

Eyewitness Account of Dr. Robert King Stone, President Lincoln's Family Physician

Stacey Bredhoff

On April 14, 1865, at approximately 10:20 p.m., John Wilkes Booth, a prominent American actor, snuck up behind President Abraham Lincoln as he watched a play from the presidential box at Ford's Theater and shot him in the back of the head at point-blank range. Booth jumped from the balcony onto the stage and, brandishing a dagger in his hand, fled into the night.

Charles Leale, a young doctor who was in the audience, rushed to the balcony to attend the president. He found Lincoln unconscious, but still seated upright in his rocking chair. Having seen Booth holding a knife, Leale initially thought the president had been stabbed and began looking for a knife wound. He laid the president on the floor to better examine him. Finally, he discovered the bullet wound in the back of Lincoln's head. As more and more people filled the cramped balcony of the theater, Leale, and another doctor who had joined him, decided that they should take the president to a house nearby where he could be more thoroughly examined and treated. Lincoln was too seriously wounded to be taken back to the White House.

Six men carried the president down the theater stairs and out into the street without a specific destination in mind. Henry Safford, a boarder in William Petersen's house, located directly across from the theater, heard the commotion, and as he watched the soldiers carrying the president somewhat aimlessly in the street, beckoned them to come inside.

The entourage carried Lincoln up the stairs, through the doorway, and into a small back bedroom.

At 6 feet 4 inches tall, Lincoln was too tall for the bed; so it was pulled away from the wall, and he was laid diagonally across it. Doctors, military officers, government officials, and well wishers began to fill the room. The president's family physician, Robert King Stone, was summoned. Leale, the 23-year-old doctor who had received his medical degree only 6 weeks earlier, remained in charge of the case until Stone arrived.

President Lincoln was 56 years old. The burdens of the presidency during the Civil War had aged him. Yet, when he was undressed to be examined and treated, the doctors and others present saw that he had the toned body of an athlete. That he lived for many hours after being shot—a fact that amazed many of the doctors—was attributed to his physical strength.

For treatment, the doctors kept the wound clear, as a means of regulating his breathing, which was monitored throughout the night. The president,

however, never regained consciousness. All the doctors in attendance knew that the wound was fatal. Only Mrs. Lincoln, stunned and inconsolable, maintained hope for his recovery. The president died the following morning at 7:22 a.m.

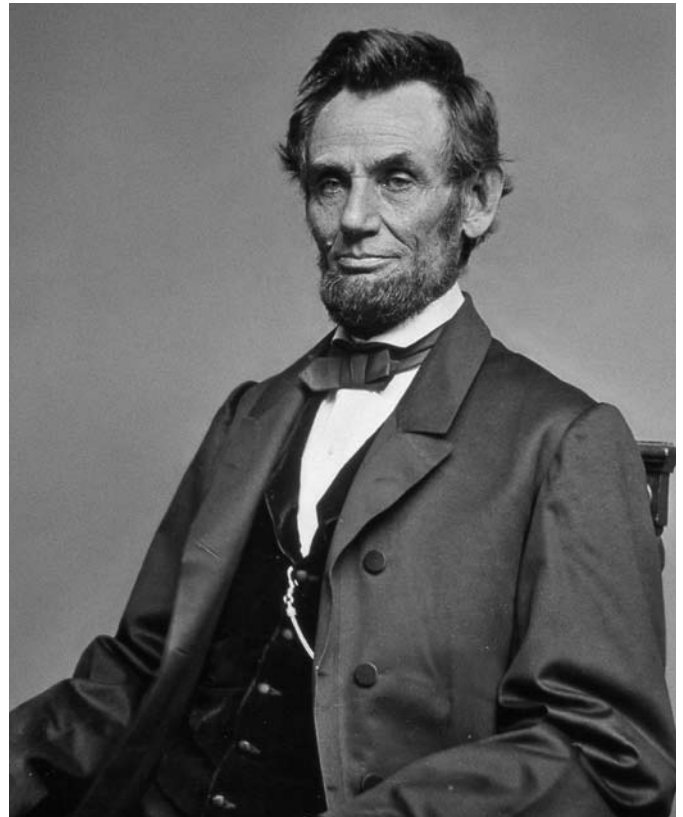
As Lincoln clung to life throughout the night, his assassin was making his way out of the District of Columbia and into the Maryland countryside. Pursued by Union soldiers for 12 days through southern Maryland and Virginia, Booth died of a gunshot wound on April 26 after refusing to surrender to Federal troops.

The murder of Abraham Lincoln was part of a larger conspiracy that included a simultaneous attack on Secretary of State William H. Seward and the possible targeting of Vice President Andrew Johnson. Johnson, who assumed the presidency after Lincoln's death, considered the crime a military one and ordered that the eight accused conspirators be tried before a military commission. The tribunal convened at the old penitentiary on the grounds of the Washington Arsenal, the site presently occupied by Fort McNair in Washington, D.C.

The commission convened for the first time on May 8 and sealed the verdicts on June 30. Of the eight defendants, three were sentenced to life in prison, one was sentenced to six years in prison, and four



Dr. Robert King Stone, photograph from the Mathew Brady Collection, ca. 1861-65, National Archives, Records of the Office of the Chief Signal Officer [111-B-5927]



Abraham Lincoln, photograph from the Mathew Brady Collection, ca. 1861-65, National Archives, Records of the Office of the Chief Signal Officer [111-B-3658]

Excerpts from Dr. Stone's testimony:

"I was sent for by Mrs. Lincoln immediately after the assassination. I arrived there in a very few moments and found that the President had been removed from the theatre to the house of a gentleman living directly opposite the theatre, had been carried into the back room of the residence, and was there placed upon a bed. I found a number of gentlemen, citizens, around him, and among others two assistant Surgeons of the Army who had brought him over from the theatre and had attended to him. They immediately gave over the case to my care, knowing my relations to the family. I proceeded then to examine him, and instantly found that the president had received a gunshot wound in the back part of the left side of his head, into which I carried immediately my finger. I at once informed those around that the case was a hopeless one; that the President would die; that there was no positive limit to the duration of his life; that his vital tenacity was very strong, and he would resist as long as any man could, but that death certainly would soon close the scene. I remained with him doing whatever was in my power, assisted by my friends, to aid him, but of course, nothing could be done; and he died the next morning at about half past seven o'clock..."

were condemned to death. Members of the commission heard from more than 350 witnesses, whose testimonies were recorded verbatim in shorthand by court reporters. Transcriptions of each witness's statement, written out in longhand, were provided to lawyers for both the prosecution and defense.

Of the 14 doctors who attended to President Lincoln on the night of his assassination, Dr. Stone is the only one who presented testimony on Lincoln's condition. A witness for the prosecution, Stone was questioned by the government's lead prosecutor, Judge Advocate General Joseph Holt. Transcribed, Stone's testimony is six pages long. Three pages of the original transcription are reproduced here. 📄

Note about the document: Dr. Stone's statement is preserved by the National Archives among the investigation and trial papers relating to the assassination of President Lincoln, in Records of the Office of the Judge Advocate General (Army), Record Group 153.

The original transcription of Dr. Stone's testimony is part of a major traveling exhibition, titled "Eyewitness: American Originals from the National Archives." It will be on view at the Jimmy Carter Presidential Library and Museum through April 29, 2007. For more information about the exhibition and for a full itinerary go to www.archives.gov.

For further reading:

Kauffman, Michael W. *American Brutus—John Wilkes Booth and the Lincoln Conspiracies*. New York: Random House, 2004.

Dr. Robert King Stone,

a witness called for the prosecution, being
duly sworn, testified as follows:

By the Judge Advocate

Q. State to the Court if you are a
practising physician in this city?

A. I am.

Q. Were you, or not, the physician of
the late President of the United States?

A. I was his family physician.

Q. State whether or not you were
called to see him on the evening of his
assassination, and the examination
which you made, and the Result?

A. I was sent for by Mrs Lincoln
immediately after the assassination.
I arrived there in a very few moments
and found that the President had



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been removed from the theatre to the house of a gentleman living directly opposite the theatre, had been carried into the back room of the residence, and was there placed upon a bed. I found a number of gentlemen, citizens, around him, and among others two Assistant Surgeons of the Army who had brought him over from the theatre and had attended to him. They immediately gave over the case to my care, knowing my relations to the family. I proceeded then to examine him, and instantly found that the President had received a gun shot wound in the back part of the left side of his head, into which I carried immediately my finger. I at once informed those around that the case was a hopeless one; that the President would die; that there was no positive limit to the duration of his life; that his



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vital tenacity was very strong, and he would resist as long as any man could, but that death certainly would soon close the scene. I remained with him doing whatever was in my power, assisted by my friends, to aid him, but of course, nothing could be done, and he died the next morning at about half past seven o'clock. It was about a quarter past ten that I reached him.

Q. He died from that wound?

A. Yes, sir.

Q. Did you extract the ball?

A. Yes, sir. The next day, previous to the process of embalment, with some medical friends, Dr. Curtis and Dr. Woodward of the Army, and in the presence also of Surgeon General, Dr. Barnes, the examination was made. We traced the wound through the brain, and the ball was found in the

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TEACHING SUGGESTIONS

Lee Ann Potter

1. Ask students what they know about the death of President Abraham Lincoln. List their responses on the board. Next, ask them where they got their information.
2. Distribute copies of the featured document (three pages) to students. Invite one student to read it aloud while the others follow along. Lead a class discussion about the document using the following questions: What type of document is it? Who created the document and for what purpose? Under what circumstances was it created? Who was the intended audience? How does information from the document confirm or conflict with other information you had about Lincoln's death?
3. Ask students to recall a significant event that they personally witnessed and to write down 10 details about that event. They may wish to describe other people who were there, the weather, what they were wearing, the location, time of day, or other information. Next, ask students whether recalling specific details was easy or difficult. Inform students that Dr. Stone's testimony was taken on May 16, 1865; one month and two days after Lincoln was shot and that he was one of more than 350 witnesses who provided testimony about the assassination. In a class discussion, encourage students to consider the benefits and drawbacks of eyewitness accounts, and to speculate as to why so many accounts were included in the trial.
4. Provide students with additional information about Lincoln's death from the background essay, and suggest that they also explore the Ford's Theater website at www.nps.gov/foth, and the Petersen House website at www.nps.gov/archive/foth/hwld.htm. Ask students to speculate how much of the information contained in the article and on the websites was available to the general public on the morning of April 15, 1865. If your community existed at the time of the assassination and had a local newspaper, encourage students to conduct research into how the assassination was covered in your local press. Or, invite students to pretend that it is 1865 and that they are reporters for various newspapers, in both the North and South, and assign them to write a 500- to 1000-word article about the assassination.
5. Share Walt Whitman's poem "Oh Captain, My Captain" with students. Ask them to describe the emotions that the poem prompts and explain that the poem was written by Whitman in response to Lincoln's death. Encourage students to conduct research into other reactions—by authors, artists, communities, and others—to President Lincoln's death.
6. Dr. Stone's account is included in an online version of the "Eyewitness" exhibit from the National Archives. Invite student pairs to select another eyewitness account featured in the exhibit at www.archives.gov/exhibits/eyewitness, and brainstorm a list of 5 to 10 questions that their chosen account prompts. Assign students to conduct research in order to answer their questions. Ask student volunteers to share the results of their research with the class.

STACEY BREDHOFF is a senior curator at the National Archives and curator of the "Eyewitness: American Originals from the National Archives" traveling exhibition. **LEE ANN POTTER** is the head of Education and Volunteer Programs at the National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, D.C. Potter serves as the editor for "Teaching with Documents," a regular department of Social Education. You can reproduce the images that accompany this article in any quantity.