

# The Assassination of President Lincoln

## 1865

John Wilkes Booth assassinated President Abraham Lincoln on April 14, 1865. Booth originally instigated a kidnapping plot after Union General Ulysses S. Grant had suspended the exchange of prisoners during the Civil War. Booth wanted to kidnap Lincoln and bring him to the South. He wanted to hold Lincoln hostage until the exchange was resumed. Booth organized a group of men, including Samuel Arnold and Lewis Powell, to help him. They planned to attack and kidnap Lincoln when he was returning from the Campbell Military Hospital after seeing a show entitled *Still Waters Run Deep*. Booth and his men waited in a restaurant, eager to follow through with their plan, but Lincoln was not at the hospital.

On April, 11 Lincoln spoke outside of the White House, and Booth attended the speech. Lincoln said he supported African-American voting rights. At this point, word had reached Washington, D.C., that Confederate General Robert E. Lee had surrendered, and the Civil War was over. Prisoners would be exchanged, so there was no point in abducting Lincoln. Booth, bitter about the Confederacy's loss, decided to change the kidnapping plot and to kill Lincoln.

Booth organized the same men and explained his plan. Booth wanted to kill President Lincoln, Grant, Vice President Andrew Johnson, and Secretary of State William Seward. He felt with these four men dead, the Confederacy would easily



be able to conquer the Union. Booth also learned Lincoln and Grant were attending a play at Ford's Theatre in Washington, D.C., on April 14. Because he was an actor and had performed there frequently, Booth knew the inside of the theatre well. Booth met with his men just hours before the assassination. He assigned each of his conspirators to a Union leader, instructing them to kill the targets at various locations. Some of the men began to waffle. They had agreed to kidnapping Lincoln, but not to murder. Booth lashed out at them, saying they were already far into this and to follow through with the mission.

President Lincoln and his wife, Mary Todd Lincoln, arrived at Ford's Theatre that night. General Grant and his wife had declined the invitation to attend the play *Our American Cousin*. Instead, Major Harry Rathbone and his fiancée went to the show. Seated in the presidential box, the two couples were applauded and sat down as the play began. Around 9 p.m., Booth arrived at the back door of Ford's Theatre. Booth entered the building and blocked the door between the

presidential box and the balcony. The soldier who had been assigned to guard the door to Lincoln's box was not at his post. He had gone to watch part of the play. Booth knew the play and waited for the right time to strike. As President Lincoln and his wife were talking, Booth came in and shot Lincoln in the back of the head. Lincoln slumped over his chair, and Rathbone attempted to attack Booth. Booth stabbed Rathbone twice in the arm with a knife. Booth then jumped from the presidential box to the stage below, breaking his left leg. Upon landing on the stage, he raised his knife over his head and said, "*sic semper tyrannis*," which meant "*thus always to tyrants*." Booth ran from the theatre with audience members chasing him. He mounted his horse, which he had tied outside, and rode away.



Army surgeon Charles Leale tried to reach the presidential box, but Booth had blocked the entrance. Rathbone made his way down the stairs to remove the blockade. Rathbone had a deep cut on his arm that would not stop bleeding. Leale made his way to Lincoln, who had no pulse. Another doctor, Charles Taft, also made his way to the box to try and treat the wound behind Lincoln's left ear. Leale knew Lincoln would not recover from the shooting. The doctors decided Lincoln must be moved to another location so they could attend to him. Aided by soldiers, the doctors carried Lincoln across the street to a boardinghouse. While Lincoln was receiving medical attention, Secretary of War Edwin Stanton ran the country, ordering an immediate pursuit of Booth. The doctors worked on Lincoln, but determined that nothing would save him. Lincoln was pronounced dead on the morning of April 15.

At the same time, Booth had been riding at a frantic pace. He crossed the Navy Yard Bridge into Maryland, where he joined David Herold, who was to show Booth the way to Maryland. They armed themselves with weapons they had hidden at an inn and made their way to the office of Dr. Samuel Mudd. He told Booth his leg was broken and made a splint for it. He also gave him a pair of crutches. A friend, Thomas Jones, hid Booth and Herold in a swamp near his house. On April 26, Union soldiers discovered the hiding place. Booth and Herold were locked in a barn, with Union soldiers ordering them out. Herold surrendered, but Booth refused. The soldiers set fire to the barn. At the same time a soldier behind the barn shot Booth in the back of the neck. The soldiers captured Booth, and he died two hours later from his gunshot wound.



Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

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Discussion Questions:

1. What was John Wilkes Booth's original plan?
2. Why did Booth's kidnapping plot fail? Why did Booth decide to kill Lincoln?
3. What did Booth's original assassination plot involve?
4. What happened when Booth informed his men about the assassination plot?

