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Abraham Lincoln Slept Here

President Lincoln in Albany and the vagaries of history

BY PAUL GRONDAHL | PHOTOS COURTESY ALBANY ARCHIVES

The course of history can change in an instant. Historians like to play a game of "What If?" and imagine how differently things might have turned out. What if the Mayflower never sailed? What if Japan did not attack Pearl Harbor? What if President John F. Kennedy had not been assassinated?

Abraham Lincoln visited Albany just once, on February 18, 1861. On that same day, a 23-year-old actor named John Wilkes Booth was in the capital city starring in *The Apostate* at the Gayety Theater on Green Street in the South End. Lincoln was just a few blocks away at a dinner and reception hosted by Gov. Edwin D. Morgan in his home on State Street — before the Executive Mansion on Eagle Street became the governor's official residence. There is no indication that Lincoln and Booth, a

radical anarchist who supported the Confederacy, crossed paths in Albany. Booth's role in the drama involved the use of a dagger. During one performance, he accidentally fell and stabbed himself in the chest, narrowly missing his heart.

What if Booth's stab wound on stage had proved fatal? What if Booth attempted to assassinate Lincoln in Albany in 1861, but failed and was imprisoned? The possibilities are tantalizing. But that did not happen. This year, we mark the 150th anniversary of Booth's assassination of Lincoln. Booth shot Lincoln in the head on April 14, 1865, with a pistol in the presidential box in Ford's Theatre in Washington, D.C., during a performance of *Our American Cousin*. Lincoln died the next morning. Maj. Henry Rathbone, 28, of Albany, was slashed on the arm with a knife as he tried to stop

Booth, who leaped from the box down onto the stage and got away. Rathbone's fiancée, Clara Harris, 20, also of Albany, was traumatized by the attack, which spattered her evening gown with Lincoln's blood. The couple were last-minute, fill-in guests and witnessing Lincoln's assassination altered the trajectory of their lives in tragic ways.

The facts of Republican President-elect Lincoln's visit to Albany in 1861 are no less compelling. He was so unpopular in Democratic-dominated Albany County that a riot broke out when Lincoln stopped here during a train journey from his home in Springfield, Illinois, to Washington, D.C., for his March 4, 1861, inauguration. Armed soldiers were called in to quell the disturbance. Lincoln's train stopped in 83 cities and towns, intended to reassure a republic unraveling after the secession of seven Southern states and the looming specter of a Civil War.

One of Lincoln's most vociferous critics was Democratic Congressman Erastus Corning, founder of the New York Central Railroad and great-grandfather of the 11-term Albany mayor. Corning and other prominent Democrats condemned President Lincoln for suspending civil liberties by declaring martial law and ordering elimination of a constitutionally protected process, the writ of habeas corpus, in response to the Civil War. In Albany, Lincoln made brief remarks at the Capitol to a joint session of the state legislature, met with lawmakers, went to dinner with his wife at Gov. Morgan's house, followed by a reception for the couple at the Delavan House, a large hotel on Broadway where the Lincolns spent the night. They left by train early the next morning.

Lincoln's next visit to Albany was posthumous. His funeral train arrived in Rensselaer at 11 p.m. on April 25, 1865, following a monumental, four-hour procession in New York City. A hearse carrying Lincoln's coffin pulled

APR. 15, 1865

BY TELEGRAPH.
LATE DISPATCHES.

ASSASSINATION OF
PRESIDENT LINCOLN!!!

HE IS SHOT THROUGH THE HEAD.

HIS ASSASSIN ESCAPES.

THE PRESIDENT INSENSIBLE

Medical Skill Exhausted.

ALL HOPE GONE.

His Family Take Leave of Him.

Sec. Seward Stabbed!

HIS INJURIES NOT FATAL

FREDERICK SEWARD INJURED

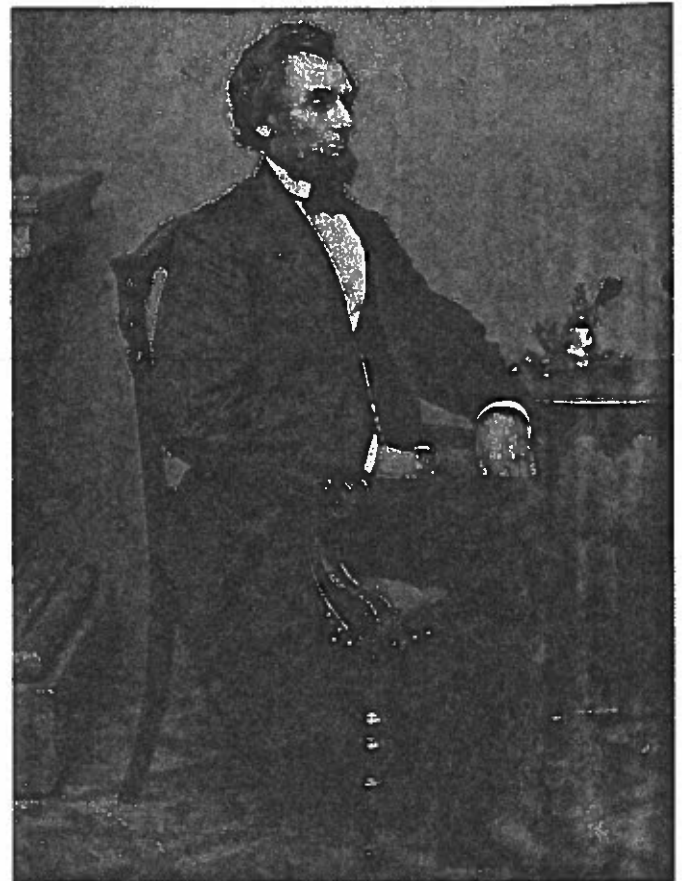
His Recovery Doubtful.

Washington, April 14—12:30 a. m.
The President was shot, in the theatre to-night, and is perhaps mortally wounded.
The President is not expected to live throughout the night.
He was shot at the theatre.
Secretary Seward was also assassinated. No arteries were cut.
LATER.
President Lincoln and wife, with some friends, this evening visited Ford's Theatre for the purpose of witnessing the performance of "Our American Cousin."

A headline from the *Albany Times and Courier*, predecessor to the *Times Union*, dated April 15, 1865.



John Wilkes Booth
around 1861.



A portrait of Abraham Lincoln, five days after leaving Albany (2-24-1861)
— Photo by the Brady Galleries, owned by the Library of Congress

by six white horses proceeded slowly over the bridge. Government officials and a military band that performed dirges trailed behind. The coffin was placed in the Capitol rotunda — the old Capitol, near the present site — and the doors were opened to the public at 1:15 a.m. on April 26. A line of the bereaved stretched for a mile in the pre-dawn darkness. Mourners filed past Lincoln as he lay in state, pulled along by attendants who did not allow any lingering. Thousands paid their respects through the night, past daybreak and into the afternoon in an unbroken chain of public grief. The viewing concluded 12 hours later, at 1:30 p.m., and the Capitol doors were closed, disappointing thousands more who had waited in line for hours.

That same day, Booth was cornered and shot to death in Virginia, ending a massive 12-day manhunt for the most notorious murderer in U.S. history. Clara Harris took the bloody dress, which was never cleaned, and put

it in a closet in her family's summer home in Loudonville. She married Rathbone in 1867. Lincoln's assassination tortured the couple as Rathbone descended into madness. On Christmas Eve, 1883, in Germany, Rathbone fatally shot his wife and stabbed himself in a bizarre re-enactment of the Lincoln assassination. He was committed to a German asylum, where he died in 1911. The bloody dress was purportedly burned in 1910. Local lore persists that it remains in the house, haunting it, entombed in a brick wall that sealed off the closet. ■

LOCAL EVENTS

Hear historian and biographer David McCullough in conversation with Lincoln scholar Harold Holzer, June 3, State Education Building, archives.nysed.gov.

Also see *Profound & Poignant: Union College Connections to the Civil War Era*, at Union College through the end of 2015.