

Chronicles of Brunonia

The Dear Old Well: The Water Procession of 1868

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Before the advent of indoor plumbing, Brown's wells were the sites of much mischief. When the registrar refused to replace a missing bucket in 1868, students took to the Providence streets to protest its absence.

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*The ladies stared with wonder, and sweetly did they smile
To see this strange procession march by in double file.*

— From “The Water Procession,” by F.E. Bliss 1868 and F. Lawton 1869

The early evening sun filtered through the elm tree canopies and glinted against the windows of University Hall and Hope College. Students had pushed open their windows to let in the warm May air, and with each breeze the loose panes rattled in their frames. The windows of the cement-swaddled University Hall, nearly a century old by now, 1868, were especially rickety, but the noise didn't bother the students inside. Out of lecture, they lolled in overstuffed chaise lounges, paging through a rhetoric textbook or gathering around a table to catch a game of whist before dinner.

Suddenly, other, louder noises interrupted the soft shuffling of the playing cards and the sporadic rattling of the window panes. The brassy blares of trumpets and the deep rumbles of tubas rang across the west end of campus, the so-called Old Front Row. The men sprang up, letting their volumes of Cicero and Sophocles fall from their laps. As they stretched their heads out the windows, a quickly assembling throng greeted them. In addition to a full brass band, students streamed forward and joined the thunderous yet singsong calls. “Bucket, bucket, who's got the bucket?” they warbled. “Bucket, bucket, who's got the bucket?”

From the upper floors of the dormitories, the students could hear Robert Metcalf's shout. “Rally the troops!” he called, gripping the round, old-fashioned tin bathtub he wore on his head.

The students knew what to do, and they wasted no time. They tugged on their hats, most in bowlers and derbies, though a few donned tall stovepipes. Each grabbed

some sort of water-carrying vessel — a mug or teakettle or pail or pitcher or jug — and slammed his thin pine bedroom door behind him. No one bothered to fumble with the keys, nasty brass beasts as long as a man's hand and clumsy in the doors' iron locks.

Outside, the students began to form rows. Brown counted 186 men that year, and nearly all seemed to be in attendance. Nineteen-year-old Metcalf, a Providence native who would go on to a career as a coal merchant, took his spot next to three others also balancing bathtubs on their heads. In front stood eight students, each armed with a bucket and a coil of rope. Another man waved a white banner bearing a single word: "WATER."

"Left! Right! Left! Forward!" called one of the men amid cheers and roars. A few muffled complaints rumbled down the line. "My poor parched throat!" one man groused, massaging the skin above his stiffly starched collar.

"You talk of your throat?" another retorted. "I haven't washed my face in days!"

"And my beard needs a good shave!" grumbled a freshman as he stroked the peach fuzz sprouting from his chin.

"Men, enough!" someone hooted, but this entreaty was deafened by the strains of "Upidee," the American Brass Band's lilting waltz. The flock took to the Providence streets. The procession had begun.

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It may have been hours (according to local papers) or it may have been days (according to the Brown men), but any length of time was too long to go without that brisk, life-giving beverage. Perhaps it was the arrival of spring that transformed a mischievous theft into a malevolent one, but as students awoke on those last days of

May 1868 and grabbed the wooden pails they kept outside their doors and the tin cups that hung outside their windows, a sorry sight greeted them at the aged stoned well.

Students liked to quip that the old well at the rear of Hope often grew absent-minded and misplaced its bucket. They also suspected that the well's wooden roof carried matches in its pocket, for it habitually sprung into flames, usually in the anonymous hours of the night. Once in the spring of 1862, a group of men held an impromptu funeral for the well, clasping hands and singing "Auld Lang Syne" around its charred and smoldering remains.

This time, the well had lost both its old oaken bucket and its sturdy rope. All that remained was a frayed and lonely wisp of twine. Well-related pranks were nothing new — the tradition of clever mischief stretched back to the antebellum days. Students often let the pail, sans water, fly to the top of the well curb, where the old oaken bucket met the wooden framework with astounding noise, and sometimes split into pieces. On another instance, students found a dead cat in one of the wells, but the poor feline was fished out without any apparent harm to the water. In the summer of 1856, the Hope College well was fed heaps of hay, and the registrar — Lemuel H. Elliott at this time, a heavy-browed man known to students as "Pluto" — had to remove the sodden fodder. The water resembled herbal tea for weeks afterward.

But at the time of this 1868 disappearance, the registrar did not respond with his typical haste. No, the Reverend William Douglas, known by the Brown men as "Billy Dug," refused to replace the bucket and rope. The Scottish-born Douglas preached weekly at the state prison and delivered religious tracts to seamen docked in Providence. During his 15 years of service as registrar, he lived with his wife and five children in University Hall, where he allowed students into his kitchen to cook — and more often

burn — their turnips and cabbage. He wore bushy sideburns, called “side tabs” at that time, and was remembered by students as a faithful, much-tested man, but by 1868 he had seen enough pranks. The hours — or was it indeed days? — passed, but no gasping throats found relief.

As the students’ discontent mounted, so did their thirst. Investigation failed to implicate any guilty scoundrels, and Billy Dug showed no sign of wavering. Then, on the afternoon of Thursday, May 28, printed handbills began to appear on the elms, on the wooden fences, and, of course, on the melancholy well itself:

NOTICE

The procession of water consumers will form at half-past five, P.M., if the well rope is not fixed by that time.

The announcements were signed, “Per order, H.O.” Chemistry was required for the junior class.

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In fairness, Brown had two wells. The men could have quenched their thirst or washed their faces at the well next to University Hall, but students shunned this water source. A survey conducted just a few months after the 1868 water procession found that 599 of Providence’s 3,143 wells produced water unsuitable for drinking, and though the University Hall fountain may not have been listed in the official report, it might as well have received mention. It was, in polite terms, not of the most hygienic character, and in honest terms, fouled by the cesspool that seeped from the neighboring privy.

This privy functioned as the school’s sole toilet. With little affection, students christened it Sprague Hall, perhaps a nod to Governor William Sprague, who never

realized his hopes to present a building to the College. The privy nestled against a cherry tree and the registrar's garden, near where Slater Hall now stands. According to long-time university servant Anthony McCabe, its proportional share of repair costs exceeded that of any other campus building, and it too was not immune to tomfoolery. A group of eight students in 1817 lit it on fire, and repeated pranks attempted similar destruction. When Sprague Hall was demolished and a room in the north end of University Hall was remade as a water closet in 1878, students rejoiced. William H.P. Faunce 1880, a modest and maladjusted student who would go on to become the school's longest-serving president, called the demolition of that ancient and undesirable edifice a most righteous deed.

But these advances in plumbing were a long way off for the students of 1868. They had no choice but to patronize the privy and to haul heavy buckets of water up several flights of stairs to their rooms in University Hall and Hope College. The drainage in Hope consisted of a single pipe leading from the south end of the building, but when this froze, students simply emptied their wash-basins from the windows of their rooms. A December 1864 report described how this defiled the grounds in the winter — the president would receive complaints about unsightly traces of wastewater left on the snow — and created “an offensive effluvia” during warmer months.

Yet the Hope College well functioned as a site of supreme social importance. It became a democratic free-for-all, the water either dousing or stoking the fiery debates on free will, predestination, and Darwin's theory of evolution. Teams returning after baseball or football contests challenged each other for the right to drink first, and late-night revelers crawled to the well from town, pleading for salvation after downing their tall schooners of ale or their eggy, nutmeg-spiked Tom and Jerries.

On this day in 1868, the men, in true Brown fashion, arrived late, hastily combing down their hair underneath their hats and buttoning their black wool vests. The refrains of the American Brass Band roused the men as they set off on their hallowed pilgrimage, hell-bent on a single aim: hydration. They marched down the hill, past the mansions on Westminster, by the clapboard houses of Weybosset, and through Market Square. They hooted at the steamships as they crossed the Providence River, continued along North Main, turned up Waterman, and finally plodded back to College Street. Here, the fleet halted for a moment at the town water pump, an old hand-operated metal contrivance. Some filled their containers with much decorum, while others abandoned their pails and craned their mouths underneath the spout to slake their thirst with the direct flow of cold water.

Such student demonstrations were uncommon for the time, and the procession met with confusion and wonder as it wended its way through Providence. Horse-car lines on iron rails had been introduced into the city during the Civil War, and the Brown men stopped to holler at the slow-moving evening commuters bound for the growing suburbs of Cranston and Johnston. An 1864 ordinance still restricted speed to seven miles per hour, and to five miles per hour on principal streets.

By the time the double-file parade had reached Benefit Street, a string of murmuring, bemused spectators lined the curbstone. The students drew nearer, and in the queue they spotted a familiar visage. There, next to the women in their bustled silk skirts and the men in their three-piece wool suits, stood President *ad interim* George Ide Chace.

Students knew Chace as a critical logician and a reserved professor of chemistry, geology, and moral and intellectual philosophy. He had little patience with idle or clever

pupils. Once, when a student failed to remember the results of his laboratory test, recalling only that the trial had gone “one way or the other,” Chace had a ready reply: “One way or the other? Everything in life is *one way or the other*, and what you come to college for is to *find out which way it is*.”

Chace’s face wore an austere expression, and his coarse eyebrows were deeply arched. The creases on his forehead followed these crooks, which sharpened as the students approached him. He held his lips tight, parting them only to release a hushed gasp. His mouth fell into a severe frown and he pivoted on the balls of his feet. The men watched and howled as Chace tore up the hill with a swift, resolute stride.

By the time the men had traipsed back to campus, thirst slaked after their pause at the College Street pump, Chace was there to meet them. The students poured through the wooden gates, still bellowing their songs. “You’ll never miss the water till the well runs dry, you’ll never miss the water till the well runs dry,” they repeated. Chace stood at the top step of Manning Hall between the fluted plaster columns. The musicians blared their last triumphant honks and then fizzled out.

“Hats off!” Chace boomed.

This command met with immediate compliance. The men doffed their bowlers and derbies, except for Metcalf and the three others, who carefully removed the tin bathtubs from their heads. Hair unkempt, the men let their copper teakettles and wooden pails fall to the cinder and gravel path.

Chace paused. The students swapped glances and covert grins. Chace’s features betrayed his uncertainty, and he fought against amused sympathy, remembering his days as a Brown man. He had been a diligent and careful pupil and had become a

demanding and sometimes unforgiving professor, but even still, he recalled the mischief of his student days. This incident, however, pushed his patience.

He did not speak long, but his usually measured tone had turned sharp. He closed his brief address by meting out suspensions for three students and then commanding all the men to return to their rooms. They obeyed, but with leisure. As Chace turned off the steps, they whooped three cheers for “Prexy,” their pet name for the president. He glanced back, just in time to witness the students pouring generous, watery libations onto the grass. They proceeded to smash all their earthenware, their clay mugs and their ceramic pitchers, on the hall’s stone steps. An elephant in a china shop could not have wreaked greater havoc.

Sun sinking, the students returned to their rooms and picked up their forgotten volumes of Cicero and Sophocles. Though a hush hung over campus that evening, an occasional, now-familiar call continued to echo across the Old Front Row: “Bucket, bucket, who’s got the bucket? Bucket, bucket, who’s got the bucket?”

Epilogue

The first to arrive to the well the following morning discovered a new bucket hanging from a new rope. When, a handful of years later, the well was covered with a stone and fitted with an iron pump, students mourned its passing. Robert P. Brown 1871 recalled his sorrow: “The grief with parting with the old well was sincere. A cold, gray stone was placed over it, from which protruded a spook of a pump, a cold-clanging, cumbersome thing of iron, offensive to the eye and ear as well as to the taste, and shunned by all the intimates and confidantes of the dear old well.”