



Lincoln Lore

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A VIEW OF LINCOLN FROM A HOUSE DIVIDED

Lincoln-related documents turn up in the most unlikely places. The Southern Historical Collection at the University of North Carolina Library in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, is rich in manuscript materials having to do with Lincoln's Confederate antagonists, but it has never been considered a major source of Lincolniana. The published catalogue of this vast collection, a substantial volume in itself, contains a subject guide, and there is only one reference to Abraham Lincoln in the whole index. However, it has proved to be a reference worth exploring. For many years, this collection has contained the papers of Nathaniel Henry Rhodes Dawson.

Dawson is typical of the sorts of persons about whom one would seek information in the Southern Historical Collection. Born in Charleston, South Carolina, in 1829, Dawson was the son of Lawrence E. and Mary Rhodes Dawson. He moved to Alabama in 1842, where he attended St. Joseph's College in Spring Hill. He became a lawyer in 1851 and moved to Selma, where he became a prominent citizen and a minor power in the Democratic party. Dawson married twice in the 1850's; both Annie E. (Mathews) Dawson and Mary E. (Tanner) Dawson bore him a child. In 1860, he was a delegate to the Democratic National Convention. In 1861, he volunteered as an officer in the Fourth Alabama Regiment of Volunteers. Dawson was elected to serve in the Alabama legislature in 1863. At the end of the war and his term in the legislature, he obtained a pardon from President Andrew Johnson and resumed private law practice. His interest in politics continued. Dawson served as a member of various county, district, and state Democratic committees and as an elector for Horace Greeley's 1872 presidential ticket. In 1875, he became president of the Commercial Bank of Alabama and a year later was chosen as a trustee of the University of Alabama. In

1880, he was again elected to the state legislature, and in 1884, he became president of the state bar association. He died in 1895.

What separates Dawson from the many Confederate soldiers and Democratic politicians whose lives can be studied from documents in the Southern Historical Collection is his marriage in 1863 to Elodie Todd, for she was Mary Todd Lincoln's half sister. The letters that Dawson and Elodie exchanged while they were engaged and he was away in the Confederate service are a source of information on the Todd family which has not been tapped, apparently, by previous students of Lincoln's in-laws. William H. Townsend's *Lincoln and the Bluegrass: Slavery and Civil War in Kentucky* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1955), an updated version of his *Lincoln and His Wife's Home Town* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1929), contains no mention of the collection, though his book remains the best source of information on the Todd family. Ruth Painter Randall's *Mary Lincoln: Biography of a Marriage* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1953) relies heavily on Townsend's work for Mary's upbringing and makes no mention of the Dawson papers. *Mrs. Abraham Lincoln: A Study of Her Personality and Her Influence on Lincoln* by W.A. Evans (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1932) was an attempt at a psycho-biography of Mary Todd Lincoln and stressed the allegedly high incidence of mental instability in her family. However, Evans did not use Dawson's papers and made a minor error of fact about Elodie Todd and N.H.R. Dawson. There is certainly nothing in the letters which



FIGURE 1. Elodie Todd

Courtesy of Lloyd Ostendorf

upsets the work of these previous students of the Todd relations. Nevertheless, there are confirmations of hunches about the Todd family and evidence on at least one aspect of the family's history that was not previously known. There is an inter-

esting portrait of two of Lincoln's in-laws who have previously been little more than names. One can also gain a unique insight into the way the Confederate Todds viewed their Yankee sister and brother-in-law.

Elodie Todd

Elodie Todd was one of sixteen children sired by Robert Smith Todd of Lexington, Kentucky. She was the seventh of the eight children (who lived to maturity—another died in infancy) born to Robert S. Todd's second wife, Elizabeth Humphreys. Elodie was born in 1844, two years after her half sister Mary Todd married Abraham Lincoln in Springfield, Illinois. Mary was the fourth of six children (who lived to maturity—one died in infancy) by Eliza Parker, Todd's first wife. Since she had left home even before Elodie was born and since she was twenty-six years older, Mary and Elodie, though half sisters, were barely nodding acquaintances. The only times Elodie ever saw her sister Mary were in 1847, when the Lincolns paid a visit to Lexington en route to Washington for Lincoln to assume his seat in the House of Representatives; in 1848, when Mary and the children returned to Lexington without Congressman Lincoln; and in 1849, when the Lincolns visited Lexington to attend to Robert S. Todd's estate (he died in 1849). Mary saw Elodie last, then, when her young half sister was but five years old.

There were, despite the lack of intimate acquaintance, some obvious family resemblances between Elodie and Mary Todd. They were both cultured and refined women. Elodie's accomplishments were especially musical ones. She played the piano well and sang well. Dawson wrote her repeatedly, saying that he longed to be with her and to hear her sing and play the piano. Her talents were much in demand in Selma society to provide entertainment at various patriotic money-raising affairs during the war. Elodie wrote humorous letters and enjoyed society. She commented in May of 1861 on a local regiment "composed of the handsomest men [she] . . . ever saw & all seem to be selected gentlemen, & so happy & merry." In the same month she and her younger sister Kittie (Katherine) "went over to the Encampment . . . and spent a very pleasant evening dancing until eleven o'clock." She seemed pleased that "the wit & beauty of Selma were assembled" at the ball. She kept up with political events and could weave them into her letters with sprightly humor. In a moment of light-hearted self-deprecation, Elodie claimed that her family had thought she would be an old maid who would stay home to take care of her mother after the "handsome daughters" were gone. ". . . I really believe," she added in reference to her engagement to Dawson, "they all think I am committing a sin to give a thought to any other than the arrangements they have made for me but as this is the age when Secession, Freedom & rights are asserted, I am claiming mine & do not doubt but I shall succeed in obtaining them . . ." She also possessed some of the more controversial Todd traits, of which she showed an appealing self-awareness. Kidding Dawson again about their engagement, she said, "I told Mother that I thought she had better give her consent & approval at once, for my mind was made up & I felt myself more of a Todd than ever & they are noted for their determination or as *malicious people* would say *obstinacy*. . ." On another occasion she admitted to Dawson that her mother had "always predicted my Temper & Tongue would get me into Trouble. . ."

The Todd family itself was divided in some respects, and there were sharp differences between Elodie Todd and Mrs. Lincoln. The most obvious, of course, was that Elodie Todd was a staunch secessionist (only one of Eliza Parker's children was a secessionist; only one of Elizabeth Humphreys's children was pro-Union). Elodie always referred to Lincoln's party as the "black Republicans," and she pictured the Southern cause as a revolt against "Northern Tyranny" for the sake of liberty. On the Fourth of July, 1861, she exclaimed, ". . . what would we be without our liberty, the few left of us a poor unhappy set who would prefer death a thousand times to recognizing once a black Republican ruler." She called Lincoln's 1860 Southern Democratic opponent, Kentuckian John C. Breckinridge, her "model for Politicians." Her zeal for Southern liberty grew with the progress of the war. In July, 1861, after there had been the first large-scale fighting of a previously largely bloodless war, she wrote with unconscious irony, "I have thought of the many who would & must die to

purchase [liberty], . . . there is not a man among you who would not willingly prefer death to slavery. . . ." She did "not now think of peace for a moment, fighting alone can accomplish our end and that hard & bloody."

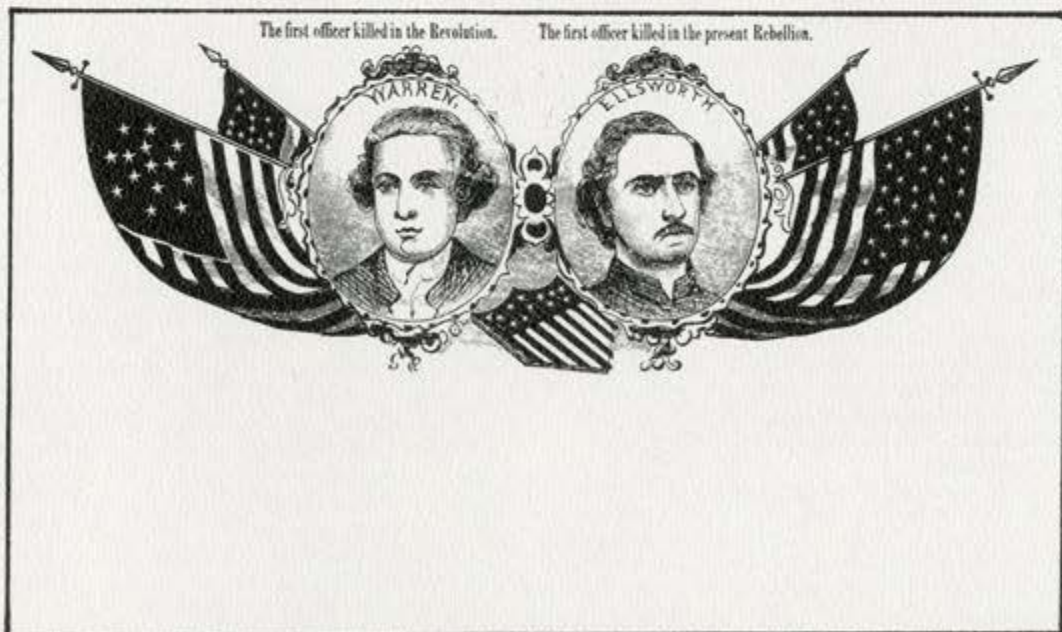
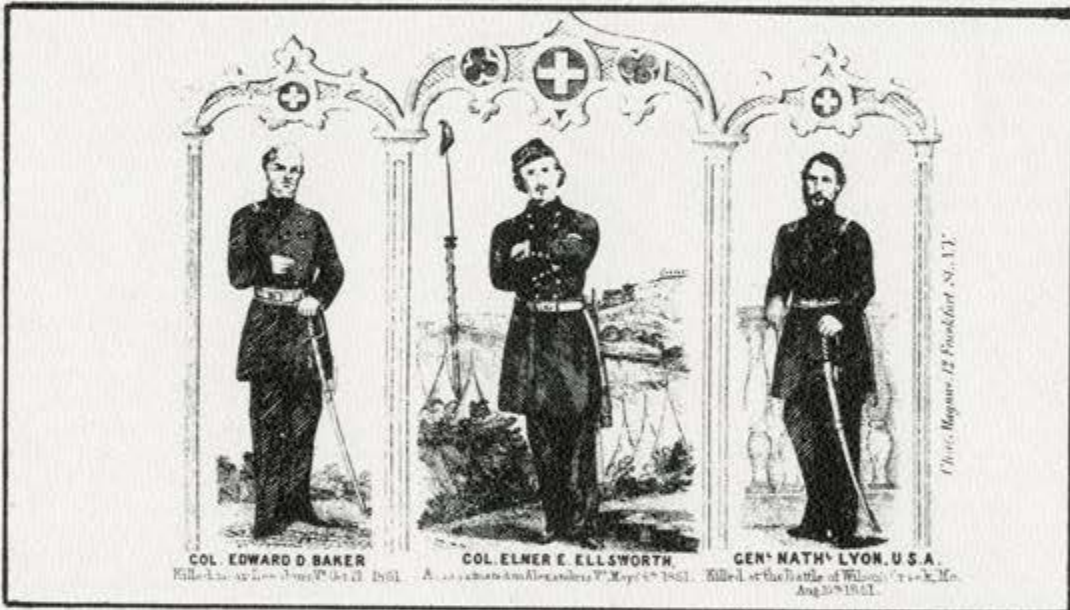
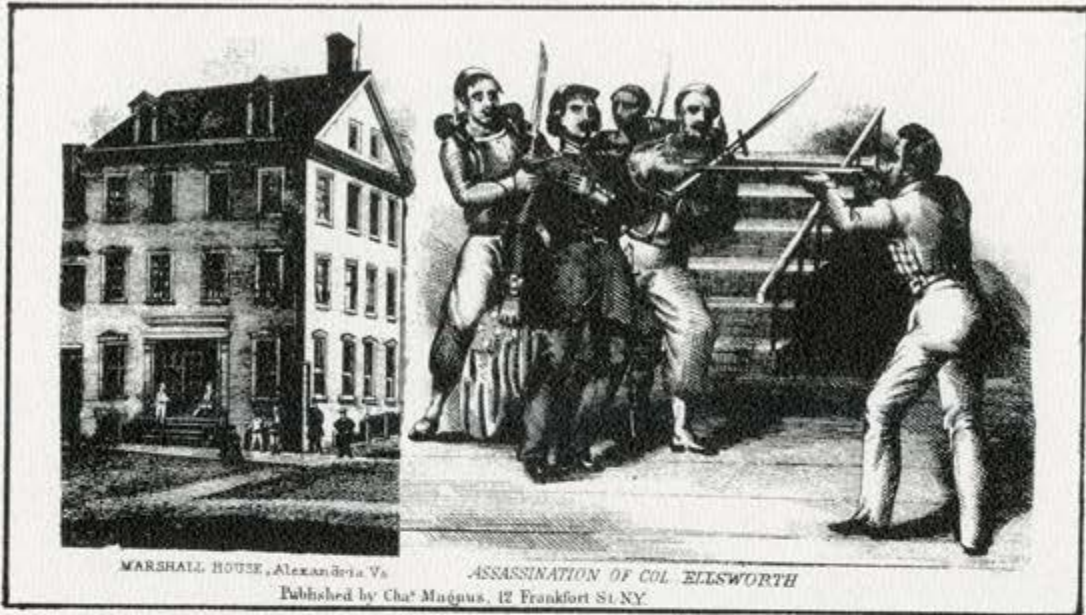
The young Kentuckian contributed more than hot words to the Confederate cause. She seems to have spent most of the time Dawson was in the service in sewing items for the Confederate soldiers. She took the work seriously, spending so much time on it that she had little time left to spend in reading. After the merry entertainments of the early months after Sumter when there was little bloodshed, she deemed it improper to engage in wild merriment while the soldiers were suffering at the front. Dawson wrote her that he was "grateful . . . to know that you have such proper feelings in regard to amusements, at times when your friends are in danger—on the day [in question] . . . we were all day in line of battle, & on that night slept on our arms— It would mortify me to think that at such a time, you could enjoy the festivities of a ball room. . . ."

Unlike her sister Mary, Elodie chose to marry a man, not of democratic manners and sentiments, but of an aristocratic, even snobbish, nature. When Dawson heard that one of Elodie's brothers was thinking of joining the army, he cautioned him "not to join the ranks as a private— The duties are very arduous, he would not like them—a gentleman" would not find them at all suitable. By contrast, Abraham Lincoln had served in the Illinois militia in the Black Hawk War, first as a captain and later as a private. One cannot imagine the Rail-splitter's dispensing such advice for gentlemen. At the Battle of Bull Run, Dawson was separated from his unit and in the confusion of battle could not find it to rejoin it. Rumors circulated back home in Selma that he had been seen "walking fast" away from the battle. Dawson was incensed at the allegation of cowardice and quickly attributed it to envy. The problem with the man Dawson thought responsible for circulating the rumor was that he "envied all above him . . . [.] He envies me I know. . . ." He attributed the rumors on another occasion to "the people, who are generally anxious to believe evil of gentlemen."

Although his aristocratic code taught him a paternalistic regard for those below him, Dawson did not admire the masses. As an officer, he did try to set an example for his men by sharing their hardships. On long marches he wore a knapsack with a heavy overcoat rolled on it, just as the soldiers did. On an eighteen-mile march, he went on foot even though a gentleman-friend offered him a horse and buggy. He did not prove, on this occasion, equal to the task, and the amusing outcome was reported to his fiancée with no self-conscious irony at all: "My feet were so blistered [and] swollen & I was so much fatigued, that I got a room, at a hotel, & went to bed & was unable to come on here, until this morning— I am very lame, have taken a violent cold, have been in bed. . . ." Dawson saw it as his duty to "visit the hospital daily to see our sick & always have my heart made sad— The pallets are occupied, with men, who are wan looking objects . . . [.] I always try to cheer them up, but it is a difficult duty." There was apparently no chaplain in the Fourth Alabama, and Dawson assumed the duty of shepherd to his flock. "On Sundays," he explained, "I read several chapters of the bible to as many of my men, as choose to come in, and we have some good vocal music . . . [.] Nevertheless, he commented also on "the depravity of our soldiers . . . [.] I do not think any other feeling than one of duty could induce me, with my present feelings, to adopt war as my occupation. . . ."

Dawson took an aristocrat's pride in his family's accom-

FIGURE 2. (facing page 2) Colonel Elmer Ephraim Ellsworth must certainly have been the most famous Colonel in the Civil War. Vignettes of his death, portraits of Ellsworth, pictures of his avenger, and mottoes invoking his memory appeared on many different patriotic envelopes during the Civil War. Southerners, as the Elodie Todd-N. H. R. Dawson correspondence reveals, also considered his death something of a sensation and interpreted it as divine retribution for invading their country. Three patriotic envelopes featuring Ellsworth are pictured on the facing page.



plishments. Honors came to aristocrats without any unseemly striving. "My father," said Dawson, "always declined political position, tho' he had inducements offered that would have lured a more ambitious man— He was the contemporary & peer of Mr Barnwell & Mr Rhett—their acknowledged superior & leader at the bar— He always advised me to pursue the law exclusively. . . ." He shared his Victorian culture's sentimental veneration of women (and especially of motherhood), and his aristocratic feelings made the female's ideal role particularly circumscribed, ethereal, and retiring:

God, who made man, saw that woman alone could fill the gasping void of companionship, in his bosom, and also created her, that her love might teach him the love he should bear to his creator—I do not think men could have received the Gospel, without the inspiring faith of the gentler sex to level him to an appreciation of their truth— All of the virtuous impulses, I ever feel, are attributable to the teachings of my sainted mother and the influence of your sex—without them I would have been a barbarian . . . [.]

Three weeks later he advised his fiancée thus:

I hope you will not become Secretary [?] for any aid Society— The ladies have been very useful & kind, but I would prefer that you remain an independent contributor— I am opposed to all female societies, as I have never seen one, not even a Bible or Church Society, where unpleasant controversies did not arise—a lady should let her influence always be felt, in all good works, but she should never expose herself to the calumnies of the evil minded. . . .

To be sure, Dawson encouraged the same kind of responsibility for inferiors among women as men:

I rejoice that you agree with me about societies of all kinds—I never wish to see you a member of one—but will always desire that you should do your full share in works of charity and benevolence— The poor will always, if my wishes influence, call you friend . . . [.]

An aristocrat's disdain for ambitious money-getting, a Democrat's traditional distrust of monopoly, and a patriot's dislike of selfishness in the midst of national crisis, all combined to make Dawson an enemy of wartime speculators. Salt was a precious commodity in the blockaded, undeveloped, one-crop South, and the "salt monopoly" apparently became a hot topic in Civil War Selma. It was a question which greatly excited Dawson:

. . . I wish these speculators could be forced into the service of the country & made to shew their patriotism in a better mode— I have no [illeg.] of such Shylocks, & I hope Public Opinion will bring them back to their propriety— The State should permit no speculation, by monopolists in articles of . . . necessity— In some parts of this state [Virginia] these "salt mice" have been threatened by Judge Lynch— Salt has been scarce here in the army on account of this disgraceful monopoly— Such heartless men are not friendly to the Confederate states . . . [.]

This was not just a temporary attitude bred of wartime emergency for Dawson. His aristocratic code dictated a disdain for new money. Commenting on a visit to Raleigh, North Carolina, in 1862, Dawson said, "Judging from all I see, I should say the society of Raleigh was cultivated[and] refined—in opposition to what we are so frequently disgusted with in new communities—tinsel pretension— Family has its influence, & parvenues are properly appreciated . . . [.] I have learned to hate the blatant democracy of our society— which would reduce any gentleman to insignificance—or to an infamous equality. . . ."

To complete the picture, Dawson was, as most of the self-styled Southern aristocracy were, a member of the Episcopal Church. He prided himself on reading "the English classics." He copied the ideals and ways of the English gentry, adopted their dislike of parvenues, and shared their idealization of a lower class that knew its place:

The poor private in the ranks, who bears uncomplainingly, all of his privations, must leave a deep well of patriotic feeling— I look at them frequently with admiration— Many of them have wife & children, at home, dependent on charity, & yet, they seem content— No country can be strong, without such a peasantry— or yeomanry—as we say in English. . . [.]

Views of Lincoln

N.H.R. Dawson, of course, had never met Mr. and Mrs. Abraham Lincoln. Elodie did not know them well. The first mentions of the brother-in-law, now President of an enemy nation, were in a lighthearted vein in keeping with the early view that there might not be a war at all and that, if there were one, it would be of brief duration and be settled by one great battle. Dawson wrote Elodie from Virginia on May 8, 1861, asking her, "Can't you prevail upon your brother in Law, A.L. to change his policy, & make peace[?]" Two days later, Dawson said he thought the war would be short because the North would soon see how ridiculous it was to think of subjugating the South: "The idea of subjugating us must be preposterous, and I think, if I could be allowed to have the ear of my future *brother in law*, I could persuade him to abandon the idea; if he ever entertained it— Can't you use your influence or get your sister Miss Kittie [a very young teenager] to use hers [?]"

Six days later, Dawson was still ringing changes on the humorous possibilities involved in the situation. He stated his wish that Elodie would write Mrs. Lincoln "so that in case of being taken prisoner I will not be too severely dealt with— Do you not think it was a very politic step in me to engage such an advocate at the head quarters of the Enemy." Elodie replied in the same bantering vein, ". . . pray do you think to inform *Brother Abe* would do you any good, he would make you suffer for yourself my being such a secessionist too."

By another coincidence, Kittie had a nodding acquaintance with Colonel Elmer Ellsworth of the Seventh New York Regiment. Elodie wrote Dawson to report that "Kittie says if you take her beau Colonel Ellsworth prisoner just send him to her & she will see that he does not escape . . . [.] Dawson replied that he would not "let her throw herself away on Col. Ellsworth—as she must have a confederate Col. for her beau . . . [.] This joke ended in tragedy and bitterness when Ellsworth became the first casualty of the Civil War. Dawson wrote in a somewhat unfeeling vein:

I hope Miss Kate was not interested in him, more than in an ordinary acquaintance— You know he exhorted his soldiers to invade the South & provided [promised ?] them "beauty & booty"— Providence seems to have cut him off, as soon as he touched our soil, and it will not surprise me, if the army, led on by hate, does not meet the same fate— There is great bitterness felt on our side, & we will kill all that we can lay our hands on . . . [.]

One day later he wrote in an even more bitter mood: "I rejoice that the 7 New York Reg was the first to be cut to pieces, & I hope a similar fate awaits all the enemies of my country— You will be surprised that I am so vengeful, but the invasion of Va. has stirred my blood—and, I think it would be a pleasure to meet our enemies in martial combat . . . [.] Elodie later informed Dawson that Ellsworth "was only an acquaintance of Kittie's [.]"

Political disagreements could not help but color the view these Southerners took of their famous Northern relation. The correspondence began to take on a slightly grimmer tone after Colonel Ellsworth's death. "Kittie is writing to Sister Mary (Mrs Abe Lincoln)," she told Dawson, "and I requested her to mention the fact of my being interested in you & should you fall into the hands of the [black republicans?], hope you will be kindly received, presented with a passport to leave King Abe's Kingdom & returned to me with care but I am fearful since Ellsworth's death that the Southerners will fare badly if they get within their clutches and hope you will keep as far as possible from them . . . [.]"

Though she had previously denounced "Northern Tyranny," Elodie had not yet spread the charge to her brother-in-law, but the phrase "King Abe" broke the ice. However, such epithets remained uncharacteristic of Elodie's correspondence and, when used, were always kept within the realm of party politics and governmental policy. She never denounced Lincoln's personal character. With her this was an important and sensitive matter of principle:

(Continued in next issue)