

Content Research - Mary Todd Lincoln / Elizabeth Keckley Dress

Possible themes and objects for inclusion on the 6Floors website organized in design categories per 7/6/06 Meeting

Explore

Explore/Object

Associated sections of video interview [from transcript]

1. Start to 00:03:29 – description of the desk
- 2.

I. Explore/Object Row 1: The Dress

- A. What the object is: Display Image #8, The Dress
- B. Description
- C. TBD
- D. TBD

II. Explore/Object Row 2: The Craft/Skill of Dressmaking and the History of the Dress before the Smithsonian

A. A dress for a reception. The dress (according to family lore) was worn by MTL on New Year's Day 1864 for a reception at the White House. Perhaps first introduce Republican Queen theme. Display: a picture of a reception at the White House in Lincoln's administration showing MTL.

1. Display: Display Image #8 and Image #3 (A reception and an image of the Dress)
2. Title:
 - a. Roll-over title: History of the dress
 - b. Descriptive title: A dress for a reception
 - c. Categorization title:
3. Accompanying text (approx. 50 words):
4. Image annotation text:

B. The making of the dress: Display the tools of the dress-maker's craft. Designing, cutting material (prob. Keckley), basic sewing/stitching (probably one of the 20 or so women working in Keckley's studio/workshop), and fine-curve stitching (probably Keckley).

1. Display: Image of tools of the seamstress's craft
2. Title:
 - a. Roll-over title: The craft of dress making
 - b. Descriptive title: The making of the dress
 - c. Categorization title:
3. Accompanying text (approx. 50 words):

4. Image annotation text:

C. Keckley's workshop. Display the other dress that the Smithsonian has that is known to have been made by Keckley (pictured on page 111 of Keckley memoirs book) for comparison.

1. Display: Image of the other dress that the Smithsonian has that is known to have been made by Keckley

2. Title:

- a. Roll-over title: Craft of dressmaking
- b. Descriptive title: Keckley's workshop
- c. Categorization title:

3. Accompanying text (approx. 50 words):

4. Image annotation text:

D. A Gift to a Cousin. The dress altered to a later fashion. MTL gave the dress to her cousin who may have had it altered to suit later fashions.

1. Display: Image of Elizabeth Todd Grimsley (Image #7)

2. Title:

- a. Roll-over title: History of the Dress
- b. Descriptive title: A gift to a Cousin
- c. Categorization title:

3. Accompanying text (approx. 50 words):

4. Image annotation text:

III. Explore/Object Row 3: Labor and the Elite; laboring to keep up (elite appearances)

A. The people (or person) who made the dress (and dresses like it)

1. Display:

2. Title:

- a. Roll-over title: Labor and the elite
- b. Descriptive title: Laboring to keep up appearances
- c. Categorization title:

3. Accompanying text (approx. 50 words):

4. Image annotation text:

B. The people who wore the dresses. Display an image of fashionable/elite people in D.C. (perhaps "The Republican Court in the Days of Lincoln")

1. Display: "Abraham Lincoln's Last Reception" (Image #3)

2. Title:

- a. Roll-over title: Labor and the Elite

- b. Descriptive title: Washington's elite
 - c. Categorization title:
- 3. Accompanying text (approx. 50 words):
- 4. Image annotation text:

C. What we see and what we don't see. First lady keeping up appearances and a working (free black woman) who helps her behind the scenes by making her fashionable dresses

- 1. Display:
- 2. Title:
 - a. Roll-over title:
 - b. Descriptive title:
 - c. Categorization title:
- 3. Accompanying text (approx. 50 words):
- 4. Image annotation text:

D. To be determined

- 1. Display:
- 2. Title:
 - a. Roll-over title:
 - b. Descriptive title:
 - c. Categorization title:
- 3. Accompanying text (approx. 50 words):
- 4. Image annotation text:

Explore/Context

Associated sections of video interview [from transcript]

I. Explore/Context Row 1: Free Blacks in the Antebellum South/ Urban Free Black Communities during the Civil War/Free African Americans in a Slave Society

A. The Journey from Slavery to Freedom: Theme: The dress as a pathway out of slavery to freedom and success. Elizabeth Keckley a former slave whose dressmaking skills enable her to purchase her freedom and reach the pinnacle of her profession. Display object: Keckley's freedom papers?? (Pictured p. 39 of Keckley memoirs; Missouri Historical Society holds original) Or possible entry from St. Louis business directory, 1859-1860 or page from "List of Free Negroes, Licensed by the County Court of St. Louis County" pictured in Fleischner.

Associated video interview clip: [about 15:20 through 16:20]

- 1. Display: Keckley's freedom papers?? (Pictured p. 39 of Keckley memoirs; Missouri Historical Society holds original) Or possible entry from St. Louis business

directory, 1859-1860 or page from “List of Free Negroes, Licensed by the County Court of St. Louis County” pictured in Fleischner

2. Title:
 - a. Roll-over title: Free African-Americans in the Antebellum South
 - b. Descriptive title: Elizabeth Keckley’s Journey from Slavery to Freedom
 - c. Categorization title:
3. Accompanying text (approx. 50 words): Her life as a slave. Discuss hiring out (Keckley hired out her labor in St. Louis): Keckley’s earnings as a dress maker made much of the money that supported her master’s (Garland) family

*“I was fortunate in obtaining work, and in a short time I had acquired something a reputation as a seamstress and dressmaker. The best ladies in St. Louis were my patrons, and, when my reputation was once established, I never lacked for orders.”*¹

Buys her freedom with money loaned by her elite clients. Sets up business in St. Louis – pays off loan.

*“The twelve hundred dollars with which I purchased the freedom of myself and son I consented to accept only as a loan. I went to work in earnest, and in a short time repaid every cent that was so kindly advanced by my lady patrons of St. Louis.”*²

4. Image annotation text:

B. “My Dear Lizzie”: The relationship between Elizabeth Keckley and Mary Todd Lincoln. Associated video interview segments: [9:12 through about 10:20] and [about 16:24 through about 23:20]. Both Southerners. Both grew up with slavery. Both lost a child during the Civil War. A two-way friendship?? Boundaries of class and race. Keckley benefited from contacts with well-to-do Republicans. Display side by side pictures of Keckley and MTL in the 1860s

1. Display: Image of MTL (Either image # 4 or # 5) and image of EK (Image #6)
2. Title:
 - a. Roll-over title: Free African-Americans in the Antebellum South
 - b. Descriptive title: “My Dear Lizzie”: The relationship between Elizabeth Keckley and Mary Todd Lincoln
 - c. Categorization title:
3. Accompanying text (approx. 50 words): Keckley’s reputation as a dressmaker enhanced by her relationship with the First Lady. Fleischner notes that Keckley “was now the desired dressmaker of loyal Union women who sought her services, especially during Mary’s well-advertised absences from Washington.”³

Keckley on her work for Mrs. Lincoln and other women of the Washington elite in 1861:

“I became the regular modiste of Mrs. Lincoln. I made fifteen or sixteen dresses for her during the spring and early part of the summer, when she left Washington, spending the hot weather at Saratoga, Long Branch, and other places. In the meantime, I

¹ Keckley, *Behind the Scenes*, 28.

² Keckley, *Behind the Scenes*, 42.

³ Fleischner, 222.

*was employed by Mrs. Senator Douglas ...Mrs. Secretary Welles; Mrs. Secretary Stanton, and others.”*⁴

Keckley on her aid to MTL after Abraham Lincoln’s assassination:

*“She denied admittance to almost everyone, and I was her only companion, except her children, in the days of her great sorrow.”*⁵

After the revelations of *Behind the Scenes*, Lincoln fell out with Keckley and her business declined.⁶

4. Image annotation text:

C. Comparison: Free Blacks in the South and in the North (Washington, D.C. and Baltimore between the North and the South) (use Berlin and Nash for reference). Perhaps a text would include a mention of “passing”: Keckley son enlisted as white in the Civil War. Discuss free black institutions.

1. Display
2. Title:
 - a. Roll-over title:
 - b. Descriptive title:
 - c. Categorization title:
3. Accompanying text (approx. 50 words):
4. Image annotation text:

D. Free African-American community in Washington D.C. Display an image symbolizing the community organizational activities of African Americans in Washington, perhaps a picture of an African-American church. Keckley chose to reside in cities with large free black communities. Keckley helps found a relief society to aid “contrabands” in Washington, D.C.⁷

1. Display: a picture of the Fifteenth Street Presbyterian Church, of which Keckley was a member. According to Foster the church was “probably the most prestigious and politically active African American church in Washington, D.C.” Foster also notes that most of the elite White House staff belonged to this church, and that the church was pastured by the radical abolitionist, Henry Highland Garnet from March 1864 to October 1866.⁸

2. Title:
 - a. Roll-over title: Free African Americans in a Slave Society
 - b. Descriptive title: Free African-American community in Washington

⁴ Keckley, *Behind the Scenes*, 65.

⁵ Keckley, *Behind the Scenes*, 142.

⁶ “Former Slave Elizabeth Keckley and the ‘Contraband of Washington, D.C., 1862,” *History Matters: The U.S. Survey Course on the Web*, <http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/6224/>.

⁷ Fleischner, 242.

⁸ Keckley, *Behind the Scenes*, editor’s note, 82

c. Categorization title:

3. Accompanying text (approx. 50 words): Keckley on her work organizing relief for freedmen in Washington:

*“If the white people can give festivals to raise funds for the relief of suffering soldiers, why should not the well-to-do colored people go to work to do something for the benefit of the suffering blacks? I could not rest. The thought was ever present with me, and the next Sunday I made a suggestion in the colored church that a society of colored people be formed to labor for the benefit of the unfortunate freedmen. The idea proved popular, and in two weeks the ‘Contraband Relief Association’ was organized, with forty working members.”*⁹

On the church as symbolic of the endeavors of the African-American community in Washington:

“The church has been a vital religious, educational, and social center. It was the first home of the Preparatory School for Colored Youth, the city's first public high school and the first black high school in the United States. Sojourner Truth held benefits for the Colored Soldiers' Aid Society at the church. Seamstress and memoirist Elizabeth Keckley organized church members in an emancipation celebration in April 1863 to commemorate the first anniversary of the DC Emancipation Act.”¹⁰

4. Image annotation text:

II. Explore/Context Row 2: Division of the Nation – Mary Todd Lincoln as Symbolic/ Elite White Washington, D.C. in the Civil War

A. Divided families. Mary Todd Lincoln as the symbol of a divided nation: The Todds take the Confederate side in the Civil War. Divided families. Associated video interview segment: [about 10:27 through about 15:15] Letter MTL to Keckley 29 Oct. 1867 in *Life and Letters*

1. Display: Image of the Todds

2. Title:

a. Roll-over title: Division of the Nation

b. Descriptive title: Divided families

c. Categorization title:

3. Accompanying text (approx. 50 words):

4. Image annotation text:

⁹ Keckley, *Behind the Scenes*, 81-82.

¹⁰ African American Heritage Trail Online Database and Free Guide, http://www.culturaltourismdc.org/info-url3948/info-url_show.htm?doc_id=204759&attrib_id=7973, “Fifteenth Street Presbyterian Church”

B. Republican Queen. Mary Todd Lincoln's anxiety about her role: Republican Queen?
The dress and MTL's role in diplomacy: the dress as a political statement

1. Display
2. Title:
 - a. Roll-over title: Division of the Nation
 - b. Descriptive title: Republican Queen
 - c. Categorization title:
3. Accompanying text (approx. 50 words):
4. Image annotation text:

C. Southern free blacks and the war – loyal to the South or the North? The additional restrictions imposed on Southern free blacks in 1861. Keckley starts out in D.C. designing and fitting dresses for Mrs. Jefferson Davis. Switches to the First Lady.

1. Display:
2. Title:
 - a. Roll-over title: Division of the Nation
 - b. Descriptive title: Southern free blacks and the war
 - c. Categorization title:

3. Accompanying text (approx. 50 words): After about six months of working in Washington, D.C. Keckley was employed (Dec. 1860) by Mrs. Jefferson Davis:

*"The summer passed, winter came, and I was still in Washington. Mrs. Davis, wife of Senator Jefferson Davis, came from the South in November of 1860 with her husband. Learning that Mrs. Davis wanted a modiste [clothing designer, tailor, and fashion expert], I presented myself, and was employed by her on the recommendation of one of my patrons and her intimate friend, Mrs. Captain Hetsill."*¹¹

Mrs. Davis invited her to go to the South with them upon secession; Keckley considered accepting the offer but decided to remain in Washington:

*"I preferred to cast my lot among the people of the North."*¹²

4. Image annotation text:

D. To be determined.

1. Display
2. Title:
 - a. Roll-over title:
 - b. Descriptive title:
 - c. Categorization title:
3. Accompanying text (approx. 50 words):
4. Image annotation text:

¹¹ Keckley, *Behind the Scenes*, 43-44.

¹² Keckley, *Behind the Scenes*, 48.

III. Explore/Context Row 3: The Dress as a Symbol of Class?? Or Consumption/Consumerism??

A. Display a dress worn by non-elite/middling women of the time for comparison

1. Display
2. Title:
 - a. Roll-over title:
 - b. Descriptive title:
 - c. Categorization title:
3. Accompanying text (approx. 50 words):
4. Image annotation text:

B. Beginning of consumerism. Display a picture of an emporium or early department store

1. Display: Image #1 along with image #2
2. Title:
 - a. Roll-over title: Consumption and consumerism
 - b. Descriptive title: The First Department Stores
 - c. Categorization title:
3. Accompanying text (approx. 50 words):
4. Image annotation text:

C. High fashion. *Harper's Weekly* descriptions of ladies' dresses/fashions (in detail) that began about this time. (Increased interest in elite fashions)

1. Display
2. Title:
 - a. Roll-over title: Consumption and consumerism
 - b. Descriptive title:
 - c. Categorization title:
3. Accompanying text (approx. 50 words):
4. Image annotation text:

D. The Dark Side of Consumerism: Debt and Failure. Perhaps display another object of consumerism from the 1860s/1870s. Or move problem of debt here. The problem of debt (MTL becomes indebted to about \$27,000 trying to keep up appearances)

1. Perhaps here a description of MTL's attempt to sell her wardrobe through the brokers Brady and Keyes.

2. *"It will not be startling news to you, my dear Lizzie, to learn that I must sell a portion of my wardrobe to add to my resources, so as to enable me to live decently... I cannot live on \$1,700 a year, and as I have many costly things which I shall never wear ,*

*I might as well turn them into money, and thus add to my income, and make my circumstances easier.”*¹³

1. Display:
2. Title:
 - a. Roll-over title:
 - b. Descriptive title: The price of elite high fashion
 - c. Categorization title:
3. Accompanying text (approx. 50 words): According to Keckley:

*“In endeavoring to make a display becoming her exalted position, [Mrs. Lincoln] had to incur many expenses. Mr. Lincoln’s salary was inadequate to meet them, and she was forced to run indebt, hoping that good fortune would favor her and enable her to extricate herself from an embarrassing situation.”*¹⁴

Mary Todd Lincoln on her distressed financial condition in 1867:

*“As you are aware of my beloved husband’s great indulgence to me in pecuniary matters, thereby allowing me to indulge in bestowing favors on those whom I considered worthy of it, it is in this respect I feel chiefly the humiliation of my small circumscribed income.”*¹⁵

4. Image annotation text:

Explore/Museum

I. Explore/Museum Row 1: How the object came to the Smithsonian

II. Explore/Museum Row 2: Museum info

III. Explore/Museum Row 3: Dilemmas of Display

- A. Conservators vs. visitors #1 (originality vs. access)
- B. Conservators vs. visitors #2 (originality vs. access)
- C. Why do we display women’s dresses? (Gender issue) #1
- D. Why do we display women’s dresses? (Gender issue) #2

Tour

¹³ Mary Todd Lincoln to Elizabeth Keckley, March 1867 in Tuner, *Life and Letters*, 417-418

¹⁴ Keckley, *Behind the Scenes*, 104.

¹⁵ Mary Todd Lincoln to Elizabeth Keckley, 15 Nov. 1867, *Mary Todd Lincoln: Her Life and Letters*

(Refer to “Explore” section above for full description/content of each item)

Tour/Brief Tour (Single Row)

- I.
- II.
- III.
- IV.
- V.

Tour/Extended Tour

I. Tour/Extended Tour Row 1: Object

- A.
- B. The making of the dress (Explore/Object II. B.)
- C. Keckley’s workshop (Explore/Object II.C.)
- D.

II. Tour/Extended Tour Row 2: Object/Context

- A.
- B.
- C. The Journey from Slavery to Freedom (Explore/Context I. A.)
- D. “My Dear Lizzie”: The relationship between Elizabeth Keckley and Mary Todd Lincoln. (Explore/Context I.B.)

III. Tour/Extended Tour Row 3: Context

- A. Free African-American community in Washington D.C. (Explore/Context I.D.)
- B. Divided families (Explore/Context IIA)
- C. Beginning of consumerism. (Explore/Context III. B.)
- D. Dark Side of Consumerism: Debt and Failure (Explore/Context III. D.)

Bibliography

Images

Image #1:



Interior of Wanamaker's Grand Depot ca. 1876, from Gibbons
 From: Citation: **Schoenherr, Steven E.** *Evolution of the Department Store.*
<http://history.sandiego.edu/gen/soc/shoppingcenter4.html> [Feb. 11, 2006]

Image #2:



Wanamaker's 1902 Grand Depot, from Gibbons

Citation: **Schoenherr, Steven E.** *Evolution of the Department Store.*

<http://history.sandiego.edu/gen/soc/shoppingcenter4.html> [Feb. 11, 2006]

Image #3:



Abraham Lincoln & Mary Todd Lincoln greeting Union generals, Cabinet members, & others at a reception. Hand-colored lithograph by John Smith, Philadelphia, 1865, from LC

Citation: **Schoenherr, Steven E.** *Evolution of the Department Store.*

<http://history.sandiego.edu/gen/soc/shoppingcenter4.html> [Feb. 11, 2006]

Images #4 and #5:



Mary Todd Lincoln

[Mr Lincoln's White House](#)

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Image #6:



Elizabeth Keckley

[Mr Lincoln's White House](#)

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Image #7:



Elizabeth Todd Grimsley – Mary Todd Lincoln's Cousin

[Mr Lincoln's White House](#)

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Image #8



The Dress Made by Elizabeth Keckley for Mary Todd Lincoln

From "Legacies: Collecting America's History at the Smithsonian"

<http://www.smithsonianlegacies.si.edu/objectdescription.cfm?ID=258> © 2001, Smithsonian Institution Press.

Books

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Interviews

Interview transcript Barbara Clark Smith