In "Our Inhospitable Hospitals" (1895) cartoonist George Yost Coffin reacted to news stories of city hospitals turning away people unable to pay for their care. Coffin, whose boyhood diaries captured prep school life in Washington, went on to be a noted political cartoonist. The diaries, now in the collections of The George Washington University, reveal the artist's early wit and talent. Unless otherwise noted, all illustrations can be found in the George Y. Coffin Papers and appear, courtesy, Special Collections and University Archives, The George Washington University.

George Y. Coffin

A Schoolboy's Life in 19th-Century Washington

by Lyle Slovick

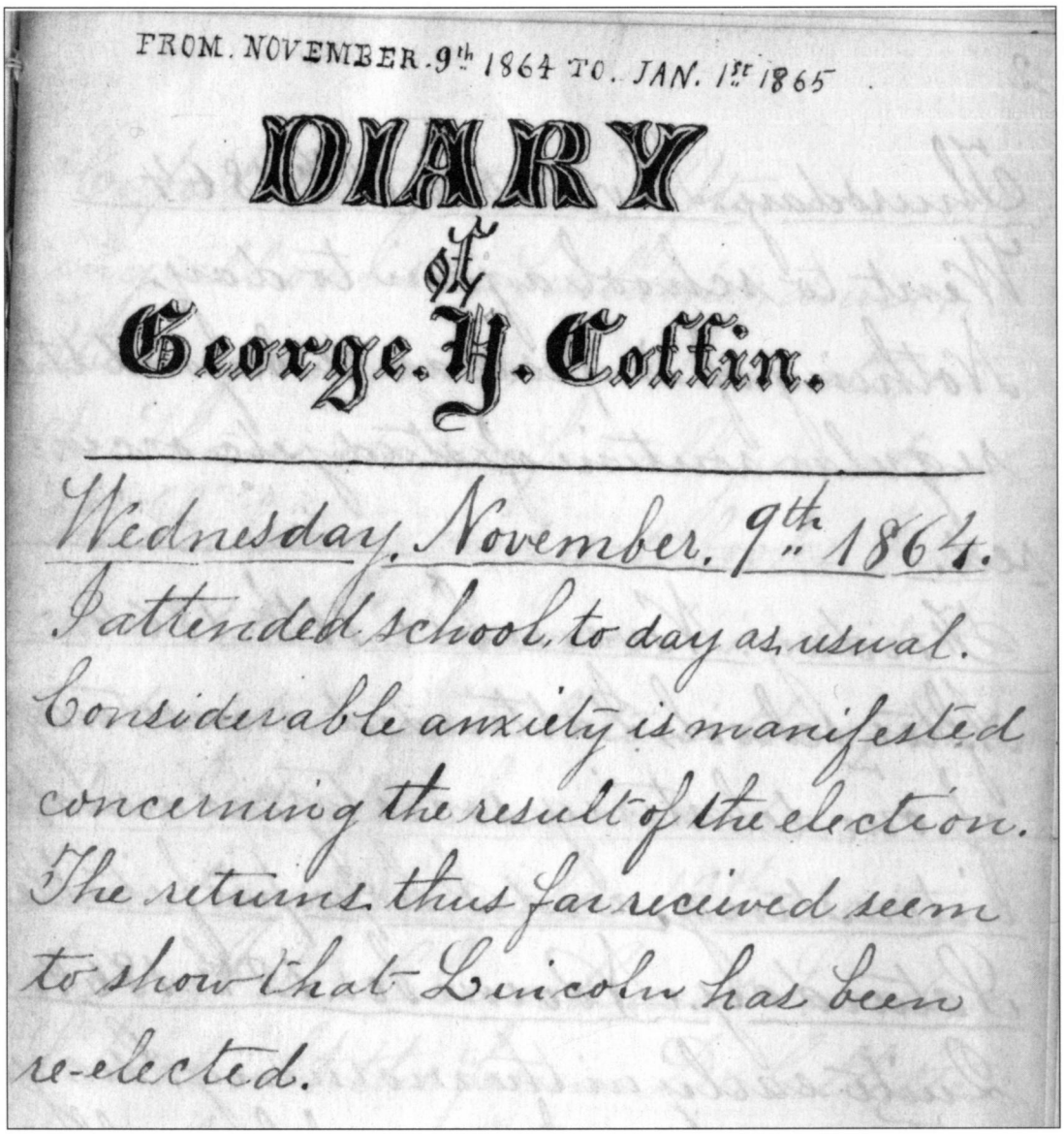
Since its founding in 1821, the George Washington University community has come to know fascinating characters, both students and faculty. The famous are legion—Red Auerbach, Alec Baldwin, John Foster Dulles, J. Edgar Hoover, Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis, Colin Powell, Edward Teller, and Margaret Truman, to name a few. The lesser known are often just as intriguing, with much to add to the history of the university as well as that of Washington, D.C. Alumnus George Y. Coffin, who died a century ago, made his contribution through the wonderful diaries he kept while a student in the 1860s as well as in the political cartoons he drew for newspapers and magazines, most notably the *Washington Post*.[1]

Coffin's thorough knowledge of Washington, its customs and characters, gave his cartoons a particular flavor and bite. He believed that, "a drop of ink will make a million think."[2] On his death, the *Evening Star* summed up his legacy:

> "Columbian students remember still, smiling through their tears, the telling pictures he would dash off of school day episodes and recreation fun. . . . He was the master of satire, but he dealt it out with such genial strokes that even the subjects smiled, and enjoyed being victims of such pleasant flagellation."[3]

In Coffin's youthful diaries, which he began keeping in 1859 at age nine, and continued off and on until 1868, Coffin developed the intelligent and witty personality that would go on to "make a million think." In addition, the diaries offer insight into both Columbian's Preparatory Department, which he entered at age 12 in 1862, and also the College itself (later The George Washington University), from which he graduated with an A.B. degree in 1869. And beyond recording vignettes of prep and collegiate life, the young diarist also left a precocious teenager's vivid

Lyle Slovick is assistant archivist, University Archives and Special Collections, The George Washington University.


FROM. NOVEMBER. 9th 1864 TO. JAN. 1st 1865

DIARY

of

George. H. Coffin.

Wednesday. November. 9th 1864.

I attended school to day as usual. Considerable anxiety is manifested concerning the result of the election. The returns thus far received seem to show that Lincoln has been re-elected.

George Yost Coffin's illuminated diary reveals his disdain for President Lincoln's re-election in 1864, when the artist was 14 years old.

record of the impact of the Civil War and its aftermath on Washington.

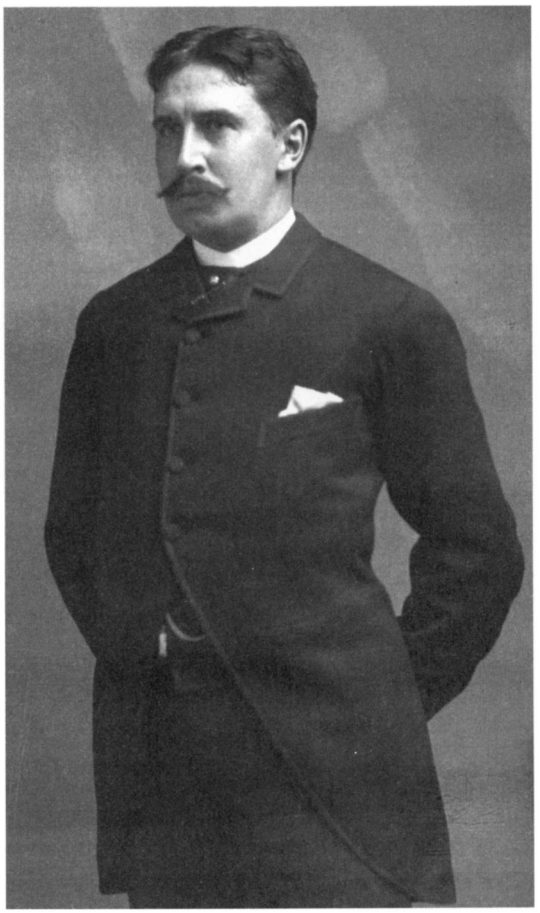
George Yost Coffin was born in Pottstown, Pennsylvania, on March 30, 1850, and came to Washington when he was eight years old.[4] His parents, Sarah A. Harrington and George M. Coffin, a "merchant" from Troy, New York, had married in Pottstown four years earlier.[5] From existing records, it appears that the elder Coffin died around the time George was born, and the subsequent diaries make no reference to the father. George was an only child. According to the 1850 Census, his mother Sarah headed her

household in Pottstown's East Ward, with baby George and a teenaged female (perhaps a domestic or boarder) in residence.[6] His mother had two sisters, Adelaide Brown and Mary Yost, and a brother, A.W. Harrington. By 1860 George and his mother had moved to Washington, residing at 354 New York Avenue, N.W. (today's 10th Street and New York Avenue), where they shared the house of his Uncle William and Aunt Adelaide (Addie) Brown with George's cousins and two Irish domestics.[7]

George Coffin's connection with Columbian College (which became George Washington University in 1904) was established at birth. His Aunt Adelaide was the daughter-in-law of Obadiah Bruen Brown, one of the school's founders and pastor of the First Street Baptist Church in Washington for almost half a century. Brown was a leading citizen with broad personal contacts locally and nationally, and served as president of the Board of Trustees of Columbian College from 1821 through 1827. George Coffin was thus born into a family that had strong ties to the Washington community.[8]

Nine-year-old Coffin wrote his first diary entry on Sunday, July 3, 1859: "My Cousin a little girl Died at the age fo [sic] Five Months." The next day Coffin wrote: "My Cousins Funeral took place. Rev. Geo. W. Samson officiated. Buried in the Congressional Burying Ground. Fireworks in the Evening at the Presidents I did not attend. Day bright and cool." Reverend Samson was pastor of the E Street Church and the newly appointed president of Columbian College. The pastor offered another link to Columbian College.[9]

As a young boy, Coffin wrote understandably brief entries at first: "Nothing of much importance which I can remember occurred," or "Today the weather was pretty cold."[10] He did, however, mention on October 3, 1860, that "the Prince of Wales arrived today" as part of a state visit to the United States and Canada. Coffin tried unsuccessfully to see the prince, commenting on October 6: "This morning the prince was supposed to leave and I tried to see him but again failed but I went to the Smithsonian Institute where I saw two pine snakes."



Diarist and cartoonist George Yost Coffin, around 1890.

As Coffin matured, the variety of daily activities he chronicled expanded. He wrote of attending school and church; visiting friends and relatives; doing chores; getting a haircut from his mother—which he wittily referred to as "a very 'barberous' operation"; going to the Congressional Library, then housed in the Capitol; and getting his photo taken (cartes de visite with his cousin Arvin at Keeley's in Philadelphia).[11]

It appears that Coffin's economic status was fairly comfortable for the time, as he wrote often of going to the theater and reading. He kept track of the books he read from 1859 to 1868.[12] They numbered around 220, and included such authors as Dickens, Scott, Bunyan, Irving, Tennyson, and Hawthorne—quite serious reading by today's stan-

One of the earliest Coffin sketches in the collection is "The Happy Family," drawn when Coffin was eight years old.

dards, but typical for a boy of his time and socio-economic class.

Coffin's recreations were not all intellectual. The diaries are replete with enthusiastic accounts of playing baseball, 16 years before the formation of the major leagues. On October 4, 1860, he wrote: "I played Base Ball this morning and practiced," and over the next four weeks he mentioned playing the game seven more times and probably only halted in the face of encroaching winter weather. He also occupied himself by drawing and painting when the weather turned bad, which he recorded doing all day long on December 8 and 31.[13] With the exception of some general drawing courses at school, Coffin was primarily self-taught as an artist; he would hone his skills throughout his childhood, preparing for the career path he followed as an adult.

In 1862 he began studies in Columbian College's Preparatory Department. The college, founded in 1821, originally comprised five buildings on "College Hill," a 47-acre parcel north of Boundary Street (now Florida Avenue) between 14th and 15th streets, N.W. The main college building, a brick edifice consisting of five floors, 58 rooms, and 60 fireplaces, could accommodate 100 students. Three other buildings were occupied by the president and his family, faculty, and a steward. One additional building was used for classrooms.[14]

The Preparatory Department played a significant role in GWU's first 76 years. Because the District of Columbia (and many cities) had no public high schools in Coffin's time, the Preparatory Department provided the thorough training necessary for admission to the regular college. The college faculty supervised the department's work, and frequently taught the boys. The department's student body always exceeded—and sometimes doubled—that of the college. When George Coffin entered the department, the annual tuition was $50 (about $1,200 in today's currency.) Records show that he took courses in geography, history, Latin, Greek, and algebra, among others.[15]

After December 31, 1860, a gap appears in Coffin's diaries, partly coinciding with the beginning of his preparatory education. Coffin resumed keeping his schoolboy diary in July 1864. That summer he and his mother went to their usual summer lodgings, his birthplace of Pottstown, "a pleasant little town in Montgomery County," Pennsylvania.[16] While there he visited friends and family, went fishing, picked blackberries, took walks, and assisted his aunts and uncles with farm work. After digging potatoes one day, he commented, "I am gradually becoming a Pennsylvanian Dutchman."[17] On September 13, Coffin and his mother, along with his Aunt Mary Yost and cousin Arvin, took the train back to Washington. "I took a sorrowful farewell of Pottstown and my friends which it contains," Coffin recorded.

Back in Washington, Coffin resumed studies at the Preparatory Department. The two-mile journey from his home to the school on the hill, in all kinds of weather, sometimes was an adventure. The wind was so fierce on January 17, 1867, he wrote, that "my courage proved unequal to facing it." When walking home that afternoon with friends, the wind at their backs, he was "kept warm laughing at the downfalls and desperate hatchases of my less fortunate companions." One spring day a year earlier he wrote: "Our daily morning walks to & from 'the Hill' are, in this bright, beautiful weather not the dreaded ordeals they were when the snow, the rain, the mud, &

the cold of February, or the freezing, warring blasts of March, used to render them, objects of terror, rather than something to be looked forward to with pleasurable anticipations." He added that such lovely weather would renew the student's energies "scattered & prostrated by the terrible conflict with teachers & lessons."[18] Coffin's choice of words typifies his periodic use of hyperbole to describe the stress of their workload.

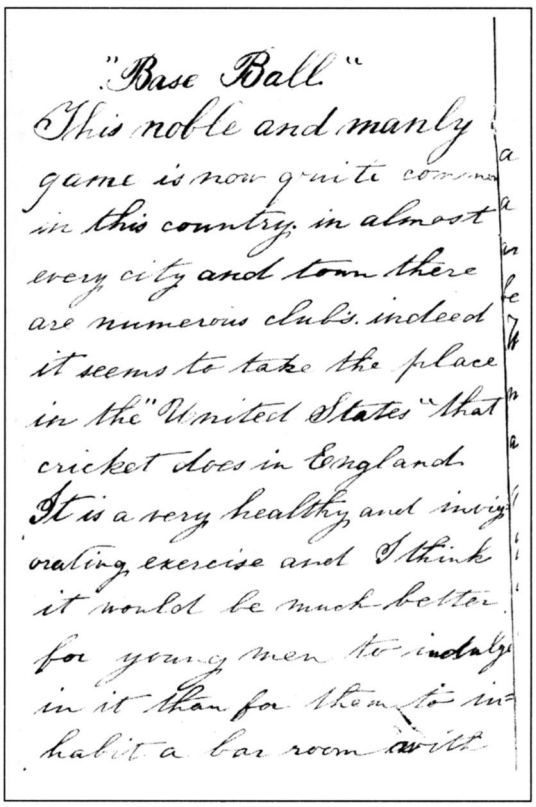
One of 53 students enrolled in the Preparatory Department in 1862, Coffin devoted enormous energy to his studies. College catalogs list as his classmates a number of friends he mentioned later: his cousins Thomas and William Brown; Clark Mills, Jr., son of the famous sculptor; and Charles E. Samson, son of the president. In 1863, even though the Civil War was pressing on the city, enrollment increased to 94 students.

As he began his last year in the Preparatory Department, on September 19, 1864, he wrote, "To day I commence school. I am in the first class, and have for my teachers Prof. Shute, Messrs. Mason, Lovejoy, Fendall & T. Samson. Many of my old schoolmates are back again, but there are also a great many new scholars." The next day he described the routine. "Went to school again today. It takes in at 9 o'clock in the morning and lets out at 3 1/2 in the afternoon, giving a recess of ten minutes at 11 o'clock and another of an hour at 1 o'clock."

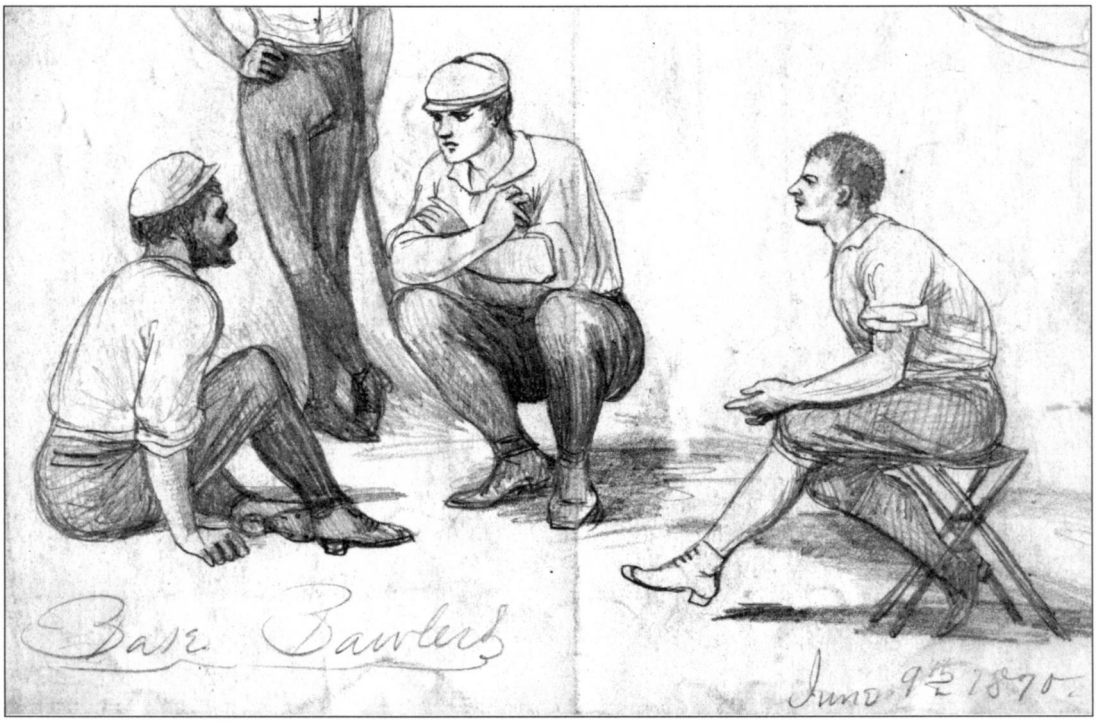
Coffin was a member of the Hermesian Literary Society, serving as editor of its newspaper, the *Casket*, in 1863. The Hermesians conducted debates, which he mentioned frequently. "I found myself," he wrote September 30, 1864, "a debater on the affirmative side of the question 'Should suicide be considered as an evidence of courage or cowardice.'" After the debate was brought to a close, "the question was decided in the aff[irmative] – the Chair casting the deciding vote."[19] It's not clear which side was "affirmative," but it probably was the side considering suicide "evidence of courage."

Other subjects debated included, "Which is the more useful to the world, the mechanic or the farmer?" and "Which exerts the greater influence over man, women or money?"[20] The Hermesians had a number of prominent members in its time, including Otis T. Mason, principal of the Preparatory School from 1861 until 1884, and later the head curator of the Department of Anthropology at the Smithsonian Institution; John B. Larner, who served the university for 20 years as chairman of the Board of Trustees; and Theodore W. Noyes, who later became editor of the *Evening Star*.[21]

For Christmas 1864, Coffin tells us that he received "Don Quiote [sic] and another book, a bottle of perfume, a pair of gloves, and a cornucopia filled with bon-bons. I spent the greater part of the day playing checkers, firing my pistol, etc. . . . At night I went with my cousins to a party over at Mrs. Dodson's across the street." He spent the rest of his holiday visiting friends and reading. On December 31 he wrote, "I have made several good resolutions for the new year, and sin-


"Base Ball"
This noble and manly
game is now quite common
in this country. in almost
every city and town there
are numerous clubs. indeed
it seems to take the place
in the United States that
cricket does in England.
It is a very healthy and invig-
orating exercise and I think
it would be much better
for young men to indulge
in it than for them to in-
habit a bar room as will

At the age of 12, baseball aficionado Coffin extolled the virtures of his favorite sport, suggesting that playing it was superior to "inhabit[ing] a bar room."



In "Base Bawlers," 1870, Coffin seems to be twitting a bunch of sore losers.

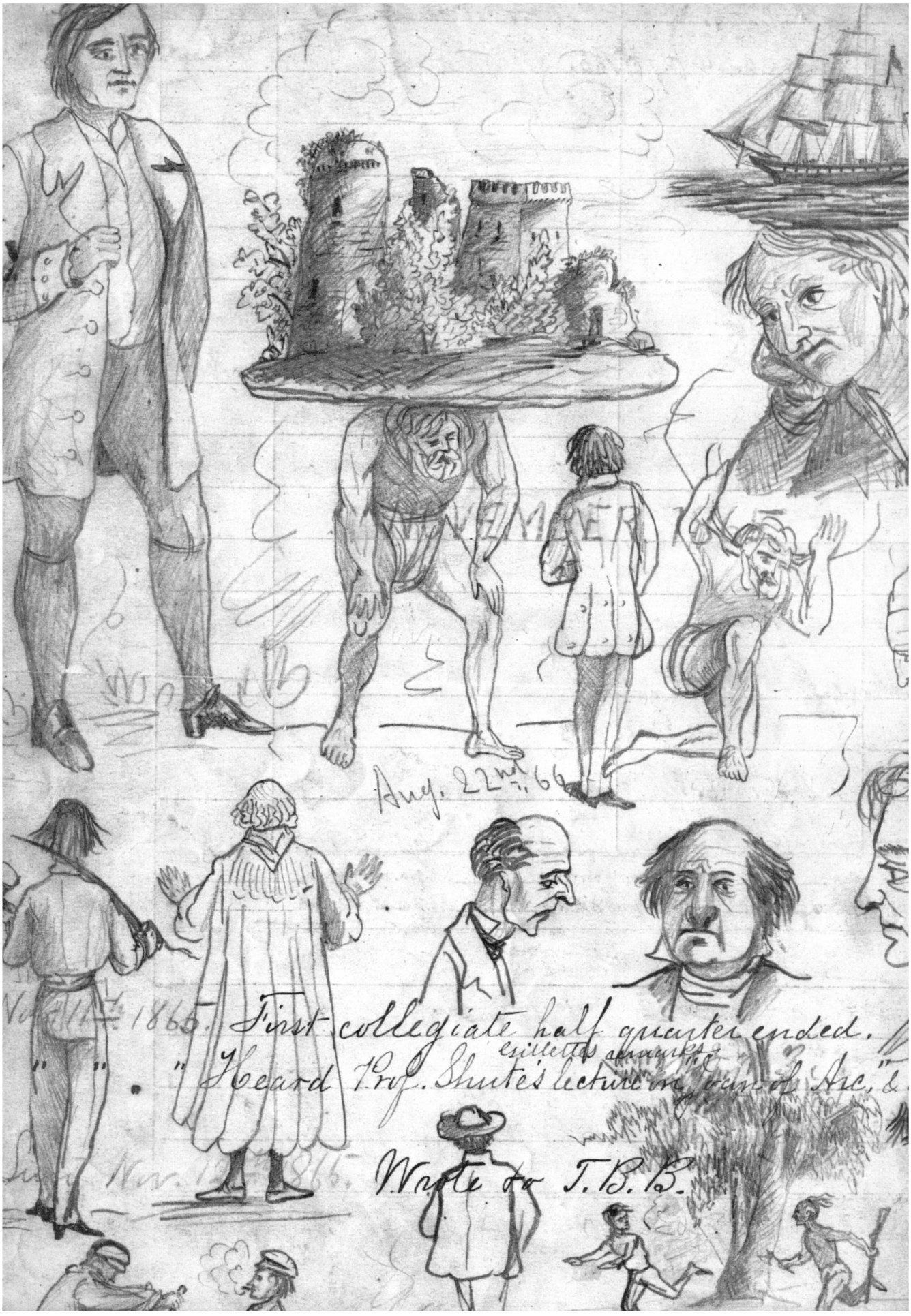
cerely hope that I may be able to keep them." Regrettably, he didn't specify what his resolutions were.

The first month of 1865 brought news of a spectacular fire that destroyed much of the Smithsonian Castle building. "I ran down from school," Coffin wrote on January 24. "Few firemen or engines were present to extinguish the flames, but there was a multitude of insolent cavalrymen to bully the crowd with their bare sabers. The magnificent building and its valuable contents are greatly damaged. The flames raged until late at night & this will probably be one of Washington's greatest losses." Coffin's asessment proved to be correct, as the fire destroyed the personal effects of founder James Smithson as well as the contents of Secretary Joseph Henry's office.[22]

In February Coffin had examinations in Latin, geometry, French, Greek, philosophy, algebra, and passed all with flying colors. Coffin's diaries are full of references to attending the theater (on March 18 he pronounced a performance of the opera *Faust* "with its grand choruses was a perfect success.") A month earlier he had gone to Ford's Theatre to see *King Lear*, *Richard III*, and *Our American Cousin*, which he found "very good and truly amusing."[23] A little less than two months later, President Lincoln would be assassinated at a performance of the same play.

Coffin wrote on March 9, 1865, "Base Ball clubs are being formed at school." He was fully taken with the game, as it is a constant theme in his diaries. A week later, on March 15, he noted that he and his classmates "play baseball at every recess & after school. The club held a meeting today, I was appointed centerfield, first nine, one of the directors to keep bats & balls & one of committee to draft a constitution." Even though he was physically small, he enjoyed playing the game, and years later credited it with being one of the exercises that helped him gain muscle mass.

The 15-year-old college freshman's drawings already displayed a sophistication and range of emotions.



"I, George the Slim," he wrote January 2, 1868, "weighed 119 lbs" and he attributed his gain to, among other things, playing baseball, lifting dumbbells and sleeping with an open window.

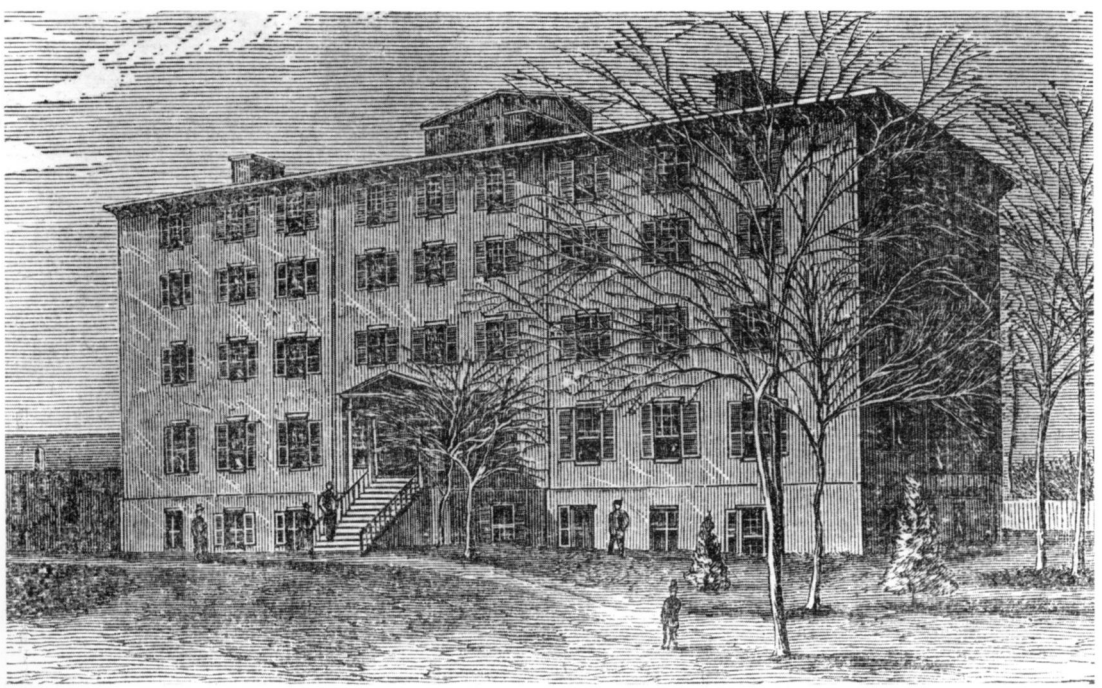
On June 23, 1862, he penned this tribute to the game: "This noble and manly game is now quite common in this country. In almost every city and town there are numerous clubs, indeed it seems to take the place in the United States that cricket does in England. It is a very healthy and invigorating exercise and I think it would be much better for young men to indulge in it than for them to inhabit a bar room with a table under their heels, a newspaper in their hands, and a meerschaum or Havana between his lips."

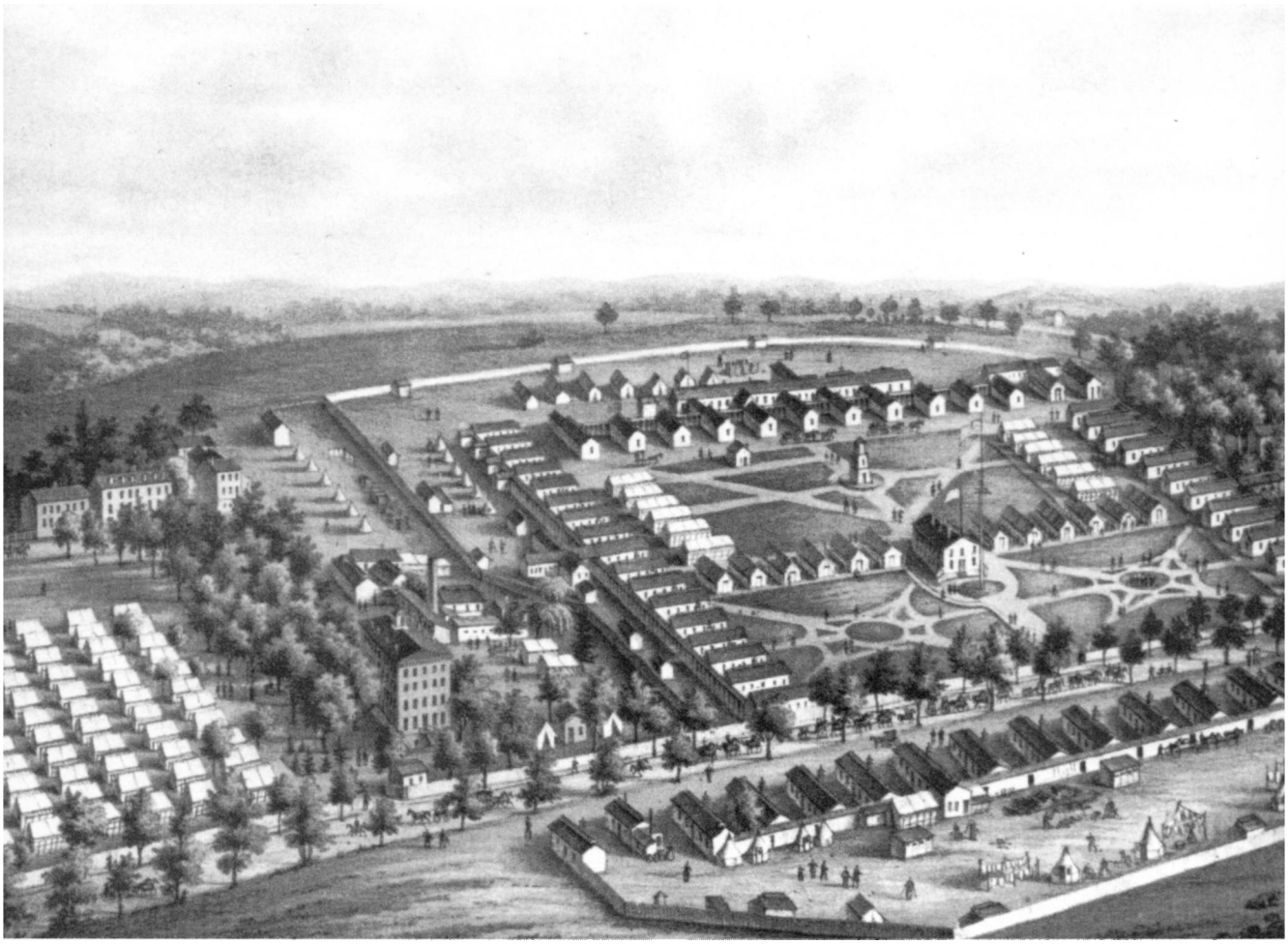
Coffin wrote of going to see organized teams playing on the "White Lot" by the White House, the area now known as the Ellipse. He recorded the outcomes of some of his own games.[24] Columbian College and the Preparatory Department each had their own teams, and apparently a healthy rivalry. On May 2, 1865, he proudly wrote, "This afternoon the 1st nine of our Club beat the second nine of the Columbian." On June 6, he noted that a game against the Columbian nine was not finished on account of the "ball giving out." Coffin wrote of the "National Base Ball Club" and the "Excelsior[s] of Brooklyn" playing an "Interesting & exciting" match on October 9, 1865. "The score stood National 36 runs. Excelsior[s] 30. A very large crowd was present, & much enthusiasm was manifested, both sides being repeatedly and enthusiastically cheered."[25]

Coffin's prep school days coincided with the Civil War (1861–1865). His diaries capture the interplay between a boy's pursuits and a nation's struggle, and Coffin was engaged in the swirling political climate of the times.

When the war began the government had taken over the main building and the grounds of Columbian College and established two hospitals

The original Columbian College building (below), where Coffin spent his school days, housed every function from dormitory to dining hall. After the Union Army commandeered the college, it built two hospitals and dozens of barracks on the grounds. The original college building is visible just left of center in Charles Magnus's 1864 lithograph (right).

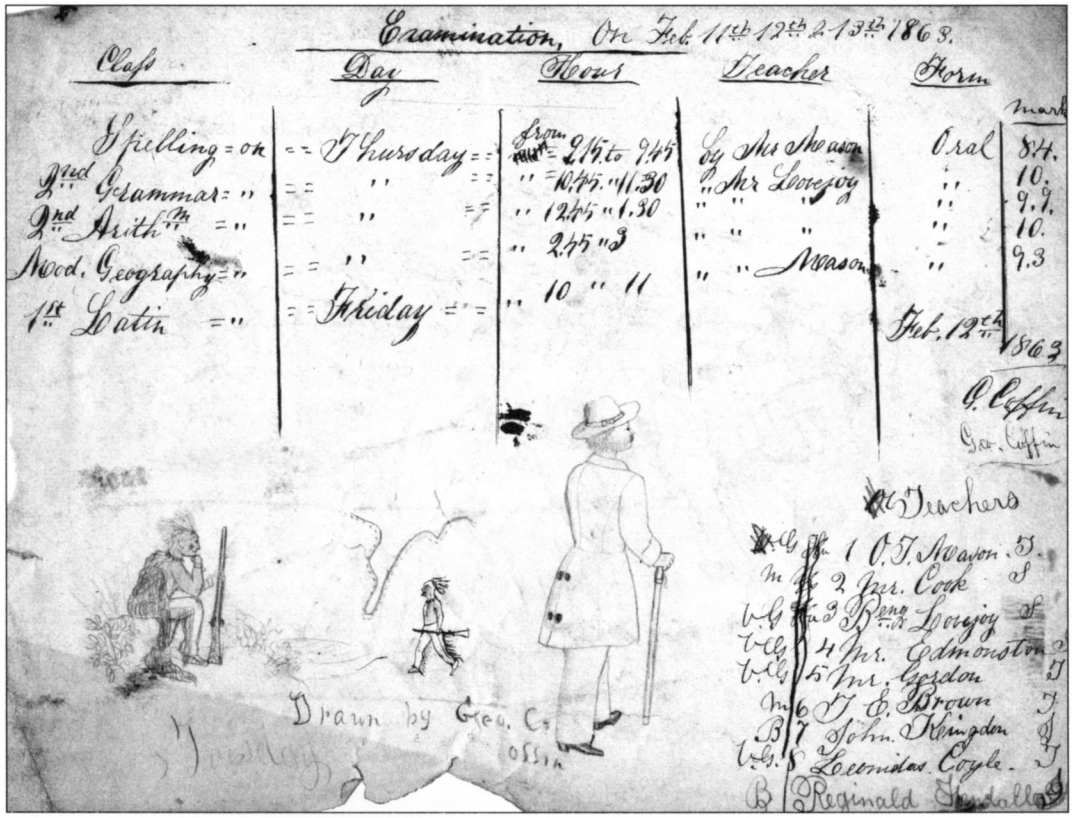




(Columbian and Carver) as well as soldiers' barracks, paying a monthly rent of $350 to the college. The students were taught in another "commodious" building on the premises, according to the College catalog, and the few students who boarded lived in the home of the principal of the Preparatory Department.[26]

Despite the intrusion of two hospitals with 2,144 beds and soldiers camping in tents from time to time on the grounds, the College and Preparatory Department continued operations during the war. This was due in large part to the yearly resolution of the faculty to continue instruction as long as there were any students.[27] When George Coffin entered in 1862 there were 53 students enrolled in the Preparatory Department and 23 in the Columbian College. By war's end there were 106 and 36 students, respectively.[28]

By 1864, when his diaries resumed after a four-year hiatus, the Civil War had been raging for three years and was a reality of daily life in Washington. On July 11 he described the preparations to defend the city from Jubal Early's raid on Washington, which aimed to bring 20,000 men to Washington and take the Capitol itself.[29] The day had been full of "rumor and excitement, the Confederates are between Rockville and Tenallytown & are reported at Silver Spring. About 9 A.M. a brigade of dismounted cavalry passed up 10th street. . . . The excitement increases as the day



Coffin noted his challenging exam schedule in 1863.

advances. the [sic] clerks and others in government employee are forming companies and arming to defend the city."

The next day, July 12, Coffin and a friend attempted to go to where fighting was taking place at Fort Stevens (just north of today's Missouri and Georgia avenues, N.W.), but they were turned back by guards. Walking home they observed a large detachment of troops, prompting Coffin to observe, "The city undoubtedly is in great danger. the [sic] firing at the forts is fairly audible in the heart of the city." He later noted seeing troops marching along H Street, N.W., yet the tone of his entries never conveyed a sense of panic or tension. In fact, he didn't mention military matters much at all in comparison to documenting his daily routine. With over 40 forts surrounding the city and more than 50 hospitals caring for soldiers returning from the front, the citizens of Washington had become used to the encroachment of the war into their lives.

Union Army reinforcements were able to beat back the Confederate forces, but not before President Lincoln arrived at Fort Stevens to witness the fighting first hand, coming under enemy fire in the process.[30] On July 15, three days after the battle ended, Coffin and another friend procured passes to go to the battlefield. They "started for the field which we soon reached. we [sic] saw the graves of several of those who fell in the fight, one man buried with a forefinger left uncovered." Unfazed, he and his friend wandered about observing the destruction around them and picking up souvenirs.

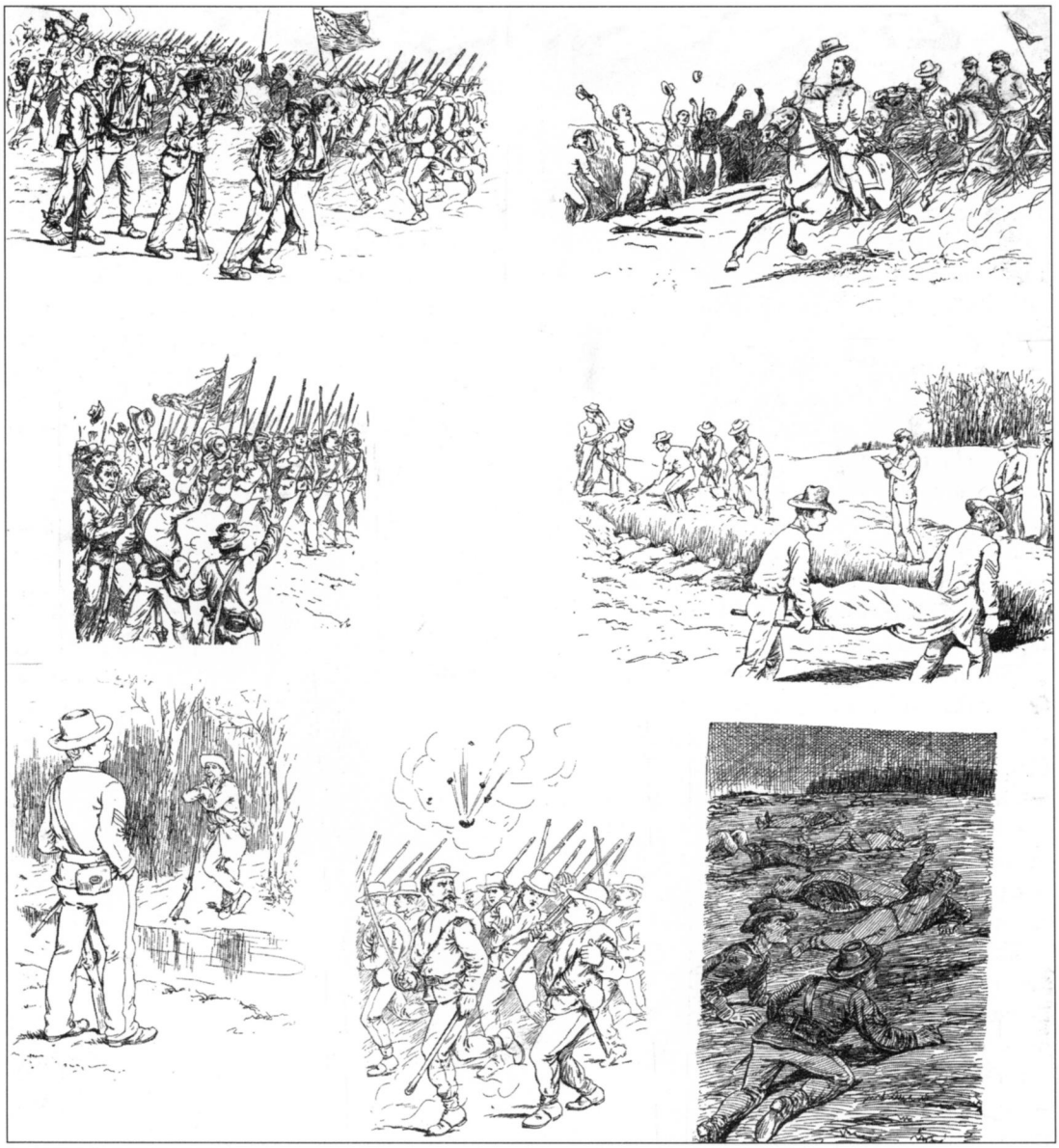
They met up with three soldiers, who "invited us to lunch with them in their 'crib' which they called the 'Hotel de posh.'" After sharing a lunch of hardtack, pork and beans, and coffee, the sol-

Though not an admirer of Lincoln, Coffin sketched the president reviewing troops. Lincoln visited Columbian Hospital on the Columbia College grounds in 1862, while Coffin was a student there.

diers went back to work, and the boys returned home. Coffin added, "Our walk home was a weary one, we being loaded down with about 95 cartridges apiece, besides other weighty trophies. However we enjoyed ourselves very much."

As 1864 drew to a close, Coffin could be found commenting on the race for president. On November 7: "Attended school today. At the long recess the school-boys balloted for the two candidates for the Presidency. Mr. Lincoln received 12 votes and Gen. McClellan received 46."

"Today the election for President takes place," he recorded November 8, "and it will be decided whether we are to have four more years of blood-



Coffin tried, but never actually observed a Civil War battle. To sketch these war scenes he probably referred to the era's popular graphic newspapers such as Harper's Illustrated.

shed, misery, taxation and ruin, or peace once more spread its wings over our distracted land, bringing blessings and prosperity in its train." A week later, on November 15, he commented: "The election has passed and we are doomed to another four years of anarchy & disaster." Clearly the incumbent was not Coffin's choice.

Even though he appeared to be no fan of Lincoln, Coffin reported going with two friends to see the inaugural procession on March 4. "After having waited for some time in the mud & rain, in the immense crowd that lined the avenue, the president or rather his closely shut carriage (for he was invisible) hove in sight. He was attended only

by his usual cavalry guard and some of the marshals." Coffin noted that the day "opened with floods of rain but about noon the clouds cleared away. Perhaps this is ominous." A little more than a month later, Lincoln would be dead.

By spring 1865, Coffin's last semester in the Preparatory Department, the Confederacy was in its death throes. On April 5 Coffin wrote of seeing "some terrible scenes among the wounded who have arrived from the front at Columbian Hospital."

On April 11, 1865, Coffin wrote: "Great rejoicing is going on over the surrender of Gen. Lee's army." Two days later he described the city: "All the public and nearly every private building are illuminated & tastefully trimmed with flags, lanterns, wreaths, etc. Many of the patriotic inscriptions were very appropriate. Bands are playing, magnificent fireworks are being set off and the city is a blaze of light. . . . Every-one is rejoicing at the prospect of peace."

Then, suddenly, April 14 brought horrible news, which Coffin documented. "At about 10 P.M. during the third act of 'Our American Cousin' at Ford's Theater, where Miss Laura Keene is playing, a pistol shot was fired in the private box of President Lincoln & a man leaped upon the stage brandishing a dagger, shouted 'Sic Semper Tyrannis, the South is avenged,' rushed out, gained his horse & escaped."

The following day he wrote: "The President died at 22 min. past 7 this morning. Thus has our rejoicing been changed into grief. Nearly every house public & private is draped in black & deep sorrow is manifested over the land, even the clouds drop tears. . . . There is now no doubt that the assassin of the President was John Wilkes Booth, the actor." On April 19, George walked from his home on New York Avenue to Willard's Hotel at 14th and Pennsylvania Avenue to see the "magnificent" funeral procession, which passed by for an hour and a half. The 15-year-old Coffin noted that he spent the remainder of the day playing ball.[31] Life went on.

The aftermath of the war and Lincoln's assassination continued to engage Coffin that spring and summer. On May 15, he wrote, "The trial of the parties accused of the murder of the President is now going on," and on May 23, "We had a holiday to-day to go to see the review of Grant's Army including Sheridan's. The troops were passing from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m." President Andrew Johnson had declared on May 10 that all armed resistance had virtually ended, and plans commenced for the review of troops. Coffin described seeing the 80,000 members of the Army of the Potomac marching twelve across on Pennsylvania Avenue.[32] "I went with our family and Walter Clarke down to Mrs. Willard's. The troops marching up the avenue, were reviewed by Gens. Grant and Sherman, etc., in front of the President's House. They all seemed in splendid condition, though bearing marks of hard service."

The following day he returned to see the review of Sherman's Army of Georgia, 65,000 strong. This time he watched from "the head of [Pennsylvania] Avenue at the Treasury where could be seen a glittering sea of steel extending from the Capitol to the White House & thousands yet to follow. . . . As Sherman & other prominent Generals passed along the Avenue they were hailed with loud cheers. Such sights seldom occur twice in a lifetime." The excitement of the occasion was marred by events afterward, as the troops lingered in the city. "The streets abound in officers & men shamelessly drunk, yelling, fighting & rioting," Coffin observed on May 26. "Saw one of them stabbed through the body & back of the neck on my way from school."

On June 13, 1865, Coffin and his friend George Ferris attended the trial of the Lincoln conspirators. "Several witnesses for the accused were examined. The proceedings were very interesting. . . . At the Court saw all of the prisoners, Payne, Herrold [sic], Dr. Mudd, Mrs. Surratt, Spangler, Atzerodt, Arnold & O'Laughlin [sic]." On July 7 he noted the excitement in the city surrounding the outcome of that same trial. "The cars were filled with persons going down to the Penetentiary [sic] to see at 1 o'clock the execution of Mrs. Surratt, Payne, Atzerodt & Herrold [sic]. President Johnson approved of the finding of the court on Wednesday and fixed the day." Coffin did not witness the executions.

During this period, Coffin saw the tragic side of life on a more personal basis, which he chroni-

cled in his diary. On January 30, 1865, he recorded the death of friend Willie Coombs, who "drowned in the river while skating on the ice." On March 14, 1865, he described classmate Mortie Clarke's accident with a pistol, which "shattered his right hand so shockingly . . . that it had to be amputated at the wrist. It is a terrible affliction both for himself and his friends. 'Beware of the Ides of March.'" Clarke survived and graduated from the College in 1868, and later earned a law degree.

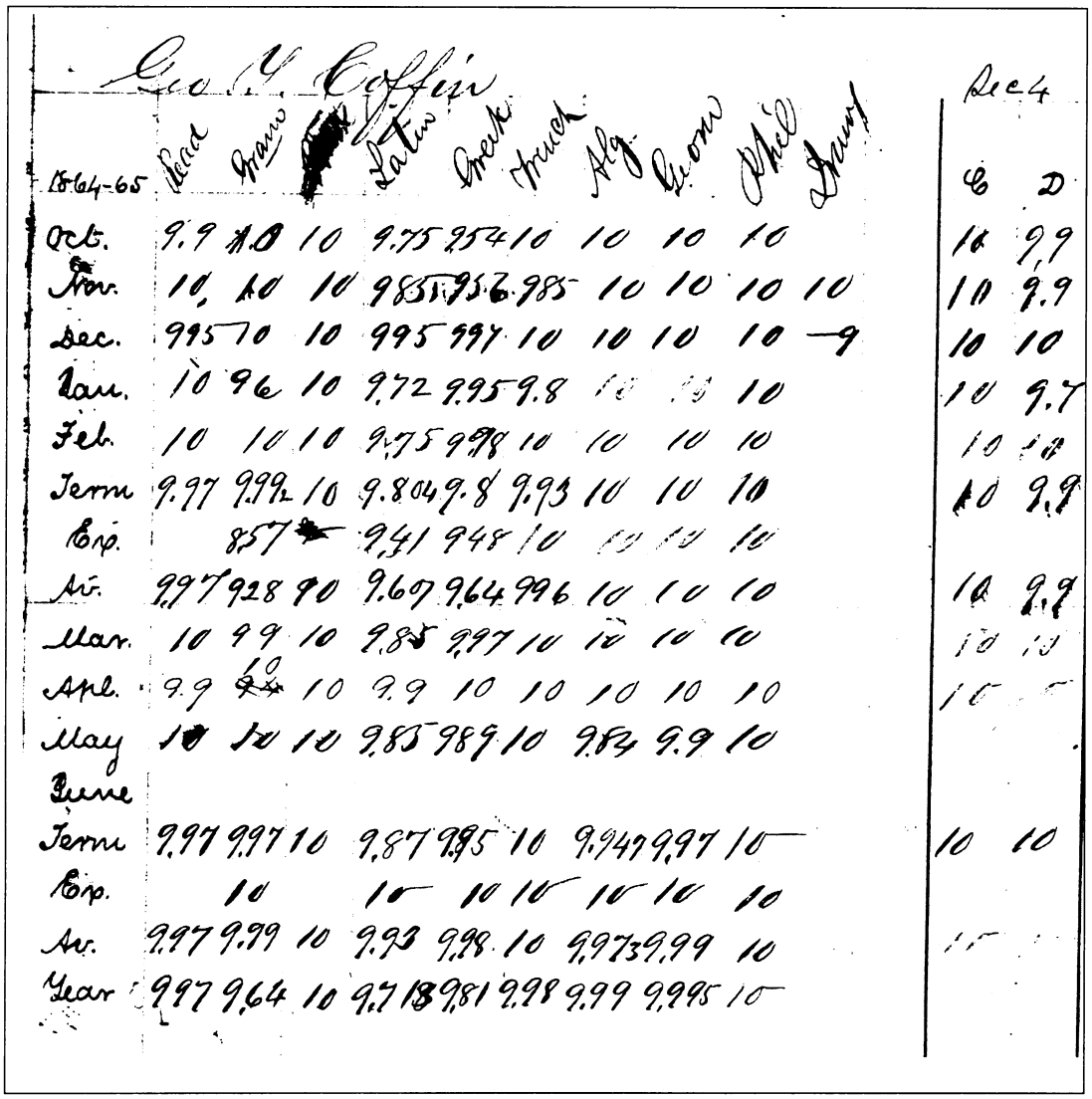
The Andrew Johnson administration, which succeeded Lincoln's and threatened significant political change as the nation struggled with Reconstruction, did not escape the critical pen of Coffin. An entry from February 22, 1868, described a national government with an "Executive Officer, to say the least, undignified; its Legislature mad with party passion, corrupt in high places; the people indifferent or unfair; military despotism imminent; ruin ahead and fanatics at the wheel; & the whole maelstrom of anarchy & destruction seething and whirling. . . ." His words captured the troubled times of Reconstruction and the turmoil surrounding President Andrew Johnson's attempts to restore the Union and give dispensation to the South. Although no fan of Johnson, Coffin's disdain for Congress was greater, and his concern that impeachment might be used as an instrument of political caprice was evident in his writing.

Coffin attended part of Johnson's impeachment trial, and on May 16 noted the country's good fortune that "Impeachment as a party weapon" had been defeated when the Senate failed by one vote to remove President Johnson from office. On May 25 he added "In the 'High Court' today the 1st and 2nd Articles were successively disposed of by the same vote as before, & then the Destructives fled in despair; i.e., adjourned the Grand Inquest, Sine die. So endeth the farce."

George Coffin was a product of his times where race relations were concerned. During and after the Civil War, thousands of African Americans relocated to Washington. Many had been field hands, the uneducated products of the slave system that existed in nearby Maryland, Virginia, and in the District of Columbia itself. One poignant entry Coffin made May 3, 1866, regarded African Americans he observed in the city. "Some of the negroes [sic] look bright & intelligent, others it is difficult to imagine human beings. Taking them all in all, it seems to me, that it is absolutely impossible for any power under Heaven to make this people equal in any particular, by any measure in any length of time, to the white race & that time will show the scheming party cabal, who now hold and abuse their power in the National Congress, how impotent are their 'civil rights bills' to effect that purpose." He, like Abraham Lincoln and founding father Thomas Jefferson, shared the conviction that whites were superior, a notion held by all but a handful of white Americans of Coffin's generation. His perspective on the "scheming party cabal," i.e., Radical Republicans bent on legislating equal rights, was not uncommon. The 14th Amendment, which guaranteed citizenship and other basic rights to former slaves, would be proposed in Congress the next month, and ratified two years later, but it could not end the problem of racial discrimination in America.

On September 27, 1865, having completed the Preparatory Department course, Coffin entered the freshman class of Columbian College. As he noted, he was lucky to be there, as the day before "Mother and myself very narrowly escaped being run over by a horse and cart at the corner of 7th and D streets."

To be admitted to the college, a student had to provide "testimonials of good moral character," in addition to the $10 admission fee. That year 50 students enrolled. Coffin and his roommate Eugene Soper chose Room 18 on the first story of the main building as their quarters (even non-boarding students had to pay room rent of $22 a year in addition to the $55 per year tuition.)[33] Coffin noted that the building was "being renovated after its four years appropriation to hospital purposes." At that time, according to the *University Bulletin*, it had a library with about 5,000 books. That afternoon George and his mother purchased his books: "Loomis' Geometry;



Geo. H. Coffin

1864-65	Read	Gram	[redacted]	Latin	Greek	Hist.	Alg.	Geom.	Phil.	Drawg	Dec 4 C	Dec 4 D
Oct.	9.9	10	10	9.75	9.54	10	10	10	10		10	9.9
Nov.	10	10	10	9.85	9.56	9.85	10	10	10	10	10	9.9
Dec.	9.95	10	10	9.95	9.97	10	10	10	10	9	10	10
Jan.	10	9.6	10	9.72	9.95	9.8	10	10	10		10	9.7
Feb.	10	10	10	9.75	9.98	10	10	10	10		10	10
Term	9.97	9.92	10	9.804	9.8	9.93	10	10	10		10	9.9
Exp.		8.57		9.41	9.48	10	10	10	10			
Av.	9.97	9.28	10	9.607	9.64	9.96	10	10	10		10	9.9
Mar.	10	9.9	10	9.85	9.97	10	10	10	10		10	10
Apl.	9.9	10	10	9.9	10	10	10	10	10		10	10
May	10	10	10	9.85	9.89	10	9.82	9.9	10			
June												
Term	9.97	9.97	10	9.87	9.95	10	9.947	9.97	10		10	10
Exp.		10		10	10	10	10	10	10			
Av.	9.97	9.99	10	9.93	9.98	10	9.973	9.99	10		10	10
Year	9.97	9.64	10	9.718	9.81	9.98	9.99	9.995	10			

As a prep school student, according to this official record of the Preparatory Department, Coffin earned excellent grades (on a scale of 1–10).

Fasquelle's French Grammar; Felton's Selections from Greek Historians; Kuhners's Greek Grammar & Arnold's Greek Prose Composition; Gould's Ovid; Andrews' & Stoddard's [sic] Latin Grammar & Arnold's Latin Prose Composition; & Smith's History of Greece."

Coffin studied French with College President Samson. He also had "declamation & composition," Greek and Greek history, math, and Latin. George became a member of the Philophrenian Society, another student debating group, and edited its newspaper, the *Spectator*. Coffin was an excellent student in both the Preparatory Department and the College, having no weak subjects. Old ledger books recording students' grades show him receiving between 7 and 9.9 as marks in his courses.[34] At the end of his freshman year he "received a certificate, having the

Coffin drew "The Men Who Fought/The Men Who Talk" for the Washington Post *(1895) in response to contentious congressional debates over pensions for veterans.*

average 9.94—10 being the maximum; the gold medal as first in my class; three bouquets from friends, and also the silver scutum fidei for punctuality and good behavior."[35]

Even though he was a good student, Coffin occasionally struggled. "My algebra & myself are not very good friends," he wrote November 20, 1865. "The cause of this estrangement as of many others between those who should be friends, is doubtless the absence of a proper mutual understanding, that is, we do not know each other well enough."

Coffin's post-war diaries mostly concern his studies, his friends, improvements to the college grounds, and the daily routine of life, including his ever-evident love of baseball. On May 30, 1866, he and his friend Stuart went to see the "match between the Union & Jefferson. . . . The match was very interesting; a much larger crowd than usual was in attendance. Contrary to general expectation the game passed off in a very quiet and gentlemanly way. . . . the decisions of the umpire were impartial & satisfactory to both sides. At the close of the 9th inning the Union had made 13 runs more than the Jefferson." On June 5, he wrote that he "walked with several of the boys over to Georgetown College to see the match between a picked nine from that institution & a picked nine from Columbian. . . . The Georgetown nine made, in 9 innings, 24 runs to 9 made by our boys." There is no evidence that Coffin tried out or played for the College team, but he was a great fan.

Baseball and times spent with friends offered a respite from his studies, which he took seriously. (When he finished his winter examinations on February 16, 1866, Coffin rejoiced, "Gloria in excelcis [sic].") He and friends made good use of their location in what then was a much more open Washington, occasionally studying at the Library of Congress and attending speeches in Congress. On April 2 a group set off for the Capitol, but "deviated somewhat from our course however to look at several savage looking members of an Indian delegation at the Clarendon Hotel & at Dan Rice's Circus a little beyond. When we at last arrived at the Capitol, we entered the Senate chamber, where nearly two hours were spent listening to most uninteresting business. . . .Thence we adjourned to the summit of the dome." Delegations of American Indians were not an uncommon sight in Washington following the Civil War. Tribes sent representatives to negotiate treaties they hoped would regulate encroachment—especially from railroad barons—upon their lands.

Back at school, normal life was returning to campus after more than four years of occupation by the federal government. On April 7, he recorded: "Great improvements are taking place in the College grounds; terraces & the edges of the grass plots have been sodded; trees are being planted; the grass seed, sown sometime ago all over the grounds, is springing up; the walks & drives have been provided with paved gutters on either side; the old gymnasium, during the war used as a dead house, has been pulled down & a new one is being erected; in short everything is undergoing a thorough renovation & improvement."

In June Coffin left for summer vacation in Pottstown, and the diary entries become sporadic. Nothing is recorded for the fall of 1867.

Coffin had an active social life, going with cousins and friends to hike and fish as well as attending dances, lectures, concerts, and the theater. As a junior at Columbian College he spoke of the camaraderie, times filled with "microscopic jokes & mammoth laughs & of refined & instructive conversation, whose chief ingredients are politics, abuse of Professors & absent fellow students, oysters, gunning, fishing, girls, etc."[36] Leavening the good times were more difficult ones. Coffin recorded this diatribe on January 18, 1868: "Columbian is not Oxford or Cambridge, Yale. . . . Our routine is made up of a great deal of failure, of humbug, of bad puns, of nonsense, of egotism, of vanity, of selfishness, of jealousy, of hypocrisy, of sycophancy & of meanness & very little learning, improvement, independence, modesty, generosity, friendship or true manliness."

The next month Coffin was preparing for exams, which were difficult. On February 7 he wrote, "My habits of application are so exceedingly slight, that now, when it is 'study or flunk,' my attempts at 'cramming' are pitiful to behold. From room to room, up stairs & down, I wandered disconsolate and desperate." By the end of the next week he had survived, and remarked on February 14 that he was "feeling happy, in the 'pastness' and the 'passedness' of the examination."

Coffin's diary-writing days were numbered even as his wit was growing. On March 3, 1868, Coffin wrote, "Attended college and said my lessons. Performed likewise an extraordinary [a]mount of loafing & howling. The former is an ancient & well known [em]ployment, which has been popular among college students & indeed

In "High Carnival on Capitol Hill or Mardi Gras Mongst Statesmen," Coffin lampoons a congressional debate over taxes, mocking Senator Thomas B. Reed by clothing him as Henry VIII and Senator Richard Bland as Don Quixote. 1895.

[m]ankind in general, from time immemorial. . . ." A week later he noted that there "were serious symptoms of the dangerous anti-studious epidemic, 'Spring-fever' apparent among the boys today, such as severe nausea at the mention of calculus or any substance of that sort & irrepressible longing after base balls, fishing rods, etc."

Significantly, in the last few pages of the final diary, he wrote of drawing, which he had been doing since a child. Legend has it that as a college student he frescoed the walls of his dormitory room with scenes and characters from Shakespeare. The frescoes were considered so good that officials preserved them during the repainting of the dorm, and there they remained until the building was razed.[37]

On June 7, 1868, Coffin revealed: "I am getting tired of this diary of mine,—disgusted with its constant round of common place; & as the wolf is never at loss for a complaint against the lamb, I have suddenly discovered (in the effort to write a speech) that my journal has been vitiating my style, taking away all classical elegance & making it look loose, careless & disjointed. However, I'll try to keep it up (the diary I mean) for a month or so, & then, if we go away, I suppose it will die out of its own accord, for I have found it heretofore, a tender plant that seldom survives transplanting."

Coffin made the final entry in these diaries just over a week later, on June 15, 1868. It's a shame he stopped, if indeed he believed his journal was "vitiating" his style. Perhaps he was influenced in his thinking and writing by the men he read, who represented "classical elegance." In any case, Coffin put his energy into cartooning, and pictures became his language of choice.

Coffin graduated from Columbian College in 1869, "having stood at the head of his class each of the seven years, taking prizes and medals innumerable and being the valedictorian on graduation day"[38] He went on to the Law Department of Columbian College, where he also served as art tutor. Completing law school in 1871, Coffin entered the U.S. Civil Service as a clerk in the Revenue Marine Division of the Treasury Department. The clerkship would be his day job up until the last year of his life, providing him with the base income (and apparently free time) to follow his muse as a cartoonist. Coffin enjoyed club life, and belonged to the Columbia Boat Club, University Club, Gridiron Club, and Sigma Chi fraternity. He was also a Mason, belonging to the Lafayette Lodge, no.19, F.A.A.M., the Mount Vernon Royal Arch Chapter.[39]

Coffin's career as a free-lance political cartoonist began in the mid-1870s with the *Washington Chronicle*, the city's first short-lived illustrated newspaper.[40] He went on to contribute to national publications such as *Harper's Weekly*, *Puck*, and *Judge* until 1883, when he took a job as an artist for the *Hatchet*, another short-lived Washington weekly. At this time he also drew for a range of newspapers. Those in Washington included the *Evening Star*, *National Tribune*, *Critic*, *National Republican*, and *Sunday Herald*.[41] He also contributed to the *New York Herald's* Washington bureau, illustrated a number of books, and was a drama critic for the *Washington Post*, *Sunday Herald*, and *Critic*.

As an article from the December 5, 1896, *Columbian Call*, a student newspaper of his alma mater, quoted Coffin as saying, "Every political situation has half a dozen comical sides to it, according to the view point." In his work as a political cartoonist Coffin was not partisan or malicious. "You need not make a man odious or repulsive in order to caricature him," he once remarked.[42] Among those he lampooned were Alexander "Boss" Shepherd (territorial governor of Washington), Grover Cleveland, William McKinley, and Theodore Roosevelt. His cartoons covered both national and local politics: the former included civil service and tariff reform, the free silver debate, U.S. imperialism; the latter the folly of Washington's hospital system and commissioner form of government.

In 1891 Coffin gave up his other free-lance clients and became the official cartoonist for the *Washington Post*, (while still working full time for the Treasury Department). He continued in both until a year before his death in 1896 of locomotor ataxia, a late form of syphilis. How he was stricken with this affliction is not recorded. "In 1894 he made a tour of Europe," the *Evening Star* reported the day before he died, "and before he left was apparently suffering from lung troubles. On his return, however, the dread symptoms of locomotor ataxia appeared, and in a short time the disease had fully developed."[43] He lived his final year as an invalid, and in his last days was confined to his apartments in the Garfield flats, at the corner of 13th and I streets, N.W. He was said to have remained hopeful and in good spirits.

Coffin was buried next to his mother in the family plot in Pottstown.[44] He had no wife or children to survive him. Ten years after his passing the Library of Congress mounted a memorial exhibition of some 400 of his drawings.[45] Commenting on Coffin's legacy, the *Washington Post* editorialized: "He was the laughing philosopher of his generation. He saw the fun of everything."[46] His spirit lives on today in his writings and drawings—extracts of his soul freely given, captured, and held fixed on the pages of yellowing paper in stories of a time gone by but not forgotten.

NOTES

1. George Yost Coffin Papers, Special Collections and University Archives Department, Melvin Gelman Library, The George Washington University (MS2048). His papers were donated to the University in 1926 by Isabelle Solomons, and contain more than 900 individual sketches in addition to sketchbooks full of doodles and drawings. The earliest dates from 1858, when Coffin was eight years old. (Solomons also gave 288 of Coffin's original pen drawings to the Library of Congress in 1904 and three scrapbooks of news clippings on Coffin to the D.C. Public Library.) The diaries cited herein are all found in the Coffin Papers.

2. "Coffin's Cartoons to Be Exhibited in the Library," *Washington Post*, Mar. 11, 1906, A5.

3. "Mr. Coffin Dying," *Evening Star*, Nov. 27, 1896, Box 11, Coffin Papers.

4. "George Y. Coffin Dead," *Washington Post*, Nov. 29, 1896, 1.

5. Marriage announcement, *Der Bauern Freund* newspaper abstract, Sumneytown, Montgomery County, PA, May 27, 1846 (the marriage took place May 18, 1846); obituary of Sarah Coffin, *The Montgomery Ledger* in Pottstown, PA, Mar. 10, 1891.

6. U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Seventh Census of the United States, 1850* (Washington: National Archives and Records Administration, 1850), M432; Roll 799, 109.

7. U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Eighth Census of the United States, 1860* (Washington: National Archives and Records Administration, 1860), M653: Roll 102, 739.

8. "Obituary: Mrs. Adelaide J. Brown," *Washington Post*, Feb. 4, 1914, 5; "Death of Thomas B. Brown," *Washington Post*, Feb. 12, 1893, 7; Elmer Louis Kayser, *Bricks Without Straw: The Evolution of George Washington University* (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1970), 75. The author is indebted to Matthew Gilmore, editor of H-DC, Washington, D.C. History and Life, http://www.h-net.org/~dclist, for sharing research notes that illuminated this connection between George Y. Coffin and Obadiah B. Brown.

9. Kayser, *Bricks Without Straw*, 109.

10. Diaries, Nov. 12 and 13, 1860.

11. Diaries, July 17, 1864 (attending church); Nov. 17, 1860, July 14, 1864 (visiting friends); July 13, 1864 (doing chores); July 30, 1864 (getting a haircut); Sept. 24 and Dec. 28, 1864 (visiting the Library of Congress); Sept. 14, 1864 (having a carte de visite taken in Philadelphia).

12. Diaries, volume one (July 1859–Apr. 1865).

13. See also Aug. 2, 1864; Sept. 24, 1866.

14. Kayser, *Bricks Without Straw*, 28–29, 34–35, 121. The campus was located on College Hill until 1884, when it moved downtown to 15th and H streets, N.W. In 1912 it moved to offices at 2023 G Street, N.W., and has been located in the Foggy Bottom neighborhood of Washington ever since.

15. Elmer Louis Kayser, "Columbian Academy, 1821–1897: The Preparatory Department of the Columbian College in the District of Columbia," *Records of the Columbian Historical Society* 71–72 (1971–72), 150, 153, 162; Preparatory School, student records, 1860–1865, Box 112, RG0031/003; *George Washington University Bulletin*, 1863/64, RG0127, Special Collections, GWU. Conversion of currency based on calculations from "Purchasing Power of Money in the United States from 1774 to 2005," http://www.measuringworth.com/calculators/ppowerus.

16. Diaries, July 21, 1864.

17. Diaries, July 26, 1864.

18. Diaries, Apr. 5, 1866.

19. Hermesian Society, minutes 1863–1869, Box 152, RG0031/003, Special Collections, GWU.

20. Kayser, "Columbian Academy, 1821–1897," 158.

21. Hermesian Society, minutes, Box 152.

22. Smithsonian Institution Archives, "This Day in Smithsonian History," http://siarchives.si.edu/history/exhibits/thisday/january.htm.

23. Diaries, Feb. 2–3; Feb. 14–17; Feb. 21, 1865.

24. Diaries, May 25, June 5, June 20, June 28, 1866, et al.

25. Ibid., May 3, 1865; May 29 and June 15, 1868. The Washington Nationals were founded in 1859.

26. Kayser, *Bricks Without Straw*, 119–22; Kayser, "Columbian Academy, 1821–1897," 157.

27. Kayser, *Bricks Without Straw*, 122.

28. Ibid.

29. Benjamin Franklin Cooling, *Jubal Early's Raid on Washington in 1864* (Baltimore: The Nautical & Aviation Publishing Company of America, 1989), 115.

30. Ibid., 143–45.

31. Diaries. Coffin's home address appears in diary no. 2, Coffin Papers, and is in *Boyd's Directory of Washington and Georgetown* from 1865. See also Stephen M. Forman, *A Guide to Civil War Washington* (Washington: Elliott & Clark Pub., 1995), 195.

32. John S. Bowman, ed., *The Civil War Almanac* (New York: Bison Books, 1982), 267–68; Shotgun's Home of the American Civil War, "Grand Review of the Armies, May 23–24, 1865," http://www.civilwarhome.com/grandreview.htm.

33. *George Washington University Bulletin* 1865/66; Board of Trustees minutes, June 25, 1866, RG0001, Special Collections, GWU.

34. Diaries, Sept. 28, 1865; Oct. 14, 1865; Jan. 26, 1867, Mar. 28, 1868; Philophrenian Society, minutes, 1867–1876, Box 154, RG0031/003; Preparatory School, student records, 1860–1865, Box 112; Columbian College Student Records, 1864–1881, Box 116, RG0031/003, Special Collections, GWU.

35. Diaries, June 26, 1865.

36. Diaries, Mar. 4, 1868.

37. "George Yost Coffin: A Distinguished Alumnus Cartoonist," *The University Hatchet*, Mar. 15, 1906, 4.

38. "Mr. Coffin Dying," *Evening Star*, Nov. 27, 1896.

39. Ibid.

40. "George Y. Coffin Dead," *Washington Post*, Nov. 29, 1896.

41. Fred A. Emery, "Washington Newspapers," *Records of the Columbia Historical Society* 37–38 (1937–38), 41–72.

42. "George Y. Coffin Dead," *Washington Post*, Nov. 29, 1896.

43. "Mr. Coffin Dying," *Evening Star*, Nov. 27, 1896.

44. "Death of Mrs. Sarah A. Coffin," *Washington Post*, Mar. 6, 1891, 6; "Funeral of Artist Coffin," *Washington Post*, Dec. 1, 1896, 1.

45. "Coffin's Cartoons to Be Exhibited in the Library," *Washington Post*, Mar. 11, 1906.

46. "George Y. Coffin is Dead," *Washington Post*, Nov. 29, 1896, 6.