The Thrasher Newsletter

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An American illustrator: A life well-lived

By PAULA THRASHER

This American illustrator's work has been described as "lighthearted, humorous reflections of everyday American life, with colorfully animated characters." You might understandably guess he would be Norman Rockwell. And you'd be wrong.

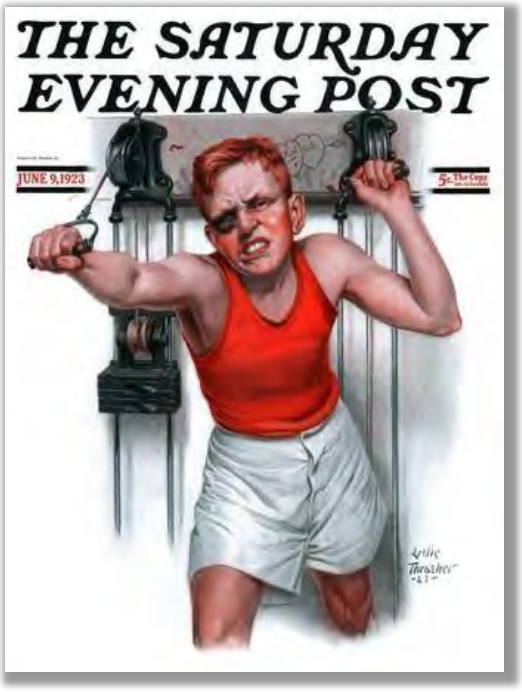
Leslie Thrasher

His name: Leslie Thrasher. Had he not died at the relatively early age of 47, some art critics have said he would have become as well-known as his friend and fellow illustrator, the vaunted Norman Rockwell. And like Rockwell, his illustrations appeared on covers of Saturday Evening Post -- 23 as compared to Rockwell's 321.

Born in Piedmont, West Virginia, in 1889 to Mason and Dorothy Thrasher, Charles Leslie Thrasher died December 1936 after a fire destroyed his Long Island, New York, summer home. A newspaper account of the time stated, "the entire home was destroyed with valuable antique furniture, several valuable paintings, including portraits by the artist of his wife and daughter, and all the clothing of the couple. The Thrashers normally reside at 33 West 67th St. Manhattan in the winter but had visited Old Field over the weekend."

Following his wife's cries for help, Thrasher, deaf at the time, was rescued from an upstairs bedroom by a neighbor and fellow artist Thomas Cooper and taken by ambulance to the hospital. Possibly because his lungs had been severely damaged during a poison gas attack when he served in France during World War I, he was treated for smoke inhalation at the hospital but quickly developed a fatal case of pneumonia.

As a teenager, Thrasher studied art at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, beginning a career as a commercial artist at 17. After graduation, he earned a scholarship to study in Paris at the prestigious Academie de la Grande Chaumière. After he returned to the United States, he moved to Wilmington, Delaware, to study under the esteemed American painter and illustrator Howard Pyle, who has been called "The Father of American Illustration." Pyle was also an author and illustrator of books for young adults.



Readying for the rematch
Illustrated by
Leslie Thrasher

Conference on the Mound

Thrasher's work first appeared on the cover of the Saturday Evening Post in 1912, four years before Rockwell's Post cover debut. Titled "Conference on the Mound," Thrasher's baseball-themed piece earned him the princely amount of $50. Not surprisingly his work has escalated dramatically in value in the ensuing years. Several years ago, M.S. Rau, a world-renown art and antique store in New Orleans, offered his "Santa," a 1930 Liberty magazine cover, for $54,500. M.S. Rau says Thrasher's "scenes of everyday Americana display a keen attention to detail and a charming sense of humor."

In the amusing oil on canvas painting, children tell a Salvation Army Santa their Christmas wish lists as, according to a description by M.S. Rau, the man in red "looks on with a mixture of fatigue and disinterest."

Although Thrasher's realist illustrations have often been mistaken for Rockwell's, and clearly their styles are similar, there is at least one difference. While Rockwell's backgrounds are richly detailed, Thrasher's are set simply against a plain white or beige background. If Thrasher is thought to be inferior to Rockwell, consider that he had less time to develop his art. In an article published by the National Museum of American Illustration, it is stated that "many feel that had he not died at an early age, his work could have surpassed Rockwell's."

Rockwell himself had nothing but high praise and admiration for his friend and wasn't offended by the comparisons.

Thrasher served in France during World War I as a part of the 40th Engineer Battalion in the camouflage unit. His lungs were severely damaged during a poison gas attack during the Battle of Belleau Wood in June of 1918. Upon returning home from the war, he married his wife Janet in New York City in 1920 and the newlyweds made their home in Manhattan.

In 1926 he was hired to create a series of covers for the then-new Liberty magazine for $1,000 a week (about $13,500 today), against the counsel of his friend Rockwell who knew how grueling such an assignment would be. Among the series was the popular "For the Love o' Lil" that followed the lives of a typical couple, Lil Morse and Sandford Jenkins.

For the Love o' Lil

As it was a challenge to come up with new storylines each week, Liberty invited readers to contribute ideas and write page-long plots. In 1930 a Columbia Pictures movie was made featuring the Lil character, and the series also inspired a radio show. The series is considered the prototype for today's soap operas.

By the time Thrasher's contract was terminated by Liberty in 1932 because of declining circulation, he had produced 360 covers for the publication.

During his time with Liberty, he continued to do covers for the Post. Although his background was in fine arts, his commercial success was impressive. Among his prodigious output were ads for Chesterfield cigarettes, DuPont, the Fisk Tire Company, and Cream of Wheat. Boys and horses were a common theme in Thrasher's work, but no doubt he did a fine job painting people.

Perhaps his most famous Post cover is “Tipping the Scales,” originally done in 1936, the year of his death. The illustration depicts a prim, elderly gray-haired woman, wearing a light purple dress and a small black hat with a floral band atop her neat up-do. She’s peering up at the weight shown on a scale where a limp chicken lies. The gray-mustachioed butcher across from her, in a white shirt, black vest, visor and wire-rimmed glasses, does the same.

Tipping the Scales

Look closely and you’ll see that both are slyly tipping the scales. She’s pushing up with a long forefinger; he’s pushing down on his side. Neither one cracks a smile that might give away their chicanery. In 1975, the Post used the illustration as a cookbook cover.

“Tipping the Scales” is the illustration most often incorrectly attributed to Rockwell. In his autobiography, Rockwell, referring to the work, wrote that Thrasher “painted one of the most famous Saturday Evening Post covers ever published. I still get letters from people who think I did it.”

That’s no faint praise from Norman Rockwell, arguably the premier American illustrator of the 20th Century, and certainly brings honor to his friend and fellow illustrator Charles Leslie Thrasher.

Genealogy of Charles Leslie Thrasher

2x GGF Benjamin Thrasher (1765-1830)
2x GGM: Unknown
Note 1: 1810 Census lists 11 household members in Hampshire Co., VA

1x GGF Peter Thrasher (1792-1853)
1x GGM: Mary Barthelow (1802-1880)
Note 1: Peter was a veteran of the War of 1812: Maryland Troops
Note 2: Mary Barthelow was born in PA
Note 3: Married on 27 December 1818 in Allegany Co., MD

GF: William A. Thrasher (1819-1880)
GM: Rebecca Ann Stewart
Note 1: 1850 Census showed family living in Hampshire Co., VA

Father: Charles Mason Thrasher (1856-1916)
Mother: Dorothy S. Murphy (1854-1943)
Note 1: Father born in VA. Mother born in MD.
Note 2: The couple are buried in Philos Cemetery, Allegany Co., MD

Charles Leslie Thrasher (1889-1936)
Janet Jackson (1893-1976)
Note 1: Leslie Thrasher was born in Piedmont, WV, on 15 September 1889
Note 2: Janet Jackson was born in New Castle, DE on 11 November 1893
Note 1: Married 14 July 1920

- Daughter: Audrey Stewart Thrasher (1921-2000)
- Married: Helmuth Balthazar De Russow on 24 February 1952
  - Son: Wolfgang De Russow (1954-)

TFA Reunion Hotel in Chattanooga

TFA 2025 REUNION IN CHATTANOOGA

By PAULA THRASHER

There's more to Chattanooga than just a choo-choo. Discover its considerable charms when the Thrasher Family Association gathers for the annual reunion May 30-June 1. The city of nearly 190,000 that lies in the Appalachian foothills along the winding Tennessee River was named one of the "Top 45 places to go" in the world by the New York Times.

We'll be staying at the Courtyard Chattanooga Downtown, which is across the street from the Tennessee Aquarium and the IMAX Theatre. It is within walking distance of many of downtown's restaurants and top attractions, including the Southern Belle Riverboat and the Creative Discovery Museum, a children's interactive experience. The hotel is undergoing renovation of its 128 rooms, restaurant, lobby, and meeting room. The work is scheduled to be completed in February, so it will be like a brand-new hotel in time for our reunion.

On Friday night, you may want to join some of your "cousins" at one of many fun dining options (we will provide more detailed information in the next issue of the newsletter). Saturday morning, we will have our annual meeting followed by box lunches catered by the Courtyard. Saturday afternoon, we will visit the amazing Tennessee Aquarium. After touring the Aquarium, you may want to catch a film at the IMAX Theatre; this will be an optional activity on your own. Saturday night's dinner will be at the Riverport Grille just steps away from the Courtyard. We'll have a buffet in the private River Room.

The Courtyard's nightly group rate is $149 plus state and local taxes. Breakfast is not included in the rate but is available in the hotel's full-service restaurant. Parking in the adjacent covered deck is $18/night with unlimited in and out.

We have a block of 10 rooms for Friday and Saturday at the discounted rate. The special rate also includes five rooms for both Thursday and Sunday nights for those of you who may want to add additional nights to your stay. The last day to book to get the group rate is April 29. You may make reservations in the TFA Reunion block by calling the hotel directly at 423-755-0871. However, the preferred booking method is through the reservation link below.
https://www.marriott.com/event-reservations/reservation-link.mi?id=1732552474192&key=GRP&guestreslink2=true&app=resvlink

Registration Form for 2025 TFA Reunion

A full schedule and more details will be in the next issue. The registration fee is $125/person. This covers Saturday's box lunch, Aquarium visit, Saturday night dinner, meeting room expense and door prizes from local businesses.

Please mail registration checks ($125/person) to: Paula & John Thrasher
5 Woodridge Place
Newnan, GA 30265

NOTE: Registration Deadline is April 30, 2025

Number attending:_____Amount enclosed: _____
Name: _____
Address:_____
City and zip:_____

We hope you will be able to join your "cousins" in Chattanooga.

The Mystery of the Moving Terminus

By DAVID E. SUMNER

Terminus was the informal name of the area that became Atlanta because it marked where three proposed railroad lines coming from the north, east, and south would meet. Originally it was just a post marker in the middle of a wooded forest. “State officials decided they needed railroads in this area, mainly because of trade competition from the Mississippi River. Much of the trade that was coming from the north was getting routed through the Mississippi River. The thinking was that they needed to build a hub with this new technology they had—railroads--to bring trade into Georgia,” said Georgia historian and archaeologist, Mark Pifer when he spoke at the 2024 Thrasher Family Reunion in June.

Dr. David Thrasher, Celestea Sharp and Don Law join in conversation with Mark Pifer after his presentation.

The area that became Atlanta was crisscrossed by several major trails created by Native Americans who had lived in the area for thousands of years before the Atlanta pioneers. The land on which Atlanta was eventually located (3.14 square miles in 1847, 134 square miles today) was officially deeded to the U.S. government by the Creeks on Jan. 8, 1821, in the First Treaty of Indian Springs. The transaction totaled 6,700 square miles with a purchase price of $250,000 (One dollar in 1822 is worth $40 in 2024). The Creek land cession of 1821 comprises about 80% of the 39 county Atlanta Region or combined statistical area (CSA) which is the sixth largest CSA in the U.S.

At the Terminus, the Monroe Railroad was planned to meet the Georgia railroad coming from the East, and the Western & Atlantic going northwest to Chattanooga, he explained. But there was a problem. “The ground at this point was too low for the Monroe to meet smoothly with the Western & Atlantic. It needed a 12-foot embankment to raise the ground and make a smooth junction with other railroads,” Pifer said.

That is where 21-year-old John J. Thrasher (1818-1899) stepped into history. He won a $25,000 contract from the Monroe Railroad to build the embankment. This story is familiar to most Thrasher cousins. He hired Irish laborers to build the embankment. His first task was to set up housing for the workers. He and his partner, Lochlin Johnson, built a camp store, Johnson and Thrasher, which was the first store in what would become Atlanta. Then they constructed simple shanties for the laborers and their families to live in. Most came from Ireland where the horror of the Great Famine was just beginning, Pifer wrote in his book "The Hidden History of Old Atlanta." And Mrs. Mulligan the wife of his foreman refused to move to Terminus unless their house had a wooden floor. Eventually Thrasher built wooden floors for all his workers. They completed the embankment in 1841, and Thrasher cleared $10,000 after he paid his salaries and expenses. Not bad for a young man of 23 to make the equivalent of $400,000 in today's money.

This is where the story of "The Mystery of the Moving Terminus" begins. Thrasher expected to make much more money than $10,000 because he had purchased 100 acres of land near the proposed railroad terminal. And, of course, any land next to a railroad terminal would significantly increase in value in future years.

"A very strange thing happened in 1842 that had extremely far-reaching effects on the creation of Atlanta and continues to perplex anyone interested in Atlanta history," Pifer said. The location of the terminus was moved 1,200 feet to the southeast. Thrasher's land suddenly seemed worth little. And the Monroe Railroad had spent $25,000 for an embankment that would never be used for its intended purpose.

"That was my ruin," Thrasher wrote. "I was very much enraged and sold out my interest in that one hundred acres for four dollars an acre, although it was about half of what I gave for it. I did not think my property would ever be worth anything, and I sold out and went to Griffin." These 100 acres are now in the middle of downtown Atlanta. Even in an 1879 article about Thrasher, Harper's Magazine wrote, "That land is now worth half a million dollars or more."

Zero Milepost display at the Atlanta History Center

Why did the Terminus mysteriously move? The initial appearance of the circumstances was that behind-the-scenes shenanigans enabled a few landowners near the new location to profit. Cousin John was left out of any of these behind-the-scenes negotiations, so he got mad and moved to Griffin. For the record, Cousin John returned two years later in 1844 and went into business buying and selling cotton on Marietta Street in the newly incorporated town of Marthasville.

Pifer's research says the explanation is a bit more logical. To finish building the railroad terminal, Gov. Charles McDonald appointed Charles Garnett as the chief engineer and former Gov. Wilson Lumpkin as the disbursing agent. These two men secretly made the decision to move the terminus 1,200 feet to the southeast. "The news that it would change was like a bomb going off for hundreds of people associated with the building of the railroads, especially the ones associated with building the Monroe Railroad and the Georgia Railroad." Gov. McDonald ordered a state investigation, but it cleared Garnett and Lumpkin of any wrongdoing.

Basically, the new location marked the junction of the Peachtree Trail and Sandtown Trail, two of many Native American trails that dated back hundreds of years. "The change to the Terminus made by Lumpkin and Garnett made its location more consistent with how the land was already being used," Pifer said. The railroads proceeded to build their tracks along these old trails, which had minimal turns and changes in elevation. "It just turned out that they [the railroads] were unable to make any significant improvements on what the Native Americans had already done," Pifer said.

Pifer concluded his talk by saying that Cousin John was his favorite character in Georgia history. His colorful and charismatic personality was infectious, and he easily made friends anywhere he went. "Pretty much anything John said, I put in my book because it didn't need any editing. That was very unusual for a person from the 1800s. He had a style, he had his own unique ideas, he had his own real personal perspective on what he did and what was happening in the Atlanta area."

Author's note: This article is based on Mark Pifer's talk in Norcross on June 8, 2024, and excerpts from his book "The Hidden History of Old Atlanta" (Charleston: The History Press, 2021). I have read this fascinating book and highly recommend it to Thrasher cousins.

What's in a Name?

By JOHN P. THRASHER

Despite the widespread impression and a historic marker stating that Atlanta was once called Thrasherville, this was never true according to Mark Pifer author of "The Hidden History of Atlanta." In his book, Pifer writes that "there was never an official place named Thrasherville." He is correct. Terminus and Thrasherville were unofficial names for the railroad generated settlement activity which preceded the legal incorporation of the town of Marthasville in 1843 and the reincorporation of the town of Atlanta in 1845 and the City of Atlanta in 1847.

Franklin Garrett, author of "Atlanta and Environs" sheds some light on the subject. Garrett quotes the Grand Jury for the September term, 1841, as follows, "We also present as a grievance the bad state of the road known as the Nelson Ferry Road, leading by Thrasherville on the road from White Hall to Montgomery's Ferry on the Chattahoochee." Garrett wrote, "The above grand jury presentments are doubly interesting in that The Terminus is designated as Thrasherville, another unofficial name for the settlement later to become Atlanta. In 1841, however, it was only a way station between White Hall and Montgomery's Ferry. The grand jury had reference, of course, to John J. Thrasher's Monroe embankment settlement around the present site of the Federal Reserve Bank on Marietta Street." Editors' Note: The Federal Reserve Building at 104 Marietta Street referenced by Garrett is today home to the State Bar of Georgia.

TFA is self-supporting. To pay your $20 dues for 2025 or to make a contribution, make your check to:

The Thrasher Family Association

Mail it to:

Warren Thrasher, Jr.
Thrasher Family Association Treasurer
50 Sassafras Trail
Savannah, Georgia 31404

Editor's Note

The Thrasher Family Association newsletter needs your input. Share ideas for stories – or better yet, suggest an article you'd like to submit. We're looking for profiles of TFA members, articles focused on family history and heritage, genealogy, photographs, reviews of books on topics related to the family, features on books written by members, and news about people and places. Get in touch with newsletter editor Paula Thrasher by calling or texting 770-328-7716 or email to pthrasher@numail.org. The newsletter is published four times a year on a seasonal basis and is published via email.

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'TIS THE SEASON