

# commentary

from other pens...

## New light shed on old capitol feud

By Lawrence L. Knutson

Associated Press Writer

WASHINGTON — In 1853, an Army engineer began keeping a shorthand journal that preserved a private record of the expansion of the U.S. Capitol and the design of the dome that became its enduring symbol. These were the years just before the nation’s plunge into Civil War, and Capt. Montgomery C. Meigs set out a highly personal account of the internal politics, bruised egos and personal rancor that marked the construction process.

But as Meigs’ pen flew across the pages, his shorthand system unintentionally turned the pages of his journal into a virtual time capsule, one that would tantalize historians for more than a century.

Meigs, who later rose to become quartermaster general of the Union Army, kept his journals in an early form of Pitman shorthand. It soon became obsolete, defying efforts to transcribe it.

Because no one could read them, Meigs’ journals lay unused decade after decade at the Library of Congress — until the Senate Historical Office found a way to crack the code.

In 1991, William D. Mohr, who had retired from a 23-year career as reporter of debates for the Senate, agreed to begin the task of translating the journals, first into modern shorthand, then into standard English.

They lay out a previously hidden account of the highly personal feud between Meigs, who was appointed to oversee construction, and Thomas U. Walter, the architect who drew the plans for the Capitol’s dome and new House and Senate wings.

“It reads like a novel,” says Wendy Wolf, the historian who prepared the journals for publication. “It is a morass of backbiting and intrigue.” “This is someone from more than a century ago speaking to us about the building of the largest single addition to the Capitol,” says historian Donald A. Ritchie. “It unlocks a lot of mysteries.”

Meigs’ diaries were delivered in monthly packets as Mohr translated each section. One of the early beneficiaries was William C. Allen, architectural historian in the Office of Architect of the Capitol.

Using Meigs’ journals as part of his source material, Allen wrote a monumental bicentennial history of the Capitol scheduled to be published this fall by the Government Printing Office.

Allen says the relationship between engineer and architect soured when Meigs assumed control of the interior decoration of the Capitol, then grew jealous of the applause Walter received when he displayed his designs for a new and soaring dome.

Meigs began sketching his own dome designs. One proposal included flying buttresses. “I can make a little greater height and a more graceful outline,” he wrote, and was distressed when few agreed.

At one point, Meigs had engraved copper plates inserted in the fresh mortar under marble blocks. Intended as messages to future archeologists, they named him as “engineer in charge” of the extension.

Walter’s view of all this has long been on the record. “I am under, probably, the most tyrannical, despotic, vain and unscrupulous man the world ever saw,” Walter said in a letter. “He seeks to rob me of everything he can to pamper his own vanity.”

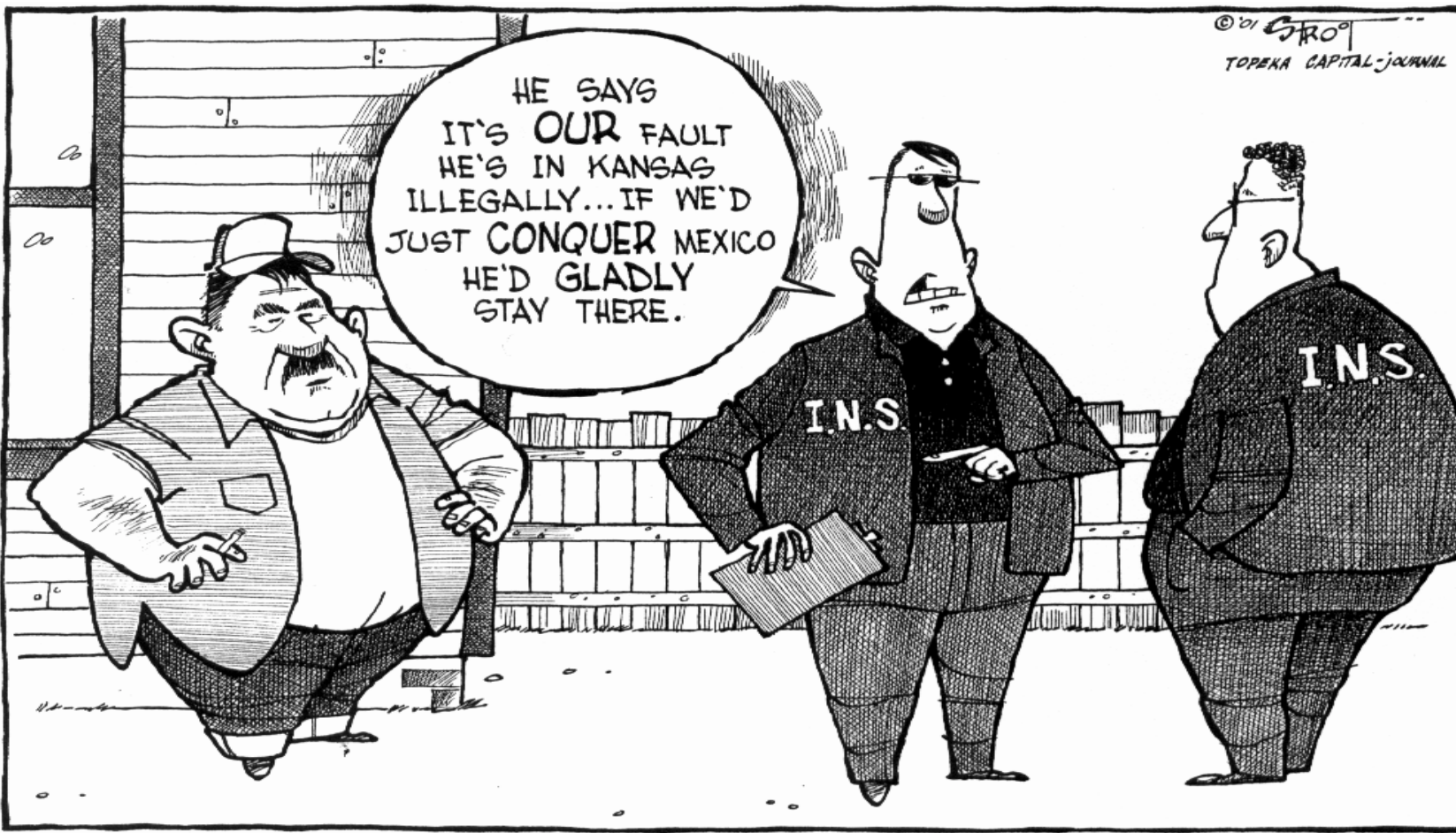
Meigs’ journal is peppered with famous names. Jefferson Davis, the U.S. secretary of war with whom Meigs first worked, became president of the Confederacy.

After trying to carry his dispute with the architect first to Floyd and then to President Buchanan, Meigs received orders in 1859 banishing him to a military post in the Dry Tortugas, islands off the Florida Keys.

War was at hand when Meigs returned to the Capitol in 1861 and he soon left to help equip the federal armies.

“History would remember Meigs’ high aspirations for the Capitol,” Allen writes, “his administrative prowess, his amazing energy and his unshakable honesty.”

EDITOR’S NOTE — Lawrence L. Knutson has covered the White House, Congress and Washington’s history for more than 30 years.



## Bundle of joy provides some funny memories

He came into our lives about three weeks after we were married. We’d thought a lot about what it would be like when he actually arrived. Never could we have imagined what we were in for.

When we got our little bundle of joy home, we realized we had nowhere for him to sleep. Deciding a large box would do, we put his blanket in the bottom along with a small stuffed animal that used to belong to my husband, Levi.

We had known he would be getting up in the night but were not prepared for the production of it all. One of us would wake when he cried, go to him, pick him up and after all the necessities were taken care of, hold him until he went back to sleep. As he got older, this was not good enough. He would not go back to sleep as quickly, forcing one of us to hold him longer.

Yes, we look back on those long nights fondly. We even laugh about the morning when I thought it would be nice for him to lay in bed with me while Levi was in the shower. Of course, I wasn’t laughing when I felt the warmth on my leg and saw the big puddle on the bed, but it’s pretty funny now.

We couldn’t get mad; he was just a little puppy. And, when you gotta go, you gotta go. Baxter, now that he is older, doesn’t have accidents like that anymore.



debra turner

- just beginning

Baxter’s real mother is a German shorthair and his father a black lab. Considering his father lived on farm a couple miles over, there really wasn’t a question of whether or not they could keep him.

His mom didn’t seem too sad to see him go, but we take him back to visit so they can keep in touch. Baxter looks a lot like his father but is more slender like his mother, even though he towers over her. And who knows where he got his crazy personality.

When Baxter was still pretty little, he was scared of most everything. He was scared of the ball with the bells inside and the squeaky toy our niece Haley got him. We would find him crying at the door when the little neighbor dogs wandered into our yard. Sometimes we wouldn’t even know what it was that scared him so. As he’s gotten older, he has almost mastered the art of pretending he’s not scared. However, just the other day he came running into

the room with his lip quivering.

He’s gotten so much bigger than I thought he would. We have to watch where we set water glasses because with one swift movement of the tail, he can send it sailing through the air. It doesn’t seem to bother him one bit. He just looks back like “what was that?” He can also see into the trash can. He doesn’t usually get into it, but sometimes when it is full, he sneaks a little something out to snack on.

Frisbee is our little one’s passion. He takes his frisbee with him everywhere, and I do mean everywhere. He props it up against his bowl when he eats, he can’t leave it behind if we go somewhere in the car and you can bet he sleeps with it. If it gets stuck in a tree, he will sit underneath looking up until we can get it out.

He’ll play frisbee in any kind of weather. Of course, when it hails, he has to stop so he can eat a few ice pellets off the ground. That’s what he thinks hail is, ice cubes falling from the sky.

Baxter loves snow. He likes to run, pounce on his frisbee and slide until it is buried in the snow. Then he digs it out, shakes it off and is ready to go again.

When no one has time to throw the frisbee for him, he will sit for hours behind a tree just waiting. He doesn’t mind how long it takes just, as long as someone comes out to throw it at least once in awhile.

## A cold war in Washington? And how!

Is it isolationist to develop a missile shield? Is that anything like the right to carry law? Maybe both are about protecting ourselves from ruffians.

Let’s see here, you can’t find the “I’ll take your guns” Indians anywhere, since the election of 2000. It seems they have been replaced by the tax refund Indians, so elections do matter. What had been a risky scheme (tax cuts) for the hang around the fort Indians now was not so risky out where the buses don’t run.

Maybe yes maybe no, both tribes may be puffing on the peace pipe but they are not inhaling. Since the last tribal council (election) it seems the northeastern Indians are on the war path saying we don’t care what the chic’s in the sticks thinks we are the balance of power. So why doesn’t that big Chief in the White Teepee smoke the peace pipe with us? But when that didn’t happen one of those Indians changed tribes and when that happened the war paint came out and the war dance has just begun.

The way they are acting in Washington you would think we were in another cold war. Well you ain’t seen nothing yet, wait till the big Chief in the White Teepee, tries to name his Indian to the supreme council (Supreme Court). Wonder if they would forget about the price gouging energy companies? Right they will forget everything.



wayne gattshall

- wayne’s world

That’s where the rubber meets the road. Since the world currency crisis back in 1997 we have two Americas. Look at the election night map of the United States, one is red (east and west coast) and the other is green, the great middle America. From the looks of Congress you would think the southern states had won the Civil War. In fact the red and green part of the country are so far apart they can’t understand each other’s language. The reds say its global warming, stupid.

But there are places in the green part of America that say the question of global warming is the surreal mutterings of a native American religion. Then the reds say wait a minute, you messiahs of the Jerusalem Syndrome are desecrating the constitution.

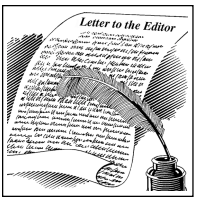
The truth is if there was the separation of church and state both tribes would be in the slammer. They say the other tribe is manifestations of evil, evil, genuine evil. So fight like the devil because if we lose the other guy makes all the rules.

## Frustrated with changes taking place in farming

Dear Editor: I am a frustrated, angry and disheartened farmer because of the things that are taking place in agriculture today. Rural and family values are the backbone of our nation. The family farm must not be substituted by corporate agriculture.

What is happening in the farm sector today is a pre-planned political move by the large corporations, namely Cargill, Conagra, and ADM who have the money and the political clout and muscle to influence elections and thus run this country. These vertically integrated food clusters are working to get the single most important necessities of life under their control, namely food. Our government is so influenced by this power machine that they are allowing this to take place with very little being done to stop it. Even the very machinery it has to protect the family farm is not being used to stop the concentration that is taking place in the agriculture sector. Our anti-trust laws are not being enforced to prevent some of the huge mergers from taking place.

These huge food clusters are getting under their control most of the necessary inputs that the farmer needs, namely seed, chemicals, fertilizer, etc. Not only do they control the inputs; they are the only markets we have for our products. It doesn’t take a genius to figure out who is going to make the lion’s share of the profit in this picture. The farmer will be nothing more than an instrument to enhance



from our readers

- to the editor

corporate America, are being used to further research to benefit corporate America’s vertical movement, forgetting the very reasons the land grant universities were instituted in the first place. Many of their instructors are teaching the lesson to dance to the drumbeat of corporate America, namely, that you had better gear up for this new picture for agriculture or get out.

Russia today is going toward more freedom and independence for their farmers with more incentives for labor. We, in this country, are gravitating to the corporate farms that have failed in Russia. Is this what we really want in America?

Our rural communities are withering away. The current trends in agriculture can only hasten this decline. We need to try to support our local businesses and avoid the Wal-marts, who are the downfall of small business on Main Street.

Farmer friends, we are over a barrel. What are we going to do about it? We may be too late! We must not go down without a diligent fight. We must contact our representatives in Congress, our national leaders, Secretary of Agriculture, Ann Veneman, and yes, even President Bush, our church leaders, and anyone who might be able to influence this very negative picture for rural America and the American way of life. Our rural way of life is at stake. Become involved and voice your concerns. Robert Farrell Hill City

## The Goodland Daily News

(USPS No. 222-460. ISSN 0893-0562)

Member: Kansas Press Association  
The Associated Press

Inland Press Association Colorado Press Association  
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Published daily except Saturday and Sunday and the day observed for New Year’s Day, Memorial Day, Fourth of July, Labor Day, Thanksgiving Day and Christmas Day, at 1205 Main St., Goodland, Kan. 67735.

Periodicals postage paid at Goodland, Kan. 67735; entered at the Goodland, Kan., Post Office under the Act of Congress of March 8, 1878.

POSTMASTER: Send address changes to The Goodland Daily News, 1205 Main St., Goodland, Kan. 67735.

TELEPHONE: (785) 899-2338. Editorial e-mail: [daily@nwkansas.com](mailto:daily@nwkansas.com). Advertising questions can be sent to: [gdnadv@nwkansas.com](mailto:gdnadv@nwkansas.com)

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SUBSCRIPTIONS: In Sherman County and adjacent counties: three months, \$22; six months, \$38; 12 months, \$72. By mail in Kansas, Colorado: three months, \$ 28; six months, \$50; 12 months, \$95. (All tax included.) Out of area, weekly mailing of five issues: three months, \$25; six months, \$40; 12 months, \$75.

### Incorporating:

The Sherman  
County Herald

Founded by Thomas McCants  
1935-1989

THE SHERMAN COUNTY  
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Founded by Eric and  
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1994-2001

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Haynes Publishing Company