

Mary Surratt - Deep Thought

Name _____

On July 7, 1865, Mary Surratt became the first woman in American history to be executed. Along with co-conspirators in the Lincoln assassination: Lewis Powell, David Herold, and George Atzerodt, Surratt was hung from the gallows at the Washington Arsenal. John Wilkes Booth, the mastermind behind the plot to murder Lincoln, Secretary of State William H. Seward, and Vice-president Andrew Johnson, had been hunted down and killed on April 26th. Surratt's guilt or knowledge in the plot has long been the subject of intense debate. Did she deserve to die?

What do we know?

We know that Mary Surratt owned a boardinghouse in Washington, D.C., and that she was acquainted with John Wilkes Booth. In addition, in the days before the assassination, Booth gave her a package that contained binoculars and another that contained guns. Surratt delivered these packages to her Maryland boarding house and instructed John Lloyd to prepare the "shooting irons" to be picked up. We also know that Surratt's son, Confederate spy John Surratt Jr., agreed to participate in an earlier plot that Booth devised to kidnap President Lincoln and bring him to Richmond. Mary probably knew her son was a spy, but to what extent she knew of either the plan to kidnap President Lincoln, or assassinate him, remains unclear. Additionally, we know that Lewis Powell, David Herold, and George Atzerodt, all stayed at or visited Surratt's boardinghouse in the days and weeks before the assassination. Finally, we know that Surratt lied to investigators about knowing Lewis Powell, who showed up at her boardinghouse following the assassination while she was being interrogated by investigators. She also told the investigators that her son had been in Canada for two weeks, as he was a focal point of the investigation. Despite her efforts to lie to protect John, he would fail to repay the favor and instead fled to Canada in an attempt to avoid capture. For this, he was labeled a coward for the rest of his life. He would eventually be captured, but avoided jail time.

Circumstantial evidence began to mount against Mary, although no "smoking gun" would ever emerge. She was arrested and her trial began on May 9th. Surratt, Herold, Powell, Atzerodt, Dr. Samuel Mudd, and four others, were tried together in a military court. Surratt was charged with aiding, abetting, concealing, counseling, and harboring the co-defendants. The testimony of John Lloyd, who revealed that Mary told him to have "shooting irons" ready at the boarding house for Booth was particularly damaging to Mary. The testimony of boarder Louis Weichman, who claimed to have overheard Mary's son having conversations with Booth, Powell, and Atzerodt, many times in the four and a half months before the assassination, was also very damaging. Weichman revealed the connections between the Surratt family and the Confederate spy network of Maryland.

The Verdict

Despite the unreliable witnesses that testified against Mary, she was found guilty on all but two charges and sentenced to death. Five of the nine judges in the case petitioned President Andrew Johnson for Mary's sentence to be commuted to life in prison because of her age and because she was a woman, but Johnson either never saw the petition or refused to sign it. Lewis Powell, who was also sentenced to death, swore that she was completely innocent before his death, although George Atzerodt implicated her further before his death.

1. The author uses the term "smoking gun" in the second paragraph. Based on the context of how it is used in this passage, describe a "smoking gun" in a fictional cheating scandal in a classroom.

2. Pretend you are part of the fictional "Free Mary Surratt" society. What are two main points you could argue for why Mary should be freed?

3. Pretend you are one of the judges who refused to sign the petition requesting commutation of Mary's sentence. Why do you think she is guilty?

4. Why is John Surratt considered a coward? Can you think of any other characters from history, literature, or the movies, who showed cowardice? Explain. Answers

Possible Answers

1. A “smoking gun” is direct evidence that links a perpetrator to a crime. If a student was caught cheating at school, a “smoking gun” would be something like a paper with answers on it, a copy of the test in a student’s possession with answers, answers written on a student’s hand, or unauthorized use of technology during the test.
2. The major point here is that there is no direct evidence that Mary knew about the assassination plot.
3. While Mary may or may not have known about the assassination plot, there was a lot of circumstantial evidence that tied her to it. She had contact with all of the conspirators and had provide shelter to them. Her son was heavily involved in a previous attempt to kidnap Lincoln. Furthermore, she lied to investigators about her knowledge of Louis Powell and the whereabouts of her son.
4. John Surratt is a coward because he left his mother to hang from the gallows to save his own life. Examples of cowardice are common in literature and movies. The “lion” considered himself a coward in the *Wizard of Oz*. In the *Lion King*, the antagonist Scar frequently exhibits cowardice. There are many others.