

The Lynching of Mary Surratt

By Don Thomas



How did Mary Surratt earn the title of the first American woman to be executed?

Some have argued that the United States military was wrong to convict a profoundly religious, working-class, single-parent-widow to be hanged by the neck until dead. But, after all, wasn't Mary Surratt a spy, plotting to overthrow the United States government to avenge the Union victory after a long and bloody Civil War?

Was it not indeed in the best interest of the nation to have her executed?



Mary Elizabeth Surratt

Isn't it true that Mary Surratt, John Wilkes Booth, Lewis Powell, George Atzerodt, David Herold, Samuel Arnold, Michael O'Laughlin, Ed Spangler, and Dr. Samuel Mudd participated in a treasonous political plot to assassinate Abraham Lincoln? As well as the attempted assassination of Secretary of State William Seward?

As 21st-century United States citizens, can we now look back to the Lincoln conspiracy trial and proudly say that truth and justice prevailed over evil and tyranny?



This depiction of the assassination conspirators is incorrect.

Over the many decades since the Lincoln assassination, thousands of historical publications have offered many different theories about the motive for Lincoln's murdered. But among most revered scholars, Mary Surratt still endures as the mother hen who hatched the conspiracy eggs.

With all those facts considered, it would be unpatriotic to claim that the military unjustly condemned Mary Surratt, not granting due process of law under the American legal system. But suppose once censured evidence can now prove that Mary Surratt did not deserve the hangman's noose. Would so many people still feel the same way about the crime and punishment of America's first executed woman?

The most significant reason there are so many books, YouTube videos, and TV documentaries about the Lincoln conspiracy is that mainstream history allows only one opinion, regardless of all else. Scholars who wish for recognition as an authority on the Lincoln assassination must not challenge the findings and decisions handed down to us by Edwin Stanton's military tribunal judges.



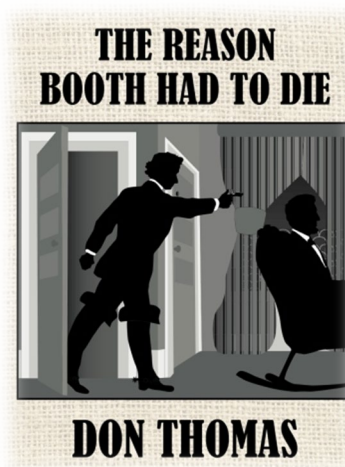
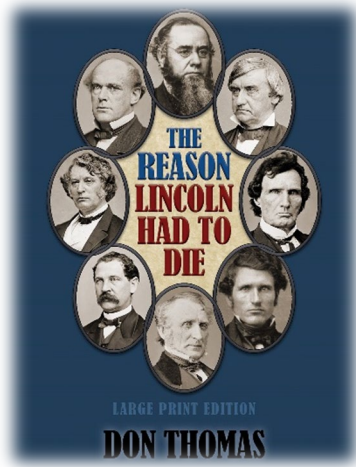
Secretary of War Edwin Stanton



*Judges John Bingham, Joseph Holt
and Colonel Henry Burnett*

Mainstream historians do not accept me as a legitimate authority on the Lincoln conspiracy, even though I have published two books documenting the only historically valid reason for Lincoln's assassination. Nor have any historians dared to argue against my analysis of the FBI forensic exam of Booth's diary confession.

However, I highlight only a few National Archives documents left out of the original investigation about Mary Surratt's journey to the gallows for this article.



In my latest book, entitled, The Reason Booth Had to Die, I do not bother to rehash all the events that led to the arrest of Mary Surratt and Lewis Powell. I instead present evidence my contemporaries on this subject have neglected to include.



Do you know what has been covered up about the coat and boots in this photograph of Lewis Powell?

In chapter 4, *The Capture of Lewis Powell*, I recap the second search of Mary Surratt's boardinghouse at the point where Mary and everyone in her house was arrested, along with a suspicious, late-night visitor named Lewis Powell alias, Lewis Payne, and James Wood.

Mainstream historians claim that on the night of Mary's arrest Secretary of War Edwin Stanton, along with his military investigators, still did not know the identity of Secretary Seward's assassin. However, in chapters 3 and 4, I provide documented evidence that Stanton and his investigators knew about Lewis Powell well before his capture.

On April 17, 1865, both military commissioners, Olcott and Wells, had already received information that Lewis Powell would seek refuge at the Surratt House. Their secret tip was the true purpose for the second raid on Mary's home **[DT2, Ch. 3 – 4, & WCE, p. 195]**.

While acting in service to the War Department, both Major Henry W. Smith and New York Detective Richard C. Morgan led separate police detachments to the home of Mary Surratt. Smith received his orders from commissioner Colonel H.H. Wells. Soon afterward, commissioner H.S. Olcott dispatched his chief clerk, R.C. Morgan, and New York Detective Thomas Sampson to the same location **[BP, pp. 122-23]**.

Colonel Olcott instructed Detectives Morgan and Sampson to seize papers, arrest Mary Surratt, all her inmates, and anyone who showed up **[WCE, p. 11, "3rd"]**. Upon their arrival, Morgan found that Major Smith and his detectives were ten minutes ahead of him with an identical mission, but under orders from Colonel H.H. Wells **[BP, p. 124]**.

The events that transpired during their late-night intrusion into the Surratt boardinghouse quickly corrupted into a fight over the bounty offered for the arrest of Lewis Powell, alias Payne. All the detectives from both detachments jealously competed for the lion's share of reward money **[WCF, pp. 193-196]**.

Smith and Morgan were first to demonstrate how easily money defiled their credibility. To make matters worse, every other officer involved gave their version of Powell's arrest, portraying themselves as most responsible for capturing the attempted assassin of Secretary William Seward **[Ibid]**.

Morgan stated during the conspiracy trial that Mary Surratt and all her boarders were in the parlor about ready for the carriage ride to General Augur's police station when he and Sampson entered the house. Lewis Powell had not yet arrived, and Morgan said that he interrogated Powell after Mary Surratt had left in the carriage **[BP, p. 123]**.

Major Smith was next to testify, claiming full charge of both detachments and that **he** interrogated Lewis Powell before Mary was taken away. Smith accused Mary of lying about not recognizing Lewis Powell as being the same man who called himself James Wood, the Baptist preacher who visited her house in February. **[BP, p. 122-123]**.

However, Morgan had just testified Mary was not present when Powell gave his reason for showing up at such a late hour. Smith was competing against Morgan for the leadership role, and the conspiracy trial prosecution chose to believe Smith's testimony over Morgan. Smith's accusation left Mary Surratt labeled an assassination conspirator **[BP, pp. 121-122]**.

Four months after Mary's execution, Colonel Olcott informed Judge Joseph Holt that Mr. Morgan was in charge of both detachments and not Smith. To his best recollection, only Morgan, Wermerskirch, and Sampson interrogated [Powell], while Smith was in another part of

the house. That on the night in question, and before the detectives left Augur's Headquarters, Olcott gave his men a general order to arrest Seward's assassin. Olcott wrote Holt [Powell] was brought to him "without suspicion on the part of anyone as to his identity" **[WCE, p. 195]**.

On April 16, 1865, Secretary Stanton appointed three Colonels, Wells, Foster, and Olcott, to manage the massive volume of collected evidence. The three commissioners reported to Judge Advocate H.L. Burnett, who took charge of all evidence gathered by the investigative Colonels. Judge Joseph Holt made Colonel Burnett responsible for selecting the evidence needed to prosecute the military case against all the conspirators. **[E&S, pp. Intro- xii, xiii]**.

Yet, Olcott waited until Mary was dead, and he and his men were fighting over reward money before reporting his evidence that would have saved Mary's life. Olcott further told Holt that the night before going to bed, he caused his Secretary Clancy to repeat the statements of each person engaged in the capture **[WCE, p. 195]**.

On December 27, 1865, Ely Devoe and Thomas Sampson filed their affidavits for reward money, claiming to be solely responsible for discovering Seward's assassin and taking him into custody. Both detectives stated that Lewis Powell was the assassin they had come to arrest and "the very man we had been sent to look for." They also noted that no other person had anything to do with the arrest and custody of [Powell] whatsoever. Their petition said that while Sampson interviewed Mary's late-night visitor, Smith, Morgan, and Wermerskirch were preoccupied, looking for paper evidence **[WCE, pp. 301-304]**.

Military officer Henry Warren Smith also testified during the John Surratt trial, admitting that everyone was alerted a person of interest would show-up at Mary's house:

On Monday, the 17th day of April... I received orders from General Augur to go to Mrs. Surratt's house and arrest her and any suspicious personages I might find there. I had a party of three men detailed to go with me **[J. Surratt Trial, Vol. I, p. 331]**.

Another assertion revealing that everyone knew Powell would show-up, is a military report submitted by Thomas Sampson. Two days after Powell's arrest, Samson stated:

The moment I saw him [Powell], I was convinced that he answered the description given to me by Col. Olcott of the man who attacked Mr. Seward, and I said immediately that is the man who assassinated Mr. Seward. Mr. Morgan coincided with me at once that he was the man **[E&S, p. 476]**.



Louis Wiechmann

On April 17, Major General Augur and Colonel L.C. Baker learned from John Surratt's best friend, Louis Wiechmann, that Surratt had not been in Washington since April 3. That [Powell] alias, James Wood wore a long-gray coat, and that he attacked Seward. Wiechmann also told Baker where Powell could be found **[E&S, p. 1333, WCE, p. 331, & BP, p. 119]**.

Before dispatching detectives to the Surratt House, General Augur, Colonel Olcott, Colonel H.H. Wells, and Colonel L.C. Baker already knew that Powell had been persuaded by Louis Wiechmann and Metropolitan police Detective James McDevitt to seek refuge at Mary Surratt's boardinghouse **[DT2, p. 17]**. That tip was why Olcott instructed his detectives to be on the lookout for Mr. Seward's assassin, who he described as a very tall, clean-shaven, black-haired young man.

Powell's arrest at the Surratt house was a prearranged set-up originating from Augur's Headquarters, after receiving information from Louis Wiechmann **[DT2, p. 20]**.

On the morning after Seward's attack, the War Department provided Louis Wiechmann a gun, new boots, and a horse before he and Officer James McDevitt began searching for Booth's accomplices. On April 16, Major General Augur appointed Louis Wiechmann and James McDevitt, Special Government Officers, to carry out private orders and report their findings **[DT2, Ch. 3, E&S, p. 72]**.

On April 17, 1865, when the police came to arrest Mary Surratt and all her inmates, Louis Wiechmann, John Holohan, his wife, and children were no longer living at the Surratt House. Wiechmann and Holohan were Special Government Officers working with the Metropolitan Police at that time and staying with Holohan's good friend, Officer James McDevitt **[DT2, Ch. 3 & 4, WCE, pp. 151]**.

On April 17, Detectives Morgan and Major Smith were sent explicitly to Mary's house to capture Mr. Seward's assassin, and arresting Mary was just an excuse to explain why the detectives just happened to be at the boardinghouse when Powell showed up.

Mary's son John Surratt was a known Confederate agent but remained a fugitive until long after the trial ended. It was imperative to capture Lewis Powell at the Surratt House to validate Stanton's Confederate conspiracy theory. Still, without John, the prosecution had to frame John's innocent mother as a Booth conspirator.

In December, five months after the conspiracy trial and punishment concluded, the War Department needed to defend their justification for Mary Surratt's execution and settle the infighting between all the detectives over the \$10,000 reward money. The award claims committee decided that every man from both detachments would receive a fair share. Charles Rosch and Ely Devoe were stationed outside the house during Powell's capture and were not eligible for a reward but received the same amount as Thomas Sampson **[WCE, p. 19]**.

Commissioners Colonel Wells and Colonel Olcott both received \$625 each.

Major H. Smith, \$2500.

Richard C. Morgan, \$1795.97.

William M. Wermerskirch, \$1436.78.

Ely Devoe, Charles H. Rosch, and Thomas Sampson received \$1005.75 each **[Ibid]**.

President Andrew Johnson also authorized an additional \$25,000 reward payments for the capture of the assassins of President Lincoln and Secretary of State William Seward.

For the capture of Lewis Powell alias Payne, Paine, James Wood, \$5,000:

Major H.W. Smith, \$1000.

Detectives Richard C. Morgan, Ely Devoe, Charles H. Rosch, Thomas Sampson, William M. Wermerskirch, citizens John H. Kimball, and P. M. Clark, received \$500 each.

Two colored women, Susan Jackson, and Mary Ann Griffin, received \$250 each **[WCE, p. 44]**.

Chapters 3 and 4 of my book provide complete, unedited statements given by Louis Wiechmann, Daniel Gleason, James McDevitt, John Holohan, and all the detectives associated with the capture and arrest of Mr. Seward's assassin Lewis Powell. My book also documents how much Stanton knew during the investigation, and most importantly, when he knew it, and why he had to cover up so much of the accumulated evidence.

Any historians who wish notoriety as an authority on the Lincoln assassination must only publish narratives that support Stanton's assertion: that the Lincoln conspiracy was a Confederate plot. But in truth, the entire historical re-creation concerning the motive to have Lincoln killed, and Mary Surratt executed, is one long disgraceful American history cover-up.

The documented fact is, Mary Surratt never lied to the military police about anything. Stanton's entire military investigation and conspiracy trial was an elaborate charade to conceal the Washington coup to remove Lincoln from office.

Mary was just one of many victims murdered following Lincoln's death and by the same treasonous political coalition within Lincoln's party, including two cabinet members from his administration, Edwin Stanton and Salmon Chase. The objective of these sanctimonious, hypocritical traitors was to remove a duly elected United States president from office by whatever means necessary, and they did not care about the truth, law, or justice.

Every Commissioner, investigator, detective, policeman, witness, and judge who had anything to do or say about Mary Surratt knew the government case against her was a sham. Yet, they all let Mary hang in exchange for their "forty pieces of gold."

An old saying states that history repeats itself, but I beg to differ. History does not repeat itself; the past is repeated by the ignorant. Those who do not remember the past are destined to repeat it. But no one can learn a lesson from a past never taught.

Research abbreviations:

DT2 – Thomas Don, *"The Reason Booth Had to Die"* by Don Thomas, (www.reasonlincoln.com)

E&S – Edwards William C. and Steers Edward Jr., editors, *The Lincoln Assassination: The Evidence*, University of Illinois Press Urbana and Chicago, 2009.

BP – Pitman, Benn – *The Assassination of President Lincoln*, Benn Pitman trial transcripts. United States Army Military Commission Lincoln's Assassination 1865.

WCE – Edwards, William C. edited & transcribed, a companion volume to **E&S** – *The Lincoln Assassination: The Reward Files*, by Williams C. Edwards, Copyright 2012. E-book, A Transcription of Microfilm File M619 from the National Archives.

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