

URIAH HUNT PAINTER
A PRELIMINARY BIOGRAPHICAL EXPLORATION

by

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The Minneapolis Tribune on June 6, 1892 remarked: "U. H. Painter was born at West Chester, Pa. in 1837 and has been in the newspaper business since he was 15 years old, both his father and grandfather having been noted newspaper editors. He went to Washington in February of 1861, having accompanied the special train that started from Springfield, Ill. The rapid development of the secession movement made Washington such an important news center that the Philadelphia Inquirer induced him to remain there, and he soon became one of the most successful of the Washington correspondents who in those days had to ride through the army as well as look after the news in the city. Under his management the Inquirer became the leading paper of the country and soon led them all in its circulation; he had a large staff under him, and at different times had charge of (the) Washington bureau of the New York Tribune, the New York Sun and the Chicago Republican and furnished matter for many other papers; continued on the Inquirer for over thirty years and until the paper was finally sold, when he declined to remain in Washington any more during the summers. He is at present on the Washington Post, in whose interest he attends the convention; he has known all the public men of the last 30 years and has enjoyed the confidence of the cabinet of Mr. Lincoln and most of these since; and during the war had the entree at all hours of the day and night to the war department or the White House and on many occasions furnished the war department its earliest and most reliable news of important events, having been several times a prisoner in the rebel lines; was clerk of the House postal committee for 10 years and made the first revision of the postal laws."¹

"A quiet but successful career" was the observation of the Rochester Democrat and Chronicle at the time of his passing away:

A man has just died at West End, New Jersey, who, while he has had much to do with making many famous men famous, was himself almost entirely unknown by name to the American public.

Uriah Hunt Painter was a successful and trusted war correspondent during our Civil war. He was present at most of the most important battles and his reports were published in the Philadelphia Inquirer. Subsequently he was the Washington correspondent of a number of papers, including the New York Sun and the New York Tribune. He was one of the founders of the Philadelphia Telegraph and a stockholder in the New York Sun and the Washington Post.

His fine business abilities brought him into close relations with the late Thomas A. Scott, once the celebrated president of the Pennsylvania railroad, and it was Mr. Painter who planned, organized and built the New York, Philadelphia & Norfolk railroad in Delaware.

Mr. Painter was the first financial backer of Thomas A. Edison. He was interested in the first phonograph, and at one time had an option on the Bell Telephone to sell it to Jay Gould for the Western Union. Gould's remarkable foresight failed him in that case. He considered that the telephone would be a mere toy, and thus lost control of it.

Mr. Painter was a staunch Republican and attended every national Republican convention from 1856 to 1896 inclusive. He was one of the men who live their lives quietly behind the scenes of publicity, happy in producing results without caring for the notoriety which is the main consideration in many minds.²

The news of the death was carried by the major wire services, noted in numerous local and national papers; the funeral was attended by a stellar cast and then the momentary notoriety subsided for his name is not to be found in any of the standard or obscure biographical sources concerned with the American past.

A Friend by birth and lifelong persuasion, Painter was a product of the Southeastern region of Pennsylvania--an area long known for its diverse and strongly held views. Born on October 2, 1837, the young man reached his majority in time to participate in the Republican Party's first convention--that, which resulted in the nomination of Fremont for President. This was the first of a long series of quadrennial pilgrimages that only ceased as a result of his terminal illness in 1900.

The magnet that was Oberlin attracted him but events were to conspire to prevent the completion of his college education--his father's business failure forced a return home in 1857 to determine what could be salvaged. Newly formed political connections must have proved invaluable--he was able to obtain capital where his parent had previously failed. With this Philadelphia money he continued the family business and was able to meet all obligations. Their lumber yard again prospered and remained a secure source of income for the remainder of his life. Other local ventures followed--such as a natural ice business and, somewhat later, a telegraph line into West Chester, Pennsylvania.³

Later in his life enemies were to twist his name into that of the ubiquitous Uriah Heap but Painter was anything but a "humble servant." He had been named, following another form of literary tradition, after a prominent Philadelphia bookseller, Uriah Hunt. At one time the Painter family operated a bookstore in West Chester--their literary bent was also reflected in the editorship of several local papers. The family connection with these local political organs was soon to turn the

young man's path towards politics and journalism. In 1860 he represented the Chicago Republican at the Wigwam Convention and thus was a witness of the nomination of Abraham Lincoln.⁴

Gathering war clouds and the eventual opening of hostilities were bound to touch the Painter family as they did in the case of so many Northern and Southern groups. A brother became a Union major and young Uriah became a war correspondent. His abilities as a "go-getter" were soon demonstrated by the first Battle of Bull Run. A group of four reporters, which included Henry Villard as well as Painter, witnessed the Union defeat and the order to fall back. Painter, who lingered too long, was taken captive by the advancing Confederates while the others were able to hurry back to Washington--Villard filing long dispatches for the New York Herald. All of these accounts shared a fate common with those of other reporters--suppression by the military censor. Meanwhile Painter, who had been forced to assist at a Confederate hospital, searched for a means of escape. He discovered a riderless and wounded horse and was able to return to Washington on it that evening. Rather than attempting to file his story in Washington he caught a train for Philadelphia and gave his story directly to the Inquirer. Coping with the disbelief of his editor and an increasingly restive mob outside of the newspaper office's "extra boards," the young man finally was able to have his story published. Later dispatches verified the accuracy of the description of the tragedy but only after the Inquirer had a nationwide twenty-four hour scoop.⁵

His ingenuity became widely known as witnessed by an event that gained him the friendship of the Secretary of War. In the Spring of 1862, after an order was issued by General Sanborn placing him under temporary arrest, the reporter was ordered to report to Edward Stanton with whom an exchange occurred:

'I never saw you before.'

'Probably not.'

'I never talked with you.'

'Probably not.'

'Then why did you publish an interview with me?'

'I never published an interview with you sir.'

'Then what does this mean?' [Stanton then confronted Painter with a copy of the Inquirer which contained a five column article captioned "An hour with the Secretary of War.']

'Did you write that?'

'I dictated that.'

'How came you to obtain your information?'

'As a private American citizen, that is my business, Mr. Secretary, and I do not think it is any of your business how I obtained my information.'

[Stanton then intimated that he was concerned with the problem of disloyalty among his staff and the article showed such intimate detail that it must have been supplied to him from within the War Department.]

'Well, Mr. Secretary...not one of your clerks has been disloyal to you. This room is full of people for two hours every day. I was here in the throng every day for one week. I crowded as near to yourself as possible, took notes of conversations which I overheard and prepared my article from data conveyed to my mind through my own ears. That "Hour with the Secretary of War" was really about twelve hours.'⁶

Other opportunities abounded. He was among the many journalists who penetrated the military picket lines--exchanging Northern papers for those of the South--especially those of Richmond. By reading the stories a reporter often obtained valuable clues concerning possible Southern strategies. Other information gathering techniques included seeking out those who were considered as unimportant by others--contrabands, tramps, prisoners or blacks. By skillful interrogation, and sometimes chance, a great deal of valuable information concerning troop strengths and movements was obtained from this flotsam and jetsam of the battle fields. The management of the Inquirer was well repaid when it led several other newspapers in establishing permanent Washington offices in what became the District's 'Newspaper Row.'⁷

In late 1862 after interviewing malingerers, deserters and tramps on the battlefield of Chantilly, Painter became certain that General Lee was contemplating an invasion of Maryland. An article was prepared, and as always sent by courier to Washington and then by post to Philadelphia. The appearance created a sensation--Painter was again placed under arrest. Stanton informed him of the concerns of Secretary of State Seward, who feared that the story might place in jeopardy the tenuous relations with nations such as England and France who were actively considering a recognition of the South. The Secretary of War, although now favorably disposed towards the journalist, had assured Seward that he knew of no valid reason or excuse for the article. The reporter felt otherwise and protested that the story was based on sound deductions and blurted: "Do you not know yourself, Mr. Secretary, that this invasion is contemplated? 'I know nothing of the kind,' said Secretary Stanton. 'On the contrary, I have telegrams from forty or fifty army officers, each declaring that the enemy is directly in his front and intends to attack him.'" Painter was to continue under arrest but his restrictions were nominal--he was to be available in Washington at a moment's notice. It was then that an assistant was dispatched to the assumed spot for General Lee's crossing at Edward's Ferry. At the first sight of Confederate actions he was to inform the journalist that action had begun. The troops arrived shortly before noon of the following day. "'I was of course immediately released from arrest, and thereafter not only the secretary of war, but Mr. Lincoln and the entire cabinet gave me their friendship and their confidence.'⁸

As an additional sign of Painter's growing political power he was requested to testify before the House Committee on the Conduct of the War. It was known that he bore no love for General George B. McClellan and this Congressional testimony ran true to form.⁹ With the collapse of the McClellan Presidential bid in 1864 political rewards were quick

to accrue. He was appointed to that rich font of patronage, the Clerkship of the House Committee on Post Office and Roads. This position carried such an amount of power and prestige that he was among the invited guests attending the Golden Spike Ceremony joining the trackage of the Central Pacific and Union Pacific Railroads.¹⁰ This was both ironic and appropriate for while there was no apparent direct evidence it was whispered that he was in some manner connected with the Credit Mobilier scandals which involved Congressional stock holdings in a company that had been organized to perform construction work for the Union Pacific Railroad at inflated prices.¹¹ His subterranean fame was also attested to when he was accused by some as attempting to siphon off some of the monies that were being used to buy the passage of the Alaska Purchase Bill.¹² His combination of journalism, politics and business was proving an extremely effective combination of talents in the free and easy atmosphere of the so-called Gilded Age.

Painter fitted well into the rough and tumble politics of the era. Anyone controlling the undoubted political power that was his was bound to incur intense animosities. In July 1866, after having opposed the confirmation of Albert Sloanaker as Collector of Internal Revenue at Philadelphia, he was set upon by a Benjamin F. Beveridge while he was engaged in a conversation in the Capitol Building. Sloanaker's supporter soon had him downed and was viciously kicking him when the melee was broken up by the Capitol Police who took the attacker into custody. An undated note to another fight between one Scott Smith and Painter in the Reporters' Gallery in the Capitol. "It was reported to Vice-President Colfax who remarked after discovering the identity of the contestants "If it's Painter that's all right." Painter lifted a chair against his adversary but someone interfered so that it only injured Smith's fingers.¹³

By the middle of the Seventies his telegraphic connections allowed an entree into Western Union affairs and to those of its rivals. He was reported to have been interested in offering the Bell telephone patent to Jay Gould among others but he most certainly organized the first local telephone company in Washington. Many years after the fact "Uncle Joe" Cannon, one time Speaker of the House, reminisced about being approached by Painter who invited him into his business office. Cannon was then told about the telephone and invited to carry on a conversation with Mrs. Painter who was on the other end of a telephone line a mile away. The Congressman was offered an opportunity to invest but had been offered the ground floor for investment so often that he was wary. He ruefully admitted many years later that he thus missed an opportunity to become a millionaire.¹⁴

His local and telegraphic connections also brought him into contact with Edward H. Johnson, another Chester County product, who had joined Thomas A. Edison in the perfecting of a process for sending multiple messages by telegraph. With this entree he seemed to have fitted in with the inventor's penchant for things telegraphic. As the Wizard of Menlo Park developed his rival form of telephone for Western Union, Johnson began to tour extensively in publicizing it. In his capacity as

"advance man" Johnson became quite familiar with Edison's slowly germinating ideas about the recording and reproduction of sound. In July and August he was associated with the Exhibition Company of Philadelphia. On August 4, 1877 he wrote that Green of the Company had discussed Edison's ideas concerning the recording of sound in the presentation of August 3rd.¹⁵ Painter, who knew a good prospect, was interested in becoming involved in this new concept. He was able to organize a syndicate of telephone associates and to beat out other potential rivals in early 1878. On obtaining the rights, and later on organizing a company, his group discovered that they had control of an imperfectly conceived invention. The inability of Edison to further develop his conception at this time doomed the Edison Speaking Phonograph Company to a slow extinction and the organization became dormant by the beginning of the 1880's. The Company was relieved of the responsibility to invest additional funds while Edison on his part was not required to experiment further on the phonograph.¹⁶ The skeleton of the Company was maintained and later it became an expensive nuisance after Alexander Graham Bell and his assistants had so developed Edison's original conception that the talking machine became practical. The newly organized North American Phonograph Company's promoter Jesse H. Lippincott was forced to buy the old Edison Speaking Phonograph Company in order to control the industry--having already bought the rights to the Graphophone and the newly developed phonograph of Edison in 1888. Lippincott was forced to pay Painter and his associates over \$275,000 for an organization that had begun with an investment of less than \$10,000.¹⁷

We do not know if it was his increasing business involvements or realignments within the Republican Party which caused his formal Congressional connections to come to an end by 1880 but he certainly remained a power within his party and had the reputation of knowing everyone. He had been also involved with Edison's newly developed lighting system and was able to arrange for such governmental installations as the Government Printing Office through his close connections with the Public Printer.¹⁸

Although a lobbyist must maintain a rather low profile for the public, Painter's activities in this area were known to many and reported as such in the press of the period. He represented the Pennsylvania Railroad and at one time spearheaded the drive by Armour and Company to push through oleomargarine legislation. Connections with the Public Printer enabled him to impress his sponsors and "friends" with his activities and having them uniformly bound as presentation sets for his sponsors--a visible reminder of his services. A thorough examination of his surviving papers would undoubtedly unearth other lobbying connections.¹⁹

In 1887 and 1888 when Edison broke with the majority of his early backers and companions Painter was not immune to the disassociation. Interestingly enough the final break was eventually occasioned by Henry Villard although Painter had already assumed a role of persona non grata.²⁰ While the Edison connection had proved lucrative in the past, Painter was not dependent upon this source of income. His invest-

ments were many and successful. He owned stock in numerous companies and had obtained a block of Pennsylvania Railroad shares. He also maintained his newspaper connections by filing an occasional story and through stock holdings in the Washington Post and the New York Sun. It is not surprising that in the remaining clippings in the Painter papers he is given favorable coverage by these journals.²¹

One story covered by these papers concerned the construction and operation of the New York, Philadelphia and Norfolk Railroad. It was seen that a railroad to tap the rich coastal Virginia farming regions would be of value and Painter either initiated the project or directed it. After a period of independent operation the trackage, not surprisingly, was acquired by the Pennsylvania Railroad. A privately owned telegraph line parallel to the tracks was also constructed and operated by Painter.²² His telegraph franking privileges as well as his access to railroad passes provided another asset for his operations. The lure of the pasteboard certainly attracted more than one congressman to him. Anyone who could command a private parlour car for his party of Congressional friends to attend a National Convention in did not have to worry about his connections.²³

As his fortune grew he began to invest in real estate-acquiring parcels in West Chester, Washington and, in particular, the area adjoining his summer residence in Long Branch, New Jersey. His presence and a careful promotion insured this West End area becoming fashionable and profitable. Another of his later passions was the theatre: He owned one in West Chester and in the Nineties he built the first fireproof show-place in Washington. He was able to boast that the few combustible items within that Lafayette Square Opera House could be replaced within two hours. Disagreements with the local booking syndicate caused him to become his own manager when he vowed to operate at a loss if needs be rather than give in. Sometime after his death Julia Marlowe spoke highly of his managerial abilities. Later this theatre became known as the Belasco but did retain a plaque placed in memory of its builder and proprietor.²⁴

But politics and the power that accompanied it were in his blood. He never really severed his connections and Long Branch always saw a continual stream of lobbyists and politicians-especially in the hot summer months. The World papers in New York seem to have borne little love for Uriah Hunt Painter and it is through them that we have some view of his later activities. One account mentioned an interview with the recently inaugurated William McKinley in which Painter reportedly berated the President concerning a recent political appointment for fully five minutes. The harangue ended without McKinley having been able to utter a word. Another unflattering picture showing a group of politicians and hangers-on obtaining stock market "tips" had "Uriah Heap" Painter characterized as an "all around hustler."²⁵

His endless good health must have been the envy of many. One local West Chester paper mentioned his assisting in the cutting of ice in a temperature of four degrees below fahrenheit dressed in his shirt sleeves

while chiding his workers on being affected by the cold. This good health was to be his downfall since he rarely consulted doctors. During the latter half of 1899 he began to fail and did not recover his customary vigour during the following spring. When doctors were consulted it was discovered in the summer of 1900 that he was suffering from "cancer of the stomach." In intense pain, he lingered until the middle of October, dying on the twentieth.²⁶

Soon after the temporary fame occasioned by his passing and his funeral had subsided the family attempted to insure his recognition. The memorial placque was placed in the Lafayette Square Opera House and the theatre owned by the family in West Chester was converted into a museum operated by the Chester County Historical Society. The Society devoted a meeting to his memory in 1939 and accepted his surviving papers at a somewhat later date. The mass of material, filling more than one entire shelving unit proved to be too much for a local society to handle and so in 1951 all material of more than regional interest was transferred to the Historical Society of Pennsylvania. Even here the papers are virtually unknown although they are partially described in the National Union Catalog of Manuscripts.²⁷

Painter's life personifies several forces at work in the late nineteenth century and as such is an excellent example of these trends. His position in the rapidly changing journalistic field bears examination. He was one of the first of the correspondents in that first "modern war" -the War between the States. His work with the various Washington bureaus also was a harbinger of journalism to come. He was a power in the Republican Party and it is possible that a close study of his life may throw valuable illumination into the workings of the party structure in the period. His work as a lobbyist bears close examination. Thus far there have been very few studies of this peculiarly modern development. He also was involved at the beginnings of several modern industrial developments and his connections with these should eventually be examined at length. Only after all of these avenues have been examined will Painter's true place in American history be known.

Note: The account of Painter's life has been drawn primarily from the clipping collection owned by the Chester County Historical Society and was partially amplified by my examination of the Painter business papers relating to the phonograph. Every effort has been made to verify the newspaper material and to my knowledge the accounts utilized seem to bear the ring of truth. The material involving the phonograph has been documented from several other sources. I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge the assistance through grants of the New Jersey Historical Commission, the Faculty Research Award Program of City University (FRAP 11042) and the BHE-PSC Award Program (RF 12161). Without this assistance I would not have been able to engage in my wide-ranging research into the history of the early phonograph industry. Also without the cooperation of the Chester County Historical Society, the Historical Society of Pennsylvania and the staff of the Edison National Historic Site I would not have been able to piece together this brief and necessarily sketchy outline of Painter's life. My thanks is also expressed to Rebecca Amann

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(Note: The majority of the material is derived from items in the possession of the Chester County Historical Society with a smaller amount derived from the Historical Society of Pennsylvania and the Edison National Historic Site. The sources are cited as follows: CC, HS, ED.) * 00 in date represents 1900.

1. Punctuation as in original. CC
2. Rochester Democrat-Chronicle 10/24/00.* CC
3. Chester County Historical Society. Notes taken at a meeting held on October 17, 1939 (typescript) p. 2 (Hereafter cites as Notes.CC
4. Ibid.
5. Various papers: Evening Star (Washington) 10/20/00; Record (Long Branch, N.J.) 10/26/00; Village Record (West Chester, Pa.) 4/20/86; Leader (West Chester, Pa.) 5/4/43. All CC
6. Syndicated story supplied in matt form. This citation is taken from its appearance in the Evening Lamp (Chicago) 4/18/91. CC
7. Leader (West Chester) 1/6/00 commenting on the recent appearance of volume four of James Ford Rhodes History of the United States from the Compromise of 1850. CC
8. Leader 10/23/00; Daily Record (West Chester) 10/8/91. CC
9. Evening Journal (Philadelphia) 4/27/62 or 63. The year was not noted. CC
10. Notes p. 2. CC
11. Tribune (Chicago) 1/11/69; an unattributed clipping, but probably from the mid-seventies mentioned that Painter was a contender for the position of Clerk of the House of Representatives. CC
12. Village Record 2/6/69 CC
13. Ibid. 7/21/66; undated memorandum of L.A. Painter located with the clippings at the Society. CC
14. Leader 1/23/23; 5/4/43; 3/13/54; unattributed clipping 11/13/26.CC
15. E. H. Johnson to Thomas A. Edison 8/4/77. ED
16. Edison Speaking Phonograph Company. Articles of Association, By-laws, Contracts, etc. 1879 passim. CC & ED

17. See Raymond R. Wile "Introduction" in National Phonograph Association. Proceedings of the 1890 Convention of Local Phonograph Companies. Nashville, Country Music Foundation, c1974. p. xxi-xxiv passim.; Raymond R. Wile "The rise and fall of the Edison Speaking Phonograph Company, 1877-1880" in Association for Recorded Sound Collections. Journal. Vol VII, No. 3 (1976) p. 26.
18. Leader 11/1/77; Notes p. 3. CC
19. The Armour and Pennsylvania Railroad connections were noted while examining the Painter papers at the Historical Society of Pennsylvania. See also Notes p. 3. HS & CC
20. There are many documents at the Edison National Historic Site and among the Painter papers documenting the split. Apparently Painter was one of the first to fall into disfavor but eventually the majority of the individuals who had earlier been connected with Edison were frozen out. The major misunderstandings occurred at the time of the sale of the Edison phonograph rights to the North American Phonograph Company and also involved frictions arising out of the Sprague Street Railways and the Edison General Electric Company. The details will be treated at length in my proposed history of the sound recording and reproducing industry. HS and ED
21. Obituary in Leader 10/23/00. CC
22. Daily Tribune (New York) 5/20/85, Leader 11/26/85, Notes p. 3.
23. Unattributed clipping. CC
24. Unattributed clipping. CC
25. Clippings World (New York) undated; Ibid. 4/5/98. CC
26. Leader 2/22/93; Obituaries from various papers. CC
27. Notes p.1. CC; National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections, 1959-1962. Entry # SM 61-1129.