

Did Booth actually get away?

Family members want body exhumed

By Haya El Nasser
USA TODAY

A president is assassinated. The killer is shot. And the conspiracy theories begin.

They come and go and sometimes keep coming back, as in the case of John Wilkes Booth, the man who killed President Lincoln.

Today, the 130-year-old controversy over whether Booth was ever caught and killed by federal troops heats up again. Two Booth family members are asking a judge to let them exhume and analyze the body buried in Booth's grave in Baltimore.

"As family members, we have a right to know who's in the grave," says Lois Rathbun, Booth's great-great grandniece (her grandfather was the grandson of Booth's brother Edwin). "There's been controversy practically since the assassination. ... We should put an end to it."

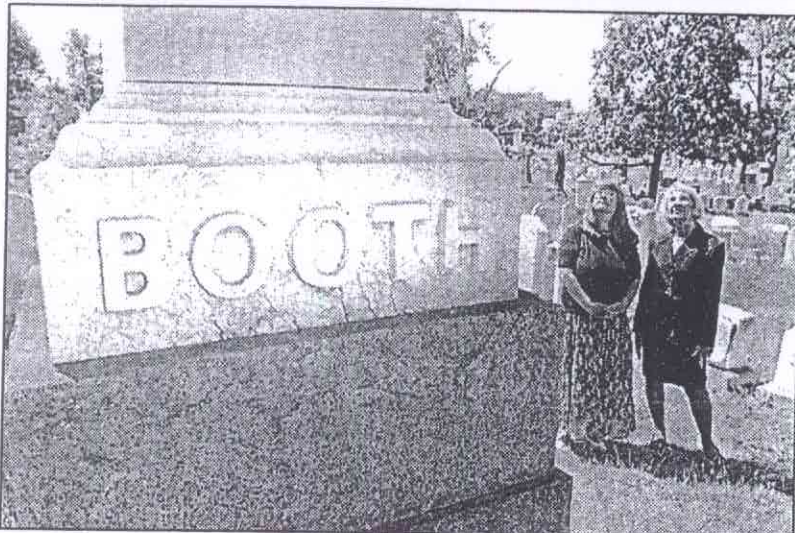
The conspiracy theory goes like this: Federal troops did not kill the real Booth, but the U.S. government passed the body off as his; Booth went on to live another 38 years under various aliases.

That theory is widely dismissed by Lincoln historians.

But Rathbun, 44, and Virginia Kline, 73, (Booth's third cousin and the niece of a woman who married one of Booth's brothers) were inspired to ask to dig up the grave by a couple of history buffs who revived the old conspiracy theory. More than 20 relatives have joined the petition.

Nathaniel Orlowek and Arthur Ben Chitty point to a wealth of accounts and affidavits to support their contention that federal troops killed the wrong man in Bowling Green, Va., and covered it up. The real Booth, they say, killed himself in Enid, Okla., in 1903.

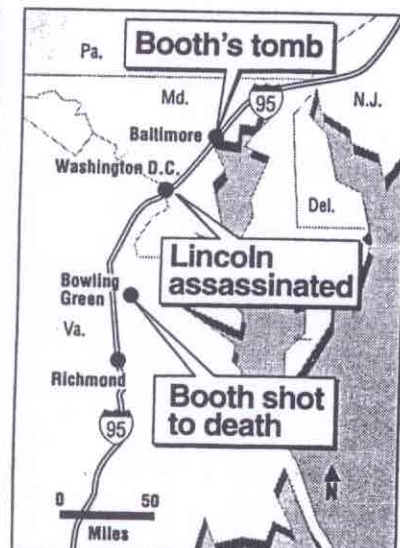
The Booth escape theory was already very much alive back then.



By H. Darr Belser, USA TODAY
'WE HAVE A RIGHT TO KNOW': Lois Rathbun and Virginia Kline at the Baltimore grave. They seek an end to the controversy over Booth's death.



AP
BOOTH: Shot President Lincoln at Ford's Theater in Washington, D.C.



By Cliff Vancura, USA TODAY

The Enid man's body was mummified, sold to a carnival and exhibited on tour as Booth's body for several years. It eventually disappeared.

"Booth got away," says Orlowek, a junior high school history teacher in Potomac, Md., who says he's been researching the Booth mystery for 22 years. "The only way to know is to exhume the body."

Three museums — including the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of Natural History — have agreed to analyze the remains.

But first, the judge has to allow the body to be exhumed. Cemetery officials are fighting the petition.

"We have a legal obligation to Mrs. Booth (John Wilkes' mother Mary Ann) who bought the lot," says William Trimble, Green Mount Cemetery's lawyer. That, he says, means that graves will not be disturbed un-

less Circuit Court Judge Joseph H.H. Kaplan orders the exhumation.

"Either Booth escaped or he didn't," says Mark Zaid, the lawyer representing Booth's descendants. "Whichever one you believe, the other side is the fraud. The family just wants to expose which is the fraud."

Most Lincoln historians scoff at the idea that the wrong man is buried in Booth's tomb.

"Absolute total nonsense," says James Hall, one of the leading scholars on the Lincoln assassination. Hall says all historical evidence shows that the man shot on Richard Garrett's farm in Bowling Green was Booth.

"Really a ridiculous story," concurs William Hanchett, professor emeritus at San Diego University and author of *The Lincoln Murder Conspiracies*. Hanchett says the myth of Booth's survival may stem from his secret burial under the Washington Arsenal — secret because the government feared his grave would become a shrine.

The body was given to the Booth family for burial in 1869.

"We don't realize today how many enemies Lincoln had — not just in the South but in the North, too," Hanchett says. "These people tended to think of Booth in heroic terms. They did not want to accept that he was dead."

But Orlowek, 37, and 80-year-old Chitty, who calls himself a "historiographer," say eyewitnesses said the man killed in the barn had red hair. Booth had black hair.

Also, they say, a doctor who had treated Booth and saw the corpse said it was freckled and that the right leg was broken. Booth broke his left leg when he leaped to the stage of the Ford Theater and fled after shooting Lincoln.

If the court allows the body to be exhumed, scientists will look for that leg fracture and evidence of a broken right thumb — another injury Booth, an actor, suffered on stage. They'll also hope to find an intact skull so they can do some computer-assisted analysis: Superimpose a picture of Booth on the facial bones to see if there's a match.

DNA testing is unlikely. The remains were already bones when buried at Green Mount. Even if DNA could be extracted from such decomposed remains, there are no direct descendants whose DNA could be used for comparison.

But now, some historians say a pair of anonymous graves behind a church in Canterbury, Conn., may contain the remains of Booth's lover and their son.

"Our opponents are still trying to cover up the truth," says Orlowek. "They're afraid that really they're wrong and we're right. If they're so convinced that they're right, they should let us do it."

Exhuming the body may just thicken the mystery. Analysis of the remains may never be conclusive and the dispute could spill into another century. "I would be just as happy to find out that he's where he belongs," says Kline.