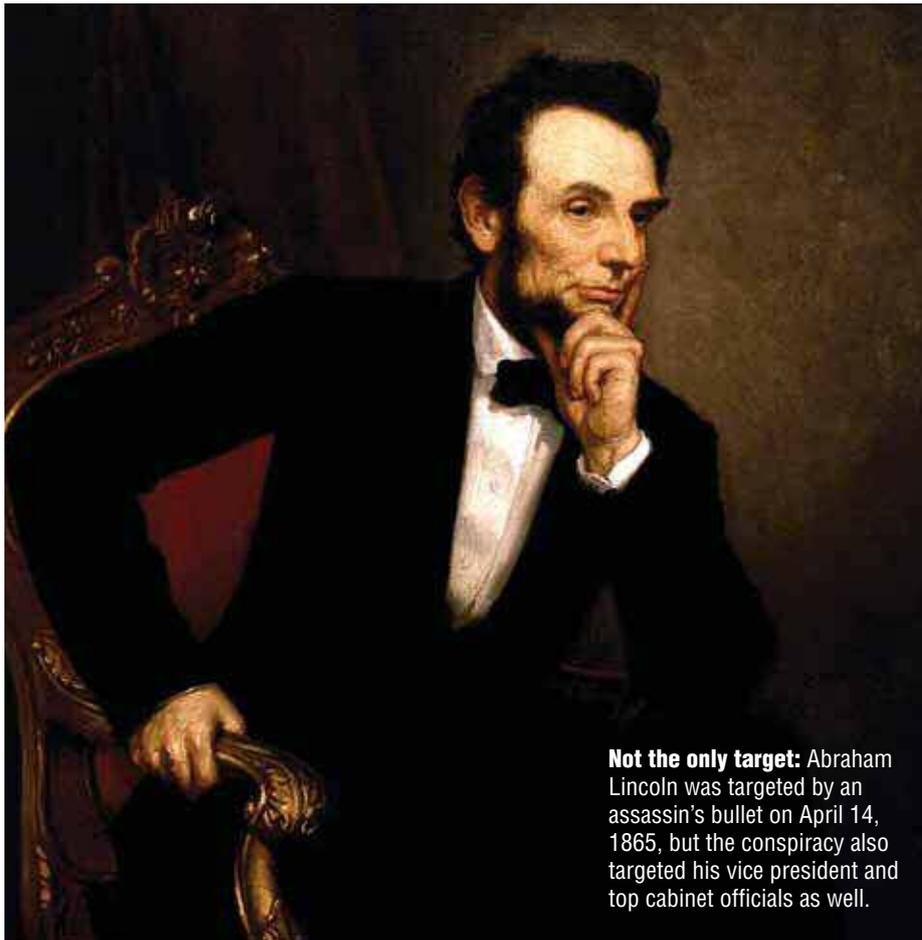


The Assassination Plot Conspiracy History, 1865

As Americans face the 150th anniversary of the Lincoln assassination conspiracy, it serves as a reminder that conspiracies have always existed and had a significant impact upon history.



Not the only target: Abraham Lincoln was targeted by an assassin's bullet on April 14, 1865, but the conspiracy also targeted his vice president and top cabinet officials as well.

by *Thomas R. Eddlem*

Two would-be assassins stopped just outside the Washington, D.C., home at about 10:00 in the evening with a detailed plan. David Herold would hold the horses outside, out of view, while Lewis Powell went inside to do the dirty work. Lewis Powell — working under

the alias Lewis Payne — was the arch-conspirator's best soldier. Only 21 years old, Powell was already hardened, having had four years of battle experience. He had fought at Fredericksburg and was wounded and captured at Gettysburg. After escaping from a Union prison camp, he had fought with Mosby's Rangers in Virginia's Shenandoah Valley.

In his summation at Powell's later trial for his crimes, John Bingham — the radical Republican congressman who would eventually draft the 14th Amendment — labeled Powell “a very demon in human form.”

Powell knocked on the door, and it was answered by William H. Bell, a black waiter. Powell told Bell that he had medicine for the convalescing William Seward, the U.S. secretary of state, who had broken both his jaw and his arm and suffered whiplash in a carriage accident just days before.

Bell instinctively opened the door and allowed Powell entry while at the same time informing Powell he couldn't go up the stairs to see Seward. “I must see him,” Powell firmly insisted. The defiance of a white man's orders in 1865 Washington, D.C. — where slavery had only recently been abolished by Congress in the city — generally meant that a black man risked a beating. But the freeman held his ground, repeatedly declaring, “You cannot see him” and offering to take the medicine with instructions to Seward.

“That will not do,” Powell finally responded, pushing Bell aside and striding up the stairs to where Seward's son Frederick W. Seward was sleeping in a chair on the landing outside the bedroom. Again, Powell reverted to his lie that he had medicine for Powell from the doctor, and that he must administer it. Frederick gave the same response as had Bell: He would take the medicine and administer it to the elder Seward with Powell's instructions. And Powell continued to firmly insist that he must see Seward and administer the medicine. Frederick informed Powell at the end of a five-minute impasse that he would not see Seward under any condition, so Powell ended the conversation by pulling out his revolver.



The revolver misfired, and Powell quickly turned the handle around and began beating Frederick over the head with the butt of the handgun until the weapon broke apart. Bell, who had followed Powell up the stairs and heard the conversation, ran down the stairs and out the front door screaming “murder!” Frederick had been knocked unconscious, with a fractured skull, and wouldn’t wake up for two months.

Powell next threw down the remains of the revolver and charged into the bedroom where the elder Seward was lying in a bed with a metal jaw brace wrapped around his head and neck. Standing beside the elder Seward was his nurse and bodyguard, Sergeant George F. Robinson, and a State Department telegram messenger, Emerick Hansell. As Hansell tried to run out of the room, Powell pulled out his Bowie knife and stabbed Hansell in the back — between the ribs — causing permanent partial nerve damage. As Sergeant Robinson placed himself between Powell

and the ailing Seward, Powell sliced down on Robinson’s forehead, leaving a long but superficial gash. But with the blow, Robinson was knocked down backward and pressed onto Seward’s bed beside the old man. Powell then jumped on top of the old man, stabbing downward at his face and shouting, “I’m mad!” with each of three blows as he tried to stab around the elaborate metal headgear and leather neck-strap. Powell landed three blows before being dragged off by Robinson, with some help from Hansell and the old man’s elder son, Major Augustus H. Seward, who had entered rushed into the room during the commotion. Blood gushed from the elder Seward’s face and neck after the blows, and he rolled defensively off the other side of the bed as the younger men fought it out.

Powell continued to slash with his Bowie knife, stabbing Major Seward in his hand as the assassin fought his way to the door. Powell must have thought

“A very demon in human form”: Lewis Powell, the would-be assassin of Secretary of State William Seward, would have succeeded but for the intervention of Seward’s bodyguard, Sergeant George Robinson.

his assassination accomplished, and the shocked faces of the other men seemed to confirm it. But as it turned out, the elder Seward survived the attack with just superficial wounds, probably a result of protection provided by the metal jaw brace. He would require stitches and incur some facial nerve damage, but not much more.

After Powell fled down the stairs and out the front door, he discovered that the cowardly Herold had already galloped away from the scene during the commotion, rather than back up his partner. Powell rode his one-eyed mare out of the neighborhood, but as he was unfamiliar with Washington, he ended up getting lost and was unable to rendezvous with his co-conspirators, who had plotted to kill more than just the secretary of state that night of April 14, 1865.

Another attack planned for the evening, on Vice President Andrew Johnson, had already failed without even an attempt being made. Co-conspirator George Atzerodt had booked a hotel room immediately above Johnson’s Washington, D.C., hotel room. But after going to a well-attended party where Johnson was in attendance, the cowardly Atzerodt apparently judged that he wouldn’t be able to accomplish the deed in such a crowd and left for the bar where he drank himself into a stupor.

The cowardly Herold met arch-conspirator John Wilkes Booth at their rendezvous point several miles outside of town shortly after midnight. There, Booth told him he had just assassinated President Lincoln at Ford’s Theater in a crowded audience. His actions are well known to history: Booth crept into Lincoln’s box at the theater and fired a .44 caliber derringer at Lincoln’s head. The bullet pierced his brain, though Lincoln’s heart kept beating through the night. Booth then jumped down onto the stage, breaking his leg on the landing, yelled “Sic Semper Tyrannus” (“Thus always to tyrants”), and scrambled out the back door where his horse was waiting.

John Wilkes Booth was as close a thing to today’s “celebrity” as existed in the 1860s. He was one of the most popular stage actors in pre-cinema America, earn-

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ing some \$20,000 per year for his acting. It was a fantastic sum for the time, the equivalent to more than \$1 million per year today in an American population that was one-tenth of the 21st-century American media market. Perhaps only his brother — the celebrated Edwin Booth, a Unionist who had just months earlier saved Lincoln's son Robert Todd from injury on a train platform — exceeded John Wilkes' acting income.

Had he not conspired to carry out the assassinations and lived, John Wilkes Booth might have ended up one of America's richest men. Booth had been an early investor in the oil business (though he lost everything on his first investment), and seemed to have understood the potential benefits of the industry.

Booth told Herold at the rendezvous point that he needed medical attention for his broken leg, a single fracture that needed to be set by a doctor. Both of them knew exactly where to go: the Maryland farm of Dr. Samuel Mudd.

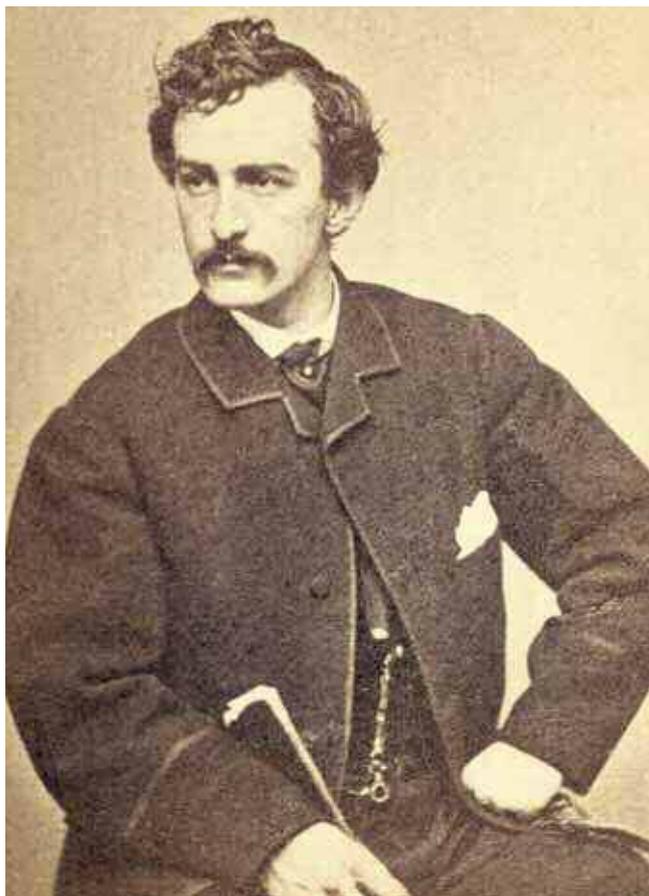
Mudd was what in Civil War-era Maryland was called a "good Southern Man," a man in a slave-holding state with decidedly — but secretly held — Confederate sympathies. Booth had met Mudd at St. Mary's Catholic church in nearby Bryantown, from which the conspiracy drew most of its known adherents. Mudd was a country doctor who had set up practice on a farm in present day Waldorf, Maryland — some 23 miles southeast of Washington, D.C. He ran his farm with a handful of slaves, and was a monster who had shot one of his male slaves — Elzee Eglent — in the leg for disobedience. Moreover, Mudd hated President Lincoln and had plotted with Booth to kidnap Lincoln, prior to the plan becoming one of assassination.

Changing Designs

Booth had initially planned to kidnap Lincoln and as many other senior members of the executive branch as possible and deliver them to the Confederate government in Richmond, using them as bargaining chips.

Lincoln, Johnson, Seward, Secretary of War Edwin Stanton, and General Ulysses S. Grant were quickly listed as targets. Booth even traveled to Montreal several times to meet with the Confederate secret service to coordinate and enlist help. Likely, Powell — one of the few non-Catholics in the conspiracy — was the main assistance the Confederates gave to Booth. But when the president's carriage was found to contain only Samuel Chase, a former treasury secretary who had recently been appointed as chief justice to the U.S. Supreme Court, in a planned March 15, 1865 ambush, the conspirators were forced to begin their plans from scratch.

A new kidnapping plan lasted only a day or so before being abandoned in favor of assassination. When Booth proposed to kidnap Lincoln at Ford's Theater several weeks later, several co-conspirators — including Samuel Arnold and his longtime friend Michael O'Laughlen — backed out.



John Wilkes Booth: His unionist brother Edwin Booth was more beloved as an actor, but John Wilkes Booth was also highly regarded as a stage actor and gave up wealth and fame to become President Lincoln's assassin on behalf of the already moribund Southern cause.

O'Laughlen thought kidnapping the president in a crowded theater in a city under military rule was "suicide."

The kidnapping plot had resulted in a fairly large circle of Southern sympathizers being recruited by Booth, who centered on persons who had become boarders at the farm of Mary Surratt in present day Clinton, Maryland. Booth even tried to recruit fellow actors into the conspiracy. Actor Samuel Knapp Chester noted that his longtime acting friend Booth had this conversation with him on November 25, 1864: "He stopped, and told me then that he was in a large conspiracy to capture the heads of the Government [including the President], and take them to Richmond." Booth boasted to Chester that 50-100 co-conspirators were involved in the Lincoln abduction plot, though it's not clear if he had been exaggerating the number. It is less clear how many remained involved when the plot turned to assassination.

At the trial of the captured accused conspirators, Chester was asked questions about Booth's plans:

Q: When did he say to you that he had abandoned the idea of capturing the President?

A: In February [1865], I think.

Q: Did he say why he had abandoned it?

A: He said the affair had fallen through, owing to some of the parties backing out.

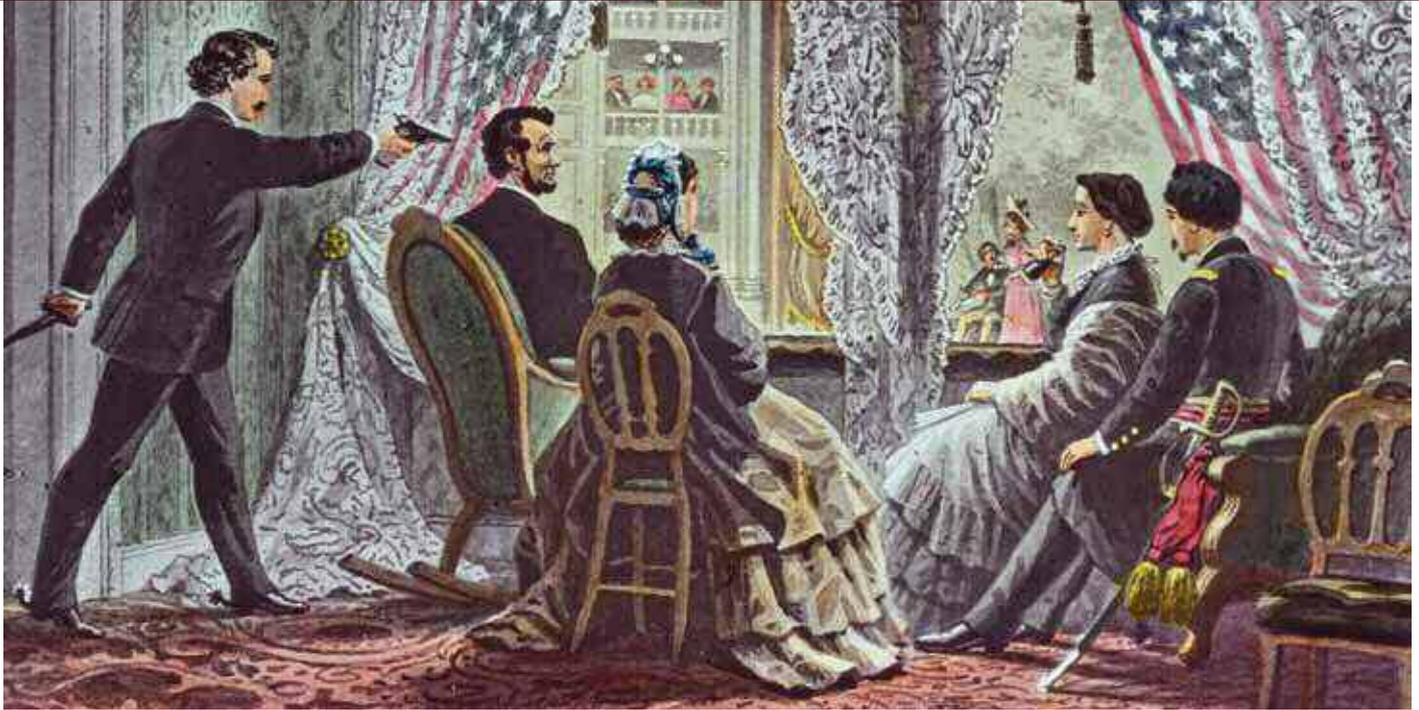
Q: On what day was it that he said to you what an excellent chance he had for killing the President?

A: It was on a Friday, one week previous to the assassination.

Q: On what day of April was that?

A: The seventh.

The move from kidnapping to assassination was a natural transition when there was no longer a destination to take the hostages. The city of Richmond fell to Union forces on April 3, and Confederate General Robert E.



Ford's Theater: After two different kidnapping plans didn't work out, John Wilkes Booth carried out the assassination at Ford's Theater while Mr. and Mrs. Lincoln watched the play *Our American Cousin*. Booth claimed he yelled "Sic Semper Tyrannus" before firing, but some witnesses said he uttered it after shooting the president.

Lee surrendered to Grant at Appomattox Court House on April 9. After that time, there was no Confederate leadership for Booth to bring Lincoln and the others to that he could reasonably hope to reach. Although General Joseph E. Johnston's Army of Tennessee was still fighting in North Carolina, and other Confederate forces were active in Texas, Georgia, and the Gulf states, the chance of Booth transporting his prisoners over hundreds of miles of Union-controlled territory was virtually non-existent.

It's possible that the assassination conspiracy may have included more targets, including both Secretary of War Edwin Stanton and Lt. Gen. Ulysses S. Grant. Two witnesses testified later — Major Kilburn Knox and John C. Hatter — that conspirator Michael O'Laughlen had been at the home of Secretary of War Edwin Stanton — one of the targets of the original kidnapping conspiracy — on the evening of April

13, just one day before the assassination (where General Grant and his wife had also at that time been visiting). A large crowd had assembled that evening to celebrate the surrender of General Lee's Army of Northern Virginia with fireworks. It could have been a coincidence, or it could have been surveillance for another assassination strike at the executive branch.

It's unclear when — or even if — Mudd backed out of the conspiracy, but John Wilkes Booth's appearance at his farm certainly re-implicated him. Mudd cut off Booth's boot, set his fractured leg, and had a set of crutches made for him. Booth and Herold rode south and hid out for several days in a pine thicket in Charles County, Maryland, en route to a Potomac River crossing to Virginia. In the pine thicket, Booth penned his final diary entry where he wrote, "For, four years I have lived (I may say) A slave in the north (A favored slave its [sic] true, but no less

hateful to me on that account.)" The irony of the statement was that it had become at least partly true under the Lincoln presidency, which had imposed wartime censorship of the press through its control of the U.S. mail (in which publications circulated), suspended habeas corpus and the right to trial by jury, and had committed numerous war crimes against civilian property in both the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia and throughout the Georgia countryside. Those war crimes undoubtedly hardened the hearts of many defeated Southerners, and Powell's fanaticism must have been magnified by witnessing "the burning" of the Shenandoah Valley by Union General Philip Sheridan beginning in the fall of 1864.

Booth and Herold made their way to the Garrett Farm in Port Royal, Virginia, by April 24, nine days after the assassination attempts. At 2:00 a.m. on April 26, federal troops, who were questioning all the homeowners in the area, arrived at the farm and inquired about Booth and Herold. The soldiers were told that the men were resting in the barn. After the soldiers threatened to burn the barn down — and had started a fire — Herold surrendered, but Booth cast about looking for ways to douse the fire. A Federal soldier fired into

Booth crept into Lincoln's box at the theater and fired a .44 caliber derringer at Lincoln's head. The bullet pierced his brain, though Lincoln's heart kept beating through the night. Booth then jumped down onto the stage, breaking his leg on the landing.

a crack in the wallboards and hit Booth in the neck, which turned out to be a fatal wound. According to one witness, after being dragged out of the burning barn, among Booth's dying words were: "Tell my mother I die for my country." And by his "country," he meant the Confederacy, which had already essentially ended.

Booth had written an undated letter he had given to his sister Asia Booth Clarke shortly before the assassination that claimed, "The South are not nor have they ever been fighting for the continuance of slavery. The first battle of Bull-run did away with that idea." However, he maintained in the same letter, "This country was formed for the white, not for the black man. And looking upon African slavery from the same standpoint as the noble framers of our Constitution, I for one have ever considered it one of the greatest blessings (both for themselves and us) that God ever bestowed upon a favored nation."

The Unjust Trials

Powell was eventually arrested entering Mary Surratt's house in Surrattsville, a dozen miles southeast of the District of Columbia, late at night on April 17. Others who would be brought to trial for being part of the Lincoln conspiracy included George A. Atzerodt, Michael O'Laughlen,

Mary E. Surratt, Dr. Samuel Mudd, Samuel Arnold, and Ford Theater carpenter Edmund Spangler.

Union forces were unable to capture Mary's son John Surratt or the Confederate Secret Service leadership based in Canada, which included former U.S. Senator from Alabama Clement C. Clay and former President Buchanan's secretary of the interior, Jacob Thompson. The younger Surratt had left for Canada the week of the assassinations, and wouldn't be captured until a year later (in Cairo, Egypt).

The trials of the conspirators were by military commission. The trial itself was an unconstitutional mess at best, and a travesty of justice at worst. The prosecution interviewed numerous witnesses who could only identify Confederate sympathizers who had made outlandish statements about how Lincoln should be killed. Such words reflecting Confederate sympathies were hardly conclusive proof of guilt since bravado — trash-talking the other side — is common in a fratricidal war, and served only to bias the nine-member military jury. Witnesses failed to establish any clear connection to senior officials of the Confederate government.

Moreover, there was a strong incentive for witnesses to invent damning information on the conspirators, as the reward for

capturing Booth had been \$50,000, more than \$2.5 million in today's money, an astronomical sum. And a number of private rewards had increased that figure to \$140,000 total. Similarly, rewards had been posted for several of the other co-conspirators of \$50,000 or \$25,000.

Surratt's tavern-keeper John M. Lloyd — initially arrested for complicity in the conspiracy — turned state's evidence. Louis J. Wichmann — a boarder at Surratt's farm and a former seminarian for the Catholic priesthood with John Surratt at St. Charles College — also turned state's evidence. Wichmann's testimony confirmed that Mary Surratt's farm was the center of planning for the assassination, and Wichmann tied Mary Surratt to the conspiracy.

Defense attorneys objected to the military commission and called for an ordinary civilian criminal trial, but Secretary of War Stanton — a named target in at least the kidnapping scheme — insisted on the blatantly unconstitutional ad hoc military commission. Attorney General James Speed put his imprimatur on a military tribunal. "I am of the opinion that the conspirators not only may but ought to be tried by a military tribunal," Speed wrote. "Congress may prescribe how all such tribunals are to be constituted, what shall be their jurisdiction, and mode of procedure. Should Congress fail to create such tribunals, then, under the Constitution, they must be constituted according to the laws and usages of civilized warfare."

Speed's bizarre rationale calling for the military commission almost seemed to prove its unconstitutionality: "I do not think that Congress can, in time of war or peace, under this clause of the Constitution, create military tribunals for the adjudication of offenses committed by persons not engaged in, or belonging to, [military] forces. This is a proposition too plain for argument. But it does not follow that because such military tribunals can not be created by Congress under this clause, that they can not be created at all.... The laws of war authorized human life to be taken without legal process, or that legal process contemplated by those provisions in the Constitution that are relied upon to show that military judicial tribunals are unconstitutional." The U.S. Supreme Court would a year later declare military tribunals unconstitutional for civilians in



Hanging of five conspirators: The military commission tried eight defendants (other conspirators had fled the country), and five were sent to the gallows. The culpability of Mary Surratt — the first woman ever executed by the federal government — in the assassination conspiracy has long been called into question.

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areas where civilian courts are functioning in the case of *Ex Parte Mulligan*.

The nine Army officers who comprised the military tribunal ended up sentencing four defendants to death: Lewis Powell, David Herold, George A. Atzerodt, and Mary E. Surratt. Ford Theater carpenter Edmund Spangler received a six-year prison sentence. Dr. Samuel Mudd, Samuel Arnold, and Michael O'Laughlen received life prison sentences, though President Johnson pardoned the surviving prisoners before leaving office in 1869. (O'Laughlen had died of yellow fever in prison.)

The Lincoln assassination military commissions have become notorious in history because they flatly violated the U.S. Constitution's guarantee of a right to trial by jury and because they may have resulted in the mistaken conviction of Mary Surratt for being part of the assassination conspiracy. (Surratt was found guilty mainly because she had stowed some guns for Booth a couple of days before the assassination, though she might not have known about the planned attacks.) For his part, kidnapping co-conspirator John Surratt always

maintained he knew nothing about the assassination plot. In 1870, after his trial (which ended with a hung jury), John Surratt stated: "Such a thing as the assassination of Mr. Lincoln I never heard spoken of by any of the party. Never! Upon one occasion, I remember, we had called a meeting in Washington for the purpose of discussing matters in general, as we had understood that the government had received information that there was a plot of some kind on hand." If John Surratt had no knowledge of the assassination (though he may have been lying), it's quite possible that Mary Surratt — who undoubtedly knew about the kidnapping plots — was similarly uninformed about the assassination plot.

The Lincoln assassination conspiracy was no "conspiracy theory," but is a documented fact of conspiracy history. However, the *extent of that conspiracy* — and the level of knowledge possessed by the Confederate government — remains a matter of historical controversy. The Confederate Secret Service was quite efficient in destroying its documents at the end of the war, and John Surratt claimed

in 1870 that the Confederate government knew nothing of the kidnapping scheme, stating, "This scheme of abduction was concocted without the knowledge or the assistance of the Confederate government in any shape or form. Booth and I often consulted together as to whether it would not be well to acquaint the authorities in Richmond with our plan, as we were sadly in want of money, our expenses being very heavy. In fact the question arose among us as to whether, after getting Mr. Lincoln, if we succeeded in our plan, the Confederate authorities would not surrender us to the United States again, because of doing this thing without their knowledge or consent." However, such a claim was simply not credible, given the frequent trips both Surratt and Booth made to Montreal to meet with the Confederate Secret Service.

A number of questions remain about the Lincoln assassination conspiracy. It's not known what role — or even what knowledge — Confederate officials had in the plot to kidnap or assassinate federal leaders. Booth had made trips to Montreal where Confederate Secret Service officials were working, but it's unclear if they would have taken an actor's boasts seriously. It has also been alleged that John Wilkes Booth and other conspirators were members of the pre-war Knights of the Golden Circle, a conspiratorial group that tried to revive the efforts of the "filibusters" who sought to use military force to conquer Mexico, Central America, and Caribbean nations and bring them into the United States as slave states. Many sources have alleged that the Knights of the Golden Circle may have had a role in the conspiracy. Even though those allegations remain unproven, they are not beyond the realm of possibility. As with most secret societies, the operations of the Knights of the Golden Circle during the War Between the States remains in an historical shadow-land.

As Americans face the 150th anniversary of the Lincoln assassination conspiracy, it serves as a reminder that conspiracies have always existed and had a strong impact upon history. John Wilkes Booth tried to patch together the shifting loyalties of his co-conspirators into a massive and cohesive assassination plot. And even though much of his plan failed, he nevertheless altered the course of history. ■



"He belongs to the ages": Booth's .44-caliber bullet blew out part of Lincoln's brain, but his heart continued beating until morning. Lincoln was not conscious after the shot. When Lincoln's heart stopped, Secretary of War Edwin Stanton (who had Lincoln's widow, Mary Todd, removed from the room because she cried too loudly) proclaimed "He belongs to the ages." (Some sources say Stanton said, "He belongs to the angels.")