

Chronicles of Brunonia

The General and the Librarian:
Rush C. Hawkins and Margaret B. Stilwell

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Has it ever occurred to you that the General is rather a shy man? It is so hard to get him started; yet once he has plunged in he is irresistible as a storyteller- he has known so many splendid men and he is so full of stories...Something will strike him just right, Then we're off!

With some difficulty, 66-year old Margaret Stilwell unlocks the bronze doors to the Annmary Brown Memorial. It is early morning in 1953, too early for visitors to arrive, and a few feet away, students in the nearby fraternity buildings are still in their beds, dreaming of the summer vacation that is only a few final exams away. It is Margaret's last day as curator, and she has come to say goodbye to the place where she had spent most of her adult life.

Stilwell stops to gaze at the portrait of the General hanging on the wall. He had been sitting for the portrait up to the time of his last visit to the Memorial, two weeks before his death. She recalled these long sittings with Gari Melchers, the artist, and how the General would begin to stoop a little as he grew tired, or how his color would fade if he were fatigued.

In the picture, the General sits tall and his cheeks are full of color. A book rests on his lap as he stares into the distance at something beyond the reach of the viewer. Gazing at it now, Margaret thought she heard his voice again as he had observed the painter's progress: "I have felt like that a hundred times, when I have sat with an old book in my hand trying to think out its identity." In this picture, Margaret felt, was the General as she had known him. Rush's eyes appeared as they did when he gazed upon rare books, certain postcards from old friends, and portraits that reminded him of his dear Annmary.

It was a hot July day in 1917 when Margaret Bingham Stilwell met General Rush C. Hawkins on the granite steps of the Annmary Brown memorial to begin work. He took out the spidery keys from his pocket and, turning to the 30-year-old Stilwell and smiling, held open the heavy bronze doors inscribed with the figures of Literature and Art, graceful women opening their arms to him in the summer sun. Once indoors, the only light came from skylights that cast waxy beams onto the wooden floor. On the wall hung glossy paintings of nude women in oriental settings, stiff, formal portraits, and a dazzling desert-scape that gave the illusion of gazing into a blinding noonday sun. Hawkins explained he had placed the disparate works in a single room so that “student or layman” would be able to become acquainted with the movement of early Western painting at a glance.

Margaret turned about slowly in the center of the room. The dim light fell on the glass cases lining its perimeter. Inside their clear prisms, 450 of the General’s 542 volumes from 300 different firms of printers (and 141 different cities or towns) in the 15th century were displayed, their ochre leaves open to a page that had particularly struck General’s fancy. The object of the General’s collection of books was to illustrate the beginning of the diffusion of printing in Europe during the 15th century, and it had been the work of the past fifty years to form the collection, the jewels of which were now arrayed before her.

As the General went to rustle through papers, Margaret’s eye was drawn to a room that she had overlooked when she first entered. She ducked into the doorway to the right of the main entrance. As her eyes adjusted to the light,

Margaret began to make out the contents of the chamber. On its Eastern side, rows of bound volumes met her eyes. Their spines recorded the names of Mrs. Paul Bajnotti (Carrie Mathilde Brown) and Mrs. Hawkins (nee Annmary Brown.)- The Brown sisters, granddaughters of the namesake of the men's university. Above the bookshelf were two small oil portraits placed side by side. She leaned closer. The first was of a handsome young man with slate-blue eyes and black, painted pupils that seemed to rise out of the canvas. He wore a wine-colored bowtie and a somewhat outdated black suit- Margaret smiled at that. Beside him was the image of a clear-browed young woman with bright, hazel eyes, her gaze set off by the blue ribbon about her neck and the royal blue of her hat. The rest of her garments were a somber black that defied the brilliance of her eyes. Margaret wondered whom the girl was mourning. The date in the corner of each read "October 1860."

* * *

It was late in August of 1858, and Rush Hawkins was at one of those typically New York parties of the first social set; a piano forte played in the background, competing with the laughter of ladies in responding to the jibes of young men. Twenty-seven-year old Rush had been staying with his cousin, a lawyer in the United States Court, and it was this well-connected relative that brought him to this gathering, where he first met the dark-haired, divine creature standing before him. Her lips parted in a soft smile, and he was delighted to find a naturalness and unaffected simplicity in the warm gesture. And then the

goddess spoke. Her voice- oh, her voice! - Had a fine, musical quality as it rose and fell, pronouncing the name that he hoped would be linked to his for eternity. This spiritual being was Annmary Brown, the eldest daughter of the Hon. Nicholas Brown of Providence. He and his two daughters had just returned from Rome, where Mr. Brown had served as American Consul General.

“By the Seventeenth of September the one, the only faltering mind, had yielded to the pleadings of the other and the engagement for life was solemnly and affectionately pledged.”

Rush and Annmary stood side-by-side in the great library of Choppequonsett, the Brown family country home in Pawtucket. A southern wind blew in from the open windows, carrying the scent of sun-warmed grass and stirring the simple veil draped over Annmary’s smiling face. It was June 30, 1860. “Choppe”- as the young bride and her family affectionately called the house— was deemed the perfect place for the nuptials. Annmary associated the sprawling home and its great deck with happy childhood summers spent with her family.¹ Her father, Nicholas Brown, had passed away that March. Throughout the ensuing months, Rush had visited Annmary in her New York apartments, bringing her books that the two would discuss for hours.

The wedding ceremony that day at the Episcopal Church in Providence had been simple; there was no fanfare, no public to gaze upon the intimate gathering. Annmary’s mother led her eldest daughter down the aisle in tears,

giving her away to the ecstatic groom. Rush would later write “the greater period in the voyage of life had begun.”

Yet stormy seas soon overtook the voyage of the two lovebirds. Ten months into their marriage, shattering news broke across the infant roads of America as gunshots fired over Fort Sumter. On April 15th, 1861, President Lincoln issued a proclamation calling for 75,000 members of local militias to suppress the rebellion in the South.

Rush Hawkins and his Zouaves- so called for the their uniforms of dark blue wool and red trim topped by a red fez inspired by North African French Colonial soldiers- had been training for months, getting up at 4am to run the length of lower 5th Avenue in New York before daybreak broke and the citizens of New York went about their business (this did not stop them from terrifying several scullery maids as they scurried by, tassels flying).

The period of preparation for his departure was short, and very hard on Annmary. “I suppose you ought to; it is your duty; but it will almost kill me,” she told her husband as he stood before her, his back illuminated by gaslight making him already seem to disappear.

On the fourth of May, Hawkins and his Zouaves landed at Newport News, Virginia, just in time to participate in the “fanfair” known as Big Bethel. The 800 members of the New York 9th aided in the bombardment and capture of Fort Hatteras and Fort Clark before Hawkins was wounded on April 19th at Camden, North Carolina. Rush answered Annmary’s letters from towns named Antietam and Fredericksburg.

The Zouaves were mustered out on May 20th, 1863, allowing Rush and Annmary to celebrate their 3rd wedding anniversary together.

Yet Annmary's weak constitution led to frequent illnesses, and the couple spent decades traveling to a series of health spas with a view, traveling Europe and even Egypt in search of a miracle cure. The couple meanwhile moved in fashionable circles as the General steadily built his collection of rare books.

Spring of 1866 and 1867 were passed in Nice, where officers in the American Squadron in the Mediterranean, headquartered at Villa France, all grew to admire and befriend the enchanting young woman. Rush, his wife, and the officers would sit out in the warm air of Southern France overlooking the water. Opening a bottle of local wine, they would discuss all that they had seen in the world as the teal waters lapsed into an indigo night. Rush describes her as sprightly and shining in these conversation- in no sense a belle, but genuine and sympathetic. Upon leaving the summer haven for the last time, (in what she would say was one of the happiest periods of her life) Annmary received a photograph of Commander (later Admiral) Sampson, inscribed " To the prettiest and most attractive woman in Nice."

In 1878, the couple visited Annmary's younger sister Carrie — "her other self" — in Rome, where her husband, an Italian Count, was an Official in the Office of Foreign Affairs. It was while visiting Carrie, a girl with a similarly weak constitution, that Annmary was struck by Roman fever with complications. Rush writes "I saved her life by carrying her from Rome to Florence against the strongest possible protest of her physician (and, one can imagine, her sister) I

knew she could not be saved where we were, and decided to take the risk.” Her fever did not break until they reached Switzerland in September.

During a period of relative health and in between his “official duties” as Fine Arts Commissioner to the “Exposition Universelle Internationale de 1889” in Paris, Rush and Annmary walked together as their faces were illuminated by the jewel-toned light of Sainte Chappelle and marveled at the Dome du Pantheon. The light of those great windows and the skylight of the dome must have seemed soothing to the spirit of the two lovers, relieved to have even a brief respite from Annmary’s chronic illness.

Annmary caught a chill on Christmas day, 1902, and passed away at the Hawkins’ home in New York ten days into the New Year. Her grief-stricken husband never married again.

“To be without her loving, genial, sympathetic companionship, which I have had the happiness to enjoy for so many years, is not to live...Existence is now only tolerable because linked with sweet memories of the past.”

In his anguish, Rush decided to construct a memorial in honor of his wife. He did not choose a fountain or a clock tower, as the husband of Annmary’s sister, Carrie Brown, had done (Carrie had died in 1892, while living abroad). Instead, he built his wife a library resembling a Greek temple, filling it with books, Civil war memorabilia, the paintings she had collected, and her body, leaving a space beside her in the marble vault for his own tomb.

All of the correspondence between Rush and Annmary was placed in a box and deposited in the memorial, under strict orders to never to be opened. Every

March 9th — Annmary's birthday — her tomb is decorated with a wreath and garland of fresh flowers, which are left "until thoroughly wilted."

* * *

"Miss Stilwell, where have you gotten to?"

The General peered in from the doorway as Margaret turned, startled. She noticed the blue gray of the General's eyes, recognizing the boy from the portrait in the old man that stood before her.

The story, and the widower, must have seemed thrilling to the Pembroke College Student who would become the librarian and curator of General Rush C. Hawkins' collections in the monument he built for his dead wife.

When Margaret B. Stilwell met General Rush C. Hawkins, she was a 22-year old senior at Pembroke College; he was a 78-year-old man. In her yearbook photo from Pembroke in 1909 — Stilwell was the editor of the *Brun Mael* in this, its inaugural year — she stares with large, clear eyes directly into the lens, Her graduation cap aimed straight at the viewer. Her thin mouth is caught somewhere between a smile and a frown.

Margaret, born and raised on nearby Benefit Street, was both Class President and the Witch in that year's annual Masque, described as chasing the fair princess through the forest with glee. On the day she met Hawkins, she was

at work as an assistant to George Parker Winship, the librarian of the John Carter Brown Library.

The aging general burst into the library —

“I came to see Winship, for a moment only. I have no time.”

Not seeing the man, the General turned to go, but stopped short to pick up a copy of Mr. Pearson’s ‘Old Librarian’s Almanack, 1774, which was lying on the table in front of Margaret.

“Have you read it?’ he asked the young girl.

Margaret said she had, and found it amusing.

“Amusing? It’s a regular sell!’ and with that he drew a chair next to her and began reading to her the quaint 18th century rhymes in his energetic voice. When he had finished, he laughed “in such a boyish way that I forgot he was the tall, imperious-looking General who had appeared in the doorway,” wrote Margaret of her first encounter with the man in the spring of 1909.² He would go on to entrust her with a lifetime’s worth of stories---alongside a world-renowned collection of Incunabula, or the first printed books of the fifteenth century.

In 1914, with World War I raging in Europe, Margaret Stilwell packed up a suitcase of her belongings and set off for New York City. In a photograph from the period, she holds a parasol to guard against the noonday sun. Her delicate hands are gloved, and a faint smile crosses her face as she looks off into the distance, one prominent foot facing forward.

In 1916 she and the General would again cross paths. An enthusiastic Hawkins opened the door to the rare book room of the New York Public Library,

where she was a cataloger of the rare book division. Her male colleagues rose quickly to welcome the distinguished collector, and Margaret followed suit. The General ceremoniously waved them off and raved about the Trustees in charge of Annmary's Memorial, but said he was anxious to find a curator for his collection. The ad he had placed in the local papers spoke of an "opportunity for a well-educated cultivated and refined woman." The employment was described as "agreeable" and to "continue so long as satisfaction is given."

The hurricane of verbosity that was the General left, and Margaret's life amongst the stacks returned to normal until the Fall, when a rainy day again brought the General in from Providence. He came always on rainy days; his eyes were injured from an earlier condition, and the soft light made it more tolerable. He was a frequent guest that autumn, dropping in to gain Margaret's "advice" on the hiring of a new librarian for Annmary's Memorial. Stilwell later wrote of this period:

He was receiving applications and certain influential persons were proffering their friends. Because I lived in Providence and knew the Memorial, he seemed to like to discuss his problems with me. He would come bringing a letter or two for me to read; we would talk the matter over together; and I would try to help him to come to some conclusion. The General, so it worked out, had ideas of his own. ...The discussion of letters and applicants had been one of the General's pleasant little ways of 'detecting.' And when he finally came to the point, I discovered I had been on the witness stand all the while.

Margaret returned to Providence in June of 1917, and the two spent the summer amongst his papers and letters "that I might understand every detail."

The General, being a military man, was keen on instructions, and Margaret soon leaned to jot down any sudden commands. The pencil in hand, she

also managed to write down many of the reminiscences sparked by a certain photograph or relic from his past.

Margaret looked up at the painting of the two Brown sisters. Carrie and Annmary's brown hair fell over their shoulders in waves, their bright, Oriental outfits shining in rich yellows, blues, and reds, bangles dangling from well-rounded forearms.

While a student at Pembroke, Margaret had often walked by Carrie Tower, inscribed with the words "Love is as Strong as Death" to commemorate the pain of the Handsome Italian Count who had swept away the granddaughter of Nicholas Brown, the founder of the men's university, only to lose her to pneumonia as she died in his arms.

Margaret would often catch General Hawkins staring up at this same, staged portrait of the sisters. He had been close to his sister-in-law, as she and Annmary had been inseparable—inseparable, that is, until their marriages sent them to opposite corners of the globe. He would often describe how the marriage of her sister to a foreigner had at first been thrilling for Annmary to discuss with Carrie as they strolled, arm-in-arm, through the parks of Providence or about the chambers of the Brown family home. But once it was actualized and the reality of Carrie's parting set in, Annmary entered a "nerve-exhausting crisis" from which she never recovered. He would bitterly recount how Annmary could never mention the marriage without regret over the fact that it separated her from her best friend.

* * *

Annmary held on tight to Rush's hand as they made their way to the gravesite. Following her death millions of miles from friends and family, Carrie had been laid to rest in Rome, the city the girls had grown up in together. Carrie had often told her big sister that she would like to be buried in the Eternal City "because the birds came so early in the spring, and the violets that grew there were so lovely, that the feathered friends she loved might sing their joyous songs above her grave." The solitary sister that stood over her grave two Springs after Carrie's death now smelled the violets floating in on the warm air and closed her eyes, turning into the broad shoulders of her husband for support.

* * *

Margaret looked at the painted smiles of the two girls and marveled at how similar their fates were to be.

Margaret sat at the cherry wood writing desk, the thick volume that the General had handed her- his scrapbook- on her lap. She turned past pages pasted with ticket stubs and photographs, before an image on page 124 caught her eye. In the tiny image — an early photograph — a western woman in a long riding coat, her face hidden by her elaborate hat, looks up at a dark-skinned man astride a camel, who returns her gaze. The handwritten caption below the photograph read "Mutual Fascination, Cairo, Dec. 1898"

“Having heard from experienced travelers and read rather exhaustively of the perfections of the Egyptian climate in winter,” Rush wrote, “we concluded to give it a trial, and sailed for Alexandria via Naples the fifth day of November, 1898, and arrived at Cairo about a month later.” The Hawkins stayed in “comfortable accommodations” at Shephard’s Hotel, and “were delighted with the sunshine and the scenes so strange to us, and were happy.”

Yet the chills that came across the desert a half an hour before sundown each night proved treacherous for the delicate daughter of Nicholas Brown. “The result of our neglect was a cold contracted Christmas night that sent the victim to bed with a strong attack of bronchial pneumonia which lasted for nearly two months.” When he recalls her illness in Egypt he is angry, quavering: “Both physicians- one consulting, the other attending- proved to be not only ignorant, but cruel, and came near ending the life of the unfortunate victim of forty varieties of doses administered in as many days.” Rush himself came down with a “nervous prostration,” and both, despite being “too ill to move with safety,” were on board a ship in Alexandria’s harbor by two o’clock in the afternoon of February 22, 1899. He writes, “the day was all that we could desire: the harbor, with its ships decorated with the colors of all nations in honor of the day, and as a compliment to the armored cruiser Raleigh, one of Dewey’s fleet which had arrived a few days before, presented a most beautiful and inspiring appearance, And through all our gloom we saw the beginning to a return of sunshine.”

The General, seeing Margaret paralyzed in thought over his old scrapbook, moved towards her to look at the picture himself and, bending forward, examined the image as if trying to read the hidden face of the woman.

Beads of sweat shone on his forehead, illuminated by the sun filtered through skylights. Margaret watched as the General backed away and shuffled outdoors, placing the thermometer from the building outside on the granite steps. The reading reached 124 degrees Fahrenheit—that due only to limitations of its own. Hawkins remarked, “There, I knew it was a hot day! Let’s stop. We’ve done enough for one day’s work.” Not looking at Margaret, he moved to place the documents and letters into neat piles. She rose and helped him and, their work finished, the two went their separate ways.

The General was fond of his history. Every visitor to his office had the privilege of hearing a lecture on the portrait of President Lincoln hanging proudly on the wall. He would gesture towards the portrait and, closing the door, tell his captive audience about the time he was invited for toast and tea with the President:

“‘Dear old Uncle Abe’ was a revelation to me, so sadly quaint, so melancholy, so simple in his manners, so humane so sympathetic, and generally so different from anybody I had ever known,” he would say. He would then recount how, during their meeting, Lincoln took out a worn volume to read his favorite poem,

O, why should the spirit of mortal be proud?
Like a swift-fleeting meteor, a fast-flying cloud,
A flash of the lightning, a break of the wave

Man passes from life to his rest in the grave.

Savoring the moment, Hawkins would then show his guest one of the most treasured autographs in his collection, a letter addressed to him from “A. Lincoln. Dec. 6, 1861.”

The summer heat wave continued throughout the following month. Above the sleeping marble tomb of his wife, the General directed young Margaret this way and that, shifting papers and personal letters amongst the 15th century printed texts.

Towards the end of one such afternoon, a car was heard outside; it was the trustees coming to take the aging General home. The day had been so warm that he had been “grinding his teeth and growling to himself all day long.” Stopping to greet the trustees, Hawkins asked Stilwell to ride with them for a cool-off before dinner. As the car cruised down the calm roads of Nayatt and Rumstick Point, the rushing air began to soothe the General’s spirits. Margaret writes that as the car came into more open fields, the old man began to hum and sing under his breath:

“If I were an Os-qu-a-rey

In the land of Tim-buc-tou,

I should eat a missionary

Tall silk hat and psalm book too.”

Amused, he sang louder and louder. Stilwell writes “It took but little imagination to picture him sixty-odd years before when, in his convalescent days at New Orleans after the Mexican War, he had sung in the chorus supporting Jenny Lind- his ‘red-letter day in Bohemia.’”

* * *

After that summer, Hawkins returned to his residence in New York on 21 West 20th Street. His declining health lessened the frequency of his visits to the memorial, but Stilwell wrote him often of the comings and goings of people and books to the library. Her letters convey a certain intimacy, an eagerness to share the excitement of the visitors she so colorfully describes.

The Annmary Brown Memorial

Providence

November 22, 1917

“My dear General Hawkins-

“...It has been fascinating work, to review the history of three wars and in the handwriting of those who actually participated in these great events. I have tried not to loiter by the way, because it seemed to me of this first important to get the material all on record. Some day, I must browse among these manuscripts and papers. There is so much that is important and hitherto unknown...

...Mr. Winship sent one of his Harvard students, who spent an afternoon here, cross- questioning me about incunabula and wood engravings. He comes from Colorado and wishes to be a businessman and meanwhile he said he wishes “to be informed.” If his zeal in business equals his energy in seeking information- the country will have another millionaire....

...Two evenings ago, Mr. William E Foster gave a reading at his home on Horace and the various Imitations, to which he very kindly invited me. Horace is his

hobby, and we rode with him through a delightful evening. So, bibliographically speaking, life has been very pleasant.

I hope that you are feeling better than a few weeks ago, and that the trip to Providence did you no harm.

Sincerely yours,

Margaret B. Stillwell.”

* * *

Nighttime in New York City, October 25, 1920. Eighty-nine year-old Rush Hawkins is crossing 5th Avenue and is hit by a car. He had made it through the Civil War to die on the city street on which he had once trained his Zouaves; perhaps not ready for the automobiles that had so changed the roads he had once walked as the suitor of Annmary Brown.

Of his funeral in the City, Stilwell wrote, “against the hundred or more men present there seemed to be hardly more than eight or ten women.” She attributed this to the undying devotion he had for his wife, and the fact that women “rather bored than interested him.”

“He liked cheeriness, grace, and above all serenity, gentleness of manner and of disposition,” writes Stilwell in her memoir of the General. “These were the characteristics of both Mrs. Hawkins and her sister- Madame Bajnotti.”

In his later years the General would never say “good-bye.” “He had said ‘Good-bye’ to Madame Bajnotti little thinking it was the last time he should see her, and he withheld the word sacred to her memory. From that time on, whenever anyone went away it was always ‘Au revoir.’”

The General was laid to rest beside his wife, buried beneath the books he had spent his life collecting.

Rush Hawkins was dead. And he had left Stilwell as librarian of Annmary's library.

From 1924 until the outbreak of WWII, the Annmary Brown Memorial served as the American clearing-house for the European Commission for recording all extant books of the fifteenth century. Rare editions of these texts came in from all over the country to be verified at the Memorial before being sent abroad. Simultaneously, Stilwell undertook the compilation of records for a new census of incunabula in the United States, Mexico, and Canada on behalf of the Bibliographical Society of America. It was under her editorship that the final records were published by the Society in 1940 during the celebration of the five hundredth anniversary of the invention of printing.

*In January of 1977, Margaret Stilwell would become the first honorary woman member of the Grolier Club. She wrote many books throughout her career, including *Incunabula and Americana, 1450-1800* (1931), *A Key to Bibliographic Study* (1931), *Incunabula in American Libraries*, *A Second Census* (1941), and later, a book of verse, *"Noah's Ark in Early Woodcuts and Modern Rhyme* (1942). She also authored and illustrated *"While Benefit Street Was Young,"* (1945) a book about her childhood address. Margaret Stilwell passed away on April 22, 1984.*



Margaret Bingham Stilwell, circa 1909 Annmary Brown Hawkins, circa 1897



Rush Christopher Hawkins, circa 1860



Margaret Bingham Stilwell, circa 1949

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