

The Surratt Courier

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Louise Oertly, Editor

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President's Message

On April 22, the Surratt Society held its third annual virtual meeting. I would like to extend my thanks to our excellent speakers for sharing their knowledge with us and to everyone who was able to attend.

There was a short business meeting, during which the following topics were discussed:

-Booth Escape Route Tours. Out of an abundance of caution of putting 50 people on a bus for one hour, the April tours were cancelled and we are hoping they can be resumed in September. In the meantime, we are keeping an email list of anyone asking about them. Once we have news on the status of the September tours, we will contact everyone on the email list. Thank you for your patience.

-Many have asked if they are still a Surratt Society member. Sorry for the lack of communication. You are still a member. The Executive Committee decided not to collect dues at this time, as most of the membership benefits offered before COVID are no longer available. One such missing benefit, as many have noted, is that members are no longer receiving a paper copy of *The Surratt Courier* in the mail. As the Park and Planning Commission is no longer printing and mailing the *Courier*, it was decided that our best option was to publish the *Courier* in digital format on the Surratt Society's website, starting with the 2020 issues. We will contact everyone once we determine what member benefits we can offer.

-As for access to the James O. Hall Research Center, it is open by appointment only.

-Surratt House Museum tours are now every half hour Thursday thru Sunday from 11 a.m. to 4 p.m.

-The election of officers for the 2023-24 term took place. They are:

President	Louise Oertly
Vice President	Bill Binzel
Treasurer	Tom Buckingham
Secretary	Rebecca Morris

After the business meeting, we listened to our speakers. Dr. Kate Larson is the author of *The Assassin's Accomplice: Mary Surratt and the Plot to Kill Abraham Lincoln*. She spoke on "Civil War Memory and the Reimagining of Mary Surratt." Julian Sher spoke on his latest book, *The North Star—Canada and the Civil War Plots Against Lincoln*, which looks at how the Confederacy utilized Canada to their advantage, as well as at the lives of several Canadians who played instrumental roles in the war and in the pursuit of John Wilkes Booth. See page 2 for Julian's article on this subject.

Louise Oertly, President

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.

Confederate North: How Canada Became a Base of Operations for the South

By Julian Sher

If you asked most Americans today what they thought about Canada's role during the Civil War, the inevitable response would center on the Underground Railroad and Canada's history as a beacon of freedom for tens of thousands of enslaved people. Most Canadians would likely agree; they are justly proud of Canada's reputation as a "North Star" in the "struggle for freedom" as Martin Luther King, Jr., aptly described it in 1967. But hidden in the shadows of history is a darker truth.

If you could travel back to 1865 to ask Abraham Lincoln and Jefferson Davis what *they* thought of Canada as the war raged on, you would have found surprising agreement from the bitter foes. The North cursed and the South cheered Canada for the same reason: it was seen by all sides as a base of operations and haven for the Confederates and murderous plots. I explore this hidden history in my new book *The North Star: Canada and the Civil War Plots against Lincoln*. Regular readers of *The Surratt Courier* would be more informed than most about some of the disturbing details of Canada's little-known collaboration with the Confederacy, thanks to the occasional article over the years. But most Americans—even avid followers of the Civil War—would be shocked to learn the disturbing truth of what in effect became what I like to call the "Confederate North."

During the Civil War, Canada was still a colony of England, so it followed England's lead as a "neutral" country in the conflict. But "neutrality" in effect meant treating an illegitimate rebellion by Southern slave states on par with the recognized American government—and thus giving the Confederates the sanctuary and support they needed.

Take banking, for a start. A rebellion needs a mission and men (and today, women) to fight. But it runs on money.

In early 1864, three years into a war they were beginning to lose, a desperate Confederacy opened up a new front, seeking to attack and undermine Lincoln's government from where he least expected—north of the border. Confederate President Jefferson Davis authorized \$1 million in gold (the equivalent of nearly \$20 million in gold today) to set up a "Secret Service" to plan, originate, and fund covert Confederate operations from Canada.¹ He hand-picked a political ally, Jacob Thompson, a wealthy Mississippi slave owner and former Congressman, to head the Canadian venture. Arriving in May 1864 in Montreal—one of the largest cities in North America then and a flourishing financial center—Thompson immediately went to the local branch of the Ontario Bank to set up what would become the slush fund for the Confederacy's war of sabotage and subterfuge waged from Canada. Based in a stately three-story building across from the imposing Notre Dame Basilica in what is now Old Montreal, the bank was run by the influential Henry Starnes, a former (and future) mayor of the city and a provincial politician.

Anson Campbell, the chief teller at Starnes' Ontario Bank, testified at the conspiracy trials after the Civil War that Thompson opened his account in May 1864 with two deposits totaling \$109,965.² Over time, Campbell said, the bank records showed Thompson's account grew to at least \$649,873.28, the equivalent of more than twelve million dollars today. Thompson and his

associates also used banks in Toronto and St. Catharines, but by far the biggest chunk of the finances flowed through Starnes' institution. Campbell explained how huge amounts of untraceable cash were siphoned into Starnes' bank.

"Thompson has bought from us several times United States notes—greenbacks as they are commonly called," the chief teller testified.

"In large sums?" he was asked.

"Yes, sir," he said—citing two examples, when Thompson transferred \$15,000 and then \$19,125 from abroad over a short period.

All of this—quite legal, if perhaps ethically dubious—was going on with the full knowledge by the bank that they were aiding and abetting the Southern cause. Thompson became a regular enough customer at Starnes's bank during his frequent trips to Montreal that the chief teller grew familiar with him. "Oh, yes, I know him well," Campbell later told American investigators.

Starnes' bank did more than move large amounts of cash for the Confederate cause; in effect, it helped the slave states launder money. Campbell explained that, "as a general thing," cheques at the bank were issued "payable to the bearer"—that is, to a specific person.

But the bank facilitated Thompson's discreet work by issuing many cheques "payable to order"—in other words, anonymously. More details into how the scheme worked came from Daniel Eastwood, the assistant bank manager. He testified that bills of exchange, signed by the Secretary of the Treasury of the Confederate States, with an address in Liverpool, England, were deposited into the "large fund" at the bank. The deposits were initially made out to a sympathetic newspaper publisher in New York, but his name "was erased at Mr. Thompson's request" and Eastwood's name was put on the paperwork "to make the draft negotiable without putting any other name" on it.

Eastwood was asked if he knew where the money ended up. "I have no knowledge," the banker said. "By the account, it will be seen that there was a considerable amount... purchased at one time and another, but we were not acquainted with the use it was put to."

What Thompson put that money to was everything from a bank raid on the town of St. Albans, Vermont, to an arson attack on New York City, not to mention piracy on the Great Lakes, and an early attempt of bio-terrorism by shipping across the border several trunks full of soiled clothing that the Confederates hoped would spread the deadly yellow fever disease and kill thousands in the North—including a targeted attack on President Lincoln. [Editor's Note: It wasn't until the early 1900's that it was proved that yellow fever was transmitted by infected mosquitoes.]

Starnes' bank was equally helpful when John Wilkes Booth dropped by to do some business on the last day of his 10-day trip to Montreal a few months later, in October 1864. Booth hung around with the many Confederate sympathizers who saw Montreal as a sort of Casablanca—a city full of spies, scoundrels, and saboteurs. He met with Confederate agents and during a billiards game he boasted—six months before he killed Abraham Lincoln—that Lincoln "would get his goose cooked" and that "Abe's contract was nearly up."³

As Jacob Thompson and others had done, Booth chose Henry Starnes' Ontario Bank branch on St. James Street to do his banking, doubtless because of its favorable reputation among Confederates.

"How often did you see J. Wilkes Booth in Canada?" chief teller Campbell was asked during the trial after Lincoln's assassination.⁴

“I could not say. He might have been in the bank a dozen times; but I remember distinctly of seeing him once.” A dozen visits, if Campbell was accurate, would mean Booth came into Starnes’ bank every day he was in Montreal, a remarkable frequency for someone with a bank balance of a few hundred dollars at the branch.

The one visit Campbell remembered in detail was on October 27, the day before Booth left the city. Booth walked in with Patrick Martin and asked for a bank draft. “I am going to run the blockade,” Booth told Campbell openly and was clearly not worried that the bank would have any objections. “[I]n case I should be captured, can my capturers make use of the exchange?”

“I told him no, not unless he endorsed the bill: the bill was made payable to his order,” recalled the ever-helpful banker.

The bank happily issued Booth a bank draft in English currency [Editor’s Note: Canada was at the time still a British colony]—about “sixty-one pounds and some odd shillings”—worth about \$300 in U.S. gold at the time. In essence, bank drafts were in the nineteenth century what travellers checks became in the twentieth: a safe way to travel without having to carry cash. Like all such documents, it was made official with a signature from the bank president, Henry Starnes.

Campbell was pushed at the trial about how this kind of “disbursement” could be used.

“We can never tell. We never ask a man anything about that,” answered the discreet banker. “A man doing business with us deposits what he likes; and we never ask any questions. He draws checks for what he likes; and we do not know what he is going to do with it.”

When Booth was tracked down and killed at Garrett’s farm in Virginia twelve days after the assassination—by an army search party, coincidentally, led by a Canadian serving as a lieutenant in the Union Army named Edward P. Doherty—they found the bank draft in the assassin’s clothing.

Not just bankers, but also leading members of Canada’s political elite, gave support of one form or the other to the South.

It was only two years after the Civil War ended, in 1867, that Canada became an independent country from England. Several of the so-called “Fathers of Confederation”—Canada’s equivalent of America’s Founding Fathers—had demonstrated sympathies with or had connections to the Southern cause.

In 1864, John A. Macdonald, who would go on to become Canada’s first Prime Minister, spoke eloquently to the delegates at the 1864 Charlottetown Confederation Conference about “the gallant defence [sic] that is being made by the Southern Republic.”

“[A]t this moment they have not much more than four millions [sic] of men,” Macdonald said, “yet what a brave fight they have made.”⁵ Keep in mind that this was three years into a war, when it had become clear to all that slavery had become the central flashpoint in the conflict.

Thomas D’Arcy McGee had played enthusiastic host to Lincoln’s nemesis and Southern apologist Clement Vallandigham, a Copperhead who found exile in Canada and even ran for governor of Ohio *in absentia* while residing there. Alexander Galt, the first Minister of Finance of the new Dominion, was friendly enough with Jefferson Davis to visit him in Quebec, when the defeated President of the Confederacy took refuge in Canada after the war.

John Abbott, who was elected to the House of Commons in 1867 and went on to serve as the country’s third Prime Minister, had made a name for himself successfully defending in court the notorious St. Albans raiders. They had used Canada as a base to launch a bank raid on the small Vermont town, netting over \$200,000 for the Confederates and killing an innocent civilian.

Leaders of the powerful Catholic Church in Canada were also very helpful to the Confederates. In the summer of 1865, after Lincoln’s assassination, priests in Quebec hid the

fugitive John Surratt, Jr.,—at the time the most wanted man in America, accused of being Booth’s accomplice—for several months in the Quebec countryside. They then helped him make his escape to Europe, where he hid for another year in the Pope’s private army as a Zouave.

In English Canada, the prominent Archbishop of Halifax, Thomas Connolly, met frequently with Confederate leaders. He also sent out a letter to his followers notifying them that the slave South had “a cause that commands the respect and sympathy of the world” and therefore worthy of “the attention and kindly services of every Catholic Bishop and Priest and layman.”⁶

Many of the English and French newspapers in Canada—owned by the financial, political and clerical elites—were decidedly pro-South.

The leading French newspaper in Montreal, *La Minerve*, had no shame in praising the Confederacy for fielding one of “the most intelligent armies we have known in America,” lauding the bravery of Southern troops.⁷

In Ontario, the voices against Lincoln and the North were even more shrill. The *Niagara Review* denounced Lincoln as a “mad, blood-stained despot at Washington.”⁸ In the week that the Civil War started, the *Toronto Leader*, arguably the most consistently pro-Confederate newspaper in the country, praised Southern soldiers for being “hearty in their cause” and warned “innocent women and helpless children are to be butchered” by armed slaves.⁹

Lincoln’s assassination changed little in the pro-Southern papers in Canada.

“It must be remembered that as atrocious as was Booth’s deed, his ‘sic semper tyrannis’ was literally justified by the facts,” argued the *London Examiner*. “The man he killed had murdered the Constitution of the United States.” The *Toronto Leader* opined that “it should not be forgotten that [for] all such deeds there is some cause,” blaming Lincoln for the harsh treatment of “the oppressed people of the South.”

The *Montreal Gazette*, astonishingly, found a way to focus most of its sympathy not on the slain President, but on “the great loss which the South sustains in his death.” The newspaper reminded its readers that it had questioned “the justifiableness of the war itself” and feared that if vengeance took over, “the calamity which his assassination causes to the Southern States is great.”¹⁰

French Quebecers got the same message from *Le Canadien* in a special edition it published on April 15, 1865. Its first worries were for “the terrible reprisals against the South that could come.” It went on to chastise those “creating a pedestal for the deceased President . . . [when] just a few days ago he was but a mediocre man.”¹¹

While many of the elites in Canada backed the Confederacy, tens of thousands of ordinary Canadians enlisted on the side of Abraham Lincoln’s Union forces to defeat the slave South. At least twenty-nine earned the Medal of Honour and five of them became Union generals. Many paid the ultimate price for valour: an estimated five thousand to seven thousand died.¹²

Canadian Blacks—many of them freed slaves or descendants of slaves—stepped forward in large numbers. An estimated 2,500 Black Canadians fought for the Union. Perhaps the most famous was Anderson Ruffin Abbott, who was the first Canadian-born Black doctor. He went to Washington, D.C., to work as a contract surgeon caring for Lincoln’s troops. They were, in his words, “modern crusaders fighting for a just cause.”

Canada was a welcome “North Star” for enslaved Blacks seeking freedom, and many Canadians in turn fought for more freedoms in the Civil War. But it is equally undeniable—though sadly buried in the shadows of history—that Canada also played a dark role in that conflict.

“History is not history unless it is the truth,” Abraham Lincoln once said. Especially when that truth makes us uncomfortable.

Julian Sher is the author of *The North Star: Canada and the Civil War Plots Against Lincoln*, published by Penguin Random House in 2023, from which this article is adapted. More information at www.juliansher.com. He would like to thank the research staff at the Surratt House Museum’s James O. Hall Research Center for their assistance during the writing of the book, and William Binzel, Vice President of the Surratt Society, for his insightful review of the manuscript.

Sources:

More detailed references and a full biography are available in my book.

¹ *Journal of the Confederate Congress*, vol. 6, pp. 690–91. See also William Tidwell, “Confederate Expenditures for Secret Service.” *Civil War History* 37, no. 3 (September 1991): pp. 219–31.

² *The Assassination of President Lincoln and the Trial of the Conspirators*. Compiled and arranged by Benn Pitman. New York: Moore, Wiltach & Baldwin, 1865, pp. 45–46

³ *New York Times*, May 7, 1865, reprinted from the *Hamilton Times*.

⁴ *Assassination of President Lincoln*, pp. 45–46.

⁵ Creighton, Donald. *John A. Macdonald: The Young Politician*. Toronto: Macmillan, 1952, p. 369.

⁶ Connolly letter, May 20, 1864, Clay, Clement. “C.C. Clay Papers, 1811–1925.” Duke University Libraries.

⁷ *La Minerve*, October 21, 1864, and June 16, 1864

⁸ *Niagara Review* quoted in the *Toronto Leader*, August 5, 1863. See also Wells, Cheryl A. “Icy Blasts to Balmy Airs: British North America and Lincoln’s Assassination.” *Journal of the Abraham Lincoln Association* 36, no. 2 (Summer 2015): pp.26–47.

⁹ *Toronto Leader*, April 25, 1865, and April 18, 1865.

¹⁰ *Montreal Gazette*, April 17, 1865.

¹¹ *Le Canadien*, April 21, 1865,

¹² The Grays and Blues of Montreal, thegraysandbluesofmontreal.com.

St. Lawrence Hall Register

Reprinted from *The Surratt Courier*, August 1997

The register of the St. Lawrence Hall Hotel in Montreal, is among the archives of the Canadian Government at Ottawa. This hotel was used as a sort of unofficial headquarters for the Confederate clandestine apparatus in Canada. Among the names appearing on this register are: Clement C. Clay, Jacob Thompson, Josephine Brown, Mrs. N. Slater (Sarah), General E.G. Lee, John Harrison (Surratt), and John Wilkes Booth. Surratt registered there twice in 1865, on April 6 and April 18, using his two given names only—John Harrison. Booth registered on October 18, 1864, giving his home address as Baltimore. He was assigned to room 150. The page showing Booth’s name was cut from the register by Federal detectives. A photograph of this page is in the Charles Bromback Collection, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress. A microfilm copy of this register has been furnished to the Surratt Society by James O. Hall. It is a valuable tool for researchers interested in the cat-and-mouse game played out by the Federals and the Confederates in Canada. Now, does anyone know what became of the original page showing Booth’s registration?

1870 Rockville, Maryland, Lecture by John Surratt, Jr.

In reading about the assassination and its aftermath, there are references to the lectures that John Surratt, Jr., gave in 1870, but how many have actually read his speech? Surprisingly, never in the 47 years that *The Surratt Courier* has been in existence, has John's lecture appeared in it, so here it is. The following is a copy of the first lecture John, Jr., gave, as reported in the December 7, 1870, edition of *The Evening Star* [Washington, D.C.]. In the 1870 newspaper article, key words/phrases were boldfaced in the story.

Reprinted from *The Evening Star*, December 7, 1870

A Remarkable Lecture!

John H. Surratt Tells His Story

“What, go twenty miles for an item?” Well you'd have thought so if you had seen the STAR reporter making the dust fly last night on the Rockville Turnpike. And this is what called the STAR reporter to Rockville last night—the following announcement in the Rockville paper;

Lecture by John H. Surratt

On Wednesday evening, December 6, 1870, John H. Surratt will deliver a Lecture in the courthouse in Rockville on—His introduction to J. Wilkes Booth...His final departure for Europe. Doors open at 6 ½ o'clock, and lecture commences at 7. Admittance 50 cents; Children, half price.

John H. Surratt—everybody knows who he is, and of his alleged connection with the conspiracy of 1865, his escape, capture, and subsequent trial and discharge in this city, over a year since. Since then he has spent a portion of his time in Lower Maryland, been in the commission business in Baltimore, and now has turned up a school teacher in Rockville, where he has availed himself of leisure hours to prepare in the shape of a lecture, a history of the events which brought him so prominently before the public. The lecture took place in the courthouse, a quaint old building, but roomy and comfortable. The village looked deserted of everything save horses and empty vehicles of all kinds, from a **sulky to a cord wood wagon**, the occupants of which had passed into the court room, the scene of the lecture. A curious spectacle was presented within. The bar was occupied by the ladies in large numbers, while without and high up around the walls, on criers' bench, &c., men and boys held every available spot. At 7 o'clock Surratt entered and passed up the side platform in unceremonious style to the judge's desk. He was unattended, wore a mixed grey suit, and with the exception of having grown much stouter, looks the same as during his trial here. He has rather a mild and pleasant face, and a decidedly intellectual head; and does not look like the sort of stuff for a performer of desperate deeds. **On his entrance** the Rockville

Cornet Band in attendance struck up a lively air, Surratt then threw off his overcoat, revealing a manuscript book, which he drew from under his arm and laid open on the desk before him. He referred to it but little, however, having his lecture well in his memory. Without any introduction he was off, speaking very rapidly but distinctly for an hour and a quarter. He has a good voice and easy delivery, to which he occasionally added great warmth of feeling, particularly when he referred to his mother, and his alleged desertion of her in her darkest hour. He spoke as follows:

The Lecture

Ladies and gentlemen:—Upon entering that door a few moments ago the impression on my mind was so strong as to vividly recall scenes of three years ago. I am not unacquainted with courtroom audiences. [Sensation.] I have stood before them before; true, not in the character of a lecturer, but as a prisoner at the bar, arraigned for the high **crime of murder**. In contrasting the two positions I must confess I felt more ease as the prisoner at the bar than I do as a lecturer. Then I felt confident of success; now I do not. Then I had gentlemen of known ability to do all my talking for me; now, unfortunately, I have to do it for myself, and I feel illy capable of performing the task; still I hope you will all judge me kindly. I am not here to surprise you by any oratorical effort—not at all—but only to tell a simple tale. I feel that some explanation, perhaps, indeed, an apology, is due you for my appearance here this evening. In presenting this lecture before the public I do it in no spirit of self-justification. In a trial of sixty-one days I made my defense to the world, and I have no need or desire to rehearse it; nor do I appear for self-glorification. On the contrary, I dislike notoriety, and leave my solitude and obscurity unwillingly. Neither is it an itching for notoriety or fame. My object is merely to present a simple narrative of events as they occurred. I stand here through the force of that which has obliged many other men to do things quite as distasteful—pecuniary necessity, for the supply of which no more available channel presented itself. This is a reason easily appreciated. So you will take it kindly, I trust, and the ground we will have to go over together will guarantee sufficient interest to repay your kind attention. In this my first lecture I will speak of my introduction to J. Wilkes Booth, his plan—its failure—our final separation—my trip from Richmond, and thence to Canada—then my orders to Elmira—what was done there—the first intimation I had of **Mr. Lincoln's death**, my return to Canada and concealment there, and final departure for Europe. At the breaking out of the war I was a student at St. Charles College, in Maryland, but did not remain long there after that important event. I left in July 1861, and returning home commenced to take an active part in the stirring events of that period. I was not more than eighteen years of age, and was mostly engaged in sending information regarding the movements of the United States army stationed in Washington and elsewhere, and carrying dispatches to the Confederate boats on the Potomac. We had a regular established line from Washington to the Potomac, and I being the only unmarried man on the route, I had most of the hard riding to do. I devised various ways to carry the dispatches—sometimes in the heel of my boots, sometimes between the planks of the buggy. I confess that never in my life did I come across a more **stupid set of detectives** than those generally employed by the U.S. government. They seemed to have no idea whatever on how to search men. In 1864 my family left Maryland and moved to Washington, where I took a still more active part in the stirring events of that period. It was **a fascinating life to me**. It seemed as if I could not do too much or run too great a risk.

In the fall of 1864 I was introduced to John Wilkes Booth, who, I was given to understand, wished to know something about the main avenues leading from Washington to the Potomac. We

met several times, but as he seemed to be very reticent with regard to his purposes, and very anxious to get all the information out of me he could, I refused to tell him anything at all. At last I said to him, "It is useless for you, Mr. Booth, to seek any information from me at all; I know who you are and what are your intentions." He hesitated some time, but finally said he would make known his views to me provided I would promise secrecy. I replied, "I will do nothing of the kind. You know well I am a Southern man. If you cannot trust me we will separate." He then said, "I will confide my plans to you; but before doing so I will make known to you the motives that actuate me. In the Northern prisons are many thousands of our men whom the United States government refuses to exchange. You know as well as I the efforts that have been made to bring about that much desired exchange. Aside from the great suffering they are compelled to undergo, we are sadly in want of them as soldiers. We cannot spare one man, whereas the United States government is willing to let their own soldiers remain in our prisons because she has no need of the men. I have a proposition to submit to you, which I think if we can carry out will bring about the desired exchange." There was a long and **ominous silence** which I at last was compelled to break by asking, "Well, Sir, what is your proposition?" He sat quiet for an instant, and then, before answering me, arose and looked under the bed, into the wardrobe, in the doorway and the passage, and then said, "We will have to be careful; walls have ears." He then drew his chair close to me and in a whisper said, "**It is to kidnap President Lincoln**, and carry him off to Richmond!" "Kidnap President Lincoln!" I said. I confess that I stood aghast at the proposition, and looked upon it as a foolhardy undertaking. To think of successfully seizing Mr. Lincoln in the capital of the United States surrounded by thousands of his soldiers, and carrying him off to Richmond, looked to me like a foolish idea. I told him as much. He went on to tell with what facility he could be seized in various places in and about Washington. As for example in his various rides to and from the Soldiers' Home, his summer residence. He entered into the minute details of the proposed capture, and even the various parts to be performed by the actors in the performance. I was amazed—thunderstruck—and in fact, I might also say, frightened at the **unparalleled audacity** of this scheme. After two days' reflection I told him I was willing to try it. I believed it practicable at that time, though I now regard it as a foolhardy undertaking. I hope you will not blame me for going thus far. I honestly thought an exchange of prisoners could be brought about could we have once obtained possession of Mr. Lincoln's person. And now reverse the case. Where is there a young man in the North with one spark of patriotism in his heart with would not have with enthusiastic ardor joined in any undertaking for the capture of Jefferson Davis and brought him to Washington? There is not one who would not have done so. And so I was led on by a sincere desire to assist the South in gaining her independence. I had no hesitation in taking part in anything honorable that might tend toward the accomplishment of that object. [Tremendous applause.] Such a thing as the assassination of Mr. Lincoln I never heard spoken of by any of the party. *Never!* [Sensation.] Upon one occasion, I remember, we had called a meeting in Washington for the purpose of discussing matters in general, as we had understood that the government had received information that there was a plot of some kind on hand. They had even commenced to build a stockade and gates on the navy yard bridge; gates opening towards the south as though they expected danger from within, and not from without. At this meeting I explained the construction of the gates, &c., and stated I was confident the government had wind of our movement, and the best thing we could do would be to throw up the whole project. Everyone seemed to coincide in my opinion, except Booth, who sat silent and abstracted. Arising at last and bringing his fist upon the table he said, "Well, gentlemen, if the worst comes to the worst, I shall **know what to do.**"

Some hard words and even threats then passed between him and some of the party. Four of us then arose, one saying, "If I understand you to intimate anything more than the capture of Mr. Lincoln I for one will bid you goodbye." Everyone expressed the same opinion. We all arose and commenced putting our hats on. Booth perceiving probably that he had gone too far, asked pardon saying that he "had drank too much champagne." After some difficulty everything was amicably arranged and we separated at 5 o'clock in the morning. Days, weeks and months passed by without an opportunity presenting itself for us to attempt the capture. We seldom saw one another owing to the many rumors afloat that a conspiracy of some kind was being concocted in Washington. We had all the arrangements perfected from Washington for the purpose. Boats were in readiness to carry us across the river. One day we received information that the President would visit the Seventh Street Hospital for the purpose of being present at an entertainment to be given for the benefit of the wounded soldiers. The report only reached us about three quarters of an hour before the time appointed, but so perfect was our communication that we were instantly in our saddles on the way to the hospital. This was between one and two o'clock in the afternoon. It was our intention to **seize the carriage**, which was drawn by a splendid pair of horses, and to have one of our men mount the box and drive direct for southern Maryland via Benning's bridge. We felt confident that all the cavalry in the city could never overhaul us. We were all mounted on swift horses, besides having a thorough knowledge of the country. It was determined to abandon the carriage after passing the city limits. Upon the **suddenness of the blow** and the celerity of our movements we depended for success. By the time the alarm could have been given and horses saddled, we would have been on our way through southern Maryland towards the Potomac River. To our great disappointment, however, the President was not there but one of the government officials—Mr. Chase, if I mistake not. We did not disturb him, as we wanted a bigger *chase* [laughter] than he could have afforded us. It was certainly a bitter disappointment, but yet I think a most fortunate one for us. It was our last attempt. We soon after this became convinced that we could not remain much longer undiscovered, and that we must abandon our enterprise. Accordingly, a separation finally took place, and I never saw any of the party except one, and that was when I was on my way from Richmond to Canada on business of quite a different nature—about which, presently. Such is the story of **our abduction plot**.

Rash, perhaps foolish, but honorable I maintain in its means and ends; actuated by such motives as would under similar circumstances be a sufficient inducement to thousands of southern young men to have embarked in a similar enterprise. Shortly after our abandonment of the abduction scheme, some dispatches came to me which I was compelled to see through to Richmond. They were foreign ones, and had no reference whatever to this affair. I accordingly left home for Richmond, and arrived there safely on the Friday evening before the evacuation of that city. On my arrival I went to [the] Spotswood Hotel, where I was told that Mr. Benjamin, the then Secretary of War [sic] of the Confederate States, wanted to see me. I accordingly sought his presence. He asked me if I would carry some dispatches to Canada for him. I replied "yes." That evening he gave me the dispatches and \$200 in gold with which to pay my way to Canada. That was the only money I ever received from the Confederate government or any of its agents. It may be well to remark here that this scheme of abduction was concocted without the knowledge or the assistance of **the Confederate government** in any shape or form. Booth and I often consulted together as to whether it would not be well to acquaint the authorities in Richmond with our plan, as we were sadly in want of money, our expenses being very heavy. In fact the question arose among us as to whether, **after getting Mr. Lincoln**, if we succeeded in our plan, the Confederate authorities would not surrender us to the United States again, because of doing this thing without

their knowledge or consent. But we never acquainted them with the plan, and they never had anything in the wide world to do with it. In fact, we were jealous of our undertaking and wanted no outside help. I have not made this statement to defend the officers of the Confederate government. They are perfectly able to defend themselves. What I have done myself I am not ashamed to let the world know. I left Richmond on Saturday morning before the evacuation of that place, and reached Washington the following Monday at 4 o'clock p.m., April 3d, 1865. As soon as I reached the Maryland shore I understood that the detectives knew of my trip South and were on the lookout for me. I had been South several times before for **the Secret Service** but had never been caught. At that time I was carrying the dispatches Mr. Benjamin gave me; in a book entitled *The Life of John Brown*. During my trip, and while reading that book, I learned, to my utter amazement, that **John Brown** was a martyr sitting at the right hand of God. [Uproarious laughter.] I succeeded in reaching Washington safely, and in passing up Seventh Street met one of our party, who inquired what had become of Booth. I told him where I had been; that I was then on my way to Canada, and that I had not seen or heard anything of Booth since our separation. In view of the fact that Richmond had fallen, and that all hopes of the abduction of the President had been given up, I advised him to go home and go to work. That was **the last time** I saw any of the party. I went to a hotel and stopped over that night, as a detective had been to my house inquiring of the servant my whereabouts. In the early train next morning, Tuesday, April 4, 1865, I left for New York, and that was the last time I was ever in Washington until brought there by the U.S. government a captive in irons, **all reports to the contrary notwithstanding**.

The United States, as you will remember, tried to prove me presence in Washington on the 15th of April, the day on which Mr. Lincoln met his death. Upon arriving in New York, I **called at Booth's house**, and was told by the servant that he had left that morning suddenly, on the ground of going to Boston to fulfill an engagement at the theater. In the evening of the same day I took the cars for Montreal, arriving there the next day. I put up at the St. Lawrence Hotel, registering myself as "**John Harrison**" such being my first two names. Shortly afterwards I saw General Edward G. Lee, to whom the dispatches were directed, and delivered them to him. Those dispatches we tried to introduce as evidence on my trial, but his Honor Judge Fisher ruled them out, despite of the fact that the government had tried to prove that they had relation to the conspiracy to kill Mr. Lincoln. They were only accounts of some money transactions—nothing more or less. A week or so after my arrival there, General Lee came to my room, and told me he had **a plan on foot** to release the Confederate prisoners then in Elmira, N.Y. He said he had sent many parties there, but they always got frightened, and only half executed their orders. He asked me if I would go there and take a sketch of the prison, find out the number of prisoners, also minor details in regard to the number of soldiers on guard, cannon, small arms, &c. I readily accepted these new labors, owing to the fact that I could not return to Washington for fear of the detectives. The news of the evacuation of Richmond did not seem to disturb the General much in his plan, as he doubtless thought then that the Confederacy wanted men more than ever, no one dreaming that it was virtually at an end. I was much amused at one expression made use of by an ex-reb with regard to the suddenness of its demise:—"D--n the thing, it didn't even flicker, but went right out." [Laughter and applause.] In accordance with Gen. Lee's order, I went to Elmira, arriving there on Wednesday, two days before Mr. Lincoln's death, and registered at the Brainard House, as usual as "John Harrison." The following day I went to work, and made a complete sketch of the prison and surroundings. About 10 o'clock on Friday night I retired, little thinking that on that night **a blow would be struck** which would forever blast my hopes, and make me a wanderer in a foreign land. I slept the night through, and came down the next morning little dreaming of the storm then

brewing around my head. When I took my seat at the table around 9 o'clock a.m., a gentleman to my left remarked: "Have you heard the news?" "No, I've not," I replied. "What is it?" "Why **President Lincoln and Secretary Seward have been assassinated.**" I really put so little faith in what the man said that I made a remark that it was too early in the morning to get off such jokes as that. "It's so," he said, at the same time drawing out a paper and showing it to me. Sure enough, there I saw an account of what he told me, but as no names were mentioned, it never occurred to me for an instant that it could have been Booth or any of the party, for the simple reason that I never had heard anything regarding assassination spoken of during my intercourse with them. I had good reason to believe that there was **another conspiracy afloat in Washington**, in fact we all knew it. One evening, as I was partially lying down in the reading-room of the Metropolitan Hotel, two or three gentlemen came in and looked around as if to sure that no one was around. They then commenced to talk about what had been done, the best means for the expedition, &c. It being about dusk, and no gas light, and partially concealed behind a writing desk, I was an unwilling listener of what occurred. I told Booth of this afterward, and he said he had heard something to the same effect. It only made us all the more eager to carry out our plans at an early day for fear some one should get ahead of us. We didn't know what they were after exactly, but we were all well satisfied that their object was very much the same as ours. Arising from the table I thought over who the party could be, for at that time no names had been telegraphed. I was pretty sure it was none of **the old party**. I approached the telegraph office in the main hall of the hotel for the purpose of ascertaining if J. Wilkes Booth was in New York. I picked up a blank and wrote "John Wilkes Booth," giving the number of the house. I hesitated a moment, and then tore the paper up, and then wrote one "**J.W.B.**," with directions, which I was led to do from the fact that during our whole connection we rarely wrote or telegraphed under our proper names, but always in such a manner that no one could understand but ourselves. One way of Booth's was to send letters to me under cover to my quondam friend, **Louis J. Weichmann**

Doubtless you all know who Louis J. Weichmann is. They were sent to him because he knew of the plot to abduct President Lincoln. I proclaim it here and before the world that Louis J. Weichmann was a party to the plan to abduct President Lincoln. He had been told all about it, and was constantly importuning me to let him become an active member. I refused, for the simple reason that I told him that he could **neither ride a horse nor shoot a pistol**, which was a fact. [Laughter.] These were two **necessary accomplishments** for us. My refusal nettled him some; so he went off, as it afterwards appeared by his testimony, and told some government clerk that he had a vague idea that there was a plan of some kind on hand to abduct President Lincoln. This he says himself: that he could have spotted every man on the party. Why didn't he do it? Booth was sometimes rather suspicious of him, and asked me if I thought he could be trusted. Said I, "Certainly he can. Weichmann is **a Southern man**," and I always believed it until I had good reason to believe otherwise, because he had furnished information for the Confederate government, besides allowing me **access to the government records** after office hours. I have very little to say of Louis J. Weichmann. But I do pronounce him a base-born perjurer; a murderer of the meanest hue! Give me a man who can **strike his victim dead**, but save me from a man who, through perjury, will cause the death of an innocent person. Double murderer!!!! Hell possesses no worse fiend than a character of that kind. [Applause.] Away with such a character. I leave him in the **pit of infamy**, which he has dug for himself, a prey to the lights of his guilty conscience. [Applause.]

I telegraphed Booth thus:

"J.W.B., in New York:

"If you are in New York telegraph me.

"John Harrison, Elmira, N.Y."

The operator, after looking it over, said, "Is it J.W.B.?" to which I replied, "Yes." He evidently wanted the whole name, and had scarcely finished telegraphing when a door right near the office, and opening on the street, was pushed open, and I heard someone say, "Yes, there are three or four brothers of them, John, Junius Brutus, Edwin, and J. Wilkes Booth." The whole truth flashed on me in an instant, and I said to myself, "**My God! What have I done?**"

The dispatch was still lying before me, and I reached over and took it up for the purpose of destroying it, but the operator stretched forth his hand and said, "We must file all telegrams." My first impulse was to tear it up, but I pitched it back and walked off. The town was in the greatest uproar, flags at half mast, bells tolling, &c., &c. Still I did not think that I was in danger, and determined to go immediately to Baltimore to find out the particulars of the tragedy. But here I wish to say a few words concerning the **register of the Brainard House**. When my counsel, by my own direction, went to seek that register, it could not be found. Our inability to produce it on the trial naturally cast a suspicion over our *alibi*. For weeks, months, did we seek to find its whereabouts, but to no purpose. Every man who was connected with the hotel was hunted up and questioned. Every register of the hotel before and after the one which ought to contain my name was to be found, but the most important one of all was gone. Now the question is what became of that register? The U.S. government, by one of its witnesses, Doctor McMillan, knew in November, 1865, that I was in Elmira at the time of the assassination. They knew it, and they naturally traced me there to find out what I was doing. That some of the government emissaries abstracted that register, I firmly believe, or perhaps it is stored away in some of the other government vaults, under charge of **some judge high in position**, but this is only a surmise of mine. But the circumstance involves a mystery of villainy which the All Seeing God will yet bring to light. The dispatch I sent to Booth also from Elmira it was impossible to find. We had the operator at Washington during my trial, but he said the original was gone though he had a copy of it. In telegraph offices they are compelled to keep all dispatches filed. Of course we could not offer this copy in evidence, because the original alone would be accepted, and that had been made away with. So sure was the government that they had destroyed all evidence of my sojourn in Elmira, that in getting me in Washington in time for Mr. Lincoln's death they brought me by way of New York City, but so completely were they foiled in this that in their rebutting testimony they saw the absolute necessity of having me go by way of Elmira, and they changed their tactics accordingly. That was enough to damn my case in any man's mind. This is a strange fact, but nevertheless true that the government having in its possession this hotel register as well as my dispatch to Booth and knowing moreover by one of its witnesses that I was in Elmira, yet tried to prove that I was in Washington on the night of Mr. Lincoln's death, giving orders and commanding in general as they were pleased to say. The gentlemen in Elmira, by whom I proved my *alibi*, were men of the highest standing and integrity whose testimony the United States government could not and dare not attempt to impeach. I left Elmira with the intention of going to Baltimore. I really did not comprehend at that time the danger I was in. As there was no train going south that evening I concluded to go to Canandaigua and from there to Baltimore by way of Elmira and New York. Upon arriving at Canandaigua on Saturday evening I learned to my utter disappointment that no train left until the Monday following, so I took a room at the Webster House, registering myself as "**John Harrison.**"

The next day I went to church, I remember it being Easter Sunday. I can here safely say that the United States government had not the remotest idea that I stopped anywhere after I left Elmira. They thought, when I left there, I went straight through to Canada. It was a very fortunate thing for me that I could not leave Canandaigua. Now mark, ladies and gentlemen, if you please, my name was signed midway of the hotel register, with six other parties before and after. There was no doubt as to the genuineness of my signature, because the very experts brought by the United States to swear to my signatures in other instances, swore also that that was my handwriting. After all this register was ruled out by Judge Fisher, because he was well aware if he admitted it my case was at an end. I could not be in two places at once, though they tried to make me so. Listen to his reason for so ruling: "The prisoner might have stepped down from Canada to Canandiagua during his concealment and signed his name there for the purpose of protecting himself in the future." It was a likely idea that the proprietor of a hotel would leave a blank line in the register for my especial benefit. Need I say that the ruling was a most infamous one, and ought to damn the Judge who so ruled as a villain in the minds of every honest and upright man. [Loud and long applause.] Had Judge Fisher been one of the lawyers for the prosecution, he could not have worked harder against me than he did. But, thanks to him, he did me more good than harm. His unprincipled and vindictive character was too apparent to everyone in the courtroom. I could not help smiling at the time to think of the great shrewdness and foresight he accorded me by that decision. At times, really, during my trial, I could scarcely recognize any vestige of my former self. Sometimes I would ask myself, "Am I the same individual? Am I really the same John H. Surratt?" When that register was produced in court, the Hon. Judge Pierrepont, the leading counsel for the United States, became exceedingly nervous, especially, when Mr. Bradley refused to show it to him, and he tore up several pieces of paper in his **trembling fingers**.

He evidently saw what a pitiful case he had, and how he had to make the dupe of his precious, worthy friend, Edwin M. Stanton. At the time of my trial the proprietor of the Webster House, in Canandaigua, could not find the cashbook of the hotel, in which there should have been an entry in favor of "John Harrison" for so much cash. When he returned to Canandaigua, my trial being then ended, he wrote Mr. Bradley that he had found the cashbook, and sent it to him. It was then too late. My trial was over. If we had had that cash book at the time of my trial it would have been proved beyond a doubt that I was in Canandaigua, and not in Washington City.

On Monday when I was leaving Canandaigua I bought some New York papers. In looking over them, my eye lit on the following paragraph which I have never forgot, and don't think I ever will. It runs thus: "The assassin of Secretary Seward is said to be John H. Surratt, a notorious secessionist of Southern Maryland. His name, with that of J. Wilkes Booth, will forever lead the infamous role of assassins." I could scarcely believe my senses. I gazed upon my name, the letters of which seemed to sometimes to grow as large as mountains and then to dwindle away to nothing. So much for my former connection with him I thought. After fully realizing the state of the case, I concluded to change my course and **go direct to Canada**.

I left Canandaigua on Monday 12 m., going to Albany arriving there on Tuesday morning in time for breakfast. When I stepped on the platform at the depot at St. Albans I noticed that one of the detectives scanned every one, head and foot, as well as the rest. Before leaving Montreal for Elmira, I provided myself with **an Oxford cut jacket** and a round-top hat, peculiar to Canada at that time. I knew my trip to Elmira would be a dangerous one, and I wished to pass myself off as a Canadian, and I succeeded in so doing, as was proved by my witnesses in Elmira. I believe that costume guarded me safely through St. Albans. I went in with others, and moved around, with the detectives standing there most of the time looking at us. Of course I was obliged to talk as

loud as anybody about the late tragedy. After having a hearty meal I lighted a cigar and walked up town. One of the detectives approached me, stared me directly in the face, and I looked him quietly back. In a few moments I was speeding on my way to Montreal, where I arrived at two o'clock in the afternoon, going again to the St. Lawrence Hotel. Soon after I called on a friend, to whom I explained my former connection with Booth, and told him I was afraid the United States government would suspect me of complicity in the plot of assassination. He advised me to **make myself scarce.**

I immediately went to the hotel, got my things, and repaired to the room of a friend. When my friend's teatime came I would not go to the table with him, but remained in the room. The ladies wanted to know why he didn't bring his friend to tea with him. He replied that I didn't want any. One of the ladies remarked, "I expect you have got Booth in there." [Laughter.] "Perhaps so," he answered laughingly. That was rather close guessing. At nightfall I went to the house of one who afterwards proved to be a most devoted friend. There I remained until the evening of the next day, when I was driven out in a carriage with two gentlemen, strangers to me. One day I walked out and saw **Weichmann on the lookout for me.** He had little idea I was so near. One night about 11 o'clock, my friend, in whose house I was, came to me and said, in a smiling way:—"The detectives have offered me \$20,000 if I will tell them where you are." "Very well," said I, "give me one half, and let them know." They suspected this gentleman of protecting me, and they had really made him the offer. One day about 12 o'clock, I was told that they were going to search the house, and that I must leave immediately, which I did. They searched it before morning. This gentleman was a poor man, with a large family, and yet money could not buy him. I remained with this gentleman until I left Montreal, within a week or so afterwards.

The detectives were now hunting me very closely, and would doubtless succeeded in capturing me, had it not been for a blunder on the part of **my friend Weichmann.** He had, it appears, started the detectives on the wrong track, by telling them that I had left the house of Mr. Porterfield in company with some others, and was going north of Montreal. Soon that section was swarming with detectives. I was not with that party, but about the same time, I too, left Montreal in a hack, going some 8 or 9 miles down the St. Lawrence River, crossing that stream in a small canoe. I was attired as a huntsman. At 3 o'clock Wednesday morning, we arrived at our destination, a small town lying south of Montreal. We entered the village very quietly, hoping no one would see us.

It has been asserted over and over again, and for the purpose of damning me in the estimation of every honest man that I **deserted her who gave me birth** in the direst hour of her need. Truly would I have merited the execration of every man had such been the case. But such was not the case. When I left Montreal there was no cause for uneasiness on my part, and upon my arrival in the country I wrote to my friends in Montreal to keep me posted in regard to the approaching trial, and to send me the newspapers regularly. I received letters from them frequently, in all of which they assured me there was no cause of anxiety; that it was only a matter of time, and it would all be well. After a while papers did not come so regularly, and those that did, spoke very encouragingly. A little while afterwards, when they came, **sentences were mutilated with ink and pen.**

I protested against such action, and for some time I received no papers at all. I became very uneasy, and wrote for publication an article signed by myself, which I sent to Montreal to be forwarded for publication in the *New York World*. It is needless to say it never went. Things continued in this way for some time, until I could stand the suspense no longer. I determined to send a messenger to Washington for that purpose, and secured the services of an intelligent and

educated gentleman. I started him off immediately, I paying all expenses. I gave him a letter to a friend of mine in Washington, with instructions to say to him to put himself in communication with the counsel for the defense, and to make a correct report to me as to how the case stood; if there was any danger; and also, to communicate with me if my presence was necessary, and inform me without delay; with an urgent request that he would see and inquire for himself how matters stood. He left me, and God alone knows the suspense and anxiety of my mind during the days of his absence. I imagined and thought all kinds of things; yet I was powerless to act. At last he returned, and so bright and cheerful was his countenance that I confess one-half of my fears were dispelled. He represented **everything as progressing well**, and brought me the message from the gentleman in Washington to whom I had sent him:

"Be under no apprehension as to any serious consequences. Remain perfectly quiet, as any action on your part would only tend to make matters worse. If you can be of any service to us, we will let you know; but keep quiet."

These were the instructions I received from my friend in Washington, in whom I felt the utmost reliance, and who I thought would never deceive me. He also sent me copies of the *National Intelligencer*, containing evidence for the defense. I certainly felt greatly relieved, though not entirely satisfied. This news reached me sometime in the latter part of June, just before the party of gentlemen of whom I have spoken arrived. They, too, assured me there was no cause for fear. What else could I do but accept these unwavering assurances? Even had I thought otherwise, I could not have taken any action resulting in good.

Just on the eve of my departure to join a party of gentlemen on a hunting excursion, while I was waiting at the hotel for the train, the proprietor handed me a paper, and said, "**Read that about the conspirators.**"

Little did the man know who I was, or how closely that paragraph bore upon me or mine. That paper informed me that on a day which was then present, and at an hour which had then come and gone, the most hellish of deeds was to be enacted. It had been determined upon and carried out, even before I had intimation that there was any danger. It would be folly for me to attempt to describe my feelings. After gazing at the paper for some time I dropped it on the floor, turning on my heel, and going directly to the house where I had been stopping before. When I entered the room, I found my friend sitting there. As soon as he saw me, **he turned deadly pale**, but never uttered a word. I said, "You doubtless thought you were acting a friend—the part of a friend—towards me, but you have deceived me. I may forgive you, but I can never forget it."

"We all thought it for the best, Charley," he commenced to say, but I did not stay to hear more. I went to my room, remained there until dark, and then signified my intention to leave the place immediately. I felt reckless as to what should become of me.

After visiting Quebec and other places, with the reward of \$25,000 hanging over my head, I did not think it safe to remain there, and so I concluded to seek an asylum in foreign lands. I had nothing now to bind me to this country, save an only sister, and I knew she would never want for kind friends or a good home. For myself, it mattered little where I went, so that I could roam once more a free man. I then went on a venture, and now, ladies and gentlemen, I go forth again on a venture. Gladly would I have remained hidden among the multitude, but the stern necessities arising from the blasting of my earthly prospects have forced me to leave my solitude and to stand again before the public gaze as the historian of my own life. One mitigation to its distastefulness in this and my first attempt, however, is the kindness with which I have been received, and the patience with which I have been listened to, for which I return you, ladies and gentlemen, my sincere and heartfelt thanks. [Applause.]

The lecture concluded, the band played "Dixie," and a concert was improvised, the audience not separating till a late hour, during which time Surratt was quite a lion among the ladies present.

John H. Surratt, Jr., was finally captured in Alexandria, Egypt, and brought to trial in 1867. A civilian (as opposed to a military) court tried him. The case ended in a hung jury, and eventually Surratt went free.

In December of 1870 Surratt gave a second lecture at Cooper Union in New York City and a third one at Concordia Hall in Baltimore, but these events were not well attended. Surratt attempted to give a fourth lecture in Washington, D.C., on December 30, 1870, but enraged citizens forced its cancellation. It is possible that Surratt wouldn't have given the lecture anyway, as he had been arrested the day before (in Richmond) and charged with selling tobacco without a license in 1869.

Washington News and Gossip

Reprinted from *The Charleston Daily News* [South Carolina], January 5, 1871

Judge Advocate-General Holt denies the recently published statement that he proposed at the time of the trial to give up Mrs. Surratt if John Surratt would come forward, and that therefore Mrs. Surratt was held and executed as a hostage. *Per contra*, another of the counsel for the government, and Holt's associate, says the original statement is true.