

For Richard Mead Atwater Benson



THE LETTER CUTTER  
*The life and work of*  
JOHN HOWARD BENSON

*John E. Benson*

The Fisher Press  
2018



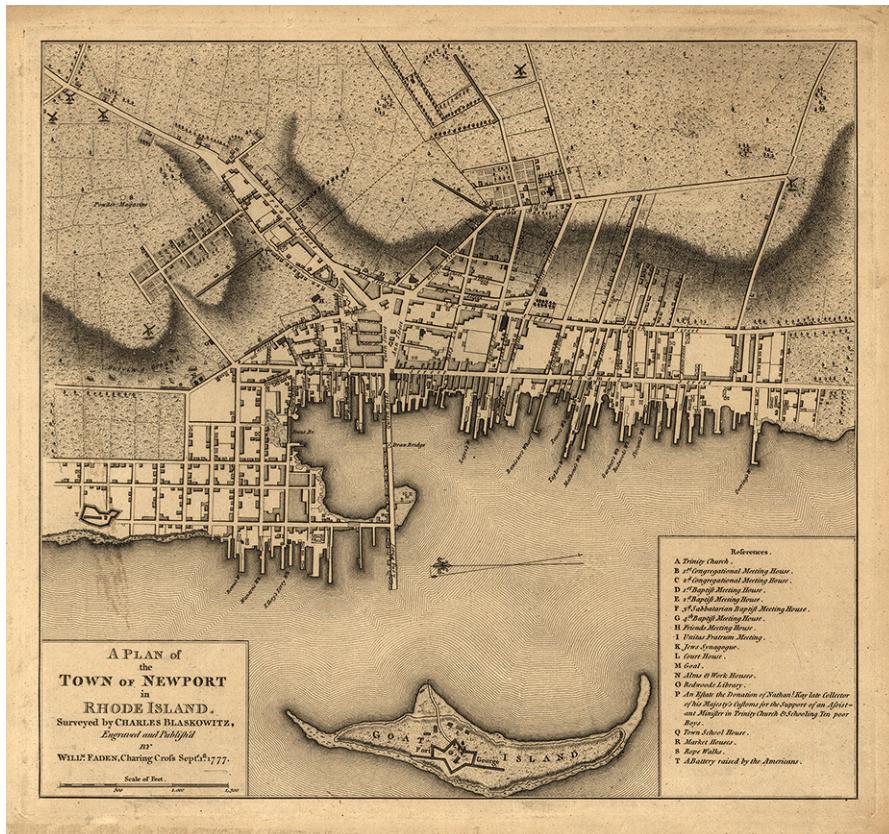
## TABLE OF CONTENTS

PROLOGUE <i>1705 to 1902</i>	9
PART ONE <i>Art School and Early Career</i>	21
PART TWO <i>Whartons Atwaters and Smiths</i>	39
PART THREE <i>Early Commissions and Waterfront Life</i>	63
PART FOUR <i>A Hurricane, a War and Steady Work</i>	105
PART FIVE <i>Mid-Career Work</i>	199
PART SIX <i>Teaching, Late Projects and Family Life</i>	233
PART SEVEN <i>Anthelia</i>	277
<i>Illustration and text citations and permissions</i>	298
<i>Colophon</i>	299
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	300



## PROLOGUE

*1705 to 1902*



An early colonial map of Newport Harbor.

NEAR THE END of the 17th century, the stonemason John Stevens left his home in Oxford, England, made his way to the coast, and sailed to the New World. He landed in Boston, in the Massachusetts Bay colony. We know little of this stage of his life and less of his time in the land he left behind. Records do show that in Boston Stevens married a woman named Marcy and with her had his first two sons, John II and William. There is little further evidence relating to his years in Boston, though he appears to have found work as a stone mason and to have known and worked with the Boston gravestone carver, William Mumford. By 1705, at age fifty, Stevens decided to travel with his new family to Newport, a flourishing seaport at the mouth of Narragansett Bay, in the colony of Rhode Island. The aging Mumford had carved memorials for several clients in Newport and may have encouraged the move.

Newport, built as it was on a deep-water harbor at the tip of Aquidneck Island, played a key role in the life of the colony. Stevens found there a lively community of merchants and craftsmen. Embraced by the waters of Narragansett Bay, a resource that provided transportation colony-wide, Newport also had a sheltered port able to serve ships that called in to trade from ports around the globe. The town, whose population in 1700 was about 2,500, not only prospered economically, but was unique among colonial settlements for its founders' commitment to the kind of tolerant society fundamental to the ideals later laid out in the new nation's Bill of Rights. Here was a place where a family of newcomers, headed by an artisan, would be welcome, nor would it be bound by the restraints of Puritan Massachusetts.

Stevens sensed the need for his services and set up shop, working out of doors on land at the northern end of the town's waterfront street, named for London's river Thames. He built foundations for houses, set fireplace hearths, and built chimneys for new construction. His first location on Thames Street was very near the largest local burying ground. If Stevens had trained to carve with Mumford it was likely for a brief period and possibly limited to rough work. However, as there was no local carver in Newport, it did not take him long try his hand at headstones. Looking at this early carving, we see that it is crude and roughly cut, with traces of Mumford's style still visible. There is conscious design effort; purely linear and without sophistication—small, rectangular slabs of local stone, worked into arched profiles and carved with simple borders. Inscriptions are cut in simplified, capital letters. Slowly, Stevens's design sense and craftsmanship would evolve, and time was on his side. Over the next thirty years, the span of the life remaining to him, Stevens developed a strong, if naive style. He is now recognized as the first in what will become a minor dynasty of carvers.

John and his wife Marcy prospered in their new home; their children grew and flourished. After a solid apprenticeship and years of carving, the eldest son John took on management of the business, his brother William working at least part-time with him. They did routine masonry jobs, augmented by the gravestone work which supplied dependable income. From the beginning the Stevenses kept careful account books, some of

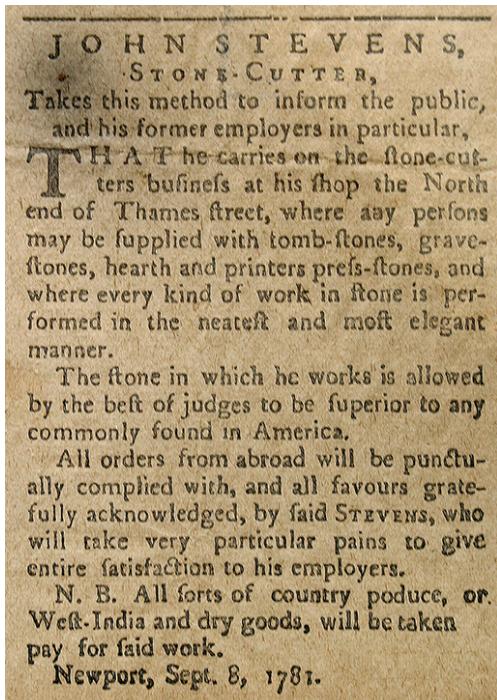


*Slate Headstone carved by John Stevens I in 1721.*

which survive and form a fascinating example of early, double entry book-keeping. Reading between the ruled lines of their ledgers can provide a compelling story of life and economy in the British colonies of America —as a family historical record the ledgers show that properties near the workplace were bought, rented and sold. Wives were taken, and a third generation of children appeared. Maintaining his father's example, young John gave that same name to his first son. Historically, these three

have come to be known as John the First, John the Second, and John the Third, and will be referenced here as John I, II and III.

John II was a fine craftsman and carver. He specialized in making large, flat gravestones, often with intricate carving of coats-of-arms in delicate, low relief. Following John I's example, the inscriptional style of the shop was personal and little related to typographic standards of the day. In artistic terms, this was unsurprising since the chief example of formal lettering available to them was the crude, colonial presswork of the time, printed from second



*Stevens' ad in the Newport Mercury, from 1781.*

hand type. Lacking a more refined exemplar, the Stevenses contrived their own letter style, born of deft chisel work and a growing sensitivity to design. Brother William, working with John, matured into a skilled letter carver. In the two sons' hands, inscriptions took on a gracious, fluid quality. This work stands to this day as an important, early style of American letterform.

John III was the most sensitive of the three carvers. He took great care with the decorative work and often attempted portraits of the deceased in place of his father's solemn cherubs or his grandfather's grinning, winged skulls.

As John III matured in the trade, the seeds of the American revolution were being sown and these soon grew into open hostilities. War came, and with it the British blockade, the occupation of Newport, and the constraints

of wartime. Many prominent citizens fled north to Providence to be free of the British. John III decamped for a time himself, leaving the business in the hands of the third brother, Philip. Trade waxed and waned. Money was scarce, and much of the work was supported by bartering.

John returned to Newport in 1778 and in 1781 took an advertisement in the local newspaper soliciting customers. The war years, however, seem to have driven the creative spirit from him. His post-revolutionary work grew routine and repetitive. Solid craftsmanship remained the hallmark of the shop, although the lettering became more typographic and less spontaneous, influenced by the English typeface of John Baskerville, newly visible in Newport. John III carried on beyond the turn of the century and died in the early 1800s. Three more generations of the Stevens family kept the business going over the next 100 years.



*The John Stevens Shop at 29 Thames Street in Newport, Rhode Island, ca. 1880.*

Late in this hundred-year period, work came to be carried out from a purpose-built workshop at 29 Thames Street, under various iterations of the Stevens name. The building, a simple, woodframe structure of two stories, was put up sometime in the middle of the 19th century. Large doors faced Thames street and a small yard in front allowed stone storage. The building's top floor produced income from rentals and at times may have served the Stevens family as a dwelling.

In 1902, the shop and business were sold by the last Stevens carver to a brother-in-law named Martin Burke. Burke employed a carver, William Burdick, to carry on headstone work. Local slate material was supplanted by the white marble of Vermont. Hand drawn letters were replaced by stenciled layouts. Ornament was derived from copybooks in the prevailing style. In this form the Stevens Shop, keeping the same name, carried on business in a relaxed fashion for the next twenty-four years.

## I

A nine-year-old boy and his tall mother are walking together across the gentle slope of Newport's Common Burying Ground. They have just spent time in the family lot in the newer cemetery uphill. The woman's husband lags behind. He is hoping to join his fellows later that day at the Masonic Hall and his thoughts are halfway there, and half on the kinds of intricate problems that always seem to occupy him. A skilled bridge player, he has a mathematician's mind that can add columns of six-figured numbers without pen or paper. This mathematical bent is perhaps inherited; his own father served as chief engineer on the famous "Palace Steamers" of the Fall River Line. Run by the New England Steamship Company, the Line still has its headquarters in Newport. The sun is bright on the three figures as they meander among the old stones of the graveyard. It is the peaceful year of 1910, on Decoration Day, when folk visit cemeteries to tidy up their family plots. The Great War, which will forever change our image of cemeteries, has yet to come.

The tall woman works at home as a decorative artist specializing in painting trays and making and repairing hand-painted wallpaper. In the 1890s, she attended the Rhode Island School of Design in Providence. Historic and floral vignettes form part of her work, rendered in oils on the inner face of glass panes. Framed and viewed from the front, these present a clear, transparent surface through which the reverse-painted subject is seen. She also does stencil-work and gilded decorations on furniture. The smell of paint and turpentine pervades her workspace at home and these scents of her craft are as familiar to the boy as the aromas of cooking, and pervade his consciousness. He already shows hints of artistic leaning in how he looks at things and expresses what he sees. Likewise, while thinking little of it, he has inherited his father's gift with numbers.

Their walk takes the three to earlier graves. Here is their ancestor Thomas Tew and his wife and son. There was another Thomas Tew 200 years before; a famous 17th century pirate and contemporary of the notorious Captain Kidd. His alliterative name and piratical exploits hold a whisper of romance, although the family on the hill claim no close relations.

From the trio's elevated vantage point, the terrain of Newport slopes downward toward the harbor. It is still a thriving port on the northeastern seaboard, as it was in John Stevens I's time. Newport's situation on Narragansett Bay affords easy access to the open Atlantic, and now harbors yachts and naval vessels as well as a fishing fleet. The city has burgeoned since the early days of the Stevens family; the population is now about 27,000. In the



*John Howard Benson (JHB) aged about 9 or 10.*

summer, this population swells with an influx of visitors—tourists, vacationers, and yachtsmen, as well as day-trippers who swarm the beaches—the place is crowded and busy. Vacant land is scarce. However, as in many colonial towns, a handsome piece of land had been set aside as a resting place for its departed citizens. Moving east up the Burying Ground, the age of the grave markers regresses from the early 20th century through the 19th and back to the beginning of the 1700s. A few stones from the 1600s still exist, inscribed with terse, mortal prose.

The boy, who is well dressed by his adoring mother in a short jacket and a loose-knotted bow tie, takes notice, as they walk, of the old headstones surrounding them. Most come in pairs—with a large, inscribed stone at the head of the grave giving the name, life span, and perhaps displaying a decoration or a motto, and a small stone at standing at the foot, holding the occupant's initials and perhaps a date. They remind the boy of the head and footboards of a bed. Early in his life he shared a bed with a twin brother who died in his third year, smaller and less hale than he. Ranging across the landscape, the boy's gaze misses little and unconsciously plants in him a sense of place and history. His parents have named him John Howard Benson.



*Elizabeth Howard Benson between her husband and a friend in a borrowed town car.*

His mother, the tall woman, is Elizabeth Howard Benson. She is the daughter of Anthelia Tew, first cousin to Ida Lewis, famous keeper of Lime Rock lighthouse near the entrance to Newport Harbor. Ida's grandfather, Aaron Willey, was born in 1775 near the time John Stevens III could see the Revolutionary War looming on the horizon. Willey spent his life as the doctor in the town of New Shoreham on Block Island, fourteen miles at sea off Newport. His name is still respected there. The boy's father, Augustus Sherman Benson, known as "Gus," has roots in Nova Scotia through his Canadian-born father, Bernard John Benson.

Elizabeth, a formidable woman, sits between her husband and a friend in the borrowed town car above. She accepts her modest circumstances, existing

in proximity to Newport's fashionable society for whose members she often works but of which she cannot be a part. She likes flamboyant dress, smokes cigarettes, and wears perfume. After her husband's death in 1934, she buys a used Model A Ford roadster and keeps an Iver Johnson revolver in the drawer of her nightstand. Descended from old New England stock, she can be traced back to the Mayflower. She descends through collateral lines from Roger Williams, founder of the colony of Rhode Island. Her craftsman's earnings are critical to the family welfare. Without her inherited talent and physical stature her son would have been a very different person.

As the boy John Howard (called Howard by family and friends) grows, he attends the local schools and also takes classes at the Newport Art Association. A talented draftsman, he studies landscape drawing, etching, and print-making. By 1920 he seems poised for a career in art. At this critical point his Uncle Jack, Gus's successful brother John Everett Benson, steps in. "The boy is too smart to risk himself in the uncertain world of art," he says. He arranges for a year at the Naval Academy's preparatory school. Conflicted, young Benson attends the school and in the spring, takes examinations for the Naval Academy. He passes the mathematics and technical tests with high honors and resoundingly fails the medical exam, ruling out a military career. An artist's life opens up before him. He applies to the Art Students League in New York and is soon accepted.

Geography and genealogy often mingle in the formation of human character. Nationality or nationalism, both blamed and celebrated for many of our inclinations, are also cited as reasons or excuses for behavior. Yet insight may also be found in the study of physical traits and personal history. Howard Benson, as he comes to be known, has a complex character. Often the tallest person in any group, he measures six feet, four inches. Curious and open-minded, he possesses an unusual pairing of mathematical skills and artistic talent. He makes friends easily, thriving on a broad acquaintance. From an early bout with rheumatic fever he also carries within him a flawed heart valve—the cause of his rejection from military service—which will limit his physical capabilities and shorten his life.





## PART ONE

*Art School and Early Career*



*JHB, as a teenager, sketching out of doors.*

## II

NEW YORK CITY in the early 1920s is undergoing a major surge in growth. The stock market crash of '29 can't even be imagined, let alone predicted. Immigration, advances in transportation, financial markets, and new construction are booming. The rewards of commerce feed the tastes and sophistication of a growing middle class whose white-collar status provides time for leisure as well as artistic and cultural pursuits. Art museums and galleries grow popular; music and theatre flourish, reaching out to an ever-widening audience.

Society's interest in the arts increases and broadens in scope even as art itself undergoes significant changes. Four decades earlier, the measured flow of European painting and sculpture was roiled by the French Impressionists whose slash and burn assault on academism opened entirely new ways of seeing. By the turn of the 20th century traditional, representational painting and sculpture can no longer satisfy the appetites of a venturesome culture.

The European plein-air practice of painting directly from reality entrances American painters of the Ashcan School like John Sloan and Robert Henri. George Bellows and Edward Hopper paint gritty, realistic urban scenes. The hugely talented John Singer Sargent paints the upper classes in their opulent homes or elegantly posed in natural settings. The exalted 19th century yoke of continental academism is thrown off. Painters begin to paint what they want to paint and not what society wants from them. Society embraces the change.

Moving to the City in the fall of 1921, John Howard Benson can see the effects of these shifts in taste in the work of his instructors and fellow students at the Art Students League. Nonetheless, the classes he enrolls in espouse traditional disciplines. They involve figure, anatomy, and landscape drawing; pen and ink drawing; etching, lithography, woodblock printing, and sculpture. For much of his time there he studies with the aging master Joseph Pennell, a consummate printmaker and draftsman. Under Pennell's guidance, drawings and prints of urban scenes become a large part of Howard's output. Learning etching and stone lithography allows him to make multiple copies of his images for exhibitions, where he has hopes for profitable sales.

Economic constraints remain a major burden throughout Howard's schooling. When in Newport, he starts to establish himself as a productive artist through his studies and exhibitions at the Art Association. Meanwhile, in New York, he continues to cultivate strong friendships and court the attention of people who may buy his work—he is perpetually short of money, although his parents try to send him a few dollars a week. Patrons often invite him to dinner, providing welcome free meals. He is also able to profit from



*JHB lithograph of the Manhattan skyline and Hudson River, ca. 1925.*

his draftsman's talent. Howard has always had an affinity for graphic art, and in New York he looks for graphic design work outside the classroom. He takes on jobs in commercial art for advertising firms, lettering layouts for architects, and drawings for editions of posters and postcards. For a short time,

he makes illustrative drawings for a doctor who is preparing a manual on surgical technique. In a note to his mother he writes, "Talk about Detail. Phew! You'd almost think they were photos." The quantity of illustrations and the exactitude of the doctor's demands take so much time away from schoolwork that the profitable job, after a time, must be dropped.



*The steamer Priscilla backing down to the N.E. Steamship Company piers in Newport's Harbor.*

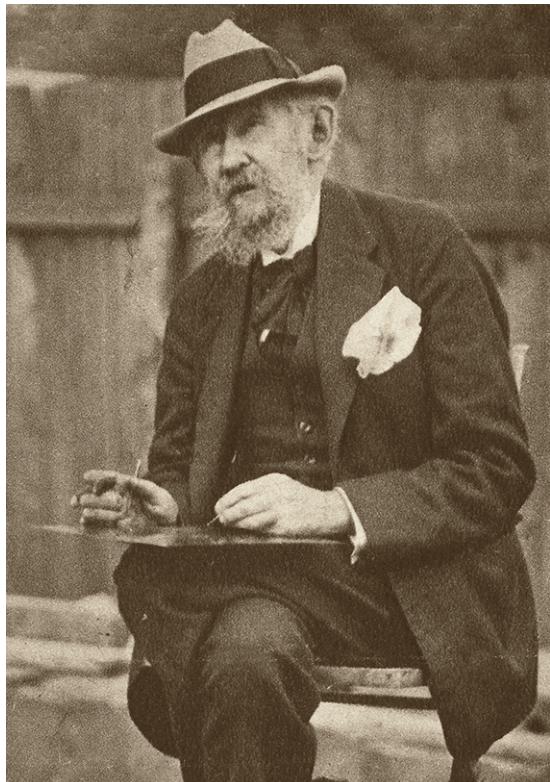
During these school years in New York, Howard spends summers in Newport while maintaining close ties in both places. The stylish steamers of the Fall River Line make regular passages up and down Long Island Sound between New York Harbor and Narragansett Bay, where Newport remains headquarters of the Line. His grandfather, having had a respected career with the company, helps Howard find summer employment working as a purser on the boats. Free passages *are* a benefit of the job, allowing easy commuting back and forth.

This link with the City and its fiscally comfortable citizens becomes an economic boon. During summer vacations, Howard enjoys a vigorous social life in Newport while he also produces work for his many contacts there; in the City he does the same for wealthy, urban clients. His physical stature, boisterous sense of humor, and out-sized personality are valuable assets in establishing a client base. A tantalizing trove of correspondence from the 20s consists of letters from him, but lacks the other halves of their exchanges. Most letters home are to his mother and a few to his father, Gus. They are

cheerfully mundane, with frequent references to expected or received sums of money and the sending of supplies, food, and furnishings. Clothes are a common topic. He sends laundry home for his mother to wash, and seems always to be running out of collars (In that time collars were not attached permanently to shirts and were separately laundered and starched). His mother doesn't complain. She is happy that her son takes pride in being a careful dresser.

For his first year and a half at school Howard lives at the YMCA in Brooklyn. After this he rents a succession of apartments, also in Brooklyn, first alone and then sharing with friends or fellow art students. Letters home in a hurried, soft pencil hand hint at a busy schedule of school work and commissions. He grows popular, and is often sought out for events and social occasions. Friendships and the busy artistic climate of the City provide constant stimulation, augmenting his work at the League. In late night letters he talks of museum openings, concerts, field trips with comrades, and social occasions with faculty members. He writes of frequent contacts at the New York Academy of Art although he appears not to have formally enrolled there. Freshly arrived in September of 1921, he mentions doing a figure at the Academy and showing them a drawing which met with praise. "They have original Whistler lithographs, an original by Howard Pyle, and another by M. Parrish. Both of the latter were students there...", and in his sole reference to New York Academy enrollment says offhandedly, "I guess I'll be able to get in O.K."

At a lunch with his mentor Pennell at the Café Moquin, Howard meets the well-known sculptor John Flanagan, who shows him a facsimile of a medal he designed for Verdun, the Great War battlefield and graveyard of so many thousands. As the year progresses, New York Academy contact con-



*Joseph Pennell working on an etching plate.*

tinues. At a show there in November he, "...met artists Vonnoh, Fisher, Butler, Snell, Yeats, Rittinger, and Wm. Robinson." Few of these names will go on to achieve the official pantheon of fame, although Bessie Potter Vonnoh is a respected sculptor and William Robinson teaches a painting class at the Art Students League which Howard later attends. The mention of Yeats holds a hint glamour—he is brother Jack to the famous poet, William Butler Yeats.

The sculptor Mahonri Young, grandson of the Mormon Leader Brigham Young, taught at the League in 1921-2, as the school's catalogue for those years shows. According to family oral tradition, Howard studied with Young, although no written evidence of this has been found, and letters home from those years do not mention Young or a sculpture class. But as several sculptors taught at the League then, by the completion of his studies, Howard had certainly learned the basic skills of modeling and plaster casting. He owned a set of clay and plaster tools that endures to this day, and a New York origin of these is likely, although not definite. They are of a style predating the handsome Caselli sculpture tools popular here in the mid-20th century. Less certain than his having acquired the basic skills of sculpting, is Howard's relationship to the oil painting tradition. Only one small, preliminary oil sketch, a landscape, exists.



*JHB oil sketch on canvas board.*

In December of 1922, Howard, "Went to the Museum to see the new Sargents." In that same month he, "Started painting... still life with Wm. Robinson." On Palm Sunday of 1922 he attends the Abbott Thayer memorial exhibit, remarking that it was "Great. They have Caritas here from Boston." Around the same time, he, "...met Timothy Cole. He is the greatest living wood engraver." Earlier that year he observes, "The Whistlers are still at the National Academy of Arts and Letters."

It has been said that to be a painter you must simply fall in love with the mesmerizing medium of colors ground in oil. This, despite talent and opportunity, Howard Benson did not do. Instead, the dramatic world of black and white, with its lines and tones and tints, was what captured him in youth and would direct him in maturity. In retrospect, this represents one of the most notable choices he made in life. The monochrome medium of sculpture-in-the-round would form a critical part of his early professional life, and he pursued it ardently for some years. Yet his devotion to it was also influenced by the second great life choice that he made. Less easy to dissect, it may be beyond any analysis other than speculation. This was his choice of religious faith.

### III

The dominance of the industrial world in American culture gave rise to a pragmatic concept of mortality. The old Judeo-Christian traditions that had enabled European people to appeal to a benevolent spirit as the origin of their essential selves, was giving way in modern America to a freer outlook, unburdened from the more ominously fatalistic constraints of medieval spirituality. The traditional world of heaven and hell, depicted for centuries in print, paint, and stone, was beginning to fade into legend, even myth. Religion's dominant role in the arts was coming to an end. For much of western history, religion and art shared an aesthetic. Not until the age of enlightenment did this standard divide. In colonial America, the founding fathers of The United States, although men of faith themselves, empowered their brilliant national constitution with an essential tenet: the separation of church and state. While perhaps a defensive maneuver against the intrusion of alternate ideas of government into their prized democracy, at the same time, it indicates a loosening of the grip of organized religion on everyday life.

In the past, only royalty or nobility could serve as an equal to the church in patronage of the arts. At the same time, no matter who the patron, commissioned works of art were subject to the principles of religious doctrine, thereby constraining the development of styles and tastes. Throughout the Renaissance, religious arbitration was often sought concerning the depiction of artistic subjects. In 1573, the socially prominent painter Paolo Veronese

was called before the Roman Catholic Inquisition to respond to charges of indecency leveled at his commissioned painting, *The Last Supper*. The artist had embellished his huge canvas with a crowd of people not mentioned in any scriptural reference to the scene. He responded: "Given a large canvas, I enriched it as I saw fit." The Inquisition was unimpressed. He was ordered to change the painting. With a deft stroke Veronese saved himself. He changed the name of the painting to *Supper at the House of Levi*; an event whose biblical description includes a variegated cast of characters. Objections evaporated, and the work of art endures unchanged.

With the establishment of the middle class and its evolving secularity, constraints loosened. By the time of the French Impressionists, sculpture and painting had freed themselves from relentless religious oversight. A liberated human figure appeared who had cast off the bonds of religious doctrine, unclothed and unadorned. Faith-based prohibitions were dispersing. Meanwhile, in its clean break with this enlightened shift in taste, art in the Catholic church became bogged down in a backwater of pre-Victorian thought.

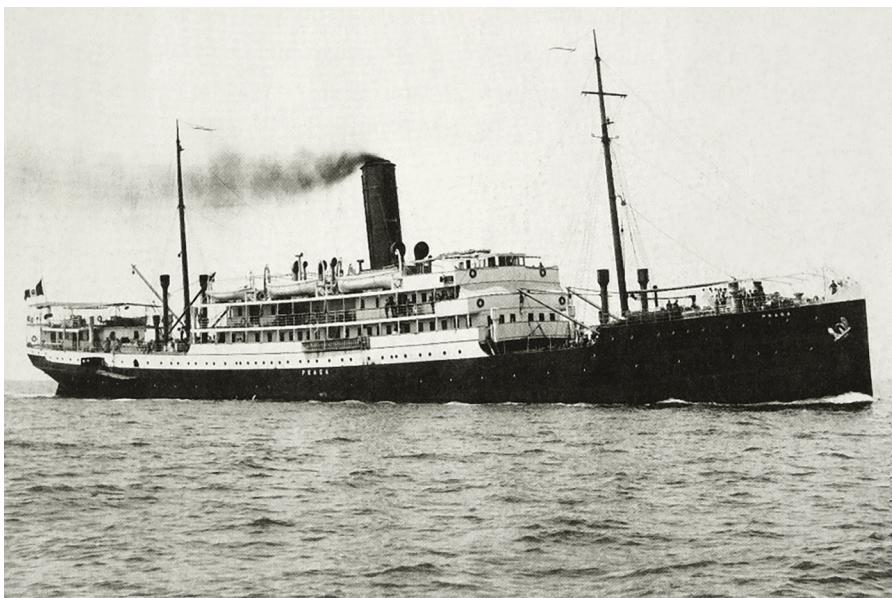
John Howard Benson, born an Anglican, makes many friends through church connections. Foremost among these is Henry Pierce whom he meets through St. John's Episcopal Church in Newport. Pierce converted to Roman Catholicism in the 20s and went on to become a priest and a monsignor. Soon Benson himself decides to convert and spends the remainder of his life as a devout Roman Catholic. When his motives for this are questioned he often wryly remarks, "It is certain that I did not embrace the Church for its enduring artistic standards."

Alongside his other graphic interests, Howard is an enthusiastic and inventive watercolorist. After completing his studies at the League, he secures a position for two summer tours as a guide on cruise ships voyaging between various ports in the Mediterranean. On these trips, in his spare time, he paints watercolor landscapes, perhaps offering them for sale to passengers, since only a few endure. The extant examples, aside from being skillfully drawn and colored, show restrained evocations of American Modernism.

During Benson's New York period, oil painters were the art stars of the day. Good painting was always apparent to him, and paintings were everywhere in his life. He seems to have enjoyed looking at them, as well as allowing hints of certain admired trends to creep into his own pictorial work. In his time as a tour guide, he voyages quite extensively throughout the Mediterranean. One ship, the *Praga* of the Lloyd Triestino line sails to Italy, stopping at Algiers, Naples, cruising down the east side of the boot, up the Adriatic to Venice, down the Dalmatian coast to Athens and the Greek islands, and then eastward to Constantinople. Letters home are full of the excitements of travel and observation. "The native town at Algiers is very grand in its

primitive way." And later, "...writing this at the Bretagne, my old Greek hotel. Am going out to lunch with a friend... and then to sketch at the Acropolis."

In Delphi, he does a watercolor of the landscape near the Amphitheater. However, stimulating as this wandering may be, he feels the pull of home, and the need to establish himself as an artist with a viable career.



*Cruise Ship Praga of the Lloyd Triestino Line.*

Once back in Newport, Howard accepts commissions for graphics and illustrative work. He secures a press for printing wood blocks and engravings—a large, cast-iron machine with a frame in the shape of an acorn. For two years he keeps it at the Art Association where he gives summer lessons. The need for a proper studio increases. In walking the streets of the town, he comes to know the old stone-cutting shop at the northern end of Thames Street. It is located at number 29—the woodframe building that still houses what remains of the Stevens's stonework business. At some point in 1925 Howard befriends its current owner Mr. Burke, by now an old man. In 1926 Benson rents the property. One year later, with a note from the bank, he purchases the building and its contents.

As Benson moves to establish his own business, the tastes, habits, and desires of Newport society, which are to serve him for years, inspire confidence. All the accoutrements of the historic business come with the purchase and he moves in, bringing his printmaking materials and his growing artistic maturity. His graphic arts skills are at full strength. He finds himself amid shelves of stone samples, collections of hammers and chisels, drills and

benches, along with the accumulated dust of years of labor. In this setting, sculpture as well as graphic arts seem a viable pursuit, and the fresh echoes of the glories of Greece that so entranced him on his recent travels may also inspire him as he ventures out on his own.



*JHB watercolor from Delphi in Greece, 1927.*



*JHB etching of Newport street with Trinity Church in the background, ca. 1927.*

## IV

Close to the waterfront, in the urban microcosm that is Newport—part colonial village and part twentieth century city—two streets run parallel. Thames Street follows the harbor-front, and Spring Street, lined with woodframe buildings on either side, lies one block to the east. Narrow streets run up hill between them, on a gentle slope that culminates in the city's highest point. Trinity Church, an exemplar of Georgian colonial architecture, stands in its churchyard on Spring Street, above the bustle of the business district of Thames below. Oldest church in the Episcopal Diocese of Rhode Island, it was designed by Richard Munday and built in 1725-26. In its early years, Trinity was the parish church of the philosopher George Berkeley, the painter Gilbert Stuart, and the composer Karl Theodorus Pachelbel, son of Johann Pachelbel, author of the now well-known Canon in D.

In the mid-1920s, the Reverend Stanley Hughes is the serving rector of Trinity and in 1926, suffers the loss of his wife. He knows Howard Benson and of his recently completed art education in New York. He also knows that Howard recently bought the Stevens Shop, many of whose 18th century stones can be found in Trinity's small graveyard. It seems only logical that the rector ask Benson to make a stone for his beloved Lydia; "Only you can do it." he says. Benson, while he has not by this time produced memorials, has done several lettering layouts for architects. He has also seen the classic carved letters of imperial Rome in the Metropolitan Museum and at various ancient sites, during his time as a tour guide in the Mediterranean. Standing in Trinity Churchyard, the work of the Stevens family surrounds him. His youthful visits to family plots in Newport have familiarized him with many fine examples of colonial gravestone work. Reverend Hughes is right, the young artist's gifts are unique, as well as eminently suitable. He cannot refuse.

Several horizontal "ledger" stones made by John Stevens II exist at Trinity. For his commission, Benson suggests following the Stevens pattern: a large, horizontal stone to cover the grave, set upon a brick foundation. A low-relief cross will adorn the top of the stone's face. Benson designs a full-size cartoon of the inscription as composed by Reverend Hughes in Latin and English. They choose green slate from Vermont as the material. The drawing is made in the style of John Stevens II and traced onto the stone surface; the actual carving is done by the artist at his shop. Each corner of the stone's face holds a Tudor rose. The stone is installed and the grateful Rector presents Benson with a welcome check. The job has pleased Howard with its straightforward utility. Financially, this kind of work is quite simple

to estimate, and the attendant rewards are clear to him—making memorials will enhance his skills in draftsmanship, increase client contact, and exhibit his final product in a prominent, public space. Benson decides to commit himself to this kind of work, and word of his abilities begins to spread. He realizes that since it is the fate of us all to confront the mortality of our family or friends, providing a fitting gravestone is often the last service we can perform for someone important to us. And, as with their other acquisitions, the well-to-do desire the highest quality in their memorials. Benson quickly realizes that this is a service he can provide

After the Civil War, the economy of the United States entered a period of unprecedented growth. Coal, oil, steel, and the railroads built industrial empires, often headed by men who had literally risen from rags to riches, that concentrated this vast new wealth among a small group of families. By the late 19th century, the holder of a new fortune would typically seek ways and places to advertise this new status and to celebrate it in a style that would outshine any rival's. The oceanfront of Newport, with its dramatic rocky shore, sheltered inlets, and grassy swards was chosen by some as the perfect stage upon which to construct a conspicuous summer home. Conveniently located between Boston and New York, the old colonial town's suitable waterfront land lay around the southern edge of its original settlement. The steamers of the Fall River Line, which began service in 1844, furnished a convenient conduit from New York to Newport. Road and rail service from Boston gradually improved as well, and during the next fifty years most of the town's desirable land was bought and built upon.

Cornelius Vanderbilt (1794–1877), was one of the wealthiest men in America, with a fortune that came from railroads and shipping. His grandson Cornelius II, in 1885, purchased a wooden house on the Newport seafront, off Bellevue Avenue. Eight years later, after this house had burned down, he commissioned a new one from the noted architect, Richard Morris Hunt. By this time, the vogue in architectural style and construction was shifting from woodframe building to masonry. Exterior and interior designs as well as furnishings were lavish, reflective of the grand villas and palaces of Europe. Hunt's proposal was for a fabulous, Italianate palazzo of seventy rooms. Called "The Breakers" it dominates the still spectacularly splendid seafront, and is a highlight of summer tours given by Newport's Preservation Society.

To enhance the opulent late 90s houses, craftsmen were brought in from Europe to finish the interiors. More traditional, or perhaps more prudent families, held to the established shingle-style construction then in fashion. But gradually, the attractive seaside land was taken over for ever more ostentatious structures that locals soon dubbed "the mansions."



JHB slate ledger stone for Lydia Hughes in the Trinity Church graveyard, Newport.

In Howard Benson's time, a local firm, the Vernon Company, is responsible for the interior work in many of these grand houses. George Vernon hires American and European woodworkers to produce furniture and paneled rooms in fine hardwoods. Decorative carving is often required, so the company also employs a team of skilled wood carvers. The head carver for many years has been Jonas Bergner, a Swede, and a serious student of interior woodwork and fine furniture—a daybook from his years at the Vernon company exists in the collection of the Redwood Library in Newport. With his typical, pragmatic insight, the young Benson makes a friend of Bergner toward the end of the woodcarver's life.

During his student years in New York, Benson took instruction in sculpture, and as he begins his new enterprise at the Stevens Shop, whose name he has preserved, he intends to offer clients services that require three-dimensional carving. With the help of Donald Sanford, a young sculptor from Yale, he accepts commissions for figurative work in stone. He will eventually produce four stone figures, and in time will appreciate the economic difficulties involved in the production of

traditional sculpture, realizing that gravestone work and relief carving are less taxing. He continues his sculptural practice for a dozen years or so, but ends it in the mid-30s.

One commission is for a headstone to mark the grave of a Naval Admiral. The client wants it to display a realistic relief image of an eagle. Benson hires the aging Jonas Bergner to carve a wooden model of the bird and then to help fashion the final version in marble. When Bergner dies a few years later Howard inherits his workbench and a small suite of the elder man's chisels. The friendship was close and supportive for both men, one at the end of his professional life and the other at its beginning.



*U.S Navy eagle and anchor emblem carved in high relief in wood by Jonas Bergner.*



*Jonas Bergner and JHB in the Common Burying Ground in Newport, ca. 1928.*



## PART TWO

*Whartons, Atwaters and Smiths*



A gathering of the Wharton-Smith families at 64 Washington Street in Newport, ca. 1884. Esther Morton Smith (called "Het") stands at top left. Her grandmother, Deborah Fisher Wharton, is seated to her right in profile and her parents, Esther Fisher and Benjamin R. Smith are opposite. Among the younger generation in the top row are also William Wharton Smith, standing to the right of his parents, and his younger brother Edward, who is seated on the rail at far right and pulling a face.

## V

AS A NATIVE of Newport with family history in the seafaring and merchant community, Howard Benson grows up apart from the lofty precincts of its Gilded Age tycoons. His town is a sturdier, year-round place, bound to the hard work of the waterfront and its commerce, and with older colonial roots. But it too contains complex social strata. English-descended sailors and tradesmen, Greek and Portuguese fishermen and farmers live side by side with an also mostly working class Black community that dates to the founding of the colony, some of whose ancestors were slaves, some who lived as freemen. One section of the Common Burying Ground on Farewell Street contains the graves of Black Americans, dating from the 1600s. These workmen were later joined by Italian craftsmen and a tight-knit Irish community who come late in the 19th century as builders, maintenance and service staff to the grand houses on the avenue. The Irish immigrants settled into the south end of the town between the commercial wharves on the inner harbor and the rocky south and east facing outcrops on the Atlantic coast where the Astors and Vanderbilts built their palaces. Eventually the Irish rose to partake in every level of the city's affairs, with some becoming successful business owners and others lawyers and politicians. There are additionally all the usual professional people that one finds in a busy place—the doctors, teachers, grocers, city administrators, ship's chandlers and myriad other figures who make a city go from day to day. Further up the social scale are descendants of Newport's first summer sojourners, well-to-do families from larger nearby cities such as Providence and Boston, and a cohort of prosperous Quakers who travelled north from Philadelphia beginning in the 18th century to escape the oppressive heat and fevers of that southern colony. This core community of old Newport is the varied social milieu that Howard Benson knows well and across all of whose layers he can comfortably navigate. He returns home to this rich mix, fresh from his New York education and his Mediterranean tours, carrying with him the confidence of youth and the work ethic of 200 years of family history. Of particular interest to the young bachelor are the many smart and attractive female descendants of the Quaker Wharton, Atwater and Smith families whom he soon befriends.

Rhode Island was founded in 1636 by the free-thinking Protestant minister Roger Williams, who had been banished from the sternly theocratic Massachusetts Bay Colony for his more secular democratic ideals. Williams was an early thinker and author on the principle of separating church and state. It may even be fairly said that he is the original founding father of that strain of American democracy. His outpost on Narraganset Bay became a magnet for like-minded individuals and religious dissidents who feared, or else were

forbidden to practice their faiths in other colonies. Newport became the center of its government with an openness to diverse beliefs which led to the early establishment of a Jewish congregation in the town in colonial times. This group built the first synagogue in America on Touro Street, which were both named for the congregation's founder, Judah Touro. In a letter to the Synagogue's congregation, George Washington made a precedent-setting statement on the subject of religious freedom. He quoted a line from the Bible, followed by the words: "For happily the Government of the United States gives to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance."



*The Robinson House, in Newport, ca. 1880s–'90s. Summer home of Esther Fisher and Benjamin R. Smith.*

From the time of Rhode Island's founding, Quakers also played a vital role in the building of the colony. This tradition, some 200 years later, was still attracting Quakers like Benjamin R. Smith, from Philadelphia. Smith, who had modest, inherited wealth, married Esther Fisher Wharton, a Philadelphian of the same faith. Born in 1836, she was sister to the metallurgist, Joseph Wharton. Typical of his age, Joseph came from a large family of four sons and five daughters. Ben and Esther Smith's marriage produced two sons, William and Edward, and two daughters, Anna and Esther. Family summers are spent in Newport at the 18th century house of their ancestor, "Quaker Tom" Robinson. Built in 1735 on Washington Street, it lies just north of the town center. The property is sited directly on the waterfront



*Horsehead, in Jamestown, RI. Summer home of Joseph Wharton and family, ca. 1930.*

and a pier runs into the harbor from the back lawn of the house. The Smith children grow up sailing on the protected waters of Narragansett Bay.

Esther Wharton's brother Joseph, over the years, amassed a considerable fortune as a metallurgist by securing patents on the production of the metal nickel. He is a founding partner in the Bethlehem Steel company and later also founded the Wharton School of Finance, which is still in operation today at the University of Pennsylvania. His family, like the Smiths, spends its summers in Rhode Island, but on the opposite side of the Bay. While the Smiths stay in Newport, the Whartons summer in the smaller, sleepier settlement of Jamestown on Conanicut Island, three miles to the west. Joseph Wharton builds a house with a domed tower on Jamestown's granite-bound oceanfront. It stands at the entrance to the Bay on the southern end of the Island of Conanicut, whose name came from the language of the local Narragansett Indians.

The house itself is later simply called Horsehead, after its so-named site. Across the water to the east, Wharton and his family can see the more flamboyant houses of Newport's social elite, but to reach Newport requires crossing the Bay by boat. The lives of those who have business or pleasure on both sides of the water are constrained by this separation. Despite Wharton's great success as an industrialist, he and the other proper Quaker families do not participate in the goings on in Newport's ostentatious "Summer Colony." Instead they create their own society, spending time with each other.

William, known as Bill, is the oldest son of Benjamin and Esther Smith. His brother Edward, a sweet natured boy, likes to sail and make things with his hands. By 1890 William has become a promising lawyer, handsome and sociable,

with a circle of like-minded friends. One of these, a promising sculptor named Edmund Stewardson, is a protégé of the great Augustus Saint-Gaudens, sculptor of the Robert Gould Shaw Memorial in Boston.



*Family and friends at 64 Washington Street. Het Smith center top. Esther Fisher Smith to her right. Edmund Stewardson stands at left below, with William Wharton Smith seated at center.*

The Smith family favors catboats, single-sailed vessels used locally for catching fish and lobster that evolved both in Newport and on Cape Cod. In Newport, the prototype was the "Newport Boat," a single-sailed vessel fitted with fish wells—watertight, wooden boxes built next to the centerboard. Fresh caught fish were put into the boxes which rose inside the hull from the bottom planking to the cockpit floor. Capped with lids, they were filled with sea water let into the wells by holes drilled through the bottom planks, so that after a day's fishing the catch came home swimming in clean seawater. A legendary builder of the Newport model was "Button" Swan whose boats were known for their sea kindliness. Ben Smith purchases one of them. His boys name her *Kingfisher* and love to sail her. In time, Bill, oldest of the two, grows dissatisfied with the gentility of the small hull and in 1890 he buys a larger vessel—a heavy, twenty-five-foot catboat with a more powerful rig.

Built by Thomas Stoddard and known as a fast sailer on the Bay, the new boat is named *Falcon*. She carries a wooden bowsprit which can be fitted over the stem to carry a jib for better speed in light air. The young lawyer likes to sail Falcon into the open ocean, past rock-bound Brenton Point. The boat carries heavy ballast and has a keel instead of the more conventional centerboard that can be raised in shoal water. In sailing craft of the time, speed and stability come with attendant costs. In some cases, a loss of buoyancy and maneuverability are among them.



Edward Wanton Smith, aged 17, at the helm of the Catboat Falcon, off Goat Island, ca. 1892.

In 1921, an article appeared in Scribner's written by C. Grant LaFarge, a cousin of the noted painter, John LaFarge. The family lived in Newport and Grant had spent time there on the waterfront. LaFarge got to know the boat builder Button Swan in the 1890s, and years later wrote the account of a day sailing with Swan on the Bay. Aboard Swan's small boat, the two men sailed out the harbor mouth and through a hazardous passage between the rocks of Brenton Reef. Anchoring amid the shoals, they went fishing in the relative calm of mid-day. After noon, they left the reef and went ashore into a sheltered cove to cook and eat a fresh-caught bluefish. Cleaned and split, it was nailed on a salt-water-soaked plank, facing a driftwood fire. While yet within the cove, LaFarge writes, and though no change in weather was apparent to him, Swan began preparing to set sail. By the time they got under way, the waves were rising and the wind was up. He further notes that the little boat, being light in weight, seemed to dance around the rocks in the freshening breeze.

On a summer day in 1892, Bill Smith and his friend Ned Stewardson take *Falcon* for a sail. Brother Edward, now seventeen years old, also comes along. With characteristic daring, Bill decides to sail close to the rocks of Brenton reef. Suddenly, and for some unknown reason, the catboat's big open cockpit fills with water—perhaps from a rogue wave. The lead-ballasted hull causes the boat to quickly swamp, and she starts to sink. Bill pulls the wooden bowsprit from its lashings on the deck. Throwing it into the water, he tells Edward to cling to it. The southwesterly wind, although blowing directly towards the nearby shore, does not bear *Falcon* and her crew home-safe.

Late that day a cart, driven by a seaweed gatherer, comes to the door of the Smith family house on Washington street. Carried in it are *Falcon*'s bowsprit and the deeply traumatized Edward. Bill Smith and Ned Stewardson have drowned. Battered wreckage of the boat is strewn across the ocean front from Brenton Point to Price's Neck. The shy and quiet Edward will discuss the tragedy only once, with his own son, William. The family saves the bowsprit.

To ease the loss, Ben Smith commissions a new catboat for his youngest son. It will be smaller than *Falcon* but somewhat larger than the Button Swan-built *Kingfisher*. The new boat, also called *Kingfisher*, serves the family for several years and is finally sold as the family's needs and taste for cruising grow. Other boats come and go: a Marconi rigged sloop called *Shearwater* and later, a cruising sloop, *Voyager*. The tragic death of their eldest son does not compromise the Smith family's love of sailing, but it makes all of them more prudent and careful seamen.



*Benjamin Raper Smith, standing beside the newly built catboat Kingfisher, ca. 1893.*

## VI

Richard Mead Atwater, yet another Quaker, was born in Providence, Rhode Island in 1844. His father, Stephen Atwater, was a civil engineer who worked on the development of the Erie Canal. He had likewise laid out the fashionable cemetery in Providence called Swan Point, and Steven's son Richard attended Brown University, earning both Bachelor's and Master's degrees. After graduating, Richard moved to New Jersey and began working for the Whitall Tatum glassworks in Millville. In 1867, he married Abby Sophia Greene, also from a Quaker family. They went on to have nine children and enjoyed a busy and rewarding life.

It may seem that the Atwaters were thus born to privilege, and while there is some truth to this, it can also be said that there are two good reasons for their success as a family. The first is that most Quakers of the time worked hard, made money, and invested it prudently. Secondly, Quakers tended to



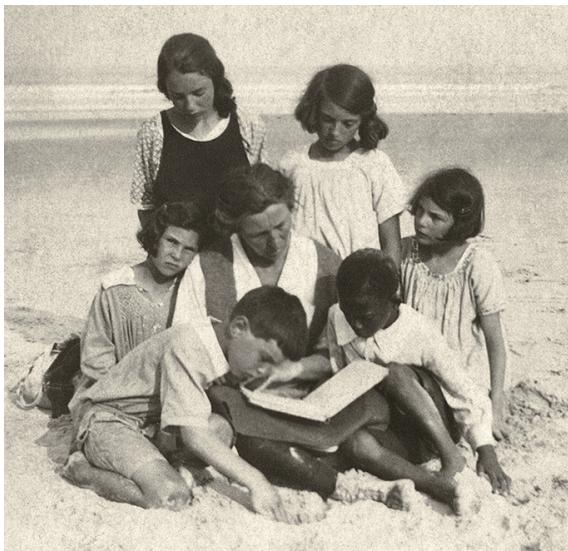
*Richard Mead and Abby Sophia Atwater and their children. Dorothea stands to the right of her mother.*

have lots of children upon whom they could depend—in addition, in a family the size of Richard Atwater's, a life of supported ease was not guaranteed to every child, their inheritance being divided among so many. There were also educations to pay for, and thus more hard work was required. Money, particularly for the girls, did not come easily. Parents provided lessons in manners and decorum, and made sure their daughters had solid basic educations, but Quaker girls, like most young women in those days, were expected to find respectable, hard-working husbands. Given their good looks and manners the Atwater sisters were equipped for the task. Quaker boys could usually find work among businesses conducted by members of their Society. They were often urged to seek professional pursuits, among which science, business, and the law were favored fields.

In 1880 Richard Atwater buys a parcel of property on the beach of Sea Isle, New Jersey, a wild and undeveloped stretch of coast below Atlantic City. Abby Sophia and the family spend summers there with the children. Richard, who works in nearby Milville, joins them on weekends. Traveling for the company, he grows frustrated by the business practices of his employer, Whitall Tatum. He decides to leave the company, and in 1890 moves with his family to Germany. He continues his technical education there for three years, where the family enjoy the benefits of the broad cultural experience

that living in a new place provides. The children attend German schools, and to help them succeed the family hires a language tutor named Herr Koehler, whom the older girls teasingly call "Hair Curler." When the family returns from Europe, the Sea Isle shore resumes its summer focus as the favorite destination.

Over the next two decades the family size increases and matures into a third generation. In 1913 Richard purchases a piece of land in Chadd's Ford, Pennsylvania that includes the old Washington Headquarters and the Wyndtryst farm and barn. The illustrator Howard Pyle, founder of the Brandywine school of painting, had run an art school there where N. C. Wyeth lived and



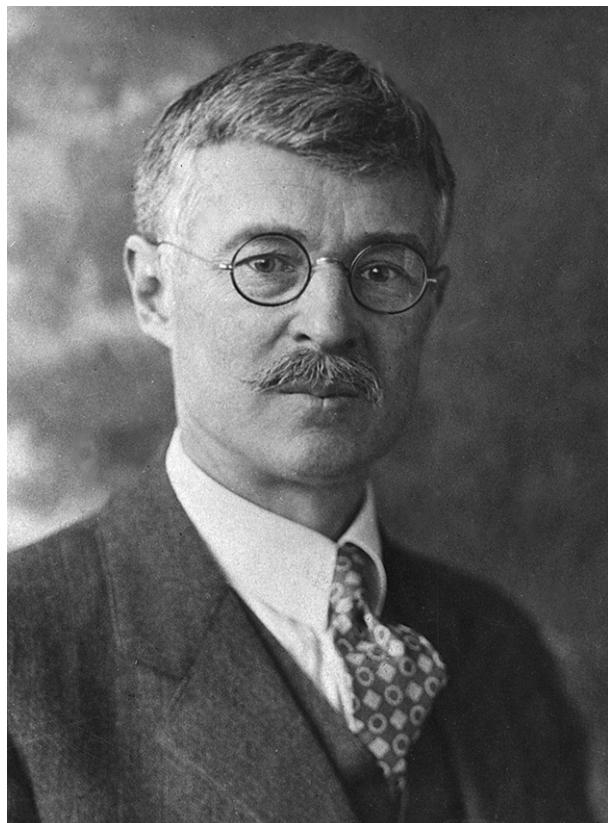
*Dorthea Smith reading to her children, an Atwater cousin, and a local boy, on the beach at Sea Isle, NJ.*



*Young Arthur Cleveland, Dorothea Smith and Richard Mead Atwater at Chadd's Ford, ca. 1890s.*

painted, as did his son Andrew. The property is bought from a family named Cleveland whose son Arthur, called "Punch," marries one of Richard's children. Years later Andrew Wyeth will paint a somber portrait of "Uncle Punch" standing beside a four-poster bed.

In 1892, a few years after the tragic loss of his older brother, Edward Smith enters Haverford College, an institution guided by Quaker precepts, and founded by a group of Quakers including Edward's ancestor, Daniel B. Smith in 1833. Graduating with a degree in chemical engineering, Edward finds work at the Exide Battery Company. Through Quaker connections he meets the Atwater daughter, Dorothea. They start a courtship and marry in 1904, buying a house in Philadelphia, convenient to Edward's work at Exide. Edward and "Doro" have six children: four girls, Sarah, Esther, Ann and Deborah; and two boys, William, named for his uncle Bill, and Edward, called Ned. All the Smith children attend Quaker schools, continuing through high school. In Dorothea's family tradition, the Smiths begin spending time on the Jersey shore at Sea Isle, and are welcomed into the extended Atwater clan.



*Edward W. Smith's company portrait from the Exide Battery works.*

Edward, meanwhile, matures into a diligent mechanic and a forward-thinking engineer. These are the early days of flight, scant years after the Wright Brothers vanquished the air. Inspired to do the same perhaps, Smith makes a successful scale model of a heavier-than-air flying machine. Not long after he tests it, his wife comes into his shop behind their house where she finds him working on a full-scale version of the design. Dorothea is an empowered woman, well-traveled and well-educated in language and literature. Like all family members she speaks in the vernacular Quaker mode, using the traditional second person singular for general address to intimates. "Edward", she says, "Thee can either fly in that thing or thee can stay married to me. Take thy choice." With some reluctance, her husband ceases his studies in aviation. It may be that spending time on the windy, New Jersey sands evoked the dunes of Kitty Hawk in North Carolina and the daring and glamorous work of Wilbur and Orville Wright. Edward's perceptive wife, knowing her husband, as well as the loss of his daring older brother, may have feared a like event.

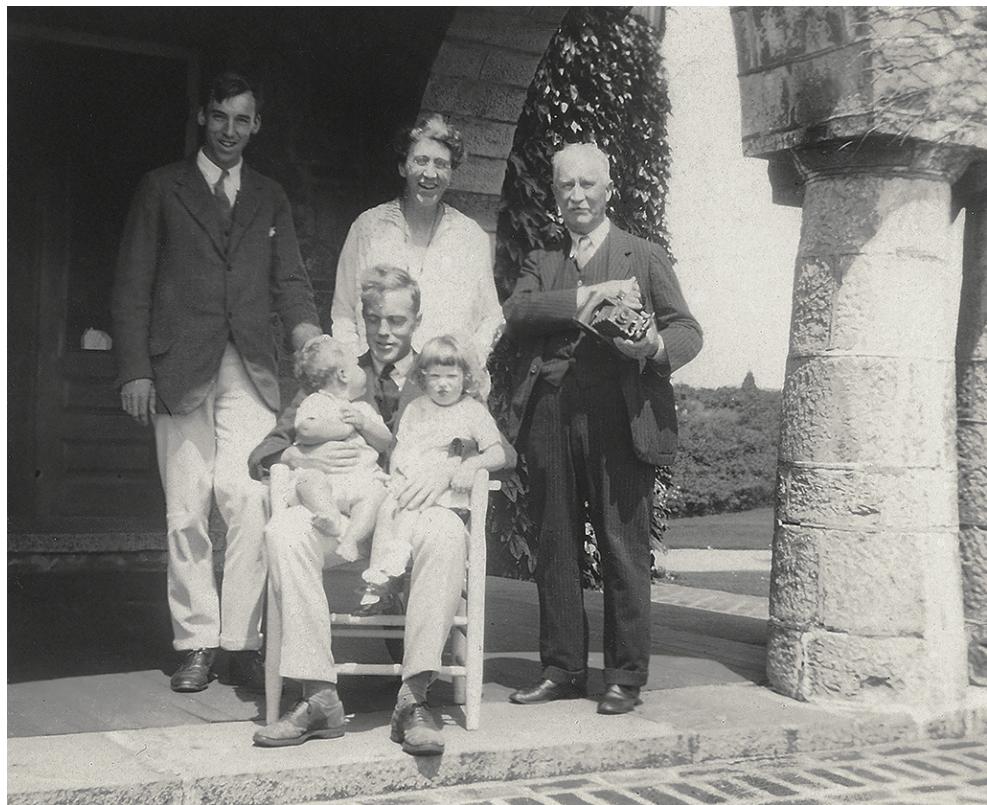
At Exide, Edward's work focusses on the development of the electric storage battery with a concentration on its use in automobiles. One problem he tackles is that of storage batteries being initially housed in glass containers. Since this use of glass in early automobiles is impractical, and alternative materials tend to fail, Smith comes up with a design called the "Ironclad." Housed in a die-stamped, steel case completely coated with rubber, it is a great success, and patents are issued by Exide, citing Smith's work. Success is too great, in fact; a few years later he comes home from the plant one day with a long face. "What's the matter?" asks Dorothy. "They've told me that my battery lasts too long."

In 1922 Richard Mead Atwater dies. Visits to Sea Isle stop, and the Smith grandparents' house in Newport soon becomes the new summer home. The dependable, long-established Fall River Line makes the journey from Philadelphia to Newport a straightforward trip. A family ride by rail to New York arrives in the afternoon, followed by an overnight steamer passage to Newport, home port to the glamorous, side-wheelers and their landing a mere stone's throw from the Smith home. Edward, the engineer, makes friends with the men and officers working the boats. He sometimes takes his older children into the engine room to amaze them as they watch the massive crank shafts of the steam engines working to turn paddlewheels housed on either side of the ship. Even passengers without such privilege can see, projecting above the upper decks of many steamers, the endless, rocking motion of the walking beam. This a mechanism which extends the engine's drive train, allowing the heaviest part of the machinery to be housed low in the vessel, preserving its stability.

## VI

In art school Howard Benson's presence is often sought as an "extra man" at social gatherings. Tall, attractive, a good conversationalist, he is cheerful and engaging. Once formed, his many friendships are maintained through both personal contact and correspondence. From Rhode Island he gets long letters from his brilliant and eccentric high school classmate Eric Taylor. Joseph Wharton's granddaughter Catherine Morris writes him from Philadelphia and from Jamestown. A gifted artist herself, Catherine has been friends with the fashionable Benson for years.

The Morris family is an interesting and sophisticated one. Catherine's father, Harrison Morris, was painted in a three-quarter length portrait by Thomas Eakins. Her mother, Anna Wharton Morris, traveled around the Continent and wrote of a luncheon in Paris where she met Auguste Rodin. Prior to her marriage, Anna was courted by the dashing William Smith before his tragic death. Smith would sail his catboat Falcon across the Bay to the pier at Joseph Wharton's house, Horsehead.



*JHB, Anna and Harrison Morris at Horsehead. Sydney Wright seated with two of his children.*

All these influences—the Quaker families with their fine houses, his New York City life and its allure, his time with Europe and her marvels—stoke the ambitions of the newly-established studio owner, Howard Benson. In his heart, however, live the frank and simple ethics of his working-class family. The lighthouse keeper and the steamboat engineer; the island doctor; the pragmatic uncle trying to steer him to a Naval career; his decorative artist mother and his mathematically gifted father—all these have established in him a practical sense of purpose upon which the foundation of his nature is built.

There is, at this time, an older painter living in Newport who Howard knows from the local Art Association where he and Catherine Morris both study and teach. This man has a pair of attractive daughters, one of whom Howard is drawn to; they fall in love and a tempestuous romance ensues (the girl is twelve years younger than he). They plan to get married but her parents put a stop to it. Coming from the economic uncertainty of an artist's life, they want their girl to marry into a higher social station. She dutifully breaks it off with Howard, and eventually weds the son of one of Rhode Island's more venerable and wealthy families. With a bruised ego, Benson turns his attention to the pretty daughters of Edward Smith.

All four houses on the corners of Poplar and Washington Streets were held for a time by Edward's father, Benjamin R. Smith; it was briefly known as Smith Corners. The four structures remain today: Tom Robinson's house; the 18th century Dennis house, now the rectory of St. John's Episcopal Church; a three story Victorian house which served for a time as home to a group of Episcopal nuns; and the 18th century Captain Warren house. The latter, by the time it came to Ben Smith, had assumed the name of its long-time owners the Cope family, Philadelphia Quakers. Their name has stayed with the property.

It is not precisely known how Howard Benson first meets the Smith Family. While serving as a purser on the Fall River Line steamers he may have noticed the studious Edward Smith shepherding his young daughters around the boats. More likely, his friendship with Catherine Morris at the Newport Art Association led to meeting her extended family. There are many connections. The handsome Smith house, colonial home of "Quaker Tom" Robinson, would have been familiar to Howard, sitting on the northwest corner of the intersection of north-south Washington and east-west Poplar Streets, not far from his Shop at 29 Thames Street. Poplar and its parallel neighbors, also named for trees, run towards and in a few cases directly into the water, where wooden brows constructed at the ends of these streets provide easy access for hauling and launching boats, and are also congenial gathering places for neighborhood residents.



*The Smith family on the back steps of the Cope house at 62 Washington Street, Newport, ca. 1929.*  
Top row, left to right: Edward, Sarah, Dorothea. Second row: Esther called "Fish," Deborah.  
Front row: Edward called "Ned," William, known as "Bill" and Anne.

He eventually settles his attentions on the second eldest of the Smith girls, Esther Fisher, who was called Fisher by her family, often in the familiar form of "Fish." She even came to sign her letters with the simple line drawing of a sideways fish. Fisher had a natural musical inclination that developed more seriously after a summertime stay at the Concord School of Music in Massachusetts. She later studied music at Wellesley college, where she played on a tin whistle which she carried throughout her senior year, driving more studious classmates to distraction. In the class year book, they voted her "noisiest." Along with her older sisters, she had many young men friends from among the families of fellow Quakers and their extended social circles, both in Philadelphia and during summers in Newport at the family's house on Washington Street.

The Smith siblings, as adults, gradually founded a family compound across the Bay in Jamestown, begun by Fisher's oldest sister Sarah, who was always called "Sally." Sally was soft spoken and serene in appearance and de-

meanor. In the mid-1930s she traveled to Japan, living there for two years and teaching at a Quaker school for young Japanese women. Connections formed there stayed in place for decades to come, and later, at the end of World War II, she re-established contact with a family named Urumatsu who had befriended her during her stay. Up into the 1960s she continued to welcome visitors from Japan. For much of her life she was employed by the Historical Society of Pennsylvania doing administrative work, and for several years ran their Philadelphia office. In the summers she began to travel to Jamestown, familiar as the home of her Wharton forbears. She ended up buying a small house on Beavertail, a separate land mass connected to Jamestown by a narrow beach and roadway, with sheltered Mackerel Cove to seaward and a salt marsh behind. Sally's house stood on the shore of the southernmost inlet of Beavertail, known as Hull Cove. She was subsequently joined in this small settlement by her brother Bill and her sister Deborah. She remained single, staying in Jamestown until the last years of her life.

The third Smith sister, Anne, was the kindest and loveliest of the four. Her cousin Catherine Morris once painted her at life-size, discreetly reclining in the nude. In her twenties Anne fell in love with a calm, fair-haired Quaker



*Hodgkin-Smith Wedding. Front row, Left to right: Sally Smith, Patrick Hodgkin, Anne Smith, Bill Smith.*

named Patrick Hodgkin. They became engaged and realized, tragically soon, that Anne had a serious health problem which was starting to compromise her vision. The family eye doctor soon discovered a brain tumor. Patrick, in speaking to the doctor, told him of the couple's plans to marry. The doctor, in turn, told Patrick of Anne's short life expectancy. Dr. Speath had long been a family friend, and advised Patrick to proceed with the marriage and give Anne all the love and comfort he could for the remainder of her life. They married, and Anne died within two years. Later, her grieving Quaker husband joined the Army Air corps, serving in World War II as a bombardier flying missions over Europe.

Deborah, youngest of the girls, possessed an almost exotic beauty. As a teenager, she would come into a room where one of her sisters was entertaining a young man, lean against the doorway, and stand there looking sultry. The suitor would be properly distracted and the sister would have to shoo Deborah away. Courted by many, she married, in the end, a gifted eye surgeon. Like most men of the time, Frank Lutman served in World War II for the duration. After the war, he went on to establish a successful ophthalmologist's practice that had a long list of grateful patients. Deborah, inspired by her sister's example, bought a small, beachside cottage on the same rocky shore of Hull Cove. She enjoyed peaceful, easy summers there with her children and siblings, untroubled by the personality differences that so troubled her marriage.

Bill Smith, older of the two boys, also bought a house on Hull Cove, a twin to Sally's simple beach house. His wife and four children stayed there every summer. Like Deborah's husband Frank, Bill mostly remained in Philadelphia to work. Ned, the youngest Smith, came to visit his siblings whenever his globe-trotting employment allowed it. Upon retirement, he also moved to Beavertail, buying his sister Sally's place when she grew older and decided to move into town.

The tranquility of the tiny settlement of Jamestown and its surrounding acreage was blissful for the Smiths, who were born and largely brought up in urban settings. They were of a new generation, one that lived through conflicts of unparalleled violence and destruction that took place on a global scale for the first time in history. The pervading peace and gentle pace of Beavertail and its beaches seemed to them a heaven-sent reward. A dirt road led to the cottages, framed with honeysuckle and rosa rugosa, bayberry, and low-growing evergreens, all kept in check off season by the winter winds. The Smith families, arriving in the springtime, would pull their shoes off as soon as they left their cars. Quickly donning bathing suits, they would scramble down the incline to the beach, their urban worries melting away as they breathed in the salt-tinged air.

## VIII

In these years leading up to World War II, Newport, as described earlier, is a multi-layered town with a complex social structure ranging from laborers and merchants – hailing from many different ethnic and religious backgrounds—to a solid upper middle class and the wealthy Industrialists and financiers of the “Avenue”. Due to an exceptional harbor and ocean access, it has also long been an important base for Naval forces. Defensive fortifications dating from the 18th century onwards are still visible, studding the shores in and around Newport. A published diary written by a member of the occupying British forces in the 1770s shows drawings of forts and warship anchorages along with their potential to provide intersecting fields of cannon fire. Moored Naval vessels and personnel in a variety of uniforms have been visible along and around the waterfront since Newport’s earliest days.

North of town, the island has open space which over the years has been occupied by farms and still contains small stretches of woodland. Colonial settlers deforested many acres of land for firewood and lumber, and during the Revolutionary War years, the British continued cutting trees for shipbuilding material. Through the late 18th and 19th centuries much of the land was bare. By the 1900s new wooded tracts began to grow up, primarily in the other two settlements of Middletown, named for its position in the center of the island, and Portsmouth, which is situated at its northern end. Historically, both have been farming communities, but by Howard’s time they were becoming built up.

Among the various social groups, attitudes, and influences that make Newport unique, there has always been a small group of craftsmen whose work, from the colonial period onward, has gained both national and international fame. Silversmiths and house builders, stone workers like the Stevenses, basket makers and chair builders—these and others have been and continue to be, commonplace practitioners of Newport crafts. Two names, however, have historically risen above the others. The cabinetmakers Goddard and Townsend devised and crafted some of the finest furniture of colonial America. In Thomas Robinson’s house there has stood, from his time to the Benson’s, a tall secretary’s desk, modestly designed but sublimely fashioned of the finest mahogany, a piece that came from the hand of John Goddard himself.

Howard’s art school mentor, the print master Joseph Pennell, responds to a letter from Benson, who writes from Newport. Benson’s talent has always seemed to him remarkable. To Pennell, the depth of the young man’s character and the breadth of his gifts hold promise of high achievement in the world of art. “I am glad you have had a success with your

work in Newport" he writes, "but Newport is a very unimportant spot in the world—save for artless things and artful people and you have got to try for bigger game."

Fine art is one of the highest of human achievements. The difficulty is that the rewarding pursuit of fine art demands not only talent, but drive, selfless application, and good luck. Unlike with many, more conventional



*JHB carving at a bench in the John Stevens Shop, ca. 1933.*

occupations, there is no dependable formula for success. Most artists who do succeed at making fine art a career—working in an age long past the time of royal or religious patronage—do so because they have found some method of support beyond their field. Personal fortunes; dedicated, wealthy supporters and collectors; unlikely or chance successes; unexpected windfalls—any or all these may contribute to the fortunes and fates of fine artists. Living a life of poverty can be a brutal reality. Progress in fine art is often written in

relinquished pleasures and yielded hopes. That an artist's life can be lived otherwise is possible, but not common.

In his new studio, Howard senses a need for the supportive presence of a wife and family. With his growing group of patrons and clients, this life of an artistic craftsman seems irresistible. The Smith girls are at hand, the road looks clear. Many years later his wife Fisher will say, "We all knew he'd pick



*Esther Fisher Smith, ca. 1933.*

one of us. We just didn't know which one it would be." The door to High Art may be closing, but the light at the end of an artisan/craftsman's tunnel shines bright. His decision is upon him, and from every standpoint, save that of immortality in the field of fine art, Howard Benson chooses well.

Fisher, however, is not so quick to leap on board with Howard's plans. It is the height of the Great Depression when he first proposes to her and the prospect of marriage to a hungry young artist, however charming and



*Fisher Smith in her Model A Ford meets a Handsome team in the Kentucky mountains.*

industrious, probably feels daunting to her pragmatic Quaker worldview in those hard times. She knows too that Howard was recently turned down by another woman and rightly suspects it is too soon for him to make a sincere commitment. Recently graduated from Wellesley College with a degree in music, Fisher knows she could probably find a job as a teacher. There follows a period in which she strikes out on her own and looks for some work that will enable her to see a bit of the real world and create the time she needs to think it all over. But her father, Edward, feeling it would be unfair for his well-provided-for daughter to take a job when so many able men are unemployed, encourages Fisher instead to look for some challenging volunteer work. She soon joins the American Friends Service Committee, which sends her down to the Appalachian Mountains to do relief work bringing school lunches to children orphaned by the all-too-frequent coal mining disasters of the time. She spends a season driving a Model A Ford across Pike County in Kentucky. This vehicle, a precursor to the famous US Army Jeep, features large wheels, giving it a high clearance from the road and a four-cylinder engine with a long stroke that delivers the necessary torque to navigate the rough dirt tracks and river beds Fisher must follow in order to deliver her supplies to her charges. She travels with a young black woman who she said "had a BEAUTIFUL voice" and the two of them play piano and sing at churches or community centers when their days of transport and heavy lifting are done.

Throughout this time, as Howard is establishing the foundations of his new business in Newport, he and Fisher carry on a regular correspondence through the post. Their letters are warm and friendly, with bits of teasing humor on her end and some occasional humid passion springing up between them. It is clear they are growing to love one another at a moderate but steady pace. By the time her sojourn in Appalachia is through, Fisher has seen real hardship first hand, and has done so within communities lacking the cultural and educational advantages she and Howard share. She knows from his writing that he is in earnest about both her and his career and together they have established a shared aspiration to live an honest life of spiritually enriching work and down-to-earth pleasures.



*Fisher Smith in the large bucket of a steam shovel at a coal mine in Kentucky.*



## PART THREE

*Early Commissions and Waterfront Life*



*JHB carving the Sargent Blessed Virgin Mary at the John Stevens Shop.*

## IX

AT THE JOHN STEVENS SHOP, Howard Benson is refining his skills as a maker of carved headstones and memorials. He also keeps up his printmaking practice to provide added income, though large illustrations are ultimately phased out because of the time required to produce them. He focuses instead on the marketing of wood engravings which can be made on a small scale, without the complex equipment of lithographic and intaglio printing. He also makes cards and various printed ephemera for established clients. A number of wealthy summer residents of the town were patrons of his youthful work at the Newport Art Association, and many of his best contacts in this social group stay with him still.

Two of these established clients are the Wetmore sisters. In 1852, William Shepard Wetmore, who has been described as a wealthy Yankee trader, built an imposing summer house on Newport's Bellevue Avenue. His son George Peabody Wetmore, educated at Yale, took a law degree from Columbia and served two terms as Governor of Rhode Island. He was then elected as a Republican to the United States Senate and served until 1913. George was married to Malvina Keteltas, sister of a decorated Civil War veteran. Malvina's great-grand father was William Smith, a graduate of the Yale class of 1719, and unrelated to the Quaker Smiths. George and Malvina summered in his father's Newport house, "Chateau Sur Mer." Mrs. Wetmore's social position, with her family's long line of distinguished Yale graduates, was unassailable.

Senator Wetmore was deeply involved in cultural institutions as well as serving on numerous boards and committees in both government and society. His work was pivotal to the expansion of the United States Navy and the building of the Naval Base in Newport. He served as joint chairman of the Committee to complete the National Capitol and also as chairman of the first Lincoln Memorial commission. While we Americans may pride ourselves in our democratic convictions, there has always been, functionally, an American aristocracy. Had such a thought occurred to them, the Wetmores would have justly felt themselves a part of it. Senator George and Malvina had four children, Edith Malvina, Maude Alice, William Shepard, and Rogers Pickman. The two Wetmore sisters, who never married, lived on at Newport after their parent's demise.

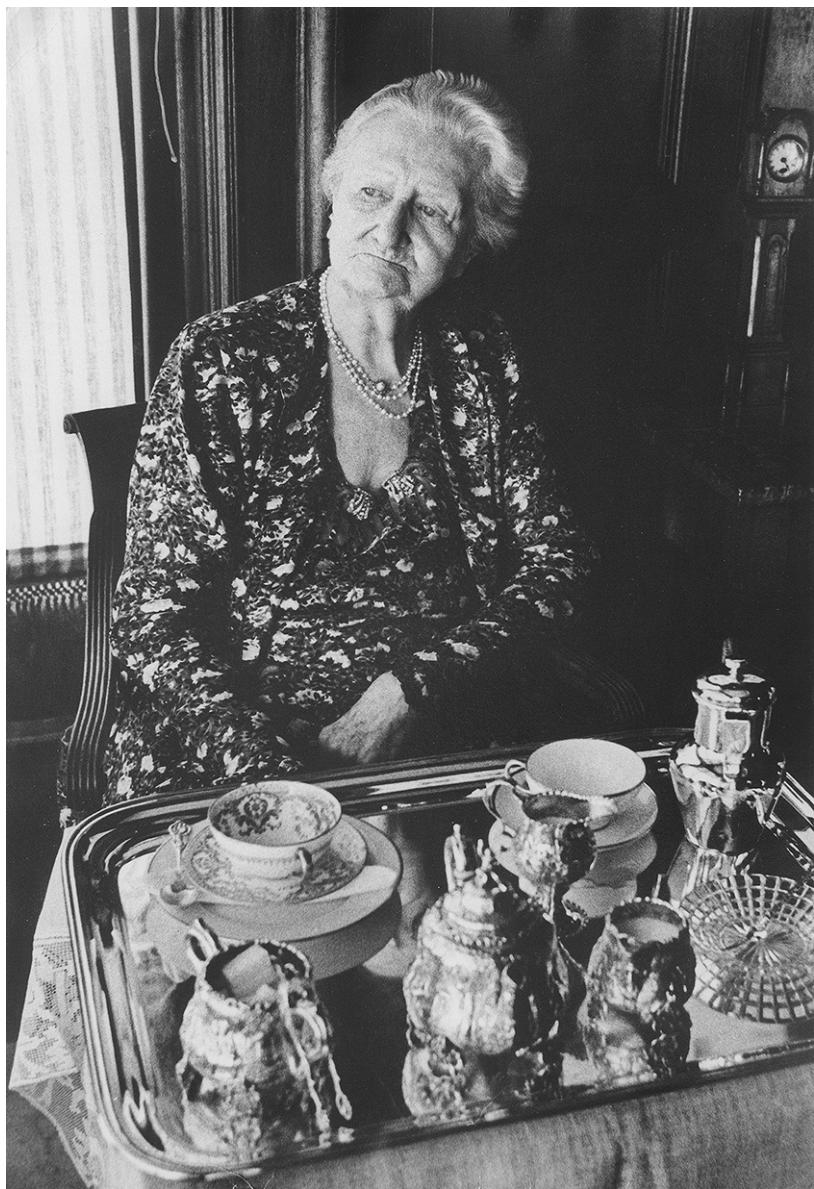
Many of Howard's early wood engravings are done for them and similar clients. Christmas cards are made as are bookplates in color, requiring multiple blocks for color printing. Here are proofs of the five blocks cut for a bookplate for a Mr. Cyrus Brown. The sixth impression shows the sequential full color print.



*Five wood-engraved blocks, printed in sequence, combine to make the sixth finished print.*

When Benson first buys the John Stevens Shop, it needs sprucing up for his distinguished clientele. The Wetmore sisters, who are active in the arts and society and maintain their father's house in its traditional role of a fashionable Newport house, give Benson the funds for building a new, red brick floor for the main workroom of the Shop. They become early patrons, good friends, and staunch supporters of the young artist.

Howard outlived Maude Wetmore but the stubbornly vital Edith lived on into her 95th year. In the early 60s a graduate of RISD, Nancy Sirkis, made an interesting and timely photographic book about Newport and its citizens. Edith reluctantly granted permission for a photograph to be taken of her older self. It is a fine, sensitive portrait of an elderly woman, intelligent and reflective, her spirit undiminished by age.



*Edith Wetmore at Chateau Sur Mer. Photograph copyright © Nancy Sirkis, 1960*

X

In 1928 Benson attends a conference of the Liturgical Arts Society of New York. It takes place at the Benedictine Priory School in the nearby rural community of Portsmouth, RI. The subject of the event is a discussion of "ways and means to improve the arts of the Church." The conference is most

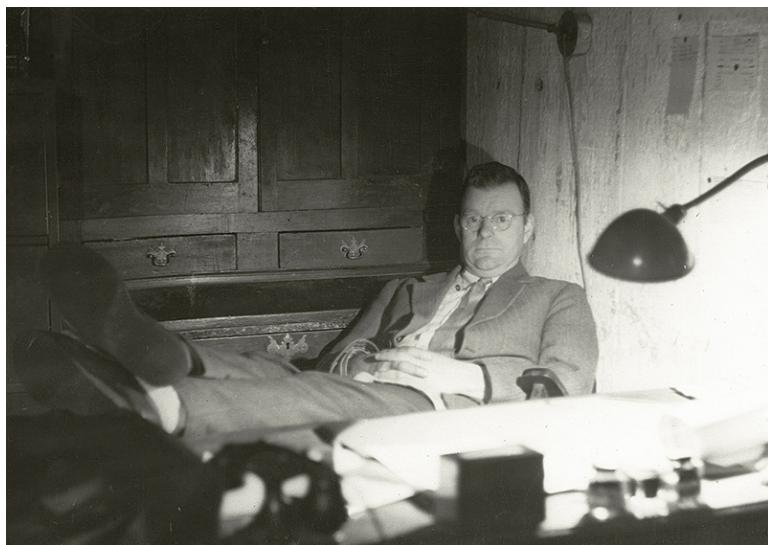
significant or being the place where Howard first meets Arthur Graham Carey, who will become a partner in the Shop and a friend for life. A devout Catholic, Carey comes from a wealthy family. He is well educated, broadly traveled, highly intelligent, and does not need to work for a living. The two men quickly discover their shared aesthetic sense as well as their convictions in matters of work and lifestyle. On the heels of this meeting, Carey commissions a carved stone crucifix from the young sculptor to be installed in the Carey family's cemetery lot



*JHB working in the back room at the John Stevens Shop.*

In the same decade Benson takes on three other commissions for similar work, commissions that will occupy much of the first fifteen years of his professional life. Some people are born with a capacity for hard work and a love of the rewards it yields. Remarkable examples of this type often become high achievers and produce what seems, to the ordinary among us, an extraordinary amount. In the case of John Howard Benson, the motivation for his ceaseless activity is the simple fact that he loves it. Idleness to him seems an intolerable bore. The ability to produce things using his hands and his artist's eye directs his greatest source of pleasure. His analytical insights are useful not only in his work, but in his relationships with other people—his expansive nature and lively sense of humor attract a broad range of colleagues and friends.

With the Carey commission in hand and a growing list of headstone work, Howard takes on help at the Shop. He hires Donald Sanford, a recent graduate of the Yale School of Art, to assist him in carving figures. Sanford, an experienced carver, has also trained as a sculptor. Benson also hires a local friend, Ted Bloom, to act as secretary in charge of bookkeeping and correspondence. Howard will handle client contact and design work, oversee the production of stones, and still have time to work on his sculptural commitments. With variations of this arrangement and with a shifting cast of characters the Shop will carry on through three more decades.

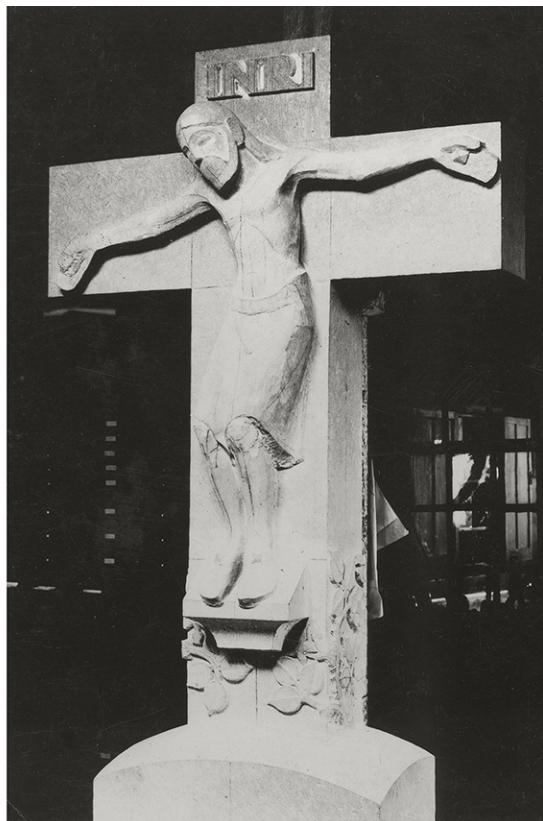
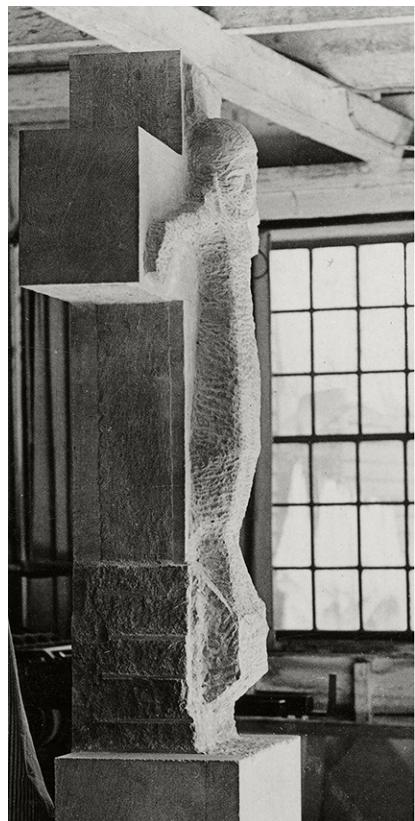


*Arthur Graham Carey sits thinking in front of a colonial cupboard.*

Carey's crucifix commission is a great boon to Benson and one that any professional artist would gladly accept. While in New York, he had studied naturalistic figure drawing and modeling, and his work to date tends to express this early training. Carey, however, is firmly under the stylistic influence of the English sculptor and letter-carver Eric Gill.

Eric Gill was a quirky, somewhat controversial character who lived and worked in England. Although he had an earthy and somewhat hedonistic nature, he was deeply committed to Catholicism. Sculpture and drawings from his hand were colored by both his spiritual conviction and his sensuality. He adopted curious habits of dress and with his followers enjoyed long and complex discussions on religious and artistic subjects. A printer himself, he also wrote tracts and publications and was a frequent lecturer. He illustrated his publications and designed typefaces to print their texts. The strength of his drawn and carved lettering is still recognized in England.

Eric Gill's artistic output is impressive; it is stylized and tied as much to Catholic dogma as to his own eccentric persona. Carey finds himself attracted to the Englishman's aesthetic, and they meet in England not long before he first encounters Howard Benson at the Portsmouth conference. In meeting the Newport carver, Carey may have felt that he was discovering an American version of Gill's alluring, Catholic philosophy. He exposes Howard to Gill's work and to that of other English artists and craftsmen.



*Carey Crucifix in process of being carved.*

One of these is the calligrapher, Edward Johnston, whose book *Writing, Illuminating and Lettering* was published in 1917. Gill, of whom Carey becomes a late-life patron, wrote the section of Johnson's book dealing with carved inscriptions. Benson purchases, carries and wears out his first copy.

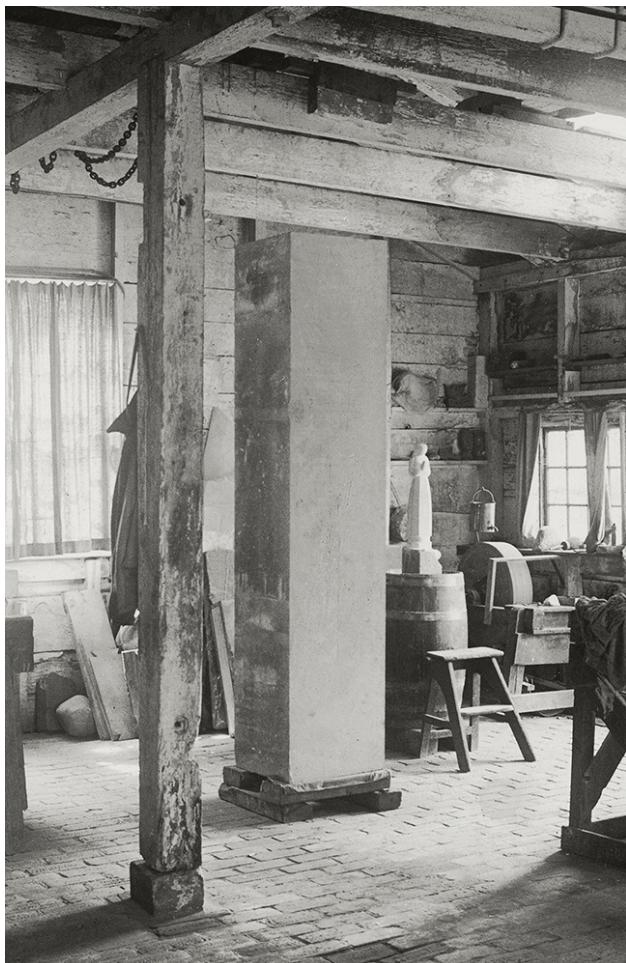
With Carey's oversight, Benson allows the crucifix commission to assume the mannerism of Gill's work. The figurative realism Benson studied in New York, expressed in the work of sculptors like Mahonri Young or Daniel Chester French, gives way. Benson's four figurative works will all reflect Gill's aesthetic, while not embracing that artist's permissive sensuality. In carving

the Carey Crucifix Benson pursues a high relief technique, using a stylized approach and linear description of the figure. The sculpture is made from a large block of limestone and conceived in geometric masses; the cross and base are



*Carey Crucifix in situ, Vermont.*

sawn as a unit from a single block at the stone quarry. Once in the sculptor's studio, the mass of the Christ figure is carved in very high relief; it stands out from, yet remains integrated with the heavy cross, which has been blocked out by sawing and carving. The work is completed over three years and shares time and space with other, less demanding commissions.



*Block for Daniel Sargent's Blessed Virgin Mary.*

Michelangelo first made large scale models in clay. These were then cast into plaster, molded using numerous three-dimensional measurements that were then transferred from these plaster models to the stone. Reference points located on the plaster model's surface were duplicated on the block as to each one's location in the three-dimensional space that the figure would ultimately describe. Masses of material between the points were gradually removed. More points of greater precision were added as the carving neared the final surface.

Benson neither models his crucifix full size in clay, nor makes the complex measurements described above. In practice, his sculpture is made by direct carving, refining the volumetric forms as they develop from simple outlined guides. In essence, his method reflects the one used by Eric Gill. Beyond this third figure in limestone and his last, a granite figure of John the Baptist

To the uninitiated, the act of carving a figure in stone seems to consist of securing a block of the appropriate material, then devising a design, and perhaps, making a model to solidify the concept. Then we imagine the artist confronting the stone—stepping up to the block, drawing a mark or two on its surface, and starting to carve. We envision the carved figure, becoming freed, bit by bit, from the block. Michelangelo, in fact, did seem to do just this. A look at his unfinished marble captives for the tomb of Pope Julius affirms our belief in his breathtaking powers of invention and creation. In fact, like most other traditionally educated sculptor of the period,

(1939), Benson will pursue no more three-dimensional work. Regarded from the perspective of his later life, these early works are not innovative. Nonetheless, he pleases his clients, and the range of his abilities broadens.

Three of Benson's four sculptures were carved in Indiana limestone, a choice that was convenient in several ways. Limestone can be worked easily with simple, hand-held tools. Unlike granite, it does not produce dangerous dust containing silica. Of the common stones for sculpture, it is also the most economical. It ranges from a hard, almost brittle matrix to one so soft it can be worked by low-impact cutting. In Egypt, the tombs of the Pharaohs were hewn from the hard limestone of the Valley of the Kings. In the Middle Ages, many cathedrals were built of local limestone, found throughout the European continent. Established monastic societies of that era would grow and flourish to a point where they sent out scouts to find sites for starting new communities. First on their list of requirements was a source of workable stone. Much of the Italian land mass is formed of limestone and France, as well, seemed to have endless sources of the stone. The style and characteristics of Gothic art and architecture evolved in large part from the advantages of working with a sympathetic, locally available material.

Benson's second sculptural commission comes from Daniel Sargent, a Catholic patron in Massachusetts. He has in mind an over-life-size figure of the Virgin Mary that will stand on the bank of his river-front property outside Boston. Howard develops it as a columnar



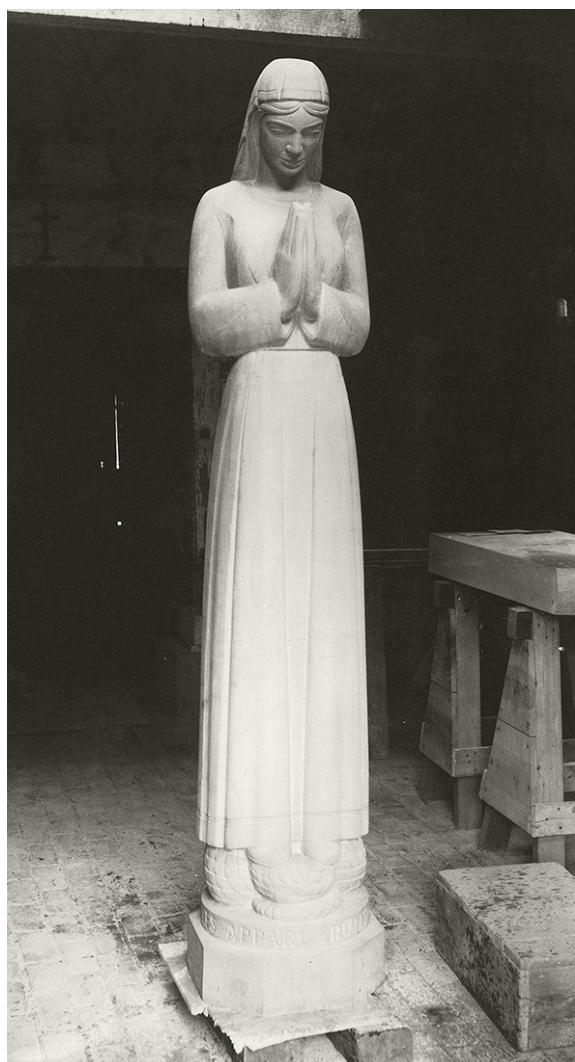
*Sargent Virgin Mary in-progress.*

composition, a draped figure in a devotional pose with bent elbows and joined palms. He designs a simple figure with stylized, full length drapery. Final dimensions are worked out and the material ordered. Although no plans for the piece survive, it is clear that Howard does draw outline profiles of the two main views of the piece. He also produces a small-scale model at this point, visible on the barrel above left, to the immediate right of the block (above). The profiles are transferred to the limestone and the mass of the stone blocked out, conforming to the profiles, on all four sides. Carving proceeds from this stage by eye. The figure stands on the curled form of a snake incorporated into a minimal plinth. Once again, the manner and style of the piece

adheres to the aesthetic of Carey's preferred exemplar, Eric Gill. Gill loved the human figure and often drew both male and female forms, candidly in the nude. Yet in three-dimensional work he often resisted frank realism and resorted to a soft and linear style.

Like Gill, Benson must be considered a direct carver. Work proceeds from geometric massing to simple, developed volumes, discrete detailing, and smooth surfaces. The figure is indicated but not slavishly rendered. The exact features of the face, hands and feet are reduced to restrained renditions of static anatomy.

When Benson was making sculpture in the 1930s, a prevalent style was that of the Art Deco movement. Marvelous works came out of this period, which was also a time of dramatic change in graphic and industrial design. The classic view of sculpture



*The Sargent Virgin Mary completed.*

was under assault by the work of innovative artists such as Constantin Brancusi, Alberto Giacometti, and Antoine Pevsner. Artists like Paul Manship and Gaston Lachaise were redefining the figure and its place in time with less flamboyant, but solidly creative work. Benson, uninspired by all such visionaries, stayed with the restrained stylization of the Carey Crucifix. While in no way avant-garde, the finished figure, standing on the river bank of the client's land, nevertheless creates an imposing presence.

## XI

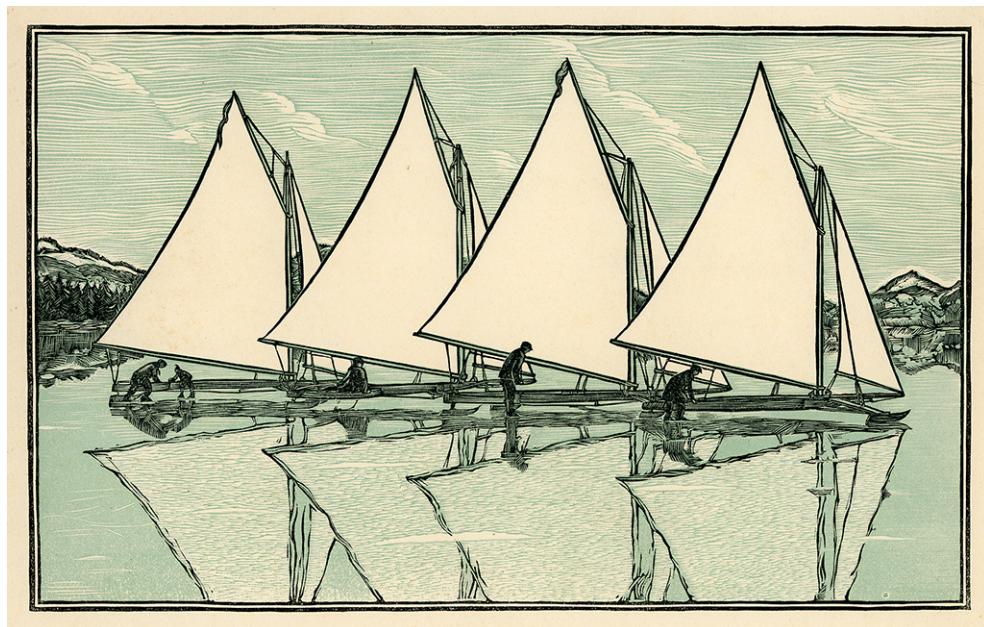
In the summer of 1934, John Howard Benson and Esther Fisher Smith are married. After his failed romance with the Painter's daughter, Howard finds that he and his newly beloved make a very good match. She will later say that the couple would walk out on her grandfather's pier, sit in the sunset and that she "let him hold me however he wanted to." Compared with her Quaker friends, Fisher may have been more "modern" than was typical at the time.

The year before Fisher and Howard married, he had lost his father, Gus, who died after a painful illness. Physical affection can work wonders for an emotionally wounded psyche and being with Fisher was, doubtless, a comfort. A vital aspect of Howard's envisioned future is thus secured by her supportive presence. Whatever challenges they are to face in the future, their commitment to each other will last a lifetime.



*JHB and EFS Wedding portrait, 1934.*

Working at the Shop, carving the limestone crucifix, tablets, and memorials, Howard Benson engages with the intricacies of letter carving and typographic design. He also starts to foresee the fiscal challenges of life in the arts. With the best intentions, a realistic relationship between time spent on artistic conception and time used for actual production are hard to reconcile. Time spent does not always equal money earned. At this juncture two things occur which are critical to his success.



*Four Herreshoff Ice Boats.* Two-color wood engraving by JHB.

The first is when The Rhode Island School of Design in Providence, where he knows the faculty and has taught occasional classes, offers him a part time teaching position. This profitable employment contributes to the Benson economy and gives it added stability. It also further broadens the scope of his vision and reveals his natural abilities as a teacher—his friends have often regarded him as a source of informed artistic judgment. His artistic skills continue to solidify, and, working with woodblocks and wood engraving, he evolves a lucid, linear style of draftsmanship. Drawing has been a lifelong habit with him and he always seems to have pencil and paper in one pocket or another. In work, he daily confronts technical or artistic problems, often solving them with a quick sketch.

His other great boon is the gift of a house. When Benjamin R. Smith died his son Edward, Fisher's father, inherited the Cope house at "Smith's Corners" in Newport; it stood just across the Poplar Street shore from his

own summer home, the Robinson house. Ben Smith had bought the Cope house some years back to provide added housing for summer guests. In these Depression years, however, summer vacations have doubtless become less elaborate, and two houses perhaps superfluous.



*Dorothea and Edward Smith with Fisher and Tommy Tew at the Cope house.*

Meanwhile in 1936, two years into their marriage, Howard and Fisher produce a son and name him for the ancestral Thomas Tew. Aside from a brief stay with Benson's mother, the family to this point have lived in various rented houses and, one year while Howard was teaching at RISD, in a noisy, dusty, third floor walkup apartment near the school in Providence. The arrival of his first grandchild moves Edward Smith to an act of

spectacular generosity. He gives the young couple the Cope house. This property is distinguished and substantial, appealing to a young family like the Bensons, with its large waterfront yard, a servant's quarters that can be converted to a home studio, and a pier for direct and private access to the harbor.

Back when he was first married, Benson had decided that a house on Washington Street would be perfect for his wife and himself and he managed to buy a small lot, four blocks north of Ben Smith's Robinson house. The lot was shallow, with a steep incline down to the water and a small, curving beach accessible only at low tide. He realized that the slope would be diminished if a seawall were built up from the sandy beach and the steep hillside re-graded. All this was begun, but the generous, surprise gift of Edward Smith brought a halt to the project a year later. The Cope house was too good to resist, and the small lot was sold.

Unencumbered with burdensome debt, Benson finds himself endowed with the trappings of success. With careful management, the life he wants can be his. The acquisition of the Cope house at 62 Washington Street becomes a turning point in his life. While his talent and dedication would no doubt have led him to modest fame, Howard's life is supported and even empowered by the stabilizing presence of his historic, waterfront home. Fisher is also able to contribute a small amount to the family's wellbeing. The Smith family is comfortable but not of significant wealth. Its members made good livings and, through the Quaker prudence of a grandfather, the family are part owners of a piece of property on the outskirts of Philadelphia. The money generated by the property is placed in a trust. Although by the time Fisher's share is divided from her siblings' the yield from the trust is small, when added to Benson's professional earnings it will augment the simple needs of their family unit. Fisher learns to be a careful homemaker and a devoted cook, Howard an enthusiastic host and a welcoming friend to many. He loves to entertain out of town visitors in their dining room facing the harbor. Over dinner one perceptive guest remarks, "Benson. You are living in Paradise." "I know," his host replies, "I know."

## XII

Entering their second decade, the Stevens Shop and its new owner expand their capabilities. Benson works at the Shop, teaches at RISD and maintains his Newport clientele, who provide him with commissions for graphic work as well as gravestones. With Graham Carey he writes and publishes tracts on life and work. Wood engravings and printed ephemera flow from the Cope house studio—Howard has converted the house's former servant's

quarters into the studio where he can work at home on certain projects. He also adjusts, as well as his intense nature permits, to the life of a husband and father. All this would seem enough to keep any man occupied, but is not enough for Benson. From his family's long involvement with the world of ships, he has learned to love salt water; when he decides to buy a boat, his own seagoing experiences, plus his own and Fisher's family connections to the water, guide his choice.

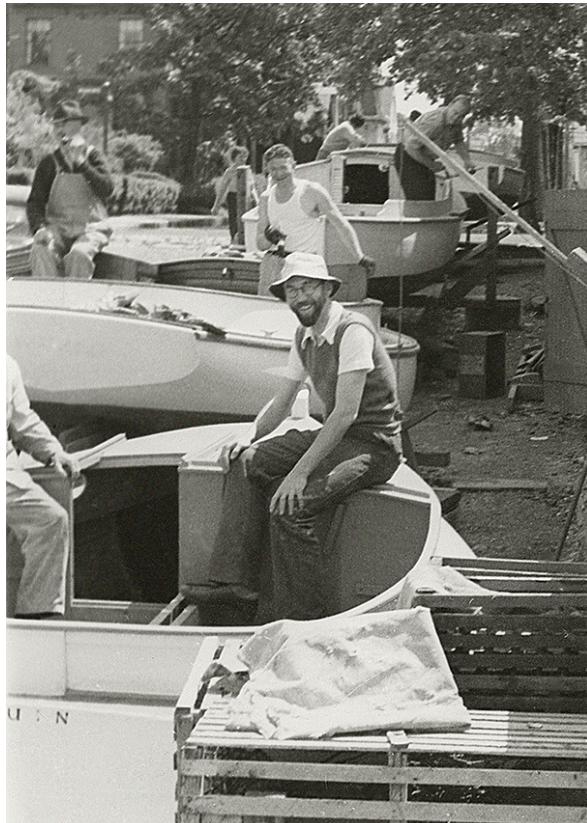


JHB with other boat owners on the Poplar Street driftway in front of the catboat Penguin.

A small Thomas Stoddard catboat built in 1885 has been operated for years by the Newport Fish Trap company, serving as a floating watchman's station for their large, offshore net. She has a large cabin where the watchers sleep, on guard against casual theft of their trapped fish.

Stoddard also built the catboat *Falcon* whose speed and strength so fatally tested the young William Smith. Howard makes an offer for the Fish Trap's boat and it's accepted. *Hattie*, as she has been called, is only eighteen feet long. Although a centerboard model, she has a deep, deadrise hull and a short, sturdy rig. The price is cheap, and Benson can afford some modifications. He reduces the cabin size, opens the cockpit to make it bigger, and updates her sail plan.

The catboat also comes with a large, gasoline engine of the type known as a "make-and-break." This engine's tall, single-cylinder design requires a heavy flywheel, with a projecting, spring-loaded handle that is used to start it. In theory, the handle can be pulled out of its socket and used to spin the wheel until the engine fires. At that point, the spring would retract the handle back into its socket. Sometimes the flywheel's rapid rotation prevented



*JHB on the driftway in the cockpit of the Penguin.*

retraction, and the handle, still jutting out, whirled in a menacing blur in front of the flywheel. This is exactly what happens with Hattie's engine, and the spinning handle breaks Benson's arm.

Unable to shave, he grows a beard which he keeps for life. Always considered attractive, he nonetheless has a slightly weak chin. The beard solves this minor flaw, giving him a striking appearance, especially in a beardless age. However, in spite of the advantages of his new look—a direct benefit derived from his experience with the make-and-break—Benson sells the old engine and installs a smaller, lighter motor with a rope starter cord, simple clutch, and reverse gear.

Now renamed *Penguin*, the catboat proves to be bluff and steady under sail and a perfect fit for Benson with his lanky frame, family, and many friends. Day sails and short cruises are made to select spots on beaches and islands of the Bay. Having grown up on similar boats and sailed to most of the preferred locations, Fisher makes a perfect companion. Somewhere she has found a long, tin storage box, its cross-section just the size of a slice of her home-made bread. She packs it with sandwiches and by mid-day the favored ones, of tomato and lettuce, unrefrigerated and with lots of mayon-



Boats on the shore of the Poplar Street driftway. Penguin is in the center at water's edge, JHB above.

naise, will take on a miraculous flavor unfamiliar to modern palates. On soft, summer Sundays they sail across the Bay to Potter's cove with its sheltered anchorage. Fisher walks up the hill from the beach to attend Quaker meeting at the small, historic meetinghouse. At noon she walks back down the hill and joins the family, where they dine on the sandwiches from the capacious container.

The Benson's new home and the Smith family's Robinson house flank each other on Washington Street. Common land of the Poplar street shore or "streetway" lies between them. Their neighborhood is known in Newport as "The Point." On old maps, it appears as a spit of land extending south from Washington street into Newport Harbor, describing a sheltered cove; the area

was originally known as Easton's Point and has been settled since the 17th century. From the 1800s, natives of the area have been known as "Point Hummers" after their practice of humming a cadence in rowing competitions held in six-oared boats. On some of the neighborhood streetways, Point families have shared waterfront access for generations. There they launch boats, haul and store them in the winter months, and maintain them through



*Penguin on a Port Tack off Coaster's Harbor Island in Newport.*

the seasons. Howard and Fisher's Cope house is situated on the south of Poplar Street's shore, forming one side of the waterfront access. Ben Smith's Robinson house across the way provides the other.

Benson's newly cemented connections with this place expose another side of his character. He enjoys working on physical tasks with like-minded friends. More successful residents of the immediate area patronize the local shipyards, but Benson, like many of his neighbors, chooses to make use of the common land in the streetway to work on, store, and launch his boat. People also use the streetway as a place from which they set and maintain

the moorings lying close offshore. Despite his enthusiasm, Benson's heart, weakened by its damaged valve, will not allow him to do heavy work. In the Shop, he has employees to assist him in physically demanding tasks. In his new role as a home and boat owner, he makes friends with the experienced and capable men of the shore. They form an engaging crew, with specific skills and long experience.

John Sullivan, de facto foreman of the shore, lends a strong, steady presence. Owner of a house one block in from the water, he can generally be seen at work on the city's "honey wagon," a truck rigged to pump out local drains and sewers when they clog in the wet winter months. Neighbors Harold Arnold and his sons are enthusiastic sailors as well, direct descendants of Rhode Island's colonial Governor Benedict Arnold. Another member of the shore crew is Thomas Raymond Kelly. He and his father are Irish. The father is grumpy, Ray care-free, twice-married, and a house painter. Of a weekend, Ray will row his skiff out to his moored, decked over, ex-Navy motor-whaleboat, carrying a case of beer. He calls to anyone in earshot, "I'm going off-shore." Sometimes he does not come home until the next day, though his boat will not have left the mooring.

There are also two Swedish men among those in the group. Jake Anderson conducts sailing tours of the Bay on his catboat, *Althea*. Lars Larson builds flat-bottomed rowing skiffs in a boat shop overhanging the water, next to the Cope house. "Pat" Haggerty is another regular—a tall, weathered, Irishman who settled in Newport after sailing in commercial schooners near end of the 19th century. On weekends, he dresses in a dark suit, collared shirt, cardigan or vest and optional tie, topped with a black, Homburg hat.

From men like these Howard Benson learns to relax and let others take the strain or even the responsibility for things he would usually feel bound to direct. There is also an elusive presence among this congenial group of Point Hummers—an older, grizzled man, mysterious and seldom seen. He never speaks, but whittles wooden sticks into sequences of crude, spool-like shapes. He finds scraps of paper, folds them into long, thrice-creased strips, then rolls them in tight-wound spirals. These sad, totemic objects are often discovered on the shore at daybreak.

### XIII

In an effort to increase the output of the Shop, Benson takes on additional help. By the time the family moves into the Cope house there are five employees. One original partner, the sculptor Donald Sanford, will leave in search of higher wages. A cousin from Newport, George Miles, is hired and Sanford's skills are replaced by those of the sculptor George Sermon, called

by his middle name Emile, who helps with the carved stone figures in progress. Sermon is a diligent carver, Miles a fast and skillful worker. Veronica Shea joins the staff as secretary/bookkeeper, replacing a departing Ted Bloom. Eventually the two Georges leave for the higher wages of the wartime



*John Stevens Shop Staff ca. 1937. Back row, L to R: Graham Carey, John Howard Benson, George Miles. Front Row: Casimir Michalzyk, Veronica Shea, Adé deBethune, George Sermon.*

years. Another sculptor, Casimir Michalzyk, joins the Shop for a year or two, a model maker and skillful sculptural technician. During Franklin Roosevelt's last full term in office Casimir gets a commission from a novelty company to make a small sculpture of a Chinese man, and the word is that Roosevelt receives one as a gift, keeping it for a time on his desk. While the Shop's wage scale stays necessarily low, the period of the 30s is a productive one for its owner. His artistic range increases dramatically.

Work in the medallic arts, another aspect of the Carey's and Benson's partnership, comes in thanks to Graham's experience in the field. In the mid-1930s, the partners win a competition to design and make models for a commemorative, United States half-dollar. The coin, designed in Art Deco style by Benson, is conceived for striking in silver, the preferred metal for US coins. Silver, over time, takes on a black-oxide patina which, in coinage,

is rubbed off by constant handling. The result of this rubbing is that low areas of the relief on silver coins stay dark while the highs are burnished bright. This fact of this chiaroscuro effect forms a vital part of the Benson-Carey design. Its bold lettering and stylized relief stand out handsomely. The face of the coin features the state's symbol of an anchor. Its back shows Roger Williams' meeting with the Narragansett Indians. Michalzyk makes large-scale plaster models of the design. From these models, the mint will produce steel dies to strike the coins.



*1936 Rhode Island Commemorative Half Dollar, designed by Carey and JHB.*

Howard shows the design to his father-in-law. Smith immediately objects to the two-dimensional quality of the anchor. An anchor of the type shown consists of three linear elements joined at their mid-points; it could be described as being like a capital letter H stood on its side, with the lengthened crossbar twisted ninety degrees. Classic versions usually show the anchor standing on the lowest element, a curved bar with sharp flukes. More realistic renditions portray the anchor in perspective, where one arm recedes one way and one the other, opposed at ninety degrees. Still other versions, like Carey and Benson's, reject this perspective view, showing the anchor in a flattened state. The practical Edward Smith, protests seeing the anchor rendered in this way and an argument briefly ensues. Smith can make no headway, and Benson remains cheerfully amused. Admired for its Art Deco style, the coin's design is nonetheless dismissed by experts who prefer fussy, realistic relief rendered in tiny scale.

By the mid-30s Benson has become an active member the RISD faculty. In 1936, the head of the sculpture department leaves the school and the administration asks Benson to take his place. Intrigued by the offer, Howard visits the sculpture studio and watches the students making figures and portraits in clay and casting them in plaster. After his studies in New York, he realizes that the final result of this traditional process must be casting the pieces in bronze. "Without this step," he observes, "the process is sterile. Bronze must be the final form." In the basement of an adjoining building he therefore finds a small space suitable for the casting process. School authorities approve the plan and agree to provide modest funding. Fisher writes to her sister

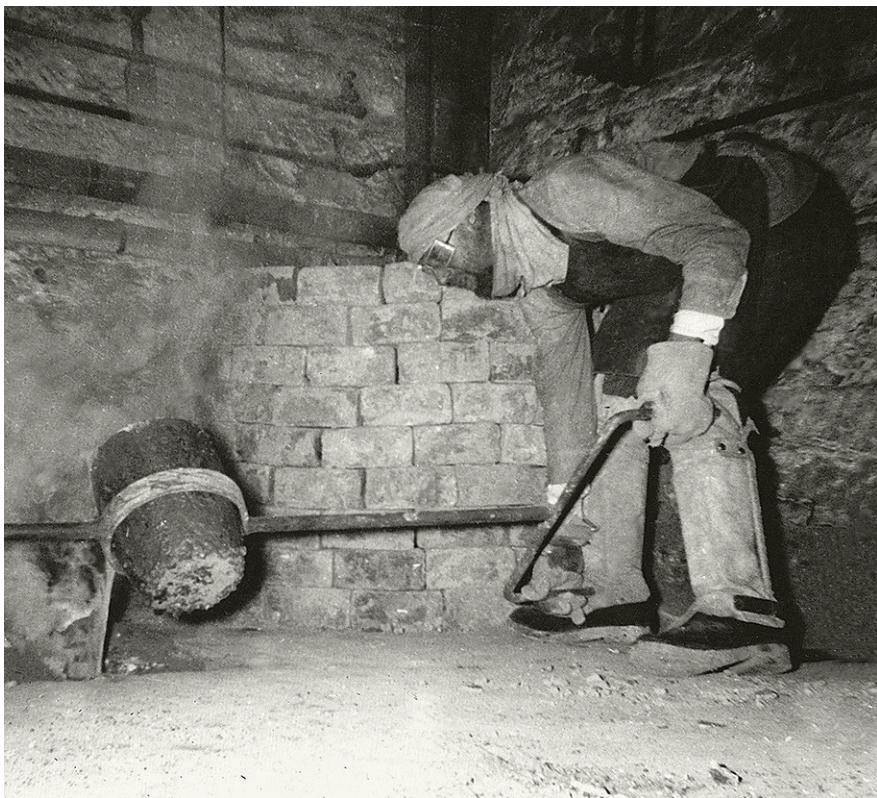
Anne that fall, "John (Howard) is awfully excited over his new bronze foundry. He's going to NYC for 4 days this weekend to get stuff for it." Having equipped the foundry, he sets it in motion to undertake the process of lost wax casting.

In its basic form, which endured until the mid-20th century, foundry work takes place in open, dirt-floored masonry buildings. Pits are made in the floor to accommodate the heat source and confine the dangerous molten metal. Melted in a pot of refractory material called a crucible, liquid bronze is lifted out of a furnace and placed in a specialized holder. In pours of a limited size this consists of a circle of steel, called a shank, which holds the nested crucible. Two bars of steel are attached to the circle, leading out from each of its opposing sides. At the end of each supporting bar is a transverse handle, with right-angled steel grips at one or both ends.

Once finished in clay or plaster, a mold of the sculpture is made and a wax cast produced from it. Larger pieces are cast hollow with thin walls; small pieces can be cast solid. To grasp the process, think of a solid, wax golf ball with the point of a wax golf tee joined to its bottom surface. The flared end of the tee will make a funnel. Fix the flared end of the tee (holding the ball) to a flat plate surrounded with a sheet metal cylinder. Into this pour a liquid mix of plaster and fireproof clay, fully covering tee and ball. When hardened and dried, put the assembly into an oven, where it is supported above the oven floor, the bottom of the mold pointing downward, exposing the wax end of the tee. Heat the oven and melt out the wax to form a hollow mold. The funnel-shaped shaft of the tee leads to the hollow, ball-shaped space. In essence, this is the nature of a "lost wax" mold.

Now holding the molten bronze, the crucible is placed in the steel shank. Each of two workers, wearing protective shoes and clothing, holds one of the handlebars. Lifted and carried to the mold, the pour is initiated by rotating the handlebars, aiming the spout of the crucible and pouring the molten metal into the mouth of the mold. The bronze-filled mold is left to cool. It is then broken away from the bronze casting. Gates to feed the molten metal into the mold, like the golf tee, are sawn off. The cast piece is finished, or "chased," as needed. Chemicals are brushed on, usually accelerated by heat, to produce a colored patina. A variety of colors may be realized by using different chemicals in sequential application. Once colored, the finished sculpture is cleaned, waxed, and polished.

Over the course of both eastern and western history, the casting of metals evolved separately in different cultures. Early casting in copper took place in Mesopotamia, five thousand years ago. The Chinese began casting bronze around 1200 BC. During the Renaissance in Europe, bronze casting was brought to a peak of artistic excellence that remains unmatched to this day.



*JHB pouring bronze at the RISD foundry.*

## XIV

In recent years, the pace of life has accelerated while human life span has increased. With the growth of industry and its attendant sciences, knowledge and education have redirected the compass of learning. Since the Industrial Revolution, the world has been witness to astounding changes—not only has life-span (in developed countries) nearly doubled and world population increased sevenfold, in our own age the very nature of how life is lived is more and more driven by digital technology. The digital age, whose roots go back less than a century, has brought extraordinary changes whose life-altering impacts are only beginning to be felt and understood.

The rear-view mirror of recent history has widened. It can no longer display a broad and simple view, where the reflections of the past may shine upon the present as well as cast light well into the future. However, among the aging, or among those old enough to have gained perspective, disaffection with the new can become a default posture. Even before the lightning changes of the digital age made our heads spin, older people tended to grouse

and complain: "Everything is going to the hell! In my day..." In every age this has been a common and somewhat reasonable belief—that change is unwelcome, and that the "old days" are gone. Sometimes, in an offhand way, we call it nostalgia. However, accounts of those born before World War I certainly remember a time which, from today's perspective, seems a completely different universe—much simpler, and to most, more manageable—perhaps even more human.

In the 19th century everyday existence was constrained by simple, pragmatic concerns. The pace of life and work was the pace of the horse. Find a job, secure a homestead, and with luck a mate and offspring. Live out your life as best you can.

The nature of the employment available to citizens of the planet before the Industrial Revolution was dictated by its farm-based economy. Agrarian societies, as they became more sophisticated, developed into hierarchies where governing was in the control of a small group of elites and labor, from the ruling class on down, was apportioned, as well as dictated by an individual's social position. Craftsmen and artisans—people skilled at making useful and/or beautiful things enjoyed a somewhat singular station in this hierarchy; their skills gave them a status that could protect and often elevate them. They could not, like simple farmers, laborers, or soldiers, be easily replaced, and what they made was essential to the survival of the society of which they were a part.

Cecil B. de Mille's and other "sword and sandal" epics, sometimes depict the Egyptian pyramid builders as oppressed slaves being lashed into frenzied labor. In fact, a visit to the worker's encampments over the hill from the Valley of the Kings shows a very different side to the picture. These workers, who essentially were skilled artisans, and their apprentices and helpers, could live decently within their social station and feel pride in their work. Building stones bearing graffiti, uncovered in ancient structures, bear this out with slogans like, "Three cheers for the Hotep Team" or its Egyptian equivalent. Simple and meaningful labor was the lot of the working man or woman. The dedicated and skilled among them could often find agreeable lives. Wise Pharaohs realized that contented workers produced more work of better quality. Grave goods from some tombs include exquisite models of group scenes, both military and civilian, illustrating the supportive aspects of their society.

Howard Benson with his Shop was, in fact, a very late embodiment of the traditional, respected artisan who made useful and beautiful things and, as a master, taught apprentices his trade. In the 1930s and until his death he and his family lived a lifestyle that, having existed since the days of the pyramid builders, was nearly over.

Thus, three thousand years into the future, Benson and Carey practice lives whose basic tenets still echo those of ancient artisans. In the wake of

World War I, even as the pace and complexity of daily life increase, it remains possible, although more and more unusual, to forge a working life not unlike that of a Renaissance craftsman. The two partners' Catholic faiths and their associations with nearby religious communities keep alive in them a sense of timelessness. The frank and straightforward business of carving stone by hand further reinforces this traditional way of life. Intelligent and equally unconventional friends are drawn to the two men and share their perspective on life and craft.



*Catholic Illustration by Ade deBethune, for the pamphlet "WORK".*

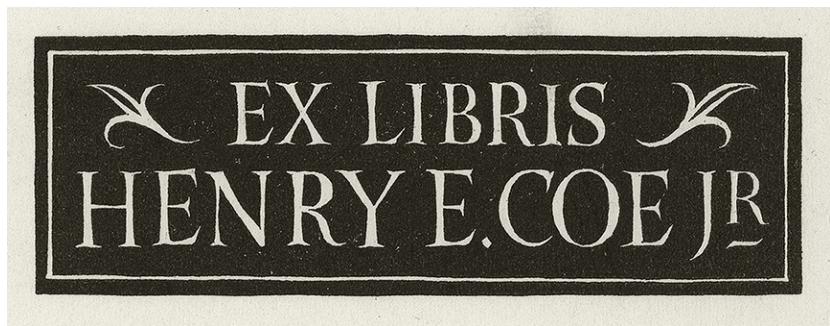
Not long after the end of World War I, Marthe Terlinden, the daughter of a Belgian baron, leaves home and she, her husband Gaston deBethune, and their family settle in New York. They are staunch Catholics and have several children. Marthe sets up a small business sewing high quality, handmade lingerie for society matrons. The youngest Bethune daughter, Adelaide is artistically gifted. Called Ade, she not only draws well but also excels as a designer of graphic images. Her Catholicism reflects her convictions, and while living in New York City she visits the office of The Catholic Worker, meeting one of its founders, Dorothy Day. Ade then makes some illustrations for the magazine which Day says are "Just what we wanted."

Shortly after this, Ade encounters Graham Carey and makes a trip to Newport where she visits him and the Shop where she also meets Benson. She quickly decides to relocate there and soon becomes a partner, renting the top floor of the building. Once established, she sets up a business making religious objects and producing printed matter marketed by mail.

During this period, the relationship between the two partners develops, building on the wide range of their personalities—Carey's didactic and philosophical, Benson's practical and productive. Amused by much that occurs, Howard himself has always been amusing. The pair contrive a mythological organization they call John Stevens University, with Benson as President and Carey as Chancellor. Spaces in the Shop are named for the work practiced in them and, over time, heraldic emblems are devised for the various arms of each department. The large back room where carving occurs will be called "Hammer Hall." Latin and Greek phrases get tossed about. The Shop darkroom is awarded the symbol of a hand mirror and the motto "Ars Est Imitatio". The partners themselves take names from Latin phrases from which clever nicknames are derived. Out of book two of Virgil's Georgics Graham chooses "Felix qui potuit rerum cognoscere causas." In rough translation: "Happy is he who knows the causes of things." Thus, Graham becomes "Potwit," likely derived from his motto's "potuit," a name that stuck with him for much of his life. Howard chose the simple phrase "icon glyphus," or "maker of images." Accordingly, he becomes "Ike" for a time, but when other classically derived names are bandied about, Fisher calls him "O'Noglyphos".

Two Shop celebrations are established. The feast of St. John takes place in summertime and the feast of St. Stephen in mid-winter. They became popular events, attended by Shop associates and their families. Dust-protective, paper hats are worn at the two annual dinners and every guest must have one. They look like the hat worn by The Carpenter in John Tenniel's illustrations for *Through the Looking Glass*. Brightly colored, pasteboard cut-outs of heraldic symbols are distributed and worn in the folded edges of the hats. The wearer's name is painted on the brim in red. Skills of the attendants are represented by symbols earned through their work. Ham and Potato salad are served and beer consumed. Each Feast has a guest of honor. Selected attendees deliver speeches to good-humored applause, and there are musicians. Everyone is urged to sing.

By the late 30s the Shop has become a solid proposition and the Benson life style established and stable, although change looms on the horizon. A severe hurricane will come in 1938, one of the most destructive in the history of United States record-keeping. Conflicts that will spawn a second world war are brewing, with all the global changes they bring forth. The Benson family will increase by two more boys, along with the attendant increase in fiscal responsibilities. Howard's heart problem and its limitations will further reduce his physical ability. Nonetheless they are and will remain a secure, family unit. Benson's work gains in sophistication while recognition of it broadens. His confidence, braced by his wife and family, remains fixed and steady.



*JHB woodcut bookplate for Henry Eugene Coe Jr.*

Henry Eugene Coe was a successful stockbroker from a well-to-do family in New York. His son, of the same name, follows him in the business. He keeps a place in the City and lives in Syosset on Long Island in a house called Berry Hill. Young Henry has an interest in books and printing, and is in the process of setting up a small private press at home. He seems to have contacted Benson first in 1932 to solicit help in getting the press in working condition. After visiting him, Benson writes the following note:

*March 21, 1932  
Dear Henry Coe,*

*I am much indebted to you for sending back my light measurer. While it was not, by any means, as serious as the loss of a tooth, still it was convenient to have it back. I wrote you a letter which I stupidly addressed to Cold Spring Harbor, and it was returned to me here after a long time and with the most amazing official decorations.*

*I expect to be with Mr. Jennings about April 9th, and as the snaps I took of the press do not give the Coat of Arms at all, I thought I might do a couple of sketches then, if you are to be out that weekend.*

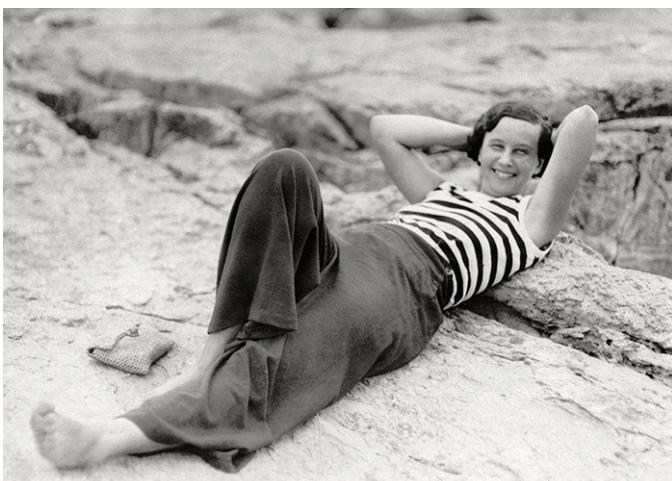
*My last letter was of no importance at all but it did mention the delightful lunch at the Club. I hope that this belated word will still carry my thanks for your kindness. I enjoyed fooling with the press very much, but feel that I wasn't much of a help.*

*I seem to have some work on hand, most of which I am behind on, but I do want to do you a bookplate and hope you will let me.*

*Very sincerely,*

This represents the first written exchange of a twenty-year correspondence and friendship in the lives of these two kind and generous men. The engraved bookplate, above, appears soon after.

Coe's father dies in July of 1933, and Benson's own father dies near that same time. Although neither writes of them, these losses may have helped solidify the two men's sympathetic attraction. Coe was already married and Benson would himself soon marry. Eunice "Dunie" Coe and Fisher Benson are quick to forge a friendship. As a foursome, though separated geographically, they quickly grow on each other.



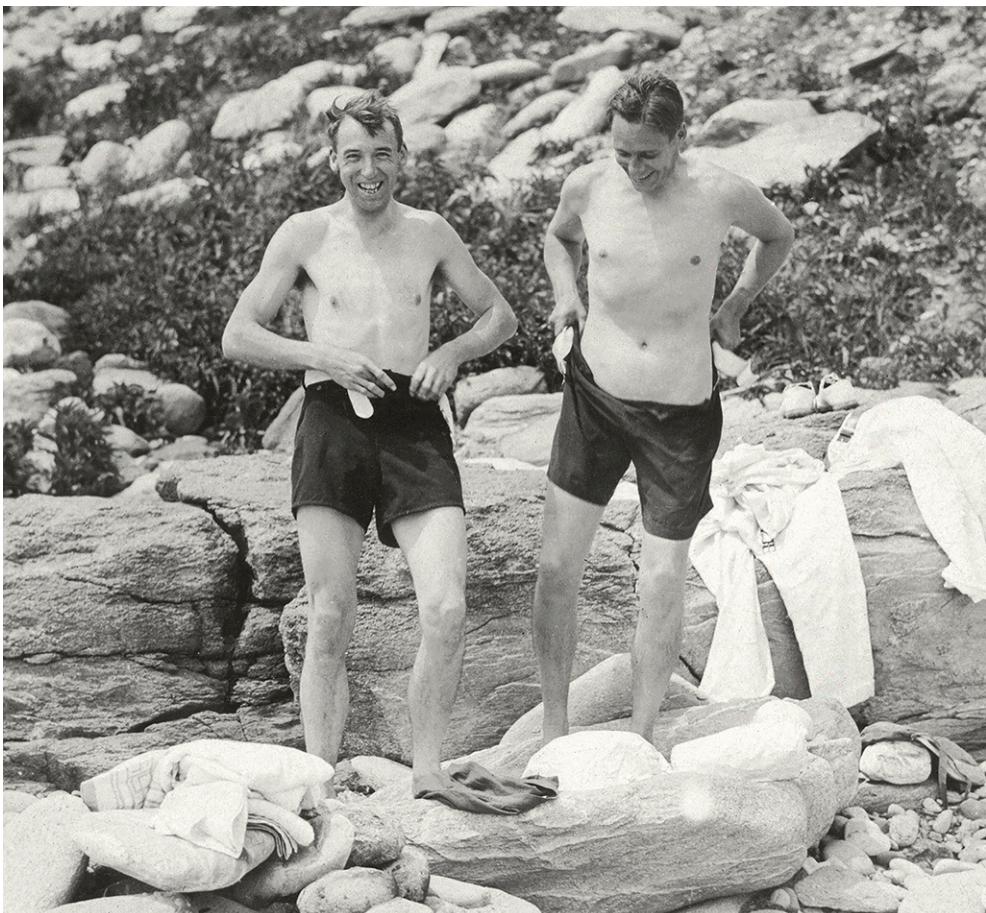
*Dunie Coe, probably on the rocks at the RI shore, ca. 1935.*

The correspondence between the couples would wax and wane over the years, but remains a constant factor in their lives. Fisher and Dunie's letters are handwritten and occur in small bursts, driven by chance or circumstance. Most surviving letters from Benson to Coe are work related. They are typed by his secretary, copied, dated and filed. Coe's letters are undated, written by fountain pen in black or blue ink in a bold, legible hand. Regardless of date they are cheerful and warm-toned.

Henry writes:

*Any weekend you want to come to us, do so. We rarely have anyone here with us and always have room. I have acquired a new lens for my camera, which I supposed to take pictures at night. I guess it does but I can't see anything on the film. This is another thing you will have to help us with.*

*Hope to see you soon,*



*JHB and Henry Coe getting ready for a swim, ca. 1935.*

When his father dies, Coe commissions Benson to make a gravestone for him and purchases a family lot in a beautiful Long Island cemetery. Benson gets to know Coe's family and they exchange letters about the stone along with ideas about its potential material and design. Once back in Newport, the artist starts to conceive the design and make preliminary sketches. Henry sends ideas about imagery and what elements to combine. Like the artist, Coe is religious. Taking all of this into consideration, Benson makes pencil sketches and submits them for the family's approval.

Since this happened early in the artist's career, records are sparse. Only a few of these first sketches have survived. However, in a descriptive letter Benson explains the relief-carved ornament as he has designed it.

*My main problem was rather difficult, as you know, to relate the three subjects—the sea, the apples, and the horses. Somehow, on a tombstone, I*

wanted them to have some meaning and finally it occurred to me that we could use one of them in each arm of a cross with the Hand of God coming from the clouds on the top arm. All three of course, would make a pattern which, at first sight, would make a simple cross.

My feeling was that they should be related and they were such fine things in themselves that there must be some way of relating them. This way, I think, has a great deal of meaning. First, it shows them as things created by God and so, worthy of man's attention. Also, it shows the whole cross as a symbolic representation of the Three Kingdoms of the earth, together with the firmament above. The Three Kingdoms, of course, being the Animal, represented by the horses, the Vegetable or Green Growing Things, represented by the Apples, and the Mineral, represented by the Sea. I also wonder how you and your mother would feel about a quotation from the Prayer Book version of the 95th psalm, "The sea is His and He made it, and His hands prepared the dry land." That, of course, gives a meaning to it all.

Work of this nature is to become a specialty of the Shop. It is not free from challenges, as different people see things in different ways. Symbolic representations of objects can be rendered in diverging modes or styles, while the tastes or experiences of viewers can call forth a variety of interpretations. The story (above) of Benson's coin design and his father-in-law's objection to its particular rendering of an anchor, is typical. But the Coe family members are much of a mind, united in their approval of his design. Henry's mother, suffering from a cold, writes on a black-edged note card:

*The more I look at your design for the stone the more I like it. Also, my son Colles and my daughter Emily are most enthusiastic about it. So I see no reason why you should not go on with it.*

*I find I am ending all my sentences with "it". Perhaps that is the reason for my cold!*

Henry agrees and writes:

*I am very much impressed by the way you have taken the three symbols and given a deeper meaning than the personal one to them. It appeals to me tremendously because those who knew my father can easily see the sense of the three things and years hence strangers can look at the stone and see the symbolic meaning.*

The Coes are the kind of client artists dream of. Over the years, Benson learns to find such people and court their custom. He can do what they want as well



*Greek cross relief from the Henry Eugene Coe Sr. stone, carved in pink Tennessee marble.*

as get them to want what he thinks they should do, and, at the same time, make it all seem appealing and within the realm of their tastes. Looking at works of art and craft from history we can see that this was the practice of many successful artists.

From this auspicious start, the process of making the Coe memorial advances with selection of material, size and shape, and placement in the cemetery lot. Benson and the Coe family discuss lettering style and carving details as well as the iconography and its representation on the stone. In each step of the process the conception and realization of the design is refined. Starting with his earliest efforts—the ledger stone for Rector Hughes's wife—to his last piece—a carved display alphabet for a New York bookseller—Benson's great ability is to understand and respect a client's wishes, yet produce a finished product still embodying the design and spirit that he himself espouses. This becomes a defining characteristic of his life and work. His capacity to get along with, and speak the language of,

whomever he encounters becomes a professional advantage. Clients like the elegant Coes and practical people like the men of the Washington Street shore feel equally pleased to know and work with him.

Unlike commercial stone shops of the time, the Stevens Shop does not have sophisticated handling equipment. There are heavy tables for holding the work, some with heavy wheels to allow them to move within the workroom. Stone moves into and out of the shop on planks and rollers. Pry bars and wood cribbing must be used for support in moving. The most advanced device inside the Shop is a rudimentary chain hoist which had to be shifted from one lifting point to another. Dependent on the simple structure of the old wooden building, lifting is a cautious process.

By the fall of 1935, Howard has finished the Coe stone and installs it in the cemetery. It meets with wide approval by the family and Henry Eugene Coe Sr. is laid peacefully to rest in the family lot. His gravestone is a horizontal ledger, akin to the one made for Newport's Lydia Hughes. The material is Tennessee Marble. Pink in color when quarried, this stone weathers down over the years to a warm, soft gray. It rests upon a base of reddish granite from Canada. As a unit, the two pieces measure over six feet by three and more than a foot thick. While the Hughes ledger is definitely in the colonial tradition, the Coe memorial has a restrained, Art Deco style. The decorative cross, raised above the surface of the stone, measures over two feet in diameter. To achieve the raised effect, the entire surface of the stone, save the cross, has to be cut back.

Howard and Fisher seem to have visited the Coes fairly often in these early years. Sharing their open and generous home must have been relaxing and restorative for both couples. Henry enjoyed working with Howard and soon found more projects to share with him. After making the book plate, there were several other small printing jobs. At one point, an exchange took place about "Ashcans" that Coe wanted to make and whose design and engineering Benson must have undertaken and overseen. A letter reveals that the objects were whimsical miniature versions of the domestic dustbin, which Coe wanted to use in the home as ashtrays, as he appears to have been a serious smoker. A metal fabricator must have ultimately been found, because only this single exchange on the subject appears in the files. A sample of the piece was around the Cope house for a time when the Benson boys were young. Like many things that caught their fancy, however, it somehow disappeared.

Another mysterious correspondence with a supplier takes place, involving the purchase of carefully specified and fairly large pieces of metal. Benson writes:

*J. G. Braun Company Sept. 30, 1935 Metal Moldings*

*Dear Sirs,*

*I am particularly anxious to obtain five 16' bars of soft steel 5/8" x 3/16" with rounded edges: also two bars of soft steel 1" x 5/16", with square edges. I would also like thirty of your #1 balls as illustrated on page 70 of your 1930 catalogue number 30. We would be glad to receive any of your recent catalogues. We do a certain amount of designing for work in wrought iron and our blacksmith does quite a bit of work in this material.*

*Very sincerely,*

A year passes and in a letter to Coe of October 12, 1936 Benson writes:

*I find it will be necessary to come down to Long Island to get a rubbing of a stone at East Hampton. The ferries are not running so I will come down via the Fall River boat with my car and drive out. As the iron work is done I thought that I would bring it with me and leave it at Berry Hill. Can you Put me up for Saturday and Sunday nights?*

*Have you decided about the position of the gate? I am sending with this a small drawing showing what is necessary in the way of a foundation. If it is convenient and you have someone on hand to do it you might have the hole dug and the cement filled up to the level of the ground. If not, we could start on it at least, while I am down.*

No response to this appears in the files but in the photograph on the next page, the mystery is solved. Henry, tall and handsome, stands in the opening of a garden wall. Cigar in mouth, he holds in place a wrought iron gate of a size not wide enough to close the space. The pose is no doubt ironic, and Benson must have had to add a steel frame that would hold and hinge the gate in place. Later in the fall of the same year Coe refers to a visit to Newport and writes, in a note:

*We have been quiet and well behaved since Newport and are about to settle in for the winter season. I am off for Canada tomorrow for a shooting trip and will be away 2-3 weeks. Hope I see you before too long.*

*With love to Fish,  
Hastily, HEC*



*Henry Eugene Coe Jr., holding up his wrought iron gate.*

## XVI

While work for the Coe family is going on Benson and his Shop put together a list of similar projects. With its larger staff, the Shop payroll must be met with a steady schedule of drawing and carving inscriptions. Sculptural commissions, needing the help of assistants, require substantial amounts of time to complete, and it is difficult to make the time spent on them worth the income they produce. In the next decade, this reality will cause Benson to abandon sculptural work and concentrate on low relief carving. While his new position teaching at RISD demands significant blocks of time, it does bring him satisfaction. Unlike much of his Shop work, it does not require the physical help of others, yet it still provides opportunities for collaboration with, and support from, like-minded artists of the faculty.

Publications on work and art become part of the Shop output in the 30s, most written or overseen by Graham Carey. A collaborative writing of *The Elements of Lettering* also gets under way. Asked to teach a lettering course at RISD, Howard feels that the book will be a valuable teaching tool. His own early use of Edward Johnston's *Writing & Illuminating & Lettering* was inspiring. He and Graham envision a less exhaustive work in simpler format and they decide that Carey will write the bulk of the text while Benson produces the lettering plates and marginal illustrations. As with sculpture, the work spreads out over the course of years. While the range of his enthusiasms remains wide, particular interests continue to direct his output. From the first, printing has been an essential element among these, and Benson's talent for capturing words and images in print forms a lasting record of his achievements.

In 1937 Ade Bethune rents the top floor of the Shop and establishes her mail order business in religious art. Access to her St. Leo Shop is via a narrow stairway rising beside the front door of the building. Ade brings in, over time, a succession of young women to work with her. There is but one bathroom, downstairs in the Shop, which the women are obliged to use while at work. Their passage up and down the stairs is a distraction that the high-strung Benson endures with typical, quiet grace. Ade, who has dropped the continental "de" from her name, proves to be a significant asset to the Shop and soon buys a house diagonally across from it on Thames Street. Her parents—Gaston and his baroness wife Marthe—join Ade there and live out their lives in Newport. They speak French at home and are called by the familiar names Bon Mama and Bon Papa. Bon Mama, as a girl during World War I, rode her bicycle across the loosely-marked battle lines, carrying messages for the military. She was later awarded a medal by France for her bravery in doing so.



*Facade of the John Stevens Shop in the 1930s.*

As partner, Ade becomes involved in the workings of Shop with Benson and Carey. Their management style involves regular partners' meetings to discuss the work practices and logistics of the business. Ade's St. Leo Shop



*Graham Carey and Ade deBethune in her Saint Leo Shop above the Stone cutting business.*

pays a modest rent and she sub-contracts for some Shop work but does not otherwise provide Shop income. Her continental pragmatism, however, proves a great benefit to the partnership.

Due to the limited scale of the workspace as opposed to the large scale of its efforts, arrangements and partnerships of this type often pose problems. Practical and down to earth, Ade's common sense helps Benson reign in Carey's genteel whimsies, which include occasionally inviting people to come and work for a while at the Shop without consulting the other partners. This disturbs the rhythm and pace that have evolved to keep the Shop busy and solvent at the same time. It is not practical to disturb this balance by accelerating production in order to increase income. Instead, long hours of composed and uninterrupted effort are required, and disruptions by casual visitors can be an economic hazard.



*JHB woodcut seals for the U.S. Office of Strategic Services and the Library of Congress.*

## XVII

At the Cope house on Washington Street, Benson has, over the years, converted the outbuilding that was once a servants' quarters into a studio for weekend and evening projects. In this space he does fine scale graphic work on a small press, which involves checking wood blocks and type-setting printed ephemera. A bench for wood engraving is established to provide a dedicated area and quiet setting for this precise, close-focused work.

Photography has long been a part of Howard's work and sketches for wood engravings are drawn and photographed for transferring to boxwood blocks as layouts for engraving. A small entry room holds type-cases and the accoutrements of letterpress printing. In the main room there is a tall chest with a steep-angled drawing board for calligraphy. The south wall has a door into the backyard while on the north wall a double door opens onto the Poplar Street shore. Windows installed high on this north wall let in the light, while the south accommodates a long, built-in bench.

At certain times of year, the studio is also used for boat work and other nautically related tasks. The men on the shore sometimes knock on the door and ask to borrow the electric power for a while. In general, however, as at the Shop, work in both the studio and on the shore, is conducted with hand tools.



JHB holding up his first son, Thomas Tew Benson.

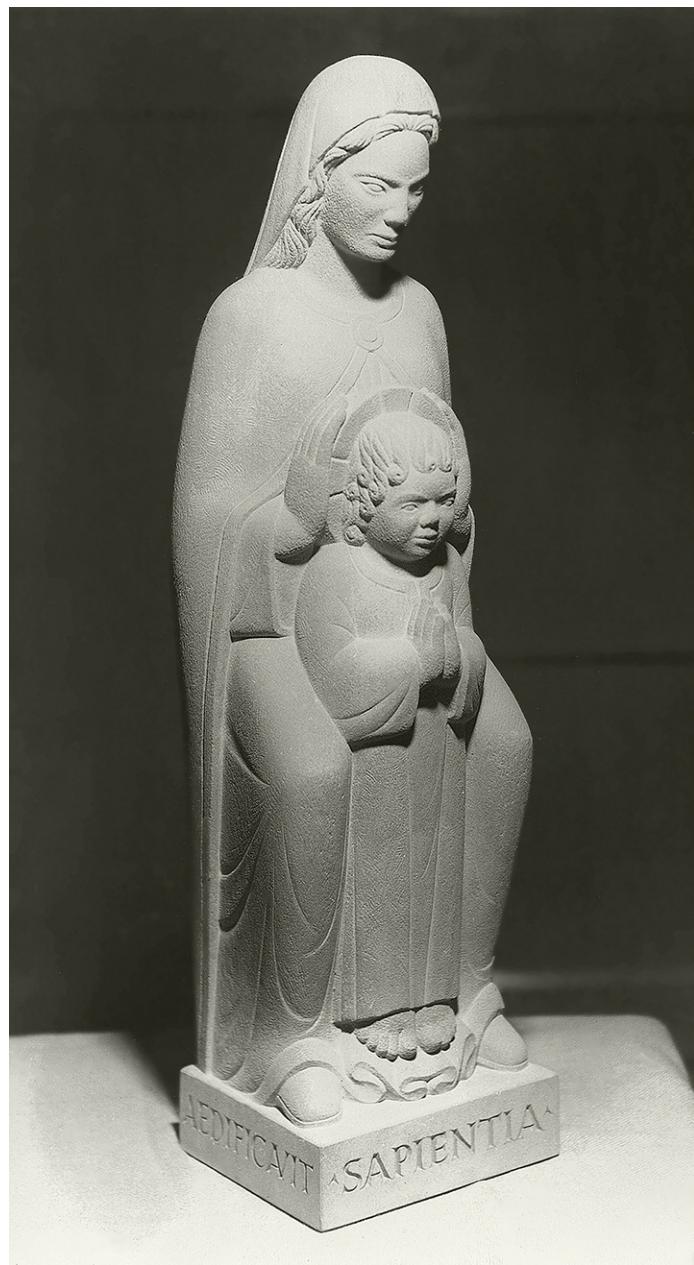
with the community and members of the lay faculty—his eccentric high school friend Erich Taylor finds work teaching there. Benson also becomes a close friend of Francis Brady who will head the mathematics department.

Howard Benson's third sculpture in the round depicts the Madonna and child in limestone, a commission for the chapel at the Priory School. Although his sculptural style has evolved, the piece still displays traces of Eric Gill's style. It is a sweet and loving effort, and there is a clear resemblance in its subjects to his own wife and eldest child.

During John Howard Benson's life, which spanned the first half of the 20th century, his Catholic faith, born of reason and supported by ritual, remained steadfast and unwavering. In his use of imagery and iconography, as in his work for the wealthy and urbane Coe family, Catholicism provided a firm grounding for ideas. Benson never knew the Catholic Mass in anything but Latin and he had a working familiarity with the written language. The Bible, a source of poetic literature, was a resource hard for a devoted Catholic

In 1926 a Catholic priest founded the Portsmouth Priory boarding school for boys in Portsmouth, ten miles north of Newport, and a priory of Benedictine monks to run it. The monks are of a solidly intellectual cast with a spare and unadorned aesthetic. The school's art department to date has been headed by an older, unmarried woman named Fortune, always correctly referred to as "Miss Fortune." When she retires, Benson succeeds her as head of the department, though his tenure is brief. The Benedictines have also created a small chapel on the property, where he often attends Mass on Sunday mornings. Benson soon forges a strong bond both

to ignore. Benson's love of heraldry and the wry postulations of "John Stevens University" supported this somewhat old-world, even medieval posture, where faith in God drives the fully realized life. As he aged and was forced to confront his heart condition head-on, Catholicism and his faith in its teachings may, in some way, have saved him.



*Portsmouth Priory Madonna.*



## PART FOUR

*A Hurricane, a War and Steady Work*



*Point residents viewing damage from the 1938 Hurricane on Washington Street. The Cope house at left.*

## XVIII

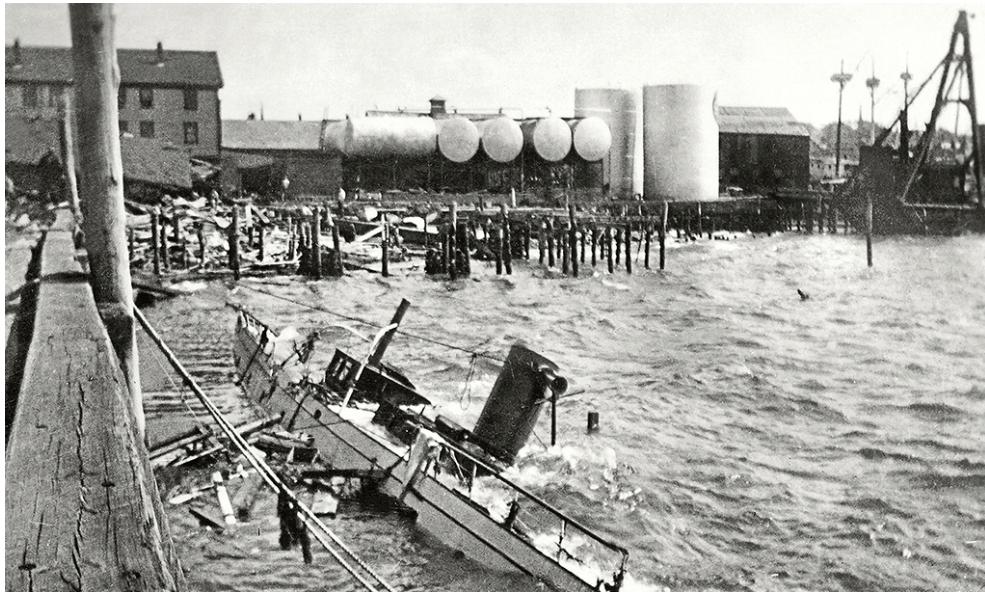
A BENSON RELATION and his wife once spent time searching for housing, as their working lives were maturing. They loved older structures and their sometimes-modest price tags, but a few near escapes from disastrous purchases finally brought home a salient fact which they codified as a buyer's guideline. "A great house is not reason enough to live somewhere." True as far as it went, perhaps, but, in Howard Benson's case, a great house made all the difference.

Fisher and Howard never regretted their decision to take the glorious, high-maintenance Cope house. If houses indeed have characters, or traits, this house, even today, retains an atmosphere that borders on the magical. However, it is conventionally built, and typical of structures from the mid-18th century. At the maximum elevation of its property's grade it stands less than fifteen feet above extreme high tide, and the seaward edge of the property is a mere two feet above mean high water. The Atlantic coast is subject to intermittent attacks by severe tropical storms. These phenomena, and the particular geography of many coastal harbors, can produce devastating salt water flooding. In the fall of 1938 just such a storm came ashore at Newport, its destructive force enhanced by the fact that its strongest winds occurred at the time of combined spring and high tides. It was the storm of the century, unequalled in ferocity since the great Gale of 1878.

Living on seacoasts breeds intimacy with weather. One might even say that seaside folk become accustomed to and on some level, revel in great weather events. After the cataclysm and while we catch our breaths; if no one in the family has been killed or suffered catastrophic loss, we roll up our sleeves and cope. Such bravado, of course, cannot undo the losses caused by a storm.

In the '38 Hurricane over 200 lives are lost in Rhode Island alone. In Newport trees fall everywhere. Many of them are the mature elms which for countless generations have lined Washington Street, their tall branches arching gracefully from their trunks. The columnar nature of the elms and the unique growth pattern of their foliage form exquisite, vaulted traceries that converge over the roadway in a natural, gothic nave. After the hurricane, elms fallen into the streets make a majestic, albeit forlorn ruin. It is of no help to know that they will be sawn up and carted off for firewood. Some have taken over a century to grow. The city is hard pressed by the financial demands of hurricane relief, and as the elms have also become vulnerable to the scourge of Dutch elm disease, Newport makes no effort to replace them.

Many houses standing at the time of the hurricane have been built using timber frame or balloon construction, making them rather struc-



*One corner of Newport harbor after the hurricane. The sunken boat was an elegant steam yacht. She would have hosted parties of stylish people in nautical attire, flaunting their wealth and privilege.*

turally sound; the loss of a roof will become more likely in the future, as methods of framing houses change. Still, wind damage is huge. Some houses built too close to the water have been swept messily away. Many roofs have their shingles stripped off. Trees falling on cars and houses cause wide destruction. Water damage and flooding abound. Wooden structures, docks, and piers, loosed from their pilings, float away as their buoyancy overcomes their resistance to the force of the flood. Boats on moorings are dragged or torn free, while many others sink in place.

On the Poplar street shore, and at nearby docks and moorings, there is similar damage to boats and gear. Howard's studio is flooded and much paperwork is lost; the Cope house survives, battered and soggy. On the night of the storm Fisher Benson writes to her parents, Edward and Dorothea Smith:

*Dear Ma and Pa,*

*We have just been through a terrific afternoon and are not sure it is over. It was very sudden, this morning having been fair and pleasant. But at 2:00 the wind began very hard from the East, so that the breakwater was a mass of waves. Everyone went out to their boats, tying on extra painters, etc. The tide was very high, to the pier floorboards by 3:00. The wind was beyond the imagination. At four Tommy and I went into the cellar to fix the*

*oil burner. Then the big Elm came down, missing for some strange reason, the house and Ell. A few shingles were torn off the roof... Soon the wind was S.W. and we could count the boats going down. The Pequemock broke loose and is up river somewhere. Bosco, Virginia, Ethelyn, Bill Mohr's boats, all are riding so far. Penguin went down about 5:30. The waves were enormous and soon began pounding into our yard. Miss Agnes' bath house floated by. Aunt's pier was floating and finally all the pilings were washed away.*

*Pa's dear little shop, our bath house, everything is gone. At six, the breakers were crashing into our cellar, the West wall having been pounded in very soon. The cellar was filled with waves. They were breaking in Aunt's yard, great big combers, just on the tennis court. You cannot imagine such a sight. The tide was full at 6:30, and all the row boats were pulled up onto Washington St. Then the other elm tree went, right by the gate. Again, we were providentially saved because the tree went into the street. Only a few shingles off the roofs. So far only 3 or 4 panes of glass have gone. You never saw such waves, full of debris, pounding and pounding without cease. The bulkhead in our wall and the north fence floated off early in the game. John was in Providence, and has, I expect, stayed there. Fortunately, Graham is here. He has been a tremendous help, nailed up many shutters, windows, etc. But it has been a terrific day. The wind is still high and puffy. We won't know all the damage 'til tomorrow. The entire Point was submerged 5 or 6 feet. Rowboats moved people out. All J. T. O'Connell's lumber floated about. His windows on Long Wharf are filled with stranded cabin cruisers.*



*The Newport-to-Jamestown ferry Governor Carr on the rocks in Jamestown after the '38 Hurricane.*

And in another note later:

*I will stop now, and write again. We've had no lights or telephone connection. Aunt has let me cook in her kitchen.*

*Stone Bridge is gone. The Governor Carr is high up on the Jamestown Shore.*

*Lots of love, Fishens*



*JHB, working on the remains of the Button Swan boat in the yard at the Cope house.*

One interesting loss of no fiscal consequence is the disappearance of an old boat almost certainly built by Button Swan. Prior to the tragedy on Brenton reef, Ben Smith's family owned a Swan built boat. It was sold by the family after young William Smith and Ned Stewardson drowned. Sometime during his years messing about in boats on the Poplar Street shore, Benson locates and retrieves what he believes is yet another Swan creation. It has deteriorated to the point of total loss, barely retaining evidence of its original hull shape. Undaunted, he makes sporadic attempts to resurrect it from its shattered state. He sets up its keel and stem on the waterfront behind the home studio, but work on the boat project gradually slows with the increase of commitments at the Shop and to his family at home. Howard and the first stage of the attempted reconstruction may be seen in the photo above. After the hurricane, no further mention of it appears. Its eroding pieces must have fallen victim to the gale. Relative to the scale of other craft destroyed that year the loss of the old boat is insignificant.

## XIX

In the mid 1930's, in Berlin, a German sculptor and metalsmith named Waldemar Raemisch felt the growing menace of the extreme political climate around him, and like many he was hesitant, unsure of what to do. The occurrence that jolted him to action, however, was when his wife, a fiercely intelligent Jewish woman, said to him, "Waldemar, they tell me I must wear a yellow star on my clothes." Raemisch was a gifted sculptor and a skilled craftsman. He had recently executed a commission from the new government to make a model for a great, ceremonial eagle to adorn a state building.

Waldemar's wife Ruth was herself an artist, an inventive enamelist. Her statement was a shock to him although rumors he had heard, even penetrating his artist's preoccupations, had prepared him. They did not hesitate. Waldemar told Ruth that they must leave Germany at once. They promptly and decisively packed up their lives and left home, never to return. It was, quite naturally, a wrenching decision. However, through a connection, he had learned of the Rhode Island School of Design, which motivated them to emigrate to the United States.

Once in America, the couple travels to Providence where Raemisch meets with the president of RISD. When he presents his credentials, there is no question as to his capabilities. The President promptly introduces him to Howard Benson, overworked chief of the sculpture department. Hired at once, Raemisch soon relieves Benson as department head.

Benson and Raemisch become great friends. It soon emerges that the German sculptor has a particular fondness for fish. With his catboat, Benson has learned to trawl for schooling fish, trailing tarred hemp lines, hooked and baited, from the broad transom of *Penguin*. He brings home mackerel and young bluefish to be cleaned, split and broiled by the patient Fisher Benson. Although he has never fished on salt water, Waldemar cheerfully joins Howard on the Bay. Blackfish, locally called Tautog, are also caught in the rocky waters facing the Atlantic. These large, bottom feeding fish, cleaned, stuffed, and baked with savory croutons, yield a sweet flesh. Heretofore unknown to him, blackfish soon become Waldemar's favorite. He likes to eat the gelatin from their heads and their baked, whitened eyes.

Waldemar, an earthy, charming man is always ready for a hug from Fisher or any other pretty and safely married woman. He sometimes makes slightly suggestive comments that would today be considered inappropriate. "Waldemar," he once said, "You know what that means, don't you? It happened in the woods." Fisher, however, remains unoffended and throughout their lives she will stay close friends with both the Raemischs.



*Waldemar Raemisch making a waste mold of a clay sculpture, ca. 1950.*

Fisher also seems not to feel that her commitment to her husband's lifestyle and many friends is a less than perfect use of her own considerable intellect. Her letters, and letters to her from friends and family, reveal a vigorous acquaintance of her own as well as a broad network of communal involvement and support. For much of her marriage she does charitable work for the Newport Community Center serving the needs of Newport's African American community. The center is located in the old Quaker Meeting House, once the hub of Quaker activities on the Island. Shabby and in chancy repair, it still manages to serve the community's requirements. What used to be the great meeting room has even been converted to a basketball court. The teenaged users of the space refer to it as "The Rec."

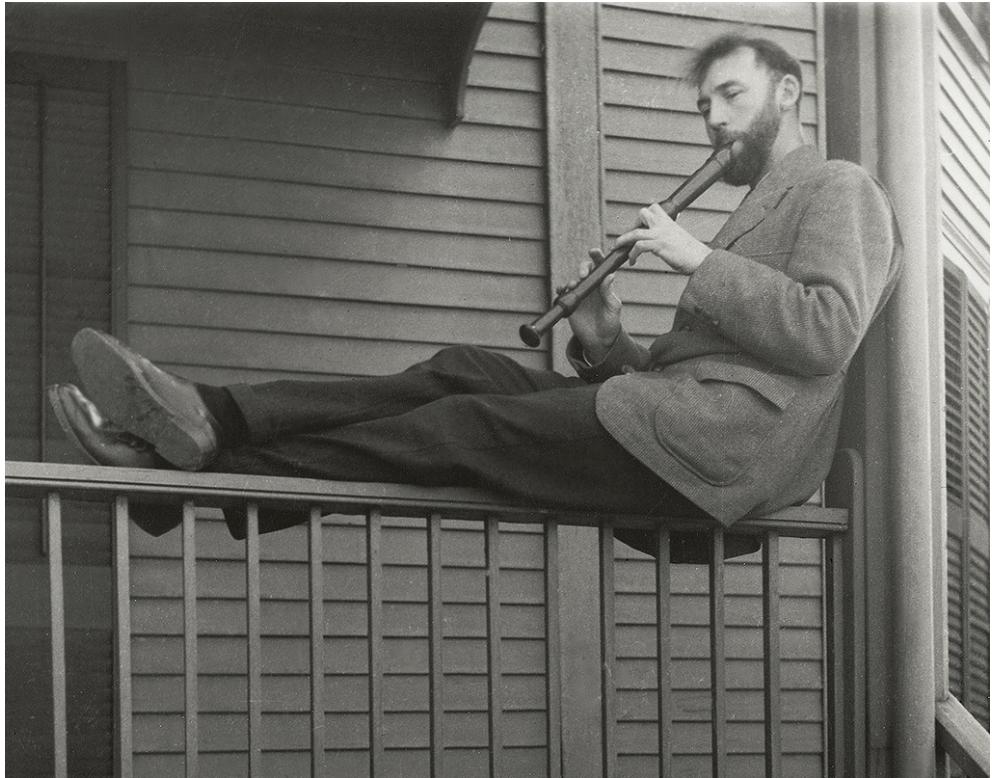
Howard Benson loves to entertain and often surprises his wife with company for dinner. On one occasion, when she doubtless has other plans, he deposits a large, fully intact blackfish in the kitchen and walks into the living room to join his guests. "John Howard Benson," she shouts after him, "Get thy damned Papist fish out of my sink!"



*Hammered Nickel Silver Tea Kettle. Waldemar Raemish, ca. 1935.*

The living room, on the waterfront side of the house and once its kitchen, has a large fireplace where home cooking originally took place. In winter evenings, it gets constant use and helps supplant the ancient central heating system. For fuel they burn driftwood salvaged from ocean beaches. On winter weekends Fisher gathers it with her rambunctious sons, walking their legs off. When burned, the salt infused wood can give off varicolored flames. If unsupervised by the fire the boys will heat a poker to red hot and try to bore holes by burning through pieces of wood. Pine is easy to perforate with repeated attempts but oak resists their best efforts. A cousin of Fisher's, on moving to Newport, spends time with the Bensons getting acclimated. At one point she asks Fisher, "Doesn't anyone in this damned town ever burn logs?"

The Cope house in Howard and Fisher's time is in semi-restored, 18th century condition. With a post-and-beam oak frame, one-inch-thick, vertical oak sheathing encloses the structure. On the exterior, the oak sheathing is overlaid with cedar clapboards. Inside, split laths have been applied between the posts and coated with horsehair plaster topped with a fine skim coat. The



*JHB playing Mr. Koch's Alto recorder on the porch railing at the Cope House.*

window frames are let in through the sheathing and fitted with double hung, twelve-over-twelve pane sash. There is no insulation. In the winter when a strong wind blows, the curtains move. Plumbing and heating were first installed in the 19th century and are barely kept up to date.

Notwithstanding such limitations, the Cope house is a magnet for friends. Unable to maintain her piano skills with a regular practice schedule, Fisher takes up the recorder. Howard learns to play himself and soon buys a set of recorders from a maker named Koch; soprano and alto for Fish and tenor for himself. Music is always a presence in the house, and even though conditions are relatively basic, they contrive a comfortable lifestyle.

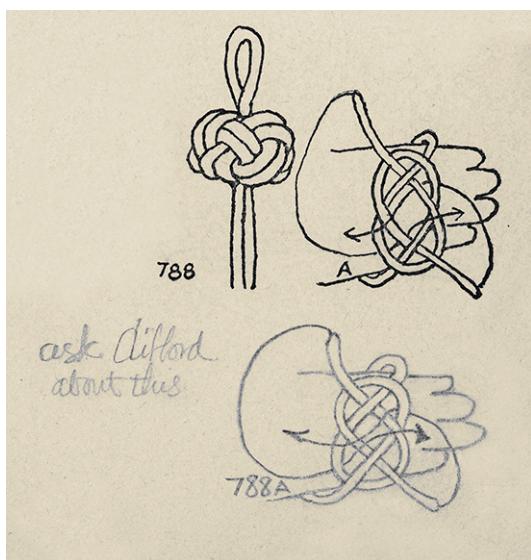
Social contact is a frequent diversion. In winter, the back room makes a fire-lit haven for guests of all stripes. In summertime, life moves into the back yard in the sun and salty air. A double-decker porch spans the back of the house. Young Bensons sleep in camp beds on the upper deck from April into October, lightly protected by a roof and water-repellent covers. The boys, who come to number three, are in and out of the water all summer long, launching boats and swimming from the pier and shore. A rime of salt and sun darkened skin is the norm.

As with generations before them, Point residents make their nearby waters a playground. Comings and goings on the shore center on boats and their gear. Every child must learn to row. Safety guidelines are set by careful monitoring of a child's ability to swim. Rowing limits are set by a distance from which a child is capable of swimming home. No one may take out a rowboat alone without knowing how to tie a square knot and a bowline. Clifford Ashley, author of the great vade mecum of knotting, is a close acquaintance of Howard Benson. The family copy of the Ashley Book of Knots, a battered first edition printed on wartime paper, has a pen-written note from the author on the title page:

*To John Howard Benson with best regards.  
Clifford W. Ashley, Westport, Dec. 16th, 1944  
"A knot is a large knob in the extremity of a rope."*

*Wm. Falconer, 1769*

An illustration in the book shows a decorative knot and its diagrammed method. Below is a Benson sketch of an alternate method with the note, "Ask Clifford about this."



*JHB sketch of a knot diagram.*

## XX

In the mid-30s, Ade Bethune is commissioned by Saint Paulinus Church in Clairton, Pennsylvania to make paintings for its new Baptistry. She secures an additional commission for her partner, Howard Benson. It's to be a granite sculpture of John the Baptist to accompany her work. It will turn out to be the least Gill-inspired of his four large sculpted works and the last he will undertake. Shop records of Howard's large sculptures are sparse. Only one preliminary drawing of the work exists—a small, graphite sketch of a long-legged, seminude man, perhaps inspired by Benson's lanky frame. Lacking Benson's clear and decisive line, the drawing is doubtless from another hand, although clearly a study for the St. John figure. Equally probable is another sculptor's help with the project. The handsome piece is completed on schedule and delivered in 1939.

Shaping granite demands extensive time and effort. Mechanization had come to the trade in the 19th century with the use of compressed air and the invention of the pneumatic hammer. In essence, this is a smaller, hand-held version of the jack hammer used to break up pavement in heavy construction. Donald Sanford, the trained sculptor and an early Shop partner, brought a pneumatic hammer and compressor into work at one point when Benson was away, leading a tour in the Mediterranean. Such tools were disdained at the John Stevens Shop. On Benson's return a serious disagreement took place and the hammer with its air lines and compressor was taken away.



*Donald Sanford working with a pneumatic chisel.*



*JHB sculpture of Saint John the Baptist.*

The photograph at left shows Sanford using his pneumatic tool on a plaster model. He is young and attentive to his task, neatly-dressed in a shirt and tie, vest, and apron. To a degree we can sympathize with the young Sanford. In skillful hands, pneumatic hammer work can be very efficient in removing significant quantities of material. When used to work on a smaller scale, it can produce precise detail. Yet it is a loud, noisy device, not conducive to refined thought and atmosphere—the compressor and its invasive sound switch on and off throughout the day. Vibration of the hand-held tool can cause nerve



*The Stevens Shop interior with work table and potbelly stove.*

damage in the hands. The rapidly repeated impact of the tool fills the air with fine, granular dust containing silica which, if not extracted by vacuum or filtered with a mask, can cause silicosis and lung cancer. This mechanized technology has become the standard in the stone trade but Benson himself never uses it. It does appear, however, that the St. John may have been carved by Sanford using the pneumatic tool, although there is no way to confirm this without more detailed records. Compared with Howard's standing Madonna, the St. John has an inventive yet still simple composition, which make it an agreeable work, well-wrought and appropriately saintly.

Principles of art and craft can govern or influence decisions in the arts, if not the art itself. DaVinci once wrote a lofty boast, claiming painting as superior to the dusty trade of sculpture, which he described as being "of lesser genius than painting; a wholly mechanical exercise." He further noted that the painter's gentility could be increased by having musicians play while the artist worked, although there is no hard evidence of musical influence in his art. One of Leonardo's most lamented lost works is a monumental sculpture of a horse for the Duke of Sforza. Under-funded, it only reached the stage of being modeled in fragile clay, and the work was never completed. Drawings of the horse and of his intended system for casting the great piece in bronze are among Leonardo's best.

Howard Benson himself had well-formed ideas of how things should be conceived and made, yet was in general a modest, confident man. Photographs of the John Stevens Shop in the 30s show an elegant simplicity both in the space and in the equipment. White-washed wooden walls and multi-paned windows reflect and cast soft natural light on the work within; they have the Shaker grace of unadorned utility. The seeming distance in time and the stillness of the pictures may be due to the slow exposures and the selective framing of large format photography, and neither noise nor motion are conveyed in the still photographs. Were these pictures taken by the artist himself? The intense and high-strung Benson sought tranquility wherever he could find it and the look of his studio reveals this trait. His success in the search is echoed most conspicuously in the serene quality of his finest inscriptions and by his carvings in low relief.

## XXI



*Relief on a Vermont white marble stone by Zerubable Collins, ca. 1772.*

During the 18th century slate was used for memorials throughout the colonies. Geologically it had been laid down as fine black mud in the Permian period of the Paleozoic era, 300,000,000 years ago, when mammalian life was not even a blip on the planetary radar. The mud was compressed over time by geologic pressure. Layers of sediment, though not metamorphosed, became a solid, bound into a relatively soft stone of fine, crystalline structure. Its sedimentary layers ultimately yielded a planar matrix capable of being split into laminar sheets. Its most conspicuous application in our time has been the manufacture of slate shingles. Thick slabs, split from an open seam of the stone, are sawn to rough shingle size and split repeatedly to finished, shingle thickness.

The oldest artwork in the world which carries its own date is made of slate. Carving properties of slate known and put to use in ancient Egypt. King Narmer's cosmetic palette celebrates the material, surprising us all the more when we learn its age. In the American colonies of the 18th century, slate became the favorite of monumental masons. It has a mournful gray color, a facility for being split by hand, and can be easily carved in fine detail. In Newport's older burial grounds, use of slate appears to have been exclusive. For its distinct virtues and historic pedigree, Benson readily adopts this material



*JHB low relief oak tree carved on a slate headstone.*

as a medium. Local slate quarries have long been gone—flooded, exhausted, or filled for alternate land use. In northern Maine, Benson finds a quarry that produces a superb, dark slate. Named for the nearby town of Monson, this material serves him through three decades.

Benson, who is practiced in the working of slate, limestone, and granite, also carves white marble from Vermont. This was a preferred material in 19th century America and withstood the weather well enough until the Industrial Revolution invented acid rain. Near local outcroppings of marble in Vermont, a small group of carvers began using the white stone in the 1700s.

Chief among these was a man with the magical name of Zerubabel Collins. At one point, Benson finds a Collins headstone at a cemetery in Shaftsbury, Vermont. Its carved portion is broken off at the grade line, leaving its tooth-like root buried in the ground. He asks the town fathers if he can make them a replacement for the stone in exchange for keeping the inscribed portion of the original. The town agrees. The old stone remains on display at his Shop.

To learn any traditional craft takes years of practice. In earlier cultures children were given routine tasks and worked from an early age, gradually becoming skilled at increasingly demanding tasks. In homes where high levels of craftsmanship were practiced, a grasp of the work came to the young apprentices through a process that was like osmosis. Understanding at a base level was established through proximity to a master craftsman and familiarity with an object's purpose. A practical aesthetic, one wedded to the utilitarian design constraints, may be seen in both humble and elegant artifacts. Quilts, knitted or woven material, wooden household furniture, stone walls, leather goods, kitchenware, spun woolen yarn—all these were made and used on a daily basis. A good quilt warms better than a poorly sewn one. A chair that wobbles will be disdained for a stronger or more stable model.

Children not suited to be craftsmen took up other pursuits like farming, forestry work, fishing, or animal husbandry. Nearly every trade involved the passing on of knowledge from one generation to the next, and was driven by its practical application to everyday life. In this analogue world, prior to the rise of industry, hierarchies of achievement were conspicuous. Up into the mid-20th century, strains of this tradition endured, and cognizant people could perceive and appreciate them. Yet the traditional production techniques and established tastes associated with quality, handmade goods were gradually eroding, just as mass production and merchandising were establishing a new aesthetic and a new order.

Howard Benson's commitment to applied art and the craft tradition, as well as the life he chose to live and the way he lived it, have a distinctly medieval cast. We can only suppose that he valued the precepts that underpin this way of being. It has been suggested that the most stable period in European history was the Middle Ages, notwithstanding the frequency of minor conflicts, major wars and brutal, intermittent marauding. Agrarian workers, trades and craftsmen, clergy, soldiers, the landed gentry, all operated within an encompassing and more or less supportive structure. (It has also been recorded that the continuity of this social model rested firmly upon the backs of a gravely oppressed working class). The bitter truth of social order is the tendency of economic station to direct the game; thus, a successful life can depend to great degree not just upon an individual's family lineage, but on that family's available resources.

Few things made by hand escape the fingerprint of the specific hand that formed them. With experience and study this “personality” can be identified and understood by later viewers—for example, in looking at the work of the Stevens family, Benson converses with the past identifying the characteristics that give a piece a certain Stevens “signature.” As his friend and patron Henry Coe says of his father’s Benson-carved memorial, “Years hence strangers can look at the stone and see the symbolic meaning.” Benson’s work not only has his distinctive signature, but is conversant with history.

Everyone likes to make pronouncements on the nature of success. We enjoy analyzing the accomplishments of others, be they friends, politicians, or the star-dusted icons of our day. Yet at heart, every human conclusion is personal at some level. Only when recorded as written words does thought expose itself to historical context. Only when subjected to the winnowing of history can pure ideas be judged. Twelve hundred years ago, in the 9th century, Hrabanus Maurus, Archbishop of Mainz wrote, as roughly translated:

*No work of man arises that long years cannot conquer,  
Which cannot be ruined in one evil day.  
Only the written word refutes fate and repels death.  
Only in books of written letters can the past have life again.  
Did not God to give his people law in lasting stone  
Cut letters with his finger in the rock?  
That which is in the world, and was, and will be in the future;  
All these things the speaking letters show.*

One huge advantage to the visual arts is that the work is rendered in solid form. For all that they may prompt differing interpretations, the best works tend to rise to the top. Tastes change, opinions wax and wane; yet excellence will out. The art titans of western history were sometimes recognized at once and celebrated in their time. Others, to gain fame, had to endure the winnowing of history, endorsing the adage that “No one achieves immortality in his own lifetime.”

Craftsmanship, at its highest level, may approach the state of art. Yet its proximity, its intercourse with utility, keep it tied to the working world. A Shaker chair, a hand-hammered Georgian silver spoon fit our haunches or our hands so well that our bodies feel the rewards of their use. A painting by Cezanne, Mary Cassatt, Vincent van Gogh—these are different things, deserving more complex thought.

In the past, the word “art” had other shades of meaning. Its reference could be to a level of achievement not usually seen—an object taken by the excellence of its making to a higher plane than its fellows. The greatest visual



*JHB with family members in 1937. Top, L to R: his great aunt, Ida Tew, Fisher Benson. Below: Elizabeth Howard Benson holding Thomas T. Benson.*

and three-dimensional art may not be so easy to recognize. At times, we don't want to recognize it, being content to appreciate more human and familiar forms. Any art student would be more than willing to draw with the lovely ease and comfort of Norman Rockwell; illustration is a friendlier field than art. But no Rockwell could stand up to the raw, dazzling power of Caravaggio. Michelangelo's drawings are as dynamic as his sculpture but they are not uniformly easy to appreciate. Goya's prints carry such weight that sometimes we cringe to look at them.

Art, philosophy, and the nature of existence are wonderful subjects for talk. Opinions differ and nearly everyone has a point of view. Their extreme range may be gauged by a comparative reading of an unlikely pair of poets. Read a love sonnet by Shakespeare and then this revealing bit of doggerel by e. e. cummings. An unlikely comparison perhaps, but in Cummings's final couplet there is a sharp nugget of truth. None of us would be here were it not for the fundamental and survivalist urge the verse celebrates.

*mr youse needn't be so spry  
concernin questions arty*

*each has his tastes but as for i  
i likes a certain party*

*gimme the he-man's solid bliss  
for youse ideas i'll match youse*

*a pretty girl who naked is  
is worth a million statues*

*— e.e. cummings*

## XXII

In its variety, the supporting cast of Howard Benson's life seems close to Shakespearian. The physical forms of the players, their voices and skills, their social and private proclivities, are the settings of his world. Two doors north of him on Washington street stands a large, 19th century house, the property of a well-respected family. Benson has long known William King Covell, the current owner. A photographer and historian of the Fall River Line, King, as he is known, is a Harvard graduate and a confirmed bachelor. Above average height, though not as tall as Benson, he wears wire-rimmed glasses and has a round, well-shaped head that is crowned with thinning hair. He teaches at the local high school and his scholarly spectacles give him a professorial air. Covell lives with his mother, a commanding older woman who occupies the front sitting room of their shared home. Four floors high, the building nests into the slope of the waterfront land. A low, granite gatepost at the entryway bears the carved words "Villa Marina" though the name is little used. Covell is a gifted musician, and later in life, he installs a small, tracker organ in his back-living room.

The decor of the house's interior is high Victorian in the American, Eastlake style. Standing in the house when the organ played is like being in a benign version of a Charles Addams cartoon. In the spacious, walled yard behind are two flagpoles which daily fly American flags. From the larger, waterside pole, a flag from a Fall River Line flies on holidays, its hoist taking up half the pole. On windy days four or five people must be pressed into service to help keep it off the ground and set it flying.



*King Covell at his organ.*

A handsome porch, of light construction, runs around the south and west sides of the house. On the bottom floor of the house, shaded by the porch and opening to the back lawn, there is a suite of rooms, though the back ones are dark and little used. Covell keeps a power boat on a mooring in front of his property. He starts a clubhouse in one of the ground floor, waterside rooms that is the domain of several strong, working-class boys from the neighborhood. They maintain the lawns, the pier, and his boat Ethelyn, serving on it as crew. They are known around the Point as the "Maxies," for their habit of baling out boats with Maxwell House coffee cans. Because they work for Covell, the boys consider themselves a cut above their peers, and their presence is another element in the mix of those who know and work along the shore.



The "Maxies". L to R: John, George, and Bill Miller, Bill Fitzpatrick, Dunc Braman and Byron, his dog.

Benson's time as a purser on the Fall River Line causes him to appreciate Covell's interest in the company's steamships, which, in a way, parallel the Mississippi River boats favored by Mark Twain. Those vessels were powered by a wide, steam-driven, stern paddle wheel. The Long Island Sound boats of the Fall River Line (whose service ends in 1937) are longer than the river-boats and powered by two paddle wheels, one on either side of the vessel. Descriptions of the steamers and the nature of their passengers are varied. As advertised by the company, the steamers are elegant, and well appointed; genteel patrons of New York and Newport travel aboard them in splendor. Quaker Edward Smith and his daughters on their trips to Newport made do with simple staterooms. A letter to young Benson from an old female relative says, "I hate to think of you working on those dirty boats." That there was a wide range of passengers seems likely.

The waterfront community of the Point, composed of an eclectic group of friends and neighbors, has a territory that extends from the intimate neighborhood streetways on Washington Street to the substantial granite docks of the Fall River Line, built on the remains of colonial Easton's Point at the street's end. Benson's and Covell's shared interest in the Line is thus easy to maintain, its headquarters being just a few blocks south. King takes

pictures of the steamers at their wharf in Newport and collects relics from older, retired boats. The old Point Hummer Harold Arnold's son Ralph, is a gifted photographer who also knows the steamers and likes to photograph them. As a teenager, he worked with King in his darkroom. He is also a sailor and owner of a small, pretty catboat of sixteen feet built, like *Falcon* and *Penguin*, by Thomas Stoddard. Ralph's uncle, the burly Bill Mohr, works for at time at the Stevens Shop, shaping and installing headstones. These families, many of whom have connections by blood extending into the distant past, combine into a mutually supportive unit. Their common love for the shoreline and waters of Narragansett Bay only strengthens the bond between them.

King helps Benson with photography for the Shop, and encourages him to install a darkroom. The two men take photographs of finished stone work, process the film and make prints. Many of King's prints survive, though most are in a yellowed state from the lack of adequate washing, a degraded condition colloquially referred to as sepia-toned.



*Ethelyn* off Washington Street with King Covell at the helm.

## XXIII

In 1938 Benson and Carey begin work on their co-authored book, *The Elements of Lettering*. Inspiration had come from Edward Johnston's *Writing, Illuminating and Lettering*, a more complex and extensive work than what they envision. On the one hand, their work will be a straightforward text on the history of written letter forms, the practice of making them with pen and brush, and their carving in stone and wood. On the other hand, it will also be a statement of Carey's and Benson's philosophy of work as discussed and developed over several years. The project, which Benson has long wanted to do, was forced low on his job list by more profitable commitments. However, Carey's easier life style and comparatively deep pockets allow him to devote as much time as he wants to the task. He urges Benson to start drawing for the book and offers to do much of the writing.



*JHB wood-engraved block showing a barn at left, and a print from that same block at right.*

Together they map out an approach to the job and set themselves to it. It is a trying task for Benson, since he needs to fit his share into the schedule while carrying on Shop work. The studio at home, refurbished after the hurricane, proves invaluable. They start the book in the summer, with Benson making drawings of historical letter styles in pen and brush. As a technical treatise, it also requires drawings of tools and methods. It is decided to include these as marginal illustrations running alongside the text.

Originally, Benson was to make wood engravings for all the artwork save the large plates of lettering. These would be produced as photo-engraved line cuts from Benson's originals. All the illustrations will thus print together, with the book's text set in metal type, in one single pass through the press. As the book's text evolves, the quantity of technical illustrations grows, and engraving them all will need more time than bargained for. It is thus decided to produce all the illustrations from photographic line cuts of ink drawings.

A Benson boxwood engraving is on the left opposite, its cuts filled with white chalk for visibility. In the engraving process, all the white areas of the block must be cut away to allow the linear drawing to print in black. A proof of the finished, engraved block is on the right. It is a handsome medium, much used since the 1700s but demanding extensive effort.

& vox citharæ & musicæ & alia  
concreta & tubæ non audiuntur in  
et amplius & omnis astifex omnis  
astifex non muetetur in et amplius &  
vox mole non audiuntur in et amplius  
  
abcde&fghilmnopqrsuvwxyz & x

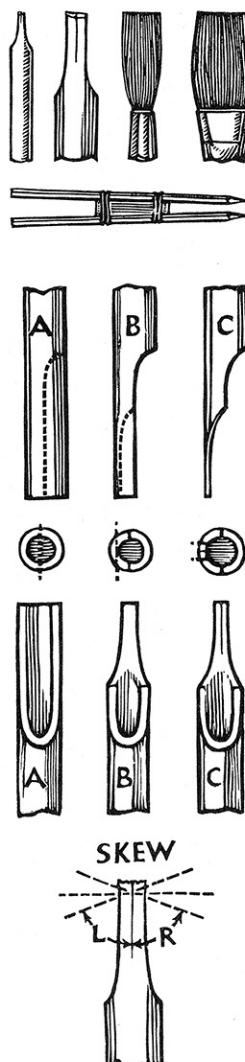
*Lombardic minuscules written by JHB for The Elements of Lettering.  
Note X mark, lower right, showing pen strokes made in two directions.*

Vanitas est diligere. quod cum omni celeritate  
transit et illuc non festinare, ubi sempiternum  
gaudium manet. Memento illius frequenter  
proverbii: quia non satiatur oculus visu, nec  
auris impletur auditu. De Imitatione Christi.

abdefghijklmnoprstuvwxyz Ecclesiastes 1-8 x

*Northern Gothic book hand written by JHB for The Elements of Lettering.*

A handsome boxwood engraving of a tall, phragmites reed is ultimately proofed and printed as a line cut in the book. This is the plant that yields the type of reed Benson uses to cut broad-edged pens for lettering the large, calligraphic plates. Smaller letters, like those seen below, are drawn with a similar pen made of a goose quill. Hollow at the inboard ends, avian quills have been used as pens for centuries. Starting in the late 1600s, many were cut with a sharp point suitable for the so-called copperplate hand. Before this the points



*JHB marginal illustration of quill types from *The Elements of Lettering*.*

of quills were cut blunt or with a squared edge, like that of a chisel. This type of point produces a wide stroke if drawn in one direction and a thin stroke if drawn in the other, a combination of strokes giving historic pen work its characteristic look.

As written in Germany, this hand was the stylistic model for printing types made around 1455 by Johannes Gutenberg of Mainz, who refined and codified the craft of printing.

In his lettering classes at RISD, Benson teaches the use of reed and quill pens, both historic tools in the art of writing. In Fisher's family there is an



*JHB writing at a traditional, inclined desk. The pen holds ink in a small reservoir formed with an S-bent watch spring. As in medieval scriptoria, the paper is held in place with a wooden stick.*

old, handwritten letter from a friend which starts by saying, "My quills are all quite blunt and yet they shall not fail to send my love to thee." By the 1900s cutting pens is an arcane skill, as the quill pen went out of common use in the 19th century. Before that time, every educated person had to learn the basic skill of cutting a pen. By the mid-1800s, due to the mechanical production of steel pen points, this capability was eroding and by Benson's time it had fallen out of practice.

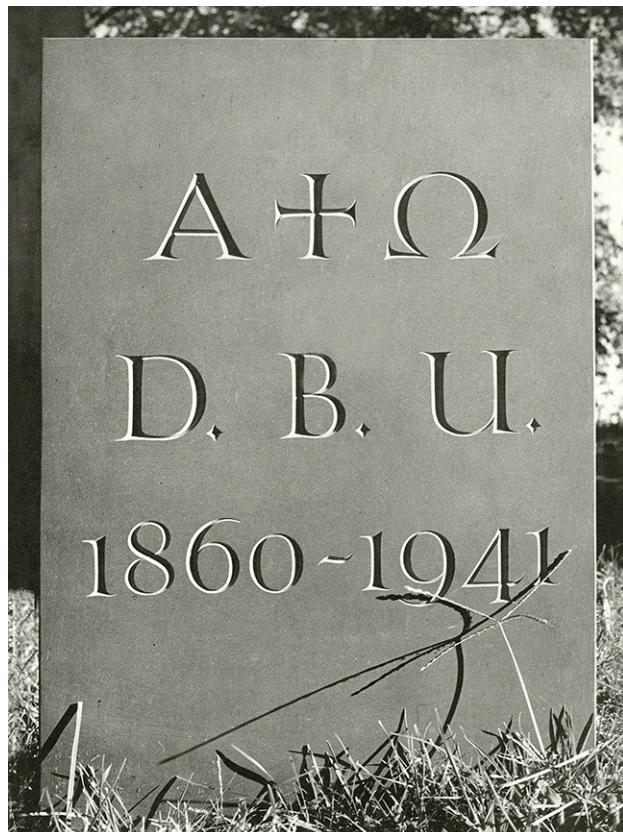
Physical lessons can increase and inform the mastery of both art and craftsmanship, whose disciplines, over the course of history, have mutually supported one another. Those who produced artisanal works acquired their skills from masters and teachers and, bolstered by whatever inborn talent they possessed, practiced what they learned until they were capable of working on their own. Because artistic objects are often valued by the precision and clarity of their manufacture, to be judged "good" relies on how well or skillfully something is made. In this same way works of fine

art, whether sculpted, painted or drawn, rely on skills that can be taught and learned as well as appreciated. Yet, the levels of achievement that confer distinction upon a work of art are less declarative. Greatness in the field of fine art is a label which can be capriciously bestowed; fame comes often by surprise.

Benson's decision to chase the definable limits of craft rather than the vagaries of high art made him who he was and gave him the life he wanted. He thrived on the singular satisfaction that comes from the successful pursuit of excellence in the making of objects. The practice of writing, which entails making letters on paper by hand, is a perfect instance of this kind of pleasure, which unfolds as the shapes and details of the letters are fixed and clearly defined, and increases with the skill and perfection of the writer's craft. Writing skill and the proper use of relevant tools had long been an established social asset. That the practice was waning did not trouble Howard Benson. His and Graham Carey's *Elements of Lettering* served for several years at RISD as a text book for his classes.

The calligraphic revolution that began in the 1950s has made the Boomers among us sensitive to well-drawn letterforms. However, the digital desktop allows us to believe that design need be no more than a matter of personal taste. Digital fonts and desktop printers can make nearly any graphic whimsy a reality. Everyone can be her or his own publisher. We no longer care much for historical perspective. We live in the Temple of the New. Yet a reading of *The Elements of Lettering* and its visual lessons is a refreshing glimpse into the past and a reflection on things gained and lost. Little more than 100 years ago, in agrarian cultures, excellence was easier to see. A shepherd's wife making a garment would often start with wool from the family's sheep. To make a blanket chest her husband would start by making planks lumbered from available trees. Producing something was a naturally rooted process—and for the average person, a rational one—that often began and ended in the same place, employing processes that were understood and shared by ordinary people.

Published in 1940, *Elements* enjoyed wide use, staying in print for more than forty years. Its first edition was printed from metal type by the famous Merrymount Press under the supervision of its founder, Daniel Berkeley Updike. Typically, Benson and Updike grew friendly and had a protracted correspondence. Their letters are in the collection at Brown University's John Hay Library. Benson later carved the Scotsman Updike's gravestone. Small and powerful, it contains a Greek alpha and omega divided by a simple cross, below which are his initials and year dates. Howard derived the design from a small sketch drawn by the printer himself.



*Daniel Berkeley Updike gravestone, Wickford, RI.*

## XXIV

A year and a month after the 1938 hurricane a second Benson son is born. They name him John Everett after his pragmatic great-uncle Jack whose career hopes for his only nephew had been trumped by a failed physical exam. Near the time Fisher Benson is giving birth to her second son, Adolf Hitler is busy annexing Poland and preparing his blitzkrieg invasions of neighboring countries. France, Belgium, Luxembourg, and the Netherlands soon fall to his troops and weaponry. More conquests and occupations follow—much of Europe is under attack or threat. Russia and Germany, first allied and then opposed, grapple with one another in a bloodthirsty struggle causing appalling carnage. In Asia, Japan deploys naval and ground forces to horrendous effect in China, then begins a campaign to establish an empire in the Pacific. However, in Newport, there is still peace; nearly two more years will pass before the United States joins the fight. When Japanese warplanes bomb

the U. S. Naval base at Pearl Harbor in December 1941, the United States declares war on Japan and strengthens alliances with friendly nations. America's industrial capabilities unite in a national mobilization effort to arm the country, providing desperately needed supplies and materiel to Britain and Russia that finally will tip the balance and win the war for the Allies.

World War II comes to Newport in the form of more ships in the harbor, wide-spread upgrades to naval facilities, and expanded shore installations. Support services as well as amenities and conveniences catering to the needs and wants of naval personnel proliferate—with dramatic adjustments to the small town's economy.

Because they live on the waterfront the Bensons are directly affected by these changes, which become part of their daily lives. Navy warships based in Newport have always been a feature on the Bay and in Howard Benson's time, the larger of them swing at huge, white, cylindrical buoys in the outer harbor. Called "Mike" buoys, their large circumference and massive moorings allow them to hold several vessels at a time. Repair ships tie on to the buoys for months, while destroyers cycle to them to be repaired while afloat. Sailors on liberty from these ships are transported to various landing sites where they stream ashore to the shops, bars, and eateries that welcome their patronage.

The New England Steamship Company and its Fall River Line have not been in operation since 1937. During the war, their Newport docks, made of pink granite from Deer Isle, Maine, are conscripted by the government to become a waterfront base on the Point. Liberty launches dock there at a small base called the Fleet Landing. This base is surrounded by a ten-foot-high, chain-link fence. Outside the guarded gate is a favorite bar. It features a projecting sign that reads, on the side facing the gate, "LEO'S FIRST STOP." Returning to the base the sailors, if they could still see, would read the other side of the sign which says: "LEO'S LAST STOP." The docks accommodate mid-sized naval vessels, tugboats, torpedo-range boats, and support boats for the harbor moorings and their heavy tackle. A second slip is built here to accommodate a new ferry that will increase service to the workshops on Goat Island.

Seamen can neither leave the base nor return to it in civilian clothes. Once ashore, in somewhat futile attempts to look like civilians, the sailors change from their dress blues at one of the several "Locker Clubs" in town, and Naval Outfitters, shops that sell uniforms and civvies to the liberty parties, often have their own lockers. Colorful calling cards are handed out, with catchy, off-color quotations like the one from Sam's Locker Club. "Sam says, Once a king always a king. Once a knight, that's enough." A smaller landing facility downtown is situated on the former docks of the New York Yacht



*The Naval installation at the old Steamship Company piers on Washington Street in Newport. The Robinson and Cope houses can be seen side by side in the upper left corner of the Point waterfront.*

Club at Market Square off Thames Street. Dockage for liberty parties and officer's gigs has long existed there as well as a slip for an older Goat Island ferryboat. This vessel, still in service during the war, was built in the early 1900s by the Herreshoff Manufacturing Company, the famous yacht builders, in Bristol, RI.

It would astonish Newport residents of recent decades to see just how much of the waterfront property in town was once in government hands. Virtually any stretch of Newport harbor with deep water at its edge was subject to eminent domain, and although some property was taken earlier in the century, much was taken during World War II. Three Bay islands near town have been taken for government use; they are production facilities for the manufacture of torpedoes with their shops and equipment. Torpedo production involves casting and heavy machining on Goat Island, making and handling explosive warheads on Rose Island, and fine machining and torpedo testing on Gould Island, north of town. Goat Island, which lies about 500 yards off and directly opposite the Cope house, also cares for the service vessels needed to maintain this multi-faceted production line as well as providing transportation between



*Goat Island Torpedo Station, one quarter mile west of Washington Street.*

the three arms of the factory. The long-established Navy base and Officer Candidate School occupy the entire property of a fourth island in Coaster's Harbor, close to the north end of Washington Street.

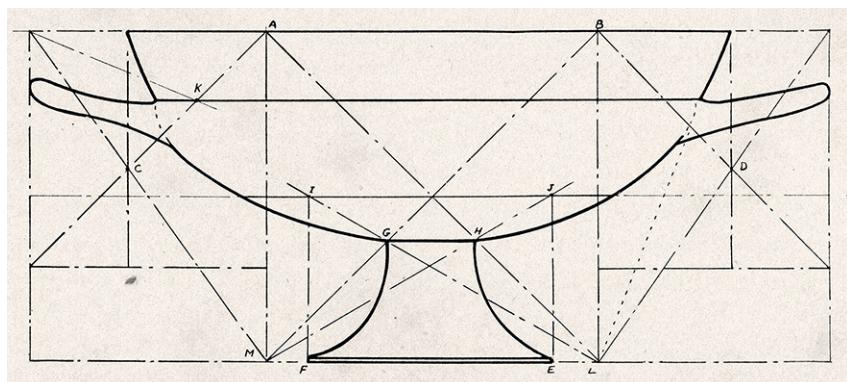
The town of Jamestown on Conanicut Island has three government installations; an Army base at Fort Wetherill occupies the site of earlier coastal defense batteries, where massive concrete foundations and tunnel networks for the gun emplacements exist to this day. An attendant waterfront facility at the eastern edge of the fort lies across the harbor mouth from Newport's Fort Adams, which is yet another military base. The southernmost end of Conanicut holds lookout posts and radio detection equipment, fenced off for security.

The war and the machinery that run it are part of Newport, visible and integral to its society and its economy. Directly involved or not, the Bensons, with their friends and neighbors, cannot avoid its realities. As the conflict develops, some believe that the United States and her allies will ultimately be victorious, but most feel it will be a long and costly struggle.

## XXV

Benson's work at RISD is a major part of his life. His lettering class is a required course for every freshman and although he has remodeled the sculpture department and turned it over to Raemisch, his teaching schedule grows to include a course in design. With his mathematical turn of mind, Benson designs the class so that it features an unusual mix of drawing and calculations. He uses a book by Jay Hambidge called *Dynamic Symmetry* that interprets features of Greek architecture using geometry and the Golden Mean. Another Hambidge book discusses Attic pottery and its design using algebraic calculation.

This mathematical approach to design, out of use since Benson's time, was oddly prophetic. Desktop publishing was only made possible in our own time by using computer-friendly typefaces and laser writers to print them. The hideous look of early dot matrix printing, initially accepted by technicians, was abhorrent to artists and designers. A brisk change occurred when digital typefaces evolved that employed quadratic splines to delineate letterforms. Benson's course on the geometry of the Greek vase would seem familiar to the font-designing wizards of Silicon Valley today.



*Dynamic Symmetry profile of a Greek kylix basin drawn by Jay Hambidge.*

Dynamic symmetry is also employed by Howard at the Shop. It turns into a useful tool for making sketches of stones. Once the arithmetical order is imposed, the blank page can hold his interest. Aging three-ring binders from that period of the Shop's records contain numerous sketches for headstones and tablets. These often show no more than a rectangular indication of the shape of the stone covered by lines and their intersections. Roughly imposed on these angular patterns, often erased and repositioned, names and dates fall into place. When called for, the contoured shapes of headstone tops are drawn, after being subjected to geometrical analysis.



*John Frazier portrait of JHB, ca. 1936. National Portrait Gallery.*

Benson's curious, wide-ranging intellect finds support at RISD. Waldemar Raemisch's European sensibilities and sculptor's eye provide a useful sounding board. Another good friend is John Frazier, a gifted painter, who will later become president of the school. Tall and thin, like Benson, Frazier's composed demeanor balances the stone carver's excitable nature. In the 30s he paints a three-quarter length portrait of the then still beardless Howard, which ultimately finds its way to the National Portrait Gallery.

Two other images of Howard's head can be seen on the RISD campus. Gilbert Franklin, a former student, fine sculptor, and now a friend of Benson's, models matching portrait heads of Benson and Frazier. These pieces, cast in bronze, are today displayed in the school's special collections library, where they are appropriately mounted on tall, wooden pedestals. Across from the school, on steep Waterman Street, is the Providence Art Club. Its hallways are adorned with black, three-quarter size silhouettes of members; the bearded Benson among them. We have forgotten, in our hirsute age, that beards were uncommon those days. Cleanshaven looks were the rule from

the 30s through the Korean war years. At RISD, Benson's beard even inspired a few daring students to grow their own.

In the days before local highways, commuting to Providence by bus takes much of the artist's time, but the experience he gains in teaching makes the time spent worthwhile. Working at the college level also helps him to get quality work from employees in his Shop. His willingness to work long hours is a hallmark of his career as is his ability to promote his own aesthetic. Looking at the span of his working life and its accomplishments, it is easy to be impressed by the scope of its output, but this does not imply that there are no rough periods.

At one point, Graham Carey becomes interested in the life and ideas of Mohandas Gandhi. According to Gandhi, the spinner and the weaver should have a say in the economic workings of the village. About this time, Graham meets Richard Gregg who had once worked with Gandhi. Carey and Gregg then decide between them to hold monthly meetings at the Shop, during which the employees can voice their wants. No fundamental changes come from these meetings, and Benson suffers under them. After nearly a year he tells Carey that, as holder of 80% of the shares in the Shop, he, John Howard Benson, is the one in charge. The meetings cannot go on. Carey takes it well, but some cooling occurs between them.

Standing behind John Howard and whatever goes on in his busy, sometimes turbulent life, is the stalwart Quaker, Esther Fisher Smith. In any marriage only the two who make up the pair can be said to truly understand it, and in truth, each can fully comprehend but one part. The chemistry of a union between two people is often bewildering to participants and observers alike. Fisher is willing to share her husband's burdens, care for his health, contribute to his welfare, bear and care for his children, and keep their house. She also feeds and helps entertain his many friends and houseguests. It is likely that during their time together he never had to make a bed, do his own laundry, or wash a dish. We can only guess what benefits she received from such devotion. Modern feminists would doubtless condemn her seeming subservience. At the same time, it is certain that without her contributions their shared life would have been very different. From the perspective of the future and by recognizing the norms of a different era, it is possible to realize that Howard and Fisher loved each other deeply, that each felt equally fulfilled by their marriage—and that neither life would have been as full without it.

Many letters exist from Fisher to her mother and sisters. They lend insight into the couple's life and share her cheerful, if sometimes exasperated accounts of their time together. Specific complaints about her husband are not much in evidence. Her frustrations mainly relate to child rearing and the mechanisms of homemaking. Correspondence and speech within the Smith

family was carried on in the uniquely Quaker mode which uses "thee" as a subject form as well its more common objective one. The sect eschewed the first person "thou" with its required, arcane verb forms as in: "Now hast thou slain the Jabberwock...". The use of the more informal "thee" denotes familiarity without necessitating other archaic constructions. In intimate speech and early letters to his wife Benson himself adopts the style.

Fisher's mother, Dorothea Smith, was complicated and highly intelligent —pretty in youth, in maturity she was short, stout, and quick tempered. Fisher's writing to her is articulate, argumentative, and filled with family news. Descriptions abound of clothes, pots, pans, and furniture. By 1941 the behavior of the rambunctious Benson boys, Tommy and "Fun" (as John Everett is nicknamed), becomes a steady topic. At one point her mother sends Fisher a buggy whip with the suggestion that it might help discipline them. Somehow, one winter's evening, it ends up briskly ablaze in the fireplace.

Letters from her mother are often indecipherable due to Dorothea's terrible handwriting. Fisher would sometimes cut out a word from one of these letters, paste it into one of her own and challenge her mother to read it. While relations between the two were often thorny, they clearly loved and depended on each other.

Letters to and from Fisher and her father are fewer in number but confirm that Edward Wanton Smith was a kind and much beloved man, and that Fisher was his favorite child. Near the end of his life he suffered from what was thought to be a stomach ulcer, but which later turned out to be cancer. Having spent his life at the Exide Battery Company working with copper, acid, lead, and cyanide, this comes as no surprise to us today. His doctor told him that the condition was terminal. He could not return to his job. With Quaker stoicism, he forsook work and played his flute. Resigned to the end, he wrote the following letter to his comrades at the company:

*To My Fellow Workers and Good Friends  
At the Exide Storage Battery Company:*

*Since it has come to my knowledge that I am never to see the most of you again, or to grasp your hands, as I should like to do; and since there are so many of you that I cannot write to each one, I'm sending these few lines to you. Collectively.*

*For many long years, up to forty or more in some cases, we have worked together, side by side, you and I, through good and hard times alike: sometimes discouraged by failures, at others elated by success. And during these years of collaboration we have come to know each other pretty well—both the strong and the weak points in each other's make up. So, I know that you*



*Edward Wanton Smith in Philadelphia, 1940.*

*have found the shortcomings and weaknesses in my personality and at times have been much annoyed with them. But this hasn't interfered with our working together; and I feel, as I look back along the trail we have followed, that you have always given me your loyal and unstinted support, which at many times has turned the doubtful issue into a successful one. When men go through life thus intimately thrown together, and come through holding each other in high esteem, that is one of the telling testimonies of true friendship. Because I have these feelings of esteem towards you and value them deeply, I wish you to know this, which is the reason for this letter.*

*Many of you have sent messages of cheer while I have been laid up and I want to thank you for these tokens of affection, which have surely lightened my burden—I really didn't know I had so many friends.*

*And now, coming to the end, it just hurts me to think of seeing you no more; but you have my very best wishes for all the health, happiness, and success that this world can afford.*

*Your old Fellow Workman,  
Edward Wanton Smith*

## XXVI

From early in his career as an artist Howard Benson worked with printed media. At the Newport Art Association, he gave demonstrations of printmaking with woodblocks on his Acorn Press. The woodblock, long a favorite in Europe, was favored for illustration because it could be incorporated into bodies of type-set text. This allowed illustrations and text to be printed in a single impression. Woodblocks are made on plank-grain wood planed to the same thickness as the height of metal type. Drawing is done directly on the surface of the block with pen or brush and ink. Knives and chisels are then used to cut away the white background areas, leaving the drawn parts in relief. Set in a press, the block's relief surfaces are coated with printers' ink applied from a pad or roller. The block is then printed with the relief parts reproducing the original drawing as a crisp image on paper.

Albrecht Dürer, the great painter and printmaker of the Northern Renaissance, often made use of the woodblock, as did most of his contemporaries. In China and Japan woodblock printing in color was refined to yield images of great subtlety. Flower paintings were reproduced in multiple colors



*Detail of The Men's Bath House, by Albrecht Dürer, c.1500.*



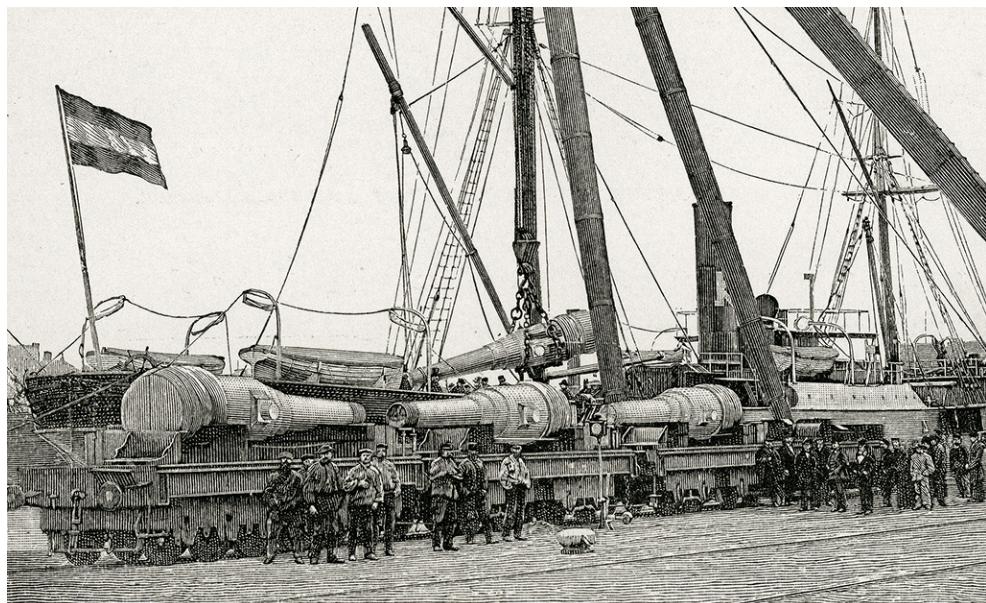
Detail "The Large Horse" copper engraving by Albrecht Dürer, 1505.

and employed separate woodblocks to print subtle shades of chromatic tone. Three other, different sorts of prints were also in wide use in the years before photography. One, stone lithography, uses the surface of a fine-grained limestone slab to receive a drawing made in grease pencil. Flooded with water, the stone face will resist oil, but the drawn areas will not. Only the drawn areas, because they have been rolled with grease, will catch the ink and transfer it to paper in a special press. Benson's print of the New York skyline, on page 22 shows a stone lithograph.

The process of etching consists of completely coating a copper plate with a layer of acid-resistant material and drawing through this with sharp, needle-like tools. The coating thus removed exposes the copper surface within the drawn lines. Controlled immersion of the plate in an acid bath etches the lines into the metal. The acid-resistant material is then dissolved and cleaned off, and the plate is heated. Repeated daubing with viscous ink works it into the etched lines. When wiped repeatedly with a stiff cloth, the etched portions alone retain ink. A powerful press then pulls the ink from the etched lines to form the image on damp, receptive paper.

Older than etching, hand-engraved plates were the first use of intaglio printing. Specialized engraving tools cut smooth lines into a plate of copper to produce drawn artwork. These sinuous, curvaceous lines cut by a burin are unmatched as physical expressions of the hand-held tool. Engraved

plates are printed in the same manner as etchings. Both techniques are called "intaglio" from the Italian for "carved" or "cut into." Our national paper currency has been printed since inception with intaglio techniques, both etched and engraved. Under magnification the printed lines show a relief quality to the ink deposit. Benson learned the techniques but did not much continue to use intaglio beyond his time in New York.



*19th century wood engraving. Heavy guns being loaded from rail to ship.*

In the 1700s, craftsmen discovered that the tools used in metal engraving could cut very fine lines across hard, end grain wood. An engraved block and its print are shown on page 103. If cut perpendicular to its growth axis, European boxwood, with its tight annular rings, can accept precise, engraved lines to describe the white portions of drawings, the lines are cut with a single stroke of a graver. As with woodblocks, boxwood engraving blocks are cut to the height of type metal so as to print together with wood or metal type. Boxwood engraving is grouped with block printing as a relief process, although its specialized tools differ from those that produce images in plank-grain wood. Before the invention of photography, boxwood engraving was a preferred medium among illustrators. Journalism soon adopted the process. Artists would attend an event and make pen and ink drawings on prepared boxwood blocks. Engraving of the images would be done with all possible speed by skilled craftsmen, cutting white lines to define the printable black relief. The blocks were then locked into a press together with metal type for text and printed as a unit.

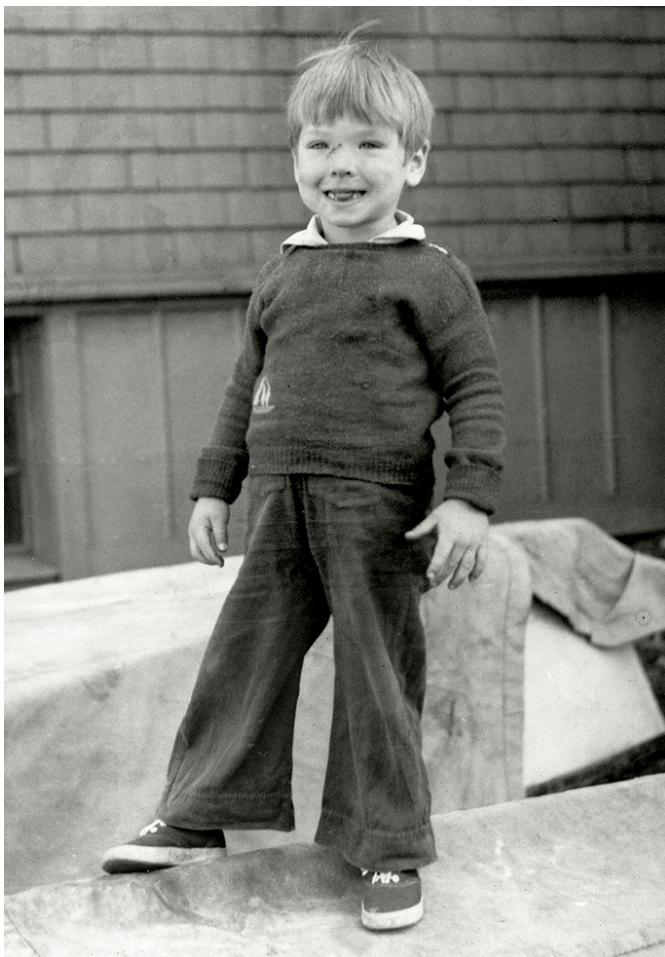
When photography appeared, its seemingly magical tones were instantly prized for their descriptive value. Efforts began at once to reproduce these realistic images in ink, on the page. Before long, photographs were being transferred directly to white-toned boxwood blocks using a photo-chemical process. Professional engravers developed linear systems to imitate photographic tonality with intricate patterns of white lines. Exquisite results were achieved and much-used, though only for a short time. This reproductive process represents an example of craftsmanship at its highest level. Yet the only art involved is that of the original photographer or sketch artist. Many of these prints survive, but only in a small, unimportant corner of the graphic arts. This method does, however, mark a turning point in the history of reproducing images—the clear and decisive intrusion of technology into the artist's world.

People have been imprinting graphic images for millennia. The process of doing this is basically a system of copying, no matter how simple or complex the technology involved. It can be said to represent imitation as a form of art. The great print makers of history dealt only in printed copies of their original work, done in wood, metal, or on lithographic stone. The original plates, woodblocks, or stones, where they still exist, may be of interest to collectors but the prints themselves are the valued works. In the past, etchers, engravers, and lithographers worked mainly from their own drawings. Being the original artists of the images, they could claim the work as theirs. Print-makers today can use professional shops to produce their work, yet still justly claim the product as their own, having conceived the original image and drawn it themselves. Today an untrained, naive practitioner of unexceptional photography can produce what some might call art with no more than the click of a shutter and a payment to a digital print shop.

Assessments of such things are subject to the whims and tastes of the time. In telling the story of Howard Benson, our only concern need be that much work of the hand today is being given over to technology, and with it the craftsman's link to the traditions that trained him. From a 21st century perspective, this may or may not be a terrible thing, depending on the values of the person who judges. And surely, with the digital revolution, more changes, some anticipated and others not, will affect the nature of those judgments.

As today's innovative technologies come into practical use, certain age-old ways, not just of creating, but of seeing and appreciating man-made artifacts will gradually be lost. Howard Benson did not anticipate this coming change, as the digital realm was confined, in his day, to a very few theorists. He would, perhaps, have been troubled by it. Then again, he was a devoted believer in the science of mathematics and its related branches. If born forty years later, he certainly would have been captivated by digital technology.

Howard also loved astronomy, and there is no doubt he would have been impressed, if not awe-struck, by the advances that digital technology has made in our ability to see and understand the marvels of the cosmos. He saw Haley's Comet as a child, and remained moved by it for life. He was also a skilled practitioner of celestial navigation. On occasion, he sailed as navigator on coastal sailing trips and taught this skill to members of The Power Squadron, an organization of the owners of power-driven vessels. Potential navigators in the group would meet with Benson on fine summer days on the southernmost point of Newport's coast, where they would practice taking sun sights. Using sextants, they would bring the solar orb down to the horizon to establish its declination with reference to precise time. Howard sometimes brought along his ever more-boisterous son Tommy Tew, who would run in front of the navigators just as they were taking their sun sights.



*Tommy Tew, with scraped nose and missing teeth, balances on a rowboat.*

## XXVII



*"Painting is but another way of feeling" — John Constable. Image detail courtesy of Tate Britain.*

In the world of visual arts, groups of similar works may be fit into either of two categories. The first covers the fine arts of drawing, painting and sculpture. The second includes artistic works dedicated or applied to utilitarian service. Although few pursuits are less productive than arguments over these two realms and their differences, we must, if we insist on disputing their relative merits, resign ourselves to a few simple truths. Art is a real thing, even if opinions about what qualifies as art may differ. Lucid understanding of what it is or is not comes best to those whose lives have been spent on its study or production. Without solid grounding in physical experience, judgment of art is a risky game. Outstanding quality can raise utilitarian work to a higher, more artful level. Vicissitudes of taste can demote a fine piece of painting or sculpture to a more utilitarian plane. Yet there does exist a universality to great art that nearly everyone can see.

This capability resides in the inherent sensitivities of the viewer and the shared appreciation of visual experience. At the human, cellular level this response is now capable of being witnessed in brain scans. Little of descriptive value has yet resulted from these studies but they are a hint of things to come. Most individuals will marvel in the presence of a perfect sunset or a beautiful wild animal and the best art will often prompt this same, instinctive response—a sensibility that landscape painters have exploited for centuries.

Despite his mentor Pennell's admonitions and the budding sculptor's successful completion of four stone figures, Howard Benson elected to follow a career in the applied arts. But he also knew and practiced another kind of

art; the art of the enviable life. He loved the art of teaching and excelled at it. Good teachers may have a bit of the necromancer in them—Benson had this gift and knew how to use it. Those with the good fortune to visit him in Newport or hear him speak on the small “a” art of lettering were entertained, enlightened, and informed.

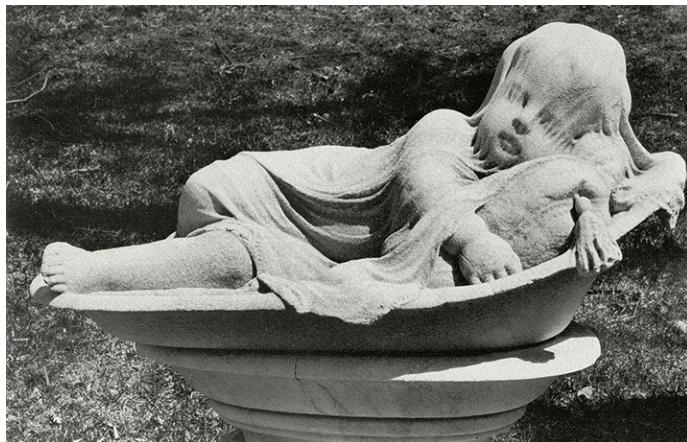


*Horace Palmer Beck gravestone.*

In a cemetery in Portsmouth, Rhode Island stands a headstone marking the grave of one Horace Palmer Beck. He died in 1936. Thus, the stone would have been made during the first decade of Benson's carved work, and near the time the Imperial Roman influence developed in his lettering style. The Beck stone has a simple rectilinear shape with tapered sides and a peaked top. Around the perimeter is an incised, linear border. In the upper portion of the stone, a stylized willow tree is carved within an outlined panel. From the panel's recessed background, the tree emerges in crisply defined relief. This type of carving is called cavo-relievo, meaning relief cut into, and below the mean surface of the stone. Benson's photograph shows the sculpted image and carved letters in reflective, raking light. The photograph is in black-and-

white but the slate itself has a light, sea green tint. It is a handsome stone and does its job well. Horace Beck is artistically remembered; his memory well served.

Cemeteries have long been favored sites to walk and visit. They are quiet spots, without the distractions of many public spaces. In small towns they often have a deeply intimate feeling, perhaps related to historic connections with the town, the familiar names, and the limited range of styles among the memorials. Seen in Newport's Common Burying Ground, the age of the stones can be roughly determined by their material; slate for the 1700s, marble for the 1800s, and granite from the 1900s to the present.

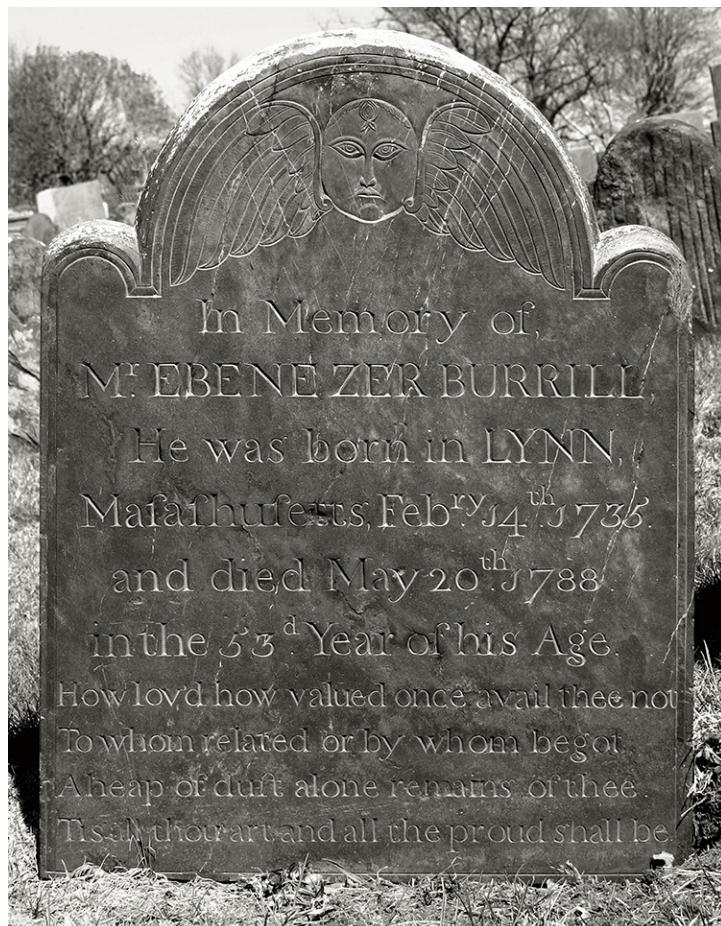


*Victorian memorial for a child in marble.*

As with the materials, there are common stylistic attributes in their memorial prose reflecting the time of their manufacture. In the 18th century, the messages carved in slate were often direct and harsh-sounding to our ears. A John Stevens II stone in Newport reads in part, "He was cut off in a moment by a profusion of blood from the lungs..." In the Victorian era memorials of white marble, sentiment and emotion are more evident. It may be that by the mid-1800s, during the century when the Industrial Revolution and its marvels made humans feel they were indeed masters of the universe, the brutal inevitability of death was a rude reminder of mortality that a sensitively worded memorial could serve to mollify. Modern times and modern medicine did not emerge together, and 19th century medicine was still bound by traditions and quackery that scientific progress had yet to banish. These dichotomies in the field of human achievement may account for the somewhat contradictory mood that exists as a subtext to the sculpted, marble image of an infant who appears to be peacefully sleeping, while being, at the same time, unmistakably dead.

In the granite age of contemporary tombstones, modernity is reflected in a resigned and factual tone, as progress speaks more with logical sentiment. Simple, biographical facts are the norm. Carefully chosen quotes from poetry or the scriptures will often appear. None the less, in the lexicon of epitaphs from the Stevens Shop, colonial tastes remain present. In terms of frankness few things can match a verse carved in 1788 by John Bull, a colleague and early employee of John Stevens III. On a slate stone to Mr. Ebenezer Burrill he quotes from Alexander Pope:

*How lov'd how valued once avail thee not  
To whom related or by whom begot  
A heap of dust alone remains of thee  
Tis all thou art and all the proud shall be*



*Ebenezer Burrill stone, carved in 1788 by John Bull.*

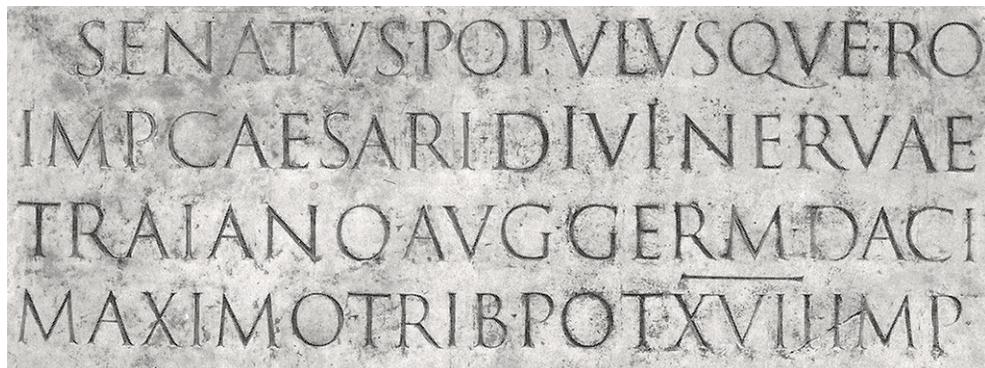
## XXVIII

Over the course of his ever-busy life, Benson's devotion to lettering does not waver. As with any artist of consequence at any point in her or his career, the work tends to be of the highest quality possible by that individual at that time. Part of an education in the arts is to study the development of great and minor artists and artistic craftsmen over time, and how at different times in their lives, different works are produced; works that vary in theme, composition, medium, and even quality. Some are born with a gift so great that greatness is always with them. Others, while granted vision and artistic insight, must work to gain specific skills. As a teenager, Michelangelo carved a relief in marble that was more venturesome and ambitious than most work of his mature contemporaries. Other artists, at the start of their careers, struggle with drawing, and have to work and practice to achieve the kind of skill that great art demands. The gentle, high-energy Benson has always possessed draftsman's talent. Yet with his carved and drawn letters, like all calligraphers, he practices diligently to maintain fluency, even as a violinist every day must play etudes and scales.

More than two millennia ago on the Italian peninsula, a culture arose that gave us the letters that we still use and prize today. This gift was in the form of the upper-case alphabet. Today we know the carved version as the Imperial Roman Capital, or Majuscule, a direct descendant of the formal lettering of Classic Greek. The Greeks, in turn, borrowed the shapes of their letters from the proto-alphabetic writing of Phoenician traders before them. However, they could not have done this if previous Mediterranean cultures had not invented their own, less workable, versions in a more syllabic vein: Hieratic Egyptian, Linear A, Linear B, Cypro-syllabic.

Taken to the boot of Italy and pressed into use by a less genteel culture, the Greek letter-forms were adopted and adapted to write the early Latin language. At the start, this yielded crude inscriptions in stone—small, simple, linear letters cut into plaques of bronze, short lines of text scratched into bone and pottery. As Roman culture evolved and grew more sophisticated, its letters matured and grew; they were used at larger and grander scales. Their shaping was refined by craftsmen whose skills were sharpened by the use of more precise steel tools. By the end of the first century AD, Roman letters reached a stage where they are now regarded as the most artful carved alphabet in western culture.

The defining word for the types of writing systems discussed and shown above is alphabetic. The alphabet of Classic Roman represents the maturity of this system. Neither pictographic, ideographic, nor syllabic but rather consisting of a small, versatile, utilitarian group of simple, recognizable



*Detail of inscription from the base of Trajan's Column in Rome, 107-113 CE.*

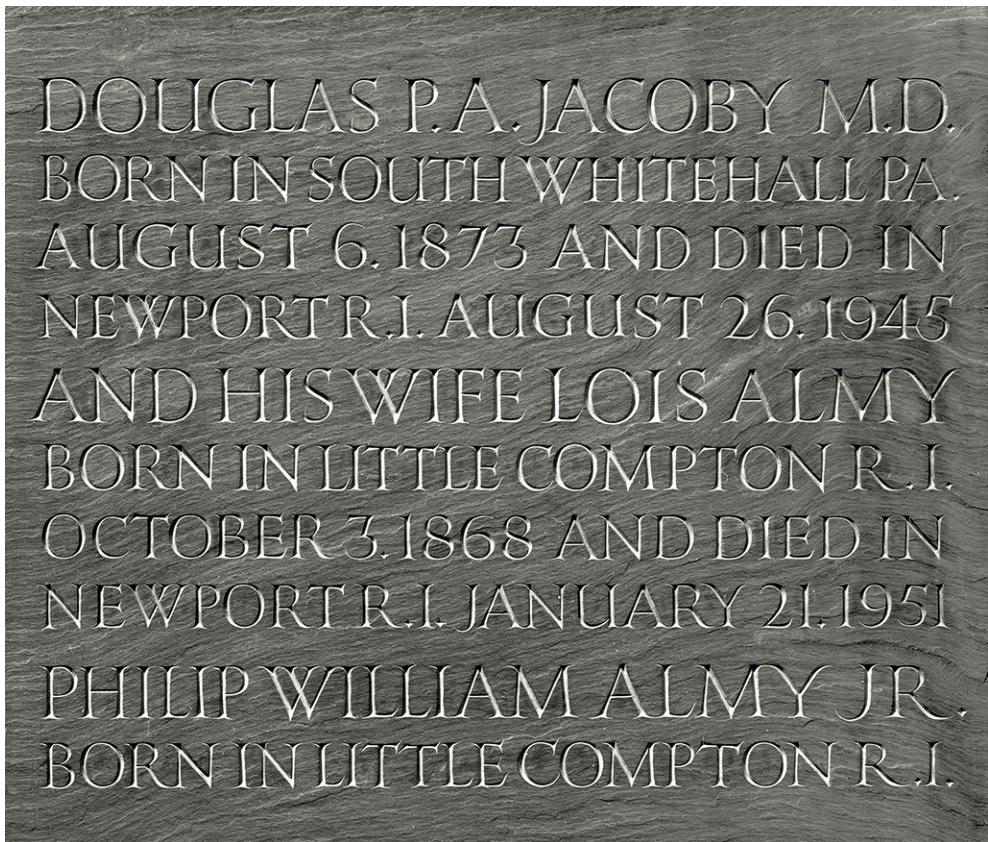
symbols. With these, individual speech sounds can be easily conveyed, combined into words or parts of words, then perceived and interpreted at a glance. At the time of the Roman alphabet's most elegant renditions in marble, an inscription was carved on the base of the triumphal column erected by the Emperor Trajan in celebration of his victory in the now long-forgotten Dacian Wars. The rendition of these letters remains celebrated among cognoscenti as the pinnacle of western, alphabetic achievement.

The Roman letters and their offspring and descendants were consolidated in the early 1500s by printers like Nicholas Jenson and Aldus Manutius. Their typefaces and printed applications fixed the shape of our letters for the next 500 years.

Renditions of the Imperial Roman Capital, and others among its typographic heirs, are those used most in carved memorials. In the late 1800s, the German scholar Emil Hubner traveled in Italy and made copies of a host of Roman inscriptions. He first recorded them by making rubbings with a sheet of lightweight paper placed over the carved letters and rubbed with graphite or hard, pigmented wax. These were then traced as outlines and reduced to small scale for printing in his grandly titled book *Exempla Scripturae Epigraphicae Latinae*. He published it in the Latin language in Germany in 1885. Benson acquired a copy of the book and studied it at length.

In the mid-1930s, a native of Iowa named Edward Catich travels to Rome as a student preparing for the priesthood. He has an interest in inscriptions, and brush-drawn letters are familiar to him from his work as a sign painter. He receives permission from the Italian authorities to erect a scaffolding on the site and makes an extensive study of the Trajan inscription. He takes photographs and makes several full-size rubbings of its letters. After his time in Rome, Catich visits Ade Bethune who by then is working with Benson in Newport. Now an ordained priest, Catich meets the carver and

tells him how he has learned to write with a brush like the Roman calligraphers. He believes that the brush, as wielded by the Romans, was the final authority for letter shape, a belief that jibes quite coincidentally with Benson's own practice. Benson gave up his line-drawn layouts early in his career, adopting instead the broad-edged brush to draw Roman letters at greater precision. Brush layouts of inscriptions are in essence calligraphic. Benson has never hesitated, from his first use of the brush, to press it into service in drawing all his letter styles. Once painted down, his brush-written letters become subject to the authority of the hand-driven chisel as it moves through the stone.



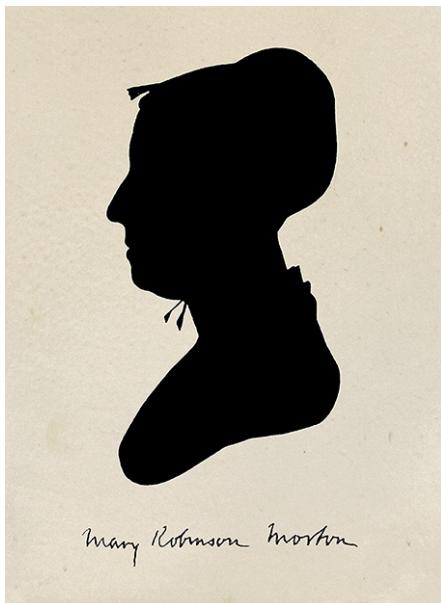
*Detail from Douglas P.A. Jacoby stone. Carved in naturally cleft slate by JHB, 1951*

Calligraphers, sign painters, type designers, all learn to love letters and excel at drawing them. Intense practice leads to mastery of technique. This kind of discipline resembles playing musical scales or mastering the moves of competitive sports. Drawing and carving lettering is an unconscious application of synaptic effort directed by learned patterns of eye-hand move-

ment. In one sense, witnessing such effort sparks echoes in the watcher's hand. Professional skill is not necessary to experience the pleasure gained from simple observation. Ask any sports fan; but don't expect a poetic answer.

Late in the 20th century, all the printing typefaces in the western world were fast being converted to electronic images by digital technology and its new devices. The analogue versions of these letters, existing mainly in metal or photographic form, had to be reinterpreted digitally. In the process of doing so, the traditional aesthetics of classic typeface design were nearly lost. The magic of the PostScript computer language, however, enabled this conversion and delivered the precise details of letter shapes and text to the new, digital printing technology. Adobe systems in California emerged as the American leader in this field, supplying quality work in a broadly supported form. Realizing that the game had changed, Adobe also instituted a new series of original, digital type designs made by contemporary calligraphers and lettering artists. One of their most successful designs and one of the most widely seen in public media is an outstanding, digital rendition of the letters from Trajan's Column. Two thousand years after its birth, favored in films, books, and more lately, digital media, its famous letters are still being celebrated by graphic cognoscenti.

## XXIX



*Sillouette cutout of Mary Robinson Morton.  
Colonial ancestor of Fisher Smith Benson.*

Relief sculpture and three-dimensional sculpture are related in both linear description and techniques of production. The best way to understand this critical, linear aspect is to consider a classic silhouette of a human profile. One key to our recognition system is its ability to recognize contour—the delineated outlines of solid objects. Prior to the invention of photography, the black and white silhouette was a favored way to present an evocative image of a physical person. Unlike a photograph or an accurately drawn likeness of an individual, this technique could not call up a precise, realistic picture to someone unfamiliar with the subject. Yet its stark, uncluttered outline view focuses on the single, most unmistakable aspect of a human face. Looking at her scissor-cut profile, Mary Morton's friends and family would recognize her at once.

We must also realize that mechanisms of recognition differ widely among individuals. The chance viewing of a stranger can set off a feeling of familiarity—the person we see reminds us of someone we know, but such feelings depend on the idiosyncratic nature of descriptive memory. Tell another mutual friend of this experience. Then, should the occasion arise, point out the seeming doppelganger to that mutual friend. The overwhelming odds are that you will receive a lukewarm response or a blank stare. Or

possibly the comment, "He doesn't look like Jim at all!" This discrepancy in sight and recognition is a reason eye-witness testimony is so unreliable—a factor that court proceedings and trial records undeniably confirm.

Successful low relief sculpture relies upon accepted, shorthand mechanisms of recognition. The now-fading art of political cartooning depended for



*Augustus Saint-Gaudens' Shaw Memorial on Boston Common. Photograph by Richard M. A. Benson.*

generations upon the exaggerated drawing of facial characteristics. President Obama's narrow face and prominent ears, his height and slenderness and even, perhaps, the implied tonality of his handsome, African American skin call up his agreeable persona. The willow tree on the tombstone to Horace Beck is similar, being more referential than realistic. It is a simplified depiction of the salient characteristics of the tree. Seeing massed, drooping, frond-like branches on a tree-like trunk rings a bell. "Oh, I see. A weeping willow."

With this distinction between rendered reality and its evocation through artifice, we come to the difference between realism and stylization. As was mentioned earlier, kindly Edward Smith, the slide rule engineer, was at pains to point out this difference in his criticism of Benson's design of the anchor on his half dollar coin. To Howard the difference mattered not at all.

He realized that the altered rendition of the anchor would be recognizable. The artist knew it as a familiar device, proven successful for centuries in drawing and low relief. To Smith it was an unacceptable, flawed representation.

Techniques of relief sculpture may be divided into two categories, high relief and low relief. High relief, in essence, is similar to sculpture in the round. Sculpted forms are rendered in fullness and with an accuracy that mimics the volumetric nature of the subject. The sculpture implies three-dimensional reality rising out of a background.



*Detail of figures from the Shaw Memorial. Photograph by Richard M. A. Benson.*

Augustus Saint-Gaudens's great memorial to the Civil War hero Robert Gould Shaw stands at the high, northwest corner of Boston Common. Set in a frame of Tennessee Marble, the sculpture is a monumental bronze relief. Its figures march parallel to Beacon Street at its highest elevation. A portrait figure of Robert Shaw depicts him sitting on a fully realized horse at the center of the piece. His soldiers march around him, modeled in precise, high relief. Although confined by the framework of the sculpture, their physical attachment to its background is inconspicuous. Shaw and his horse appear as icons of reality, flanked by the marching ranks of black soldiers. As the men recede into the background their relief diminishes until the last man in each rank, still in precise rendition, approaches low relief. Saint-Gaudens was a master of sculptural technique and the Shaw Memorial is his tour de force.

Above Shaw's head, at the top of the sculpture, is the image of a floating angel. The sculptor obsessed over this single aspect of the piece, attempting multiple different treatments, even after its casting into the final bronze we

see in Boston. The plaster model below is a low relief study. As finally rendered in bronze, it attains high relief like the rest of the monument. Saint-Gaudens was a master of both disciplines. In each, however, he clung to realistic drawing, choosing not to resort to stylization. At the same time, heralds of change were sounding, in the form of modernism.

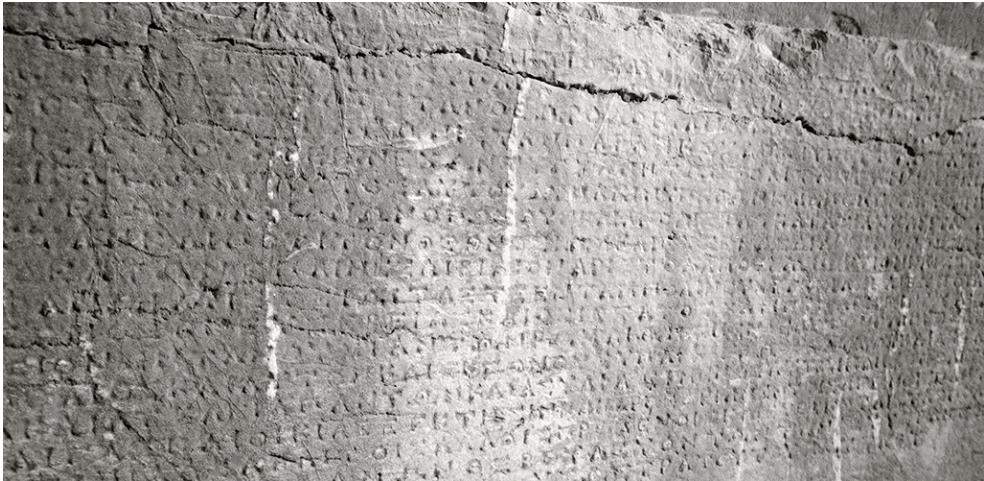


*Angel relief from Saint-Gaudens Shaw Memorial. Photograph by Richard M. A. Benson.*

Howard Benson was not an artist of the ambition and aspirations of Saint-Gaudens. However, his chosen fields mingled the disciplines of graphic art, calligraphy, carving, and sculpted relief. His abilities were wide-ranging, and could have tempted him to specialize in one or another of his skills. This focus might have led to a successful career in fine art, perhaps as a sculptor. Benson's responsibilities to his family drove him to take a more practical direction for his considerable talents. Steady work had to be found. Making gravestones and memorials, especially for the well-heeled and well-known, who desired the best for their departed members, would provide him with a dependable source of income.

As it becomes better known and appreciated, Benson's work, and its classic elegance, gain him social status and modest renown. His artistic, craftsman's labors embody the ideal of a lost age; a Renaissance craftsman (bearded in a beardless age) pursuing an ancient craft in a modern world. Well-read and well-spoken, with a lively sense of humor, he is a sought-after guest as well as a genial host. In company, he can talk with ease about what he does and what he makes, in ways that are clear and enticing.

Making his way up to the amphitheater at Delphi in Greece, the young tour guide Howard Benson would have observed the hand-made texture of the marble blocks fronting the pathway. Like all such relics of the ancient world, each would have been individually carved into its rectilinear shape with hammer and chisel. On many of the stones, almost indistinguishable from the chiseled textures of their manufacture, hundreds of tiny incised Greek letters may still be seen. We only can suppose that his observing eye noticed them, and entranced him with the music of their geometry.

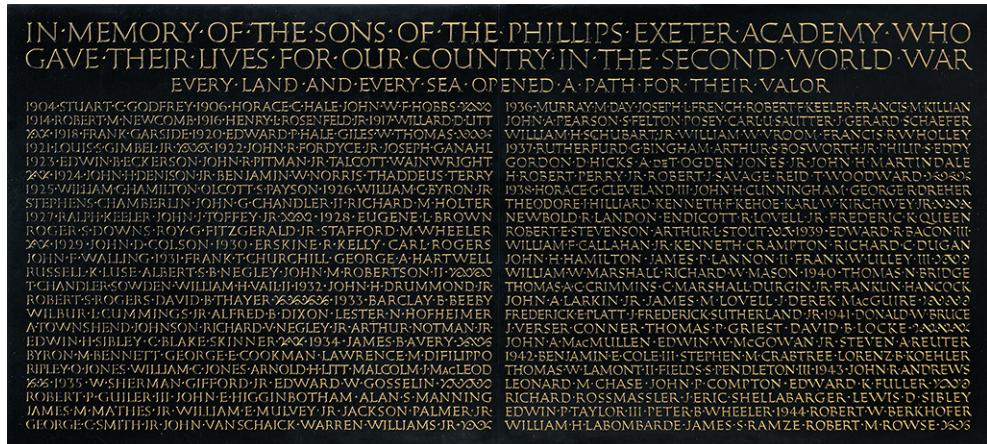


*Weathered inscription in classic, v-cut, Greek capitals, 1.7cm high.*

### XXX

By the mid-1940s, the Portsmouth Priory, where Benson has taught and in whose chapel his Madonna stands, has matured into a respected private school known throughout the northeast. Like many such institutions, it seeks funding from its alumni as well as other sources. In the tradition of commemoration, such schools begin to commission carved memorials in their chapels and buildings in recognition of charitable gifts. After the tax on personal income was levied, with its deductions for qualified donations, a wave of generous if somewhat self-serving munificence becomes an important part of private school income. Appropriate places are set aside on school campuses to acknowledge these gifts with simple memorials, carved in memory of students and faculty. Prominent New England schools come to know and solicit Benson's inscriptional work

Philips Exeter Academy, another prominent private school for young men, commissions a large work of this type from the Shop. The memorial is to honor those Exeter students who gave their lives for their country in World War II. It is an impressive list, consisting of the names and graduation dates of nearly 150 students. Names are laid out in two dense blocks of closely-spaced text, carved into two slate panels, joined by a molded plaster frame. The names and dates are justified into two crisp rectangles. To effect this layout, Benson introduces decorative calligraphic ornaments to fill lines of inconsistent lengths. The letters are carved and picked out in oil colors and metal leaf. Decorative and stately in their formal lines, they adhere to the standard set in Imperial Rome two thousand years ago.



## *WWII memorial tablet at Phillips Exeter Academy.*

In Groton, Massachusetts in 1884 a young Episcopal priest likewise founded a preparatory school, naming it for the town, as would happen in Portsmouth, Rhode Island with the founding of Portsmouth Priory. The Groton School soon became prestigious among New England's prep schools, and its founder, Endicott Peabody, ran it for fifty-six years. Early in the twentieth century, the architect Henry Vaughan designed a chapel for Groton in his signature English Gothic style.

After Peabody's death, the school decides to have an inscription carved in Peabody's memory into the limestone wall of the chapel. Benson is retained for the work. Upon approval of the design, he goes to the school, erects a scaffold against the designated wall, and lays out and carves a simple memorial to the founder. Passing students often gather around, impressed by his skill and perhaps hoping to see him make a mistake. In this desire they are disappointed.

The capital letter, as ordained in Imperial Rome, is the official vehicle of public inscription. In any major message, the stately Trajan letter style, or its near cousin the Claudio, holds sway. In Benson's ceremonial commissions, as at Exeter, this standard endures. Carving in Benson's Shop is usually done with the stone horizontal. Inscriptions on buildings naturally requires work on vertical surfaces. At Groton and in the inscription above, done for a museum in New York, vertical surfaces allow the carver a more natural position in which to work.

One interesting aspect of lettering is the way legibility remains dependent on familiar word form. The effect is best seen with lower case letters but also occurs with capitals, as in the following example. All year long, from their waterfront dining room on Washington Street, the Bensons witness an ongoing parade of marine traffic. On large commercial vessels the

ship's name is often painted high up, near the point of the bow, in bold, contrasting capitals. If a family member calls attention to a passing ship all will try to read the name. "PRINCESS..." Someone says, "princess, princess... princess something?" And, almost always, if the vessel comes closer or the haze clears, the second word reveals itself to be foreign or of unfamiliar shape. PRINCESS SALONIKA, for example. The eye-brain link, in the case of the second word, can decode it by word form alone, rather than by familiarity yielding an accurate guess. Benson himself, if one can divert his attention from its constant hum, will glance up and read the whole name, taking advantage of his far more extensive visual vocabulary.

We tend to think of our alphabet as consisting of twenty-six letters and, should it occur to us, ten numerals. Further reflection might include a second alphabet in the form of lower case letters and even a vague number of unspecified symbols or punctuation marks. In actual practice, the basic standard for 21st-century typography in English requires a total approaching 200 separate characters for most typefaces. A number of these are fairly recent additions—forms and symbols required by the international nature of today's communications.



*JHB Carving a vertical tablet on site.*



*From the marble headstone of Bliss Willoughby.*

In the past, many metal typefaces contained extra characters where frequent combinations of letters were cast in a single piece of type. In colonial gravestones, it is still possible to see some of these now-obsolete forms of letters and letter use. An alternate style of the lowercase letter "s" was taken into typographic use from hand-lettered texts by scribes of the Middle Ages. Rendered in metal type it was given a shape nearly identical to the lowercase letter "f". Use of the character was defined by a scribal rule allowing it only at the start or middle of a word but never at the end. The Benson-rescued marble headstone by Zerubable Collins is inscribed in lower case letters. The deceased's first name, Bliss", as rendered, looks at a glance like "Blifs".

This common misreading can cause confusion. One grieving Shop client, having lost his wife and wanting a memorial for her, errs in recalling a colonial epitaph. Discussing her inscription, he says, "I want to have the line from an old stone I saw that said, after her name, "The amiable comfort of..." A tactful pause and then, "I think," Benson says, "that what you saw may have read, 'The amiable consort of...' using the old, f-like form of 's'." "Oh my; of course, you're right." says the client. "Well, leave it as I remember it. She was always a comfort to me."

Another engaging example is the word "ye", carved on some old stones. This is often set with the "e" riding over the "y" and seeming to convey the word ye. But the "y" in this case stands in for an Old English letter called a "thorn". The letter "y" would read "th", and thus yield the word "the."

Seeing the small word so written spurs temptation to imitate the voice of Long John Silver in the film of "Treasure Island." In character, with his Norfolk accent, the actor Robert Newton set the standard for film pirates of the future.



*From an 18th century slate headstone.*

### XXXI

Single stones set upright are called monoliths. From the Greek mono for single, and lith from lithos, for stone. Early examples of the type are the Egyptian obelisks (the name meaning pointed pillar, likewise from Greek). In the west, the most widely seen monoliths are those of prehistoric Britain and France, and the Irish Ogham and Scandinavian rune stones of the Middle Ages. The term megalith is often used to designate grandly-scaled examples, like Stonehenge which, standing on the open grassland of Salisbury Plain, remains one of the most compelling prehistoric structures in the western world. The physical and temporal power it conveys are impossible to appreciate unless in person; once viewed it will never be lost to visual or philosophic memory.

The Ogham stones of medieval Ireland and Wales date from the 4th to the 9th centuries and were undeciphered for years. Their symbols have a unique form, consisting of collections of inscribed straight lines. From one to five in number they are cut on either side of, or diagonally across, a prominent edge or seam on a roughly shaped stone. Five more marks, in the form of notches made directly on the stone's edge, complete the set of twenty characters.

More to Benson's liking were the Rune Stones of Scandinavia which date from the 1st through the 5th centuries. The runes have an unusual set of symbols that evolved from the Roman alphabet through cultural contact between natives of the north and Roman mercenaries. Their symbols are essentially Latin but the language rendered is Norse. Cut on stone, bone, and wood they lack deep-curved lines. Inscribed examples are often embellished with illustrations of ribbons or serpentine creatures. Runes are commonly inscribed within these rudimentary images.

In the Stevens Shop are three books of photographs showing rune stones in rural Sweden. Howard Benson studies them, carving an alphabet of runes on a wooden door at the Shop. In doing so, he realizes that the strokes of the alphabet all run across or transverse to the grain of the wood. Carved in wood, cross grain strokes cut cleanly. If carved parallel to the grain, wood fibers tend to run out of the cuts, so the stroke direction in runes may derive from this. Benson's fascination with the architecture and construction



Ogham Stone.



Rune Stone.

of letters supports the unique design repertoire he is building with his work. He does not engage mid-20th century tastes in graphic design, but instead learns all he can about historic lettering and calligraphy.

Scholarly study of the colonial gravestones of the area had lately been advanced by the scholar and photographer, Harriet Merrifield Forbes. Forbes's photographs of early stones illustrate her book, *Gravestones of New England, and the Men Who Made Them*, which she published in 1927. Like Benson, she admired the carved lettering of John Stevens II. In 18th century Newport, the Stevenses had few sources of formal lettering to use as models. Printing in the early colonies was done with used, second-hand type of European or British origin. All the Stevenses could extract from these was the shape of

the characters and an approximation of their style. William and John II's lettering styles therefore developed by learning from their father's vigorous carving and then evolving their own refined designs. V-cut inscriptions by them show the facility of these second-generation craftsmen. The texture of their inscriptions resembles the patterns of woven textiles or the grain of figured wood. They are living letters, familiar, readable and utterly their own.

Benson's tour-guide stints in the Mediterranean expanded his familiarity with classic sculpture. Since then his visual vocabulary has continued to widen in scope. A sense of excellence takes shape in his consciousness, running from the minuscule to the monumental. He admires the bronze Charioteer of Delphi and later discusses it with his sculptor friend Raemisch. Kritios Boy he knew, and the bronze Poseidon, although he tells Fischer he doesn't like the high Greek sculpture of Praxiteles. Italy he visited, Britain only briefly, by ship. He never saw Stonehenge.

Monumental masonry conveys the idea of eternity. Environment contrives to confirm or refute the notion that a built object can indeed last forever. In dynastic Egypt, the ecology of the Nile flood plain and the climate of the region provided ideal conditions for mineral longevity. The country was (and remains) hot and dry, except for the annual deluge—rains that flooded the Nile and watered the fields that surrounded it, an event vital to the survival of Egyptian culture. Along the great river, little has been constructed below its flood line. What is not covered with riparian growth consists of rock and sand.

If you want a gravestone that will last un-blemished forever, and Egypt is not an option, take it to the New Mexican desert. Hide it in the sand. Hot, arid, mineral land fosters the survival of stone. In New England, we experience opposite conditions. Ours is a region of wide swings in temperature and degrees of humidity. The air in coastal areas contains salt; precipitation takes various forms—rain, dew, sleet, and snow. The lifespan of most slate stones from 18th century New England is ending. Slate degrades and delaminates. Air pollution can degrade many stones; white marble monuments are deteriorating, due especially to acid rain.

Benson's fondness for slate is logical; The colonial cutters slate stones are visible in most Newport cemeteries. Soon after starting work at the Shop, he encounters the dense black slate from northern Maine. It has a striking appearance that he particularly likes, and he will use it throughout his career.

Hand carving and low relief are subject to natural erosion. The best, deep-bed slate from commercial quarries is now close to exhaustion. Even granite, our most enduring material, is under threat. Global warming is starting to encourage the growth of lichen and other deposits on our stonework. These organic growths can absorb water, freeze in winter and exfoliate a stone

surface. The commercial monument industry deals with this by insistence upon hard granite and deep, sandblast carving. Cemetery management has begun to advise chemical cleaning as a part of regular maintenance.

Public monuments command our attention, and receive institutionally funded care. Individual memorials do not, as they are designed to be personal and private, and thus depend for care upon surviving friends and family. Decoration Day, a day set aside for individuals to honor and maintain private memorials, is no longer celebrated in the United States.

In some countries burial is for a limited time only. Bones are then removed and put in an ossuary. In warm climates organic matter can encrust stones and obscure them. The poet Hugh MacDairmid, an important figure in the Scottish Renaissance, touched on this. He wrote many of his verses in Scottish dialects. In rough, modern English one his poems, "The Eamis Stane", may be read:

*In the dumb dead of the cold harvest night the world, like a loose tomb-stone, shudders in the sky and my eerie memories fall like a down-drift of snow. Like down-driven snow so I could'na read the words cut out in the stone, had the fog of fame nor the lichen of history\* not over grown them.*

\* "history's hazelraw" in MacDairmid's dialect



*John Stevens II stone in native slate being overtaken by lichen.*

## XXXII



*Westerly RI granite quarry in the early 20th century.*

Despite his love of slate, Benson is often required to carve granite. In some cases, a new stone in a family lot might be required, one that would match the material of existing stones. Late in the 19th century, granite became the preferred monumental material, and certain cemeteries started requiring it. Benson finds that he likes carving the fine-grained granite from nearby Westerly, Rhode Island—its crystalline matrix carves well. In skilled hands, it lends itself to crisp edges and precise detail. The location is convenient, and production of the stone takes place in family-owned quarries thirty miles from Newport.

Routine quarrying requires that the extracted portions of the granite be of sufficient size to yield measured blocks. Well-managed quarries look like giant steps cut into a cliff face. The most workable stone is usually found some distance below the mean grade of the land. Once a deposit of good material is located, the land above, known as overburden, is cleared away. During this process, some of the Westerly quarries unearth material exhibiting

stained, naturally-formed surfaces—these often appear in planar layers of workable thickness. Lettering and ornament cut into these stained faces expose the lighter color of the grain beneath. Growing familiar with the convenient local quarries, Benson discovers this material and finds it appealing. He asks the quarrymen to let him know when they find pieces of “seam-face” stock and to save them for him. Samples of the material shown to clients bring an enthusiastic response. The natural look of seam-face granite from Westerly provides him with a distinct alternative to more formal materials. For the last half of the artist’s career, Rhode Island quarries produce the material in very limited quantities. The John Stevens Shop and its modest crew will produce several large memorials in the seam-face stone.

Most carvers tend to draw letters in outline upon the material they are about to cut. At inscriptional scale, this tendency can pose a problem—the outline itself, no matter how fine, is subject to interpretation. Do you carve up to the drawn line, do you split the line, or are only fragments of the line left in place? Remarkable variations can occur within this tiny boundary. In making a layout using a painted letter the edge may be made finite, thus defining an otherwise indescribable meeting place of surface and cut. Sailors at sea as they approach the shore say they can smell the land. Landsmen nearing the shore believe they smell the sea. Neither is correct. What both sense, be they sailors or carvers, is something else, best defined by saying what it is not; not land, not sea, not paint, not surface; the finite, vital edge of the carved letter to come.

Howard Benson’s Catholic faith helps widen his social connections in the northeast. Among these connections, the foremost is Portsmouth Priory with its community of Benedictine monks that admires and supports his efforts, and helps open doors to new clients. Benson’s work, consistently fine both in craft and in design, is also becoming more widely known, mostly by word of mouth, as the number of satisfied clients gradually increases. His monument work is consistent and lucrative enough to be a key factor in the Shop’s economic stability.

Large families with many children need sizeable burial sites. A single stone centered in a spacious lot is called a family monument. Larger than a headstone, it bears the family name and often some form of decoration. Smaller markers with specific names and dates are placed around or nearby it, on individual graves. A contact comes from a client in Gloucester, Massachusetts who needs stones for a family lot. They want a large central monument, one with imagery appropriate to their Catholic convictions. Benson shows them samples of seam-face Westerly granite. In texture and natural color, it seems to the client perfect. Design sketches are submitted, ideas are considered, and a decision made.

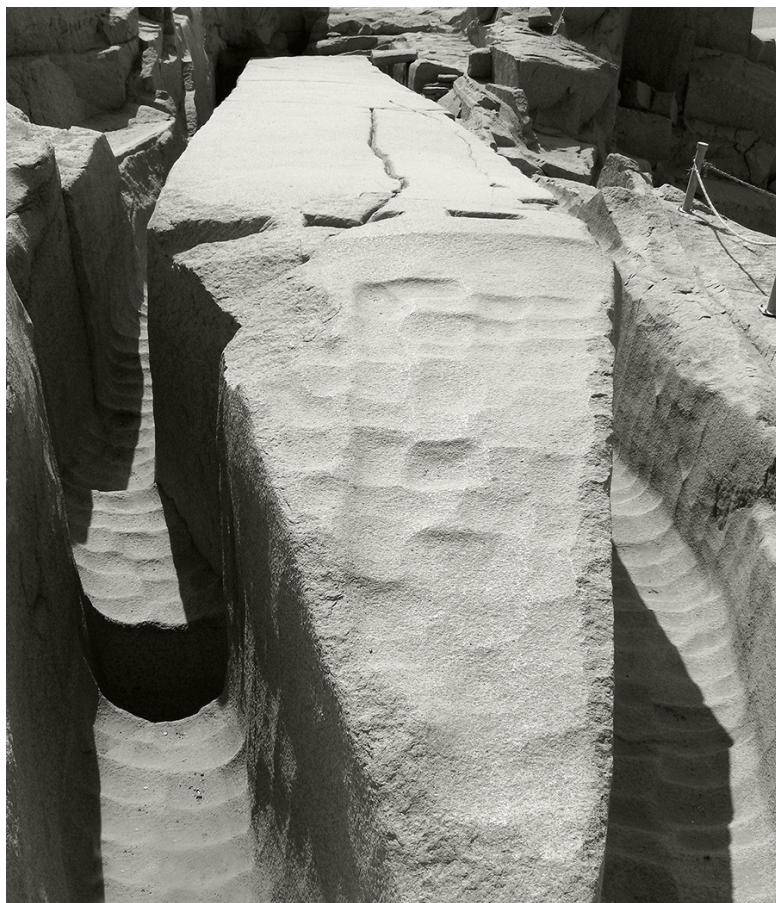


*Bonia family monument, carved by JHB in seam-faced Westerly granite.*

Three quarrying families, the Coduris, the Comollis, and the Yankee Smiths are consulted, as each has a different source for the stone. Benson and his client finally decide on a large piece of seam-face granite to be refined in shape, giving it a peaked top and slanted sides. It is then delivered to the Shop. A quotation, from Revelation 14:13, will be inscribed around the edge of the monument. No mention exists of who thought of using this passage, but the fit is so perfect that Benson seems likely responsible. Framing the edge of the stone, the words contain its space, uniting the active surface. In the center is a deeply-cut Latin cross. Perched on the arms of the cross are mirrored images of a simplified oil lamp, based on those found in ancient Greece. Beneath the cross bar are the Alpha and Omega of the Greek alphabet, standing for the beginning and end of physical life. Below the cross, functioning almost its base, is the Latinate family name BONIA. In each element the light-colored, carved granite shows through, a pleasing contrast with the stone's warm-toned face.

The elements of commemoration are simple to state. Mark the burial and honor the dead. Once the stone memorial is installed, the work is done. Continued relevance is a different matter, open to other considerations. Cemeteries are certainly interesting places to walk and think; they are also settings which encourage the contemplation of human mortality. Historic graveyards invite us to stroll among the departed and feel in touch with them. This is true of any graveyard, whether it is on the island of San Michele in Venice or beside a New England country church; on the scale of a modest, Quaker burial ground, or Arlington National Cemetery. Each place is like an outdoor museum—one that demands little from us save our presence—a presence that means nothing to the occupants. The responsibility for appreciation rests entirely with ourselves.

### XXXIII



*Granite obelisk, partially excavated in a quarry in Aswan, Egypt.*

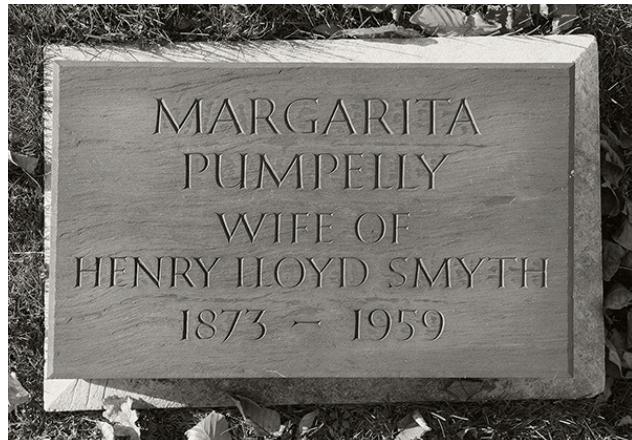
Stone is one of our most durable materials. Hard stones like granite can be hand carved with hammer and carbide tipped chisels. In the ancient world, similar tools existed but the chisels were of soft metal. The hardest, semi-precious stones like jade or jasper, could only be shaped by flaking or abrasion. Granite as well required impact carving, by bashing its surface with harder stones. In the granite quarry at Aswan in Egypt, an unfinished obelisk remains—it is attached to the quarry-bed, shaped by hand at its top and three long sides. At the mid-point of the shaft and branching both upward and downward, is a deep crack that occurred during the carving. The uncompleted obelisk was abandoned on the spot. Hand-beaten trenches in the quarry bed surround it. These are sculptures in themselves, barely wide enough to accommodate a small person and the arc of his rounded, hand-swung hammer stone. They speak of effort unfamiliar to us and serve as monuments to the nameless carvers who shaped them. It would be absurd to compare this work to a hand-carved gravestone. Yet, if one spends a few days hand-carving a piece of stone, an inevitable kinship with historic carvers may arise.

Igneous granite and its kin are followed in workability by hard marbles, slate, and various softer marbles. Limestone is the softest of the widely-worked stones; if weathered long enough in harsh conditions all common stone degrades.

The dark slate from Monson, Maine served Benson throughout his working life. It was taken from a deep, mine-like quarry whose shaft went down hundreds of feet. Monson's combination of sedimentary matrix and fine grain provides three useful features. The surface of the material when split has an even, handsome texture. This allows it to be used for some applications without further surface treatment. The fineness of the stone encourages delicate carving, requiring fairly modest effort. Beyond this, the slate has a grain that is like wood's, with a directional trend resulting in three definable orientations, giving the material great strength in planar application. It is practical for gravestones because it may be expected to last in harsh climates for a century or more. As seen in Egypt, in a favorable environment, slate can last for millennia. Yet as minerals go, it is relatively soft, and this softness affects the way slate monuments endure. The nature of carving in slate also roughens chisel-cut portions of inscribed work, resulting in a lighter color in the cuts, contrasting nicely with the dark surface. The contrast increases legibility but with time this effect diminishes. Other hazards, such as impacts from mowing machinery can scratch and even split a slate gravestone. In an effort to forestall such damage, Benson sometimes puts horizontally-laid stones on granite bases.

As the Shop's reputation grows, its client base widens, and likewise the distribution of its works. For this reason, when carvers are called to work on

site, it may be in a place that is distant from Newport, where the job that requires matching an original Shop carving. One kind of demand for on-site work is the updating of graveyard inscriptions. Though they seldom die together, husbands and wives often share a stone, and the burial of the surviving partner



*A slate ledger stone on a granite base.*

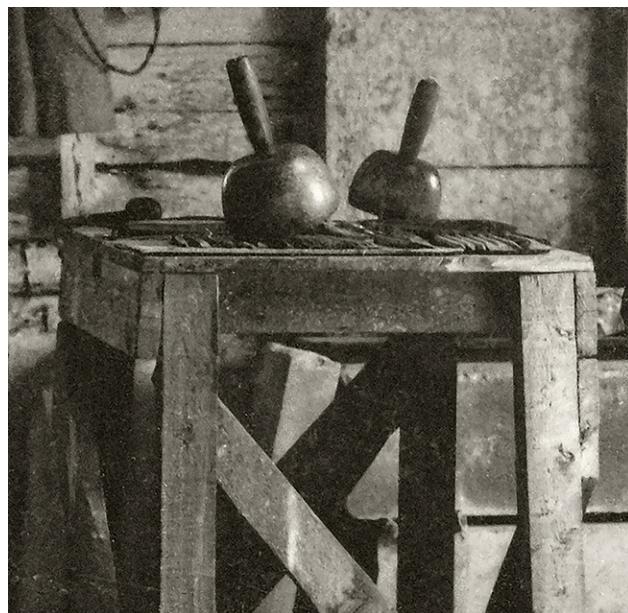
often requires an update of a shared stone's inscription. Subsequent generations also desire burial in old family plots, as long as there is room, and these burials require stones whose inscriptions match the others in the group. In neighboring cemeteries, this poses no problem save that of timing and weather—if a stone is distant the expense of sending a carver to it can be significant. Carving in place, however, can be an agreeable task. Cemeteries are calm and contemplative spaces. Mortality and its timeless imponderables give substance to the work and the time spent on it. Greenery abounds. Birds sing. Metaphysical thoughts emerge in the verdant silence, broken only by the steady tapping of mallet and chisel. Andrew Marvel, who died within a decade of the birthday of John Stevens I, reflected at poetic length on this phenomenon. "To His Coy Mistress" written near 1650, is fraught with implication and desire. Three extracted couplets give a sense of its story:

*Had we but world enough and time,  
This coyness, lady, were no crime...*

*But at my back I always hear,  
Time's winged chariot hurrying near...*

*The grave's a fine and private place  
But none I think do there embrace.*

## XXXIV



*Mallets and chisels in the back room at the shop.*

In the past, scientists often referred to humans as the "tool using animal," a distinction that once seemed reasonable, but which today can be easily challenged. We now realize that many animals use tools. Some fashion them for specific use. Birds are among the best non-human tool users, a close second to primates. We are also coming to grasp the sophistication of animal communication, sometimes taking place over long distances and in ways obscure to us. Recent studies have suggested that small groups of crows can pass on acquired information to much larger crow populations. The great whales clearly communicate with each other using a form of sonar reaching across vast ocean distances.

Our marvelous human brain, from its earliest development, has enabled us to communicate of our thoughts and feelings in numerous ways. One of these has been our ability to produce illustrations of mental images. The oldest occurrences of such imagery have given us the first examples of fine art. Prehistoric cave paintings or sculpted representations of our fellow humans have no known purpose other than giving lasting form to visual and thought-driven imaginings, although these early artistic renderings doubtless had functions in cultures now lost to us. We need not seek to classify them as either Art or Craft, but by dint of their uncontested age and intrinsic metaphysical power these works command our deepest respect.



*JHB carving in a corner of the John Stevens Shop, next to his forge.*

John Howard Benson may be said to represent the last generation of modern women and men able to unaffectedly practice traditional artistic craft. He grew up and spent most of his life with no exposure to television. With his mathematical mind and its abilities, he excelled at practical tasks like celestial navigation, as well as using pure mathematics to artistic purpose. But the dancing, ever-curious attentions of his artist's wit needed few mechanical aids or assistance. At the same time it is certain that, had he lived a generation later, he would have been as captivated as we all are by digital technology, and might have dreamed up novel uses for it. Towards the end of his life, he learned of the Polaroid camera invented by Edwin Land, a marvel at the time, but which today, with the ubiquitous use of instantaneous digital photography, is nearly forgotten. Although Benson was briefly engaged by Polaroid's novelty, he didn't see its value.

Donald Sanford's pneumatic hammer seemed a coarse and brutal tool to Benson; the gentle tapping of a wooden mallet is more musical to him. Steel pointed pens have been in use for over a century, yet in formal lettering he avoids them. For display calligraphy, he prefers the reed pen or the quill. While this does reveal a rather theatrical bent there is, in fact, sound reasoning behind his choices. The Phragmites reed, in deft hands, does make an excellent pen. In addition, the traditional goose quill, sharpened to a chisel-edged point, writes with the natural precision of a fingernail picking up the thin edge of a piece of paper. In addition, it has sometimes been easier over the course of his career, to cut a pen than to find a suitable steel one and earn the money to buy it. At RISD, Benson goes so far as to force his lettering students to cut quill pens, bringing a harvest of primary feathers from domestic white geese into the class for students to pick from. His first move in making the pen is to cut one end of quill to a sensible length and strip the feathers before attending to the point. Some students, conditioned by modern conceptions of the tool, leave the long feathers intact. If Benson sees this he walks up, takes the pen from their hand, cuts off the end, strips the feathers and hands it back. "We're going to write with it," he says, "not fly with it."

Some years after his *Madonna and Child* is installed in the humble Priory Chapel, Benson decides that the piece needs a framework of wrought iron to hold candles that he now envisions surrounding the sculpture. Wrought iron work has always been part of the Shop's output and once or twice a year the forge in the corner is used to make steel chisels for carving. For larger, wrought-iron work he hires a blacksmith, a fine craftsman named Bill Bowley. By this time Bill, with others of his trade, has embraced modern techniques. Benson, however, still uses the old method of hammer-welding for fusing pieces of iron. This consists of heating both pieces of metal to

near white heat, aligning them simultaneously on the anvil, no mean feat in itself, and hammering them together until they become one. Howard specifies many such welds in the frame he designs for his carved Madonna and Child. Bowley suggests that they make them with a newer, gas-welding technique. "Bill," says Howard with a smile, "for that remark you'll be condemned to forging chain for eternity."

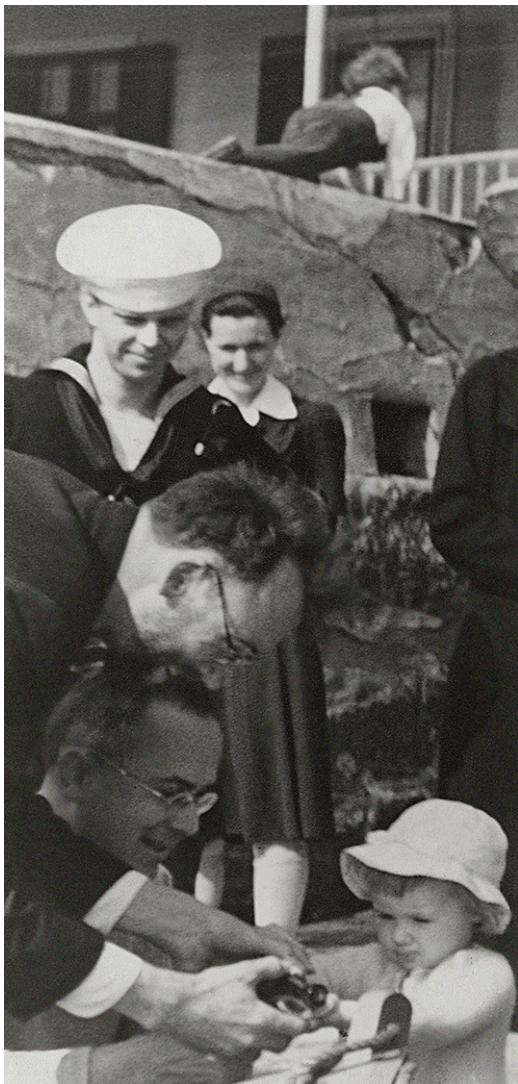
Discussions concerning the distinctions between art and craft, as well as the relative abilities of those who practice in these fields, can arise in the course of teaching both disciplines. In Benson's time, these discussions are common at art schools among students exploring the differences in stature between those who are considered important artists, and those who are not. One difference, however, can be explained through this simple observation—the only quality that cannot be taught is natural talent. Anyone who excels in a sport or in playing a musical instrument will likely acknowledge this. Professionals invested in art education may not. No one wants their accomplishments attributed to accidents of birth or genetics. Yet, no matter how hard you train or practice, the ultimate level in many fields is simply not attainable by everyone. If you aren't naturally quick enough to hit a major league fastball there's no hope for you as a professional slugger. Absent the inexplicable ability to attain transporting tones like those of Maria Callas's voice or Heifetz's violin, the highest art of musical performance is not available. The hook here is that the Babe Ruths of this world, along with those who excel in fields of performance more traditionally called "the arts," can be and have been referred to as artists—but their work must also be recognized as extraordinary craft.

Edward FitzGerald, a wealthy Englishman born in the 1800s, grew interested in Persian poetry of the 11th century. He is perhaps best known for translating and popularizing a selection of quatrains by Omar Khayyam, known in his time as a mathematician, astronomer, philosopher, and poet. Opinions differ as to the accuracy of Fitzgerald's translations. Informed readers feel that his versions, though steeped to a great degree in the sentimentality of the Victorian era, have a place in Western literature and may be appreciated as evocative if not precise renditions of Omar Khayyam's work. Fitzgerald was not, perhaps, an artist in verse, but through his words we can almost hear the whispered voice of the old Persian Polymath, commenting on the ancient controversy.

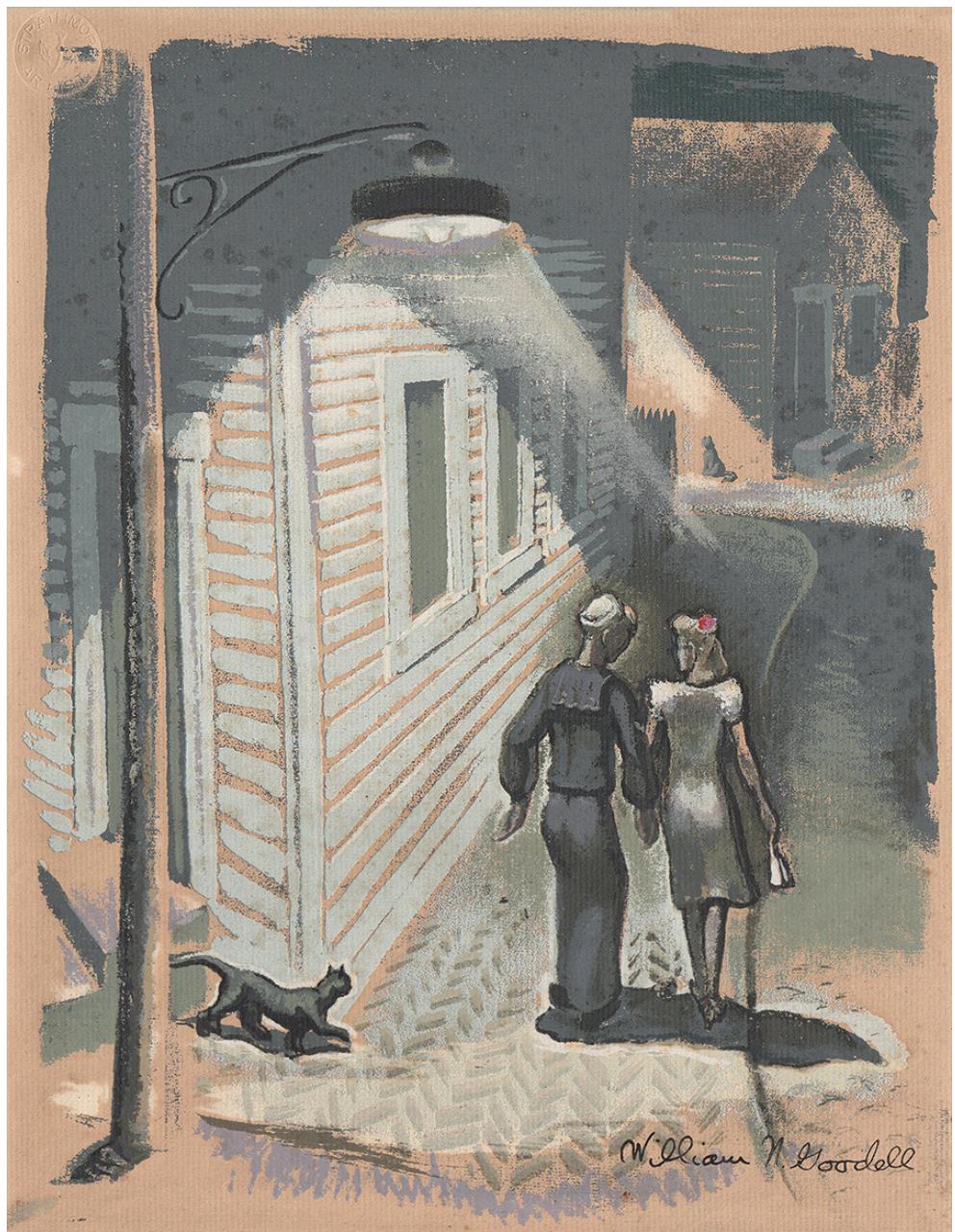
*Myself when young did eagerly frequent  
Doctor and saint, and heard great argument  
About it and about: but evermore  
Came out by the same door where in I went.*

Because of his weak heart, Howard Benson cannot serve in the military. However, during World War II he does do one brief stint as an air raid warden. Seeing wardens in the nighttime streets and being alarmed by sirens of air raid practice are regular diversions for residents of wartime Newport. Although the bombing of the northeast coast is not likely due to Germany's lack of aircraft carriers, the chance of bombing still makes people wary. Black window shades are installed at the Cope house. Early in the war, Fisher writes her mother and mentions the possibility of moving away from the waterfront in case the torpedo factory is bombed.

Navy personnel are quite conspicuous on Newport streets during these war years and the Benson household becomes a haven for some young service men. Galed Gesner, who serves in the Navy, is a friend as well as a deft craftsman and model maker. One of his models survives in the family, a miniature whale boat, complete with whittled oars and whaling gear; all its loose pieces are now lost, from repeated handling by the Benson boys. Another Navy man, Bill Goodell, is a gifted artist. He too finds his way to the Bensons. His three-color silkscreen print shows a night time scene in the town. A lone sailor and his girlfriend walk hand in hand away from the viewer, seen only by a black alley cat. The print survives today, although memories of Goodell do not.



*From bottom up: Marion Covell (King's niece), King, Howard, Galed Gesner, Agnes Swift, and an adventurous Fun Benson on the seawall, ca. 1943.*



*Silkscreen print by Bill Goodell.*

Raymond Gram Swing is a popular local newscaster during these years whose son, Peter, is a sailor serving on a battleship. Peter is musically gifted and when possible, he too, visits the Bensons. He and Fisher sing and play recorders together. For Fisher, this is a rare pleasure, as she stopped her regular piano practice a few years earlier owing to the demands of marriage and motherhood. Peter and Fisher maintain an active correspondence during the war. Decades later she returns to him the letters he wrote to her during that turbulent time. In a grateful response, Swing writes:

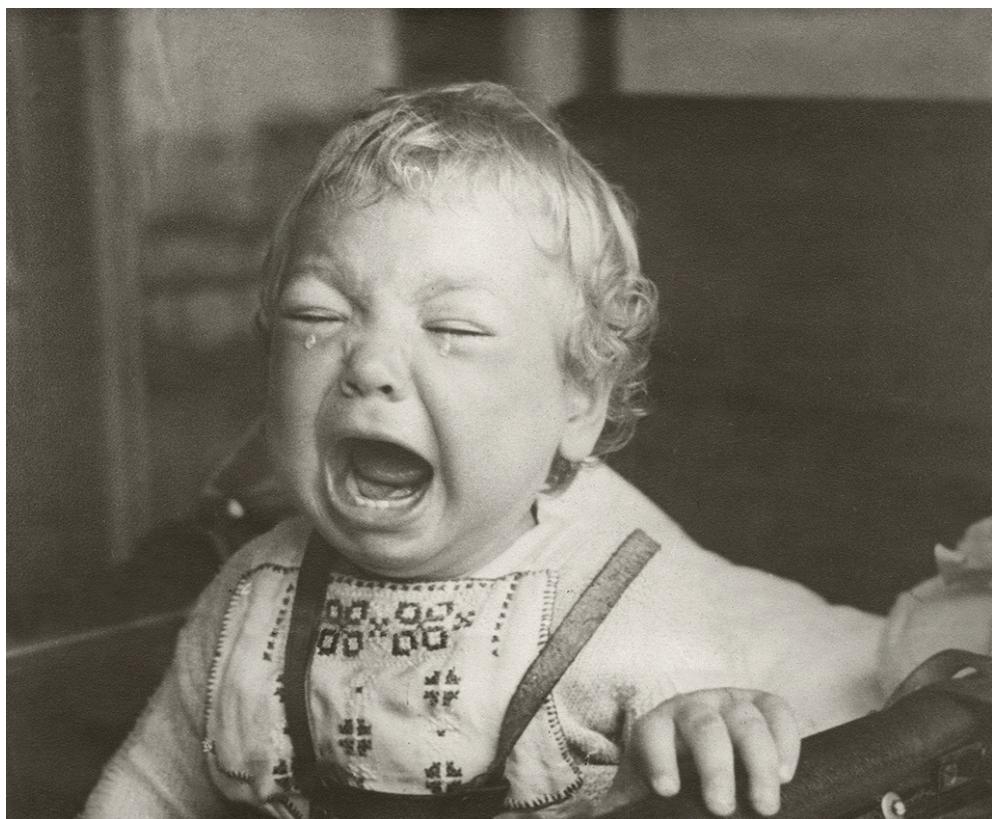


*Peter Swing plays Fisher Benson's alto recorder at a USO party in Newport.*

*Dear Fisher:*

*I spent a quiet evening last night reading the letters I wrote John and you from the USS New Jersey over forty years ago. I realized, in a flashback, how much I owed you both for all the letters you, Fisher, wrote to me then.*

*The Bensons were my emotional oasis then at a time when I clearly needed one. I had forgotten how much I needed it. It was a powerful experience for me to rediscover the feelings I had from those times. It has been a long time since I felt them.*



*Montgomery Clift's photograph of Tommy Tew Benson, crying in his baby carriage.*

The Smith family stockbroker was a man named William Clift. He had a shy and sheltered son named Montgomery. At one point, Mr. Clift decided that his client's sons, the outdoorsy and athletic Smith boys, might be a good influence on Monty. He brought him to meet them, and Monty Clift and the youngest Smith, Ned, quickly became drawn to each other, as opposites sometimes are. In fact, they became friends for life, though when older, their differing life styles prevented regular contact. Clift was a glossy, glamorous movie star who was also gay. The happily heterosexual Ned Smith, after leaving the Army, worked as an engineer traveling the world to set up electro-chemical processing plants. He eventually married the daughter of Stanley Woodward, a Massachusetts seascape painter.

Montgomery Clift, before fame captured him, studied photography. He once won a prize with a picture of the young Tom Benson, blonde, curly-haired, and bawling.

Howard's mother, Elizabeth, is a constant presence in the family. Howard has always called her Mère, and the boys call her GaGa. Busy and productive throughout most of her life, she eventually stops working at her various artistic endeavors and gives up driving. As she ages her practicality wanes and her vanity grows in ways that are difficult for her daughter-in-law to deal with. Elizabeth loves to shop, although she does it with commendable restraint. Through her, the Benson family has another Hollywood contact aside from the young Montgomery Clift. Her house on Ayrault Street in Newport has two tenants, whose income is critical to her. In the next house downhill lives



E.H. Benson at the beach with Tom, ca. 1940.



Fisher Benson's brother, "Uncle Ned" Smith.

Charlie Johnson, who works as a plumber. He and his hired hand Smitty are often needed in the Cope house, with its antiquated fixtures. The Johnsons have a son, twenty years older than Tom. Interested in the theatre, he moves to California and grows successful as the 1950s movie star, Van Johnson. His early familiarity with Van, who almost never returned to Newport, is a great point of pride to the elder Mrs. Benson.

Ade Bethune's Saint Leo Shop on the Stevens Shop's second floor has its own cast of characters. Fisher Benson enjoys the company of Ade's family and grows fond of her mother, "Bon Mama." The Bethunes are also helpful with the Benson sons. Ade is Fun's godmother and a steady ing

influence. Tom Benson continues to be a challenge for his father. Howard has difficulty dealing with boy's loving but persistent demands for attention, and Fisher often discusses the problem with Bon Mama.



*"Fun" Benson, aged about 2.*

one; grace and patience with the boy do not come easily to him. Tom is in constant motion, often with powerful, unrestrained curiosity. In later life, this unqualified enthusiasm would make Tom a great listener and loyal and charismatic friend. As a little boy in an undisciplined and permissive family, he was often a liability.

Fisher has told many stories about her own upbringing. Some are critical but all show the devotion she felt for her immediate family. Many tales are told with a sharp and telling ruefulness which she mitigates with humor. Perhaps her mother, whose temper and even sharper wit were more defensive than shared, prompt Fisher's forgiving nature. They certainly foster her relaxed style of mothering. In one favorite tale from her own childhood she describes an occasion at the dinner table in the refined house her mother kept at Church Lane in Philadelphia. Fisher rises from the table to get something from the kitchen. "Fishie." Her mother calls out. "If thee kicks my chair I just don't know what I'll do with thee." When little Fisher passes her mother's place, as she later recounts, "I looked down and saw my foot just swing out and kick that chair."



*The Cope House facade, seen from Washington Street in the late 1940s.*

The Benson home on Washington Street, known in the family as the Cope house, provides a unique haven for Howard, Fisher and their three sons. The atmosphere is so convivial that visiting friends hate to leave. The house was built in the late 1700s and is a fine example of high colonial architecture. Standing upon a hand-laid foundation of dressed stone, it has a dirt-floored cellar nearly six feet deep. There are two large chimneys, each with four flues, each of which rises between a pair of front and back rooms. There are eight fireplaces.

On the first floor, the two rooms on the street side are used as sitting rooms, and the back room on the north-west side was the original kitchen. It has a fireplace large enough to roast a pig and is still a favorite gathering place. The room opposite it in the back has become a newer kitchen with a stove and sinks, as well as counters for preparing food. The front door, facing the street in the center of the façade, opens onto a small, symmetrical stoop with brownstone steps and a wrought iron railing. In the front hall, a formal staircase faces the front door and climbs to a landing onto which the



*The great fireplace in the original colonial kitchen on the northwest bay-side of the Cope House.*

second-floor rooms open. At the end of the downstairs front hall a smaller, winding, back stairway leads to the second and third floors. The plan of the second floor mirrors the first; its rooms are used as bedrooms. The third floor, with smaller rooms built under the roof, in the past served as servants' quarters. An added bay, off the house's south end, rises two floors to the eaves and helps to accommodate the furnishings of the more up-to-date kitchen. On second floor the same bay serves to enlarge the master bedroom which holds an enormous sleigh bed, sized for Benson's long-legged frame. The third floor of the house was converted at some point to a little apartment, complete with kitchen, and now is reserved for guests and occasional rentals—favored family friends staying for longer visits. A rectangular, 19th century addition was built behind the house which Benson remodels as a home studio after the 1938 hurricane.

For hardy colonists and its ship captain owner the house was perfectly suitable, and was in fact more luxuriously appointed than many other dwellings of that time. But by Benson's day standards have changed, and it is no longer considered well-equipped for year-round use. There is no insulation, and the heating plant is decrepit and coal-fired. For the Cope family and later for Fisher's grandfather Ben Smith, it made a wonderful summer house, shaded on the street side by stately elms, and with an airy, two-story porch on the water side. From there, the back yard runs a mere ninety feet to the seawall. Prudent home owners on Washington Street's waterfront side favor high

sea walls to keep extreme tides and winter storms at bay. Less aesthetically intrusive, the Cope house's seawall rises only to the level of the highest spring tides. A hollow, wooden wall, sketchily maintained and permeable, rises another two feet from grade. At the highest tides, or during storms, seawater floods into the lower part of the yard.

Built low to the water, the pier was susceptible to storms but bred intimacy with the Bay. In the spring of 1942, three years old and clad in winter woolens, Fun Benson toddles out on the pier. A plank has recently gone missing about half way along out. The boy steps through the hole. Fisher, who was watching him from the kitchen, relates the event:

*"I looked up and saw him fall. I seemed magically to float across the yard over the seawall and into the water to get him. I have no recollection of motion. He fell and I was there. I picked him up and found myself waist-deep in water with him screaming in my ear"*

In fairness to Fisher, she is in fact a caring and diligent mother. Blame for the accident lies more with her husband's casual maintenance of the pier's deck, although both are easy-going parents who give their children plenty of freedom. Feats of daring are permitted that make the boys confident and adventurous to the point of near-fearlessness. By chance and because the three are strong and agile, the boys will survive their hazardous childhoods relatively unscathed.

Thanks to the presence of the Navy and its casual policies concerning waste disposal, the waters of the inner Bay are badly polluted. The Bensons swim anyway. They also eat fish and lobsters taken from the outer harbor which is closer to the cleaner, open ocean. Hard-shell clams, in Rhode Island called quahogs, are harvested from places known to be relatively clean; shelled "steamer" clams are also dug in brackish, marshy spots in the less polluted corners of the Bay. Natives believe them safe if they are boiled before eating. The black mussels that cling to the coastal rocks and the footings of wharves and piers are also a local delicacy when steamed.

The picture on the next page shows Howard and Tommy Tew pushing off from the shore in the spring of 1939. A mast lies on saw horses at the end of the pier. Damage from the '38 storm is seen in missing pilings. At the far left is the giant shear-legs crane used to lift boilers from Fall River Line steamers. The brow at Poplar Street is made of wood from the high-water mark to the low-tide line. A sense of what this was like can be gotten from the photograph on page 77. Its large wooden surface gives the place a warm, inviting atmosphere; small boats lining the storage area seem like furniture in a giant, wooden-floored living room. Seen above, the lower end of the



*JHB and Tommy Tew in a wooden rowboat in 1939. '38 Hurricane damage is still visible in the piers.*

wooden brow, washed away in '38, has been replaced with a temporary wooden ramp. Not long after the war the city will tear out the old wooden brows on the Point, replacing them with concrete paving.

Crabbing from the pier is a pastime for the Benson boys. In the Bay, an edible type of red crab exists, prevalent only in deep water. Blue clawed, Chesapeake Bay crabs, William Warner's "beautiful swimmers," are rarely seen. But the green crab, differing from both these, is the Newport harbor-crabber's quarry. The creatures can be found on the rocky shore off the brow of the streetway or in front of the seawall at low tide. An overturned rock will reveal young greens, tiny and scurrying madly. The boys lie on the planks of the pier, hanging their heads and arms over the edge, above the shallow water. All that is needed is a length of household string and a fist-sized rock. A few mussels harvested from the shore are cracked with the rock to expose their flesh. Tied with the string, a cracked mussel is lowered to the bottom in a shallow place where crabs are likely to lurk. The crabber watches until a crab of decent size takes the bait. Then, slowly, he draws the string up; a delicate touch is required to keep his quarry holding on. Useless to the boys except for sport, as green crabs are not good to eat, they are returned to the water after being confined for a time in rusty cans. Local fishermen set crab pots to catch green crabs in greater numbers to use as bait for blackfish.

The family owns a small, flat bottomed-skiff with two lapped strakes forming each side and planked thwartships with white cedar; she has a gently pointed bow and a tilted transom notched with a "scull hole," where a single oar can be set to drive the boat. There are also two small thwarts, one for the rower and one in the stern. Overall, the boat measures a bit over eight feet. Built by the legendary Button Swan, she has come down in the family from Fisher's grandfather Benjamin Smith. The young boys play safely in the little skiff in the yard but Tom is the only one who will row in her. In a rare act of theft, the Swan skiff was stolen from the shore in the 40's.

Rowing with two oars is a relatively straightforward process and can be learned quite quickly by anyone with reasonable coordination. Sculling, propulsion with one oar only, much used around the watery world, is more difficult. In China sampans and other craft are driven by a long, sculling oar with a bent shaft, set aft in the vessel. It is often lashed to the deck inboard of the oar's fulcrum and worked with slow heavy strokes by a standing oarsman. The most sophisticated example of sculling technique is the use of a side-mounted oar by the Venetian gondoliers, who maneuver their boats with the grace of ballet dancers. The hull design of the gondolas evolved over time to enable this mode of locomotion, and in Venice's small canals these craft can turn a canal corner whose diagonal width barely exceeds the boat's



*Tom and Fun in the Button Swan skiff, rowing on the grass. September, 1940.*

own length. To manage this, they have evolved a wondrous form of oarlock allowing various positions for the oar and giving it several modes of use. Carved by Venetian craftsmen in dark hardwood, the oarlocks, called forcole, have become prized as examples of utilitarian sculpture.

The family catboat Penguin had a wooden sculling notch mounted on the stern; an oar was always carried in the cockpit. On one or two occasions, when the engine was acting up and Howard was fussing with it, Fisher would scull the boat to maintain steerage way with slow, forward motion. The boys all learned to scull after becoming adept at rowing. One challenge of the task was to drive the boat through a curving course without having the oar jump from its notch. To maneuver the boat in a spin, easy enough by rowing with two oars driven opposite to each other, was considered a notable achievement in sculling.

In Narragansett Bay, serious accidents are rare but real. In Fisher's family, the loss of her uncle William Smith with his friend Ned Stewardson still looms in memory as a cautionary tale; the boys know the story and learn the rules of boating safety. One winter on a stormy, snowy day a Navy liberty launch is swamped in the rough seas and three sailors die in the freezing waters. Early in the 50s a local boy, Stanley Hurley, is playing in a rowboat with friends just off the brow of Poplar Street. With too many boys on board the boat capsizes and Stanley goes missing. The water is fairly shallow but all efforts to find him fail. Next morning, the old Point Hummer, Harold Arnold, is pulling his crab pots and finds the body. It is a cruel day and a further admonition to the children of the Point to learn and practice safe habits on the water.

The great lexicographer and essayist Dr. Johnson did not, apparently, love boating or the sea. He once wrote, "Being in a boat is like being in jail, with the added chance of being drowned."

Early in 1943 Howard and Fisher decide that they will probably not have another child. They attend a lively party and, once home, tumble into bed unthinking. Their third son, duly named Richard Mead Atwater after Fisher's beloved grandfather, shows up smiling nine months later. "Tommy" Tew is seven and John Everett, nicknamed "Fun," is four by the time baby Richard is born. Unlike Tommy and Fun, Richard, dubbed "Chipper", is calm and contained—the three boys, who already display marked individuality will soon develop into complex and interesting characters. Howard's reaction to the children is mixed, and Fisher takes on the major burdens of child care.

The accidental child, Chipper, later shortened to Chip, will turn out to be the most accomplished of the lot, and far and away the most centered. He is always cheerful, deeply engaged with the world and its wonders, and able to entertain himself unsupervised for hours. In retrospect, it seems that the

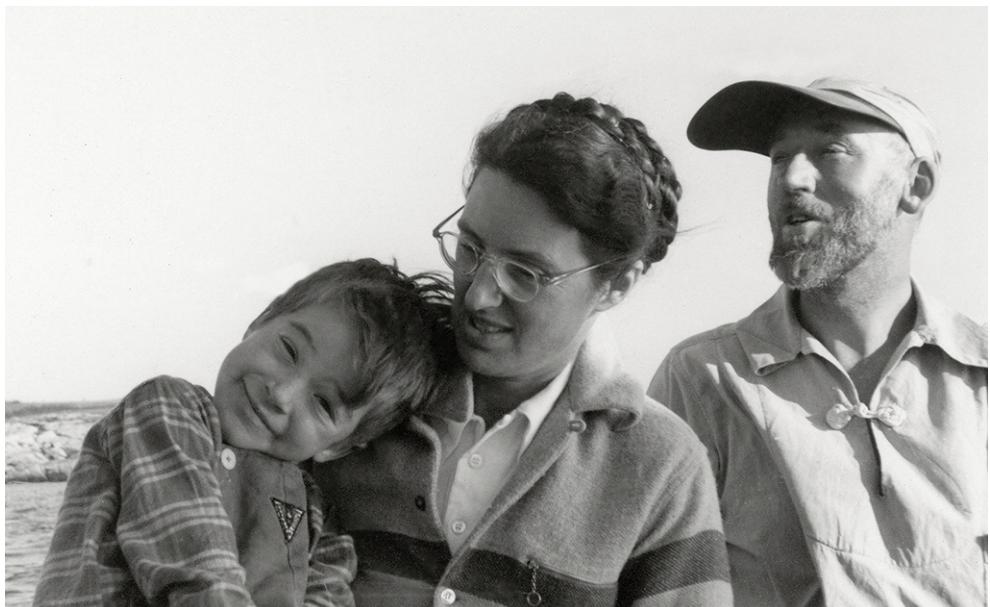


*Fun holding the newborn Chipper on his lap.*

go to their family doctor, Jose Ramos, who sits the boy in chair and takes out his doctor's pocket watch. Close up it gives out a soft, but unmistakable ticking. "Can you hear the watch?" the doctor asks. Chipper has a lisp. "Yeth"

senior Benson did not live long enough to become more than a semi-formal presence to his youngest son. Most likely the artist's flagging health and its attendant restrictions, together with the boy's blissful self-sufficiency, amounted to a sort of distance between them. Then too, as Howard's physical condition worsens Fisher's attentions are perforce divided.

Despite the distractions of Howard's health, she decides at one point that young Chipper must have a hearing problem. He often seems not hear her when she calls. They



*Chipper Benson sailing on Penguin with his parents.*

he replies. The doctor walks across the room. "Can you hear it now? "Yeth." Doctor Ramos walks out into the hall, asking the question a third time. "Yeth," comes the same answer. The test reveals Chip's remarkable hearing and his keen concentration, powerful enough to blank out most interruptions.

The three boys form a loose-bound unit, focused on their activities, but coming together for family outings and events. In summer, boats and the waterfront provide a constant source of diversion. Teeming with naval vessels and service boats, the harbor at Newport is a wonderland of activity. There are two types of tugboats. Two large, seagoing tugs dock at the base on Washington Street. They have American Indian names: *Hopi*, *Nipmuck*. Smaller tugs roam the harbor and dock at Goat Island. All the tugs gain favor because they leave wakes of large shapely waves as they pass the shore—when the boys go rowing and a tug passes by the wakes form a sort of mini roller coaster for their rowboat.

Other Navy service craft likewise intrigue them. Torpedo testing is done off Gould Island, north of town, and continues for a time after the war. Range boats transport equipment and retrieve sample weapons from the testing range. When carrying explosive warheads, the Range boats must fly a signal pennant. Named "Baker" the flag is bright red, with a shallow swallowtail. If a boat is seen flying the pennant a comment or knowing glance passes between the boys. To help them learn the signal pennants, Howard makes them a deck of cards with all the flags drawn in watercolor.

Waterfront families and their neighbors are as much citizens of the harbor as they are of the town. Some have boats of a size suitable to moor off the Point. In Howard Benson's time, there are perhaps fifteen boats on moorings off Washington Street. They are reached by rowboats from the neighborhood, stored on both sides of the three streetways.

Well into the 50s, launches, ferrying sailors ashore for a spell of "liberty" as the Navy calls it, ply back and forth between vessels in the outer harbor and the Fleet Landing in town. Two common types of service launch have evolved for the purpose—sturdy, open forty-foot launches and shorter twenty-six-foot motor whale boats. The latter take their name from the seaworthy, double-ended whale boats of the previous century. Watching the liberty launches in the course of their work is a constant source of diversion for the locals on the shore. The forty footers are manned by an engineman, a helmsman who acts as skipper, and an able seaman. The helmsman stands at the stern of the boat on a platform raised above the floor below the gunwale, surrounded by a brass rail. Officers of higher rank are carried in dressier tenders painted glossy black, with white and varnished trim. All other Navy boats and ships get painted a neutral gray, each driven by the most practical engine that its hull can hold. Tugboats, larger and harder working, are little more than a

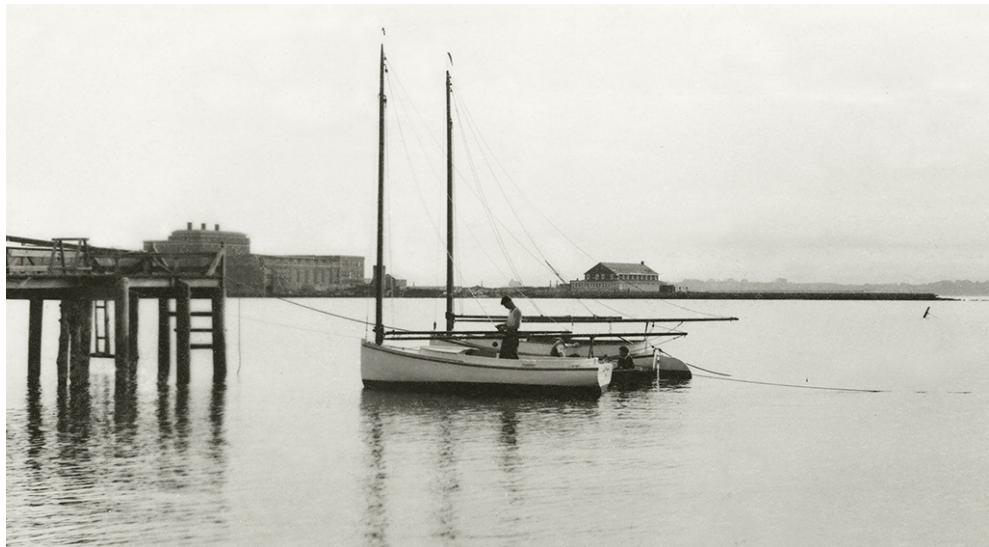
strong hull sufficient to contain and float an outsized engine capable of towing a ship far larger than itself. While active, the torpedo factory employs two ferries to carry cars and passengers from a pair of slips—one downtown and one on the Point. The boys are not allowed to row among the large power boats that crisscross the harbor until they learn basic nautical rules.

On windless or foggy days bell signals from launches close to shore are often heard. Learning the signals, the boys gain insight into the niceties of boat handling. "Full Ahead" is signaled by four brisk clangs. "Full Astern" by two. "Ahead slow" is a single ring, three means "Stop." Navigation is by eye, by lights, and with help from a large, gimbaled, magnetic compass near the helm. One day in thick fog, Tom and Fun hear a tentative sequence of bells close to land. After a tense pause an official voice shouts through the murk:

"Who's in charge here?"  
The instant reply, "He is."  
And immediately back,  
"Like Hell I am!"

The smaller, twenty-six-foot motor whaleboats are used for short haul carriage of work parties and crews. On a few occasions, if circumstances favor it, a work crew will veer off duty and land at a public pier where the deckhand runs to a convenient shop to buy illicit supplies. During the wartime years, the old New England Steamship Company's granite docks, conscripted by Uncle Sam, held an enticing storehouse of nautical gear. For years they stayed fenced, gated, and patrolled. After the war, the regulations ease. Venturesome boys make sorties by rowboat into the forbidden territory. Interesting flotsam found in the harbor and around the sea shore gets smuggled home. Weathered tins wash up, containing food rations. If the tins are still watertight, the contents are consumed with exaggerated zeal. Most coveted are the tins of circular biscuits shaped like larger versions of those served at English teas; they are short, crisp, dry, and given to exfoliation.

The above picture shows two Stoddard catboats tethered to the Benson pier. *Jack Rose* is nearest the shore with owner Ralph Arnold in the cockpit. Both seem recently launched. Neither boat's sails have been bent and the *Jack Rose*'s rudder is not hung. Outboard of her is *Penguin*, with the Benson skiff riding between the two catboats. Howard and Tommy Tew have rowed out to bring her in, setting a stern anchor as they come. The mast shown in the picture on page 171 is on the pier's end, as both photos were taken on the same day. The northern ferry slips are not yet built, but the Fall River Line sheer-legs will soon come down.



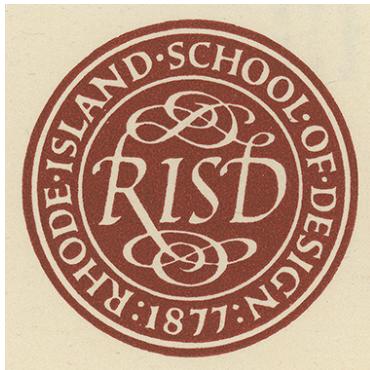
*The Jack Rose and the Penguin swinging off the Benson's pier, with Goat Island's torpedo base beyond.*

Throughout their childhood the Benson boys are subjected to a cohesive mix of influences, breeding in them an unconscious yet solid comprehension of the physical world and how human actions are governed by its nature. Out of all these influences and their combinations, an aesthetic sense develops in each of the boys. It will manifest itself as insight into how man-made objects express themselves, not only as well-made and functional, but beautiful and pleasing to the eye. In their appraisal and understanding of objects, they learn, unawares, to read stories of manufacture and the heredity of knowledge—the informed passion of the maker invested in the object, made worthwhile and visible to the world. Both parents know this in themselves—the same knowing that lived in the Renaissance atelier and the medieval monastery. At the dawn of history, it flowered in the hands of cave painters in Paleolithic Europe. In the best of its artifacts it is a pulse; a visual heartbeat.

For Howard Benson work and home life can run together, and time spent on profitable work in the Cope house studio can save the artist from business distractions at the Shop. It is in this home studio that he fulfills RISD's commission for a design for the school's diploma, to which he adds a handsome seal. The diploma is designed in bold calligraphy and printed in two colors—seventy years later his diploma and school seal are still in use.

Individual diplomas are inscribed by hand with each graduate's name, field of study, and date. For this exacting yearly task, the work also takes place in the home studio. In remodeling the building after the '38 hurricane, a new, flat tin roof was added. Access to the roof, a popular but forbidden vantage point, can be had by a short scramble up to it from the back porch. Should a

boy want an elevated view of something on the Bay his footsteps will sound as a noisy drum beat in the studio below. At least once a year, while inscribing diplomas, Benson is forced to run out the door and drive off an offending child.



JHB's design for the RISD seal.

One summer weekend his neighbor, the steamship maven King Covell, asks Benson to re-gild the finials of his two flagpoles. Applications of gold leaf are routinely carried out at the Stevens Shop and the task is a pleasant one. King takes the spherical finials down from the poles and their copper surfaces are cleaned and sealed. Benson then paints them with a bright yellow, oil-based gold size. The yellow film of size dries slowly to the desired degree of tackiness. Overlapping sheets of twenty-three-carat gold leaf will be laid onto the sized spheres and burnished to brilliance. While the work is in progress Fun Benson comes in from the back yard of the Benson house and calls out to his mother,

*"Mummy, Mummy, Where's Daddy?"*

*"Oh." she replies, he's up the street,  
painting King's balls yellow."*

## XXXVIII

A large, carefully made graphite drawing of Howard's survives from the 1920s. Bad things have happened to it. The paper is of poor quality and has lost its integrity. Something has been eating it, probably silverfish—their appetite for processed wood pulp is famous. A large tear runs part way down from the top of the sheet. Common, garden varieties of dust and dirt have provided a rich patina. Any forger would be delighted with the effect. And yet, despite these problems it survives, exemplifying the confidence of Benson's draftsmanship.



*Early JHB graphite drawing of Bill and Gladys Bozyan McCloud's house.*

The drawing is almost photographic in its rendering, and were it clean and crisp, two thirds of the scene could be from the present day. It is the right hand third, however, that reveals the picture's era. The hanging street lamp is from the 20s. The lighthouse is still connected to Goat Island by the causeway destroyed in '38. The ferry at the extreme right is unmistakable. It is the Conanicut which went out of service in 1927. So, here we find ourselves, in the blush of a peaceful summer day between the two world wars.

In the 1930s, an Armenian family buys the house next door to the one Howard drew in the 20s. Side by side, the two houses are both on the Washington Street waterfront. The family patriarch, Arakel Bozyan, is a striking man with large features, a thick moustache and a handsome bald head. He and his wife Aghavni have five children: Frank, Victoria, Gladys, Edith, and Theodore, always called Buster. Frank has a musical ear, plays the organ, and ends up teaching music at Yale. All the girls have dramatic features and lively personalities. The oldest daughter, Vicki, marries and has two tall sons. Edith, the youngest girl remains single; she is an artist and antique dealer in Newport. The middle daughter, Gladys, marries an older Scotsman named Bill MacLeod, a second marriage for him.

Bill MacLeod has owned the house in the pencil drawing since 1916. Gladys and Bill have two daughters. Mary Ann, and Jane, Fun Benson's first childhood friend. Arakel, called "Pop" Bozyan and Aghavni, called "Mom"

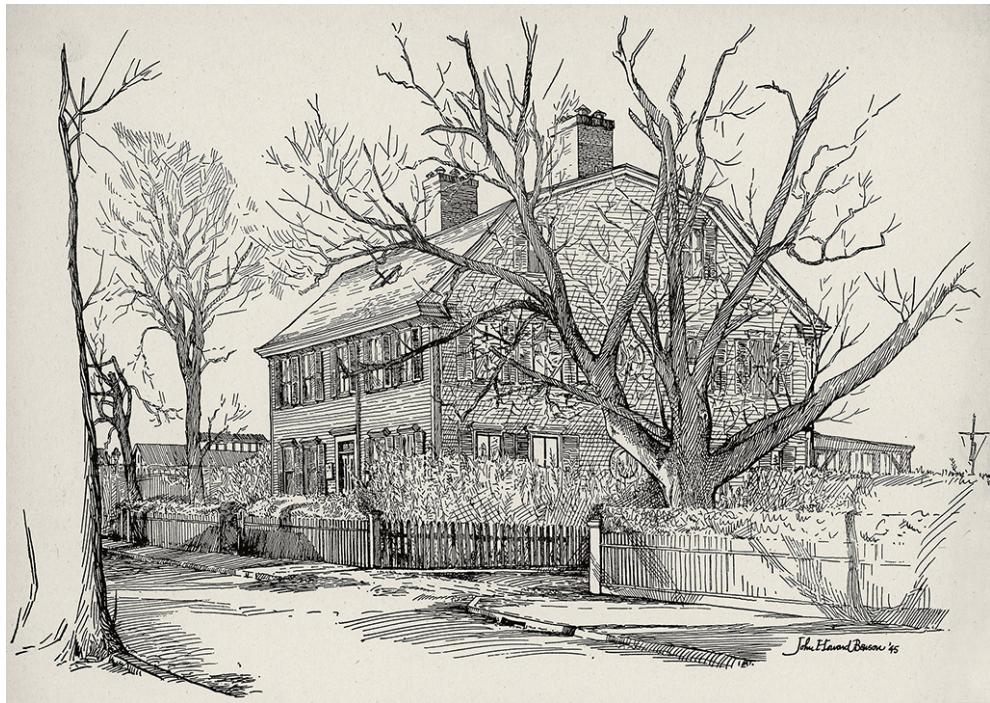
live with varying assortments of their family in their newer waterfront house, next door to the north. This house is later given to the oldest daughter, Vicki and her family.

By the time Howard and Fisher are settled in the Cope house they have around themselves the makings of an extended, neighborhood family. The Robinson house next door has come down through Ben Smith's family to Fisher's cousin Henry Wood. Henry is a stockbroker and has married a stylish woman named Dagmar Lundholm, a gourmet cook, and admired hostess. She and Henry have two children, a son, Henry Jr. and a daughter Anna. For much of the year they live in Boston where Henry Sr. works, and come to Newport every summer. Next to the rough and ready Benson boys the Wood children, a decade older, are more worldly and mature.

King Covell lives in a large Victorian house between the Woods and the Bozyans. King has two siblings and six nieces. Three of the nieces are the same ages as the Benson boys and three a few years younger. The older girls are the daughters of King's sister, who is married to a man named Ramsey. Although they live elsewhere, the Ramsey girls visit their Uncle King in the summers and are admired from afar by the Benson boys. King's younger nieces are the daughters of his brother Robert and his wife Virginia, who live further north on Washington Street. Robert has the musical gift of perfect pitch, and every Christmas he and King lead a group of carolers around the Point. Each selection starts with a clear, resonant note, vocally sounded by Bob Covell, smack on the tonic of the chosen key. King is likewise musical. When he plays his pipe organ in the house it rattles the rafters and can be heard through the walls.



*Neighboring houses on the waterfront, ca. 1920-30. L to R: Bozyan house, Bill and Gladys McLeod's house (behind a tree), the Sanford Covell house—called Villa Marina, and the Robinson house.*



*JHB drawing in pen and ink of the Hunter House. Made for the Newport Daily News calendar, 1945.*

King Covell lives in a large Victorian house between the Woods and the Bozyans. King has two siblings and six nieces. Three of the nieces are the same ages as the Benson boys and three a few years younger. The older girls are the daughters of King's sister, who is married to a man named Ramsey. Although they live elsewhere, the Ramsey girls visit their Uncle King in the summers and are admired from afar by the Benson boys. King's younger nieces are the daughters of his brother Robert and his wife Virginia, who live further north on Washington Street. Robert has the musical gift of perfect pitch, and every Christmas he and King lead a group of carolers around the Point. Each selection starts with a clear, resonant note, vocally sounded by Bob Covell, smack on the tonic of the chosen key. King is likewise musical. When he plays his pipe organ in the house it rattles the rafters and can be heard through the walls.

The waterfront families are drawn together by place and circumstance. They move in much the same circles and form a ready support group for Fisher when so much of her husband's time is spent in teaching and in dedicating long hours of painstaking work to his artistic career.

In the next house south of 62 Washington Street, lives an unmarried woman named Agnes Storer. She was born in Italy in 1875, the only daughter of Horatio Robinson Storer, a physician, numismatist, and pioneering figure

in the anti-abortion movement in Massachusetts. Storer's motives for this posture were likely straightforward, and, as he was a gynecologist, perhaps well-founded for his time. He died in 1922. His daughter Agnes moves to Newport and into the early 20th-century-era house next door to the Bensons. She continues to live alone, becoming well-known around town and to the Bensons in particular. Young Thomas Tew is a favorite neighbor of hers. He likes to scramble over her fence and call at her back door. At her death, she leaves him a thousand dollars and a handsome, over-the-mantel-sized seascape by the painter William. T. Richards. The tree in the illustration of the Hunter house above, shows the southeast corner of Agnes Storer's yard which abuts the Elm Street shore.

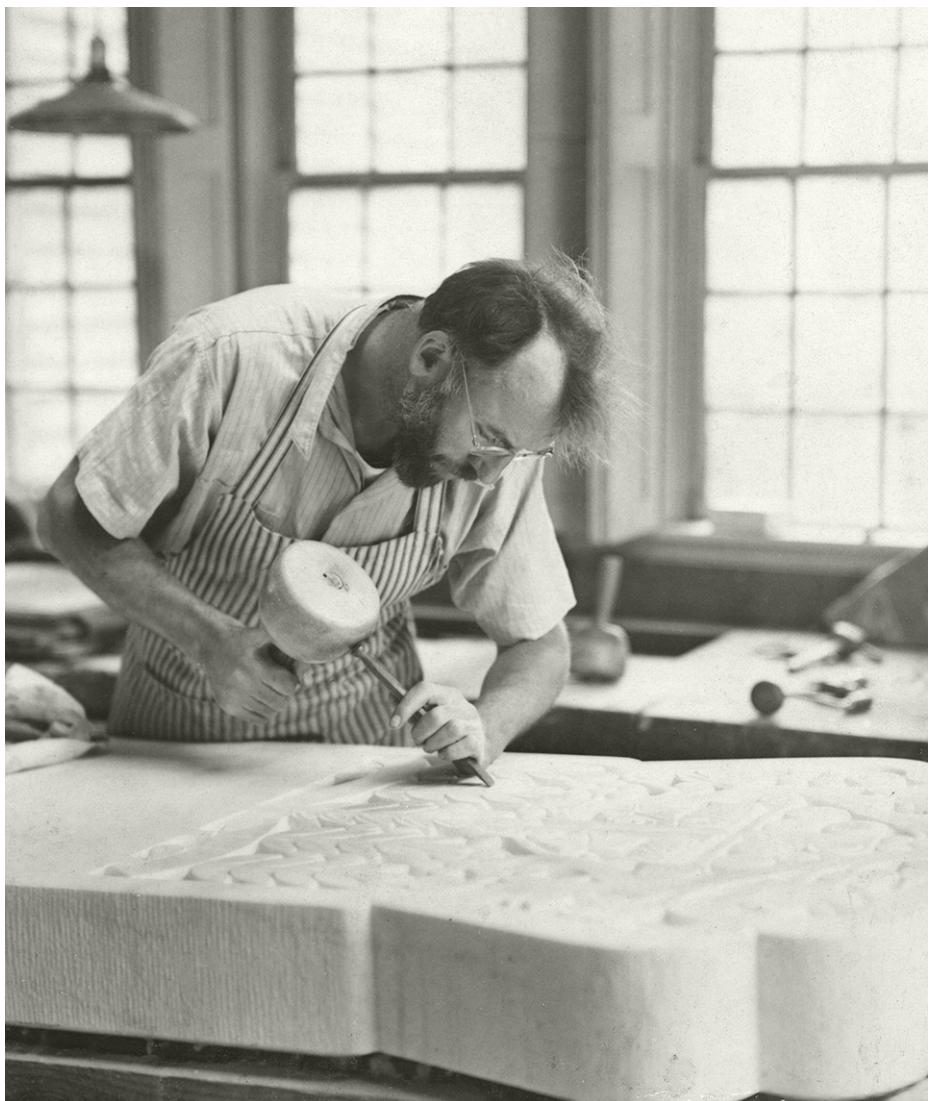


*The Cope House, from its pier before the '38 hurricane blew off its widow's walk and the little boat house at the foot of the yard. JHB's studio would later be converted from the addition off the porch.*



## PART FIVE

*Mid Career Work*



*JHB carving the Bodell stone with a zinc mallet and steel chisel.*

## XXXIX

THE COMPLEXITY of interpretations associated with great art objects may, for the average viewer, be an obstacle to their appreciation. Academic dissection of important works can further complicate the process of understanding, as the more one knows about a subject the more conditional the process of appreciation can become. Theater critics are conspicuous abusers of such knowledge. If you have seen some of the best theatrical portrayals of Hamlet over the years, your assessment of a new one may be blurred by saturation—not a problem if you write for similarly experienced audiences but irrelevant to most theater enthusiasts. In 1432 the Florentine painter Paolo Uccello made three fantastic pictures of a battle scene. Most who see the pictures have no idea of the significance of the not-so-famous Battle of San Romano, yet our pleasure in looking at the works remains undiminished by this fact. The paintings stand, by dint of their merits, as splendid works of art. Was that battle known intimately to Uccello? Quite possibly; they were contemporary with his own life. Does this matter to the rest of us? As John Howard Benson might have said, “Not at all.” As much as knowledge informs our opinions it is not always a precondition for their worth.

The traditional, physical methods of art and craft have come under disdainful assault by some who tout the remarkable achievements of the digital age. In the past, when people saw an example of hand-carved lettering in stone, it was easy for them to appreciate as well as critique—it was the work of a very skilled or not-so-skilled craftsman. Later, as the world became more and more machine driven, a frequent comment became, “Isn’t there an easier way to do that?” Today, in the business of carving in stone, an approximate form of V-cut letter can be made with a combination of digital type design and a high tech, computer driven router. Using rapidly spinning diamond cutting bits, a passable v-cut can be achieved. Likewise, the old-world style of carved and gold-leafed signs can be achieved by using a similar technique. Many sign “boards” today are made of mechanically inscribed urethane foam. Basic typesetting and composition are available on most digital desktops. The once exclusive craft of graphic design has been handed to everyone. It is possible that we do all benefit, but the profession has inevitably changed. Regarding such ironies, Fisher Benson liked to quote from the book of Samuel, “How the mighty have fallen!”

That being said, Newton states in his Third Law, that for every action there is an equal and opposite reaction. And so, in our frenetic, digital world we have actually begun to see a resurgence of interest in traditional crafts. Fine furniture making, wooden boatbuilding, and similar disciplines are being taught to a generation of new enthusiasts. To a person who has not

known the rewards of hand work from childhood, their discovery in adulthood can be fascinating and compelling, even more so to those who discover that they are good at making things and like doing it. Appreciation of a well-made object is a tonic, an even stronger one if you have made the object yourself. And the better you get at it, the more satisfying your work becomes.

## XL

As World War II grinds on to its dreadful climax, Allied victory becomes more and more inevitable. Work at the John Stevens Shop has continued through the conflict, although often affected by shortages of manpower and materials. Stone has not been a problem but difficulties in shipping develop due to gasoline rationing. Most young American men are at war or occupied in wartime work. Howard's health is sometimes a factor in his performance, though this problem is managed thanks to his wife's ministrations. He runs his Shop through the war years with mature employees like the local Bill Mohr, whom he uses for masonry and stone shaping. The help of his partners, Graham Carey and Ade Bethune is a blessing. Often in Newport, Graham commutes from Cambridge, Massachusetts to help with client contacts and to have discussions on design. Ade, while running her St. Leo Shop on the building's second floor, assists with drawing and consultation. In the mid-40s one of Benson's students from RISD, a young woman named Roxanne Price, comes to work for him.

Known as Nancy, she is the great niece of a noted landscape painter. Quiet, gracious to a fault, smart, and gifted, she emerges as a godsend to the business. The boss likes her from the first. Fisher, perhaps concerned by the addition of a pretty young woman to the staff, soon sees Nancy's worth and accepts her gracefully. Over the next decade the two build a strong friendship.



*Nancy Price.*



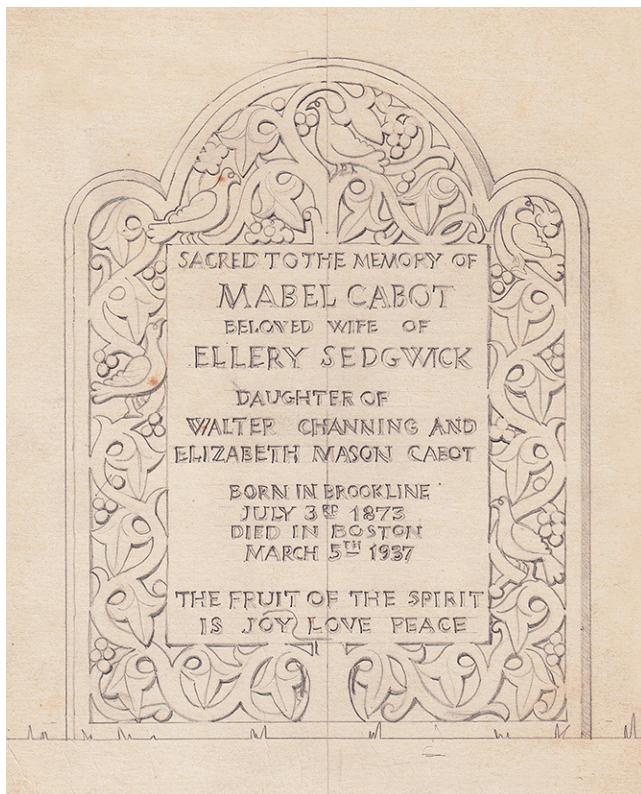
*The Three Johns* by Edith Ballinger Price, 1954.

Nancy Price's father (Charles) Matlack Price knows Howard through his cousin Edith Ballinger Price, and by way of connections at RISD. The painter William Trost Richards was Edith's grandfather and many of Richards's exquisitely rendered oil paintings depict the land and seascapes of Rhode Island in the 19th century. Edith, who lived in Newport and taught at the Art Association, was herself a skillful draftsman, a successful book illustrator, and an independent woman. She drew this cartoon of the stone-carving Stevens family although she mistook their dates—all three were not alive in 1735. It is a charming work none the less.

In May of 1944, as Eisenhower's troops and Allied forces are massing for the D-Day assault, Elizabeth Paine Metcalf writes to Graham Carey. Her handsomely penned letter starts:

*"My Uncle Mr. Ellery Sedgwick tells me you designed Aunt Mabel's lovely gravestone. My father, R. T. Paine, died last autumn and my mother wishes to have a stone designed that would harmonize with the other stones in her lot in Brookline. I wondered if you would be willing to undertake this."*

In the Shop files is the first sketch made for the Mabel Sedgwick headstone. It is not from Benson's hand, so Carey himself may have drawn it. The finished stone is installed at the head of Mabel's grave in a unique cemetery lot called The Sedgwick Pie. All burials within it are laid out in concentric circles around the graves of the patriarch, Theodore Sedgwick, born in 1736, and his



Graham Carey's layout drawing for the Mabel Sedgwick stone.

wife Pamela Dwight. One story says that the purpose of the arrangement will appear on Judgment Day. When all rise up to glory, facing the center of the Pie, they will see only fellow Sedgwicks. The place, nevertheless, is a very handsome lot in an equally beautiful cemetery in a lovely, old New England town.

This correspondence and the families it mentions evoke a kind of Who's Who of social distinction. The first Robert Treat Paine was a signer of the Declaration of Independence, a Harvard graduate, and a lawyer. His mother was the daughter of Reverend Samuel Treat, a founder of Newark, New Jersey. Mrs. Metcalf's father, R. T. Paine, had an initial career as a merchant; he sailed to Spain and made a profitable whaling voyage to Greenland. Ellery

Sedgwick (1872 -1960) was another descendant. Also a Harvard graduate and an alumnus of Groton School, he assumed the editorship of the Atlantic Monthly in 1909. By 1928 he had solved its financial difficulties and dramatically increased its circulation. The Rhode Island School of Design in Providence was founded by a Metcalf and remained under the family's stewardship for three generations. Graham Carey may have been approached for the commission because he was of a similar social background as the Sedgwicks, Paines, and Metcalfs; his family was connected to John Jacob Astor.

The daughter of R. T. Paine knew what she wanted for her father's stone. It would be set in the family lot in Brookline, Massachusetts. Existing stones there are flat ledgers placed horizontally upon the graves. One is from a design by Bela Pratt, a sculptor from Cape Ann, Massachusetts. Pratt had studied with Charles Grafly who made the monument in Washington, DC honoring General George Gordon Meade, victor of the Battle of Gettysburg. Dedicated in 1927, it now stands near I. M. Pei's East Building of the National Gallery of Art. Both monument and museum are made of Tennessee marble. It seems that a photograph was requested of the Pratt stone to serve as a model for the new one. Mrs. Paine writes to Howard Benson:

*I have been promised over and over again by a photographer that he will go to Brookline and take (a picture) of the wreath and then every weekend, it is put off. I shall eventually succeed.*

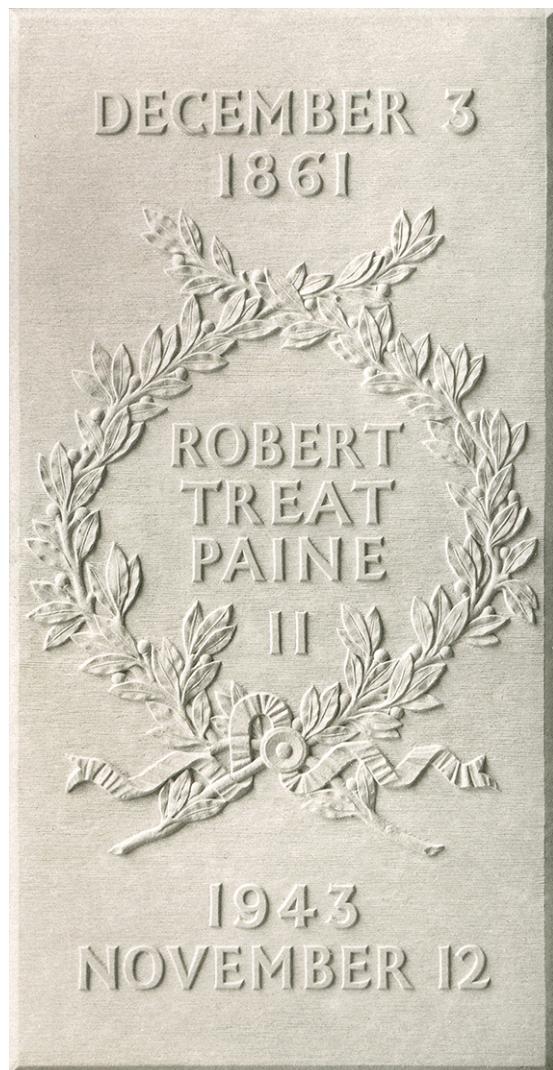
In spite of her resolve, Elizabeth Payne Metcalf never gave a photograph of the wreath to the Shop and no image of the Pratt-designed gravestone appears in the record. There is, however, a large photograph of a marble-topped sideboard in elegant mahogany with ornate gilded adornments. The central motif is a wreath in ormolu. Was this alternate design suggested by the determined client?

When at last completed in Tennessee pink marble, the design does incorporate this wreath device. It is drawn to



Sideboard top, with ormolu wreath.

occupy the major space on the stone. Above it, carved in similar scale is the date of birth; below this the date of death. The four-part name "Robert Treat Paine II" is arranged in four lines, filling the space within the wreath itself. Both lettering and ornament are carved in restrained yet dramatic, raised



*Robert Treat Paine memorial.*

relief. The background of the entire low-relief design is cut away and the chisel-finished face allows the grouped elements to stand proud upon it. If one knows the Meade Memorial it is clear that it and Mr. Paine's gravestone are very different creatures. However, they do share important characteristics; they were created at roughly the same time, and both are made of similar material.

FLAGS OF THE  
OLD STATE HOUSE  
NEWPORT R. I.

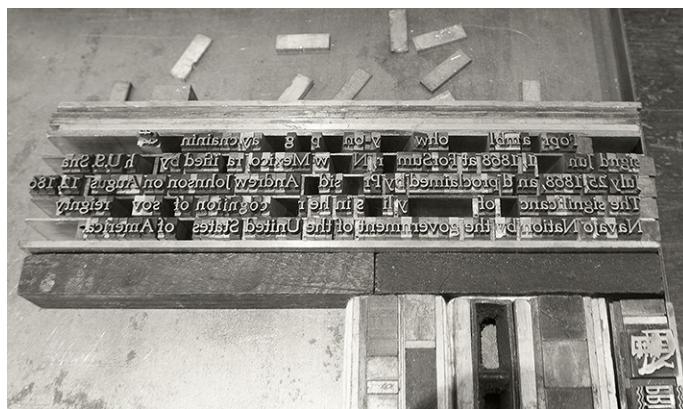
*Wood engravings in color  
by John Howard Benson*



OLD STATE HOUSE INC.  
NEWPORT, R. I.

*Title page for JHB's letterpress book of RI Flags, ca. 1945*

In the mid 1940s Benson is preparing to print a small, letterpress book, commissioned by his patron Edith Wetmore, showing a group of flags from the old Rhode Island State House in Newport. The flags, most in poor repair, are redrawn to a uniform standard as color diagrams by Durr Freedley, a painter and friend of Howard's. Accompanied by a short, informative text they will be reproduced as wood engravings and printed in color at Benson's home studio. The text of the book is to be set in the foundry type Janson, full cases of which were a gift from his friend and patron, Henry Coe. Printing will be done in Cope House studio, and Nancy Price will be given her first job for the Shop as the book's typesetter.



*Movable lead type blocked-up for printing on a letterpress.*

In our digital world the taxing process of setting metal type is largely forgotten. Those unfamiliar with the process are often amazed when they discover the demands and precision of the task. Each piece of type, with its individual letter, is selected from a case with many compartments. As with all printing types, the letters are made backwards so as to print right way around. Their sentences must thus be set right to left. Professional typesetters hold in one hand what is called a composing stick, where the individual letters, plucked from their boxes by the composer's other hand, are set in left-to-right sequence, but upside down. The typesetter can therefore read the sentence—upside down but in its proper, left-to-right order. The type is then slid, en masse, onto the bed of the press. Once printed, the type is washed free of ink and either stored for further editions or precisely re-distributed piece by piece into its case.

Having seen Nancy's nimble work as a RISD student, Benson asks if she might like to help with setting type for the Flag Book on her vacation. She does and does it well enough to be asked to come to the Shop and learn

to carve letters. She will stay at the Shop for twelve years, learning the many skills required in the trade. Her presence becomes priceless to the boss whose physical limitations will increase in the next decade.

Durr Freedley had died in a car accident by the time the flag book came to be made. Born in 1888, he lived and worked in Newport from 1932 to 1938, and was a good friend of Howard Benson's. Freedley's work may be seen in Newport at St John's Church and in the chapel at the Seaman's Church Institute, off Thames Street.



*Durr Freedley in his studio, mixing colors for a portrait.*

Freedley attended Williams College for two years where his work was widely admired. Following this he moved on to Harvard, graduating with a cum laude degree. During one Harvard summer vacation, he had traveled to Italy. Among his friends there was Paul Manship, an important figure in the Art Deco movement and one of the foremost sculptors of the day—his gold-leaved figure of Prometheus is set on the west wall of the skating rink at Rockefeller Center. Freedley enlisted in the Army Air Service in 1917, serving first in Texas and then in Hampton Roads, Virginia at Langley Field, where he worked on the development of camouflage for warplanes. He was soon ordered to France, but the war ended before he saw action, and he received an honorable discharge in 1919.



*Freedley portrait of a society gent, Seneca Pierce, 1924.*

A broadly gifted artist and designer, Freedley had a penchant for church decorations, murals, and stained glass. Working as a decorative arts curator at the Metropolitan Museum, he was instrumental in the development of its American Wing. But Freedley's main work, and likely his bread and butter, was as a society portraitist. He gained recognition in this field, and the quality as well as the subject matter of his work gained him an entrée into the high society world of New York, Paris, and Newport. A gay, single man, he enjoyed and celebrated the stylish milieu into which he had deftly fit himself. Grounded in the Arts and Crafts movement by his studies, he moved to Paris in 1923. The tolerance and sophistication of the city afforded him a welcome and comfortable lifestyle. The Art Deco movement was flourishing there, and he soon integrated the style into his own work. After four years or so in Paris he returned to the United States, and to the social circles of New York and Newport, renting an apartment in New York in 1927. Traveling by Fall River

Line steamer, he moved back and forth between the two cities, and settled in Newport in 1932.

Freedley died tragically at the age of forty-nine in an automobile accident in Lexington Massachusetts. Benson and Howard Moise, another friend, were named trustees of a small sum left by the artist to benefit artistic endeavors. Freedley left the residue of his estate to Benson. This consisted of portrait studies, finished but unclaimed paintings, drawings, notebooks, and sketches. The young Benson boys grew up accompanied by a changing parade of Freedley pictures, most portraying elegant society patriarchs, matrons, and scions, that hung in the Benson home over the years.

## XLII



*Robert Flaherty at work.*

Near the war's end, Gordon Washburn, brother-in-law of the documentary film maker Robert Flaherty, contacts Benson to discuss making a film about the artist and his work. Best known for such films as *Nanook of the North*, Flaherty is in many ways responsible for the evolution of the documentary form. Washburn, Director of the RISD Museum at the time, knowing that Flaherty is without work, offers him the opportunity to make a short documentary film financed by the Museum. Benson and his work are considered



*Bob Flaherty films JHB cutting a reed pen.*

as a likely subject. The stone carver and the film maker meet. Although years apart in age, the pair finds common ground, mainly through their interest and experience in photographic media. Like most Americans of his time Benson loves movies. He often takes the older boys to the Avon Cinema in Providence to see films like Errol Flynn's Robin Hood and Olivier's Henry the Fifth. In due course Flaherty comes to Newport and work on the film begins.

Motion picture photography is a new and intriguing experience for the stone carver. He sees at once the possibilities of using the "documentary" as a new way to convey the essence of artistic craftsmanship. Filming begins in the summer of 1944 and proceeds in relaxed fashion based on each man's schedule. Flaherty starts coming to Newport for a few days, and shooting film with and about the artist. Unlike Benson he has a casual approach to method. Working with 16mm reversal film he makes only one work print and does a rough cut directly from it, often with Benson on hand offering suggestions. Robert, whom Benson soon calls Bob, sometimes brings his wife along on his visits to Newport. Of striking appearance, Frances Flaherty has white hair braided and wound round her handsome head.

Flaherty's equipment gets set up in the artist's home studio. After a work session with the photographer Benson often takes it upon himself to make further, unsupervised edits when Flaherty has left. This practice goes on for a time. Flaherty's casual work habits are instilled and unchanging at this late stage in his life and are hard for the still-agile Benson to accommodate —one day's shooting is lost due to Bob's having forgotten to load film in the camera.

By the end of the first summer it becomes clear that each man has a very different idea of what the film could or should be. Flaherty wants it to be a documentation of the life and work of a distinct and unique individual. The individual, Benson himself, wants no such laudatory presentation. He



*JHB selects phragmites reeds in a seaside marsh in Middletown, RI.*

feels it is the physical work that should have center stage. They appear to have had no serious arguments, and no record of heated conflict exists—on the contrary, each had grown quite fond of the other in the time they shared.

The major part of Flaherty's work, done intermittently in Newport in 1944, continued for a time in the fall of 1945 then came to a stop in December of that year. One 16mm reel exists, showing Benson cutting a goose quill pen and briefly demonstrating its use. Another short segment shows Benson cutting phragmites reeds used in making pens for larger letters. Both segments were assembled at first by Benson and later by his associates.

Robert Flaherty dies in 1951 at the age of 67, and photographs in the Shop files show Howard carving the Flaherty name on a large boulder, marking the lot where the film-maker is buried. Bob's wife Frances is to join him there. A simple slate stone marks the grave site, bearing both their names. To accompany these, Howard carves an Irish emblem of clasped hands and a heart, called the Claddagh.

Benson's working life, punctuated by family adventures and workday routine, depends on a non-stop sequence of paid jobs: relief carving, headstones, graphics, teaching. The cadence of life at the Shop is measured by the tapping of chisels and mallets cutting slate and marble, or steel hammers carving granite. A few times a year the forge and anvil in the corner will smoke and ring as steel chisels are forged, hardened and tempered. Unlike in today's workplaces, power tools are seldom heard. These daily routines, depicting the Shop's artisans at work with their traditional ways and tools, were likely what the practically-minded Benson conceived of as the film's subject. Another film maker might have been able to succeed with this idea but Flaherty's goals were different. In truth, he was a more conceptual artist whose selected images could only be captured with spontaneous autonomy. To understand how he worked, we need only look at Flaherty's completed films, some of which own a significant place in film history. A way to look at the failure of the Flaherty-Benson film project is as another standoff between Art and Craft.

## XLIII



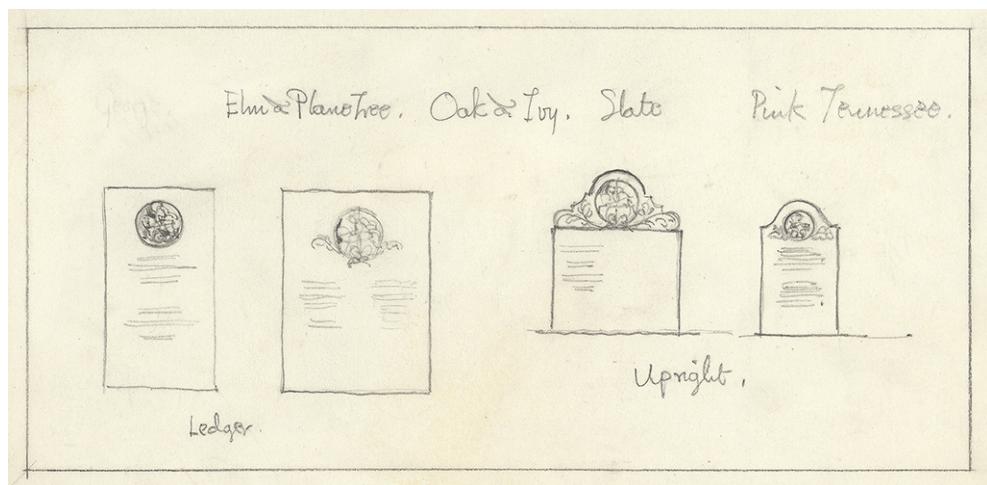
*The Berkeley Chapel at Saint Columba's Church, in Middletown, RI.*

Margaret Louise Post was born in 1876, daughter to William Post and Rosalie Anthony. A Newport native and summer resident, she was the niece of Frederick Vanderbilt. Her winters were spent at his Hyde Park estate in New York. In the mid-90s she married James Laurens Van Alen, another Newport native. He was the son of James John Van Alen and the grandson of Caroline Astor. In Newport, in the late 1920s, Mrs. Van Alen had encountered Howard Benson at the Art Association, and when her husband died in 1927 she commissioned Benson to make a gravestone. It would mark James Van Alen's grave at St. Columba's Cemetery in Middletown, Rhode Island, where Mrs. Van Alen had purchased a large, corner lot, anticipating future burials.

Mrs. Van Alen orders two large slate ledger stones, one for her husband and one for herself. Made of the dark gray slate from Monson Maine, each measures six feet by three. Benson makes the Van Alen stones soon after the one for Mrs. Stanley Hughes, and these new stones as well follow the pattern of a Stevens ledger stone. Each displays a cross at the top, corner ornaments of simple roses, and elegantly laid out letters. James's inscription features his name, inscribed in Roman capitals. Below it, his dates are carved in capitals and lower case. The foresighted widow has similar decorations on her stone and a matching inscription with room for her own dates. James Van Alen's stone is placed over his grave in the beautiful St. Columba's churchyard. Its

small church is known as the Berkeley Memorial Chapel, named for the philosopher George Berkeley, whose Rhode Island home stands nearby.

Mrs. Van Alen's own stone is to be stored at the John Stevens Shop until needed. In an effort to be obliging, Benson agrees to this arrangement and offers the service for unrecorded compensation. Since there is no record of a formal agreement, any damage to the stored stone will be Benson's responsibility. His gracious patron, known as Daisy to her friends, outlives her husband by many years. Her large and handsome stone proves a headache as the Shop reaches the limits of its storage capacity.



JHB rough sketches of a headstone for Prince Serge Mdivani.

The Van Alens have two children, a son James, and a daughter, Louise, who would marry Prince Serge Mdivani. After the Soviet invasion of Georgia in 1921, the aristocratic Mdivani family fled to America, where they were soon dubbed "the marrying Mdivanis." One son is the glamourous, polo playing Prince Serge. First marrying the movie actress Pola Negri, he divorces her after the stock market crash takes her fortune. Next is a marriage to the opera singer Mary McCormic. When this union fails he takes up with Louise Van Alen. It develops into a passionate romance, and they marry. That same year Mdivani plays in a polo match, his adoring wife watching him from the sidelines. In the melee of the match, the prince is suddenly dismounted. Lying on the field, he receives a fierce kick from an agitated pony. A few hours later Mdivani dies. The Van Alens bury him in their family lot in St. Columba's.

In heavy mourning, his devastated wife calls on Howard Benson. She asks him to mark the prince's grave with a memorial consisting of a white, marble heart suspended in chains. In the traditional setting of this country churchyard, the passionate young widow's flamboyant design will seem

intrusive. Benson slowly and diplomatically convinces her to think of something more consistent with the churchyard's surroundings. Her mother will certainly have had a hand in the discussion and a quick sketch in the file may have come from a meeting with Mrs. Van Alen. These days we would call this little drawing a napkin sketch, such as designers often make in spur-of-the-moment discussions over coffee. Easy to overlook, they sometimes contain the first version of an eventual design.



JHB's marble gravestone for Prince Serge Mdivani.

The family and Benson settle on a large, standing headstone of white marble from Colorado. The material, called Yule Colorado, may be seen in the steps and façade of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, DC. Prince Mdivani's ornate coat of arms will serve as ornament, but the concept of the marble heart in some form is non-negotiable and provides the centerpiece for the memorial.

Prince Serge's finished stone is very like the option seen opposite, second from the right. The final product has more ornamentation and is larger than the size implied but the final product shows a recognizable evocation of a sketched design. Carved in outline, a heart-shaped panel forms the center of the overall design. Bas relief decoration in northern European style surrounds the heart, the carved inscription enclosed within it.



*Carving of St. George and the dragon.*

Louise Mdivani also commissions a suite of silver cups in her husband's memory to serve as trophies for polo matches. Howard agrees to design them and makes a drawing for a sculpted finial that will be a cover for the major piece. It takes the form of small pyramidal sculpture of St. George and the Dragon. Benson carves a boxwood model from which the silver finial will be cast. Though he does not fabricate precious metals, he does engrave lettering in silver. He draws several designs for the cups and discusses them with Louise. As with many of his clients, Louise is charmed by the handsome carver, and they have grown friendly. The cups need to be finished relatively quickly,



*Polo trophies designed by JHB, with his St. George figure cast atop the large cup.*

and their fabrication is given to a New York firm. To guide the engraver, Benson draws Serge's name in elegant, shaded roman capitals. The little sculpted tableaux, carved with Benson's restrained Art Deco style, looks handsome atop the polished, silver trophy.

In due course, the grieving widow recovers and marries again to an agreeable man named Saunderson. Her marriage to Mdivani lasted less than a year, and as time passes the prince's stone becomes an anomaly among the darker slate stones in the Van Alen lot.



*Decorative relief by JHB on Bruguiere headstone.*

Mrs. Van Alen remains a dependable patron of the John Stevens Shop. In Hyde Park, New York she marries a second time, to a yachtsman named Louis Sather Bruguiere, who, two months after the loss of the Lusitania, had survived the sinking of the liner Arabic by another German U-boat. The couple live together in Washington, DC while also keeping Wakehurst, the Van Alen estate in Newport. The house replicates a limestone English country house of the same name. Their happy marriage ends when Mr. Bruguiere dies. Buried at Hyde Park, Louis receives a Benson stone of his own, somewhat different from the recumbent ledgers of the Van Alen family. The headstone is in the colonial style, upright and made of slate, with the triple arched head-shape of the 18th century. A flowing, organic pattern of decoration forms borders which grow upwards to fill small, side arches. At the top, the borders join the central arch to surround the family crest. So framed, the main surface of the stone shows Louis Bruguiere's inscribed name and dates. Under them are the carved words "Husband of Margaret Louise Post" with space for her dates below.

Mrs. Bruguiere maintains the majestic Wakehurst in the grand manner with a suitably accomplished staff; it was said that in her house, the brass polisher polished only brass. By the time of Mr. Bruguiere's death his widow has been declared the "dowager empress of American society." In her later years, Margaret Louise Post Van Alen Bruguiere—Daisy—begins to feel lonely in her big house in Newport. Before his death she had loved James Van Alen and been a devoted wife to him—Mr. Bruguiere evokes a similar devotion on her part, yet his resting place seems far away. Daisy has grown used to Newport and does not want to be buried in Hyde Park. Still, she misses Louis.

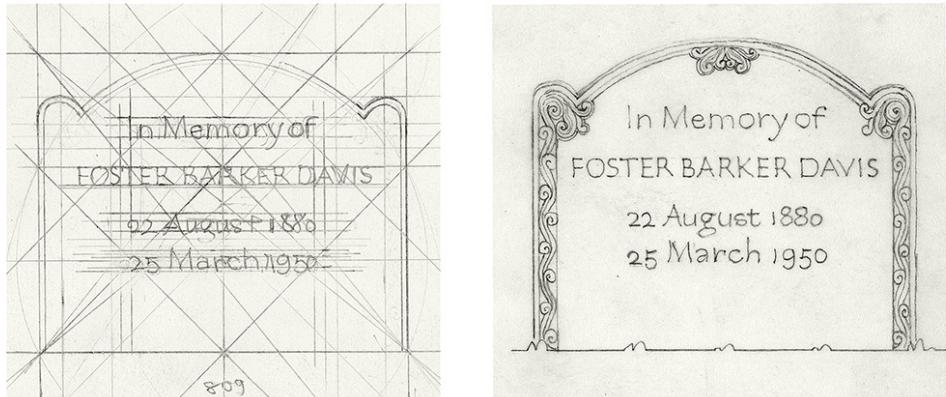
She thinks about the fact that Prince Mdivani was a member of the family for less than a year. Perhaps she can move him to a private lot of his own? She decides to find out, and discusses the matter with Edward Windsor, a gracious and personable man, now serving as Rector of St. Columba's. They decide it will be fine to shift the prince to the new space, making room for Mr. Bruguiere to rest with Daisy in the family lot of the peaceful, country churchyard.

#### XLIV



*JHB works on a brush layout on a Slate headstone.*

In the wartime years of the early '40s, the Shop becomes more settled with fewer changes of workers and a more stable environment. Benson's teaching load lightens, the job list slims down and efficiency increases. Nancy Price is a steady influence and is duly made a partner in the business. The partnership between Benson, Carey, Bethune and Price will be the final form of the Shop under Benson's leadership. His heart condition continues to decline, but his activity still rivals that of a healthy man's. Carving, however, creates a strain and must be curtailed to a certain degree. Nancy's own carving improves, soon taking up the slack, and the regular flow of memorial work continues unabated.



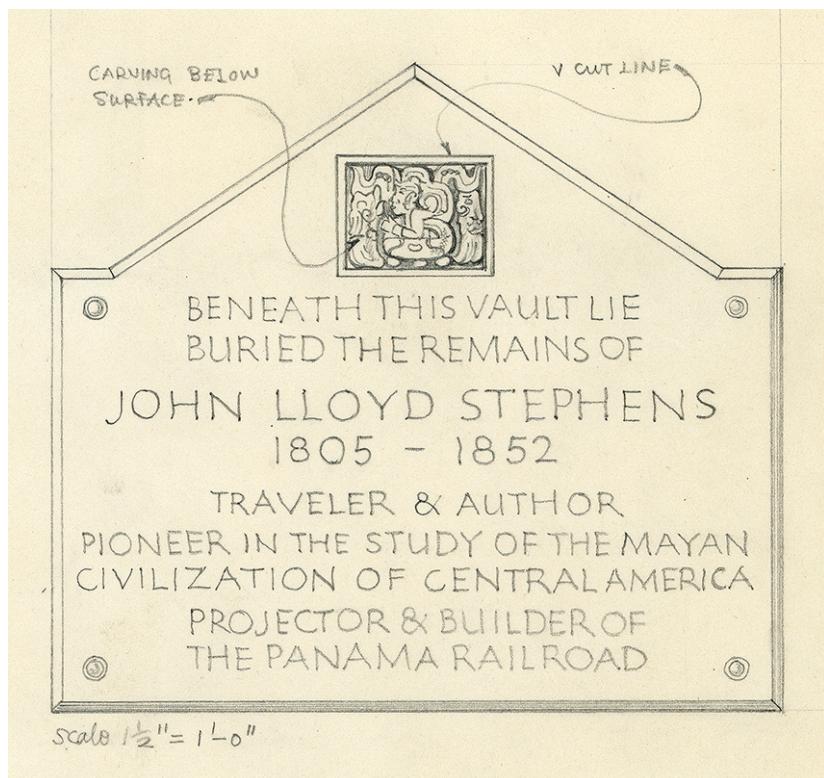
*L to R: Headstone design with dynamic symmetry, and the finished presentation sketch.*

Benson continues to rely on the use of dynamic symmetry. An odd system, it can require several geometric adjustments to make sketched design elements agree. Following arithmetical description of the stone surface, he coaxes the lines of lettering to conform to its co-ordinates. A finished overlay sketch on tracing paper completes the process. His drawing skills remain strong and dependable, the power of his line stays true.

When first organized, the shop records and all small-scale paperwork were kept loose in file folders. This did not suit Howard's orderly mind. Soon he begins putting condensed, culled records in three ring binders. Rough sketches have often been lost, and he decides to adhere his best sketches with rubber cement onto paper backing sheets. Sadly, this will prove an ill-advised practice, as rubber cement eventually corrodes most common paper. The sheets are arranged alphabetically by client, then distributed to the binders. The binders themselves are organized by geographical area. Howard's mind was always well-ordered, for all that its order was unique unto himself.

The steady flow of good jobs is the Shop's lifeline—and the Benson family's—and there are periods during the war years when suitable work is somewhat scarce. In 1945, the Shop receives welcome a commission for a commemorative tablet to John Lloyd Stephens. A native of New Jersey, Stephens was educated in the classics at two private institutions in New York City. At the age of thirteen he entered Columbia College, graduating at the head of the class of 1822. He earned a Law Degree at Litchfield Law School, went into practice, and returned to New York City where he spent the next eight years. In 1834, he traveled in Europe and in Egypt. In 1839, he was appointed Special Ambassador to Central America by president Martin Van Buren. With his friend, the architect and illustrator Frederick Catherwood, Stephens explored sites in Central America, rediscovering the ruins of the Mayan civilization, accounts of previous discoveries having been lost to

memory. Over the course of two expeditions, the two men demonstrated beyond doubt that the Maya were the founders of a highly developed and sophisticated culture that pre-dated the Roman Empire. He also argued convincingly that the Maya were a native people, and did not emigrate to the Americas from Europe, as some had claimed.



JHB layout drawing of the Stephens Monument.

Stephens wrote a book about their explorations, *Incidents of Travel in Central America, Chiapas, and Yucatán*, illustrated with Catherwood's exquisite drawings. Its publication in 1841 revived interest in the forgotten civilizations of Mesoamerica. Its combination of solid archeological work and meticulous depictions ranks the book as a significant artistic achievement. Subsequent to these travels Stephens went on to become Vice President of the Panama Railroad Company. An accident in Bogotá caused injuries that prompted his return to New York, where he assumed the presidency of the company. He died there in 1852 at the age of forty-seven, having succumbed to kidney failure.

Due to his great respect for Stephens's accomplishments, Benson is particularly determined to produce a stone memorial tablet that will both record and honor Stephens's work in concise, lapidary form. He decides to

use a Mayan logogram as the central element of the design. It will be carved in a rectangle in the peaked top of a slate tablet with horizontal shoulders, articulating the rectangular, inscription space below. The relics of Mayan culture that Stephens and Catherwood found are of a style and potency little known to non-specialists or scholars in the field. They evoke mystical forms of art and magical practice.



*Detail of JHB's interpretation of a Mayan relief from the Stephens monument.*

Benson's muscular roman capitals, picked out in the pure yellow gold of Mayan jewelry, record in brief the impressive discoveries of the explorer's life. His carved inscription and low-relief Mayan glyph speak with similar, sculpted voices. Set on the wall of the structure that holds Stephens's grave, the weight of slate memorial is borne by four large bolts with decorated heads whose unusual shape reinforces their reference to unfamiliar origins. Working with his customary deftness, Howard Benson makes an artifact that is utterly his own, yet remains tied by informed taste and practice to both Stephens and the mysterious world he and Catherwood uncovered.

An interesting parallel to Catherwood's archeological drawings is the work of the Scottish painter and lithographer, David Roberts. He was a talented and dedicated illustrator and a painter of scenery working in London in the 1820s. Roberts came to know the great painter J. M. W. Turner who urged him to forsake illustration and devote more time to serious painting. Following this advice, Roberts became an Orientalist painter of great note. In 1838, Stevens and Catherwood were in Mesoamerica, swatting away

insects and crashing through the jungle. In the same year David Roberts traveled to the African continent, navigating the shifting sands of the Nile Valley to prepare numerous drawings and watercolor sketches of the crumbling ruins of ancient Egypt. Returning to England, he made meticulous, color lithographs of the scenes, which earned him wide acclaim. Unlike Catherwood's depictions of the "lost" world in Mesoamerica, Roberts drew artifacts seen daily by Egyptian people but little known outside their country. The work of both artists provided accessible images of cultures unfamiliar to the growing and intellectually insatiable middle classes in Europe and America. Exotic civilizations stimulated people's imaginations and were seen as repositories of wonder.

Some years earlier Percy Bysshe Shelley published a poem describing a battered, colossal sculpture in the Egyptian desert. The toppled stone figure was of the Pharaoh Rameses II, whom the Greeks called Ozymandias. It became one of Shelley's most famous works and fueled popular interest in ancient cultures.

### *Ozymandias*

*I met a traveler from an antique land  
Who said: "Two vast and trunkless legs of stone  
Stand in the desert. Near them, on the sand,  
Half sunk, a shattered visage lies, whose frown,  
And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command,  
Tell that its sculptor well those passions read  
Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things,  
The hand that mocked them and the heart that fed:  
And on the pedestal these words appear:  
My name is Ozymandias, king of kings:  
Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!"  
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay  
Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare,  
The lone and level sands stretch far away*

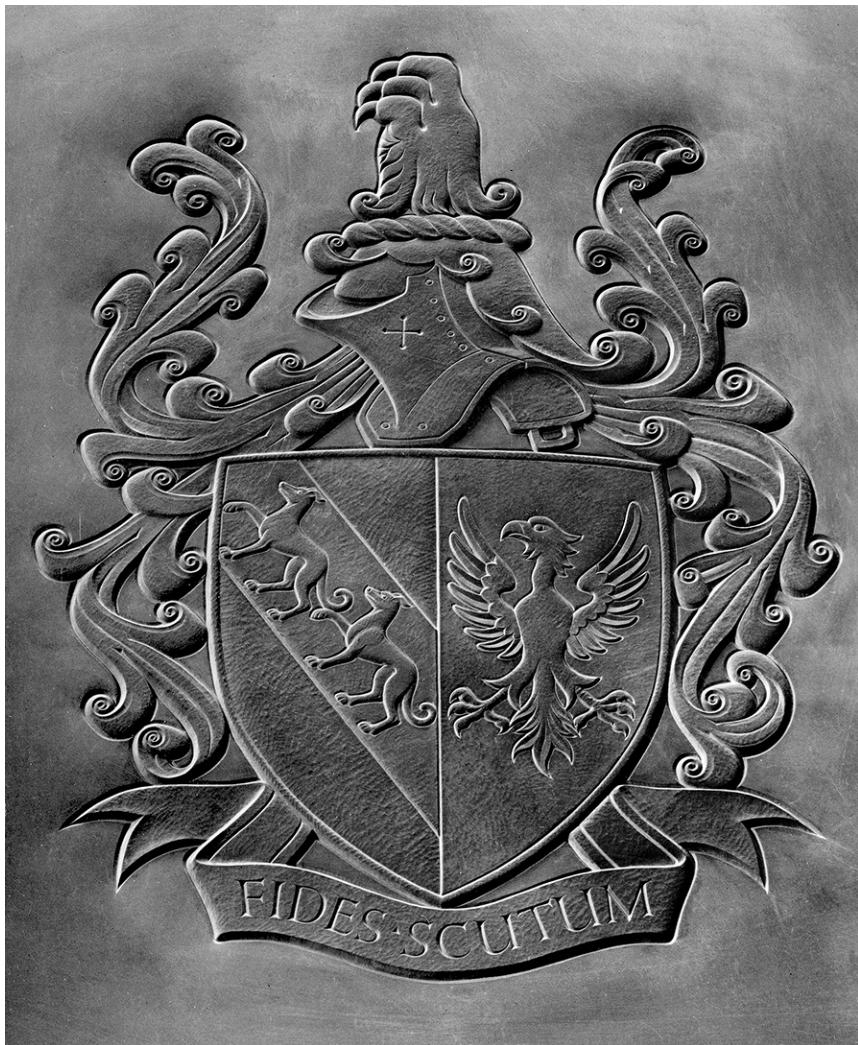


*Nancy Price, carving in the front room at the shop, ca. 1943.*

Carving lettering in stone takes time; wordy prose must be discouraged. A clever carver at the Shop once summed it up: "Writers in stone learn brevity." A headstone is by nature an intimate object whose setting determines the way we view and interpret it. Known or unknown, the occupant of a grave is a presence felt. Yet the complexities of human lives, of those loved and lost, call out for notice.

Graphic images have always played important roles in commemoration. A compelling image can have an immediate and powerful impact upon its observer. The beauty and complexity of prehistoric artworks suggest that writing and linguistic intelligence may have evolved together. Over time they became formalized into systems of depiction through alphabetic scripts and their ability to communicate, record, and preserve our actions. Literacy was born from the desire to communicate thoughts and ideas beyond the fragile envelope of the self. Written history confirms the endurance of human thinking but Prehistoric art came first. In the digital age, our taste for brisk, pictorial communication has resurfaced in the abbreviated graphics of our text messages.

Imagery and iconography act as tidal currents in Benson's work. His ability to depict real things in direct, iconic form becomes a hallmark. He never lacks for historic or personally-derived inspiration. From his father's Masonic connections, he has adopted the imagery of the carpenter's square



*A JHB relief-carved heraldic crest on the Fitzhugh stone.*

and the compass or divider, tools in daily use in his own work. Inspired by Fisher's musicality, he has learned to read music and to play the recorder; musical imagery provides further sources of inspiration. He is influenced by the natural world—critical to the designs and motifs of the Arts and Crafts movement of the late 19th century—as well as religious symbolism, fundamental to the tradition of art in his Catholic faith.

Early cultures not only used iconography as a basis for their proto-writing systems, but also color and imagery to distinguish social hierarchies. In medieval Europe, a system of iconography, called heraldry, evolved to proclaim status and heredity, displaying what is commonly called a coat-of-arms, a combination of symbols representing a particular family, guild, or association. While written communication was well developed and widely used it was only available to the educated clergy and upper classes. Heraldry was able to communicate vital messages of allegiance or hostility to the masses who could not read. Also, because they were helmeted and suited in armor to the point of anonymity, battling knights required blazons and banners to distinguish friend from foe.

Armorial adornment began as a simple system used to distinguish factions and alliances. Over generations its pictorial emblems grew more elaborate, decorative, and even witty. As noble families expanded, emblems of identity were applied to family branches and their generations. Ancillary divisions and colored distinctions were incorporated into heraldic arms. During the Middle Ages, ornate coats of arms were commonly seen in England, Germany, France, Italy and Spain, and were often carved into the architecture as decoration on walls, over doorways, and on the facades of buildings.

In ritualized combat, contests held during the “age of chivalry,” participants would meet on charging horses aiming to dismount each other with lances. Called jousts, these encounters were held on special tilting fields where the knights wore elaborate, often lavishly decorated protective armor, including specially designed helmets. Decorative crests grew popular, fitted atop the iron helmets for ostentatious display.

Howard Benson is drawn to the somewhat arcane but absorbing field of heraldry and teaches himself to understand and observe its rules and symbols. Being a younger country than Europe, America has no tradition of armorial use, save that adopted from older countries, and there are few designers expert in its use. The Shop becomes one of the few places in the United States able to serve clients interested in applications of heraldry. Ade Bethune, with her family’s aristocratic background and European heritage, is familiar with the disciplines of heraldry, and collaborates with Howard in its application. Patrons of European origin with family coats of arms often suggest them as suitable additions to their memorials.

In the city of Florence, a medieval masonry building from the year 1255 still stands, having once housed municipal offices and also a prison. Called the Bargello, it has an atrium within and a grand stone stairway leading to a balcony that serves its upper floors. Today, most of the space serves as a gallery of northern Italian art.

Carved shields, representing the arms of various individuals and families, adorn the limestone walls flanking the stairs. Their sculpted imagery implies personal or family influence—symbolically representing rank and status. In sculpted stone, these armorial shields embody the arrogance and warlike character of the society that fostered them. On the ground floor of the Bargello, in a sculpture gallery, visitors may encounter Michelangelo's sculpted head of Marcus Brutus, who led the conspiracy to assassinate Julius Caesar. Depicted as a physically powerful man, his face conveys only regal detachment.

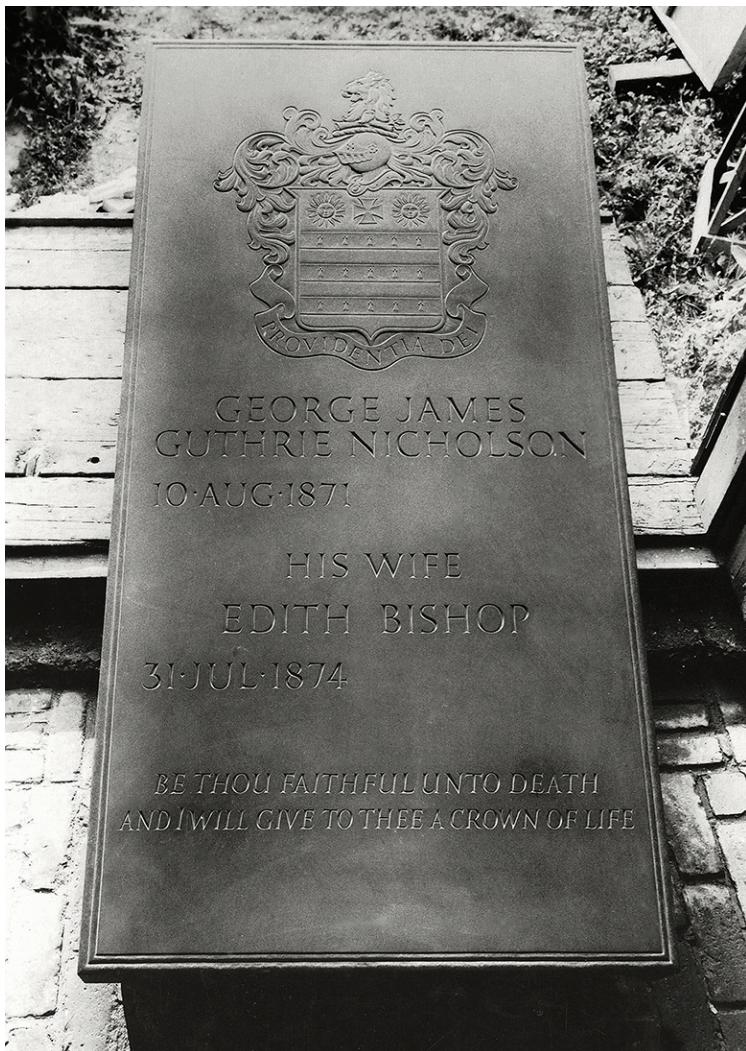


*The Bargello staircase, Florence, Italy.*

Mr. George James Guthrie Nicholson, a distinguished Newport resident, engages Benson to make a stone for himself and his wife. At age seventy-four he will live another seven years, but feels the need to compose the last chapter of his life in appropriate style. It may be that he felt a distinction similar to that portrayed by Michelangelo's Brutus. Nicholson's correspondence with Benson is formal at first, and the possible use of heraldry receives no mention. Nicholson wants a stone of granite, which, for several decades, has been a favored material in graveyard memorials. Benson suggests the dark gray granite from Quincy, Massachusetts. Efforts to find a suitable piece, however, grow frustrating.

Once booming, the Quincy quarries are gradually closing down. Times are changing, and stone quarrying has always been a chancy business. In

Benson's time, a driver heading toward Boston from the southeast would see huge piles of discarded blocks of Quincy stone not far from the highway, but seams of quality granite are scarce. After a time, Benson proposes slate as an alternate material and Nicholson agrees. There then appears to have been a misunderstanding as to timing of the work—the pace of work at the Shop



*JHB's Nicholson stone sitting in the back door at the shop prior to setting.*

may not have conformed to the increasing speed of post-war commerce. A brisk exchange of letters sets things straight.

The Nicholson plot lies in the Cemetery at Saint Mary's Episcopal Church in nearby Portsmouth. Built in the 1850s on farmland, its setting remains bucolic and the pretty, wooded burial ground has become a favored

cemetery among Episcopalian families. When the Nicholson coat of arms is suggested, Benson agrees that it will be a perfect addition to the design, consistent with traditional memorials in the colonies and Britain. The family's arms are also complex and appealing. Benson proposes carving them in low relief with the background cut away to make the ornament seem raised up from the mean surface.

The arms, displayed on a shield, show two heraldic suns flanking a cross formée above three bands of ermine. In European arms ermine is a sign of royalty. Atop the shield is a large tilting helm with a torse of twisted ribbon and mantling. Its outsized crest is that of a lion—heads of animate creatures have long served in heraldry. In such use, varying ways developed of representing the separation of the heads from the bodies they had owned. One, called erased, and used here by Benson, shows the neck drawn as if artfully torn from the body. Below the shield is a flowing ribbon with the Latin motto *Providentia Dei*. In the upper part of the shield the suns are given human faces and pointed rays. The cross formée has the familiar shape of the German, Iron Cross. Three bands of ermine imply the family's royal connection.

Historic artifacts may speak their meanings to different viewers in different ways. Distance from the time of their creation and uncertainties as to origins can muddy the waters of context. Still, the objects themselves hold lessons for us all, whether we are historians, informed amateurs, or just average, everyday viewers. By their very physical creation, artifacts assume the characteristics and skills of their makers—they are even called by their maker's names: a Michelangelo bust, a Stevens gravestone, a Benson memorial—the merest glance at a compelling artifact can cause a glint of recognition in the viewer. Curiosity and lack of bias are, in fact, ideal prerequisites for worthwhile observation. The old saying "Out of the mouths of babes..." points out that while experience and learning may enhance appreciation, they can also compromise it.

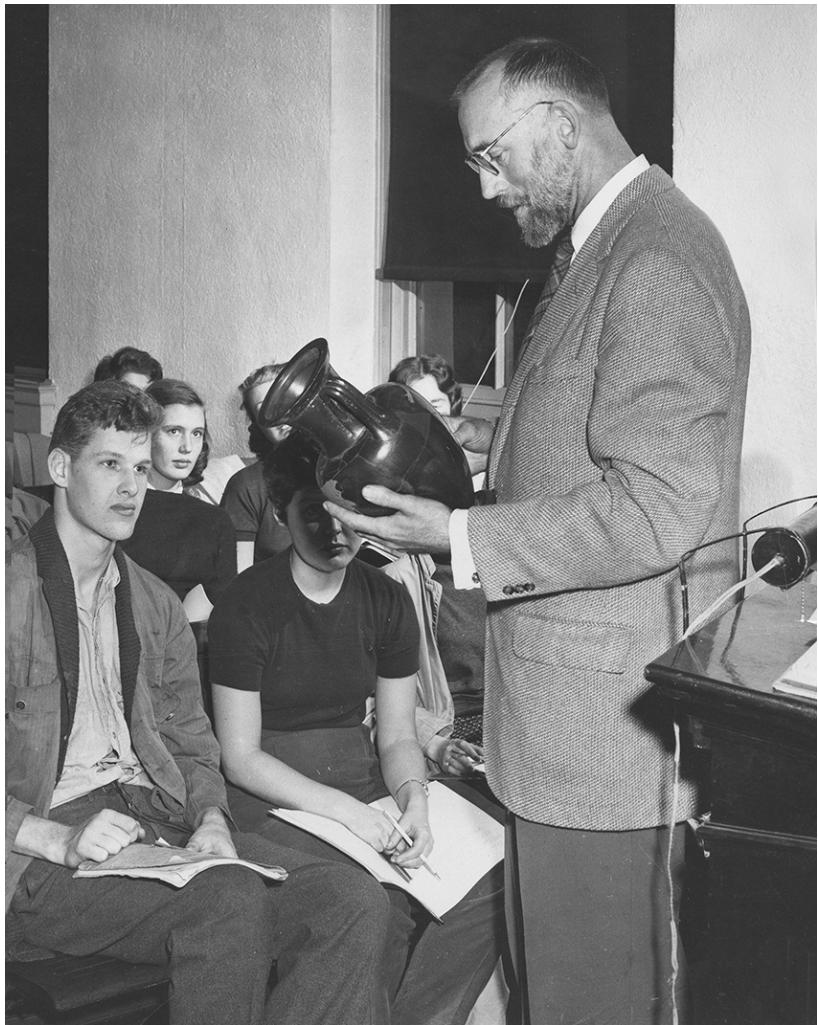
George J. G. Nicholson and his wife now rest beneath a beautiful, patrician gravestone of gray-black slate from Monson, Maine. It stands under the spreading branches of a huge beech tree in St Mary's Cemetery, graciously conforming to Nicholson's wishes, yet unmistakably the work and design of Howard Benson. Although global warming is now causing the spread of lichen on the faces of nearby stones, direct sunlight does not reach the Nicholson memorial and lichen has been held at bay. Leaves falling from the tree surround the slate with a soft, natural bed. Patches of dappled sunshine flicker and pierce the leafy canopy, illuminating the otherwise darkly-shaded carving. We can't predict how the stone's environment will fare in the future, but seventy years after completion, the Nicholson-Benson collaboration endures, embodied in this elegant and fitting memorial.





## PART SIX

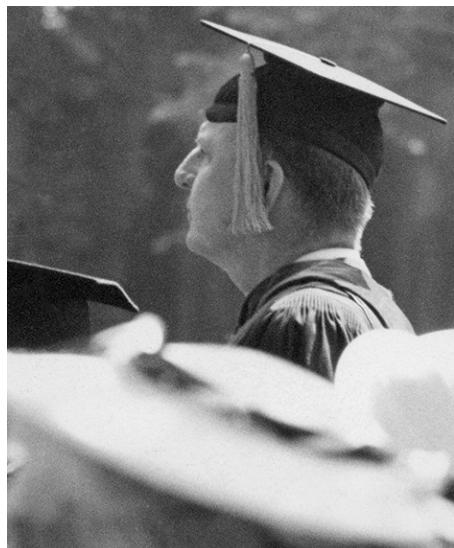
*Teaching, Late Projects and Family Life*



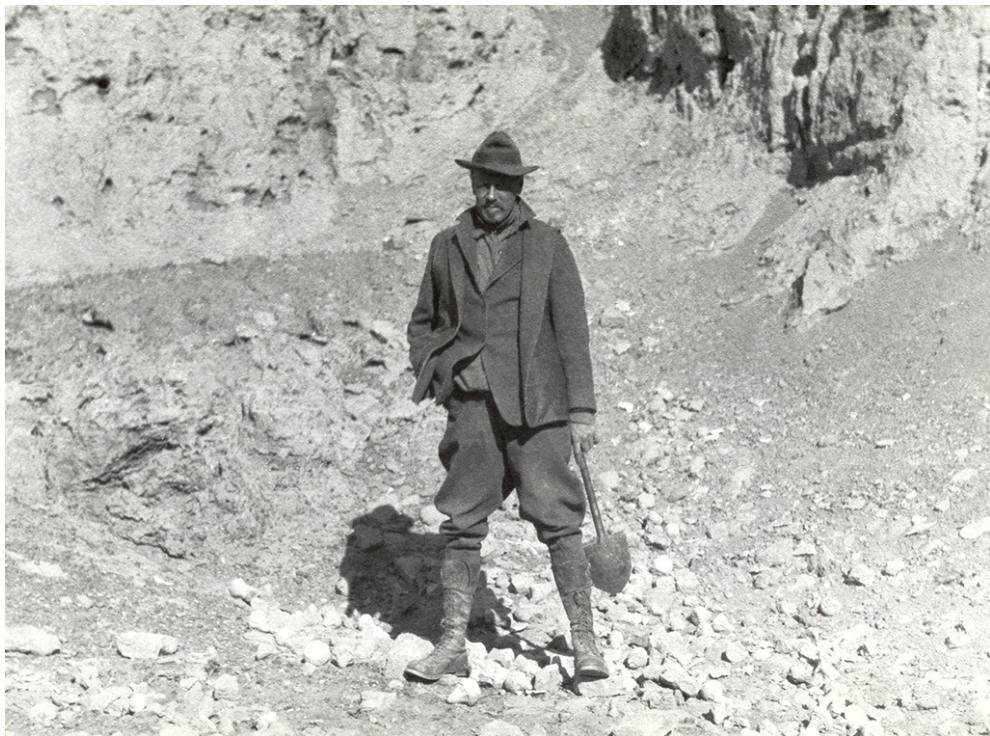
*JHB lecturing on Classical aesthetics at RISD, ca. 1950.*

**W**HILE TEACHING AT RISD, Howard Benson maintains close relations with both Harvard and Yale Universities; his association with these two respected institutions serves as a point of pride. President John F. Kennedy, on receiving an honorary degree from Yale, remarked, "Now I have the best of both possible worlds, a Harvard education and a Yale degree." Howard Benson's Yale connections stem from various associations with teachers and administrators over the years. One particular friend is William Wimsatt, a member of the English faculty and godfather to Benson's third son, Richard. The social impact of Benson's height has been mentioned, but next to Bill Wimsatt this advantage disappears. Seven feet, one inch tall he stands a full head higher than the artist. His profile is like a golden eagle's; keen-eyed with a marvelous nose and powerful features, topped by a thatch of light brown hair. Wimsatt is a polymath, a respected scholar, and an author of international repute. Visiting Benson at the Cope house, he seems to the boys a benevolent giant who converses mysteriously with their father using often words unfamiliar to them. On one visit to Newport, the big man reclines on the living room couch reading a paper while Benson sets up a chess board some distance away; Bill possesses the ability to play blindfold chess. He calls out a move to Howard who moves the piece for him as Wimsatt reads, facing away from the board. Howard then moves his own piece and calls out his move to Wimsatt. The game proceeds in this relaxed fashion to the finish. Benson loses.

Howard gets to know members of the staff at Harvard's Fogg Museum and at various other university libraries in Boston. At the Boston Museum of Fine Arts in the 1940s, he meets Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, Curator of Indian Antiquities, and responsible for the first program in the study of South Asian art at Harvard. "Coomy" is also a friend of the archaeologist Langdon Warner, who was one of the "Monuments Men" of World War II. Letters indicate that both visited Benson in Newport around the same time. Benson has frequent contact with them and their circle in Cambridge.



*Bill Wimsatt at a Commencement ceremony.*



*Langdon Warner on a dig.*

At the time of this writing, a photograph of Warner, on a dig, circulated on the internet—he is said to have served as inspiration for the film character Indiana Jones. From the photograph above, it seems that a certain sartorial influence, at least, can be claimed. The circle of friends decides to honor Coomaraswamy with a gift and a citation when he leaves America. It is to be a pair of sterling silver drinking cups, then informally called “cans.” Benson is commissioned to write out a citation for the occasion. In a letter to the ever-busy calligrapher, after asking how the “screed” was progressing, Warner writes:

*“Coomy is going back to India to seek simplicity, sitting on a dunghill or some such thing. How he will manage this while clutching a pair of sterling silver cans I cannot guess.”*

Philip Hofer, another Harvard friend, is made Curator of Printing and Graphic Arts at the Harvard’s new Houghton Library. Hofer commissions Benson to carve a suite of small slate tablets for the Library’s collection. One is a diminutive rendering of an inscription that had stood over the door of a library in ancient Greece. The lettering reads, in classic Greek, “Healing place

of the soul." In an ironic twist, one meaning of the phrase in modern Greek is, "insane asylum." Neither Hofer nor Benson seems to have been aware of this at the time.

Benson's colleagues at Yale ask him to produce a medal for the school. It is to be designed to honor a new class of benefactors whose gifts do not fit into any established category. He cheerfully takes on the job and, as so often occurs, has fun with it.

Benson's earlier work on the Rhode Island Tercentenary Half-Dollar, minted in 1936, has sharpened his understanding of medal design and its production. The Rhode Island coin was made in the modern manner, by first drawing a design and next making a large-scale bas-relief in plaster. A mold of the relief then was made by electroplating the plaster to form a negative metal replica. A pantographic engraving machine uses the replica to reduce the scale and engrave a steel "die." The die is the final-size, negative pattern in steel of the low-relief design.

The easiest way to envision such a thing is to think of a wooden butter mold like the one seen above. Carved backwards in sunken relief, these molds were pressed into soft butter when forming decorated butter pats for dinner parties. Similarly, the backwards-engraved steel die for a coin or medal is struck, in this case with a force of tons, into a blank of softer metal, like silver or bronze, held within a steel collar. Its design is thus reproduced in raised relief on the finished medal.

Dies engraved by pantographic reduction have been in use for over a century. One problem with this method is that large-scale modeling encourages a refined and precise style of realism which, once reduced in scale, looks fussy. These medals often appear overly complex in their small, finished sizes. In the past, dies for striking coins and medals were engraved same-size by hand and eye alone. Any coin or medal from the distant past will reveal this lively, muscular origin. Benson elects to use this ancient technique, a new kind of engraving for him.

The classic method for making letters on medals was to hand engrave them backwards in the die at actual size. In the late 1700s medalists began making steel punches for each letter required. These were then used to strike the



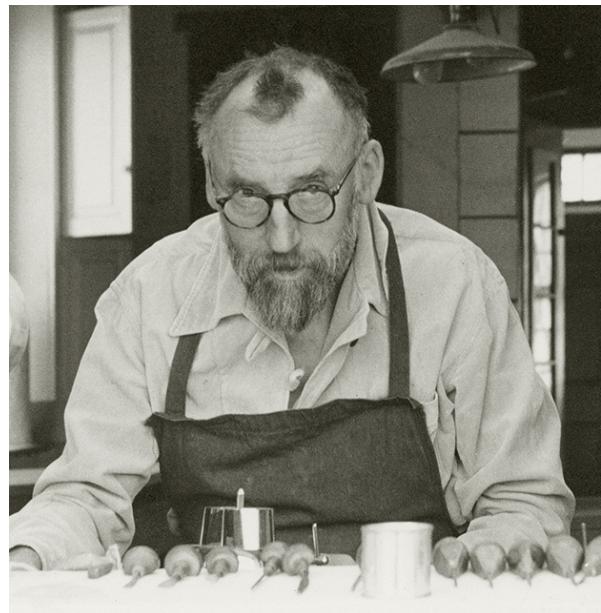
*Butter mold, carved in reverse relief in wood.*



letters as negatives into the die rather than by engraving them. More precise and typographic, punched letters come out raised on the strike. Benson chooses this method for the lettering on the Yale medal. As a lettering specialist, he wants the experience of learning the technique. Four of his cut punches are seen above. The photograph beside them shows him working on a single punch in a window at the Shop. It is held in a small engraver's vice, and its small scale reveals the precision of the task.

The resulting medal is pleasing to all. The piece is simple and direct; the University symbol, an open book inscribed with a short message in

Hebrew, set in the center of a shield —medallic design at its simplest. The shield lies within a circle with the legend, "FOR SERVICE TO YALE :LUX ET VERITAS" surrounding it within the outermost rim of the medal. For added visual interest, circle and rim are each formed of raised beads. The finished strikes receive a dark patina with buffed silver highlights. Benson engravés the name of each recipient on the back of the finished medal by hand, along with the date of its award.



JHB making a punch for the Yale Medal. Punches at left, 1955.



*Finished Medal, struck in silver and patinated.*

## XLVII

When World War II ends, Congress commissions the Austrian-born sculptor Felix de Weldon to make a monumental bronze sculpture in honor of the United States Marine Corps. It is to be based on the famous photograph of the flag raising on Iwo Jima, the work of the Associated Press photographer, Joe Rosenthal. In it, six United States Marines raise a flag on the hard-won summit of Mount Suribachi. A first flag raising had already been accomplished and recorded, but it was decided to restage the event in order to give it a more dramatic and evocative cast. Six Marines were posed with a half-raised flag and flagpole angling upward, the men's hands upon it. They are portrayed in a realistic, pyramidal group, poised at the very moment the flagpole rises. The arrangement is dynamic, the image inspiring and unforgettable.

The drama and specific nature of the event as depicted by the sculpture call out for words. De Weldon approaches Benson about inscriptions for the pedestal of the bronze-cast sculpture. The year is 1950, and the stone carver, troubled by his heart condition, is unable to undertake the actual carving of the letters. De Weldon assures him that the carving can be done by the stone workers in Sweden while they are making the sculpture's pedestal. All Benson needs to do is lay out the inscriptions, make a half-size brush drawing of them, and design a simplified linear wreath to surround a quote that will be displayed on the prominent face of the monument's base. This he gladly agrees to. It is further proposed that his staff at the Shop carve a full-size alphabet of the letters that will be used. This is done in a piece of the base's black granite so that the Swedish carvers will have an exact model to follow. A text is composed, to be displayed on the upper edge of the base, with names the Marine Corps' most historic battles. A large line drawing of a wreath is then laid out, based on a small sketch by Ade Bethune. A stirring phrase will be carved within the wreath:

"UNCOMMON VALOR WAS A COMMON VIRTUE."

Felix de Weldon, highly experienced in the production of monumental artworks, instantly saw the historic and dramatic value of the Rosenthal image. He agreed at once to undertake the work and, assisted by several other artists and craftsmen, devoted nine years of his life to completing it. Cast in bronze on a heroic scale, it weighs 100 tons. The finished work is installed on a hillside in Arlington, Virginia, near the National Cemetery. The grouped figures stand on an octagonal base of black Swedish granite. To accommodate the design of the sculpture, the base is elongated; running along a north-south axis. When completed, the Iwo Jima monument and its surroundings



*Joe Rosenthal's AP photo of U.S. Marines raising the American flag on Iwo Jima in 1945.*

are designated a National Park as well as the official United States Marine Corps Memorial. In 1954, Five Star General D. Dwight Eisenhower, Supreme Commander of U. S. forces in World War II, attends the dedication.

In terms of artistic stature Felix de Weldon was not a dazzling talent. His great skill was in conceiving and selling memorial concepts to those who desired and could afford to pay for them. His use of outsized scale was often a determining factor in his success, and the best of his pieces are so large they tower over us, eclipsing the relaxed quality of his modeling. He also did not hesitate to enlist other skilled artists to assist him.

Today, the choices and designs of public memorials are directed by popular views and preferences rather than by the wishes of a ruling elite. In the past, patrician tastes and bankrolls dictated choices of artist and subject matter, although even then, the final product was constrained by the conventions of political and/or religious authorities. Rembrandt's Night Watch for example, was paid for by the leaders of the military company it depicts. Their tastes may have been narrow but the artist, who lived by the support of these patrons, triumphed over the artistic limitations of his benefactors' visions.

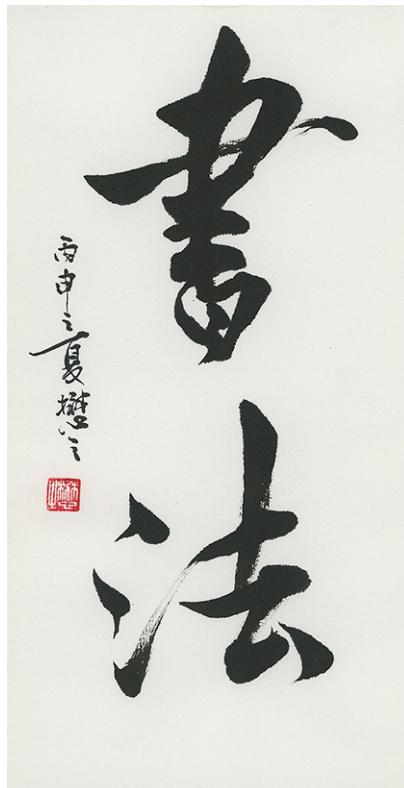
Today we evaluate the aesthetic taste of public works like the Iwo Jima memorial on a more public and democratic scale. And so, by the mid-20th century, while most civic sculpture of a realist nature could no longer claim the honorific of fine art, its power to evoke and inspire endures to the present day. In this sense, the Iwo Jima Memorial must be viewed as significant as well as a popular success. The black granite pedestal raises the sculpture to a lofty plane, and Benson's letters, carved in Sweden to his design and picked out in gold, compliment the lines and reflective surfaces of the black, polished granite. The design of Ade Bethune's wreath formalizes the words of the inscription, and the tails of its ribbon serve to draw our eyes to the Marine Corps' famous motto, *Semper Fidelis*.



JHB inscription on Iwo Jima monument in Washington DC.

## XLVIII

Lettering as an art form possesses a discrete if modest, pedigree. Asian calligraphers are highly valued by their respective cultures for the quality of their work, and their writing is regarded in both the East and West as a worthy form of art. However, western lettering as fine art is less secure, and for this reason, its practitioners may be somewhat defensive about their craft. The evolved and inescapable purpose of the western alphabet is to communicate language through the legible depiction of its elements. This achieved aim, of yielding instantly readable words in print, causes us to regard our lettering as functional rather than artistic. Life in our busy society is directed by signs, and their authoritative nature has cast their letters in the role of



*Modern Chinese calligraphy from a shop sign in Beijing.*

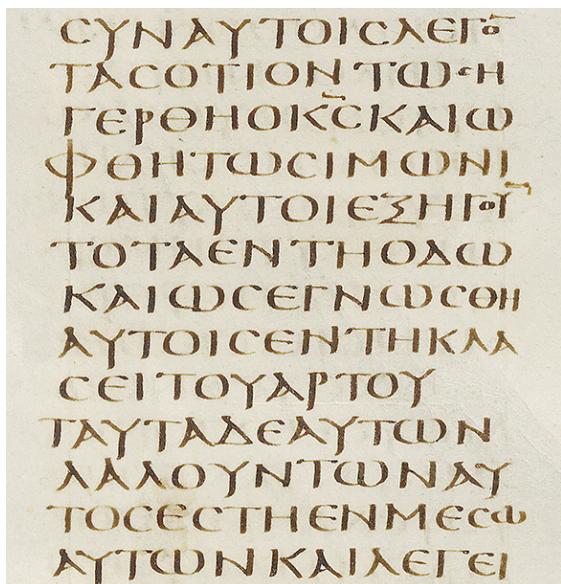
tools. Asian writing, however, cannot be read by most western eyes. Its freer, far more numerous forms, and the intricate mechanics of their production, are unmatched in other cultures. Unfamiliarity with the language and its characters may lead western viewers to see Asian calligraphy as pure decoration.

## MIND THE GAP

*Warning to travelers in the London Underground.*

Large scale, commercial lettering in the west used to be painted by hand, using a brush. From time to time this gave such lettering a chance to attain the realm of artistic craft. Today, digital technology has compromised this effect. Notwithstanding, fine lettering in the western world has at times found a place in the applied arts. Illuminated medieval manuscripts like The Book of Kells or Les Tres Riche Heures of Jean Duc de Berry certainly approach works of fine art.

From earlier times, we have also inherited pen-written manuscripts such as the Codex Sinaiticus, which originally consisted of the known texts of the Old and New Testaments. The portion of the Sinaiticus held in the British Museum still has major parts of each, and scholars now consider it one of the most important books in the world. It is written by quill pen in four columns of a Greek book hand called Uncial. Even in its shortened form, there are 694 pages of limp vellum. Each pair of sheets accounts for most of the skin from a single calf—flensed, scraped, split, burnished, and seasoned to a creamy off-white uniformity. Upon this surface in glancing light, the ink-formed letters glisten like the surface of a sun-dried shark's egg.



*Letters from the Codex Sinaiticus.*

The majestic, yet restrained athleticism of the quill pen's marks is unvarying from the first page to the last. Simple letters walk across their lines and down their columns in uncontested utility. The letters are like the notes of plainsong; without doubt, their participation in the Catholic Mass possessed a similar, majestic tonality. It is estimated that the time and labor required to produce the book would have taken the entire working life one, skilled individual.

At the Portsmouth Priory, where Howard Benson will often attend Mass on Sundays, the Benedictine monks sing high Mass on holy days, employing ancient rituals and words that hark back to the times of the Codex Sinaiticus. The Benson boys, usually squirming by the end of an ordinary service, are sometimes placated by the timbre and unintelligible but soothing

cadences of the chanting. One old monk clings to the outdated habit of singing in a key convenient to himself and, at times, of no harmonic relation to the general music. All that matters to him apparently, is the accuracy of melodic line. His soft, low-toned voice floats beneath the precise, chromatic tones of the larger community.

It is certain that the Catholic Mass, to Benson, is more than a habitual escape to the known comforts of ritual. Its celebration gives him a sense of participation in the stuff of the liturgy itself. The kneeling and rising, the standing and sitting, all to the accompaniment of Latin, incense, and ringing

bells, recharge his spiritual batteries. That he believes utterly in the substance and promise of the Roman Catholic faith there is no reason to doubt. That he depends on it emotionally is equally sure. Somewhere in his travels, he acquired a small reliquary cross in gold repoussé. It is of late Byzantine origin, hollow, with an opening at the



*Gold Byzantine cross belonging to JHB.*

back betraying its purpose. The gold has a warm, yellow glow. In today's market, it would be a precious object. When Ansgar Nelson, a Danish-born priest at the Portsmouth Priory and a Benson friend decides to return to Scandinavia, Howard gives him the little cross as a parting gift; Father Ansgar will later rise in the church to become a Bishop Coadjutor in Sweden.

Howard's religious conviction plays a strong role in his marriage to the steady Fisher Smith. Prior to their wedding, according to a requirement of the Catholic Church at the time, Fisher agreed that any children would be raised in the Catholic faith, as by this time, the nature of Howard's beliefs and his personal manner of their practice were familiar to her. Technically, his Catholic parish is the large Byzantine-revival Church of St. Joseph in Newport. He maintains a relationship with this parish and attends Mass there fairly often. Yet the humble chapel at the Priory School is equally favored as a place of worship. His friendships with its Benedictine monks are, to a degree, shared by his wife. Their closeness to the Priory family of Francis Brady reinforces this bond. Other faculty members are also part of their social circle, and Howard's old Newport High School friend Eric Taylor is a science teacher at the school. His partner, Graham Carey, is known by the Portsmouth monks

as a vigorously intellectual believer. Anglican, as well as Roman Catholic patrons of the Shop are part of the mix. In this company, Fisher finds a shared sensitivity towards her eccentric and devoted husband. She is quite willing, when asked, to attend mass at the Priory chapel or St. Joseph's. Her own faith and its Quaker simplicity is clear to the boys and to Howard himself, asking very little from them by way of participation. In Fisher's life, the presence of her parents, her siblings, and their families are a bastion to her faith and an asset to their marriage—they are a broadly engaged, open-minded, and conspicuously intelligent group.

It is not known whether Howard ever attended a Quaker Meeting. His own faith is seldom mentioned in surviving correspondence. Years prior to his marriage he had known the Smith girls as friends. He was first closest to Sally, oldest and most pensive of the four. Concerned for his emotional welfare, she might well have taken him to Quaker meeting. One evening in August of 1927, they both attended a summer gathering at Ben Smith's house on Washington Street. Missing Howard, Sally at one point walked outdoors to find him. An excerpt from her diary records snatches of their conversation and its casual brush with philosophic thought. The entry reads:

*It is after sunset. The northern sky is hung with bands of heavy grey mist that cling to the almost ripple-less water. The moored boats stand out in great contrast of deep, dull black. I walk down to the pier, seeing his black silhouette against the water, for he is sitting on the bench at the end of the pier and looking northward.*

"Do you want a drink of water?" I ask. "The Director said that the only thing you wanted was to be alone, but I came down to see you all the same."

"No, I don't. I saw that you were all busy and came out here to rest. I can't work sometimes. Look at the Constellation. Isn't she marvelous in this light? You don't know if she has windows in the side of her stern or not, do you?"

"I don't think so."

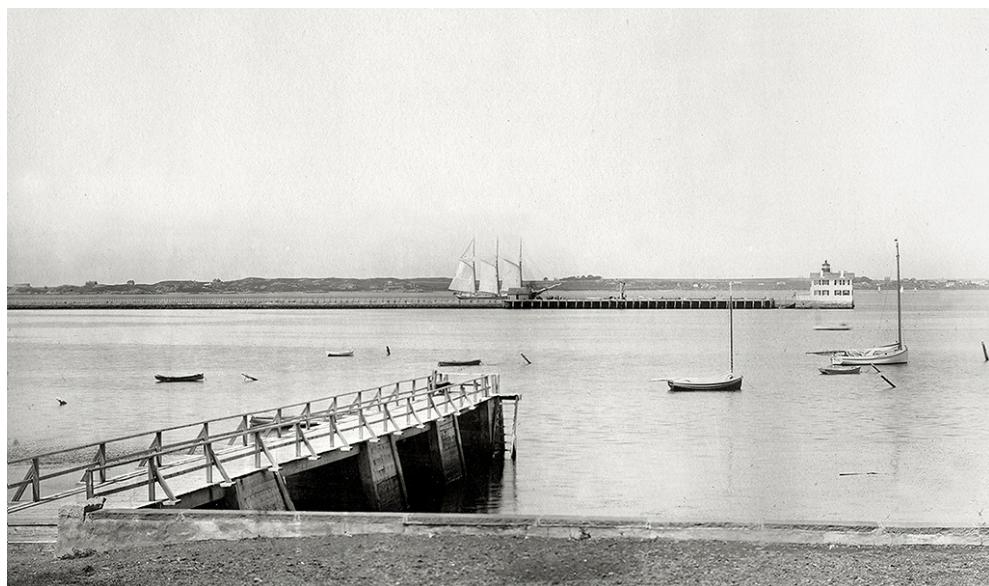
"If only I had come earlier we might have rowed down. Then I could have found out."

(The Constellation, moored at the Naval Training station on Coaster's Harbor Island, was believed, at that time, to be a revolutionary war frigate).

*He lights his pipe and, holding the match so that it comes beside the image of the distant Kingfisher and says, "Amazing how the eye can make the small match and the distant mast seem the same size, isn't it? Did you ever think of the end of our visual range? It's complete blackness at the other side, you know."*

*I didn't understand and he went on to explain to me, "While I'm looking at the Training Station I can't see the lights of City Pier behind me but I know they are there. That's the end of the picture but we never bother ourselves to see it that way."*

Both were in their twenties and neither had serious attachments. Sally was clearly fond of the long-limbed Benson and may even have vaguely contemplated matrimony. The artist, as she found him on the end of the pier, was preoccupied with work but happy to talk with his pretty and attendant friend, sister of the yet-unrealized love of his life.



*Photograph of the Smith family pier in 1890*

## XLIX

The waterfront of the Cope house, the Robinson house and its surroundings next door, the topography of the shallow water, the public and private piers leading to it—all these are a stage set for summer, upon which the catboat Penguin plays a role of her own. In the course of her restoration Benson has scaled down the rig and sail plan for easier handling and rebuilt the cabin to serve as dry storage for supplies and clothing. The enlarged cockpit can hold six or seven passengers—more, if small children are invited. At the time, Newport harbor and the water between it and Jamestown are in fact, a kind of paradise. Howard Benson's observant dinner guest knew just what he was looking at, outside the dining room window.

In use from the earliest days of the colony, the area around the Cope house had been variously developed over three centuries. In the 1660s the land that was to become Benson property was the site of a large, commercial dock. Shaped like the letter L, it was built of wooden cribbing filled with piled rubble. The stem of the L moved westerly from the property and then, after thirty yards, turned sharply south for ten yards more. Destroyed early in the 18th century, the dock's rocky foundation remains, ranging from one foot to eight feet below mean high water as it moves away from land. Known to locals but not to visiting boatmen, it provides a source of diversion to watchers from the shore, lying, unmarked, on a direct, southerly course from the north toward Elm Street's public pier. If a helmsman heading to the pier is uninformed and the craft deep enough, it will bang smartly into the rocks of the "Old L".

In a late fall storm, a battered old boat fetches up on the Old L and soon disintegrates, leaving its large, cast iron engine projecting above the rubble. It is a "menace to navigation" for several seasons. The city fathers, preoccupied by the war, choose to ignore it. The men of the Poplar Street shore, led by John Sullivan, eventually wade out onto the reef on a low, summer tide. They beat the cast iron engine block into pieces with sledge hammers and scatter them in the adjacent deep. Tom and Fun Benson watch from the Cope house pier, fascinated by the focused violence of the action as well as the time lag between visible hammer blows and the arrival of their sound—another lesson in practical physics for the curious boys.

Some years later a local man with little experience builds a boat of plywood, a not yet viable material for marine use, and the little craft has trouble keeping the water out. The builder, oddly nicknamed "Popcorn," ties it up one morning to the Elm Street pier and leaves it there, half-sunk and canted over to the north with its flat deck forming a near perfect ramp from the water to the pier railing.

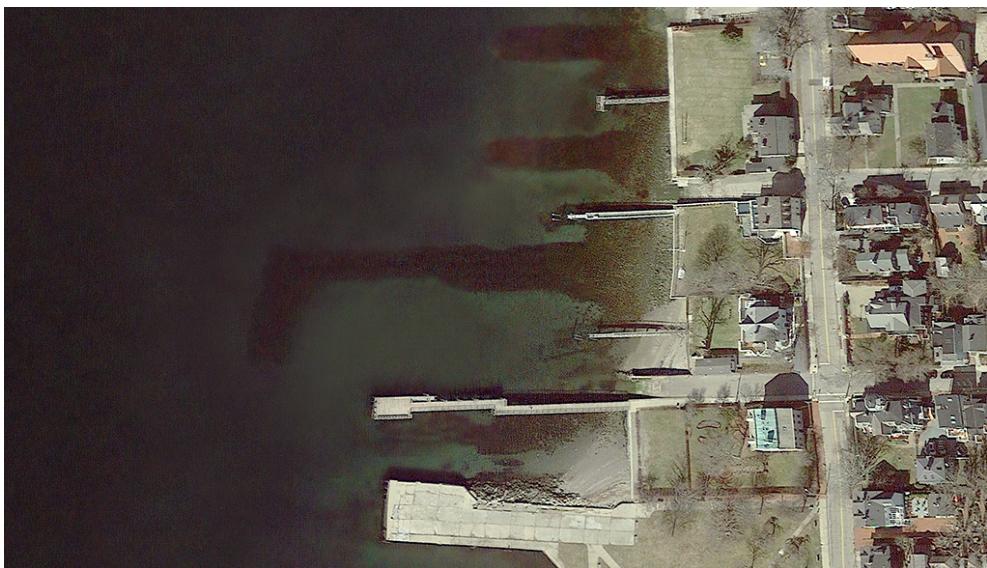


Shore folk on the Poplar Street driftway, early 1950s. L to R: Unknown City worker, John Sullivan, Ray Kelly, Harry James, Barnaby Keeney (future president of Brown University), Howard Benson, Pat Hagerty, Harold Arnold, Chipper Benson.

The summer of that same year as the failure of Popcorn's boat, two local auto mechanics, picking through the trash at the Newport dump, find a war surplus pontoon from an old seaplane. It has a rounded upper surface and a flat bottom, rising to form a kind of bow. Into this they stuff a four-cylinder automobile engine. A rudder and propeller shaft with a two-bladed prop stick out at an angle from the stern. Painting it gray with an open red mouth and sharp white teeth, they name this craft *The Shark*. With theatrical timing they plan to test it on the same day Popcorn's plywood cruiser lies, listing, at Elm Street. The motor gives the appointed helmsman trouble and for a few minutes, *The Shark* comes to rest across the end of the Benson pier. Tom and Fun are once more at hand. The mechanic gets the engine running at a good clip, in neutral. Standing up at an awkward angle and trying to hold the boat in place, he slips, and hits the gear shift. Instantly tossing him aside, *The Shark* takes off, zooms south across the Old L, and races up the ramped deck of Popcorn's boat. It comes to an unsteady rest, its engine screaming, athwart the railings of the Elm Street Pier. Without doubt, it is the dramatic high point of the boys' summer.

An extreme low tide at winter shows the rocky bottom of the Old L from the South, around 1930, amid a welter of pilings. Nearest is the Cope house pier, later to be the Benson's. Visible beyond is Ben Smith's pier and its dark rock footing. King Covell's longer pier sticks out beyond. The mass of the Old L fills the foreground. After its loss in the '38 hurricane the Smith pier was not rebuilt until the late 1990s. For more than fifty years the old foundation was a familiar hazard to Poplar St. boaters.

Benson's colleague and friend the sculptor Waldemar Raemisch sails with him one sunny day in *Penguin*. The wind blows just enough to gently move the boat. They fish for a while, talk, and enjoy each other's company. Coming in as the wind fades, Howard drops the sail and starts the motor. The four-cycle engine, water jacketed and dependable, hums in its tidy box in the cockpit, far more efficient than the old motor which broke its owner's arm and began his beard. Carried away with its power-driven speed after the leisurely sail, Benson sweeps into the pier a bit wide and plants the boat squarely on the rocky remains of the adjacent, Smith pier. *Penguin* comes to an abrupt halt. Benson leaps to his feet and jumps around, trying to free the vessel. Raemisch mildly asks. "Vat's the metter vit the mohtor?" Benson yells back, "There's nothing wrong with the motor, man. We're on a reef!" Soon enough a few shoves with the long, sculling oar have them free and safely tied. Fisher is not there to calm him and the comical nature of the event is embarrassing and frays his nerves. Given what the Raemischs have left behind in Nazi Germany, Waldemar remains blissful and unconcerned.



Satellite photo showing rubble of a 17th century wharf west of the Cope house, locally called "The Old L".

## L

In 1949, during a trip to England, Graham Carey encounters an illustrator and cartoonist named Thomas Derrick, whose work often appears in the English magazine *Punch*. Graham admires the artist's linear style as well as his use of black ink and a pointed brush. The two meet and Carey soon invites him to Newport to visit the Shop. The invitation is not discussed at length with Benson and is fairly open-ended; Derrick shows up early the following summer.



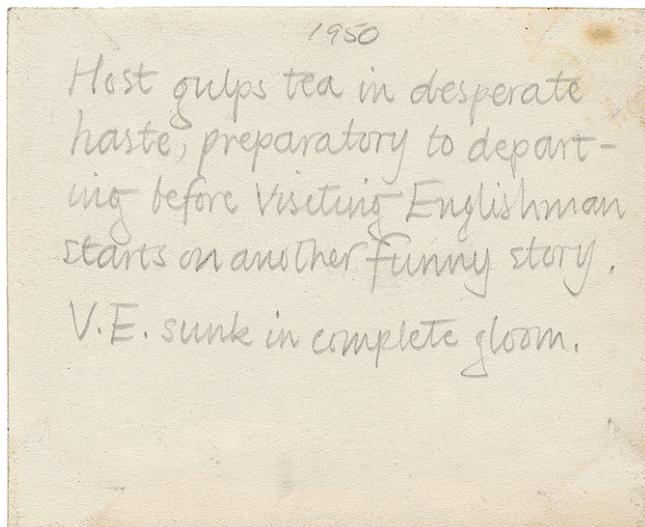
*Thomas Derrick and JHB in Ade Bethune's Saint Leo Shop, 1950*

The English word "derrick", once the surname of a 16th century English hangman, was later given over to machines for lifting heavy weights. Derrick the cartoonist seems pleased by the gruesome connection implicit in his family name, and likes to tell the back story. Graham suggests that Derrick stay with the Bensons at the Cope house, and his visit grows into a prolonged stay, placing an added burden on Fisher, although she and the Englishman grow fond of each other over the weeks. Derrick, a small, amusing man, manages to fit into the Benson household in an amiable way. He addresses Howard and Fisher as "Sir John and Lady Benson."

Like many working Englishmen after World War II, Derrick is not well off and brings almost no money with him. He spends time at the Shop and tries to fit in, but no profitable work can be found for him. Room and board are provided by the Bensons. After a time, Graham has the idea that Derrick might make portraits of the two senior partners, Howard and himself.

The workroom at the Shop was built onto the back of the old, Stevens building, which had started out as a simple, lightly-fabricated structure. Before

Benson's time it had a dirt floor, graded to the level of the front Shop which was built into the gentle slope of the land. This old dirt floor was the one replaced by the new brick paving given to the Shop by the Wetmore sisters. In constructing this added workroom, the back of the old shop was left as built and simply incorporated into the new construction. Two of its four back windows were made doors into the enlarged space. In the remaining two windows, frames and sash were simply left in place. In Benson's time wall-board is installed in the room and the window frames filled in with painted



*Hand-written note, possibly by Nancy Price, on the back of Derrick's photo.*

panels. In summer months, afternoon tea is held in the workroom. The idea of the portraits comes to Graham on one such occasion. Their placement in the window panels is discussed and the idea takes shape.

As they progress, the paintings emerge as large, stylized renditions of the two figures, Benson and Carey. Sketched first in charcoal, they are simply finished in oil paint. The subjects are shown dressed in their work clothes, set about with the tools of their trades. Graham, being of a philosophic bent, is given heraldic embellishments that embody his conceptual ideas. The practical Benson gets the carpenter's square and the triangle, a mallet in his right hand and a chisel in his left. Leaning against him is a tall phragmites reed, standing for instruments used in calligraphy and lettering. Each panel contains a shield displaying heraldic elements of the mythic John Stevens University. The portraits will hang in the Shop from the time of their creation to the present. Their guileless, sturdy style complements the iconography of the place. In a workroom whose efforts are commemorative they appear both curious and suitable.



Thomas Derrick portrait of G. Carey with the symbols and legends of the Four Causes.



Derrick's portrait of JHB with his materials and tools.

After being named capitol of the colony of Rhode Island, Providence matured as a small city of successful merchants and their families, settled on the hillside above the downtown waterfront. Its academic community began to flourish, and in Benson's era, the city is home to several respected schools. Members of the Moses Brown family were prominent citizens—they made a fortune in commerce, played a role in America's Industrial Revolution, and founded Brown University. The scion of the family in the 1940s, John Nicholas Brown, was a formidable individual whom Benson came to know as a friend and patron.

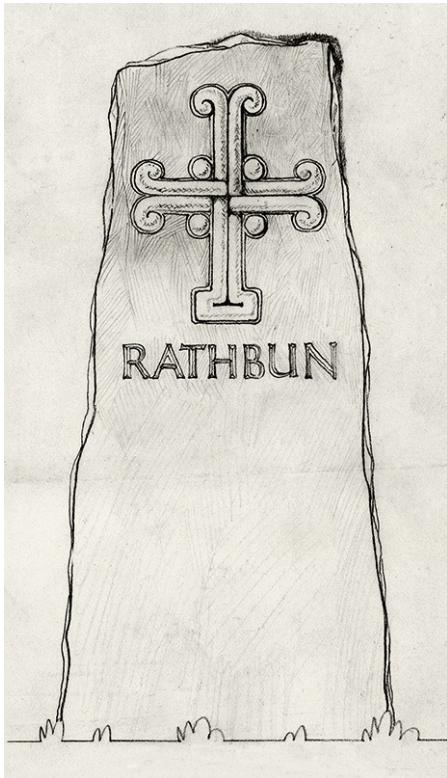
Teaching at RISD, Benson meets members of the Mary C. Wheeler School, a girls' prep school in Providence that Fisher attended before she went to Wellesley. The faculty ask him to design a school seal. He does so, choosing to design a stylized flame encircled by the school name in pen-drawn capitals. Up the hill from RISD, where Brown has its campus, he also meets Barnaby Keeney, who will later be made Brown's president. After World War II, Keeney and his family rent the third floor of the Cope house for two summers. Keeney loves fishing. On occasion, he tries vainly to catch a striped bass. Late in one of his summer visits he succeeds at last. Photographs are taken to memorialize the event, with Keeney's daughter and Chipper Benson straining to hold up the trophy fish.



*Barney Keeney's daughter and Chipper hold up a Fish.*

Swan Point, the beautiful cemetery that Providence set aside as a resting place for its leading citizens is sited on hilltop east of town. The community has long regarded it as a preferred location for family plots. Its large, varied assortment of monumental stonework spans 165 years, dating from the 1850s to the present. Fisher's great-grandfather Atwater, a civil engineer, drew its original plan. To walk through Swan Point is to receive a primer on American memorial design. The Stevens Shop under Benson made several stones which stand there still, as Lincoln Kirstein said "...in mineral potency, serenity and silence."

A monument shop north of the cemetery was built to serve the combined needs of Swan Point and a neighboring burial ground. Initially it employed a monumental mason (as they are called in Europe), a Swedish granite carver named Sven Johnson. Many years later, a connected friend from Providence told the following story. It seems word came down from Boston that an advertising company needed a model for an advertisement that would show



*JHB sketch for the granite Rathbun stone.*

a strong arm holding a hammer. Somehow this inquiry reached Sven. He secured the name of the company and, legend has it, walked to Boston, hammer in hand. In due course, the product was released in its new, bright-yellow package with the purported image of Sven's brawny arm holding his hammer poised for a blow.

By the end of the 40s Sven is gone and another granite cutter, Joe Percy, works in his place at the shop between the cemeteries. At one point during those years, a family named Rathbun commissions a stone for their lot in Swan Point. Benson draws a sketch of a monolith of seam-face Westerly granite, showing a carved cross and the family name. He is at the top of his game and the image he comes up with is formidable. The family approves



*Finished Rathbun stone at Swan Point cemetery.*

the design and presses him to complete the monument as quickly as possible. Although busy with other work, he locates a suitable slab of the granite but cannot schedule the job in time to suit the client—between the Shop and RISD, Benson's schedule is full. While commuting to RISD one day, it comes to him that the stone might be cut by Joe Percy at his shop in Providence where he, Benson, can weekly supervise its progress. Percy agrees to carve the piece under his direction.

The stone itself does not quite possess the monumentality implied by the sketch, but Joe does a fine job. The Rathbun memorial is a success.

Relative scale is an issue frequently faced by designers. Architects in particular must figure out how to present grand ideas using small scale drawings. The tradition of making scale models of buildings is a vital factor in the architectural process, and skilled model makers often include in their presentations figures of people at the same relative size in order to help viewers comprehend the finished scale. By using a reasonably fixed range of sizes for his stones Benson, from the start, establishes a sense of appropriate size for his own work and its representation in small-scale sketches

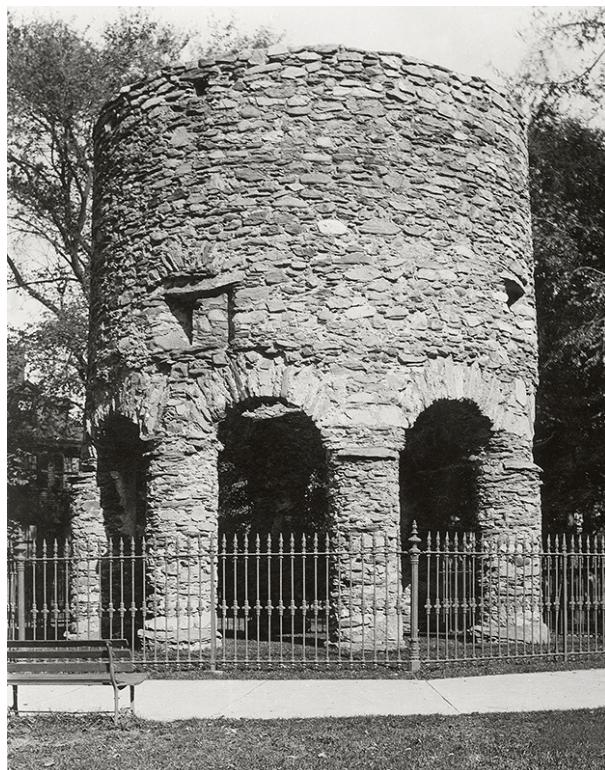
One great virtue of the carved capital letter, as evolved during the time of the Roman empire, is its ability to assume monumentality through increased size. Up to this time alphabetic scripts were not carved at large scale. In Egypt, hieroglyphs were often enlarged, but their fixed, pictorial nature carries a sense of scale uncompromised by changes of size. Greek and Mesopotamian inscriptions, during the heights of their civilizations, were



*The marble Arch of Titus in Rome, its bronze inlaid letters having been taken for guns.*

not rendered in monumental scale. Rome, however, whose expansions and aggrandizements were factors essential to its culture, favored prodigious, imposing inscriptions. When their size was to exceed normal scale, the letters were frequently rendered in a different form. For the grandest applications, the letters were first cast in bronze. It is likely that this was done by casting in molds of sand, impressed from wooden patterns of the individual letters. Each letter in the inscription was then carved in the negative below the stone surface, traced in place from the castings. The bronze letters were finally set into the carved recesses with pins and mortar, cast with a uniform thickness so the carving is not V-cut but of a flat, right angled section.

Several such carvings exist, as on the triumphal arches of Titus and Constantine. Devoid of metal and showing holes where the bronze letters were pinned in place, their elegant, carved cavities yet remain, grand and readable. The alphabet patterns were like typefaces, or what today we call fonts. It was only necessary to make one pattern for each individual letter and cast as many as needed in each required size. These inscriptions survive but their inlaid bronze letterforms do not. In the early days of gunnery, the preferred metal for casting cannons was bronze; gun metal was expensive. Virtually all the bronze-filled letters from Imperial Rome were pillaged and melted down to feed the furnaces of early gun factories.



*The "Old Stone Mill", once thought to be a Viking structure.*

Starting in the early colonial period, Newport and its surrounding land was steadily deforested, and thus the hillside above Newport harbor was open and treeless. Near the high point of the elevation there is a curious masonry tower of uncertain origin. Benedict Arnold, Governor of the colony in the 1660s, built a house on the hilltop which gave him a commanding view of the town and harbor. The stone structure stood near his house, and is mentioned in Arnold's papers as "My stone built windmill." While its construction has been ascribed to everyone from the Portuguese to the Chinese, it was also, for years, believed by many to be of Viking origin, as its architecture closely resembles that of round towers found in Scandinavia.

People are taken with the idea of Norse settlement in North America; it appeals to a romantic ideal of adventure and exploration—brave people in sturdy, hand built boats crossing treacherous seas to explore the unknown. In the Canadian maritime province of Newfoundland, archaeologists confirm the existence of Viking settlements dating from the 11th century. On the east coast of the continent, below Canada, the origin of like settlements has

not been verified, but the romance of the Norsemen is alluring. The Saga of Eric the Red mentions Vinland (supposedly near or on Cape Cod), and a land farther to the south called Markland. Over the years claims for Rhode Island locations for this place have been popular in the state. The existence of Newport's mysterious "Old Stone Mill" reinforced these hopes. For years a favorite hotel in Newport was "The Viking". The earliest telephone exchange proudly took the same name. A "Viking" tour boat still circles the Bay.

In 1941 Benson is contacted by Hjalmar Holand, a Norwegian native who came to the United States in his teens. He settled in Wisconsin and went on to write extensively about Norwegians in northwestern America. A dedicated historian, Holand enters into a correspondence with Benson about supposed evidence of Viking exploration in this country. He visits the artist in Newport and makes measurements inside the old stone mill. They refer to it as the Newport Tower. The two correspond with each other about various aspects of the structure. Talk continues over several years about implications revealed by measurements of the Tower.



*Runic inscription on the edge of the spurious Kensington Stone.*

Later in the 40s the respected Swedish archaeologist Gustaf Holstrom also contacts Benson, and a sound friendship evolves over the following years. Holstrom, called Uncle Gustaf, is a magnificent character to the older Benson boys. Bearded like their father, he carries an Expedition Knife made by the craftsman John Erikson of Eskilstuna. Its keen, cutting edge enthralls Tom and Fun.

Holstrom is interested in another relic of presumed Norse origin known as the Kensington Stone. Made of the common mineral Graywacke, it weighs upwards of 200 pounds. A Swedish immigrant farmer in Wisconsin claims he discovered it in 1898, tangled in tree roots, but its ancient origins have long been contested. Carved on its face is an inscription in runes with a shorter inscription running along one edge of the stone. The two carvings are judged to be by different hands. Holand and Benson review the carving from casts, as did several experts in Nordic language. Authorities ultimately pronounce the stone a hoax, but Howard and Uncle Gustaf are not overly dismayed by the ultimate judgment of its lack of authenticity. As professionals, they are accustomed to setbacks; their enthusiasm endures.



*Fisher and the boys with Johannes Bronsted on the steps at the Cope House.*

In 1949 a third Scandinavian authority contacts Benson and visits him in Newport. Johannes Bronsted, a native of Denmark working at the National Museum in Copenhagen, differs in character from Hjalmar Holand. Of a strictly analytic mind, the pragmatic Bronsted does not indulge in romantic speculation. Aware of both Holand and Halstrom's work, he cuts through the persistent uncertainties that question the previous investigations of both men. In a frank and clear-headed letter to Benson, Bronsted outlines his dismissal of the Kensington Stone. His thoughts on the Newport Tower are likewise explained and he lists several possible dates for the structure within a narrow range. On receipt of Bronsted's conclusive letter Benson writes: "You do not need to worry about my being upset over your findings regarding the Newport Tower. It was never a Viking church until it was proven to be and it still remains an interesting structure with many problems as to why it was built in colonial times in its particular shape and form. I still think it is doubtful if Arnold ever saw it but all these problems are most intriguing and no one should ever have such a fixed mind that he is disappointed when the truth is presented." William Godfrey, a dedicated young archaeologist, recently graduated from Harvard, conducts extensive excavations of the Tower's foundation trenches. In the process he will find overwhelming evidence for colonial origin.

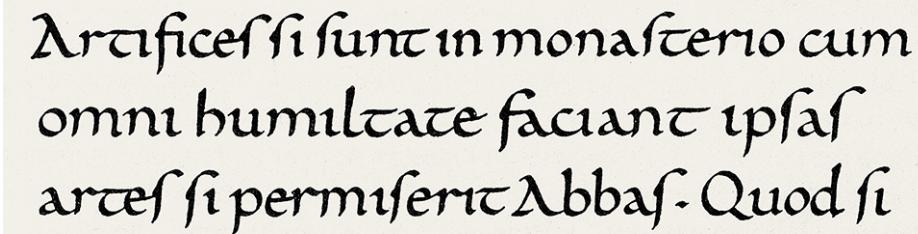
## LIII

In the year 774, roughly concurrent with early Norse culture, the European continent was divided into separate nations. Charles the Great, King of the Franks, was also made King of Italy. In contrast to the warlike Norsemen, Charles was educated and socially constructive. He established Christianity as the official religion of the realm and in the late 8th century conquered and



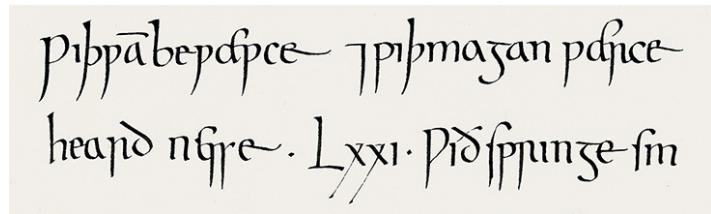
*Script 1. Lindesfarn.*

consolidated the many large and small kingdoms of Europe. At the turn of that century, he became known as Charlemagne and was crowned emperor of what is now called the Carolingian Empire. Latin, the language of the realm at that time, was being written by diverse and independent peoples in idiosyncratic, national scripts. Citizens from the north could not read the writing of their southern contemporaries.



*Script 2. Carolingian Minuscule.*

Charlemagne hired an English scribe named Alcuin of York and installed him at the scriptorium of the Abbey of Tours in France. The emperor instructed him to devise a national script that would combine the best attributes of all the national hands. In due course, a beautiful and highly legible lowercase letter was brought into use. It became the national script of the Empire. Since then, we have recognized the letterform as the Carolingian Minuscule.

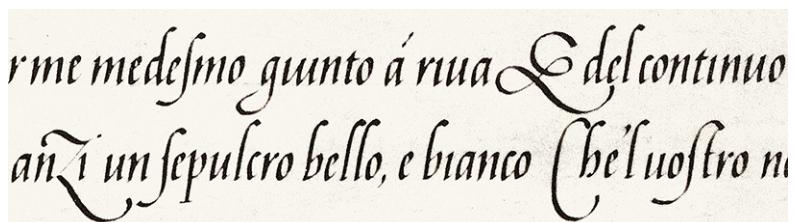


Script 3. Saxon book hand in Saxon language, 10th century.

The Empire's power waxed and waned over the ensuing years. Charlemagne's dream of a united Europe endured but did not flourish much beyond his lifetime as, once again, local governments and geographical elements fostered national characteristics. Over the years, Alcuin's beautiful hand was subjected to the quirky manipulations of local taste.

By the 1500s Italian scribes were starting to update the libraries of papal Rome. They looked back to the Carolingian models for clear examples of a unified script. In the hands of such writers as Bartolomeo Sanvito and Poggio Bracciolini the script from Charlemagne's time was again refined, becoming the elegant, Humanistic Minuscule of the Renaissance. Written on limp vellum with a broad-edged quill and black ink it is one of the finest hands ever developed.

In rapid, less formal writing during the Renaissance, this minuscule letter took on a sloping, compressed character with ligatures joining letters in sequence. Adopted by the papacy, this new, humanist-based script became the official hand of papal chancery. The mechanics of the writing and its attendant rules spread outward from church use as handwriting for the small, but widening, educated class. Queen Elizabeth I of England was instructed in the hand by the English scribe, Bartholomew Dodington. He and his contemporary Roger Ascham had studied the Italian masters. Named for the papal offices the "Chancery Italic" became the popular handwriting of the time. A version is visible in the powerful, sculptural writing of Michelangelo Buonarrotti. A more elegant rendition, written backwards by the left-handed Leonardo da Vinci, may be read right way round in a mirror. The near perfect version of the hand seen below is the work of the scribe Bernardino Cataneo.



Detail of script from the hand of Bernardino Cataneo in his copy book of 1524.

In the West, printing from moveable type began in northern Europe. Its mechanics and techniques were brilliantly refined and made practical by Johannes Gutenberg of Mainz. Born at the end of the 14th century, he reached the age of seventy-three, living in a society where the stiff, geometric, gothic letter was the standard and served as the model for his typeface. He was a sublime craftsman and a brilliant technician. Gutenberg's great, forty-six-line bible was among the first and remains, uncontested, one of the finest printed books from his or any other age. Printing technology quickly began its sweep across Europe.



*Chinese woodblock similar in technique to Arrighi's blocks for his Operina.*

Early in the 16th century, following Gutenberg's innovations, a center for printing sprang up in Venice. There, in northern Italy, the new lowercase letter took hold, spread south in printed matter, became established, and has remained our graphic ideal for over 500 years. The "Chancery Italic" version of the letter was likewise produced as a typeface based upon the work of the papal scribes. In time, it became a companion face to lowercase Roman type. From this point onward, the shapes of our letters were fixed.

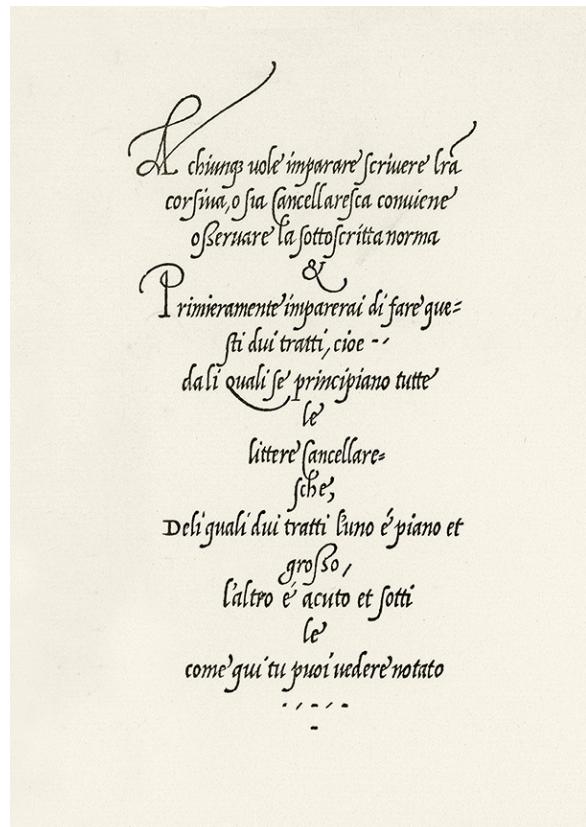
One of the leading Italian scribes of the period was Ludovico degli Arrighi, called Vicentino after Vicenza, the place of his birth. Working in the chancery offices as a writer of apostolic briefs, he was constantly badgered for examples of his exquisite handwriting. Wearied by repeated appeals for his italic hand, he decided to write and print a book with his own lettering. On thin paper, he wrote instructions for writing the "Cancelleresca" or Chancery letter. The work was called the *Operina* or the "Little Work" of Ludovico degli Arrighi. When completed, the sheets of instructions, together with pages of examples and words of inspiration were glued, back to front,

onto clear-grained woodblocks. Thus reversed, they were still readable through the thin, glued paper. A woodcut artist named Ugo da Carpi was hired to carve away all the white parts of the pages and leave only the tiny, backwards letters standing in relief on the blocks. Pages were then printed from the them in a press, collated, sewn into signatures, and bound into a book. None of da Carpi's wood blocks survive. In China, however, this method of printing calligraphy had been in use for centuries.

Benson learns about Arrighi from his fellow calligraphers and bibliophiles in England, Europe, and America. After World War II, there was a growing wave of interest in the art of writing. Popular support took hold in Britain, manifested by a movement to improve handwriting in schools. Enlightened type design work was practiced there as well as in Holland, where a well established tradition of fine printing supported the new awareness of calligraphy. Once attuned to this growing international interest, Benson learns to write the Italic hand at small scale. He sharpens points for pens, researches inks and paper, and incorporates

the skill into his work at the Shop. Several scholarly publications about the Italian writing masters appear, which he buys and studies. Where possible he makes friends with their authors. The work of Arrighi particularly engages him, and his own handwriting changes to reflect this influence.

Word reaches Benson of a book auction in New York where a copy of the Operina will be sold. Howard consults his friend Herman Cohen, owner of the Chiswick Bookshop in the City, and they attend the auction together. Benson has scared up as much money as he can at the time, 350 dollars. Only one other bidder attends, an Englishman constrained by limitations

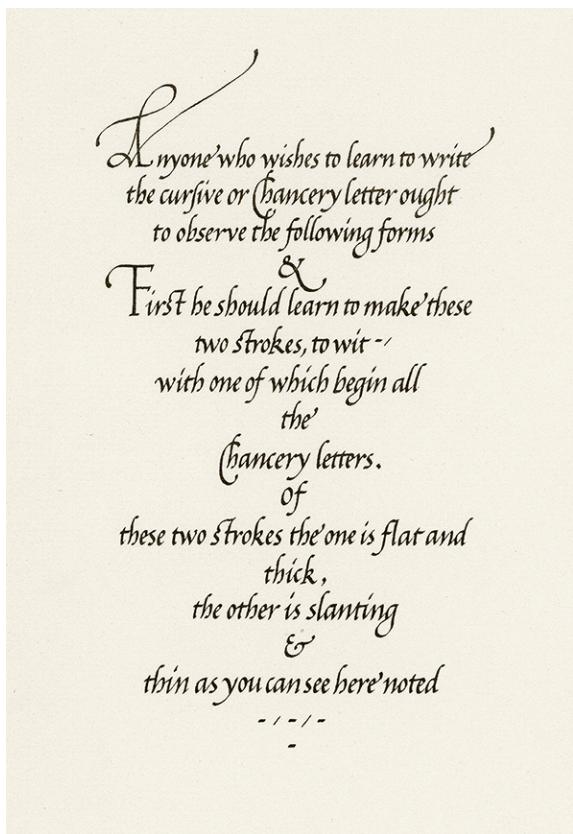


A page of Arrighi's original woodblock printed text.

on the amount of money he is allowed to take out the country. Benson's final bid exceeds the Englishman's limit, and he wins the book. Legend has it that most other potential bidders were known to Cohen who pressured them not to bid against Benson. The book comes home with him. Back in Newport, facing the usual backlog of work, he begins spending evenings examining his purchase.

The Operina starts with a title page. Next is a statement of purpose

with the author's name and the date of publication: MDXXII; 1522. Arrighi's instructions for the Chancery hand follow in twenty-one pages of Italian. Nine more pages follow. Most contain maxims and poetic quotes in Latin. Benson has a barber, a clever Neapolitan, with whom he discusses Italian grammar as he learns the language. The Latin parts of the text are roughly translated with the help of a local high school teacher named Susan Franklin. More precise translations are made and confirmed through consultation with authorities on Latin and Italian in the Church and in Rome.



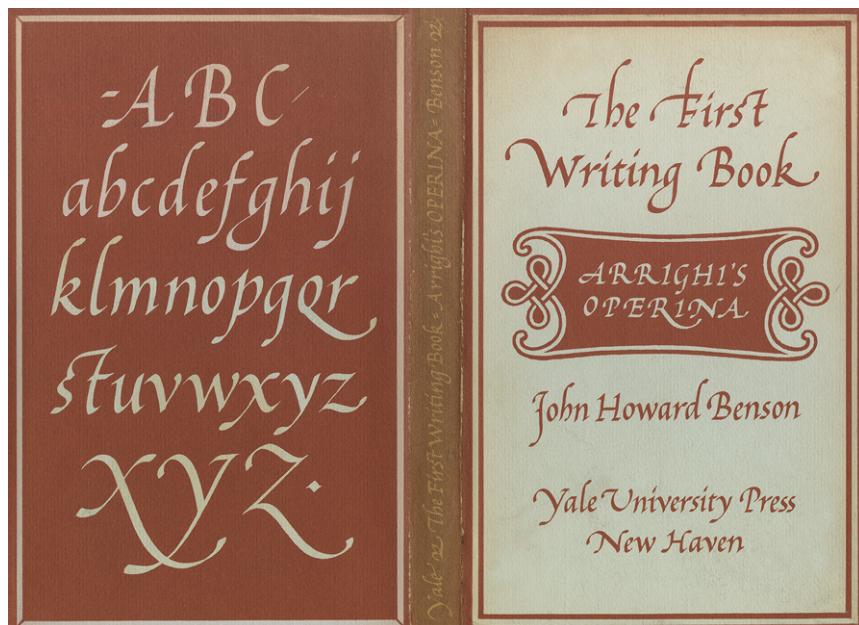
JHB's translated, pen-drawn facsimile.

Howard's decision to translate the book takes shape. Translations have been done before, but he has the idea of writing it out as an English language facsimile. He will copy the layouts of each page as rendered in everyday English and arrange them to imitate the appearance of the original. His developed italic hand, while not a precise copy of Arrighi's, will evoke its spirit and read clearly to modern eyes. Work on the book proceeds from 1952 onward. No vagrant piece of paper is safe from practice writing. Scraps are everywhere in the house and studio, covered with pen-written words. His own Chancery Italic matures in the process.

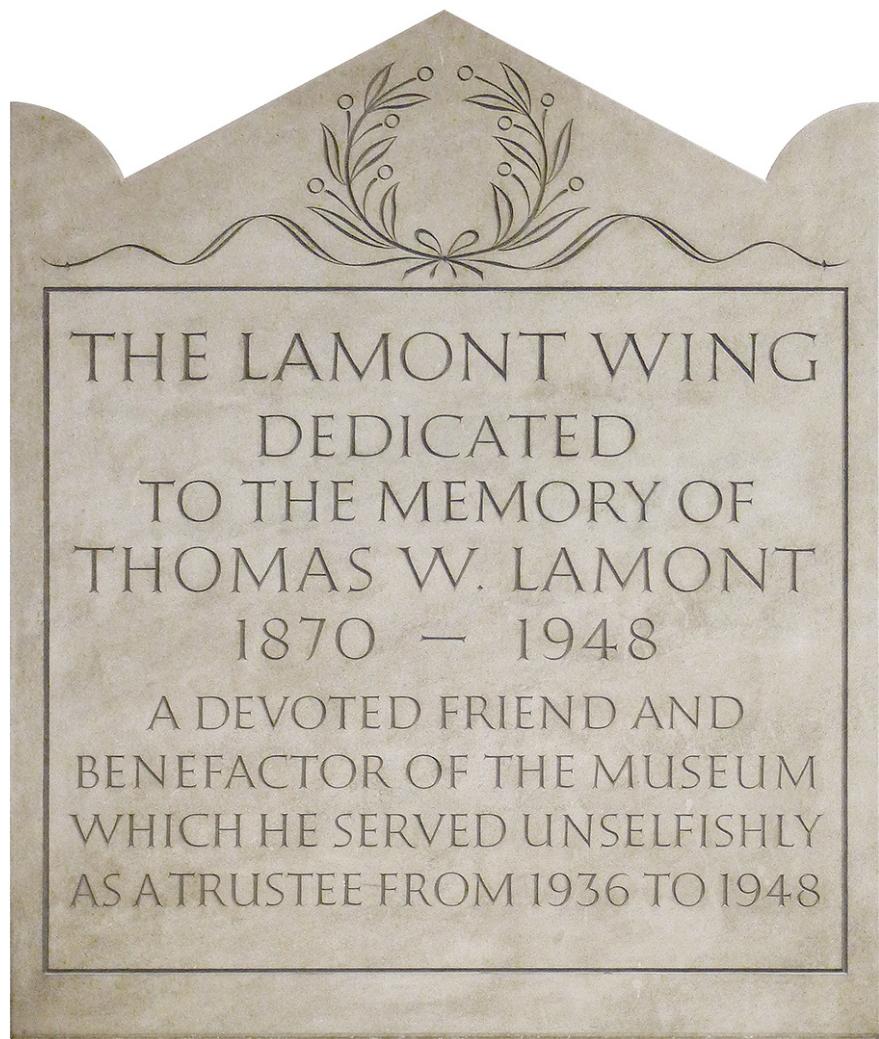
As Arrighi's personality emerges from the pages,

It grows clear that Howard will not attempt an exact replica of the *Ope-rina*. Being fifty years old, as happens to most of us when we age, his vision is changing. He decides to write his pages at a slight magnification and then reduce them to the original size for printing. To echo Arrighi's layouts Benson uses a free style of translation which allows him to mimic the design of the original pages. Wherever possible, leading or capitalized words are translated with a matching capital for the English. On completion, the work is titled *The First Writing Book*. It consists of a same-size facsimile of the Italian original and Benson's translation, re-written in pen. He writes an introduction while his friend Philip Hofer supplies a preface. Notes are added and a short bibliography. Save for the facsimile of Arrighi's block-printed original, Benson writes the entire book by hand. His original pen work is purchased for the Hofer Collection at Harvard's Houghton Library.

The first British edition is released by Oxford University Press in England in 1955, the second of its *Studies in Calligraphy*. The first American edition is printed at the Meriden Gravure Company under the direction of Howard's friend Harold Hugo, financed with the help of Herman Cohen. He dedicates the book to his friend Henry Eugene Coe who died in 1954. The work will go through three subsequent editions by Yale University Press, remaining in print for thirty years



Dust jacket from the first edition of JHB's *The First Writing Book*.

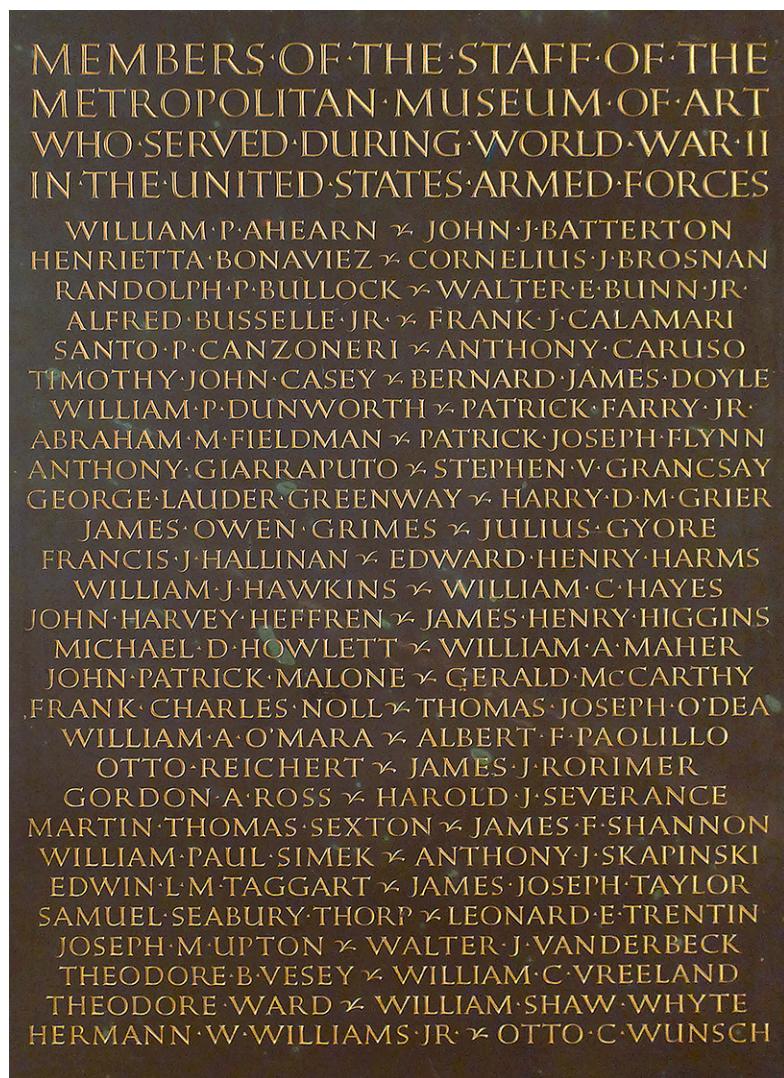


*Limestone tablet outside The Lamont Wing at the Metropolitan Museum in New York.*

As the writing book proceeds so does carving in the Shop. Three Benson works from the period may still be seen in the Metropolitan Museum in New York today. The first is a tablet of Greco-Roman design hanging at the entry of the Lamont Wing on the main floor, honoring Tomas W. Lamont, a benefactor of the museum.

The second of Benson's pieces can be found off the museum's entrance lobby on the same floor. It is a memorial tablet dedicated to museum staff members who died in World War II. Carved in a slate called Vermont purple, it has a grayish red tone. The inscription is in Roman capitals, massed in

dense array below a four-line heading of larger capitals. Picked out in gold, the bright letters stand out against the dark-colored stone. The memorial's names represent the broad demographic makeup of the staff: Ahearn, Bullock, Calamari, Grancsay, Vanderbeck, Simek, Wunsch...fifty-six in all. In order to



*Colored slate tablet honoring Metropolitan Museum staff who served in WWII.*

render an even, yet democratic pattern of letters Howard maintains frequent contact with Dudley Easby, the Metropolitan's secretary. Each line of lettering has two names in alphabetic order. Some lines are a bit short and some a shade too long. In February of 1951, with a photo of his brush painted layout, he writes:

*"Some of the names can be opened up more fully, but you can see that if I had middle names of all the people involved it would help achieve a better pattern. The aim in this sort of capitals inscription should be to approach the character of the Greek inscriptions with their even spacing and coverage."*

At the outset of the work the architects Voorhees, Walker, Foley, and Smith prepare a sketch of the tablet. Their representative is Salvatore Grillo, whose name in Italian means Cricket. As usual, he and Benson meet and immediately make friends. The desire for flexibility in the layout of names is agreeably dealt with by the museum authorities. In May of '51 Easby writes:

*"Grillo came up with a photostat of the layout and showed it to Preston and me. It looks fine." Then, "I am sorry, but Otto Reichert has neither middle name nor a middle initial." And at the end of the letter, "The correct spelling of the name you refer to is 'Paolillo'."*

Lists of names can be trying for designers as their lengths and letters combine in odd ways. Names like John Doe and Hepzibah Menuhin simply cannot be shoehorned into equal spaces. The look of Greek inscriptions mentioned to Easby refers to a method of ruling a lettered surface into lines of square spaces. Each space then holds a single letter. There was neither word spacing nor punctuation. The small scale and geometric nature of formal carved Greek yielded geometric balance. In contrast, Roman capital letters have a far more dynamic character and are less easy to compose. In Latin, they bind into harmonic patterns of contained and delineated spaces. With our polyglot, English tongue they behave less agreeably. Consider the words LUNA and MOON. Latin gives us a pleasing series of letters, with stems, a horizontal, a diagonal, and a curve. English yields a comical pairing of Os, ogling us like cartoon eyes begging for pupils.

A third Benson work at the Metropolitan is a large inscription over the door of a small auditorium, designed by Sal Grillo's firm and named for its donor, Grace Rainey Rogers. It is carved on ten panels of Monson slate, five over five. Once more the straightforward design work of Benon's partner Ade Bethune is called on. She makes a sketch for the inscription's central ornament, a harp and scroll drawn in a fluid, calligraphic line. Howard refines Bethune's harp and below it sets the donor's name in an alphabet of restrained, italic capitals. With brush and poster paint the he lays out the finished design, kneeling on the floor. Carving takes place in the Shop. When completed, palladium leaf will be laid into the finished cuts. The metal palladium, silver in color, will not tarnish. Laid into carved black slate it shows to dramatic advantage



*JHB painting the layout for the inscription at the entrance to the Grace Rainey Rogers Auditorium.*

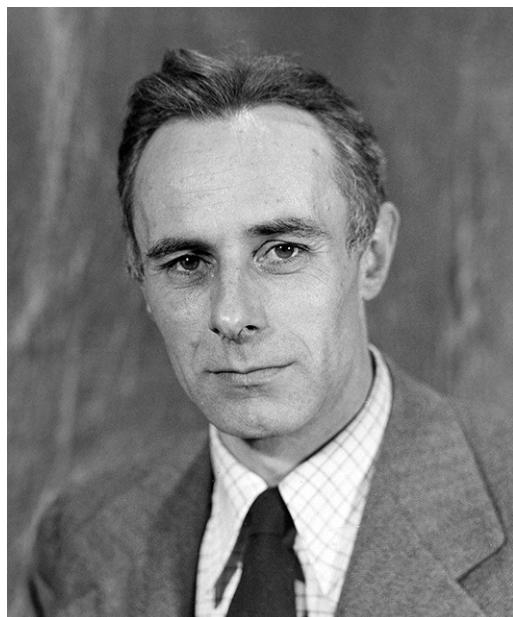
## LV

At the Portsmouth Priory School, Howard comes to know the mathematics teacher Francis Brady. Brady is married to Susan Bernie, an intelligent, independently-minded woman with a degree in philosophy. The family live in a farmhouse on the school property; like Benson they are Roman Catholic. They ultimately have six children, all bright and good looking with the brood evenly balanced between boys and girls.

Francis Brady and Howard Benson grow close, and forge a warm friendship. Howard gets into the habit of attending Sunday Mass at the Priory chapel. He sometimes brings one or two of his sons, and they eat an occasional family breakfast at the Brady's after Mass. Both families endure economic challenges with style and conviction, and mutual money woes may have strengthened the bond between them. When all together, the two families total thirteen members, although this rarely happens. Brady is a handsome Irishman, small, quiet, and forceful. Benson is tall, outgoing, and excitable. Sue Brady, a different creature from the Quaker Fisher Benson, possesses a contentious intellect and a spontaneous, raucous laugh. Both women might have agreed that we do not get to choose the wives of our husband's friends as friends of our own. Yet the two form a firm bond and one

that will lend support to both families. It is likely that the two do not discuss methods of child rearing—next to the Bensons, the Brady children seem icons of obedience and demeanor. With strong willed parents and three girls and three boys in the family, they are equipped to learn, and practice, the virtues of good manners and proper behavior in mixed groups. Benson's son Thomas is a large and somewhat awkward, left-handed presence, and the three of his boys together are often a wild and unruly crew. In the early 50s, offspring of both families are photographed together with three children of the host family of that day, that of Doctor and Mrs. José Ramos.

On occasion, of a summer, Howard and Francis would take a sailing trip for a few days on *Penguin*. Few paid attention to where they went on these trips and no one now knows what they spoke about with one another. Years later a Brady son would tell of seeing the pair in the living room of their Priory farmhouse, wreathed in tobacco smoke and roaring with laughter. Rockwell Kent might have loved to draw them; Ishmael and Queequeg they were not, nor would so humble a sailing trip have produced so poetic an outcome. Speculation on their thoughts and conversation yields little insight. For both men the brief and simple escape from work, wives, children, and economy must have been a welcome respite, requiring little beyond the pleasure of each other's company and the waters of Narragansett Bay.



*Francis Brady, Math teacher at the Portsmouth Priory.*



*Tom Benson, driving a Fordson tractor at the Biehl wheat farm in Lavina, Montana.*

In his youth, Tom Benson had a difficult relationship with his high-strung father, but a summer spent with his mother's cousins, Betty Joan and Clarence Biehl, forms a turning point for him. For the teenage Tom, harvesting wheat on Clarence and Betty-Joan's Montana farm delivers a straightforward, unambiguous work experience. He earns the respect of these two industrious and virtuous people and comes home a changed young man. Howard softens toward his son, and their relationship improves.

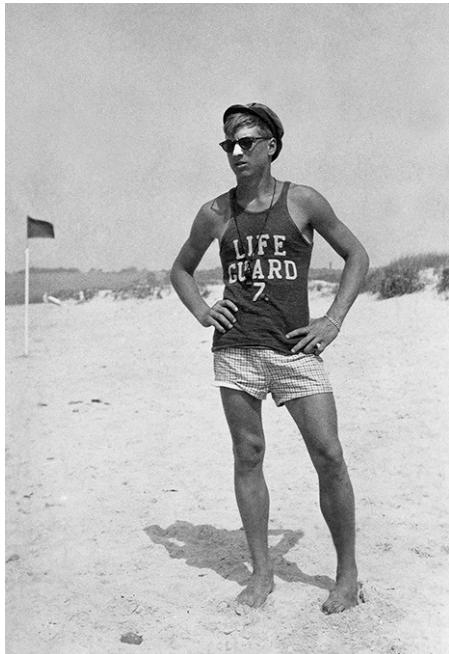
Tom goes on to summer employment as a lifeguard on local ocean beaches. He has become a powerful, deep-water swimmer. At one ocean beach losses by drowning have averaged two per year. During Tom's time as head lifeguard there are none. As he grows, he gets tall. Six-foot-three, blond, tanned, and muscular, he exudes dependability, and in 1953, enlists in the Navy. He attends specialist school as a Mineman, learning to service, maintain, and handle explosive, underwater mines. After being certified he is sent

to a base in Bremerton, Washington where he learns diving and scuba techniques. He acts in a theatrical troupe on the base in his spare time. Throughout the period he works with weapons capable of instantly killing him and his fellows if they ignore safe practice. After his time in Washington, the Navy flies him to Yokosuka, Japan where he serves in the division of mines for the two remaining years of his enlistment. Tom's substantial physique as well as his affable nature endear him to the people of war-ravaged Japan.

Fun Benson, smaller and less confident than his older brother, is shy, self-effacing and spoiled by both parents. His nickname evolves through a series of variations ending up as "Fud." He does not possess his older brother's gift for friendship. When young, however, he was more affectionate than Tom and his father favors him. He shines his father's shoes, learning the supportive rewards of repetitive work. Inheriting his mother's athleticism, the boy shows great agility but is apt to move too fast, and hates organized sports. Notwithstanding the silly picture, at left, he never played golf, loves knives and inclines to accidental injuries through haste and inattention. From a temporary fixation on firearms, he suffers two self-inflicted gunshot wounds, both blessedly minor. He gets into scrapes with Tom, who, after getting his first driver's license, will borrow the family car of a Sunday, and skip Mass to take them both out exploring the island and its waterfront environs.



*Fun striking an athletic pose with a wooden cane.*



*Tom on Lifeguard duty at Sachuest Beach.*



*Chip Benson with Tang, the family dog.*

Chip is young enough not to join the older boys' adventures, nor does he share their appetites for risk. Self-contained from birth, he is cheerful and contented. As an adult, he would say that he had the "stupid happy gene." Far from stupid, he in fact possesses a razor-sharp scientific mind. He will go on to be a renowned photographer, a professor and Dean of the School of Art at Yale University, and a recipient—for his pioneering innovations in photographic reproduction—of the prestigious MacArthur "genius" grant. In Chip's case the overblown nickname of the honor is actually appropriate to his IQ. Unlike Tom and Fud, he is not obsessed with girls. He ultimately marries his childhood sweetheart and stays with her forever.

After graduating from high school, Chip attends Brown University for one semester with the help of its new President Barnaby Keeney. When it ends in December, he goes to Keeney's office and says, "I think I am going to leave and join the Navy. I'm not learning the things I want to." Keeney calls the head of the English Department and says, "I am sending a young man to see you. He's leaving the school. I want you to read him the first chapter of Moby Dick." The book, long a presence in the family, is known to the boys through the family's edition, containing Rockwell Kent's majestic, black-and-white illustrations. Their starkness and the chiaroscuro of the story are formative elements as the boys grow up.

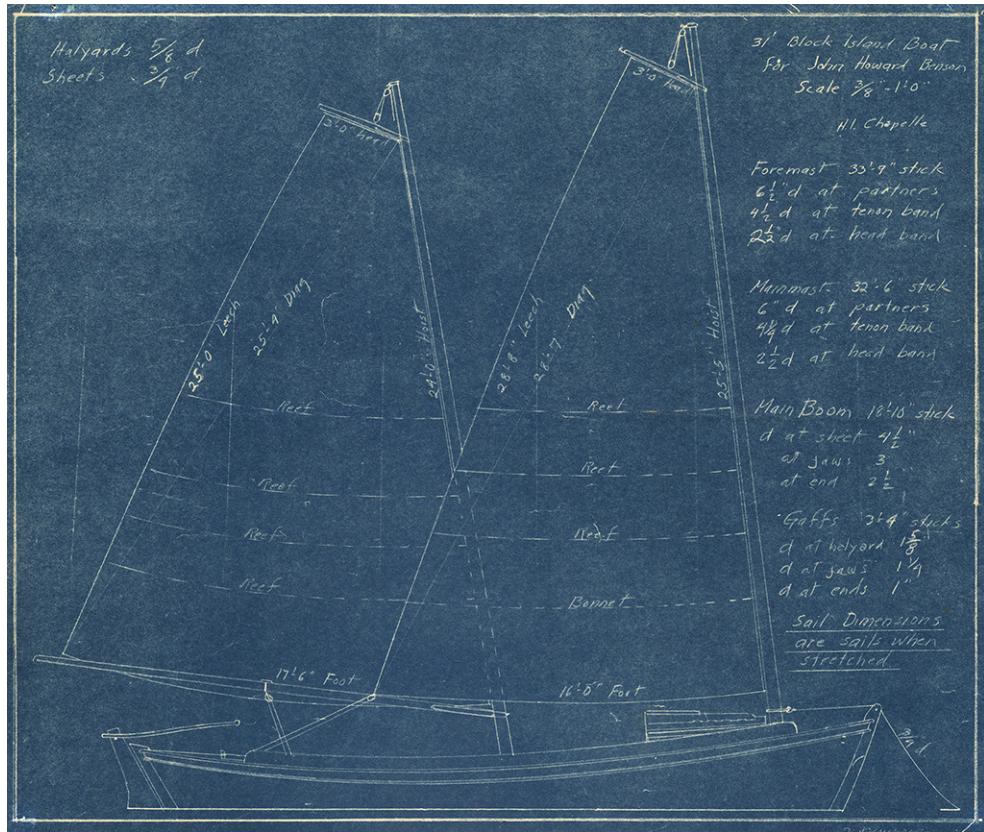
Sons of remarkable parents, the three young men carry the hallmarks of their parentage. Fisher Benson, relaxed and patient, stands as a model of decency and principle. Yet these virtues are neither flaunted nor pressed upon the boys—the genteel pacifism of the Quaker sect is, rather, absorbed by them from birth. She practices the Quaker form of speech throughout her life and its archaic intimacy affirms her unqualified affection. Fisher's hands-off style of mothering breeds independence. Buoyed by parental stability the young Bensons roam free and engage the physical world where the salt-water-oriented life of post-war Newport provides priceless lessons. They have inherited from their father a built-in vade mecum of hard work, done by hand.

One summer day young Fun walks with Howard from the back porch down to the water. They are going for a "spin" in *Penguin*, tied to the pier. Because there is barely any wind Fun knows that they will move under the power of the boat's winsome little gasoline engine which sits, securely bolted down, in its cockpit engine box. Fun knows that inside the box is a piece of cord, tied off and knotted in a loop. To start the engine, the lid of the box is lifted off. With the gas line opened and the choke held briefly closed by the loop of cord, gasoline flows into the carburetor. A starter rope with its transverse, wooden handle wraps around a spindle on the flywheel. With his father's strong pull on the rope, the engine will burst into life. This exciting action is looming in the boy's mind when he looks up at his father and asks, "What makes an engine go?" Benson immediately pulls a pencil and a scrap of paper from his pocket. He pauses for a moment, drawing a simple diagram. Pointing out its parts he says "This is the piston in the engine, connected to a crank to turn this flywheel. On top of the piston, gasoline comes into this closed space and explodes from a spark. The explosion drives the piston down and the crank turns the wheel to spin the propeller." The boy stands... dazzled with comprehension. Benson pockets the paper and walks onto the pier.



## PART SEVEN

*Anthelia*



One of naval architect Howard Chapelle's blueprint plans for JHB's Block Island boat, Anthelia.

**T**HE ISLAND COMMUNITY of New Shoreham lies fourteen miles at sea off Newport, on Block Island. This landmass had been known for centuries by the local Indians but Europeans named the island after the Dutch explorer Adrien Block, who landed there 400 years ago. A small, year-round farming and fishing community has existed on Block Island ever since.

After the Civil War, the island gained repute as a port-of-call for yachtsmen and summer tourists. Steamers provided regular service to and from a man-made harbor formed with a stone breakwater. A seaworthy type of sailing workboat evolved there that was, for a time, a preferred design for fishing vessels. The type, called a "Block Islander," was a deep draft, dead-rise design. Lapstraked, it carried two unstayed masts with no headsail. In today's nomenclature, the type would be called a cat ketch. These craft were built in differing sizes; most of those used in commercial fishing being near forty feet in length. As open boats, they carried heavy ballast to resist choppy, local seas.

The noted nautical historian Howard Chapelle wrote several popular books on boats and their construction, and the Block Islander appears in one of them. Paule Loring, an artist in Wickford, Rhode Island, has built a



Pier and breakwater at New Shoreham, showing two Block Island boats and steamer Mount Hope.

small Block Island boat to Chapelle's plans. It is soon seen sailing in and around Narragansett Bay. Loring works as a cartoonist for Rudder, a popular boating magazine. Benson knows of Loring, and one day meets him when he sails into Newport in his little boat, *Glory Anna*. Howard admires the craft. An idea grows in his mind that it would be a good thing to have just such a boat himself.

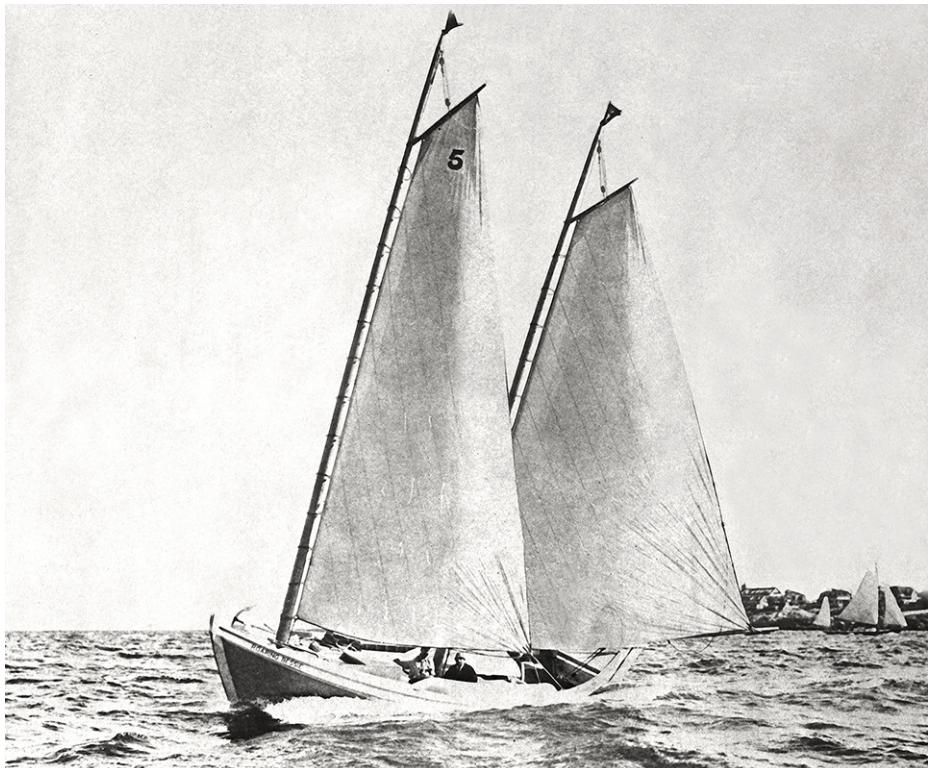


*The Glory Anna under power.*

The sailing cartoonist has a party at his Wickford home, and Benson is invited. He is in charge of the older boys that day and is obliged to bring them along. Tom and Fun roam around the party acting up, as usual. At one point from behind a hedge they hear two party guests talking. "I love Howard Benson. But you know, I can't stand those god-damned kids."

Their father doesn't hear the comment, and his boys' rowdy behavior does not prevent Loring from inviting Howard sailing on his boat. Howard accepts, and the sail follows soon after. The small, tidy vessel fascinates the artist. A ghostly presence seems to stir in him—is the spirit of his Block Island ancestor Aaron Willey sailing with them on this day? Whatever the cause, *Glory Anna* has bewitched him.

Benson initiates a long correspondence with Howard Chapelle. He sets in motion his idea to build a Block Islander for himself. Over the course of fifteen years he has carefully husbanded the Art Fund inherited from Durr Freedley. The distributions he has made from the modest account have diminished its capital, but no compensation has been taken from it for his work. He feels that his boat project deserves support. "After all," he says to



*The Roaring Bessie under sail.*

himself, "If that boat isn't an artistic purpose I don't know what is." Between the remnant of the Freedley fund and other sources he feels able to float the project.

The Benson-Chapelle correspondence lasts for several years. At the start, it centers on design and construction for the new boat. Benson offers to make a half-model which Chapelle agrees would be a good start on plans for the hull form, before drawing it up on paper. Traditional boats are bilaterally symmetrical on a longitudinal axis, and so it is only necessary to make a model of one side of the hull. Measurements taken off one half serve as the mirror image of the other. The two Howards, Chapelle and Benson, hold long conversations about size and construction. As a starting point, they research historic vessels and surviving lines and offsets. Several of the old boats

have been measured and their dimensions preserved, though not one hull survives. The working boats from Block Island were larger than Loring's *Glory Anna*, whose twenty-two feet is a bit more than half the length of the larger, historic vessels.

A newer boat is found in the records, although she is an anomaly. Forty feet long, she was built smooth-planked, near the turn of the century. She too is gone. A newspaper photo shows her with her rail down, trusting the splash board to keep the water out. Her smooth hull may not have resisted



*Lena M* and other Block Island Boats.

heeling quite as well as lapstraked models, but all these vessels seem to show a rather low rail whenever sailing briskly. In the picture on the preceding page, we can see the crisp bow wave and its trough, which exaggerates the degree of heel. The most interesting aspect of this Block Islander may be her marvelous name, *Roaring Bessie*.

Lapstraked hulls are thought to descend from skin boats such as the Eskimo Umiak. These consisted of a wooden framework built first, which gives a solid form upon which to frame the skin covering. Wooden Viking ships evolved later, when larger, stronger vessels were needed for carrying groups of people and cargoes. As with skin boats, a Viking ship's framework

of wood gives shape to a “skin” of overlapped planks laid up from the keel. Repeated, lapped seams give the hull a supple strength. Made from quarter-grain lumber, the boats are known to have flexed in the waves. Traditional Block Island Boats were all lapstraked. Even though built for hard use, they did not last long. By the 20s only photographs and records of lines remain. In the 50s, Benson and Chapelle work from several sets of historic dimensions and drawings. The pair pores over them to find a suitable model. They settle on the hull of a boat named Island Belle. For a sail plan they pick the Lena M, seen on the left, with another of the larger boats.

They scale down the lines to a length of thirty-one feet. With plans in hand Benson looks for a builder. His brother-in-law Ned Smith tells him about a boatbuilder he met in England; as price is an issue, Ned thinks this might save money, but

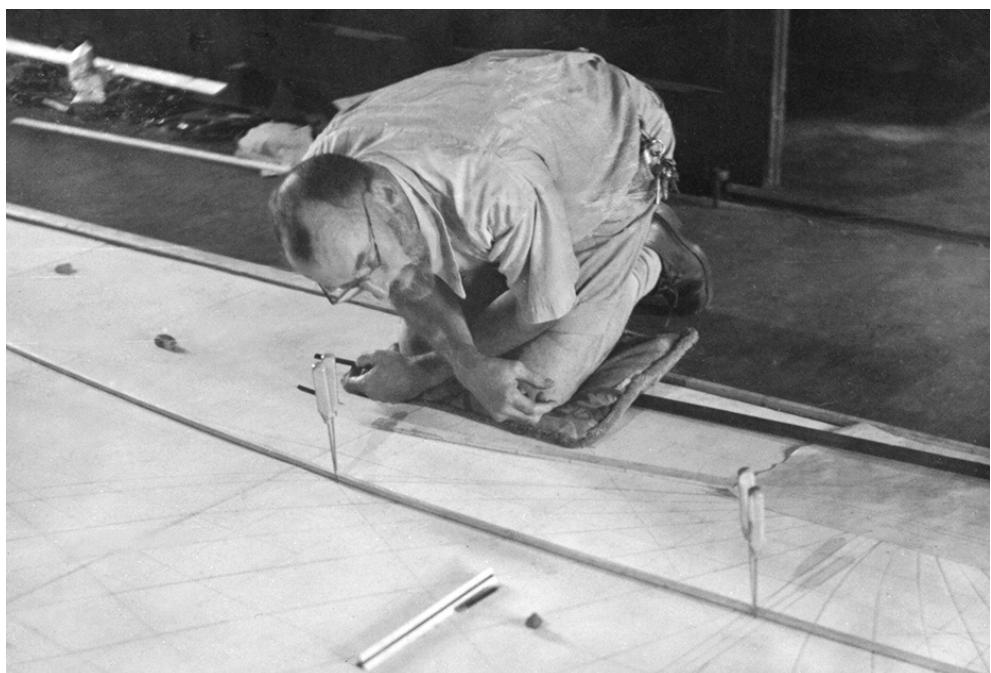
transatlantic logistics cool this approach. Howard then finds a Portuguese-born boat builder, Toni Correia, who lives in nearby Middletown. Correia makes an estimate for building the boat that is within the Benson budget. Methods and materials are discussed, and Benson grows confident. Correia knows his stuff. They work out the realities of the cost, and then agree on conventional construction and traditional materials. Toni measures his shop, confirming that the boat will fit.

Boat-building has a long tradition in Rhode Island, for yachts as well as vessels like Benson’s Block Islander. In the early 20th century, the heyday of America’s great wooden yachts, the Herreshoff Manufacturing Company in Bristol was a leading designer and builder. Nathaniel Herreshoff designed many of the America’s Cup contenders, and his partner and older brother John B., although blind later in life, could check the accuracy of half-models by feel.

The practice, at the time, was to conceive a hull design, then draw it roughly at small scale. The next step was a half-model, from which the lines of the new boat are to be judged. Approved lines are taken off the model and “lofted” at full scale. Drawn on white painted panels, the lines are laid down to mathematical co-ordinates established by the half model. Thin wooden strips are bent to the described shapes of the lines which are then drawn in dark pencil.



*JHB's half-model of the Island Belle.*



*JHB lofting plans for his Block Islander, in Edith Wetmore's Carriage House at Chateau Sur Mer, 1954.*

## LVIII

A series of in-progress photographs of the construction of Howard's Block Island boat have been saved by his sons and are shown in sequence on the following pages. With lofted lines, drawn at full scale, the white-painted panels of the plan are taken to Toni Correia's shop where they provide contours to shape the keel and frames.

In the first two photographs, construction begins with this wooden foundation serving as the backbone of the new vessel. Keel, stem and stern-post are shaped in white oak to the mid-line profile. Cross section lines are transferred to soft pine patterns called molds, one for each established station. Stood on the keel, they describe the volumetric shape of the hull.

Next, pine battens are fastened over the molds along the sheer line and in stages down to the keel. Once in place, steamed oak ribs are laid inside the battens still held in place by the molds. The framework is then planked, over the ribs from the keel upward. Each strake receives a bevel so the next will overlap it. The pine battens come off in sequence as the planks go on.

The lapped strakes are joined with copper nails, fitted inboard with washers called roves. Projecting inboard from the roves, the nails are clipped off, leaving a small amount above the roves. In the fifth picture, a worker outside backs up the head of each fastening with a block, while its end is hammered over the rove by a worker inside.

A critical part of the hull is at the lowest plank, or garboard, where planking joins the keel. To add to the strength at this point, heavy timbers are cut to shape and set in over the keel and strakes. For maximum strength, they are cut from trees with resilient, natural-grown curves.

The sixth photo shows Bob Capron painting the inside of the planked hull with a preservative called Cuprinol. Outlawed now, it is considered a potent poison. While Bob works, Benson's long legs can be seen in the foreground as he takes a break and lies at ease. His cardiac disability was accommodated by all.

In the last two pictures, Howard and Toni work on the foredeck as the project nears completion. Benson is opposed at first to plywood, but Toni sells him on the material. Thus decked, the cabin will consist of a modest galley space forward and two long bunks astern of it, on each side, behind the mainmast. There is no headroom in the galley unless the hinged hatch cover is raised. Benson stands there, on a box, for the last photograph. The boat is planned for modest cruising and built on a tight budget. When finished she is put on a stout trailer and hauled to the brow at Poplar street. Painted a dark green, she has a gray cabin sole and decks. Early on, Howard decides to call the boat after his Block Island grandmother, *Anthelia*.



*Toni Correia with stem and keel.*



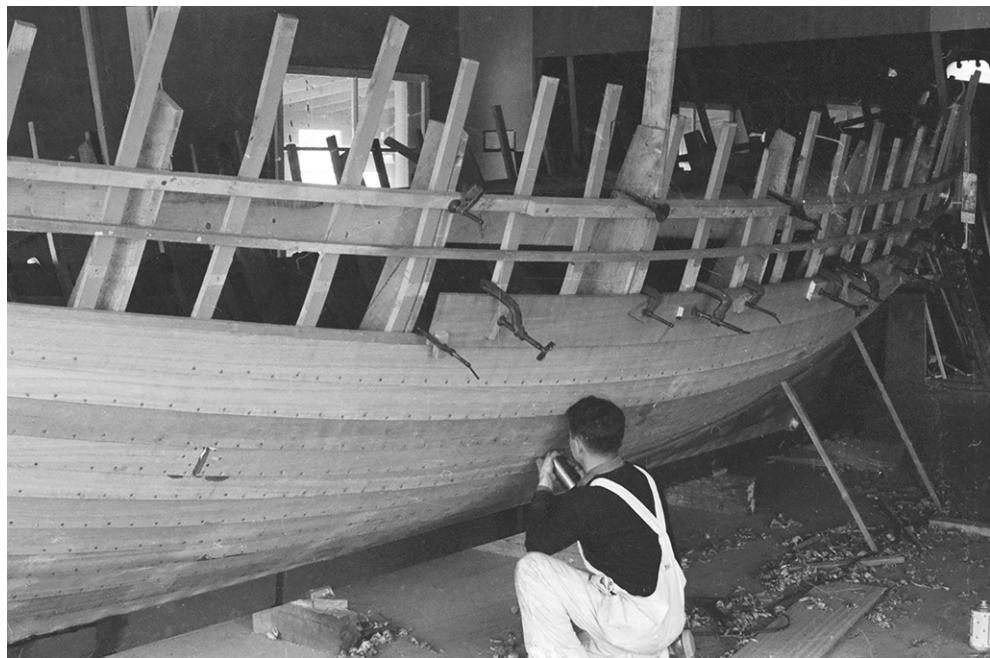
*Keel, stem and molds.*



*Hull with battens.*



*Picture: Hull with garboards.*



*A workman backs the fastenings, nailed by another man inside the hull, of the strakes.*



*Bob Capron sealing the inside of the hull with cuprinol. JHB rests in the foreground.*



*Howard and Toni working on the plywood foredeck.*



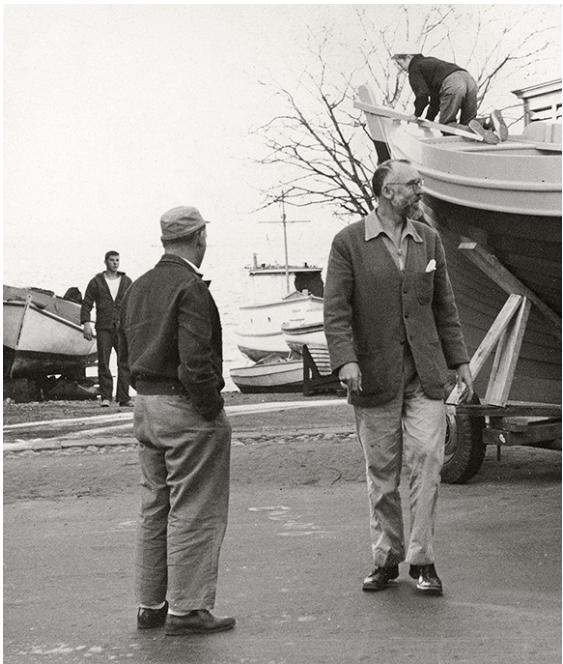
*JHB standing in the foreward hatchway.*



JHB and Howard Chappelle on the foredeck of *Anthelia* prior to launch.

Two severe hurricanes hit Newport in 1954. Seaside life carries on, but the Cope house's seawall is destroyed. Repairs are still in progress the following year. *Penguin* has also come to grief in the second of the two closely-sequenced storms. The first is a high wind, high water hurricane called "Carol". The second, "Edna," is a high wind, low water hurricane. *Penguin* drags her mooring during Edna, swamps and is badly damaged on the Old L. She is sold to a local named Fred Grey who takes her to a boat yard in town, moves to Florida and leaves her behind where, at last, she is burned.

Howard Chapelle comes up from Annapolis for *Anthelia*'s launching. He and Benson hold a conference on the foredeck. What they speak of is not known but their expressions tell of its cordial nature. They have become good friends and over the three years of the project they have written back and forth frequently. Getting the daily mail Fisher would call out, "Another love letter from Chap!"



L to R: Tom Benson, Toni Correia, JHB, and Chip on deck.

on the bow to bless the vessel. Paule Loring had sailed down from Wickford in Glory Anna and stands off with an outhaul line to guide the boat into the water. Bob Baker, an enthusiastic sailor and boat builder, married to a cousin of Fisher's, attends in his No Man's Land double ender, Orca. A historic craft, lovingly restored, she is tied up to the pier as *Anthelia* is readied to launch. A cavalcade of old Newport friends, workers from the Stevens shop and the watermen of the Poplar Street shore are gathered in force. Barnaby Keeney drives down from Brown University to attend the event.

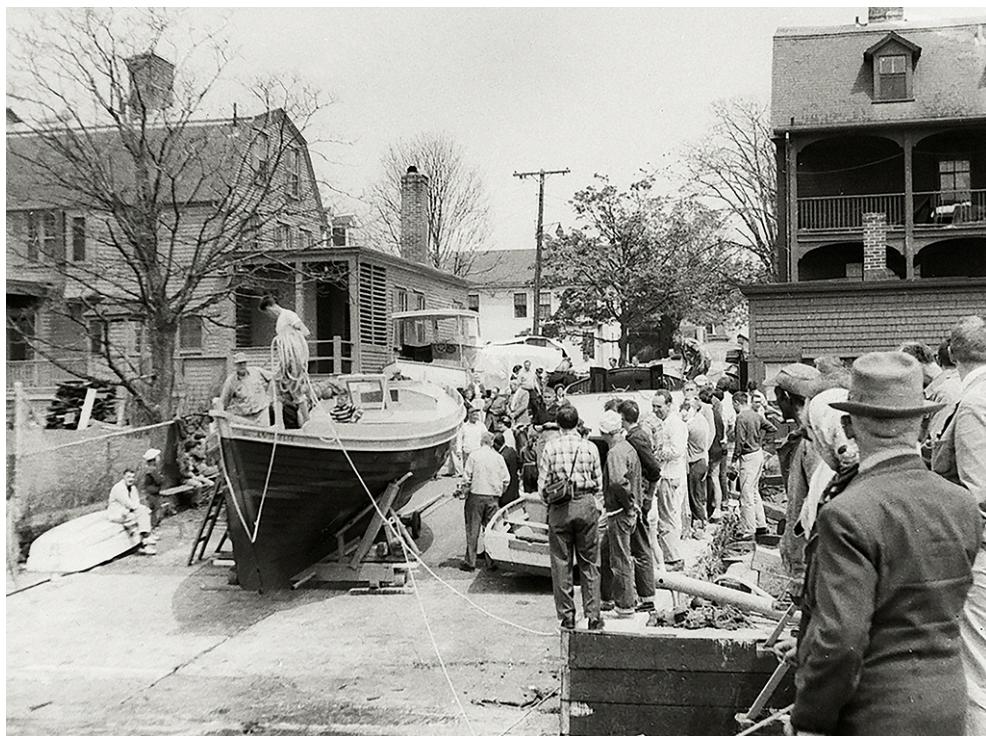
As completion of *Anthelia* nears, Howard starts a decorative carving on top of the curved stem of the bow, which is called the beakhead. He finishes it on the shore just before the launching. A passerby hears him laughing and stops. "What's so funny?" she asks. "If I had to pay for this," Howard replies, "I couldn't afford it."

On the launching day, a crowd assembles on the pier, the half-repaired seawall, and around the boat on the streetway. A Catholic priest scatters holy water



Fisher Benson preparing to christen the new boat.

As it did for King Canute, the tide eventually rises. In due course, the *Anthelia* slides into the Bay. Soon her masts are stepped and sails bent. Men of the shore run the engine in and judge it sound. As he helps tune the rig and adjust the ballast, Benson's condition dogs him. The pleasures of building the boat and watching it grow have been a joyous experience. He will sail on her only once.



*A crowd looks on as Anthelia is lowered to the water's edge.*



*Roman Gravestone.*

Graham Carey's wife dies in 1953. Alone and with both children gone, he buys a colonial house in Newport one block south of the Shop. Although he keeps his place in Cambridge and his farm in Vermont, Graham begins to spend more time in Newport where he soon starts courting Nancy Price. A pretty, delicate young woman she has now spent a decade working with Howard Benson as a carver, book keeper, and photographer. Taking pictures with an early 35mm reflex camera, Nancy photographs finished stone work, processing the pictures in the Shop darkroom. She also takes many candid images of Benson himself which she catalogues and preserves. Her carving is dexterous and dependable though it does not reach the power of Benson's work. Her relationship to Carey, an older man, develops rapidly. Late in 1955, they marry.

In the summer of '55 John Everett "Fud" Benson comes to work for three months at the Shop. Fifteen years old, he takes to the work, does what is asked of him, and displays promising talent. With his father's and Nancy's help he starts to carve letters, and completes two stones for client's pets. For his last piece of the summer he copies the humble Roman gravestone seen above.

As the year wanes Benson's health is failing. His heart condition has been worsening for a decade. After several small heart attacks, he has a more serious one. Under the strain, he gives up teaching at RISD. Work at the Shop continues although Nancy Price, now Carey, leaves to live with her husband. Howard turns to Fisher, asking if she will step in to run the office. She steps in at once. James Casey, a decorated World War II veteran who had earlier worked briefly at the Shop, and now works on his own, is asked to come back. Married to one of Ade's apprentices, he has started a family and is happy to have a salaried job. A gifted and accomplished craftsman, Casey works diligently and well. Having worked as a sign painter he knows the ins and outs of brush-painted letters and quickly begins to handle much of the required work.



*Jim Casey uses the I-beam track to move a stone.*

Howard some of Henry's elegant clothes which the artist wears and enjoys, although with a touch of sadness—as well as being close friends, the men were of a size. Another stone must be made for the Coe lot, this time in Monson Slate. Around this time, Howard's sculptor friend and colleague Waldemar Raemisch also dies. Howard carves a simple granite stone for him and sets it in Swan Point Cemetery in Providence. His sailing friend and fellow catholic Francis Brady dies in this same short stretch of years. The discrete stone Benson makes for him has a Chi Rho symbol at the top. Beneath the name is the Latin verse *Lex Dei Eius In Corde Ipsius*. "He carried the law of God in his heart." These are hard losses, accentuated by his own diminishing health.

Ulysses Young joined the staff some years earlier. His father, Milton Young, worked as a handyman for Benson's mother. Ulysses, who is married to a robust woman named Minnie, does the heavy work of handling, shaping, and setting gravestones. His job also includes routine maintenance and tending the coal stoves which heat the Shop through the winter.. In all of Howard's time the building never has central heat.

In 1954, Howard's friend and patron Henry Coe dies. Coe leaves him several rare books and his printing equipment. His wife Dunie sends



*RISD President, Max Sullivan assists JHB at his Yale commencement.*

Throughout his life, Benson has stayed in touch with his contacts and friends in New York. The booksellers Herman and Viv Cohen have long been patrons and friends. Herman, who helped with acquiring and financing the Operina, commissions the Shop to make a sign for his bookstore. Herman and Viv also decide that they want a Benson alphabet stone to display in their bookshop. Early in his career Howard began making display alphabets for collectors. Their carved letters are picked out in gold or palladium leaf; bibliophiles and collectors of calligraphy are keen to have them. His favored alphabet layout is used throughout his career. It consists of a horizontal rectangle showing justified lines of his roman capitals, lower case Roman, and Chancery Italic. The Cohens approve this design for an alphabet stone for themselves and Benson adds it to his job list.

During these years, he receives important recognition. Yale University awards him an honorary Master of Arts degree. As a young man, he had only earned a certificate from New York's Arts Students League. The distinction of a Yale degree, even if honorary, is a welcome accolade. His tall friend, William Wimsatt, is certainly involved. Howard is also made a member of the Academy of Arts and Sciences at the suggestion of his friend Walter Whitehill. The American Institute of Architects gives him their Craftsmanship Medal for excellence in calligraphy. Fisher later wrote of this time. "Clearly his countrymen were beginning to appreciate what John Benson stood for and promised, just as he could not help but realize that the sands were running out."



JHB working on engraving the Yale Medals.

As his health declines, Benson receives the best medical help available to him. His problem, a flawed mitral valve, cannot be repaired at this time. Doctors do what they can. Diet helps but cannot provide a cure. At the age of only fifty-five, his mind is clear and functioning as well as ever. The hands and eyes still work but a nagging fatigue seems omnipresent. If he gets too tired Fisher simply puts him to bed. In the home studio, work on engraving and printing projects continues. He updates his seal for RISD and re-engraves it for the school diploma. Shop work carries on at a reduced but steady rate. With Fisher in the front office and help in the back room he feels supported and able to keep going.

Howard's friendship with book seller Herman Cohen helps him maintain his New York connection—the urgent atmosphere of the City has long been a draw to him. But as his life slows down he travels less. Hospitalized in '54 he engravings names on the Yale medals working on a bed-table in his hospital room. Doctors and nurses are amazed. The slate alphabet stone ordered by Herman and Viv Cohen is also started. It is to be his last completed commission.

Throughout his life Benson has stayed resolutely focused and engaged, possessed of a boisterous sense of humor and a booming laugh. He manifests what seems to be two moods—complete engagement with the task in hand or jovial response to the whimsical turns of life. Between these two states of being the only upsets he suffers are frustrations with delay and impediments to progress. He has no patience with indolence. Sailing on his catboat he finds diversion in the tasks of handling the boat and conversing with friends on board. When the yachts of Newport gather to race he loves to watch them jockey for the start. At times, he joins other sailing enthusiasts on day trips. He sails with George and Katherine Warren on Souri and with John Nicholas Brown aboard his splendid yawl, Bolero.

Salt water flowed in the blood of his Block Island forebears. His marriage to Fisher and her sailing family awakened him to the pleasures of sailing on Narragansett Bay. The passion stays with him for life. His three sons learned to sail with him on *Penguin*. All of them, without realizing it, received remarkable educations in sailing, boat handling, and seamanship.

On February 22, 1956 Howard Benson is stricken with yet another heart attack. Early the next morning he dies. Fisher, black-haired and attractive, has not yet reached her fifties. His loss shocks the community and brings expressions of sympathy from overseas and across the nation. Tom, in the Navy at Bremerton, Washington, hears the news. He later tells how he had just returned from liberty but for some reason chose not to change out of his dress blues. He is able to jump onto a plane at once and fly home without delay.

Letters of sympathy stream into the Cope house. Barnaby Keeney, due to deliver a speech at Brown, rewrites it and instead speaks with eloquence of his departed friend. Herman Cohen telegraphs Fisher from New York. "I will be at St. Joseph's on Saturday. All love." Saint Joseph's parish holds a High Mass which fills the capacious church. The Bishop of Rhode Island officiates. Monks of the Portsmouth Priory share in saying the Mass. Jim Casey makes a pine box for him, inscribing a Latin motto around its edge. Ade Bethune paints a Roman cross down its length.

John Howard Benson lies buried in the old Tew lot of Newport's Common Burying ground where he had walked throughout his life. The day of his funeral is unseasonably mild and clear. Among the assembled mourners is a sense that spring might be just around the corner. Eighteenth century memorials, carved by his predecessors at the John Stevens Shop, surround him. Stones to his Yankee ancestors stand at his feet.



### *Happy the Man*

*Happy the man who, journeying far and wide  
As Jason or Ulysses did, can then  
Turn homeward, seasoned in the ways of men,  
And claim his own, and there in peace abide!*

*When shall I see the chimney-smoke divide  
The sky above my little town: ah when  
Stroll the small gardens of that house again  
Which is my realm and crown, and more beside?*

*Better I love the plain, secluded home  
My fathers built, than bold façades of Rome:  
Slate pleases me as marble cannot do:*

*Better than Tiber's flood my quiet Loire,  
Those little hills than these, and dearer far  
Than great sea winds, the zephyrs of Anjou.*

*Joachim Du Bellay  
Translation by Richard Wilbur*



*John Howard Benson's gravestone in the Common Burying Ground in Newport, RI*

## PICTURE CREDITS AND PERMISSIONS

1. pp 3. "A Plan of the Town of Newport Rhode Island" surveyed by Charles Blaskowitz, 1777. Courtesy of the Photography and Map division of the United States Library of Congress.
2. pp 65. *Edith Wetmore at Chateau Sur Mer*, 1960, Photographed by Nancy Sirkis, © 1960.
3. pp 106. *Sunken Steam Launch on Long Wharf in Newport*, 1938, photo courtesy of Susan Pieroth.
4. pp 133-134. *Aerial photographs of the Naval installations at Washington Street and Goat Island in Newport, RI ca. 1940s*. Courtesy of Walter Nicolds, Museum Specialist at the Naval War College Museum.
5. pp 136. *Oil portrait of John Howard Benson*, 1936 by John Frazier Courtesy of the Smithsonian National Portrait Gallery.
6. pp 145, detail from *Harnham Ridge, Salisbury*, by John Constable. Image courtesy of Tate Britain.
7. pp 165. *Quarry workers in Westerly RI*. Photograph courtesy of the Babcock-Smith House Museum in Westerly, RI.
8. pp 172 and 181, photographs of John Howard Benson at work, and the facade of his family home, the Captain John Warren house, (AKA "the Cope House") in Newport, RI. Photographs by Robert Meservey, courtesy of the Preservation Society of Newport County.
9. pp 226. Courtyard of the Bargello Museum in Florence Italy, ca. 1900, Niday Picture Library, Alamy Stock Photo.
10. pp 234. *Langdon Warner on a Dig*. Photographed by Kara Khoto, image courtesy of the Harvard University Libraries.
11. pp 238. *Marines raising the American Flag at Iwo Jima in 1945*. AP Photograph by Joe Rosenthal, courtesy of the United States National Archives.
12. pp 241. Detail of letters from the *Codex Sinaiticus*, image courtesy of the British Museum.

Note: All other illustrations and photographs come directly from the Benson and Smith families and from the archives of the John Stevens Shop.

## TEXT CREDITS AND PERMISSIONS

1. pp 238. *mr youse needn't be so spry*, Poem by e.e. cummings, published with permission of Harcourt Brace and Co.
2. pp 296. *Happy the Man*, Poem by Joachim Du Bellay, translated by Richard Wilbur

THE LETTER CUTTER  
*The Life and work of*  
JOHN HOWARD BENSON  
*by*  
John E. Benson

First Edition Copyright  
John E. Benson  
&  
The Fisher Press  
2018

Type set in Aldus Light Standard Roman  
Printed at Puritan–Capital Press  
Hollis, New Hampshire

Designed by Christopher W. Benson  
Edited by Anne Benson  
and  
Christopher Stinehour

No part of this book may be copied  
or reproduced in print or online  
without permission from the author  
or The Fisher Press

ISBN

With special thanks to Barbara Benson and Allan Chasanoff