Floyd L. Carter as a young man, about 1890.

**March 22, 2017 / LEAVE A COMMENT**

**Author's note:** *A version of this story was originally published in the January 2011 issue of Thousand Islands Life magazine to mark the 100th anniversary of Carter's invention.*

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*“The familiar sound of a put-put from the vicinity of Washington Island caused people to look at one another on Saturday. It was the real noise so familiar to everybody on the water front and as it came nearer and more distinct the docks were well peopled. An ice boat without a sail is a real novelty here, but such it proved to be.”*

So opened a brief article in the *Jefferson County Journal* about the events of Saturday, January 21st, 1911, on a dock overlooking the St. Lawrence River in the Thousand Islands region of Jefferson County, New York, describing a new invention by local man, Floyd L. Carter, that was to be the subject of much attention—and imitation.[1]

Floyd Carter was born in 1877 near Clayton, a son of Byron Carter and Clarissa Britton. In 1896 Floyd married Ada[2], only daughter of Michael J. Diepolder, the keeper of Rock Island Lighthouse.[3] By 1900, the couple was living at 1711 Spring St. in Thousand Island Park.[4] It was here that Floyd began to hone his skills as a mechanic and a...
The Thousand Islands region lies at the confluence of Lake Ontario and the St. Lawrence River and consists of 1,864 islands scattered between the U.S. and Canadian mainlands. Until the Thousand Islands International Bridge opened in 1938, boats were the only form of transportation for inhabitants of the islands or for those wishing to cross the international border. In winter, when the river froze over, locals would use “ice boats”—homemade wooden platforms to which they attached sleigh runners, a cloth sail, and a rudder for steering—and wait for a steady wind to push them across the ice. Not only was it slow going, but it was also dangerous since the boats could be difficult to control and were at the mercy of the elements.

![An early example of the kind of sail-powered iceboat in use at the time of Carter’s invention, published in Jonathan Haddock’s 1895 book A Souvenir of the Thousand Islands (Watertown, N.Y.), 257.](image)

The first mention of Floyd Carter in connection with an iceboat was in 1904, when he was working as an oarsman carrying passengers for hire between the islands and the mainland. The December 29th edition of the Watertown Daily Times records: “Bill Tidd visited his parents here Christmas and on his return to Clayton engaged F. L. Carter with his ice boat to take him to Fisher’s Landing.” That trip ended abruptly when the iceboat, clocking 40 miles per hour, hit a weak spot in the ice, sending its passengers skidding across the icy river and damaging the iceboat severely.[5]

Over the next few years, Floyd earned a reputation as one of the finest boatbuilders on the river. In 1906, he assisted Clinton Snell at Lafargeville in the construction of a naptha launch, 25 feet long with an eight foot beam.[6] He built more than 20 racing boats, including some of the Sliver model. In 1909 he introduced the Gazelle, cited as the smallest but fastest racer of its type on the river, which was purchased by Charles Freeman of New York City. By the end of the year Floyd had plans to move to Dallas, Texas, to go into the automobile business.[7] Fortunately for the onlookers at the docks in the winter of 1911, he stayed put....
The iceboat that Floyd Carter unveiled in January 1911 was 8 feet long and 7 feet wide. Instead of having a mast and sail attached for wind-driven propulsion, like those used in the vicinity up to that time, his innovation was to incorporate an airplane propeller for locomotion. Carter used a six horsepower Panard engine to drive the propeller, which had a span of more than 6 feet. Two large runners provided support in the back, while a shaft attached to a single steering sleigh in the front provided directional control. On its first trip across the ice the boat topped 50 miles per hour.[8]

Not to be outdone, other local builders soon introduced their own variations on Carter’s concept:

On January 31st, 1911, Fred Guernsey of Clayton presented his motor ice boat, identical to Carter’s with the exception that his engine was attached via sprocket chain to a spiked cogwheel at the rear of the boat which dug into the ice to move it forward.[9]

In December 1911, airplane builder Charles Hoffman introduced his “Areao-Ice-Hydro-plane”, an 11 foot contraption with 37 inch beam, consisting of runners attached to the bottom of a boat hull, powered by a five foot propeller rotating 1,900 times per minute and achieving top speeds of 60 miles per hour. Hoffman’s invention could use the runners while on ice, and stay afloat via the hull when it struck water, making it ideal for the thawing season (if only Carter was driving this back in 1904!).[10]

In 1912, Theron Patterson and Benton Wilbur of Alexandria Bay extended the motorized ice travel concept to dry land. Their idea was to affix two cutter runners to a horse sleigh, and mount a 16 horsepower engine in the back, connected to a six foot air wheel for propulsion. This new “motor sleigh” was capable of reaching speeds on land of 30 miles per hour, could climb hills, and on one trip reportedly traveled by road to Chippewa Bay, then over the river to Dark Island. Two years later, Patterson improved his design with a new torpedo shape powered by a lighter engine, achieving 40 miles per hour.[11]
In 1929, Julius M. Breitenbach’s sleek new Arctic Goose was in service, hitting record speeds of 131 miles per hour.[12]

In 1931, Morris Knight patented a variation on Hoffman’s design, for an iceboat capable of navigating both ice and open water.[13]

By 1953, an airplane-based iceboat was in use by Robert Lashomb to carry the mail from Clayton to Grindstone Island, shortening the trip to 15 minutes or less—still the practice today.[14]

Floyd Carter died in February 1935, but his skill in both mechanics and boatbuilding continued to inspire his family long after[15]:

His young brother-in-law, Larry Diepolder, whom Floyd helped rear at Thousand Islands Park, went into business as a “gas engineer” and boat pilot.[16] In 1921, Larry moved to St. Petersburg, Florida, where he competed in water races using boats he built himself. He opened “Die Polder Electric Motors” which is still in business today.[17]

Floyd’s son Austin S. Carter moved to Chelan, Washington, after World War II, where he engaged in the boatbuilding business on Lake Chelan.[18] In 1950, he was granted a patent for his concept of a “foldable boat.”[19]

So the next time you are on a lake or a river and you hear the familiar “put-put” of an engine off in the distance, perhaps you’ll remember the story of Floyd Carter and his motor ice boat from more than 100 years ago. And when you hear it, be sure to stop, linger a while, and look around… for like those assembled on the dock that chilly day, you may just find yourself a witness to the next great invention!

[Note: The author, Mark Wentling, is the great-great-grandson of the article subject, Floyd Carter.]

SOURCES:

All images from author’s personal collection except where otherwise noted.


[2] Carter Bible Records, 1834-1974, family pages only from unknown Bible; digital images made by Mark A. Wentling, Randolph, Massachusetts, 2009. The Bible originated with Byron Carter and his wife Clarissa Britton, parents of Floyd Carter, whose births are the earliest entries; comparison of ink and handwriting suggest most entries were created by Ada Diepolder, Floyd’s wife. The Bible passed to her daughter Kathleen (Carter) Abbott Philow and was then lost when her estate was dispersed following her death in 1984. The Bible turned up on the online auction website Ebay in 2009 and was purchased by Mark A. Wentling, great-great-grandson of Floyd and Ada, and it is now in possession of his grandmother, Barbara (Carter) O’Brien, Floyd and Ada’s granddaughter, as of 2017.


Insult upon injury: the tragic life of Professor Joshua Thorp

APRIL 22, 2016 / 1 COMMENT

[Do you have an ancestor whose story you’d like to discover? I am a professional genealogist with more than 20 years of experience. Find out how I can help!]

Thorp, John J., Litchfield, proprietor of the Cedarville Hotel, was born in Rural Grove, Montgomery county, September 26, 1848, and settled in Danube in 1859. He is a son of Prof. Joshua Thorp, who spent most of his life in teaching. He was for some time principal of the academy at Onondaga Valley, N. Y., and also of the High School at Watertown. He was a very successful teacher and lecturer, and was in the war of the Rebellion. He was a son of Ebenezer Deacon Thorp, one of the pioneer settlers of Root, Montgomery county. John J. Thorp married Ella Young, of German Flats, and they have four children living: Benjamin F., Raymond J., Mabel J., and Ethel Thorp. Professor Joshua Thorp married Miss Catharine Shull, the daughter of Jacob Shull of Danube, Herkimer county, New York. She was the mother of John J. and Louisa A. Thorp.

So read a sketch of the Thorp family published in 1893 in Hardin’s History of Herkimer County, New York. By this account, Joshua Thorp led a rather illustrious life, excelling in the noble profession of teaching, serving his country during the Civil War and raising two children.

Yet, Hardin’s work was not entirely unbiased. Like many publishers of “glory books” in his day, Hardin probably partially paid for its publication by canvassing homes in the county, offering to include a person’s biography in exchange for their commitment to buy a copy. In this case, Hardin likely got his details from Joshua’s son John Jacob Thorp, who resided in the county.

John was busy building a business reputation of his own. Hardin needed a sale. Both had reason to tell a
happy tale.

Was the story true? Read on and judge for yourself….

**Fact or Fiction?**

Joshua Thorp was born about 1825 in the Town of Root, Montgomery Co., in New York’s historic Mohawk Valley, a son of Ebenezer Deacon Thorp and Martha Ann Young.[1][2] By 1846 he and his wife, Catherine Shull, had welcomed their first child, Louisa Ann “Eliza” and three years later came son John Jacob.[3]

Joshua was indeed an educator. In the 1850 census (the first in which the whole family appears by name) Joshua reported his occupation as “school teacher” and he is on record as a teacher at the Crum Creek School in the nearby Town of Oppenheim.[4] As for whether he was principal at Watertown, records do not exist to investigate the claim[5]; however, an unbroken chronology of principals at Onondaga Valley Academy does exist and Thorp’s name is not on it.[6] ....Strike one.

According to Hardin, Joshua also served in the Civil War; however, there are no records of a New York soldier by that name to support that claim.[7] ....Strike two.

Given the conflicting evidence, the verdict on the veracity of Hardin’s book is a mixed one. Joshua did indeed teach, but not where Hardin reported. And there is no evidence of a military career.

The true story of Joshua’s life would be found in other records—and in surprising places....

**A Family Broken**

In the summer of 1853, tragedy struck Joshua’s home when his 28 year old wife Catherine died, leaving him to care for his daughter Louisa, 7, and son John Jacob, 5.[8]

In the 1855 census, Louisa and John were living with their grandparents, Ebenezer and Martha, and their aunt Hope A. Thorp, on the family farm in Root.[9] By 1860, Ebenezer and Martha were both dead.[10][11] Joshua was not named in his father’s will.[12] By 1865, Louisa had married and John, 16, had been taken in by his uncle John I. Shull at his farm in the Town of Danube.[13][14]

Where had Joshua gone? Was he off looking for better paying work to provide for his children? Or had he abandoned them? The search for answers to these questions would lead far away from the family farm in New York....
A New Start

Joshua showed up next in 1861, 900 miles away in Stark County, Illinois, where he was teaching in the town of Toulin. According to Leeson’s Stark County history, “[Joshua] Thorp presided over the seminary from October, 1861 to February 1862....In March 1862, [he] proposed to teach the high school for $30 per month, on condition that he be authorized to employ a female assistant”[15] Leeson goes on to say ”]. Thorp...was principal of high school, or No. 1, at $50 per month,”[16]

Why had Joshua left his children to teach in Illinois of all places? The records don’t say.

Joshua didn’t stay in Toulin for long. By 1863, he’d moved 40 miles northwest to Geneseo, Henry Co., Illinois, where in June he registered for the military draft. By this time, the country had been in a state of civil war for two years. He reported himself to be a 37 year old unmarried teacher born in New York. Was this proof of the Civil War service Hardin reported back in New York? As it turns out, no. There are no records of a Joshua Thorp serving from Illinois; in fact, there are no records fitting Joshua’s description serving from any state during the war. The claim of Civil War service, like the one about being principal at Onondaga Valley, seems to have been bogus.[17]

By 1867, Joshua had moved again, to Kane County, where he found work as principal of the high school at Elgin City, while boarding at a house on the southeast corner of North and North Center streets.[18]
By 1870, Joshua had moved yet again—and this time he had company. The federal census of Polo, Ogle County, Illinois, shows Joshua, a 44-year-old school teacher from New York, living with wife Katie, a 27 year-old housekeeper born in Illinois, and three-year-old Carrie Thorp, also born in Illinois.[19]

After years of moving around, Joshua began to put down roots in Polo. He was admitted to the local lodge of Freemasons and appears to have become a favorite. A newspaper article entitled "Masonic Festivals" tells of him reading the poem "Solomon's Temple" and presenting a chair to one of his fraternal brethren "in a very happy manner, eliciting universal commendation."[20]

Joshua had a new family. He was well-liked in his new community. Things were looking up for him, professionally and personally.

A Turn for the Worse

Joshua’s good fortune would not last long. Within a few short years tragedy struck again, when Katie died. The 1880 census shows Joshua as a widower and single father caring for Carrie, by then 13, and attending school. The two were boarding in the South Evanston neighborhood of Chicago where Joshua was employed as a teacher.[21]

By the time Carrie reached adulthood, Joshua’s life was crumbling.

On 20 November 1888, "J. Thorp," a 63-year-old schoolteacher from New York, was admitted to the Ogle County Almshouse at Oregon. He was listed as a "transient" with a "good" education, but in "poor" health. Joshua had apparently lost all means to support himself and he had no property to speak of. The cause for his "pauperism" was listed as "crank," a term indicating he had become unbalanced, eccentric and ill-tempered.[22]

Ogle County Almshouse was locally known as the “County Farm,” since it was quite literally a farm. In 1878, the county Board of Supervisors had authorized the purchase of 50 acres along the west bank of Rock River, south of Oregon, and the erection of a building to house patients. In 1883, an 18-room brick building for the insane was also built. In Joshua’s time, the farm was expanded to over 100 acres. Not until 1909 were the buildings “heated with hot air furnace by blast, and lighted by electricity”[23].
Within a few months of admission, Joshua may have been transferred to the Elgin State Hospital, originally opened in 1851 for treatment of the insane. An entry in the almshouse register for Joshua reads “March 14, 1889 Went to Elgin,” but it is crossed out.[24] If he was sent to Elgin he may have been turned away (explaining the cross-out) since prior to 1894 Elgin’s policy was to send those who were too infirm for treatment back to their county’s almshouse.[25] This was probably the case with Joshua, who was in poor health.

Joshua was eventually discharged from Ogle County Almshouse on 30 October 1895.[26] In total, he had been a patient nearly seven years.

Upon discharge, Joshua was “sent to his children” in New York.[27] His destitute condition must have been quite a shock to his family and friends, who by then had in their hands Hardin’s glowing remarks about his achievements as a soldier and educator. This was not the man proud son John Jacob had described only two years earlier!

Things must have gone badly for Joshua upon his return to New York since he didn’t stay long. Just five months later, on 27 May 1896, Joshua was readmitted to the Ogle County Almhouse in Illinois. The cause of his condition was again listed as crank. Authority for his admission was recorded as “returned from the east.”[28] Had he returned to the almshouse voluntarily or was he forcibly admitted? The record hints at the latter.

His second stay would be his last. Joshua Thorp’s life came to an end at the Ogle County Almshouse, when on 31 July 1900 he died of consumption (a.k.a. tuberculosis). He was 75 years old. He was laid to rest in the almshouse cemetery.[29]

The Final Insult

Dying at the almshouse wasn’t the last indignity the once-hailed professor would suffer—his headstone was even inscribed with the wrong name: Joseph Thorp.[30]
Adding insult to injury, due to a land dispute in 1967 all the markers in the almshouse cemetery were pulled up and piled in a corner near the road. It wasn’t until 1970 that the markers were put back, but by then no one was quite sure where each patient was buried, so the stones were laid flat on the ground in rows according to best guess.[31]

So for more than a century, Joshua Thorp has lain buried in a farm field, made nameless by a careless mistake, and today his actual resting place is only an approximation.
Unanswered Questions

For all the facts the paper trail reveals, the most important—and troubling—questions about Joshua’s life remain unanswered:

Why did he leave his children in New York? With all of his experience as a teacher and principal he clearly was capable of providing for them.

Hardin would have interviewed Joshua’s son John in 1893. By then Joshua had been a patient in the almshouse in Illinois a full five years. Is it possible that John hadn’t heard from his father in years and had no idea that he’d fallen on hard times? Or did John know and choose to leave that part out of the story he told Hardin in order to cover up his father’s tragic turn and his own embarrassment? Given the evidence contradicting Hardin’s book, it doesn’t seem too large a leap to conclude that John was giving Hardin the best story he could come up with about his father. A sterling family reputation would reflect well on John and his business. Who would bother traveling to Illinois to check the facts?

What kind of relationship did John and Louisa in New York have with their half-sister Carrie in Illinois? Perhaps none. Katie and Carrie weren’t included in Hardin’s account, indicating John never mentioned them. Likewise, in Illinois, Joshua’s obituary claimed he had “no relatives” surviving other than Carrie.[32] Did they not know about one another? Or was there acrimony amongst the children stemming from Joshua’s seeming abandonment of his first family years before? Certainly Joshua must have spoken to John and Louisa about his new wife and daughter during his brief return east in 1895. Then again, perhaps Joshua jumped the train en route and never made it back to New York at all.

Did Louisa and John ever find out what became of their father? Did they ever try to find his grave at the almshouse, only to be turned away? “Nope, no Joshua Thorp here.”

We’ll probably never know the answers to any of these questions, but thanks to diligent genealogical research we at least know the questions left to ponder.

Conclusion

This story began with the lofty claims of a son about his father’s grand accomplishments as reported to a publisher more than a century ago. Sound genealogical investigation proved essential parts of the story to be untrue—and left out—possibly out of ignorance, but just as likely to protect the family’s reputation.

Through careful evaluation of census records, city directories, newspaper accounts, almshouse registers and cemetery records scattered across nearly a thousand miles, the true story of Prof. Joshua Thorp’s life emerged, depicting a much more flawed—and perhaps sympathetic—character.

Would you like the story of your ancestor told? Read more about my professional genealogy research services!
Obituary for Joshua Thorp, printed in the Dixon Telegraph.

Author’s Note

The subject of this story was my great-great-great-grandfather. I’d like to thank two groups who made this story about him possible by pointing you to their websites:

First, are Kristine A. M Gilbert and the volunteers with the Ogle County, Illinois, GenWeb site. Kristine photographed and transcribed all of the stones at County Farm Cemetery in 2004 and put them online. Please have a look at Kristine’s work and if you have Illinois ancestors see the many other cemetery transcripts and photos created by the Ogle County GenWeb team of volunteers.
Second, are Ruth Abramovitz and Barbara Heflin with the Illinois Regional Archives Depository (IRAD), who transcribed the index to Ogle County Almshouse records and made them searchable online. Please read about their work on the IRAD website.

It was through the work of both these groups that I pieced together the final puzzle of who Joshua a.k.a. “Joseph” Thorp really was. Thank you!

Further Reading

If you’d like to learn more about using institutional records, including sanitariums, state hospitals, asylums, poorhouses and almshouses, as part of your genealogy research, then I suggest the article by Sharon DeBartolo Carmack entitled “Genealogy Workbook: Institutional Records,” published in the Jan/Feb 2016 issue of Family Tree Magazine. You can get it online or you can order a copy via interlibrary loan from your nearest library. [I provide the above link as a convenience to my readers; I’m not affiliated with Family Tree Magazine nor with the article author.]

References


[5] An inquiry to the school district in 2000 indicated records were not available for time period in question.


[9] 1855 New York State Census, Montgomery County, population schedule, election district 1st & 2nd, Town of Root, unpaged, dwelling 150, family 25, for Ebenezer, Martha A., Hope A., Louisa and John J. Thorp; digital


Introduction. The purpose of this website is to provide an outline of some efficient ways to trace English persons in the past. It does not attempt to cover the rest of the British Isles.