

Grant Hall Dedication: April 3, 2013

Comments by Hans Binnendijk

- Thank you Colonel Sumpter for hosting this event and thank you General Martin for inviting me to speak.
- This evening we are gathered to dedicate Grant Hall and to witness the recreation of the 1865 court room where justice was dispensed to those conspiring to assassinate Abraham Lincoln and to decapitate the United States government.
- Grant Hall is arguably the most important historical landmark in South West Washington. It is here that the last chapter of our calamitous Civil War ended.
- It is fitting that that this historic building be named in honor of Ulysses S. Grant, the General-in-Chief of the Union Army during our Civil War and subsequently our 18th President. He was in command while the trial of the Lincoln conspirators took place and this part of the original penitentiary was preserved during his presidential administration. Grant Hall's proximity to Lincoln Hall reminds us of the friendship and trust they shared.
- The Old Arsenal Penitentiary that originally stood here was designed in 1826 by Charles Bulfinch, then the "Architect of the Capitol".
- This remnant of the Penitentiary whose reconstitution we commemorate today was nearly demolished on more than one occasion. The architect of Roosevelt Hall, Stanford White, reportedly refused to attend the Roosevelt Hall dedication ceremony because this building obstructed the view of Roosevelt Hall from the front of the post. It subsequently remained on a demolition list for most of its existence.
- One part of the effort to save the building was to change its name from Building 20 to Grant Hall on the theory that it would be harder to tear down Grant Hall than Building 20.

- Today's dedication ceremony will further insure that this historic building will continue to stand on the grounds of Fort McNair well beyond our years.
- I want to thank several people who made today happen. First, thanks to the small team who first met with me perhaps seven years ago dedicated to the proposition that this building should survive and be transformed: NDU curator Susan Lemke, research associate Gina Cordero and historian Kim Holien. We have worked together on the project since then.
- My most enthusiastic thanks go to former Congressman Ike Skelton and his then Committee Chief of Staff (now Undersecretary of Defense) Erin Conaton who quickly understood the importance of this building and secured funding for the reconstruction of Grant Hall. Without them, we would not be here today.
- Thanks to our NDU engineers Chuck Fanshaw and Rick Dean who saw this not as just another construction project but as a chance to make history live. They also gave the Africa Center wonderful new office space.
- Finally thanks to Richard Moe of the National Trust for Historic Preservation for his support and to Webster Stone, Executive Producer of the film The Conspirator who donated props from the film for use in Grant Hall.
- Let me orient you physically with respect to the position of the Old Arsenal Penitentiary as it was in 1865. We are sitting where jail cells used to be – they were stacked three high and extended close to the river where the Warden's quarter was located. There was a tall brick wall stretching on three sides to the parking lot enclosing the penitentiary yard. The trial took place on the third floor of Grant Hall. The scaffold where four of the conspirators were hanged is near the front of the tennis courts. They were buried just to the right of the scaffold. John Wilkes Booth, who was killed in Virginia while trying to escape, was buried temporarily at the far end of this walkway.

- Most of the Penitentiary was demolished during the Grant Administration, but this wing was spared because of the court room. Later in the 19th century, renowned architect Adolf Cluss remodeled the building and it subsequently became officers' quarters. This recent renovation has tried to preserve as much of Cluss' work as possible.
- The trial began on May 9, less than a month after Lincoln's assassination. A laundry room above the Deputy Warden's quarters was converted to a court room.
- The eight defendants were held in the cells isolated, handcuffed and chained. The men forced to wear cloth hoods.
- The nine person jury or commission was made up predominantly of Army officers. The use of a military court to try civilians was controversial at the time, as it is now. A simple majority was needed to find guilt and a 2/3rds majority was required for the death penalty. Defense attorneys were given very little time to prepare. There was no appeal except to President Andrew Johnson. And he was in no mood to grant appeals.
- The movie The Conspirator portrays the court room scene fairly well – except it was filmed at Fort Pulaski, Georgia.
- A few members of the press were invited to cover the trial. Historians describe the atmosphere as being more like a saloon than a court room.
- The trial lasted longer than Secretary of Defense Edwin Stanton would have liked. He wanted a very speedy trial to avoid any chance of rekindling the Confederacy. A total of 351 witnesses were called. On July 5 the commission sent its verdict to President Johnson who concurred with all of their findings except for clemency for Mary Surratt.
- On July 6 the defendants were told about their fate and on July 7, 1865 four were hanged. Alexander Gardner captured their execution in a series of photos that set a new standard at the time for photo journalism. The other

four defendants were sent to prison in the Dry Tortugas – three returned alive.

- Three of the four who were hanged (Lewis Powell, George Atzerodt, and David Herold) were clearly guilty of a capital offense.
- The fate of Mary Surratt has led to continued controversy. Many books and now the movie The Conspirator argue her case. She was certainly a Confederate sympathizer and her son John Surratt was among the earliest of Booth's conspirators. Her boarding house on H Street was considered to be "the nest in which the plot was hatched". She visited her home in what is now Clinton Maryland on the day of the assassination to deliver a package for John Wilkes Booth; that was Booth's first stop after assassinating Lincoln. The issue became "what did she know and when did she know it". There was clearly some witness tampering and she was convicted based on circumstantial evidence.
- Many who have lived and worked in Grant Hall have experienced eerie encounters with what some believe is the ghost of Mary Surratt. I truly do not believe in ghosts, but I must say I had at least two moments in Grant Hall that challenged my disbelief.
- With this ceremony, Grant Hall joins several other buildings that played a crucial role in the events surrounding Lincoln's assassination and that have been renovated. There is Fords Theater with its wonderful museum in the basement, the Peterson House where Lincoln died; the Surratt House Museum in Clinton Maryland; and now Grant Hall. Mary Surratt's boarding house on H Street has a historic plaque on it but remains a Chinese restaurant. The food is not bad, but that should be the renovator's next target.
- Thank you for listening and I hope you enjoy the reception and tour of the court room.