

# The Home of *Ben-Hur*: Lew Wallace's Study

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Nestled in the heart of Crawfordsville, Indiana, is a monument to one of the state's most original and prized sons, General Lew Wallace. A statue of Wallace stands next to his ambitious dream: a personal study that he built near his home and designed as a "pleasure-house for [his] soul." The building remains today as a museum that commemorates his life and legacy and teaches us about potential fulfilled and dreams achieved. To explore and honor his legacy, the General Lew Wallace Study and Museum partnered with Wabash College in November 2005 to present the Lew Wallace Symposium. Made possible through a matching grant from the Indiana Humanities Council in cooperation with the National Endowment for the Humanities, this day-long event featured Wallace scholars from around the nation who presented their latest research on a variety of topics. Three of those presentations are featured in this special Lew Wallace issue of the *IMH*.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Other authors and topics included: Roger C. Adams and his passion for collecting editions of *Ben-Hur*; M. Teresa Baer's work on the Susan Wallace papers and what her research reveals about this remarkable Victorian woman; Gail Stephens's analysis of Wallace and the battle of Shiloh; Gloria Swift and her investigation of Wallace at the battle of Monocacy; and Shaun Chandler Lighty's examination of Wallace's identity in nineteenth-century America.

At an early age, Lew Wallace knew he was an independent learner, fighting classroom rules and escaping to adventures in the nearby woods at first chance. By age 16, he abandoned formal education for a series of positions, including attorney, copy clerk, and soldier. A brief enlistment with the 11th Indiana Infantry in the Mexican War shaped Wallace's passion for military life. The first article in this issue, "A Struggle for Respect: Lew Wallace's Relationships with Ulysses S. Grant and William Tecumseh Sherman after Shiloh," touches this theme. William M. Ferraro considers Wallace's controversial actions during the Civil War battle of Shiloh, his relationships with Grant and Sherman during and after the war, and his lengthy struggle to reestablish himself in the eyes of these fellow generals.

With the conclusion of the war, Wallace served as a military judge during the 1865 Lincoln conspiracy trial and as president of the military court that convicted Henry Wirz, commandant of Andersonville Prison. With these final military duties fulfilled, Wallace returned to his family and a law practice in Crawfordsville, awaiting the next great role. It would be as author. He had been a writer since before the war, working on a novel about the Spanish conquest of the Aztec Empire. The book was finally published in 1873 as *The Fair God, Or, The Last of the 'Tzins: A Tale of the Conquest of Mexico* and that same year he began to write *Ben-Hur: A Tale of the Christ*. On the verdant acreage surrounding his Crawfordsville home, Wallace often sat in a comfortable chair under his favorite beech tree and wrote his manuscript on a lapboard. The book was finished in New Mexico Territory, where Wallace accepted appointment as territorial governor in 1878. Each night Wallace worked on *Ben-Hur* by candlelight, and his wife Susan fretted that the lit windows of the governor's palace in lawless Santa Fe might invite assassination attempts.

*Ben-Hur* was published to great acclaim in 1880, launching a phenomenon that Wallace could never have imagined. In the second article of this issue, "The Charioteer and the Christ: *Ben-Hur* in America from the Gilded Age to the Culture Wars," Howard Miller traces the impact of Wallace's tale on American culture by illustrating the transformation of the charioteer and Christ figures within the novel's numerous stage and screen adaptations. Wallace completed five other novels during his lifetime, but none had the lasting cultural impact of *Ben-Hur*.

Just after the publication of the book, Wallace accepted appointment as minister to Turkey. He spent four years in the Middle East, and



Lew Wallace's study, Crawfordsville, Indiana, 2007  
Completed in 1898 as “a pleasure-house for the soul,” the study now serves as a museum of Wallace's life and legacy.

Courtesy General Lew Wallace Study and Museum,  
Crawfordsville, Indiana

returned home again to Crawfordsville, where he began writing his third historic novel, *The Prince of India* (1895), which tells the story of a Jew during the fall of Constantinople in 1453.

In the next decade, Wallace began an ambitious building project on his property. Built over the course of three years, his large, free-standing study was a repository of souvenirs and memories from his life as a soldier, statesman, author, musician, and inventor. By the time the study was finished in 1898, the largest balance of Wallace's life was behind him—perhaps haunting him—as he relished this “place for [his] old age

to rest in and grow reminiscent, fighting the battles of youth over again.”<sup>2</sup>

Wallace’s eclectic study was the subject of news features across the country, and visitors traveled to see the magnificent “home of *Ben-Hur*.” When the general died in 1905, his family opened the study’s doors as a museum to share it with admirers. Today, the study is part of a larger compound that includes his carriage house and gardens and is known as the General Lew Wallace Study and Museum. Owned by the city of Crawfordsville and governed by the Lew Wallace Study Preservation Society, a 501(c)3 organization dedicated to the preservation of the study, the museum provides a gathering place for scholars and fans of Lew Wallace and his works.

In 2005, the museum marked not only the centennial of its opening, but the 125th anniversary of the publication of *Ben-Hur*. For two weeks that summer, the museum offered special programming and events, including an open house, free museum admission, the Lew Wallace Music Festival, and the Lew Wallace Youth Academy. The spirit of that celebration lives on in the Youth Academy, now held each summer as a week-long history day camp focused on Wallace’s life lessons: leadership, character, and life-long learning.

I invite you to visit the General Lew Wallace Study and Museum and witness for yourself Wallace’s uniquely American story represented through the museum’s historic buildings and authentic collection.



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<sup>2</sup>Lew Wallace to Susan Wallace, December 4, 1879, in Lew Wallace, *An Autobiography* (2 vols., New York, 1969), 2: 926.