

October 23



Lincoln's Assassination and John F. Parker: The Odd and Unsuccessful Bodyguard

The assassination of President Abraham Lincoln is one of the most widely known facts of American history. Practically everyone knows most of the vital details of the story; Lincoln was assassinated in Ford's Theater by John Wilkes Booth right at the end of the Civil War. However, there are some interesting details that would not be considered common knowledge about that night of April 14th, 1865. One being that Booth was actually granted access to the presidential box. The second being that Lincoln's assigned bodyguard, John Frederick Parker, was missing from his post right outside the door. Incredibly, the bodyguard's negligence would then go unpunished.

The assassination of Abraham Lincoln was not an act of a lone gunman with a singular target. John Wilkes Booth had multiple co-conspirators that had originally planned to kidnap the President. This would allow the group to ransom the President back to the Union in exchange for Confederate prisoners and buy the Confederacy precious time to bargain for better peace terms as the war came to a close (Beard and Makowicki 1). Numerous kidnapping attempts were made

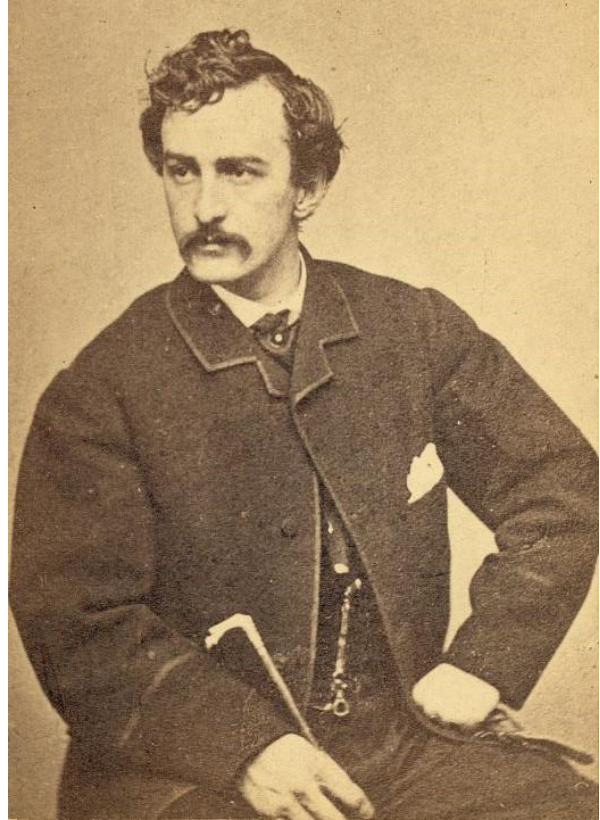


*The latest photograph of President Lincoln – taken on the balcony at the White House (March 6, 1865).
Source: Library of Congress.*

through late 1864 to early 1865 with no success. As time went on, Booth looked more towards the possibility of outright murder. With the surrender of Confederate General Robert E. Lee and his army on April 9th, 1865, combined with Lincoln's public address on the 11th where he mentioned giving Black men the right to vote - Booth abandoned the idea of kidnapping and focused solely on assassination (Beard and Makowicki 4). Upon hearing that Lincoln was to see the play *Our American Cousin* at Ford's Theater, Booth's team of traitors decided on doing as much damage as possible to the Union with a plan to kill the President, Vice President Andrew Johnson, Secretary of State William Henry Seward, and Union General Ulysses S. Grant all within hours of each other. Presumably, the Union would then fall into a state of confusion or anarchy during the succession process. Booth's target was President Lincoln and

General Grant who were both intended to be in the presidential box. However, Grant had left the city and was not present at Ford's Theater (Hoffman 258). Co-conspirator and former Confederate soldier Lewis Powell was to kill Secretary of State William Seward. Sympathizer George Atzerodt was to kill Vice President Andrew Johnson (National Park Service).

The attacks on the Vice President and Secretary of State would both fail. Atzerodt would have misgivings about his role and not follow through with the attack. Powell would brutally attack Secretary Seward and his family in their home but would only manage to severely wound Seward. John Wilkes Booth arrived at Ford's Theater hours before Lincoln's entourage would enter - including Mrs. Lincoln, Major Henry R. Rathbone, and Rathbone's fiancée Clara H. Harris. All would be seated in the presidential box. Booth had a man hold his horse in an alley behind the theater, ordered a drink at a saloon next door, and then returned to the theater with a single-shot derringer handgun and a hunting knife (Beard and Makowicki 7). Booth was familiar with the play, being a well known actor from the prominent Booth family of theater performers. He knew he had to be in the presidential box sometime around 10:15-10:25 P.M. in order to time his gun shot during a period of audience



John Wilkes Booth (ca.1865). Source: Library of Congress.

laughter after the line "Well, I guess I know enough to turn you inside out, old gal; you sockdologizing old man-trap!" was delivered by an actor on stage (Goodwin 109; Hoffman 257).

The first obstacle to overcome would be to get access to the president, though this turned out to be not much of an obstacle at all. Booth would have to make it through two closed, unlocked doors. The outer door opened into a short passageway revealing the inner door to the presidential box (Wilkes). A man named John Frederick Parker was assigned to stand directly in front of the outer door in order to protect the president. The Secret Service that we know today did not exist at the time. The Secret Service was formed in 1865 with the goal of stopping the growing problem of counterfeit currency in the U.S., but they would not serve as a protective service for the President until many decades later. Instead, the Washington DC Metropolitan Police Force would act as armed bodyguards. John F. Parker was a veteran member of the force and one of four officers chosen for White House duty (Eisenschiml 11). Though he was one of the first members to join the force, it is remarkable that he was able to remain an officer at all, much less be given such an important role of guarding the President. His inadequacies as an officer were seemingly abundant. His record included warnings and charges for conduct

unbecoming of an officer and dereliction of duty. Examples of his actions included insubordination to a superior officer, visiting a house of prostitution while on duty and discharging his firearm out of the window, sleeping while on duty, and intoxication while on duty (Eisenschiml 12-13). He was never fired for these acts. Curiously, after all of this, he was detailed for duty at the Executive Mansion by Mrs. Lincoln (Turner and Turner 210).

On the night of April 14th, 1865, John F. Parker was scheduled to relieve another one of Lincoln's bodyguards at the White House at 4 P.M. He arrived at 7 P.M., three hours late. When Lincoln's entourage made it to the theater a few hours later and took their seats, Parker assumed his guard position seated in a chair beside the outer door of the presidential box (Martin). During the play's intermission, Parker decided to leave his post to get a drink at the Star Saloon near the theater. This was the same saloon that Booth had been at before reentering the theater with his weapons. Despite the 150 years that have passed since Lincoln's assassination, historians still are not certain whether Parker even returned to theater after intermission. It is believed that he may have stayed at the saloon until after the assassination had occurred or had returned to the theater and taken a seat in a different area so that he could watch the play (Wilkes). Regardless, when Booth made his way towards the presidential box, the seat placed directly in front of the outer



Derringer handgun John Wilkes Booth used to assassinate Abraham Lincoln. Source: Library of Congress.

door was empty. That is not to say that Booth entered unnoticed. Also outside of the presidential box at that time was Charles Forbes, Lincoln's personal messenger and valet. He had gone to the saloon with Parker but had returned. When approaching the door, Booth apparently recognized Forbes and was seen handing him a piece of paper from his vest pocket. He was then permitted to enter the presidential box where he immediately bolted the door, took his position, and shot Lincoln in the back of the head (Wilkes). He then made his escape. Why was Booth allowed to enter? It is likely that his fame as an actor may have convinced Forbes to let him see the President, perhaps to pay his respects. After all, President Lincoln was a theater enthusiast and was aware of the Booth family. Some historians believe that Lincoln attended the performance *The Marble Heart* at Ford's Theater in 1863, in which John Wilkes Booth had a leading role (Beard and Makowicki 68; O'Brien; Martin). Interestingly, some historical accounts of that night do not mention Forbes and he is not known to have given a witness testimony during the investigation. He seemingly remained on good terms with the Lincoln family despite the incident and was not blamed.

The same cannot be said for John F. Parker. Those aware of his presence did blame him. Yet in the confusion, anger, and search for the conspirators that followed the assassination, he was never truly held legally accountable. On May 3rd, he was charged for neglect of duty for his actions on the night of the assassination but the case was dismissed one month later. We will never know what the administrative hearing revealed as no transcripts have ever been found



*Assassination of President Lincoln at Ford's Theater. Lithograph (1870).
Source: Library of Congress.*

(Eisenschiml 16). No newspapers followed the story of the missing bodyguard and his name was totally absent from the official report on Lincoln's death (Martin). His fellow members of the Metropolitan Police Force certainly thought he should have been punished. Colonel William H. Crook, one of Lincoln's bodyguards, wrote of Parker in his memoir, "...had he done his duty, I believe President Lincoln would not have been murdered by Booth...Parker's absence had much

to do with the success of Booth's purpose" (72-73). Since no actions were immediately taken against Parker until his early May hearing, he was free to continue his job just as before. This included his position inside the White House. Some days after the murder, Mrs. Lincoln was made aware that he was on duty that night and summoned Parker to her room. According to Elizabeth Keckley, a former slave now acting as a dressmaker in the White House, Mrs. Lincoln lashed out at Parker, "So you are on guard tonight - on guard in the White House after helping to murder the President...I shall always believe that you are guilty" (85-86). Though Mrs. Lincoln had certified his position for White House service earlier, it is abundantly clear what she thought of the man now. Parker could not muster much of a defense, reportedly saying that he did not believe someone would want to kill such a great man (Keckley 86). Personally, Parker did carry the guilt from that day. Colonel William Crook recalled that Parker, "looked like a convicted criminal the next day" and was never the same man afterward (74).

After Parker's charges were dismissed, he was put back on duty as a patrol officer around Washington D.C. and maintained a relatively clean record. His carelessness eventually caught up to him in 1868, when he was caught sleeping on duty again and was promptly fired (Eisenschiml 19). He lived the rest of his life as a carpenter and passed away in 1890. It is unfortunate we know so little about John F. Parker and Charles Forbes. Neither garnered much interest from the press or legal proceedings of the day and their quiet lives afterwards never shed more light on the fateful night. The holes left in the story have provided a fertile ground for conspiracy theories, many often directly mention Parker. Today, both of these characters are mostly forgotten in the mainstream consciousness on Lincoln's assassination, more so acting as interesting "fun facts" to share with others or as an answer to a difficult historical question on trivia night.

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The Gardiner Hall Jr Museum is open to the public Saturdays from 10:00am to 12:00pm. For more information, please call 518-791-9474.

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