Senator Garret Davis, KY: I have never seen myself any satisfactory evidence that Booth was killed.

Senator Reverdy Johnson, MD: I submit to my friend from Kentucky that there are some things that we must take judicial notice of, just as well as that Julius Caesar is dead.

Senator Davis: I would rather have better testimony of the fact. I want it proved that Booth was in that barn.

I cannot conceive, if he was in the barn, why he was not taken alive. I have never seen anybody, or the evidence of anybody, that identified Booth after he is said to have been killed. Why so much secrecy about it? . . . There is a mystery and a most inexplicable mystery to my mind about the whole affair. . . . [Booth] could have been captured just as well alive as dead. It would have been much more satisfactory to have brought him up here alive and to have inquired of him to reveal the whole transaction . . . [or] bring his body up here . . . let all who had seen him playing, all who associated with him on the stage or in the green room or at the taverns and other public places, have had access to his body to have identified it.

Senator Henry B. Anthony, RI: I am happy to relieve my friend from Kentucky by informing him that a small part of the skeleton of Booth is in
Thousands of "wanted" posters bearing John Wilkes Booth's likeness were in circulation within days of President Lincoln's murder.

the anatomical museum of the Surgeon General. I do not know how it is identified, but it is certified to be that.

Get Booth

On the afternoon of Monday, 24 April 1865, 10 days after John Wilkes Booth assassinated Abraham Lincoln, a Union army lieutenant, Edward P. Doherty, reported to Lafayette Baker's headquarters on Pennsylvania Avenue in Washington, DC. So did two men in whom Baker, the War Department's chief detective, placed principal confidence: his cousin, Luther B. Baker, and Everton J. Conger. Both had been Baker's close aides in a locally active military unit which, under his command, had conducted limited field operations earlier in the Civil War. They were now private citizens. Lafayette Baker reassigned them as "special detectives" carrying their former military rank and ordered them into Virginia to scour the country and "get Booth."

LT Doherty commanded the 16th New York Cavalry detachment assigned to the mission as an escort. An officer with combat experience, he did not relish subordinating himself to Baker's confidential agents. And with this simmering dispute over seniority, the party boarded the federal steamtug, John S. Ide at the Sixth Street wharf and cast off at sundown.

They descended the Potomac River, disembarked at Belle Plain toward midnight, and crossed funnel-shaped King George County at its narrow westerly side, the neck between the Potomac and the Rappahannock Rivers. The two detectives separated from the main column and rode house to house, arousing inhabitants from sleep with shouted questions, Conger for no clearly stated reason passing himself off as "Boyd from Maryland."
Garrett's Barn

Doherty's troops struck the Rappahannock at dawn and by afternoon were at a fisherman's cottage near the ferry where they displayed photos of John Wilkes Booth. Doherty pressed the fisherman, William Rollins, into service as a guide. By nightfall that Tuesday, all his 25 soldiers and the 2 detectives had crossed the river into Caroline County. Acting upon information from Rollins (or his wife), they rode into Bowling Green and at the Star Hotel hauled a young ex-Confederate army private named William Jett from his bed at gunpoint. And with Jett now their guide, the cavalry galloped back up the rutted highway to the farm of Richard H. Garrett. Two men were sheltered there. One was a Washington youth named David E. Herold. The other was older, had a bandaged leg, and supported himself on crutches. He had presented himself to the Garrettts as a wounded Confederate officer; one of his forearms bore the tattooed letters JWB, and he had given his name as James W. Boyd.

After forcing the Garrettts to reveal that the pair slept within their large tobacco barn, the troops surrounded it, Luther Baker shouting for the men inside to surrender. The lame man, called Boyd, demanded to know why he should do so and asked repeatedly who was besieging him.

There followed through the locked barn door a verbal give-and-take during which no names were ever volunteered. Herold chose to give himself up and the door was unlocked for him to come out. As the soldiers seized the young man and tied him to a tree, he maintained that his companion in the barn "told me his name was Boyd."(3) Over LT Doherty's objections, detective Conger moved to the rear of the barn and set it afire.

Between the barn's gaping side timbers its sole occupant could be seen, a stumbling silhouette against the gathering blaze until a shot rang out and he fell. The bullet had passed through his neck, shattering vertebrae and severing the spinal cord. Luther Baker reached him first, then Conger rushed into the barn exclaiming that the man had shot himself. Baker thought Conger had fired the bullet but "the idea flashed through my mind that if he had it had better not be known."(4)

They took the man's weapons, a Spencer carbine and two pistols, carried him first to the foot of a locust tree and then, as fire enveloped the barn, the Garrett's front porch, where he was placed with a mattress beneath his head. One of Doherty's soldiers rushed to Port Royal for a doctor, whose name, Charles Urquhart, would eventually surface—but not so any record of his strange house call, nor a death certificate; nothing at all for posterity beyond the impression that after examining the mortally wounded man, the doctor merely closed his bag and rode off into the predawn gloom, never to be heard from.

The man survived the shooting about 3 hours. While he still breathed, Conger emptied his pockets, the contents of which included a little book in which the Garrettts had seen "Mr. Boyd" writing.(5)

Conger set out at once with these items for Washington. Accompanying him as far as the steamboat landing at

This is how Harpers Weekly portrayed Booth's final stand in Garrett's barn.
Belle Plain was SGT Boston Corbett, a former hatter and religious mystic who had rechristened himself after the city in which he claimed to have been born again. Upon arrival in the Capital, Conger officially reported that President Lincoln’s killer had been tracked down, cornered, and shot while trying to escape, and that SGT Corbett had pulled the trigger.

Conflict and Myth

The foregoing paragraphs recount all that can reliably serve to convey what occurred at Richard Garrett’s farm on that April night nearly 128 years ago. Impartial study shows that much else told and retold ever since purporting to detail the capture and demise of John Wilkes Booth is so riddled with conflict and myth as to be necessarily viewed with caution, if not dismissed outright.

This is significantly the case respecting the captive’s alleged last words. The detectives Conger and Baker testified that at different moments he muttered, “Tell Mother I died for my country,” “I did what I thought was for the best,” “Kill me, oh, kill me,” “Did Jett betray me?” “My hands,” and finally, “Useless, useless.” LT Doherty’s report to his superiors contains no reference to any dying utterances and 20 years later he publicly denied that any were made with the exception of “Useless, useless.” On this point, the last word might be granted the Surgeon General of the Army who conducted an autopsy on the body from Garrett’s farm: “Immediately after the reception of the injury, there was very general paralysis ... deglutition [swallowing] was impracticable and one or two attempts at articulation were unintelligible.”

If such differences in testimony are traceable to rivalry for reward money, this possibility alone justifies circumspection. At any rate, not even the record of the body’s 18-mile journey from the Rappahannock crossing to the Belle Plain landing is without its bizarre aspects. Luther Baker and a two-man military guard had charge of it and once across the river at Port Royal, the detective pushed on ahead of the troops, much to Doherty’s consternation. As the lieutenant afterwards stated, “under some pretense or other [Baker] managed to send the guard back to me with some frivolous message and stole away with the body.” And when Doherty reached Belle Plain, the corpse was nowhere in sight. After it had belatedly appeared, to be placed aboard the waiting steamer, Baker blamed his ex-slave wagon driver for taking the wrong road. Said Doherty in later years, “I did not act as severely as I should have done with Mr. Baker.”

Shortly before 11 p.m. the party with the body arrived off Alexandria where Lafayette Baker took charge of it. There ensued an unexplained delay of at least 3 hours before it was transferred to a tug and borne across the Potomac to the Washington Navy Yard. What followed is described in a testy letter written by LCDR Edward E. Stone, commanding officer of the ironclad monitor USS Montauk, laid up in the yard for battle repairs. Stone had been ashore at the time but learned from his officers that:

A tug came alongside, on board of which was Colonel Baker, the detective, with a dead body, said to be that of J.W. Booth, the assassin. Said body was passed on board with the implied understanding that it had been put on board for safe-keeping. No orders whatever were left with the officer of the guard or the commanding officer concerning it, nor was any written authority for so disposing of it shown to any officer of the vessel. It was a most informal and unmilitary proceeding, which should have been nipped in the bud.

Following anxious word from the commandant of the Navy Yard that the body was "changing rapidly. What disposition shall be made of it?", the Secretaries of War and Navy conferred before breakfast then sent a reply across town:

You will permit Surgeon General Barnes and his assistant, accompanied by Judge Advocate Genl Holt, Hon John A. Bingham,* Special Judge Advocate, Major Eckert, Wm. G. Moore, clerk of the War Department, Col. L.C. Baker, Lieut. Baker, Lieut. Col. Conger, Chas Dawson, J.L. Smith, Gardiner [sic] (photographer) & assistant, to go on board the Montauk, and see the body of John Wilkes Booth.

Immediately after the Surgeon General has made his autopsy, you will have the body placed in a strong box, and deliver it to the charge of Col. Baker—the box being carefully sealed.

*John A. Bingham, a former congressman from Ohio, later served as the only civilian on the commission that tried the alleged Lincoln assassination conspirators.
All but 3 of the 13 cited in the above order were connected with the War Department. The exceptions were the photographers Alexander Gardner and his assistant Timothy O'Sullivan, and Dawson, the latter a clerk at the National Hotel where the assassin had frequently stayed. The wording of the order reflects an official presupposition that the body was indeed Booth's. If the nation (and posterity) wanted more convincing identification, the proceedings aboard the floating ironclad during the next few hours would have to suffice.

A Parade of Witnesses
The weather that Thursday forenoon was warm for April, the Montauk's armorplate hot to the touch. The body from Garrett's farm lay on a bench alongside the rotatable gun turret, an awning mercifully shielding it from the sun's rays. Shortly before noon, Joseph K. Barnes, Surgeon General of the Army, had come on board "and without informing any officers who he was, or seeming to pay the slightest respect to Military etiquette . . . walks up to the corpse and commences to cut adrift the wrappings."(12) Testimony was taken, but not from LT Doherty. First thing that morning, Lafayette Baker had promised him career advancement and reward money. But since "publicity might frustrate plans," Doherty was ordered to "go to your barracks and keep your mouth shut."(13) Also "disposed of. It cannot be found," according to Luther Baker, was "a sworn statement" he made before Joseph G. Holt, Judge Advocate General of the Army, "before I gave up the body. I was the first to give evidence."(14)

In the pilot room over the turret, Holt and Bingham, the "Special Judge Advocate," took depositions and hurried through an abridged set of questions. The hotel clerk Dawson, the only private citizen other than the photographers authorized to "see the body of John Wilkes Booth," claimed to have been "merely as intimate [with the actor] as I would be with any guest in the hotel. I distinctly recognize [the body as Booth's]—first from the general appearance, next from the India ink letters J.W.B. on his wrist." Which wrist? "The left."(15) (Booth's initials were on his right arm, according to a letter the War Department had just received from the Army's provost marshal general at Baltimore.)

For reasons not officially explained, decisions were made to secure additional "witnesses." Conveniently at hand, the captain's clerk on Montauk claimed to have known Booth personally "about six weeks . . . and recognized [the body] when it was brought on board . . . from the general appearance."(16)

The Montauk's acting-master, William W. Crowninshield, had also "known Booth" 6 weeks, "was introduced to him on two different occasions. He was about five feet nine and threenuarter inches high." To this oddly meticulous estimate, Crowninshield added that he identified the

USS Montauk (left) at the Philadelphia Navy Yard about 1902.
The Doctors (left to right): Samuel Mudd set Booth's broken leg, Joseph K. Barnes directed the autopsy on Montauk, assisted by Joseph J. Woodward. John Frederick May's contradictory testimony left several questions unanswered.

body "from my knowledge of its general appearance."(17) A Washington lawyer related to Montauk's marine captain had "met [Booth] one evening at a 'hop' at the National Hotel" and recognized the cadaver as Booth's from its "general appearance . . . I do not think I can be mistaken."(18)

Though readily approachable in the city of Washington, no stage acquaintances of John Wilkes Booth viewed the body. No personal friends or relatives of the actor were summoned to identify him. Some of Booth's co-conspirators in an alleged assassination plot were actually on Montauk, shackled within the windlass room and the sail room, but they stayed there. Almost as if to explain why no categorical evidence was sought, it would be reported that "the shaving off the mustache, the outcropping of the beard, the untidy and disordered appearance of the body, had so changed the assassin's look that his stage and street acquaintances would hardly have recognized the corpse as that of John Wilkes Booth."(19) At the same time, newspapers reported that the War Department was in possession of Booth's diary, but 2 years would pass before there was any official announcement to this effect.

That Booth had indeed shaved off his mustache was reliably reported to the War Department, also that he had fractured a bone in his left leg. Records do not show who, if any, of the "witnesses" on Montauk were aware of those reports. Booth had rid himself of the mustache on 15 April at the home of the Maryland physician, Samuel Mudd, who set his fractured limb. In Virginia, one of Richard Garrett's daughters would remember that their visitor, "Mr. Boyd," wore a mustache.(20) After Alexander Gardner photographed the body aboard Montauk, his assistant, Timothy O'Sullivan, carried the plate to their studio accompanied by a government detective under orders to take possession of both plate and print once it was developed. He was then to deliver these items to the Secretary of War or Lafayette Baker. "[I] even went into the dark room," the detective remembered. He had not seen the body on Montauk itself, but on his way to the War Department he pecked into the envelope containing the picture. "It looked just like the pictures attached to the [reward] posters except that the hair was longer on the sides, the mustache was shaggy and dirty . . . . I think it was Booth . . . ."(21)*

Everton Conger was asked if "the body on board this boat, which has been recognized by other witnesses as that of John Wilkes Booth, is the man killed by you?" Conger replied yes, and as for recognizing him at Garrett's farm, he did so "from his resemblance to his brother, I had often seen his brother, Edwin Booth, play in the theater." On the same point, Luther Baker testified that he had turned the fallen man over, "looked at his face, and saw it was Booth's, judging by the likeness I had."(22)

As if to enhance the credibility of the proceedings aboard Montauk, yet one more witness was required. Lafayette C. Baker, as head of Secretary of War Edwin M. Stanton's detective corps, had already acquired the wartime reputation of a scheming bully upon whose say-so innumerable citizens, innocent and guilty alike, were locked up in the Old Capitol Prison. When Baker came calling in person on Dr. John Frederick May to identify the remains on Montauk, "I deemed it most prudent to obey."(23) But when he stood by the crude bier and the tarpaulin cover was removed, May at once turned to Surgeon General Barnes and said, "There is no resemblance in that corpse to Booth, nor can I believe it to be him."(24)

Washington-born and eminent in the fields of medicine and surgery, May was middle-aged and married with six children. That he was believed to have once removed a tumor from Booth's neck was the stated reason for his appearance on the monitor. After his initial astonishment, he asked if the body had a scar on the back of its neck and Barnes said it had. Presumably, it would not be a neat scar, as Booth had reopened the wound during a subsequent stage performance. More likely, it would now resemble "a large, ugly looking scar instead of a neat line. [Barnes] said it corresponded exactly

*Both the photographic plate and the single print disappeared.
Autopsy

Joseph K. Barnes was a Harvard-schooled doctor on close terms with Secretary of War Stanton, to whom he owed his status in the sphere of military medicine. Two weeks before, Barnes had been one of a half dozen physicians engaged in the postmortem examination of the slain President. Now he would conduct an autopsy on the body just identified as the assassin. Barnes was assisted by Joseph J. Woodward, a brilliant young researcher in photomicrography at the recently established Army Medical Museum, then located two blocks east of the White House. Afterwards, Woodward wrapped in brown paper the cervical vertebrae and spinal cord showing the track of the bullet. These he carried to the Museum where in due course they were mounted and catalogued. Surgeon General Barnes meanwhile wrote to Stanton that the cause of death was “a gunshot wound in the neck—the ball entering just behind the sterno-cleido muscle 2½ inches above the clavicle, passing through the bony bridge of the fourth and fifth cervical vertebrae—severing the spinal cord and passing out through the body of the sterno-cleido of the right side, 3 inches above the clavicle. Paralysis of the entire body was immediate.”(27)

Barnes referred to a “gunshot wound.” The Catalogue of the Surgical Section of the United States Army Medical Museum, published under his direction in 1866, describes the wound as caused by:

a conoidal carbine bullet [that] entered the right side, comminuting the base of the right lamina of the fourth vertebra, fracturing it longitudinally and separating it from the spinous process, at the same time fracturing the fifth through its pedicle and involving that transverse process. The missile passed directly through the canal with a right inclination downward and to the rear, emerging through the left bases of the fourth and fifth laminae, which are comminuted, and from which fragments were embedded in the muscles of the neck. The bullet in its course avoided the large cervical vessels.(28)

Without mentioning names, the catalogue numbers the specimens of vertebrae and spinal cord—“From a case where death occurred a few hours after injury, 26th April 1865”—as 4086 and 4087. The year 1875 saw publication of The Medical and Surgical History of the War of the Rebellion (1861-65), also under Dr. Barnes’ direction. The cases reported here are generally identified each by the name of the soldier victim, but in a section headed “Wounds and Injuries of the Spine” appears: “CASE—J.W.B.—was killed on April 26th 1865, by a conoidal pistol ball, fired at the distance of a few yards from a cavalry revolver.”(29) The details that follow conform with the catalogue entry and go on to state the impracticability of deglutition on the part of the victim and the unintelligibility of his “one or two attempts at articulation.”(30) At the National Museum of Health and Medicine (today part of the Armed Forces Institute of Pathology), the original card attached to Specimen 4086 quotes the catalogue text, but shows word erasure and substitution done in 1931 to make it read “pistol ball,” thus corresponding to the text in Surgical History.

The corpse had a proclivity for disappearing acts. LT Doherty had lost it on the trail back from Garrett’s farm. The macabre sleight of hand was repeated at the Washington Navy Yard whose commandant, John B. Montgomery, a veteran of the War of 1812, made known his ire and bafflement. “The removal of the body [from Montauk] was entirely without my knowledge . . . suddenly and unexpectedly removed . . . . This unusual transaction deprived me of opportunity for enclosing the body in a box . . . as ordered.”(31)

LCDR Stone (shortly thereafter to be replaced as Montauk’s captain by his acting-master, one of the identifiers) angrily likened the body’s departure to its furtive arrival. “I’m sorry to say that I was not present at either time or I should have put a stop to it.”(32)

The Disposition

Under Lafayette Baker’s supervision, the body was taken in a boat to the grounds of Washington’s old penitentiary, in wartime use, an arsenal. Partly shrouded in a gunny sack, it lay awhile in a small summer house upon a jetty. An inquisitive passerby glimpsed its face and “recognized it [as Booth’s] from posters and circulars.”(33) Its next stop was in one of the old cells, then serving as an ordnance storeroom, where it was quickly interred.
A lucite rod traces the path of the bullet that killed the man in Garrett's barn (posterior and anterior [opposite page] views. It may be noted that Surgeon General Barnes' contradictory descriptions of the wound, neither of which are wholly supported by the anatomical specimens, cast further doubt on the reliability of the identification and autopsy.

Two years later, during structural renovation, the remains were transferred to another part of the facility. That same year the War Department made public the diary entries Booth had written while a fugitive, Conger testifying that the booklet containing them was taken off the man killed at Garrett's farm. Many of its pages had clearly been cut away. Conger, Stanton, and Thomas T. Eckert, his close aide and chief of the military telegraph, all stated that the booklet was in the same mutilated condition when they had first seen it. Lafayette Baker, by that time no longer in government service, testified to the contrary.

Early in 1869, after Stanton's departure from the War Department and in belated response to requests from Edwin Booth, the remains were taken up yet again and removed to a Baltimore undertaker for transfer to the Booth family. There was more talk of identification, and this time to be confirmed by location of a plugged tooth in the skull. Joseph, youngest of the Booth brothers, supervised the proceedings. Edwin was not present. Eyewitness recollections, most published decades later, contained references to physical features but at the time it was locally reported that "the flesh [has] disappeared, leaving nothing but a mass of blackened bones." Dr. Mudd, when under arrest for alleged complicity in Lincoln's murder, had described Booth's leg injury as "a straight fracture of the tibia about two inches above the ankle. There was nothing resembling a compound fracture." In his letter to Secretary Stanton after the autopsy on Montauk, the Army Surgeon General had stated that "the left leg and foot were encased in an appliance of splints and bandages, upon the removal of which, a fracture of the fibula (small bone of the leg) 3 inches above the ankle joint, accompanied by considerable ecchymosis, was discovered." In Montauk's pilothouse that sultry April Thursday no questions had been asked about the leg. However, shortly before his death in 1891 Dr. May composed a memoir in which he attributed his identification of the body to "my mark . . . unmistakably found by me upon it. Never in a human had a greater change taken place . . . every vestige of resemblance to the living man had disappeared. But the mark of the scalpel during life remained indelible in death" settling once and for all "the identity of the man who assassinated the President." And the leg? "The right limb was greatly contused, and perfectly black from a fracture of one of the long bones. . . ."

An old man's memory playing him false? This was suggested more than 30 years later and drew a response from May's son, also a doctor. His father's statements were unfailingly reliable. If he said that the right leg was bruised and discolored, "that would undoubtedly mean that it was the right leg that was broken." Letters that reflected puzzled or suspicious minds reached the desk of the Judge Advocate General of the Army. They had come to the right place. In

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his memoir Dr. May refers to "a commission of high functionaries of the government formed to obtain evidence as to [Booth's] identification."(43) The "commission" was Judge Advocate General Joseph Holt and his assistant Bingham, and the statements they took on Montauk were appropriately filed in the Judge Advocate General's office, as was documentation detailing the search for Booth and the capture at the Garrett farm. The record of the manhunt and of the ritual on Montauk was from the beginning, and would remain, part of the archives of that office. One of the inquiring letters, in 1912, asked "what became of John Wilkes Booth and whether there is positive proof of his having been shot to death?"(44) The Judge Advocate General replied that "This office has no official information concerning the pursuit and capture of John Wilkes Booth."(45) And when, 3 years later, the secretary of the Washington, DC, based Columbia Historical Society sought the names of the "high functionaries" mentioned by May, the response, from the same Judge Advocate General, was that "this office has no official reports or information concerning the capture and killing of Booth, nor as to what means, if any, were taken to identify the body of the man brought to the Navy Yard at Washington as that of the assassin."(46)

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7. The Medical and Surgical History of the War of the Rebellion (1861-1865), Vol I, p 452.
10. Ibid., p 146.
11. Photograph of letter of Secretary of the Navy Gideon Welles and Secretary of War Edwin M. Stanton to Katz DM. Witness to an Era: The Life and Photographs of Alexander Gardner, p 159.
12. Hibben, p 149.
15. Charles Dawson testimony, 27 April 1865. Investigation and Trial Papers Relating to the Assassination of President Lincoln.
23. May JF. Mark of the Scalpel. 24. Ibid.
26. Ibid.
29. The Medical and Surgical History of the War of the Rebellion (1861-1865), Vol I, p 452.
30. Ibid., p 452.
31. Hibben, p 147.
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33. Scott EH. Monograph in David H. Bates Collection.
34. Impeachment Investigation: Testimony Taken Before the Judiciary Committee of the House of Representatives in the Investigation of Charges Against Andrew Johnson, pp 323-331.

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The Forensic Evidence

For this article, Navy Medicine requested that a study be made of the cervical vertebrae and spinal cord section recovered by Dr. Joseph Woodward following the autopsy aboard USS Montauk. A team of forensic pathologists and anthropologists from the National Museum of Health and Medicine and the Armed Forces Institute of Pathology in Washington, DC, were able to establish that the fatal wound, caused by a large caliber, low velocity weapon, entered the neck high on the right side, traversing downward and exiting the neck low on the left side. There is no evidence that the wound was self-inflicted, putting to rest one hypothesis that the man in Garrett’s barn may have shot himself. The posterior aspect of the spinal cord exhibits severe damage consistent with quadriplegic paralysis. The spinal cord’s anterior aspect is intact, indicating that respiration might have continued for several hours.

With such a small sample to study, the scientists were unable to determine the precise age or identity of the victim, only that he was a young to middle-aged adult. A forensic study of the long bones and skull augmented by the use of video superimposition could establish once and for all whether the body of John Wilkes Booth repose in Baltimore’s Green Mount Cemetery. —JKH