

# REMINISCENCES OF A COLUMBIA BOY OF THE ASSASSINATION OF PRESIDENT LINCOLN

By C. H. Martin

About May 1, 1926, the fact, came to the author's attention, that Mr. D. J. Richards still living at Hazard, Kentucky, was in the Ford theater at the time of President Lincoln's assassination. Communication with him brought the information that he was a Columbia boy. Realizing the historic value of his reminiscences of that event and the particular interest it bears to our society, I take pleasure in quoting excerpts from his letter to the author dated May 25, 1926:

"I am enclosing herewith as per your request of the 22 inst. an account which I hope you will find interesting. There have been so many of the papers throughout the country that have already published something along this line and I have had so many clippings sent to me that I have either filed or sent away to others that I was unable to locate any to forward to you prior to leaving on a business trip. I was at the Centennial fifty years ago and the last time that I was in Philadelphia I went to Danville, Pennsylvania, my birthplace, and intended to visit Columbia, but could not do so. I remember being in Lancaster sometime in the Sixties when, as a member of the Oswego baseball club, I played with others in your city. If I remember rightly, I was a guest of one of the young men by the name of Barr. His folks were in the book and stationery business. I recall the names of the Columbia folks: the Pattons, Houstons, Bachmans, Brennemens, Minnichs, Shooks, and I expect if I would put on my thinking cap I might recall many more. Mrs. Frey was the Columbia postmistress and Andy Kauffman one of the rising young lawyers. I just recall that I was chief clerk to the man in charge of the expedition to bring back the dead bodies from Cuba. There were quite a number of representatives from the various states that went down there to assist, and among them was a man from Columbia. Of course when I assigned the ones going down their rooms, etc., I did not think anything of those who were registered from points in Massachusetts, Illinois, New York, Maryland, etc., but when this name and place was brought before my eye, that man got what he wanted. He was a crank on snapping views and after reaching Cuba I was about to purchase some views when he told me not to do that as he intended to give me one of every view he had taken. and after reaching New York he would have them put up in first class order by one of the leading photographers of that city. He went to look for the photographer and in about two hours he came back and the air was filled for a time as though our ship was close to sinking. When asked what the matter was, after another sulphurous blast, I learned that in all his snapping he had not taken a single picture and had spoiled some dozen or more rolls. I forgot his name but I am sure he was of German descent and was a representative of the Pennsylvania boys that fell in Cuba."

Respectfully yours,

(Signed)

D. J. RICHARDS.

The highly interesting account of his reminiscences follows:

"There wasn't a prouder being in the whole city of Washington, D. C. on the morning of April 14th, 1865, than the little 15-year-old boy wearing the Uniform of a Cadet, being a student in the Columbia, Pa. Classical and Military Institute, as he walked by the side of his Father, Mr. David Richards, Superintendent of the Maltby-Case Rolling Mills located at Columbia. Mr.

Richards, my Father, rewarded me with a trip to Washington on account of having passed my grade and won the honors of the class. An uncle, Mr. Thos. D. Lewis, was confined in a Hospital at Alexandria, he having been in the Union Army, and we were going there to have him brought home. My Father came to this country from Wales, and was one of the first workers in Iron in the new works that were erected at Danville, Pennsylvania in 1842. He became naturalized, had received his second papers and for a time was busily engaged in getting his fellow-countrymen to become citizens. He in company with Congressman Kelly, a man known and dubbed as "Pig Iron Kelly" from the Philadelphia Congressional District, stumped together in Pennsylvania and Ohio in the second Lincoln campaign. Father was called the "Blair County Puddler." We then lived at Duncansville, Blair County. He being one of the Company that ran the Old Portage Iron Mill of that town."

The boy had expected among other things to have the privilege of shaking hands with "Honest Old Abe the Railsplitter," now the great President of a great country. On our arrival on the morning of the 14th, Washington had not gotten over rejoicing over the fact that the War was ended. Peace was declared, for the flags were flying, bands playing, crowds hurraing, soldiers marching on the streets and avenues and houses were decorated with bunting. Father and son wended their way to the City National Hotel on Pennsylvania Ave. and after breakfast they set out on the way to the White House. Reaching there it was learned that the President and Cabinet were busily engaged in discussing matters pertaining to the new conditions and this prevented the fulfilling of one desire—shaking hands with him or even speaking to him. The Adjutant General's office was busy, so much so that a permit to take the Uncle from the hospital could not be had, so the time was spent after seeing the sick man a short time, in looking over the city.

Late in the afternoon, when the evening paper made its appearance the boy called his father's attention to an item which read that the President would be present in Ford's Theater, when the play of the American Cousin would be produced for the first time in Washington. On inquiry it was learned from the clerk of the hotel that all tickets except those sold to the regular Washington society of theater goers, had been taken up by the Ticket Scalpers. Tickets however were obtained, at a cost of \$2.50 and at Eight o'clock sharp father and son were seated just about the center of the auditorium. The orchestra played a short time, then the curtain was raised, and the play began. About the middle of the first act the Orchestra struck up the tune of "Hail to the Chief"—the vast crowd stood and every eye turned to the right side of the hall when Mr. and Mrs. Lincoln, with a young man and a young lady preceded by two plain clothes men was seen going toward the President's box—it being the second on the right. The President appeared in the front of the box, placing his old stove-pipe hat on his left breast he bowed to the right, left and center, then took his seat, and the play continued.

It was, according to my best recollection, about the middle of the second act when there was a pause, or break. It looked as if someone had forgotten their cue. Just as the audience was about to show it's impatience there came from somewhere, seemingly from the top of the stage, a figure of a man, he fell over to one side, recovered, then raising his right arm with a dagger in his hand he cried out "Sic temper tyrannis" and then limped to the left entrance and went back of the stage. There was another pause of several minutes, the audience eagerly looking for what was to follow. As the man made his appearance there was of course a sound, but the audience thought that it might have been a fall of some of the property back of the stage or the noise as of a falling body. About the time when the audience were again going to give a demonstration of their impatience a man was seen coming from the direction of the box, he went to the rear of the audience, touched a man on the shoulders and whispered something in his ear. The man so

touched rose at once and both walked hurriedly back. A man seated by the side of the Surgeon, for the man seated was one, heard this much, "Come quickly, the President has been shot," and by the time the two were near the stairway to the President's box, cried out "THE PRESIDENT HAS BEEN SHOT." Then there was a rush for the stage, and no doubt many would have been hurt and some killed had it not been that Mr. Fold, holding up his hands as if to keep the crowd back, said, "The President has been shot by John Wilkes Booth, who has gone down in the rear of the Theater, mounted a horse, and is on his way for the 'Long Bridge.'" The crowd had been checked, soldiers came in, cleared the house, and shortly after the President's body was carried to a building across the street from the Theater, where he died some little time before daylight on the 15th. There was no record of his saying anything before he passed over to rest beneath the shade of the trees.

---

"When I told the story first, some eight or nine years ago the question was asked how does it come that the plain clothes men allowed Booth to go in to the Box? I could account for it only on the ground that being well known in Washington, and especially by the plain clothes men, an Actor that might be familiar with the play, they thought nothing of his going in to tell the President of the first part of the play, and give pointers on the play as it was produced. As soon as he went in he walked up behind the President, whose face was toward the stage, and fired the fatal shot, hitting him about the base of the brain. Then Booth started to the front to leap to the stage. His foot caught in the Flag by the spur he was wearing, causing him to turn on his ankle and he badly sprained it, so much so that he walked with difficulty and pain. He only travelled by night lying hidden during the day.

It was not long before Col. Baker the Chief of the Secret Service with a posse of men found Booth in a tobacco barn at a place near the Virginia and Maryland line. He was ordered out but he refused and it was said that he declared he would not be taken alive and anyone entering to get him would come to their death. Col. Baker ordered one of his men to gather some kindling, intending to smoke or burn him out. Booth seeing the man about to start a fire raised his gun or carbine; but before he shot Sergeant Corbett seeing Booth raise his gun, ran the muzzle of his gun thru a knot hole, pulled the trigger and Booth fell, the shot taking effect nearly at the same place that the President had been hit. It was also said at the time, that he died, in a short time before he did he was heard to say "Tell mother I died for my country."

What became of Booth's body is another question asked. I can well remember hearing my mother say, after it was learned that the body would not be turned over to relatives for burial, "Oh I do think the government ought to do this. His loved ones, because he must have some one that loves him, would like to know where the body lay." There were two places spoken of, one being in the old capital prison yard, the other, and this appears to be right, down somewhere on the Potomac river at a point only known to Col. Baker and two or more who went at the darkest hour and after placing irons in the sack containing what was left of the body it was hurled overboard. One of the reasons assigned at the time for this was, that there were some in this country at that time who might have made of the spot, a shrine. In fact it was so reported that a man in one of the Alabama cities erected a monument to Booth's memory and if stood in his yard up to and until the breaking out of the World War when it was destroyed by some troops passing thru on their way to camp.

On the evening of the 15th as the Father, Uncle and boy were on their way to the train to return home, they saw evidences not of rejoicing, gay bunting, etc., but all buildings were draped with mourning—there was a silence so great that it effected all—and to this day when asked about the change the boy, now a man of 76 will say “That day was the darkest, quietest day, save one in the world’s history—but Thank God it was followed in course of time by a brighter day.” The prayer of the men, women, boys and girls of this great Nation should be “God save the Nation,” and make it truly great.” Great in His sight rather than in the sight of men.

Signed (The Rambler),

D. L. RICHARDS.

Author: Martin, C. H.

Title: Reminiscences of a Columbia boy of the assasination of  
President Lincoln / by C. H. Martin.

Primary Material: Book

Subject(s): Lincoln, Abraham, 1809-1865 --Assassination.  
Richards, D. V.  
Columbia (Pa.)--History.

Publisher: Lancaster, Pa. : Lancaster County Historical Society, 1927

Description: 71-74 p. ; 23 cm.

Series: Journal of the Lancaster County Historical Society ; v. 31,  
no. 6

Call Number: 974.9 L245 v.31

Location: LCHSJL -- Journal Article (reading room)

=====

+++++

Institution Name  
Institution Address  
Institution Phone Number  
Institution E-mail Address