WORKING MEN’S INSTITUTE

An analysis of its founder and collection

ABSTRACT

This article serves as analysis of the Working Men’s Institute library and museum, its founder and collection. It also provides specific examples from the archival collections as testament to its detailed evidence of Maclure’s life as geologist, educational reformer and philanthropist. This article attempts to prove the fact that this institution not only serves the purposes of its missions but also as a testament and living legacy of one of the founders of several American institutions.

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INTRODUCTION

Nestled in the small historic town of New Harmony Indiana sits a beautiful, Victorian three-story brick building. This building houses a library, museum, and archives. It holds a modest collection of nonfiction and fiction materials as well as audiovisual materials and periodicals and various programs are held throughout the year. It serves the area as a fully functioning public library, free to New Harmony and Harmony Township residents. In addition to serving as a library, the institute holds an archival collection of manuscripts and rare books. The second story of the institute houses a museum of natural science artifacts and other various specimens of New Harmony’s early years. These services support the original mission of the institute to “disseminate useful knowledge to working men and their families” and today’s supplemental mission to protect “unique holdings while making them accessible to increase public awareness and knowledge of the New Harmony experience” (Working Men’s Institute, n.d.) But does the institute serve yet another purpose? This article attempts to prove that this institute furthermore serves as a living legacy of its founder, William Maclure. His words, his works and his welfare live within these walls and preserve the story of a man who contributed to not only the community, but to the world through his work in Geology, educational reform, and library philanthropy.

WMI LOCATION AND COLLECTION

The WMI home in the town of New Harmony, Indiana is an absolute ideal location for an institution of this character. This town was home to not one but two societal experiments of utopianism, the second of which Maclure was a major benefactor and contributor. Douglas stated “when the Working Men’s Institute in New Harmony, Indiana, was founded in 1838 at the site of one of the most important American experiments in communal living, it defined for itself a political agenda deeply rooted in the radical social theories of its benefactor William Maclure” (Douglas, 1991).

The Working Men’s Institute in New Harmony is no modest collection of sample manuscripts collected here and there over the years. Within these archives is the vast correspondences of Maclure throughout his time in New Harmony and afterwards. His letters are both personal in nature and regarding business. The collection also houses manuscripts from the two experimental societies that took place here- the Harmonists and Owen communities which existed between 1814 and 1827.

EARLY LIFE

William Maclure was born in Ayr, Scotland on October 27, 1763. At the early age of 19 he traveled to United States and then London where he made a fortune as a successful businessman. He returned home, but in a few years came back to the United States (Aber, 2015). Due to his great success as a businessman, Maclure retired at an early age, and the rest of his life was committed to his other great interests, mainly geology and education reform (Donnachie, 2003).
He officially became a citizen of the United State in 1796. His love for geology was born during his time in Europe, where he took opportunities to collect specimens of natural science and it had quickly become “the engrossing study of his mind” (Morton, 1841). He used his passion to draw up the first geological map of the United States. While crudely constructed, it was the first of its kind and became widely distributed and the general reference of the geological construction of the United States. The map was consecutively published with Observations on the geology of the United States of America in 1809 (Morton, 1841). Maclure himself modestly admitted to the crudeness of his work, concluding his observations with “should this hasty and imperfect sketch, call forth the attention of those possessed of more talents and industry for the accurate investigation of this interesting subject, the views of the writer shall be fully accomplished” (Maclure, 1809). His map and observations were published in the Transactions of the American Philosophical Society of America of which Maclure was a key figure. His publication earned him the common title “The Father of American Geology.”

MACLURE IN NEW HARMONY

In January 1826, Maclure arrived in New Harmony with the “Boatload of Knowledge” aboard the appropriately named Philanthropist (Pitzer, 1998). The following passengers were among the travelers: Robert Dale Owen, Thomas Say, Madame Marie Duclos Fretageot and her twelve-year-old son, and Dr. Samuel Chase and his wife. Maclure, Madame Fretageot, and Joseph Neef were all advocates of the Pestalozzian methods of teaching and had established an experimental boarding school in New Lanark, Philadelphia in the style of Pestalozzi. It was here that Madame Fretageot met Robert Dale Owen and contacted Maclure regarding Owen’s plans for a socialist community on the Wabash -future New Harmony (Wilson, 1964). The institute’s archives house several correspondences regarding their work and their educational beliefs.

The archives also contain several correspondences of Maclure’s regarding the Workingmen’s Institute’s establishment, the obtaining of materials for the collection and the granting of the use of Maclure’s library by his brother Alexander Maclure to the Workingmen’s Institute.
Figure 1: New Harmony Manuscripts, Series I, Folder 33: 1833 Letter from William Maclure in Mexico to Samuel W. Carpenter with several request including “8) obtain books published in favor of the working classes” (New Harmony Manuscripts, 1812-1871, n.d.).
Figure 2: New Harmony Manuscripts, Series I, Folder 49: April 24, 1838 -- Alexander Maclure gives the Working Men's Institute use of William Maclure's library under the condition that they keep a circulation record.

Figure 3: New Harmony Manuscripts, Series I, Folder 50 Sept 30, 1838: “Discusses the founding of the Working Men's Institute and challenges the strict interpretation of the requirement for
membership – Those who work with their hands and no other. Amphlett insists that shopkeepers, clerks, servants, etc. would benefit from good books and lectures. This portion signed ‘Librarian.’ Discusses crops and David Dale Owen's work. He encourages Maclure to leave his immense geological collection in New Harmony saying ‘collections are the true textbook of natural science’” (New Harmony Manuscripts, 1812-1871, n.d.).

EVIDENCE OF PHILANTHROPY

The archives contain other letters attesting to and providing evidence of Maclure’s philanthropy to not only the Working Men’s Institute but other institutes as well.

Figure 4: New Harmony Manuscripts, Series I, Folder 39: Dec. 16, 1839: Letter from George W. Irving to William Maclure praising Maclure as a great philanthropist.
Figure 5: New Harmony Manuscripts, Series I, Folder 41: Mar.19 1836 --  Letter from Jeremiah Warder from Springfield, Clark, Ohio requesting any assistance Maclure can give including donations of books or specimens of natural science to their newly establish academy. The letter has been endorsed and signed by Maclure.

EVIDENCE OF GEOLOGY

Evidence of Maclure’s study of geology is evident at the museum housed on the second floor in the Working Men’s Institute of New Harmony, Indiana. The collection houses specimens of natural science, from minerals and rock formations to conches and fossils from around the world. It also holds a proud collection of historical artifacts from New Harmony and the Wabash River area, including personal items from citizens of the early communities. WMI Director Ryan Rokicki stated that though there is no actual proof that any of the WMI collection specimens were from Maclure’s personal collection, he believed it is a strong possibility, but being that Maclure was the former president of the Academy of Natural Sciences at Philadelphia (ANSP), Rokicki said most of his collection is housed there (personal communication, April 26, 2016).
EDUCATIONAL REFORM

Maclure’s interests in education are evident within the correspondences of the New Harmony Manuscripts as well. The following image shows a letter from John M. Keagy of the Woodside Institute in Philadelphia to Maclure. Keagy is thanking Maclure for engravings and minerals which he assumes is an “indication that you approve of our mode of proceeding in the instruction of youth” (New Harmony Manuscripts, n.d.). In the first decade of the 1800s, Maclure became interested in the Pestalozzian system of education, devised by Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi. After personally visiting Pestalozzi’s school for boys and girls in Yverdon, Maclure considered it “the most rational system of education” and his entire outlook on education was transformed (Warren, 2009). He began making monetary, book, and scientific instrumental donations to the school.
In another letter from Joseph Neef to William Maclure on Dec. 6, 1834, Neef also regards Pestalozzi, his radical ideas, and advises Maclure to take severe caution in his endeavors (New Harmony Manuscripts, n.d.).

LATER YEARS

The second utopian experiment, like the first, experiences many troubles, including conflicts between Owen and Maclure, who regarded himself as less of a partner than Owen considered him (Wilson, 1964). He maintained his involvement was limited to the Educational Society and “a liability for half of Owen’s losses in the town up to $10,000” (Wilson, 1964). Maclure began to regret his involvement in New Harmony, argued about financial responsibilities with Owen, suits were filed by and against both parties, but eventually a settlement was agreed upon and Maclure was given 490 acres for the sum of $44,000. While his methods of education did not long survive New Harmony, many of his methods have become widely adopted. The Workingmen’s Institute was a result of the help of Madame Fretageot’s son Achille and the working men of New Harmony (Wilson, 1964).
Maclure had long struggled with poor health, and frequently spent long periods away from New Harmony, “finding the climate of southern Indiana intolerable” (Wilson, 1964). He spent his last years in Mexico, having turned over his interests to his brother, Alexander. The New Harmony Manuscripts house the last correspondence ever sent from William Maclure before his death in Mexico in 1840 (Donnachie, 2003). Maclure’s final letter was dictated to a Jas. H Arthur. Arthur’s letter was copied Dr. M. Burroughs in Vera Cruz. It regards his failing health and having to stop at San Angel on his way to Vera Cruz where Dr. Burroughs was (New Harmony Manuscripts, 1812-1871, n.d.).

At Maclure’s death, his will granted “the sum of five hundred dollars to any club or society of laborers who may establish in any part of the United States a reading and lecture room with a library of at least one hundred.” 140 clubs and libraries in Indiana and 16 in Illinois took advantage of this offer (Working Men’s Institute, n.d.). Unfortunately, the Working Men’s Institute was the only one to survive.

IN DEFENSE OF PRESERVATION

With so much evidence to the life of Maclure and his achievements housed in the archives of the WMI and his groundbreaking work in geology exhibited and expanded upon in the contents of the museum, one may beg the question, “So what?” Why are these documents so important and why do they need to be preserved? While the answer may seem obvious to some, others may not understand that these manuscripts are much more than a record of history. They are also a record of culture and politics. They serve as a mirror to the ways of life at the time. They are also evidence of library history, and the foundations of today’s libraries. Quite simply put, preservation is one of the most important duties of libraries, museums, archives and historical societies (Cloonan, 2007). And finally, these manuscripts offer a “trip through the mind of someone who is long gone,” someone who shaped the town and, while the society he worked to create failed, helped make it the historical landmark it is today.

IN CONCLUSION

The Working Men’s Institute could arguably be the best testimony of Maclure’s life as geologist, educational reformist and philanthropist. The institution’s location in an already heavily historic town in Indiana has possibly been one of its reasons of survival these many years. Perhaps it is because this was Maclure’s institution that he personally saw the making of as a model for future institutes to come, and unfortunately all of which have now perished or been absorbed into Carnegie libraries. (Douglas 1991). Perhaps it has maintained relevance and significance in its trifold purpose as library, museum and archive. I believe, given the information provided through his correspondences and the evidence within the walls of the institution, that it is a combination of all of these factors that keep the library and museum alive today and hopefully safe for the future. I believe that it is of great importance that this institution be honored as a testament to his life.
About the Author: Katie Reineke is an Indiana University student of IUPUI School of Informatics and Computing. She lives in Posey County, between Evansville, Indiana and New Harmony, Indiana. She received her Bachelor of Arts in Journalism and German Studies from the University of Southern Indiana in 2011. A frequent lifelong visitor of New Harmony, Reineke has found great interest in the town’s unique history and has chosen it as the subject for several of her graduate projects. Reineke anticipates graduation with her Masters in Library and Information Sciences in Winter 2016. She may be contacted via email at kreineke88@gmail.com.
References:


