

# A history of ford's theatre essay sample



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Where Lincoln's Legacy Lives: A History of Ford's Theatre When the site of Ford's Theatre first started being used for theatrical performances in 1861, it was never expected to leave such a huge mark on American history. The location for the Ford's Theatre has had a very diverse history. This location has a well-known history dating back to 1833 when it was built as the First Baptist Church of Washington, also known as the Tenth Street Baptist Church. The reason for the two names was common in that area to differentiate it from other local churches. This First Baptist Church was fairly large and merged with the Fourth Baptist church in 1859 to grow to an even larger congregation. At this point, the location became empty for two years. In 1861, this location started its history at a theatre when it was bought by John T. Ford who was a theatre manager from Baltimore. Ford was married to Edith Branch Andrew Ford who was mother to his eleven children, many of whom became actively involved in the theatre. He started off as a clerk in a tobacco warehouse before quickly deciding that it wasn't the job for him. He became a bookseller in Richmond for many years before starting writing. Ford had written *Richmond As It is* which led to him working for a minstrel company and really began his interest in theatre.

He managed theatre in various cities including Alexandria, Charleston, and Philadelphia. He became quite a prominent figure in the theatrical community ("The Obituary Record"). When Ford first obtained the vacant First Baptist Church, he leased out the building on a five year contract with an option to buy it at the end of that period. After he acquired the building, he right away turned around and rented it out to George Christy to perform with a group of minstrels. As it was still unnamed at this point in time, it was

simply promoted as " The George Christy Opera House." During his time there, Christy left the building the same so it just appeared as a church, both on the interior and exterior. The seating also remains the same during this time, with the church pews and the single balcony. On February 28 of 1862, Ford closes the theatre for a little under a month to remodel the interior of the building so that it can better hold theatrical and musical productions. He spent more than \$10, 000 to improve the building for theatrical purposes. When it opens back up on March 19, Ford names it " Ford's Athenaeum."

The athenaeum quickly becomes very popular and has a consistent customer basis, quickly bringing in proceeds. On December 30 of the same year, the original church's exterior is destroyed by a fire due to a defective gas meter. No one was injured but it caused \$20, 000 worth of damage to the building. Due to the damages, in 1863 John T. Ford goes ahead and builds a new theatre. This theatre was called " Ford's New Theatre." The grand opening for this building took place on August 27, 1863 with a sold-out performance of The Naiad Queen. (" Ford's Theatre" NPS) This new building once again rapidly becomes very popular. In November, President Abraham Lincoln attended a performance of The Marble Heart at Ford's New Theatre. In this show of The Marble Heart, John Wilkes Booth starred playing the role of Raphael, the villain. Lincoln actually attended the theatre another seven times over the next couple of years. Throughout 1864, Ford continued to restore the building, especially over the summer, to bring the theatre back to some of the former glory of the intricate structure. Over the year, he worked to hire a crew and respectable actors full time as he managed the property.

The theatre became more of an official theatre throughout all of these processes and rebuilding. During this time, the theatre constantly stayed busy and produced a high amount of income from the shows. The shows that brought in the most proceeds were shows that held highly known actors of the time, such as John Wilkes Booth. Booth was a well-loved actor of the time with an absolutely fantastic career and skill. Though Booth only performed at Ford's New Theatre one other time, he was well-known by the owner and other theatre members due to his work in other theatres. By some coincidence, Lincoln happened to see Booth perform in New York as he was still running for president. At this point, Booth was playing Duke Pescara in *The Apostate* at the Gayety Theatre. This is the same role that Booth played in the last appearance of his career which took place at Ford's Theatre on March 18, 1865. A little under a month later on April 14, President Lincoln, his wife Mary, and their guests attended the Ford's Theatre to see a performance of *Our American Cousin*. James Ford - John's brother - was in charge of theatre for this night while John was out of town. During intermission of this show, Lincoln's bodyguard left momentarily and didn't return for Act 3.

Before the start of the third act, John Wilkes Booth entered Lincoln's box to wait. Since Booth knew the play well, he waited for a line that normally brought about a lot of laughter to muffle the shot. At the beginning of Act 3 Scene 2, Booth shot Lincoln in the back of the head; a wound that Lincoln ends up succumbing to the next morning. ("Ford's Theatre" NPS) After the assassination, John T. Ford was pulled into question for conspiracy against Abraham Lincoln. He was thrown into jail over this time while the questioning

was completed and law enforcement could figure out what had really happened. During this time, his theatre was put into the possession of the federal government and Ford had to obtain official permission to re-open the theatre once again, after the hanging of the conspirators on July 7. During this time, troops were consistently placed around the building to avoid any problems. The theatre was set to re-open and premiere *The Octoroon* on July 10, 1965 - that day Ford received a letter threatening to burn the theatre if he attempted to start running productions again. The theatre was forced to shut down.

Soon afterwards, the building was taken over by the government and turned into an office building. Until they could work through a settlement, the government paid a lease to Ford every month for use of the building. In July of 1866, Congress paid John T. Ford \$88, 000 for the purchase of the structure. After Congress took control of the building, it was converted into an office building for use by the government. The building held the Army Medical Museum, the Office of the Surgeon General, and the War Department. On June 9, 1893, the building faced yet another disaster. A section of the building simply collapsed killing twenty-two government employees and injuring another sixty-five. The cause of the collapse came from the building being overloaded from the office materials. It did not help that the contractor was excavating with improper support. It was soon decided that the building was incapable of being used as offices due to the weight of the materials. The location then stayed closed for many years due to the damage and lack of funds to fix the building. It remained in use as a

place of storage until 1931 when it was turned over to the Department of the Interior.

They took care of the building and restored as much of the original structure as possible. At this point, it was designed to become the "Lincoln Museum" and between 1931 and 1933 the first floor of the building was open to the public. As much information and material as possible on the Lincoln assassination was provided for the museum. On June 10, 1933, the building was transferred to the National Park Service, which it remains associated with today. In January of 1968, Ford's Theatre was officially reopened as a working theatre and a National Historic Site. The building continued to be known as Ford's Theatre and as much of the building as possible was restored. A dedication ceremony was presented at this point to honor this historic landmark; this ceremony and following gala was attended by a number of well-known celebrities. A month later, the theatre was opened to the general public. In April, they performed a production of *She Stoops to Conquer*, marking the first show in this theatre in over a hundred years. The theatre continued to be open as a working theatre until 2007 when it closed for renovations and restoration.

These renovations took approximately a year and a half to complete. These new renovations to the theatre made improvements to the heating and air, as well as modern lighting and sound systems for the theatre. At this point, they also upgraded the museum with more artifacts and information about Lincoln, his life, and his assassination. The renovations also covered a new lobby, new restrooms, and an addition of an elevator to make the building more accessible. These renovations were completed in February of 2009 and

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the theatre was once more re-opened. At this point, Ford's Theatre held a gala for the opening that was once again attended by numerous celebrities as well as President Obama. In July, the Ford's Theatre Museum opened to the public. The renovations on the museum included new seats, modern sound and lighting systems, renovated restrooms, and enhanced accessibility with elevators. A new lobby with a concession stand and a board room for special events were also built. In honor of the Lincoln Bicentennial, Ford's Theatre produced the world premiere of *The Heavens Are Hung in Black*, a play by James Still that chronicled Abraham Lincoln's presidency during a time of personal and professional crisis. In February 2012, Ford's Theatre opened the new Center for Education and Leadership, where visitors can discover the lasting effects of Lincoln's presidency.

Two floors of the exhibit address the immediate aftermath of the assassination; it also features funeral artifacts that have never before been displayed for public viewing. A distance-learning lab allows Ford's to engage students and teachers nation wide through the use of state-of-the-art technology. A Leadership Gallery floor is used as a short-term exhibit, lecture, and reception space. This short-term exhibit space will house exhibits pertaining to history and to Lincoln. The opening of the Center completed the Ford's Theatre expansion project to give visitors an enhanced experience on Lincoln's life and legacy.

The productions that fill the Ford Theatre today may echo with drama or laughter, but it will forever be associated with the events of April 14, 1865, when President Abraham Lincoln was assassinated by actor John Wilkes Booth. This location has become well-known and respected because of one

event that defines its history. It started off as a widely attended church and grew to become this theatre that John T. Ford built up from the ground and made it extremely successful for the time. This theatre has become a tribute to Lincoln and his history. It has become a dedication to the assassination and a museum for the surrounding details rather than become an actual theatre again. The Ford's Theatre has a rich history of its own that has become overwhelmed by a single gunshot.

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