The FOUR Who Were HANGED

A New Picture of the Lincoln Conspirators and Their Execution

An Article by
LLOYD LEWIS

(Reading time: 21 minutes 42 seconds.)

[EDITOR'S NOTE: In an article published in LIBERTY last week the author did much to shatter the romanticism which has surrounded the Booth conspirators, especially Mrs. Surratt, the woman hanged for her part in the murder of Abraham Lincoln. In the following article the conspirators are painted as they were before they met Booth, as they worked with him, and the manner in which they met death on the gallows.]

THERE were four to be hanged. But, because one was a woman, Christian Rath, the hangman, could find nobody to dig the graves.

Rath stamped up and down the corridors of the jail, rubbing his head. It hurt. Things had started badly.

At daybreak he had gone out into the prison yard to test the new rope he had bought for the hanging. Crowds had stared at him through the tall iron fence. Even at that early hour the morbid and curious had begun to pack the streets around the penitentiary. To them Captain Rath had paid no heed, marching straight to a tree with a sack of shot across his shoulder and the rope in his hand.

Up in the tree, he tied one end of the rope to the sack and the other to the limb upon which he sat; then, edging well forward to eye the jerk, he shoved the sack into space.

The bough broke and the Captain alighted upon his head.

As he picked himself up, all dirt and morning dew, guffaws and whoops of glee arose from the mob.

Yes, things had started badly and now were worse.

The rope might be stout enough, the gallows was almost ready, after yesterday's carpentering, but here it was nearing 8 o'clock—the hanging due around noon—and not a grave dug!

Captain Rath hurried into the prison office to see Lieutenant Colonel McCall, who was in charge of the military guard. He was told to ask for volunteers.

Addressing the regiment, Rath asked for 100 helpers, some to man the spades, some the traps, some the coffins, some to bind the hands and feet of the condemned.

"And every man will get a drink of whisky when the thing is done," he concluded.

Every soldier in the regiment stepped up!

It was in such slapstick comedy that the most terrible hanging in the history of the Republic began. The day, July 9, 1865, was to end in low comedy, too, in spite of all the shudders that were to run through the 2,000 spectators in the jail yard, and on out across the nation.

Comic and grotesque though much of the day might be, America has never seen anything in it but terror. The four who were hanged were the Lincoln conspirators, and America has always been too busy deifying Abraham Lincoln to look upon his assailants as anything but shapeless fiends and monsters.

WHENEVER the nation has stumbled upon the picture of those four dangling by their necks, it has shivered and shut the book. It may know the archassassin, John Wilkes Booth, a little better, recalling with less horror his death at the hands of Union cavalrymen in the burning barn, weeks before. It may know him as a vague myth with the outlines of a tragedian, but it has never recognized his accomplices as the comedians they were.



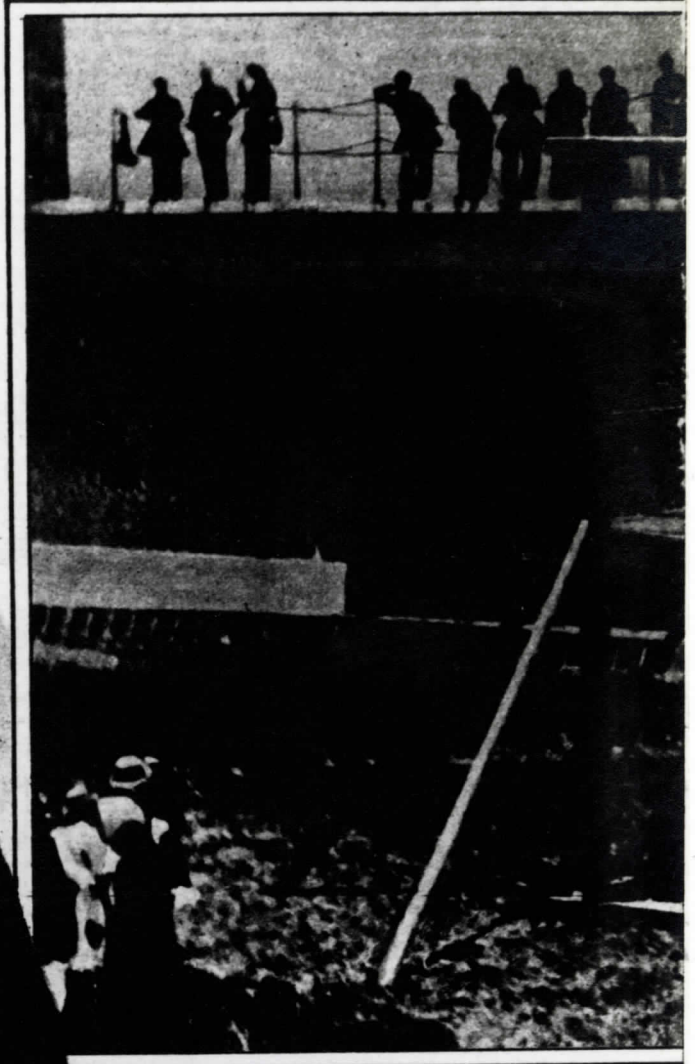
Albert Davis Collection

John Wilkes Booth, who played the chief rôle in the grim national tragedy.

Comedians indeed; the most imbecile group of loons and nincompoops that ever blundered into notoriety; and long ago they might have been distinguished as exactly that, had it not been that the Republic must be forever looking at Lincoln's death through the spectacles of superstition.

* * *

All morning the carpenters were hammering at the gallows tree, in the inclosure behind the prison, adding finishing touches to the strong, simple affair whose upper beam, to which the ropes were tied, rose some twenty feet above the ground, and whose platform was midway of this height.



How four of the conspirators in Lincoln's Surratt's figure can be identified by means of

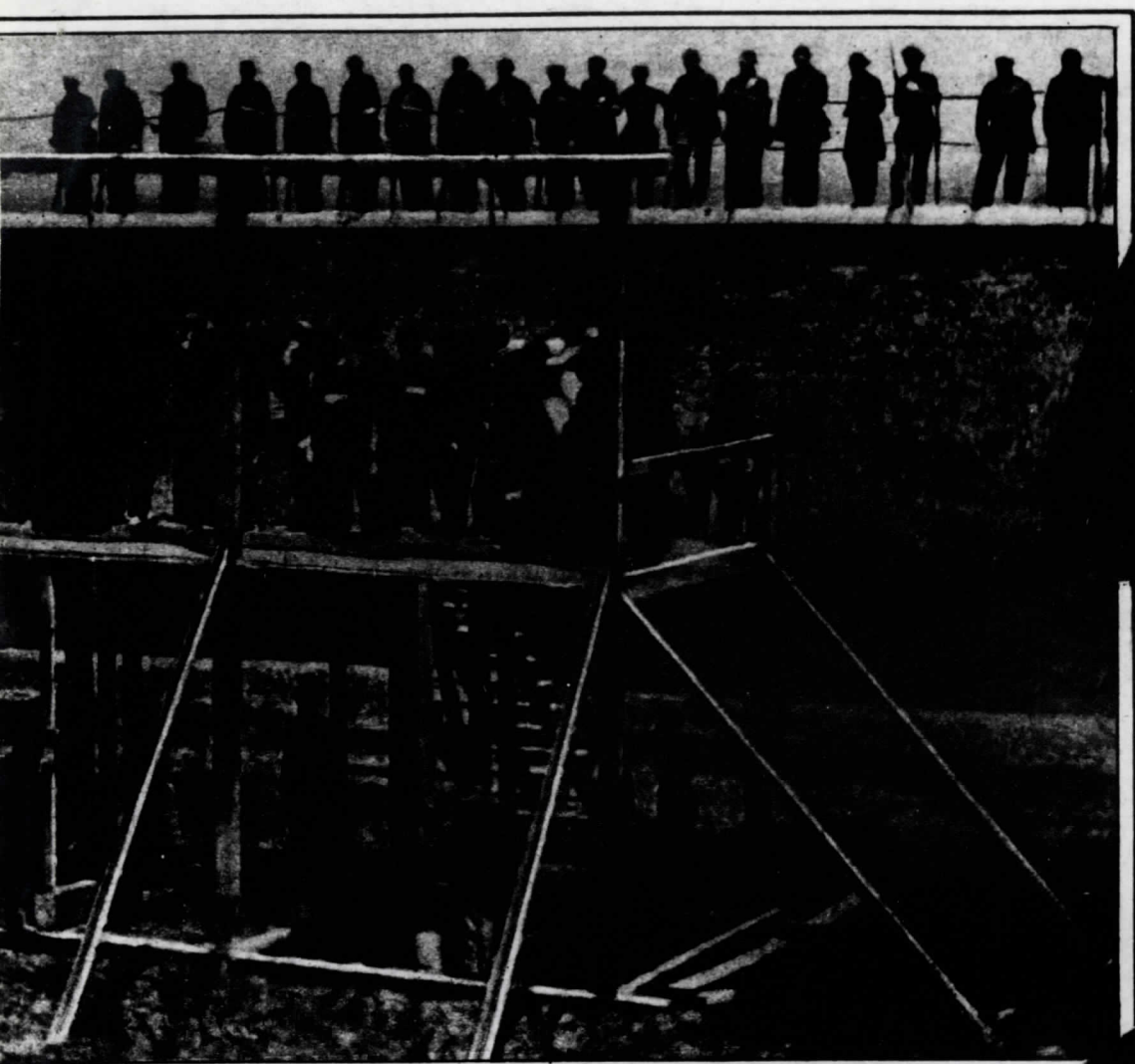
By eleven-thirty the traps were ready for the test which Rath was to give them with 300-pound weights. Rath ascended the steps, noting that the four graves were ready and yawning between the scaffold and the high penitentiary wall.

A thousand infantrymen were scattered about the jail yard, and to this number were constantly added newspaper men and such other civilians as could secure the prized tickets of admission. No government officials were to come to the hanging and no high army men except Generals Hancock and Hartranft, who were in charge.

One newspaper man, as he entered the yard, looked at the four nooses dangling and the four graves gaping, and blurted out, "My God, they're not going to hang all four, are they?"

People everywhere in the United States were asking that, too.

It was the woman people were wondering about—Mrs. Mary E. Surratt, the lodging-house keeper of Washington who had been tried and found guilty with seven men for con-



assassination met their deaths that brazen-hot noon of July 9, 1865. Mrs. the umbrella, held over her head to shield her from the burning rays of the sun.

Brown Bros. phot



Albert Davis Collection

Mrs. Mary E. Surratt —"She kept the nest where the egg was hatched," said President Johnson.

spiring with John Wilkes Booth to kill Lincoln and his Secretary of State, Seward. At the announcement that President Johnson had doomed her to the gallows, a great clamor for her pardon or reprieve had arisen. At the very moment that the reporter stood aghast at the sight of her waiting grave, her lawyers were asking the Supreme Court of the District to save her with a writ of habeas corpus, arguing that her trial and conviction by a military body had been unconstitutional.

In the face of President Johnson's suspension of the right of habeas corpus in the case, the court was helpless. Johnson's answer to prayers and pleas was an adamant statement: "She kept the nest where the egg was hatched," his reference being to the Surratt house where Booth had assembled his plotters.

All forenoon, however, Johnson's private secretary kept a fast horse hitched to a buggy outside the White House door on the bare chance that the President might change his mind.

The rattle of the drops, as Rath tested them, told the newspaper men that the government had not weakened; the woman must die. And the telegraph, clicking off its bulletins to the waiting country, told everybody that all four were to hang.

IT was brazenly hot in the inclosure. Deathly hot in the prison, too; hot where the condemned sat with their families—such as had families—and with their ministers.

There was but one cool place in the penitentiary—the tier of cells below; and the conspirator who was there had been dead too long to care.

John Wilkes Booth lay in this tomb, cool and silent, except for the dim echoes of wails and commands that sifted down from the floor above. Lonely down there too, for not a soul, unless it was Christian Rath, in that day's crowds even knew that Booth's body was in the prison.

Indeed, it is doubtful if twenty men in the whole Republic knew, so stealthily had it been hidden by Stanton, the Secretary of War, whose mind was a nightmare of suspicion that the defeated Confederacy longed to steal Booth's corpse and worship it as a holy relic.

THROUGH the cells of the condemned upstairs, there was weeping, terrible and long. Seven sisters hid David Herold, the nitwit, with their embraces. Nitwit or no, they loved him.

A daughter clung to Mrs. Surratt, sobbing wildly.

A clodlike creature, miserably dressed, cried beside Atzerodt. She was the woman with whom he had cohabited, minus benefits of clergy, in those days when he had lived wretchedly at Port Tobacco, Maryland, making carriages and relaying information to the Confederates.

In one cell of the four there was calm—the cell of Lewis Powell, gigantic moron, who paid no heed to the preparations about him.

All but the woman were manacled. All but she had worn chains since those mid-April days when they had been seized as suspects and imprisoned in the sweltering holds of naval monitors out on the Potomac. Heavy bags had been fastened over their heads to prevent them seeing and talking.

The prisoners had been brought to the penitentiary from the ironclads on April 29, so that they might be handy to the courtroom when the military commission began its hearings. Rath confined them in cells, each of the male conspirators being watched by four guards and, for still safer keeping, handcuffed to iron bars. Each dragged a seventy-five-pound ball on a two-foot chain.

To the government, ferocious with rage, the simpletons were beasts, and it was not until their jailers had come to know them for imbeciles that they received humane treatment.

Major Porter, the prison physician, ordered the bags off their heads on account of the terrific heat, and Captain Rath turned them out into the prison yard occasionally for air, listening shrewdly to their talk. Not once did he hear them deny their guilt; only squabble over dates and trivial items.

AT their trial feeble efforts had been made to establish two of them, Powell and Herold, as mental defectives, unfit for hanging. A physician, Dr. Samuel McKim, had told of Davy Herold's incapacity as a drug clerk: "I have known him for the last six years and I consider him a very light, trivial, unreliable boy; so much so that I would never let him put up a prescription of mine if I could prevent it, feeling confident that he would tamper with it if he thought he could play a joke on anybody. In mind I consider him about eleven years of age."

Just as Booth had been a failure at acting, so had this silliest of his followers been a failure at pharmacy. A stupid and giggling lout was Herold, too shiftless to work for his widowed

[CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE]

[THE FOUR WHO WERE HANGED
Continued from Page Fifteen]

mother and seven sisters, all of whom adored him and kept him in spending money.

Livery stables knew him well. There he loafed, talking horses and hounds, and there Booth, looking for recruits, found him.

Herold was so thrilled by intimacy with the "play actor" that he followed Booth out of Washington on horseback the night of the assassination, although he had done nothing more desperate than gallop about the streets of Washington while others in the conspiracy disappeared on their bloody errands.

Davy had boasted to strangers, during the flight, that he and his companion were "assassinators of the President," but he had wilted very suddenly when the Union troopers banged pistol butts on the door of the barn where the two had been cornered and had come out, all in a twitter, to surrender rather than, like Booth, shoot it out with the soldiers.

EQUALLY as monstrous a criminal was Atzerodt, a cartoon of an assassin, humped, simian, fawning, with hair that hung and whiskers that straggled. Booth had won him, with promises of gold, to the kidnaping plot over which the conspirators had labored so comically in the late months of '64. Atzerodt's duty was to provide the ferry upon which Lincoln, properly roped and delivered by Booth, was to be hustled over the river into Confederate territory, where he could be traded back to the Union for an army of secession prisoners of war.

When this absurd plot failed, Atzerodt was assigned by Booth to kill Vice President Johnson in the general attack upon the heads of the government.

Although Booth knew Atzerodt for the great coward that he was, it was hoped that with Herold to escort him to Johnson's hotel, and with Johnson as drunk as might reasonably be expected, the trick could be turned. When the hour came, Atzerodt whined that he had enlisted to capture, not to kill, persisting in this until Booth so drenched him with whisky and threats that he agreed to go ahead.

But with Booth off for Ford's Theater to attack Lincoln, Powell off for the home of Seward, and Herold meandering away somewhere, the little German was left alone. Slowly he forced himself to the Kirkwood Hotel, where the Vice President lay in his room drunk and asleep.

Atzerodt got as far as the bar, only to find that his courage had oozed away so completely that not even liquor could call it back. He stumbled out to his horse and rode aimlessly about the town, hearing the hue and cry arise around Ford's Theater, cringing, trembling, bumping about the streets like a blind rat, whimpering as the city went madder and madder around him, pawning his revolver, and finally striking off on foot for his childhood home, twenty-two miles north of Washington. There the detectives found him, four days later, moping because a neighbor girl had found his love advances distasteful.

The woman who awaited the gallows was hard-visaged, but by no means the defiant witch that the frenzied Northern reporters described in their newspapers. Life had disappointed her. She had been hailed as the belle of Prince George County in Maryland when she had married John H. Surratt and had gone to live on his inherited estate outside Washington. A slave, driven to fury by cruel treatment, burned the house. Her husband, after a few years, bought a tavern thirteen miles out of Washington.

The drift was all downhill. Money was scarce. The war turned their tavern into a rendezvous for Confederate spies and messengers. In '63 the husband died, and the widow, growing grimmer, moved into Washington to open a boarding house on H Street.

Her daughter Annie came home from the convent school. Her younger son, John, wheel-headed and frothy, was of little aid. With her consent he ran the Federal lines occasionally with military secrets for the Confederacy. Once he went to work for the Adams Express Company, only to leave when his friend John Wilkes Booth began building the kidnaping melodrama in hot whispers.

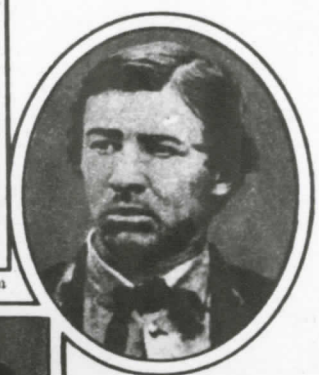
Mrs. Surratt entered the plot. She was violently pro-Southern, broodingly religious, much given to pious hopes that God would punish the sinful pride with which Northerners celebrated their victories. She was fascinated, probably to the point of romantic love, by Booth's matinée-idol manner. She was Booth's senior by twenty years.

But she was of more use to the conspiracy than was her son. That chatterbox was safe in Canada when assassination time came. Mrs. Surratt it was who furnished the rendezvous for the plotters, who hid equipment for Booth to pick up on his flight, who shut her lips in the face of inquisitors, and who was now come to the end of a rope not wholly hers.



Albert Davis Collection

Ford's Theater in Washington, where the President was shot.



Frederick H. Meserve Collection

David E. Herold.



Lewis Powell.



George Atzerodt.

Three of the conspirators hanged for Lincoln's death.

COOLEST of all the four, as noon came, was Lewis Powell—and gamest too—perhaps not so game as indifferent. He listened casually—if, indeed, he listened at all—to the prayers of the Rev. Gillette, who had come to minister him.

Powell was the son of a Baptist preacher in Live Oak Station, way down in the mental backwoods of Florida, and it was as a preacher, "the Rev. Wood," that the boy had been introduced by Booth into the Surratt lodging house.

Lewis Powell was the sole one of Booth's survivors worth hanging, although judged by modern standards of criminology he deserved the reform school more than the gallows.

When Booth had announced that the time for slaughter had come, Powell drew on his cavalry boots, patted his knife and pistol, and rode directly to the Seward home. There he forced his way to the sick bed of the statesman, clubbed and cut four strong men to the floor, slashing the prostrate Seward wickedly, but failing, as he had always failed, in his job.

He missed the jugular, slicing cheeks and neck instead, and finally, after shaking off the bloody attendants who still sought to protect the Cabinet officer, he strode out of the house shouting, "I am mad! I am mad!"—his work still undone.

At sixteen, Lewis Payne Powell—he had not then adopted his middle name—had followed his two older brothers up to Richmond, where the armies of secession were assembling. The streets of this, his first big city, were full of noise and young men. In the dazzling excitement of the place he found his first theater and, on its stage, the most entrancing sight of his life—a bounding, thrilling god whose flashing eye and strutting histrionics bound the boy in a spell.

It was John Wilkes Booth, making one of his last Southern appearances before the war was to shut him off altogether from the population that applauded his type of acting so deliriously.

After the show Powell hung about the stage door, hoping for a glimpse of his new deity. His hopes were exceeded when Booth, always gratified by admiration, stopped and spoke to him, found him agreeably worshipful, and so took him to a near-by oyster bar, where he filled the boy with oysters, liquor, and dizzy tales of life back-stage.

Almost immediately after this meeting the war rose, swift and smashing. Powell's two brothers were killed. He himself was shot down and captured at Gettysburg. Recovering in a Union hospital, he seemed so tame that the Union surgeons made a nurse of him, transferring him in time to Baltimore. From this second hospital he soon escaped, rejoining his regiment in Virginia.

The deserting habit was on him, however, and in January, 1865, he stole back to Baltimore, where he took the oath of Union allegiance under the name of Lewis Payne. In Baltimore, too, he found a haven in the rooming house of a Miss Margaret Branson, whom he had known as a nurse at Gettysburg.

One morning a Negro maid "sassed" him while cleaning his room, and he turned immediately into a beast, knocking her to the floor, stamping upon her with wild cries that he would have her life. Other lodgers pulled him away. The girl sent for the police and Powell hastily departed.

It was March and chilly as he dragged his feet out through the town. Homeless, penniless, the enemy of both North and South, he was looking soddenly ahead when a voice from the steps of Barnum's Hotel called him.

There stood his god.

Booth, who could never remember his lines on the stage, remembered faces and names very well.

Came now golden days for the young anthropoid—fat, lazy days in grand Washington hotels, breakfast in bed, new clothes with money jingling in the pockets—long, intimate hours with his idol.

BUT when Booth had gone from town, blood-spattered, whipping for Virginia, Powell was a child again—the mentally undeveloped dullard that a battery of physicians described when his lawyers presented an insanity plea at the trial.

He was a child again, without question, as he departed from the shambles of the Seward house, throwing down his hat and knife in the hallway, walking out to his horse, and riding away so slowly that Seward's Negro servant kept up with him for a whole city block.

Instead of striking off across the river for the rendezvous with Booth and Herold, he

wandered into the woods at the city limits, spurred frantically around and around until his horse gave out, slept in ditches, and finally came blundering back to the Surratt house and thus into the hands of Secret Service men who had not even known of his existence.

At the moment he stepped up on the Surratt stoop, the detectives were inside arresting Mrs. Surratt in the hope that she might give up the whereabouts of her son John, for whom the government was offering large rewards as the assailant of Secretary Seward.

Looking out, the Secret Service men saw a muddy giant, pick in hand. The fellow mumbled and turned to go. He was seized and drawn in for questioning.

Cornered, Powell stammered that he had been hired by Mrs. Surratt to fix a drain and that he had called to find out what time she was expecting him in the morning. As it was then close to midnight, the man was evidently lying, the detectives reasoned; also his hands were soft. So they stood him under the hall gaslight for Mrs. Surratt to see.

"Do you know him?"

"Before God, I never saw the man before."

That one lie of hers went far to hang her.

With that the detectives took the woman and the strange drain man to headquarters, and in the morning brought Seward's colored servant to look at Powell. The darky boy peered at the new prisoner in the gloom and toppled over backward, screaming, "It's him! I know him by that lip."

Powell had a sulky, pouting lip that fitted conspicuously into the line of his slanting brow and jutting jaw.

The next day he was carried to a cell in the bowels of the monitor Saugus and identified by Seward's son as the guilty man.

Slowly the news came seeping down. Seward was recovering. Mrs. Surratt was in chains. Dimly Powell understood that his return had linked her to the crime. Remorse churned inside him, and one day he tried to butt out his brains against the iron door of his cell.

THROUGHOUT his confinement Powell held aloof from the other prisoners. With his guards he was as playful, as luxuriously good-natured, as a tame leopard in a zoo.

Sympathy, however, he scorned. Once an aged Negress came to the prison, asking to see him, and, when they opened the cell door, ran to him, calling baby names. He pushed her away, saying, "Go away, woman; I don't know you."

Further on down in the tier of cells lay the four prisoners whom Captain Rath did not have to hang.

Edwin Spangler was one—Spangler the stage hand, town drunk, glutton, and champion crab fisherman of the Potomac—another comic portrait of an assassin. He had held Booth's horse at the stage door the night of the shooting and was suspected of having helped to arrange the entrance of the theater box so that the murderer might bar it against interruption while he did his work.

Spangler had no confessor in his cell and he wondered why. No one had told him that his sentence was only six years in the government prison on the Dry Tortugas.

Close by, in another cell, was the only educated member of the band, Dr. Samuel Mudd, the gentlemanly physician at whose home Booth had halted, in his careening flight, to have his broken leg set—he had splintered it leaping down from the theater box to the stage.

That Mudd had known Booth was admitted, but there was evidence that the acquaintance was of Booth's seeking, and the physician might have gone free if he had not denied harmless truths and built up the suspicion that he had much to hide. Life imprisonment on the Dry Tortugas was his sentence.

On down the tier lay Samuel Arnold, fit addition to the gallery of such staggering fiends and monsters—Sam Arnold, desultory farm hand of Hookstown, Maryland, deserter from the Southern army, loafer, coward. In his loafing he had listened to the absurd kidnaping plot, kindled for a time with the dramatics of the idea, and then, when the thing had grown too silly even for him, had spatted with Booth.



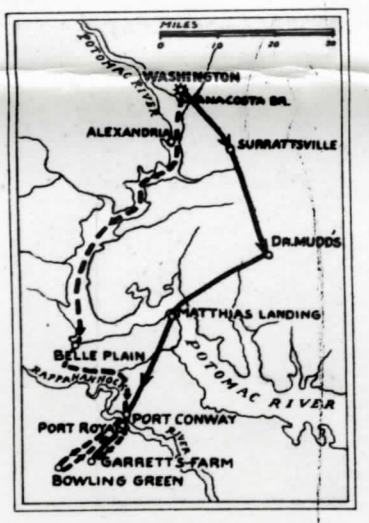
Michael O'Laughlin. Samuel Arnold. Dr. Samuel Mudd. Edwin Spangler.

Frederick H. Meserve Collection

Four of the lesser Lincoln conspirators who escaped with their lives.

He was enjoying the excitements of Hookstown agriculture when the officers came for him, trailing one of his letters that had been found in Booth's trunk.

Last in this secondary group of plotters was Michael O'Laughlin, another boyhood acquaintance of Booth, a bibulous and haphazard hay pitcher in his brother's Baltimore horse-feed barn. Like Arnold, O'Laughlin had been drawn into the kidnaping scheme when the thing was a gaudy dream of *Tom Sawyers* in haymows. Life imprisonment was his sentence.



How Booth fled, was cornered, and where he was killed. The black line shows the assassin's route and the dotted line his pursuers' trail.

One conspirator was not in the jail. John H. Surratt was lying in the homes of Confederate sympathizers near Montreal, hidden from the Secret Service, which was desperately hunting him. That September he was to escape to Europe, take service under an assumed name in the Papal Guard, and be discovered there by a former schoolmate, St. Marie. After his return to America in irons, he was tried, but the jury disagreed and he went free.

In time, too, Spangler, Mudd, and Arnold were to go free, President Johnson pardoning them. O'Laughlin died of yellow fever in 1867.

BUT of these prisoners nobody talked or wrote on the 9th of July, 1865. All the reporters were around the cells of those who were about to die. The hour, 1 o'clock, had come, and the death march was due. But neither Rath, nor Hancock, nor Hartranft wanted to hang a woman.

Finally they could decently wait no longer. Orders were orders and General Hartranft ordered the march to form. Two thousand souls were packed into the stifling inclosure, half of them civilians, many of whom had raised umbrellas for shade.

The back door of the penitentiary swung open and the woman appeared, her black bombazine dress glistening in the scorching sun, her veiled head drooping, and her knees sagging so that one of the two Catholic priests who flanked her had to lift constantly at her arm to keep her from falling. The other priest held an umbrella over her head.

Behind her came four soldiers; then Lieutenant Colonel McCall, who was to bind her hands and skirts on the scaffold.

For the occasion McCall had purchased a new straw hat with a ribbon on it, and the headgear glistened in the sun as he stepped out of line to let the parade go by.

Followed next Atzerodt, still gibblegabbling, shambling along with a Lutheran minister praying at his side.

Four soldiers.

Davy Herold.

Poor Davy, self-conscious, flustered, chattering helpless nothings while the Episcopalian minister kept step, praying.

Four soldiers.

Then Powell.

The Visigoth entered the arena, his head bare, his low-cut undershirt showing his magnificent neck to the sun. Across the yard his eye turned, hard and steady. It noted one thing—McCall's new straw hat.

With a quick, cool gesture Powell lifted it from the officer's head and put it upon his own.

He had borrowed a hat to be hanged in.

The procession mounted the steps and ranged itself across the platform. Mrs. Surratt had the post of honor, at the right. Sharing her drop was Powell. Herold and Atzerodt had the other trap in common.

THE condemned took chairs. Mrs. Surratt swayed against the priests. Herold trembled. Atzerodt kept muttering "Good-by, shentlemans." Powell eased back in his chair and looked up curiously at the rope. His eyes were unwinking.

General Hartranft read the order of execution, Mrs. Surratt kissing the crucifix repeatedly. Hartranft concluded and motioned to the clergymen for the last prayers.

The condemned were then motioned up to have their arms pinioned, and as Powell rose, a wandering little gust of wind, coming whimsically to life in that lifeless heat, whisked off the new straw hat and sent it zigzagging down among the soldiers.

Powell was peering after it, gesturing to the bluecoats to hand it back to him, when the executioners began binding his arms. And by the time it was returned, it was too late. The white hood was ready and he motioned, "Never mind!"

Captain Rath went from prisoner to prisoner, adjusting the ropes.

McCall, bareheaded, gently removed Mrs. Surratt's bonnet, adjusted the white hood, pinioned her arms, and tied a strip of cotton cloth around her skirts below the knees so that they would not fly up when her body shot down. Then he slackened the rope about her arms when she whimpered that it hurt.

All was ready. But Rath played for time. General Hancock had not yet appeared. Rath knew his general was hoping still.

Suddenly that back door flew outward and Hancock strode forth, stern of face, nodding to Rath, "Go ahead!"

Rath spoke out, loudly, in the silence, "Her, too?"

Hancock nodded again. The soldiers on the platform all drew back to be sure their feet were not on the trapdoors. Rath clapped his hands twice, the men down below whacked with their axes, the props flew out, the doors and those on them flew down.

The four were hanged.

THE END