Interviews: Charles A. Dana's Recollections of the Civil War

Tarbell, Ida M.
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Col. Taylor, who belonged to the Department in Washington went over himself and made the arrest. This Colonel Taylor was a nephew of President Taylor and was a Colonel or Lieutenant Colonel. I am not sure which. I do not think Col. Wisewell had anything to do with the arrest. I do not remember about that. I suppose they got some wind of it and they had supposed that Col. Wisewell was to make the arrest, but that had never been the plan of the Department.

Yes, E. L. Blunt was judge of the U. S. District Court, and we always placed great confidence in any testimony that he would give.

I got this report from the Provost Marshal in Portland (Story of Jacob Thompson) I don't remember when that began but I know that at the time they all reported to me. I don't remember when it was ordered or when it began or on what occasion.

New Price keeps a little law shop on Centre street near the Tombs. He is a criminal lawyer.

I don't remember the circumstances of that. He probably failed to keep his contract. Probably there was some fraud in his contract. A great many of those cases were mere routine cases. I got a report of the facts about that and
then I would go to the Secretary and get his order. That was merely an execution of his order.

They robbed a paymaster. It was money belonging to the United States. I think these were professional thieves, but I don't remember.

Forage frauds were very heavy and Mr. Watson must have spent many years continuous labor in studying out these frauds. You will find them all recorded in his records. The whole thing was very remarkable. These frauds were committed by varying the proportions of grade in mixed forage; that is, it had been ascertained by experiment that oats mixed with corn made a most excellent sort of forage. I don't remember the exact relative value of the two, but suppose that oats were worth 35 cents a bushel and corn worth 70 cents, and the regular proportion was to mix half oats and half corn. Then, you see, half a bushel of corn would be, say, 35 cents, and half a bushel of oats would be 17 cents; so a bushel of mixed forage would come to 52 cents. Suppose you put in three-quarters of a bushel of oats and a quarter bushel of corn, you see the value of the bushel. It was in that way, by falsifying the combination, that an inferior value of forage was furnished upon contracts and
furnished to the Army of the Potomac and used by the cavalry there.

(Moorehead) That is on account of these frauds and forage. I remember Mr. Watson wanted to proceed very strenuously against the guilty parties, who were, some of them, parties pretty high up in the Army of the Potomac, in the Quartermaster's Department. Mr. Stanton was willing to do it but Watson got some of them arrested—I think he arrested D. L. Moorehead. Mr. Lincoln tried to get Watson to let him out because David Wilmot, who was Senator from Pennsylvania and the author of the Wilmot proviso, interested himself very much in his behalf. Watson would not give in. He said to Lincoln: You can release this man on your order, but if you do I will make the reason known and you will have to stand the responsibility. Lincoln did not do it. He told Wilmot he could not get Watson to do anything and Wilmot said: Oh, damnation.

(Capitol Prison.) Back of the Capitol. It was the building that had first served for the Capitol before the prison building was erected. I think, after it had ceased to be used by Congress, it was converted into a prison. When I went back to Washington I think it had been converted into houses, private houses, but that is a mere impression.
It was a three or four story red brick building, common, ordinary, old-fashioned, red brick building. It was comfortable. The principal hardship was being put in prison. I really never was in the building in my life. I only know what I was told, that it was a comfortable building; that it was kept warm, and that the prisoners had sufficient foot and had the liberty to go out in the prison yard for exercise.

Those were general prisoners of war, I suppose. You see the old Capitol Prison was used for this prison purpose. There were few prisoners of war put in it, but men generally accused of some offence, some offence of a criminal nature, or some offence against the laws of war. When they did not have room there for them they would be obliged to send them somewhere else.

Yes, I think there was a separate department for women.

Yes, I don't remember them now, though. I don't remember them distinctly. I don't think there were very many.

There were always some, and the confederate women made great efforts to impose upon us.

That case of the young man named Montgomery who went to Canada: He was the son of a man who had been a clergyman, I think a Presbyterian Minister, in Washington; I don't think his real name was Montgomery, but that was the name I always
knew him by. The last time I saw him he came in this office and sat down where you are sitting now. That was sometime after the war was over. He had then received an appointment as consul to some foreign country, I think somewhere in Europe. He came to me and wanted to go down to Richmond. Who endorsed him I do not know. His proposition was that he should be arrested and put in the old Capitol Prison, that he should escape from it, should be fired at by the guard as he was escaping and that there should be published in the Washington papers an account of his escape. So, I remember sending Col. Baker out to a certain hotel and there he was to be at a certain time and was to water his horse at a fountain that flowed at that place. This was over in Virginia. Baker arrested him and put him in the old Capitol Prison. He first brought him to the War Department. Nobody knew anything about this scene. Baker brought him to me on a Sunday evening at the War Department and said: I have arrested the man; he is very violent. He was brought in to me so that I might identify him and see that it was the right man. I sent him to the Old Capitol Prison and sent for Col. William B. Wood, who had fallen in with him in some way. Col. Wood is now in Washington, and if you could rely upon everything
he says he would be a very precious man. He was the keeper of the old Capitol Prison and was also a general detective, and the man we consulted when anything of the sort was to go on. He has a son who is a reporter in this office. I sent for Col. Wood and said: I want this man put in the prison and I want him to escape tomorrow at such and such a time and I want the guard to shoot at him but not to hit him. That was carried out. The man escaped and went down to Richmond and told this story, and the story created a great deal of excitement. He came back to me after awhile. He was going to Canada, and had letters from Judah Benjamin to the rebel agency in Canada. He went and delivered the letters from Benjamin and got a letter from them in reply. This letter was written in a cipher and we had no key at all to it. It was sealed with lots of seals and special stamps. Coming back he came and put this message in my hands. I remember going over and telling Mr. Lincoln. Mr. Stanton was not well at that time and was at home. Mr. Lincoln I met at Stanton's house. I don't remember whether I went there directly with the President on the day we met that evening or not, but the question was to consider: Shall we open this letter. If we do we will run a chance of not being able to read it.
Finally they determined to open it and I went back and made arrangements with Mr. Eckert, who is now President of the Western Union Telegraph Company in this town and Mr. E. H. Bates, a young man who was employed in the telegraph office in Washington. Mr. Bates lives here and is President of a bank now. Well, the first thing they did was to get a seal made. It was on a Sunday night. After having made that preparation they opened the document and, by Sunday noon, they studied it over and had learned the cipher and it was only their familiarity with ciphers that enabled them to read it. I could not have done it. They were the same men who made that cipher I showed you the other day. The President went over to Mr. Stanton's. They discussed the whole thing up and down whether to deliver this letter in Richmond or shall we send on Montgomery to Richmond or shall we keep the letter, or shall we capture him and take it from him, or what shall we do? and whether it would be more useful to them to let Montgomery go on and get more letters and continue this business of mail carrier, or whether it would be more valuable to keep the original letter and preserve all necessary evidence of its genuineness in order to put it before the Commission in London, the one that gave damages of $15,000,000 to the United States. Finally, I
think, we made him go and take the letter. After the war he got this appointment as consuk, but I don't remember where.

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