

National Museum of Health and Medicine

Otis Historical Archives

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OHA 10

Curatorial Records: Deed to Ford's Theatre

Accession Number: N/A

Date of Records: 1800-1895

Size: 1 box, ¼ linear feet

Finding Aid by: Laura Cutter (2015)

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Restrictions: This collection is unrestricted.

Condition: This collection may include fragile material that requires special or limited handling.

Historical Note: The plot of land now occupied by Ford's Theatre was originally the site of the First Baptist Church of Washington, constructed in 1833. Nearly 25 years later, the church trustees, having merged with other congregations by that time, chose to sell the building and land. The layout of the building, which was used for concerts as well as worship, was of interest to John T. Ford, a theatre manager from Baltimore, MD. Ford leased the building in 1861, with the option to purchase it after five years, despite the protests of at least one board member, who predicted a dire fate for any theatre occupying a former house of worship. Ford operated the theatre until February 1862, when he closed it for renovations. One month later he reopened it under his own name and the theatre achieved considerable success under his management. In December of that year, a devastating fire burned Ford's Theatre to the ground and Ford planned to rebuild a grander building in its place.

In August 1863, the new Ford's Theatre opened with fanfare in Washington and success followed throughout the next year and a half, including visits by President Lincoln. When John Wilkes Booth shot the president at Ford's Theatre on April 14, 1865, the nation plunged into grief. These events also marked an end to Ford's Theatre. Military guards were posted at the theatre and access was granted only by special permission. During the investigation the theatre was studied in minute detail and during the trial of the Lincoln conspirators, the jury visited it.

Meanwhile, at the start of the trial, John Ford had only recently been dismissed as a prime suspect in the case and released from jail. Ford had a longstanding friendship with Booth, unsurprising given Ford's success as a theatre operator and Booth's status as one of the preeminent actors in America. In addition, Ford was visiting Richmond on the night of the assassination, an act construed by some as symbolic, as it was the capitol of the defeated Confederacy. These facts brought Ford under the scrutiny of Secretary of War Edwin Stanton. A warrant was issued for Ford's arrest, and he and his two brothers were jailed for 39 days. Ford protested his innocence, but Stanton was unconvinced. Meanwhile, the theatre was closed and remained in the official possession of the federal government.

After Ford was released and the conspirators hanged on July 7, 1865, Ford planned to reopen his theatre. He advertised *The Octoroon* for the night of July 10 and sold over 200 tickets. He also received a letter threatening to burn down the theatre, should it be reopened as such. The Judge Advocate ordered the theatre to refuse admission and Ford refunded ticketholders the night of the performance. He did not attempt to open the theatre again.

Starting in July, the United States government paid Ford for the lease of the theatre until the purchase of the building was authorized by Congress and a final settlement was dispersed by the Treasury department. The specific parcel of land was located on 10th Street in Northwest Washington, D.C., between E and F streets. It is square number 377 within Washington and is comprised of Lot 10 and parts of Lot 9 and 11. Ford, it was said, remained vocal about his mistreatment by Stanton and bitter at the federal government.

On April 7, 1866 an Act of Congress approved the purchase of the theatre for "the deposit and safekeeping of documentary papers relative to the soldiers of the army of the United States and of the museum of the medical and surgical department of the army" [*sic*]. The next day the building was assigned to the Office of the Surgeon General by Secretary of War Edwin Stanton. The theatre was gutted and three floors were installed—the top floor for the Army Medical Museum and the first and second floors for the pension records and surgical records of the Surgeon General's Office. Under the command of curator Joseph K. Barnes, the museum was moved to the newly renovated theatre in six weeks and would remain there for the next 20 years.

Series/Scope and Content Note:

This collection includes records generated during the transfer of ownership of Ford's Theatre from the Fords to the United States government. Included are the surveyor's history of the property, previous ownership records, a surveyor's map of the land, and the deed of gift formally transferring the property.

BOX AND CONTENT LIST

SERIES 001: BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION AND MILITARY

Box 001

00001. Original file envelope for Ford's Theatre material, catalogued November 22, 1895

00002. Title to Ford's Theatre—General abstract
[This document is a surveyor's history of the property occupied by Ford's Theatre. The document includes precise information about the physical extent of the property made up of two partial and one complete plot of land. Also included are ownership records of each plot as early as 1800.]
00003. Map of Ford's Theatre property by William Forsyth, Surveyor of the City of Washington, May 5, 1866
[Rendering of the three plots of land that comprise John Ford's property, the location of Ford's Theatre. It was probably made in accompaniment to the Title to Ford's Theatre.]
00004. Indenture between John T. and Ethel B. Ford and the United States of America, May 12, 1866
[The document acts as land deed transfer between the Fords and the United States. The process of giving over the land title is called an indenture.]
00005. Extract from the deed of John T. Ford
[This document consists of extracted text from the document 'Title to Ford's Theatre.']
00006. Extract of endorsement of Surgeon General to the Secretary of War, January 14, 1878
00007. Ribbon and seal of the University of Kentucky at Louisville, 1846 [its relation to Ford's Theatre is unknown.]