

A CURIOUS LETTER

REPORT OF A CONVERSATION BETWEEN
JEFF DAVIS AND WILKES BOOTH

Page 88. *LCB*

The following letter is published in the Cincinnati Commercial of Monday:

Fort Wayne, Ind., June 14th, 1865. -- I am of Northern birth and parentage, but, having emigrated to the South when but 16 years of age, I became completely identified with Southern interests and feelings, and could talk almost as glibly of Southern rights, and the immunities of slavery, as President Davis himself. For seven years previous to the late civil war, I was deputy clerk of the County Court at Macon.

But to the point. Soon after the war commenced - about seven months - through the friendship and influence of Hon. Howell Cobb and vice-president Stephens, I was appointed clerk in the war department at Richmond, at which post, I served, except when called into the trenches, which occurred but twice, until the confederate government, with Lee's army, withdrew from Richmond, when I proceeded, with eight trunks, filled with papers belonging to the war department, about 15 miles from Richmond, when the locomotive attached to our train broke down, and, the air being filled with rumors of Yankee cavalry in the neighborhood, I took the opportunity of quitting the train and returned to Richmond on foot where I arrived just as the Federals were entering the city. From thence I made my way North, through the assistance and courtesy of Gen. Weitzel, and have finally settled down here, after taking Uncle Sam's big oath, from whence in a few weeks, I shall return to the sunny South, with the fervent wish and prayer to God that, henceforth, I may live in a peaceful country, for the thing I most desire, next to Southern independence, is peace.

But I am still digressing. My duties in the War Department were light, they consisting principally in indorsing, in red ink, and filling in

appropriate places, all papers belonging to the Confederate secret service, And I must here state that no documents were ever received from parties in the North, with reference to the assassination of Mr. Lincoln. Many were, however, received from parties in the South, offering to capture or assassinate Mr. Lincoln for certain sums of money. Such propositions, however, never received the least attention, but were universally passed over, without official notice; and none of them were ever replied to. And, from a conversation at which I was present, which occurred in the latter part of February last, in the war department office, between President Davis, Secretary Benjamin and Mr. Breckinridge, on the one part, and two strangers, together with a man named and introduced as Booth, on the other part, I am satisfied that neither Davis nor Breckinridge were in favor of the least personal injury being done to Mr. Lincoln, but, on the contrary, strenuously opposed any movement in that direction.

The gentleman above referred to as being called Booth, was brought into the war office in company with the other two strangers, by President Davis and Secretary Benjamin. Mr. Booth was introduced to Mr. Breckinridge by Secretary Benjamin. The other two men were not introduced and took seats at the further end of the room, without taking part in the conversation that ensued, except that when they retired, they said, "Good-bye, gentlemen," to those remaining.

Booth commenced by saying that a plan was formed, by parties in the Northern States and Canada, friends of the confederacy, to capture or assassinate Mr. Lincoln, that he had a full list of the names, and all they desired was an official recognition on the part of the confederate authorities, and then the project would certainly be executed. He further stated that they desired no pecuniary assistance from the government, as that was already secured; that they were not after gain, but were actuated only by a desire to render the confederacy a service, by removing the tyrant

who was the cause of so much suffering to the country and the only obstacle in the way of a speedy peace. These are the words, as near as I can now remember. Messrs. Davis and Breckinridge both expressed their hearty condemnation of the plot, and advised Booth to think no more of it. That they felt that their cause was just and that God, in His own good time, would give them the victory, without resorting to any thing but the most honorable warfare, and that they were willing to leave Lincoln's punishment, for his great crime, to the providence of a just God and an outraged people. Benjamin said nothing. Booth then retired, and the last words he uttered in the room were, "He must die!" After Booth and his friends were gone, Davis said, "Those fellows came here merely to see the Richmond sights, and their assassination plot is mere fudge." Breckinridge and Benjamin laughed, and the latter said, "I think so." The matter received no more attention, and all agreed with Mr. Davis, that the plot was mere "fudge." I am satisfied that none of them ever expected what has since become so dread a reality. In conclusion, let me say that I am willing to be qualified to the above statement of facts.

Truly, yours,

JOHN B VAN DIEN.