



“We Were Harassed Considerably”

DONN PIATT & FREEDOM OF THE PRESS

The Ohio-born journalist was known for explosive language and exposing corruption—as well as threats of violence from enraged readers.

His descendant shares his legacy. | By Margaret Piatt

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When Donn Piatt died in 1891, newspapers nationwide published obituaries of the Ohio-born journalist. Most lauded his skills, and a few politely expressed criticisms; but all noted his independence, explosive language, and dedication to expose the faults and corruptions of those who held public office. Piatt’s career began in 1840 as a 21-year-old who submitted reports of rural political meetings to the *Catholic Telegraphic* and the *Ohio Statesman*. Publication encouraged him to believe he could become a writer despite a forced apprenticeship in his father’s law office.

The elder Piatt was a well-connected Whig who operated a substantial farm with mills near West Liberty. He practiced law there and in Cincinnati. Two apprentices from that city joined Donn in the rural office. They favored the Democratic-Republicans, and in a desire to recruit more than the twelve known party members in Logan County, they published a newspaper, the *Democratic Club*.



Donn Piatt

“A DISAGREEABLE AND SOMETIMES DIRTY BUSINESS”

In the 1892 biography, *Donn Piatt: His Work and His Ways*, Charles Grant Miller quoted Piatt on his journalistic approach: “our ideas of editing were to find a man’s sore spot, and calling him by name apply hot irons to it while executing a war-dance of the most terrific sort.” Readers responded actively. As Piatt explained,

“... we were made familiar with eggs that could not, under any circumstances, be called fresh.” This pelting was followed by the tossing of “old boots” and “Thomas cats” into the news office and “several frantic efforts to throw Franklin’s sacred relic out the window.” Piatt claimed, “We were harassed considerably but did not mind, for we were battling for the constitution and our rights, and that is always a disagreeable and sometimes dirty business.”

As Donn Piatt’s career meandered through the fields of law, diplomacy, military service, and journalism, he developed associations with



Donn Piatt established *The Capital*, a weekly Washington paper in 1871. Volumes 1-9, March 1871–February 1880, have been digitized by The Ohio State University Libraries.

COURTESY OF MARGARET PIATT

members of the President's family. We are willing the falsehoods telegraphed over the country by the sycophantic followers of the Administration shall go uncontradicted, for they carry the gist of the matter, which is that an independent outspoken press is not to be tolerated in this Government reservation called the District of Columbia; where it is proposed that nothing shall prosper that lacks the sunlight of the royal countenance."

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—DONN PIATT

prominent politicians, writers, and opinion leaders. These led to more journalistic opportunities and fodder for editorials. In 1868, he accepted a position as Washington news and editorial correspondent for the *Cincinnati Commercial*. Fellow journalist Henry V. Boynton commented, "Donn blazed out upon the politicians, the shams, and the frauds of the national capital with vigor and a heat which made newspaper circles tropical. He cut and slashed and hammered till his welts, saber cuts, and bruises were thickly distributed. Thus he made his presence known."

THREATS OF VIOLENCE

Piatt's political preferences led him to join the Free Soil Party before he campaigned for Lincoln as a Republican. His biases saturated his editorial work, yet party allegiance did not direct his attacks. In *The Capital*, a weekly Washington paper he established in 1871, Piatt wrote viciously against other Republicans including President Grant to whom he referred as, "His Inebriated Excellency." Piatt challenged that Grant was not only corrupt, but also unfit and unwilling to learn his presidential obligations. Club-wielding members of Grant's family retaliated by entering Piatt's home. The journalist was not there, and no violence occurred.

The incident received coverage throughout the nation and prompted Piatt to write in *The Capital* on January 18, 1874, "We abstain purposefully from comment on the indignity offered us personally and the attack on the press by two

A LASTING VOICE

Donn Piatt's career did prosper through the popularity of *The Capital*, which has given him a lasting voice. Volumes 1-9, March 1871–February 1880, have been digitized by The Ohio State University Libraries, who acknowledge it as, "an outstanding resource for the study of American culture from the highest levels of government and business to the everyday observations of life on the streets of Washington."

In the 2012 biography, *Donn Piatt, Gadfly of the Gilded Age*, Peter Bridges summarized Piatt's commitment to journalistic freedom. "He wanted people to believe that nothing would keep him from saying what he thought about a country that was rich in politicians but 'singularly barren in statesmen,' where the two political parties differed only in name and who held office, and where only five million people in a population of fifty million did any reading, 'and not more than one million read intelligently.'" ♥

Margaret Piatt is a collateral descendant of Donn Piatt and, like him, she began and is ending her career working at the family home now known as Piatt Castles. Her intermittent years have been spent in the fields of museum education and interpretation, living history, and theater.



TRAVEL

Piatt Castles, home to Donn and his brother Abram Sanders Piatt, are open to the public. Near West Liberty, these unique houses are operated as museums which interpret 200 years of Ohio history.

Mac-O-Chee Castle, Donn's home, is located at 2319 State Route 287; Mac-A-Cheek Castle is at 10051 Township Road 47.

For information, including hours of operation, admission, and programs for group tours, visit piattcastles.org or call 937-465-2821.