

John Edward Buckingham, Sr.

(Jan 1828 – 26 Mar 1909)

Buckingham. On Friday, March 26, 1909 at 8:50 a.m. at the residence of his son, 716 8th street northeast, John E. Buckingham, Sr. Funeral on Monday, March 29 at 2 p.m. Interment private.

The Evening Star, June 13, 1876

Mr. Buckingham, the well known and popular doorkeeper of Ford's Opera House, will have a complimentary benefit tendered him Thursday evening, on which occasion the "Ticket-of-Leave Man" will be presented with a strong cast. The favorite actress, Miss Annie D. Ware, will sustain the character of the "Widow Willoughby." Young Harry Buckingham will be the "Sam Willoughby" of the play, and will do it as well as he does "Bob Crockett." Mr. Forsberg will also appear. Thomas Trodden will present some of his well known specialties. Ford's Opera House should be crowded, for the courteous "Buck" deserves a rouser.



The Evening Star, Monday, April 15, 1889

Twenty-four Years Ago

Today the Anniversary of Abraham Lincoln's Death

Some of the Circumstances Connected with His Assassination

Recalled by Men who Witnessed the Occurrence and

Who Remember the Incidents

Doorkeeper Buckingham's Memory

"You were keeping door at the theater on that fatal night were you not?" said a Star reporter recently to Mr. John Buckingham, now the doorkeeper at Albaugh's, when the conversation had turned upon the tragedy, after speaking of Edwin Booth's oath never to play in Washington again.

"I was, indeed," was the reply, "and I don't want ever to go through

such an experience again. Booth came up to the door and looked into the house two or three times during the evening before he went upstairs to go around to the President's box. He made some pleasant remark to me, and wanted I should leave the door and go into the adjoining saloon with him, and take a drink; but I declined to do so. He had the run of the house and could, of course, go where he pleased. I never once thought of his having any particular motive in his frequent visits to the door and glances about the house. It was late when the President arrived, and there had begun to be a fear that, after all the preparations that had been made, such as decorating the boxes, etc., he would not put in an appearance. He did come, though, and I remember he had the same kindly smile, though tinged with sadness, that I had always noticed when he came to the theater. I was not looking at the stage when the shot was fired, but the moment I heard the sound of the pistol I turned into the house just in time to see Booth jump from the box and rush back of the scenes. No one realized at first what had happened, until there was one piercing shriek from Mrs. Lincoln, and then the cry from some one, 'He shot the President,' told of the terrible crime that had been committed. Harry Haw and Laura Keane were on the

stage, for you remember it was 'Our American Cousin' that was being played, and they appeared perfectly paralyzed with terror. Billy Withers, who was leading the orchestra and big Joe Stuart, were the first to get upon the stage and make a rush for Booth, and the former had a slit or two cut in his coat by the knife which Booth had in his hand. Neither of them could stop him, however, and he got away. You know all the rest. I had a light overcoat that I had put under the rack where I kept my checks, and I forgot, all about that until a month afterward, when I found it just where I had left it."

The Evening Star, July 5, 1890, p. 2

They Were On The Stage

Parkhurst Was Not the Last Survivor of the Laura Keane Company

The statement in the dispatches from New York concerning the death of George A. Parkhurst to the effect that Parkhurst was the only surviving member of the company that played "Our American Cousin" at Ford's Theater in this city on the night that Lincoln was assassinated is erroneous. Mr. John E. Buckingham of 612 A street southeast, who was door keeper at Ford's on the night of the assassination, says that to his knowledge at least four members of the company are living. These are Harry Hawk, T.C. Gourlay, J. Matthews and W.J. Ferguson, who had the respective characters of Asa Trenchard Sir Edward Trenchard, Mr. Coyle and Lieut. Vernon. Parkhurst took the part of a bailiff and was on the stage when Booth fired the fatal shot.

The Evening Star, April 16, 1894, p. 2

The Great Tragedy

Mr. John E. Buckingham's Recollections of the Assassination

Twenty-nine years ago, Saturday, Abraham Lincoln, President of the United States was assassinated in Ford's Theater by John Wilkes Booth. One of the most graphic accounts of that sad event is that by Mr. John E. Buckingham, who was the ticket taker at the theater at the theater on that fateful night. He has put his memories of that occasion into book form, and the volume is called "Reminiscences and Souvenirs of the Assassination of Abraham Lincoln." From that is taken the following:

Booth's Actions Preceding the Crime

"In looking back over the occurrences now," says Mr. Buckingham, in speaking of the event, "I can see that Booth must have been under great stress of excitement, although his actions did not seem to me at that time to be at all strange. He was naturally a nervous man and restless in his movements. I remember he first came in, and said, as he took hold of two of my fingers, 'What time of night is it?' I told him to step into the lobby, and there he could see the clock. Next he came and asked me to give him a chew of tobacco, which I readily did. Afterward I went into the saloon just below the theater to get a drink, and Booth was there drinking brandy. I went back to the door, and he soon came again. He passed into the house and stood a moment looking at the audience, and then went out again. Shortly afterward he returned, and passed in and around upstairs into the balcony, humming a tune. I did not see where he went at the time, for I was engaged in putting my checks in a little closet that I had there, and was so occupied when I heard the pistol shot. I turned just in time to see him leap to the stage, although for a moment I did not recognize the man as Booth. It was only when he raised himself and gave utterance to the words, 'Sic semper tyrannis,' that I discovered that it was John Wilkes Booth.

Horror of the Audience

"No one," continued Mr. Buckingham, "can picture the horror and excitement that took possession of the audience. Everybody jumped to his feet, ladies screamed and fainted, men cried 'Stop him,' and

several jumped to the stage in their endeavor to prevent Booth's escape. Finally the ex-mayor, Wallach, who was standing on the sidewalk in front of the theater, was asked to come in and request the people to retire. He did so willingly, begging them to retire as quietly and as speedily as possible. In this way the theater was emptied, and then attention was turned to Mr. Lincoln, whose head had fallen forward, and who was evidently unconscious, and breathing stertorously. Mr. Lincoln and his party occupied two boxes on that occasion and the partition between them had been taken out so that practically it was one large box. In one compartment sat Mr. Lincoln and Miss Harris, the daughter of Senator Ira Harris of New York, and in the other were Mrs. Lincoln and Maj. Rathbone. Mr. Lincoln was unconscious, and Miss Laura Keane went up into the box and took his head upon her lap, and held it while the examination was made by some physician--I don't remember who--who happened to be in the audience as to the character of the wound. It was found that the bullet had gone through one of the cervical vertebrae and lodged in the brain, and that the injury was necessarily fatal. He was taken across the street to the house of Mr. Petersen, and Surgeon General Barnes was sent for.

The Subsequent Events

"Personally, I cannot tell of any of the subsequent events in regard to Mr. Lincoln on that night, I was so busily engaged in looking out for myself. The theater was immediately taken possession of by United States troops and a guard placed at every entrance. I know it was months after that before I had returned to me an overcoat that I had left in the theater, and then it was in such a condition, although it was comparatively a new garment, that I gave it away to a colored man."

Mr. Joseph Sessford, who was in the ticket office of Ford's Theater on the night of the assassination, remembers distinctly the manner of Booth and of his coming into the theater and going out again several times during the evening. He can tell many anecdotes of the man, whose ability was great as an actor, but whose awful crime has left only obloquy upon a name that is otherwise honored. Mr. Sessford corroborated Mr. Buckingham in regard to Booth's actions just previous to his entering the private box and firing the fatal shot.

The Evening Star, February 11, 1906, p. 17

Incidents in the Career of John Wilkes Booth

Written for The Star by John E. Buckingham

Doorkeeper at Ford's Theater at the Time Lincoln Was Assassinated

On the 18th day of February, 1861, when Abraham Lincoln was on his way to Washington to be inaugurated President of the United States, he stopped off at Albany, N.Y., to attend ceremonies arranged by the citizens of that place in his honor. On the same date John Wilkes Booth was playing an engagement at an Albany theater. At that time how little did either dream of the terrible tragedy that was later to link their names together for all time to come!

Amid the roar of artillery from Observatory Hill President Lincoln arrived in Albany from the west, via the Central railroad. On reaching the Broadway crossing the train was stopped and the President was received by the common council, headed by Mayor Thacher. The 25th Regiment was under arms and crowds of citizens thronged the streets. The presence of the chief magistrate of the nation in Albany is always an event worthy of note, but at this time – just on the brink of the civil war into which the country was to be plunged; when the blood of citizens was at fever heat; when all eyes were directed toward the tall, gaunt figure that was to stand at the helm of the ship of state – the arrival of Mr. Lincoln created the utmost excitement.

He was welcomed to the city by the mayor, in a formal address, which was responded to by the President. He visited the legislature and was the guest of Gov. Morgan. In the evening Mr. and Mrs.

Lincoln received the citizens at the Delavan. It was the first time that thousands in that vicinity ever saw the countenance which has since become so familiar.

That very night, the first and perhaps the only night ever passed by Abraham Lincoln in the city of Albany, an actor, almost unknown, except by name, was playing his first engagement at the little Gayety Theater, in Green street.

* * *

A little more than four years later and the face of Lincoln was once more seen in Albany, but the people who gazed upon it were in mourning, for it was now cold in death. At 6 a.m., April 26, 1865, the remains of the martyred President laid in state at the capitol of New York, and were viewed by a sorrowing procession until 1:30 p.m., when the coffin was closed and thousands who had come from miles around to gaze for the last time upon the face of the great emancipator were unable to view the remains. That very night, too, the actor of four years previous, but then the hunted assassin of the President, was shot like a dog by the light of a burning barn in which he had taken refuge near Bowling Green, Virginia.

John Wilkes Booth in 1861 was only twenty-three years old, and he was regarded as one of the handsomest men that ever graced the stage. His first appearance in Albany, February 11, was as Romeo to Annie Waite's Juliet, and for this romantic role he seemed perfectly fitted. The fame of his dead father prepared the way for his reception, and the good reports of his brother, Edwin, raised anticipation in relation to this younger aspirant, who was said to be equally if not still more highly gifted. His success was immediate. On the second night he appeared as Pescara in "The Apostate," its first representation in this country since his father played it. In this role he so much resembled the elder Booth, whom he never say play, that certain spiritualists in Albany could only account for the similarity by the theory that the spirit of his father must have been hovering around to inspire him with his energy, conception and soul. While falling in the last act Booth's dagger fell first and he struck upon it, the point entering the right armpit, inflicting a muscular wound about two inches deep, from which the blood flowed freely. Had it gone a little deeper how the whole course of future political events in this country might have been changed! As it was, Booth laid up for a night or two only and reappeared in the same role Monday, February 18, the night of the presidential visit, with his right arm tied to his side, but fencing with his left like a demon.

Tuesday he played "Julian St. Pierre;" Wednesday, "Othello;" Thursday, "The Stranger;" Friday for his benefit, "Richard III," and Saturday, "Charles de Moor." At a subsequent engagement, beginning March 4, the day of Lincoln's inauguration, Booth played, besides several of his former roles, Hamlet, Claude Melnotte, Macbeth, Shylock, Raphael, in "The Marble Heart," and the dual role in "The Corsican Brothers."

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Booth, from the first, was a violent secessionist. On the morning of his arrival in Albany he expressed his sentiments in public at Stannix Hall with the greatest freedom; so much so that word was sent to the management of the theater that the new star had better heed a word of caution. Treasurer Cuyler accordingly called around to see Booth and found him at breakfast.

After an introduction, Mr. Cuyler explained his errand and suggested that if Mr. Booth persisted in expressing his sentiments in public not only would he spoil his engagement but endanger his person.

"Is not this a democratic city?" exclaimed the actor.

"Democratic? Yes; but disunion, no!" was the reply.

Booth accepted the situation, and thereafter kept quiet; but his sentiments only grew stronger for repression.

Each time Booth came to Albany it was noticed that he grew more morose and sullen, and from a genial gentleman he changed into a soured cynic. The last time Mr. Cuyler saw him in Washington the actor scarcely recognized him, although in Albany they had been pleasantly and even intimately associated. April 22 Booth began another and his last engagement in Albany, one which came to an abrupt and almost tragic end. Indeed, Albany seemed fraught with danger for the young and gifted actor.

He was at this time supported by Henrietta Irving, who had played with him three nights. She made her first appearance there March 18, in a play entitled "San Mars, or the Warrior Bride," written by a young lady of Albany. Miss Irving also played Camille, Meadea, etc., and then joined the stock company. On the fourth day of the Booth engagement she rushed into his room at Stanwix Hall, armed with a dirk, and inflicted a severe wound upon his face. She then retired to her own room and stabbed herself, but not seriously. Miss Irving was subsequently leading lady at the Trimble Opera House, during its first season. She afterward became the wife of Edward Eddy and was with him when he died in the West Indies. She is still upon the stage.

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In 1863 Booth retired and speculated in oil. November 23, 1864, he, with his brothers, Edwin and Junius Brutus, played "Julius Caesar" at the Winter Garden for the benefit of the Shakespeare monument fund.

His last appearance as an actor on the mimic stage was at Ford's Theater here, where he played Pesacra for John McCullough's benefit. April 14, 1865, in the same theater, while the third act of "Our American Cousin" was being performed, he shot Abraham Lincoln, President of the United States to death. The assassin jumped from the private box in which the presidential party was seated to the stage, and brandishing a dagger and shouting "Sic semper tyrannis," fled the building, mounted a horse and rode away.

On the 26th he was discovered in a barn near Bowling Green, armed to the teeth and bidding the world defiance. He was shot and killed by Boston Corbett. His remains were first secretly buried at midnight under the flagstones of the arsenal warehouse in Washington, but in February, 1869, by permission of the government the remains were disinterred by the relatives and buried in Baltimore cemetery one Sunday before a large crowd of people. Shortly afterward, at the suggestion of Edwin Booth and his sister, Mrs. John Sleeper Clark, who had fears that the grave might be desecrated, the body was again disinterred and laid in the Booth lot in the Greenmont cemetery, Baltimore, alongside the body of his father.

The Evening Star, Friday, March 26, 1909

Familiar Face Gone

Death of John E. Buckingham the Veteran Doorkeeper

Enfeebled for a Year

Known to Thousands of Theater-Goers of the City

Last One to Talk to Booth

Conversed With Lincoln's Assassin Shortly Before the Tragedy on 10th Street Occurred

John E. Buckingham, who was a doorkeeper at the old Ford's Theater, on 10th Street the night of President Lincoln's assassination, died at the home of his son, John E. Buckingham, jr., 716 8th street northeast, at 8:50 o'clock this morning. Mr. Buckingham was eighty-one years old.

His death, although expected, was a great shock to the members of his family and the large number of friends both in this city and Baltimore. He had been practically confined to the house, because of his enfeebled condition, for the past year.

Mr. Buckingham married in 1851 in Baltimore, Miss Jemima Young, who died about eight years ago at her home in this city. In addition to a number of grandchildren, Mr. Buckingham's four sons, John E. Buckingham, jr.; Charles Buckingham, George Buckingham, and William Buckingham, survive him. A fifth son, Henry Buckingham, a successful actor, lost his life to a theater fire in Baltimore about fourteen years ago.

The Veteran Doorkeeper

John E. Buckingham was born in Baltimore. He learned the trade of woodmaker and served an extended apprenticeship. Mr. Buckingham came to Washington in 1861 to take a position as expert woodman at the Washington navy yard. There he labored continuously until 1887, and then entered the service of Edward Clark, then architect of the Capitol.

While he was employed by Mr. Clark he constructed the portable scaffolding in the rotunda of the Capitol from which the artists worked in decorating the interior walls. After being employed by Mr. Clark about ten years he retired from active pursuits and made his home with his eldest son, John E. Buckingham, jr., at 716 8th street northeast.

Mr. Buckingham soon after his arrival here devoted his evenings to the theaters, having had a previous experience in Baltimore as doorkeeper at the playhouses there. He was employed at different times as doorkeeper of several theaters in Washington.

During Mr. Buckingham's experience as doorkeeper in this city and Baltimore he compiled a continuous record of events covering a period of more than thirty-five years. At the time of the assassination of President Lincoln in April, 1865, Mr. Buckingham was the doorkeeper of Ford's Theater, and conversed with John Wilkes Booth, the assassin, about ten or fifteen minutes before the crime was committed.

Recollections of Booth

In speaking of the incident recently, Mr. Buckingham said:

"About ten minutes or more before he shot Mr. Lincoln Booth came to me at the front door and chatted over some trivial matters, during which he asked me for a chew of tobacco -- I recollect that as though it were yesterday. Suddenly he looked up and asked me what time it was. I didn't have a watch, and directed him to go to the box office, where he could see the clock on the inside.

"He glanced at the timepiece, then returned to where I was standing and talked a minute or so more before entering the theater. He walked down the aisle opposite the box occupied by the President, looked about him, and then left. A very short time after that he fired the fatal shot. Throughout the whole time he talked to me there wasn't the slightest indication of nervousness or suppressed excitement. He was about the coolest man I ever talked with."

Immediately after the shooting, Mr. Buckingham, with a large number of others who were about the theater at the time or were rounded up in different sections of the city, was taken to the navy yard and confined until the preliminary investigation into the murder had been concluded. It was proven conclusively to the inquisitors that the doorkeeper had nothing to do with the assassination plot, and in the course of several days was released.

Career as Doorkeeper

Subsequent to the assassination of President Lincoln and the closing up of Ford's Theater, Mr. Buckingham was employed as doorkeeper at Watt's, afterward Ford's Opera House, now the Majestic Theater, also at the old Washington Theater. Albaugh's Grand Opera House, the National Theater and

the Lafayette, now the Belasco. His active work as a theater doorkeeper ended when he retired from the gates of the Lafayette entrance because of physical disability.

Prior to coming to Washington he was employed as doorkeeper at John T. Ford's Theater, in Baltimore, and in his youth acted as call boy in the same house. In this capacity Mr. Buckingham met many of the leading actors and actresses of that day, including Edwin Booth.

Because of his long association with various theaters Mr. Buckingham enjoyed an extensive acquaintance among actors of the old school, and delighted to talk of his theatrical experiences.

Forman, Stephen M., **A Guide to Civil War Washington**, Washington, DC: Elliott & Clark Publishing, 1995.

Buckingham was the night doorkeeper at Ford's Theater the night of Lincoln's assassination. He had helped Clay Ford decorate the box that President Lincoln occupied. Buckingham was not at his daytime job at the Navy Yard because it was Good Friday. At approximately 9:40 p.m. Booth came up to Buckingham. Taking hold of two of his fingers, he asked Buckingham the time of night. Several minutes later, Booth again approached Buckingham and asked him for a chew of tobacco. Booth's actions were not strange to Buckingham, who later remembered that the actor was "naturally a nervous man and restless in his movements."