



## Book Notes

A fortnightly publication of the JRBS

Vol. 1, No. 6

August 16–31, 2020



### **The early life of Marsden J. Perry**

It is often forgotten that Providence once held a world-famous Shakespeare collection—in the John Brown House, right across Power Street from the world-famous Americana collection built by John Carter Brown. In terms of his competition for collecting Shakespeare, Marsden J. Perry was (for a time) first among an impressive list of names—E. Dwight Church (whose fabulous collection was later bought up by Henry

Huntington), Robert Hoe, J. Pierpont Morgan, Brayton Ives, and William Loring Andrews. Only Henry Clay Folger would eventually outstrip him, mostly due to an almost maniacal devotion to the Bard, which he shared with his wife, as well as being able to hold onto the fortune he made.

Marsden Perry has been described as a perfect real-life example of the hero in the rags-to-riches stories made popular by Horatio Alger, Jr.—even though, in actuality, most of the plots were rags-to-middle class respectability. *Ragged Dick*, Alger’s first best-seller, was published in 1868, so it is possible to claim that it influenced Perry as a boy. Alger’s novels were derived from the experience of many young men of the age, and stemmed from his own feelings of being an outsider looking in. The precocious son of a Unitarian minister with modest means, Alger’s genteel poverty and less-than-aristocratic heritage barred him from membership in the more prominent clubs at Harvard in the 1850s. Likewise, Perry’s modest birth and lack of formal education would leave him uninvited to join the Hope Club or the Agawam Hunt—a path easily trod by the Goddards, the Gammells, the Metcalfs, the Sharpes, and the Browns. When he was invited to join, there was a perceptible whiff of the not-quite-acceptable. The Walpole Society received him graciously enough, but with some reservations—“Unhampered by the traditions of childhood,” wrote Lawrence Wroth in the Society’s *Note Book*, “he was free to develop his own taste and to find out for himself what was best.” This locution is typical of the delicate yet sharp characterization of the self-educated by those with more formal pedigrees of learning and culture. But Perry clearly had a fire in the belly, like many self-made men.

Very little is published about his early life before he came to Providence in 1871. He was born in Rehoboth to Horatio and Malvina (Wilson) Perry. The date of his birth is often stated as November 2, 1850, but there is contradicting evidence. In fact, the more I looked into his birth and parentage, the more fascinating and conflicting the story becomes—but for now I’ll stick with what we know—or what we think we know.

Marsden Perry may have been born as early as 1847, based on both his military records, census records, and his marriage record. According to Rehoboth birth records, **which do not list Marsden Perry**, his elder brother Othniel (by Malvina) was born February 5, 1846. A search of early Rehoboth records and military records has revealed that he also had an even older brother named Horatio<sup>1</sup>, but probably that sibling came from

---

<sup>1</sup> According to Horatio Jr.’s military records, he was born about 1841, enlisted September 11, 1862, served in Company G. of the 47th Massachusetts Infantry, mustered out September 1, 1863, and died in his early 60s on September 21, 1904.

Marsden's father's first wife. In that case, this Horatio, Jr. would have been his older half-brother.

According to military records, Marsden enlisted on December 1<sup>st</sup> 1864, and his birth year is listed as 1846—so if that date is right, he had just turned 18. Further, Malvina would have had to have gotten pregnant a month or so after having her first child with Horatio, Sr.—named Othnial, and born February 5, 1846—in order to have had Marsden in early November of 1846. This is possible, but it is also possible that she had him later; but then, Marsden's reported age in other records would be false. Clearly someone is lying somewhere. Of course, lying to enlist has always happened. Falsifying birth and marriage records happens less, but it is not unheard of.

Horatio Perry, Sr. was a farmer, and died at the age of 40 in 1853 (of consumption, probably tuberculosis). Perry's mother was, remember, Horatio Sr.'s second wife. According to records she was born in Georgia and was then 24; she re-married a younger man (who was 19) seven months later—his name was William Miller, a farmer from Swansea. Marsden and Othniel then go to live with the Millers. Othniel became a farmer, but died at the age of 30 (of lockjaw) in 1876.

Marsden was, according to one source, raised by his paternal grandmother, Lucy Perry, who was a schoolteacher, sometime between 1855 and 1860. According to census records, he is still with the Millers in 1855, but not in 1860. He was educated at home and in the district schools, but at the age of 16 (some sources say 12) he left home for Boston, where the record goes dark for a bit until he was old enough to enlist (or lie about his age to enlist). His military record lists his occupation as “peddler.”

The National Park Service Civil War Soldiers and Sailors database shows a Marsden J. Perry as a member of an unattached unit, the 26<sup>th</sup> Company (Massachusetts Infantry); after its muster-in, the 26<sup>th</sup> was shipped off to serve in Mississippi and Louisiana—but clearly he did not go with them.

According to his *New York Times* obituary, he was in an “unorganized body of recruits, from which he was selected to serve out the remainder of the Civil War as a clerk in the office of the Provost Marshal.” The provost marshals were the Union's military police. They hunted and arrested deserters, spies, and civilians suspected of disloyalty; confined prisoners; maintained records of paroles and oaths of allegiance; controlled the passage of civilians in military zones and those using Government transportation; and investigated the theft of Government property. After

---

the peace was declared, says the *Times* article, he went back to private employment until he relocated to Providence. According to his military record, he mustered out on May 12, 1865, so he spent another six years in Boston, doing who knows what—but whatever it was, he was undoubtedly working and saving.

Perry moved to Providence in 1871—most sources say he was then 21, but I now believe he was older, say 24. In this year, Thomas Edison is in New York City inventing a better stock ticker; six years later Edison would begin work on incandescent lights, which would be important to Perry by the mid-1880s.

In 1871 Perry clerked for (or owned, sources vary) a store that sold fruit, nuts and candy on North Main Street. He married Candace Tamison Hubbard, the daughter of a Providence stockbroker, on June 19, 1872—and here is another basis for my assertion of his birth date being in 1846, because the marriage record notes his age as 25, which would be correct if his birth date was November 4, 1846. The marriage ended in divorce at some unknown point, and produced no children. He made enough money by 1874 to open M. J. Perry & Company at 98 Westminster Street, which in those days was called a “chattel mortgage business” – today we would say it was a pawnbroker. Back in the 1870s, there was not *quite* the aspect of sleaze that we now associate with pawn shops. An article in the *Providence Journal* dated August 29, 1877, described the classified business of the pawnbroker in amusing detail:

It operates to a considerable extent in connection with banks. It not infrequently happens that a customer of some bank finds himself in want of funds, but without the particular form of securities in which banks delight. Nevertheless, his need is urgent and the customer explains his situation to the bank cashier.

The cashier muses, and at length says, “how much is your watch worth?”

“Five hundred dollars,” responds the customer.

“Got any diamonds?” continues the questioner.

“I paid \$5,000 at Tiffany’s for my wife’s diamonds,” is the answer.

“Well, if you can borrow the diamonds for a few weeks, and you will lend me your watch, I think I can get a friend of mine to lend you the money.”

The cashier makes an appointment, and the result is that a gentlemanly pawnbroker “retires” the watch and diamonds; the borrower speculates with the

money, and if his plans turn out well, he soon redeems his property; the pawnbroker takes a rather large commission, the cashier quite a small one, and everybody is happy.

By 1881 Perry had done well enough (such places do when money is tight and credit is hard to secure, as it was during the depression years of the 1870s) to engage in two separate ventures: he organized the American Ring Traveller Company (which manufactured equipment used in textile mills), and he bought enough stock in the Bank of America to become a Director.

*To be continued...*

---

Rick Ring, President  
The John Russell Bartlett Society  
Celebrating our 37th year of promoting book culture  
<http://www.jrbs.org/>