

EXECUTIONS OF PRESIDENT LINCOLN'S ASSASSINATION CONSPIRATORS

An Excerpt From the Civil War Diary

of Corporal Jacob Keller

INTRODUCTION

Harry (Hal) Keller, III, of Bloomsburg recently gave a copy of his great-grandfather Jacob Keller's Civil War diary to the Society. A few years after the Civil War, Jacob Keller came to Bloomsburg and established the Keller Wholesale Company on Main Street. The business still continues to this day and is managed by Harry and Jim Keller, the great-grandsons of Jacob. The sign on top of the building has the year 1872 when the firm was established. Keller died in 1912 at the age of seventy-two and was buried in Old Rosemont Cemetery.

Jacob Keller who was from Lancaster County enlisted as a private in Co. C, 9th Regiment of the Pennsylvania Cavalry at the age of twenty-one on September 4, 1861. After completing his three year enlistment, he re-entered the service as a corporal in Co. C, 2nd Regiment of U.S. Volunteers. While stationed in Washington, D.C., in the summer of 1865, he was one of the soldiers assigned to the military guard unit at the execution of four conspirators in the assassination of President Lincoln.

The assassin, John Wilkes Booth, in his effort to escape, died from a soldier's bullet in a barn on Richard H. Garrent's farm near Port Royal, Virginia, twelve days after committing his deadly deed. There existed a widely held belief that Lincoln's death was not merely a sinister act of a single person but rather the result of a conspiracy.

Within a few weeks, military officials on May 10 brought eight civilians before a military commission and charged them with participating in a conspiracy to kill President Lincoln. After the commission finished hearing the cases it reached its verdicts on June 30. Four of the accused, George Atzerodt, David Herold, Lewis Paine, and Mary Surratt, received the death penalty while the other four individuals were sentenced to prison terms.

The following is verbatim excerpt from Jacob Keller's diary in which he described the hanging of the four conspirators.

July 7th

Fell in line at 5 ½ O.C. A.M. Marched to the arsenal grounds, Washington D.C. and were stationed around the outside as Sentinels, with orders to pass no one. About

12.15 P.M. I went in & succeeded in gaining admittance to the jail yard, where the scaffold was erected for the execution of Mrs. Surratt, Payne, Herold & Atzerodt. The scaffold consisted of a platform about 8 or 9 feet high. Supported by square wooden posts & 3 upright posts supporting a cross piece to which was attached the four ropes, already properly noosed.

At about 5 minutes past 1 o'clock the prisoners were led out in the following order. First Mrs. Mary E. Surratt, assisted by a priest & two officials. She appeared very much affected and but for the support of her escort would have fallen to the ground. She was led on the scaffold and seated in a chair on the right, when she appeared to faint away. Atzerodt was next to mount, and trembled greatly as he seated himself on the left of the scaffold.

Payne mounted the scaffold with a firm step, and was seated on the left of Mrs. Surratt and Herold on his left. Mrs. Surratt was attended by Catholic divines, and the men by ministers from different denominations, who thanked the officers & soldiers who had charge of the prisoners, for the kindness with which they had invariably been treated. Short prayers were then offered by the ministers, after which the prisoners were made to stand up while the ropes were being adjusted & the caps placed over their faces. Mrs. Surratt was held up by her attendants until the drop fell, and she was launched into eternity without a struggle. Payne appeared very quiet and calm, hardly moving a muscle, but very pale. He stood erect until the drop fell, and met his doom like a man, his struggles were short. Herold died hard as the noose did not slip to the right place when he fell. While Atzerodt who shook with terror while the noose was being adjusted, died almost without a struggle.

Mrs. Surratt was dressed in black, with black bonnet and veil. Payne had on a dark blue flannel shirt, cut low around the neck, and pants of the same color, & a new Plated straw hat. Herold wore a very dark coat and light grey pants, with black slouch hat, and Atzerodt wore a brownish colored suit and no hat. The Coffins were simply rough Pine boxes, and the graves were dug on the left of the scaffold.¹ The drop fell at precisely 23 minutes past 1 o'clock.

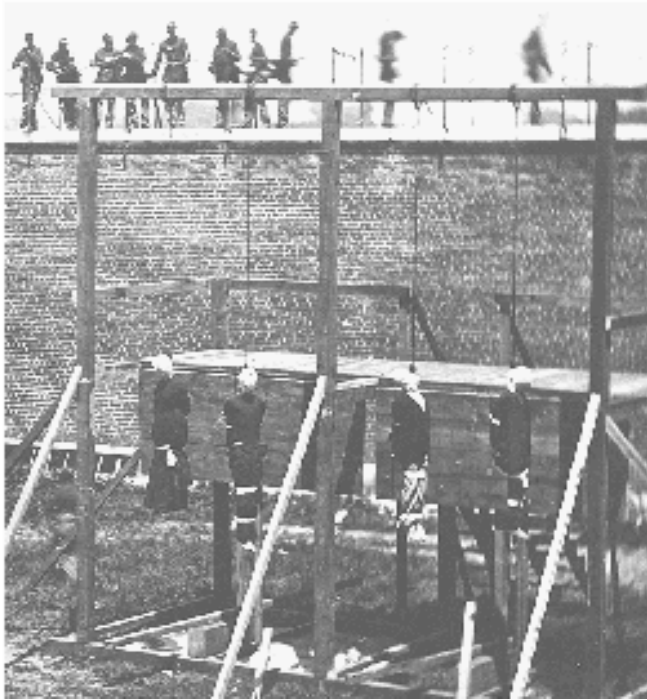
Atzerodt was the only one of the prisoners who spoke upon the scaffold, his words were – "Gentlemen take warning," or to that effect, and afterwards – "Goodbye Gentlemen. I hope to meet you all in another world."

Thus perished four of the Chief Conspirators, a warning to all who may, in future, meditate the assassination of the head of the people's government. Shortly after the execution we formed our line and returned to camp, having marched, going and coming, upwards of ten miles, beneath a very hot sun, and over very dusty roads. The sky was clear, not a cloud to be seen for the greater part of the day.

¹ Shortly before President Andrew Johnson left office in 1869, he signed an order allowed the family members of the four conspirators to claim their bodies from the graves on the Arsenal grounds for private reinterment.



Jacob Keller



According to Jane Snyder's family history, Jacob Keller, her great-grandfather, was one of the soldiers standing on the wall above the gallows.