Volney B. Palmer: The Nation’s First Advertising Agency Man

Volney B. Palmer, the son of Nathan and Jerusha Palmer, was born in or around Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania, in 1799. Palmer’s father, Nathan, was active in Wilkes-Barre public affairs from the time he arrived in the area in 1794 until the family’s departure in 1818. Nathan Palmer studied law in the office of Judge Cleaveland of Canterbury, Connecticut, and was admitted to the practice of law before the Supreme Court of Connecticut in 1792.

In the year 1794, when Judge Cleaveland closed his law office and led a band of Connecticut settlers to the Western Reserve to found the city on the Cuyahoga River that today bears his name, Nathan Palmer decided to move to Wilkes-Barre, where he was admitted to the Pennsylvania bar in 1795. There he raised five sons: Strange, Sterne, Volney, John, George, and one daughter, Eliza. Their politically active father held various positions in Luzerne County, such as Clerk of the County Commissioners, Clerk of the Orphan’s Court, Prothonotary, Register of Wills and Recorder of Deeds. He was elected to the first Town Council of Wilkes-Barre and later served in the State Senate as representative from 1810–1812. In 1812, he was appointed County Treasurer, a position he held until he and his family left Wilkes-Barre for Mount Holly, New Jersey, in 1818.

Why Nathan Palmer left Wilkes-Barre, where he had earned a position of prominence and respect, to move to Mount Holly, can

1 Palmer’s birthdate can be inferred from his obituaries in the Philadelphia Evening Bulletin, July 30, 1864, and The New Jersey Mirror, Aug. 13, 1864, in which his age at his date of death, July 29, 1864, is given as 65.
3 Jewell O. Harvey and Ernest G. Smith, A History of Wilkes-Barre (Wilkes-Barre, 1927), III.
only be conjectured. One historian has referred to his “numerous mercantile interests”\(^4\) without being specific, and these may have been drastically affected by the depression that had been troubling eastern Pennsylvania for the previous two years. For whatever reasons, the Palmer family came to Mount Holly in 1818, when Volney was nineteen, to start a newspaper in that rural community. The choice of location was a good one. This Burlington County farming center is situated in the central part of New Jersey, and had trade ties southwesterly to Philadelphia and northwesterly to Trenton.

Mount Holly had no newspaper at the time the Palmer family arrived, and there seemed to be no great demand for one. Two years earlier, in 1816, James McKnight and Jacob Felthausen, printers from New York state, had begun publication of *The Mount Holly Advertiser*, but that paper ceased after only a few issues.\(^5\)

The first five issues of *The Burlington Mirror* carried in its editorial column a lengthy apology entitled, “A Prospectus for Publishing a Newspaper in Mount Holly.” In this statement, editor Nathan Palmer acknowledged the failure of previous newspapers and promised to do better with his new venture. The Palmers would, he promised, run an honest newspaper, would not take sides in controversies and would open the paper’s columns to all sides of dissenting opinions. The paper’s motto: “Pledged to no party’s arbitrary sway, we follow truth wher’er it leads the way.”\(^6\)

Publishing *The Burlington Mirror* was a family affair, with Nathan providing capital and editorial direction, and his sons furnishing the necessary labor. Volney Palmer’s mother, Jerusha, and his sister, Eliza, both of whom were later to publish the paper themselves, received their training in journalism in the early days when the entire family worked together. Their efforts were well received by the citizens of Mount Holly, and one year to the day after the first issue the paper was expanded in size and the name

---

\(^6\) *The Burlington Mirror*, Sept. 16, 1818. Portions of the first issue and complete copies of subsequent issues are available in The Historical Society of Pennsylvania. All other issues, excepting the first five, are available in the Main Library, Rutgers University.
changed to The New Jersey Mirror and Burlington County Advertiser.

A little more than half of The New Jersey Mirror consisted of advertisements typical of the period—rewards for lost horses and runaway apprentices, cures for strange-sounding maladies, whisker-growing nostrums and stage coach schedules. The remaining columns were devoted to six-weeks old news from Europe, excerpts from other newspapers, poems, essays, local news and a somewhat bland editorial, usually on the advantages of living in the United States, in general, and in New Jersey, in particular.

Editorials occasionally indicated that the Palmer family was intimately acquainted with the problems confronting every newspaper publisher of the day: obtaining a steady supply of newsprint at reasonable prices; circulating the paper regularly to subscribers; and convincing loyal subscribers to pay, preferably in advance. Running a newspaper in the early 1800s was a constant battle with dwindling financial resources, and the Palmer family was no stranger to hard times. At several periods, subscribers in arrears were urged to pay in cash, if they could, or in hay, oats, wood, butter, cheese or other commodities.  

Aside from a one-year period in 1826 when he turned the operation of the paper over to his oldest son, Strange, Nathan continued as publisher until his death on July 28, 1842.  

The New Jersey Mirror was left by Nathan to his widow,  who served as publisher until her death in 1856, when the Palmer newspaper became the responsibility of Eliza. That Jerusha proved to be a successful publisher is apparent from the personal property inventory of her will, which showed an estate of $9,766.81, over and above the newspaper itself, a considerable sum for 1856.

Around 1830, Volney B. Palmer and his brother Strange left Mount Holly for Pottsville, a new town growing rapidly because of the development of the anthracite coal fields by Philadelphia financier and speculator Stephen Girard. Both Volney and Strange had accumulated a little capital during their Mount Holly days,

8 The New Jersey Mirror, 1826–1827.
9 Prerogative will of Nathan Palmer, Register of Wills, State Capitol, Trenton, N. J.
10 Will of Jerusha Palmer, Archives Room, State Library, Trenton.
and both were surely aware of the real estate boom in the anthracite area.

The economy of the country was flourishing in the 1830s. Credit was easier to obtain than it had been for a long time, and the states were expending large sums of money on roads, canals, and other internal improvements. "Rents here are very high," The Pottsville Miner's Journal and General Advertiser boasted in 1830, "and a two-story building on the main street will command a rent between $200 and $300 per annum. Capitalists could not lay out their money to better advantage than by purchasing lots and building upon them."

While neither Strange nor Volney B. Palmer were very likely the capitalists called for in The Miner's Journal, each seemed determined to join in the promised growth of Pottsville. In the April 10, 1830, issue of The Miner's Journal, Strange Palmer announced that he was opening a "General Agency and Conveyancing Office in the front room of Mrs. Otto's Boarding House in Pottsville." For the next nine years, Strange engaged actively in the real estate business.

His brother Volney also participated in real estate activities. In February, 1830, along with two partners, Edwin Swift and George Farquar, he invested $1,000 in Lot No. 10 in Pottsville; in May, 1830, he and Farquar each put $500 into Lot No. 16, and only a few days later he bought out his partner's share of this lot for $375; later on, in May, he purchased Lot No. 8 for an undisclosed sum from the town's founder, Benjamin Potts. Except for this real estate investing, there is no evidence available to indicate other lines of business pursued by Volney B. Palmer in Pottsville, but writers on the subject have suggested, without offering any proof, that he was first an editorial writer and later advertising manager of The Miner's Journal. They are probably wrong on both counts.

11 Gilbert C. Fite and Jim E. Reese, An Economic History of the United States (Boston, 1965), 164.
13 Grantor-Grantee real estate transactions, Register of Deeds, Schuylkill County Court House, Pottsville.
14 F. Allen Burt, American Advertising Agencies (New York, 1940), 244. The Pottsville Miner's Journal was not a journal for miners but a four-page weekly newspaper edited by
With such a substantial investment in Pottsville real estate, it seems more reasonable to believe that Volney Palmer concentrated on the real estate business, probably working with his brother Strange, at least until 1839. At that time, Strange became publisher of the *Pottsville Emporium and General Advertiser*,\(^{15}\) perhaps enlisting the aid of his brother in the venture. In 1841, Volney, with his wife Eliza, left Pottsville for Philadelphia to open a real estate office. The 1841 issue of *M'Elroy's Philadelphia Directory* contains the following listing: “Palmer, Volney B., real estate office, 104 S. 3d.”\(^{16}\)

It is difficult to imagine a more inappropriate place or a more inauspicious time to start such a business than Philadelphia in 1841. The entire country, but especially the east, was deep in the throes of a depression triggered by the Panic of 1837, and Philadelphia endured more than its share of financial troubles. A state government on the verge of bankruptcy, unemployment a way of life, credit either impossible to get or, if available, so costly that borrowing from a bank was the last possible step before disaster, the year 1841 was not a good year to even be in Philadelphia, let alone to start a real estate agency. Palmer provided a poignant testimonial to the times in his real estate transactions. In 1842 and 1843, he sold his building lots in Pottsville, purchased in 1830 for $2,375.00, at a loss of $300.00.\(^{17}\)

Since a newly established real estate office was not apt to be greeted with success, it is not surprising to note in the 1842 edition of *M'Elroy's Philadelphia Directory* that he had broadened his business interests to include a coal office: “Palmer, V. B., Real Estate and Coal Office, 104 S. 3d.” In addition to this listing in

---


\(^{16}\) *M'Elroy's Philadelphia Directory* (1841), 205.

\(^{17}\) Grantor-Grantee Real Estate Transactions, Register of Deeds, Schuylkill County Court House, Pottsville.
the alphabetical index of the Directory, Palmer inserted a half-page advertisement which included his first association in print with the advertising business.

ADVERTISEMENTS and Subscriptions received for some of the best and most widely circulated Newspapers in Pennsylvania and New Jersey, and in many of the principal cities and towns throughout the United States, for which he has the Agency, affording an excellent opportunity for Merchants, Mechanics, Professional Men, Hotel and Boarding house Keepers, Railroad, Insurance and Transportation Companies, and the enterprising portion of the community generally, to publish extensively abroad their respective pursuits—to learn the terms of subscription and advertising, and accomplish their object here without the trouble of perplexing and fruitless inquiries, the expense and labour of letter writing, the risk of making enclosures of money, &c, &c.\textsuperscript{18}

The arrangement of the copy suggests that Palmer in 1842 viewed himself as a real estate man who had a coal business and who also happened to be agent for advertising and subscriptions for a few nearby newspapers. On the other hand, the copy in the paragraph concerning advertising suggests that Palmer had given some thought to reasons why advertisers might use an agency. The few benefits he listed are hardly definitive and he expanded his list of advantages considerably in future advertisements, but those included in his first advertising effort reveal that Palmer knew how to sell and that he was aware that he would have to do so vigorously.

The September 9, 1842, issue of \textit{The New Jersey Mirror} contained an advertisement by Palmer headed, “V. B. Palmer’s Real Estate and Coal Office and Newspaper Agency.” The three functions appear for the first time together, and, although they are set in diminishing type size, there is no doubt from the emphasis of the copy that Palmer was now serious about the advertising agency business. Beneath the line, “Advertisements and subscriptions received for newspapers published in the following cities” was the first listing of those towns and cities in which Palmer represented a newspaper; only the names of the towns are listed, not the names of the newspapers themselves. The names and rates of the newspapers which were Palmer’s principals remained a closely guarded secret from all but active clients.

\textsuperscript{18} \textit{M’Elroy's Philadelphia Directory} (1842), 203.
D. B. GROVE,
PIANO MAKER,
338 HIGH STREET,
AND
ORGAN BUILDER, 110 FILBERT ST.
V. B. PALMER'S
REAL ESTATE
AND
COAL OFFICE,
No. 104 SOUTH THIRD STREET,
(a few doors below the Exchange.)
Philadelphia.

ADVERTISEMENTS and Subscriptions received for some of the best and most widely circulated Newspapers in Pennsylvania and New Jersey, and in many of the principal cities and towns throughout the United States, for which he has the Agency, affording an excellent opportunity for Merchants, Mechanics, Professional Men, Hotel and Boarding-house Keepers, Railroad, Insurance, and Transportation Companies; and the enterprising business portion of the community generally, to publish extensively abroad their respective pursuits—to learn the terms of subscription and advertising, and accomplish their object here without the trouble of perplexing and fruitless inquiries, the expense and labour of letter writing, the risk of making enclosures of money, &c. &c.
D. B. GROVE,
Piano Maker,
338 High Street,
AND
Organ Builder, 110 Filbert St.

V. B. Palmer's
Real Estate
AND
Coal Office,
No. 104 South Third Street,
(A few doors below the Exchange)

Philadelphia.

Agency for the Purchase and Sale of Houses and Lots, Farms, Farming, Timber, and Coal Lands, Bonds, and Mortgages, Ground Rents, Anthracite Coal, &c.

Advertisements and Subscriptions received for some of the best and most widely circulated Newspapers in Pennsylvania and New Jersey, and in many of the principal cities and towns throughout the United States, for which he has the Agency, affording an excellent opportunity for Merchants, Mechanics, Professional Men, Hotel and Boarding-house Keepers, Railroad, Insurance, and Transportation Companies; and the enterprising business portion of the community generally, to publish extensively abroad their respective pursuits—to learn the terms of subscription and advertising, and accomplish their object here without the trouble of perplexing and fruitless inquiries, the expense and labour of letter writing, the risk of making enclosures of money, &c. &c.
No attempt was made in this advertisement to sell the concepts of advertising, which was to be the standard practice in future advertisements, and there was no promotion of a "System of Advertising" which was promulgated frequently in subsequent advertisements. Palmer simply announced that he was in the agency business, that he had completed his preliminary work, that he had moved from idea to the operational stage.

The September 14, 1843, issue of The New Jersey Mirror contained an advertisement inserted by the publisher, as follows:

V. B. Palmer, Esq., at the Real Estate and Coal Office, No. 59 Pine Street, below Third, two squares south of the Merchant's Exchange, Philadelphia, is authorized to receive subscriptions and advertisements for The New Jersey Mirror . . . and give receipts for the same. Merchants, Mechanics and Tradesmen in general may extend their business by availing themselves of the opportunity for advertising in country papers which his agency affords. 19

And the following announcement in the January 18, 1845, issue of The Pottsville Miner's Journal indicated that real estate, coal, and advertising were still combined:

Volney B. Palmer at his Real Estate and Coal Agency, corner of Third and Chestnut Streets, Philadelphia, No. 160 Nassau Street, New York, No. 10 State Street, Boston, and Southeast corner of Baltimore and Calvert Street, Baltimore, is our agent for receiving subscriptions and advertisements for The Miner's Journal.

Overimaginative writers have described the beginning of the first advertising agency as something like Paul's conversion on the road to Damascus. From what we read in Palmer's advertisements, there was nothing sudden about it, no brilliant burst of ideas, no seeing a sudden need and moving into a vacuum with an organization. The idea for an advertising agency was a product of Palmer's long apprenticeship in the newspaper business and the troubled times that must have been hampering his real estate and coal business. Under the pressures of making a living when a living was hard to make, Palmer slowly and tentatively initiated his agency.

19 The directions given in this advertisement are incorrect. The reference here is to Palmer's original office at 104 South Third Street, which had been closed at the time this advertisement was inserted in the family newspaper.
Publishers were hardly clamoring for a service they didn’t know they needed, and advertisers were not trampling each other in the coal yard at 59 Pine Street. From what we can gather at this time, the process of developing a new service called an advertising agency was both slow and tentative. Indeed, the term “Advertising Agency” was not used by Palmer until he included it in an insert in McElroy’s Philadelphia Directory in 1849. At times he called himself a “newspaper agency” and at times a “business agency,” and at least once a “coal agency,” but until 1849 he was not running what he referred to as an “advertising agency.”

The American Newspaper Subscription and Advertising Agency of Volney B. Palmer claimed to be the sole representative of 1,300 of the estimated 2,000 American newspapers published in 1849. A manufacturer or retailer contemplating an advertising program could walk into one of the offices Palmer maintained in Philadelphia, New York, Boston or Baltimore, look over the list of newspapers available to him, examine specific papers from the publications racks, indicate the particular market area that interested him, describe his seasonal preference and reveal the amount of money he intended to spend.

The Palmer agency then prepared for its potential client a speculative presentation, which included space rates for each newspaper and the total proposed expenditure. To compensate his agency for this work, and for the actual preparation of advertisements, the Palmer agency deducted a commission (considered to be 25 per cent but never publicly stated) from the publisher’s bill before payment. No one had ever done anything quite like this before. Businessmen were aware of advertising, of course, but hardly in an organized, systematized way. Palmer set out to show his clients how they might use this tool “to advertise judiciously, effectively and safely.”

“You have only to step into his office with the notice you wish given to the whole people of the United States, and it is done,” the publisher of The Boston Chronotype declared in 1846. The publisher of The Baltimore Sun testified in 1843 that “Mr. Palmer is, we believe, entitled to the credit for originating and establishing upon

a general scale in this country, this new and important public convenience. . . .”

How Palmer viewed his advertising agency business can be seen in the following list of advantages it boasted:

1. The most widely circulated journals in America are on file for the convenient examination and selection, and the terms for each recorded for the inspection of subscribers and advertisers.
2. The publishers have appointed and authorized him to make contracts for subscriptions and advertising. His receipts are regarded as payments, and therefore valid and sufficient.
3. Advertisements are inserted in any one paper or (from a single copy) in any number, at the lowest cash price, without extra charge, at the earliest practical time, and a copy of each paper furnished to the advertiser, that he may be sure that his order was complied with.
4. Editorial and Business Notices inserted on the most favorable terms, calling attention to advertisements.
5. Reliable explanatory information of places, character and circulation of papers, adaptation of various business pursuits and comparative rates of advertising in different papers cheerfully given with every reasonable facility, for adopting at once a safe, judicious, efficient system of advertising.
6. Advertisers save the postage and avoid the labor of correspondence with publishers, risk of remittances, unseasonable and repeated calls of strangers with separate bills, the various deceptions of journals of dubious character, and losses from contracting with incompetent and irresponsible persons.
7. To avoid unnecessary expense, concise forms of advertising are written without charge, and valuable practical suggestions made for improvement in style and force such as are written by unpracticed hands.

The advantages listed above throw an entirely new light on his business, indicating that he was far more than a passive middleman. It is clear that he served the advertiser by providing counsel on media selection, that he handled the physical detail of production and billing, that he wrote, or counseled on, advertising copy, and that he did all this at no charge to the advertiser. It is also clear that he earned his commission from the publishers by seeking out and directing the advertiser to the pages of his principals' newspaper, and that he had both their confidence and their authorization to represent them in giving receipts for payment.

22 Ibid.
23 Ibid.
One historian has stated that Palmer arranged for the newspapers to bill the advertiser directly and the advertiser to pay the newspaper directly. If such were the case, then what reason would Palmer have to make the point that he was empowered by the proprietors to make contracts and give receipts? One gives a receipt in exchange for money as evidence that the money was paid. Palmer clearly was taking money from the advertisers, deducting his commission, and then paying the net amount of the bill to the publisher.

The subject of writing copy for the advertisements he inserted has never been appreciated by modern writers. As early as 1842, Palmer explained the concept of his advertising agency and the copywriting function he assumed in the following advertisement:

Advertising and Business Cards will be written without charge for the advertiser. This mode of advertising and distributing Business Cards throughout the country is not only the most thorough and effectual, but by far the most economical and convenient that can be adopted.

The phrase, "System of Advertising," appeared frequently in Palmer's writings. He urged businessmen to use advertising on a regular basis, to use it to develop new markets, to take advantage of the flexibility of advertising to specific regions or in specific seasons. The publisher of Parker's Journal had this to say about Palmer's advertising system:

Go into Volney B. Palmer's office . . . and look over the letters he has received from commercial houses and then say whether or not this advertising system is productive of benefit. Mr. Palmer, as the Father of American Advertising, may well be proud of his offspring; there are thousands now in prosperous businesses who acknowledge themselves indebted to him for all their wealth; he saw the necessity of increased publicity for the interests of commerce and organized a system which can now electrify the Union into a knowledge of whatever facts he desires to be generally known. An inventor no longer has to fight his way through years of starvation and neglect; he goes to Palmer, and overnight, finds his discovery the topic of discussion in every social circle from Maine to California within a fortnight.

Palmer amplified his system of advertising: "There are two things on which we always rely for the prosperity of our system; viz.:

24 Frank Presbrey, The History and Development of Advertising (Garden City, N. Y., 1929), 262.
25 The New Jersey Mirror, Sept. 1, 1842.
26 V. B. Palmer's American Newspaper Subscription and Advertising Agency (1855), 35.
first, the conscience to recommend as much advertising and no more than suits a man's interests; and secondly, the knowledge and facilities which enable us to advertise most profitably for the advertiser.”  

Of all the quotations which Palmer used in his promotion literature, none seems to capture the essence of his advertising agency as well as this letter from “Izzard” to “Mac,” publisher of the Dayton Transcript, written in June, 1846:

One of my first devoirs was attention to your business with your agent, Mr. V. B. Palmer, and it will not be uninteresting to give you some detail of an hour's interview with this extraordinary man. I say extraordinary because he is not only the first who has set foot on a new system of propelling the commercial machinery of this country, but has conceived the plan... and by virtue of perseverance and energy... succeeded.

To give you some idea of his views: he draws a comparison between all commercial pursuits and the great theater of mankind in their physical and intellectual capacity. Whereas the physical must be aided by the intellectual... so the material affairs of business transactions must be aided and sustained by a proportionate exercise in intellectual energy.

Formerly, the material of trade required but little intellectual exertion. While our population was comparatively small... it was easy then to give notoriety to business abroad by verbal or written communications. The times have changed. The material of trade had advanced beyond all calculation for speed and dispatch...

Everyone is now obliged... to aid his physical exertions in trade... by due recourse to those means by which his business or profession may become generally known. This is the intellectual part of business, and the press is the great medium through which it can be developed.

Publicity must be gained through the Press, or the business establishment, like a body without a soul, must return to the elements from which it sprang. Such are the views of Mr. Palmer, and I think them correct, and I congratulate you on having your name on his list. He is a real businessman...

Amid all the hyperbole in the writings of and about Palmer, there was a feeling that something new and significant was in the air. Businessmen who had wallowed through a series of depressions with only occasional glimpses of prosperity for the previous decade should be excused if they viewed the zealous Palmer with a feeling bordering

27 Ibid., 38.  
28 Ibid., 40-42.
on awe. In an eight-page, pre-printed insert, the first and only to be bound into *M'Elroy's Philadelphia Directory*, Palmer cited an editorial from *The Gloucester Telegraph*: “There has sprung up an enterprise which would have been laughed at as impractical a dozen years ago. This originated . . . with V. B. Palmer, Esq., who is known already wherever an American newspaper finds its way.”

By the middle of the 1850s Palmer was looked upon by many businessmen as the commercial messiah. A few testimonials published by him will indicate the admiration of some of his clients:

With Mr. Palmer, we have had a business acquaintance for the past seven or eight years, and during that time have had no occasion to find fault, except, perhaps, he sometimes has taken his jobs a little too cheap to afford himself a reasonable commission and us very fat pay for our services. He is a man of strict integrity, and the business community puts full confidence in him.

*Cheshire Republican*, Keene, New Hampshire

We paid a visit to the spacious rooms of V. B. Palmer, Esq., the advertising agent, Court Street, Boston. He is agent for nearly all the newspapers in the United States; he is a gentleman of the old school, and abundantly fitted for his station. He is doing an immense business in his line, and if any Boston merchants wish advertisements inserted in our paper, they have only to call on him and have the work done at once.

*Westfield News Letter*

Mr. V. B. Palmer, the well-known Newspaper Agent, has been engaged in the agency for receiving advertisements and subscriptions for almost every journal in the Union . . . and one more indefatigable and intelligent . . . does not exist.

*New Orleans Picayune*

From an intimate acquaintance with Mr. Palmer, we are prepared to say that any business connected with the Agencies which he advertises will be both promptly and honorably transacted . . . he has reduced this business to such an admirable system that all parties can hardly fail to be satisfied.

*New York Daily Tribune*

Volney B. Palmer was, without a doubt, a vigorous and effective apostle of change as he traveled the narrow streets of Philadelphia around the Merchants Exchange, calling on men of commerce and urging those who were not spending money on advertising to do so.

---


30 *V. B. Palmer's American Newspaper Subscription and Advertising Agency* (1855), 45-47.
at once: "A capitalist who freely spends one hundred thousand dollars to build and furnish a grand hotel . . . would stare if you suggest the outlay of $5,000 in letting everybody know that such a hotel had been opened; and so he spends ten thousand dollars in rent, for servants, superintendence, &c., while waiting for his house to become known . . . which a judicious outlay of $5,000 for advertising at the outset, would have saved and transmuted into profit." 31

To those merchants comfortably satisfied with their existing level of trade, he delivered the following jeremiad: "People must not only know him and his business, because otherwise they will not find him, but they must know him because otherwise they will find and trade with those who are better known. Customers, like sheep, are gregarious, and flock where they see others flocking." 32

To those merchants skeptical of investing in advertising, he offered both a reassurance and a challenge in impressive terms easy for them to understand: "As a general rule, an advertisement in a paper now will meet the eyes of four to ten times as many persons as a like announcement would have done twenty years ago. It is easy to place one where it will meet the eyes of one hundred thousand persons within two days, or by using half a dozen papers to challenge the attention of half a million people." 33

Challenge the attention of half a million people—what Philadelphia manufacturer would want to do that in 1842? Why, for example, would the Philadelphia-based owner of a patent medicine formula spend money on an advertisement for his nostrum in the *Missouri Republican* of St. Louis? It was one thing to convince a reluctant retailer to advertise locally or to sell a hotel owner on doubling his advertising budget, but what did Palmer say in response to a Philadelphia merchant's question, "Why should I advertise in St. Louis, Missouri?"

The phrase "Industrial Revolution"—that neat label at once both misleading and convenient—never entered his vocabulary. Palmer may have been one of those adventurers whose activities accelerated industrial and commercial development, but he was not aware at the time that he was engaged in some sort of "revolution."

31 Ibid., 60.
32 Ibid., 36.
33 Ibid., 61.
A revolution implies a sudden and dramatic upheaval in the social and economic fabric of society, but in the United States in the 1840s no such upheaval was taking place. Men were setting the stage for it, however, whether they knew it or not. The steam engine was becoming more reliable, more efficient, and more practical for transportation needs; by the 1850s anthracite coal was fueling its steam-generating boilers. Palmer sensed the great changes these two advances would bring to the world, and he commented:

Before railroads had annihilated space, before the Collins Line converted the Atlantic seaboard into a ferry station, before the electric telegraph rendered thought universal and coexistent, whole villages vegetated and trade was confined not to the best but to the nearest source...men traveled little, and each locality supplied its petty needs through one accredited channel—New Yorkers purchased in New York—Bostonians in Boston, and so on...But now we have changed all this; we think by lightning and hurry forward on wings of iron and lungs of fire; newspapers give instantaneous publicity to every face of interest; we prefer to purchase the best things in the cheapest market, and an advertisement is the natural mode of acquainting the public with the result of private industry and skill.34

Here, then, is the "Industrial Revolution" as seen by a man engaged in its beginning. In one paragraph, Volney Palmer suggested the expanding and increasingly efficient transportation system knitting all sections of the country together; men and goods moving freely, safely and less expensively; newspapers appealing to a new level of literacy and the broadened interests of their readers; increasing production that demanded new outlets; new levels of available income being spent on new goods and services; and advertising carrying the good news to all the country. In the 1840s the pieces were beginning to fit together: production, distribution, market, transportation and the means of communication via newspapers. All had advanced to the point where Volney B. Palmer was able to assemble them into a whole and call it a "System of Advertising."

By the year 1846, his advertising agency consisted of four offices: Philadelphia, northwest corner of Third and Chestnut Streets; New York, Tribune Building, Nassau Street; Boston, 6 Congress

34 Ibid., 34.
Street; Baltimore, North and Fayette Streets. Palmer maintained his residence in Philadelphia and supervised the office in that city, hiring managers for the other three. S. M. Pettengill recalled that the Boston office of the Palmer agency was at 20 State Street when he joined the firm in January, 1848, occupying quarters in the back of Mr. Willey's bookstore. A clerk, J. Sargent, and Pettengill were the only two employees at that time. He stated that the office was moved to new and larger quarters in the summer of 1848, but that he and Sargent still made up the entire staff.55

An advertising agency that could be operated from the back room of a book store by two men must have been a simple operation with relatively low overhead. Space was required to display the newspapers represented by the agency for the perusal of advertising prospects and perhaps for a conference room in which agent and client could sit down together and discuss advertising. Pettengill was hired by Palmer as a general canvasser and clerk. His duties were to look over the local newspapers, check advertisements, and then call on those advertisers and try to get them to place their business through the Palmer agency. He also canvassed among advertising prospects for business cards to be inserted seasonally in thirty nearby country newspapers. These were small-space advertisements, rarely more than one column wide by one inch deep, containing only the name, address, and the principal product or service offered by the advertising firm.

Whenever Palmer visited Boston, as he did four or five times a year, Pettengill would accompany him on solicitation rounds. On their return to the office, Pettengill would have the responsibility for preparing the media and budget proposal which would be presented to a prospective client for his approval.

Pettengill described a typical business day with Palmer:

He would come into his office about 9 A.M., look over the daily newspapers for new advertisements, which I would cut out and make a list of for calling on. At about 10 o'clock we would sally out, calling on the most important advertiser first.

He would march into the counting-room of the merchants, calling for the principal partner, and announce himself and hand his card, with a

pleasing address and with as much assurance as if he were a customer
who was about to purchase a large bill of goods.

If he found the merchant busy, he would politely excuse himself and
inquire when he could have the pleasure of seeing him, and if possible
would make an appointment for that or the succeeding day. Shaking
hands and tipping his hat gracefully he would leave.

If he found the party he was calling on willing to listen, he would introduce
me and make a well-considered statement on the benefits of advertising
in general and to the party he was addressing in particular. He would
mention parties who had made fortunes by the use of judicious advertising.
He would show how he (the merchant) could easily double his business
and profits by a like course. He would point out the places where he should
advertise, and how he should do it. He would generally enforce his words
by some well-told stories, and get all parties into good humor and laughing
heartily. He would end up by asking if he might be permitted to make
out an estimate for the merchant's advertising.36

Palmer made no charge for his estimates or for setting up the
advertisement for the merchant, Pettengill recalled, and no obliga-
tion of any kind was involved so far as the merchant was concerned.
Pettengill and Palmer would check off those cities or areas the
merchant wanted to reach with his advertising message, and in the
next day or two, Pettengill would return with the completed recom-
mandation and a contract to be signed by the merchant.

Palmer felt that he was the sole agent for the newspapers on his
list, and insisted that they should make a statement to that effect
at the head of their editorial column. The New Jersey Mirror and
The Pottsville Miner's Journal did so, and many other papers he
represented also complied.

As their sole and exclusive agent, Palmer charged these newspa-
papers for postage stamps which he used in correspondence for and
to them. He charged publishers for losses incurred when an adver-
tiser failed to pay his bill. This was handled simply by deducting
the amount from the publisher's bill before paying it, a course
which often caused hard feelings, but Palmer usually had his way.
Palmer believed that as the agent of the publishers his losses were
really their losses. Although his attitude in this instance can be
justified both legally and ethically, it later proved to be a vulnerable

36 Ibid.
point. His agency would not pay a publisher's bill until the agency had first been paid by the advertiser. 37

Neither Palmer, nor Pettengill, nor Palmer's publishers mention the amount of the commission paid to Palmer. The only available source for the often-quoted figure of 25 per cent is George R. Rowell, a late-nineteenth century adman: "Mr. Palmer not only demanded a commission of 25 per cent on all the advertisements he forwarded, but demanded the same allowance upon any advertisement that might be forwarded by one who had once been his customer." 38

Rowell recalled a comment of T. C. Evans of the Evans & Lincoln Advertising Agency in Boston that "he regretted coming into the business too late, for no longer could an advertising agent count upon the clean 25 per cent profit that had been possible in Palmer's time." 39

There is no reference by name or company to any advertising client of the Palmer agency in any of the brochures or pamphlets published by him. What may seem like a curious omission becomes plausible when the position of the Palmer agency is reconsidered. Palmer was the agent of newspaper publishers; his client was any advertiser who happened to place advertising through his agency on any given day. An advertiser might use the services of the Palmer agency one day and a competitor's agency the next. There was at this stage of agency development no list of loyal clients for whom an agent worked. What loyalty or stability that existed was between agent and publisher and not between agent and advertiser.

In the late 1850s, Palmer formed a partnership with the men who worked for him as managers of his offices: John E. Joy, J. E. Coe, and W. W. Sharpe. No evidence is available to indicate the percentage of partnership owned by each man, but it seems probable that Palmer permitted each to buy shares of the business from earnings. The year 1858 is a likely date for the partnership. McElroy's Philadelphia Directory that year, for the first time, listed the agency as "V. B. Palmer & Company."

After Palmer's retirement, Joy and Coe came to control both the Philadelphia and the New York offices. They removed Palmer's

37 Ibid., 687.
38 George P. Rowell, Forty Years an Advertising Agent (New York, 1906), 72.
39 Ibid., 109.
name from the agency. W. W. Sharpe later became manager and then owner of the New York office and developed it under his own name into one of the best-known and most respected advertising agencies in New York City at the turn of the century.

The Boston office of the Palmer agency was taken over by S. R. Niles, the man hired to replace Pettengill, and he, too, became a successful advertising agent in that city. The Baltimore office was closed between 1851 and 1855. After the death of Palmer in 1864, the Philadelphia office became known as Coe, Wetherill and Smith. This name was changed to Coe, Wetherill & Company, following Smith’s death.

It was this advertising agency that Francis W. Ayer bought in October, 1877, and incorporated into N. W. Ayer & Son. This purchase gave N. W. Ayer the rightful claim to being the oldest in the United States and the only firm that can trace its history in an unbroken line directly to the original agency founded by Volney B. Palmer.

To return to Palmer, John Manning, advertising manager of John Wanamaker’s Department Store at the turn of the century, had this to say about him:

In looking up the facts of Mr. Palmer’s agency, I note that he seemed conscious of the logical weakness of the agency element of the business, and aimed from the very first to secure and perfect a system that would monopolize the entire trade, if he could get the cooperation of the publishers.

He saw that a multiplicity of agents in the same trade, and, moreover, in a calling that required but little capital with which to start, would soon involve very great competition, with the natural result of very small profits. This is all the legacy Mr. Palmer left the business.

Palmer’s strong opposition to competitive agencies probably began in 1848, when his assistant in the Boston office, S. M. Petten-
DONALD R. HOLLAND

372

July

gill, left him and started an agency of his own. In every issue of his Almanac, Palmer warned against the fallacy of multiple agents, enlisting, on occasion, his friend and fellow-essayist, Horace Greeley, publisher of the New York Daily Tribune, to support his position. Other publishers also took his side and he printed their letters in his Almanac to support his claim that the ideal agency-publisher relationship was one of sole and exclusive representation:

V. B. Palmer is the only authorized agent… all other persons pretending to act in that capacity… are acting without authority.

Milwaukee Sentinel & Gazette

Mr. V. B. Palmer is agent for the Union… Persons wishing to advertise with us, will learn our terms and order through him. We have no other agents…

Sacco, Maine, Union

Our agent for the city of New York is Mr. V. B. Palmer… A dozen different could not do half so good that this one may, if generally supported.

New York Daily Tribune

We receive an invitation almost every day from some fellow who claims to be an advertising agent… We have been “wooled” on several occasions by these “sharpers” and we caution the country press against the rascals. V. B. Palmer is the only agent for the press we ever had any transactions with who pays promptly and acts honorably. We recommend him to the profession.

Albany Knickerbocker

“Rogues and pretenders,” “A swindler and a dupe,” “More of the cheating sort,” such acrimony spills out from bold face headlines in page after page of a promotion pamphlet Palmer published in 1855. His anger at competitive agencies seems to have become a compulsion by 1855, and one is curious to know what his loyal publishers and clients must have thought of his protestations. They, after all, were in competitive businesses and subject to similar pressures, and yet they did not publish pamphlets with the following printed on the cover, complete with a cut of a pointing finger: “To prevent Imposition, the public have been repeatedly cautioned against the acts of imitators and pretended agents, who infest some of our cities.”

45 Ibid.
46 Ibid.
47 V. B. Palmer’s American Newspaper Subscription and Advertising Agency (1855), 55.
48 Ibid., 1.
An editorial convention of the publishers of all newspapers in New Jersey met in November, 1846, and one of the items on their agenda was the question of single or multiple agents. The publishers determined that:

It is inexpedient for us to acknowledge more than one agent in each of the cities of New York and Philadelphia for our several papers.

And whereas, Mr. V. B. Palmer of Philadelphia, has established agencies in all the larger cities, at a considerable sacrifice of time and money, and whereas we have the utmost confidence in Mr. Palmer, therefore,

Resolved: that we recommend him as the proper person to act as agent. 49

The publishers further amplified their resolution by pointing out that a newspaper that added more than one agent competed with itself, a view that would generally be ignored by other newspaper publishers until the 1860s when they solved the problem by appointing special agents to represent their separate newspapers.

That Volney B. Palmer wanted to keep the advertising business to himself is understandable. Palmer created the business, its terms, its methodology, its techniques. Now, others were moving in and reaping the benefits he had worked so hard to sow. His refusal to accept the inevitability of competition in a business so easy to enter, and his inability to admit that others might add new and improved methods to his own, did much to discredit him among publishers and competitors.

One of the important advantages advertising provided the newspaper press, Palmer explained in a pamphlet written in 1855, was that of: “extending the influence and increasing the efficiency of . . . the PUBLIC PRESS, releasing it from pecuniary dependence upon cliques and monopolies, insuring to it . . . the free expression of opinion which it only nominally enjoys while deriving its main support from an opinional constituency. . . .” 50 Here was an idea surely new to the business community: the revenue from increased advertising maintains freedom of the press by providing an alternate source of income, aside from subscriptions, to publishers. In addition to acquainting businessmen with his advertising agency, Palmer also promoted the concept of systematic advertising and supported freedom of the newspaper press.

49 V. B. Palmer's Business-Men's Almanac (New York, 1850), 63.
50 V. B. Palmer's American Newspaper Subscription and Advertising Agency (1855), 26.
Each issue of U. B. Palmer’s Business-Men’s Almanac for 1849, 1850, and 1851 contained an essay of approximately 3,500 words on the subject of the press system in the United States, two entitled, “The Newspaper Press,” and one “The American Press.” Palmer’s advertising pamphlet had this to say on press freedom:

While the press is free as now, tyranny and oppression can never overcome our national manhood. . . . And yet, few newspapers in the country can live and become strong without devoting a portion of their columns to advertisements.

The rate of newspapers is so low . . . that the mere subscription price, without some other aid, will not sustain them. The oldest, most permanent and most influential papers in the country are those that are enabled, by yielding a portion of their columns to advertising, to put a quota of their income from that source onto the paper itself for its improvement—devoting that expense to it which its mere subscription price will not justify. . . .

If then, the newspaper is so indispensable as a guardian of our liberty . . . how valuable is any mode by which it obtains strength and permanency. How important a duty it becomes to sustain it. How few think that in the communication they make through the advertising columns of a newspaper . . . is the higher one of strengthening the newspaper of their choice, of giving it a wider circulation and more power in its efforts of spreading with more certainty and efficiency into the family circle. . . .

In his essay entitled “The Newspaper Press” in his Almanac for 1849, Palmer reviewed the condition of the press in the middle of the nineteenth century, citing criticisms ranging from those of George Washington to Horace Greeley, the latter referring to the press as “satanic.” Palmer denounced as a form of communism a proposal placed before Congress in 1848 that would have permitted all newspapers and magazines to have the use of the mail post-free. Such a system, Palmer stated, would be unfair, for the pious Quaker would then pay for the dissemination of catholicism and the diligent family man for the spreading of vice and corruption. The assumption is quite plain in Palmer’s essay that he viewed advertising, not governmental support through paid postage, as the answer to providing the revenue that makes the newspaper press free.

There is no doubt that Palmer considered himself a teacher. He

51 Ibid., 24-25.
pointed out to businessmen that newspaper subscribers have a wide variety of interests and reminded them that wise advertisers selected newspaper and audience carefully to obtain the most effective advertising. He also warned that merely advertising to attract the attention of potential customers is not enough; the knowledgeable businessman must remember that he kept the customers he obtained initially through advertising only by the good conduct of his business.

At another point in his essay, Palmer reminded his readers that the press in the United States was fortunate in not being harassed by government as it was in other countries—England in particular:

The New York, Boston, Philadelphia or Baltimore publisher buys his paper untaxed and unstamped; he issues 1,000 advertisements in his daily sheet, paying no duty; but the Englishman, for every insertion of the same 1,000 must pay the government $365.

The taxes levied in the United Kingdom on newspapers exceeds $6,000,000: and while we are educating the frugal or the humble by furnishing 600,000 sheets daily at one cent, Queen Victoria’s aristocracy keeps the millions in ignorance by taxing the smallest sheet nearly three cents.52

For the next several paragraphs in his essay, Palmer rivaled Thomas Paine in his indignation over the Stamp Act, and attributed much of the ignorance of the British masses to this method of raising revenue at the expense of a free press. The word “we” appeared in nearly every reference made to the press system; without a doubt, he considered himself and his advertising agency an integral part of the American press system.

Palmer observed that the newspapers of 1850 were better printed, that higher quality newsprint was used, that delivery was faster and that news coverage was considerably improved. All of these much needed and much praised improvements cost money, he noted, and he returned to the function of advertising in furnishing this money:

An expense is incurred, which in former ages would have been supposed impossible for the proprietor to realize, but which yields good profit through the powers of combination and cheapness. The advertising of a

52 V. B. Palmer’s Business-Men’s Almanac (New York, 1849), 64.
public journal known to be well established and generally read, amounts to a large sum yearly, and when the receipts from that source . . . are added up, the aggregate product enables its intelligent and enterprising owners to increase their general usefulness.  

Palmer overlooked few opportunities to give advertising credit for maintaining a free and viable press, but in the essay cited above he may have gone a bit too far. He ignored the many advantages of large-scale printing made possible by the "magnificent steam presses," referred to earlier, and to the widening audience for the newspaper. Advertising revenue was increasing, of course, but circulation and the income from that source was increasing as well; publishers were also effecting economies from the mass production of newspapers that contributed substantially to their profits.

Only three copies of *V. E. Palmer's Businessmen's Almanac*, the outlet for many of his views, are known to be extant (the issues of 1849, 1850, and 1851), although others may have been published before or after these dates. The *Almanacs* measure 5" x 7" and are sixty pages in length; the cover carries a sub-title, "A Work for Everybody." This is somewhat misleading, since the *Almanacs* were published for businessmen and sold to them at 12½c each or one dozen for $1.00. The almanac portion, prepared by free-lance writers hired by Palmer, contained much information edited specifically for businessmen; for example, tariffs, money and exchange, the coal trade, railroads, immigration, post-office regulations, the iron trade, population statistics, weights and measures, routes and distances and thirty-seven rules of conduct for businessmen. The latter were more revealing of Palmer than they were useful, consisting as they did of warnings and admonitions concerning punctuality, a firm handshake, a ready story and a close regard for the time of both customer and salesman. In addition to the information above, Palmer’s *Almanacs* contained the conventional almanac data: monthly calendar, time of sunrise and set, tide tables and phases of the moon.

The final six or eight pages, as well as the second and third covers, were devoted to the dual advantages of advertising and the Palmer agency, which "embraces most of the best Commercial, Political,  

53 V. B. Palmer's Business-Men's Almanac (1850), 55.
Religious, Literary, Scientific, Congressional, Legislative, Reformatory and Agricultural Journals... for which he is the duly appointed agent, and specifically authorized by the proprietors to receive and receipt Subscriptions and Advertising.” In each issue, Palmer continued to stress his theme that through his agency “a regular, safe and systematic means is afforded the business community of giving notoriety abroad to their respective callings and pursuits.”

Each issue of the Almanac contained two major essays of approximately 3,500 words, one by Palmer and the other by Horace Greeley. Two of Greeley’s essays were entitled, “Reform in Trade,” and the third “A Philosophy of Advertising.” Greeley matched the zealous Palmer in enthusiasm for advertising’s potential to change the methods of trade. There is a sense of excitement in the writing style of both men, an almost religious fervor that they tried to convey to the businessmen who read the Almanacs.

The Almanacs must have cost Palmer a considerable sum to print and distribute, even though he apparently produced them himself and offered them for sale at a nominal price. In general, they were well-produced, professionally designed publications that must have made a favorable impression on the business community for their author.

Another publication was V. E. Palmer’s Newspaper Subscription and Advertising Agency, a shirt-pocket size condensation of the promotional material in the Almanacs, measuring 2¾” by 4¾” and containing sixty-six pages. Unlike the Almanacs, it contained no practical information of immediate use to businessmen, unless the following quotation which appears at the top of the cover might possibly be considered in that category: “He which soweth sparingly shall reap also sparingly; and he which soweth bountifully shall reap also bountifully.” Palmer obviously meant St. Paul’s Second Epistle to the Corinthians to serve as an admonition to those businessmen who neglected advertising. The small pages printed in agate type contained advice to businessmen, aphorisms, testimonials from satisfied clients and publishers, warnings against competitors and some promotional copy on the advantages of advertising. The following example demonstrates Palmer’s ability to shift from

54 Ibid., 78.
straight exposition to an amusing soliloquy by a perplexed and jealous businessman:

There's Tewksbury; he's been off again—down to Newport with his wife, two children and a servant! Where under heaven he gets money to spend in this way, is more than I can tell. Look at him now—lives out of town, keeps a horse, drives in and out every day. His expenses must be large—yet he seems to pay as he goes. I hope there's nothing wrong about Tewksbury. Then look at the money he spends on advertising! Why that is enough to ruin any man, I don't care how rich he is....

Wouldn't I look well taking my wife down to Newport and staying there eight weeks?—eight weeks, indeed! I sent her on a cheap excursion—but I couldn't go myself. I can't afford it—don't take in enough money to do it. And then to see a man spend his money just to let people see his name in the papers and sending cards and bills about the country. Tewksbury bleeds freely for his vanity, I must confess!

Actual size reproduction of the front cover V. B. Palmer's American Newspaper Subscription and Advertising Agency, 1855. The only extant copy is in the British Museum, London.

55 V. B. Palmer's American Newspaper Subscription and Advertising Agency (1855), 59.
The pamphlet also furnished a complete listing of those areas or states in which Palmer represented a newspaper. The Almanacs could justify their existence on the useful information they contained. Even if a businessman who received a copy did not read Palmer's promotional copy, he would have felt some mild affection for the donor. What he felt after perusing U. B. Palmer's Newspaper Subscription and Advertising Agency is hard to imagine. The size is difficult to file; the type size and style makes reading by middle-aged eyes all but impossible; the tone is quarrelsome and boasting.\textsuperscript{56}

Of those who have written about Volney B. Palmer, the man closest to him was S. M. Pettengill. He described this former employer as follows:

a short, thick-set gentleman of good address, genial and pleasant in manner, and had a good command of language, full of wise saws and modern instances. He was a capital story-teller, wore gold spectacles and carried a gold-headed cane, and was a first-class canvasser. He had more self-possession and assurance than any man I ever knew. . . .
He would sometimes meet with men who said they believed the benefits of advertising were all a humbug, and that the money spent for it was thrown away. He would then ask such men if they ever tried it, and . . . if the reply was yes . . . he then told the old story of the Indian who heard that sleeping on feathers made a bed softer and more comfortable, and tried it by buying a handful of feathers and putting them on a smooth rock, lay down on them but he "didn't rest any better but was covered with the blank things in the morning"—that feathers were "no good"—"they are a white man's humbug."\textsuperscript{57}

Others who described Palmer endorsed Pettengill's opinion. The publisher of the Dayton Gazette, a principal of Palmer's, had this to say about his agent: "We found Mr. Palmer not the gross, surly uncommunicative individual some agents who have your money in their hands are, but quite the contrary, a fat, jolly, hearty old fellow of about 45 [he was 54] who enjoys a joke and is, withal, quite a wit in his way."\textsuperscript{58}

Only one photograph of Palmer is known, and it has been reproduced in Hower's history of the N. W. Ayer Agency. The full-page

\textsuperscript{56} Only two copies are known to be extant: one is in The Library Company of Philadelphia, the other is in the British Museum.
\textsuperscript{57} S. M. Pettengill, "Reminiscences of the Advertising Business," Printers' Ink (Dec. 24, 1890), 687.
\textsuperscript{58} U. B. Palmer's Business-Men's Almanac (New York, 1851), 44.
halftone shows a heavy-set man of middle years posed pensively in a chair reading a copy of the *Evening Bulletin*. He is fashionably dressed, wears spectacles, and his thick, graying hair is brushed neatly to one side. His heavy, square chin rests on his clenched left hand, and one finger of that hand is laid against his left cheek. The nose is prominent, the eyes dark and receding, the eyebrows heavy and gray. The mouth is down-turned but suggests the slight beginning of a smile. The likeness is that of a well-established, mature businessman of the 1850s.  

There is an air of mystery surrounding the final days of Volney B. Palmer. An article in the advertising journal, *Fame*, stated that he became violently insane and that Horace Greeley hired a man to take care of him.  

There is no available evidence to support this statement. Circumstantial evidence presents several arguments against it. While Horace Greeley was a friend of Palmer and was known as a generous and thoughtful man who might well have rendered such a service if it were necessary, there is no reason to believe he ever had need to perform such a charitable act. Unfortunately, the story has been given wide circulation by various writers, some of whom chose to view Palmer's insanity as either divine retribution or the natural end of an advertising agency man.


Throughout his career Palmer had assumed that his primary task was selling the concept of advertising. In all his writings, he stressed the importance of advertising first and the services of the Palmer agency second. Service both to publisher and advertiser was the distinguishing mark of the Palmer agency. He made it as easy as possible for an advertiser to come into his office, examine newspapers, plan a campaign around a budget and have all the accounting and bookkeeping details handled efficiently. For his principals,

---

60 John Manning, *Fame*, 18.
the publishers, he was a vigorous sales force that showed them a source of revenue they hadn’t known existed.

No advertising historian has hitherto noticed that Palmer was a copy writer, that he understood the power of the written word to convey an idea, a mood, a suggestion. He considered himself skilled as a writer of advertising and offered either to write copy himself or edit the copy of “those unpracticed in the techniques.” From the evidence, it seems that the role of Volney B. Palmer was considerably broader than any writer has previously indicated, and his contributions to advertising and to the agency business greater than previously suspected. To summarize his many accomplishments: he was the first advertising agent in this country; he promoted the concept of advertising to change marketing techniques; he sold a “System of Advertising” instead of simply offering newspaper space for sale; he wrote, produced and delivered advertisements to newspapers for advertisers.

Palmer was the agent of the newspaper publishers. He provided many services for advertisers, but his loyalty was directed to those publishers who paid him a commission for his services. The actual functions of the Palmer agency—assisting with budget planning, evaluating and selecting media, preparing advertisements, writing advertising copy, and delivering, checking and billing—are the fundamental functions of a modern advertising agency today.

Taken as a whole, Palmer’s chief contribution was the acceleration of the concept of systematic advertising. Advertising, of course, existed before he set up business, and it would be folly to suggest that advertising and the early agents triggered the “Industrial Revolution” in the United States. It is, however, reasonable to suggest that Palmer and other early agents served as a sort of catalyst in the nineteenth-century marketplace. Through their efforts, merchants, manufacturers and businessmen of all kinds were made more aware of the changes taking place in the marketing structure and were led, perhaps even pushed, into raising their sights beyond their immediate market. The advertising agents of the mid-nineteenth century were an accelerator force that quickened the pace of industrial change, generating results far beyond their immediate goals or their wildest flights of imagination.

University of Florida, Gainesville

DONALD R. HOLLAND