

REPORT

Of the Joint Committee on the subject of the Public Printing.

—————
FEBRUARY 19, 1819.

Read, and ordered to lie upon the table.

—————

The Joint Committee, on the subject of the Public Printing,
REPORT:

That, regarding the subject committed to them, as connected with the convenience of the members, the information of the community, the economy of time and money, and the character of the country, they have given it all the consideration which their other engagements permitted.

That three different modes of procuring the printing of Congress to be executed, have undergone their discussion and deliberation:

I. Offering the work by advertisement (as at present) to the lowest bidder.

On this mode the committee would remark, that although at the first glance it may strike the mind as the most economical, experience and observation do not prove it so. Competitors for the work underbid each other, until it is undertaken for a less sum than it can be afforded at; and too small an establishment, and too few workmen are consequently employed, to execute the printing with the necessary promptitude. Hence, both Houses have frequently to wait long for interesting and important communications from the President, or Heads of Departments, reports, bills, resolutions, &c. upon which they are called to act; and the loss of time thus incurred, considering the daily expense at which Congress sits, costs the nation much more than the difference, between the present price, and a liberal allowance, which would justify the application of a greater capital to ensure the despatch of the work.

Another disadvantage attending the present mode is, that the reduced price of the work prevents that care and attention from being bestowed on it, which is necessary to its neatness and accuracy. And documents are not only distributed through this nation, but dispersed through Europe; which are executed in such an inelegant and incorrect manner, as must bring disgrace and ridicule on the literature, and the press of our country.

That the present price of printing is too low, would readily be discovered by any of the profession; and the fact, that no other printer in the District could be found by the Secretary or Clerk, who would execute the work at the contract prices, must satisfy the mind of every gentleman, of the truth of what the committee have asserted. How far it is reputable for Congress to endeavor to get their work done below a fair and reasonable price, may be a matter of doubt; but it does not admit of a question that the compensation ought to be adequate to the object of procuring that work to be done at a proper time, and in a suitable manner.

II. A second mode suggested to, and considered by, the committee, was the establishment of a National Printing Office (with a bindery and stationery annexed,) which should execute the work of Congress while in session, and that of the various Departments of Government during the recess; and should do all the binding, and furnish all the stationery, for the Departments, as well as for Congress. To ascertain the amount of expenditures on these objects, inquiries were addressed by the committee to the Heads of Departments, attorney general, and postmaster general; and an answer received from each. Some of the reports were made in such a manner as not to enable the committee to separate the accounts for printing from those for binding and stationery; but the whole amount exceeds 41,000 dollars. Add to this, the expenditures of the Senate and House of Representatives on the same objects, v z: the former, 8,000 and the latter, 15,000, and the aggregate cost of the public printing, binding, and stationery, is about 65,000 dollars a year, of which, probably one half is for printing. And this, it will be remembered, does not include the great variety and number of blanks executed elsewhere than at the Seat of Government, from copies furnished by the Departments of the Treasury, War, &c. and which might all be done here at a much less expense, were a National Printing Office established.

The committee are of opinion that such an establishment, under the superintendence of a man of activity, integrity, and discretion, would be likely to produce promptitude, uniformity, accuracy and elegance, in the execution of the public printing; and they are not certain that it would not, in the result, connecting with it a bindery and stationery, as already suggested, be found the most economical. But as the principle is somewhat novel, and the details would require some deliberation, the committee have not deemed it advisable, at this late period of the session, and amidst the pressure which both Houses experience from the accumulation of business important to the nation, or interesting to individuals, to submit a proposition on which there would probably be a considerable diversity of opinion, and consumption of time.

III. Under all circumstances, the committee have deemed it their duty to recommend, that a tariff of prices for every kind of printing required to be done for Congress, be fixed by a joint resolu-

tion of the two Houses, to continue in force for two years; and that before the close of the present session, each House make choice, by ballot, of a printer, to execute its own work, during the next Congress. The prices should be adequate to the employment of sufficient capital and workmen to perform the work expeditiously, and to ensure such care and attention as shall give it such a degree of accuracy and elegance, as shall not dishonor the literature and typography of the country. With former contracts before us, and with the professional knowledge which may be called in aid, no difficulty would occur in forming the tariff alluded to, on principles at once liberal to the printer and advantageous to Congress; and in the selection of its printer, each House would doubtless take especial care to choose a man of capacity, probity, and responsibility. In addition to the bond and security, to be required of them for the faithful performance of their obligations, a provision might be added that in case of any unreasonable delay, another person might be employed to do the work at such price as the Secretary or Clerk might be able to get it done for, and that the public printers should respectively, be responsible for any difference between the sum allowed them, and that which it might be necessary to give him. The committee therefore, submit the following resolution:

Resolved, That the Joint Committee on public printing be instructed to report a resolution for carrying the foregoing proposition into effect.

