



# THE LINCOLNIAN

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JOHN THOMPSON FORD  
1829-1894

## JOHN T. FORD AND FRIENDS

by Edward Steers

Ford's Theatre, located in the heart of the District of Columbia, is one of the most widely known historic landmarks in the country. There are few people who do not recognize Ford's Theatre as the site of John Wilkes Booth's successful attempt to assassinate Abraham Lincoln on the night of April 14, 1865. Nearly as many people recognize the name of the man who owned and operated the Washington theatre as they do those of Booth and Lincoln. While John T. Ford has achieved a high degree of name recognition, few people, including many students of the assassination, know very much

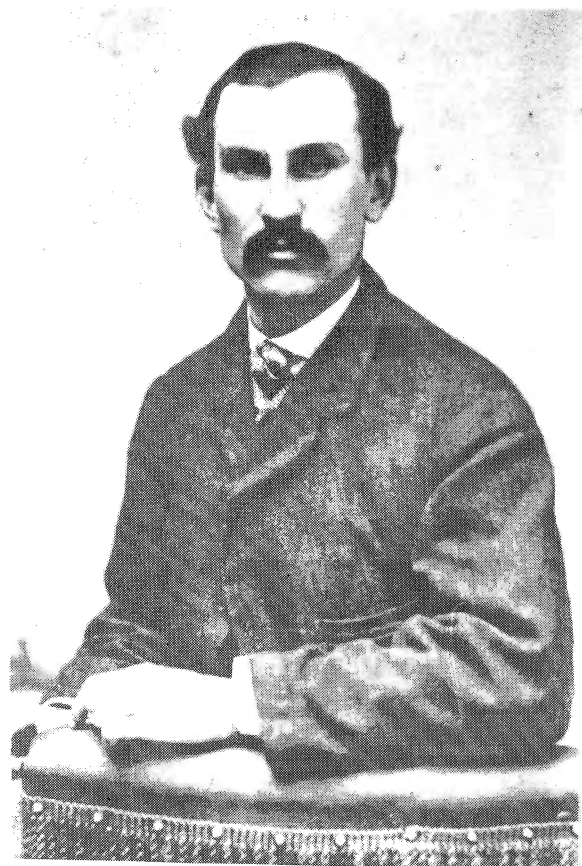
HARRY CLAY FORD. BORN 1844. THE YOUNGEST OF THE THREE FORD BROTHERS, "HARRY" SERVED AS TREASURER FOR HIS BROTHER JOHN'S THEATRICAL COMPANY.

about this interesting man and his great entrepreneurial career other than the fact that he owned the theatre on Tenth Street.

John Thompson Ford was born on April 16, 1829 in the city of Baltimore. In his early years, he apprenticed in various family businesses which included retail grocery and tobacco stores. In 1847, while working for an uncle who operated a tobacco warehouse in Richmond, Ford struck out on his own, attempting to publish a newspaper and operate a periodical store. It was while working in Richmond that same year that Ford wrote a farcical comedy for a local troupe known as the "Nightingale Minstrels". The success of this early venture into the world of show business soon led Ford to become business manager for the Richmond based musical group.



The taste of the theatre was much to Ford's liking and in 1851 he moved to Philadelphia where he became business manager for "Kunkle's Nightingale Ethiopian Troupe." Kunkle's Troupe had become famous in many of the Eastern and Southern theatres and opera houses and during the 1854-55 season, Ford formed a partnership with Kunkle and his partner Thomas Moxley. The three men agreed to lease theatres in three of the major show cities in the east - Baltimore, Washington and Richmond. Ford was to manage the "Holliday" theatre in Baltimore, Moxley the old "National" in Washington, and Kunkle the "Variety" Theatre in Richmond. They formed two stock companies of actors, which they rotated between the three theatres. They were unable to agree on specifics however, and they dissolved the partnership in 1857, with Ford retaining rights to the Holliday in Baltimore. When Thomas Moxley, who ran the Washington theatre, came upon financial problems in Washington, Ford stepped in and took over, turning it into a financial success.



In 1861, Ford leased the Baptist church located at 511 Tenth Street, and renovated it into a theatre. He then leased the building to George Christy and his famous minstrels for a period of two months, during which time he carefully watched the Washington market. After deciding that the city would support a good theatre, he began staging his own productions. In December of 1862 however, fire brought an abrupt end to Ford's enterprise when it destroyed the building. Almost immediately Ford decided to rebuild the theatre and return it to full operation as soon as possible. Even with serious wartime restrictions Ford and his Baltimore architect, James Gifford, rebuilt the burned out structure and opened to new crowds of theatre-goers in August of 1863. By April 14, 1865, Ford was operating one of the Country's most successful theatres and, when President Lincoln arrived that evening, it was his tenth visit to Ford's since its reopening in 1863.

The tragic events of April 14 were a major blow to Ford's Washington operations. Arrested and thrown into Old Capitol Prison, his theatre was

JAMES REED FORD. BORN 1840. KNOWN TO THE FAMILY AND THEATRE EMPLOYEES AS "DICK" JAMES FORD WAS BUSINESS MANAGER OF THE TENTH STREET THEATRE.

closed by order of Edwin Stanton. Ford was virtually out of business for the second time in less than two years. Temporarily down, Ford was not out. Eventually released from prison, he attempted to reopen his theatre, but was stopped by the government following adverse public reaction. The government eventually agreed to lease the building from Ford and after lengthy negotiations bought it outright for \$100,000. At this point, Ford decided to return to his hometown of Baltimore and concentrate on his business in that city.

In 1870, Ford bought the Holliday theatre in Baltimore and in 1871 built the Grand Opera House where he now put most of his energies. He continued to expand his operations throughout the 1870's and by 1879 was representing the famous composers Gilbert and Sullivan throughout the U.S. Although not required, Ford was the first to voluntarily pay the English artists royalties for performing their famous works.



JOHN HOUSTON. JOHN FORD'S  
ADVERTISING AGENT

Through the years, Ford employed the leading stars of the era, including such greats as John Sleeper Clark (who married John Wilkes Booth's sister, Asia), Edwin Booth, Edwin Forrest, John McCulloch, Joe Jefferson, and the beautiful Charlotte Cushman.

On April 14, 1894, the 29th anniversary of the assassination of Lincoln, John T. Ford died at the age of 65 in his Baltimore home, following a two-month illness. He was buried in Baltimore's famous Loudon Park Cemetery along with many other notables of his period. During the later years of Ford's life, he became one of Baltimore's most prominent citizens. He was a member of the Baltimore City Council, served as ex-officio Mayor, was a director of the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad and at one time president of the Union Railroad Company. At the time of his death, he left a wife and ten children - four sons and six daughters who carried on his theatrical businesses.

Included with this article are several pictures (eight) which are unique. They show the three Ford brothers who owned and operated the Tenth Street Theatre, along with several members of their company who were present on the night of President Lincoln's assassination. These photos have never been published. They came from a special carte-de-visite



FAR LEFT. ALFONSO T. HOUCK. 1840-1886. ALFONSO HOUCK BEGAN WORKING FOR FORD IN 1856 AT THE AGE OF 16 IN BALTIMORE. HE LATER CAME TO WASHINGTON WITH FORD AND WAS WORKING AT THE TENTH STREET THEATRE AT THE TIME OF THE ASSASSINATION. BURIED IN BALTIMORE'S GREENMOUNT CEMETERY, HIS TOMBSTONE READS: "WELL KNOWN BILL-POSTER."



JAMES LAMB. LAMB WAS JOHN FORD'S SCENE PAINTER AT THE WASHINGTON THEATRE. DURING THE CONSPIRACY TRIAL IN 1865 HE WAS A WITNESS AND TESTIFIED ABOUT EDMAN SPANGLER'S ACTIVITIES AND CONVERSATIONS ON THE NIGHT OF THE ASSASSINATION.



JAMES ST. CLAIRE. USHER

(CDV) collection of photographs put together early in this century by one of the early Lincoln assassination collectors. The pictures have been dated from the period 1864-1866 and are the only known photographs of the Ford brothers and five of their employees from this special period. We thought that the readers of the Lincolnian would enjoy being the first to see them. The pictures are now part of the collection of the author.



JOSEPH S. SESSFORD. SESSFORD WAS IN CHARGE OF TICKET SALES FOR THE TENTH STREET THEATRE AND ALONG WITH JAMES LAMB WAS A WITNESS AT THE MILITARY TRIAL.

FORD'S NEW THEATRE.  
*Tenth Street, near E.*

JOHN T. FORD - - - - Proprietor and Manager.  
(Also of Holliday street Theatre, Baltimore.)

MONDAY EVENING, NOVEMBER 9, 1863.  
Last Week of

MR. J. WILKES BOOTH,  
And Messrs. CHAS. WHEATLEIGH,  
HARRY PEARSON,  
G. F. DE VERE,  
AND THE GRAND COMBINATION COMPANY.

**THE MARBLE HEART.**

Phidias..	}	..... Mr. J. Wilkes Booth.
Duchalet		
Diogenes	}	..... Mr. Chas. Wheatleigh.
Volage		
Georgias	}	..... Mr. Harry Pearson.
Chateau Margeau		

ON TUESDAY—HAMLET.

ADMISSION:

Dress Circle.....	50 cents	Orchestra Chairs....	75 cents
Family Circle.....	25 cents	Private Boxes....	\$10 and \$6

Box Sheet now open, where seats can be secured without extra charge. nov 4—

PLAYBILL ANNOUNCING J. WILKES BOOTH STARRING IN FORD'S PRODUCTION OF "THE MARBLE HEART" FOR NOVEMBER 9, 1863. LINCOLN ATTENDED THIS VERY PERFORMANCE AND SAW BOOTH IN THE STARRING ROLE. THE THEATRE HAD BEEN BACK IN OPERATION THREE MONTHS FOLLOWING THE DECEMBER 1862 FIRE AND RENOVATION.

## THE LINCOLN ROCKER

by Joan L. Chaconas

"Yes, that was the real rocker in the box Lincoln sat in that night, with blood-stains on the back of it", and "they carried his body across the street to that house", whereupon a finger was pointed in the direction of the Beefeeder Restaurant. This is the conversation I overheard a few weeks ago while standing in front of Ford's Theatre. It started me wondering - how many visitors to Ford's realize that the Lincoln rocker, and almost everything else that meets the eye are reproductions?! This fact is pointed out by the National Park Service guides during their most informative talks, but if one misses the talk, there is no way to tell the real from that which is recreated.

The "real" rocker referred to is currently on view in the Henry Ford Museum in Dearborn, Michigan and has never been displayed in Ford's Theatre. The darkish stains which some people mistake for blood are there most likely as a result of not using an "antimacassar". Lincoln was of course taken across the street to the Petersen House, which is

next door to the Beefeeder Restaurant. Again, do visitors know that Corporal James Tanner once roomed in the building that now houses the restaurant? Tanner was trained in phonography, the forerunner of shorthand, and offered to take down the statements given to Stanton by the various witnesses of the activity at Ford's Theatre on the night of April 14, 1865.

After Lincoln's death, Ford's Theatre was closed to any further theatrical performances. The building was purchased by the government and, by December of 1865, had been gutted, rebuilt and was being used as the Army Medical Museum. The contents of Lincoln's box (boxes 7 & 8) were turned over to the War Department to be held and used as material evidence. After about a year with the War Department, the items were then relegated to a dusty storage area in the basement of the Smithsonian. They remained there until 1921, when Mrs. Blanche Chapman Ford, widow of Harry Clay Ford, sought the return of her husband's property, namely the Lincoln rocker. Harry Clay, John T. Ford's brother, had removed the rocker from his room over the Star Saloon, and had placed it in the box for Lincoln's comfort.



By 1929, after much correspondence, the government, acting under the precedent that the property of Jeff Davis had been returned to his heirs, returned the rocker to Mrs. Ford. She in turn offered the chair up for auction at the American Art Association, Anderson Galleries in New York City. The rocker was purchased for \$2,400.00 by Israel Sack, a Boston antiques dealer who worked as an agent for Henry T. Ford. The chair went into the Henry T. Ford Foundation and was displayed for a while at the Court House in Dearborn, Michigan. Today, as previously stated, it is on display in the Henry Ford Museum in Dearborn and approximately 950,000 visitors view it annually, along with the rest of Ford's vast collection of Americana.

During the 1960's, Ford's Theatre underwent a two million dollar renovation to restore the theatre as it was on the night of April 14, 1865, under the direction of Interior Department historian George Olszewski, the results of which you see today.

Basically, the restoration was done from Mathew Brady photographs taken shortly after the tragedy. The Interior Department contacted the Ford Museum in hopes that they would return the Lincoln rocker when they were informed of the restoration, but they could not be persuaded. This meant a reproduction rocker was necessary.

Among the many names submitted to Olszewski for consideration, the Carlton McLendon Furniture Company of Montgomery, Alabama was determined to be the best qualified. At first McLendon refused the task, balking at signing a contract. He said "I've been in business for 30 years and I've never yet signed a contract. Somebody tells me they want something; I build it, deliver, send an invoice, and they pay me. That is the end of it". McLendon finally agreed to make the reproduction rocker at no charge "...just as a gesture to my government". But the government, true to its red tape image, said they

didn't work that way and that McLendon had to charge them!

Since the original chair was not available for measurements, McLendon was obliged to use enlargements made from Brady's original negatives. The rocker is "an exact duplicate of the original, made of walnut and covered with red damask, ... with every dimension and carving detail accurate to a tolerance closer than one sixteenth of an inch".

The company also duplicated the Mary Todd Lincoln chair, restored the original sofa that Major Rathbone was seated upon that night, and made reproductions of the two additional straight-backed chairs in the box.

The newly restored Theatre was dedicated on January 21, 1968 and the McLendons were among the invited guests. The Washington Post newspaper gave a complete run-down on the persistent research applied to Ford's restoration and of course told of McLendon's work on the reproduction furniture. As a result of this and several ensuing television programs and interviews, the McLendons found themselves receiving many orders for both the Lincoln rocker and the Mary Todd Lincoln chair.

Today you can still purchase a reproduction Lincoln rocker and the Mary Todd Lincoln chair from the McLendon Furniture Company in Montgomery, Alabama.



Among the many items the Department of Interior had to reproduce was the wallpaper decorating the Presidential Box. Samples of the original paper are in the Osborn H. Oldroyd Collection of the Park Service. A small sample of this reproduction wallpaper is provided by Joan L. Chaconas and Ed Steers.

#### A BASIC LINCOLN LIBRARY

by George Landes, Jr.

( Editor's Note: With the following selections, we continue to build a basic Lincoln Library for the dedicated collector of Lincolniana and for those persons who wish to read more on the life and deeds of Abraham Lincoln. For reference, the first portion of our bibliography appeared in Volume I, Number 2 of the Lincolnian, November-December, 1982. Our compilation will continue in future issues. Comments and criticisms are welcomed.)

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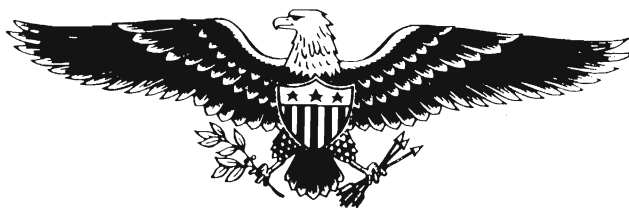
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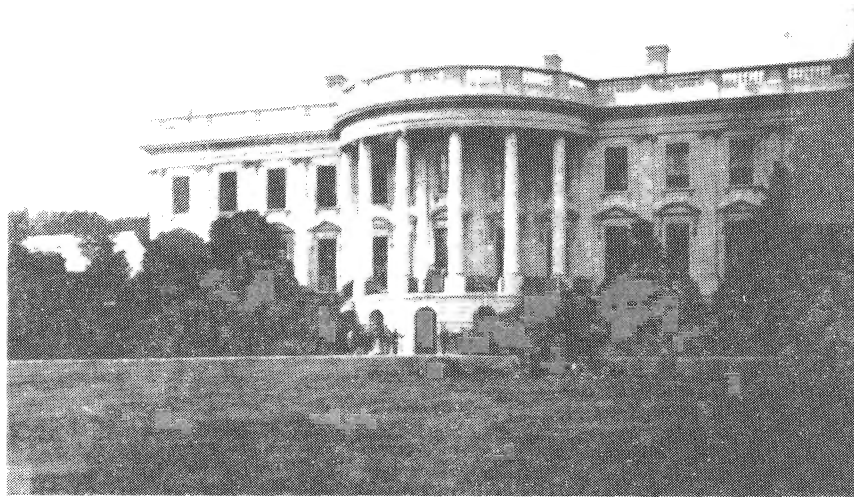
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## MR. LINCOLN'S WASHINGTON

On Saturday, September 17, 1983, the Lincoln Group will co-sponsor a special tour of Washington entitled Mr. Lincoln's Washington. The tour will be lead and narrated by our own Washington, D.C. historian, Joan Chaconas. Joan will take us to several of the sites familiar to President Lincoln which still exist in a changing capital city. Included are visits to the New York Avenue Presbyterian Church (the Lincoln Church), Lincoln's Summer White House at the Old Soldiers Home, and famous Oak Hill Cemetery where young Willie Lincoln was laid to rest in 1862 and where several of Lincoln's closest associates and friends are buried. This interesting tour will be shared with the Montgomery County Civil War Round Table so those of you who want to make this tour should reserve your seat on the bus as early as possible. To make reservations or obtain further information call Joan at 372-6945. The price of the tour is \$15 for Lincoln Group members and \$20 for guests.



### CALENDAR OF EVENTS

- July 1-3 Annual Mason-Dixon Civil War Collectors Show at the Gettysburg Sheraton Inn. The number one civil war show in the country. Daily from 9 AM to 5 PM.
- July 16-17 Civil War Encampment at the Beale-Dawson House in Rockville. This two day festival is sponsored by the Montgomery County CWRT and the Montgomery County Historical Society.
- August 14 Civil War Reenactment - Battle of Fort Stevens (which President Lincoln watched from the ramparts). To be held at Fort Ward Park, 4301 W.Braddock Road, Alexandria, Virginia.
- September 8 Montgomery County CWRT Monthly Meeting. Speaker: Joan L. Chaconas on Mr. Lincoln's Washington. Holiday Inn. Gaithersburg, Md. Dinner 7PM Speaker 8PM.
- September 10 John Wilkes Booth Escape Route Tour. Call Joan Chaconas at 372-6945.
- September 14 LINCOLN GROUP MONTHLY MEETING. FORT LESLEY J. McNAIR. SPEAKER: JOAN CHACONAS ON MR. LINCOLN'S WASHINGTON. COCKTAILS AT 6PM, DINNER AT 7PM, SPEAKER AT 8PM. PLEASE NOTE THE DAY CHANGE TO WEDNESDAY.
- September 17 LINCOLN GROUP TOUR. MR. LINCOLN'S WASHINGTON. FOR RESERVATIONS CALL JOAN L. CHACONAS AT 372-6945.
- September 24 The John Wilkes Booth Escape Route Tour. Last run of the year. For reservations and further information call Joan L. Chaconas at 372-6945.