

The Surratt Courier

Published Bimonthly by the Surratt Society

July/August 2022

Louise Oertly, Editor

Volume XLVII No. 4

President's Message

In the last issue, I promised more information on the Booth family. In this issue, we meet the “children” of John Wilkes Booth, and also discuss some new information that came to light in 2020.

Normally my President's Message would be something of a more historical nature, but I have been asked to make several announcements.

Surratt House Museum

For those of you who are interested in taking a tour of the Surratt House Museum, I received a message that will help you plan your trip. For the foreseeable future, due to staffing changes, the following is the new schedule of when the Museum is open:

Thursday and Friday

Open for prearranged tours
at 11 a.m. and 2 p.m.

Saturday

Open for walk-ins tours
from 11 a.m. to 3 p.

Sunday through Wednesday

The museum is closed.

James O. Hall Research Center

Many of you have been asking about the status of the James O. Hall Research Center. According to the same message, you may now call the Museum at (301) 868-1121 or email them at pgp-johrc@pgparks.com to schedule an appointment.

If you go to the Surratt Society's website, surrattmuseum.org, and click on the

JOH Research Center, you will find forms to fill out to help facilitate your request.

Hartranft Homecoming

On Saturday, September 24, from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m., the Schwenkfelder Library and Heritage Center in Pennsburg, Pennsylvania, is opening a special exhibit featuring General John Frederick Hartranft. You will not only learn more about the Medal of Honor recipient's role in the Civil War and his appointment by President Johnson as special provost marshal and governor of the military prison at the Arsenal in Washington, D.C., but also about the experiences of other Schwenkfelder descendants and Perkiomen Valley residents who served.

At 1:30 p.m., a presentation by Mark Grim on the *Imprisonment, Trial, and Execution of the Lincoln Conspirators—an Overview* is scheduled. Mark Grim is a professional historian and public speaker, who specializes in General John F. Hartranft. The hour-long presentation will discuss Hartranft's days in command of the military prison at the Washington Arsenal

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

during the trial and execution of the Lincoln assassination conspirators. Hartranft kept a copy of each day's report to his superiors on the condition, requests, and guarding of his infamous inmates. These reports, known today as the *Hartranft Letterbook*, were carefully preserved by his descendants and provide a basis for Mr. Grim's lecture. [The Hartranft Papers are now stored at the Pennsylvania Museum of History as part of the National Archives collection. Also, see page 3 for more information about the *Hartranft Letterbook*.]

There will also be a gathering of the Hartranft family, who will share family stories and some have agreed to allow the museum to display family antiques related to John and his wife, Sallie.

If anyone would like to attend the Hartranft Homecoming or attend the

presentations, it is free and open to the public. There is also information on local historic sites, such as the birthplace and home of John F. Hartranft, which is just seven miles from the museum.

For more information, go to <https://www.schwenkfelder.org/hartranft> or <https://www.hartranft.us/>

Booth Escape Route Tours

Out of an abundance of caution, the Surratt Society has decided not to schedule Booth Escape Route Tours for this Fall. It is our hope that concerns about COVID will continue to diminish in 2023, and that we will be able to resume our popular tours in the Spring.

Louise Oertly, President

In Memoriam

It seems that with each issue, I am announcing the loss of another Surratt Society member and/or historian. Those of you, who have chased Booth from Ford's Theatre to his final stand at Garrett's farm, have probably stopped at the Bryantown Tavern and perhaps met its owner, Bob Cook. Unfortunately, we have received word of Bob's passing. He will be missed.

The following obituary was written by his son, Matt.

Robert William Cook of Bryantown, Maryland, passed away peacefully on Tuesday, July 26, 2022. He was born in New York City on August 3, 1944, to William and Elizabeth (Murray) Cook. He was 77 years old.

Bob accomplished many things throughout his life. He was a 40-year career Intelligence Officer for the Central Intelligence Agency. Prior to his government service, he was an actor at the American Shakespeare Theater in Stratford, Connecticut.

His love of literature, history, anthropology, philosophy, American filmmaking, popular culture, and, above all, his unceasing quest for truth and justice was his guiding star. His restless intellect inspired him to accomplish so many things, first and foremost the curation of a one-of-a-kind private library containing volumes on topics as diverse as the Lincoln assassination to the sinking of the Titanic, the history of the Romanov Russian Imperial family to the study and classification of dinosaurs, and to the history of the Civil War and a thousand other things in-

between. He generously volunteered his time to historical and cultural societies such as the Surratt Society and the Folger Shakespeare Library, and always welcomed curious visitors to his home at the Bryantown Tavern, the historic site where John Wilkes Booth conspired to assassinate President Lincoln.

Robert Cook's encyclopedic knowledge and deep and abiding curiosity for the world was unique, rare, and wonderful beyond words. Neither it, nor he, can ever be replaced, but his impact on the lives, hearts, and minds of everyone who was lucky enough to have met him endures.

He is survived by his wife of 55 years, Suzanne; his son Matthew Cook and his wife Amy Szabo; two grandchildren; and three great grandchildren; as well as by his sisters Patricia and Deborah. At the family's request all services are private. In lieu of flowers, the family asks well-wishers to make a donation in his name to the Surratt Society:

Surratt Society
9201 Edgeworth Drive #3853
Capitol Heights, MD 20790

The Hartranft Letterbook

Reprinted from *The Surratt Society News*, December 1983

By James O. Hall

As with many historical "finds," this one started innocently enough. Mrs. Nancy Scott, Special Collections, Gettysburg College, got in contact with Mr. John C. Brennan and expressed an interest in the Surratt Society's Booth Escape Route Tour. She also disclosed that she had something in her library dealing with the assassination of President Lincoln.

On October 28 [1983], Nancy Griffith and Betty Ownsbey drove to Gettysburg to see what this was all about. They found a gold mine of information about the trial and execution of the alleged conspirators.

The background is this: General John Frederick Hartranft (after the war, he went into politics and was elected governor of Pennsylvania) was ordered to the old Washington penitentiary, at what is now Fort Leslie J. McNair, to command operations there incident to the care and custody of all prisoners during the conspiracy trial. These were administrative duties similar to those of a prison warden. His orders were to report daily to his immediate superior, General Winfield Scott Hancock. So each morning Hartranft prepared a report covering the events of the previous day. His copies of these reports contain much information not previously known and some different slants on what historians have previously accepted.

General Hartranft retained these letterbooks. They were passed down to his grandson, Hartranft Stockham, of New Oxford, Pennsylvania. On October 23, 1965, Mr. Stockham presented them to Gettysburg College (Lutheran). They went into Special Collections, and there they sat, unnoticed by Lincoln scholars until Mrs. Scott's correspondence with Mr. Brennan aroused curiosity.

It is not the purpose here to review the more than 100 pages of these letterbooks. This will have to be done with great care and over a period of time. But, some preliminary comments are in order:

1. A new stairway was built in the section where the trial was to be held, so that the court and witnesses would not have to pass through any part of the structure used for confinement. Thus, people coming to the courtroom itself were not ordinarily subject to General Hartranft's inspection and jurisdiction. But, he carefully reported by name every person given a pass to enter the prison itself. Also, he reported by name visitors who were allowed to see prisoners in the courtroom when the court was not in session.
2. There has been some doubt as to whether attorneys for the prisoners were allowed to see them outside the courtroom—that is, in the prison part of the complex. They were, but not often. In several entries, he refers to such meetings subject to restrictions, whatever that means.
3. At various times, Hartranft describes the menu. For example on May 1st at 8 a.m., the prisoners got a meal of coffee, soft bread, and salt meat.
4. Dr. Samuel Mudd was not hooded; the other male prisoners were, including some who were not on trial.
5. There is no direct reference to Mrs. Surratt being hooded at any time. Reading between the lines, she was not.
6. The prisoners got clean clothing once in a while. One male prisoner was furnished clean "drawers," but it was found that his leg irons were riveted and he could not put them on.
7. Hartranft protested the hooding on June 6th and recommended the hoods be removed from all but "195." Powell ("Payne") was then in cell 195. The reports contain no further reference to hoods, even for Powell.
8. On June 18th, Hartranft reported that Spangler's mind was "wandering." His report (per Dr. Porter's recommendation) suggested that the prisoners be taken out in the open air once each day and be furnished with reading material (apparently hoods were gone by then).
9. Mrs. Surratt refused to eat at first and then took only tea and toast for a while. Further, she was very sick toward the end. Hartranft arranged for Miss Anna Surratt to stay with her in a "side room"—that is, not a cell.
10. On July 6th, Atzerodt (knowing he was to be hanged) asked to see "Mrs. Rose" and her five-year-old daughter from Port Tobacco, Maryland. (Note: Atzerodt was known to have a mistress and child in Port Tobacco, but her name is usually given as "Mrs. Wheeler.")
11. One surprise in these reports by Hartranft is that David E. Herold wanted to "confess." He was furnished with writing materials for this purpose. There are three references to him sitting in the courtroom, outside hours of court, writing furiously on this "confession." Hartranft did not say what happened to this document. (Note: We can, I suspect, now look forward to a Herold "confession" being offered for sale by some Americana dealer. All neatly fabricated, of course.)

Mrs. Griffith and Miss Ownsbey have also ordered copies of these letterbooks, and readers of this newsletter may expect further information as they have time to sort things out.

[2022 Editor's Note: *The Lincoln Conspirators – Their Confinement and Execution, as Recorded in the Letterbook of John Frederick Hartranft*, edited by Edward Steers, Jr., and Harold Holzer, was published in 2009.]

Another Branch of the Booth Family?

In the May/June 2022 issue of *The Surratt Courier*, you were introduced to the children of Junius Brutus Booth, Sr. However, a discussion of the Booth family would not be complete, if it didn't mention another portion of the Booth family—the “children” of John Wilkes Booth. However, some interesting facts came to light in 2020 that answer the questions about the legitimacy of that claim. Let's meet the families first.

JWB, Jr.

Joan Chaconas, President's Message
Reprinted from *The Surratt Society News*, March 1981

On January 26 [1981], our very energetic [former] docent [and Lewis Powell historian], Betty Ownsbey from Richmond, Virginia, and myself went down to the Hampton, Virginia, Veterans' Hospital to interview John Wilks Booth, Jr. This is about a two-hour drive south of Richmond. We had no problem this time, as we had gotten clearance from James Tanner (read that name again—sound familiar?). I must admit that we both felt strange asking to see John Wilks Booth. (This John Wilks leaves the “e” off.)

Mr. Booth was ready and waiting for us. He had even alerted Mr. Meyrich Green (editor of the hospital's monthly newsletter) that we were coming, and he was there also—complete with paper, pencil, and camera!

Mr. Booth is an alert, sharp, knowledgeable gentleman from Shelby County, Texas, born in 1898. His claim is that the original John Wilkes Booth did not die in the barn in 1865, but escaped and “went to Dr. Samuel Mudd to get fixed up. The Sarots [sic, Surratts] took care of him while this [was] going on, then he rode South through the Carolinas, Tennessee, and into Mississippi to a town named Benoit.” In 1866, the original Booth “married a Texas girl,” and in December of 1866, he had a son and named him John Wilks Booth. This was our Mr. Booth's father, making the original Booth his grandfather! The original Booth disappeared “two or three years later” and was seen by some “on a wagon train going west.” At this point, he also disappears from the modern Mr. Booth's story.

Our first question was, “Where is your proof?” His proof is the story told to him by the descendants of the Burroughs family of Benoit, whose home the original Booth stayed in “‘til his leg got OK.”

Our Mr. Booth is quite sincere and there is no doubt that he believes what he is saying. Going through life with the name of John Wilks Booth has dotted his life with some amusing incidents—like when he was struck by a car. The next morning, the headlines of Schenectady, New York, paper read, JOHN WILKES BOOTH STRUCK BY AUTO. This brought a line of reporters to his hospital bed for interviews. While viewing the diorama of the Battle of Atlanta in Georgia, a guide noticed his name in the guestbook and asked for him to pose for a picture. There he was—J.W. Booth under a picture of Lincoln surrounded by the Battle of Atlanta and his autograph!

We enjoyed talking to Mr. Booth, who, by the way, has a son named John Wilks Booth III, but we found his story much too hard to believe without some evidence in writing to substantiate it. I had mixed emotions when I got back home and addressed a letter to Booth from the Surratt Society!

Further information on John Wilkes Booth, Jr.

A Living Legend?

Reprinted from *The Surratt Society News*. May 1985

Surratt Society member, W.E. Chesson of Newport News, Virginia, has sent two newspaper clippings that could conceivably raise some eyebrows. [If you haven't already read the previous article.] Mr. Chesson commented, "This should make JWB, Jr....the first cousin of Izola Forrester (author of *This One Mad Act*)."

From the *Times Herald*, Newport News, Virginia, September 21, 1982

MAN DIES WHO CLAIMED TO BE JOHN WILKES BOOTH'S GRANDSON

SUFFOLK – John Wilkes Booth, Jr., 83...died Sunday in the Veterans Administration Hospital, Hampton. Booth attracted notice last year when he announced his belief that he was the grandson of John Wilkes Booth.

He contended that...the President's killer did not die on a farm in Bowling Green, Va., on April 26, 1865. The VA patient said that after Booth shot Lincoln, he escaped to Maryland where he had a fractured ankle fixed.

Then, he said, the assassin eventually made his way to Shelby County, Texas, and fathered a son, also named John Wilkes Booth, born Dec. 8, 1866. This was his father.

He also contended that the assassination was the work of a widespread conspiracy involving high government officials.

After the VA patient's story appeared he was approached by several persons interested in the assassination. They hoped he could help clear the names of two convicted conspirators who claimed they were innocent: Dr. Richard Mudd [sic, it was Dr. Samuel Mudd; Richard was his grandson], who set Booth's broken leg after the assassination, and Mary Surratt, who ran a boarding house Booth frequented....

Survivors include a son, John Wilkes Booth III of Suffolk.

From the *Virginia Pilot*, February 18, 1985

SUFFOLK MAN TRACES HIS ROOTS TO ASSASSIN

By Frank Roberts

SUFFOLK – Twenty-two [sic, six] days after John Wilkes Booth assassinated Abraham Lincoln...he was cornered in a burning barn in Bowling Green, Va., and killed by Union soldiers.

“That story is a lot of hooey, a bunch of baloney,” said John Wilkes Booth III, who says he is the accused assassin’s great-grandson....

Aggravated by what he labels twisted history, he scoffs at the “official” version of the events after the assassination....

Booth said he relies on a family history, written by his father, John Wilkes Booth, Jr., when he was 82. “My father was born in Shelby County, Texas, Dec. 8, 1866, and [was] named John Wilkes Booth,” wrote the elderly Booth in longhand in the account he passed on to his son. The assassin’s son was not tagged “junior” because Booth, still fleeing from the law was using the alias “John St. Helen,....”

“My grandfather was born more than a year and a half after the Lincoln shooting,” said John Wilkes Booth III, “so obviously his father couldn’t have been shot in a burning barn. There were two people in there, and the soldiers just said that one was Booth....They set the barn afire. There was no autopsy. [2022 Editor’s Note: There was an autopsy of the body in Washington.] They thought they would say he died there....Our family traced John Wilkes Booth south through Benoit, Miss., across the Mississippi River into Arkansas, to Shelby County, Texas.... He married when he was in Shelby County, Texas, to a half Choctaw Indian, but I don’t know her name,” [Booth] said. “My grandfather told my Father about the marriage.”

The family feels sure that Booth died in Enid, in the Oklahoma Territory, of alcoholism.

“We don’t even know how old he was,” Booth said. “We know he got on a wagon train going west to Enid. And that’s where we lose him.”

(The family traces its ancestor’s route after the assassination.)

After shooting Lincoln in the head...Booth hurdled to the stage.... He broke his ankle in the leap, but he escaped through a back door, mounted a horse and went to the Maryland home of Dr. Samuel Alexander Mudd, who set his leg.

The men did not know each other. The doctor...set Booth’s leg. Later Mudd was arrested, found guilty as an accessory and sentenced to life imprisonment.... [Editor’s Note: Dr. Mudd and Booth had met previously.]

When Booth left the doctor, he went to the home of Mary Surratt, an innkeeper who lived near Baltimore. [Editor’s Note: The Surratt Tavern is south of Washington, D.C., in present-day Clinton, Maryland, and the boardinghouse is in Washington.]. She harbored him until he was able to ride horseback. The family said they do not know how long she sheltered John Wilkes Booth.

“She was the first woman ever to get capital punishment from the U.S. Government. It was for harboring Booth,”

After Lincoln’s assassin left Surratt’s, “we traced him to the Burroughs Plantation near Benoit, Miss. He stayed there until he could ride again,” Booth said. His family got that information from a grandson of the man who harbored him...

“They transported him across the Mississippi River into Arkansas, traveling by night...through Louisiana and into Shelby County, Texas.”

Booth said that his great-grandfather “might have been a good actor if he’s been able to leave strong drink alone.”

John Wilkes Booth III has no sons and no brother. There is no one to carry on the name of John Wilkes Booth.

You have met the Texas Booths, now meet the New England branch of the family made famous by the book, *This One Mad Act*.

Izola Forrester

Reprinted from *Surratt Courier*, November 1990

Society member Joyce Knibb of Rhode Island advises us that she and fellow researcher Patricia Mehtens are completing an investigative manuscript on the lore surrounding the supposed wife and daughter of John Wilkes Booth. Ms. Knibb writes:

...We have almost completed a lengthy investigation of the reputed wife and daughter of John Wilkes Booth who lived in our town of Burrillville in the mid-eighteen hundreds. Local lore has it that Booth “hid out” and/or visited our northwestern section of Rhode Island after the assassination of President Lincoln. We have concentrated our efforts on the life story of this woman and her daughter along with the activities of the Booth family in southern New England.

The granddaughter of Martha Izola “Booth” was born in our village of Pascoag in 1878. Town records have her name as Izola Louise Wallingford, daughter of George and Ogarita Wallingford. In 1937, Izola Forrester published This One Mad Act relating the family account of her grandmother’s marriage to John Wilkes Booth and to “solve once and for all the mystery around John Wilkes Booth.” Stanley Kimmel in the second edition of The Mad Booths of Maryland refers to this grandmother, daughter, and granddaughter as the common-law family of John Wilkes Booth.

It has been an interesting investigation of entangled truths and untruths. We have come to no definite conclusion to whether or not there are shreds of truth in our local lore. We present the documentation, circumstantial evidence, and hearsay that we have unearthed and leave the reader to draw his or her own conclusion.

Addendum added in the January 1991, *The Surratt Courier*:

In the November 1990 issue, we mentioned research being done by members in Rhode Island regarding the claims made by Izola Forrester in *This One Mad Act* in reference to John Wilkes Booth’s marriage and then supposed escape. We erred in [not stating that the wedding and daughter happened before the assassination and another child] was born after 1865. Researchers Joyce Knibb and Patricia Mehtens sent the following:

According to Miss Forrester’s book, This One Mad Act, the marriage between her grandmother and John Wilkes Booth occurred in 1859 in Cos Cob, Connecticut. His daughter, Ogarita, was born in the fall of that same year. Although Miss Forrester wrote that John Wilkes Booth escaped from the Garrett tobacco shed and fathered another child by Martha Izola in

California, this child, Harry Jerome Drersbach Stevenson, was born either in Baltimore or Boston in 1869, 1870, or 1871.

We fear that others will disregard our lengthy pursuit of the Burrillville Booths, if they believe that we believe Booth made his escape and lived until 1879...one of his reputed death dates. (We do not "believe" that JWB found a willing stand-in for his final act.)

One More Twist to the Tail

In December of 1885, Edwin Booth read the following article, which appeared in the *New York Tribune* and other newspapers. It claimed that an article in a Boston paper, which stated that John Wilkes Booth was still alive and well in Alabama, was false. Edwin Booth read the *Tribune's* article. But instead of being pleased that someone was discrediting yet another tale about his brother's alleged survival, Edwin Booth was furious that the author claimed to have been his brother John Wilkes' widow and mother of his two children. Edwin wrote that same day to his daughter Edwina:

"Today's *Tribune* contains a wretched lie about John Wilkes' family, not one word of truth in it from end to end; I suspect it is the beginning of a 'black-mail scheme' of which I had some intimation months ago through a Boston lawyer... The widow of this *Tribune* article is only one of twenty that wrote to me after John's death & is the one, I suspect, who got all poor Rose's money—some \$10,000 from her. Rose says all that is ended now & that she will save her money—I hope she is not deceiving me." [Note: Rose was Edwin and John's oldest sister, Rosalie. The widow Edwin suspected was Martha Izola Mills, Izola Forrester's grandmother.]

Reprinted from *The Sun* [New York], Saturday, December 5, 1885

J. Wilkes Booth's Family A Son and a Daughter Who Have Lived Under a False Name for Twenty Years

Boston, December 4—A rumor, credited to the author of a book recently printed at Birmingham, Ala., was widely circulated not long ago to the effect that John Wilkes Booth, the assassin of President Lincoln, was still alive. A gentleman of this city, who is well acquainted with the widow of Booth, wrote to her, enclosing the newspaper paragraph. His letter brought the following touching reply:

An item in the *Boston Herald* has just come to my notice of some man, unknown, in Birmingham, Ala., who has a desire to resurrect John Wilkes Booth. Whoever this man may be, let me warn the public that his only motive must be to make money, for, as sure as the sun shines in the heavens, so sure is John Wilkes Booth dead. I, myself, saw him buried, saw and examined his body before it was laid in its final resting place. He carried marks upon his body known only

to his family and intimate friends, and these marks were identified by his family. We all know that the last act of his life was wrong. We also know that we should not judge. We know not the why or wherefore, but it is my opinion that those of us who live long enough will yet learn that, although it was John Wilkes Booth's hand that struck the fatal blow that ended a good man's life, yet it was a those in high authority who were the head of a diabolical conspiracy, the result of which steeped several families in the deepest woe and left a nation to mourn.

Although not generally known, J.W. Booth left a family—a wife and two children, a daughter and son now grown to womanhood and manhood. This family has lived in seclusion and under a false name for twenty years. For these innocent ones' sakes, let their dead alone, and let them sorrow in peace. I beg for the sake of the Booth family, now mourning over the death of the mother of J. Wilkes Booth, that the public will show some little charity, and leave wrongs that someone has done in the hands of a higher power, who in His own good time, will make all things right. Let the dead rest for the sake of the living and the innocent.

New Information on JWB's "Children"

After the Lincoln assassination, there were numerous John Wilkes Booth sightings, which in some cases resulted in marriages. All totaled there were three "known" children, of which two were born after 1865, who were told the family secret—John Wilkes Booth was their father. Of course, if you believe Booth died in the barn, you, like many others, question the validity of these claims.

On December 3, 2020, answers to many of these questions were revealed on the television show, *History's Greatest Mysteries*, when it explored "The Escape of John Wilkes Booth." Using forensic investigation methods, the many claims of marriages and sightings were disproved by handwriting experts comparing John Wilkes Booth's signature with the signatures of the alleged Booths. The expert's conclusion was not a match. This included the 1859 Connecticut marriage license of Martha Izola Mills to John Bryon Wilkes Booth, the 1872 Tennessee marriage license of Louisa J. Payne (Paine) to John W. Boothe, and the signature of David E. George in Enid, Oklahoma.

On the question of the John Wilkes Booth's children, the answer to this question was easily proved by doing a DNA test. The acknowledged Booth DNA was provided by a descendant of Junius Brutus, Jr., and a descendant of Jane Booth Mitchell, the senior Junius Brutus Booth's sister. Their DNA was compared to a John Wilks Booth, Jr.'s, descendant. There was no DNA match. As for the claim in Izola Forrester's book, *One Mad Act*, that Booth married her grandmother, Martha Izola Mills, and fathered a daughter in 1859 and a son around 1870, the DNA results again proved that there was no match to either of her children's descendants.

At the end of the show, the question of whether John Wilkes Booth escaped or if he was killed and now buried in the Booth family plot at Green Mount Cemetery in Baltimore was raised again. According to the investigators, the only way to solve this is to exhume his body and test the remains DNA. There is only one problem and best explained by quoting from Asia Booth Clarke's book, *The Unlocked Book*.

"On Saturday afternoon, June 26, the remains of Mr. Booth were buried in Green Mount Cemetery, Baltimore, Md. At the foot of the monument of the late Junius Brutus Booth, a grave

was dug for the mortal remains of John Wilkes Booth. Mr. James, assistant at Christ Church, read the funeral service of the Episcopal Church over the remains. At the conclusion, the body was lowered into the grave, and the remains of the other [Booth] children, Frederick, Elizabeth, Mary Ann, and Henry Byron, [all originally buried in Bel Air, Maryland] contained in one box, with silver plate, were laid upon the top of his coffin, and soon the busy spade of the workman filled the grave, leaving only the customary mound to mark the spot.”

The problem with a proposed exhumation? To get to John Wilkes Booth’s body, the remains of his siblings will have to be disturbed. The next question is, will there be any remains left after over 150 years in the ground? In the case of my elderly cousin’s grandmother, when her father died in 1929, all that was found in her grandmother’s unmarked gravesite were the metal handles from her wooden coffin.

Here is one more article on a member of the Booth family that you’ll find interesting.

The Blanche Booth—Frederick Black Letters

By Blaine V. Houmes

Reprinted from *The Surratt Courier*, May 1996

In February of 1925, newspapers across the country relayed an amazing and yet curious story that John Wilkes Booth, the assassin of President Lincoln, had not been shot by federal troops and that family members had even visited him in his later years. The source was a niece of Booth, the actress Blanche DeBar, and when interviewed in her apartment in Minneapolis, she claimed that the allegations of Finis L. Bates were true—that Booth had actually died in 1903, committing suicide in Oklahoma while living under an assumed name.

In her stories, Miss DeBar gave a near-verbatim recounting of the details Finis Bates had previously used when he attempted to bolster his claim that an itinerant housepainter, David E. George, was really Booth. Indeed, most of the February newspaper articles were given over to the Bates story and liberal use of quotations from his writings, with little actual interview of Miss DeBar.¹⁻⁵ She had previously signed a notarized four-page document on March 29, 1922, after meeting with Mr. Bates and reviewing his book and “pictures, papers, and souvenirs...” She also claimed to have identified and “examined the mummified body of John Wilkes Booth, now being exhibited by Finis L. Bates and lessees...” In a separate document of the same date, she even agreed to appear with Mr. Bates “on the stage or otherwise, as may be necessary, in the exhibition of the body of John Wilkes Booth...”⁶

By 1925, the theatrical career of Blanche DeBar Booth was near a close. Born [1844] the daughter of the oldest Booth son, Junius Brutus, and Clementine Booth, she acquired her stage name from her maternal uncle, Ben DeBar, who adopted her and introduced her to the stage. Miss Booth’s last public engagement had been years before with the Sanford Dodge Stock Company, and she only worked now as an occasional tutor of drama. Her primary support was from the Actor’s Fund, a benefit of the theatrical profession.

Frederick L. Black had been retained by Henry Ford in 1920, after the auto maker developed a keen interest in the Lincoln assassination story. Employed as the director of Ford

Motor Company public relations, Mr. Black traveled and researched for the next two years, accumulating boxes of letters, documents, and artifacts—even using local Ford auto dealers around the country as investigators, to acquire needed material.

Black first checked on Blanche Booth in March of 1925. The manager of the Minneapolis Branch of the Ford Motor Company, S.A. Stellwagon, wrote to him:

*“She surrounds herself with great secrecy. The telephone has been disconnected. A notice in the hall of the apartment building where she lives states that she will see no one under any circumstances without a telephone appointment, and, of course, it is impossible to reach her by telephone.”*⁷

An employee of Mr. Stellwagen was able to make contact, however, and noted:

“...the stories she gave the International News Service did not quite agree with the statements she gave Mr. Bates in 1922 and her answer was that the [newspaper] article which appeared... February 21, 1925, was... right to the point and in line with her thoughts.... While she appears to be quite active for a person so far advanced in age, it was quite apparent during our conversation...that her thoughts and mind undergo spasmodic changes, as she caught herself from time to time, contradicting previous statements made.”

Blanche Booth finally wrote Mr. Black in May of 1925. She mentioned her reluctance to answer further questions:

“I have for some time been beset by various persons—correspondents—in reference to various conflicting rumors concerning the John Wilkes Booth tragedy and mystery. I have been living here, very simply teaching dramatic work & sometimes giving dramatic recitals... I try to avoid this publicity. P.S. I have been treated invariably, so generously and kindly by newspaper and literary gentlemen, that, tho they make mistakes—I try to keep quiet...I have kept to the truth...”

By this time, Black had published a series of seven articles in *The Dearborn Independent*, consecutively appearing between March 21 and May 2, 1925. They detailed the assassination of Lincoln, the pursuit and capture of his conspirators, and the strange story of David E. George. The public response was good; he planned an additional series of five articles, and even gleefully noted to a friend that now “Mrs. Bates is making a desperate effort to unload the cadaver.”⁸⁻⁹

Fred Black wrote Miss Booth on May 23, 1925, thanking her for the letter, yet concerned with conflicts in her previous statements:

“Unfortunately, the statements and affidavits given to Mr. Bates March 29, 1922, and the stories given to the Minneapolis Daily Star do not agree, which naturally made us question your statements...The chap...in the [news]paper could easily have been David George but since he was a dope fiend, he may have actually thought he was John Wilkes while under the influence of morphine.”

Miss Booth wrote back within the week, evasive but worried that she was being misquoted and misrepresented by different sources:

“...I’m puzzled to know what I could have expressed to the late Mr. Bates—when he called upon me here, at my apartment—you have the date of the year, you tell me 1922—that conflicts with what I say now...Mr. Bates book is, I think, the authority...Where can I see my ‘untruthful’ accounts? Did Mr. Bates publish another volume?”

She was concerned, though, with not just her integrity, but also her financial interests, noting materials loaned to Finis Bates had never been returned:

“P.S. In strict confidence, Mr. Black, I had lately, a deal of trouble to get from Mrs. Bates—the widow, a letter of mine from my late uncle Edwin Booth—from which I quote [in the February 1925

newspaper interviews]. [A similar letter had recently been sold and] *brought—I am told, one thousand dollars...*”

Fred Black lost little time in reply. In June he sent her photostats of the affidavit she had signed for Finis Bates, along with the copies of the interviews she had given the *Minneapolis Daily Star*, for comparison. He detailed the many historical inaccuracies and discrepancies between them, and asked her for comment. She wrote him immediately:

“I have read carefully the papers you sent me. I am not and never have been a ‘business woman’—always getting away from, sometimes ignoring, these, to me—wretched commercial, legal documents. I’m distressed at what I read in these black & white sheets...Something has gone wrong here...I’ll try to be clear! I never saw the body that is spoken about, as being that of John Wilkes Booth...”

She repeated her story of being approached, while acting in Enid, Oklahoma, by someone who claimed to be John Wilkes Booth:

“I exchanged but a word or two with him, letting him know I was too fatigued to see anyone—as I have repeatedly mentioned...I had no doubt that that John had been captured by the government & shot...[and] I thought it all a stupid trick then...never thinking anything more of the incident until I partly, not carefully, read the book, written by Mr. F.L Bates, which he sent to me, here. Shortly after this Mr. Bates came to Minneapolis to meet me...Several of my days were given to his service—meaning no benefit to me, outside of the interest, and influence which grew out of what he wrote...Mr. Bates brought at one time while visiting me....a young lady typewriter...this seemed nothing importantly legal about the doings...I have no recollection of these black & white pages [the notarized statement] being read to me...I dislike the publicity I am involved in...I am not proud of being in any way connected with so shocking a tragedy...Please Mr. Black do not get me into any further trouble...I cannot afford it...”

Her letter mailed to Frederick Black was incomplete; on the last page, her pleading stopped abruptly in mid-sentence. Black noticed this and wrote June 25th, wondering what else she may have had to say. She replied again within the week, but by this time her letter seemed even more frantic:

“...I own a very beautiful life-sized...oil painting of Edwin Booth, [when he played] Hamlet at his own theatre. [Ma1]. I’ve been advised to keep it...I know its worth and I desire to part with it...Is there anyone of your wide circle of friends interested? Speak of it for me—will you?...Mr. Black do not get me into further trouble, I am alone—so to speak—on the planet.”

Although this appears to be the last letter to him from Miss Booth, it was not the last time he mentioned her. In a letter to the author Francis Wilson, dated October 24, 1928, he wrote:

“At one time I had quite a bit of correspondence with Blanche Booth. It was interesting the way Bates attempted to put a fast one over on her.”

Blanche DeBar Booth—widowed, without children, penniless and near-blind—was moved at the age of 86 to an eastern nursing home in 1929. She had wanted to go there “in order to be near the city where at one time she was the toast of Broadway.¹⁰” She died of cardiovascular disease a few months later, on April 14, 1930, [65th anniversary of the Lincoln assassination] at Amityville, New York. Her cremated remains were buried the following month in a Brooklyn cemetery, in a common lot reserved for those cared for by the Actor’s Fund.¹¹

Endnotes:

¹*Minneapolis Daily Star*, February 21, 1925

²*Washington Times* (D.C.), February 21, 1925

³*Detroit Times*, February 21, 1925

⁴*Detroit Free-Press*, February 22, 1925

⁵Bates, Finis L., *Escape and Suicide of John Wilkes Booth*. (Boston: George M. Smith & Co., 1907)

⁶Notarized affidavit signed by Blanche Booth, March 29, 1922. Photocopy in Frederick L. Black Archives, Oakland University, Rochester Hills, Michigan

⁷Carbons and photocopies of all correspondence, courtesy of Frederick L. Black Archives, Oakland University, Rochester Hills, Michigan.

⁸The additional articles were never published. A book-length, unpublished manuscript of twenty-two chapters is currently (in 1996) being edited by Oakland University for publication.

⁹Letter from F.L. Black to Dr. Amos T. Harrington, May 11, 1925. Carbon of original in Frederick L. Black Archives, Oakland University, Rochester Hills, Michigan.

¹⁰From obituary in the *Minneapolis Times*, April 15, 1930.

¹¹Private communication. The Evergreens Cemetery, Brooklyn, New York. Blanche DeBar Booth's death certificate is on file with Registrar of Vital Statistics, Village of Amityville, New York.