

THE BOATLOAD OF KNOWLEDGE

New Harmony, Indiana, as a Center of Natural History in the Nineteenth Century

Toward the end of January, 1826, a shallow-bottomed keelboat (one of those indispensable workhorses of the Mississippi and its tributaries in the days before steam) drew up to the landing-stage at New Harmony, Indiana, on the Wabash after a long journey down the Ohio River from Pittsburgh. Some of the passengers had already disembarked two days before at the Mount Vernon landing on the Ohio with the bulk of the luggage and travelled in heavy wagons overland to New Harmony, but most were still on board. That long voyage down the Ohio may not rank with the voyages of the *Pinta* or the *Mayflower* but it has its own secure place in the history of science in North America. On board were some of

By Ian MacPhail



the most celebrated figures in the intellectual life of Philadelphia. The name of the keelboat was the *Philanthropist*, but someone called it "the Boatload of Knowledge" and that is the label that has come down to posterity.

Who were they and what were they doing out here in this mosquito-ridden village in the Indiana bush far from the elegant and gracious life of Philadelphia?

First we have to look at New Harmony itself and see what was going on there because that is what drew this band of intellectuals into the wilderness. In 1814, George Rapp, a Pietist preacher from Württemberg in Germany and a group of his followers set up a religious community on the banks of the Wabash on what had been an old Indian camping ground. He called the settlement Harmonie. In 1825 he decided to move elsewhere and he sold out to the charismatic Welsh reformer, Robert Owen, who was looking for a site for his socialist Utopia in North America. The community that Robert Owen established there is its best known claim to fame. It is perhaps not so well-known that from 1829 until 1841 New Harmony was the place of imprint of some major American works in natural history and for a longer period, into the '70's, a center of pilgrimage for scientists because of the work in natural history that was being done there.

Owen's social experiment was not a great success, partly at least because he did not screen the members of the community but issued an open invitation to all free spirits to join the enterprise and was not prepared (as Donald Culross Peattie puts it) for the "number of cranks, knaves, fools, ne'er-do-wells, lazy louts, religious maniacs, cracked-brained theorists, and fanatics for continence or incontinence" that appeared. The place was already over-crowded, about a thousand persons (New Harmony today has scarcely more), when Owen, with his beguiling Welsh tongue recruited to his visionary settlement William Maclure and the thirty-odd scientists and educators from Philadelphia, that comprised the "Boatload of Knowledge". Owen's eldest son, William, protested that what they needed most were mechanics and manual laborers but, in fact, as another commentator has pointed out, "if the Boatload of Knowledge had not come to New Harmony, Robert Owen's social experiment in America would have received a much smaller place in history and the "Golden Age" of cultural achievements in the village on the Wabash during the next fifty years would probably not have been realized."

Who was on board? There was, first of all, William Maclure, the rich Scottish philanthropist, who had his own utopian ideas of education and was looking for somewhere to put them into practice. He had already





Lucy Way Sistare Say

made his name as a geologist with the publication of his *Observations on the Geology of the United States* in 1809, revised in 1817. He was one of the early members of the Academy of Natural Sciences in Philadelphia and its incumbent President; Thomas Say, zoologist, conchologist, entomologist, a charter member of the Academy of Natural Sciences and Curator of the American Philosophical Society; Charles-Alexandre Lesueur, the future curator of the Muséum d'Histoire Naturelle at Le Havre, whom Maclure had met in Paris some ten years before and induced to come to Philadelphia. He became a member of the American Philosophical Society and was the first person to study and collect the inland fishes of North America; John Speakman, another of the founders of the Academy of Natural Sciences, a pharmacist by profession and a friend of Thomas Say's; Marie Louise Duclos Fretageot, an intellectual Frenchwoman, who ran a seminary of higher education for young women in Philadelphia, accompanied by several of her students, including Lucy Sistare, who was later to marry Thomas Say; Robert Dale Owen, the eldest son of New Harmony's founder Robert Owen, who was later elected to the Indiana Legislature, worked vigorously for women's rights, free public education and emancipation of slaves, and eventually served in the U.S. Congress and introduced the bill that created the Smithsonian Institution.

These were the chief stars in that galaxy of talent, and their presence on the *Philanthropist* and sojourn in New Harmony must have left a substantial void in the intellectual life of Philadelphia.

The work of the community of New Harmony was intended to be a mix of manual labor, recreation in the arts and intellectual activity. All property was to be held in common and all work shared. I think that the word *communist*, now used so narrowly and pejoratively, was first used in the United States to describe the members of the New Harmony community.

"The Boatload of Knowledge" were the leavening for the intellectual life, but they too were expected to work at manual tasks, and Thomas Say would get blisters on his hands from digging in the garden, and Madame Fretageot's pretty young students would get called away from performing on the piano to milk cows. One activity that suited them better was printing and the production of books, and from 1829 onwards the press that had been established there turned out an astonishing assortment of scientific works. Let me list some of them.

The first major work was Thomas Say's *American Conchology, or Descriptions of the Shells of North America*, which appeared in seven parts between 1830 and 1838. The plates were engraved by Lesueur and hand-colored by Lucy Sistare, who took time off to elope with the author and get married before finishing the work. The modern printing journal, *The*

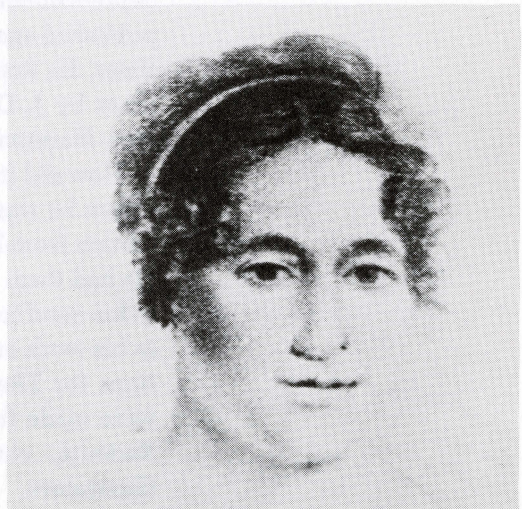
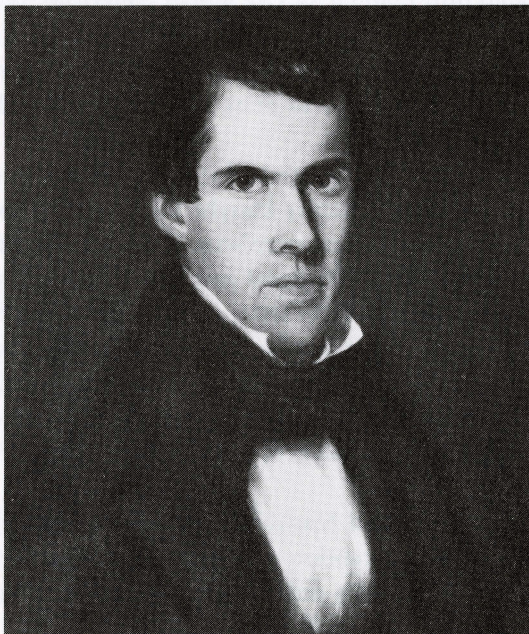


Thomas Say



Charles Alexandre Lesueur

Robert Dale Owen



Madame Marie Duclos Fretageot

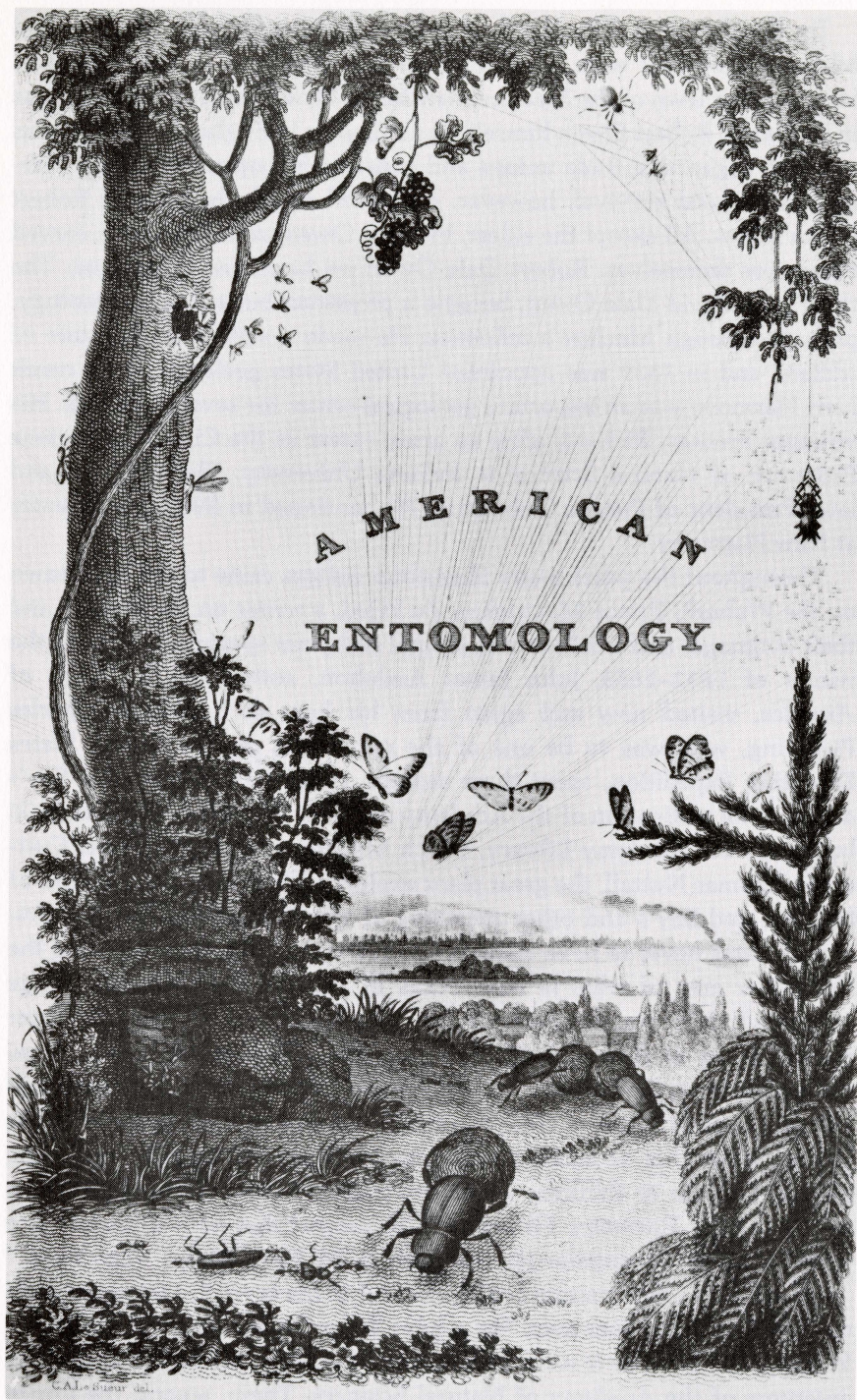
Colophon, remarks that it would take a great many words "to account for the miracle of its production in the ague-ridden wilderness that was Indiana in the 1830's." Say had already begun his other important work, *American Entomology* before coming to New Harmony and the first two volumes had been produced in Philadelphia. The third was completed at New Harmony though not printed there. Some of his lesser works, however, on shells and insects were printed at New Harmony also.

William Maclure, who eventually quarreled with Robert Owen, became the guiding spirit of the community after Owen lost interest in it. He wrote and published there his *Essay on the Formation of Rocks*, 1832, and *Observations on the Geology of the West Indian Islands*, 1832.

The finest and most significant of all the works printed at New Harmony, however, was the work of a man who is not associated with the community, who had indeed left the United States to return to his native France long before the community was established. He was François-André Michaux and he and his father, André, before him had been two of the leading plant explorers in North America around the turn of the century. His father wrote the first flora of eastern North America; François-André wrote the first *silva*, the standard work until the publication of Charles Sprague Sargent's 14-volume work of 1898-1902. Michaux's *silva* was originally published in Paris between 1810 and 1813 in French under the title *Histoire des Arbres Forestiers de l'Amérique Septentrionale*, translated into English as *The North American Sylva* and published again in Paris between 1817 and 1819 and reissued there several times. Its first American publication was Philadelphia 1841 in three volumes by J. Dobson but the printing was done by William Amphlett at New Harmony.

How did it ever come to be printed in New Harmony? It is very simple. When he was in France, William Maclure bought the whole of the Paris edition from Michaux along with the copperplates of the 156 illustrations. He had them when he went to New Harmony and it must have long been in his mind to republish them. As early as 1828, according to Cecil K. Byrd in his work on Indiana imprints, Madame Fretageot was seeking subscriptions for *The North American Sylva*. The fine copperplates incidentally were made from original paintings by Pancrace Bessa and Pierre-Joseph Redouté, commonly regarded as among the greatest of botanical illustrators.

A note in the *New Harmony and Nashoba Gazette* for December 17, 1828, suggests that the original intention was to issue the work to subscribers in numbers of five plates at a dollar each. No copies in parts are known, however, and I do not believe this was ever done.



Title page drawn by C. A. Le-sueur for Thomas Say's American Entomology (Philadelphia, 1824).

By the time that *The North American Sylva* appeared, Maclure and Madame Fretageot were dead. Thomas Say had died in 1834 and was buried in the lawn of the Maclure mansion in New Harmony. Lesueur was in Le Havre. Robert Owen himself was still alive in England where he was active in organizing trade unions and consumers cooperatives. New Harmony's cultural survival, however, continued mainly because of Robert Owen's sons. All except the eldest, William Owen, who died early, carved names for themselves. Robert Dale Owen we have already noticed. The third son, David Dale Owen, became a physician but turned to geology, perhaps through Maclure's influence. He made a survey of the state of Indiana and in 1839 was appointed United States geologist. As a result New Harmony was an important geological center for several decades. His younger brother, Richard, after an army career in the Civil War became Professor of Natural Science at Indiana University, Bloomington, and later President of Purdue University. He continued to live intermittently at New Harmony.

Throughout the years many illustrious visitors came to the little town on the Wabash. Prince Maximilian Zu Wied, a writer on the Indians and their languages and a collector of animal and plant specimens came in the winter of 1832-1833. John James Audubon, author of *The Birds of America*, visited now and again from his base in Kentucky. Charles Pickering, who was to be one of the naturalists on the United States Exploring Expedition, spent three months at New Harmony after Say's death at the instigation of the Academy of Natural Sciences to select 2000 books for the Academy Library, which Maclure wished to donate. Curiously Thomas Nuttall, the great plant explorer of the west and a friend of Maclure and Say's and other members of the Academy of Natural Sciences, seems never to have visited New Harmony. When he explored the Red River area of what is now Texas in 1819 he first saw the Osage orange which he was to name *Maclura* after his friend. Thomas Say later planted many of them around New Harmony. That erratic genius, Constantine Samuel Rafinesque, was interested in Robert Owen's ideas and lectured once or twice at New Harmony. On one of several visits to the United States that he made, Sir Charles Lyell, the Scottish geologist who had set Darwin to thinking about the transmutation of species spent a winter in New Harmony. He noted in his journal that he had found there what he called, "a singular phenomenon in the New World, a shy child."

There were other visitors but by the end of the seventies the great days of New Harmony were over. For a brief flowering the little village on the Wabash had been as it were an intellectual suburb of Philadelphia or an anteroom of the Academy of Natural Sciences. There, among the Osage

orange and goldenrain trees that Thomas Say had planted, several generations of the most lively and enquiring men and women of the age lived and worked. There were Utopian dreams, good talk, stimulating ideas. What is left of them? There are not many descendants of "The Boatload of Knowledge" in the village today though some of their names are still to be found. The Utopian dreams have been transmuted by time and reality, the scientific ideas have taken their place in intellectual history. *Littera scripta manet*. What remains of that remarkable season in the wilderness are some major contributions to the natural history of North America.

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