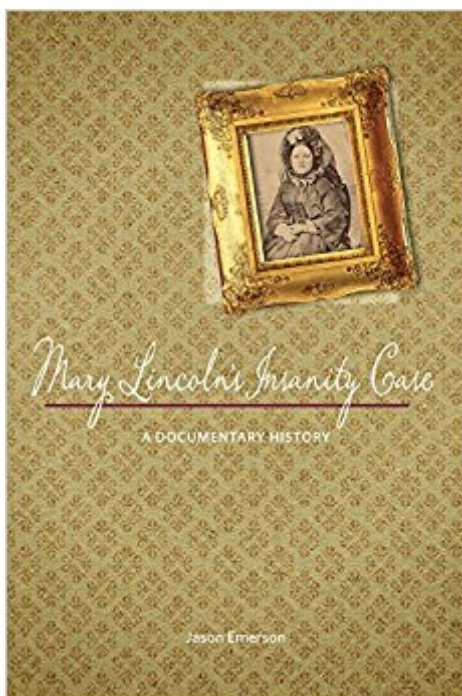


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# Mary Lincoln's Insanity Case: A Documentary History



## Synopsis

In 1875 Mary Lincoln, the widow of a revered president, was committed to an insane asylum by her son, Robert. The trial that preceded her internment was a subject of keen national interest. The focus of public attention since Abraham Lincoln's election in 1860, Mary Lincoln had attracted plentiful criticism and visible scorn from much of the public, who perceived her as spoiled, a spendthrift, and even too much of a Southern sympathizer. Widespread scrutiny only increased following her husband's assassination in 1865 and her son Tad's death six years later, after which her overwhelming grief led to the increasingly erratic behavior that led to her being committed to a sanitarium. A second trial a year later resulted in her release, but the stigma of insanity stuck. In the years since, questions emerged with new force, as the populace and historians debated whether she had been truly insane and subsequently cured, or if she was the victim of family maneuvering. In this volume, noted Lincoln scholar Jason Emerson provides a documentary history of Mary Lincoln's mental illness and insanity case, evenhandedly presenting every possible primary source on the subject to enable a clearer view of the facts. Beginning with documents from the immediate aftermath of her husband's assassination and ending with reminiscences by friends and family in the mid-twentieth century, *Mary Lincoln's Insanity Case: A Documentary History* compiles more than one hundred letters, dozens of newspaper articles, editorials, and legal documents, and the daily patient progress reports from Bellevue Place Sanitarium during Mary Lincoln's incarceration. Including many materials that have never been previously published, Emerson also collects multiple reminiscences, interviews, and diaries of people who knew Mary Lincoln or were involved in the case, including the first-hand recollection of one of the jurors in the 1875 insanity trial. Suggesting neither accusation nor exoneration of the embattled First Lady, *Mary Lincoln's Insanity Case: A Documentary History* gives scholars and history enthusiasts incomparable access to the documents and information crucial to understanding this vexing chapter in American history.

## Book Information

Paperback: 264 pages

Publisher: University of Illinois Press; Reprint edition (July 17, 2015)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0252081269

ISBN-13: 978-0252081262

Product Dimensions: 6.1 x 0.9 x 9.2 inches

Shipping Weight: 12.6 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 5.0 out of 5 stars 1 customer review

Best Sellers Rank: #1,015,311 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #73 in Books > Law > Health & Medical Law > Mental Health #197 in Books > History > Americas > United States > Civil War > Women #1303 in Books > Biographies & Memoirs > Historical > United States > Civil War

## Customer Reviews

"Mary Lincoln's Insanity Case makes a valuable contribution to the story of Mrs. Lincoln and her son Robert. This volume will enable scholars and students to write about Lincoln and his family with ever greater authority."--Michael Burlingame, author of *Abraham Lincoln: A Life*"This book is the first to capture and provide in one resource all of the documentation relevant to Mary Lincoln's long-controversial insanity trial and treatment. Jason Emerson distils the full body of evidentiary material into an easily accessible chronology. An essential reference for anyone interested in the subject."--Harold Holzer, author of *Father Abraham: Lincoln and His Sons*"An impressive array of material, arranged chronologically, stemming from the insanity trial, including private correspondence, progress reports from Lincoln's attending physician at the Bellevue Place Sanitarium, newspaper articles, diaries, and interviews. This is an essential resource for anyone interested in the Lincoln family."--Register of the Kentucky Historical Society

A comprehensive look at Mary Lincoln's mental state

Not many First Ladies have lived a life filled with such sorrow as Mary Todd Lincoln's. And not many Presidential children lived a life filled with quite as much drama as Robert Todd Lincoln. But the relationship between Robert Todd Lincoln and his widowed mother, Mary Todd Lincoln, detailed in Jason Emerson's remarkable "Mary Lincoln's Insanity Case: A Documentary History," was strikingly universal. In 1875 when Robert became aware, ten years after his father's assassination, that his mother was becoming increasingly deranged, he sought the advice of numerous doctors and trusted family friends on how best to handle Mary's situation. When they agreed that she was in need of medical care, but wouldn't submit to it, the only way he could force her to begin psychiatric treatment was to take her to court. In Illinois, this amounted to a civil trial, which played out to the public through the scandal-mongering press of the day. Through those newspaper articles, personal letters and trial records, author Jason Emerson traces Mary Lincoln's Insanity Case from early 1875 through her trial, treatment, and aftermath. Robert's relationship with his mother is in some ways

unique - after all, how many Presidential spouses and children have survived the assassination of their husband and father, with their lives played out in the public eye - and in some ways very relatable, with the familiar case of a frustrated adult child trying to care for his unreasoning parent. Mary and Abraham suffered the loss of two young sons before his assassination, and in 1871 Mary and Robert lost their remaining son and brother, Tad, at age 17. The accumulation of these sorrows seemed to drive Mary over the edge of reason, with her delusions, paranoia and monomania (in the form of obsessive shopping) becoming undeniable, forcing Robert to act. She was declared insane by the court in Springfield, Illinois, (the verdict can be found on page 169 of the book) and was remanded to "a State hospital for the insane." Fortunately, a less harsh option presented itself: Bellevue Place sanitarium in Batavia, Illinois, where Mary was sent for psychiatric care. The hospital, which housed only 20 other women, was located in the home of Dr. Richard Patterson, a forward-thinking doctor who treated her with the best care that was available at the time: "moral therapy" in the form of fresh air, rest, baths, and diversion. She wasn't there more than a month when she began to agitate for her release. A vortex of letters began circulating between Mary; Robert; Dr. Patterson; Mary's sister and brother-in-law, Elizabeth Todd and Ninian Edwards; and a spectacularly meddlesome couple, James and Myra Bradwell, friends of Mary's who decided that she had been wrongly incarcerated and who fomented Mary's escape plans. Robert and Mary became estranged when she accused him of wanting her money, although it is perfectly clear by all accounts that his actions as the court-appointed conservator were in her best interest. It is here when Robert's pain and anguish at his mother's accusations come through most clearly, and the pace of the book accelerates as he tries to extricate himself from the position while still protecting her assets. Emerson's thorough account of Mary Lincoln's insanity case is both documentary history and searing family portrait; a love story between a mother and son who survived the unthinkable.

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