Constantine Samuel Rafinesque

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Transylvania Professorship Acceptance Letter
Written by Constantine Samuel Rafinesque April 25, 1819

Christy Spurlock
Western Kentucky University
Philadelphia 25th April 1819

Sir,

I do myself the honor of acknowledging receipt of your favor of the instant, which announces my appointment to the Professorship of Botany and Natural History in the University, and imports the conditions and terms of said appointment; and I beg leave to advise you as you regard, of my acceptance thereof, which I hope you will be pleased to communicate to the board of Trustees.

It is my determination to be in Lexington before the end of the Summer, unless my presence should be needed before, of which I shall be informed I hope by my friends or the usual means.

Meantime allow me to declare myself respectfully,

Sir,

Your most obedient,

Robert Wickliffe Esq.
Chairman of the Board of Trustees of the Transylvania University.

Lexington, Kentucky.

Constantine Rafinesque
Other Images

Image of Constantine Rafinesque from “his” Transylvania University Twitter page with the tag line, “They see me hauntin’, they hatin.”  https://twitter.com/RafDidIt

Image of Rafinesque’s tomb inside the Old Morrison Building at Transylvania University
Image from http://www.findagrave.com/

“Pumpkinmania” part of the numerous “Raf Week” celebration activities. Pumpkins are placed on the steps of the Old Morrison Building, which houses the Rafinesque tomb.
Image from http://smileypete.com/calendar/event/pumpkin-mania-at-transylvania-university/
Artifact Description

The primary source I selected is a letter dated April 25, 1819 written by Constantine Samuel Rafinesque. I found a copy of the letter in materials housed at Department of Special Collections at Western Kentucky University. The letter is addressed to Robert Wickliffe, “Chairman of the Board of Trustees of the Transylvania University, Lexington, KY accepting a, “professorship of Botany and Natural History.”

So begins the 19th century professional academic career of the brilliant naturalist at Transylvania. After seven years at the university he left amidst controversy. Among his peers, some viewed Rafinesque as an innovative genius, others as a dilettante who sporadically held classes.

In his wildest imaginings, Rafinesque could not have foreseen his remains being unearthed in 1924 from Philadelphia and relocated to Lexington, Kentucky, and that students would gleefully enter a lottery each year in the hopes of being selected to spend the night in his tomb on campus. Nor could he have envisioned the dining hall, “The Rafskeller,” which in name pays a sort of daily homage to him. Perhaps he would be pleased that in an age of social media “he” has an active Twitter page. Little could he or his peers have imagined that just shy of 200 years later, “Transy” students would be celebrating his life, legacy, and a fabled curse all culminating annually in “Raf Week.”

How and why did this professor capture the imagination of generations of students? By exploring just one legend at one early Kentucky institution, which begins with a simple letter, perhaps insights can be gained into collegiate “patron saints” in general. Who becomes an academic institution’s metaphorical “patron saint” and why?
A look at the man the behind the myth answers the “why” question for this particular legend. He was a fascinating, eccentric genius who by his own account cursed Transylvania and its president upon his abrupt departure.

Constantine Samuel Rafinesque was born outside of Constantinople on October 22, 1793. As a child he traveled Europe with his parents and developed a fondness and fascination with natural science. In 1802, Rafinesque arrived in America and spent his first few years working as a merchant’s clerk, and then as a secretary to a gentleman, all the while spending his free time studying botany by traveling and collecting samples and specimens over several states (Wade, 1931).

In 1805, Constantine left America for Italy. He spent ten years there eventually marrying a Sicilian woman and fathered both a daughter and a son. While in Italy, through his correspondence and speaking he became known to many men of science in Europe. In 1815, for unknown reasons he left his Italian wife and children behind for America. A shipwreck resulted in the loss of all his possessions. At thirty-two and lucky to be alive, he landed in Connecticut to begin anew (Wade, 1931).

On this second visit to America, Rafinesque found employment as a tutor for the three daughters of a Mr. Livingston in New York. At the same time, he pursued his botanical interests and went on collecting trips with fellow naturalists. While in New York, he became friends with John D. Clifford who permanently resided in Lexington, KY. Rafinesque promised to visit Clifford in Lexington (Weiss, 1936). John Clifford was Rafinesque’s former merchant employer and was then a trustee at Transylvania (Kleber, 1992)

Constantine left for Lexington in May of 1818. Typical of the day, he traveled by multiple means including foot, boat and carriage. He spent time at his former employer Clifford’s residence and during the visit, Clifford entreated Rafinesque to live with him and as a trustee, promised him a professorship at Transylvania (Weiss, 1936).
Transylvania was founded in 1799 as a result of the combination of two schools by the Kentucky legislature: a Danville grammar school and Kentucky Academy (Harrison & Klotter, 1997). By 1819, Transylvania was well regarded among American universities. Their medical college was particularly renowned. Thomas Jefferson while trying to found the University of Virginia in 1820 lamented, “We must send our children for education to Kentucky or Cambridge,” (Harrison & Klotter, 1997).

With the support and encouragement of his friend John Clifford, Rafinesque began his tenure at Transylvania in 1819. His career at Transylvania lasted seven years, from 1819-1826, and was troubled throughout. Rafinesque used the then “innovative” practice of teaching botany with actual specimens. He tried to found a botanical garden in conjunction with the university (Kleber, 1992).

Rafinesque never felt appreciated at Transylvania and there does seem to be a type of inherent conflict or tension between him and many of his colleagues who were classically educated and placed little value his study of the natural world. On the other hand, Rafinesque was often away on collecting trips inviting the criticism of neglecting his teaching duties (Weiss, 1936).

His lack of satisfaction with his employment can be seen in his correspondence with Thomas Jefferson. Rafinesque had met Thomas Jefferson in 1804. The two men seem to have hit it off, both with a love and interest in the natural world. The two nature enthusiasts would have two periods of correspondence: first in 1804 before Rafinesque left for Italy and then again while at Transylvania (Betts, 1944).

In a letter to Jefferson dated September 16, 1819 Rafinesque wrote asking to be considered for professorship at the University of Virginia. He listed his qualifications including publications in a variety of languages, the numerous academic societies he was a member of, etc. There is a brief passage that is particularly telling about his feeling regarding his professorship at Transylvania:
I am now well situated in this town; but some untoward circumstances in the university, might induce me to prefer a more eligible situation elsewhere, and nearer from the Atlantic Shores.

(Betts, 1944)

In 1826, Rafinesque left Transylvania. He was not asked to resign his professorship, however he did leave abruptly. His last lectures took place over the winter of 1825-26 (Weiss, 1936) There is wide range of speculation as to conflicts with colleagues, but no singular definitive “proof” as to why he left (Wade, 1931).

One can surmise that his leaving was the result of numerous events. The failure of subscribers for his proposed Transylvania Botanical Garden to actually pay up their promised amounts had to be disheartening. Rafinesque wrote:

“I soon became aware of a secret hostility to my undertaking, and several subscribers did not pay their installments. It became impossible to struggle against the influence of the foes of science.” (Weiss, 1931)

Another was upon his return to Lexington after a lengthy trip in 1825, he found his collegiate rooms broken into, his books and collections in disarray and that he was no longer considered a collegiate “boarder.” He blamed Transylvania president Horace Holley and his “hatred of science” for his loss of his rooms. Rafinesque took other lodgings in Lexington and gave lectures on medical botany in the winter of 1825-26 (Weiss, 1931).

After leaving Lexington, Rafinesque would spend the remaining years of his life in Philadelphia studying his collections, writing, publishing and other pursuits. He suffered from poor health and died in poverty on September 18, 1840 (Weiss, 1931).
Rafinesque was buried in Ronaldson’s Cemetery in Philadelphia in September of 1840. In the 1920s as the cemetery fell into neglect, several individuals both in Philadelphia and at Transylvania became involved in the project of moving Rafinesque’s remains to Lexington. The bones enshrined in the Old Morrison Building at the university are in actuality the remains of Mary Passimore. This error was due to multiple burials that had taken place at the Philadelphia cemetery (Kleber, 1992).

Rafinesque was a brilliant, if eccentric naturalist who was perhaps a good century ahead of his time. A prolific writer, by his own estimation he published 220, “works, pamphlets, essays, and tracts.” He created 6,700 names in the field of botany (Kleber, 1992).

Rafinesque wrote in his Life of Travel that he left Transylvania “cursing” both the school and its president. His “curse” does not read like an actual sort of gypsy-like curse, but more as an off handed expression of frustration with the university’s administration and some of his colleagues. President Holley died within a year of Rafinesque’s departure and there was a campus fire. Coincidences combined with his tomb on campus, have helped Rafinesque enter into both Transylvania and Lexington folklore.

With his brilliance he would no doubt appreciate the irony in his place today as Transylvania’s “patron saint.” “Raf Week” has become an annual pre-Halloween celebration sponsored by the Transylvania University Student Government Association Activities Board. There are a variety of activities each year such as Pumpkinmania, trick-or treat, costume contests for both students and faculty, and a Thriller parade. (Clark, 2011) There are facebook pages devoted to “Raf Week” activities and contests, You Tube videos of students spending the night in the tomb, as well as an amusing CS Rafinesque Twitter page with regular postings, such as the request for a space heater in his tomb.
Many universities have a fascination with their designated “patron saint,” and with a variety of superstitions and rituals surrounding the individual, however, all collegiate “saints” are not necessarily human. Another example would be the homage paid at Washington and Lee to General Lee’s famous horse, Traveler. The horse has developed an almost cult-like status, surpassing his real life role as a simple, sturdy Morgan horse who went about the Civil War and then he years on campus as General Lee’s preferred mount. Traveler was popular while he lived on campus, and in death he has been transformed into mythic status. Students and alumni regularly place apples and pennies on his grave stone at Washington and Lee.

Whether a disgruntled 19th century genius professor of botany, or a horse, colleges love their designated “saints,” with their accompany superstitions and rituals for the same reason the public at large does. Superstitions and rituals are fun. They ground generations of alumni, staff and faculty to an institution. They give those connected to a university or college over generations more than inanimate buildings on a campus to emotionally embrace. They provide a persona to identify with, often a touchstone to the earliest days of an institution. One should not search for logic or apply too much analysis to any institutions’s designated collegiate “saint.” One should simply accept, and embrace and if one is a Hilltopper, wave a red towel furiously for Coach Diddle.
References


Wade, J. (1931, April). Rafinesque in Kentucky. *Kentucky Progress Magazine*, p. none available. Copy of article found in file of photocopied materials at the Department of Special Collections, WKU, without page numbers.
