Who's Buried in Rafinesque's Tomb?

MORE THAN THIRTY YEARS AGO, Robert K. Spencer of Philadelphia boasted that "I may be the only person alive who has set eyes on C. S. Rafinesque." Spencer had been present when Rafinesque's grave in Ronaldson's Cemetery was opened in 1924, by his father, James A. Spencer, an employee of the Chas. M. Stieff piano company in Philadelphia. The young Robert Spencer had skipped high school classes that day; as the others present were long dead, there was a certain truth in his assertion that no one else then alive had seen Rafinesque.

His memory of what he had seen proved somewhat disappointing. He recalled only a few long bones, and he was not sure whether they were from an arm or a leg. There was a "kneecap bone"—he remembered that. But especially, he said, he was impressed by the size of the skull, a skull which suggested a man with a bulging forehead—appropriate, he thought, to the towering intellect it once had housed. He could not remember seeing any vertebrae or even a pelvis. "To tell you the truth," he remarked, "it was a cold, raw day, and we all wanted to hurry up the work and get back inside. I've wished since I had taken notes at the time." He had forgotten that he had in fact written about what he saw. His account, which is still extant, was put on paper within two weeks of the event.

An autopsy report on Rafinesque's body had been published in 1840, but forgotten until brought to light more than a century later by Francis W. Pennell. The report includes, among other anatomical and physiological details, a minute description of the brain and its arachnoid membrane. It remarks on the thickness of the cortex; it

1 Spencer, long since deceased, first told me his story when I was a young professor at Lehigh University. He was then a college representative for Appleton-Century-Crofts. College book salesmen, at that time still operating in the relaxed tradition of Heaven's My Destination, tried to find a common bond of interest with prospects for adoption of their textbooks. Mr. Spencer found one with me, for I had already begun what seems to be a lifelong pursuit of the fugitive writings of Rafinesque and the murky biographical details about him.
gives the depth of the fissures in the brain’s convolutions; and it confirms a cerebellum “of normal size, measuring four inches transversely.” This is information that could have been obtained by no other means than by opening the skull.

Dr. Edward Hallowell, who wrote the report, had been called in for consultation by Dr. William Ashmead, the attending physician, eight days before the patient’s death. His autopsy confirmed their diagnosis of cancer of the stomach and liver, but Dr. Hallowell, a member of the Academy of Natural Sciences as well as the College of Physicians, used this opportunity to advance medical knowledge, as any good pathologist would. He did a complete and thorough autopsy, and was not content merely to confirm the diagnosis. Therefore, he had to saw off the top of the cranium.

In 1924, when Rafinesque’s grave in Philadelphia was opened, the autopsy report was unknown. It was received opinion then—and continues to be believed today—that Rafinesque “died in a garret, in abject poverty”; that his frail body was let down from a window by ropes, by a few kind-hearted friends who spirited away his remains to save their being sold by a rapacious landlord to a medical school for dissection; and that he was buried in “potter’s field.” In 1949 Pennell cleared up the landlord story—what he called an ugly rumor—by pointing out that the autopsy, which took place thirteen hours after death, accounted for the fact that the body “had been removed to another room, when Dr. [James] Mease”—executor of Rafinesque’s estate—“brought Mr. Bringhurst, the undertaker, to obtain it for burial.”

2 Edward Hallowell, “Case of Cancer of the Stomach and Liver,” Medical Examiner 3 (September 19, 1840), 597-99. This weekly Philadelphia medical journal clearly was unable to keep to its publication schedule. Though the date of this number is the day the autopsy was performed, the article itself is dated October 1840. Each of two sets of cemetery records gives a different cause for Rafinesque’s death, neither of which is cancer. Probably Dr. James Mease, the executor of the estate who arranged the burial, was not in communication with Dr. Hallowell.

3 Francis W. Pennell, “The Last Sickness of Rafinesque,” Bartonia, No. 25 (1949), 67-68. In his autopsy report Dr. Hallowell wrote that he attended his patient at 10 a.m. on September 18, that the patient died at 9 p.m. that day, and that he and Dr. William Ashmead carried out the autopsy “thirteen hours after death”—which would be at 10 a.m. on September 19. However the probate record of Rafinesque’s will records testimony of those at his bedside saying that at 1 p.m., September 18, Rafinesque dictated a revocation
Yet, eighty-four years later, Robert K. Spencer saw an intact skull of impressive size brought out of Rafinesque’s grave. What he remembered thirty-odd years after that was a skull distinguished by its swelling brow line— not a skull in two parts, with the cranium sawed through, as indeed it had to be if the skull were Rafinesque’s. Faulty as memory might prove for anyone, surely the one thing a person would remember—when he remembered even a patella bone—would be a skull sawed open.

The Franco-American naturalist Constantine Samuel Rafinesque (1783-1840) has attracted more than his share of attention—some of it because of the confusions as well as the contributions he brought to natural science, some of it because of his colorful personality. Notorious while he lived, he has caused more than one writer since to toy with the idea that his name rhymes with the words picturesque and grotesque. He placed on the title page of his autobiography a bit of French doggerel of his own composition, “Un voyageur des le berceau, / Je le serais jusqu’au tombeau”—A traveler from the cradle,

of all earlier wills but was too weak to sign the dictation. It goes on to say that he asked the man to whom he had made the dictation to return the next day at 12 o’clock, but he “died next day 10 minutes before 9.” Thus even the exact date of Rafinesque’s death—whether September 18 or 19—remains confused.

Several persons who knew Rafinesque personally have testified that his head struck observers as large; John James Audubon remarked on his “broad and prominent” brow. The only absolutely authentic portrait done from life, though aesthetically poor, is that used as a frontispiece for Rafinesque’s Analyse de la Nature (Palermo, 1815). Drawn in 1810, when Rafinesque was twenty-seven, this shows a head large for the body depicted.

Rafinesque, A Life of Travels (Philadelphia, 1836). Rafinesque wrote in his will, “I wish my body if possible to be burnt rather than buried as I do not want to contamine [sic] the Earth by decay, nor be a cause of disease to other men. My ashes if they can be collected I wish to be deposited in a[n] urn, to be kept with my collections.” However, a hitherto unknown deathbed revocation of the will exonerated Dr. Mease from the obligation of carrying out these and other provisions. The file copy of Rafinesque’s will is in Book 14, File 214, at the Philadelphia City Archives. It was published by Thomas Meehan in the Philadelphia Public Ledger, February 18, 1891, but is more accessible in Richard E. Call, The Life and Writings of Rafinesque (Louisville, 1895), 217-27, where even the newspaper’s typographical errors are faithfully reproduced. It happens that the unbound, uncatologued holograph will also was extant at the Philadelphia City Archives when I examined it in 1980. Stored in a manila folder, it had two loose sheets laid in behind it. One of these was Rafinesque’s revocation of all earlier wills, dictated September 18, 1840; the other was the probate record approving the revocation.
/ I'll be one to the grave. He could not have envisioned the putative posthumous travel that will be narrated here. Probably he would not have been pleased, for his will called for cremation—an uncommon practice in Philadelphia in 1840.

A contemporary of Audubon, Rafinesque has had less impact than Audubon on popular imagination, being known from his lifetime onwards mostly for his personal eccentricities. Yet he has a small but secure place in the history of natural science in America, if for no other reason than his having first named so many plants and animals that later biologists have had to deal with. He still has the distinction of having published more Latin plant names than any other botanist. His scientific descriptions, hastily written and often published in obscure media, have occasioned much bibliographical research. Since the principle of priority applies in determining the accepted scientific names of plants and animals, many of the more than 600 articles about him address the problem of the validity of his published nomenclature.

In death, as in life, Rafinesque is linked with Philadelphia and with Lexington, Kentucky. He was born to a French father and German mother in Constantinople, where his father represented a Marseilles mercantile partnership in the Levant. The young Rafinesque must have had some sentimental attraction to Philadelphia, for his father had died there during the yellow fever epidemic of 1793, and lay in an unmarked grave. With his brother, Antoine, Constantine Rafinesque first came to Philadelphia in the spring of 1802, aged nineteen, to learn the merchant's trade in the counting house of the Clifford Brothers firm.

After some botanical explorations in Pennsylvania and neighboring states, Constantine Rafinesque, again with his brother, returned to Europe, where he lived in Sicily from 1805 to 1815, and where he began his voluminous publishing ventures in most branches of the natural sciences. He made, he said, a small fortune in the employment of Abram Gibbs; this released him to devote all his time to botany, ichthyology, and related pursuits. Gibbs (banker, merchant, and American consul in Palermo) was a business acquaintance of the Cliffords in Philadelphia, and, in fact, it was while he was personally conducting a trading venture in Livorno that John D. Clifford (1779-
1820) had first met Rafinesque. Their lives were entwined until Clifford’s early death.

Clifford, who liked to roam as much as Rafinesque did, had gone many times to Lexington on business, but left day-to-day business affairs there to a partner, Elisha Fisher. After Fisher lost $1,400 of the firm’s money, Clifford went to Lexington in 1804 to dissolve the partnership. While there, he married Mary Morton, daughter of William “Lord” Morton, another Clifford business associate, and brought her back to Philadelphia with him. By 1808, however, Mr. and Mrs. John D. Clifford were comfortably settled in Lexington. There, Clifford rapidly became a leading citizen. His intellectual interests had an outlet in the founding of an atheneum and museum; his religious interests (despite an ancestral Quaker background), in the building of an Episcopal church.

Lexington is where Rafinesque came across Clifford in 1818. Rafinesque had returned to America three years earlier, when he was shipwrecked off the coast of Connecticut, an event so traumatic he never braved the Atlantic crossing again. In addition to his other distinctions, Clifford was now a trustee of Transylvania University, just then beginning the remarkable efflorescence it would have under

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6 Writing to his sister, Georgette Lanthois, from Philadelphia after his visit to Lexington, Rafinesque said, “Je fus reçu très cordialement à Lexington par mon ancien ami Mr Clifford (le même qui était à Livourne en 1802)” — I was warmly welcomed in Lexington by my old friend Mr. Clifford (the same one who was in Livorno in 1802): C. S. Rafinesque to Georgette Lanthois, November 25, 1818, Rafinesque Family Archives (in private possession), Paris. Information such as this is cited from unpublished sources because the two standard biographies—by R. E. Call and T. J. Fitzpatrick—are little more than rehashes of Rafinesque’s own autobiography and fail to include it.

7 There is no biography of Clifford. Some of it can be inferred, as information here has been, from the roughly 10,000 items in the Clifford Family Papers at the Historical Society of Pennsylvania (hereafter, HSP). See especially Thomas and John Clifford to Elisha Fisher, January 7, 1804; John D. Clifford to Thomas Clifford (his father), June 8, 1804; and William Morton to Thomas and John Clifford, July 31, 1804.


9 Rafinesque had mixed motives for returning to the United States in 1815. He was disappointed at being passed over in Sicily for an academic chair; he wanted to participate in the natural history exploration of the westward-expanding American nation; a man of peace, he wished to escape the European turmoil of the Napoleonic wars; and, as much as anything, he was fleeing from the virago Josephine Vaccaro, who had borne him two children.
the presidency of the Reverend Horace Holley, a Unitarian from Boston. Holley was trying to recruit a distinguished faculty to transform his backwoods academy into a true university. But he had nothing to do with bringing Rafinesque there. Indeed, he deeply resented the “Constantinopolitan,” as he called him. Rafinesque’s presence at Transylvania was wholly the doing of trustee Clifford. Rafinesque had good cause to write in his autobiography that, while he had other friends in Lexington, “none was a Clifford, who shared my taste and views” and was only four years his senior; “if Clifford had lived longer, he might have become for me the Cliffort of Linnaeus.”

Rafinesque’s unsalaried appointment as professor of natural history and botany, the only university post he ever held, lasted from 1819 to 1826. After a tiff with Holley in 1826, he stamped out without even bothering to pick up the last payment due him as librarian, keeper of the natural history cabinet, and secretary of the faculty. Rafinesque returned to Philadelphia by a circuitous route and, aside from several excursions up and down the east coast, remained there until his death. He became a naturalized American citizen in 1832. And he published, published, published—mostly on natural history subjects, but also on languages, ethnology, American prehistory, economics, and one book-length philosophical poem.

Clifford’s presence in Lexington accounts for Rafinesque’s residence there, but not for Rafinesque’s posthumous glamour in Lexington. To understand this we must navigate the shoals of local pride, fantasy, and even superstition.

Having lost its medical school to Louisville in 1859 and with its law school defunct by 1912, Transylvania University settled down in 1915 to being an undergraduate institution, under the name Transylvania College. Chartered in 1780, it had established a remarkable record during a few decades in the nineteenth century. It had educated

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11 Nor were his classes part of the curriculum. He had the privilege, shared only by the medical faculty, of advertising courses of lectures and collecting fees from such students and townspeople as cared to attend. In addition, he taught French, Spanish, and Italian on a fee basis.
scoring congressmen, senators, governors, ambassadors, and historical celebrities ranging from Stephen F. Austin to Jefferson Davis, as well as hundreds of western physicians and lawyers—all with the result that a deep sense of historic pride and destiny had developed at the school. In 1969 it readopted the name Transylvania University, in celebration of its heritage, though, in fact, it continues as a regional liberal arts college.12

Out-of-state tourists, however, driving down North Broadway today through the two block campus and, ignorant of early American history and equally innocent of Latin, invariably associate the word Transylvania with Bram Stoker’s Dracula, a book they probably have not read but may have seen in one of its several film versions. This unfortunate association is underscored if they stop to visit the campus. A student will be assigned to guide them about, and the tour will conclude with Transylvania’s greatest wonder: the Tomb of Rafinesque.

After unlocking an unmarked door set flush in the corridor wall of a building called Old Morrison, the guide slowly pushes back two creaking iron grills to reveal a cubical room, with no windows, dimly lit by indirect lights. The dusty concrete floor and peeling plaster of this room—in sharp contrast with the fresh paint, polished brass, and gleaming pegged floors elsewhere in the building—hint at unspeakable mysteries concealed from all but the initiated. The building itself, named for an early benefactor, is a registered National Historical Landmark. One of Gideon Shryock’s earliest designs, it is Greek Revival in style, the pediment of its façade supported on six Doric columns, and it has what Lexington intellectuals delight in calling “antepodia”—box-like banisters on either side of the wide steps which sweep up to the second floor. These steps are seldom used, except for ceremonial occasions. One actually enters the building by a side door on the first floor. By entering on the west side of the building and turning right immediately after entry, one faces the door to Rafinesque’s tomb. The crypt housing it is the interior of the western “antepodium.”

While a visitor begins to take in the above-ground tomb, which is completely covered by what appears to be a stone slab, the guide recounts that Rafinesque was a great unappreciated scientist, but he neglected his classes to botanize in the woods; that he "discovered the theory of evolution before Darwin"; that he had a torrid love affair with Mary Holley, the president's wife; and, of course, that he died in a garret and was buried in potter's field—convictions which have evolved over the years mostly in the imaginations of the guides.\(^{13}\) The guide may tell you that Rafinesque Day, occurring about Halloween time, has become a tradition at Transylvania, and that on that night four lucky students, two boys and two girls, are selected to pass the night together in the crypt, "right here on these graves!" At this point the visitor's attention will be called to a second tomb, to the right of Rafinesque's, the stone identifying it as that of "Prof. S. F. Bonfils, / a native of France who in / consequence of / political con-/ vulsions emigrated to the / United States. He devoted / the last thirty years of / his life to the education of the / youth of his adopted country. / Died in Lexington / July 6, 1849 / Aged 54." The more flippant guides say they are "tombmates."\(^{14}\)

The guide is less likely to tell you that part of the Rafinesque Day festivities consists of a bonfire that night, and that boys dressed as undertakers solemnly carry a black coffin around the fire, while, in

\(^{13}\) It would have been hard to neglect classes nobody was required to take anyway, since the academic year at that time was scheduled for those months during winter when the rewards of plant hunting are few. Like a number of other naturalists, Rafinesque had little patience with the prevailing concept of fixed species. He understood biological variation, but his geological time frame was still the Biblical one and he had no inkling of natural selection as the agency for change. He was an evolutionist in much the same sense as Charles Darwin's grandfather, Erasmus Darwin. Yale-educated Horace Holley had sufficient professional reasons to despair of Rafinesque, who wanted to overturn the time-tested curriculum based on Latin and Greek classics in favor of new-fangled sciences. Mary Holley, as befits a college president's wife, invited Rafinesque to tea; she may have studied Spanish with him. The only evidence ever advanced for the love affair is a poem Rafinesque wrote. The title is "Lines to Maria, who asked me if I should like to love in a cottage," where love probably is a misprint for live.

\(^{14}\) Very little is known about Bonfils, except that during their lives he could have had no connection with Rafinesque. His full name was given by the Louisville Courier-Journal (June 6, 1939) as St. Sauveur François. It added that he was a native of Corsica, served with Napoleon before Waterloo, and died of cholera. Wright, Transylvania, 373, says that his remains were shifted from Lexington's Episcopal cemetery to the Transylvania crypt in May 1939, at the request of his great-granddaughter.
some years, students have been known to scream obscenities to release whatever primordial urges bedevil students in the autumn when the moon is full. Nor are you likely to learn that it is believed that some years the grave itself has been opened (the cover is not cemented down; three or four strong athletes could lift it off) and a moldy leather bag containing the actual bones has been stuffed inside the symbolic coffin. You may be sure the guide will dwell long on the “Curse of Rafinesque.” If it were not kept alive by Transylvania students themselves, the curse story would go on being resurrected annually by Kentucky newspapers needing filler for their Halloween issues.

A few newspaper writers have gone to the trouble of seeking out the source of the story, which is a single sentence in Rafinesque’s autobiography. Returning from a trip to Philadelphia in 1825 (for which, incidentally, he punctiliously requested leave of absence), he found his rooms in the college had been broken open; one had been

13 A counter-myth surfaces at Transylvania now and then. This story has it that when the “body” arrived in Lexington it was put in storage for a time in the attic of the College of the Bible, while the tomb was being prepared. The College of the Bible, an independent training school for ministers of the Disciples of Christ (more commonly known in the South and Middle West as the Christian Church), stood at that time on the Transylvania campus. Then the remains were confused with other “bodies” stored in the same place, with the result that the wrong remains were entombed. However, the notion of dead bodies stacked up like cord wood in a theological institute is so mind-boggling it strains even the credulity of Kentucky Christians.

16 Lexington newspapers usually publish an anonymous squib, often quoting one or another Transylvania professor on how it feels to work in an institution burdened by such a maldeiction. Louisville’s Courier-Journal, however, has been diligent in keeping the legend alive by publishing signed pieces. The following, all from the Courier-Journal, came to hand without much searching: Gerald Griffin, “The Professor’s Curse,” August 1, 1937; John S. Gildinson, “Distinguished Oddity,” December 11, 1949; Bob Cooper, “Curse Endears Rafinesque,” October 25, 1964; Joe Ward, “The ‘Curse’ of Rafinesque—An Eerie Tale Has Inspired an Annual Ritual on Transylvania Campus,” October 26, 1974; Billy Reed, “Transy’s Mad Botanist: Brilliant But Careless,” February 23, 1976; and Byron Crawford, “Pioneering Professor . . . He Worked on the Frontier of Knowledge,” September 15, 1982.

Curiously enough, the story of the curse has never spread much beyond Kentucky. Most popular articles about Rafinesque emphasize his eccentricity and bear titles like “Madness or Genius?”—which is the title of the Rafinesque chapter in Wayne Hanley’s book, Natural History in America (New York, 1977). A recent article (Peggy Robbins, “The Oddest of Characters,” American Heritage 36 [1985], 58-63) manages to get nearly everything wrong without once mentioning the curse.
given to students; and his collections and books were in disarray. Rafinesque blamed the violation on Holley’s “hatred against sciences,” and he wrote: “I took lodgings in town and carried there all my effects: thus leaving the College with curses on it and Holley; who were both reached by them soon after, since he died next year at sea of the Yellow fever, caught at New Orleans, having been driven from Lexington by public opinion: and the College has been burnt in 1828 with all its contents.”

It happens, however, that A Life of Travels is Rafinesque’s own English translation of words he wrote earlier, in 1833, in French. In his native language all he had said was: “Je pris logement en Ville & y transportai tous mes effets, maudissant de bon coeur l’injustice de mon expulsion prématuée, et dévouant le Collège à la justice divine. Qui a atteint l’un et l’autre, car Holley mourut bientôt après a la N. Orleans de la fièvre jaune, ayant été obligé de quitter Lexington par l’Opinion publique, & le Collège a été brûlé en 1828 avec ce qu’il renfermait!” One might translate this: “I took lodgings in Town & carried there all my effects, cursing heartily the injustice of my untimely eviction, and consigning the College to divine justice. Which overtook both, because Holley died soon afterwards in N. Orleans of the yellow fever, having been forced to leave Lexington by public Opinion, & the College burned down in 1828 with everything in it!” Cursing injustice and relinquishing the college to the impartial judgment of the divine will are rather different from a direct and baleful malediction.

Whether knowledge of Rafinesque’s original words would have forestalled the legend of the curse is anybody’s guess. Probably not. Having pondered his ill treatment for three years, when he came to translate his own words, Rafinesque himself hinted at causality; to minds less clear than his, subsequent disasters at Transylvania came to be regarded almost as proof. In 1961 a woman student was found

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17 *A Life of Travels*, 78. It seems that Rafinesque’s historical inaccuracy did not spoil the efficacy of his curse. Actually, the college burned May 9, 1829, and Holley died July 31, 1827.

18 *Précis ou Abrégé des Voyages, Travaux, et Recherches de C. S. Rafinesque* (1833); the Original Version of *A Life of Travels* (1836), ed. by Charles Boewe, Georges Reynaud, and Beverly Seaton (Amsterdam, 1987), 72. The manuscript of this earlier form of Rafinesque’s autobiography was unknown until 1982.
strangled to death in her car, parked directly outside the Rafinesque tomb—a crime never solved, people will tell you, shuddering over the thought that she must have been the victim of no natural force. On a cold January night in 1969 Old Morrison was gutted by fire, with only Rafinesque's tomb, it is now said, escaping unscathed. And more recently, when a workman fell to his death while repairing the gymnasium roof, people again recalled the curse of Rafinesque with nervous tittering.

A more salutary side of Transylvania's infatuation with Rafinesque has been its attempt, in the twentieth century, to make his genuine accomplishments better known. The library, which already had some manuscripts in his hand and several of his rare printed works, tries to purchase all significant books about him, and now possesses the three portraits said to be of Rafinesque. In 1940 the university sponsored a Rafinesque symposium to commemorate the centennial of his death, and it sponsored another in 1983 on the bicentennial of his birth. On the occasion of the latter, a participant remarked that this was the first conference she had attended held over the bones of the honoree.

What can be said about the authenticity of those bones? It happens that a few years ago a highly experienced physical anthropologist who is certified by the American Academy of Forensic Sciences offered to come to Lexington and examine the contents of the tomb. He proposed to make precise measurements of all osseous material, to submit his scientific report to the university, and to offer it for publication only to one of the staid journals of forensic science. Above all, there was to be no sensationalism, and the investigator himself said it was not within his competence to render a judgment on whether the bones were those of Rafinesque or someone else. That would be up to historians and biographers, who might use his findings as evidence they would have to interpret. The tomb, which is built up of bricks from the concrete floor, would be undamaged, and its massive cover, which is not cemented down, would only have to be lifted off and replaced.

After some time, the proposal was rejected by the university's president, who wrote that the project would be too disruptive to Transylvania. Within a year it was possible to present the proposal again, to the successor of this president. This time it had the enthusiastic endorsement of Jean Rafinesque, the naturalist's great-great-
grandnephew, who, himself a physician, had come to Lexington to participate in the bicentennial celebration. The new president curtly rejected the proposal, saying the matter had already been settled. And there the question remains, with Transylvania tolerating student highjinks that border on the occult while refusing to permit a scientific investigation which might dampen them.

Since it is unlikely the tomb will soon be opened, one other approach to the mystery of its contents remains. This insight can be accomplished by bringing together documents at either end of the Pennsylvania-Kentucky axis, papers never before brought into juxtaposition with each other. As in Charles Willson Peale’s celebrated self-portrait, it is time now to draw back the curtain on this cabinet of curiosities and reveal who is buried in Rafinesque’s tomb.

It is said, on dubious authority, that a small wooden marker once indicated the location of Rafinesque’s grave in Ronaldson’s Cemetery in Philadelphia. But the marker evidently soon rotted away, and the exact position was unknown for more than seventy years. Then, about 1914, a man named Anthony M. Hance took an interest in trying to find the grave and, though he “came away disappointed,” his efforts did lead to the success of others. Samuel N. Rhoads, proprietor

19 My own interest was to ascertain whether the tomb contained an intact skull, such as Robert K. Spencer believed was removed from the grave in Philadelphia. I might as well confess, though, that I also hoped to carry out a small beau geste. Doctor Rafinesque had brought me, as a personal gift, two bottles of a noble cognac from Paris, France (as we say in the Bluegrass, to distinguish the City of Light from the better-known village of the same name in Bourbon County). I wanted to place one of these, in a lead-lined oaken box, in the tomb before it was sealed, with instructions on the box that it not be opened until a century had passed. Inside the box, on a slip of parchment, were lettered these words: As we are now, so you will be: / Drink of this cognac merrily; / But let a tear fall in your glass, / For Constantine . . . and Jean . . . and Chas.

20 H. H., in a letter printed in the Philadelphia Ledger, May 5, 1877; the author had Rafinesque’s dates wrong and even confused the order of his initials, which he said were painted on the board.

21 In three articles Rhoads published the most intelligent commentary yet to appear about Rafinesque’s ornithological contributions; they are: “Rafinesque as an Ornithologist,” Cassinia 15 (1911), 1-12; “Additions to the Known Ornithological Writings of C. S. Rafinesque,” The Auk 29 (1912), 191-98; “Ornithological Notes of Rafinesque in the Western Review and Miscellaneous Magazine,” The Auk 29 (1912), 401.
of the Franklin Bookshop in Philadelphia, read Hance’s article and undertook to search the cemetery records. In 1919 he wrote to Henry C. Mercer, who had encouraged Hance’s efforts, that he would be happy to contribute to the cost of the memorial stone Mercer planned to place on the grave. He told Mercer that, with the aid of the sexton, he had “located the exact spot easily enough, for the plots and lots all have their exact locations marked by stone corner monuments with registry Nos and letters corresponding to the registers in the sexton’s office. These I verified personally and stood on the site of Rafinesque’s grave, which is flat, no mound[,] and thickly set with grass and weeds, (which the man was mowing off adjoining lots) and by now, no doubt is cleared.” He gave the coordinates of the site he identified as 16 south, 11 west, 3rd grave.

Ronaldson’s Cemetery, at the southwest corner of Ninth and Bainbridge Streets, had fallen on bad times by 1919. For one thing, it was full—one might say, in the light of further discoveries, it was running over. For another, this was not a fashionable part of the city.

22 Anthony M. Hance, “Grave of Rafinesque, the Great Naturalist,” Bucks County Historical Society Papers 4 (1917), 510-29. This is badly mistitled, for it says little about the grave but rehearses Rafinesque’s life as it appears in his autobiography, A Life of Travels. After the exact location of the grave had been ascertained, Hance reprinted the article as a separately paged pamphlet and here included, inside a black box on the last page, the coordinates of the grave site discovered by Rhoads. The coordinates are correct, but Rafinesque’s age at death is given as sixty-three, which is wrong. However, this error supplies a helpful hint about what may have happened during the later exhumation. There are two sets of cemetery records; the one which lists the names of burials alphabetically also makes this error in Rafinesque’s age, while the other which lists burials by lot numbers gives no age. Though Rhoads used the lot record, Hance’s repetition of the correct coordinates—which appear in both sets of records—along with this erroneous age suggests that he, and perhaps others later, consulted only the alphabetical record. Moreover, Hance also gives “visceral obstruction[,]” which appears only in the alphabetical record, as the cause of death. To identify other burials in the same grave from the alphabetical record alone would require examination of hundreds of entries on pages widely separated from each other, and could easily lead to an error in their serial order.

23 Henry C. Mercer’s many accomplishments in archaeology have been less remembered than his rather unfortunate book, The Lenape Stone, or the Indian and the Mammoth (New York, 1885), a study of an artifact since proved to be fraudulent. It was this study which brought Rafinesque to his attention because Rafinesque had preserved the Lenape creation myth, the Walam Olum. Independently wealthy, Mercer had the means to honor Rafinesque in a fitting manner.

24 S. N. Rhoads to Henry C. Mercer, August 11, 1919, Henry C. Mercer Correspondence, Fonthill Manuscript Collection, Bucks County Historical Society, Doylestown, PA.
In such a place, strewn with broken bottles and covered by weeds, it is little wonder that everyone accepted without question that Rafinesque, wretched in his last days, had been shoveled without ceremony into a pauper’s grave. However, founded in 1827 by the philanthropic James Ronaldson, the burial ground known officially as the Philadelphia Cemetery after its incorporation in 1833 was, for a time, a show place. Its plantings and graveled walks made it a park for the neighborhood, where people strolled of an evening for pleasure. Its most notable facility was a bell house. There a person found dead could be laid out for a day or more, with a string in his hand that would ring the bell should he happen to revive. Protection against premature burial was as highly prized by the nineteenth century as “perpetual” care is by the twentieth.

Moreover, Ronaldson, first president of the Franklin Institute, who had grown wealthy as a type founder, specifically laid out the burying ground as an alternative to potter’s field. It was intended for “strangers”—that is, those, whether of modest means or not, who were denied burial in a churchyard because they lacked church membership. As a consequence, many of the early burials were of visitors to the city, including actors. A Protestant by family background, Rafinesque seems never to have been much of a churchgoer; his friend and executor, the socially prominent Dr. James Mease, made a logical choice in selecting his resting place. Lot 16 south, 11 west, was one of several reserved by Ronaldson himself, who lived another year beyond Rafinesque’s death.

Nevertheless, Rhoads was prepared to accept the sexton’s opinion that Rafinesque’s remains had been located in a pauper’s lot, for this helped to explain the startling information he had further to report to Mercer:

Strangely enough, the records show that two persons were buried in the same space, 7 1/2 x 4 ft, in 1831; then in 1840 a man named “Passimore” and Rafinesque were interred in the same space! In 1847

25 Though never rich, Rafinesque probably was better off during the last four years of his life than at any earlier period in America. He published eleven volumes and several substantial pamphlets at his own expense, and he had an entire rented house—at 172 Vine Street—for his collections. It is hard to understand why he should choose to lie ill in the attic when he had the use of a whole house, albeit a modest one.
Mary Passimore’s bones (etc) were confided to that identical spot, and in 1848 Julia Steen’s remains were added to the conglomerate!!

According to the sexton, some graves had been dug thirty feet deep, “to allow of successive superimposed layers of bodies to be placed in the same vertical space”; but in the case of Rafinesque and Passimore, the sexton speculated that two bodies had been “closely laid side by side to occupy one grave space normally devoted to one person of means.” And there the matter rested as far as Rhoads and Mercer were concerned. Their interest was only to identify the correct 7½ x 4 foot spot, not to sort out the remains of those who lay beneath its surface.

The sexton’s speculation would carry more conviction if it were known that both men interred in 1840 were buried only in winding sheets. However, the bill presented to Dr. Mease by the Brighurst firm is extant, and it shows that a walnut coffin was used for Rafinesque. It appears highly unlikely that both a coffin and another body, however prepared for burial, could be placed in a space only four feet wide, especially when allowance is made for the improbability of removing earth to that exact width. Moreover, there were intervals, however brief, between burials made in grave 3 which, though of no interest to Rhoads, incline one toward the sexton’s hypothesis of a grave thirty feet deep to begin with. And, probably also of little interest to Rhoads, the fact is that serial burial in Ronaldson’s Cemetery was the norm, not the exception. The records show that in the lot where Rafinesque lay, grave 1 had seven burials, grave 2 had five, and grave 4 had nine; elsewhere, too, in the cemetery, including in family plots, serial burial was common, as it still is in many European cemeteries. Here is the complete record for Rafinesque’s grave site:

26 S. N. Rhoads to Henry C. Mercer, August 11, 1919, Mercer Correspondence.
27 Dr. Mease was billed $16 for the funeral expenses: $7 for the coffin, $3 for shroud and winding sheet, $6 for hearse. See “Brighurst & Co. Accounts Ledger, Feb. 1824 to April 1849,” 82, HSP. This was a modest funeral by contemporary standards; some entries on the same page listed coffins for as high as $80. No record has appeared anywhere that a clergyman officiated at the interment.
1831-Dec 15  Martha Williams, 52 years, found dead
1831-Dec 18  Rob Grey, 38 years, Inflammation of the Brain
1840-July 1   Sam Passmore, 68 years, cholera
1840-Sep 19   C. S. Rafinesque, disease[d] spleen [Marginal note: "Rafinesque—Removed 1924"]
1847-May 28   Mary Passmore, 62 years, Consumption
1848-June 21  Julia A. Steen, 37 years, Pneumonia

Without further regard for the other five occupants of grave 3, Mercer completed his arrangements to cover the entire grave site with a memorial to Rafinesque. In correspondence with Rhoads, he worked out a suitable inscription and cast a flat rectangular marker in his own Moravian Pottery and Tile Works in Doylestown. It was made of fine grain concrete, with this inscription, in intaglio, on the surface: "Honor to Whom Honor Is Overdue / CONSTANTINE S. RAFINESQUE / Born Constantinople 1783 / Died, Philadelphia, September 18, 1840 / To do good to mankind has / ever been an ungrateful task / The works of God to study / and explain / Is happy toil and not to / live in vain / This tablet placed here September 1919."

Mercer was too ill to accompany the stone to Philadelphia, but he sent it to Rhoads along with the letter of authorization he had obtained by correspondence with the secretary of the cemetery. Rhoads hastened to write to Mercer as soon as the job was completed, mentioning that the slab had been placed just as Mercer planned, on concrete posts at each corner to raise it about an inch above the surface of the ground.

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28 "Ronaldson Cemetery Interments: Lots," II, 249, HSP. Photostat of a handwritten ledger, this is one of two sets of burial records; the other is an alphabetical list by name. The alphabetical list records the name of the last burial as that of Juliet A. Steen, and that of Mary Passmore as Mary Passmore. Probably Passmore is the more common spelling of the name. The surname Passmore occurs with some frequency in Philadelphia history, a Thomas Passmore being mentioned as one of six city auctioneers in James Mease’s Picture of Philadelphia (1811).

29 Most of the words of the inscription come from Rafinesque’s own writing, polished up a bit by Mercer. Rhoads wanted to add “Time renders justice to all at last,” from Rafinesque’s autobiography. Rejecting this, Mercer did add the name of his pottery works on the side of the four-inch slab and, underneath, he incised these initials to commemorate those responsible: A. M. H., S. N. R., H. C. M.
He assured Mercer he had cautioned all those present to keep quiet about what they had done, for all along Mercer had been writing to him that if the newspapers got wind of the project they would "slime" it. Among those present had been four members of the Academy of Natural Sciences representing various branches of botany and zoology, as well as Professor John Harshberger of the University of Pennsylvania. And he added that moving the slab from the truck to the grave site presented a problem solved only when eight men—of whom Rhoads was "proud to have been one"—carried it there by brute force.  

In his reply, Mercer mentioned hearing from the truck men that additional help for moving the slab had providentially appeared. "As I am slightly superstitious I regard the appearance of the gigantic Italian and his friends in the nick of time to carry the slab either as that of ghosts from the haunted house at Tenth and Bainbridge Streets or of early Sicilian friends of Rafinesque himself."  

The newspapers did learn about the event, of course, for the next month Mercer had a letter from Mrs. Charles F. Norton in Lexington, saying she had read about his "noble" act and wanted to thank him on behalf of the friends of Transylvania. As Rafinesque's eventual successor at Transylvania's library, she felt it appropriate to write a thank-you note; and, as would later appear, she had a personal interest in Rafinesque, believing he had sketched a portrait of one of her female ancestors. Thus began, through librarian Elizabeth Norton, motivation for returning Rafinesque's remains to Lexington when Ronaldson's Cemetery was threatened with destruction.

Even as the memorial stone had been put in place, Mercer learned from a Philadelphia friend that Ronaldson's Cemetery was likely to be turned to other uses. Though, in fact, this did not happen for another thirty years, the same fear was evident in Lexington within

30 S. N. Rhoads to Henry C. Mercer, September 24, 1919, Mercer Correspondence.
31 Henry C. Mercer to S. N. Rhoads, September 25, 1919, Mercer Correspondence.
32 Mrs. Charles F. Norton to Henry C. Mercer, October 16, 1919, Mercer Correspondence.
33 Harry B. Weiss to Elizabeth Norton, July 4, 1931, Transylvania University Archives (hereafter, TU Archives). Planning to publish a group of portrait sketches by Rafinesque, Weiss was in touch with Mrs. Norton to identify some of the subjects. That titled "S. S. of Frankfort" in Weiss's book, Rafinesque's Kentucky Friends (Highland Park, 1936), may be the one she had in mind, but the sitter had to be an ancestor more remote than Mrs. Norton's mother, as Weiss thought.
five years, when the forthright Mrs. Norton resolved to salvage the bones of Rafinesque. She promptly got in touch with her brother in Philadelphia—James A. Spencer.

Out of filial regard for his native state and with fraternal affection for his sister, Spencer agreed to take on the assignment and thought the necessary permissions had been obtained when Transylvania's dean, Thomas Macartney, journeyed to Philadelphia to escort back to Lexington what were respectfully referred to as the ashes. Then the trouble began—trouble that produced the documentation from which we can today reconstruct what happened.

Spencer had made arrangements with the Oliver H. Bair Company to open the grave; he had the good wishes of the secretary of the mayor; and he had a permit from the city's Board of Health—a permit valid only for seventy-two hours when he wrote to his sister on February 14, 1924. Dean Macartney arrived, but the job was finished only on February 27th, when Spencer wrote again, nearly two weeks later. Meanwhile they had been chased from pillar to post.

The sexton balked at letting them into the cemetery, since it was private land, not under city control. Trying to be helpful, the undertaking firm advised them to telephone a Mr. Taylor. Mr. Taylor in turn referred them to the secretary of the cemetery. The secretary proved too feeble to talk with them in person but, through his daughter, advised them to seek the approval of the heirs of James Ronaldson. James Ronaldson's heirs turned out to be two elderly women living somewhere in New Jersey. Along the way they picked up the suggestion that having permission from the man who placed the stone would be helpful, so they drove to Doylestown and returned with Mercer's agreement. Armed with this, they went back to the cemetery, only to be told that they absolutely had to have the permission of Mr. Taylor—the same Mr. Taylor they had earlier telephoned—who was acting manager of the cemetery. Driving some distance outside the city, to wherever Mr. Taylor lived, they at last confronted him in person.

Mr. Taylor agreed that their undertaking was magnanimous, and he assured them that he personally had no objection to their mission. But you see, he pointed out, there was a dollar a year ground rent due on every grave, which the relatives and friends of the deceased had been remiss in keeping paid up. Licking the stub of a pencil, he
quickly calculated that for a burial dating from 1840 the sum of $84 was due.

As reported by Spencer, they said they understood that this demand would have to be met. "We would agree to pay the charge in order that there be no further delay, but"—and Spencer now sprang his own surprise—"we of course would only pay % of the assessment as there were 8 other bodies buried in this 1 grave"! All consideration of ground rent was then dropped, and Spencer remarked to his sister that "the suggestion that we make public the fact that there were 9 bodies in this one grave I think was the reason he agreed to let us proceed." Spencer went on to say that "Taylor seemed to be a nice gentleman, and it is possible he too was glad to know that the body of this great man, who had lain so long in a pauper's grave was to be removed, & taken to Lexington, where it would be placed in the keeping of that grand old institution whose board of trustees were so anxious to do it honor."34

Even if his belief included three too many bodies, Spencer knew the grave contained multiple burials—a fact he might have learned through his conversation with Mercer in Doylestown, for there is no evidence that he or anyone else in 1924 actually inspected the cemetery records. Perhaps there seemed to be no need to do so, because the site was already marked by Mercer's slab. Nor is there any way to ascertain how he determined the serial order of the burials; this question is not addressed in any of the extant letters by him or by Dean Macartney. The important point is that they—or their workmen—made a slight miscalculation.

We can detect the error now only because the inquisitive John Harshberger, author of *The Botanists of Philadelphia* (1899), who had been present at the laying of the memorial stone in 1919, read about the exhumation in the Philadelphia *Inquirer* (March 4, 1924) and wrote to ask the dean whether he could "give me some details of the condition of [Rafinesque's] remains"; "that is, as to the condition of the coffin and the bones accompanying it."35

34 James A. Spencer to Elizabeth Norton, February 14, 1924, February 27, 1924, March 21, 1924, TU Archives.
35 John W. Harshberger to F. B. McCartney [sic], March 6, 1924, TU Archives. The exhumation was also put on more permanent record than that of newspapers by David Starr
Probably wearied by the whole affair, the dean was unable to provide many concrete details, but his reply deserves extensive quotation since his appears to be another eyewitness account of what was removed from the grave. He wrote:

In reply to your inquiries I would say that the coffin in which Rafinesque was buried was found to be intact except that the top had caved in under the weight of earth. The wood of which the coffin was constructed was perhaps not over half an inch in thickness. A portion of the top of the coffin was removed with the bones, but the bottom of the casket was so well preserved and so firmly embedded in the earth that it resisted attempts to remove it and so was left in the grave, as we did not wish to disturb a body that the records said was buried beneath Rafinesque.

I am sorry not to be able to tell you the exact nature of the bones found. To corroborate and extend my own knowledge I write to a man who was present at the exhuming, but his knowledge of anatomy is even more inadequate than my own. I am writing now to another man who I am sure can give more definite information, and I shall be glad to communicate this to you later. The skull was very well preserved, there were two long bones which were evidently those of the arms, some of the ribs, one knee cap, a part of the hip bone and many small bones and pieces of bones. The undertaker said that considering the age of the man and the length of time since the burial, the body had been very well preserved.36

The first man, whose knowledge of anatomy was inadequate, could have been James A. Spencer. His March 21 response to his sister (who had requested the "full details concerning the removal of the ashes of Rafinesque") told how he and Macartney had been beset by obstructions at every turn and how they finally had overcome them. There is not a word about what was removed from the grave. If the second, more knowledgeable man ever replied, no record of his response has been found. What remains is the dean's observation, like that of the young Robert Spencer, that the "skull was very well preserved."

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36 Thomas Macartney to John W. Harshberger, March 31, 1924, TU Archives.
In fact, the dean may have borrowed the observation from Robert. In his response to Harshberger he used Robert’s language, whose letters lay before him. In reply to a letter from the dean, Robert had written:

Last Wednesday morning Dad and I were at the graveyard at promptly eight o’clock. We were the only ones that were tho. A short time after Mr. McNab and Mr. Taylor came and finally the truck men. The men who were to move the stone had not come so the truck men picked it up and carried it away. It was lying on top of five supporters that were sunk into the grave. Dad left with the truck men and Mr. Taylor did soon after. When the men first started to dig they found it hard work because the ground was frozen and the supporters were in the way. After these were removed I found they were made of terra cotta piping filled with concrete and weighted with heavy lumps of cement. About ten the men from Costow’s came to remove the stone. It was funny to hear Mr. McNab send them about their business.

By this point Robert has revealed why his father could not report on what came out of the grave—he had not been present—and, since Robert wrote this for the dean’s information, the dean likely had not been present either. Left now as probably that of the only eyewitness who wrote about what he saw, young Robert’s testimony takes on even more weight.

The first body was found after digging perhaps five or six feet. The only remains were a few bones and a piece of the skull. These were put in a small box before they were replaced in the grave. Just here some water flowed into the grave making it very muddy and hard to work in. About a foot deeper were found the remains for which we were looking. Mr. McNab said they were very well preserved considering the age of the man at his death and the length of internment [sic]. The coffin was perfectly intact except that the top had caved in with the weight of the earth. The wood of which the coffin was constructed was not over a half inch in thickness. The shape was like that of a mummy case and was long and narrow. Part of this was removed with the remains but the floor of the casket was so firmly embedded in the earth that it resisted all attempts to move it and so was left in the grave. The box in which the first body was placed was then put back into the grave and it was refilled.\[^{37}\]

\[^{37}\] Robert K. Spencer to Thomas Macartney, March 8, 1924, TU Archives.
Wishing to know more, the dean must have queried Robert again. A week later Robert dispatched another letter to Macartney, first explaining that McNab was the man from the undertaking firm—another reason for believing the dean was not present—("I tried to see him before writing this but he is out of town"), then providing most of the language Macartney used without attribution in his letter to Harshberger about the condition of the bones.

I am not sure that I can tell you exactly how many and which of Rafinesque’s bones were found as I did not notice particularly. Anyhow there was the skull, two long bones which were evidently the upper arms, the ribs, one knee cap (I remember this especially as the men spoke of it), part of the hip bone and many smaller bones and pieces of bones. I am sorry that this is not more accurate but I hope it will answer.38

We may never know why the men from the Bair undertaking firm thought Rafinesque’s remains lay at the second level from the surface, or whether the excavation would have gone deeper, to the third and correct level, had the elder Spencer been present. However, the few bones and partial skull they found five or six feet below the surface were those of Julia (or Juliet) A. Steen, who died of pneumonia in 1848 at the age of 37. Those found about a foot lower at the second level, including the well-preserved skull Robert K. Spencer remembered for three decades, were the remains of Mary Passimore (or Passmore), who died of consumption in 1847 at the age of 62. Since the bottom of Mary Passimore’s coffin stuck fast and the excavation went no deeper, lying below and left untouched were the remains of C. S. Rafinesque and three others.39

With a shipping label still preserved in the Transylvania archives, Mary Passimore’s consumptive bones were dispatched by rail to Kentucky the same day, on February 27, 1924, under Rafinesque’s name—and even that was misspelled. The shipping label mistakenly

38 Robert K. Spencer to Thomas Macartney, March 15, 1924, TU Archives.
39 To cross-check the accuracy of the records, I have scrutinized the coordinates of the graves for every name listed in the “Alphabetical Record” and found that the only persons recorded for lot 16 south, 11 west, 3rd grave are identical with those listed for this grave in the second volume of “Ronaldson Cemetery Interments: Lots.” At the end of the “Alphabetical Record” appear a few burials of unknown persons, but none of these is listed for lot 16 south, 11 west, 3rd grave.
certified that "the body contained in this case died of a non-contagious disease," and it made the further unlikely assertion that it had been "arterially embalmed." Later, Mercer's stone was also shipped to Lexington. It rests on the tomb today, identifying the remains of Mary Passimore as those of C. S. Rafinesque.

If the troubled spirit of Mary Passimore has sometimes disrupted the tranquillity of Transylvania because of the unseemly hoopla performed annually over her mortal remains, the bizarre error that brought them to Kentucky might have been suspected earlier. One journalist went far enough into the Transylvania archives to come across James A. Spencer's letter, and to write that the Philadelphia grave contained nine bodies, as Spencer thought. Written before recent calamities began striking the university, this Halloween article, however, expressed in its heading the pious hope that "Rescue from Grave May Have Lifted Rafinesque Curse on Transy."40

Finally, in 1950, the land occupied by Ronaldson's Cemetery at Ninth and Bainbridge was turned into a public playground, and it continues in that use today. At that time the remains known to be of Revolutionary War veterans were reinterred in the burial ground of Old Swedes Church. The others were trucked 18 miles northeast to Forest Hills Cemetery, Somerton, which is still within the present-day boundaries of the City of Philadelphia.41 If the bulldozers went deep enough—that is, more than six feet—they scooped up all that was left of Rafinesque; if not, he now lies beneath the pounding feet of Society Hill soccer players. In either event, there is a kind of symmetry in the fact that, like his father, he lies in an unmarked grave, somewhere in Philadelphia.

The Filson Club

Charles Boewe

40 Joan Hickerson, Lexington Herald-Leader, October 11, 1959. Oddly enough—whether by guess or by error—she also states that Rafinesque's was the third body down from the surface; she only failed to read far enough to learn that the body removed was at the second level.
