

How Wilkes Booth Died As Told by Eye Witness

Myth of Assassin's Escape to the West Persists After Sixty Years of Authentic Testimony to Contrary.

By J. S. KIRTLEY

Pastor of the First Baptist Church, Philadelphia

THE rather recent death of Rev. Dr. Richard B. Garrett removed the last eyewitness to the tragic death of the slayer of Abraham Lincoln. Dr. Garrett was a son of the man who unconsciously played host to the assassin of the President. Though he was a lad of eleven, he carried through life a vivid recollection of the event and before his death furnished me the data of this story.

The recent revival of the old story that Booth did not die at that time and place, but that he escaped and lived in Mexico for 30 years makes the story of the eyewitness all the more timely and interesting.

There seem to be but two people now living who

"Mr. Garrett, I suppose you hardly remember me," said one of them.

"No, sir, I believe not," was the reply.

"Well," said the young man who was dressed as a Confederate officer, "my name is Jett and I'm the son of your old friend Jett, of Westmoreland county."

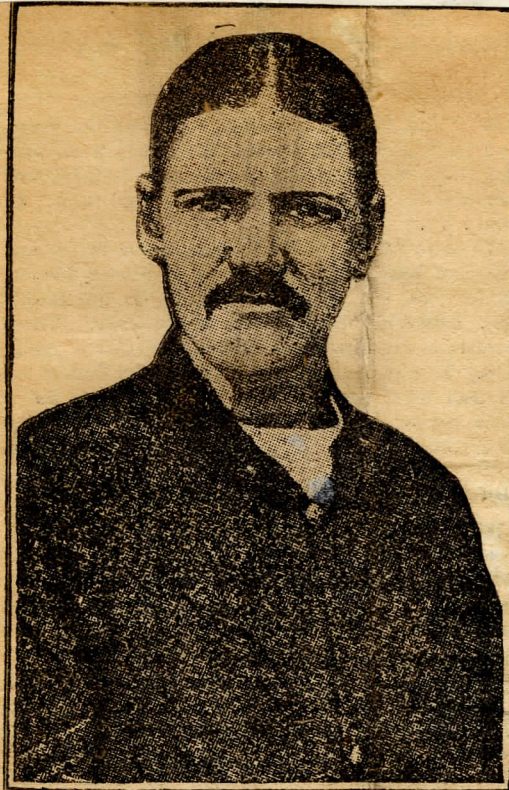


saw Lincoln die. One is Robert Todd Lincoln, the President's only living son, and Thomas Proctor, who gave up his bed in a lodging house near the Ford Theatre that the dying President might be placed on it. Mr. Proctor is now 83 years old, and has been, for several years, in the St. Andrew's Brotherhood home, in Gibsonsia, Pa.

Mr. Garrett and his son Richard were sitting on their front porch about three o'clock on the afternoon of April 24 when three men on horseback rode up to the front gate and halted. The father and son went out and greeted them in their usual hospitable manner.

He turned to his two companions and introduced one as Lieutenant Ruggles, also a Confederate officer, and nodding towards the other, he said, "this is my friend, James Boyd, a Confederate officer who was wounded at the battle of Petersburg and is trying to get to his home in Maryland. Can you take care of him a few days till his wound will permit him to travel?"

Mr. Garrett was known for his hospitality far and wide and he always welcomed wayfarers, whether Union or Confederate. Many were the utter strangers he had entertained at his home.



BOSTON CORBITT

He invited all to come in, but Jett and Ruggles said they were on their way to Bowling Green and didn't have time to stop. They helped the wounded man down, gave him a crutch and rode away, leading the horse that Boyd had been riding.

Boyd went in and was given a chair on the porch. The lad brought him a drink of water and asked him if his wound pained him much.

"Yes," replied Boyd, "it wasn't properly cared for and the riding has jarred it so that it gives me a great deal of pain."

Boyd was left alone and he sat on the porch several hours, dozing most of the time. The handsome face of the strange sleeper, his clearcut features and the shock of black hair crowning his shapely head touched the heroic sentiment of the boy. And there was a very interesting belt worn by the stranger in which was a pair of opera glasses exposed to the lad's curious gaze.

At supper the family discussed the news of the day and, while Boyd took only a limited part in the conversation, he charmed them all with his grace and culture.

After supper he was assigned to the room occupied by Jack, an older son of Mr. Garrett, who had but lately returned from service in the Confederate army.

Early the next morning, April 25, Jack went to Port Conway to fish, but returned about one in the afternoon quite excited by talk he had heard about the assassination of President Lincoln. Mr. Garrett exclaimed:

"Well, it was a reckless man who did it."

"You think so?" asked Boyd with some energy.

"Yes; no good will come of it," he replied.

When Boyd asked what made him think so, Mr. Garrett said Mr. Lincoln was a better President than they imagined and would be more lenient toward the South than his successor would be. Boyd inquired the amount of reward offered for the capture of the assassin, and, when young Garrett told him, exclaimed:

Reward Seemed Small

"One hundred thousand dollars! Why, that isn't as much as I expected them to offer. I guessed they would give \$500,000 for the murderer."

Another of the Garrett boys spoke up: "Well, he'd better not cross my path; I'd behead him just to get a share."

"Would you?" asked Boyd.

"No," said the young man, laughing, "it would be a big temptation to a poor Southern soldier home from the war without a cent, but I wouldn't harm a hair of his head, for I'm tired of fighting and have shouldered my gun for the last time."

Boyd replied with a faint smile:

"Well, I hadn't taken you for a bloodthirsty sort of man."

As they left the table Mrs. Garrett asked Boyd if she might not dress his wound.

"No, madam, I thank you, though it does give me pain," he replied. "There are other things I think of more than my wounds."

About 5 o'clock that afternoon they saw a heavy dust arising down the road and three men rode up rapidly. Boyd said:

"Why, there's one of our men now."

"What do you mean by one of your men?" asked Jack Garrett.

"Oh, just one who crossed the river with us," was his quick reply.

He grew excited and asked Jack to go upstairs and get his pistol, which he had left at the head of his bed.

"What's the matter with you? What makes you so nervous?"

"Oh, nothing. I always feel safer when I'm armed."

He put the pistol in a holster and hobbled to the front gate where he met a man whom they had not seen before, but who seemed to be an acquaintance of his.

It was at this point that young Garrett first told his father of the suspicions he had begun to feel about Boyd. In fact all the family had begun to have a haunting wonder as to who the remarkable stranger was.

The two other men who had ridden up were Jett and Ruggles. They went on north toward Port Royal, but shortly came galloping back and shouted to Boyd: "Make your escape; the Federals are crossing the river at Port Royal."

They rode on into a thicket nearby and hid while Boyd and his companion ran for some underbrush.

Wanted to Buy a Horse

It was not long before 50 U. S. cavalrymen came from the direction of Port Royal and stopped to water their horses at a place almost opposite the Garrett farm, owned by a colored man, Ned Freeman; then they rode on two miles to a tavern called the "Trap," where they took supper and rested a while before going on to Bowling Green.

After they had passed and were out of sight Boyd, with his friend, came back to the house and offered Jack \$10 to take them over to Guinea. Jack declined because his horse had been working all day and was too tired. Then Boyd offered to buy the horse for \$150, but the offer was refused.

By this time Jack was convinced something was wrong and expressed his fears to his father. Mr. Garrett tried to disabuse his mind of suspicion, but Jack insisted that, as the war was over, the presence of these soldiers meant something serious.

He then walked over to Ned Freeman's to try to get light on the mystery. Ned told him the soldiers were hunting two men, one of whom was lame.

He returned to the house and asked Boyd if he had got into any trouble in Maryland and requested him, if he had, to go away, as his father was getting old and they didn't want anything to disturb him. Boyd carelessly replied there had been a little trouble but it had blown over.

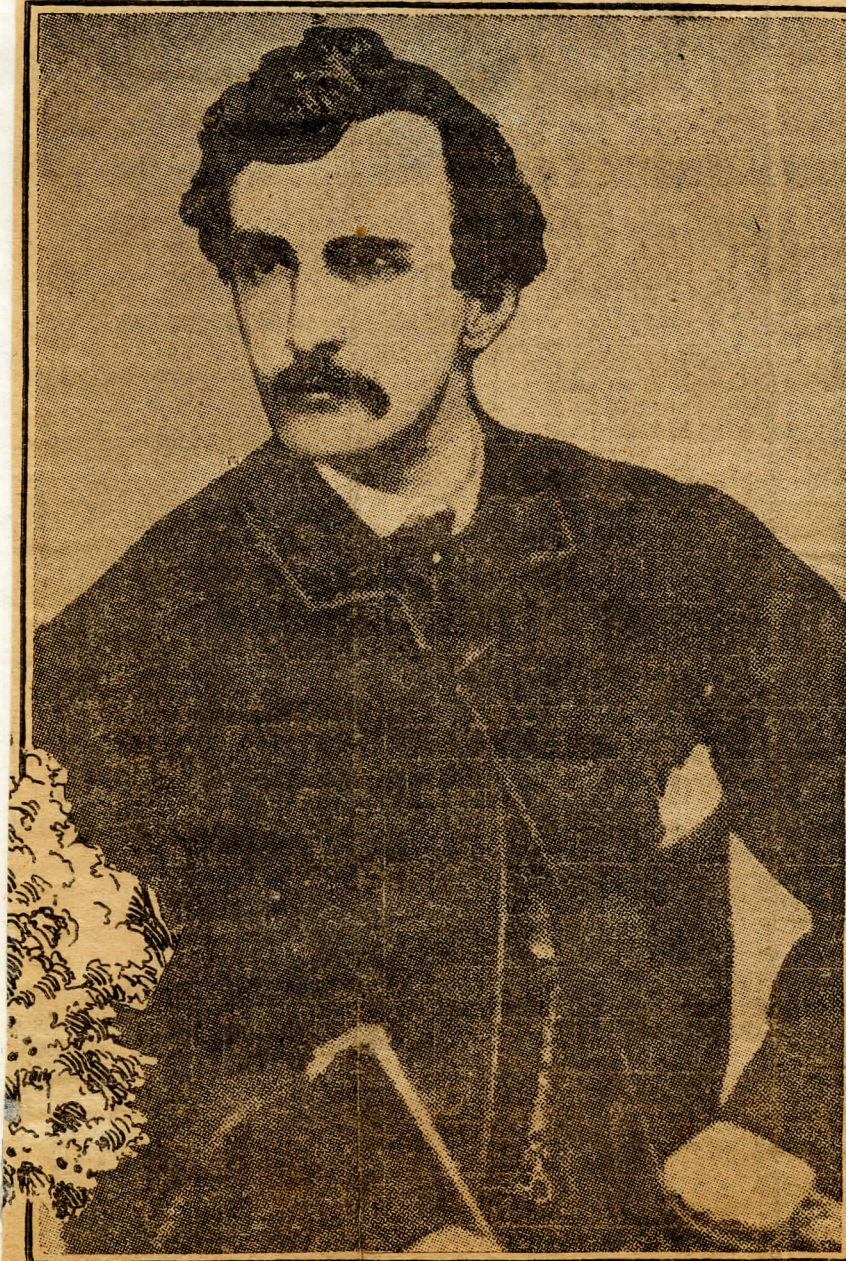
That evening, after supper, as they sat on the porch and smoked, Boyd asked if he and his companion might not sleep on the porch, to which Mr. Garrett replied that the dogs were too savage. Then he asked if they might sleep in a large tobacco barn not far off. They told him it had been used as a storeroom and contained a lot of rubbish, but he insisted he wouldn't mind that.

For a while Boyd sat on the porch, the picture of dejection. About 9 o'clock, at his request, young Garrett got the key to the barn and took them out to let them spend the night there. Double doors were on all four sides of the barn and, in the

upper story, were large windows. Sticks of tobacco hung from the rafters, hay was piled up in places and old furniture was strewn all about the floor. They moved the furniture, piled up some hay for a bed and requested young Garrett to lock them in for the night. Garrett's suspicions were so persistent he and his brother slept under a nearby shed for fear Boyd and his friend might steal their horses and flee.

But to return to Jett and the soldiers who had followed on. While the soldiers were resting at the "Trap" Jett was on his way to Bowling Green. The soldiers soon followed and found him in Bowling Green fast asleep. They awakened him and demanded that he take them to the place where John Wilkes Booth, the murderer of President Lincoln, was concealed.

At 2 o'clock in the morning they were back at the Garrett home, led by Captain Jett, for the man hiding in the barn was none other than the assassin of the President. His companion was his body servant, David E. Herold, afterwards hanged as co-conspirator.



J. WILKES BOOTH

Jett had first met Booth and Herold when they crossed the river Monday. He heard Booth ask the ferryman if there was a Confederate officer nearby and had introduced himself to Booth as such an officer.

As he walked up the beach with Booth, Herold, who was a few feet in advance, turned about and told Jett who they were and what they had done. Booth reprimanded him for doing so, but they both thought they would be secure with any Confederate officer. On being asked to take them to a place of safety, Jett procured horses, was joined by his friend, Lieutenant Ruggles and started for Mr. Garrett's home, which he had selected because of the latter's well-known hospitality. Before they reached the place they evidently made some temporary arrangement for Herold stayed behind a while, as we have already seen.

Slept in a Barn

Now at that early hour Jett brought the soldiers to the place where Booth had fraudulently secured shelter. They were an excited and noisy crowd and the commotion roused Mr. Garrett out of a sound sleep. He came out and they treated him pretty roughly, accusing him of harboring the slayer of Lincoln. He replied that he knew nothing of any murderer, that two men had asked him to let them spend the night and he never turned away anyone.

A detective named Baker put his pistol to Mr. Garrett's breast and threatened to shoot him dead if he didn't show where the assassin was; others threatened to hang him. Even after he had disclaimed any knowledge of the man they put him in a secure place under the guard of four men.

At this point Jack Garrett came up and told them where the two men were and they rushed to the barn. They ordered Booth to come out or they would burn the barn. He proposed that if they would give him 50 steps he would make good his escape, but they returned a thunderous "No!"

In a firm voice, Booth spoke to them: "There is one man here who will surrender, but I never will. I want you to know, however, that the gentleman with whom I am stopping doesn't know who I am nor what I have done."

The man Herold, Booth's bodyguard, was a coarse, cowardly fellow. He came out, scared nearly to death. They bound him to a tree nearby, where he could see all that went on at the barn. The soldiers compelled young Garrett to pile hay and brush around the building. Booth could see them from within by the light of the fire, and he called out: "Gentlemen, I could pick off all of you with my pistol, but I don't wish to do it. I have accomplished all I want, and I wouldn't hurt a hair of your heads."

Then Colonel Conger set fire to the hay and soon the whole building was in flames. Booth stood leaning on his crutch, his face white and set. When the light fell clearly on him, Sergeant Boston Corbitt took aim with his pistol and shot him through the throat. He fell instantly and Jack Garrett was ordered to drag him from the burning barn, which he had much difficulty in doing.

He was taken by the soldiers to the house and laid on the porch, while a messenger was dispatched for Dr. Urquhart. Booth seemed to be dead, but, when someone tried to place a pillow under his head, he opened his eyes and said: "No, no, let me lie here, let me die here." Later, as they tried to make him more comfortable, he repeated the request.

All the members of the Garrett family were present, including a woman who was visiting in the home.

The latter saturated a cloth with water and placed it to his dry lips. Under her gentle touch he opened his eyes and said: "Tell mother I died for my country. I did what I thought was best."

After a few minutes of silence, he opened his eyes again, repeated his message to his mother and closed them in death.

The soldiers sewed his body in an army blanket, put it in a spring wagon and drove away in the wagon, to Washington City, taking Herold also.

The body was turned over to Dr. George Loring Porter, who was in medical charge of the arsenal in Washington. I am indebted for some of the following facts to an article by Dr. Porter in the Columbia magazine of April, 1911, and also to data furnished me by his only living son, J. Benton Porter, of No. 1527 Spruce street, Philadelphia, and by his daughter-in-law, Mrs. George Porter, of Langdon, N. H.

The Body Was Hid

Dr. Porter and his wife were out rowing on the Potomac that afternoon, and in their absence soldiers rowed up to the summer house on the bank of the river, ordered the Negro nurse and the little daughter of Dr. Porter away, threw the body wrapped in a guany sack and blanket on the floor and departed, leaving a sentinel on guard.

On his return, Dr. Porter, Mr. Stebbins, the military storekeeper, and four enlisted men, took charge of the body. Dr. Porter and Mr. Stebbins, the latter carrying a lantern, led the way. The four men followed, the body being in a wagon, one man leading the horse, one following and one on either side.

On reaching the old penitentiary building the men were blindfolded and led about through the building. Mr. Stebbins opened the massive door of the cell and the body was secreted under a stone, the door

was locked and the key returned to the War Department.

Dr. Porter says the identification of the body as that of John Wilkes Booth, the man who assassinated President Lincoln, in Ford's Theatre, was complete. The mustache and the lock which hung over his forehead were cut off at Dr. Mudd's, who treated his wound on his flight from Washington and his face showed identity with the one which that mustache and the lock of hair had adorned. Several men identified him by various signs. Among them was Charles Dawson, chief clerk of the National Hotel, who positively identified the body by the initials "J. W. B.," which had been tattooed in India ink on the right hand between the thumb and forefinger. Mr. Dawson swore that he had often seen the letters on his right hand when he signed the register and that he once said: "Booth, what a fool you were to disfigure that pretty white hand in such a way."

Dr. J. Frederick May also identified him by a scar on his neck where he had removed a small tumor from the left side of his neck, three inches below the ear. Booth was anxious that it should heal "by first intention," but while he was in a rehearsal with Charlotte Cushman, when she was to grasp him by the shoulder, she seized his neck, tearing the wound wide open, and it healed "by granulation," leaving a mark by which Dr. May identified the body as that of Booth.

On the removal of the body at the request of his family, in 1869, to the family burying ground in Baltimore, his brother, the famous Edwin Booth, had a new examination made and declared himself satis-

fied as to the identity of the body. The permission to remove the body to Baltimore was given on the one condition that there should be no stone or marker of any kind to identify the grave. There it rests today.

Why Corbett Shot Him

Dr. Porter had medical charge of the conspirators during their imprisonment. He was at the execution of Herold, Levi Payne, Mrs. Surratt and George A. Atzerodt, on July 7, 1865, and officially pronounced them dead. He sailed with Captain Budd under sealed orders to place the other four conspirators at Fort Jefferson, Dry Tortugas. O'Laughlin died there of yellow fever. Dr. Mudd did good service in breaking the epidemic and was pardoned. Arnold and Spangler were pardoned and released in about three years. John H. Surratt was acquitted of complicity in the crime. Spangler died in 1875 at Dr. Mudd's home. Dr. Mudd died in 1883; Arnold many years later.

Captain Christian Rath, who supervised the execution of the four, became a railway mail clerk on the road between Detroit and Grand Rapids and died years ago at his home in Jackson.

Boston Corbitt, who shot Booth that morning in Mr. Garrett's barn, lived in Camden, N. J., for years. When asked why he shot when ordered to take Booth alive, Corbitt said he looked ready to shoot the first one who came into the door of the barn and "besides," he said, "he deserved to die." Corbitt went to Kansas, lost his mind and died there.