

Albion boy John Collins saw executions of Lincoln assassination conspirators

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Last week's article featured the story of William Collins of Albion who claimed that he was present with the detachment of cavalrymen from the 16th New York Cavalry responsible for the capture of John Wilkes Booth. Occasionally I receive feedback from readers that pushes me in a particular direction and this week just happens to be one of those occasions. Steven Miller of Illinois, an expert on Boston Corbett, contacted me about John Chamberlain Collins and encouraged me to explore his story. So I thought it would be of interest to share more about the life of John C. Collins.

John Collins was born Sept. 19, 1850 at Albion to Michael and Susan Collins; one of nine children born to the couple. He was raised Roman Catholic, presumably attending St. Joseph's Church after its establishment, and attended the local schools in the village. At the outbreak of the Civil War, his brother, William, enlisted with the 28th New York Infantry raised under the command

of David Hardie. John was 11 years old and simply too young to even lie about his age to enter the service.

Based on the recollections of John Collins, his brother was home on furlough likely around the time of his father's death in 1864. It was at this time that John, with some gentle coaxing, traveled to Washington, D.C. to stay with William for a short period of time. A series of unfortunate events involving William, including a battle wound, three-month recovery, and eventual capture by Confederate soldiers, extended John's stay with the 16th New York Cavalry.

The men of the unit adopted the 14-year-old Collins as a sort of "regimental boy" or mascot for the group, cutting a small uniform for him and providing him with a pony that was too small for regular service. Mr. Miller sent me an article that appeared in The Sunday Star, a Washington, D.C. newspaper, on April 12, 1914. In the article, John Collins recalls his presence with the unit, noting that they were stationed just outside of Wash-

ington when Lincoln was assassinated. After news reached the regiment, detachments were sent out in search of John Wilkes Booth and David Herold, although he is careful to make no mention of his brother, William, in this particular piece.

The focus of the particular article is his brief relationship with Boston Corbett, the man credited with killing Booth. Collins recalled that Corbett was an eccentric man whose tent was positioned across the street from his in the company town. As a devout Christian, Corbett wore his hair parted in the center because "Jesus did so," and frequently claimed that he was divinely selected to avenge the death of the "great-hearted President."

Perhaps the most interesting anecdote pertaining to John Collins relates to the trial and execution of those accused of conspiring to kill Abraham Lincoln with Booth.

When Mary Surratt, Herold, Lewis Powell and George Atzerodt were set to be executed on July 7, 1865 for their connection to the assassination plot,

was likely permitted due to his uniform and was believed to be the youngest witness to the execution. This photograph shows the aftermath of the event, two soldiers stand on the front left corner of the gallows with rifles over their shoulders. One man appears to be looking to his left towards the young boy standing with a forage cap atop his head and sack strung over his shoulder.

He appears to gaze with interest at the bodies hanging from the ropes, those individuals accused of conspiring to assassinate the President of the United States.

Steven Miller believes that this young man was, in fact, John C. Collins. As noted by Barry Cauchon, at least one researcher believes this to be a boy around the age of 8-10, meaning it is not Collins. Cauchon notes that Alfred Gibson, Gov. Hartranft's 16-year-old assistant, was also present for the execution.

One might ask how a 16-year-old might look more like an 8-10 year old than a 14-year old. The point is that the list of known boys present

at the execution contains two names; Collins and Gibson.

After the war, John Collins attended Brockport Normal School (now SUNY Brockport) and eventually graduated from Yale University with a Bachelor of Arts degree in 1875. After the conclusion of his studies, he enrolled in Yale's School of Religion and graduated in 1878 with a Bachelor of Divinity degree.

More remarkable than his presence at the execution of Surratt, Herold, Powell and Atzerodt was his life after the war. He took an interest in Christian social work and assumed leadership of the New Haven, Connecticut Boys' Club in 1884, growing the membership of the organization considerably over a three year period.

By 1891, his work was responsible for growing the organization's oversight to more than 13,000 boys. Although he was not responsible for establishing the organization, the Rev. John C. Collins expanded the reach of what we now know as the Boys & Girls Club of America.