

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

---

Documentary Editing: Journal of the Association  
for Documentary Editing (1979-2011)

Documentary Editing, Association for

---


2011

# What's in a Name? Cultural Onomastics and Other Scary Things about the Lincolns and Their Contemporaries

James M. Cornelius

*Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum*, james.cornelius@illinois.gov

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/docedit>

 Part of the [Digital Humanities Commons](#), [Other Arts and Humanities Commons](#), [Reading and Language Commons](#), and the [Technical and Professional Writing Commons](#)

---

Cornelius, James M., "What's in a Name? Cultural Onomastics and Other Scary Things about the Lincolns and Their Contemporaries" (2011). *Documentary Editing: Journal of the Association for Documentary Editing (1979-2011)*. Paper 6.  
<http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/docedit/6>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Documentary Editing, Association for at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Documentary Editing: Journal of the Association for Documentary Editing (1979-2011)* by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

# What's in a Name?

## Cultural Onomastics and Other Scary Things about the Lincolns and Their Contemporaries<sup>1</sup>

James M. Cornelius

Let me engage in some speculative onomastics. Onomastics is the study of both what a person or a group calls himself, herself, or itself, and what others call that entity. It is the Lincolns' names for themselves, and what others have called them, that is the main point of discussion for this talk. Many of their contemporaries underwent similar letter-adding or letter-dropping in their names. Again, this will be speculative. I am no more a cultural historian than the next person. Nor have I performed a thorough search of the scholarly literature on either nineteenth-century naming and spelling patterns or gone into semiotic, postmodernist, or phenomenalist theory on why things get done wrong. But I hope that the few small novel points I might make will cause attention to be drawn to some odd treatment the Lincolns have suffered at the hands of their followers.

The language spoken in central Illinois in the nineteenth century was not quite the language spoken here today. In the early seventeenth century colonists to Plymouth noted that within about twenty years the local accent was no longer the same English accent they had left behind. Later, for example, it is thought that as settlers to the Midwest left Virginia or Maine, their accents flattened out, perhaps matching the terrain. This pattern is certainly true in southern Russia, where voices in Tolstoy lilt like the steppes, not at all like the rapid-fire seaside patter of Joseph Brodsky in St. Petersburg; of a Dickensian Thames-side patter; or a Brooklynese lament out of Thomas Wolfe. Think, instead, of Washington Irving's sleepy-tongued rustics or Twain's inland drawlers. Broad lands affect the mind, hence the tongue. In our first federal census, in 1790, there were twice as many surnames in South Carolina as there were in what became Maine, though their white populations were about the same.<sup>2</sup> Some of this difference stems from broader geographical origins, and some from variant spellings amongst less-literate residents, including census-takers. The population of Kentucky, the

<sup>1</sup> This essay is revised for publication here from a presentation at the annual meeting of the Association for Documentary Editing in Springfield, Illinois, in October 2009.

<sup>2</sup> *A Century of Population Growth* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1909), p. 114.

spawning ground for so many central Illinoisans thirty years later, partly reflects this Southern variability. Most Lincolnians are familiar with how our sixteenth president's ancestors, whether Northern or Southern, show up as Lincone, Lincolne, Lincorn, Linkhon, Linkhorn, Linkum, etc.

Then, please consider the name "Abraham." It had two syllables to most who spoke it, and the man who became president saw it printed that way, "A-brum," year after year, as late as the year he was elected president. In 1834, when the Berry-Lincoln store was going under, his friend Charles Matheny / Matheney wrote out an order for sheriff Elkin / Elkins against "Abram" Lincoln and William Berry for \$57.86 in favor of William Watkins / Watkin for debt in an appeal. Also \$8.16¼ cents as interest and costs—they were more careful about fractions than about consonants.

In the same formative period, a small town just north of Springfield, Cantrall, owes its name to the rugged settlers Cantrall. Some of their papers have recently come to light, and these bear the spellings Cantrall, Cantrell, and Cantrill (the eponymous Levi usually signed it Cantrall). Pronunciation can be as tricky as the spelling. Ward Hill Lamon, Lincoln's friend from Danville—is that LAH-mun, LAY-mun, or LEH-mun; if the last one, we might factor in *some* evidence that he was related to Rev. James Lemen, who supposedly had a secret pact with Thomas Jefferson to prevent slavery from setting roots here in the Northwest Territory; and was *he* LEE-mun, or LEH-mun? There is the Bloomington magnate Asahel Gridley, a Christian name almost never found today and thus mispronounced "AS-a-hell," though they said "uh-ZAY-ul." What of the Alton and Springfield printer, Preston Bailhache—I am told that is pronounced "Beh-LOCK-ey" (they came from Ohio, descended perhaps from early French), though hereabouts one will hear "BAIL-haitch." As concerns the putrefaction of French names under the sweltering Anglo-American sun, the great economic thinker of the day, the British editor of *The Economist* Walter Bagehot—is that BAGG-ut, or BADGE-ut? Never, to us, the original Bah-ZHO; but he left no descendants, so we have no one's word to trust. How would Lincoln and Treasury secretary Salmon (don't mention the "I") Chase have said it when discussing the LUHN-don market in greenback debt? For that matter, what of the Supreme Court justice Roger B. Taney? Knowledgeable folks today know that it was said TAW-ney . . . though that is not really right. A Marylander, he himself said it TAH-ney, and we Northern knowledgeable have over-accentuated the odd part. The British economic historian R. H. Tawney, spelled TAW-ney, said his the same way . . . TAH-ney. In a few ways, the American easterner's tongue is more like the British than the American midwesterner's.

The international element was always present in these parts. Lincoln's

friend Billy the Barber was variously William de Fleurville or William Florville; he was born in Haiti. Billy's daughter Sinete (I will not try that one) married Gilbert Johnson, who was apparently a French "Gibert" before a white American clerk added the "l." Among Portuguese Protestants in these counties, Ritta de Silva had all three parts of her name spelled in different ways, even in one document. Lieutenant-governor Koerner was born Gustavus, gradually Americanized that to Gustav, and later the publisher of his memoirs had it Gustave; and never mind the vanishing umlaut in his last name. (Even a lieutenant-governor gets his name mangled.) But, oddly enough, James Shields, who nearly fought a duel against Lincoln and who lived till he was twenty-one in Ireland, the least literate of the sources of Illinois settlement, never seems to have had his name misspelled. I have recently turned up a case of a nineteenth-century Swiss immigrant woman here in Springfield whose surname, Riepstein, is spelled six different ways in the city directories and censuses, in a thirty-five-year span. The topic arose because a photograph of her turned up, by a photographer previously unrecorded, and on the back her name was pencilled in—spelled a seventh way. So take pity upon Lincoln's fellow Black Hawk War soldier, American-born Jacob Early, whose name was spelled three ways in the same year.

Before moving on to how the Lincolns added to our sorrow by naming their boys, check the first names of our first seventeen presidents: nine bore the first names of English kings: George, John, James, William. (Not until Franklin Pierce did one have an *American* first name.) From the Old Testament we had two more, Zachary and Abraham. From the New Testament, three: Thomas and Andrew, and another if you count Martin (Luther). (Millard Fillmore got his mother's maiden name.) The Lincoln family chose traditionally for their boys: Robert, Edward, William, and Thomas (if not English kings, then all archbishops of Canterbury, anyway). Perhaps it was due to the commonness of these names that their diminutives have been shuffled around. Was he "Edd-y" or "Edd-ie"? People now seem to prefer "Edd-y"? Yet when he died one or both of his parents wrote a poem that appeared in the *Illinois Daily Journal*, the Whig paper in Springfield, spelling it "Edd-ie." Bobbie and Willie, his brothers, typically get the i-e treatment. This makes it hard for some people *not* to call the youngest one "Taddie." The family called the boy "Tad" and so is *sui generis*, a nickname that nearly replaced the Christian name given in memory of his semi-literate grandfather Thomas. The boy turned out semi-literate, too—give a dog a bad name and hang it, they say in Kentucky. Years later some newspapers, making him genteel, called him "Thaddeus." Tad's mother, by the way, wrote in 1864 that "my little boy's name is Thomas Lincoln, a very plain name."<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Mary Lincoln to Fanny Barrow, May 27, 1864, Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum (ALPLM), Springfield, Illinois.

For some of this confusion we cannot blame historians: Mary Lincoln spelled the second son's name "Edd-y." In the same letter to her husband she spelled the older boy's name "Boby."<sup>4</sup> For those contesting authorship of the poem upon Edd-ie's death, whether it was by the father or the mother, the spelling of the name as published seems to have been his father's preference. We might have had other problems than these. Lincoln wanted to name that first son "Joshua" for his friend Speed. And it is my opinion that the last son might have been named "Henry" because he was born nine months and five days after the death of Henry Clay, the politician idolized by both Abraham and Mary.

For my main point, let me introduce you to a woman you may not have met. She was wellborn in a southern state early in the nineteenth century. She was not entirely happy with her home life after a certain point, and left that home as a teenager. She fell in love with a man and eventually married him, giving over nearly all of her personal life and identity to his work, his efforts, and his and her children, as was common in that day. After his death she grieved deeply and thought sadly of him every day. You are thinking of her name now, I expect. I will give you three choices. Is it Mrs. Lincoln? Is it Mary Lincoln? Is it Mary Todd Lincoln? The person "Mary Todd" ceased to exist in a legal sense on November 4, 1842, when she wed Abraham Lincoln; in a personal sense she may have ceased to exist then, too. She became Mary Lincoln.

There are 319 documents at the Presidential Library in this woman's hand. She signed her letters one dozen distinct ways, involving her full name, initials, with or without "Mrs.," etc. *She never once used the name "Todd" in any of these, and she never once used the initial "T."* She signed her name "Mary Lincoln" or "Mrs. Lincoln" or "Mrs. Abraham Lincoln" or "Mrs. A. Lincoln" and even, twelve times, "Mrs. Cuthbert" or just "Cuthbert." She did not ever, let me repeat, ever, refer to herself as "Mary Todd Lincoln."

Abraham and Mary's oldest son has undergone a similar renaming. At home Robert was called Bob and Bobbie and Young Bob—to distinguish him from the family's horse Old Bob—and then, when his father was president, he was referred to by young ladies as Prince Bob and by political wags as the "Prince of *Rails*," a nifty coinage that drew upon the visit to these shores in the fall of 1860 by the Prince of *Wales*, and traded on Bobbie's father's nickname "The *Rail Splitter*." Robert might even have had royalty in mind when he and his wife named their son Abraham Lincoln II—not junior—but called him Jack (the card below the king and queen). Robert became a successful attorney, a member of the Garfield and Arthur cabinets, minister to the Court of St. James's (where he finally met the Prince of Wales), and an industrial executive; all that time he

<sup>4</sup> Mary Lincoln to Abraham Lincoln, May 1848, ALPLM.

signed himself R. T. Lincoln or Robert T. Lincoln. He did not ever sign or call himself Robert Todd Lincoln. Yet this year a man called me from Cincinnati to ask about “Robert Todd.”

This resurrection of the name “Todd” has a couple of sources. There was one good reason: As Robert Lincoln went off to serve as minister in London in 1889, and his wife Mary, done having children, became socially more noticeable, she was referred to now and then as Mary *Harlan* Lincoln, to distinguish her from a mother-in-law who had died seven years earlier. Yes, the time for any confusion between the two had long since passed, which brings us to the less-good reason: the Todd family. The three-part name Mary Todd Lincoln first seems to have appeared in print during the 1890s in magazine articles. Just as we thank Ida Tarbell for launching seriously researched Lincolnology, we may owe her partial thanks for starting the Todd / Lincoln craze (perhaps I should say Ida Minerva Tarbell, though she was not descended from an august line of sea-goddesses, Southern or otherwise). For it is Emily Todd Helm, a half-sister of Mary, who was one of Tarbell’s sources, and who then penned a piece herself in 1898 called “Mary Todd Lincoln” in *McClure’s* magazine. Emily’s father had been killed at the battle of Chickamauga—General Ben Hardin Helm, fighting for the South. In this sense, we owe the continued use of “Todd” to the Southern irredentist cause as well as the Southern aristocratic cause—the two are related. Or, really, we owe it to Mary Lincoln’s father, Robert Smith Todd, a widower who remarried and produced nine half-siblings of our Mary, one of whom let the world know forevermore that she was related, half-way, to greatness.

All this was magazine stuff, possible to miss. Jump forward a bit to a happy time, 1909, when the world marked the centennial of the sixteenth U.S. president’s birth. Yet it was also an unhappy time in America, when the goals of Reconstruction were not widely embraced in much of the country. The Emancipation Proclamation, for which Abraham Lincoln thought he would mainly be remembered, had led to a partial normalizing of blacks’ position at law, in society, at voting time. But by the fiftieth anniversary of that Proclamation, in 1913, they were more or less excluded from remembrances, as they had been excluded around the land from the 1909 Centennial celebrations of Lincoln’s birth. The focus in 1913 was less on the fiftieth anniversary of Emancipation than on the soldiers of the North and the soldiers of the South getting together and peaceably sharing their battlefield tales of youth at Gettysburg and elsewhere.

Within this political and cultural milieu, what could be done to underscore the reunion of the two halves of the nation, as exemplified by the First Family of wartime? Certainly not through Abraham Lincoln, still much reviled by many Southerners. Mary Lincoln was now formally rechristened Mary Todd Lincoln. For the first time, in 1911 a publication used the term, as far as I have been able to track it.

And what was that publication? It was a pamphlet promoting a memorial to be built in her birthplace in Lexington, Ky. Who better to enshrine an old-South, monosyllabic, consonant-rich name like “Todd” than the good people of Lexington? So what was the purpose of giving her three names? It probably was not to distinguish her from Mary Harlan Lincoln, who had very largely withdrawn from the spotlight, becoming a Christian Scientist. I posit that the reason was to remember the nobility of the South, and nobility meant the early settlers as well as the wealthy, at a time when in socio-economic terms the South did not look all that noble or wealthy. I think that “Mary Todd Lincoln” was born to stand in for that re-marriage of North and South that was memorialized by the old soldiers preparing to revisit Gettysburg in 1913.

Robert Lincoln died in 1926 and his widow Mary died in 1937. During those years I find the triple-barrel name Mary Todd Lincoln coming up only occasionally during the flapper era, in use by Honoré Willsie and Hazel Rice Larrimore, though not evidently by any men. Ida Tarbell used both forms now. Within a few years of the death of the second Mary Lincoln, a still-read biography of the wife of the sixteenth president appeared, by Ruth Painter Randall (note the three names). Randall called the First Lady “Mary Lincoln” in her biography, a World War II-era bestseller with a domestic theme to it. And so the heroine tended to be called in the popular mind for another decade or two, until, to inscribe the last and continuing chapter of this story, we see the triple-decker name seized upon as part of the women’s movement in the 1970s, enshrined in her collected letters in 1972 by Justin G. Turner and Linda Levitt Turner (note the initials or three names); and in Jean Baker’s 1987 biography, entitled *Mary Todd Lincoln*. Using all three names now is nearly universal.

One side note to this topic is that two years ago a man in Alaska called about an 1852 book he owned that was signed by Mrs. Lincoln on the flyleaf. Indeed, it was signed Mary A. Lincoln. This was plausible, but incorrect.<sup>5</sup> Mrs. Lincoln was christened Mary Ann Todd. When her parents, rather unaccountably, named their next daughter Ann Marie Todd, the eight-year-old Mary Ann took umbrage and dropped the “Ann” from her name. So she never was Mary A. Lincoln. And we recently saw a calling card, printed “Miss Mary A. Todd” with a Boston hotel name and address penned on to it, as if she were staying in Boston ca. 1840. Again, plausible; but it’s the telltale “A.”—she did not use it.

In sum, I posit that the combination of incipient women’s-rights thought in the suffragist movement after 1900, along with the old-South emphasis on

<sup>5</sup> The book signed by Mary A. Lincoln was not a fraud, but was evidently owned by a woman truly with that name.



who's-your-family surnames, and, finally, the women's movement of the 1970s, brought us to the point at which Mary Lincoln could be distinguished from that low-born gangly feller she hooked up with. Mary Lincoln did not hide her maiden name; she just did not use it in her speech, conversation, or writing. Ever.

Her well-known husband, the nationally known debater and ex-congressman, had his name rewritten in a different way. He was called "Abram" on a host of publications. This orthographic slip-of-the-lip arose from pronunciation, we may be fairly sure: he was called the two-syllable version in print in 1857 in a pamphlet contesting Douglas's views on the Dred Scott decision; in 1858 in the first printing of his "House Divided" speech; in 1859 when he spoke to those assembled at the Wisconsin State Fair, by no means the most rural, slurring group he ever met; and perhaps most oddly, in the first semi-official presidential campaign biography, available just days after the Chicago wigwam that nominated him. The *New York Morning Express*, a Democratic daily, wrote after that wigwam triumph: "But is Mr. Lincoln's name 'Abe,' or Abram, or Abraham (we ask in good faith), for we mean to spell it the orthodox way. The *Post* [William Cullen Bryant's paper] calls him Abraham; the *Tribune* [Horace Greeley's paper], Abram. 'Abe' is doubtless the B'hoy abbreviation."<sup>6</sup> Bryant of the *Post* ought to have known, since his brother lived in Princeton, Illinois—out here where flat, slurred speech was evidently less of a problem than back in Greeley's environs, Westchester County, N.Y. Nothing is worse than insinuating that your opponent is a B'hoy (the Irish street-lurker's pronunciation of "boy"), especially if the great majority of Irish voted for Democrats.

A few more variant spellings of his Christian name popped up during his presidency, maybe by people who did not read much, or spell well, or had a reason to folksify him; I have seen an 1865 mourning badge with the spelling "Abram." For Mr. Lincoln, the pattern has been a *more* certain handling of his name since the day he died. For his wife, her name has been handled *less* certainly since her death.

Ponder for a moment the best-known denizen of Illinois before 1860, Stephen A. Douglas. He was born Douglass, with two esses on the end. The latest of his letters I have seen in which he spelled it that way was 1845. Others printed it with two esses on some of his speeches in the late 1840s, and the last place I find it printed is on one of the four variant editions of his June 1857 speech, *Kansas, Utah, and the Dred Scott Decision*,<sup>7</sup> while three other printings of

<sup>6</sup> *New York Morning Express*, May 20, 1860.

<sup>7</sup> The others are a Chicago Democratic printer, a Springfield Democratic printer, and a general Washington, D.C., press; the wrongly spelled one, which does not list a printer, conceivably was a Republican or Whig imprint.



the same speech spell it right. The standard biography of Douglas, by Robert W. Johannsen, merely says that during the 1840s he switched over to using the single “s,” but Johannsen does not state why.<sup>8</sup> Did Congressman Douglass drop an “s” so that no one would think he was connected with Frederick Douglass, the runaway slave whose autobiography appeared in 1845? This has been suggested, and it seems possible, though not likely. Frederick was not well known until some years later, and this kind of crossing the orthographic street to avoid a black man did not otherwise occur in the nineteenth century, and least likely perhaps by one as big-headed and powerful as Stephen A. Douglas.

One more case shows that spelling could be culturally unfair in yet another way. Late in 1865 Mary Lincoln wrote a letter of recommendation for her confidante and servant, Elizabeth Keckly, spelling it with the e-y that came to be accepted two years later when the memoir *Behind the Scenes* was published in New York. The title page of that book spelled it e-y. But on the note Lizzie wrote on the day Lincoln died, she spelled her own name Keckly, ending l-y.<sup>9</sup> Keckly, a literate African American, had had her name respelled by her publisher and evidently by her former employer as well.

None of the above should be a great surprise to members of the ADE. People’s names and their spellings were in flux, just as the structure of our institutions sought a new formation, a new birth, in that period. Lincoln himself had to write to the chairman of the party convention that nominated him for the presidency, “It seems as if the question whether my first name is ‘Abraham’ or ‘Abram’ will never be settled.”<sup>10</sup> The changing goes on: Ronald REE-gun changed how he pronounced his name in the 1950s, and he prospered; Gary Hartpence shortened his name to Hart, and his nomination bid in 1984 was ruined, though not because of his name change. So too does our government continue to change, or at least the labels we, its operators, put on things.

<sup>8</sup> Johannsen, *Stephen A. Douglas* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), chap. 5.

<sup>9</sup> Mary Lincoln to George Harrington, March 20, 1863, ALPLM; E. Keckly note, April 16, 1865, ALPLM; Elizabeth Keckley, *Behind the Scenes* (New York: G. W. Carleton, 1868). If you look into a library catalogue under Elizabeth Keckley/Keckly, you can see that the difference in spelling continues today.

<sup>10</sup> Lincoln to George Ashmun, June 4, 1860, in Roy P. Basler, ed., *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln* (9 vols., New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1953), 4: 68.