

The Mark Twain – Joseph Twichell Walk

Joseph Twichell, while a student at Yale, was the best friend of Edward Carrington, the Colebrook native who was to meet an untimely death on a Florida battlefield during the final month of the Civil War. Carrington was a truly remarkable person, and his death had a profound effect upon his friends who survived him. When he was laid to rest at the Colebrook Center Cemetery, Twichell was one of several who rededicated their lives in order to strive to achieve not only their life's goals, but to attempt to fill the void left by one who had held such promise to better humanity.

Twichell went on to become one of the leading lights among Congregational clergy, and became the minister of a church of that denomination in Hartford. Throughout his lifetime, he retained a close friendship with the Carrington family that lasted well into the twentieth century. He visited here on a regular basis and the Carringtons spent time with him and his family whenever they were in the capitol city.

Seven or eight years ago Steve Courtney, an editor of the Hartford Courant, began writing a biography of Joseph Twichell, and in the course of doing research for this, visited the archives of the Colebrook Historical Society figuring correctly, as it turned out, that there would be material among the extensive Carrington files. Additionally, he became familiar with the Chinese students that frequented the Carrington household in the 1870s and 80s. These students were members of the Chinese Educational Mission, 120 members strong, sent here to gain a Western education. The mission headquarters was in Hartford and Joseph Twichell was an official American member of their board of governors.

Among Twichell's close friends was the American writer Samuel Clemens, who wrote under the pen name Mark Twain. Twain and Twichell enjoyed walking, and one such walk was to the top of Talcott Mountain, where they would visit the Heublein Tower's predecessor, Bartlett's Tower. Several of the Chinese students used to accompany them on this particular walk. Steve Courtney resurrected this walk several years ago, and now it is an annual event, held every October. Steve has been kind enough to invite me on this sojourn, although my schedule has not allowed me to join in this event so far. Now that you know a little about the background, I think you will find the Email that arrived last week interesting.

“To all friends of Hartford's autumn Twain-Twichell walk:

The walk this year is scheduled for Saturday, October 8.

For those who may be hearing about this for the first time, each year (give or take a couple) since 1995 an informal Hartford group has walked from the Mark Twain House eight miles to Heublein Tower in Talcott Mountain State Park west of the city. We roughly retrace the route Mark Twain and the Rev. Joseph Twichell took each fall to Bartlett's Tower, which stood on the crest of Talcott Mountain in the 1870s in roughly the same spot. This year marks ten years since the first of our walks.”

“Twain's and Twichell's walks and conversations were an important part of the men's friendship throughout the 1870s and 1880s and they often referred to them in their correspondence. On one such walk Twichell suggested Twain 'hurl' his Mississippi reminiscences into a magazine, which ultimately led to 'Life on the Mississippi.' Twain reported that he would read his bawdy masterpiece '1601' aloud at a rest stop on the way

to the tower. Twichell, for his part, got ideas for sermons and relayed a rich trove of Civil War and other anecdotes.”

“ ‘I have been thinking of you all the morning,’ Twichell in Hartford wrote to Twain in Europe in October 1878. ‘It is one of those golden, perfect autumn days when one’s desire to be off somewhere among trees, mounts to a passion and can hardly be refused. Had you been home I should have been after you betimes; and by now we should be bathing our souls and bodies in the delicious tinted light of the wood paths of Talcott Mountain, kicking the yellow and red October leaves before us (Oh, the sweet rustle of ‘em!) and having a talk, old fellow. There never was such weather as is upon us now. It really seems ungrateful and wicked not to give all the time to it one possibly can.’”

“So we do give it some time. We follow city streets and suburban roads; picnic and do a few readings at the Auer 4-H Farm on the way up; follow the ‘delicious tinted light of the wooded paths’ to the Tower; rest and chat some more, examine the wonderful work of Friends of Heublein Tower has done up there (see www.friendsofheubleintower.org), take a look at the ‘royal view’ of the Farmington Valley and ultimately carpool back to the Mark Twain House,”

“We gather at the Mark Twain House before 7:30a.m. (There’s a reason for this: the Greater Hartford Marathon closes the streets in the area at that time) and step off about 8. It is an eight-mile walk through Hartford and suburbs to the tower. We leave the tower via cars left nearby no later than 2:30 p.m. (I’ll be seeking volunteers to get up early and leave these cars up on the mountain.)”

“Let me know if you’re coming! We have to limit participants at 30, so be sure to pre-register if you’re interested; details will follow.”

“This should also be the last year that there won’t be a book about Joe Twichell in print, as ‘The Civil War Letters of Joseph Hopkins Twichell: A Chaplain’s Story,’ edited by Peter Messent and myself, will be coming out from the University of Georgia Press in March 2006.

Yours for pedestrian enjoyment, Steve”

Last year this event took place one month prior to my traveling to China to attend the 150th anniversary of the graduation of Yung Wing from Yale, and I wrote the officials there asking if it would add any significance if I were to take this walk and follow the footsteps of the Chinese students who had made the trip all those many years ago. A reply came back immediately that I should forgo this, as they wanted me to make it to China in one piece! (Apparently they have heard about the physical condition of many senior Americans!)

I received a reply concerning the question posed about a “Sugar wedding” in last week’s column from Liz Thompson. She informs me that information she had, also written in the 1870s, was this celebration took place at the sixth anniversary of the couple’s marriage. Apparently the custom did not catch on, as there don’t seem to be further references to it