

THE JACKSON AND VAN BUREN PAPERS.

BY WILLIAM MAC DONALD.

I HAVE lately had occasion to examine the papers of Jackson and Van Buren in the Library of Congress, and the president of this Society adjudged that some remarks about those collections would be appropriate for this meeting.

The Jackson papers are known as the Montgomery Blair collection. They were presented to the Library in 1903 by the family of Montgomery Blair, who received them from the Jackson heirs. I do not know entirely the history of the Jackson papers, but enough to suggest that it is an interesting one. I remember the late Senator Hoar saying a few years ago, speaking of these papers, that when he was a member of the Senate Committee on the Library, there were brought to the rooms of the Committee at the Capitol two trunks, said to contain the papers of Andrew Jackson. The trunks had been removed temporarily from a building in Washington in which they had been stored for some time, and the custodians, being in doubt as to the safest disposition to make of them, had placed them temporarily in the Capitol in the custody of the Senate Library Committee, or some member of it. The Senator told how he opened one of the trunks, and discovered that the papers were neatly arranged in bundles; and having a curiosity to examine some of them, he took up the one lying on top, and read, endorsed in Jackson's handwriting upon the outside of it, "General Pakenham's plan of the battle of New Orleans, picked up on the field."

Mr. Worthington C. Ford, custodian of the manuscripts

in the Library, is my authority for saying that the Jackson papers were turned over by Jackson himself to Amos Kendall, Postmaster-General in Jackson's administration, to be used in the preparation of a biography of Jackson. From those papers Kendall selected such as he desired to use, but the whole collection in his hands was destroyed in a fire which consumed Kendall's library.

The Jackson collection is very large, extending to a great many hundreds, perhaps thousands, of papers. At the time I examined it, somewhat less than a year ago, the papers had not been calendared, although a calendar was in process of preparation; and the papers were roughly classified by years, arranged in the admirable style with which everyone is familiar, in the Library.

The Van Buren collection is also very extensive. It is, however, only one of two existing collections of Van Buren's papers; another still remains in private hands. This one came to the Library through Mrs. Thompson Van Buren. Neither this collection nor the one still in private hands was used by Mr. Shepard, the author of the biography of Van Buren in the American Statesmen Series. The collection, which is still in private hands, I understand is inaccessible to students. It is to be hoped that it will eventually pass into the hands of the Library.

The most important portion of both collections is the correspondence. The Jackson papers are evidently fragmentary, there being large gaps in the whole collection. The Van Buren collection is more orderly, having apparently been selected with care by Van Buren himself from the papers he desired to preserve. Of the two collections, the Van Buren collection is far the richer, although there are many Jackson letters in the Van Buren collection and some Van Buren letters in the Jackson collection. The Van Buren collection contains in the neighborhood of three hundred letters, many of them confidential, between Jackson and Van Buren.

In looking over these papers, I noted a few of the subjects to which they relate, and I here suggest a few of the points that will have light thrown upon them whenever these papers shall be made available through publication.

One of the first things that attracted my attention was the bearing of the papers on Jackson's alleged illiteracy and lack of education. It has not been an uncommon charge of Jackson's biographers that he was an unlettered person; that he did not write his own state papers, and that at the best he furnished perhaps ideas and invigoration, but relied upon friends like Kendall, James A. Hamilton of New York, Isaac Hill of New Hampshire, and others to write the papers for him. Jackson's handwriting is unmistakable, and while there are few of his great State papers in either of these collections in his own handwriting, those papers preserved being obviously copies, there are fragments enough to lead me to the conclusion that not only the ideas, but the essential language of all of Jackson's more important papers are his own. He was illiterate, but certainly not uneducated. No more than most men, perhaps; did he always spell correctly. His punctuation is sometimes astray, and as he evidently wrote in a hurry, we find lapses of grammar and rhetoric which would be repaired by revision. But I think the evidence is strong that the essential thoughts and phraseology of his more important writings are distinctly his, and no one's else. I see no reason to believe, from examination of those papers, that his State papers underwent any more or different revision, or were prepared in any different way, than the State papers of most of our Presidents.

The most interesting single paper which I had occasion to note is a document which is filed with the papers of October 1828, but undated. It is unmistakably in Jackson's handwriting, and is headed, "Memorandum of points to be considered in the administration of the government." It bears every evidence of having been written before

Jackson took office as President, though whether or not it should be assigned to October, or to a date subsequent to the election, I cannot determine. The "points" are extremely interesting. They are as follows:

- "1. A strong constitutional Attorney-General.
 - "2. A genuine old-fashioned Cabinet, to act together, and form a counsel consultative.
 - "3. No solicitors to be appointed.
 - "4. No members of Congress, except heads of departments, or foreign ministers to be appointed.
 - "5. No foreign minister to be rejected without the Senate, etc.
 - "6. The public debt paid, and the tariff modified, and no power usurped over internal improvements.
 - "7. A high-minded and enlightened principle in the administration of the government, as to appointments and removals.
- "These things will give a brilliant career to the administration."

Some of these "points" are peculiarly interesting, when we recall the things which Jackson did, or sought to do, and the things which he was said to desire to do. We know, for example, that he had difficulty with his Cabinet, and that it was twice reconstructed during his two terms of office. The first Cabinet crisis over the Mrs. Eaton affair has become famous in our annals; yet in one of his letters, April 26, 1829, before his Cabinet was entirely complete, he declares it to be one of the strongest that has ever been in the United States.

Prof. Sumner, in his "Life of Jackson," has, I believe, taken the position that when Jackson dismissed his Cabinet and acted independently of it, he not only did not usurp any authority, but reverted to the original theory of the Cabinet, namely, that the Cabinet was simply a body of heads of departments whom the President might consult if he chose,

but whose suggestions he was in no way bound to follow. In this "Memorandum of points," however, we have Jackson's declaration that he desired a "genuine old-fashioned Cabinet, to act together and form a counsel consultative." What the original theory of the Cabinet was seems to me to be difficult to say, for the reason that, under the Constitution, the Cabinet has no existence as such; but Jackson at the outset evidently regarded it as a body of advisers.

Then we have the wide-spread criticism of Jackson for his appointments and removals. The "memorandum of points" contains certain significant declarations in view of his actual policy. "No solicitors to be appointed" evidently means that none who solicit office shall be appointed; whereas we know that Jackson was hardly installed before almost anybody who solicited an office was appointed, even if someone had just previously solicited it and received it. "No members of Congress except heads of departments and foreign ministers to be appointed." We know that Jackson was charged with appointing more members of Congress to office than any previous President. "A high-minded and enlightened principle in the administration of the government as to appointments and removals." I am unable to find that Jackson expressed any regret for any demoralization in the administrative branch of the government which resulted from the wholesale removals, or from the appointment of unfit men. So far as he expressed himself on that point at all, he seems to have felt that his course was justified.

I came upon a letter of Van Buren's in the collection, in which he states that the appointment of Swartwout as Collector of the Port of New York, was made against Van Buren's decided and earnest remonstrances; and there are other letters that go to show that representations were made to Jackson concerning the unfit character of certain office appointees.

There is also an interesting matter which Jackson several times refers to, namely, his view that a defalcation in accounts or financial irregularity of any sort must debar anyone from the public service. An interesting letter to Van Buren in September, 1829, in reference to Lewis Cass, who, it was rumored, was to be removed from office, states that Jackson had no idea of removing Cass, unless in the settlement of his accounts he should be proven a defaulter, adding, "You know the rule is, friend or foe, being a defaulter must go." There are several other letters in which Jackson makes similar statements. An undated memorandum of March 31, 1829, in reply to a letter from Van Buren, in which Jackson holds that the late removals of comptrollers had been made in the interests of honesty, adds: "The people expect reform; they shall not be disappointed; but it must be judiciously done, and upon principle."

I observed no particular reference to the "great debate" in the Senate between Webster and Hayne. There are, however, a number of letters between Jackson and Hayne referring to the nullification situation in South Carolina; papers which show that Jackson was watching closely the movements in that State, and that there could have been no possible excuse for anyone in South Carolina to have imagined that Jackson would sit quietly by and allow South Carolina to leave the Union without a protest. One very interesting entry is a letter written by Jackson to Joel R. Poinsett, who was the active leader of the Union party in South Carolina at that time, and who kept up a correspondence with Jackson and others at Washington. Writing on the ninth of December, 1832, the day before the great proclamation to South Carolina was issued, Jackson states that in "forty days from the date of my orders," if force should become necessary, "I will have forty thousand men in the State of South Carolina" to put down resistance and enforce law.

There are a number of entries with reference to internal improvements, though they do not make wholly clear Jackson's attitude, which indeed never became quite clear on that subject; and a very interesting entry, in a memorandum to Van Buren, at the time when the negotiations with Great Britain for the removal of duties on the West Indian trade were in progress. We have been commonly told, in accounts of that episode, that Jackson sent a representative to Great Britain to say that conditions had changed in the United States, that there had been a change in public opinion, and that he was prepared to negotiate with Great Britain if Great Britain would meet him half way; and that Great Britain took the proper stand, and the trade was opened. Jackson was willing to negotiate, but took care also to be ready for contingencies. In a communication to Van Buren, April 10, 1830, Jackson directs the latter to "let a communication be prepared for Congress recommending a non-intercourse law between United States and Canada, and a sufficient number of cutters commanded by our naval officers and our midshipmen made revenue officers, and a double set on every vessel." In six months, he concludes, Canada and the West Indies will "sorely feel" the effects of such vigorous action.

The Jackson papers make some additions to our knowledge about the removal of the deposits. Van Buren had written to Jackson to express the hope that he would consult with the Attorney-General about the legality of transferring the deposits. Jackson replies that he has consulted the Attorney-General; and we have Taney's letter assuring Jackson that he is authorized to proceed, and adding: "I am fully prepared to go with you firmly through this business, and to meet all its consequences." The letter is endorsed on the back in Jackson's handwriting: "To be filed with my private papers—as evidence of his virtue, energy and worth."

I have only to add, in closing this very brief allusion to these papers, that the Jackson and Van Buren papers, taken in

connection with the Poinsett papers now in the possession of the Pennsylvania Historical Society, and the lately published Calhoun correspondence edited by Prof. J. F. Jameson for the American Historical Association, make it possible to re-write much of the history of the Jackson and Van Buren period. I suspect that when this history is re-written, it will be found that most of the older accounts are in need of substantial correction.

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