BOSTON HERALD - January 12, 1905

JOHN MATTHEWS, OLD ACTOR, DEAD

Was John Wilkes Booth's Room-Mate in Civil War Times, and Once Suspected of Complicity in the Assassination.

AT FORD'S THEATRE WHEN SHOT WAS FIRED

Was in Palmer's Original Stock Company and in "Two Orphans" Cast When Brooklyn Theatre Was Burned in 1876.

[Special Dispatch to the Boston Herald.]

NEW YORK, Jan. 11, 1905. John Matthews, aged 69, an actor who for a time was held as a suspect in connection with the assassination of President Lincoln, died today in a little furnished room in a boarding house in West Thirty-eighth street, which for 21 years he had called home, and where at various times he had sheltered many actors who were themselves without homes.

Some time during the night heart failure had ended a career which for half a century was filled with tragedy and romance.

Matthews was Wilkes Booth's roommate and one of his closest friends, and was on the stage in Ford's Theatre, Washington, when the fatal shot was fired. After the assassination his room was searched, and because of papers left in the grate by Booth he was arrested on suspicion of knowing something of the plot. His innocence was later established, but his friends say he never recovered from the effects of the accusation.

By his death the theatrical world lost a man whom every one in it called "friend." Mr. Matthews retired on Tuesday night apparently in good health. He had been to the Knickerbocker Theatre to see the production of "Twelfth Night," a play in which he many times had taken part in the days when the names of Booth and Barrett were household words. As was his custom before retiring, he talked for an hour with his landlady, Mrs. Martha Kimball.

He was one of the original members of A. M. Palmer's Union Square Theatre stock company and had a part in the original production of "The Two Orphans," and he was with that play at the Brooklyn Theatre on the night of Dec. 5, 1876, when the theatre burned and many lives were destroyed.

CLOSE TO BOOTH'S HEART.

Letter of Extenuation Written by President's Slayer Was Intrusted to Matthews.

John Matthews, actor, comedian and friend of John Wilkes Booth, was probably closer to the untoward event that robbed the nation of Abraham Lincoln than any other man. On the night of April 14, 1865, he was at the front of the stage in Ford's Theatre, waiting for the drop curtain, when the eyes that were directed toward him were diverted to President Lincoln's box by a flash of fire and the report of a revolver in the inclosed area of the box. Aid that swarmed to the wounded President carried the man who had fought a successful war to the room of John Matthews, and there he was made comfortable on the bed that the actor had occupied only the night before, and on which Booth and Matthews had sat during the afternoon as they talked on casual subjects.

Yet, closely as he was associated with these stirring and grievous events, John Matthews knew no more of Booth's intention than the stage hand who shifted scenery on that eventful night. Having joined Laura Keene's company in 1858, when she brought out "Our American Cousin," with Joseph Jefferson and E. A. Sothern in the cast, he had continued with it. When John Wilkes Booth became one of its members Matthews came to know him rather intimately, but was never initiated into the plot for kidnapping the President which Booth and others were perfecting.

So close was he to Booth's heart that on the very afternoon of that April 14 the letter addressed to the National Intelligencer, written by Booth in extenuation of his plot, was intrusted to his fellow-actor. Matthews himself tells of the meeting in the following letter, which explains why Booth's epistle was never published:

"Much has been said in the public prints in regard to the missing letter of John Wilkes Booth. As I am the person to whom this letter was intrusted, I know its contents and the circumstances attending its delivery into my hands better than any person now living. It was on the afternoon of Good Friday, April 14, 1865, at about 4 o'clock, that I met John Wilkes Booth on horseback, on Pennsylvania avenue. We met, shook hands and passed the compliments of the day.

"It so happened that the officers of Gen. Lee's army had just passed up in a body. I asked Booth: 'Johnny, have you seen Lee's officers just brought in?' He replied: 'Yes, Johnny, I have.' Then placing his hand on his forehead, exclaimed: 'Great God! I have no longer a country.'

"Observing his paleness, nervousness and agitation, I remarked: 'John, how nervous you are! What is the matter?' To which he replied: 'Oh, no, it is nothing.' And continued with: 'Johnny, I have a little favor to ask of you. Will you grant it?' 'Why, certainly, Johnny,' I replied, 'what is it?' He then stated: 'Perhaps I may leave town tonight, and I have a letter here which I desire to be published in the National Intelligencer; please attend to it for me, unless I see you before 10 o'clock tomorrow; in that case I will see to it myself.'

"At that moment I observed Gen. Grant riding in an open carriage, carrying also his baggage. Seeing this, I called Mr. Booth's attention to him, and said: 'Why, Johnny, there goes Grant. I thought he was coming to the theatre tonight with the President.' 'Where?' he exclaimed. I pointed to the carriage; he looked toward it, grapsed my hand tightly and galloped down the avenue after the carriage. This was the last time I met him until I saw him on the stage at Ford's Theatre.

"I desire to state all that did occur in that interview, and to say, also, that the letter was given with no secrecy of manner, nor was there any remark made about anything that might occur during the night.

"Now for the contents of the letter. It was written on commercial note paper, and it was only at the concluding paragraph that anything was said bearing on what transpired, which was to this effect and in these words:

" 'For a long time I have devoted my energies, my time and money to the accomplishment of a certain end. I have been disappointed. The moment has now arrived when I must change my plans. Many will blame me for what I intend to do, but posterity, I am sure, will justify me.

" 'JOHN WILKES BOOTH.' "