

Curiosities on the Cumberland: Early Nineteenth-Century Museums in Nashville, Tennessee

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On the basis of this thesis defended by the candidate on 5/1/12
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To my parents, William and Susan Jensen.
Your encouragement, love, and support mean the world to me.

Introduction

The Tennessee State Museum is a modestly sized museum located in downtown Nashville, TN. It opened in 1937 for the purpose of displaying historical objects significant to the state since the time of World War I, later incorporating other collections in the process of becoming a state museum. Take a stroll through the halls of the museum today to find a variety of objects and paintings exhibiting the history of both Nashville and the state of Tennessee. Among the collection is a life-sized painting of a youthful Andrew Jackson, painted by Ralph E.W. Earl. The curators note for their visitors that this painting was housed in a museum located on Nashville's public square, opened in 1817 by the portrait artist Earl. Little else is said about that museum, other than the recognition that such an institution represented the beginnings of the modern State Museum.

The legacy of Earl's museum as well as others that existed in Nashville in the early nineteenth-century has been overlooked in the histories of Nashville and Tennessee. These museums have been resigned to footnotes¹ in the histories of modern institutions and to token mentions in timelines of Nashville history. The purpose of this thesis is to bring to light the stories of these museums, collectively placing them in the context of both a young Nashville and in the larger American narrative of museums and collecting culture. We must ask of the museum owners, why Nashville and why a museum at this time? I argue that the presence of two museums in early nineteenth-century Nashville, given the city's youth and geographic location, demonstrates the significance of museums, with their dedication to objects, curiosity, and scientific inquiry, in the cultural life of the new nation and its new states.

Museums have existed in a form which present-day observers would recognize since the beginning of the Renaissance in the fifteenth century. These "cabinets of curiosities" were the

domain of wealthy monarchs and princes; they gained importance not only for their artistic or intrinsic value but as symbols of princely power.¹ From this courtly tradition, museums evolved into institutions for academic research and scientific inquiry, some connected with colleges and universities while others were gathered by enterprising and inquisitive individuals. All across Europe, from Florence to Paris, Dusseldorf to London, thousands of museums were founded within the course of a few centuries. Eventually, museums opened their doors to the public and with this move began a custom of public education through museum attendance. In eighteenth-century England, the expansive nature of this public fascination with curiosities generated not only cabinets but also wax works (predecessor to Madame Tussauds), traveling “raree shows” with live curiosities, as well as the thriving social, political, and culture scene centered in the city’s coffee houses.

The precedence of previous museum traditions informed the founding of American museums, but the resources and limitations of a new nation and the New World did as well. What were the factors influencing people to found or attend museums at the time? T.H Breen’s study of the convergence of the American and Consumer Revolutions suggests that eighteenth-century Americans learned to communicate status and politics through everyday “things,” like tea or paper, representing a decisive shift towards foregrounding objects in the minds of Americans.² Some historians, such as Lillian Miller and Alexandra Oleson, credit the unique American spirit of freedom and a developing cultural nationalism for the creation of museums

¹ Edward P. Alexander, *Museums in Motion: An Introduction to the History and Functions of Museums* (Nashville, TN: American Association for State and Local History, 1979), 5 -6.

² T.H. Breen, “‘Baubles of Britain’: The American and Consumer Revolutions of the Eighteenth Century,” *Past and Present*, No. 119 (Oxford University Press, 1988), 73 – 104. See also, Ann Smart Martin, “Material Things and Cultural Meanings: Notes on the Study of Early American Material Culture,” *The William and Mary Quarterly*, Third Series, Vol. 53, No. 1 (Williamsburg, VA: Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture, 1996), 5 – 12.

across the nation.³ Others argue more that American museums are a continuation of a European tradition and sign of Americans striving for elite society and refinement.⁴ US citizens were acting on a European model, but they were also fighting to distinguish themselves as a legitimate part of that culture and not as members of a colonial backwater. One of the ways to do this, Ken Arnold suggests, is to create museums, where the physical permanence of objects in a collection could lend a sense of legitimacy to the ideas which spurred their collection and to the masters of these collections themselves.⁵ According to Germain Bazin, the museum became “one of the fundamental institutions of the modern state,” a tool to be used for the glory of a nation.⁶ Americans were re-examining the objects surrounding them – natural, artificial, everyday – and re-purposing them in museums as symbols of American nationalism.

American museum founders saw their institutions as ways to establish the reputation of their nation, state, or city. Ivan Karp states that museums are closely related to “ideas about art, science, taste, and heritage” and thus central to the establishment of identity.⁷ Translated from the modern interpretation of museums into the early nineteenth century, this idea still holds. Museums were typically located in the center of a town or city and as such became a physical and symbolic display of power and knowledge. As Tony Bennett noted in “The Exhibitionary Complex,” they were a city-sized version of “show and tell.”⁸ Historians such as Don Doyle and David Hamer explain the existence of public and private institutions, like museums, in new

³ Alexandra Oleson and Sanborn C. Brown, eds. *The Pursuit of Knowledge in the Early American Republic: American Scientific and Learned Societies from Colonial Times to the Civil War* (Baltimore: American Academy of Arts and Sciences, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), xvii - xx. See also, Lillian Miller, *Patrons and Patriotism, the Encouragement of Fine Arts in the United States, 1790 – 1860* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966).

⁴ Richard L. Bushman, *The Refinement of America: Persons, Houses, Cities* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1992), 2- 4.

⁵ Ken Arnold, *Cabinets for the Curious: Looking Back at Early English Museums* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2006), 5.

⁶ Germain Bazin, *The Museum Age*, translated by Jane van Nuis Cahill (New York: Universe Books, Inc., 1967), 169.

⁷ Ivan Karp, “Introduction: Museums and Communities: The Politics of Public Culture,” in *Museums and Communities: The Politics of Public Culture* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1992), 6 – 7.

⁸ Tony Bennett, “The Exhibitionary Complex,” *Culture/Power/History: A Reader in Contemporary Social Theory*, eds. Nicholas B. Dirks, Geoff Eley, and Sherry B. Ortner (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), 151.

cities on the frontier as “boosterism”: a material way of displaying the civilization, culture, enlightenment, and public spirit and pride of a city to its rivals or to prospective citizens.⁹

Museum founders, like Ralph E.W. Earl, are thus examples of town “boosters,” seeking to make a name for their town amidst the frenzy of frontier towns and the establishment to the east. They were providing outlets of culture and education to a public which was now hungry for these interactions.¹⁰

While concepts such as institutional symbolism and boosterism which were part of the cultural context of the early Republic certainly apply in many ways to Nashville, the city evades classification within that cultural context. The difficulty presented by Tennessee is that while geographically “southern,” the state was at the time newly formed from a territory and thus subject to classification as a frontier space. Nashville’s significance must therefore be prefaced by the duality of its situation as both part of the American South and the trans-Appalachian west. However, this unique position makes Nashville an interesting case study for an exploration of the qualities of American cities at this time.

Nashville’s relative age compared to the rest of the nation is another lens through which to understand the city’s unique position. How did the museum tradition make it west to Nashville and in such haste, as the city was only incorporated in 1806? The variety and number of institutions located in Nashville during such a short period of time gives credence to the strength of the intellectual life in Nashville. That such a relatively small population, which was booming but transient, could give rise to several museums in a city so newly forged is telling of the spread of urbanization and intellectual culture throughout the emergent American nation.

⁹ Don H. Doyle, “The Social Functions of Voluntary Associations in a Nineteenth-Century American Town,” *Social Science History*, 1(1997): 333-355. David Hamer, *New Towns in the New World: Images and Perceptions of the Nineteenth-Century Urban Frontier* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), 335, 338.

¹⁰ Joel J. Orosz, *Curators and Culture: The Museum Movement in America, 1740 – 1870* (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 1990), 28.

In order to best understand the background from which the Nashville museums developed this thesis opens with a discussion of the history of collecting culture in Chapter 1. From a brief overview of the general early American cultural landscape, it moves back in time to the earliest collecting cultures, most importantly cabinets of curiosities. From the humanism of the Renaissance to the Enlightenment in England, various examples of museums and displays of curiosities are discussed as a way of exploring the motives for opening museums and the significance each museum had in its respective location. This history of collecting cultures and curiosities is then traced back to the United States to highlight the first museums that opened in the new nation, detailing how they were both similar to and different from their European predecessors.

From the general history of museums the thesis then moves to the history of Nashville and, specifically, its cultural institutions in Chapter 2. How did the legacy of Nashville's founders survive through to the nineteenth century? The city was influenced by the people that came to Nashville, their occupational patterns, and the ways in which they were entertained. What can be said about Nashville's identity as a frontier, as part of the trans-Appalachian West, and part of the South? The city's dual identity and competition with other frontier towns in the west and in Tennessee had lasting influences on the city and its institutions. And Nashville was home to a multitude of intellectual and cultural organizations and institutions including the Tennessee Antiquarian Society, the Nashville Library Company, the Nashville Lyceum, the Tennessee Historical Society, as well as three museums, several colleges, a theater, and traveling curiosities and entertainers. This history of Nashville and its cultural landscape provide the background for where and why museums developed in that city in particular.

Chapters 3 and 4, respectively, explore in depth the two major early Nashville museums along with their owners: Ralph E.W. Earl and Gerard Troost. Ralph E.W. Earl's Nashville Museum, which opened first and with a much broader concept than any of its soon to follow counterparts, was a museum of both historical and scientific objects. Earl was an itinerant portrait artist who, through his travels throughout the South, became connected with Andrew Jackson before deciding to settle in Nashville. It seems he developed affection for the city and state, because a few short years after he arrived, he proposed his museum. Earl had optimistic notions about the scope and influence his Tennessee Museum would have in the city and the state. This hopefulness suggests that he acted as part of a movement to prove Nashville was a legitimate center of Tennessee cultural activity. Dr. Gerard Troost, on the other hand, was an established scientist not only in his native country of the Netherlands, but also in America, having taught for some time in Philadelphia. His museum was of a purely scientific nature and, while he collected specimens throughout his life, he had already established a collection before opening a museum in Nashville. Where Earl strove to be a promoter of Nashville through his museum, Troost was the result of the effects of such promotions. He is the embodiment of the international transportation and communication networks which Nashville attempted to become a part of in the early nineteenth-century. These men, from vastly different backgrounds, tapped into the same cultural vein consisting of collecting and displaying objects to achieve an intellectual or educational purpose which was running throughout the nation and Nashville as well.

In the beginning of the nineteenth century, museums and collections tailored specifically to states or cities proliferated.¹¹ Despite its situation, two museums were founded in young

¹¹ H.G. Jones, *Historical Consciousness in the Early Republic: The Origins of State Historical Societies, Museums, and Collections, 1791-1861* (Chapel Hill: North Caroliniana Society, 1995), 125 – 138.

Nashville amidst a flurry of other cultural activity. The development of these centers of material culture at this time of frontier and nation-building demonstrates that Tennesseans, as Americans, were part of a larger collecting culture brought over from Europe. They relied on the developing network of knowledge and curiosities, embodied in their founders, to help them establish museums shaped by their location but built on a European model. Nashvillians collected and placed significance on objects in ways which were not new to museum history but which, translated to a new nation in need of developing its own historical narrative, used them to define themselves as a people, as a nation, and as citizens of those United States.

Chapter 1

Collecting Culture, Cabinets of Curiosities, and How the Museum Came to America

From its birth, the United States of America existed within a set of contradictory identities: of Britain but not British, geographically isolated from Europe but surrounded by its colonies, striving to be among the world elite but committed to the importance of its people. Americans believed themselves to be apart from the rest of the world, no matter how similar they might have seemed in thought, action, or appearance, because of the unique circumstances of the New World. They were provided with what seemed like an unlimited amount of land abundant with natural resources. With all of these advantages and despite the obstacles, a sense of cultural and civic nationalism developed in the new nation. Brought together under the common goal of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness and reinforced through the ratification of the Constitution, the patriotism of Americans in the immediate post-war period only seemed to grow as time went by. Bolstered by victory in the War of 1812 and the reported success of cities and towns along the western frontier, early nineteenth-century Americans were beginning to see the truth of Alexander Hamilton's grandiose pronouncement in Federalist Paper No. 1 that America was indeed "an empire in many respects the most interesting in the world."¹²

Fueled by the cultural nationalism of the early Republic, Americans began producing new ideas and institutions in the areas of politics, education, and religion as well as their own fine goods and fashions. They created uniquely American products based on European models.¹³ Within this atmosphere of American exceptionalism, many of the nation's first museums, including the Nashville museums of the early nineteenth century, were founded. But what

¹² Alexander Hamilton, "Publius", *Federalist Paper Number 1*.

¹³ Russel Blaine Nye, *The Cultural Life of the New Nation: 1776-1830* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1960), 99-123.

defined a museum? By the time the colonies won their independence from Great Britain nearly four centuries of museum history already existed to foreground and inform the establishment of contemporary museums. Museums had already begun the evolution from being solely elite private collections to public cabinets and displays; both of those traditions were manifest in British America. It was not until the founding of the US that the number and scope of museums really reflected an interest in collecting culture among the American people. How did the models for the creation of museums come to America and why did they fit so well into the framework of the new nation? This chapter will explore how European collecting culture developed from the sixteenth century forward and where America fits amidst the depth and breadth of museum history.

The Roots of European Collecting Culture

The history of museums can be traced all the way back, if desired, to the temples of ancient Greece and Rome dedicated to the muses and filled with sculpture, valuable metal trinkets, and other precious treasure. Indeed, we get the term “*museum*” from Latin (Greek: *mouseion*).¹⁴ Although they can be viewed as precursors of modern museums, examples of collecting cultures in antiquity are not particularly useful in comparison. As historian Nick Prior notes, these early collections were not the secular spaces we are familiar with today but instead amassed objects in an effort to pay homage to or glorify a divine figure.¹⁵ Examples of such collections include ancient temples and the collections of religious relics and curios which persisted through the middle ages in the great cathedrals. In other words, while they were collections of beautiful and curious objects, they were not gathered together to be displayed.

¹⁴ Edward P. Alexander, *Museums in Motion: An Introduction to the History and Functions of Museums* (Nashville, TN: American Association for State and Local History, 1979), 3 - 5.

¹⁵ Nick Prior, *Modernity and Museums: Art Galleries and the Making of Modern Culture* (New York: Berg, 2002), 14.

This principle of collection combined with display, and what are identified as the first museums, appears amongst the princely courts of Renaissance Italy. The humanism of the Renaissance fueled an interest in knowledge of the natural world, of man's relationship with nature, and of the classical past. As such, beginning in the fifteenth and continuing throughout the sixteenth century collectors began amassing objects which would educate them on the past and present of the world which surrounded them. A large and profitable market for the actual products of antiquity developed through which collectors could purchase sculptures, Roman coins, and tablets as well as artifacts from Egypt, including mummies.¹⁶ As the effects of colonization began to work their way back to the Old World, natural curiosities began to appear in these cabinets alongside priceless pieces of art and antiquities: preserved animals such as the dodo bird, unique mineralogical specimens, and any object connected to Indians were wondrous revelations from the New World.¹⁷ These collections were, by and large, private and often solely the domain of princes wealthy and powerful enough to procure the most desirable artifacts.

Sixteenth century Italy also contributed two new terms to the development of museums: gallery and cabinet or *galleria* and *gabinetto*.¹⁸ Princely collections could include both a gallery for painting and sculpture, a long hall often lit from one side with the art along the far wall, and a rectangular cabinet room to hold the remainder of the curiosities, usually of natural history and smaller objects. Thus developed the term "cabinet of curiosities," often used interchangeably with the term "museum" in the beginning of museum history. Cabinets were called such because the rooms literally held glass cabinets and drawers to shield delicate objects from dust, light, and curious fingers. Not to be outdone by their southeastern counterparts, the royals of Northern and

¹⁶ Germain Bazin, *The Museum Age*, trans. Jane van Nuis Cahill (New York: Universe Books, Inc., 1967), 43.

¹⁷ Oliver Impey and Arthur MacGregor, ed., *The Origins of Museums: The Cabinet of Curiosities in Sixteenth- and Seventeenth-Century Europe* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), 2.

¹⁸ Alexander, *Museums in Motion*, 8.

Western Europe developed their own courtly collections. The Germans called them *Wunderkammer*, or “wonder-room,” and just like their Italian counterparts they were filled with curios, small works of art, and taxidermy animals. There were also *Kunstammer*, or the “art-room,” similar to the Italian gallery in that they focused on collections of art and sculpture.

Collecting and establishing a cabinet or gallery, or both, was such a common practice amongst royals across Europe that by the middle of the sixteenth century nearly every court had or was in the process of developing one.¹⁹ Literally thousands of museums had opened in the course of a few centuries. Many of the most famous rulers of the era had equally famous collections, among them the Medici of Florence, King Charles I of England, and the Hapsburgs of the Holy Roman Empire.²⁰ Thomas daCosta Kaufmann asserts that royals used their collections as symbols of their princely power. This power, extended into the realm of antique and art dealing, was thus represented by how valuable, unique, and curious their collections were compared to others. The Renaissance witnessed a shift in the way people thought about objects, past and present, and the ways in which they could be used as symbols.²¹

The large-scale and rapid development of museums from the fifteenth century onward represents what could be called a “socio-cultural phenomenon.”²² What reasons can one attribute to this phenomenon? The concept of collecting was not new and is arguably an instinctive human trait. Collecting, especially of valuable or interesting objects, is based upon human desires for physical security, social distinction, connoisseurship, and an attempt at

¹⁹ Ken Arnold, *Cabinets for the Curious: Looking Back at Early English Museums* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2006), 14.

²⁰ Alexander, *Museums in Motion*, 20-21.

²¹ For more on this concept of the changing role of the object in the Renaissance, see Paula Findlen, *Possessing Nature: Museums, Collecting, and Scientific Culture in Early Modern Italy* (University of California Press, 1996). Findlen argues that the changing material culture of the Renaissance, the proliferation of museums, and the creation of a “theology of objects” were central to the development of the Renaissance.

²² Joy Kenseth, qtd. in Arnold, *Cabinets for the Curious*, 14.

immortality when your collection continues on with someone else.²³ The wealthy princes of Europe had no need for physical security, but gathering objects of a certain level of quality not only sets them apart from their peers but also implies that the collector has knowledge of these valuable items. Especially important, too, is the ability to leave a legacy inherent in the relative permanence of a collection compared to a human life. Museums, while often seen as functioning merely as containers of objects, lend the ideas that they nurture amongst European princes and intellectuals “a physical permanence as well as an implied symbol of legitimacy.”²⁴ The courts of Europe used museums as a way of exhibiting the reach of their socio-political and geographic power while also competing culturally with each other.

The fifteenth century was not only host to shifts in thought but to technical advancements as well, especially in travel. An increase in maritime travel led to both goods and information being transferred across oceans and national borders more rapidly and freely than ever before. Europeans’ fascination with amassing objects and knowledge was thus facilitated by more efficient methods of transportation and communication. Museums became part of a noteworthy trade system of art, curiosities, and perhaps most importantly information. Without communication and knowledge of an outside world, collections and intellectual institutions would have lost their importance in obscurity. The networks that developed were necessary both to fuel the competitive drive to create museums and to inform the significance of a museum’s objects and stories in an increasingly globalized society.²⁵ This concept, originally applied to Renaissance cabinets, is especially important for American cabinets discussed later in the

²³ Alexander, *Museums in Motion*, 5 -6.

²⁴ Arnold, *Cabinets for the Curious*, 5.

²⁵ A. Hunter Dupree, “The National Pattern of American Learned Societies,” *The Pursuit of Knowledge in the Early American Republic*, 23, 29.

chapter. The courts of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, then, had both the motivation and the means by which they could amass grand cabinets of curiosities.

The Effects of the Enlightenment

Museums as we would recognize them today, spaces open to the general public and often created for the benefit of society in general, did not develop until the seventeenth century. This is not to say that there was no such thing as a public museum up to that point, for even the Medici admitted certain members of the public into their palace collections by appointment. However, under the influence of Enlightenment thought, the seventeenth century saw the creation of museums designed specifically to be open to the public, to diffuse their knowledge to a larger audience.

It was the British who, although previously holding a fairly small role in museum history, spearheaded the founding of public museums, the first of which is the Ashmolean Museum at Oxford University. Founded in 1683 from the combined collections of naturalist John Tradescant the Elder and antiquarian Elias Ashmole, the Ashmolean was housed in its own building constructed specifically for the museum and connected to both a chemistry laboratory and a library.²⁶ This institution was perhaps the first great public museum that was didactic in nature. The art museum at the university in Basel, Switzerland, founded in 1661, preceded the Ashmolean by over twenty years. That gallery was not as pedagogically focused as the Ashmolean, but both of these museum prototypes represent the increasing importance of college and university campuses in the development of some museums.²⁷ These academic institutions were spaces well-equipped to acquire specimens with combined funds, previously established

²⁶ Bazin, *The Museum Age*, 144.

²⁷ Alexander, *Museums in Motion*, 23.

far-flung information systems, and the knowledge and ability to preserve the art or objects once acquired.

Less than a century later, nations began creating museums in the same style of university cabinets but for different functions. European rulers established museums for the purpose of identifying the power of their courts, but the British once again can take credit for producing the first national museum not belonging to or stemming from a royal collection. Established in 1753, the British Museum is the legacy of Sir Hans Sloane, who was the president of the Royal Society for Improving Natural Knowledge and physician to the British royal family. His library and natural history collection, numbered at around 80,000 pieces, was sold to the state upon Sloane's death. Combined with the libraries of Robert Hartley, Earl of Oxford, and Sir Robert Bruce Cotton, the three collections comprised the beginning of the first great national public museum and library, the British Museum.²⁸

Other examples of national museums that cropped up in this time period abound. Germany established museums in Munich, Dresden, and Dusseldorf, among others, around 1750. France's great collections were often cut off to the public if not housed in Versailles, which was generally open to anyone who owned or could rent a plumed hat and sword. Louis XIV allowed his subjects to wander the gardens of Versailles and his successor Louis XV exhibited a series of paintings in the Palais du Luxembourg in Paris for the public. France's most famous national museum, while conceived of prior to the French Revolution, was not fully realized until the violence had already begun: the Louvre opened August 10, 1793. However, Napoleon's rule managed to make the national museum even more fantastic than it already was through his constant acquisition, or theft, of the treasures of conquered nations. Napoleon was merely one of

²⁸ Bazin, *The Museum Age*, 146 - 147.

a long line of rulers who conceived of museums as symbols of national glory, a concept which would be revisited by the Americans.²⁹

The Enlightenment focus on reason, order, humanitarianism, and progress would not just be felt in the transition from private cabinet to public museum. Unfortunately, as Kenneth Hudson asserts, although some early museums were open to the public they were still mainly bastions of elitist culture, focused on one audience, and run by autocrats who had no interest in pleasing a wider public. Indeed, this argument is still one which curators struggle with today: to whom does a museum “belong”?³⁰ Whether people were truly being allowed into spaces labeled “public” or not, they were creating public spaces which might not replace the great museums but would function in many of the same ways. Guided by a sense of obligation to society, intellectuals sought to provide outlets of culture and education to a public which was now hungry for these interactions.³¹ The public was not just allowed into museums but were creating museum spaces on their own. This is best demonstrated through the establishment of a public culture among the enlightened middle class which frequented the coffee houses of London.

London was one of the major metropolitan cities of Europe by the seventeenth century. It was a center for education, culture, politics, and business; a place where the great minds of the time congregated and exchanged ideas. The British suffered for a long time, however, under strict class divisions separating the aristocracy and titled individuals from everyone else. Sequestered in the fashionable West End neighborhood of London, British aristocrats were among the few who could afford to create cabinets and host salons. The answer to this elitism was the development of what is termed a “coffee house culture.”

²⁹ Alexander, *Museums in Motion*, 23-24.

³⁰ Kenneth Hudson, *A Social History of Museums: What the Visitors Thought* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1975), 10, 31 – 47 .

³¹ Joel J. Orosz, *Curators and Culture: The Museum Movement in America, 1740 – 1870* (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 1990), 28.

London coffeehouses were spaces where the line between patrician and popular interest in curiosities could be blurred. The elite classes, interested in displays of natural and artificial rarities and the circulation of information, could stroll along eclectic business and institutions of Fleet Street mixing with the middling classes immersed in the popular and commercial culture of the city.³² The coffeehouses, specifically, were places for both exotic consumption options and exotic attractions. Along with coffee one might find the latest oriental drink on the menu and a live rhinoceros in the courtyard. The businesses which labeled themselves as coffeehouses did serve the brew, but they were also generally multi-functional and could be, at the same time, barbershops, inns, auction houses, and even public baths in the Roman tradition. The development of coffeehouse culture represents not only the commercialization of curiosities but a crossing of boundaries between classes. Coffeehouses provided social access, for both elite and middling classes, to a space which played host to more public and urbanized information networks and collecting cultures than those previously under the domain of the wealthy.³³

England also played host to a variety of less formal but certainly more entertaining museum-esque forms, including traveling exhibits of curiosities or “raree shows.” These might showcase inanimate objects, but whereas museums of this era were filled with stuffed animals and the detritus of strange societies, these raree shows were an opportunity to parade around live curiosities. Elephants, polar bears, rhinoceros, and even Native American individuals were the types of curiosities which might be showcased to audiences of all ranks and class throughout England in the manner of a traveling circus.

The collecting culture which evolved in Great Britain at first followed the pattern of princely cabinets and galleries but soon came to be characterized not by the actions of the *ton* but

³² Julie Flavell, *When London Was Capital of America* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010), 75.

³³ Brian Cowan, *The Social Life of Coffee: The Emergence of the British Coffeehouse* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2005), 89, 112, 116, 145.

those of the middling classes. London contained within its boundaries the traditional museum culture of the elite, in the case of the British Museum, as well as museum-type spaces where knowledge was both collected and dispersed to a much broader audience, such as in bustling Fleet Street and traveling raree shows. This widely varying collecting culture was brought to American soil. Americans abroad certainly took part in London culture, especially prior to the American Revolution when they were considered, by themselves and others, to be British citizens.³⁴ London provided the socio-cultural model for an ideal American city, of which a collecting culture must necessarily be a part.

A Combination of Complexities: America and the Museum

At the end of the eighteenth century Americans cut themselves loose from the British Empire and London was no longer legally the capital of British America, no longer the ideal role model for the American city despite continued strong ties. Post-Revolution Americans felt the need to develop America in its own unique form. This desire and their history created a difficult set of circumstances often arising from the dichotomy of the nature of the early American identity: always informed by their experience as British citizens but striving to be culturally, politically, and geographically separate from Europe and the mother country. However, a study of museums shows that they, too, exist within of framework of conflicting identities: private versus public, elite versus middle class, art versus curiosities. Both entities struggle with the need to walk a middle road between being the “best” and being accessible to all. It is perhaps for this reason that Americans found museums so appealing and such a useful medium through which they could build up American arts and sciences. Perhaps some of these contradictions, at

³⁴ This is one of the themes throughout Flavell's *When London Was Capital of America*.

least on the side of the museum, forced many of them into obscurity. Almost none of the early museums of the United States prevailed in their intended form to the modern age, often not past the antebellum period.

It is actually useful to ask of American institutions: what is *not* a museum? Growing out of an American need to pursue and diffuse knowledge, a profusion of organizations sprang up in the early republic. There were not only museums of art and history, but learned societies, lyceums, and library companies. Learned societies focused on collecting documents, pamphlets, and other intellectual writings dedicated to a subject chosen as the foundation for the society, usually history or science. An oral tradition of learning was provided for by lectures given through a local lyceum and the printed word spread through the membership in library companies.

What confuses these rather straightforward definitions and roles is that many learned societies, lyceums, and library companies either had a cabinet of their own or met in a museum space. To give an example, within a period of thirty years Nashville played host to the Tennessee Antiquarian Society, the Nashville Library Company, the Nashville Lyceum, a bookseller which functioned as a lending library, the Tennessee Historical Society, as well as three museums. Nashville's population, compared to other American cities, would not rank anywhere near the top ten or even the top twenty.³⁵ In other words, there was a lot of knowledge and many ways of dispersing it without a population which could reasonably support it; the desire to pursue knowledge over-stepped the reality of the situation. The functions of these spaces overlapped so often that many of these institutions forced each other into obsolescence.

³⁵ Anita Shafer Goodstein, *Nashville, 1780 – 1860: From Frontier to City* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1989), Appendix A.

What distinguished museums is that while many functioned as spaces for research and idea-sharing they never lost their commitment to objects.

Although there were many intellectual institutions, organizations, and societies existing simultaneously in the early American Republic, there was no shortage of proper museums. The Charleston Museum of Charleston, South Carolina, has the distinction of being not only the first museum established in the United States but also of still being in existence, more or less. On January 12, 1773, the Library Society of Charles-Town voted to establish a museum.³⁶ A local newspaper reported that the Society had appointed a committee which would prepare materials for “a full and accurate Natural History” of South Carolina. The collections were to include animal, vegetable, and mineral materials; a complete array of natural history artifacts and objects.³⁷

North in Philadelphia emerged the beginnings of the broader concept of an “American museum.” Two artists used their own extensive private collections to establish larger museums similar to the way Troost used his collection of geologic specimens to open his museum of Natural History. What distinguishes these two examples, first Pierre Eugène du Simitière’s American Museum and then Charles Willson Peale’s Philadelphia Museum, was that they were opened to the public. While neither of them lasted as long as the Charleston Museum, their historic legacy is of great importance to their contemporaries, close followers, and to modern museum philosophy.

³⁶ George Gaylord Simpson, “The First Natural History Museum in America,” *Science*, 96(1942): 261-263.

³⁷ Edward P. Alexander, “The American Museum Chooses Education,” *Curator: A Quarterly Publication of the American Museum of Natural History* 31(1988): 61 – 80.

The designation of “first history museum” in the new republic goes to Pierre Eugène du Simitière’s American Museum in Philadelphia, which opened in 1782.³⁸ Du Simitière was a Swiss immigrant and a naturalized US citizen who chose to settle in the up-and-coming American capital of Philadelphia. He was a longtime collector and, before opening a museum, the owner and curator of a rather sizable cabinet of natural and historical artifacts. Du Simitière is famous in his own right as the original designer of the Great Seal of the United States, as well as those of New Jersey and Delaware, and for providing us with the phrase “E Pluribus Unum.”³⁹

Du Simitière invited the public to the opening of his “American Museum” beginning June 1, 1782, with limited admittance times and a price per ticket of “half a dollar.” A broadside which du Simitière distributed throughout Philadelphia lists, in extreme detail, both the “natural [and] artificial curiosities” available for perusal, including “petrifications,” “fossils,” and a variety of land and marine “productions” (preserved animals) as well as “antiquities of the Indians of the West Indies, and of North American Indians” and “A Collection of curious Paintings.”⁴⁰ His descriptions of the collections do not sound that different from those which would, several decades and thousands of miles away, fill the Nashville museums. The American Museum of Philadelphia was a prototypical example of an early American museum, a curiosity cabinet grown larger and incorporating a variety of intellectual interests. Du Simitière had plans for a larger American Museum and for advertising further across the nation, but his death prevented this from coming to fruition.

³⁸ Hans Huth. “Pierre Eugène Du Simitière and the Beginnings of the American Historical Museum,” *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 69, 4. (1945): 315-325.

³⁹ “The Great Seal of the United States,” United States Department of State, Bureau of Public Affairs. September 1996.

⁴⁰ Pierre Eugene Du Simitiere. “American Museum. The subscriber having been induced from several motives, to open his collection for the inspection of the gentlemen and ladies, strangers in this city, and their friends ...”. Printed by John Dunlap, 1782. American Antiquarian Society, 2002.

Founded a short four years later, Charles Willson Peale's art and natural history museum was the next step in museum development for both Philadelphia and America.⁴¹ Charles Willson Peale grew up in Annapolis, MD, the eldest son and heir presumptive to a manor estate in England, if he could ever claim it – which he never could. He is perhaps more well-known for his career as a painter than his role as an early museum proprietor. After studying under Benjamin West in London, just like Nashville's own Ralph E.W. Earl, Peale came back to the states to paint portraits but ended up fighting in many major campaigns of the American Revolution. Eventually, Peale and his large family settled in Philadelphia.⁴²

Charles Willson Peale's Philadelphia Museum, now known more commonly as Peale's Museum, opened its doors in 1784. Peale was concerned with not only the systematic arrangement of his specimen, but in the research which his collections could inspire and the educational opportunities which could be provided as well. He envisioned the museum as an enjoyable educational experience and developed the motto "rational amusement," meaning that he attempted to mix both serious scientific endeavors with entertaining curiosities.⁴³ The reason so much is known about Peale's new vision of the American Museum is because he made several eloquent appeals to his important friends, such as Thomas Jefferson, and to the American public. Caught up in the fervor of the American Revolution, Peale strove to make a new American museum based on a spirit of nationalism. He wanted to celebrate the patriotic efforts of early American leaders and of the unique qualities of North America, both of its citizens as well as

⁴¹ Alexander, "The American Museum Chooses Education," 61.

⁴² David R. Brigham, *Public Culture in the Early Republic: Peale's Museum and Its Audience* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1995), 149 – 150.

⁴³ Charles Coleman Sellers, "Peale's Museum," *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society*, 43(1953), 255.

flora and fauna.⁴⁴ He was largely successful in many of his endeavors: his methods of display are considered to be nearly identical to modern museum practice and his acceptance of the realities of his patrons' interests, which was actually a wide range of people, shows his forward-thinking approach to museum administration. Yet, Peale's insistence on "rational amusement" was its eventual downfall. When his competitors copied his model in the hopes of stealing away some of his business, they were often not burdened with maintaining an intellectual and scientific purpose in addition to entertaining their audiences. Thus, with the loss of revenue, Peale's family eventually had to close the museum in the mid-1800s and sell the collections.⁴⁵

Why were Americans so eager to pursue knowledge and establish collections in their new republic? As the examples of Du Simitière and Peale suggest, part of the impetus for creating learned societies and other institutions which promoted knowledge was a desire to make America part of the international learned community. The intense cultural nationalism infusing the post-war period and glorified the nation created a belief that the same tenets of liberty and freedom which benefited the citizens would nourish scientific and cultural knowledge. Ken Arnold relatedly suggests that museums often functioned for more "middling sorts," of which many Americans most certainly were a part, as a tool for social mimicry or social elevation.⁴⁶ Although separated from Great Britain, they still represented the epitome of a powerful English-speaking nation. Copying their collecting culture was one way in which Americans could emulate the British without sacrificing core patriotic values.

Alexandra Oleson also states that natural history was patriotic in that it would call attention to the unique "productions" of the New World and be a rich resource for American and

⁴⁴ Charles Willson Peale, "To The Citizens of the United States of America," published in *Dunlap's American Daily Advertiser*, Philadelphia, Jan. 13, 1792. Taken from Bettina Messias Carbonell, ed., *Museum Studies: An Anthology of Contexts* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 129 – 130.

⁴⁵ Sellers, "Peale's Museum," 256.

⁴⁶ Arnold, *Cabinets for the Curious*, 5.

international scientists.⁴⁷ This assertion is supported by the writings of Thomas Jefferson who, among other things, was motivated to organize the Lewis and Clark expedition through a desire to document all of the species of flora and fauna which made America unique and valuable. Jefferson's belief in the value of American species was in direct opposition to those Europeans, including the French naturalist Georges-Louis Leclerc, Comte de Buffon, who were convinced that because Native Americans suffered disproportionately from European diseases that there was something inherently wrong with New World soil which would make species weak. Americans, continuing into the 1830s, were still intent on proving that America was not inferior to Europe.

Museum owners consistently strove to attain rational amusement, pleasurable instruction, and the promotion of piety through their museums. They felt a duty to society to establish these institutions so that every citizen in America might be introduced to education and, in the case of history museums, the narrative of the United States of America. The museums of America were decisively distanced from their aristocratic backgrounds, because there were no aristocratic homes to overtake (as was the case of housing the British Museum and the Louvre) and few costly treasures which could be secured through an antiquities trade prevalent in Europe, although some mummies and such found their way to America.⁴⁸ While strongly modeled after and linked to European collecting culture, American museums were shaped by circumstances of geography, population, and the availability of resources. They might not have been as sophisticated as their European counterparts, but they contained equally, if not more, curious objects. The motivations of their proprietors reflect the kinds of direct connections which exist between the fifteenth century courtly cabinets and American museums.

⁴⁷ Alexandra Oleson, "Introduction," *The Pursuit of Knowledge in the Early Republic*, xv – xxv.

⁴⁸ Dillon Ripley, *The Sacred Grove: Essays on Museums* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1969), 17 - 23.

The one significant way that American museums diverged from their predecessors is that they did not experience nearly the same longevity that most European museums enjoyed. Why were most American museums so short-lived? While many cabinets and collections persisted under different names, like the Charleston Museum, there was no American Museum in the vein of the venerable British Museum until the establishment of the Smithsonian Institution in 1846, which at that point did not look much different than its supposedly more primitive predecessors.⁴⁹ Many museums fell victim to their need to entertain the public and devolved into a “dime museum” model.⁵⁰ The early nineteenth century also saw a shift from objects-based to story-based interests in museums; curiosities, so reliant on their unique and indefinite nature, could not create a cohesive narrative.⁵¹ There were also movements to professionalize various fields, including science and, later, history, but these movements changed how people viewed the functions of museums. Museums of the early American period could not redefine their goals quickly enough to suit the needs of the intellectuals that frequented them and thus resorted to the public as their main audience.⁵² When this happened, they ceased to be museums in the traditional sense and became the side-shows many historians accused them of being in the first place.

Unlike the nation in which they were created, the museums of early America could not reconcile the contradictions inherent in their nature which made them so attractive to Americans. They were places of knowledge and refinement, but opened to the public. Curators filled them with local American curiosities, but necessarily immersed these objects within a larger,

⁴⁹ Orosz, *Curators and Culture*, 238 – 239.

⁵⁰ For more information on dime museums see Andrea Stulman Dennett, *Weird and Wonderful: The Dime Museum in America* (New York: NYU Press, 1997).

⁵¹ Hilde S. Hein, *The Museum in Transition: A Philosophical Perspective* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2000), 3 - 7.

⁵² Susan Crane, “Story, History, and the Passionate Collector,” *Producing the Past: Aspects of Antiquarian Culture and Practice 1700 – 1850* (Brookfield, VT: Ashgate Publishing Company, 1999), 190 – 193, 198.

international importance. Their ties to an aristocratic background, although shed in favor of devotion to Enlightenment ideals, lent them, their cities, states, and country a sense of power and legitimacy through the symbolism of the material culture they collected and displayed.

Chapter Two

The Nashville Scene: Pioneers, Plantations, and Popular Culture

“Whisky! Whisky!” The bold text headline was a recurring advertisement in the city newspaper, the *Nashville Whig*. This advertisement would be unremarkable were it not for the fact that the majority of what is being advertised is not actually alcohol; further reading of the advertisement shows, in much smaller type, that the merchant is also offering sugar, coffee, and log wood as well. Nashville citizens were a people whose attention was lured by the promise of alcohol, particularly their native whisky, and not by more domestic offerings. The entire newspaper is not centered on “Whisky!,” though: surrounding advertisements offer a notice of the opening of the Nashville Female Academy and such apparently commonplace items as bacon, whisky stills, saddles and bridles, as well as negroes. The contents of their bi-weekly paper demonstrate that Nashvillians were white settlers in the market for alcohol, education, and goods they cannot manufacture for themselves in addition to being engaged in the business of slavery. One edition of the *Whig* reveals Nashville as part of a frontier, the slave South, and the trend towards an awareness of the importance of knowledge and intellectualism in a growing community.⁵³

This chapter discusses the history of Nashville and Tennessee and the resulting cultural milieu of that early nineteenth-century town which spawned several museums in a period of two decades. What were the circumstances of the founding of the city in 1806 and what information could that provide in explaining cultural development? Nashville was shaped not only by its founders but by the transient population which flowed through the city on a regular basis as a result of commerce and trade. How does Nashville’s physical location, both in the Cumberland Valley and relative to other cities, affect its identity? It has already been identified as both

⁵³ *The Nashville Whig*, March 5, 1817, pg. 3

western and southern, but these terms come laden with assumptions, the analysis of which provides insight into the city's identity. Lastly, what institutions, organizations, and exhibitions constituted the cultural scene in which the Nashville museums were established and how do their histories contribute to the history of the museums themselves? The founders and patrons of the Nashville museums were informed by the larger popular and intellectual cultural context of the city.

The relative rapidity of the establishment of museums, among other cultural institutions and organizations, in young cities of the trans-Appalachian west makes a study of the museums of Nashville useful to that narrative. These cities were in competition with one another, in the context of the frontier and their own individual states. The attempts at establishing culture and "civilization" on the frontier, of which the foundation of museums is a part, was both a way of advancing the scientific and historical consciousness of the population and a show of optimism about a city's progress in comparison to other frontier cities as well as the cultural capitals of the United States.⁵⁴ In the cities of British America the seeds of the American museum movement were planted. In the cities of the American west, cities like Nashville, the idea was disseminated and took nearly as firm a hold.

The Founding and First Forty Years

In 1779, the first white settlers arrived from the east to a spot along the Cumberland River well known to Indians and early traders as fertile hunting ground. The salty sulfurous water of the "Big Salt Lick" spring attracted deer, buffalo, bears, and eventually a former French army captain, Timote de Monte Breune. As Nashville's first recorded citizen he came to be known as

⁵⁴ Carl Abbott, *Boosters and Businessmen: Popular Economic Thought and Urban Growth in the Antebellum Middle West* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1981), 206 - 207.

the “Patriarch of Tennessee,” although he is more widely recognized by the truncated version of his name, Demonbreun. The North Carolinians moved to the Watauga Valley in east Tennessee and, attracted by the fertile lands of the Cumberland Valley, came to Demonbreun’s French Lick and established Fort Nashborough, from which the city’s current name would be derived.

Among these first settlers was a young girl of thirteen, Rachel Donelson, famous for her future role as the beloved wife of Andrew Jackson.⁵⁵

Cheap lands in Middle Tennessee continued to draw settlers from the east and especially North Carolina, the colony that laid claim to that particular portion of disputed Indian lands to the west. Life in the Cumberland Valley was not easy despite its multitude of attractions. Tennesseans grew tobacco, wheat, and corn, but the state’s changeable climate produced unseasonable frosts and thus unreliable cotton production. Early settlers suffered repeated attacks from Cherokee Indians; the federal government did not remove Native Americans from the trans-Appalachian south until 1819. The Cumberland was also not always a reliable transportation resource because of low water depth, leaving an arduous and more expensive overland trade route. However, because of its central location, Nashville became a stopping point along this overland route with traders often passing down into Mississippi or New Orleans along the Natchez Trace.⁵⁶

Nashville’s position on the Cumberland River ensured that the city would remain an important point of trade and communication with the rest of the South and West. Those early settlers had engaged in the expensive and dangerous keelboat trade along the Cumberland, prior to the use of steamboats, to transport products down to New Orleans in exchange for finished goods upriver. This risky, slow Mississippi trade was gradually replaced by an abundance of

⁵⁵ Henry McRaven, *Nashville, “Athens of the South”* (Chapel Hill, Scheer & Jervis, 1949), 4 – 9.

⁵⁶ John Solomon Otto, *The Southern Frontiers, 1607 – 1860: The Agricultural Evolution of the Colonial and Antebellum South* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1989), 74 – 75, 82 – 87.

steamboats following the War of 1812. Later on, ships like the *General Robertson* in 1820 would be built by the city's own Nashville Steamboat Company. The steamboat business was especially profitable compared to the keelboat and barge system. Despite the financial panic of 1819, when cotton plummeted to nineteen cents per pound from its previous thirty, in 1821 six thousand bales of cotton shipped to New Orleans and by 1825 a further 30,000 bales. That large amount of cotton was estimated to be worth about one million dollars.⁵⁷

However, since the variable Tennessee weather placed it on the climatic edge of commercial cotton growing and the temperamental Cumberland River sometimes endangered river trade, the people of Nashville and Middle Tennessee increasingly relied on other products. Nashville became a center of industry for transforming bulky products into goods with a better cost-to-weight ratio: corn to whiskey, wheat to flour, and hogs to salt pork.⁵⁸ As a port city connected to the even larger port city of New Orleans, Nashville came to be an important commercial and processing center for the surrounding hinterland and, increasingly, for all of Middle Tennessee.

The trading post and fort grew until Nashville was officially incorporated as a town in 1806. Nashville was only as big as what amounts to a couple of modern city blocks.⁵⁹ However, over the next decade Nashville would experience a period of booming population, economy, and intellectual pursuits which would increase its presence on the national stage and in the history of American cities. Around 1823 buildings within city limits numbered around five hundred in total and these lined dirt streets. Of the five hundred, no more than six had a third floor and most were still constructed of logs, including some of the larger two-story buildings.⁶⁰ Yet these

⁵⁷ Anita Shafer Goodstein, *Nashville, 1780 – 1860: From Frontier to City* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1989), 35, 42.

⁵⁸ Otto, *The Southern Frontiers*, 88.

⁵⁹ Goodstein, *Nashville*, 1.

⁶⁰ Francis Garvin Davenport, *Cultural Life in Nashville on the Eve of the Civil War*, PhD Thesis (Vanderbilt University, 1936) 7.

buildings boasted a bookstore, a Masonic Hall, a theater, the Jackson Hotel, the Nashville Inn, a smattering of general stores, and several taverns.⁶¹ Most of the wealthier citizens often followed the pattern of living in a log cabin, then wooden house, and, if they were lucky, eventually a brick mansion.⁶² This young Nashville would certainly not compare consider with a city on the level of Charleston or Philadelphia, but while the buildings may have been crude they were filled with the makings for a lively city life.

One of the turning points in Nashville's history was the year 1812, during which the city was named the temporary capital of Tennessee and one of its citizens earned national fame.⁶³ Andrew Jackson, the hero of the Battle of New Orleans, had called the city home since 1788, when he arrived a poor, Scotch-Irish orphan a mere twenty-one years old. Andrew Jackson's victory in the War of 1812, despite technically occurring after the war was over, was a huge step in promoting the career of the enterprising general and to recognition of his hometown. Part of Nashville's early nineteenth-century boom period can be attributed to the rise in prominence of its most enduringly famous citizens. When Jackson returned to his home just south of Nashville, the Hermitage, he inevitably attracted those interested in paying respect to the war hero and, later on, meeting the candidate for the Presidency.⁶⁴

Jackson can in fact be looked to as a quintessential Nashville citizen. He was one of those individuals who followed the pattern of houses from log cabin to brick mansion, his being the Hermitage, bespeaking his humble beginnings. Nashville's fertile lands and position on the

⁶¹ Compiled from information in the *Nashville Whig*, years 1825 – 1826.

⁶² Lewis Perry, *Boats Against the Current: American Culture Between Revolution and Modernity, 1820-1860* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 27.

⁶³ "Nashville History Timeline," Nashville Public Library, accessed April 4 2011, http://www.library.nashville.org/research/res_nash_history_timeline.asp. Nashville was the capital on and off during the Antebellum period, where the capital was switched between Knoxville and Murfreesboro before finally making its permanent home in Nashville in 1846.

⁶⁴ Lewis Perry, *Boats Against the Current*, 25 – 27.

Cumberland River ensured that the majority of the population was either involved in agriculture or the business surrounding it, Jackson included. The city leadership was composed of what Anita Shafer Goodstein terms a “merchant-banker-lawyer alliance.”⁶⁵ Nashville’s leading men might have primarily identified with one of those labels, but for the most part they were jack-of-all-trades types and might have been employed in a number of pursuits. Jackson was an excellent example: at various points in his life he was a store owner, planter, lawyer, soldier, and politician.⁶⁶ The people of Nashville were frontiersmen looking for opportunity in a growing town, wherever that opportunity might be, and given the relatively small population many of the more prominent leaders had their hands in many professional pursuits.

While these men might have been the ideal Nashville citizens, a large variety of migratory entertainers passed through the city, some of who were in the business of legitimate performance (there was a theater, after all) and others whose aim was to trick the good people of Nashville out of their money. The city had its fair share of beggars, both real and false, claiming to be, among other things, stranded foreigners or poor former soldiers.

Not to be forgotten, either, are the African American slaves who worked on the plantations and in the households of Nashville. While Nashville was a frontier, it was also a slave society. Much of the wealth that afforded Nashville’s leaders the ability to pursue cultural activities was gained through the exploitation of slaves. The community in Nashville was held together through the strength of family connections, but this community and especially its leadership excluded blacks, recent immigrants, and the poor. Nashville’s population numbered only three hundred forty-five at the turn of the nineteenth century. In the next twenty years this number tripled twice, once during each decade, leaving the population in 1820 at just over three

⁶⁵ Goodstein, *Nashville, 1780 – 1860*, 20.

⁶⁶ Perry, *Boats Against the Current*, 27.

thousand.⁶⁷ By 1850, Nashville's population totaled 10,165. Out of that number 2,028 were slaves and 511 were free blacks, accounting for nearly twenty percent of the population.⁶⁸ The role of Nashville's slaves in creating the prosperity of the agriculturally-based city is undeniably important. While Nashville's leadership was of white backwoods stock, the dirt streets and wooden buildings along the Cumberland were filled with a colorful cast of pioneers and transients in the first half of the nineteenth-century.

The Significance of Geography in Nashville History

Up through the early nineteenth-century Nashville's first designation was that of "frontier." Tennessee did not achieve statehood until 1796, having been a part of western North Carolina until the state ceded the lands to the federal government so that it could develop the "Southwest Territory." Located in the trans-Appalachian west, Nashville was isolated by the necessity of a difficult overland journey to reach the territory. Past Tennessee, and even in contested regions within it, were Indian lands. Tennessee was on the edge of legal US territory, reaching to the Mississippi River, and represented the American frontier and the West at the time.

While Tennessee was on the legal frontier of United States, it displayed frontier qualities for some time, including a lack of population density, a reliance on imported fine goods, and an independence of character. Perhaps the most famous scholar of frontiers is Frederick Jackson Turner, whose 1893 thesis declared that the American frontier was the defining American experience and that it was closed in 1890. He chose that year specifically because it was the year that the US Census Bureau declared that the "frontier of occupancy" was no longer distinct

⁶⁷ Goodstein, *Nashville, 1780 – 1860*, xli, 205.

⁶⁸ *Seventh Census of the United States* (1850)

throughout the American West. This frontier of occupancy, Turner's defining characteristic of a frontier, consists of an area where there are less than two people per square mile. However, the US Census Bureau lists several stages of occupancy in areas which could be defined as frontier spaces. John Solomon Otto's *The Southern Frontier, 1607 – 1860* proposes a more complex view of what is meant by "frontier," taking into account the agriculture and economy of an area and the number of cities in addition to the population density. By his definition, in 1860 Nashville was still part of an "intensive agricultural frontier" region, an area with less than forty-five people per square mile and a step below the final frontier of over forty-five people and industrialization.⁶⁹

Middle Tennessee's continued agricultural rather than industrial economy also accounts for the fact that the people of Nashville often looked to imported goods for the finer things in life rather than relying on their native products.⁷⁰ Such a trend was common in the United States where even wealthy persons on the east Coast were known to call upon their eastern counterpart, the British, for even more refined materials and education. Nashville's citizens were not all intent on becoming refined, though. Much of the lament of later intellectuals who called the city home centered on the general lack of interest in cultural pursuits among the population, often attributed to a sense of frontier independence.⁷¹ Nashville lawyer and politician John Bell made clear his low opinion of the general population of Nashville in an address to University of Nashville alumni in 1830: "The rude and fearful spectre of arts unduly prized, learning generally unappreciated, and every effort to create a thirst for science and a taste for general improvement

⁶⁹ Otto, *The Southern Frontiers*, 1 -3, 104.

⁷⁰ A discussion of the various products that were available to the people of Nashville is detailed in Chapter 8, "Silk Handkerchiefs and Feather Beds" in Harriette Simpson Arnow, *Seedtime on the Cumberland* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1960), 343 - 386.

⁷¹ Davenport, *Cultural Life in Nashville on the Eve of the Civil War*, 15.

paralyze the cold indifference of the better informed and by popular jealousy and suspicion.”⁷²

Dr. Philip Lindsley, the President of the University of Nashville, also found fault with the people of Nashville in many ways, including the fact that they had the “offensive” habit of chewing and spitting tobacco.⁷³ The men and women of Nashville who rejoiced at the presence of colleges, bookshops, and museums apparently had to fight against the sentiment that “improvement” belonged in the east, not on the frontier.

Nashville was part of the western frontier in many senses but was also definitely located in the American South through geography, politics, and popular thought. The term “South” is itself problematic, given the multitude of images and connotations it is associated with. Regions and states have been grouped in the South by climate, through the legal status of slavery in the state up to 1860, by US Census statistics, and by popular imagination. Generally, though, Tennessee is a part of the South even given all of those separate distinctions. It is a part of the humid subtropical zone of North America, was a slave state, is one of sixteen states counted by the US Census Bureau as part of the South, and entertains the traditions of the Old South.⁷⁴

Nashville has been identified thus far as a city, albeit a frontier one, but the theme of the Old South is decidedly anti-urban. Where does Nashville fit into the picture? For a long time, the Old South myth held sway in the history of the Antebellum South, proposing that the South was primarily based on agriculture, mostly consolidated on plantations, and that any center was either not “urban” in the northern definition of the word or not “southern” in its incorporation of industry. Nashville presents some opposition to this myth, then, in that for a town of its size it had a reasonable level of industry in addition to the significant presence of plantations. So, too,

⁷² John Bell, “An Address Delivered at Nashville,” October 5, 1830, *Being the First Anniversary of the Alumni Society of the University of Nashville*, 4.

⁷³ Philip Lindsley, *The Works of Philip Lindsley, D.D.* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1866), electronic resource.

⁷⁴ Paul Conkin, “Hot, Humid, and Sad,” *The Journal of Southern History*, 64 (1998): 4 – 6.

do the other five “southern” cities that are listed in the top 15 for population in all of the US in 1850: Baltimore, New Orleans, Louisville, St. Louis, and Washington. These cities are admittedly located on the periphery of the South or along major waterways, but so too are the largest cities in the North such as Philadelphia, New York, and Boston with perhaps the exception of Albany.⁷⁵

In fact, while much of the South could be described as rural there was still a strong pro-urban stance in many regions where there were persistent attempts at town-building despite many failed attempts. Even Andrew Jackson, that quintessential Nashville citizen and representative of an agricultural lifestyle, was a shrewd businessman who worked to promote towns like Pensacola, FL, and Memphis, TN.⁷⁶ The cities of the nineteenth-century were all thriving cultural centers with relatively varied economies despite their regional identification. Nashville was both Southern and urban. The city might have been surrounded by large areas of hinterland, but steam power’s ability to connect parts of the nation previously disjointed providing trade and communication was modern and urban.

Culture Comes to the Cumberland

Nashville’s museums existed within the framework of not only the geographical and economic position of Middle Tennessee but also in the context of the other institutions, organizations, and cultural displays which could be found in an early nineteenth-century town and Nashville in particular. As mentioned in Chapter One, Nashville was host to a large variety of these types of cultural entities such as the Nashville Library Company and the Tennessee

⁷⁵ Leonard P. Curry, “Urbanization and Urbanism in the Old South: A Comparative View,” *The Journal of Southern History* 40(1974): 43-60.

⁷⁶ Lyle W. Dorsett and Arthur Shaffer, “Was the Antebellum South Antiurban? A Suggestion,” *The Journal of Southern History*, 38(1972): 93-100.

Antiquarian Society, but these were by no means the only signs of the cultural capacity of the city. Throughout the early nineteenth century Nashville played host to developments in education, theater, and an interest in antiquity and curiosities.

These developments' effects are evident in that Nashville was nationally important enough to warrant a visit from Revolutionary War hero General Lafayette on his tour through the United States in 1825. Arriving by steamboat along the Cumberland on the 2nd of May, Lafayette was greeted by thousands of patriotic men and women from Nashville and the surrounding area lining the streets and the public square. As the *Nashville Whig* reported, the General professed his extreme gratitude at this display in a state so "lately a wilderness" and wanted to "personally congratulate them as the spirited promoters of their own rapid prosperity" and their role in "one of the most extraordinary achievements, that have ever irradiated the annals of patriotic glory."⁷⁷ Despite some of its continued frontier qualities, even a Frenchman recognized the progress that Nashville had made.

The educational system of Nashville was not highly developed in the first half of the nineteenth-century but what educational institutions were present were well-respected by their peers. A public education system would not be established in the city until 1850, its citizens instead relying on private academies, such as the Lancasterian and Stevens Schools, or tutors to provide primary education.⁷⁸ Of note among the various private schools is the Nashville Female Academy, opened in April, 1817. The school advertised "Female Education" in "English Grammar, Geography, Logic, Philosophy, Astronomy, Belles-lettres and History, together with such other branches as shall be calculated to complete a substantial education." Girls attended

⁷⁷ Edgar Ewing Brandon, ed., *A Pilgrimage of Liberty: A Contemporary Account of the Triumphal Tour of General Lafayette through the Southern and Western States in 1825, as Reported by the Local Newspapers* (Athens, OH: The Lawhead Press, 1944), 232.

⁷⁸ *Nashville Whig*, February 21, 1825; December 12, 1825.

the school five days a week at the cost of twenty dollars per five month session. The continued popularity of the school, as demonstrated by the enrollment of one hundred students in the 1825 session, eight years after its founding, indicates that education was taken seriously not only for young men in the city but for young women, as well.⁷⁹

Cumberland College represents another attempt to establish quality higher education in Nashville. Established in 1806, the college was thought to be Nashville's key to recognition in intellectual circles. It was not until the presidency of Philip Lindsley in 1824, however, a full eighteen years after its founding, that the institution began to fulfill its potential.⁸⁰ Lindsley was the former vice-president, professor of languages, and librarian of Princeton University. His decision to come to Nashville and dedicate his life to Cumberland College, whose name was changed to the University of Nashville under his presidency, not only increased the reputation of the university but also influenced the decision of one of the museums' founders to come to Nashville. Gerard Troost brought his family to the city on the Cumberland so he could teach alongside Lindsley at the University of Nashville.⁸¹

While education was focused on the youth of Nashville, the theatrical productions appealed to all categories of citizenry. The first theater groups to reach Nashville were traveling bands who performed plays on a circuit basis throughout the South. An actor in one such group described Nashville in 1817 as a place where "theatricals were wanted, and where there had not yet been a regular dramatic company."⁸² Advertisements often ran in the *Nashville Whig* promising entertainment like "a new popular Drama, as performed in London and Paris, to

⁷⁹ *Nashville Whig*, March 5, 1817; March 7, 1825

⁸⁰ University of Nashville, Board of Trustees, *The University of Nashville, 1785 to 1892* (Nashville, TN: Marshall and Bruce, 1892), 26 – 29. Microfilm of the original.

⁸¹ Lindsley, *The Works of Philip Lindsley*, electronic resource, np.

⁸² Noah Ludlow, *Dramatic Life as I Found It* (G.I. Jones, 1880).

overflowing houses...called The Magpie and Maid”⁸³ In 1826, Nashville had a new playhouse under construction, reportedly its third, at the corner of Union and Sumner streets (now Fifth Avenue). The theater was wildly popular, probably because it was a singularly entertaining way to spend an evening and was understandable and enjoyable to every demographic in the city.⁸⁴

Apart from the theater, the citizens of Nashville found other ways to quench their thirst for amusement. Each edition of the newspaper featured a poem, often written by a reader, but sometimes borrowed because of the topic from another newspaper. Some of the titles include “The Voice of Him I Love” by Mrs. Opie and “Money Helps the Genius” by an A.A.⁸⁵ Also featured were notices of balls, musicals, and dancing, usually at the ballroom of the Nashville Inn. There was even an advertisement to see “The Greatest Natural Curiosity” next door to the Eagle Tavern: a live elephant. It was a must-see for “those wishing to gratify their curiosity, by seeing the wonderful works of nature.”⁸⁶ Traveling curiosity displays and circus-like acts, such as those which traversed England through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, provided entertainment to Nashvillians and added to the amusements provided by the two museums that existed during this period.

There were also articles reprinted for the benefit of the reader which dealt with topics of curiosities or antiquities. From St. Louis came the story of farmer on the Merrimack River who found “a number of graves, the size of which appeared to be uncommonly small” and convinced himself and the reporter that they were dwarf skeletons. The St. Louis Enquirer’s explanation for reporting on the curious discovery is that “This subject certainly invites the attention of the learned and curious ... at least to form some plausible conjecture of a race of beings who have

⁸³ *Nashville Whig*, October 28, 1817

⁸⁴ James H. Dormon, Jr., *Theater in the Antebellum South, 1815-1861* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1967), 88, 249, 289.

⁸⁵ *The Nashville Whig and Tennessee Advertiser*, Feb. 7, Feb. 14, 1818

⁸⁶ *Nashville Whig*, September 11, 1819

inhabited our country at a period far [earlier].” The *Nashville Whig and Tennessee Advertiser* obviously thought their readership to be among the learned and curious to be interested in “ANTIQUITY” as it was labeled.⁸⁷

Despite its position on the frontier and in an agricultural area difficult to reach over land or by water, Nashville developed into a lively town that was host to a wide variety of cultural outlets. It is as part of this cultural milieu that the Nashville museums were founded, one by a Yankee painter, the other by a European geologist and professor. Given the dates when the museums were founded, 1817 and 1828 respectively, the museums showed up on the scene as soon as the economic stability of the city was ensured and enough wealth had been accumulated that there was a target audience available. This is true, too, for the theater.⁸⁸ The rate of development of the first museums, relative to the city’s founding date, shows that the rate in the trans-Appalachian west was much more accelerated than those of older cities. The cities of the east, founded in the original colonies, waited many years before they were established enough to support a museum. For more established cities like Charleston and Philadelphia founding dates were in the late 1700s; for Cincinnati and Nashville between 1818 and 1820. In the West, civilization and culture, including museums, generally came with the foundation of a town lock, stock, and barrel.⁸⁹

Early nineteenth-century Nashville, Tennessee, was a part of the American west, part of a tradition of western urban boosterism aimed at carving out a slice of civilization along the frontier through the population and acculturation of new towns and cities.⁹⁰ Early institutions of education and entertainment established in Nashville are evidence that from its beginnings the

⁸⁷ *The Nashville Whig and Tennessee Advertiser*, Dec. 12, 1818

⁸⁸ Dormon, *Theater in the Antebellum South*, 31.

⁸⁹ David Hamer, *New Towns in the New World: Images and Perceptions of the Nineteenth-Century Urban Frontier* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), 211.

⁹⁰ David Hamer, *New Towns in the New World*, 212.

city was interested in developing its cultural worth in similar patterns to the rest of the nation. When Earl founded his museum in 1817 there were already several cultural attractions in the city, but he must have felt that the objects-based symbolism inherent in a museum collection would supplement the temporary exhibits, traveling shows, and learned societies Nashville had previously played host to. The founding of museums in Nashville shows that not only did its inhabitants consider it to be a sufficiently urban center to support a museum but also a community which identified with the intellectual and cultural trends of the greater United States community.

Chapter 3

Ralph E.W. Earl and the Tennessee Museum

“It is believed that Nashville, from its extensive commercial intercourse with other towns and districts, and its central situation, is a place peculiarly favourable to the collection and display of the materials of a State Museum. Already we have been promised several valuable articles, and useful assistance, and we honestly invoke all who feel just pride in the name of a *Tennessean* to unite in efficiency to our exertions.”

R.E.W. EARL,

GEO. TUNSTALL

Nashville, June 27, 1818⁹¹

A year and a half after he arrived in Nashville, Ralph E.W. Earl was so enamored of the city that he decided to make it his permanent address and the founding of its first museum his second profession. The above quotation is the conclusion of a prospectus first published in *The Nashville Whig and Tennessee Advertiser* and later circulated throughout the state of Tennessee. In the piece, Earl and his partner, George Tunstall, outline their plan for the creation of a “State Museum.” Although he was not a native of Tennessee, like many of the Nashville’s inhabitants at the time, his arrival in the city marks the beginning of the museum movement in Tennessee.

Nashville’s first museum director is generally remembered not for his interests in collecting but for being President Andrew Jackson’s portraitist. Born in New York as the son of painter, Earl’s life revolved around his career in art. He trained under his father and in Europe before returning to America to become an itinerant portraitist. Earl came to Nashville as a portraitist intent on depicting the great hero of the Battle of New Orleans, Andrew Jackson. He would die in the city as the “Court Painter” of Andrew Jackson’s presidency, a close confidant of the Jackson family, and the creator of the first Tennessee State Museum.

Earl and his partner set out to found an institution which would serve not only the people of Nashville but of the state and the nation. The museum was modeled on its contemporaries: its

⁹¹ “Tennessee Museum,” *Nashville Whig and Tennessee Advertiser*, Saturday July 4, 1818, Nashville, TN.

founder an artist combining his trade with collection; its collections reflecting natural history, artificial curiosities, and art; its stated purpose and goals attempts to boost the reputation of city and state. As a cultural institution founded in a frontier town, the museum would fulfill several purposes: as a display of power to other rival towns, as a symbol of order and continuity in an area so recently claimed from the wilderness, and as the focal point of a town working on engendering pride in a shared identity. Nashville was to ensure its importance in Tennessee, the frontier, and the tradition of collecting culture in the US and abroad.

The Young Portraitist in his Father's Footsteps

Earl's father moved throughout the northern colonies in the period before the American Revolution. Unfortunately for the painter, his Loyalist leanings forced him to retreat to England for the duration of the war. When he returned to America in 1785 he had a new English wife, despite not having properly divorced his first one, and the inspiration to open a portrait studio. His studio never achieved success despite his relative popularity; however, his son and namesake did.⁹²

Ralph Eleaser Whiteside Earl or, as he is more commonly referred to, Ralph E.W. Earl was born to Ralph Earl and Anne Whiteside most likely in the year 1788 and most likely in New York City. An 1802 portrait of a General Daniel Bissell is the first known painting by Ralph E.W. Earl. Having received no formal artistic training until he traveled to London in 1809, Earl's similarity of style with his father suggests that he learned from him. This early training would have lasted until his father's death in 1801, at which point his son took up the family

⁹² "Ralph Earl (1751-1801), Artist Biography," Worcester Museum of Art, accessed Oct 7, 2011, http://www.worcesterart.org/Collection/Early_American/Artists/earl_r/biography/index.html.

business and became an itinerant portraitist using his father's contacts in the art world.⁹³ At the age of twenty-one Earl found himself in London studying under the painter John Trumbull, known for his now-iconic *Declaration of Independence* on the two dollar bill, with whom he became a particular friend. He also met Benjamin West, an adviser for many American painters and a member of the Royal Academy. After only a year in London, he moved in with his maternal grandfather and uncle in Norwich, England, and began a series of portraits commissioned by local gentry. He achieved both a bit of success and happiness during this period, remarking to Trumbull that "General [Money] is a particular friend and correspondent [sic] of the Duke of Kent whom he is going to solicit favour to let me paint his portrait for him ... What have I done to deserve all these honours!"⁹⁴

Earl was right to be appreciative of the important connections provided by his family. He was young and naïve, in more ways than one: the artistic style of both Ralph Earl and Ralph E.W. Earl's is categorized as folk, or naïve, portrait painting. Earl had this in common with several other American artists, including none other than fellow painter-turned-museum-proprietor Charles Willson Peale. This naïve style, described as honest, unsophisticated, and homespun, is in contrast to the more dynamic portraits being painted for the wealthy mercantile classes of England and America. It is characterized by the simplicity of subjects' poses and surroundings as well as a similarity of facial expressions and shape.⁹⁵ To his European contemporaries Ralph E.W. Earl was, quite literally, a country boy; he displayed a style more

⁹³ The William Benton Museum of Art at the University of Connecticut, *The American Earls: Ralph Earl, James Earl, R.E.W. Earl* (University of Connecticut, 1972), 48.

⁹⁴ Earl, R.E.W. Letter to John Trumbull from Norwich, England, dated February 18, 1810. T.H. Gage Papers, American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts. Qtd. in *The American Earls*.

⁹⁵ Deborah Chotner, National Gallery of Art (US), *American Naïve Paintings* (Oxford University Press, 1992), xi.

fitting to rural gentry than to London elites.⁹⁶ Spending time in the studios and galleries of London and Paris, Earl was exposed to not only the styles of individual portraits but also the majesty of European historical painting typical of the early nineteenth century.



Figure 1. Ralph E.W. Earl, *Family Portrait*, 1804 (National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., gift of Edgar William and Bernice Chrysler Garbisch.)

After five years in England and a year in Paris, Earl returned to his birth country, carrying with him the grand tradition of European historical painting.⁹⁷ He arrived in Savannah, Georgia, in December of 1815 planning to capitalize on his training and the mood of the nation. The country was still abuzz over the United States' victory in the War of 1812, particularly over the final showdown between the British forces and General Andrew Jackson at the Battle of New Orleans. Before he even reached his native shore, Earl envisioned painting an epic depiction of

⁹⁶ Margaretta M. Lovell, "Reading Eighteenth-Century American Family Portraits: Social Images and Self-Images," *Winterthur Portfolio*, 22(1987): 260.

⁹⁷ Chotner, *American Naïve Paintings*, 103-104.

that famous battle.⁹⁸ He spent the next few years as an itinerant portraitist throughout the southern states, much as his father had done in Connecticut, establishing a reputation as an artist and developing material for this project.

Earl traveled to Nashville in January of 1817 to paint the portrait of the hero of the battle himself, General Andrew Jackson. While his epic project was never realized, Earl must have never regretted that it brought him to the Hermitage, the Jackson family plantation. His relationship with the Jacksons would bring him a wife, a guaranteed career, a selection of confidants, and the resources to establish a museum.

The Court Painter

As pivotal as Andrew Jackson's role was in the rise of Nashville to national prominence, his role in Ralph E.W. Earl's life and career was even more significant. Earl came to Nashville with the express purpose of meeting the General, but he stayed because of the personal relationships he formed in the city. It was there that the portraitist was introduced to his future wife, Rachel Jackson's niece, Jane Caffrey. Rachel was a member of the Donelson family, one of Nashville's founding families, and Jane was the daughter of Rachel's older sister, Mary Donelson Caffrey. Earl and Caffrey wed on May 19, 1819. Tragically, Jane died during childbirth the following year when she was only eighteen years old. Upon her death, Earl moved into the Hermitage, where he became a vital part of Andrew Jackson's inner circle for the rest of his life.

Earl's portraits of the President define his life in the relationships he formed, the places he lived, and his historical legacy. During his time at the Hermitage and in Washington, D.C. during Jackson's presidency, Ralph E.W. Earl painted dozens if not hundreds of portraits of

⁹⁸ The William Benton Museum of Art, *The American Earls*, 49.

Jackson. He came to be referred to as the “court painter” given his position in the Jackson administration and his preferred subject matter. The title is not inconsequential, either, given that public fascination with the popular President led to Jackson’s likeness being replicated on all manner of souvenirs and trinkets. In addition to Earl’s numerous portraits, other oil paintings, sculptures, paperweights, ships’ figureheads, whiskey flasks, Sevres vases, medals, engravings, and political cartoons bore “Old Hickory’s” face or silhouette. That Earl came away with a moniker derived from his time with the president suggests that he acquired some of Jackson’s prestige, fame, and appeal.⁹⁹

Earl and Jackson were more than painter and subject, though; they were close friends and traveling companions. When Andrew Jackson was elected to the Presidency and moved into the White House in 1829, Earl followed. The new President provided him with a private studio within his residence where the painter could work uninterrupted. The studio space was interrupted at times, however, by the President and his advisors on matters of important business or personal conversation. One such event was the drafting of Jackson’s veto of the bill to re-charter the National Bank, one of the hallmark moments of his Presidency, all penned while Earl was painting in the room.¹⁰⁰

Even more telling is an emotional scene described by one of Jackson’s closest unofficial advisors, Preston Blair. Earl had transported a painting of Rachel Jackson from Tennessee to the White House to make copies. The President happened to stop by the studio to see Earl while the portrait was in view. It was 1831, several years after Rachel’s death, but upon seeing the portrait, Jackson “stood and gazed at it for a few moments...until as the association rose in his mind he began to weep, and his sobs became so deep that Earl carried the picture away to relieve

⁹⁹ Albert T. Gardner, “Hiram Powers and ‘The Hero,’” *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin*, 2(1943): 104.

¹⁰⁰ Robert V. Remini, *Andrew Jackson and the Course of American Freedom, 1822 – 1832, Volume II* (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1981), 182, 365.

him.”¹⁰¹ Jackson was comfortable enough with the man that he would stop by for conversation, was unafraid to show emotion to Earl, and entrusted him with the care of Rachel’s portrait, an object that Jackson held dear. When Earl died, Jackson wrote that his “death to me is a great bereavement. He was my friend and constant companion when I traveled, and had I health and a wish to travel I have now no one to go with me. He was a good and honest man, a true friend and safe companion.”¹⁰²

Earl had other, more subtle influences on the Jackson household and his adopted hometown, especially after he returned to Nashville in 1836. Although he was a portraitist by trade, it seemed he dabbled in landscaping: he designed the Hermitage’s geometric flower-beds and the unique guitar-shaped driveway in 1837.¹⁰³ When the Marquis de Lafayette visited Nashville in 1825, it was Earl who was charged with designing the invitation to the “brilliant” public ball that was Tennessee’s going-away fete for the Revolutionary War hero.¹⁰⁴ His involvement with city affairs and with the Jackson family, so pivotal to the history of Nashville, shows how seriously Early took his commitment to his new hometown. He made deep, lasting personal bonds within the city and earned himself a place as an honored citizen of Nashville and of the nation because of his time in the capital. It is only fitting that he should attempt to create a museum which would be beneficial to Nashville’s curiosity, knowledge, and reputation.

¹⁰¹ Francis Preston Blair to Mrs. Benjamin Gratz, April 20, 1831, in Thomas H. Clay, “Two Years With Old Hickory,” *Atlantic Monthly* (1887), LX, Issue 358. Page 193. Accessed online.

¹⁰² John Spencer Bassett, *The Correspondence of Andrew Jackson*, V (Washington, DC: Carnegie Institute of Washington, 1935), 566.

¹⁰³ James C. Kelly, “Ralph E.W. Earl,” *Tennessee Encyclopedia of History and Culture, Version 2.0*, accessed 7 Oct 2011, <http://tennesseencyclopedia.net/entry.php?rec=416>.

¹⁰⁴ Auguste Levasseur, *Lafayette in America in 1824 and 1825... Volume 2*, electronic resource.

The Tennessee Museum

Although it was the first public museum in Tennessee, Ralph E.W. Earl's museum fits firmly into the museum building tradition up to this point in history. Earl was not himself a collector; his itinerancy probably kept him from keeping too many possessions. But as a European-trained painter, educated East Coast man, he embodied many of the characteristics of his American museum-founding predecessors. He modeled his collection after theirs, covering the natural sciences, mechanics, and art. The role this museum was to have then in Nashville, Tennessee, and the nation at large, as outlined by the founders in their initial prospectus, is indicative of just how much the Tennessee Museum wished to favorably compare itself and its state with its contemporaries through imitation.

With the prospectus Earl and Tunstall called upon the good people of Nashville and the entire state for contributions to the collection, for it was noted that generous editors across Tennessee would give the article "one or two insertions" in their papers. A variety of things were deemed acceptable, for it was not to be a museum solely of science or of history; it was to be a museum reflecting all aspects of Tennessee's heritage. "Contributions of whatever is rare, curious, or useful, in the works of nature or art..." were asked of the readers; among items which would be accepted were "stones, earths, & minerals," "models of labor saving machines," "preserved [animal] specimens," and "portraits of distinguished characters."¹⁰⁵ Geological and biological specimens demonstrated the unique natural landscape of the state and North America. Models of machines showcased Tennesseans' ability to conquer their environment. And a troupe of local portraits attempted, perhaps, to replicate the local gentry that Earl had painted in rural England. Among the individuals represented in the museum were Generals John Coffee and John Carroll, who supported Jackson in New Orleans; John Haywood, Supreme Court Justice of

¹⁰⁵ "Tennessee Museum," *Nashville Whig and Daily Advertiser*, July 4, 1818

the State of Tennessee; and of course Andrew Jackson. Earl was looking to provide Tennesseans with a place where all the best of the state would be displayed.

It was a grand project destined, at least initially, for a small scale because it was not until a letter to the editor on June 5th, 1822, that Ralph E.W. Earl announced his museum would be open to the public the following Friday. When Earl and Tunstall published their prospectus they had not yet reserved space for their proposed collection. Now that the museum was a reality, it was located on Nashville's Public Square. The museum held the promised "natural and artificial curiosities," as well as several of Earl's own portraits. In 1823, a young boy who visited the museum wrote of the life-sized portrait of the great General Jackson that he had seen in Earl's museum.¹⁰⁶ That painting still hangs in the museum today.

¹⁰⁶ "History," Tennessee State Museum, accessed online, <http://www.tnmuseum.org/Information/History/> .



Figure 2. The life-sized painting of Jackson the young boy saw at Earl's museum in 1823, still hanging in the Tennessee State Museum. Ralph E.W. Earl, *Andrew Jackson*, date unknown (Tennessee State Museum).

The local demonstration of exceptionalism, intelligence, and importance in the museum would not only reach Nashville's inhabitants but anyone who happened to pass through the capital city. Nashville's "central situation" allowed it to sustain "extensive commercial intercourse" with other cities along the Mississippi River, its tributaries, and the Natchez Trace. The city was thus, in Earl's and Tunstall's eyes, a "peculiarly favourable" place to build a

museum, advancing “in a very material degree the interests and reputation of the state.” Their aim was to create a focal point in the city which, through the collection and ordering of natural and artificial curiosities, would exhibit the social order of their community and the power that Nashville had over its wilderness beginnings.¹⁰⁷ They fully believed their optimistic claims that Tennessee was capable of sustaining this type of institution and that Nashville should be chosen against all other options in Tennessee. “Almost every state in the union possesses them...”; should not Tennessee be included in their number?

Creating a museum in Tennessee was such an obvious choice to the founders that they declared an explanation for their reasons “superfluous” and anyone who disagreed did not “feel just pride” in being a Tennessean. Nineteenth-century towns were indeed a focus of rivalry on the frontier. David Hamer suggests a close relationship between the rise of towns within a territory or along a frontier and the consolidation of that region’s identity and pride. Especially in antebellum Tennessee, with its population spread out due to the plantation economy, towns became the point of consolidation. One of the ways these towns could compete with each other was to display how impressive their advancement was. Earl thus posed the Tennessee Museum as a form of cultural boosterism. It was a symbol of Nashville’s central position, literally and figuratively, in Tennessee and a rallying point around which to develop state pride.¹⁰⁸ European monarchs of centuries before had established cabinets to show legitimacy and earn a place in intellectual discourses. Earl and Tunstall set up the Tennessee Museum in a similar way: as the ultimate feather in Nashville’s proverbial cap.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁷ Don H. Doyle, “The Social Functions of Voluntary Associations in a Nineteenth-Century American Town,” *Social Science History*, 1(1997): 335.

¹⁰⁸ David Hamer, *New Towns in the New World: Images and Perceptions of the Nineteenth-Century Urban Frontier* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), 211-212, 224.

¹⁰⁹ “Tennessee Museum,” *Nashville Whig and Daily Advertiser*, July 4, 1818

There is no question that the museum, in the eyes of the people of the early nineteenth-century, would have brought a certain amount of prestige to Nashville. Was there further motivation for creating this museum as the embodiment of the center of the town and the state? The date of the museum's founding suggests there was: Nashville was Tennessee's capital from 1812 until 1817. The legislature then moved to Knoxville for a year before returning to Middle Tennessee and Murfreesboro, the geographical center of the state, until 1826. It is possible that during that time Nashville, as one of the historic capitals of the state and a larger city than Murfreesboro, attempted to establish a reputation for itself as the rightful center of cultural, social, and political activity in Tennessee. Earl's Museum was proposed and opened in the nine year period that the legislature met in Murfreesboro, suggesting that the foundation of a museum was not just empty rhetorical boosterism but a strategy for the promotion of Nashville as the true capital of Tennessee. Indeed, when the state legislature finally voted on where the capital should be the debate was intense and the vote came close to choosing Murfreesboro.¹¹⁰ Perhaps without the aid of institutions like the Tennessee Museum, and Troost's later museum, Nashville would not have won out.

The museum was neither as grandiose as its founders originally planned nor as long-lived as Earl's portraits proved to be; it closed in 1827. Earl stayed active in Nashville until his death at the Hermitage on September 16, 1838. He was buried alongside his wife, near Rachel Jackson, in the Hermitage cemetery. The man who came to Nashville to promote his career in historical painting saw the end of his life in that same city, a member of the Jackson family, one of the most proliferate presidential portrait artists of all time, and creator of the foundation for the modern Tennessee State Museum. Earl's collection eventually passed on to the Nashville Antiquarian Society which was short-lived but, together with the later Society for the Diffusion

¹¹⁰ Henry McRaven, *Nashville, "Athens of the South,"* (Chapel Hill: Scheer & Jervis, 1949), 82.

of Knowledge, formed the basis for the Tennessee Historical Society in 1849.¹¹¹ The Tennessee Historical Society's object collections, including Earl's, went to the Tennessee State Museum when it opened in 1937. While Ralph E.W. Earl's vision did not fully come to fruition for another century, his museum acted as a marker of Nashville's centrality to the state and Tennessee's belonging within the nation.

¹¹¹ Ann Toplovich, "The Tennessee Historical Society at 150:Tennessee History 'Just and True,'" *Tennessee Historical Quarterly*, 58 (1999): 196-215.

Chapter 4

Gerard Troost and the Nashville Museum of Natural History

The communication of information and ideas among Europe, the east coast of the United States, and the developing trans-Appalachian west shaped the development of US culture and museums. If this network of information were personified, it would be manifested in the form of Gerard Troost.¹¹² He is representative of European scientific and collecting traditions transplanted to a nineteenth-century American city. Troost did not stop in the first American city he encountered, though, he traveled further west under the influence of idealized notions of the possibilities of the American west. Perhaps the cultural boosterism of men like Ralph E.W. Earl, among others, is part of what convinced Troost that the western US and Nashville were places of scientific and intellectual opportunity. Regardless of his reasons for traveling to Nashville, Troost carried with him his physical collection of mineralogical specimens and his inherent collection of connections through New Harmony, Philadelphia, Paris, and Amsterdam.

Troost came to America after extensive education throughout Europe, settling in Philadelphia before making the journey into the wilds of the West. He was born in 1776 in Bois-le-Duc, Holland, the French name for the Dutch “s-Hertogenbosch,” a city in the south-central region of the Netherlands. He received the degree of Doctor of Medicine at the University of Leyden and Master of Pharmacy at the University of Amsterdam in 1801, focusing his studies on chemistry and mineralogy. After graduation Troost worked as a pharmacist in Amsterdam and The Hague and then in the army, first as a private soldier and then as an officer of health. His work brought him to the attention the King of Holland, Louis Bonaparte. In 1807 he was sent to

¹¹² Troost’s first name is spelled differently in various texts, sometimes “Girard” or “Gerhard.” In the publication of official reports on the geology of Tennessee, his name is given “Gerard Troost” and therefore that is the spelling used throughout this thesis.

Paris to continue his scientific studies and then continued traveling throughout France, Switzerland, and Germany collecting a large cabinet of minerals for the monarch.¹¹³

The French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars embroiled Europe in conflict throughout the end of the eighteenth and beginning of the nineteenth century and colored Troost's life and work there. For much of Troost's life, from 1795 through 1806, the Netherlands were known as the Batavian Republic, a political entity occupied by and under the protection of France. In 1806, however, France's Emperor Napoleon I declared the country the Kingdom of Holland and placed his younger brother, Louis Bonaparte, on the throne. Despite being a stranger to the land, King Louis took an active concern in the welfare of the Dutch people, which is apparent in his sponsorship of Gerard Troost's scientific endeavors.

Napoleon's empire inspired interest in scientific research, through both nationalistic and Enlightenment motivations, and this attitude must have shaped Troost's understanding of the role of scientific research. Napoleon set himself up as a patron of sciences and in many ways he was an excellent supporter. Before his rise to military and political fame, his interest in science and mechanics earned him a membership in the First Class of the Institut de France, formerly the Institut National des Sciences et Arts. The Institute originally consisted of three divisions or classes, the second of which, focusing on Moral and Political Science, Bonaparte later abolished because of his dislike of its "idéalogues" members.¹¹⁴ He also developed friendships with several important scientists of the period including mathematician and physicist Pierre Simone

¹¹³ L.C. Glenn, "Gerard Troost," *The American Geologist*, (1905): 71-73.

¹¹⁴ Charles Coulston Gillispie, *Science and Polity in France: The Revolutionary and Napoleonic Years* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 446 – 447, 610-611.

de Laplace and chemist Claude Louis Berthollet.¹¹⁵ During his time as emperor he offered prizes for advancements in science, medicine, and technology.

While he might have personally had Enlightenment-guided interests in science and learning, the utility and national prestige of successful scientific research were at the forefront of Napoleon's mind. Napoleon did provide funding to sciences but, like the various governments of France before him either in the Ancien Régime or the Revolutionary period, was looking to support his geopolitical power and to control nature by understanding it through science. Expeditions and experiments were often motivated by the needs of the nation, whether those were developments in military science, the creation of an electrical battery, or the search for a source of sugar other than the British West Indies.¹¹⁶ Part of Troost's education was in Paris under Napoleon; the scientist would have been exposed to the elite research being done in a variety of disciplines but also to the atmosphere of combined personal, political, and utilitarian motivations for continuing research. Under Napoleon, science was both a cultural value and a reflection of national prestige. Unfortunately for his brother Louis, a predilection to ignore the commands of Napoleon in favor of Dutch interests got the king ousted from the throne in 1810 when Napoleon incorporated Holland into his French Empire. This abrupt removal led to Troost's arrival in America.

A European Scientist in America: Philadelphia and New Harmony

Troost ended up in America mostly by accident. The scientist was attempting to reach the island of Java, in what is now Indonesia, on a scientific commission for the king. His work

¹¹⁵ Robert Fox, "Scientific Enterprise and the Patronage of Research in France 1800 - 70," *Minerva*, 11(1973): 445 - 446.

¹¹⁶ Maurice Crosland, *Science Under Control: The French Academy of Sciences 1795 - 1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 1, 23 - 24.

on the European continent learning mineralogy and crystallography and purchasing specimens for the crown earned admiration from the court and scientists alike. Thus, his placement on the naval expedition to Java was no surprise. However, France's occupation of the Netherlands prompted the British to blockade the country and no Dutch ships could leave Amsterdam, sailing for the expansion of scientific knowledge or not. Troost took it upon himself to travel to the United States from a German port in an effort to travel to the East Indies on an American ship. His trip across the Atlantic was foiled, however, by a French privateer who had him imprisoned at Dunkirk before his identity enabled a release to Paris. His time in the French capital was useful, though, for in that time he became a corresponding member of the Museum of Natural History of France

In Paris he yet again attempted to reach the United States, this time successfully earning passage on a ship sailing for Philadelphia in March of 1810. Barely two months after Troost's departure Napoleon deposed his brother King Louis. A year later, the British took control of Java. Troost was therefore in Philadelphia with no commission and no pressing reason to go back to Europe. It seems that the scientist liked what he saw in Philadelphia and decided, as so many colonists had before, to make a name for himself in the New World.¹¹⁷

Dr. Gerard Troost settled into Philadelphia, one of the largest cities in the United States and an excellent home for a scientist. His talents earned enough admiration that he helped to found the Academy of Natural Sciences of Philadelphia in 1812 and was also elected as its first president. Troost remained in that position until his resignation in 1817. Throughout this time, he manufactured drugs and chemical preparations in his Philadelphia laboratory. He also participated in various scientific expeditions and investigations into neighboring states and was appointed Professor of Mineralogy at the Philadelphia Museum and Professor of Chemistry in

¹¹⁷ L.C. Glenn, "Gerard Troost," 71 - 73.

the Philadelphia College of Pharmacy around 1821.¹¹⁸ Troost's involvement in the Academy of Natural Sciences in Philadelphia and the friends he made there determined the course of the rest of his life.

Among this small group of like-minded scientists Robert Owen found some of the most enthusiastic supporters of his utopian community. Robert Owen was an Englishman and, through his attempts to create ideal communities in both England and the United States, founded both the cooperative movement and one form of utopian socialism. His history coincides with Troost's in Philadelphia in November of 1824, when Owen came to the city to explain his plans for a community located in New Harmony, Indiana. Similar theories to Owen's on the benefits of community living and experiments in the utility of such schemes had been attempted by the Shakers and the Harmonists, the followers of the Rapp family and previous inhabitants of Harmonie, Indiana.¹¹⁹ The men of the Academy of Natural Sciences (ANSP) most likely learned of these efforts through the 1822 pamphlet of New York Quaker Dr. Cornelius Blatchly, *An Essay on Common Wealths*, which also praised Owen's ideas. A year later, Troost and several colleagues decided to try to live together as a community. When Owen greeted them with his plan, they were enthusiastic about the possibilities available to them in such a scheme.¹²⁰

Robert Owen's plan was to establish a community on the Wabash River by purchasing the village that previous communitarians, the Rappites, had created. Owen's background was that of an activist protesting child labor in English factories, fueled by his ownership and management of a cotton mill in New Lanark, the first of his community experiments. Through

¹¹⁸ Ellen V. Piers, "Girard Troost Pioneer Scientist," *Peabody Journal of Education*, 30(1953): 265 – 274.

¹¹⁹ The town name originated as "Harmonie," but was changed to "New Harmony" by Robert Owen with the foundation of his community in the village. It was later shortened to "Harmony" and is often referred to as such in writings on the community. For more information on the various communities that were built at Harmony, see Anne Taylor, *Visions of Harmony: A Study in Nineteenth-Century Millenarianism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987).

¹²⁰ Taylor, *Visions of Harmony*, 78 – 81.

his experiences he developed his views of society and human nature: “Any general character, from the best to the worst, from the most ignorant to the most enlightened, may be given to any community, even to the world at large, by the application of the proper means.”¹²¹ The “proper means” was education, not only in the general sense but an education in the function of an individual in society, and should be started in childhood. This principle, set out in his earliest essays, served as the foundation for New Harmony. All individuals of the community were to be equals, from farmers to scientists, with the belief that “individual happiness can be increased and extended only in proportion as [a person] actively endeavors to increase and extend the happiness of all around him.”¹²² The scientists of the Academy understood this to mean that they could each contribute in their individual way, through scientific knowledge and teaching, and make an honorable and honest contribution to a community which would consist of all manner of people. For scientists struggling to make a living in a society which did not fully appreciate their talents, to have equal footing as laborers and men of wealth was something to be desired.¹²³

The members of the ANSP who embarked on the journey to New Harmony along with Troost were Thomas Say, an entomologist; Charles-Alexandre-Lesueur, an ichthyologist and talented artist; John Speakman, the librarian and treasurer of the Academy; and William Maclure, a geologist who was successor to Troost as President and was the leader and financier of the trip. The group was closely knit, having gone on several research trips together through the ANSP, including a month-long trip through southeastern Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and New

¹²¹ Robert Owen, *A New View of Society; or, Essays on the Principle of the Formation of the Human Character, and the Application of the Principle to Practice*, First published in 1813. Accessed online through The Avalon Project, Lillian Goldman Law Library, Yale University.

¹²² Owen, *A New View of Society*. Also, Edward Royle, *Robert Owen and the Commencement of the Millenium: A Study of the Harmony Community* (New York: Manchester University Press, 1998), 20 – 21.

¹²³ Many of the scientists who joined to New Harmony commune were barely making enough money to support their families, Gerard Troost included. He resigned from the Presidency of the Academy of Natural Sciences of Philadelphia because of his financial troubles. Leonard Warren, *Maclure of New Harmony: Scientist, Progressive Educator, Radical Philanthropist* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2009), 168.

York while they were contemplating joining Owen in New Harmony. Reuben Haines, a member who did not move to New Harmony, described the scientific expedition as an ideal leisurely trip, stopping frequently to sleep and dine at inns along the way as they traveled in coaches. Lesueur practiced his artistry; Say collected insect specimens; Troost and Maclure studied iron forges, mills, and the geology of all the regions. By the time they returned from this expedition, Owen was in Philadelphia and the group of scientists believed that it was an unparalleled opportunity.

The idealism of the ANSP members was soon to meet with the reality of the New Harmony community since the men, once decided, took only a few weeks to settle their affairs in Philadelphia. Troost was so enthusiastic about the opportunity that he departed Philadelphia, along with Speakman, before the majority of the other members to reach their meeting point, Pittsburgh. He, like many other Americans, found inspiration in Owen's teachings and saw it as an opportunity to build upon the American ideal of equal rights for all, guaranteed by law.¹²⁴

The group first encountered problems on their way to the commune; the country was not as ideal as Owen made it out to be. Similar to the Cumberland, the water levels of the Ohio River varied and by the time the group departed from Pittsburgh the river was impassable by steamboat, forcing the group to order a keelboat instead. It was December in 1825, the river was freezing over and ice blocked their way or froze them in many times. The passengers spent their days in the cramped keelboat, named the *Philanthropist* by Owen, by reading aloud to each other various philosophic works, playing whist, and discussing what was to happen at their new home. Finally, on January 23, 1826, the *Philanthropist* arrived at the landing for New Harmony along the Ohio River, Mount Vernon.¹²⁵

¹²⁴ Warren, *Maclure of New Harmony*, 152, 182, 162.

¹²⁵ Taylor, *Visions of Harmony*, 129 – 136.

When the “boatload of knowledge,” as the group came to be known by Owen, reached New Harmony Robert Owen had already begun to develop the community from its preliminary stages. He wanted to prepare the community for the group, moving it towards his image of perfect equality. The reform resulted in the creation of a constitution for the community a mere two days after their arrival. The document listed the principles of the community:

- Equality of rights, uninfluenced by sex or condition, in all adults.
- Equality of duties, modified by physical and mental conformation.
- Co-operative union, in the business and amusements of life.
- Community of property.
- Freedom of speech and action.
- Sincerity in all our proceedings.
- Kindness in all our actions.
- Courtesy in all our intercourse.
- Order in all our arrangements.
- Preservation of health.
- Acquisition of knowledge.
- The practise of economy, or of producing and using the best of everything in the most beneficial manner.
- Obedience to the laws of the country in which we live.

The influence of Enlightenment ideas, a return to communalism, and the development of an early version of socialism are evident in the rules laid out for the Community of Equality. They stressed the importance of order, freedom and equality, and knowledge, but all in line with providing for the good of the community. Apart from these original principles, community members were also supposed to live exactly the same way as their neighbors: eating the same food, wearing the same clothing, and living in the same style house. The only way in which the community separated itself was through their occupations with the development of working departments such as education, manufacture, and commerce.¹²⁶

Troost and his colleagues formed part of the education department and continued the work of the schools already present in New Harmony. There were pleasant aspects of New Harmony to look forward to including weekly concerts, balls, and meetings to discuss the Principles. Troost, along with Lesueur, frequently took long exploratory trips along the rivers in

¹²⁶ Taylor, *Visions of Harmony*, 138 – 139.

the first few years of the community. However, unrest about the inequality of the supposed Community of Equality and Robert Owen's financial mismanagement precipitated the disbanding of the community. The scientists were still present and New Harmony was indeed a center for scientific learning. Troost was not among them, however, having been one of the first to leave after the disbandment.

Charles-Alexandre Lesueur, Troost's companion on river voyages and friend from their common background in Paris, lamented the loss of "l'ami Troost" to the University of Nashville in 1828. We do not know why Troost left New Harmony when so many of his friends stayed, other than that he must have lost faith in the ideals he originally held. Thomas Say, one of the original members to travel to New Harmony, offers insight into the thoughts of the scientists after the disintegration of the community in an 1830 letter to his friend and fellow ANSP member and nephew of the Emperor, Charles Bonaparte: "Great industry is requisite in this remote region to compensate for the disadvantages under which a naturalist must labour, the partial distribution of books, the want of Museums, the want of stimulating intellects."¹²⁷ They could not properly complete scientific inquiry with the pressures of a frontier community and the lack of knowledge, information, and intellect present among its citizens. Troost moved to Nashville, which was not quite as remote as New Harmony, and almost immediately set about establishing one of the things which Say lamented the lack of: a museum.

¹²⁷ Taylor, *Visions of Harmony*, 192 – 193, 204.

Troost in Tennessee: Professor and Geologist

Most of the information known about Gerard Troost in Nashville is obtained through the writings of his colleague, Dr. Philip Lindsley, the President of the University of Nashville.¹²⁸ Lindsley most likely convinced Troost to move to Nashville, where he would have a position as a professor of a variety of scientific disciplines including Chemistry, Geology, and Mineralogy. His position as professor at the University of Nashville seemed to bring him as much joy as it did his students and the people of Nashville. At the dedication of a portrait of Troost in 1906 at Peabody College, one of his old students offered this glimpse of the man: "He was the most lovable of men and the most delightful and entertaining companion ... there was no social function during his day at Nashville to which he was not an invited guest, and no one was more honored."¹²⁹ This European man, trained in some of the most formidable bastions of scientific learning, fit in splendidly with the society of Nashville.

One of Troost's most important legacies in the annals of Tennessee history is the fact that he was the first official state geologist. Just as he had in Philadelphia, Troost began to make expeditions all over the state of Tennessee to collection information on its geologic structure and natural resources. The state legislature was apparently aware of the advantages of having this type of information and thus appointed him "Geologist, Mineralogist, and Assayer for the State" with a salary of \$500 a year in 1831.¹³⁰ During his time as State Geologist, Troost set out to make a geological survey of Tennessee, the likes of which really had not been done in any state up to that point. He classified rocks, noted their arrangement, and also accounted for the location of deposits of valuable minerals which could be mined by the state in a series of reports between

¹²⁸ Philip Lindsley, *The Works of Dr. Phillip Lindsley, D.D., Late President of the University of Nashville* (Nashville: J. B. Lippincott & Co., 1859).

¹²⁹ Chancellor Porter, "Address delivered in the chapel of Peabody College," December 12, 1906, reproduced in Piers, "Girard Troost," 268.

¹³⁰ Piers, "Girard Troost," 267.

1835 and 1848.¹³¹ Overall, his was ground-breaking work in terms of both scientific study and economic survey of geological resources.¹³²

The last of Troost's scientific endeavors was a report on the crinoids of Tennessee, a classification of marine invertebrate whose fossilized remains were scattered throughout the state. Troost's monograph was left unpublished due to the scientist's death a short four weeks after it was sent to the Smithsonian Institution. The extensive report was summarized and republished by the Smithsonian in 1909. They praise Troost's "accurate observation and logical interpretation" which was "remarkably good when one considers the almost unknown path he followed in the field of science." Research into Troost's findings in the past ten years has also yielded evidence that many more specimens that he classified, confused through modern labeling, can now be attributed to the scientist.¹³³ Indeed, even a passing familiarity with geology and paleontology allows a reader to realize that Troost's detailed descriptions and drawings, while not argumentative or analytical, are invaluable to the knowledge of the geologic history of Tennessee.

Troost dedicated his last report to the citizens of Nashville in October of 1849. He wrote: "In no place have I been received with more kindness than in Nashville." Tennessee was a magnificent opportunity for a geologist like Troost: "No state or country of the same extent is as rich as the state of Tennessee, and to spread the name of my adopted state amongst the scientific world was my principal aim." The scientist was still a corresponding member of the *Museum d'histoire Naturelle* in Paris and as such had told his French colleagues of the wonder of the state. Some of that information relayed by Troost was published by that venerable European

¹³¹ Gerard Troost, *Geological report to the ... General assembly of the State of Tennessee, By G. Troost, M.D. Geologist to the state*, Tennessee Geological Survey (Nashville: S. Nye & Co., 1835 – 1848).

¹³² Glenn, "Gerard Troost," 78 – 79.

¹³³ William I. Ausich, "A Critical Evaluation of the Status of the Crinoids Studied by Dr. Gerard Troost," *Journal of Paleontology*, 83(2009): 484 – 488.

institution.¹³⁴ Troost professed that he is so dedicated to his new home that his “principle aim” in continuing scientific inquiry throughout his life is not only for the sake of knowledge but to get Tennessee recognized in the international scientific community. Even after having lived in European capitals of culture and science like Paris and Amsterdam, then an American center of those same pursuits in Philadelphia, Troost still viewed Tennessee as worthy of admiration from him and the rest of the world.

The Nashville Museum of Natural History

While Ralph E. W. Earl began his museum with his historical paintings and portraits, Gerard Troost focused on his impressive collection of minerals, rocks, shells, and fossils collected through his geological and mineralogical explorations. As early as July 1, 1828, the same year he moved to the city, an advertisement for the “Nashville Museum of Natural History” appeared in the *National Banner and Nashville Whig*. The exhibit was to be displayed in the Masonic Hall and would feature Troost’s “splendid collection of objects of Natural History.”¹³⁵ This was only one year after Earl’s museum closed in 1827.

Troost’s aim was not merely to instruct his visitors; he meant for the museum to be entertaining as well. His advertisement states that he intended to give additional exhibitions in “Chemistry and Natural Philosophy,” or what we would now identify as “science.”¹³⁶ Certainly the most enticing portion of the museum, though, would be the “Phantasmagoria.” This part of the museum was “much admired and amusing” and took top billing on a Saturday night. A phantasmagoria was an exhibition made up of “phantoms” one might say, optical illusions

¹³⁴ Elvira Wood, *A Critical Summary of Troost’s Unpublished Manuscript on the Crinoids of Tennessee*, Smithsonian Institution, US National Museum, *Bulletin* 64 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1909), vi, 3 – 4.

¹³⁵ *National Banner and Nashville Whig*, July 1, 1828, pg. 1

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*

produced through the use of artificial light such as lanterns and candles.¹³⁷ Hence, the exhibition would need to be held at night, “at early candlelight,” so that there might be enough darkness to properly display the illusions. This type of exhibit fed the public’s desire for fantastic and supernatural stories, themes, and ideas; in short, it was thoroughly entertaining.¹³⁸

His dedication to providing entertainment through his collections is an interesting development in Troost’s character. Up to this point in his life Troost’s career in science was strictly academic, most of his time spent on research expeditions, examining specimens, or working as a professor. The main contrast, though, is with his life in New Harmony. While the Owenites did not condemn entertainment, their lifestyle of equality did not provide wealth or leisure time enough to support a wide variety of amusements. The addition of entertainments to his museum could be a reaction to the lack of intellectual and entertaining stimulation available in New Harmony. Perhaps it is also a sign that he recognized the need to temper serious science with amusement when it came to reaching out to the citizens of Nashville.

Yet a museum was founded in Harmony, albeit after Troost left, in 1834 by Robert Owen’s third son, David Dale Owen. Arriving after the dissolution of the community in 1828, David Dale took after Maclure and Troost in their scientific inquiry, becoming a geologist and taking over the regular meteorological observations begun by Troost. In addition to this emulation, David Dale also developed his own cabinet of bones, rocks, plants, and taxidermy animals in his small home. This collection later moved to the small stone granary behind the home of Anna and Alexander Maclure, younger siblings of William Maclure, and grew to include apparatus for experimentation, mineralogical and geological specimens, and a human skeleton. In a 1826 letter to his elder brother, William, Alexander Maclure claimed that no

¹³⁷ *Oxford English Dictionary*, online edition, accessed 7 October 2011.

¹³⁸ “Gothic Nightmares: Fuseli, Blake, and the Romantic Imagination,” Tate Gallery, Britain, accessed 7 October 2011, <http://www.tate.org.uk/britain/exhibitions/gothicnightmares/about.htm>.

museum or laboratory west of the Alleghenies could compare to David Dale's collection.

Whether this is true or not is debatable. Consider that William Maclure, wealthy and successful geologist, was apparently jealous of the treasure trove of geological specimens which Troost had brought with him to New Harmony even though he had an extensive personal library and collection of mineral and biological specimens.¹³⁹ Regardless, Troost not only created his own museum in his new hometown but inspired scientific inquiry in those left behind in New Harmony, a trend which developed into a museum.

Not much else is known about Troost's exhibition as it existed from 1828 until his death in Nashville on August 4, 1850. At this time, his estate was inventoried, including his collections. On December 26, 1851, the following were listed in his estate: "Minerals, 13,582 specimens; Fossils, 2,851 specimens; One case of rocks; One case of shells; Six cases of books; A large lot of maps and engravings; A box of minerals in New York."¹⁴⁰ How each category was classified, for example if one single bone was noted as a fossil rather than a set, is not clear. But regardless of the system of inventory, Gerard Troost must have exhibited an extensive collection. The sheer number of minerals alone would overwhelm a small room; one wonders where he must have stored all of it when it was not displayed. Such a collection would display the varied interests of a man who for his entire life studied the environments surrounding him and sought to understand them.

The collection was deemed so important that Dr. Lindsley urged somebody to purchase it from Troost's two children, who had inherited it. He appealed to the state, to the City of Nashville, and to the University to try and keep the collection in Nashville.¹⁴¹ For a time, it did remain at the University of Nashville. But after the Civil War, the bulk passed to the Polytechnic

¹³⁹ Taylor, *Visions of Harmony*, 222 – 223.

¹⁴⁰ Estate Inventory, December 26, 1851, reproduced in Piers, "Girard Troost," 272.

¹⁴¹ Lindsley, *The Works of Dr. Philip Lindsley*, np.

Society of Louisville, at the price of \$20,500, to be held at the Public Library of Kentucky. Troost's collection is now part of the Louisville Science Center's catalog; among the items are catalogs which Troost wrote describing some of his mineralogical specimens.¹⁴² While the collection is no longer in Nashville, Troost's legacy lives on in a different city of the South.

Gerard Troost brought a conspicuous cosmopolitanism to Nashville that the city previously had not entertained. His European origins provided him with the means for maintaining ties with his colleagues in the Netherlands and France, even when he was in the trans-Appalachian west of the United States. He used those contacts to advertise the wealth of information he found valuable in Tennessee, thus raising the state to not only national but international significance. But even before he traveled to Tennessee, his work in Philadelphia through the Academy of Natural Sciences established him as an expert of early nineteenth-century science, particularly geology. It was this reputation, earned in America, which led him to join the group at New Harmony which would eventually lead him to Nashville. Troost literally traveled the route by which information and goods would have reached Nashville: originating or passing through the cultural capital of Philadelphia, cross the mountains of either Appalachia or the Alleghenies, and then taking one of the many rivers running through the Midwest down to the Cumberland and Nashville. He is a curiosity himself; a souvenir of cultural differences brought from far away to titillate the curiosity of the citizens of Nashville. He displayed to the nation and the world that Nashville was a worthy part of the network of information, ideas, and goods so crucial to cities in the early nineteenth century.

¹⁴² Alan Goldstein, "Troost's Diamonds," *Letters, Mineralogical Record*, Jan/Feb 2006, 101.

Conclusion

Museums are seemingly timeless institutions. Their beginnings in the Renaissance period have not stopped them from evolving and continuing on through several iterations to become the modern institutions we would recognize today. Stalwart European museums like the Ashmolean and the Louvre still stand and even Charles Willson Peale's grand plan for an American Museum was picked up by later collectors, eventually becoming the Smithsonian Institution. While so many museums have persevered and so many new museums have shown up on the scene, the history of many of the earliest museums has disappeared.

Most pressing to this thesis, and one of the reasons for its research, is the lack of information on the two earliest Nashville museums. We do not have collections listings and mentions of the museums in diaries, letters, or ephemera either never existed or have not yet been found. For institutions founded on the basis of collecting and preserving objects, it is curious that there should be so little record left of them. Both Ralph E.W. Earl and Gerard Troost are relatively famous in their respective fields, but even this amount of notoriety did not save their collections from being split up, their records mostly lost. Perhaps both men were more focused on the immediacy of their collections and the benefits of knowledge, experimentation, and prestige they could be provided with directly through their museums. The impermanency of their collections led to these museums being largely ignored except for footnotes in their biographies or entries in a timeline. We are left curious as to the details of their existence.

Their lack of documentation is one of the many reasons why the Nashville museums deserve to be understood, in the context of each other, their city, their state, and the history of the collecting culture which spawned them. Nashville presents a distinctive case not only because of these two museums, but because it is not easily labeled. As both Southern and Western, a

commercial center that is also part of a larger agricultural region, a frontier striving to attain culture and prestige, Nashville is a counterpoint to many cities which have been the focus of previous museum histories. Just the knowledge of these museums' existence has provided a framework for the analysis of the roles of collecting cultures in nineteenth-century cities.

The museums of Nashville represent an effort of Nashvillians to boost the reputation of their city and state and to establish social order on the frontier through the example of the orderly display of the museum. Objects of their life and land provided them with a symbolic representation of the prestige and power they were hoping to garner as a state in the union and the future capital of Tennessee. Nashville and its museums in the early nineteenth century show how collecting cultures and the networks of information and goods which fueled them were created across national and geographic boundaries, contributing to the ways in which Nashville defined itself in contrast and conjunction with European and east coast traditions.

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