



TimeLines

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*"You have to look
at history as an
evolution of history."*

Jean Chretien

Theft Of Lincoln's Body Thwarted By Infamous Agent

By Michelle Henry

Patrick D. Tyrrell is best known for his role in disrupting a plot to steal Abraham Lincoln's body in 1876. He is memorialized in the *Biographical History of the America's Irish in Chicago, 1897* as a "celebrated detective," concluding that "no roll of Chicago's American Irish would be complete were it wanting in the name of Patrick Daniel Tyrrell."

According to his biography, Tyrrell was hired in 1874 by the Secret Service, a relatively new agency whose main objective was to thwart counterfeiters. Without a federal currency, most banks issued their own paper money, making it easy to print and circulate queer (the slang of the time for counterfeit bills). It is estimated that close to half of all paper money in circulation during the Civil War was counterfeit.

Tyrrell was working for the Secret Service in Chicago in 1876 when a plot was hatched by a notorious gang of counterfeiters to get their engraver, Ben Boyd, released from prison. Boyd's printing plates were so skillfully executed that they fooled most experts.

One of Tyrrell's informants infiltrated the gang and learned that their plan was to steal Abraham Lincoln's body and hold it for \$200,000 ransom and the release of Boyd.

Tyrrell received permission from Abraham Lincoln's son, Robert, to let the crime be partially carried out so that the culprits could be caught in the act. Tyrrell and his agents were waiting in the cemetery on the night that the culprits had planned to break into Lincoln's tomb.

As they were opening Lincoln's sarcophagus, a noise alerted the robbers and they scattered into the night. Ten days later, Tyrrell and his men had arrested all of them. They were charged with larceny (destroying a monument and grave robbing were relatively minor offenses at that time).

Dyer's history of the Secret Service describes Tyrrell as having "arrested more counterfeiters, captured more counterfeit money, and done more to break up the business than any one who was ever connected with the secret service."

Records held in the Chautauqua County archives in Mayville present a different side of Tyrrell's character.

Tyrrell was a toddler when he came with his parents from Ireland to Buffalo. By age 14, he was working as a carpenter in the local shipyards.

In December 1851, Tyrrell married Mary Shannon and shortly thereafter moved to Dunkirk. Together they had eight children. Tyrrell's career in law enforcement began in Chautauqua County when he was appointed a deputy in 1868 by Sheriff Lewis Andrews.

In the county archives are several civil actions against Tyrrell. In 1869, an action was

brought against him for not returning a gold watch that he had taken as evidence in a robbery. The watch's owner claimed that Tyrrell was using the watch as his own and

refused to return it. Several additional civil actions followed for nonpayment of notes.

Tyrrell was later sued by Sheriff Andrews for "deceit, fraud, delay, neglect, or oppression" for not properly accounting for the money he was collecting in legal fees as deputy. The sheriff was awarded

a judgment of \$829 against Tyrrell. Tyrrell's career in law enforcement appeared to be over.

The family left Dunkirk and moved to a farm in French Creek. The relationship between Tyrrell and his wife Mary was apparently tumultuous, because in April 1870 Mary sued for support. She stated that she had been turned out of the house and that Tyrrell refused to let her return or to support her.

After hearing testimony in Dunkirk, French Creek, and Buffalo, Mary was awarded a legal separation from Tyrrell on the grounds of cruel and inhumane treatment, and support of \$115 per year. The separation stipulated that "neither party is at liberty to marry another person during the life of the other party."

Tyrrell left Chautauqua County and headed west with his older son John, who had recently married (we know this because Tyrrell stated his objection to the marriage in his response to Mary's claim for support).

We next find Tyrrell in 1875 in Marshall, Iowa, where he married Kate Tyrrell, his son John's young widow! We don't know where or when his son died.

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While Tyrrell was working as a Secret Service detective in Chicago in July 1876, Mary Tyrrell traveled there to demand his arrest for bigamy. The *Chicago Tribune* carried the dramatic story and printed Tyrrell's response to the charge. In the newspaper, Tyrrell stated that he had secured a full divorce (providing the date of his legal separation in Chautauqua County) and that he was legally married to his second wife. He claimed that, before his death, his son John had confessed to making false allegations against him during the divorce proceedings.

Law enforcement apparently sided with Tyrrell, because it doesn't appear that he was charged. Mary submitted a letter to the editor of the *Tribune* lamenting that Tyrrell lied about his dead son and had taken advantage of his widow. She signed her letter, Tyrrell's "wife for life."

Working for the St. Louis District of the Secret Service in 1879, Tyrrell moved his family to a farm in Shawnee County, Kan. Tyrrell was rarely home, working between St. Louis and Chicago, where he still maintained a residence. Kate was left to raise their two children and to manage the farm, which she built into a successful 360-acre enterprise.

In 1899, the "fine brick house" that Tyrrell had retained in Chicago was seized when he didn't pay his taxes. He returned to Kansas and attempted to have Kate removed from the farm property. Kate filed for divorce, claiming that for most of the past 20 years, Tyrrell had neglected his responsibilities as husband and had not provided for his family. Kate's attorneys asked that she be awarded the farm because she alone had managed it and made it profitable. Tyrrell countered that she had no right to the property because she was not his legal wife! He claimed that she was actually the wife of his son and that his legal wife was dead (he was correct – Mary had died in 1893).

Kate and Tyrrell's children, now both adults, testified that they had always known Tyrrell to be their true, legal father and the husband of their mother. The judge ruled in Kate's favor and Tyrrell moved back to Chicago.

After charging Tyrrell with bigamy in 1876, Mary stayed in the Chicago area, living with her adult children. Tyrrell died in Chicago in 1920. His death certificate lists Mary as his wife. They are buried together in Calvary Cemetery in Evanston, IL.