

Gwen: This episode comes from New York City. And our first investigation begins in Greenwich Village. April 14, 1865. An actor enters a popular theater in our nation's capital. Quietly he makes his way upstairs to the private boxes. At 10:15 p.m., during the third act of "Our American cousin," John Wilkes Booth fires a single bullet into the head of the president of the United States... [Gunshot] ...committing one of the most infamous assassinations in American history. Nearly 140 years later, a woman in downtown New York City believes that the plot to assassinate Abraham Lincoln may have begun in her building. Jean Deerking is a schoolteacher here.

Jean: If I were to find out that the plot to assassinate Abraham Lincoln actually took place here, I think I would feel very mixed about it. I would be excited that a historical event of this magnitude took place here. However, this event was so tragic, you know, the assassination of Abraham Lincoln, it would be a bit powerful also.

Gwen: I'm Gwen Wright, and I've come to Greenwich Village to investigate one of the most famous conspiracies in American history.

Jean: Hi, nice to meet you, Gwen?

Gwen: Yes.

Jean: Come on in.

Gwen: Well, Jean, what have you heard about this house?

Jean: Well, living in the Village, I've heard lots of different rumors about this building in particular. I've heard that this was the house of a mayor. I've heard that it was a stop on the Underground Railroad. I've heard that it was a French hospital. The thing that I'm really most intrigued and interested in finding out is whether or not John Wilkes Booth conspired right here in this building to assassinate Abraham Lincoln.

Gwen: Where'd you hear this story?

Jean: I've heard it from several different sources. I've heard walking tours say this again and again. This is a stop on every walking tour, you name it, everything from the history of Greenwich Village to the ghosts of Greenwich Village, and I would just be so interested to find out whether or not it's true.

Gwen: I think I can find out for you whether or not that happened.

Jean: That would be great. It would be so exciting.

Gwen: After Booth shot Lincoln, he leapt onto the stage, breaking his leg, but he still managed to escape, first to Maryland, then to Virginia. He eluded authorities for 12 days before being tracked down and killed in a shoot-out. Of his known co-conspirators, four were hanged and three others were sentenced to hard labor for life. We all know that Lincoln was assassinated in Ford's theater. But if Jean's story is true, then the plot was put into motion, not in Washington, D.C., but right here at 45 Grove Street in New York City. The first thing I need to know is whether or not Jean's building was even here at the time John Wilkes Booth was plotting to kill Lincoln.



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There's several ways I could date this house. The plainness is itself a giveaway. This late federal style tended to be quite reserved. Some ornamentation was in the use of bricks, which were called Flemish bond, alternating long, short, long, short. This arched doorway set into the house, it's not a large porch, is also characteristic of that era. And so are the lentils above the windows. All these details help me date Jean's building to the late 1820s or around 1830. So there's one thing I'm sure of. This house was here when John Wilkes Booth was plotting Lincoln's assassination. What was John Wilkes Booth doing here? We don't immediately associate a northern stronghold like New York with radical southern politics. Were attitudes here in line with Booth's pro-confederate sympathies? I'm going to meet my colleague, Columbia University Professor Eric Thoner, to find out more about New York City during the Civil War.

Eric: We shouldn't think of the civil war as a fight between a moral north and an immoral south. Slavery was a terrible crime, obviously, but the north also was riddled with racism. On the eve of the civil war, a right wing secession is taking place. The mayor of New York, Fernando Wood, who was a democrat, proposed that New York also secede from the union, not to join the confederacy, but to become a kind of free city, so that it could trade freely with north and south and become just its own little entity. This didn't happen, of course, but it shows you how closely tied in New York was with the cotton economy and how petrified the leaders of New York were about the prospect of losing that connection with the slave south. New York financiers financed the cotton. New York insurance agencies insured slavery on slave ships. Many new Yorkers, longshoremen, shipbuilders, merchants, et cetera, their livelihoods depended on the strength of the southern economy. So that's one of the reasons there is a lot of pro-southern sentiment in this city.

Gwen: So, Eric, Booth could easily have felt that he could find supporters for his cause in New York City?

Eric: It's hard to think of a city in the north that Booth would have thought it was likely to find southern sympathizers more strongly than in New York City. So, as odd as it sounds, the climate in New York was right for Booth to hatch his conspiracy here.

Gwen: But what link could there have been between John Wilkes Booth and 45 Grove Street? I'm checking with New York City's Landmarks Preservation Commission to see if historical records of Jean's building mention Booth. Thank you. Here's the report. Great. This is a report that the landmarks commission put together listing all of the houses in the Greenwich Village historic district, so ours should be here. Let's see. Here's Grove Street. Here we have 45 Grove. A full page of description. This magnificent house was once a freestanding mansion surrounded by spacious grounds. It's described here as undoubtedly one of the finest and largest federal residences in Greenwich Village. Booth was a stage actor, so it's doubtful he could have afforded a mansion like this. But wait. Around 1850 there seemed to have been some major changes to 45 Grove Street. The property is sold in 1851 for development. It's reclassified from a first-class to a second-class resident, which means there were commercial properties on the basement and parlor floor, and I would expect that much of this was rented out. This makes sense, given the history of Greenwich Village. By the 1860s, many mansions like 45 Grove had been converted into boarding houses. Maybe Booth came to town for theater work and rented a room in Jean's building. I'm meeting with Richard Sloan of the Lincoln group of New York to see if Booth ever appeared on the New York stage. Richard, was John Wilkes Booth the proverbial itinerant actor? Would he have left Washington and come to perform in New York?

Richard: Yes, he did on a couple of occasions that I know of, once in Brooklyn and once in November of 1864. He and his brothers Edwin Booth, the famous Shakespearean actor, and their brother Junius Brutus Booth, junior, they performed here in a special production of "Julius Caesar" at the Wintergarden Theater. It's just a couple blocks from here. In fact, I have a copy of the program here.

Gwen: Fascinating. Three Booth brothers in "Julius Caesar." how strangely appropriate, a play about intrigue

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and assassination just six months before Booth assassinates Lincoln. I'm trying to tie Booth to a specific address, 45 Grove Street. Do you know it?

Richard: I know 45 Grove Street.

Gwen: Yes.

Richard: That was a house that an actor friend of John Wilkes Booth lived in the late 1860s. His name was Samuel K. Chester. Samuel Chester.

Gwen: I haven't heard his name.

Richard: He was a boyhood friend of John Wilkes Booth going back to Baltimore in the 1840s, and they started their careers together in the theater in Richmond, Virginia, at the Richmond Theater, around 1858. That's really interesting. That may have been an involvement. And in that performance of "Julius Caesar" with the three Booth brothers, Sam Chester is actually in the cast. He supported them. He's listed as C.K. Chester for some reason, but that's him. That's Sam Chester.

Gwen: Could Chester be the missing link? Could he have helped plot Lincoln's assassination? I'm heading to the national archives in Maryland, where the records from the investigation into Lincoln's assassination are kept. Here we have a summary of testimony concerning "The following persons confined in old capital prison and supposed to be implicated in or to have had knowledge of the assassination of the president. Captain Samuel Cox. Samuel K. Chester." so Chester is on this list. These are the original handwritten documents from May, 1865. And here's Samuel Chester's statement. "I live in New York. I'm an actor. Have known John Wilkes Booth. I was on terms of close friendship with him." Chester goes on to describe his friend Booth coming to visit him in New York City. "I lived then in another part of the city at 45 Grove Street, near Bleecker." Here in Jean's building, Booth visits Chester, late in 1864. According to Chester, they leave 45 Grove Street for a walk through Greenwich Village. They head south to a local tavern. "I went with him to the House of Lords on Houston Street to drink with him. We drank considerably." They leave the House of Lords and walk up Broadway. Booth wants to talk to Chester about a speculation or plan, but he won't reveal what it is. This is the speculation that I am concerned in. There was an immense party connected with it. Booth is being very secretive and quite nervous, meandering with Chester along what was back then a very quiet street in the Village. They finally stop near Washington Square Park and Booth reveals the elaborate plot he's been concocting. It's a conspiracy to bring down the union and give a victory to the confederacy. And Booth wants Chester to help. "It is a conspiracy against the government to capture the heads of the government at Washington and carry them to Richmond, including Mr. Lincoln." To Richmond, Virginia, capital of the confederacy. This isn't what I was expecting. This isn't a plot to assassinate Lincoln, but to capture him. But would Samuel Chester go along with it? Chester protests and says, "No, John, I can't have anything to do with anything of that kind." Booth offers him \$3,000 to \$4,000. Chester won't do it. Booth then threatens him and says, "I carry a derringer loaded to shoot everyone that betrays me." Chester is still resistant. According to Chester's statement, they then part company. Booth heads back to Maryland, but keeps writing Chester, asking him to join the conspiracy. Chester is unwavering. "I wrote to him imploring him to give up this wild idea. Booth came to New York after that and he told me that he had given up this idea, that the affair had fallen through." But that wasn't the case. John Wilkes Booth and Samuel Chester would meet one last time. Just one week before the assassination, Booth again visits Chester in New York City. They go out and Chester reports, "Finally he slapped his hand upon the table and said, 'what a splendid chance I had to kill the president.'" He was right next to him on the stand at the inauguration. He didn't do

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anything, but clearly, Booth is still obsessed with the idea of harming the president. As we all know, on that fateful night in 1865, in front of a packed Ford's Theater, Booth acted on his murderous obsession with the president. Now it's time to tell Jean what I've learned.

Jean: Hi, Gwen. Nice to see you again.

Gwen: Jean, first I'd like to thank you for asking a very interesting question. It's opened up some really important insights about the role of New York City in the civil war.

Jean: I'm excited to hear the answer.

Gwen: Well, like lots of stories, the one that you heard does have some truth to it.

Jean: Okay.

Gwen: Someone who lived here did know about a plot against Lincoln.

Jean: Really?

Gwen: But it wasn't Booth who lived here.

Jean: Okay, that's a relief.

Gwen: It was a man named Samuel Chester, who was an actor and a close friend of Booth's. They had been boyhood friends. And Booth told him about a plot that originally was going to be one to kidnap the president and other heads of state.

Jean: Really?

Gwen: Yes, Chester told him he wouldn't join the plan and tried to dissuade Booth from doing anything.

Jean: I feel relieved. It's nice to know that something that terrible didn't happen here.

Gwen: Samuel Chester continued his acting career and lived in New York City until his death in 1921. If he had been able to convince his friend, John Wilkes Booth, to change his mind, there's no doubt that the history of the United States would have been dramatically altered.

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