



Episode 703, Story 2: Booth Letter

Tukufu: Our next story investigates a death threat sent to one of the first Presidents of the United States. On April 14, 1865 - a man standing in the shadows of President Abraham Lincoln's theatre box fired one final shot. It was the first assassination of an American President, and John Wilkes Booth's motives have been questioned and studied for generations. Now almost a hundred and fifty years later, Marsha Mullin of Nashville, Tennessee has learned of a letter – supposedly written by John Wilkes Booth's father to another American President¹.

Marsha: Today someone would be taken off to jail in five minutes for writing a letter like that.

Tukufu: Marsha has invited me to the Hermitage, President Andrew Jackson's family home in Nashville, where she is chief curator. So what do you have for me?

Marsha: Well a couple of years ago a visitor brought to our attention this letter, which was a death threat to Andrew Jackson written in 1835. I really didn't know anything about it. So, I got a copy of it from the Library of Congress. Junius Brutus Booth was a very famous actor. But interestingly enough, he was also the father of John Wilkes Booth.

Tukufu: Now that's an interesting connection.

Marsha: It's very interesting.

Tukufu: It's dated the 4th of July 1835, from Brower's Hotel, Philadelphia. "You damned old scoundrel, I will cut your throat whilst you are sleeping." He's insisting that Jackson pardon two men on Death Row... "I'll have you burnt at the stake in the city of Washington. Your master, Junius Brutus Booth." Man! Now this is a threat. So the father of the guy who killed Lincoln threatened to assassinate a President.

Marsha: Well that's the question, because when you look at the back of the letter someone has written "anonymous". And so that was very curious. Is it by Junius Brutus Booth or not? Jackson



scholars seem to believe that it was written by someone else. We'd like to know if Junius Brutus Booth really wrote this letter. And if he did, why?

Tukufu: Well let me see if I can find an answer to your question. The sins of a father are not necessarily visited upon the son. But President Lincoln's murder altered American history. If John Wilkes Booth's father also threatened the life of a sitting President, that's certainly interesting, and possibly significant. Jackson was the seventh President of the United States, and first took office in 1829. Junius Booth was the popular Shakespearean actor of the day. Question is – why have historians doubted that Junius Booth wrote this in the first place? Marsha's left me 20th century publications of a Jackson biography and a collection of his correspondence. Junius Brutus Booth, here, is in quotation marks. "Booth," in quotation marks, "to Andrew Jackson, July 4th, 1835." The quotation marks indicate the authors and editors also doubted that Booth wrote the death threat. I need to find out if these doubts are based on some actual evidence. The letter writer – whoever he was – wanted two men pardoned. De Ruiz and De Soto. I wonder what other clues their might be. It says down here in a post script. "You know me. Look out." Does it mean that he knew him personally? Does it mean that he knew "of" him? "I wrote to you repeated cautions." Did he write more threats to the President? The papers of the Andrew Jackson Project at the University of Tennessee in Knoxville is in the process of publishing an updated version of every known document that Jackson wrote or received. Dan Feller is the director and editor of the project.

Dan: Let's go into the Jackson papers.

Tukufu: Have you ever seen this letter before?

Dan: Oh yes, we know it well. We don't think that the real Junius Brutus Booth wrote it. Our assumption is that the original notation was correct. That it's anonymous.

Tukufu: Dan explains that President Jackson's strong hand and often unpopular policies had made him a lightning rod for criticism and threats. Six months before our letter was written he was the victim of the first assassination attempt against an American President. A deranged housepainter attempted to shoot him outside the capitol building, but the pistol misfired.



Dan: Shortly after that the *Washington Globe* published several columns of assassination letters that it said Jackson had received. Let me put these up on our computer screen so you can read them better. Here's one.

Tukufu: "Damn your old soul, if you do not do something for the good of the country, I will murder you." Wow. Dan says Jackson drew public criticism because he wanted to do away with the federally-chartered Bank of the United States, which he regarded as an unconstitutional concentration of financial power.

Dan: Here's another one, "remove them deposits back again, and re-charter the Bank, or you will certainly be shot in less than two weeks, and that by myself!" The United States Senate actually censured Jackson for removing the deposits. The only time a President has ever been censured by the Senate.

Tukufu: Dan says the Ruiz and De Soto mentioned in our letter were Spanish pirates operating out of Havana. With ten others, they had robbed an American merchant ship in September 1832. The pirates' capture and subsequent trial electrified the nation.

Dan: This was a huge case. It had all of the aspects of a modern show trial.

Tukufu: One of the Spaniards, De Soto, was pardoned, most likely because he previously had saved the lives of some American sailors. Dan says the pardon was almost certainly not as a result of the death threat. How seriously was this threat taken? Dan doubts there was any official investigation into the letter. The Office of the President did not have the protective layers it has today.

Dan: There was no Secret Service. There was no Federal Bureau of Investigation. There were really no White House Police. In fact assassinating the President or threatening to do so was not a federal crime.

Tukufu: Here he says, "I wrote to you repeated cautions." Do you know of any other communications between Booth and Jackson?



Dan: If there were any, we would have seen them. We know of one letter from someone calling himself Junius Brutus Booth to Jackson and this is it.

Tukufu: And that's it.

Dan: And not only no letters from Booth or to Booth, but no mention of Booth in Jackson's correspondence.

Tukufu: Whoever wanted these pirates pardoned, Dan's convinced it wasn't Booth.

Dan: Every historian previous to us, every Jackson biographer has assumed that Booth didn't write it. Someone in his office, and he had a number of clerks working for him, probably wrote this word "anonymous."

Tukufu: Okay, Jackson did not write it?

Dan: It doesn't appear to be Jackson's handwriting, no.

Tukufu: Has there been an analysis of the handwriting in this letter?

Dan: As far as I know, no one has ever taken it to that step because they thought it was unnecessary.

Tukufu: That seems a curious omission. The Folger Shakespeare Library in Washington, DC, has several Junius Booth letters in their collection. Heather Wolfe is Curator of Manuscripts. She's made special arrangements with the Library of Congress to obtain the original threat to Jackson. Heather, nice to meet you. So this is the original letter

Heather: I picked two of our Junius Brutus Booth letters for a handwriting analysis. I picked these two letters because they were closest in date and format to the 1835 letter to General Jackson.

Tukufu: It's the first time Heather has seen the original letter to Jackson, and a couple of items strike her as odd.



Heather: He signs the letter to Jackson with his full name Junius Brutus Booth. All of the letters at the Folger are signed J.B. Booth, and that was his typical signature.

Tukufu: The rest of the letter looks as if it could have flowed from the same pen.

Heather: you see here, "I wrote to you repeated cautions." And see the bottom of that "c" how it loops around dramatically. Well in this letter here, we see the word "camp" with that same very distinctive majuscule c, which is very unique to Junius Brutus Booth. One of the most distinctive attributes he has is the cross bar on the miniscule ts. So if you look at the word "the" in this letter. The crossbar goes fully across not just the t but also the h and e.

Tukufu: Wow! If Booth didn't write this himself – she says, the forger was at the top of his class. Heather's made another discovery.

Heather: This letter from 1834 mentions that he needed to escape the farm for a couple of days and go to Philadelphia and it says, "therefore I strode to Philadelphia. Brower's hotel is now about the best in that city."

Tukufu: So he has a history of frequenting the Brower's hotel in Philadelphia. So what do you think? Did Junius Brutus Booth write this letter?

Heather: Based on handwriting analysis alone, yes it is a Junius Brutus Booth letter, but I'm not a Booth expert so I think that's a question for Booth scholars. We need to find out more about the context of the letter.

Tukufu: Why did a famous Shakespearean actor care enough about the fate of two Spanish pirates – to have penned a death threat to the President of the United States? Gene Smith has agreed to meet me at the Folger Library's Elizabethan Theatre. He's the author of a book on the Booth family's influence on American theatre.

Gene: In addition to being a great actor, Junius Brutus Booth was a great madman, all his life. There is no question he was insane.



Tukufu: Gene says that wild and erratic behavior on stage led Booth to be dubbed “the mad tragedian”.

Gene: His bouts of lunacy could interrupt the production; he would run away from the theatre and be found walking naked down the street.

Tukufu: Booth’s excessive drinking exacerbated his madness.

Gene: Theater managers would lock him up to keep him from getting drunk. Frequently, he would escape simply vanish for three or four days.

Tukufu: Did his fits of madness lead him to acts of violence?

Gene: Yes, but only very occasionally. He was capable of in the middle of a performance of becoming so involved in killing Desdemona as Othello that when the moment came to press the pillow against Desdemona’s face, people were afraid that he would actually murder the actress.

Tukufu: Well, this letter is a threat to assassinate President Andrew Jackson. Could that violent behavior have extended to murder?

Gene: It is possible. However, it’s important to know Junius Brutus Booth had a reverence for life that was extraordinary. In general, he hurt no one but himself. His kids were forbidden to swat a fly. He would not cut down a tree.ⁱⁱ

Tukufu: His death threat – if Booth penned it -- may have been a bout of alcoholic madness. His reverence for life, bizarrely provoking him to threaten murder.

Gene: My guess would be that Mr. Booth probably read that Jackson was considering the execution of these two men and in one of his frenzies threatened to kill him.

Tukufu: He doubts President Jackson took it seriously.



Gene: Indeed, the letter says you know me and he did know him. Jackson and Booth were close personal friends. I think Jackson would have probably said, "Well that's Booth for you." And Jackson would have laughed it off.

Tukufu: Gene paints a picture of a turbulent and deeply troubled man – frequently absent from his family

Gene: Junius Brutus Booth was away on the road, trouping around as an actor for much of the year.

Tukufu: But Gene is reluctant to make any connection between the death threat Junius Booth may have made to President Jackson, and his son's murder of Abraham Lincoln thirty years later.

Gene: I think it's exceedingly improbable. His killing of Abraham Lincoln was so alien to his father's reverence for life that there cannot be any traceable path.

Tukufu: I'm not sure what to make of all of this. And I still don't have any solid evidence to support the handwriting analysis. Hey Dan. How you doin'? It's Dan Feller. Seems our meeting prompted him to do some additional research. I tell Dan about the handwriting comparison, and what else I've learned about Junius Booth. It's been suggested to me that Jackson and Booth were actually friends. And that this letter was written in jest.

Dan: I doubt that very much. We have here all of Andrew Jackson's letters that anyone knows about. We know of no evidence to put Jackson and Booth together in any way.

Tukufu: His team has uncovered several new pieces of information. Our letter is dated July 4th. He's been able to figure out Booth's whereabouts that day.

Dan: These are newspaper advertisements showing that Booth was indeed in Philadelphia on July 3rd and 4th. He was scheduled to play Othello on the 3rd at the Chestnut Street Theatre.

Tukufu: I see.



Dan: And scheduled to play Richard the Third on the 4th.

Tukufu: That puts Booth in Philadelphia at the time the letter was written.

Dan: And here's the real clincher. This is another letter that Booth wrote in August of 1835. He apologizes for the "ungrateful and shameful conduct I have evinced towards the worthy managers of the Chestnut Street Theatre on a recent occasion. Friday July 3rd and Saturday the 4th." In fact he did not play on July 3rd and 4th. He didn't show up.

Tukufu: So he was there and maybe in one of his fits of madness did not perform?

Dan: Exactly.

Tukufu: But as for threatening to assassinate the President, I still don't have a smoking gun.

Dan: But look further down in the letter.

Tukufu: There, at the end, Junius Booth himself gives me my final piece of the puzzle.

Dan: "My insane behavior..."

Tukufu: I think I finally have an answer for Marsha. Very interesting investigation. Thank you very much for the opportunity to get into the life of Junius Brutus Booth. I tell Marsha that the handwriting of this assassination threat matched other letters penned by Booth.

Marsha: That's cool. I am really pleased.

Tukufu: But what tied the circumstantial evidence together was an open letter from Booth that seemed to be an admission of guilt.

Dan: He says, "my insane behavior in writing insolent letters to my best patrons and to the authorities of this country, I can scarcely hope will be pardoned."



Tukufu: The authorities of this country – you think he's referring to President Andrew Jackson here?

Dan: I'll bet he is, because one sentence further down he says, "May god preserve General Jackson and this happy republic."

Tukufu: Dan says our handwriting analysis and his questioning of conventional wisdom, have corrected the historical record. President Lincoln's killer - John Wilkes Booth - was fathered by a man who also threatened to murder a sitting President.

Dan: We had assumed as those before us had assumed that the real Booth didn't write this letter on the basis of that one word "anonymous". It turned out he did. It reminds us always to check our facts. Always to go back and verify even when we think we know what really happened.

Marsha: That is amazing. I'm shocked. It's an interesting coincidence that he wrote such a letter and that his son ended up assassinating Lincoln.

Tukufu: Thank you very much for the opportunity to investigate the story.

Marsha: thank you!

ⁱ Kauffman, Michael. American Brutus: John Wilkes Booth and the Lincoln Conspiracies. Pg. 415. "Chap.5 Note 4: Following is the order of their birth:...John Wilkes, born May 10, 1838"

ⁱⁱ Kauffman, Michael. American Brutus: John Wilkes Booth and the Lincoln Conspiracies. Pg. 84. "Booth abhorred killing, and counseled his children to avoid it. In his household, even the insects were spared. 'You should never kill a fly,' he told his children...His physician, Dr. James Rush, noted that even his own family found his views obnoxious. 'This fellow I say in his mad humanity, will not eat meat forsooth because it encourages acts of suffering to animals,' he wrote incredulously. This 'mad humanity' extended throughout the human race. He regarded all people as equals, and would share his meals and his quarters with anyone in need."