

Excerpts from: "[The Autobiography of Jephtha Homer Wade | A Modest American](#)"  
Western Reserve Historical Society, 2018

When I was about 18 years old coal was discovered in Pennsylvania, followed by a boom in the building up of new towns, thus offering work to a large number of carpenters and joiners that was responded to from all parts of the country. The fever had its effect upon me among the rest, and with the consent and approval of my brother, Enoch Yost and I (about the same age and shop mates together) went to Pottsville Pa., and there joined his older brother William who had gone before, and had written us about it. We worked at our trade in Pottsville for \$1.25 a day and board, good wages for those times.

the fall of 1831 when I was offered work in a sash, Blind, and door factory run by water power, and owned and carried on by Erastus Partridge, a wealthy and highly esteemed Merchant, Banker, etc. of that place. It being then the commencement of winter, and it being an offer of steady work in a comfortable shop, I settled with my brother, and accepted the position. I had not been there long before I was promoted to foreman of the factory employing 18 to 20 hands, and a little later on was taken in as a Full Partner with the Entire management of the business. This partnership resulted satisfactory to both parties, and as profitable as the nature of the business would admit of, and made Mr. Partridge and I very warm Friends, not only during our business connection, but Equally so thereafter. This partnership lasted about 6 years, when poor health made it seem important that I get out of the Fine dust, made by so many Fine buz saws running on all kinds of timber. While in the factory my mechanism took a wide range, and I got the reputation of being a sort of universal genius or Jack of all trades, so much so that people quite frequently came to me for what they could not get made or repaired anywhere Else.

My health was failing before I had the cholery, and failed more rapidly after, till I was unable to do but little in the factory beyond overseeing and giving directions, and it seemed more and more certain that I must get out of it. But what could I do? About that time Randall Palmer (a portrait painter to whom I have already referred) came to Seneca Falls, and soon got up a furor, as Family Portraits in that place were quite a novelty, and as Palmer was a musician (much more than I was) we soon got acquainted. I was frequently in his studio, as was also some of my shop mates, and one Saturday evening as we sat around the stove chatting about Palmers Pictures Bristol remarked, that as I done most everything why not try painting Portraits?

I made out to support myself and family with my brushes till forced by ill health to quit painting in 1845, as I had before been driven more than once from the business I was in, and compelled to look up something I could do. As an artist, I am sorry to say, I reached no eminence to be proud of less perhaps than any other branch of business I have undertaken, nor is it very much to be wondered at, in view of all the circumstances. My health was never suited to so sedentary a life, and poor as it was I was obliged to have a good deal of fresh air and outdoor exercise, and this took time.

As I look back upon the many times I have been compelled by failure of health to leave the business I was in, and take-up something new, or invent something to turn my hand to for an honest living, it leaves me to look with more satisfaction upon, and to be more thankful for than for any other gift, the ability, when driven from one thing, to be able to take up and succeed in something else, and leaves me but little chance to sympathize with that Class of idlers who are always complaining that they "can't find anything to do."

At this juncture, in the spring of 1846, I got a job to build a line of Telegraph along the M.C.R.R. This was an unexplored field. I had never seen such a thing, or any tools used in such work, and everything had to be invented as we went along.- I got up such tools as seemed necessary, including a tent sufficient to accommodate the men, with the necessary accommodations for sleeping and eating in regular camp stile , hired a cook and a hand car with which to move from one camping ground to another, and bought a saddle horse for myself, which made us all very comfortable, and soon proved to be good for my health and a very economical way of doing such work, under the tent at night and in the saddle during the day soon revived my health and hopes. The R.R. had then only a strap rail, and I invariably got on and off the cars where I chose without asking them to stop. The engineers all knew me, and when they saw me about to board a train between stations would good-naturedly try their best to pass me, but never succeeded in doing so but once, and then when he found he had beaten me, stopped and backed up to let me on. Improved health and a realization of the wonderful possibilities of the Telegraph soon satisfied me it was the opening I had been looking for. It did not take me long to learn all that was then known of it, and to reach the conclusion that it was bound to become an important business, and as but few know anything about it those who learned it first would find it in as good positions as they were qualified to fill. With this in view, I entered heartily into it, not intending however to remain long as an employee, and beginning at the bottom and working up gave me decided advantage over some Presidents who were made so for their wealth or their prominence in other businesses, and here my mechanism was of some value, as I could make any instrument in the business and soon learned to use them.

Not long after opening the office lightning followed the wire in, melted portions of the instruments, burnt some papers and set the building on fire, which created considerable alarm, and led to a general fear that it was dangerous to life and property, and for some time people were afraid to have it in or about their buildings. This suggested the necessity of a lightning arrestor that would prevent lightning coming in without interrupting with the telegraph current or the working of the lines. I invented one which was soon adopted by other offices, and has never been materially improved upon. I should have patented it, but did not.



I deemed it time to start out for myself. I built a line along the highway from Cleveland to Columbus and Cincinnati, and as fast as the R.R. was finished I built the second line connecting those points, still leaving the line along the highway. I next built along the highway from Cincinnati to St. Louis. At that time the crossing of the Mississippi River half a mile wide was a difficult matter. The Telegraph Co. already there had spanned it on high masts and from the top of the shot tower, but the span was so long as to break in every sleet storm, and not infrequently from other causes. 24 cables had been laid and lost, they had to be weighted to sink them, and lacked strength to withstand the strain from ice and floodwood. I combined weight and strength by covering the cable with heavy longitudinal wires, which answered all the requirements, and was the first cable ever laid with iron armor, without which cables are worthless, the crossing of rivers difficult, and the crossing of oceans impossible. I foolishly neglected to patent this very important invention and thus lost or failed to make a large fortune

I am a little ahead of my story, and will go back to the origin of the W. U. Tel. Co. - I was doing the best I could with my lines between Cleveland and St. Louis, and by economy and close attention made them live within their means. Speed was looking after the line between Buffalo and Milwaukee, and like most others was running behind. From Buffalo to Cincinnati was a line of printing Telegraph owned by Capitalists in Rochester, who also controlled a Morse line from Cincinnati to St. Louis. They were losing money, as they had to hire done what I could do myself. And after a few years of ruinous competition in this way Col. Speed and I succeeded in selling to the Rochester party for \$60,000 all our Telegraph interests including the Morse patent for the 7 N. Western states. This gave them the controlling interest in and what was known as the "Wade lines" and about 1/3 interest in the "Speed lines." I agreeing to stay with them as Genl Manager at a salary of \$3000 and expenses, and an interest in the sales of the patent. To make this sale was a long tedious job - to get them to put \$60,000 into the business where they had already put so much and were so heartily sick of it was no easy job, but it was finally accomplished, and was the first step in the way of consolidating Telegraph lines, and formed the nucleus around which was built the mammoth W. U. Tel. Co. with a capital of \$40,000,000, when I broke down, and more than twice that now. I had lugged the thing so long, and under so many difficulties and discouragements, that this sale was like an oasis in the desert to me. But glad as I was to get something out of it, it did not lessen my work or anxiety, as my successors were impatient to have my estimates verified without due allowance for time to bring it about, and the hardest work, and most trying period in the business followed that sale, as I would arrange to add one after another. I had to go to Rochester to get the approval of the Board of Directors which was sometimes more difficult than to negotiate with our rivals. H. S. Potter was President and J. Medbury V. President, both so much better in the britchen than in the collar that I found it necessary to bring about a change. Potter and Medbury were asked to resign, and Sibley as President and I as Vice President were elected in their places. This lasted but a short time, till the Board reversed this, and made me President and Sibley Vice President.