

# The Surratt Courier

Published Bimonthly by the Surratt Society

---

November/December 2020

Louise Oertly, Editor

Volume XLV No. 8

---

## PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

This time of year, I would normally write a longer message with a seasonal theme. However, this year has been anything, but a normal year. I for one will be glad when this year is over.

Below is a copy of the first commercially sold Christmas card, which was printed in England in 1843, the same year, Charles Dickens published *A Christmas Carol*. The card was designed by David Cole and illustrated by John Callcott

Horsley. Of the original print run of 1,000 cards, only 21 cards are known to have survived. The hand-colored card shows a family gathered around a table enjoying a glass of wine with the message: *A Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year to You*.

May that wish be true for everyone this holiday season, and here's hoping that 2021 will be a better year than 2020.

Louise Oertly, President



---

*This newsletter is a bimonthly publication of the Surratt Society, a non-profit volunteer affiliate of the Surratt House Museum, a historic property of the Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission. It is located at 9118 Brandywine Road, Clinton, MD 20735. The museum's phone number is (301) 868-1121. Annual Surratt Society membership is \$10. Visit our website: [surrattmuseum.org](http://surrattmuseum.org).*

\*\*\*\*\*

## CALLING ALL WRITERS AND RESEARCHERS

Since Laurie Verge was very good at getting people to do things, I thought that I would use her words to solicit articles for *The Surratt Courier*. This appeared in the October 1981 issue.

“In order to maintain the high standard of feature articles that this newsletter has become known for, the editor is requesting assistance. To date, we have been fortunate in receiving a wealth of articles for inclusion in our monthly [the *Courier* is now bimonthly] publication. However, more are needed in order to ensure its continuation.

“Although we certainly encourage original research items on the Lincoln assassination, we are also quite happy to reprint articles from other sources (i.e. period newspapers, magazines, books, etc.). We gladly give credit to the origins of such articles.

“There is also a special need for pieces concerning life during the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. While many of our members are chiefly interested in all aspects of the Lincoln assassination, we realize that others are also interested in the social and cultural history of the period. If you happen upon information on the Lincoln assassination, Surratt history, life in Southern Maryland, Civil War history, antiques of the period, costumes and customs, music, art, etc., etc., please share with us.”

Articles may be sent to *The Surratt Courier* by email to [surrattsociety@gmail.com](mailto:surrattsociety@gmail.com) or by mail to Editor, *The Surratt Courier*, c/o Surratt House Museum, 9118 Brandywine Road, Clinton, MD 20735. Thanks for your help.

\*\*\*\*\*

## WHY BOOTH AND HEROLD AT *INDIANTOWN* MAY BE A MYTH

by William P. Binzel<sup>1</sup>

What was the actual role played by Thomas A. Jones in getting John Wilkes Booth and his accomplice, David Herold, across the Potomac River in the aftermath of the assassination of Abraham Lincoln? The generally accepted “narrative”<sup>2</sup> has Jones leading the pair down to Dent’s Meadow on the Maryland shoreline; putting them in an \$18 boat; giving them a candle and a compass; pointing them in the direction of Mrs. Quesenberry’s home on Machodoc Creek in Virginia; pushing the two men off into the Potomac River on a pitch dark night; and figuratively waving goodbye to them from the shore. According to the “narrative,” being inexperienced boatmen, the fugitives failed to cross the Potomac that night. Instead, they drifted further north on the river and landed at *Indiantown*, the home of John J. Hughes along Nanjemoy Creek, and still in Maryland. Nearly every account of Booth and Herold’s twelve-day escape written in the past 125 years includes a stop at *Indiantown*, so much so, that by virtue of repetition, it is generally assumed to be a “historic fact.” But, where did that portion of the “narrative” originate and is it true?

On its face, the “narrative” is problematic for two reasons: (1) it is completely out of character and much too passive for the role that Thomas Jones was known to have played

throughout the course of the Civil War, and; (2) the sole source for most of that portion of the “narrative” is Jones, himself. The role and dedication of Jones is perhaps best described by the distinguished Lincoln assassination author, Ed Steers:

*Of the people serving as agents in southern Maryland, Thomas Jones ranked at the top. Jones had labored long and hard in service to the Confederate cause as the principal agent in charge of a mail courier route and of ferrying people across the Potomac River to Virginia. Jones was a good agent and an important part of the Confederate underground apparatus. Several years after the war ended Jones published a memoir in which he wrote, “I entered with zeal into the Confederate cause.” Although an active agent, Jones managed to avoid arrest by the military authorities most of the time. In October 1861, however, he was not so lucky. Jones was arrested near Pope’s Creek and thrown into the Old Capitol Prison in Washington and charged with “disloyal practices.” Held for six months, he was eventually released after taking the oath of allegiance and returned home to Charles County, where he immediately resumed his activities in spite of his oath.*<sup>3</sup>

Authors John and Roberta Wearmouth describe those activities as: “Jones himself regularly crossed the [Potomac] river during the war years and was never apprehended while en route. In fact, the ‘Jones Ferry’ carried hundreds of passengers back and forth during the war years, nearly all having some business with the Confederacy. Directly across the river was the farm of Benjamin Grimes in King George County [Virginia].”<sup>4</sup> They go on to cite Jones’ “devotion and courage” to the Confederate government,<sup>5</sup> “crossing the river nearly every night, and sometimes twice or more of a night, with boats, sometimes rowed by two pairs of oars, at others by three, while he steered with an oar in the stern. The interlopers could ride down from Washington to Pope’s Creek in six or seven hours, and Jones could put them at Grimes’s house opposite in less than an hour.”<sup>6</sup>

Maryland historian Robert Pogue, wrote: “Thomas A. Jones was to me, the most interesting in the whole story about Booth. He was a man of indomitable courage, cool, and without fear during a time of great personal danger, and extremely loyal to his friends and his beloved Confederacy.”<sup>7</sup>

In his application for membership in the Society of the Army and Navy of the Confederate States in the State of Maryland, Jones described his own actions in the war as: “I contracted with Col. William Norris, Chief of the Signal Service of the Confederacy, to act as Chief Agent for Maryland to forward all dispatches and other papers connected with the Confederacy, and to furnish said government with files of northern papers which were supplied promptly with but little interruption, receiving said papers the next morning after their publication. **Also it was part of my duty to aid all Confederate scouts and agents to and from Richmond.**”<sup>8</sup> (emphasis added) Norris would also say that Jones was “absolutely reliable” and that “a truer man never stepped on the Earth.”<sup>9</sup>

Such descriptions hardly sound like a man who was responsible for two agents desperately attempting to escape from the Yankees “until Friday night, April 21, when they were put in a boat by Jones and his trusty servant, Henry Woodland, and left to their fate upon the stormy bosom of the Potomac.”<sup>10</sup> By all accounts, when it came to accomplishing a mission on behalf of the Confederacy, Jones did not act in a haphazard or casual manner. It does not seem likely that he would have discharged his duty by launching Booth and Herold, who were “inexperienced in navigating,”<sup>11</sup> alone onto treacherous river currents on an inky black night.

The “narrative” maintains that the first week of Booth’s escape largely remained a secret for nearly two decades, only to be revealed by the dogged determination of journalist George Alfred Townsend (later known as “GATH”), who relentlessly pursued an elderly and impoverished Thomas Jones in 1883. For the sum of \$60, Jones agreed to be interviewed repeatedly by Townsend, who published his article, “How Wilkes Booth Crossed the Potomac,” in *The Century Magazine* in April 1884. As Townsend wrote:

*The last witness in Maryland ended here [at the home of Dr. Samuel A. Mudd]. The Government, in its prosecution of the conspirators, took up the fugitives next at the crossing of the Rappahannock River in Virginia, on the 24<sup>th</sup> of April [1865], having failed to trace Booth a step farther in Maryland, although he did not cross the Potomac until Saturday night, April 22<sup>nd</sup>. A whole week remained unaccounted for; and for the first time the missing links of the connection are here made public. Probably not half a dozen people are alive who have ever heard the narrative fully told.<sup>12</sup>*

It took Townsend nearly **twenty years** to ascertain a version of the details of how Booth escaped from Maryland to Virginia, details that Colonel Henry H. Wells had learned in less than **two weeks** after Lincoln’s death. After interrogating suspects – which likely included beatings and torture – in Charles County, Maryland, Wells had a version of how Booth crossed the Potomac and the names of the people involved. On April 28, 1865, Wells filed the following report with his superior:

*Headquarters Military District of the Patuxent Bryantown Md April 28, 1865*  
*Col. J. H. Taylor*  
*Chief of Staff AAG*  
*Washington DC*  
*Sir,*

*I have the honor to make the following report.*

*Booth and Herold were piloted from two miles below Bryantown by Osborn [Oswell] Swann, a colored man, who was forwarded yesterday to Col. Foster [i.e., arrested and sent to Washington]. After remaining for two or three hours, perhaps longer, at the house of Samuel Cox, they went to the house of Austin L. Adams at Newport, where it seems they must have arrived on Thursday, the time I cannot as yet make positive. They remained at Adams’s house, or concealed in the pines nearby, for two days; Mrs. Adams and her husband concealed them and furnished them with food.*

*Cox was sent to Washington yesterday morning. Adams and his wife will be arrested during the day today. Booth and Herold were undoubtedly concealed in the woods by Thomas A. Jones who was forwarded to Col. Foster last evening. They appear to have been ferried across the Potomac by a man named Bateman and the prisoner Jones. Cavalry are now in pursuit of Bateman.<sup>13</sup> With this I also forward a prisoner named James W. Wilson and another named James Owens, from the latter of whom I have obtained an important part of the above information. I send herewith also a copy of the statement procured from Owens. He did not make it until he was handcuffed and threatened to be hung up.*

*It also appears that Thomas Harbin and Joseph Bayden [Baden] had come over from Virginia some three or four weeks since, and were making arrangements for Booth and Herold’s passage through the country and across the Potomac. Capt. R. D. Pettit was dispatched by me*

*yesterday with cavalry and necessary guides and detectives to secure and bring in all these parties.*

*It seems that as soon as Booth and Herold arrived at Adams's house they sent the horses ridden by them back in this direction in charge of a boy [Sam Cox, Jr.?], whose name I have not yet been able to discover, but hope to do so during the day. I also hope to ascertain definitely the whereabouts, and disposition that has been made of the horses. They were undoubtedly sent back this way, with a view to blind and mislead parties pursuing.*

*I had cavalry and detectives at Newport and all through that neighborhood for several days before the capture of the fugitives, and am strongly inclined to the opinion that at least half a dozen parties in that neighborhood knew of their concealment, and of their route of escape [e.g., Samuel Cox, Sr. and Jr.; Franklin Robey (Cox's overseer); Thomas Jones; Austin Adams and his wife; James Owens; James Wilson, Thomas Harbin; and Joseph Baden]. Every effort will be made to arrest all persons in any way connected with them. ...*

*I have the honor to remain,*

*Very Respectfully,*

*Your obt. Svnt.*

*H. H. Wells*<sup>14</sup>

The speculation by Wells of how Booth and Herold were “ferried across the Potomac” was no doubt fueled by his interrogation of James Owens over several days. In his statement, also dated April 28, 1865, Owens provided Wells with the following information: “A Mr. Bateman, I don’t know his first name, who lives at the oak on the roadside about three miles from Newport, as you go through Allen’s Fresh towards Cobb Neck, told me that Jones put them across the Potomac. They crossed from Pope’s Creek a little above Mr. Watson’s on the creek. . . . Bateman told me that the men got over the Potomac all right, and I judge that he and Jones rowed them across by his saying that they got over all right, and I judge by what the folks said.”<sup>15</sup>

It must be noted that Thomas Jones labeled Colonel Wells as “a most bloodthirsty man.”<sup>16</sup> That the cause of James Owens’ death on June 23, 1865, at age 35 and while incarcerated at the Old Capitol Prison, was recorded as “Inflammation of Brain,”<sup>17</sup> attests to some of the “sternest measures to elicit anything from him” and others suspected of having a role in Booth’s escape.<sup>18</sup>

Desperate to make some money in his waning years, Jones followed Townsend’s article by “authoring” a book published in 1893, entitled *J. Wilkes Booth*, with the lengthy subtitle of “*An Account of His Sojourn in Southern Maryland after the Assassination of Abraham Lincoln, his Passage Across the Potomac, and his Death in Virginia.*” After Jones’ name as the author was the notation, “The only living man who can tell the story.”<sup>19</sup> Colonel William Norris, Jones’ boss in the Confederate Signal Corps, wrote of Thomas Jones: “He is not an educated man but a GENTLEMAN in every fibre.”<sup>20</sup> As such, the prose of the book makes it extremely unlikely that Jones was the actual author of much of the text, and therefore, it is impossible to discern what was actually written or said by Jones and what may have been invented by the ghostwriter, attorney, and newspaperman John E. Stone of La Plata, Maryland.<sup>21</sup> The book was written from Jones’ perspective and largely parrots the details contained in the earlier Townsend article, which may have served as an outline used by Stone.

The intrepid Osborn Oldroyd wrote that a year after Jones’ book was published, he was visited by Jones at the Petersen House in Washington, D.C., in April 1894. Oldroyd asked Jones

to again recount his version of events, which became pages 101-110 of Oldroyd's 1901 book, *The Assassination of Abraham Lincoln*. Here again, in Oldroyd's account, Jones was remarkably consistent in his details, which ended with: "I pushed the boat off, and it glided out into the darkness. I could see nothing, and the only sound was the swish of the waves made by the little boat.... I stood on the shore and listened till the sound of the oars died away in the distance, then climbed the hill and took my way home, and my sleep was more quiet and peaceful than it had been for some time."<sup>22</sup> Not only was it consistent with Jones' previous accounts, it was lifted nearly word-for-word from Jones' book, as was most of Oldroyd's version of Jones' story. Oddly, the one detail that is inconsistent is the amount Booth paid Jones for the boat. Townsend wrote that "Jones received from Booth seventeen dollars in greenbacks, or a little less than the cost of the boat which Jones had to surrender forever"<sup>23</sup>; in Jones' book, he said, "I took eighteen dollars, the price of the boat I would never see again"<sup>24</sup>; and in Oldroyd, Jones said, "I took seventeen dollars, the price of the boat."<sup>25</sup>

Over the years, Townsend's article and Jones' and Oldroyd's books have been oft-cited as the true account of Booth's movements through Maryland and into Virginia. Through repetition, they have been nearly universally accepted by assassination historians as primary sources and factual. Few have stopped to question whether Jones' version is accurate or merely what a dedicated Confederate agent, for his own reasons, wanted history to believe. Being an accomplished operative, Jones had made sure that no one saw him in the presence of Booth and Herold. In addition, Jones knew that his version could not be contradicted by the dead, and most likely would not be contradicted by those still living who had managed to stay unnoticed and unpunished for decades. In short, whatever Jones chose to tell Townsend and what was included in the books, became the "narrative," but it may not be true.

Jones admitted as much in January 1890. In 1887, Jones secured a political patronage job at the Washington Navy Yard. Two years later, in late 1889, a political rival of Jones' patron prevailed upon Secretary of the Navy Benjamin Franklin Tracy to have Jones fired from his position for his role in assisting Booth.<sup>26</sup> His discharge and the reason for it, made the news. When interviewed and asked about his involvement with Booth, Jones candidly disclosed that he had not revealed "the whole story":

*"You are charged with assisting Booth to escape," said the reporter.*

*"So I noticed in the papers." [replied Jones]*

*"Is it true?"*

*"To a certain extent, yes: and I may say that I have never committed an act that I am ashamed of..."*

*"Well, about Booth's being ferried over the river?"*

*"I assisted in that. I have not and do not deny the fact."*

*"Who assisted you?"*

*"I prefer not to give names just now."*

*"Did you know at the time that Booth had assassinated President Lincoln?"*

*"Just right at the time I did not, but in a few moments after I took hold of the job I did, and I didn't let go then."*

*"Will you not give us the whole story?"*

*"I have good reasons for not doing so just at the present time. But I desire it understood that I am not ashamed of the part I took. ... I may give you an interesting story sometime in the future, but at present do not deem it wise to do so." <sup>27</sup>*

While we cannot know the “good reasons” Jones had not to “give us the whole story” in 1890, it is obvious that what he revealed to Townsend years earlier was not “the whole story.” It is possible that Jones was saving the actual details of his role for revelation in *his* book, but his discharge from the Navy Yard may have convinced him that there was little to be gained by further implicating himself, especially when he needed to seek and retain employment.<sup>28</sup> Consequently, Jones’ book contained little more information than what he had previously related to Townsend. It was a version of events already made public and one that he could not retract.

Perhaps, most telling is a note in Thomas Jones’ handwriting, apparently written shortly before his death in March 1895 (a near-deathbed confession?) that reads: “**Captain Williams offered the reward on Tuesday 18<sup>th</sup> of April 1865 in Brawner’s Hotel in Porttobacco Md. and on the 22<sup>nd</sup> of April 1865 at night I took Booth and Harald to a point on the Potomac River, known as Dent’s Meddow in Charles County, Md. And from thence landed them on a Point at the mouth of Machodoc Chreek, in king George County Va. Respectfully yours T. A. Jones.**”<sup>29</sup> (spelling as in the original, but emphasis added)

There are three very compelling aspects of Jones’ note. First, it suggests that he was much more than a passive observer standing on the Maryland shore, and that he played a very active role in getting Booth and Herold across the Potomac from Dent’s Meadow and **landing them** at Machodoc Creek in Virginia. If that is true, then it must follow that the “narrative” of Booth and Herold at *Indiantown* is fiction.<sup>30</sup>

Second, and of equal importance, is the date on which Jones said he got the pair across the river, i.e., the **night of Saturday, April 22, 1865**. While it differs on whether the fugitives spent twelve hours or thirty-six hours there,<sup>31</sup> the “narrative” places Booth and Herold out of Jones’ hands and at *Indiantown* from dawn to dusk on that day, April 22<sup>nd</sup>.

Jones’ note combined with Owens’ statement, would suggest that Jones moved the pair from the pine thicket near Bel Alton to Newport on Thursday, April 20<sup>th</sup>, where they slept in the woods near Austin Adams’ tavern. On the evening of Friday, April 21<sup>st</sup>, Jones moved them back closer to the Potomac, and from there, on the evening of Saturday, April 22<sup>nd</sup>, Jones and “Bateman” rowed the two men across the Potomac to Machodoc Creek and led them to the home of Elizabeth Rousby Quesenberry.<sup>32</sup> Once in Virginia on the morning of Sunday, April 23<sup>rd</sup>, Jones delivered the fugitives to the care of Confederate agents who lived nearby, Thomas Harbin and Joseph Baden – the two individuals named in Owens’ statement.<sup>33</sup> Such a scenario would also address one of the more troubling aspects of the “narrative,” specifically, that from the time that Booth and Herold pushed off on Friday evening until they landed in Virginia on Sunday morning, the nautical novice and diminutive David Herold would have spent nearly fourteen of the thirty-six hour period rowing on the treacherous currents of the Potomac River, covering a distance of twelve miles from *Indiantown* to Gambo Creek in Virginia, in one night alone.<sup>34</sup> (Per the “narrative,” Booth and Herold landed at Gambo Creek and Herold walked the mile from there to Mrs. Quesenberry’s house by himself, a rather amazing feat considering that it is questionable as to whether Herold had ever before set foot in Virginia.) Herold’s life was not one of a physical laborer. Just the blisters alone from rowing for that many hours should have left him relatively incapacitated. Yet, not one of the several witness who saw Herold on Sunday, April 23<sup>rd</sup>, or Monday, April 24<sup>th</sup>, indicated that he looked any of the worse for wear.

And third, is Jones’ reference to his meeting with Captain William Williams, one of the detectives engaged in the massive manhunt for the fugitives in southern Maryland. As Jones told the story:

*It was while in Port Tobacco that day [Tuesday, April 18, 1865] I made the acquaintance of Captain Williams. He was standing in the bar-room of the old Brawner Hotel (now St. Charles Hotel) in the act of drinking with several gentlemen who were gathered around him, when I entered. Some one introduced me to him and he politely invited me to drink with him. Just as we were about to take the drink, standing with our glasses in our hands, he turned to me and said, "I will give one hundred thousand dollars to any one who will give me the information that will lead to Booth's capture."*

*I replied, "That is a large sum of money and ought to get him if money can do it."*<sup>35</sup>

Williams also publicly recounted the same story, which gives Jones' version credibility. In the course of the four years since the start of the Civil War, Jones had been imprisoned in the Old Capitol Prison for six months; his wife died leaving him to care for their nine children; his home and farm were lost in foreclosure; his trip to Richmond in early April 1865 in an attempt to collect his \$2,300 salary for two and a half years of work in service to the Confederate government ended in failure upon the government's evacuation of Richmond on April 2<sup>nd</sup>; and his life savings of \$3500 was invested in Confederate bonds, which were worthless. The man was, for all practical purposes, destitute and was offered nearly two million in today's dollars in exchange for revealing Booth's location. But Jones remained silent and intent on his mission of getting Booth and Herold across the Potomac. With such a strong dedication to a single purpose, it makes it highly unlikely that Jones would leave its accomplishment to chance and simply push Booth and Herold into the night at Dent's Meadow, and on their own.<sup>36</sup>

The *Indiantown* story first appeared in Townsend's 1884 article, and the primary source for it appears again to be Jones: "It was not until months after this **that Jones ascertained** that the fugitives did not succeed in crossing the river that Friday night. They struck the flood tide in a few minutes, were inexperienced in navigating, and when they touched the shore sometime that night and discovered a house near by, to which Herold made his way, the latter saw something familiar about the place, he knowing all that country well."<sup>37</sup> (emphasis added) According to the article, Herold recognized the property as that occupied by John J. Hughes on land owned by Hughes' father-in-law, Peregrine Davis. The two men then obtained food from Hughes, remained concealed along Nanjemoy Creek during the day (Saturday, April 22<sup>nd</sup>), and successfully crossed the Potomac that night. However, if Jones was his source, Townsend did not explain how Jones "ascertained" the details of activity that he did not witness. Those details had to have been assembled indirectly from other sources, possibly Herold and Booth.

On April 27<sup>th</sup>, the day after he was captured, Herold was interrogated aboard the *Montauk* by Special Judge Advocate John A. Bingham. At one point in his statement, Herold mentioned Peregrine Davis as one of eight men he had visited in the past in "the lower counties."<sup>38</sup> He went on to say that the pair landed on the shore along Nanjemoy Creek, and he "went to a man's house and wanted to buy some bread. He said he hadn't baked & would not bake any."<sup>39</sup> However, in the words of James O. Hall, Herold's rambling statement "is glib, full of misdirections, evasions, and outright lies."<sup>40</sup> With regard to Booth, in one of the two entries in the 1864 date book that has become known as his "diary," Booth wrote: "After being hunted like a dog through swamps, woods, and last night being chased by gun boats till I was forced to return wet cold and starving, with every man's hand against me, I am here in despair." The assumption has been that Booth likely made the entry while on the banks of Nanjemoy Creek at *Indiantown*, although the exact date of that entry has been the subject of debate. On their face, Herold's statement and Booth's

diary would seem dispositive that the two men were at *Indiantown*; however, one must consider the motive and veracity of the respective raconteurs.

Herold never mentioned Hughes or *Indiantown*, and his statement is replete with falsehoods and fabrications. Booth's writings were an effort to outline his justification for killing Lincoln, and not to record history. As far as telling the truth, Booth had a self-serving flair for the dramatic in his version of events: "*I shouted Sic semper before I fired. In jumping broke my leg. I passed all his pickets, rode sixty miles that night, with the bone of my leg tearing the flesh at every jump.*" That was all an exaggeration, intended to refute newspaper accounts that condemned Booth's assault on Lincoln as cowardly.

The contents of Herold's statement in 1865, as well as Booth's "diary," which came to light in the 1867 trial of John Surratt, Jr., may have been known to Jones and used by him to construct the details of his version of that portion of the "narrative" that – if true – he could not have witnessed or known firsthand; but details he nonetheless apparently provided to Townsend. Much of the story associated with Booth and Herold at *Indiantown* is Hughes "family tradition."<sup>41</sup> It is interesting to note that the local *Port Tobacco Times*, in the obituary for John J. Hughes on July 15, 1892, made no reference to Booth being on his property.<sup>42</sup> In contrast, the obituary for Thomas A. Jones in the *Times* on March 8, 1895, contained the words: "Mr. Jones is most widely known on account of the part he took in assisting Booth and Herold to escape to Virginia after the assassination of Mr. Lincoln," and continued with much of the account from Townsend's article and Jones' book.

Most of the Lincoln assassination "narrative" has been assembled over the years by historians, authors and researchers, and it is not the purpose of this article to cast aspersions on them or any of their work. This article is intended to be provocative, and yes, even speculative. Primary sources are essential in the ongoing quest to discover historic fact as best we can. However, the *interpretation* of a primary source tends to be accepted as historic fact, if it is repeated often enough over time. As such, it tends to preclude closer scrutiny and evaluation of the source itself. Consequently, it is essential to periodically question those interpretations and to examine anew the motivations, intentions, and circumstances surrounding a primary source. It did not come into existence in a vacuum and consideration of the overall environment at the time of its birth is both warranted and necessary. As it relates to Thomas A. Jones' version of the events of April 1865, that is the purpose of this article.<sup>4</sup>

---

Sources:

<sup>1</sup> The origin of this article was a conversation with fellow Surratt House Museum docent Joseph E. "Rick" Smith, III, as we sat in Surratt's Tavern. Without Rick's extensive knowledge, it is unlikely that this article would have been written. The author is extremely grateful to Rick for his contributions to, and review of, this article.

<sup>2</sup> George Alfred Townsend, "How Wilkes Booth Crossed the Potomac," *The Century Magazine*, Vol. 27, No. 6 (April 1884), p. 822. The "narrative" is the word used by Townsend to describe the story of Booth's twelve days as a fugitive.

<sup>3</sup> Edward Steers, Jr., *Blood on the Moon* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2001), p. 65 (footnotes omitted).

<sup>4</sup> John M. and Roberta J. Wearmouth, *Thomas A. Jones – Chief Agent of the Confederate Secret Service* (Port Tobacco, MD: Stones Throw Publishing, 2000), p. 5.

<sup>5</sup> Wearmouth, *Jones*, p. 36.

<sup>6</sup> Townsend, "How Booth Crossed," p. 823.

<sup>7</sup> Robert E. T. Pogue, "John Wilkes Booth and the Indomitable Thomas A. Jones," *Chronicles of St. Mary's* (Monthly Bulletin of the St. Mary's County Historical Society), Vol. 22, No. 7 (July 1974), p. 3.

<sup>8</sup>Wearmouth, *Jones*, p. 39.

<sup>9</sup>Letter from William Norris to Eugene L. Didierly, September 25, 1890, in the Gunther Collection, Chicago Historical Society.

<sup>10</sup>Osborn H. Oldroyd, *The Assassination of Abraham Lincoln* (Washington, DC: O. H. Oldroyd, 1901), p. 267. That was the description supplied to Oldroyd by Samuel Cox, Jr.

<sup>11</sup>Townsend, "How Booth Crossed," p. 831.

<sup>12</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 822.

<sup>13</sup>A search of the census records reveals that Joseph Bateman (b. 1826) and his brother, George (b. 1828), lived near Newport in Allen's Fresh. Joseph's occupation was listed as "sailor," so it is probable that he or his brother was the "Bateman" referenced by Wells and Owens. Another Potomac blockade runner, Richard M. Smoot, named a different George Bateman (b. 1835) in association with Lincoln assassination conspirators, John H. Surratt, Jr., and George Atzerodt. According to the census records, that George Bateman's occupation was also listed as "sailor." He and his brother, Charles, lived in the vicinity of Port Tobacco, thirteen miles from Newport. (See: Richard Mitchell Smoot, *The Unwritten History of the Assassination of Abraham Lincoln*, ed. Randal Berry (ECO Publishing, 2011), p. 6; and William A. Tidwell, et al., *Come Retribution* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1998), p. 339.) [The author is grateful to Rick Smith for his assistance in identifying the Batemans and where they lived.]

<sup>14</sup>William C. Edwards, ed., "Henry H. Wells," *The Lincoln Assassination: The Reward Files* (Washington, DC: National Archives Microfilm Record Group M-619, CD-ROM, 2008), 458:407-410. There are additional aspects of Wells' report that should be explored, such as why none of the individuals identified and arrested by Wells were ever charged or tried. That Wells' report has largely been ignored by assassination historians over the years may stem from the fact that it was misfiled in the National Archives, becoming part of the M-619 *Reward* files, when it should have been included in the M-599 files of the *Evidence*.

<sup>15</sup>Edwards, ed., "James Owens," *The Reward Files*, 458:411-415.

<sup>16</sup>Townsend, "How Booth Crossed," p. 832.

<sup>17</sup>The author acknowledges and thanks Steve Williams, who in 2019, located Owens' cause of death and burial information in the records of the Arlington National Cemetery, where Owens is buried.

<sup>18</sup>William C. Edwards and Edward Steers, Jr., eds., "M. A. Clancey," *The Lincoln Assassination – The Evidence* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2009), p. 353.

<sup>19</sup>Thomas A. Jones, *J. Wilkes Booth* (Chicago: Laird & Lee Publishers, 1893; republished by the Society for the Restoration of Port Tobacco, Inc., 1955).

<sup>20</sup>Norris to Didierly letter, September 25, 1890.

<sup>21</sup>Wearmouth, *Jones*, p. 85. John E. Stone was the son of Thomas David Stone, who was a cousin of Frederick Stone, the attorney who represented David Herold and Dr. Samuel Mudd at the conspirators' trial. The Wearmouths' source was Samuel Cox, Jr., who made notes in his copy of Jones' book in August 1893, and which were first made public some years later by Cox Jr.'s grandson. Inside the back cover of the book, Cox Jr. wrote: "Ghost written by John Stone, a nephew of Judge Frederick Stone."

<sup>22</sup>Oldroyd, *Assassination of Lincoln*, p. 110.

<sup>23</sup>Townsend, "How Booth Crossed," p. 831.

<sup>24</sup>Jones, *Booth*, p. 110.

<sup>25</sup>Oldroyd, *Assassination of Lincoln*, p. 110.

<sup>26</sup>In a strange coincidence, Jones' patron was Congressman Barnes Compton (D-MD), whose 1888 election to the House of Representatives was being contested by his political rival, Sydney Mudd, a Republican. Mudd was ultimately successful in his challenge and was seated in the House in March 1890. Compton regained the seat in the following November election. Sydney and Dr. Samuel Mudd were distant cousins. Sam's grandfather (Alexius) and Sydney's great-grandfather (Henry Thomas) were brothers.

<sup>27</sup>"AIDED BOOTH TO ESCAPE – Why A Maryland Man Was Discharged From the Navy Yard," *The Washington Post*, January 19, 1890.

<sup>28</sup>Toward the end of his life, Jones was practically destitute. Upon his death in 1895, Jones' total net worth was \$181.60. (See: Wearmouth, *Jones*, p. 147.)

<sup>29</sup>The note was discovered by Lincoln assassination researcher and author, Richard Sloan. This author wishes to acknowledge and thank Mr. Sloan for his gracious generosity in sharing it and other sources used in this

article. Any fault with the interpretation of Mr. Sloan's information is mine alone. Jones' note is now in a private collection, but a copy of it may be found in the files of the James O. Hall Library at the Surratt House Museum in Clinton, MD.

<sup>30</sup>To bolster the "narrative," some authors have relied on a note written on April 27, 1865, the day after Booth's death, by William R. Wilmer of Port Tobacco, Maryland. Wilmer told the authorities that he "had reason to believe that two men – one answering the description of Booth – was [*sic*] seen last Friday [April 21<sup>st</sup>] in Nanjemoy Creek at a point nine miles from this place." However, Wilmer's statement is much too vague (e.g., "I have reason to believe" and not "I saw") and lacking in detail (e.g., whoever the actual witness was, claimed to see a man "answering the description of Booth" when, at the time, most men of average height with dark hair resembled Booth from a distance), to be considered as proof that some unidentified witness had actually seen Booth and Herold in the vicinity of *Indiantown* on that day. It seems more probable that Wilmer was angling for a piece of the reward. In any event, by the time Wilmer's note was received by Washington Provost Marshal Major James O'Beirne, Booth was dead, and the "sighting" was never investigated.

<sup>31</sup>See: William P. Binzel, "When Did Booth and Herold Attempt to Cross the Potomac?" *The Surratt Courier*, Vol. 44, No. 6 (June 2019), pp. 3-10.

<sup>32</sup>Mrs. Quesenberry was later arrested, brought to Washington, and provided a statement to Colonel Henry H. Wells on May 16, 1865. Edwards and Steers say: "Elizabeth Quesenberry's statement is disingenuous. Her home at the mouth of Machodoc Creek on the Virginia shore was a safe house for Confederate agents." (See: Edwards and Steers, "Elizabeth Rousby Quesenberry," *The Evidence*, p. 1074 n1.) That, combined with a desired rendezvous with nearby Confederate agents Thomas Harbin and Joseph Baden, may explain why her home was the destination instead of another Confederate Signal Corps station along the Potomac, such as the farm of Benjamin Grimes.

<sup>33</sup>Jones and Harbin were brothers-in-law, as Jones' first wife was Harbin's sister.

<sup>34</sup>William Tindall, "Booth's Escape from Washington after the Assassination of Lincoln, His Subsequent Wanderings and Final Capture," *Records of the Columbia Historical Society, Washington, D.C.*, Vol. 18 (1915), p. 11.

<sup>35</sup>Jones, *Booth*, pp. 90-93.

<sup>36</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 110.

<sup>37</sup>Townsend, "How Booth Crossed," p. 831.

<sup>38</sup>Edwards and Steers, "David Herold," *The Evidence*, p. 666.

<sup>39</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 674.

<sup>40</sup>James O. Hall, *On the Way to Garrett's Barn* (Clinton, MD: The Surratt Society, 2001), p. 7.

<sup>41</sup>See: Steers, *Blood on the Moon*, p. 184.

<sup>42</sup>According to Townsend: "The keeper of the house at Nanjemoy [i.e., Hughes] became frightened after they [Booth and Herold] left, and rode into Port Tobacco and told his lawyer of the circumstance, who took him at once before a Federal officer." (See: Townsend, "How Booth Crossed," p. 831.) A search of the National Archives' M-599 files of the Lincoln assassination *Evidence*, the M-619 files of the Lincoln assassination *Rewards*, and the conspirators' trial did not reveal any statement by John J. Hughes.

<sup>43</sup>This article is dedicated to Laurie Verge. Laurie was the consummate teacher who always promoted additional research into the mysteries and questions of history. In one of my last conversations with her, Rick Smith and I sat in her office. I outlined the concepts of this article, and she encouraged me to write it. So, this is for Laurie, who now knows all the answers.

\*\*\*\*\*

## CHRISTMAS WITH THE SURRATTS

by Laurie Verge

Reprinted from *The Surratt Courier*, December 1977

As we celebrate the festive season of Christmas, we can easily think back to the time of the Surratts. What was Christmas like for them?

Did Mary spend time in the weeks before Christmas sending cards of greetings, as we do today? The first known Christmas card was designed in England in 1843 by John Calcott Horsley, but New Year cards had been printed for many years before this. At Christmas, people had often decorated their own visiting cards for the occasion, and children would prepare fancy papers as a form of greeting for their relatives. By 1860, some commercial cards were catching on in America. Perhaps young Anna may have been tempted by some in the shops along Pennsylvania Avenue on one of her trips to the city.

What about Santa Claus? Dr. Clement Moore's *The Visit of St. Nicholas* (better known today as *'Twas Night Before Christmas*) had been published anonymously in 1823, the year of Mary Surratt's birth, and was taken to the American heart. There was no stopping St. Nick, and finally Thomas Nast published his artistic conception of Dr. Moore's figure in 1863 in *Harper's Illustrated Weekly*. He named it Santa Claus, a derivative of the Dutch names Sanct Herr Nicholaas or Sintirklass. By 1863, Mary's children were grown, but for how many years had their stockings "hung by the chimney with care...?"

More easy to imagine are the decorations that Mary would have used. Pine, crowsfoot, and running cedar abounded in the woods of Southern Maryland and were, undoubtedly, used in the Surratt home. Ivy, laurel, yew, bay, and holly were the most popular 19<sup>th</sup> century greens. The woods of Surrattsville held much of these also. The most prized Christmas decoration of the period was, surprisingly, rosemary. Fresh fruit from the markets of the city would be part of the décor with ornamental apple trees a favorite and, surely, mistletoe, which young Isaac and John would shoot from the neighboring trees for Anna to fashion into a kissing bough.

Would a Christmas tree be part of the decorations? The custom had spread from Alsace and the Black Forest region of Germany throughout Europe in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and became popular in the U.S. after 1850. The first Christmas tree in the White House was brought in by Franklin Pierce in that decade. And, *Godey's Lady Book* carried instructions on decorating the tree in its Christmas edition for 1860. The cedar became a favorite Southern Maryland Christmas tree, and a small one may well have sat upon the parlor table with small fruits, gilded nuts, candies, bows, and angel's hair of gold and silver threads as decorations.

The South had its Yule log, called the Christmas log. One custom called for the plantation master to allow a Christmas rest for the enslaved people. The holiday lasted as long as the Christmas log burned. However, a known trick to keep it burning slowly was to secretly sprinkle water on the log. Could such a trick been practiced, while Surratt and his sons were attending one of the popular turkey-shooting matches held during the Christmas season?

Turkey was popular in Mrs. Surratt's kitchen, too. When the Christmas bird was basted, its aroma mixed with those of mincemeat, fruitcakes, and gingerbread. Oysters were brought home from Upper Marlboro for Christmas breakfast. The smells of whiskeys and wines must have flowed down the hall to mix with those from the tavern, where the customers were raising their toasts to the season.

Some weeks before Christmas, these same toasters had been at work on their own farms in a sort of Christmas prelude—hog killing day. The day had to be right: chilly, frosty, and cloudless. The huskiest hands were sent to the pens for the best pigs, and soon each carcass was dropped into a cask of steaming water, and its hair scraped off. Suspended from beams, it hung for cooling and interior cleaning. Fat was turned into lard; sage, thyme, and other seasonings went into sausage; and children roasted the real delicacies—pig tails. Spareribs and pigs feet were enjoyed, as were "crackling", the crisp treat remaining after the lard was removed. All the children competed for the great prize of the day, pigs' bladders. These were saved for

Christmas, when, blown up, they made superb balloons. How many seasons did a rooms of the Surratt home hear the magnificent pop of the hog bladder?

Above all the cooking and decorating for the season was the true meaning of the day. Mary Surratt was a devout Christian, and Christmas Day meant solemn Mass at St. Mary's in Piscataway. On the way there and also on their return, the family probably visited friends and relatives. By early afternoon, perhaps the Jenkins family with Mary's widowed mother would gather at the Surratt home for the Christmas meal.

With the big feast over in the late afternoon, evening settled in with light conversation and perhaps music from Anna at the melodeon. The sounds of a spiritual sung by one of the enslaved people may have drifted in to entertain the group, as the family again looked over their gifts: a book of verses for Mary, some "store-bought" lace for young Anna, new hunting knives for the boys, and perhaps a nice brandy for father. Homemade jams and cakes from neighbors may have been appreciated, as a gift giving was less profuse in the Surratt's' day.

The Surratt Christmas did not have the elegance and fancy parties of the plantation Christmas in the deep South, but it is important to remember that Mary Surratt was a lady, an educated lady, who appreciated the nice things in life. Even when life became hard, we can feel sure that she would strive to have the best possible holiday for her family.

---

Sources:

*The Book of Christmas Folklore* by Tristan Potter Coffin

*The Southern Christmas Book* by Harnett T. Kane

*A Book of Christmas* by William Sansom