

# JOHN HOWARD BENSON AND THE JOHN STEVENS SHOP

AN INTERVIEW OF JOHN E. BENSON

by Joanna Shea O'Brien



John Howard Benson  
1952

The sculpture studio of John E. Benson on Cross Street in Newport, Rhode Island, is as sunlit and pristine as the old John Stevens stone carving shop around the corner is shadowy and dust-filled, but they are both spaces of seemingly ceaseless industry. The brick-floored and book-lined John Stevens Shop is a repository of knowledge, skill and vision, three centuries in the making. Founded in 1705 by John Stevens, and carried on by generations of the Stevens family, the shop was bought by a young artist named John Howard Benson in 1927. The Benson family has been running the shop ever since, upholding a remarkable legacy in American stone carving.

John Howard Benson was an artist, a scholar and a teacher. His acquisition of the John Stevens Shop enabled him to take the diverse influences of his life – history, mathematics, philosophy, art, people and ideas – and merge them into a craft that became both his art and his livelihood. His work can be found throughout Newport and New England cemeteries, at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City, The Fogg Museum in Cambridge, and at Brown, Yale and Harvard Universities. His son John, now retired and devoted to sculpture, was only 25 when asked to design and carve the inscriptions of the John F. Kennedy



Memorial at Arlington Cemetery. Now a third generation Benson, John's son Nicholas continues the work, operating the shop, carving headstones and traveling like his father and grandfather to distant sites to work his skill and artistry upon slate, marble and granite.

John Howard Benson  
**Alphabet Stone**  
V-cut alphabets in Monson slate, gold leafed 1955

Nicholas Benson in the  
John Stevens shop



JSO: Let's talk about the place where this all began.  
Tell me more about your father.

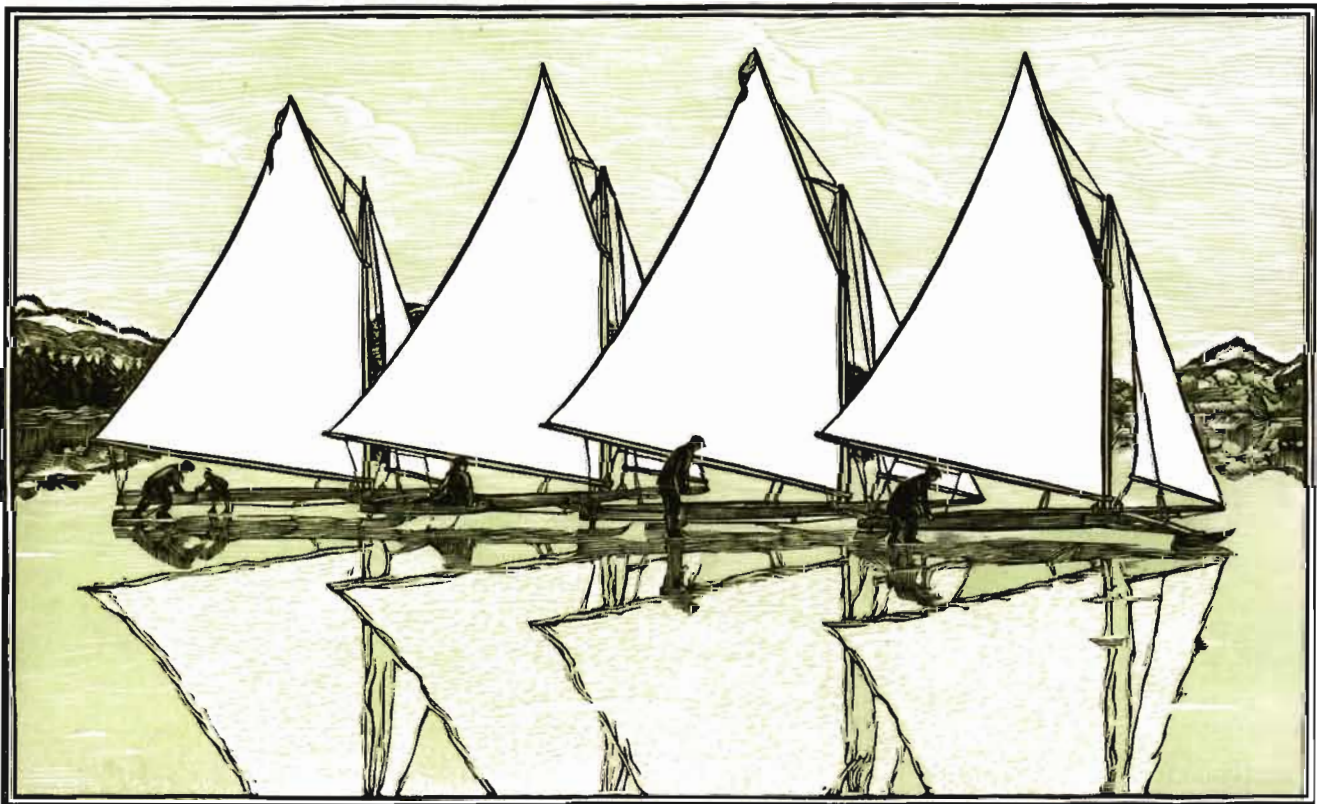
JEB: My father was trained as a printmaker and a watercolorist in the twenties at the Art Students League in New York. While there, he came under the influence of a number of interesting artistic types, although no lettering people, because lettering wasn't being taught there at that time. The chief influence was a man named Joseph Pennell, who was a brilliant lithographer and etcher, although he's fallen into disfavor because of his anti-Semitism. Nonetheless, he was a fine craftsman and artist. There was also a sculptor named Mahonri Young, by whom my father was much influenced.

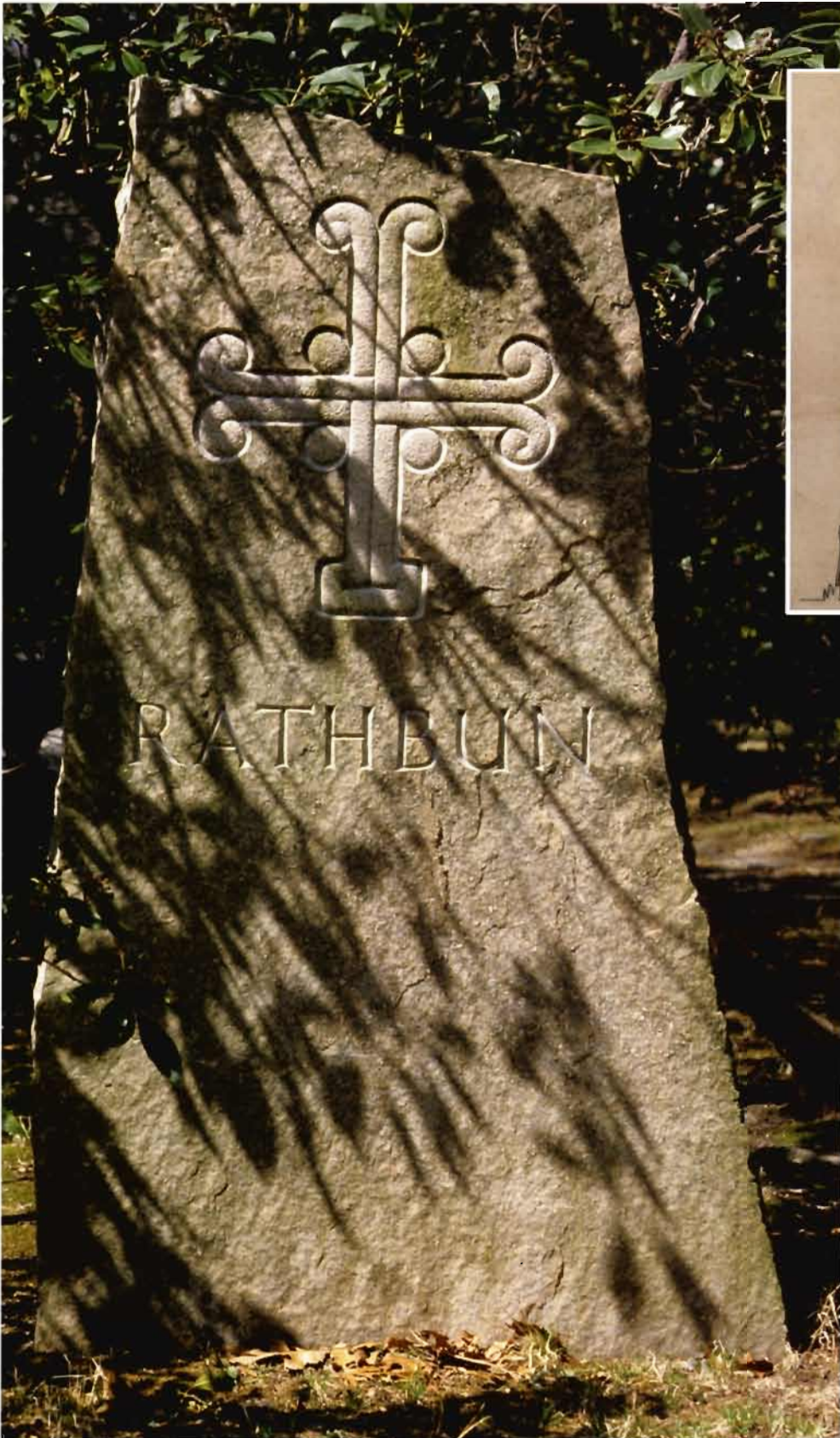
He studied with these people in New York and then he returned home here to Newport. During the summers he got a job as a tour guide on a cruise ship going to Greece and he toured through Athens

and Delphi and took people around and learned about the sculpture and architecture of ancient Greece. No lettering yet. The Greeks didn't make monumental letters in stone – they made very small letters, quite beautiful, but not monumental until later with the influence from Rome.

My father was basically an only child, although he had a twin brother who died when he was about four years old. But he was the only child of a very interesting woman who was herself an artist. She was a decorative painter, and her name was Elizabeth Howard Benson. He grew up in an artistic environment, although he was definitely spoiled, and one of the things that his mother liked to do was to go to the cemetery on what used to be called Decoration Day. Back in those days, they used to go to the graveyard and tidy up the family lot and put flowers on it. One of the older family lots was in the colonial

John Howard Benson  
**Iceboats**  
Wood engraved illustration  
in two colors c.1934





*Above*  
John Howard Benson  
**Rathbun**  
Pencil sketch for family  
monument

*Left*  
Family monument carved and  
V-cut in Westerly granite 1948



John Howard Benson  
**Agnus Dei**  
Hand carved sculpture in Westerly  
granite c.1938



**John Stevens I**  
Headstone in Rhode Island slate 1721

graveyard here. My father became interested in the old 18th century gravestones of which there were hundreds. By and by, he began to realize that the shop that made many of the gravestones was still here in Newport. It had started in 1705 by an Englishman who came over here from Oxfordshire as a mason, not a stone carver. He came to Newport and soon realized that there was no one carving gravestones in the town. People were having to get them from Boston. So, John Stevens started to carve gravestones himself. At the age of 50 he taught himself how to use a hammer and a chisel to do fine work and he started what amounted to a minor dynasty, in this little corner of Newport.

By the time John Howard Benson got here, the last member of the Stevens family who actually carved stone had died, but the work was carried on in a rather relaxed fashion by an old man, whose name was Martin Burke. The shop was still working, and it actually had become a gathering place for neighborhood characters. When my father was in his twenties, having had this influence on Decoration Day of seeing and admiring the old stones with his artistic mother, he began to hang around there. By and by, he started to work at this old stone carving shop, just as a sort of thing to do. He was through with his artistic training in New York, and he came and started to fuss with the old tools and get to know old Mr. Burke.

Right around that time, the wife of the most important Episcopal clergyman in Newport had died. And this man knew my father, because my father was very good company, he was socially aware. In fact, when he was in art school in New York, he was living on so little money that he had a list of well-to-do people all over New York that he could go to and have dinner with, about 20 or 30 friends, and

each one would feed him one night a week, and so he was able to survive on very little money. This is why, when he came back to Newport, he really knew quite a few people. One day one of them, this Episcopalian minister, got in touch with him and said,

“Look Howard, Lydia has died and I want you to make a gravestone for her.”

And he said, “Well, I don’t know how to make a gravestone.”

And he said, “Well, you’ve been hanging around that old shop – I just want you to do it.”

And so he did. Basically, he was off and running. Fairly soon he figured out that he was going to buy the shop and work there. Then in 1934, he married this very pretty lady, Esther Fisher Smith, one of four Quaker sisters whose family came from Philadelphia and who used to summer here.

In addition to studying printmaking and etching and watercolor in New York, he also studied sculpture at the Art Students League. He had a pleasant if rather formal and stylized approach to sculpture, but he soon realized that it was hard to make money making sculpture, and it was more straightforward to earn money carving gravestones. His focus was thrown eventually and completely towards the gravestones, but the sculpture found its outlet in relief carvings on the stones. So that’s how he got into the business.

My father is fond of saying that he had never studied lettering in New York and that if he had studied it, it would have been bad, because the lettering done at that time was of a very stilted, commercial nature. There were a few places where



**John Stevens II**  
Headstone in Rhode  
Island slate 1737

good stuff was being done. Eric Gill, the English sculptor and letter carver, revived a tradition of lettering, via people like William Morris, who had gone back to an earlier age and recognized the excellence of historic lettering, like the Carolingian minuscule and the humanistic minuscule. Gill learned how to carve letters very beautifully, bringing his sculptural talents to bear. And my father did the same thing here, although some years later.

My father had to teach himself everything about lettering. He picked up a little bit from the old buzzard in the shop, Mr. Burke, who had learned from the Stevens family. Now the interesting thing about

the Stevens family is that when John Stevens the First got here to Newport, in 1705, he knew almost nothing about lettering or carving letters. The only standards he had to adhere to were those of the contemporary, rough and ready stone carvers around Boston, and his own recollection of the virtuoso engravers and the ornate hearts and flowers of English gravestones. The English tradition at that point had grown out of the work of the writing masters and tended to be very formal and very studied. John Stevens only had a general of recollection of this standard. The only other source he had for letter images was in the printing of the times in the colonies and the printing in that period was very poor. It was being done from beat-up second or third-hand types, and all that he could extract from these printed forms was the skeleton of the letter.

He started to teach himself to carve with a mallet and a chisel, in the local soft slate, which was quarried here on the island. He looked a little bit at the printed letters and the letters from England and the fellows from Boston, but basically he made up his own letter style. The style he made up was non-typographic – in other words, it did not consist of a series of images of perfect, individual letters combined into words but consisted of an approach to lettering that was much more like drawing word pictures. Right through his life his work can be politely described as naïve and even a little crude, yet he displayed a powerful sense of design. He also had several children, two of whom came to work with him at the shop, William Stevens and John Stevens the Second. Both of them started right out where their father was at the top of his career, and both of them were still free from typographic influence because the printing standards had not changed. These two boys, John and William, began to carve



very beautiful letters. The best of those letters, possibly carved by John the Second, possibly William and perhaps by them both are, as far as I'm concerned, some of the most beautiful lower case roman letters that have ever been carved in stone.

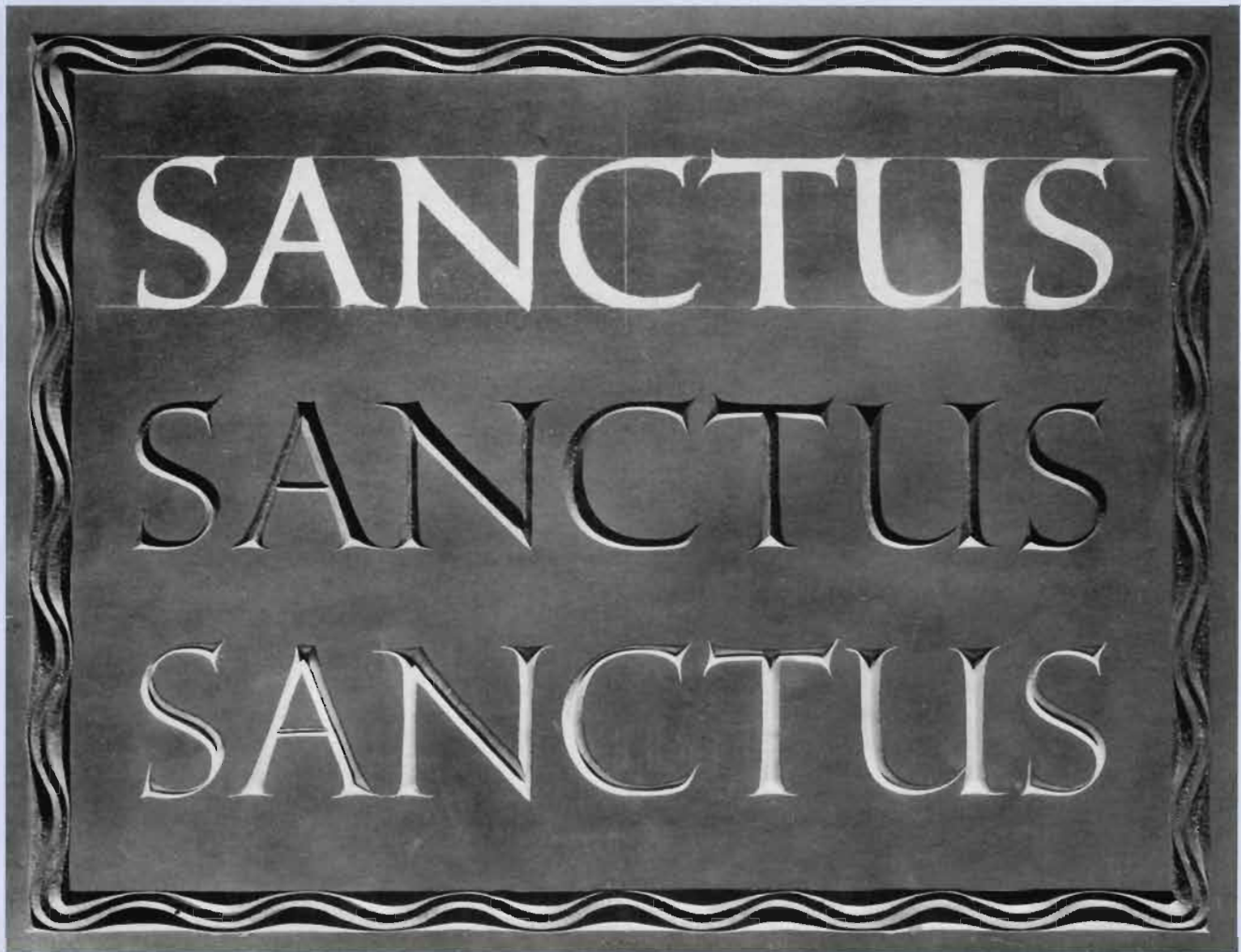
They consist of vigorous, lively, well-learned use of the hammer and chisel and a calligraphic approach to lettering. Not calligraphic in the sense of pen-written but calligraphic in the sense of making pictures of words instead of arranging perfect letters in a line. Fabulous! Then there was John the Third, and he was a wonderful artist. He was the most artistically skilled of the lot and he began to do portraits and things in stone. He evolved the family letter, perhaps a little too far – it got a little too slender and

spindly. Then, John Baskerville's types came to Newport in the hands of James Franklin, the brother of Benjamin Franklin, who had a print shop here. We believe James Franklin started to print in the elegant Baskerville type. John the Third started to copy these Baskerville letters and his inscriptions immediately stopped having the vital, lively calligraphic quality of his father's and his grandfather's, and began to look more like typography, although his decorative work was graceful and lively.

These are the influences that played on my father in the early part of his life. He drew his letters in the beginning with a pencil and this is the way most of the English carvers today draw their letters – they draw an outline letter with a pencil and this is what my father did. Eric Gill,

**John Stevens III**  
Detail of carved ornament  
in Rhode Island slate 1770





John Howard Benson  
**Sanctus**  
Demonstration stone,  
V-cut border, painted,  
V-cut lettering in Monson  
slate c.1941

however, drew with a brush. I consider my father to be his equal in many ways and in one or two ways superior as a letter carver because Gill's energies were divided between lettering and sculpture. Most of the letters that have Gill's name on them were carved by his apprentices. My father, through most of his life, up until the late forties, really carved most of the letters himself, or at least finished them.

So, he started drawing his letters with a pencil, but then he began to be interested in probably the most beautiful capital letters that were ever carved in stone, letters that were carved in first and

second century Rome during the Roman empire. The best of them were drawn with a brush. He had a good friend who was a Catholic priest named Edward Catich. Catich had been a sign painter in Chicago and he was very good with the brush and he became interested in Roman letters. He and my father began to talk quite vigorously about this. Catich came here and my father convinced Catich that he couldn't really understand these letters unless he started to carve them and Catich convinced my father that he couldn't really understand them unless he drew them with a brush. And so this kind of nice thing happened between them. Catich went on to become a brilliant

brush writer and he was a great theorist, but he didn't have a full-time shop. So, although he was a dedicated and important letter carver in this country, he wasn't like my dad, who became a jobbing craftsman, ran a shop and he made a living for himself and his wife and his family and the wives and families of the people that came to work with him.

JSO: So, when you say brush, do you mean a brushstroke on a piece of paper or on the stone?

JEB: The Romans didn't have paper as we know it. I suspect they would loosely scratch a line of letters in skeletal form on the marble and then they would either just carve directly from that or they would take a brush and draw the letter with the brush on the marble with water-based paint. Then they would carve the letter according to the layout of the brush. They used a chisel-edged brush that makes a thick stroke and a thin stroke, and the thing that Catich did was to figure out just how wonderful the best of the Roman letters were in relation to their brush written origins. My father learned how to do this and got to be very, very good with the brush, although once again, his work was empowered with this marvelous combination of a decorative art, almost in a folk tradition, and a sophisticated understanding of layout and design from his study in New York, and his phenomenal mathematical mind. Before art school he had taken the examinations for the Naval Academy and turned in one of the highest scores they had ever had in mathematics and then flunked the physical because of his bad heart. He had a mathematical system for laying out his gravestones and the designs of his stones are very sophisticated in terms of the placement of the lettering and the disposition and shape of the ornament. And yet they have

this boisterous, lively folk art quality. They are combinations, like his character itself, of many, many diverse strains, a confluence of genetic materials that produced a truly remarkable mind.

In addition to everything else, he was about the most engaging and amusing man you could ever meet. He was six feet four and he wore a beard in a time when no one wore a beard and he would walk into a room and everyone would stop talking and pay attention to him because he was that kind of charismatic character. He was odd. He was strange. My brother Richard is fond of saying, "Had he not met my mother, he most certainly would never have procreated, because he was so strange."

Because of his capacity for making friends and because of his charismatic nature, he was able to get interesting people to work with him. Each of these people brought things into the relationship and took things away and they contributed things and learned things. The shop was a real crafts shop in the sense that groups of people worked there. One of the people that helped him in many ways and even to some extent made his life more complicated, was a man named Arthur Graham Carey, a well-to-do fellow that my father met and made friends with. Carey gave my father some money either to help him buy the shop or maybe a little later to help him renovate it, and so my father made him a partner in the shop. They took on a third partner, a fabulous character who was a woman artist who had come over with her parents from Belgium after WWI. Her name was Ade de Bethune, and she was the daughter of a baroness. She rented the top floor of the John Stevens Shop and she had her business there which consisted of making Catholic artworks which she sold by mail order all over the country. She did icons

and crucifixes and rosaries and it was another intense hotbed of artistic activity in the shop. When my father bought the shop, the top floor was rented to a cabinet-maker, named William Gilliam. He did this furniture work up there and then he died and left my father some nice tools. Another influence was a wonderful old Swede named Jonas Bergner who was a very fine craftsman. He was a superb relief carver in wood. He worked for a company here in Newport that did elaborate furniture and paneling for the big houses built in the 19th century. Jonas taught my father how to carve relief sculpture and when Jonas died he left my father some of his woodcarving tools.

This is what I mean, this circle of influence. My father made friends with the wealthy people of Bellevue Avenue, all the people in those Newport mansions, and made gravestones for them when they died. One old pair of sisters, the Wetmore sisters, were good friends of his and one of them gave him a new brick floor for his shop, the wreckage of which is still there. His timing was great and his life was great. His work is characteristic of the many strands of interest he had in his life and the many friends and the support that these friendships provided and of the workings of his own fabulous and intricate mind.

JSO: In reading about your father, he is described as a scholar, a man of great vision and imagination. From a perspective of the basic question, "how to be an artist," it seems he had boundless energy, to be able to absorb so much information and then put it into practice. Obviously, he was brilliant, maybe even a genius.

JEB: Well he was brilliant, genius is a bad word.

JSO: Well, I'm intrigued by this ability to absorb all of this information and then actually produce it. I'd like to talk about the contrast between the basic work of the artist and the vision behind it, essentially, the struggle for the artist. Obviously there is some..

JEB: Magic, is what there is!

JSO: Magic in this Benson family, for sure!

JEB: Well, not necessarily in the Benson family, anybody that wants to be creative faces this issue of reconciling what they see inside their head and what they see being produced by their hands. We are in a period now that is very odd, in the arts and the fine arts, where people are doing work that is fundamentally conceptual. That is, it's idea driven, and many people actually get other people to make things for them, and many of the artists today say that the actual physical object is relatively unimportant, it only serves to illustrate their idea. I consider that nonsense. I consider the physical artifacts that have come down to us from the past to be repositories of real human energy and insight. That energy and insight and sensitivity and vision can be recovered and enjoyed to a great extent by later generations, and this is what art is all about. An artist has a way of seeing something and works to make an object that captures and formalizes that vision in a material form that can be appreciated by other people.

Edward Hopper was once asked about the actual method he used to produce a painting – how do you make a painting? He said, "It's very simple. I preconceive the painting completely in my mind before I start and then the act of physically making the painting consists of the reluctant surrender of that ideal to the available reality." That is a big one. He starts to make it and he realizes that this

idea either cannot be perfectly produced in the material or should not be perfectly produced in the material. So the materials and the idea come together and they make the thing that finally becomes the art and this is the way it is with all of us.

And so that is that magical little place where it happens, you see. We can go and look, so you can see physical side of it.

We leave John's studio through the back door, and slip into the 300-year-old shop. The mid-afternoon sun filters through hand-made glass window panes and casts light on an ancient craft that has survived into the 21st century. People are at work, but the place is quiet, almost as though they are listening for the whispers and the dull clink-clink of the chisel from stone carving giants of the past.

Benson points out the window to a patch of garden across the street; a landscaped little square of perfectly arranged flowers. "You see that, look at that landscaping..." and his hand moves back towards the shop's front, "versus that." In between the bricks that pave the small courtyard, weeds shoot up tall and sway in the breeze from the Bay.

"That's the difference – it's a matter of what is formal and laid-out versus following these vital, living lines, these brushstrokes of nature."

Benson offers to show me a few of the headstones. We hop into his six year old Saab and he navigates the narrow, twisty streets of old Newport. The ride in his car is a bumpy and shaky one, and I marvel at his manic energy that he somehow channels into smooth precision when sculpting each morning. He pulls through the perilously narrow entrance gates to a

cemetery and we pile out to wander through a Newport graveyard.

"There, there," he points out enthusiastically. "Can you see the difference? The letters of the first John Stevens and those on that other stone?"

I can't exactly tell, at first.

"See that, you see how the letters dance, how they move? You see how the words are moving, how alive and organic they are? Compared to the others. It's like the weeds out front. You capture that with the lettering!"

We drive a short distance to another cemetery, to see the work of the Stevens family and of his father. In an instant, Benson and I are standing in front of a headstone. Benson has been here no doubt hundreds of times. The gravestone is simple and unadorned.

It reads:

**John Howard Benson**  
1901-1956

In the sun-lit silence, as the unpredictable wind rustles the overgrown grass, the words from a Stephen Spender poem that Benson recited earlier that morning now come to mind,

"Born of the sun they traveled a short while towards the sun,

And left the vivid air signed with their honor."

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Joanna Shea O'Brien received an M.F.A. in Nonfiction Writing from Columbia University, where she also worked as an interviewer for the September 11th Oral History and Narrative Memory Project. She currently resides in Cambridge, MA. Her parents, Joanne E. Shea and the late Daniel F. Shea, both studied under John Howard Benson at Rhode Island School of Design in 1952 and 1953.

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Editor's note: The John Stevens family written about here, the John Stevens who writes about Asian calligraphy and the contemporary calligrapher John Stevens of North Carolina share the same name but are not related.