

THE DOMESTIC FINANCES OF SECRETARY OF WAR W. W. BELKNAP

By Philip D. Jordan*

When General William Worth Belknap was sworn in as President Grant's Secretary of War on November 1, 1869, he was an Iowan of property and distinction.¹ There was then little, if anything, in his personal or public life to indicate that he was destined to be a central figure in the widespread corruption of the Grant administration.²

On March 2, 1876, at 10:20 in the morning, when a distraught Belknap handed his resignation to President Grant, one of the worst scandals of the administration broke over Washington and the nation. Later that same day the House voted articles of impeachment against the Secretary for "high crimes and misdemeanors while in office," the charges being that over the past six years Belknap had accepted some \$20,000 from Caleb P. Marsh, in return for Marsh's appointment to the post tradership at Fort Sill. Marsh had testified before the House Committee on Expenditures in the War Department that he had made an agreement with Mrs. Belknap, a few months before her death in 1870, and that payments had been made annually, first to her and following her death to the Secretary.³ Apologists for Belknap tried to prove that he had thought the money came from the estate of his wife's sister, Mrs. Bower, whom he had married in 1873.⁴ The Secretary's resignation left some doubt as to the jurisdiction of the Congress, and the impeachment trial, which was held before the Senate in July, acquitted him, "less than two-thirds of the Senators present voting guilty."⁵ Those who voted against impeachment explained that they had done so not on the

*Philip D. Jordan is professor of history at the University of Minnesota, Minneapolis.

¹ *Appleton's Cyclopaedia of American Biography*, 1:225; *Dictionary of American Biography*, 2:147-8.

² For an excellent short account of the impeachment, see James F. Rhodes, *History of the United States, 1850-1877* (7 vols., New York, 1910), 7:189-91.

³ *House Report No. 186*, 44 Cong., 1 Sess., March 2, 1876.

⁴ *Des Moines Register*, March 10, 1876.

⁵ *House Report No. 791*, 44 Cong., 1 Sess., Aug. 2, 1876.

question of his guilt but in the belief that they had no power to impeach a government official who had resigned.

It has been said that Belknap's love of fine living was a contributing cause of his impeachment and resignation from office on March 2, 1876.⁶ This charge may be true, but it is most difficult to prove. However, there is little doubt that the Belknaps lived handsomely during their Washington years, perhaps enjoying a somewhat higher standard than befitted a Cabinet member.

Immediately after the news of the impeachment, stories began to appear detailing the style of living of the Belknaps. Much attention was given to the wardrobe and jewels of Mrs. Belknap.

Her wardrobe was said to be the richest in the city, and every dress made by Worth in Paris. She had hats and boots and jewels to match every toilet. Her feet are her pride, and the envy of her lady friends. Although of more than the ordinary height of women — being five feet six inches tall — she wore one-and-a-half boots. Every boot and slipper she wore came from Paris. . . . The jewels Mrs. Belknap most frequently wears consist of a string of large pearls around her neck, with a beautiful pendant of diamonds. Her earrings are two solitaire drops for each ear. An aigrette of diamonds is the only ornament she ever wears on her shapely head, amid the puffs of dark hair that are always arranged to suit the contour of the handsome face. . . .⁷

In spite of these stories, it can be shown that the Secretary's household expenses were annually less than his salary. In other words, Belknap was living within his income. Such a statement, of course, does not imply that he was unwilling to receive monies which stemmed from other sources or that he did not accept them.

Naturally, when the scandal broke, there was much talk about how the Secretary and his wife could live and entertain so splendidly. A story from Washington claimed:

A great deal has been said about the ex-Secretary being forced to obtain money surreptitiously in order to maintain his extravagant style of living. He has kept a strict account of his expenses during his housekeeping experience, now extending over about three years, and his books and bills show that month by month, with

⁶ Cyrenus Cole, *Iowa Through the Years* (Iowa City, 1940), 346-7.

⁷ *Des Moines Register*, March 10, 17, 1876.

one and possibly two exceptions, his expenditures were less than his salary as Secretary. His house rent, for example, is only \$1,500, and has never been more than \$2,000. These facts will serve to indicate the probable defense in the approaching trial, and to show that the popular judgment in the case has been at least in some respects a hasty one.⁸

Belknap was born in Newburg, New York, September 22, 1829, received the usual common school education, and was tutored in law by H. Caperton of Georgetown, D. C., after being graduated from the College of New Jersey at Princeton in the class of 1848.⁹ The handsome young man emigrated to Keokuk in 1851 to hang out his shingle and, within a few years, to be elected to the state legislature as a Democrat. He found Keokuk a charmingly sleepy, but thriving, village on the Mississippi and loved the community until the day of his death in October, 1890.¹⁰

In one of his first letters from Iowa, Belknap spoke of the "State of my adoption," and painted a pen picture of his combined office and living quarters. "A blazing fire of crackling hickory adds its enchantment to the room and while the musty and dust covered law books serve to give a professional aspect to affairs all disagreeable feelings are counteracted by the air of bachelor like coziness."¹¹ When business carried him along the Des Moines, he saw a most beautiful countryside. His pleasure, when he took rooms at the Galt House in Farmington, was somewhat marred by bedbugs. Keokuk, however, was a "right good" place to stay, for the weather was delightful, the town healthful, and business brisk.¹²

The Civil War interrupted Belknap's law practice, and like many another Hawkeye youth, he turned to soldiering. He was mustered in on December 7, 1861, as a major in the Fifteenth Iowa Volunteer Infantry, served at Shiloh and Vicksburg, marched with Sherman to the sea, and was honorably discharged on August 24, 1865, with the rank of brevet major general.¹³ His war letters reveal a competent officer who nevertheless was not

⁸ *Ibid.*, Apr. 21, 1876.

⁹ Mrs. William G. Belknap to Belknap, May 12, July 9, 1851, *W. W. Belknap Papers*. (These family papers are temporarily in the possession of the author.)

¹⁰ *New York Tribune*, Oct. 17, 1890; *Washington Evening Star*, Oct. 13, 1890.

¹¹ Belknap to his sister, Clara Belknap, Oct. 28, 1851, *Belknap Papers*.

¹² Belknap to Clara Belknap, Aug. 31, 1852, *ibid.*

¹³ For Belknap's war services and the record of the Fifteenth Iowa Volunteer Infantry, see Francis B. Heitman, *Historical Register and Dictionary of the United States Army* (Washington, 1904), 1:207; Lurton D. Ingersoll, *Iowa and the Rebellion*

insensitive to army mismanagement. "On duty I strive to do what is expected of me," Belknap wrote from the vicinity of Vicksburg, "and I know that since I have been in the service I have tried to do the work assigned me, as it should be done, and yet often when posting pickets, or visiting the front or when engaged in something, which ought to have my individual attention I catch myself thinking of home. . . ." He spoke also of corruption and cowardice in the service and of the "unpatrotic conduct of many men whom the people of the country regard as fine and perfect. . . ." ¹⁴ He was bitter toward those who remained at home, speculating in cotton, abusing men of different opinion, "praising up the everlasting nigger," and worshipping the memory of John Brown.

The war years could not last forever. A more mature Belknap returned to Keokuk to resume his law practice and to take a greater interest in the Republican party, which he had joined. Before the close of 1865 he was appointed collector of internal revenue with headquarters in Keokuk. A salary of about \$125 plus commissions frequently brought him a monthly income of more than \$500.¹⁵ This, together with law fees, made him one of Keokuk's most prosperous citizens. Belknap invested his capital cannily, so that when he was appointed Secretary of War he possessed sound securities and real estate holdings.

In addition to his Keokuk residence, with an assessor's evaluation of \$3,700, Belknap owned a half of a city lot, an interest in thirty-two acres near the city, a two-thirds share in a thirty-five-acre farm, and held complete title to a two-and-a-half-acre tract. A lot in Keokuk's Estes addition was valued at \$60. He thought his personal property, including household goods and furniture, was worth \$1,500. There were also land holdings in Texas, which his father, General William Goldsmith Belknap, had acquired while serving in the army prior to the Mexican War. Belknap reckoned his total property at \$13,760.¹⁶ His second wife, Carrie Tomlinson Belknap, also owned some property.

(Philadelphia, 1866), 246-68; A. A. Stuart, *Iowa Colonels and Regiments* (Des Moines, 1865), 289-94; Jacob A. Swisher, *Iowa in Times of War* (Iowa City, 1943), 134, 135, 180; W. W. Belknap (ed.), *History of the Fifteenth Regiment, Iowa Veteran Volunteer Infantry* (Keokuk, 1887); Mildred Throne (ed.), *The Civil War Diary of Cyrus F. Boyd, Fifteenth Iowa Infantry, 1861-1863* (Iowa City, 1953).

¹⁴ Belknap to Clara Belknap, Feb. 7, 1863, *Belknap Papers*.

¹⁵ Salary receipt, Collector's Office, First District, Keokuk, June 12, 1869, *ibid.*

¹⁶ Holographic penciled memo, undated, but headed: "W. W. B. became Secretary of War on Nov. 1, 1869. At that time he owned the following property." Some of

The Belknaps first took up residence at the Seward House in Washington, where they remained from the day that Belknap took the oath as Secretary of War until they found more comfortable quarters in the Kennedy House. They later moved to the Wilkes House, where they were able to do light housekeeping. On April 26, 1872, the then widowed Secretary moved to the Arlington. His rent from November 1, 1869, to April 26, 1872, amounted to \$10,501.76, and extra entertainment amounted to \$925, making a total expenditure for the two years and six months of \$11,426.76. Belknap's salary for the same time was \$19,723.39. Board and room at these hotels averaged about \$300 a month.

Belknap remained at the Arlington until December 1, 1873, a stay of one year and seven months. His total room and board for this period was \$6,506.25, and special entertainment came to \$612.¹⁷ The Secretary did most of his important entertaining at a restaurant owned by J. P. Crutchet, who was noted for his superior food and liquors. Between January 30, 1872, and February 22, 1876, Belknap entertained here some thirty times at a total cost of \$2,097.50. On the first date his guests were residents of Iowa, and the supper charge was \$150. In February, 1872, he paid \$225 for a supper party in honor of Princeton graduates. On March 16, 1875, a dinner for fourteen came to \$91. Early in 1876, a small group of intimate friends was served ham, boned turkey, pickled oysters, and sandwiches for \$33.¹⁸

Carrie Tomlinson Belknap died on December 27, 1870. In 1873 the Secretary married his late wife's sister, Mrs. John Bower. The new Mrs. Belknap was anxious for a home of her own and, during the fall of 1873, rented a residence at 2022 G Street. A roomy house four stories high, it had at least three bedrooms, two parlors, a library, a dining room, and several long halls. As wall-to-wall carpeting was then in vogue, Mrs. Bel-

the Texas lands were acquired in 1836, when General William G. Belknap was stationed at Fort Jessup in Louisiana. He, with one or two others, became the owner of a league of land in Sabine County. Additional land was acquired in Jasper County. John F. Hankle to W. W. Belknap, Nov. 12, 1880; John H. Broocks to Anna Belknap, Nov. 6, 1890; Purchase agreement between W. G. Belknap and others, Parish of Natchitoches, Louisiana, March 4, 1837; Statement of Settlement, Belknap and Walker Heirs, Morris Tract, Sabine County, Texas, New York, March 17, 1914, *ibid.*

¹⁷ Penciled resume by Belknap of expenses in various hotels, drawn up July 17, 1876, *ibid.*

¹⁸ J. P. Crutchet's receipted bill, Jan. 30, 1872-Feb. 22, 1876, in the amount of \$2,097.50, *ibid.* On the reverse are inventories of four smaller dinners.

knap ordered that all floors be covered. The best quality Brussels was used for most of the rooms. An Aubusson carpet was selected for the parlor at a cost of \$450, and a Smyrna carpet was chosen at \$225 for the library. She also ordered fourteen hassocks to be specially manufactured at a cost of \$15. The total bill for carpeting, pads, stair carpets, and laying amounted to \$1,198.96. This statement was dated November 14, 1873, and was paid on February 9, 1874.¹⁹

The Belknaps moved into their new home on December 1, 1873, but there was much to do before the place was fit to entertain guests. A china dinner service for twelve persons was purchased for \$50, wallpaper came to \$102.97, ornaments and ceiling molding amounted to \$32.30, a large gilt frame cost \$25, and a piano was purchased in New York for \$600. Later in the year, Mrs. Belknap ordered a coachman's livery at \$55.²⁰

There is no doubt but that the Belknaps were determined to live as befitted Cabinet members. Their monthly household expenses averaged around \$400, depending upon the season of the year and the amount of entertaining they did. November, 1874, may be considered a typical month. Belknap kept careful accounts during his entire stay in Washington, and his entries, together with receipted bills, show that during November he spent the following:²¹

Gas	16.50
Milk	9.51
Subsistence Dept., U. S. Army	41.15
Servants	62.00
Washing	25.00
Oysters	7.00
Fuel	74.75
Park and Tilford (groceries)	7.03
Marketing	28.85
Butter	70.20

¹⁹ Invoice of W. and J. Sloane, Carpet and Floor Cloth Warehouse, 649 Broadway, New York, *ibid.*

²⁰ Invoices of Nicol Davidson & Co., 686 Broadway, New York, Dec. 27, 1873; G. C. Shaw, paperhanger, Washington, Jan. 1, 1874; John Alexander, upholsterer and paperhanger, Pennsylvania Avenue between 12th and 13th streets, Washington, April 8, 1874; Thomas A. Wilmurt, 54 East 13th Street, New York, Feb. 28, 1874; F. G. Smith & Co., 427 Broome St., New York, Jan. 9, 1874, *ibid.* The retail price of the piano was \$1,000, but Belknap was given a reduction of \$400.

²¹ The expenditure for wine was above average during November, but this probably was due to the approaching holiday season.

Ice	7.18
Rent	167.00
Wine	239.54
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	755.71

The Subsistence Department of the Army stocked 106 different items, ranging from allspice, beef, corn meal, and lemon crackers through molasses, pickled onions, pork, and raspberry jam, to rice, saleratus, sugar, tea, and Worcestershire Sauce. Belknap could, if he wished, place special orders for goods not stocked regularly. He availed himself of this privilege frequently, ordering sweetbreads, kidneys, buckwheat, codfish, mock turtle soup, and oatmeal. The family must have been especially fond of fresh beef, for month after month beef stood high on his account from the Subsistence Department. Thus, in May, 1874, 53 pounds, at sixteen cents a pound, were delivered; in June, 40 pounds; in July, 12 pounds; in August, 11½ pounds; in September, 27 pounds; in October, 104 pounds; in November, 94 pounds; in December, 127½ pounds. During the first quarter of 1875, there were 198 pounds of fresh beef delivered to the home on G Street. In addition, ham, veal, and fresh pork were ordered in quantity. Belknap never ordered less than \$18 worth of merchandise from the Subsistence Department, and his highest bill seems to have been \$60.63.²²

This statement, covering the month of January, 1875, is interesting, not only because it reveals the price of groceries, but also because it indicates what seem to be unusually large purchases:²³

13½ lbs. bacon	13¼ cents	1.79
82 rations of soft bread	4.1 "	3.36
55 lbs. fresh beef	17 "	9.35
3 lbs. factory cheese	17 "	.51
4½ lbs. chocolate	61 "	2.74
16 lbs. roasted Java coffee	40 "	6.40
45 lbs. family flour	4 "	1.80
33 lbs. ham	14.2 "	4.68
10 lbs. lard	15 "	1.50

²² Receipted inventories from the Subsistence Department, United States Army, for the months listed. This department should not be confused with the Quartermaster's Department. For a brief sketch of the Subsistence Department, see Thomas H. S. Hamersly (comp. and ed.), *Complete Regular Army Register of the United States* (Washington, 1880), Pt. 2, pp. 340-43.

²³ Receipted inventory, Subsistence Department, Jan. 31, 1875, *Belknap Papers*.

6 cans string beans	36	"	2.16
5 lbs. macaroni	14	"	.70
2 cans ground mustard	12	"	.24
4 bottles of olive oil	47	"	1.88
6 cans of French peas	34	"	2.04
14 lbs. salt	1½	"	.21
1 box of salt	9	"	.09
110 lbs. laundry soap	5½	"	6.05
6 boxes of large sardines	27	"	1.62
15 lbs. of brown sugar	10.2	"	1.53
10 lbs. cut loaf sugar	12	"	1.20
8 lbs. granulated sugar	11.2	"	.89
1½ lbs. of black tea	1.20		1.80
1½ lbs. green tea	1.00		1.50
18 cans of tomatoes	13	"	2.34
1 gal. cider vinegar	25	"	.25
6 cans yeast powder	12	"	.72
14 lbs. shin [bones]	8	"	1.12
2 doz. eggs	35	"	.70
12½ lbs. buckwheat	4.8	"	.60
6¾ lbs. codfish	8	"	.54
1 broom	32	"	.32
			\$60.63

Staples such as these were supplemented, of course, with a variety of other foods. During garden months, when fresh vegetables were in season, the purchases for marketing amounted to as much as \$87.19 a month. Bakery goods — dinner rolls, cakes, pies, Boston brown bread — came from at least two of Washington's best bakeries. Ice creams and cake were procured from Ida M. Demonet, 1714 Pennsylvania Avenue. Her bill for January, 1874, amounted to \$12.25. The Secretary generally purchased whisky, wines, and Bass Pale Ale from Thomas Russell at the Sign of the Golden Eagle on Pennsylvania Avenue. His statement from Russell for March, 1875, amounted to \$80.63. Thomas Bolden, whose statements carry no printing and give no address, furnished an astounding amount of oysters. During March, 1875, for example, the Belknaps received twenty-eight quarts, fourteen pints, and three dozen, at a total cost of \$11.33.²⁴

²⁴ Receipted inventories of the following accounts: Wm. F. Hunt, market produce, July 3, 1876, \$7.19; F. Desfosse, French and American Baker, 806 Nineteenth Street, March 8, 1875, \$2.00; George S. Krafft, Baker and Confectioner, 1746 Pennsylvania Ave., June 30, 1876, \$6.00; Ida M. Demonet, French Confectionery, 1714 Pennsylvania,

In addition to viands purchased in Washington, Belknap regularly ordered large quantities of butter from Vermont and Pennsylvania and had wine shipped from Philadelphia. Such household items as pressing irons and lamps came from New York. Now and again, Park and Tilford shipped from New York superior quality peaches and cherries.²⁵

The Belknaps gave up their G Street home after the impeachment, having lived there two years and three months. During this period their rent amounted to \$3,922, their household expenses to \$7,499.34, and their entertainment to \$2,674.14, making a grand total of \$14,095.48. Belknap's salary for the same time was \$18,308.20. The difference between the total salary and the total household expense was \$4,212.72. Belknap reckoned that the entire salary which he had received from the time he was sworn in on November 1, 1869, until he resigned on March 2, 1876, was \$52,187.15, and that his total household expenses were \$32,640.49. The difference between these two figures was \$19,546.66.²⁶ It must be remembered, however, that Belknap did not include the expenses for clothes for himself and family, nor did he take into account other purchases which were not applicable to his household. No mention, for example, was made of transportation, taxes, physician's fees, purchases for individual and personal use, or gifts and presents. Belknap calculated that his average salary was \$686 a month, that his average household expense was \$430, and that the average monthly excess of salary over household expense was \$256. This was a narrow margin indeed when Belknap's total scale of living is considered and when one remembers that such additional items of expense as suggested above were not included in his computations.

That Belknap himself was disturbed by money matters after he resigned the secretaryship is perfectly apparent in a letter he wrote his son, Hugh, nineteen days after his retirement. In this pathetic communication, Belknap spoke first of the "malignant attacks of enemies and the bitter personal as-

Jan. 1, 1874, \$12.25; Thomas Russell, 1213 Pennsylvania Ave., \$80.63; Thomas Bolden, oyster merchant, March 1, 1875, \$11.33, *ibid.*

²⁵ Receipted inventories, S. C. Noble, country produce, St. Albans, Vt., Oct. 27, 1874, \$70.20; J. & J. Darlington, country produce, Ivy Mills, Pa., Dec. 29, 1874, \$13.50, and March 30, 1875, \$13.00; Steamer *Geo. H. Stout*, freight from Philadelphia, Nov. 6, 1874, \$15.79; Jones & Hubbell, House-Furnishing and Hardware, 920 Broadway, Aug. 11, 1874, \$4.40; Park & Tilford, fine groceries, 921 Broadway, Oct. 27, 1874, \$7.03, *ibid.*

²⁶ Penciled summary, in Belknap's hand, of total household expenses and total salary, dated July 17, 1876, *ibid.*

saults in newspapers" and insisted that the War Department had been run in an economical manner. He concluded with a discussion of tax payment on lands he owned, saying: "Every cent counts now and may God give me strength to go through the future with success and strength."²⁷

One Iowan has left a description of Secretary Belknap in better days:

In appearance, General Belknap was a pronounced blonde. In person, he was not much above medium height, stout, full-habited, inclined to embonpoint. His face was oval, his cheeks full, his complexion very fair, his blue eyes large and lustrous; his head large, his brow broad, his glossy flaxen hair, soft and wavy; his beard full and luxuriant. It is no exaggeration to say that his whole bearing was noble and Apollo-like.²⁸

After the scandal broke, stories appeared in the newspapers of the changed appearance of the once-handsome Belknap. An army officer reported on a visit to the ex-Secretary:

Words fail to express how this man has aged and suffered during the last few days. His flowing beard was knotted and tangled, his eyes and his sunken cheeks made up a picture of woe and despair that would have touched a heart of stone. . . . He was unmanned. He choked and sobbed several moments. . . .²⁹

After the first shock of the scandal, Belknap recovered his equilibrium and faced the future courageously and conquered it. His friends, who never lost confidence in him even during the mud-slinging days of 1876, lent him strength and hope. Even his enemies, among them some who had jeered and scorned the most, came to respect him. His old comrades of the Fifteenth Iowa stood by him. Toward the close of life, Belknap associated himself with an eastern law firm, busied himself with the Grand Army of the Republic, and maintained a wide correspondence with friends and members of his family. He died in the autumn of 1890, at the age of sixty-one, was given a military funeral, and lies buried in Arlington Cemetery.

²⁷ Belknap to his son, Hugh Belknap, March 21, 1876, *ibid.*

²⁸ Edward H. Stiles, *Recollections and Sketches of Notable Lawyers and Public Men of Iowa* . . . (Des Moines, 1916), 360.

²⁹ *Des Moines Register*, March 17, 1876.