



John Wilkes Booth: Celebrity, Conspirator, Assassin

A Star of the American Stage

The man who shot Abraham Lincoln was the mid-19th-century equivalent of a modern American movie star. John Wilkes Booth was a famous “tragedian”—a Shakespearean actor—and the scion of a celebrated theatrical family. The Booths were roughly the equivalent of the modern-day Barrymores.

Young, charismatic, and widely regarded as exceptionally handsome, Booth was a genuine celebrity. Audiences knew his name, followed his career, and flocked to see him perform. His fame would later help him move freely through Washington without attracting the suspicion that might have followed an unknown man.

A Confederate Who Never Enlisted

Booth was also an ardent supporter of the Confederacy, although his dedication apparently did not extend to joining the Confederate army. He seems to have believed he had bigger fish to fry.

In 1864, Booth gathered a group of conspirators and began hatching a harebrained scheme to kidnap President Lincoln, carry him into the South, and exchange him for Confederate prisoners

of war. He hoped that recovering thousands of captured soldiers might revive the Confederacy's dwindling military fortunes.

We can only shake our heads at the stupidity and impracticality of the plan. Given the questionable competence of Booth's compatriots—and judging from their performances after the assassination—it is astonishing that he ever believed they could kidnap the president of the United States and spirit him across Union lines.

From Kidnapping to Murder

Booth's kidnapping plans were overtaken by two events that must have devastated him: the capture of Richmond, the Confederate capital, and Robert E. Lee's surrender to Ulysses S. Grant at Appomattox Court House.

As Booth moped around Washington while others celebrated the approaching end of the war, his desperation hardened into something more sinister. He decided to act. Gathering his band of conspirators, Booth devised a plan that he hoped would decapitate the United States government and give the defeated South one final chance. The plot had three principal targets:

- Booth would murder President Lincoln at Ford's Theatre.
- Lewis Powell, a powerful 20-year-old former Confederate soldier, would murder Secretary of State William Seward at his home.
- George Atzerodt, a German-born carriage painter, would murder Vice President Andrew Johnson at his hotel.

A Plot Unravels

Booth, as we know, succeeded.

Powell came frighteningly close. Seward was recovering in bed from injuries suffered in a carriage accident when Powell forced his way into the house and attacked him with a knife. Powell severely injured Seward's son Frederick, stabbed Army Sergeant George Robinson, and slashed the secretary repeatedly across the face and neck. Seward survived, in part because the metal brace being used to support his broken jaw deflected some of the blows.

Atzerodt, meanwhile, lost his nerve. He made no attempt to attack Johnson, spent part of the evening drinking, and fled Washington the following morning. Authorities arrested him several days later at the Maryland home of his cousin.

Booth's grand conspiracy had collapsed almost as soon as it began—but not before he had inflicted a wound upon the nation that would never entirely heal.

Murder at Ford's Theatre

Booth was no stranger to Ford's Theatre. He had performed there many times and knew the building, its routines, and its passageways. When he learned that Lincoln would attend the comedy *Our American Cousin* on the evening of April 14, 1865, he understood that his opportunity had arrived.

Booth entered the theatre and made his way to the vestibule behind the Presidential Box. After securing the outer door, he stepped inside, raised a single-shot Deringer pistol, and shot Lincoln in the back of the head. He apparently timed the shot to coincide with one of the play's biggest laugh lines, hoping the audience's laughter would conceal the sound.

Major Henry Rathbone, who was attending the play with his fiancée, Clara Harris, attempted to stop Booth. Booth slashed Rathbone's arm with a dagger and then vaulted over the railing of the Presidential Box onto the stage below.

The spur of Booth's riding boot caught on the Treasury Guard flag decorating the box, and he landed awkwardly. Booth later claimed that the fall broke his left leg, although some historians believe the injury may have occurred later during his escape on horseback.

The Assassin's Final Performance

Facing a confused audience, Booth brandished his dagger and shouted: "Sic semper tyrannis!"

The Latin phrase—Virginia's state motto—means "Thus always to tyrants." Some witnesses later recalled hearing Booth add, "The South is avenged," although accounts differ. It was the assassin's final curtain call.

Despite his injured leg, Booth escaped through the rear of the theatre, mounted a waiting horse, and fled toward Maryland. For twelve days, federal forces pursued him through Maryland and into Virginia in one of the largest manhunts in American history.

On April 26, soldiers cornered Booth and fellow conspirator David Herold inside a tobacco barn on the farm of Richard Garrett. Herold surrendered, but Booth refused. After the barn was set on fire, Sergeant Boston Corbett shot Booth through the neck. The assassin was dragged onto the farmhouse porch, where he died several hours later.

John Wilkes Booth had imagined himself performing a heroic act that would avenge the Confederacy. Instead, he murdered a president, devastated a nation, and secured his place in history—not as a Southern savior, but as one of America's most notorious assassins.

Source

Swanson, James L. *Manhunt: The 12-Day Chase for Lincoln's Killer*. HarperCollins, 2006. See my review of that book at cjsmothers.com/my-favorite-books.