

Return Jonathan Meigs, the Court Clerk with a Wonderful Name and Political Connections

**by
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When the DC Circuit was reorganized in 1863, President Abraham Lincoln entrusted the effort to a Tennessean with the interesting name of Return Jonathan Meigs III (1801-1891) as clerk. Meigs owed the appointment to the man who succeeded to the presidency two years later, Andrew Johnson.

Meigs came from a politically distinguished lineage. His uncle had been governor of Ohio (1808-1810), a U.S. senator from Ohio (1810-1814), and a U.S. Postmaster General in Washington (1814-1823). Meigs himself had served as Attorney General of Tennessee and reporter for the Tennessee Supreme Court. He was a member of the Nashville Board of Education, a trustee of the University of Nashville, and a trustee of the Tennessee School for the Blind. But when Tennessee voted to secede from the Union and join the Confederacy in June 1861, the Nashville family, whose sympathies lay with the North, fled first to New York City and then to Washington. That is when Johnson recommended Meigs to Lincoln to deal with the newly created Supreme Court of the District of Columbia and serve as its clerk. The telegraph from the Military Governor of Tennessee, Andrew Johnson, read:

“The President can make no better appointment for any office than R. J. Meigs. He is eminently qualified for any position which may be imposed upon him. He is thoroughly loyal and was forced from this State on account of it.”

Johnson must have believed what he wrote. According to family lore, a few years later when he became president after Lincoln’s assassination, Johnson offered Meigs a seat on the Supreme Court, but Meigs declined, citing his age. Meigs’s concern proved unfounded: he was in his sixties at the time and lived to be ninety.

Meigs’s home was “an ugly old frame building” at 302 New Jersey Avenue SE [near the Capitol Building] but “big enough to hold a man [Meigs], his son and daughter-in-law and several of their nine children, a longtime family maid, a cousin from Baltimore attending school in Washington, and . . . Rep. Trimble [congressman from Tennessee], and several other people. . . .” Meigs was a widower, his wife having died a few years earlier.

Naturally, court clerk Meigs and his family received an elevated status when Andrew Johnson moved into the White House in the autumn of 1865 after Mary Lincoln’s slow withdrawal. His daughter-in-law, Elizabeth Meigs, was a friend of the President’s wife from their days in Tennessee. She “often went in the White House carriage which was sent for her to call on the First Lady.” Elizabeth’s

daughters went to kindergarten with the President's grandchildren. Since Elizabeth was living in Meigs's house, this kept him close to the President. The story is told that when it was time for the President to sit for a portrait, he chose Meigs's house as the venue.

In less happy times, when Johnson was impeached in 1868, daughter-in-law Elizabeth "was greatly concerned." She feared the effect on the invalid First Lady. On the day of the Senate vote, Senator Joseph Fowler of Tennessee dropped by Meigs's house to pick up Congressman Tribble, who was living there, and noticed Elizabeth's agitation. Fowler apparently had counted the votes and knew Johnson would be acquitted. "Now, Mrs. Meigs," he said, "don't go out, but I'll tell you, you have nothing to worry about; things are going to come out all right." Elizabeth supposedly locked herself in her room so she could not be accused of releasing the information. Her husband would later complain that had he known earlier in the day, he could have cleaned up on Wall Street."

On April 14th, 1891, Return Meigs "was standing at his desk about 11 o'clock . . . turning over the leaves of the records." It was his 90th birthday. "Presently came a summons for him to appear in the consultation room of the court in general term.... Obeying the summons with his accustomed promptness, and accompanied by his granddaughter, Miss Sally Meigs and Maj. L. P. Williams, assistant clerk," he walked into a room where Judges Hagner and James, Crier Robert Ball and Mr. S. T. Thomas stood. "The judges took pleasure in presenting a cane to him." It was a "heavy ebony stick with a heavy carved gold head made to fit the hand comfortably."

"Mr. Meigs was much surprised at the whole occurrence, but made a happy response, and said that although he had never used a cane he would keep this one until he grew old, and as he retired he suggested that he should enter in the court minutes [the catchy phrase]: 'Return J. Meigs caned by the court'."

In October of 1891, just six months into his retirement, Return J. Meigs "came home from his office for lunch but was feeling unwell so lay down instead of walking back to the court, and passed away." His body was interred in Oak Hill Cemetery in Georgetown.

One of his sons served as a clerk of the Supreme Court of the District of Columbia from 1863 until 1903, and the son's daughter Miss Elizabeth M. Meigs (granddaughter of Return Meigs) was the first woman promoted to the position of assistant clerk in 1913. It was deserved: she had worked in the court for twenty years as a "copyist and indexer." She would tell the Washington Post in May 11, 1913: "Almost all my folks and nearly everybody I ever knew were lawyers.... 'I'm no suffragette,' she laughed, as she stamped 'filed' on a writ of error.... My great-grandfather was a member of Gen. Washington's staff during the revolutionary war. His son—he was my great-uncle, you know—was the governor of Ohio. I never

studied law—just kind of absorbed it, like a blotter does ink. But I like it—it’s awfully interesting.”

Return Meigs’s house was just south of the present Cannon House Office Building, which was built in 1904. The house was torn down years before the Hotel Congressional (1948) was established in the 302-308 numbers of the block on New Jersey Avenue SE. Today, the area is an asphalt parking lot between the Cannon Building and Metro Station-Capitol South.

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SOURCES:

Mrs. John H. (Margaret Benedict) MacNeill, of Indialantic, Florida, a direct descendent in the Meigs family. Her informal “Notebooks” of stories from the Meigs families, especially the recollections of grandmother “Topsy” Meigs recorded by other members of the family, are the sources of this account.

J. L. Blake, A General Biographical Dictionary . . . 7th ed. (New York: Alexander V. Blake, 1845), pp. 632-633.

Tennessee. 34th General Assembly, 2d Session. 1866. Private and Public Acts, Chapter XXVI, pp. 35-36. “An Act to furnish the Hall of Representatives with the Portrait of His Excellency, Andrew Johnson.”

Google: <http://memory.loc.gov/>
“Papers of Abraham Lincoln,” in the American Memory [online], Library of Congress. SEE: American Memory, then Presidents, then Lincoln, Abraham, Papers, ca. 1850-1865, then search for Meigs, Return Jonathan, then #1: Andrew Johnson to Abraham Lincoln, Wednesday, February 04, 1863 (Telegram regarding appointment of R. J. Meigs).

Washington Post newspaper: April 12, 1891, April 15, 1891, October 22, 1891, March 24, 1903, December 20, 1907, and May 11, 1913.