

Ford's Theater in Washington, DC, is the site of one of the most heartbreaking events in U.S. history. It was here that President Abraham Lincoln was killed by an assassin just days after the Civil War ended. The Civil War had taken a dreadful toll on both the president and the nation—an estimated 750,000 men had lost their lives. Now that war was over, Lincoln wanted to lead the whole nation toward a better future. Then, in Ford's Theater on April 14, 1865, an assassin named John Wilkes Booth robbed President Lincoln of the chance to see the country whole again.

The Theater

From the outside, Ford's Theater did not look like a place that would become historically significant. However, the inside was quite elegant. White-painted walls, columns, and arches gave the theater a classical look. Gold accents highlighted the stage, while rich red carpeting gave the feeling of royalty. Upper and lower balconies curved gracefully above the floor seats. Some 45 gaslight sconces lined the edge of the upper balcony. Altogether, the theater could seat more than 1,700 patrons.

As you can see in the photograph, each side of the theater featured four private boxes. The top two boxes to the right of the stage were reserved for the president when he wished to attend a play. On the fateful night of April 14, 1865, the

Presidential Box was decorated with flags and a picture of George Washington. The decorations on the Presidential Box may have been to commemorate the Union victory and the end of the war. The entire city had been celebrating since the news on April 9 of Confederate General Robert E. Lee's surrender to Union forces at Appomattox Court House in Virginia.

The President and First Lady Attend

On the night of April 14, the president and his wife, Mary, decided to attend Ford's Theater. A comedy called *Our American Cousin* was playing. The Lincolns invited another couple to join them, Clara Harris and her fiancé, Major Henry Rathbone. Miss Harris was a senator's daughter and Mary Lincoln's friend. The four entered through the main lobby, which was a narrow, red-carpeted area flanked by doors on either side. They walked up the main



The two private upper boxes at Ford's Theater were known as the State Box or Presidential Box. When the president attended a play, he was on display nearly as much as the actors on stage. On the night of April 14, 1865, President Lincoln sat in the upper right box.

staircase to the dress circle, or lower balcony. The stairs rose from the ground level to a landing and then curved and continued upward.

The president, first lady, and their guests arrived at 9 p.m. Mary Lincoln wore a gray silk dress and bonnet. The president wore a formal black suit, high silk hat, white gloves, and boots. Atop his suit, the president wore a coat of fine wool that had been made for his second inauguration. Its lining featured stitching that depicted an eagle and the phrase, "One Country, One Destiny."

When the Lincolns and their guests arrived at Ford's Theater, the play had already begun. Seeing the president arrive, the actors on stage paused the performance. The orchestra played "Hail to the Chief," and the audience rose to give the president a standing ovation. The Union had won the war! The troops could come home! The mood in the theater must have been festive.

Sometime after the president had settled into the upholstered rocking chair that the theater provided especially for him, John Wilkes Booth—a well-known and popular actor—entered the box. The White House footman, who was watching the door to the Presidential Box, allowed Booth access to the box. Booth then wedged a piece of wood from a music stand across the door so that no one else could enter.



This drawing shows the scene at Ford's Theater after Booth leaped to the stage below the Presidential Box.

The Assassin Strikes

John Wilkes Booth had planned his attack well. He had someone waiting outside the theater, holding a horse at the ready. He also knew the play *Our American Cousin*, and he waited for a certain part in the play before he made his deadly move. When one of the actors delivered an especially funny line, the crowd broke into uproarious laughter. The loud noise hid another loud noise—that of a pistol shot. Major Rathbone, the president's guest, rose to apprehend Booth, but Booth slashed at Rathbone with a knife. Booth then leaped 12 feet to the stage below.

As Booth jumped, two things happened. He shouted something, and the spur on his boot got caught in one of the flags draping the box. Witnesses differed in their description of these events. However, it is thought that Booth shouted "*Sic semper tyrannis!*" It means "thus always to tyrants" in Latin. Many also believe

that when Booth's spur caught in the flag, it caused him to land awkwardly on the stage and break his leg in the fall. Booth fled from the stage to his waiting horse and vanished into the night.

For several minutes, no one in the theater outside of the Presidential Box realized that the president had been attacked. Some thought that Booth's leap to the stage was part of the play, but then Mary Lincoln screamed. As the realization of what had happened slowly dawned, pandemonium broke out. While lead actress Laura Keane tried to keep the crowd calm, a young doctor who was in the audience tended to the president. He was soon joined by a second doctor, and they quickly carried the president to a house across the street from the theater.

It was a long, weary, and hopeless night for those who stood vigil at the fallen leader's side. President Abraham Lincoln died at 7:22 a.m. on April 15, 1865.

The Fate of Booth and Ford's Theater

Federal agents tracked John Wilkes Booth to Virginia on April 26. There, near the Rappahannock River, he refused to surrender and was shot and killed.

After receiving threatening notes from an anonymous writer, John T. Ford was forced to close his theater following the shooting. In 1866, it was purchased by the federal government. For the next 27 years, Ford's Theater was used for offices. Tragedy struck again in 1893. The three floors of the theater collapsed. Twenty-two workers were killed and 68 were injured. From 1893 until 1931, the theater was used only for storage. In 1932, the Lincoln Museum opened on the first floor of the old theater. In 1933, the building was transferred to the National Park Service. Today, it serves as a working theater, a historical monument, a world-class museum, and a learning center. The tragedy of the assassination will haunt the nation forever. So, too, will this question: What might have been the nation's course had President Lincoln lived? Stepping into the halls of Ford's Theater allows history to come alive. Today, many people who visit Ford's Theater pause to consider the impact of Lincoln's presidency and to pay tribute to the events that occurred here.



The government offered a \$100,000 reward for the capture of John Wilkes Booth.

After reading the passage, answer the following questions:

- 1.** The phrase inside President Lincoln's top coat, "One Country, One Destiny," referred to
 - A.** the words of the president's Emancipation Proclamation.
 - B.** the Preamble to the United States Constitution.
 - C.** the hope that the country would be reunited following the war.
 - D.** the fear that the South would never rejoin the Union.

- 2.** Which word best describes the mood at Ford's Theater when the president and his party arrived on the evening of April 14, 1865?
 - A.** panicked
 - B.** uninterested
 - C.** somber
 - D.** celebratory

- 3.** Why were so many people inside the theater slow to react to Lincoln being shot?
 - A.** Booth was able to shoot Lincoln from a distance and not make any noise.
 - B.** People thought the shooting was a planned part of the play.
 - C.** People could not hear the shooting over the laughter of the audience.
 - D.** Mary Lincoln told everyone to remain calm.

- 4.** How do the circumstances of Lincoln's assassination reveal the role chance, oversight, and error can play in historical events? How might history have been different if Lincoln's aides could have protected him? Use details to support your answer.