

A History Hobby

By **ANDREW FERGUSON**

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On a bright Saturday afternoon earlier this month, 30 or so of us gathered to give James O. Hall the send-off he deserved. Appropriately enough, the memorial service was held in the James O. Hall Research Center of the Surratt House museum, in Clinton, Md., 12 miles south of Washington. Mr. Hall died in February at the age of 95, leaving no immediate survivors. The 30 who showed up were instead neighbors, friends, a pair of nieces and random hangers-on who, like me, had known him only slightly but who honored him as a giant in a long and noble and underappreciated line.

I don't think there's a good word for what Mr. Hall did: "researcher" is too dry, "historical investigator" carries hints of melodrama, and "archivist" suggests a dutiful drudge, which Mr. Hall was not. "Amateur historian" probably fits best, though it sounds vaguely derivative and second-tier. Following a career with the Labor Department -- he retired in the early 1970s -- Mr. Hall turned himself into the world's foremost authority on the assassination of Abraham Lincoln. Historians, pros and amateurs alike, sought him out for his knowledge and access to his exhaustive files. As one of them put it, James O. Hall knew more about Lincoln's murder than anyone who ever lived, including John Wilkes Booth.



Martin Kozlowski

Uncorrupted by graduate degrees, with no thought of professional advancement, Mr. Hall exemplified a tradition in the study of American history, particularly in the Lincoln field, where the most interesting writing and research is often done by hobbyists. It's been this way from the beginning. Until the middle of the last century, all the great Lincoln biographers made their livings outside the university -- journalists like Ida Tarbell and free-lance enthusiasts like Benjamin Thomas produced biographies that were beautifully written and filled with news. Even now, dozens of Lincoln or Civil War roundtables flourish, and many of them publish quirky newsletters in which members let drop bits of recondite research or boldly advance new theories. While other areas of academic research have shriveled into hyperspecialization, the amateur tradition has kept the Lincoln field blessedly free of the guild mentality that can make academic history seem the dreary province of pedants and bullies.

Amateurism does have its lapses, as Mr. Hall well knew. Growing up on the Oklahoma frontier, he had listened as a boy to the old men swapping stories of their service in the Civil War. After his own service in World War II, Mr. Hall picked up a book by a chemist named Otto Eisenschiml. "Why Was Lincoln Murdered?" -- published in 1937 -- was thought for many years to be the definitive account of the assassination. As a historian Eisenschiml was a marvelous chemist, transmuting half-truths and shards of random evidence into a seemingly plausible case that Lincoln's Secretary of War, Edwin Stanton, had masterminded the president's death.

"I started to read the book," Mr. Hall told me once, "and I thought, Good God!" He could scarcely believe that investigators in 1865 had failed to uncover a conspiracy so immense as the one Eisenschiml proposed. "I decided I'd poke around on my own." The rest -- pardon the expression -- is history. Mr. Hall plunged into the transcript of the conspirators' trial, pored over contemporary accounts in newspapers, diaries and letters, and pieced together the notes taken by the original investigators. Eisenschiml's book is now just a historical curiosity, thanks in large part to Mr. Hall's meticulous debunking.

He recounted this story one afternoon several years ago, in the living room of his apartment in McLean, Va. Widowed and living alone, he rolled from kitchen to bedroom to office in a wheelchair. But his courtesy and generosity were undiminished. An amateur myself, I had come to chase down the truth about Samuel Mudd, the country doctor who had mended Booth's broken leg after the assassination and was later convicted as a conspirator. Mudd has long been cast as a victim of popular hysteria and prosecutorial bloodlust.

Mr. Hall rolled alongside his massed rank of filing cabinets, each drawer marked with the name of an assassination figure, pulling out files. "You need to start to piece the case together yourself," he said. He had me arrange the folders -- stuffed with old Photostats, handwritten notes, pages torn from notebooks -- in teetering stacks on his desk. Mr. Hall was far from a Mudd defender ("He was in it up to his eyeballs," he finally told me), but he wanted me to find out on my own. That's how he'd done it, he said.

"I had to teach myself genealogy," he said. "Not because I liked genealogy, but because it's how you find things that have been lost." Over the years, he tried to trace the descendants of everyone even remotely tied to the assassination. When he found a new great-granddaughter or the grandson of a nephew, he politely peppered that person with letters and phone calls, asking the descendant to rummage through attics -- or offering, even better, to do it himself. His industry never flagged, and it led him to some of his greatest discoveries. In a dusty cubby in a forgotten archive, Mr. Hall made one of the major Lincoln finds of the past 50 years: a letter of self-justification Booth wrote the morning of the murder.

Typically, in 1977, Mr. Hall chose to publish this astonishing find in the Lincoln Log, a newsletter for buffs. Its circulation was minuscule compared with the slick magazines -- National Geographic or American Heritage -- that would have loved to showcase such a find and maybe make its discoverer famous. But Mr. Hall was without professional vanity; that's what it means to be an amateur, after all.

At the end of his life, Mr. Hall treated his vast archives with the same modesty and discretion. At least two well-endowed universities made a play for the contents of his file cabinets. Instead, he gave them to the small, homespun Surratt House museum, once the country home of the Lincoln conspirator Mary Surratt and a favorite gathering place for buffs. With a single stroke, he transformed the museum into the Alexandrian library of assassination studies. It was a gesture of confidence and fellow feeling, made to all amateur historians from the best of their kind.