**The Mary Surratt Story**

**Background**

There she was with the three others: Lewis Payne, George Atzerodt, and David Herold. It was a hot July 7th and the bag over her face was stifling but this was going to be for only a little while. Images around her were all the more frightening because of her failing eyesight. Everything people, circumstances, and the past had become a blur. One thing that was clear, however, was that these four were the most hated people in the country and cries for revenge were heard everywhere. John Wilkes Booth, that former famous actor and now infamous killer, had gone on before them dying in a burning barn in Southern Maryland. Mary's son John had disappeared into Canada and later Europe. There were others on the periphery but now it was she and these three others who had to answer for the assassination of President Abraham Lincoln.

By all accounts Mary Surratt was a quite and respectable Catholic woman. Like so many Marylanders she was sympathetic to the Southern cause during the Civil War. She and her husband had a farm and tavern in Surrattsville, Maryland, about ten miles from Washington DC. The fact that the town took on their name suggests a long lineage in that place. They were devout Catholics and sent their son, John, to a seminary, St. Charles College in Baltimore before the war. He attended that school until the summer of 1862. A daughter, Ann, had gone there as well. With the onset of the war John boarded in a family inn in Washington until the assassination. In the meantime the rest of the family acted as occasional spies, contraband runners and plotters. It was John Surratt, while away at school in Baltimore, who became acquainted with John Wilkes Booth and introduced him to the family.

Mary's husband died in 1862 and after trying to run the place on her own for two years she moved the family to Washington DC. She leased the old tavern to a former Washington policeman named John Lloyd and purchased a Washington boardinghouse at 541 H Street (now 604 H Street). The new house contained eight rooms; six large and two small. She rented the rooms and provided board. All kinds of people gathered at the boardinghouse, generally those who were from the country who came into town for a few days. John Surratt brought together the sundry rebel sympathizers in the area including the wild and talented John Wilkes Booth. It was here, in Mrs. Surratt's house in the heart of the capital, that the plot was hatched to kidnap and hold for ransom the President of the United States.

Mary Surratt's involvement in the killing of the president has been a subject of historical controversy. Due to the influence of her son, she did provide a haven for the plotting of the kidnapping in her boardinghouse on H Street. Was she an innocent bystander, perhaps over indulgent for her son's social life and overwhelmed by such visitors as the famous Booth, or a willing plotter in the conspiracy to abduct the President? Whether she played an important part of the plotting is hard to say, but certainly she knew of it and likely acted in some minor roles. On numerous occasions she was instrumental in bringing various people together with Booth and her son. Booth frequently called at the Surratt boardinghouse generally asking for John Surratt but in his absence visiting the mother. Their interviews were always held privately away from any of the other guests. One witness later observed: "I have been in the parlor in company with Booth when Booth has taken Surratt up stairs to engage in private conversation." In addition, she was called upon to carry items and messages outside of the city. On Tuesday previous to the Friday assassination she sent a friend to Booth to borrow his buggy. Previously she had gone into the country carrying some carbines and had them secreted in a friendly farm in rural Maryland. Other arms and ammunition were hidden in the storage room of her tavern in Surrattsville. Now these three days before the assassination Mary Surratt showed up at her old tavern and quizzed the lessee as to whether the carbines were ready and accessible. It was reported that she said "Mr. Lloyd, I want you to have those shooting irons ready." And "Some persons would call for them shortly." Or were these just social visits made by a concerned property owner checking on her lessee? Lloyd who made these statements was a chronic drunk and was most likely trying to save his own skin. To what extent was he trying to deflect attention to Mary Surratt? Then there is the issue of abduction turning to murder.

For several months Booth had planned to kidnap the President and spirit him away to the South where he would be kept to force the end of the war. In fact, an attempt had been made earlier as Booth, John Surratt, Payne and Atzerodt rode out of Washington in the middle of March, 1865, following a presidential carriage in hopes of kidnapping Lincoln. Mrs. Surratt knew of this adventure and reportedly wept bitterly over the possible danger and repercussions for her son. The President was not in it and the entire thing was called off. However, there was a dark alternative possibility. Booth was at the Capitol on March 4, 1865, when Lincoln delivered his celebrated Second Inaugural Address. Booth became excited and, it was reported later, he was heard to say "What an excellent chance I had to kill the President, if I wished, on Inauguration Day!" Kidnapping and assassination were mixing in the mind of Booth. Of course, a presidential murder in order to be really effective had to dispose of Vice President Andrew Johnson and Secretary of State William Seward, thought Booth. In his twisted logic Booth even threw in General U. S. Grant as a targeted victim. Clearly a core of the conspirators was involved in that back and forth deliberation. Then a critical event occurred.

On April 9th, 1865 Grant accepted the surrender of Lee at Appomattox and the war was virtually over. There were still some armies and guerilla bands not yet under Union control but the conspirators knew it was over. Washington still remained an armed camp as if an invasion remained a distinct possibility. But now kidnapping for a victory gave way to murder as revenge. Booth was to kill the President. Payne and Herold were to kill the Secretary of State. And indeed Seward received several knife wounds by Payne. Atzerodt was to kill the Vice President but at the last moment was paralyzed with fear and did nothing. Almost overnight the plot to kidnap which Mary Surratt surely knew of switched to assassination. To what extent she knew of these change of plans is subject debate.

Now as she stood with the other three, justice was to be addressed.