



Fact, Fiction or a Bit of Both

MARSHALLTON RESIDENT NATHAN SIMMS, BURIED AT BRADFORD CEMETERY,
HOLDS A PLACE IN THE LINCOLN ASSASSINATION LEGEND

By Gail O. Guterl



very legend hinges on a thin thread of truth, even if, as time passes, it is impossible to discern what that truth is. That is the case of a long-ago Marshallton resident, Nathaniel “Nathan” L. Simms, and his connection or lack thereof to events surrounding the assassination of President Abraham Lincoln.

Depending on which account you read, Simms, a freed slave (or was he born free?) is purported to have held John Wilkes Booth’s horse at Mary Surratt’s hotel in Maryland after Lincoln’s assassination. Or some reports claim he held Booth’s horse at Ford’s Theater in Washington, DC? See what I mean?

Accounts of Simms’ actions after President Lincoln’s assassination of April 14, 1865, are riddles wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma, with one report stating one thing and another stating something else. However, for an event that many question even happened, there are certainly plenty of accounts and reports of it from sources like the archive of the Friends of the Lincoln Financial Collection in Indiana, to local contemporary newspaper reports, many from papers that no longer publish.

What seems consistent is that in 1865, Simms was a “waiter boy” at Mary Surratt’s boarding house in Surrattsville, MD, about seven miles from Washington, DC. Some accounts say he was 14 years old, others say 18. In his own words in an undated Washington Star article Simms said he was bound out to Mrs. Surratt when he was 14 “there being seven other colored boys on the place.”



Simms stated in the article: “John Wilkes Booth was a frequent visitor at the house, he being very intimate with my mistress’ son, John Surratt. Booth, a kind of helpless fellow, required a good deal of waiting on, and from him I received my first money I could say was mine.”

As Simms recounted many times after the assassination, Booth frequently visited the hotel in the two months preceding Lincoln’s assassination. “A few days before the shooting of the president, Mrs. Surratt and I went into

Washington and she bought nine or 12 pistols at a gunsmith’s. They were put in a little coffin, which the undertaker hauled in his hearse across the eastern branch bridge. ... Mrs. Surratt, after reaching home, hung the pistols on the walls of her room. On the night of the assassination Booth and John Surratt ate supper together and left the house. About midnight Booth returned and I heard Mrs. Surratt clap her hands and exclaim: ‘I’m glad the old rebel is dead’, meaning our noble Lincoln. That same night I helped Booth into the saddle and he shot down the pike as if demons were after him. On opening the house next morning, I was surprised to see the piazza and yard full of soldiers. One of them asked if Booth had been at the house during the night and I replied that he had. In a short time my mistress and all hands about the place were taken into Washington.”

Even with Simms’ own words to confirm his story, several newspapers of the era reported Simms held Booth’s horse at Ford’s Theater. In Edward Steers Jr.’s 2007 book, *Lincoln Legends: Myths, Hoaxes and Confabula-*



tions Associated with Our Greatest President, he proposes that it was Peanut John Burroughs, a stable boy at Ford’s Theater, who held Booth’s horse that night.

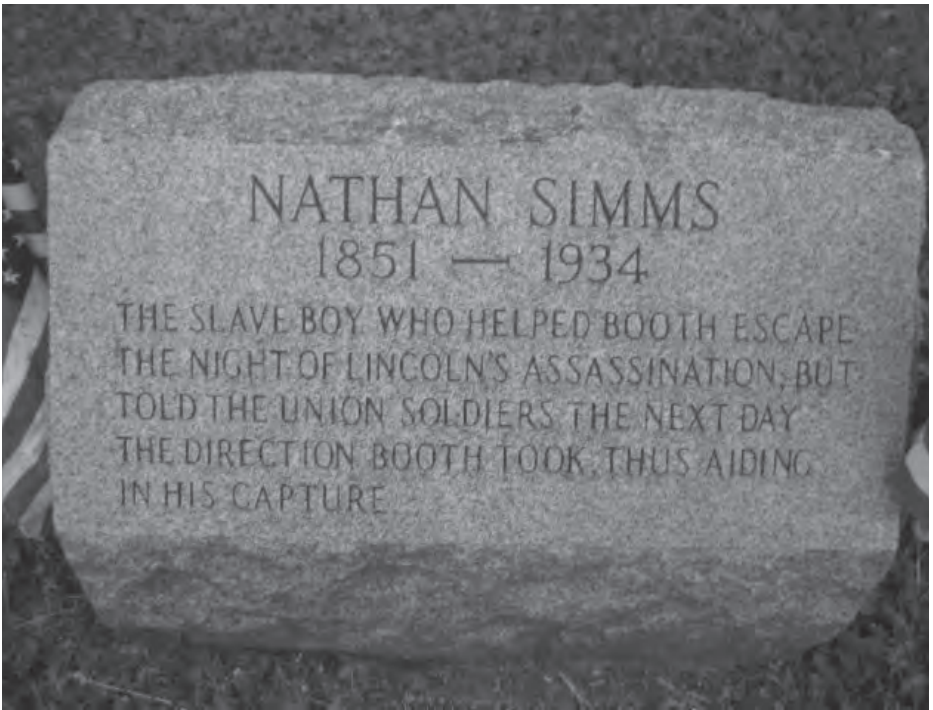
Very little is known about Nathaniel L. Simms, called “Uncle Nate” by Marshallton residents. Some of what is written confuses the story further. Most accounts say he migrated north to Marshallton around age 19. A 1934 article in the *Daily Local News* reports he was born May 4, 1839. However, that would have made Simms 31 years old when he held Booth’s horse and 91 when he died. Most accounts put his age at death at 82 or 84.

Several regional newspapers report two marriages for Simms, one in 1883 to Julia Coulson of Kennett Square, and the second to Sarah Ann Thomas of Oxford in 1894. He was a widower at the time of his death. Simms worked for farmer John Hoopes of East Nottingham Township during the 1880s and lived in a house in Northbrook for a time. He did odd jobs around the community and appeared to be hardy into his 80s. As late as 1932, when he was 81, a Feb. 12, 1932 *Philadelphia Ledger* article reported that he still cut corn for local farmers and chopped his own firewood.

While we know some details of Simm’s life, his resting place in death is unclear. According to a January 19, 1934 *Philadelphia Ledger* article and an article in the *Coatesville Record* the same day, Simms “died this week and was buried yesterday... He was buried in potter’s field of the Chester County Home for the Poor at Embreeville”, which became the Embreeville State Hospital. However, a *Daily Local News* article that same day in 1934, and an *Oxford Press* article Jan. 25, states Simms was buried in Bradford Cemetery in Marshallton. (That potter’s field, according to Asylum Projects (<http://www.asylumprojects.org>, keyword Embreeville State Hospital), is now part of the Cheslen Preserve outside the now-closed Embreeville State Hospital grounds. A sign at the field encompassing all those buried in the cemetery which has 240 remaining stone grave markers, states “Known but to God, respected by us.”) The *Coatesville Record* article stated: “News of Sims [sic] demise did not become generally known and when no person claimed the body it was consigned to the Potters Field.... His wife died a few years ago, leaving him alone.”

So where is Simms buried? In 1966, the Marshallton Boy Scout Troop #52 believed Simms was buried at Bradford Cemetery off Northbrook Road, right around the corner from Marshallton Village, and worked to have a monument placed on his grave. That marker states “Nathan Simms, 1851-1934, The slave boy who helped Booth escape the night of Lincoln’s assassination but told the Union soldiers the next day the direction Booth took, thus aiding in his capture.” Additionally, in 1975 the Military Order of the Loyal Legion of the United States, a Philadelphia-based group made up of descendants of Civil War soldiers, laid a wreath on Simms grave saying the group planned to mark the grave each April 14 in years to come.

The grave marker is located in the far southeast corner of Bradford Cemetery at the tree line at 39° 56.852’ N, 75° 40.709’ W.





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