

Booth and the Body of Evidence

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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

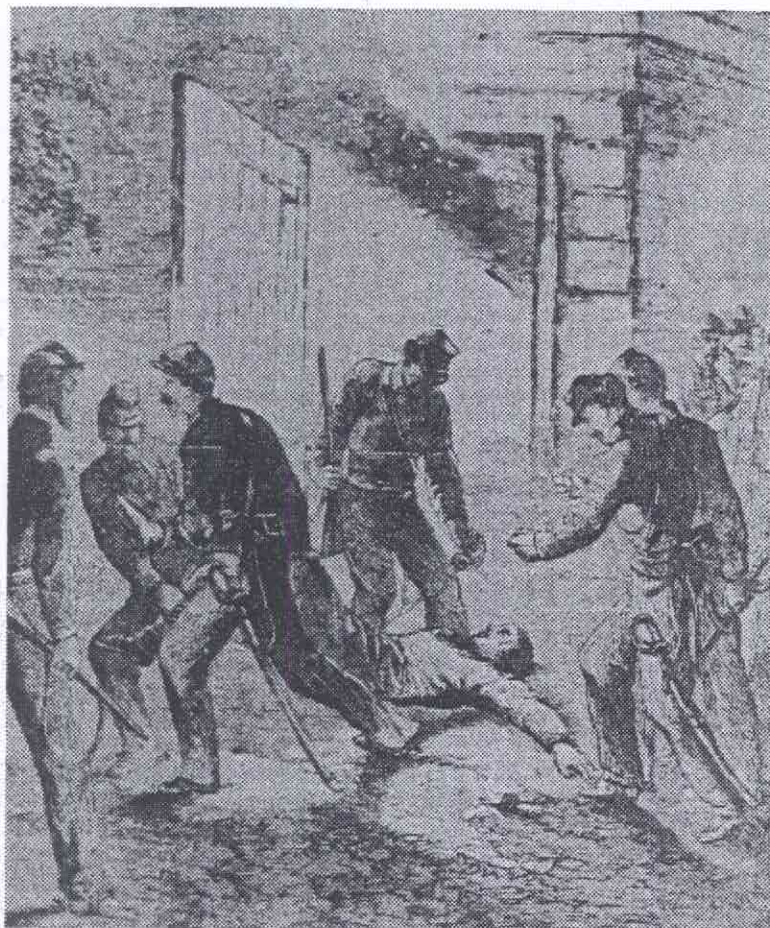
went aboard the ship to examine the corpse left little doubt: "A host of witnesses who were acquainted with Booth testified it was his body that lay on the deck of the Montauk."

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.



FROM FRANK LESLIE'S ILLUSTRATED NEWSPAPER, 1865