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## Benjamin’s Fiction Writing Helped Inspire a Stronger Navel Fleet to Defeat Spain

*The people in New York saw the balloons as they successively rose from the four ves-sels, and wonderingly watched their progress. They saw the first of them gently sail toward the city until about over the Cathedral on Fifth Avenue. Then a dark object seemed to fall from the car, the lightened balloon shot upward, the object struck the roof of the cathedral, there was a fearful explosion, a trembling of the earth as if an angry volcano were beneath, and the crash of falling buildings followed. Through the great clouds of dust and smoke it could be seen that not only was the cathedral shattered, but that the walls of every building adjacent to the square on which it stood were down.... A second balloon dropped its charge into the receiv-ing reservoir in Central Park, luckily doing no damage, but throwing up a tremendous jet of water. The third and fourth balloons let fall their dejectiles, the one among the tenements near Tompkins Square destroying an entire block of houses simultaneously; the other on High Bridge, completely shattering that structure, and so breaking the aqueduct through which the city obtains its water supply. The Spanish admiral now ceased firing volun-tarily and sent a message by flag-of-truce announcing his intention to continue the throwing of balloon torpedoes into the city until it capitulated.... The situation was, in truth, one of sadness—of bitter humili-ation. The Empire City had fallen, and lay at the mercy of a foreign foe.*

From, THE END OF NEW YORK, 1881

So wrote Park Benjamin, Albany Law School class of 1870, in his sensational short story “The End of New York,” first published in 1881.<sup>1</sup> Benjamin (1849-1922) was one of the few Albany Law alumni to venture into fiction;<sup>2</sup> but he drew on a highly specialized background in writing the story, and he did so with a highly didactic purpose.

Having graduated from Annapolis and serving under Admiral Farragut before resigning from the Navy to attend Albany Law, Benjamin possessed both legal acumen and technical engineering knowledge of a high order. This combination soon brought him to the head of the New York City patent bar.

Despite his intellectual property practice, Benjamin found time to serve as associate editor of *The Scientific American* and chief editor of *Appleton’s Cyclopedia of Applied Mechanics*, as well as writing five books, subjects as diverse as electrical engineering and the history of the U.S. Naval Academy.

Benjamin wrote that the 1880s U.S. Navy was so weak, its vessels obsolete, its budget grossly inadequate, that it constituted a serious threat to national security. His “End of New York” depicted in vivid terms an 1881 New York City defenseless before an aggressive Spanish fleet, armed with innovative balloon bombs. With their modern equip-ment, the Spaniards swept aside the pathetic, antiquated hulks of the American Navy and devastated the metropolis of North America. The story attracted a great deal of attention; it was part of the movement, later led by Theodore Roosevelt and Henry Cabot Lodge, that led to the creation of the American fleet that largely won the Spanish-American War a decade later. Benjamin, himself, was instrumental in the creation of the U.S. Naval Reserve.

Benjamin remained active, both as a patent attorney and as a writer on technical and naval affairs, up through World War I. He collected a valuable library on these subjects that he donated to Annapolis.

—Robert Emery, Associate Director & Head of Reference, Library

<sup>1</sup> Republished in *Short Stories by American Authors* (Scribners, 1884), which also contained one of Henry James’s early stories.

<sup>2</sup> Another example is Jack Casey (class of 1987), best known for his historical novel *The Trial of Bat Shea* (1994).