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CONGRESS.

HOUSE of REPRESENTATIVES.

FRIDAY, April 23, 1802.

Debate on the Bill for abolishing the Mint.

In Committee of the whole, L. R. Morris in the chair.

Mr. Giles observed that when he had laid certain resolutions on the table respecting this subject, it was said the House had not sufficient information on which to act. To obtain this information he had suffered them to lay. The information is now received. He believed that information would satisfy the House of the little utility of the Mint. He believed that from the effects of a peace in Europe, we should have silver enough, and that we really had copper enough to serve for several years. There was another circumstance, which made it necessary for the House to act on the subject this session. After the 3d of March the establishment will have to be moved to this place. There was also another reason for acting. The director states the implements to be considerably out of order. Rather than incur the expence of these repairs, he thought it best for the United States to disembarrass themselves of this expence, and save an annual sum of 20,000 dollars. This would also afford a relief to the revenue after repealing the internal taxes.

The committee rose, and reported the bill without amendment.

The report of the committee was immediately taken up.

Mr. S. Smith. When this subject was formerly before the house, I said "that the gentleman from Virginia was warranted in saying, that the gold coin of the United States was finer than some other in circulation—for the director of the mint, in his report for 1800, stated the American gold to be 27.42 dollars on 1000 penney weights finer than the Spanish doubloon; that the same report stated the expence of the mint establishment at 20,986 dollars, the gain on copper for the same year, 5,050 dollars, leaving the real cost of the mint for that year 15,936 dollars—the whole copper coin for 1800 being only 29,279 dollars, from which it will appear that each cent (as was understood) would cost the United States half a dollar—this however was on the presumption that little gold or silver would in future be offered for coinage. In answer a gentleman from Connecticut (Mr. Dana) said, that I was mistaken if I meant to say that each cent had cost the United States half a dollar, that if I had said each dollar's worth of cents had cost half a dollar I should have been more correct. In answer I said that every gentleman must have seen from the statement I gave in figures of the quantity coined and the cost of the mint establishment for a year, that I meant to say that each dollar's worth of cents had cost half a dollar, and that if I had said otherwise, it ought to have been considered as a 'lapsus linguae', and not as an attempt to mislead.

I have considered it proper, in justice to myself, to repeat what I had said on a former occasion on the same subject, because the reporter of that debate had been extremely inaccurate, owing perhaps to his not being accustomed to the taking of debates*. It will be remembered that a similar mistake to that made by me, had been made the same day by the gentleman from Connecticut (Mr. Griswold) from Delaware (Mr. Bayard) and from Virginia (Mr. Giles). Indeed it was not easy to avoid such mistakes in the warmth of debate.

I have now before me the last report of the director of the mint, by which I am confirmed in my former opinion, the expence of the establishment has, exceeded, even my expectations as to the cents: again I repeat what I formerly said—that the secretary of the treasury may be empowered to contract with the bank, or with individuals of the United States, who shall be obliged to stamp the cents within the United States, for the quantity required annually. I observe that the director imports from England the planchettes, or pieces the size of the cent, and stamps them at the mint; the same will be done by the banks or individuals without any cost or charge on the government, and we may put down an establishment that has cost the United States 30,000 dollars per annum.

Mr. Dana. The gentleman from Maryland, I presume, has reference to me. I have a tolerable recollection of what passed on that occasion, though not a complete one, and I conceive the statement of the gentleman from Maryland (Mr. S. Smith) to be perfectly correct. It will be recollected that after the same mistake had been made by my colleague, and other gentlemen, that I rose and said I was pefectly satisfied that when the gentlemen from Maryland said that each cent had cost the United States half a dollar, it was a mistake, and made without any intention whatever of misleading the judgment of the House.

As some observations have been made on the coinage of the precious metals as symbols of royalty, and as an idea has been thrown out that the copper coinage ought to be effected in foreign countries, I will refer to the report of the then secretary of state, to shew the ideas which he entertained on this subject. [Mr. Dana here quoted this document.] I consider this as a complete answer to the coins being made in a foreign country.

But my great objection is that the bill destroys the whole establishment; and that it does this in so instantaneous a manner that it is scarcely possible to sell to the least advantage the implements of the institution; and because the copper coinage is rather a source of profit than loss, as government may give this description of coins a value far beyond the current price of the metal. I am not tenacious of the whole establishment; but I should wish to see some provision, at least for a copper coinage, made before the whole establishment is broken down. As to the law for fixing the mint at Philadelphia expiring next session, that can be very easily obviated. To do this it will be only necessary to continue in force the act lately passed for keeping the mint at Philadelphia.

Mr. Giles said that all gentlemen united in opinion that this establishment could only be maintained by a heavy charge to the government. And if we turn to the report of the director, we will find that he himself supposes the gold & silver coinage not now necessary. This is the most excessive part of the system. We must, then, if we keep up the institution, expend annually 20,000 dollars, and find that after the expenditure there is very little to be done.

As to the expence of the copper coinage as stated by gentlemen it is a mere estimate; whereas the fact is that about 30,000 dollars a year have been expended for 10 years; why continue this expence? To coin bullion when we have no bullion to coin.

The gentleman from Connecticut has read an extract from the report of the Secretary of State (the now President) and he infers an opinion of that character that coining precious metals is an act of national sovereignty. I suppose not to do it, is also an act of sovereignty.—The truth is, the sovereignty consists merely in the power to do or not to do it. I suppose gentlemen are for laying out 30,000 dollars annually, barely to shew that such a power exists. I believe there is another act of dignified national sovereignty, the act of passing wholesome laws; national sovereignty in this case does not consist in making the impression of our laws ourselves, but in having the power to direct it to be done. It would be extraordinary, if in this case as the other, we were to lay out 30,000 dollars to shew that we possess this attribute of national sovereignty. As to the expending thousands of dollars, every body knows we do that every day on a liberal scale. That, therefore, is no argument with me.

As to the copper coins, I am told there is no deficiency of them. They are, I believe, of very little consequence where I live, for the people won't take them. But I believe there is a sufficient quantity for the country.—But if not this bill does not preclude the obtaining more. I have no objection to making a contract with the bank to supply us with cents, and I believe it may be done in this way without costing us a dollar. The gentleman from Connecticut states the profit that may be derived from depreciating the coin. This, it is true, has often been tried, but it has generally failed. It certainly could not be far extended; for it would soon be discovered to be a mere cheat.

As far as the institution has heretofore gone, out of 30,000 annually expended about 5000 dollars has been saved by the copper coin: I believe that profit will induce the bank to undertake the coinage. At present the copper coin is impressed on metal of the same size that is imported here—and the only thing done here is to make the impression. This the bank can do as well as the government.

Mr. Giles said he believed the idea of the gentleman from Maryland (Mr. S. Smith) correct, that our gold coin was so pure that it had tempted workers in metal to transmute it, and he believed this effect would continue so long as the present law existed. The effect will be that the mint will be refining the precious metals barely for the benefit of workers in those metals. This, he believed, was the reason why we had so little coin made from the precious metals; and the consequence will be that in a short time we shall have very little of them. For these reasons he believed the establishment useless, and that the single question was whether we would abolish an useless establishment, or keep it up at an annual expence of 30,000 dollars. If, however, it was the wish of the house to retain it, he would acquiesce, though he thought it best to act up to the principles on which they had started.

Mr. Dana disclaimed all thoughts of adulterating the precious metals. His remarks had applied exclusively to the copper coinage.

Mr. Eustis said it appeared to him that in this establishment much money was paid for but little service rendered. But as this bill had been suffered to lie for a long time, he had entertained the belief that the gentleman who had introduced it, had contemplated the retaining some of the offices, while the expences were reduced. Mr. E. conceived this would be the best policy, as there were men employed in the institution who could not learn in a day or year what it was necessary for them to know. If such men shall hereafter be wanted, they cannot be easily got. It appeared to him that every establishment is responsible for the coin that bears its own stamp. Now, suppose coin is imported, who is to determine its purity? We must have some responsible officer to examine it. It has always appeared to him very desirable to have a coin between the amount of bank notes and copper coin. Such a result certainly should not cost 30,000 dollars; he supposed it might be reduced to 10,000. He believed the time would come when we will have a gold and silver coinage, not from a sentiment of national pride, but from its utility. At present bank paper is very useful; but the time may come when it shall be thought proper to substitute coin for it. The idea of importing copper coin had never been agreeable to him. He believed it absolutely necessary to have an assay-master. He would, therefore, rather that the bill should not pass, if not amended; though he wished a reduction of the establishment.

Mr. Griswold—I do not think the gentleman correct in the view he has taken. I believe the expences hereafter will be much lower than they have been heretofore, from the cost of the implements—But gentlemen ought to take into view the benefit of the nation derived from this establishment. If bullion be not coined here, it must be sent to Europe, and all the charges of transportation and insurance will be so much expence to us—If gentlemen will attend to the sum coined last year, they will find that the whole expence of the establishment is saved to the nation. If the coins are too fine they may be reduced; for there is no necessity of having them finer than the coins of England, with whom we have principal intercourse.

With regard to the expences of coining, I differ from the gentleman from Maryland (Mr. S. Smith) who supposes every dollar of cents cost half a dollar. On the other hand I believe there is a profit. I have, indeed, no doubt of it. I believe government is a gainer from that coinage. I know government can render itself a gainer, as the value of the cent when coined is much greater than before; for with regard to the base metals it is proper for government to impress what value it pleases, as they are confined to our own internal commerce. Of course we may subject the copper coinage to such regulations as not to be productive of expence.

It is well known that the amount of the copper coinage is small. If the establishment is destroyed, it will be lessened, and this will be attended with infinite embarrassment to a certain description of citizens. Is it not then essential, at any rate, to pass this bill with some reservations? The great expence is an objection to the establishment. But let us wait, at least for one year, to find whether this expence will not be greatly reduced by peace—and let us postpone the bill to next session.

Mr. G. concluded by offering a motion to this effect.

Mr. Giles. I think the house prepared to act at this time. Yet, though I shall vote against the postponement, I shall be perfectly satisfied with it, if acceptable to the house. Nor do I object to a regulation to save the copper coinage. I rather believe this will be the better plan; though I believe this cannot be done this session, as it will require a greater knowledge of the necessary offices for it than we can possess.

I differ with gentlemen as to expence. I wish we could obtain a reimbursement of the expence already incurred. I do not like these ideal gains—nor do I believe that bullion has ever been remitted to Europe to be coined, and returned in the shape of English guineas. If remitted, I believe it has been done to pay our debts. I believe the value of the coin is altogether ideal. It is not the shape, but the intrinsic value by which it is estimated. I, therefore, consider the expence of coinage as so much loss, and infer that we ought to dispense with the establishment.

It is optional in the house to postpone the bill to the next session, or make provision now for a copper coinage. I am perfectly willing to give some officer the power of contracting for a copper coinage. This is the only thing we can now do.

Mr. S. Smith said, that he was against the postponement. He wished the subject decided on during the present session. On examining the last report of the director of the mint, he found that the whole quantity of gold silver and copper coined from the commencement of the mint, until February last, amounted agreeably to the report only to three millions and forty five thousand dollars. The coinage of which had actually cost the United States 296,957 dols. being nearly 10 per cent on the whole amount coined. If the motion to postpone should not succeed, I will move to recommit to a select committee, in order to bring in a section to provide for the coinage of cents and half cents by contract.

Mr. Elmendorf said he rose to state the result of his enquiries. On making enquiry of the secretary of the treasury, it was stated that government had a great quantity of copper on hand, which it was found very difficult to dispose of. He gave this information to shew that no inconvenience would result from having no new copper coinage during this and the ensuing year. The report states that the expence of importing cents is not more than 20l. per ton. This is so much less expensive than to impress the coins ourselves, that I should prefer importing them.

The question of postponement to the next session, was then taken, and lost—Ayes 32—Noes 57.

Mr. S. Smith then moved a recommitment of the bill to a select committee.

Carried—Ayes 49.

* Allusion is here made to the Washington Federalist.

Character of Edanus Burke, taken from the Charleston City Gazette.

Died, on Tuesday, the 30th day of March, in the 59th year of his age, the honorable *Edanus Burke*, one of the chancellors of this state. He was a native of Galway in Ireland. In the death of this great and good man, the community in which he lived has sustained a severe and afflicting loss; his friends have to mourn an amiable companion, and America, a patriot of prominent character and distinguished eminence. Fired with an ardent love of liberty, at an early period of life he abandoned his professional pursuits in a neighbouring country, and joined the American army with that zeal and fearless spirit, which ever characterised the energies of his undaunted soul. In his pure and elevated mind every consideration was deemed subordinate to the freedom and happiness of man. The first murmurs of the revolution wakened in his feelings congenial sentiments of resistance to tyranny, and marked distinctly the part he was to take. Actuated by such generous sympathies, he threw life and fortune into the common stock of suffering humanity, and never swerved from the straight line of a republican soldier, 'till the glorious object of the contest was secured and America free.' "Though the connection with her, (to use his own expressions) brought him little besides the affection she inspired; though the changes in her health and appearance were often for the worst, yet it made no change in him; and neither in feeling, word or deed, from the fidelity he pledged to her, did he deviate a moment." When the memorable epocha of independence arrived, he returned to perform the judicial duty of a station assigned to him by the confidence of his country. From the relaxed and unsettled state of things, just emerging from revolution, and amidst a conflict of revengeful and malignant passions, springing from the seeds of those habits, superinduced by war, the functions of a judge were at that time both difficult and dangerous, and the laws not easy of execution. The political passions of the people, so agitated by so fierce a storm, did not suddenly subside. Before the fervor inspired by the times could evaporate and the public temper assume its natural serenity, the administration of justice was contemned, opposed and vilified. Associated on the bench with colleagues of unshaken firmness, the licentious were appalled, and the disorderly reclaimed to just submission and obedience. In those moments which succeeded the revolution, when the war was over and before the public mind could feel, in its regenerate form, the force and restraint of laws; when too many were found to mistake the claims of justice for the violation of freedom; when their arms, the instruments of their independence and companions in an immortal struggle, were yet in their hands; the personal intrepidity of the judge was necessary to the protection of the court. Our judicial annals will testify to the world his conduct in emergencies of this kind, and how influential he was, with others, in restoring tranquility, in inculcating respect to authority and promoting general harmony. He continued to discharge his trust till his appointment to the bench of the court of equity, in 1799. In these departments, to a mind strictly independent and scrupulously impartial, was united a heart full of justice and philanthropy. His perception was prompt; his attention strong and vigilant; his judgment accurate; his reasoning sound, yet perspicacious; his sensibility was not inferior to these. To the accused, his countenance seemed always rather lighted up with the complacent smiles of a father, than exhibiting the severity of a judge. To the innocent he was a protector; to the unfortunate a benefactor; to the poor and fatherless a friend. "Large was his bounty and his soul sincere." They will long, very long remember the generous hand which so often relieved their distress, and the manly eye which shed so many tears over their miseries! In musing over these virtues, they will not forget the refined and delicate nature of his charity; which, while it mitigated want in many a sinking heart, stamped a higher character on benevolence.

As a public man he participated in the service and shared in the honours of his country. He was for many years a member of the state legislature, and distinguished himself by the opposition he made in the famous Jacksonborough assembly, on the questions of confiscation and banishment—He was elected a member of the first Congress under the federal constitution.

In the character of Mr. Burke the biographer will find rich and abundant materials for future fame. This short sketch on an event so recent, cannot do justice to the fulness of his singular merit—Even the warmest emotions of friendship, on an occasion like this, cannot summon together the diversified traits of his valuable and excellent life; it must be left to history. The most grateful trait to his memory will be a faithful portrait of him, modelled upon those circumstances and features of character which have rendered him deservedly eminent and greatly beloved.

His integrity was stern, erect, inflexible; his sense of honor lofty and heroic; his love of honesty and truth strikingly conspicuous; his reputation for all was universal—His enmities were like those of other men, but his friendships were eternal—In the great and interesting qualities necessary for the latter, he was inferior to no man—Dissimulation and deceit stood aloof at an immeasurable distance from his presence—Gift-