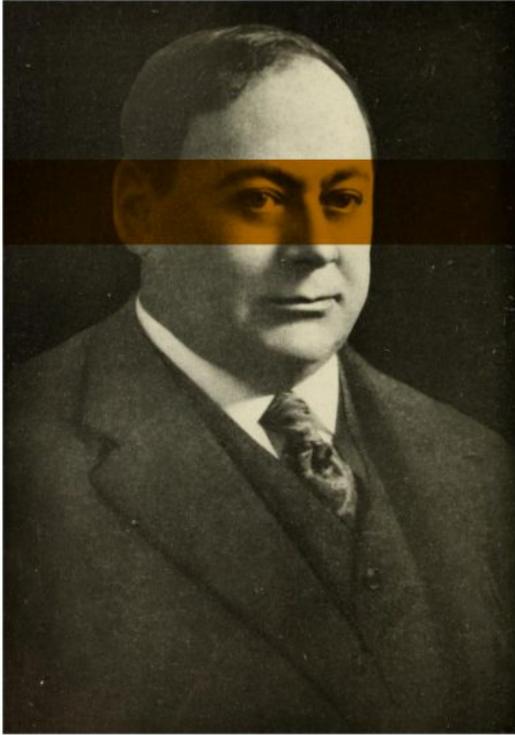


Scandalous Conduct: An exploration of an entrapment scandal in Newport



“The Newport Navy Scandal is something we stumbled on a couple years ago very randomly,” says Matthew Lawrence. He and his partner Jason Tranchida are creating an art project, *Scandalous Conduct/Newport 1919*, around this remarkable episode in Rhode Island history, which encompassed, as their website declares: “An Episcopal minister. 41 naval recruits. A zealous newspaper editor. A drag show. A beanstalk. The YMCA. A future president of the United States.”

As the editors of the queer art magazine *Headmaster*, Lawrence and Tranchida “come across a lot of interesting, underappreciated moments in queer history, so when we found out about the Newport Navy Scandal, we were surprised that we hadn’t heard about it before.” The scandal, as Lawrence describes, involved “an undercover operation, where they get a bunch of sailors who are young and handsome, and basically start a secret mission to go out, entrap other sailors, and then report back on what they’ve done.” The Navy so mishandled the operation that it led to a Senate inquiry that almost derailed the career of then Under Secretary Franklin Delano Roosevelt.

While largely forgotten today, the story became national news at the time, thanks in large part to John Rathom, the enigmatic former editor of *The Providence Journal*, who Tranchida describes as a “charismatic huckster.” It was Rathom who “singlehandedly took a homophobic Navy entrapment scheme and turned it into a national scandal.”

Rathom was a national figure at the time. He’d garnered national attention during the war by, as Lawrence says, “publishing a lot of stuff about German spies living in Rhode Island, this elaborate, spy thriller kind of stuff, and he was traveling and doing sold-out speaking engagements.” The problem was that Rathom’s spy stories were made up. When Rathom was exposed by the Navy in 1917, he “got into an altercation with FDR,” which led to a personal vendetta against the under secretary. Rathom’s incessant coverage of the Newport story became a way to exact revenge on Roosevelt.

For anyone who might long for the simplicity of an era before fake news, Rathom, who lied elaborately about both the news and his life — Lawrence dug up a census form that falsely claimed he was born in Antarctica — is a reminder that such an era never existed.

While most of the Scandalous Conduct/Newport 1919 project is on hold due to COVID-19, Lawrence and Tranchida will present some of their research tonight, Thursday, May 21, in a free virtual talk hosted by the Providence Public Library (7 pm, registration required). The talk is part of the Library’s Exhibition and Program Series “The King Is Dead,” which explores “how we use and understand the news.”

Tranchida and Lawrence are planning other stages of the project that they hope to present in 2021. “There’s a lot of ways to approach this story,” says Lawrence, “from the military side, to the gay rights side, to the weird Rhode Island history side.” There’s even a parallel to the current pandemic, as the story takes place “just as the Spanish influenza was running through Newport.” In addition to an artistic component, Tranchida and Lawrence will put together a panel with scholars they’ve met who are researching different aspects of the story.

You can register for the PPL talk tonight at provlib.org/calendar/?id=6679052&d=2020-05-21