“the President is murdered.”
(GLC00368.01)
At noon on Good Friday, April 14, 1865, five days after Robert E. Lee had surrendered at Appomattox, President Abraham Lincoln was shot in the back of the head by John Wilkes Booth while attending a play at Ford’s Theatre in Washington D.C. The next morning “The Great Emancipator” was dead.

For months, Booth had been planning to abduct or kill the president and other leaders in Washington. On the morning of April 14, Booth went to Ford’s Theatre, where he often performed, to pick up his mail. He discovered that Lincoln would attend that night’s performance of “Our American Cousin,” and decided to strike. Returning to the theater that night, the well known actor was admitted into the president’s box by Charles Forbes, the White House footman who was watching the door. The municipal policeman who was supposed to be protecting the president had left the door to enjoy the play. Booth entered, snuck up behind Lincoln’s chair and, at 10:13 p.m., shot him once in the back of the head from two feet away. Booth then jumped down from the president’s box onto the stage and shouted “Sic semper tyrannis” (“Thus always to tyrants”), the Latin motto for the state of Virginia.

Lincoln, unconscious and bleeding badly, was rushed across the street to a nearby house to be cared for in private. Though doctors tended to Lincoln throughout the night, his wound proved fatal. He stopped breathing at 7:22 a.m. on April 15. After the doctors had pronounced the president dead, Stanton, who had been sitting next to Lincoln’s bed, is reported to have stood up and said, “Now he belongs to the ages” (some historians believe the last word was “angels,” others have suggested “sages.”).

At 10:00 p.m., conspirators David Herold and Lewis Payne arrived at the home of Seward. When William Bell, a servant opened the door, Payne told him he had medicine from Dr. Tullio Verdi. Bell refused to let him in, so Payne pushed past him and rushed up the stairs. Frederick Seward, the Secretary of State’s son, came out and asked him what he wanted. Payne hit Seward with his revolver, fracturing the young man’s skull in two places. Payne was now confronted by George Robinson, Seward’s bodyguard. Payne slashed him with a Bowie knife before leaping onto Seward’s bed and repeatedly stabbing him. Payne, thinking he had killed Seward, raced out to Herold, who was waiting with Payne’s horse. Herold escaped to Mary Surratt’s boarding house in Maryland, and then with Booth headed for the deep South. Though initial reports stated that Seward had been killed, he had only been seriously wounded, and eventually recovered.

This letter offers a first hand account of the events of that fateful night as John B. Stonehouse describes how the jubilation surrounding Lee’s surrender was replaced by the assassination of President Lincoln and stabbing of Secretary of State William Seward.

“Just as I was going to bed a man ran in breathless and pale enquiring which of the Theatres the President was attending - he said he must find him at once as Mr. Seward had been murdered in his bed - We followed him to the door and there met people rushing from the Theatre saying “the President is shot-” “the President is murdered.” Such a [struck: scene] time I never before beheld and never want to again.”
times yesterday. I saw the knife the assassin stabbed Mr. Seward with and the pistol with which he broke Mr. Frederick Seward's skull. There is blood and hair sticking to it still. Neither of the men have as yet been caught. I am as well as usual. I glad to hear you are the same. I have been instructed to remain here until further orders. Love to Mama.

Washington
April 14, 1865

Dear Johnny. Since I have been here this time the most exciting times that this country ever saw have taken place. Thursday evening Washington I was crazy with joy over the surrender of Lee. Even one of the Public Buildings was illuminated, and every private house was lighting with candles from top to bottom. The people were wild with excitement. Men, women & children
were all out of doors.

The next evening a grand performance was advertised to be given at Ford's Theatre and it was announced that the President and ladies and Gen. Grant and wife were to be present.

Just as I was going to bed a man ran in breathless and pale enquiring which of the theatres the President was attending — he said he must find him at once as Mr. Seward had been murdered in his bed — we followed him to the door and there met people rushing from the theatre saying the President is shot. "The President is Murdered." Such a time I never before beheld and never want to again.

At first no one seemed to believe it but it soon became certain that it was all true. Just as I got to Ford's Theatre they were carrying the President to a house across the street. He died not move or speak after he was shot. I have been with the keepers a full account of it. I have no doubt if I was at Secretary Seward's house several