

SHADY SLEUTH
Vigilante-turned-detective Lafayette C. Baker assembled a force of spies to help eradicate rebellion in Washington, D.C.

MASTER SPY? *OR* SCOUNDREL!

LAFAYETTE BAKER, THE NATION'S FIRST FEDERAL POLICE CHIEF, PLAYED ROUGH AND DIRTY

BY JULIA BRICKLIN

Among the many colorful characters thrust into the national spotlight during the war, few have as checkered—and confusing—a story as Lafayette C. Baker, the vigilante-turned-detective appointed by Winfield Scott to head spying operations for the North. That agency, known as the National Detective Bureau, was the federal government's first formal intelligence-gathering operation, and Baker had free rein in deciding how agents went about spying for the North and rooting out Confederate sympathizers. ¶ Fast forward a century to the 1960s, and Baker takes center stage for a controversial theory about a conspiracy to assassinate Abraham Lincoln, headed by Secretary of State Edwin Stanton. Evidence of such a scheme was based on a welter of details and documents, with the core evidence being two coded messages in invisible ink—supposedly in Baker's hand—alluding to the plot and expressing fears for his life (see sidebar, P. 43). How might such a theory, now discredited, emerge? Consider the duplicitous tactics Baker employed throughout his life. ¶ Baker's Washington, D.C., career began after Lincoln appointed Stanton secretary of war and Stanton hired the sleuth as a special provost marshal. Stanton, who shared Secretary of State William Seward's passion for rooting out subversives, funded Baker in assembling a force to eradicate rebellion in the capital. But Stanton's staunch anti-subversive stance and Baker's thirst for respect and political power would prove to be an unhealthy union. 🐾

“LAFAYETTE” BAKER was born on October 13, 1826, in Genesee County, N.Y., to Remember and Cynthia Baker. Baker’s grandfather, also named Remember, was a cousin of Ethan Allan who helped capture Fort Ticonderoga with Allan and the other “Green Mountain Boys” in 1775. Lafayette’s father served as an officer to General Winfield Scott during the War of 1812, and it seems likely that Baker used that family connection to secure an interview with Scott when the Civil War broke out. When Baker was a teen, the family moved to Lansing, Mich. As a young adult, he traveled to New York and then Philadelphia to establish a mercantile business.

In 1853 Baker decided to try his luck selling goods to gold prospectors in California. He worked as a paper mill machinist to pay the bills, eventually setting up a mercantile agency with a real estate agent and newspaper distributor. The two also served as consultants for merchants interested in advertising in San Francisco papers. Later “Baker & Hoogs” advertised their services as debt collectors, “prepared to make Collections or demands of any nature,” throughout the Western states, territories and British Columbia. This taught Baker how to shape stories for the press, and also enabled him to hone his strong-arm tactics, always executed in the name of the “public good.”

It’s not surprising that Baker soon enlisted in what became one of the West’s most successful vigilante organizations. In the mid-1850s, San Francisco was plagued by vice, corruption and crime. The San Francisco Committee of Vigilance, organized on June 14, 1851, enrolled more than 700 members and maintained a headquarters where suspects were incarcerated, interrogated and tried without counsel and due process. By the time it disbanded that September, the Committee had arrested hundreds and executed four men.

In 1856 the Committee reorganized with a vengeance, partially in response to the murder of a local newspaper editor, but largely because its officers—many of whom had headed the 1851 committee—saw an opportunity to cleanse the city of Democratic Party influence and incorporate its own “People’s Party.” The Committee of 1856 enrolled about 5,000 men who patrolled the streets, conducted investigations, held trials without benefit for the accused, deported citizens and defied writs of habeas corpus.

Jacob Mogelev, author of *Death to Traitors: The Story of General Lafayette C. Baker, Lincoln’s Forgotten Secret Service Chief*, writes: “Baker gloried in his service as a Vigilante. It gave him a sense of power even though he never achieved a higher rank than that of private....He ran with the pack, but he learned the twin arts of disguise and deception.” Mogelev also notes that Baker thought a brain was better than a gun, perhaps a kind nod toward Baker’s later avoidance of combat in the war.

The 1856 Committee of Vigilance disbanded in August, mostly because its members had managed to get one of their own, James Curtis, elected chief of police. That December, when the city reorganized its law-enforcement forces, Baker made the cut. For two years he immersed himself in crime-fighting.

By July 1857, Officer Baker routinely appeared as a prosecution witness in City Court. That August Curtis made him a detective. On December 18, 1857, Baker testified for the prosecution in the rape case of 12-year-old Margaret Taylor, but he did not support or refute either side. Instead he suggested a third scenario, in which the youngster had been violated by a different person, whom he testified to having seen taking the girl for buggy rides away from public eye “at least ten times.” The detective was apparently not sanctioned at all when the rape story turned out to be completely fictional—the girl’s father had made a false accusation against her stepfather, in retaliation for not handing over money and property.

Baker sometimes followed would-be criminals around for days, retrofitting information to make himself look brilliant. On March 21, 1858, for example, the *Daily Alta* reported how Baker nabbed shoplifters at a boot store: “Detective Baker, who has had his suspicions of certain well known thieves, took it into his head yesterday to secrete himself into a room next to theirs, and boring a hole in the intervening wall, awaited with his usual patience their arrival.”

When the alleged thieves arrived, they apparently detailed the entire theft ring to each other, but implicated someone else entirely, one John Smith, alias “Old Man.” Baker subsequently arrested Smith who, he said, was the culprit he had suspected all along.

On April 29, 1858, Baker resigned for reasons that are unclear, though they might have had something to do with increasing scrutiny of Curtis’ department, which was accused of profiting from reward money handed out by insurance companies and banks. That summer Baker drifted, seemingly unable to shed his cloak-and-dagger

routine, and even telling the *Sacramento Bee* that he had been hiding in a Nevada prison, disguised as an inmate so he could gain further particulars from three men accused of robbing a Wells Fargo stagecoach.

That August Yuba County officials arrested Baker for receiving stolen property, though the charges were ultimately dropped. The ex-officer tried desperately to hold onto his law-and-order image in civilian life, setting up a telegraph office in downtown San Francisco and delivering what he deemed interesting updates to the newspapers.

Baker sailed for New York on the ship *Golden Age* on January 1, 1861. He later claimed he had planned to attend to some mercantile business back east for a short period. But Mrs. Baker accompanied her husband. Regardless of his actual purpose, according to Edwin C. Fischel, author of *The Secret War of the Union*, Baker entered the service in February 1861, perhaps as a detective for Charles P. Stone, the new inspector general of Washington, D.C., under Scott.

Initially, Baker was responsible only for helping secure Lincoln’s safety in and around the capital. Even after the inauguration and the commencement of war that April, his duties were fairly mundane: recovering government horses, and securing shipping depots, train stations and abandoned Confederate property in Virginia. But meanwhile Scott formed the National Detective Bureau, and on February 15, 1862, Secretary of State William H. Seward transferred the Bureau to the War Department, then under Edwin M. Stanton. Baker brought nearly 60 subordinate detectives with him when he moved to the War Department.

C. Wyatt Evans, who has examined Secret Service accounts and written numerous articles on Baker, says the detective’s extensive travels and ability to hire so many subordinates so quickly were likely part of Seward’s efforts to establish a network of agents in the major cities, ports of entry and along the Canadian border. On March 30, 1862, Baker was appointed a special agent of the War Department, and the expenses paid to him and his network reveal he was aggressively tracking down and arresting individuals deemed disloyal—numbering in the hundreds.

But as the war continued, reports of Baker’s alleged solicitation of bribes and unsubstantiated finger-pointing started to appear in the newspapers. Perhaps officials would have continued to look the other way—after all, the spies and contraband-movers flitting in and out of Washington needed to be tracked—but he started to become a real nuisance. Baker’s men repeatedly ran afoul of military officers, according to Edwin Fischel. Brig. Gen. Marsena Patrick finally complained to Maj. Gen. Daniel Butterfield, saying, “[Baker’s] detectives have systematically robbed the officers and men of this Army of Clothing, subsistence, mess & other stores and necessaries.” He added, “...from my knowledge of their Chief ‘Baker’ I believe him to be capable of making any statement however false, & of committing any act, however criminal and damaging the Public Service to gratify his own passions.” Maj. Gens. Ambrose Burnside and Joseph Hooker reportedly looked the other way at Baker’s intrusions because the detective was aware of their own indiscretions, involving prostitutes and gambling.

LAFAYETTE BAKER CONSPIRACY THEORIST

☛ Did Edwin Stanton engineer President Lincoln’s assassination, as part of a plot to seize control of the U.S. government?

☛ Was Lafayette C. Baker, former chief of Stanton’s National Detective Police Force, poisoned to ensure his silence about that bizarre scheme?

THOSE QUESTIONS were raised by Robert H. Fowler, then editor of *Civil War Times Illustrated*. Fowler went so far as to devote his entire August

1961 issue to sensational theories based on research by Ray Neff, an Indiana

State University professor and Civil War buff who claimed to have discovered two ciphered messages by Baker in an 1864 volume of Colburn’s *United Secret Service Magazine*.

According to theories promulgated by Neff and others during the 1960s, the plot came about because Stanton, as well as Vice President Andrew Johnson and Congressional Radicals, had been furious that Lincoln planned to treat the South leniently during Reconstruction—so they enlisted Baker and Assistant Secretary of State Major Thomas Eckert to recruit a presidential assassin.

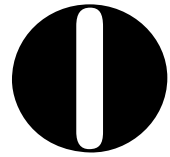
In the ciphers supposedly discovered by Neff, written in invisible ink and resurrected using tannic acid, Baker detailed how Stanton plotted Lincoln’s murder, conspiring with at least 11 members of Congress as well as a governor. Baker also wrote of “constantly being followed” and expressed fear for his life before dying in 1868. Conspiracy theorists seized on this story to speculate that Baker had actually died of arsenic poisoning rather than succumbing to meningitis, as certified by his doctors.

The provenance of Neff’s ciphers has never been confirmed, and numerous historians later criticized both Neff and Fowler for promoting unfounded conspiracy theories in the magazine. And 20 years later William C. Davis, a subsequent *Civil War Times Illustrated* editor, ran a series of editorials about the 1961 article, effectively debunking many of the outlandish claims that had been promoted via the story.



SILVER SHIELD

As head of the U.S. Military Detectives in 1865, Baker helped track down John Wilkes Booth and Dr. Samuel Mudd.



ON NOVEMBER 10, 1863, the *Washington Evening Star* reported Baker's provost marshal position had been eliminated. There were rumors that the detective had attempted to gather intelligence on his own boss, Stanton, by tapping telegraph wires—but it could also be that Baker's force was seen as superfluous. Baker himself was still paid by Stanton subordinates for various duties, and he even headed his own "First District Calvary" for awhile, though he was paid on an ad-hoc basis.

Shortly after Baker's formal separation from the War Department, he was indicted for trespass, as well as libel and false imprisonment of Treasury employee Dr. Stewart Gwynne, whom he had accused of stealing and put in Old Capitol penitentiary for three months. What Secretary of the Treasury Salmon P. Chase had intended to be a perfunctory audit, under pressure from New York Congressman James Brooks, turned out to be a disaster; Baker interviewed and harassed the Treasury staff for weeks on end. According to several newspapers, including the *Chicago Times*, Baker even hired prostitutes to testify that they had participated in orgies with Treasury employees.

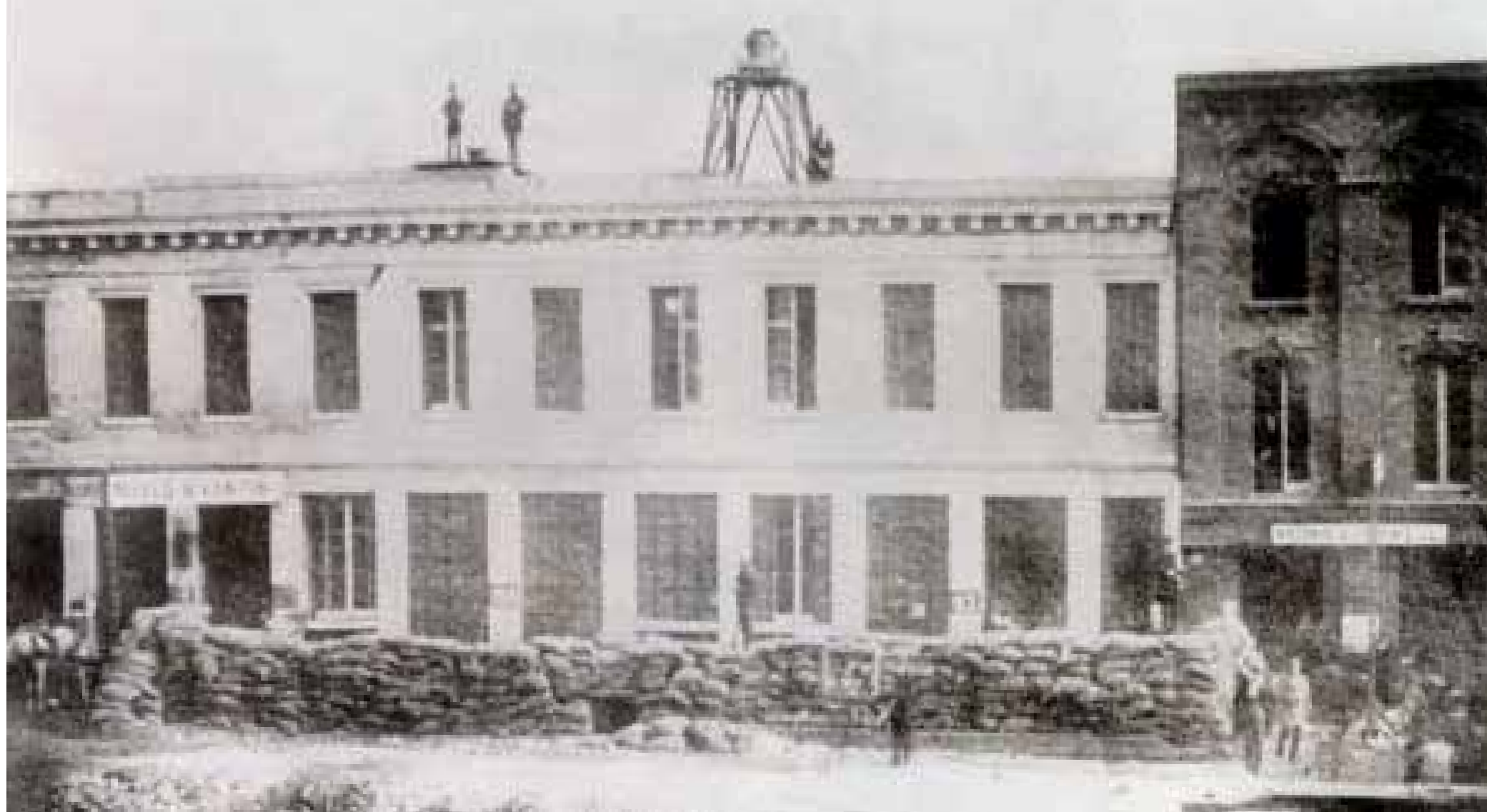
A congressional committee chaired by James A. Garfield that investigated those charges in June 1864 found Baker was very active during the whole investigation in assisting Brooks to find testimony, and that "nearly every witness summoned to prove the alleged immoralities in the Treasury was previously manipulated by him...a written abstract was made by him of what the testimony would be."

At one point just before Baker arrested Gwynne, he reportedly "arrested a funeral procession, took from the coffin the corpse a young lady, late an employee of the Treasury Department, charging that she had died in an attempt to procure an abortion, the result of immoralities in the Treasury Department." Not surprisingly, Chase and Stanton did not lend any support to Baker when that episode came to light. But Baker was not punished—other than being fined \$1.

The court of public opinion turned against Baker after those revelations. The once admiring *San Francisco Bulletin* reported: "He is sharp, shrewd, unscrupulous. He was for awhile our municipal police, while Curtis was Chief, but was expelled for what particular offense we do not remember. During his service, his house "was robbed" just as he had collected \$1,000 of license money." The article went on to say that Baker's mercantile business had solicited funds from businessmen and placed them on the "exchange in New York, which turned out to be utterly worthless." The paper also invited "the Administration" to look no further than San Francisco if it needed more testimony to his wickedness or untrustworthiness.

Baker's public career might have ended then had it not been for Lincoln's murder. Desperate times call for desperate measures, however; Stanton recalled Baker, who used his network to help corner John Wilkes Booth at Richard Garrett's farm. Baker was promoted to brigadier general as a result.

It is in connection with the assassination that the conspiracy theories involving Baker, Booth, Stanton, Seward and others later surfaced. One story is that Baker's men actually killed a fellow named Boyd, rather than Booth, but succeeded in passing Boyd's corpse off as the presidential assassin's. The myriad details of that plot are hard to follow, but it's easy to see that Baker's



FORT VIGILANCE

During Baker's membership in the San Francisco Committee of Vigilance, the vigilantes incarcerated and interrogated suspects inside this converted warehouse on Sacramento Street.

bizarre behavior in other cases could have supported such theories. It's also worth noting that Baker pursued a prolonged fight for the bulk of the reward money for capturing Booth in the press and with a congressional committee, and this public fracas undid any goodwill he had earned with Booth's capture. The resulting notoriety also led to speculation the detective had produced a corpse in order to obtain the lion's share of the reward.

Baker's subsequent escapades provided the newspapers with even more fodder. On November 16, 1865, a grand jury in the District of Columbia indicted him for

unlawfully imprisoning Joseph Cobb on charges of pardon brokering, and robbing Lucy, Cobb's wife. On March 28, 1866, Baker was found guilty of some of those charges, but once again was fined only \$1 plus costs. That same month he informed newspapers that he suspected Andersonville prison chief Henry Wirz would try to take his own life to martyr himself for the South. Then Baker claimed he had prevented Mrs. Wirz from slipping her husband a dose of strychnine while giving him a kiss in his Old Capitol cell. But Mrs. Wirz's attorney produced affidavits from witnesses who swore that she had actually been hundreds of miles away at the time.

The War Department eventually stopped paying Baker's expenses. And in January 1866, President Andrew Johnson had Baker escorted from the White House, after discovering that the former detective had been spying on him too.

Baker moved back to Philadelphia sometime before May 1867 and began working on a book of his "remembrances" with the Rev. J.T. Headly, and probably a few others. During many of his final days the former detective was often feverish and bedridden. He died on July 3, 1868, at age 42, of what his physician specified was meningitis.

Mrs. Baker would try for years to get her widow's pen-

sion increased. In the process, she had various doctors write affidavits stressing virtually the same thing—that her husband had not been "afflicted with any mental aberration of the mind" between his discharge from service and his death. Yet she simultaneously sought to connect his death to "mental excitement to which he was subjected while in the service." In retrospect, both types of testimonials seem to suggest that her late husband might not have been a very stable individual.

The question remains: Did the former chief of detectives write ciphers in a detective manual that was penned after his dismissal, alluding to a government conspiracy against Abraham Lincoln? Maybe, maybe not. But it is all too plausible, given the many enemies he had made during his career, that Baker believed government agents wanted to kill him. If there was anyone in Civil War history who was likely to make up such a story, it was Lafayette C. Baker—and he would have believed his own words.

Julia Bricklin last contributed to CWT in December 2013, when she profiled Thomas Brigham Bishop, "The Music Man."