

# A CHAPTER IN THE DEATH CHASE OF JOHN WILKES BOOTH



Abraham  
Lincoln

It always has been supposed that when John Wilkes Booth, in his flight after the assassination of Lincoln, crossed the Rappahannock shortly before he took refuge in the barn of the Garrett farm, where, according to the accepted version of the affair, he was shot by Sergeant Boston Corbett, of the Sixteenth New York cavalry, he was accompanied only by his accomplice Harold and by three Confederate officers, who were returning to their homes, and who, taking pity on his forlorn condition, turned back to aid him further in his flight. These officers were Maj. M. B. Ruggles, Lieut. A. R. Bainbridge and Capt. Jett.

The interesting narrative printed below shows, however, that there was a fourth man, E. Wellford Mason, on the scow ferryboat which was poled across the river by a negro.

At the time Mr. Mason did not know that one of the men crossing with him was Lincoln's assassin, and when he made the discovery motives of safety led him to maintain silence about it. It has been kept a secret until now, a fact which makes the narrative a peculiarly interesting contribution to the history of the great tragedy and the swift retribution which followed it.

Lincoln was shot in Ford's Theater, Washington, the night of Good Friday (April 4), 1865. It was during the second scene of the third act of "Our American Cousin," in which Laura Keane was taking a benefit. Booth, whose last appearance had been on the stage of the same theater as Pescara in "The Apostate," was well known to the attaches of the house, and no one thought of questioning him when he made his way around the rear of the dress circle to the passage leading to the presi-

dent's box. A few minutes later a pistol shot startled the house. The president's head fell forward on his breast.

A man—John Wilkes Booth—leaped from the box to the stage. As he landed his spurs caught in the folds of an American flag used in the decorations. He fell, breaking his leg, but managed to regain his feet, turn to the audience, shout "Sic hemper tyrannis," escape by the stage door so familiar to him, mount a horse held there in readiness and dash away.

For six days Booth hid in woods near a farm, about thirty-five miles from Washington. April 22 he managed to cross the Potomac and he and Harold reached the Rappahannock at Port Conway April 21. There the negro driver refused to take them further, and Harold appealed for aid to Ruggles, Bainbridge and Jett, who had just landed from the scow. Ruggles has stated that Booth was in a pitiable condition. His broken leg had been rudely bandaged in pasteboard splints, and was so swollen that it seemed to Ruggles that nothing short of eventual amputation could save his life. These men saw him across the river and as far as the Garrett farm, some three miles distant.

That very morning in Washington Lieut. Edward P. Doherty, of the Sixteenth New York Cavalry, received orders to take twenty-five men and scour the Rappahannock district. He reached Port Conway the following day, and showing Booth's photograph to some women in the house of the owner of the ferry, he judged from their looks that they had seen Booth cross there not so very long before.

That night, at Bowling Green, Lieut. Doherty located Booth at the Garrett farm, ascertained that he had an Harold were in hiding in the barn and had the building set on fire. It was then early morning

of April 26. Harold came out and surrendered. At that moment Boston Corbett, who had been stationed by a large crack in the side of the barn, saw, by the firelight, Booth aim a carbine as if to shoot either Doherty or Harold.

Corbett fired, his bullet entering the back of Booth's head only about an inch below the spot where Booth's bullet had struck Lincoln. According to Doherty's narrative in the Century Magazine, he borrowed a needle from Miss Garrett, sewed the body in a saddle blanket and put it on an old wagon, and, reaching Washington at 2 o'clock on the morning of April 26, placed Harold and the dead assassin on the monitor Montauk. On Booth's body were found a diary, a large bowie knife, two pistols, a compass and a draft on Canada for £60.

By J. Sydnor Massey.

FOR thirty-eight long years the name of John Wilkes Booth has no other name in all the world. For thirty-eight years newspapers, magazines and books have been telling the story of his assassination of President Lincoln, of his subsequent perilous flight from the national capital city through rugged rural regions and over rivers and creeks, and of his capture in Caroline county, Va., by Federal soldiers. But no historian or journalist has made the story full and complete by giving the names of all the gentlemen who crossed the Rappahannock river with Booth, in that historic ferryboat, just before he met his tragic end in the Garrett barn.

No newspaper, magazine or book has been able to go further on this point than give the names of Bainbridge, Ruggles and Jett. Mr. E. Wellford Mason, one of the most prominent citizens of King George county, Va., who chanced to cross the Rappahannock in the boat with the fleeing assassin, succeeded in concealing his name at the time, as he also succeeded in getting "out of the way," in order to avoid being arrested and taken to Washington as a witness, etc., and as years passed he stoutly declined to let it be known that he was "the tall young man" whose name could not be learned, his sole reason for keeping the "secret" being his desire and determination to avoid publicity and newspaper notoriety.

Now that the newspapers state—and the statement is accepted as a fact—that the recent death of Messrs. Bainbridge and Ruggles removes from earth the last of the gentlemen who crossed the Rappahannock with Booth on the memorable occasion, Mr. Mason consents, for the first time, that his name be made public in that connection.

Aside from the fact that Wellford Mason's prominence, social standing, high

character and reputation for veracity entitle all of his statements to consideration, there are indisputable proofs that he was one of the little company that crossed the river with John Wilkes Booth.

While Booth was hiding in the jungles of Charles county, Maryland, awaiting an opportunity to cross the Potomac into Virginia, the news of the assassination, and of the large reward offered for information that would lead to the capture of the president's slayer, spread through the rural districts on both sides of the Potomac, but there was no idea or thought more foreign to the minds of the inhabitants than that Booth would ever set foot on the soil of that section of Virginia. No one even dreamed that a fugitive from justice would jeopardize his chances of escape by including this neck of marshes, creeks and gulches in his route. Hence, strangers passing through this county were not even regarded suspiciously or "eyed curiously," notwithstanding the reward offered by the United States government.

## SEEKING MEDICAL AID.

When the opportunity came for Booth to resume his flight by crossing the Potomac into Virginia, under the cover of night, he did not go direct from Mr. Jones', in Maryland, to the home of Mrs. E. R. Quesenberry on Machodoe creek, in King George county, Va., as has been stated, but landed first at Barnfield, the home of Dr. Abraham Barnes Hooe, in the hope and for the purpose of receiving needed medical treatment by Dr. Hooe—treatment that would enable him to make his arduous journey with less discomfort.

Finding that Dr. Hooe's magnificent mansion, which had so long overlooked the broad Potomac for many miles, had been reduced to a heap of ashes, and Dr. Hooe and family gone, Booth and his companion, Harold, rowed some two miles further down the river to the mouth of Machodoe creek, thence a mile or so up the creek to the Quesenberry home. In the vicinity of Mrs. Quesenberry's there lived a man who owned a one-horse spring wagon—one of the few such vehicles to be found anywhere in all this section at the close of the war, and this man agreed to convey Booth from Hooe's neck across King George county to Port Conway, on the Rappahannock river.

So cleverly and successfully did Booth keep his identity concealed and so unsuspecting were the people here that he was enabled to consume all this time in getting from "Hooe's Neck," on the Potomac, to Port Conway, on the Rappahannock, without being detected. Mr. E. Wellford Mason, who had just recently returned to his home in King George from the Confederate service, started to Caroline county, on the south side of the Rappahannock, for the purpose of purchasing a wagon. Arriving at the ferry at Port

Conway, Mr. Mason unexpectedly met his acquaintances Messrs. Ruggles, Bainbridge and Jett. With them and among others about the ferry was a stranger who attracted his attention by a constantly and remarkably maintained reticence.

There was nothing about Harold, the other stranger, to attract his attention and he soon lost sight of him. But the reticent yet restless and peculiar manner of the spare, pale, unshaven faced stranger aroused his curiosity, and when an opportunity was afforded Mr. Mason remarked to Mr. Ruggles that it was rather strange that he (Ruggles) did not introduce the stranger. However, no introduction followed.

Soon the party of men—including Mr. Mason—was in the ferryboat and going toward the Caroline shore. Here Mr. Mason noticed that Mr. Bainbridge carried a crutch and a cane, without using or seeming to have use for either, whereupon he thus queried: "Say, Bainbridge, what in the d— are you carrying a crutch and a cane for, while you are without an ailment?"

"Oh, well, just for amusement," replied Mr. Bainbridge, after a brief pause. Mr. Mason said: "Darn poor amusement, it seems to me—a crutch and cane carried around for amusement; you must be hard up for amusement," Bainbridge, "The crutch and cane belonged to Booth," but Mr. Mason did not know this.

When the ferryboat landed on the Caroline shore the party separated. Mr. Mason going one way, and Booth, Harold, Jett, Bainbridge and Ruggles going another. Mr. Mason having failed to ascertain the name of the "stranger."

Mr. Mason returned to his home that night, and the following morning started back to Caroline, with a pair of horses with which to bring the wagon of which he went in search the previous day. This time he found a number of soldiers and others at Port Conway, all of whom, it seemed, had just crossed over from the other side of the river. In the midst of the group of soldiers was an old fashioned, curtained carryall wagon, which was being driven by a colored man whom Mr. Mason had known for many years.

Sitting erect and motionless on one of the seats of the carryall was the same "stranger" who had attracted Mr. Mason's attention when crossing the river the previous day. Not suspecting that the "stranger" was dead, Mr. Mason approached the driver and asked: "Who is this you have here in your wagon, old man?"

The driver, in a suppressed and trembling voice, answered: "It is Booth, the man who killed the president. You see he is stone dead now—day done shot him—over yonder somewhere, to de Potomac."

In the presence of the soldiers, and without weighing his words, Mr. Mason ex-

claimed, "Great God! this is the same man that crossed the river with me yesterday—Booth! Is that Booth? Why, I was with him yesterday and did not know who he was!"

Mr. Mason then made inquiries, whereupon the colored man told him about the capture, the burning of the barn, etc., and told where the fatal bullet struck Booth, etc. Mr. Mason here raised a curtain, and, on seeing the wound in Booth's head, just behind the left ear, exclaimed:

"Why, that was no rifle ball at all. You told me that he was shot with a rifle, didn't you? I'll swear a pistol bullet made that hole in Booth's head! No rifle in this crowd carries so small a bullet as that! I've been handling rifles and pistols too long not to know a pistol ball from a rifle ball."

## WAS HE A SUICIDE?

"Why, he must have killed himself with a little pistol," continued Mr. Mason.

Mr. Mason's gratuitous exclamations and comments, and especially his declaration that he crossed the river with Booth the previous day, now attracted Federal soldiers to his side, and he would have been then and there arrested and taken to Washington as a witness or a "suspicious character" but for a timely incident. It seemed that the crowd was minus a horse or two with which to cross King George or the Potomac, and while Mr. Mason was elaborately discussing the wound, etc., his horses were objects to be coveted.

One of the party, not of the soldiers, remarked, with an apparent sigh of relief, "We'll take one of this man's horses," Mr. Mason, forgetting his dignity, exclaimed, "I'll be — if you or any other man on God's green earth shall take one of my horses! No, sir! I'll shoot the man who attempts to take one of my horses!"

Col. Conger, attracted by sharp words, hastened to the scene, and in a most gentlemanly and courteous manner assured Mr. Mason that his horse should not be touched, remarking: "We came here for but one purpose, and that was to get Booth. We have him—that's all we want, and no one in this crowd shall molest you or anything belonging to you or any one else."

The horse episode attracted attention from the statement that Mr. Mason had been with Booth, and he lost no time in getting away from Port Conway. Being reminded later in the day that what he and had said would cause his arrest as a witness, he hid himself to the neighboring jungle and remained in hiding for some days.

From that day to this Mr. Mason has stoutly adhered to the theory and belief that Booth took his own life rather than surrender or be captured alive. He declares that it is impossible for the wound in Booth's head to have been made by a rifle bullet, arguing that the bullet was no larger than a certain variety of the English pea—a smaller bullet than was carried by any "shooting iron" used by soldiers at that time. He argued other points in support of his suicide theory, and says that his first conviction that Booth was shot by a small pistol in his own hand was based not only upon his extended knowledge of and experience with firearms, but upon a wound which he received himself during the war.

The village of Port Conway, where Mr. Mason met Booth and party, and where they crossed the Rappahannock, is not without some interesting history. It is not only one of the oldest villages in Virginia,

and was not only one of the most important ports in this country more than a century ago, but it is the birthplace of James Madison, the fourth president of the United States.

The unpretentious mansion in Port Conway where, in March 1751, James Madison first saw light was held in high esteem, and was visited by multitudes of sight-seers for many years. But the Madison mansion has long since succumbed to the ravages of time, and now a huge depression in the ground and some moss covered bricks and stones—the remains of the old cellar—are all that remain to mark the spot where our country's fourth president was born. It is very near by this old cellar, grown up with shrubbery, that Mr. Mason examined the wound in Booth's head. A few yards from that spot was the scene of the spirited conversation between Mr. Mason and the man who proposed to take one of his horses.

The Rappahannock river is less than half a mile wide at Port Conway, and directly opposite this village is Port Royal, in Caroline county, which enjoys the distinction of being one of the oldest towns in the United States, antedating Philadelphia and the other large cities of the country.

## A HISTORIC FERRY.

The ferryboat in which Booth and party crossed the Rappahannock and the ferry franchise at that place belonged to William Rollins, who died a little more than a year ago. The "Port Conway ferry" had been in operation many years when the civil war "broke out," and was for many generations the only ferry on the Rappahannock river, except the one at Fredericksburg, some thirty miles above. Hence Booth had to make the long, circuitous trip from Hooe's Neck to Port Conway, having been informed, it is supposed, that at no other point could he find facilities for crossing the Rappahannock into Caroline county.

Since it has been said that M. B. Ruggles, one of the gentlemen who happened to cross the Rappahannock with Booth, is survived by no "very near relatives," it may be proper to add here that his brother, Maj. Edward S. Ruggles, is still living and is one of the most prominent citizens and agriculturist of King George county. He was for years prominent in politics and public affairs, and for a few years he represented King George and Stafford counties in the general assembly of Virginia.

There stands now a persimmon tree on the banks of Gambo creek, a short distance from the home of Mrs. E. R. Quesenberry, on Machodoe creek, and some of the old citizens of that community declare that Booth and Harold left their boat moored to that tree when they started across the country in a wagon toward Port Conway. The wheels of the rickety spring wagon in which Booth traveled from Hooe's Neck to Port Conway occupied a corner in an old blacksmith's shop in King George county up to a few years ago. Several years after the close of the war this blacksmith shop was rented and operated by an old colored man who always said that the wheels were in the shop when he took charge of it, and so superstitious was he that he would never touch them. So they remained, dust-covered and decaying in that corner as long as the old man lived.

What became of those old wagon wheels after his death is not known. It is believed that they were consumed by a fire which destroyed a part of the old shop a few years ago.