

The William Holmes McGuffey Museum: A Brief History

William Holmes McGuffey was a Miami University faculty member in 1836 when he compiled the first edition of the *McGuffey Eclectic Reader* at 410 East Spring Street in Oxford, Ohio. Between 1836 and 1920 the *Readers* taught the expanding American public lessons in reading, spelling, and civic education by using memorable stories of honesty, hard work, thrift and personal respect. His brother Alexander Hamilton McGuffey, who also lived here for a time, assisted later editions in the series.

After the Civil War, later editions of the *Readers* became the basic schoolbook in thirty-seven states. By 1920 they had sold 122,000,000 copies, stimulating the growth of publishing houses in Cincinnati, New York, Philadelphia and Chicago, and reshaping the American public school curriculum. Scholars have credited the *Readers* with a major role in shaping democratic values across the expanding nation, facilitating unprecedented access to public literacy, and influencing the socialization of generations of immigrants to the United States. Today the *Readers* remain in print, and are often used in home schooling.

McGuffey lived in a frame house at the Spring Street site in 1828, and in 1833 removed that structure and built a brick home there in a Federal vernacular style common to aspiring and successful families in southwest Ohio. McGuffey left Miami in 1836 for presidencies at Cincinnati College and Ohio University, and later lived the rest of his life at the University of Virginia as Professor of Moral Philosophy.

Between the 1850s and 1958 at least six different Oxford families owned the former McGuffey property. A west wing was added and other changes made to it about 1860, the first of a series of renovations typical of Miami Valley domestic architecture.

To mark the Miami Sesquicentennial in 1958 the University purchased the house from heirs of Miami Treasurer Wallace P. Roudebush (who owned and lived in the home after 1926), and secured an endowment from Mrs. Emma Gould Blocker to operate it as a museum. The site was awarded National Historic Landmark status in 1966 by the United States Department of the Interior. After the DeWitt Log Home (1805) and Elliott Hall (1825), McGuffey House (1833) is the third-oldest structure on the Miami University Campus and the second-oldest building in continuous daily use.

The first Director of McGuffey Museum was Professor W. E. Smith, who also served as Chair of History and Dean of the Graduate School. Smith and his spouse Ophia Smith were prominent local historians. He was named Director in 1947 when the Museum was established in a defined area of Alumni Library, and served until his death in 1963. Smith apparently reported directly to the President, and beginning in 1958 he personally supervised a renovation and redecoration of McGuffey House that altered its 19th century vernacular character to the formal neo-Georgian style fashionable in the late 1950s. At that time Smith's office and research space were relocated to an office on second floor of the Museum.

Mrs. Emma Gould Blocker had been an employee of Alumni Library, and in 1958 her gifts of furniture and other items were combined with University holdings to create an exhibit collection for McGuffey House. It included items of 19th century decorative arts as well as items pertinent to McGuffey and Miami history. Mrs. Blocker planned to live in the house as hostess, but died before it opened to the public in 1960.

After Smith's death in 1963 Sterling Cook managed McGuffey Museum in his capacity as Curator of Miami's Rowan Hall Gallery and Miami Art Museum, until retiring in 1986. With only a small Art Museum staff and Oxford community volunteers, during this period McGuffey Museum programming was confined to modest public hours on weekends, casual tourism, and visits by schoolchildren. In 1997 James Robeson, Interim Director of the Art Museum, responding to an initiative by Art Museum Registrar Beverly Bach, authorized a professional architectural assessment of the property for historic preservation and adaptive reuse as a teaching museum. The project included structural stabilization, new heating, ventilation and air conditioning, public access and accommodations, installation of electrical and telecommunications equipment.

In 1999 Robert Kret, with experience in historic preservation, was named Director of Miami Art Museum. He and Beverly Bach worked with Smith Group/Architects Four of Ann Arbor, Michigan, to create a three-phase renovation plan for McGuffey Museum that would yield a structure for contemporary professional practice while respecting its Landmark status.

Renovation Phase I—a two-year commitment of \$701,377 for structural stabilization, funded 49.9% by principal of the Blocker Endowment and 50.1% by state, Miami and local annual funds—was contracted to Triad Associates of Oxford in Spring 2000. Then in November 2000 Kret left Miami for a position at a major art museum, and administrative reorganization at Miami followed. The Art Museum was moved to the School of Fine Arts, and upon the recommendations of Kret and SFA Dean Pamela Fox, Provost Ronald Crutcher separated McGuffey Museum and the Art Museum to clarify and focus their different missions. The Provost's Office assumed responsibility for McGuffey Museum and Beverly Bach was reassigned as full-time Curator. Curtis W. Ellison, Professor of American Studies, History, and Interdisciplinary Studies, was named Interim Director.

Since reopening to the public June 15, 2002, McGuffey Museum has been open six afternoons weekly and attracted 5,900 visitors from Ohio, 28 states and seven countries. It has hosted public events including a reception for the exhibit *100 Years of the School of Education and Allied Professions: Teaching the Teachers and Changing Society*, a dedication ceremony for an Ohio Bicentennial Historical Marker, a 20-year all-class reunion of 400 graduates of Oxford's McGuffey School, educational events for numerous Miami, Oxford and Southwest Ohio organizations, and open houses for Oxford and Miami communities on event days and holidays. It is a feature attraction for Miami's annual Reunion Weekend.

The Museum's volunteer organization boasts over forty members who contribute time and resources. McGuffey is a member of the Miami Museum Consortium, and the Art Museum has identified it as a Beta site for digital cataloging of Miami artistic and historic artifacts.

Faculty in programs such as American Studies, English, Communication, Teacher Education, Fine Arts and History, as well as teachers from Talawanda High School, bring classes to the Museum. The School of Education and Allied Professions, Miami Art Museum, Amos Library at Murstein Alumni Center, Miami University Archives and Western College Alumnae Association have undertaken cooperative projects with the Museum. Student Affairs, Alumni Relations, the Registrar, and the University Secretary have held staff programs there. A graduate student aide has created an educational program for elementary school students, another wrote a senior capstone project on development opportunities for the Museum, and another created the Museum website.

Today McGuffey Museum continues to collect, conserve and exhibit artifacts about McGuffey and the *Eclectic Reader* series, as well as 19th century vernacular architecture and domestic life in southwest Ohio, and is developing a commitment. The Museum's permanent collection includes personal items of the Miami figure who most influenced 19th & 20th century public education; a rare collection of the nation's most popular textbook, the *McGuffey Eclectic Readers*; diverse items pertaining to the national history of literacy and schooling since the 1830s; and material culture, paintings, decorative and domestic arts of Victorian Oxford and southwest Ohio. Museum exhibits interpret the permanent collection in seven rooms showing unique artifacts of McGuffey at Miami University, eras of regional domestic life and arts, University history exhibits, and 19th Century vernacular architectural practices of southwest Ohio. An artifact inventory designed for Internet access has been completed. Because the site is the only National Historic Landmark at Miami University offering public programs, Museum staff work closely with Miami Physical Facilities personnel to implement U.S. Department of the Interior guidelines for preservation of historic properties and artifacts.

Notable donor support has included gifts providing for historically appropriate window treatments and gifts for exhibits showcasing rare 19th century household items, furniture, dishes and glassware. The renovation project received a 2003 *Award of Merit* from the Ohio Historic Preservation Office, a division of the Ohio Historical Society, and the Butler County Historical Society named Curator Beverly Bach a 2003 *Butler County Bicentennial Historian*. Feature articles on the Museum have appeared in regional and state magazines and newspapers, including *USA Today*.

Last Revised December 2004 C. Ellison