



# Lincoln Lore

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## Major Rathbone And Miss Harris Guests of the Lincolns In The Ford's Theatre Box

Only for a moment did Major Henry Reed Rathbone and Miss Clara H. Harris appear in the tragic scene at Ford's Theatre the evening of April 14, 1865. While they had eagerly accepted the Lincolns invitation to attend the performance of *Our American Cousin*, they were apparently last on the guest list. The President had invited several other persons, notably General and Mrs. U. S. Grant, that day to Ford's and all, for one reason or another, had declined.

While Major Rathbone was known socially by the Lincolns, the President no doubt relied upon him to act as a sort of bodyguard, as Secretary of War Edwin M. Stanton had refused to allow his chief aide Major Thomas T. Eckert to accompany Lincoln to the theatre. Some historians are of the opinion that Stanton believed that by refusing Lincoln the services of Eckert he would be deterred from attending the theatre. Lincoln admired Eckert's strength remarking that, "I have seen Eckert break five pokers, one after the other, over his arm."

Upon being informed that Major Eckert had work to do that could not be put off, Lincoln replied: "I shall take Major Rathbone along . . . but I should much rather have you, since I know you can break a poker over your arm."

Major Rathbone was born, in Albany, New York, on July 1, 1837. He received the appointment of Major of U. S. Volunteers on November 29, 1862. Old residents of Albany recalled that his father was an early mayor of the city and that the son was red-haired and of a fiery disposition. He was "a slight, smallish man with thick 'Burnsides' akin to the whiskers affected by Dundreary in the play."

After the death of Rathbone's father, his mother, Pauline Penny Rathbone, married United States Senator Ira Harris, of New York (1861-67), whose first wife had died leaving him with a daughter named Clara. This marriage made the young couple stepbrother and stepsister (although they were grown at the time of their parents marriage). Clara was described in 1865 as "young and lovely."

Little did the happy couple anticipate the traumatic effect on their personal lives that the events of the evening at the theatre would set in

motion. To best relate the assassination of Lincoln through the eyes of the Major and his fiancée, their affidavits as to what transpired, which were subscribed and sworn to before A. B. Olin, Justice of the Supreme Court, and dated April 17, 1865, follow:

Affidavit of Major Rathbone  
District of Columbia,  
City of Washington, ss.

Henry R. Rathbone, brevet major in the army of the United States, being duly sworn says, that on the 14th day of April instant at about twenty minutes past 8 o'clock in the evening, he, with Miss Clara H. Harris left his residence at the corner of fifteenth and H Street, and joined the President and Mrs. Lincoln and went with them in their carriage to Ford's Theatre, in Tenth street; the box assigned to the President is in the second tier, on the right hand side of the audience and was occupied by the President

and Mrs. Lincoln, Miss Harris, and the deponent and by no other persons; the box is entered by passing from the front of the building in the rear of the dress circle to a small entry or passage-way, about eight feet of length and four feet in width.

The passage-way is entered by a door, which opens on the inner side. The door is so placed as to make an acute angle between it and the wall behind it on the inner side. At the inner end of this passage-way is another door, standing squarely across, and opening into the box. On the left-hand side of the passage-way, and very near the inner end is a third door, which also opens into the box. The latter door was closed. The party entered the box through the door at the end of the passage-way. The box is so constructed that it may be divided into two by a movable partition, one of the doors described



THE ASSASSINATION OF PRESIDENT LINCOLN.  
AT FORD'S THEATRE WASHINGTON, D.C., APRIL 14, 1865.

From the Lincoln National Life Foundation

Currier & Ives lithograph (1865) of "The Assassination of President Lincoln At Ford's Theatre, Washington, D.C., April 14th, 1865." This view, perhaps more than any other, depicts Major Rathbone in a highly emotional state of action. Not one of the dozen or so lithographs of Lincoln's assassination can be considered historically accurate.

opening into each. The front of the box is about ten or twelve feet in length, and in the center of the railing is a small pillar overhanging with a curtain. The depth of the box, from front to rear, is about nine feet. The elevation of the box above the stage, including the railing, is about ten or twelve feet.

When the party entered the box, a cushioned arm-chair was standing at the end of the box farthest from the stage and nearest the audience. This was also the nearest point to the door by which the box is entered. The President seated himself in this chair, and except that he once left the chair for the purpose of putting on his overcoat, remained so seated until he was shot. Mrs. Lincoln was seated in a chair between the President and the pillar in the centre, above described. At the opposite end of the box — that nearest the stage — were two chairs. In one of these, standing in the corner, Miss Harris was seated. At her left hand, and along the wall running from that end of the box to the rear, stood a small sofa. At the end of this sofa, next to Miss Harris, the deponent was seated. The distance between this deponent and the President as they were sitting, was about seven or eight feet, and the distance between this deponent and the door was about the same.

The distance between the President, as he sat and the door was about four or five feet. The door, according to the recollection of this deponent, was not closed during the evening. When the second scene of the third act was being performed, and while this deponent was intently observing the proceedings upon the stage with back towards the door, he heard the discharge of a pistol behind him, and looking around, saw, through the smoke, a man between the door and the President. At the same time deponent heard him shout some word, which deponent thinks was "Freedom!" This deponent instantly sprang toward him and seized him; he wrested himself from the grasp and made a violent thrust at the breast of the deponent with a large knife. Deponent parried the blow by striking it up, and received a wound several inches deep in his left arm, between the elbow and the shoulder. The orifice of the wound is about an inch and a half in length, and extends upward toward the shoulder several inches. The man rushed to the front of the box, and deponent endeavored to seize him again, but only caught his clothes as he was leaning over the railing of the box. The clothes as deponent believes, were torn in this attempt to seize him.

As he went over upon the stage, deponent cried out with a loud voice: "Stop that man." Deponent then turned to the President; his position was not changed; his head was slightly bent forward and his eyes were closed. Deponent saw that he was unconscious and supposing

him mortally wounded rushed to the door for the purpose of calling medical aid. On reaching the outer door of the passage-way as above described, deponent found it barred by a heavy piece of plank, one end of which was secured in the wall, and the other resting against the door. It has been so securely fastened that it required consider-



From the Lincoln National Life Foundation  
A photograph of Clara H. Harris, the daughter of Senator Ira Harris, of New York, who married Major Henry R. Rathbone on July 11, 1867.

able force to remove it. This wedge or bar was about four feet from the floor. Persons upon the outside were beating against the door for the purpose of entering. Deponent removed the bar and the door was opened.

Several persons who represented themselves to be surgeons were allowed to enter: Deponent saw there Colonel Crawford, and requested him to prevent other persons from entering the box. Deponent then returned to the box and found the surgeons examining the President's person. They had not yet discovered the wound. As soon as it was discovered it was determined to remove him from the theatre. He was carried out, and the deponent then proceeded to assist Mrs. Lincoln, who was intensely excited, to leave the theatre. On reaching the head of the stairs, deponent requested Major Potter to aid him in assisting Mrs. Lincoln across the street to the house to which the President was being conveyed.

The wound which deponent had received had been bleeding very profusely, and on reaching the house, feeling very faint from the loss of blood, he seated himself in the hall, and soon after fainted away, and was laid upon the floor. Upon the return to consciousness, deponent was taken in a carriage to his residence.

In the review of the transactions, it is the confident belief of this deponent that the time which elapsed between the discharge of the pistol and the time when the assassin leaped from the box, did not exceed thirty seconds. Neither

Mrs. Lincoln nor Miss Harris had left their seats.

H. R. RATHBONE.

Subscribed and sworn before me this 17th day of April, 1865.

A. B. Olin,

Justice Supreme Court, D. C.

Affidavit of Miss Harris  
District of Columbia,  
City of Washington, ss.

Clara H. Harris being duly sworn says that she has read the foregoing affidavit of Major Rathbone, and knows the contents thereof; that she was present at Ford's Theatre with the President and Mrs. Lincoln and Major Rathbone on the evening of the 14th of April, instant; that at the time she heard the discharge of the pistol she was attentively engaged in observing what was transpiring upon the stage, and looking round she saw Major Rathbone spring from his seat and advance to the opposite side of the box; that she saw him engaged as if in a struggle with another man, but the smoke with which he was enveloped prevented this deponent from seeing distinctly the other man; that the first time she saw him distinctly was when he leaped from the box upon the stage; that she then heard Major Rathbone cry out, "Stop that man!" and this deponent then immediately repeated the cry, "Stop that man! Won't somebody stop that man?" A moment after some one from the stage asked, "What is it?" or "What is the matter?" and the deponent replied "The President is shot." Very soon after two persons, one wearing the uniform of a naval surgeon, and the other that of a soldier of the Veteran Reserve Corps came upon the stage, and the deponent assisted them in climbing up to the box.

And this deponent further says that the facts stated in the foregoing affidavit, so far as the same come to the knowledge or notice of this deponent are accurately stated therein.

CLARA H. HARRIS

Subscribed and sworn to before me this 17th day of April 1865.

A. B. Olin

Justice Supreme Court, D. C.

Herbert Wells Fay, who published the sworn statements in his magazine, *Week By Week*, March 23, 1935, made an interesting compilation of certain points contained in the sworn statements of Major Rathbone and Miss Harris, in the light of other testimony (not necessarily contradictory), that has been given careful study and is generally regarded as authentic:

Lincoln in cushioned arm chair.  
Box 12 feet above stage.  
At right of the audience.  
Lincoln put on his overcoat.  
He, wife, Rathbone, Miss Harris in box.  
Lincoln 5 feet from box door.  
Pistol shot the first alarm.  
"Sic semper tyrannis," not heard.  
Assassin muttered, "Freedom."  
Smoke obscured view.  
Rathbone grapples assassin.



From the Lincoln National Life Foundation

This photograph of Major Henry R. Rathbone was presented to Dr. Otto L. Schmidt of Chicago, Illinois, by Congressman Henry R. Rathbone. Dr. Schmidt at one time served simultaneously as president of The Mississippi Valley Historical Society, The Illinois State Historical Society and The Chicago Historical Society. The photograph is inscribed as follows: "A photograph of my father for my good friend Dr. Schmidt from Henry R. Rathbone."

Stabbed in left arm.

Don't say spurs caught in flag.

Nor mention breaking of leg.

Found box door barred.

Saw Col. Crawford, U.S.A.

Also Major Potter.

Assassin leaped after 30 seconds.

Men carried Lincoln across street.

Rathbone married Miss Harris, who

first announced, "President shot."

Don't mention Booth.

It is of interest to point out that Otto Eisenschiml in his book, *Why Was Lincoln Murdered*, Little, Brown and Company, 1937, pages 35-37, made a very critical analysis of the Rathbone-Harris statements in the light of other rather remarkable evidence.

Perhaps Major Rathbone became acquainted with President and Mrs. Lincoln through his stepfather, Senator Harris. Miss Harris' father had been one of Lincoln's staunchest Republican supporters in the Senate during the war and a very warm friendship had developed between Mrs. Lincoln and the young lady. As a result a number of personal letters passed between the wife of the President and the daughter of the Senator. These letters were later presented to Robert T. Lincoln by Henry Riggs Rathbone, the son of the Major, who served in Congress as a Representative from Illinois.

Major Rathbone had an eventful military career. He entered the Union Army in May, 1861, as captain in the 12th Infantry and was appointed major and assistant adjutant general of volunteers in March, 1865. On July 11, 1867, he resigned from the volunteer service and in February, 1869, was appointed major in the 5th United States Infantry.

He was brevetted three times — the last time as colonel — for gallant and meritorious services during

the campaign from the Rapidan to Richmond; again for services in the office of the provost marshal general of the United States and a third time for services in connection with the organization of the volunteer armies during the war. His military career ended in December, 1870, when, at his request, he was honorably discharged.

The awful tragedy at Ford's Theatre, which Rathbone and Miss Harris witnessed brought them into a "singular sympathy" and on July 11, 1867, they were married. They had fortune and high esteem, three children were born to them and they passed a few years in Washington, D. C., respected by all, extremely decorous in their lives and character, "but those who were in their especial intimacy knew that there was a cloud always hanging over the spirit of Rathbone." Without question the trauma of Lincoln's assassination left an impression on Rathbone's mind from which he never recovered. He was noticed to be more depressed in manner and spirit than he had been before April 14, 1865 and although still a young man seemed burdened with a gravity greater than was natural for his years.

Eventually the family went abroad to Hanover, Germany, where it was hoped the children would complete their education. Meanwhile Rathbone secured the post of American consul general having received one appointment (there were likely others) from President Grover Cleveland in 1887.

His tenure of office was abruptly ended because Major Rathbone killed his wife on December 24, 1894 (?). It is reported that Rathbone was inordinately jealous of her attention to the children, and on Christmas Eve, as she went up to the bedroom to fill their Christmas stockings, she was followed by her husband and brutally murdered during an emotional upset.

Rathbone had brooded over Lincoln's assassination, and his failure to prevent it, until his mind developed homicidal tendencies "from which his wife more than once barely escaped." On the fateful night of his wife's murder, Rathbone, who was brooding over his proposed removal to an asylum, made a mad rush with murderous intentions on his children and was prevented from killing them when his wife threw herself between them and her maniac husband.

The wife suffered many knife and pistol wounds as her husband in his delirium reenacted the tragedy at Ford's Theatre in Washington, D. C. Some reports indicate that Rathbone attempted to commit suicide, by stabbing himself after killing his wife, but such efforts proved futile, if true. "And thus, as so often before or since, (a) great wrong, wrought in high places, breeds similiar if less conspicuous evil to which no limit of time or place can be assigned."

After killing his wife Rathbone was arrested by the German authorities and was tried and convicted of murder. He was sentenced to the Hildesheim Asylum for the Criminal Insane. In this institution in Hanover, Germany, Rathbone lived in luxury. He made periodical attempts to se-

cure his release, but finally gave up all hope of securing his freedom and awaited the end in some tranquility.

In September, 1910, the physicians of the asylum reported that Rathbone was failing rapidly and that he would not survive long. He did survive almost a year when the end came on August 14, 1911. He was buried in Hanover, two days later.

Rathbone's son, Henry Riggs Rathbone, was born on Lincoln's birthday in 1870. He was elected as a Democrat to Congress (1923-1928) from Cook County, Illinois. He manifested a great interest in the Lincoln story and, in addition to giving a great many Lincoln addresses (one was delivered in the House of Representatives on February 12, 1924), he introduced several bills in Congress for the establishment of Lincoln memorials, one of which was passed by Congress in 1926 for the purchase by the Government of the famous Oldroyd collection of Lincolniana for the sum of \$50,000.

In his address before the House of Representatives, Congressman Rathbone made the following statement concerning his parents: "As you doubtless know, my parents were the young engaged couple, Major Rathbone and Miss Harris, the daughter of United States Senator Ira Harris, of New York, who drove that fateful night of April 14, 1865, with President and Mrs. Lincoln in the carriage to Ford's Theatre and sat with him in the box, when the bullet of the assassin cut short the life of the President. I am able to say with the utmost assurance of truth and judging from the words uttered by Lincoln in the presence of these persons in his last hour, that his great heart held nothing but kindness and good will toward all his countrymen, that no one could have rejoiced more at the return of peace, and that in his last moments he was looking forward with the highest hope to an era of happiness and prosperity for all his beloved people, North and South alike."



From the Lincoln National Life Foundation

This photograph of Mrs. Henry R. Rathbone bears the following inscription: "A photograph of my mother which I present with the greatest pleasure to my dear friend O. L. Schmidt by Henry R. Rathbone."

## CUMULATIVE BIBLIOGRAPHY 1970-1971

Selections approved by a Bibliography Committee consisting of the following members: Dr. Kenneth A. Bernard, Boston University, 725 Commonwealth Avenue, Boston, Mass.; Arnold Gates, 289 New Hyde Park Rd., Garden City, N. Y.; Carl Haverlin, 8619 Louise Avenue, Northridge, California; James T. Hickey, Illinois State Historical Library, Old State Capitol, Springfield, Illinois; E. B. (Pete) Long, 607 S. 15th St., Laramie, Wyoming; Ralph G. Newman, 18 E. Chestnut St., Chicago, Illinois; Hon. Fred Schwengel, 404 Union Arcade Bldg., Davenport, Iowa; Dr. Wayne C. Temple, 1121 S. 4th Street Court, Springfield, Illinois. New items available for consideration may be sent to the above persons, or to the Lincoln National Life Foundation.

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