Chronicles of Brunonia

The Rutted Road from University Hall: The Final Reign of Asa Messer

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Asa Messer, the eccentric and rude third president of Brown University, falls from grace amidst parallel scandals of religion and university politics.

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Written in partial fulfillment of requirements for E. Taylor's EL18 or 118:
"Tales of the Real World" in the Nonfiction Writing Program, Department of English, Brown University.

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December 20, 2011

Synopsis: Asa Messer, the eccentric and rude third president of Brown University, falls from grace amidst parallel scandals of religion and university politics.

Asa Messer set the first draft aside. Surrounded by warring factions within the University, even the University president could not afford such an emotional, charged letter of resignation. To quench the fires, he needed to stop fighting back; he picked up his pen and began again, mildly, piously. The citizens of Providence, the Corporation, the students, the alumni – many had lost faith in Messer, rebelled against his leadership, or rejected his religious uncertainty. Alumni distributed pamphlets and published newspaper columns in the *Providence Inquirer* attacking and sometimes defending Messer, while students disturbed classes and rioted. Now, in the late fall of 1826, Messer's reputation had sustained the same vandalism as school buildings. It was time to go, after almost forty years of service to Brown. After the uproar over Asa Messer, his reign over Brown and his unconventional beliefs, memory of Brown's third president faded quickly away; his decades at Brown and the revolts that ended them remain in the shadow of Francis Wayland, his more moderate successor.

Moderate, by 1826 Rhode Island standards, meant Baptist. Roger Williams founded the colony seeking religious freedom – for Baptists, with concession to other religious groups; by the end of the Revolutionary War, Baptists controlled Rhode Island government, business, and education. It was the social designation of choice, a prerequisite for respect and power within the state. Brown was no exception. When Asa Messer graduated from the College of Rhode Island in 1790, the university took its heritage to heart: a non-denominational institution with Baptists at the helm. But for all the university's spirit of religion, a requirement stood that while the university president had to be Baptist, there were to be no tests of religion. Even after the College of Rhode Island became Brown University, the president was expected to actively serve in the Baptist faith.

As the Baptists had been chased out of Massachusetts before the founding of Rhode Island, some resentment for Boston lingered through the centuries. In the early 1800s, an intellectual subgroup of the Boston Congregationalists shocked Baptists with a new, radically liberal line of questioning: what if Jesus isn't God? What if there is no Holy Spirit – or if there is, it's not God? Baptists adhere strictly to the Trinity, the concept that there is a God the Father, a God the Son Jesus, and a God the Holy Spirit. But these deviant Congregationalists, known as Unitarians for their belief in a unified God, challenged beliefs dating back to the centuries after the crucifixion. Yet the ideas spread, and Unitarians took control of Congregationalist Harvard while a few prominent Providence men dabbled in Unitarianism themselves – including Asa Messer's close friend and Corporation member, Samuel Eddy, who was subsequently thrown out of the First Baptist church down the hill from Brown's campus (which is indeed the very first Baptist church on the continent). Eddy's scandal drew suspicion to Messer, whose loud, awkward religiosity seemed to lean increasingly towards the Unitarians. Though he denied any deviance from the Baptist dogma, the degree he received from Harvard Divinity School in the middle of his Brown presidency did little to calm debate. But with no religious tests, no challengers at Brown could remove an infidel from his post as President, particularly not one who still identified as a Baptist. Messer repeatedly resorted to this lone rule to defend himself from the growing coalition against his presidency.

Despite the allegations, Asa Messer was Baptist through the day he died – at least, according to him. He preached at First Baptist his entire adult life, although in his later years also spoke at First Unitarian, but spent his professional career as an educator. Messer stayed at the College of Rhode Island after graduation as a tutor, and then as a professor of the Learned Languages (Latin and Greek) and Natural Philosophy (chemistry and physics). When Jonathan Maxcy, second president of the College of Rhode Island, retired in 1802, the Corporation appointed Messer as president *pro temps*. Two years later, the same year the Corporation renamed College of Rhode Island to Brown University

to honor Nicholas Brown's $5,000 professorship endowment (worth perhaps $100,000 today), Messer accepted the honor of becoming the institution's third president. The first fifteen years went well – Messer founded Brown's first medical school, expanded the faculty, and oversaw the construction of Hope College, the second campus building. The number of students enrolled peaked during his term at 162 undergraduates in 1821, with numbers not surpassed until the twentieth century; graduates of his era include congressmen, governors, diplomats, and businessmen.

These esteemed Brunonians attended school under a bumbling, graceless president. Brown in these days was a school for the provincials of Rhode Island, to bring to them a rigorous, civilizing education – and its leader, in great contrast to his learning, befitted a less-than-cosmopolitan university. Pronunciation errors marred his ineloquent speeches, and even in class lectures Messer often admonished students for mimicking his poor elocution, unaware of his own mispronunciations. His off-putting rhetoric tended also toward the crude. In the midst of other allegations during the last years of his tenure as president came students' recollections of ethnic slurs and other offensive humor in his conversations with students. Less disturbingly, he was a tepid and tedious orator, known to deliver drawn-out and monotonous sermons throughout the school year.

After his resignation, students remembered him as a burly, fatherly man; “fatherly” men of this era were more stern than caring – and a father could be judged by his discipline. A noted disciplinarian, Messer maintained a list of infractions and fines ranging from a few cents to over a dollar (about $20 today) for absence from class or chapel, unruliness and tardiness. His most notorious invention was “rustication,” a harsh punishment that sent misbehaving students to improve their character and clear their minds for a semester while toiling on a farm. Most students were unfamiliar with his other, scientific inventions: flumes – types of small aqueducts, for which he held two patents. His creative engineering did little to help the increasing need for student discipline. Although pranks had once been limited to stashing Messer's horse in his third-floor office in University Hall, or painting his horse and

setting it loose during outside ceremonies, they took a turn for the violent in 1817.

Behind University Hall, students built a hut out of kindling and set it afire; though no criminal suspicions appeared in correspondence, the prank distressed Messer, whose barn (as well as the roof of University Hall) had been within reach of sparks had the wind changed that night. In 1819, students damaged dormitory areas of University Hall and interrupted and undermined lecturers during recitation; some students faced rustication for these “disturbances,” as they came to be called. Subversion like this resurfaced at the opening of Hope College, Brown's second building, in 1823. Soon after its doors opened as a residence hall for students long tired of living next to classrooms in University Hall, students vandalized its new chapel, broke windows and damaged the heavy wooden doors. This matter was more serious than other pranks, and upset the Corporation – after all, Corporation member and namesake donor Nicholas Brown had built and named the college himself.

Soon after, as recounted in a publicly scathing 1826 pamphlet, the junior class rebelled. By1824, the University faculty hadn't grown to meet the demands of larger class sizes and had in fact lost beloved lecturers in the most-demanded subjects; feeling ignored and worried that the situation would only worsen in their final year, outspoken third-years openly circulated a petition calling for additional and more competent professors of Natural Philosophy and Chemistry. The weak faculty resulted from Messer's “tyrannical” mishandling of University priorities, they said. These students didn't know the financial constraints that prevented rapid hiring and showed ignorant of the ailing agrarian economy as the financial system recovered from the nation's first financial crisis, the Great Panic of 1819. A debate between government control and independence had arisen across Antebellum America, unintentionally mirrored on College Hill as irate Brown students insisted on new Chemistry tutors. Offended and subordinated, the Corporation formed a committee to investigate the junior class riots and the Hope College vandalism, and rusticated and expelled half a dozen students.

While students overlooked the University's scant resources, they also were blind to a second,

and perhaps more influential factor in Messer's and the Corporation's decision-making. In any Rhode Island institution, struggles between entitled and powerful Baptists and all non-Baptists defined inter-organizational politics. That Messer was only obliquely a Baptist likely reduced his administrative clout, especially as he worked less and less to conceal his Unitarian tendencies by giving sermons at the Unitarian church and writing spiritually questioning letters to friends who were public figures. Letters to the *Providence Inquirer* – which some later alleged Messer himself had written – admonished the Corporation for limiting Messer's powers to hire, because they feared he would hire non-Baptists to subvert the ruling coalition of Baptist faculty. One letter to the editor claimed plainly that the Corporation of Brown University wished to sabotage Messer solely on the grounds of his unconfirmed religion.

Of course, no religiously-based faculty decisions are on record. A professor of Chemistry had left Brown abruptly in 1824, the inspiration for the junior-class riots that year. It is possible that Messer ousted faculty he found threatening (though he made no moves to injure the professor who would soon succeed him), and even more possible that he did so to regain power over an increasingly restrictive Corporation. None of these decisions survived on paper, yet the mystery was likely greater during the controversy itself. Other allegations surfaced, besides the students' claim that Messer fired unfavorable instructors and the opinions columnists' claims that the Corporation worked against Messer, that insisted the Corporation and Messer were actually colluding to silence students and chase out Baptist teachers. However, the Corporation's interests could not be surmised that quickly: it had non-Baptist representatives, many of whom sat in chairs of responsibility during Messer's hardest years; yet it was overwhelmingly Baptist, with many conservative local dignitaries who had a personal investment in ensuring the Baptists – and not the Boston Unitarians – would continue to run Providence. They could not have been his lackeys, but with old friends on the Corporation, Messer probably didn't have many enemies on the Corporation either. The situation, unlike its representation in the Providence media, was

hardly black or white.

Yet nobody won. The Corporation “disturbances” committee, established in September of 1824, included the treasurer and secretary of the Corporation with three other trustees. The committee, as recorded in the Corporation Minutes, failed to meet even once. Both pro- and anti-Messer advocates found this breakdown in function damning evidence of either Messer's silencing power over the Corporation or of the Corporation's utter disinterest in the challenges facing Messer and his slipping control of the Brown student body. Something was up, but what exactly was fishy about the committee is unresolved. The junior class of 1825, outraged at the inaction, wrote the pamphlet that serves as today's only source on the student riots. Its distribution was public, and the writing within targeted the community surrounding the University, likely alumni and parents of students. Now out of the University's reach, one (temporarily) anonymous member of the class of 1825 took charge of the pamphlet, which Messer denounced. It was “replete with allegations against me,” he wrote to the Corporation, daring its members to prove the manipulations of which he was accused. This rhetoric implies an antagonistic distance between Messer and the Corporation, and it was clear that Messer's job was on the line. Months later, Messer submitted an exhausted and passionately Christian letter of resignation. The first draft, sentimental and filled with images of his “pungent” sadness, remained in his drawer, unsent.

The Corporation was quick to accept the resignation, a sign it too understood there was no regaining the control Messer once held over the young men he had brought to a continually improving university. Of course, conspiracy-seekers see the quick turnaround in leadership as evidence of the Corporation's covert preparedness for the occasion. Francis Wayland, a young professor at Brown, served as acting president, and then full president, from the day Messer resigned. He was a tried-and-true Baptist and, as the University soon learned, a competent leader. His discipline regime was even harsher than rustication – though it seems that rustication itself incited as much student anger as faculty

decisions.

The memory of Messer deteriorated, and the students' diatribe remained the last shot fired, echoing down the paneled halls of Brown University recollection. In fact, Messer had founded Brown's first and prestigious medical school, expanded the student body and the campus to unprecedented size and grandeur, cultivated the Brown name and inspired philanthropic donations from the Brown family. He was a patented inventor and mentor to hundreds; after Wayland's resignation, alumni from Messer's era wrote to the University expressing their fondness for the days of Messer's grounded and unpretentious leadership. Messer later made an unsuccessful run for governor of Rhode Island, regarding which the *Inquirer* published letters in support of Messer, defending his eligibility as a Baptist. Ironically, no Baptist was permitted as governor in the original Rhode Island charter, signed by Charles II – and as Messer would have it, he was a Baptist through the day he died.

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