

0. EXECUTION of MARY SURRETT - Story Preface

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In this image we see the former grave site of Mary Surratt at Mt. Olivet Cemetery in Washington, D.C. Photograph online, courtesy Library of Congress.

Mary Surratt - who always maintained her innocence - was condemned (be patient with this slow-loading PDF link) to be "hanged by the neck until she be dead." The same fate awaited Lewis Payne (whose real name was Lewis Thornton Powell), David Herold and George Atzerodt. The other four defendants were also found guilty but were given prison sentences.

Five of the nine men who had judged Mary sent a message to President Andrew Johnson recommending mercy for her:

The undersigned members of the Military Commission detailed to try Mary E. Surratt and others for the conspiracy and the murder of Abraham Lincoln, late President of the United States, do respectively pray the President, in consideration of the sex and age of the said Mary E. Surratt, if he can upon all the facts in the case, find it consistent with his sense of duty to the country to commute the sentence of death to imprisonment in the penitentiary for life.

The President did not change his mind. He later claimed no one had told him about the clemency request.

On the day of the execution, Anna Surratt went to the White House weeping and pleading for her mother's life. Had she been able to see the President, perhaps he would have granted clemency. However, Preston King (President Johnson's good friend) and Senator James Henry Lane turned Anna and her lawyers away. Anna was told the President wasn't seeing visitors that day.

With all life-avenues now closed to her, Mary would take her place alongside the other three condemned prisoners. The United States government would put her to death on the 7th of July, 1865.

The weather, on the day of the hanging, was unbearably hot. William Coxshall, who was assigned the job of dropping the trap door on the left side of the gallows, became so nauseated that he threw up before the hanging.

Mary Surratt, who had spent the last night of her life with her daughter Anna, knew her clemency requests and habeas corpus application had been denied. She mounted the scaffold where she could see awaiting coffins and open graves. She pleaded with her jailors:

Please, don't let me fall!

General John F. Hartranft - designated as a special provost - and his staff had been in charge of the prisoners. Known for his kindness toward Mrs. Surrat, during her incarceration, Hartranft read the death sentences to the condemned while others made sure the trap doors worked properly.

Just before the end, the prisoners' faces were covered with hoods. Moments before the signal to execute, the prisoners' ropes were checked. A drawing depicts the last seconds before the trap doors gave way.

Coxshall describes the execution scene, from the time the prisoners arrived at the scaffold until they died:

The prison door opened and the condemned came in. Mrs. Surratt was first, near fainting after looking at the gallows. She would have fallen had they not supported her. Herold was next. The young man was frightened to death. He trembled and shook and seemed on the verge of fainting. Atzerodt shuffled along in carpet slippers, a long white nightcap on his head. Under different circumstances, he would have been ridiculous.

With the exception of Powell [Payne], all were on the verge of collapse. They had to pass the open graves to reach the gallows steps and could gaze down into the shallow holes [about three feet deep] and even touch the crude pine boxes that were to receive them. Powell was as stolid as if he were a spectator instead of a principal. Herold wore a black hat until he reached the gallows. Powell was bareheaded, but he reached out and took a straw hat off the head of an officer. He wore it until they put the black bag on him.

The condemned were led to the chairs and Captain Rath [Christian Rath, in charge of the execution] seated them. Mrs. Surratt and Powell were on our drop, Herold and Atzerodt on the other.

Umbrellas were raised above the woman and Hartranft, who read the warrants and findings. Then the clergy took over talking what seemed to me interminably. The strain was getting worse. I became nauseated, what with the heat and the waiting, and taking hold of the supporting post, I hung on and vomited. I felt a little better after that, but not too good.

Powell stood forward at the very front of the drop. Mrs. Surratt was barely past the break, as were the other two. Rath came down the steps and gave the signal. Mrs. Surratt shot down and I believed died instantly. Powell was a strong brute and died hard. It was enough to see these two without looking at the others, but they told us both died quickly.

After the four prisoners were hanged, the gathered crowd dispersed. There was nothing else to see that day.

See Alignments to State and Common Core standards for this story online at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicAlignment/EXECUTION-of-MARY-SURRATT-Conspirator-Mary-Surratt>

See Learning Tasks for this story online at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicActivities/EXECUTION-of-MARY-SURRATT-Conspirator-Mary-Surratt>

Media Stream



Mary Surratt - At Her Trial

Image of Mary Surratt, at her trial, online courtesy Surratt House Museum.

Excerpted passages from *History of the United States Secret Service*, by La Fayette Curry Baker, published (in Philadelphia) in 1867.

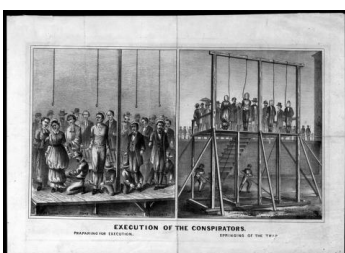
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Execution Scene - Mary Surratt

Photo online, courtesy Library of Congress.

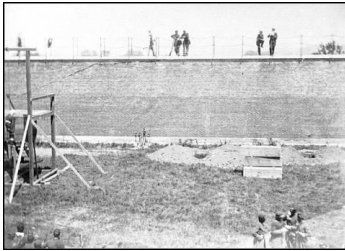
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Mary Surratt at the Gallows

Image online, courtesy Library of Congress.

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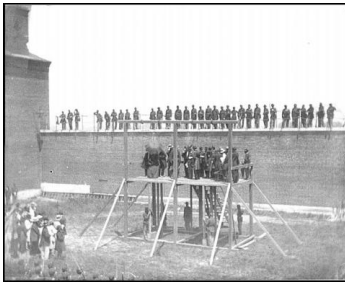


Surratt Execution - Coffins at the Scene

Image online, courtesy Library of Congress.

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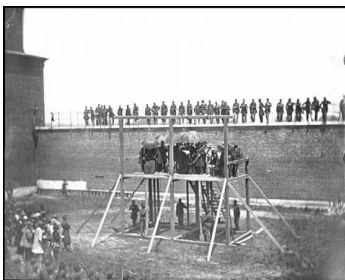


Mary Surratt Shielded by an Umbrella at the Gallows

Image online, courtesy Library of Congress.

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Condemned Lincoln Conspirators on the Scaffold

Image online, courtesy Library of Congress.

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Surratt Execution Scene - Placing Hoods

Photo online, courtesy Library of Congress.

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