

3.3

Development of Indiana's Educational System

It shall be the duty of the General assembly, as soon as circumstances will permit, to provide, by law, for a general system of education, ascending in a regular gradation, from township schools to a state university, wherein tuition shall be gratis, and equally open to all.

— 1816 Indiana State Constitution, Article IX, Section 2

Early Pioneer Education

In the first half of the nineteenth century, Hoosier pioneers had limited access to schooling. Most of them were lucky if they learned the “3 Rs”—reading, writing, and arithmetic. As in so many other aspects of pioneer life, the family's economic progress was the central focus. Children learned the basics of farm life such as hunting, building shelter, planting and harvesting, spinning and sewing, and cooking from their parents. Parents might also have taught their children how to read, write a few words including their names, and do simple arithmetic.

Church and Sunday school were places where children were able to learn and practice reading and writing. Sermons, hymns, and scripture introduced young people to words and concepts that became, as in Abraham Lincoln's case, permanent parts of their vocabulary and thought. The first Sunday schools appeared in Indiana in the 1810s, and by 1829, the state had more than one hundred of them. Religiously motivated individuals and groups got them up and running, believing that the frontier sorely needed both Christianity and education. Protestant denominations—Methodists, Baptists, and Presbyterians—led the way with Sunday school education. Methodists were the greatest in number, but Presbyterians, often educated in the East, made a big impact on not only religious education but education in general. In Indiana education reformer Caleb Mills was the most influential Presbyterian in this regard.

III. LESSON THIRD.

Same subject continued.



The **RAKE** is an *instrument* used by the farmer to gather up his hay, or grain. It is made of wood, and has teeth.



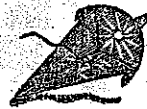
KEYS are made of iron, or copper. They are used to *lock* or unlock doors, trunks, &c.



This is a **LEAF** of the oak, which is one of the largest trees that grow. Men *build* ships of the oak.



HIVES are houses made for *bees*, in which they make their honey. They are made of wood or straw. People sometimes make hives with glass windows, so that they can look in and see the bees making honey.



Where is the boy who does not love to fly the **KITE**? It should be made very light. You must not let it get *tangled* in the limbs of trees.

DEFINITIONS.

Instrument—a tool.

Lock—to make fast.

Build—to make, to construct.

Honey-bee—the bee that makes honey.

Tangled—caught.

B

Elementary Reader

This page from *The Elementary Reader to Accompany Webster's Spelling Book* (1835) shows the kind of textbook young Hoosier children studied if they were able to go to school. This book taught spelling and reading using illustrations for words and definitions. As students progressed, they moved on to readers with moral stories and poems to read aloud with emphasis on proper pronunciation, enunciation, and pauses.

Books were scarce on the frontier, so the Bible may have been one of the only books that a Hoosier pioneer child ever read. There was a void in secular, or non-religious, Indiana educational opportunities. Even though the 1816 state constitution had promised that the state would create a general education system

that would be open to all citizens, progress was slow to non-existent at first. Common schools, similar to today's public schools, were locally created and funded, meaning they were funded by the town or township, not the state. Nowhere were they free and open to all. There were no state standards, nor were there schools to train teachers. Therefore, the ability of teachers varied greatly, and they received very low pay. Schooling was catch-as-catch-can for Hoosier children. In 1840 the state discovered how serious an educational problem it had.

The 1840 Census

"The name Hoosier [remained] the synonym for ignorance."

— Author Charles W. Moores, 1905

The federal census of 1840 revealed that less than one-quarter of Indiana children between five and fifteen attended school. Additionally, about one in seven adult Hoosiers could not read or write. Indiana's literacy ranked eighteenth among the twenty-eight states in the Union—lower than all northern states and four southern states. In part, Indiana's high illiteracy rate was due to the scant education in the Upland South—Kentucky, Tennessee, and the Carolinas—which had been home to many Hoosier pioneers. Not surprisingly then, southern Indiana counties had the highest illiteracy rates since many of the settlers in the area had come from the Upland South. But in the broader sense, the state's illiteracy was the result of its failure to deliver on the promise of free education for all in its 1816 constitution. The 1840 census was a call to action for education reformers, who began an energetic campaign to create a true system of public education.

Caleb Mills, "One of the People"

"Let us shut our eyes no longer to the teachings of experience. Let us have a system based on the broad and republican principle, that it is the duty of the State to furnish the means of primary education to the entire youth within her bounds."

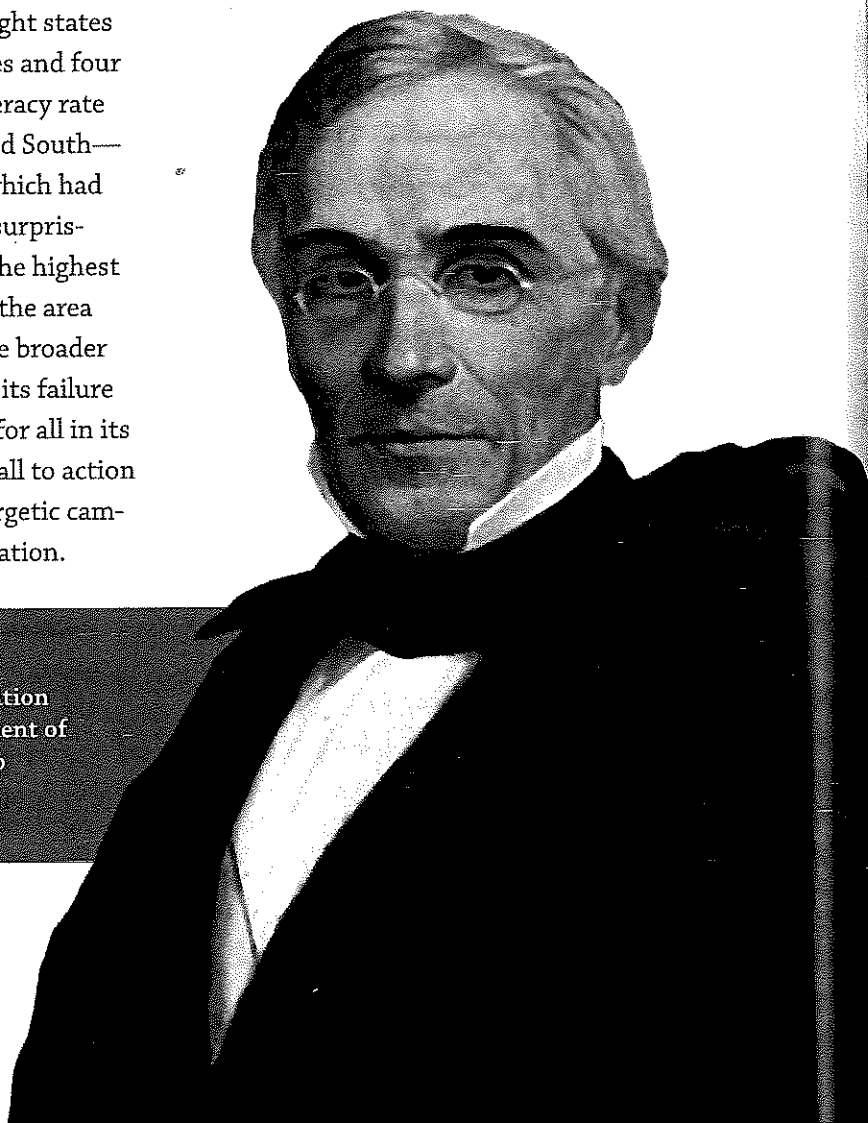
— Caleb Mills, to the Indiana General Assembly, December 6, 1847

Caleb Mills, a New England Presbyterian missionary, was determined to bring both religion and education to the frontier. A graduate of Dartmouth College and Andover Theological Seminary, he arrived in Crawfordsville in 1833 to head a Presbyterian school that became Wabash College. Although Mills had been an advocate for public education before the 1840 census revealed the embarrassing statistics about Hoosier education, he emerged as the leading advocate of a state system of public education after the census report was published.

Caleb Mills (1806–1879)

Caleb Mills, one of Indiana's greatest education reformers, served as Indiana's superintendent of public instruction from 1854–55. Mills also helped establish Wabash College, where he taught Greek for forty-four years.

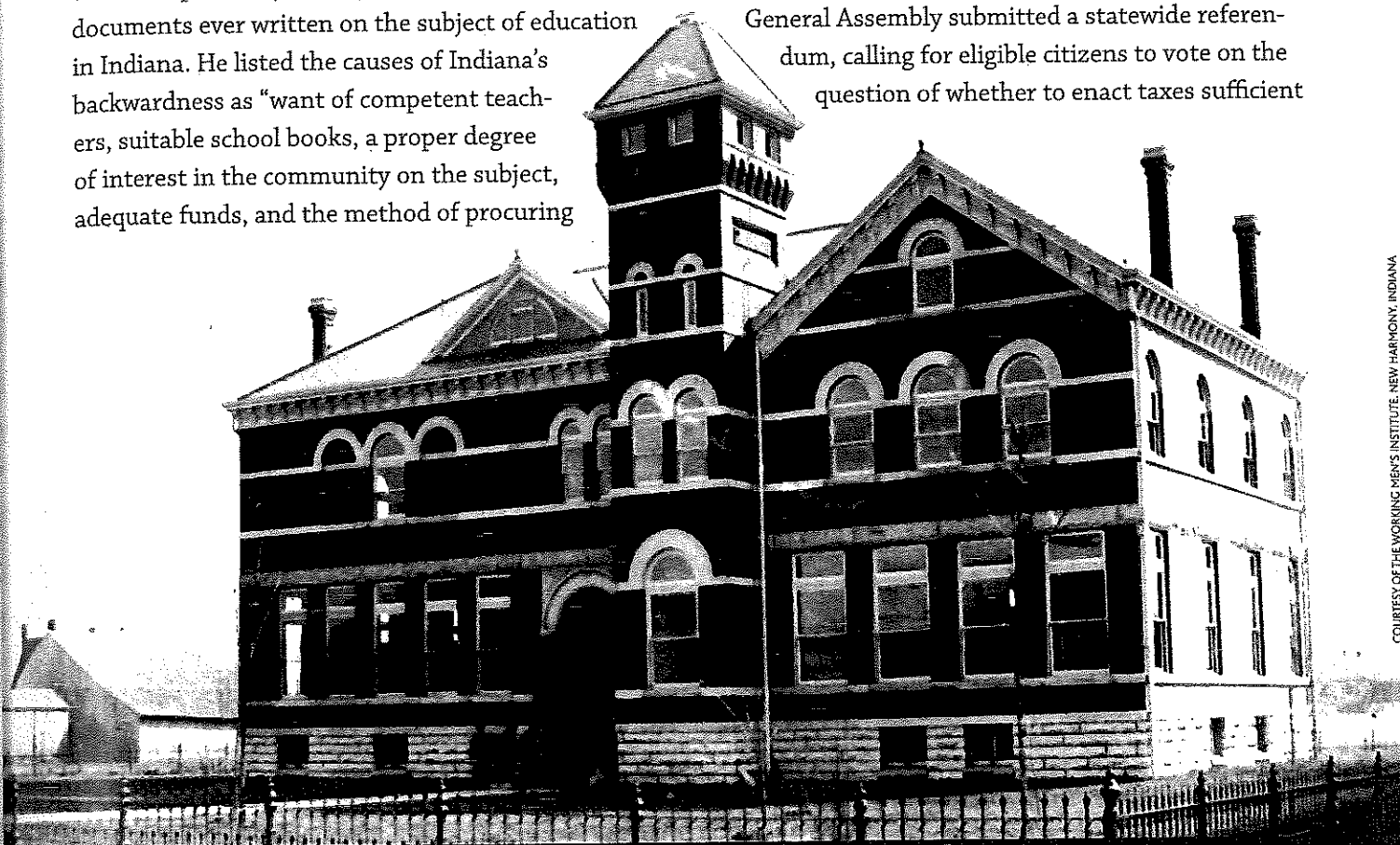
COLLECTIONS OF THE ROBERT T. RAMSAY JR. ARCHIVAL CENTER, WABASH COLLEGE, CRAWFORDSVILLE, INDIANA



Between 1846 and 1852 Mills wrote and distributed six eloquent and elaborately argued messages to the state legislature and signed them simply as "One of the People." They are arguably the most important documents ever written on the subject of education in Indiana. He listed the causes of Indiana's backwardness as "want of competent teachers, suitable school books, a proper degree of interest in the community on the subject, adequate funds, and the method of procuring

such funds." He argued for the necessity of state and township school taxes, stating, "There is but one way to secure good schools, and that is to pay for them."

Pressured by Mills and other reformers, Indiana's General Assembly submitted a statewide referendum, calling for eligible citizens to vote on the question of whether to enact taxes sufficient



COURTESY OF THE WORKING MEN'S INSTITUTE, NEW HARMONY, INDIANA

New Harmony

New Harmony on the Wabash River in what is now Posey County presented an intriguing alternative to the values and lifestyle of frontier Indiana. From 1814 to 1827 two utopian groups that believed in the perfectibility of society settled in New Harmony, one after the other. The first group, the Harmonists, were Christians who believed that the second coming of Christ was near. They also believed in and practiced free education, but it is the second utopian group that has had a lasting influence on Indiana's education.

In 1824 industrialist Robert Owen bought New Harmony and traveled from England to the fledgling state of Indiana, intending to create a new way to educate and better society. The Owenites, as his followers were

called, believed in abolishing private property and in equality between white men and women. Their plan required that all members work and contribute as they were able and equitably divide the material and cultural rewards. Though the community quickly failed economically, some of its ideas were implemented in Indiana by a couple of the community's members. Owen's son, Robert Dale Owen, advocated strongly for publicly funded schools, served three terms in the Indiana state legislature (1836-38), and was a delegate at the constitutional convention of 1850-51.

William Maclure, often referred to as the father of geology, came to Indiana as a business partner with Robert Owen and stayed when Owen left.

Maclure supported education that was free and open to all, and he led the New Harmony schools. In 1838 Maclure founded the Working Men's Institute, seeking to provide a place where laborers and their families could further their knowledge. He went on to establish Working Men Institutes across Indiana. Although none but the original remains, the others were often the first free public libraries in their communities and provided the base for many of the public libraries in Indiana today.

The Working Men's Institute in New Harmony, Indiana, is now the oldest operational library in Indiana and is also a museum. Though the library was originally housed in a church, it was moved to this building in 1894.