

Deep Thoughts Questions – Dr. Samuel Mudd

Name _____

Dr. Mudd was an American physician and farmer who lived near Bryantown, Maryland, during the American Civil War. Like many people who lived near Bryantown, Mudd was a slave owner who supported the Confederate States of America. In 1864, the state of Maryland abolished slavery, making the future of Mudd's tobacco plantation uncertain. That same year, Mudd was introduced to the actor John Wilkes Booth. Booth claimed he was interested in buying land in the region, but was really touring the area to map an escape route for his planned kidnapping of Abraham Lincoln. To what extent Mudd and Booth discussed the kidnapping plot is unclear. Historians do know that Booth stayed overnight at Mudd's farm and purchased a horse from him. Ultimately, the kidnapping plan failed to come into fruition. Booth and Mudd met again in Washington in late December of 1864 but the details of the meeting remain unknown as well.

On April 14, 1865, John Wilkes Booth shot President Lincoln at Ford's Theater in Washington, D.C. While managing a desperate escape from the theater, Booth broke his leg. Despite his injury, he was able to escape Washington that night and rode toward southern Maryland. One of his accomplices, David Herold, met Booth in the wilderness in an attempt to guide him to safety. When it became clear that Booth would be unable to continue without medical attention, Herold guided him to the house of Dr. Mudd. At 4:00 in the morning, they knocked on Mudd's door. Mudd recognized Booth but was likely unaware that he had just assassinated the president. Mudd diagnosed the broken fibula, fashioned a splint, and arranged for a pair of crutches to be delivered. Booth and Herold were extended hospitality and spent the remainder of the morning and much of the next day at Mudd's farm.

The next morning, Mudd rode into Bryantown, where he quickly learned news of Lincoln's assassination and the identity of the assassin. Unbelievably, Mudd found himself at a crossroads of American history. He had two choices. He could tell the authorities in Bryantown that Lincoln's assassin was incapacitated at his farm less than five miles away, and thus, become one of America's great heroes. Or, he could say nothing and protect the assassin. Mudd's decision would have a major impact on his life and on the course of American history!

Mudd chose to protect Booth. Although there are conflicting accounts of what followed, Mudd probably calmly returned to his farm and demanded that both Booth and Herold leave immediately. It is thought that Mudd waited at least 24 hours to tell the authorities anything about his visitors. When he was finally questioned by the authorities, he may have also led them in the wrong direction in their quest to capture Booth. Mudd's explanations drew the suspicion of detectives, who continued to question him over the course of the next few days. Mudd initially claimed to never have met Booth before, but eventually it was revealed he had in fact met him several times.

On April 26, 1865, Dr. Samuel Mudd was arrested and charged with conspiracy to murder Abraham Lincoln. In this context, conspiracy means he was involved with the planning and execution of the murder and escape. On June 29, 1865, Mudd was sentenced to life in prison. He escaped the death penalty by a single vote.

In 1869, Mudd was pardoned by President Andrew Johnson for helping to stop an epidemic of yellow fever in prison. He was released from jail and returned to his farm near Bryantown. He died at the age of 49 from pneumonia. Mudd's conviction remains a source of controversy today.

Questions

1. Describe Mudd's relationship with John Wilkes Booth.
2. Describe the decision that Dr. Mudd was forced to make. How did his decision impact his own life and American history?

3. How did detectives unravel Mudd's story?

This passage contains the following words. What do you think each word means? Write your definition and then use a dictionary or the internet to find the actual definition.

Word	Your Definition	Actual Definition
incapacitated		
conspiracy		
crossroads		

Answers

1. The relationship between Mudd and Booth is unclear, although they certainly knew each other and may have done business together or discussed the kidnapping plot together.
2. Mudd was confronted with two scenarios: protect Booth from the authorities, or, turn him into the authorities. Choosing the first scenario would have made him a hero in the North (and ultimately in United States history), but Mudd was a slave owner and was thus against the North. Mudd chose to protect Booth which ultimately resulted in his arrest and near execution. It also resulted in additional time for Booth to execute and plan his escape.
3. Detectives unraveled Mudd's story because Mudd lied to them about knowing Booth. When authorities learned that Mudd lied, he was arrested.

Vocabulary

Incapacitated – without strength; unable to move well or at all.

Conspiracy – a secret plan to commit a crime or misdeed.

Crossroads – a point in which an important decision must be made.