

Emerson's Lectures in Indianapolis

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On January 1, 1863, a large audience gathered in Boston's Music Hall to celebrate the fulfillment of President Lincoln's pledge to free the slaves. The signing of the Emancipation Proclamation prompted the "leading patriots in and around Boston"—among them Ralph Waldo Emerson—to call for a "Musical Festival of rejoicing" in honor of the event. The musicians had tuned their instruments and the "great audience" was waiting expectantly for the overture. But there came instead the unexpected announcement that Emerson had written a prologue for the occasion and that the poet himself would read it. The poem he read was the "Boston Hymn" and, according to one observer, no one who heard Emerson that day "could ever forget the tone and emphasis of the speaker."¹

The war years to this point had not been prosperous ones for Emerson. Only a year before the Music Hall recitation the poet had written his brother William that "almost all income from lectures has quite ceased," and "we are all trying to be as unconsuming as candles under an extinguisher. . . ."² Emerson had continued to lecture during 1861 and 1862, but his engagements were limited mainly to New England. Emerson's plans for 1863 included a lecture tour in the West—the first he had scheduled since 1860. A few days after the music festival he set out on his travels to New York, Canada, Ohio, Michigan, Wisconsin, Illinois, Indiana, and Pennsylvania.³

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¹ *Journals of Ralph Waldo Emerson, 1820-1876*, ed. Edward Waldo Emerson and Waldo Emerson Forbes (10 vols., Boston, 1910-1914), IX, 477-79. Hereafter cited as Emerson, *Journals*.

² Emerson to William Emerson, January 21, 1862, *The Letters of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Ralph L. Rusk (6 vols., New York, 1939), V, 263-64. Hereafter cited as Emerson, *Letters*. Emerson's books had had no sale during 1861 and his lectures that winter would yield little income; there was less income also from his investments. Ralph L. Rusk, *The Life of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (New York, 1949), 413.

³ William Charvat, *Emerson's American Lecture Engagements: A Chronological List* (New York, 1961), 37-38. Some of Emerson's appearances in Indiana cities are described briefly in Robert R. Hubach, "Nineteenth-Century Literary Visitors to the Hoosier State: A Chapter in American Cultural History," *Indiana Magazine of History*, XLV (March, 1949), 44-46.

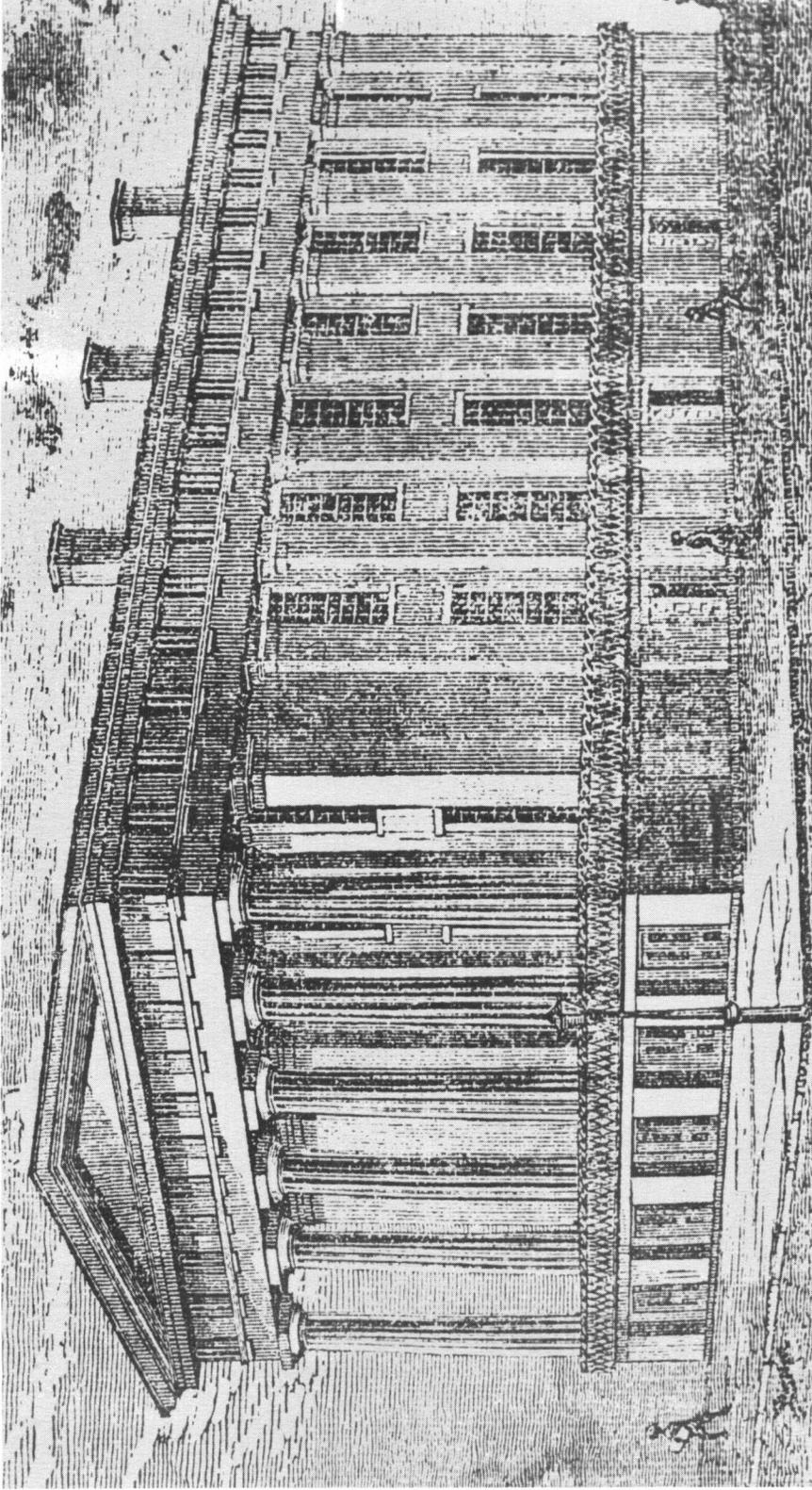
The trip was not to be an uneventful one. On the way to his first engagement in Toronto the famous scholar stopped off on January 4 at Niagara Falls where he spent a quiet Sunday sightseeing and retired early in the American House. At three o'clock in the morning the cry of "Fire!" sounded throughout the hotel. He dressed hurriedly in the dark, collected what possessions he could find, and made his way through a "cloud of smoke and cinders" to the street. The hotel "was burned out thoroughly," leaving only the four walls. Emerson had left most of his baggage at the Suspension Bridge, but he did suffer an important loss—his railroad ticket from Buffalo to Chicago. He walked the two miles to the bridge where he was lucky enough to meet Reuben N. Rice, a native of Concord who had moved to Detroit and assumed a position of some authority on the Michigan Central Railroad. Rice gave him a pass that was good from Detroit to Chicago which considerably diminished Emerson's financial loss.⁴

After this adventure, the New Englander filled his two engagements in Toronto and then proceeded to Rochester, Buffalo, Cleveland, Detroit, Ann Arbor, Milwaukee, Racine, and Beloit in quick succession. January 22 found him speaking at Bryan Hall in Chicago. By then Emerson had been on the road three weeks and had traveled hundreds of miles under conditions often difficult and trying. With a tight schedule to follow, he had spoken almost every weekday night.⁵

Advance arrangements had been made to include in the tour a lecture in Indianapolis under sponsorship of the Young Men's Christian Association, but the exact date had not been determined. The agent in Chicago responsible for arranging Emerson's western schedule was too late in notifying the sponsoring group in Indianapolis that the lecturer planned to appear there on Friday, January 23. After "a long day's ride from Chicago," he arrived in Indianapolis Friday only to find no preparations had been made for his lecture that night. The Masonic Hall—the only hall in the city—was engaged for the concert of pianist and composer L. M. Gottschalk and soprano Carlotta Patti. Emerson suggested Saturday night, but the hall was booked then for

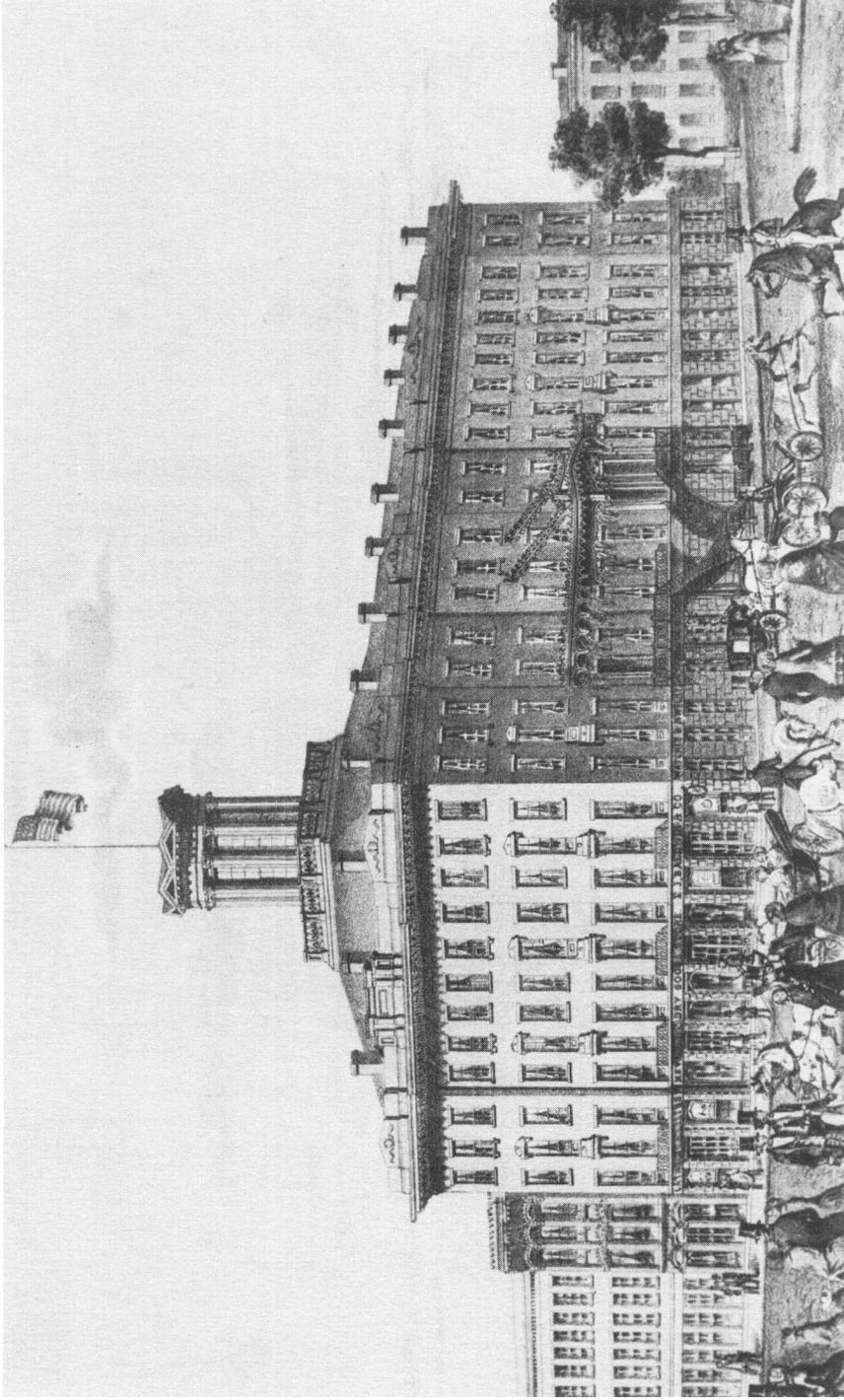
⁴ Emerson to Edith Emerson, January 8, 1863, Emerson, *Letters*, V, 304; Emerson, *Journals*, IX, 479-80.

⁵ Emerson, *Letters*, V, 308n; Charvat, *Emerson's American Lecture Engagements*, 38-39.



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THE MASONIC HALL OF 1848



The Bates House, from a colored lithograph by Robyn & Co., Louisville, on the cover of sheet music, "Bates House Polka," by William H. Currie (Indianapolis, 1854). Indiana Historical Society Library, Indianapolis.

the "farewell" concert of Gottschalk and Patti. Monday night was also out of the question because of a patriotic rally, so the lecture was set on Tuesday, January 27. In a letter to his daughter Emerson explained that he could not give up the Indianapolis lecture and go on immediately to his next engagement because "at Chicago, not suspecting difficulty here, I had emptied my pockets, & made it necessary to read here."⁶

Though pound poor, Emerson settled down at the Bates House, described in the Indianapolis city directory at that time as "The First Class House of the City, and in fact the Largest and best arranged House in the state." Evidently Emerson was not as impressed with the luxuriousness of the Bates House as were its owners and manager, for he described his stay in Indianapolis as an "imprisonment in dingy hotel & muddy town."⁸

On Saturday morning, January 24, Emerson visited the Blind Asylum, "where he witnessed the examination of the different classes, and expressed himself highly pleased with the proficiency of the pupils and the course of instruction of the Asylum." In the asylum's chapel the pupils sang a "spirited song," and he spoke for a few minutes, "congratulating them on the auspicious circumstances in which they were placed, and giving them reasons for feeling that, notwithstanding their misfortune, they had many means of happy and pleasant communication with the world." Superintendent William H. Churchman assured Emerson that the ninety-five pupils greatly appreciated "poetical recitations," and the poet proceeded to recite a ballad by Sir Walter Scott. Since the activities of the blind students were obviously restricted, the Indianapolis *Daily Journal* seems justified in concluding that the occasion was very pleasant for all parties.⁹

A Mr. Davis of Indianapolis endeavored to make Emerson's visit to the Hoosier capital as pleasant as possible. He

⁶ Emerson to Ellen Emerson, January 24 and 30, 1863, Emerson, *Letters*, V, 309, 310.

⁷ James S. Sutherland, *Sutherland's Indianapolis Directory, 1861* (Indianapolis, 1861), 112. Bates House later became the Claypool Hotel. *Indiana History Bulletin*, XXX (July, 1953), 115.

⁸ Emerson to Ellen Emerson, January 30, 1863, Emerson, *Letters*, V, 311.

⁹ Indianapolis *Daily Journal*, January 26, 1863. Most of the newspaper items on Emerson cited in this article are reproduced in their entirety in Frederick E. Schortemeier, "Indianapolis Newspaper Accounts of Ralph Waldo Emerson," *Indiana Magazine of History*, XLIX (September, 1953), 307-12. Exceptions are Indianapolis *Daily Herald*, February 12, 1866, and Indianapolis *Daily Journal*, February 13, 1866.

brought lawyers and college professors to visit Emerson, and tried to make amends for the fact that the lecturer had arrived from Chicago to find "no hall & no preparation" awaiting him. Emerson reported that Davis "carried" him to hear Gottschalk and Patti, but the poet was apparently not sufficiently impressed to record his reaction to their performance.¹⁰ The Indianapolis *Daily Journal* reviewed the concert, however, and their reporter described the program Emerson probably attended. Every piece was "well received" and many of the songs were "rapturously encored." Patti's rendition of the encore "Comin' thro' the Rye" was "sweetly sung," but the "most brilliant vocal gem of the evening was the French Laughing Song." Gottschalk's "perfect imitation of the Banjo concluded the entertainment."¹¹

In a few brief sentences the *Daily Journal* for Tuesday, January 27, mentioned Emerson's lecture that evening. More print was devoted to an anecdote about the "beautiful and accomplished" Carlotta Patti. The item noted that "the fair cantatrice is slightly lame" and reported that when she came limping on the stage a man in the audience remarked "I pity Patti." But as her "dulcet tones . . . gushed forth in liquid harmony" his pity was changed to admiration: "His heart went pitty-patti and his hands patted." Immediately below the short paragraph on the singer were six lines announcing that "one of the profoundest thinkers and ablest essayists of the present age, will lecture before the Young Men's Christian Association." And immediately below that timely announcement, in the same local news column, it was noted that on the previous Saturday afternoon "two stables near the Fire Engine House in the 7th Ward, were partially consumed by fire."¹² Little wonder that in a town where he was mentioned between hearts going "pitty-patti" and stables burning, Emerson thought the best feature of the city the fact that "it is laid out on the model of Washington City & its streets are named for the States."¹³

¹⁰ Emerson to Ellen Emerson, January 24 and 30, 1863, Emerson, *Letters*, V, 309, 311. Rusk indicates that Davis was probably Edwin A. Davis, an Indianapolis attorney. *Ibid.*, 311n.

¹¹ Indianapolis *Daily Journal*, January 24, 1863.

¹² *Ibid.*, January 27, 1863.

¹³ Emerson to Ellen Emerson, January 30, 1863, Emerson, *Letters*, V, 311. Indianapolis was first platted by Alexander Ralston, who had "assisted Major L'Enfant in the survey of Washington City. . . ." Jacob Piatt Dunn, *Greater Indianapolis* (2 vols., Chicago, 1910), I, 28.

Emerson, tall, bony, and undoubtedly wearing his traditional dark suit, must have appeared slightly out of place as he advanced to the stage of Masonic Hall. The hall, standing three stories in height, was located on the southeast corner of Washington and Tennessee streets. The first floor was divided into a number of business rooms, the entire second floor was "a large commodious hall" seating about two thousand persons, and all the third floor was devoted to Masonic purposes. A city directory for 1861 describes the room as it appeared when Emerson spoke there: "The Hall is finished in a beautiful style of art. The walls are of a beautiful rose tint—the cornice in silver white, with a beautiful Raphael scroll, relieved by a brilliant blue ground, while the ceiling is tinted so as to give the impression of a greater height to the Hall. It is handsomely elaborated with stucco center pieces in white and blue which lend a soft mellow appearance to the whole interior. The wood work is in equally good taste, being pure white."¹⁴ Despite the grandeur of the hall, Emerson had no better word than "tolerable" to describe his visit to the city. Doubtless he found the pay for his lecture—\$50—little compensation for the frustration of rushing "at great haste & inconvenience from Chicago" only to find his lecture would be delayed for four days.¹⁵

About the success of that lecture, much information can be gleaned from the Indianapolis *Daily Journal* and the Indianapolis *Daily Gazette*. Evidently the weather on Tuesday, January 27, 1863, left much to be desired, for the *Journal's* reporter stated that "a better night might have brought out a larger crowd . . . but it could hardly have brought out a more appreciative one" for Emerson's lecture on "Clubs, or Conversation."¹⁶ Those who braved the elements to see and hear the famous Ralph Waldo Emerson were probably surprised at the plainness of his appearance. Apparently his lecture audiences were frequently struck by his lack of beauty. He stood nearly six feet tall and sloping shoulders emphasized

¹⁴ *Sutherland's Indianapolis Directory, 1861*, p. 31; William Wesley Woollen, *Biographical and Historical Sketches of Early Indiana* (Indianapolis, 1883), 506. In 1894 Tennessee Street was changed to Capitol Avenue. Dunn, *Greater Indianapolis*, I, 31.

¹⁵ Emerson to Ellen Emerson, January 24 and 30, 1863, Emerson, *Letters*, V, 309, 311; Charvat, *Emerson's American Lecture Engagements*, 39.

¹⁶ *Indianapolis Daily Journal*, January 28, 1863. Calvin Fletcher described January 27 as cloudy and gloomy and wrote that it snowed and turned cold that night. Fletcher and his wife attended the lecture. Calvin Fletcher Diary, January 27 and 28, 1863, *Indiana Historical Society, Indianapolis*.

his slight build. Below his short cropped brown hair was a thin and deeply lined face. His forehead was narrow, his eyes blue-gray in color, and his nose large and hooked. Frequently he appeared before a lecture audience with an all-too-obvious mixture of bashfulness and embarrassment.¹⁷

His Indianapolis audience seems to have been an appreciative one. As he read his essay, the report said, the subject "was found to be as expressive as before it appeared obscure." The purpose of the lecture was "to show what conversation is, and its value in teaching men or bringing out their characters, and the importance of 'clubs,' or social gatherings, properly applied and regulated, to produce and cultivate genuine conversation."¹⁸ Six years later, when Emerson's *Society and Solitude* was published, it included an essay entitled "Clubs," much of which was taken verbatim from his lecture on the same subject. The purpose of the essay was apparently the same as that of the lecture. Emerson wished to drive home the point that "Wisdom is like electricity. . . . There is no permanently wise man, but men capable of wisdom, who, being put into certain company, or other favorable conditions, become wise for a short time, as glasses rubbed acquired electric power for a while." Emerson described conversation as "the laboratory and workshop of the student" and said that "the wish to speak to the want of another mind assists to clear your own."¹⁹

The Indianapolis lecture on "Clubs, or Conversation," was filled with "anecdote and erudition." The *Journal* stated that the poet "had anecdotes and maxims from the Greeks, legends from the Scandinavians, bon-mots from the French, repartees from the English, and facts from everywhere. . . ." The article described Emerson's style of delivery as being "perfectly adapted to his style of oratory . . . unlike anybody else's, full of quaint jerks and turns of thought, and as quaint halts and modulations of speech, yet both strong, direct, and devoid of the slightest suggestion of a desire to let either help the other by any grace of ornament or oratory." The item noted another interesting aspect of Emerson's delivery: "He has a fashion of seeming to forget the last word or two, always significant, and . . . stumbling upon them unexpectedly with

¹⁷ David Mead, *Yankee Eloquence in the Middle West* (East Lansing, Mich., 1951), 42-43, quoting Cincinnati *Daily Gazette* and Cincinnati *Daily Times* of January 28, 1857.

¹⁸ Indianapolis *Daily Journal*, January 28, 1863.

¹⁹ *The Complete Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (New York, 1929), 690, 696.

an effort that the most elaborate declamation could not produce." The reporter emphatically declared that this was no "trick of the rostrum" on Emerson's part, but merely a "necessary halting of the speech to let the idea catch up with it." To illustrate what he had in mind, the reporter then continued:

Speaking of the bringing out of one thought by another in conversation, a corresponding or related thought . . . [Emerson] said: "Thoughts always go in pairs. One fact recalls another, however distant in time or different in circumstances the knowledge of it may have been acquired. Related thoughts will come together. Thoughts go in pairs. And this is the reason, probably, why, when a man tells a good story he invariably"—hesitating as if he had forgotten what to say—"tells it again."²⁰

The *Daily Gazette* reported that Emerson's audience was an intelligent and appreciative one, and—like the *Journal*—remarked that the lecture abounded with "anecdotes, maxims, and queer illustrations." It noted that Emerson stressed the value of clubs for the purpose of "providing the necessity, and developing a healthy flow of Conversation." The only objection to his style or manner of lecturing was that it was "too much like a book." His delivery was described as not "bold and full enough" to enable hearers to "take in every sentiment and digest it before another of equal or greater importance is uttered." The critic compared the organization of the lecture to a child stringing beads with a thread that is unknotted—"the ideas drop off as fast as they are run on"—and also suggested that perhaps "a better selection of a subject could have been made for this time and latitude."²¹

The mix-up in Indianapolis apparently caused the poet to miss an engagement at Erie and possibly another at Meadville, Pennsylvania. A master at understatement, Emerson wrote to his daughter from the Monongahela House in Pittsburgh: "I did not have good fortune in my trip to Indianapolis." Emerson left Indianapolis the day after his lecture and arrived in Pittsburgh on Thursday, January 29; his lectures there were scheduled for February 3 and 5. Since his first Pittsburgh lecture was delivered in a hall where the temperature was "somewhere between 32° and zero," Emerson was no doubt most happy to complete his engagements there and return to his home in Concord.²²

²⁰ Indianapolis *Daily Journal*, January 28, 1863.

²¹ Indianapolis *Daily Gazette*, January 28, 1863.

²² Emerson to Ellen Emerson, January 30, 1863, Emerson, *Letters*, V, 310-11; *ibid.*, 311n.

The following year Emerson apparently gave only two lectures outside New England—one in New York City and one in West Chester, Pennsylvania. He made numerous appearances on the New England lecture circuit, however, and, knowing that he would soon be forced to take to the road again to meet expenses, found time to write a new series of six lectures called "American Life." The most popular lecture in the series was "Social Aims," which he delivered first on December 4, 1864, at Boston. For this lecture alone he was to receive a total of more than \$4,000 between 1864 and 1870. Early in 1856 Emerson again traveled west, reading the entire "American Life" series at both Chicago and Milwaukee and giving one lecture at each of his other stops in New York, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin.²³ The need for funds forced him to travel to Brooklyn for two series of lectures in December, 1865,²⁴ and to arrange for 1866 the most extensive western tour he had undertaken since 1860. Emerson returned to Indiana on this trip and lectured at La Porte, Richmond, and New Albany as well as Indianapolis. Other western states he visited that year were Pennsylvania, Ohio, Illinois, Iowa, Wisconsin, Michigan, and New York.

Hotels in the West were improving and travel was becoming somewhat easier, but his western trip in 1866 was still long and arduous—especially for a sixty-two-year-old man—and kept him away from home from the second week in January until February 19. The editors of his *Journals* report, however, that he "almost invariably returned rather refreshed and stimulated by his winter's experiences in the advancing West."²⁵

During 1866 Emerson read "Social Aims" over and over again. Before he presented it at Masonic Hall on February 13, 1866, he had read it at least fourteen times on the western tour alone.²⁶ A relatively short essay, it contained some lofty ideas: "Manners are greater than laws; by their delicate nature they fortify themselves with an impassable wall of

²³ Charvat, *Emerson's American Lecture Engagements*, 10, 40-46; *Uncollected Lectures by Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Clarence Gohdes (New York, 1932), 17.

²⁴ Rusk, *Life of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, 431.

²⁵ Emerson, *Journals*, X, 129; Charvat, *Emerson's American Lecture Engagements*, 10, 41-42. A discussion of Emerson's interest in the western lecture tours and the effect of these contacts with the West on Emerson and his ideas is in Russel B. Nye, "Emerson in Michigan and the Northwest," *Michigan History Magazine*, XXVI (Spring, 1942), 159-72.

²⁶ Charvat, *Emerson's American Lecture Engagements*, 41-42.

defence. . . . While one man pins us to the wall, with another we walk among the stars. . . . Life is short, but there is always time for courtesy. . . . Social enjoyment requires one or two companions, related by ties of the mind or the heart."²⁷

Emerson probably found Indianapolis greatly changed by the Civil War. As historians and observers of that period have noted, the Hoosier capital altered its outlook and very way of life during the war years. According to John H. Holliday, the "grim era closed upon a new Indianapolis." A once quiet town was replaced by a "bustling city with new ideas, new aspirations, new ways." The population of the city more than doubled between 1860 and 1866, money was plentiful, and real estate boomed. The total valuation of property for taxation increased approximately ten million dollars during the five year period, an indication of the general expansion. A new sophistication and a certain blasé attitude were noted along with these material changes.²⁸

Newspaper coverage of Emerson's visit in 1866 tends to reflect this change. The Indianapolis *Daily Herald* advertised that Emerson, the "eminent poet and scholar," would deliver the third lecture in the current series sponsored by the Young Men's Library Association and that his subject, "Social Aims in America," promised to be "a rare intellectual treat." The *Daily Journal* ran the same advertisement on its front page. Both advertisements included the fact that admission to the lecture was fifty cents, reserved seats costing seventy-five cents. The 1863 lecture had been announced for seven o'clock; the 1866 lecture was scheduled to begin at "1/4 to 8 o'clock."²⁹

Newspaper comments on the lecture were most precise. The *Daily Journal* announced in its news columns:

The citizens of Indianapolis have been duly and sufficiently advised of the fact that Ralph Waldo Emerson, the lecturer, philosopher and scholar, delivers to-night, at the Masonic Hall, the third lecture in course under the auspices of the Young Men's Mercantile Library Association, of Indianapolis. To inform our readers that of all the professional

²⁷ *Uncollected Lectures by Ralph Waldo Emerson*, 17-19.

²⁸ Dunn, *Greater Indianapolis*, I, 238. The material cited is in the chapter, "Civil War Times," by John H. Holliday. George C. Mercer, *One Hundred Years of Service: A History of the Y.M.C.A. of Indianapolis* (Indianapolis, 1954), 12; Berry R. Sulgrove, *History of Indianapolis and Marion County, Indiana* (Philadelphia, 1884), 16, 17; Kenneth M. Stamp, "The Impact of the Civil War upon Hoosier Society," *Indiana Magazine of History*, XXXVIII (March, 1942), 8-9.

²⁹ Indianapolis *Daily Herald*, February 12, 1866; Indianapolis *Daily Journal*, February 13, 1866.

lecturers in our country, Mr. Emerson is, perhaps, the most distinguished, would be to presume an unpardonable ignorance on the part of our people who know that fact as well as we do. . . .⁸⁰

The *Daily Gazette* and the *Daily Herald* were equally matter of fact. The former announced that "Masonic Hall will contain an audience to-night composed—be they many or few—of the intelligent and intellectual of our community. It is not everybody that can appreciate Mr. Emerson. . . . But in a city as large as this, there ought to be enough to furnish a good size audience."⁸¹ The *Herald* noted that "Our citizens must not forget the opportunity of hearing the lecture this evening of this distinguished American poet and popular writer."⁸²

According to the report in one newspaper it would seem that Emerson's audience was not as "appreciative" as it had been in 1863. Though there was a "fair" turnout to hear him speak, the lecture was "barely" acceptable. He seemed to be "out of humor" from some cause or other; the reporter wondered if it was perhaps because in the midst of the "splendor" of Masonic Hall he was forced to lecture from behind an "old, greasy kitchen table, with a candle box on top. . . ."⁸³

This time Emerson's visit to the Hoosier capital was brief and uneventful. He received \$65 for reading "Social Aims," stayed at the Bates House once again, and moved on immediately to New Albany where he was paid \$100 for a lecture the following night.⁸⁴

Though he was to make several other western tours before his death in 1882, Emerson never visited Indianapolis—or Indiana, for that matter—again as a lecturer.⁸⁵ Whether this was his decision or due to lack of response from those approached in Indianapolis has not been—and possibly cannot be—determined. It would seem, however, that the "intelligent and intellectual" of the city were not as impressed by Emerson on his second visit as had been the audience that braved the elements in 1863.

⁸⁰ Indianapolis *Daily Journal*, February 13, 1866.

⁸¹ Indianapolis *Daily Gazette*, February 13, 1866.

⁸² Indianapolis *Daily Herald*, February 13, 1866.

⁸³ Indianapolis *Daily Gazette*, February 14, 1866.

⁸⁴ Charvat, *Emerson's American Lecture Engagements*, 42. Emerson had lectured in Richmond, Indiana, on February 12; he appeared in New Albany on February 14. *Ibid.*

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*