

The Surratt Courier

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Louise Oertly, Editor

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President's Message

The other day, I received an email from one of our Surratt Society members, which made me realize that some of you may not be aware of the relationship between the Surratt Society and the Surratt House Museum. The Surratt Society is a friends group dedicated to the preservation of the historic site and the interpretation of history involving the Surratt House Museum. The Surratt Society encourages research into the role that this site played in the events surrounding the assassination of Abraham Lincoln and into life in mid-19th century Southern Maryland.

The Surratt House Museum is a historic property owned and operated by the Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission (M-NCPPC), a local inter-county government agency. That means that the Surratt Society has no control over any M-NCPPC operations or actions, including personnel, that take place at the Museum. We can only provide our comments and concerns, like everyone else.

On that note, there have been several major changes at the Surratt House Museum over the past year. The new Museum Director, Veronica Gallardo, came on board in March of 2021. When COVID-19 restrictions were lifted, the Museum was finally able to reopen. However, if you visit, you will find that there have been substantial changes in how the tours are now conducted. The tours have a new format, which will be partly self-guided and there will no longer be costumed docents leading the tours. It will also cover a more inclusive

history. So far, I haven't had a chance to experience the new tour format, but have been assured by Veronica that visitors have embraced the changes.

As for 2022, it looks like it's going to be another year of changes. This time the changes are in personnel. Joan Chaconas has recently retired from the Museum staff. She has been associated with the Museum since its opening in 1976, first as a docent and then as an employee of the M-NCPPC. Over the years, Joan has contributed many articles to the *Surratt Society News* and *The Surratt Courier*, so this issue is dedicated to Joan and offers a selection of her articles from the past 45 years beginning on page 4.

Another personnel change is Colleen Puterbaugh's contract, as the archivist of the James O. Hall Research Center, was terminated as of February 4th. The Museum Director informed the Surratt Society's Executive Committee that the decision was made so that they "can reallocate our resources to create multiple new positions that will better align with and enable us to meet our strategic goals and achieve our vision. This was not an easy decision to

This newsletter is a bimonthly publication of the Surratt Society, a non-profit affiliate of the Surratt House Museum, a historic property of the Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission. The Surratt Society's website is surrattmuseum.org Contact us at surratt.society@gmail.com or by mail at: Surratt Society, 9201 Edgeworth Drive #3853, Capitol Heights, MD 20791-3853. The Surratt House Museum's phone number is (301) 868-1121.

make, but it is one that we believe to be in the best interest of the Museum and team as a whole.” This also means that the James O. Hall Research Center is closed for the foreseeable future. On page 3, you will find a message from Colleen to everyone she has worked with over the past seven years.

Now for some good news. At long last, preservation work has begun on the exterior of the historic Surratt House. The peeling wood siding is being removed and replaced as needed, and structural damage is being repaired. So in the coming months, if you pass by the Surratt House Museum, you will gradually see the historic house come back to its original barn-red glory.

Just to give everyone a heads up, we are planning another virtual “mini-conference” meeting this April. If you have signed up on our website to be on our email

list (and I encourage our members to do so), you will get a notice with the details when they are available; otherwise, check for details on our website in the coming weeks.

As for the Booth Escape Route Tours, many of you have inquired about when they will resume. Unfortunately, there will be no bus tours in April, but we hope to be able to resume them this fall.

Also, the Surratt Society has a new mailing address:

Surratt Society
9201 Edgeworth Drive #3853
Capitol Heights, MD 20791-3853

You can also contact us by email at: surratt.society@gmail.com

Stay safe.
Louise Oertly, President

IN MEMORIAM

Sanford “Sandy” Prindle
January 19, 1943 – November 2, 2021

We have lost another of our historians. Sandy Prindle was a Tarrant County Justice of the Peace for 24 years. During his career, he served Texas by sitting on numerous boards and writing and passing laws to better the justice courts. His positions of service included President of the Justices of the Peace and Constables Association of Texas (JPCA), Vice President of Texas Association of Counties (TAC), and Legislative Chairman of JPCA three times. In addition, he taught law to the other judges through the Texas Justice Court Training Center from 1995 until his retirement in 2006.

His awards include JPCA Judge of the Year (2000), JPCA T.A. Vines Award, and JPCA Lifetime Achievement Award.

After his retirement on December 31, 2006, he decided to devote his time to writing both fiction and history full time. He was a Civil War scholar with expertise on the Lincoln assassination and is the author of *Booth’s Confederate Connections*. He gave lectures and seminar presentations to the Tarrant County Civil War Roundtable and at the Surratt Society’s annual conference.

He is survived by his wife, Linda.

Calling All Writers

We are looking for articles to use in *The Surratt Courier*. The topics can range from the social history of the time to the Lincoln assassination and its cast of characters or even questions you would like to have answered. I can't guarantee that everything submitted will be used right away, but I will do my best. Send them to surratt.society@gmail.com

Dear Society Friends,

It has been a pleasure working with you over the past seven years. I've learned so much about the many rabbit holes in the history of Lincoln's assassination and Booth's escape through helping you conduct your own research. In many ways, you were my teachers, as much as I was your librarian. Together we uncovered new and untold histories that were both exciting and intriguing. From Ficklin Day to praising Weichmann's habit of typing all correspondence; from exploring Booth's womanizing ways to uncovering the many mysteries of Sarah Slater; and, of course, the many genealogical connections in Southern Maryland. I've learned more about my new home in this short time than many people learn in a lifetime of living in southern Prince George's County.

Though it is difficult to say, my time as archivist at the James O. Hall Research Center has come to an end. My last day on site was in early February. I sincerely hope this is the start of the next chapter for the Research Center and not a permanent closing. Continued requests for research material as needed by members may help to sway the cause of the Center's necessity and use for public benefit. In other words, if you have a need, you should continue to reach out to the Museum.

The site itself continues to see revitalization through renovation of the Visitor's Center and the exterior preservation work on the Historic House, as well as any future projects to come. I do look forward to seeing this final vision realized for the Museum itself and to prepare the Museum for success in the 21st century.

I would be remiss if I didn't thank the faithful and tireless library volunteers: Carol Macknis, Sandra Walia, and Patti Cass. Through their efforts from 2016-2019, we processed the entirety of the Periodicals Collection and almost all of the vertical reference files from our many donors over the years, as well as creating inventory lists for a wide variety of the collections from Microfilm to Institutional History. Unfortunately, we still had two boxes from Gail Merrifield Papp to inventory when the pandemic hit and effectively shut down all volunteer work. Be that as it may, it doesn't diminish the immense contribution of their work to the documentation and preservation of records at the Research Center. I truly could not have done my job without their efforts.

Many thanks to all of you for your support and kindness over the years.

Sincerely,
Colleen Puterbaugh

A Tribute to Joan Chaconas

Joan Chaconas has been with the Surratt House Museum since the day it was dedicated in 1976. Over the years, she has transitioned from a tour guide (both at the Museum and on bus trips) to a detective (hunting for Lincoln assassination related treasures and documents) to television celebrity (well to us anyway, on Lincoln assassination related segments, which the Booth's mummy always seem to make an appearance) to Surratt House Museum employee. Over the years, she has contributed many articles to the *Surratt Society News* and *The Surratt Courier*. Her topics range from the conspirators, to her searches for assassination related documents, to ship disasters, to the people and places in Washington, D.C., to stories of the missing legs of Dahlgren and Sickles. Enjoy the selection I've put together in honor of her retirement.

John T. Ford and His Theatre

By Joan Chaconas, President's Message
Reprinted from *The Surratt Courier*, July 1987

In 1987, John Ford Sollers (1904-1999), a drama professor and the grandson of John Thompson Ford (1829-1894) owner of Ford's Theatre, donated material on Lincoln's assassination and 19th century theater history to the Library of Congress. Within this group of historic items are playbills, theater/lobby broadsides, scripts, scrapbooks, photographs, and letters—which he had inherited from his Aunt Lizzie Ford, the theater owner's daughter.

Also made available was the Masters thesis written by John Ford Sollers and submitted to the Committee on Graduate Study at Stanford University in 1962. Entitled *The Theatrical Career of John T. Ford*, a copy of this thesis is in the James O. Hall Research Center. The following information has been gleaned from Mr. Sollers' thesis:

When John T. Ford leased the building on 10th Street between E & F Streets, it was abandoned. It had been built in 1833 to house the First Baptist Church. Ford spent \$10,000 installing a dome, dress circle, parquette and family circle to seat 1,200 people. It was enhanced by murals painted to represent the seasons and with likenesses of Shakespeare, Mozart, Edwin Forrest, and Joseph Jefferson. It also had a complete and beautiful stock of scenery. It opened March 19, 1862, as Ford's Athenaeum. On December 30, 1862, the Athenaeum burned, the fire starting from a defective gas meter. The loss was only partially covered by insurance and was estimated at \$20,000. Ford's new brick theater was estimated to cost \$75,000. There was a two to three week delay during construction, as they struck quicksand while trying to place the foundations. It resulted in a cave-in. They were finally able to "push the walls down to solid ground." On August 27, 1863, Ford's New Theatre opened.

On April 14, 1865, John T. Ford was in Richmond. He did not learn of the tragedy that had occurred at his theater until Sunday evening, the 16th. The fact that Ford was in Richmond on the very day of the assassination was interpreted as incriminating, and a telegram for his arrest was sent to Richmond and followed him back to his home in Baltimore. On Tuesday, the 18th, he was arrested at his home and brought to Washington, where he was "consigned to a barred and locked

garret room in the Carroll Annex [of the Old Capitol Prison] in Washington. The room contained a bag of straw and some dark blankets and their usual accompaniments. No chair, table, or convenience whatsoever save a slop bucket and a stone pitcher. When I wrote—I did so on the floor and when I wanted sit down, the straw was the only accommodation.”

Ford’s brothers, John Sleeper Clarke, and Junius Brutus Booth, Jr., were imprisoned with Ford the next day. Despite all the efforts made to free Ford and clear his name, he was held without charges for 39 days. One time he was taken to the conspirators’ trial in a closed army ambulance, but he didn’t actually testify at the trial until after his release on May 27, when he appeared for the defense for his former stagehand, Edman Spangler. For the first three weeks of his imprisonment, Ford kept a diary; the names of “Mrs. Surratt and daughter” and “Dr. Mudd, apparently a very clever gentleman,” appear. Ford’s notes are sketchy, but basically, he is angered that most of the prisoners were detained for long periods of time with no formal changes. When Ford was released, he returned to Baltimore and back to managing his theater there.

On June 1st all theaters were dark for the “day of humiliation and prayer” in memory of Lincoln. Ford staged a matinee benefit in Baltimore on June 3rd for the Lincoln Memorial Fund and raised nearly \$1,800. He presented a framed engraving of the late President to each police station in Baltimore to be given to the policeman selling the most tickets to this benefit.

Ford’s Theatre in Washington remained dark. It was returned to its owner on June 22nd. Public sentiment was against having the theater reopened, and Secretary of War Edwin Stanton “...submitted a paper draw up....to the purchase of Ford’s Theatre to be devoted to religious purposes...” At one time the YMCA decided to purchase the building and convert it into a combination lecture room, library and museum, as a memorial to Lincoln. This plan fell through. Finally, Ford advertised that all the deals had failed to materialize and he needed to start to resume his business. On July 8th, General Thomas Ewing, Jr., Spangler’s attorney, wrote a letter to Ford in which he stated he had heard from Spangler that the soldiers on duty at the Arsenal would not allow Ford to reopen and that a “row would occur” if he did. He added this postscript to his letter, “Spangler is in high spirits, and rejoices at not having been hung!” Ford ignored Ewing’s letter and attempted to open, but an order brought to him by Colonel Ingraham on the very evening of the opening performance closed the theater once again.

There was a lively debate in the newspapers regarding public feeling that the reopening was “an outrage” with Ford answering these cries saying he was still willing to sell his theater to those who were “anxious to change its character,” but that if he did not do so immediately, he intended to manage “in my own house my own business in my own way and hope to do so with as little offense as possible.” Ford finally had to engage a lawyer to help him either wrest the theater away from Stanton’s grasp or get the government to buy him out. The government finally did just that, and the contract to gut the building was awarded to a brother-in-law of Stanton. John T. Ford was deprived of a valuable piece of real estate, and he most likely lost money in the transaction.

Ford tried to save Mrs. Surratt, as he was convinced of her innocence. While in prison, Ford was (to put it in his words) “accosted by” Weichmann who “begged” his advice. Ford advised him to tell the truth. After Weichmann was interviewed by Stanton, Ford noticed a drastic change in him. He could hardly contain his terror. A few days later, Weichmann “exhibited considerable self-control and said he...made up his mind to stand by the government....From the little said, it could easily be seen that he considered his safety and Mrs. Surratt’s conviction was consequent results and were inseparately connected.”

Ford continued his efforts to work for a pardon for Spangler and for Dr. Mudd. He sent food and the *Washington Intelligencer* to Spangler; and in turn, Spangler sent him cribbage boards, a lady's writing desk, and an inlaid, tilt-top chess table he had made while in prison at Fort Jefferson. Ford also aided Edwin Booth in the recovery of the body of John Wilkes Booth. Ford accompanied Edwin Booth to an interview with President Johnson. A few days later, Ford identified the body of Booth and watched it transported to Baltimore. He wired Edwin, who had returned earlier to New York: "Successful and in our possession here." As a result of Ford's indirect involvement with the Lincoln assassination in the years to come, he was looked upon as a dignified authority on the assassination.

The Other Tragedy at Ford's Theatre

By Joan Chaconas, President's Message
Reprinted from *The Surratt Courier*, February 1989

We all know of the tragedy that happened on Friday, April 14, 1865, at Ford's Theatre, but how many know of another tragedy that occurred at Ford's on another Friday—June 9, 1893?

In going through my files, I came upon a copy of an article from *The Washington Post* dated December 6, 1927. The headline reads, "120 Killed, 213 Injured in Collapse of Theater Buildings in Washington, D.C." The story recounts these two historic tragedies. One of these was the Knickerbocker Theatre—the roof collapsed under the weight of a heavy snowfall (28 inches) on Friday, January 27, 1922, at 9:10 p.m., killing 98 and wounding 136 more. The second was Ford's Theatre.

After the assassination of Lincoln, Ford's Theatre was sold and gutted. By 1893, it was being used as a government office, housing the Records and Pension Division of the War Department. The tragedy at Ford's occurred at 9:35 on the morning of Friday, June 9, 1893. The former theater at this time was being renovated, and it seems that rumors about the building being unsafe were rampant. However, the government continued to use the building.

At least 300 employees were at work when the collapse occurred. According to the *Post* article: "...a pillar on the southwest corner of the spot marked 'Dangerous' began slowly to sink. The clerks jumped for their lives, but they knew not which way to run. The second floor above the pillar began to drop, the third floor caved in and fell through to the second floor. In a few seconds, the whole mass of timbers, brick, and humanity were blotted out by a dense cloud of blinding, choking dust. It was as ghastly a spectacle as Washington has ever beheld as the ruins were explored and the mangled, dead and living, were taken out." Twenty-two people were killed and 80 wounded.

The next day, an editorial appeared in the *Post* stating that "...everyone who knows the wicked and humiliating truth will understand that Friday's tragedy was a direct, logical, and long-foreseen result of the mean demagoguery that parades a spurious economy at the cost of justice, decency, and humanity. For years, the clerks and other Federal employees have been huddled in innumerable death traps, to lose their health by slow degrees and die out right by sudden accidents, in order that a few selfish impostors might flaunt themselves before a crowd of gulls."

An inquest was held in Willard's Hall. [Author's Note: Incidentally, this building was originally built as the F Street Presbyterian Church, which merged with the New York Avenue

Presbyterian Church in 1859, and was sold to the Willard Hotel. The New York Avenue church became Lincoln's religious center while he was President.] The inquest narrowly missed becoming a violent fray as relatives of the dead had organized an indignation meeting at the Hall also and were denouncing those they thought responsible as murderers! There were indictments, but—after several years of legal entanglements—no one was held accountable for the accident. Congress paid a total of \$144,800 to the 21 heirs of those who lost their lives—awards ranging from \$4,500 to \$50. [roughly \$149,358 to \$1,660 today]

I guess that, if we are superstitious, the hidden message here would be: Don't go to a theater on a Friday, especially one that used to be a church!

The "Old Capitol" Prison

By Joan Chaconas

Reprinted from *The Surratt Society News*, April 1977

Immediately following their arrest and preliminary examination on the night of April 17, 1865, Mrs. Surratt and her daughter, Anna, were jailed in the Carroll Annex of the Old Capitol Prison. This prison was one of the Civil War "institutions" in Washington, D.C., and had a varied and interesting history,

During the War of 1812, the British invaded Washington, D.C., and burned many of the buildings, including the Capitol. Congress held its first session after the British invasion in Blodgett's Hotel at 7th and E Streets, N.W. In 1815, a group of enterprising local citizens erected a new brick building at 1st and A Streets, N.E., for the sole purpose of leasing it to the government for a temporary Capitol. In 1816, Congress ordered work to begin on the new Capitol; meanwhile, they moved into the 1st Street building. Sessions of Congress were held there for quite some time until the new Capitol was ready. Thus, the former building became known as the "Old Capitol."

After Congress moved, the building became a boardinghouse run by an aunt of Mrs. Rose Greenhow, who was to become one of the most famous spies of the Confederacy ever caught by the Federal government. One of the best-known lodgers at the boardinghouse was John C. Calhoun, who died there in 1850. Ironically, Rose Greenhow was to later be imprisoned in the "Old Capitol" Prison.

The building was turned into a government prison in July of 1861. According to Margaret Leech in her book, *Reveille in Washington*, no attempt was made to strengthen its decayed walls, broken partitions, or creaking doors and staircases. Wooden slats were nailed across the windows, and high board fences formed an inner quadrangle between hastily constructed annexes. The only real protection came from armed guards inside and out. The prison was originally for prisoners of war, but it soon housed an assortment of Rebel mail carriers, smugglers, blockade runners, and even Federal military offenders and other "political prisoners." Former enslaved people from Rebel Territory, who were destitute, were kept at the jail as an "act of charity." They performed menial labor for the government during the day and returned to the prison at night for lodging. Superintendent of the prison was William P. Wood, a crony of Secretary of War Stanton, and reportedly a friend of Mrs. Surratt's brother, Zadock Jenkins. However, this fact did little to help her.

On November 10, 1865, the prison yard was the site of the hanging of Henry Wirz, keeper of the infamous Andersonville Prison in Georgia. According to one source, soon after Wirz's hanging, the prison was torn down to its foundation. By 1869, a building there was described as being "a row of handsome dwelling houses ornamented with Mansard roofs" and was the property of a Mr. Brown, who was the Sergeant-at-Arms of the Senate at the time.

In 1935, the present Supreme Court building was built on the site of the "Old Capitol" Prison. Over the door of that building is the inscription, *Equal Justice Under Law*, as if in repentance for the injustices of the site during the Civil War.

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Editor's Note: A follow-up on the above article about the Old Capitol Prison appeared in *The Surratt Society News*' May 1977 issue.

There seemed to be a little disagreement as to whether the Old Capitol Prison was torn down or remodeled. Mr. Tommy Gwynn asked our Congresswoman Marjorie Holt to do a little bit of detective work. Mrs. Holt came up with the following information from the Archivist of the Library of Congress:

"The Old Capitol Prison which stood on the present site of the Supreme Court was built after the British burned the Capitol in the War of 1812 and served as the Capitol from approximately 1814-1819. It was variously known as the 'Brick Capitol' and the 'Old Capitol.' It was converted into a prison during the Civil War, at which time Mary Surratt was taken there. In 1867, the structure was remodeled into three residences which were torn down supposedly between 1930 and 1932, when the cornerstone for the present Supreme Court Building was laid."

Historic Fort McNair

By Joan Chaconas

Reprinted with the permission of the Lincoln Group of D.C., Jan/Feb 1983
in *The Surratt Courier*, June 1984

Fort Lesley J. McNair is one of the oldest continuously active military posts and site of the first planned Federal Penitentiary. It was also a place where Lincoln was a frequent visitor.

In 1791, Pierre L'Enfant, as part of his plan for the Federal City, designed the point of land bounded by the present day Anacostia and Potomac Rivers, known as Greenleaf Point, to be used as a military reservation. By 1797, the government had acquired 28½ acres and established a fort at the tip of land closest to the Potomac River.

In 1803, the government built an arsenal on the site after the design of George Hadfield. The new arsenal became a distribution center for the army's artillery and ordinance. The new establishment soon became known as the Arsenal.

The year 1814 was not a good one for the city of Washington—nor was it for the Arsenal. The British on their incendiary march through the city, headed straight for the Arsenal, which they found abandoned. Legend has it that a British soldier used a lighted torch to peer down a dry well in which the Americans had moved their gunpowder for safekeeping. Needless to say, it was quite an explosive farewell for the Arsenal and 45 of the British soldiers. [2022 Editor's Note: A doctor

at the scene reported, “A tremendous explosion ensued, whereby the officers and about 30 of the men were killed and rest most shockingly mangled.”]

In 1831, a penitentiary was built at the Arsenal and the first prisoners incarcerated. The new prison building was 300 feet long and ran east to west. It contained 160 cells, each of which measured 7 x 3½ feet. Prison reformist Dorothea Dix was so favorably impressed by the new prison’s facilities, when she visited there during the 1830s, that she donated money towards stocking the prison bookshelves.

By 1860, the penitentiary had become overcrowded and any sense of orderly administration had all but disappeared. At the same time, the Arsenal was also overcrowded and in desperate need of space. This lack of adequate accommodations led President Lincoln in 1862 to transfer the penitentiary responsibilities to the War Department and all of the prisoners were sent off to the Federal Penitentiary at Albany, New York.

During the war years, Lincoln frequently visited the Arsenal to witness the testing of new inventions in ordinance. Many of these tests were made at his personal request. In October of 1861, Lincoln watched the firing of the Union Repeating Gun and was so impressed that he took personal responsibility for the purchase of ten of them at the cost of \$1,300 each. [2022 Editor’s Note: That would be \$41,186.66 per gun today] Thus was recorded the first sale of a machine gun in the nation’s history. Lincoln also witnessed the testing of several cannons, one of them being the “Cincinnati” breechloader, and he is reported to have witnessed the testing of bullet-proof vests. At times, Lincoln’s interest in the testing of ordinance proved hazardous. In November of 1862, while at the nearby Navy Yard, he miraculously escaped serious injury while watching a rocket demonstration.

The Arsenal employed large numbers of young women, who made paper cartridges filled with black powder. In 1864, a tragic explosion killed 21 of these young girls. Lincoln keenly felt their loss as a part of the mounting war casualties. Both he and Secretary of War Stanton attended the funeral services and led the procession on foot from the Arsenal grounds to Congressional Cemetery, where the girls were placed in a mass grave.

Lincoln’s last visit to the Arsenal was in March of 1865, when he and his party left to join General Grant at City Point, Virginia. What happened a few weeks later at Ford’s Theatre will never be forgotten, nor will the events that took place at the Arsenal shortly thereafter.

Following Lincoln’s death at the hands of John Wilkes Booth, many suspects were arrested and put into irons. The number of people arrested was finally winnowed down to eight main suspects, identified as the *Lincoln conspirators*. The conspirators were eventually placed in the former penitentiary building on the grounds of the Arsenal, because of its isolation and greater security. The penitentiary had been abandoned as a cell block, and was now being used to store munitions. The conspirators were locked in alternating cells to prevent communication between themselves and ensure their solitary confinement. These cells were located in the center prison block of the penitentiary building on the third floor. A door was cut through an interior wall leading from the prison block into the eastern extension into a large room, which became the courtroom. It was here that the greatest trial of the 19th century was held.

The trial officially began on May 9th [the day before what would have been Booth’s 27th birthday] and lasted 81 days. The final sentence of the military tribunal was that four (Mary Surratt, George Atzerodt, David Herold, and Lewis Paine/Powell) would hang, three (Dr. Samuel Mudd, Michael O’Laughlen, and Samuel Arnold) would serve life sentences, and one (Edman Spangler) would serve for six years. The hanging took place on July 7, 1865, in the courtyard of the prison—a few feet distant from the present Officers Club. After being pronounced dead, the

bodies of the unfortunate four were immediately buried on the grounds next to the scaffold. Booth had been shot at the Garrett's farm near Port Royal, Virginia, on April 26th. His body was brought back to Washington and buried under the floor of the western extension of the penitentiary building. The bodies of the other conspirators would later be moved and join him there. In 1869, the bodies were exhumed and turned over to the various family members for proper burial, bringing to a close the Arsenal's direct link to Lincoln's murder.

[2022 Editor's Note: In 1881, the Arsenal closed and was transferred to the Quartermaster Corps. It became known as the Washington Barracks. From 1898 to 1909, a general hospital was located at the post. It was here that Major Walter Reed worked until his death in 1902. He found the area's marshlands an excellent site for his research on malaria. His research contributed to discovery of the cause of yellow fever.]

The Arsenal was renamed several times during its long history and in 1948 took its present name, Fort Lesley J. McNair. General McNair, Commander of Army Ground Forces during World War II, was one of the many American soldiers who lost their lives on Normandy Beach following the 1944 invasion. Over 600 of the approximately 1,000 generals, who served in World War II, were graduates of the Army War College, which had been established in 1904 at the Washington Barracks, as the Arsenal was called then.

Fort Lesley J. McNair stands today as an active and ongoing representation of history, both military and national. For Abraham Lincoln, the Washington Arsenal was an educational resource that kept him abreast of the "mechanics" of war and weaponry, and it is fitting that it should now be an area known and respected around the world for military defense education. To students of the Lincoln story, it is a grim monument to the efforts of the government to "remove the stain of innocent blood from the land" as Secretary Stanton wrote to the Military Tribunal, which was about to try the accused Lincoln assassins.

[2022 Editor's Note: Today, the portion of the penitentiary cell block, which housed the courtroom, still stands. Most of the building is used as office space, but the third floor courtroom area has been restored to its 1865 appearance. Tours [pre-COVID] were held quarterly the first Saturday of February, May, August, and November. Call Joint Base Myer-Henderson Hall Public Affairs at (703) 696-3283 for more information.]

An Interview with W.E. Doster

By Joan Chaconas

Reprinted from *The Surratt Society News*, September 1978

I was privileged to meet and interview Mr. Alexis Doster (1890-1979), the son of General W.E. Doster (1837-1919). This was arranged for me through the kind efforts of Alexis Doster III (1943-2017), his grandson.

It was a three-hour drive into New Jersey to the Doster residence, and I must admit I was really excited. It seemed hard to believe that I was about to meet a man whose father had been the defending attorney for Lewis Thornton Powell/Paine and George Atzerodt during the Conspiracy Trial. This would put me only "one person away" from the scene! I wondered what I would discover.

Mr. Doster was dressed in a white Panama suit, when I met him, and he sported a snappy-looking mustache. He was quite a distinguished and handsome gentleman for his 88 years. With the interview about to begin, I started the tape rolling and asked my questions:

Q) Did Mr. Doster have a receipt or any record of how or if his father had been paid?

A) No.

Q) Did Mr. Doster ever hear his father remark on the innocence or guilt of the conspirators?

A) No. Just Mary Surratt. He said she was innocent. My father said she was a lovely lady, in the sense that she was a “lady,” not a “woman,” if you know what I mean?! [He went on to say] She was a lady in every respect—her upbringing and everything. She was very charming. I think he fell for her very heavily.

Q) At the time of the trial, General Doster was 28 years old. I asked him if he ever heard him mention her daughter Anna.

A) Yes, one time—but I can’t quite remember. She came to my father for sympathy. She was in tears.

Q) I asked about the pen knife of Powell’s, which Powell supposedly told Doster he could have.

A) He knew nothing of this.

All the while we were talking, the General stared down at us from a very large portrait. I could almost see him nodding his head in approval after each thing his son said. Because the General was 53 years old when his son, Alexis, was born, there was that vast difference in age. His son was never, to quote him, “quite mature enough to talk too much of the trial.”

The author of *Reveille in Washington*, Margaret Leech, told him that she was inspired to write her book only after she had read W.E. Doster’s *Lincoln and Episodes of the Civil War*. She, too, was thrilled at meeting General Doster’s son. General Doster dictated his book to his secretary in 1915 at the age of 78. It is a most interesting little book and it is in the Museum’s library.

Mr. Doster told me that his father was born in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, in 1837 and went to Yale. Upon his graduation, he then attended Harvard Law School, the University of Heidelberg in Germany, and the Sorbonne in Paris. He spent his time accomplishing such feats as memorizing the principal excerpts from Milton’s epic poem, *Paradise Lost*!

He joined the Union Army in 1861, and in February of 1862 was appointed Provost Marshal of the District of Columbia. In 1863, he became a Lieutenant Colonel with the 4th Pennsylvania Cavalry. He was at Chancellorsville and Gettysburg, and in 1864 he was honorably mustered out as a Brevet Brigadier General. In 1865, he did an admirable job as the defending lawyer of the conspirators, Powell and Atzerodt—proving full well the deck was stacked against any line of defense.

After the Conspiracy Trial was over, he returned to Pennsylvania and resumed his law practice until his death in 1919. This period of time was by no means uneventful. He won a high reputation as one of Pennsylvania’s most able corporate lawyers. For 35 years, he was counsel for the Bethlehem Iron (later Steel) Company, for the Lehigh Coal and Navigation Co., and for several other major firms. In 1867, he helped found the *Weekly Chronicle*, which later became the *Bethlehem Daily Times*.

General Doster was an avid traveler and painter. For you treasure hunters, there are hundreds of water colors out there somewhere signed by W.E. Doster. The family has none of his paintings, as the General’s will stipulated everything would be sold and the proceeds divided amongst the children.

All through the interview, I could feel the great respect and admiration that this gentleman I was talking to had for his father, General W.E. Doster. I have only presented the highlights here.

The General was indeed an outstanding man—not only of this time, but for any time. He is proving so interesting that I will be continuing the interviews with some of his other descendants—including one with a box of memorabilia. I shall report on these interviews in later editions of the newsletter.

[2022 Editor’s Note: Ten years later Joan would make a trip to Goshen, Connecticut, and meet the great-grandson of General W.E. Doster. He allowed her to go through General Doster’s papers. While most of the papers related to Doster’s life before and after the Civil War, only a few related to the Civil War period. It was in this lot that Joan discovered the missing statement that George Atzerodt gave while on the monitor *USS Montauk*. It had been alluded to during the 1865 Conspiracy Trial. Joan’s article on her discovery and the Atzerodt statement originally appeared in the October 1988 *Surratt Courier* and was reprinted in the May/June 2021 *The Surratt Courier*, which is available on our website.]

The Detectives (A discontinued cereal!)

By Joan Chaconas

Reprinted from *The Surratt Courier*, March 1979

Mystery lurks in the strangest places! On one of my many jaunts to the National Park Service (NPS) Lincoln vault, I came across a letter written as late as 1940 in which a lady wrote that her great-aunt made the hanging hood for Mrs. Surratt and had also cared for her (Mrs. Surratt’s) child. This got me curious, so what better than to go to the great oracle, James O. Hall (JOH), and see what he had to say about it!

Several weeks later I received a note from Mr. Hall and a photostat copy of an obviously very old and crumbly newspaper clipping from the (hold on to your hats!) *Follansbee Review*, West Virginia.

JOH had taken a trip down to Elkton, Virginia, and had headed for the address on the 1940 letter. A sweet lady in her seventies answered the door and cordially invited our ace investigator into her home. Yes, she had written the letter, but she thought it strange that it took almost 40 years for a response! JOH won her over and she gladly showed him the old newspaper article her information had come from.

The story goes like this. Her great-aunt was Priscilla Catherine Dodd, who was married to General Levi Axtell Dodd. General Dodd was a member of General Hartranft’s command, and he had been placed in immediate charge of all the alleged conspirators at the Arsenal Prison. The headline on the article was quite large and read “ONLY WOMAN TO WITNESS THE EXECUTION OF MRS. SURRATT.” (Where were you, Dr. Walker?) The subtitle read, “General Dodd’s Widow Was Concerned in Thrilling Civil War Incident.” The article told of Mrs. Dodd’s death on May 21, 1916. It went on to say that, “Mrs. Dodd took a great liking to the doomed woman and did much to comfort her and her child. She made the death cap worn by Mrs. Surratt at the execution and a few minutes before the trying ordeal, was secretly let in to witness the execution. She cared for Mrs. Surratt’s child for a while after the execution.”

According to JOH, General Hartranft lived on the grounds of the arsenal and we can make an educated guess that General Dodd and the Mrs. did as well. This could account for Mrs. Dodd being at the prison and being in such close contact with Mrs. Surratt.

The next super sleuth to appear on the scene was John C. Brennan (JCB). JOH was curious as to where the two Dodds in question were resting now. Quickly, (because that's the only way JCB works!) JCB found out from his underground contacts that the General had died August 7, 1901, and that he and his wife were reposing in Green Mount Cemetery [in Baltimore, ironically the same cemetery in which John Wilkes Booth and two other conspirators are buried] under the watchful eye of John Mayhew.

Along with the article on Mrs. Dodd was another on the General, complete with photo. Part of this article stated that General Dodd was the only surviving General, who was in charge of the assassins of President Lincoln, and that he had taken those who were sentenced to life imprisonment to the Dry Tortugas. He also had been chief marshal of the parade at the unveiling of the Hartranft statue at Harrisburg, Pennsylvania.

According to JCB, "General Hartranft died in 1889, possibly while still serving as Governor of Pennsylvania, so the statue erected in Harrisburg would logically have been placed subsequent to 1889." There were no discernible dates on either article.

And that, dear reader, solves but one of the many mysteries that lay buried in the NPS files!

That Other April Tragedy, The Sinking of the Steamer *Sultana*

By Joan Chaconas

Reprinted from *The Surratt Society News*, May 1977

As Lincoln was finishing his last few hours work and making ready to attend Ford's Theatre on April 14, 1865, a completely unrelated event was occurring at the same time many miles removed from the Capital city. The beautiful and graceful steamship *Sultana* was lazily, but expertly, being wheeled in and tied up at a wharf in Cairo, Illinois. Both these seemingly ordinary events were to end in overwhelming tragedy.

Lincoln was to die the next morning from an assassin's bullet, throwing the world into uncontrollable mourning. And the *Sultana*? As she steamed down river on April 27, without warning, her boilers blew up at 2 a.m., spewing hundreds of just released Northern prisoners of war into the cold, flood-swollen Mississippi River. Close to 2,000 perished. Thus, the *Sultana* became one of the greatest marine disasters in naval history.

The *Sultana* was built in 1832 as a pleasure cruise ship. A newspaper report in 1863 in the Cincinnati *Daily Commercial* claimed her to be "one of the largest and best business steamers ever constructed." Early steamboats were wood-burners, but the *Sultana*'s four high pressure boilers were the new coal burning type. The interior fixtures had a "Victorian" elegance about them. She cost \$60,000 to build and was licensed to carry 375 persons, including the crew. Why had she been so grossly overloaded? What caused her boilers to explode? Why was this tragic event given so little notice?

In the spring of 1865, Grant agreed to a man-for-man exchange of prisoners, causing thousands of Northern prisoners to be released from Andersonville and Cahaba, two Confederate

prison stockades. These men were herded together at Camp Fisk near Vicksburg, Mississippi. Here over 5,000 sick, lame, near dead prisoners anxiously awaited transportation north to their families, their homes, but best of all to their freedom. Then along steamed the *Sultana*. She pulled into Vicksburg for some necessary repairs on a boiler and, when she finally left port she had been loaded up to her jack staff with over 2,500 men, women, and children.

On that same April 27th, Lincoln's Funeral Train was passing through Albany, New York. Also, the newspapers of that morning carried the story that John Wilkes Booth had been found and killed. There seemed to be little room left in the hearts of the people or on the pages of the newspapers for the awful disaster of the *Sultana*. There was too much competition and the doomed *Sultana* went almost unnoticed.

By this time, dear reader, I hope I have whetted your appetite enough to want to know more about the *Sultana*. James W. Elliott wrote a fascinating book on the subject called *Transport to Disaster*. His very moving story is based on the few published accounts that exist, but what really makes his story come alive are the words of his own grandfather. He was on the *Sultana* that awful night and lived to tell the tale. If you get this book and read it, you will weep for the poor unfortunately souls.

2022 Editor's Note: On January 15th, the PBS program *History Detectives Special Investigation, (Episode 1: Civil War Sabotage?)* investigated the *Sultana*'s explosion. The conclusion was the steamer's boiler explosion was caused by a combination of snow melting into the northern Mississippi River making the river flood, and the overloaded steamer struggling against the swollen river putting a strain on the patched boiler. Of the 2,400 passengers, it is estimated that 1,700 were killed by the fire onboard or drowning in the river, making it the worst maritime disaster in American history. The reason for the overcrowding? The steamer was made to carry 375 passengers and crew. It left the harbor carrying an estimated 2,400 passengers—over six times its recommended capacity. The reason for this? The Federal government paid steamboat companies as much as \$10 per person to transport the soldiers and freed prisoners. Bribing military quartermasters was not uncommon, so the steamers were packed with as many soldiers as possible.

The Saga of the Pearl

By Joan Chaconas

Reprinted from *The Surratt Courier*, May 2016

On the evening of April 15, 1848, while their owners slept, 77 enslaved people left their homes and silently made their way through the streets of Washington and Georgetown to that wonderful place called "Freedom"—at least that was the plan. With help from the Underground Railroad, these people were heading to a wharf at the Potomac River and a ship named the *Pearl*, their passage to "Freedom." Among these brave souls were the six Edmonson siblings in their early teens, Mary Bell and her ten family members, four people enslaved by Ignatius Mudd, and one person enslaved by Dolley Madison. All told there were 38 men and boys, 26 women and girls, and 13 children threading their way through the city on this dark night.

Who was the brave captain of the ship? If caught taking the enslaved to freedom, he certainly faced jail time and fines. Daniel Drayton was his name. He was 46 years old and sailed

ships between Philadelphia and Washington hauling wood, oysters, and other articles to sell. At this time, Drayton had no ship of his own, so he engaged Edward Sayres and his ship to transport the enslaved for the price of one hundred dollars. Sayres was to take them down the Potomac River to the Chesapeake Bay and then up to the Frenchtown landing at the top of the Bay. Here, they would be met and led north by friends in wagons or other modes of travel.

In 1848, there were 40,001 whites, 8,158 freemen, and 2,113 enslaved living in the Washington/Georgetown area. The people here had mixed feelings about slavery. Most people wanted to abolish slavery, at least in Washington, the Nation's Capital. Visitors to the city made disparaging remarks about seeing the enslaved and "slave pens" in the area. There were some others who had the attitude that the enslaved in Washington were well-treated and they should be content with the things as they are.

Being enslaved in Washington, depending on which household you belonged, was easier than being enslaved in the South and in certain parts of the North. That was the main reason runaway slaves made their way to Washington. It was also thought by the runaways that the government would be a protector. Another reason was that there were many freemen in the city, and they were usually willing to help. It was easy to blend into the population.

But these people wanted to be free. They did not want to be considered property like furniture and livestock or be hired out and not be able to keep but a very small portion of their earnings—most if not all of it going to their enslavers. The enslaved could buy their freedom, if they saved their money. It cost hundreds of dollars and amazingly many of the enslaved were able to save and buy their freedom and that of their families.

Back to the runaways. Have our people safely made it to the ship—have they boarded the *Pearl*?! Yes, they are all on board and crammed below deck in a rather small space with just enough room to sit. The ship has taken off, but the wind has died down and the ship is idle, alarming its passengers. They are dangerously close to the shores. Finally, the wind picks up, and they are on their way. Smiles and singing break out. The ship gets as far as Point Lookout at the mouth of the Chesapeake Bay, when a squall breaks out in the Bay, making it too dangerous to enter. They are forced to anchor in a small, nearby cove and wait until the weather clears.

Back in the city, families have now awakened to find no fires have been prepared, no breakfast is being cooked, and no servants are around. The enslaved have escaped. The alarm has been sounded. Somehow—and it isn't clear how—the search party of police are alerted to the fact that the *Pearl* just took off and the runaways were on it. Now, a ship is in pursuit of the *Pearl*.

Drayton and Sayres are arrested, and they and the ship of runaways are towed back to the city. A three-day riot occurred as a result of this event, referred to as the Washington Riot of 1848. The mob wanted to hang Drayton for stealing their property. Fortunately for him, he had police protection. Some owners were surprised that their enslaved wanted to run away, as they felt they were treated quite well. One person, who was getting a lot of blame for this escape, was the editor of the *National Era*, a moderate abolitionist newspaper. The irate mob attacked the newspaper office, which was located across from the Patent Office. They were stopped before harm came to the editor, Gamaliel Bailey.

Drayton and Sayres were charged with 77 counts of theft and 77 counts of illegal transportation of slaves. The bond was \$1,000 [that's \$35,588.40 today] for each of the enslaved, totaling \$77,000 [that's \$2,740,306.80 today]. The two men could not meet their bond. They and the 77 runaways were taken to the "Blue Jug" jail located behind City Hall of 4th and G Streets.

The news of the *Pearl* was big news. It appeared in all the newspapers, local and otherwise, and it caused much heated political debate in Congress regarding the morality of slavery in the Nation's Capital.

But business must go on, and the Alexandria slave trading company of Bruin and Hill was at the jail and bought some of the enslaved from their angry owners and were preparing for a trip to the slave market in New Orleans. Some owners did take their enslaved back. One wonders how well they were treated afterwards.

The attacks on the *National Era* and editor Bailey continued for days. Finally the mobs were convinced to go home, but heated debate still continued in Congress. It was felt by some that this event, the escape and capture of the *Pearl* and its occupants, hastened and strengthened the anti-slavery cause.

In 1849, Congressman Abraham Lincoln proposed a bill for the "compensated emancipation" of the enslaved in the District of Columbia. It didn't go anywhere. In the following 1850s, there was a steady decline in the number of locally enslaved in Washington, so perhaps slavery "will exhaust itself" as some thought.

Still, the city now wondered how it could absorb all the runaways who kept coming into the city. Whites wanted to keep the ratio of blacks to whites at 26%. Hoping to attain this, the city modified their enforceable black codes. They reduced the peace bond to \$50 for every free black over twelve years of age and required the surety of only one white freeholder, but every black person applying for residence had to report within five days of their arrival or pay the penalty of a fine or do a term in the workhouse. The mayor's permission was required for a public gathering and secret meetings were forbidden.

The Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 was partly responsible for keeping the influx of the enslaved down, but by 1854 controversy was back again over the territorial organization of Kansas and Nebraska. Events, such as the *Pearl* escape and the very heated debates on slavery in Congress, continued up to the 1860s. The runaway slave question was really one of the main issues in the years prior to the Civil War. Differences between the North and South over slavery caused the country to become two regions and ultimately brought us to the war that killed thousands of our young men, a very sad solution.

By 1867, all blacks were free and the black codes were gone, at least in Washington, D.C. Many blacks owned property and a few, such as the Wormley family, had their own business. They started as caterers and eventually had a very popular hotel near Lafayette Square. Freedmen bureaus had been set up and were helping blacks with housing and education. Things looked bright, but the brightness dimmed over the following years. If you fast forward to 1913, you will find a bill signed by President Wilson that segregated all Federal workplaces.

The enslaved who attempted to escape on the *Pearl* were looking for the freedom we all deserve. They paid a high price. Some of the people captured on the *Pearl* went back to the life they tried to leave, some went to the Deep South into a worse situation. The two men, who led the ship escape, went to prison for several years.

Today the price of freedom is within reach, but one must still work for it. There will always be people looking for the *Pearl* and that magic, elusive destination. To learn more about this story, read Mary Kay Ricks' book, *Escape on the Pearl*.