

Was the Union Cavalry's Captain Obadiah Jackson Downing "One of Five" Who Carried Lincoln's Dying Body?

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Colonel Obadiah Jackson Downing made the following claim in a written statement:

"I witnessed the assassination of President Lincoln. Colonel Cook and I took some captured flags to Washington, and, attended Fords Theater on that memorable night. I was one of five who helped carry body across the street."

Although that statement can be neither proven nor disproven at this point, there is still good reason to believe this Civil War hero of Brandy Station and other major battles. Official records tell his story, which is much abbreviated here.

On December 10, 1862, O.J. Downing mustered into Company H, Second New York Cavalry ("Harris Light Cavalry") at age 26. On August 19, 1862, he was commissioned a Second Lieutenant. On December 10, 1862, he was promoted to Captain and given command of Company B. Capt. Downing fought in about 130 Civil War battles or skirmishes, including Manassus (March 10-16, 1862), Fredericksburg (December 12-15, 1862), and Gettysburgh, PA (July 1-3, 1863). He was a true hero of several battles in the vicinity of Brandy Station, Virginia (October 2-12, 1863), where occurred the largest cavalry battle ever fought in the Western Hemisphere (15,000 mounted Union and Confederate soldiers, plus infantry). He was cited for valor in several field communiques to Headquarters of the Union's Cavalry Corps.

On May 13, 1864, he was reported captured during General Sheridan's raid on Richmond. After his release, he returned to the 2nd New York Cavalry regiment on April 10, 1865—four days before Lincoln's assassination at Ford's Theatre. The "Harris Light" was under General George A. Custer's command near Appomattox Courthouse, where General Lee had surrendered to General Grant on April 9th. Capt. Downing had been made Custer's Aide-de-Camp.

On April 14, 1865, Downing witnessed Lincoln's assassination at Ford's Theatre. Although his claim that he helped carry the dying President's body to Petersen House cannot be proven beyond a shadow of a doubt, information collected from the following sources lends reasonable credibility to his claim:

- a. The Site Manager and Curator of Ford's Theatre (in 2005), who reviewed their files of about 100 eyewitness accounts, singled out those who claimed to have helped carry Lincoln from the theater, and recorded much of the information shown in the attached spreadsheet, of which they now have a copy. (I added several names that were not on their list.)
- b. *Blood on the Moon: The Assassination of Abraham Lincoln*, by Edward Steers, Jr.
- c. *We Saw Lincoln Shot*, a compendium of eyewitness accounts by Timothy S. Good
- d. *American Brutus*, book about John Wilkes Booth by Michael W. Kauffman
- e. Dr. Leale's Address, Delivered Before the Commandery of the State of New York, Military Order of the Loyal Legion of the United States, at the regular meeting, February 1909, City of New York
- f. A number of newspaper articles (a very significant one quoted below)
- g. Mentions in two history books on Lee County, Illinois
- h. The Lincoln Library in Springfield, Illinois
and
- i. Various other sources, including the authors of the three books mentioned above.

Again, it must be acknowledged that no one is—or ever can be—absolutely sure who helped three doctors carry Lincoln’s dying body from Ford’s Theatre to Petersen House (the boarding house across the street), where he died at 7:20 the next morning. This is partly because there are conflicting accounts. In his book, *Blood on the Moon: The Assassination of Abraham Lincoln* (2001), Dr. Edward Steers summarizes a number of eyewitnesses’ statements. He recounts that Dr. Charles A. Leale, a twenty-three-year-old Army surgeon, was most probably the first doctor to enter Lincoln’s balcony box and make a diagnosis. Doctors Taft and King quickly joined him. Steers quotes Leale: “We decided that the President could now be moved. . . . To assist in this duty I assigned Dr. Taft to carry his right shoulder, Dr. King to carry his left shoulder and detailed a sufficient number of others, whose names I have never discovered, to assist in carrying the body, while I carried the head going first.” [This quote is from the above-mentioned public address by Dr. Leale, who is considered by most historians to be the most reliable eyewitness.]

According to Steers, the “others” whose names Leale never discovered were [may have been] four soldiers from Thompson’s Battery C, Independent Pennsylvania Artillery. Steers said the following: “Stationed at Camp Barry on the outskirts of the city, the four soldiers decided to visit the city and take in a play. Their names were Jacob J. Soles, John Corey, Jake Griffiths, and William Sample. With the three doctors at the head and shoulder area, the four soldiers gently picked up the president’s torso and legs. . . . With Leale in the lead, the body of President Lincoln was ‘borne on loving hands’ through the balcony area to the lobby stairs. At this point they were joined by two soldiers who had been helping to manage the large crowd of stunned people filling the dress circle. Years later they would step forward and add their names to those of their four comrades. They were William McPeck and John Weaver.”

According to the staff at Ford’s Theatre, around 20 people have claimed to be among those who helped carry Lincoln. [See the **attached two-page spreadsheet**, which lists names, dates, etc.] What can be proven?

Almost certainly Doctors Leale, Taft, and King were involved. But other historians question whether Soles, Corey, Griffiths, and Sample actually were. In his book, *We Saw Lincoln Shot: One Hundred Eyewitness Accounts*, Timothy S. Good states the following: “Jacob Soles and his three friends . . . are often mentioned in accounts of the assassination as the bearers of Lincoln’s body. All were members of the same Union army regiment and had attended the theater together. Reck and Bishop [two other historians] both accept Soles’ claim in this regard. Yet the earliest account known that perpetuates Soles’ claim was recorded in 1931, over sixty years after the fact. [In his book, Steers says that the earliest was in 1928.] Furthermore, Soles was the only one of his group to assert that he had helped carry the president’s body. [One other author says that a second man also made the claim.] Bedee, Flood, Greer, and Hazelton are others who claimed to have carried the president, but all of their accounts were given in the same time period as Soles’ and are therefore equally suspect. Thus, although Dr. Leale, Dr. King, Dr. Taft, and Albert Daggett certainly assisted in carrying Lincoln from the theater to the Petersen House, none of the other members of the entourage can be identified with certainty.”

Although a number of sources mention Soles and his comrades, and although I am not even an amateur historian, important pieces of his story do not seem to fit together well with other pieces of the puzzle—such as others’ accounts and several problematic details that, taken together, make up a logical yet circumstantial case against his claim:

First: A Pittsburgh area newspaper has quoted Soles as saying that he and his comrades arrived at the theatre “well after the play had begun” and that they were seated in the rear of the first balcony. He also said that they were seated about 12 to 15 feet away from the President’s box, and that, after they heard the shot, they were “at Lincoln’s side in a second.” Of course, nothing can be said with

certainty, but there are several reasons for questioning these statements: According to Ford's Theatre personnel, the first balcony did have some seats, but three to four times the number of people legally allowed in the balcony were actually standing and "crammed" together. Thus, because Soles and his friends were late, they were very likely not given the more desirable seats in the front, but were probably situated, as Soles stated, in the rear of the balcony, where there was probably only standing room. A floor plan of the first balcony shows that this would have put Soles and his comrades much farther away from the President's box than 12 to 15 feet. And, being farther toward the rear, they probably would have had considerable difficulty getting through other patrons either standing or sitting between them and the box—especially doing so "in a second."

Second: Soles said that he and another soldier held Lincoln down at his feet, while the two other soldiers held him "at his head." There are two major difficulties with these statements:

1. Remember that, in his well-documented statements above, Dr. Leale said that he assigned Dr. Taft to carry the President's right shoulder and Dr. King to carry his left shoulder, and that he himself carried the head going first. So, if we take Leale's word, the "two other men" referred to by Soles could not have been positioned at the President's head.
2. Why, when the President had been shot in the head, would Dr. Leale have ever assigned two soldiers (non-medical personnel) "at the President's head?" It makes no sense. And again, Dr. Leale said that he himself was holding the head and tending to the bleeding wound.

Given the two points above, Dr. Leale's account apparently contradicts Soles' account.

Third: Soles said that six enlisted men carried Lincoln's body. But here are very problematic details that further make his claim somewhat suspect: As stated by Dr. Leale, and as also shown in attached **Figure 1**, Drs. Leale, Taft, and King [and probably Albert Daggett, for a total of 4 men] were already carrying parts of the body. Since Lincoln was 6'4" tall (a total of 76"), and since the "average man" might be as wide as 22-24" (say 22") with arms at the sides, 4 men side by side (on both sides of the body) would take up at least 88" (with no room between them at all), or 12" longer than Lincoln. So, there were probably no more than 3 men on each side of the body. If one considers that a man might be about 21" from his shoulder to his waist, and that the tall President might have been just several inches more, then the two doctors each assigned to carry a shoulder (facing each other across the torso) would have taken up space from Lincoln's shoulder down to about his waist. This means that there were probably two men (facing each other) carrying the body at and below the waist. And that, in turn, could mean that it might have taken only one more person to carry Lincoln's lower legs and feet. Thus, as **Figure 1** shows, it would have been physically impossible for 10 men (Leale, Taft, King, and Daggett, and then Soles, his three companions, and the additional McPeck and Weaver) to have all gotten around Lincoln's body at the same time. Even Soles, his three companions, McPeck, and Weaver could have had some difficulty positioning all six of themselves around Lincoln's body.

Soles probably would not have had direct access to the detailed statements made by Dr. Leale at the Commandery of the State of New York (referenced above). Even so, eyewitness accounts that gave similar details were published in newspapers shortly after April 14, 1865. Many people, including Soles and even O.J. Downing, could have read those accounts and imagined themselves taking a helpful part in this most tragic and momentous event. And many eyewitnesses, perhaps including Soles and his friends, may have thought that they were directly involved because they either cleared or moved out of the way for those transporting Lincoln's body. Perhaps after many years, Soles figured, "Who would ever be able to contradict my claim?"

With accounts being published in newspapers after the assassination, did O. J. Downing read them and figure the same? It's possible, but I prefer not to think so—not only because he was an officer and a war hero, or because I am his great grandson and a retired Navy Captain, but also because of the additional information below. Here's the circumstantial case that I feel I have a right—even an obligation—to make on behalf of my ancestor:

The following is a direct quote from the September 7, **1876** issue of *The Dixon Telegraph*. This earliest published mention that I could find, and the strongest evidence that supports Downing's claim, came about 50 years before Soles' claim was made public in newspapers in 1928 and 1931: "Major Downing and Henry Dement delivered able and patriotic speeches at Harmon last Saturday evening. They were both gallant soldiers all through the war: Captain Dement, in the west, and Major Downing in the east Major Downing happened to be in the theater, at Washington, when President Lincoln was shot by Booth, and assisted in carrying the president to his death bed." Downing's involvement was also mentioned in these two books: *History of Lee County* (Chicago: H. H. Hill and Company, 1881); and *Portrait and Biographical Record of Lee County, Illinois* (Chicago: Biographical Publishing Co., 1892).

The February 11, 1922, the *Dixon Evening Telegraph* gave this account: "It was on the occasion when Mr. Downing, then a Major [no, actually a Captain] in his New York regiment, came to Washington to deliver to the war department the flags that the regiment had captured from the Confederates, that the Dixon man saw the assassination of President Lincoln. Col. Downing and his companion [Col. Edwin F. Cooke, who was then a Major] had completed their mission and were about to return to their command when they learned that Mr. Lincoln and General Grant were to appear at Ford's Theatre that evening. They delayed their departure and secured theater seats that would give them the best possible view of the President's box. They were seated there, close to the stage and in full view of the President and his party when they heard the shot that sent a world into mourning, and saw the assassin, the actor, Booth stand up in view of the horror-stricken audience, shout "Sic Semper Tyrannis" and leap over the railing to the stage. As he jumped, one of the spurs on his riding boots caught in the folds of the American flag draped around the box and threw him on his side. As he made for the wings leading to the exit where his horse awaited his flight, the actor looked back at the President's box and said, 'I have done it.' Colonel Downing was among the first to rush to the aid of the stricken President and was one of five men who carried him from the theater to another building across the street."

In footnote 1 of his book, *American Brutus*, Michael Kauffman mentions O. J. Downing and Col. Cook by name: "Eyewitness biographies are derived from obituaries and Civil War pension files. The former prisoners of war were Obadiah Downing and Edwin Cooke; Downing also took part in the Dahlgren Raid. At least 250 eyewitnesses were combat veterans."

The **attached two-page spreadsheet** illustrates the case for Downing. It shows that he was the sixth earliest individual who claimed to have helped carry Lincoln's body. After Leale, Taft, King, and Daggett, there are Augustus Clark (#5) and O.J. Downing (#6). If Augustus Clark is the same "Willie" Clark whose room and bed were used for the dying President's body, then Augustus Clark could not have helped carry Lincoln—because the room's owner was not there that night and did not return to his room until later the next morning. If Augustus Clark is another individual (as those at Ford's Theatre believe), then his claim that "he heard the commotion and rushed across the street to the theater from the rooming house where he lived" is very dubious. It would have been virtually impossible for someone to cross the street through the forming crowd, get through all the patrons who were streaming out the doors (because the theater manager was emptying the theater), get through the packed lobby, up the stairs, and across the crowded dress circle to Lincoln's box, where there were already enough people available to carry the dying body. Those considerations make O. J. Downing's case stronger than most if not all others', largely because his statements were actually published as early as 1876—many years before others' claims were publicly recorded. The fact that his claim was published very soon after the assassination means that it would have been much easier to disprove it

then than it would be today. In addition, he is one of only two people who mentioned an exact number of people who carried the body. He said five; Soles said six.

The Bottom Line: Given what I have read or heard, but not everything possible, I grant, here is what I believe to be a very likely scenario:

Leale assigned Taft and King to carry Lincoln's shoulders. It is possible that two doctors facing each other were carrying the shoulders, two men facing each other were carrying the waist and upper legs, and one man was carrying the lower legs and feet. Leale may have had Lincoln's head cupped in his hands—and every few minutes would cradle Lincoln's head in one hand while using the other to wipe blood from Lincoln's head (as he said he did). In other words, when Downing said five men carried the body, he may have been referring to two on each side (making four) plus one at the feet. He may not have counted Leale, because Leale was not bearing any significant amount of weight. Could five men have carried Lincoln? Consider this: The President of the United States has just been shot, and there was probably enough adrenalin flowing through those (five?) men's veins that they could have carried Lincoln a greater distance than just across the street—and without needing others to take their places along the way.

However, because nothing can be proven regarding who else besides the doctors might have helped carry Lincoln's body, it must be acknowledged that the descendants of others who claimed they helped also have a right to stand up for "their guy." And regardless of anyone's role, all of these witnesses shared in one of the greatest but saddest moments in history.

On June 5, 1865, the 2nd New York Cavalry was "mustered out" of Custer's 3rd Cavalry Division. On June 23, 1865, Downing and other members of that unit were honorably discharged from the Union Army at Alexandria, VA. On October 4, 1865, he was promoted to Major in the New York State National Guard (6th Brigade, Second Division). On February 18, 1866, Downing was promoted to Brevet Colonel in the New York State Volunteers [not that state's National Guard]. According to Dr. Richard Sommers, Director of the U.S. Army Military History Institute at Carlisle Barracks, PA, this appears to have been an "ex post facto" (after the fact) promotion—which, in effect, would have meant that Capt. Downing might be considered to have been "Colonel Downing" at the end of the war. It certainly entitled him to be addressed as "Colonel" thereafter. [New York State has no longer has promotion records from that time, but there is an official certificate in possession of the Downing family.]

In 1867 Downing left Long Island for Dixon, Illinois, where he became a businessman. He was also involved in the emancipation of slaves, which brought Booker T. Washington to the Downing home for several meetings. On July 6, 1925, Obadiah Jackson Downing passed away at the age of 90.

LIST of People Who Have Claimed They Helped Carry Lincoln From Ford's Theatre

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Information based on: (a) files at Ford's Theatre as of April 2005; (b) Edward Steers' book, *Blood on the Moon*; (c) Timothy S. Good's book, *We Saw Lincoln Shot*, with many eyewitness accounts; (d) Mike Kauffman's book, *American Brutus*; and (e) numerous newspaper articles.

Date		Who	What	Some Details:
4/15/1865	+	Dr. Charles A. Leale 7/20/1867 2/19/1909	Ltr to Gen. Butler, Lib. of Congress. carried Lincoln's head, swabbing blood from it (from Leale's long account in " <i>Lincoln's Last Hours</i> " address in New York City)	In several accounts, Leale is considered most reliable eyewitness; first MD to Lincoln's box; assigned Drs. Taft and King to help carry Lincoln's right and left shoulders.
4/16/1865	+	Dr. Charles Sabin Taft	eyewitness account; mentioned by Dr. Charles A. Leale's account	assigned by Dr. Leale to carry Lincoln's right shoulder
4/15/1865	+	Dr. Albert F. A. King	mentioned in Dr. Charles A. Leale's accounts	assigned by Dr. Leale to carry Lincoln's left shoulder
4/15/1865	+	Albert Daggett , Clerk in Dept of State	letter to mother: (substantiated by Ford's Theater)	"I helped carry the President out and we bore our precious burden into the house of Mr. Peterson, next door to my boarding house where he remained until he died."
4/16/1865 1894 or 7			letter to sister: "recollections"	"I saw the whole of it and helped carry the President into the house..."
4/16/1865	- ?	Augustus Clark, from Peterson house (claim definitely discounted if he is "Willie" Clark)	letter to Uncle, published in <i>New York Times</i> , Nov. 26, 1977	he heard the commotion and rushed across the street to the theatre from the rooming house where he lived. (Hardly possible: would have had to get thru crowds ... in street, streaming out theater doors, in lobby, on the stairs, in dress circle area, and near Lincoln's box.) "Willie" Clark was not at Petersen House when Lincoln's body was taken to his room. He did not return to his room until later the next morning. Source: Ed Steers.)
9/07/1876	+	Capt. Obadiah Jackson Downing (was later a Major and Brevet Colonel in New York National Guard)	<i>Dixon Telegraph</i> , Dixon, IL September 7, 1876 issue	"Major Downing happened to be in the theater, at Washington, when President Lincoln was shot by Booth, and assisted in carrying the president to his deathbed."
1881			<i>History of Lee County (IL) (1881)</i>	"... was present at the theater at the time of the assassination ..."
1892			<i>Portrait and Biographical Record of Lee County, Illinois (1892)</i>	"... and assisted in carrying the dying President to the house across the street."
1914-1930			5 other <i>Dixon Telegraph</i> articles: 4/13/1914; 2/11/1922; obituary of 7/06/1925; 9/22/1930	All mention his being at Ford's Theater and helping to carry Lincoln's body across the street (to Petersen House).
4/13/1925			<i>Sterling Gazette</i> , Sterling, IL signed statement made at age 87 in 1922	"... helped carry the limp form of the great Lincoln out of the theater."
1922			(now in Public Library, Dixon, IL)	"I witnessed the assassination of President Lincoln. Col. Cook and I took some captured flags to Washington and attended Ford's Theatre...I was one of <u>five</u> who helped carry body across the street." (No one else so specific as to the number of people.)

1880's	?	Capt. Edwin Bedee, 12th Reg, N.H. Vols.	N.H. Regimental History	"Bedee was second in box after Dr. Leale. Held Lincoln's hand. Mary Lincoln gave him papers from Lincoln's pockets to hold. Helped carry President to house. Gave Sec. of War Stanton papers from Lincoln's pockets."
12/31/1908	-	Major Isaac Walker McClay (late claim; questionable)	<i>New York Times</i> obituary	"Major McClay with two other officers of the Washington Arsenal attended the theatre, and after the shooting he and his fellow officers carried the President to the Petersen House and placed him on a bed in a rear room."
2/15/1911	-	W.H. Flood personal friend of Lincoln (considered questionable)	death announcement <i>Washington Post</i>	"I took my place at the head of the <u>stretcher</u> , and, with Capt. Owen, walked to the <u>Oldroyd</u> house, where the President breathed his last." (Questionable: Elements of statement not corroborated by some accounts; e.g., Dr. Leale was at Lincoln's head.) (Petersen House later became "Oldroyd House" when sold.)
1922	-	Frederick Johnstone roommate of Albert Daggett in house near Peterson's. (claim late, questionable)	<i>Farm & Fireside Magazine</i>	Looked outside and saw comotion. Went across the street to the theatre, stood at the foot of the stairway where he saw his roommate (and others) carrying the President. His roommate bid him to join in. (Dubious, because difficult if not impossible to get thru crowds both outside and inside theatre.)
2/08/1931	+/-	Jacob J. Soles, Thompson's Battery C Independent Pennsylvania Light Artillery (claim late, questionable; possibly corroborated by Wm. Sample)	<i>Pittsburgh SundayTimes-Telegraph</i> , February 12, 1928; <i>New York Tribune</i> , February 8, 1931	article speaks about this soldier and three others from Thompson' Battery who were at the theatre in seats about 15 feet from the President's box. Names of his companions: Jake Griffiths, John Corey, William Sample. Soles, along with the others, carry Lincoln down the steps inside the theatre where they are joined by "two others" in carrying the President across the street. (Questionable: Were already at least three known--and possibly five--persons carrying Lincoln. Six more positioned around body would be physically impossible.)
Others:				
?		William McPeck		
?		John Weaver		
?		_____ Hazelton		
?		Capt. Owen	mentioned by W.H. Flood (above)	
3/14/1900		Capt. John Sears	newspaper article	considered a dubious claim
3/14/1900		Capt. John Busby	newspaper article	considered a dubious claim
2/05/1909		Capt. Oliver C. Gatch	newspaper article	considered a dubious claim (brother made claim on his behalf)
1914		_____ Greer		

FIGURE 1: Possible People Positioned Around Lincoln's Body

[All squares are 1 inch wide.]

