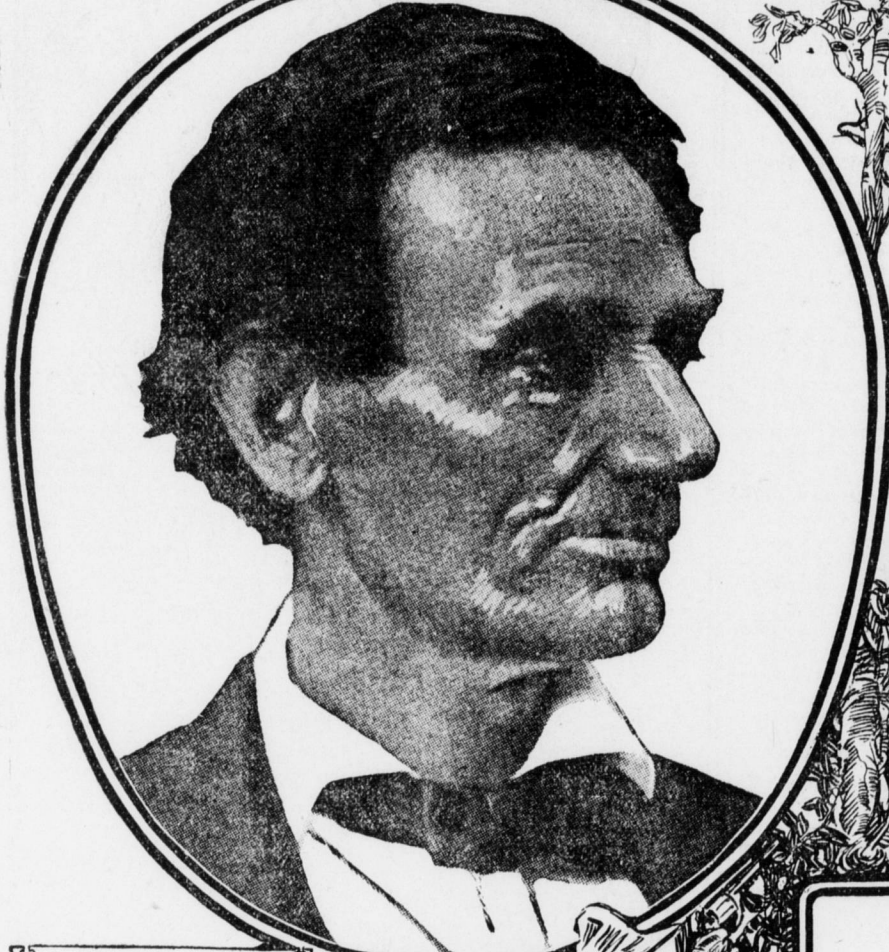


# Early Conspiracies Against Lincoln

by John W. Nicholls



Abraham Lincoln

**A**BOUT the middle of August, 1862, Company K of the One hundred and fifth Pennsylvania volunteers, known as the "Bucktail" regiment, of which I was a private, was detailed as a bodyguard of President Lincoln and continued in that capacity until his assassination in the spring of 1865.

During the three years of my stay in Washington, the most critical period of the nation's history, I saw and heard many things that have never found their way into the public prints. Some of the bodyguard were constantly with the president and his family, whether at fashionable levees, receptions to foreign legations or private interviews. At all such functions we were silent spectators of all that took place. We were always treated with the highest respect by the Lincoln family, who regarded us as a part of the household. Every private of the guard received the same attentions of courtesy as the most famous statesman or diplomat at the capital. We all formed a strong personal attachment for the president and when the grand old man laid down his life in behalf of the cause that had been his life work we felt as if we had lost the dearest friend we ever had.

During the first two years of our term of service the most rigid discipline was enforced. Sometimes we would be ordered to use extraordinary vigilance and to let no one enter the grounds of the White House without the proper passes and to be very particular as to who approached the president. Often the order would come for the guards on duty to be doubled. It was seldom that he knew the direct cause of these extra precautions, but we supposed that the officers of the secret service were in possession of information of some plot that brooded harm to the president.

Up to 1864, owing to our vigilance and the protecting hand of Providence, our beloved chief had escaped the hand of violence. The back of the confederacy was broken, a good feeling pervaded all Washington and consequently the strict watchfulness that had prevailed grew into laxity. This was the fatal period, for it was at this time that conspiracies were hatched and confederates overran the city, comparatively unmolested. The president and family spent the summer at the soldier's home, situated about three miles north of the city, and thither the bodyguard always accompanied them.

It was in the summer of 1864, while we were up at the home, that an incident happened that came very near culminating in just such an awful tragedy as followed only a few months later at Ford's theater. It was the custom of the president to remain late at the war department when anything of great importance was happening in the army, consulting with the secretary of war and transmitting and receiving dispatches, and after his work was finished he would ride out to the soldiers' home. That summer he had persistently refused an escort, imagining himself perfectly secure.

One night about the middle of August I was doing sentry duty at the large gate through which entrance was had into the grounds at the home. The place is situated about a quarter of a mile off the Bladensburg road and is reached by a devious driveway. About one o'clock I heard a rifle shot in the direction of the city and shortly afterward could hear approaching hoofbeats. In two or three minutes the horse came near enough so that in the dim moonlight I recognized the rider as the belated president. The horse, a

very spirited one, belonging to Lamon, the marshal of the District of Columbia, was Mr. Lincoln's favorite saddle animal and when he was in the White House stables he always chose him. As horse and rider approached the gate I noticed that the president was bareheaded. After I had assisted him in checking his steed the president said to me: "He came pretty near getting away with me, didn't he? He took the bit in his teeth before I could draw the reins."

I then asked him where his hat was and he replied that somebody had fired a gun off down at the foot of the hill, which scared his horse, and the lurch of the animal toppled his hat off. I led the horse to the cottage where the president and his family was staying. There he dismounted and went in.

Thinking the proceeding a little strange, a corporal and I started in the direction from which the report of the gun had been heard, to investigate. When we came to the place where the driveway meets the main road we found the president's hat—a plain silk hat—and on examining it found a bullet hole through the corner of the crown. The shot had been fired upward and it was evident that the person who had fired it had secreted himself close to the roadside. We listened and searched the locality thoroughly, but to no avail.

The next day I gave Mr. Lincoln his hat and called his attention to the bullet hole. He unconcernedly remarked that it was put there by some foolish gunner and was not intended for him. He said, however, that he wanted the matter kept quiet and admonished us to say nothing about it.

The next fall, after we had taken up our winter quarters at the White House, a conspiracy to kidnap the president was unknowingly frustrated by us. Had the truth of the affair leaked out at the time it doubtless would have created great excitement. Our quarters were immediately in front of the south porch of the Executive Mansion, a position which placed us at about equal distance from the treasury building on the east and the war and navy building on the west.

For reasons at the time unknown to us we were ordered to move our guard tent and place it at the west end of the gravel walk, directly in the rear of the war department. While we stayed there nothing occurred to arouse suspicion. Shortly afterward we learned, however, that on the very night after we had moved the tent the confederates had a plan laid to capture the president. The conspirators were to hide in the shrubbery and when the president came along



Mrs. Lincoln

the walk they were to seize, gag and carry him across the river into Virginia. Thence he was to be taken to Richmond or some other confederate stronghold, where he was to be held as a hostage. The members of the bodyguard always supposed that the conspirators were frightened away when they saw our guard tent and abandoned the plan of kidnapping.

Not long after the attempted kidnapping another episode took place, which afterward was found to have been planned by a band of assassins who made their headquarters in the city. Bourke, the veteran coachman, who had served at the White House through Pierce's and Buchanan's administrations and thus far into Lincoln's, was taken sick and compelled to be off duty.

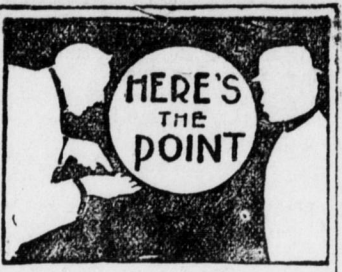
Immediately a stranger, who represented himself as an experienced coachman from Baltimore, applied at the White House and was employed as coachman. From the first he was domineering and after a few weeks became so important that he was discharged and Bourke reinstated.

One night shortly afterward, just about dusk, the discharged coachman was seen sneaking around the stables by some of the guard. The stables had been locked for the night and it was not supposed that he could do any damage and consequently the men who saw him did not go to the stables. Presently the whole interior of the barns was found to be on fire. The guard was called out and by dint of great exertion we saved the president's coach and team, but Tad Lincoln's ponies and Col. Hay's carriage team perished in the flames.

The plan was to have this man fire the stables and thus to distract our attention. During the excitement some of the conspirators were ready to rush into the White House and murder the president, but instead of remaining in the house Mr. Lincoln ran out among us and thus in all probability frustrated another attempt at assassination.

What makes this appear more likely now is the fact that, after the incendiary was arrested he produced several witnesses, who later found employment at Ford's theater, to testify that he was down in the city during the whole of the evening. These were the persons who doubtless planned the final conspiracy that brought the great benefactor to the grave.

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