

John Wilkes Booth, letters and diary entries

Source: “*Right or Wrong, God Judge Me*”: *The Writings of John Wilkes Booth*, ed. John Rhodehamel and Louise Taper (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997).

John Wilkes Booth to Mary Ann Holmes Booth

Editorial note: “Autograph letter signed, National Archives.”
[Philadelphia, November] 1864

Dearest beloved Mother

Heaven knows how dearly I love you. And may our kind Father in Heaven (if only for the sake of my love) watch over, *comfort* & protect you, in my absence. May he soften the blow of my departure, granting you peace and happiness for many, many years to come. God ever bless you.

I have always endeavored to be a good and dutiful son, And even now would wish to die sooner than give you pain. But dearest Mother, though, I owe you all, *there* is another duty. A noble duty for the sake of liberty and humanity due to my Country—For, four years I have lived (I may say) A *slave* in the north (A favored slave its [sic] true, but no less hateful to me on that account.) Not daring to express my thoughts or sentiments, even in my own home Constantly hearing every principle, dear to my heart, denounced as treasonable, And knowing the vile and savage acts committed on my countrymen their wives & helpless children, that I have cursed my wilful idleness, And begun to deem myself a coward and to despise my own existence. For four years I have borne it mostly for your dear sake, And for you alone, have I also struggled to fight off this desire to begone, but it seems that uncontrollable fate, moving me for its ends, takes me from you, dear Mother, to do what work I can for a poor oppressed downtrodden people. May that same fate cause me to do that work well. I care not for the censure of the north, so I have your forgiveness, And I feel I may hope it, even though you differ with me in opinion. I may by the grace of God, live through this war dear Mother, if so, the rest of my life shall be more devoted to you, than has been my former. For I know it will take a long lifetime of tenderness and care, to atone for the pang this parting will give you. But I cannot longer resist the inclination, to go and share the sufferings of my brave countrymen, holding an unequal strife (for every right human & divine) against the most ruthless enemy, the world has ever known. You can answer for me dearest Mother (although none of you think with me) that I have not a *single selfish motive* to spur me on to this, nothing save the sacred duty, I feel I *owe the cause I love*. [sic] the cause of the South. The cause of liberty & justice. So should I meet the *worst*, dear Mother, in struggling for such holy rights. I can say “Gods’ will be done” And bless him in my heart for not permitting me, to outlive, our dear bought freedom. And for keeping me from being longer a hidden lie among my country’s foes. Darling Mother I can not write you, you will understand the deep regret, the forsaking your dear side, will make me suffer, for you have been the best, the noblest, an example for all mothers. God, God bless you. As I shall ever pray him to do. And should the last bolt strike your son, dear Mother, bear it patiently And think at the best life is but short, and *not at all times happy*. My Brothers & Sisters (Heaven protect them) will add my love and duty to their own, and watch you with care and kindness, till we meet again. And if *that happiness* does not come to us on earth, then may, O May it be with God. So then dearest, *dearest* Mother,

forgive and pray for me. I feel that I am right in the justness of my cause, And that we shall, *ere long*, meet again. Heaven grant it. Bless you, bless you. Your loving son will never cease to hope and pray for such a joy.

Come weal or woe, with never ending love and devotion you will find me ever your affectionate son
John.

John Wilkes Booth to the Editors of the *National Intelligencer*

Editorial note: “Text of letter written and destroyed on 14 April 1865, reconstructed from memory by John Matthews with the help of Philadelphia journalist Frank A. Burr, and published in the *Washington Evening Star* on 7 December 1881.” This letter generally follows Booth’s less readable April 14 “To Whom It May Concern” letter, which was left with his sister Asia Booth Clarke and published in the 19 April 1865 edition of the Philadelphia *Inquirer*.

Washington, D.C., April 14, 1865.

To My Countrymen: For years I have devoted my time, my energies, and every dollar I possessed to the furtherance of an object. I have been baffled and disappointed. The hour has come when I must change my plan. Many, I know—the vulgar herd—will blame me for what I am about to do, but posterity, I am sure, will justify me. Right or wrong, God judge me, not man. Be my motive good or bad, of one thing I am sure, the lasting condemnation of the North. I love peace more than life. Have loved the Union beyond expression. For four years have I waited, hoped and prayed for the dark clouds to break and for a restoration of our former sunshine. To wait longer is a crime. My prayers have proved as idle as my hopes. Gods [sic] will be done. I go to see and share the bitter end. This war is a war with the constitution and the reserve rights of the state. It is a war upon Southern rights and institutions. The nomination of Abraham Lincoln four years ago bespoke war. His election forced it. I have ever held the South were right. In a foreign war I too could say “country, right or wrong.” But in a struggle such as ours (where the brother tries to pierce the brother’s heart) for God’s sake chose the right. When a country like this spurns justice from her side she forfeits the allegiance of every honest freeman, and should leave him untrammelled by any fealty soever to act as his conscience may approve.

People of the North, to hate tyranny to love liberty and justice, to strike at wrong and oppression, was the teaching of our fathers. The study of our early history will not let me forget it, and may it never.

I do not want to forget the heroic patriotism of our fathers, who rebelled against the oppression of the mother country.

This country was formed for the white, not for the black man. And, looking upon African slavery from the same standpoint as the noble framers of our constitution, I, for one, have ever considered it one of the greatest blessings, both for themselves and us, that God ever bestowed upon a favored nation. Witness, heretofore, our wealth and power; witness their elevation and enlightenment above their race elsewhere. I have lived among it most of my life, and have seen less harsh treatment from master to man than I have beheld in the North from father to son. Yet, Heaven knows no one would be willing to do more for the negro race than I, could I but see a

way to still better their condition. But Lincoln's policy is only preparing the way for their total annihilation. The South are not, nor have they been, fighting for the continuation of slavery. The first battle of Bull Run did away with that idea.

Their causes for the war have been as noble and greater far than those that urged our fathers on. Even should we allow that they were wrong at the beginning of this contest, cruelty and injustice have made the wrong become the right, and they stand now before the wonder and admiration of the world as a noble band of patriot heroes. Hereafter reading of their deeds Thermopylae^[i] would be forgotten.

When I aided in the capture and execution of John Brown (who was a murderer on our western border, and who was fairly tried and convicted before an impartial judge and jury of treason, and who, by the way, has since been made a God.) I was proud of my little share in the transaction, for I deemed it my duty[,] and that I was helping our common country to perform an act of justice, but what was a crime in poor John Brown is now considered (by themselves) as the greatest and only virtue of the whole Republican party.^[ii]

Strange transmigration! Vice to become a virtue, simply because more indulge in it. I thought then, as now, that the Abolitionists were the only traitors in the land, and that the entire party deserved the same fate as poor old Brown. Not because they wished to abolish slavery[,] but on account of the means they have ever endeavored to use to effect that abolition. If Brown were living I doubt whether he himself would set slavery against the Union. Most, or nearly all the North, do openly curse the Union if the South are to return and retain a single right guaranteed to them by every tie which we once revered as sacred. The South can make no choice. It is either extermination or slavery for themselves (worse than death) to draw from. I know my choice, and hasten to accept it. I have studied hard to discover upon what grounds the right of a State to secede has been denied, whether our very name, United States, and the Declaration of Independence both provide for secession[,] but there is now no time for words. I know how foolish I shall be deemed for undertaking such a step as this, where on the one side I have many friends and every thing to make me happy, where my profession alone has gained me an income of more than twenty thousand dollars a year, and where my great personal ambition in my profession has been a great field for labor. On the other hand, the South have never bestowed upon me one kind word; a place now where I have no friends, except beneath the sod; a place where I must either become a private soldier or a beggar. To give up all of the former for the latter, besides my mother and sisters whom I love so dearly (although they so widely differ with me in opinion), seems insane; but God is my judge. I love justice more than I do a country that disowns it; more than fame and wealth; more (heaven pardon me if wrong) more than a happy home. I have never been upon a battlefield, but oh! my countrymen, could you all but see the reality or effects of this horrid war. As I have seen them in every state save Virginia, I know you would think like me, and would pray the Almighty to create in the Northern mind a sense of right and justice (even should it possess no seasoning of mercy) and that he would dry up the sea of blood between us which is daily growing wider. Alas, I have no longer a country. She is fast approaching her threatened doom. Four years ago, I would have given a thousand lives to see her remain (as I had always known her) powerful and unbroken. And even now I would hold my life as naught, to see her what she was. Oh! my friends, if the fearful scenes of the past four years had never been enacted, or if what has been had been but a frightful dream, from which we could

now awake, with what overflowing hearts could we bless our God and pray for his continued favor.

How I have loved the old flag can never now be known. A few years since and the entire world could boast of [none] [ed.'s brackets] so pure and spotless. But I have of late been seeing and hearing of the bloody deeds of which she has been made the emblem. And would shudder to think how changed she had grown. Oh! how I have longed to see her break from the mist of blood and death so circled around her folds, spoiling her beauty and tarnishing her honor. But no; day by day has she been dragged deeper and deeper into cruelty and oppression, till now (in my eyes) her once bright red stripes look like bloody gashes on the face of heaven. I look now upon my early admiration of her glories as a dream. My love (as things stand today) is for the South alone, and to her side I go penniless.

Her success has been near my heart, and I have labored faithfully to further an object which would more than have proved my unselfish devotion. Heartsick and disappointed I turn from the path which I have been following into a bolder and more perilous one. Without malice I make the change. I have nothing in my heart except a sense of duty to my choice. If the South is to be aided it must be done quickly. It may already be too late. When Caesar had conquered the enemies of Rome and the power that was his menaced the liberties of the people, Brutus arose and slew him. The stroke of his dagger was guided by his love of Rome. It was the spirit and ambition of Caesar that Brutus struck at.

“Oh that we could come by Caesar’s spirit,
And not dismember Caesar!
But, alas!
Caesar must bleed for it.”^[iii]

I answer with Brutus:

He who loves his country better than gold or life.
John W. Booth

From John Wilkes Booth’s Diary

Editorial note: “Autograph manuscript, National Park Service, Lincoln Museum at Ford’s Theatre, Washington, D.C.; transcription from William Hanchett, ‘Booth’s Diary,’ *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society* 72 (Feb. 1979): 39–56.” Italics have been removed.

Zekiah Swamp and Nanjemoy Creek,
Charles County, Maryland,
17 and 22 April 1865

April 13th
14 Friday the Ides

Until to day [sic] nothing was ever thought of sacrificing to our country’s wrongs. For six months we had worked to capture. But our cause being almost lost, something decisive & great must be done. But its failure is owing to others, who did not strike for their country with a heart.

I struck boldly and not as the papers say. I walked with a firm step through a thousand of his friends, was stopped, but pushed on. A Col- was at his side. I shouted Sic semper *before* I fired. In jumping broke my leg.^[iv] I passed all his pickets, rode sixty miles that night, with the bones of my leg tearing the flesh at every jump. I can never repent it, though we hated to kill: Our country owed all her troubles to him, and God simply made me the instrument of his punishment. The country is not what it was. This forced union is not what I have loved. I care not what becomes of me. I have no desire to out-live my country. This night (before the deed), I wrote a long article and left it for one of the Editors of the National Inteligencer, [sic] in which I fully set forth our reasons for our proceedings. He or the Govmt

Friday 21—

After being hunted like a dog through swamps, woods, and last night being chased by gun boats till I was forced to return wet cold and starving, with every mans hand against me, I am here in despair.^[v] And why; For doing what Brutus was honored for, what made Tell a Hero.^[vi] And yet I for striking down a greater tyrant than they ever knew am looked upon as a common cutthroat. My action was purer than either of theirs. One, hoped to be great himself. The other had not only his countrys but his own wrongs to avenge. I hoped for no gain. I knew no private wrong. I struck for my country and that alone. A country groaned beneath this tyranny and prayed for this end. Yet now behold the cold hand they extend to me. God *cannot* pardon me if I have done wrong. Yet I cannot see any wrong except in serving a degenerate people. The little, the very little I left behind to clear my name, the Govmt will not allow to be printed. So ends all. For my country I have given up all that makes life sweet and Holy, brought misery on my family, and am sure there is no pardon in Heaven for me since man condemns me so. I have only *heard* what has been done (except what I did myself) and it fills me with horror. God try and forgive me and bless my mother. To night I will once more try the river with the intent to cross, though I have a greater desire to return to Washington and in a measure clear my name which I feel I can do. I do not repent the blow I struck. I may before God but not to man.

I think I have done well, though I am abandoned, with the curse of Cain upon me. When if the world knew my heart, that one blow would have made me great, though I did desire no greatness.

To night I try to escape these blood hounds once more. Who can read his fate. God's will be done.

I have too great a soul to die like a criminal. Oh may he, may he spare me that and let me die bravely.

I bless the entire world. Have never hated or wronged anyone. This last was not a wrong, unless God deems it so. And its with him, to damn or bless me. And for this brave boy with me^[vii] who often prays (yes before and since) with a true and sincere heart, was it a crime in him, if so why can he pray the same I do not wish to shed a drop of blood, but "I must fight the course." Tis all that's left me.

Notes

i At the Battle of Thermopylae, in the fifth century B.C., the greatly outnumbered Spartans, though finally killed to the last man, managed to hold off the Persian army long enough to allow the rest of the Greek army to withdraw, setting the stage for the Greek naval victory at the Battle of Salamis.

- ii A member of a militia unit called the Richmond Grays, Booth was present at Brown's execution on December 2, 1859, but had not actually "aided in the capture."
- iii Imperfectly quoted from Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar*, II.i.169–171.
- iv Lincoln was accompanied, at the performance of *Our American Cousin*, by Maj. Henry Rathbone and his step-sister, Clara Harris. After shooting Lincoln, Booth jumped to the stage below and reportedly shouted "Sic Semper Tyrannis" ("Thus Always to Tyrants").
- v After shooting Lincoln and jumping to the stage, Booth fled the theater, had his leg treated by a local doctor, and was later joined by his associate David Herold. After hiding for a week in the swampy Maryland woods, they crossed over into Virginia and made their way to the farm of Richard H. Garrett, where federal officers surrounded them in a barn on April 26. Herold surrendered, but the defiant Booth was shot and died a few hours later.
- vi The legend of the fourteenth-century Swiss folk hero William Tell has it that Tell killed the tyrannical Austrian governor Gessler, setting the stage for Switzerland's independence.
- vii David Herold, one of Booth's accomplices in the original plan to abduct Lincoln.