The Doctor Mudd Debate Continues

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My comments concern several statements made by John McHale in his letter (*Maryland Independent*, Aug. 8). McHale is not correct when he writes that the government did not prove “...any criminal act on (Dr. Samuel A.) Mudd’s part.” The government proved, and subsequently convicted Mudd of the specification that he conspired with John Wilkes Booth in Booth’s conspiracy to capture Abraham Lincoln; a conspiracy which ultimately led to Lincoln’s murder, and that he knowingly aided and abetted Booth in his effort to escape the federal authorities. There is no doubt among any reasonable student of the assassination that Mudd knew Booth when he came to his house in the early morning hours of April 15, 1865, and that Mudd learned of Lincoln’s murder while Booth was still a “patient” of Mudd’s. This proves aiding and abetting the murderer of President Lincoln.

In addition to the two statements which implicate Mudd in Booth’s conspiracy and which McHale trivializes (statements of Samuel Cox, Jr., and Confederate agent Thomas Harbin), he overlooks two additional statements by Dr. Richard Stuart and William Bryant, another Confederate secret service agent, both of whom said that Mudd had sent Booth and Herold to Stuart’s house after leaving Mudd’s.

As to George Atzerodt’s “one statement” in his “lost” confession, it is anything but ambiguous as claimed by McHale. Atzerodt stated, “...Dr. Mudd knew all about it, as Booth sent (as he told me) liquors and provisions for the trip with the President to Richmond, about two weeks before the murder, to Dr. Mudd’s.” What is ambiguous in this statement? Atzerodt’s statement was not made under duress, but was made to Atzerodt’s own brother-in-law who was on the staff of Provost Marshal James L. McPhail, both of whom had come to Atzerodt at his own request.

The “alleged admission” referred to by McHale was given in sworn affidavit by Capt. George W. Dutton, who was the officer in charge of escorting Mudd and his three co-conspirators to Fort Jefferson. The same admission which Samuel Cox, Jr., said Mudd confided to him in 1877.

The statements by these six individuals are dismissed by Mudd’s defenders as being lies by known liars. It was Mudd, however, who did the lying. This is proven by the record, and by Mudd’s own statements. When Mudd told authorities that he “...never saw either of the parties before, nor can I conceive who sent them to my house,” he lied. He had met with Booth on at least three prior occasions. On two of these occasions he introduced two key conspirators to John Wilkes Booth who were important to Booth’s capture plans: John H. Surratt Jr. and Thomas Harbin. Both of these men were Confederate agents and both agreed to join Booth’s plot as a result of Mudd’s introduction. And both men later fingered Mudd as the man who did the introductions.
When Mudd finally admitted (in writing) that Booth had been an overnight guest in his house one Sunday evening in November 1864 and purchased a horse from Mudd’s nearest neighbor the next day, he lied. He lied to cover up a much more important meeting with Confederate agent Thomas Harbin in December of the same year. That is when Booth stayed the night with Mudd and purchased the horse. We know Mudd lied because he inadvertently let the truth slip in an affidavit he filed while in prison. Innocent men do not lie. Mudd lied, and he lied repeatedly.

In Mudd’s treatment of his slaves and his concept of blacks, you need only read Mudd’s own writings to see that he was a racist who described blacks as “...irresponsible beings of the unbleached humanity,” and that he suffered the “...humiliation of being guarded by an ignorant, irresponsible and prejudiced negro soldiery.”

McHale puts the best light on Mudd’s shooting of one of his slaves. After all, the slave was “obstreperous.” In his letter, McHale does not quote but paraphrases the testimony of Jeremiah T. Mudd concerning the shooting incident. This appears to soften the incident. McHale writes that Samuel Mudd “...fired some buckshot in Eglent’s general direction...” He did not. He fired directly at him. Jeremiah Mudd said that Dr. Mudd “...had his gun with him, and he thought he would shoot him...”

Nowhere in the testimony does it state that “several pellets inadvertently struck Eglent in the leg...” The evidence from all witnesses including Samuel Mudd’s own witnesses which included family members, was that Mudd shot his slave. Not in the “general direction,” not “inadvertently striking Mr. Eglent with several pellets.”

Mudd took his gun and intentionally shot Eglent in anger. Eglent was hit, suffered wounds and had to be treated. This was not some training exercise that Samuel Mudd was teaching his slave proper behavior. This is also not the image we have all been raised on of the kindly country doctor who was persecuted for nothing more than adhering to his Hippocratic oath.

Lastly, Dr. Samuel A. Mudd did have his day in court. Not once, but three times during his lifetime.

First before a military tribunal, second in federal district court before a federal judge and finally, before the U.S. Supreme Court through the appeal of his co-conspirators Samuel Arnold and Edman Spangler. Mudd lost before the first two courts.

The third court, the Supreme Court, ruled the appeal moot since Arnold and Spangler were pardoned on March 1, 1869, before the court could hand down a ruling. Mudd had been pardoned before the case was argued.

The majority of students of the assassination come down hard on the country doctor who escaped the gallows by his effective lying. They remain convinced that his name is still Mudd.

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