

The Washington Post

The exhumed skull of a would-be assassin, and its long journey home.



The skull of Lewis Powell, who was hung in Washington in 1865 for his involvement in the conspiracy to assassinate Abraham Lincoln, is shown in this photo from 1992. (Courtesy of Betty Ownsbey)

By [Michael E. Ruane](#) July 4

In January 1992, Virginia historian Betty Ownsbey got a call from a friend. She asked if she was sitting down. Ownsbey feared bad news, but her friend said the word, from the grapevine of Lincoln assassination buffs, was exciting: “They found Lewis Powell.”

“Where?” Ownsbey said.

“He’s in the Smithsonian,” her friend replied.

At least his skull was.

The notorious Lewis Thornton Powell was hanged in Washington in 1865 for his involvement with John Wilkes Booth in the conspiracy to assassinate President Abraham Lincoln. Powell's role had been to kill Secretary of State William H. Seward, and he nearly succeeded, stabbing Seward in his home, as Booth was shooting Lincoln in Ford's Theatre on April 14, 1865.

[\[Lincoln's assassination in three acts\]](#)

Powell, 21, and three others were executed at what is now Fort McNair on July 7. But over the succeeding 127 years, the final location of his remains had become a mystery.

In 1865, the body of the 6-foot-2 Powell was squeezed into one of the wooden gun crates prepared as coffins for the condemned and was buried with the others beside the gallows outside a federal penitentiary in Southwest Washington.

A small fence was erected around the plot, and the graves of the four were marked with wooden headboards, said Owsbey, who has written a biography of Powell.

In 1867, the four were secretly exhumed and reburied beneath the floor of a penitentiary warehouse, where the body of Booth had already been laid to rest.

In 1869, the government released the bodies to the families, and all but Powell's were claimed.

Some years later, it was exhumed and eventually moved to the old Holmead Cemetery, in Dupont Circle, by Washington funeral director Joseph Gawler, according to a news account.

On Dec. 16, 1884, Gawler dug up Powell again, because Holmead was closed and being emptied.

At some point, Owsbey said in an interview, Gawler took Powell's skull and gave it to the U.S. Army Medical Museum in the District.

A museum logbook shows that the skull arrived there on Jan.13, 1885.

It became specimen number 2244, "skull of a white male," the log states. The entry continues: "P-. Hung at Washington D.C. for the attempted assassination of Secretary of State W.H. Seward, in April 1865."

The museum, which was then located in Ford's Theatre, already had a section of Booth's spine. Perhaps Gawler believed Powell's skull belonged there, too, Owsbey said.

The rest of Powell, along with hundreds of other residents of Holmead, was relocated to Rock Creek Cemetery in Northwest Washington.

On May 3, 1898, the Army Medical Museum gave its collections of 2,206 skulls to the Smithsonian, saying they belonged more to the study of anthropology than medicine.

Among the skulls was Powell's, according to the Smithsonian.

[\[Four people were hanged for Lincoln's assassination — and it was caught on camera\]](#)

Almost 100 years passed.

In 1992, as the Smithsonian was examining skulls for possible repatriation to Indian tribes, it came upon one that had the number 2244 written on its forehead.

Its catalogue file read: “Cranium of L. Payne, hung at Washington DC for the attempted assassination of Secretary of State, W.H. Seward, in 1865.” Payne was an alias that Powell often used.

Experts noticed that the skull bore evidence of a broken jaw. Owsbey knew that Powell had been kicked in the face by a mule when he was a child.

In 1994, the skull was turned over to Powell’s family descendants and buried beside his mother in Geneva, Fla.

“I provided the coffin,” said Owsbey, who attended the burial. “It was very nicely done.”

