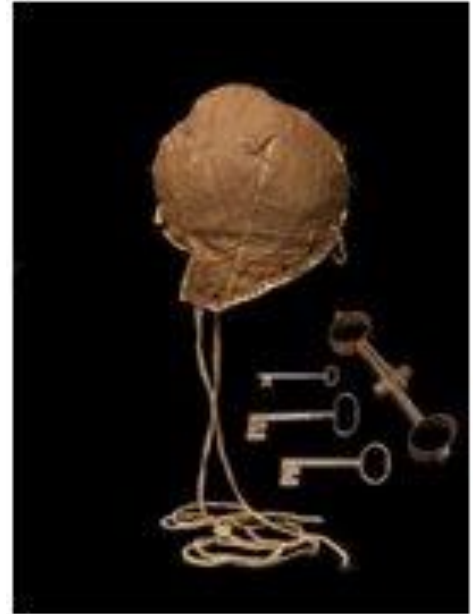


## Once Upon A Time in Quincy: Artifacts of the Lincoln conspirators

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Wrist irons worn by George Atzerodt, a hood worn by Lewis Powell, the key to Mary Surratt's cell and keys to the Capitol Prison are displayed in the Lincoln Gallery at the Historical Society.  
Photo courtesy Historical Society of Quincy and Adams County



By PATRICK MCGINLEY

On April 14, 1865, President Abraham Lincoln was shot. An attack was also made on the life of Secretary of State William Seward.

These events started one of the greatest manhunts in our history. On April 26, John Wilkes Booth was shot and killed. The Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum (ALPLM) details that nine others were arrested as part of the conspiracy to kill the president, the secretary of state, and as was later discovered, the secretary of war.

Of the nine who were tried, only one, John Surratt, was acquitted. Edman Spangler was sentenced to six years of hard labor. Samuel Arnold, Dr. Samuel Mudd, and Michael O'Laughlen were sentenced to life imprisonment. Four conspirators were sentenced to be hanged: George Atzerodt, Lewis (Payne) Powell, David Herold, and Mary Surratt. All four were hanged on July 7, 1865.

Rare artifacts at Historical Society

The Historical Society of Quincy and Adams County has some very rare artifacts pertaining to the last four conspirators. The Society has on display the keys to the Capitol Prison and the key to Mary Surratt's cell.

Many people thought at the time that Mrs. Surratt's life would be spared. A woman had never been hanged before, and surely the government would not do so now. Mrs. Surratt's daughter stood crying outside the White House, pleading for President Andrew Johnson to spare her mother's life, but to no avail. Mrs. Surratt became the first woman to be hanged by the United States government.

The Historical Society also has the wrist irons worn by George Atzerodt. These wrist irons are known as

"Lily Irons" and are far different from handcuffs today.

The irons were made to prevent the hands from touching each other. Imagine two metal circles in which to place your hands, separated by a metal bar about 15 inches long. The circles for the wrist irons were applied very tightly. Samuel Arnold later wrote: "The irons were so tightly fitting that the blood could not circulate and my hands were fearfully swollen, the outward skin changing its appearance to a mixture of black, red, and purple color . . ."

Hoods confined prisoners

The prisoners were at first kept aboard ironclads in the Potomac River and later transferred to the Old Capitol Prison. During their imprisonment, all were kept in hoods to keep them from seeing and communicating with each other.

Different types of hoods were used. One type was used while transporting them from their cells to the courtroom, but a much more confining type was used while the prisoners were in their cells.

While still being held in the ironclads, Lewis Powell tried to kill himself by banging his head against the iron walls of his cell. The ALPLM states that Secretary of War Stanton ordered that: "... prisoners on board the Ironclads ... shall have for better security against conversation a canvas bag put over the head of each and tied around the neck with a hole for proper breathing and eating, but not seeing, and that (Powell) be secured to prevent self-destruction ..."

Once moved to the Old Capitol Prison, a more severe type of hood awaited them. As related by Samuel Arnold: "... I found a differently constructed hood ... of a much more tortuous and painful pattern than the one formerly used. It fitted tightly, containing cotton pads which were placed directly over the eyes and ears, having the tendency to push the eye balls far back in their sockets, one small aperture allowed about the nose through which to breathe, and one by which food could be served to the mouth ... cords were drawn as tight as the jailer in charge could pull them, causing the most excruciating pain ... tied in such a manner around the neck that it was impossible to remove them ... the hoods never being removed excepting when brought before the Court and always replaced on our exit. ... "

The Historical Society has on display the hood believed to have been worn by Lewis Powell. The hood, the wrist irons and the keys are in the Lincoln Gallery of the Historical Society.

Browning likely acquired artifacts

A good question might be just how these artifacts ended up in Quincy. Sen. Orville Browning of Quincy was a very close friend and confidant of Abraham Lincoln.

He was present at the autopsy of the President, helped Mrs. Lincoln plan the funeral arrangements, and was chosen as one of Lincoln's pall bearers. He helped write the defense of the conspirators for their trial before a Military Commission and objected to the fact that the conspirators were not given a fair trial in a civil court.

In his diary entry of July 6, Sen. Browning wrote: "The findings of the Military Commission were approved today by the President, and Mrs. Surratt, Atzerodt, Herald (sic) and Payne were directed to be hung tomorrow ... this commission was without authority and its proceedings void. The execution of these persons will be murder."

It is most likely that Browning acquired the artifacts, and it is believed they were later passed on to his estate lawyer, L.E. Emmons, or to Henry Asbury, another friend of Lincoln's. They were then given to Colonel Distin. Distin passed them on to his daughter, Mrs. L. E. Emmons, who presented them to the Historical Society.

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**Sources**

Panels from the exhibit, "Blood on the Moon." Springfield, IL: Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum, 2005.

Quincy Herald-Whig, February 12, 1950.