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# Assassin in the Crescent City: The Untold Story of John Wilkes Booth on his only visit to New Orleans in the Spring of 1864

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## **Abstract**

Was Booth fully radicalized into the Confederate cause during his time in New Orleans? John Wilkes Booth's three weeks in New Orleans in the spring of 1864 occurred during a pivotal time of turbulence and change in his life in the year preceding his assassination of President Lincoln and brought several major issues to the forefront of his consciousness: his constant public comparison to his family and its legacy, his faltering stage career, his financial troubles, and his perceived oppression of the Confederate South, which he loved. Existing literature has established that 1864 was a pivotal year in which Booth would abandon his stage career and become a conspirator in the assassination, yet it fails to suggest a potential timeline or factually supported reason for his radicalization. Booth was always sympathetic to the cause of slavery, but what exactly drove him to do something as extreme as killing the President? The personal problems and failures Booth experienced in the months leading up to the assassination, specifically during his time in New Orleans, contributed to his turning from struggling actor to Confederate assassin.

*Keywords:* History, Lincoln Assassination, John Wilkes Booth, New Orleans, Theatre, Theatre History

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John Wilkes Booth was born on May, 10 1838, one of nine siblings. Junius Brutus Booth, Sr., his father, raised his family on “The Farm” in Bel Air, Maryland, where he would retreat in the summer as a safe haven from the rigors and demands of his acting career. Brutus’ two older sons, Junius, Jr., and Edwin, served as his traveling companions in their teens as theatrical apprentices. In 1852, Junius, Sr., took only these two older sons to work in theatrical endeavors in San Francisco, California (Kiell 141-44). John was left as the eldest male at home to provide for his mother, two sisters, and younger brother, Joseph. His theatrical aspirations for training were wholly neglected over his older brothers’ goals. When home, Junius discouraged Booth and his other children from attending new productions and pursuing theatrical careers (Withers 55-59). Due to his family’s lack of encouragement, Booth pursued his theatrical aspirations on his own. With assistance from his sister Asia’s boyfriend and future husband, John Sleeper Clarke, Booth secretly rode off for a day trip on August 14, 1855 and made his professional stage debut in Boston as Richmond in *Richard III*. During this time, actors trained in the form of local, resident stock companies, so for the 1857-58 season, Clarke helped Booth yet again and secured him a position playing supporting roles in the Philadelphia Arch Street Theatre, receiving a salary of \$8 a week. During this year, despite the daily rehearsals, he focused little on improving himself, was careless, and was even booed off the stage several times (Withers 66-67). By summer of 1858, Booth made more than double the salary, \$20 a week, at the John Marshall Theatre of Virginia, where he still played small, but better roles as a Second Juvenile man of the theatre. The Richmond Theatre provided him opportunities that his time in Philadelphia did not; he performed in a smaller theatre that offered him better roles, more opportunities to perform under the tutelage of major traveling stars, and an embrace by southern audiences. Booth received two-thirds of his training from this stock company during the 1858-59 and 1859-60

seasons before becoming a full-time traveling star, a Tragedian, the following season.

After three years of stock company training, Booth gained a heightened stature in his new role as a traveling star Tragedian, having to adjust to the nature of its demands. He braved the abysmal conditions of the Civil War actor, including drafty theatres, long working hours, cold dressing rooms, and travel in adverse weather. Reports of severe illness, injury, and voice problems became a frequent feature of his reviews, one of the contributing factors toward his eventual career decline. Due to his lack of training in stage combat, he was frequently injured on the job. All of this made Booth's health and income suffer, making it increasingly difficult for him to maintain the demands of touring life, a reliable performance schedule, and a sustainable living wage. When Booth was paid in Boston after his final matinee performance, it was the last dollar he would earn from anywhere, much less from theatrical performance, for the rest of his eleven months of life; he performed only three more times after this engagement in unpaid benefit performances (Hall and Maione 8). Booth's living expenses and activities for these last eleven months came out of the little remaining capital he had from his touring life, making his financial situation tight, unstable, and inconsistent.

Booth was no stranger to voicing his political beliefs and acting on them, often becoming volatile when confronted with those who disagreed with him, even if he was in the heart of the free North. A notable example of his boldness occurred while he was training in the Virginia stock company during October of 1859. Abolitionist John Brown raided a federal arsenal at Harpers Ferry, Virginia in order to secure ammunition and launch a war on slaveholders. Because of this, the Richmond Grays, a Virginia Regiment, was ordered to Charleston and later to the scene of the event to witness the subsequent hanging. On the very night they were leaving, Booth grabbed a uniform and musket, abandoned his theatre engagements, and joined the

Richmond Grays, marking Booth's only participation in military life and his clear commitment to the Confederate cause. As Booth went on into his touring life, his tolerance for Northern sentiment seemed to decrease, evidenced by the increase of confrontations as his career advanced. 1864 marked a significant year in this change.

Booth's three weeks in New Orleans in the spring of 1864 occurred during a pivotal time of turbulence and change in his life in the year preceding his assassination of President Lincoln. A series of personal failures and problems in the months leading up to the assassination led him to become deeply depressed, viewing life as less worth living and dying as a "Southern Hero" more attractive (Head 255). These personal problems and failures, I contend, especially felt during his time in New Orleans, are what contributed to Booth's turning point of radicalization into the Confederate cause. When discussing Booth's motivations for the assassination, scholars tend to overstep the reach of historical evidence to suggest, without much support, Booth's reasoning. Constance Head acknowledges that it is "tempting to repeat unfavorable stereotypes about Booth: to see him as an insane, drunk, second-rate actor, obsessed with longing for fame at any cost," yet still buys into the "Southern Hero" myth, asserting that Booth would rather die as a hero for the Southern cause of slavery than continue on his miserable career path (254). Others still, like Norman Kiell, assert that "John Wilkes Booth was deranged...[from the] delusion in which he perceived and hated Lincoln as a reigning king [which] was derived from the denial of rage against his brother Edwin" (139). These instances are only a few of countless examples of unsupported assertions about Booth's motivations. This thesis seeks to humanize and make real Booth's reasons for his radicalization utilizing historical evidence to suggest factually accurate reasons for this change, namely his declining career and public reception, his ailing finances, and his strongly held views on slavery and the South, while also suggesting a potential location for

this radicalization, New Orleans.

The historical significance of the St. Charles Theatre of New Orleans to the country, city, and Booth personally undergirds what he experienced while performing there. During the 1830s and 1840s, New Orleans had one of the largest and most grand playhouses in the country because of the grandeur of the theatre and the talent it attracted. Many stars of the day, including Junius Brutus Booth, Sr., and Edwin Booth, trod the boards of this prominent theatre, a fact of which John Wilkes Booth was most certainly aware. Brutus Junius Booth, Sr. was the first Booth family member to perform in New Orleans's St. Charles Theatre in the fall season of 1845 to theatrical triumph (Baron 337). Brutus returned in both the 1850 and 1852 seasons, bringing his sixteen-year-old son, Edwin Booth, in the former season (Baron 352). Brutus Sr.'s New Orleans engagement was the last in which he would ever perform, dying on a steamer departing the city following his engagement. The sudden and unexpected nature of this tragedy engrained the Booth family name into the collective consciousness of the New Orleans theatre community and into their theatrical heritage as they clung to the memory of his final performance there. During the 1857-58 season, while John Wilkes Booth was beginning his stock company training in Philadelphia, Edwin revived the memory of his deceased father's genius by coming to New Orleans for an engagement at the St. Charles, from which he profited greatly, filling the arts aficionados of this entertainment-starved city with excitement and expectation (Titone 317, 175-76). Several years later, along came John. The New Orleans public loved the Booth family and their performances, warmly welcoming John Wilkes Booth to the New Orleans stage with the great expectations of his father and older brother in mind for his first and only engagement at the St. Charles for three weeks from March 14 to April 3 of 1864.

Booth's engagement was part of the big reopening season of the St. Charles Theatre, which had been closed since April 12, 1861 due to wartime pressure (Titone 316). In January of 1864, Ben DeBar, the theatre's lessee, delegated his usual role of manager to T. W. Davey, who took charge of the stock company sent down from St. Louis to reopen the theatre on February 5 (Kendall 496). As New Orleans was occupied by the Union at the time, Booth was required to get a military pass to perform in the formerly Confederate city (Arnold and Kauffman 33). Life in Union-occupied New Orleans was unpredictable. The effects of war were visibly noticeable, which greatly distressed Booth who saw the ravaged and war-torn countryside in his travels to New Orleans, arriving to see the city's social structure crumbled and in turbulence resulting from the 15,000 Federal troops overrunning the city (Samples 142). Many New Orleans citizens became accustomed to the violence and numb to it, with quarreling and free-shooting common everywhere. Quick and unforeseeable changes in theatre bills became common as actors, stagehands, and other theatre professionals found themselves suddenly stuck in the middle of rioting mobs, making it uncertain what, if any performance, would be given that night (Samples 143). Times like this were stressful for theatres, which did their best to press on and provide relaxation from the tension and stress of daily life and the realities of the war-torn city. The St. Charles catered to a diverse audience that included Union soldiers, freed slaves, Confederate sympathizers, carpetbaggers, townspeople, the new poor, and the new rich (Samples 143). Booth arrived to this hostile environment of turbulent politics, diverse audiences, and high tensions in New Orleans to perform for his three week engagement.

Upon entering New Orleans to perform at the St. Charles, Booth was under immense pressure. According to *The Daily True Delta*, after a delayed arrival, Booth arrived in New Orleans on the ship the Olive Branch on March 9, 1864. The general public had great

expectations for Booth's engagement. *The Times Democrat* stated "J. Wilkes Booth, whose signal dramatic talent is hereditary, will soon make his appearance at this theatre. We expect a great and oft-repeated treat in witnessing his representations" (11 March 1864). From Booth's arrival, his debut performance was delayed until Monday, March 14 as Richard in *Richard III*, giving the paper much time to circulate notices about his arrival and upcoming performances at the theatre. *The Daily True Delta* reported that the normal procedure of purchasing tickets at the door was altered to allow for all people to select what character and show in which to see Booth and acquire good seats for that performance; the shows he was slated to perform were announced three days in advance, at which point seats were to be secured (13 March 1864). The newspaper statements aired the public's great expectations for Booth's engagement, fueled by the family legacy of great performances with which his father Brutus, Sr., and brother Edwin had graced the city. Booth, aware of newspapers' critical role in shaping public artistic opinion, often visited the editors of his engagement city's major papers. As the *New York Evening Post* later reported on April 15, 1865: "On his arrival [in New Orleans], we are told, [Booth] called upon the editor of one of the leading journals...He had the same quiet, subdued, gentlemanly manner in his intercourse with others that marks his whole family" (qtd. in Loux 141).

Over the course of his New Orleans engagement, Booth primarily performed his repertory from Shakespeare and contemporary melodrama, which included *Richard III*, *Hamlet*, *The Corsican Brothers*, *Richelieu*, *Money*, *The Robbers*, *Othello*, *The Lady of Lyons*, *Macbeth*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Merchant of Venice*, *Damon and Pythias*, *The Marble Heart*, and the Booth family specialty, *The Apostate*. Head asserts that "like any actor, Booth had his share of both bad and good reviews throughout his career, but he had never been so harshly treated as by the New Orleans critics. It takes little imagination to picture him reading, day after day, the consistently



unfavorable descriptions of his performances, and to sense something of his damaged pride” (257). This assertion misrepresents the reality of reviews Booth received. More than anything, it is important to note that while Booth did receive some rather harsh reviews in New Orleans, he also received just as many lukewarm or positive reviews. All the reviews share one thing in common: his comparison to his family, both his father and brother. This, more than the bad reviews or anything else, most likely affected the way Booth felt about himself, his performances, and his career. With the great family legacy in mind, John Wilkes Booth received a spectrum of reviews: positive, negative, and those that fell in between. There is no shortage of examples of Booth’s positive reviews in New Orleans. On March 17th *The Times-Democrat* reported: “Seldom have we seen a man whose age and talent so well evinces that dramatic talent is intuitive, and not to be cultivated with years...Mr. Booth seeks not to play a part, but to be intrinsically of it...” But for all his positive reviews, he also received negative or mixed reviews and criticisms, specifically more towards the second half of his engagement. An example of one such review complimented his performance while simultaneously equating it to mediocrity, saying that he needed more time to temper his talent to be consistent; *The Daily True Delta* remarked

His acting last Sunday night [in *Richard III*] gave assurance that he will, when time and experience have settled on his brow, be fully equal to his sire [Junius, Sr., his father]...[Booth’s] performance, like that of all young men of genius, is very uneven, some parts being grand and others falling to the level of mediocrity...As a whole the performance was masterly, and demonstrates that J. Wilkes Booth is one of the greatest geniuses that ever attempted the difficult character of Richard (27 March 1864).

This type of mixed commentary was the most common in reviews of his performances, yet other reviews were not as kind and much more scathing. A relatively long review of his opening night performance as *Richard III* was particularly unkind. *The Times-Picayune* wrote

Great expectations of Mr. Booth's ability as a tragedian had been formed...mainly because he is the son of one who, as *Gloster*, had no equal, and the brother of one who, as a tragedian, already occupies a proud position. We think these expectations have not been fully satisfied...[because] his performance...as a whole, disappointed us. His elocution appeared to us to be deficient in clearness, and very labored, and, to our thinking, he displayed great redundancy of action (16 March 1864).

Some newspapers were so displeased with his performance that they refused to print reviews.

*The New Orleans Times* wrote that "the late hour to which Mr. Booth's rendition detained us, precludes any specific comment we would otherwise make" (qtd. in Titone 317). Aside from his performance style, a large number of his negative reviews were related to his poor elocution and labored speech. Booth was forced to cancel two performances in the midst of his engagement, March 26 and 27, due to illness, and would have to cut his entire engagement, originally intended for five weeks, down to three for the same reason. Booth's speech issue had been mentioned previously in other cities' reviews, but in New Orleans, it seemed a particularly prominent factor that contributed to the audience poorly receiving his performances. On the last day of his engagement, April 3, *The Times-Picayune* specifically mentioned this fact in their summary and review of Booth's overall engagement in New Orleans, summarizing his and the public's perception of it:

Actors are not over prone to praise each other, but we have heard a good actor say that J. Wilkes Booth had quite as decided theatrical talent as any member of his talented family.

It is a matter of regret that a physical disability (we trust temporary) prevented his engagement from being so gratifying to himself or to his friends as was desirable...

Clearly, neither Booth nor the public were satisfied with how his first engagement in New Orleans fared. This was Booth's second to last engagement for the rest of his theatrical career, so this clear decline in his performance abilities, attributed overwhelmingly in the reviews to his necessity for more training, but more specifically for his ailing health and elocution, certainly must have contributed to his negative feelings about himself and his turn toward radicalization. How much it affected him and his radicalization is hard to say, but one must consider how his suffering performances, when paired with his constant comparison to his father and brother, affected Booth's view of himself as living in the shadow of his father and brother and how that influenced his subsequent actions.

Despite elocution issues and mixed reviews, Booth still attracted large audiences in New Orleans, contrary to some scholars' claims. *The New Orleans Times* remarked that he "certainly made a furor here," of which Loux states that "furor or not, the audiences were small" (141). Claims that the crowds were small could not have been further from the truth; Booth played to packed houses throughout his engagement. Of his opening night performance, *The Times-Picayune* said that "the announcement that Mr. J. Wilkes Booth would make his first appearance last night, as *Gloster*, in "Richard the III," completely filled the house" (16 March 1864). This trend of packed houses only continued, despite the reviews of Booth's uneven performances and diction issues. A statement from *The Daily True Delta* on March 30 during his final week of performances suggests the most likely reason for his ability to pack the houses: "The mere fact that this favorite young actor is to appear will be sufficient to fill the house, as it has been doing ever since his first appearance." John Wilkes Booth was a member of the Booth clan of actors,

and whether or not he was talented, had voice issues, or problems with consistency in his performance style was irrelevant in the minds of the public; they simply wanted the opportunity to witness a member of the legendary Booth family perform. The name sold tickets more than anything, a fact that most likely must have had some impact on his own view of his talent, self-worth, and career.

Theatrical newspaper reviews overwhelmingly provide us with all extant information regarding Booth's whereabouts on the New Orleans stage. As for the nature of his performances, the mixed reviews they received, and the public's reactions to them, *The New York Clipper* summarizes his New Orleans reviews best:

The critics, as usual, are at variance respecting his merits...People, however, seem to think differently and continue to witness and applaud his performances. Though Mr. Booth is by no means a finished actor,...there is the stuff in him of which great ones are made and if he will but apply himself assiduously to his profession he will in due course of time become a great actor (qtd in Loux 141).

As for the New Orleans theatre-going public, one New Orleans resident with whom Booth stayed during his engagement, Edward Curtis, recalls that the "New Orleans people loved him [Booth] for his gentleness, for his histrionic ability, for his power to make them laugh or cry, for jest and quip, and for the many things which an actor can do and say to lighten the burden and make easier the way of life" (qtd. in Kendall 500). Booth's stage time in New Orleans can perhaps be best described as riddled with inconsistencies, illness, and voice problems, yet still effective in providing an escape from the stresses of daily life for the general public.

As explored in previous sections, Booth's touring years from 1861-1864 were characterized by financial instability, especially during the 1864 season. This financial instability

was made worse by his lavish and over the top lifestyle. While performing in New Orleans, Booth stayed at the home of Edward Curtis and George Miller on Felicity Street between Baronne and Dryades, and it is from a 1902 newspaper interview of Curtis that the majority of our information comes on how Booth spent his free time (“When Booth Was Here”). When not in rehearsal or onstage, Booth rode horseback, played games, and frequented taverns where he drank, cut up, and had a good time. In all that he undertook, he was extremely competitive.

Curtis recounts:

No matter what he did he went the limit. If it were playing in the theatre he was the best and most impassioned in all the cast. If it were rolling tenpins he would not be content with any but the highest score, and if he was the low man he would make us play all night till he tied the score or come out the victor in the contest. (“When Booth Was Here”)

Booth enjoyed the New Orleans nightlife, embracing all it had to offer while drinking, entertaining, and meeting new people. He was known to frequent the saloon at 103 St. Charles, the Phoenix Bowling Alley, and the billiard parlor of the St. Charles Hotel. Curtis recalled how Booth often played billiards or entertained others all night with his friend, Tim O’Neil: “Always they had a crowd of congenial spirits around them...when the theatre was closed at night and Booth was off duty they would go around and amuse hundreds of people who had not seen the show” (“When Booth Was Here”). It was with O’Neil that Booth also attended the Phoenix Bowling Alley, where he often went to bowl with another one of his new Louisiana friends, Hiram Martin. Curtis characterizes Booth’s time in New Orleans as one of heavy drinking, saying that “Booth was a great drinker while here. He would go out on a spree during the day, but would wind up at the theatre at night... When completely under the influence of whisky [he] was almost crazy” (“When Booth Was Here”). Between Booth’s heavy drinking, robust social

life, and post show escapades, he over-extended himself both socially and financially, and by extension, professionally, causing his health and quality of work to suffer. Booth had the ability to connect with people on a human level in all his personal interactions, yet it was only a matter of time before his pro-slavery views came to light in conversations and social settings. As the *New York Evening Post* later reported,

On his arrival [in New Orleans], we are told, [Booth] called upon the editor of one of the leading journals, and in the course of conversation he warmly expressed his sympathy with Secession. Indeed, he was well known as a Secessionist, but he was not one of the “noisy kind.” He had the same quiet, subdued, gentlemanly manner in his intercourse with others that marks his whole family. (qtd. in Loux 141)

Booth never hid his Confederate views and often spoke up about them in some manner in most cities he visited. A Union officer with whom Booth socialized contributes to this view of Booth as a benevolent and mannered secessionist, stating that “he was careful to suppress his political sentiments in the company of those with differing opinions;” (Loux 142). In some of his recollections, Curtis himself supports the view that Booth was a reserved secessionist:

Booth was of a sensitive and a sentimental nature, and the things he saw on the street, where ladies were compelled to bow their heads to the negro soldiery, and where they were compelled to walk under the flag which they then abhorred, could not but have made a powerful and lasting impression upon a mind like his. He must have brooded over it, must have been horror-stricken at the sights he saw, and then grew morbid and finally he saw no remedy but the removal of the head of the nation...He was not known as a prominent advocate of the South’s cause. Perhaps he was, but this was one of the things not required. (“When Booth Was Here”)

New Orleans was only the second Union-occupied city in which Booth performed, the first being Nashville. Despite being notoriously vocal in his anti-Union sentiments earlier in the War, he was very discreet in these beliefs during his time in Nashville in February of 1864, giving a highly successful two weeks engagement with no reports of fights, arguments, or political expression (Head 256). Based on his past record of vocally expressing his anti-Union views, it is rather surprising that Booth did not do so in Nashville. The fact that Booth was silent about his anti-Union sentiments there but quite vocal about them in New Orleans suggests that something changed for Booth while in New Orleans. Several documented incidents of Booth asserting his belief in the Confederacy occurred during his time there, giving more credence to this view. Booth almost got in a shootout with a Union Sergeant over his rebel views at a dinner party in the home of the St. Charles Theatre manager, Thomas W. Davey. At dinner, Booth “was very vitriol in his talk as to Pres’t Lincoln, and called the Union soldiers all manner of evil names.” Also at the party was Davey’s old friend, First Sergeant James Peacock of the 8th Regiment, Indiana Volunteer Infantry, a native Canadian and newly naturalized unionist citizen. Peacock was enraged, calling Booth a “cowardly dog” claiming that “if Booth had one spark of manhood in him, he would be in the Confederate ranks with a gun on his shoulder.” Then his views would be worthy of consideration. Booth, also enraged, reached into his pocket for a revolver. Peacock responded by grabbing the carving knife and telling Booth that “if he attempted to draw a pistol on me, I would eviscerate him.” Davey and his wife rushed in to diffuse the situation (quoted in Alford 169). Booth also defied the Union in New Orleans when he was dared to sing the “Bonnie Blue Flag,” a Confederate marching song, and did so openly on the streets. Curtis recalls:

Booth was dared to sing “Bonnie Blue Flag.” Without a moment's hesitation he broke out to the words of the song. We were too scared to think for a moment, as it was treason to sing that song, and so we broke and ran. But Booth calmly continued to the end of the first verse and then escaped through his marvelous fascinative power. He even made the soldiers believe he did not know anything about the law against a song because he had heard it on the street of the city, and liked the words and the tune... (“When Booth Was Here”)

Booth clearly knew what he was doing when he sang the Confederate song out of defiance, yet did so anyway to spite the Union. Curtis states that Booth “cared little for military restrictions and he wanted to show his indifference to the regulations which Butler had imposed” and later goes on to say that “Booth at the time was not a very pronounced advocate of the Southern cause...he did not do anything here to indicate that he was desperately enlisted in the fight for Southern rights. The singing of the ‘Bonnie Blue Flag’ was a piece of daredevilry and nothing more” (“When Booth Was Here”). While the claim of Booth’s indifference to Butler and his military restrictions is true, Curtis’ claims about Booth not being a pronounced advocate of the Confederate cause do not bear out. Booth’s experiences in New Orleans and his witnessing of Union military occupation impacted him deeply. Several months after visiting New Orleans in November of 1864, Booth wrote to his friend of his travels that

I have never been upon a battlefield, but, O my countrymen, could you all but see the reality or effects of this horrid war, as I have seen them, I know you would think like me. And would pray the Almighty...that he would dry up this Sea of blood between us - which is daily growing wider. (Booth et al. 126)

In addition to these bold incidents, he associated with a network of New Orleans friends who were well connected to the Confederacy and its leadership that easily could have influenced



his thinking to become more radical. Some scholars claim that John Wilkes Booth was recruited and trained as a Confederate Secret Service Agent by other agents while in New Orleans during his engagement from March 5th to April 9th of 1864, but this view is wholly speculative and factually unsupported. One scholar states that “it is not known when or exactly under what circumstances John was recruited and accepted his role as an agent of the Confederate Secret Service, but that he was an agent and was in regular contact with other agents, who had ties to the Confederate leadership, has been firmly established,” while yet another scholar similarly asserts that “the inner workings of the Confederate Secret Service are difficult to determine. By the end of the summer of 1864, John Wilkes was in active contact with Confederate agents and had been shown how to operate their cipher system” (Fazio 37; Titone, 319). Evidence of Booth’s association with people possessing Confederate sympathies and connections to Confederate officials exists, but all claims of Booth being recruited into the Confederate Secret Service by its agents while in New Orleans is unsupported. At best, one can examine the network of people possessing both New Orleans connections and strong Confederate ties or sympathies with whom Booth socialized while in the city.

Several members of Booth’s family possessing New Orleans links were prominent Confederate sympathizers; Ben DeBar was the operating proprietor of both the St. Louis Theatre of St. Louis, Missouri and the St. Charles Theatre of New Orleans. He was also Booth’s brother-in-law and adoptive father of Booth’s niece, Blanche Booth, alias DeBar (Edwards 98). In the wake of Booth’s assassination of Lincoln, J.H. Baker, Colonel and Provost Marshal General, raided the home of Ben and Blanche Booth DeBar in St. Louis, searching and removing all their papers; from this raid, Baker writes of Ms. DeBar:

At the breaking out of the rebellion Miss Blanche Booth (DeBar) was in New Orleans...[and was] an unmitigated rebel, as indicated by her papers [and] by various expressions of sentiment found in her writings...She avows she has a deep abhorrence for the act of her uncle. She admits it is true that in the outbreak of the war...her sympathies were warmly with the South, but that since her return North, her mind has been made entirely changed with regards to the contest...(Edwards 99)

Whether or not she actually changed her mind or simply stated so to avoid arrest is unknown, but the convenience of her sentiments and change of heart seems suspect. Similarly, the letter speaks of her adoptive father, Ben DeBar, alluding toward his Confederate sympathies:

Ben DeBar... has been connected with the Saint Louis Theatre in this city for a number of years, and has the reputation of being a sympathizer with the rebellion. At the outbreak of the war he was several times admonished by Provost Marshals for pandering to rebel tastes on the stage of his Theatre. This is no question whatever that all his inclinations were that way then, but he has lately, to protect his pecuniary interests, modified his demonstrations. (Edwards 99)

Once again, the existence of DeBar's pro-Confederate sympathies and his former admonishment for them illustrates a clear inclination toward supporting the Southern cause, so an apparent change of heart leaves one questioning the legitimacy of its sincerity. The letter goes on to say that no correspondence of a particularly political nature was found between either of them and Booth himself (Edwards 99). However, Blanche Booth and Ben DeBar's apparent Confederate sympathies and clear connections to New Orleans, specifically the St. Charles Theatre, offer a clear New Orleans-Confederate connection and possible influencing cause for Booth's radicalization.

Booth's family aside, a network of others that potentially connected Booth to the Confederacy while in New Orleans existed. Edward Curtis recalls one man with Confederate connections, Hiram Martin, with whom Booth used to hang out at the bowling alley while in the city:

Hiram Martin...used to be a blockade runner, and he and Booth were great friends...I do not know whether or not Booth knew the man was a blockade runner, but we did. We never told Booth because it was not safe then to tell anybody what anybody else was doing, but they were chummy and they used to have match games at the Phoenix ("When Booth Was Here")

Not only was Booth "chummy" with a former Confederate blockade runner, but he was also suspected of being too close with the family of the boarding house in which he resided, including George W. Miller and Edward Curtis, who had close ties to Confederate officials. Curtis recounts this reality, saying that "it is true that he stayed at our house, and we were sometimes under suspicion of having been too intimate with the officials of the Confederacy, but beyond this I do not know of an act of his while here which indicated he was so wedded to the cause that he considered himself its last and most desperate defender" ("When Booth Was Here"). Curtis would have been fourteen years old when Booth stayed in his family's New Orleans boarding house, so he may not have been fully privy to the information to which his half-brother, George Miller, was, but the mere existence of suspicion of their Confederacy involvement raises some thought-provoking questions: How close was the Curtis family with the Confederate officials and could the family have connected Booth with them, prompting his radicalization? The truth may never be known, but Ben DeBar, Blache Booth, Hiram Martin, and George W. Miller comprise Booth's known network of New Orleans friends who possessed Confederate sympathies and ties

and could have connected him with Confederate officials, ultimately prompting his radicalization.

John Wilkes Booth ended his theatrical touring career, going on to assassinate American President Abraham Lincoln on April 15, 1865 at Ford's Theatre in Washington, D.C. in the midst of the Civil War. While no extant evidence supports the assertion that Booth was radicalized while in New Orleans to this extreme act of political murder, this thesis offers the most comprehensive exploration as possible of all existing literature and evidence of factors supporting this view as historically plausible. These influencing factors include his constant public comparison to his family and its legacy, his faltering stage career, his troubles with financial security, and the oppression of the Confederate South, contending that they culminated to spur his radicalization in New Orleans. Examining his childhood and family life, stock company training and touring years, and more specifically, the personal problems and failures he experienced in the months and year leading up to the assassination serve to personify Booth as a complex person, instead of as a monster assassin, to explore what influences contributed to his turning from struggling actor to Confederate assassin while in New Orleans. While no extant evidence explicitly supports this possibility, one lead exists, that, if pursued, offers hope for finding clear support of it: a box of correspondence originally written between George Miller and Booth after he had left the city. These letters, as of 1902, were said to still be in the care of the Miller family, and if found today, could provide the only definitive proof of whether or not Booth was radicalized to the Southern cause and by whom while performing in New Orleans in the spring of 1864.

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