

Caroline Nestmann Peck 1921-1987 by Stephen E. Thompson

Caroline Nestmann Peck, Egyptologist, was born on June 27, 1921 to Carl and Louise Webb Nestmann in Wheeling, West Virginia. Her father was a professional church organist and choir director who had trained in Germany at the Leipzig Conservatory of Music, and her mother had been a school teacher. Caroline was the youngest of four children. In June of 1939 she graduated from Wheeling High School as valedictorian of her class. She then attended The Elliott School of Business in Wheeling for one year, learning a marketable skill which would allow her to earn money for college. She then moved to New York City, where she spent two months working for The Eagle Indemnity Company. From there, she joined her sister at the Research Division of the Standard Oil Development Company in New Jersey, where she worked as a secretary for eighteen months. In the fall of 1942, she enrolled in the University of Chicago with the intention of studying astronomy. She attended school part-time, and worked as the secretary for the Department of Oriental Languages and Literatures. This was where she had her first exposure to the study of the ancient world, and as a result, she changed her major to Near Eastern Archaeology. She spent one year as the secretary of the Oriental Institute, and another as the secretary to the chairman of the department. In 1944 she was employed as an editorial assistant, and was instrumental in seeing to press Henri Frankfort's immensely important *Kingship and the Gods*. As an undergraduate, she studied Mesopotamian archaeology, as well as Hebrew, Akkadian, and in her last year at Chicago, Egyptian.

In 1945 she received her Ph.B. from the University of Chicago, and promptly was admitted to graduate school there, with one year of advanced standing. Her main advisor

was Frankfort, and under his supervision she completed her MA thesis on the pre-Kassite sculpture which had been excavated at Bismaya in 1903-04 by Edgar James Banks of the Oriental Institute. In conjunction with her work on the sculpture, she also worked through the field notes of the excavation, organized these records, and made preliminary studies of the pottery which will one day provide a firm foundation for final publication. Apparently, when Banks retired from the University of Chicago, he took his field diaries with him. In September of 1948 Caroline spent a week as the guest of Banks' widow in Florida transcribing those diaries, and her transcripts are still housed in the Oriental Institute Library. In addition to her work in Mesopotamian archaeology, she also studied Egyptian archaeology. Caroline was not one to neglect her languages, and she took several courses in Sumerian historical texts. Caroline was only able to attend graduate school part time, but she still was able to finish her A.M. by 1949. After receiving her A.M., Caroline was inducted into the national honor society Phi Beta Kappa.

In 1947, Henri Frankfort left the University of Chicago, and Caroline again became a secretary at the Oriental Institute. She realized that working as a secretary was impeding her academic career, and she decided to leave Chicago. In February of 1949 she was awarded a graduate fellowship at the Oriental Institute, but she declined. She was at that time considering two offers. One involved transcribing cuneiform inscriptions in Baghdad under the auspices of the American University, and the other was at Brown University. In 1949, Brown University hired Richard A. Parker away from the University of Chicago to be its first Wilbour Professor of Egyptology and chairman of the newly established Department of Egyptology. He asked Caroline to accompany him as his part-time technical assistant and instructor and first graduate student. Of the two prospects, Caroline preferred Parker's offer, and accepted it before the Baghdad job materialized. At Brown, her training took a more philological direction, and she stated her purpose as "to supplement her archaeological training" in preparation for research and teaching in ancient Egyptian archaeology and history. In addition to her work with

Professor Parker, the visiting scholar program he initiated allowed her to study with some of the world's greatest Egyptologists, including J.J. Clère, Georges Posener, I.E.S. Edwards, and Jaroslav Černý. In 1952, Caroline married Russell Peck, an assistant professor of Physics at Brown University.

Caroline continued to work as a technical assistant and secretary for the Department while taking classes and working on her dissertation. One of her assignments during the years she worked as an assistant was the so-called "Gunn Index." This was envisioned as a companion and supplement to the great *Wörterbuch der Ägyptischen Sprache*, edited by A. Erman and H. Grapow. This index, still housed in the Department of Egyptology at Brown, consists of a large filing cabinet filled with 4x6 index cards. A card was created for each entry in the *Wörterbuch*, and it was intended that references should be entered on the cards to texts published since the *Wörterbuch* had been completed, in 1931. Unfortunately, as with many ambitious scholarly projects, this effort never proceeded very far. The project never really progressed much beyond creating the cards for the references, and very few cards had references recorded. In addition to her administrative and research responsibilities, Caroline also had teaching duties. She offered the Department's only course on Egyptian archaeology, "An Introduction to the Material Culture of Ancient Egypt."

In 1955 Caroline was admitted to candidacy for the Ph.D. in Egyptology at Brown. Following a suggestion made by Posener, she chose as her dissertation topic the inscribed First Intermediate Period material from the records of George A. Reisner's expedition to Naga ed-Der in Southern Egypt. Most of these records were housed in the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston. In her completed dissertation, she publishes four of these tombs, and discusses their decoration, the objects found in the tombs, the titles held by their owners, and suggests criteria by which the tombs might be dated. Caroline's methodology was influenced significantly by Henry George Fischer's then unpublished dissertation "Dendera in the Old Kingdom and its Aftermath."

In 1956 Caroline experienced what was to be one of the major disappointments of her career. She was appointed as a Kathryn McHale Fellow of the American Association of University Women for the academic year 1956-57. This coincided with a sabbatical that her husband was spending at the University of Birmingham in Great Britain. Caroline had planned to visit the major Egyptological collections in Great Britain and to consult with the leading European Egyptologists regarding her dissertation. She also planned to travel to Egypt, where she planned to collate the inscriptions and reliefs which form the substance of her dissertation. These could be found in the Cairo Museum and at Naga ed-Der, and she also hoped to check the tomb plans and measurements at the site itself. She planned to spend at least one month in the field at Chicago House, the Oriental Institute's permanent presence in Egypt, where she planned to work as an epigrapher.

Unfortunately, fate intervened to prevent Caroline's trip to Egypt. Caroline had obtained her visa and the necessary immunizations, and was within days of departure for Cairo when war broke out between Egypt and Israel in the Sinai. Egypt closed its borders to British and French traffic, and the U.S. State Department placed a ban on all American travel in the Middle East. Caroline briefly considered entering Egypt via Khartoum, but the director of Chicago House, George Hughes, informed her that while she might be able to make it to Luxor, Chicago house was short on fuel and food, and was unable to support an extra person. As Caroline expressed it, "with keen regret" she abandoned her plans for Egypt, and spent the year working in England and visiting the great Egyptological collections of Europe. This was as close to Egypt as Caroline was ever to come, as she never again had the opportunity to visit the country to whose study she had devoted her academic life.

In 1957 Caroline returned to her position as a Teaching Associate in the Department of Egyptology at Brown. Now that her dissertation was complete, her teaching responsibilities expanded. What had previously been a one-semester survey of

Egyptian archaeology now became a two-semester series of courses called "Art and Archaeology of Ancient Egypt." Caroline continued with her administrative responsibilities and her work on the dictionary project as well. The Peck's first child, Susan, was born in September of 1959, and Peter came along in August of 1962. In 1961 and 1962 she had served as an advisor for an exhibition of ancient Egyptian art at the Museum of Art of the Rhode Island School of Design. In February of 1963 Caroline resigned her position as a teaching associate in the Department of Egyptology to accompany her husband on a sabbatical leave at Los Alamos, New Mexico. While there, Caroline experienced her first bouts with respiratory trouble, which were to plague her throughout the '60's. In 1967, after her children were in school, Caroline returned to the Department as a Teaching Associate and added the History of Ancient Egypt to her course responsibilities.

In 1970 Richard Parker proposed enlarging the scope of Caroline's teaching responsibilities still more. This was perhaps in preparation for his pending retirement. Parker may have even intended to position Caroline for appointment as the junior faculty member in the Department upon his retirement. Her teaching duties were to include a seminar in Egyptian Archaeology, one in Egyptian history, and courses in Pyramid Texts and Old and Middle Kingdom letters. As it turned out, Caroline was to spend the academic year 1970-71 with her family in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, where her husband was spending a sabbatical year at the hospital of the University of Pennsylvania. She requested and received a leave of absence from her position of Teaching Associate. She received a grant from the Wilbour Egyptology fund at Brown to cover the expenses involved in preparing for her new courses while she was away. During this time Caroline accomplished some work with the Egyptian material in the University of Pennsylvania museum as part of her preparation for these courses. This work was cut short by a recurrence of respiratory problems. She was hospitalized with pneumonia for a week and made a slow recovery.

Unfortunately, Caroline's new teaching responsibilities were to last only one semester. Her career at Brown University came to an abrupt end early in 1972. Apparently, there had been some tension between the two Egyptological giants of Brown, Richard Parker and Ricardo Caminos. Caroline apparently tried to mediate between the two opposing parties, and was caught in the middle during the transfer of the chairmanship of the department. Upon ascending to the Chairmanship of the Department, Caminos asked for and obtained Caroline's resignation, which she tendered on November 23, 1971, and which took effect on January 31, 1972. Caroline was evicted from her office in Wilbour hall. The Classics Department graciously offered her office space, and she continued working on the Naga ed-Der material until 1977. In 1977, she put her library and research materials in storage and retired from Egyptology. Caroline's years of work on the Naga ed-Der material had resulted in ten loose-leaf notebooks of information which she donated to the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston. These contain an object register of Reisner's excavations at Naga ed-Der which she had been able to create by studying field photographs and accession lists from the excavation. From 1977 to the time of her death on September 9, 1987, Caroline returned to the skills which had financed her college education, and worked as a stenographer and unofficial editor for Rhode Island Legal Services.

Caroline published very little throughout her career. Articles on Rameses and Bubastis for the *Encyclopedia Americana* and reviews of several fascicles of the revised edition of the *Cambridge Ancient History* are her only published work. Her dissertation is available from University Microfilms International. Caroline's perfectionism, as well as her duties in the Department of Egyptology at Brown and her family responsibilities all contributed to her lack of publications. At no time in her career was Caroline able to devote her attention to archaeology full-time. This is unfortunate, because her work showed great promise. Commenting on her dissertation, Henry G. Fischer notes that it displays very careful scholarship. As recently as 1996, Anthony Spalinger quotes

approvingly from her work and notes that her discussion of the Egyptian *tp-trw* feast surpasses that of her teacher, Richard Parker.¹ At one point, the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston suggested publishing her dissertation, but again, circumstances beyond Caroline's control conspired to prevent the project from ever reaching fruition. Caroline also frequently delivered public lectures to various local groups, including local branches of the American Association of University Women. In addition to her academic abilities, Caroline also was a talented singer, and was a member of the Providence Singers, an amateur group of performers who prepared concerts of choral music for public performance.

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