

## John Wilkes Booth Slept Here

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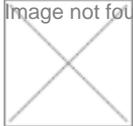
[1]

146 years ago this month, John Wilkes Booth, on the run after he shot President Abraham Lincoln, was killed in Virginia. The story is familiar (whether you believe it or no [2]t), as is Booth's theatrical background. When it came time to work on the most recent Question of the Week [3], this seemed like a timely topic, but one that would only work if I could somehow link Booth to this area. So I wondered, did John Wilkes Booth ever come to Philadelphia to act?

Yes he did (which is why I think it's safe to say he slept here, even if only for a night or two).

John Wilkes Booth's theatre career began in Baltimore in the mid 1850s when he was still in his late teens. In 1857, he joined the company at the Arch Street Theatre. (This is was different locale, as I learned, from the Arch Street Opera House that opened in 1870 and is now the home of the Trocadero [4].) At this the time, the performing arts in Philadelphia were rapidly expanding. The city was already home to the Chestnut and Walnut Street theatres (the latter was then known as "The Olympic") and, in 1857, the new Academy of Music opened on Broad Street.

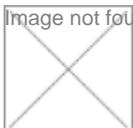
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The Arch Street Theatre opened in 1828. It was once located on Arch Street between 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> streets and was one of the nation's oldest theatres. As with many new theatres, it underwent several management changes in its early years. Coincidentally to Booth's arrival, the theatre reached its stride in the 1850s, when one William Wheatley managed the house along with comedian John Drew. (A decade earlier both Booth's brother and father appeared in at Arch Street in the play *The Iron Chest*.) In 1861, John Drew's wife, Louise Lane Drew, took over as manager; and it was under her 31-year tutelage that the Arch Street Theatre grew in prominence and became one of the nation's most well-known theatre companies. Mrs. Drew had the theatre renovated in 1863 with all the trimmings of modernity, such as plush seats and crystal chandeliers. She was one of the first women in America to manage a theatre over such a significant amount of time. Between Booth's first appearances at the Arch Street Theatre in late 1857 (under his stage name "Mr. Wilks") and his descent into infamy, he performed in Richmond, Virginia, and returned to the Arch at least occasionally to perform.

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Modern reviews of Booth's acting abilities are mixed, and no doubt his hailing from a famous theatre family affected external perceptions of his career, as well as his own internal ideals.

Putting aside the possible outcomes for the nation at large, it would have been interesting to see how his theatrical career may have developed had he not taken a turn for the worse.

*HSP's playbill collection (Collection 3131) consists primarily of playbills and programs from various theatres in Philadelphia and other cities, 1754-1989. Eighteenth-century programs include London theatres as well. It's a treasure trove for anyone interested in researching Philadelphia's theatrical past.*

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#### **Links**

[1] [http://digitallibrary.hsp.org/index.php/Detail/Object/Show/object\\_id/5116](http://digitallibrary.hsp.org/index.php/Detail/Object/Show/object_id/5116)

[2] <http://www.thehistoryblog.com/archives/9362>

[3] <http://www.hsp.org/node/3065>

[4] <http://www.thetroc.com/>

[5] [http://digitallibrary.hsp.org/index.php/Detail/Object/Show/object\\_id/5117](http://digitallibrary.hsp.org/index.php/Detail/Object/Show/object_id/5117)

[6] [http://digitallibrary.hsp.org/index.php/Detail/Object/Show/object\\_id/4292](http://digitallibrary.hsp.org/index.php/Detail/Object/Show/object_id/4292)