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Forensic Analysis of the Abraham Lincoln Assassination: An On-Site Study of the Presidential Box at Ford's Theatre

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Abstract: On April 14, 1865, Abraham Lincoln was assassinated while watching a play from the Presidential Box at Ford's Theatre in Washington, DC. There is still controversy concerning the findings of Lincoln's autopsy. The physicians that attended the autopsy documented that the bullet entered the left occipital region of the brain, but opinions differ as to the path the bullet took through the brain. The official autopsy report documented that the bullet traveled through the left brain and did not cross the midline. Others who watched the autopsy claimed that the bullet entered on the left side of the president's brain, crossed the midline, and ended up just above the orbit on the right. In this manuscript, we reviewed all of the statements of the witnesses to the assassination in an effort to reconstruct the approach that John Wilkes Booth, the assassin, took through the Presidential Box as he approached the president. In addition, we conducted an on-site analysis of the shape and dimensions of the Presidential Box at Ford's Theatre to support the approach that Booth took. Based on this forensic analysis, we provide supportive evidence that the findings of the official autopsy report are accurate; that is, the bullet that entered the president's left brain stayed on the left and did not cross the midline.

Key Words: forensic medicine, assassination, Abraham Lincoln, John Wilkes Booth

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In 1965, on the 100-year anniversary of Abraham Lincoln's assassination, JK Lattimer published an article entitled *Autopsy on Abraham Lincoln*,¹ in which he reports on a rediscovered, handwritten, summary of the autopsy. These notes, authored by Lincoln's personal physician Dr Robert King Stone on April 15, 1865, state that the bullet fired by John Wilkes Booth entered the president's left occipital region and "lodged in the cerebral matter, just above the corpus striatum of the left side." This document extended the controversy concerning the path that Booth's bullet took through Lincoln's brain. There are 5 accounts of the findings of the president's autopsy; some conclude that the bullet entered on the left occipital skull and stayed on the left side of the brain, and others suggest that it crossed the midline and lodged over the right eye. In this manuscript, we review all available documentation from the time of the assassination, including eyewitness reports, and all versions of the autopsy. In addition, we will review a recent trip the authors took to Washington, DC, to visit the Presidential Box at Ford's Theatre. During the site visit to Ford's Theatre, we studied the shape of, and access to, the

Presidential Box and how these factors affected the forensics of the assassination.

WASHINGTON, DC, APRIL 14–15, 1865

Assassination

The details of the assassination of Abraham Lincoln have been reviewed by a variety of authors.^{2–4} The assassin, John Wilkes Booth, arrived at Ford's Theatre in the evening of April 14, 1865, to fulfill his plan to murder the president of the United States. The president and his guests arrived after the play, "Our American Cousin," had begun. Lincoln, his wife, Major Henry Rathbone, and fiancé, Clara Harris (daughter of US Senator Ira Harris of New York), were seated in a double box (box 7 and box 8) of Ford's Theatre in Washington, DC, which served as the Presidential Box during Lincoln's visits (Fig. 1). When the president occupied the box, the furniture was arranged specific for the presidential party's needs. The theater provided a rocker for Lincoln, which was placed just inside the door of box 7. The rest of the party was seated as shown in Figure 2.⁵ The entrance to the Presidential Box was a door on to the second floor seating (Dress Circle) of the theater (Fig. 1). The door from the Dress Circle opened into a 4-ft wide, 10-ft long vestibule, which had 2 doors, one to box 7 and one to box 8 as shown in Figure 2.⁶ Both doors were hinged to open into the box space. The door to box 8 was used as the entrance to the combined 7/8 box space when the president was in attendance.⁶

At approximately 10:15 PM, Booth walked along the back of the Dress Circle where he entered the vestibule of the Presidential Box. Once in the vestibule, Booth blocked the door to the Dress Circle with a piece of wood.⁵ At this point, Booth either opened the door to box 7 or stepped through the already open door to box 8. Booth was likely less than 2 ft from Lincoln when he pulled the trigger. After he shot the president, Booth stabbed Henry Rathbone as the major confronted him in the Presidential Box.⁵ Booth then jumped to the stage and escaped through the rear of the theater, after which he rode by horseback out of Washington, DC, and into Virginia. He was found by Union Troops 12 days later at a farm just south of Port Royal Virginia where Booth was fatally shot when he refused to surrender.³

Death of a President

President Lincoln's final hours were documented by several physicians who attempted to treat him. His exam suggested lethal intracranial hypertension from the onset.⁷ Lincoln's pupillary reactivity changed over time and was not diagnostic of a specific injury. Initially Lincoln's right eye was fixed and dilated, but as his intracranial pressure increased due to bleeding, the president developed bilateral fixed and dilated pupils, which occurred around 1:00 AM on April 15. The president was declared dead at 7:22 on the morning of April 15, 1865, 9 hours after the shooting.⁸

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FIGURE 1. The Presidential Box at Ford's Theatre, Washington, DC. The photograph taken by the authors on May 2, 2023, as viewed from box 5 on the opposite side of the stage. The photo also shows the balcony seating of the Dress Circle and the door (highlighted by a white asterisk *), which enters into the vestibule of the box.

The Autopsy and Its Official Report

The autopsy was conducted at the White House on April 15, 1865, by JJ Woodward and E Curtis approximately 2 hours after Lincoln was declared dead. The report of the autopsy is clear as to the laterality of the wound. The left occipital entrance wound was documented by the doctors who examined the patient immediately after the injury and by the autopsy. Despite the fact that Booth was in close proximity to Lincoln at the time of the shooting, none of the physicians who saw the entrance wound commented on the presence or absence of powder burns. Drs Woodward and Curtis demonstrated the bullet tract, which was marked by blood, bone fragments, metal fragments and destroyed brain tissue.⁹ They recorded their findings immediately after conducting the autopsy. The handwritten report has been preserved and is clear relative to the laterality; the bullet entered the left occiput, passed through the left lateral ventricle, and landed in the left cerebrum.⁹

AUTOPSY CONTROVERSY

The controversy of the bullet tract was created by the 5 physicians who documented differing historical accounts of the autopsy. Woodward and Curtis, who conducted the autopsy, documented their findings, including the path of the bullet in the left brain, by a written report dated April 15, 1865.

Dr Woodward authored the report and stated that the bullet “entered through the occipital bone about one inch to the left of the median line and just above the left lateral sinus, which it opened. It then penetrated the dura matter, passed through the left posterior lobe of the cerebrum, entered the left lateral ventricle and lodged in the white matter of the cerebrum just above the anterior portion of the left corpus striatum, where it was found.” He also stated that the “track of the ball was full of clotted blood and contained several little fragments of bone with small pieces of the ball near its external orifice. The brain around the track was pultaceous and livid from capillary hemorrhage into its substance.”⁹ The bullet dropped out of the brain as it was lifted out of the skull. The course of the bullet was not documented by finding it in the brain, but it was documented by the destruction of brain tissue and bone fragments along the course of the bullet.¹⁰

These findings were also confirmed by Lincoln's personal physician, Robert Stone, who also documented the findings in his handwritten note penned on the day of the autopsy.¹¹ On May 16, 1865, he testified at the Lincoln Assassination Conspirators trial that the “ball was found on the anterior part of the same side of the brain, the left side...”¹²

Woodward, the author of the autopsy report, was one of the best-known pathologists of his era. Joseph J. Woodward, MD, has been called America's first academic surgical pathologist. He coauthored the definitive medical history of the Civil War and pioneered the use of photomicroscopy. In addition to conducting Lincoln's autopsy, he also helped care for President James Garfield when he was shot in 1881. Woodward was elected president of the American Medical Association in 1882.¹³

Woodward was aided by Edward George Curtis MD. Curtis was an army surgeon who served as Woodward's assistant at the Army Medical Museum from 1864 to 1870.¹⁴ He independently documented his thoughts about the autopsy in a letter to his mother dated April 22, 1865. In his letter, he noted that the bullet “...entered a little to the left of the median line at the back of the head, and passed almost directly forward...”¹⁰

Two other physicians who attended the autopsy, Dr Charles S. Taft, a 30-year-old Army surgeon,¹⁵ and Joseph K. Barnes, Surgeon General of the US Army,¹⁶ recorded the path of the bullet. Both reported that the bullet crossed the midline and lodged in

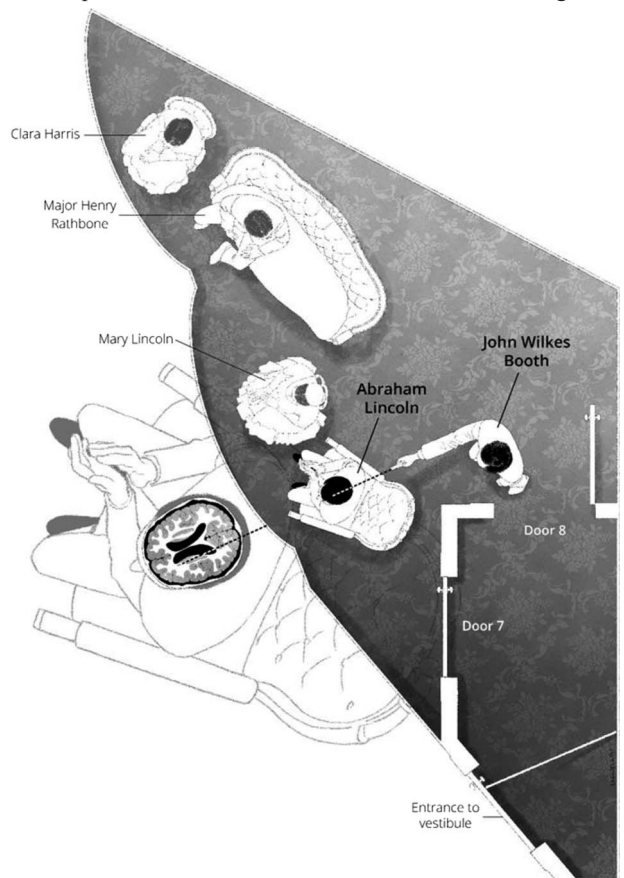


FIGURE 2. This drawing, rendered by Megan Llewellyn, an artist from Duke University, shows the occupants of the Presidential Box at Ford's Theatre at the time of the assassination. The position of the rocking chair, in the angle in front of door 7, and Lincoln's angle of gaze to the orchestra seats are demonstrated. This depiction of the assassination also shows Booth entering door 8 of the box at the time of the assassination.

the right brain, just above the orbit. Taft, who was one of the first doctors to care for Lincoln at Ford's Theatre, documented the laterality in a manuscript published on April 22, 1865.⁸ He reported the gross appearance of the destruction along the bullet track as did Woodward, and he additionally stated that the bullet crossed the midline and landed on the right of Lincoln's brain. Taft acknowledged in his manuscript that ... "some difference of opinion existed as to the exact position of the ball." Two years after the assassination, Barnes testified in the trial of John H. Surratt that the bullet "entered the skull to the left of the middle line, and below the line with the ear. It ranged forward and upward toward the right eye, lodging within half an inch of that organ."¹⁷ In his testimony, he did not elaborate on the details of the bullet path but simply stated the course—left to right.

There are a variety of additional findings on the autopsy that have been used to support both theories of the bullet trajectory through Lincoln's brain. The asymmetrical engorgement of blood in the orbits, the presence of right greater than left subdural hematomas, and the presence of bilateral orbital fractures all were likely related to a "countercoup" injury and were not related to the course of the bullet.² All of the findings on the original autopsy are consistent with injuries that could have been sustained from a .44 caliber hand gun fired at close range.¹⁸

Both handwritten reports (authored by Stone and Woodward) that were scribed within 24 hours of the autopsy stated that the bullet stayed on the left and gave details of the destruction of the brain tissue in the path. Historians who choose to discredit the reports of Stone and Woodward do so based on the fact that these men were sleep deprived by the time they recorded the events surrounding the assassination and therefore subject to faulty memory. In view of many of the statements given by a variety of the witnesses of the events of April 14 and 15, 1865, the most dependable observations were those documented immediately after the assassination and the least dependable were those that were documented at later dates.¹⁹

THREE UNRESOLVED VARIABLES

There are 3 variables that remain uncertain concerning the assassination that affect our understanding of the trajectory of the bullet through Lincoln's brain. They include the following:

1. Was Booth holding the Derringer in his right or left hand during the assassination?
2. Where was Lincoln looking at the time of the assassination (his angle of gaze)?
3. Did Booth enter door 7 or door 8 of the Presidential Box as he approached Lincoln?

Numbers 1 and 2 above will be addressed based on eyewitness reports of the assassination. Number 3 will be addressed based on our site visit to Ford's Theatre.

Booth Was Right-Handed

By all accounts Booth was right-handed.²⁰ Booth as a youth made a tattoo of his initials on his left hand, "JWB," and this tattoo was used to help identify his body at his autopsy.²⁰ If the tattoo was on his left hand, he would have been right-handed to make the tattoo on himself. Every known drawing of the assassination shows Booth with the Derringer or knife in his right hand. When Booth jumped on stage, almost every witness stated that Booth held a knife in his right hand.^{21–23} There is only 1 witness to the crime that has suggested that Booth held the Derringer in his left hand.²³ Finally, the knife wound sustained by Major Rathbone

was to his left proximal arm, which is a defensive wound.⁵ This wound would most likely be created by a right-handed assailant.

Where Was Lincoln Looking at the Time of the Assassination?

The position of Lincoln's gaze would affect the angle of the bullet tract through the president's brain. There are very few eyewitnesses that were looking at the Presidential Box at the time of the shooting. For most of the play, the president could not be seen by the 1000 occupants of the theater because he was often leaning back in his rocking chair and therefore not visible to the crowd.²⁴ His rocker was angled slightly toward the stage so he could watch the play²⁵ (Fig. 2), but his head was obscured by the curtain hanging from the left side of the box. Occasionally he was seen leaning forward, resting his head in his hands near the ledge of the box.²⁶ One eyewitness was looking directly at Lincoln when the shot was fired.²⁷ According to James P. Ferguson, when the shot was fired, Lincoln was looking to his left and down to the orchestra seating area peering between the curtain and the post at the left edge of the box (Figs. 2 and 3)



FIGURE 3. Photograph taken during the May 2, 2023, visit to Ford's Theatre. The authors staged the assassination by hanging a skull in the appropriate position over the rocking chair in an effort to reproduce the position of Lincoln's head at the time of the assassination. The skull, with a hole created at the occipital entrance wound, was suspended in the approximate position and angle as reported by Ferguson (the only eyewitness who was looking at the president at the time of the shooting). If the president was looking toward the orchestra seats, and if Booth entered door 8, this is the approximate angle the shot was fired. From this approach, the bullet would have entered the left occiput and stayed on the left side of the brain, landing in the left orbital region as stated in Woodward's autopsy report.

Site Visit to Ford's Theatre: Door 7 or Door 8

John J. Ford of Baltimore opened “Ford's New Theatre” in August of 1863. After Lincoln's assassination, the theater was purchased by the US government to be used as an office building and museum. In June of 1964, Congress appropriated funds to restore the theater to its original form as designed by Ford in 1863. The reconstruction project, which was completed in 1968, attempted to recreate an exact replica of the previous theater. There were no architect drawings of the original theater, so a variety of photographs, drawings, and historical documents were used to recreate the structure. By most accounts, the Fords' Theatre we see today is a very close replica of the theater that Ford created in the 1860s.^{28–30}

On May 2, 2023, the authors (TNP and SS) were granted access to the Presidential Box at Ford's Theatre by the National Park Service. While we conducted our site visit to the Presidential Box, we measured several dimensions of the box in an effort to document that the dimensions of the reconstructed box were similar to the dimensions that existed in April of 1865. For example, our measurement from the frame of door 8 to the far-left balustrade of the box was 53 inches. Based on an 1865 drawing of the theater, the same distance may have been between 52 and 63 inches. This estimate of the 1865 dimensions of the box was calculated by assuming that the external width of the building was 71 ft in 1865 and is 71 ft today as confirmed by the Park Service rangers at Ford's Theatre. We then took the drawings taken from 1865 (Fig. 4) and estimated the distances within the box.

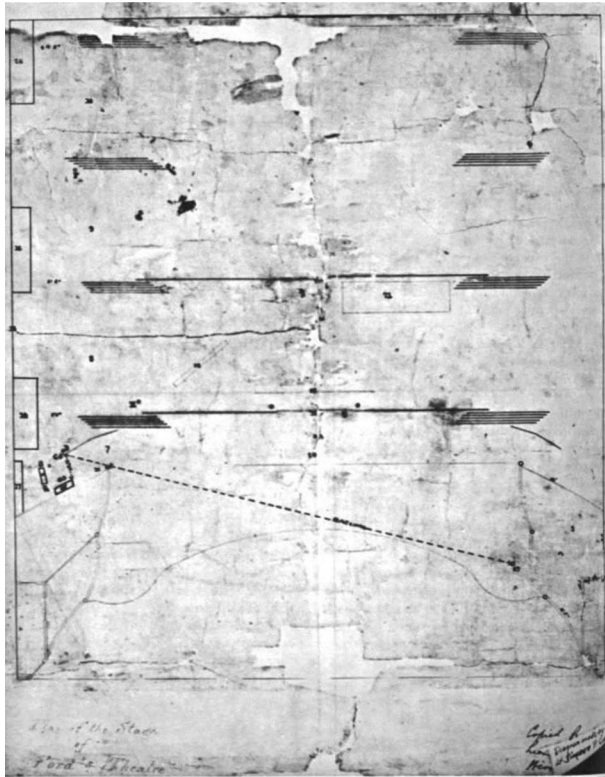


FIGURE 4. The original stage plan for Ford's Theatre as drawn for the Lincoln conspirators' trial.^{6(p52)} Lt Simon P. Currier of the Judge Advocate's office was asked to create a drawing of the interior of Ford's Theatre, including careful measurements of several structures including the boxes. This drawing was used during the trial of the assassination conspirators from May to July of 1865.



FIGURE 5. Photograph taken during site visit to Ford's Theatre on May 2, 2023. The authors staged the assassination by hanging a skull in the appropriate position over the rocking chair in an effort to reproduce the position of Lincoln's head at the time of the assassination. This is the view from door 7 looking into the box. If Booth entered door 7, he would have been “trapped” by the rocker in the angled space behind the door. In addition, Booth would have easily been in the peripheral vision of the president. It should be noted that if Booth entered door 7, the muzzle of the gun would have been pointed at the side of Lincoln's head, not the occiput, where the fatal bullet entered the skull.

We believe that the current box is similar to the box that existed in 1865, and minor differences in the dimensions of the box would not affect our conclusions.

Door 7 or Door 8

The only eyewitness who saw Booth's position in the Presidential Box was Major Rathbone. In his narrative, recorded on April 17, 1865, Rathbone stated that during the second scene of the third act as he was ... “intently observing the proceedings upon the stage with his back toward the door, he heard the discharge of a pistol behind him and looking round saw through the smoke, a man between the door and the President.”⁵ Rathbone confirmed that door 8 was open and door 7 was closed while the presidential party occupied the box, but he did not state which door Booth stepped through.⁵ If Booth was standing between door 8 and Lincoln, it is easy to understand how quickly Rathbone was able to physically confront Booth after the shooting, and this further explains how quickly Booth stabbed Rathbone and escaped by jumping to the stage (Fig. 2).

Some historians have presumed that Booth made a small hole in door 7 (before the assassination), looked through the hole to see the president seated in his rocker, and stepped through door 7 to shoot the president.³¹ In reality, the hole was created by Ford and his workers, so the presidential guard or courier did not have to open the door to check on the president.³² Given the proximity of door 7 to the back legs of the rocker, even if Booth looked through the hole in door 7, it is unlikely that he entered that door

as he would have been “trapped” in the narrow angle of the box, with Lincoln and the rocker blocking his planned escape, over the rail of the box (Fig. 2). The photograph in Figure 5 was taken during our visit to Ford's Theatre. The skull was suspended to recreate the location of Lincoln's head just before the shooting. Given the direction of Lincoln's gaze toward the audience, if Booth entered door 7, he may have been within the president's peripheral vision and would not have had a clear shot of the occipital region of Lincoln's head.

CONCLUSIONS

In this manuscript, we have reviewed the evidence that supports the accuracy of the official autopsy report of Abraham Lincoln, which states that the fatal bullet entered the left posterior aspect of the president's brain and lodged in the “left corpus striatum.” We relied predominantly on the eyewitness accounts of events of April 14–15, 1865, that were recorded within weeks of the assassination. The physical evidence of the structure of the Presidential Box at Ford's Theatre suggests that Booth entered through door 8 at the time of the assassination because Lincoln's rocking chair was blocking the entrance through door 7. As Booth entered door 8, he would have taken 1 step to be in within 2 ft of the back of the president's head. With Lincoln's head tilted toward the orchestra seats, a bullet from a right-handed assassin that entered the left occiput and would have stayed on the left side of the brain as documented in JJ Woodward's autopsy report. Our current day forensic analysis confirms the most reliable 19th century pathological evaluations and reporting.

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