A French chef comes to America, to New York. He opens a cooking school and attempts a restaurant. He travels throughout the Northeast giving classes. The media give him maximum exposure and praise, even indicating that he might save America from its own poor cooking and eating habits. He overextends himself. He loses favor, the media stop discussing him, and he dies quietly and unnoticed. Yet, Pierre Blot leaves a legacy.

A modern tale? No, one from the nineteenth century. The jury is still out on the role of early French influence on American cookery. And rightly so, as not all the evidence has yet been gathered, nor all the leads investigated. One piece of evidence involves Pierre Blot and the first French cooking school in New York City. Given the importance of Blot and the almost unbelievable publicity he enjoyed during his lifetime, it is strange to find so little known about him today. Virtually all the information presented here appears in print for the first time in over 130 years.

The contemporary stories of Blot’s activities need neither embellishment nor paraphrasing. The eyewitness accounts are vivid and informative, delivered in a prose style so pleasing that they are a delight to read. Because most of the newspapers and magazines cited are not readily accessible, I have chosen to present much of the relevant text as it originally appeared in the media of the day.

A simple book review in the July 14, 1863, edition of The New York Times introduced the public to Pierre Blot:

WHAT TO EAT AND HOW TO COOK IT. Containing over One Thousand Recipes systematically and practically arranged, to enable the Housekeeper to prepare the most difficult or simple Dishes in the best manner, by Pierre Blot, late Editor of the “Almanack Gastronomique,” of Paris. 12mo. New York: D. Appleton & Co.

The tempting bill of fare, set forth in M. Blot’s title page, will be found realized in his work. More business-like than the romantic Soyer, his little manual is plain and precise in its directions, bringing American practice to test the theories of French science. If it is true, as most travelers assert, that the profusion of the good gifts of nature in the United States is as remarkable as the waste and neglect that too often accompanies the process of their conversion into the food of man, the multiplication of the works of this nature is a positive service to the economic interests of the country.

Within a few years, Blot and his work must have thoroughly captured the imagination of New Yorkers, as numerous publications began to trumpet him and his activities. On February 9, 1865, The New York Times began a series of lengthy and idolatrous articles on the man they most often referred to as Professor Blot. The initial article, headlined “A NEW SCHOOL OF ART” and subtitled “Professor Blot’s Culinary Academy of Design—The Rise and Progress of Gastronomical Science,” begins:

If the old proverb be true that God sends meat but the devil sends cooks, then we have among us a diabolical emissary of the first order, not only a cook, but an agent from the propaganda of Pandemonium. Monsieur Blot, Professor of Gastronomy, magnum coquus, &c., having devoted his life to the study of his art, comes to us like a benevolent missionary of civilization, and offers to instruct one hundred pupils in the mysteries of culinary science.

We wholly disagree with the old saw invented by some inmate of a bachelor’s boarding-house, who never experienced any of the blessings to be derived from artistic cookery, and so far from considering Prof. Blot a messenger from the Evil One, we deem him a beneficent being sent from the heaven of good Americans to confer upon us the blessings of a good cuisine.

After a detailed discussion of gastronomy throughout history, the article concludes with still more praise for Blot:

It is an evidence of rapidly increasing refinement when we can support among us a Monsieur Blot, whose ambition to make cooking in this country one of the Arts, is laudable and worthy of encouragement. There are said to be 4,000 different dishes known to educated cooks. We hope the Professor will not attempt more than a tithe of these at his first course of lessons. One of the first elements of domestic happiness is a good kitchen presided over by a good cook. Our Lares and Penates—our household gods—are throned there, and the cook is the
The other dishes followed in order. The dressing of the fowl was very interesting, being entirely different from the ordinary method, as in fact were nearly all the professor’s proceedings. The lesson throughout was watched with interest by all present.

The professor will have three classes, which will meet twice each week, a course of lessons continuing ten weeks. One class, for servants, will be held in the morning, and two classes in the afternoon for ladies.

Two weeks later, on April 7, 1865, another lengthy article appeared in the Times. Entitled “Cooking as a Fine Art. Success of Prof. Blot’s Academy Assured,” it offered further information on the way the school was conducted:

A few days since we had the pleasure of visiting Prof. Blot’s “Cooking Academy,” and listening to his instructive lecture on the art of cooking. There were between forty and fifty ladies present, and their close attention to the subject under discussion showed that a very deep interest was felt. All of the pupils were the heads of the families of our most distinguished and wealthy citizens, with the exception, perhaps, of five or six, who, we should suppose, were the daughters of parents whose good sense and love of humanity had induced them to send them to Prof. Blot, that they might be instructed in the art which has so much to do with the temper of the stern sex. The “Academy” comprises the second floor of the building No. 90 Fourth-avenue. The front room is furnished with neat settees, three rows deep on one side and two on the other, so arranged on staging that the vision of those in the back rows is not at all interfered with by the occupants of the front. In front of the fire-place is one of Kane’s ranges, so built that every part of it is visible to the class. Over the fire-place is a black-board, on which is written the entire bill of fare for the day. In the center of the room is a large table, on which the food to be cooked is placed, in presence of the class.

On one side of the fireplace, the cooking utensils are arranged in the most orderly manner; among them we noticed saucepans of all sizes, meat forks, colanders, sieves of various degrees of fineness, a mortar and pestle, dripping pans of all sizes, tart plates, jelly moulds—in short, everything that could be thought of as necessary to first class cooking. Everything about the kitchen is so delightfully orderly and clean that it does one good to be there.

The Professor is a political refugee, and when he came here ten years ago, saw the necessity of a cooking school, but being unable to speak English, could not carry out his idea until the present time. He has been teaching French in some of our schools, and has also taught in the families of several of our leading citizens. He is a person of refinement and education, and combines the chemistry of cooking thoroughly with the art. No one who listened to his pleasant and conversational lectures could help being delighted with his simplicity and clearness of style. He knows, in fact, how to teach. He is attentive to his class, always pleased and ready to answer any question which may be put to him. The assistant, who prepares the food while Prof. Blot is

Evidently Prof. Blot was to save the Republic!

Six weeks later, on March 24, 1865, the Times, in what may be the first detailed public description of a cooking school in America, informed its readers:

The ladies of New-York have been furnished with a new sensation by Monsieur Blot, a French professor of cooking, who has recently instituted a cooking academy in this city. The reform about to be instituted by the professor will be more acceptable to the people of New-York than any which has heretofore been derived from pleasure-loving and extravagant France. Monsieur Blot not only claims that his dishes are better than those of Americans, but that they are much healthier and more economical. He also pays much attention to making them attractive when placed upon the table.

The professor has been quite successful in obtaining pupils, at the present time having sixty-two, many of whom are wealthy and intelligent ladies, who are determined not only to know how dishes should be prepared, but also how to cook themselves. The formal opening of the Cooking Academy took place yesterday afternoon, at No. 90 Fourth-avenue, about twenty ladies being present. The kitchen is in the second story of the building, and is quite democratic in its appointments, the ladies sitting on wooden benches. A large range was at one side of the room, with culinary articles placed on a side table. In the center of the room was a table upon which the chickens, fish and meats were prepared by a female assistant, the professor at the same time explaining the process and its advantages. Different dishes will be prepared each day, the more difficult ones being taken up as the pupils become familiar with the professor’s method.

“Pot au feu; striped bass, Hullandar’s sauce; filet of mutton, larded and braised; roasted chicken a jus; spinach a la creme; turnips, as a garniture for the boiled beef; genoises, with almonds.”

The female cook, with the superintendence of the professor, began the operations by preparing a fancy piece of round steak for pot au feu, and the process was duly noted by the persons present, some of whom penciled it on paper. Many questions were asked of the professor, all of which he politely answered.
explaining every detail, is really an artiste; she does everything with so much ease and dexterity, and is so perfectly neat, that it is quite a study to watch her movements. The bill of fare on the day of our visit was: “Pot au Feu,” “Shad au gratin,” “Vol au vent de poulet,” “Salsify Bechamel Sauce,” “Pommes de terre en croquettes,” “Tourte Francaise.”

Each lady in the class was provided with a notebook, and wrote down all the minutiae of the preparation and cooking of each article. The lessons occupy about two hours, in which everything on the bill is prepared and cooked with the exception of the pot au feu which requires five hours to simmer, so that it has to be made before the class assembles. The class for ladies is held on Tuesdays and Fridays, at 1 o’clock precisely, and closes at 3 or a little after. There is a class for servants on the same day from 10 to 12 o’clock.

We had no idea of the poetry of cooking until we had heard and seen the charming way in which the Professor lectures and his assistant prepares the pabulum vitae for the benefit of those mortals who cannot live on ambrosia; though from the delicious taste of articles we saw cooked, we scarcely think that “ambrosial food” on which the immortals live could be made more ethereal and at the same time more nourishing. Epicurus himself would have given not a little to have had that kingly “shad au gratin” grace his festive board, for never was shad like it in appearance or flavor. Ere long our fair daughters will be as desirous of excelling in the haute ecole de cuisine as they now are of surpassing each other in the performance of difficult piano and vocal music. We augur, therefore, for Professor Blot certain and great success, for one who has witnessed the lecture will find it almost an impossibility not to attend constantly.

The course comprises twenty lessons, with a different bill of fare each day, and the terms are so low as to be within the reach of all who desire to understand scientific cookery.

I suspect that any cooking teacher today would be ecstatic over this kind of publicity. As far as I can tell, no other nineteenth-century cook in America was treated with a comparable level of media hyperbole.

By early the next year, the cooking school had moved to Broadway, and Prof. Blot was offering a new series of courses. On January 11, 1866, in an article entitled “Cookery Condensed—Prof. Blot’s New System,” the Times noted:

Prof. Blot commenced a new series of lectures on Tuesday afternoon, at the Academy, No. 896 Broadway. He intends in this course, which comprises 20 lessons, to condense the art of cooking, so that every dish in French cookery may be learned during the 20 lectures. As there are four or five thousand dishes in the French cook’s catalogue, one can readily see the immense advantages of this condensation method. It will be impossible for anyone to make any mistake in the preparation of any article, after listening to the Professor’s clear and concise explanations. All who wish to join the class just formed had better make early application, as each lecture is invaluable.

This blandishment is followed by the bill of fare and a lengthy discussion of the recipes. It then continues:

Those who live out of town and have been unable to attend Prof. Blot’s lectures heretofore on account of the time consumed, will find this course particularly advantageous, as it enables them to learn in ten weeks all they could have learned before in a year.

We therefore commend Prof. Blot’s system of condensation most heartily, and feel sure that those who do not avail themselves of the privilege of attending his classes this Winter will feel most bitterly that they have “left undone those things which they ought to have done.”

If, by now, the reader is astonished at the over-enthusiastic reporting on Prof. Blot in The New York Times, read on. The Professor was about to take his show on the road. In May and June 1866, Prof. Blot gave a series of lectures in Boston. Prior to Blot’s visits to New England, newspapers there began to issue their own puffery. For example, Blot was mentioned favorably at least three times in the January 1866 Boston Daily Evening Transcript. The following article, “The Cooking Range is Getting a Wider Range,” appeared there on February 17, 1866:
Professor Blot has met with such success in New York and obtained such popularity amongst house-keepers who give dinner parties, or who can fare sumptuously every day, that he has been induced to establish a branch of his Academy in Brooklyn, Long Island. This movement inspires a hope that he may yet visit Boston to flourish for a brief season, at least, as a star-cuisinier. By this time he ought to have graduated pupils who can go forth as missionaries of his esculent science and appetizing art. It strikes us in these days, when employment is wanted for women, that some lady educated by Prof. Blot, might do civilization a service by giving practical lectures on the preparation and serving up of French dishes. Why should the stronger sex monopolize the chief of aesthetic vocations? Clearly the reform of the kitchen and the dining room ought not to be monopolized by those who are eligible to political office and the right to suffrage.

Two months later, on April 23, 1866, this same paper gleefully reported that Prof. Blot “is coming to Boston to lecture,” and that “we should rejoice to have just such a blot in our culinary civilization, judging from the Professor’s practices in New York.”

Blot delivered a series of fourteen lectures at Mercantile Hall in Boston from May 9 to June 8, 1866. Each was fully reported in the Boston Daily Evening Transcript, which devoted an extravagant amount of space (from three-quarters of a column to a column and a half) to each class. The lectures were “sketched by a Lady,” whose identity I have been unable to uncover. After brief introductions to the events at the lectures, the reporter gave quite detailed information on each specific recipe and usually ended with a few brief remarks. Here is a selection of excerpts, which give an idea of who attended the lectures, how they were conducted, and how very popular they and the Professor were:

From the Boston Daily Evening Transcript

May 10, 1866
Professor Blot’s First Lesson. What singular things occur in this nineteenth century! One can but wonder what would be the thoughts of some grand old Puritan of two hundred years ago could he open his eyes upon the anti-Puritanic doings of now-a-days. Innovations in dress, furniture, equipage and amusements would cause terrible quaking of his stout heart lest New England’s sons and daughters were slipping away from the ancient landmarks into an awful pit of abomination. But, astonishing as all these must be, what would have been his horror could he have witnessed the throng of maidens, young housekeepers, and stately matrons, gathering in Mercantile Hall yesterday to learn the secrets of French cooking from a Frenchman himself. Really, he would have concluded the world was a whirligig, and he would have prayed to be whirled out of it as soon as possible. But the attracting power was no desire to imitate foreign customs, as one follows fashion in dress, &c., but a pure wish to become completely au fait in the culinary department;—that madame herself might be mistress, instead of being at the mercy of somebody in the kitchen, as is too often the case in this land of poorly-trained servants.

At one o’clock yesterday, sat note-books and pencils in hand, tea-spoons and palates expectant, hundreds of ladies, who never looked more like ladies at any lecture in Boston. They had come to get at the root of the matter,—not the “root of all evil,” but the root of much good. For what is there comfortable or enjoyable in temporal things,—and we had almost said, spiritual too—unless based upon palatable, nutritious food and good digestion! It is hard to be a saint over sour bread, burnt meat and its necessary consequences, a dyspeptic stomach.

While the ladies were assembling Professor Blot, and his pleasant-faced, active assistant were busying themselves in getting the necessary supply of spoons, sauce-pans, kettles, &c., into systematic order; and from the perfection of every operation which followed during the lesson, the audience was convinced that harmony in the kitchen is possible.

The Professor commenced his lecture punctually at one o’clock. The first duty of the ladies present was to copy the bill of fare.

Of course every lady who reads this article expects that we are going to tell her just how the Professor cooked everything in the bill of fare. We would like to do this but we prefer to hint at just so much, that every lady who believes in progress will wish to see, hear, and learn for herself.

So plain and simple did the Professor make all his instructions that nearly every lady present, even though she were previously totally unskilled in the culinary business, quite earnestly allowed her intention to attempt one or more dishes on the morrow.

When the bill of fare was completed, each lady tested the qualities of the various dishes, and all were evidently well pleased, if the smiling faces and satisfied exclamations were criteria.

The two hours passed away rapidly and pleasantly. The Professor’s great suavity of manner, his intelligent explanations, his patient willingness to answer all questions, and his apt replies, made the lecture one of the most enjoyable entertainments with which the ladies of Boston have been favored for some time.

In no way can a lady combine pleasure with profit more certainly than by attending these lectures. One cannot help carrying away from each lesson a fund of necessary knowledge.

We regard Professor Blot as a blessing, and trust he will spread sunlight in many a household.

May 12, 1866
Prof. Blot’s Second Lesson. There is no one of the thoroughfares of Boston which presents a more attractive appearance on a sunny day than the upper portion of Summer street. A glance down that street exhibits kaleidoscope-like views—changing groups and colors of an almost bewildering character. But yesterday the panorama seemed unusually brilliant from the procession of earnest-hearted ladies attracted to Mercantile Hall by the remarkable culinary skill of one
man, who possesses in an equal degree the power of imparting knowledge of his art to others. Some men know a great deal, but lock up their wisdom and throw away the key. Prof. Blot is certainly not one of these.

Having so pleasant a remembrance of the enjoyment of the first lecture on Wednesday we were really impatient for the second, and so anticipated the hour of commencing by arriving at the Hall to take a sharp look about us. Our eyes naturally turned to the platform. On the left was the all-important black board containing the bill of fare for the day; but we noted an accession to the useful articles on that part of the stage; a kitchen clock was prominent, hinting punctuality to the cook. In the centre was the gas-cooking apparatus, with its many fiery tongues leaping up as if impatient to begin their work. At the right was a table, the contents of which were so temptingly and tastefully arranged as to excite admiration. The orange hue of the carrot, the golden butter, the vivid green of the parsley, the deeper shade of the spinach, the carmine of the radishes, the snowy whiteness of the eggs, the delicate tint of the lemon formed a most harmonious blending of colors, and suggested the beautiful in the kitchen.

At the close of the lecture the quality of the various compositions was tested and great satisfaction evinced by the “committee of the whole.” This essential part of the proceedings seemed to be of a most agreeable nature. Let the reader imagine several hundred ladies intent upon reaching the table where the delicate morsels lie, now balancing a tea-spoon or reaching forward to secure a little soup or marmalade; now carefully drawing the spoon back lest a drop of the dainty bit be wasted, or come in contact with some elegant dress; then passing a plate to and fro in the crowd, and all smiling, good-natured and chatty. A stranger would almost think it a family gathering so friendly do they appear, each endeavoring to satisfy herself by personal demonstrations of the Professor’s skill. The harmonious effort is a fitting conclusion to the practical teachings of the Professor, which go far to evoke concord in all departments of domestic affairs.

May 15, 1866

Mons. Blot’s Third Lesson. The usually large number of ladies gathered again yesterday, at Mercantile Hall, at the third lecture of Professor Blot on the science of the cuisine. Our lady friends who do not reach the hall till the lecture hour lose the benefit of the preliminary work, which is done before eleven o’clock. Many of the articles on the bill of fare have to be prepared with great care, and it is highly beneficial to any lady—who she well skilled herself or otherwise—to witness the remarkably facile manner with which Monsieur Blot’s competent assistant performs her duties previous to the lesson. Yesterday she dissected a chicken with the skill of an anatomist; larded a fillet of beef with delicate little shreds of pork; scraped and cut potatoes into dainty slices, and performed many other essential operations with a dexterity it would be profitable to imitate. In fact, so admirably does she accomplish her part of the programme that all the housekeepers who attend the lectures have been guilty of the sin of covetousness, and were it possible, the strongest lady would carry off this model cook to her own domicile, as an unfailing panacea against all future ills in the kitchen.

May 17, 1866

Mons. Blot’s Fourth Lecture. We doubt if more thoroughly appreciative audiences ever honored a lecturer in Boston than those with which Prof. Blot has been favored at Mercantile Hall. The ladies who attend are of great culture, with keenly active minds, and the interest with which they listen to and seize upon every important point advanced, evinces most plainly wide-awake, progressive natures. Every lady has so evidently the desire to gather up everything which shall improve her domestic affairs, and to understand thoroughly all the mysteries of the culinary art, that the labors of Mons. Blot must be greatly lessened by the manifest sympathy between the audience and himself, and the earnest manner in which his instructions are received. Even the most inveterate opposers of women’s rights must certainly acknowledge that some of the Boston ladies, at least, understand their true sphere, and intend, by perfect cultivation to qualify themselves to reign supreme in it.

May 19, 1866

Mons. Blot’s Fifth Lesson. From the large number of ladies assembled in Mercantile Hall yesterday, on the occasion of the fifth lecture of Professor Blot, we judge that clouds and rain are regarded only as slight obstacles when a knowledge of gastronomy is desired. Clad in waterproof and other rain-defying garments, the lady auditors were as prompt as the Professor himself.

Many who have not attended these lectures have expressed doubts as to the practicality of the instructions given. Could they have heard the remarks which reached our ears yesterday, they would renounce all such erroneous views. Each lady who commented upon her efforts in some particular dish, since the last lecture, declared unqualified success. In fact, by a careful imitation of the examples set by the lecturer, failure is impossible.

May 22, 1866

Mons. Blot’s Sixth Lesson. There seems to be not the least abatement of interest on the part of the ladies in the lectures of Prof. Blot. Each day we meet the same familiar faces, together with many new ones, who, having learned of the good things to be seen, heard and tasted, desire a part in the “golden opportunity.”

May 24, 1866

Mons. Blot’s Lecture Yesterday. The seventh of these very pleasant occasions, for which Mercantile Hall has become quite famous within the last few weeks, occurred yesterday. There looms, as it were, an atmosphere of cheerfulness pervading the room during their continuance. The social chat of the ladies, exchanging friendly salutation, relating their experiences in culinary operations a la Blot; the busy,
lively appearance of the impromptu kitchen; the earnest, careful manner of Mons. Blot himself; the urbanity with which he answers all questions; his endeavors to promote the comfort of every lady present;—all contribute to render the two hours unusually agreeable and beneficial to the social natures of those participating in its benefits.

May 26, 1866
Mons. Blot’s Lesson Yesterday. The ladies who attend these lectures, ought certainly to congratulate themselves and Mons. Blot upon the very much improved manner in which the tasting process is now conducted. It is really as beneficial and instructive to scan the appearance of the various dishes as to test the flavor. The viands compounded during the lectures are arranged upon the edge of the platform, and the ladies pass by them, and inspect and admire, and then return, taste, and are delighted.

June 2, 1866
Mons. Blot’s Eleventh Lesson. The writer of these sketches can only affirm what she has said several times before, that the teachings of Mons. Blot are eminently practical; her personal experience, and that of every lady with whom she has conversed, confirms the fact. That the dishes are economical can be equally well proved, and are adapted to the “middling class” as to “stylish people with a dozen servants.” And while a complete novice in culinary operations may gather information sufficient to enable her to manage a kitchen quite respectably, the experienced housekeeper will find new ideas to compensate for the time spent at Mercantile Hall.

June 9, 1866
Mons. Blot’s Fourteenth and Last Lesson. Yesterday was completed the course of lectures upon the Art of Cooking, which has occupied the attention of the ladies for several weeks; and no diminution either in interest or attendance was apparent.

The lecture was extremely interesting and instructive. Mons. Blot thanked the ladies present for their patronage and kind attention; he felt proud of his success in securing their confidence.1

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1. The tables for cooking and preserving meats and fowl, from Pierre Blot’s What to Eat, and How to Cook It, 1863. Courtesy of Jan Longeneck.
The lectures at Mercantile Hall were so well received that a book was published based on them. *Prof. Blot's Lectures on Cookery. Delivered at Mercantile Hall* contains about 125 recipes with additional pages of household hints.\(^2\)

Among the ladies who attended Prof. Blot’s lectures was Mrs. Amelia Lee Holmes, who wrote to her son, Oliver Wendell Holmes, on May 21, 1866:

Mr. Emerson’s lectures are just over & have been much liked.—And now three times a week the ladies [go] to Prof. Blot to learn how to cook—& a great big French woman stands with her huge carving knife—her pots & pans—& carries out all his teachings—then the ladies rush with their spoons to try his delicious compounds—come home—& try to be French cooks themselves.\(^3\)

In addition to the specific reporting on Blot’s lectures quoted above, many other references to him and to the popularity, crowds, and profitability of his lectures can be found in a variety of New England newspapers. On June 18, 1866, the *Salem Register* (Salem, Massachusetts) summed up the successful career of Professor Blot:

Prof. Blot’s lectures on Cookery will be continued today and each succeeding day until the course is finished. The lessons excite very great interest in all who attend, and none will regret the time and money spent at his sessions. *The New York Evening Post* says:

"Professor Blot, of gastronomic celebrity, having closed, for the present, his successful operation in this city, in Brooklyn and in Boston, is travelling in the country. His fame has spread everywhere, and his invitations to cook and lecture are almost without number. He began this week, we understand, a course of lectures in Salem, Massachusetts, and thence he will go to Worcester, Springfield, Hartford, New Haven, Bridgeport and other towns, where delighted women and curious men await his coming. It is understood that when this cooking tour in New England is ended, a trip will be made to Central and Western New York where a few lectures will be delivered previous to a return to New York City next Fall."

Professor Blot carries his kitchen with him. The pots and pails, and kettles and pans, forming a collection that nobody but an expert could comprehend, and are packed in three great boxes; and a cook goes along to operate, while the Professor gives his instructions. Lectures are delivered rapidly, one in each day; and when the short course is concluded, the kitchen and its manager move on."

Let us leave Prof. Blot for now, at the height of his popularity, travelling throughout the eastern United States, valiantly attempting to teach French cooking to the American housewife. With the overwhelming success of his lectures and demonstrations, both in New York and New England, as well as the extraordinary press publicity, Professor Blot’s influence on American cookery would seem to be profound and long lasting. This, however, was not to be the case, as I shall reveal in the concluding installment to this article in the next issue of *Gastronomica*.

**NOTES**

1. I would like to express my gratitude to the American Antiquarian Society and its staff for their assistance in compiling these newspaper columns.
2. Boston: Loring, Publisher, 1866.