

A TRAGEDY'S SECOND ACT;

DID COL. HENRY RATHBONE'S
AGONY AS AN EYEWITNESS TO
THE LINCOLN ASSASSINATION
LEAD HIM TO MURDER HIS WIFE,
CLARA HARRIS, 18 YEARS LATER?



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On Aug. 7, 1891, the royal Prussian physician in the town of Hildesheim, Germany, went to a mental asylum in a former Benedictine monastery to examine a wealthy American who had been an inmate there for the past eight years.

The patient's name was Henry R. Rathbone. He was a former U.S. Army officer who had once moved in the elite circles of Washington society and now had exclusive quarters in the 800-year-old complex, where he had been confined by the German courts.

The physician, one A. Rosenbach, found Mr. Rathbone thin and graying. He was 53, stood 5-foot-11 and weighed 140 pounds. The doctor took his pulse -- 68 beats per minute -- and temperature -- 99.6. Both about normal.

The doctor noted that the patient was polite, carefully dressed, and "earnest." He appeared healthy, although the pupil in his right eye was larger than the left. The patient refused to discuss his mental condition, but the asylum records spelled it out.

Henry suffered from hallucinations. He believed he was being persecuted and tortured. He thought there was an apparatus in the wall pouring "injurious vapors" into his head, causing headaches. He believed he could hear people gliding suspiciously in the corridor outside his suite.

The doctor noted two more things: Mr. Rathbone declined to discuss his late wife, Clara, whom he had murdered in 1883 in the German apartment in which they were living during a European tour. And he would not talk about the assassination of President Abraham Lincoln.

These two events, many years and an ocean apart, seemed unrelated. The doctor was unsure that they were connected. But Henry R. Rathbone's friends and relatives had long been convinced that they were most certainly and fatefully linked.

In 1865, then-Army Maj. Rathbone and his fiancée, Clara H. Harris, were in the presidential box in Ford's Theatre when John Wilkes Booth crept in and shot Lincoln. The major grappled briefly with Booth, who stabbed him with a knife and escaped.

It was a scene quickly memorialized in heroic prints and lore around the country: The assassin leaping from the balcony. Rathbone reaching for him, eternally in vain, crying, "Stop that man!" Clara's scream: "The president is shot!"

The couple married two years later and had three children. But Rathbone, by most accounts, was never the same. On Christmas Eve, 1883, following a long deterioration, he attacked his wife with a pistol and dagger and then slashed himself, just as Booth had done to Lincoln and Rathbone. Rathbone barely survived and afterward contended that the attack had been conducted by someone else. He said he was injured trying to intervene.

The story made headlines in Washington, where the couple and their children lived on Lafayette Square, and in New York, where their families were among Albany's finest.

But it soon faded from the papers and now is but a haunting footnote to the Lincoln assassination, whose 144th anniversary this month comes during the bicentennial year of the 16th president's birth.

With all that has been written about Lincoln -- an estimated 16,000 books -- little has been said about the Rathbone tragedy, as it was known in its day. Aside from a novel about the couple published 15 years ago, the case is mentioned only in passing. Indeed, for three decades an erroneously identified photograph of Clara Harris hung unchallenged at Ford's Theatre, until it was finally pointed out by a Gaithersburg antiquarian, William Hallam Webber, and was taken down in 1999.

It may be that the story of Henry and Clara lacks the heroic romance of Lincoln and the Civil War. There is no martyrdom. No glorious farewell. No monuments to their memory. There is, instead, the specter of mental illness, and even the possibility that the trauma of the assassination might have had nothing to do with Clara's slaying.

On its face, it is a tale of two survivors, as the novelist Thomas Mallon, put it: the man who failed to stop Booth and the devoted woman who had to live with him. But it is also the story of a couple's struggle with insanity. There's no detailed account of how Henry and Clara coped with his illness, or what Clara felt as she watched his frightening descent. Their story must be pieced together.

In the summer of 1891, after Rosenbach finished his examination, which was part of Henry's application for a military pension, he wrote a report. A translation resides in the National Archives. Rathbone was suffering with "delusions of persecution," the doctor believed. His condition was incurable, and Rosenbach concluded: "The cause of his disease is not known."

At 8:20 on the damp, chilly night of April 14, 1865, Abraham and Mary Lincoln pulled up in their big black carriage outside the home of New York Sen. Ira Harris, just off Lafayette Square. They were headed to a performance at Ford's Theatre and had stopped to pick up their guests.

Official Washington was then a small community. The president lived across the street from the square. Secretary of State William H. Seward lived on the east side of the square. Secretary of the Navy Gideon Welles lived on the north side. And Sen. Harris lived at 15th and H streets, a block away.

Harris, a former judge, had come to Washington in 1861, when he gained the New York Senate seat vacated by Seward. He brought with him an unusual family. His first wife had died, and he had married a widow, Pauline Rathbone. Both were members of Albany's most illustrious families.

The senator's family included a son, William, and three daughters, Clara, Amanda and Louise. Pauline had two sons, Henry and Jared. The couple had married around 1848, and their children had virtually grown up together.

Clara was now 30, a cultured, self-assured woman who moved in the highest Washington social groups. She had become an intimate friend of the first lady, Mary Todd Lincoln, with whom she often attended the theater, and was a familiar guest at the White House. Henry was 27, an intense-looking young man with receding, wavy auburn hair, mutton chops and a desk job in the Army.

And although in their youth he had essentially been her little brother, they planned to be married.

Going to war had been a difficult change for Henry. He had been to college and had studied law, and he spoke French. His late father had been the mayor of Albany and left behind a fortune when he died.

With the outbreak of hostilities, Henry became an officer in the 12th U.S. Infantry. He fought in the battles southeast of Richmond in the spring of 1862. That September, he commanded a company at the Battle of Antietam, outside Sharpsburg, Md. In December, he was at the Battle of Fredericksburg, a bloody defeat for Union forces.

At one point, he and his stepbrother, William, landed on the staff of Gen. Ambrose E. Burnside, who commanded the Union's army at Fredericksburg.

Records don't indicate that Henry was ever in the thick of combat. But they do show the toll the war took on him.

"His bodily health, never robust, suffered impairment from ... fever in 1862," his Washington doctor, G.W. Pope, wrote. Henry was sick for two months that summer.

In the winter of 1863-64 he was sick again, suffering from a malaria-like illness.

He returned to the Army against the doctor's advice and was sick again later in 1864. Once again, he returned to duty, despite his physician's advice that he seek an easier job in the service.

"I felt satisfied that these repeated attacks of a wasting and debilitating disease were likely to permanently injure your constitution," the doctor, Henry D. Paine, wrote to him later. Rathbone must have taken the advice, because by April of 1865, and probably earlier, he was working in Washington.

Clara, meanwhile, had been close friends with the 46-year-old first lady since the Harris family's arrival in the capital in 1861. "We have been constantly in the habit of driving and going to the opera and theater together," Clara wrote later.

In April of 1865, with the war essentially over, Washington was in a state of jubilation. On April 13 -- four days after Confederate Gen. Robert E. Lee's surrender at Appomattox -- Washington saw what was called "the grand illumination." There were fireworks, bonfires, gaslight designs and torchlight parades, and the streets were thronged with revelers.

Clara was invited to the White House one night earlier that week and stood with the first lady to watch the president speak from a window to a cheering crowd outside. "After the speech was over, we went into Mr. Lincoln's room," Clara later wrote. "He was lying on the sofa, quite exhausted but he talked of the events of the past fortnight . . . and Mrs Lincoln declared the last few days to have been the happiest of her life."

April 14 was Good Friday, a solemn day, but with the agony of the war finally over, the Lincolns wanted to enjoy themselves. There was a comedy called "Our American Cousin" at Ford's Theatre, and the first couple decided to go. But they wanted company.

They originally invited the man of the hour: Union Gen. Ulysses S. Grant, who had just accepted Lee's surrender. But the general's wife, Julia, and Mary Lincoln did not get along, and the Grants had planned to visit their children in New Jersey.

The invitation went instead to Henry and Clara. They were waiting at the senator's home, where they lived, when the presidential carriage arrived. Despite the night chill, Clara recalled, the Lincolns were "in the gayest of spirits."

The play had started when the foursome arrived. But the performance stopped when the president entered. The audience stood and cheered, and the orchestra played "Hail to the Chief." The entourage made its way to the presidential box. The president took a seat in a cushioned rocking chair near the door. His wife sat in a chair to his right. Rathbone sat on an ornate, upholstered walnut sofa near the back of the box. Clara was in a chair to his right. At one point the president reached over and held his wife's hand. She joked: "What will Miss Harris think of my hanging on to you so?"

At 10:13 p.m., during Act 3, Scene 2, Booth slipped in through the door just as actor Harry Hawk delivered the comic line, "you sockdologizing old man-trap," down on the stage. The gunshot mingled with the laughter. The major turned and saw Booth through the gun smoke.

Booth yelled something like, "Freedom!"

"I instantly sprang toward him, and seized him," the major said later. "He wrested himself from my grasp."

In addition to his derringer, Booth also carried a kind of Bowie knife that he now plunged toward the major. "I parried the blow by striking it up," Rathbone said. But the blade cut into the inside of his left arm near his armpit. It pierced his biceps and grazed the bone a fraction of an inch from two major blood vessels.

The major recoiled, but then reached for Booth again, grasping only a piece of his clothing before the assassin vanished over the railing.

"Stop that man!" Rathbone yelled.

From the stage, Booth shouted: "Sic semper tyrannis!"

The box was now in chaos. Lincoln, with a gunshot wound to the back of his head, sat slumped in his chair, eyes closed. Clara screamed: "The president is shot!" Blood was everywhere -- most of it from Rathbone's stab wound. It soaked Clara's dress, and streaked her hands and face.

Rathbone struggled to open a door to the box that Booth had wedged closed with a piece of a music stand. In rushed doctors and soldiers. Mary Lincoln was hysterical as the physicians laid the president on the floor.

The doctors decided that Lincoln was too badly wounded to be transported to the White House. Instead, they had him carried to a boardinghouse across the street. He was laid on a bed in a back room, and the death vigil began. Henry and Clara helped Mary Lincoln across the street.

The first lady was overwhelmed. She would shriek every time she noticed Clara's dress, "Oh! My husband's blood," although the blood was more likely Henry's.

Shortly after they arrived at the boardinghouse, Henry passed out and was taken to the senator's house. It's not clear how long Clara stayed with the first lady, but G.W. Pope later remembered that Clara was at home when he was called to the Harris house that night to tend to Henry.

Henry lay stripped of his clothes and as pale as a corpse, Pope recalled. He had lost a lot of blood and was delirious. He raved that the president had been shot: "God in heaven, save him!" Clara was calm, bringing water, towels and bandages as an Army surgeon, who had also been called, stitched up Henry's wound.

"Clara Harris was a young lady of remarkable courage," Pope remembered, with a "presence of mind in many emergencies, as I had known."

A few weeks later, Clara posed for photographer Mathew B. Brady, reportedly in the dress she wore the night of the assassination. She told a friend she was trying not to think about the assassination. "But I really cannot fix my mind on anything else," she wrote.

Seventeen years later, on a day in November, Henry Rathbone walked into the Albany office of his wife's uncle, Hamilton Harris, with whom he had studied law as a young man. He was now the picture of prosperity, with his top hats, pinkie ring and ornamental walking canes. He was about to embark on another of his regular trips to Europe with his family -- traveling on one of the most modern steamships afloat.

But Henry was ill. Harris asked him what was wrong. Henry claimed that he was suffering from dyspepsia, a chronic stomach ailment that historians say was then linked to so-called "nervous" disorders. "He described to me in a vivid way," Harris would remember, "all the horrors of that disease."

It was late fall of 1882. Henry was 45. He had recovered from his stab wound, stayed in the Army, and, in 1867, he and Clara were finally married. They moved into an elegant 22-room home on the west side of Lafayette Square. They had three children -- the eldest born on Lincoln's birthday in 1870.

Yet Henry was plagued by mysterious medical problems. During 1869 and again in 1870 he was treated for what a doctor described as "attacks of neuralgia of the head and face and in the region of the heart attended by palpitations and at times difficulty breathing." In December 1870, Henry abruptly retired from the Army.

Despite his ailments, he still had connections and money. And although he did not need to work, in 1877 his friends and relatives peppered the new administration of President Rutherford B. Hayes with pleas that Henry get the State Department post of charge d' affaires in Denmark.

Two dozen letters came in from a host of backers. Civil War hero Gen. William T. Sherman, then commander of the U.S. Army, wrote. So did the famous admiral, David D. Porter, on behalf of "my esteemed friend." Rathbone's old Civil War commander, Burnside, praised his gallantry and intelligence, adding, "I have a great interest in his welfare and advancement."

Yet most of the correspondence is curious for what it does not say about Henry -- the one thing he might have been most known for. Of all the letters, only two mention his role at Ford's Theatre. Had people forgotten? Was it inappropriate to mention? Was it unwise?

Despite the effort, he didn't get the job.

There's no account of Henry's reaction, but his friends would tell the newspapers that over the next few years, he turned increasingly volatile. He became obsessed with the notion that Clara was going to leave him and take the children.

She was 48, and had wealth of her own. She was charming and elegant, and in photographs from around that time, she has a delicate face and a look of serenity. But her life with Henry must have been anguished, as he grew more estranged and hostile.

Shortly after his Albany visit, Henry, Clara, her sister Louise and the children, Harry, 13, Gerald, 12, and Pauline, 10, sailed from New York aboard the steamship Werra, bound for Germany. One story had it that Clara agreed to go only after Louise said she would go, too.

By December of 1883, according to a local German newspaper of the time, the five of them, along with a governess, had been living in an apartment on Heinrichstrasse in Hanover for about seven months.

Henry had become even more depressed and erratic, people would recall later. He was pale and thin, and said he was afraid of himself. He had hallucinations. His relationship with Clara had grown even more tense. He was said to be so fearful that she would leave him that he would not allow her to sit by the window or be alone. He begged her to stay with him, and around this same time, he bought a revolver.

According to most accounts, before dawn on Christmas Eve, Henry either entered or tried to enter the room where the children were sleeping. Clara, alarmed that he might harm them, maneuvered him back to the master bedroom and closed the door. There, Henry shot her several times with the gun and stabbed her in the chest with a knife, which he then turned on himself.

Hon A.A. Sargent,

US Envoy Extraordinary etc. etc.

Sir:

The Vice Consul of this district . . . informs me . . . that a terrible tragedy had occurred in the American colony in Hanover. Col. H.C. Rathbone of Washington D.C. in a fit of insanity killed his wife and wounded himself, it is thought mortally. I am at present in possession of no further particulars . . .

I am sir your obt servt

Williams C. Fox

US Consul

The note was dated Dec. 25, 1883, and was sent from the U.S. consul in Brunswick, Germany, to the chief American minister in Berlin. Word quickly spread to the United States, where it was sensational, front-page news. "COLONEL RATHBONE'S MANIA," the New York Tribune blared. Reporters tracked down Henry's Washington lawyer, doctor G.W. Pope, Hamilton Harris and others. Many believed Henry had never recovered from Ford's Theatre and had a kind of Civil War post-traumatic stress syndrome. "The scene always haunted his mind," his lawyer told the Washington Star.

Pope said: "He never was thoroughly himself after that night . . . I have no hesitation in affirming that the dreaded tragedy, which preyed upon his nervous and impressionable temperament for many years, laid the seeds of that homicidal mania."

Louise took charge of the children and moved them into a hotel. Her brother, William, who had served with Henry during the war, arrived from his home in Cleveland. Clara was buried Dec. 28 in a plot in the city's ornate Engesohde cemetery. Louise, William and the children returned to the United States on Feb. 4.

Consul Fox, meanwhile, visited Henry in the hospital. "He is hopelessly insane," Fox reported. "He is suffering from the worst form of Melancholia and imagines that everyone is conspiring against him. He realizes fully what he has done and says that it is the result of a conspiracy."

The German authorities realized Henry was mentally ill and could not be prosecuted. After he recovered from his wounds, he was sent in April to the Provincial Insane Asylum at the former monastery. There he would live for the rest of his life.

In January of 1911, a reporter working for The Washington Post visited Rathbone at the monastery and related that his suite was like a hotel's, with its own dining room and library. Rathbone was then 73 and still looked like a man of refinement. But his doctor said that he remained very sick. He scarcely ate, was chronically paranoid and still was tormented by hallucinations. He did not have many visitors.

Henry Rathbone died at 2:15 a.m. on Aug. 14, 1911. It's not clear what finally killed him, or what illness he'd had all that time. Was it post-traumatic stress, linked to the assassination? Or something else? Today, psychiatrists and historians say his symptoms suggest that he might have been suffering from schizophrenia or post-traumatic stress disorder. Brief obituaries ran in the papers. One headline said: "Old Soldier Had Become Mentally Deranged."

On Nov. 20, he was buried with his wife. There was likely no fanfare. And their epitaph, if any, has been lost. Many years later, the cemetery declared the graves abandoned and made the plot available for reuse. No one knows what happened to their remains.

Among Henry's survivors was his eldest son, Henry Riggs Rathbone, the Lincoln birthday baby. He was a 41-year-old lawyer in Chicago and would shortly become a member of the U.S. Congress

The younger Rathbone soon became known for his devotion to the memory of Lincoln and often was a keynote speaker at Lincoln birthday events. According to the newspapers, he also spoke at Civil War commemorations, lauding the deeds of his parents' generation, reciting the Gettysburg Address, even delivering a talk he titled "Lincoln's Last Day."

He often told of his parents' presence at Ford's Theatre, and no doubt, of the invitation, the carriage ride and the innocent witnesses to the greatest tragedy of their time. Records do not show that he ever mentioned what befell them later.