

LINCOLN LORE

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SHOULD FORD'S THEATRE BE RESTORED?

There has been considerable agitation in Washington and some resolutions passed about the restoration of Ford's Theatre. Senator Milton R. Young of North Dakota seems to have taken the initial steps in bringing the matter to the attention of Congress. Of course, the implication is that if Ford's is now restored as a theatre it will be used for stage productions. It might be of some interest to get the reaction of the people of Washington following the assassination toward the opening of the theatre and its future use for theatrical performances.

The unrest in Washington over the opening of Ford's Theatre was introduced on July Fourth 1865 by an editorial in the *Chronicle* which stated: "The country will never sanction the use of the building again for theatrical purposes. It is holy ground, and must not be profaned." This statement was followed up by the suggestion that the government should purchase the theatre.

The tragedy which had occurred in the theatre on the night of April 14 was kept fresh in the minds of the people by the trial of the conspirators which had been in progress for some time and which came to a conclusion on July 7 by sending four of the condemned to the gallows and four others to prison.

The Y. M. C. A. had attempted to raise funds for the acquisition of Ford's Theatre which was to be preserved as a memorial to the martyred President, but the project was not successful. The failure of Mr. Ford to sell the theatre which had been closed since the assassination, caused him to plan for its opening again as it had brought in no revenue since the fateful day in April.

Under the caption "Public Amusements" in the *Chronicle* for July 10 there appears this notice:

"FORD'S THEATRE—'The Octoroon; or Life in Louisiana', will be performed at Ford's Theatre this evening. The company comprises many of the old favorites of this establishment. We have no doubt there will be a fine attendance."

It will be recalled by those who are familiar with the Ford's Theatre play bill used on the night of the assassination that this advance notice appeared at the bottom of the bill:

"Saturday Evening, April 15 Benefit for Miss Jennie Gourlay. When will be presented Bourcicault's great sensational drama 'The Octoroon.'" Apparently Ford planned to start with the same production announced back in April.

The *Chronicle* on July 11 carried this brief notice: "Ford's Theatre was not opened last evening, on account of an order from the War Department received about six o'clock prohibiting the performance." On the back page of the same issue is this news item:

"Mr. Ford had advertised to reopen his theatre on the evening of Monday, the 10th instant. Every preparation had been made to entertain an audience; actors had come from a distance, at considerable expense, and new scenery made ready, and about two hundred tickets sold, when Colonel Ingraham came down to inform Mr. Ford that there was an order out, to the effect that there should be no performance that night.

"At 6½ P.M. the order was received at Camp Fry to send a company of thirty-three men to Ford's Theatre to prevent any performance. The company arrived and crossed bayonets before the door, allowing no one to enter."

B. H. Nadal, known to Lincoln collectors as the author of the pamphlet entitled "National Reconstruction" wrote a long letter to the *Chronicle*, discussing the open-

ing of Ford's Theatre, which was published in the July 12 issue of the paper. There is room in this bulletin for only one or two of his observations. He states: "I cannot endure the very thought that Ford's Theatre should ever again be a play house. . . . Even the great body of our loyal people . . . are shocked, not to say appalled, at the thought that the actor should again stalk where our father and hero weltered. The theatre is and must be, in some form or other, a monument to Mr. Lincoln; that is settled. Nothing can prevent it."

John T. Ford the owner of the theatre, observing Mr. Nadal's statement, set forth his views in the July 14 issue of the paper. He said in part: "I merely wish to say, that up to July 1 my theatre was for sale at a stated price, a value placed upon it by real estate men in this city, including W. E. Spaulding, Esq. owner of Glover's Theatre. Failing to sell, my next duty was to occupy and use the building. . . . I must claim the rights belonging to my citizenship—the absolute control of my property and the perfect right to prosecute my lawful business."

A "veteran soldier of 61" expressed his opinion in the *Chronicle* for July 24 as to what should become of Ford's Theatre, in these words: "If the ground is rendered sacred where our brave soldiers have fallen and we loose our shoes, as it were, while treading upon it, surely the place where our revered leader fell a martyr to the cause of liberty and human freedom ought not to be less sacred in our eyes; and it will be a burning shame to us, both at home and abroad if we fail to make this spot a commemorative one."

All kinds of suggestions were offered in the press as to what should be done with the building. Some thought it should become a "little sister" to the Smithsonian Institute, others thought of it in terms of some kind of an educational institution or a library, but the government had other plans.

There seemed to have been some action taken with respect to the use of the theatre by July 26 as this news item appears in the *Chronicle*.

"The Secretary of War having occupied Ford's Theatre, informed Mr. Ford's counsel (Hon. H. Winter Davis) that he recognized his right to compensation, and, after a careful investigation of the value of the building, rented it until the 1st of February, 1866, for \$1,500 a month, with the privilege of purchasing it for \$100,000—the price agreed upon with the Christian Commission, if Congress see fit to do so; if not, to return it in good condition. It is proper to add, in view of newspaper criticisms on the Secretary, that he manifested great alacrity and liberality in dealing with Mr. Ford. The building will probably be needed for the depository of the rebel archives."

The property was acquired by the government for \$100,000 on April 7, 1866 and was utilized by the Record and Pension Bureau with an army medical museum occupying the third floor. The subsequent history of the building is set forth in an interesting brochure entitled *The Lincoln Museum* prepared by Stanley W. McClure and issued by The National Park Service.

The fact that the building was acquired by the government and in the minds of the people forever closed to theatrical performances, seemed to quiet the remonstrances, but it fell far short of what many anticipated for it. The present movement to again restore the theatre makes the sentiment of the people at the time it was closed of some importance.