

LINCOLN AND HIS PRINTERS

GPO IN THE CIVIL WAR

U. S. GOVERNMENT PRINTING OFFICE

October 2013

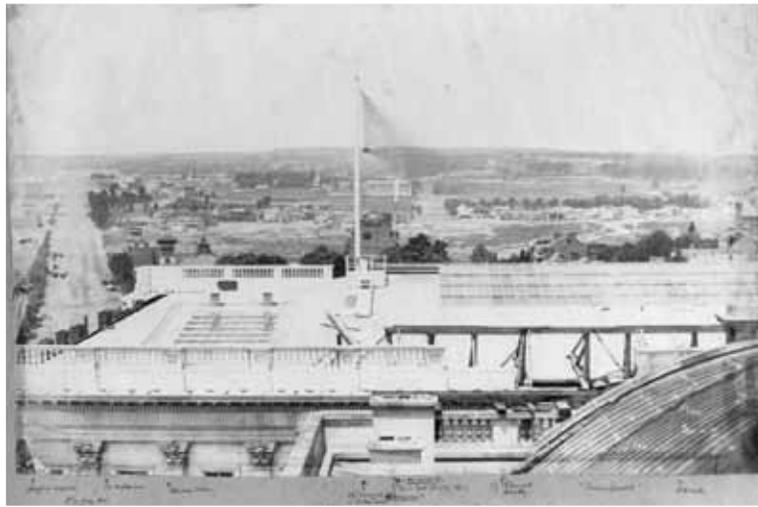


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## INTRODUCTION



On the day that Abraham Lincoln was inaugurated President, March 4, 1861, the United States Government Printing Office opened its doors on H Street at North Capitol Street in Northwest Washington. The area was farmland gradually giving way to roads and buildings. Nearby Tiber Creek overflowed in wet weather, creating swamp and puddles, giving the neighborhood its nickname, “Swampoodle.”



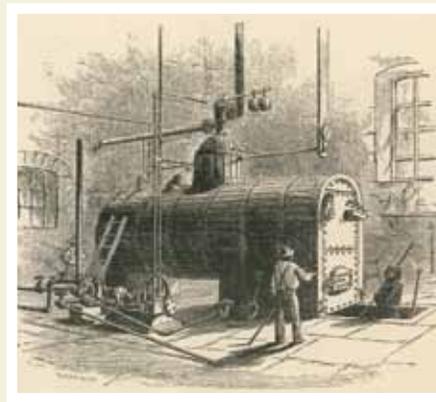
Swampoodle in 1861 was a seedy, chaotic shanty town that had grown up over the preceding decade as Irish immigrant laborers streamed into Washington. Its main drag was Jackson Alley, with a reputation for lawlessness and squalor almost unequalled in the city, a reputed “no-go” zone for the police. GPO formed the western boundary of Swampoodle, and drew many of its workers from its alleys and shanties.



## GPO & SWAMPOODLE

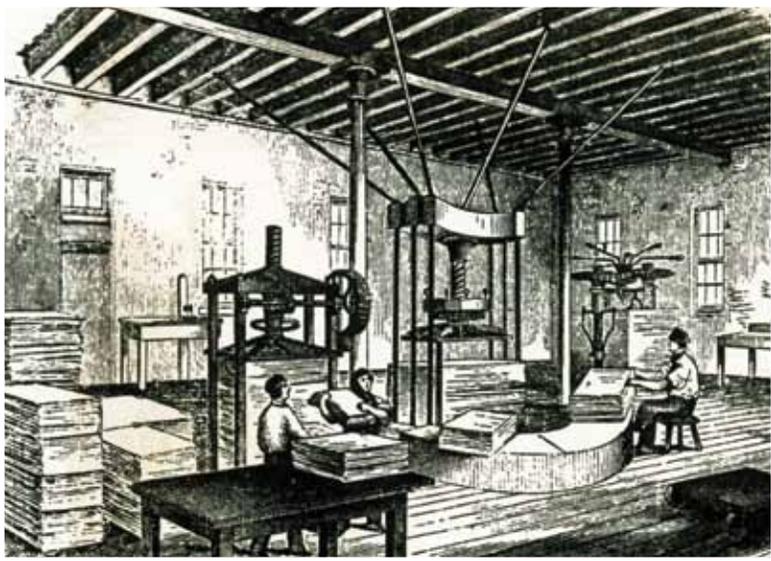


The main building had been designed by Edward Clark, Architect of the Capitol, in 1856, and had opened for business as the printing establishment of Cornelius Wendell, printer for the Senate, in November, 1857. Wendell’s was the largest and best equipped printing plant in Washington, and one of the largest in the country.



A visitor approaching GPO first caught sight of the tall chimney of the engine house where a 40-horsepower steam engine supplied heat and power for the office. Also on the site were a machine shop, stable, and warehouses where some 40,000 reams of paper came and went each year.





On the second floor, the visitor found the office of the Superintendent of Public Printing. A walnut bookcase caught the eye with its examples of fine work such as the Annual Message of the President to Congress, Annual Report of the Regents of the Smithsonian Institution, and others. Adjoining this sanctum was the business office, and nearby the proofreading room, where copy was carefully scanned to eliminate errors.



On the first floor was a wetting room, where paper was dampened prior to printing, and a huge hydraulic press for pressing the damp sheets. In the ink room, pigments, oil, and varnish were blended and ink rollers were stored. The press room commanded the greatest attention, with 23 Adams bed-and-platen presses and 3 Napier cylinder presses, all powered by steam, tossing off as many as 100,000 sheets in a single day.



The bulk of the second floor was occupied by the composing room, a spacious hall with 60 windows for natural light and gas fixtures for evenings and work on cloudy days. There were 93 double stands of type and all the other tools of the trade: composing sticks, imposing stones, galleys, and many thousands of pounds of metal type.

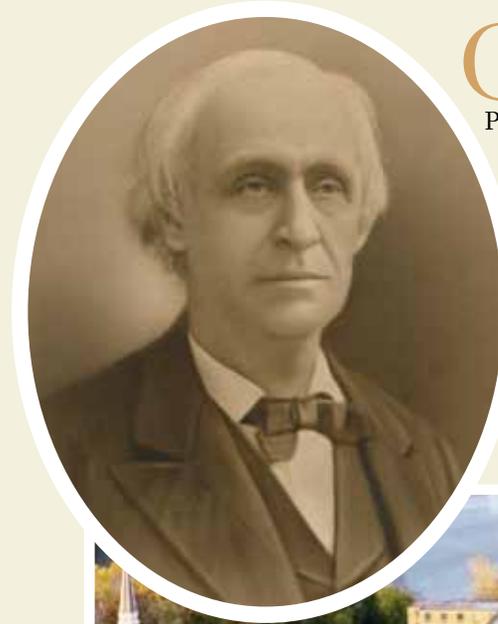


## LINCOLN & DEFREES

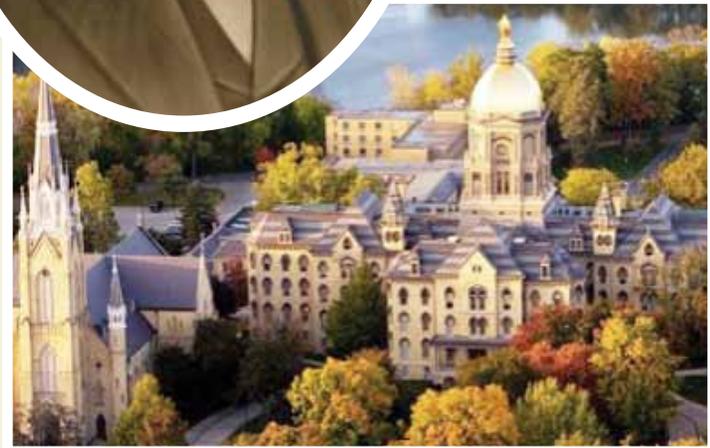


The third floor was devoted to the bindery. In a large folding room 150 women were seated at tables where they rapidly folded printed sheets by hand. Elsewhere were two powerful cutting machines for trimming the edges of books, shears for cutting book board, gas burners for heating gilding tools, and many other tools. Adjoining this was the ruling room, where pale blue and red lines were applied to pages for the many blank record books used throughout the Government.

The fourth floor was a large store room for printed sheets and books waiting to be bound.



Over all of this presided the newly appointed Superintendent of Public Printing, John D. Defrees, described as, “a plainly dressed, quiet mannered man; a printer by trade.” Defrees was, in fact, far more than a quiet, unassuming bureaucrat.

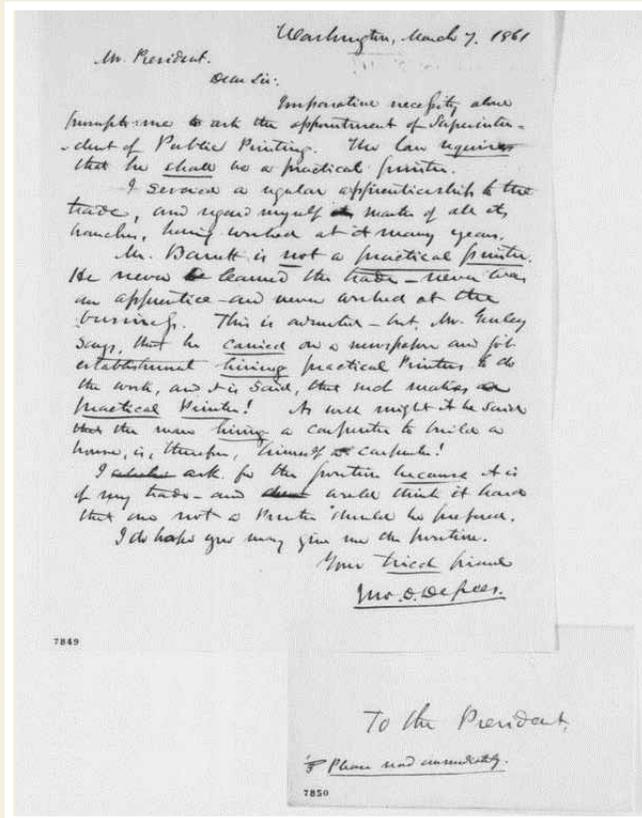


State of Indiana

Born on November 8, 1810, in Sparta, Tennessee, John Dougherty Defrees was the son of a farmer hostile to slavery. The family moved in 1818 to Piqua, Ohio, and in 1824 John was apprenticed to a printer. At 17 he began working as a journeyman printer in Xenia and Cincinnati, Ohio, and later in Louisville, Kentucky. At 21 he and his brother Joseph established a newspaper in South Bend, Indiana. Two years later he sold his interest in the paper, was admitted to the bar by the Indiana Supreme Court, and began to practice law. After being elected a state senator, he helped obtain a charter for a small academy on St. Mary's Lake that would grow into the University of Notre Dame.



Defree's letter to Lincoln, seeking appointment as Superintendent of Public Printing



Manuscripts Division, Library of Congress

In 1854, Defrees' purchased the Indiana State Journal in Indianapolis and gained a reputation as the most caustic, brilliant, and fearless political editor in the west. He was active in the liberal wing of the Whig party, and later, the Republican party. Many Republicans, including Abraham Lincoln, sought his advice and political support.

In 1860, after decades of waste and abuse in contracting for printing, Congress opted for reform in the shape of its own printing establishment and created GPO by joint resolution. They purchased the Wendell plant in late 1860 for \$135,000. Defrees, who had worked diligently on Lincoln's behalf in Indiana, wrote to the new President on March 7, 1861, asking to be appointed Superintendent of Public Printing. Lincoln appointed him on March 23.

Defrees served through the Civil War years as GPO was launched on the mission Congress had directed. In his annual report for 1861, he noted savings of \$60,000 for the first half-year alone, compared with charges under the previous system.



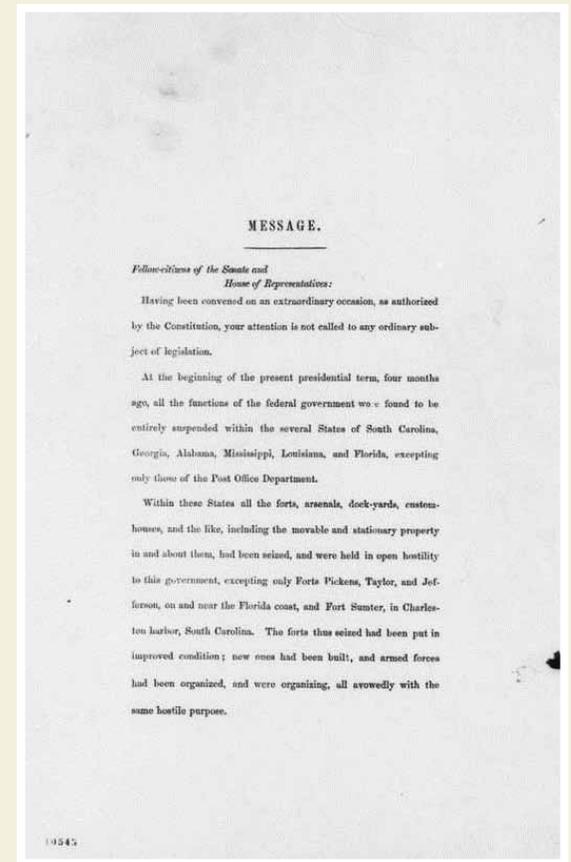
Defrees' stature as friend and advisor to Lincoln is clear. Lincoln's papers in the Manuscripts Division of the Library of Congress contain many letters from Defrees offering advice, introducing people of significance, and conducting business.

One particular document illustrates the close relationship between Defrees, GPO, and Lincoln: the message to Congress that Lincoln delivered on July 4, 1861, detailing the executive actions taken in the early weeks of the Civil War and setting forth his views on the aims of the war.

While researching this message recently, Dr. Michelle Krowl, Manuscripts Specialist at the Library of Congress, looked at multiple drafts in longhand and set in type.

In an era before typewriters, copiers, or computers, it would have been a regular feature of GPO's work to set presidential documents in type and make proof copies to be returned to the President for his further revision.

Dr. Krowl noted names penciled in the margins of one particular draft and contacted GPO to inquire about the significance. By consulting the Superintendent's annual report for 1861, which lists the names of all 350 or so GPO employees, it was possible to verify that the names and marks indicate "takes" for GPO compositors. Then, as now, copy arriving at GPO for composing into type was sliced into pieces, called "takes," to be worked by multiple compositors simultaneously, especially critical because all type was set by hand. The head deskman in the Composing Division would mark and assign takes to the compositors, assuring that the composed galleys of type were subsequently assembled in the proper order for the production of a proof.

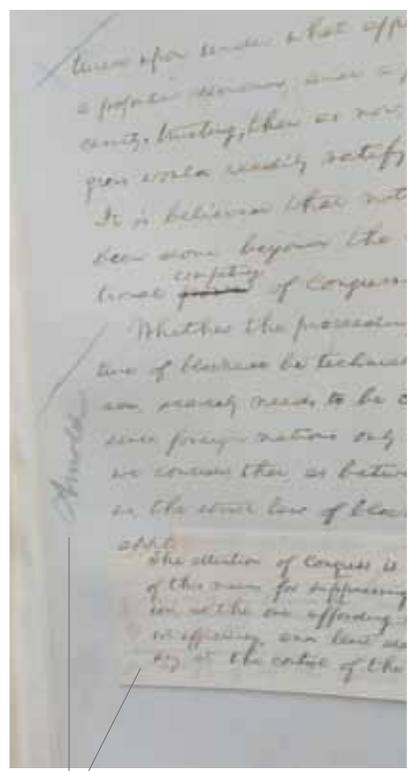


Manuscripts Division, Library of Congress

A page from a printed draft of Lincoln's July 4, 1861 address to Congress.



The July, 1861 message makes clear that Defrees' role was, from the outset of his term, more than an appointee held at arm's length. Subsequent drafts of the message show his role as advisor and editor.



Handwritten draft of the July 4, 1861, address showing pasted-in revisions, and a compositor's name in the margin.

Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress

Dr. Krowl relates that Lincoln was an inveterate note-maker, often scratching ideas or fragments of noble prose on scraps of paper or in “miscellaneous notebooks” for later use. He liked to “cut and paste” these scraps, and drafts of his writings frequently feature scraps of text set in type alongside scratched “miscellaneous” notes all pasted on a sheet with further text interpolated in longhand.

Historian Douglas Wilson, in his book *Lincoln's Sword*, relates that Defrees worked closely with Lincoln and “... regularly removed a large proportion of Lincoln's freely bestowed commas.” In many cases Lincoln would accept these edits; in others he would not and would add even more commas. Wilson points out that, although grammatically unconventional, Lincoln's punctuation points to “his basic sense of language,” which is spoken cadences. The commas provide notation for the pauses and breaks that would have sounded right to Lincoln's ear.

In this message, Lincoln and Defrees had a further disagreement over the use of the term “sugar-coated” to describe the spin put on the rebellion by secessionists. Defrees told the President the expression was “undignified” and proposed an alternative.

“Defrees,” Lincoln is reported by biographer Francis B. Carpenter to have said, “the word expresses precisely my idea ... the time will never come in this country when the people won't know what ‘sugar-coated’ means!” The word stood and is part of the success of the message.

The final setting of type resulting from the manuscript in the Library's collection would have been used to produce sufficient copies for submission to the Clerk of the House and Secretary of the Senate.



## LINCOLN'S VISIT

On October 24, 1863, Lincoln visited GPO. Newspaper reports tell us that he toured the plant and spoke briefly to the employees.

Defrees later reported that “A poor girl in the employment of the GPO had a brother impressed into the rebel service, [who] was taken prisoner by our forces. He desired to take the oath of allegiance, and to be liberated. She sought an interview with the President who wrote a note asking me to inquire into the facts, which I did, and the young man was liberated on the President's order.”

## EMANCIPATION PROCLAMATION

In a long history of important documents, the single document with perhaps the greatest significance was the Emancipation Proclamation.

Lincoln's “preliminary” proclamation was issued on September 22, 1862, as a general order of the War Department. Historian John Hope Franklin describes the scene:



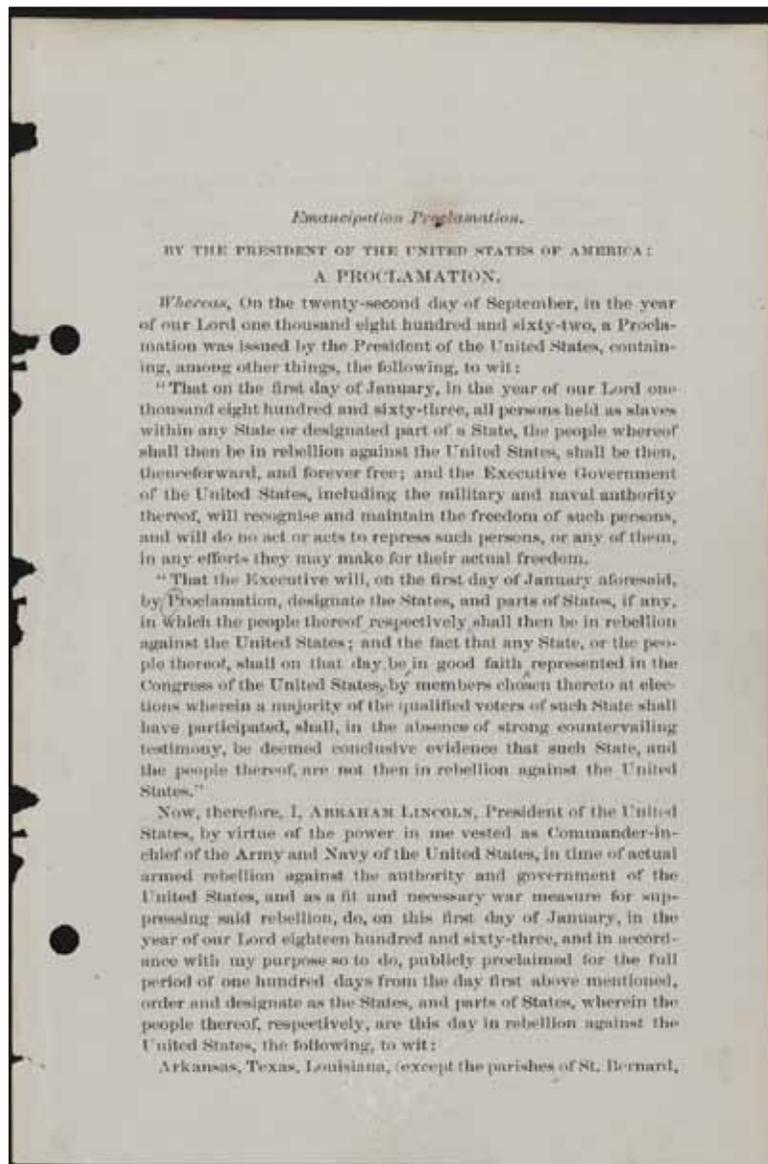
“First reading of the Emancipation Proclamation by President Lincoln” by Francis Bicknell Carpenter.

U.S. Senate

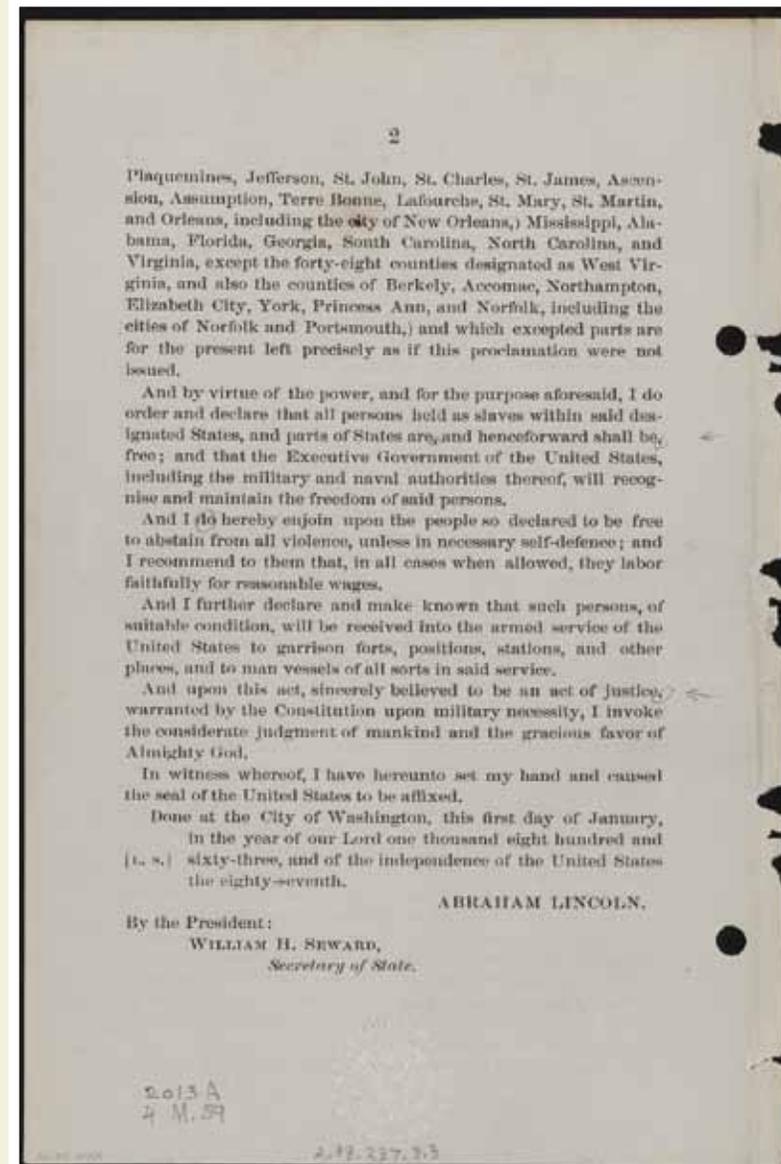
“The historic meeting of the Cabinet was hardly over on September 22, 1862, before the printing and distribution of the preliminary Proclamation had begun. That afternoon and evening the employees of the Government Printing Office worked late and prepared copies for distribution to the press and government agencies. [Secretary of State] Seward ... ordered copies that were to go ... to the numerous diplomatic posts of the United States in foreign countries.”



The preliminary Proclamation was issued in "... general orders format, as an order of the Commander-in-Chief to the armed forces. Because he had direct control over the Army, the President thus made it unnecessary to go through Congress to activate the Proclamation."



The final Proclamation, issued January 3, 1863, bore minor modifications. In December, 1862, perhaps in the course of preparing the final version, Superintendent Defrees wrote to Lincoln's secretary John G. Nicolay, "Only a few events stand out prominently on the page of the history of each century... The proposed proclamation of the President will be that one of this century."



A year later, Defrees advised Lincoln further, "Now why not send a message to Congress recommending the passage of a joint resolution proposing an amendment to the Constitution forever prohibiting slavery in the States and territories?" Lincoln, through Nicolay, promptly replied, "Our own friends have this under consideration now, and will do as much without a resolution as with it."



Lincoln and his secretaries, Nicolay and Hay, by Alexander Gardner, 1863

## COMPANY F & COMPANY G



Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress

Gen. Jubal Early

As the war dragged on, Washington came under threat of Confederate attack by the forces of Gen. Jubal Early. Throughout much of the war GPO printers and binders had formed two militia companies, company F and company G, in the so-called "Interior Department Regiment." Hours were set aside for drill and instruction and GPO was guarded at night.

On July 11, 1864, Early's forces, approaching from the northwest, came within 5 miles of the Capitol and were engaged by Union forces at Fort Stevens, near the present-day Walter Reed Medical Center.



Union troops at Fort Stevens in northwest Washington.

Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress

Company F, the printers, marched to defensive positions across the Anacostia River, near Fort Stanton and St. Elizabeth's Hospital. When reinforcements from General Grant's forces at Petersburg, Virginia, arrived a day later and helped repulse the attack, the GPO militiamen returned to their work in Swampoodle.



Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress

The bridge over the Anacostia near the Washington Navy Yard, across which Company F marched.

After the war, GPO continued its growth and expansion. The original building was enlarged in 1865, 1871, and 1879. The number of employees grew steadily, as did the production of public documents.

After Lincoln's assassination in 1865, President Andrew Johnson appointed a new Superintendent of Public Printing, the man who built the building purchased by Congress for GPO in 1860, Cornelius Wendell. He served only five months before the Senate replaced him with his predecessor, John Defrees, who then served until 1869.

The neighborhood surrounding GPO developed too, with many new houses and businesses in the years immediately after the war. John E. Hicks wrote: "The 'glory' that had been Swampoodle was flown, its most noted thoroughfare, Cabbage Alley, had vanished, and the Tiber, the stream that once overflowed the early Irish of Swampoodle, was controlled. The once turbulent section had become a quiet residential district where the clock on St. Aloysius tolled out the time of day ..."

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The text for this booklet is based on articles originally written for the GPO newsletter *Typeline* in 1983-84, by GPO Agency Historian Daniel MacGilvray (retired).

Photographs are from the GPO photograph collection, unless otherwise credited.

The exhibit *Lincoln and His Printers: GPO in the Civil War* opened in October, 2013. The invaluable assistance of the following individuals and institutions made the exhibit possible:

Mr. John DeFerrari  
Dr. Michelle Krowl  
Mr. Marc Leepson  
Ms. Tandra Johnson Reap  
The Interpretive Programs Office of the Library of Congress  
The Manuscripts Division of the Library of Congress

## COLOPHON

The text of *Lincoln and His Printers: GPO in the Civil War* is set in Adobe™ Caslon Pro, a digital version of a classic typeface which bears the name of its designer, William Caslon (1692-1766). In the early 18th century, most English printers were using type cast in Holland. Caslon's type, although clearly modeled on Dutch forms, is regarded as the first significant embodiment of English typography. Most of the type brought to Colonial America was "Old Style" or Caslon, and the first printing of the *Declaration of Independence* was set in it by John Dunlap of Philadelphia.

By the time of GPO's founding in 1861, most book printing was being set in Caslon, and the first large purchases of type for the growing GPO were for large quantities of "Old Style." This reliance on Caslon, "almost superstitious" in the words of typographic scholar Beatrice Warde, continued until the era of hot metal typesetting began in the early 20th century. GPO's largest single job ever, the massive 128-volume *Official Records of the War of the Rebellion*, printed between 1880 and 1900, was set in Caslon.



U.S. GOVERNMENT PRINTING OFFICE

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