Descendants of Dr. Samuel Mudd Defends His Innocence 136 Years Later

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A descendant of Dr. Samuel Mudd, who treated the injured leg of Abraham Lincoln's assassin John Wilkes Booth contents that Mudd was innocent of conspiracy in the assassination.

Keywords

Dr. Samuel Mudd, Conviction, Prison, Innocence, John Wilkes Booth, Assassination, Abraham Lincoln, Ford's Theater, Broken Leg, Confederate Sympathizer, Conspirator, Pardon, Supreme Court, Stella Thelan, Edward Steers, Jack McHale

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Transcript

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MATT LAUER: On April 14, 1865 after shooting President Abraham Lincoln at Ford’s Theater, John Wilkes-Booth broke his leg jumping from the presidential box. He managed to escape on horseback to southern Maryland a ride that brought him to the home of Dr. Samuel Mudd who set Booth’s broken leg. STELLA THELAN, Dr. Mudd’s great-granddaughter: When he came to Dr. Mudd’s home there would have been no possible way for Dr. Mudd to know that Lincoln had been assassinated.

LAUER: Dr. Mudd was later convicted of aiding in the assassination of Lincoln and sentenced to life on a federal prison island off Florida. Pardoned after four years for his efforts during an outbreak of yellow fever at the prison, Mudd went home to Maryland and died at the early age of 49.

Jack McHale, a retired FBI agent who’s married to Dr. Samuel Mudd great Granddaughter has written a book on Dr. Mudd’s involvement in the Lincoln assassination. Ed Steers is a civil war historian who specializes in the Lincoln assassination. His book is titled, His Name is Still Mudd.

Gentlemen, good morning to both of you.

JACK MCHALE: Good morning.

EDWARD STEERS: Good morning Matt.

LAUER: Good morning. Mr. McHale let me start with you. We aren’t going to be able, in five minutes, to settle a case that’s been argued for 135 years, but give me your very best argument for why Dr. Mudd is innocent.

MCHALE: I have studied this for about 10 years and I came to the conclusion that historians can speculate and they can extrapolate and they can come up with all sorts of theories and they can deal in the great “what if,” but as a law enforcement officer I wanted to see the facts, the evidence and having examined a case for 10 years, I’ve come to the conclusion there was no evidence presented at the trial that Dr. Mudd had committed any crime, local, state or federal. And today I would say that no United States
Attorney would even take that case into court now. And certainly no grand jury would even indict and I think he was, actually I think he was a victim of the hysteria at the time.

LAUER: Well let me just interrupt for a second because we know that Mudd was a confederate sympathizer he had met Booth on a couple of occasions, and by the way Booth was a very famous actor of his day, compared to like the Harrison Ford or Tom Cruise of his day. How could he have not known that he was treating John Wilkes Booth?

MCHALE: Both of the Mudds testified, or gave affidavits to the effect that Dr. Mudd did not recognize Booth and Mrs. Mudd didn’t because he came to their house wearing a false beard and a scarf over his head. And I think possibly that was as much because of Mrs. Mudd-- she hated Booth and I don’t think he wanted Mrs. Mudd to recognize him.

LAUER: Alright Mr. Steers, let me turn to you. You say that that Dr. Mudd was into the Lincoln assassination up to his eyeballs. Give me your argument.

STEERS: Well Matt, there’s a large body of evidence to show that Dr. Mudd was not only a conspirator with John Wilkes Booth, but that he was the key conspirator, arranging several meetings with known confederate agents such as John Surratt and a man named Thomas Harbin. And I think it’s important to realize that when John Wilkes Booth arrived at Dr. Mudd’s house on the morning of April 15th shortly after murdering Abraham Lincoln, that it was the fourth time that these two men had met and that none of these meetings were accidental, they were all planned.

LAUER: However, there was no 24-hour cable news coverage at that time so is it clear, is it possible that Dr. Mudd did not know that Lincoln had been assassinated when Booth arrived at his home?

STEERS: Well it’s possible, but it’s not probable. I mean, certainly when he arrived at his home he wouldn’t have known unless John Wilkes Booth told him. But remember a few hours later, Dr. Mudd rode into Bryantown, a small village where he met Federal soldiers that told him that both President Lincoln had been assassinated, and that the assassin was John Wilkes Booth.

LAUER: Mr. McHale, why did Dr. Mudd accept a pardon in 1869 if he was innocent?

MCHALE: Basically he wanted to get out of prison. Had he not—he had a case pending before the Supreme Court at that time—and had it not been for the pardon, I think we wouldn’t be here today because I think probably the thing would have been resolved by the Supreme Court but the pardon released him and he grabbed it and went home.

LAUER: Mr. Steers, do you think that the Mudd family has a case or a chance to win this case on appeal?

STEERS: No I really don’t. But I do understand their position and I think it’s in the Mudd family interest to drag this case out just as long as they can because I think when the final verdict is issued, I think its going to come down against Dr. Mudd, as it has already in two federal courts.

LAUER: And Mr. McHale, is it true that the family is trying to win on a technicality, saying that the Dr. Mudd should not have been tried before a military panel in the first place because he was a civilian?

MCHALE: As a matter of fact, a year after the Dr. Mudd trial, the United States Supreme Court said it was unconstitutional to bring civilians before a military commission. But the government ignored that finding.
LAUER: But if he’s cleared on that technicality, would that satisfy the Mudd family? Would it clear his name?
MCHALE: Actually all the Mudd family wants, is to have somebody say Dr. Mudd did nothing wrong in the first place. A pardon is just a statement of forgiveness. They would like somebody to say he committed no crime to begin with.
LAUER: One hundred and thirty six years after the assassination the debate continues. Edward Steers, Jack McHale thank you both very much.