

PAUL E. WIRT:

Inventor of Improvements in the Fountain Pen

By George A. Turner

In "The Passing Throng" a regular column that appeared years ago in *The Morning Press*, on December 10, 1938, there appeared a letter written by Wesley Wirt, a Civil War soldier, to his son, Paul Estherly Wirt. The father, the commissary sergeant of the 171st Pennsylvania Volunteers, a nine months regiment, wrote the letter while stationed at New Bern, North Carolina, on March 27, 1863. Fearing that he might die in the war, he wanted to share some fatherly advice with his thirteen-year-old son whom he held in high regard.

Wesley Wirt, born in Espy and forty-two years old, was much older than the average soldier. In his early years he taught school in New Jersey and later established a school in New Columbus, Huntington Township in Luzerne County, that subsequently became a successful academy. At the age of thirty-one he decided to leave teaching to study law under attorneys John Cooper and Charles R. Buckalew and became a member of the Columbia County Bar. He and his wife, Susan, were the parents of seven children: Paul, William, Florence, Rueben, Augusta, Martha, and Charles. Two of their children, Rueben and Augusta, died in 1860 and 1861. The Bloomsburg Town Council elected him in 1873 as its secretary, which he held until his death on April 25, 1878. The letter follows:

Dear Paul:

You are now arrived at an age when you can begin to understand something of life, and when you should begin to examine intelligently whether or not you are as well prepared as other boys have been for the great contest in which all men have to engage. For a real contest you will find it if you live to the age of your father.

I have great confidence in your integrity, Paul. I know you to be an honest, as well as a sensible, boy; and unless something has changed, or does change, this early character of yours, you will come to be a man respected by the world and by yourself, which latter is of more importance than most people imagine. I do not propose to read you a long homily on the value of goodness, for most youths hear so much of this from inconsistent Sunday School teachers and ministers, and have it thrust before them so often in their schoolbooks, that they are apt to become disgusted - not with piety and morality themselves, but with the constant prating thereof. I only wish to give you my opinion as a man of the world and as your nearest friend, except your mother, in the world. I do not propose to treat as most fathers do their sons, to give you cold and distant advice and imperious directions. It is as a friend and younger companion that I shall always treat

you. This I desire to have impressed on your mind that you may be self-reliant and fearless, and actuated by the highest of motives; for as to positive punishment, you will, I think, never receive any from me, unless, in cases of dereliction of duty to yourself or to society, you will consider the disapprobation and indignant astonishment of your father as such. We all have faults and your father and, perhaps yourself, have grievous ones; but this should not hinder us while we strive in our love for correct principle to correct these faults from holding up our heads like men. For to err is human. As Burns says, "A man is a man for a' that."

Now then, Paul, (and I hope the advice is not necessary), make a man of yourself. This is to be done by education and the education I speak of is acquired by habits of thought and reflection, by observation and reading. These with the love for what is proper and honorable, and a due respect for yourself, will do the work. Mind, I stick for self-respect; for I have no patience with this feigned humility which is so fashionable among hypocrites. One man is as good as another, especially if he knows as much, as is as honorable and high-minded as the other. I may see very little of you in the future, for there is no telling when the war and the consequent separation of families will cease; and you will soon be a young man; and I may die any moment away from home. It is true I hope and indeed expect to spend many happy days with you and your mother and your brothers and sisters, but I cannot help feeling whenever I write that it may be my last letter.

Above all things, Paul, if you care for my esteem, and expect to be happy in the future, be kind to your mother; but this, too, I hope is useless caution. It will be well, however, for you to remember that nothing would alienate me from you so quick as unkindness to her, especially in my absence.

Write to me often; and be a little careful as to the style in which your letters are got up - folding, endorsing and all. Such things show the education, or the want of it, of the man; and from such things the world often forms its opinion. Doing things well is many times the only means which the world has of ascertaining whether you know how to do them. As to your studies, they, of course, must be mainly of the common elementary kind: but I am prepared to say that I think you had better soon begin to fit yourself for military life. Our nation is to be a military aristocracy and civilians in the country will soon be mostly found in the army. We will soon have a military aristocracy, and civilians remaining at home will be mere drudges, or at least be looked on as such. Society at home will mainly consist of two classes - the raisers of bread and meat for the army and the buyers and sellers of the same.

Practice mathematical drawings and get hold of mathematical science, such as algebra and geometry, themselves. You can do all this out of school as well, perhaps, as in. You may find it hard work at first, but stick to it, and you will soon come to like it; for the mind invariably comes to love what it devotes itself to a long time. Learn to be neat and exact in your drawings. To this purpose use the best pencils, paper and inks, and keep all your implements and materials in good order. In your studies, never "skip" a problem, thinking you cannot solve it and that you can understand it better by and by. This has

been the ruin of many a student. Clear the way as you go, if it does take time. Leave no stragglers in your rear, or your onward progress will be continually hindered by attempts to bring up these neglected friends. You would never get on -- But I must close. I have written nothing as to what is doing here because I wrote to your mother fully a few days ago. Things remain about as they were then. You probably have had all the good advice I have written you, a hundred times before. Nevertheless I, for my part, feel the better for having given it to you. Now then, go in. Follow the dictates of your own conscience, obey the precepts of the Bible, for they contain a morality recognized as sound by all enlightened men in all ages of the world, put a proper trust in the Higher Power and you will not fail.

Your affectionate father, W. Wirt

Paul E. Wirt as a young man initially followed in the footsteps of his father by studying law under the guidance of Charles G. Barkley, a well known Bloomsburg attorney, and in 1877 was admitted to the Columbia County Bar. In the same year, at the age of twenty-eight, he married Sara M. Funston.

His interest in practicing law soon gave way to developing a fountain pen. He became one of the early pioneers to invent a fountain pen. To make this new writing instrument required a lot of ingenuity. Basically, a fountain pen has an ink reservoir, and for it to work successfully the design had to allow for an even flow of ink when writing, so the ink would not leak or become clogged. This new writing instrument, which we now take for granted and consider commonplace, was a wonderful technological improvement over the goose quill and the pen with a metal nib that had to be dipped into an ink well.

The actual date when Wirt made his first fountain pen is not known. George Fischler and Stuart Schneider in their book, *Fountain Pens and Pencils*, cited the year 1878 when he received his first pen patent. However, according to George Kovalenko, a fountain pen collector living in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, there is a lack of evidence that Wirt received a fountain pen patent before 1882. Wirt established his factory for manufacturing fountain pens in 1885. By 1910, the government issued twenty-eight patents to him as he further perfected his pen – making him one of the most productive early inventors of the fountain pen and in perfecting it. To make a functional and reliable fountain pen became an endeavor of great competition. The government registered more than 400 patents to a number of individuals involved in improving the fountain pen between 1880 and 1900.

The Bloomsburg Daily on February 1, 1902, published an article detailing some interesting facts about his fountain pen business. The factory located on the southeast corner of Iron and Eighth Streets was 25 by 75 feet and consisted of two stories. Around thirty employees made nearly 3,000 pens each week. Cliff Lawrence writing in *Pen Fancier's Magazine*, August 1989, noted that Wirt's factory was very efficient and by 1889 had produced 350,000 pens. Fischler and Schneider credited Wirt's ingenuity in

designing machinery to make pen parts that allowed him to out produce his many competitors and to have cost advantage over them. Wirt pens were sold throughout the nation with Sear and Roebuck as one of his major outlets. At the high point of production, Wirt would employ around than sixty people. Today, the former factory exits as an apartment building.

The famous American writer, Mark Twain, did magazine endorsements for the Wirt pens in the late 1800s. A *Harper's Magazine* in 1889 carried a Wirt Fountain Pen advertisement in which Twain proclaimed: "An absolutely perfect reservoir pen, a pen compared with which all other pens are frank failures."

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Paul Wirt's only son, Karl F., died at an early age of forty-two from a stroke on July 21, 1921. Mostly likely his death was one of the factors that influenced Wirt to retire from the pen manufacturing business in 1922 after forty years. He sold his fountain pen company on May 19, 1925, to B. F. Maize and Robert H. Knorr.

His other business pursuits included being a director and president of the Bloomsburg Water Company and a long tenure as vice president and director of the Bloomsburg National Bank (later called the Bloomsburg Bank & Columbia Trust Company, and today known as First Columbia Bank and Trust Company).

In community affairs he served as a member of Bloomsburg State Teachers College Board of Trustees for nearly forty-one years from May 1891 to January 1935. At the time of his death, the Board of Trustees adopted a "memorial" that said in part: "His many years of earnest and loyal devotion to the best interests of the Bloomsburg State Normal School and the Bloomsburg State Teachers College, and by his jovial and happy personality, he earned and enjoyed the affectionate regard of his fellow members of this Board and the esteem of all with whom he came in contact." Beginning in the mid-1890s he became a member of the vestry for St. Paul's Episcopal Church for many years. When the church completed its bell tower in 1891, he provided a set of bells in memory of the deceased members of his family. Clearly, his success in business and role in the community made him one of Bloomsburg's more prominent citizens when he died at the age of eighty-five on January 21, 1935. A few months before his death the Bloomsburg Rotary Club honored him for his long and distinguished career of outstanding service to the community. Without doubt, the life of Paul Wirt became a testimony to his father's advice.