

The Conspiracy to Kill Lincoln

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New Light on

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John Wilkes Booth was not the lone assassin of Abe Lincoln. There was a genuine conspiracy to kill the 16th president of the United State. Yet even the Lincoln assassination buffs aren't satisfied with the answers. One hundred and eleven years after the crime, questions still linger.

Did the Confederacy help Booth? Why was he shot during his capture? Were Mary Surratt and Dr. Mudd, both convicted conspiracy to kill Lincoln, actually innocent?

In the case of political assassinations, wonders never cease. Just ten years ago, for example, a fascinating photo surfaced linking Booth and his accomplices to Lincoln. And in 1972, Floyd Risvold, a Minneapolis businessman and collector of Americana, discovered a long-lost manuscript by the chief witness against the conspirators. It has recently been published as "A True History of the Assassination of Abraham Lincoln and of the Conspiracy of 1865." Its author, a shy law department clerk named Louis Weichmann, just happened to be living at the boarding house where the plotters lived.

I talked to Risvold about the new light Weichmann's manuscript sheds on the case.

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Q. Was John Wilkes Booth involved with higher-ups or not?

A. Nobody has ever proved that he was. But the War Department was so obsessed with linking Confederate President Jefferson Davis and his Cabinet to the crime that it put false witnesses on the stand at the assassins' trial.

Here's a case where the government tried to manufacture, rather than deny, a wider conspiracy.

Q. Yet the flawless execution of the deed and the thousands of dollars spent in the planning strongly suggest that Booth had important help.

A. You have to understand the man's character. He liked to hog the show. As an actor, he often changed the script and the scenery to heighten the drama of his own role. Booth earned around \$20,000 a year, an enormous sum in those days. So money wasn't a problem.

Q. Like Lee Harvey Oswald, Booth was eliminated before he could be tried. How convenient was his passing?

A. The War Department issued orders that Booth should be captured alive and returned to Washington with all due precaution. They didn't want him killed.

Unfortunately, an over-excited Union soldier named Boston Corbett shot Booth through a hole in the wall as he was emerging from a burning barn. Corbett went berserk a few years later and emptied his gun inside the Kansas Legislature where he was a guard. He was committed to an asylum and faded into history.

Q. Like Oswald once again, Booth was known to be a dangerous person. Why



JOHN WILKES BOOTH
He liked to hog the show

wasn't he arrested or watched after he tried to attack Lincoln at the second inauguration?

A. I suppose the Secret Service didn't take assassination threats seriously, as strange as that seems to us today. At the second inauguration, Booth broke through the police lines armed with a knife and attempted to rush the platform where Lincoln was standing. The police merely shoved him back into the crowd.

Q. Isn't there photographic evidence, a sort of Zapruder film, of this attempt?

A. Yes. The picture surfaced in 1965. It shows Booth standing on a balcony just above Lincoln. Some scholars have identified five of his accomplices bunched together in the same photo. Since the face of Lincoln was blurred in this particular exposure—the only one that shows Booth clearly—few prints were made and therefore hardly anybody ever saw the developed picture.

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Q. Booth's co-conspirators—eight in number—were tried within three weeks of the assassination. Were they railroaded?

A. Although the government prosecuted the right parties, most historians consider they

Booth

received an unfair trial. The atmosphere of the time and place, plus a military rather than a civil court, was not conducive to calm deliberation.

I doubt that the results would have been different in different circumstances. Four conspirators were hanged, three got life, and a stagehand at the Ford Theatre got six years.

But perhaps Mary Surratt, the woman at whose boarding house the plot was hatched, might not have been executed under different conditions. The evidence against her was strictly circumstantial.

Q. Why was so much leniency shown to four of the murderers?

A. Because the military court felt that different degrees of guilt should be met with different degrees of punishment. Actually, five of the nine judges signed a clemency plea for Mrs. Surratt and recommended that President Johnson commute her sentence. Johnson falsely claimed that the chief judge never gave him the plea. He ordered the execution two days after reviewing the trial records.

Q. Dr. Samuel Mudd, the man who set Booth's broken leg the day after the assassination, claimed his innocence. His descendants are still trying to clear his name. Was he guilty or not?

A. Mudd lied when he said he never met Booth before the assassination. That was proved at the trial. Then he was forced to admit Booth had been a visitor at his Maryland farm. But he still insisted on the stand that he didn't recognize the man with the broken leg as Booth.

But on his way to prison he made a full confession of his connection with Booth, affirming that he helped the assassin escape with full knowledge of his crime.

Q. So why was Mudd released after serving just four years of a life sentence?

A. It was politics. President Johnson pardoned him and the other conspirators in one of the last acts of his presidency. Since he was leaving the White House and intended to run for the Senate from his native Tennessee—as a Democrat—he thought he'd help his Southern cause by the pardon.

Apparently it worked. Johnson was elected to the Senate.

Q. One of the unsettled questions about the assassination concerns Secretary of War Edwin Stanton. There were many rumors that he had something to do with the murder.

A. The rumors started because Stanton did not provide bodyguards for Lincoln. Actually, Stanton tried to dissuade him from attending the theater that evening. He thought it was too dangerous. Although he convinced General Grant to stay home, the president went anyway. And, as Commander in Chief, the president could have ordered his own military escort, which he failed to do. Secretary Stanton cannot be blamed.