

A Pictorial Scoop in 1859

The efforts of newspapers and news magazines to be the first with the news is not a phenomena of the twentieth century. It was quite common a century ago. The efforts of *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper* and *Harper's Weekly* to excel in both speed and accuracy in 1859 are comparable to those of *Life* and *Look* today. The rivalry at that time was just as intense and a scoop was something over which the victor did not hesitate to crow. John Brown's raid on Harper's Ferry, with its subsequent trial and executions, provided a field day for newspapers of that period. Since many northern papers were Abolitionist, or at least sympathetic in their attitude toward Brown, the Virginia authorities granted them virtually no opportunity for personal interviews nor were they allowed to be present at the execution. One exception was *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*, a conservative pictorial paper that had revealed no sympathy for Brown nor for the general cause of Abolition. As a result the artist and correspondent for *Leslie's* were granted many special favors and opportunities. *Leslie's* was not slow to point out to its readers the authentic quality of its work and the

purely imaginative contributions of its bitter rival—*Harper's Weekly*. The following letter refers to the picture on the inside back cover of THE PALIMPSEST drawn by an eyewitness.

CAUTION — MORE BOGUS PICTURES.

SATURDAY EVENING, December 17th, 1859.

The Publishers of one of our imitators having announced that they will issue early this Saturday afternoon Pictures of the Executions at Charlestown, which took place at one o'clock P.M. on Friday afternoon, we make the following statement to put the Public on their guard:

None of the Artists there present reached New York till six o'clock on Saturday evening, five hours after said paper was issued; while these fancy Pictures were on the press at three o'clock this Saturday morning, fifteen hours before the sketches made there could have reached New York.

We could have published at the same time, but we preferred to wait for the *bona fide* sketches.

As a proof of our immense facilities, we give the history of the double page block in the present paper. To make preparations for the execution of this cut we engaged rooms at a hotel adjacent to our office, where our Artists and Engravers, who were to work all night, were to sleep during the day, ready to obey our summons at a moment's notice. As soon as our Artist arrived with the drawing it was sketched upon the block, which was made up of sixteen pieces bolted together; these were then divided among our Artists, who each finished a piece, which were then sent to our Engravers. Sixteen men worked upon them, relieved at times by others; and thus our engraving, which by the old system could not have been done in less than two or three weeks, WAS FINISHED IN ONE NIGHT. It is

only in our Establishment that such a marvelous feat could be accomplished.

This picture has been reduced to its present size from a double page spread measuring 14 x 20 inches, and represents a truly "lightning fast" effort back in 1859, Coppoc and Cook having been hung on December 16, and the picture appearing in the December 24, 1859, issue of *Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*.

Our forebears were just as thrilled in 1859 with *Leslie's* feat as the present generation was with its first introduction to wirephoto and television. Generations yet unborn may witness even more phenomenal exploits in the field of communications a century hence.

WILLIAM J. PETERSEN