think the legitimate, if you want to say, criticism of Mrs. Lincoln as first lady has nothing to do with her mental condition, where you can only feel empathetic, but legitimately, there is criticism about how she conducted herself in ways that always were in danger, if exposed, of embarrassing the president.

TERBORG-PENN: Now, in this case, this purloined letter, it was the gardener who took the letter and gave it to the press.

SMITH: That was the story that was – came about.

TERBORG-PENN: And then the gardener – and then the gardener leaves for Scotland, leaves the employ of the White House.

SMITH: Yes, yes.

TERBORG-PENN: So he must have been paid to do this.

SMITH: The other side of the argument is, that that was the story they cooked up, in effect, to cover the – to what had actually happened.

SWAIN: Let's take another call. Candace is in Fredericksburg, Virginia. Hi, Candace, welcome.

CALLER: Thank you. I'm enjoying the show very much. I have a question regarding the broken first engagement – then they got back together, of course, what, about a year-and-a-half later and got married. Number one, why do you think they broke up? And, number two, why'd they get back together? And do you think Lincoln loved her throughout their marriage? Thank you.

SWAIN: Thank you so much. I'm going to hold that question because, as this program progresses, we will go back in time to how Abraham and Mary got together, and we will answer Candace's question, I promise.

Let's take another one from Chad in Baltimore. You're on, Chad.

CALLER: My question is about Elizabeth Keckley. I think she served both Mary Lincoln and Varina Davis, the first lady of the Confederacy, I'm not sure.

TERBORG-PENN: She made dresses for a variety of people, including Jefferson Davis' wife, General McClellan's wife. She was very popular. She had her own shop. She did not live in the White House. She had her own residence that – a place where she rented. And she was very popular among the congressional wives, who then recommended her to Mrs. Lincoln.
SMITH: Had she bought her freedom?

TERBORG-PENN: Yes, she bought her freedom when she was in St. Louis through dressmaking.

SWAIN: As the Lincoln's traveled back and forth between the White House and the Soldiers' Home, they often passed what's called contraband camps...

TERBORG-PENN: Yes.

SWAIN: ... in Washington. What were the contraband camps?

TERBORG-PENN: People escaping from slavery during – especially in Washington, coming from Maryland and Virginia in particular with their families, or slaves, enslaved people who were emancipated, but had no place to go.

And there were several contraband associations across the nation, but Mrs. Keckley was one of the founders of the Washington contraband association. And she talked, Mrs. Lincoln, into donating, and from what I hear, Mrs. Lincoln talked the president into making donations.

SWAIN: We have many people on both Facebook and Twitter asking us questions about her views on slavery. Here are a couple of them.

Ronald Wolford Blair, since the Todds were friends with Henry Clay, president of the American Colonization Society, did Mary also prescribe to the gradual emancipation and colonization of the slaves? Or did she follow Lincoln's change of heart to eventually press for immediate emancipation and scrapping the colonization effort?

And Christian Gant on Twitter very simply asks, what she anti-slavery? Did she support the 13th Amendment?

Do we know?

SMITH: She was anti-slavery.

TERBORG-PENN: Yes. Yes.

SMITH: And she certainly supported the 13th Amendment.

TERBORG-PENN: Thirteenth amendment, right. And they say that she influenced the president into the immediate emancipation, even though I think that was a war strategy.

SMITH: I think you're right.

TERBORG-PENN: You know, but she was definitely – she didn't – she didn't go the other way. She was encouraging him to go ahead and do it.

SMITH: But the mention of Henry Clay, it's very important. In some ways, what brought them together was – I mean, this very unlikely couple in many ways was a shared love of politics, which, again, particularly unusual for a young well-bred lady of that era, but in particular, Henry Clay, who was a neighbor...

TERBORG-PENN: Right.
SMITH: ... of the Todds, who was a good friend, and who was Lincoln's political hero. So in some ways, Henry Clay is the political matchmaker behind this unlikely union.

SWAIN: Well, a good segue into our next visit, which is to Springfield. Springfield, Illinois is the capital of the state and the place where Abraham and Mary would meet. Let's watch more about some of the collections in the Lincoln Library there of Mary Lincoln first lady artifacts, and we'll learn more about how that city, which is so important to them, preserves her memory.

(BEGIN VIDEO CLIP)

JAMES CORNELIUS, PRESIDENT LIBRARY FOUNDATION: Here we have some things that Mary Lincoln had in the White House. She continued to be interested in books. Here is just two volumes of what we think was a 27-volume set of the works of Sir Edward Bulwer-Lytton, not a name much recognized today, though this particular novel is sort of remembered, "Last Days of Pompeii," and Mary signed these books, in this case, 1864.

She was a pretty good writer of letters. This is her personal letter seal with the monogram ML on it. Notice that there's no T in there. She never, ever called herself Mary Todd Lincoln; she never ever called herself Mary T. Lincoln. She was Mary Lincoln or Mrs. Abraham Lincoln or Mrs. President Lincoln. The inclusion of Todd in her name is a 20th century invention.

This is a letter that begins to show some of her difficulties, you would suppose, in the sense that her reputation suffered. She's writing to the assistant secretary of the treasury, Mr. George Harrington, asking if he can find a job for her dressmaker, Elizabeth Keckley, because she doesn't any longer need the services of Ellen Shehan and wants her off the jobs list and wants to get Elizabeth Keckley onto the jobs list over at the Treasury. "And I promise I will never ever ask you for another favor again, Mr. Harrington" – though, of course, she did over and over.

But the real cause of their sorrow in the White House personally was the death of their son, Willie. This is a piece of sheet music which we just acquired. It was one of the two copies of it recorded anywhere in a library. We suppose there are a few others out there. "Little Willie's Grave," hard to imagine how many people would have wanted to buy this outside of the Lincoln's immediate circle of friends, and yet a substantial publisher in New York, William Holm and Son, did print it. He was the first child to have died in the White House and one of only two presidential children ever to die in the White House.

(END VIDEO CLIP)

SWAIN: That is the Lincoln Presidential Museum and Library in Springfield, Illinois, which our guest, Richard Norton Smith, was very much involved in the creation of.

But going back to her need for money, Dan Nygaard reminds us on Twitter that Abraham Lincoln was a very successful lawyer in Springfield and, in fact, worked for the railroads and made quite a bit of money for that. So what was his income in the late 1850s? And why did they need money so far?

SMITH: That's a great point, because it's interesting. If you go back and look at the contemporary accounts, Mary's preoccupation with money seems to have been something that started with Washington. In fact, there are friends and neighbors who talked about how thrifty she was necessarily, what a good housekeeper she was during his legal days back in Springfield.

I think it was grounded in her sense that we've talked about a little bit already, that she was a national figure and she was representing the West, if you will, that she was quite aware there were people who were condescending to both her and her husband, that she had a place, a status, and appearance to maintain. And I think it was as simple as that. I also think it got out of hand.
Lincoln left an estate of $85,000 at the time of his death, of which she as a widow would inherit one-third. And you figure she was – at the time of his re-election, she was in debt $27,000.

SWAIN: On that note, it’s been said that Mary bought duplicates, and we’re not talking duplicates, we’re talking 100s sometimes of many items, such as gloves and parasols. Was this true? And then what has happened to all those items?

SMITH: That's a great question. She – and that is true, that is the sort of the obsessive nature. Over time, it became more pronounced, that she would go and buy dozens of sets of gloves at a given time.

TERBORG-PENN: But one thing, though, wearing gloves in Washington, with all those people coming in, you – I'm sure she was aware of the germs that people had, and I think that that was a significant thing.

Mrs. Keckley kept some used gloves of the president that Mrs. Lincoln took off of his hands and gave to her, so whenever there were meetings and people were coming by, they wore gloves. I mean, this was in the movie, this was real, this – the movie about, the "Lincoln" movie, showed his servants saying, you know, "Mrs. Lincoln wants you to wear these gloves. It's important to wear these gloves.” And that caught me, as she knew about the disease in the city.

SWAIN: Yes, but she did buy, in some cases, 300 sets of these. So I mean, even knowing about the...

SMITH: But you know what? One of the really touching sort of counterpoints to this is Lincoln loved to see her in beautiful clothes. It was one of the few extravagances that he was comfortable with.

SWAIN: So he was indulgent on the one hand and critical on the other.

SMITH: He was – I would say much more indulgent than he was critical.

SWAIN: Now, we need to move to re-election. I mean, we can't do justice in this short program to the tumultuous years of the White House. But was there any question that Lincoln would seek re-election?

SMITH: There wasn't any question that he would seek re-election. There was a profound question whether he would be, in fact, re-elected, as he himself acknowledged as late as August of 1964, wholly dependent on the course of the war.

And at that point, before Sherman's march, before Atlanta had fallen, before it became very clear that it was only a question of time that the North would win, Lincoln himself believed that he would not be re-elected. So you can imagine the mood upstairs around Mrs. Lincoln.

TERBORG-PENN: And he had bouts of melancholy, a lot of them. And apparently, she was one of the few people who could soothe him and bring him out of it.

SWAIN: And here's what Mary Lincoln had to say shortly after their re-election in 1864. "Our Heavenly Father sees fit oftentimes to visit us, at such times for our worldliness, how small and insignificant all worldly honors are, when we are thus so surely tried.”

SMITH: Well, you know, there's still a part of the debate about Lincoln, too, is Lincoln and religion. Clearly, Mary was a devout churchgoer, who even – I think she had some doubts planted by the death of Willie.
Lincoln himself never joined a church, but even as far back as Springfield, we have accounts of him spending hours and hours sitting at home with the minister going over the Bible. I mean, he knew his King James Bible front and back. That's in some ways where he taught himself to write.

SWAIN: The fateful night in April of 1865, when the Lincolns who were pretty avid theatergoers make the decision to see "Our American Cousin" here at what's now Ford's Theater in Washington, D.C., and Lincoln is assassinated. Tell us very briefly the story of his death and Mary's role in that.

TERBORG-PENN: Well, she's right there, of course, so she witnesses it. In fact, she's the one that cries out first, "The president has been shot," because people assumed that this man who jumps is part of the show. And then they take him across the street to, what is it, a boarding house?

SMITH: Yes.

TERBORG-PENN: And he's very sick. And his cabinet members – and to me, that was very strange, that his cabinet members are all around him while the doctors are there. And she's hysterical. I guess she would be, you know? And so they get one of her female friends to take her out of the room, and they keep her there. They wouldn't bring her in. And that's what – it takes him all night to pass away.

SWAIN: 7:22 in the morning, he died.

TERBORG-PENN: Right. And the sad thing is that they wouldn't let her see him at the end, because they didn't want to hear her – from what I gather is because they didn't want to hear her hysteria.

SMITH: Yes, Secretary Stanton, who took charge of everything in the house that night, at one point said, you know, take that woman out of the room. And Robert Todd Lincoln was at his father's bedside, but Mary was not there when the end came.

SWAIN: Let's hear a call from Michael in St. Petersburg, Florida. Michael, are you there? All right.

CALLER: I'm sorry, yes.

SWAIN: Go ahead with your question, please.

CALLER: Well, first, thank you for taking my call. I have enjoyed the entire series, and I have followed it with Margaret Truman's biography of the first ladies. And she devotes quite a bit of time to Mary Todd Lincoln and remarks that, in many historians' lists, Mary Todd Lincoln ranks at the very bottom of the list. You know, I don't agree with that, and I'm wondering how your commentators would also rank Mrs. Lincoln in terms of all of the first ladies.

SWAIN: Thank you very much.

SMITH: Oh, boy. I'll put it this way. I certainly would disagree with those who would rank her at or near the bottom. I think, first of all, that is, to put it mildly, less than compassionate.

But I also think her years in the White House, her story is really unique in all of the annals of White House history. I think she's a unique figure. And the fact that 150 years later we're having this discussion, we're still debating her motives and her conduct, and, you know, it tells you she's an important first lady, and I'll leave it at that.

SWAIN: She's important because of the man to whom she was married?
SMITH: She's important because of the man to whom she's married. She's important because of the part she plays in the story, which is still being debated after all of these years. We still feel as if we don't know who she was. And, you know, we're not having this debate over Angelica Van Buren.

SWAIN: Would you rate her?

TERBORG-PENN: Oh, yes, she's one of my favorites, not my true favorite, but – and I kind of divide them up into 18th-19th century, and 20th-21st century. And among the 19th century ones, she and Abigail Adams would be my favorites. So, no, I would rank her quite high.

And I also think that you have to look at her vision as a partner. There were several first ladies who considered themselves to be partners with their husbands, not that they were trying to tell them what to do, but to help advise them, to help take care of them, whether mentally or physically or politically. And I think she was a very significant influence on her husband.

SMITH: She's a tragic figure.

TERBORG-PENN: Yes, that's part of it.

SMITH: We should agree with that. And part of the tragedy is that very partnership, which arguably did help contribute to his becoming president, in many ways was destroyed by the war and the presidency that they had worked together to achieve.

TERBORG-PENN: And the vilification.

SWAIN: Devlin is in Queens, New York. You're on, Devlin.

CALLER: Thank you so much, and thank you for producing such a wonderful program. I watched it every night.

SWAIN: Thank you.

CALLER: And I just want to also comment about Carl Sandburg's "Lincoln," that was the television movie starring Hal Holbrook and Sada Thompson in 1974, and I think today's movie is good, but if you really want to get good and in-depth about the Lincolns, I think people should really watch this type of movie. And also on YouTube, you can also talk about finding out Lincoln's body was almost stolen from his crypt at the time.

And that's something I didn't even know about, as well. And I just want to bring it out, this series, that there's so much information about the Lincolns that it would take a whole year to, you know, to earth up. But I will rate Mary Lincoln up there with Eleanor Roosevelt and Jacqueline Kennedy. Thank you so much.

SWAIN: Thank you very much. Well, you make the Jacqueline Kennedy connection. And in fact, 100 years later, when John F. Kennedy was assassinated, Jacqueline would look to the plans from the Lincoln funeral to guide her through the decisions for the Kennedy funeral. Tell us about the Lincoln funeral.

SMITH: Well, the Lincoln – there has never been anything like it then or since, basically 20 days, thereabouts. What they did was they retraced the route, essentially, the inauguration route from Springfield to Washington. And they – with a couple of exceptions, they retraced that route.
And there were 10, in effect, state funerals in cities along the way. By one estimate, a third of every Northern American either looked upon the president's face in his casket or actually saw the train go by.

It was an extraordinary pageant of grief, very Victorian, very 19th century, and, of course, the irony is that Mrs. Lincoln was not along for any of it. In keeping with tradition, she remained behind at the White House absolutely grief-stricken. And so she really didn't attend any of her husband's funerals.

SWAIN: Elizabeth Keckley describes her in the month in the White House missing all of the celebrations as wailing with grief repeatedly. What can you tell us about her response?

TERBORG-PENN: Well, I can understand it. I don't – it's not me, but, I mean, considering all the things that she had to go through in her early part of the marriage, getting to the White House, the triumph of that, then the death of their son, then his assassination in front of her, I mean, I can understand that.

But I also think – and maybe this blow on the head might have exacerbated her emotional state – but she was getting it – letting it out, letting it all come out, and it was very sad, but I can understand it.

SWAIN: Both Kentucky and Illinois claimed the Lincolns as their own. Mary Todd Lincoln, or Mary Todd, was born in Lexington, Kentucky. We're going to visit that place next.

(BEGIN VIDEO CLIP)

GWEN THOMPSON, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, MARY TODD LINCOLN HOUSE: We're at the Mary Todd Lincoln House. This is Mary's girlhood home, where she lived from the ages of 13 to 21. This is not where she was born, but her birthplace no longer stands. So this is the most significant property still standing related to Mrs. Lincoln's childhood.

We are in Mary's bedroom. She shared a room over the years with various sisters and also with various cousins who lived with them. The Todds did have family members who came to live with them here in Lexington, and that was primarily so that those family members could attend school.

Lexington was known for its educational and cultural institutions. Mary Lincoln had at least nine years of formal schooling. She first attended Wards Academy, which was within walking distance of her birthplace, and then she went on to attend Madame Mentelle's Academy.

At Madame Mentelle's Academy, Mary learned everything that was expected of women of her class, such as needlepoint and dancing, but they also learned higher levels of what in this time period are traditionally male subjects, such as literature and arithmetic. So Mary's formal education made her one of the most educated women of her generation.

The popular image of Mary Todd Lincoln is often very dark and dour, but her childhood here in Lexington, many of the stories associated with it just represent a typical childhood. She had a pony that she rode around town. She and her siblings would catch minnows in the creek that ran out back. And she and a cousin were actually quite precocious, and they attempted to create their own hoopskirts and then sneak off to wear them to Sunday school.

This is the family parlor of the Mary Todd Lincoln house where Mary and her parents and her many siblings would have spent the evening together. But it's important to keep in mind that, in addition to the white family members, there were enslaved African-Americans at the Todd home. On average, over the years that they lived here, they had five slaves who provided all the household labor and lived at the property. And that included usually three women and two men.
We have a portrait of Mary's stepmother's mother. This is Mary Brown Humphreys. She's said to have been a formative influence on Mrs. Lincoln. Mrs. Humphreys was very well-educated. She spoke French fluently. She's also interesting because of her views in regard to slavery. In her will, she chose to provide for the gradual freeing of her slaves over a period of years after her death. And this represents the political position of gradual emancipation. And this is one position on the spectrum in regard to slavery.

This is the dining room of the home. This is where Mary, along with her older siblings and parents, would have entertained other prominent families of the day, including politicians. One of the greatest politicians of the day and a neighbor of the Todds was Henry Clay. Henry Clay was the leader of the Whig political party at the national level and was a friend of the Todd family.

Mary Lincoln's father was also a member of the Whig political party. And Todd and Clay shared some political ideas, especially in regard to slavery. Both Clay and Todd supported the American Colonization Society, which was a movement to resettle free blacks back to Liberia. So this represents yet another view on slavery that Mary Lincoln was exposed to as a child.

This is the gentlemen's parlor of the house. It's a formal area of the house that usually would have been off-limits to the women. But according to one of Mary Todd Lincoln's cousins, Mary would sit in on some of the political conversations that would happen here when her father was entertaining other prominent men of the day. And they say that Mary Lincoln might have taken an interest in politics in part to help garner attention from her father, who was very active in state and local politics.

(END VIDEO CLIP)

SWAIN: And our next caller is from Lexington, Kentucky. John is on the line. John, your question or comment?

CALLER: Hello. Thank you for taking my call. I certainly appreciate the empathetic and the very – the stress on the unique specific aspects of Mary's time in the White House. Of course, one that is briefly brought up here in the segment we just watched is the fact that many of Mary's kin became Confederates during the war, very famously so. In fact, I live in the home of her sister, Emilie, Emilie Todd Helm, who married a man who would eventually become a Confederate general in his own life.

My question is, could you all talk a little bit about Mary's perception of her Confederate siblings while in the White House, and especially for mourning? Did she mourn for her Confederate kin? Thank you very much.

SWAIN: Thank you. Interesting question.

SMITH: It is. You know, her family was so huge. The first family, she was the fourth of seven children. And the second family, there were nine children. And there were three – at least three or four of her siblings or stepsiblings who fought actively for the Confederacy. And some of them died.

TERBORG-PENN: And one of them was the husband of one of her favorite stepsisters, Emilie.

SMITH: Yes, I think – exactly.

TERBORG-PENN: Yes. Right.

SMITH: Yes. And he was – I believe he was killed.

TERBORG-PENN: Right, right.
SMITH: Yes. And the Lincolns actually had Emilie to stay at the White House for some extended period of time. In fact, there was a scene where – I believe there's a union general who's at the dinner table and, in effect, complaining about sharing the dinner table with a rebel. And Lincoln said, "Mrs. Lincoln and I don't need any help from you in deciding who our guests will be."

Anyway, Mary made it very clear that her siblings had taken up arms not only against her country, but against her husband, and she saw no reason to mourn their loss.

SWAIN: Nancy is in Bristol, Indiana. You're on, Nancy.

CALLER: Oh, thank you. This wonderful, unique woman is my hero. And something that's not brought up very often – I mean, it is brought up often is about her mental condition, but I've never seen in all the books I've read anything about the laudanum and paregoric that she took. It's a – oh, what's the word? It's a drug, and it affected her mind. She took these things from a child on. She had headaches I guess all her life. This would calm her down. But we know it affects the brain, and I don't – I don't understand why more people don't bring this up, especially as her mental condition got worse as she got older.

SWAIN: Thank you, Nancy. Do you know anything about her treatment of her headaches?

TERBORGH-PENN: No, I don't, but that would make sense, what she's saying would make sense.

SWAIN: But you read that she suffered from headaches throughout her life.

TERBORGH-PENN: Yes, yes, probably migraines.

SMITH: It was migraines all her life. Lincoln used to leave the office – thunderstorms, too. She was terrified at thunderstorms. And at the first sign of a thunderstorm...

TERBORGH-PENN: He'd go. He'd go home.

SMITH: ... he would leave the office and go home.

SWAIN: Horace is in Philadelphia, as our discussion of Mary Todd Lincoln continues? Hi, Horace.

CALLER: Hey, good evening. I'm fascinated by the program. I've been listening since it's been on and watching every night that it appears. I'd like to know, how did the Lincolns come to know each other? Who courted who? And how did they get to meet?

SWAIN: Well, thanks so much. May we answer that by video? Because we are next going to learn more about the Lincolns' Springfield home. And we'll learn a little bit more about their life there as we visit that. Can we watch that next?

(BEGIN VIDEO CLIP)

SUSAN HAAKE, CURATOR, LINCOLN HOME: This is the Lincoln home in Springfield, Illinois. This is the only home Abraham and Mary Lincoln ever owned. This is where Mary learned how to be a wife and mother. They lived here from 1844 to 1861, so over the course of those 17 years, they added on and added on and created this two-story, very comfortable upper-class home.

After about 11 years of living here in the house, they were able to add a full second floor as part of the expanding – of not only their family, they were expanding their house at the same time and Mr. Lincoln's career. He was traveling the circuit, and so most of the day-to-day oversight would have been Mary Lincoln.
She was very decisive. She knew exactly what she wanted, so it was probably not too tough of a project for her. They were able to add five bedrooms. There's a guest bedroom, which would have been a luxury. Mr. Lincoln and Mrs. Lincoln then were able to have their own space, not necessarily to highlight problems in their marriage, but just so that each had their own space. Privacy is not something you get a lot of in the 1850s and '60s, so Mr. Lincoln could stay in here, work midnight, 1 A.M. on legal papers or political views.

Mrs. Lincoln would have to get up early to start breakfast. Her two youngest sons slept in a trundle bed, pulled out from under her bed, and then across the hall was another bedroom that was Robert's initially. As the oldest son, he got his own room. But as soon as he went away to college, his younger brothers moved right in.

And then the last bedroom up here was the hired girls' room. They had a hired girl almost every year they lived here, and that girl then had her own space at the end of the hallway right up from the kitchen.

We're in Mary's bedroom now. And this would have been a sanctuary for her, as she was in a house full of boys and men and a lot of men coming to visit Mr. Lincoln. So she would have needed a spot that she could call her own, that she could retreat to if she needed to, that could serve as a home office for her. This is literally and figuratively the center of the home.

This stove is called a royal oak stove, and you can see the oak leaves and the acorns on the stove door, or the oven door, and it came from Buffalo, New York. Mary purchased this stove here in Springfield from a local stove dealer we think somewhere between $20 and $25 for the stove.

And if you think about it, the average person only making about $500 a year at that point, this is an expensive purchase. She liked it so much, she wanted to pack it up with the rest of their things and take it to the White House in Washington. Mr. Lincoln reminded her that she wasn't going to be doing a lot of cooking once she got to the White House, so they left it here for the renters that they had rented the house to.

The neighborhood that they were in was starting to become a little bit more middle-class. It had started out a little bit lower-middle-class, small houses, lot of widows. People were moving into the neighborhood. The neighborhood was starting to grow a little bit. So Mary wanted to not only keep up with the Joneses, she kind of wanted to be the Joneses.

(END VIDEO CLIP)

SWAIN: So that's a glimpse of the Lincolns' life together in Springfield. But a question was asked, how did the couple meet? They were 10 years apart in age...

SMITH: That's right. Well, she left Lexington, it's been speculated that a relationship with her stepmother may have been a factor. But in 1839, she went to Springfield. Why Springfield? Well, her sister was married to a man named Ninian Edwards, Jr. His father had been governor of territorial Illinois. And so she was immediately thrown into the social set. I mean, Springfield was a tiny town, maybe 2,500 people, but it was very hierarchical. And Mary...

SWAIN: And she was wealthy and well-educated.

SMITH: She was – yes, this is something that I think people tend to overlook, why Lincoln was attracted to her in the first place, classic opposites attracting. I mean, this was a young woman who, frankly, was – could have had her choice. No fewer than four United States senators, future senators expressed interest in Mary.
She spoke French fluently. She was by all accounts a witty conversationalist, highly educated, you know, for women of her day, a compelling, magnetic figure. And Lincoln stood off to one side, almost his mouth hanging open, the contrast between his own lack of formal education, his own lack of polish.

And one of the things that Mary did that I think she doesn't get a lot of credit for was, in effect, to add some polish to her unpolished husband. She was his advocate. She imagined after he'd lost two races for the United States Senate that his political career wasn't over. She imagined him in the White House long before he ever did, and her famous strawberry socials in the parlor on the first floor were just one tangible way in which she conducted a campaign for him.

SWAIN: Well, Abraham Lincoln might have been entranced, but he wasn't certain, and he broke off their engagement for a year-and-a-half, is that correct? And here's something that he had to say after breaking off the engagement with Mary: "I am now the most miserable man in the world. If what I feel were equally distributed to the whole human family, there would be not one cheerful face on Earth."

Can either of you tell us how they finally got back together?

SMITH: Actually, yes. The local newspaper editor, a man named Simeon Francis, his wife, in effect, stepped in and said, "Well, this is ridiculous. You know, you care for each other. Let's be friends," and, in effect, reignited the friendship. And by November of 1842, without really telling anyone, they announced I think that very day – Mary let it be known to the Edwards family that they were marrying that night.

Ninian Edwards and his wife insisted, no, we have to do it at our house, et cetera, et cetera. The great tragic irony of all of this is that it was in that same house 40 years later that his life came to an end.

SWAIN: Our next caller is from Christie in West Fargo, North Dakota.

CALLER: Hi, thank you for having me. And I'm calling today because I wanted to know your feelings about what Mary would have thought when Lincoln signed for the slaves to become free, he also signed for 38 Dakota Native Americans, plus two, to be hung in Mankato, Minnesota, which was the largest mass hanging in our United States history.

And being a Native American from North Dakota, I was just wondering on your comments. What did Mary – did she know about this? And if she did, what were her feelings on it at the time?

SWAIN: Dr. Terborg-Penn, do you know?

TERBORG-PENN: I haven't seen anything about her response to the hanging. I know she was very excited about the Emancipation Proclamation. I suspect, from what I have gleaned about her caring for people who were disadvantaged and who were outsiders, so to speak, that she might not have liked the idea. But I don't know. Do you?

SMITH: I don't. I know Lincoln tried to reduce that number. The original list was much, much larger than that, and he reduced it significantly. And one sense is that he went along with the whole thing somewhat reluctantly, but I don't know more than that.

SWAIN: Cindy in Denver. Hi, Cindy.

CALLER: Hi, thank you for taking my call. I had a question. Well, first of all, I wanted to say thank you for this series. It's great. And I wanted to ask if either of your guests had ever heard about Mary
Lincoln suffering from mental illnesses that we would today acquaint with being bipolar or manic depressive.

SWAIN: Well, thank you for asking that question. We've got many people on Twitter and Facebook all wanting to put a name on Mary Lincoln's anguish. And how possible is that to do, when you're looking back through a lens of 150 years, with the disciplined psychology or psychiatry that didn't exist in that day?

TERBORG-PENN: Well, that's what I thought. That's what I was thinking. And they used to call it manic depressive before we got the bipolar. But it seemed as though sometimes she was very excited and very outgoing, and then sometimes – but wasn't depressed as much as hysterical, you know, with grief or...

SWAIN: But still, how possible is it for us...

TERBORG-PENN: To know this.

SWAIN: ... to know what the medical diagnosis...

TERBORG-PENN: No, but the symptoms give you hints.

SMITH: Yes, but, you know, first of all, I'd point out the obvious. Neither one of us is professionally trained...

TERBORG-PENN: Right.

SMITH: ... to diagnose any condition. But it's no doubt that there is this continuing fascination and a desire on the part of people to put a name to her condition.

TERBORG-PENN: Well, from what I understood, none of the physicians could figure it out. They couldn't really come up with anything conclusive in diagnosis.

SMITH: But, you know, as a girl, she was called high-strung. You know, later on the euphemisms were mercurial. Who knows?

SWAIN: Elaine, Cochran, Georgia. Good evening.

CALLER: Hi. Thank you for the program. I will mention that the book and supper club that my husband and I are in with three other couples has read Patricia Brady's biography of Martha Washington, so I was excited when that program was on.

SWAIN: Wonderful. Thanks for being with us for the series.

CALLER: Two months ago, we read Joseph Ellis' "First Family" about John and Abigail Adams, and so that has been – had added more to my knowledge of those two.

And one – another book that we read, which is fictionalized – I will say that we've read "Team of Rivals," by the way – another one that we read which is a fictionalized biography of Mary, so I know how you might feel about that. But it did nothing and it was new to me or contradicted anything I've heard from other sources, historical sources, except that there was mention of what appeared to be an affair with some government employee. It's been several years, and I'm sorry that I don't remember the author.
But I would be very skeptical about it, except for the fact that existing newspapers were quoted with dates and headlines, and I thought if this author has made this up, she has really been bold in doing so. It seems to me the employee was supposed to have been maybe somebody in charge of housing or government buildings in D.C., but I wondered if you have any comments on that or know anything about it.

SMITH: Only that one of the criticisms that has been made – and I almost – I alluded to it earlier – is that some of her conduct fed gossip – that's how I would characterize it – fed gossip that suggested that Mrs. Lincoln, in her desperation for money, befriended inappropriate individuals. And how far it went – I would be very, very skeptical, to be honest with you.

TERBORG-PENN: I would be, too.

SWAIN: And we also should say that this was the first time in history that newspapers were having columnists...

SMITH: Well, that's right.

SWAIN: ... opinion writers. So this opinion of her was spread in the newspapers across the country.

SMITH: Yes.

SWAIN: And this was the – really, a change in the way that first ladies were treated by the press.

SMITH: Sure, sure.

SWAIN: So this was new.

TERBORG-PENN: And she thought she was the scapegoat. I mean, she really felt it.

SMITH: And stop and think of how incredibly intense the popular emotions were. They were in the middle of the Civil War, and so naturally that carries over to coverage of the president and his family.

SWAIN: We're going to look next at another video visit to the Springfield home. And this one helps us understand more that political partnership that Richard Norton Smith referred to between the two Lincolns.

(BEGIN VIDEO CLIP)

SUSAN HAAKE: This is the Lincoln home in Springfield, Illinois, the home where Mary helped build Abraham Lincoln's political career. Mary and Abraham would invite friends and family over to talk politics, talk the events of the day. This is where he became the president.

Mr. Lincoln was a very ambitious person. He had a lot of goals in life, but those were then enhanced when he met and married Mary Todd. She also was very ambitious. She said she wanted to marry a man of good mind and hopes for a bright future. And she also said she was going to marry a man who would be president.

There was something about Abraham Lincoln that she saw the potential and encouraged it and then helped develop it, lessons in etiquette in the dining room that helped kind of polish him up for Washington society, the political parties that they had where they invited a lot of very important people, the strawberry-and-cream parties, talking with the wives of those very important gentlemen. She wielded a lot of power both over Mr. Lincoln and over where he was going.
This is the dining room. When they moved in, it was an eat-in kitchen, and that's not something that a polished, high-society, upper-class person would do. Mary had grown up with a formal dining room in Lexington, Kentucky, and she felt she needed to have one here, because her – she didn't want her children growing up without proper manners.

And in a lot of cases, Mr. Lincoln needed that polishing, as well, so all of her boys needed some polishing and manners. So she created this dining room to have that formal space for she and her family, but also for when they had guests over.

There were a lot of different people that came to visit Mr. Lincoln during the 1860 campaign, and then after he was elected president, there was actually almost four months between the election and the inauguration, so there were a lot of visitors coming to Springfield. One of them was William Seward, who ended up being Mr. Lincoln's secretary of state.

Mary being an excellent hostess, she would, of course, have had trays of something that – maybe a slice of her famous white cake or the macaroon pyramid from Wadkins Confectionary that was downtown Springfield, that they – we know they bought lots of those macaroon pyramids. So you could get your refreshments in here, maybe relax a little bit more after the formal side of meeting Mr. Lincoln.

This is the double parlor, and these are the two nicest rooms in the house. Mary spared no expense to some extent. There's marble-top tables, there's brass valances, the windows, there's gilded candlesticks, there's a walnut whatnot shelf with a bust of Mr. Lincoln on it. That was here in 1860. Not everybody in the neighborhood could say that, they had a bust of their husband in their living room.

So this was fancy place. This is where she wanted to show off. Mary would have held her parties in here where she would have been discussing Mr. Lincoln's political aspirations. This is where people started when they came to visit during a party. They start at the front door, met Mr. Lincoln here. He was probably standing in the archway between the two rooms, maybe went through the dining room, picked up a little bit of refreshment, and then met Mary in the sitting room before going out the front door again.

This is where Mr. Lincoln met with the Republican National Convention Committee that told him he had been nominated to run for president. So this was the seat of power in this house.

Mary helped to basically showcase what her husband had done, how far he had come from that one room, log cabin in the middle of nowhere, Kentucky, to this beautiful house, very comfortable house, and kind of hinted at where they were headed, stating to the world that Abraham Lincoln had made it and he was ready to move on.

(END VIDEO CLIP)

SWAIN: Next, is Tim – calling from Tim – excuse me, a caller from Wausau, Wisconsin, whose name is Tim. Hi, Tim. Go ahead.

CALLER: Thank you for taking my call. I have read several biographies about Mary Lincoln, and I have never, ever seen anything in there as to how influential she was on some of the policies that Abraham enacted while he was president. And I'm just wondering if either of your guests could elaborate further as to the extent of her influence on the political decisions that were made in the White House during Abraham's term in office.

SWAIN: Thank you. Was she interested in politics or in policy?
SMITH: She was interested in personalities. She used to refer to Seward as "that abolitionist sneak." Grant was "that butcher." But the fact is, I think – we talked earlier – ironically, once they actually had attained their goal, once they moved into the White House, I think her influence certainly, as we would use that term today, over policy diminished. I think their partnership was in some ways broken.

I think the war consumed him, and I think it was a source of frustration for her. The relationship that they had had before the presidency was in some ways greatly diminished. So I don't think she was significantly influential in terms of shaping public policy or his conduct of the war or even who he put in his cabinet.

SWAIN: We have just eight minutes left and still a lot of story to tell. Mary Lincoln lived for 17 years after Abraham Lincoln's assassination. What were those years like for her?

TERBORG-PENN: Well, part of the time, she was in a mental institution, because her son, Robert, put her there. And I have been debating about him very much, about the way she felt he had been disloyal to her and how he was able to control her money and become the, I guess, executor of it. And so she had to struggle, but she managed to plug in people who could help her, and I thought that was admirable, even with her problems, that she was able to do that.

SMITH: You know, she did something that was just not done. I mean, she was obsessed with money. And at one point, she moved to sell off a number of her White House dresses, which just made, you know, the public impression all the worse.

SWAIN: But she was in debt, was she not?

SMITH: She was in debt. Remember, those $27,000 that she owed. No, she needed the cash; there's no doubt about it. She petitioned Congress over and over for a pension, which finally belatedly was granted, $3,000.

SWAIN: A month?

SMITH: A year.

SWAIN: A year.

SMITH: And subsequently raised to $5,000.

SWAIN: So that was her contribution to future first ladies.

TERBORG-PENN: But only after she found out that another first lady – and I can't remember which one it was – was getting $5,000. And then she said, "Now, if you're giving her $5,000, you should be able to give me $5,000."

SMITH: I think that was Mrs. Garfield. She went to live in Europe, because actually it was cheaper, and then, of course, she had another great tragedy, in 1871, when Tad...

TERBORG-PENN: Tad died, yes.

SMITH: ... Tad died.

SWAIN: How did he die?

SMITH: Ted died of tuberculosis, it's believed.
SWAIN: And how old was he?

SMITH: He would have been, I would say, 16.

TERBORG-PENN: Teenager, uh-huh.

SWAIN: And did he die in Europe?

SMITH: So, you know, out of all of her children, only one lived to adulthood...

TERBORG-PENN: The one who she thought was disloyal.

SMITH: He died coming back from Europe.

SWAIN: Bob is watching us in Baltimore. Your question?

CALLER: Yes. It's a great program, first of all, and this is a question about Tad Lincoln. What was Mary Lincoln's relationship with her youngest son? My impression from the movie "Lincoln" and from what I've read otherwise is that Tad and his father had a strong and affectionate bond. Did Tad have a similar relationship with his mother? Thank you.

SMITH: I think the answer to that is yes. And I think it carried over. Tad realized – Tad had a curiously adult sensitivity. I mean, following the death of his father, he realized how vulnerable his mother was. And, in effect, he appointed himself to try to take care of her.

TERBORG-PENN: I think his personality was also similar to hers. And I think they were simpatico on that. I think she recognized that, and he recognized that. So I would think that's another reason why they would be close.

SWAIN: So she spent – immediately a time in Chicago, in the Hyde Park section of Chicago.

TERBORG-PENN: Right.

SMITH: That's right.

SWAIN: And then she went to Europe.

SMITH: She went to Europe, she came back, and then Robert had her incarcerated for several months. There was a second trial, however, at which she managed to convinced the jury that she was perfectly sane. She and Robert never really reconciled.

She went back to Europe for four years, lived in France for four years, and then in 1880, returned to Springfield. By this time, she was almost blind. She had severe cataracts. And she went to live in her sister's house, the house in which she had married Mr. Lincoln, and that's where her life ended in 1882.

SWAIN: Donna in Benton, Illinois, you're on.

CALLER: I think they answered my question. I was wondering if Robert and his mother ever got to be friends again. Did he not offer to take her to his home?

SMITH: Yes, he – you know, there was a – what you might call a formal reconciliation, but it was – I emphasize “formal.”
TERBORG-PENN: I don't think she trusted him. I wouldn't have.

SWAIN: Related to this, SM on Twitter asked, are there any living relatives of the Lincolns?

SMITH: There are no direct descendants of the Lincolns.

SWAIN: So Robert had no children?

SMITH: Robert had a son, Abraham Lincoln II, who died. And I used to remember the lines, but the last direct descendants died in the 1970s.

SWAIN: This is one of those great questions to wrap up the program, and it comes from John Richardson on Facebook. He writes, to the historians, when you are alone with your friends, what is your favorite story to tell about Mary Lincoln? Want to go first?

TERBORG-PENN: Well, OK, that she and Elizabeth Keckley had a great relationship, they were the same age, they both lost sons, because Keckley's son was lost in the Army during the Civil War, and that Mary supported the causes that Elizabeth Keckley supported.

SWAIN: And what does that tell you about Mary Lincoln?

TERBORG-PENN: That she's a very sensitive person, that she could empathize.

SWAIN: And how controversial would it have been for her to be friends with an African-American?

TERBORG-PENN: I think it would have been, to some extent, even though people kept calling Elizabeth Keckley her servant, but I don't think Mary looked at her as a servant. I think she considered her to be a companion.

SWAIN: Richard, your favorite story?

SMITH: Well, I guess I'd say in the case of what might have been. And Lincoln, of course, served only one term in Congress. His opposition to the Mexican war ensured that he would not be re-elected.

And so it was Mary who managed the campaign to try to get him a government sinecure, the job of a commissioner of the general land office, at $3,000 a year. It was Mary who wrote the letters. And in the end, when he was offered in its place the governorship of the Oregon territory, it was Mary who turned it down, telling him that Oregon was not Whig-friendly, it was likely to be Democratic, and it would not advance his long-term political interests to be the governor of the Oregon territory.

SWAIN: We have just a short time left. We'll go to Pami next in Denver, Colorado.

CALLER: Hi. I was calling, I would just like to know a couple of things. What do you think she would have wanted her legacy to be today? And also, the second thing is, would she have been for or against the women's movement in the '60s, if she could travel through a time machine?

SWAIN: All right, thank you very much. Well, let's do the legacy, and you might do the women's movement question. All right?

TERBORG-PENN: OK.

SMITH: The legacy?
SWAIN: What would she have wanted her legacy to be, was the question.

SMITH: That she loved her husband, and her family, and her country, in that order.

SWAIN: And can you speculate.

TERBORG-PENN: And I want to add to that. She wanted people to get along; I really think she did. And that was something she tried to do early in their White House years, was to be fair and greet people and encourage people, regardless of what party they were in.

But in terms of women, I think she might have been persuaded to be a feminist, but it's kind of hard to tell.

SWAIN: Well, we are out of time. And I hope we have done what we set out to do, which is to provide a more nuanced picture of Mary Todd Lincoln, the wife of our 16th president. I want to say a special thank you to the White House Historical Association who has been our partner and will be our partner throughout our series, 35 installments of this all together, and to our two special guests, Richard Norton Smith and Rosalyn Terborg-Penn, for your contributions tonight. Thanks for being with us.

TERBORG-PENN: My pleasure.

SMITH: Thank you.

END