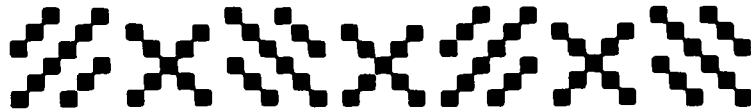


Governor Joseph A. Wright, Librarian

*Martin D. Joachim**

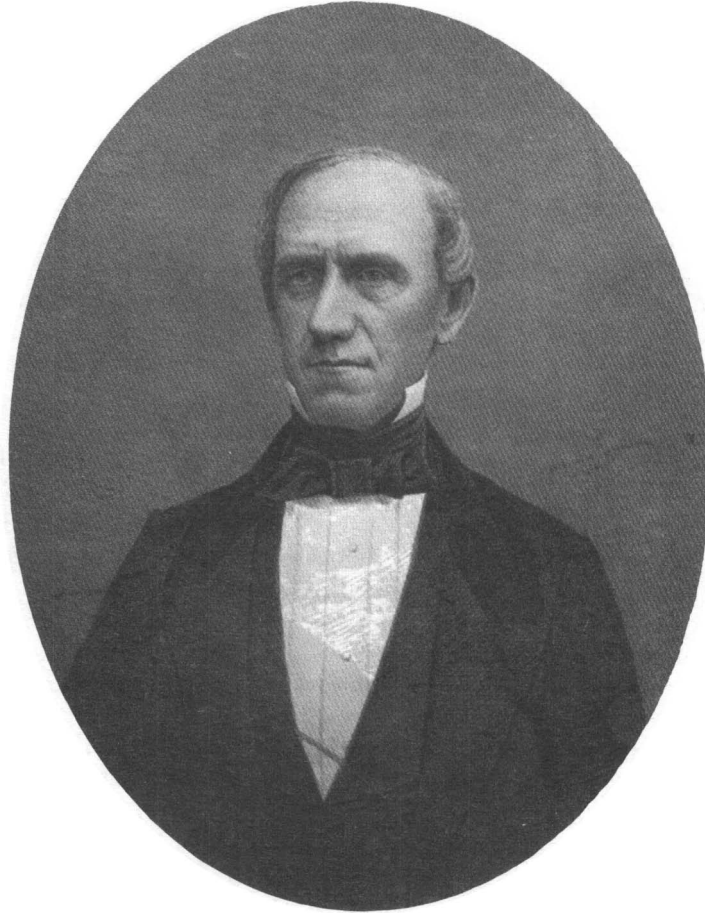


Although details of the political career of Joseph A. Wright, governor of Indiana from 1849 to 1857, are well established, biographical sources do not indicate that the governor was once a youthful librarian at the Monroe County Library in Bloomington, Indiana, a position which he held from December 3, 1827, to February 25, 1830. At the age of seventeen or eighteen,¹ "Joseph A. Wright was elected Librarian who appeared & gave bond & security which was approved by the [library] board."² The position of librarian was thus the first public office of a fledgling politician whose career would ulti-

* Martin D. Joachim is associate librarian and head of the Cataloging Department, Indiana University Libraries, Bloomington.

¹ Wright's birth date is given in most sources as April 17, 1810. A *Biographical History of Eminent and Self-Made Men of the State of Indiana* (2 vols., Cincinnati, 1880), II, 247, gives the year of birth as 1809. In his doctoral dissertation Philip M. Crane discusses the question of the birth date. He notes that the 1810 date is used in William W. Woollen, *Biographical and Historical Sketches of Early Indiana* (Indianapolis, 1883), 94; and in Jacob P. Dunn, *Indiana and Indianans: A History of Aboriginal and Territorial Indiana and the Century of Statehood* (5 vols., Chicago, 1919), I, 501. Crane goes on to state: "Woollen and Dunn doubtless took the date from newspaper accounts of Wright's death in 1867 which listed the date of his birth as 1810. The records of early Indiana legislatures contained in the English Collection at the Indiana Historical Society library list Wright as twenty-four when he served in the 1833-1834 session of the General Assembly. This would mean, if correct, that Wright had to have been born in 1809, for the session ended before his birthday in April 1834. Moreover, references by Wright himself to events in his life at particular ages support the 1809 date. Probably the best evidence comes from a genealogy taken from a family Bible . . . citing Wright's birth date as 1809." Philip M. Crane, "Governor Jo Wright: Hoosier Conservative" (Ph.D. dissertation, Department of History, Indiana University, Bloomington, 1963), 4. If the 1809 date is accepted, Wright would have been about 4½ months shy of his nineteenth birthday when he was elected librarian.

² Monroe County Library, Record of Trustees, December 3, 1827 (Indiana Room, Monroe County Public Library, Bloomington). This document will hereafter be referred to as Record of Trustees. It is interesting to note that Wright's appointment as librarian did not meet the requirements stipulated in the library's own bylaws. Article 4 of the bylaws states that "the Librarian



JOSEPH A. WRIGHT

Reproduced from William W. Woollen, *Biographical and Historical Sketches of Early Indiana* (Indianapolis, 1883), opposite 94.

mately include service as a member of both the Indiana and United States houses of representatives and senates, as governor of Indiana, and as United States minister to Prussia.

Coming from Washington, Pennsylvania, Wright's family settled in Bloomington about 1820. The future governor resided in Monroe County until about 1830 when he moved to Rockville in Parke County. During the decade of his residency in Bloomington, Wright, by perseverance and hard work, overcame his family's poverty and the death of his father in 1825 to put himself through two years at the state seminary (later Indiana University) and to qualify for admission to the study of law.³ Much of this dedicated work and his legal studies took place while he was librarian.

By the time Wright became librarian of Monroe County, many libraries had already been organized in the Ohio Valley. In 1780 the Virginia legislature chartered the Transylvania Seminary in Lexington, Kentucky, but it was not until late 1788 or early 1789 that the seminary received any books to start its library. "This was certainly the beginning of the first Anglo-American library in the Ohio Valley south of Pittsburgh."⁴ The number of libraries in the Middle West continued to grow, and by 1850 there were in Indiana, Kentucky, Tennessee, Ohio, and Illinois more than five hundred of them, not including private libraries and school or Sunday school libraries.⁵ The first library in Indiana was established at Vincennes in 1806 and was supported by the sale of shares.⁶

A library for Monroe County was organized by the legislature in an act approved January 14, 1818. Section 6 of the act indicates an early awareness of the importance of books and

shall be a resident & qualified voter of the County of Monroe." "By-Laws for the Bloomington Library," Record of Trustees, March 31, 1820. The Indiana Constitution of 1816 states: "In all elections . . . every white male Citizen of the united States, of the age of twenty-one years and upwards, who has resided in the State, one year immediately preceding such election shall be entitled to vote in the County where he resides . . ." Charles Kettleborough, *Constitution Making in Indiana: A Source Book of Constitutional Documents with Historical Introduction and Critical Notes*. Volume I, 1780-1851 (*Indiana Historical Collections*, Vol. I; Indianapolis, 1916), 107.

³ Woollen, *Biographical and Historical Sketches*, 94-95.

⁴ Thomas D. Clark, "Building Libraries in the Early Ohio Valley," *Journal of Library History*, VI (April, 1971), 102.

⁵ Haynes McMullen, "Libraries in the Ohio Valley Before 1850," in *Reader in American Library History*, ed. Michael H. Harris (Washington, 1971), 57.

⁶ A discussion of the Vincennes Library can be found in Jane Kitchell, "The Old Vincennes Library," *Indiana Magazine of History*, XXVIII (December, 1932), 240-46; and Horace Ellis, "The First Library in Indiana," *Public Libraries*, X (December, 1905), 509-12.

libraries: "The agent to be appointed for the county of Monroe, shall reserve in his hands ten per centum out of the nett [*sic*] proceeds of the sales of lots which may be made at the seat of justice of said county for the use of a county library"⁷ The Monroe County Library was a subscription library, the members of which paid annual fees for the use of books and materials. While Wright was librarian, there were two classes of subscriptions available: "one class who wish [to] take (and so subscribe) books every two weeks shall pay one dollar. The other class who wish to take (and so subscribe) books every four weeks shall pay fifty cents annually for the use of said books."⁸ Minors were not permitted to subscribe.⁹ Not until 1848 could women use the library. In that year the board decided that "on Wednesdays from 9 A.M. to 12 [the] Library would be open for the accomodation [*sic*] of Ladies."¹⁰ Hours of access to the library were limited. The librarian was obligated to "attend at the room of the Library on every Saturday for the purpose of delivering out, and receiving in, Books and shall not be compellable to attend on any other days unless at his own choice";¹¹ thus, for at least the first few years of its existence the library was open only on Saturday from 10:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m.¹²

As librarian, Wright had certain specified duties:

He shall keep a pair a [*sic*] regular entry of all Books, Pamphlets, Charts, &c which he may let out or receive into the Library, and deliver the same to the President and Trustees at any time they may require it.

It shall be the duty of the Librarian to report all injuries . . . or otherwise of Books let out by him to the President & Trustees

It shall be the duty of the Librarian as often as required to lay before the Board a true and perfect list of all books pamphlets Maps &c which shall have been received into the Library, and also a list of all receipts and expenditures of any monies belonging to the Library . . . and it shall be his duty to number all the books in the library and keep a catalogue of the same for the inspection of those entitled to receive books from the Library.

The Librarian . . . [will] let no Books be out of the Library except he receiving the Certificate for the money paid to the treasurer of said Library, together with an endorsement thereon signed by some good security approved by the Librarian, & that he will be responsible for the same and secure delivery of the book or books.¹³

⁷ Indiana, *Special Acts* (1817-1818), 16.

⁸ Record of Trustees, May 22, 1826.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, June 26, 1848.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, July 3, 1824.

¹² *Ibid.*, May 22, 1826.

¹³ *Ibid.*, May 31, 1820, July 3, 1824.

It was also "ordered that the Librarian be authorized to collect all fines imposed by this [library] board."¹⁴ The size of the book collection administered by Wright was no larger than a few hundred volumes. By July, 1830, according to one county history, the library had about eight hundred volumes.¹⁵ Almost nine years later, however, the *Bloomington Post* listed only 152 titles in about five hundred volumes.¹⁶

While he was librarian, Wright studied law with Judge Craven P. Hester, a Bloomington attorney, who also had a connection with the Monroe County Library. Hester was in one instance "appointed as Agent for the Purpose of Purchasing Books" ¹⁷ Reference is also made at one point in the Record of Trustees to "C. P. Hester the Librarys Attorney,"¹⁸ and he also served as president of the library board.¹⁹ Hester's working relationship with Wright on the library board may well have influenced the judge's decision to admit the youthful librarian into his law office for study.

Wright's interest in law is evident from the following entry in the Record of Trustees for 1830:

Ordered that Blackstone's Commentary, and 'Chitty's Pleadings' be sold to the highest bidder provided, that they bring the amount of the original cost.

Ordered that Joseph A. Wright (having purchased the above books) execute his note with approved security on a credit of twelve months for thirty-two dollars, to the Treasurer of the Library, of which sum fifteen dollars is to draw interest from the date the last sum being for Chittys Pleadings.²⁰

Since Wright had acquired his license to practice law in 1829, Blackstone's *Commentaries* and Chitty's *Pleadings* would have been useful additions to his personal legal library.²¹ This entry

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, November 12, 1829.

¹⁵ Charles Blanchard, ed., *Counties of Morgan, Monroe and Brown, Indiana: Historical and Biographical* (Chicago, 1884), 400.

¹⁶ *Bloomington Post*, March 15, 1839.

¹⁷ *Biographical History of Eminent and Self-Made Men*, II, 247; Record of Trustees, January 8, 1825.

¹⁸ Record of Trustees, November 12, 1829.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, March 10, 1831.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, February 25, 1830.

²¹ Woollen, *Biographical and Historical Sketches*, 95. Sir William Blackstone's *Commentaries on the Laws of England* was the most popular book among Indiana's first lawyers and, within a short time of its publication, became the standard reference source on English common law and the basic student textbook. Joseph Chitty's *Treatise on Pleading and Parties to Actions* was also a common feature of private law libraries. See Michael H. Harris, "The Availability of Books and the Nature of Book Ownership on the Southern Indiana Frontier, 1800-1850" (Ph.D. dissertation, Graduate Library School, Indiana University, 1971), 170-81.

in the Record appears on February 25, 1830, the same day on which the board accepted the resignation of Wright as librarian.

When Wright ran for governor in 1849, his humble origins and poor childhood were major issues in his campaign to convince the voters that he was a self-made man worthy and capable of leading the state. His father had died in 1825. In order to support his family he worked in a brickyard and did odd jobs. He also performed various tasks for the state seminary to help cover some of his school expenses. An early biographical study cites university records to show the types of jobs that Wright performed:

Friday, May 6, 1828.

Ordered, That Joseph A. Wright be allowed for ringing the college bell, making fires, etc., in the college building during the last session of the College Seminary, the sum of \$16.25. . . .

Bloomington, Friday, October 3, 1828.

Ordered by the Board of Trustees, That Joseph A. Wright be and he is hereby allowed the sum of one dollar for repairing the top of one of the college chimneys, and that the treasurer pay the same.

November 18, 1828.

Joseph A. Wright is allowed for repairing arches in the small seminary building and kitchen the sum of \$1.25.²²

In the Record are entries to show that Wright was also a handyman for the library:

Ordered that Joseph A. Wright the Librarian be and he is hereby allowed the sum of five dollars for services rendered in furnishing firewood, oiling books &c for the past year.

Ordered by the board that Joseph A. Wright be allowed 62½ cents for furnishing five panes of glass and a quire of paper for the use of the library.²³

After Wright acquired his law license, he moved from Bloomington to Rockville to set up practice, probably in late 1830 or early 1831. On February 25, 1830, the library trustees "ordered that Joseph A. Wright's resignation as Librarian be accepted."²⁴ An entry in the Record on August 3, 1830, implies, however, that Wright had not yet moved from Bloomington as of that date:

On motion ordered that the Present Librarian be and he is hereby authorised to call on Joseph A. Wright a former Librarian for the following Books, To Wit, Chatabriands Travels one vol, Salmagundi first vol., Miltons Work one vol,

²² Woollen, *Biographical and Historical Sketches*, 94-95.

²³ Record of Trustees, November 22, 1829.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, February 25, 1830.

Shakespeare 2nd vol, and if Said Wright will not Deliver up Said Books, the Present Librarian is hereby Authorised to bring Suit and Collect the amount of Said books in money from Said Wright.²⁵

It seems unlikely that the current librarian would have been "authorised to call on" Wright if he were no longer in Bloomington.

This entry in the Record need not be interpreted as meaning that Wright had unlawfully taken these books from the library when he left office. In fact, early librarians were often fiscally responsible for all books in their libraries. The Record itself contains an entry detailing some of the librarians' responsibilities in this regard: "the Librarian [will] report at each meeting of the Board any injury done to any and every book and the person by whom injured, and on failure to report as above he shall be accountable for the injury done."²⁶ Thus the implication of the order "to call on Joseph A. Wright a former Librarian" most likely means that the itemized books were missing from the collection and that Wright had not reported this loss; since Wright had been librarian, he was responsible for the books. The Record does not indicate that this matter was ever brought to suit, and the Monroe County court records do not indicate that such a suit was ever filed. An examination of the Record reveals that current librarians were frequently authorized by the board to call upon former librarians for missing books.²⁷

The Record of Trustees of the Monroe County Library provides little-known information about the early public career of Joseph A. Wright. Indeed, details about Wright's tenure as librarian suggest that the future governor had an earlier dedication to public service than has been generally recognized.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, August 3, 1830. On the basis of this entry in the Record of Trustees, it appears that Wright was still in Bloomington in August, 1830. There is no indication that he began his practice of law in Monroe County, and there is disagreement as to exactly when he moved to Rockville. Woollen, *Biographical and Historical Sketches*, 95, states that Wright moved soon after he obtained his license in 1829. H. W. Beckwith, *History of Vigo and Parke Counties . . .* (Chicago, 1880), 105, states that Wright arrived in Rockville no later than 1830. Rebecca A. Shepherd, Charles W. Calhoun, Elizabeth Shanahan-Shoemaker, and Alan F. January, comps. and eds., *A Biographical Directory of the Indiana General Assembly, 1816-1899* (Indianapolis, 1980), 431, gives the date as 1831.

²⁶ Record of Trustees, May 22, 1826.

²⁷ Wright himself was authorized to call upon former librarian Addison Smith for missing books. *Ibid.*, December 3, 1827.