

HOW OUR BEST KNOWN ASSASSIN BECAME A HOOSIER

by Charles B. Huppert

On January 7, 1930, a telltale letter was written by Robert B. Stewart of Brazil, Indiana to the daughter of John B. Wilkes who had lived in Terre Haute, Indiana, from about 1850 until his death in 1916. A claim was being made against Mr. Wilkes' estate under a will executed on September 12th 1883, in Bombay, India, by John Byron Wilkes. The Terre Haute Wilkes was born on December 15, 1822, in Sheffield, England, to Samuel Wilkes and Olivia Barber Wilkes. The India Wilkes had left the United States and entered India through Ceylon, claiming that he was born in Sheffield on December 15, 1822 to Samuel and Olivia Wilkes.

Robert Burns Stewart, at the time he wrote the letter, was a young lawyer of age thirty-one. In 1944 he would become the elected Circuit Court Judge of Clay County, Indiana, a position he would hold for 26 years until his death on August 27, 1970. This author was, at the time of his death, entering his last year of law school, and he clearly remembers the stir and flutter about Judge Stewart's unexpected death. Judge Stewart was to the bench and bar in Indiana no ordinary jurist. His reputation placed him as a jurist of the highest caliber.

Thus we can conclude that the facts presented in Robert Stewart's letter are, in his mind, accurate. And, given his propensity for fastidiousness, those facts are undoubtedly true.

In his letter he intentionally failed to divulge what is believed to be the true identity of the John B. Wilkes of India, yet he speaks freely of his 1883 will and portions of its contents. One portion he relates is a specific bequest to Sarah Catherine [sic] Scott. Sarah was born on December 8, 1865, in Indianapolis. She was the daughter of Mary Katherine (Kate M.) Scott of Brookville, Pennsylvania. Kate's father was the publisher of the Brookville Republican and he had sent Kate to Washington City to cover Abraham Lincoln's second inaugural in early March, 1865. There she met someone with whom she had become acquainted in the early years of the Civil War when she was an

army nurse. The acquaintance was John Wilkes Booth. Nine months later, in Indianapolis, Kate delivered Sarah Katherine Scott with the help of another Sarah for whom the new daughter was named. The midwife, Sarah, was shortly thereafter to marry Samuel Baysinger and she and her new husband raised baby Sarah in southern Parke and Clay Counties in Indiana.

The clause of the India Wilkes will which gave Sarah \$25,000 reads:

Fourthly, to Sarah Katherine Scott, **natural heir of my body**, I bequeath the sum of Twenty Five Thousand Dollars in United States currency and appoint Andrew Potter as her trustee until she shall have reached the age of thirty years or shall have married, whichever shall have occurred first. [emphasis writer's]

If Kate became pregnant by John Wilkes Booth, which she said in 1910 she did; and, if her daughter, Sarah, were the natural heir of the body of the India Wilkes, then the India Wilkes and John Wilkes Booth are one and the same.

The will also gave \$15,000 to Sarah's mother, Kate Scott. Kate, after the proceeds were received, set up a trust for Samuel and Sarah Baysinger. After Sarah Baysinger died, Samuel became the sole beneficiary of the trust. When Samuel died in 1929, Mrs. Wilson and her daughter claimed the trust for Mrs. Wilson's mother, Elizabeth Marshall Wilkes, under the residuary clause of the India Wilkes' will. Robert B. Stewart was the administrator of the Samuel Baysinger estate and thus became involved with the details of the distribution of funds pursuant to the will in the 1890s when they were finally released.¹

Andrew Potter at the time of the execution of the India Wilkes will and his death a month later was living in Ladoga, Montgomery County, Indiana. He had been a member of the National Detective Police during a larger part of the War and had been a business colleague of General Lew Wallace of Crawfordsville, Indiana, accompanying him when he was territorial governor of New Mexico.²

¹ Estate of Baysinger, Cause No. 1178, Clay Circuit Court, where a copy of the India Wilkes will can be found.

² Andrew Potter is the subject of the last chapter of Edward Steers' 2007 book *Lincoln Legends: Myths, Hoaxes and Confabulations*. The chapter title is "The Man Who Never Was."

After Potter ended his employment with the NDP he became a railroad detective and then was employed by Lew Wallace to investigate an oddly high number of deaths among people associated with the War Department at the conclusion of the Civil War. President Ulysses S. Grant had asked Wallace to head the investigation. As a result, though there was significant evidence of murderous activity, nothing ever came of the report due to a decision not to pursue the matter. Then in September 1886, Wallace summoned Potter to his Crawfordsville study and told him of a task he was given to handle the Indiana side of the estate of John Byron Wilkes of India. Wallace told Potter that in order to fully understand the circumstances, he needed an investigation to determine whether the India Wilkes had in fact died and whether he was in fact the assassin of President Lincoln.

At this time neither Wallace nor Potter knew about the Terre Haute Wilkes man who had the same identity as the India Wilkes. One might ask: How would John Wilkes Booth have known of a Terre Haute Wilkes from whom he might steal an identity; the Terre Haute Wilkes was merely an Englishman machinist at the Eagle Foundry? The answer lies with Lola Alexander who was born Harriet Stover in Virginia. However, she was raised in South Bend, Indiana, where she married her first husband, Thomas Snedaker, on March 25, 1846. We know that Lola had an interesting relationship with John Wilkes Booth; a photograph and letters from her were found in Booth's room at the National Hotel in Washington shortly after the assassination. We also know that Lola had a relationship with the Terre Haute Wilkes family. It is believed that this connection provided Booth with not only a place to stay when he was on tour in the Midwest, but also the necessary information to allow him to commit an early version of identity theft. Regardless, Lola was a good friend of Schuyler Colfax, U.S. Congressman from Indiana and Vice-President during Grant's first term as president, who was also from South Bend, Indiana. When she died in February, 1905, she was buried in the City Cemetery there, near the grave of Vice-President Colfax.

Sarah Katherine was not the only person specifically named as a beneficiary in the India Wilkes will. The first person mentioned is Ogarita Rosalie Wilkes, also "natural heir of my body". She was born in 1859 to Izola Mills D'Arcy Booth, who was allegedly married to John Wilkes Booth on January 9, 1859. Ogarita's first name was probably selected by her mother who was Spanish.

Ogarita's middle name was probably selected by her father using the name of his older sister, Rosalie. At the time of the assassination, Izola was living with her daughter and maid, Sarah Johnson, at Bolivar Heights, Harper's Ferry, West Virginia. Izola, Sarah Johnson and her son Henry, who had been Booth's theater valet, are all beneficiaries named in the India Wilkes will.

Next named is Harry Jerome Stevenson, who was born in 1870, and probably a son of John Wilkes Booth and Izola, although the will did not provide that he was "heir of my body". Harry's story is long and most believable when considered in light of two references: the first being a statement made by John Henry Stevenson in 1886 to Lottie Eaton in Muscatine County, Iowa; and second, the book *This One Mad Act*, written by Izola Forrester, daughter of Ogarita.³ Also named as beneficiary is Mary Louise Turner as "natural heir of my body", daughter of Ella Turner who is also named in the will. Ella while carrying Mary Louise tried to commit suicide when she heard that Mary Louise's father had assassinated President Lincoln.

The tenth person specifically named is the India Wilkes' wife, Elizabeth Marshall [Burnley] Wilkes. She got the remainder of the estate after 2,000 pounds sterling was first paid to each of her two daughters, presumably by Elizabeth's first husband whose last name was Burnley. It is interesting to the point of perplexity that all persons specifically named, except Elizabeth, figured so prominently in the life of John Wilkes Booth.

While it is obvious from the foregoing that John Wilkes Booth was neither a full-blooded nor adopted Hoosier, he certainly pretended to be one when he misappropriated the identity of John B. Wilkes of Terre Haute, Indiana. But this is not the end of Booth's connections with the State of Indiana.

In September, 1925, William Wood Parsons, past president of Indiana State University, then Indiana Normal School, passed away. His first wife was none other than Harriet Emily Wilkes, daughter of our Terre Haute John B. Wilkes. Dr. Parsons was vitally interested in how his father-in-law figured into the history of John Wilkes Booth. Apparently he had discussions about it with the

³ Published by Hale, Cushman and Flint, Boston in 1937.

Editor of the Terre Haute Star, his city's morning newspaper. John C. Shaffer was listed in the Star as not only being editor of that paper but of several others including the Indianapolis Star. A few months after Parsons' death, Shaffer interviewed Martha Mills at her home in Indianapolis. The story that Shaffer hoped to get was never published. However, a transcript of the interview was, and in it Miss Mills tells of receiving a letter from a John Wilkes after the assassination about the first of June, 1865, but which was definitely in the hand of John Wilkes Booth. In the letter he asked Miss Mills to meet him in Central Park in New York City which she did. From there the two of them journeyed to Montreal where they stayed for about two weeks while he awaited mail to arrive. During this time he executed a power of attorney which gave powers to proceed with litigation with regard to some oil property he owned in western Pennsylvania. When all was done he said goodbye to Martha and that was the last time she ever saw him. Notes and the transcript of the interview were to be in a book written by Richard H. Gemmicke, a professor at Indiana State University who inherited many of the papers of William Wood Parsons.

One of the most perplexing facts of the Booth story is the press release of the news of his demise. The man who was shot in Garrett's barn died on Wednesday, April 26, 1865. His body was then removed to Washington where it arrived during the early morning hours of the next day. The body was taken on board the *Montauk* in the Anacostia River and kept in a sown up blanket until approximately 11:00 a.m. when a party arrived on board and Surgeon General Joseph Barnes cut the blanket open to reveal the body. Prior to that time no one who had seen the body knew Booth with the exception of David E. Herold, and he did not give a statement until later that day. The final identification of the body was not completed until mid-afternoon. Yet, at 9:20 a.m. that morning, the Secretary of War dispatched the following telegram:

[OFFICIAL]

War Department)
Washington. April 27, 1865 – 9:20 A. M.)

Maj.- Gen. John A. Dix, New York:

J. Wilkes Booth and Harrold [sic] were chased from the swamp in St. Mary's County, Maryland, to Garrett's farm, near Port Royal on the Rappahannock, by Col. Baker's force.

The barn in which they took refuge was fired.

Booth, in making his escape, was shot through the head and killed, lingering about three hours, and Harrold was captured. Booth's body and Harrold [sic] are now here.

Edwin M. Stanton,
Secretary of War

Why would Stanton, who was known to be quite prudent, have issued such a statement that was delivered by General Dix to the Associated Press? Why would it have made any difference to Stanton if the man killed were Booth? If the world thought that Booth was dead his lips would be sealed even if he lived. The people would have their villain and Stanton would be spared the embarrassment of having to announce that they had killed the wrong man.

Another prominent Hoosier who had access to the files generated after the assassination was William McKee Dunn.⁴ At the time of the assassination Dunn was Assistant Judge Advocate General under Joseph Holt, both having been appointed by Lincoln in June of 1864. It was Holt who prosecuted the eight conspirators in May and June of 1865. When Holt retired in 1875, President Grant appointed Dunn as his successor.

Dunn was born to Williamson Dunn and Mariam Wilson Dunn at Hanover, Indiana, in Jefferson County in 1814. Williamson would found Hanover College there in 1827. After graduating from the Indiana Seminary in Bloomington, later to become Indiana University, McKee went on to graduate school at Yale, taught mathematics at Hanover, and then studied law and became a lawyer in 1837. He was a member of Indiana's House of Representatives and a member of its 1850 constitutional convention. He was a United States Congressman from Indiana during 1859-1863, and his Civil War service included being an aid-de-camp to General McClellan for a short time in 1861. He served in the JAG Corps for almost 17 years both as Assistant Judge Advocate General and, during the last five years, as Judge Advocate General, retiring in 1881. He died July 24, 1887, at his beloved Maplewood in Fairfax, Virginia.

McKee Dunn was personal friends with William Wood Parsons of Terre Haute, who would become a 25-year president of the Indiana Normal School. Parsons was to have

⁴ Dunn is a second cousin of the author of this paper.

collaborated with McKee in writing McKee's biography. However with the death of Dunn and the elevation of Parsons to the presidency of the School, the work was never completed.

McKee Dunn was a confidant of Andrew Potter. He also was custodian of all the JAG records concerning the assassination of President Lincoln. It is obvious from correspondence between Dunn and Potter that Dunn was among those who questioned whether the India Wilkes was really John Wilkes Booth. On September 16, 1886, Potter wrote to McKee that the prior Friday (September 10th) he had received in Ladoga, Indiana, a note from General Lew Wallace asking him to come to Crawfordsville for a meeting with him. At the time Wallace was attempting to figure out the connection between the India Wilkes and the funds on deposit in United States and Canadian banks under the name of John B. Wilkes, having been requested to do so by General Grant after the failure of his investment firm of Grant and Ward in New York City. The next day Potter met with Wallace who asked him to investigate the death of the India Wilkes and the issue of whether or not he was really the "assassin" as Wallace called him. Potter sought, in the letter to McKee, his counsel whether he should take the assignment. He received back from McKee a positive response. After he negotiated the financial aspects of the endeavor, he agreed to take on the project.

Around the first of October Potter began his investigation. His travels took him east to Washington City, New York City and Philadelphia. While in Washington, Potter sought the aid of John Watson Foster. Another Hoosier, Foster was born in 1836 in Petersburg, Indiana. A lawyer and general during the Civil War, he became a diplomat serving as minister to Mexico, Russia and Spain. Eventually he would become Secretary of State under Benjamin Harrison. Later his grandson, John Foster Dulles, became Secretary of State under Eisenhower. Another grandson, Allen Dulles, became the chief of the Central Intelligence Agency. Potter asked Foster to use his influence to get information on the John Byron Wilkes who had gone to India in the late 1860s and had died in the Assam province near Gauhati on October 12, 1883. After learning what he could in the East, Potter then went to California. While in San Francisco, he received word from Foster to contact the British Consul there. In doing so Potter learned that Wilkes had

been allowed to enter Ceylon and India because he represented that he was born to Samuel and Olivia Wilkes on December 15, 1822, in Sheffield, England. The British had checked this out, found it to be true, and allowed entry.

Drawing from the information he collected, Potter concluded that the India Wilkes was not John Wilkes Booth and that Wilkes had made the money during the War dealing in contraband with the Confederates. When he reported his conclusions to Wallace, he didn't know that the same John Byron Wilkes was in Terre Haute, Indiana, and, at all relevant times, always had been.

One of the most tantalizing chapters of this saga comes as a result of the writing of George W. Julian. Excised from his diary by his daughter, Grace Clarke, Julian's April 24, 1865 entry tells of a meeting which took place that day in the office of Edwin Stanton, the Secretary of War. In addition to Stanton and Julian, present were also Zachariah Chandler and John Conness, both United States Senators. Julian was a member of the House representing a district in Indiana which included Indianapolis. A very disturbed Secretary of War announced that John Wilkes Booth's diary had been found and there was much in it. It was shown to both Chandler and Conness who read the passages concerning them and announced that if the diary got out they would be ruined. After removing six photographs from the diary, Stanton give the diary to Thomas Eckert and instructed him to lock it up and not to disturb it unless ordered to do so by Stanton.

The red diary had been discovered the day before, Sunday, April 23rd, along with other Booth artifacts along the banks of Gambo Creek, which is a tributary of the Potomac River in the Northern Neck of Virginia, on land now belonging to the U. S. Dahlgren Naval Surface Warfare Center. This is across the River and not too far from the shore of Maryland at Popes Creek from where Booth crossed the Potomac earlier that weekend.

It is important to realize that on the crucial dates of April 23rd and 24th, Booth was still on the loose. The shot that rang out at Garrett's tobacco barn did not occur until the early morning hours of Wednesday, April 26th. Shortly thereafter, on the body that had been shot, another diary

was found -- this one was black. Neither diary was publicly produced until the John Surratt trial in the summer of 1867 and only then, the red one with many pages removed.

Most amazing is the chain of possession of the photographs which were found in the red diary. At the time there was a young physician, Dr. Edward Curtis, who after graduating from Harvard University and serving a stint in the Army had completed his medical training at the University of Pennsylvania in 1864 and was appointed to the Microscopical Department of the Army Medical Museum. This museum is now a part of the Armed Forces Institute of Pathology and is located on the campus of Walter Reed Hospital. Stanton ordered that the photographs be sent to Dr. Curtis and that glass negatives be made from them. Four of the negatives survive and have been recently discovered in the Neff-Guttridge Collection at Indiana State University.

As to the identity of the women in the photographs, three were correctly identified as Alice Grey, Lucy Hale, and Effie Garmon. Mis-identified as Fanny Brown was a photo of Izola Booth, and mis-identified as Helen Western was a photograph of Kate Scott. The original photographs are now with the National Park Service and housed among the artifacts of the Ford Theatre Museum.

While the photos themselves are to a great degree interesting, it is the marks of Dr. Curtis which are most instructive. Written on at least three of them are the initials "N. D. P." which stand for National Detective Police. Additionally, Dr. Curtis wrote the date he made the plates "4-24-65". He also placed his own initials "E. C." on the plates. The date matches with the diary of George Julian. And, the fact that the photos came from the red diary and that another diary was found on the body shot and killed at Garrett's barn tends to drive a nail in the casket, so to speak, that holds the tenet that it was not John Wilkes Booth who was shot in that barn, allowing him to live on as a Hoosier for the remaining eighteen years of his life.