

**FOR THE DISSEMINATION OF USEFUL
KNOWLEDGE THE WORKINGMEN'S
INSTITUTE, NEW HARMONY, INDIANA**

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Southern Indiana holds a treasure, the Workingmen's Institute.¹ Founded in 1838 by William Maclure, it is the oldest continuously operating public library in the state of Indiana.² While the origins of the Workingmen's Institute (WMI) and its history in the community of New Harmony are fascinating subjects, they have also been well documented.³ Rather than focusing on the past, this article attempts to focus on the present and future of the Workingman's Institute as it continues to define its three separate functions: public library, museum, and special collection.



FIGURE 1. Sign in front of the Workingmen's Institute, New Harmony, Indiana.

PUBLIC LIBRARY

The Workingmen's Institute began as a public library, in the sense that any male laborer who sought knowledge could join. Although the public library is now open to all members of the public, the Library Director, Sherry Graves, still holds the original motto, "the dissemination of useful knowledge" as the ideal to which the institute should aspire.

The Workingmen's Institute serves New Harmony and New Harmony Township, which total about 1,700 residents. Although there are only 150 children in New

Harmony public schools (K-12) and the city itself has the oldest per capita residents in the state, the WMI strives hard to maintain its public library status. Not only because of the funding received from the state for being a public library, but also because of the original mission of the Institute which no one wants to abandon. Recently, the WMI received two Gates Foundation computers, which have enabled it to provide computing and Internet facilities to patrons. In addition, the WMI provides computer classes to older patrons wishing to tackle the new technology. Unfortunately, the older population and lack of children in New Harmony have led to tough choices. Story time had to be abandoned because there were not enough participating children to allow the program to continue. However, despite these setbacks, Director Sherry Graves does have long-term goals for the growth of the public library. Especially interesting to her is the reformation of reading and lecture programs that were extremely popular at the WMI up until the 1930s.⁴

MUSEUM

The museum is the second aspect of the WMI as it functions today. The museum collection, consisting of over 30,000 artifacts, is an interesting mix of objects of local and specific interest, as well as items that have a much broader and universal appeal.



FIGURE 2. Public Library Section of the WMI

Thanks to its notoriety as an early scientific institution, the Workingman's Institute has received (and continues to receive) numerous donations of artifact collections of scientific interest. The museum houses several natural history collections of both native and exotic flora and fauna. Of particular note is their collection of mollusk shells, which has been rated as one of the best in the world. They also maintain an excellent collection of local specimens from the Wabash River and Southern Indiana.



FIGURE 3. Mollusk shells on display at the WMI

The museum is also home to an extensive collection of historic artifacts of the groups that have populated the region of New Harmony. These include collections of Native American artifacts as well as those related to the two utopian communities who populated New Harmony, the Rappites (Utopian Harmonists under Rev. George Rapp, 1814-1825) and the Owenites (a scientific collective under Robert Owen, 1825-1826). The WMI has amassed an impressive collection of interesting items related to these two groups that give New Harmony much of its distinctive history and appeal including everything from period items of daily use to scientific instruments to art collected and produced by members of these early communities. Of particular note is the textile collection at the WMI, which, according to Sherry Graves, is one of the oldest and best in Indiana, as well as an impressive collection of early American dolls. There are also artifacts relating to the regional history of the Wabash Valley.

SPECIAL COLLECTIONS

The WMI maintains two major archives, the Branigan Archive and the Lilly Archive (made possible by a grant from the Lilly Foundation). The Branigan Archive was the first archive built at the WMI and primarily houses the personal papers of residents and people related to the history of New Harmony. The

Branigan Archive also includes papers and manuscripts of research done in and on New Harmony. Of note is the Vreeland collection, which consists of the notes and raw data of two sociologists who studied the town and its inhabitants in the 1930s but never published the information. The Archive also includes the papers of Caroline Dale Snedeker, a well-known children's author, and those of the Golden family. The Lilly Archive contains books including the collections Robert Owen and his descendants, as well as other inhabitants of the communities of New Harmony. Although small, the Lilly Archive



FIGURE 4. Mollusk shells on display at the WMI

maintains a varied and excellent collection of unusual and rare books. Of note are their collections of books related to theology, engineering, travel, geology, paleontology, chemistry, medical history, mathematics and natural history as well as socialism and utopian societies. The oldest book in the collection, *Nemesii philosophi clarissimi de natura hominis liber utilissimus*, an early work on psychology by Giorgio Valla, dates to 1538. Other notables include the first American edition of *Moby Dick* and first editions of Audubon's *Birds of America* (vols. 1-8) and *Quadrupeds of North America* (vols. 1-3).

CONCLUSION

Relative to its size, the WMI is a powerhouse of information and history in a small town along the Wabash River in Southern Indiana. It has something to offer anyone who visits it from professional scholars of subjects ranging from history to science to visitors interested in New Harmony's unique place in American history. Like all libraries, they face budgetary and personnel constraints and must prioritize their resources in order to carefully develop each aspect of their institution. The WMI has the added difficulty of dealing with a variety of different projects to serve the public. Given this, it is not always possible for them to maintain facilities and resources that larger, better-

endowed institutions might be able to sustain. They are in the process of putting their holdings online and continue to develop their museum exhibits, while still taking time to run a public library for the community of New Harmony. Receiving upwards of 7,000 visitors a year and with only two employees, the WMI is continuing to carve not one but several niches for itself in a multitude of worlds. It exists as three institutions in one, public library, museum and special collection, and it is committed to filling each role.

NOTES

¹ Special thanks to WMI Director, Sherry Graves, who was extremely helpful, informative, and welcoming while the authors gathered information for this article. All references to information provided by Ms. Graves refer to: Sherry Graves, personal interview by the authors, 23-24 May 2003, notes in possession of authors.

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⁴ For more information on the WMI please visit their website: <http://www.newharmonywmi.lib.in.us/>

⁵ Donald E. Pitzer and Connie A. Weinzapfel, "Utopia on the Wabash: The History of Preservation in New Harmony," *CRM* 9 (2001): 18.

⁶ See for example: Josephine Mirabella Elliott, *Partnership for Posterity: the Correspondence of William Maclure and Marie Duclos Fretageot, 1820-1833* (Indianapolis, IN: Indiana Historical Society, 1994); Josephine Mirabella Elliott, "William Maclure: Patron Saint of Indiana Libraries," *Indiana Magazine of History* 94 (June 1988): 178-190; J. Percy Moore, "William Maclure – Scientist and Humanitarian," *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 91,3 (1947): 234-249; Jeffrey Douglas, "William Maclure and the New Harmony Working Men's Institute," *Libraries and Culture* 26,2 (1991): 402-414.

⁷ Tellingly, in 1910, a full quarter of the library budget was allocated for lectures. These turn of the century lectures were often done by well-known scientists of the time.

⁸ Sherry Graves, personal interview by the authors.