

OHIO VALLEY HISTORY

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Cover: 1873 Poster.
Courtesy Archives &
Rare Books Library,
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Cincinnati

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EDITORS' CORRECTION:

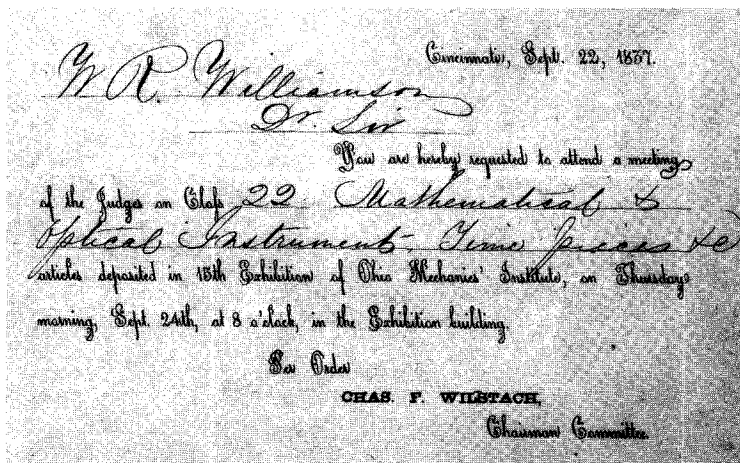
On this page in the Winter 2004 issue of *Ohio Valley History*, the editors incorrectly associated the Thomas Jefferson Papers with the University of Virginia. In fact, the Thomas Jefferson Papers: Retirement Series is sponsored by the Thomas Jefferson Foundation, and it is housed in the Robert H. Smith International Center for Jefferson Studies, at Monticello, Charlottesville, Virginia. Our apologies.

Exhibiting the Changing World through the Ohio Mechanics Institute: *From Annual Fairs and Exhibitions to Grand Expositions, 1838-1888*

JUDITH SPRAUL-SCHMIDT

Beginning a decade after the establishment of the Ohio Mechanic's Institute [OMI] in 1828, the Institute offered a series of fairs and exhibitions characteristic of a changing American society and reflective of Cincinnati's changing perceptions of the world. The Annual Fairs, held from 1838 to 1845, demonstrated the extent of production and civility in Cincinnati particularly, and in America generally, by rewarding and announcing the work of individual citizens and artisans.

The styling of the name of the sponsoring institution, and the evolution from the singular possessive form of the original term "Mechanic's," suggests that orientation. The Annual Exhibitions, held during the 1850s, signaled a shift in institutional purpose in the city and in the nation toward a promotion of the industrial artisan as a part of a definable group. In this decade, Cincinnati's perceived those trained in the "mechanic arts" and, after the London Crystal Palace Exhibition, particularly those employed in industry, as belonging to such a group. Accordingly, in this era OMI changed the presentation of its name to the plural possessive, "Mechanics'," suggesting its orientation to a particular group of mechanics. By the 1870s and 1880s, with the advent of the Grand Industrial Expositions, their organizers de-emphasized artisans in favor of products, principally those made by industrial companies and corporations. They addressed the expansion of American industry and suggested a perspective of civilizing laborers rather



*Judge's Notice for the
15th Exhibition of the
Ohio Mechanics' Institute.
Cincinnati Museum Center,
Cincinnati Historical
Society Library*

than facilitating their individual development through self-culture. By their organization as well as the various entertainments and attractions, this final round of Expositions themselves reflect a decidedly hierarchical view of class in Cincinnati and in America. OMI's name now lost all vestiges of the possessive form; the now-Ohio Mechanics Institute seemed not to be the property of its students, but a modern institution. The three series of exhibits suggest the changing purpose of OMI and important shifts in perceptions of the world in which it operated.

Created as “an Institution in the city of Cincinnati, for advancing the best interests of the Mechanics, Manufacturers and Artizans, by the more general diffusion of useful knowledge in those important classes of the community,” OMI offered public lectures and regular courses of instruction. It possessed a circulating library and reading room, allowing the institute to take its place alongside the city's new common schools, academies, lyceums, and subscription libraries. Each of these vibrant, burgeoning institutions was designed to increase opportunities for learning. Each functioned as a “sort of universal self-and-community

improvement association,” providing its participants with intellectual and character-building enlightenment. In an age in which character development (“civility” in the parlance of the day) seemed an important factor in a citizen's success, success itself was perceived as the product of individual initiative. Thus residents held that providing opportunities for individuals to cultivate these traits was appropriate public policy. Institutions like OMI would enhance the nation's citizens and facilitate their prosperity by fostering the fulfillment of the ideals of the democratic

republic, counteracting what some observers called a growing “incivility” of the 1820s and 1830s.

Indeed, John D. Craig, a nationally known lecturer in “natural philosophy” and future head of the U.S. Patent Office, explained the Institute's objectives to Cincinnatians when he urged that OMI demand consideration from “any community desirous of encouraging the useful arts and manufactures and [at] the same time guarding against the moral turpitude and degradation of human character” that follows from “mental darkness.” He urged the people to take the lead in diffusing useful knowledge by in-



Lithograph from the Louisville Grand Industrial Exposition of 1873, by the Louisville Steam Lithograph Co. The Filson Historical Society

corporating and supporting OMI, with membership available to virtually the entire citizenry in this democratic era of expanding white manhood suffrage. Its founders offered an array of courses on philosophy, geometry, and literature and touted the success of their students, two of whom had risen to the level of board member in its first five years.

In 1838, the Institute raised funds by holding a “Grand Mechanics and Citizens Ball” and proceeded with plans for holding its first annual fair. In proposing this new endeavor, the directors cited exhibitions of locally made products from both Europe and “large eastern cities of our own country,” and their success in exciting emulation “among our ingenious mechanics and artisans, and making known to the community at large their respective merits.” Promoters boasted that Cincinnati’s new status as the country’s fastest growing city, the “Queen City of the West,” derived from its attractiveness to these yeomen and from the merits of OMI’s courses, lectures, and library offerings. The Institute’s directors projected the 1838 Fair as the first of a series of annual events that would offer a formal, annual inventory of Cincinnati’s material products “in the useful, ornamental, or fine arts.” The fair offered all exhibitors, whether independent craftsmen or large manufacturers, the occasion to demonstrate the quality of their goods to potential buyers. For an admission price of twenty-five cents, visitors gained entry to the three-day exhibition, where exhibits displayed products ranging from stoves to fabrics to birdcages. Judges awarded diplomas or certificates to the best items in each of a long list of categories on the basis of their “fine finish and workmanship.”

With speakers scheduled for two of its evenings, the exhibition presented visitors “with much to admire, and something by way of instruction.” On the last night of the Fair, spokesman E. D. Mansfield argued that the Fair itself demonstrated the maturity of the leaders and residents of the city of Cincinnati and boasted the “mechanic arts” as incomparable in the American political and social environment. The mechanic arts, Mansfield exclaimed, were “united to all that pertains to the social progress” and remained the genius of the American system in that such pursuits allowed each citizen to contribute fully to the nation’s ever-widening circle of knowledge and achievement. In this spirit, OMI’s directors reaffirmed their commitment to making the fair a regular event and established a “committee on arrangements” to set up the 1839 Fair. The Committee would accept items for display or for sale and judges would award certificates “for such inventions as may be deemed of public utility; and also for excellence in workmanship.” One newspaper editor touted the fair as “the very best mode of advertising “Cincinnati’s industrial prowess, and securing the orders of merchants from abroad.”

The fair itself did not disappoint. Categories represented included ma-

chinery, stoves, castings and gratings, mathematical instruments, edge tools, and agricultural implements, as well as harnesses, saddlery and trunks, carriages, chairs, and cabinet furniture and upholstery. Books and stationery, boots and shoes, chinaware, copperware, earthenware, hats, musical instruments, carpeting, sculpture, designs and paintings were all enumerated, and the provision was made as well for “miscellaneous articles.” Though the fair was planned to draw articles that were well-made, its proponents maintained that it displayed “such things as are daily made and offered for sale at the shops” of the city and not special exhibition models.

Following this success, similar exhibitions followed in the years from 1840 to 1845. Each spring, the committee sent circulars soliciting participation from producers throughout the West, explaining that “the origin of these exhibitions is western, and their object is to bring into notice the products of western industry and skill, and to draw out and urge forward western talent and enterprise.” Public exhibitions of this kind, according to the sponsors, offered “samples of what is regularly done” in the West as advertisements of the progress of the region, the importance of its urban center, Cincinnati, and the skill of its craftsmen. While OMI officials ostensibly refused to “resort to puffing contrary to the spirit of an enlightened age,” their winners, nonetheless referred frequently to the institute’s awards in their own advertising. In the newspaper notice of one awardee, the description “FIRST PREMIUM BOOT—FOURTH ANNUAL FAIR” spoke for itself.

Ohio Mechanics' Institute

THIRTY-NINTH ANNUAL MEETING

AND

ELEVENTH ANNUAL EXHIBITION

OF THE

SCHOOL OF DESIGN.

PROGRAMME.

MUSIC.

ADDRESS BY HON. EDW'D F. NOYES.

MUSIC.

ANNUAL REPORT OF BOARD OF DIRECTORS.

MUSIC.

READING LIST OF AWARDS.

MUSIC.

DISTRIBUTION OF PRIZES.

MUSIC.

ELECTION OF OFFICERS.

MUSIC.

MUSIC BY MENTER'S BAND.

Exercises Commence at 7 1-2 o'clock, at Greenwood Hall,

TUESDAY EVENING, MARCH 12, 1867.

Announcement for the Thirty-Ninth Annual Meeting, Ohio Mechanics' Institute, 1867. Cincinnati Museum Center, Cincinnati Historical Society Library

and emphasis of the Institute changed. Evidence suggests the decreasing importance of the public lectures and even of general scientific courses for members; new classes aimed to prepare their participants to practice specific operations and not to make rational observations of the world around them. The OMI revised its corporate charter in 1846-47, and constructed its own building in 1848, in a new program dedicated to the training of operative mechanics. Institute leaders once more spoke to the potential of its revised program to advance the city of Cincinnati as well. One advocate described the Institute’s School as “the moral gymnasium of the soul” and thus the

The Annual Fairs marked the culmination of the program envisioned at the formation of OMI. By the late 1840s, the program

vehicle through which the enterprising mechanic “recovers his dignity in the exercise of his facilities, and becomes at the same time, a more useful citizen.” The Institute, he insisted, by continuing to train a class of “more intelligent mechanics than in any other city in the world,” would help Cincinnati take advantage of its geographical position to become the center of American industry.

In this new atmosphere, the directors considered resumption of its fairs and in 1850 offered what it called its Tenth Exhibition. Two years later, in the third of these exhibitions, the renaming of displays and their congruence with the reordered Institute became evident. Though the Institute continued to solicit goods of all kinds, its Exhibition Committee began to differentiate between the categories and to rank them in a hierarchical order. The Committee recommended that it award gold Exhibition medals only for the best products of select “classes.” It promised such medals for steam engines adapted for use in railroads or steamboats or for safety improvements on them; it designated one gold medal for “the best new invention for the prevention of accidents from explosions of steam boilers of high pressure steam engines” for propulsion on land or sea and a second for “the best model of a low pressure steam engine of not less than 5 horse power to be exhibited in action during the exhibition.” Fine finishing of goods no longer earned the highest awards; the Committee reserved them for operative machinery. The silver medal, offered for second place in machinery, signified the highest award for all other categories.

At the Institute’s Thirteenth Exhibition, held in 1854, noting the competition from exhibitions in New York and nearby Dayton, Ohio, the Committee established a Machinery Department separated from all other items and placed all items “of every kind in the useful, ornamental, and fine arts.” However, in the next year, the exhibition again designated a separate Machinery Department, but, in the interest of drawing further exhibitors and spectators, it reinstated the gold medal for all other categories outside of the Machinery Department. Conscious of the nation’s growing sectional divide, for the Fourteenth Exhibition the sponsors called specifically for submissions from mechanics and artisans “in the East and the West, in the North and the South” but reasserted their regional identity

OHIO MECHANICS' INSTITUTE,

Cincinnati, *April 16* 1847

Mr. Geo. Richey

Sir:

You are hereby notified that you were at a meeting held on the 13th of Apr. duly elected a Member of this Institute.

You are requested to avail yourself of the earliest convenient opportunity to attend at the Hall, and sign the Constitution.

Respectfully,

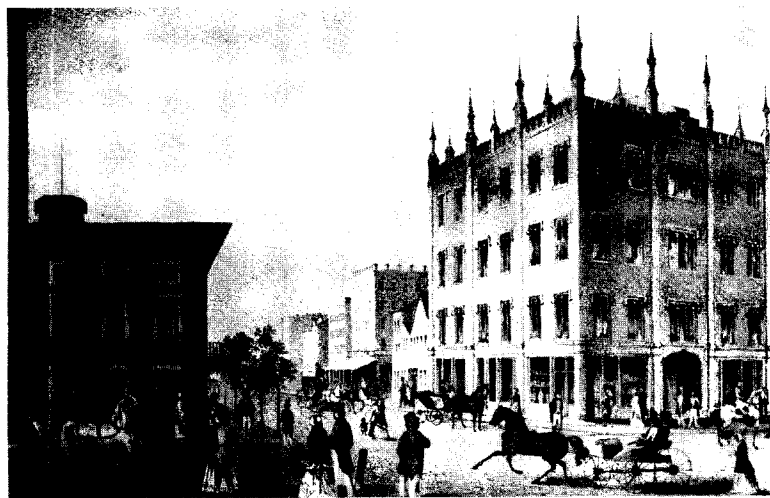
John Whitman Sec. Sec.

1847 Membership
Notification for the Ohio
Mechanics' Institute.
Cincinnati Museum Center,
Cincinnati Historical
Society Library

by offering special premiums of fifty dollars for the best works of mechanics in “Ohio, Kentucky, and Indiana,” “the West,” and the “valley of the Mississippi.” In 1857 the Institute constructed its own Crystal Palace for that year’s exhibition, which the sponsors pictured on their circular calling for submissions boasting the legend “The Great Western Emporia of Arts and Manufactures.” None of these efforts, of course, blocked secession, or the Civil War, but even in 1860, that year’s exhibit emphasized broad regional connections over the growing disharmony between north and south. The change apparent in 1860 was the Institute’s description of its exhibition’s purpose as “the promotion of the industrial arts,” formally acknowledging its specific commitment to advancing industrial development in Cincinnati and its hinterland beyond.

The Civil War soon changed the Fairs’ very nature. Industrial exhibitions in American cities gave way to wartime U.S. Sanitary Commission Fairs. The war disrupted Cincinnati’s principal traditional downriver

trading routes through the southern states to the busiest port in the nation, New Orleans, but it bolstered industrial production, especially in steam age industry, and strengthened the elaboration of railroad lines. In 1866, the first year after the war’s end, OMI’s Board of Directors voted not to return to sponsoring their old exhibitions on the grounds that “the general and direct effects of an exhibit are local, or nearly so, and their practical bearing is, in a word, a form of advertisement, having for its ultimate end increased trade and



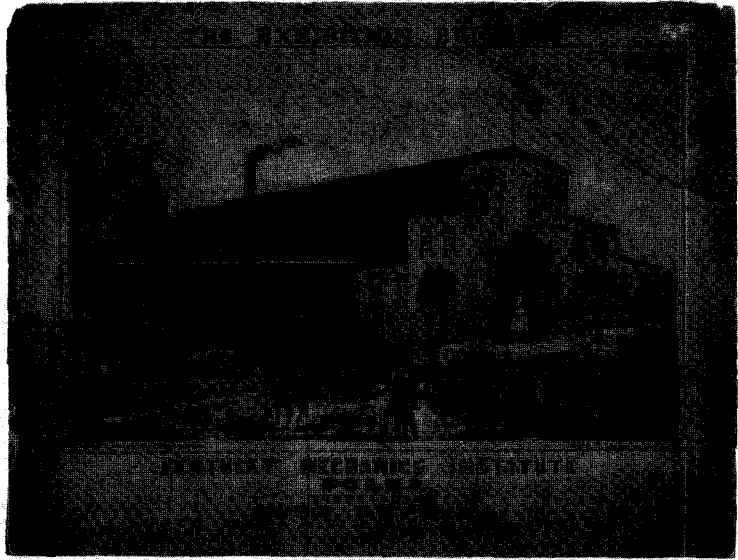
*Mechanic's Institute,
Cincinnati, Ohio, by
Onken's Lithography,
1851. Cincinnati Museum
Center, Cincinnati
Historical Society Library*

business.” Nonetheless, in the next year, they created a committee to look into providing a grander event, one that would specifically connect art and industry without burdening the Institute with all of its financial risks.

The occasion for holding such an event came several years later, in partnership with the newest Board of Trade, formed in 1869, and the Chamber of Commerce. “It has been the desire of the Directors for the past several years to hold under the auspices of the Ohio Mechanic’s Institute a Grand Industrial Exposition of the Arts and Manufacturing,” the directors explained in 1869, “which should be indicated by the great advancement made in every branch of domestic production and representative of the central and western states.” The three sponsoring institutions each designated five representatives to the Exposition Committee. The

challenge of creating a site large enough to meet the Committee's vision supported its goal of showcasing Art and Industry. Indeed, the Committee offered funding for the new Saengerfest (or Music) Hall, built on city land, opposite Washington Park and bordered by the Miami and Erie Canal, to hold an 1870 international convention, adding other exhibit buildings as needed.

The Committee circulated its call for participants in an enterprise "to which artisans, manufacturers, inventors, and all engaged in the production of works of art and ingenuity are invited to contribute." They promised a main line of shafting for machinery, 2 7/16 inches in diameter and at two hundred RPMs, as well as premiums of gold and silver medals and diplomas. In the Exposition's aftermath, the Committee boasted of exhibits from twenty-four states and crowds exceeding three hundred thousand. Ecstatically, it proclaimed "The Grand Exposition was an entire success, and the wonder of the whole country. It was, without doubt, the largest and most complete exposition ever held in the United States."



"The Kentucky Mechanics Institute Polka," by G.W. Brainard & Co., 1853. The Filson Historical Society

The Ohio Mechanics Institute returned to the practice of sponsoring exhibitions in 1870, but in fundamentally different terms. The exhibitions reflected changes in the ascendancy of industry in the economy, in the hardening notions of social classes, in the shifting configuration of the old walking city toward the "new" city, with its series of neighborhoods from "downtown" through industrial zones to hilltop suburbs, and in the emergence of a newly defined activist city government. The fourteen Expositions from 1870 to 1888 demonstrated as well the drive of Cincinnati's "Boosters" to shore up Cincinnati's faltering position in city population rankings as the city slipped from sixth largest city in 1840 to seventh in 1860. Despite its decades-long place as the West's "Queen City," Cincinnati faced the challenge of what the city's mayor described in 1869 as "our rival cities, Chicago and St. Louis." In this enterprise, these "Grand Expositions" highlighted the development of industrial production, but in a context of artistic expansion that included the establishment, by the 1880s, of the city's biennial May festivals, symphony orchestra, art museum, art academy, and one of the nation's first zoological gardens.

These later Expositions, vastly larger than their predecessors, operated under the joint auspices of OMI, the Chamber of Commerce, and a new Board of Trade, created specifically to advance industrial interests. With the support of city government, local businesses, including hotels, street railways, and several railroads, assisted these three institutions in 1878 with the construction of a grand new Music and Exposition Hall, a venue for the community to enjoy elite, European symphonic music. Their cooperative effort highlighted the efficacy of combining Art and Industry to advance their views of progress in Cincinnati and in American society. The Exposition Board envisioned these Expositions as national showcases to highlight the central place of Cincinnati in industry and the arts in America, and, in an age of expanded transportation and communication links, as the ideal center for conventions and other national meetings.



A. T. Goshorn (1833-1902) served as director for several industrial expositions in the 1860s. Cincinnati Museum Center, Cincinnati Historical Society Library

Exposition reports in succeeding years reiterated that claim, as did the posters circulated before each event. The poster for the Third Exposition, held in 1872, promised that the event would be the “Largest ever held in America,” spreading over seven acres, and the 1873 and 1874 Exposition posters touted themselves as “the representative exposition of America.” National leaders noted the relative success of the “grand industrial expositions” in naming A. T. Goshorn, director of several, to head the nation’s Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia in 1876. Cincinnati did not try to compete with its own event that year, but the Exposition Committee worked with the promoters of the May Musical Festival (who had staged their first two events in 1873 and 1875) to build a permanent structure for both purposes. As one local newspaper editorialized, the time was right for the construction of such a building so that “Cincinnati, the center of the Nation as to

population, would be not only the music and art capital, but the City of National Conventions, political and religious.”

After working out the details of securing site guarantees from the city, raising subscriptions from individuals and companies, obtaining a matching grant challenge from local patron Reuben Springer, and despite disagreements between Music Hall’s and the Exposition’s respective interest groups, the impressive main building was completed in 1878. Additional exhibition wings opened in 1879, in time for the Seventh Exposition. President

Rutherford B. Hayes, who had launched his political and legal careers in Cincinnati (and married a native daughter), returned to open the Exposition, as he had as Ohio's governor in 1870.

Six more such Expositions took place through 1886, when the Committee announced plans for a grand Centennial Exposition celebrating the 1788 founding of Cincinnati and of the region it served. The Committee promised "an exposition of the products of industry, commerce, manufacturing, agricultural, science, art and industry, of all the visible evidences of modern progress and civilization" to mark the anniversary. Like its predecessors, this production would include a power hall, with a series of engines continuously operating to power machinery, and additional buildings for artistic, horticultural, and agricultural displays. But the 1888 Exposition added decorative electric lights, additional temporary buildings, and, most dramatically, a machinery building, built over the Miami and Erie Canal. The organizers renamed that portion of the canal "Venetian," complete with gondolas and costumed gondoliers. OMI's directors, noting that institution's long history of fairs, exhibitions, and expositions, claimed "Cincinnati, justly and with pride, styles herself the 'Mother of Expositions.'"

The spectacular Exposition, however, marked the end of such spectacles. Indeed, although it drew a great deal of interest, the Exposition did not turn a profit. Nor did it—or could it—reclaim Cincinnati's position as Queen City of West. The census of 1890 would reveal Cincinnati's decline to the nation's ninth largest city, eclipsed by the sites of the next two American World's Fairs: Chicago, now second, and St. Louis, now fifth. Despite the city's and its leading institutions' best efforts and the development of a diversified economy, Cincinnati could not overcome the changing American system of cities. Moreover, after 1888 OMI's commitment to diffuse "useful knowledge" to "Mechanics, Manufacturers and 'Artizans'" was being challenged by national crises, including hardening class divisions marked by industrial labor turmoil, a devastating economic depression, the validation of Jim Crow laws, immigration restriction, and the abandonment of the tribal rights of Native Americans. Instead, OMI concentrated its efforts on providing a truly technical education for the professional development of skilled workers as a particular class in the *hierarchical system of industrial production*.

Indeed, OMI operated effectively despite the dramatic changes of the nineteenth century by adapting its structure and organization to meet new technological and economic developments and changing perceptions of American society. The changes are evident in the activities of the Institute but also in the styling of OMI's name and in the terms attached to each set

of exhibitions. While the fairs, exhibitions, and industrial expositions constituted just one part of its activities, by their very nature as public displays and subjects of contemporary discussion, they provide a window into their time. They reveal as well Cincinnati's changing position on the frontier of American urban rivalry, in a nation (unlike England or France) without a true metropolis. They expose as well the rise of industry, and more particularly the ascendancy of the corporation and the hardening of class lines and perceptions in America. ♣

Note on Sources:

The records of OMI, located at the University of Cincinnati's Special Collection and Archives, contain the most important sources for this work. Additionally, city directories, city of Cincinnati records (including Annual Reports) after 1851, and local newspapers (especially the Cincinnati *Daily Gazette* for the first era and the *Cincinnati Commercial* for the later) proved valuable. Specific citations in this essay come primarily from OMI reports of the annual exhibitions and from the *Daily Gazette*, October 28, 1828, February 1, 1838, June 21, 1839, and July 5, 1841, and the *Cincinnati Commercial*, March 3, 1878.