John Wilkes Booth-Myth of the Sixties

In The Sunday Commercial Appeal there appeared an editorial about the old myth that John Wilkes Booth, the assassin of Abraham Lincoln, lived in Richmond, Va., during the 80's under the name of Dr. Armstrong. We have received two very interesting letters commenting upon the editorial, one from C. L. Marsilliot, a well-known Memphis lawyer who grew up in Richmond; the other from Dr. Arthur Howard Noll, canon of St. Mary's Episcopal Cathedral. They follow:

To The Commercial Appeal:

In response to the request of your editorial in today's issue entitled "A Myth of the Sixties," I beg to state that I am sufficiently familiar with the case of "Rev. Dr. Armstrong," late of Atlanta, to be willing to assert that it is not to be so hastily relegated to the category of "amazing legends, myths and old wives' tales." "Armstrong" was tried for immorality by an ecclesiastical court in Atlanta in the early 80's, was suspended from th ministry or deposed, (I do not at the present moment recall which it was), and disappeared from the public view. At the time of his trial there were frequent comments made upon his resemblance to John Wilkes Booth, and there were not a few who were convinced of his identity with the assassin of Lincoln. Among these was the Rev. Dr. William M. Pettis, some time rector of St. Paul's Church, Chattanooga, who died last year. Dr. Pettis was a cultured gentleman, a scholar, and not the kind of a man to be misled by vagaries or to nurse illusions. So convinced was he of the identity of "Dr. Armstrong" with Booth that he collated a mass of data on the subject with the intention of publishing it as soon as he could feel that the evidence was complete. It was my privilege to have a long conversation with Dr. Pettis about 20 years ago in which he related some remarkable incidents in connection with the subject of his researches, and since that time I have been very much inclined to "doubt that Booth met his just fate in the manner commonly accepted by the public."

I take it for granted that The Commercial Appeal is familiar with the book of our fellow townsman Mr. Finis Bates which furnishes a very careful review of the circumstances attending the assassination of Lincoln and the efforts made to apprehend the assassin. It will be seen from a reading of this book that the evidence is by no means conclusive upon which the public has accepted the familiar version of the manner in which Booth met his fate. And it is very remarkable that the hiatus in Mr. Bates' narrative of the man whom he believed to have been John Wilkes Booth, is filled by the meteoric career in the ministry of "Rev. Dr. Armstrong."

ARTHUR HOWARD NOLL.

Memphis, March 26.

Memphis, March 26, 1922.

To The Commercial Appeal:

I have read with a great deal of interest your editorial in today's paper under the title of "A Myth of the Sixties," in which is quoted the following statement from a letter written by some gentleman to "Commerce and Finance:"

"It is well known by many people still living in Richmond, Va., that John Wilkes Booth preached during the '80s for five years or more at Monumental Episcopal Church under the name of Dr. Armstrong and afterward had a church in Atlanta, Ga., and died a natural death during the '90s."

Inasmuch as I was reared in Richmond and was personally well acquainted with Dr. Armstrong, I feel constrained to agree with your statement that this "is the most preposterous yarn that has ever come under our notice."

So many years have elapsed that I do not now recall the family history of Dr. Armstrong, but it can be obtained without great difficulty even now. Certainly it was well known in Richmond during the years he occupied the pulpit of Monumental Church.

During the years of the incumbency of Dr. Armstrong the diocese of Virginia was presided over by a saintly bishop who was himself living in Virginia during the dark days both prior and subsequent to the Civil War and who was thoroughly familiar with the antecedents of each and every minister who served under him. Moreover, at that time all of the facts and circumstances surrounding the assassination of President Lincoln were so well known to the prominent ministers of all denominations that it would have been impossible for John Wilkes Booth, had he survived, to have succeeded for a minute with such an imposture. Among the noted Episcopal ministers of that day in Richmond were Dr. Peterkin, rector of St. James Church, not only a man of most scholarly attainments, but who was perfectly familiar with the history of not only all of the Episcopal flvines in his diocese but with that of most, if not all, of the ministers of other denominations then serving in Richmond. There was Dr. Francis Sprigg, rector of Moore Memorial (afterwards Holy Trinity) Church, who for many years edited the "Southern Churchman." I doubt if any man in Virginia in those days knew as many people as Dr. Sprigg, from the Potomac to the Carolina line, or who commanded wider or more accurate sources of information on any subject relating to the personnel of the Episcopal clergy. Then, among the other clergy of the city was the noted Presbyterian divine, Rev. Moses D. Hoge, who was the friend of Dr. Armstrong. Dr. Hoge was the intimate friend of Stonewall Jackson and Robert E. Lee; and if there was any fact concerning the history of the events of those days which was not within the knowledge of Dr. Hoge, I have never heard of it. Then there was Dr. Hawthorn, probably one of the greatest pulpit orators the Baptist Church ever brought out. His church was very near that of Dr. Armstrong, and the two men were fast friends. Dr. Hawthorn likewise possessed a most accurate and intimate knowledge of men and things in his day. At that time in Virginia there was such a close and happy co-operation between all of the Protestant denominations (which I am glad to say still exists) that there was a close acquaintance between all of the ministers, so that each was fully informed as to the antecedents of the others.

Among the distinguished laymen of that day, all perfectly familiar with these matters, were the celebrated Dr. Hunter McGuire, himself an Episcopalian, who was the personal physician and medical director of Stonewall Jackson; Gen. Alonzo L. Phillips, an enthusiastic member of the Baptist Church, and many others I might name, all of whom knew Dr. Armstrong well.

Dr. Armstrong's manner of wearing his hair and his general appearance did, as a matter of fact, suggest somewhat the style affected by the great actors of those days. His complexion was very dark, his hair was black and his general build was such as to cause some of his friends, as I very well remember, to jocularly refer to him as John Wilkes Booth, to the great amusement of the doctor himself.

Dr. Armstrong was a great preacher and was dearly beloved by his congregation. I am sure no one pretending to any knowledge of the subject ever seriously suggested any such statement as that made by the gentlemen writing to "Commerce and Finance." Certainly if there had been even a suspicion that John Wilkes Booth and Dr. Armstrong were one and the same, it could not have escaped the knowledge of men such as those I have named and many others who had ample means and opportunity of learning the facts, consequently concealment of the truth would have been an impossibility.

C. L. MARSILLIOT.