

Senate Statistics

Secretaries of the Senate

John W. Forney (1861-1868)



During the busy, stirring times [of the Civil War era] there was no man at the National Capital more sought after for influence and advice than Colonel Forney. His residence on Capitol Hill was daily thronged by the high and the low, the statesman and the soldier, the beggar and the prince, so that an audience with Colonel Forney was sought for with as much eagerness as one with the highest dignitary connected with the Government. *Obituary, December 11, 1881*

Who was the first Republican Secretary of the Senate? Who is the only Secretary to have previously served as Clerk of the House? Which Secretary conducted an active newspaper publishing business while in office? Which Secretary played major roles in both the Democratic and Republican parties? The answer to all these questions is "John W. Forney." Forney's 1861 to 1868 tenure as Secretary coincided with the darkest chapter in the nation's history, the politically turbulent era of civil war and reconstruction.

Born in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, on September 30, 1817, John Forney left school at age thirteen for a job to supplement his family's meager income. Three years later, he went to work as an apprentice in the printing office of the *Lancaster Journal*. By the time he reached his early twenties, the shrewd and enterprising young man had taken over as the paper's editor and owner. Along the way, he developed close ties to Lancaster's most prominent figure, U.S. Senator [James Buchanan](#). In 1845, soon after Buchanan became Secretary of State in the cabinet of newly elected President [James K. Polk](#), he used his influence to gain Forney a coveted patronage position as surveyor of the port of Philadelphia. For the next quarter century, Forney followed a dual-career pattern, not uncommon in that era, of publishing newspapers while holding government jobs.

When Forney moved to Philadelphia, he sold his Lancaster paper and became editor and owner of the *Philadelphia Pennsylvanian*. When the Democrats lost the presidency in 1848, Forney lost his surveyorship and relocated to Washington, D.C., where he went to work as an editorial writer for the *Washington Daily Union*. In 1851, he succeeded in winning election as Clerk of the House, a congressional position he had long coveted. Several years later, he purchased partial ownership in the *Union*. As Clerk, he used his influence with House leaders to obtain for the *Union* financially rewarding contracts for printing House documents. (Widespread controversy related to awards of printing

patronage led Congress within a few years to establish the Government Printing Office.) In his most visible role as Clerk, Forney presided successfully during a rancorous two-month 1855-1856 House speakership contest.

In 1856, Forney resigned his House position to campaign for James Buchanan's presidential election and his own election to one of Pennsylvania's U.S. Senate seats. After Buchanan won and Forney lost, the publisher asked the new president for a high-profile administration appointment. When political conditions frustrated Buchanan's efforts to accommodate him, Forney moved back to Philadelphia and established a new paper, the *Press*. He soon broke with Buchanan over the president's proslavery policies and the administration's inability to steer lucrative government printing contracts his way. In 1860, as Buchanan's failed policies were leading to southern secession and the breakup of the Democratic party as a significant political force, Forney shifted his political allegiance to the recently established Republican party. He again won election as Clerk of the House.

When [Abraham Lincoln](#) became president in March 1861, he helped Forney gain the necessary votes to become Secretary of the Senate. While settling into his new responsibilities, Forney established the *Washington Sunday Chronicle*. The following year, he agreed to President Lincoln's suggestion that he convert the *Sunday Chronicle* to a daily newspaper. Soon, nearly forty thousand copies of the Chronicle were being distributed to the Army of the Potomac, responding to Lincoln's desire that a proadministration newspaper be available to these troops.

Only a sparse record remains of Forney's activities as Secretary. When not prowling the chamber floor, or perched in his seat at the mahogany desk directly in front of the presiding officer, Forney might have been found in his private office -- the same room (S-219) used by today's Secretary of the Senate. Adjacent suites under Forney's jurisdiction housed the legislative and financial clerks (S-220 and S-221), the executive clerk (S-222), the chief clerk (S-223), and the engrossing clerk (S-224). When the Senate decided in 1867 to create an Appropriations Committee, that committee's chairman took over Secretary Forney's room, sending Forney to S-224, a space that remained the Secretary's private office for the next 120 years.

As Secretary, Forney enjoyed good relations with Tennessee Senator [Andrew Johnson](#). It was to Forney's spacious Capitol Hill lodgings that Johnson had gone on the night of March 3, 1864, for a stag party celebrating his impending swearing-in as vice president. On the morning of March 4, the aftereffects of typhoid fever, the previous evening's party, and three recently consumed drinks of whiskey contributed to Johnson's unsteady and hostile demeanor as Forney guided him into the Senate chamber to take his oath of office and deliver an inaugural address best described as a harangue.

Following Lincoln's assassination, Forney's paper strongly supported President Andrew Johnson. By February 1866, however, when Johnson vetoed the Freedman's Bureau act, Forney joined Republican moderates in declaring the new president's honeymoon with Congress at an end. When a group of Johnson supporters gathered outside the White

House and shouted, "Give it to Forney!" Johnson responded, "I do not waste my ammunition upon dead ducks."

Secretary Forney spared none of his own editorial ammunition, however, in his paper's relentless attack on the increasingly beleaguered president. In April 1868, at the time of Andrew Johnson's Senate impeachment trial, the president bitterly told an *Associated Press* reporter that Forney had always been after some favor. He recalled that the Secretary had begun to grumble following the 1864 presidential election because he felt the Lincoln administration had not rewarded his support with sufficient patronage. "The first thing he did," said Johnson, "was write me a letter, hoping that when I came to the Vice Presidency [in 1865] I would give him the control of some patronage that he said belonged to the office of the Secretary of the Senate, but had of late years been given to the Sergeant-at-arms. He hoped I would change that."

Forney left office on June 4, 1868, several weeks after the conclusion of Johnson's Senate trial. He sold his Washington paper and returned to Philadelphia, where he continued his journalistic pursuits. In his final years, he once more shifted political loyalties, moving again to the Democratic party. He died on December 9, 1881.