



'MISERABLE VILLAGE' — On the evening of the Civil War, Washington was a city of 60,000 persons, shot through with and entirely surrounded by secessionists. To the west, north and east was Maryland, which was temporarily dominated by Southern sympathizers, and to the south was Virginia, rocking on the brink of secession. Flocks of geese wandered along Pennsylvania ave. and pigs wallowed around the Capitol. John Hay, one of President Lincoln's secretaries, called Washington a "miserable sprawling village." The sketch above was made from a balloon in early 1861 and shows the still unfinished Capitol dominating the "village." (UPI Telephoto)

Life in 'Miserable Village'

UPI Correspondent
By MERTON T. AKERS

Washington on the eve of the Civil war was a one-paved-street city of 60,000, shot through and entirely surrounded by secessionists.

Flanked on the west, north and east by Maryland, which was temporarily dominated by southern sympathizers, and on the south by Virginia, rocking on the brink of secession, Washington was a beleaguered capital.

Perhaps half of the city was secessionist or in sympathy with the South. Its one railroad connecting it with the North ran through Maryland, with a branch to the west into Ohio and another east to Annapolis from a junction north of the city. Southern sympathizers in Maryland could isolate the capital at will by cutting the railroad.

Garrison Is Small

At the start of 1861 the Washington "garrison" consisted of a few War Department officers, 300 Marines, three officers and 52 enlisted men of the Ordnance Department and four under-strength militia companies.

Along the one paved street—Pennsylvania Ave.—the blue cockades of secession could be bought at newspaper stands.

The cobblestones of Pennsylvania Ave. were hard to detect under the dust (in the summer) and mud (in the winter). Big chuck holes yawned for the unwary omnibus driver or day dreaming horseback rider.

Flocks of geese wandered along the avenue or along any other street that suited their fancy. Pigs wallowed around the Capitol and Judiciary Square.

Tiber Creek meandered along the Mall, "floating" (with) dead cats and all kinds of putridity and reeking with pestilential odors. Residents dumped slop in the gutters and their dead animals into the creek. John Hay, one of President Lincoln's secretaries, wrote that the south windows of the White (pest) House let in the "ghosts of 20,000 drowned cats."

There was a rudimentary water system but most people depended on wells and springs for drinking water. Two sketchy sewers backed up in basements more often than they drained. The area along the Potomac river was considered uncommonly unhealthy. A contemporary guide book dismissed this health hazard, saying that while "billious and intermittent fevers prevail to a considerable extent, the malarial influences do not last long and those who have become acclimated are seldom subjected to these diseases."

Streets Wrecked Coaches

Besides omnibuses, the capital had a new horse-drawn street car system, promoted by Jay Cooke, the New York banker, but the citizens generally disdained it, calling it a "Yankee invention." Omnibuses would pick up passengers and then saved boot shines and hoop skirt hems from mud or dust.

A newspaper invited attention to the condition of F st. at 11th. A half dozen coaches were "shipwrecked"

there in one day. One belonged to a foreign diplomat. "The coach settled into the mud up to the axle," the newspaper said. "One of the distinguished occupants was rescued by a huge Negro, who, wading leg deep to the coach, brought the foreign officer in full diplomatic regalia through the sea of mud on his back to terra firma. The other occupant plunged into the muddy chasm, and came out safe but with the mud hanging sadly on his gay costume."

There were upwards of 60 hotels, nearly all of them boarding houses for government employees and congressmen.

Fanciest was Willard's at 14th and F sts., the same site but not the same building as the Willard hotel now. Willard's could, and frequently did, serve meals to 1,500 persons a day. It was the gathering place for officials, politicians and newspapermen, especially for breakfast when the menus featured fried oysters, steak and onions, blanc mange and pate de fois gras. (One restaurant—Harvey's—employed 20 oyster shuckers to keep up with demand.)

Tourist Signs Were Few

The National and the Metropolitan hotels stood on opposite corners of 6th st. and Pennsylvania ave., and were favored by southerners. The National had suffered an eclipse at the time of President Buchanan's inaugural. The President and other guests caught an intestinal malady there which became known as "National disease." "Old Buck's" nephew died of the disease, which some said was the result of a black Republican plot but more moderate people thought it was caused by defective sewers. By war time the National again was popular.

The standard tourist route covered six spots—the Capitol, the White House (called the Executive Mansion then, the Smithsonian Institution, the Post Office building, the Patent Office and the new Treasury building.

Few went to see the unfinished Washington Monument, a "factory chimney with the top cut off." The Senate and House wings of the Capitol were new and attracted the largest crowds with their paintings and marble halls, although only three of the 100 corinthian columns were in place. The dome was being rebuilt and was crowned with a construction crane. Crawford's statue of Armed Liberty lay on the lawn, eventually to top the new dome. Symbolic, some said.

Greenough's great 12-ton statue of George Washington, at the Capitol, with the "Father of his Country" naked to the waist and draped in a Roman toga, drew some comment, mostly ribald, from tourists.

Labeled 'Miserable Village'

Hay summed up Washington as "this miserable sprawling village which imagines itself a city because it is wicked, as a boy thinks he is a man because he smokes and swears."

This "miserable village" seethed with alarms of threat-

ened uprisings, plots to overthrow the government, conspiracies to kidnap the President and plans for seizing the Treasury. It was a pick-your-own-rumor time.

President Buchanan thought something needed doing about it and called on old Lt. Gen. Winfield Scott. Scott in turn called in a West Pointer and Mexican War veteran, Charles P. Stone, to reorganize the District of Columbia militia which was heavily infiltrated by southern sympathizers.

Col. Stone went to work with speed and dispatch. Backed by Joseph Holt, secretary of war, and at one critical point by the President, Stone by the March 4 inaugural of Lincoln had purged secessionists from the militia and organized enough new units to furnish most of the inaugural guards.

He ran up against determined southern opposition. After Ft. Sumter was fired on, 16 companies of Stone's militia were the first to be mustered into federal service.

District Youth Rally Set Tonight

The First Assembly of God, 1108 West Main st., will be host to a monthly district youth rally, Monday, Feb. 27, at 7:30 p.m., according to Gerald Smith, president of the local Christ Ambassadors group. Churches from throughout the valley will participate. A combined orchestra from the different churches will provide the music. Guest speaker for the evening will be the Rev. Elwood Irby, Jacksonville Assembly of God. A trophy will be awarded to the group with the highest total of points, based on the percentage of their members present. This will include orchestra members and visitors. It was announced.

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