

MEETING “FATHER ABRAHAM”
WASHINGTON, D.C., FEBRUARY 1864

*Lois Bryan Adams to the
Detroit Advertiser and Tribune*

A journalist, schoolteacher, and poet who had edited the literary and household departments of the *Michigan Farmer* for several years, Lois Bryan Adams moved to Washington in the summer of 1863 and began working as a clerk for the recently established Department of Agriculture. Adams contributed regular letters to the *Detroit Advertiser and Tribune* while also serving as a volunteer for the Michigan Soldiers’ Relief Association. She wrote about a White House reception and a fund-raising fair held at the Patent Office (where the Department of Agriculture was housed) in letters that appeared in the *Advertiser and Tribune* on February 16 and February 29, 1864.

Life in Washington
A LADY’S FIRST DAY AT THE PRESIDENTS
Correspondence of the *Advertiser and Tribune*
Washington, February 8, 1864

Saturdays are public reception days at the White House. From 11 till 3 o’clock all who choose can go and pay their respects to the President and his lady, pass through the room and conservatories and go on their way.

One mile west of the Capitol, directly through the heart of the city, stands the Presidential mansion. It is Saturday, the 6th of February, a chilly, cloudy day, with a lowering sky threatening rain; but let us go. Standing at the Seventh street crossing we turn our face to the east, up Pennsylvania Avenue. Look a moment; does it seem possible that we can ever work our way through that thronging, crowding mass, pouring down the broad pavement in one incessant stream? You say no, and look toward the street cars passing each way every two or three minutes, but they are full, too—crowded to suffocation; the

sidewalk will be better; there, at least, one may breathe more of Heaven's breath than of their neighbors.

We are on the fashionable, north side of the avenue; but glance across—the other side is nearly as crowded as this and all the broad space between is thronged with double lines of heavy army wagons drawn by four or six mules each, and seemingly endless in each direction; squads and companies of cavalry are passing, some one way and some another; state and private carriages, rattling hacks, omnibuses, street cars and every sort of vehicle imaginable seem mixed up in inextricable confusion; the noise is deafening and the ground trembles; but everybody is hurrying on; let us pass too, if pass we may.

Soldiers are here too, in companies and singly, in every style of uniform, and most uniformly gathered in knots and platoons about the hotel and restaurant doors. There, tearing along through the crowd, come 30 or 40 little negro boot-blacks, following the rattling music of a fifer and drummer who are beating up recruits for some low theater tonight; and here are elegantly dressed ladies and gentlemen, and young misses and children, with their jaunty hats and showy scarlet plumes—crowds of everybody, going and coming, and standing at corners gathered about the handsome show windows of the stores and shops. We press on, following close upon the train of those rustling silks that sweep across and dip into the filthy gutters at every crossing, and draw little waving lines of wet dust from every brimming runnel of slop-water running down from back yards and alleys. These silks are going to the President's.

Ah, now, the way is uphill, and growing tiresome. We are passing Willards, and rounding the corner of the Treasury, that immense marble caudle-cup, whose recesses we hope to explore some day, and explain to the public how that wonderful "pap" is made, on which so many Government pets get full. Now the silks have taken themselves into the cars. We go north past the Treasury, and its grounds, and then turn again to the west. All around this square on either side of the avenue the pavement is plastered with sticky mud some inches deep; but passing this we come in front of the President's grounds and find ourselves on broad, dry, granite flagstones clean and white. The avenue here runs east and west again, and the White

House is on the south side some little distance from it. Between the house and the street is a semi-circular park planted with evergreens and other trees, and having a bronze statue of Gen. Lafayette in the center. Around this little park sweeps the broad graveled carriage drive, bordered on the outer side by the wide granite footwalk and passing directly under the deep colored porch of the mansion. The park and drive are surrounded and protected by high iron palings. Iron gates lead into the drive and walk which are nearly always open.

Today guards armed with swords, mounted on handsome black horses, sit facing each other just within the gates at each end of the drive, and two more are stationed directly in front of the house. Between these guards the carriages freighted with their brocades and velvets and plumes make their entrance and exit. Foot guards are at all times pacing up and down the pavement before the house. Let us go up the steps and enter the open doors. Here is a mother plainly dressed, leading her little boy of ten to whom she is telling the story of Abraham Lincoln's youth. In the vestibule a waiter stands, motioning with his hand the way for visitors to go. The mother and child pass on; we follow. There is no crowd, nobody going in just now but us. Just inside the door of the blue room stands the President between two young men, and a plump, round-faced, smiling man stands opposite him. Between these two the mother leads her boy. The President takes her hand in one of his, places the other on the boy's brown curls, says some kindly words to both, and they pass on.

The same hand takes mine, the eyes look down as kindly; he bows low and says, "How do you do?" in a tone that seems to demand a friendly reply. But no reply comes. My heart is on my lips, but there is no shape or sound of words. In one glance at that worn yet kindly face I read a history that crushes all power of speech, and before I am fairly conscious that I have touched the hand and looked into the eyes of our honored Father Abraham, I find myself on the opposite side of the room. Doubtless if he had a thought about me it was, "What a stupid creature! who does not know enough to give a name or answer a civil question!"

Six months had I been in Washington without seeing the President. Six months of anxious waiting for friends whose

long-promised "some day" never seemed to draw any nearer, till at last, tired of patience and friends together, I went alone. And that was the way I met him. I, who had honored him from the first moment he put his hand so firmly to the helm of our mighty ship of state, to steer her through the perilous sea of blood and strife; I, who could have knelt to touch the hand that first swept the curse from the nation's capitol, and then proclaimed freedom to all, in the name of God and humanity; I, the child of a State so loyal and true to her very heart's core that her veteran troops, almost to a man, have re-pledged themselves to stand by him till the fiery ordeal is past; I, who had sung for him, knowing he had not time to sing for himself, and had longed for the day to come when I might speak to him as well as for him—that was the way I did it!

It is late, for it has taken at least two hours' walking on the streets, to say nothing of numerous advances and retreats up and down the sweep of the semi-circle, to get resolution up to the point of accomplishing even this. There is but time to glance about us and then retire with the already departing crowd.

The blue room is a circular apartment, papered, draped, and furnished with the color from which it takes its name. In the center, under the massive chandelier, is a white marble table, supporting a vase of rare flowers, and beside it stands Mrs. Lincoln, now in animated conversation with the ladies and gentlemen gathered about her. We need not speak to her—she will never know we have been in the room—many others come in the same way, only to look and go. Another time we shall have confidence to pay her the respect due to her station.

It is a general remark that Mrs. Lincoln, at her receptions and parties, is always dressed with the most perfect taste—always richly and elegantly, and never over-dressed. Today she was robed in purple velvet; she wears a postilion basque, waist or body of the same, made high at the throat, and relieved by an elegant point lace collar, fastened by a knot of some dainty white material, in the center of which glistens a single diamond. The seams of the basque and skirt are corded in white, and the skirt, basque, and full open sleeves all richly trimmed with a heavy fringe of white chenille. The delicate head-dress is of purple and white to match the dress. It is all very becoming,

and she is looking exceedingly well, receiving and dismissing her guests with much apparent ease and grace. Mrs. Lincoln is short in stature, plump, and round favored, with a very pleasant countenance.

But the President with his attendants has already left the room; the guests are fast departing; the conservatory doors are closed; we pass out with the rest, and pass a resolution to make better use of the next reception day at the White House.

L.

From Washington

OPENING OF THE GREAT FAIR AT THE PATENT OFFICE

From Our Own Correspondent

Washington, February 23, 1864

Washington celebrated the birthday of its great namesake in a very appropriate manner. The 22nd was the day set apart for the inauguration of the grand Fair got up by the ladies for the benefit of the Christian Commission and the families of the District volunteers. Although quite a little army of soldiers, clerks, and others, officered by the lady managers had been at work on the decorations of the hall, all was not yet quite complete when the hour for admitting the public arrived, but amid the blaze of splendor that everywhere met the eye, these little deficiencies were quite unnoticed.

The hall itself is the grandest place that could have been selected for such an exhibition. It is in the third story of the Patent Office building, on the partially finished and unoccupied north side, and is 300 feet in length by 75 feet wide, and high in proportion. The floor is of marble, and the walls, though yet unplastered, have been so wreathed and draped with evergreens and the national colors, that scarcely a blemish is visible. Down the center and along each side, stands, booths, bowers, and fairy-like arbors are ranged, all brilliant with the "red, white, and blue," draped, festooned, and bound and blended with the twining wreaths of evergreen. These booths and bowers all bear appropriate mottoes, and are all filled with the beautiful and tempting things that Fairs are made of, with

pleasant-faced ladies adding still stronger temptations for visitors to invest in the great charity scheme. The hall is warmed by registers, and well lighted with gas, and presents by night a scene of bewildering beauty and dazzling splendor.

At the extreme west of the hall a handsome stage is built up, at the back of which is a large brazen shield, from which spears and lances radiate like sunbeams, bearing on their points small crimson pennons, while behind them flash the everywhere present stars and stripes. The front of this stage is handsomely draped and festooned, like everything else, with red, white and blue, and evergreens fashioned in various symbolic forms. On each side of the front is a splendid stand of arms, surmounted by armor and an ancient plumed helmet, and intertwined with evergreens.

It was expected that Edward Everett would have been here to deliver the opening address, but he did not come, and his place was very happily supplied by the Hon. L. E. Chittenden. The vast hall was crowded almost to suffocation long before the speaker was announced, and the passing time was somewhat enlivened by the martial music of the band present.

A little before eight, a general buzz and clapping of hands went through the crowd, and it was whispered that the President was coming up the hall. Very soon, accompanied by his son Robert, the Rev. Mr. Sunderland, Hon. B. B. French, and other gentlemen, he passed through to the rear of the stage, came upon it and quietly took his seat on a sofa in one corner, with his son beside him. Prayer was offered by Mr. Sunderland in a most fervent and patriotic spirit, after which Mr. Chittenden was introduced. His address was of considerable length, but so earnest, patriotic, and eloquent, that it was listened to throughout with rapt attention, the audience frequently showing their hearty approval by sincere and merited applause. After the address, the Hon. B. B. French, Commissioner of Public Buildings, read an original poem on the occasion of the present gathering and exhibition. It was also radically patriotic and anti-slavery in its tone, and was loudly applauded by the audience.

When Mr. French retired there was a universal clapping of hands for the President to come forward. It continued so long and so earnest that several gentlemen on the stage went to him

to persuade him to gratify the general desire; but it was some moments before he would allow himself to be moved at all, and when he did rise and come forward, it was evidently with very great reluctance. He was looking extremely pale and worn, but smiled good-naturedly as he remarked that he thought the Committee who had invited him to be present had practiced a little fraud upon him, as no intimation had been given that he would be expected to say a word. He was unprepared for a speech, and felt that after the eloquent address and poem to which the audience had listened, any attempt of his would be a failure; besides, from the position he occupied everything that he said necessarily went into print, therefore, it was advisable that he should say nothing foolish. (Laughter and applause, and a voice, "Nothing foolish ever comes from our President.") It was very difficult to say sensible things. In speaking without preparation he might make some bad mistake, which, if published, would do both the nation and himself harm. Therefore, he would only say that he thanked the managers of the fair for the persevering manner in which they had prosecuted the enterprise for so good an object, and with this expression of his gratitude, he hoped they would accept his apology and excuse him from speaking.

He then retired to his seat amidst the hearty applause of the multitude. Soon after this the benediction was pronounced, and the President and his party withdrew. There was music by the band, and some singing on the stage afterward, and the hall was filled till midnight and after by the crowds who on this first day of opening came more to see than to buy.

One of the most attractive features among the decorations at this fair, is a miniature representation of Gen. U. S. Grant's headquarters at Chattanooga. Near the center of the hall a space some 14 feet square is inclosed, and within are built up two little mountains of rock work, mosses, and branches of evergreen. On the top of one mountain is a fort, with soldiers, cannon, and everything complete; on the other a lookout; a rustic bridge spans the gorge between them, and at the bottom of the gorge is a small body of water with a boat and ducks on its surface; and along its banks and scattered among the rocks are turtles, cattle, goats, and birds, as like as life. A winding gravel road runs from the fort to the lookout, and

heavily laden wagons are ascending the heights of each mountain. On the low ground beneath the foot and protected by it, is a rustic building, with the name "U. S. Grant" over the door. Around the whole enclosure slender columns with evergreens springing up, from the tops of which light arches meet over the center, forming a sort of airy dome. Altogether it is very beautiful and draws crowds of admirers.

As a sort of side scene some enterprising ladies have got up a representation of a New England kitchen a hundred years ago. Here several hoopless dames may be seen in petticoat and short gown, with high-crowned cambric caps and other evidences of antiquity; one is spinning at the big wheel, another at the little one; one winding yarn from old-time swifts, one carding; young girls churning, knitting and paring apples; visitors coming in with their antique calash sunbonnets; the fortune-teller in her red cloak and hood, the circulating snuff-box, strings of dried apples along the wall, the wooden mortar and pestle and iron candlesticks on the chimney-piece, old-fashioned pitchers and pewter dishes on the dresser—all are there, and the identical old fire-place, that some of us may remember, with the pot hanging from the crane, and the fore-stick burned in two. It all seems very well done except the talking. When people here attempt Yankee talk, they slide down at once into the negro slang, which is quite another thing. However, the New England kitchen at the Washington fair promises to be a very attractive and remunerative feature.

L.