

Having Your Head Examined

The Strange Odyssey of Phrenology in Iowa

by Timothy Walch

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That brief notice touched upon the core elements of phrenology in Iowa. Over a period of nearly 60 years, Iowans were educated, entertained, examined, and inspired by the principles of something called "phrenology." Was it a science? Was it flim-flam? Iowans would go back and forth on the topic well into the 20th century.

As early as 1844, Iowa newspapers mentioned this new way to study human behavior, and books on phrenology were advertised in the *Hawk-eye* as early as 1847. And only a month before O'Leary appeared in Burlington in 1857, the Jackson County Teachers' Association had passed a resolution stating that "a thorough knowledge of the science of Phrenology [is] a highly important qualification for a teacher."

So what was phrenology? Simply put, it was a system that claimed to discern mental faculties and character attributes by interpreting the size and contours of the human skull. Although the desire to better understand the human mind was as old as ancient Greece, no systematic effort addressed this complex issue until the late 18th century, when a Viennese physician named Franz Joseph Gall began to lecture on a new discipline that he called "craniology," the science of the mind. Gall postulated that the human brain comprised 27 distinct "organs" that governed human character and behavior. More important, Gall hypothesized that every human skull, with its individualized bumps, ridges, dips, and crannies, was key to the secrets of

those 27 organs. A close examination of any skull could reveal a great deal about that particular individual.

Gall commissioned models of the heads of great men to explain the links between the shape of the skull and personal achievement. Gall's protégé Johann Spurzheim spread the discipline to the English-speaking world under the term "phrenology"—from the Greek word *phrenos* for brain. By the time Spurzheim visited the United States in 1832, he was no stranger to the American medical and scientific communities, nor were his ideas. The noted phrenologist was fêted at numerous banquets and receptions in New York; in Boston, his lectures, planned for the Athenaeum, had to be moved to the Masonic Temple because of the size of the crowds. But within a matter of weeks, he fell ill and died. Three thousand people attended his memorial service, including the president of Harvard University and the entire membership of the Boston Medical Association. His grave was marked by a marble monument purchased by a prominent merchant.

Spurzheim's death did not diminish Americans' interest in phrenology. Historian Richard Boyer writes that phrenology became "part of the vocabulary of most intellectuals, as current as Freudianism was to become later." Although there was always opposition to it, phrenology through the 1840s was considered an orthodox scientific discipline by many, and its possibilities captivated thinkers such as Horace Mann, Samuel Gridley Howe, and Orestes Brownson, as well as writers such as Poe, Emerson, and Whitman.

In the search to understand humankind, phrenology seemed to make sense. Because the "organs" that





SHSI (IOWA CITY): SCHULDT, PA 232

composed the brain supposedly correlated to attributes (such as combativeness, benevolence, tenacity, and grandiosity), the attributes that were most dominant and developed in an individual would therefore appear as more prominent bumps, which one could detect on the surface of the head. Organs less developed meant that those faculties were weak and showed up as indentations or slight valleys on the head. Reformers saw phrenology as a key to understanding social problems like crime, intemperance, and insanity, and it was not uncommon for phrenological research to be done in asylums and prisons.

But phrenology quickly shifted from a scientific discipline devoted to researching and observing hu-

An extremely rare image of a phrenologist, taken in Klemme, Iowa, about 1900. He holds a model head, standard to the practice. An empty chair awaits a volunteer to be “phrenologized,” and the hefty books on the table are meant to imply training and expertise. Note the two men on the side fences; they’re holding up a backdrop for the photograph.

man behavior to a practical system of personal analysis to help individuals map out their lives. “Practical phrenology” had substantial appeal to the people of a new nation eager to re-invent themselves. It proved irresistible to Americans of all social classes. Through “mental exercise,” an individual could strengthen and cultivate positive traits and repress and inhibit negative ones.

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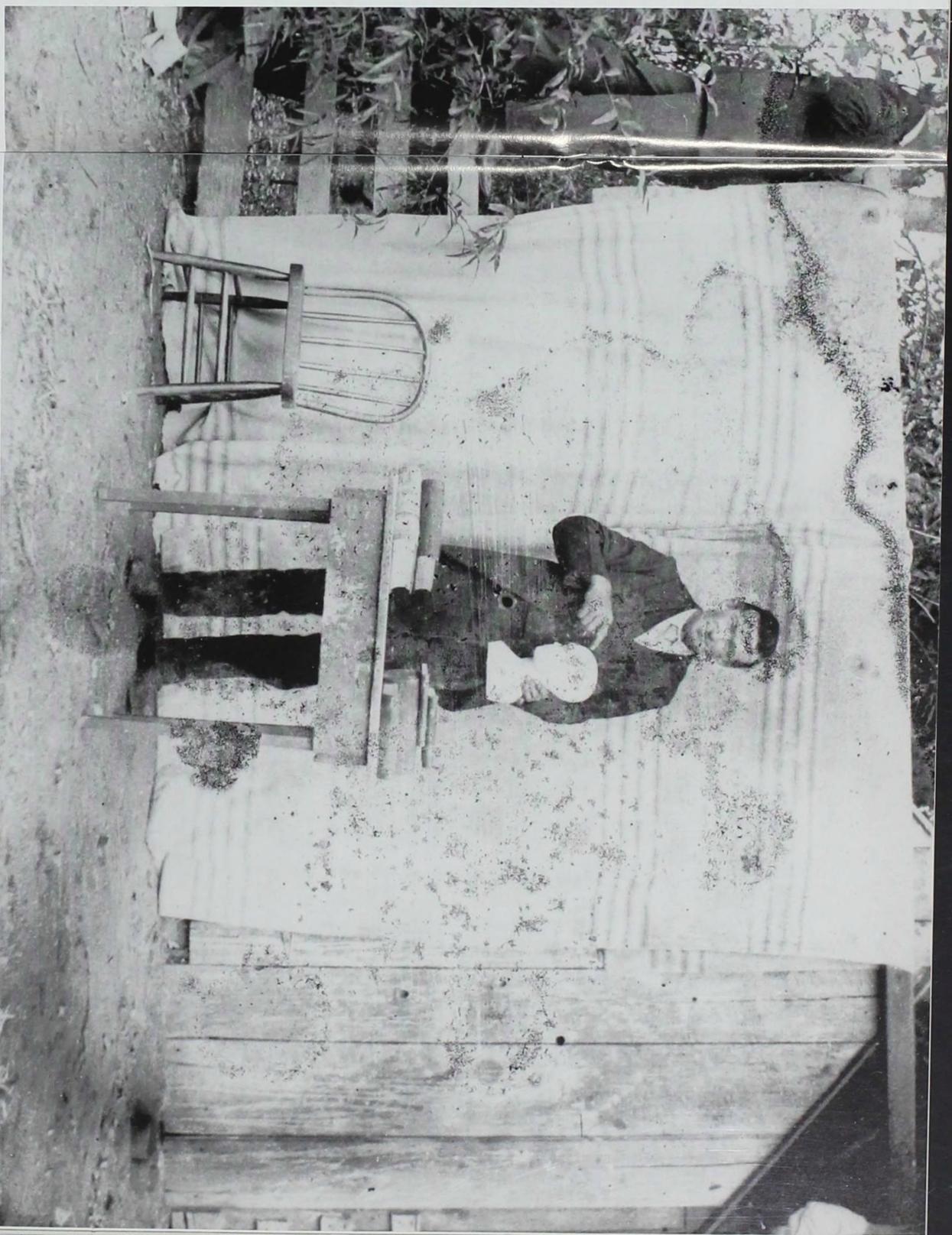
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"The Human Face Divine."

A New System of Physiognomy,—Eyes, Ears, Nose, Lips, Mouth, Head, Hair, Eyebrows, Hands, Feet, Skin, Complexion, with all "Signs of Character, and How to Read Them," given in

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Physiology, Heart, Lungs, Stomach, Bones, Muscles, and Nervous System.

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Physiognomy, with all the various "Signs of Character, and How to Read Them."

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designed for Learners, showing the exact location of all the Organs of the Brain. [By Express.] Large size, \$1.75; Small size, 75c. FOWLER & WELLS, 389 Broadway, N. Y.

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Attesting to their broad appeal, phrenology publications were widely advertised in national periodicals. These ads appeared in issues of *American Agriculturist* in 1864.

The new science was used for everything from advising parents on their children's future careers to finding the perfect mate to evaluating the work tendencies of prospective employees.

In the masterful hands of Lorenzo Fowler and his brother Orson, practical phrenology swept across the United States. Together with Samuel Wells and Nelson Sizer, the Fowler brothers offered training courses and established a publishing house in New York that produced a national journal (with a circulation of 50,000) and a steady stream of textbooks and pamphlets. Advertisements for Fowler & Wells were commonplace in newspapers all across the country, including Iowa.

The mechanism that had the most to do with the popularity of phrenology in the 19th century was the lecture circuit and its yearly crop of self-trained "professors" and "doctors" who traveled from town to town to give talks and demonstrations. "One authority has calculated that about twenty thousand practical phrenologists plied the trade in the nineteenth century," notes historian Charles Colbert. "Whatever the number, there were certainly enough to visit every hamlet in the union."

Curious audiences were not hard to drum up; even skeptics welcomed the occasional diversion. Thomas Macbride, a botanist and later State University of Iowa

president, was a child in eastern Iowa when a phrenologist—"a glib speaker"—arrived in the area. "Night after night," Macbride recalled, "the [school]house was full, first at ten cents and then fifteen, [with] charts in the name of O. S. Fowler, duly signed; drafts on the future for each lucky boy. . . . The fancy of youth was captured; in many a manly heart ambition stirred; and doubtless beyond the meadows the noblest visions rose, even hovered above the handles of the plow."

Macbride quoted a neighbor's more blunt assessment of the phrenology lecturer: "The man says something nice now about everybody; but I think they'll all be over it by and by; there can't be so much goodness in one neighborhood."

Over the course of several decades, thousands of Americans listened to traveling lecturers and then paid them to examine their heads, chart their findings, and provide personal recommendations. Free lectures typically ran for several nights; the private examinations brought in the profit. The charts and the advice were generally positive, and such "scientific" reinforcement gave the subjects a sense of their own self-worth—proof of one's special talents, good character, and promising future. Wasn't that assessment worth a dollar or two?

John Pattee apparently thought so. In 1855 Pattee had been appointed by the governor to fill a vacancy as auditor of public accounts. When Orson Fowler came to Iowa City, then the state capital, in 1856, Pat-

tee requested a phrenological chart. Among many strengths, Fowler noted Pattee's tenacity, benevolence, and morality—though he lacked "brass, boldness and self-assurance." He had too much caution and too little self-esteem to be a lawyer, but he was "methodical," "good in figures," and wanted "every single thing in place." This boded well. That fall Pattee was elected state auditor.

Well-known phrenologist Nelson Sizer assessed Jared Fuller in 1854 as having "in your nature commingled, two distinct physical elements, power and activity, & were you not a tough man you would have broken down long ago, for you work with all your might."

John Elkins's phrenologist had good things to say about the young man's honesty though he lacked the "mental temperament to be more than a common man." Elkins became a blacksmith and later served in the Civil War as a sergeant in the 29th Iowa Infantry.

A phrenologist named James Walker prepared a profile for James L. Winter of Iowa City in 1866. Here again, the written assessment reflected positive attributes. "[You have] much self respect," wrote Walker of Winter, "a dignity of character, and an active mind, a passion for self improvement, a full appreciation of the value of education and a desire to attain its benefits." Winter went on for several pages with remarks of a similar tone and nature—although one passage is completely blacked out, perhaps by a self-conscious Winter.

It is difficult to determine whether Pattee, Fuller, Elkins, and Winter took their charts seriously. But judging by diaries and scrapbooks, it's certain that a farm family named Gillespie put great stock in phrenology.

Emily and James Gillespie lived in Delaware County. As Emily's diary shows, she was in an unhappy, abusive marriage. But she had a fervid belief in education and great hopes for herself and her two children, Henry and Sarah. Phrenology fueled those hopes.

Emily had attended local phrenology lectures as early as 1873, and Henry attended such a lecture when he was 15—"the first time he has ever been alone, any place in the evening," she wrote. Three years later, when Henry was 18, Emily ordered his phrenological chart from Nelson Sizer in New York. As instructed, she sent two photos of Henry (front and side views), along with his chest, waist, and head measurements; height and weight; color of complexion, eyes, and hair; and information on his marital status, general health, and education.

How could a phrenologist in New York ascertain the attributes of a young farmer in Iowa? As historian Robert E. Riegel makes clear, "The work and theories of the phrenologists were by no means confined to the bumps of the head, as is often assumed. In diagnosing any individual their first interest was in his general physical characteristics, such as height, weight, and texture of the skin." Thus, in common parlance, the term phrenology also referred to physiognomy, which was the study of facial features and contours—the size and shape of the forehead or jaw, for instance, or the distance between the eyes. Coarse features might imply anger or oafishness, for example; a pale, delicate look suggested nervousness or a poetic sensitivity. The stance and movement of the body, even how one spoke and shook hands, also yielded clues for sizing up one's character. To a phrenologist, "kindness bent the head forward, dignity carried it upward and backward,

SHSI (IOWA CITY): JAN. 21, 1864

PHRENOLOGIKAL KARACTER OF MR. MARK M. LEBERRY Given at the offiss of Proff. Josh Billings, praktikal phrenologis, prise \$4

Amtivness.—Big. Stiks out like a hornet's ness. You ought tew be able tew luv the whole human familee with yure bump at onst.—You will never be a widderer long, not enny.

Pollytikz.—You have got the natral wa. A splendid bump. It feels like a Dimmokratik pumb, too. Menny a man has got to be konstable with half yure bump.

Kombatifness.—Sleightually, very much. Yu might fite a woman, but tuff match. I shud like tew bet on the woman. This bump wants poultising.

Besides announcing and advertising phrenologists, local newspapers poked fun at them. These quips ran on the front page of Toledo's *Iowa Transcript* in 1864.

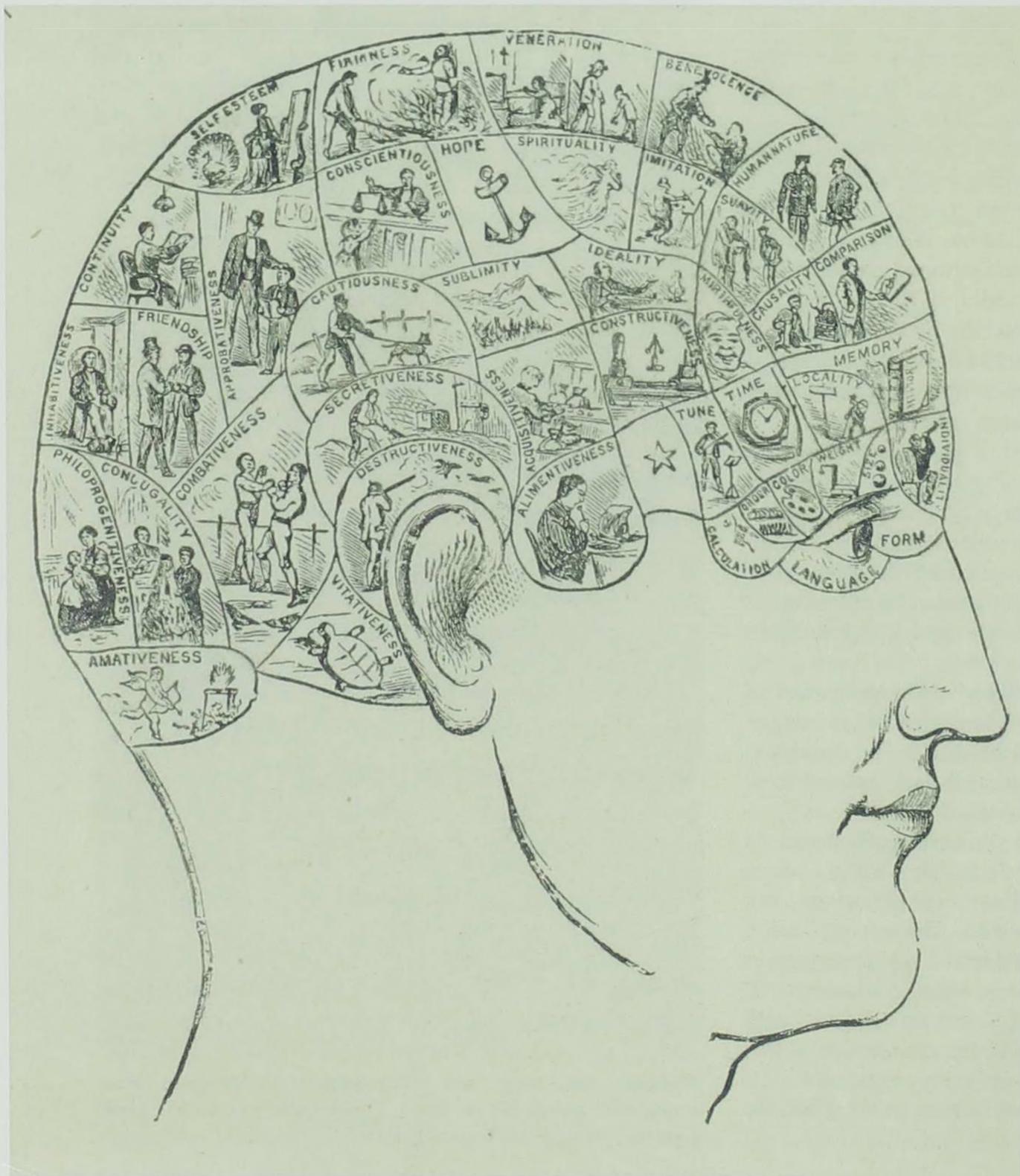
firmness produced straight posture," writes scholar Madeleine Stern.

Thus, when photos of Henry Gillespie arrived by mail, Sizer evaluated his facial features and shape of his head. From that assessment, he recommended suitable occupations for the 18-year-old. And based on the written description of his health, weight, height, and complexion, Sizer prescribed certain healthful habits and discouraged harmful ones. Advice on healthy living was a common component of phrenological charts and was considered useful by the subjects.

According to her diary, Emily Gillespie was de-

lighted with Sizer's analysis of her son, according to her diary: "This [is] indeed a model Chart, giving him the highest recommendation as to the different scientific works which he might do—or adopt as a business—to succeed in life. . . . Doctor. Merchant. Photographer. in fact every thing scientific—even down to a dentist."

Sarah, his sister, was equally proud of Henry's "splendid" chart, though her diary notes less prestigious career possibilities that Sizer had recommended. "He can be a jeweler, keep a variety store, or a book store, could be a carriage trimmer, make inside finishing of house, or a piano-forte maker," Sarah wrote.

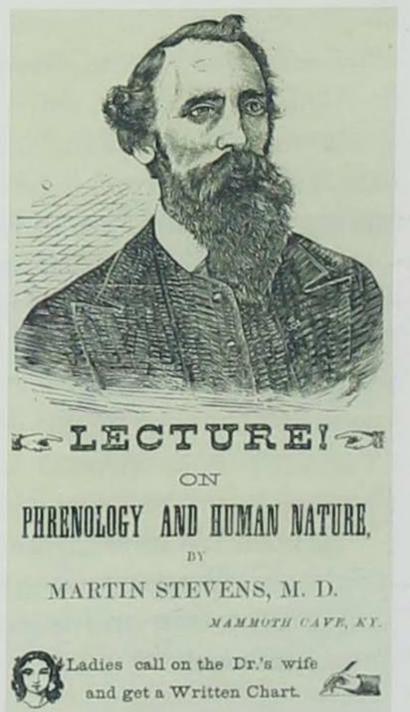


Marry someone pleasant and plump. Don't pursue mechanical work. Watch your health. That was the advice of phrenologist Martin Stevens (below) for Samuel S. Townsley.

Left: Each brain "organ" was responsible for a character trait. The positions of the organs appear on this diagram.

Right: Based on the skull's contours, traits were rated from 1 to 7. High ratings like Townsley's were common; phrenologists knew the value of flattering their subjects.

Bottom right: In just a few lines, Stevens made recommendations for Townsley's future.



BOTH PAGES: SHSI (IOWA CITY); DETAILS OF SAMUEL S. TOWNSLEY'S PHRENOLOGICAL CHART

"His Hope is like the head light of a Locomotive & illuminates the distance, though like the Locomotive you may travel in darkness."

A few months later, Sarah, 17, received her own 16-page chart from Nelson Sizer. The first half advised seeking good food, "sleep, fresh air, pure water and sunshine." The second half stated that she was "steadfast, positive, decided and determined." She should marry "a man with . . . a head a little broader than yours; it need not be quite so high at the crown." "You could learn a mechanical [manual] trade, such as millinery; but you never would be satisfied with it....

Medicine first; teaching second, reporting and type writing third, would place you on an independent basis, whether you married or lived single."

Sarah's mother, Emily, was ecstatic. "Only think of it both my Children Doctors—well I am proud of it & will help them all I can."

Two years later, Emily noted in her diary that she had attended a local lecture by Professor G. Morris and then "went to his room. he examined my head & I got a Chart. . . . [Morris] said it was the most remarkable head he ever examined. that it was almost impossible for a person to reach as high a position as I was capable

Sizes, Names and Meanings of the Signs of Character.

AMITIVENESS.—Comradial love, affection. 6	IMITATION.—Copying, aptitude for mimicry. 6	TEMPERAMENTS.	
CONJUGAL LOVE.—Union for life, instinct. 6	MIRTH.—Fun, wit, ridicule, facetiousness. 7		
PARENTAL LOVE.—Care of offspring, and all young. 6	INDIVIDUALITY.—Observation, curiosity to see. 6		MENTAL, Gives thought 7
FRIENDSHIP.—Sociability, union of friends. 6	FORM.—Memory of <i>shape</i> , looks, persons, things. 6		
INHABITIVENESS.—Love of home and country. 6	SIZE.—Measurement of quantity by the eye. 6		MOTIVE, furnishes strength 5
CONTINUITY.—Application, consecutiveness. 5	WEIGHT.—Control of motion, balancing. 6		Signs of longevity are for 65
VITATIVENESS.—Clinging to life, tenacity, endurance. 4	COLOR.—Discernment, and love of colors, hues, tints. 5		
COMBATIVENESS.—Defence, courage, criticism. 6	ORDER.— <i>Method</i> system, going by <i>rule</i> , arrange't. 5		Your health is _____
DESTRUCTIVENESS.—Executiveness, push, propell. 6	CALCULATION.—Mental arithmetic, numbers. 6		23 1/2
ALIMENTIVENESS.—Appetite for food, etc. 6	LOCALITY.—Memory of place, position, travels. 6		
ACQUISITIVENESS.—Frugality, economy, to get. 5	EVENTUALITY.—Memory of facts, events, history. 5		
SECRETIVENESS.—Self-control, policy, to keep. 5	TIME.—Telling <i>when</i> , time of day, dates, punctuality. 6		
CAUTIOUSNESS.—Guardedness, care-taking, safety. 6	TUNE.—Love of music, sense of harmony, singing. 5		
APPROBATIVENESS.—Love of applause and display. 8	LANGUAGE.— <i>Expression</i> by words, signs or acts. 5 6 6 2		
SELF-ESTEEM.—Self-respect, dignity, authority. 6	CAUSALITY.— <i>Planning</i> , thinking, philosophy. 7		
FIRMNESS.—Stability, perseverance, steadfastness. 4	COMPARISON.—Analysis, inferring, illustration. 7		
CONSCIENTIOUSNESS.—Sense of right, justice. 6	HUMAN NATURE.—Sagacity, perception, motives. 7		
HOPE.—Expectation, anticipation, perfect trust. 6	SUAVITY.— <i>Pleasantness</i> , blandness, politeness. 4		
SPIRITUALITY.—Intuition, prescience, faith. 5	CONSTRUCTIVENESS.—Ingenuity, invention, tools. 6		
VENERATION.—Worship, adoration, deference. 6	IDEALITY.— <i>Taste</i> , love of beauty, poetry and art. 6		
BENEVOLENCE.—Sympathy, kindness, mercy. 6	SUBLIMITY.—Love of the grand, vast, magnificent. 7		

MR, you would live very happily with a person who is plump and has dark eyes, dark hair, and pleasant appearance. You can follow a professional, business or mechanical pursuit and should roam in the fields of literature. You should make a teacher, Minister, Statesman or Phrenologist. You would advance in society affairs and march on science with gigantic strides. You must take care of your health.

The Doctor charges 50 cents for a Phrenological Examination, and 50 cents more for a written Chart, which is worth more than Prof. O. S. Fowler's \$5 charts. Call and have a social chat with the Doctor about Wyandotte Cave, Indiana, or Mammoth Cave, Kentucky.

of doing & also desirous to do. . . . That I could be one of the finest poets, one of the best authors, & in the finest arts I could have reached the very highest."

Sarah's diary reveals that she and Henry were considering "going to the Phrenological Institute in N.Y. & we *will* too if we can, as soon as we can. We will have to read & study some first." Though often plagued by ill health, Sarah saw great promise in phrenology, and it appears that she re-read Sizer's report whenever she faced personal challenges. She kept in touch with him, and on the back of one

envelope, she wrote, "Latent talent and ambitions thwarted. I naturally turned to him who had understood & these responses boosted hope & courage up." Years later she wrote an afterthought to her chart: "I should like to add that this characterization is perfect in every detail." Then she made reference to the challenges she had faced on the farm: "Conditions environing the formative years were filled to overflowing with duties that overburdened the heart, head and hands; leaving me a physical wreck at twenty-one."



"Let the hair be wet and brushed down as smoothly to the head as possible, so as to show its shape," instructed Fowler and Wells to those who mailed photos to a phrenologist. Above: These images of B. Mishler were taken by Iowa City photographer and artist Isaac Wetherby, who also drew and painted nearly 70 busts of famous people, from Shakespeare to John C. Fremont; these were used by traveling phrenologists in the 1850s. Below: Henry Gillespie's photos for Nelson Sizer.



A touring phrenologist relied on local newspapers to draw an audience, and editors surely welcomed the advertising as well as something new to write about, though their tone varied. Some lecturers were praised: a Dr. Brevoort was deemed a "celebrated Phrenologist" and spoken of "in the highest terms" by a Cedar Falls newspaper in 1861. Others were scorned: in Clarksville in 1868, the audience was "beautifully sold" by "Professor Bronson and his infant guide," but the "bogus lecturer" skipped town without paying his bills. And some were fodder for humor: in 1860, the *Cedar Falls Gazette* reported that "a Yankee that has come lately West, advertises that he will mend clocks, lecture on phrenology, milk cows . . . and catch crabs in creeks." Clearly, by 1860 phrenology had lost much of its scientific luster.

Touring phrenologists, even those with faux titles of "doctor" or "professor," had to broaden their appeal and promise entertainment. They routinely pulled volunteers from the audience to demonstrate how they read their traits. If the volunteer was a local celebrity, or a pretty young woman looking for a mate, so much the merrier.

Magnetism, hypnotism, and a song or two were often part of the evening's instruction and entertainment. A four-man show appeared in Fort Dodge in early September 1866. The mesmerist, banjo player, and tightrope walker all "astonish[ed] the natives," but the fourth act cancelled: Professor Warnick, a phre-

SHSI (IOWA CITY); WETHERBY COLLECTION

SHSI (IOWA CITY); GILLESPIE COLLECTION

nologist and ventriloquist had lost his voice. (Warnick was billed as "the world renowned Negro Delineator [of character]. Another phrenologist who toured in Iowa with a similar act was George S. Yates, "The Colored Phrenologist and Ventriloquist.")

Of course, lecturers continued to tout the practical value of phrenology. "The Great Prophet St. Germain," who visited Dubuque in 1870, had "the ability to cure persons radically from deep-rooted vices, such as excessive drinking, gambling and unfaithfulness within nine days," or so claimed his advertisement. In 1876, A. E. Willis also lectured there on "phrenology and kindred sciences" that would "Benefit the Human Family" and focus on "Domestic Happiness, or Marriage and Divorce." Hardly any condition was outside the bounds of phrenology.

The *Davenport Daily Leader* reported that "Prof. Warren is considered the best entertainer in the lecture field," and "laughter, merriment and instruction attract large audiences to his lectures." Warren displayed "skulls of idiots, murderers and eccentric people" to illustrate his talks. Although the skulls were surely replicas, the gruesomeness would have appealed to some of the public.

Models of heads, as well as portraits, were typical props. U. E. Traer had "a splendid gallery of . . . a great number of portraits of 'great, good' or bad men, showing the traits of the human head." In fact, as early as the 1850s, Traer had been using phrenological portraits created by Iowa photographer and artist Isaac Wetherby. With "no rival in the West," Traer was a frequent lecturer in the state. In an 1886 lecture, he advised two young people to marry. "They were total strangers," Nelson Sizer later wrote, "and formed part of a group of persons who were invited to come forward to the platform at a lecture. They became acquainted and were married a year later." The couple named one of their children after Traer.

Traer also managed the Siloam Spring Sanitarium in Iowa Falls, a "resort" for the "treatment of all the various chronic diseases." But a story from Primghar in O'Brien County in 1894 marred his reputation. Following a lecture at which he identified Carrie B. Hitchings of Sanborn as an invalid, Traer treated her for an undisclosed illness. According to the *Waterloo Courier*, Traer allegedly "performed an operation and Hitchings complained of a great pain." She died five days later. A coroner's inquest concluded that "Mrs. Hitchings came to her death as the result of an operation performed by Dr. Traer, with some metal instrument, and that said operation was unskillfully and carelessly done." He later sued the *Iowa Capital* for \$25,000 for al-

leged libel in connection with the woman's death. He did not stop lecturing.

Iowa newspapers reprinted stories on everything phrenological—from general explanations of the principles, to speculation that phrenology might have some value in treating mental disorders, to humorous stories about phrenological parties where a local phrenologist amused guests with his skills. Upon the death of Orson Fowler in 1887 (he had visited Dubuque again, in 1880), a substantial obituary appeared in the *Cedar Rapids Gazette*, but no other Iowa paper took notice of his passing.

Judging from 1890s articles, there was something of a resurgence of what some editors referred to as "bumpology." A bill introduced in the Minnesota state legislature called for a commission on phrenology, anatomy, and physiology. The *Davenport Daily Leader* noted the 1896 centennial of phrenology in a widely reprinted story. Other Iowa papers published stories about a national phrenology convention in Chicago.

But despite ongoing popular interest in phrenology, newspapers paid it only marginal respect—and that respect was shifting toward derision. Perhaps the *Cedar Falls Gazette* best captured the Iowa sentiment at the turn of the century: a professor of phrenology could no more "tell what's in a man's head by running his fingers over it, than a skillful chicken thief can tell by running his fingers over the clapboards of a chicken coop how many chickens are inside."

One Iowa phrenologist, Robert J. Black of Vinton, was prepared to publicly defend his profession. Black first came to public attention as the result of a fluke interview with former president Grover Cleveland in early November 1900. Black had been lecturing at Princeton University and took it upon himself to visit Cleveland, who lived in the area. Although Black was known as a phrenologist, his visit had nothing to do with that subject.

The two men talked politics and focused on Cleveland's views on the upcoming campaign. A Philadelphia reporter interviewed Black, and the story appeared in numerous U.S. papers. This prominence carried over long after Black returned to Iowa. And when a professor of psychology from the State University of Iowa in Iowa City criticized Black's beloved profession, he responded vigorously.

The confrontation began in March 1905 when Carl E. Seashore, the new chairman of the psychology department, lectured to the student body. Seashore said bluntly, "The man who says that he can tell your char-

acter by the bumps on your head lies when he says so."

Under the headline "Seashore Hits Bump Artists," the *Waterloo Courier* quoted the lecture at length. "Phrenology claims to be a science of the function of the brain," Seashore was reported as saying. "It rests upon four principles, three of which are absolutely false. The phrenologist argues that first the brain is the organ of the mind which is true, but figurative; second, that the mind may be reduced to a number of faculties; third that these faculties are seated in different regions; and fourth that the size of each region is a measure of the faculty associated with it. The last three principles are preposterous nonsense."

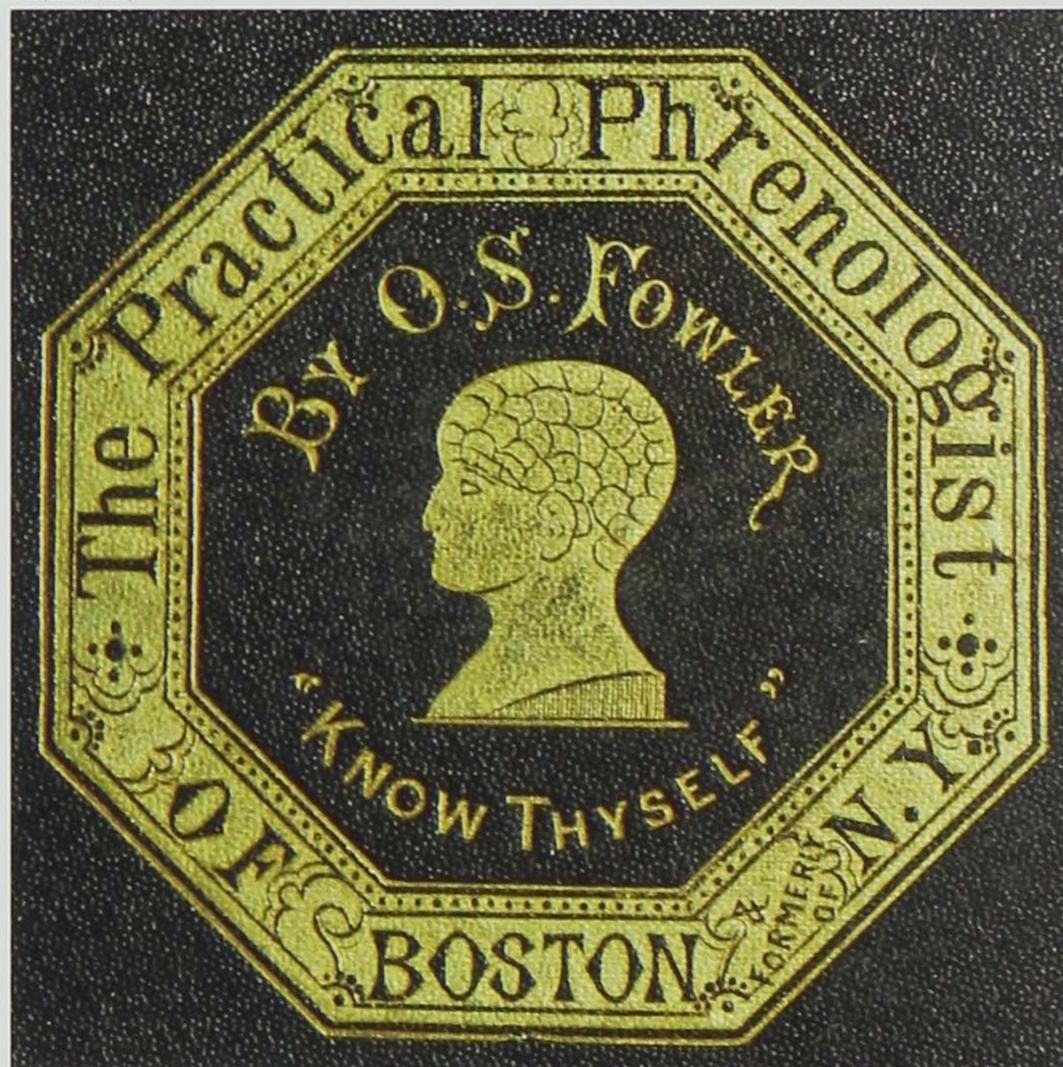
Seashore elaborated on each of the false tenets of phrenology and warned that although phrenologists had keen powers of observation of personal appearance, "the phrenologist tells you just what you tell him. A glib tongue and a ready command of bold generalities are the only other material aids."

Glib tongue? Bold generalities? These were fighting words to Bob Black. Black's "back is up," the *Iowa City Daily Press* reported, and he "will prove the integrity of his profession, and the power of phrenology." Black later told a Waterloo paper that "he could teach the professor a thing or two if he could meet him."

The *Waterloo Daily Reporter* continued, "As no attention was paid to [Black's] statement, he decided upon more aggressive measures and he has now issued a sweeping challenge which includes every professor in the state university of Iowa to the effect that he will meet any one of their number in a public debate on the validity of his science for a purse of four hundred dollars."

Under the headline "Bump Reader Sore," the *Daily Iowan* reviewed the terms laid down by Black and speculated on who should speak for the university. No mention was made of Seashore. "Perhaps it will be necessary," joked the student paper, "to use the 'try-out' system, selecting the men best informed on the subject and sending these into what might be called a 'Black' preliminary." But "because of the lateness of the season, the difficulty in getting a large enough hall,

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For those who ascribed to phrenology, "Know Thyself" implied "Improve Thyself." The symbol of phrenology was a side profile of a human head, with the "organs" of the brain delineated. The symbol appears here on the cover of a book by Orson Fowler (1869).

and the trouble in securing competent judges, nothing will come of this challenge."

"Up to the hour of going to press," noted the *Daily Press*, "members of the university community have not stumbled over one another in a wild desperate and destructive rush to accept Black's challenge."

Black repeated his challenge. But there is no record of any comment from Seashore or the university.

For the rest of the decade, Bob Black and a few other phrenologists on the lecture circuit appeared in the press from time to time. A few articles by Jessie Fowler, daughter of phrenologist Lorenzo Fowler, touted the practical uses of phrenology by reading faces from photographs. The presidential campaign of 1908 prompted her article on the qualities of candidates William Howard Taft and William Jennings Bryan, also based on her reading their faces.

In the 1912 campaign, "bumps on the head" again figured in. "If there's anything in phrenology," noted one wire story, "Bob LaFollette is slated for the

presidency. Dr. J. T. Allen, president of Aurora college [in Illinois], who recently examined LaFollette's head, says the pugnacious statesman's bumps spell 'president.'"

Not to be outdone, Bob Black weighed in for Woodrow Wilson (who had endorsed Black when he visited Princeton back in 1900). "Black is known to practically every resident of Cedar Rapids," noted the *Gazette*, "and during his lifetime claims that he has 'read the heads' of 24,000 people in this city alone." Quite an achievement. (And, of course, Woodrow Wilson won.)

The phrenological movement in Iowa essentially ended on January 4, 1916, with the announcement of the passing of Robert J. Black. His obituary called him "the man who examined more craniums and started more men on a successful career than the most noted college professor who ever lived." Noting Black's unwavering belief in phrenological principles, the obituary concluded, "For years the people of Cedar Rapids have been accustomed to receive a call from Black and his familiar handbag once or twice a week. His visits to the different stores and office buildings have been the occasion of much good-natured fun—for Black knew the value of humor as well as the serious side of life."

But it was the last sentence of the obituary that best captured the epitaph of the movement: "[Black's] demise marks the passing of a phrenologist of the old school."

No others came forth to replace him or to champion the movement in the state. One has to look hard to find even a passing mention of phrenology in Iowa papers after his death. And these few references are to a discredited pseudo-science of the 19th century. For all practical purposes, the strange odyssey of phrenology in Iowa was over.

So what are we to make of the role of phrenology in American culture? Robert Riegel offers one of the best assessments. "Contrary to common belief," he reminds us, "phrenology did not originate as the scheme of money-making fakers, but from the study of able men using the best scientific methods of that day." He points to the rise of the "practical phrenologist" as the beginning of the end of the discipline. "This practitioner, frequently without training," he adds "sought to capitalize on the new science and make it pay dividends."

In sum, that was the story. By the time phrenology reached Iowa, the scientific discipline had become a pseudo-science, a parade of practical phrenologists offering answers—sometimes vague, sometimes spe-

cific—to the pressing questions about one's talents and future.

No doubt, many Americans valued this advice. "A paltry two bits entitled the sitter to sage counsel about vocational aptitude or marital prospects," concludes Charles Colbert, "and in a nation where social and geographic mobility were increasingly the norm, such advice was in great demand." Iowa was no different than the rest of the nation in that regard.

Even today, Americans in general, and perhaps Iowans in particular, have a persistent desire to improve themselves. For nearly six decades Iowans had the opportunity to use practical phrenology to do just that. Perhaps having your head examined wasn't such a bad idea after all. ❖

As a volunteer at the State Historical Society of Iowa, Timothy Walch scours Iowa newspapers for topics ranging from the Civil War to phrenology lectures to the 1940 federal census.

NOTE ON SOURCES

This article is based on a search of online databases of Iowa newspapers from the earliest editions to 1950, as well as on rare phrenological materials in the Special Collections of the State Historical Society of Iowa. In SHSI-Des Moines: John Elkins; Jared Fuller; and Stall Family Papers. In SHSI-Iowa City: Sarah Jane Kimball (see BB 27.1); John Pattee; Samuel S. Townsley; James L. Winter; and Emily, Henry, and Sarah Gillespie. See also Judy Nolte Lensink, "A Secret to Be Buried": *The Diary and Life of Emily Hawley Gillespie, 1858-1888* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1989); and Suzanne L. Bunkers, "All Will Yet Be Well": *The Diary of Sarah Gillespie Huftalen, 1873-1952* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1993).

In SHSI Libraries are several 19th-century books and pamphlets on phrenology, as well as *American Agriculturist* and Toledo's *Iowa Transcript*. Material on Isaac Wetherby appears in Marybeth Slonneger, *Wetherby's Gallery* (Iowa City: By Hand Press, 2006), 51-56, 61, 146-47. Thomas H. Macbride described a phrenologist in his *In Cabins and Sod-Houses* (Iowa City: State Historical Society of Iowa, 1928). Nelson Sizer, *How to Study Strangers by Temperament, Face and Head* (New York: Fowler & Wells, Co., 1895) was located online, as were issues of the *Phrenological Journal*.

In addition, the author consulted a number of scholarly works about phrenology in the United States. The most important work remains the published dissertation by John D. Davies, *Phrenology: Fad and Science—A Nineteenth Century American Crusade* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1955); and Robert E. Riegel, "The Introduction of Phrenology to the United States," *American Historical Review* 39 (Oct. 1933). Charles Colbert focuses on the role of phrenology in American art history; see *A Measure of Perfection: Phrenology and the Fine Arts in America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997). A useful overview appears in the introduction to Madeleine B. Stern, comp., *A Phrenological Dictionary of Nineteenth-Century Americans* (Westport: Greenwood Publishing, 1982). See also Richard O. Boyer, *The Legend of John Brown* (New York: Knopf, 1973), 450.

Copies of all Iowa newspaper articles located on phrenology are held in the *Iowa Heritage Illustrated* production files (SHSI-Iowa City).