

HISTORICAL AND ARCHITECTURAL FEATURES
SIGNIFICANT IN THE RESTORATION OR PARTIAL RESTORATION
OF FORD'S THEATER



UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE
NATIONAL CAPITAL PARKS

JANUARY, 1956.



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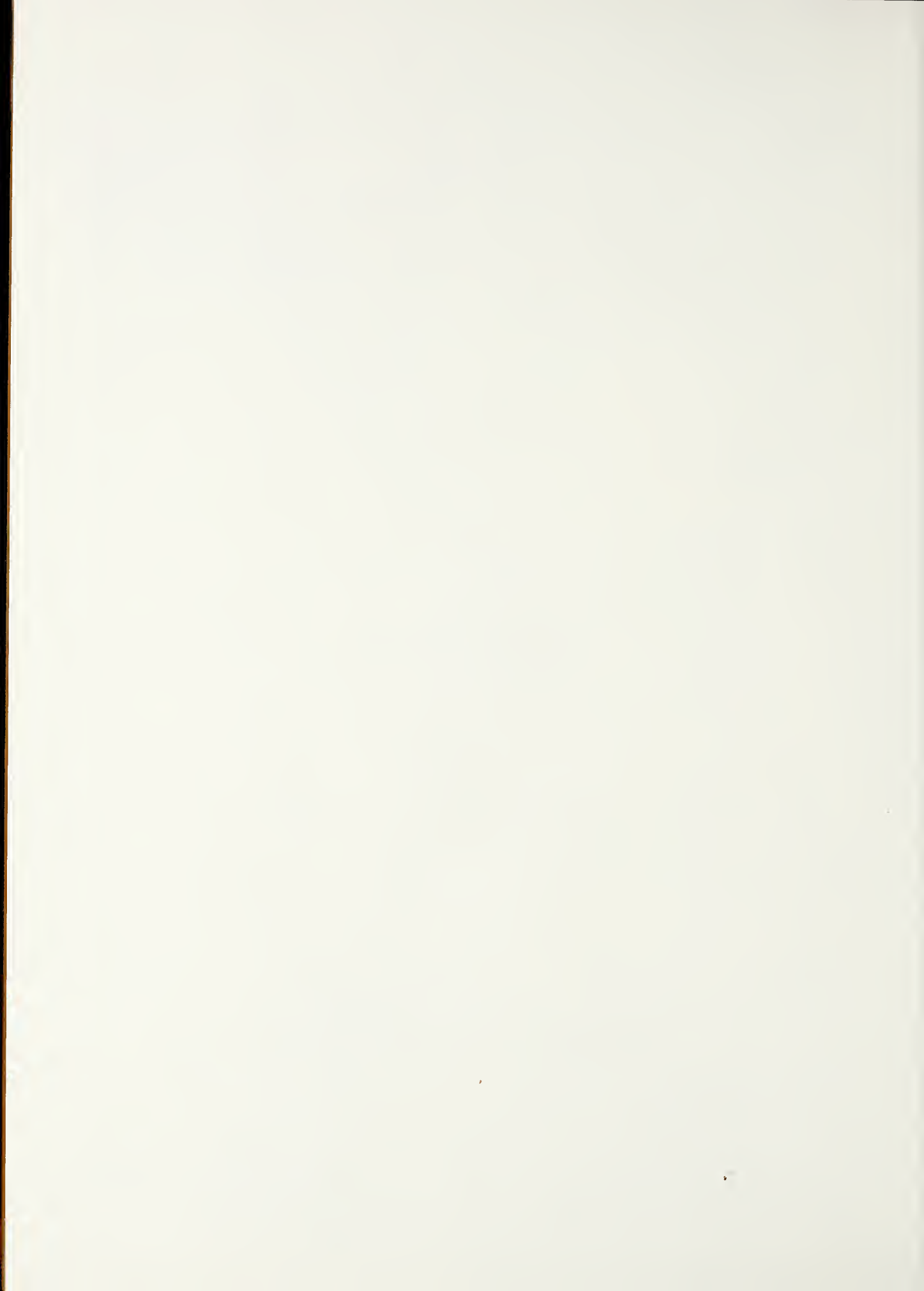
By

STANLEY W. McCLURE.



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HISTORICAL AND ARCHITECTURAL FEATURES SIGNIFICANT
IN THE RESTORATION OR PARTIAL RESTORATION OF FORD'S THEATER

During the installation of the present exhibits in the Lincoln Museum in 1943-4, extensive research was necessary to determine the accuracy of various accounts of the assassination of Abraham Lincoln, the flight of John Wilkes Booth, the trial and execution of the conspirators and other related events. Records of the trial of the conspirators, contemporary newspaper accounts, numerous magazine articles and books on the subject were consulted and examined. Due to the necessity of improving the exhibits as quickly as possible, neither the time nor the facilities permitted the collection of all of the material located in accordance with standard historical procedure. Information unearthed as a result of the study, however, was used not only in preparing the labels and installing the exhibits, but remains today the principal source in writing official publications and as the basis of most of our present knowledge of these subjects.

Descriptive material on the interior and exterior architecture of the theater, although only one phase of the research study, was not lost sight of when the work was undertaken. References on the architecture of the building, found in many scattered sources, were either copied or noted for future reference. In connection with this work, a number of photographs, sketches and rough plans of the



theater were added to the collection. Except for the known plan of the dress circle, the original drawings of the architect and builder, James J. Gifford, if such ever existed, were not located.

This report is being prepared in order to assemble essential historical and architectural features of old Ford's Theater which have become known as a result of the research in installing the present exhibits, and from conclusions reached from close association with these subjects over a number of years.

EXTERIOR FEATURES OF FORD'S THEATER

West Front of Ford's Theater. Only one photograph of the exterior of Ford's Theater as it was at the time of the assassination has been located. Although the exact date of the photograph is unknown, it was apparently taken a few days after the assassination as black mourning bands hang from the windows and soldiers on the sidewalk guard the closed building.¹ A wooden platform, erected for the convenience of patrons alighting from carriages, is seen in the photograph.² About 24 feet in length, the platform was placed exactly in the center of the building with one end resting upon the sidewalk and the other extending into the street. It did not quite reach the entrance door on the south. The pavement in front was about 16 feet in width.³ The gas lamp was erected on the sidewalk in front of the theater in 1864.⁴

There were five doorways opening into Ford's Theater. The stairway leading to the family circle (gallery) was reached by the



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Ford's Theater after the assassination. Soldiers guard the closed building and mourning bands hang from the windows. (Reproduced from photograph by Alexander Gardner, Washington, D. C.)



Ford's Theater building about 1870. The changes made to the west front and the roof in 1865 when the theater was converted into an office building can be seen by comparing this photograph with the earlier one. (Reproduced from a photograph by an unknown photographer in the Lincoln Museum collection.)



doorway on the extreme south.⁵ On the brick wall of the building, south of this entrance, was a sign which could be reproduced in the restored theater, which read "Family Circle - 25 cents."⁶ The doorway next on the north was the main entrance while the three other doors on the north were used solely as exits. The first floor front of the building seems to have been painted white or covered with white stucco over the bricks. The sidewalk and street in front of the building are undoubtedly at a lower level today than in 1865. Two wooden steps are shown at the south entrance in the photograph and one at the main entrance. Most of the transom and paneled door of the south entrance can be seen in the photograph and should be of value in reconstructing these features of all five doorways.⁷

An early photograph, taken about 1870, shows the changes on the outside of the building after it was converted from a theater into a three story office building.⁸ The three large ventilators, apparently of wood, shown in the original photograph, were removed, and a large skylight was constructed at the center of the roof. In the original photograph, two small brick chimneys are seen on the lower edge of the roof on the south, one toward the front and one at the rear. Undoubtedly there were also two similar chimneys on the north roof, but the photograph does not show that side of the building.⁹ When the building was converted into an office building in 1865, following the assassination, a single large chimney was erected toward the southeast corner. The pediment and cornice of the theater, shown unfinished in the original photograph, were completed as seen in the photograph made about 1870.¹⁰ The timber

trusses supporting the roof remain essentially as originally constructed.

During the remodeling of the building in 1865 from a theater into an office building, it was discovered that the weight of the front wall had caused it to lean inward. A new vertical wall was built over a portion of the outer face of the old wall to make it plumb. Inside the wall bulges six inches at the center on the level of the third story. Since it is braced against the floor beams and its thickness is so great (at the foundations, the wall is 3' 3" thick; it diminishes to about 2' 8" on the second floor level depending on the bulge, and from a point near the top of the third floor on up it is 2' in thickness), the bulge does not affect its stability.¹¹ In the photograph of April, 1865, the front has six shallow brick pilasters, while the four center pilasters have been set forward with quarter pilasters at the sides as seen in the 1870 photograph.

In the reconstruction of the building, following the partial collapse of the interior floors on June 9, 1893, the windows on the second and third floors were enlarged, except those on the south which appear to be the originals.¹²

North Wall of Ford's Theater. The north and south walls of the building are 18" in thickness throughout. In 1878, the two story brick building was erected on the north side of the Ford's Theater building. Since the foundation of the north wall of the building extended only three feet below the sidewalk level, an excavation for the basement of the brick building on the north was made to a

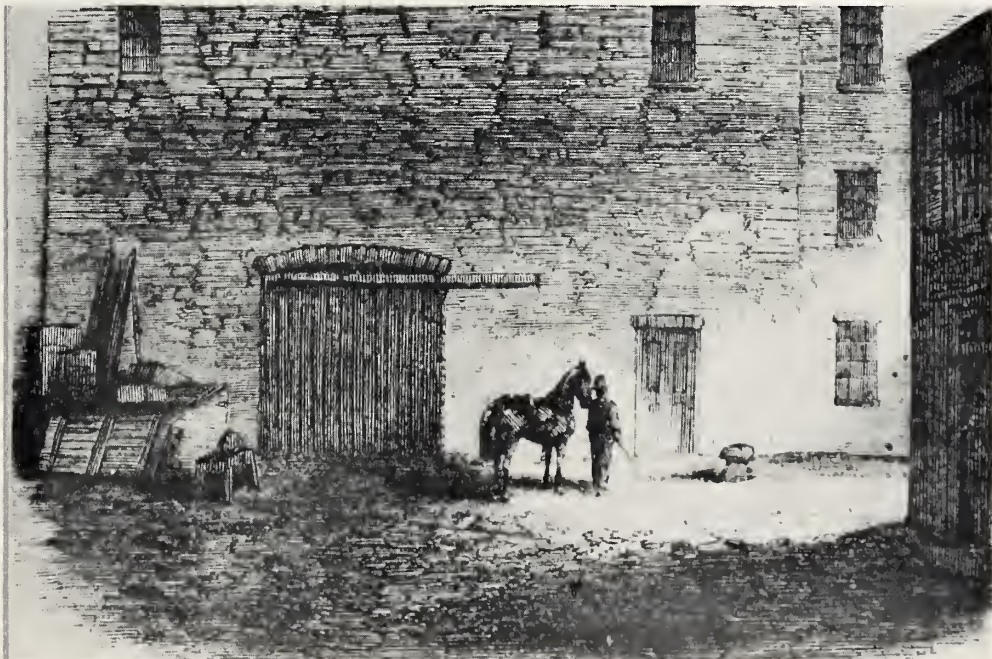
depth of nine feet, and it was necessary to place underpinning beneath the north wall of the theater building to a depth of seven feet. The north wall at that time was found to be very badly warped, bulged inwardly and presenting a very unstable appearance. The wall apparently assumed this shape during its construction, and caused the builders much concern about its safety.¹³

South Wall of Ford's Theater. Early in 1864, a lounge for the convenience of theater patrons was opened from the dress circle to the second floor of the three story brick building on the south.¹⁴ A photograph taken in 1930 clearly shows the opening which had been converted from the original doorway into a window.¹⁵ In 1931, the south wall was covered with cement to prevent moisture seepage and the opening was bricked up in the course of this work.¹⁶ Two new windows were cut in the south wall of the third story in 1894.¹⁷

East Wall of Ford's Theater. A contemporary sketch of the east or rear wall of Ford's Theater shows two windows on the second floor level, the door to the alley near the north end of the wall, and a large door at the center.¹⁸ The latter was 14 feet wide, permitting the moving of stage properties in and out of the building.¹⁹ The door to the alley opened inward and two upper and two lower rectangular panels are shown in the sketch. Three of the windows of the east wall of the four story annex, attached to Ford's Theater building on the north, are also seen in the sketch.²⁰



The south wall of Ford's Theater building in 1930. An X marks the window once the doorway leading from the dress circle to the lounge in the adjoining building which had been removed in 1928. (Photograph in the Lincoln Museum collection.)



Contemporary sketch of the rear of Ford's Theater, showing the small door by which Booth made his escape. (A. Berghaus, Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper, May 13, 1865.)

Some features of the original rear wall can perhaps be determined from a photograph taken after the collapse of Ford's Theater on June 9, 1893. Although only a portion of the wall is shown in the photograph, the large door at the center, partially bricked up, can be discerned. The door to the alley, through which Booth escaped from the theater, however, had been converted into a window.²¹

In the conversion of the Ford's Theater building into an office building in 1865, the back wall was found to be out of plumb. It was strengthened by the addition of an interior wall and anchors tying the wall to the system of interior beams. In repairing the building following the collapse of June, 1893, an examination of the rear wall revealed that it bulged out, as nearly as could be measured, about ten inches in its central section. After the interior had been restored, a report by a Board of Engineers recommended certain additional work to be done to strengthen the building. One recommendation was for the removal of the entire east wall and the erection of a new wall on concrete foundations. The new brick wall, erected in 1894, is 24 inches thick up to the level of the third floor and 18 inches from this height to the top of the wall. The rear wall of the north annex, which was also torn down and rebuilt, is 18 inches thick from the foundation to the second floor, and 13½ inches thick from there to the top.²²

Brick Building South of Ford's Theater. The three story brick building on the south, in the area now occupied by a parking lot,



Scene at the rear of Ford's Theater building following the collapse of a portion of the interior on June 9, 1893. This is the only known photograph of the original rear wall of the building. (Photograph in the Lincoln Museum collection.)



Removing the bodies of the persons who met their death in the partial collapse of the floors of the Ford's Theater building on June 9, 1893. The windows on the second and third floors, except that on the south, were enlarged in 1893. The door of the annex on the right admitted into a corridor which led to the stage door of the theater. (Photograph in the Lincoln Museum collection.)

was also owned by John T. Ford and used partially in connection with the theater. The first floor was occupied by Peter Taltavul's "Star Saloon." The second floor, as mentioned before, was converted into a lounge for the patrons of Ford's Theater early in 1864. John T. Ford's brothers, James R. Ford, the Treasurer; and Henry Clay Ford, the Business Manager of Ford's Theater, had their sleeping rooms on the third floor of the building.²³ The photograph of Ford's Theater, taken a few days after the assassination, also includes this building and provides some of the architectural details of the west front.²⁴ The north door of the building led into a corridor about three feet wide which followed along the south wall of the theater and led to the stage door, located in back of the boxes. This passage was used by the actors and employees in reaching the stage and dressing rooms of Ford's Theater.²⁵

INTERIOR FEATURES OF FORD'S THEATER

The cornerstone of Ford's Theater was laid on the morning of February 28, 1863, by James J. Gifford, the architect and builder. A substantial brick structure of imposing architectural proportions, it was then considered one of the finest theaters in the country. The new edifice was completed and opened to the public on the night of August 27, 1863, when the dramatic pageant "The Naiad Queen" was presented to a capacity audience.²⁶

The Main Lobby and Entrance. The box office of Ford's Theater





Diagram of west front of Ford's Theater. No. 1 - entrance to the gallery. No. 2 - door used by President and Mrs. Lincoln and Booth. Nos. 3 and 4 - these doors were open in mild weather, but on April 15, 1865 were closed and only used for exits after the performance. No. 5 - as the stairway to the dress circle was located there, this door was used for exit only. A - Peter Taltavul's "Star Saloon." B - reception room, with a door leading into the dress circle. C - rooms of Henry Clay Ford and James R. Ford. D - Saloon of James P. Ferguson. (Photograph reproduced from Osborn H. Oldroyd, The Assassination of Abraham Lincoln, 8.)





was located inside between the two doorways on the south. It had a ticket window facing north for the patrons of the orchestra, parquet and dress circle, and one on the south for those admitted to the family circle. A window facing east, which presumably was the upper part of the door to the box office, looked out into the auditorium. The ticket taker for the main part of the house stood behind an iron railing in the lobby at the rear of the parquet seats.²⁷

No photographs or detailed plans of the west or lobby section of Ford's Theater have been located. It is shown in a rough plan of the interior of the theater found in the papers of John T. Ford.²⁸ Descriptive material on this part of the theater is also meager and such as exists contains very little detail. According to the statement of James J. Gifford, the builder of Ford's Theater, the width of the entrance vestibule was seven feet and at the center about ten feet. The length of the vestibule was in the neighborhood of 30 feet.²⁹ A clock hung on the wall at the rear above the door. At the entrance into the lobby, there was a temporary door covered with oilcloth or canvas to preserve the warmth of the lobby.³⁰ There was a "little tin postoffice" hanging on the wall of the box office.³¹ As was his custom, John Wilkes Booth appeared in Ford's Theater at noon on the day of the assassination and a letter was brought out to him from the office.³²

The Floors of Ford's Theater. Since detailed plans of the main floor of the auditorium of Ford's Theater are lacking, the levels



Contemporary photograph showing a part of the orchestra pit with music racks and one of the openings under the stage. Mathew B. Brady Collection, The National Archives, Washington, D. C.

of the lobby, parquet and orchestra sections and the stage are problems which must be determined by the architectural and engineering staffs. In the conversion of the theater into a three story office building, it was specified that the first floor was to be seven and one-half inches above the door sills of Ford's Theater.³³ A sketch appearing in a magazine following the assassination shows the parquet and orchestra seats sloping toward the stage.³⁴ A portion of the orchestra pit with music racks and one of the openings under the stage is shown in a contemporary photograph.³⁵ The orchestra pit was perhaps four or five feet lower than the stage. It had its greatest width at the center and narrowed at the sides. The orchestra at Ford's Theater, of which William Withers, Jr. was Director, consisted of eight or ten musicians with no piano. The orchestra pit, and perhaps other parts of the theater, was probably similar to that in the present Ford's Theater in Baltimore which was also constructed by James J. Gifford, in 1872. Although the original cost of Ford's Theater in Washington is unknown, the theater in Baltimore was erected for \$175,000.³⁶

The only stairway to the dress circle was located at the northwest corner of the main floor. This was the stairway used by President and Mrs. Lincoln and later by John Wilkes Booth on the evening of April 14, 1865 to reach the Presidential box. The nature and details of this apparently small stairway are not definitely known, but one witness testified that "I believe there

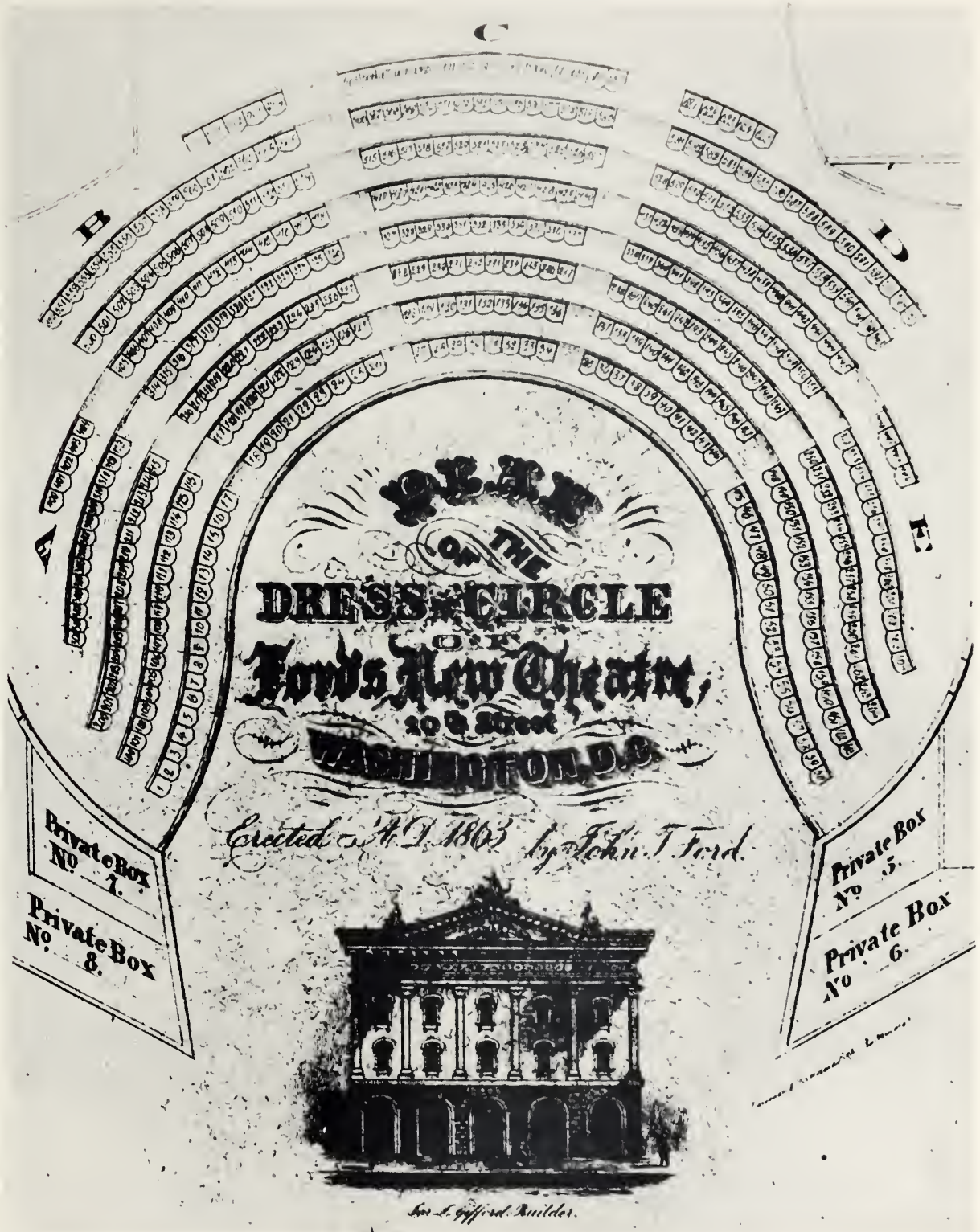


is a little winding stairway; I am not certain about that. I believe it goes up a small flight of stairs and then turns in the middle to go to the second floor"³⁷

The unscaled plan of the dress circle, the only detailed plan of any of the floors of Ford's Theater, should be very useful not only in restoring the dress circle, but also in working out some features of the other floors. The size of the lobby and the seating arrangement of the main floor might conceivably be very similar to that of the dress circle.³⁸

Seating in Ford's Theater. According to the newspaper accounts of the time, the three floors of the auditorium seated 2400 persons. Of these, the orchestra was to seat 400; the parquet in the rear 400; the dress circle (first balcony) 600; and the family circle (second balcony) 1,000.³⁹ In June, 1893, John T. Ford stated that the capacity of Ford's Theater was nearly 1700.⁴⁰ In making plans for the number of seats in 1943-44, in connection with the study being made for constructing the diorama or model of Ford's Theater, it was evident that the figure of nearly 1700 was more nearly correct than that of 2400 as reported in the newspapers. A study of the unscaled plan of the dress circle, the only plan discovered for any of the floors, reveals the reason for the discrepancy in the number of seats. The front row is numbered from 1 to 60, but the numbers 61 to 99 are omitted as the second row begins at 100 and runs to 163. These omissions continue through the eight rows of seats in the dress circle plan.





This unscaled plan of the dress circle, the only detailed plan of any of the floors of Ford's Theater, is probably similar to those of the other floors. The highest numbered seat is 625 but actually there are only 421 seats in the plan. (Reproduced from an old photograph, by an unknown artist, in the Lincoln Museum Collection.)



Actually there were only 421 seats in the dress circle, although the highest numbered seat, in the northwest corner, was 625. If similar reductions in the number of seats as reported in the newspapers for the other floors are made, there would have been about 280 seats in the orchestra and parquet instead of 400 in each, and about 700 in the family circle rather than 1,000 seats, making a total of 1681 in the entire theater.⁴¹

The orchestra, parquet, and dress circle, sloping downward toward the stage, were equipped with cane-bottomed chairs.⁴² When Ford's Theater was converted into an office building a total of 988 cane-seat chairs were removed from the building by the Quartermaster General's Office.⁴³ This number would only be sufficient for the orchestra, parquet and dress circle, with no allowance for the seats in the family circle. Since information on the type of seats in the family circle is lacking, admission there being only 25 cents, benches rather than cane-bottomed chairs were modeled for the seating in that part of the theater in constructing the diorama.

The Boxes of Ford's Theater. The historical material relating to the eastern or stage section of Ford's Theater, where the boxes occupied by the Lincoln party were located, is much more extensive than in other parts of the building. The most important of this material, consisting of contemporary photographs, sketches, incomplete plans, documentary evidence, and newspaper and magazine accounts, will be referred to throughout this account. Although the





Booth crossing the stage after vaulting from the box. This sketch which appeared in Frank Leslie's Illustrated Weekly, May 20, 1865, shows the parquet and orchestra seats sloping toward the stage. It is also the only known pictorial source indicating the nature of the dome and proscenium of the theater.



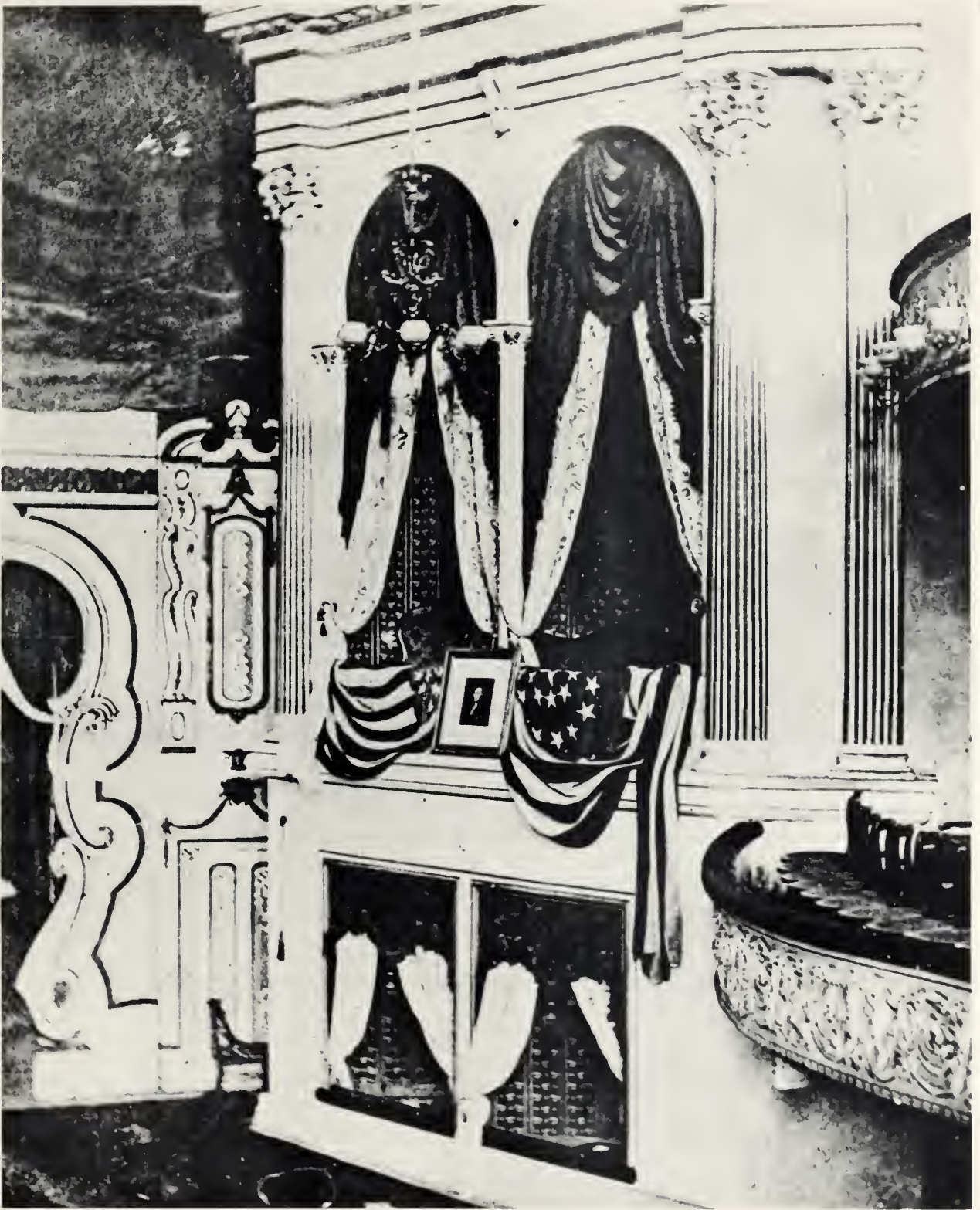
Diorama depicting the scene of the assassination on exhibit in the Lincoln Museum. The model was constructed in proper perspective from information secured from contemporary sketches, photographs and historical research.

plans of the builder have not been located for this area of the theater, and some of the descriptive accounts from various sources are contradictory, an analysis of the large amount of available material should make it possible to reproduce a reasonable accurate approximation of this section of the interior as it existed in 1865. The diorama of Ford's Theater was constructed in the period from 1944-6 from historical research and the information secured from this material.

The boxes of Ford's Theater consisted of two upper and two lower boxes located on each side of the stage. Although the boxes on each side were identical, interest naturally centers on the upper boxes (Boxes 7 and 8) located on the south side of the stage since these were occupied by the Presidential party on the night of April 14, 1865. On that night, the auditorium was filled to capacity, but only the double Presidential box was reserved.⁴⁴

As can be seen in the original photographs taken a few days after the assassination, the lofty arches of the upper boxes extended above the level of the family circle as it sloped from the rear toward the stage area of the building.⁴⁵ The Presidential party, after ascending the stairway at the northwest corner of the lobby, passed to the rear of the dress circle seats, then proceeded down the aisle leading to the double box.⁴⁶

The measurements of the Presidential box are shown on a plan prepared by the War Department following the assassination. These dimensions seem to be essentially correct and should be very valu-



Photograph of the Presidential box taken several days after the assassination. The two upright American flags and the Treasury Guards' flag had been removed when the photograph was made. The lofty arches of the box extended above the upper balcony which, except for the slope toward the stage, is on the level of the present third floor of the building. (Reproduced from the original negative in the National Archives, Washington, D. C.)

able in preparing detailed drawings for the restoration of Ford's Theater. Some inaccuracies in the plan are apparent - the apron of the stage curves the wrong way and the depth of the stage is erroneously shown as greater than the width of the theater. In other respects, however, the plan seems to be accurately drawn.⁴⁷ The measurements on this plan were followed in 1944 when the outlines of the boxes were marked on the floor of the Lincoln Museum.

The only entrance to the Presidential box, and to the upper boxes on the other side of the stage, was from the dress circle. The outside door, which Booth secured with a pine bar to prevent others from following him into the box, led into a vestibule about four feet wide and almost ten feet long.⁴⁸ The door to Box 7 on the north side of the vestibule was closed, and the Lincoln party entered through the door to Box 8 at the far end of the passage. During the afternoon of April 14, 1865, Edman Spangler, the stagehand, removed the temporary partition between the two upper boxes, converting it into a single large box for the convenience of the Presidential party.⁴⁹ The partition was an inch in thickness and about seven feet high.⁵⁰ A black walnut rocking chair, upholstered in red damask, a sofa and a high-back chair had been placed in the box. The rockers of the rocking chair fitted into the angle of Box 7 behind the closed door and nearest the audience. The rocking chair placed in this position prevented the use of the door to Box 7 so that the party had to use the door to Box 8. The President took this chair with Mrs. Lincoln seated in a cane-bottom chair on his right, toward the center pillar of the double box.



The single shot muzzle loading Deringer, used by John Wilkes Booth in shooting Abraham Lincoln. Slightly less than six inches in length, the pistol had a caliber of .4375. Transferred from the Judge Advocate General's Office of the War Department in 1940, the Deringer is now on exhibit in the Lincoln Museum.



President Lincoln was seated in this black walnut rocking chair, upholstered in red damask, when he was shot by John Wilkes Booth. The chair, acquired by Henry Ford, is now exhibited in the Edison Memorial Institute, Dearborn, Michigan. (Reproduced from the original negative in The National Archives, Washington, D. C.)



Miss Clara Harris, a friend of Mrs. Lincoln who accompanied them to the play, was seated in the right-hand corner of Box 8 in the high-back chair, and Major Henry R. Rathbone, her fiance, was seated on her left and to the rear on the sofa.⁵¹

In preparation for the arrival of President and Mrs. Lincoln, Acting Manager Henry Clay Ford, the 20-year old brother of the owner, John T. Ford, supervised the decorations of the state box. Two American flags, each on a staff, were placed on either side of the box and two others were draped on the balustrades. One of these flags was loaned by the Treasury Department. The blue regimental flag of the U. S. Treasury Guards, also borrowed from the Treasury Department, was suspended on a staff at the center pillar. An engraving of George Washington, in a gilt frame about two feet square, was placed in front of the pillar as an added touch to the decorative scheme.⁵²

Draperies of buff satin and curtains of Nottingham lace hung from the arches of the boxes. A figured crimson paper covered the walls, and the floor was laid with Turkey carpet. In what was described as "chaste chandeliers" were suspended in front of the upper boxes.⁵³

After firing the fatal shot into the back of President Lincoln's head, the assassin, John Wilkes Booth, vaulted over the railing of the box onto the stage below. The toe of his right boot struck the framed engraving of Washington, turning it completely over. The spur on the heel of his right boot caught in the fringe of the





Sketch by Albert Berghaus which appeared in Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper, April 29, 1865, representing John Wilkes Booth in the act of assassinating President Lincoln in his box at Ford's Theater, April 14, 1865. From left to right are: Booth, President Lincoln, Mrs. Lincoln and Maj. Henry R. Rathbone.



In this contemporary sketch, John Wilkes Booth is shown in the act of leaping from the box to the stage after shooting Abraham Lincoln. Although his right spur caught in the fringe of the flag, it appears that it is the one on his left boot in the sketch. Sketched by Albert Berghaus, Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper, May 6, 1865.



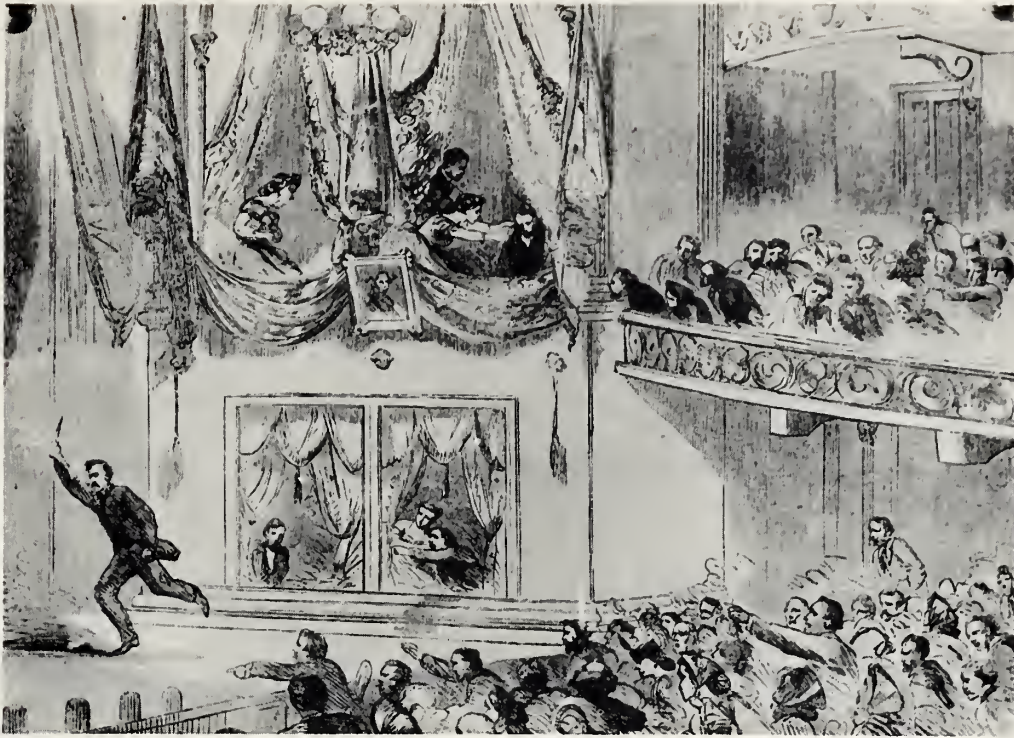
Treasury Guards' flag and brought it down, tearing a strip with it. These obstacles caused the assassin to lose his balance and he fell awkwardly on the stage, tearing a rent in the stage carpet. He landed in a kneeling position, with his left leg resting on the stage. In the fall, the large bone in his left leg was fractured about two inches above the ankle.⁵⁴

The height of the box above the stage has been variously estimated. Major Rathbone thought that it was "about ten or twelve feet," including the balustrade. In any event, it was not an uncommon height for Booth who introduced leaps equally as high in his dramatic performances.⁵⁵ An artist who visited the scene gives the height as $11\frac{1}{2}$ feet on his preliminary sketch for Harper's Weekly. Apparently he measured the distance, and unless evidence to the contrary is unearthed, this would seem to be a reasonable figure for use in preparing plans for the restoration of the boxes of Ford's Theater.⁵⁶

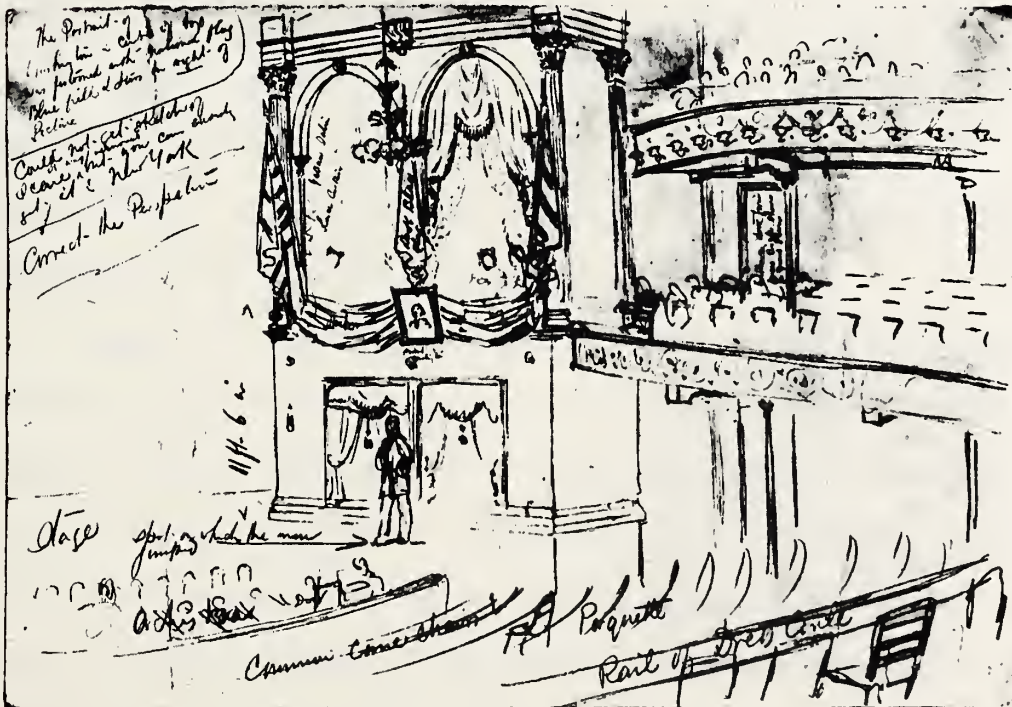
The floor levels of the lower boxes, beneath the Presidential box and the upper boxes on the opposite side of the stage, were about two feet lower than stage level. Consequently, the openings of these boxes were much smaller than those required for the upper boxes.⁵⁷

The Lincoln Museum collection contains several original articles relating to old Ford's Theater. On exhibit is the door to Box 7 with the small hole used by the assassin to peer into the box before entering to shoot the President. It was presented to the Lincoln Museum in 1939 by Col. John T. Ford III, grandson of the Civil War owner of the theater. The pine bar used by Booth to secure the vestibule door is on display. On loan from the Washington Gas Light





Landing on the stage, Booth instantly regained his feet and is asserted to have shouted "Sic Semper Tyrannis" before dashing from the stage. The sketch is erroneous in that the lower boxes were unoccupied. (Harper's Weekly, April 27, 1865).



Preliminary sketch of the assassination scene by A. R. Waud for Harper's Weekly. The height from the railing of the box above the stage is marked as $11\frac{1}{2}$ feet. The sketch also contains data of value concerning the curtains, draperies, the blue flag on a staff at the central pillar and other details. (Reproduced from the original sketch in the John Pierpont Morgan Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D. C.)

Company is the meter for the gas lights at Ford's Theater. The Treasury Guards' flag is also exhibited. The daughter of Maj. Emory S. Turner, who had retained it after the Treasury Guards regiment disbanded, presented the flag in December, 1932, to the Lincoln Museum. One of the American flags which draped the balustrades is also at the Lincoln Museum. It was transferred to the collection in 1938 by the Treasury Department.⁵⁸

The collection also contains pieces of the wallpaper and lace curtains from the Presidential box. Two original playbills for "Our American Cousin" are among the valuable articles. One playbill was printed beforehand, while the other, printed on April 14, 1865, was revised to include a verse of the patriotic song "Honor to Our Soldiers," composed by members of the Ford Theater Company and to be sung during the evening. An ornamental bracket and the door to the box, painted white or light gray, indicate the color of the boxes and other woodwork. This is further substantiated by the contemporary photographs which show the woodwork in a light color.

A number of other original articles could no doubt be secured providing Ford's Theater is restored. The walnut rocker in which President Lincoln was seated is in the Edison Memorial Institute of the Ford Foundation, Dearborn, Michigan. Perhaps the chair will be returned to the restored theater; if not, a replica of it could no doubt be made from existing photographs and actual measurements. The engraving of Washington which hung in front of the central pillar; the couch that was in the box, and the set of furniture which was on the stage at the time of the assassination have been offered by



FORD'S THEATRE

FRIDAY EVENING APRIL 14th 1865

Friday Evening, April 14th 1865

BENEFIT

AND
LAST NIGHT
OF MISS

LAURA KEENE

JOHN DYOTT and HARRY HAWK.

TOM TAYLOR'S CELEBRATED ECCENTRIC COMEDY,

ONE THOUSAND NIGHTS,
OUR AMERICAN

COUSIN

FRANCIS FRANCHARD MISS LAURA KEENE

Alb. Murett, Philip A. ... John Dyott

Ans. Franchard, ... Harry Hawk

W. ...
M. ...
J. ...
T. ...
S. ...
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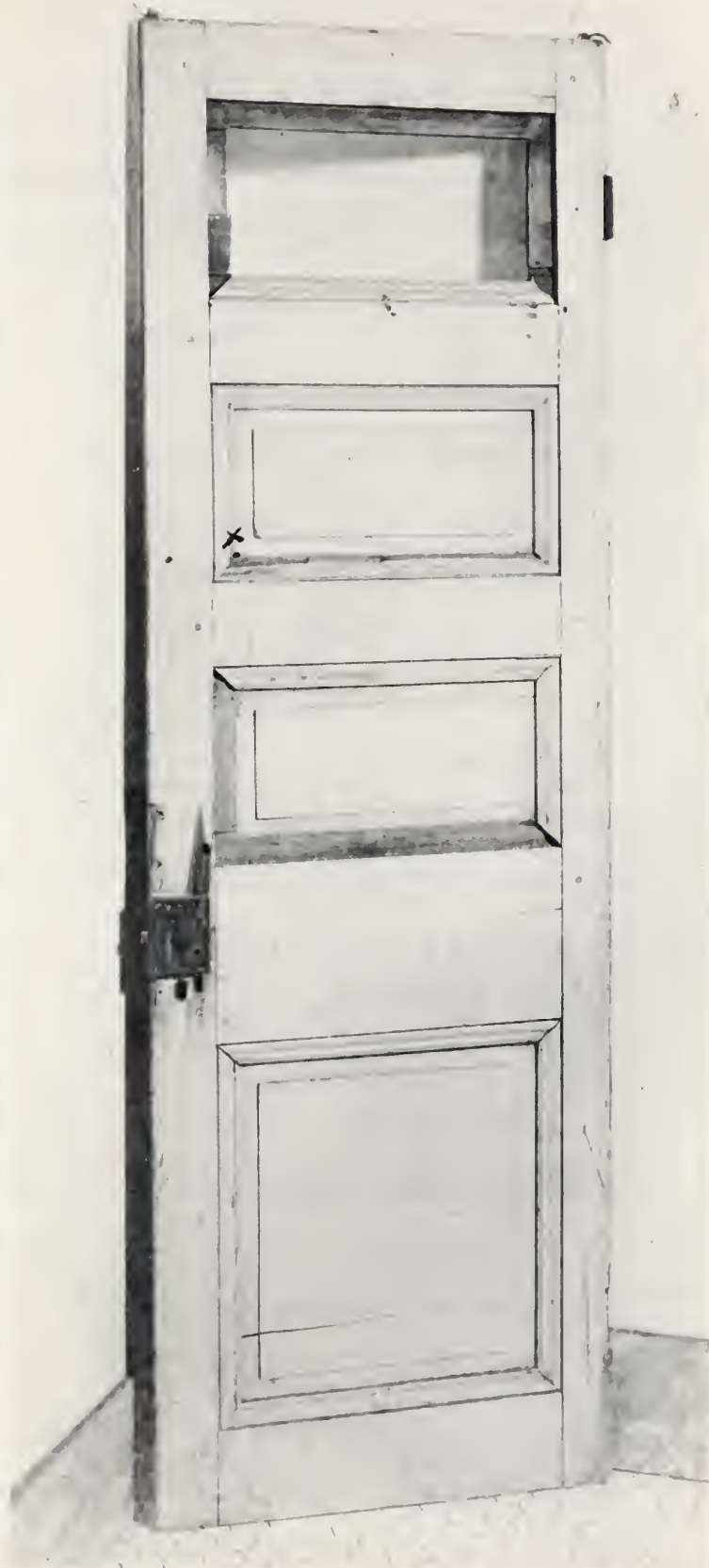
PATRIOTIC SONG AND CHORUS
"HONOR TO OUR SOLDIERS."

Wm. ...
Wm. ...
Wm. ...

BENEFIT of Miss JENNIE GOURLAY

THE OCTOBER

EDWIN ADAMS



Playbill of "Our American Cousin," the performance at Ford's Theater on the night Abraham Lincoln was assassinated. (Reproduced from the original playbill in the Lincoln Museum Collection).

Photograph of the door to the box in which President Lincoln was seated. The X marks the hole used by Booth to observe the position of the President in the box. (Lincoln Museum Collection).



members of the John T. Ford family for the restored theater. Other articles, unknown at the present time, will undoubtedly be offered when restoration of Ford's Theater is accomplished.

The Stage and Scenic Setting of Ford's Theater. The stage of Ford's

Theater occupied the eastern end of the building with the boxes located on each side and nearest the audience. From the center of the curved apron of the stage to the rear wall of the building, the distance was about 40 feet. Gas lights with decorated shields facing the audience were spaced along the apron.⁵⁹ A green baize carpet covered the stage floor in back of the apron.⁶⁰

It was approximately 10:15 p. m., April 14, 1865, when John Wilkes Booth entered the Presidential box and shot Abraham Lincoln. The play "Our American Cousin," a comedy by Tom Taylor with the distinguished actress Laura Keane in the role of Florence Trenchard, a part she had enacted more than 1,000 times, was nearing the close of the second scene of the third act when the tragic event occurred.⁶¹ The dairy scene in the act had been changed, and the stage had been closed in to show a room in Trenchard Manor. At the center of the back wall of the scene was a doorway hung with portieres, behind which was a set piece to mask the opening. The distance from this scene to the footlights was about 20 feet.⁶²

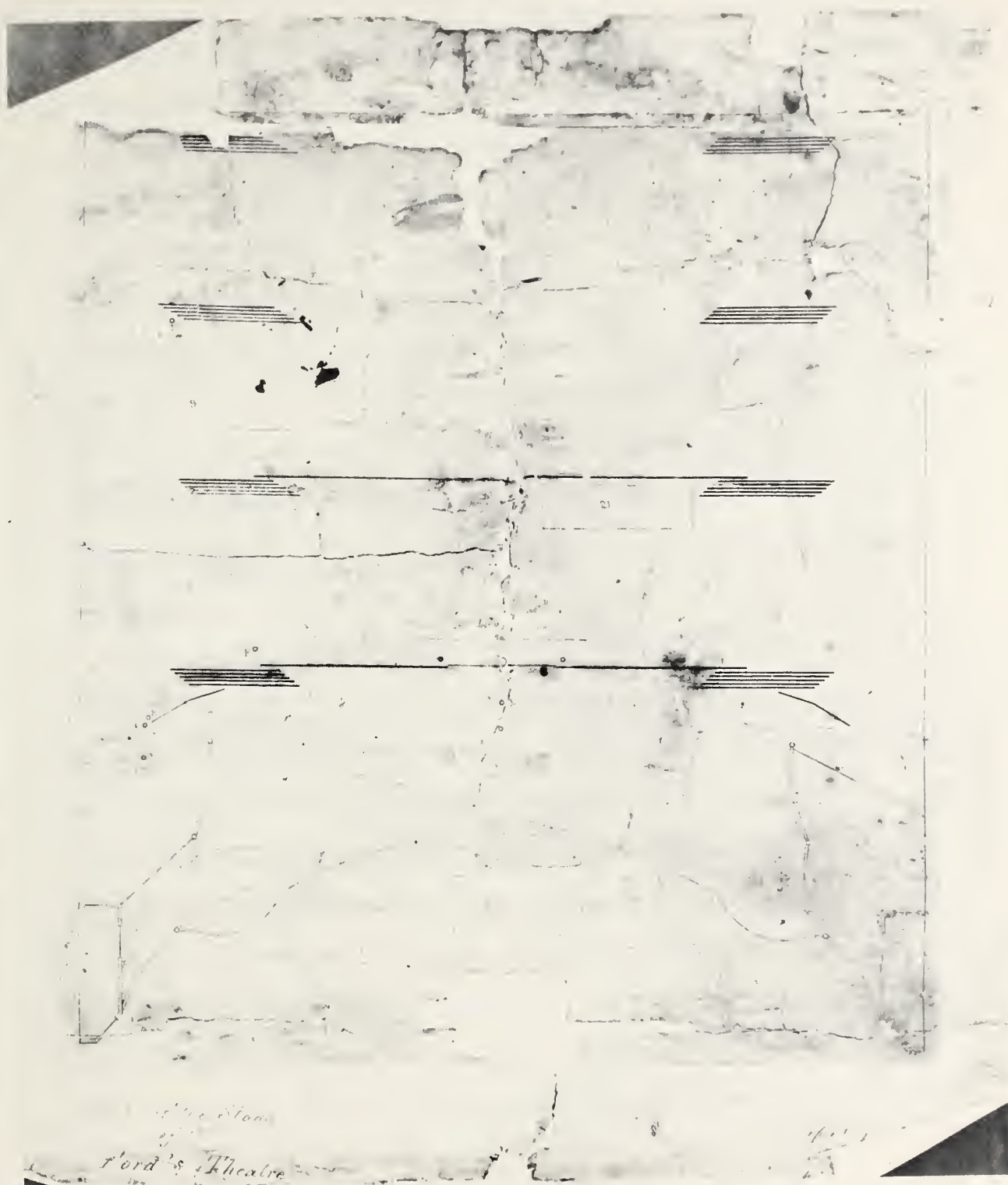
John Wilkes Booth, thoroughly familiar with the play, had timed his entrance when only one person was on the stage. The lone figure of Harry Hawk, playing the part of Asa Trenchard, was standing at the center of the stage in front of the curtained doorway at the fatal moment. After firing the shot and vaulting to the stage, the assassin



regained his feet with the agility of an athlete despite the fractured bone in his left leg. As he arose from the stage, he is asserted to have flourished his dagger and shouted "Sic Semper Tyrannis" (Thus always with tyrants), the motto of the Commonwealth of Virginia, before dashing across the stage. Harry Hawk, seeing Booth striding toward him with a knife, ran through the curtained doorway and up a flight of stairs to the flies.⁶³

In his diagonal dash across the stage, Booth traveled a distance of about 40 feet.⁶⁴ Leaving the stage by the first entrance on the north side of the theater, Booth passed between Laura Keane and the young actor William J. Ferguson, who was acting as prompter at the time.⁶⁵ The prompt desk was located near the entrance and in back of the boxes on the north side of the stage. It was about two feet square with a cupboard under it.⁶⁶ At the rear and near the center of these boxes, was the "gas-box" which enclosed all the mechanism for controlling the raising and lowering of gas lights throughout the building. A wooden box about breast-high, four feet long and two feet wide, it contained four wheels of about the diameter of a person's head, the entire equipment for the management of the lighting. The gas man, Edward Gorman, stood on duty at the box during the performance.⁶⁷ In the narrow aisle leading from the stage to the rear door, Booth bumped into William Withers, Jr., the orchestra leader. He slashed twice at Withers, cutting his coat and knocking him to the floor, before rushing out the alley door. Grasping the reins from "Peanuts" Burroughs, the half-witted chore boy who was





Plan of the stage of Ford's Theater. Although the apron curves the wrong way, the dimensions of the boxes seem to be accurately drawn. (Reproduced from the original in the Records of the Judge Advocate General's Office, War Department, The National Archives, Washington, D. C.)



holding his horse, the assassin felled him with the butt end of his dagger, then mounted the horse and rode swiftly from the alley.⁶⁸

Major Joseph B. Stewart, a lawyer who was 6 feet 6 inches tall and said to be the tallest man in Washington, was sitting in a front seat of the orchestra, on the south side. Startled by the shot, he looked up and saw Booth tumbling onto the stage. Rising instantly, Stewart climbed over the orchestra pit and footlights, and pursued Booth across the stage, shouting several times "Stop that man!" He had difficulty in going out the back door, not knowing that it opened inward. He finally stepped outside only to have Booth frantically swing his horse to the side away from his grasp and ride away down the alley.⁶⁹

From the first entrance to the door leading to the alley, the distance was about 25 feet.⁷⁰ The passageway to the alley was about three feet wide.⁷¹ It was kept clear of scenery or other obstructions at all times, since the actors and actresses used it in going from their dressing rooms to make their entrance onto the stage.⁷² Near the end of the passage, at the northeast corner of the building, there was a covered stairway or trapdoor which led underneath the stage to the orchestra pit.⁷³ In the basement below was a box where the carpenters sometimes stored their tools. In going under the stage, one had to stoop and only a narrow passage led to the door of the orchestra pit.⁷⁴

Shortly after 9 o'clock on the night of April 14, 1865, John Wilkes Booth had come to the rear door of the theater and called

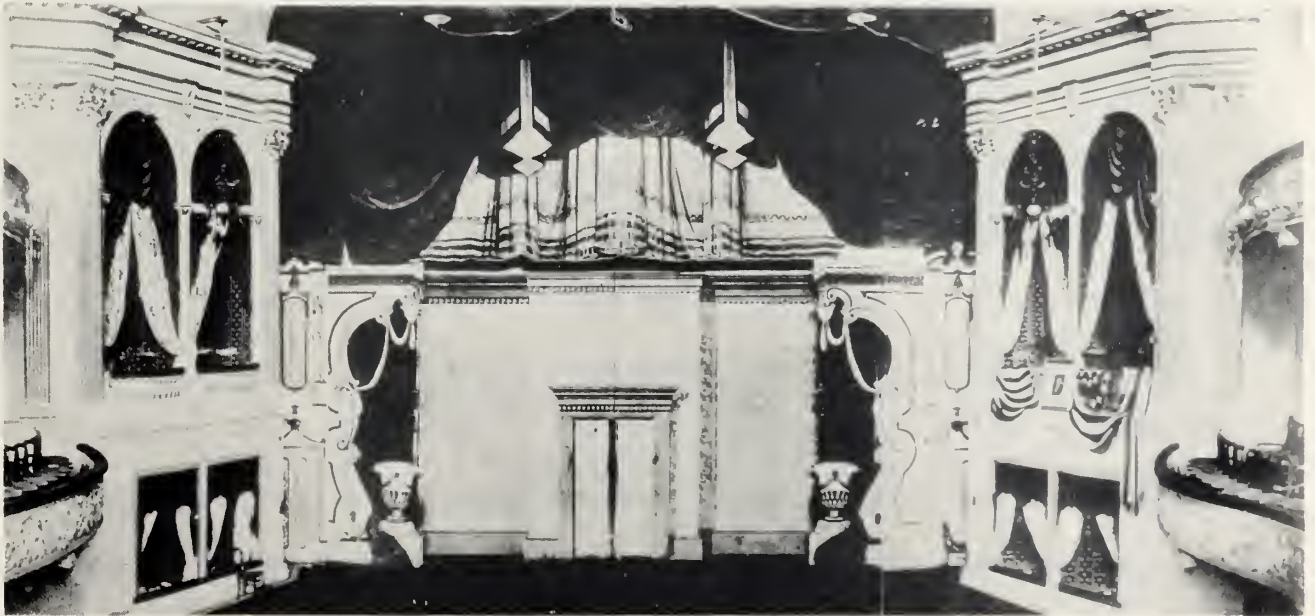
for Spangler to hold his horse. Spangler acted as one of the scene-shifters and his almost continuous presence was required at his post on the side near the Presidential box. As soon as Booth passed inside, Spangler called for "Peanuts" Burroughs to watch the horse. Since the dairy scene was in the back stage, Booth was unable to cross the stage in going to the saloon located in the building on the south side of Ford's Theater. He went down the covered stairway into the basement and crossed underneath the stage to the stairway leading to the stage door. Going out the stage door, located to the rear of the Presidential box, Booth followed the corridor to 10th Street and entered the saloon. Instead of his customary brandy, he ordered whiskey and a glass of water before entering the theater to assassinate President Lincoln.⁷⁵

On the south side, a projection of about three feet made the stage of Ford's Theater that much narrower on that side than on the other, and that much narrower than the front of the house.⁷⁶ The stage was not level but sloped downward from the back to the front at an appreciable angle. To go toward the back of the stage was actually "up-stage," and toward the audience was "down-stage." In order to plumb the scenery on the sloping stage, wedges were inserted under the flats and wings. They were solid and heavy pieces of wood about six inches long and three or four inches in thickness at the widest part.⁷⁷

The fore part of the stage in front of the proscenium arch was called the "apron," which projected several feet into the



The U. S. Treasury Guards' flag in which the spur of the assassin's boot caught as he vaulted from the box onto the stage. A rent was made in the flag (opposite the eagle's wing) and the fringe was torn from the edge and carried on his spur as he dashed across the stage. The lower cut portion was later removed by souvenir hunters.



Photograph of the stage and boxes of Ford's Theater, taken a few days after the assassination by Mathew B. Brady. The scenery on the stage, with the curtained doorway at the center, is as it was at the time President Lincoln was assassinated.



auditorium. On either side of the back stage, a few feet from the walls, were pieces of scenery, known as "tormenters," which were movable. The spaces between them and the walls were known as the "Left First Entrance," and the "Right First Entrance." The left side was on the south and the right on the north as viewed from the stage of Ford's Theater.⁷⁸ The width of the first entrances was about four and a half feet wide.⁷⁹ The several scenes, painted on canvas, were used for various plays and were general scenes such as chambers, woods, kitchen, prison and etc. Occasionally, the supply was augmented by new settings as required. During a play, the scenes were brought forward from the back of the stage and pushed backward and forward in their grooves several times. A space of perhaps six feet was left between the several scenes, enough for persons to pass between them.⁸⁰ The spaces at the side of the stage were then as now the "wings." Stretching overhead were the "floats" and the hanging gas lights in long rows of wire netting protection. The upper rigging arrangements were the "flies" as they still are.⁸¹

There were two curtains above the stage of Ford's Theater, but only one was ordinarily used. The one in use had a bust of Shakespeare and a landscape scene.⁸² It was kept high up above the stage. The other curtain, which was painted green, went down with such a rattle that it was not lowered.⁸³ The dark curtain shown on the contemporary photographs is undoubtedly the green curtain. The color of the wall-paper in the scene on the stage at the time of the assassination is unknown. The design appears to be in some light color. The background seems to be a little darker shade, perhaps a light buff or

similar color. In the photographs, it shows as much lighter than the stage carpet, the green curtain or the draperies in the boxes.

Detailed information on the nature of the ceiling of Ford's Theater is lacking. It was described as being domed and unusually lofty.

Several weeks before the theater was opened on August 27, 1863, it was reported in a local newspaper that "In a few days the interior will be ready for the pencil of the eminent scenic artist, Mr. Charles S. Getz, who will ornament it in tasteful and elaborate style. The dome will be finished splendidly in fresco, varied with figures in basso and alto-relievo."⁸⁴ In another newspaper of the period, it was stated that "Mr. Ford has received in his enterprise extensive and talented aid from our Washington artisans and mechanical establishments from Messrs. J. F. Reynolds and Company, successors to W. T. Dove, on Ninth Street, he received all of the innumerable chandeliers, gas and water fixtures, conduits, etc., used; and the Messrs. Schneider furnished the iron work, so profusely employed in strengthening and adorning the structure. The water pipes and gas pipes were all laid under superintendence of Joseph F. Brown, Esq., the indefatigable head of the Washington Gas Company."⁸⁵

The contemporary photographs are evidence that the boxes and fronts of the balconies were elaborately decorated. A sketch which appeared in an illustrated weekly newspaper following the assassination is the only source which shows the decorations of the dome and proscenium. The architectural staff will have to determine whether this is a faithful representation or merely the artist's conception of these features of the theater. The decorations and details of the boxes and balconies

in this sketch seem to be executed properly and coincide with these features as seen in the contemporary photographs.⁸⁶

Dressing Room Annex. The structure at the northeast corner of the old Ford's Theater building was used for dressing rooms and other purposes. It was a separate building but was attached to the theater. Originally a four story structure, the floor levels were changed in 1865 when Ford's Theater was converted into a three story office building. Evidences of the old floor levels remain and the bricked-up windows of the former four story structure can be seen on the outside along the north wall. Drawings of the original building are also in the files of the National Capital Parks.

The door from the annex led onto the north side of the stage in the rear of the boxes. On the first floor was the Green Room, used by the actors as a waiting room before going on the stage, and the star's room.⁸⁷ The manager's office was also located on the first floor. James J. Gifford, the stage carpenter, had his bed in the manager's office.⁸⁸ This room was also used by the watchman.⁸⁹ Upstairs were the dressing rooms for the actors.⁹⁰ The carpenter shop was located in one of the upper floors. Edman Spangler, stage-hand at Ford's Theater, sometimes slept in the carpenter shop.⁹¹

The painter, James Lamb, had his room at the rear of the theater high above the stage. It is probable that the fourth floor of the annex connected with it. According to his statement, "It (the painting room) occupies a position in the rear of the theater, facing the rear wall, at an elevation of about thirty six or thirty seven feet from the

stage, commanding an entire view of the stage, right and left It is open (side next to stage). There is a mere railing at the back, so that a man has a full view of the stage and of the auditorium; not of the auditorium entirely; you can see into the orchestra, and into a portion of the parquette." When asked further about the location of the painting gallery, he replied that it was "The highest floor of the theater-away from everybody. Back of the stage, very high up."⁹²

From roof to basement, the old Ford's Theater building is in a deplorable condition and is badly in need of repair, stabilization and renovation. An engineering study will undoubtedly reveal that conditions are even worse than are known now and will furnish exact information on the state of the building. During the past several years, several proposals for the future treatment of the Ford's Theater building have been made. These include complete restoration, partial restoration, and improvement of the museum exhibits with inclusion of certain selected features of the old theater. In order to stabilize the building and to make exhibits in the Lincoln Museum collection more presentable, the cost would be approximately the same with whichever proposal is adopted. Preliminary plans for the restoration of Ford's Theater have already been prepared by the architectural staff. In furthering these plans, or in accomplishing any of the other proposals which may be adopted, the information contained in this report should be most useful.

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