

Tracking an Assassin

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After being hunted like a dog through swamps, woods, and last night being chased by gunboats till I was forced to return wet, cold, and starving ... I am here in despair. And why? For doing what Brutus was honored for -- what made Tell a hero. And yet I, for striking down the greater tyrant than they ever knew, am looked upon as a common cut-throat....I struck for my country and that alone.

-- diary of John Wilkes Booth, April 21, 1865

It's not surprising that the exhausted and ailing John Wilkes Booth wrote down his innermost thoughts during his grueling 12-day flight from justice. As a die-hard Southern sympathizer and a well-known actor, the theatrical, manipulative Booth wanted to give his account of his murder of Abraham Lincoln.

It was 130 years ago tonight that the 26-year-old actor entered Lincoln's upper box at Ford's Theatre during a packed performance of "Our American Cousin," a British comedy. Waiting for the play's biggest laugh, Booth shot the president in the head, then leapt from the box, caught a spur in a flag and fell to the stage, breaking a small bone in his leg. Booth uttered "Sic semper tyrannis" ("Thus always to tyrants"), then fled out a back alley and onto F Street NW. The Civil War had ended five days before, when Gen. Robert E. Lee surrendered at Appomattox.

In the days after the assassination, Booth -- hungry, filthy and aching from his leg -- managed to cover more than 60 miles by horseback, wagon and rowboat from the District through southern Maryland, across the Potomac River and into Virginia, where he was shot to death by a federal soldier.

Booth's trek is a source of fascination for many of today's Civil War buffs, some of whom trace the route annually by car or on special tour buses. Following the route "is a way of keeping history alive," says Laurie Verge, historian and manager of the Surratt House and Tavern Museum in Clinton. The house is one of several places where Booth stopped during his escape.

If you've got good maps, a car and a free weekend, you can follow Booth's footsteps on your own. Your experience will be somewhat different from Booth's. In the 19th century, Booth encountered muddy, unpaved roads, and big hills and swamps. Today suburban businesses crowd some of the route near the Surratt House and north of it.

But people who try to trace Booth's route "can really understand that Booth went a long way and that it was possible because he had help," says Michael W. Kauffman, a member of the Surratt Society who created a detailed map of the escape route for Blue & Gray Magazine in 1990.

Kauffman emphasizes that many Maryland residents resented Lincoln, who instituted what amounted to martial law, having people arrested -- including legislators -- to keep the state in the Union. "If Maryland had seceded, Washington would have been surrounded by the Confederacy," says James O. Hall, an authority on the assassination.

Regarding the people Booth encountered on the route, Verge says, "Each character has his own story line, there's the great backdrop of the Civil War, and if you just stick to the facts, it would play as a great epic." And it would have been an even more grandiose epic if Booth had gotten his way: He had plotted with David E. Herold and other conspirators to kill several officials the night of the assassination. (Plans to kill Vice President Andrew Johnson and Secretary of State William H. Seward failed, though Seward was seriously wounded.) Herold traveled most of the escape route with Booth.

Along the route you can tour: Ford's Theatre, 511 10th St. NW, and across the street, the William Petersen House, where Lincoln died April 15, 1865 -- the interiors of the theater and the house have been restored to appear as they did at the time of the assassination; Mary E. Surratt's house and tavern, where Booth and Herold picked up weapons; and the residence of Samuel A. Mudd, a doctor who treated Booth's leg.

You can drive past old Bryantown Tavern, where Booth met with Confederate agents before the assassination; St. Mary's Catholic Church, where Mudd is buried and where he first met Booth in 1864; the Zekiah swamp, which the fugitives entered; and Rich Hill, the former home of wealthy Samuel Cox, who sent provisions to Booth and Herold when they hid in a nearby thicket for several days. (Booth and Herold got rid of their horses at the thicket, fearing the animals would hasten their detection by the federal cavalry.)

By obtaining permission, you can enter property now privately owned by a Jesuit retreat and drive past Huckleberry Cottage, former home of Confederate agent Thomas A. Jones; and you can park near the retreat's bluffs along the Potomac River, which Booth and Herold crossed in a rowboat owned by Jones. The view from the bluffs and across the Potomac is beautiful and dramatic. Here the river is about two miles wide, making one realize how desperate Booth and Herold must have been to cross at night with federal gunboats in the area.

Verge says that every time she goes to the bluffs, "I'm moved. Even though I deplore what Booth did, I feel sorry for him. He had to feel sort of trapped.

"He had hobbled around for a week, exposed to the elements. He had to realize he was not the hero he thought he was going to be."

After crossing a bridge into Virginia, you can see the exterior of the house of Elizabeth Quesenberry, who prepared food for the fugitives. And you can see Cleydael, the former home of

Richard Stuart in King George County, and the Peyton family home in Port Royal, both places where the fugitives were denied shelter. Some two miles south of Port Royal is a plaque that marks the site of the former Garrett Farm, where Booth was shot to death.

While much of the escape route has changed in the 130 years since Booth made his unsuccessful run to the south -- probably hoping to reach Mexico, Verge says -- three sites attempt to re-create what he encountered: Ford's Theatre, the Surratt tavern and the Dr. Mudd House.

The son of a famous Shakespearean actor, Junius Brutus Booth, the handsome John Wilkes had a lucrative career in the theater before giving it up for the Confederate cause. He had toured the United States, and Lincoln, an avid play-goer, had seen him perform at Ford's Theatre.

Booth "was very popular with the ladies," says Jeff Leary, a ranger with Ford's Theatre, which is run by the National Park Service. "When he died they went through his pockets and there were five photos of women on him." The photos today are displayed at Ford's, as is the derringer Booth used to kill Lincoln, the dagger he used to stab Maj. Henry Rathbone before leaping to the stage, the date book he used as a diary, and a compass Booth used during the escape -- still spotted with wax from a candle he used to read it.

The assassination had tragic consequences for associates of Booth. Acquaintances such as Surratt and Mudd, both Confederate sympathizers, were brought before a military court. Surratt was the first woman to be hanged by the federal government; Mudd was sent to prison. Their guilt is still debated today by their descendants and students of the Civil War.

Also hanged were Herold and two other conspirators: Lewis Powell and George Atzerodt. The executions took place at a former D.C. penitentiary -- today the site of the tennis courts at Fort McNair in Southwest.

Much of what happened along the escape route has been researched by James Hall for the Surratt Society. Hall says one of the first places that received Booth and Herold was Surratt's house and tavern; they showed up around midnight on April 14, two hours after the assassination. The fugitives gulped swigs of whiskey, then obtained a rifle, ammunition and field glasses from John M. Lloyd, an ex-D.C. policeman who rented the tavern from Surratt.

According to testimony Lloyd gave at Surratt's trial, Surratt traveled from the District to the tavern earlier the same day, telling him to "have the shooting irons ready. There will be parties here tonight who will call for them." Lloyd said she also told him to deliver a wrapped package to the parties, which turned out to be field glasses Booth had given to Surratt earlier that day at her boardinghouse on H Street NW.

The debate about Surratt is "her degree of guilt," Verge says. Supporters of Surratt, who was executed at age 42, maintained that Lloyd lied and that she delivered messages and packages without knowing Booth's intentions.

Today much of the structure of the Surratt House and Tavern is original, although the interiors have been re-created with period furniture. On a tour you can see a reproduction of the original attic of the kitchen wing and look down a shaft where a rifle was hidden by Lloyd after Booth and Herold left the premises.

Months before the assassination, Booth, John Surratt (Mary's son) and other conspirators met to plan what turned out to be an abortive attempt to capture Lincoln and ransom him for Confederate prisoners. After the assassination John Surratt fled to Europe but was brought back two years later. John, who was in New York at the time of the assassination, was tried by a civilian court, which resulted in a hung jury. (After Mary's execution, the Supreme Court ruled that a military court had no jurisdiction over civilians if the civil courts were functioning).

Mary's husband, John Surratt Sr., paid \$600 to build the house and tavern in 1852. The tavern served also as a post office, polling place, hostelry and a Confederate safe house, where Southern spies could get shelter and mail. You can see a re-creation of the dual post office and tavern, where liquor bottles are set on a shelf near mail slots. Sitting on a period card table are playing cards with pictures but no numbers -- since much of the rural clientele was illiterate. In the parlor, there is a beautiful desk with a fruitwood veneer and a table with mahogany veneer, both owned by Mary Surratt.

There's the "travelers" room, with a plain table and ironstone dishes for tavern customers; a neighboring dining room for the Surratt family is fancier, with lace tablecloth, linen napkins and silverware.

The museum's permanent exhibit displays family artifacts, such as Surratt's wire-rim spectacles, pocket watch and a handkerchief with the family name embroidered on it.

In the District, you can see the former boardinghouse, today a restaurant called Go-Lo's, at 604 H St. NW in Chinatown. A bronze plaque outside and a historic photo inside the restaurant acknowledge the history of the building.

After leaving the Surratt tavern, Booth and Herold arrived early the morning of April 15 at Mudd's house. Mudd, 32, set Booth's broken leg, had crutches made and sent Booth and Herold upstairs to a bedroom to sleep.

Mudd had met Booth on several occasions before -- Booth even stayed at the Mudd house in 1864. Many historians say the two met on clandestine Confederate matters. Others, including Mudd descendants, say the meetings were innocent social and business-related matters.

Docents at the house, now a museum, stress Mudd's side of the story. The father of four children, Mudd maintained that he did not recognize Booth in the candlelight because Booth was wearing false whiskers. Mudd also said he did not know about the assassination until he went to Bryantown after sending Booth to bed. Later on April 15, Booth and Herold left the Mudd property by horseback down a plantation road, which you can still see behind the house. (The

original red plush couch where Booth first sat in the parlor and the bedroom where he slept can be seen on the Dr. Mudd House tour.)

The next morning, Easter (April 16), Mudd went to St. Peter's Catholic Church and asked his cousin to inform authorities that two "strangers" had been at his home the day before.

The Dr. Mudd House rises dramatically on 10 acres of land, which numbered 281 acres in Mudd's day, when tobacco, corn and wheat were farmed by slaves.

Most of the furniture in the house is original from Mudd's time, because the house was owned by the Mudd family until it was deeded to the Dr. Samuel A. Mudd Society in 1983. His granddaughter, Louise Mudd Arehart, is still involved in running the house, and you might hear Mudd lore from her if you venture into the gift shop.

"I was the last child to be born in this house," says Arehart, 77. Although her grandfather had died 34 years earlier, his spirit remained with the family, she says.

Even when Arehart was a child, the public had a fascination with the house. "My mother would {act as} a docent. She'd watch to see if folks were coming by {and invite them in}."

At his trial, Mudd was convicted of aiding in the death of Lincoln and received a life sentence at Fort Jefferson Prison in Florida. President Andrew Johnson pardoned Mudd in 1869, after Mudd helped save the lives of prisoners and guards during a yellow fever epidemic. Mudd returned home to his wife, Claudine Louise, and they had five more children. Beautiful wood furniture that he made in prison is displayed at the house, including a checkerboard table and an unusual-looking desk in the front parlor.

Arehart's cousin, Michigan resident Richard Mudd, 93, has been trying for 77 years to convince the Army to erase the conviction of his grandfather. Arehart herself "would like to get a complete exoneration for Grandpa. It was still his duty to take care of that sick man." The family is awaiting the result of a 1992 appeal to the Army to have the military trial declared invalid.

(Other parties interested in the Booth case are making their own attempts to amend the historical record. Efforts are underway to exhume Booth's body at a Baltimore cemetery to confirm its identity, on the theory that the real Booth succeeded in escaping. And Kauffman theorizes that Booth didn't break his leg at Ford's, but on the escape route before reaching Mudd's house.)

After leaving Mudd's house, Booth and Herold made their way to Virginia, meeting Willie Jett and two other Confederates. The five men went on horseback to Port Royal, Va., after crossing the Rappahannock by ferry. They arrived at Richard Garrett's farm the afternoon of April 24.

Jett introduced Booth as James W. Boyd to Garrett, who agreed to take him in. Then the other four, including Herold, went south to the Star Hotel in Bowling Green.

Herold returned to Garrett's farm the next day, where he and Booth slept in a tobacco barn. A federal investigation led the cavalry to Jett at the hotel. At gunpoint, Jett told soldiers that Booth was at Garrett's farm.

The troopers surrounded the barn early the morning of April 26. Herold came out. Booth refused to budge.

Everton Conger, a retired cavalry officer, set fire to the barn. Booth limped toward the door. A shot was fired, possibly by Sgt. Boston Corbett. Booth fell, wounded in the neck.

The Ford's Theatre museum gives Conger's account of Booth's dying words: "He repeated two or three times, 'Kill me, kill me.' The reply was made to him, 'We don't want to kill you, we want you to get well.' " Booth died moments later, taking to the grave all he knew about the assassination conspiracy.

All that's left is the testimony of those who knew the assassin, his writings, and the roads, hills and waterways that bear silent witness to Booth's final, desperate days.

Sites to Visit

Note: WashingtonPost.com has updated the information below, which appeared with the original article, so that it is current as of July 1996.

If you want to visit buildings open to the public, it's a good idea to break up the tour into two or three days, perhaps reserving the District for the first day, Maryland for the second and Virginia for a third. Try to get detailed state and county maps. Privately-owned properties cannot be entered without the permission of the owner. Information below is partly based on material from Michael W. Kauffman and Laurie Verge of the Surratt Society.

Ford's Theatre: 511 10th St. NW. Open 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. daily except Dec. 25. Free admission. Twenty-minute talks on the assassination are given about six times a day (call for times). 202/426-6924 (TDD: 202/426-1749).

Peterson House: 516 10th St. NW. Same hours and phone numbers as Ford's Theatre.

Surratt House and Tavern: 9118 Brandywine Rd., near the intersection of Route 223 (Woodyard Road) and Brandywine Road, Clinton. Open Thursday and Friday 11 a.m. to 3 p.m., and weekends noon to 4 p.m. Admission: \$3 for adults, \$2 for senior citizens, \$1 for children 5-18, and free to children under 5. 301/868-1121.

Doctor Mudd House: Poplar Hill and Dr. Samuel Mudd roads, near Charles County. Open 11 a.m. to 3 p.m. Wednesdays and noon to 4 p.m. weekends. Admission \$3 adults, \$1 ages 17 and under. Tours of 15 or more arranged by appointment. 301/645-6870 or 301/934-8464.

Bryantown Tavern: From Dr. Mudd's, turn right onto Dr. Mudd Road and go about 1.5 miles to a right on Bryantown Road (Route 232). Go about three miles, cross Route 5 and make right onto Trotter Road. Second house on the right is Old Bryantown Tavern. Privately owned.

St. Mary's Catholic Church: On east side of Route 232, about one mile south of Bryantown Tavern.

Zekiah Swamp and Samuel Cox House: From St. Mary's Church, turn left onto Oliver's Shop Road and go about four miles to right on Route 6. After the sign for Zekiah swamp, turn left on Bel Alton-Newtown Road. Go about two miles, passing Clark's Run, then up the hill and slowly go about a half mile to search for plaque on right denoting Rich Hill or the Samuel Cox House. You won't be able to see the white frame house until driving beyond the plaque. Privately owned.

Collis House and Pine Thicket: From Rich Hill, continue on Bel Alton-Newtown Road about one mile, cross railroad tracks and make an immediate left onto Wills Street, go .2 mile to see the former Collis House, now a privately owned white frame house at 9185 Wills St. Continue on Wills until it dead-ends. To the left beyond the railroad tracks is the thicket where Booth and Herold hid.

Huckleberry: Return to main road in Bel Alton and turn left, then turn left onto Route 301 (Crain Highway). Go about 1.5 miles and turn right onto Pope Creek's Road. About a mile ahead, slow down to see Huckleberry cottage on the right at the Loyola Retreat House. To enter the retreat, you must first get permission by calling the director a week ahead at 301/870-3515.

Quesenberry House: From Huckleberry, turn right on Pope's Creek Road and continue until it ends, turning right on Edge Hill Road; go about a mile, turn right on Route 301 (Crain Highway) and go south to Governor Harry W. Nice Memorial Bridge (\$1.50 toll). After crossing the Potomac, turn left at first traffic light onto Potomac Drive (Route 614). Quesenberry house is at the end of Potomac Drive at Ferry Dock Road. Privately owned by the Dahlgren Marine Works.

Cleydael: Backtrack on Potomac Drive to Route 206 (Dahlgren Road) and turn left, eventually crossing Route 301 and driving past Route 218. Go about 1.5 miles and turn left into the Cleydael new housing development, turn right at Old Peppermill Road and look for second house on right (old white frame house with a porch and black shutters). Privately owned.

Port Royal: Backtrack out of Cleydael development, turn left on 206 and go about a mile; turn left on 611 (Eden Drive) and go about two miles then turn right on 301 (James Madison Hwy.). In Port Royal turn left on Caroline Street. The Peyton House, now a dilapidated structure, is on the right corner of Caroline and King.

Bowling Green and Garrett farm: Leaving Port Royal, turn right on King, then right on Middle Street, then left on Route 301. The plaque for Garrett farm is only 2.5 miles south of Port Royal, but it's in the northbound lane of Route 301. It's best to go first to Bowling Green and double back. Continue south from Port Royal on 301 to the 301 South Business exit into Bowling Green. Turn left at traffic light onto Main Street. Go about .4 mile and stop when you see DeJarnette and Beale Insurance Agency on the left, the site of Star Hotel where Willie Jett stayed (he led cavalry to Garrett farm). Backtrack to Route 301 north toward Port Royal. Travel about nine miles, pass sign for Peumansend Creek, climb hill and carefully look for plaque on the right side designating site of Garrett farm.

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