

Charles S. Taft- Signal Corps Surgeon (at Ford's Theater)

Back in the theater, the press of the crowd was getting out of hand as onlookers pushed toward the stage for a better view of the box. Looking down on them, Lieutenant Bolton now ordered everyone to disperse. But the audience had worked itself into a frenzy, and nobody paid much attention to the provost guards officer. Dr. Charles S. Taft, a surgeon for the Signal Corps, saw that his wife, Sarah, was in danger of being crushed against the wall of the orchestra pit. He managed to boost her onto the stage, where at least she would have room to breathe. Her friend Annie Wright was forced to improvise. Annie's husband, John, was the stage manager at Ford's, and she was anxious about his safety. She tried to pull herself up with a bass viol from the orchestra pit, but a couple of failed attempts left her straddling the instrument in a painful and awkward position.

The crush had Lue Porterfield in a panic. A petite young woman, Lue lacked the size and strength needed to push her way through the crowd. She was about to fall underfoot when a large man appeared out of the audience and lifted her up over the footlights. Actor E. A. Emerson, seeing her on the stage, thought she was about to faint. He took her in his arms and fanned her with his Lord Dundreary wig. In less grim circumstances, the scene would have been comical.

Dr. Charles Taft was torn by indecision. His distraught wife wanted desperately to go home, but he was a surgeon and someone in the box was calling for help. He couldn't just walk away. Taft found Annie Wright and asked her to look after Sarah. Then he looked up at the box, and a man asked, "Do you want to get up there?" Taft nodded, and Daniel Beekman offered him a boost.

Far too many people were in the box already. Actress Laura Keane was there, and a young obstetrician named Albert Freeman Africanus King had also pushed his way in. Like young Dr. Leale, King had just received his medical degree. When Dr. Taft finally pulled himself up over the railing, he found that he was the senior man in attendance, although he was only thirty.

Dr. Leale was still searching for the wound. He knew he didn't have much time. The president was in a state of paralysis. His eyes were closed, and his breathing was labored. The doctor could find no pulse, and though he needed to examine the patient, he couldn't do so in such a tight space. So with the help of a few soldiers, he lifted Mr. Lincoln out of his rocking chair and laid him on the floor. As he did so, he noticed a small clot of blood on the president's coat near one of the shoulders. Leale thought he had found the area of the wound, but when he tried to look at the president's neck, he found that the tie was too tight. He struggled to loosen it, and one of the men huddling over him suggested he just cut it off. He handed Leale a penknife.

Leale pulled off the president's coat and peeled back his shirt. But even with the shoulders and chest exposed, he could find no knife wounds. Fanning his fingers through the president's hair, at last he found something. On the back of the head, a little to the left of center, was a bullet hole. The tissues around it had swelled, and a clot had formed in the opening. Leale pulled his hand away, and the wound bled. As it did, the president began to breathe more freely.

Lieutenant Bolton stood to the side, awaiting orders. The crowd showed no signs of calming down. Though they should probably leave the building, Bolton alone was powerless to make them do that. Curiosity outweighed their fear, and even with the threat of a stampede, many refused to leave unless someone forced them out.

Dr. Charles Taft quickly took in the situation. From the look of things, a couple of soldiers were preparing to carry the president back to the White House. Taft didn't think Lincoln could survive such a trip, even in a carriage. He announced that he was an army surgeon, and in his professional opinion, the president should be taken someplace close by—perhaps the nearest house. Dr. Leale concurred, then briefed Taft on the patient's injury. Such a wound, Dr. Taft said, would have to be mortal. Though Leale had already said as much, the older man had paid little attention; he didn't realize that the man who spoke to him was also a doctor. Nevertheless, Leale still had the soldiers' attention. He gave the signal, and six men lifted the president's limp, unwieldy form. As they carried him out of the box, someone noticed Mr. Lincoln's coat lying in the corner. Some papers had fallen out of the pockets, and at Dr. Leale's suggestion, they were handed over to Captain Edwin Bedee, 12th New Hampshire Infantry, who happened to be standing in the box.