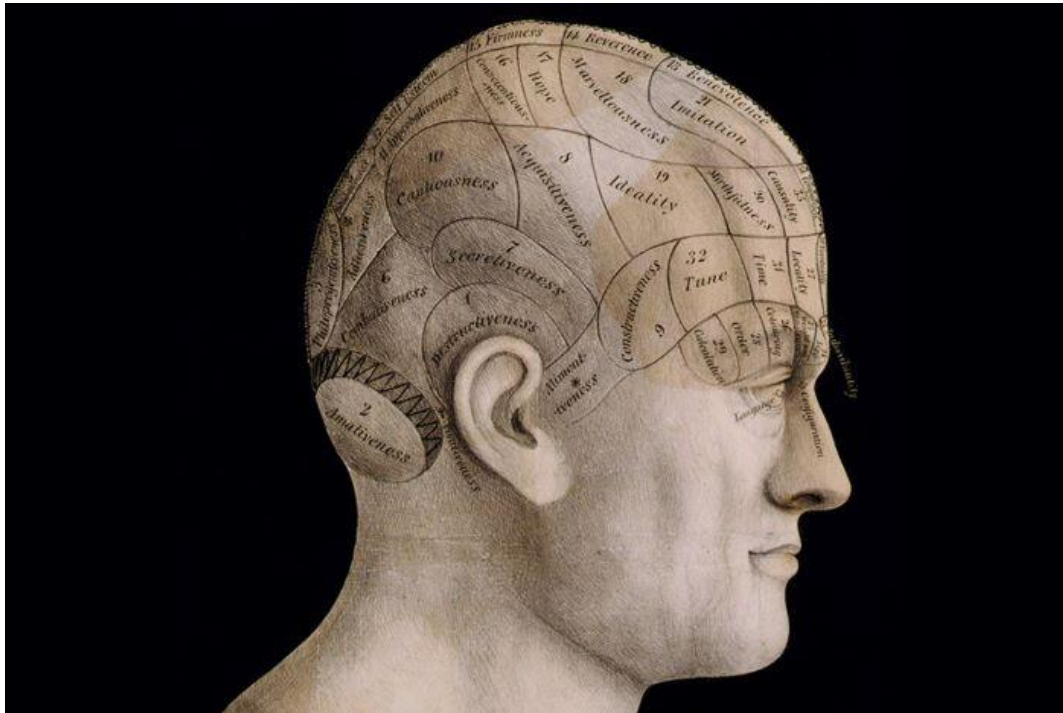


## William Carroll and the Science of Phrenology

Terence Walz

In September 1834, William Carroll, Clerk of the Supreme Court for seven years, husband of Sally Sprigg Carroll for six, and father of three children, decided to have his head examined by a phrenologist. The science was all the rage in the young United States and had been for at least a decade. In Britain between 1823 and 1836, some 24 societies were set up across the country, with 1,000 members. Such an examination of the bumps and contours of the skull were deemed clues to one's character and personality traits.<sup>1</sup>

In antebellum Washington a local phrenological society formed in 1825 and met regularly at various venues, first at Mr. Haskell's Academy near St. John Church, and later at the Medical Department of Columbian College.<sup>2</sup> William may have attended some of the sessions, if he wasn't a member. Baltimore, to which the Carrolls had family ties, also had a phrenological society, and a key mover in the organization was a distant relative of Sally's, Dr. Richard Sprigg Steuart.<sup>3</sup> In Washington, Thomas Sewall, a professor of anatomy at Columbian College, lectured on the weakness of the science, which then became part of the Proceedings of the Phrenological Society of the City of Washington, but it did little to dampen enthusiasm for the subject.<sup>4</sup>



Divisions of the skull as suggested by phrenologists such as Gall and Spurheim.

Image: <https://daily.jstor.org/what-skulls-told-us/>

Dr. Joseph Lovell, US Surgeon General who became president of the society,<sup>5</sup> lectured on phrenology and offered demonstrations. It is possible that William consulted him when he had his own head probed.

The measurements made in the exam were written down on a sheet of paper that was not signed. The practitioner appended the following note:<sup>6</sup>

These are the only organs that I can pronounce on with certainty -- Order, Size, weight, form, etc. -- I am frequently mistaken in, and do not wish to bring the Science into discredit from my ignorance.

Thus, a number of the “organs” on the usual chart of phrenological measurements he could not assign any number to or was afraid to because he felt no particular specialization in assigning them.<sup>7</sup> All of these particular organs were among the “intellectual organs.”

Amativeness	Large	Secretiveness	Large - 5
Philoprogenitiveness	Full	Moderate	Full - 4
Conscientiousness	"	Self esteem	Mod - 3
Combativeness	"	Full	Small - 2
Destructiveness	Moderate		Very large 7
Cautiousness	Full		
Firmness	Very large (7)		
Veneration	Large	Love of approbation	
Benevolence	"	Large	
Ideality	Full to large (5)		
Hope	Large		
Mirth	Very large	Adhesiveness	
Causality	Large	Full to large (5)	
Comparison	(Full) 5		
Locality	Large		
Eventuality	"		
Individuality	Very large		

These are the only organs that I pronounce on with certainty. -- Order, Size, weight, form &c. I am frequently mistaken in, and do not wish to bring the Science into discredit from my ignorance. --

Carroll's phrenological measurements, as taken in 1834  
by an unknown practitioner.  
Maine Historical Society, John Marshall Brown Papers.

## William Carroll's phrenological measurements:

### **Affective Organs**

#### *Propensities*

Amativeness	Large 5
Philoprogenitiveness	Large 5
Concentrative	Large 5
Adhesiveness	Full to Large (5)
Combativeness	Large 5
Destructiveness	Moderate 3
[Not assigned]	
Alimentiveness	
Constructiveness	
Acquisitiveness	

#### *Sentiments*

Self-Esteem	Full 4
Benevolence	Large 5
Caution ness	Full 4
Firmness	Very Large 7
Veneration	Large 5
Ideality	Full to Large 4 to 5
Hope	Large 5
Mirth	Very Large 7
Love of approbation	Large 5
[Not assigned]	
Wonder	
Imitation	

### **Intellectual Organs**

#### *Perceptive*

Individuality	Very Large 7
Locality	Large 5
Eventuality	Large 5
Secretiveness	Moderate 3
[Not assigned]	
Order	
Number	
Weight	
Form	
Colouring	
Size	
Time	
Tune	
Language	

#### *Reflexive*

Causality	Large 5
Comparison	Full 4

### The Relevant Size of Different Organs

Very large	7
Large	5
Full	4
Moderate	3
Small	2

What does this exam tell us, if anything, about William Carroll's character? We know from reports on his work that he was a highly organized individual, polite, efficient, dutiful to his chief (the chief justice), and mindful of his office and its responsibilities. He hardly ever missed a day at work. These might be reflected in the high marks he scored for "firmness" and "individuality." We also know from some of the letters exchanged between him and his children that he was well-considered by them and remembered with affection. Toward his wife, Sally, he certainly exhibited the "amateness" that he scored a "5" in – she gave birth to a series of children from the time she was 16 until she was 49, and his devotion to her was twice inscribed in Bibles that were used in the inaugurations of presidents Buchanan and Lincoln.<sup>8</sup>

William also scored a "5" in the organ was "mirth." Apparently, his sense of humor was well known in Washington. Marian Gouverneur, who knew the Carrolls from the time she was a bride in 1854 until Mrs. Carroll passed away in 1895, remembered him as a man of the "bon mot." She gave an example of this in her memoir. "Upon being asked upon one occasion whether he knew the elder Mr. Corcoran, he replied: 'I have known him from first to last and from last to first.'"<sup>9</sup>

Mrs. Carroll seems to have cherished the phrenological chart made of her husband and kept it with her until her last days, thirty-two years after he died. And so, her devoted daughter swept it up with the other Carroll papers when the house was cleared out after her death.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://daily.jstor.org/what-skulls-told-us/>.

<sup>2</sup> *Daily National Intelligencer*, June 16, 1825. Mr. Haskell's Academy of just north of the church and was a place where lectures in French and other subjects could be given, as well as dancing lessons. Public education had not yet been established. See <https://genealogytrails.com/washdc/books/cenhistchp14.html>.

<sup>3</sup> Steuart's mother was Rebecca Sprigg, descended from Thomas Sprigg, who was the first to own Northampton farm and was Sally's great-great granduncle. Rebecca's niece was Sopheia Sprigg Mercer, who was married to the father of Sally's son-in-law.

<sup>4</sup> Available online through the National Institute of Health Library: <https://collections.nlm.nih.gov/catalog/nlm:nlmuid-8502961-bk>

<sup>5</sup> In 1831. The vice president was Dr. Henry Hunt, the son in law of Tench Ringgold: *Daily National Intelligencer*, January 28, 1831, p. 3

<sup>6</sup> Maine Historical Society, John Marshall Brown Papers, Box 12, Folder 4.

<sup>7</sup> A useful comparison is the phrenological chart of the painter, Rubens Peale, done by a Dr. Collyer in 1836 which was published by the Maryland Center for History and Culture: <https://www.mdhistory.org/head-cases-the-baltimore-phrenological-society/>.

<sup>8</sup> On his Bibles, see my posting, "

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<sup>9</sup> Marian Gouverneur, *As I Remember* (New York: Putnam's, 1907): p. 217. The "bon mot might be a play on William Wilson Corcoran's rise from poor beginnings to very great success, but also that Carroll knew him inside out all during those years.