

Guarding the Lincoln Conspirators

BY MEMBER ED ISAACS

My family's history became important to me after my father died in 1990. While learning about my family tree, I made many discoveries. I learned three of my ancestors served the nation during the Revolutionary War, and two served in the Civil War. I happened to have a photo of my great-great-grandfather, George E. Dixon, a Civil War veteran, so I decided to do research about his experiences during arguably the greatest crisis in American history.

George was born in Pound Ridge, N.Y., on Dec. 2, 1834. He enlisted as a private in the 172nd Infantry Regiment New York at age 27 on Sept. 6, 1862, following in the footsteps of his paternal and maternal grandfathers, Amos Dixon and John Saunders, both of whom fought for their country in the Revolutionary War. He was transferred to Company M, 6th Regiment New York Heavy Artillery on Dec. 4, 1862, and then was transferred a year later to Company A. George saw action in many battles in Virginia during Gen. Ulysses S. Grant's campaign in the East—among them the Wilderness, Spotsylvania, Cold Harbor, Bethesda Church, and Petersburg—fighting in seven engagements over a six-week period at one point. Amazingly he survived, but because of injuries he suffered at Bethesda Church (musket shot from his hands) and Petersburg (shot in the right arm), he was transferred to the Veteran's Reserve Corps (VRC) 14th Regiment Company C in January 1865. This regiment, I soon discovered, was in charge of guarding the Lincoln conspirators during their trial and execution.

Up to this point, gathering information on George had been fairly easy because of the resources handed down from my father. Now, however, I was stumped. Through a genealogy website, however, I was able to contact a distant cousin who, I learned, had our great-great-grandfather's Civil War diary. My cousin thought the diary should be closer to the family roots in New York, so she sent it to me.

One page immediately got my attention. On page 27, George listed the names of the Lincoln conspirators to be hanged on July 7, 1865, along with the names of the guards, executioners, and prisoner cell numbers. This is the first known documentation found to list the names of the guards and their duties guarding the



Above: Member Ed Isaacs, left, with Phil and Linda Anderson of Fairfield, Conn., and a collection of Lincoln assassination-conspiracy memorabilia at the Rowayton, Conn., Historical Society. **Left:** Isaac's great-great-grandfather's Civil War diary, which contained the names of the conspirators, their prison guards, executioners, and other details of the incident.

prisoners. It reveals that the condemned were moved to cells on the first floor where two guards each were stationed for duty, while the prisoners spared from the gallows were assigned one guard each. And it was documented in the handwriting of my great-great-grandfather.

Shortly before the execution, George E. Dixon was promoted to sergeant and a few months later he was honorably discharged. In his discharge papers he was described as "a good and faithful soldier." Following the war, George became a stagecoach driver. He died in 1925 at age 90, one of the oldest members of the local post of the Grand Army of the Republic veterans' organization.

Member ED ISAACS is from Norwalk, Conn.