

# *The Surratt Courier*

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Louise Oertly, Editor

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## President's Message

As the newly elected president of the Surratt Society, my first "official" act is to thank Louise Oertly for her many years of dedication in that position.

With the passing of Laurie Verge and the changes at the Surratt House Museum, it has not been an easy task. The Bylaws of the Surratt Society, which was formed to support the operation of the Surratt House Museum, impose a limit on the consecutive number of terms of its president. Louise has generously agreed to continue to serve the Society as Vice President. Along with Tom Buckingham as Treasurer and Becky Morris as Secretary, I welcome their support.

Collectively, our objective is to maintain the Surratt Society as an entity that Laurie would recognize. Louise has also agreed to remain as editor of *The Surratt Courier* (which is a very good thing, as she is far superior than I at such things and I do not plan to write regular "messages"), but I will continue to assist her with editing.

I have enjoyed the articles from issues of the *Courier* from the past, but we are always looking for new perspectives and information and welcome the submission of articles for publication. I hope that you will take that as a challenge.

Again, thank you for your support and your desire to keep an entity dedicated to the exploration of Lincoln's assassination and related topics at the forefront of our research. The fascination of history is that

even after 159 years, we are still scratching our heads and trying to ascertain what really happened. As Laurie intended, let's continue the search together.

Bill Binzel, President

**Editor's Note:** As Bill and another reader pointed out, it's interesting to read reprinted articles, but newer information may be available—especially if it corrects any misinformation in the decades' old articles that are being reprinted. If there are errors, please let us know. Of course, this doesn't mean we are only looking for corrections. If you have new information you would like to share, please send an article on that too. The topics can range from the Lincoln assassination and its cast of characters to social history of the times.

If you haven't noticed, I love reading and sharing old newspapers articles. Courtesy of the Library of Congress's site, <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov>, it's much more fun and less dusty finding them online. You might even find an unsolved murder/suicide? in your family like I did.

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*The Surratt House Museum, a historic property of the Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission. The Surratt House Museum's phone number is (301) 868-1121.*

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## **An Unlikely Escort: The Dentist Who (Maybe) Helped Mary Lincoln Out of Frankfurt**

By Susan Higginbotham

In 1870, the widowed Mary Lincoln and her son Tad, who had already been in one war zone in Washington, D.C., found themselves in another as France and Prussia faced off.

After her husband's assassination, Mary refused to return to Springfield, Illinois.<sup>1</sup> Although the Lincolns owned a home at Eighth and Jackson Streets there and three of her married sisters lived nearby, Mary was on chilly terms with many of her former neighbors. She decided instead to make her home in Chicago. Accompanied by her sons Robert and Tad, she moved to that city in May 1865. There, with Robert working for a law firm and Tad enrolled in school, she had little to do but to brood and await the division of the estate of her husband, who had died intestate [without a will]. Having bought heavily on credit during her years as First Lady, she owed thousands of dollars to merchants.

To clear her debts, Mary hit on the idea of selling her wardrobe. It was no longer needed now that Mary was perpetually in mourning garb. Enlisting the help of Elizabeth Keckley, a former slave turned dressmaker who had created many fashionable garments for Mary in Washington, Mary traveled to New York in September 1867 under the name of "Mrs. Clarke." What followed was an unmitigated disaster. Mary's identity was quickly discovered. Aside from the sale being regarded as in poor taste, prospective buyers were unimpressed by the clothing, which of course was no longer in the height of style and not in the freshest condition. Those who could afford the asking prices did not need to buy secondhand garments anyway. The press, never well-disposed to Mary, was merciless, and Robert Lincoln was humiliated and worried. Referring to money, he confided to his fiancée, Mary Harlan, "The simple truth, which I cannot tell anyone not personally interested, is that my mother is on one subject not mentally responsible."<sup>2</sup>

Soon afterward, journalist James Redpath persuaded Elizabeth Keckley, who had been a frequent companion and confidante of Mary in Washington, to publish an account, *Behind the Scenes, or; Thirty Years a Slave and Four Years in the White House*. Keckley meant well, but this time it was she who took a drubbing at the hands of the press, which was appalled by the notion of a black woman presuming to write about a person, who in some respects, had been her former employer. Mary herself was furious with Keckley, who had included some letters from Mary in the appendix. Keckley blamed Redpath, claiming he had not had her permission to do so. In a letter to a friend, Mary referred to Keckley sneeringly as the "colored historian."<sup>3</sup> Their friendship was over, at least as far as Mary was concerned. Keckley retained a photograph of Mary Lincoln into her old age.<sup>4</sup>

In all this there was one bright spot. The Lincoln estate was at last settled, leaving Mary reasonably secure and her debts paid. Mary decided to travel to Europe, which she and Lincoln had planned to visit after his second term as President ended. Her physicians had recommended travel abroad—a common prescription for those who could afford it—and she was eager to escape the American press. Having remained in America long enough to attend Robert's wedding to Mary Harlan in Washington, D.C., Mary and Tad set sail for Europe in October 1868. After arriving in Bremen [Germany], they moved to Frankfurt, where Tad was enrolled in school. Although Mary and Tad traveled elsewhere, Frankfurt would remain their base for some time.

Meanwhile, a young dentist with the splendid name of Isidor Mordaunt Sigismund had also settled in Frankfurt. A younger son of a rabbi, Isidor had been born around 1840 in the Polish town of Praszka, near the Prussian border. His half-sister Ernestine Louise Rose, over thirty years his senior, had arrived in the United States with her English husband in 1836. An abolitionist and outspoken atheist, she became prominent in the women's rights movement and, in her day, was nearly as well-known as Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton.<sup>5</sup>

Isidor first appears in American records in 1857, when he completed a form in Boston declaring his intent to become an American citizen.<sup>6</sup> He was not, however, a man who liked to stay in one place. Soon he was in England, where he and an older brother patented a dental apparatus, but he returned to the United States in time for the Civil War.<sup>7</sup> He served briefly in the Union Army before returning to Europe, after which he enlisted once more and quickly deserted.<sup>8</sup> In 1867 in London, he married Caroline Gregory, the daughter of an English gentleman. [The marriage seems to have been a miserable one and ended in divorce in 1877.<sup>9</sup>] By 1869 Isidor was in Frankfurt, where he brought a defamation suit against a merchant who claimed that he had drilled into a healthy tooth.<sup>10</sup> From 1869 to 1871, he regularly advertised himself as an "American Dentist" based in that city.<sup>11</sup>

As Isidor plied his trade in Frankfurt, Mary alternated between gloom and some measure of content. She had a new obsession: trying to get Congress to grant her a pension, a reasonable enough desire under the circumstances, but Congress was dragging its feet. Mary could do nothing but urge her loyal friends, like Senator Charles Sumner, to keep the issue alive. In the summer of 1869, however, she got a respite in the form of a tour of Scotland. In October, more good news came, when Robert Todd Lincoln and his wife provided Mary with her first grandchild. Finally, on July 14, 1870, Congress awarded Mary a pension of \$3,000 per year. Mary was with Tad in Innsbruck, Austria, when her friend James Orme sent a telegram carrying the happy tidings.

Mary mailed a letter of thanks to Orme from Innsbruck on July 16, 1870, but she was not in a position to dwell for long on the good news. As Mary told Orme in the letter, war between France and Prussia was imminent, and she had been warned by someone in Frankfurt "that the French were on the Rhine, and if we wished to secure our baggage . . . we must return & see after our effects—also, to entirely arrange our affairs in Germany." She added, "You can well believe that when my funds will be placed before me, and we have quiet times again (for the agitation in Europe is very great), the obligation will be remembered."<sup>12</sup>

Three days later, France declared war on Prussia. Despite all the agitation, Mary stayed put in Frankfurt for several more weeks. On August 17, she wrote to Sally Orme, James's wife and Mary's friend, that she planned to leave for London in four or five days. She added that Tad had gone to see General Philip Sheridan, who had come to observe the Prussian field armies, and that she was not using her accustomed mourning stationery because it was packed up.<sup>13</sup> On September 7, she wrote to Senator Sumner from York, England. After thanking him for his efforts on her behalf, she concluded, "My heart has been made sick the past summer, by being almost in the middle of the fearful war, which has convulsed the Continent."<sup>14</sup> That would be Mary's last known comment on the Franco-Prussian War.

Mary did not detail how she and Tad got out of Frankfurt safely, but recently, while researching the family of Ernestine Rose, I stumbled onto a document that may shed some light on the matter. It comes from Isidor Mordaunt Sigismund, the dentist mentioned above.

In 1903, just before preparing to leave New York for Europe again, Isidor, a naturalized citizen of the United States, found that he had lost his papers. Applying for a passport, he attached

a letter to the Secretary of State, dropping name after name. After claiming to have been a friend of the late President Hayes, he added:

It was I who was requested to take charge of the late Mrs. Lincoln & her son, “Tad” (wife of President Lincoln) soon after the outbreak of the Franco-German war from the South of Germany to Antwerp, where she was—if I mistake not—she was taken to the States in an American man-of-war.<sup>15</sup>

Was Isidor telling the truth? He is not entirely trustworthy, for his behavior in his later years had become increasingly erratic. In 1901, he had been tried at London’s Old Bailey for libel after sending a series of unpleasant letters to his half-niece, whom he believed had connived to have him excluded from Ernestine Rose’s will.<sup>16</sup> He had a gambling problem, and perhaps a drinking problem as well.<sup>17</sup> He quarreled with his landlady, with fellow steamship passengers, and (rather self-defeatingly) with the owners of the gambling dens he frequented.<sup>18</sup> A relative believed that he had kidnapped his son by his second marriage.<sup>19</sup>

On the other hand, his story is plausible. Isidor was living in Frankfurt at the same time Mary and Tad were and directed his dental services toward Americans. He was well-traveled. Having grown up near the Prussian border and practiced in Frankfurt, he probably spoke fluent German, and his years in England and the United States make it likely that his English was good as well. As a dentist who also practiced medicine, he would have probably been reassuring company for Mary, who suffered from a number of ailments. All this would have made him a suitable escort for Mary and her son.

On balance, I am inclined to give Isidor credence. While Mary and Tad were no longer alive to contradict his story, Isidor did not have much to gain from its telling, as he had traveled abroad for so long and so often that it was unlikely he was in any real danger of having his passport denied. It appears that he never told his story for financial gain and did not exaggerate his importance, although he frequently wrote articles for Jewish newspapers and lectured in the early twentieth century. Few people in 1903 would have remembered that Mary Lincoln had been abroad in 1870. The fact that he got a detail wrong—Mary did not go to the United States, but to England—suggests a faulty memory after thirty-three years rather than a fabrication. And poor Mary’s name probably did not carry much weight in 1903. All in all, while his account has not been corroborated, there is no reason to dismiss it out of hand.

Mary and Tad finally returned to the United States in 1871, where yet another tragedy awaited—the death of eighteen-year-old Tad, who had matured from the rambunctious boy of the White House years into a thoughtful, considerate young man. The rest of Mary’s story—her commitment to an insane asylum at the instigation of her only surviving son, Robert; her successful campaign to be released and declared “restored to reason;” a second flight to Europe; and her death at her sister Elizabeth Edwards’ house in Springfield in 1882—is well known. Isidor, meanwhile, helped treat wounded troops during the war (at least, he recalled that he did), and then went back to his restless life.<sup>20</sup> Just weeks after making his final voyage from England to New York, he died in his Manhattan lodgings on September 24, 1913.<sup>21</sup> Although it was said he had once been wealthy, he was given a pauper’s burial. If his story about escorting the former First Lady is true, one can only wonder what these two highly-strung people made of each other.

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## REFERENCES

<sup>1</sup> My summary of Mary’s postwar life is based on Catherine Clinton, *Mrs. Lincoln: A Life* (New York: Harper, 2009) and Justin G. Turner and Linda Levitt Turner, eds., *Mary Todd Lincoln: Her Life and Letters* (New York: Fromm International Publishing Company, 1987).

- <sup>2</sup> Jason Emerson, *Mary Lincoln's Insanity Case: A Documentary History* (Urbana, Chicago, and Springfield: University of Illinois Press, 2012), p. 4.
- <sup>3</sup> Turner and Turner, *Life and Letters*, p. 476.
- <sup>4</sup> Jennifer Fleischner, *Mrs. Lincoln and Mrs. Keckley: The Remarkable Story of the Friendship Between a First Lady and a Former Slave* (New York: Broadway Books), p. 324.
- <sup>5</sup> For a good overview of Ernestine Rose's life, see Carol A. Kolmerten, *The American Life of Ernestine L. Rose* (Syracuse University Press, 1999). I have documented the ties between Ernestine and Isidor in an article awaiting publication. For a passport application in which Isidor specifically mentions Ernestine as his sister, see note 15.
- <sup>6</sup> Ancestry.com: Massachusetts, U.S., State and Federal Naturalization Records, 1798-1950 (Isidor Sigismund), declaration of intention dated February 2, 1857. All Ancestry records were last accessed on March 2, 2023.
- <sup>7</sup> Specification of Isidor Sigismund: manufacture of artificial teeth. Patent No. 815, April 1, 1859 (Wellcome Collection), <https://wellcomecollection.org/works/sfhft8qe/items?canvas=3>, accessed on February 12, 2023.
- <sup>8</sup> *The Index*, September 22, 1864, p. 599; Patrick A. Schroeder, *We Came to Fight: The History of the 5th New York Veteran Volunteer Infantry, Duryee's Zouaves (1863-1865)* (Brookneal, Va.: Patrick A. Schroeder, 1998), p. 491.
- <sup>9</sup> General Register Office for England and Wales, Marriage of Isidor Mordaunt Sigismund to Caroline Elizabeth Gregory, January 5, 1873; *Daily News* (London), May 17, 1877, p. 2.
- <sup>10</sup> *Juristische Gesellschaft in Frankfurt am Main, Dritter Jahrgang 1869*, pp. 363-67,
- <sup>11</sup> *Kölnische Zeitung*, November 3, 1869, p. 8; July 20, 1870, p. 4; July 1, 1871, p. 3 (among other issues).
- <sup>12</sup> Turner and Turner, *Life and Letters*, pp. 574-75.
- <sup>13</sup> Thomas F. Schwartz and Anne V. Shaughnessy, "Unpublished Mary Lincoln Letters," *Journal of the Abraham Lincoln Association* (1990), <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/spo.2629860.0011.105>, accessed March 2, 2023.
- <sup>14</sup> Turner and Turner, *Life and Letters*, pp. 576-77.
- <sup>15</sup> Ancestry: U.S., Passport Applications, 1795-1925 (I. Mordaunt Sigismund), April 2, 1903.
- <sup>16</sup> *The Times*, November 7, 1900, p. 14; *The Morning Post*, November 1, 1900, p. 7; *The Proceedings of the Old Bailey* (ref. no. t19010107-110), January 7, 1901, <https://www.oldbaileyonline.org/>, accessed February 12, 2023.
- <sup>17</sup> *The Weekly Dispatch*, August 13, 1865, p. 4; *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, December 17, 1904, p. 1; *Westminster Gazette*, August 25, 1908, p. 8; *Evening World*, November 10, 1908, p. 16.
- <sup>18</sup> *Westminster Gazette*, August 25, 1908, p. 8; *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, December 17, 1904, p. 1; *The World*, May 3, 1904, p. 7.
- <sup>19</sup> Notes in Yuri Suhl papers, Howard Gottlieb Archival Research Center, Boston University. Yuri Suhl was Ernestine Rose's first modern biographer.
- <sup>20</sup> *The Hebrew Standard*, October 23, 1903, p. 1.
- <sup>21</sup> *New York Times*, September 26, 1913, p. 11; *The Sentinel* (Chicago), October 10, 1913, p. 23; *American Hebrew & Jewish Messenger*, October 10, 1913, p. 662; Death certificate, James Mordaunt Sigismund, Department of Health of the City of New York, N.Y., No. 28301. Isidor had begun using "James" as his first name.

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Editor's Note: Going through my files for an idea of what to use for this issue, I came across an article on the successful and not-so-successful assassins of U.S. Presidents. As the last article in the March/April 2024 issue of *The Surratt Courier* mentioned the assassination of President Garfield, I found this additional information rather fascinating. As the author was not listed and it was printed just after President Reagan was shot, I decided to add more information, when I thought it was necessary.

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## **Assassins Their Attempts, Foiled and Otherwise**

Author Unknown

Reprinted from *The Surratt Courier*, June 1981

The attempt to kill President Reagan and the arrest and treatment of his would-be killer got me thinking about the many times this has happened in our country. The urge to do away with American leaders seems to have begun in the year 1776. Here is what I found.

According to an unverified report, a member of the Life Guard [it protected George Washington, his staff, and the Continental Army's payroll] named Thomas Hickey [a British Army deserter] was arrested on suspicion of counterfeiting. While in the New York jail, Hickey tried to recruit other prisoners to support the British and told of a plot to assassinate Washington, then Commander-in-Chief of the Continental Army. Fellow prisoners reported what Hickey said. It resulted in him being court-martialed and charged with inciting and joining in a mutiny and sedition, and treacherously corresponding with, enlisting among, and receiving pay from the enemies of the United Colonies.

Hickey was hanged on June 25, 1776, before an estimated 20,000 onlookers. On Washington's orders, all soldiers who were not on duty at the time were to be present at the hanging. It was to deter his troops from entering into similar traitorous practices and what the consequences would be. George Washington went on to become President on April 30, 1789.

Fifty years later, on January 30, 1835, a 35-year-old, broke and out of work housepainter named Richard Lawrence jumped out from behind a column on the east side of the Capitol Building and fired two pistols, point blank, at President Andrew Jackson. Jackson had just attended a funeral service in the Capitol and was in the procession on its way outside. Both of Lawrence's pistols mis-fired! Lawrence was apprehended on the spot [after Jackson attacked Lawrence with his cane] and came to trial on April 11, 1835. His prosecutor was Francis Scott Key. The crime, assault with intent to kill, was then only a misdemeanor and punishable by fine and imprisonment. Key convinced the jury to find Lawrence not guilty by reason of insanity, and he spent the rest of his life in mental hospitals and jails. His final days were spent in the new Government Hospital for the Insane—today known as St. Elizabeths Hospital. Lawrence outlived "Old Hickory" by more than 16 years. He died on June 13, 1861, with the distinction of being the first man in history to make an armed attack on a U.S. President.

Just thirty years after the attempt on Jackson, the 26-year-old actor, John Wilkes Booth of the "mad Booths of Maryland," succeeded in his attempt to kill President Abraham Lincoln at

Ford's Theatre on April 14, 1865. Booth was tracked down by soldiers and shot and killed on April 26<sup>th</sup> at the farm of Richard Garrett near Port Royal, Virginia. His body was returned to Washington and buried [with the other conspirators] under the floorboards of the Penitentiary Building on the Arsenal grounds. In 1869, his body was exhumed and given to his family, who then buried him in Green Mount Cemetery in Baltimore.

It was only sixteen years to the next Presidential assassination. On July 2, 1881, at about 9:30 a.m., Charles Julius Guiteau, a 38-year-old mixture of lawyer, lecturer, swindler, and theologian, gunned down James A. Garfield in the Baltimore and Potomac Train Depot in Washington, D.C. [This station was located near the site of today's National Gallery of Art and was in use until 1907, when Union Station was built.] Earlier in March of that year, Guiteau had gone to see the President to seek a position along with many other office seekers. His letters to the President and many other high officials went unanswered. Guiteau, not receiving the royal treatment he thought was due him, penned a letter on the morning of July 2<sup>nd</sup> starting off with, "the President's tragic death was a sad necessity...."

While moody Guiteau was in his room at the Riggs House at 15<sup>th</sup> and G Street, just a few blocks away at the White House, Garfield was preparing for a short vacation to New England—little realizing that he was preparing for a much longer trip. Guiteau had purchased his revolver from John U. Omeara's gun shop on 15<sup>th</sup> Street across from the Treasury Department in part of the building that was once known as Rhodes Tavern. He had done his target practicing along the Potomac. Guiteau's trial began on November 14, 1881, and lasted for 10½ weeks. His case was heard by Judge Walter S. Cox, who was the defense counsel for Sam Arnold and Michael O'Laughlen in 1865 at the trial of the Lincoln conspirators. Guiteau constantly interrupted the trial proceedings with insults and threatening remarks for everyone. At one point, Guiteau argued that the doctors were responsible for Garfield's death [considering the lack of sanitary practices by doctors of the time, it was probably true], since the President had not died immediately but had lingered on painfully until September 19<sup>th</sup>. Toward the end of the trial, the very lenient Judge Cox gave Guiteau permission to address the jury, which he did dramatically, saying that the Lord had chosen him because of his brains and nerve to remove the President and that "to hang a man in my mental condition....would be a lasting disgrace to the American people." He finished up partly singing and reciting *John Brown's Body*. Even though he was obviously bonkers, the jury found him sane, guilty, and sentenced him to be hanged. On June 30, 1882, after reciting to reporters a poem he had written that morning in his cell [it started with "I am going to the Lordy"], he was hooded and sent on his way! Judge Cox was criticized for his leniency afterwards, which was probably due to the fact that he saw the ultra-strict military Commission in action earlier.

The next president to suffer an assassin's attack was William McKinley. On September 6, 1901, Leon F. Czolgosz had entered the Temple of Music Building of the Pan American Exposition and was waiting patiently in line to shake hands with the President. He had wrapped a large white handkerchief around his revolver and hand, which he held to his side as though injured. As soon as McKinley put out his hand to him, Czolgosz fired twice through the handkerchief. One bullet hit McKinley's breastbone and did not penetrate, but the other did enough for both. McKinley died eight days later. Czolgosz was immediately pounced upon by soldiers and police and, throughout the trouncing that they gave him, he muttered, "I done my duty." Czolgosz told his jailers that he did not believe in rulers of any kind and said that he was an anarchist.

In 1898, when Czolgosz was 25, his mental and physical conditions had changed quite drastically from an active hard worker to a moody loafer. In 1900, he became so morbidly

fascinated with the assassination of King Humbert I of Monza, Italy, that for weeks he took the newspaper clippings on it to bed with him!

On September 23, Czolgosz's trial began. It ended on September 24. The verdict was "Guilty." On October 29, Czolgosz was electrocuted at Auburn State Prison in New York after declaring, "I am not sorry for my crime." Sulfuric acid was poured into his coffin after it was lowered into the grave, and the remains of Czolgosz were disintegrated within a few hours.

Next on the scene appeared John Nepomuk Schrank, a 36-year-old New York saloon keeper and tenement house owner. He was a quiet, small, unassuming person who had no real friends. His one girlfriend was among the many who perished when the steamer, *General Slocum*, burned in the East River at Hell's Gate. On September 21, 1912, Schrank bought a gun from a shop in New York and set out to assassinate Theodore Roosevelt. Roosevelt was at this time the nominee of the Progressive Party, and he was campaigning for a third term. Schrank finally caught up with him on October 14, 1912, in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, in front of the Gilpatrick Hotel. Roosevelt had just left a dinner given in his honor and was waving to the crowds from his car. Schrank shoved his revolver between the heads of two men in front of him and pulled the trigger. The bullet hit Roosevelt in the chest. Had it not been for the fact that the bullet hit his eyeglass case and his folded speech before hitting him, Roosevelt would probably have been killed. Before Schrank could fire again, he was tackled to the ground and disarmed by Roosevelt's stenographer. Roosevelt had been the first President to receive the formal protection of the Secret Service, but this discontinued when he left the White House in 1909—so there were no guards around when Schrank went into action. Roosevelt refused to go to the hospital, but instead went on to the auditorium to deliver his speech—after which he was taken to the hospital suffering from shock and loss of blood. However, he made a rapid recovery. The Roughriders won the public's admiration, but lost their votes. Woodrow Wilson became the next President.

Schrank was charged with armed assault with intent to kill, an offense then punishable under Wisconsin law by imprisonment for not less than one year nor more than 15. The two reasons that he gave for wanting to kill Roosevelt were:

1. He thought the two-term tradition was the most sacred tradition in American politics.
2. He believed Roosevelt had been responsible for McKinley's murder. [This information was supposedly given to him by McKinley's ghost!]

On November 13, the court appointed a sanity commission to examine Schrank. In their opinion, Schrank was "suffering from insane delusions" and he was ordered committed by Judge A.C. Backus. He spent the rest of his life in state mental hospitals. In 1940, when he heard that Franklin D. Roosevelt (FDR) was going to run for a third term, he was very upset. He said, if he were free, he would do something about it, since he had saved the nation from a third term once before. Schrank died on September 15, 1943. However, FDR had already been the target of an assassin ten years before.

Guiseppe Zangara, a 32-year-old bricklayer tried to kill FDR on February 15, 1933, in Miami, Florida. Zangara's decision to kill was brought on by his chronic stomachache, which he felt was caused by the hard work he had had to do when he was a child in Italy. This caused him to harbor a deep resentment against capitalistic society. Assassination was always on his mind. While in Italy, he entertained the idea of killing King Victor Emmanuel III; and when he got to the U.S., he toyed with the idea of doing in Calvin Coolidge and then Herbert Hoover. While debating who would get the bullet, Zangara heard that President-elect FDR would be in town to make a speech. Since Hoover was in Washington, D.C. (where it was cold, and the cold hurt his stomach), Zangara decided that he would stay where it was warm and shoot FDR. Zangara had



been in the States for 10 years, was a naturalized citizen and a registered Republican. He went to a pawnshop in downtown Miami and bought a .32 caliber revolver and ten bullets for \$8. He loaded the gun with five bullets and headed for Bayfront Park and FDR. Zangara found all the seats in the amphitheater taken, but he managed to shove his way to about fifteen feet from the first row. He would have gone farther had not a man reprimanded him for being so rude and pushy.

The motorcade arrived, and soon FDR was in view in an open car. The car drove past Zangara and to the middle of the theater where it stopped near the stage. Seated on the top of the back seat, FDR made a short speech, after which he invited Mayor Anton Cermak of Chicago to come down from the stage to see him. When they finished their conversation, Zangara jumped up on a chair and fired all five rounds directly at FDR's head. Roosevelt was uninjured, but five people were hit. Mayor Cermak died from his wounds [again, the question was raised about the medical care received being the cause of his death], but the rest recovered.

Zangara was tried twice. On February 20, 1933, he received 80 years in prison. On March 9<sup>th</sup>, after the Mayor died, he was found guilty of murder and sentenced to death. When Zangara heard his sentence, he said: "You give me electric chair. I no afraid of that chair! You one of capitalist. You is crook man too. Put me in electric chair. I no care!" The last few minutes of Zangara's life were quite upsetting to him, when he found out that there were no cameramen around to record his final minutes. "Viva l'Italia! Goodbye to all poor peoples everywhere!...Push the button! Go ahead, push the button!" he yelled. Justice was swift. He was electrocuted on March 20, 1933. A little over a month after Zangara pulled the trigger.

The Blair House on Pennsylvania Avenue in Washington, D.C., was the scene of the next assassination attempt. On November 1, 1950, Griselio Torresola and Oscar Collazo tried to do in President Harry "Give Em Hell" Truman. Both men were members of the Puerto Rican Nationalist Party in the Bronx. Collazo, at 36, was the eldest by eleven years. They were motivated by their desire of independence for Puerto Rico, which they saw as a victim of American imperialism and indifference. The men arrived in Washington at Union Station and took rooms at the nearby Harris Hotel. They did a little sightseeing that day before they made their way to Blair House armed with 69 rounds of ammo between them. In less than three minutes, 27 shots had been exchanged. When the smoke cleared, five men had been shot—two fatally. One of the dead was a White House guard, the other was Torresola. Truman was unharmed.

Collazo recovered from his wound and came to trial on February 27, 1951, before Judge T. Alan Goldsborough. He was found guilty and given the death sentence. He was scheduled to be electrocuted on August 1, 1952, but on July 24 Truman commuted his sentence to life. Collazo was sent to the Federal penitentiary at Leavenworth, Kansas. Under the Carter administration, Collazo, who was suffering from cancer, gained his freedom.

In 1955, a few more Puerto Rican Nationalists shot up the House of Representatives. Five members of the House were wounded, but all recovered.

Dallas, Texas, November 22, 1963—24-year-old Lee Harvey Oswald shot and killed President John F. Kennedy. As the Presidential motorcade rode past the Texas School Book Depository, Oswald was ready and waiting at a window on the sixth floor with his .65mm Italian military rifle. Oswald was shot and killed by Jacob Rubenstein (Jack Ruby) on November 24<sup>th</sup>, as he was being transferred from the Dallas police headquarters. Ruby died of cancer during his imprisonment on January 3, 1967.

There were two attempts on the life of Gerald Ford, and this time the women got in on the act. On September 5, 1975, Lynette "Squeaky" Fromme made an attempt in Sacramento, California. Seventeen days later, Sarah Jane Moore tried in San Francisco. Both women were

sent to prison for life; but, according to California law, they would eventually be eligible for parole. [Editor's Note: Fromme was released on parole in 2009 and Moore in 2007.]

And now, we're up to March 30, 1981, when John W. Hinckley, Jr., attempted to assassinate U.S. President Ronald Reagan. On March 29<sup>th</sup>, Hinckley arrived in Washington, D.C., on a bus originating from Los Angeles and checked into a hotel. The following morning Hinckley wrote a letter to actress Jodie Foster, explaining that this assassination attempt was his way of getting her attention. He then took a taxi to the Hilton Hotel, where he knew Reagan was to speak at an AFL-CIO conference. When Reagan emerged from the Hilton Hotel, Hinckley started firing. His bullets hit Reagan and three others. They all survived their wounds.

In 2014, White House Press Secretary James Brady's death was ruled a homicide, citing the 1981 gunshot wound ultimately caused his death. However, Hinckley could not be charged for Brady's death, because he had been found not guilty by reason of insanity at his first trial.

After his arrest, Hinckley spent the next four months being interviewed by both prosecution and defense psychiatrists. The prosecution was required to prove his sanity beyond a reasonable doubt, because he was charged in Federal court. It didn't help prove their case when Hinckley tried twice to kill himself in May and November of 1981. After deliberating for four days, on June 21, 1982, the jury found Hinckley not guilty by reason of insanity to all 13 charges. After the trial, Hinckley wrote that he was disappointed that Josie Foster did not reciprocate his love. He considered the shooting of Reagan as "the greatest love offering in the history of the world." Hinckley was committed to St. Elizabeths Hospital.

On June 15, 2022, he was finally released with no court restrictions.

With the exception of Collazo and, possibly Booth, these assassins and would-be assassins were and are victims of mental disease. Some of them echo each other's fanaticism. Booth wrote, "Our country owed all her troubles to him [Lincoln], and God simply made me the instrument of his punishment." Schrank wrote, "God has called me to be his instrument." Guiteau wrote, "His removal is an act of God." Czolgosz said that he thought killing the President would be good for the nation, and Collazo did what he did for the liberty of his country.

None of these men were sorry for what they had done. In fact, Guiteau was so sure of the rightness of his act that, in his will, he stipulated that any monument erected in his honor should read, "Here lies the body of Charles Guiteau, Patriot and Christian. His soul is in glory."

According to scientists, there is no accurate profile of the typical assassin in American society. But some observations have been made. Their targets will probably be persons whose lifestyles cause them to feel envious. They will rationalize their acts by calling them political or religious necessities. Some are loners and products of broken homes and unloving parents. By killing an authority figure, the assassin is shouting for attention, telling the world that they are "somebody"—somebody whose name will go down in history!

For an interesting study of the mind of an assassin, see the movie *Taxi Driver*.

Unfortunately, there will always be someone around who is dissatisfied with the way things are going for him/her and whose solution will be assassination.

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**SOURCES:**

Robert Donovan, *The Assassins*, (Popular Library, 1964)

Dr. John K Lattimer, *Kennedy and Lincoln: Medical & Ballistic Comparisons of Their Assassinations*, (New York, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1980)

Research by Professor John Kelly of the University of Delaware

*The Washington Post* of May 10, 1981, *Parade* section, page 12.

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Editor's Note: While going through back issues to find articles for the May/June 2022 issue of *The Surratt Courier*, this article found its way into my stockpile folder. The subject of that 2022 issue was the lesser-known members of the Booth family and, as John Wilkes Booth is one of the better-known members, it didn't qualify for that issue. However, it does go well with the previous article in offering "new" insights into the mind of the assassin.

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## **Dr. Head Speaks on John Wilkes Booth**

By Laurie Verge

Reprinted from the *Surratt Society News*, April 1980

For those of you who were unable to attend our March [1980] meeting, we can only say that you missed one of the finest speakers that we have had at our Surratt Society meetings. And, she is one of "us"—Dr. Constance Head, professor of history at Western Carolina University and docent at the Surratt House Museum.

Dr. Head had promised to offer some new insights into JWB, and she did just that. Her talk was the perfect explanation as to why the assassin remains fascinating to historians. She asked us to consider some of the personal history of Booth and of his family, before making a final judgement on his character.

The effect of his father's brilliant and controversial personality was a key factor in his development, but Dr. Head offered a new angle which such authors as Kimmel and Van Doren Stern have minimized. Junius Brutus Booth, Wilkes's father, was totally devoted to the sanctity of life. All life was to be revered. A quote from some of his correspondence stands out, "Every death its own avenger breeds." How could his son kill Lincoln after such an upbringing? To him, Lincoln represented the killer of thousands of young men; Wilkes would become the "avenger."

Many historians have attempted to psychoanalyze Booth. They point quickly to the fact that, while married to another, Junius Brutus Booth ran to America in 1821 with a common law wife and sired a "brood" of children. The real wife arrived in America [Baltimore] years later [1846], when Wilkes was 8-years-old, and, she quickly spread the truth—and nothing but the truth—as to how she had been wronged. Historians will tell you that Wilkes hated his father for this. Yet his sister, Asia Booth Clarke, pointed out that her brother was eager to defend his father and almost idolized him. There was no basis to the theory that Lincoln represented the hated father figure to Booth. In fact, he may have seen his father as the third great Junius Brutus of history. The first was a revolutionary who drove out the last king of Rome. The second caused the famous death of Julius Caesar. Did JWB see his father in the same glowing company with these men?

Historians have also made reference to Wilkes's supposed inferiority to his older brother, *The Prince of Players*, Edwin Booth. These feelings of inferiority caused him to grab at any spotlight. Several theaters' reviews of the day show that Wilkes was well thought of. He was termed "genius," "most promising star on the American stage," "played....with tact, grace, and appreciation of character."

Depression seems to show up in 1864, however. He began to have a problem with his voice. Poor projection from the throat instead of the chest had produced a speaking problem for

the actor. He speculated in the oil business and lost a good deal of money. He probably had been engaged in some underground work for the Confederacy and began to see the futility of the Southern cause, and then his “perfect” kidnap scheme to ransom the President of the Union States for released prisoners-of-war fell through.

Recently discovered letters written by Asia Booth Clarke [letter reprinted below] have been gone through by John C. Brennan and reveal a new thought. John Wilkes Booth converted to Catholicism according to his sister. Raised with a Protestant background, could this conversion point to a spiritual and intellectual restlessness? It also brings in a new idea: In Catholicism, suicide is a mortal sin. Wilkes displayed some tendencies toward depression and suicide, yet possibly he didn’t want eternal damnation. The assassination of Abraham Lincoln would surely result in his death—“his heroic death.” Was this the way he chose to deal with his own emotional problems?

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Dr. Head is gathering material for a new work on Booth. With the facts and insight that she gave us at the March meeting, this promises to be an excellent work. Maybe an update of *The Mad Booth’s of Maryland* and *The Man Who Killed Lincoln*??

[Editor’s Note: Unfortunately, Dr. Head died in 1985 before she could complete her research and publish her book.]

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## A Sister’s Thoughts

### A Letter from Asia Booth Clarke

Reprinted from Surratt Society Newsletter, April 1985

On May 22, 1865, just one month after the death of Lincoln and of John Wilkes Booth, the assassin’s beloved sister Asia, wrote the following letter to a friend, Jean Anderson. This letter, along with nearly fifty others covering the years 1852-1874 are now in the possession of the Peale Museum in Baltimore. Transcripts from these letters are on file in the James O. Hall Research Center.

Philadelphia  
May 22, 1865

My dear Jean,

I have received both your letters and although feeling the kindness of your sympathy, I could not compose my thoughts to write. I can give you no idea of the desolation which has fallen upon us. The sorrow of his death is very bitter, but the disgrace is far heavier. Already people are asserting that it is a political affair, the work of a bloody rebellion, the enthusiast’s love of country, etc., but I am afraid to us it will always be a crime. Junius and John Clarke have been today

confined in the Old Capitol [Prison], Washington—for no complicity or evidence. Junius wrote an innocent letter from Cincinnati which by a wicked misconstruction has been the cause of his arrest. He begged him to quit the oil business and attend to his profession, not knowing that oil signified conspiracy in Washington, as it has been proven that all engaged in the plot passed themselves off as oil merchants. John Clarke was arrested for having in his house a package of papers upon which he never laid his hands or eyes, but after this occurrence when I produced them, thinking it was a will put here for safe keeping, John took them to the U.S. Marshal, who reported to headquarters. Hence, this long imprisonment for two entirely innocent men. I would not object at present to have back for my private uses all the money they squandered in sanitary commissions, hospital endowments, relief of soldiers' widows, and the like, for the good done by them as actors and citizens goes for nothing towards proving loyalty and it might well have been tendered to better purposes. I suppose they will be examined in the leisure of the court and return home to be through a spell of illness as one gentleman has done, who was released last week and whose arrest proved merely a farce, as General somebody in authority expressed it. Poor old country, she has seen her best days and I care not how soon I turn my back upon her shores forever. It is the history of the Republic over again. I was shocked and grieved to see the names of Michael O'Laughlin and S. Arnold. I am still more surprised to learn that all engaged in the plot are Roman Catholics. Wilkes was of the faith professedly and I was glad that he had fixed his faith on one religion, for he was always of a pious mind and—I won't speak of his qualities, you know him. My health is very delicate at present, but I seem completely numbed and hardened to sorrow. The reports of Blanche and Edwin are without truth. Their marriage was not to have been till September and I don't think it will be postponed as that is a long way off yet. Edwin is here with me. Mother went home to New York last week. She was three weeks with me until he came...

I told you, I believe, that Wilkes was engaged to Miss Hale. They were devoted lovers, and she has written heart-broken letters to Edwin about it. Their marriage was to have been in a year, when she promised to return from Spain to him, either with her father or without him. That was the decision only a few days before this fearful calamity. Some terrible oath hurried him to this wretched end. God help him. Remember me to all and write often.

Yours ever true,  
Asia

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Junius Booth was confined in the Old Capitol Prison for three months, from April 26, 1865, until June 23. John Clarke, Asia's husband, was arrested on April 27 and released on May 27. Although Asia expresses impatience to be out of the country, she did not leave until March 1868, almost three years later.

The SANITARY COMMISSIONS on which Asia regrets having squandered money, were relief societies dedicated to raising funds to improve the lot of the Union soldier in the field. The largess that these funds provided was called (no matter what it was—a glass of current jelly or a pair of red flannels) sanitary stores.

All the usual methods of raising money were employed at the Sanitary Fairs, from the sale of donated articles to that of the exquisite pleasure of scrutinizing a lady's skin through a magnifying glass.

By James O. Hall, Laurie Verge, and Joan V. Bragdon