

Department of Historic Resources

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STATE HISTORICAL HIGHWAY MARKER “ELIZABETH HOBBS KECKLEY (1818-1907)” TO BE DEDICATED

—Dinwiddie County marker recalls life of Keckley; born enslaved, she became a seamstress, personal maid, and confidante to Mary Todd Lincoln during her years in the White House—

—The marker’s text is reproduced below—

RICHMOND – A state historical marker issued by the Virginia Department of Historic Resources honoring Elizabeth Hobbs Keckley, a former slave who became a seamstress and “confidante” to Mary Todd Lincoln, President Lincoln’s wife, and later published a memoir about her life and four years in the White House, will be dedicated this weekend.

The dedication ceremony begins at 1 p.m., Sunday, October 19, at the historic Dinwiddie County Court House, located at 14101 Boydton Plank Road, in Dinwiddie. The event is open to the public.

Speakers making brief remarks during the ceremony will include Betty Bowen, director of the Dinwiddie County Historical Society; Elva Trice Belchers, who will discuss the life of Keckley; filmmaker Tim Reid; and Dr. Luranett Lee, of the Virginia Historical Society and a member of the Department of Historic Resources’ State Review Board

Keckley (or Keckly) was born in Dinwiddie County in 1818. “She lived as a slave in Virginia and North Carolina,” according to the marker, “but eventually bought her

freedom in 1855.” Relocating to Baltimore and then Washington, D.C., Keckley, renowned as a dressmaker among the city’s fashionable and powerful women, “became a seamstress, personal maid, and confidante to Mary Todd Lincoln” during Lincoln’s years in the White House.

In 1868, Keckley’s memoir was published under the title “Behind the Scenes; or, Thirty Years a Slave, and Four Years in the White House,” thus making her among the first in what is now a long line of those with access to the White House publishing insider views. Keckley’s account, in the words of the marker, “met with criticism from Mrs. Lincoln for its candor.” Keckley died in 1907.

The Dinwiddie County Historical Society is sponsoring the dedication ceremony for the marker, and the manufacturing costs for the Keckley sign were covered by a federal transportation grant through the Department of Historic Resources.

Virginia’s historical highway marker program, which began in 1927 with the installation of the first historical markers along U.S. Route 1, is considered the oldest such program in the nation. Currently there are more than 2,500 official state markers, most maintained by the Virginia Department of Transportation, as well as by local partners in jurisdictions outside of VDOT’s authority.

Text of the marker:

Elizabeth Hobbs Keckley (1818-1907) S-85

Born near here in Dinwiddie County in 1818, Elizabeth Hobbs Keckley, or Keckly, was a dressmaker and abolitionist. She lived as a slave in Virginia and North Carolina but eventually bought her freedom in 1855. By 1860 she had relocated to Baltimore and then to Washington, D.C. Because of her dressmaking skills, she became a seamstress, personal maid, and confidante to Mary Todd Lincoln, President Abraham Lincoln’s wife. In 1868, Keckley’s account, *Behind the Scenes; or, Thirty Years a Slave, and Four Years in the White House*, appeared and met with criticism from Mrs. Lincoln for its candor. Keckley died in 1907.

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