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Was That Booth's Body?

Richard H. Hall's comments regarding John Wilkes Booth [Close to Home, June 25] leave the impression that were it not for the "stubborn view of a small band of believers," the controversy about John Wilkes Booth's misidentification might be laid to rest. But it is reliance on myth—not actual evidence—that has caused such doubts to persist for 130 years.

Hall quoted a 13-year-old book by Thomas Reed Turner, "Beware the People Weeping," which asserts that a "host of witnesses" made a positive identification of Booth's body. However, no close friend, accomplice, relative or stage acquaintance identified the body that was hauled aboard the Navy ship Montauk as Lincoln's assassin. Even Hall admitted that friends and relatives were not invited to view the remains. Yet he illogically concluded that people who at best had only a limited association with Booth should be trusted to accurately identify whether the dead man was John Wilkes Booth.

Even a contemporary report cast doubt on the claim. On April 29, 1865, the New York Tribune wrote, "The shaving off of the mustache, the outcropping of the beard, the untidy and disordered appearance . . ." had significantly altered the appearance of Booth's body, making a positive ID more difficult for those only casually acquainted with Booth's visage.

The official record names 14 people as having viewed the body on the Montauk. Of that 14, 10 were connected with the War Department and four were civilians. None was a close acquaintance of Booth.

One civilian was a hotel clerk, two were photographers and the fourth, Dr. Frederick May, once operated on Booth's neck. Upon viewing the remains, May declared, "There is no



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resemblance in that corpse to Booth, nor can I believe it to be him." Some witnesses.

As for Booth's alleged last words, the testimony of witnesses conflicts. Lt. Edward Doherty, commander of the cavalry troop that surrounded the barn, testified under oath that the mortally wounded man never uttered a word other than "useless, useless."

A man who suffered a fatal spinal cord injury and who probably had difficulty breathing on his own was unlikely to have uttered the dramatic last words some have attributed to him over the years, such as:

"Tell mother I died for my country."

"I did what I thought was for the best."

"Kill me, oh, kill me" etc.

The surgeon general of the Army, Joseph Barnes, who was in the best position to judge the case medically, said in his official autopsy report, "Deglutition [swallowing] was impracticable, and one or two attempts at articulation were unintelligible."

Following the autopsy, Booth's unembalmed and uncoffined body was buried under a floor of Washington's old penitentiary. Hall said that when the government finally released the remains to the Booth family in 1869, "Many reputable people identified the corpse."

However, a contemporary source indicated that identification would have been difficult. A newsman on the scene described the remains as "a mass of blackened bones." Moreover, the claim of a dentist who identified the bones as Booth's by merely fingering a plugged tooth in the skull is absurd.

For years, the stubborn little band of "revisionists" who demand the truth have confronted arguments based on established fable not fact. The primary sources—government documents and testimony available in the National Archives, the Library of Congress and other public repositories—speak for themselves.

—Jan K. Herman

is a historian with the Navy
Medical Department.

Booth and the Body of Evidence

Myths die hard, especially those related to presidential assassins. When a judge recently ruled against a request to exhume John Wilkes Booth's body ["Md. Judge Tells Revisionists to Let Booth, History Rest in Peace," *Metro*, May 27], his action left behind a feeling of uncertainty and inconclusiveness.

A June 11 letter from Jan K. Herman, historian at the Navy Medical Department, reflected the stubborn view of a small band of believers that there was something fishy about Booth's identification. Herman, citing a two-year-old article in the journal *Navy Medicine*, wrote:

"[This] account, based on official government sources, shows without any doubt that not a single relative, stage acquaintance or proven close friend so much as saw the body that was 'identified' on the USS *Montauk* as John Wilkes Booth."

Strong language and strong implications, but Herman's statement is somewhat disingenuous because Booth's friends and acquaintances were deliberately kept from going aboard the *Montauk*. Union officials wanted to

prevent southern sympathizers from exploiting Booth's remains through demonstrations or acts of veneration.

However, the implication that the body retrieved from the Garrett farm in rural Virginia and shipped by steamer to Washington was not identified as that of Booth lacks any basis in fact. The testimony is rather clear about the identification of Booth. The only complicating factor is that human emotions were running high, and Secretary of War Edwin Stanton took some actions at the time that have fed the conspiracy flames ever since.

Earlier versions of the myth of Booth's survival have falsely argued that the man in the tobacco barn on Garrett's farm was so severely burned when Union soldiers torched the building that identification would have been impossible. In fact, Booth was shot in the neck through a crack in the barn wall and fell paralyzed. He was dragged out of the barn before the flames reached him and lived for several more hours, even exchanging a few words with his captors. His visage was well-known to the cavalry soldiers who witnessed his death.

Although friends and relatives were not invited onto the *Montauk* to view Booth's body, a number of officials were. They included Surgeon General Joseph K. Barnes, Judge Advocate General Joseph Holt and Judge Advocate Major Thomas T. Eckert. A biographer of Stanton states flatly, "Barnes directed an autopsy on the dead man and identified Booth beyond a possibility of doubt."

The most thorough analysis of the conspiracy theory is Thomas Reed Turner's book "Beware the People Weeping." Acknowledging that Stanton's behavior and some discrepancies in the evidence have provided some basis for believing that it was not Booth who died on the Garrett farm, Turner nevertheless rejects this view.

"A possible explanation for the persistent belief that Booth survived Garrett's barn may have to do with folklore," he suggests.

Despite widespread rumors in the newspapers of the day that the body wasn't Booth's, Turner notes that the delegation of Union officials who

went aboard the ship to examine the corpse left little doubt: "A host of witnesses who were acquainted with Booth testified it was his body that lay on the deck of the *Montauk*."

Turner reports that another doctor, J. Frederick May, also identified Booth's remains. May later was a witness at the trial of conspirator John Surratt.

When the body was finally released to Booth's family in 1869, Turner notes, "Again, many reputable people identified the corpse, including a dentist who had filled Booth's teeth."

Even if the remains of John Wilkes Booth could be located, exhumed and studied, it is doubtful at this late date that anything conclusive could be determined. The judge no doubt made the right decision for a number of good reasons. Little is certain in history or science, but the evidence for identification of Booth's body is strong, and the evidence for the contrary view is correspondingly weak.

—Richard H. Hall
is the author of a book
on the Civil War.