

# Josiah Warren (1798-1874)

## reformer, inventor, musician, writer

An interesting account of Josiah Warren's life and work was written by his son, George W. Warren. Parts of George's boyhood were spent in New Harmony, and he served under David Dale Owen, geologist from New Harmony, in Owen's epic survey of portions of Wisconsin, Iowa, and Minnesota (1847-1849). Later, George moved to Evansville and became the leading 19th century band leader there.

George Warren's account has not previously been published. Permission to publish it here, gratefully acknowledged, was given by the Labadie Collection, University of Michigan. A link to the Labadie Collection is provided below. The account was probably first written in hand and undated, then typed, probably by a librarian, with two inked-in corrections of dates. The account is presented here in its entirety, with no changes except for correcting a few typographical errors, dividing long sections into paragraphs, and inserting headings.

**Warren's Birth; Patents Signed by Presidents** My father was born in Boston, Mass. in 1798. He and his brother George joined the "Old Boston Brigade Band" while very young. In 1821 my father came west, settled in Cincinnati and followed the profession of music for some time.

The same year, he invented a lamp for burning lard, as the only artificial light then used was the tallow candle. As tallow was twenty-five cents a pound, and lard only three cents, this invention was a revelation, this being before lard oil was known. The patent documents for the lard lamp were signed by President John Quincy Adams. The patents on the printing presses invented by my father were issued under the signature of Andrew Jackson, and B. F. Butler, in 1835. The lard lamp invention developed into a large lamp manufactory located in Cincinnati, where the lamp business was carried on for years.

### **Warren Attracted to New Harmony**

But when Robert Owen's Community was started at New Harmony, Indiana my father became interested in the Owen movement. He sold out the lamp factory and moved to New Harmony, Indiana. "The citizens of the Owen Community were of the most elegant, well educated and refined class of people," but my father soon saw that connected interests, in ownership of property, annihilated individual interests, and also destroyed individual responsibility for short-

comings. Very soon this sacrifice of personal liberty to transact business as he chose, proved the fallacy of the communistic scheme.

Mr. Owen was a man of pure, liberal and honest motives, and while scores of pages have been devoted to his abuse, not a person who wrote this abuse ever knew what purity was compared with that of Robert Owen and his family of four sons - Robert Dale, William, David and Richard.

### **Cincinnati; "The Peaceful Revolutionist"; Cholera**

Seeing the great mistake of the connected interest system, my father left New Harmony for Cincinnati, and followed again the musical profession, at the same time musing over the problem of "true civilization" and "labor for labor" doctrine.

In those days to print a paper was an expensive undertaking and, as my father had no money, the question was how to get his ideas before the people. After a long time he managed to get into the type-casting department of the Cincinnati Type Foundry at the corner of Vine and Fifth Streets (where it is still in operation). By close observation he caught the idea of the type-mould, and going to work, he succeeded in making a type-mould and all his patterns, with everything appertaining to the different fonts of type. Well I remember, in [dated obscured], then I was a little chap, I watched my father making type at the same fireplace at which my mother cooked the meals. For days, months and years did my father work to enable himself to publish his paper - "The Peaceful Revolutionist."

Then in 1832 the cholera first made its appearance, and I well remember how my father set up his type and printed hand-bills cautioning the people how to live during the prevalence of that disease. These bills described the symptoms and how to treat them. Then I was allowed to go with my father to scatter the bills of caution along the streets, and I remember how proud I was when those who saw what my father was doing, shook hands with him so warmly.

What with his work of printing precautionary notices and attending a large number of funerals with masonic lodges, firemen and other organizations requiring bands, my father was kept busy for days and weeks and months; there was scarcely an hour that a funeral didn't take place. Time went on, so did deaths, but our family lived through it. Fortunately the writer, being only six years of age, could not realize the state of affairs, nor the horror of the situation—he trotting along, scattering [and] broadcasting the "caution" notices, proud of telling how many papers he had given to the people each day.

If the city records of 1832-1834 were not destroyed during the destruction of the court house some years ago, the thanks of the city alderman to him will be found recorded to Josiah Warren if I mistake not.

### **Lease on Property Returned; "Labor for Labor"**

I should have stated that when my father left New Harmony and went to Cincinnati in 1827 he leased from Mr. Longworth (a gentleman well remembered by old inhabitants of Cincinnati as one of the largest real-estate owners of the city) a tract of land lying between Elm and John and from 5th to 9th, for 99 years. Had he not become a "reformer" of the labor question and a student of the problem of "Peaceful Revolution," he might, with his knowledge of business, have lived and died a rich man, but as his convictions as to the rights and liberties of the laboring classes

generally became more confirmed he concluded this purchase of land to hold for a profit, all wrong, so he returned the 99 year lease to Mr. Longworth.

Time went on. Finally some friends, who were interested in his "Labor for Labor" ideas, joined in his movement, and he was induced to move to Trenton, Ohio, with the idea of starting a community to be run on the "Labor for Labor" system, but after building a comfortable residence within a mile of Trenton, and living there for some three years, he found we were too remote from those who were interested in these things, so in 1838 we moved back to New Harmony, and he applied himself to simplifying the art of printing.

### **World's First Continuous Sheet Press**

About this time he found that in order to build such a press as he contemplated and his ambition dictated, it was necessary for him to go to Cincinnati so that he could have his work done, and some time in March he went to Cincinnati, taking me with him. He soon had his work room for the iron work and machinery, also cabinet shops, office and printing office for job work such as business cards, advertisements, etc. The writer, then only 13 years of age, did the typesetting and card-printing; this work was done on one of my father's job presses. The building where this work was done, and where the first continuous sheet press was ever built and worked, was in the middle of the magnificent block facing the splendid fountain on Fifth Street. The block at that time was considered a splendid structure, being two stories high.

The work of building the press progressed rapidly for those times, and job printing was carried on by the writer. Finally the great and beautiful press was finished, and fully tested. It proved capable of striking off from forty to sixty copies per minute—an achievement in printing never before heard of or imagined. As it was the intention to use this mammoth press for the presidential campaign of 1840 as soon as it had been thoroughly tested, this magnificent printing press was placed on board the steamboat Rover on New Year's Eve, 1840—I shall never forget that night.

### **Moving the Press to Evansville**

It was cold, and a terrible wind, snow and a hail storm [were] in full blast as we pulled out from the wharf. As the Rover was the last boat which was expected to leave for some time, she was well crowded with passengers. It got colder and colder, and the ice was forming rapidly. Finally we cut our way to shore several miles from Madison, Indiana, or 57 [miles] above Louisville.

In the morning we were informed by the Captain that the prospects were very flattering for a starve-out or a walkout of seven miles to Madison, and all hands started on a dismal walk through the snow, the beautiful snow. We made the trip, got to Louisville, stayed three days, and it kept freezing harder. As no stages were running, my father made arrangements to go in a sleigh, got up at 4 A.M., took the sleigh, rode three hours, stopped for breakfast, and finding we were nearly frozen, we concluded to walk the balance of the way home—one hundred and seventy five miles. This distance we made on foot in six and a half days to New Harmony. It took the Rover over two months to do it [to Evansville], as she was icebound all that time.

### **Trouble in Evansville; Time Store in New Harmony**

Finally the press was placed in the office at Evansville. This beautiful machine opened up splendidly, but no sooner had my father returned home than the platen press jammers commenced their anarchistic devilment. They had never seen a press that would print more than four to six copies per minute and they were going to be d--m if any bloody press should take the bread out of their mouths by doing the work in no time. So these scoundrels kept my father in hot water, till one day he engaged some wagons and had the press hauled home and broke it up.

In the meantime, between the 1840 presidential campaign and the destruction of the continuous sheet press (it was used, I believe for about two years) my father started the "time store." It was located in the building that stood contiguous to where the magnificent New Harmony Institute [was] just erected (which is the generous gift of Dr. Murphy). [Here, we surmise that G. Warren wrote his account not long after 1894, the year the construction of the present Workingmen's Institute was finished.]

The time store was started by my father for the purpose of illustrating the labor-for-labor system. The goods he bought principally of Evansville merchants. The customers would come in and ask for what was wanted. The time dial was set to correspond with the minute hand of the clock and when the customer was through with his purchase, the time required in waiting on him was figured up; this labor was paid by the customer in labor notes, and the cost of the goods was paid in cash. There was no profit added to the first cost of the goods, except the amount expended in freight, bills, and other incidentals. The labor notes, of course, represented all classes—merchants, farmers, doctors, and every description of laborer, and the rates per hour were regulated by the cost to the person of having to spend the time in learning the business in which he was engaged. I remember that a large number of the citizens of the town and country contiguous used to meet once every two weeks at the "Hall," fitted up in a large building called "No. 1" which belonged to my father. In this [building] were also the shops where the library printing presses, type cases, etc., were being made.

The friends of the labor movement met, and the question was discussed, the prices of different kinds of labor suggested, and acted upon. This was continued for a time, but of course it being only an illustration of the "labor for labor" idea, in about two years this was dropped, and, as father had received from his friend Robert Dale Owen a large amount of property in buildings and land for an interest in the undertaking, and as my father concluded that his friend, Mr. Owen, had not gotten value received, he decided to deed back to Mr. Owen the whole of that property. How many men would have done this?

### **Stereotyping; New Music Notation; Concluding Remarks**

He then bought property about a mile out in the hills and building a residence, devoted himself to a new method of stereotyping, spent time and money, and his work was the first of the kind which developed into the present system of electrotyping.

Being a fine musician, he saw that the art of music was much retarded by the intricacy of the present method of musical notation. His method was all right: it dispensed with the sharp and flat signatures, and the tier and length of the stem gave the length of the note, and the piano or forte power [i.e., dynamic level] was designated by the size of the note itself.

But the fallacy of the introduction of any new method of musical notation is prominently apparent when we are cognizant of the fact that the whole world has but one system of musical notation, also the whole world has used no other since the art developed into an art. [Actually, some of Josiah Warren's ideas *are* manifest in many 20th century musical scores.]

My father, however, spent a great deal of time in making plates by means of his own invention, to print his system of musical notation, previous to his going to Boston. He went there in 1850 and interested himself in developing a printing process by which the type plate was on a cylinder; this system of printing was used in Washington City, I believe, the surface of the plate being a composition of Gum Shellac with other ingredients.

Devoting himself to the advancement of civilization, he died in Boston in [1874], having gone through a checkered life, and for many years a fine musician. I never know him to use profane language or to touch liquor of any kind, or use tobacco in any form. He was strictly temperate in every respect.

Many of the aspects of Josiah Warren's life and works remembered by his son in the foregoing account are examined in some detail in

**Frederick D. Buchstein**, "Josiah Warren: The Peaceful Revolutionist," *Cincinnati Historical Society Bulletin* 32 (1974) 61-71.

Buchstein notes that John Stuart Mill called Josiah Warren "a remarkable American" and in his own *Autobiography* adopted Warren's phrase "Sovereignty of the Individual." It is interesting that the words "individual sovereignty" stand in sharp contrast to Robert Owen's utopian principles for communitarian living. Perhaps the months Warren spent as a part of the Owen experiment sharpened his notion of individual sovereignty.

One might ask how Josiah Warren was able to finance his high speed press. According to Richard Leopold's biography of Robert Dale Owen (p. 139), the enterprise was a \$6,000 investment by the sons of Robert Owen, who lived in New Harmony.

Details about the use of Warren's press in Evansville and New Harmony are as follows: *The South-western Sentinel*, started by Jacob P. Chapman, in its first issue, dated February 28, 1840, carried the following paragraphs:

"The first number of *The South-western Sentinel* is the first newspaper probably in the world which was ever printed on a continuous sheet. Our press or printing machinery is the invention of Mr. Josiah Warren of New Harmony. He has brought a series of experiments extending through nine years to a successful close, and this machine, which he calls his speed press, is one of the results.

It receives the paper from a roll, prints it by means of a roller, and winds it as it is printed. It is worked by a man and a boy, or, at somewhat slower speed, by a man alone. It is supplied with self-inking apparatus by which the ink is strictly under control. Its construction throughout is very simple. It has not a single geared wheel about it. It is chiefly composed of rollers, twenty-three in number, with several pulleys. Its form is elegant and its appearance substantial.

The paper use...is cut into sheets after it is printed... Should the experiment, which has succeeded admirably thus far, cause the introduction of Mr. Warren's printing machines throughout the Union, the printers' vocabulary will be somewhat changed. We order not so many reams, but so many yards, of paper, which comes to us like cloth in rolls.

*The South-western Sentinel* closed in 1840, but the press remained in Evansville for the opening of another paper, named *Indiana Statesman*, published every Friday by Alexander Burns, Jr. (a cousin of the poet Robert Burns). The first issue was dated May 13, 1842 and until Sept., 30, 1842 (vol. 1, no. 21), the press ran in Evansville.

However, because of the problems already described by Warren's son, the press was moved, and beginning with vol. 1, no. 22, dated Oct. 22, 1842, the *Statesman* was published very Saturday morning, from the east end of the Hall in New Harmony until the final issue, dated March 7, 1846. During all these years, 1842 to 1846, the paper carried much local news from both Evansville and New Harmony. Several issues carried examples of Warren's newly invented "universal typography". (See the link below.)

The standard biography is

**William Bailie**, *Josiah Warren: The First American Anarchist*, Small, Maynard & Co., Boston, 1906.

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