

# 100 Years Ago Today: Lincoln Assassinated

## BOOTH PLANNED TO AVENGE SOUTH

WEDNESDAY, APRIL 14, 1965.

Actor Was Trapped in Barn After Flight — Some of Plotters Were Executed

nated at Ford's Theater

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throwing his inheritance to Mary.

Learning of his poverty, Mrs. Montchessington flounces offstage after taxing the American for bad manners.

Asa watches her go, snorts, and delivers this knee-slapper: "Don't know the manners of good society, eh? Waal, I guess I know enough to turn you inside out, old gal—you sock-dologizing old mantrap!"

The house roared as Harry Hawk spoke those lines.

And it was at this moment, taking advantage of the noise of laughter, that the assassin struck.

Incredibly, no one was standing guard at the door to the State Box.

The assassin had entered without challenge. He had pushed open the door from the unlighted hallway and now he stood in the carpeted box, seeing Lincoln, sitting in a horsehair rocker, silhouetted against the stagelights.

Carrying in his right hand a single-shot Derringer, an eight-ounce brass-barreled weapon, only six inches long, and in his left hand a long dagger, John Wilkes Booth pointed the Derringer between the President's left ear and spine and squeezed the trigger.

### Only One Witness

That fateful moment was witnessed by only one man—the assassin. Drapes and flags shielded the President from the audience. The attention of the President and of Mrs. Lincoln, who sat at his side in a straight-backed chair, and of their young guests, Maj. Henry R. Rathbone and his fiancé, Miss Clara Harris, sitting on a sofa, was riveted on the stage where Harry Hawk, savoring the laughter of the crowd, held the boards alone.

A lead ball, nearly a half-inch in diameter, crashed into Lincoln's skull, inflicting a mortal wound.

Offstage, near the prompt desk, W. J. Ferguson, an actor, heard the shot and, looking up, saw "Mr. Lincoln lean back in his rocking chair, his head coming to rest against the wall which stood between him and the audience . . . well inside the curtains."

Major Rathbone leaped from the sofa and grabbed at the assassin. He was no match for Booth. The young actor, member of a Maryland family that had won distinction on the stage, was a superb gymnast and swordsman and a crack

shot.

Booth stabbed at the heart of Rathbone. Rathbone parried the lunge with his upper right arm, which was deeply slashed. As Rathbone reeled, Booth leaped to the balustrade. He slashed again at the groping hand of Rathbone and plunged 10 feet to the stage below. As he leaped the spur of his right foot caught in the folds of the Treasury Guard's flag, placed there as a special decoration for General Grant, who had begged off at the last minute and was on his way with Mrs. Grant to Burlington, N. J., to see their children in school there.

### Theater Was in Chaos

Witnesses disagreed over what happened next. The theater was filled with chaos and panic. In his fall, Booth broke the shinbone of his left leg. But he scrambled up at once, dagger still in hand, and ran past the bewildered Hawk.

Behind the theater a slow-witted chore boy known as Johnny Peanuts was holding Booth's rented horse, a fast bay mare. Booth sent the boy sprawling with a clout from the butt of his dagger, leaped on the horse and dashed for the Navy Yard Bridge across the Anacostia River.

Some historians like to believe that the wild-eyed, raven-haired Booth paused for a moment on the stage, brandishing the bloody dagger and shouting the state motto of Virginia, the words of Brutus as he drove the knife into Caesar:

"Sic semper tyrannis" (Thus be it ever to tyrants).

Others insist that he spoke the melodramatic line while perched on the balustrade, ready to jump. Some witnesses believed they heard him shriek "The South is avenged!" Others, "The South shall be free!"

Lincoln never recovered consciousness, but his death was slow. He was carried across the street to the modest home of William Peterson, a tailor. There in a rear room, he was placed upon a bed and physicians summoned. He breath came in long gasps. Examination showed that the bullet had lodged near his right eye. The wound bled very little.

### The Death Room

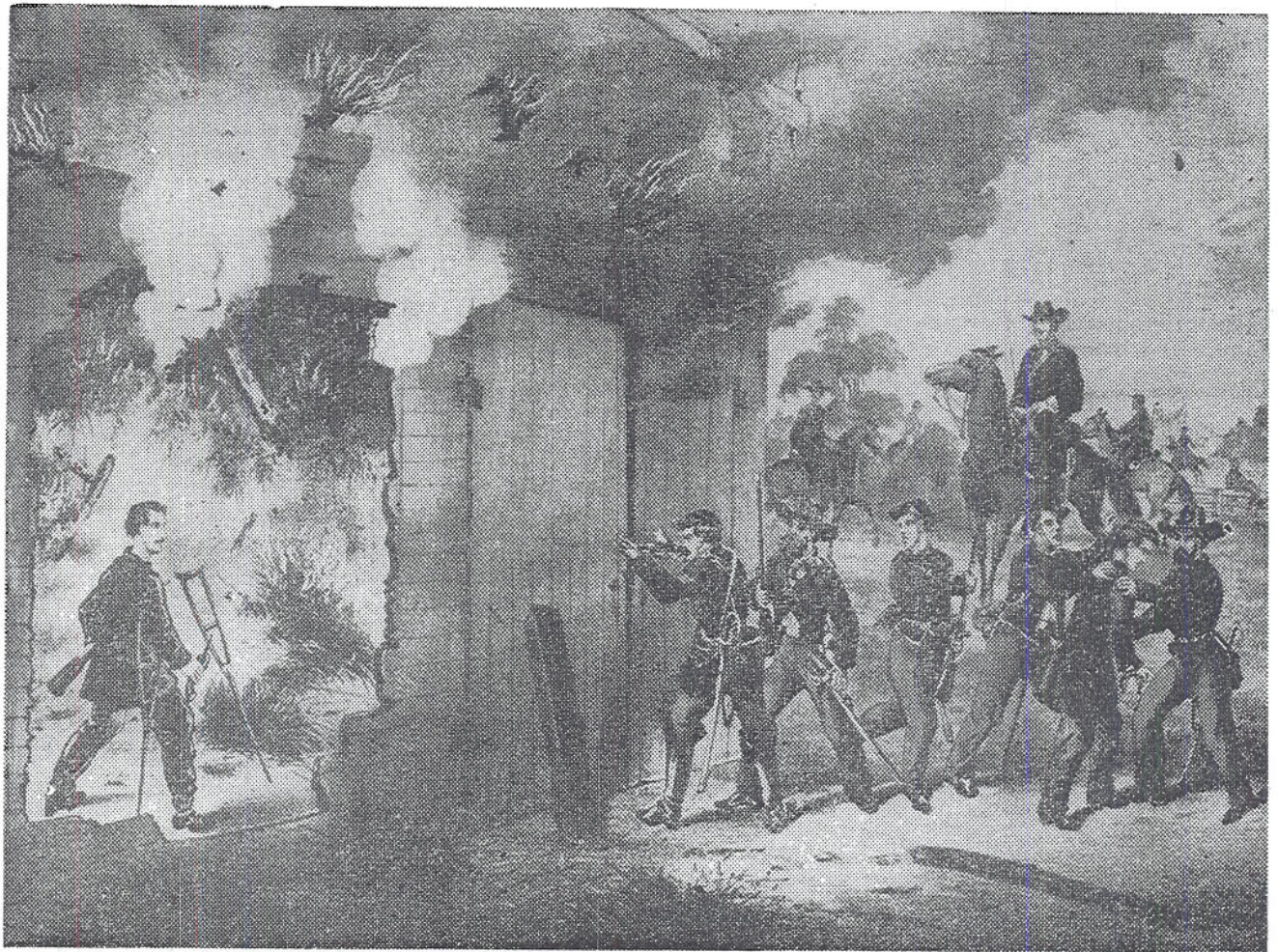
Gideon Welles, Secretary of the Navy, summoned from his home, gave this picture of the death room:

"The giant sufferer lay extended diagonally across the bed, which was not long enough for him. He had been stripped of his clothes. His large arms, which were occasionally exposed, were of a size which one could scarce have expected from

## in the Capital

his spare appearance. His slow, full respiration lifted the clothes with each breath that he took. His features were calm and striking. I had never seen them appear to better advantage than for the first hour, perhaps, that I was there. After that, his right eye began to swell and

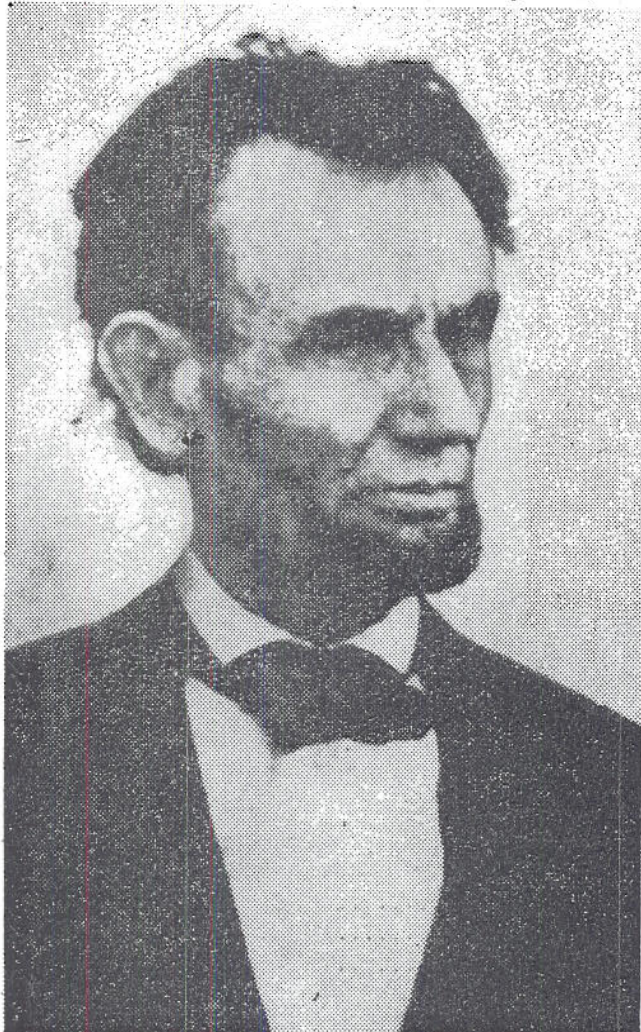




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**ASSASSIN BROUGHT TO BAY:** John Wilkes Booth, Lincoln's killer, is pictured in contemporary sketch as he was trapped in a tobacco barn near Bowling Green, Va.

Federal soldiers set the barn afire when Booth refused to come out. At right David E. Herold, an accomplice who surrendered, is being led away. The assassin was killed.



Associated Press

**PRESIDENT LINCOLN:** This photograph of the President was taken about one month before his assassination.



**JOHN WILKES BOOTH,** the President's assassin.



Associated Press

**DAVID E. HEROLD,** who said that he shot Booth.



**AWFUL EVENT.****President Lincoln  
Shot by an  
Assassin.****The Deed Done at Ford's  
Theatre Last Night.****THE ACT OF A DESPERATE REBEL****The President Still Alive at  
Last Account.****No Hopes Entertained of His  
Recovery.****Attempted Assassination of  
Secretary Seward.****DETAILS OF THE DREADFUL TRAGEDY.**

[OFFICIAL.]

WAR DEPARTMENT,  
WASHINGTON, April 14—1:30 A. M.]

Maj.-Gen. Dix:

This evening at about 9:30 P. M., at Ford's Theatre, the President, while sitting in his private box with Mrs. LINCOLN, Mrs. HARRIS, and Major RAYBURN, was shot by an assassin, who suddenly entered the box and approached behind the President.

The assassin then leaped upon the stage, brandishing a large dagger or knife, and made his escape in the rear of the theatre.

The pistol ball entered the back of the President's head and penetrated nearly through the head. The wound is mortal. The President has been insensible ever since it was inflicted, and is now dying.

About the same hour an assassin, whether the same or not, entered Mr. SEWARD's apartments, and under the pretence of having a prescription, was shown to the Secretary's sick chamber. The assassin immediately rushed to the bed, and inflicted two or three stabs on the throat and two on the face. It is hoped the wounds may not be mortal. My apprehension is that they will prove fatal.

The nurse alarmed Mr. FREDERICK SEWARD, who was in an adjoining room, and hastened to the door of his father's room, when he met the assassin, who inflicted upon him one of more dangerous wounds. The recovery of FREDERICK SEWARD is doubtful.

It is not probable that the President will live throughout the night.

Gen. GRANT and wife were advised to be at the theatre this evening, but he started to Burlington at 6 o'clock this evening.

At a Cabinet meeting at which Gen. GRANT was present, the subject of the state of the country and the prospect of a speedy peace was discussed. The President was very cheerful and hopeful, and spoke very kindly of Gen. LEW and others of the Confederacy, and of the establishment of government in Virginia.

All the members of the Cabinet except Mr. SEWARD, are now in attendance upon the President.

I have seen Mr. SEWARD, but he and FREDERICK were both unconscious.

EDWIN M. STANTON,  
Secretary of War.**DETAIL OF THE OCCURRENCE.**WASHINGTON, Friday, April 14—12:30 A. M.  
The President was shot in a theatre to-**NEWSPAPER REPORT:**  
The New York Times ran long story of assassination.

that part of his face became discolored."

Throughout the night the watchers maintained their hopeless vigil. The weather had turned cloudy and damp. At dawn, with easterly winds stirring the budding trees on 10th Street, the rain set in.

The death struggle had begun. The President stopped breathing at times. Once, Mrs. Lincoln cried to him, "Live! You must live!" and again, "Bring Tad—he will speak to Tad—he loves him so." [Thomas (Tad) was the Lincolns' youngest son.]

At last, at 7:22, the breathing ceased entirely. A young Army surgeon placed coins over the eyelids of the President and drew a white sheet over the face. "A look of unspeakable peace" had settled on the drawn features of Lincoln, wrote John Hay.

Today, with memories of another Presidential assassination still painfully fresh, Americans tend to see many parallels in the lives and deaths of Abraham Lincoln and John F. Kennedy.

Both were deeply involved in the civil rights struggle.

Both were shot on a Friday. Both were shot in the head from behind, and in the presence of their wives.

**Both Assassins Slain**

Both Presidential assassins were shot dead before they could be brought to trial.

Both Presidents were succeeded by Southerners named Johnson.

Both Presidents were mourned as national martyrs in remarkable demonstrations of grief.

Carl Sandburg, describing the nation's shock at the murder of Lincoln, wrote:

"Thousands on thousands would remember as long as they lived the exact place where they had been standing or seated or lying down when the news came to them, recalling precisely in details and particulars where they were and what they were doing when the dread news arrived."

Both assassinations plunged millions of Americans into deep depression, assailing them with forebodings that the nation was on the brink of fresh disasters.

But here the list of curious parallels ends abruptly. In the case of Lincoln's successor, the dark forebodings were justified: Andrew Johnson of Tennessee, the 17th President of the United States, was tried on impeachment charges and escaped conviction by one vote in the Senate.

President Kennedy was followed by a man who filled out the remaining months of his term with surprising power and

assurance. Lyndon B. Johnson of Texas proved so popular that he was elected 36th President in 1964 with a record-shattering plurality, carrying all but six States.

**A Dream of Death**

There was scant parallel, too, in the lives of Lincoln and Kennedy. Lincoln, born in poverty, self-educated, rose by his own strength. Kennedy, born to great wealth, polished at Harvard, had a far easier path. And no civil war disrupted the nation during his Presidency.

The gaunt, melancholy Lincoln was disturbed by dreams of death. A few days before the tragedy at Ford's he had told friends of a vivid dream in which he discovered a corpse in a coffin in the East Room of the White House. A throng of people stood mournfully around the catafalque, and there were sounds of wailing.

"Who is dead in the White House?" Lincoln asked a soldier in the dream.

"The President," was the answer. "He was killed by an assassin."

No such macabre dreams afflicted John F. Kennedy. Unlike the worn-out Lincoln, he was still a young man, brimming with health, when he made his fateful visit to Dallas on Nov. 22, 1963.

On that morning, with a fatalistic air, he remarked to a friend, Kenneth O'Donnell, that "if anyone really wanted to shoot the President of the United States, it was not a very difficult job—all one had to do was get on a high building, someday with a telescopic rifle, and there was nothing anybody could do to defend against such an attempt."

**Lingering Suspicion**

Yet, the ease with which the assassinations—both of Lincoln and of Kennedy—were carried out give rise to lingering suspicions that neither murder could have been perpetrated by a single hand and that in both cases a vast and sinister conspiracy was being "covered up" by the Government.

After the slaying of Lincoln, millions were convinced that Booth was merely a puppet in the hands of President Jefferson Davis and other leaders of collapsed Confederacy.

After the slaying of Kennedy, millions contended that the President was the victim of a left-wing conspiracy, that Lee Harvey Oswald, the assassin, was either an agent of Moscow or of Fidel Castro, the Cuban leader. But there were other millions who contended with equal passion that Kennedy was the victim of a right-wing plot.

Not even the report of the Warren Commission has com-



pletely put to rest doubts that Oswald, a paranoid ex-marine who once defected to Moscow, was indeed the solitary slayer.

"Why did President Johnson appoint a 'known Communist' like Earl Warren to investigate the assassination? right-wingers asked.

"Why were all the members of the Warren Commission closely connected with the United States Government?" demanded Lord Bertrand Russell of Britain's Who Killed Kennedy Committee, a supporter of many left-wing causes.

Still, the Warren Report satisfied most Americans that the Kennedy assassination was the work of one man, and that no conspiracy, foreign or domestic, was involved.

#### Oswald Denied Slaying

Unlike Booth, who openly proclaimed his deed, Oswald, during his two days in police custody before he was killed by Jack L. Ruby, denied he had anything to do with the murder of the President. With Oswald, there was no confession, no admission of guilt.

Unfortunately for history, the investigation of the Lincoln murder did not approach the work of the Warren Commission in competence and dispassionate objectivity. Most historians agree that the trial of Booth's co-conspirators before a military court was an outrage to justice.

Booth, hunted like an animal in the swampy wilderness on both sides of the Potomac below Washington, was finally trapped with an accomplice in a tobacco barn near Bowling Green, Va. The Federal troops had orders to capture him alive. But when he refused to come out, after permitting his accomplice, David E. Herold, to surrender, the barn was set afire.

Soldiers could see him through the cracks, standing in the glare, leaning on a crutch, his carbine propped under his arm. As the flames crept near, the soldiers saw him draw his revolver. There was a shot and Booth fell.

The soldiers dragged him from the barn, still breathing. An argument broke out. One officer said Booth had shot himself. Another officer insisted Booth had been shot by a soldier.

#### Appeared as Lecturer

Sergeant Boston Corbett, a religious fanatic who had once tried to castrate himself after having been ogled by street walkers, stepped forward and said he had shot Booth. "God Almighty directed me," Corbett said.

Was Boston Corbett the Ruby of Lincoln's assassination?

Some historians suspect that Corbett was lying, that he was merely grasping at the chance of being hailed as a national hero.

After the war Corbett appeared on the lecture platform. But his speeches were incoherent, and he soon returned to his prewar occupation as a hatter in Boston. Later he drifted West, served for a time as doorkeeper of the Kansas Legislature, was committed to an asylum for the insane in Topeka, from which he escaped, and he was last seen at Neodesha, Kan. in 1888, complaining bitterly at the shameful treatment his nation had given him and adding that he was going to Mexico.

Whether Corbett was a liar or not, there was no doubt that Booth had received a moral wound. Paralyzed, Booth begged his captors to kill him. He moaned:

"Tell Mother I died for my country. I have done what I thought was for the best."

A doctor came. "My hands," Booth murmured, rubbed with ice water.

"Useless, useless," Booth said. They were his last words. He died soon after dawn on the porch of the Richard H. Garrett farm.

Meanwhile, several alleged co-conspirators had been rounded up. The cast of characters tried by the special military tribunal in Washington was colorless and undistinguished, even though it included Mrs. Mary E. Jenkins Surratt, the Washington boardinghouse keeper who was to become the first woman convicted and hanged by the Government.

#### Rebels Tried in Absentia

The prosecution, inspired by Secretary of War Edwin M. Stanton, based its case on the false proposition that Jefferson Davis and other Confederate leaders were responsible for the assassination and had aided Booth and his accomplices.

These rebel leaders were tried in absentia. Their names, linked with the eight defendants standing before the bar, made the latter seem all the more blackly traitorous in the eyes of the commission.

Prejudice was also heightened by irrelevant testimony on Confederate atrocities. Stanton was anxious to link the small-fry defendants with Jacob Thompson and Clement C. Clay, the Confederate Commissioners in Canada. At closed hearings, the trial judges were told that the Rebel Commissioners in Canada had planned to blow up the Croton Dam, which contained the reservoir supplying of New York City's water. They were told also of a mysterious

plot to import yellow fever into the country."

Most of this preposterous testimony came from Sanford Conover, a former Confederate soldier turned informer, who later was exposed as a fraud. Conover was described at the trial as a former clerk in the Confederate War Department in Richmond where "he had excellent opportunity to obtain information regarding the secret movements and machinations of the Davis government."

Conover testified that Commissioner Thompson confided to him that the Rebel authorities had commissioned Booth to kill Lincoln, four Cabinet members and General Grant.

The Northern press, while protesting that the defendants had the right to a civil trial, were at no pains to be objective about Mrs. Surratt, whose guilt, according to some historians, still remains unproved. From the start, the press condemned Mrs. Surratt as "hard-faced," "brazen," "an Amazon of undaunted mettle," "defiant," and "with a pair of cold, clear, devilish gray eyes that would make her a good stage landlady, ready to look after her own interests and to get all the money she could from her customers."

#### Meeting at Boardinghouse

It was at Mrs. Surratt's, a middle-class boarding house, that Booth, during the three months preceding the assassination, held meetings with the ragtag group of men he had recruited for the plot. Mrs. Surratt denied any knowledge of the conspiracy, although she sympathized with the Confederacy and had a reputation for harboring blockade runners, and although her son, John H. Surratt Jr., a Confederate spy and dispatch carrier, was deeply involved in the early stages so hot that a priest held an umbrella over her head against of the Booth conspiracy. This was when the plan was to abduct Lincoln, take him to Richmond and hold him there as exchange for Confederate prisoners.

The Government based its case against Mrs. Surratt on two trips she made to Surrattsville, Md., south of Washington on April 11 and on April 14, the day of the assassination. Surrattsville was on Booth's planned route of escape; he had cached some carbines in a tavern owned by Mrs. Surratt in that village.

The two trips sent Mrs. Surratt to the gallows. Although she protested that she went to Surrattsville on personal business—she urgently needed the \$479 a Mr. John Nothey owed her for a piece of land—two

witnesses testified that she had delivered a field glass to the tavern at Booth's request and that, on the second mission, she had instructed the proprietor to have the weapons ready. Mrs. Surratt insisted that she never mentioned weapons, that she merely passed along Booth's instructions to have the "things" ready. When asked whether she knew that the carbines were hidden in the tavern, she replied, "No sir, I did not."

Mrs. Surratt, a pious, plain-faced woman whose black hair was parted in the middle, was hanged on July 7, 1865, a day the blazing sun as, with sagging knees, she approached the gallows.

As the white hood was lowered on her face, she whimpered: "Don't let me fall! Hold on!"

The three who were hanged with Mrs. Surratt that sweltering day were:

Lewis Paine, 20, the son of a Baptist minister, who had tried to murder Secretary of State William H. Seward at the same time that Booth shot Lincoln. A gorilla-shaped youth with powerful arms, slanting brow and low intelligence, Paine fought his way into Seward's bedroom, inflicting stab wounds on the Secretary, his two sons and two other men.

David E. Herold, 23, shiftless and unemployed, with the mentality of a 12-year-old. It was Herold who guided the lamed Booth through the sparsely populated country south of Washington after Booth's leg had been treated by Dr. Samuel Mudd.

George A. Atzerodt, 33, a Prussian-born carriage painter who was squat and brawny, with staring eyes and straggling whiskers. Booth thought that Atzerodt, who lived on the Potomac at Port Tobacco, Md., would be useful in ferrying the conspirators across the river.

Mrs. Surratt's son, John, who dropped out of the conspiracy a few weeks before the assassination took refuge in Canada, then fled to Italy, where he joined the Papal Zouaves, an armed force that had been formed in 1860 for the defense of the papal states and was later disbanded. The Vatican ordered Surratt's arrest, but he escaped to Alexandria, Egypt. There he was arrested and returned to the United States.

Indicted for conspiracy to murder the President, Surratt was brought to trial in 1867. He was able to procure reputable witnesses who swore that he was in Elmira, N.Y., on the day Lincoln was shot. The trial

ended with a hung jury, and the Government eventually dropped the prosecution. After teaching and lecturing, Surratt became an auditor for the Baltimore Steam Packet Company, a job he held until his death in 1916.

The other alleged conspirators, Dr. Mudd, Michael O'Laughlin, Samuel Arnold, a farmhand, and Edward Spangler, a scene shifter at Ford's, were imprisoned at Fort Jefferson, in the Dry Tortugas.

O'Laughlin died of yellow fever Sept. 23, 1867. The others, Dr. Mudd, Spangler and Arnold, were pardoned by President Johnson in February, 1869.