Capt. Isaac Bassett
(- 18 Dec 1895)

The Evening Star, December 28, 1888

Two Golden Weddings

Full of Honors and Years--Testimonials of Friends

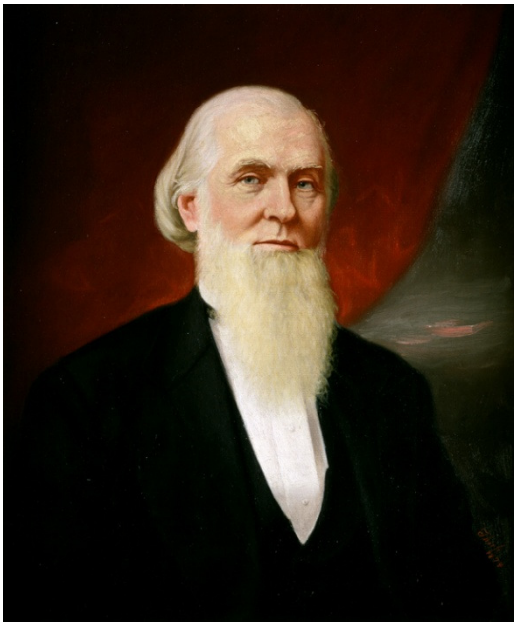
The fiftieth anniversary of the marriage of Capt. Isaac Basset to Miss Adeline Hurdle was celebrated last night by the two particularly interested parties and by a number of other persons who were only incidentally interested. The home of the happy couple, at No 18 2d street northeast, was crowded yesterday evening from 7 to 11 o'clock, and the 69 year old official and his wife, just three years younger, received the congratulations of a host of visitors, many of whom have known the assistant doorkeeper for the greater portion of the 57 years which he has spent in the service of the Senate. Two sons, Mr. G.T. Bassett, of the pension office, and Mr. Isaac A. Bassett, of the post office, were present, and so was Mr. Grafton D. Henson, who was one of Capt. Bassett's supporters on the occasion of his marriage.

Among the numerous presents received were a silver tray from several Senators, accompanied by a note from Senator Evarts; a gold card receiver, from the Senate pages; a gold urn, from Mr. and Mrs. G.W. Winner, of New York; and a music box, from Mr. G.T. Bassett. Gold coins were sent by several persons, but a bouquet, from Mrs. Cleveland to Mrs. Bassett, had the place of honor, and was aparently the most high-valued gift received.

For the McConnelsville Herald, January 2, 1889

Mr. Bassett, the Oldest Government Employe

A few days since I met at his accustomed place in the chamber of the U.S. Senate at Washington Mr. Isaac Bassett, assistant Sergeant-at-Arms of the U.S. Senate.



Mr. Bassett is the oldest official in the employment of the United States Government in length of service, having been appointed a Page of the Senate in 1831, through the influence of Daniel Webster; and from that time until the present – more than fifty-seven years – he has served the Government without a day's intermission.

Mr. Bassett is a very nice looking old gentleman; tall and straight, with rosy cheeks, a mild blue eye and an abundance of long gray hair, carefully combed and curled under at the ends.

He said that he had written a book of reminiscences, which would probably not be published until after his death. He thought that many things that his book would contain would be interesting, “but there are a *great many things*,” said Mr. Bassett “I will never say anything about.”

Prior to the time Mr. Bassett was appointed Page, there was but one Page in the service of the Senate, now there are fourteen. Mr. Webster said that as the Democrats had a Page, the Whigs ought also to have one. As usual, Mr. Webster's argument prevailed, and so young Bassett was appointed in September, 1831. He had served during the year 1830, however,

without an appointment, and from that period to the present has been a witness to every notable event that has occurred in the United States Senate. He heard the great debate between Webster and Hayne, of South Carolina, in 1830. He was present when Brooke, of South Carolina, made his villainous attack upon Charles Sumner. He also saw Governor Foot, of Mississippi, draw his pistol and threaten to shoot Thomas H. Benton, of Missouri.

Speaking of the debate of Webster and Hayne, Mr. Bassett said: "The scene was extraordinary, and one of great excitement. I heard the wife of a U.S. Senator say, just after the discussion, that 'Hayne is the orator, but Webster the statesman.'"

Mr. Bassett spoke of Mr. Webster as a man of magnificent presence. He was not vehement in his oratory, but spoke slowly and very distinctly, much in the manner of Roscoe Conkling.

"Which was the greater man, Webster or Conkling?" I inquired of Mr. Bassett. The old gentleman replied that he would rather not answer my question, lest he might be offensive to some friend who might possibly hear of his answer; but he would say that "Mr. Conkling was a great man and a great orator."

"Who was the greatest orator you ever heard in the Senate," I asked Mr. Bassett.

"Henry Clay, far above all others," he quickly replied. He added that "Mr. Hayne and Mr. Preston, of South Carolina, and Mr. Benjamin, of Louisiana, were grand speakers, but was reserved for Mr. Clay to eclipse them all; that there was a fascinating grandeur and charm in his eloquence that was simply indescribable, and that, in his opinion, could never be equaled." "When Mr. Clay made his farewell speech to the Senate," said Mr. Bassett, "it was a very sad day; every eye was suffused with tears; even Senator Benton, who never was known to shed a tear before, cried like a baby.

"Mr. Clay used a great deal of snuff, especially while speaking," Mr. Bassett remarked, "and he often apologized to us Page boys for the 'trouble' we had in taking it to him from the Vice President's desk, where it was always to be found."

Again referring to Mr. Webster, Mr. Bassett said: "Mr. Webster's temper was not always the best. He once shook me severely because I could not find him a carriage to take him home after making a speech one cold day, and told me to go to Georgetown if I could not get one in Washington. Mr. Webster had to walk that day.

Mr. Bassett spoke of the peculiarities of John Randolph, of Roanoke. "Randolph was fond of hunting with his dogs and gun. Game was quite plentiful in the vicinity of Washington, and frequently after a hunt Randolph would come into the Senate Chamber with knee breeches and hunting suit on, and, putting his gun into the corner of the room, his dogs would like at his feet while he would attend to his Senatorial duties."

But Mr. Bassett, like the great men he talks about, must soon be gathered to his Father's. What wonderful changes have taken place at the Capitol since his advent as an employe of the Government! The old Capitol, which, in 1830, would hardly compare with many county court houses in Ohio, has grown to colossal proportions; its marble and glass and iron reach almost to the clouds; its stately corridors and stair ways and marble halls, decorated with statuary and pictures and fresco are now the admiration of millions. The city of Washington itself, was but a struggling town in 1830, the seat of Government of scarcely 13,000,000 of people; but now it is one of the most beautiful cities in the world, with more than 200,000 of a population, and the Capitol of a nation of 63,000,000 of free and happy men, women and children!

Cybil Hawkins

Bassett. On Wednesday, December 18, 1895, Capt. Isaac Bassett. Funeral service will be held at 1st Presbyterian Church, 4 1/2 street n.w., Sunday, December 22 at 2:30 p.m. Short service will be held at residence at 1:45 p.m. by Rev. Dr. John Chester. Relatives and friends invited.

The Evening Star, December 9, 1895

Capt. Bassett's Condition
Death may Come At Any Time or
He May Live Several Days

At 2:30 o'clock today the condition of Capt. Isaac Bassett, assistant doorkeeper of the U.S. Senate was unchanged. Capt. Bassett is extremely weak and his death would not be unexpected if it occurred at any time. He may however live for several days.

The Evening Star, December 12, 1895

Capt. Bassett's Condition
It is Not Materially Changed From What It Was Yesterday

At 2:30 o'clock today the condition of Capt. Isaac Bassett, assistant doorkeeper of the United States Senate, was not materially different from what it has been for several weeks. Yesterday the captain showed evidences of sinking, but during the night there was a slight rally in his condition, and today he is resting easily. At times last night the captain was unconscious and his wanderings showed that he was in imagination back at his old place in the Senate chamber. He was conscious all today, however, and could readily make his wants known.

The Evening Star, December 14, 1895

Capt. Bassett Weaker
His Physicians Say He Will Not Survive Much Longer

Capt. Isaac Bassett is said to be much weaker today. Dr. Curtis who is attending him says that he will not survive much longer.

The Evening Star, December 17, 1895

Capt. Bassett Sinking
Not Expected to Live After Sundown Today

Dr. Curtis said this afternoon that he did not expect Capt. Bassett to live after the going down of the sun today. The captain is in a very low condition and may die at any minute.

The Evening Star, December 19, 1895

Capt. Isaac Bassett's Death
The Venerable Senate Employee Passes Peacefully Away
His Services at the Capitol--Arrangements for the Funeral--
An Interesting Career Closed

Capt. Isaac Bassett died at 4:10 o'clock yesterday afternoon, surrounded by members of his family. There were present his wife, who has passed her seventy-fourth year of age, his sons, Isaac A. and George T., his brother and his sister. The death of Capt. Bassett was expected for several weeks, and there were many times when it did not seem possible for him to live more than a few hours, but his wonderful vitality frequently surprised his attending physician, and time and again he rallied, when it seemed that his life was ebbing away. It was known for a long time that his disease could not be other

than fatal, and the autopsy verified the belief that he suffered from a cancer of the pancreas and a large pyloric orfice of the stomach.

His Last Moments

Capt. Bassett was conscious almost to the last moment of his life, although he had not been able to converse with his friends for some days, and during the twenty-four hours preceding his death the lower part of his body had been practically lifeless. But he could recognize his friends about his bedside, and clung to their hands affectionately as his end approached. Many Senators called at his home 18 Second street northeast, and Dr. Sunderland, his pastor, was there daily.

As long as the captain lived his mind dwelled on the old familiar scenes of the Senate, and he would inquire of the doings there so long as he had the power of speech.

His Long and Faithful Service

For the first time in sixty-four years the reassembling of the present Congress found Capt. Bassett absent from the Senate Chamber. The second page of that body and appointed at the instance of Daniel Webster, Bassett became an object of interest as the years passed by. He was always faithful to his duties and was promoted to be assistant doorkeeper of the Senate, which position he has held for over a generation. His father was from Connecticut, and removed to this city about a hundred years ago; his grandfather, Isaac Bassett, having been a soldier in the Revolutionary War. During the war he organized a company for the defense of the capital with Senator Gorman, who had served under him as a page, as lieutenant, and it was by this service he gained the title of captain. He had been an eye witness to numberless interesting scenes in Congress, and as a confidential employee was never known to betray his trust. The full story of Capt. Bassett's interesting life was lately published in The Star.

Funeral Arrangements Incomplete

Up to 2:30 o'clock today the Senate had taken no action in relation to the funeral of the late Capt. Bassett. It was thought by many that in consideration of the long service of the late assistant doorkeeper of the United States Senate, a "senatorial funeral" might be given him. But it is very doubtful if this will be done. It is likely, however, that an appropriation will be made covering the expenses of the funeral, and that a committee of Senators will be appointed to attend the ceremony.

The Senate Takes Notice

In executive session this afternoon the death of Capt. Bassett was referred to and the question of what the Senate should do in relation thereto was briefly discussed. No action was taken, but a resolution will probably be introduced in open session tomorrow by Mr. Sherman suggesting a proper course for the Senate. This resolution will commend the faithful services of Capt. Bassett.

The Evening Star, December 20, 1895

Capt. Bassett's Funeral

A Senate Committee Appointed to Attend the Services

The arrangements for the funeral of the late Isaac Bassett have been changed. Services will be held at 2:30 o'clock Sunday afternoon at the First Presbyterian Church, 4 1/2 street northwest, and Dr. Sunderland and the chaplain of the Senate will officiate.

In the Senate today Mr. Gorman introduced a resolution asking that a committee be appointed to attend the funeral. The Vice President appointed on this committee Senators Gorman, chairman; Sherman, Hawley, Peffer, Mitchell of Oregon and Roach.

The Evening Star, December 23, 1895

Capt. Bassett's Funeral

Impressive Services Over the Remains of the Veteran Senate Employee

The funeral of the late Capt. Isaac Bassett took place yesterday afternoon from the First Presbyterian Church. The remains were in charge of Acacia Lodge, F.A.A.M. under Grand Master Baird, Capt. Bassett having been a charter member of that lodge. The services were conducted by Rev. Dr. Byron Sunderland, Chaplain Milburn of the Senate and Rev. Dr. George Little. They were attended by Senators Gorman, Sherman, Hawley, Peffer, Mitchell and Roach, honorary pallbearers on the part of the Senate, the active pallbearers being J.W. Boteler, J.E. Horford, J.A. Sunderland, G.E. Stone, Stephen Bates and J.A. Tolman.

Dr. Sunderland preached the funeral sermon. The interment was at Congressional cemetery.

The Evening Star, December 10, 1895

Webster's Protege

Capt. Bassett Appointed Through the Statesman's Influence

Sixty-Four Years of Public Service

The White-Haired Assistant Doorkeeper Now on His Death Bed

An Interesting Career

There has been no more picturesque personality about the United States Capitol than Captain Isaac Bassett, the assistant doorkeeper of the Senate, whose death is momentarily expected. Sixty-four years of service under the government has had no influence to cause him to feel that he any claim for a continuation of his official place except the claim that would arise because of duties well and conscientiously performed. He has proved faithful in his humble capacity, which carried with its duties often commensurate with a much higher place. He has always been as kindhearted as a child, his life as simple as a child's, his every action prompted by motives of honor. From his earliest days he has occupied a place of trust and he has regarded a violation of confidence as the most grievous sin man could commit.

Sketch of His Life

Captain Bassett was born in this city in 1819, his father having come to Washington from Connecticut to take a position at the Capitol, being employed about the Senate as a doorkeeper when young Isaac, a bright and docile boy of twelve years, was appointed a page at the instance of Daniel Webster. Isaac would frequently go over to the Capitol with his father and busy himself about any work he could do. He would help make fires, and an orderly instinct caused him to improve the appearance of the Senators' desk when they came to the Capitol at noon. He was always alert and ready to run an errand, and before long he became a pet--a Senate mascot. A lovable little fellow, he won the heart of Daniel Webster, among others, and Webster took occasion to see that the boy would not be lost in the Senate by having him appointed a page, he being the second page to serve that body.

Young Isaac was the recipient of many favors at the hands of Daniel Webster. The latter would frequently call him to his side, take him upon his knee and talk to him kindly. The little page had no cause to fear the austere statesman in those days, but the time was to come when their relations became more formal. Captain Bassett never forgot the day when this change came about. Mr. Webster wanted a carriage and he sent Isaac to find one. The boy walked around the Capitol, but the ever-present hackmen were for once out of sight. He went to the Senate and going familiarly up to the statesman whom so many held in awe said:

"There are no carriages, Senator. They've all gone."

There was no carriage! Perhaps Mr. Webster thought the boy had verged on that line where "familiarity breeds contempt," and that he had been indifferent to his command. He turned on the page, annoyed at the delay he suffered in not being able to leave the Capitol when he wished, and, with the severity for which he was so well known on greater occasions, said:

"Get me a carriage; get one if you have to go to Georgetown!:

From that moment Isaac no longer approached Webster as a child might approach its father. He always went to him formally, as a soldier might go to a martinet, and no overtures on the part of Webster could draw the child to him as of old. The rebuke nearly frightened the life out of young Isaac, and he found a carriage. There were no street cars in those days, no telephone to quickly communicate with a livery stable, but if a carriage were wanted, it was necessary to find it somewhere--anywhere. Capt. Bassett never forgot how he ran on that occasion, here, there, everywhere, wondering whether there was a conspiracy among the hackmen to keep out of his way, nervously looking back to see if Webster, whose austerity was riveted on his memory, was giving him chase. Finally he got the coveted vehicle and Webster was appeased.

Strange stories have been told about the effect of this rebuke on young Bassett. A favorite story is that the boy's hair turned white while Webster looked at him, but the explanation of this fiction is that the Bassett family were given to gray hair early in life, and the captain's began to turn white when he was quite a young man.

A Familiar Figure

No Senator has been pointed out to so many visitors to the Capitol as has Capt. Bassett. For a generation he has been one of the sights of the building as little to be overlooked as would be the marble room adjoining the Senate, or the echo stones in the old House of Representatives. It was before the war that he was made assistant doorkeeper of the Senate. At the assembling of the Senate he could always be seen at the left hand of the Vice President. He stood reverentially as the chaplain asked a divine blessing on the proceedings of Congress. Tall, always attired with scrupulous neatness, for many years wearing a black broadcloth Prince Albert coat, his long white beard and hoary locks allowed to grow to his shoulders and brushed to a marvelous degree of precision, his serene countenance and ever watchful eye, are features of his appearance remembered by every one who has seen Capt. Isaac Bassett, assistant doorkeeper of the Senate. It was his proud claim that he never missed a single session, day or night, of the Senate since 1831, until two years ago, when he broke down during the night sessions when the repeal of the Sherman law was being considered. But he still could claim, until the meeting of the present Congress that he had never missed the opening of Congress for sixty-four years. It bore upon him heavily when he realized that he could not be in the Senate when the Fifty-fourth Congress was called to order, and from noon of that day his attendants noted that he grew worse. All during the summer and fall Capt. Bassett hoped to be able to be at the Capitol on December 3, and as that day approached and he did not gain strength, he still hoped he would be able to be taken over to his accustomed place, even if he were to remain but a short time.

Capt. Basset has not enjoyed a sinecure all his life. During late years he has been relieved from much of the active work that fell to him formerly, A.H. Stewart, his assistant on the floor assuming many of his duties. But for years he was to the Senate what an executive officer is to a man-of-war. Everything was in his keeping, and if any Senator had a complaint to make, he made it to the captain. The Senate has always been a fastidious body, and Capt. Bassett knew the Spanish proverb, "There is no such thing as a trifle." He was everywhere familiar with every detail of the Senate, so far as it related to the material comfort of that body, and never merited reproach for an oversight. All the pages looked upon him as a father and he ruled them by love rather than through discipline.

His Home Life

Capt. Bassett's home life has been a happy one. For many years he has lived on 2d street just north of East Capitol. The house was built many years ago, and has a comfortable side yard, while the captain's love of whatever has age led him to preserve above his door the old number, marked in gilt letters, which designated his home before the present numbering was adopted. He looked upon the "No. 18" as a usurper of "No. 387." His wife is living and he has two sons, Isaac Bassett, jr., and Geo. Bassett, and a daughter, while there is an Isaac Bassett the third, who was a page in the Senate until he developed into manhood, when he sought other employment. In 1888 Capt. and Mrs. Bassett celebrated their golden wedding, and on that occasion they received a number of presents from members of the United States Senate, as well as a handsome written testimonial signed by Henry B. Anthony, and accompanied by a portrait of himself in oil.

Capt. Basset is one of two men employed in the service of the Senate who are appropriated by name. Besides his salary of $2,694 per annum, he is given $500 by direct appropriation.

Faithful to His Trust

Many are the stories that are told of Capt. Bassett, nearly all of them being instances of the great fidelity to duty. During the war Capt. Bassett went into the Senate to find several soldiers busy defacing the desk formerly occupied by Jefferson Davis. They were hacking the woodwork with their bayonets. Bassett promptly went to them and in his quiet way remarked:

"That desk was used by Mr. Davis, but it's the property of the United States, and I am here to protect it. Please don't touch it again."

The captain's argument was heeded, and the desk remains in the Senate now, being used by Senator Cockrell of Missouri.

Capt. Bassett was a lover of relics. Every desk in the Senate had a history known to him. These desks are nearly all of great age, though they are kept in such thorough repair that they have the appearance of being new. He could tell who had used each desk, and his mind was filled with personal incidents connected with the Senate property. It was such things that appealed to him. He knew little about the political business of the Senate, and while he thought little of the great political significance of a speech, he would remember the speech and its peculiar effect on the Senate and the occupants of the galleries. He had no politics, except that he was an intense Union man, and to him the country was one, and political divisions seemed insignificant. All Senators were simply "Senators" to him, and that title called the forth his most intense interest and respect. It was enough for him to know that a Senator wanted something. He was sure to have it if the captain could supply it. Republicans and democrats were alike to him. They were all kind to him, and he knew they were all "Senators."

It Wasn't Cocked

An instance occurred about a quarter of a century ago which showed how cool Capt. Bassett could be under trying circumstances. It was in connection with that famous exciting scene which took place in the Senate lobby when Senator Willard Saulsbury was to be quieted, and the inoffensive Bassett was chosen to approach him in order to pacify him. The former didn't quite understand what Capt. Bassett was going to do, and drawing a pistol, he placed its muzzle to the captain's chest, saying, in an excited tone of voice:

"If you touch me, I'll kill you."

Capt. Bassett didn't wince, and the pistol was not fired. When he talked of the incident, which brought him many congratulations for his coolness, he said:

"But I looked at the pistol, and saw it wasn't cocked."

When there was a high state of excitement prevalent during the Tilden electoral incident, it was the duty of Capt. Bassett to carry papers from one house of Congress to the other. An innocent participant

in the proceeding, yet Capt. Bassett was the victim of a good deal of hard feeling, and he received anonymous letters threatening his life. However absurd this inclination to wreak vengeance on the inoffensive official may appear, he was, in a measure, a target for cranks, but he maintained his outward calm aspect for which he was always known.

His Reminiscences

A favorite theme of Capt. Bassett has been his declared determination to write a book of reminiscences, and it is known that he has a couple of trunks filled with material with which to construct his work. He is supposed to have considerable manuscript in shape to be published, but being very reticent about all his actions there is no one who has a very definite idea of what his material consists. It is supposed to be made up mostly of incidents relating to personal matters which have occurred in the Senate within his memory and of which he has been an eye witness. As he cared little for political questions, and took no interest in them, it is not likely that any papers he has left contain more than sketches of personal incidents.

Many stories are related of the simplicity of the life of Capt. Bassett. He was entirely free from anything that could in the most remote way be termed a dissipation. He was a total abstainer from tobacco. He hardly knew the taste of wine, but he did indulge in pinches of snuff, a habit, he acquired in the old days in the Senate, and he always had charge of the senatorial snuff boxes, which remain in the Senate chamber to this day, though they have become obsolete. The captain has been presented with a number of handsome snuff boxes, and he has exchanged pinches of snuff with many of the most famous men in the history of this country.

In The Same Company

Senator Gorman has always had an especially kind place in his heart for Capt. Bassett, whose acquaintance he made when, as a page, he revered the captain and regarded him as one of the greatest men in the country. Mr. Gorman knew Capt. Bassett quite well in his early days. During the war, when the venerable assistant doorkeeper was elected captain of a military company in the District of Columbia, young Gorman was chosen a lieutenant in the same command. The company was drilled by Capt. Bassett, and it became proficient as one of the means for defending the Capitol. It was never called out in active service, however. It was by this service that Mr. Bassett became "Capt." Bassett, as he has since been known.

The Evening Star, December 24, 1888

Two Golden Weddings

Two of Them Occur on the Same Evening

Next Thursday evening the fiftieth anniversary of the marriages of two old citizens of Washington, Capt. Isaac Bassett and James M. Wright, esq., will occur.

Capt. Bassett was born in this city August 4, 1819. His father came here in the early days of this city from Connecticut and his mother from Ireland. He attended the preparatory department of Columbian college. Before he was twelve years old he was appointed page in the Senate through the influence of Daniel Webster. He has remained in the service of the Senate ever since, and is now assistant sergeant-at-arms. He has been in service 58 years, and is the oldest employee of the government.

Congressional Cemetery Newsletter, January 1997

Historical Profile: Isaac Bassett

Isaac Bassett (R32/188) had a 64 year career in the U.S. Senate beginning in 1831 with his appointment as a page at age 12. His papers and artifacts have recently been donated to the Senate and are the basis for an exhibit in the Capitol on display until September.

Simeon Bassett (R77/D-4), Isaac's father, was a stone mason who worked on the Capitol reconstruction following the fire of 1814. Later he was Senate doorkeeper. When Daniel Webster determined that the one page then working in the Senate needed assistance, he sought Isaac's appointment. Instead of attending school with his contemporaries, Isaac waited on the likes of Webster and Henry Clay filling sand shakers and cutting quill pens. He was a Senate employee the rest of his life.

As an adult, Bassett was assistant Doorkeeper for the Senate. He performed many of the ceremonial and caretaking chores--assigning senators' seats, carrying the electoral ballot boxes to the House chamber after each presidential election, and turning back the clock to delay the conclusion of a Senate session. He also supervised the pages. One of his charges, Arthur P. Gorman, later returned as a senator from Maryland and Democratic floor leader.

Bassett received gifts at landmarks in his career. Senators subscribed for two: a portrait commissioned in 1876 and a silver Tiffany snuff box commemorating the 50th anniversary of his service in 1881. These and other gifts from his fellow employees are included in the exhibit.

By the end of his career, Bassett embodied the tradition and institutional memory of the Senate. When asked of his longevity, he said, "The only reason that I can give is that I tried to mind my own business and let other people alone."

Although proud of his service to the Senate, Bassett regretted his lack of formal education. In his unpublished memoirs, he wrote, "My experience is that if I had my time to go over again I never would enter the Senate as a page, messenger, or an officer."

Generations of Bassett's are at Congressional, but descendants have now spread to all parts of the country.

Shortly before her death in 1897, Mrs. Bassett donated Capt. Bassett's picture to the Oldest Inhabitants (Evening Star, January 1, 1898).