Assassination of Abraham Lincoln

Abraham Lincoln’s killer, John Wilkes Booth, was a Maryland native born in 1838 who remained in the North during the Civil War despite his Confederate sympathies. As the conflict entered its final stages, he and several associates hatched a plot to kidnap the president and take him to Richmond, the Confederate capital. However, on March 20, 1865, the day of the planned kidnapping, Lincoln failed to appear at the spot where Booth and his six fellow conspirators lay in wait. Two weeks later, Richmond fell to Union forces. In April, with Confederate armies near collapse across the South, Booth came up with a desperate plan to save the Confederacy.

Learning that Lincoln was to attend Laura Keene's acclaimed performance of "Our American Cousin" at Ford's Theatre in Washington, D.C., on April 14, Booth—himself a well-known actor at the time—masterminded the simultaneous assassination of Lincoln, Vice President Andrew Johnson and Secretary of State William H. Seward. By murdering the president and two of his possible successors, Booth and his co-conspirators hoped to throw the U.S. government into disarray. Only the assassination of Lincoln was successful – George Atzerodt didn’t have the nerve to kill Johnson and backed out; Lewis Powell attacked Seward, but his brutal stabbing attack only injured him and failed to kill him.

At 10:15, Booth slipped into the box and fired his .44-caliber single-shot derringer into the back of Lincoln's head. After stabbing Rathbone, who immediately rushed at him, in the shoulder, Booth leapt onto the stage and shouted, "Sic semper tyrannis!" ("Thus ever to tyrants!"–the Virginia state motto). At first, the crowd interpreted the unfolding drama as part of the production, but a scream from the first lady told them otherwise. Although Booth broke his leg in the fall, he managed to leave the theater and escape from Washington on horseback.

As the nation mourned, Union soldiers were hot on the trail of John Wilkes Booth, who many in the audience had immediately recognized. After fleeing the capital, he and an accomplice, David Herold, made their way across the Anacostia River and headed toward southern Maryland. The pair stopped at the home of Samuel Mudd, a doctor who treated Booth's leg. (Mudd’s actions earned him a life sentence that was later commuted). They then sought refuge from Thomas A. Jones, a Confederate agent, before securing a boat to row across the Potomac to Virginia.

On April 26, Union troops surrounded the Virginia farmhouse where Booth and Herold were hiding out and set fire to it, hoping to flush the fugitives out. Herold surrendered but Booth remained inside. As the blaze intensified, a sergeant shot Booth in the neck, allegedly because the assassin had raised his gun as if to shoot. Carried out of the building alive, he lingered for three hours before gazing at his hands and uttering his last words: "Useless, useless.”

Four of Booth’s co-conspirators were convicted for their part in the assassination and executed by hanging on July 7, 1865. They included David Herold and Mary Surratt, the first woman put to death by the federal government, whose boarding house had served as a meeting place for the would-be kidnappers.