

Promotion of Useful Knowledge

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The closing years of the American Reconstruction are often noted by the presidency of Ulysses S. Grant and the slide of international economies into a first post-Civil War national depression. Southern historians would say that these two facts are not unrelated. Voters of 1874 agreed. Nearly 100 seats in Congress changed party affiliation in that year's national elections and the newly united states tore into a postbellum battle for its moral core.

The subsequent presidential election of 1876 achieved only a contested outcome. Voting irregularities abounded, as did overt violence. Ohio Republican Governor Rutherford Hayes' and Democrat Samuel Tilden's campaigns were finally settled by a fifteen-member body in January 1877. The result was a Hayes victory but a ceding of the South to paramilitary organizations and local governments. Federal troops pulled out of Florida, Louisiana, South Carolina, the last remaining states in which the national Army remained. Reconstruction was deconstructed.

The five and one-half long years of economic contraction sparked by the Panic of 1873 proved ultimately to be a greater force than cannon or cavalry. The weaponizing of unemployment, bankruptcies and local miseries were powerful toxins to change following a war of brother vs. brother. A complex interwoven international web of credit failures, currency complications and gold versus silver eventually closed the New York Stock Exchange itself. Railroads and banks followed, cotton, iron and eventually grain prices dropped precipitously and paychecks became scarce. The woes of the market hit home. Thusly, the grand peace and unification hoped for after the bloodshed of Antietam and Shiloh faded in Congress into an expendable goal. The mothers, fathers, brothers and sisters of the 51,112 casualties of Gettysburg, 34,624 of Chickamauga, 30,099 of Chancellorsville, 27,399 of Spotsylvania, 26,134 of Antietam, 25,416 of the Wilderness, 25,251 of Manassas, suffered a double fate of the loss of their sons along with the utter demolition of the desired ends of both the Confederacy and the Union in political

maneuvers after the war. 620,000 Americans died during four years of internecine all-out war. Just twelve years after, Reconstruction failed.

When I enter the second floor Lounge parlor of the Queen City Club, I see the portraits of Hiram Ulysses Grant and William Tecumseh Sherman adorning the fireplace mantels before the fineries of the china, the graceful paneling and the glorious windows onto East 4th Street. Both accomplished military men and battlefield strategists were Ohioans by birth. Following the war, one chose a path of leading a torn nation from the White House, the other stayed resolute in his bellicose nationalism as secretary of war, violently quelling both further rebellion and the “Indian Problem” on the Trail of Tears.

In their personal writings, one hewed ever so gently towards greater economic opportunity for oppressed races; the other saw danger in greater numbers of conscripted soldiers on the wrong side. Yet even these convenient novelized characterizations lose the context and meaning of the time. Ulysses Grant, the hard-drinking reluctant West Point graduate and champion of the Emancipation Proclamation, also married Julia Dent, the Missourian daughter of a Confederate sympathizer and holder of dozens of enslaved Africans.

Oddly, in a trivia point of history, Grant only gained his famous “S” initial in a clerical error by his nominator to the Academy, Congressman Thomas Hamer. He wrote to his future wife, “I have an ‘S’ in my name and don’t know what it stands for... Find some name beginning with ‘S’ for me.”

Sherman, also a West Pointer, was from a landed family that tragically lost their Sherman patriarch early. The children, eleven strong, nonetheless achieved political, business, military, legal and international note. Sherman was well known to Washington DC. His uncompromising war tactics are well publicized; he considered “hard war” a necessity to achieving permanent union. Despite his lionized figure in simple histories of heroes and villains, Sherman was no modern thinker on racial equality. He wrote, “Theoretical notions of humanity and religion cannot shake the commercial fact that their labor is of great value and cannot be dispensed with,”

among many other explicit rationalizations of slavery. “Two such races cannot live in harmony save as master and slave,” he wrote indefensibly to his wife in 1860.

History is a deceit. Yet it is also the paths to many truths. The authors of history—academics, researchers, museums, universities—bring singular points of vantage to episodes in which no one experience or telling chronicles the complete set of interactions.

In Pepperdine endowed law professor Robert Pushaw’s 2018 review of Ron Chernow’s book *Grant*, he writes, “Grant’s experience during that war gradually brought about a profound change in his views on race. Grant’s transformation reflects the evolution of the very aims of the Civil War, which began as a fight to save the Union but eventually added the goal of ending slavery.”

Ultimately, the 1877 capitulation of the presidency and collapse of Reconstruction in the face of economic recession ceded the nation’s avowed soul and deferred its reckoning on racial injustice. The financial hardships of the depression of the 1870’s exposed the intransigence of resistance to change. The swords won the American Civil War, but the ploughshares of politicians, power and advantage-taking amidst adversity eventually carried the day. In his 2017 National Review account of Richard White’s *The Republic for Which it Stands: The United States during Reconstruction and the Gilded Age, 1865-1896*, part of the *Oxford History of the United States*, Kyle Sammin writes, “After troops withdrew from Southern capitals in the late 1870’s, state government filled the vacuum and expanded their powers to create what became the Jim Crow system of segregation... a sharp line between the old *free labor* idea of Lincoln’s day and the *contract freedom* of the late Gilded Age.”

Those of us who toil in the arts and letters, and I count our fortunate fellow Literarians among them, may ask, but what of the aforementioned vaunted Gilded Age? How does it comport with the economic difficulties of the 1870’s? Sammin continues, “Both groups believed that workers had the right to take their labor where they pleased under whatever terms they and their employers could managed (*sic*) to agree upon... What changed was not the idea but the scale. The size of employers, and thus their negotiating power, increased. Workers’ power did not, unless they joined a trade union.”

The glories of industrial wealth in the U.S. eclipsed the staid business strictures of Europe, launching the American experiment into global competitiveness. Here again, history lives within a thorny thicket. There are truths in the branches and vines yet the whole organism made up of many, each weaving a path through. The noble goals of social justice, such as they may be, in Lincoln's post-Civil War America were checked by the reality of great economic inequality and tacit systemic defenses of such.

And so on to Cincinnati. 1874—the year of the upheaval of Congress following a financial panic that continued for sixty-five devastating months for most Americans—was also the first commonly recorded chapter in the story of the Art Palace of the West. The 1876 hundredth birthday of the American colonies' declared independence from British rule served as a moment for celebration. The broken nation, less than ten years distant from the assassination of its wartime president, saw a chance for a nationalist statement about the higher callings of its people. In 1874, the Women's Centennial Executive Committee of Cincinnati formed with Elizabeth William Perry as president. The sole purpose was to send a sampling of fine women's artmaking from Cincinnati to the national commemorations in Philadelphia. Fundraisers followed—notably a Martha and George Washington teacup and saucer party that drew “thousands” in Mt. Auburn. Patriotism abounded and the American flag was omnipresent. Shortly following, the group held a highly successful three-day Carnival of Nations sale fair in Exposition Hall next to the site of today's Music Hall. Exposition Hall, an enormous but rudimentary space, with its tin roof and wooden beams, spoke to Cincinnati's ascendance as a center of arts and industry. Its shortcomings as a choral venue led to the construction of our Music Hall.

By 1876, Benn Pitman of the University of Cincinnati School of Design, Henry L. Fry and William Henry Fry brought national attention to art carving, ceramics and textiles by formidable Cincinnati women in a special pavilion at the Centennial Exhibition. The sensation caused by such fine work from the western frontier swelled pride in the Committee and our city. Yet in truth the exhibition was hard-won by the volunteer leadership. Cincinnati's own Alfred Goshorn, director general of the Centennial, earlier in 1875 reneged on a commitment to a space

for women's work in the main exhibition. The affront was nontrivial to Cincinnatians; the local committee wrote, "We feel keenly the injustice of putting women on a different footing from other exhibitors." The ladies responded by launching an alternative exhibition in their own pavilion, at the expense of the combined women's committees, with substantial real estate devoted to the Cincinnati Room. In the Cincinnati Art Museum's *Art Palace of the West, A Centennial Tribute, 1881-1981*, Kenneth R. Trapp, Curator of Education cites C.B. Norton's 1876 Centennial catalog: "The wood-carving of the ladies of Cincinnati deserves wide remembrance, not alone for its exquisite beauty, nor for the evidence it presented of that patience which is one woman's chief good qualities, but because it gave signs of culture which are in themselves promise of future good to the nation."

Immediately following the close of the Centennial, attended by eight million people over six months, the Cincinnati committee reorganized itself, "to advance women's work, more particularly in the field of industrial art." Mary Louise McLaughlin and Maria Longworth Nichols were among the distant travelers who had made the trip.

Less than two months later ambitions back home grew again. A coeducational meeting launched a volunteer study group in Cincinnati, "to prepare a scheme for the organization and establishment of an Art Museum and Training Schools." The chair summarized, "The ladies are aware of the magnitude of the proposition to inaugurate successfully a movement for a museum, with its masterpieces of fine and industrial art, its library and training schools." It is worth noting that nine leading men separately banded together, "in order to inspire confidence in those who may wish to contribute to the support of the enterprise." The men astutely identified an economic development opportunity in the trades of industrial arts, adeptly proven by the volunteer labors of the women with whom they circulated. The men's names are known today: Bullock, Davis, Dexter, Harrison, Nichols, Wilson, Winslow, the ubiquitous Goshorn, and Joseph Longworth.

Here the strands of recorded history coincide. The flagging economic conditions of the day and long period of continued recession in 1877 finally tempered the dreams of Cincinnati's elite. When words and meetings moved to the necessity of general fundraising, progress slowed and

halted. The fate of the new enterprise hung in the balance. Most entrepreneurial cities could dream, but could Cincinnati overcome the inertia of scarce resources?

At this juncture, a retrospection to earlier 19th century Cincinnati is in order. Nicholas Longworth, the most unlikely hero of Cincinnati history, was born in 1782 on the east coast in the simmering late years of post-revolution America. Before the turn of the century he went west and found himself under tutelage of Jacob Burnet reading the law in Cincinnati.

By account of Abby Schwartz in 1988's Taft Museum exhibition and text, Longworth's own legal practice thrived alongside the rapid growth of the frontier city. His speculation on Cincinnati's future was demonstrated in his acceptance of land titles when clients were short on funds. By the age of thirty-eight, Longworth no longer needed to practice law and reinvented himself as a real estate magnate and man of culture.

Nothing could have been more unexpected. Nicholas Longworth was a man slight in stature and eccentric in behavior. In 1841, the talented nineteen-year-old painter Lilly Martin Spencer relocated from Marietta and remarked on Longworth, "... A little bit of an ugly man came in... he came forward and, taking my hand and squeezing it hard, he looked at me with a keen, earnest gaze... His manners are extremely rough and almost coarse, but his shrewd eyes and plain manner hide a very strong mind and generous heart." His obituary of 1863 was unusually frank, noting that Longworth "would confine his donations to the worthless and wretched vagabonds that every one else turns away from." Abraham Lincoln, on his visit to Cincinnati in 1857, sought out the famed seventy-five-year-old Longworth. Found in his vineyards, the tattered gardener hid his identity and toured Lincoln with the explanation, "My master, they say, is a queer duck." Upon discovery he said, "Sometimes I get 10 cents and sometimes as much as a quarter for showing visitors my grounds." His affinity for artists and changemakers was well known. Worthington Whittredge's biography, again cited by the Taft Museum's Abby Schwartz, praises, "It may be said with entire truth that there was never a young artist of talent who appeared in Cincinnati, and was poor and needed help that Mr. Longworth, if asked, did not willingly assist him."

The American West as a tabula rasa for meritocracy, educational opportunity and unspoiled landscape was both fodder and pursuit for Longworth's success. The late 1830's and 1840's, arguably Longworth's creative prime years, form an encyclopedia of societies and endeavors to activate Cincinnati as the great American experiment, free from Europe's gentry and its obstacles. The Cincinnati Academy of Fine Arts of 1838 had a deep impact for artists and patrons. 1847's Western Art Union was even more expansive in its vision: "to render the city a school for art, a mart for the elegant productions of the pencil, the burin and the chisel—a center for the concentration of the patronage of the arts of our country." It managed its own exhibition space and housed studios for Cincinnati artists, akin to the American Art Union in New York. Its subscription-based purchase model lasted only five years but made an impact. At the highest level of ambition, the National Portrait and Historical Gallery project of 1851 nearly accomplished its aim of acquiring the paintings of Philadelphia's Peale Museum and forming a national institution in the heartland. Longworth was instrumental in all.

This very club, the oldest of its type in America, was formed in 1849. Before and following, the reformed Cincinnati College resurfaced in 1835 and eventually won Charles McMicken's bequest in 1858 and the McMicken School of Design, today's Art Academy of Cincinnati, in 1869. The Young Men's Mercantile Library planted its idealistic roots in 1835. Perhaps most successful was the 1828 Ohio Mechanics Institute, housed on the site of today's dilapidated Terrace Plaza Hotel at Sixth and Vine. It branched into the fine arts, particularly the "useful, fine and ornamental." Wendy Jean Katz's research enumerates Cincinnati art exhibitions of the period as also including the Western Museum, the Firemen's Fund, Ball's Daguerrean Gallery, Faris' Daguerrean Gallery, the Western Association for the Encouragement of Manufacture and the Arts, the Shakespeare Gallery, Wiswell's Gallery, the Cincinnati Gallery of the Fine Arts, Cincinnati Athenaeum and Society of Literary and Educational Discussion, the Cincinnati Sketch Club, and the Cincinnati Drawing and Painting Gallery. Interest was high and the scene active.

Amidst each of these efforts, an intriguing 1840 society bears inspection. Katz's *Regionalism and Reform: Art and Class Formation in Antebellum Cincinnati* credits the competitive environment for arts, education and culture as the cause of the demise of the important Cincinnati Academy of Fine Arts. It more particularly points to the success of the Section of

Fine Arts of Cincinnati's Society for the Promotion of Useful Knowledge. Most Cincinnati artists of potential and renown were members. Nicholas Longworth, once again, was a sponsor.

The Society for the Promotion of Useful Knowledge was predicated on fourteen active divisions—fine arts along with, in Katz's description, "the professions (law, medicine, teaching), the sciences (exact, political, and natural), and the liberal and practical arts (literature, philosophy, history, language, commerce, agriculture, statistics)." It was an outgrowth of the more inward-facing Cincinnati College of Teachers. The shared goal was the offering of "moral, intellectual and social resources" to the citizenry.

The Cincinnati society's art gallery charged admission to its annual exhibition, a show which in 1841 was unfathomably large in scale with 238 works. The artist members read far more democratically than do other social and academic societies: Kellogg, Beard, Frankenstein brothers, Read, Whittredge, Hiram Powers, Powell, Sonntag, Eaton. But again, Nicholas Longworth as a sponsor.

The 1842 exhibition of the Society for the Promotion of Useful Knowledge was advertised in the Cincinnati Enquirer on June 8th, 1842 with notice of opening the next day "in the large Saloon on Third Street, between Walnut and Vine, and continue for one month... No charge will be made for admission to Clergymen, to Artists of Cincinnati and vicinity, the members of the Section or Cincinnati Academy, or to those who have furnished more than two specimens for the exhibition." Robert Duncanson placed three paintings in that exhibition.

The Society for the Promotion of Useful Knowledge's aspirations were grandiose; the 1899 Report of the Commissioner of Education of the U.S. Bureau of Education describes the Society as "the extension of the influence of the college" and the formation as "aiding in the improvement and extension of practical education, and of laying the foundation of the great Western Academy of the Sciences and General Literature." The dream of Ormsby Mitchel, the Western Academy never materialized. But Mitchel's project to place a telescope in Cincinnati on Mount Ida, later relocated to Mount Lookout, did. Nicholas Longworth assisted with the land and the Cincinnati Observatory was born. The Society had promoted useful knowledge indeed.

Meeting on the first Thursday of each month, the board of the Society for the Promotion of Useful Knowledge wrote in its 1841 minutes, “The highest charity and the plainest justice is to share with others, especially those who have few advantages, what gives most light, strength and joy to our own souls. Again, free institutions are based on the conviction, that every individual, without regard to class and condition, has a right, limited only by his degree of capacity, to all the virtue and intelligence which the community possesses, and is entitled to the best opportunities for growth and usefulness which the community can give. Only by the acknowledgement of this right, in profession and practice, can free institutions be preserved.”

The basis for the odd phrasing of the Society derives from as early as 1773 in Virginia, with the Virginia Society for the Promotion of Useful Knowledge. The Encyclopedia of the Thomas Jefferson Foundation states, “Thomas Jefferson was no doubt a charter member.” Empirical science espoused by the Society gained great momentum, but the interruption of the American Revolution made its span and influence short-lived. The American Society for the Promotion of Useful Knowledge had already merged into the American Philosophical Society in 1769. Some smaller local societies regrouped and found traction in fits and starts after the Revolutionary War years, yet without central organization. Thus, each became something different.

Cincinnati’s 1840 revival was broad and ambitious, befitting the attitude of the city. John P. Foote, later author of 1855’s *The schools of Cincinnati and its vicinity*, served as president. Fifteen lectures were planned, with “generally about five hundred persons present.”

In his volume, Foote recounts, “The association... indulged in visions of future usefulness—as influences beneficial to society—as bright as those brought before the minds of the votaries of ambition—and as delusive.” “The principal cause of the decline and fall of this institution was the same that has produced the same effect in the cases of many other valuable institutions, viz: - the want of an endowment to supply the funds for defraying the necessary expenses.” Foote continues with, “... though it could not do what it attempted, yet the effort to do it, was one of those which will inspire desires, and future efforts, to effect the same result, perhaps in some other more effective form... The occasional failure of plans of beneficial institutions, are not to

be taken as proofs either of the impossibility or impolicy of establishing such institutions; but only as notifications that some different systems of operations should be pursued or a more favorable season selected for their commencement.”

We return now to 1877, thirty-five years from the idealistic lectures of the Society for the Promotion of Useful Knowledge. A civil war and a beginning of reckoning with the national stain of slavery permanently reshaped American identity. The Gilded Age was upon us yet joblessness and economic depression defined the experience of Americans in the industrial centers. In Cincinnati, boom times nevertheless continued and the city’s astounding population growth is now a matter of city planning lore. Fewer than 25,000 Cincinnatians in the 1830’s exploded to nearly 300,000 in the 1880’s.

And so, the enterprise to create an art museum and school, generated with so much energy after the nation’s Centennial, sparked with a series of public lectures in Cincinnati. The promotion of useful knowledge rose again. With the constitutional crises of the Grant and Hayes presidencies and Reconstruction far away in Washington DC and the South, Cincinnati invited Colonel Sidney Maxwell, George Ward Nichols and Charles P. Taft in a strategic approach to gain public interest in arts and education. It worked.

Sidney Maxwell, superintendent of the Chamber of Commerce, spoke eloquently on March 11, 1868 at Pike’s Opera House. His topic was not an art museum, nor the fine arts at all. He opened with, “It is not the purpose of the lecture to consider the subject of manufactures in its artistic bearings, but mainly, from a business stand-point, to indicate very briefly it needs must be, what our manufactures are, and what we have reason to expect from them, in connection with our future growth.”

The Women’s Art Museum Association’s patience and indirectness on the topic became more focused on March 20, when George Ward Nichols interpreted his book *Art Education Applied to Industry* for the audience. Published after the Centennial, Nichols wrote: “the term art education is used... in the largest sense. It means the artistic and scientific instruction applied to common trades and occupations, as well as to the fine arts. It means that the educated sense of the

beautiful is not the especial property of one class, but that it may be possessed and enjoyed by all.”

The sponsors brought the point home on April 5 with Charles Taft’s treatise at Pike’s on *The South Kensington Museum: What it is; How it originated; What it has done and is now doing for England and the World*. The not so subtle subtitle further reads: “The adaptation of such an institution to the needs and possibilities of this city.” The argument was made, in three parts with craft and adeptness. It was not lost on the crowd that the new South Kensington Museum was the most advanced museum of its type, opening in 1857 and surpassing the academically hidebound British Museum in popularity. Today, the South Kensington Museum is the esteemed and beloved Victoria & Albert Museum.

The story from here forward is well known to Literarians and most Cincinnatians. By 1880, Charles West donated the initial \$150,000 for the first purpose-built art museum west of the Alleghenies. The mayor of Cincinnati declared October 9 to be Museum Day with, “all public offices be closed... and that all public and private buildings be decorated with flags, etc., and that the day be otherwise celebrated as a public holiday.” West’s gift was matched by public subscription and the Cincinnati Art Museum was on its way. West later gave another \$150,000 in endowment to support the museum, echoing the sentiments of John Foote and his earlier admonitions about the sustainability of public institutions.

Once again, the Longworth family resurfaces in the history. The city’s shortsighted refusal to purchase parts of Nicholas Longworth’s vineyards as parkland between 1818-1846 cost the taxpayers dearly in real estate price escalation. The need for clean water and an adequate public works infrastructure from 1865-1881 finally did make Longworth’s Garden of Eden desirable, regrettably after his passing. The “People’s Park,” as the mayor referenced it, opened under the Board of Park Commissioners with landscape architect Adolph Strauch at the helm. An 1882 agreement gifted twenty acres to the newfound Art Museum Association. The Cincinnati Art Museum opened its doors in grand fashion in 1886.

Meanwhile, the long economic malaise across the country and Europe showed signs of breaking in the United States by the end of the 1870's. But chaos resumed with a severe market crash and another depression in the early 1880's followed by transformative industrial innovation. The Gilded Age and its uneven prosperity closed with attitudinal change and the Progressives found fertile ground for a reset of the national conscience.

Ulysses S. Grant, he of the phantom middle initial, passed in the summer of 1885, only sixty-three years old. More than a million attended his funeral. His completed memoirs achieved wide popularity. William T. Sherman lived on and died at a mature seventy-one, spending time with painting, literature and theater. His memoirs of 1875, sixteen years before his end of life, largely focus on the War and were reissued in 1886 only with explanatory letter responses and maps. He had declined the 1884 Republican presidential nomination with the famous words, "I will not accept if nominated and will not serve if elected."

By 1886, the Women's Art Museum Association of Cincinnati completed its work with the resolution, "... the object in view of which the Association was formed is accomplished by the opening of the Cincinnati Art Museum in Eden Park." The now Sir General Alfred Goshorn, the very same who led the Philadelphia Centennial and crossed the Women's Centennial Executive Committee, served as the appointed first director of the Cincinnati Art Museum.

And so in conclusion I return to the Society for the Promotion of Useful Knowledge. Then as now, the contours and textures of history are formed both by knowledge itself and by its promoters, its uses and its imperfect people. The work to illuminate the full spectrum of history is essential and binds us together in an interweave of experiences that approach truth.

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