
CHAPTER 8 — 1861
EPILOGUE



Montgomery C. Meigs, 1861 *Architect of the Capitol*



"View of the Capitol, Showing Present State of the Dome," 1861 *U.S. Senate Collection*



"The Inauguration of Abraham Lincoln as President of the United States, at the Capitol, Washington, March 4, 1861" *U.S. Senate Collection*

CHAPTER 8—1861

[FEB.] 20TH. To Washington, where I had again the happiness of embracing my wife and children. Finding them all well and rejoiced, like myself, to be once more together. As I left Washington on the 22nd of October, I have been just 4 months absent, less 2 days.

[FEB.] 21ST. To Engineer office. General Totten took me over to see the Secretary,¹ who received me most kindly. Complimented me upon my conduct and said he was glad to see me back again in Washington, in my right place.

He told me that Floyd had told the cabinet that he had a long rigamarole of a letter from Captain Meigs, that pestilent fellow who got trouble wherever he went, and that it was perfectly ridiculous that he wanted men and guns to defend the Tortugas and some heap of rocks, perfectly indefensible. And the cabinet, not being prepared to expect false representations from one of their colleagues, believed him, thought me a silly fellow, and did not read my letters.

Soon after Floyd's exposure, General Scott² came. One of the first things he called attention to was the great importance of holding with sufficient garrison and stores the fortress of the Tortugas and of great asset. Then Floyd's speech about my letters was told to him. He advised them to read my reports, that he had a letter from me which was very much to the point and not at all rigamarole. On reading them, Mr. Holt says he is astonished at the vision they showed. And with telegraph, loss of not a moment in sending the [steamship *Joseph Whitney*] to relieve me. They were under great concern. An expedition of which they had some concern for the city and harbor of Charleston should be ahead of them.

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¹ John Floyd had resigned as secretary of war on December 29, 1860. Joseph Holt (1807–1894), who had been postmaster general since March 1859, became secretary of war in January 1861.

² Winfield Scott (1786–1866) was general-in-chief of the army. Since 1859 he had been in the Pacific northwest dealing with the British over ownership of San Juan Island. Secretary Floyd had ignored his long-distance pleas to reinforce the southern forts. Scott returned to Washington in January 1861.

[FEB. 23] This evening, Mr. Lincoln,³ the President, arrived incog, having been advised by General Scott to come through Baltimore in this way in order to avoid the risk of a popular disturbance there. This is all much spoken of.

In the evening to the club. I met Bache, who asked me whether I intended to claim the Capitol. I said, "Of course. Why?" "Well, I think you are now in a position to be generous." I told him that I thought my complete restoration to the position from which Floyd and Walter, by wrong and intrigue, had removed me, necessary. That I would wait a few days for Captain Franklin to ask the Secretary to publish an order restoring me to my position at his request, as an act of justice. If this was not done, I should myself apply my powers of persuasion to bring it about. If I met Captain Franklin, I supposed he would at once do this. If that is done, he would stand clear from all blame or suspicion of having been a protege of Floyd. He would do it justly, perhaps generously. If not, I had no doubt that I should recover my position, and he must take the consequences. That I would wait a day or two longer. I had already waited about 3 days.

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[FEB.] 25TH. Today Mr. _____ came to see me and said that he had been told by Captain Franklin that if I wished him to take charge of the completion of the Cabin John Bridge,⁴ which he very much hoped I would, he could be spared for a sufficient time in each month from the duties at the Capitol to attend to this. This showed at once that Franklin had no idea of asking my restoration, and I sent him a note setting forth generally what I thought the true view of the case and asking his cooperation in it.

I visited Cabin John and ordered work recommenced there.

[FEB.] 26TH. Received this morning Captain Franklin's answer. He declines any cooperation and says that he thinks it would be a great injury to himself, that the world would say that he was put in the place by a dishonest Secretary of War and turned out by an honest _____ as soon as I got back.

Upon receipt of this letter, I went to the War Department and said to Mr. Holt, "Sir, you informed me that you brought me back to put me into my right place." He said that he had done so, that he wished to restore me to the position from which I have been removed by a

³ Abraham Lincoln (1809–1865), Whig then Republican, of Illinois had served in the House of Representatives, 1847–1849. At the time of this entry, he was president-elect, awaiting his inauguration on March 4, 1861.

⁴ Meigs had been placed back in charge of the aqueduct.

series of acts with which he had little sympathy, when he little understood, none at all, now that he thoroughly understood them.

I then gave him a narrative of my connection with the public board, Mr. Walter, Captain Franklin, Mr. Floyd, etc., and he promised to issue the orders to restore me.

[FEB.] 27TH. Today I called again upon Mr. Holt, who had been so occupied the day before as to be unable to issue the necessary orders restoring me to the charge of the public building.

I showed Franklin's letter to the Secretary, and he said that it removed the only regret he had in the act, that it put the refusal to give up a place which justly belonged to me upon someone else, which he had no regret at overruling.

I asked him to give Franklin the place vacated by Bowman's orders to West Point;⁵ that though there was something in the letter of Franklin which seemed to me to be regret, still there was probably at his disposal no officer who by long experience in construction and lately in architecture was so well fitted for this position. He promised to do this and signed the orders accordingly. I drew them up.

I gave the drafts to Mr. [Denham] and told him to hand them to Captain Franklin, [say] that I sent him some papers which I trusted and believed would not be disagreeable to him.

[FEB.] 28TH. At noon, met Franklin at his office and took charge of the public building. I spent some little time in the Senate and went also to see the Secretary and the President.

Mr. Buchanan received me very kindly. I told him I wished to thank him for much personal kindness and for having done me justice, I believed, as soon as he discovered thoroughly the character of the man who had persecuted me.

General Scott, when I called upon him upon my first return, I thought would have embraced me, he seemed so glad to see me. Indeed, all the people seem to sympathize with me.

MARCH 1. In Congress. The Vice President promised me a good committee of conference upon the appropriations for the Capitol which have been rejected by the House and will be insisted upon by the Senate.

I went to bid farewell to the President, who, poor man, seems broken up. He is to be pitied, for, though weak and unfit for his place, I be-

⁵ Alexander H. Bowman had been in charge of constructing the extension of the Treasury building. He had recently been appointed superintendent of the U.S. Military Academy at West Point.

lieve that so far as his weak character, honesty and policy went, he wished to save his country from disunion.

The Secretary got an order signed revoking all orders interfering with my authority as defined in Davis' original instructions.

[MARCH] 2ND. Appropriations for Capitol \$250,000 passed.

Made the official calls upon the President and Mr. Holt.

I received today the order by Mr. Holt revoking all orders interfering with my authority for the public works as established by Secretary Davis before Floyd began his machinations.

[Printed material inserted.]⁶

[MARCH] 3RD. To Capitol, Senate in evening. Congress in session. Exciting times, these. The country trembles in the throes of death.

[MARCH] 4TH. I stood in the crowd at the inauguration. So near that I heard much of the inaugural. It seems to be patriotic _____. Mr. Lincoln declares his intention to also occupy and possess the forts in the possession of the United States. To attack nobody but to resist all attacks upon the United States. To be patient, lenient, and to endeavor by pacific policy to bring all misguided people to a proper sense of their duty.

The general impression seems to be that we have at last found that we have a government. The troops were under arms in parts of the city, and the whole thing passed more quietly than usual.

* * *

[MARCH] 6TH. Received Mr. Walter's refusal to acknowledge my authority to dismiss him.

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[MARCH] 12TH. Called upon the President, Secretary of War and Navy, with officers.

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[MARCH 14] I received order of Secretary [of War Simon] Cameron disapproving my order dismissing Walter.

[MARCH] 16TH. Writing an answer to Mr. Cameron, saying that I had official authority to dismiss Mr. Walter and full and sufficient reason

⁶ An article from an unidentified newspaper reporting that on March 2 Meigs had written to Walter to dismiss him from his post at the Capitol. Walter responded that he held the position by presidential appointment, and Meigs had no authority to dismiss him.

for exercising that authority. Had a talk with John Lee. Club at Franklin's.

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[MARCH] 18TH. To see Mr. Seward, Secretary of State, on Cameron and Walter. He is a friend.

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[MARCH 19] To Silver Spring to see Mr. Blair⁷ to consult with him about Mr. Cameron and my letters and Walter's case. In the evening to the reservoir, where some 70 or 80 are at work.

[MARCH] 21ST. To War Department, where I saw Mr. Cameron about the contract for the [dome] work, which was illegally made and is extravagant in its price. Talked with him about Mr. Walter. He declares that he intends to support me and thinks Walter might be permitted to draw his pay. He shall be subordinate to me.

* * *

[MARCH] 23RD. Paid much money for Capitol and Post Office. Lovely work on Cabin John Bridge.

* * *

[MARCH 25] Leutze called about decorating the Capitol at my request.

Went to Brady's [studio] by request and had my photograph taken. A good likeness.

* * *

[MARCH] 29TH. To Great Falls. When we came home, I found a request from the Secretary of State to come to see him. I went, and with him to the President, who wished to see me. He said that they were in a difficulty and he wished to have the President talk with some man who would speak of what he knew not of politics in military operations and one who could be set in the field. He said that they had Generals Scott and Totten, but no one would think of putting either of those old men on horseback.

The President talked freely with me, and I told him that men enough could be found to volunteer to endeavor to relieve Fort Sumter, but that persons of higher position and rank than myself thought it not to be attempted, that this was not the place to make the war, etc. He

⁷Montgomery Blair (1813–1883) served as postmaster general, 1861–1864.

asked me whether Fort Pickens⁸ could be held. I told him certainly, if the Navy would do its duty and had not lost it already.

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[MARCH] 31ST. As I was about to start for church this morning, Colonel Keyes,⁹ General Scott's military secretary, called and said that Mr. Seward had sent for me. We went to his house, where he requested us to put down upon paper an estimate and project for relieving and holding Fort Pickens in consultation with General Scott, and to bring it to the President before 4 p.m.

I learned from the President himself the other day that he had verbally directed General Scott to hold all these forts and make arrangements to reinforce them on the 5th of March. That about the 10th, finding nothing done, he had thought it best to put himself on record and had repeated the order in writing. That he learned that the *Brooklyn* had gone to Key West, and as she had the troops [for Fort] Pickens on board, he supposed that his order had fizzled out. That General Scott had told him he did not think that Pickens ought to be held and this had given him a cold shock. He had not slept the night before he saw me—that is, Thursday night. Felt much relieved at my assurance that the place could be held against all opposition by proper arrangements.

Keyes and myself went to the Engineers office, wrote out, after looking over the plans of Pickens, our views, compared notes, agreed, and were at the President's at 2½ p.m. Told him that we found we had not time to see General Scott and be back with the result before 4 p.m. and had called to report.

He and Mr. Seward directed us to read our papers, and then ordered us to see General Scott. "Tell him," says the President, "that I wish this thing done and not to let it fail unless he can show that I have refused him something he asked for as necessary. I depend upon you gentlemen to push this thing through."

* * *

[APRIL 1] To the President's. Got Lieutenant D. D. Porter¹⁰ ordered to go to New York, take any vessel ready and suitable, and proceed to sea and not draw rein until he was inside of Pensacola harbor, to capture the _____ steamer and to prevent any boat crossing the harbor with troops to attack Pickens.

⁸Fort Pickens was at the entrance to Pensacola harbor in Florida.

⁹Erasmus D. Keyes (1810–1895) was a soldier and West Point graduate who served as military secretary to General Winfield Scott, 1860–1861.

¹⁰David D. Porter (1813–1891) was a naval officer who was then in Washington.

I sent a dispatch to commandant of Brooklyn Navy Yard to get the *Powhatan* ready for sea with the least possible delay. This was signed by the President.

Hard at work all day making orders for the signature of the President and for others. We had much discussion as to who was to command this expedition. The Secretary of State wished me to be promoted and take command; and when General Scott showed him that this could not be done, as the law would not allow it, he asked me to go. I told him I was ready for any duty, in any place, in any capacity, at any pay, so long as it was in my country's service.

General Scott said it was cruel to ask me to go away from these great works and that in a rank so low as that which my captain's commission must give me.

Seward said any arrangement which I could make for carrying on the works in my absence would be carried out. To this he pledged himself, and I got no pay anyhow, that fame would come from Pickens as well as from the Capitol, and the Capitol might stop; there was no use in a Capitol unless we had a country.

* * *

[In the entries omitted here, Meigs described his expedition to reinforce Fort Pickens. On April 7 he embarked from New York on the steamship Atlantic with five companies of troops, including sappers and miners, light artillery, and seventy-three horses. On April 13, the ship arrived in Key West, Florida, where it picked up guns, howitzers, and ammunition. The expedition then continued to the Tortugas for additional supplies, including a scow for landing artillery, before heading to Pensacola and Fort Pickens, arriving on April 16. The fleet of Confederate ships anchored nearby did not attempt to prevent them from reinforcing the fort with troops and horses. Porter and the Powhatan arrived on April 18, and several other ships brought additional reinforcements, guns, and supplies. On April 23, having ensured that the fort was secure and protected by several warships, Meigs and the Atlantic left for the return voyage to New York. At Key West they learned that the Confederates had attacked Fort Sumter on April 12 and 13, that the president had called for 75,000 troops, and that the nation was now at war. After stopping in Havana for coal, the ship reached New York on May 1.]

MAY 1ST. Arrived in N. Y. The papers received at the landing showed that the country is in arms. Thousands of men are hastening to Washington to defend the capital against the rebels who threaten to take it, and the bridges on the railroads to Baltimore have been burned and communication is now by Annapolis, having been opened by steamer and by the New York 7th Regiment and the Massachusetts 8th. History gets too full for me to follow it here.

* * *

[Meigs returned to Washington via Annapolis, having spent the night with family in Philadelphia.]

[MAY] 3RD. This morning to Washington, which we reached about 9½. . . .

I went at once to the Department of State to report my return to Mr. Seward, who complimented me upon my success and told me to see the President. I found the President with all but 2 members of his cabinet assembled and had a talk with them. They showed great confidence in me and treated me with much consideration.

Then to General Scott, who said he was writing against time and could not then see me.

[MAY] 4TH. At work about the Department to get the proper ones (officers) sent out to the Gulf.

* * *

[MAY 8] . . . The country is in a flame.

* * *

[Meigs discussed with various cabinet members the capacity in which he could be most useful to the Union. He felt he would do better to remain as an engineer rather than to accept the suggestion that he be made a "colonel of a marching regiment."]

[MAY 15] We [Meigs and Postmaster General Montgomery Blair] discussed the question for some time. He said that he thought I would have to take the place of Quartermaster General, for I could be useful to him. He had, as Seward told me, scolded him for cheapening me by offering me a colonelcy, and told me Seward thought that I would not of course take that.

I told him the administration must decide for themselves in what place they would put me. I should do my duty if I could in any place but would not ask for any.

[On May 15, 1861, President Lincoln promoted Meigs to brigadier-general and made him quartermaster general of the Union army. Meigs' performance in this role proved crucial to the Union victory.

[Before taking up his duties as quartermaster-general, Meigs shut down work on the Capitol. It remained suspended during the first year of the Civil War, except that Janes, Fowler, Kirtland and Co. continued to erect the ironwork for the dome. In 1862 work resumed on the Capitol extension and dome, with Thomas Walter in charge, but under the supervision of the Inte-

rior Department, which was less burdened than the War Department at the time.

[The work continued throughout the war, and in 1863 the dome was sufficiently complete that Crawford's Statue of Freedom could be hoisted into place, symbolizing the continuity of the Union even in the midst of civil war.

[When the new secretary of the Interior in Andrew Johnson's administration gave Commissioner of Public Buildings Benjamin B. French authority over all public buildings in Washington in 1865, Thomas Walter resigned as architect. The work went on, however, and in January 1866 the dome was finally complete, its canopy adorned with Brumidi's painting, The Apotheosis of Washington.

[Remaining as quartermaster general of the army until 1882, Meigs oversaw construction of a number of government buildings. In 1867 he was finally able to travel to Europe and view its art and architecture. After he retired, he designed and built the Pension Office building in Washington, completed in 1886, which is now the National Building Museum. Meigs continued to keep a diary throughout his life.]