

STATE YOUR CASE (No. 2), John Elliott: How Did John Wilkes Booth Break His Leg?

I believe that John Wilkes Booth did not break his leg when jumping from the balustrade to the stage at Ford's Theatre. I support Michael Kauffman's theory that Booth broke his Fibula when his horse fell on him after he crossed in to Maryland.

First I will refute the diary entry Booth wrote during his escape, claiming he broke his leg in jumping. Booth's version of events is filled with exaggerated claims that were written in response to newspaper articles calling him a coward.

Next, I will present the first eyewitness accounts taken in the early days after the assassination that state John Wilkes Booth ran or rushed across the stage after jumping from the box. Surely a man who had just broken his leg would show some signs of pain or would limp after breaking his leg.

Last, I will present the evidence that I believe shows JWB broke his leg when his horse fell on him. This includes more eyewitness accounts and medical opinions.

Sources:

We Saw Lincoln Shot

American Brutus

The Lincoln Assassination/The Evidence

Timothy S. Good

Mike Kauffman

Edwards and Steers Jr.

Booth's Diary Entry

History books tell us that John Wilkes Booth broke his leg while jumping from the balustrade of President Lincoln's box to the stage at Ford's Theatre. This is the most commonly held belief because John Wilkes Booth wrote that it happened that way. But should we take his word for it? A closer examination of his diary entry shows that he tried to paint a more daring and heroic image of himself during what he believed to be his crowning achievement.

John Wilkes Booth believed avenging the South by assassinating President Lincoln was a noble and great accomplishment. He was shocked at the "cold hand extended" to him by his fellow southern sympathizers and by the newspaper accounts of what he had done. His response to the criticism was written while hiding out during his escape.

"I struck boldly, and not as the papers say. I walked with a firm step through a thousand of his friends, was stopped, but pushed on. A colonel was at his side. I shouted Sic Semper before I fired. In jumping broke my leg. I passed all his pickets, rode sixty miles that night with the bone of my leg tearing the flesh at every jump".

1. *was stopped but pushed on* – Booth was stopped briefly but “pushing on” meant being allowed immediate access after showing his calling card.
2. *A colonel was at his side* – Major Rathbone was the man who attempted to stop John Wilkes Booth from escaping, not a Colonel.
3. *shouted Sic Semper before I fired* – NOT ONE eyewitnesses heard John Wilkes Booth shout Sic Semper before he fired his pistol. The overwhelming majority didn’t hear him say anything until he had landed on the stage. The truth was, he shot President Lincoln from behind without warning.
4. *rode sixty miles* – the distance he rode was 30 miles.
5. *with the bone of my leg tearing the flesh at every jump* - The fracture JWB sustained was not a compound fracture but rather a clean break that did not puncture his skin nor tear at his flesh. While it was certainly a painful injury, Booth enhances his account by stating the flesh of his leg was being torn by the bone.

First Eyewitness Accounts

The first eyewitness accounts of Lincoln’s assassination are considered to be the most accurate as they were taken while still fresh in people’s memories. I have isolated the accounts focusing on Booth’s reaction after he jumped to the stage. 13 people described Booth as either running or rushing for the exit. Some even stated that he sprang to his feet after jumping to the stage. Others said he “came across the stage” or “fled behind the scenes”. NOT ONE PERSON MENTIONED HE LIMPED OR FAVORED HIS LEG AFTER JUMPING.

A.M.S Crawford – “I saw him as he **RAN** across the stage”

Harry Hawk – “as he was **RUSHING** towards me with a dagger”

James P. Ferguson – “as he came across the stage”

Basset – “**RAN** across the stage”

Edwin Bates – “**RUSHED RAPIDLY** across the stage”

Frederick A. Sawyer – “**RAN** with lightening speed across the stage”

Jason S. Knox – “**RUSHED** across the stage”

Harry Hawk (letter to his parents) – “**RAN** towards me”

Helen DuBarry – “as he crossed the stage”

Julie Adeline Shepherd – “**RUSHES** through the scenery”

Spencer Bronson – “and **RAPID** left the stage”

Maj.Gen Butler – “**RAN** to the opposite side of the stage”

Charles Sabin Taft – “Springing quickly to his feet with the suppleness of an athlete”,
“**RAPID** stage stride”

Samuel Koontz – “**RUNNING** across the stage”

John Downing Jr. – “striding across the stage”

G.B. Todd – “fled behind the scenes”

Sheldon P. McIntyre – “**SPRANG** to his feet”, “**RAN** across the stage”

Evidence of a Horse Accident

The first indication that John Wilkes Booth may have had an accident with his horse comes directly from Booth himself. Late in the afternoon of April 14th, John Wilkes Booth described his horse as a “bad little bitch” that wouldn’t stand to be tied.

The last known person to speak with Booth before he crossed in to Maryland was Sgt. Silas T. Cobb. Sgt. Cobb was on guard duty at the Navy Yard Bridge connecting Washington D.C. to Maryland. Cobb questioned Booth before letting him pass on. He described Booth in detail and didn’t observe him to be in any pain or distress. He did however mention that Booth’s horse was “restive”. Restive is defined as resisting control or difficult to control.

Sgt. Cobb’s statement is important because everyone else who encountered Booth from that moment on mentioned that he was in a great deal of pain and suffering from an injured leg.

Below are three people who mentioned that Booth told them he injured his leg in a horse accident:

David Herold in a statement given to JAG John Bingham stated that Booth had told him he had broken his leg when “his horse had fallen or he was thrown off and his ankle sprained”.

John Lloyd, who leased the Surratt tavern swore that John Wilkes Booth “complained that he had broken his leg from his horse falling; seemed to be in great pain; did not dismount”.

Dr. Samuel Mudd swore in a statement to detectives that Herold and Booth had told him “one of their horses had fallen, by which one of the men had broken his leg”.

Thomas Davis, a farm hand for Dr. Mudd said the following of one of the horses: “she was lame in her left front leg, she was very lame before taken out of the stable and taken to water about 10 or 11 o’clock.

Medical Opinion

According to Mike Kauffman, Lincoln Assassination researcher and author of American Brutus:

“The National Library of Medicine keeps statistics on equestrian injuries, and according to them, the second most common injury occurs when a horse trips and rolls on its side. The rider is unable to get his foot out of the stirrup, and the girth of the

horse presses outward on the lower leg, snapping the fibula straight across, just a couple of inches above the ankle. This is precisely the injury that Booth suffered, and I've found medical records of Civil War soldiers who suffered the same injury in the same way (Capt. James McCamly, for example). According to several doctors who offered their opinions on my tours, this kind of injury cannot happen from a leap. The pressure in such a case would be downward, and the fracture would not be transverse, but oblique."

** The National Library no longer keeps these statistics.

According to Blaine Houmes, an Emergency Medical Doctor:

"I have seen people walk on a fractured fibula for 1-2 days before having it evaluated, but this is way, way not the norm as most are in immediate pain. I have also twice seen someone walking around with a broken hip, which would seem impossible. I think most people have also heard of instances where someone of superhuman strength lifted a car off an injured loved one, but that doesn't mean it's common.

Key points:

1) It would be virtually impossible with a fractured left ankle to mount a horse from the standard left side without further injury (quite possibly transforming a closed fracture into an open or compound fracture, due to the torsional forces.

2) Catching your ankle under a falling horse would easily satisfy criteria needed to break your ankle. I doubt Booth would have had time to react and pull his foot from the stirrup during a fall at full gallop, to prevent injury".