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DISUNION

What Lincoln Left Behind

By Martha Hodes

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Disunion follows the Civil War as it unfolded.

John Wilkes Booth shot Abraham Lincoln at Ford's Theater, in Washington, on the evening of April 14, 1865, and within hours, telegrams and newspapers began to deliver the news around the country. As horrible as Lincoln's murder seems to us today, it is hard to fathom just how earth-shattering it was for many people at the time. It was shocking enough that this was the first presidential assassination in American history. But it also came at a moment — less than a week after Gen. Robert E. Lee's surrender at Appomattox — when Americans were either celebrating victory or despairing at defeat.

To Mattie Jackson, a runaway slave, the tidings of Lincoln's death felt like "an electric shock to my soul." Many refused to believe it. "I still think we must be the victims of a gigantic street rumor," a white woman confessed to her mother.

Future disastrous events would bring the disbelieving to radio, television, the telephone and social media, but in the spring of 1865, astounded Americans could confirm reports of catastrophe only by seeking out other human faces.

As soon as Lucy Hedge saw the headlines, she dressed and left her New England home to walk through the streets, where, she wrote later, "gloom and dismay were pictured upon every countenance." In Louisville, Ky., "distress was visible in every colored person's face," said one observer, while in New York, a weeping white man made his way to Wall Street to join "the crowd with sad and horror-stricken faces."

With so many mourners looking into one another's eyes, Lincoln's opponents

had to be on guard, for no exhibition of glee among defeated Confederates would be tolerated. In Richmond, Va., the captured Confederate capital that Lincoln had visited a little over a week earlier, “Each man looked sharp at those who passed him,” a Northern missionary wrote to his father.

Many Confederates stayed out of sight — but not all. Some dared to clap or cheer in public, and on Bienville Street in New Orleans, a white man taunted grieving African-Americans by pointing to a newspaper headline about the assassination and, one black woman recalled, “poking his tongue out.”

Soon, though, came a shift. Whereas the bereaved at first sought confirmation in as many faces as possible, before long their attention was riveted on a single face: that of the murdered president. On April 18 Lincoln lay in state, inside a walnut coffin resting on a towering and lavishly decorated catafalque, in the East Room of the White House. The funeral took place the next day, and the day after that the body again went on display, this time in the Capitol rotunda. Thousands filed by. What better proof of the appalling turns of events?

From the capital, the body of the slain president traveled for two weeks, across nearly 1,700 miles, with elaborate ceremonies in 11 cities. Everywhere visitors were overwhelmed by the “rush and jam” to see the body, as guards kept the congested lines moving so rapidly that “it was impossible,” one spectator protested, “to obtain a satisfactory view.” Mattie Jackson, for one, knew that she would not be “convinced of his death” until she “gazed upon his remains.”

Yet the ritual viewing of Lincoln’s body — and his face — proved troublesome. When mourners did catch a glimpse of that singular visage, many were disappointed. To one, “his whiskers being shorn off made his face look small”; to another, “the expression was wanting.”

With embalming still a rudimentary science, people felt let down by the physical diminishment that came with decay. By the time Lincoln’s body got to Chicago, it seemed to one mourner that he “did not look as they fancied great men did.” The lifeless face simply could not live up to visions of the exalted commander in chief. A man who had stepped out of the snaking line in Philadelphia chose instead to “remember Mr. L. as I saw him in Trenton, with that bright smile playing in his

face," an image far more memorable than "the set features of a corpse."

Even after Lincoln's burial in his hometown, Springfield, Ill., on May 4, some still could not entirely grasp what had happened. Many turned to artifacts — pasting headlines into scrapbooks, collecting commemorative photographs — in an effort to come to terms with the unfathomable.

Marian Hooper traveled from Boston to Washington in late May, making her way to the boardinghouse across the street from Ford's Theater, to which the fatally wounded president had been carried on the night of April 14, and where he had remained unconscious in a cramped back bedroom until he died the next morning. The blood-soaked pillow, "left just as it was on that night," she wrote home, was "a painful sight, and yet we wanted to see it." And why? Because, she explained, "it makes it so vivid."

As the war had ground to an end, Lincoln's mourners could comfort themselves by believing that their president would guide them through the aftermath of the conflict. Now he was gone. Even as the bereaved yearned for visual evidence to help them absorb the cataclysmic truth, all Americans would long continue to ponder the fate of the nation, and what might have been different, had Lincoln lived.

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