

# John Wilkes Booth's Other Photograph from Richmond 1859-1860

*By Angela Smythe  
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## Vetting Booth's Photograph Taken in Costume as Uncas, Chief of the Mohicans



Garry Davidson (1849-1923)

“Garry Davidson, the super-property man the super any sort of a man, when honor, loyalty, service are standard! Garry, once of Booth's Theatre, but for some seasons past of the Lawrence Barrett Company, said he felt he was in heaven. "Why ! I am seeing Mr. Booth every day again, and in the theatre at rehearsal. What more could I want?' There was only one Garry ever! He alone won the implicit trust of both these great artists.<sup>1</sup>”

In 1908 Otis Skinner told the story of Edwin Booth's devoted “property man,” Garrison (Garry) Davidson observing the dramatic destruction of John Wilkes's possessions by his brother Edwin.<sup>2</sup> It is not the purpose of this paper to vet the totality of that story, but to focus solely on the factuality, and thus the credibility, of two parts as they relate to a printed photograph of John Wilkes Booth taken while in

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<sup>1</sup> Goodale, Katherine (Kitty Molony) Behind the Scenes with Edwin Booth; Boston & New York, Houghton Mifflin Company, 1931, Pg. 14

Richmond 1859-1860. This paper will first establish that some version of the event actually occurred, and secondly establish the destruction, and thus, the existence, of a photographic print of John Wilkes Booth taken in costume stemming from Richmond 1859-1860.

### Garry's Own Story

Otis Skinner's 1908 fabled rendition of "Garry's" account of Edwin Booth's dramatic "midnight" (actually early morning hours) burning of John Wilkes trunks might simply be attributed to journalistic sensationalism, an example of a Mark Twainism's to "never let the truth get in the way of a good story," *except* for the fact that in 1896, three years after his beloved employer's death, Garry, himself had described the event. Garry, not Otis Skinner was the originator of the story 12 years before Skinner's article appeared in print.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Otis Skinner, "The Last of John Wilkes Booth", American Magazine, 1908

<sup>3</sup> "Burned Booth's Clothes: How John Wilkes' Wardrobe was Destroyed", Boston Daily Globe, Jan. 26, 1896) Authored 3 years after Edwin Booth's death by his devoted property man, "Garry" Davidson story was reprinted in at least two other newspapers: "Burned Booth's Clothes: How Edwin Disposed of his Brother's Stage Costumes", Galveston Daily News, March 1, 1896 and "Booth's Clothes. How Edwin Disposed of his Brother's Stage Costumes," Denver Post, March 14, 1896.

**Never let a good story (Otis Skinner’s) get in the way of (two) facts, which confirm Garry’s observations.**

**Fact #1**  
**“John Wilkes Booth’s famous Overcoat”**



John Wilkes Booth,  
Carte de Visite taken by Charles D. Fredricks New York (1863)  
Library of Congress.

While later versions of Garry’s story authored by others focused on items of John Wilkes Booth’s theatrical “wardrobe” being destroyed, Garry’s own earlier eye witness account mentioned only one costume by name, Othello’s. *Garry’s narrative was focused on the destruction of the mundane, John Wilkes’ personal wardrobe.* In particular, Garry focused on one garment, a splendid overcoat, one with an elegant fur collar. Starting with his time in Richmond, John Wilkes’ was noted for wearing this distinctive garment throughout his lifetime.<sup>4</sup> It is the same

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<sup>4</sup> On the subject of Booth’s overcoat, Richmonder George Crutchfield, who claimed to have known Booth “quite well,” remarked that in Richmond “he frequently wore, when on the streets,

one observed by Richmond Gray John O. Taylor to be over Booth's arm when he boarded the train for Charles Town and was again mentioned when marching through Washington D.C. with Governor Wise and the 1<sup>st</sup> Regiment of Virginia Volunteers on their way to the Baltimore & Ohio Depot.<sup>5</sup> The coat is seen in the celebrated picture book on John Wilkes Booth, "John Wilkes Booth, Himself." Booth was photographed wearing this same item in images #20 and #24.<sup>6</sup>

***"For the first thing that caught my eye as I lifted the cover was an elegant long overcoat with a fur collar. I had not asked for anything up to that moment<sup>7</sup> but my cupidity got the better of me then and I could not help asking Mr. Booth if he would now allow me to keep that. It was so warm and elegant it seemed a pity to destroy it when I needed it. But he shook his head and sadly said: "No Garry, it must not be. There is no man living I would more willingly give that coat to than you but I cannot endure the thought that any man, not even you Garry, is wearing a coat that my poor misguided brother had worn. It must disappear in the flames forever." And, wiping away the tears that literally rained down his cheeks, **Mr. Booth opened the furnace door and with his own hands tossed in coats, shirts, trousers, neckties, hats and everything the trunks contained.**" (Emphasis added)***

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a fur trimmed over-coat". (Crutchfield, George. Personal Letter to E.V. Valentine dated July 5, 1904, V.M.T.C.) A coat matching the one that Crutchfield described appears in several later photographs of John Wilkes Booth. The stylish coat had a unique Inverness style attached cape and Astrakhan (curly lamb) fur collar. Its design would make it memorable and Booth evidently was fond of it. There are numerous instances of Booth being described wearing this coat. It stood out even during his 1864 career as an oilman in Pennsylvania [ "...impressively handsome in an overcoat with astrakhan collar and flowing over-cape" (Dolson, The Great Oildorado, pg. 148).] Even his sister Asia remarked about this distinctive garment: "[h]e was known everywhere by his large loose-hanging light overcoat, with its deep sleeves and cape... His was not a face or figure to go unremarked. *He was easily recognizable*" (Clarke, Asia Booth, The Unlocked Book; A Memoir of John Wilkes Booth by his Sister, New York, G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1938, pg. 118 – *emphasis added*)

<sup>5</sup> Antebellum Richmond, "*Bound for Glory, John Wilkes Booth and the Richmond Grays, the Journey to Charles Town – 1859*", Angela Smythe, Web. 10 May 2012  
<http://antebellumrichmond.com/bound-for-glory.html>

<sup>6</sup> Gutman, Kelly, O., and Gutman, Richard , John Wilkes Booth Himself, Hired Hand Press, 1979, images #20 and #24

Rather than focusing on spectacular theatrical costumes, Garry's recollection is centered on Booth's personal wardrobe, normal street attire. His detailed description of a coat, prompted by his admitted personal need and desire, attests to the facts of what he saw, free from any charge of dramatic sensationalism.

Over the years, Garry's story would grow as he recounted the event to a trusted cadre of fellow "theater folk",<sup>8</sup> in particular Amy Leslie, who enjoyed a 40-year career as a theatre critic for the Chicago Daily News.<sup>9</sup> Leslie herself would author articles about the event starting the year after Garry's initial article, 11 years before Skinner's version. Her newspaper accounts of it are found in the Salt Lake Herald, Nov. 28, 1897 and in the Newport News, Virginia Daily Press, March 26, 1898. In 1901 she included the story in her book, Some Players, Personal Sketches by Amy Leslie.<sup>10</sup> Each time the story was told after Garry's initial eye witness account which described mundane clothing articles, its focus shifted more and more to details regarding the destruction of John Wilkes' theatrical costumes and away from the mention of any ordinary items of clothing. The coat was never mentioned in any version other than Garry's initial ones in 1896. Garry wanted the coat, but the public wanted sensationalism, the burning of John Wilkes Booth's fabled theatrical costumes, and not the burning of his overcoat, shirts, neckties and pants, the same uninteresting items they all possessed. No, Richelieu's ermines, velvet doublets, silken robes, daggers that "were beauties" were far more interesting...

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<sup>8</sup> "Over a warm glass on a cold night, when the wind howled and strange confidences became something more than idle gossip, Garry Davidson would divulge some of the romantic treasures in his memory of Booth. Garry, a man who began his connection with the stage as basket boy at Booth's theater, and who secretes honorably the most romantic, pathetic stories of his adored master and teacher. Davidson's recollections of Edwin Booth are the most familiar and intimate of any ever uttered. Many things Gary knew he never spoke about because of the respect for this morbid shyness of his famous benefactor." Leslie, Amy, Some Players, Personal Sketches by Amy Leslie. Herbert S. Stone & Company, Chicago & NY, 1899, pg. 39.

<sup>9</sup> "Notes on the Passing Show", Dallas Morning News, September 9, 1930

<sup>10</sup> Leslie, Amy, Some Players, Personal Sketches by Amy Leslie. Herbert S. Stone & Company, Chicago and New York, 1901, pages 39-41



Illustration that accompanied Skinner's article "The Last of John Wilkes Booth", American Magazine, 1908

### **Fact #2**

#### **John Wilkes Booth' "other" photograph from Richmond 1859-1869:**

Garry's inclusion of John Wilkes' coat driven by his own personal need and desire speak to the credibility of Garry's seeing that item. In the later account of the event so famously reported by Skinner in 1908, Garry's inclusion of seeing a photograph of John Wilkes in Indian dress pinned to an actual costume with the note "dated Richmond, Virginia 1859-1860" authenticates its existence. The proof lies in the inclusion of an obscure fact; The choice of the correct costuming for a little known role which John Wilkes Booth played during that same very limited correct time and venue, *albeit guessed for the wrong part,*

"Pinned in a cloth was a stunning Indian dress – genuine thing – with a photograph of John Wilkes in the same costume, dated Richmond, Virginia 1859-1860. *I guessed the part to be Metamora.*" <sup>11</sup> (*emphasis added*)

### **Not Metamora – But Uncas**

John Wilkes Booth never played Metamora. It is a fact that the only time that John Wilkes Booth played an Indian role was during his time as a supporting player in the Richmond theatre, the last time during the 1859-1860 theatrical season in the obscure role of Uncas from the now long forgotten play, Wept of the Wish-Ton-

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<sup>11</sup> Otis Skinner, "The Last of John Wilkes Booth", American Magazine, 1908

Wish.<sup>12</sup>

Garry seeing an Indian costume, the role “guessed as that of Metamora” was a natural one. Metamora was a star’s role, specifically written for Edwin Forrest. Seeing the photograph of John Wilkes costumed as an Indian, Metamora would be the likely guess, associating it with John Wilkes’ three-year career as a star player. However, the date of the photograph circa 1859-1860 identified it as a supporting role, that of the obscure part of Uncas from the play “Wept of the Wish-Ton-Wish”.<sup>13</sup>

If the story were made up, the odds against correctly identifying John Wilkes Booth in (1) in such an obscure (Indian) role, and (2) within the only correct venue and time when he performed it would be overwhelming. It is too factually obscure to be anything but the truth. Garry saw it. A photograph, not an ambrotype, pinned to the costume itself.

### **Why a photograph in 1859-60?**

During the mid to late 1850’s, at a time preceding popular acceptance by the general public of ephemeral paper prints over the era’s “jeweled icon of remembrance”, the ambrotype, actors including a young John Wilkes Booth, his older brother Edwin, Edwin’s namesake, the flamboyant Edwin Forrest, and America’s leading actress, Charlotte Cushman, recognized the promotional value of making multiple prints from a photographic image. By the late 1850’s using a wet plate collodion negative to produce multiple paper prints had become the “industry standard” amongst actors to promote themselves, especially when in costume, which furthered the public’s association of them with the character they portrayed.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Samples, Gordon, The Stage Career of John Wilkes Booth McFarland and Company, Inc., Jefferson, North Carolina, and London 1982, pgs.196-224. Rough Magic: The Theatrical Life of John Wilkes Booth, PhD Thesis, Deidre Lindsay Kincaid, August 2000, University of Hull, pgs. 372-373.

<sup>13</sup> Samples, Gordon, The Stage Career of John Wilkes Booth McFarland and Company, Inc, Jefferson, North Carolina, and London 1982, pgs.196-224. Rough Magic: The Theatrical Life of John Wilkes Booth, PhD Thesis, Deidre Lindsay Kincaid, August 2000, University of Hull, pgs. 372-373.

<sup>14</sup> As early as 1855, Charlotte Cushman was photographed by Mathew Brady costumed in her famous role as Meg Merrilies from the play “Guy Mannering.” Two years later Brady would include an imperial paper print copy of it amongst other printed portraits of “the notables” exhibited in his New York Gallery (“Advertisement,” New York Tribune, November 10, 1857)

By 1859-1860, Mathew Brady, using a collodion negative, produced paper prints of America’s

In the antebellum South, photographers lagged behind their more innovative northern brethren. However there was a notable exception in Richmond, George W. Minnis, who during the late 1850's had mastered this new technology and had successfully shifted from solely providing the one of a kind ambrotype to offering his clients wet-plate collodion prints.<sup>15</sup>

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then most celebrated actor Edwin Forrest costumed for 6 of his most famous roles: Spartacus, Metamora, Lear, Shylock, Macbeth and Richard III.

<http://www.npg.si.edu/exh/brady/gallery/30gal.html>

John's brother Edwin's numerous photographs taken in costume found to date stem after his return from his first tour of England, 1861- 1862, however he was photographed in ordinary street wear from salt print photographs found to date from the 1856 - 1860. For JWB: see variant of Gutman #4, the Railsplitter, Vol. 3, Number 4, April 1998, pg. 6, and article on Antebellum Richmond:

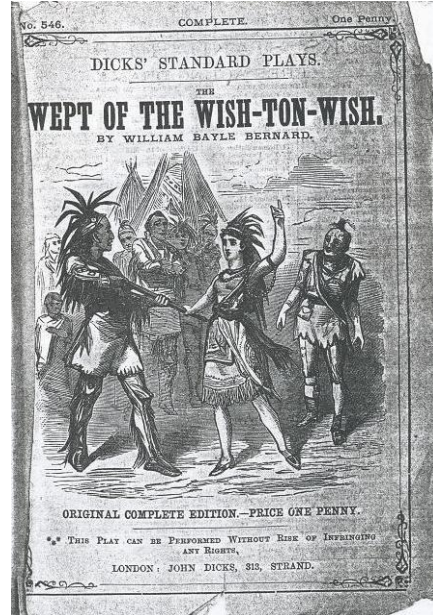
<sup>15</sup> <http://antebellumrichmond.com/the-power-of-prints.html>

## What would the costume have looked like?

Uncus was similar enough to have been mistaken for that of Metamora



ABOVE - Costume for the role of Uncas, “Chief of the Mohicans” was described as: “A buckskin shirt, leggings and moccasins, richly trimmed with beads and porcupine work, - eagle plumes, wampum, belt, pouch, etc., etc.”<sup>16</sup>



ABOVE - Illustration for Wept of the Wish-Ton-Wish showing Indian Costumes

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<http://books.google.com/books?id=OtVZAAAACAAJ&pg=PA4&dq=wept+of+wish+ton+wish&hl=en&sa=X&ei=uHVKU8yWIYO98gHo4oHwCg&ved=0CF4Q6AEwCQ#v=onepage&q=wept%20of%20wish%20ton%20wish&f=falseCostume> – (The Wept of the Wish-Ton-Wish)



ABOVE - Edwin Forrest early in his career, costumed for his signature role as Metamora



ABOVE - Mathew Brady Studio, Edwin Forrest as Metamora  
Modern salted paper print from original collodion negative, circa 1860

### **Why a picture of Uncas?**

John Wilkes' tenure in Richmond (1858-1860) was as a supporting actor where he was learning his craft. Any photograph taken in costume during his years in Richmond would reflect supporting roles. Booth's choice of taking a photograph costumed as Uncas would be a natural thing for him to do for a number of reasons.

### **Good friend Maggie Mitchell**

First, Portraying Uncas coincided with good friend Maggie Mitchell's Virginia tours. In June 1859, Maggie Mitchell toured Richmond-Lynchburg-Petersburg, where she was recounted as the "Minnehaha of the Drama" in the play *Wept of the Wish-Ton-Wish*.<sup>17</sup> Secondly, during that tour, John Wilkes's own

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<sup>17</sup> City Items, Richmond Whig, June 7, 1859

From his advertisements that appeared during the same timeframe as Maggie Mitchell's tour and John Wilkes appearance in the role of Uncas, one photographer was lavishly touting his ability to do this very work in Richmond – the leading candidate to have been the photographer who reproduced RG#1; George W. Minnis, <http://antebellumrichmond.com/conversations.html> Minnis also operated a branch gallery in Petersburg and Lynchburg. Ruggles, Jeffrey, Photography in Virginia, Virginia Historical Society, Richmond, 2008, Pg. 29

exemplary performance supporting her in the cast as Uncas won him an early accolade from Leonard Grover.<sup>18</sup>

“I attended the theatre at which Maggie Mitchell was playing a star engagement. In the cast appeared the name of John Wilkes, playing the character of Uncas, an Indian. He seemed the most talented actor in the company, and I later learned that he was John Wilkes Booth.”

### **Billy Bow Legs**

Perhaps another reason for him to have his picture take in the role is that it reminded him of another Indian that had figured in his early childhood, legendary Seminole Chief "Billy Bow Legs,"<sup>19</sup> whose identity he had adopted as his youthful alter ego,<sup>1</sup> using that name as late as age 16 to sign his letters.<sup>20</sup>



Billy Bowlegs, 1858

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<sup>18</sup> Samples, Gordon, The Stage Career of John Wilkes BoothMcFarland and Company, Inc, Jefferson, North Carolina, and London 1982, pg. 32

<sup>19</sup> Chief Billy Bowlegs or Billy Bolek (Holata Micco, Halpatter-Micco, Halbutta Micco, and Halpuda Mikko in Seminole, meaning "Alligator Chief") (ca. 1810–1859<sup>[1][2]</sup>) was a leader of the [Seminoles](#) in [Florida](#) during the Second and Third [Seminole Wars](#) against the [United States](#). One of the last Seminole leaders to resist, he eventually moved to [Indian Territory](#) (present-day [Oklahoma](#))

<sup>20</sup> Letter to T. William O’Laughlen, Harford County, Maryland, 30 April, 1854

Whatever the reason, Uncas or his performance in that role meant something to him on a personal level because he not only took a photograph in costume for it, but he retained the costume itself. As a star, John Wilkes Booth would most certainly never again play this role, nor would he step on Edwin Forrest's notoriously sensitive toes by taking on Forrest's decades-long signature Indian role of Metamora.

### **Remaining Questions**

***“Did other copies of this photograph exist?”*** Unknown, but certainly possible. Unlike RG#1's initially misidentified Confederate volunteers, John Wilkes Booth costumed as an Indian certainly wouldn't be easy to overlook! A good secondary search parameter that might yield results would be to seek photographs of Maggie Mitchell similarly costumed during the same early time in her career.

***“What other photographs might John Wilkes have taken during his two theatrical seasons in Richmond as a supporting player?”*** Again unknown.<sup>21</sup> What IS known is that the young actor John Wilkes Booth undoubtedly knew the special technology existed to run prints at a time when this was not commonly done

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<sup>21</sup> Nina Titone on page 215 in My Thoughts Be Bloody, claimed that John Wilkes returned from Richmond with “his baggage stuffed with photographs...” While I cannot locate that information as specifically mentioned in the cites she provided for it (pge. 420) it is I believe a fair inference. Titone, Nina, My Thoughts be Bloody, Free Press, New York, 2010

in the south, and used the process to generate prints of RG#1.<sup>22</sup> And, from Garry Davidson's story, we now know that like his fellow actors up north, he utilized this technique while in Richmond to pose for at least one photograph in costume as Uncas, Chief of the Mohicans.

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<sup>22</sup> Antebellum Richmond, "*Has He Been Hiding in Plain Sight? John Wilkes Booth and the Richmond Grays*", Angela Smythe, Web. 10 May 2010  
<http://www.antebellumrichmond.com/hiding.html>

Antebellum Richmond, "*Out of Hiding – John Wilkes Booth and the Richmond Grays*", Angela Smythe, Web. 10 May 2011 <http://antebellumrichmond.com/out-of-hiding.html>

Antebellum Richmond, "*Chasing Shadows 150 Years Old – John Wilkes Booth and the Richmond Grays, Part One; Chasing a Shadow from Richmond*", Angela Smythe, Web. 10 May 2013  
<http://antebellumrichmond.com/chasing-a-shadow-from-richmond.html>

AntebellumRichmond.com, "*Glimpsing a Shadow from Richmond – John Wilkes Booth and the Richmond Grays*", Angela Smythe, Web. 16 April 2014  
<http://antebellumrichmond.com/glimpsing-a-shadow-from-richmond.html>

"*Chasing Shadows 150 Years Old – John Wilkes Booth and the Richmond Grays, Part Two; Conversations through the Glass*", Angela Smythe, Web. 10 May 2014  
<http://antebellumrichmond.com/conversations.html>