

THE LINCOLN ASSASSINATION CONSPIRATORS

THEIR CONFINEMENT AND EXECUTION, AS RECORDED IN
THE LETTERBOOK OF JOHN FREDERICK HARTRANFT

Edited by **EDWARD STEERS, JR.**, and **HAROLD HOLZER**

With a Foreword by **ALLEN WEINSTEIN**, Archivist of the United States

LOUISIANA STATE UNIVERSITY PRESS  BATON ROUGE

in association with

NATIONAL ARCHIVES AND RECORDS ADMINISTRATION WASHINGTON, D.C.

CONTENTS

FOREWORD, BY ALLEN WEINSTEIN ix

PREFACE xi

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS xiii

I THE STORY

- 1 John Frederick Hartranft 3
 - 2 The Conspirators Are Cornered 13
 - 3 Abandon All Hope 21
 - 4 *Inter Arma Silent Leges* 33
 - 5 Let the Stain of Innocent Blood Be Removed from the Land 48
- Afterword: Hartranft's Postwar Life 56

II THE LETTERBOOK: Transcribed and Annotated

Editors' Note 63

Rules of the Prison 65

The Letterbook 71

APPENDIX: REPRODUCTIONS FROM THE LETTERBOOK 161

Hartranft's Appointment and the Rules of the Prison 162

A Typical Two-Page Spread from the Letterbook 164

Hartranft's Response on Charges Mudd Was Given Special
Treatment 166

The Execution Order from Major General Hancock 167

Hartranft's Report of the Execution 168

INDEX 171

1

John Frederick Hartranft

The general who guarded—and some say coddled—the Abraham Lincoln assassination conspirators, but then coolly sent them to their death on the gallows, was born on December 16, 1830, in tiny New Hanover Township, in Montgomery County, Pennsylvania. John Frederick Hartranft grew up in the rural hamlets that modern tourists now call Pennsylvania Dutch country—so named because it was, more precisely, a haven for German immigrants (the family was originally called “Herterranft”). He lived first in the village of Gilbertsville and then in nearby Boyertown, where the future Union officer’s father became an innkeeper, and later a real estate speculator.¹ Ultimately the family moved on to Norristown, which today is a western suburb of Philadelphia.

After some local schooling, Hartranft was sent to study at the nearby Tree-mount Seminary, where he earned praise for gentlemanly demeanor from its headmaster, even if he did not distinguish himself there as a scholar. Still, the serious young man went off for further education at Marshall College in Mercersburg, and then, at age twenty, transferred to Union College in Schenectady, New York. Three years later, he earned an engineering degree and returned home to Pennsylvania to begin a career as a surveyor’s apprentice with the Water Gap Railroad in Easton. It seemed, until then, a rather ordinary, quietly ambitious, small-town American life.

1. A. M. Gambone, *Major-General John Frederick Hartranft: Citizen Soldier and Pennsylvania Statesman* (Baltimore: Butternut and Blue, 1995), 5. Gambone’s is the one standard biography of Hartranft, and this essay owes an inestimable debt throughout to the author’s groundbreaking scholarship.

Evidently, engineering did not much suit Hartranft—though it would undoubtedly help later, just as it would benefit many other army men during the Civil War, in sustaining his military career. Engineers—like Hartranft’s future commanding general, George B. McClellan—were much coveted by the army. With his now-prosperous father’s encouragement—and influence—“Fred” Hartranft also became a county deputy sheriff, a political appointment that was secured because of the elder Hartranft’s growing influence in the local Democratic Party.

Fred, newly married, apparently liked the intersection between professional and political life, and doubtless his interest in the latter fueled his decision to study law with a local attorney (only a fraction of aspiring attorneys attended formal law schools in the mid-nineteenth century). Hartranft was officially admitted to the Pennsylvania bar on October 24, 1860.

That very same day, half a continent west in Illinois, another lawyer was busy defending himself against a charge that he had contributed money to finance the recently executed abolitionist John Brown’s failed 1859 raid on Harpers Ferry, Virginia. “I never gave fifty dollars, nor one dollar, nor one cent, for the object you mention, or any such object,” wrote the lawyer with evident indignation. His name was Abraham Lincoln.²

Just two weeks later, after a roiling statewide campaign that pitted Hartranft’s Democrats against the rising Republicans in the Keystone State, Lincoln won a decisive victory in Pennsylvania and handily defeated three opponents in the national race for the presidency. Lincoln never campaigned in Pennsylvania (or anywhere else for that matter, staying close to home throughout the contest), but Hartranft probably “saw” the Republican nominee on the countless engravings and lithographs that were published to introduce him to voters that fall. Indeed, one of them, an engraving by Philadelphia printmaker Samuel Sartain, had been issued specifically for circulation in the “swing” state of Pennsylvania, to make the homely Republican nominee look handsome “whether the original would justify it or not.” Judging by the outcome on Election Day, the print could not have hurt.³

2. Roy P. Basler et al., eds., *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, 9 vols. (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1953–55), 4:131.

3. John G. Nicolay to Therenia Bates, August 26, 1860 (typed copy by Helen Nicolay), Lincoln Museum, Fort Wayne, Ind. The Sartain engraving, based on a miniature painting from life by John Henry Brown that, in turn, owed a debt to an Ambrotype photograph by Preston Butler, can be seen in Harold Holzer, Gabor S. Boritt, and Mark E. Neely, Jr., *The Lincoln Image: Abraham Lincoln and the Popular Print* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1984), 64.

Politically ambitious, and no doubt disappointed at the outcome, young Hartranft could not possibly have imagined that over four and a half years the Union would dissolve, the country (including his native state) would be engulfed by civil war, and the westerner who had won the 1860 election would be killed, with the conspirators charged in his death placed under Hartranft's personal care.

Already involved in engineering, law, and politics (he had also served from 1858 as a member of his borough council), the blue-eyed, raven-haired, now-elaborately mustachioed Hartranft had also begun pursuing a military career a full three years before the Civil War began. He became captain of his local militia and, later, lieutenant colonel in the Pennsylvania State Militia.

While such peacetime training prepared Hartranft and his men for little more than drilling and parading, it made the thirty-year-old commander an obvious choice to raise a regiment once Rebel troops fired on Fort Sumter in April 1861, and President Lincoln responded with a call for 75,000 volunteers "to maintain the honor, the integrity, and the existence of our National Union, and the perpetuity of popular government."⁴ The presidential order came on April 15, 1861—four years to the day before Lincoln himself died, the victim of a pro-Confederate, pro-slavery assassin in Washington.

Hartranft answered Lincoln's call quickly. Within days of the president's proclamation, he enlisted a regiment of six hundred 90-day volunteers. The newly anointed Fourth Pennsylvania promptly headed south to Maryland to ensure the safe passage of Northern troops marching to the defense of the nation's capital, and also as a show of force designed to keep that crucial slave state from leaving the Union.

The eager young officer soon found himself encamped at the U.S. Naval Academy in the state capital of Annapolis, part of a strong show of federal force intended to discourage firebrand Maryland legislators from convening a secession convention. Maryland became the Union's first test of strength, and also the scene of its first exercise of possibly extraconstitutional means to protect the viability of the Constitution itself—or so the Lincoln administration argued (the Supreme Court would rebuke the policy after the war). Worried that Maryland secession would isolate Washington and doom his effort to keep all the slave-holding border states in the Union, Lincoln was determined to keep Maryland in federal hands, even if it meant arresting potentially disloyal legislators and holding them without official charges. Hartranft was squarely in the middle of the epic struggle, whether he liked it or not.

4. *Collected Works of Lincoln*, 4:332.

There is no small irony in the fact that Hartranft and his comrades in the Union army—while successful in preempting Maryland secession—enraged many Marylanders, with deadly effect. Some went “underground,” like the talented artist Adalbert Johann Volck, who secretly published scathing anti-Lincoln etchings and discreetly shared them with like-minded friends. But a more dangerous local dissident went on to rant to friends in taverns and theater dressing rooms, warning anyone who would listen that Lincoln’s despotism meant dreaded Negro equality and the end of states’ rights. That man, of course, was Marylander John Wilkes Booth.⁵

Immensely pleased with his early military experiences, Hartranft must have been even more excited when his regiment was transferred to Washington, then on to Alexandria, Virginia, where it briefly saw real action—the first Pennsylvania regiment to do so. But the clash was minor compared with what was awaiting the army’s still inexperienced, ill-equipped men near a little Virginia town called Manassas and a creek the locals called Bull Run.

As it turned out, Hartranft’s soldiers did not share their colonel’s patriotism and eagerness for the decisive fight that most Northerners believed would end the rebellion once and for all. To Hartranft’s mortification—and to the detriment of his subsequent military career—his troops unexpectedly decided to disband and return home on the eve of the Battle of Bull Run, arguing that their ninety days’ enlistment had come to an end. Nothing that Hartranft or the commanding general of the Army of the Potomac, Irvin McDowell, said to the soldiers could change their minds. The colonel was forced to muster out his regiment and, with nowhere else to go, report to Colonel Samuel P. Heintzelman’s Third Division as an aide-de-camp. Heintzelman then assigned the frustrated colonel to the commander of the First Brigade, Colonel William B. Franklin. General James B. Fry, who was on the scene when the “demoralized” Pennsylvania regiment “insisted upon their discharge,” could not disagree with General McDowell’s complaint—somewhat exaggerated, but not by much—that Hartranft’s troops “marched to the rear to the sound of the enemy’s cannon.”⁶

July 21, 1861, proved to be a Union disaster, as Confederate forces unexpectedly routed the Federals and drove them back in disarray toward Wash-

5. See Booth’s “To whom it may concern” letter of November 1864, in which he spoke of Lincoln’s “tyranny” and insisted that “this country was formed for the *white* not for the black man.” See John Rhodehamel and Louise Taper, eds., *“Right or Wrong, God Judge Me”: The Writings of John Wilkes Booth* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997), 124–25.

6. Robert Underwood Johnson and Clarence Clough Buell, eds., *Battles and Leaders of the Civil War*, 4 vols. (1887; rpr. New York: Thomas Yoseloff, Inc., 1956), 1:179.

ington, upending picnicking civilians who had settled complacently along the field to observe what they believed would be a quick and bloodless Southern rout. Hartranft was himself praised by his superior officers for his valiant, if vain, effort to “rally the regiments which had been thrown into confusion” during the battle—valor that would ultimately earn him a retrospective Congressional Medal of Honor, albeit twenty-five years later.⁷

Unfortunately, although it was generally acknowledged that Hartranft was a loyal officer who had stoically sought ways to serve his country at an embarrassing moment, he emerged from the horrifying experience of Bull Run—his first exposure to “seeing the elephant” in real battle—with a reputation as the colonel who could not prevent his regiment from defecting on the eve of battle. As Secretary of War Edwin M. Stanton would icily observe of Hartranft several months later: “Why, this is the Colonel of the Fourth Pennsylvania Regiment that refused to go into service at First Bull Run.” Even journalist William Howard Russell of the *London Times* thought it worth reporting to the world that Hartranft’s men had “deserted the field on the day of battle,” simply because their “*time was up*.”⁸

For the next few years, indelibly marked by the scandal, Hartranft would be repeatedly passed over for promotion. With no prospects in sight after the guns at Manassas cooled, he headed home to raise a new regiment—this time comprised of three-year enlistees. At least the new 51st Pennsylvania Volunteers would suffer none of the inglorious experiences of Hartranft’s first command. In contrast, this regiment went on to see action in no fewer than nineteen subsequent battles. Hartranft was acknowledged as a strict disciplinarian, a relentless driller, and a cool commander under fire.

Hartranft saw action in the assault on Roanoke Island in February 1862, the Battle of New Bern, North Carolina, later that winter, and the disastrous Second Battle of Bull Run in August. Hartranft wrote home right after that defeat—perhaps a bit defensively, with memories of First Bull Run still weighing on his mind (and reputation), that the 51st had been “victorious in every part of the engagement in which we participated” on the “old field of Bull Run.”⁹ But it was not enough to prevent another Union humiliation on the scene where the war was supposed to begin—and promptly end—thirteen months earlier.

7. *Official Records of the War of the Rebellion*, ser. I, vol. 2, pt. 2, p. 406.

8. Eugene A. Barrett, “The Civil War Services of John F. Hartranft,” *Pennsylvania History*, 23 (April 1865): 166–75; Belle Becker Sideman and Lillian Friedman, eds., *Europe Looks at the Civil War: An Anthology* (New York: Orion Press, 1960), 49–50.

9. Gambone, *Hartranft*, 55.

Instead, once again and more bloodily than ever, the war went on. Hartranft's exhausted men fought again in the muddy cornfields of Chantilly, Virginia, at the summit of South Mountain, and across the hotly contested stone bridge at Antietam, where, General Jacob B. Cox recalled somewhat obliquely, Hartranft was "made to feel the necessity of success."¹⁰ After enduring the bloodbath of the sunken road at Fredericksburg, General Edward Ferrero, a onetime West Point dance teacher whom Hartranft disliked, enthusiastically reported that "the highest praise is due Colonel Hartranft . . . for his gallant conduct and valiant service."¹¹ But Hartranft was battle-hardened now, and realistic about his dim prospects for advancement. Despondently, he wrote home to admit, "I think that to take Richmond now . . . is doubtful." The war in fact was not yet halfway over.¹²

Hartranft's service in the eastern theater of the war had been marked by considerable praise but no promotion, and it probably cheered him a bit to learn that his regiment would next be shipped west. The voyage, however, proved difficult, and almost immediately, Hartranft's troops were thrown into the long, though ultimately triumphant, siege against Vicksburg that ended with the city's capture in July 1863. The unit next occupied nearby Jackson, Mississippi, without firing a shot. In recognition of this unexpected and casualty-free success, General Ulysses S. Grant enthusiastically recommended the colonel for immediate promotion to brigadier general, and according to one story, the long-frustrated Pennsylvanian even got himself fitted out for a general's overcoat and confidently tried it on for size in full view of several of his comrades. But the promotion never came through. Hartranft, who had battled illness for weeks, went home to Pennsylvania, still a colonel, to try to recover his health.

Revived by this unexpected reunion with his family, Hartranft returned to active service in time for the Battle of Campbell's Station, near Knoxville, Tennessee, in November 1863. Again Hartranft distinguished himself, sending part of his regiment to bravely confront Confederate forces while wisely dispatching others to guard vital Union-controlled railroad lines. "Hartranft steadfastly held his ground," Brigadier-General Orlando Poe remembered. "All who saw it say that the troops moved with the greatest coolness, deliberation, and precision under heavy and continuous fire."¹³

10. *Battles and Leaders of the Civil War*, 2:652.

11. *Official Records*, ser. I, vol. 21, pt. 2, p. 326.

12. Gambone, *Hartranft*, 72.

13. *Battles and Leaders of the Civil War*, 3:733.

Only a few days later, back in Hartranft's home state of Pennsylvania, President Lincoln rose to speak at the new soldiers' cemetery, where casualties of the summertime Battle of Gettysburg had been laid to rest. On the rare occasions when the president spoke publicly during the war, his words were invariably reproduced quickly in the newspapers. There is no evidence that the Gettysburg Address made it into print in the western journals that Hartranft might have seen before his most notable military success to date at Knoxville. But surely he came soon enough to know that the war had been rededicated to a "new birth of freedom" that encompassed not only the preservation of the Union, but the new goal of ending slavery under the terms of Lincoln's recently promulgated Emancipation Proclamation. Still, even if the war had taken a new direction, Hartranft remained mired in the past: buoyed by new praise from his commanders, but still, vexingly, without the rank that he coveted and felt he deserved.

Ever the politician, the lifelong Democrat could foresee, at the dawn of the 1864 presidential election year, a struggle that would transform politics-as-usual. General George B. McClellan, onetime commander of the Army of the Potomac under which Hartranft had served earlier in the war, was nominated by the Democrats to oppose Lincoln under a peace platform. Hartranft was ready to change political allegiances. "I would rather see the flag burned, and its ashes scattered to the winds," Hartranft told a hometown crowd during his regiment's holiday-season furlough, "than it should be disgraced by a dishonorable peace."¹⁴

Evidently, however, Hartranft did not immediately embrace all of Lincoln's ambitious war goals. Back on duty in Annapolis, the colonel found himself charged with discrimination when he allegedly commandeered a supply of tents requisitioned for black troops and reassigned them to white soldiers. The incident should have set Hartranft's career back even further, but racism was hardly as serious an offense as losing control of a regiment under fire, and now, of all times, his long-awaited promotion finally came through when General Ambrose E. Burnside, his old commander at Fredericksburg, persuaded the War Department to elevate Hartranft to the rank of brigadier general. The promotion was made official on May 1, 1864, one year to the day before his appointment as military governor of the Washington Arsenal prison.

Throughout the ensuing spring and summer, Hartranft's new First Brigade of the Third Division saw furious action in Virginia: at the Wilderness, Spot-

14. Gambone, *Hartranft*, 94.

sylvania, Cold Harbor, Petersburg, and the Crater—names associated in history with the hardest kind of relentless warfare. Grant vowed publicly to fight it out along the Union line “if it takes all summer,” to which an enthusiastic Lincoln urged in turn: “Hold on with a bull-dog gripe [*sic*] and chew & choke, as much as possible.”¹⁵ But it fell to brigade commanders like John Frederick Hartranft, not to mention the men serving under them, to deliver on Grant’s gutsy promise. They did so at enormous cost in human life. Slowly, relentlessly, agonizingly, a war that had once ebbed and flowed at gargantuan hit-or-miss battles now settled into continuous fighting across wide and varied terrain, as Grant settled in, in “bulldog” style, to erode sagging Confederate strength.

“I am thankful to HIM who orders our destinies, that I am safe,” Hartranft wrote to his wife after the Union setback at the Crater, a badly botched attempt to tunnel under a Confederate salient outside Petersburg and detonate a bomb to destroy it. In the ensuing chaos, black troops were massacred inside the Crater as Hartranft looked on helplessly. In all, the Union lost nearly four thousand men—and more. “We lost the best opportunity of a Grand Victory . . . I have ever seen,” Hartranft admitted. But at least he had done his duty “to the best of my understanding.”¹⁶ By year’s end, with Lincoln safely reelected to a second term and the country newly committed to winning the war and abolishing slavery completely by constitutional amendment, Hartranft was reassigned to command a new Third Division of the Ninth Corps.

His finest hour in the field came in late March 1865, just three weeks after Lincoln inspiringly pledged at his second inauguration to pursue “this terrible war . . . until every drop of blood drawn with the lash, shall be paid by another drawn with the sword.”¹⁷ On March 25, forces under Hartranft’s command captured Fort Stedman, Virginia, taking some 1,600 Confederate prisoners while losing only 258 of their own men.

As Hartranft recalled of the early action before dawn that day: “Every officer and man stood up nobly, and . . . struggled desperately to hold their own in the face of supporting batteries within a hundred yards and superior forces pressing on all sides.” But the Confederate offensive seemed to be succeeding, until Hartranft’s men counterattacked shortly after 7 P.M., unleashing a deadly blizzard of cannon and musket fire against the Rebel positions. That evening

15. Ulysses S. Grant to Edwin M. Stanton, May 11, 1864, in John Y. Simon, ed., *The Papers of Ulysses S. Grant*, 26 vols. (Carbondale, Ill.: Southern Illinois University Press, 1962–2003), 10:422; Lincoln to Grant, August 17, 1864, *Collected Works of Lincoln*, 7:499.

16. Gambone, *Hartranft*, 112.

17. *Collected Works of Lincoln*, 8:333.

the fort finally fell, and as Hartranft almost matter-of-factly described the decisive moments some years later:

At 7:30 o'clock the long line of the 211th lifted itself with cadenced step over the brow of the hill and swept down in magnificent style toward Fort Stedman. The success of the maneuver was immediate and complete. The enemy, apparently taken by surprise and magnifying the mass pouring down the hill into the sweep of a whole brigade, began to waver, and the rest of the Third Division, responding to the signals, rose with loud cheers and sprang forward to the charge. So sudden and impetuous was the advance that many of the enemy's skirmishers and infantry in front of the works, throwing down their arms and rushing in to get out of the fire between the lines, looked in the distance like a counter-charge, and the rest were forced back into the works in such masses that the victors were scarcely able to deploy among the crowds of their prisoners.¹⁸

The fort safely in Union hands, Hartranft was promptly breveted to the rank of major general, although the honor was somewhat soured when he learned that the first newspaper reports of the battle credited his triumph to another German-American general with a similar name: George L. Hartsuff. Still, Hartranft was now entitled to send to his men the kind of formal public message of thanks and congratulations he had become accustomed to receiving from his own superiors: "You have won a name and reputation of which veterans might feel proud."¹⁹

So could Hartranft. Back home, his local Norristown bank acknowledged his triumph by printing up greenbacks decorated with his portrait, a sure sign of growing fame. In Virginia, Hartranft's victory had even more important consequences. The attack to which the general had responded turned out to be the final Confederate offensive thrust of the entire war. Hartranft's victory all but ended General Robert E. Lee's ability to fight. Just a few weeks after the fall of Fort Stedman, Lee surrendered to Grant at nearby Appomattox Court House.

Hartranft's military experience had encompassed the entire war, through both defeat and victory. His men had turned their backs on the enemy at the very first battle of the rebellion, but charged against it heroically at what proved to be the very last. Now, for hundreds of thousands of survivors, the war was finally over. But in a sense, it was only now beginning for John Frederick

18. John F. Hartranft, "The Recapture of Fort Stedman," *Battles and Leaders of the Civil War*, 4:588–89.

19. Gambone, *Hartranft*, 147.

Hartranft. His greatest test was yet to come, not on the battlefield, but in the Washington prison where he was to perform the most difficult service of his career; not against the enemy who fought hand-to-hand combat against the Union, but against the civilians who had killed the commander-in-chief while the nation celebrated the return of peace.

Two weeks after Abraham Lincoln's April 14 assassination—on May 1, 1865, to be precise—the nation's new president, Andrew Johnson, appointed John Frederick Hartranft to the post of special provost marshal general for Washington, D.C. His specific assignment was the most important of his professional life: to command the military prison at the Washington Arsenal, which had just incarcerated the seven men and one woman who would be charged with complicity in Lincoln's assassination. Hartranft was ordered to report to the special military commission for "the execution of its mandates."²⁰ The transfer of the accused to the federal penitentiary had occurred on April 29, two days before Hartranft's official appointment as their jailer.

From that day through the execution of four of John Wilkes Booth's one-time gang of kidnappers-turned-assassination accomplices, the Pennsylvania-born general held responsibility for the most notorious prisoners in American history. On the following pages, his careful, almost meticulous supervision is recounted—often in the very words he wrote in messages and reports that have been preserved in letterbooks residing in the Pennsylvania State Archives. Living through history—and making significant history of his own—Hartranft was now to face his greatest challenge, and earn his greatest distinction.

20. Benn Pitman, *The Assassination of President Lincoln and the Trial of the Conspirators . . .* (New York: Moore, Wiltach and Boldwin, 1865), 17.

2

The Conspirators Are Cornered

On April 26, 1865, just twelve days after Lincoln's murder, a troop of Union cavalrymen cornered his assassin, John Wilkes Booth, and Booth's cohort, Davy Herold, at the farm of a Virginia planter. Following a bravado resistance, Booth was killed and Herold taken into custody. While Booth's death brought an end to the manhunt for Lincoln's killer, it did not end the nation's intense grieving. It marked only the end of the first phase of an emotional period that had begun in jubilation three weeks earlier when Robert E. Lee surrendered his tattered Army of Northern Virginia to Ulysses Grant at Appomattox Court House, effectively ending the long Civil War. But along with sadness came a thirst for vengeance. Northerners wanted their president's murderers swiftly captured and severely punished.

America's greatest criminal manhunt lasted less than two weeks, during which time hundreds of people were swept up in the government's dragnet and thrown into prison, including those unlucky enough to be needed as witnesses in support of the government's case against the conspirators. In some instances it was difficult to tell the accused from the witnesses from the conditions under which both were incarcerated pending trial.¹

As the president's body was being slowly transported across the country toward its final resting place in Lincoln's hometown of Springfield, Illinois, the government prepared to prove to the world that John Wilkes Booth was the tool of a larger conspiracy whose perpetrators were the leaders of the Confed-

1. The government held certain witnesses in Old Capitol Prison as a matter of course to ensure their availability when needed to testify. If these witnesses were not held, there was no guarantee that they would appear when called by the prosecution.

eracy. The government would claim that while Booth may have held the small derringer that ended the life of Abraham Lincoln, there were many fingers on the trigger, not the least of whose were those of Jefferson Davis himself, the president of the Confederate States of America. But Davis and his lieutenants were still at large, their whereabouts unknown. Two weeks after Booth's death, Davis would be captured near Irwinsville, Georgia, still believing there was hope for his Confederacy.

The first of the conspirators to fall into government hands was Edman Spangler, a simple man whose principal sin was knowing Booth and his father, the renowned actor Junius Brutus Booth. Spangler had worked as a carpenter at the elder Booth's home in Harford County, Maryland, some fifteen years earlier. At the time of Lincoln's murder, Spangler worked for the Ford brothers in their Washington Theatre, the site of the assassination, as a "scene shifter" and carpenter. John Ford had found him to be a reliable employee who performed various tasks around the playhouse. The descriptions of the accused that appeared in the local newspapers reflected the prejudice of the times, but they satisfied the public's desire to learn everything it could about the alleged killers of the president. Spangler was said to have an "unintelligent-looking face . . . swollen by the excessive use of alcohol, a low forehead, brown hair, and anxious-looking eyes."²

Spangler's past acquaintance with Booth and his position at Ford's Theatre made him a prime suspect. Perhaps the willingness of other employees to point a finger at the hapless Spangler reflected a desire to turn suspicion away from themselves; in any case, Ford's other employees were not suspects. Several of those present at the theater on the night of the assassination swore that Spangler was standing by the rear stage door when Booth came rushing past to escape the theater after shooting Lincoln. As Booth fled through the open door, it quickly slammed shut behind him. The government became convinced that Spangler had deliberately stationed himself at the stage door to aide Booth's escape. Whether he had done so unwittingly or according to plan made no difference. Helping Booth in any way was sufficient cause for arrest.

Spangler was arrested on Monday morning, April 17. Under questioning, he told his interrogators that he knew John Wilkes Booth and that Booth had indeed asked him to hold the reins of his horse while Booth entered the the-

2. Ben. Perley Poore, ed., *The Conspiracy Trial for the Murder of the President, and the Attempt to Overthrow the Government by the Assassination of Its Principal Officers*, 3 vols (1865; rpr. New York: Arno Press, 1972), 1:12.

ater on the night of the assassination. But Spangler obliged Booth only temporarily, soon turning the job over to “Peanut John” Burroughs, a young boy who helped out around the theater. He took his nickname from the bags of peanuts he sold to theatergoers. Spangler’s primary responsibility was shifting the scenes between acts; thus he insisted he could not leave his post for long to watch Booth’s horse.

Spangler told the detectives that soon after he began working at Ford’s Theatre, Booth hired him to convert a shed located on the alleyway behind the theater into a stable. Booth told Spangler that he needed it to house two of his horses whenever he was in town. Spangler had agreed to serve as Booth’s stableman and care for his horses, tying the knot between the two men ever tighter.

Another witness, Jacob Ritterspaugh, likewise a Ford’s Theatre carpenter, claimed that on the night of the assassination, Spangler struck him across the face, admonishing him not to say which way Booth went—“for God’s sake, shut up” were the words Ritterspaugh recalled Spangler using.³ First taken into custody on Saturday, Spangler was kept overnight and released Sunday morning. He returned to the boardinghouse at Seventh and G streets where he took his meals, and he was arrested there Monday evening, April 17, while eating supper. Spangler was temporarily held at Old Capitol Prison before being transferred to the monitor USS *Montauk* anchored in the Potomac River near the Washington navy yard. From the *Montauk*, Spangler was transferred to the penitentiary cellblock on the grounds of the Washington Arsenal, which was located on Greenleaf Point in southeast Washington.

On the same day as Spangler’s arrest, Samuel Arnold and Michael O’Laughlen, two of Booth’s childhood friends, were taken into custody in Baltimore. Arnold was arrested at Fortress Monroe, where he was working as a clerk in the store of John W. Wharton. O’Laughlen turned himself in when he learned that detectives were looking for him in conjunction with Lincoln’s death. He did not want to be arrested at home in front of his mother.

Monday night, April 17, proved equally fateful for two of Booth’s other confidants, Mary Surratt and Lewis Powell. Detectives had visited Mary Surratt’s boardinghouse on H Street just three and a half hours after the shooting in Ford’s Theatre. The name of John Surratt had been mentioned in connection with that of Booth only a few hours into the investigation, and detectives decided to pay a visit to the Surratt boardinghouse. James A. McDevitt, one of

3. Ibid., 2:460.

the detectives questioning the actors at Ford's Theatre for any leads, said that he received a tip "to keep an eye on Mrs. Surratt's house on H Street."⁴ McDevitt and his colleagues searched the house thoroughly, looking for any sign of John Surratt or Booth. Finding neither man, the detectives returned to their headquarters, leaving the occupants of the house in a state of high anxiety.

On Monday evening around eleven o'clock, a second team of detectives, headed by Major H. W. Smith, returned to the Surratt house. Colonel Henry H. Wells, provost marshal for the defenses south of the Potomac, had received several snippets of information from different sources that all had a common connector—the 541 H Street boardinghouse. He ordered his detectives to search the premises thoroughly and then arrest the occupants, whether they were suspects or not. The innocent would be sorted out later. Smith bluntly informed Mary Surratt that they had come to arrest her and "all in your house, and take you for examination to General Augur's head-quarters."⁵

While Smith waited for the ladies to gather their belongings, one of the more fortuitous events for the government occurred. A "peculiar knock" was heard at the front door. It was too late at night for guests to be dropping by, raising the detectives' suspicions. On opening the door, an officer found himself face to face with a tall man, a pickaxe on his shoulder. Startled by the uniformed men standing in the hallway, the stranger told the detective that he had the wrong house. When asked whose house he sought, the man answered, "I came to see Mrs. Surratt." The detective replied that he had the right house, and when asked what his business with Mrs. Surratt was, the man astutely said that she had hired him to dig a drain alongside her house. He wanted to find out precisely where, so he could begin the next morning without disturbing her guests.

The man was Lewis Thornton Powell (alias Lewis Paine or Payne). Told he was at the right address, he was ordered to step inside. Powell had fled William H. Seward's house on Friday evening after savagely attacking the secretary of state and several members of his family. Powell had been given the task of assassinating Seward, while George Atzerodt, another of Booth's conspirators, was assigned the job of killing Vice President Andrew Johnson. Powell came the closest, nearly killing Seward and his son, Frederick. Atzerodt lost his courage at the last minute and fled the scene.

4. "Tragic Memories," *Washington Evening Star*, 14 April 1894; the article also appeared in the *Indianapolis News*, 14 April 1894. McDevitt states that he thought he received the tip from the actor John McCullough, but McCullough has since been shown to have been in Canada at the time. Who gave McDevitt the tip remains unknown at present.

5. Testimony of H. W. Smith in Poore, *The Conspiracy Trial*, 2:14.

Now, three days later, Powell, apparently tired of hiding out and hungry, found his way to Mary Surratt's house, where he had been a boarder several weeks earlier. The *Baltimore Clipper* for Thursday, April 20, described Powell's arrest:

The Secretary's [William Seward] negro doorkeeper was sent for without the knowledge of what was wanted, came into the room and was seated, the gas having been turned down previously. After he was seated the gas was turned on brightly, and without a word being spoken, the poor boy started as if he had been shot, and the pseudo laborer started also and turned deadly pale.

The recognition was instantaneous and mutual. On being asked why he seemed so affected, the negro immediately answered: "Why at's the man wot cut Massa Seward," and moving for a moment uneasily and with his eyes intently fixed on the prisoner he continued: "I does't want to stay here no how."⁶

At the time Powell was ordered into the parlor of Mary Surratt's house, she was asked if she recognized the man. She seemed alarmed on seeing Powell and, raising her arm in the air, declared, "Before God, sir, I do not know this man, and I have not seen him before, and I did not hire him to come and dig a gutter for me."⁷ Her denial bode poorly for Powell and for herself. The fact that Lewis Powell sought out Mary Surratt's house, of all the places in the District, suggested that he knew she would offer him safe haven. The authorities further suspected she was trying to cover up something more serious. Mary would also deny knowing Davy Herold, although he too had visited her house on more than one occasion. To deny knowing Powell only added more water to Mary's sinking ship.

George Atzerodt was the next suspect to fall into the government's hands. Atzerodt was arrested at the Richter farm in Montgomery County, Maryland, some twenty-five miles northwest of Washington, D.C. Atzerodt had been recruited into Booth's capture plan by John Surratt and Thomas Harbin, two Confederate agents who had been introduced to Booth by Dr. Samuel Mudd in December 1864. For four years, Atzerodt had ferried men and materiel across the Potomac River in support of the Confederacy. Atzerodt proved to be a good boatman. In the years that he plied the Potomac's waters he was never arrested.

Atzerodt's intended victim, Andrew Johnson, vice president for only forty-one days, was living at the Kirkwood House at Twelfth Street and Pennsylvania Avenue. Atzerodt got as far as the hotel bar on the night of April 14,

6. *Baltimore Clipper*, April 20, 1865, p. 1, col. 5.

7. Testimony of H. W. Smith in Poore, *The Conspiracy Trial*, 2:15.

but lost his courage and fled. He roamed around the city for several hours before checking in at the Kimmel House hotel on C Street near Sixth Street, at 2:00 A.M., where he soon fell asleep. Awaking around 6:00 A.M., Atzerodt left the hotel and walked to Georgetown in the District of Columbia, where he pawned his revolver. He eventually made his way to the old homestead where he had lived as a boy.⁸

Atzerodt's arrest occurred during the early morning hours of Thursday, April 20. A neighbor had tipped off a local farmer named James W. Purdom that Atzerodt had been overheard speaking about the assassination as if he knew its intimate details. Purdom worked as an undercover informant, passing information along to Union troops stationed at Monocacy Junction, not far from Germantown. When Purdom dutifully sent his information about Atzerodt up the chain of command, it reached Captain Solomon Townsend of the First Delaware Cavalry, stationed at Monocacy Junction. Townsend ordered a party of six cavalymen, under the command of Sergeant Zachariah W. Gemmill, to go to Purdom's house and then have Purdom lead the troopers to Richter's farm. The troopers arrived at the farm before dawn and, finding Atzerodt asleep in bed, arrested him along with Hartman Richter and two farmhands, James and Somerset Leaman.⁹ Atzerodt was taken to Monocacy Junction and then to Washington, where he was placed in the hold of the USS *Saugus*, a monitor anchored at the federal navy yard. The government's dragnet was reeling in Booth's cohorts. Only Booth, Herold, and Mudd were still at large. Mudd would be the next one snared.

On Monday, April 24, Dr. Samuel Mudd was taken into custody at his home in southern Maryland. Mudd presented an interesting case, and a much disputed one, even to this day. Of the eight conspirators charged with Lincoln's murder, Mudd was the only one to go to the military voluntarily with information. Actually, Mudd did not deliver his information in person; he sent his cousin, George Mudd, in his stead. The day after Booth and Herold stayed at

8. In 1844, Henry Atzerodt, George's father, came to America and with his brother-in-law, Johann Richter, purchased the farm in Germantown, Montgomery County, Maryland. In the 1850s Henry Atzerodt sold his interest in the farm to Richter and moved his family to Westmoreland County, Virginia. The farm fell to Johann Richter's son, Hartman Richter, and George Atzerodt visited Hartman Richter on many occasions before the assassination.

9. Affidavit of James W. Purdom, July 14, 1865, National Archives and Records Administration (hereafter NARA), M-619, reel 455, frame 0857; letter from Captain Solomon Townsend to Brigadier General Erastus B. Tyler, May 10, 1865, NARA, M-619, reel 455, frames 0565-66; statement of Sergeant Zachariah W. Gemmill, NARA, M-599, reel 2, frames 1014-19.

the Mudd farm, the doctor asked his cousin to visit the soldiers in Bryantown, located five miles south of the farm, and tell them about the two men that had been at his house.

On learning that two men had crossed over the navy yard bridge shortly after the president was shot, Major General C. C. Augur, in command of the defenses of Washington, had sent Lieutenant David Dana and a troop from the 13th New York Cavalry into southern Maryland with orders to arrest anyone who appeared suspicious. Dana had set up headquarters at the Bryantown Tavern. So it was to Lieutenant Dana that George Mudd went on Monday, April 17, to tell about the two visitors to his cousin's house. Dana delayed visiting Dr. Mudd and did not send any of his soldiers to bring Mudd to Bryantown for questioning. Instead, he waited for Lieutenant Alexander Lovett to arrive from Washington. Lovett, a member of the Veteran Reserve Corps, had been ordered to go to Charles County along with several military detectives and search the area for suspicious characters thought to have information about Booth and his cohorts.

Arriving in Bryantown around noon on Tuesday, April 18, Lovett checked in with Lieutenant Dana. When Dana told him Mudd's story, Lovett and three military detectives, accompanied by George Mudd, rode to Dr. Mudd's house to question the doctor and his wife. When Lovett finished questioning Mudd, he had a feeling something was not quite right. After listening to Mudd's account of the two visiting strangers, Lovett concluded that the injured man was Booth. He decided to carry the information directly to his superior officer and rode back to Washington on Thursday, April 20, where he reported to Colonel Henry H. Wells, provost marshal for the defenses south of the Potomac. Wells went to Secretary of War Edwin M. Stanton and informed him that Booth had been seen in the Bryantown area and that his leg was broken. Stanton ordered Wells to go to Bryantown and follow up on the information that he had received from Lovett. In the meantime, Lovett was sent back to Bryantown to pick up the hunt.

Not satisfied with Mudd's answers during their first meeting, Lovett questioned the doctor a second time on Friday morning. During his second interview, Mudd repeated much of the same information that he had given Lovett on Tuesday. Lovett's suspicions were again aroused. He told Mrs. Mudd that his men would have to search her house, whereupon Dr. Mudd suddenly recalled an important piece of evidence: the boot that he had removed from his injured visitor's foot. Mudd explained that it had been accidentally shoved under the bed and was only later discovered while the room was being cleaned.

On examining the boot, Lovett noticed an inscription on the inside upper margin that read “J. Wilkes.”¹⁰ When he showed Mudd the inscription, the doctor insisted that he had not noticed it before.

Dissatisfied with Dr. Mudd’s evasiveness and highly nervous demeanor, Lovett took him into Bryantown for further questioning by Colonel Wells. Wells questioned the doctor extensively before allowing him to return home, stipulating that he return to Bryantown the next morning (Saturday).

When Mudd returned to Bryantown as ordered, Wells presented him with a statement he had drafted from Mudd’s answers the day before. He asked Dr. Mudd to read it over and, if he agreed with it, to sign and date it.¹¹ Wells, like Lovett, had become suspicious of Mudd and thought he lied about not recognizing his visitor as Booth. On Monday, April 24, Wells, now convinced that Dr. Mudd was connected to Booth and his conspiracy, ordered Lovett to return to Mudd’s house and arrest him. Lovett took Mudd to Washington, where he was placed in the Carroll Annex of the Old Capitol Prison. Mudd was then transferred to the arsenal penitentiary, where the other prisoners suspected of Lincoln’s murder would join him.

Two days later, on April 26, Booth and Herold were finally cornered at the Garrett farm. Booth was killed and Herold captured. At last the government was satisfied that it had accounted for the key perpetrators in Lincoln’s assassination and was ready to avenge his murder. Preparations were made to transfer the eight accused prisoners to the old federal penitentiary within the Washington Arsenal. Here the prisoners would be held and their trial would take place, in a makeshift courtroom set up exclusively for that purpose. John F. Hartranft was about to enter their lives.

10. Contrary to what some authors have written, the name “Booth” was not part of the inscription, nor was the word *Booth* scratched out. The entire inscription simply read “J. Wilkes.”

11. Statement of Dr. S. A. Mudd, NARA, M-599, reel 5, frames 0212–0225. The signature on the original document (Saml. A. Mudd) was clearly the same as the signatures on a half-dozen other documents of known provenance signed by Dr. Mudd.