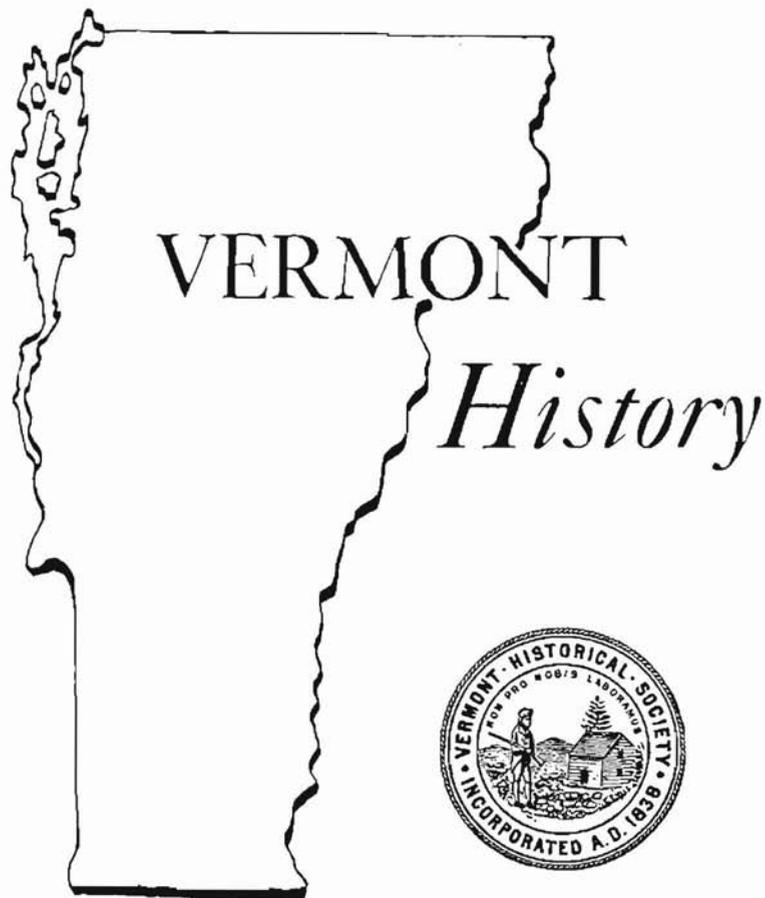


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"I had always heard of Mr. Marsh as a *cold man*, but I have seldom been addressed with words containing sympathy and cordial sentiment like those with which he spoke...."

## In Italy with Mr. and Mrs. George Perkins Marsh

By TOM DANIELS

In 1861 Vermont's elder statesman, George Perkins Marsh, was appointed Minister Plenipotentiary to the new Kingdom of Italy. A native of Woodstock, Marsh had served as a member of Vermont's Congressional delegation (1843-1848) and as the United States Minister to Turkey (1848-1854). When not occupied practicing law or by a variety of business ventures, Marsh devoted himself to study. A leading scholar of his day and an accomplished linguist, Marsh spoke a dozen languages fluently and wrote books on a wide range of topics including architecture, language and agriculture. He is best remembered for his pioneering and perceptive study of ecology, *Man and Nature*.<sup>1</sup>

Accompanied by his second wife, Caroline Crane Marsh, George Perkins Marsh remained in Italy until his death in 1882. His position as minister coincided with the age of the Grand Tour when wealthy Americans swarmed to Europe to soak up the culture of the Old World. Rome especially attracted the "innocent" tourists as well as scores of aspiring sculptors and painters, and Marsh found himself, in effect, operating a travel agency, finishing school, salon, and embassy.

In November, 1873, Mrs. Cornelia Underwood of Burlington arrived in Rome accompanied by her four children (Cornelia, fourteen; Levi, twelve; Violet, seven; and Tom, four). Shortly after her arrival, Mrs. Underwood contacted the Marshes who had lived in Burlington for several years. Marsh and Mrs. Underwood's husband, Levi, a prominent Burlington lawyer and former Lieutenant Governor (1860-1862) were acquaintances.

Mrs. Underwood chronicled her travels in a series of letters to her husband and carefully copied each letter in a journal. Excerpts from her journal provide a fresh glimpse of the Marshes in Italy over a century ago.<sup>2</sup>

Hotel Costawzi  
Rome, Italy  
November 3, 1873

My Dear Husband,

I have just received such a delightful call from Mr. Marsh and Mary Edmunds.<sup>3</sup> Last evening, I sent Mrs. Marsh a note telling of our arrival and giving her my address.

Mr. Marsh spoke to me of his loss by Henry Clews<sup>4</sup> and says he would not advise any person to put their money in the hands of any American fiscal agent, but put it in the Barrings [sic]<sup>5</sup> hands who are rich beyond a peradventure and do not have to resort to the Pacific Railroad or any such way of getting rich. He says if he ever gets any money again, it will be put in the hands of the Barrings.<sup>6</sup>

Mr. Marsh wants to know if the college library building<sup>7</sup> is fireproof. It will make a difference about leaving his library to it, which he shall not do if it is not fireproof.

Mr. Marsh looks well and young for his years [seventy-two]. He said that when he was in America last, he heard so much of Helen<sup>8</sup> as being intellectual and accomplished, and it was with deep regret that he heard of her death. I had always heard of Mr. Marsh as a *cold man*, but I have seldom been addressed with words containing sympathy and cordial sentiment like those with which he spoke of dear Helen.

December 5, 1873

I took Cornelia with me last evening and went to call on Mrs. Marsh. They live in great style on the second floor of No. 8 Basitio Street, with men in full English servant's dress who speak both English and Italian. Mrs. Marsh looks very young;<sup>9</sup> she has not a grey hair in her head and Mr. Marsh looks much her senior. She was dressed in mourning for her niece in a black satin and velvet dress and lavender ribbons and gloves, and looked lovely.

Mrs. Marsh said the sight of my face so brought back her old days of teaching at Mr. Crane's school<sup>10</sup> and she first accosted me as Cornelia Chamberlain.<sup>11</sup>

Mrs. Marsh is so very young in her feelings for a woman who has had no children. She is the most brilliant talker I have ever heard. She does not only talk well herself but draws other people out which is more than half the art of a good talker. She makes me think of Corinne when talking of Italy to Madame Oswald in Madame deStael's novel.<sup>12</sup> Mrs. Marsh is eloquent in her admiration of the Italian character and the attainments of the cultivated Italian people. It is the view she has, having the access to the cultivated society here and speaking the language,

*George Perkins Marsh*



whereas a traveller—all travellers who live in hotels and apartments, and stay a few days or even a few months come in contact only with hotel keepers, drivers, shop keepers, and valets and couriers. I find myself judging Italy by what and who I see on the streets of Rome. Mrs. Marsh says this is not the safest of judgments; she says that the cultural and natural powers of these people are beyond that of any other nation.

Mr. Marsh says that many Americans are so filled with horror at the Catholicism of Rome that they cannot see its immense growth and increase in liberal principles. It is hard for us, coming from America and Vermont, to understand how, when politics and religion are the same thing. It may be a difficult task to take on republican feelings in a Catholic country, still this is the case in Italy today. Mr. Marsh says there is not a freer government under the sun than Victor Emmanuel's.<sup>13</sup> And he says that the gentlemen who constitute the Italian Parliament are infinitely more intellectual and full of general knowledge than the same number of senators and congressmen in America.

I have not found Mrs. Raymond's<sup>14</sup> idea of the Marshes a true one in my case, as they have been exceedingly cordial and kind to me, and certainly no person's conversation could be more instructive as they have lived so long in Italy and have made a study of the country, its real condition and powers.

Mrs. Marsh says we will be welcome at her house any evening, and when I am homesick I must go there.

January 7, 1874

I went last night to dine at the Marshes and took Levi and Violet. It is so pleasant to have persons to talk to of Burlington affairs; and they don't seem to feel that home is far away. Mr. Marsh says it is a fortnight's travel and then there is the telegraph.

Mr. Marsh is as old fashioned as you please and quite a beau to us. He talked a great deal with Levi; he thinks Levi looks just like you.

I must tell you that Mr. Marsh told me he believed in woman's rights!

Mr. Marsh dined with the King yesterday and described the State Dinner to us. The King himself never eats one mouthful at the Dinners and is not allowed by etiquette to converse on any political subject.

Mr. Marsh says that the Italians he has found honest, has never had anything stolen, and has kept house here and in Florence and Turin thirteen years. He tells me he thinks Italian the most difficult of all foreign languages to learn. He says he will be happy to assist us about our movements when we leave Rome, as he has been in all the European countries and knows the points of interest and the expense of living in each. He says he can be of more use to us than the guide books—no one could be more kind and cordial.

Mrs. Marsh's influence is to keep the young ladies under her charge true to their own individuality, and making and keeping them matured. Now Miss Crane<sup>15</sup> who has been here six years is a thoroughly American character, as unaffected as any girl who has never left her New England home, yet very lady-like at the same time.

I think Mrs. Marsh has the same kind of practical enthusiasm for Italy that Mrs. Browning<sup>16</sup> had, and she seems like a poetess. Mrs. Marsh says she never was homesick even when she first came to Europe; she finds life so full and satisfactory here that she never tires of it.

I probably shall not see the Marshes again in Europe as they do not leave Italy in summer but stop at their villa in Florence, which they keep as a summer residence. Mrs. Marsh is very sweet and good to me that I sometimes think it a pity to leave Rome so soon.

Yesterday I went out 'sight seeing' (which is my profession) with Mary Edmunds. She is very happy in Rome and with her aunt I do not wonder. Mrs. Marsh is a great favorite of mine, she is truly elegant and so learned and able to transmit what she knows.

It is hard sometimes to realize that Rome is so far from Burlington. But I am in love with Rome. Though at first there was so much to take a strong hold of me, it is the very reason I love it now. I have had such first rate acquaintances and gotten along so very well.

Your affectionate wife,  
Cornelia Underwood

In February, Mrs. Underwood and her children left Rome to continue their tour of Europe. During the next few months, Mrs. Underwood corresponded with Mrs. Marsh and tried to convince the Marshes to rent the Underwood house in Burlington the following winter.<sup>17</sup> George Perkins Marsh still had business interests and family<sup>18</sup> in Burlington, but the Marshes never returned to America, preferring instead the generous stipend from the United States government, elegant accommodations, agreeable climate, and an occasional visitor from home.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>(Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1965) a reissue.

<sup>2</sup>Underwood MSS, in the possession of the author, Burlington, Vermont.

<sup>3</sup>Mary Edmunds was the niece of Senator George F. Edmunds of Vermont. Senator Edmunds, who married a niece of G.P. Marsh, used his influence in Washington to help Marsh retain his post in Italy.

<sup>4</sup>Henry Clews was a Wall Street financier and associate of Jay Gould, whose abortive attempt to corner the gold market touched off the Panic of 1873.

<sup>5</sup>Barings was a well known British financial and investment house which collapsed in 1890 because of unfortunate Argentine investments.

<sup>6</sup>When he went to Italy in 1861, he was in financial difficulty. He had lost large sums with the collapse of his investments in textile mills and the Central Vermont Railroad. See David Lowenthal, *George Perkins Marsh, Versatile Vermonter* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1958), pp. 41-43 and Ch. 8.

<sup>7</sup>The "new library" at the University of Vermont, finished in 1863, was built on the present site of Williams Science Hall. Prior to that the books had been "shelved on the second floor of the 'Old Mill.'" See Julian Ira Lindsay, *Tradition Looks Forward* (Burlington, Vermont: The University of Vermont, 1954), pp. 220-221. Marsh did leave his extensive collection of books, engravings, drawings, and papers to the University of Vermont.

<sup>8</sup>Helen Underwood, the eldest daughter of Levi and Cornelia Underwood, died in February, 1872.

<sup>9</sup>A woman of notoriously poor health. Mrs. Marsh was fifty-seven. David Lowenthal refers to her as an invalid in his introduction to the 1965 edition of *Man and Nature*, p. xiv.

<sup>10</sup>Caroline Crane Marsh met Marsh when she was in Burlington teaching at a girl's school run by her brother, Rev. Dr. Crane. Cornelia Underwood had attended Dr. Crane's school.

<sup>11</sup>Her maiden name.

<sup>12</sup>*Corinne, or Italy* (1807).

<sup>13</sup>An avowed anti-Catholic, Marsh welcomed King Victor Emmanuel's rise to power at the expense of Pope Pius IX. See Lowenthal, *Marsh*, pp. 214-216.

<sup>14</sup>A Burlington acquaintance.

<sup>15</sup>A niece of Mrs. Marsh.

<sup>16</sup>Elizabeth Barrett Browning (1806-1861), English writer and poet.

<sup>17</sup>The Underwood house, destroyed by fire in 1903, stood at the corner of Pearl and Prospect Streets, just off of the University of Vermont green in Burlington.

<sup>18</sup>Marsh's brother, Spencer, was a professor at the University of Vermont and a friend of Levi Underwood.