

Cranford Resident Present at Lincoln's Assassination

By Steven Glazer

“Don't know the manners of good society, eh? Well, guess I know enough to turn you inside out, old gal—you sockdologizing old man-trap!”

Those were the very last words heard by martyred President Abraham Lincoln. He was laughing at them just as he was struck by an assassin's bullet on the evening of Good Friday, April 14, 1865. Those same words were heard by Wesley Rogers Batchelder, a future judge and prominent resident of Cranford, also present at Ford's Theatre in Washington that night.

Judge Batchelder was born on August 23, 1844, in Bath, New Hampshire. At a young age, Batchelder moved to Lowell, Massachusetts. By the time of the Civil War, he was employed as clerk in the town's register of deeds. In February 1864, Batchelder secured a wartime position as confidential secretary to Lowell's most famous citizen of the nineteenth century, Union General Benjamin F. Butler, and left to join the general at Fort Monroe in Hampton, Virginia.

Judge Batchelder served General Butler at Fort Monroe, as well as in Washington, for the remainder of the Civil War. On Sunday, April 9, 1865, Confederate General Robert E. Lee finally surrendered to Union Commander Ulysses S. Grant. Batchelder was to leave Washington by steamer and join General Butler at the end of the week to help wrap up affairs at Fort Monroe, but instead missed the boat. Finding himself in Washington on Friday evening at war's end with nothing else to do, Batchelder went to Ford's Theatre for a little humorous entertainment

That night, Judge Batchelder saw a smiling President Lincoln enter the theater and ascend to the presidential box to watch the play, *Our American Cousin*. Shortly after 10:00 pm, during the final act, Batchelder heard the crack of a pistol, followed by John Wilkes Booth leaping to the stage, shouting “Sic semper tyrannis!” He also witnessed Mrs. Lincoln screaming and fainting, after which the insensible president was carried away. These events were indelibly etched in Batchelder's memory.

After the war, Judge Batchelder returned to Lowell, where he worked for a short time on the Concord Railroad, followed by a stint in hardware manufacturing. In 1868, he married Rosina Whithed, and joined her family's retail coal business, while also serving for many years as justice of the peace. In 1890, he moved to Newton, a suburb of Boston, where he operated a wholesale coal business. Retiring in 1914, he moved to Cranford.

Wesley Batchelder was well received in Cranford, where he resided at 11 Holly Street. Shortly after his arrival, he was elected justice of the peace and became an officer of the Cranford Republican Club. In 1916, he was elected to the Board of Education and appointed chairman of the municipal affairs committee of the Board of Trade. The following year, the Township Committee appointed him Police Court Judge, and he was widely praised as fair and impartial. Judge Batchelder also enjoyed the respect of Cranford's black citizens, who invited him to celebrations at the Baptist Church, where he was sometimes asked to address the congregation and he often spoke of President Lincoln at such events

Judge Batchelder passed away at his home on September 14, 1920, after a brief illness, with the flags at all school buildings then lowered at half mast. After funeral services at his Holly Street residence, the Judge's remains were interred in Lowell, where he now lies with his wife and parents.