Lincoln Lore

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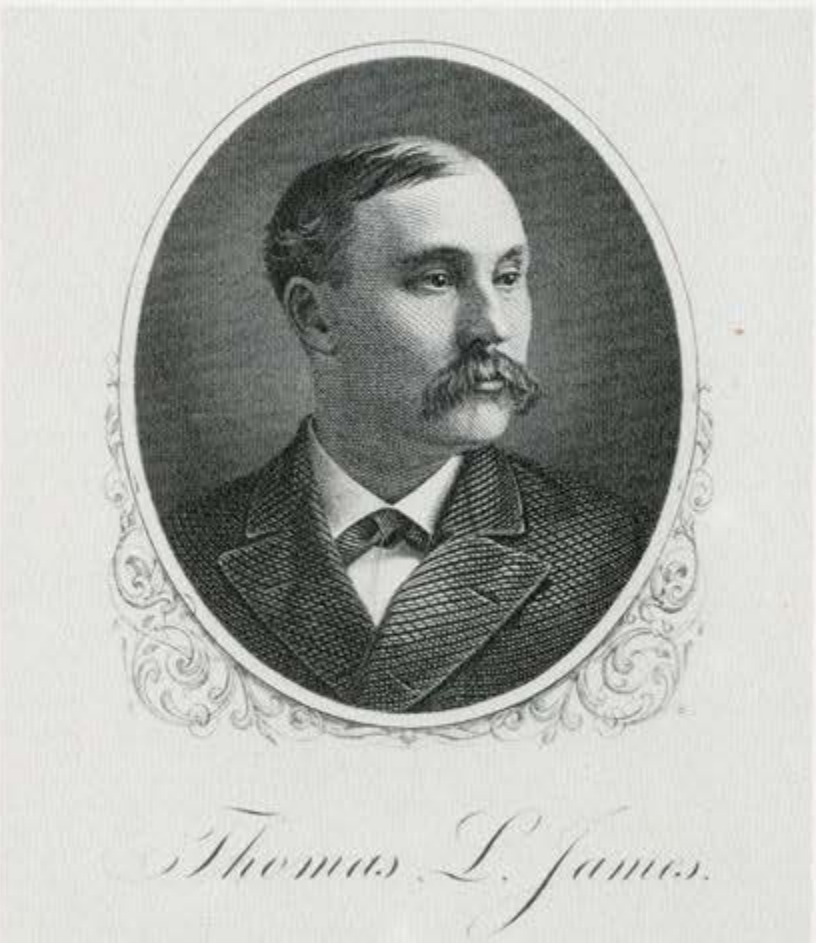
Abraham Lincoln Did NOT Defend His Wife Before the Committee on the Conduct of the War

We are witnessing a Lincoln myth in the making, and it provides a rare opportunity to see what cultural forces are necessary to promote to the status of popular myth one of the many obscure and doubtful stories about the sixteenth President. The event in question is Abraham Lincoln's alleged visit to a secret session of a congressional committee investigating rumors that Mary Todd Lincoln was leaking military secrets to the Confederacy.

I. Origins of the Story

Lincoln's visit was first described in an article which appeared in a Washington, D.C., newspaper sometime after 1905 (the article refers to the "late" John Hay, who died in 1905). The author, E. J. Edwards, attributed the "anecdote" to Thomas L. James, who had heard it "at the time he was Postmaster General in Garfield's cabinet" from a "member of the Senate committee on the conduct of the war in Lincoln's first administration." Edwards's article continued:

> "You doubtless remember," said the senator to Gen. James, "that during a crucial period of the war many malicious stories were in circulation, based upon the suspicion that Mrs. Lincoln was in sympathy with the Confederacy. These reports were inspired by the fact that some of Mrs. Lincoln's relatives were in the Confederate service. At last reports that were more than vague gossip were brought to the attention of some of my colleagues in the Senate. They made specific accusation that Mrs. Lincoln was giving important information to secret agents of the Confederacy. These reports were laid before my committee and the committee thought it an imperative duty to investigate them . . . . One morning our committee purposed taking up the reports that imputed disloyalty to Mrs. Lincoln. The sessions of the committee were necessarily secret . . . . [Suddenly] at the foot of the table, standing solitary, his hat in his hand, his tall form towering above the committee members, Abraham Lincoln stood . . . . The President had not been asked to come before the committee, nor was it suspected that he had information that we were to investigate the reports, which, if true, fastened treason upon his family in the White House.
>
> "At last Lincoln . . . said:
>
> "'I, Abraham Lincoln, President of the United States, appear of my own volition before this committee of the Senate to say that I, of my own knowledge, know that it is untrue that any of my family hold treasonable communication with the enemy.'
>
> ". . . we sat for some moments speechless. Then by tacit agreement, no word being spoken, the committee dropped all consideration of the rumors that the wife of the President was betraying the Union . . . . We were so greatly affected that the committee adjourned for the day."



Courtesy of The New-York Historical Society, New York City
FIGURE 1.

Edwards's article, the original title of which is clipped from the copy of the article in the Lincoln Library and Museum collection, was privately republished as a pamphlet entitled *The Solitude of Abraham Lincoln* by Gilbert A. Tracy in Putnam, Connecticut in 1916. A statement by Tracy in pen on the title page says that only thirty copies were made, and a pencilled statement made on the cover at a later date claims that only sixteen were printed. No alterations were made in the story, and it was published, according to the title page, by permission of the author.

The story would very likely have disappeared into the obscurity typical of stories from rare pamphlets had Emanuel

Hertz's *Abraham Lincoln: A New Portrait* (New York: Horace Liveright, 1931) not repeated it (on pages 238-239). Carl Sandburg probably picked it up from Hertz; he did not quote Edwards verbatim, as Hertz had, but the story appears in the second volume of Sandburg's *Abraham Lincoln: The War Years* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1939), pages 199-200. In a chapter about the events of late 1862 and early 1863, Sandburg said that "Senate members of the Committee on the Conduct of the War had set a secret morning session for attention to reports that Mrs. Lincoln was a disloyalist." The poet thus added to Edwards's anecdote a date and one subtle embellishment which will be discussed later.

Again the story seemed likely to vanish from popular consciousness. Despite the fact that it was ready-made ammunition for Mary Lincoln's apologists, the first of a long line of these, Ruth Painter Randall, discredited the account. Her *Mary Lincoln: Biography of a Marriage* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1953) related the story but admitted that the "evidence is too vague and in part inaccurate . . . to justify an established historical conclusion that this incident occurred. One cannot accept Lincoln's words literally from such a long-delayed, indirect account and the dramatization is highly seasoned. The thought comes to mind that this story might be a confused version of Lincoln's interviewing members of the House Judiciary Committee in regard to the Wickoff-Watt imbroglio." Mrs. Randall had seen the story in Hertz's book, and then checked the original clipping in the Lincoln National Life Foundation collection. She used her sources scrupulously and threw cold water on the story, but her condemnation was mild and rather tentative; she felt that the story had at least the virtue of pointing "up the ghastly situation created by the idea that Mrs. Lincoln was disloyal." As a partisan of Mrs. Lincoln, Mrs. Randall wanted to believe it, but her respect for historical rigor prevented her from doing so.

Early in July, 1973, Connecticut Senator Lowell Weicker read Carl Sandburg's version of the story into the records of the Senate Watergate hearings and into the political conscience of the nation. Weicker read the anecdote before a national television audience to show that the first Republican President had been willing to give testimony before a congressional committee. Senator Weicker's staff may have picked the story up from the newspapers. Bob Cromie had printed the anecdote as supplied by Lincoln-student Ralph Newman in the *Chicago Tribune* of June 2, 1973. The story was repeated by Philip Warden eleven days later in the same newspaper.

This political use of the Edwards-James-Sandburg story gave it a currency that no attempt simply to dramatize Lincoln's beleaguered presidency or to defend Mrs. Lincoln's reputation could have provided. Almost overnight Lincoln's visit to the Committee became not an obscure anecdote but an important moral, if not legal, precedent. Weicker willingly quoted the statement that Lincoln "had not been asked to come before the committee." Senator Ervin, Chairman of the Senate Watergate Committee, never held that the Committee could issue a subpoena for President Nixon's testimony, and the Lincoln story was left as a moral example of willingness to volunteer information. President Ford has tacitly testified to the power of the moral example by appearing voluntarily before a congressional committee himself.

II. Is the Story True?

To date, Ruth Painter Randall is the principal, if reluctant, challenger of the story's truthfulness. She noted immediately that the Committee on the Conduct of the War was a *joint* committee made up of members from both houses of Congress. Thus E.J. Edwards's original article erred in terming it a Senate committee. Here Sandburg's embellishment becomes important. He also knew the Committee was a joint committee, but the poet in him liked the drama and solemnity of the occasion. Although he did not quote the story entirely from Edwards (via Hertz), Sandburg did seize on such dramatic passages from the original account as these for their literary impact: "Had he come by some incantation, thus of a sudden appearing before us unannounced, we could not have been more astounded"; the president's eyes revealed "above all an indescribable sense of his complete isolation." Therefore Sandburg's quiet alteration of the original words "member of the Senate committee" to "Senate members of the Committee" is proof that he did not possess Mrs. Randall's respect for historical rigor and discipline; he wrote what he wanted to believe and was willing to alter the record to fit it. In so doing, he also gave the story new life, for he thus eliminated the one glaring error which would have tipped off everyone thereafter that the story was based on very flimsy evidence. Even the most cursory glance at the multi-volume reports of the Committee on the Conduct of the War reveals that they were signed by House members as well as Senate members.

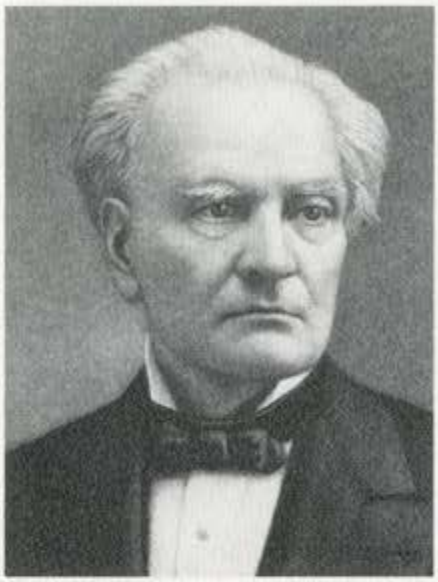
Sandburg, however, nearly made a serious error of his own by claiming that the Committee "set a secret morning session" to investigate the rumors. Edwards had said that the Committee's sessions were "necessarily secret." In fact, *all* sessions of the Committee on the Conduct of the War were held in secret. As a committee set up to investigate military operations during wartime, it could hardly have held *public* sessions with any hope of gaining testimony from the generals it interviewed. Edwards's version, of course, left open the possibility that *all* sessions were secret; Sandburg's version came nearer implying that this session was unique for its secrecy.

There are more reasons to doubt the story than these. Sandburg, probably for stylistic reasons, eliminated Edwards's remark that the anecdote had been "related to Gen. Thomas L. James at the time he was Postmaster General in Garfield's Cabinet." This time unconsciously, Sandburg considerably improved on the original by expanding the period of time in which the anecdote could have been told. According to the original version, however, this time was very limited, for Garfield was President for only six months, being assassinated in September of the first year of his administration. Postmaster General James, then, had to hear the anecdote from a Senate member of the Committee on the Conduct of the War in 1881.

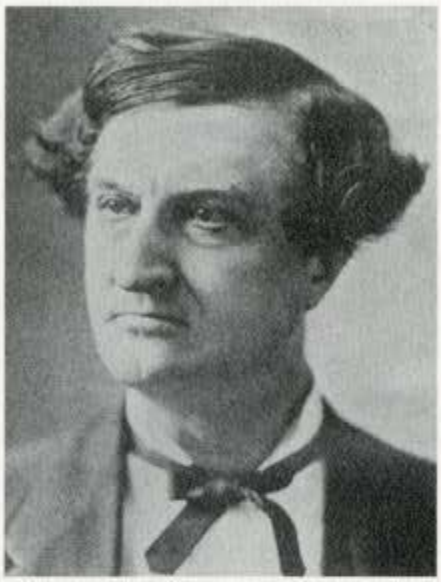
The problem is that most of these men were dead by then. Senator Benjamin Franklin Wade of Ohio, Chairman of the Committee, died in 1878. Senator Zachariah Chandler, who also served on the Committee throughout the war years, died in 1879. Tennessee's Andrew Johnson, who served on the Committee only until he became military governor of Tennessee in 1862, died in 1875. Senator Joseph A. Wright of Indiana also served on the Committee for a brief period, but he died in 1867. Only two other senators ever served on the Committee. One was Pennsylvania's Charles Rollin Buckalew, who was not elected to the Senate until 1863. The other was Oregon's Benjamin Franklin Harding, who served in the Senate only after December 1, 1862 (he filled the seat vacated by the death of Lincoln's friend Edward D. Baker). Buckalew and Harding both lived until 1899.

If Thomas L. James heard the anecdote in 1881 from a Senator who had been a member of the Committee on the Conduct of the War, he heard it from Buckalew or Harding. Buckalew seems an unlikely candidate because he was a Democrat. James was a long-time Republican, and it is doubtful that he had any special relationship with Buckalew. The Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War could meet without a quorum. In practice, this meant that no Democratic members of the Committee had to be present at the sessions, and critics of the Committee frequently complained that the minority members were ignored. It seems very doubtful indeed that Republicans would have invited Buckalew to be present at a meeting discussing rumors which, if true, would have doomed the Republican administration and probably destroyed the party. Moreover, Buckalew left the Senate for good after his one term. If James heard the story from this Democrat, either the Postmaster General travelled to Pennsylvania to see him, or Buckalew travelled to Washington, for Buckalew returned to Washington as a Representative only in 1887.

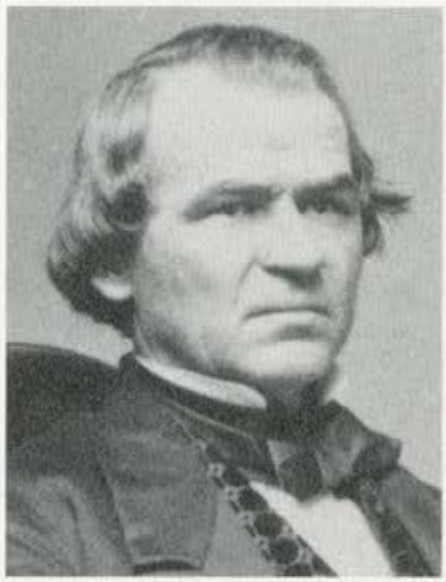
B.F. Harding, on the other hand, was a Republican like James; this fact increases the possibility of intimacy with James and the all-important possibility that Harding might have been privy to a meeting of such critical importance to the Republican party as the one Edwards and James described. However, Harding served only one term as United States Senator. According to a biographical sketch supplied by the Oregon Historical Society, Harding "retired" to Oregon after 1865 and died there thirty-four years later. He did not hold any national office, elective or appointive, after 1865. Unless James (a New Yorker) visited Oregon or Harding visited Washington, it is impossible for James to have heard the story from this, the only Republican senator who had served on the



Benjamin F. Wade

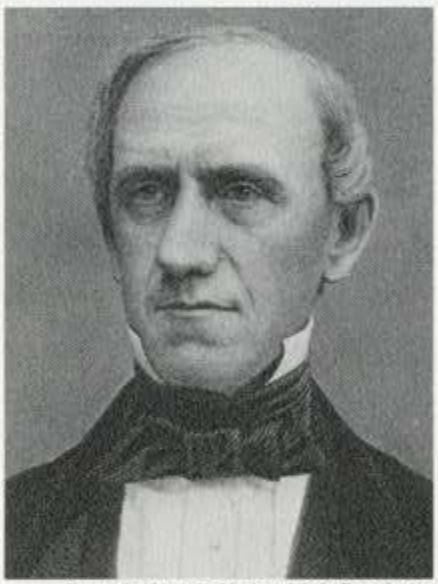


Zachariah Chandler



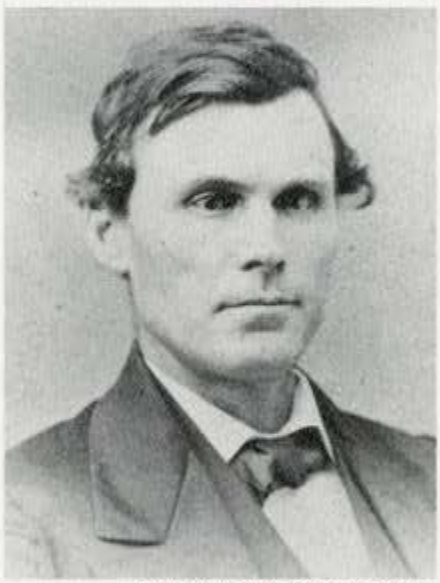
Pictures from the Lincoln National Life Foundation

Andrew Johnson



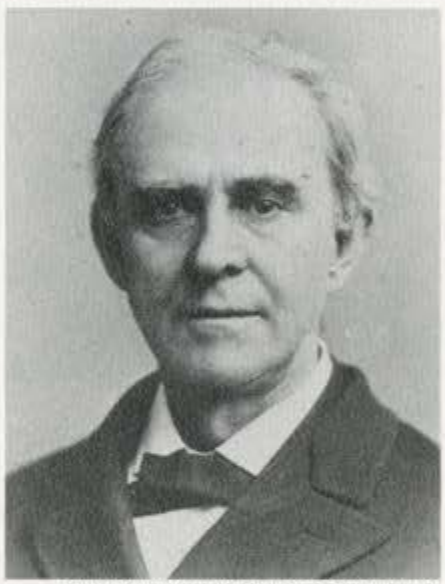
From the Lincoln National Life Foundation

Joseph A. Wright



From the Oregon Historical Society, Portland

Benjamin F. Harding



From the Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia

Charles R. Buckalew

FIGURE 2. COMMITTEE ON THE CONDUCT OF THE WAR, SENATE MEMBERS

The popular view of the Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War stems primarily from T. Harry Williams's first book, *Lincoln and the Radicals* ([Madison]: University of Wisconsin Press, 1941). Written with the flamboyance and combativeness of youth, *Lincoln and the Radicals* bristles with sharp characterizations and strong language. Members of the more anti-slavery wing of the Republican party are consistently called "Jacobins"; Thaddeus Stevens was "caustic, terrifying, clubfooted"; the radicals were "in the embarrassing, and often sinister, position of regarding Union defeats on the battlefield as helpful to their cause." Against the onslaught of these Huns, Abraham Lincoln was, "Like the Lucretia threatened with ravishment, he averted his fate by instant compliance." The Committee's popular reputation fell to such a low level that Harry S. Truman claimed in his *Memoirs* in 1955 that, when he was a Senator during World War II, he set up a congressional investigation in such a way as to avoid the errors of that earlier congressional committee, which had been "of material assistance to the Confederacy." Lincoln's image changed before that of the Committee did, and historians came increasingly to see President Lincoln as an assertive and adept politician who steered the country's course between the radicals and the conservatives in the party. Thus the Committee was still seen as malign in nature, but it was no longer deemed to have influential and inquisitorial power over Union policy. Hans L. Trefousse's article, "The Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War: A Reassessment," *Civil War History,* X (March, 1964), 5-19, thus reversed Williams's view of the relationship between the President and the Committee: "In many ways he used the group, taking advantage of its impatience in a manner so skillful as to bring about great reforms despite conservative opposition." To date, there is no full-length study of the work of the Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War, although the records of the testimony given before the Committee have been mined by numerous military historians. Such a study, especially if done with a careful eye to distinctions between decisions based on military considerations and decisions based on political considerations, would serve a useful purpose.

Committee who was still alive in 1881.

Examined closely, the story of the Lincoln visit to the Committee on the Conduct of the War vanishes after improbabilities are stacked on improbabilities. To narrow the evidence to manageable form for verification is a relatively simple task. Ignoring Edwards's mistake about the make-up of the Committee on the Conduct of the War, the curious student can very quickly show that only two men, one a Democrat, neither important figures in Congress or on the Committee (which was dominated by its energetic chairman), could possibly have told James the story. Both had been out of national public office for over a decade by 1881. The man in nearby Pennsylvania was a Democrat who probably would not have been present at the alleged session; the Republican lived a continent apart from Washington, D.C.

III. Why Believe It?

The remarkable thing is less that the evidence proves flimsy upon examination than that no one has bothered particularly to examine it. Myths feed on a greater willingness to use a story than to study it. Over the years, the Edwards-James story has served several different causes.

Almost everything written to date on the Committee on the Conduct of the War stems from the period when the abolitionists were taking a beating at the hands of American historians and when every effort was made to delineate a gulf between those Republicans with abolitionist leanings and their President. Edwards's own anecdote was largely free of taking sides in the factional dispute. Edwards said nothing harsh about the Committee, and indeed the story is supposed to have come from a member of that very Committee. Yet it was easily adaptable in other hands to that anti-abolitionist animus, and it was to that factional end that Sandburg used the story. He prefaced it with a description of "the snarling chaos of the winter of 1862-63." Amidst mutterings of "a secret movement to impeach President Lincoln," Sandburg said, "Stubbornly had he followed his own middle course, earning in both parties enemies who for different reasons wanted him out of the way." Conveniently, the names of the "radical Republicans who took part in the secret movement, . . . could only be guessed." Edwards's anecdote, though this was not its original intent, was readily adaptable for those who wished to prove the unreasonableness and immoderation of Lincoln's factional opposition.

The anecdote was kept alive by other motives. Although Ruth Painter Randall's biography of Mary Todd Lincoln gave it more dignity than it deserved by saying that it at least showed the sort of problems this Southern First Lady could have, she rejected it. Her followers have been less careful. Irving Stone's *Love Is Eternal* (1954), a sympathetic account of the Lincolns' domestic life, was a novel and could therefore invoke the story in an effort to depict the unfairness and malignity of Mrs. Lincoln's critics (see pages 380-382). Margaret Bassett's *Abraham & Mary Todd Lincoln* (1973), also a sympathetic account of Mrs. Lincoln, cited Mrs. Randall's book in the bibliography but nevertheless said that Mary Todd's character "became so much a public issue that the President was impelled to say to Congress that he guaranteed his wife's loyalty." Ishbel Ross also noted "a deep debt of gratitude to the late Ruth Painter Randall" for her sympathetic research on Mrs. Lincoln. Nevertheless, Ms. Ross's *The President's Wife: Mary Todd Lincoln* (1973) states that "It has become legendary that when he [Lincoln] heard what was afoot, he walked alone to the Capitol and appeared suddenly before the committee."

There are doubtless two forces at work here, perhaps indistinguishably. One reason for the relatively new desire to believe the best of Mary Todd and the worst of her enemies is the feminist movement which is causing a great deal of interest in the role of women in history and which allows us, for example, to see Mary Todd Lincoln's interest in politics as a forward-looking escape from the nineteenth-century female stereotype rather than as an inappropriate meddlesomeness. At the same time, some authors use the story for the sake of an almost Victorian sentimentalism, replacing the First Lady on her dignified pedestal far from the vulgar vipers in Congress. Neither form of Mary Lincoln apologetics, however, was strong enough on its own to launch the story to national popular mythic status.

That leap required powerful political motives, by which I do not necessarily mean "party" motive (Senator Weicker is, or was, a member of the same party as Presidents Lincoln and Nixon). The fact of the matter is, nevertheless, that the anecdote was again useful to those who wished a standard of presidential accountability different from that of the incumbent President's. Use was still the criterion, and not intellectual curiosity. After President Nixon suggested a parallel between his own beleagured presidency and Lincoln's, *Time* magazine's Hugh Sidey (in the February 25, 1974 issue) could quote historians Bruce Catton, Richard Current, and David Donald that they found the parallel forced and selective (President Nixon's speech, they said, notably ignored Lincoln's reputation for honesty). Yet *Time* did not bring up a similar battery of Lincoln historians to testify about the alleged appearance before the Committee on the Conduct of the War.

The myth of Lincoln's defense of his wife before Ben Wade's Committee is based on flimsy evidence and a great deal of desire—desire to make the abolitionists look bad, desire to make Mrs. Lincoln's critics seem at once unreasonable and influential, and desire to prescribe a standard of political behavior for today's Presidents. Whatever the merit of these desires, no cause is well served by making precedents from shoddy anecdotes. We have been watching the birth of a myth; let us hope soon to see its quiet demise.

From the Lincoln National Life Foundation

FIGURE 3. Mary Todd Lincoln in 1863

Mary Todd Lincoln (1818-1882), daughter of Robert Smith Todd and Eliza Parker Todd, was born on December 13, 1818, in Lexington, Kentucky. Although there is little information available on the above picture, it was supposedly taken "in the autumn of 1863" and the print was "the right-hand image of a stereograph card published by E. & H.T. Anthony Company in 1865." Mrs. Lincoln is wearing the same mourning attire that she wore for many months after the death of her third son Willie in February, 1862. See *The Photographs of Mary Todd Lincoln*, (1969) by Lloyd Ostendorf.