



Wissahickon Valley

historical society

Ambler
Lower Gwynedd
Whitpain

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May 2008 Newsletter

From the President's Desk,

It has been a very busy spring so far, and the time has been flying by. We had an excellent program in April, with Peg Johnston presenting a PowerPoint slide show of photographs of interesting architecture in the area. Not only was it very informative, but it was a lot of fun guessing which building was in the picture before Peg told us. That same week, Jeannie and I attended the meeting of the Fort Washington Historical Society, which was held at the Highlands. They were presenting an award to our own long-time member, Bernadette Dougherty, for her work as Ambler Main Street Manager.

We will be wrapping up our program season at the May meeting, with our annual picnic (once again at Bob and Gloria Meyers) for the June meeting. Please be sure to let me know what food you plan to bring, and also remember to bring a wrapped item for a Corn Auction.

We still need a few more people to work on the Program and Membership committees. As we discussed at the last meeting, we want to focus on making changes that will strengthen the Society and entice and energize new members, while still retaining the values that have sustained us so far. We will honor our traditional practices but not be bound by them.

John Simon and I will be meeting soon with one of the Whitpain Township Commissioners to renegotiate the Lease. I hope that we will have good news on this front in the near future, and that we have a new roof before the summer is out.

Looking forward to seeing you at the next meeting!!

Russell Bellavance, President

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One of History's Mysteries: From time to time I will be presenting an interesting mystery, whodunit, or intriguing anomaly from history for members of the Wissahickon Valley Historical Society to contemplate, figure out, or ruminate over. Let's have some fun with history!!

Did Lincoln's assassin escape? Science may finally lay debate to rest

By Edward Colimore

Inquirer Staff Writer

Sometime after 2 a.m. on a cool, cloudy Wednesday, a group of detectives and blue-clad troopers cornered a murderous fugitive in a tobacco barn on the Garrett family farm near Port Royal, Va. "Draw up your men before the door and I'll come out and fight the whole command," called a voice from the barn. "Well, my brave boys, prepare a stretcher for me! "A soldier lit a tuft of hay, threw it inside and spied the silhouette of a man on crutches, a carbine on his hip. *Pop!* A shot was fired and, 143 years ago today, John Wilkes Booth - assassin of Abraham Lincoln - collapsed to the ground, mortally wounded in the neck.

That's what history says. But two local Booth family descendants - Joanne Hulme of Philadelphia's Kensington section, and her sister, Virginia Kline of Warminster - aren't convinced. They think that another man was killed and that Booth, who they believe was the president's assassin, lived to a ripe old age.

Aided by Booth historians, researchers and scientists, the sisters may now be on the threshold of proving their theory through DNA tests. Why not compare DNA from Booth family members to genetic material from the man in the barn, contained in specimens at the Mutter Museum in Philadelphia and National Museum of Health and Medicine in Washington? And how about checking those museum specimens against DNA in the hair of the assassin's brother, actor Edwin Booth, which is preserved at the Players, a New York theatrical club?

Depending on the specimens' condition, DNA experts confirmed this week that it is possible to get the answers sought by the family. "Since I was a girl, I've been told that he escaped," said Hulme, 58, recalling Booth family lore. "I want to know for sure who was in the barn," added Kline, 48. The sisters' belief is shared by Booth researcher and educator Nate Orlowek, of Silver Spring, Md.; historian Jan Herman, editor-in-chief of *Navy Medicine*, the Navy's official medical journal; author and historian Leonard F. Guttridge, of Alexandria, Va.; Booth buff Ken Hawkes Jr., former autopsy assistant at the Regional Forensic Center in Memphis, and others. "I've been studying this since I was 15 years old," said Orlowek, 50, who is leading the "false Booth" research effort and helping to prepare a request for the specimen in Washington. "It's one thing if historians want to disagree with us, but it's hubris to say that it's impossible [we're] right. What kind of historian is that?" "It's not too late to set the record straight," added Herman. "This is not a minor footnote in history."

Most experts "have a vested interest in keeping the standard story unchanged . . . but I'm convinced it wasn't Booth" at the barn, said Guttridge, coauthor of *Dark Union: The Secret Web of Profiteers, Politicians, and Booth Conspirators That Led to Lincoln's Death*. Booth's present-day pursuers are not discouraged by esteemed Civil War scholars who dismiss as irrational the escape theory and tales of Booth's mummified body on display in carnivals. Orlowek and his followers hope to convince them by

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matching the museum specimens' mitochondrial DNA with DNA from Booth's descendants or from Edwin Booth's hair and saliva residue on his old smoking pipes. "Anytime anyone official wants to take a look [at the Edwin Booth specimens], they are more than welcome," said John Martello, executive director of the Players, founded by the assassin's brother.

At the National Museum of Health and Medicine, which has three cervical vertebrae from the area of the gunshot wound, a panel judges specimen requests based on the inquiry's merit. Among the criteria are social, legal and ethical implications of the research, said Timothy Clarke Jr., a spokesman for the museum, located on the campus of Walter Reed Army Medical Center. He could not say how long it would take to consider a Booth request. The Mutter Museum, which has cervical tissue from the alleged Booth, said that the specimen's DNA has degraded from being stored in formaldehyde and alcohol. "The good news is that science is evolving and expanding everyday," said Anna Dhody, Mutter curator. "Maybe years from now, even embalmed specimens will be tested for DNA."

John Wilkes Booth would have loved this drama. He was the matinee idol of his time, a dashing Shakespearean actor who, with his brothers Edwin and Junius, performed in Philadelphia, New York and Washington. But on the night of April 14, 1865, after firing a .44 caliber bullet into the brain of Abraham Lincoln at Ford's Theater in Washington, Booth took on a new role: fugitive. "I have too great a soul to die like a criminal," Booth wrote in his diary in southern Maryland. "Oh! May He spare me that and let me die bravely."

Countless historians say the assassin gave his final performance at the Garrett barn. Hulme and Kline heard a different story. "The first story my mother ever told me was that John Wilkes Booth was not killed in the barn," Hulme said. The soldiers' victim was James William Boyd or John William Boyd, who bore a striking resemblance to the assassin and was sought for the murder of a Union captain by some accounts. "He was shorter than Booth and had red hair" instead of the actor's black wavy locks, Hulme said. Her mother, Virginia Eleanor Humbrecht Kline of Warminster, was one of more than a dozen descendants who gave permission to open the Booth burial plot at Green Mount Cemetery in Baltimore in 1995. They wanted to check the remains for identifying marks - a broken left leg and crushed right thumb - and to use photo superimposition, a technique that would have attempted to match the skull to photos of Booth. But a judge turned down the family and Orlowek after learning that Booth had been interred at an undisclosed location in the cemetery to prevent desecration of his grave. That left DNA as the only option for the descendants and Orlowek, whose research will be featured on TV's *Unsolved Mysteries* in the fall.

A minuscule bit of the Washington museum's specimen - the size of a match head - would be enough to get DNA, said researcher Ken Hawkes. "The specimen is sitting there in the National Museum of Health and Medicine, just sitting there," said Hawkes. Added Hulme, "I just want the truth."

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Mother's Day

History and Customs... In the U.S. Mothers' Day is a holiday celebrated on second Sunday in May. It is a day when children honor their mothers with cards, [gifts](#), and [flowers](#). First observance in Philadelphia, Pa. in 1907, it is based on suggestions by Julia Ward Howe in 1872 and Anna Jarvis in 1907.

Although it wasn't celebrated in the U.S. until 1908, there were days honoring mothers even in the days of ancient Greece. In those days, however, it was Rhea, the Mother of the gods that was given honor.

Later, in the 1600's, in England there was an annual observance called "Mothering Sunday." It was celebrated during [Lent](#), on the fourth Sunday. On Mothering Sunday, the servants, who generally lived with their employers, were encouraged to return home and honor their mothers. It was traditional for them to bring a special cake along to celebrate the occasion.

In the U.S., in 1908 Ana Jarvis, from Grafton, West Virginia, began a campaign to establish a national Mother's Day. Jarvis persuaded her mother's church in Grafton, West Virginia to [celebrate Mother's Day](#) on the anniversary of her mother's death. A memorial service was held there on May 10, 1908 and in Philadelphia the following year where Jarvis moved.

Jarvis and others began a letter-writing campaign to ministers, businessmen, and politicians in their quest to establish a national Mother's Day. They were successful. President Woodrow Wilson, in 1914, made the official announcement proclaiming Mother's Day a national observance that was to be held each year on the 2nd Sunday of May.

Many other countries of the world celebrate their own Mother's Day at different times throughout the year. Denmark, Finland, Italy, [Turkey](#), Australia, and Belgium celebrate Mother's Day on the second Sunday in May, as in the U.S.

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