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HISTORY
OF THE
Last Session of Congress.

[Continued]

Columbia.

On the 26th of January a bill was reported, for establishing the government of the Territory of Columbia, composed of a legislature of one branch with 25 members, 7 whereof to be chosen by the taxable citizens of the district east of Rock Creek, 7 from the district west of Rock Creek, and 11 by the county of Alexandria; of a governor to be appointed by the President of the United States; and of judges with a tenure of office during life, unless removed by the President on the application of two successive legislatures.

On the 29th of March, the order of the day was called for on this bill, when Mr. T. Morris moved to postpone its consideration until the 4th Monday in November. This motion was supported by Messrs. Nicholson and Dennis, on the ground that the provisions of the bill were disagreeable to the inhabitants of the district, and that they would be oppressive and expensive, and prevailed without any opposition.

Various projects of laws on this subject were afterwards started in each branch of the legislature. But owing to the extreme difficulty and delicacy of the object, and still more, perhaps, owing to the apathy of the members, they all failed of success. Resort was, however, at last had to the act of incorporation for the City of Washington, which was passed, not without considerable opposition, particularly from the federal side of the Senate, in which body it was so shockingly mangled, as to exhibit probably the most imperfect system ever devised by a legislative body. As, however, the greater part of its imperfections can only have been the offspring of inattention, it may be expected that Congress will unhesitatingly hereafter apply its hand to its improvement and correction.

The situation of the district of Columbia ought not to be dismissed without remark. Her degraded political condition, exhibiting the humiliating spectacle of a body of citizens deprived of all their political rights, in the midst of a nation glorying in its freedom, claims the early attention of the legislature and the people. Even should the principle in its present limited application be considered harmless, it ought to be remembered that it furnishes a precedent for more extensive encroachments upon political rights. It is far, however, from being harmless. A government, surrounded by 20,000 slaves, dependent upon its bounty, can answer no good end, while it may issue in effects alarming to the general freedom.

Salaries.

On the 29th of January, Mr. Alston moved a resolution, which, after a short debate on the mode of reference, was carried without a division, directing the committee of revisal and unfinished business to enquire into the expediency of continuing in force, for a longer time, the whole, or any part of an act entitled "An act to augment the salaries of certain officers therein mentioned," passed March 2 1799, which act expired the 2d of March 1802, and that the committee be authorised to report such alterations in the salaries of said officers, as to them may seem advisable.

On the 9th of February Mr. Davenport, from the committee appointed on the above object, brought in a bill to continue in force an act to augment the salaries of certain officers therein mentioned, which was referred to a committee of the whole, who took it up on the 24th of March, and agreed to it with an amendment limiting its duration to two, instead of three years, as originally in the bill.

On the ensuing day the house took up the report of the committee, and agreed to it; but not without debate.

The bill, thus amended, revived, and continued in force for two years, the act of the 2d of March 1799, which had expired by its own limitation on the 2d of March 1802. By this last law the salaries of the secretaries of the four heads of department, the attorney-general, the comptroller, the auditor, and register of the treasury, the treasurer, commissioner of the revenue, the accountant of the war and navy departments, and the post master, and assistant postmaster-general, were augmented.

Mr. John C. Smith moved to introduce into the bill a specification of the salary allowed to each officer, instead of reviving the act of March 1799, in general terms.

This motion was supported by Messrs. John C. Smith, Dana, Griswold, Elmer, Huger, Morris, Goddard, and Bacon; and opposed by Messrs. Gregg, S. Smith, Nicholson, Giles and Varnum.

Those who supported the motion contended that no analogous instance to the present bill could be found; that there was no instance of a law that had actually expired being revived, and taking effect from the period of expiration; that the law intended to be restored had expired on the 2d of March last; and that the present law was in fact a new proposition to augment the salaries of several of the heads of departments from 3,500 to 5,000 dollars, &c.—That though they had no objection to continue most of the salaries at their augmented amount, there might be some of them that did not bear a proper proportion to the rest; that this was actually the case with respect to the secretary of the navy and of war, and the attorney general; the former of which were not sufficiently high, while the latter was too high; that many of the present members of the House were not in the legislature when these compensations were fixed, and that they ought to have an opportunity of comparing them with each other; that though the present secretary of the treasury had himself voted against this increase of salary, that could be no inducement with them to vote against it; that if it were meant by gentlemen who brought in the bill, to conceal from the people that these salaries were augmented by the present legislature, they would be deceived; that they would, on the other hand, gain credit by an open avowal of the fact; if this was not done, it would be said, here are gentlemen who have been declaiming against high salaries until they obtain the offices of the government, and then they allow these high salaries, and attempt to conceal the allowance; that the late salaries being predicated upon a state of war, might perhaps be too high for permanent salaries, and if so, required reduction; and that in order to determine the point, each salary should appear on the face of the bill.

Those who opposed the motion denied the accuracy of the precedents alluded to by gentlemen on the other side; and contended that all similar acts to the present had been revived in a similar style; that this had been invariably and frequently the case; they professed themselves astonished at hearing it said that the present course pursued was unfair; if unfair, gentlemen had themselves set the example; an example set in every deliber[ative] body in the world, practised in the [Bri]tish parliament, and it was believe[d in] every body where the parliamentary mode of transacting business was adopted, nor was it believed that it precluded any proposition of amendment; as to the salaries, it was deemed correct to continue them, without alteration, as they had for several years stood, and as they had been fixed by the gentlemen who now opposed the bill—If there was any disposition to vary them, the objections of gentlemen might apply. With respect to the compensation allowed to the attorney-general, it was the same with that which had been permanently fixed; an additional compensation had been allowed him for prosecuting claims under the British treaty, but that sum was not included in the salary allowed in the bill; that as to the imputation attempted to be fixed, of a disposition to conceal from the people the effects of this bill, it was absurd, as the people were well acquainted with the details of the law to which this bill referred, and no misapprehension could take place, except from intentional deception.

The amendment of Mr. Smith was lost—Yeas 37—Nays 46.

On the next day the bill was read a third time and passed by 50 Yeas to 22 Nays, after a debate, in which it was advocated by Messrs Dawson, Smilie, Alston, Bacon, Nicholson, Elmer and Claiborne; and opposed by Messrs. Goddard, T. Morris, Tallmage, and Hastings.

We shall not further detain the reader by a detailed notice of the arguments urged on this occasion. The public mind is too enlightened to be the victim of party stratagem, nor can it refrain from reflecting, whenever this paltry subject shall be noticed, that those who opposed the continuance of the old salaries were the very men who originally voted them to their political friends. Nor can it escape remark, that there is a great difference between voting an augmentation of salary, and for a continuance of salary once augmented. When this view of the subject is dispassionately taken, it will be seen what claim to credit attached to the charge of inconsistency thrown on the republican side of the house, and how far the federal side forfeited all claim to that virtue by their conduct on this occasion. One fact ought not here to suppressed. It is a truth that there is no salary office under the government of the United States that is a source of emolument to the citizen who, free from an indulgence in luxury, lives on a scale sufficiently liberal to command the comforts of life, and the intercourses of society.

With these remarks we shall dismiss, after a concise notice, an attempt made about the same period, to impress on the public the existence of a solicitude to lighten their burthens by a reduction of the daily allowance of six dollars made to the members of the two houses. This was occasioned by a motion of Mr. Bacon to appoint a committee to enquire into the expediency of reducing the compensation of the Senators and Representatives.

Although nearly every member that took the floor declared the existing compensation to be reasonable, yet a succession of propositions, whether serious or ludicrous we pretend not to say, ostensibly to reduce it, was made. Mr. Bayard proposed a reduction of the daily allowance to four dollars—Mr. Davis moved to strike out four and insert two—Mr. Bayard agreed to conform his motion to that of Mr. Davis—Mr. S. Smith, to test the disinterested patriotism of gentlemen, proposed one dollar, or an entire abolition of all compensation; when, on motion of Mr. John C. Smith, to the apparent satisfaction of the house, who had become disgusted with the legerdemain of party, the motion was referred to a committee previously raised, to enquire into the state of the civil list; where to the honour of the house, it reposed during the remainder of the session.

Mint.

On the 29th of January Mr. Giles remarked, that as a report was soon expected from the committee of ways and means, it was important to ascertain the sense of Congress on the continuance of an establishment attended with a considerable expence. He said he alluded to the mint. If it should appear that this establishment cost more than the benefit derived from it, he presumed it would be discontinued. He therefore submitted a resolution, which he wished to lie for consideration, declaring that the several acts in relation to the mint ought to be repealed.

On the 8th of February the resolutions of Mr. Giles were called up, and the House went into a committee of the whole on them; when Mr. Rutledge moved that the committee should rise, in order that they might be referred to a select committee.

On this motion a debate ensued, which was protracted to the hour of five, in which the motion was supported by Messrs. Rutledge, Griswold, Dana, Elmer, Mitchil and Bayard; and opposed by Messrs. Bacon, S. Smith, Randolph, Giles and Macon.

Those who advocated this disposition of the subject stated, that it was the usual course pursued on all topics either of great or little moment; that it was peculiarly proper in this case, as no documents had this session been presented to the House; that the institution of the mint had existed for ten years without any public complaint against it; that the coinage of the precious metals was every where considered as one of the attributes of sovereignty; that in its exercise a great good accrued to the community; that without it we should be dependent upon the coin of foreign nations, whose own interests might induce them to debase their coin, and thereby tax us to the extent of the adulteration; that this was in fact the case with the Spanish coinage, which had fallen during the last 20 years 5 per cent in intrinsic value; that the establishment of the mint had, moreover, already driven out of circulation the base gold of Germany, and the light silver of England; that in time it would supersede the trifling bank paper in circulation, which from its minute and perishable character sunk in the hands of individuals; that the experience of all nations, and the first principles of political economy, had demonstrated the great advantages of having a medium of commerce of a fixed and definite value.

Such were the arguments urged *generally* in favour of the mint establishment.

But it was further contended, that though considerations of economy should dictate a reduction of the establishment, it might still be proper to retain so much of it as was connected with the coinage of copper, or to substitute in its room some plan for that purpose; that the chief expence of a mint arose from the alloying and refining of gold and silver; that if this object were abandoned, the institution might be so modified as to obtain the coinage of copper at a trifling, perhaps, no expence whatever; that the profit on the copper coinage had been 5,000 dollars in one year, which would probably be enlarged by the reduced price of copper during peace; that if the institution of a national mint should eventually be given up, still it would be the best policy of the government, before such event, to make arrangements for a copper coinage, which in our present situation could be more beneficially effected than after putting out of our possession the means we now hold, of making with banks or individuals, a good bargain for the public.

In relation to a copper currency, it was insisted that great evils had heretofore arisen from the want, and great benefits were now derived from the possession of it; that before the mint was established we had no such coin in which a general confidence was placed; that base coppers were imported from Birmingham in barrels; and others were fabricated here; that they became an object of speculation; were first exchanged at a high rate, and then sunk to one-fourth of their original value; that the loss was almost exclusively felt by the poor who held them; and that it was firmly believed the pecuniary loss of the poor of the United States, from this source, and from the want of a medium that would answer for *change*, had been on an average equal to the whole annual expences of the mint.

For these reasons it was hoped the House would not act with precipitation, but by referring the subject to a select committee, obtain a collection of facts and opinions, on which alone it would be becoming to act.

Those who opposed the reference of the subject to a select committee, alleged that no effect other than delay could arise from such a disposition of it. The House already possessed an estimate of the Secretary of the Treasury for the present year, apparently predicated on the expences of the past year, by which it appeared that the certain annual expence of the establishment was about 21,000 dollars, exclusive of repairs, which, it was understood, were at present required to a considerable extent; and that though the coinage of the last year had not been reported by the director, it was presumed it did not materially vary from that of the preceding year; that all the information, therefore, was now before the House that could be expected; that so far from the measure having been pushed with precipitation, the motion had been made two weeks ago, and frequent notice since given of the intention of the mover to call it up; that if gentlemen were not now prepared to come to a discussion; it was their own fault; but that, in fact, the then debate shewed that they were prepared from the numerous arguments and the great information they had thrown out.

It was contended that the institution of the mint, so far from being venerable from age and fortified by the constant approbation of the public, had been the frequent object of animadversion in the legislature; and that in one instance a bill had passed this house, and in another the senate, repealing it; and that in another case an attempt had been made to stop all appropriation for it.

It was contended that the institution was useless and even pernicious; that it involved a heavy annual expence, and extended executive patronage; that, whatever temporary benefit may have resulted from it during the war, which, in its effects, brought here a considerable quantity of gold and silver bullion, those effects were now over, and there was not the least probability of our receiving from abroad any quantity of these metals, that would in the smallest degree remunerate the nation by their coinage for the great expence incurred; that as to the coinage of copper, that could be as well done without as with the mint, with little, perhaps no expence; while, at present, every dollar's worth of cents coined, cost an equal sum in the coinage of them.

It was alleged, that the mint did not protect the community from the circulation of spurious coin; that this appeared from the very acknowledgements of gentlemen, that in those countries where there were great mint establishments, a base coin was extensively circulated; that the protection of the community must be ascribed to the knowledge and experience of individuals, and to the jealous caution of the banks. If foreign powers should debase their coin, and it should be sent for circulation here, the only remedy would be, a law declaring it not to be a tender; and this was the very remedy we had already and effectually practised in the case of several descriptions of adulterated coin.

It was alleged, that though the mint had been in operation ten years, the great object, for the attainment of which it was instituted, remained unaccomplished. It had been then said, that long before this time so much gold and silver coin would have been issued as to supercede the necessity of admitting foreign coins as a tender; whereas we had this very session passed a law, allowing them to be so received; nor was there the least probability of the cessation of this necessity within any assignable time.

It was alleged, that the idea of the establishment of the mint being an essential attribute of sovereignty, was a gross mistake; as that attribute consisted not in the act of coinage, but in the power inherent in the government to decide what should or should not be considered as money. The institution might, it was true, be considered as such an attribute, by those who borrowed their ideas from, and were disposed to imitate the paraphernalia of royalty, but could never be so considered in a republic, where the public good rejected whatever was useless, and lopped off whatever was burthensome without being beneficial; that under a monarchy, such an institution would be correct, because the principles of the government did not consult the general good, but the good of those who governed; and because the institution added another impetus to executive patronage; but in a republican government the good of the people was to be consulted, their money was to be saved from wanton expenditure, and executive patronage required diminution rather than increase. That, in fine, this was a part of a great system of economy, which the people had called for, and which it was hoped, those whom they had placed in the administration would practise.

The question was then taken on the rising of the committee and lost—Ayes 33—Nays 54.

After a similar motion had been made and lost in the house, the original resolution of Mr. Giles for the abolition of the Mint was adopted, and a committee appointed to bring in a bill to that effect.

On the 23d of April the bill was taken up, the further consideration of which Mr. Griswold moved to postpone till the third Monday in November. He was supported by Messrs. Dana, Emmot and Huger; and opposed by Messrs. Giles, S. Smith, Holland, and Eustis[?]; and the motion failed by a majority of three.

When on motion of general S. Smith it was recommitted with a view to making provision for a copper coinage.

The next day an amendment was reported to the bill, providing that the Secretary of the Treasury be authorised, under the direction of the President, to contract with the bank of the United States, or with individuals, for the coinage of cents and half cents; provided the amount annually coined shall not exceed twenty tons, and that no expence shall be incurred by the United States—and further providing that all the implements and personal effects of the mint shall be retained.

After another ineffectual motion of postponement, the report was agreed to, and the bill ordered to a third reading on the ensuing Monday, when it passed. It was immediately carried to the Senate, who, on the same sitting informed the house, that they had disagreed to it; whereby the establishment of the mint was once more saved from immediate abolition.

French Spoliations.

On the 5th of February a memorial was presented from sundry merchants of Baltimore, praying relief, in the case of numerous and heavy losses sustained, in consequence of the illegal capture and condemnation of their property, under the authority of the French government, prior to the promulgation of the late convention between the United States and France; in the provisions of which compact the memorialists discover an unqualified surrender of their claims, instead of the redress which they expected to obtain.

This memorial, with others of a similar nature, were referred to a select committee.

On the 11th of March, Mr. Griswold laid the following motion on the table:

"Resolved, that it is proper to make provision, by law, towards indemnifying the merchants of the U. States, for losses sustained by them from French spoliations, the claims for which losses have been renounced by the final ratification of the convention with France, as published by proclamation of the President of the United States."