

Anonymous.
1886

"The Coast Survey Scandal,"
The Washington Post (Sunday 17 October), page 2,
column 2.

THE COAST SURVEY SCANDAL.

Sworn Charges Laid Before the District Attorney Yesterday.

Charges and specifications were yesterday lodged with the District Attorney and sworn to by Col. H. E. Coleman, against Supt. F. M. Thorn, B. A. Colonna, R. M. Bache, John W. Parsons, H. G. Ogden, F. H. Parsons, Edwin Smith and C. O. Boutelle, all of the Coast and Geodetic Survey, implicating them in the issuance of false vouchers. Information against five or six other members of the survey is being prepared, and as soon as it is ready the whole matter will be laid before the Grand Jury. The charge against Supt. Thorn and Mr. Colonna is that those gentlemen kept upon the roll of the survey, and paid for the month of July, 1885, three men who had been absent from the office for periods of from four months to two years, although they had been warned and knew that those men had rendered no service for the periods named. The charges against the other defendants are the issuance of false vouchers prior to the incumbency of Superintendent Thorn.

"Yes, I induced Col. Coleman to file this information," said Mr. Vincent J. Fagin to a POST reporter last night. "I probably am better acquainted with the survey than any man there or in the Treasury Department, as for three years I was its disbursing agent. Mr. Coleman was an assistant under me and knew almost as much about the rottenness of the institution as myself and was perfectly willing to swear to the charges. You see I am the principal witness in every one of these cases, and it would hardly do for me to be prosecutor and witness and everything else. I do not charge that Mr. Thorn is dishonest or that he is permitting dishonesty in the bureau, but I claim that he is utterly incompetent and that he is keeping in the service men who ought to have been discharged long ago. The object in bringing up this matter is to cause the publication of the evidence which was taken at the investigation last year and to secure the punishment of those whom that evidence convicts. I have no doubt that there will be several arrests very shortly."

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"Mr. Thorn Heard From,"
The Washington Post (Monday 18 October), page 2,
column 6.

MR. THORN HEARD FROM.

His Reply to the Charges Made by
V. J. Fagin.

"On the 24th of July, 1885," said Mr. F. M. Thorn, Superintendent of the Coast Survey, when asked to say something in reply to Mr. Fagin's charges, "within a few days after my arrival in Washington, I was placed in charge of the Coast Survey and of an investigation of its management. Absolutely without a day's preparation I undertook the double duty and during the ensuing fortnight had opportunity for but very little rest night or day. On the fifth or sixth day after the commencement of the investigation and right in its midst the pay roll of an office force comprising over a hundred employees came to me for approval. Among the names were those of three people who had served from forty to fifty years in the bureau but were then rendering no service. It is entirely proper though not necessary to the vindication of the propriety of the transaction to say that their cases were analogous to that of the venerable employe of the State Department who, this present season, was chided for returning to his duties and for not continuing absent after expiration of his leave. They had worn out in the service. Neither of them had been notified, so far as appeared, of the termination of his service. It was decided without controversy in any quarter (until long afterwards) that they were probably entitled to their salaries until notified of the termination of their employment. I think that principle has several times, and in various phases, been judicially established. At all events, it is not over three months since the Acting Secretary of the Treasury expressed to me the opinion that such was the law, and it seems to have been officially established as the proper action, by the First Comptroller's allowance and recognition of the validity of precisely similar vouchers to the same parties. Instead of keeping the parties on the pay roll, I promptly severed their connection with it by notifying them at once and receiving their resignations, thus unequivocally settling all question of their right to further salary. If the former superintendent had terminated their employment, by similar action, as soon as their disability became patent, I think he might have defied criticism as far as their cases were concerned. It was because he appeared to have taken no measures of the kind, but continued their pay from month to month indefinitely that the committee criticised him. The matter of their payment and immediate unequivocal retirement

from the survey was promptly decided upon as the proper thing without a syllable of objection; the investigation was resumed and continued for several days, and long afterward vouchers, in another case, for several months' wages without service--in a case where it was understood that the party had been already discharged--were sent to me for approval from the office of the First Auditor. I believe the action taken by Mr. Colonna and myself in the matter to be unassailable in law and in morals."

"What do you say to Mr. Fagin's assertion that men have been retained who ought to have been discharged?"

"In reply to Mr. Fagin let me say that instead of having him, as he alleges, 'for three years the disbursing agent' of the bureau he has never been its disbursing agent at all. As to his assertion that I am 'keeping in the service men who ought to have been discharged long ago,' it is the simple fact that every man to whom he refers has been 'kept in' under the specific advice and instruction of Secretary Manning, from whom Assistant Secretary Smith assured me that he received the same advice. I believe his advice was wise and I know it was manly. As I have already mentioned, the testimony, which the present proceeding is said to be intended to revive, has been out of my custody and in that of the Department much more than a year. It is mainly ex parte affidavits, some true, some false, some mistaken, some since retracted, and more or less wild gossip since disproved. The publication of such material against people who were not confronted with the witnesses and did not cross-examine them, nor appear by counsel, and the spreading of it before the public who can know nothing of the credibility or motives of any of the witnesses, or of the probable value of their testimony, would be simply an indiscriminate assassination of character."