

Abraham Lincoln papers

From Ira P. Rankin to Abraham Lincoln, June 30, 1863

Personal and confidential

San Francisco June 30. 1863

Sir.

On the first day of the present month I relinquished the position of Collector of this port which I received by your favor two years before, to the Hon F. F. Low¹ appointed by you as my successor

¹ ID: Frederick F. Low, a California merchant, banker and politician, served as a Republican in the U. S. House of Representatives (1862-63). After the expiration of his term in Congress, Low was appointed to replace Ira P. Rankin as the collector of customs at San Francisco. Low held this office for only a few months and resigned in order to become governor in December, 1863. Low served a single four year term as governor and was appointed minister to China in 1869.

I have hesitated about saying anything to you on the subject, but have concluded that I should not do justice to my own feelings should I omit to do so. The fact that you appointed me to so responsible a position proves that at the time of the appointment I had your confidence: I am not willing by my silence to leave room for the impression on your mind that in my own judgment I have done anything to forfeit it.

On the contrary I retire from office certainly not without regret, which in view of the manner of my leaving would be impossible, but without self reproach.

I have to the best of my ability, and I know with diligence and integrity performed the duties of my position. Whatever may be the case hereafter the Govt (I speak with confidence from what I know of the former course of business) has never before been so well served in this office. What I believed to be a true economy in expenditures has been observed so far as matters came under my authority; good & faithful men have been appointed to place; frauds to a large extent which had escaped detection for years have been discovered and broken up, and nearly a quarter million dollars worth of merchandise involved in them seized and confiscated; and outside of the specific duties of my place as Collector I have to the best of my ability filled that somewhat representative position which as a leading officer of the general government the Collector of this distant port is

considered to occupy. I do not for a moment question that with the light you had you acted in my removal with sole reference to your public duty, and what you believed to be the good of the service, and therefore I submit without complaint.

You will permit me however to say that in my judgment as in that of all honorable and disinterested men here without an exception — which I ever heard of, the manner in which the affairs of the Custom House were investigated and reported upon was an outrage upon the simplest principles of justice, and one than which, if generally pursued with public officers, nothing would tend more directly to bring the government into disrepute.

The examination made by the Special Agent of the Treasury² was Entirely ex-parte. I was neither present nor represented. I never saw a word of the testimony given by perhaps 100 witnesses with one single exception. Matters which I explained are left unexplained in the Agents report. Other matters are unfavorably reported upon, in regard to which seeing that the Agent had wrong impressions, I desired him to call certain witnesses believing they would disabuse his mind, but my request was in no case complied with. I have most conclusive evidence that long before Mr Brown left this City he had selected my successor, who as a matter of fact I understand came very near being appointed instead of Mr Low.

2 Thomas Brown was the special agent of the Treasury Department who investigated the San Francisco customs house in 1862-63.

My case was most manifestly prejudged, as was noticed and remarked upon by many of my friends during the progress of the investigation. The whole thing was conducted with the most monstrous unfairness. In addition to what I have already intimated as to its character, the Agent selected to aid him as his legal adviser a Mr Merrill known by him to be bitterly hostile to me, and to be an applicant for the place I was filling — actually to my certain knowledge applying for influence to aid his aspirations during the very time he was acting in the above capacity

I do not hesitate to say that no officer of the government in any of its departments could expect to come out blameless from an investigation so conducted.

I know the substance of Mr Browns report, upon which I suppose my removal was decided upon, and I declare it to be in some of its most important parts absolutely and specifically false, while I declare it as a whole to be so framed as to be substantially false in its intent and Effect.

Yet I beg to assure you, that though I feel I have been wronged when a conspiracy of a years growth started and fed here and fanned at Washington, has culminated in my removal from office, my

private griefs are of little consequence, and will in no way affect my disposition to do everything in my power towards sustaining the government and your Administration

As a private individual, I can perhaps more calmly and disinterestedly admire the earnestness, wisdom and unquestioned patriotism with which you have met great difficulties and great crises, and so far as the Executive is concerned, navigated the ship of state amidst a sea of troubles. The sympathies of all good and patriotic men on this coast are with you, and will be to the end.

Mr Low, who would I don't doubt, have made a very acceptable Collector, you will probably have been advised before this reaches you, has been nominated as our Candidate for Governor. I hear the names of numbers of persons as candidates for the Collectorship.

Permit me as a private citizen, whose opinion however upon public men in this state, I claim to be as good as that of any other man, to refer to two or three of them, among many. Mr Phelps³ our late Congressman is named. While I don't think he would make any better Collector than you have had for the past two years, he is a respectable man, reasonably popular, and would I presume make a satisfactory officer. Annis Merrill is a lawyer, cold selfish and thoroughly unpopular. D. W. Cheesman (Assistant Treasurer) is also a candidate. In my judgment it would not be easy to find a more unsuitable man, having reference to his notorious want of business capacity, his manners, character, and his standing both in the community at large and in the party.

The Collector of this port is brought into contact not only with his own subordinates, and the persons ordinarily doing business at the Custom House, but with Foreign consuls, distinguished strangers, and with other officers of the government both civil and military upon numerous matters of consultation and advice, and for the credit of the administration it is of great importance that the man holding the position should be thoroughly competent and suitable to fill it.

3 Timothy G. Phelps was a Republican member of the Thirty-seventh Congress (1861-63) from California.

Begging you to excuse me for troubling you at such length, I remain always

With great respect

Your most obt Svt

Ira P. Rankin