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Myth and the Lincoln Assassination: Did John Wilkes Booth Escape?

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Myth And The Lincoln Assassination:



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John Wilkes Booth

The assassination of Abraham Lincoln, like most American assassinations, is surrounded by myth and legend. Unfortunately, there have been so many conspiracy theories created over a hundred-year period that it is now very difficult to separate fact from fiction.

It is not always readily apparent why there should exist so many misconceptions concerning Lincoln's death since the events themselves appear to be rather simple. John Wilkes Booth, a well-known actor and Southern sympathizer, had assembled a group of conspirators with the intention of kidnapping the President and exchanging him for Confederate prisoners held in Northern prison camps. However, Booth's accomplices were a group of misfits who were not up to the task. After an abortive attempt in March, 1865, which failed because Lincoln was not in his carriage as anticipated, the group disbanded. On Good Friday, April 14, 1865, with the South having surrendered, Booth, by now determined to kill Lincoln, shot and mortally wounded the President as he attended a play at Ford's Theatre. Louis Payne, who had been enlisted by Booth in the kidnapping scheme, assaulted and seriously wounded Secretary of State William Seward, while another accomplice, George Atzerodt, assigned to kill Vice President Andrew Johnson, lost his nerve.

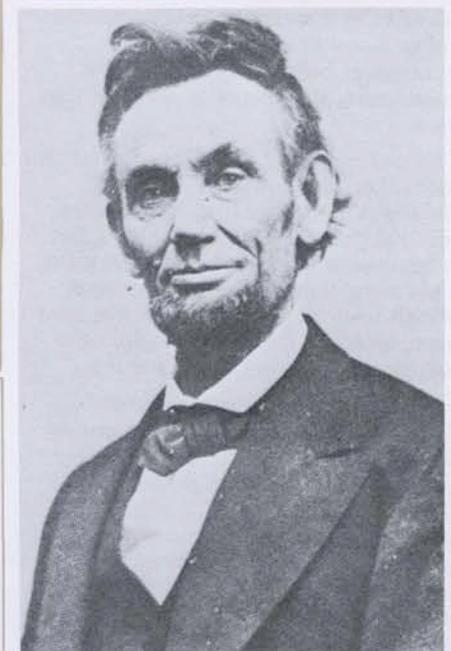
Did John Wilkes Booth Escape?

By
Thomas R. Turner

The full resources of the government were thrown into the pursuit of the assassins. Booth was tracked down and killed in the barn of farmer Richard Garrett near Port Royal, Virginia, on April 26, 1865, while David Herold, who had joined him in flight, surrendered. The authorities began a round-up of Booth's alleged accomplices which led to the additional arrests of Payne, Atzerodt, Michael O'Laughlin, Edward Spangler, and Samuel Arnold. Also arrested were Mrs. Mary Surratt at whose home the conspirators had held meetings and whose son, John, was alleged to be one of the plotters, and Dr. Samuel Mudd, a Maryland doctor who had set Booth's broken leg.

A military commission was assembled to try the conspirators. A military court for civilians was controversial in 1865 and has been a source of controversy since. However, most people looked upon the court as an investigative body which could unravel all of the assassination events. After a lengthy trial, Herold, Payne, Atzerodt, and Mrs. Surratt were found guilty and executed. The court sentenced Spangler, O'Laughlin, Arnold and Mudd to prison after deciding that while they might have been involved in the kidnapping plot their roles in the murder did not seem so apparent.

The cases of Mrs. Surratt and Dr. Mudd caused great dispute. Mrs. Surratt was the first woman hanged by the Federal Government. Furthermore, it was later revealed that the court had recommended that her sentence be commuted to life imprisonment, although President Johnson may not have been made aware of the plea when he signed the death sentence. The fact that her son, John, was found guilty when tried before a civil court jury during 1867 has also caused many historians to argue for her innocence. Similarly, Dr. Mudd has been



Abraham Lincoln on April 10, 1865 - one of the last portraits.

portrayed as an innocent victim of circumstances who, in aiding Booth medically, was only doing his duty.

While the assassination produced some legitimate controversies about the trying of civilians by the military and the actions of the government in apprehending the assassins, it is where the legitimate controversies end that the myth begins. One of the first myths, although a natural one, was the public's belief that the South was behind the murder. Jefferson Davis was accused of masterminding Lincoln's death, but the charge was later dropped. While this idea of Southern involvement was erroneous, it is easy to understand its contemporary acceptance at the end of the Civil War which was one of the most traumatic and divisive events in our history.

Gradually, the emphasis began to shift so that by 1867 hints were raised that President Johnson might have been behind Lincoln's murder. Johnson's political enemies who were then trying to impeach him portrayed Johnson as profiting from the President's death by gaining power himself.

When this view proved to be untenable a new theme appeared which was to grow and became embellished over the years. At first it was argued that Secretary of War, Edwin M. Stanton, and the Radical Republicans hated Lincoln's lenient

policies toward the South and took advantage of his death to institute a reign of terror and substitute their own harsh Reconstruction program. This developed into charges that Stanton and the head of the National Detective Police, Lafayette Baker, along with other Radicals, had plotted Lincoln's death so that they might carry out their plans. The military trial was seen as a means of insuring silence and as a way to execute Booth's accomplices before they could make embarrassing statements or tell what they knew.

Interestingly, one of the more persistent myths that has grown out of these allegations is the one that John Wilkes Booth did not die in Garrett's barn, but that someone else was killed in his place. It has been charged that government officials were aware that Booth was alive but covered up the fact to shield their own participation in Lincoln's murder.

Rumors of Booth's escape began almost simultaneously with his reported death. Booth's remains were buried unceremoniously on the grounds of the United States Arsenal. But when the government sought to mislead the public by suggesting the body of Booth was dumped into the Potomac, rumors began to develop that the government resorted to secrecy and that the body in question was not that of Lincoln's assassin. In 1867, a certain James Campbell wrote a letter to the *New York Times* stating that while he was in Calcutta, India, he had heard William Tolbert, who had sailed on the Confederate raider, *Shenandoah*, wager 500 pounds that in six months time he would prove that Booth was still alive and in good health. He wondered why a man would wager so much money if the story was not true. In August of the same year the *Louisville Courier Journal* carried a letter from Professor Frazer to Professor Maxwell claiming that Booth was alive in the South Seas.

Certain individuals who resembled Booth were also later rumored to be the villain. Dr. James G. Armstrong, a preacher from Richmond, Virginia, and a mysterious Mr. Sinclair of Chattanooga, Tennessee, were believed by many people to be the assassin. Reverend Armstrong apparently enjoyed the publicity and did little to dissuade people from their belief.

While such rumors might have eventually died out, several books appeared which kept the myth alive. Lawyer Finis L. Bates wrote *The Escape and Suicide of John Wilkes Booth* in which he attempted to prove that a Texas acquaintance, John St. Helen, was none other than John Wilkes Booth. St. Helen, who at one time believed he was dying, allegedly confessed his identity to Bates. When he miraculously recovered from his illness he added other details, including the revelation that Andrew Johnson had

Wounded, Booth is dragged from the burning Garrett barn to die.



Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper

been behind his plot to kill Lincoln and that the government had mistakenly killed a man named Rudy or Robey and not Booth.

Bates and St. Helen then parted company but this would not be the last time their paths would cross. In 1903, an itinerant sign painter named David E. George committed suicide in Enid, Oklahoma. The newspapers reported that George had been making statements before his death that he was John Wilkes Booth. When Bates hastened to Enid, he identified the body as that of John St. Helen and confirmed that this was indeed Lincoln's assassin.

The undertaker allowed Bates to take possession of the embalmed remains which were kept in his garage for a number of years before becoming an attraction in traveling carnival shows! From time to time the mummy was subjected to probing, such as with x-rays, in an attempt to prove conclusively whether the body was Booth's. Pictorial and popular magazines obligingly publicized this *scientific* investigation.

Another book along these same lines was *This One Mad Act*, by Izola Forrester, only one of the many self-styled widows, children, or grandchildren of John Wilkes Booth. After her mother died, Miss Forrester came into possession of family papers which convinced her that Booth has been her grandfather. She also began to notice the resemblance of her Uncle Harry Stevenson to Booth and learned that John Stevenson, Harry's supposed father, had told him that he was Booth's son. Stevenson, being a friend of

Booth's and a fellow member of a Southern secret society, had adopted the boy.

A recent work that has tried to tie all these threads together is the 1977 book and movie *The Lincoln Conspiracy*. The authors claim to have discovered important new manuscripts, including missing pages of Booth's diary, that conclusively prove that Booth survived Garrett's barn. Booth supposedly was intimately involved with several groups, including Maryland planters, northern businessmen, and radical Republicans to either kidnap or kill the President. However, since Booth proved to be inept in carrying out his mission, the task was assigned to J. W. Boyd, a former Confederate soldier who bore a striking resemblance to Booth.

The egotistical Booth, however, was not a man to be deterred so easily, and before Boyd could act, Booth murdered the President. Frightened government officials who knew that Booth, if captured, could reveal their own involvement in the murder, decided that Booth must be hunted down and killed. J. W. Boyd, who knew the countryside well, along with David Herold, who was arrested because of his association with Booth in the kidnapping scheme, were sent with government detectives to aid in the pursuit. Their cooperation was insured by threatening them with death if they refused.

Fearing that their knowledge placed them in a precarious position, Boyd and Herold escaped from the detectives and were hiding in Garrett's barn on April 26, 1865. In the darkness, the troops, who

only knew Booth from his photograph, killed Boyd. When the government discovered the error, it was decided it was better to have a dead Booth, even if it was the wrong person, and thus, the cover-up began. The real Booth escaped, according to this interpretation, going first to England and perhaps later to India. It is also quite conceivable that he returned to Enid, Oklahoma, to die as David George in 1903.

Such tales of mistaken identity have great public fascination and the movie version of *The Lincoln Conspiracy* has probably convinced many people who might never have read the book about the assassination that this version is true. However, like most other myths about the Lincoln assassination, the legend of Booth's escape, on closer examination, proves to be false.

The Bates and Forrester claims are very easy to dispose of as both authors make numerous factual errors. The Robey who Bates claimed died in Garrett's barn was still alive as late as 1889. There is also not a shred of evidence that Booth married or had children.

The *Lincoln Conspiracy* thesis which seems to be more substantially documented proves to be no more accurate. Thanks to the editor of *Civil War Times Illustrated*, William C. Davis, it has been conclusively proven that J. W. Boyd did not die in Booth's place in Garrett's barn. Family papers as well as newspaper obituaries show that Boyd did not die until January, 1866. If that central premise is incorrect then the other evidence so cleverly woven together to support this thesis appears to be an elaborately engineered historical hoax. While the authors and producers of *The Lincoln Conspiracy* may themselves have been unwitting participants in this deception they, nonetheless, bear a major responsibility for perpetuating this fraud.

While such myths prove to be untrue they raise much more fundamental questions about the Lincoln assassination and other American assassinations. Why if they are not true, have they been so persistent?

In the first place, research seems to indicate that the very act of killing a president tends to lead quickly to charges of conspiracy. The president is perceived to be an all-good, all-powerful father figure, and his death is seen as a case of parricide. It is not very satisfying to believe that the life of such a man can be taken so easily by a lone, mentally unbalanced assassin. That scenario does not satisfy the hope of mankind that life is more than random chance, that there is some meaning or purpose to life. It is much more satisfying to believe that the President died at the hands of

conspirators who had a basic ideology for what they did; this type of death gives some sort of meaning to the sacrifice.

Secondly, as regards the particular myth of John Wilkes Booth's escape, it has been suggested that the Lincoln assassination fits a universal folk-myth pattern. America already had one genuine folk hero in George Washington, but Washington was an austere hero, cold and aloof. Lincoln fit the need for a warm, personalized folk-god and he was immediately transformed into the role by his death.

As Lincoln was transformed into this mythological role, so too was John Wilkes Booth. In traditional mythology the slayer of the folk-god cannot be released by an ordinary death but must wander the world alone and branded with infamy. The murderer owes everything to the deification of his victim. No one has ever read or questioned where the murderers of Presidents Garfield and McKinley are buried but the murderer of Lincoln could not rest so easily.

The death of another American president who has himself become a mythological figure, John F. Kennedy, seems to add weight to the correctness of this interpretation. The grave of Lee Harvey Oswald was just recently opened and his remains positively identified after rumors persisted that Oswald had a double and that an imposter was buried in the grave.

The historian researching the Lincoln assassination, or any American assassination, must apply the same caution and standards of evidence as one would with any other historical subject. If approached in this manner a great deal of accurate information can be developed about the events and how and why people react to such traumatic experiences. Unfortunately, the great majority of authors on the Lincoln assassination have lacked this judicious approach. Although John Wilkes Booth died in Garrett's barn, no amount of research or evidence is ever apt to dispel this particular myth completely, since it seems to satisfy a fundamental human need to make assassinations fit into a pattern.



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