



COOPER UNION HISTORY PROJECT

Original Intent: The Union That Never Was

by Barry Drogin, EE '83

Abstract

A trip back in time to The Union as Peter Cooper originally intended it to be.

You entered The Union from the main entrance at the north, under a triangular arch with the large letters “SCIENCE AND ART” embossed, ascending one of two exterior staircases which brought you past the first floor, full of store-front shops, up to the second floor, filled with rented offices and commercial storage spaces, some used by the owners of the shops. You proceeded up an interior staircase to the third floor, where you encountered a remarkable collection of curiosities: various stuffed animals, including an enormous blue whale, as well as many stuffed birds and a recreation of a forest; alcoves containing waxworks and marble statues, carved effigies of America’s founding fathers and its notable citizens, as well as reproductions of famous Greek, Roman and European philosophers, mathematicians, scientists, and politicians, some imagined or based on some artist’s imagining from centuries ago; and, most importantly of all, an amazing collection of mechanical devices and the latest in modern inventions. More amazing was the round elevator you encountered at the southern end of the building. You sat on its upholstered seats and admired its carved wood panels as an elevator operator averted his gaze and took you to the fourth floor.

On the fourth floor you encountered an astonishing cosmorama, a vast set of peepholes into magic lantern depictions of foreign scenes, historical events, and eminent personages beyond those depicted amongst the waxworks and statues on the third floor. You were humbled to be young and exposed to this vast trove of knowledge beyond your experience and grateful that you could access this knowledge without charge, thanks to the donations of the city, its wealthiest denizens, and the founder who had endowed the land and built the building, Peter Cooper, the Glue King. You returned again and again to be inspired by these wonders, confident that you could only be expelled due to some act so heinous as to move a majority of your fellow students to vote for your expulsion.

Exhausted from walking through the vast spaces of the third and fourth floors, you took the elevator up again to the fifth floor, where you retired to a refectory on the east side of the building, a cafeteria where you might enjoy a repast or tea, depending on the time of day. Also on the east side of the building were five rooms rented to professional artists, who might be in the mood to allow you to observe their facility with a paintbrush or chisel or show you some items for you to admire and purchase. There was also a lecture room which was used for various purposes: ladies studying practical science; a debate society; and an invited speaker from the

Associates, an elite scientific society. There was also an adjoining library on the fifth floor, which contained scholarly volumes and poetry collections.

You left The Union to eat dinner, but might return in the evening to attend an event in the Large Hall in the basement. If it were the weekend, you might be able to get in to hear a learned professor provide a free lecture about economics or social sciences. On other evenings you may have purchased a ticket to see the great John Tyndall give one of his “Lectures on Light,” enthraling you with electric lights, prismatic hues, and experimental machines. Sometimes the hall was occupied by choral students or used for anniversaries, ceremonies, or commemorations of some sort; at other times, political organizations may have rented the hall for a meeting, which may have been restricted to its members or intended to attract new members. Perhaps Samuel Clemens or Brett Harte or some other author was earning his keep by charging admission to a lecture about travels outside New York City: down south, out west, in Europe, or in more exotic and far-off places. You remembered that, in this same hall, Peter Cooper had gathered the Governors of the states, entering from the southern side of the building under a triangular arch with the large letters “THE UNION” embossed, and worked out the gradual and orderly abolishment of slavery, avoiding the political strife which had threatened to tear the country in two and start a civil war.

If the weather was agreeable, you might take the round elevator again to the roof, where a large telescope afforded you some spectacular views of the cosmos from out of the darkness of the abandoned streets, the monthly moon the only light. If you were there before dusk, you might hear an orchestra and enjoy some light refreshments brought up from the kitchen of the refectory on the fifth floor, or you might have the chance to peer through a microscope at some tiny secret of nature.

Once a year the trustees of The Union gathered to make plans, discuss the finances, and choose which female student would be awarded \$500 for heroism or sacrifice for humanity. At the helm of the trustees was the oldest member of the Cooper family, joined by the Mayor of New York City, a federal judge, three state superior court judges, the president of the free City College of New York, the president of the Mechanics Society, and the editors of New York City’s principal dailies and weeklies.

After reading their Annual Report, you would return to your time machine and travel back to the future, where you would be astounded by how this unique institution had held so closely to the original intentions of its esteemed founder, Peter Cooper, whose words you would often quote in support of preserving what you always knew was his vision for the institution.

The current version of this document can be found at <<http://www.notnicemusic.com/CUHP/original.pdf>>. Corrections to this document are appreciated and, if based on substantiated facts from legitimate sources, will be implemented by the author. The original version was completed on April 15, 2017.

The Cooper Union History Project website, <<http://www.notnicemusic.com/CUHP>>, is a space to publish research on Cooper Union’s history with the aim of amassing a faithful representation of the principles, aims, and lessons of Cooper’s past and present.