More About John Wilkes Booth

We are indebted to many of our readers for interesting letters on the editorial appearing in The Commercial Appeal about 10 days ago on the John Wilkes Booth myth that is, that Booth was never killed at all. Two letters, one from C. L. Marsilliot, the other from Dr. Arthur H. Noll, both of Memphis, have already been published. We publish below anther series:

Memphis, Tenn., March 29, 1922.
To The Commercial Appeal:

Anent the discussion of the real identity of John Wilkes Booth and "Rev. J. G. Armstrong," of Atlanta, now going on in The Commercial Appeal, I believe I can add a chapter that will not only prove more or less startling, but will cause those who scout the "mythical stories," to take a more serious view of this long perplexing question—was John Wilkes Booth really killed at the time and in the manner described in the various accounts of the case? Was the "Rev. J. G. Armstrong" of Atlanta and John Wilkes Booth one and the same person?

I would like to answer the last question by saying that I believe I knew John Wilkes Booth in the person of the "Rev. J. G. Armstrong," of the Episcopal Church in Atlanta, Ga., and I further believe that my readers will agree with the assertion when they shall have finished this article, which I shall recount as nearly as possible, at this late date, for it occurred many, many years ago, when I was quite a young man. I was a resident of Atlanta at the time, and held a position on the Atlanta Constitution and knew the "Rev. J. G. Armstrong" very well. He was a very brilliant man, highly educated, and it was said of him that he was the possessor of the finest private library in the city.

As well as I remember, he was a tall, "raw-boned," sallow complected man, with features as clear cut as a cameo, with a limp in the left leg, I believe. His hair was long, falling almost to his shoulders and as black as a raven's wing. I used to wonder why he did not have it cut, but I learned later that he wore it in that manner in order to hide a disfiguring scar on the back of his neck. That was "J. G. Armstrong," or John Wilkes Booth as I knew him.

Now for the startling story!

One day an old man, a stranger in the city, was standing in the main entrance of the Kimball House, on North Pryor Street, when the Rev. J. G. Armstrong passed. He took one glance at the tall, limping figure, threw both hands above his head and exclaimed!

"John Wilkes Booth, as I live!"

With this exclamation, he staggered and would have fallen, but for the assistance of two men, who helped him to a seat in the lobby. Soon recovering, he asked one of the men who the man was.

"That is Rev. J. G. Armstrong, of the Episcopal Church," he was answered.

"That may be the name he goes by here, but his real name is John Wilkes Booth, the assassin of Abraham Lincoln," he replied, and no amount of reassurance could shake his opinion.

The story got into the papers, of course, and was played up in a more or less humorous vein and after the usual nine days' wonder, was forgotten.

Now for the most startling part of this strange story.

Ten days after the above happening, about 11 o'clock at night, the Constitution received a special message from Cincinnati, which read something like this:

"Man just arrested here in a house of ill-repute, blind drunk, who declares himself to be John Wilkes Booth, but papers on his person show that he is Rev. J. G. Armstrong of Atlanta."

Talk about bombshells!

Here was one!

Henry W. Grady was living then, and happened to be at the office at the time.

He rushed a wire to a Cincinnati paper for more particulars, feeling, of course, that there must be a horrible mistake somewhere. In the meantime he ordered the story left out.

An hour later a second message was received, confirming the first, adding that the man still claimed to be John Wilkes Booth.

In the meantime reporters were sent out to find Mr. Armstrong. A search of the city failed to develop anything. He was not in the city!

"It can't be true!" exclaimed Grady. "Leave the story out until further orders," and he went home for the night.

Grady and Armstrong were warm friends and the story worried him to the fullest. He acted like one in a perfect daze for the next few days. He kept a reporter on watch at the residence of the missing man with instructions to report to him immediately the first and slightest clue that might develop. But the reporter kept his vigil in vain, and after a week's watch he was called in.

Several nights later came the climax, in the form of a telegram from Augusta, which was almost a reproduction of the Cincinnati story. It was short and to the point and said:

"Police just arrested a man in a house of ill-fame who, though maudlin drunk, declares that he is John Wilkes Booth, but he was recognized by one citizen as the Rev. J. G. Armstrong of Atlanta."

That was enough. There seemed to be no room for further doubt, and the story was given out, and I shall never forget the tremendous sensation it created. Not so much for his wild claims of being Booth, but the fact that Rev. J. G. Armstrong, known and loved by everybody, should have fallen so low and to such infamous depths in so short a time.

Now that is the Atlanta end of the story as I remember it, and as I said at the outset, I believe that John Wilkes Booth and the Rev. J. G. Armstrong were one and the same person.

I read Dr. Arthur Noll's communication with interest, and note that his views and my own agree on the real identity of the man. He also states in his card that Armstrong was tried by an ecclesiastical court in Atlanta and was either suspended from the ministry or deposed, he doesn't remember which. The doctor thus refreshes my own memory on that point. Armstrong was tried, found guilty of gross immorality and, I think, deposed, and the trial was based on the two escapades I have mentioned, as I remember the matter.

It seems strange to me that if John Wilkes Booth was really killed, as history tells us, no man can be found who is ready to come forward and testify unqualifiedly to the fact.

J. M. BARRON.

To The Commercial Apepal,

I have read with interest your editorial and the two letters concerning John Wilkes Booth and Dr. Armstrong. Let me contribute this. In 1877 or 78, I was a pupil of James P. Parker, who was a West Pointer that had gone south and fought with the southern army. He was a colonel, I think, maybe higher. In teaching us history when he came to the assassination of President Lincoln and Booth's death in the barn, Col. Parker told us he knew Booth had not been killed as there recorded and said if we would call at his home he would show us proof. We, or at least three of us, that I now recall, went. They were Jno. B. Wickliffe and Chas. N. Wickliffe of Wickliffe, Ky.

When we were in Col. Parker's room he told us that he knew Booth as well as we boys knew each other and then he produced a letter from Booth to him (Col. Parker), dated, as I now recall, in 1870 or 1871 and was written from Cuba and was postmarked from there.

The letter made no reference to Mr. Lincoln nor to Booth's escape. It told of the country and its prospects, begged Parker to come and join him; expressed a desire to see this country again but said "you know I can't."

It was signed "Jno." as I recall it.

Colonel Parker was as positive the letter was from John Wilkes Booth as you or I would be as to a letter from a friend or relative.

I don't know if Col. Parker is still living. Up to a few years ago he was living in New Mexico and was a government surveyor and well and hearty though about 80 years.

I know nothing of the Dr. Armstrong matter, but these facts I do know.

JOHN W. RAY,
Helena, Ark., March 28, 1922.

Mansfield, La.
To The Commercial Appeal:

It is no "myth." Dr. Armstrong, I think his initials were "J. G.", though of that I am not certain, was rector of Monumental Episcopal Church, Richmond, Va., for several years, and the "story" of his being in reality John Wilkes Booth was a commonplace tale in those days. I enjoyed a delightful dinner with Dr. Armstrong in the home of Mr. Stephen Putney, a well known business man in Richmond a couple of generations ago. Mr. Putney married Miss Withers, a daughter of Senator Withers, and I attended the brilliant wedding in Alexandria. As one of the invited and honored guests, I was seated for the occassion with others in "Washington's Pew," during the ceremony. When Mrs. Putney came to Richmond she united with the Monumental Church. As I was pastor of the Broad Street Methodist Church, of which Mr. Putney was a leading member, and Dr. Armstrong was Mrs. Putney's pastor, she gave a dinner at which both Dr. Armstrong and myself were the guests.

I never saw John Wilkes Booth, but was familiar with his picture, and Dr. Armstrong was his double in looks. The story of Armstrong being Booth was favored by the circumstance that Dr. Armstrong limped, and used a cane, and probably by the secret wish that the man who struck Lincoln down did escape. For while all right-thinking people deplored the assassination of Lincoln, in the embittered state of southern feeling then, when the fair fields of Virginia lay waste under the ruthless hoof of Sheridan, and red with the blood of her sons, it was natural to feel revenge. I remember as the guests were departing from Mrs. Putney's dinner, Mr. Putney whispered to me: "What do you think about it now?" He meant the rumor that Armstrong was Booth. I simply put my finger to my lips in token of silence. And I put it there still. I know nothing about it, except that there was a Dr. Armstrong, that he was rector of Monumental Church, and closely resembled John Wilkes Booth.

S. A. STEEL.

Brownsville, Tenn.
To The Commercial Appeal:

In today's paper, under the title "A Myth of the Sixties," you request correspondence from any reader who has ever heard of the story of John Wilkes Booth's preaching under the name of "Dr. Armstrong."

About twenty-five years ago, I read in a newspaper, The New York World, I think—an article from a man who some years previously had visited a western city. I cannot recall his name, but there was no effort at concealment, and he wrote with every indication of candor and veracity.

One night he attended church. The minister's name, he was informed, was "Dr. Armstrong." when the minister rose to begin the service our narrator was immediately impressed with the peculiar familiarity of his voice and manner, but could not recall any specific occasion on which he had seen "Dr. Armstrong" before.

In the course of the sermon, however, "Dr. Armstrong" began to recite "The Siege of Corinth." As the recitation proceeded with great dramatic skill and power, the listener at once remembered that some years previously he had crossed the Atlantic on a ship that carried an unusually large number of distinguished and interesting passengers, among whom was John Wilkes Booth and some of his theatrical friends.

On several occasions during the voyage, Booth entertained the ship's company with dramatic performances and once recited "The Siege of Corinth," with startling power and effect.

So when "Dr. Armstrong" launched into the recitation, the hearer immediately recognized the tone and manner of Booth and was filled with astonishment, but thought it best not to mention the matter.

Some nights after this he found opportunity to call on "Dr. Armstrong" at home. He was ushered into the sitting room with the explanation that "Dr. Armstrong" was engaged with some one in the study and asked that he would await his coming. Some subconscious curiosity prompted him to sit where he could see the door to the study. He waited long and patiently, for he was determined to see "Dr. Armstrong."

Finally the door to the study opened and Dr. Armstrong and Edwin Booth came out into the hall. Edwin took affectionate and brotherly leave of Dr. Armstrong, and quietly passed out. Dr. Armstrong then came into the sitting room. He had a slight limp, as of one who had suffered a broken ankle, and the writer satisfied himself that he was not mistaken as to Dr. Armstrong's identity, but made no mention of having received any information to this effect from Dr. Armstrong himself.

This writer also stated that Dr. Armstrong afterwards came to some city on this side of the Mississippi River, but I rather think he named New Orleans, and not Richmond.

I think I have seen some reference to this story once since, but do not now recall the exact circumstance.

While I did not quite grant to this story the credence of historic fact, I reflected that strange things do sometimes happen.

C. W. ANDERSON.