In Search of the Real Maclure

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William Maclure (1763–1840) lived a remarkable yet enigmatic life. For more than half a century he effectively pursued his interests in business, science, and social reform on two continents. Born in Ayr, Scotland, on October 27, 1763, Maclure studied briefly with a tutor and in public school. In 1778 at age fifteen he began his lifelong travels with his first of many visits to the United States, attending to the American merchandising interests of his father. By 1782 William began his own import-export business when he took a trip to make contacts in New York City. That year he joined the London trading firm of Miller, Hart & Company. Stimulated by the ideas of the American and French revolutions, he spent time in both countries during their times of transformation. In 1796 he became a United States citizen and established a residence and a firm, Maclure & Company (later Maclure & Robinson), in Philadelphia.

By 1800 the thirty-seven-year-old Maclure had amassed enough money to permit him to turn his attention to the two growing interests that occupied the rest of his life: the new science of geology and educational reform to improve the lives of the working classes. The next fifteen years found Maclure making geological surveys of the natural resources of Europe and America. With remarkable stamina he collected mineral specimens and rocks from a wide variety of regions. These stretched from the British Isles to Russia, from the Baltic Sea to the Mediterranean Sea, and throughout the eastern United States from the St. Lawrence River to Georgia and from the Mississippi River to the Atlantic Ocean. As early as 1809 when Maclure read his paper “Observations on the Geology of the United States, Explanatory of a Geological Map” to the American Philosophical Society in Philadelphia, he had already completed enough scientific exploration to justify his later recognition as “the Father of American Geology.”

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Geology, however, was only one of the passions of the second half of Maclure's life; education was the other. He conceived of education in the broadest sense. He saw political, economic, and social reform taking place only as education moved beyond such classical subjects as Greek and Latin for the upper classes to practical knowledge that would transform the lives and social position of common workmen and their families. In the early nineteenth century William Maclure became one of the most ardent advocates of the modern teaching methods of Swiss educator Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi. He sponsored schools based on Pestalozzi’s system in Spain, France, and America. In the Philadelphia area he supported the earliest Pestalozzian teachers and schools in this country. Joseph Neef, William S. Phiquepal, and Marie Duclos Fretageot each directed a separate school before 1825.

Maclure then enticed them and other Pestalozzian educators to join him in Robert Owen’s utopian experiment in character formation at New Harmony, Indiana. It was the biggest gamble of his life. By combining his educational, scientific, and financial resources with Owen’s socialistic communal effort to begin the New Moral World at New Harmony, he hoped to realize his dream of raising the standard of living of the working poor in the Industrial Age.

He convinced several of the most important members of the American Philosophical Society and the Academy of Natural Sciences of Philadelphia (of which he was president) to take up residence in Owen’s utopia on the Wabash. A few, including naturalists Charles-Alexandre Lesueur and Thomas Say, made the icy trip down the Ohio River in 1825 on Maclure’s now-famous “Boatload of Knowledge.”

The Owenite experiment in community-building at New Harmony lasted only two years. During that brief time, however, Maclure and his Pestalozzian teachers placed New Harmony’s schools in the vanguard of education in America. They operated an Infant School for children as young as two, replicating Owen’s program at New Lanark, and conducted classes in the Pestalozzian style for those six to fourteen. They introduced Maclure’s concept of vocational training in the School of Industry, one of the two earliest such institutions in America. In the school boys learned printing and other trades, publishing noteworthy volumes of the research of New Harmony and other scientists on their own press. Maclure brought New Harmony scientists and master tradesmen into the classroom and into a program of lectures for adults. Long after the abandonment of Owenite communalism in 1827 and the departure of its feuding partners—Owen in 1827, Maclure in 1828—New Harmony remained a monument to Maclure as a center for scientific research and publication. For decades the village bore Maclure’s geological stamp. It became a base for the state and federal geological surveys led by David Dale Owen that opened the Midwest for industrial development.
In addition, New Harmony gave Maclure the opportunity to begin his own experiment in educating the general public by means of libraries for workingmen. The Workingmen's Institute in New Harmony, for which William Maclure donated the initial funding in 1838, continues today as the oldest functioning library in the state of Indiana. Yet this single library does not define the extent of Maclure's contribution to education in the Midwest. After he died in Mexico on March 23, 1840, his will provided $500 gifts that eventually went to 144 workingmen's libraries in Indiana and 16 libraries in Illinois.

Regardless of these achievements, the details of Maclure's life and the significance of his work have only recently been effectively excavated from the bedrock of European and American history. Maclure's place as a pioneer of geologic exploration was scarcely acknowledged before 1925 when Charles Keyes published his article "William Maclure: Father of Modern Geology." The magnitude of Maclure's European geological explorations and some of his ideas came to light when John Doskey edited The European Journals of William Maclure in 1988. Additional insights into Maclure's private life and social thought emerged in 1994 from the archives of the New Harmony Workingmen's Institute when Josephine Elliott edited *Partnership for Posterity: The Correspondence of William Maclure and Marie Duclos Fretageot, 1820–1833.* Maclure's scientific, philosophical, and reform writings, as extensive as they are, remain largely hidden from public view. Furthermore, "the Father of American Geology" still awaits a biographer.

The essays in this issue of the *Indiana Magazine of History* are intended to bring readers another step closer to discovering the real Maclure. They originated as papers presented in special sessions devoted to an assessment of Maclure's contributions to science, education, and social reform. These sessions were held in New Harmony during the 1993 international conference held jointly as the twentieth annual meeting of the Communal Studies Association and the fourth triennial meeting of the International Communal Studies Association.

In the first essay, "'The Spirit of Improvement': The America of William Maclure and Robert Owen," Daniel Feller, associate professor of history at the University of New Mexico, puts Maclure and Owen in the context of the times and of the reform ideas of Jacksonian America. In his article on "The Spain William Maclure Knew,"

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*These include Maclure's *Observations on the Geology of the United States...* (Philadelphia, 1817), *Opinions on Various Subjects, Dedicated to the Industrious Producers* (3 vols., New Harmony, Ind., 1831–1838), and his many articles in New Harmony's newspaper, *Disseminator of Useful Knowledge.*
Alberto Gil Novales, professor of contemporary history at Madrid University in Spain, gives an account of Maclure's frustrating connection to Spain through his travels and educational efforts during the country's turbulent three-year period of liberal government.

"William Maclure's Boatload of Knowledge" by Donald E. Pitzer, professor and chair in the History Department and director of the Center for Communal Studies at the University of Southern Indiana, Evansville, details the historic importance of the migration of notable educators and scientists from Philadelphia to Robert Owen's New Harmony. In his "The Boatload of Trouble: William Maclure and Robert Owen Revisited," Charles Burgess, professor of history of education emeritus at the University of Washington, Seattle, points out the inevitable difficulties that issued from mixing two social reformers with differing views on the methods to achieve their ends, if not on the ends themselves.

The sixth essay, "William Maclure's Impact on Geological Science after the New Harmony Experiment," by Markes E. Johnson, professor and chair in the Geoscience Department at Williams College, Williamstown, Massachusetts, outlines the contributions of pioneer geologists William Maclure and Amos Eaton, who were dedicated to educational systems in which geology took an important place and who founded the New Harmony School of Industry and the Rensselaer School in Troy, New York, respectively. "William Maclure as Publisher in the New Harmony Reform Tradition" describes the quality and significance of the scientific and philosophical publications produced on the New Harmony press by the boys of Maclure's School of Industry. This essay was prepared jointly by Ian MacPhail, until 1993 research fellow and curator of rare books of the Sterling Morton Library of the Morton Arboretum in Lisle, Illinois, and Marjorie Sutton, formerly librarian of the Kingwood Center of Mansfield, Ohio.

The final essay, "William Maclure: Patron Saint of Indiana Libraries," is by Josephine Mirabella Elliott, former librarian of the New Harmony Workingmen's Institute and archivist emerita of the University of Southern Indiana. It tells the tangled and triumphant story of the 160 public libraries created from the educational concerns and last will and testament of William Maclure. This final gift to the people of Indiana and Illinois instilled the public library concept in the Midwest.

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