



The First Communist to Serve in the U.S. Government?

Norman Dasinger, Jr., April 16, 2021

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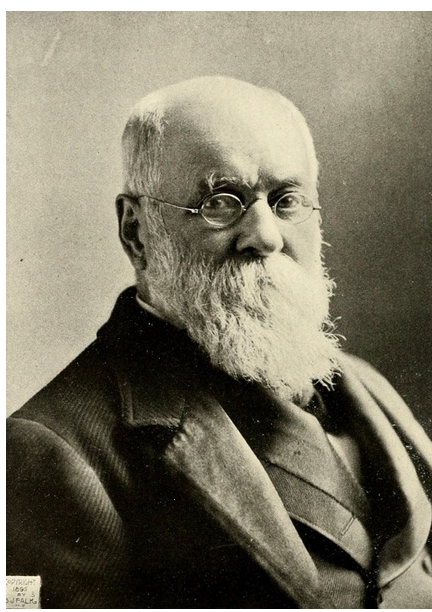
Charles A. Dana during his tenure at the *Tribune* | LOC

President Lincoln called him “the eyes and ears of the Union.”

Born in Hinsdale, New Hampshire in 1819, Charles A. Dana became a store clerk in Buffalo and began to study languages. He wanted to be a scholar of Germany and its associated languages and entered Harvard in 1839 but had to leave in 1841. He soon joined the Brook Farm Institute of Agriculture and Education, located in West Roxbury, Massachusetts. This utopian experiment in communal living, inspired by the ideals of transcendentalism, was based on balancing labor and leisure while working together for the benefit of the greater community. It counted Ralph Waldo Emerson, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Edgar Allan Poe, and Henry David Thoreau as interested observers of this experimental assembly.

While Dana was there, the Brook Farm adopted a societal model based on the socialist concepts of Charles Fourier and Horace Greeley, the acclaimed newspaper editor, and the colony began publishing *The Harbinger* as an unofficial journal. Dana was the primary editor of this publication. The Brook Farm would close in 1847 as Emerson wrote, perhaps a reason why, “The members naturally were surprised to observe that one man ploughed all day and one looked out of a window all day ... and both received at night the same wages.”

Dana’s publication, *The Harbinger*, was saved and moved to New York, where Dana continued to control it. Soon, he decided to make a life change and he joined Greeley at the *New York Tribune* as their correspondent in Europe, where he associated with another employee of the *Tribune*: Karl Marx.



Dana in 1895 | public domain

In 1849, Dana returned to New York to become proprietor and managing editor of the *Tribune* and in this capacity actively promoted the anti-slavery cause. He resigned as editor in 1862 and U.S. Secretary of War Edwin Stanton immediately made him a special investigating agent of the War Department. As directed, he sent frequent reports to Stanton concerning certain field generals. He spent considerable time with General Grant and reported him to be “modest, honest, judicial ... and gifted with a courage that never faltered.” In March 1864, Dana was made Assistant Secretary of War.

After the Civil War, he became an art connoisseur, a published author, and a strong supporter of the Grant and Cleveland presidential administrations. He was editor and part owner of the *The Sun* (New York) newspaper and remained in control of it until he died in 1897.



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