

Chronicles of Brunonia

The Legend of Josiah Stickney Carberry

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In 1929, a Brown University legend was born: the venerable and nonexistent Professor Josiah Carberry. The two witty and prank-loving professors who created him hardly knew what madness would ensue.

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On January 24, 1929, a young, round-faced professor in Brown's Department of Classics found the key to a glassed-in bulletin board in University Hall. A lover of pranks, John W. Spaeth, Jr. found the opportunity for mischief irresistible and swiftly composed a false announcement:

Next Thursday evening at 8:15 in Sayles Hall, Dr. J. S. Carberry will deliver a lecture on 'Archaic Greek Architectural Revetments in Connection with Ionian Phonology.' Admission is free, dress is formal. For tickets and information, apply to Prof. John Spaeth.

A fellow Classics Department member, Dr. Benjamin Crocker Clough, passed by the sign and immediately recognized that his friend's posting was a hoax; he took it upon himself to pencil in, between 'will' and 'deliver,' a carat and the word *not*. Still, his correction went unnoticed by many; 150 people showed up to the nonexistent talk, and Spaeth was peppered with questions about the mysterious lecturer. When faced with one such inquiry by a curious graduate student, Spaeth ad-libbed a few admiring remarks about Carberry's prestige as a scholar of psychoceramics, or the study of cracked pots; then, apparently caught up in the joy of invention, he mentioned that Carberry had a wife, Laura, and two daughters: Lois and Patricia. His impromptu remarks formed the foundation of what would become a wildly-complicated and lovingly-curated myth at Brown.

Spaeth and Clough were immediately taken with this figment of their mutual imagination, and commenced straight away in making Carberry the perpetrator of their practical jokes. In large part, this consisted of sending each other telegrams and notes, like the phone message slip filled out and left for Spaeth in February of 1930: **There**

was a telephone call at 4 A.M. o'clock from Mr. J.S. Carberry, who said *you were a damned crook and what had you done with those Greek vases of his. He says Lois & Patricia told him all. He ~~wants~~ dares you to call him up.*

The playful pair also amused themselves by submitting works from members of the Carberry family to various publications; in March of 1929, a poem by Lois was published in the *Providence Journal*:

“Sphinx Song”

*Born of the purple chaos of the wind,
Clamorous and pinguid,
Taut with fuzzy, fusty garlands
of insensate spactara,
Challenging the redolence of LIFE,
She knelt there.*

*All her carmine courage, giddily abortive,
Muttered matters immaterial,
cackled squeamish visions,
Bartered for a moiety of FAITH
And shuddered.*

Gun-boom...Drum-boom...Silence...

Though the poem was printed without any indication that Lois was entirely fictional, both Clough and Spaeth had written extensively for the *Providence Journal*, so the paper's editors were likely in on the joke. Still, after receiving a deluge of submissions from Carberry family members over the following years, the *Providence Journal* refused

to print anything bearing that last name, precluding some real-life Carberrys from announcing their weddings.

Spaeth and Clough, as avid Classics scholars, extended Carberry's writing whims to academia, delighting especially in penning letters of correction and suggestion to various journals of Greek and Latin study; Josiah was the recipient of numerous letters of thanks and interest from grateful editors. He even authored two pieces published in *Classical Weekly*, including one Spaeth-penned gem entitled "Another Catullus to Another Lesbia."

* * *

Spaeth left Brown in 1930, becoming a Dean and Professor of Classics at Wesleyan University in Middletown, Connecticut. Clough stayed in touch with him through pun-riddled and poetic Carberry postcards; one such missive featured a picture of the Atlantic ocean captioned with "MORNING ON THE ATLANTIC"; the reverse side bore Clough's loopy, narrow script: *What more romantic / than morning on the Atlantic? / Your affnate & frantic / Josiah & Laura, pedantic.*

Spaeth responded occasionally—in 1936, for example, he commissioned a wedding announcement in the *Middletown Press* for Lois Carberry and (the already-married) Clough. Still, the Carberry correspondence was largely one-sided, with Clough fashioning Spaeth's brainchild into a wordplay fiend with a penchant for foreign languages and esoteric academic references—in other words, a fellow much like Clough himself.

Clough, a doughy-faced man who held three Harvard degrees, had come to work for Brown's English department in 1913, switching to Classics after eleven years and eventually chairing that department. In 1929, he married Elsie Lustig, the proprietor of The Book Shop, a well-loved Providence establishment until its closing in 1963; the Market Square store was the subject of one disgruntled letter from Carberry in 1944:

I feel I must take pen in hand to state as follows: Upon entering the Book Shop the other day, I noted a sign on your door, stating, "Book Shop—5 Steps Down." I have always been the kind of a person who is given to following directions at all times, and I, therefore, went down five steps. "One, two, three, four five," I counted – to myself, so as not to disturb any persons who might be about. It was at that point that I suddenly became involved in a difficulty. I did not find the Book Shop five steps down as the directions had stated so plainly I would. Fortunately, I had the presence of mind to take the proper step – to be specific, the sixth. Thereupon, I found myself in the Book Shop, but only thereupon. It is things like this that lead such people as I to ask, "Is this trip necessary?" Some day someone is going to count on there being only five steps, like the sign states, and that person is likely to end up right in the middle of the Modern Library. Do you carry public liability insurance? Now it just so happens that I have just the thing, and I may just drop in on you one of these days. Man has to make a living, you know; who the hell takes ceramics these days?

Carberry's playfully persnickety nature mirrored that of Ben Clough, who commented in a 1936 article in the *Providence Journal*: "Some things I no longer try to like: Contract, Henry James, debates, El Greco, oratory. Other things, I like pretty permanently: Chopin, Mark Twain, boats, Maupassant, travel, Thucydides, Tacitus." Unsurprisingly, Clough also fostered a great love for folk tales and American myths; in 1944, he edited a collection entitled *The American Imagination at Work: Tall Tales and Folk Tales*, saying, "I am fascinated by that borderline between history and fiction in which the 'true narrative' becomes, innocently or otherwise, a little less or more than the truth."

Clough retired as a professor in 1949, though he stayed active in university life, serving as the official curator of Carberryania. By the early 1950s, the fame of Carberry had spread, and Clough replaced Spaeth as the primary recipient of Carberry notes as students and colleagues sent him dispatches from around the world.

In 1943, Josiah wrote from Algeria, able to communicate through the United States' World War II Victory Mail. In 1950, he found himself in Turkey, writing: *P.S. Lois has married a Kurdish chieftain. They are wintering in Prague. Patricia has caused me great trouble of an indelicate nature best left undescribed here. My wife is a source of comfort and discomfort. She looks after my needs as best she can; but is sorely jealous of my new friends, the psychic fish.* (He included several drawings of said fish.)

The letters thus expanded upon Josiah's family history: Patricia's obsession with puffins and skill in hunting animals whose names start with "pt"; the marriage of one daughter (though it isn't clear which) to Truman Grayson, Josiah's assistant who was often beleaguered by attacks from animals whose names start with "a"; Laura's difficulties with personal pronouns, unfailingly signing letters "from Josiah and I." Laura's particular defect apparently led to considerable strife with her husband, resulting in a personal ad in the *Middletown Press* in 1955 which read: *Come home, J.S. Promise never to use the wrong case again. Your going has left nothing but remorse for Lois, Patricia, and I.*

* * *

The surge in the ranks of Carberry devotees after 1950 can be traced to the efforts of W. Chesley Worthington '23, or Chet, who had taken Clough's essay class as an undergraduate. Worthington, a hawk-faced, handsome man—like a crabappled George Clooney—started editing the *Brown Alumni Monthly (BAM)* in 1930, but became a full-time Brown staff member only in 1940, when he was hired as Director of Alumni Relations. Worthington featured Carberry in *BAM* whenever possible, printing portions of Josiah's postcards and invoking his name during fundraising drives.

Worthington became even more active in Carberry propagation efforts when, on Friday the 13th of May, 1955, a letter signed by Carberry arrived at University Hall, the envelope containing \$101.01 in cash. Since the return address in Manchester, New Hampshire was that of a liquor store, there was no way to tell who had authored the letter, which stated: *The enclosed \$101.01 is for a special fund in memory of my future late wife, Laura Carberry; to be known, of course, as the Josiah S. Carberry Fund. ...Each Friday the 13th shall henceforth be designated as Carberry Day. The Curator shall urge alumni, students, friends of the University, and other unfortunates to donate anonymously to the Fund such small change as they might have on their persons on Carberry Day.*

Worthington, in conjunction with Clough and other Carberry activists, spearheaded Carberry Day festivities every Friday the 13th, posting announcements for new and nonexistent lectures—"Asps and Aardvarks," "Pot Shards of the Amazon Delta," "The Influence of Psychoceramics on the Neo-Protestant Movement at Berkeley," "Positive Negativism"—and placing cracked pots around campus in which students were

instructed to deposit loose change. The collected funds were given to the University Library—a favorite cause of Worthington’s, who co-founded Friends of the Library of Brown University—to purchase “such books as Professor Carberry might or might not approve of.” Worthington often planned alumni and fundraising functions on Carberry Days, always beginning events by reading a telegram of regret from Carberry: *Deeply regret that I cannot accept your invitation to make my usual Sayles Pitch in Sayles Hall. Instead, I shall be enjoying a lobster dinner with some Cape Cod grammarians. They eat only the subordinate claws.*

Worthington also orchestrated Carberry’s trip around the world in a single day on July 4th of 1956, in which 24 dated postcards were mailed detailing Carberry’s activities in various locations, one from each of the world’s time zones. In this project and in general, Carberry’s voice lost some of its refinement and erudition because so many people were simultaneously crafting his remarks, but his odd affinities still managed to shine through, as in a letter from 1959 from Columbus, Georgia: *Although at present I am without repose in a primitive land, I send greetings in honor of him, who brought the reptiles into England. My research has – ever enlarging upon itself – taken me into the realm of what I dub “Gastro-ceramics”, and particularly “hush-puppies” which are taken internally (inferentially?) by the inhabitants of this region. Generally they are preceded by Fish and followed by Indigestion, and furthermore, they are virtuously indestructible, having been known to have survived by many years their soon-departed hosts. Perhaps the hardest of man-made substance, “hush-puppies” are said to release energy out of all proportion to their size in the rare cases in which their cellular structure is shattered. As you may well imagine, “Gastro-ceramics”—and*

“hush-puppies” in particular—present a fascinating and hitherto unexplored field of endeavor. I am about to embark on an expedition to Mammy’s Catfish Shanty and I am letting you know just in case.

* * *

Over the years, the frequency of Carberry epistles has waxed and waned, but under the stewardship of Clough and Worthington, no lull lasted especially long. After Clough’s death in 1975, Worthington took over Carberryania curatorial duties, and much of the support for the legend of Josiah shifted to the archivists at the John Hay. Certain Brown Presidents—namely Vartan Gregorian and Howard Swearer—have also spurred the activism of Carberry aficionados; for whatever reason, those two received many more dispatches from that venerable professor than any Presidents before or since.

Since Worthington’s death in 2002, though, the stream of Carberry ephemera has dwindled: only three postcards have been sent by him since 2000. Still, Josiah’s name lives on—in Brown’s online card catalog, inaugurated in 1995; in the on-campus eatery, opened in 1991—and on each Carberry Day, the possibility remains: Josiah just might back get in touch.

With love and good wishes,

The Carberrys & I

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