

Ambassador Walter Hines Page Came Home To Die

BY ROBERT MASON
Walter Hines Page was a Tar Heel born and a Tar Heel bred, and when he died he was a Tar Heel dead—and buried in Old Bethesda churchyard outside Aberdeen. Otherwise he seldom was in North Carolina, except for an unprofitable year in Raleigh. The Civil War, which ended before he was 10 years old, dictated his exile.

Born in Cary August 15, 1855, in a family that became renowned for business and political accomplishments, Walter as a child was studious. "There's my bookworm," his father, Allison Francis Page, would say, bemused. He was a poor hand in his mother's vegetable garden. His parents hoped he would apply his peculiarities to the Methodist ministry.

At age 13 the boy rode a railway coach to Bingham School in Mebane, which had been founded in 1793 by the Rev. William Bingham, a Presbyterian from the Scottish community in Northern Ireland, and was operated at the time by Major Robert Bingham, a Confederate veteran. Three years later, in 1871, the Major would become the father of a son christened Robert Worth Bingham, who would become Ambassador to the Court of St. James—and for Walter Hines Page that would be a remarkable coincidence.

For a long time an academic path, so to speak, had led from Bingham School's oak grove to Davie Poplar, on the University of North Carolina campus, and it would be traveled again. But when young Page left Bingham after a two-year hitch in the cadet corps there, he enrolled in the brand-new Cary Academy, which his father had helped to organize and build. A year later, in the fall of 1871, he presented himself at Trinity College. The University had shut down in 1870, victimized by Reconstruction misgovernment, and would be dormant until 1875.

Chose Trinity
Davidson and Wake Forest College were available, having relit their lamps in 1866 after the Civil War blackout, but they were, respectively, Presbyterian and Baptist institutions. The Pages had been Methodists for about as long as there had been Methodism—ever since Walter's

great-grandfather, Lewis Page, up in Lunenburg County in Virginia, had embraced the frontier persuasion. So Walter bounced in a buggy to Trinity, which now is Duke University in Durham but which in 1871 was "nothing but a gaunt, square brick building, much out of repair, surrounded by a scraggly lawn and a wooden fence," in rural Randolph County.

Page began life at Trinity by refusing, fists balled, to be hazed. That is one story. Another is that he moved after a single evening in his first boarding place because the widowed landlady had daughters who might distract him from his books. (A more likely version features Baltimore belles when Page was a fellow at Johns Hopkins University.) And there's the legend that the already-somewhat-elegant Page couldn't abide Old Man Braxton Craven, who was classicist, attorney, mathematician, astronomer, preacher, tobacco-chewing dirt farmer, blacksmith, wood-cutter, cobbler, miller, storekeeper, nurse, and president of Trinity College. Page surely yearned for more stimulating surroundings.

He found them, again under Methodist shelter, at Randolph-Macon College in Virginia, which he entered in 1872 in response to a recruiting visit to Fayetteville by the president, the Rev. James A. Duncan. Graduating after three years with prizes in Greek and oratory, he was recommended by Professor James R. Price, whom he admired, to Professor Basil Lanneau Gildersleeve, a nationally recognized scholar charged with setting up a classics department at fledgling Johns Hopkins University. Page was among the first 20 fellows installed there. The next year he toured Germany, which was becoming the world capital of scholarship.

When Page went home to Cary, the University of North Carolina had been functioning again for three years. In an effort to repair some of the damage to public enlightenment that its suspension illustrated, and by grace of the George Peabody Fund, it sponsored a "summer normal school"—a teacher-training institute. Page was pleased to be asked to head the English department.

At Chapel Hill he met Edwin A.

Alderman, who would become president of three universities—North Carolina, Tulane, and Virginia; Charles D. McIver, who would found the Normal and Industrial School that now is the University of North Carolina at Greensboro (and twice turn down the Chapel Hill presidency); and Charles B. Aycock, who at the turn of the 20th century would be elected North Carolina's "education governor." All were underclassmen at the university.

Page's homecoming might—just might—have become permanent if North Carolina hadn't been so poor. It lacked the money to add him to the university's permanent faculty.

But it wasn't hard for Page, having gone away, to go again. He had lost his provincialism. In Virginia he had become Jeffersonian. At Johns Hopkins he had studied with and under, as he wrote his cousin Sarah Jasper, "Jews, Catholics, and I suspect, also atheists...this might be so from the very nature of the institution." In Germany he had met a good many fellow-students from America and noticed that mighty few were southerners.

He took a job teaching English literature and rhetoric at Male High School in Lexington, Ky., for \$1,500 a year. The salary was less attractive to him than the notion that the move "may open the way for me to—well, journalism."

The writing bug had bitten him. And that happened. A Lexington man with money and literary interests who imagined a need for a Southern-biased magazine started *The Age*, which he "modeled after the English weekly reviews." Page bought in by signing a thousand-dollar note. He did well at writing editorials and reviews but poorly at hawking advertising. The venture flopped. He went home and spent the next eight months looking for a job. He applied to practically every newspaper in North Carolina. To kill time, he wrote a story set in Hillsborough that contained thoughts he was developing on a new course for the South. He sent the thick manuscript to William Dean Howells, editor of the *Atlantic Monthly* in Boston. Howells bought and published it.

Encouraged, Page circularized the country for a newspaper position. But his elaborate resumes brought no replies. Toward the end of 1879 he placed a "card"—a glorified want ad—in the *Nation*, a New York magazine that he figured editors and publishers read.

From St. Joseph, Mo., came results. James Burns, owner of the *Gazette* there, hired him, unseemingly at \$15 a week to cover the stockyards and police beat. Page borrowed \$50 from his father and headed west.

He got out of Cary just in time. All the other Pages—father, mother, four sons, three daughters—were leaving. Allison Francis Page had concluded that he could not recoup his pre-Civil War affluence in Wake County. He had lost \$10,000 in cotton and tobacco manufacturing, and was ready to return to lumbering, in which he had pro-



AMBASSADOR — Walter Hines Page is shown on arrival in London to begin duties as Ambassador to Court of St. James in May of 1913.

felt secure enough to marry Alice Wilson, a Michigan-born girl he had known at Cary Academy and at Chapel Hill. The ceremony took place in St. Louis.

After a year and a half in St. Joseph, Page turned himself into one-man newspaper syndicate reporting Southern conditions and attitudes to the metropolitan press. "Soon I was rolling in wealth," he would recall. "I had money in my pocket for the first time in my life."

The New York World invited him to join its staff, and he accepted. He continued to be a roving reporter, covering what he chose. In Atlanta he chanced to meet Woodrow Wilson, who had just begun to practice law there.

Then he was summoned to the New York office as an editorial writer and literary critic. He had been in the ivory tower a year when Joseph Pulitzer, the Rudolph Murdoch of his time, took over the World. Pulitzer called an editorial-staff meeting and announced: "Gentlemen... heretofore you have all been living in the parlor and taking baths every year. Now I wish you to understand that, in the future, you are all walking down the Bowery."

Walter Hines Page was no more a Bowery man than he had been a Trinity youth. He wasn't a North Carolina man either, but he hadn't learned that. At age 28, father of two sons, still looking for an anchor, he returned to the state of his birth and upbringing with firm intentions of staying.

Raleigh Newspaper

In Raleigh, Page took over a failing weekly newspaper, the *State Chronicle*, with offices beneath a store. He converted it into a daily and gave it a format much like the *New York World's*. And he set about to revolutionize North Carolina.

"Never was there such a stirring of dry bones in the old state," Samuel A. Court Ashe, who edited the rival *News and Observer* and quarreled editorially with Page, would remember in his *Biographical History of North Carolina*. Almost every other state historian of the era has demonstrated a fascination with Page.

"He was trying to needle his state into action... to turn its back on a past with which it was too

much occupied," wrote Rose Howell Holder in a biography of Charles D. McIver. Josephus Daniels, who first observed Page from Wilson, where he edited a weekly, found his "style nervous and vigorous. He brought, I thought, a new breath of fresh air into North Carolina journalism." (But, as Daniels' biographer, Joseph L. Morrison, pointed out, on going daily with the *Chronicle*, Page took on two established rivals at hopeless odds.)

The author of a four-volume Page biography, Burton J. Hendrick, provided details of Page's editorial bombardment. Page ridiculed the state and rest of the South for their "One Subject" politics: the Negro. In a demand for Negro education and industrial training he bluntly advised: "Let his women alone"—a shocking message to lynch-prone defenders of Southern (i.e., white) womanhood. He even suggested that the money spent on monuments to Confederate mothers would be better channeled to schools for their illiterate children. The state's young people, he insisted, were its best hope, making "a few first-class funerals" its greatest need.

The turgid oratory of legislative halls and the hustings offended Page's sense of literary form and his intelligence. The Old Soldier forever seeking political office on the strength of an empty sleeve, a dubious rank, and a much-rehearsed recital of brave marches and glorious battles and heroic retreats, became his special butt.

Page was not always the angry editor. He was fond of starting humorous controversies, such as a noted discussion of "the best way to cook a rabbit." And he could be charming in occasional pieces about a fishing excursion to a country pond or a long-ago conversation with his grandfather. But sooner or later he would denounce the South's frying pan and catfish hole as hatefully as he mocked its campfire embers and fat-pine torches.

Watauga Club

He had admirers as well as critics. Young men who gravitated to his basement desk shared his fervor for public education, black schools as well as white, and especially for industrial training. Six of them joined him in the Watauga Club,

which, revived and revised, exists yet; and through it were primarily responsible for the establishment of the North Carolina Agricultural and Mechanical College, now North Carolina State University.

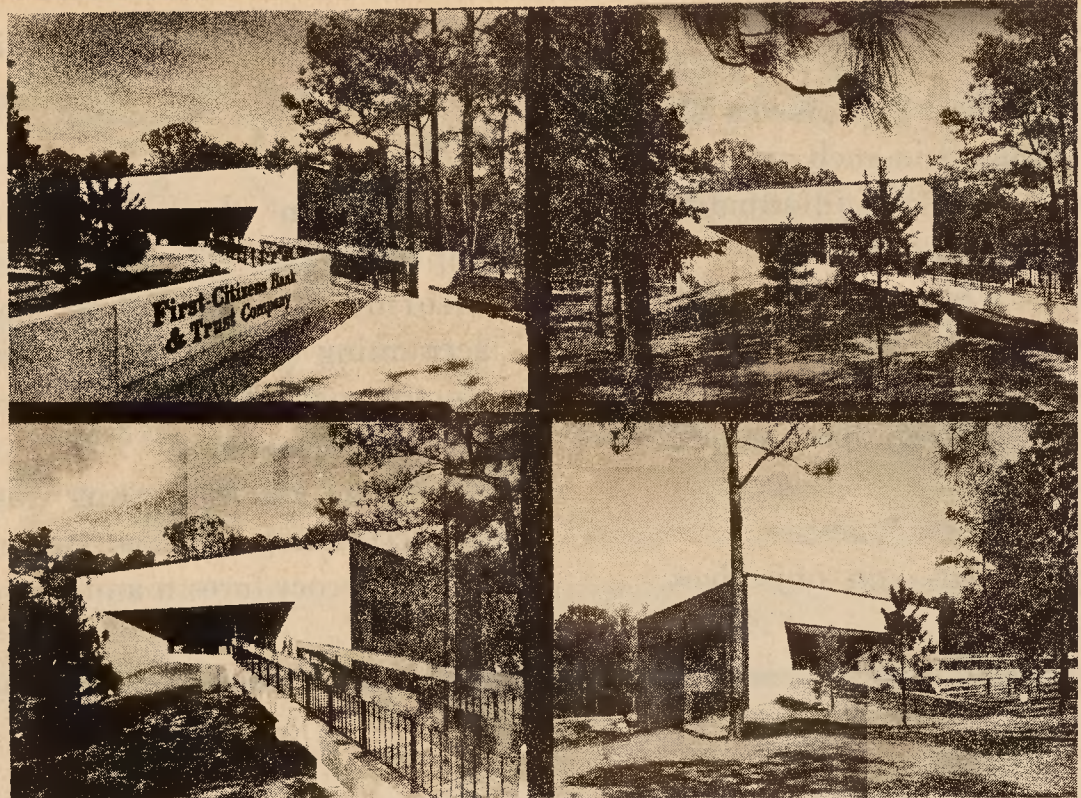
If Page had been able to wangle the state printing contract, worth \$1,500 a year, he might have made it. Instead he lost his shirt. Taking two weeks off to prospect again for a job outside the state, he brought Josephus Daniels from Wilson to fill his chair.

Page felt rejected by his native state. But if indeed he was rejected, it was not as a Tar Heel. It was as a cosmopolitan among a parochial people who, even when looking ahead, clung to old experiences, old memories, and old values. If the University of North Carolina had been available to him and he had studied there, Page might have obtained as much academic learning as he acquired at Trinity, Randolph-Macon, and Johns Hopkins. But he would not have sat among "Jews, Catholics, and...atheists." It is not likely that he would have visited England and toured Germany and noticed that few Southerners traveled far in a quest for knowledge. Surely he would have forsaken his boyhood faith and given serious thought, as he had done, of becoming a Unitarian minister (deciding against it mainly because he did not wish to break his Methodist mother's heart). The chances are that he, like Alderman and McIver and Aycock, would have pondered North Carolina from its bosom rather than as an often-straying son. But Reconstruction flowing from the Civil War closed the University of North Carolina just when Page was ready for it.

Besides the handicap of being far ahead of North Carolina's thinking, Walter Hines Page bore a poor business head, as his sympathetic but puzzled father well knew. Young Joe Daniels saw enough of the *State Chronicle* in two weeks to understand its flaws and potential. He returned to Wilson and his \$100 a month income.

However, the next year Daniels resurrected the *Chronicle*, laid the groundwork for his legislative appointment as state printer, bulldozed Ashe into selling him

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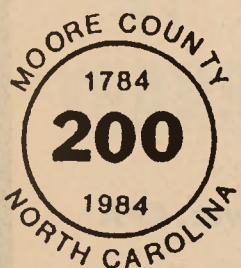


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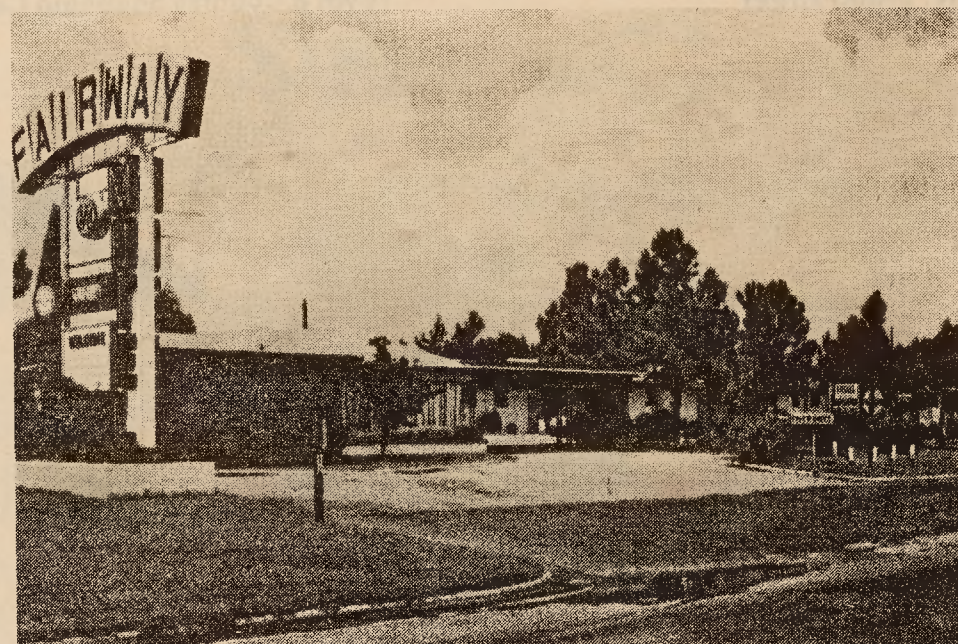
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