

The Civil War

Townsend led fight for monument to newsmen



Above: George Alfred Townsend became a rich and widely read columnist, poet and novelist. Right: The monument is known as the War Correspondents Arch. It became the centerpiece of Townsend's estate.

By Michael Richman
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The Civil War marked a primitive, yet new and dramatic, era in American journalism. Tendencies by reporters to exaggerate events and convey inaccurate information because of poor lines of communication became glaring as the war progressed.

The Northern press supplied usually a more realistic canvas of the war than Southern reporters, who wrote misleading stories — particularly after the Union victory at Gettysburg in 1863 — for fear that the truth about Confederate losses would devastate civilian morale. "The reporting of news by the Southern press was an essential ingredient not simply of journalism but also of the Confederate propaganda effort," wrote J. Cutler Andrews in his 1970 book, "The South Reports the Civil War."

But, particularly, the Civil War signaled journalism's advance into electronic sophistication. Before the war, the telegraph was used for news gathering only to a limited extent. But as fighting induced an intense demand for the rapid transmission of news, reporters used the telegraph to relay information that appeared on front pages faster than ever.

After the surrender of Fort Sumter, newspapers emblazoned on their reports the phrase "by telegraph," possibly because, in itself, editors felt it was as impres-

sive as the beginning of the war.

Nearly 600 correspondents — known as "specials" — reported on a war that divided the nation, more than half of them representing newspapers in Union states. The most daring newsmen assumed the same risks during battle as the armies they covered, and they were frequently regarded by some Union generals as impediments to the prosecution of the war: Gen. William T. Sherman was notorious for his dislike of the breed.

One of the war's elite reporters was George Alfred Townsend, born in Georgetown, Del., in 1841, the son of an itinerant Methodist preacher. He went to work for the Philadelphia Inquirer the day he graduated from high school in 1860. At 21, he began reporting from the front lines in Virginia for the New York Herald in 1862. He relayed details on the Seven Days Battle and the ensuing Battle of Malvern Hills, after which Union Gen. George B. McClellan retreated down the peninsula, and on the Battle of Cedar Mountain. After acquiring a case of "Chickahominy fever," he went to England and pursued other journalistic and literary work.

Townsend returned to the United States in 1864 and eventually signed on with the New York World. At the 1865 Battle of Five Forks, where Union troops decisively defeated elements of the

Army of Northern Virginia a few days before Appomattox, Townsend was given an account of the battle directly by Union Gen. Philip H. Sheridan. His report got to New York before most other writers were aware of the significance of the battle and earned Townsend the nickname "Scoop," as recounted in Jerry Shields' book "Gath's Literary Work and Folk." (Townsend's reports were signed with his initials "GAT," and at some point he added an "h" and became widely known as "Gath.")

After the war, Townsend became a rich and widely read columnist, poet and novelist. In 1884, he bought a tract of land in Maryland's Washington County at Grampton's Cap — one of the sites at which the 1862 Battle of South Mountain was fought two days before Antietam. There he built a complex of stone buildings on the estate he named "Gapland."

Townsend led the effort to erect a monument to the Civil War newspaper correspondents, artists and photographers, and it was dedicated on Oct. 16, 1896. The monument is known — to the degree it is known — as the War Correspondents Arch, an odd but compelling memorial that is not really on the way to anywhere. It became the centerpiece of his estate, which is now Gathland State Park.

The monument near Burkittsville was Townsend's unique and lasting endeavor. Recently, John

Howard, superintendent of the nearby Antietam and Monocacy National Battlefields and overseer of the arch, presided at a ceremony marking the monument's 100th anniversary. The tribute featured CNN correspondent Peter Arnett, who covered the Vietnam War and has been honored for his reporting from Iraq in the Persian Gulf war, and Dorothy Rasmussen, a great-granddaughter of Townsend's.

The monument lists the names of 157 Civil War correspondents, photographers and artists. Some of the more prominent are Junius Henri Browne of the St. Louis Republican, Sylvanus Cadwallader and Henry Villard of the New York Herald, Joseph Burbridge McCullagh of the Cincinnati Commercial and Gazette, and Peter Wellington Alexander of the Savannah (Ga.) Republican. Also prominent are Matthew Brady, who with his associates produced more than 3,500 photos of battle and camp scenes, and Edwin Forbes, a celebrated sketch artist of the war.

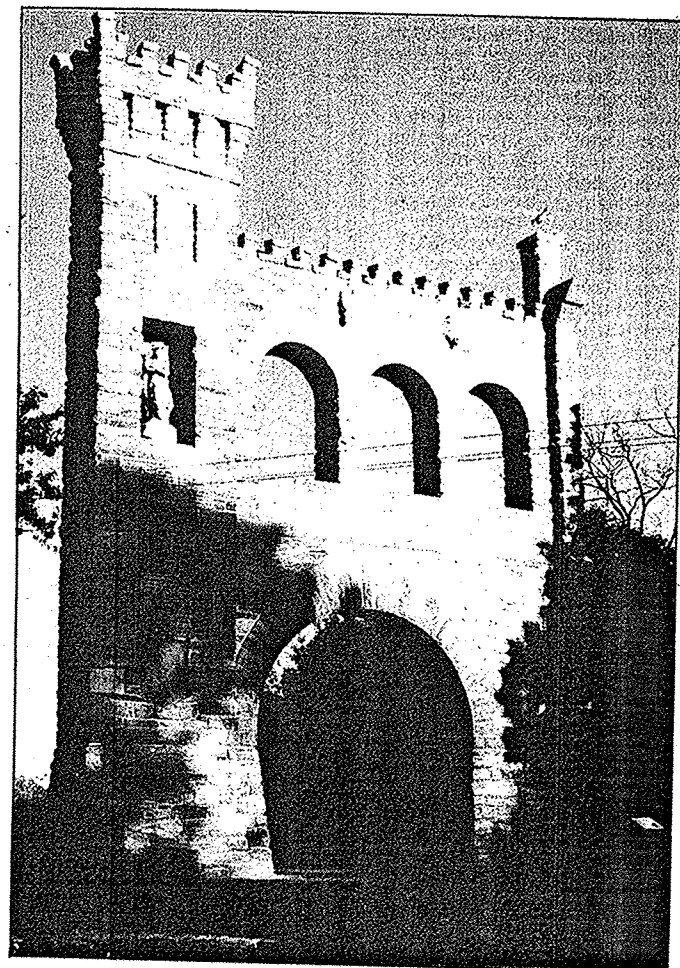
The words "War Correspondents" are engraved on the front of the arch. The monument has no particular design — it is "just a collection of symbols" recognizing the work of Civil War journalists, says Lorna Hainesworth, a member of the Friends of Gathland State Park Inc., which maintains the site.

At the bottom of the 50-by-40-foot structure is a 16-foot-high Moorish arch of Hummelstown purple stone. Three superimposed Roman arches, which represent description, depiction and photograph, are above the Moorish arch. Niches shelter the carvings of two horses' heads, emblematic of the correspondents' transportation. Muses symbolizing the telegraph and writing are accompanied by the words "speed" and "heed," respectively.

Townsend chose the monument's conspicuous asymmetry based on the Antietam Volunteer Fire Co. in Hagerstown, which was near a train station at which he would stop on his way back from Washington. Among the famous names who helped finance the project were Joseph Pulitzer and Thomas Edison.

Townsend made sure to include his name among the long list of Northern journalists, some of whom were part of "The Bohemian Brigade" — a group of correspondents who covered Union Gen. John C. Fremont's army in the West. Young, literary and partisan, they envisioned the conflict as an extension of what they called "Bohemia," a carefree and unconventional status where people do as they choose.

George Regan, a coordinator of the Society of Civil War Correspondents, speaking at the recent ceremony, wore clothing of the era



and portrayed Junius Browne, who was imprisoned by the rebels in Vicksburg, Miss., in 1862.

"The war correspondent is a hybrid, neither a soldier nor a citizen; with the Army, but not of it," Mr. Regan quoted from Browne's memoirs. "He is present at battles, and often participating in them, yet without any rank or recognized existence."

As the war intensified and the competition for news, especially among correspondents from the Union, became ever fiercer, newspapers began energetically deploying special correspondents to the battle front. Four Chicago newspapers, two from Philadelphia, and five New York papers — including the World, the Evening Post, the Times and the Tribune — hired "specials" New York, with a total of 17 daily newspapers, dominated wartime reporting.

One of the many correspondents from the New York press, Townsend quickly became known as a savvy journalist. Before the war, he was a drama editor for the Philadelphia Press for a time, during which he came to know an actor named John Wilkes Booth.

A few weeks before President Lincoln was assassinated on April

14, 1865, Townsend accidentally encountered Booth while on his way to cover the fighting in Virginia. After Lincoln was shot, Townsend was thus in a rare position to write about the assassin as he was still being sought.

Townsend compiled considerable detail about Booth through various sources, such as New York police detectives who were willing to share confidential information, and the New York World was able to publish a series of reports that added "to the fame already created by his recent reporting of the war," Mr. Shields writes.

The monument that George Alfred Townsend inspired and saw to completion on a secluded and placid Maryland hilltop is believed to be the only one in the nation honoring those who brought the grim news of the war to homes in the North and South.

In poor health in his later years, Townsend died in April 1914 and was buried in Philadelphia, having proudly commemorated his wartime journalism and that of his colleagues.

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