HALF A CENTURY OF NEW YORK NEWSPAPER LIFE

Personal Reminiscences of Famous Editors of the Sixties--How Tweed's Fire Engine Company Turned a Compositor Into a Reporter and the Seventh Regiment Helped to Serve a Warrant on Mayor Fernando Wood

By Major GEORGE F. WILLIAMS.

My father was a Captain in the British army, my grandfather held the same rank in the famous Scots Greys and participated in their historic cavalry charge at Waterloo, under Gen. Sir Thomas Picton, who was killed in the moment of victory. My boyhood days were passed on the Rock of Gibraltar, where I was born; on the Island of Malta, in the East Indies and Burma, at Berbice and Demerara, on the Gold Coast of Africa and in the West Indies.

Our regiment was almost decimated by yellow fever on the Island of Jamaica, nearly 200 of the officers and men dying out of a total force of 650. I was one of the victims, but recovered, as did most of the children present. To save the regiment from annihilation it was decided to send the command to the Island of Barbados for convalescence in open field camp, and finally to Nova Scotia.

After spending a month under canvas we embarked on what was known as a seventy-four gun frigate, the William IV. Scarcely had the huge ship passed out of sight of land when it encountered a terrific hurricane, which actually blew the frigate to near the coast of France. Though very close to England, military red tape naturally sent us back to Barbados, where we arrived after a tempestuous voyage of sixty-five days. Disembarking, we again lived under tents for a fortnight while the ship was cleaned and refitted.

During the month of November, 1848, the regiment arrived at St. John, N. B., on the Bay of Fundy. Destined for Halifax, the command had to march overland to that city, where all the winter clothing awaited us. The children born on what is called the "commissioned and enlisted lines" here encountered their first snowstorm, almost perishing with the cold. The elder boys preferred marching with the troops to freezing in the baggage wagon train. I shall never forget the suffering of that twenty-four days tramp, though I subsequently made many a fatiguing one during the civil war. Two years after the regiment was transferred to Canada, where both of my parents died from the effects of sudden and acute change in climate, leaving me an orphan at the age of 13.

Entering a newspaper office, I learned all branches of the printing trade, unconsciously becoming a rather fast typesetter. During 1856 I found myself a journeyman printer in the city of Buffalo and in July of that year arrived in New York city. There were no sleeping accommodations in the trains of those days, passengers passing the night as best they could in the uncomfortable coaches as they were then called.

Mayor Fernando Wood was at that time waging war on the cab drivers, who were fleecing the public in about the same way as our taxi companies have recently been doing. A mere boy of 19, with a small trunk and only three tattered dollars in my pocket, I left the Hudson River Railroad train at Eleventh avenue and Thirtieth street, not knowing that each car was hauled by a six horse team to the junction of Hudson and Chambers streets. Taking a cab for Lovejoy's Hotel, corner of Park Row and Beekman street, the driver demanded $4 from me as his fare. In my dilemma I appealed to the hotel clerk, asking him to pay the man and take my watch as security.

"Four dollars?" exclaimed the clerk. "We'll soon settle that."

On our going to the sidewalk we found that the cabman had disappeared, the fellow knowing that he risked a heavy fine and loss of license, so I saved my money.

Just then the hotel windows began rattling, as several cannon shots were fired in rapid succession before the City Hall. Asking the cause I was told that Capt. Rynders of Tammany Hall (now THE SUN building) was firing a salute of 100 guns in honor of the landing of our United States Minister to England, James Buchanan, who had recently been made the nominee of the Democratic party for President. It was quite a coincidence that Mr. Buchanan and I should arrive in town on the same day.

Mayor Wood had been, like many a man before and after him, elected as a reformer, and he began his administration by making a radical change in the city's police organization and regulations. In those days of fifty-odd years ago Americans were averse to wearing uniforms. Outside of the regular army and the militia no man could be induced to wear anything except citizen's dress, so the idea of organizing a police in uniform made a stir. Up to that time the cities of the State were policed by men whose only distinction was a huge brass star, worn on the lapel of a rather dilapidated coat. It was a very convenient arrangement, for when the constable wanted a glass of whiskey he could slip his brazen star into his pocket and indulge his desire with impunity.

Before Fernando Wood's advent there were not more than 100 of these "watchmen" on duty below Canal street. They were commanded by a solitary captain, who only saw his men when they went out on post or came in on being relieved, and not always then.

The New York police as organized by Mayor Wood numbered about 1,200 men. George W. Matsell was chief, with ten or fifteen captains and twice as many lieutenants. Civil service rules were of course unknown, appointments being commonly made by the Democratic district leaders. It was therefore not surprising that the rank and file was partially composed of what are now known as gunmen and gangsters.

Mayor Wood was' an unscrupulous politician of the old school and his aim was to create a body of men in visible authority to control the polls at elections. He at the same time made the streets safer at night and human life was a trifle more secure, but only a trifle. Hereafter I will show how the downfall of Wood and his bluecoated thugs came about.

Good compositors were scarce when I came to the city, so I soon found employment. The newspapers were THE SUN, *Herald*, *Tribune*, *Times* and *Zeitung* as morning issues. The *World* came soon after. The *Express* and *Commercial* were the evening papers. The morning sheets issued a four page edition at 2 and 4 A. M., containing two or three columns of late current news. Each regular evening paper began the day at 1 o'clock, with all the fresh news on its first page, the remainder of the sheet being filled with matter "from our second and third editions of yesterday." This old matter was discarded in succeeding issues to give space for afternoon news. But readers were satisfied.

It was considered a hardship among morning newspaper compositors that they were compelled to work on the Sabbath, and conscientious typos frequently avoided it by engaging substitutes, paying them half a dollar or more as a bonus. On the Sunday after my arrival I was offered a night's work on the *Times* with full cases and a bright half dollar in hand. To my surprise I found that my rate of setting type ranked about second among the thirty-five men on the floor. This led to my being made a "regular" on the first vacancy, and I held the stick and rule for over a year, when a trivial circumstance caused a complete change in my sphere of employment.

THE SUN was then in its twenty-third year and occupied the top floor and part of the first floor of a building on the southwest corner of Fulton and Nassau streets. The *Herald*, twenty-one years old, had absorbed two or three four story buildings, originally dwellings, at the northwest corner of the same streets. These had been, from time to time, rudely connected with each other, no two floors being on the same level. The *Tribune*, now in its fifteenth year, was located in a rather dilapidated brick building standing on the site of its present towering edifice. The *Times*, having struggled for five years, had only recently moved out of Theatre alley to the corner where the Beekman-Nassau Building now stands, and it remained there until it moved in 1857 into its new edifice on the site of the old Brick Church.

One of the strictest rules in composing rooms at that time (and for all I know it may exist now) was that in the event of a fight the man who struck the first blow was instantly and peremptorily discharged. A very good rule, but it so happened that in a dispute my fellow compositor struck me first, and as I had my steel rule in my hand when I struck back it cut his lip. This fact and the assertion of bystanders that my blow was the first struck misled the foreman and I found myself incontinently dismissed from my case.

Angered by the injustice I ran down stairs into Nassau street about midnight, just as over a thousand volunteer firemen and their attendant runners were rushing downtown with twenty or thirty hand fire engines and hose carts. Boylike I joined the mob, only to discover that the fire was a trifling one near the corner of John street.

The fact that there was nothing to do gave leisure for two rival engine companies to fight—one of them being "Big Six," afterward famous for having Bill Tweed as its foreman—so they turned their hose streams on each other, "washing" as it was called. From water the combatants next resorted to their steel hose wrenches, until several pistol shots brought silence upon the wild scene.

In those days the newspapers relied upon a little chap named Pepper for ordinary fires. Now it so happened that two men were wounded during the pistol shooting and I followed their bearers to the hospital in City Hall Park, where I secured the names of the wounded firemen and other necessary details. My being a discharged typo made no difference to Ned Moore, the *Times's* night editor, for he accepted my half column story of the battle. None of the other papers had a line about the tragedy—one of the men dying during the day. A "beat" counted for a good deal in those days, and I never set type afterward, Mr. Raymond promptly placing me on the *Times* editorial staff, and I became the sixth member of the happy little brotherhood. The change from a fast compositor to a cub reporter made a decided reduction in my income, but the new life had more charm for me, as against the drudgery of typesetting.

The Presidential campaign of 1856 was an exciting one. The new Republican party, destined to hold national power for over thirty years, had just sprung into existence, making Gen. John C. Fremont its nominee. Everybody was talking about the Missouri Compromise. The Dred Scott slave decision and the arrest of fugitive slaves in several free States had inflamed men's minds throughout the East and the West. Violent demands made by the cotton States and members of Congress that slavery be extended into Kansas and other United States Territories inflamed veins of the body politic, while what was called the "Border Ruffian War" added fresh fuel to a fierce though smouldering fire.

For the first time political processions took on a quasi military character, the Republicans turning out tolerably well drilled and partially uniformed bodies of men. Mr. Buchanan's election was a foregone conclusion, but the new party had shown unexpected strength. The controversy over, the extension of slavery became heated and violent in both houses of Congress, party ties were loosened in men's minds and a feeling of uncertainty reigned. Senator Charles Sumner was assaulted in the Chamber by Preston Brooks, and this coupled with bitter threats by Southern members on the floors of both houses of Congress, gave new impetus to the hostile feeling throughout the North and the South. It was a portentous epoch, and political discussion among all classes of men was heated and acrimonious.

At saloon bars and restaurant or hotel tables, in street cars and on railroad trains, in church vestibules and hotel corridors; over the shop counter and at the bank window, in the machine shop, amid roar of wheels and shafts; on the farm and at the crossroads, where men met on their way to market or meeting house; in lawyers' offices and the courts of law, in jury rooms, where men forgot the evidence they were considering to argue on political issues; in the family circle and on the street, in stock exchanges and on the curb, at the village blacksmith's forge and post office; in the barn and the hay field, in the quiet country store and the tavern, warm argument was the ruling passion. Yet few imagined that the nation was in danger of an internecine war.

Fernando Wood was an ardent supporter of the Southern view of the existing situation, and he did not scruple to use his police force to break up city Republican meetings. So arbitrary was the Mayor that he roused the State Legislature, irrespective of party, in 1857, to pass the Metropolitan police act. This bill created a force having authority in New York and Brooklyn, with nearly all of the territory now known as Greater New York. The usual legal devices were resorted to by Wood in hopes of defeating the act on grounds of its unconstitutionality; injunctions were obtained from convenient Judges and local anarchy seemed impending.

Finally the court of last resort decided in favor of the bill, when the new commissioners called upon the Mayor to surrender authority over his police force. He defiantly refused, so a warrant was issued for his arrest, which was placed in the hands of Capts. Carpenter and Dilks for service. These intrepid officers started for the City Hall with 150 Metropolitans on one hot July day to serve the warrant, though it was known that Wood had assembled over 600 of his uniformed ruffians in the basement and corridors.

In rear of the City Hall there is still a flight of steep steps, then surrounded by a high iron spiked fence, with a narrow open gate. Having been detailed to report the proceedings and being denied admittance to the hall because the *Times* was inimical to Wood I rather foolishly sat down on these rear steps awaiting the outcome. Carpenter and Dilks boldly ascended the steps, closely followed by about half their straw hatted force. Then trouble began, for several hundred men of the old police rushed out and gave fierce battle. One of the Metropolitans was fatally wounded and many badly hurt. During the melee I received a crack on the head from a club, and how I got over that six foot railing I never knew.

News of Mayor Wood's armed resistance was telegraphed to Gov. John A. King, who took advantage of the presence of the Seventh Regiment in Broadway, it being on the way to Boston to join in some celebration. The command was halted by the Governor's order at Chambers street and Col. Abram Duryee marched his knapsacked companies into the park. Taking possession of all the doors and approaches to the City Hall at the point of the bayonet and driving Wood's policemen out of the building Duryee saw the warrant duly served. Mayor Wood then surrendered, and the Seventh proceeded on its way to the steamer chartered for the excursion. During the following month nearly every man in the old force asked for a position in the Metropolitan ranks, only those who could prove good character being accepted.

The morning newspapers were at that time rigidly confined to eight pages of the same size as those now used, the evening journals being blanket sheets of four big square pages. The Hoe six, eight, and finally ten cyclinder revolving presses had been introduced in the early '50s and were believed to be the acme in that direction of mechanics. Compared with the web perfecting presses these cylinder machines would now be thought only fit for the junk heap. They had a capacity of 1,000 copies per cylinder per hour and consisted of a huge central drum, on which were clamped, on a quarter section, heavy iron frames called turtles because of their convex type surfaces. Each page of type, cleverly bound together, became wedged into a solid mass, and when the big drum revolved the forms were inked as they encountered impression cylinders carrying wetted separate sheets of paper, which fell to a table underneath.

The first set of forms consisted of the second, third, sixth and seventh pages, containing advertisements, financial and market reports, with the earlier news. This side went to press about 11 o'clock, the second reaching the pressroom at 3 A. M. with the latest intelligence, the half printed sheets being handled over again. When the customary news columns could not accommodate all the night's supply of real news the needed space was only obtained—strange as it may appear to advertising managers of the present day—by throwing out whole columns of advertising already paid for. This cramped condition of press facilities continued until the beginning of the civil war, when stereotype plates were invented, which permitted the issue of supplements.

During 1856 Robert Bonner began pushing the sale of his New York *Ledger* by filling columns and pages of the daily papers with small four line reiterated announcements saying that Sylvanus Cobb or Fanny Fern wrote for the *Ledger*. Henry J. Raymond was fond of printing in the *Times* a special original article by some well known author, but he never complained when his night editor omitted these articles to avoid throwing aside paid advertisements.

One morning an entire page was taken up by Bonner's repeated advertisements, when the founder of the *Times* rose in wrath and in a fierce editorial announced that while the *Times* had no objection to aiding the *Ledger's* circulation there was a limit to patience, so Mr. Bonner could in future, and at double rates, have only three columns per day for his benefit. Bonner of course took advantage of this free advertising by filling his three columns in the next day's *Times* with a small advertisement headed "No You Don't, Mr. Raymond," in which the editor was told that the *Ledger* would never desert him.

Raymond was naturally furious over this ridicule, but his business instincts forbade throwing away $600 whenever Bonner chose to so spend the money. A day came when the *Times*, SUN, *Herald* and *Tribune* printed eight page supplements filled with Bonner advertising.

Bill posting was conducted on free lance principles in the early '50s, though the "regulars" respected each other's paper. One day Bonner employed some outsiders to post 50,000 costly illuminated posters, which were promptly covered over by the "regulars." Undaunted by this move Bonner adopted new tactics. Hiring forty or fifty men he gave them 100,000 one sheet bills, printed in red ink, and asking: "Have You Read the New York *Ledger?*"

Working in the early morning hours these men covered every poster in sight on hoardings and fences, so that at sunrise the entire city, from Central Park to the Battery, wore a garment of scarlet. Of course there was a row, and Bonner had to promise not to repeat the performance, which he could very well afford to do. It has been said that this incident originated the slang phrase of painting the town red.

While on the subject of advertising it is well to remember that when Hill, the theatrical manager, went to Boston with Denman Thompson he filled an entire page of every newspaper in the Hub with a big type announcement of the play. Mr. Thompson happened to be a personal friend of the leading Boston pastor, who asked the actor if he had any share in the pecuniary profits of the piece.

"Of course I have," was the reply.

"Then why do you allow your manager to waste money on whole newspaper pages when one-tenth of the space would do as well?"

The actor took the same view and suggested that Hill be less extravagant.

"Say, Thompson," thundered Hill, "do you imagine your friend the dominie would have even noticed our play if we had not put in a handbill instead of the usual ten line 'ad'? Why, man, that big 'ad' is a surety for full houses during the whole engagement."

Thompson did "see" and never again interfered.

Newspaper comment was often very bitter in those days, the editorship being of a decidedly personal character. The *Herald* was known as "The Satanic Press." Greeley edited the *Tribune* as "The Whitecoated Philosopher" and Raymond had earned the nickname of "The Little Villain." Such phrases as "our esteemed contemporary" had not yet been invented. Whenever the *Times*, *Herald* and *Tribune* assailed each other, and they were always at it, the fiercest invective dropped from the pens of the editorial rivals. Readers seemed to enjoy these philippics, and it became the custom to ask "Have you seen what Raymond or Bennett or Greeley says to-day?"

Henry J. Raymond was a very mild, equable tempered man, though he could often use vigorous, vituperative language on paper. He never scolded while finding fault, speaking apparently more in sorrow than in anger, his reproof having all the more effect. As the years rolled on all of these famous editors happened to meet at the funeral of a distinguished citizen, the melancholy occasion leading to peace among them.

But Horace Greeley, being forgetful and absentminded, one day forgot the compact and pounded Raymond in his accustomed style. That afternoon Mr. Raymond called me into his room, and pointing to the objectionable editorial requested me to go over to the *Tribune* office, see Mr. Greeley and politely remind him that he had broken through the bounds of courtesy.

I found the old gentleman almost buried in a mass of exchanges, some covering his desk. On hearing my message, which I had to twice repeat before he understood, the queer old fellow broke out with his customary profanity.

"You go back, young man, and tell Henry," said he, "that he has been an editor long enough to know that there are damned fools in every newspaper office and this one is full of them. When I wrote that article I intended to treat Henry very gently, but those damned compositors upstairs put everything upside down."

Mr. Raymond laughed heartily over Greeley's quaint ingenuity in thus confessing himself as the real offender, but the latter never transgressed in that way again.

The founder of the *Herald* was a glutton for news, subordinating to that feature the editorial matter. He also liked advertising. One night the pressure of important news and paid matter was so great that William F. Smythe, the *Herald* night editor, began throwing out the Wall Street and market columns and finally every editorial. "Doug" Levien, one of the editorial writers, loudly complained at the sacrifice. Mr. Bennett's reply was:

"It's a very gude paper, Levien, and ye needn't complain. Why, mon, dinna ye notice the advartisements?"

Sarcastic in mood and temper, Mr. Bennett possessed a keen sense of humor. He had a horror of typographical errors and invariably complained to his foreman, frequently demanding the dismissal of the offender. In such cases the foreman often protected a valuable man by asserting that the error had been committed by a "sub" compositor who held no regular situation, the explanation being accepted in silence.

One afternoon the old gentleman climbed upstairs to the composing room to examine some mechanical improvement. He was met on the way by a young man who dodged to and fro until he was told to stand still. Hurrying past the editor went on, then stopped and demanded:

"And who are ye?"

"Oh, I'm nobody, just a sub."

"Eh, mon, let us hae a look at ye. I never saw a sub before."

The Associated Press was at that time in its infancy, Mr. Raymond and Frederic Hudson having frequent cause for exchanging notes concerning it. Sent one day with one of these notes I met on the *Herald* stairs, which were dark and unlighted, an old gentleman who seemed to be in a hurry. As we stumbled together he shouted:

"And where are ye going? Canna ye let a body pass?"

"All right," was my reply. "But if I owned this office I'd have these stairs lighted and the steps mended."

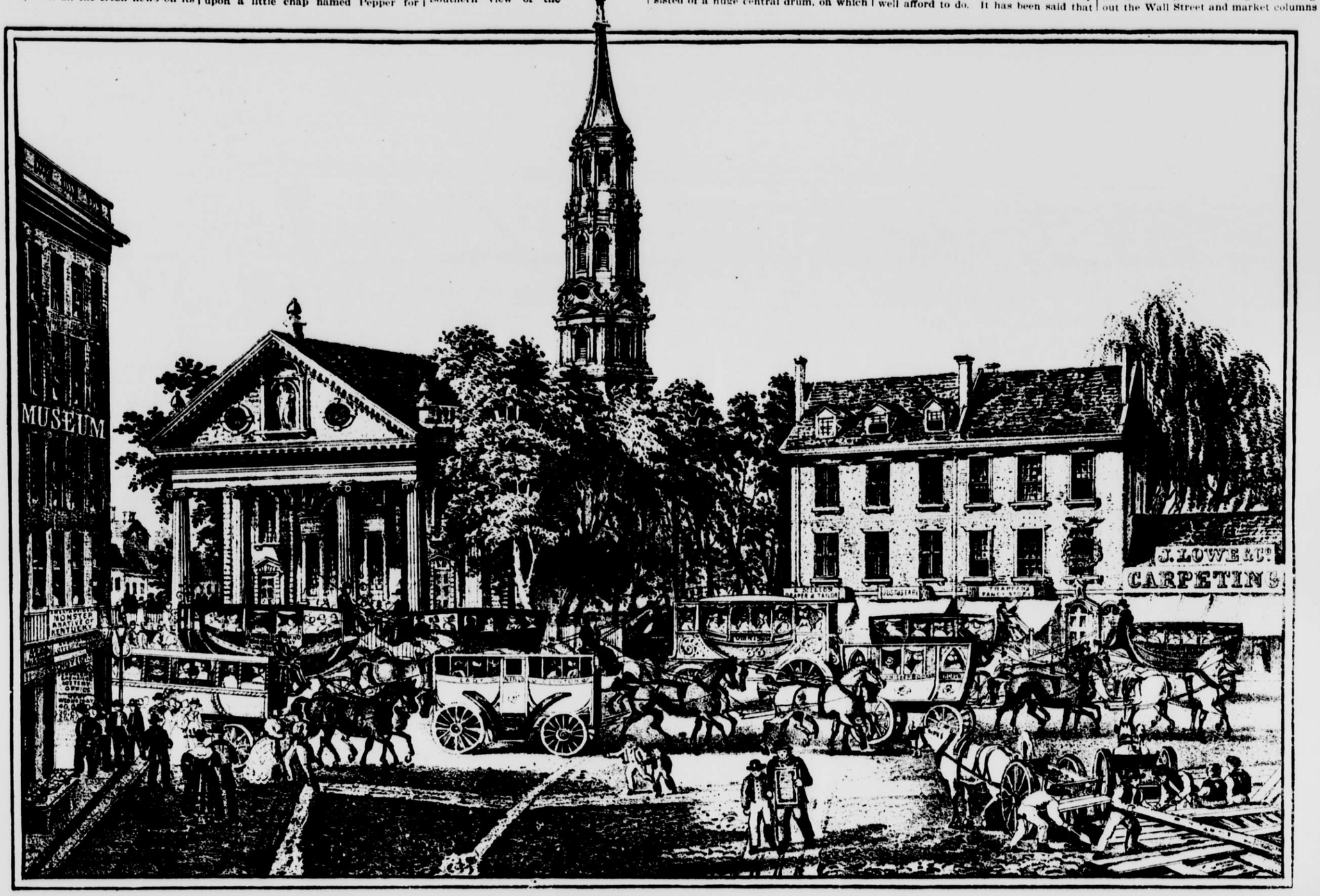
"Eh, but that's weel thocht of," said he, and disappeared.

The following Saturday I went again to the *Herald* building to meet one of the reporters for a fishing excursion on the Harlem River, then famous for such sport. As I entered the city room I saw the same old gentleman coming from Mr. Hudson's sanctum.

"Eh, young mon, we hae had the gawse put in and the stairs mended. Dinna ye mind that?" said he, whimsically.

"Yes, sir," I replied, confusedly, now realizing that it was Mr. Bennett, "and I'm glad of it."

There was an expression of awe on every reporter's face as I spoke.



Lower Broadway