

The Sun, Sunday, May 16, 1897

Saw Lincoln Murdered

H W Lewis Was at Ford's Theater On the Fatal Night

*He Was in the Gallery When He Heard the Shots Fired
And Saw Lincoln's Head Dropped – The Great
Commotion That Followed– Size of the Audience – The
First Shot in the War*

A few days ago, The Sun printed a letter from a Brooklyn correspondent asking if The Sun had "ever heard of or from anybody who attended the theater in Washington on the night that Abraham Lincoln was shot besides those who became more or less well-known by the connection with the incidence of that night." The correspondent added:

There must have been a thousand or more people there, and many have died since then, but I do not recall having seen in the papers in twenty years any references to any person, living or dead, that he or she was in the audience at Ford's theater the night that Lincoln was shot.

The Sun has received several letters from persons who were in Ford's Theater on the night of Lincoln's assassination, or know of others who were there. One of those letters said that Henry W Lewis of 84 Wolcott St., Brooklyn, witnessed the murder of the President. A Sun reporter went to see Mr. Lewis one day last week. Mr. Lewis is now 62 years old and somewhat feeble in health, but has a vigorous memory. He recalls with lively interest the occurrences in Ford's Theater on the night of April 14, 1865. In his younger days Mr. Lewis used to be a Seaman. By the time he was 20 years old he

had been around the world. He saw the gold rush to California and that to Australia, which country he visited in 1850. In the latter part of the Civil War Mr. Lewis was employed on the Government transport Constitution, which plied between Washington and the Army of the Potomac in Virginia.

On April 14 the Constitution reached Washington from City Point, where she had delivered a cargo of bread for the Army. She brought back part of the Ninth Corps. to Washington. When she reached town the members of the crew read that Lincoln and Grant would attend Ford's theater that night.

"I've often seen Lincoln," said Mr. Lewis, "but had never seen Grant, and I proposed to several of my mates to go to the theater to see Grant and the play, 'Our American Cousin.' We arrived at the theater just before the performance was to begin. There were no seats to be had and we passed in on admission prices and stood up behind the seats in the upper gallery. We watched the incidents of the night eagerly and in the third act of the play heard the pistol shot that Booth fired."

"Instantly there was much confusion. I think the excitement in the gallery was as great as that in the other parts of the theater, of which so much had been written. There was a great commotion and a great craning of necks. I remember distinctly seeing Lincoln's head drop to his arm. He was unconscious, of course and no one had yet reached him. I also saw Booth jump to the stage and sink to the floor on one knee. We could tell that he was saying something just before he dragged himself off the stage. The noise in the place was that of a roar by this time. Those in the gallery were on their feet, and we could see no more. A stampede began, such as I suppose occurs at a time of fire in the theater. To this day I do

not know how I reached the street. I have absolutely no recollection about it and never had. My mates also do not remember how they got out. All we knew was that we were swept out of the place and found the street is thronged. It was a sad night and we were late in reaching our quarters.”

"Curiously enough, in all my work and what few journeys I have made since I have never met a man and never heard of one except the officials who was in Ford's theater on that night. Instead of there being 1000 persons present, as The Sun's correspondent suggested, there must have been 2500. There was standing room only and it is strange that so few of those present have ever been heard from. For years, the incidents of that night came to me with a sense of horror. It was a long time before I could shake it off. I have often talked freely of that night with my acquaintances and I suppose that the others who saw the assassination did the same, and certainly it is pecculiar that so little has been heard of the various individuals who composed the audience on that memorable night"

Mr. Lewis has another reminiscence that his friends have always like to hear him tell. He saw the first shots fired at the outbreak of the Civil War. It was in Charleston Harbor on April 12, 1861, but he says it was not at Fort Sumter. It was at the coaster Nashville at 4:30 o'clock in the morning. Mr. Lewis was the lookout on the Nashville. The Union fleet, consisting of the transport Baltic and the warships Pawnee, Pocahontas and Harriet Lane, had left New York before the Nashville, but the Nashville passed them and arrived off the bar on Charleston Harbor first. The Nashville, which belonged to a Line running boats between Charleston and New York regularly, and had carried arms and ammunition to the

Southerners, resembled the Harriet Lane in her size and rig, and when she approached the bar the Southerners thought she was the Harriet Lane. They had been warned that the Harriet Lane was coming down. The famous battery on Morris Island threw a shot at the Nashville on this supposition, and this opened the hostilities in Charleston Harbor. The shot fell half a mile from the Nashville. It was followed by another, which came within a quarter of a mile of the vessel. Capt. Murray who commanded the Nashville, gave orders at once to retire from the bar. To have gone in what had been certain destruction.

As the Nashville was leaving the bar, the Harriet Lane hove in sight. Capt. Murray didn't want the Captain of The Lane to examine his papers, so he shouted to his chief engineer named Hood to "shake her up." The Capt. of the Lane saw what was going on and fired a blank shot as a warning to stop. The Nashville went on. The Harriet Lane swung around broadside on and fired a solid shot.

"Stop her, Hood!" shouted Capt. Murray to his Chief Engineer, and forthwith the Nashville came around.

The Captain of the Harriet Lane simply asked some perfunctory questions and both ships lay off the bar and watched not only the first shots fired on Fort Sumter, but also the entire bombardment of 36 hours. On Sunday, April 14, the day of the evacuation of Fort Sumter, the Nashville went into harbor, and Mr. Lewis, with Capt. Murray and others, rowed over to the fort. The only souvineer of the visit that Mr. Lewis has retained is a grapeshot with a dent in it that was fired against Fort Sumter from one of the rebel batteries in the harbor.

Among the letters which The Sun has received from those who were present at the assassination of Lincoln is one from William Elmendorf of Hoboken, who says:

I see by last Sunday's Sun that after F H B of Brooklyn and Silas Owen of Cohoes, New York, wish to know if anyone who was present at Ford's theater in Washington on that night when Lincoln was shot. I was there and I have the original program. My present address is 1107 Washington St., Hoboken, NJ. I am a native of Kingston, New York, and I believe that some of the letters I wrote immediately after the assassination of Lincoln are now in the old Senate building in Kingston, together with some others placed there by my brother, who now resides at Catskill.