

# VERMONT



# HISTORY

VOLUME 79, No. 2 SUMMER/FALL 2011

## *Acrostick.*

M ost worthy our esteem and love and praise,  
A re they who seek and walk in Virtue's ways;  
R efecting honor on their name and sex,  
Y outh it adorns: for Age secures respect.  
B e it your honor thus my dear young friend,  
R ound you this wholesome savor to extend  
O utshining those whose only pride is worth  
W hose whole aim centres, in the love of self.  
N ow be it yours, most to excel yourself.

Huntington, Vermont, June 18 1864.  
By James Johns.

- The Strange Career of Benjamin Franklin Prentiss,  
Antislavery Lawyer *Kari J. Winter*
- Guns for Billy Yank: The Armory in Windsor Meets the  
Challenge of Civil War *Carrie Brown*
- The 1917 Polio Outbreak in Montpelier, Vermont *Elisha P. Renne*

The Journal of the Vermont Historical Society

# About the Cover Illustrations

## James Johns: Fastidious Vermont Chronicler

James Johns (1797–1874) was an intriguing, inventive, reclusive Vermonter living in the first half of the nineteenth century. Like Wilson “Snowflake” Bentley two generations later, Johns was a Vermont farm boy with a single-minded devotion to an art form. For Bentley it was photographing snowflakes; for Johns it was pen printing. Bentley became famous in his own time for his accomplishments and is widely celebrated today; Johns was known to only a few historians and collectors during his life and today is an obscure figure in Vermont’s colorful past.

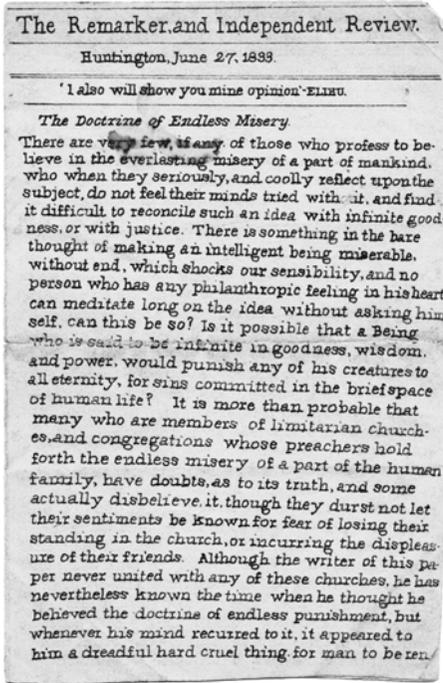
Johns grew up on a farm in Huntington and lived in that town most of his life. One of six children, he had little opportunity for more than a district school education. Johns, like Bentley, spent most of his life eking out a living as a farmer. Johns, again like Bentley, began his lifetime avocation in his early teens when he began to issue small hand-lettered publications designed to resemble printed works.

Johns’s early pen printed work included the “newspaper,” *The Vermont Autograph and Remarker*, which he wrote and distributed from as early as 1833 until 1873. In 1857 he acquired a small hand press and used it to publish several small books but abandoned it by the 1860s, returning to printing by hand. He produced the final issue of his newspaper on August 28, 1873, eight months before his death at age seventy-six in Starksboro.

Although the newspaper was Johns’s most widely distributed item, his pen-printed output consisted of obituaries, poetry, short stories, essays, sermons, speeches, music, acrostics, and local history. The content of many of these publications was very precise and particular. Johns seemed most comfortable recording the minutiae of his day and of his forbearers. Sometimes he combined several forms to create a unique document. For example, he created “obituary verse” in which he memorialized the deceased. Some of these poems were pen printed and a few were published on his letter press. His acrostics (front cover) are poems in which each letter of an individual’s name is the first letter of each line of the poem.

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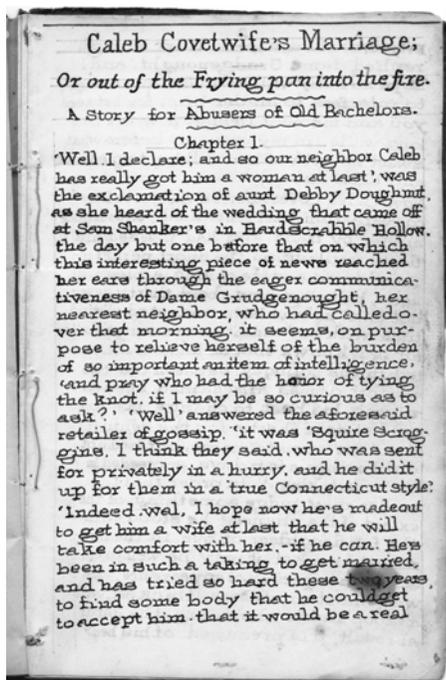


The Remarker and Independent Review, the predecessor of a newspaper pen-printed by James Johns, June 27, 1833. James Johns Papers, Vermont Historical Society Library, Barre, MS 61B:8.

Johns also recorded history, using his talents to document the unfolding history of his rural town. In a series of diaries from 1830 to 1873, Johns chronicled the weather, local accidents, births, deaths, and marriages of Huntington as well as personal events. The diaries, which Johns called variously *Weather Journal*, *Minutes*, or *Yearly Chronicle*, are handwritten and bound in brown paper, often with a pen-printed cover title. Johns pen printed annual lists of the members of the Vermont legislature from 1796–1843 and made handwritten copies of votes in the 1840s on various Vermont legislative issues that interested him.

Johns also used his historical knowledge and interest to create short stories, such as the one shown below. According to biographer Robert W. G. Vail, writing in *The Papers of the Bibliographical Society of America*, “As Johns left the Green Mountains only once or twice in his life time, his inspiration was entirely local. But he was well informed on the history of his state and read everything he could find to supplement the tales he had learned in his boyhood from the veterans of the Revolution and the War of 1812 who had been his father’s neighbors.”

The Vermont Historical Society’s Leahy Library has what is thought to be the largest collection of James Johns’s work in a research repository. Both of the two great builders of the VHS collections in the twentieth



"Caleb Covetwife's  
Marriage; or Out of the  
Frying Pan into the Fire," an  
example of a short story by  
James Johns, no date. James  
Johns Papers, Vermont  
Historical Society Library,  
Barre, MS 61:18.

century had a hand in assembling this remarkable collection. Trustee and librarian Dorman B. E. Kent acquired the core of the Johns collection from the influential Rutland antiquarian book dealer Charles E. Tuttle and gave them to the Vermont Historical Society in 1920. In 1957 additional items, largely Johns's poetry, were acquired as part of the large collection of Vermontiana bequeathed to the VHS by Dartmouth librarian Harold G. Rugg.

A complete description of the James Johns collection at the VHS, written by volunteer Priscilla Page, can be accessed on the Internet at [www.vermonthistory.org/documents/findaid/johns.pdf](http://www.vermonthistory.org/documents/findaid/johns.pdf). Additional biographical information on Johns can be found in *The Vermont Encyclopedia* (2003):171 and in *The Papers of the Bibliographical Society of America* (27, pt. 2 [1933]):89-132.

PAUL CARNAHAN, *Librarian*

*Front cover: Acrostic in honor of Mary Brown, an example of poetry by James Johns, 1864 (James Johns Papers, Vermont Historical Society Library, Barre, MS 61A:10).*

*Back cover: Ambrotype of James Johns, ca. 1850. Gift of Alice Benjamin Keith, 1958.*

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