

Frequently Asked Questions  
Spirits of Tudor Hall  
Prepared by Dinah Faber, October 2008

**Why did John Wilkes Booth assassinate President Abraham Lincoln?**

John Wilkes Booth assassinated Lincoln because in his eyes Lincoln was a tyrant who acted to impose his will upon the Southern states during the American Civil War (1861-1865). (*Webster's Dictionary* describes a tyrant as “an absolute ruler unrestrained by law or constitution.”) In 1864, John Wilkes wrote, “I have ever held the South were right. The very nomination of Abraham Lincoln four years ago, spoke plainly—war, war upon Southern rights and institutions.” Asia Booth Clarke wrote that in 1864 her brother declared that Lincoln had made “himself a king” and that if Lincoln were re-elected, his second term would “be a reign.” [*Unlocked Book*, pg. 124]

It is important to remember that in the years leading up to the Civil War, Maryland was deeply divided on issues of states' rights and slavery. This was certainly true in Baltimore and Harford County. Unfortunately, John Wilkes Booth's father died when the boy was 14 and still at an impressionable age. Many of the people John Wilkes Booth associated throughout his formative years were decidedly pro-South and pro-slavery, and this had a definite and deep influence upon him. It is also important to remember that John Wilkes was relatively young at the time of the Civil War. He was 22-years-old when Fort Sumter was fired upon in April 1861 and 26 when he was killed in April 1865.

As incredible and unlikely as it seems to Americans of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, John Wilkes believed that enslaved African Americans actually benefited from and were protected by their enslavement. In 1864, he wrote, “Witness their elevation in happiness and enlightenment above their race, elsewhere. I have lived among it [slavery] most of my life and have seen *less* harsh treatment from Master to Man than I have beheld in the north from father to son. Yet Heaven knows *no one* would be willing to do, *more* for the negro race than I. Could I but see a way to still better their condition. But Lincoln's policy is only preparing the way for their total annihilation.” [*Right or Wrong. God Judge Me,*” pg. 125.]

At the same time, John Wilkes recognized and acknowledged that the United States had benefited economically from slavery. He wrote that he “considered *it*, one of the greatest blessings . . . that God has ever bestowed on a favored nation. Witness heretofore our wealth and power.” [“*Right or Wrong. God Judge Me,*” pg. 125.]

As much as John Wilkes would have liked to join the Confederate Army, he promised his mother he would not do so. However, he was involved in carrying messages on behalf of the Confederacy and smuggling drugs and other contraband into the South. He also led several of his friends and acquaintances into a plot to kidnap President Lincoln and take him to Richmond where he would be held for ransom or a prisoner exchange. When the Civil War ended before the risky and apparently impractical kidnap plot could be carried out, John Wilkes resolved to take matters into his own hands and strike a final blow for the Confederacy. Unfortunately, he and his co-conspirators were all too successful.

Copies of suggested reading list are available at Tudor Hall for anyone who would like to learn more about John Wilkes Booth and his motives for assassinating President Lincoln.

### **Were other members of the Booth family pro-South or pro-North?**

John Wilkes Booth was devoted to his mother; and, as a result, she was able to persuade him to promise her he would not join the Confederate Army. In 1864, however, he seems to have seriously considered breaking his promise. In a letter he wrote to Mary Ann at that time (the letter was apparently never sent) John Wilkes wrote, “I care not for the censure of the north, so I have your forgiveness. And I feel I may hope it, even though you differ with me in opinion.”

After Junius Brutus Booth Jr. was arrested following the assassination, he stated that he “found his brother Wilkes strongly in sympathy with the Southern cause and endeavored by frequent and earnest argument to dissuade him from his views on that subject.” “June” also said that he begged Wilkes “for his own and his family’s sake not to meddle in the family quarrel, as it might be styled, and only obtained a promise from him that he would not join the rebel army.” [“*Right or Wrong,*” pgs. 133-134.] Asia described her brother Junius as “neutral” on the war. [“*Unlocked Book,*” pg. 135] However, some evidence apparently exists indicating he may have been critical of Lincoln and his

administration. [“John Wilkes Booth’s Enigmatic Brother Joseph,” *MD Magazine*, Spring 1983, note 33, pg. 34.]

Edwin Booth was firmly pro-North and stated that he only voted for president once in his life and on that occasion he voted for Lincoln. Disagreements about the Civil War caused Edwin and John Wilkes came between the two brothers and had a negative impact on their relationship.

Asia Booth Clarke was vague about her own views on the Civil War. However, she was quite eloquent about John Wilkes’ views, “I could not believe him safe or beyond danger at any time, knowing his Southern principles . . . I knew now that my hero was a spy, a blockade-runner, a rebel! I set the terrible words before my eyes, and knew that each one meant death. I knew that he was today what he had been from childhood, an ardent lover of the South and her policy, an upholder of Southern principles. . . . I knew that if he had twenty lives they would be sacrificed for that cause.” [*John Wilkes Booth: A Sister’s Memoir*, pg. 83.]

It appears that Joseph Booth may have been the one member of his immediate family who also held definite pro-Southern sympathies. According to Booth scholar Stanley Kimmel, author of *Mad Booths of Maryland*, Joseph Booth enrolled in medical school in Charleston, South Carolina, where he “joined one of the Confederate staffs as a physician and served with the rebels attacking Fort Sumter.” [*Mad Booths*, pg. 162] However, to date, no documentation has been found to document Kimmel’s statement. The fact that Joseph Booth disappeared from New York City in the spring of 1862 and set off without informing his family on a trip that would eventually take him around the world, raises some suspicion that Joseph may have embarked upon his travels at least in part to avoid being drafted into the Union Army. He did not return to the East Coast until May 11, 1865, when he was arrested on suspicion of being involved in his brother’s assassination of Lincoln. He was released without charge.

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