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CONTEMPORARY NEWS-LETTER

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## THE ACCIDENT ON BOARD THE U. S. S. "PRINCETON", FEBRUARY 28, 1844: A CONTEMPORARY NEWS-LETTER

Edited with Notes by ST. GEORGE L. SIOUSSAT  
University of Pennsylvania

CONCERNING the tragic event of February 28, 1844, described in the document which follows, there was no lack of contemporary testimony. The suddenness of the disaster; the consequent contrast of death, pain and sorrow with the gaiety that had marked the excursion of the United States ship *Princeton* upon the Potomac River that day; the loss of two members of the Cabinet and the narrow escape of the President of the United States; all these circumstances made the *Princeton* accident "news" for every Washington reporter, elicited inquiry and comment in many quarters, and inspired letter writers among those who were eye-witnesses.<sup>1</sup>

Moreover, the great gun which burst, the vessel, and the commander, Robert Field Stockton, are of interest to the historical student, not merely because of the accident, but because gun and vessel, respectively, constituted examples of important changes in naval construction, of which Commodore Stockton was the exponent. Again, the fact that the accident necessitated a second reconstitution of President Tyler's cabinet reminds us that the catastrophe had political results, also, that vitally affected the course of our national history.

Of all the contemporary writings that have come to our notice none gives so detailed a story of the events of the accident and its

<sup>1</sup> *E.g.*, *The National Intelligencer* (Washington, D. C.), February 29, 1844, and following days. *Niles' National Register*, Vol. 66, March 2, 1844, contains matter which takes up about one and one-half pages. A particularly interesting account of the disaster and of the events that succeeded it is found in Henry A. Wise's *Seven Decades of the Union . . .* (Philadelphia, 1881), pp. 220-227. Wise was not on the vessel, but was at Gadsby's Hotel when the news of the accident was brought. Included in his story is his account of the means by which he induced President Tyler to appoint Mr. Calhoun as Secretary of State in Upshur's place.

aftermath as this news-letter, sent by George Sykes, of Burlington county, New Jersey, to his sister Ann Sykes. The writing was begun March 5, 1844—though the manuscript is mistakenly dated “2nd Mo”—and completed March 20.

George Sykes, according to a biographical sketch to be found in the *History of Burlington and Mercer Counties, New Jersey . . .* by Major E. M. Woodward and John F. Hageman (Philadelphia, 1883), was born September 20, 1802, near Sykesville, Burlington county, New Jersey, and died February 25, 1880. He attained distinction as a surveyor and conveyancer by reason of his mastery of the intricacies of New Jersey land titles and surveys, especially in Burlington, Ocean and Monmouth counties. With this lore he combined an extensive knowledge of the local history of the region in which he lived. *The Biographical Directory of the American Congress, 1774-1927* (Washington, 1928) states that he was elected as a Democrat to the Twenty-eighth Congress (March 4, 1843-March 3, 1845) and that he was elected to the Twenty-ninth Congress to fill the vacancy caused by the death of another, and served from November 4, 1845 to March 3, 1847. While in Congress he was known as “Friend Sykes, the Quaker member.” It is said also that he gave an interested support to the appropriation of funds to assist Morse with his experimental telegraph line from Washington to Baltimore. In 1847, his name was mentioned in connection with the Democratic nomination for governor of New Jersey, but the choice of the convention fell upon another. Mr. Sykes was a member of the state legislature of New Jersey, 1877-1879.

For the opportunity and permission to print this letter grateful acknowledgment is made to the owner, Mrs. Walter L. Reeder of Columbus, New Jersey, a descendant of a brother of George Sykes, and to Dr. Walter H. Mohr of the George School, through whose kindness the document was brought to our attention. The letter is written on twenty pages of letter paper, roughly thirteen by eight inches. In the printing which follows the spelling and punctuation of the original have been kept, except that the word “and,” wherever indicated by the customary sign, has been spelled out, periods substituted for dashes at the end of sentences, and manifest duplications of words or letters avoided. Parts of the letter, the omission of which is indicated in the usual manner,

have no bearing on the general story and contain only unimportant personal matters.

House of Representatives  
Washington 2nd [*sic.*] Mo 5th 1844

Dear Sister

Thy letter of the 14th instant reached me by due course and the information contained in it of your all being well at home afforded me much pleasure. Before this reaches thee you will have heard of the Melancholy accident on board the United States Steam Ship Princeton on the 28th of last month and will doubtless be anxious to learn the particulars. Not one of the various statements in the newspapers undertaking to give a detailed account so far as I have seen has been correct. It may not be improper to remark that this fine National ship was built by the General Government under the immediate superintendence of Captain Robert F. Stockton<sup>2</sup> of the Navy and of Princeton N. J. In the construction of it he had taken a deep interest and felt some pride in endeavouring to render it a model as perfect

<sup>2</sup> An adequate sketch of Robert Field Stockton (August 20, 1795-October 7, 1866), by Dr. C. O. Paullin is to be found in the *Dictionary of American Biography* (hereafter cited as D.A.B.) (Washington, 1928-1937). The long naval service of Commodore Stockton was punctuated with furloughs of considerable extent in which he devoted himself to politics and to business. Politically his opinions seem to have been variable, as he supported successively John Quincy Adams, Andrew Jackson, William Henry Harrison, and later the American Party. On the break-up of the Whig Cabinet President Tyler wished to make Stockton Secretary of the Navy, but the offer was declined. In the course of his career in the Navy Stockton had seen service in both the War of 1812 and the War with Algiers, had been engaged in the suppression of the slave trade off the African coast, and in the extinction of piracy in the West Indies. Later, upon the outbreak of the Mexican War, it will be recalled, he was sent to the Pacific to supersede Sloat and had a prominent part in the combination of the military and naval forces which completed the conquest of California.

In Stockton's vigorous activity in connection with the building of the steamer *Princeton*, to which Mr. Sykes alludes, he had leaned heavily upon the talents of the inventor John Ericsson (July 31, 1803-March 8, 1889), later the designer of the *Monitor*. The *Princeton* was the first ship of the Navy to be built with a screw propeller, and upon the construction of it great influence was exerted by Ericsson's success in the smaller vessel which bore Stockton's name, which, after crossing the Atlantic from England, is said to have become a tug. The names of Ericsson and Stockton are conjoined, however, not merely with respect to the *Princeton*. For the cannon which burst, the "Peacemaker," while not built by Ericsson, had followed the ideas expressed in the design of another, dubbed the "Oregon," which was of Ericsson's planning. The accident established a

as possible for the purpose intended and by his energy talents and unremitted exertions combined with his experience skill and practical knowledge had so far succeeded both in the construction of the vessel and ordnance that they were considered and almost universally admitted by the best judges to be superior to those of any other vessel of the same size in the English or American Navy. As an evidence of the superiority of her engine it is only necessary to advert to the circumstance of her leaving Philadelphia in the severest weather we have had the past winter—coming round by sea and cutting her way through ice from eight to ten inches thick in the Potomack between 30 and 40 miles to this city without the slightest difficulty and nearly in as little time as an ordinary ship would when the river was free from ice—all these circumstances taken in connexion with the fact that the appropriation was two hundred and ten thousand dollars for building it while the actual cost was—only about one hundred and seventy five thousand a thing unprecedented in the construction of national vessels—but the certain guarantee of the strict economy—as well as skill of the individual under whose direction she had been built

Ardently attached to the Navy and desirous of exhibiting the improvements he had made in Naval architecture as well as the economy in constructing the vessel to the public at large in order to satisfy the community that the superiority was not imaginary

prejudice against Ericsson which, though entirely unfair, continued to operate against him down to the very time when he produced the plans for the *Monitor*. (See sketch of Ericsson in *D.A.B.*; also Edgar Stanton Maclay, *A History of the United States Navy from 1775 to 1902*; New and Enlarged Edition in Three Volumes, New York, 1902. Maclay, however, is in error as to the date of the accident.) For Stockton and other naval officers bibliographical data may be found in the work, now somewhat out of date, of Robert Wilden Neeser, *Statistical and Chronological History of the United States Navy, 1775-1907*. In two volumes (New York, 1909).

The arrival at Philadelphia of the *Princeton*, under Stockton's command, was noted in the *National Intelligencer* of Washington, January 29, 1844. On February 16, the House of Representatives had received from President Tyler a message dated the 12th with which was included a communication from Captain Stockton addressed to David Henshaw, at that time Secretary of the Navy, and written from Philadelphia, February 5. Stockton described the *Princeton* as "having received her armament on board, and being nearly ready for sea . . ." Writing in a very untechnical style, evidently with the purpose of impressing the Secretary and Congress, Stockton praised his vessel in unmeasured terms. The *Princeton*, a "full-rigged ship," could "perform any service that can be expected from a ship-of-war." With her sails alone she was at least equal to any ship of her class and could make greater

but real Captain S brought it round to this city and soon after his arrival invited the president—heads of department and a number of scientific gentlemen in Washington to an entertainment which he gave on board in order to give them an opportunity of examining for their own satisfaction the vessel and her machinery and with a view to exhibit the powers of the engine etc. the vessel made an excursion down the Potomack several miles and returned. The effect of this exhibition was such that the most sceptical did not fail to express their convictions of the superior skill manifested in the construction of the vessel its engine and ordnance on their return to Washington. On the 20th pursuant to invitations from the captain to the members of congress—and the senate about 225 assembled at Greenleafs Point to go on board the Princeton on an excursion down the river similar to the one I have mentioned and after spending the day on board—partaking of the excellent dinner and wines furnished by Captain S—listening to the music of a full band and examining the machinery—the company returned every one so far as I could judge being satisfied and pleased with the excursion

According to etiquette at Washington upon the arrival of a stranger or citizen of distinction persons wishing an introduction to him must apply to the member of Congress from his congressional district—hence Captain S being decidedly the greatest lion at the Metropolis the present winter and a resident of my congressional district I have often had as many as a dozen calls

speed than any sea-going steamer or any other vessel heretofore built. Special mention was made of the engines which, with the "water-wheel," were below the surface of the water, safe from an enemy's shot and would not interfere at any time with the use of the sails but could be made auxiliary thereto. One is amused to read the argument that "the engines, being seldom used, will probably outlast two such ships [steamships]." After describing the armament of two long two hundred and twenty-five pounder wrought iron guns and twelve forty-two pounder carronades, all of which might be used at once on either side of the ship, Stockton concluded:

"It is confidently believed that this small ship will be able to battle with any vessel, however large, if she is not invincible against any foe. The improvements in the art of war, adopted on board the Princeton, may be productive of more important results than anything that has occurred since the invention of gun powder. The numerical force of other navies, so long boasted, may be set at naught. The ocean may again become neutral ground, and the rights of the smallest, as well as the greatest nation may once more be respected." (28 Cong., 1 Sess.; H.R., *Ex. Doc.*, No. 121. The letter is reproduced in the *National Intelligencer* of February 19, 1844.)

upon me in a day from persons wishing an introduction to him some of whom I had never seen before and I felt somewhat embarrassed on the day of the excursion given to the members of congress. one of the first things upon getting on board was the ceremony of introduction to him—and as he and myself stood about midship as the members came up there were perhaps 75 out of the number who had to whisper their names and the states they were from to me first. Strange as it may appear though meeting in the same room at the capitol nearly every day for three months there were at least that number whom I did not know—sufficiently well to call by name—this was the second entertainment given on board at Washington and as an evidence of the feeling which prevailed among the company after getting in the boats to leave the ship the boats settled pretty deep in the water some one remarked—“Captain I hope your boats and men may be depended upon and that after treating us so well today you will not drown us”—he was leaning over the side of the ship and seeing me in the bow he replied—“Oh no you have Sykes there with you. he is my representative—gentlemen, you may all feel yourselves entirely safe while he is along.” Immediately (with only three exceptions) every man in the boat pulled off his hat from John Q. Adams<sup>3</sup> of Massachusetts between 75 and 80 years

<sup>3</sup> John Quincy Adams (July 11, 1767-February 23, 1848) gives in his famous *Memoirs. . . Comprising Portions of his Diary from 1795 to 1848*, edited by Charles Francis Adams (Philadelphia, 1876), Vol. XI, pp. 515-516, under the date of February 20, 1844, a paragraph descriptive of this excursion. What Adams in his characteristic manner confided to his diary contrasted with the enthusiasm which, according to Mr. Sykes, he manifested in public. After succinctly describing the *Princeton* and its armament, Adams called the vessel “a gimcrack of sundry other inventions of Captain Stockton himself,” and added: “She was ordered round here to be exhibited to the President and heads of the Executive Departments, and to the members of both Houses of Congress, to fire their souls with patriotic ardor for a naval war . . . Holmes’s motion to adjourn over the day was carried by evading the call for the yeas and nays, and even the call for tellers. I went with Isaac Hull Adams to Greenleaf’s Point, and thence embarked in the *Princeton*’s barge on board that vessel. I was punctual to the hour of eleven, and the first of the company that came. Captain Stockton received me with great politeness, and showed me all the machinery of the ship. Afterwards, upwards of a hundred members of the House came on board. The two great guns are called the Peacemaker and the Orator [*sic*]. A salute was fired from the carronades, and the Peacemaker was three times discharged. The vessel was steamed down twelve miles, to Fort Washington, and back to her moorings, opposite Greenleaf’s Point. A plentiful cold collation was served. We reached home at four P. M.”

old, the oldest member in congress down to Jno Wentworth<sup>4</sup> of Illinois aged 27 the youngest and gave three long loud and enthusiastic cheers (as the boats pushed off) for "*Captain Stockton and the Princeton*" no one doffing his hat more quickly—or cheering more enthusiastically than J Q Adams who had spent the day on board minutely examining and making the most critical investigations about the machinery etc. of the vessel and with which he expressed the greatest satisfaction in common with the others without respect to party or politics Captain S called round at the Exchange Hotel to see me next day after the house had adjourned and in the course of conversation inquired of me how the members appeared to like the ship—and if they seemed pleased with the excursion. I told him I thought he ought to feel complimented—as he had completely stopped the wheels of government for one day. Congress having adjourned over to accept his invitation—and that some one had remarked to me that he had Congress in his power and if he had chosen to take the vessel out to sea with the members on board—they would probably have been willing to make a very liberal appropriation for the Navy for the sake of getting back—and that so far as I had heard every individual of the vast number old and young had expressed the highest approbation and confidence in the superiority of the vessel as well as the utmost satisfaction and enjoyment with the excursion and the entertainment they had received on board the day before. He said he felt gratified to hear they had not ben disappointed in their anticipations—that he had passed an almost sleepless night the night before the excursion fearing that among so many persons from every part of the Union some accident might happen on the river or some unpleasant circumstance take place while they were under his care—and that his only object in inviting the members of Congress was to let all see for themselves that there was no humbug about the ship or her machinery and that the improvements were real—and consequently merited the attention of every person who felt an interest in the American Navy. The excursion I have just mentioned was the second given on board the ship and was on the 20th of last month. Members of Congress and the Senate only being invited the first excursion having been on the

<sup>4</sup> John Wentworth (March 5, 1815-October 16, 1888). Elected as a Democrat from Illinois to the Twenty-eighth and succeeding Congresses.



16th at which the president heads of department—the Naval committees—and officers of the Army and Navy who were at Washington were invited. at each time the big gun had been fired several times and notwithstanding the great numbers on board on both excursions everything passed off well without the slightest unpleasant occurrence to mar the pleasure of the excursion—which was a little remarkable considering the large number each time the various ages—and habits and feelings of the guests—together with the fact that in consequence of the ships drawing 19 feet water she could not get over the bar in the Potomack but had to anchor out in the channel of the river half a mile from the wharf from which all the company both times had to go to the ship and return in small boats rowed by the sailors.

It has been customary for many years before any new National vessel sails on her first cruise for the officers to give the citizens of the place she sails from a ball on board by way of Christening—and as none but public men had been invited on the two excursions the private citizens and many ladies of distinction in Washington were very solicitous that Captain S should give a ball on board the Princeton. The matter was held by him under advisement some days but from the first he appeared to be opposed to it in his own mind and he finally decided against it alledging his object in bringing the ship to Washington had been accomplished and that the ship was not a suitable place to give a ball—saying that if he must give a ball he would rather give one in the city of Washington which would be much more easy to attend and a suitable room could be obtained—people continueing rather urgent he finally concluded to make another excursion and give an entertainment on board—to which the President and heads of department and such members of the cabinet and members of the senate and house of representatives as had wives or daughters with them in Washington and officers of the Army and Navy and many private citizens residing or visiting in Washington with their families were invited.

The number of invitations exceeded 400 half of whom were ladies and every one with (only one or two exceptions) who had an invitation attended and many persons who had not received invitations actually applied either personally or through their friends—but which the Captain in many instances absolutely was

obliged to refuse—so great was the interest felt in the Metropolis and surrounding country—and such the eagerness to go on the excursion on board the Princeton that had the invitation been a general one I really think it would have required two such ships to contain the guests. In this state of the case I was in Captain Stocktons room on the evening of the 27th it being the evening before the last excursion and found him about writing a letter to his wife in Philadelphia and which he sent to the post office that evening. He had expressed some fears that some unpleasant occurrence might take place particularly as there would be so many ladies. He commenced the letter to his wife with these words. (*Tomorrow—Tomorrow—Oh that tomorrow were past and I could say All is well*). Among the very first gentlemen I became acquainted with on my arrival in Washington was Thomas W. Gilmer<sup>5</sup> late governor of Virginia who was first elected to Congress last fall and consequently like myself was a new member until he was nominated by the president for Secretary of the Navy with a salary of \$6,000 per annum—and his nomination was unanimously confirmed the same day by the senate. He was from Charlottesville Virginia and Isaac S. Tinsley<sup>6</sup> a baptist Clergyman who is the present chaplain of Congress was from the same neighbourhood and an intimate friend of his—the chaplain boarded at the Exchange hotel his room being near mine—as he was a pleasant and agreeable man I soon got acquainted with him—and we became quite intimate—often visiting back and forward at each others rooms—as he and Gilmer were intimate friends he introduced me to the governor whom I was in the habit of meeting every day at the Capitol and whom I found an agreeable and gentlemanly man frank and dignified in his manners—though easy and without stiffness in his conversation—and I have scarcely met a man in this city to whom I was more attached or entertained higher sentiments of esteem and regard.

Amongst the visitors in Washington was a lady from Mississippi and another a Miss Sommerville from Prince Georges

<sup>5</sup> Thomas W. Gilmer (April 6, 1802-February 28, 1844). Appointed Secretary of the Navy, February 15, 1844. At the time of his death he had been less than two weeks in office.

<sup>6</sup> Isaac S. Tinsley. This minister elicited from John Quincy Adams some comment that was not entirely complimentary. (*Memoirs*, XI, pp. 507-8.)

County Maryland who were staying at a Mr. Beales—on Capitol hill. and both of whom I had frequently met at Levees—and parties. These ladies—S. S. Phelps<sup>7</sup> the Senator from Vermont and myself were to take under our escort on the occasion—and as we called upon them in the morning before the excursion—Beale kindly ordered his coachman to put the horses to his carriage and take us from his house down to the steamboat wharf. When we got down to the wharf a few minutes before 11 O'clock we found a great concourse of persons there and others constantly arriving to take the steamboat which Captain S had chartered to take the company from the wharf at Washington to the ship which was about six miles down the Potomack opposite Alexandria. The steamboat not being a large one it settled down in the water considerably when the company got on board and several persons expressed some fears. The steam boat left the wharf about 20 minutes past 11 and proceeded to the ship where we arrived about 12 O'clock and all got safely on board the Princeton from the steam boat

The Princeton at this time made a most beautiful appearance as she lay at anchor about the middle of the Potomack her yards all manned with the crew. The American Flag and broad penant streaming in the gentle breeze and the British and the flags of almost every other nation float in the gale suspended from the spar and rigging. As the president and members of the Cabinet passed over the side of the ship on a plank from the hurricane deck of the steamboat—the sailors and Marines in the shrouds—pulled off their hats and gave three cheers while the Marine band a full band of excellent musicians struck up "*The Star Spangled banner*" with a very happy effect. The day was mild and serene without a cloud—the company were all dressed in their very best and every one seemed pleased and happy. As soon as the company had all got on board the steamboat pushed off and left for Alexandria at which place a vast assemblage of persons were collected on the wharf and gave three cheers for the Princeton. The seamen weighed anchor on the Princeton which then fired a National

<sup>7</sup> Samuel Shethar Phelps (May 13, 1793-March 25, 1855). Whig Senator from Vermont, 1839-1851. A newspaper clipping,—the name of the paper not given,—attached to the manuscript of Mr. Sykes' narrative quotes a vivid description of the pathetic scene after the accident, written by Senator Phelps to a gentleman in New York, dated Washington, March 3, 1844.

salute of 26 guns one for every state in the Union being cannon called 42 pounders—the engine was put in motion the sails unfurled to the breeze and the ship gently gracefully and majestically moved along the broad expanse of the Potomack the band struck up "*Hail Columbia*" and played several other national airs until the ship came opposite Mount Vernon—when it played "*Washington's March Hail to the Chief etc.*" The big gun had been fired strongly contrasting the deafening roar of Cannon with the music of the band and the melody of the national songs. The cabins are so arranged that they can all be thrown into one extending the whole length of the ship which was done to set the table which was loaded with almost every delicacy of the season many of which had been procured from Philadelphia expressly for the occasion—to which were added superior Champagne and other wines, choice fruits etc., etc., in profusion and the company were invited to be seated at the table which as there were not seats for all at once—was occupied by the ladies and a few of the gentlemen the first time amongst whom was the highly accomplished Mrs. Madison<sup>8</sup> widow of the late James Madison former president of the United States—who was born and brought up a friend as she informed me—and who by the bye is without exception the most accomplished and lady like woman I have ever met with at her time of life being now near 80 years old though I have often seen women of fifty who look older and are far less active and sprightly than she is. After those who had dined at the first table had finished their dinner . . . the company rose and went on deck to see the big gun fired again. Gov Gilmer and myself were standing together and concluded to count the number of times the ball struck the water and glanced before it finally sunk. We each counted seven times distinctly and thought it might possibly have struck once or twice more which we might not have seen in consequence of the obscurity of the smoke. Several of the company said they had counted fifteen or sixteen times the first ball had glanced before it finally sunk.

After this the Captain directed the sails to be furled, the ship wore round and commenced her return—the band struck up that beautiful tune—"*Home Sweet Home*" very appropriately—every-

<sup>8</sup> Dolly Payne Madison (May 20, 1768-July 12, 1849).

one seemed pleased and determined to please and act the agreeable in the best manner and from the purest motives. All appeared on a perfect level and equality in the most republican style the ladies from Mrs. Madison the eldest on board down to the boarding school young lady in her teens conversing and smiling at the witty joke or amusing anecdote—the gentlemen from the president<sup>9</sup> (who by the bye is naturally frank and affable), down to the private citizen were sitting in groups—with the ladies in the cabin or standing in small collections on the deck. Some discussing national affairs others conversing on literary and scientific subjects until the dinner was announced for those who had not dined at the first table—upon which nearly the whole company went in the cabin those who had dined seating themselves on the side of the cabin opposite the table while the others took seats at the table which was on one side of the cabin and extended nearly the whole length of the ship—the machinery—and all the paraphernalia for propelling being under the cabin and of course entirely out of sight.

Captain S. being the host according to etiquette took his seat at the end or head of the table the president sitting next to him at his right hand—Chas A Wikliffe<sup>10</sup> [*sic*] of Kentucky the postmaster general on the same side next to the president Commodore Stewart<sup>11</sup> next to Wickliffe Captain Kennon<sup>12</sup> next—Virgil

<sup>9</sup> John Tyler (March 20, 1790-January 18, 1862) became President on the death of William Henry Harrison, April 4, 1841. The well known work of his son, Lyon Gardiner Tyler, *Letters and Times of the Tylers*, 2 vols. (Richmond, 1885), and 3rd volume (Williamsburg, 1896), mentions briefly the *Princeton* disaster (Vol. II, p. 289), and contains an address, "The Dead of the Cabinet," delivered at Petersburg, April 24, 1856, in which, after the lapse of twelve years, the former President, with more sentimentality than modern taste approves, elaborated on the virtues of his friends who lost their lives in the disaster. (*Ibid.*, pp. 384-399.)

The day after the accident, the President, informing Congress of the death of the Secretaries, was careful to say that in his estimation there had been no carelessness or inattention on the part of the officers or crew of the *Princeton*, and that the catastrophe in no measure detracted from the value of the improvements contemplated in the construction of the *Princeton*, or from the merits of her brave and distinguished commander and projector. (28 Cong., 1 Sess.; H.R., *Ex. Doc.*, No. 158.)

<sup>10</sup> Charles A. Wickliffe (June 8, 1788-October 31, 1869). Appointed Postmaster General, September 13, 1841.

<sup>11</sup> Charles Stewart (July 28, 1778-November 6, 1869). Born in Pennsylvania. Famous as commander of the *Constellation* and of the *Constitution*. He was the grandfather of Charles Stewart Parnell.

<sup>12</sup> Captain Beverly Kennon, Chief of the Bureau of Construction and Equipment of the Navy. He had been a naval officer since 1809, and in 1839 commanded the *Macedonian* of the West India squadron.

Maxy<sup>13</sup> [*sic*] next—Col Gardner<sup>14</sup> [*sic*] next and so on down that side of the table were seated other gentlemen all the ladies having dined at the first. On Captain Stocktons left and next to him sat Levi Woodbury<sup>15</sup> former Governor of New Hampshire late secretary of the treasury and now senator from N H—next to him Abel P Usher<sup>16</sup> [*sic*] of Virginia secretary of state—next to him Wm Wilkins<sup>17</sup> of Penna secretary of war—next myself—next to me was S S Phelps senator from Vermont who went in company with me from Beals—next to him Thos W Gilmer former governor of Virginia late member of Congress and at the time secretary of the Navy to which he had been appointed only about two weeks before which left his seat vacant in Congress—next to him Thos H Benton<sup>18</sup> senator from Missouri and after that a number of gentlemen whose seats I did not notice particularly—when the dinner was over some person called upon Captain S for a toast he filled his glass and gave *The president of the United States* which was received without distinction of party (there being a number of each party on board) with three times three as it is called being nine cheers—next the president was called on for a toast and he gave—“*The three big guns—the peace maker the Oregon and Captain Stockton*”\* which was received

<sup>13</sup> Virgil Maxcy (May 5, 1785-February 28, 1844). Originally of Massachusetts, but during his political career a resident of Maryland. He had resigned, June 17, 1842, from his service as chargé d'affaires of the United States to Belgium.

<sup>14</sup> David Gardiner of New York, member of New York State Senate. His daughter Julia became the second wife of President Tyler, June 26, 1844.

<sup>15</sup> Levi Woodbury (December 22, 1789-September 4, 1851). He was later appointed an Associate Justice of the Supreme Court of the United States, succeeding Mr. Justice Story.

<sup>16</sup> Abel Parker Upshur (June 17, 1791-February 28, 1844). Of Virginia. Secretary of the Navy in President Tyler's reconstituted Cabinet. Upshur had taken great interest in the *Princeton*. July 24, 1843, he was appointed to the Department of State, *vice* Hugh S. Legaré, who had died a month before. An interesting sketch of Secretary Upshur by Randolph G. Adams is in Volume V of *The American Secretaries of State and their Diplomacy*, edited by Samuel Flagg Bemis (New York, 1928).

<sup>17</sup> William Wilkins (December 20, 1779-June 23, 1865). Like Gilmer, he had been a member of the Twenty-eighth Congress; and at this time had been Secretary of War but two weeks.

<sup>18</sup> Thomas Hart Benton (March 14, 1782-April 10, 1858). Senator from Missouri. In his *Thirty Years View . . . by a Senator of Thirty Years*, Vol. II (New York, 1856), Ch. CXXVIII, pp. 567-8, Benton gave a detailed account of his own experience and of his impressions concerning the disaster.

\*In addition to the usual number of guns on board the *Princeton* there were two very large ones of wrought Iron, viz the Peacemaker and the Oregon it was the peacemaker which burst [Footnote in the original.]

with three cheers—next some gentleman at the other end of the table called out and begged leave to give a toast which had been offered by a lady in company—“*The American Flag, the only thing American which wears a star and the only one which bears a stripe*,—This was received with the most enthusiastic applause though not one of the company except the lady who offered it and the gentleman who repeated it knew by which of the ladies it had been offered. The gentleman who repeated it had been in conversation with Miss Wickliffe of Kentucky the daughter of the postmaster general one of the finest girls in Washington and only about 19—and had asked her in a joke what toast she would give—when with the greatest sangfroid, she repeated the above to him in an under tone without supposing any thing more would be said about it but it seemed so appropriate with the American Flag streaming in the breeze from the masthead of the very national vessel we were on that he gave it without saying a word to her about it

Upon his giving it—and its being so enthusiastically received by the company she was observed by some half dozen ladies and gentlemen who sat near her—to blush like crimson and shew the greatest confusion which led them to suspect her of the authorship—yet although nearly the whole company were anxious to know and enquired repeatedly for the name of the lady—the gentleman who announced it had the delicacy to withhold her name—which was not generally known until sometime afterwards. Several other toasts were given when one of the midshipmen came down in the cabin and reported to the captain that the big gun was loaded and ready to be fired upon which some one remarked let us go on deck and see it. Captain S observed to Gilmer—“But Mr. Secretary of the Navy we have had no toast from you let us have yours before we go.” Many upon hearing Captain S. remark called loudly for a toast from the Secretary of the Navy. Upon which Gov. Gilmer filling his glass with cold water (being a member of the church and also of the temperance society like a large number of the members of the present Congress and many officers of the government) and gave “*Fair trade and Sailors rights*” which was received by the company with great applause. Immediately the company seated at that end of the table all rose to go upon deck the president and Captain taking the lead. Upon

reaching the deck a gentleman addressing the president said, "I would like to speak with you a moment" on hearing which the president stopped to talk with him while the rest of the company passed on to the bow of the boat where the gun was—leaving the president behind at the door of the cabin near the stern in conversation with the gentleman. S. S. Phelps taking Miss Somerville by the arm jocularly remarked to her "*you must shew your courage and firmness by standing close to the gun with me and see it fired without even winking*"—to which she replied with a smile in a bantering manner—"I dare go any where that you dare. The lady who was under my escort remarked to me—"Mr. Sykes I beg you will excuse me but I am not at all partial to the smell of gunpowder nor have I any fancy for hearing the almost deafening roar of artillery—I would therefore prefer remaining where I am while you go forward to see the gun fired" of course I did not insist as I thought *myself* it was not surprising to hear a lady express such sentiments especially after having seen the gun fired twice the same day. Just at the moment the wind sprung up pretty fresh on the river and being rather chilly I returned to the cabin to get my surtout.

As I was passing the president who was still standing in conversation on the deck by the Cabin door—he said with a smile—"Mr. Sykes are you going back to the cabin for another glass of Champaigne? If I find that you prefer Captain Stockton's wine to the company of the lady whom you have just been conversing with—I shall not only doubt your gallantry but begin to fear you are becoming a little dissipated since your residence in Washington. I only replied that the company of the lady was quite agreeable and Captain Stockton's wine was very good but since I thought the president had set an excellent example to the company by wearing his cloak on deck my respect for him and regard for my own comfort were sufficient inducements for me to return to the cabin and put on my overcoat. As soon as I put on my overcoat I returned to the deck and found the president still in conversation at the steps from the Cabin. As I passed him some one in the cabin commenced singing an old fashioned national song—in the Cabin—upon hearing which the president observed



—“When I was a young man that was one of the most popular songs in Virginia—and as I have not heard it for 20 years or more I prefer returning to the cabin and listening to it instead of seeing the gun fired again with these remarks he did not go to the gun and fortunately a large number of the company followed his example so that when it was fired not more than 100 persons were on the deck. I passed on and as a number had collected round the gun while I was going after my coat—I took my station upon a caronade (42 pounder) a little behind the others to have a better opportunity of seeing the ball strike the water.

The ship had her sails all furled and was propelled gently along by the engine alone at the rate of 10 or 12 miles an hour—the gun was on the bow of the boat and pointed towards the Virginia side of the river over the larboard bow of the ship which was about two miles below Alexandria when the gun was fired. The report was not so loud as at the previous discharges—all passing out at the muzzle while at the last discharge when the gun burst the greater part of it escaped on the deck which was completely enveloped in smoke for some moments—the smoke being infinitely greater on deck than at any time before my attention was directed some two or three miles up the river to see the ball strike the water. I saw it strike only once after which it raised but little and almost instantly sunk. I thought it strange it should only glance once—and as my eye was resting on the river my attention was next arrested by noticing something falling on the water which at first I supposed was a piece of the Wadding—but from subsequent circumstances I am now satisfied it was a fragment of the gun which went over the larboard side of the ship—and as it fell in the river I observed some ten or a dozen hats and various pieces of canvass floating on the water at which I was surprized—being utterly unconscious that the gun had burst. Just at this moment some person near me who happened to be looking towards it exclaimed “*the gun has burst and there are about 20 persons killed*.” Upon turning my eyes towards it I was astonished to find that every man between me and the gun was lying prostrate on the deck—and about 30 or 40 men lying in heaps indiscriminately and

promiscuously round the gun either killed wounded or knocked down and stunned by the concussion as the smoke gradually cleared away. I thought at first they were every one killed. A solemn deathlike and dreadfully awful silence prevailed at the moment neither sigh groan or shriek being heard I felt perfectly calm and collected—my eye next caught three gentlemen struck down almost by my side by a fragment of the gun nearly one half of the breech from whom as well as the others the blood was running in crimson streams down the deck their countenances so blackened by the smoke of the powder and distorted in the agonies of death that at the first glance I did not recognize a single one of them but at the next moment I discovered that the middle one of the three was Governor Gilmer who was lying on his back on the deck a little inclining to his right side his mouth open as if gasping for breath. Upsher the secretary of State lying dead across Gilmer's left arm while his right hand was on Gardners breast who still breathed hurriedly and convulsively.

As soon as I recognized the Secretary of the Navy (Gilmer) I threw off my overcoat stepped to him intending to pick him up and carry him out of the dreadful melee—this I was unable to do in consequence of the fragment of the gun weighing between one and two tons having fallen upon one of his legs which after several efforts I could not remove. I then went behind him raised him up in a sitting position upon the deck loosened his cravat and unbuttoned his vest—as quick as I could, but as I stood behind him with my knee against his shoulders—his head fell over on his right shoulder he breathed but twice I placed my hands under his chin to hold up his head—but the vital spark had flown forever—and the Immortal Spirit of Thomas W Gilmer had departed to Him who gave it. My attention was next attracted to his wounds the blood flowing freely from his left ear had soaked entirely through the sleeve of my coat. So that after placing my hand upon his heart and finding it entirely still I requested a couple of marines to get some handspikes and remove the fragment of the gun from the bodies which they immediately did. I then requested a sailor to go down in the cabin and bring up the cushion from one of the settees upon which with the assist-

ance of the sailor I straightened him out. I believe the secretary of state (Upsher) was killed instantly. Gardner breathed several times after Gilmer died but it seemed to me both died in less time than it takes to write it. Melancholy indeed did I feel as I stood contemplating the palid features of Gilmer—and the two gentlemen lying by his side stretched out in the sleep of death upon the hard planks of the deck dressed in the finest black cloth which was soaking in their lifeblood while the highly polished boots were filling with it especially when I reflected that one of them had been my intimate friend and that not fifteen minutes before the fatal gun was fired I had enjoyed their conviviality at the festive board and that my hand so soon after as well as my coat should have been stained with their blood. During the time I have just described other persons were attending to the others who were killed viz Captain Kennon and Virgil Maxcy and those who were wounded—Kennon was mangled in the most dreadful manner his breast was completely mashed in both legs and both arms were broken in several places and one of his feet came off in attempting to get his boot off. Maxcy's arm came off about halfway between his arm and wrist as a gentleman took hold of the hand to assist in laying him out I think they were both killed instantly. The presidents servant was leaning against a cannon which was struck by a piece of the exploded gun—he was a stout black man about 23 or 24 years old and lived about an hour after—when they came to examine him and lay him out neither the surgeon of the Princeton nor any other person could discover the slightest wound or injury about him. It appeared that nine of the seamen who were round the gun had some of their limbs or bones broken (one had both legs broken) besides other wounds—these nine were sent that evening in boats to the hospital—eight more who had very severe fractures and bruises were retained on board the vessel under the care of the surgeon of the ship Doctor Hunter<sup>19</sup>—besides these there were many others who were seriously hurt by bruises and simple flesh wounds—but all are doing as well as could be expected and it is remarkable that among

<sup>19</sup> Lewis R. Hunter (— to June 24, 1887). Assistant Surgeon, U.S.N., January 3, 1828; Surgeon, February 9, 1837.

so many broken limbs there has not one been amputated. When the gun burst Captain S. and his Lieutenant (Hunt) with the gunner named King<sup>20</sup> were standing nearest to it and Captain S had his foot on the carriage of the gun at the time and a fragment of the gun weighing between 50 and 100 pounds passed between them tearing the clothes of each as it passed by them and struck a gun carriage directly behind them—crushed the solid white oak in splinters besides bending a large bar of iron almost like a reed. Captain S told me since that the only recollection he has of the circumstance is that he seemed for a moment completely surrounded by the flame of the powder, which burnt off his whiskers—hair—the padding under his Epaulettes—and scorched his clothes in various places—he was so completely metamorphosed and blackened by the powder that although I looked at him attentively I did not recognize him until I recollected he wore white pantaloons which were most dreadfully blackened so much so that I person would hardly have supposed them to been light coloured before the accident—he wore a cap which like some 30 or 40 hats was blown overboard and lost of course—his face was burnt as was also the Lieutenants and Kings—the gunner. the Lieutenants eyebrows were burnt off as smooth to the skin as if they had been shaven which greatly altered his appearance his eyebrows being naturally very black and heavy. It seems almost incredible that Captain S. Lieutenant Hunt and King the gunner should be so near the gun when it burst and not be killed though they were all badly burnt and bruized and otherwise injured by the concussion so much so as to be confined to their rooms for nearly two weeks after getting to the hotel at Washington though neither of them had any bones broken. The young lady who was under the escort of Phelps was standing between him and Thos H Benton, both of these gentlemen are perhaps a little over the ordinary size both of them were knocked down by the concussion—while she stood firm and erect although her bonnet as well as their hats was blown overboard—her bonnet strings were tied in the usual manner

<sup>20</sup> Lieutenant W. E. Hunt. Gunner R. S. King. Their testimony at the court of inquiry is in 28 Cong., 1 Sess.; H.R., *Report* No. 479, May 15, 1844.

under her chin—the concussion was so great that her bonnet was blown off in the river—leaving the strings still tied under her chin they being torn off from her bonnet where they were sewed to it—her face was considerably burnt though in other respects she was less injured than either of them. Benton has not been well enough to be in his seat since the accident. The wounded were all taken below. the ship continued her course to Alexandria and the steamboat took the guests up to Washington the killed and all the wounded except the nine who had broken limbs remained on board the Princeton all night—a small boat left the Princeton as soon as she arrived opposite to Alexandria for such Physicians as could be procured. Washington was in a great ferment as soon as the intelligence was received and continued so until a late hour of the night—the wife of Gov Gilmer who was some three or four years younger than he was—was on board but in another part of the ship, she is a handsome and very accomplished woman and no person to have seen them together would have supposed them to be the parents of eight children all of whom are living—he was 42 years old and though his hair and eyes were black and his complexion dark like Governor Vroom<sup>21</sup> of New Jersey though he scarcely a gray hair in person size and action he resembled Tanton Earl<sup>22</sup> more than any person I have ever met with—indeed the first time I ever saw him was the second morning after I first arrived in Washington—he was walking along Pennsylvania Avenue to the Capitol—General Farlee and myself were a little behind him and I could not help remarking to the General that the gentleman ahead of us very strikingly reminded me of a friend of mine in N Jersey. I afterwards made the same remark to Gov Gilmer himself. Gardner was a widower and his two daughters who were great belles were on board—he was rich and had spared no expense on their education—and had spent nearly two years travelling in Europe with

<sup>21</sup> Peter Dumont Vroom (December 12, 1791–November 18, 1873). Was governor of New Jersey, 1829–1832, and 1833–1836, and a Representative in Congress, 1839–1841.

<sup>22</sup> This is probably the Tanton Earl (May 30, 1800–September 16, 1854) listed as No. 589-7 in Pliny Earle, *Ralph Earle and his Descendants* (Worcester, Mass., 1888), p. 151, as a resident of Springfield, New Jersey, and a farmer. He was evidently related to the Sykes family.

them and visiting in the best society there—though not decidedly handsome they were both very fine looking with highly polished and accomplished manners. Their grief was extreme over the mangled remains of their parent—their tears flowed freely. but Gilmer's wife though frantic with grief could not shed a tear. The grief and tears of the relatives of the dead seemed to add greatly to the effect of the accident. The next morning I took the first steam boat which left Washington for Alexandria and from Alexandria I took a small boat and went on board the Princeton. The deathlike silence which seemed to prevail on board the ship made the scene more solemn if possible than it was in the excitement of the day before. The surgeon had directed that Captain S should be kept as quiet as possible and that no one should see him except his family and those of his officers who were on board. his son however informed him that I had come from Washington when he immediately sent a message requesting to see me. I went in his state room and found him in his berth—upon shaking hands he burst into tears and I felt much affected at his sufferings both in body and mind—the latter being much the most severe

The Cabinet makers at Alexandria sent or rather brought the coffins on board about 10 O'clock five being of mahogany while the blackmans was of cherry but so nearly resembling the mahogany as not to be distinguished without taking particular notice. After the bodies were put in the coffins a small card with the name of each person was tacked to the head. the steamboat came along the side of the Princeton and dead were removed from one to the other. The marines and sailors and indeed all others on board except the wounded ranged along in two lines bare headed and the band chanting the funeral dirge as each coffin was passed from the ship to the steamboat. As soon as the coffins were removed to the steamboat it pushed off and started for Washington while minute guns (or a canon was fired every minute) from the time the dead left the ship until they arrived at the Presidents house. A tremendous concourse of people we found at the wharf in Washington when the boat arrived arrived some in carriages—some on horseback and many on foot who accompanied the bodies

from the wharf up to the presidents house (which is about a mile and a half from the wharf) where they were all placed in the large East room—where but the evening before the accident I had met them all at the presidents levee which being the last levee for the season was of an unusually brilliant and imposing appearance. What a change in less than two days. I then went back to the wharf to meet the boat which brought Captain S who arrived in the steam boat about three OClock—the President sent his carriage down to the wharf and invited him and insisted indeed on his coming to his house. The captain absolutely declined this invitation to go to the White House and being unable to walk was carried to the presidents Carriage which took him to Gadsbys hotel where he usually stays while in Washington—after assisting to carry him up to his room I went to the hospital at the Navy Yard in a carriage at his request to see how the poor wounded sailors and Marines were. I found them all as comfortable and doing as well as could be expected. Standing by the bed of the poor fellow who had both legs broken—and who was apparently about 30 years old—I remarked he had met with a great misfortune—his eyes filled with tears as he took my hand to bid me farewell and he said with deep emotion—“Great as it is I have great reason to thank God I was not instantly killed and I am likely to get well without having my legs taken off by the Doctors because I have a wife and four small children in Philadelphia who are entirely dependent on me for support and I do not know what would have become of them. I did not get back to Washington till near 10 OClock.

The senate and house of Representatives met the day after the accident and immediately adjourned over till the next second day—till which time it seemed as if a general gloom was suspended over the Metropolis—the presidents servant was buried by the coloured persons—and his relations—the next day after the accident. The others were all put in leaden coffins which were placed in the mahogany ones which had been made large on that account the leaden coffins were all soldered tight with a pane of glass which was also soldered in the leaden coffin fitted directly over the face so that as the

mahogany coffin was open the spectator could see the face of the deceased by looking through the pane of glass in the leaden coffin there winding sheet not being folded over the face—the top of the leaden coffin was covered with a piece of black satin inside of the mahogany. Virgil Maxcy being a native of Maryland his remains were taken from the presidents house by his friends and removed to his home where it was buried.

The funeral of the others took place on seventh day morning I believe I sent a paper containing an account of the arrangements which I would like thee to take care of by cutting the description out and putting it with this letter.

The members of congress met at the Capitol at 10 OClock A. M. the sergeant at arms had procured a large quantity of crape at the expense of the government and as each member came in the hall the sergeant cut a piece off and tied it round the left arm of the member after which the members took their seats at half past 10 by the clock in the hall the speaker<sup>23</sup> took his seat and called the house to order in the usual manner every member except five or six having crape on. Never have I seen so much gloom and solemnity in the hall. The speaker then wearing a white scarf rose and announced in an impressive tone the occasion for which the members were called together. Viz. to proceed in carriages prepared at the expense of the government to attend the funeral from the presidents house in a body. after which the members walked two and two down to the yard in front of the Capitol where they took seats in the carriage as they drove up and proceeded to the presidents house which is about a mile and a half from the Capitol. On arriving at the square in front of the presidents a vast concourse of the military both of Cavalry and Infantry were drawn up in columns to receive the members—all the military being in their military dresses and the officers in full uniform. some with Epaulettes glittering like burnished gold others with the brightness of polished silver but all covered with black crape of only one thickness however stiched over them—the marshals general on horseback with large white linen scarfs. When

<sup>23</sup> John Winston Jones (November 22, 1791-January 29, 1848). Of Virginia. Concerning his election as Speaker, John Quincy Adams, in his *Memoirs*, Vols. XI and XII *passim*, has much to say.



we arrived at the presidents house we found the doors and windows hung in black crape as were also the doors and windows of the Navy Department and Department of state and also the houses of many private citizens in the city.

On the carriages stoping under the piazza in front the members got out and walked two and two through the hall and took the seats prepared for them between the coffins and the south end of the room. The president heads of department foreign ministers etc. occupied the seats in the north end of the room while the Clergy in their black silk gowns and white scarfs sat at the feet of the Coffins with relatives and near friends of the deceased. Though the East room is very large 80 feet long by 44 wide ceiling 22 feet high) it was filled with the persons I have mentioned while the hall and other rooms in the presidents house were filled to overflowing with private citizens.

The large chandeliers in the East room were hung in black crape—and the large mirrors were covered. The coffins of the secretary of State—Secretary of the Navy Captain Kennon and David Gardner were arranged in the order I have named them—the secretary of state being to the south or right as we entered—they were all closed and were placed directly in front of the door (Maxcy having been taken home by his friends in Maryland the day before). The coffins of the secretary of state and David Gardner were each covered entirely with a rich black velvet pall laid over them—while those of the secretary of the Navy and Captain Kennon which were the two middle ones—were each entirely covered with the American Flag laid over them and in addition to that Kennons had his military coat spread over his with the epaulettes to indicate his rank and his military cap set on the coat directly over the upper joint of the coffin where the hinges are with his two swords sheathed crossed on the top of the coffin just over his breast. In addition to these each coffin had a wreath of evergreens and flowers twined together laid on the top about halfway between the shoulders and foot. The episcopalian minister preached a sermon on the occasion and the two chaplains performed the burial service at the house during which time the silent tear stood in many an eye from the presidents down to the private citizen. All appeared to be deeply impressed with the solemn scene before them and I could not but reflect how changed was the appearance from

the pleasant gaiety of the company assembled in that very room at the levee only the evening before the accident when I met all of the deceased with their friends and nearly all the members and company there assembled and many others assembled round the president to pay him their respects as chief Magistrate of the Nation and to share and partake of his hospitality while the magnificent Chandeliers now shrouded in crape sent forth their resplendent lights which were reflected by the large mirrors now concealed from the view—the light hearted and happy who had mingled in the waltz and the dance now sitting in the same hall in silence and sadness—and the music of the band was exchanged for the sermon and prayer of the minister and the sighs and tears of mourners and relatives. The funeral moved from the house about 12 O'Clock—the five hearses each drawn by a pair of beautiful jet black horses. Virgil Maxcys body having been taken home to his friends the day before the hearse intended for him though empty went in the procession and as soon as the funeral moved minute guns were fired one every minute at the Navy yard and another every minute from the area in front of the capitol making two guns each minute until the funeral reached the congressional burying ground which is about two miles from the Capitol by which it passed and about three miles and a half from the presidents house from which it started. An immense number of the military not only from Washington Georgetown Alexandria and Baltimore but also from the neighbouring parts of Maryland and Virginia had assembled in their regimentals and with slow and measured steps joined in the procession having their bright arms all reversed as is customary on such occasions—the officers with their epaulettes shrouded in crape and with the marshalls with white scarff all mounted on elegant horses and the long line of carriages extending [*sic.*] a full mile in length rendered the whole an imposing and impressive spectacle—the cloudy and gloomy state of the weather—the sounds of the minute guns including the roar of the canon at the Navy yard like the muttering of distant thunder—the reports of the artillery near the Capitol—the mournful tones of the muffled drum—the sad but sweet and plaintive notes of the band as it performed the funeral dirge in the procession from the presidents to the burying ground as the whole moved along with the military precision and accuracy of Clock-

work with measured step and slow. All seemed to combine to render the scene awfully and deeply solemn impressive and instructive. When the funeral arrived at the burying ground—the Military formed again to receive it—the bodies were placed in the large congressional Vault the band chanted a requiem—the Military fired a volley over the Vault and the large assemblage quietly and thoughtfully retired to their several homes—many doubtless thinking over in their minds the events of the last four days which they can probably witness but once in a lifetime and upon the reflection of which the head should be made wiser and the heart be made better. The persons who were Slain by the accident were all in the prime of life. They enjoyed to the fullest extent the confidence of their fellow citizens—and occupied high official stations and through the mysterious dispensation of Providence they seemed to be singled out from amongst the large assemblage like the towering oak of the forest to be struck down and cut to pieces as with the lightning's blast in the possession of high temporal honours while the poor sailors and marines like the shrub of the valley though bruized and injured by it were spared to finish out the measure of the existence allotted by their Creator to the human family<sup>24</sup>

Such is a brief but tolerably full outline of the Princeton and the Melancholy occurrence on the 28th. It may seem to some persons that I have related some remarks and occurrences of a trifling nature which ought not to have been included in an account of such an awful nature. My only reply is that I have endeavoured to give a true account of things just as they occurred—of the gay as well as the sad. . . . I was not at all conscious of having been struck by anything at the time as I was not sensible of the slightest injury—but the day but one after the accident I was changing my shirt and noticed a small black and blue spot about the size of a quarter dollar on the inside of my right arm about halfway between the palm of my hand and my elbow which I was entirely at a loss to account for but on putting on my coat and looking

<sup>24</sup> Of the news of the disaster, the proceedings in the House and Senate, and the funeral services, John Quincy Adams, who had declined an invitation for the excursion of the 28th, has an account in his *Memoirs*, Vol. XI, pp. 521-525. The gun called in other sources the "Oregon," Adams speaks of as the "Orator." In S. C. Busey's *Pictures of the City of Washington in the Past* (Washington, 1898), a lugubrious series of accounts of funeral processions describes (pp. 277-280) that of March 2, 1844.

at the sleeve I noticed a small hole through the cloth only and upon searching I found a small piece of the gun not larger than a small pea had struck me on the arm gone through the cloth and lodged between the cloth and lining of my coat which had caused the bruise on my arm. I wrapped the piece of iron up in a newspaper and sent it to Joe Platt. Captain Stockton had two pieces rather larger blown entirely in the fleshy part of leg and Jno. A Perrine clerk of the Princeton one about the same size blown into the fleshy part of his left arm

Captain S. was not out of his room for a week or ten days after the occurrence. I was in the practice of calling in to see him every day his mental suffering was extreme.<sup>25</sup>

Governor Gilmers brother had given out invitations to large party at his house in Virginia to be held the night after the occurrence at which a great many of the friends relatives and neighbours were collected. The news of the death of his brother reached him in a letter about 9 OClock just as the company were about sitting down to supper and of course all left immediately on hearing of the event and without sitting down to supper. This brother left next morning for Washington—to take the widow and children home to Virginia which he did on the 6th instant—the day before he left I received a message from him "saying that though a stranger entirely to Captain S. he would like to

<sup>25</sup> On May 15, 1844, there was read and laid upon the table, with the order that two thousand copies be printed, a report presented by Mr. Parmenter from the Committee on Naval Affairs. With the Committee's report were included several other documents, among them the findings of a court of inquiry held in March. Here one finds the testimony of various officers and men concerning the details of the gun and its discharge. Stockton himself was unable to appear before the court and was represented by John R. Thomson of New Jersey. From these documents it appears that Stockton, with F. B. Ogden, William Young and Captain Ericsson, was in England in 1839. Upon Stockton's order, Ogden procured from the Mersey Works in England a gun which was afterwards found to be badly cracked. But this defect was cured by shrinking three and a half inch bands on the after part of the gun; when it was fired forty-four times in one day. This was not the "Peacemaker," but the gun called the "Oregon." The "Peacemaker" was of New York manufacture and Stockton had "proved" it at New York, January 15, 1844. It appears also from these papers that on March 14, Tyler, undeterred by the disaster, had ordered the Secretary of the Navy to proceed to the construction of another gun of the same type.

The Committee pointed out that these guns had been purchased by Captain Stockton without any express order from the Navy Department, and commented on the irregularity of this method of procedure, particularly from the standpoint of financial responsibility. (28 Cong., 1 Sess.; H.R., Report No. 479, May 15, 1844.)

see him before he returned to Virginia. I immediately went round to see the captain and apprise him of the message requesting the messenger to wait until my return. The captain said it would be a satisfaction to see him—which I informed him of by message. Accordingly he called that very afternoon at the Exchange for me to accompany him and introduce him to the captain. The scene at the introduction was truly affecting—both of them though apparently men of almost iron nerve were deeply affected Stockton though unable to leave his bed by which the brother of the deceased had taken his seat they sat sometime without speaking but after a short interval the brother remarked that though a stranger to Captain S he felt it his duty to call on him while in Washington and say to him that though the friends of Gov Gilmer mourned over his loss greatly yet they sympathized with Captain S for his anguish of mind on the occasion and though they deeply lamented the accident which deprived the Gov of his life—they did not censure Captain S. for it but regarded it as a calamity which no human foresight could prevent—he spoke with great emotion. The friends of the other persons killed afterwards called on Captain S and expressed the same opinions. The friends of Gov Gilmer removed the body from the vault on the 7th instant to the steamboat and proceeded with it to Charlottesville in Virginia where his relatives are buried. On opening the mahogany coffin his countenance as seen through the glass over his face in the leaden coffin appeared perfectly natural and without the least change or smell

Several of the friends of the deceased amongst whom were Isaac S. Tinsley the Chaplain of Congress—accompanied his remains to his home. The chaplain wishing to spend a few days in Virginia did not return to Washington till the day before yesterday. I met him in the house this morning when he told me that upon their arrival in Richmond a committee met them at the boat and the body was taken to the Statehouse and placed upon the table in front of the Governors chair which the deceased formerly occupied—where it remained all night—the next morning it was estimated there were between 5 thousand and 8 thousand persons collected in Richmond to see him—when the Mahogany coffin was opened again to let his friends see him which they could do through the light of glass over his face in the leaden coffin.

In the afternoon his remains were taken home and buried in the churchyard near there. The accident occurred on the fourth day of the week. Robt Tylers wife—or Mrs Robert Tyler as she is generally called here—had sent invitations to a private party she was to give at the presidents house on the evening of the sixth day following. The secretary of War Post Master General and many others had also sent invitations to parties on different evenings for nearly two weeks after the accident but of course all were suspended immediately after—and there has been no party of pleasure in Washington since the dreadful occurrence

In my letter to Tanton I mentioned I would write next day but had not time being the whole day among the dead and wounded

My health continues very good. Captain S left here several days since in the Princeton much better but not entirely well. Although I commenced my letter on the 5th instant it is now the 20th I fear in endeavouring to give a full account I have made it unreasonably long and prosy. . . .

Thy brother affectionately,  
Geo Sykes

To Ann Sykes

Write soon . . . The mail is about Closing. I have not time to look over all I have written—therefore wish thee to excuse mistakes—and omissions