

LINCOLN LORE

Bulletin of the Lincoln National Life Foundation - - - - - Dr. Louis A. Warren, Editor.
Published each week by The Lincoln National Life Insurance Company, of Fort Wayne, Indiana.

No. 369

FORT WAYNE, INDIANA

May 4, 1936

DR. SAMUEL A. MUDD

The nation wide showing of a motion picture featuring the imprisonment of Dr. Samuel A. Mudd for his alleged implication in the assassination of Abraham Lincoln has created a new interest in the charges brought against the Maryland physician.

Seven men and one woman were tried for "a conspiracy to assassinate the President of the United States and various members of the government." Assistant Judge Advocate Bingham held that "the act of any one of the parties to a conspiracy in its execution is the act of every party to that conspiracy and therefore the charge and specification that the President was murdered by every one of the parties to this conspiracy."

The sentence of Dr. Mudd, then thirty-two years of age, who was named as one of the conspirators, follows:

"The commission do therefore sentence the said Samuel A. Mudd to be imprisoned at hard labor for life, at such place as the President shall direct."

On July 5, President Johnson approved the sentence and Dr. Mudd was ordered confined in the penitentiary at Albany, New York. Ten days later the President modified his order and changed the place of imprisonment to the military prison at Dry Tortugas, Florida.

There are at least three questions which one asks after viewing the motion picture featuring the imprisonment of Dr. Mudd:

1st. What important facts contributed to his conviction?

2nd. Why was he persecuted?

3rd. Was his health undermined?

Partial answers to these questions are found in a book on "The Life of Samuel A. Mudd" written by his daughter, Nettie Mudd, in 1906. Pages where information is found are noted.

His Conviction

Dr. Mudd, sympathetic with the Confederacy and son of a large slave holder, first met John Wilkes Booth at Bryantown, Maryland in November, 1864. Booth went home with Dr. Mudd, had supper with him, remained over night, and to breakfast. Dr. Mudd went with Booth to look at a horse which Booth purchased. Both men returned to Dr. Mudd's home and then Booth departed before dinner.

On December 23, 1864, Dr. Mudd introduced John Wilkes Booth to John Surratt, one of the conspirators, at Washington, D. C. Surratt, Dr. Mudd and a Mr. Weichman went with Booth to his room for drinks. Dr. Mudd said he never saw Booth again between that time and the assassination four months later. pp. 43, 44.

When Booth jumped from the Lincoln box to the stage of the theatre on

the night of April 14th, he broke a bone in his leg. At four o'clock the next morning in company with Herold he appeared at the home of Dr. Mudd and requested to have the bone set. This done, Booth was put to bed and after breakfast was again visited by the doctor. Herold borrowed a razor and Booth's mustache was shaved off. Later Herold started out with Dr. Mudd to go to Bryantown, four miles away. Soldiers were in the town looking for the Lincoln murder suspects and here Dr. Mudd learned of the assassination of Lincoln. pp. 31, 32.

Herold preceded the doctor home; and, when the doctor arrived about four p. m., he observed Herold and Booth leaving the premises over the route to the river Dr. Mudd had shown them. Mrs. Mudd advised the doctor that she had visited the patient but he had not eaten anything and when he departed he wore a false beard that became partially detached as he left the house, so that she was able to see his face beneath it. Dr. Mudd and his wife concluded that their visitors were suspicious characters. p. 31.

The testimony introduced by the witnesses for the prosecution indicated that Dr. Mudd recognized Booth as his patient and that he knew of the assassination before Booth left. The defense, however, denied that Booth was known to the doctor while at his home. Although the soldiers hunting for the assassin were but four miles away, Dr. Mudd is alleged to have withheld information about his visitors until the following day. The information did not reach the authorities until Monday morning more than thirty-six hours after Booth and Herold left the community. The failure of Dr. Mudd to notify the officers himself worked seriously against him.

His Persecution

Dr. Mudd arrived at Fort Jefferson, Dry Tortugas, Florida, on July 25, 1865. He was immediately made acting steward and nurse in the prison hospital and on August 25, 1865, wrote to his wife, "I have little or no labor to perform." p. 115. On September 25, he attempted to escape but was discovered in hiding on a United States transport. He wrote to his brother on September 30th, "For attempting to make my escape I was put in the guard house with chains on hands and feet and closely confined for two days. An order came from the Major for me to be put to hard labor wheeling sand. I was placed under a boss who put me to cleaning old bricks. I worked hard all day and came near finishing one brick." p. 124.

Five days after his attempted escape he again wrote to his brother, "I will soon assume my former position or one equally respectable . . . I have no labor to perform, yet I am compelled to answer roll-call and to sleep

in the guard house at night." p. 129. To his wife he wrote on October 23rd, "I am a prisoner under guard, not under a parole and under no obligation to remain if I can successfully evade and free myself." p. 134. For the next three months Dr. Mudd was kept in chains during the day time and was confined in the guard house, but on February 8th, he wrote that he had been relieved of his chains. p. 164. On April 27th, he wrote his wife, "I can perform all I have to do in a couple of hours." p. 175.

It is not indicated in his correspondence during his subsequent imprisonment that he was put at hard labor and there is no mention of his having been beaten or physically abused at any time. We may conclude that the confinement in chains was directly due to his attempted escape.

His Health

One month after Dr. Mudd arrived at Fort Jefferson, in a letter to his wife, he wrote, "This place continues to be unusually healthy." p. 115. On August 13, 1866, he made note that "a strict eye is kept to the cleanliness of the place and being remote from the main land, we have no fears of an infectious or epidemic disease." p. 197.

On February 14, 1867, he wrote his wife: "My health has continued unusually good through the winter up to this time. I weighed a few days ago one hundred and forty-five which is only a few pounds short of my usual weight." p. 224.

That summer he wrote, "The health of the island is excellent—very little sickness and nothing of an epidemic character." p. 247. Eighteen days after this reference to his health, on August 28th, fever broke out and raged through the prison for about two months, at which time Dr. Mudd rendered valuable service. He was himself confined with the fever for eight days and although somewhat weakened from the attack, within a week or two, on October 22nd, he was able to write to his wife, "I am still possessing my usual health with the exception of strength which I find slow in returning after the fever." p. 281.

Dr. Mudd was pardoned by President Johnson on February 13, 1869, after having served less than four years of his life sentence. On March 8th he regained his liberty, arriving home on March 20th, according to his daughter "frail, weak, and sick, never again to be strong during the thirteen years he survived." p. 320. Nettie Mudd gives an account of her father's death as follows:

"My father died from pneumonia, January 10, 1883, after an illness of nine days. He contracted the disease while visiting the sick in the neighborhood in the night time and in inclement weather." He was then fifty years of age.