PRESIDENT’S MESSAGE

I hate to admit it, but Hollywood can have a positive effect on the public’s interest in history. One of the most recent examples is the movie, *The Monuments Men*. I remember reading about these men many years ago, but now I want to know more after seeing the movie. Another example is *The Conspirator*. It piqued the public’s interest and brought them to the Surratt House Museum to satisfy their curiosity. Our increased attendance numbers definitely confirm this. Most everyone knew the main characters of the assassination story – Abraham Lincoln, John Wilkes Booth, and maybe Mary Surratt. However, thanks to the movie, Mrs. Surratt and her lawyer became real people to the public, not just names in a book. We came away from the movie knowing that Aiken had changed his attitude towards Mrs. Surratt in the end. But how much of that was Hollywood spin?

I may have found something that can help answer that question. While filing away some papers, I found an old *Surratt Society News* (predecessor of today’s *Surratt Courier*) from July 1983. One of the articles contributed by James O. Hall contained a letter from Frederick Aiken, which gives us some insight on his opinion of Mrs. Surratt and her trial. Since the short article appeared over 30 years ago, I thought I would share it with you again.

AND, WAS MRS. SURRETT KEPT IN IRONS?

The allegation that Mrs. Surratt was in irons (manacled) was asserted, denied, and then carried on from 1865 to 1900. It still remains a question to many students today. Mrs. Jane -con’t. pg.2-

MARK YOUR CALENDARS

Surratt House is open for guided tours on Wednesdays, Thursdays, and Fridays from 11 am to 5 pm and on Saturdays and Sundays from 12 noon to 4 pm, with the last tours beginning one-half hour before closing. Members receive free admission by showing current membership cards.

Through December 2014 – *Between the Lines: Southern Maryland in the Civil War*. An exhibit that will be featured at the end of the regular public tour explaining life for the inhabitants of Southern Maryland under Union “occupation.”

April-May – *All Booth Escape Route Bus Tours are filled*.

May 20 – *Spend the Day in Historic Virginia* as the museum sponsors a trip to Cherry Hill Farm (dating to the Revolution era) and Ben Lomond Historic Site (ca. 1830). Contact Surratt House for further details. 301-868-1121

June 17 – *The American Treasure Tour* to Oaks, Pennsylvania for a tram tour of three acres of 19th- and 20th—century treasures (over 10,000 objects). Contact museum for details.

June 7-8 – *Death Comes a Knocking*, a special program on mourning customs of the Civil War era. 12-4 pm. Free. Some exhibit materials will remain up for public tours during June.

This newsletter is a monthly publication of The Surratt Society, a non-profit volunteer affiliate of Surratt House Museum, a historic property of The Maryland-National Capital Park & Planning Commission, 9118 Brandywine Road, Clinton, Maryland 20735. 301-868-1121. Visit http://www.surrattmuseum.org. Annual membership is $10 per person.
President’s Message—con’t—

Swisshelm asserted that Mrs. Surratt was in irons in a letter to the New York Tribune in September of 1873. The editors of the Washington Daily Morning Chronicle decided to ask Frederick A. Aiken, a defense counsel, about this. Here is Aiken’s reply:

Washington, D.C.
1407 F Street
September 17, 1873

To the Editor of the Chronicle:

I have your note of this date, inclosing the letter of Jane G. Swisshelm, published in the “Tribune” (New York) the 16th instant, and asking me, “Is her statement true that Mrs. Surratt was manacled during her trial?” Without reference to any other fact, or to any of the details in the case of that most unfortunate lady, I have to say in reply that at no time during her unlawful trial was Mrs. Surratt manacled, either on her wrists or her ankles, while in the presence of the court. I not only speak from my own absolute knowledge, but from recollection of Mrs. Surratt’s oft-repeated statements to me that she was not manacled.

Yours very truly,
Frederick A. Aiken

Also in this issue, was a totally unrelated tidbit of information, which seems appropriate now that spring is officially here. It comes from Alison Gernsheim’s book, Victorian and Edwardian Fashion. “In 1844, a lace cap from Paris called the bonnet assassin was said to live up to its name and ‘makes a tolerably pretty woman look very killing’.” That puts a whole new meaning to the Easter bonnet.

Louise Oertly, President

WELCOME OUR NEWEST MEMBERS:

David and Linda Joswick –
Gettysburg, Pennsylvania
James M. Olsen – White Plains, Maryland

* * * * *

AND THE SURRATT SOCIETY IS HAPPY TO ANNOUNCE that a longtime member and supporter of the Society and museum has been awarded Honorary Membership in the Surratt Society. Mr. Roger J. Norton of Florida is a retired teacher, originally from Illinois, who has continued to influence students of varying ages via his outstanding website, Abraham Lincoln Research Site, which encourages interaction. He has corresponded with thousands of students (and adults) since the mid-1990s - and in many cases referred them to Surratt House for additional information when assassination-related. His website was the first one in the nation to be recognized by the Library of Congress and added to their Resource Center.

Several years ago, he offered his services to our museum director and several members of the Surratt Society and created a very popular online forum called the Lincoln Discussion Symposium, which encourages dialogue on all aspects of Lincoln studies – from birth to assassination as well as announcements of events, programs, etc. in that field. The forum currently has over 300 members and is heavily used each day.

Throughout all this time, he has remained professional and professorial – and even has been designated the “politest man on the internet” by one of his forum members. The Surratt Society is proud to honor him for his many services to the Lincoln field. It is historical dedication such as this that will keep our heritage alive. The award was announced at the recent conference banquet on March 15.

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AN UPDATE ON SAVING RICH HILL

As you know, we have been very concerned with the fate of Rich Hill, home of Samuel Cox and a stop on the Booth escape route. In the March issue of this newsletter, we were happy to announce that the house and property had been purchased by the Charles County, Maryland, government. We now wish to correct that statement – the house and land were donated to the county for preservation by the owners, Delegate and Mrs. Joseph Vallario of Upper Marlboro, Maryland. Delegate Vallario is a longtime representative to the Maryland House of Delegates, and we thank his family for their generosity and support of historic preservation.

GEORGE WREN: THE MAN WHO ALMOST STOPPED THE ASSASSINATION
by Wesley Harris

As a member of Richmond’s Marshall Theater stock company during the 1859-60 season, George W. Wren became acquainted with fellow actor John Wilkes Booth. The Marshall was the site of father Junius Brutus Booth’s first American performance, and Edwin performed there many times. John Wilkes performed there first in 1858 for John T. Ford, who owned the theater at the time. When war seemed imminent, Ford moved to Washington, D.C. to take advantage of the boom in that city’s population. Many of the actors who frequented Richmond and other Southern venues, including Wren and Booth, also found work in the North.

Born in London on April 29, 1837, Wren received an education at home before immigrating to America. He worked as an actor, bookkeeper, journalist, and as a theatrical agent and manager. Wren became a stage manager at Laura Keene’s Manhattan theater. He encountered Booth frequently in New York and Washington. One day he had a “little spat” with his friend Booth about the battle at Fort Sumter. When Wren announced he was going to fight for the Union, Booth responded angrily, saying “he did not doubt but what the South would gain what they were fighting for.” Wren was convinced Booth planned to serve the South.

Wren enlisted in 1861 as a 24-year-old in the 61st New York State Volunteers, a unit composed of men mostly from Albany and New York City. The regiment saw action in some of the East’s fiercest battles—Antietam, Fredericksburg, Chancellorsville, and Gettysburg. Wren was mustered out in October 1864 as a lieutenant.

After the assassination, actors and crew from Ford’s Theatre drafted a resolution to condemn the “wanton and brutal” act by “a fiend named John Wilkes Booth.” The resolutions were printed in several newspapers bearing the signature of George Wren, orchestra leader William Withers, and stagehand William Ferguson.

After the war, Wren served as clerk of the Excise Bureau in Brooklyn where he resided with his wife. He was elected as a Republican to the New York State Assembly from the Seventh District of Kings County. It was during his time as an assemblyman that he recounted an amazing story of how he almost killed John Wilkes Booth hours before the assassination at Ford’s Theater. First appearing in the New York Sun, the story of Wren’s confrontation with Booth appeared in papers across the country:

LINCOLN’S ASSASSINATION.
Assemblyman Wren Telling How He Came Near Preventing It.
Drawing a Pistol to Shoot Booth on the Morning of the Tragedy—A Previous
Understanding That They Were to Shoot on Sight.

Albany, April 2--A number of members of the Assembly were in Assemblyman Wren's parlor a few evenings ago, and the conversation turned upon the law respecting the carrying of concealed weapons. Assemblymen Lindsay and Shanley and others expressed various opinions about the law, but Mr. Wren said nothing. He sat quietly smoking a brierwood pipe and listening to all that his colleagues had to say. At length Mr. Lindsay asked him what he thought of the law, and whether it had done very much to prevent the carrying of concealed weapons in New York.

"Well, I've had my lesson," said Mr. Wren, "and it was one that taught me the danger of carrying weapons. I had my hand on my pistol to shoot John Wilkes Booth once, and I wish I had, for I drew on him on the morning of the very day that he assassinated Lincoln."

There was no further talk about concealed weapons. The assemblymen were anxious to learn more of the incident that Mr. Wren referred to.

"Did you know Booth?" asked Mr. Lindsay.

"Intimately. I had acted with him a season in Richmond, and been on the Southern circuit several times with him. I have slept with Booth many and many a time and there was no one of my friends that was better liked."

Mr. Wren being urged to narrate the incident, began:

"When I had served my time in the army and got my discharge, I made an engagement with Mr. Grover, who then had one of the Washington theaters under lease. There were quite a number of my old friends in Washington, actors who were known, at least to the profession. There was Jim McCullom, Sam Chester, John Jennings, Sam Verney, and others, and we used to meet socially every Sunday night. Sometimes Wilkes Booth would join us. He would frequently tell us when we asked him where he'd been so long for we would not see him around sometimes for days, and then he would suddenly appear that he had been taking horseback rides, lie used to argue with us on the merits of the Southern cause.

"On the afternoon that the Marine band serenaded Lincoln when he returned from his visit to Richmond, Sam Verney, Jennings, and myself went to the White House, and on our return went to the office of C. D. Hess, who was manager for Mr. Grover. We were going to hear a new play read. We were playing 'Aladdin' at Grover's and Miss Effie Gorman was leading lady. She was in Mr. Hess' office with the others, if I remember aright. At all events, Booth came in and greatly interrupted us with his violent secession talk. I think this was on the Wednesday before the assassination. Booth asked Mr. Hess at that time, when President Lincoln was going to the theater to see 'Aladdin,' for the president had been invited to be present and had promised to do so.

"The next day a number of us, after rehearsal, were standing in front of Grover's, and afterward we went into the lobby of the theater. As I now remember, there were Mr. O. H. Hess, Mr. Verney, Mr. Jennings, and one or two other gentlemen. Booth came sauntering in. My impression was that he had been drinking. He began at once to talk about the war. We didn't pay much attention to his wild talk, for we had heard very much of it, but he finally spoke of Lincoln by a very vulgar and profane term. That made me very angry.

"'John,' said I, 'what do you talk that way for? The war is over. Your side is beaten. What is the use of crying now? If you feel so bad, why didn't you go into the
Southern army, as I did in the Northern? It don't look well to brag now, when you never shouldered a musket for your side.

"Perhaps I have done as much as you did for the cause, and can do more. Do you mean to say that I am a coward?"

"I didn't say so, John, I replied, 'but I did say that you ought to have showed your courage before you talk as you do now.'

"At this he got very angry. 'You call me a coward, do you?' said he, and he drew his pistol at once.

"I was angry, too, and a good deal more foolish, being a hot-headed young fellow then of 27, but I also remembered that he had me at an advantage.

"'Hold on, John.' I cried, throwing up my hands, 'I am not fixed. If you fire now you will prove yourself a coward. Let me go home and get fixed, and we'll have this shoot out on sight if you say so.'

"I had just that melodramatic and foolish bluster, and was silly enough to be in earnest in what I said, for Booth, after looking at me a minute, put up his pistol and said, 'You want to be prepared the next time you see me;' and I went home and got my revolver, but didn't see Booth again that evening.

"The next morning, which was the day of the assassination, I went around to Ford's theater to see Miss Laura Keene, and pausing down the front lobby, supposing that a rehearsal was in progress, I saw H. Clay Ford and also Booth, who turned toward me and, as I supposed, made a movement to carry his threat into execution. I had on a light over coat and my revolver in the pocket, and I put my hand on it prepared to shoot through the pocket at Booth, for I supposed it was going to be the best thing to get the first shot. Fortunately for me, perhaps unfortunately for the country, I waited an instant, and saw Booth extend his hand to me. He came up saying, 'Won't you shake hands, George. I wasn't myself yesterday. Let bygones be bygones.' Of course, that was the end of the trouble.

"That evening, while Miss Germon was singing 'Sherman Has Marched to the Sea' and I was standing in the wings ready to go on, C. D. Hess came rushing in to the wings and said to me with a face like death, 'Lincoln has been shot in his box at Ford's.' I said at once, and I presume Mr. Hess will remember it, 'That John Booth did it.' I am sorry I was profane, but perhaps that will be pardoned. Jim McCullom, Sam Hall, and I went up to Booth's father's farm, in Maryland, the next morning, looking for him, for we had heard him talk about some caves that were there. We went armed to the teeth, actor like [here Mr. Wren smiled] and in a very histrionic manner. Of course we didn't find him. Afterward I went to the gunboat and saw Booth's body. It was the poor fellow, fast enough. I have been inclined of late years, as I have recalled his wild and unreasonable manner all that winter, to have charity enough for Booth to believe that his mind was deranged.

"From that day to this," continued Mr. Wren as he refilled his pipe, "I have not carried weapons, though I used to wish that I had shot Booth. If everybody had the experience I have had, there would be no need for any law on the matter."

How much of Wren's tale is true is hard to determine. In extensive statements to the authorities after the assassination, he did not mention the confrontation despite giving detailed examples of Booth's secessionist leanings.
"FAREWELL, SISTERS, FAREWELL"
by Joan Chaconas

I was asked to write an article about the explosion at the Washington Arsenal that took place on June 17, 1864. That explosion caused the death of twenty-one, young, women workers. All of these women were from "the Island," which was referred to as the poor section of Washington City. But, before we hear of this calamity, let’s learn a little about the history of this area and the Washington Arsenal.

In 1791, Pierre L’Enfant, the man who designed the city, designated this point of land as a reservation for the purpose of protecting the city. By 1797, it was known as the Fort at Turkey Buzzard. By 1803, George Hadfield, the architect of the Capitol, had designed the arsenal building; and by 1814, there was a battery of eight guns at the point, now named Greenleaf Point for James Greenleaf, an early land speculator.

In 1814, when the British marched on Washington, they captured the fort. An accidental explosion killed many of the British soldiers and destroyed the fort. Two years later, it was rebuilt, and by 1817, was renamed the Washington Arsenal. It continued as such until 1881.

In 1826, the government purchased land immediately north of the Arsenal, and in 1831, constructed the United States Penitentiary. In 1857, this area was incorporated into the Arsenal grounds, creating the northern boundary. From 1898 to 1909, a general hospital was on the grounds. This was the forerunner of Walter Reed Hospital; and Major Walter Reed, while serving at the post, died in this hospital as a result of peritonitis after an appendix operation.

From 1903-1908, the grounds were remodeled and the marshy edges filled in. By this time, the Army War College had been built (later called the National War College). The grounds were now called the Washington Barracks. In 1948, the post was renamed Fort Lesley J. McNair, in honor of the General, who was killed in Normandy, France in 1944.

That’s a brief synopsis of the area. Now, let’s go back to the early morning of June 17, 1864, and the Washington Arsenal.

During the Civil War years, women were employed at the Arsenal making cartridges. Many of these women were quite young, and some were the main money maker in the family. Some were wives whose husbands were off fighting, and some were widows. Some were daughters supporting a widowed mother. These women worked a 12-hour day, from 6 am to 6 pm for