

Laura Keene

(Mary Frances Moss)

July 20, 1826 (Winchester, England) – Nov 4, 1873 (Montclair, NJ)

SHE WAS LAURA KEENE, a British actress and an eyewitness to the playing out of one of America's greatest tragedies, and she was astute enough to understand the value of being in the right place at the right time.

Her story begins in 1844 when she (born Mary Frances Moss), married John Taylor, the rascally godson of the Duke of Wellington.¹ Although the marriage introduced Mary Frances to British royalty, it was a marriage rife with problems and unkept promises. Seven years into the marriage, John, in an ill-fated attempt to outrun the law, was captured, convicted, and sentenced to life in a British penal colony in Australia.

Elizabeth Yates, a British actress who was also Mary Frances' aunt, helped Mary become an actress by paying for her acting lessons and introducing her to influential theatrical people. And of course, including the Duke of Wellington's name on her résumé didn't hurt either.

Recognizing the value of notables in her new career, she also knew the downside of being linked to the less-desirable elements of society, such as her criminal husband, so she changed her name from Mary Frances Taylor to Laura Keene.

It was as Laura Keene that she caught the attention of British theatrical producer Charles Matthews who, in 1852, gave her a part in the production, *Chain of Events*, at the Lyceum Theater in London.

During that same year, Laura accepted an offer by American producer James Wallack to join a stable of leading ladies in his New York stock-theater company, which she did, afterward performing in and starring in numerous performances.

At some point after arriving in New York, she met businessman John Lutz, the owner of the Charles Street Theater in Baltimore.

When Lutz's wife became terminally ill, limiting his ability to care for his various business concerns, he asked Laura to manage the Charles Street Theater, which she did, becoming the first woman in America to run a theatrical facility.

Laura found management as much to her liking as acting, and she added another theater, the Varieties Theater in New York, to her list of responsibilities. Then she opened her playhouse, Laura Keene's Theater, that provided her with the opportunity to pick and choose the roles she'd like to perform.

One of the productions that she was particularly fond of was *Our American Cousin*, which debuted at her theater on October 15, 1858, with herself playing the female lead, the role of Florence Trenchard.

She was acting again in that favored role the night of April 14, 1865, but this time the performance was not at her theater in New York, but at the Ford Theater in Washington, D.C.

You already know what happened, or at least most of what happened next.

John Wilkes Booth fired a single bullet into the back of President Lincoln's head as he was watching the performance.²

Major Henry Rathbone, a guest of the president in the Presidential Box, struggled briefly with the assassin who was able to free himself from Rathbone's grasp and drop from the presidential box to the stage and out the back door.³

Now, here's something about the story of Lincoln's assassination that your teacher may not have been aware of herself.

Distraught and pushy, Laura Keene, the star of the stage production that the President had been watching, forced herself through a labyrinth of doctors, soldiers, and theater patrons and while still wearing her theatrical costume, boldly asked to kneel at the President's side.

Army surgeon Charles Leale, aware of who she was, and of the bullet lodged deep in Lincoln's head, granted Keene's request with the whispered words, "The President's wound is mortal. It is impossible for him to recover."

Keene knelt and cradled Lincoln's head against her shoulder, her costume absorbing some of the blood and brain tissue that oozed from the wound.⁴

As she was comforting the President, several men entered the Presidential box to assist in carrying Mr. Lincoln to a boarding house across the street.

Laura withdrew and watched as the men maneuvered the tall, lanky body through the doorway and down the hall.

Left with her thoughts, she was fully aware that she had become a part of American history, and that when Lincoln's last hours have passed, and the historian's pen begins to write, she would be part of the story.

Laura Keene died of tuberculosis on November 4, 1873, and was laid to rest in Greenwood Cemetery in Brooklyn, New York. She was fifty-seven years old.

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1. Some sources identify John Taylor as Harry Wellington Taylor. After John Taylor's (or Harry W. Taylor's) death in 1860, Laura Keene married John Lutz.
 2. Wayne Winterton, *From Ace to Zamboni*, pp. 102-105.
Some claim that John Wilkes Booth didn't die in a tobacco barn following Lincoln's assassination but lived (as David George) for another thirty-eight years.
 3. *Stories from History's Dust Bin*, Volume 3, pp. 105-106.
Henry Rathbone became so distraught from his failure to protect Lincoln from the assassin that he killed his wife and committed suicide.
 4. The bloodstained sleeve of actress Laura Keene's blouse can be on display at the National Museum of American History in Washington, D.C.

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*Character is like a tree, and reputation is like a shadow.
The shadow is what we think of it; the tree is the real thing.*
Abraham Lincoln (1809–1865) 16th U.S. President