



Behind the Scenes in the Lincoln White House: Memoirs of an African-American Seamstress

Elizabeth Keckley

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"Behind the Scenes in the Lincoln White House: Memoirs of an African-American Seamstress" tells the story of Elizabeth Keckley, a former slave who became a successful Washington, D.C., dressmaker and confidante of First Lady Mary Todd Lincoln. This intimate bond allowed Keckley to witness the happy times as well as the tragic events that unfolded within the Lincoln White House. Keckley's post-Civil War life story is part slave narrative, part gossip column, part Horatio Alger story. Though Elizabeth Keckley lived longer as a slave than as modiste to Mary Todd Lincoln, most of her engrossing autobiography is devoted to her White House years. The opening three chapters establish her as a woman to be reckoned with: the "school of slavery," as she calls her bondage, taught her to be fiercely self-reliant, persevering, and defiant, though more than one slavemaster tried to beat her into submission. Having worked as a reputable seamstress for three years while also performing her full-time duties as a slavewoman, she finally managed to buy freedom for both herself and her son. After a brief, unhappy marriage, she began her rapid social ascent from seamstress for the solid South's "best ladies" to Mary Todd Lincoln's best friend and confidante. Elizabeth Keckley's narrative is riveting as she recounts life in the White House during the Lincoln administration in meticulous detail. "Behind the Scenes in the Lincoln White House" is a remarkable firsthand narrative of both African-American and Civil War history, sure to engage equally the history buff, lovers of literature, and those who don't mind a bit of good, old-fashioned gossip.

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