Mariah (Bartlett) Vance
Daytime Servant to the Lincolns
Part 2

By Wayne C. Temple*

George and Phebe Bartlett should have been free upon their arrival in Illinois. The Illinois Constitution of 1818, in Article VI, Section 1, clearly stated that “Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude shall hereafter be introduced into this state otherwise than for the punishment of crimes.” But servitude by indenture was allowed, providing that males were set free when they reached their twenty-first birthday and females when they became eighteen. Phebe would have been approximately forty-four—or even younger—when Shelton brought her to Illinois, and she no doubt began soon thereafter to work for wages. In 1850 she was living in the household of a son-in-law and stated her age as seventy, but she had no idea of where she had been born. This is certainly Mariah’s mother, and Mariah even named one of her daughters “Phebe” after this grandmother, and Phebe is not a common first name. (Notice the phonetic spelling in these records.)

According to Mariah’s interview, she was indentured at the age of nine to William Lewis May. Her sister, Elizabeth, at the age of eight, was also “bound” at the same time to another man. Perhaps as a result of the extra income from these indentures, Stephen Shelton, on February 8, 1832, purchased an additional eighty acres, the East Half of the Northeast Quarter, in Section 32 of Township 15 North, Range 6 West of the Third Prime Meridian.  

May, a consummate and industrious politician, has not received a thorough study of his life. However, research for this study has disclosed the basic facts of his colorful life. He was born in Kentucky in 1793 and removed to Edwardsville in Madison County, Illinois, where he registered some indentured servants on October 15, 1817. Illinois Territorial Governor Ninian Edwards, a Democrat, appointed him Justice of the Peace for Madison County on December 10, 1817. In 1818 a census taker set him down as a free white male, twenty-one years and older, with two other whites in his household, together with two slaves. Two years later he had only one slave. On January 28, 1822, he received a commission as Captain in the Eighth Infantry Regiment of Madison County’s Illinois State Militia. A Jacksonian Democrat and unmarried, May proved to be a wily politician with a rather unsavory reputation in Edwardsville. While living there he was indicted for “burglary” when caught in the house of a married woman who seems to have invited him there for a sexual encounter. May admitted the seduction but revealed that the charge of “burglary” had been entered in the arrest record rather than state that the true charge was illicit intercourse. The case was later dropped and May wrote, “in early manhood I have committed many follies and indiscretions.” In another legal indictment May paid the complaining witness to depart from Illinois.

Evidently to escape his tarnished image, May left for Morgan County. He was there by 1827, because on September 6 of that year he was commissioned a Justice of the Peace in Jacksonville. He also served as a Representative from Morgan County in the Sixth Illinois General Assembly (1828–1830). He resigned his Justice of the Peace commission on August 29, 1829, after having moved to Springfield, Sangamon County, where he had begun his duties as Register of the Federal Land Office on August 8, 1829, an appointment from President Andrew Jackson. The 1830 Census found him there with one male under the age of five; one from ten to fifteen; and one from thirty to forty years of age. In his family were also one female under five; one from ten to fifteen; and two from twenty to thirty years of age. There was no mention of any indentured servants or “colored” persons.

Yet by 1831 or so he certainly had acquired the indentured services of Mariah Bartlett. In Springfield, May’s career began to blossom and expand greatly. In February of 1833 he became the partner of Stephen Trigg Logan, but there is no record that he was a licensed attorney! Then he was elected to Congress as a Representative from District Three, which included Springfield. He served three consecutive terms: 1833–1835; 1835–1837; and 1837–1839 as a Democrat. But in 1839 John Todd Stuart, a Whig, succeeded him for one term. While in Congress May met and married Caroline Roddny, just seventeen, the daughter of the late United States Senator Caesar Augustus Rodney (1772–1824). William A. Wiggins, on December 27, 1837, performed the ceremony in Wilmington, Delaware, home of the bride. Caroline was one of fifteen Rodney children.

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As the money rolled in, May, on December 27, 1833, purchased eight tracts of School Land in Morgan County. He also desired to become a delegate to the Democratic Convention to nominate a presidential candidate, but the Illinois State Senate vetoed that resolution on February 12, 1835.

When the 1840 Census was taken in Springfield, the enumerator discovered that May had a number of male and female members in his family in addition to one person of color—that would have been Marah. While a bond servant of May, she had joined the Zion Missionary Baptist Church in Springfield in April of 1838. Marah was probably about fifteen or sixteen. Eighteen blacks assembled at the home of Anderson Carter on West Washington Street to start the “Colored Baptist Church,” and Marah was a founding member at this first meeting. She recalled that “Mr. May, the man who raised me, was one of the kindest hearted men in the world.” Marah worked as a servant in the house and May never sent her out to work in the fields. With such kindness and understanding May certainly had no objection to her attending church services. He may have even encouraged it.

An entrepreneur of the first order, May sought profitable business enterprises and used his political influence to obtain them. He received authorization from the Illinois General Assembly to establish a ferry at the outlet of Lake Peoria. His charter was to run for about twenty-five years of age and had been born in Ohio, thus free by being born in part of the Northwest Territory. As a wedding present, Elizabeth (Smith) Todd (April 18, 1793–March 11, 1865), wife of Dr. John Todd, who was the uncle of the soon-to-be Mrs. Abraham Lincoln, gave Marah a nice wooden stand for her new home. She cherished that piece of furniture and vowed never to part with it—she still owns it in 1903. If Mary Lincoln had ever given Marah any artifacts or furniture, the latter would certainly have mentioned that fact. Such a bequest would have been considered much more valuable in 1903 than a small stand from Elizabeth Todd!

The reason that John and Elizabeth Todd knew Marah so well is easy to explain. At approximately the same time that Marah was indentured to May, Marah’s sister, Elizabeth (called “Betsy”) was bound to John Todd (April 27, 1787–January 9, 1865). Marah even hinted that she might also have worked at times for the Todds before her marriage.

A respected physician, John Todd graduated from Transylvania and then attended the University of Pennsylvania where he received his M.D. degree. He came from his home near Lexington to Edwardsville in 1817. In 1827 President John Quincy Adams, a Whig, appointed Todd as Register in the Federal Land Office at Springfield, and he immediately moved there. However, President Andrew Jackson, a Democrat, removed him in 1829 and replaced him with May, a fellow Democrat—simply a political removal. A religious man, Todd was a Ruling Elder in the First Presbyterian Church. In those days, physicians often dabbled in politics.

As soon as Elizabeth Bartlett reached eighteen she was released from her indenture. She married Henry W. Baylor on April 30, 1846. Baylor, a man of color, was a respected professional barber, and at the time of his marriage was about twenty-four years of age. In 1850 he had “Phebe” Bartlett in his household, perhaps indicating that he was more able to provide for his mother-in-law financially than was Henry Vance, her other son-in-law. Vance earned his living as a “laborer,” while Baylor stood out as a leader in his community. He was a member of the Negro School Committee and resided on the north side of Washington Street, west of the gas works. That was in the same neighborhood where Marah and Henry Vance lived. Baylor had his barbershop under the St. Nicholas Hotel, where he probably served many travelers and numerous gentlemen of Springfield. Latter, he formed a partnership with Henry Ellis Jr. Marah vouched that after she and “Betsy” arrived at the age of eighteen, they continued to see and work for both the Todds and the Lincolns. Both knew the children of these two families and loved them all.

May continued his business adventures after Marah left his household as a free woman. He departed from Springfield to operate his ferry service at Peoria, leaving behind a large amount of debt. Beginning early in his life, May had lent money and borrowed even more to finance his ventures. In addition to his ferry line, he sought and received permission in 1845 to construct a toll bridge across the Illinois River at the point where his ferry operated. When his Springfield creditors sued in court to retrieve their loans in 1845, J. E. Carter, a constable in Peoria County, replied when served that he could not seize any of May’s property, because he could not find any that he owned in Peoria!

With creditors closing in on him and no means of repaying them, May borrowed $500 from Ellen Rodney, an in-law, and departed for California, supposedly—as later reported—followContinued on page 4
A New Lincoln Group Forms in the South

For twenty-nine years, Bridgewater College President Phillip C. Stone has been commemorating Abraham Lincoln’s birthday by taking people to the gravesites of the Sixteenth President’s Virginia ancestors. Stone’s purpose in the gravesite visit is to remind Virginians of Lincoln’s vision of Union and the aspirations of the Declaration of Independence, which meant so much to Lincoln. Stone’s recent Lincoln birthday celebration brought together over seventy-five people to learn about the Lincoln legacy in Virginia. Beginning this year people can support Stone’s work by joining the Lincoln Society of Virginia. Incorporated last year, the mission of the Lincoln Society of Virginia are: 1) To commemorate and disseminate information about Lincoln family connections in the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia; 2) To protect and preserve Lincoln landmarks in the Shenandoah Valley, including Lincoln homes and the Lincoln Cemetery; and 3) To support efforts to interpret Abraham Lincoln, his life, work, and legacy, particularly in Virginia. Membership is open to anyone interested in the Sixteenth President. The Lincoln Society of Virginia plans on holding a conference on May 1 at Bridgewater College addressing the theme, “How Should Virginia (and the South) Interpret Abraham Lincoln?” Those interested in membership may write: Phillip C. Stone / Lincoln Society of Virginia / Bridgewater College / 402 E. College St. / Bridgewater, VA 22812.

Condolences go out to the family of LaWanda Cox, who died at the age of ninety-two. Other members who have died are David Obel, Bronx, New York, and Gary Thompson of Springfield, Illinois.

The Association of Lincoln Presenters will hold its eleventh annual meeting in Detroit from April 15 to 17. A number of members will then come to Springfield, Illinois, for the opening of the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Museum on April 16–19.

Frank J. Williams, Chief Justice of the Rhode Island Supreme Court, was appointed to serve on the first review panel for military commissions. During his two-year tenure he will hold the rank of Major General. The purpose of the panel is to review the military commission proceedings of the enemy combatants held by the United States at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba.
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ing the gold rush there. He signed a note on April 1, 1849. Without doubt he set out sometime after this transaction. It is certain that he went down the Illinois and Mississippi to the Gulf of Mexico where he took a steamer and then crossed the Isthmus of Panama overland where other steam ships picked up passengers for the final leg of the long journey to California. From a letter that May sent back to Springfield, he mentioned his "passage" to San Francisco where he had arrived safely. But that "City by the Bay" was not his final destination. No, he proceeded to Sacramento where he died on September 29, 1849. (An editor speculated that the fatigue of the long land trek across the Isthmus had weakened him physically.) May was buried there the following day, leaving behind his many debts. Even his four traveling companions had been unable to repay him for their passage. The long suffering widow found that her departed husband had left no will, and the courts and administrators were still struggling with the estate as late as 1874. Caroline (Rodney) May had come west to live with her husband, and yet their three children, Rodney, William Jr., and Florence, were all born in Delaware, indicating that she went home each time for her confinements. Mary Lincoln attempted always to keep a hired girl living with her at Eighth and Jackson, yet she was often without help. Only a few of them are positively known, because they were in the house when the census was taken. Mary N. Johnson was there in 1860, and Catherine Gordon has been mentioned previously.

Within the first year of her marriage, Mariah's first child, William H., was born. When she started to assist Mary Lincoln with the housework, she perhaps had five young children. In 1850, there were William, age eight; Ellen, seven; Catherine six; Phebe, four; and Julia nine months. In all, she would bear thirteen babies, of which only five grew to maturity.

Mariah began her numerous services to the Lincoln household about 1850 or even earlier. As she told a reporter in 1903, she had worked hard all her life. It would have been most difficult to leave her very small offspring at home and travel from the north side of Washington Street, between Klein and Rutledge (west of the Springfield Gas Light and Coke Company) to the Lincoln residence. Perhaps she took the youngest ones with her. She may have had a horse or mule with a cart. We know that Mariah encouraged education for her growing family and sent them to school. Census reports confirm this statement, so the older ones were probably at school during the day.

Only Robert Lincoln publicly mentioned Mariah Vance and recalled her fine cooking for them. Quite often Mary Lincoln suffered from severe headaches or other maladies that necessitated Mariah taking over the kitchen as well as performing other vital household chores. Fondly, Robert remembered how she had made tasty corn pone and bacon for him and also nursed him in boyhood sickness.

In 1860 the Vances were still living at their usual location. Henry continued to earn his living as a laborer, but he now possessed $800 in real estate and $50 in personal property. Since the 1850 Census, Mariah had given birth to Narcissa, age eight; Rosa, five; John L., four; Cornelius, three; and Walter, four months. However, Walter died on July 9, 1863, and was buried in Hutchinson Cemetery.

Mariah continued to serve the Lincolns until they leased the house in preparation for the move to Washington, D.C. President-elect Lincoln rented the homestead to Lucian Tilton on February 8, 1861. To prepare for their departure, Lincoln hired Mariah to pack up their belongings, clean the entire house, close all the windows tightly, and lock all the doors. When finished, she delivered the keys to the Chenery House at the northeast corner of Fourth and Washington streets where the Lincolns were staying until their train left Springfield on February 11, 1861. She never again saw Lincoln alive after that date.

During the early war years, the Vances remained at their old address. Henry, listed as "colored," continued to work in Springfield. In 1863 he is duly mentioned in the city directory, which was probably compiled in 1862. But his name disappeared from the 1864 directory. On July 7, 1863, a Vance was buried in Hutchinson Cemetery, but no first name was listed. This could be Henry—the time frame is correct, but the age seems to be in error; perhaps a careless mistake.

In 1865 Mariah witnessed the arrival of Lincoln's body back in Springfield. Nothing more is known of Mariah until the 1869 directory. There she is listed as a widow at the old family residence on Washington Street, between Klein and Rutledge.

Nevertheless, by July 18, 1870, Mariah was living with her oldest son, William H. Vance, in Danville, Vermilion County, Illinois. She kept house for him, since he had no wife or children. When Mariah moved to Danville she took two other sons with her: John, age fourteen, and Cornelius, thirteen, both of whom she put in school. When William, age twenty-eight, worked as a barber, owned $400 in real estate and possessed $150 in personal effects. He operated his shop at 79 Main Street.

In 1874 William more clearly identified his business location. He was under the First National Bank, on the northwest corner of Main and the Public Square. His residence was on the northwest corner of Gilbert and Harrison. It can be assumed that his mother, Mariah, was with him at this spot. By 1878 we know that William and Mariah were living on the south-
west corner of Gilbert and Madison. Yet by 1880 William cannot be found. His mother was keeping house by herself. She admitted that she could not read or write but revealed, again, that she had been born in Illinois and was widowed still.

With no 1890 census available, there is a gap in official information. However, land records in Vermilion County indicate in 1891 that Mariah was a landowner. In 1900 Mariah lived as a boarder at 613 Gilbert Street with the family of Mallen Banks, age twenty-one, a widowed black woman with one daughter, Sarah, three years of age. Mariah, no doubt, was helping to run the household, and her son, John L., still single, was residing in this Danville family, too. For a living, he worked as a cook and could read and write English, proving that his schooling had paid dividends. He had not been unemployed at any time that year. Mariah claimed to be ninety years of age, but that certainly was very incorrect. John probably supplied much of the income for this household of four.

At a later date, John married Carrie Thomas, daughter of C. John and Maria (Spring) Thomas. She had been born on March 4, 1863, in Lafayette, Indiana. Cancer of the stomach claimed John’s life on January 29, 1923. At that time, he was a retired cook and evidently traveled before returning to Danville about 1898. Cornelius supplied the information but knew very little about his own family members, not even the maiden name of his own mother! When death occurred, John was living at 208 West Townsen Avenue in Ward 7 of Danville with Cornelius. Burial was made in Springhill Cemetery at Danville. Carrie Vance died on September 13, 1937, at 1007 Harmon Avenue (Ward 7) in Danville. She, too, was interred in Springhill Cemetery.

Cornelius, in 1900, was reported as the head of his household at 408 Harmon. He had been married fourteen years, having wed Lucy Garrett on March 13, 1886. She had been born in Kentucky, but her parents stemmed from Virginia. Both Lucy and Cornelius could read and write English. A businessman, Cornelius at that time ran a private laundry—certainly as a sideline—and had not been unemployed that year. It must be noted that the 1900 Danville directory, which was beyond doubt compiled in the preceding year, listed him on page 268 as a cook residing at 408 Harmon Avenue. That must have been his primary occupation. Perhaps Mariah actually ran the laundry for him. And the following year, the directory showed Cornelius (sometimes called “Neal”) living at the same address but employed as a laborer.

1. United States Census, 1850, Springfield, Sangamon County, Ill., p. 90A, 1. 3; p. 97A, 11. 6–12; United States Census, 1880, Danville, Vermilion County, Ill., p. 370D, 1. 38; Probate Record No. 14, Illinois Regional Archives Depository (IRAD), University of Illinois at Springfield.


11. United States Census, 1830, Sangamon County, Ill., p. 184, 1. 16.


15. United States Census, 1840, Springfield, Sangamon County, Ill., p. 5, 1. 22.


20. Marriage License No. 2624, County Clerk’s Office, Springfield.


23. Ibid.


25. Marriage License, Sangamon Co.


29. Ibid., July 13, 1903.

30. Laws of the State of Illinois . . . the Fourteenth General Assembly (Springfield: Walters & Weber, 1845), 237–38. In 1847 the law was amended to allow May “and his associates” to build the toll bridge. Private and Special Laws of the State of Illinois . . . Fifteenth General Assembly (Springfield: Charles H. Lanphier, 1847), 9–10. So, May needed more capital than he personally had and sought outside money. Then he got legislation passed to empower the Peoria City Council to issue stock not to exceed $10,000 for this project. Ibid., 120.

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The Abraham Lincoln Association Celebrates Mr. Lincoln’s 196th Birthday

The Abraham Lincoln Association continued its time-honored tradition of commemorating Abraham Lincoln’s birth with a scholarly conference and banquet. The Hall of Representatives was at capacity for the program, “Lincoln and the Constitution.” Insightful papers were offered by Herman Belz, Phillip Paludan, and Daniel Farber, with spirited comments by Sandra VanBurkleo. Kim Matthew Bauer, curator of the Henry Horner Lincoln Collection at the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library, moderated the session. Dr. Roger D. Bridges presided at the banquet where Richard Norton Smith gave an informative and entertaining update on the museum.

ALA board members and speakers were given a sneak preview of the museum on February 11. The assassination has always fascinated the public and Dr. Mark Plummer’s exploration of the topic did not disappoint. The evening ended with the singing of the “Battle Hymn of the Republic,” led by Mrs. Christell.

The 114th Regiment Illinois Volunteer Infantry (Reactivated) presents the colors.

Dr. Roger D. Bridges offers opening remarks at the banquet.
Please enroll me as a member of the Abraham Lincoln Association in the category indicated:

Railsplitter $35
($25 Student)
Postmaster $75
Lawyer $200
Congressman $500
President $1,000

Members residing outside the U.S. add $3.00.

Mail this application (or a photocopy) and a check to:

The Abraham Lincoln Association
1 Old State Capitol Plaza
Springfield, Illinois 62701

Name
Street
City
State
Zip

Web site: www.alincolnassoc.com
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31Probate Files of Wm. L. May Estate, Peoria County Records, IRAD, Western Illinois University. One note alone was for $966.05.
32Ibid.
35Probate Files of Wm. L. May Estate. A court in Sacramento also had to deal with this matter.
38United States Census, 1850, Springfield, Sangamon County, Ill., p. 97A, 11. 6–12, taken Oct. 25, 1850. The census takers consistently spelled Phoebe as “Phebe.”
39United States Census, 1900, Danville Township, Vermilion County, Ill., Dist. 73, Ward 5, sheet 2, 11. 80–83.
40Literary Digest, Aug. 14, 1926, 42.
42Temple, By Square & Compass: Saga of the Lincoln Home (Mahomet: Mayhaver Pub., 2002), 139.
43Illinois State Journal, July 13, 1903.
44Springfield City Directory 1863 (Springfield, Ill.: Campbell & Richardson, 1863), 131.
46Springfield City Directory for 1869–70 (Springfield, Ill.: Daily State Register, 1869), 171. No directory entries can be found for dates between 1864 and 1869.
48Toledo, Wabash & Western Railway Gazetteer and Directory (Detroit: Burch & Polk, 1872), 250.
51United States Census, 1880, Danville, Vermilion County, Ill., p. 370D, 1. 38, taken June 10, 1880.
52Deed records courtesy of Chuck Hand of Paris, Illinois; United States Census, 1900, Danville, Vermilion County, Ill., Ward 5 Sheet 2, 11. 80–83, taken June 1, 1900.
53Death Record No. 3475 for John, and 483 for Carrie, Vermilion Co.
54United States Census, 1900, Danville, Vermilion County, Ill., Ward 6, Sheet 9, 11. 28–35; Vermilion County, Marriage Record, D, 119.
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Part 3 will appear in the next issue of For the People.