

MARY LINCOLN'S "SUICIDE ATTEMPT": A PHYSICIAN RECONSIDERS THE EVIDENCE.

By Norbert Hirschhorn, MD

EDITOR'S NOTE: Norbert Hirschhorn is a physician specializing in the public health of women, children, and communities in the USA and the Third World. He has published essays on the health and history of Emily Dickinson, Mary Todd Lincoln, and an essay providing evidence for medicinal mercury poisoning of Abraham Lincoln.

INTRODUCTION

"I propose through the hasty though diffuse mode of dictation to give you the circumstances attendant upon the commission of Mrs. Lincoln to the insane asylum." So begins Lincoln's political operative and lawyer Leonard Swett's report to Judge David Davis, executor of Abraham Lincoln's estate.¹ Upon application of her son Robert, a Chicago court was to decide if Mary Todd Lincoln was insane and in need of a conservator; it was believed that her increasingly erratic and delusional behavior put at risk the nearly \$60,000 she now carried on her person. On May 19th, 1875, after a hearing lasting several hours, the jurors found in Robert's favor, and that she was "a fit person to be sent to a State Hospital for the Insane."²

The next afternoon, according to contemporary sources, hours before she was to be taken to Bellevue Place (a privately owned sanitarium in Batavia, Illinois), Mary Todd Lincoln bluffed and bullied her way past

several persons guarding her at the Grand Pacific Hotel, and visited three pharmacies seeking laudanum (alcoholic tincture of opium) mixed with camphor. The first druggist, alarmed and suspicious, prepared instead burnt sugar in water, which she immediately downed.

This brief article examines five questions: Did the episode occur? What happened? Did Mary Lincoln have a legitimate reason to ask for laudanum and camphor? If the preparation had actually contained laudanum, would she have been in danger? And finally, was her precipitate swallowing of the potion an attempt at suicide?

Did the episode occur?

Among Lincoln biographers a sharp division of opinion exists. Neely and McMurty give the story generally as told in newspaper articles the next day.³ Jean Baker, however, claims that "this story was probably false," spread by a newspaper owned by son Robert Lincoln's former law partner; "more a son's exculpation of filial treachery,"⁴ for the whole insanity trial, "than a mother's demonstration of suicidal tendencies."⁵ There are two main sources for the story, which the biographers cite: Swett's report, and detailed newspaper accounts in *The Chicago Tribune*, *The Chicago Times*,

and *The Daily*... the narratives... so do interest... details, which... reports. Clear

Swett wa... about Mrs. Li... In his report... exchange wit... change clothe... " 'And why w... moment?' she... Lincoln I am... window.[']" N... the entire cas... the sensation... bringing her t... This unnerve... custody was a... mind present... anything I ha... advanced on



Mary Todd's supposed "insanity" may have actually been due to the chronic pain she endured as a result of a host of medical conditions of which she was victim. Her erratic and bizarre behavior was most likely the result of her suffering on a daily basis and from which she could find little relief from the discomfort.

Photo Courtesy of the Abraham Lincoln Library and Museum
Harrogate, Tennessee

and *The Daily Inter-Ocean*. The particularity of the narratives lends credibility to the story; but so do interesting if minor differences in the details, which indicate no single origin for the reports. Clearly, something serious happened.

Swett was already deeply concerned about Mrs. Lincoln's precarious mental state. In his report to Davis he recounted this exchange with Mrs. Lincoln, who wanted to change clothes before going to the courtroom: " 'And why won't you leave me alone for a moment?' she said. [']Because if I do Mrs. Lincoln I am afraid you will jump out of the window.[']" Not only had Swett to assemble the entire case and prepare the witnesses for the sensational trial, he was responsible for bringing her to court, by force if necessary. This unnerved him: "The matter of her custody was a worse question, and to my mind presented more real terrors than anything I have ever undertaken. To have advanced on a battery instead would, it seems

to me, have been real relief." In addition, he was answerable for her security before removal to the sanitarium, and for the retrieval by any means the nearly \$60,000 in cash and negotiable bonds she had pinned to her undergarments (which, finally, she yielded peaceably). Thus when she escaped her watchers, obtained and drank what she thought was laudanum, Swett could only tremble in his concluding remarks to Judge Davis, "It is perfectly frightful to think how near she came to poisoning herself."⁶

What happened?

According to the accounts and their variations, Mary Lincoln—always a formidable presence—escaped a maid and two men, a Pinkerton detective and a "stalwart darky,"⁷ by "plausible stories."⁷ The guards had been posted since the day before to keep her safely in her room at the Grand Pacific Hotel on

Clark Street until she could be brought to the sanitarium,⁸ but the watchers were instructed “in no case to lay hands on her or to offer her any violence.”⁹ She bolted downstairs to the Squair and Co. pharmacy on the ground floor. There she asked either for two ounces each of laudanum and camphor,¹⁰ or three ounces of the mixture.¹¹ She said she needed the medicine to massage into her “neuralgic” shoulder. The clerk and proprietor knew by whom they were confronted and became instantly suspicious. Buying time, they told Mrs. Lincoln to return in half an hour,¹² or ten minutes,¹³ whereupon she went across the street, or down the block,¹⁴ to the drugstore of Rogers and Smith at the corner of Adams and Clark Streets, on the same mission. She either went on foot, or by hired carriage,¹⁵ followed by Frank Squair (with the hapless Pinkerton man in tow¹⁶), who urgently signaled Smith not to comply. Mrs. Lincoln then proceeded one, or two more blocks¹⁷ to Dale’s drug store on Clark Street, but by now Squair was ahead of her effecting another refusal. She returned to Squair’s establishment, where Squair himself quickly prepared a solution of burnt sugar and water, which she drank on the spot.¹⁸ She went to her room but—and here the three newspaper accounts converge—some twenty minutes later descended again to Squair’s asking for another ounce of laudanum, ostensibly because she found no relief of her pain. Now she insisted on watching the druggist make up the potion, but Squair told her the opiate was kept in the basement. He soon returned with another vial of caramel water, this time labeled “Laudanum - poison,” which she again swallowed on the spot. Her son Robert and Swett, alerted by messenger soon after her escape, arrived on the scene at the tail-end of the excitement. Swett’s report elides the specific details of the chase but is otherwise consistent with the newspaper accounts.

Neely and McMurty summarize the events mainly as told by *The Chicago Times*. Jean Baker, citing Swett, *The Chicago Times*, and *The*

Daily Inter-Ocean, remarkably denies the event ever took place: “What makes the newspaper story [sic] even more implausible is the suggestion that a fifty-six-year-old woman—stiff in limb and gait from arthritis and gout, readily identifiable in her widow’s black, watched by three attendants, a sheriff’s deputy, and a maid stationed in her room—could elude her guards, *walk three miles...and return again on foot* to her room just at the moment of her son’s timely arrival and her removal to the asylum.”¹⁹ [Emphases added.] None of these details comes from the contemporary sources cited; nothing in the published biographical literature indicates that Mrs. Lincoln ever had gout; and the street locations of the drug stores and the hotel are within one to two blocks of each other.²⁰

Did Mary Lincoln have a legitimate reason to ask for laudanum and camphor?

Mary Lincoln had more than “neuralgia,” a non-specific term. My colleague Professor of Neurology Robert G. Feldman and I have demonstrated that Mrs. Lincoln suffered from a chronic and extremely painful neurologic disease of the spinal cord disease called “tabes dorsalis,” brought on most likely by long-standing diabetes, and lasting until her death.²¹ The signs and symptoms of this disorder were precisely those adduced to convince the 1875 jurors, and many others who attended her, of her insanity. The stabbing, shooting, needling and burning pains typical of “tabes dorsalis” flashed through all parts of her body, including her shoulders, unpredictably and for variable lengths of time, as is typical of the condition. (In our paper we were able to trace her symptoms as far back as November 1869; a letter of hers to Jesse Kilgore DuBois recently published takes the course of illness back to at least mid-1868: “Tell your wife...that I intend to gather *all the needles* that are now running through my body, & send them to her, in a handsome, *European pincushion*.” [Emphases in original].²²)

Laudanum
for many uses.
skin over pain
of the 19th cen
and plasters co
camphor.²³ Th
Mary Lincoln
was troubled
and the pain w
impelled to se
compound she
the remedy.

If the “medicine”
she have been in d

It is impos
Lincoln requ
ounces (45-60
camphor—from
preparation ca
opium,” other
recipe of a lea
pharmacopeia
contained 3.75
milligrams; wh
held 60 grains
3900 milligram
two ounces of
However, a fa
grains or 325 m
really containe
Mary Todd Lin
twelve times t
hours—Squair
worried—*unle*
like the famed
Thomas de Q
to 150 grains o
9800 milligram

As a long
well as her spi
Lincoln woul
anodyne. The
that she was t
hydrate aroun
as well the im

Laudanum was popular among Victorians for many uses, including its application on the skin over painful limbs.²³ Medical formularies of the 19th century give recipes for liniments and plasters containing both laudanum and camphor.²⁴ Thus it was not unreasonable for Mary Lincoln to assure the druggists, "that she was troubled with neuralgia in her shoulder, and the pain was so often severe that she was impelled to seek relief by bathing it in the compound she ordered."²⁵ However, she *drank* the remedy.

If the "medicine" had actually contained laudanum, would she have been in danger?

It is important to distinguish what Mary Lincoln requested—one-and-a-half to two ounces (45-60 cc) each of laudanum and camphor—from the pharmacologic preparation called "camphorated tincture of opium," otherwise known as paregoric. In the recipe of a leading 19th century US pharmacopeia two ounces of paregoric contained 3.75 grains of opium or 244 milligrams; while two ounces of laudanum held 60 grains of opium (one grain per cc) or 3900 milligrams.²⁶ Jean Baker pronounced the two ounces of laudanum as "not a lethal dose." However, a fatal dose can be as little as five grains or 325 milligrams.²⁷ Had Squair's vial really contained two ounces of laudanum, Mary Todd Lincoln would have ingested twelve times the lethal dose and died within hours—Squair and his clerk were right to be worried—*unless* she was addicted to laudanum like the famed opium eaters of past centuries. Thomas de Quincey, for instance, tolerated up to 150 grains of laudanum a day, equivalent to 9800 milligrams of opium.²⁸

As a long-time sufferer from migraine as well as her spinal cord disease, surely Mrs. Lincoln would have been accustomed to some anodyne. There is at least anecdotal evidence that she was taking both laudanum and chloral hydrate around the time of the trial;²⁹ there is as well the impeccable testimony of Maria

Vance, the Lincolns' housekeeper in Springfield, that Mrs. Lincoln drank large quantities of paregoric.³⁰ No credible evidence exists, however, that she was ever habituated to the large amounts of laudanum necessary to avoid lethal poisoning.

Two facts testify strongly against addiction to laudanum, at least in 1875: There is no evidence that she experienced or was treated for withdrawal symptoms while in the sanitarium,³¹ which would have been severe. More important, no opium addict would mistake caramel for the bitter taste and smell of laudanum. Therefore, on to our last question:

Was her precipitate swallowing of the potions an attempt at suicide?

Opium, and its products, was a common agency of suicide in the mid-nineteenth century.⁷ Laudanum was easily accessible even from ethical purveyors without a physician's prescription, and could be downed impulsively and painlessly. An analogous situation today is suicide by drinking pesticides.³²

One does not know, finally, what was on Mrs. Lincoln's mind that spring afternoon standing in front of Grand Pacific Hotel. But the pain of her chronic illness, the undoubted post-traumatic reaction to the tenth anniversary of her husband's murder,³³ her public mortification during the hearing for insanity, the loss of her money and perceived betrayal by her son, and the prospect of incarceration, all sufficiently support the conclusion that her attempt was real, impulsive, but as a measure of her tenacity and strength of character, not to be repeated.

Acknowledgments

The author thanks Dan Dixon and Peggy Tuck Sinko for their research assistance, Paul Nagel and Cynthia Myntti for their reviews of the manuscript.

References

- ¹ Leonard Swett to David Davis, 24 May 1875. *David Davis Family Papers*, folder 112, Illinois State Historical Society.
- ² *The Chicago Daily Tribune*, 20 May 1875, p. 1, cols. 3-5.
- ³ Mark E. Neely, Jr. and R. Gerald McMurty, *The Insanity File. The Case of Mary Todd Lincoln* (Carbondale IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1986), 34-35.
- ⁴ Jean H. Baker, *Mary Todd Lincoln: A Biography* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1987), 326.
- ⁵ Anonymous. 1875. Mrs. Lincoln. Attempt at suicide. *The Chicago Tribune*, 21 May 1875, 8, cols. 1-2; Anonymous. Insanity's freaks. Displayed yesterday in the strange actions of unhappy Mrs. Lincoln....*The Chicago Times*, 21 May 1875, 5, cols. 4-5; Anonymous. Mrs. Lincoln. Another sad chapter in the life of the demented widow....*The Daily Inter-Ocean*, 21 May 1875, 8, col. 1.
- ⁶ Swett to David Davis, 24 May 1875.
- ⁷ *The Chicago Times*, 21 May 1875.
- ⁸ The hotel was located on the lots bounded by S. Clark, W. Quincy, S. Lasalle and W. Jackson streets - Chicago History Society, personal communication.
- ⁹ *The Chicago Times*, 21 May 1875.
- ¹⁰ Swett to David Davis, 24 May 1875; *The Chicago Times*, 21 May 1875.
- ¹¹ *The Chicago Tribune*, 21 May 1875; *The Daily Inter-Ocean*, 21 May 1875.
- ¹² *The Chicago Times*, 21 May 1875; *The Daily Inter-Ocean*, 21 May 1875.
- ¹³ Swett to David Davis, 24 May 1875; *The Chicago Tribune*, 21 May 1875.
- ¹⁴ "...across the street": *The Chicago Tribune*, 21 May 1875; "...down the block": *The Chicago Times*, 21 May 1875.
- ¹⁵ "...on foot": *The Chicago Tribune*, 21 May 1875; *The Daily Inter-Ocean*, 21 May 1875; "...hired carriage": *The Chicago Times*, 21 May 1875.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁷ "...one block": *The Chicago Tribune*, 21 May 1875; "...two more blocks": *The Chicago Times*, 21 May 1875.
- ¹⁸ *The Chicago Tribune*, 21 May 1875; *The Daily Inter-Ocean*, 21 May 1875.
- ¹⁹ Baker, *Mary Todd Lincoln*, 326.
- ²⁰ www.mapquest.com, accessed 1 November 2001.
- ²¹ Norbert Hirschhorn and Robert G. Feldman, "Mary Lincoln's Final Illness: A Medical and Historical Reappraisal," *The Journal of the History of Medicine* 1999;54:511-542.
- ²² Thomas F. Schwartz and Kim M. Bauer, "Unpublished Mary Todd Lincoln," *Journal of the Abraham Lincoln Association* 1996;17:1-21.
- ²³ John S. Haller, *The Physician and Sexuality in Victorian America* (Champaign IL: University of Illinois Press, 1974), 276.
- ²⁴ Benjamin Ellis, *The Medical Formulary....* 3rd ed. (Philadelphia: Carey & Lea, 1831), 107; Benjamin Ellis, *The Medical Formulary.... Carefully Revised and Much Improved by Albert H. Smith*, 12th ed. (Philadelphia: Henry C. Lea, 1868), 153; Alfred Stille and John M. Maisch, *The National Dispensatory....* 2nd ed. (Philadelphia: Henry C. Lea's Son & Co., 1880), 334, 829.
- ²⁵ *The Chicago Times*, 21 May 1875.
- ²⁶ George B. Wood and Franklin Bache, *The Dispensatory of the United States of America*, 11th ed. (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott, 1858), 1311, 1313-14.
- ²⁷ Michael J. Clarke, "Suicides by Opium and Its Derivatives, in England and Wales, 1850-1950," *Psychological Medicine* 1985; 15:237-42.
- ²⁸ Thomas de Quincey, *Confessions of an Opium Eater*, see chapter "The Pains of Opium" - the full text may be read on the Internet: <<http://users.lycaeum.org/~sputnik/Ludlow/Texts/Opium/prelim.html>>, accessed October 15, 2001.
- ²⁹ Baker, *Mary Todd Lincoln*, 324; Neely and McMurty, *The Insanity File*, 33.
- ³⁰ Lloyd Ostendorf and Walter Oleksy, eds., *Lincoln's Unknown Private Life. An Oral History by His Black Housekeeper Mariah Vance*, (Mamaroneck, NY: Hastings House Book Publishing, 1995), 92, 140.
- ³¹ Neely and McMurty, *The Insanity File*, 37-40; Baker, *Mary Todd Lincoln*, 336; *Chicago Post and Mail*, "Mrs. Lincoln [...] A Visit to Her by 'The Post and Mail' Correspondent, 13 July 1875, 2.
- ³² G. Hutchinson, H. Daisley, D. Simeon, V. Simmons, M. Shetty, and D. Lynn, "High rates of paraquat-induced suicide in southern Trinidad," *Suicide and Life Threatening Behavior* 1999;29:186-91.
- ³³ Baker, *Mary Todd Lincoln*, 331.