

John Gould Stephenson

(1 Mar 1828 – 11 Nov 1883)

The Washington Post, November 15, 1883, p. 2

Dr. Stephenson's Funeral

The funeral of Dr. J.G. Stephenson took place yesterday afternoon from Rev. Dr. Chester's church. The services were conducted by Dr. Ingersoll, and the interment was made at the Congressional Cemetery. A large number of friends of the deceased were present, including his late associates in the Pension office, and members of the Army of the Potomac.

Source: Librarians of Congress (?)

Stephenson, John Gould (1828-1883)

John Gould Stephenson served as Librarian of Congress from May 21, 1861, until his resignation,



effective December 31, 1864. A political appointee of President Abraham Lincoln, Stephenson was a physician and Republican partisan from Terre Haute, Indiana, who, as Librarian of Congress, apparently spent as much time serving the Union Army as he did supervising the Library. Shortly after assuming office, Stephenson hired Ainsworth Rand Spofford (q.f), a Cincinnati bookseller and journalist, as assistant librarian; for all practical purposes the eager assistant librarian--with Stephenson's consent and knowledge--was in charge of the Library during the rest of Stephenson's term of office. On December 31, 1864, Spofford was appointed Librarian and held the post for the next 32 years. The consensus among historians of the Library of Congress seems to be that John G. Stephenson "did the Library of Congress neither harm nor good during his administration."

John Gould Stephenson was born in Lancaster, New Hampshire, on March 1, 1828, the sixth child of Reuben and Mary King Stephenson. Reuben Stephenson was a prominent Lancaster citizen and one of the incorporators of the Lancaster Academy, where John attended school. From the Academy, Stephenson went to the New Hampshire Medical Institution and then to Castleton Medical College, where he received a doctorate in medicine on November 23, 1849. About 1851, the young Dr. Stephenson migrated west to Terre Haute and, a few years later, he became active in the newly formed Republican Party. He was one of Lincoln's earliest supporters for the presidential nomination, and after Lincoln's nomination and election. Stephenson launched a determined campaign to become Librarian of Congress. His reasons for pursuing this particular post, rather than an appointment to another agency, remain obscure.

The Lincoln papers at the Library of Congress contain numerous letters from Indiana citizens and officials urging Stephenson's appointment as Librarian, including endorsements from Senator Henry S. Lane and the soon-to-be secretary of the interior, Caleb B. Smith. On May 7, 1861, the candidate himself was in Washington and wrote to Lincoln, informing the President that he had been "an earnest and continuous laborer in the Cause that triumphed in your election." After listing his political endorsements,

Stephenson noted that his "pecuniary condition" would be "greatly relieved by you granting the application." Lincoln complied and, on May 24, 1861, appointed John G. Stephenson to be the fifth Librarian of Congress. His predecessor, John Silva Meehan (q.v.), who had served as Librarian since 1829, accepted the change gracefully and even nonchalantly, simply informing the chairman of the congressional Joint Library Committee (in a letter dated May 28, 1861) that "Mr. John G. Stephenson of Indiana will begin duties on first day of June next."

Less than four months later, Stephenson acquired the services of Spofford, an experienced bookman, as assistant librarian. Describing Stephenson to a friend in May 1862, Spofford characterized the Librarian as "a thorough good fellow, liberal, high--minded, and active, but with no special knowledge of books." By September of 1862, however, relations between Stephenson and Spofford were less congenial. Upset by the Librarian's dismissal of another assistant, Spofford threatened to quit unless he received a promise of full support from Stephenson in the future. As Spofford described the situation to his friend Henry B. Blackwell:

I have made it a condition of retaining my post that I am to be subjected to no hasty deprivation of support--that no appointments or removals shall be made without my approval. While I conceive that Stephenson has in this instance disappointed the confidence I had always reposed, still his uniformly generous treatment of me and his readiness to repair the past by doing whatever I should advise, leave me willing to continue association with him.

The headstrong assistant librarian clearly was responsible for the major accomplishments of the Library of Congress during Stephenson's term of office: the compilation of two lengthy manuscript reports critical of the Library's condition and urging Congress to authorize improvements; successful lobbying for a \$160,000 appropriation to expand the Library's rooms; the inauguration of more comprehensive and efficient book-buying procedures; and, in September 1864, publication of the 1,200-page *Alphabetical Catalogue of the Library of Congress: Authors*, the first complete author catalog in the Library's history. Nevertheless, Stephenson undoubtedly lent his support and approval to Spofford's efforts.

Probably less is known about John G. Stephenson than about any other Librarian of Congress. In the summer of 1861, he served as a volunteer surgeon for members of the 19th Indiana Regiment, who were in a temporary hospital set up in the Patent Office building. For the rest of his career, however, the jobs he held were more political than medical in their nature. According to his own account, in 1863 he served with the Army of the Potomac, not as a surgeon but as "a volunteer aide de camp with my militia rank of Colonel, participating in the battles of Fitzhugh Crossing, Chancellorsville, and Gettysburg." He received a commendation for his performance at Gettysburg. William Dawson Johnston, in his *History of the Library of Congress 1800-1864* (Government Printing Office, 1904) states that Stephenson was "interested in speculations created by the war," citing as evidence a June 8, 1872, resolution paying the Library's London book agent \$1,480, "of which sum he was unjustly defrauded by the conduct of the Librarian in 1863." Despite the harsh wording of the resolution, it is not clear whether war speculations or technical problems involving methods of payment prompted the congressional action.

Following his resignation as Librarian of Congress (in 1864), Stephenson kept his legal residence in Washington and apparently held several political jobs, even though his record of employment is unclear. On November 16, 1881, nearly seventeen years after he left the Library, he was appointed as a medical

reviewer at the Pension Office. John G. Stephenson died on November 11, 1883, and is buried in an unmarked grave in the Congressional Cemetery in Washington D.C.

Biographical listings and obituaries--[Obituary]. Washington Evening Star, Nov. 12, 1883; [Obituary], Washington Post, Nov. 12, 1883. Books and articles about the biography--Carter, Constance, "John G. Stephenson: Largely Known and Much Liked." Quarterly Journal of the Library of Congress 33:71-91 (April 1976); Cole, John Y. "A Congenial Intellectual Occupation," Manuscripts 26:246-53 (Fall 1974); Johnston, William D. History of the Library of Congress 1800-1864, Washington: Government Printing Office, 1904; Mearns, David C. The Story Up to Now; The Library of Congress, 1800-1946. Washington: Government Printing Office, 1947; Wood, Richard C. "Librarian-in-Arms: The Career of John G. Stephenson," Library Quarterly 14:263-69 (Oct. 1949). Primary sources and archival materials--Material relating to Stephenson's family is in the Lancaster, New Hampshire, Historical Society. Stephenson's letterbooks while Librarian of Congress, as well as the two unpublished annual reports prepared during his administration, are in the Library of Congress Archives. Spofford's correspondence concerning Stephenson is in the National Woman Suffrage Association Archives, Library of Congress. There is a personnel file for Stephenson in Record Group 84, Office of the Secretary of the Interior, National Archives and Records Service.

John Y. Cole