The Flight of Lincoln's Assassins

On the Trail of J. Wilkes Booth and David E. Herold—Third Article

By F. L. BLACK

"VENGEANCE!" was the cry of Washington and the North on Saturday, April 15, 1865, when the word sped abroad that Lincoln was dead. Where had the assassins hidden? Who aided them? The terror-stricken Capitol city was made still gloomier by a heavy rain. It was rumored that there was a great conspiracy headed by Jeff Davis and his colleagues to murder all the officials of the Union Government. The wildest tales were easily believed, reason fled, and chaos reigned.

The first attempt at organization for the pursuit and capture was a special commission of three colonels formed in the early morning hours to start an investigation. Hundreds of soldiers, policemen, and detectives were put on guard by the War Department at all possible avenues of escape. The Navy sent warships to patrol the Potomac and prevent the flight of the assassins by water. Other than the crossing of the Navy Yard bridge, no trace could be found of the direction which Booth and Herold had taken, although it was surmised they had gone toward lower Maryland and the Potomac.

On Sunday $30,000 reward was offered for the capture of the fugitives. This was increased to $100,000 by the War Department and handbill descriptions of Booth, Herold, Payne, and John Surratt were posted.

"Booth," said the handbill, "is 5 feet 7 or 8 inches high, slender build, high forehead, black hair, black eyes, and wore a heavy black moustache, which there is some reason to believe has been shaved off."

In the meantime, where were the assassins? At the conspiracy trial Polk Gardiner testified that on the night of the fourteenth of April, he was on the Bryantown road, coming to Washington, and about 11 o'clock, when on Good Hope Hill, he met two horsemen, one about half a mile behind the other, and both riding very fast. The first, who was on a dark horse, asked if a horseman had passed ahead; he also asked the road to Marlborough, and if it did not turn to the right. Gardiner told him no; to keep the straight road.

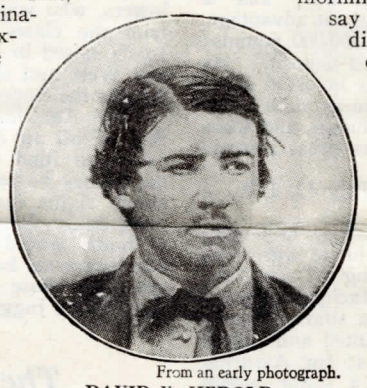
As the second horseman rode up, a number of teamsters were passing and the witness heard him ask them whether a horseman had passed ahead. He rode a light horse of a roan or an iron-gray color.

According to John Lloyd, keeper of the Surratt Tavern, ten miles from Washington, on Friday at midnight, Booth and Herold rode up to the front door. Herold dismounted and entering asked for the weapons which had been left by them five or six weeks before. Booth did not enter and refused to take his carbine, saying that his leg was broken. In addition to a carbine, Herold was given a field glass left by Mrs. Surratt that afternoon and a bottle of whisky from which he first drank then took it out to Booth. As they were leaving Herold boastingly claimed, "I am pretty certain we have assassinated the President and Secretary Seward." Then both were off on the road toward the village of T. B.

With a fracture, what was more natural than that Booth should seek medical assistance from one he felt could be trusted—Dr. Samuel Mudd, a rebel sympathizer, whom he had met the previous autumn. Arriving at the home of Doctor Mudd about daybreak on Saturday morning, Herold rapped at the door while Booth remained mounted. Doctor Mudd opened the door and with the aid of Herold helped Booth off his horse and into the house. Placing him on a sofa, the doctor, according to his own story, split the leg of his boot down to the instep, slipped it off and the sock with it. He then felt carefully with both hands down along the leg, and found that it was fractured near the ankle. He then improvised out of pasteboard a sort of boot that adhered close enough to the leg to keep it rigidly straight below the knee. A low-cut shoe was substituted for the leather boot. Colonel H. H. Wells testified that, in an interview the week after the assassination, Doctor Mudd told him he had examined Booth's leg and found that the front bone was broken, nearly at right angles, about two inches above the instep. It seemed in his (Doctor Mudd's) judgment as slight a breaking as it could possibly be.

Procuring the doctor's razor, Booth shaved off his mustache and going upstairs, he and Herold remained until between 3 and 4 o'clock that afternoon when the nearness of evening made it seem safer to venture forth.

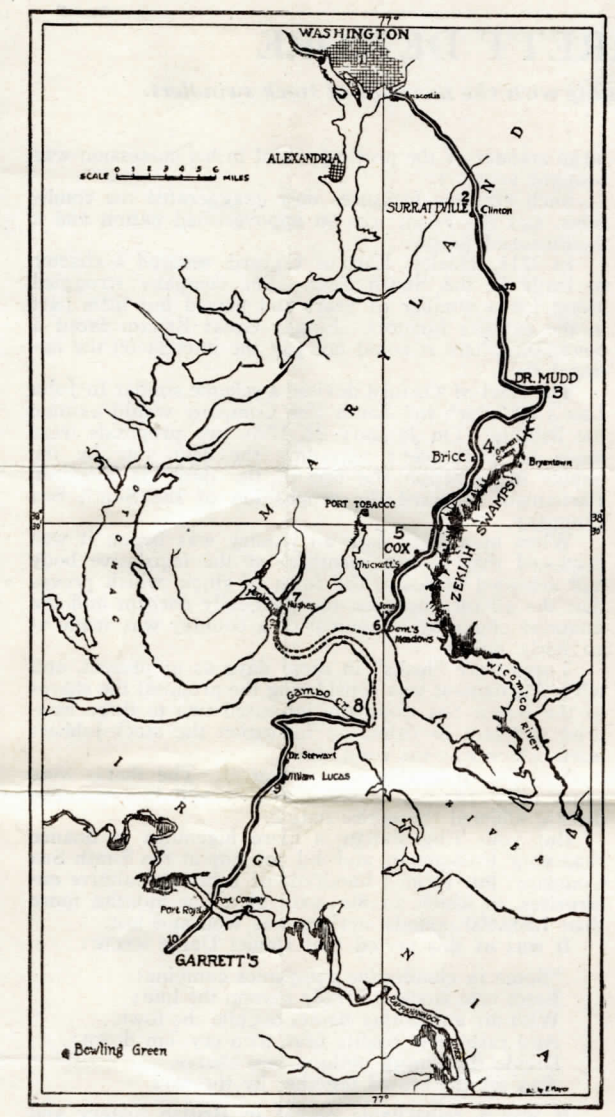
On the following Friday the boot removed from Booth's broken leg was given to Federal detectives and placed in evidence at the trial. Inside the leg of the boot were found the words, "J. Wilkes." It was a long riding boot, for the *left* foot, slit up the front for about eight inches, and can be found today in the secret archives of the War Department among other mementoes of the assassination.



From an early photograph.
DAVID E. HEROLD.

Booth and Herold lost their way near Brice Chapel and finding a Negro, Oswald Swann, hired him to lead them to Rich Hill, the house of Samuel Cox, a southern sympathizer, where they arrived early Saturday morning. This was on the edge of the Zakiah Swamp, several miles south of Doctor Mudd's. Cox, afraid to take them in, hid them in the thickets near the swamp and sent for his foster-brother, Thomas J. Jones, who has told his story in a book, "John Wilkes Booth," from which we quote:

"It was a little after nine o'clock when we reached Rich Hill. Cox met me at the gate and we walked off a short distance to an open space where there was nothing that might conceal a listener. At length he said to me: 'Tom, I had visitors about 4 o'clock this morning.' 'Who were they, and what did they want?' I asked. 'They want to get across the river,' said Cox, answering my last question first; and then added in a whisper, 'Have you heard that Lincoln was killed Friday night?' I said,



Route taken by fugitives.

1. Ford's Theater, 10:20 p. m., April 14. 2. Surrattville, midnight, April 14. 3. Dr. Mudd's, 4 a. m. to 4 p. m., April 15. 4. Near Brice's, lost; Herold goes to Oswell Swann's and takes him for a guide. 5. Reaches Cox and is placed by him in "the thicket," a. m., April 16; remains there to p. m. April 21. 6. Dent's Meadows, put in boat by Jones to cross river, p. m., April 21. 7. Miss their bearings in the darkness and enter Nanjemoy Creek and stop near Colonel John J. Hughes', April 22. 8. Cross river and leave boat at bridge Gambo Creek, a. m., April 23. 9. Stop overnight in cabin of William Lucas, April 23. 10. Cross ferry at Port Conway and arrive at Garrett's barn, April 24. Captured and shot 2:30 a. m., April 26.

'Yes, I have heard it,' and then told him of my interview with the two soldiers the evening before. When I had finished there was silence between us for a minute, which was broken by Cox.

"'Tom, we must get those men who were here this morning across the river.' He then went on to say that about 4 o'clock that morning he was disturbed by a knocking at the door. On opening the door he found a strange man standing there, while waiting at the gate was another stranger on horseback accompanied by a Negro man of the neighborhood, named Oswald Swann. He went out to the man on horseback, who, upon being satisfied that it was Samuel Cox he addressed, took him a little apart, out of hearing of the Negro, and told him what he had done. He showed him in India ink upon his wrist the initials of J. W. B. He told Cox that he knew he (Cox) was a southern sympathizer who had worked for the Confederacy and that he threw himself upon his mercy. He explained how he had broken his leg and thereby been prevented from reaching the river that fateful Friday night. All this Cox told me, speaking almost in a whisper, standing near his gate that bright Easter morn.

"'Sam,' I replied, 'I will see what I can do, but the odds are against me. I must see these men; where are they?'

"He then told me that he had sent them to a place in a thick piece of pine about one mile to the west of his house—his overseer, Franklin Robey, guided them to the spot, with the promise that he would send someone to them; and had advised them to remain perfectly quiet. He agreed with them upon a signal by which they might know the man who came to them was from him. This signal was a peculiar whistle which I do not remember now. He also provided them with food for the day, and I believe, though I am not sure, with a pair of blankets.

"'Take care how you approach them, Tom,' Cox said to me as I was leaving. 'They are fully armed and might shoot you through mistake.'

"I left Cox and rode toward the spot he had indicated. As I drew near the hiding place I saw a bay mare, with saddle and bridle on, grazing in a small open space where a clearing had been made for a tobacco bed. I at first thought that she belonged to someone in the neighborhood and had got away. I caught her and tied her to a tree. I then went on a little farther until I thought I was near the place indicated by Cox. I stopped and gave the whistle. Presently a young man—he looked scarcely more than a boy—came cautiously out of the thicket and stood before me. He carried a carbine ready cocked in his hands.

"'Who are you, and what do you want?' he demanded. 'I come from Cox,' I replied; 'he told me I would find you here. I am a friend; you have nothing to fear from me.'

"He looked searchingly at me for a moment and then said, 'Follow me,' and led the way for about thirty yards into the thick undergrowth to where his companion was lying. 'This friend comes from Captain Cox,' he said; and that was my introduction to John Wilkes Booth. He was lying on the ground with his head supported on his hand. His carbine, pistols, and knife were close beside him. A blanket was drawn partly over him. His slouch hat and crutch were lying by him. He was dressed in dark—I think black—clothes; and though they were travel-stained, his appearance was respectable.

"I told Booth that I would do what I could to help him; but for the present he must remain where he was; that it would not do to stir during the hue and cry then being made in the neighborhood. I promised to bring him food every day, and to get him across the river, if possible, just as soon as it would not be suicidal to make the attempt.

"He held out his hand and thanked me. He told me, as he had told Cox, that he had killed President Lincoln. He said he knew the United States Government would use every means in its power to secure his capture. 'But,' he added, with a flash of determination lighting up his dark eye, 'John Wilkes Booth will never be taken alive'; and as I looked at him, I believed him.

"He seemed very desirous to know what the world thought of his deed, and asked me to bring him some newspapers.

"Wednesday and Thursday passed uneventfully. The neighborhood was filled with cavalrymen and detectives. They visited my house several times during that week (as they did every house in Southern Maryland) and, upon one occasion, searched it. They also interviewed my colored man, Henry Woodland, and threatened him with dire penalties if he did not tell all he knew. Henry did not know anything because I had told him nothing. I took no one into my confidence.

"On Friday evening, one week after the assassination, I rode down to Allen's Fresh. I think I had been there every day Booth had been under my care, except the Tuesday I went to Port Tobacco.

"Allen's Fresh, about three miles east of my house, was and still is, a small village situated where Zakiah Swamp ends and the Wicomico River begins.

"I had not been long in the village when a body of cavalry, guided by a man from St. Mary's County, named John R. Walton, rode in and dismounted. Some of the soldiers entered Colton's store, where I was sitting, and called for something to drink. Soon afterward Walton came in and exclaimed, 'Boys, I have news that they have been seen in St. Mary's,' whereupon they all hastily remounted their horses and galloped off across the bridge in the direction of St. Mary's County. I was confident there were no other soldiers in the neighborhood. 'Now or never,' I thought, 'is my chance.' I waited a few minutes so as not to excite suspicion by leaving immediately after the soldiers, then mounted my horse and rode slowly out of the village.

"As soon as I was well out of the village, I put whip to my horse and rode rapidly toward the spot where the man who was that night to test his fate was lying. It was dark by the time I reached the place. I had never before visited the fugitives at night; I, therefore, approached with more than usual caution and gave the signal. Herold answered me and led the way to Booth. I informed them of what had just occurred at Allen's

Concluded on page 15)



The Surratt Tavern as it looks today.