

**Middlesex County
Cultural and Heritage
Commission**

**Middlesex County
Board of
Chosen Freeholders**

**New Jersey
Historical Commission**

a Division of the
Department of State

© 2013 County of Middlesex
Cultural & Heritage Commission

This publication was prepared for the web, as a companion booklet to Civil War resources for educators and students.

Let us know what you think of this booklet and the publication on our website about Louisa May Alcott, Civil War nurse and advocate for better medical care. Both monographs were compiled from the personal diaries of these women who were witnesses to some of the most dramatic days in our nation's history.

Behind the Scenes . . .

**30 Years a Slave/
4 Years in the
White House**

by
Elizabeth Keckley

**A Story
of the
Civil War**

**as Told
in her
Own Words**

Introduction

We present the writings of Elizabeth Keckley, former slave and seamstress to Mary Todd Lincoln during the Civil War. Through her diary and the excerpts here we acknowledge the strong African American women of this era, during this 150th anniversary 2011-2015

Many historians will discuss Civil War battles and the conflicting sentiments of the Northern and Southern states - and this is most important in our understanding of this period. The Cultural and Heritage Commission is challenging what we know about the human experience and in particular, the plight of African Americans, both freed Blacks and slaves.

Elizabeth Keckley rose in stature in her community because of hard work and her remarkable skills that were in demand by women of society. She tells us about the Civil War through her diary and from a unique point of view.

*Anna M. Aschkenes, Executive Director
Middlesex County
Cultural & Heritage Commission*



Born a slave in Dinwiddie Court House, Virginia in 1818, Elizabeth Hobbs Keckley suffered through the anguish and agony of slavery, was fortunate enough to legally purchase her freedom, then operate her own

successful business in the center of our nation's capital. Keckley also wrote one of the most valuable slave narratives in American History and the first to appear after the abolition of slavery.

Keckley received her first work assignment as a slave at age four. When she was older, she became an able seamstress, then a notable dressmaker and crafter of high fashions for women when living in St. Louis. Keckley purchased her freedom and traveled north where she quickly became a favorite dressmaker to the elite in antebellum Washington. Among her more notable clients was the wife of Jefferson Davis, the man who was later inaugurated as the President of the Confederate States of America.

Note: The stories are from Elizabeth's diary. The text in blue represents her own words.

In the early months of the Civil War, Elizabeth Keckley was employed by her most prominent and frequent client, First Lady, Mary Todd Lincoln. Within months, a strong bond was forged between Mary Todd and Elizabeth. Throughout the Civil War, Elizabeth Keckley became a frequent visitor to the White House and important to the First Lady. In 1868, Keckley's autobiography was published. Rich in detail and raw emotion, Keckley illustrates the political, social, and emotionally charged Lincoln household during her years at the White House.



At four years of age Elizabeth Hobbs was in slavery. She told this story about that time in her life.

My master, Col. A. Burwell was somewhat unsettled in his business affairs . . . While living at Hampton Sidney College, Prince Edward County, Va., Mrs. Burwell gave birth to a daughter, a sweet, black-eyed, baby, my earliest and fondest pet. To take care of this baby was my first duty. True, I was but a child myself – only four years old – but then I had been raised in a hardy school – had been taught to rely upon myself, and to prepare myself to render assistance to others.

The lesson was not a bitter one, for I was too young to indulge in philosophy, and the precepts that I then treasured and practiced I believe developed those principles of character which have enabled me to triumph over so many difficulties.

Notwithstanding all the wrongs that slavery heaped upon me, I can bless it for one thing — youth's important lesson of self reliance.

Elizabeth Hobbs describes a severe punishment while in the course of her duties.

My simple attire was a short dress and a little white apron. My old mistress encouraged me in rocking the cradle, by telling me that if I would watch over the baby well, keep the flies out of its face, and not let it cry, I should be its little maid. This was a golden promise, and I required no better inducement for the faithful performance of my task.

I began to rock the cradle most industriously, when lo! out pitched little pet on the floor. I instantly cried out, Oh! The baby is on the floor, and, not knowing what to do, I seized the fire-shovel in my perplexity, and was trying to shovel up my tender charge, when my mistress called to me to let the child alone, and then ordered that I be taken out and lashed for my carelessness.

The blows were not administered with a light hand, I assure you, and doubtless the severity of the lashing has made me remember the incident so well.



Badge reads *House Servant 1800*
Courtesy, Smithsonian Magazine

Badge worn by a slave who was a house servant in 1800. This was required to be worn by slaves leaving their master's property.

Elizabeth Hobbs once witnessed a slave sale and told what she had seen.

When I was about seven years old I witnessed, for the first time, the sale of a human being. We were living at Prince Edward, in Virginia, and master had just purchased his hogs for the winter, for which he was unable to pay in full. To escape from his embarrassment it was necessary to sell one of his slaves. Little Joe, the son of the cook, was selected as the victim. His mother was ordered to dress him up in his Sunday clothes, and send him to the house.

He came in with a bright face, was placed in the scales, and was sold, like the hogs, at so much per pound. His mother was kept in ignorance of the transaction, but her suspicions were aroused. When her son started for Petersburg in the wagon, the truth began to draw upon her mind, and she pleaded piteously that her boy should not be taken from her; but master quieted her by telling that he was simply going to town with the wagon, and would be back in the morning. Morning came, but Little Joe did not return to his mother. Morning after morning passed, and the mother went down to the grave without ever seeing her child again. One day she was whipped for grieving for her lost boy.



Slave children
from Georgia
(names
unknown)

Sometimes slaves did not want to face punishment.

One of my uncles, a slave of Colonel Burwell, lost a pair of ploughlines, [reins held by the driver of the horse which pulled the plow] and when the loss was made known the master gave him a new pair, and told him that if he did not take care of them he would punish him severely. In a few weeks the second pair of lines was stolen, and my uncle hung himself rather than meet the displeasure of his master.

My mother went to the spring in the morning for a pail of water, and on looking up into the willow tree which shaded the bubbling crystal stream, she discovered the lifeless form of her brother suspended beneath one of the strong branches.



The first Confederate "White House" in Alabama at the beginning of the Civil War - another location was later chosen.

An able seamstress, Elizabeth is able to earn money despite her status as a slave.

I was fortunate in obtaining work, and in a short time I had acquired something of 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. With my needle I kept bread in the mouths of seventeen persons for two years and five months.

Elizabeth Hobbs married.

About this time Mr. Keckley, whom I had met in Virginia, and learned to regard with more than friendship, came to St. Louis. He sought my hand in marriage, and for a long time I refused to consider his proposal; for I could not bear the thought of bringing children into slavery—of adding one single recruit to the millions bound to hopeless servitude, fettered and shackled with chains stronger and heavier than manacles of iron. I made a proposition to buy myself and my son; the proposition was bluntly declined, and I was commanded never to broach the subject again. I would not be put off thus, for hope pointed to a freer, brighter life in the future.

Elizabeth again asks to buy her freedom.

*One day, when I insisted on knowing whether he would permit me to purchase myself, he turned to me in a petulant manner, thrust his hand into his pocket, drew forth a bright silver dollar, and proffering it to me said: *Lizzie, I have told you often not to trouble me with such a question. If you really wish to leave me, take this: it will pay the passage of yourself and boy on the ferry-boat, and when you are on the other side of the river you will be free. It is the cheapest way that I know of to accomplish what you desire.* I looked at him in astonishment, and earnestly replied: *No master, I do not wish to be free in such a manner. If such had been my wish, I should never have troubled you about obtaining your consent to my purchasing myself. I can cross the river any day, as you well know, and have frequently done so, but will never leave you in such a manner. By the laws of the land I am your slave – you are my master, and I will only be free by such means as the laws of the country provide.**

He expected this answer, and I knew that he was pleased. Some time afterwards he told me that he had reconsidered the question; that I had served his family faithfully; that I deserved my freedom, and that he would take \$1200 for myself and the boy (her son).



Civil War envelope showing the White House and Columbia, both symbols of the Union (North)

Elizabeth Keckley devises a plan.

I went to work in earnest to purchase my freedom, but the years passed, and I was still a slave . . . In the mean time Mr. Garland [former owner] died, and Mr. Burwell, a Mississippi planter came to St. Louis to settle up the estate. He was a kind-hearted man, and said I should be free, and would afford me every facility to raise the necessary amount to pay the price of my liberty. Several schemes were urged upon me by my friends. At last I formed a resolution to go to New York, state my case, and appeal to the benevolence of the people.

The plan seemed feasible, and I made preparations to carry it out. When I was almost ready to turn my face northward, Mrs. Garland told me that she would require the names of six gentlemen who would vouch for my return, and become responsible for the amount at which I was valued. I had many friends in St. Louis, and as I believed that they had confidence in me, I felt that I could readily obtain the names desired. I . . . obtained five signatures to the paper, and my heart throbbed with pleasure, for I did not believe that the sixth would refuse me.

Elizabeth becomes hopeful that she can buy her freedom through the help of friends.

A carriage stopped in front of the house; Mrs. Le Bourgeois, one of my kind patrons, got out of it and entered the door. . .

Lizzie, I hear that you are going to New York to beg for money to buy your freedom. I have been thinking over the matter, and told Ma it would be a shame to allow you to go North to beg for what we should give you. You have many friends in St. Louis, and I am going to raise the twelve hundred dollars required among them. Don't start for New York now until I see what I can do among your friends.

Elizabeth buys her freedom legally.

The twelve hundred dollars were raised, and at last my son and myself were free. *Free! Free! What a glorious ring to the word. Free! The bitter heart-struggle was over.*

Elizabeth Keckley begins her first venture as a free woman and entrepreneur, capitalizing on her superb skills as a seamstress. One of her clients was the wife of Jefferson Davis, and it is from Mrs. Davis that Elizabeth learns of the impending Civil War. Learning that Mrs. Davis wanted a modiste [dressmaker], *I presented myself, and was employed by her on the recommendation of one of my patrons. . . . Almost every night, as I learned from the servants and other members of the family, secret meetings were held at the house; and some of these meetings were protracted to a very late hour. The prospects of war were freely discussed in my presence by Mr. and Mrs. Davis and their friends. . . .*

While helping Mrs. Davis dress one day, she said to me: *Lizzie, you are so very handy that I should like to take you South with me.*

When do you go South, Mrs. Davis? I inquired.

Oh, I cannot tell just now, but it will be soon. You know there is going to be a war, Lizzie?

. . . Who will go to war? I asked.

The North and South, was her ready reply. The Southern people will not submit to the humiliating demands of the Abolition Party; they will fight first. [Abolitionists were persons who fought against slavery and politically opposed the Southern states belief that state governments had an authority to allow slavery.]

And which do you think will win?

The South of course. The South is impulsive, is in earnest, and the Southern soldiers will fight to conquer. The North will yield, when it sees the South is in earnest, rather than engage in a long, bloody war. [said Mrs. Davis.]

But, Mrs. Davis, are you certain that there will be war?

It was then that Elizabeth heard these very historic words.

Certain! — I know it [said Mrs. Davis]. You had better go South with me; I will take good care of you. Besides, when the war breaks out, the colored people will suffer in the North. The Northern people will look upon them as the cause of the war, and I fear, in their exasperation, will be inclined to treat you harshly.

Mrs. Jefferson Davis went on to say: *Then, I may come back to Washington in a few months, and live in the White House. The Southern people talk of choosing Mr. Davis for their President. In fact, it may be considered settled that he will be their President. As soon as we go South and secede from the other States, we will raise an army and march on Washington, and then I shall live in the White House.*

[Elizabeth tells us]

I thought over the question much, and the more I thought the less inclined I felt to accept the proposition so kindly made by Mrs. Davis. I knew the North to be strong . . . I preferred to cast my lot among the people of the North.

Elizabeth states her most important ambition.

Ever since arriving in Washington I had a great desire to work for the ladies of the White House . . .

Elizabeth gains an opportunity to work for First Lady of the United States, Mary Todd Lincoln , when one of her clients, told her

. . . I have often heard you say that you would like to work for the ladies of the White House. Well, I have in my power to obtain you this privilege. I know Mrs. Lincoln well, and you shall make a dress for her provided you finish mine in time to wear at dinner on Sunday

Elizabeth works for Mrs. Lincoln.

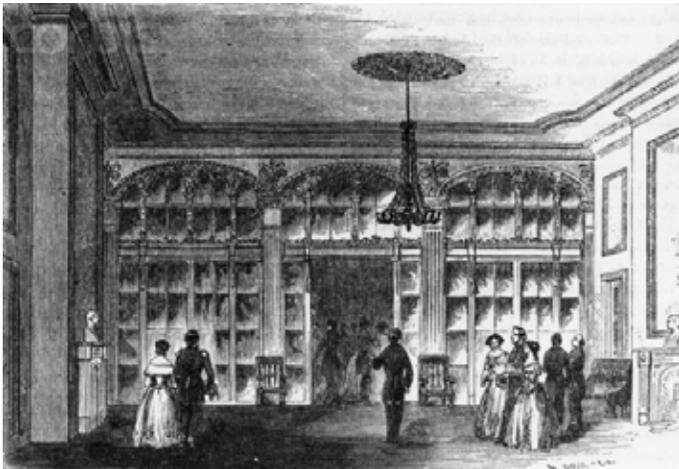
I became the regular modiste [one employed in women's fashion] of Mrs. Lincoln. I made fifteen or sixteen dresses for her during the spring and early part of the summer, when she left Washington; spending the hot weather at Saratoga, Long Branch, and other places. In the mean time I was employed by Mrs. Senator Douglas, one of the loveliest ladies that I ever met, Mrs. Secretary Welles [husband to Secretary of Navy Gideon Welles], Mrs. Secretary Stanton [wife of Secretary of War Edwin Stanton], and others.

Mary Todd Lincoln in one of her fancy dresses worn at the White House





This is an actual image of the White House kitchen at the time Elizabeth Keckley worked at the White House and was the seamstress for Mrs. Lincoln. Following the Civil War, the tradition of African-Americans working in the White House kitchen continued. Dolly Johnson, seen in this 1890 photograph, was recruited to the White House by President Benjamin Harrison.



White House entrance hall as it appeared in 1856.

Elizabeth witnesses one of the many depressing conversations President Lincoln had with Mrs. Lincoln.

In 1863 the Confederates were flushed with victory, and sometimes it looked as if the proud flag of the Union, the glorious old Stars and Stripes, must yield half its nationality to the tri-barred flag that floated grandly over long columns of gray. These were sad, anxious days to Mr. Lincoln, and those who saw the man in privacy only could tell how much he suffered. One day he came into a room where I was fitting a dress on Mrs. Lincoln. His step was slow and heavy, and his face sad. Like a tired child he threw himself upon a sofa, and shaded his eyes with his hands. He was a complete picture of dejection. Mrs. Lincoln, observing his troubled look, asked:

Where have you been father? [said Mrs. Lincoln To the President]

To the War Department, was the brief answer of the President.

Any news? [said Mrs. Lincoln]

Yes, plenty of news, but no good news. It is dark, dark everywhere, said Mr. Lincoln.

Elizabeth witnessed many candid conversations between Mrs. Lincoln and the President, often debates about the abilities of certain generals. Here Elizabeth recalls a conversation about General George McClellan, an early commander of the Army of the Potomac, frequently criticized for his lack of decisive action against the Confederate Army.

He is a humbug, remarked Mrs. Lincoln one day in my presence.

What makes you think so mother? good-naturedly inquired the President.

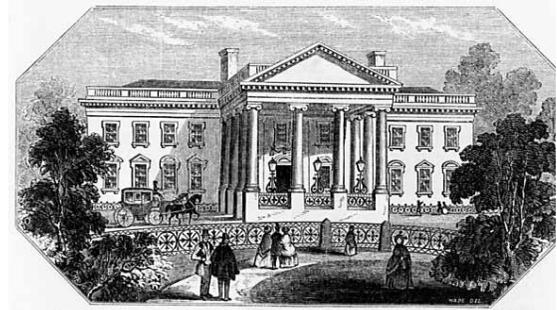
Because he talks so much and does so little. If I had the power I would very soon take off his head, and put some energetic man in his place, said Mrs. Lincoln.

The President responded, *But I regard McClellan as a patriot and an able soldier. He has been much embarrassed. The troops are raw, and the subordinate officers inclined to be rebellious. There are too many politicians in the army with shoulder-straps. McClellan is young and popular, and they are jealous of him. They will kill him off if they can.*

North portico of White House during the Civil War, right

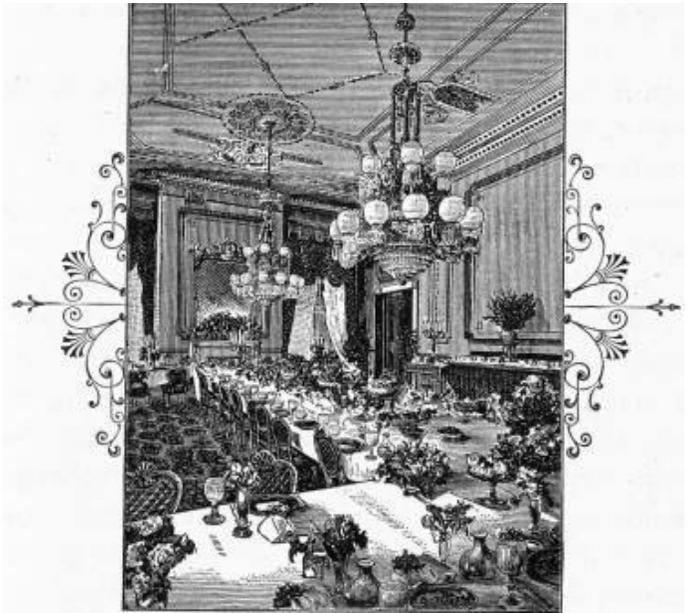


But Mrs. Lincoln did not give up, and said, *McClellan can make plenty of excuse for himself, therefore he needs no advocate in you. If he would only do something, and not promise so much, I might learn to have a little faith in him. I tell you he is a humbug, and you will have to find some man to take his place, that is, if you wish to conquer the South.*



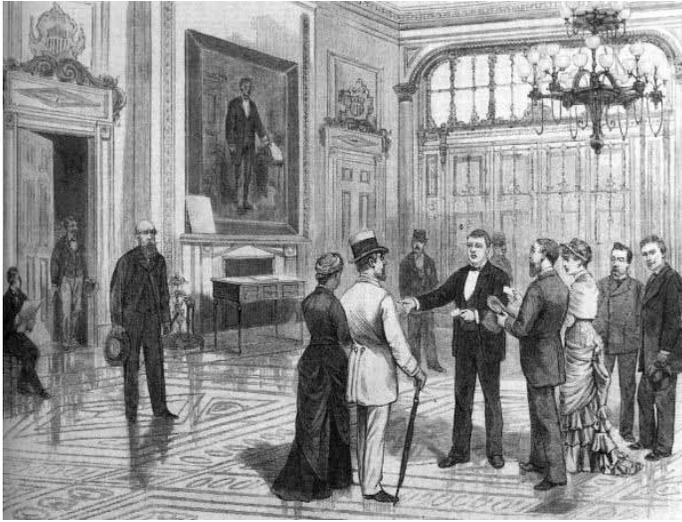
Elizabeth decides to start relief work for the African Americans living in Washington D.C.

One fair summer evening I was walking the streets of Washington, accompanied by a friend, when a band of music was heard in the distance. We wondered what it could mean, and curiosity prompted us to find out its meaning. We quickened our steps, and discovered that it came from the house of Mrs. Farnham. The yard was brilliantly lighted, ladies and gentlemen were moving about, and the band was playing some of its sweetest airs. We approached the sentinel on duty at the gate, and asked what was going on. He told us it was a festival given for the benefit of the sick and wounded soldiers in the city. This suggested an idea to me. 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 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.



White House dining room at the time of Elizabeth Keckley's employment there, above and an etching of a White House reception below.





White House entrance hall after the Civil War.

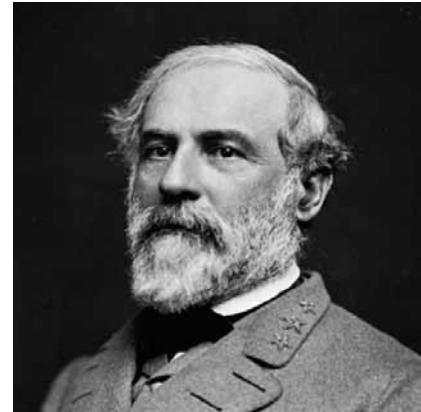


Mary Lincoln dressed for a White House reception

Elizabeth Keckley recorded this conversation in her diary on the very day that the President was assassinated.

President Lincoln was offering his opinion of General Robert E. Lee, and said

I will here record an incident showing his feeling toward Robert E. Lee. The very morning of the day on which he was assassinated, his son, Capt. Robert Lincoln [he had joined the army], came into the room with a portrait of General Lee in his hand. The President took the picture, laid it on a table before him, scanned the face thoughtfully, and said: It is a good face; it is the face of a noble, noble brave man. I am glad that the war is over at last.



General Robert E. Lee of the Confederate Army

Elizabeth describes Washington, D.C. just days after news spread of President Lincoln's assassination (Lincoln was assassinated on April 14th, 1865, and died the next day).

The President was dead, and a nation was mourning for him. Every house was draped in black, and every face wore a solemn look. People spoke in subdued tones, and glided whisperingly, wonderingly, silently about the streets. About eleven o'clock on Saturday morning a carriage drove up to the door, and a messenger asked for Elizabeth Keckley.

. . . I hastily put on my shawl and bonnet, and was driven at a rapid rate to the White House. Everything about the building was sad and solemn, I was quickly shown to Mrs. Lincoln's room, and on entering, saw Mrs. L. tossing uneasily about upon a bed. The room was darkened . . . She was nearly exhausted with grief, and when she became a little quiet, I asked and received permission to go into the Guests' Room, where the body of the President lay in state. . .

No common mortal had died. The Moses of my people had fallen in the hour of his triumph. . . I gazed long at the face, and turned away with tears in my eyes and a choking sensation in my throat. Ah! Never was man so widely mourned before. . .

Returning to Mrs. Lincoln's room, I found her in a new paroxysm of grief. Robert [Lincoln] was bending over his mother with tender affection, and little Tad was crouched at the foot of the bed with a world of agony in his young face.

*I shall never forget the scene – the wails of a broken heart, the unearthly shrieks, the terrible convulsions, the wild, tempestuous outbursts of grief from the soul. I bathed Mrs. Lincoln's head with cold water, . . . Tad's grief at his father's death was as great as the grief of his mother, but her terrible outbursts awed the boy into silence. Sometimes he would throw his arms around her neck, and exclaim, between his broken sobs, *Don't cry Mamma! Don't cry, or you will make me cry too! You will break my heart.**

She [Mrs. Lincoln] denied admittance to almost everyone, and I was her only companion, except her children, in the days of her great sorrow.

*[Mrs. Lincoln remarked,] *Lizabeth, you are my best and kindest friend, and I love you as my best friend. I wish it were in my power to make you as comfortable for the balance of your days. If Congress provides for me, depend upon it, I will provide for you**

With the war over, and Mr. Lincoln mourned by the American people, Elizabeth continued her volunteer responsibilities with the relief organization she helped found. She speaks of the newly freed slavers who came to Washington, DC by the thousands, having no other place to go.

... the others went to work with commendable energy, and planned with remarkable forethought. They built themselves cabins, and each family cultivated for itself a small patch of ground. The colored people are fond of domestic life, and with them domestication means happy children, a fat pig, a dozen or more chickens, and a garden. Whoever visits the Freedmen's Village now in the vicinity of Washington will discover all of these evidences of prosperity and happiness.

The schools are objects of much interest. Good teachers, white and colored, are employed, and whole brigades of bright-eyed dusky children are there taught the common branches of education. These children are studious, and the teachers inform me that their advancement is rapid. I number among my personal friends twelve colored girls employed as teachers in the schools at Washington.

Elizabeth Keckley lived until 1907. She was a formidable historic figure for her humanitarian work and for her designs that graced the figures of the prominent women of the mid 1800s to the 20th century. Her designs are housed in the Smithsonian Institution's *American Legacy* collection.

Perhaps her most important contribution is her diary, as she was witness to one of the most dramatic and controversial times in American history.



Striped gown designed and crafted by Elizabeth Keckley and worn by Mrs. Lincoln the White House

Day dress made by Elizabeth Keckley and recently on view in a university gallery





Keckley designed White House gown and cloak



Thank you to the Smithsonian Institution, Federal World press, New York Times archive, American History website, Confederate Museum, Library of Congress, Middlesex County Cultural & Heritage Commission for images seen here.



Elizabeth Keckley, later in life

This booklet may be printed or copied for use in the classroom.

This booklet was researched and written by historian Douglas Aumack and Executive Director Anna Aschkenes of the Middlesex County Cultural and Heritage Commission.

Middlesex County Cultural & Heritage Commission
703 Jersey Ave New Brunswick, NJ 08901-3605
732.745.4489 (voice) 732.745.3888 (TTY users only)
<http://co.middlesex.nj.us/culturalheritage>