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HOW THE BLOW CRUSHED EDWIN BOOTH

Eugene Tompkins' Recollections of the Coming of News Of Lincoln's Assassination 40 Years Ago.

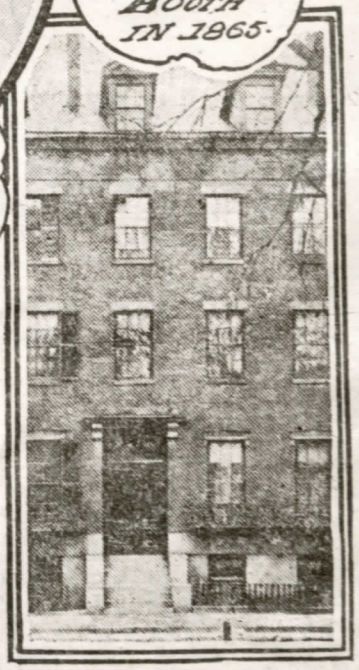


EDWIN BOOTH IN 1865.

EUGENE TOMPKINS TODAY.



JOHN WILKES BOOTH IN 1865.



ORLANDO TOMPKINS HOUSE IN 1865.

It is doubtful if any other Bostonian has the same reason for vivid recollections of the assassination of President Lincoln, April 14, 1865, that Eugene Tompkins, owner and former manager of the Boston theatre, has. Boy though he was at that time, he enjoyed in the Booth family the intimacy almost of a relative, and it was beneath his father's roof that Edwin Booth was staying the night his brother committed the most notable crime in American annals.

Edwin Booth, in 1865, had been visiting Boston as a tragic star for seven years, and had become a warm friend of Eugene Tompkins' parents, the elder Tompkins having been one of the chief owners of the Boston theatre, where Booth annually appeared.

When in Boston, Booth always preferred the private hospitality of Orlando Tompkins' house, 13 James st, opposite Franklin park, to the publicity of the Tremont house, then the favorite hotel with eminent actors, and thus it happened that it was in the room on the third floor, front, in Mr Tompkins' house, that he first heard the news that fateful morning of April 15, that was to embitter the remainder of his life.

Through Edwin's intimacy with the Tompkins family, his brother, John Wilkes Booth, came into friendly relations with its members, visiting them when he was in Boston, and writing to Mr Tompkins whenever he had any little commission he wished carried out here.

John Wilkes Booth was a prolific correspondent in his day, yet his autographs are said to be now very rare, because the reign of terror that followed the assassination caused nearly everyone who had a scrap of his writing to throw it into the fire.

The older generation well remember what a popular resort was the drug store of Orlando Tompkins, at the south corner of Winter and Washington sts, 40 to 50 years ago, for men of artistic and literary tastes, many of whom then lived within five minutes' walk.

Moreover, his interest in the Boston theatre rendered his store a natural rendezvous for the great actors of the day, among whom were the two Booths, who might not infrequently be seen by passers by talking with Mr Tompkins in his moments of leisure.

Among the letters from John Wilkes Booth to Olando Tompkins, which the latter's son preserves today, is one written from Ford's theatre, Washington, Feb 9, 1865, only three weeks before the date that Booth had originally set for the assassination of Lincoln. He had had some very satisfactory photographs taken at Black's, in this city, not long

before, and he requests Mr Tompkins to have a dozen of them sent to him as quickly as possible, by which it would appear that he was not unmindful of providing souvenirs for his friends before committing a crime that was certain to make him an outlaw for life, if not to seal his doom.

Only two weeks before the actual assassination, and when his plans were well perfected, John Wilkes Booth visited Boston, on his way to Canada, as is supposed to confer with a coterie of conspirators against the union, though nothing of the kind was then suspected.

He called at Mr Tompkins' store, took him across the street to the large jewelry establishment of Shreve, Crump & Low, and did something thoroughly characteristic of him when he had money—insisted that Mr Tompkins select a handsome bloodstone ring and wear it as a perpetual reminder of his esteem. Booth had it marked: "J. W. B. to O. T.," and Mr Tompkins wore it till he heard that the giver had killed the President. That was the last time Booth was ever seen by any member of the Tompkins family, but the ring is now one of Eugene Tompkins' historic curios.

At the time of the assassination Edwin Booth was 32 years old, and at the very zenith of his brilliant career. He was idolized by women and he enjoyed a distinction never before acquired by any other actor in America, that of being constantly sought by the most desirable circles of society. Pres Felton of Harvard university, the poets Longfellow and Holmes, Mrs Julia Ward Howe and her famous husband having been among his warmest friends and admirers.

He began an engagement at the Boston theatre March 27, 1865, coming with the prestige of a season of 150 nights in New York city, just terminated, during a part of which he had been supported by his two brothers, Junius Brutus and John Wilkes, the latter at that time ending his career on the stage.

Edwin had reached the last night but one of a three weeks' engagement here on Friday, April 14, and the bill was "Don Cæsar de Bazan" and "The Iron Chest," the latter the story of a man who had committed murder and was continually haunted by remorse and terror of the possible punishment for his crime.

The late Harry McGlenen, then business manager of the Boston theatre, used to recall the curious fact that at just about 10 o'clock, the hour when John Wilkes sped the fatal bullet into the brain of Lincoln, Edwin, in "The Iron Chest," was crying out in simulated, but too prophetic agony:

Mountains of shame are piled upon me—me
Who have made fame my idol.
I have labored for a name
As white as mountain snow, dazzling and speckless;
Shame on't, 'tis blurred with blots.

For the last time in many months Edwin Booth slept soundly that night. The murder was unknown away from the vicinity of the newspaper offices till the morning of the 15th, which was Saturday, as it is this year. Edwin Booth was awakened at the Tompkins home by his valet, a Baltimore colored man, who almost whispered, with suppressed excitement:

"Has you heerd de news, Massa Ned?"

"What news?" asked his master indifferently

"De President was shot last night."

"Who could do such a terrible thing as that?" asked Mr Booth.

"Dey say 'twas Massa John, sah," replied the valet.

Mr Booth was so overcome that it was feared he would lose his reason. The whole country lost its head for a time, and feeling was so strong against the Booth family, as well as against actors in general, that Edwin then and there resolved never again to set foot upon the stage.

During the forenoon he received a letter from Henry C. Jarrett, manager of the Boston theatre, notifying him that his engagement was at an end and that the theatre would be closed indefinitely.

Mr Booth, or more likely, some one in his behalf, sent to the newspapers a reply to Mr Jarrett's letter, in which the tragedian expressed horror for the crime, and grief at the disgrace brought upon his family, while protesting his own loyalty to the government. Rev George H. Hepworth, pastor of the church of the Unity, also published a letter the same day, asserting that he had examined Mr Booth's trunks and his correspondence, and that they contained nothing to cause the slightest suspicion that he had known anything of his brother's criminal designs.

The next day, Sunday, Mr Tompkins called on Capt Albert A. Folsom, then superintendent of the Providence railroad, and arranged with him to transport Mr Booth to New York with as much privacy as possible by the Shore line train that afternoon. Capt Folsom had a sleeping car provided in the old Providence station on Pleasant st, and before any of the other passengers arrived that afternoon he met the Booth party at the station entrance.

Mr Booth, so prostrated he could scarcely walk, and looking like a dead man, was assisted from his carriage by Mr Tompkins, Mr McGlenen and the valet, and half carried to the sleeping car, where he was at once put to bed and there remained till he reached New York. He went to the house of his mother and sisters in East 19th st, Mr Tompkins accompanying him.

Edwin's elder brother, Junius Brutus, and John Sleeper Clark, husband of one of his sisters, although both well known, as was Edwin, as stanch supporters of the union cause, were at once arrested and kept in jail for many months, though there was not a particle of evidence to warrant such action.

It was remarkable that Edwin was spared the disgrace of arrest, but that he had a narrow escape is testified to by Eugene Tompkins, who, soon after the assassination, was a guest of Edwin's mother in New York, when secret service men from Washington called and notified Edwin to hold himself in readiness to go with them to Washington that night. Before night, however, they received orders by which he was released from further restraint.

For nine months Edwin Booth adhered to his resolution not to return to the stage. In the meantime he and his family had got terribly into debt, and as he knew of absolutely no way of making a living, to say nothing of supporting his mother, save by acting, his resolution gave way and he revived "Hamlet" in New York, in January, 1866, meeting with an ovation that was a natural revulsion from the popular dementia of the preceding spring, though up to the time that the curtain went up on his first performance there were whisperings that he would be shot if he ever dared to set foot on the stage again.

Few Bostonians will fail to be surprised on learning that John Wilkes Booth once owned property on Commonwealth av in this city. In October, 1864, six months before the assassination, he bought from the commonwealth, which was then filling in the Back Bay territory, a houselot on the north side of the avenue, halfway between Clarendon and Dartmouth sts, as an investment for the benefit of his mother, paying $8192 for it.

Two years after John's death, his mother, in consideration of $10, transferred it to her youngest surviving son, Joseph Adrian Booth, who sold it in 1876 at a handsome profit over the original price, receiving $15,687. Today it is probably worth four or five times the original purchase price. The house that occupies the lot now is numbered 115.

Alexander Corbett Jr.