



# The Trial: The Assassination of President Lincoln and the Trial of the Conspirators

*Edward Steers Jr.*

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On the night of April 14, 1865, John Wilkes Booth assassinated President Abraham Lincoln in what he envisioned part of a scheme to plunge the federal government into chaos and gain a reprieve for the struggling Confederacy. The plan failed. By April 26, Booth was killed resisting capture and eight of the nine conspirators eventually charged in Lincoln's murder were in custody. Their trial would become one of the most famous and most controversial in U.S. history.

New president Andrew Johnson's executive order on May 1 directed that persons charged with Lincoln's murder stand trial before a military tribunal. The trial lasted more than fifty days, and 366 witnesses gave testimony. Benn Pitman, a recognized expert in phonography, an early form of shorthand, was awarded the government contract to produce a transcription of each day's testimony. Pitman made these transcripts available to the prosecution and the defense, as well as to select members of the press.

Although three versions of the trial testimony were published, Pitman's edited collection was the most accessible. He skillfully winnowed the 4,300 pages of transcription into one volume, collated the testimony by defendant, indexed the testimony by name and date, and added summaries of the testimony.

In *The Trial*, assassination scholars guide readers through all 421 pages of testimony, illuminating Pitman's record. By drawing together the evidence that resulted in the conspirators' convictions, *The Trial* leaves no doubt as to the events surrounding the assassination of Abraham Lincoln, making this book a fascinating account of the trial as well as an essential resource.

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