The Cooperative Spirit

There is no end which human will despairs of attaining through the combined power of individuals united in a society.

Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*

Every man composes a link in the great chain of being; and a sympathetic feeling, like the electric spark, passes from one to another.

*Cincinnati Mirror, and Western Gazette of Literature, Science, and the Arts*

We should say that they have chosen a Franklin as the patron of their city, and the doctrines of the goodnatured Richard for their creed and gospel.

*Western Monthly Magazine*

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In reappraising the implications and significance of Frederick Jackson Turner’s “Frontier” thesis, Professor G. W. Pierson of Yale University asked this question: “How account for the organizing and cooperative talents of the Americans consistently with any thoroughgoing moral or ideological individualism?”

1 American historians have slighted this paradox, preferring to dwell upon the tradition of “individualism,” more in keeping with our popular folklore, than to examine what is now considered a kind of “alien” importation—the phenomenon of “association” or “cooperation.” That both “individualism” and “cooperation” developed simultaneously from our national beginnings and helped to determine the character of our institutions was clear to an observer like Tocqueville, but in later years the achievements of

the triumphant individual came to overshadow the role of the association or group. Spokesmen for the post–Civil War plutocracy elaborated on the beauties of free enterprise; the success code, composed of maxims and generalizations no longer appropriate for an industrialized and restricted society, glorified those personal virtues which alone could produce economic prosperity. Finally, the influences of the frontier interpretation of American history has tended to support this overemphasized notion of the individual’s function in American development. It furnishes a colorful but very incomplete background for our national past and ignores a set of powerful forces which, in this writer’s opinion, were largely responsible for the greatness and prosperity of the United States.

What was this tradition of cooperation? How was it reconciled with the gospel of individualism? And how was it objectified in the social life and institutions of a youthful western community? To answer these questions the investigator must first turn back to the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, to the pre-Revolutionary days when the principle of disinterested benevolence and the individual’s obligation to the community were sanctioned for spiritual and practical reasons. “Every individual,” said one typical pronouncement, “cannot but be sensible that he is not a Whole, and capable of subsisting by himself; but rather a member of a great Body of Mankind, which must dissolve and perish, unless the several Parts are compacted and kept together by some common Tie;—and this Tie can be nothing else, but Universal Benevolence.”3 “True Virtue,” whether interpreted in Calvinist or deist terms, meant the love of someone other than one’s self.

The principle of social obligation had been enunciated in the Puritan principle of “Stewardship,” which required God’s elect, and especially the magistrates, ministers, and other officers of church and state, to assume special responsibilities to society. As one election sermon put it: “Publick Persons must have Publick Affections as well as Relations. They are more responsible to God than others and more concerned in the Sins of the Land and Places where they have charge than others.”4 But practical considerations, too, determined the preference for “the Welfare of Communities to that of Individuals.” Motives other than pure benevolence played a part in the agitation for schools and charities, in Cotton Mather’s suggestions for social action. The ignorant and idle, to Benjamin Wadsworth, were not only

2. R. H. Gabriel, The Course of American Democratic Thought (New York, 1940), 158.
3. Samuel Cooper, A Sermon Preached in Boston, New-England, Before the Society For Encouraging Industry and Employing the Poor (Boston, 1753), 12.
4. John Rogers, A Sermon Preached Before His Excellency the Govenour (Boston, 1706), 48.
likely "to prove Vicious themselves," but "Paysonnis, Infexious Plagues to the Publick. A little Leaven," he preached, "Leavens the whole lump; what will one scabby sheep do?" Cooperative action became, therefore, social necessity as well as a source of diversion. Men organized societies for practical purposes, to promote the general and spiritual welfare, to correct abuses and reform vice.

As colonial society in America grew more secular, the practical and rational arguments for mutual cooperation were heard more frequently than moral and ethical arguments. And Benjamin Franklin, inspired by Cotton Mather's sensible theories on the forming of useful projects, became the prototype of the eighteenth-century social man. Franklin symbolized the urban. He was the modernizer of obsolete institutions, the efficient administrator who accelerated a slow "man-power age" by the instrument of joint effort. He correctly gauged the potentialities of an aroused public opinion, and he learned how to control it. It was this perfect archetype of American citizen, this urban civilized man, whom the country, and notably the trans-Allegheny West, chose as its patron saint.

Franklin's extraordinary influence and popularity in the West can be seen in the number of cities, counties, and societies dedicated to him, and in the frequency with which he was cited in the literature of the day. A model citizen, businessman, philanthropist, and intellectual, he beautifully exemplified public spirit fused with personal success. That is to say, in the words of a Cincinnati paper, he left no debts and he was useful. This was a utilitarian age, it must be remembered, when only the functional and scientific were respected, when teachers held up the Bacons, the Franklins, and the Henry Broughams as worthy of emulation and sneered at inactive theoreticians. The day of the "visionary," a word always carrying an opprobrious connotation, was passing away. Harmless but unprofitable men who mused apart, declared one Cincinnati editor, no longer would receive veneration. At last the educated, engaged in practical pursuits and tied down by no restrictions, might seek unlimited rewards. And Franklin stood as the antithesis of the dreaming scholar; he was the successful man of enterprise who, while he enriched the community, enriched himself. Edward Mansfield called such

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5. Benjamin Wadsworth, Rulers Feeding & Guiding Their People, With Integrity and Skillfulness (Boston, 1753), 13.
activities “Christian” and “utilitarian,” “eminently profitable”; at the same
time they strengthened “the chords of peace and union.”

Franklin, Timothy Walker once said, had been one of the first to perceive
that as a lone individual without means he could do little for the public good,
but that with the help of others, he could accomplish anything. What Frank-
lin did was, in a sense, to exploit the “social dispositions of his countrymen,”
to give the naturally benevolent tendencies of Americans impulse and direc-
tion. Without these associations for human improvement, Walker believed,
only “a bare and miserable skeleton of social existence would remain.”

Walker characteristicly emphasized the instrumental implications of as-
sociation rather than the ethical or moral. To the statement “Many can
accomplish what one cannot,” he added a more mercenary sentiment: “We
mean to receive as much as we give, and we ask others to join us on that
principle.” Even cultural societies could not simply be regarded as agen-
cies of benevolence and generosity. Like banks and insurance companies,
they were joint stock companies, formed for mutual benefit and paying
dividends.

How had men lived before this heaven-sent device of association revolu-
tionized the world? Walker advanced the popular theory that not until after
the “dark ages” was this principle known. In that dismal era (usually de-
scribed by western orators as stagnant, unproductive, and primitive), the art
of combination languished. No one thought of adding his contributions to
those of his fellows. “What we now admire under the name of public spirit,”
Walker said, “that noble and expansive feeling which identifies self with
community, and works with such resistless energy for all great and salutary
purposes, was left to exhibit its mighty operations in very recent times.”

But the revelation soon appeared, and men without large private fortunes
recognized the necessity of accumulating funds by association. In no country
was this device more practicable than in America, where the spirit of national
institutions encouraged the pooling of resources. Walker’s description of the
process is interesting:

Some individual conceives a high or useful enterprise. He has not the
means to execute it himself; but he proposes it to those around him, and

10. Walker MSS, II, Walker Papers, Library of Ohio Historical and Philosophical Society,
59–64.
11. Ibid.
12. Ibid.
they, if it be reasonable, concur in his views. The flame once kindled spreads like a fire in the forest. A society is formed, and funds begin to accumulate. Emissaries are sent out to form other branches, and these correspond and cooperate with the first. The boundaries of states form no barrier. Sometimes nation emulates nation. Thus the drop of charity grows into a stream, the stream soon swells into a river, and the river pours its accumulated treasures into an ocean of social benevolence.\(^{13}\)

Such was the belief of a prominent lawyer in Cincinnati, and what he had to say about association in general reflected, to a large degree, the feelings and attitudes of his fellow citizens. Obviously, a certain amount of mutual dependence was to be expected in a young and insecure community, a community lacking adequate credit facilities and continually threatened by the hazards of climate, fire, flood, and disease. A society of “lone wolves” could not have survived. Businessmen joined together to organize their banks and insurance companies, to build steamboat lines, or to protect themselves against the incursions of foreign merchants. Poor people pooled their money to store up fuel supplies when prices were low. Citizens, hungry for culture or aping the eastern society from which they had so recently divorced themselves, established social and improvement clubs, while immigrants from Europe joined together and formed societies with their own countrymen. According to Timothy Flint, these charitable, reform, fraternal, and benefit societies were capable of removing mountains and achieving “seeming impossibilities.”\(^{14}\) Even the societies having no immediate practical value, it was recognized, while not actually producing gold, might indirectly pay out golden dividends.

It would be very misleading, however, to attribute all cooperative experiments in Cincinnati simply to cold expediency. If societies attracted membership because they achieved certain objectives through joint effort which no single individual could have accomplished, they also gratified the humane feelings of the citizens. Apparently, the people personally benefited from working together, but they also derived a keen satisfaction.

Associations, as Walker implied, sprang up naturally in a democracy where no fixed ruling class with a tradition of social responsibility and control directed civic undertakings. Here was no centralized government ma-

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achinery which planned and managed public enterprises. No inflexible caste division split American society into isolated groups and limited the diversions and opportunities of the people. On the contrary, a vast anonymity and sameness, a complete absence of glaring distinctions, encouraged men and women to seek out those with kindred interests and to find a place for themselves. Societies or associations not only satisfied human gregariousness; they also gave the individual a sense of belonging to something, something which helped to distinguish him from the mass of his fellows.

Membership in a trade union, in a missionary society, in a science club, in all the philanthropic, cultural, and economic organizations exfoliating from Cincinnati society thus gave security and place to the individual. And as the city grew larger and more heterogeneous, the numbers and kinds of organizations multiplied. No matter how poor a man was, or of what race, religion, and nationality, he could find some group that would take him in. These indispensable groups or associations carried out activities beyond the sphere of the government but tremendously important to the welfare of the city. Indeed, it is not too farfetched to maintain that Cincinnati’s cultural reputation, as well as her growth and prosperity, could be largely attributed to group rather than individual enterprise.

One might ask, at this point, how a faith in cooperation could be reconciled with the militant individualism of the success code. In their reliance upon local cooperation and their rejection of outside interference, were independent Americans, as Tocqueville suggested, merely showing their distrust for authority? Did the association, by giving concrete form to an ideal held in common by many people, at the same time increase individual zeal and accelerate individual initiative? Was cooperation, in short, ever disconnected from practical self-interest? It is certainly possible to argue that cooperation and individualism were not mutually exclusive. But even if we accept this seeming paradox, how could a society affirm the doctrine of cooperation and utilize the maxims and methods of Napoleon? How could an educational system which encouraged rivalry, ambition, and business zeal be harmonized with the ideal of general welfare?

We find an answer to the dilemma in a statement which appeared in one of the Cincinnati newspapers: “In a republic, the prosperity of the country is intimately blended with that of each individual citizen . . . a citizen may

15. Alexis de Tocqueville, Democracy in America, ed. Francis Bowen (Cambridge, 1864), II, 149.
pursue his individual benefit in connection with a high consideration of his country's good, without laying himself under any imputation of a want of patriotism, or acting under purely selfish motives." If one believed this, there need be no contradiction between personal acquisitiveness and joint enterprise. Cooperation enriched the individual; individual pursuits benefited the whole. Trusting in the power of Adam Smith's "Unseen Hand," the businessman of Cincinnati could follow his own calling with the comforting knowledge that his ambition and zeal were synonymous with public spirit. Business welfare was simply another name for public welfare.

The large number of societies organized in Cincinnati during the twenties and thirties indicates the widespread faith in the efficacy of association. Indeed, the formation of societies became almost a craze. Through the simple magic of combination, it was confidently expected that any reform or project would be speedily accomplished. Group effort would somehow colonize the slaves, purify the morals of riverboatmen, construct a seaman's hospital, or convert the heathen. Few citizens in Cincinnati would have dared to participate in any associationist schemes so drastic and far-reaching as the Fourier or Owenite communities. Association, after all, was conceived of as an effective device to quicken social progress; it was intended to complement rather than to provide a substitute for free individual enterprise. But the group activities of urban men and women at this time might be regarded as a bourgeois counterpart to the radical communal experiments.

The amazing proliferation of societies reached what some considered to be alarming proportions. Religious bodies, in particular, seemed to lose their perspective and to launch campaigns for the organization of auxiliary church groups without considering the danger of unnecessary multiplication and excessive overlapping. One church, for example, besides forming a branch of the American Colonization Society, organized affiliated chapters among the women and children of the congregation. It was not unusual for a man to join the main society and have his wife, his son, his daughter, and even his

17. Although the "complacency and delight" with which the citizens viewed their "favorite City of the Woods" may have appeared to be selfish, the *Liberty Hall and Cincinnati Gazette* declared: "It is not an abstract and odious selfishness which considers only a personal advantage; but it is the germ of that local and social partiality, which in its enlargement constitutes the patriot's virtue, and is the legislature that binds a nation to itself" (Jan. 21, 1825).
infant child enrolled in separate auxiliaries. Even well-meaning and devout people occasionally grew impatient with this complex arrangement.

"The truth is that we are society mad," an article in one of the city papers concluded: a "violent mania" seemed to prevail among "a small minority of the community" who directed public sentiment on this subject. Although societies for certain purposes had accomplished much good and deserved all the support they received, the author of this criticism admitted, their indiscriminate organization "on all occasions for all purposes" nevertheless might well destroy their influence. It was reaching the point, he predicted, where women and children in Cincinnati would soon form a society to pay off the national debt. At this time (1830) he listed fifty of the sixty or seventy religious societies established in the city.\(^{19}\)

Protest against the epidemic of religious and charitable societies, like the charge of church domination, cannot be attributed to mere sectarian malice. Because charity agents for local and national groups continually badgered for contributions, it is not surprising that some should complain of the "designing self-server," the "weak headed enthusiast," who constantly dunned the hardworking citizens.\(^{20}\)

Agents for new societies usually followed a stereotyped procedure. They would at first obtain the sanction of all the religious leaders in the city, "held as obligatory as the papal mandate,"\(^{21}\) then issue announcements to the press, and wind up with an open meeting to raise funds. In this way, these religious organizers built up an amazing series of missionary, tract, Bible, Sunday school, and benevolent societies among adult groups, young men and women, and children.\(^{22}\) In Cincinnati pious and public-spirited men and women lent sympathetic ears to any useful or humanitarian project. Proposals for prison discipline societies, schools for the blind, medical dispensaries, hospitals, asylums, and charity schools were at least entertained, if not always acted upon.\(^{23}\)

Responsibility for directing many charitable enterprises usually fell to a certain class of devout and respectable but not always efficient women "man-

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19. Ibid., Sept. 4, 1830.
21. Ibid.
22. A typical example was the Juvenile Society for benevolent purposes, composed by "misses" aged nine to fifteen, meeting and working one afternoon every two weeks and raising funds for charity schools and missions. Joshua L. Wilson MSS (University of Chicago, Chicago), XI, 1633.
agers” frequently selected for other reasons than ability or experience. As an expression of esteem for their minister, they might elect his wife or near relation to a place of authority without considering the capabilities of the candidate. Others were chosen to win over an influential family or to attract a new resident. Some took office because of their popularity, some merely by chance. As a result, well-meaning incompetents and impractical misfits sometimes ran a society into debt, bungled its meetings, and ultimately destroyed its effectiveness. The women, it was urged, ought to place more weight on “talent, education, or capacity” and less on family and church connections. Talent might be found in all circles of society, a critic in the *Cincinnati Chronicle and Literary Gazette* declared: “There are pious and intelligent women to be found among our mechanics, our tradesmen, our merchants, our professional classes.”

But even though one admits the excessive zeal, snobbery, and incompetence of these religious and charitable societies, they nevertheless acted as powerful influences in city life and stood for a noble if sometimes impracticable ideal. The assumptions of a society are highly significant even when they fail to become objectified in human behavior. Frequent affirmation of the cooperative method and flowery announcements of the humanitarian programs to be realized through association must therefore not be dismissed as rhetoric. When Bellamy Storer told a temperance group in 1833 that “our whole social system is built, not on the happiness of the few, but on that of the many,” and that whatever is “calculated to produce so noble an end is worthy of an enlightened age,” he did not accurately describe the society in which he lived, but he did articulate the philanthropic ideal of his audience. A more detailed analysis of a few of the benevolent enterprises carried on during the years between 1819 and 1838 will show how the citizens partially approximated this ideal.

Cincinnati’s Female Association for the Benefit of Africans is a good example of a certain kind of benevolent society common in the Queen City. Organized and directed by some of the most respectable women in the city, this society supported schools for the moral instruction of blacks and cooperated with other societies engaged in the same work. Any woman who paid the twenty-five cents for the entrance fee and fifty cents for annual dues could join. Seventy-six women signed the constitution when the society

24. Ibid., Apr. 27, 1833.
started in 1817. Most of them belonged to the Dorcas Society, founded the same year to administer poor relief, and appear to have been hardworking and public spirited. The infant society, facing “the witticisms of the worldly” and “the doubts and fears of the good,” began by teaching Bible reading to some of the black servants of the members. In four years these conscientious women were instructing sixty to eighty scholars and bringing Negroes “en- chained in ignorance and superstition” to “the Kingdom of the Lord.” They believed that religious training of this kind mitigated the danger latent in a servile and uninstructed class and demonstrated the teachability of the “col- ored” race:

for notwithstanding they are placed so low in the scale of human being, it is only the pride of the human heart and the prejudice of education, together with a forgetfulness of “who maketh us to differ,” that has created any enmity to, and so often has wrought contumely and sarcasm on those who have befriended them.26

The “contumely and sarcasm” changed in fifteen years to threats of violence (see chapter 10), but the benevolent women of Cincinnati had contributed to a movement which was to have profound effects on Cincinnati history.

The care of orphans furnishes another illustration of private cooperation. Prior to 1833 the responsibility of providing for orphans fell upon the town- ship, but, as the Gazette pointed out, the “means of the township, and the duties of township officers” were “wholly inadequate to the organization of a system commensurate with the permanent interests either of orphans or the community.” As future members of society, many responsible citizens believed, orphans required more than the bare necessities; it was about time to supplement cold public charity with private benevolence and build an asylum in the city. Because the Catholics had already established the successful St. Peter’s Orphan Asylum, managed by “Sisters of Charity,”27 interested women were particularly anxious to build a home for the children of Protestant parents.

Contributions running from five dollars to five hundred dollars poured in, and in the spring of 1833 directors were elected for the new institution. True to form, the most prominent women of the community—Mrs. Gar-

26. Constitution of the Female Association for the Benefit of Africans, MS (Ohio Historical and Philosophical Society).
27. CCLG, Dec. 15, 1832; ibid., Aug. 14, 1830.
We come, a little orphan band,
       Our song of thanks to bring,
For all that makes our infant hearts
       With joy and gladness sing.
Once, sickness, hunger, want, and cold,
       Blighted our dawning years;
No father came to guide our steps
       No mother wiped our tears.29

Standing on the stage of the First Presbyterian Church, dressed in white frocks, they presented an edifying picture. The report read to the audience described an institution consisting of seventy-nine young persons, a superintendent, a teacher, and a nurse. Some had been turned out to pious families, while those who remained received instructions in the useful arts and sound religious training.

The original home, an old building standing on what had formerly served as the paupers’ burial ground, and an additional ten acres had been donated by the council to the managers of the asylum. But cramped quarters and the increase of inmates following the cholera years of 1832, 1833, and 1834 led to plans for a newer and larger building on Elm Street. Professional leaders and fraternal organizations carried on the campaign by appealing to the benevolence and civic pride of the citizens.30 An orphan asylum, a prominent clergyman declared, was the

important jewell still wanting in the crown of this “Queen of the West,” and if you desire to claim for her, the still brighter and more honorable title of a christian city, you will not be content to have such an institution as this, merely in being . . . you will have the outward and visible sign of it! to show the world, that your city is fully clad and equipped for her high destination.

30. CG, Oct. 6, 1832; Jan. 26, 1836.
The sponsors of the project had their reward when a new $18,000 building was erected ready "to receive and educate the helpless youth, cast upon the community by vice or misfortune."  

A longer list of charitable and public service institutions which came into being through the initiative of private citizens might be cited at this point: the Commercial Hospital and Lunatic Asylum, finished in 1823 after precipitating considerable controversy; the Western Asylum for the Education of the Deaf and Dumb, projected in 1819 by Joshua Wilson and opened three years later;  

the public eye infirmary, first conceived by Dr. Daniel Drake and supported after its opening in 1827 by the contributions of charitable subscribers. These and other comparable institutions frequently failed to live up to the grandiose expectations of their founders, but they reflected the resourcefulness and humanity of the citizens.  

Consider for a moment the Cincinnati Humane Society, established in 1819 for the purpose of resuscitating drowned persons. Equipped with boats, drags, a movable bed, and other kinds of apparatus deposited in houses by the riverbank, this voluntary society, like the others previously mentioned, performed a valuable service for the city. The president, officers, and directors (again, one notes, chosen from the most prominent citizens) worked out a system whereby three companies, stationed at strategic points along the river, would be ready for any emergency. Quicker rescues, better resuscitation apparatus, and the help of the town's leading doctors cut down on the number of fatal accidents, and the society, supported by the contributions of its members and by occasional grants from the city council, was able to continue its work. The Humane Society is a concrete, if modest, illustration of community cooperation.  

Indeed, the zeal with which acquisitive and hard-working businessmen devoted themselves to these humane and non-pecuniary pursuits is com-

31. Ibid., June 13, Oct. 6, 1836.  
33. In the spring of 1827, Drake had visited various eastern cities and collected a library of French, English, and Italian books dealing with diseases of the eye. One hundred citizens subscribed an annual contribution of one dollar each and the clinic opened in July of that year. See Autobiography and Correspondence of Allen Trimble, Governor of Ohio (Columbus, 1909).  
34. Benjamin Drake and Edward Deering Mansfield, Cincinnati in 1826 (Cincinnati, 1827), 36.
mendable. Even if many gave no more than lip service or the use of their names to charitable enterprises, even if social pressure rather than humanitarian concern sometimes motivated their actions, doubtless an equal number were genuinely sincere and public spirited. Certainly the number and variety of charitable institutions they sponsored and directed lends credence to the latter assumption.

Less altruistic than charitable societies, and emphasizing the practical necessity of mutual cooperation, were the mutual aid societies that flourished in Cincinnati during this period. Their popularity and the philosophy which seemed to underlie their purpose even alarmed some of the more spiritually minded. Mutual benefit, they argued, implied quite cynically the unreliability of private charity and encouraged the poor to depend upon their own plans for security. This distrust of charity, the philanthropists charged, destroyed true benevolence. Essentially a selfish conception, the mutual benefit society grew out of “a fearful apprehension of suffering from poverty,” which shook poor peoples’ “confidence in the kindness of their fellow men, and their faith in the assistance of the Most High.” These critics also predicted that aspiring demagogues would win the confidence of the benefit societies and “secure their support by flattering their ambition with the hope of establishing a workingmen’s party and government.”

Defenders of the benefit plan met these revealing objections with practical arguments. Benefit societies permitted the workingman who had no money to lend or invest to insure himself by paying out twenty-five and fifty cents a month. With these modest contributions regularly paid by fifty to one hundred members, a fund was accumulated large enough to relieve members during sickness, pay funeral expenses, and assist their widows and orphaned children. Insurance of this kind differed from a charitable bequest in important respects. The workingman received his money

not as a gift of some haughty employer, who gives to enslave the receiver; not as funds to the township appropriated to the support of paupers, but as his own, the stock he has laid up for his support in sickness. Nor is this all; it is not as soon expended as a sum of his alone would be; it is seldom that the interest is drawn, even under the most unfavorable circumstances.

35. CCLG, Sept. 10, 1831.
The society could never accumulate a sum large enough to be “dangerous to the government,” this view held, since organizations were allowed to hold only limited sums.36

But the debate between the defenders and critics of benefit societies appears to have been largely academic. A substantial number of citizens apparently did not have complete faith in the benevolence of the wealthy or, at any rate, they refused to take chances. The year 1819 saw the establishment of the Mutual Relief Society of Journeymen Hatters and Union Benevolent Society of Journeymen Taylors,37 and in the succeeding years many similar societies appeared. The Lafayette Benefit Society of Cincinnati, designed “to assist those of its members whose circumstances may require it; and particularly to render pecuniary aid to widows of deceased members,”38 invited citizens to share its benefits in 1824; the Franklin Benevolent Society took shape in 1828, and so the story ran.

The preamble to the Cincinnati Benefit Society, established in 1823, is a typical statement of the aims and principles of this type of organization.

We, Citizens of Cincinnati, being convinced of the fallibility of our nature, and our unavoidable exposure to disease and casualties, do, therefore, agree to form ourselves into an association for the purpose of raising a fund to relieve each other, in case of disease or accident.

Applicants under forty-five years of age and of good character who paid the three-dollar entrance fee became bona fide members; dues were twenty-five cents a month. The constitution of this society provided for regular administrative officers, a standing committee to examine the qualifications of the applicants, and a committee to visit and investigate the disabled. Any member who had been in the society for a year and had paid his dues received $3.60 a week, if confined to his bed, and less if he could work a little. The member got ten dollars to bury his wife, and his widow received the same for burial expenses plus an annual pension of twenty-five dollars as long as she lived decently. Shoemakers made up the larger part of the membership in this model society, although pavers, saddlers, chair painters, bookbinders, clock makers, glaziers, carpenters, confectioners, masons, coopers, and merchants were represented.39

36. Ibid., Oct. 1, 1831.
38. LHCG, Nov. 19, 1824.
Even more like a life insurance company was the Franklin Benevolent Society, organized in 1827 and operated under a more complicated system. Composed at first of mechanics and tradesmen, in later years it apparently attracted the "man of competence." A board of eleven trustees, elected by the members, appointed the officers and invested the funds in land and bank stock. No applicant over forty-five was accepted and the dues were higher than in the Cincinnati Benefit Society. Teachers, editors, liquor dealers, hatters, blacksmiths, merchants, and draymen could be found on the membership lists. Their widows counted on a fifty-dollar annuity, and the society took on the responsibility of educating their children.

Although benefit, savings, and protection societies denied admission to no responsible citizen, various native groups among the English, Scots, Irish, and Germans provided their own organizations. Those of Scottish origin banded together in the Caledonian Society, and the Scots Society watched over the families of destitute members and assembled periodically to celebrate the birthday of their patron, Saint Andrew. Irishmen formed the Erin Benevolent Society to relieve their distressed countrymen and the families of indigent members. Composed of "resident" and "honorary" members, this group required a five-dollar entrance fee and annual dues of three dollars. The largest and most active of these native bodies, the St. George Society, was made up of native-born Englishmen and the sons and grandsons of Englishmen. A charitable committee of six members remained constantly on duty to provide for the indigent. Organized in 1830 and predominantly working class in its membership, the society in 1834 numbered 139.

Social considerations undoubtedly had something to do with the formation and support of such groups in Cincinnati, particularly among the foreign born, but fear and insecurity must not be discounted as reasons for their growth. A dependence upon the rich implied an inferiority few Americans at this time would have cared to admit; poverty was regarded as somewhat akin to moral depravity. Suspicious of the motives of their social superiors and...

40. CG, Sept. 1, 1832.
41. CCLG, Dec. 27, 1834; Cincinnati Mirror, and Chronicle IV (1835): 83; CG, Sept. 1, 1836.
43. CCLG, Dec. 4, 1830.
44. See Constitution and By-Laws of the Erin Benevolent Society of Cincinnati (Cincinnati, 1828); LHCG, Mar. 20, 1828.
45. CCLG, Feb. 1, 1834.
resenting any suggestion of noblesse oblige, such men naturally turned to a practical device which enabled them to escape the pauper's doom and maintain their self-respect.

The apprehension over the possibly subversive nature of benefit societies gradually disappeared as their functions became more fully understood in Cincinnati. A similar distrust of English Friendly Societies on the part of the authorities had followed after the French Revolution, and it seems quite possible that the relief features of the Cincinnati mechanics' organizations during the 1820s concealed their trade union character. However, when wealthy and prominent men became members of various benefit groups and when the essentially conservative influence of these societies was recognized, they attained respectability. The popularity of secret benevolent societies in Cincinnati, moreover, provided a far more sensational subject for these outsiders afraid of combination.

The "joining" proclivities of the citizens had first been manifested in 1794, when Masonry got its start with the founding of the Nova Caesaria Harmony Lodge, No. 2, and by 1819 two other chapters had been instituted. A new lodge, added in 1825, commemorated Lafayette's visit to the city, and two others had appeared by 1829. Throughout this period, the Masons, comprising hundreds of the substantial citizenry, held their meetings, paraded in the streets, and celebrated public occasions. Their positions in the community, it is important to note, enabled them to withstand the anti-Masonic storm in 1831 which crippled their brother organizations in other parts of the country.

The Cincinnati press had watched with growing trepidation the westward progress of anti-Masonry. While reserving judgment on its merits or dangers, the Cincinnati Gazette, at the same time, regretted the indiscriminate censur-

46. Weisenburger, in The Passing of the Frontier, in The History of the State of Ohio, vol. 2, ed. Carl Wittke (Columbus, 1942), 86, credits the German immigrants with introducing to Cincinnati the idea of the mutual aid society. Societies of this kind, however, appeared in the city when the German population was small and unimportant, and I find no evidence of German influence. In my opinion, the mutual aid society in Cincinnati can be attributed to the English workingmen who were already thoroughly familiar with organizations of this kind before they came to Cincinnati. English Friendly societies had been in existence at least several centuries and performed the same functions as the benefit societies. Moreover, the structure and methods of the English and American organizations were curiously alike. See J. M. Baenreither, English Associations of Workingmen (London, 1893), 155–69. A study of mutual aid societies in nineteenth-century America is badly needed.

47. H. A. Ford and K. B. Ford, History of Cincinnati Ohio, with Illustrations and Biographical Sketches (Cleveland, 1881), 214.
ing of the Masons and deplored the truculent anti-Masonic attitude displayed by various religious, political, and social groups. The first important religious sortie came in 1831 when Dyer Burgess, a Presbyterian preacher, published the prospectus for his "Anti-Conspirator, or Infidelity Unmasked." Masonry's vaguely deistic overtones and revolutionary associations have always seemed to antagonize religious and political conservatives. Burgess, strangely enough, lumped Masonry with atheism and the slavery heresy and tried to expose it as "Infidelity organized and masked." In the following issues of his paper he redoubled his charges against the wolf in sheep's clothing by identifying Masonry with dueling and self-murder. Burgess' campaign did not have much effect in spite of his anti-Jacksonism. His remarks about slaveholders could not have pleased the businessmen in the city with southern clientele, and his printing of the prospectus of Garrison's Liberator must have annoyed the rabid anti-abolitionists.

The role of the Presbyterians in the anti-Masonic movement, furthermore, only intensified the anger of certain elements already provoked by interference of that denomination in secular affairs. When Burgess cited Lyman Beecher's identification of anti-Masonry with the cause of religion, when he complained of a Sunday parade of Masons "dressed in habiliments as black as superstition itself" and "preceded by the stately struttings of a pretended minister of Christ," he was insulting a respected Methodist, the Reverent O. M. Spencer, and his influential denomination. Insinuations of this kind only drew upon Burgess and his Presbyterian supporters the rejoinders of men more skilled in the arts of vilification and abuse. Masonry continued to be regarded as a noble, disinterested, and humanitarian movement.

The Order of Independent Odd Fellows, imported from Baltimore and first instituted in 1830, had to overcome the same kind of opposition as the Masons. Samuel Yorke Atlee, the Odd Fellows' most articulate defender, took pains in 1833 to repudiate the accusations that his order was made up of atheists, convivialists, deists, political cabalists, and Masons. To those who objected to the grandiloquent titles of "Right Worthy Grandsires" and "Most Excellent High Priests," he pointed out that the president of the

48. CG, May 1, 1829; Anti-Conspirator, or Infidelity Unmasked I, June 5, 1831.
49. Anti-Conspirator I (1831), 37; ibid., Aug. 27, 1831.
50. Ibid., II (1832), 266-67.
51. True Blue and Castigator, Apr. 23, 1832.
52. WMR I (1827): 300-303.
United States bore a high-sounding title. He sought further to discount the dangers of secrecy by observing that Congress itself occasionally met in secret session.  

The Odd Fellows, more closely related to the old English relief societies than the Masons, seems to have gratified both the love of secrecy and the practicality of Cincinnati men. It made rapid progress. Three years after its founding, the order claimed four hundred members, and by the following year, two hundred more. The purpose of the society, Atlee said, was "to carry into effect benevolent purposes, to inculcate principles of charity, and to enforce useful, moral precepts." In explaining the benevolent character of the order, Atlee condemned what he called "ostentatious coffin-charity" indulged in by the grinders of the poor. "After many years of labor," he said, "the massy pile is reared in memory of the venerable founder; and revenues, which might have raised up a thousand useful citizens of the State, are basely squandered to perpetuate a lie." The insurance program of the order made its members less dependent upon this "coffin-charity," while its social advantages were obvious.

Marching in funeral processions and anniversary parades, and meeting from time to time with "decorous conviviality," the Odd Fellows, like the Masons, satisfied the gregarious needs of the Cincinnati citizens and offered an escape from the humdrum routine of unremitting business. Any free self-supporting man between the ages of twenty-one and forty-five who believed in God could join. No questions were asked about the candidate's politics, sect, or occupation, and the impersonality of urban living was at least mitigated by the warmth and friendliness of fraternal association. Dressed in the gorgeous regalia of his order and carrying its "beautiful banner," the Odd Fellow enjoyed a pleasure denied to the uninitiated in his city.

If the ideals of "Friendship, Love, and Truth," the "social motto of the fraternity," were not always realized, an organization like the Odd Fellows at least struck a human and disinterested note in a community more noted for its acquiescent zeal. Here Protestants and Jews, Whigs and Democrats, clock makers, steamboat captains, architects, merchants, and professional


54. CCLG, Mar. 9, 1833.

55. Atlee, An Oration, 8.


57. CCLG, Mar. 29, 1834.
men met together and helped to counteract the disintegrating tendencies of city life which resulted from the quick increase in size and population during these transition years. "So rapidly has our city enlarged itself," the Cincinnati Journal said in 1834, "and such is the migratory character of our citizens, that we are almost strangers to one another."58 Fraternal societies tended to break down the prejudices and misunderstandings which divided people and deliberately attempted to preserve the neighborliness and mutual concern of the small village.

Just as men worked together for the purposes of charity and mutual benefit, so it was believed they might cultivate their minds quickly and efficiently through joint effort. Mutual instruction, popular lecturing, and cooperative experiments in learning seemed admirably suited to the needs and temperaments of the American people and provided the most powerful and exciting method of popular education. What better institutions than lyceums, mechanical societies, and library organizations could be devised for the proper instruction of this "great moving agitated mass" of the United States? How else could learning be disseminated throughout the land to the consequent strengthening of democracy? How many incipient Franklins, Henrys, Hamiltons, Newtons, or Byrons might be living in Cincinnati, unknown and unsung? Only societies could bring forth these hidden talents.59

Because of the peoples' restless curiosity and love of novelty, responsible citizens worried about the kind of intellectual bill of fare best suited for a young republic. The Cincinnati Chronicle warned:

If they do not hear good lecturers they will hear bad ones. If they do not hear the preacher, they will hear Mrs. Darusmont [Francis Wright] or some fanatical follower of Agrarianism. If they do not listen to history and philosophy, they will listen to animal magnetism or the Mormon bible.—In fine, the people of this country are free and consequently enquiring. They will go where enquiry is made, and will investigate for themselves; hence those who would indoctrinate them with sound knowledge must take popular means."60

This had been the view of Lord Brougham, leader of the English Whigs and founder of the Useful Knowledge Society, whose ideas on popular educa-

59. CCLG, Mar. 13, 1830.
60. Cincinnati Chronicle Nov. 4, 1837.
tion had been extraordinarily influential in America. Brougham shared with other utilitarian thinkers of his day a profound faith in the power of science. His admiration for Franklin and Bacon, his appreciation of those business virtues glorified by the American success code, his emphasis on the empirical and useful can all be found in his famous essay, "Practical Observations Upon the Education of the People" (1825), probably one of the most influential pamphlets ever written. This work, reported a Cincinnati newspaper five years after Brougham's publication, had already gone through between thirty and forty editions and had "done more, perhaps, in giving an impulse to the cause of popular education, than all the other works that have been published since the time of its appearance."61 Brougham’s plans, calling for a system of public lectures, improvement societies, and mechanic libraries, and for the publication of cheap books, 62 were quickly effected by his readers and admirers in America. Lyceums and workingmen's libraries sprang up all over the country where Brougham’s name became a byword for progressive statesmanship.63

Brougham had told the "upper classes" that the question of whether or not the people should be instructed was settled. It now remained to be seen whether the people would be well or poorly taught. If the "Working Classes" chose, they might "secure for ever the inestimable blessing of knowledge."64 It is worth noting, however, that in America the mass culture movement was an upper-class phenomenon, a program of education imposed from above on an apathetic working class. American workingmen at this time were fighting for a free school system and holding up public education as the panacea for all evils; it is doubtful whether they had the time or inclination to organize mutual improvement societies among themselves. In Cincinnati most of the projects for mutual cultivation originated with the middle-class intellectuals, the same group that organized and directed societies for the education of the working classes. Apparently only the propertied groups seemed apprehensive about the dangers posed by an unenlightened populace.

Literary clubs and societies had appeared in Cincinnati from the earliest times, a fact which would indicate the urban character of the city even during its infancy. Enough talent was available in 1806 to form a debating society,
and in 1813, when Cincinnati's population numbered something like four thousand, the town's bright young men formed the School of Literature and Arts. This society took all knowledge as its province and appears to have been the first of the ambitious cultural organizations which flourished and declined in the following years. After 1819 the number and diversity of improvement societies steadily increased. Groups of Cincinnati men and women began to meet at weekly gatherings for the purpose of discussing such problems as innate ideas, the benefits of Sunday schools, and the existence of the Devil. Occasionally a group like the Society of Investigation (1822) aroused suspicion because of its reputed radical and atheistical leanings, but for the most part politics and sectarian theology were excluded from discussions. The typical aims and conservative spirit of the improvement clubs can be found in the declaration of purpose submitted to the press in 1829 by the Washington Literary and Forensic Circle. This society of young gentlemen hoped to perpetuate and diffuse the principles of government first laid down by Washington and to disseminate a knowledge of science and truth.

Indeed, organizations like the Inquisition Society and the Legislative Club were less concerned with the kind of knowledge imparted than with the manner of imparting it. Fluency, promptness of speech, and quick perception were the abilities most highly prized in commercial communities. And the debating societies cultivated these talents. Those incapable of mastering the art of oratory concentrated on composition and learned to sway their fellow citizens through the persuasiveness of words and the clarity of thought.

One of the most influential and lasting of the debating associations that gave tone to the intellectual life in Cincinnati was the Franklin Society, founded in 1825 and continuing until about 1834. Approximately one hundred members, many of them prominent teachers, lawyers, businessmen, and politicians, belonged to this organization, which emphasized writing, declamation, reading, and debate. Two weeks before each meeting the "critical court," comprising the body of the membership, set two questions for discussion, and the president appointed the disputants for each side. When the debate ended, the president delivered his verdict and then the secretary re-

66. CG, Feb. 6, 1829.
67. CCLC, Mar. 28, 1829. For references to the Legislative Club, see MC, IV (1835), 147; ibid., IV, 211.
68. Historical Scraps MSS (Ohio Historical and Philosophical Society).
corded the vote of every member. The “critical court” also criticized and dis-
cussed written productions of the contributing members. If two-thirds of the
court felt the composition merited further hearing, it was sent to the city
newspapers. Thus, Charles Drake’s essay on the character and life of sea-
men, in which the doctor’s son discussed their heroic and vicious qualities,
was published as a good example of the society’s literary productions.

Usually the improvement society, which began with considerable fanfare
and verve, did not live up to the optimistic expectations of its founders. For a
time the members faithfully attended the meetings and punctually fulfilled
their assignments, but when the novelty wore off and no rival association of-
ered competition, then “the vis animi began to flag.”69 A period of decline
quickly followed, audiences attending the debates grew sparser, and the so-
ciety finally folded. This is the history of the Cincinnati Literary Society, the
Legislative Club, and the Franklin Society.

New organizations, however, quickly supplanted the decadent ones; the
faith in the progress of knowledge, in the ability of all men to improve them-
selves, was maintained. During their heyday these debating and literary asso-
ciations developed the expressive powers of Cincinnati’s luminaries and
provided some dramatic moments in the life of the city. One wishes more
exact transcriptions of the debates and orations existed: for example, the
clash between Charles Fox and Timothy Walker on the subject of usury, the
debate on the national currency, the arguments advanced in defense of soli-
tary confinement and against capital punishment, and the titles of the poetic
effusions and scholarly discoursesdeclaimed before earnest audiences. But
even if these details are lost, it is safe to assume that during their brief but
intense existence, debating and literary societies served both to divert and to
instruct the citizens of the Queen City.

Little more information is available about the scientific associations which
flourished in Cincinnati throughout this period, but their number and popu-
larity would seem to indicate considerable general interest in science. Natu-
ral history museums and medical societies were being formed in every
section of the country at this time. New York, Boston, Philadelphia, and
Charleston had already attained preeminence as centers of scientific study,
and American investigators were publishing their work in the natural and
physical sciences.70 New publications, lecture lyceums, and mechanical in-

69. CCLG, Feb. 8, 1834.
stitutes helped to spread interest in the sciences among the population of the West, and Cincinnati early acquired a reputation for her scientific institutions. Settlers from New York, Boston, and particularly Philadelphia probably stimulated the organization of scientific societies in the Queen City, and many citizens took up such studies as biology, mechanics, geology, and chemistry.

Dr. Drake had appealed to the utilitarian predilection of his fellow citizens when he outlined his plans for a western museum in 1820. A collection of zoological and mineralogical specimens, antiquities, and exhibits of the useful arts might at first appear to be too multifarious and inappropriate for a young community, but Drake argued that a new country could not afford to specialize. “Ancient communities, only,” he said, “exhibit a perfect separation of kindred trades and occupations, and a divorcement of the extraneous branches of science from the learned professions, to which, in young societies we find them closely united.” By studying fossils, geology, mechanics, hydrostatics, astronomy, and other related sciences, young men might begin the pursuit of their callings with some understanding of first principles and a knowledge of their country, a knowledge which no amount of foreign travel could provide. The extensiveness of scientific information, Drake concluded, determined the degree of private and public prosperity. Since efforts to promote science always paid off, he felt they should be continued even during periods of financial embarrassment. Public and private disasters, he told an audience then in the grip of a depression, were caused by ignorance. Next to faith in God, a reliance upon science and learning best prepared the individual for the trials of life.

The preamble of the constitution of the Society for Mutual Instruction in Natural Science (1827) affirmed this faith in the powers of science:

Experience has long since taught that science properly pursued has uniformly eventuated in good to man; has much enlarged the sources of his happiness, and meliorated the conditions of society. That from the collision of opinion, truth has been elicited; while the mass of facts collected through the freedom of communication, has added to the store of general knowledge. That the study of nature is the only path to self preservation,—

71. Daniel Drake, An Anniversary Discourse, on the State and Prospects of the Western Museum Society (Cincinnati, 1820), 7. Drake had an unshakable faith in the power of association which withstood hundreds of disappointments. For a classic statement of this faith, see his address to the graduating class of the Medical College of Ohio, quoted in Otto Juetten, Daniel Drake and His Followers (Cincinnati, 1909), 54.
that "the proper study of mankind is man," therefore our researches
should be directed to nature, the social compact, and to ourselves; the en-
larging the sphere of our enjoyments, and establishing principles cal-
culated to meliorate the condition of society.

This society, which seems to have been a special interest of James Gazlay,
was organized on the assumption that the expression of human intellect
knew no limits and that through a "combination of capacity and talent" bril-
liant individuals might collectively study the entire range of natural science.
Homo sapiens was so constituted that, more than any other animal, he had to
rely upon cooperation and mutual dependence. As a member of the Society
told his colleagues,

man whose food, whose raiment, and whose habitations, must be pro-
duced by complicated operations of combined labor, united with a sci-
entific knowledge of the various agricultural, manufacturing and mechanic
arts, constantly requires for his sustenance and comfort, the assistance and
good offices of great numbers of his brethren.72

The Western Academy of Natural Sciences, established by a group of the
town's leading scientists, intellectuals, and businessmen in 1835, repre-
sented another attempt to put into effect the practical principles outlined fif-
eteen years before by Drake.73 Seeking to promote the natural sciences,
especially botany, geology, and zoology, the society built up a collection of
fossils, plants, shells, and minerals, and assembled a small but select library.
Meetings were at first held at the Cincinnati College, where the authorities
provided a room to house the collection of books and cabinets.

When one considers the condition of our Valley [commented the Mirror
and Chronicle in praising the society], the immense field it opens to the nat-
uralist, and that what is now vague and oral, might, when collected and
written, not only afford pleasure to the man of science, but be particularly
useful to the men of the world, we think that none can doubt the propriety
and necessity of forming such an association, to which, as a center, all
knowledge respecting the forests, the iron, coal, lead, the fisheries, and the
animals of the West, may tend, and from which it may again go forth
clearly and with authority.74

72. Western Tiller, Apr. 27, Nov. 30, 1827.
73. Records of the Western Academy of Natural Science, MSS (Ohio Historical and Philo-
sophical Society). See Max Meisel, A Bibliography of American Natural History (Brooklyn, 1926),
II, 594–96.
The society became moribund around 1855, its collections and library later passing into the possession of the Cincinnati Society of Natural History (1871), but during its early years, it sought to encourage popular interest in natural history and did succeed in sponsoring some serious investigation.

Cincinnati doctors also founded their own societies for mutual improvement and the dissemination of science, besides supporting the non-professional associations. Such groups as the Cincinnati Medical Society (1819, 1820, 1832), the First District Medical Society (1824), the Ohio Medical Lyceum (1832), and the Hamilton County Medical Association (1837–39) held their meetings, listened to papers, built herbariums, and established pharmaceutical cabinets and libraries. Lectures and debates encouraged “ emulation”; and since the meetings were not confined to Cincinnati doctors, but included doctors in neighboring counties and advanced medical students, these societies served as vehicles for bringing together medical men from various sections of the state and country and gave Cincinnati her reputation as a medical center. Enthusiasts of science saw in the establishment of works for “the diffusion of scientific intelligence” positive indications of Cincinnati’s progress and refinement. “Whatever may be the state of any country,” a correspondent wrote in 1822, “if a general taste for scientific improvement can be excited and kept alive among its inhabitants, there is no effect more certain to follow any cause, than that such a country will become prosperous and happy.”

Two important organizations, one of them hitherto unmentioned, represented Cincinnati’s supreme efforts in the direction of mutual improvement—the lyceum and the Ohio Mechanics Institute. If these societies never achieved the visionary expectations of their founders, they nevertheless symbolized the popular faith in association and the belief that many could accomplish what one could not. An American, Josiah Holbrook, shares with Brougham the honor of inspiring these associations for the diffusion of scientific and useful knowledge. His famous recommendations for adult associations, set forth in the American Journal of Education of 1826, started a chain of lyceums that spread throughout the country, and his advocacy of

75. See Juettner, Daniel Drake, 437–41; Greve, Centennial History of Cincinnati, I, 954; CCLG, March 13, 1820; Feb. 15, 1834.
76. LHCG, July 10, 1822.
teachers' organizations, popular tracts, and the use of cheap scientific apparatus had important influence on educational circles.

Although Holbrook was apparently in touch with some Cincinnatians and probably helped to inspire the idea for the Cincinnati Lyceum, similar projects for popular education had been in existence a long time before his proposals for the adult association. Popular lectures on chemistry and botany were delivered in the Queen City before 1819. Elijah Black, well-known pedagogue and scientist, considered them the "grand outlets of information to the numerous classes who are drinking at the fountain of science"; popular lectures, he hoped, would aid the potential scientist who might not have the time, the money, or the training to pursue his studies independently. By 1819 lecture programs which would blend instruction with amusement were receiving the hearty support of at least a small number of enterprising individuals, public-spirited men anxious to further the literary and scientific reputation of their city. "Popular lectures on important subjects," one of them wrote in this year, "are eminently calculated to amuse and enlighten our citizens; to extend our literary reputation, and to convince those persons at a distance who pronounce us a commercial people alone, that we have here, both the Tyre and Athens of the west."

All through the twenties public lecturers discussed everything from the principles of steam to "collateral evidences respecting the Deluge." Drake discoursed on mineralogy and fossils; Constantine Rafinesque, who claimed he could take the mussel beds of the Ohio and manufacture pearls for the nation, told about his strange discoveries to an audience at Mr. Dorfeuille's Museum, and the Reverend Samuel Robinson, a learned Presbyterian divine, lectured on profane history. Robinson's lectures appear to have been especially appreciated, as the following tribute shows:

Yes, Robinson, before thy mighty mind,
   In grand review the world seems passing on;
Thy memory excels all human kind.
   And Clio hails thee her adopted son.

78. CCLG, Mar. 24, 1832.
79. LHCG, Oct. 14, 1816; Dec. 15, 1818; Dec. 17, 1819.
80. Ibid., Oct. 18, 1825.
81. Thomas Pierce, The Odes of Horace in Cincinnati; As Published in the "Western Spy and Literary Cadet," during the Year 1821 (Cincinnati, 1822), 22–24. Pierce made fun of this strange man and called him "Professor Muscleshellorum."
82. Constantine Rafinesque, A Life of Travels and Researches in North America and South Europe (Philadelphia, 1836), 75–76.
Her ample pages once before thee spread,
Are in that iron memory enchained;
Thou seem'st familiar with the ages fled,
And all the monarchs that have ever reigned. 83

Theology, astronomy, grammar, ancient Greece, electricity, Negro colonization—all were expounded from the lecture platform, and a tradition was set for the more formalized programs which were to follow.

The idea for the Ohio Mechanics Institute first occurred to a group of enterprising citizens in 1828 after they had listened to a course of public lectures on physical science delivered by Dr. John M. Craig. Their plans for the mental and social improvement of the Cincinnati mechanics slowly took shape, and by 1830 lectures and classes had been organized in a wing of the Cincinnati College. During the next few years purchases and gifts of books started the nucleus for a small library, and the two-thousand-dollar bequest of the liberal capitalist J. D. Garrard enabled the Institute to acquire "philosophical apparatus." 84

From seventy to eighty members attended classes and lectures during 1831, and the membership, in spite of the catastrophes of the following year, more than tripled by 1833. The secretary's report claimed 270 subscribers, of whom 180 were practical mechanics; the rest comprised a composite group of editors, merchants, tradesmen, and laborers. Annual dues of three dollars entitled the subscriber to enroll in any of a wide variety of evening courses which met from one to three times a week. Besides enjoying the privilege of attending lectures and using the library, the ambitious member could receive instruction in French, algebra, geometry, arithmetic, chemistry, geography, and architectural drawing. 85

Through the facilities of the Institute the poor mechanic might take advantage of certain educational opportunities hitherto denied to his class. Books and scientific apparatus, purchased through joint contribution, proved again the familiar Cincinnati contention that a "body of persons may accomplish for each other collectively, that which in their individual capacity, they never could obtain." 86 Even the conservatives approved of this kind of labor combination.

83. National Republican and Ohio Political Register, Sept. 2, 1825. See also CMWGLSA V (1836): 111.
84. CCLG, Feb. 26, 1831, Nov. 24, 1832.
85. Ibid., Dec. 20, 1833.
86. Ibid., Feb. 7, 1829.
The Institute carried on throughout this period, although it came perilously close to collapse on several occasions. In spite of the appeal that apprentices be encouraged to attend free public lectures of such importance to the development of the mechanics arts, only scanty audiences at first responded. And yet the Mechanics Institute had more vitality than the many ephemeral literary societies that quickly flared up and as quickly died. Some workingmen, at least, seemed to support it, and young apprentices, anxious to improve their situations, enrolled as scholars. "They are all equal," an observer reported in 1832, "therefore, unembarrassed and their mind has free scope to exert itself." Taught by practical mechanics and professional teachers, and working among themselves, they learned "through the medium of books and papers the experience of others." After completing the elementary courses, the mechanics were ready for "scientific lectures" and independent investigation.

The constitution of the Institute had established five departments: fine arts; history, literature, and moral sciences; languages; mathematics and physical science; and operative mechanics. Workingmen, as might be expected, were more interested in the last two divisions, but the scholars at the Institute heard lectures on all subjects and collected a wide and indiscriminate collection of information. The following represents a sample list of topics discussed by various businessmen, professionals, and mechanics from 1829 to 1837: the life of Mohamet [sic] and the Saracenic conquests, the French Revolution, the history of sculpture, the properties of steel, eloquence, savings institutions and public dispensaries, magic and alchemy, the influence of science upon the morals of society, optics, natural history, physics, anatomy, intellectual eminence, circulation of the blood, the advantages of a scientific education, the Constitution, the structure of the nervous system, phrenology, education and the promotion of character, electromagnetism, insanity, drunkenness, natural philosophy, republican institutions, shooting stars, elocution, the arrangement of dried plant collections, the Bible, the origin of alphabetic writing, the necessity of libraries, the English language, animal mechanics, the history of commerce, the education of the blind, manual labor schools, and education for mechanics.

Judging by this varied assortment of subjects, the directors of the Mechanics Institute believed in extensive rather than intensive education, and one wonders how successful it was as a practical training school. Apparently its defender felt that the Institute encouraged resourcefulness. The diffusion

87. Ibid., Nov. 24, 1832.
of general scientific knowledge would suggest new opportunities to those who had failed in business and would counteract the effects of depression. Whether the directors and teachers of the Institute had any grounds for such a belief is not known, but their willingness to lecture without compensation, to pay for the cost of the experiments, and to contribute sums of money indicated their strong faith in the value of this cooperative experiment.

More high-toned than the Ohio Mechanics Institute, and complementing its functions, the Cincinnati Lyceum represented another ambitious experiment in mutual improvement. Organized on a similar plan of lectures, classes, and library reading, this society numbered seventy-five members in the first year of its organization (1830) and carried the name of practically every prominent man in Cincinnati in its membership books.

The dividing of the membership into committees on natural history; antiquities; botany, geology, and manufactures; the library; and ways and means suggests the principle interests of the society, as do the titles of the lectures delivered from 1831 to 1835. Natural philosophy, civil history, the history of man, physical geography, vegetable physiology, climate and atmospheric phenomena, vices of civic life, the steam engine, the French Revolution, the conquest of Mexico, the history and prospects of lyceums, the life and character of Franklin, Galileo and his times, western geology, properties of the atmosphere, the tendencies of science, the Samothracian mysteries, hydrogen, the development of talent and the early struggles of man, the legal rights of women, the institutions and character of the Hindoos, the life of Gouverneur Morris, the physiology and habits of insects, the political influence of Quakerism, electricity, female education, popular superstitions, the philosophy of the senses, the administration of justice in Ohio, and the philosophy of fashion were some of the subjects discussed.

Sponsors of the Lyceum had carefully pointed out its practical purpose. Lyceums, declared Nathan Guilford, a famous advocate for popular education in Cincinnati, employed "a plain common-sense method, with a direct view to the communication of knowledge," and they achieved this result swiftly and efficiently. Moreover, lyceums were said to harmonize with the

88. CCLG, Jan. 8, 1831.
89. Ibid., Dec. 8, 1832.
90. As Salmon P. Chase observed in the Cincinnati American: "Who is there, to whom benefit is not derivable, from every addition made to the stock of public information? If but one individual is made more enlightened than before, those who are around him must participate in the advantage. One communicates to another, who, in turn, diffuses what he has received through the circle of his association" (from R. B. Warden, An Account of the Private Life and Public Services of S. P. Chase [Cincinnati, 1874], 198).
aims of business by developing strong and varied intellectual capacities. There is little doubt that even if this preoccupation with utilitarian matters, the emphasis on science, disturbed a few lovers of metaphysics, poetry, and eloquence, the bulk of the Cincinnati Lyceum’s supporters were attracted by its practical program. As James Hall told a Lyceum audience, natural sciences were better adapted for popular diffusion than languages and metaphysics. The kind of education, he believed, which prepared men for the contemplative, inactive life, instead of qualifying them for the business of society, was worse than useless.  

But the Cincinnati Lyceum, in spite of its practical aims, did not touch the uneducated elements in the city who might have profited most from its courses. The private lectures delivered under its auspices seem to have been patronized by the upper levels of society, or at least by men and women able to afford the two-dollar annual dues. Many citizens, wrote a newspaper editor, seemed to feel “that the institution originated in a desire to have a genteel society for the diffusion of knowledge.” Lectures, moreover, were not planned and were too frequently given by young men hardly competent to address the public. This haphazard arrangement of the program made systematic instruction difficult. It can be said, finally, that the Lyceum was merely a thinner and polite version of the Ohio Mechanics Institute, less useful and less popular. Had the two organizations been united, as some citizens wanted, the small unread library of the Lyceum would have supplemented the extensive collection of the Institute and a better and more coherent program of lectures could have been arranged.

In estimating the quality and success of these associations, one might say with Hazlitt that they “confounded a knowledge of useful things with useful knowledge.” A faith in the importance of indiscriminate details, in the value of the “cosmical ploughboy and a mob that knows hydrostatics,” guided their actions and tended to make them the purveyors of a very superficial kind of culture. Inspired generally by a shallow utilitarianism, they nevertheless failed to touch deeply the very classes for which they were theoretically designed.

Now it is, of course, very easy, from the vantage point of the present, to criticize the citizens' naive faith in the power of fact and to make fun of their superficial surveys, their wishful thinking. Yet societies of the kind described

91. Ibid., May 28, 1831.
92. *CCLG*, Nov. 9, 1833.
channeled diverging minds, stimulated and directed new energies, and formed the pattern, however crude, for the similar and more effective educational societies of the future. Perhaps it is not so important that knowledge of a kind was disseminated. It is significant, however, that societies for mutual improvement attained considerable vogue in this business community, that the value of popular culture was correctly measured, and that an ideal, held in common by many people, became objectified through cooperative means.

It has been shown how the citizens of the Queen City cooperated with one another in the organization of charitable, religious, fraternal, and improvement societies. Something now should be said about their civic celebrations, those public gatherings symbolizing common achievement and unity, which, together with the other group enterprises, interrupted the monotony of business. On numerous occasions, the people found an excuse to drop their private concerns and assemble. Besides the innumerable election parades, military marches, and processions instigated by partisan groups and particular societies, the entire city frequently turned out to pay homage to the fire department, to welcome heroes like Andrew Jackson and Lafayette, or to commemorate anniversaries. Some of these public celebrations required a great deal of joint planning and preparation.

Every July 4th the citizens participated in public ceremonies. Usually they paraded to some appointed spot, listened to an oration, and then returned home or to their hotels for the holiday dinners and the customary patriotic toasts. By conforming to this tradition citizens both demonstrated their patriotism and made a gesture in the direction of class or social unity. For on this day every class and occupation was honorably represented and paraded in concert. Mechanics bearing flags or badges emblematic of their different trades marched in a procession which included light infantry, city guards, militia officers, the committee of arrangement, the chaplain, the orator, the reader, members of the bar, judges of the Court of Common Pleas, the city council, the mayor, the alderman, college students and professors, and ordinary citizens. In the twenties the afternoon festivities were enhanced by the parade of Sunday-school children. Dressed in white and carrying standards bearing “appropriate moral inscriptions,” they presented, according to contemporary reports, “a most animating and delightful prospect” for Christian freemen. Various groups and societies vied with one another to

94. _LHCG_, July 8, 1823.
create the most splendid appearance. Blacksmiths and draymen, handsomely mounted and dressed, turned out for the 1836 celebration, while the carpenters constructed “a schooner under full sail and a steamboat with steam up” for the same occasion.

Just as the celebration of July 4th expressed the collective spirit of the people, so did public commemorations like Washington’s birthday, the immense receptions for famous men, and the anniversary gatherings. On these occasions, too, the city dignitaries, mechanical societies, fraternal orders, and other groups of citizens joined to honor the illustrious dead, to welcome honored visitors, or to congratulate themselves upon the growth of their beloved city.

Anniversary celebrations in particular united “all sects, political and religious, all castes and classes, all ages, both sexes, and emigrants not less than natives.” It was at such times that the people temporarily put aside their mundane preoccupations and reaffirmed common bonds and feelings in parades, toasts, orations, and prayers. Reflecting as they did civic and national pride, these celebrations reminded the people of their mutual dependence by recalling the events of the past and hinting at the glories of the future. Men and women were present at the semicentennial anniversary in 1838 who remembered when this dynamic commercial city was a wilderness haunt. Moralizing on the purpose of the semicentennial, the Cincinnati Chronicle concluded: “Then should we be brought in to sympathy with each other; and becoming united in recollections, press forward in the development of those noble destinies, which cannot be contemplated without rapture.”

Before ending this discussion of the cooperative spirit in Cincinnati, it should be emphasized that the citizens were not motivated by any collectivist or autarchic notions of economics and government. They believed in cooperative effort on the grounds that “many hands make light work,” that multitudes might achieve what the individual could not, but they never claimed the superiority of group over individual activity; association was simply a convenient device for accomplishing large objectives. Particularly in matters of

95. CMWGLSA V (1836): 191.
96. CC, Aug. 4, 1838. See also Western Monthly Magazine II (1834); 145–47; CG, Feb. 25, 1836; Dec. 15, Dec. 29, 1838.
business, as one student of the subject has observed, "individual enterprise was held to provide the only sound basis for a healthy economic development."  

And yet, this same writer continues, men were not averse to combining "when the burdens of competitive individualism appeared to outweigh the benefits." Cincinnati businessmen, shaken by the 1819 panic, organized a society for the promotion of domestic economy and signed a non-importation agreement, reminiscent of the colonial merchants, in order to prevent their currency from draining eastward. They promised not to buy or use eastern foodstuffs and clothing, to practice rigid economy, and to patronize home manufacturers. Agricultural societies, formed by Cincinnati's leading merchants and other businessmen, concentrated the economic powers and resources of many "into one unanimous combination," and other examples could be given to show how men combined to bolster their security. The idea of association, then, permeated every phase of Cincinnati society, even influencing the conduct of the city's archindividualists.

Associations, although unquestionably of practical value to the citizens, did not approximate the goals set by the visionary Mr. Owen. They did exert, however, an enormous influence upon the social and cultural life of the community. Merchants, mechanics, professionals—in short, the majority of the city's population—met daily, even hourly, to discuss common interests, exchange information, and form new projects. Associations promoted, it is

98. Ibid.
99. See LHCG, Aug. 17 and 27, 1819; Cincinnati Directory, 1819. Other examples of business cooperation would be the attempt on the part of the meatpackers to fix prices in the winter of 1835–1836 (see M. Joblin and Co., Cincinnati Past and Present: or, Its Industrial History, As Exhibited in the Life-Labors of Its Leading Men [Cincinnati, 1872], 272), and the combination of the Dry Goods Merchants in 1836. The latter is particularly interesting. The merchants agreed to fix prices, and also decided not to give samples or to take back certain kinds of articles. Customers would no longer be permitted to try on gloves and stockings or pay in one-cent coins ("their use encourages too much closeness in trade"). The meeting also resolved that the auction system was detrimental to their property and unjust and that peddlers should be required to pay a license tax. "We are well aware," the Committee of the Dry Goods Merchants declared, "of the extremely delicate nature of an attempt to fix a particular price upon particular goods; but having nothing in view but a strong desire to see the mercantile part of the community place themselves finally upon that high and honorable ground they should occupy, your committee, at the same time they are in favor of open and honorable competition, cannot but express their unmixed disapprobation of a competition, alike unfair and dishonorable" (CG, Dec. 8, 1836). Significantly enough, however, this body of merchants was instantly assailed as monopolistic and aristocratic (ibid., Dec. 12, 1836). See also Weisenberger, The Passing of the Frontier, 86–87.
true, the qualities most prized by an acquisitive society—emulation, enquiry, and enterprise; but even more significant, they symbolized an active democracy. As James Gazlay said: "Where many are compelled to act together, contact and association must be had to soften the asperities of the individual, and harmonize the mass. Meetings of the people are the chief levers of republican action."\(^{100}\)

\(^{100}\) *WT*, May 16, 1828.