

THE MAN WHO MADE WASHINGTON

BY HENRY M. HYDE

THEY are tearing down the shabby row of second-hand stores, garages and soft drink parlors which now fills the south side of Pennsylvania avenue, in Washington, from the Capitol to the Treasury. In its stead are rising a series of white stone palaces.

Among the landmarks which are to be removed is a large and hideous solitary bronze figure now standing on a high granite pedestal at the corner of Fourteenth street. In the granite base is cut the one word

SHEPHERD

From an artistic standpoint I suppose that not even Washington can show anything worse. It is the effigy of a tall, fat man, with a big, square, hard, smooth-shaven face. The figure, with its massive chest and shoulders, is attired in full morning dress, the tails of the coat sharply cut away. It has about it the comic suggestion of a pouter pigeon, just after blowing itself up. The right hand is thrust behind the back and in the left is held a partially unrolled bronze scroll. It is almost a figure of fun, except for the suggestion in that heavy, truculent face that anybody who grins is likely to get a swift punch in the nose.

To few people, in all probability, will the name on the monument mean anything. As for the younger generation, not even when it is told that this is the tribute of the national capital to that Boss Shep-

herd whose fame was coupled with the fame of Boss Tweed in the '70s will it be conscious of any faint stir of memory. That is a pity, for the story of Shepherd is one of the most amazing, amusing and ironic in our history. A burly giant of a man, lusty and dominating, he was driven into exile by the outraged citizens of Washington—after he had lifted the national capital out of the mud and prevented it being removed to the Mississippi valley. He presided over a régime, as Governor of the District of Columbia, which for shameless and spendthrift graft had no rival, even in the Dreadful Decade after the Civil War—yet a joint committee of Congress, which investigated the scandal for months, could not find that the Boss was personally dishonest. In less than three years he threw \$30,000,000 about the streets of the city—more than a quarter of the assessed valuation of all the property there at the time.

He found Washington an evil-smelling hole. He left it, up to its neck in debt, a half-completed but glorious wilderness of streets, squares, excavations, fills, and mighty boulevards. It was as if an army of half-crazy engineers had been interrupted in the midst of a tremendous professional orgy. Perhaps it is no wonder that the people of Washington, eight years after the Boss had fled to Mexico to escape their wrath, welcomed him home again with triumphant parades, public receptions and banquets in his honor.

To understand him and get the full and delightful flavor of his story, a glimpse of the city in the '60s and '70s is necessary. When the Civil War broke out it was a town of 50,000, governed by a mayor and a double-barrelled City Council, elected by the citizens. Beyond appropriating money, now and then, for an ornate public building, Congress did nothing to mark the fact that Washington was the seat of the Federal government. The local residents had to pave the streets and make all other public improvements. Since a large proportion of them were government clerks and other hangers-on—to say nothing of thousands of penniless Negroes—there was precious little money in the city treasury and much of that little was commonly wasted.

Outside of a few blocks the streets were not paved at all. When it rained they became deep swamps. If a fire broke out the engines had to travel on the sidewalks to make any progress. There was no sewage system. In wet weather the few drains which had been built backed up and flooded the streets. There was an open canal, on the surface of which dead cats floated and mosquitoes bred. A stagnant creek—the Tiber—ran through the center of the town.

Domestic animals ran at large. Pigs rooted and wallowed in the gutters along Pennsylvania avenue. It is a Washington tradition that on one occasion the British Minister, returning home late from an official function, tripped and fell over a 200-pound hog, which had climbed the steps leading to the front door of the Legation and gone to sleep in the vestibule.

Such conditions did not greatly disturb the statesmen who gathered from all over the country when Congress met up on the hill. Most of them came from communities in precisely the same stage of devel-

opment. But European visitors, of course, were disgusted at what they saw, and went home ridiculing the pretensions of Washington. To be sent there was a severe punishment for a diplomat.

The statesmen in Congress did not mind, but they were inclined to complain because of the location of the capital on the Eastern seacoast. Many of them had to travel a thousand miles to take their seats, and seventy years ago a thousand miles was a great distance. They found fault, also, with the terrific heat in Summer. The growing bitterness between North and South emphasized the fact that the location of Washington just across the river from Virginia made it easy of capture in case of war.

There was a growing party which favored a removal to a more central and safer location.

II

When the Civil War finally broke out all the national energies were concentrated on its prosecution. No attention at all was paid to public improvements in Washington. The mud in its unpaved streets grew deeper. Columns of Army wagons were mired on the avenue and everywhere the highways were cut with tremendous ruts. Garbage was uncollected, or dumped into the canal, or into the creek which ran through the city.

To meet the war emergency the Baltimore & Ohio railroad laid tracks across town, circling the bottom of Capitol Hill. As the fighting went on thousands of runaway Negroes swarmed into the city and settled like flies in the alley slums. Their vote controlled the local elections until the form of government was changed and all the citizens of Washington were disenfranchised. Several times during the war

Washington was in danger of capture by the Confederates. If after the first battle of Bull Run, for instance, the Southerners had followed the retreating Union forces a little faster and a little further they might have walked right into a practically undefended city. These repeated fears, and the continuing evidence that Washington was full of Confederate sympathizers, greatly increased the sentiment among the majority in Congress in favor of moving the seat of government to a safer and more loyal site.

When the war ended, another high tide of floaters, Army followers, grafters and freedmen swamped the city. The population doubled between 1860 and 1870. In no way was the town prepared to handle this swarming mass of 100,000 people, a big proportion of whom were illiterate and penniless Negroes.

Grant came to the White House and brought with him a trail of grafting officials. The new black voters, handled like sheep by the politicians, sent to the City Council a shameless lot of aldermen. What little money was available for public uses was stolen or wasted. Practically nothing was done to improve the squalid town. Democrats and the better class of citizens generally stayed away from the polls in disgust and despair. The gang which managed local politics showed its contemptuous sense of humor by running barges down the river and loading them up with vagrant Virginia and Maryland Negroes. These were brought to the city on election day and voted in the names of the more prominent absentees. Thus Washington, like—one had almost written—all other Southern communities, went through its scandalous and depressing period of Reconstruction.

Finally the leading citizens rebelled. By giving a series of steamboat excursions

down the Potomac, at which champagne and other entertainment was furnished, they persuaded Congress to pass a bill which wiped out the popular form of government. It was provided that the President should appoint a Governor of the District, with a Board of Public Works to take charge of the delayed business of making the city habitable. When word came that the bill had passed Congress, members of the City Council rushed to the City Hall and started to carry off the furniture of the Council chamber. Even the desks and chairs of the aldermen were being loaded into express wagons when police arrived to stop the looting. One statesman was discovered with a feather-duster concealed inside his trousers leg. That final, impromptu session won for the last City Council in Washington the historic nickname of the Feather-Duster Council.

Five years went by after the close of the war without anything being done to improve conditions. Tiber creek and Slash run still flowed sluggishly through the city. Into them the few existing drains discharged sewage. Dead cats still floated on the stagnant waters of the old canal. There were hundreds of hog-pens, and in them householders deposited their garbage. A big red light district grew up south of Pennsylvania avenue and not far from the White House. It was known for years as Hooker's Division, because Hooker had camped his troops there during the war.

Meanwhile sentiment continued to grow stronger for the removal of the capital to a city nearer the center of the country. Finally a convention was called to bring pressure on Congress and force the removal. Delegates representing seventeen States met in St. Louis, listened to vivid descriptions of the horrors of Washington,

adopted a memorial to be presented to Congress, and adjourned to meet again when the agitation had gathered still greater force.

III

Alexander Shepherd was born in 1835 on a farm just outside Washington. It is recorded that his father owned a few slaves, but he could hardly have been well-to-do, for at the age of seventeen the boy was apprenticed to a plumber and gasfitter. He was a tall, strapping, aggressive youngster, and by the time he was thirty he had climbed to the head of the firm and owned it.

He was never ashamed of his trade. Once when he was Governor of the District—he was still not forty years old—he attended a reception given by one of the old “cave-dwellers” who call themselves the aristocrats of Washington. Evidently his hostess was determined to put him in his place.

“Governor, we are highly honored,” she said, with a murderous smile. “I believe you put up the gas-fixtures in this house with your own hands?”

“Yes, I did,” replied the unabashed Shepherd, “and I put them up to stay. Look, I’ll show you.”

Reaching up, he took hold of the fixtures with both hands and deftly skinned the cat.

“You see,” he said. “They are just as solid as the day I hung them.”

When the Civil War broke out, although his father had been a slave-owner, and though Washington sentiment was predominantly with the South, Shepherd enlisted for three months in the Union Army and served out his term. When he returned to Washington and the plumbing business, he immediately plunged into

politics. He was elected to the City Council while still in his twenties, and a little later he was chosen president of its upper branch. He became an intimate of President Grant, by then in the White House.

Physically, he was almost a giant and in every capacity he was aggressive and dominant. He married early and became the father of ten children. Although he knew and practised all the tricks of post-war politics, he was, at the same time a member of the Presbyterian Church in good standing and was accustomed to hold family worship every morning. On one occasion, tradition says, he had, with his huge family, just left the breakfast table and knelt down to pray when his attention was distracted by the noise made by a neighbor’s cow, which had invaded his dooryard and was eating the flowers in a bed under the open window.

“Get that damned cow out of the flower bed!” he flung over his shoulder to one of his kneeling sons, and went on with his prayer.

For whatever reason, Shepherd took an active part in persuading Congress to abolish the mayor and City Council and put the District under a territorial form of government. When this was done Grant appointed Henry D. Cooke the first Governor of the District. Mr. Cooke was president of the biggest bank in Washington. He was also a brother of Jay Cooke, head of the Philadelphia banking firm which largely financed the Lincoln government and which later, during the panic of ’77, disastrously failed.

Under Governor Cooke, most of the power of the new territorial government was lodged in a Board of Public Works. Alexander Shepherd had himself made vice-president and executive officer of that board, though there was no warrant in law for the creation of such a position.

From then onward for three years he governed Washington alone and single-handed, with practically no check upon his authority. Cooke was an old dodo, who travelled largely on the reputation of his brother. His bank got rich pickings out of discounting the millions of certificates of indebtedness which Shepherd issued, and Cooke himself had a profitable part in certain unsavory real estate speculations. As Governor he was entirely dominated by Shepherd. The Board of Public Works was an even greater joke. After the Boss elected himself its executive officer it rarely, if ever, held a meeting. Its members signed on the dotted line whenever he issued an order.

The story of what happened during the next three years would seem fabulous if it were not all embalmed in the pages of three thick books which contain the testimony taken by a joint committee of Congress, headed by Senator Allison of Iowa. Senators Thurman of Ohio and Boutwell of Massachusetts were the other senatorial members, and five members of the House of Representatives completed the committee. It sat daily for three months and examined more than a hundred witnesses. Its report, covering thousands of pages, was a complete compendium of municipal graft.

Contracts for excavating and paving streets, for laying sewers and executing other public works were peddled from hand to hand, two or three men taking profits from the same job. Contracts for grading were let without even a preliminary estimate of the amount of work involved. Some of them ran to hundreds of thousands of dollars. Juicy jobs were awarded to dummies, who later turned them over to insiders on payment of a few thousand dollars. For instance, John F. Seitz, one of the witnesses, testified:

I made application for the carriage way on Tenth street. I am a baker by trade. I received \$2,500. The check was given to M. Frank Kelley, a clerk in the office of the Superintendent of Assessments, by Dr. L. S. Filbert. The money was divided equally between M. Frank Kelley, Arthur Shepherd and myself.

Arthur Shepherd was the brother of Boss Shepherd. E. M. F. Faetz, another witness, testified:

I sold my interest in a contract to Geo. W. Linville for \$7,000. I had two public positions at that time, one under the general government, the other under the District government, as a member of the Auditing Commission.

Bids were never advertised to be let to the lowest bidder. Boss Shepherd fixed in advance the amount to be paid per yard for grading, excavating, the laying of pavement, etc. He then awarded the contract to whoever he pleased. In scores of cases he increased the amount after the contracts had been let. To a man named Lewis Clephane, for instance, a contract for grading was let at twenty cents a yard. Clephane was one of the inside ring. Shortly after he got the job the price was advanced by Shepherd to thirty cents a yard, with an additional allowance of one-and-a-half cents for every hundred feet the dirt removed was hauled. If the haul was a quarter of a mile the price paid amounted to nearly fifty cents a yard. This contract alone amounted to several hundred thousand dollars, but it was let, like most of the others, without even a preliminary engineering estimate of the amount of work to be done.

When Shepherd took hold, Washington was a city with practically no public improvements. In sixteen months he let contracts for 365 miles of street paving, nearly a million feet of curbing, 130 miles of sewers, 3,500,000 cubic yards of excavating,

55 miles of parking, and 40 miles of water mains. All the while, he was legally authorized to spend but \$4,000,000, and the laws of Congress forbade him to obligate the national government in any amount or to increase the indebtedness of the District. Not even the joint committee of Congress, after months of investigation, could determine with any accuracy how much was actually spent. But the official records, incomplete and fragmentary as they were, revealed that contracts to the amount of at least \$26,000,000 had been let.

An inside gang of seven men got most of the loot. Governor Cooke was one of them, and five of the other members were contractors. The identity of the seventh member was always a mystery. Boss Shepherd himself was more than suspected. But though his brother and his business partner were involved in the purchase and sale of contracts, the congressional committee unearthed no evidence that he actually had any personal share in the stealing.

The gang employed many ingenious schemes, since widely imitated, to increase its profits. It formed a real estate pool, financed by Cooke's bank, and bought large blocks of suburban real estate. Then Shepherd built wide boulevards to connect them with the city. When funds ran low the Board of Public Works—which was Shepherd—issued \$13,000,000 in so-called certificates of indebtedness, which, by some chicanery of the law, were supposed not to increase the bonded debt of the District. Their legality was uncertain and they sold at a large discount. It was in handling this depreciated paper that Governor Cooke's bank got its biggest loot. A contractor, paid off in the scrip, would cash it at the Cooke bank for 60% of its face value. Then the bank would send the certificates to the office of the

Board of Public Works and, in the long run, collect 100%.

But in spite of all this and of a thousand pages more of equally damaging revelations, the joint committee brought in a Scotch verdict of not proven against the Boss. Not once did it mention his name by way of reprimand or reproof. Perhaps this was because he had a powerful friend at the White House. Even after his gaudy career as executive officer of the Board of Public Works, Grant appointed him Governor of the District to succeed Cooke. Now, when, as a result of the report of the joint committee of Congress, the territorial form of government was abolished and a commission of three members appointed to rule the District, Grant nominated him as one of the triumvirate. But that was too much for even the tough stomach of the Senate. It revolted and rejected the nomination. So the Boss retired to private life.

IV

It would be unfair and untrue to convey the impression, even by insinuation, that Alexander Shepherd was merely a grafter. He was much more than that. And it must be remembered that he was never convicted of accepting a dishonest penny. Here is a truthful anecdote which helps to reveal the quality of the man.

When the Boss took hold of the government of Washington, one of the chief blots on the face of the city was the track of the Baltimore & Ohio Railroad, which ran across town near the foot of Capitol Hill. It had been laid as an emergency war measure. John W. Garrett, a mighty man of the public-be-damned era of railroad operation, was president of the railroad. With him Shepherd conducted brief and vain negotiations for the removal of

the track. Then, convinced that Garrett's refusal could not be shaken, the Boss acted.

Late one night he assembled a crew of 300 workmen, tore up the tracks and piled them about the B. & O. Station, so that it was almost entirely cut off from the outside world. Over from Baltimore stormed the enraged railroad Titan. Shepherd was waiting to meet him. It is a loss to history that a record of that interview was not kept. Doubtless it was full of roars, denunciations, threats and defiance. Only its conclusion has been preserved.

"Shepherd," said President Garrett when the row was over, "I offer you the job of first vice-president of the Baltimore & Ohio. You are just the man I have been looking for."

Another eyesore which marred that gorgeous picture of the rejuvenated capital which the imagination of Shepherd had painted was a huge and ramshackle market-house occupying the block now the site of the Washington Public Library. Its stall-holders claimed a vested right in the property and resisted the Boss's efforts to have it torn down. One day he learned they were about to apply for an injunction against its destruction. That night he again mustered his wrecking crew and, with pickax and crowbar, razed the building over the heads of its tenants. One dauntless greengrocer defended his stall against the invaders until the roof crashed in and killed him.

But neither for this, nor for his raid on the Baltimore & Ohio, nor for his incredible and lawless wastage of nearly \$30,000,000 was Shepherd ever legally called to account. The influence of his great and good friend in the White House was too potent. But even that influence does not wholly explain the Boss's immunity. Perhaps he got away with it because corrup-

tion was so widespread in those days that few men, whether in or out of office, cared to force him to tell all he knew. And there still remained the reckless, flaming audacity and the ruthless energy of Alexander Shepherd himself. To tackle him was a good deal like trying to fight an earthquake.

But after the Senate refused to confirm his nomination as one of the three commissioners of the District, his stay in Washington was short. He had lost his business. He was violently hated by thousands of taxpayers, many of whom had been almost ruined by the huge burdens he had laid on their unwilling shoulders. There were recurrent rumors that criminal proceedings would be started against him. One day, without notice, he suddenly removed himself to Mexico, from which Republic it was then difficult, if not impossible, to extradite a fugitive. In Mexico he became a friend of Porfirio Diaz, then at the beginning of his long reign of ruthless power, acquired a silver mine, and in a few years built up a considerable fortune.

At the end of eight years it was announced that he was coming back. And now behold a miracle! The city which had driven him out, proud at last of the glories he had forced upon it, sent a committee of its leading citizens to the railroad station to welcome him home. He was greeted as the greatest of civic heroes and escorted to his hotel amidst cheers and triumphant music. There, after listening to addresses of adulation, he held a public reception and made a speech to the applauding multitude.

After a visit in New York, he returned to Mexico, where he died in 1902. A few years later, the people of Washington erected in his honor the bronze statue now threatened with removal and destruction.

V

When Shepherd elbowed himself into power, the condition of Washington had been slowly growing worse for seventy-five years. With its population of 100,000—more than a quarter of them illiterate former slaves—the swampy village seemed about to drown in its own muck. There were a dozen sound reasons for the removal of the capital to a new site—cleaner, decenter, and nearer the center of the country.

By spending and wasting thirty millions of non-existent dollars in half as many months—by laying out imperial avenues, great circles, squares and parks all over the country-side—the Boss so deeply involved the moral, as well as financial, credit of the nation as to make the removal of the capital forever impossible. He bluffed and shamed Congress into accepting its full share of the responsibility of maintaining

the decency, not to say dignity and beauty, of the seat of government.

A man more scrupulous, of less reckless and ruthless audacity, could have accomplished nothing. By flaunting the laws, by plunging headlong into the construction of public works of a magnitude and magnificence unheard of before, Shepherd made the modern Washington possible and inevitable. The wholesale grafting that went on during his régime was, in the long view, merely only an unpleasant incident of it.

So it will be a shame and a scandal if his bronze effigy is taken down and hidden away or melted up and cast into souvenirs. It should rather be carried up the avenue at the head of another triumphant procession, and there permanently set up at the foot of Capitol Hill.

There let him stand, a grim, ironic, truly American figure, looking down over the city which he looted—and saved!

THE ARTS AND SCIENCES

Building Construction

THE WORK OF THE BRICKLAYER

BY CHARLES POWERS

MY father came of a family of English bricklayers, but never learned the trade himself. After serving as an Army officer in India, he came first to Canada and then to the States, where he married my mother and engaged in the contracting business. He was a general contractor in the South, and sometimes employed a few bricklayers. Bricklayers are good fellows to those they like, and I am sure that some of those men liked me, because the years that followed proved as much. During my childhood I had a great deal of sickness, and the bricklayers used to pet me and buy me presents. I was a slender, brown-haired boy with a leaky heart and an inferiority complex, and they were sorry for me. Some of them would sometimes let me lay a few bricks, and that, coupled with a boy's admiration for certain of them, prompted me to try to learn their trade.

Among the bricklayers whom I especially liked were Charley Poli and Carl Owens, and it was under their tuition that I began my apprenticeship. Carl, who was known to his associates as Polly, had contracted to do the brick work on a building at Tinsman, Ark., and Charley was working for him. I was past fifteen, and they decided to teach me the trade. Charley was running a corner, and Carl put me to backing up with common brick behind the 4-inch thickness of faced brick which composed the outside surface of the wall. He always kept me near Charley or himself,

so they could watch me. They were very kind to me, and there shall always be a pain in my heart when I remember that Charley was burned to death some years later in a hotel fire in Louisiana.

I had worked with him several months, and gained some experience, and had risen from \$2.50 to \$3.50 per day, when he sent me alone to lay the foundation for a house. That house happened to be for a widow, and, of course, what I built was more of a freak than a foundation. What the lady said to me about it is still vivid in my memory, but is not to be repeated here. After twenty years I am still afraid of widows. She was a beautiful woman, and Carl told me years later that she had once refused to marry him, and that he sent me to lay that foundation in order to get revenge.

I did not have an apprentice's card in the union for the simple reason that, while with Carl and Charley, I did not need any. So after serving six months—when an unfortunate combination of circumstances made it necessary for Carl to leave the State—I was left an "orphan apprentice". There was no other contracting bricklayer nearby who could take me on. Thus at sixteen, with six months' experience, I started out with a bag of tools and an inferiority complex to build up the world with bricks.

From the time Owens left Arkansas until the time I qualified as a bricklayer was a matter of long, soul-deadening years. During those years I hoboed over half the States of the Union, and a part of