

JOHN WILKES BOOTH (1838-1865) AND LEWIS THORNTON POWELL (1844-1865): CONTROVERSIAL IDENTIFICATIONS OF TWO SOUTHERN CONSPIRATORS FOUND GUILTY OF ABRAHAM LINCOLN'S DEATH

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Abstract - On April 14, 1865, at about 10:10 pm, a man shot Abraham Lincoln in the back of his head at point blank range. His name was John Wilkes Booth. The President of the United States died the following day. Meanwhile, a man broke into William Seward's office, the Secretary of State, and seriously wounded his face. The attacker's name was Lewis Thornton Powell. Both of these men succeeded in leaving the American capital without any trouble. However, few days later, Booth was arrested in a farm in Virginia and was summarily executed. His body was repatriated and an autopsy was conducted on April 27, 1865. While the report was absolutely positive concerning the murderer's identification, the journalists remained doubtful. Were we definitely sure it was Booth's body? As for Powell, he was arrested three days later. He was judged and sentenced to death. But examinations resulting from his trial have shown dental idiosyncrasies which turned to be crucial in the identification of a skull discovered several years later.

Keywords : American Civil War, History, Forensic dentistry.

INTRODUCTION

Since Christmas 1860, Major Anderson's 68 men (Kaspi, 1992) were surrounded in Fort Sumter in South Carolina by 6000 secessionist militia men. But no reinforcements arrived. On April 12, 1861, General Beauregard launched a series of attacks with artillery fires. At first, Anderson refused to surrender, but then, the next day, he was resigned not to resist.

The American civil war had just broken out. It lasted 4 years and ended up with General Lee's surrender at Appomattox, on a Sunday, on April 9, 1865. This fratricide conflict was the most murderous of the American history. 618,000 men lost their lives during this war.

John Wilkes Booth (1838-1865)

His parents were English Shakespearian actors who immigrated to the United States in 1821 and settled in a farm in Bel Air in Maryland, where John Wilkes was born in 1838. His scholarship was rather disastrous (Kimmel, 1940). When he was only 17 years old, Booth made his stage debut as the Earl of Richmond in Shakespeare's Richard III. Two years passed before he made another appearance on stage in 1857 when he joined the Arch Street Theater in Philadelphia. In 1858, he became a member of the Richmond Theatre. Soon the critics praised his performances and gave him the nickname of "the handsomest man in America."

On December 2, 1859, John Brown, the abolitionist found guilty in the raid against Harper's ferry, was hung. Wearing a Richmond Grays militia uniform, Booth joined other armed men to guard the court where Brown was being judged. Booth escorted the doomed at the foot of the scaffold.

On November 6, 1860, Lincoln was elected President of the United States of America. Immediately, in a very aggressive pamphlet, Booth vilified the newly elected president's politics and made clear his strong support of the secessionist cause.

On April 12, 1861, the war broke out. Abraham Lincoln declared martial law in Maryland, a state bordering Washington D.C., and the Southerners who had settled over there were immediately incarcerated. John's family was divided upon the subject. Therefore, the actor promised his mother not to enlist in the Southern army (Kauffman, 2004). Yet, Booth got arrested for making anti-government remarks. He followed on with performing on various stages and crossed paths with Lincoln on several occasions. Therefore, on November 9, 1863, in Ford's Theater, Lincoln sat in the same "presidential box" (number 7) in which he would be assassinated two years later. In front of him, on the stage, Booth played Raphael in Charles Selby's The Marble Heart. At one point during the performance, Booth was said to have shaken his finger in Lincoln's direction as he delivered a line of dialogue.

Booth made a final appearance in this theatre on March 18, 1865. It was the last appearance of his career. However, as he had performed several times there and that Booth's family was long time friends with John T. Ford, the theater's owner, Booth had day and night access to Ford's Theater.

By 1864, the tide of the war had shifted in the North's favour. Booth began devising a plan to kidnap Lincoln in exchange of the release of numerous Southern soldiers. To this end, he recruited old friends as accomplices and who were ready to pick a fight with the federal authorities.

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In the summer of 1864, Booth met with several well-known Confederate sympathizers in Boston, Massachusetts. In October 1864, he made a trip to Montreal to meet the people in charge of the Confederate Secret Service and set forth his plot.

After Lincoln's re-election in November, 1864, Booth met routinely Southern sympathizers at Mary Surratt's boarding-house.

On November 25, 1864, he performed Julius Caesar with his two brothers, Edwin and Junius. This was the only time they performed altogether (Kauffman, 2004). With his accomplices, Booth attempted twice to kidnap Lincoln but in vain, for the President had always changed his plans at the very last moment. On April 9, 1865, General Robert E. Lee surrendered at Appomattox.

On the morning of April 14, 1865, Booth (Norton, 2001a) learnt that the President and Mrs. Lincoln would be attending a play at Ford's Theater in the evening. He immediately assembled his team, made plans for the assassination, and a getaway plan. He assigned Powell to assassinate Secretary of State Seward and in the same time, he informed his walker-on Atzerodt to assassinate Vice-President Johnson. By decapitating the Union government's leaders, he hoped to throw a state of panic which would convince the Confederation to reorganize and to continue the war.

At 8:25 pm, Abraham Lincoln (Catton, 2002) entered box number 7 of Ford's Theater to attend a play. At 10:10 pm, a man slipped into Lincoln's box and shot him in the back of the head at point blank range with a 44 caliber Deringer. On April 15, 1865, Lincoln died at 7:22 am. It was the first time in the United States that one of the country's Presidents had been assassinated.

After the assassination, Booth escaped from Washington, D.C. Herold, a co-conspirator, was waiting for him outside the city. The murderer escaped but broke his leg later in the escape. He was soon identified and the authorities put a price on his head (Swanson, 2007).

He was pursued by Lieutenant Edward P. Doherty and the 16th New York Cavalry Regiment through Southern Maryland and across the Potomac and Rappahannock rivers. Finally, Booth was surrounded by the soldiers in Richard Garrett's farm, near Bowling Green, Caroline County, Virginia.

On April 26 1865, the soldiers ordered to attack the farm. Soon Booth's two accomplices gave up but the former refused. Despite the orders, Sergeant Boston Corbett fired at Booth fatally wounding him in the neck and breaking his spinal cord. Booth was dying for two hours. A doctor from Port Royal had been sent on the scene by Lieutenant Doherty but he arrived too late. His body was repatriated via the Potomac river to Washington for identification and autopsy. The ironclad USS Montauk was in charge of the mission.

Once in Washington, the authorities (Norton, 2001b) summoned all the people who possibly knew Booth personally in order to identify the body positively. Therefore, Dr. John Frederick May (Norton, 2001c) who, some time prior to the assassination, had removed a large fibroid tumor

from Booth's neck before the assassination, easily found the scar from his operation.

As for Booth's dentist (Hyson, 2001), Dr. William Merrill (whose office was at 344 Pennsylvania Avenue), he had cured and filled two teeth with gold for Booth shortly before the assassination. After prying open the corpse's mouth, he positively identified his two fillings. As for, Charles Dawson, the clerk at the National Hotel where Booth was staying, he identified the initials "J.W.B" tattooed on the corpse's left hand, between the thumb and the index. Finally, other people, three to be accurate, identified the corpse positively. The autopsy took place aboard the Montauk on April 27, 1865. It was performed by Surgeon General Joseph K. Barnes and Dr. Joseph Janvier Woodward (Norton, 2001b).

Dr. Barnes' account on the autopsy to Secretary of War Edwin Stanton (Swanson, 2007):

Sir,

I have the honour to report that in compliance with your orders, assisted by Dr. Woodward, USA, I made at 2 PM this day, a post-mortem examination of the body of J. Wilkes Booth, lying on board the Monitor Montauk off the Navy Yard.

The left leg and foot were encased in an appliance of splints and bandages, upon the removal of which, a fracture of the fibula (small bone of the leg) 3 inches above the ankle joint, accompanied by considerable ecchymosis, was discovered.

The cause of death was a gun shot wound in the neck - the ball entering just behind the sterno-cleido muscle - 2 1/2 inches above the clavicle - passing through the bony bridge of fourth and fifth cervical vertebrae - severing the spinal chord (sic) and passing out through the body of the sterno-cleido of right side, 3 inches above the clavicle.

Paralysis of the entire body was immediate, and all the horrors of consciousness of suffering and death must have been present to the assassin during the two hours he lingered. Meanwhile, Dr. Woodward (Norton, 2001b) wrote the following detailed account of the autopsy:

Case JWB: Was killed April 26, 1865, by a conoidal pistol ball, fired at the distance of a few yards, from a cavalry revolver. The missile perforated the base of the right lamina of the 4th lumbar vertebra, fracturing it longitudinally and separating it by a fissure from the spinous process, at the same time fracturing the 5th vertebra through its pedicle, and involving that transverse process. The projectile then transversed the spinal canal almost horizontally but with a slight inclination downward and backward, perforating the cord which was found much torn and discolored with blood (see Specimen 4087 Sect. I AMM). The ball then shattered the bases of the left 4th and 5th laminae, driving bony fragments among the muscles, and made its exit at the left side of the neck, nearly opposite the point of entrance. It avoided the 2nd and 3rd cervical nerves. These facts were determined at autopsy which was made on April 28. Immediately after the reception of the injury, there was very general paralysis. The phrenic nerves performed their function, but the respiration was diaphragmatic, of course, labored and slow. Deglutition was impracticable, and one or

two attempts at articulation were unintelligible. Death, from asphyxia, took place about two hours after the reception of the injury.

Most historians allege that Booth was killed on April 26, 1865, at Garrett's farm. However, because of the mystery remaining surrounding his autopsy and the murderer's burial, some believe that Booth escaped from Garrett's farm, and that another man died that day in his place. They also think that the government is fully informed and to escape embarrassment when it discovered it had the wrong man, the mistake was quickly covered up.

As a matter of fact, the controversy started during the trials of Booth's conspirators. It intensified on 1867 during John Suratt's trial (Brown, undated) but the rumour then settled down.

On 1869, Booth's remains were exhumed (Riaud, 2007). During the autopsy, a dentist positively identified his work. Was it Dr Merrill? The report did not mention it. For his part, Edwin Booth decided to identify his brother's head. Before the identification, Frank Oakes Rose (Hyson, 1999), an actor who was present in the room, and who was also Booth's friend when he was in the stock company of Ford's theater, heard him saying: "I can identify my brother, John Wilkes Booth, who has a tooth filled with gold on the right jaw, next to the canine."

In 1890, an article in the National Tribune (Hyson, 1999) reported that Booth's family had decided at that time to send a dentist to identify his remains positively. He apparently did so but his name was not mentioned.

In the Spring of 1898 there was much newspaper coverage relating that Booth had escaped death and made his way to South America, but nothing more.

It was not until 1903 that the question of Booth's escape surfaced again.

On January 13, 1903 a man in Enid, Oklahoma, by the name of David E. George died. In his last dying statement, the man confessed that he was in fact John Wilkes Booth. This was soon the topic of high debate among the journalists. Indeed, both George and the murderer enjoyed Shakespeare, and the former confessed it publicly. Moreover, he died when he was 63 which was also the actor's presumed age and his right leg had been broken just above the ankle, years ago...

While uncertainty remained, George's remains were embalmed in the Pennimann Undertaking Rooms until the identity was made clearer. The body was mummified and kept on display at the undertakers' for many months when shortly thereafter, Finis L. Bates (Brown, undated), a Memphis Lawyer, bought the mummy.

After examination in 1869, Edwin Booth's identification of his brother proved to be true. When the controversy started in 1903, Oakes (Hyson, 1999) related: "that he heard no one suggesting a doubt regarding the body's full identification." Moreover, in the Alexandria Gazette of June 8, 1903, Richard Garrett's son (Norton, 2001c) affirmed to have seen Booth's body.

As a matter of fact, this mummy would be no less than a rip off. Indeed, Bates, in the early 1870s, had been a close friend

with a man going by the name John St. Helen who confided to Bates that he was John Wilkes Booth. When in 1903, he heard the news concerning the death of George, Bates rushed to Enid to check out if John St. Helen and David E. George were one and the same person. Upon arriving, the lawyer recognized his old friend. He bought the mummy and thought to have made a juicy business as he presented it in a carnival sideshow circuit for money.

Unfortunately, the controversy continued.

The mummy scattered ill-luck around almost as freely as Tutankhamen is alleged to have done with people who approached it and who died in mysterious conditions, such as its owner who died alone and moneyless.

In 1931, the mummy was examined by a group of medical men and criminalists in Chicago. It was also X-rayed. It was claimed that the fractured leg, the scar on the neck, etc. were all verified. The panel was soon convinced that they had proven that the mummy was in fact the remains of John Wilkes Booth but the investigation failed to gain wide publicity.

In 1932, Dr Louis Warren (Hyson, 1999), director of Lincoln Historical Research Foundation in Fort Wayne, Indiana, published an article in Lincoln Lore, which is now called "the Warren's Report", of which the conclusion is unequivocal concerning the murderer's identification: "A well-known dentist from Washington, Dr Merrill, filled two teeth with gold for Booth a few days before the assassination. Dr Merrill remembered what he had done in the actor's mouth and has been called to identify his work. He identified the two fillings positively."

In 1937, the Harkin family bought the mummy for \$100,000 until 1942. Just like Bates, the Harkins made this money profitable by displaying the mummy in exhibitions which evidently had an admission fee. The remains of the presumed Booth became a profit-making fair animation.

The controversy continued from 1992 to 1996. From 1992, two historians, Nathaniel Orlowek and Dr Arthur Ben Chitty (Hyson, 1999) demanded another exhumation in order to conduct another identification. Backed by 22 members of the Booth family, a petition was filed in the Circuit Court for Baltimore City which was publicly reported in the New York Times of October 25, 1994. In 1995, after five days of hearing, this was blocked by Judge Joseph H. H. Kaplan who considered that the past events did not justify such a request. In 1996, the Maryland Court of Special Appeals upheld the ruling.

Lewis Thornton Powell (1844-1865), alias Lewis Payne, alias Lewis Paine

Lewis was born in 1844 in Randolph County, Alabama. Powell was his parents' name. George Cader Powell was his father. Lewis was educated according to Baptists precepts by his father. When Lewis was 13, he was violently kicked in the face by the family's donkey, breaking his jaw. The boy lost a molar and had his jaw broken. The medical personnel who examined him during the conspiracy trial noticed that this injury led to the left side of his jaw being more prominent than the right. When he turned 15 years old, the boy and his family moved to Florida.

In 1861, when he was 17, he enlisted in the Confederate Army, in the 2nd Florida Infantry, Company I. While he was in Richmond with his company, Lewis met John Wilkes Booth who was performing a play. An immediate friendship resulted.

On July 2, 1863, he was severely wounded and captured at the battle of Gettysburg. He was transferred in September to the United States Army Hospital in Baltimore, Maryland. A week after his arrival, Powell escaped. He crossed the lines at Alexandria, Virginia trying to locate the 2nd Florida. Soon he understood that it was much easier to travel with a horse than by foot. Therefore, he enlisted in Mosby's Rangers cavalry. Powell rode with the 43rd Battalion, Company B. His reputation grew while he served in this army. Fellow rangers described young Powell as "chivalrous, generous, and gallant". At the end of 1864, Powell began his involvement with the Confederate Secret Service. He crossed the lines at Alexandria, returning to Baltimore. Alas, he was once again arrested on charges of being a "spy". As witnesses failed to appear, he was released but required to sign an Oath of Allegiance to the Union on January 13 1865. He did so, under the name Lewis Paine in memory of the family he rode with while he was under Mosby's orders. It was in Baltimore at the end of February 1865 that he met the other conspirators in Mary Surratt's boarding house, an accomplice.

On the night of March 15, 1865, Paine met with Booth (Norton, 2001d) and other members of the conspiracy against Lincoln at Gautier's Restaurant on Pennsylvania Avenue. On the 17th, Paine, Booth and other conspirators planned to kidnap President Lincoln. The plot failed as Lincoln never arrived on the spot where he was supposed to be kidnapped. On April 5, 1865, the Secretary of State, William Henry Seward (Bollet, 2002), had been injured in a carriage accident. Not only he suffered a concussion to the head and the face, had a broken right arm, and many serious bruises, but he had the two sides of his lower jaw broken, next to the premolars. The surgeons tried to hold up the jaw with bandages, teeth bindings and a jaw splint. The sick man was not even able to talk and suffered consistently.

On April 14, 1865, during the mid-afternoon, the conspirators held one final meeting. Booth assigned Paine to kill Secretary of State William Seward.

The same night and at the same moment Abraham Lincoln was shot, Powell gained access to Seward's home by telling a servant, William Bell, that he was delivering medicine from Dr Verdi, Seward's attending physician. He seriously injured Seward's son but his gun misfired. Paine attacked the Secretary of State with his knife and struck him down several times. He did not succeed in killing him. However, he severely wounded him to the right cheek and the scruff. The cheek was hanging down on the lower jaw, baring the inside of his mouth. He was extremely bleeding. Dr Verdi, the family doctor (Riaud, 2006), succeeded in stopping the haemorrhage by compressing the wound, by applying ice and by stitching his wounds. Dr Gunning was called at short notice at his New York dental office and cured Seward's wounds. The right side of his mandibular fracture never recovered leading to a subsequent bad articulation.

Lewis (Norton, 2001c) escaped and hid for three days in a wooded lot. On April 17th, he was arrested at Mary Surratt's boarding house. Soon, he was recognized by Seward's head-waiter.

During the trial of the conspirators, Paine was found guilty and sentenced to death. He was hung on July 7, 1865. He was buried in Washington (Riaud, 2007): firstly, in Graceland Cemetery near Georgetown but later was disinterred and buried in Holmstead Cemetery. In 1871, his family claimed the remains. They were buried on the Powell family farm. In 1879, Powell was again disinterred and buried next to his mother in Geneva, Florida. At this time, while the remains were carried to Florida, a discovery was made: the corpse was headless. The capital city's undertaker had removed the skull in 1869 when the body was moved from a cemetery to another.

This skull easily identifiable because of Paine's accident when he was 12 years old (Ownsbey, 1993) became specimen number 2244 in the Army Medical Museum housed at Ford's Theater. It is thanks to the documentation of the trial that he was indisputably recognised.

In May of 1898, the skull was given to the Smithsonian Anthropology Department where it remained until its re-discovery in January of 1992. Next to the skull was the following documentation: "Cranium of Payne hung (sic) in Washington, D.C. in 1865 for the attempted assassination of Secretary of State William H. Seward." Despite the information, identification was conducted on the skull. The identification process of the skull was the same as the very first one. The Institute decided to release Powell's skull to his family in Florida where he was buried next to his mother's remains in November of 1994.

CONCLUSION

On April 14, 1865, only John Wilkes Booth was a famous and recognized actor. Despite the fact that Powell was a very apt soldier in the Confederate army, he was unknown. Their conspiracy against the Northern government, Lincoln's assassination, and the murder attempt against the Secretary of State, William Henry Seward, made their names go down in history. Their main goal was to decapitate the federal government in order to convince the Confederate government to reorganize and to continue this fratricidal war. Despite Lincoln's assassination, they did not succeed what they had planned.

Even if doubts remained regarding their deaths, it is indisputable today that the two conspirators have perfectly been identified thanks to all the known and used forensic means of the time. There will always be skeptics to say the contrary, but history showed us that the positive identification of John Wilkes Booth and Lewis Thornton Powell is unquestionable.

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