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“Science-Art-History”: The Early Years of the York Institute, Saco, Maine, 1966-1971

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“SCIENCE — ART — HISTORY”
THE EARLY YEARS OF THE YORK INSTITUTE,
SACO, MAINE, 1866-1971

At the close of the Civil War, lumbering and farming continued to be important activities along the Saco River, but the landscape, economy, and social fabric of Biddeford and Saco were dominated by the spinning machines and looms of the York Manufacturing Company and its offspring, the Pepperell and Laconia Mills. Since the construction of the first cotton mill at Saco Falls in 1830, the industry had expanded at a dramatic rate. Monumental building projects yielded a forest of brick mills, absorbing most of the riverfront property at the falls. The mills employed thousands of operatives, who arrived in droves from outlying farming towns and European ports to secure their spots in the industrial dream. The factory bell was only just beginning to beckon the French-Canadian workers, who would emerge as the region's most significant immigrant community by 1880. Between 1850 and 1870, the population of Biddeford nearly doubled; it would grow by another sixty percent by 1900.¹ Biddeford was incorporated as a city in 1855; Saco, in 1867. The industrial revolution had taken hold in southern Maine with great momentum and had catapulted Biddeford and Saco into the modern age.

This modern age was dominated by science, technology, and invention, by discovery and self-improvement; the attainment of knowledge was a fashionable pursuit. It was also a period of awakening social consciousness, as community leaders recognized the need to improve the lot of the common people, in both the necessities of life and its enrichments. It was in this climate that a group of thinkers and businessmen from Saco designed an institution dedicated to exploring and reporting on the great ideas of the day. The first meeting of the new society took place in early 1866 at the home of merchant George Calef.² Founding members included John Johnson, a Saco



Located on Main Street, Saco, the Sweetser Block, with its heavy Italianate cornice and granite keystones, was home to the York Institute from 1890 to 1926. The Institute was founded during the vigorous early years of Saco's industrial growth and, like the local business community, it reflected a firm faith in science, progress, and the uplifting influence of art and history. York Institute photo.

native who met with fame and fortune as a pioneer in photography, producing the first daguerreotypes in America, Superintendent of Schools John Locke, Maine Secretary of Agriculture Stephen Goodale, attorneys Moses and George Addison Emery, artist Charles Henry Granger and businessmen Roscoe Dennett and John Hanscom. The name they chose for the organization, the York Institute, was deliberately broad, encompassing the County of York rather than the City of Saco, and classifying the group as neither a historical society nor a natural history cabinet.³

In January 1867 the York Institute was incorporated with a mandate "to promote the study of Natural History; to encourage Science and Art; also to collect and preserve whatever relates to the Natural and Civic History of York County."⁴

The ambitious and varied goals of the York Institute reflected not only the diverse interests of its founding members,

but also their vision of an interdisciplinary educational center for the public. The Institute, wrote John Locke in 1890, “was founded on a broad basis. Had it been limited in purpose, it would have been limited in results. Its plan was for the diffusion of general knowledge, hence has been gathered here the nucleus for study in every department of science, art and history. Here is perpetual object teaching for young and old.”⁵

In conceiving their society, the founders looked to at least two other organizations as models, making visits in May 1866 to the Essex Institute in Salem, Massachusetts, and the Boston Natural History Society.⁶ It is interesting to note that, at the time, the Essex Institute held natural history collections as well as historical collections and a library. The York Institute’s name and mission were no doubt inspired by its long-established counterpart in Essex County. Shortly thereafter, the York Institute opened rooms in Calef’s commercial building to hold meetings and house the fledgling collections. Located in the heart of Saco’s industrial and business district on Factory Island, the Institute was neighbor to the York Manufacturing Company and would maintain a close relationship with the cotton mill for many years.

The first gift to the York Institute was made in 1866. It was a stuffed bird — a scarlet tanager — which was unfortunately not long for the collection. By 1890, “for want of proper care it yielded to the destroying power of moths.” Other natural history objects were acquired, including minerals, fossils, and shells. George Calef presented the first historical artifact, a map of Saco and Biddeford, in 1866.⁷ Thus began a twenty-year period of collecting, in which the natural historians deposited their rocks and skeletons, while the historians won a place for ancient documents and Revolutionary War memorabilia. Last but certainly not least were the curiosities, which bring a bit of the eccentric to so many nineteenth-century museum collections. The donations made the day after the incorporation of the Institute reveal the eclectic nature of the holdings: the beak of an albatross, a specimen of peat, a piece of the monument to St. Constantine in Constantinople, and a 1741 volume of religious essays.⁸

In the next five years, historical acquisitions included Confederate souvenirs, photographs, a “witch detector used in Salem in 1660,” and an engraving of the Landing of the Pilgrims. They were displayed beside such natural history treasures as petrified nuts, aquatic animals in alcohol, a quarter of a bushel of Polish wheat, a “remarkable insect,” and the foot of an albatross (presumably unrelated to the beak donated in 1867!). Native American artifacts found on Saco farmlands were collected, as well as bows and arrows from the South Sea Islands, favorite anthropological objects which found their way into many early museums. For curiosity’s sake, there were artificial teeth and a piece of mortar from the house in which Columbus was born.⁹ The *York County Independent* reported in 1869 that “a valuable curiosity was ... presented ... — a Finland loaf of bread, which it is worth a visit to the rooms of the Institute to see, if only for the resemblance it bears to the loaves mentioned in the New Testament.”¹⁰

In order to support its growing collections and library of scientific and historical texts, the Institute sponsored fundraising activities designed to increase membership and introduce the organization to the community. The tradition of public lecture series, which continues today, was established in 1866, and in 1868 the Institute hosted its first annual “Grand Invitation Ball,” with dancing and carriage transport available for \$1.50. Prose readings and entertainments were produced to aid the Institute “in its extremest need.” With the monies raised, the reading room and museum room were opened to the public twice a week.¹¹

At the monthly meetings of Institute members, more serious business was at hand. Speakers delivered papers on gold mining, blood circulation, mathematics, geography and electricity, on the circulation of sap and other agricultural issues, on the duality of the brain, the history of York County, the elements of perspective, and on the reconciliation between science and religion. In fact, according to B. Redford Melcher, an early chronicler of the Institute, the scientific orientation of the society had led some to consider the new group as irreligious, although great pains were taken to remain bipartisan

and nonsectarian. The morality of science, as part of God's plan, was a popular theme of lectures: "Are there not those who are unmoved by the words of Inspiration, and yet will listen reverently to the voice of nature? And what is Nature, but the name for the effect whose cause is God."¹²

By 1870 the Institute's library and museum holdings had outgrown the rooms in the Calef Block. Ira H. Foss, the agent of the York Manufacturing Company, offered the use of the corporation's "York Hall," free of charge, and the first meeting was held at the Factory Island property in May 1871. The new facilities rekindled interest in contributing to the collections. A plan of the first church of Biddeford was presented, as was an oil painting of Saco Falls in 1829 by William S. Gookin and a dynamometer, used to measure water power in the York Mills in 1830. Captain Alfred Patterson even donated a *live* alligator (though it is no longer in the collection).¹³

In the mid-1870s matters of history began to receive nearly as much attention as the sciences, which had dominated the activities of the Institute in its first years. Town records, school reports, church papers, and genealogical materials were acquired. The contribution by publisher Daniel Remich of a run of the *Kennebunk Weekly Visitor* and the *Kennebunk Gazette* from 1809 to 1842 generated great interest in the development of an early newspaper collection. Advertisements announced that liberal premiums would be paid for certain early issues of Maine papers, and \$100.00 was raised in 1874 "for the preservation of rare old newspapers."¹⁴

Around the same time, the first historical household artifacts came to the collections. Those objects which revealed something of daily life in the past — spinning wheels, flax breaks, foot stoves — were the preferred treasures of the Colonial Revival. The gradual shift in orientation from natural history to regional history was no doubt summoned up by the great wave of nostalgia which swept the country at the time of the Centennial in 1876. A nation recovering from civil war, distressed by the urban problems accompanying the industrial revolution, and overwhelmed by the strangeness of new immigrant populations now looked to the past as a period of simple



Cornelius Sweetser (1808-1881).

values, hard work, decency, and Yankee homogeneity. To preserve the relics of the olden days was to preserve those values, and enshrining family and community heirlooms in the Institute's rooms began to appeal to descendants of the region's first families.

By the late 1880s, the Institute was once again forced to seek new quarters. Building alterations had made York Hall impossible to heat during the winter, and without monthly meetings, interest in the Institute dwindled. By 1890 there were only twenty members left. The few diehards realized that some action was necessary to save the organization and its collections and so launched a campaign to move the Institute to a new location. Some officers of the York Manufacturing Company suggested that the corporation fund a new building in the interest of the public, but less altruistic stockholders rejected the idea.¹⁵ Instead, Cornelius Sweetser's \$10,000 bequest to the Institute was used to purchase a building which Sweetser had constructed in 1874.

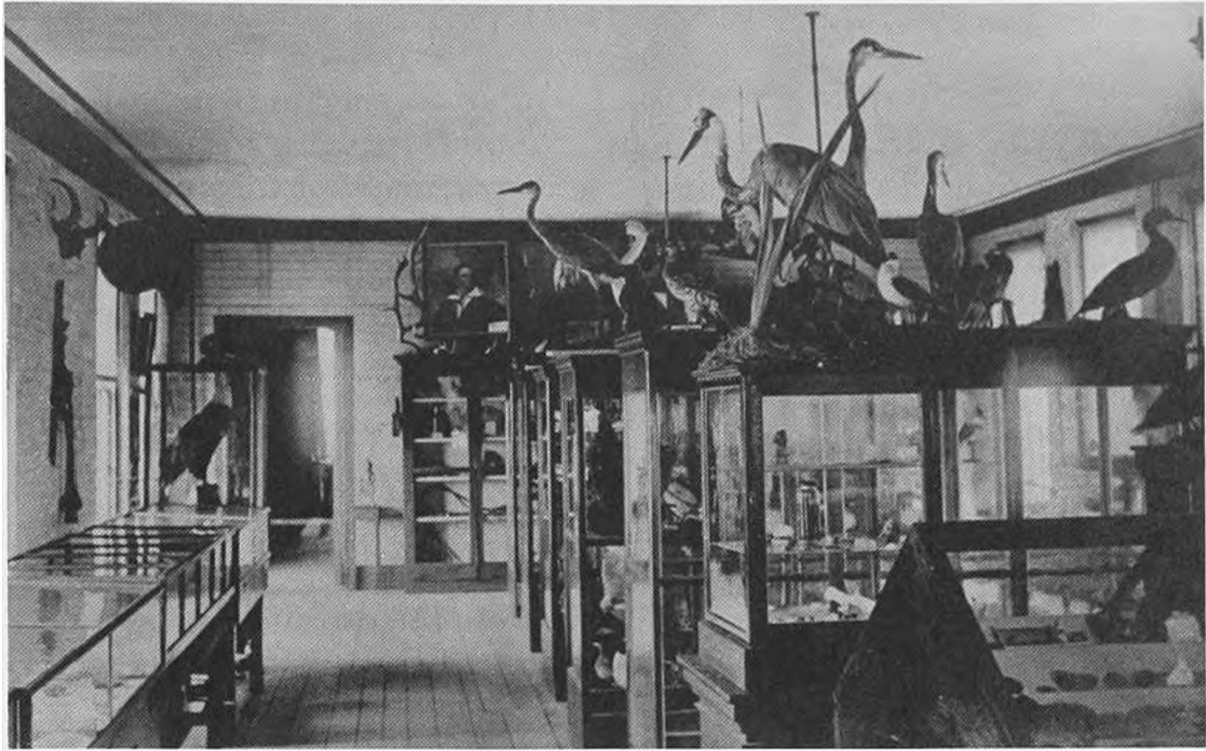
The Sweetser Block, located just over the river from Factory Island on Main Street, Saco, had previously housed a printing shop and shoe factory. In December 1890 the renovated building was dedicated with much pomp, fanfare, and hope that the new facility would attract the public once again.

On the first floor, the Institute rented space for the Post Office and two retail shops. On the second floor the library was housed, along with a "Museum Room" with large cases for birds, shells, minerals, "weapons of the Red Man," and those "ugly looking spears from the Fiji Islands." On the third floor was the "Art Room," necessitated by the growth of the Institute's collection of local portraits.¹⁶ These included the masterpieces of the collection, John Brewster, Jr.'s full-length likenesses of Colonel Thomas Cutts and his wife Elizabeth, donated by George Addison Emery, a Cutts descendant, in the 1880s.

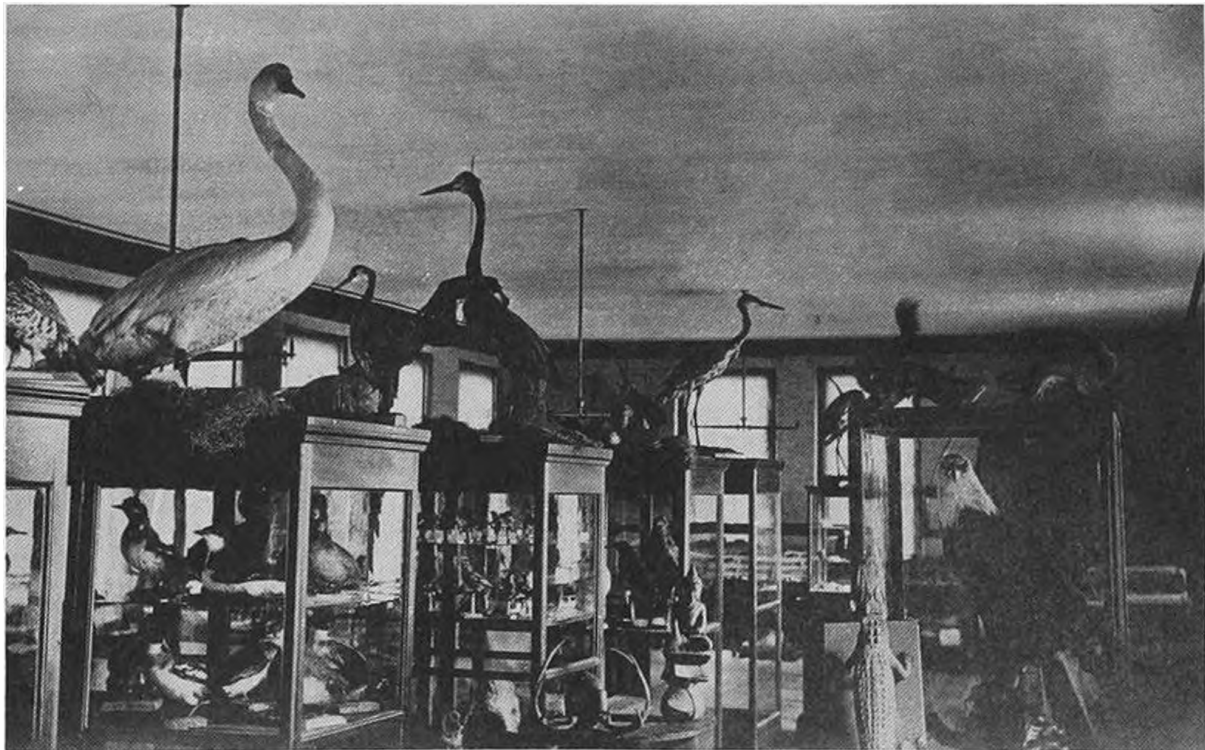
The two front rooms of the third floor were to be installed as period interiors, an "old fashioned bedroom" and an "old fashioned kitchen with spinning wheels and other articles of domestic industries." The planning of period rooms indicates that the furniture and decorative arts collections had begun to grow.

The new building also housed a 380-seat auditorium with a proscenium arch "built on the strictest principles of Greek architecture." The walls were frescoed in light blue and gold, and along the balcony rail, emblazoned in gold letters on a blue ground, were the words SCIENCE ART HISTORY, the disciplines of the York Institute.

In a newspaper account, a reporter reflected on the new role of the former shoe factory: "The stairs which once knew the hurried feet of many employees hurrying to and from their work now feel only the leisurely tread of the seeker after knowledge and curiosities." The Rev. J. L. Marsh added that the York Institute, revitalized by its new quarters, now "ought to be the center of educational influences in the town, a place where we can come and reap the labors of others by means of lectures given by specialists."¹⁷



In an age before specialization in museum disciplines, virtually anything of interest could qualify as a museum artifact; an eclectic collection of animals, birds, shells, minerals, implements from the South Seas, a statue of Buddha, eighteenth-century fans, ceramics, and candlesticks was packed into oak display cases in the "museum rooms" of the Sweetser Block.



With plenty of room, the Institute once again requested donations for the collections, primarily seeking historical materials: records from across the county, maps, pictures of old buildings and dwelling houses, examples of spinning and weaving, curios, paintings, prints, and portraits. It was in fact these artifacts which would begin to dominate the museum rooms and command the interest of Institute leaders such as John Locke:

The spinning wheel and the loom, the reel and the swift, the break and the heckle are articles upon which the present generation looks with wonder. The progress of invention has outgrown these rude appliances. In another generation, the use of them will be among the lost arts. To those in middle age they tell of the industry and thrift in our Early New England homes, and to coming generations they will be reminders of the sturdy stock from whence they sprung.¹⁸

The interest in the past, awakened by the Colonial Revival, would henceforth change the direction and role of the York Institute.

Few records survive from the period of the Institute's tenure in the Sweetser Block. Public lectures continued, but became less scholarly and more social in flavor. Theatrical groups were organized, presenting such entertainments as "Ten Nights in a Bar Room: The Great Moral Drama" and the comedy, "Cool Collegians."¹⁹ The building was renovated again in 1911.

In 1926 the children of Marshall and Julia Lougee Pierce, early benefactors of the Institute, donated funds for the erection of a museum building, to be located on northern Main Street on a field near Thornton Academy. Retaining the Colonial Revival spirit, Portland architect John Calvin Stevens designed a two-story brick cape. Galleries on the first floor provided a setting for the natural history and painting collections; period rooms on the second floor were installed as bedchambers, and a

Lectures on science, history, art, philosophy, music and morality were popular fare at the York Institute in the nineteenth century. This 1866 broadside reveals an early but typical formulation of historical society goals: uplifting public events with proceeds dedicated to “preserving and displaying all specimens and curiosities of a scientific, historic, and military nature.” York Institute photo.

Popular Lectures !

Under the auspices of the York Institute, a society recently organized in Saco, for promoting the study of Natural Science in this county, a course of

SIX LECTURES

WILL BE DELIVERED AT

TOWN HALL!

The proceeds will be devoted to furnishing the Society Rooms with suitable apparatus for preserving and displaying all specimens and curiosities of a

Scientific, Historic, & Military Nature.

These Rooms will be open to the public every week. For such a worthy object a full attendance at the Lectures is earnestly requested

The first Lecture of the course will be delivered

THIS, WEDNESDAY EVENING, NOV. 21, 1866,

— BY —

REV. E. C. BOLLES

OF PORTLAND.

A Popular and Entertaining Lecturer.

Course Tickets \$1.00. Single Tickets 25 Cents.
To be found at Piper's, Burnham's, Locke's, and the Door.

Doors open at 7 1/2. Lecture will commence at 8 o'clock.

“colonial kitchen” was designed for the basement, complete with hearth and wainscoting.

The new building was a museum facility, however, without library or meeting space. The Institute retained ownership of the Sweetser Block, at least for a few years, presumably for the use of the auditorium. In 1928, when the English- and French-speaking factions of Saco’s Catholic Church split, masses were held in French at the York Institute’s Hall while a new church was readied.²⁰

During the next two decades, the York Institute began in earnest to build a superb collection of paintings and decorative arts. Most artifacts date from the Federal Period (1783-1820) and are of local provenance, reflecting life and taste during the early years of the area’s growth. To George Addison Emery’s gift of Cutts family portraits and furniture were added more paintings by John Brewster, Jr., bringing to fifteen the number of works in the collection by this master of American primitive painting.

YORK INSTITUTE AND MUSEUM

The bequest of Almira Locke McArthur (the daughter of John Locke) included early nineteenth century furniture, ceramics, silver, and paintings owned by the Cleaves, Tucker, and Dummer families. Tall case clocks, tables, case pieces, needlework, and costumes revealed the artistry of local makers from the Fairfield, Moulton, Nye, Scamman and Shepley families, among others.

From the 1920s until World War II, the York Institute functioned primarily as a museum, but was only open to the public a few hours each week. The building served as headquarters for the Red Cross during the war. It was not until the 1960s that a strengthened endowment enabled the officers to open the building daily.²¹ A large temporary exhibition gallery was added in 1968, further emphasizing the Institute's role as a museum.

In the late 1960s efforts were made by the Board of Trustees to increase public visitation and dispell the perception of the Institute as a social club for the local elite, a notion which had been developing through the 1950s. To that end, the word Museum was added to York Institute. The name change not only identified the Institute as a public facility, but clarified the role that had evolved for the organization through the twentieth century.

The Dyer Library, a private institution established in 1881 to serve as Saco's library, had moved in 1955 to the Deering House, next door to the York Institute. In 1971 the library and museum merged to form the Dyer Library Association, and the Institute's library holdings were transferred to the Dyer. The marriage has been a successful one, bringing together two important educational facilities dedicated to the "diffusion of general knowledge." Today, the York Institute and the Dyer Library offer reading rooms and galleries, as well as a historical society, a community arts group, tours, lectures, films, and classes, fulfilling the original mandate of the founders of the York Institute.

The development of the York Institute, from a scientific lecture society and public reading room for self-education, to a

natural history cabinet, to a historical museum, and finally to a multifaceted cultural center for the community has reflected the changing attitudes and aspirations of the public it serves.

NOTES

¹Biddeford's population was 6,094 in 1850; 10,282 in 1870; 16,145 in 1900. See Roy P. Fairfield, *Sands, Spindles and Steeples* (Portland, Maine: House of Falmouth, 1956), p. 391.

²York Institute Record Book, 1866-1931, York Institute Museum, Saco, Maine (YIM hereafter).

³See B. Reford Melcher, "York Institute: Something of its Past, Present and Future," *York Institute Publication* I, no. 1 (1884): pp. 3-5.

⁴York Institute Record Book, 1866. Reprinted in *Articles of Incorporation, Constitution and By-Laws of the York Institute* (Biddeford, Maine: Daily Times Printing, 1885), p. 3.

⁵John Locke, Address at Dedication Ceremonies, 1890, YIM, p. 31. Reprinted in the *Biddeford Daily Journal* (Maine), December 16, 1890.

⁶York Institute Account Book, 1866-1886, YIM, May 12 and May 16, 1866.

⁷Locke, Address, p. 4.

⁸York Institute Accessions Book, 1867-1875, YIM.

⁹*Ibid.* Spears, bows, and arrows from the South Sea Islands are also in the collections of the Bowdoin College Museum of Art, Brunswick, Maine (established 1811) and the Old York Historical Society, York, Maine (established 1900).

¹⁰*York County Independent* (Saco, Maine), June 15, 1869.

¹¹Locke, Address, pp. 8-9.

¹²Melcher, "York Institute," pp. 4-8. Fairfield, *Sands, Spindles and Steeples* (p. 297) indicates that the battle between the Darwinists and the Fundamentalists had been underway from Saco's pulpits and soapboxes since before the Civil War, and would continue well into the 1890s.

¹³Accessions Book.

¹⁴Locke, *op. cit.*, pp. 11-12; *York County Independent* (Saco, Maine), February 23, 1897).

¹⁵*Ibid.*

¹⁶*Biddeford Daily Journal* (Maine), December 16, 1890. The article includes a floor plan of the new Institute building.

¹⁷*Ibid.*

¹⁸Locke, Address, p. 35.

¹⁹Broadside, flyers and playbills from Institute productions, YIM.

²⁰Fairfield, *Sands, Spindles, and Steeples*, p. 177.

²¹Barbara Bond, *History of the York Institute*, n.d., YIM.