

Oswald and Booth

The Scientific Evidence

By Frank J. Sarna

Over 130 years ago John Wilkes Booth assassinated President Abraham Lincoln. On April 26, 1865, after eluding capture for 12 days, Booth eventually was apprehended, shot and killed. His body was initially buried in the floor of the Arsenal Penitentiary. Then finally laid to rest in 1869 at Green Mount Cemetery in Baltimore Maryland. The descendant's of John Wilkes Booth have made efforts to have his body exhumed. Booth's family requested the disinterment for the purpose of verifying that the body buried there, is in fact that of John Wilkes Booth.

This scenario takes me back to another Presidential assassin, assassination, and exhumation. On Oct. 4, 1981 Lee Harvey Oswald's body was exhumed 14 years after Ruby's single shot sent the nation into a quagmire of unanswered questions that are still with us except one.

This exhumation began in 1977 when British author Michael Eddowes published his book *The Oswald File*. Eddowes claimed that in 1962 a Soviet agent, doubling for Oswald, was sent to the United States, and participated in the conspiracy to assassinate President Kennedy. It was Eddowes contention that the man buried in Forth Worth's Rose Hill Cemetery was not Oswald, but that of a Soviet agent.

Eddowes supported his theory using fluctuations in Oswald's height. Listed below is a table detailing these changes.

<u>Year</u>	<u>Location</u>	<u>Height</u>
1956	USA/Marine	5'6"-5'8"-5'9"-5'11"
1959	Russia	59"
1962	USA	5'11"
1963	Mexico	5'6"-5'11 "-6ft
1963	USA/Texas	5'9"

Even though I find the difference in height interesting, one should keep in mind that these measurements are only estimates at best. However, there are two physical characteristics that do merit additional investigation.

The first is a scar that was present behind Oswald's left ear. Oswald incurred the scar when he was six years old after he developed an infection of the bone behind the left ear. His condition was diagnosed as acute mastoiditis and required a surgical procedure known as a mastoidectomy. It was this simple procedure that left the above mentioned scar.

The second physical characteristic was the a scar on the left wrist. This scar was the result of a failed suicide attempt that occurred in 1959 while living in Russia.

My interests were heightened a few years later with the efforts to exhume Oswald's body. By this time I had collected several documents and been to the National Archives and viewed Oswald's autopsy photographs. Among the documents that I've collected was a FBI report dated 12/3/63 that verified that the presence of a scar behind Oswald's left ear. To quote from that report:

"simple mastoidectomy" was done on a Lee Oswald. Hospital records state " 6 year old admitted with acute mastioditis, left. Simple mastoidectomy performed, no complications,"

The scar on Oswald's left wrist was also verified in Dr. Rose's original autopsy report:

Commission No. 305 Dr. Earl Rose autopsy report on Lee Harvey Oswald states "Volar aspect of the left wrist there is a transverse 13/4 slightly raised white scar."

In Dr. Rose's report there is no mention of a mastoidectomy scar Dr. Rose's report states:

"SCALP,SKULL,CRANIAL CAVITY & DURA: Not remarkable. No evidence of injury is noted."

Also in relation to the scar on Oswald's wrist it was noted in a FBI document dated 2/25/64:

"He (Dr. Rose) projected the slides in the presence of Special Agents ARTHUR E. CARTER and MANNING C. CLEMENTS, and the scars are not noticeably apparent in them."

In all fairness to Dr. Rose he wasn't looking for a mastoidectomy scar because it was not pointed out to him that Oswald had one. As for the scar on Oswald's left wrist, I had viewed the Oswald autopsy photos in the National Archives and I was not able locate a scar on the wrist. After the exhumation I obtained 13 of the 27 autopsy photographs from a private source and upon closer examination located the scar on Oswald's left wrist, just as Dr. Rose noted in his autopsy report.

Oswald's disinterment and second autopsy clearly verified that the body buried at Rose Hill Cemetery was indeed Lee Harvey Oswald. For Oswald's widow Marina, the disinterment and autopsy were of personal value, taking burden of future speculation off her children. Marina stated:

"Through the years, more and more mystery surrounds the assassination, So if it is in my power to put to rest some speculation, I would rather face the task myself instead of putting the burden on my children in the future."

Prior to exhumation I had put together enough evidence to convince me that the man buried in Rose Hill Cemetery was in fact Lee Harvey Oswald. However, in my opinion the exhumation of Lee Harvey Oswald was of tremendous value, because it finally laid to rest the question of Oswald's identity.

Seventeen years would pass when the matter would surface with the exhumation. As Dr. Linda Norton the head of the pathology team stated

"There is no reason to ever disturb that body again. Ever."

This is the aspect of President Kennedy assassination that can truly be called "Case Closed."

Now 130 years after the assassination of President Lincoln history is again repeating itself, except in reverse. Like the case with Oswald, members of Booth's family have requested that the body be exhumed to identify the remains. Lois Rathbun Booth great grandniece stated:

"As family members, we have a right to know who's in the grave ...there's been controversy practically since the assassination ...we should put an end to it. "

This sounded strikingly similar to what Marina Oswald said fourteen years earlier.

In one way the Lincoln assassination was unlike the Kennedy assassination. In 1963 Oswald was the only one arrested and charged with the President's death. After Oswald was shot by Jack Ruby, the government found no conspiracy. According to the government, Oswald alone assassinated the President. However, in regard to the Lincoln assassination, the government determined the presence of a conspiracy. As a result eight people were arrested and tried as Booth's co- conspirators. In the end four were hanged.

But like the Kennedy case, the Lincoln assassination was left with many unanswered questions, one being who is buried in Green Mount Cemetery? A Baltimore judge has rejected the exhumation of Booth's grave. If I have formulated five different strategies to determine if John Wilkes Booth is in the grave site at Green Mount Cemetery, with or without exhumation.

The first of these strategies would be to explore the fact Booth had a tattoo on one of his hands and a scar on the back of his neck. Although this avenue would be impossible for a modern day exhumation, it would be possible to research past observations of Booth for answers.

The body of the man shot at Garrett's farm was placed on a old cart and brought back to Washington. Once in Washington the body was placed on the deck of the ironclad, which was anchored in the Navy yard in Washington. One of those who identified the body and knew Booth was Charles Dawson. Dawson, a clerk at the National Hotel remarked "What a fool you were to disfigure that pretty hand in such a way." As a youth Booth wrote in India ink on his hand his initials JWB. Dawson "frequently observed" Booth's hand when he would sign the hotel register.

Another was a guard Sergeant Peddicord who would recall years later the initials on the body's hand. Two other identifications come in the form of letters, One was written two or three days before the shooting at Garrett's farm. In a letter to Secretary Stanton a H.C. Young wrote of knowing Booth "well for several years." Mr.Young also stated "I also think and am pretty sure that he has the initials J.W.B. in India ink on one of his hands near the thumb." The second was a message dated April 26,1865 (the date Booth was killed) also sent to Secretary Stanton from Provost-Marshal-General J.L.McPhail stating:

Sir: The following marks are upon the person of Booth by which he may be recognized; On his right arm are the initials of his name, and on his left hand, between the forefinger and thumb, a small cross, and across the same hand several spots, all in India ink.

However, there were many others that believed the wrong man was shot at Garrett's farm. Several people witnessed Booth's apparent apprehension and shooting. Many stated that the man shot at Garrett's farm was James William Boyd, a Captain in the Confederate Secret Service, not John Wilkes Booth.

To explain these claims one must also be aware of two communications sent to Lincoln's Secretary of War, Edwin M. Stanton. Two or three days after the assassination of President Lincoln, Secretary Stanton received a letter describing the tattooed initials JWB on Booth's hand. Stanton also received a message the day of Booth's apparent apprehension and shooting at Garrett's farm. The second message also referred to Booth, and described in detail the initials on his hand. Based on these facts it is my opinion that Booth knew Boyd and used his name as an alias in order to elude the authorities.

Also when the body was brought back those who knew Booth identified it as Booth. Also a guard on the Montauk, Sergeant Peddicord recalled the initials JWB on the body's hand. In all probability Booth knew Boyd (how much I don't know) and used his name as a alias to throw the authorities off his trail.

Another case of someone who knew Booth alive, saw him in death, and identified him and was Dr. John F. May. Dr. May met John Wilkes Booth two years before the assassination. Booth came to see Dr. May to have a lump removed from the back of his neck. Dr. May told Booth that there would be a scar if he didn't allow it to heal. One night during a play, actress Charlotte Cushman embraced Booth so hard that the wound opened up and left an ugly scar. On the Montauk, Dr. May identified Booth and his scar. Dr. May would make a statement at the inquest that would lead some people to wonder how could the body be that of John Wilkes Booth in the past with his ivory white skin and coal black hair.

On board the Montauk in a question answer testimony Dr. May stated: "I do recognize it, though it is very much altered since I saw Booth. It looks to me much older, and in appearance much more freckled than he was. I do not recollect that he was at all freckled. I have no doubt it is his body. I recognize the features. When he came to my office, he had no beard excepting a moustache."

Based on Dr. May's testimony, it is of great importance that the reader note the following:

- 1) Booth (age 26 at the time of his death) "much older"
- 2) Booth (known to have Ivory white skin) "freckled"

Those that knew Booth recalled that he had "coal black hair". Dr. May stated the body was freckled. People with freckled skin usually have red hair. One has to remember that Booth was a wanted man, he had little to eat, a broken left leg and had been on the run for 12 days. Booth would write in his diary:

" After being hunted like a dog through swamps and woods, and last night being chased by gunboats till I was forced to return, wet, cold, and starving, with every mans hand against me, I am in despair."

Booth had shaved his mustache off at Dr. Mudd's he and he would have had a 12 day old beard by the time he was shot at Garrett's barn. According to Dr. May, Booth's physical appearance had changed drastically due to the twelve days that he had spent on the run. Dr. May, who knew Booth prior to Lincoln assassination, would later write that Booth's body would have to be put in the sitting position to recognize it as Booth. Dr. May would also write: " Looking down on it, I was finally enabled to imperfectly recognize the features of Booth. But never in a human being had a greater change taken place, from the man I had seen in the vigor of life and health,

than in that of the haggard corpse ... its whole facial expression sunken and starvation it had undergone."

Osborn H. Oldroyd in his privately published book *The Assassination Of Abraham Lincoln* stated four years after the assassination when Booth's body was turned over to Booth's family:

"The box was somewhat decayed, but the lettering on it was legible. When the box was opened and the body taken from the blanket which was wrapped around it, it was found that four years burial had brought it to decay. The skull was detached, and, when lifted out, a dentist who had filled Booth's teeth, identified his work, thus proving the identity of the body beyond a doubt. The hair was in its natural state and hung in long ringlets."

Booth was also identified through his dental records.

According to history, a dentist by the name of Dr. Merrill had filled two of Booth's teeth prior to Lincoln's assassination. Dr. Merrill was twice called upon to identify Booth's body. The first occasion was aboard the *Montauk* in 1865, the second time occurred in 1869 and at Harvey & Marrs undertakers. On both occasions Dr. Merrill was able to identify his work. Another method used to identify Booth's body was hair color. In Theodore Roscoe's book *The Web of Conspiracy*, published in 1959, a man by the name of Basil Moxley who in 1903 made headlines in 1903 in the *Baltimore American*:

NOT BURIED HERE!

REMARKABLE DISCOVERY BY MR. BASIL MOXLEY!

He says another body was interred in Greenmount for that of the assassin!

Mr. Moxley was one of the pallbearers at John Wilkes Booth's funeral four year's after the government turned the body over the family. Mr. Moxley said that the body was not that of Booth and that the funeral was a "well-intended deception" to console Booth's grief stricken mother. Mr. Moxley also stated that the body had red or reddish brown hair. James William Boyd was said to have red hair. However in George S. Bryan's book *The Great American Myth* published nineteen years before Roscoe's book. We find the following footnote:

"June 4, 1903; p. 12. Faded black hair tends to take on a reddish cast. "Since the color of hair is a compound color," said Dr. Clark Wissler of the American Museum of Natural History in a letter to the present writer, "I suppose this means that the red in the original color fades last.")

Any ruddy tinge, after a period of years; would thus be accounted for in authentic specimens of John Booths hair."

The presence of a broken left leg is still another method of confirming the identity of John Wilks Booth. According to historical accounts, after Booth shot Lincoln he shouted "Freedom" (According to the statement of Major H. R. Rathbone) and jumped from the railing of the box. After jumping from the box, Booth's spur caught the Treasury flag. This caused him to land off balance, fracturing his left tibia two inches above the ankle. Five days before Booth was shot at Garrett's farm, Dr. Samuel A. Mudd gave a statement in part that say's:

"I then took a piece of the bandbox & split it in half, doubled it at right angles, took some paste and pasted it into a splint. On examination I found there was a straight fracture of the tibia about two inches above the ankle."

The final means of identifying the body of John Wilkes Booth which may be through photographic evidence. It was rumored and reported in the *New York Daily Tribune* on April 29, 1865:

"Yesterday a photographic view of the body was taken before it was removed from the monitor. It was then placed in an ordinary gray army blanket in which it was sewed up."

One of Booth's descendants Virginia Kline told USA TODAY

"I would be just as happy to find out that he's where he belongs."

Like Oswald's exhumation at least one piece of the Lincoln assassination may be solved.