

## **Canavan prose sample #1**

### **Washington City Then from “Lincoln’s Final Hours”**

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#### Washington City Then

The city directory listed 111 boardinghouses in 1865, but nearly every home in Washington had a sign in the window welcoming those willing to pay \$3 to \$10 a week for a room.<sup>1</sup> Boarders were treated like family – and subjected to all the drama and dilemmas and confidences of the household.<sup>2</sup> Some families rented out one room. Some catered to a specific clientele, like Mrs. Beveridge’s at 224 Third Street West, where Indian chiefs stayed while negotiating treaties.<sup>3</sup> And some houses, like the Petersen’s, rented every available space, even the 6.5 x 10-foot second-floor staircase landing.<sup>4</sup>

It was a simple matter for a homeowner to rent out a space, no matter how small, during the war. The city’s population tripled to almost 200,000, and prices rose too, so much that some foreign governments moved their embassies to Baltimore.<sup>5</sup>

Because Petersen’s Boarding House stood just one-and-a-half squares uphill from Pennsylvania Avenue, its roster of past tenants included at least three members of Congress -- William A. Newell and Andrew K. Hay of New Jersey and John C. Breckinridge of Kentucky, who went on to serve as vice-president under James Buchanan and later switched sides and served as a Confederate general.<sup>6</sup>

In 1865, Washington was not the marble-faced, manicured capital it would become.<sup>7</sup> The Washington Monument stood temporarily abandoned at 156 feet – less than a third of its

eventual height. Cows, sheep, goats and poultry grazed around its stump. Pavement was uncommon. Drainage was unheard of. Pigs rooted for garbage in city streets. Rubbish and sediment swept out of shops and homes washed into intersections.<sup>8</sup> After a steady rain, the city's unpaved streets of clay and loam were mired in mud, one to three feet of it, so much of it that carriages would get swamped and their occupants would have to dismount.<sup>9</sup> When a foreign delegation's coach sank up to its axles near the Treasury building, its occupants, in full diplomatic regalia, cried in vain for planks to be brought so they could disembark without sinking into the sludge. Long after the sun dried the streets, deep washboard ruts remained. Men, even the president, wore shin-high boots with suits and formal wear, because shoes sometimes vanished in the paste-like muck.<sup>10</sup>

Dead dogs, cattle and, occasionally, citizens drifted down the fetid Washington City Canal, along with most of the capital's sewage. The canal, 80 feet wide in some spots, was an unwholesome leftover from the early part of the century. Long-since replaced by railroads as a mode of transportation, it still stretched across the city from the front of the Capitol to the back of the Executive Mansion, reeking of rotted produce, discarded fish and human excrement.<sup>11</sup> Adding to the stench were the stables and corrals that dotted the city. The largest, Giesboro Point Cavalry Depot, housed 21,000 horses.<sup>12</sup>

Ears were assaulted with a constant din of voices, gunfire, bugle calls and horses' hooves. Soldiers discharged their weapons daily, and cannon fire vaguely echoed from battlefields in nearby Virginia. On top of the stench and the racket, the putrid canal water carried malaria, cholera and the typhoid that killed 11-year-old Willie Lincoln in 1862.<sup>13</sup>

Saloons and at least 85 houses of prostitution peppered the city.<sup>14</sup> Gambling halls aplenty beckoned bettors, including members of Congress. “Murderer’s Bay” was the name locals gave to the shanties and saloons and houses of ill repute that lined the blocks just east of the Executive Mansion. Mrs. Lincoln insisted her husband carry a wooden stick when he walked through the city alone. When he remembered it, the president carried a thick oak plank studded with two bolts, one from the U.S.S. Monitor and the other from the rebel Merrimac. He didn’t really believe it would alter his fate. “I long ago made up my mind that if anybody wants to kill me, he will do it,” he told reporter Noah Brooks.<sup>15</sup>

War had wholly enveloped the federal city by 1865. Churches were converted into makeshift hospitals. Members of Congress could hear barrels of flour being rolled into storage beneath the stately Senate chamber. The smell of fresh bread wafted into Congressional offices from the ovens installed in the Capitol basement to feed the troops. Soldiers, about a quarter million in all, made camp on the Mall, in the Treasury Building, even next to the inventions in the Patent Office.<sup>16</sup> And the Capitol’s gleaming new dome was still unfinished inside, and, for the moment, it was shenanigans central for Union soldiers. The high-spirited New York Fire Zouaves, a regiment outfitted in colorful ballooned harem pants, dangled ropes from the rotunda walls and swung willy-nilly back and forth under the gaping dome.<sup>17</sup>

The Eighth Massachusetts held its own mock congress in the new Senate chamber. The chamber wasn’t the only thing the soldiers appropriated for their own use. When they wrote home, they did it on official Congressional stationery.<sup>18</sup>

Wounded soldiers arriving from battlefields by train were treated at 56 army hospitals, some makeshift, others state-of-the-art like three-year-old Armory Square, where the most severe

wounded were taken. Adjacent to the magnificent new Smithsonian building, it featured eleven long pavilions placed side by side. Before the war's end, 1339 men died there, but that didn't stop loved ones from hoping. Whenever wounded soldiers arrived from the front, anxious family members crowded the city's 66 hotels awaiting news.<sup>19</sup>

Four theaters brought celebrated actors and musicians like Laura Keane to town.<sup>20</sup> They stayed in boardinghouses or booked hotels like the National or Willard's. Willard's Hotel was the city's grandest, two blocks from the Executive Mansion, close enough for the president to pop in to exchange nods with leaders from every state and many foreign countries. Northerners and Southerners tended to use different doors. Willard's was especially popular with Unionists, so much so that some guests slept on cots in the hallways.<sup>21</sup> H.S. Benson's National Hotel, eight blocks east on Pennsylvania Avenue, catered to "secesh people," Mr. Lincoln's word for Confederate sympathizers.<sup>22</sup> A city block long, she was the largest in the city. What was found in Room 228 there would make headlines on April 17.

In 1865, Washington City was part world capital, part small Southern town. The magnificent hotels and marble palaces of government were just one of its faces. Diplomats wouldn't have noticed the hidden alleys teeming with those who served and entertained them. Non-whites lived in places like Goat Alley, almost invisible from the main streets and topful with small wooden living quarters.<sup>23</sup> Actors took shortcuts through openings like Baptist Alley, which ran between the back door at Ford's and Ninth Street, with a leg out to F Street. It took its name from the denomination that occupied Ford's before it was converted from a church to a theater in 1861.<sup>24</sup>

Successful immigrants like the Italians and Germans who lived on Tenth Street, built row houses a comfortable 25 feet wide and drank in taverns like the Dew Drop Inn and Charley Bennett's,

uphill from Ford's. Financiers and cabinet members lived in the posh mansions lining Massachusetts Avenue or the stately townhouses belting Lafayette Square. The public buildings were grander yet. Forty-two scrolled columns graced the marble front of the Post Office. The Executive Mansion featured two imposing porticos. The Capitol Building, which housed the Congressional library and the Supreme Court then, stretched 457 feet.<sup>25</sup>

The U.S. Christian Commission set about its mission from a plain brick building at 500 H St. Its goal was to counter war, drinking and gambling with prayer, patience and the occasional gift. Armed with hymnals, Bible tracts and \$3 million worth of supplies, the commission volunteers, including Walt Whitman and Louisa May Alcott, comforted soldiers and supported officers in the field, especially chaplains.<sup>26</sup> Although they gave away 1.5 million Bibles, George H. Stuart, the wealthy Presbyterian layman who led them, said, "There is a good deal of religion in a warm shirt and a good beefsteak."<sup>27</sup>

While the war went on around them, small businessmen like William Petersen thrived. The city directory for 1865 listed looking-glass makers, bill posters, cider makers, stencil cutters, stair builders, fancy-box makers, embalmers of the dead, and one matchmaker, Philip Alldorfer of 26th St. West.<sup>28</sup>

The ordinary citizens of Washington treasured their newly built marble halls of government, but few enjoyed a public building quite the way the members of the Megatherium Society did the showy red-sandstone Smithsonian Castle. The young club members, whose namesake was an extinct giant sloth, were a loose band of amateur and professional naturalists, astronomers, biologists and entomologists. They rented one room under the turreted and spired roof of the new faux-Norman castle for their weekly meetings. When the last of the staff left for the day,