A young mechanic or artisan's apprentice laboring in the inland community of Lancaster, Pennsylvania shortly after the War of 1812 had cause for concern. Years of protection from imported goods provided by Jeffersonian embargoes and war had come to an end. Competition from Philadelphia artisans had always been troublesome, but the prospect of increased foreign competition as well seemed even more daunting. On a more positive note, the youthful mechanic was plying his trade in a city with a well established craft tradition and in a young nation with a seemingly unlimited potential for growth. Furthermore, the rhetoric echoing through the early republic heaped ample praise on the artisan.¹

Throughout the broader society interest in social reform was growing, and this trend had implications for the artisan. The connection between the two resided in the fact that the same frame of mind that produced the drive for free schools, prison reform, and temperance also contributed to the creation of mechanics' institutes. The idealism that saturated the reform movements also influenced the early mechanics' institutes.

Bruce Sinclair points out that the primary aim of such an organization was to render "knowledge . . . open to all who seek it" as opposed to having it "restricted by exclusive universities."² Restricted knowledge, historically, was alleged to be the ally of tyranny; conversely a republic would have to provide ready access to news and scientific progress.

One of the more subtle purposes of the mechanics' institute was to
enhance the social standing of artisans, and thus to challenge the notion that those who work with their hands are second best. It was also argued the mechanic ought to be "scientific." He ought to master the theory behind his work rather than merely relying on tradition, training, or intuition. Furthermore, since mechanics' institutes were aimed primarily at young and impressionable apprentices—some of whom were away from home—sound moral character and moral uplift ought to be part of the program. On a more mundane level, the organization was expected to promote and protect the economic interests of local artisans.

Given the noble aims of the mechanics' institute, and in view of the glowing reports from pace-setting Philadelphia regarding the Franklin Institute, it is not at all surprising that in Lancaster in 1829 interested mechanics, together with a generous sprinkling of patricians, held a series of meetings in local taverns and decided to create their own mechanics' institute.

This study aims to examine the history of the Lancaster Mechanics' Institute in order to better understand the distinction that grew up between its initial goals and its actual achievement. The Mechanics' Institute of Lancaster never became another Franklin Institute. This is not at all surprising, since the Franklin Institute developed very rapidly into a high-powered scientific organization whose Journal was far too scholarly for most artisans and mechanics. Yet it is also worth noting that the Lancaster society had only fleeting success as a small town mechanics' institute.

What did the Lancaster Mechanics' Institute become—if not a mechanics' institute? Even more important, why did local artisans and mechanics turn their back on the society? Which organizations in town were deemed worthy of their interest and support, and why?

It will be the thesis of this paper that patricians who directed the Lancaster Mechanics' Institute in its early years naively believed the inflated rhetoric that was in the air regarding the artisan and mechanic of the early republic. Accordingly, they pushed the institute in the direction of books, programs, and goals that never really appealed to the intended constituency.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE LANCASTER MECHANICS' INSTITUTE

As noted earlier, a number of meetings attended by mechanics and patricians in Red Rose City taverns in 1829 led to the creation of the
Lancaster Mechanics' Society. While the Society's statement of purpose essentially echoed ideas already noted in this paper, the founders did explicitly say the organization had no direct political ambitions. The group also claimed to be above mercenary pursuits, thereby crowding the distinction between protecting the local artisan's market and being greedy.  

Hugh Maxwell, a Lancaster newspaper publisher transplanted from Philadelphia, was the leading enthusiast and first president of the Society. A list of early contributors underscores the pronounced influence of local patricians. Political luminaries Thaddeus Stevens and James Buchanan were on the list, as were leading merchants J.F. Steinman and Christopher Hager. Judge Alexander L. Hayes and numerous attorneys were also members.

The Society hoped to achieve its goals by operating a library, sponsoring lectures, and eventually opening a night school. To that end local benefactors contributed books and Lancaster notables agreed to lecture. Among the early lecturers were attorney Redmond Conyinghan on history, physician Washington L. Atlee on chemistry, and a Dr. Fowler on phrenology. Alas, the goodwill and fanfare present at the creation did not preclude early difficulties.

As early as October of 1830 the Society's Minute Book speaks of lacking sufficient funds to carry out the intended mission. The immediate solution was to appoint a committee of four to collect back dues. Almost a year and a half later as the same problem persisted, the faithful dues-paying members grew restless and even a bit nasty. One noted, "several members have been more a burden than a benefit to us, by withholding their mite." It was time to get delinquent members to "fulfill their engagement, or their names will be erased with disgrace from our list." In addition, to compensate, "we should not close the door to other citizens whose charitable heart is open and willing to assist us."

During the mid and late 1830s complaints about lack of money and inability to collect dues subsided and several positive steps were taken. On December 19, 1836 the school committee of the Mechanics' Institute voted to open an evening school with courses meeting one night a week for twelve weeks. Members were to be charged fifty cents for admission to the course while non-members were to be charged one dollar. (The evening school lasted for about a decade.)

In the spring of 1838 managers of the Lancaster Lyceum generously offered "five of the most studious and exemplary" apprentices of the Mechanics' Institute the privilege of attending Lyceum lectures.
interaction with the Lyceum was expanded the following year when the mechanics opened their own new building at 31 South Queen Street. The Lyceum agreed to pay $30 yearly for the right to hold meetings there and also to pay a portion of maintenance costs. The 30' by 70' two story building housed an apprentices' library (containing 1,600 volumes) and reading room on the first floor, and a spacious second floor designed for lectures, concerts, and balls. The cost of the ground and new building was $7,000 with subscriptions to the project totaling $3,677.43 by the end of 1839. Sometime during 1840 a telescope was acquired. The available records give no indication of the origin, power, quality, or cost of this scientific instrument, but if it was a substantial telescope, it may well have been the first in the community.

All available evidence strongly suggests that 1839-40 was the high water mark for the Mechanics' Institute of Lancaster. Beyond the achievements just cited, it is estimated that a crowd of 1,000 attended the opening of the Mechanics' building, a sign that some enthusiasm had spilled over into the community. The ensuing fourteen years, however, proved bleak. In early 1841, when no further progress had been made in debt reduction, a building to the rear of the main structure was leased to a military group for drill practice. The following year a debt of $2,666 was labeled “pressing” and the reading room experiment was brought to a close. During 1843 board meetings were canceled for lack of a quorum, and it became necessary to sue the military drill group for back rent. Throughout 1844, 1845, and 1846 there are major gaps in the minutes indicating ongoing difficulty in raising a quorum. Sometime in 1848 the pretense of trying to hold meetings was abandoned and the library was closed. (The evening school had closed two years earlier.)

Remarkably enough, the evident lack of interest in the Mechanics' Institute during the 1840s did not lead to its demise. Some members of a tradition-conscious community kept the group alive, at least on paper. In a desperate but also amusing last-ditch effort in early 1852 the Mechanics' Institute passed a resolution “EXHONERATING THOSE MEMBERS WHO ATTENDED EACH MEETING FROM THEIR MONTHLY DUES.” This ploy, however, proved fruitless. Later in 1852 the hall itself was sold to the Second Presbyterian Church for $4,000 and a building in the rear was sold the following year to John Keller for $1,400. The society utilized these sales proceeds to pay off outstanding debts and reinvested the remaining $3,850 in city mortgages.

With the termination of the night school in 1846, the closing of the library in 1848, and the sale of the Mechanics' Hall in 1852 any realistic
hope of fulfilling the lofty aims of the mechanics' institute movement in Lancaster died. The resurrection of the society together with its library in 1854 does not mean that Red Rose apprentices and mechanics were thirsting after the benefits of a mechanics' institute; perhaps they never had. What the reopening did signify was that a number of men such as printer and publisher John Baer, saddler Henry Pinkerton, and machinist William Diller—all quite established and successful—desired to keep the idea of a mechanics' institute alive. What they gained from this was the satisfaction of perpetuating a tradition, and the knowledge that they were making a subscription library available to artisans and the general public in an era when such a benefit could not be taken for granted. The ensuing history of the organization makes this clear.

THE REVIVED MECHANICS' INSTITUTE

In December of 1854 some 2,000 books were regathered and the Mechanics' Institute reopened in a room on the second floor of Peter McConomy's shoe store at 17 West King Street, the very center of town. The *Minute Book* makes no mention of rent being paid, and conceivably at the outset a rent-free room was Peter McConomy's contribution. In an equally deft move in 1857 the Institute made John Baer president, and he in turn published a catalogue of the library's holdings that included not only books, but encyclopedias, magazines, and 18th century German and English newspapers. Quite likely the catalogue was the price Baer paid for the privilege of being named president. (He printed a second catalogue in 1860.)

The year 1857 also brought a proposed merger from the recently chartered Historical, Agricultural and Mechanics' Institute of Lancaster that held out the promise of greater funds and a larger library. For reasons that are not clear, the older Mechanics' Institute rejected the overture, prompting the new group to merge with the Lancaster Athenaeum. Together the two organizations maintained a library in City Hall in a room donated by the City Council.

The 1860s were prosperous years for the old Mechanics' Institute, and yet the record reveals an uncomfortable self-consciousness with regard to having been in effect reduced to a library. For example, in November of 1862 the officers required that a conspicuous MECHANICS' LIBRARY sign be placed on the wall of the library room. This was done, presumably, to remind readers of a more glorious past.

On the 35th anniversary of the Lancaster Mechanics' Institute
S.S. Rathvon, a successful local tailor who also served as librarian, poignantly observed that when the society was young, "its operations were surrounded by a blaze of glory. . . . After the novelty connected with its primitive days had . . . subsided, there commenced its slow but sure decline."24

A librarian's report for 1865 revealed a list of readers borrowing an average of 110 books per week or something in excess of 5,000 borrowings annually.25 The annual report for 1866, however, made it clear that 175–200 paying members were needed in order to operate effectively. The fact that 200 members could not be found in a metropolitan area of 25,000 led to some disparaging remarks regarding the intellectual curiosity and prowess of the community.26 The annual reports also lamented the fact that most of the circulating books were works of fiction while the scientific, philosophical, and historical works gathered dust on the shelves. S.S. Rathvon's tone approached bitterness in his 1867 report when he noted, the Mechanics' Institute "regrets that it is not able to give a better record of that class of persons in the community for whose special benefit it was first instituted."27 The charade of running a mechanics' institute continued through the 1870s, 80s, and 90s with few noteworthy developments. An effort to open the library twice a week in the 1880s failed for want of patronage. In 1885 Dr. R.K. Buehrle, the newly elected secretary, belabored the obvious when he observed, "the old limitation of mechanics only as officers" was now "obsolete."28 In 1886 a new constitution was drafted with the quiet admission that the "original aims and purposes of the founders of the Society had never been realized."29

The 1890s brought relocation until the Mechanics' Library finally occupied the A. Herr Smith Free Library Building at 125 North Duke Street, where it utilized two rooms rent free. At this point the several thousand volumes had found a permanent home as 125 North Duke also became the address of the Free Library of Lancaster County.30

Why did the apprentice artisans and mechanics of the Red Rose City fail to respond to the programs and opportunities provided by the Mechanics' Institute? How could they ignore the potential benefits that might have been derived from grasping the noble vision? An editor of Scientific American expressed frustration in 1852 when he noted:

We find great fault with mechanics. . . . How few of them learn to be draughtsmen or mathematicians, and yet these qualifications are essential to their rise and progress in life . . . so few of them read and study good works in comparison with the great majority who
read useless and empty books, and whose conversation is distinguished by much foolishness and little sense.\textsuperscript{31}

In short, how could young men ignore the opportunity to learn, to better themselves, to get ahead, to rise intellectually, socially, and economically?

Another way to pose the same question is to ask, Why can’t men who work with their hands become something more? Or, in following the lead of the editor of \textit{Scientific American}, why can’t a mechanic learn drafting and mathematics and become an engineer—particularly in an era when so many engineers did not have formal university degrees or professional licenses?

The answer to this question, regardless of precisely how it is posed, is that artisans and mechanics invariably have their own agenda, their own goals, their own aspirations; and these are rarely understood or adequately respected by substantial middle class and patrician elements in society. What it all boils down to is a major gap separating what artisans hoped to become and what someone else thought artisans ought to become.

Most who began their working lives as artisans or mechanics did indeed expect to continue in that capacity. They did not anticipate becoming engineers or industrial leaders. They did not expect to rise very far socially, nor did they expect to become wealthy. Reading habits, where they existed, were likely to involve newspapers, magazines, or fiction. Leisure activities were comfortably free of intellectual and cultural uplift, and at times even frowned upon by the more genteel elements in the community when taken to the extreme.\textsuperscript{32} To the extent that the Lancaster Mechanics’ Institute offered lectures on history or courses on chemistry or books on philosophy they were shooting wide of the mark.

\textbf{WHAT DID ARTISANS AND MECHANICS CARE ABOUT AND JOIN?}

A host of newspaper stories together with listings in city directories show that artisans participated in many local organizations, had a sense of their own identity, and welcomed opportunities to display artisanal pride. One of the more vivid examples of this was a major parade described in the \textit{Lancaster Intelligencer} of September 12, 1868 as an “imposing and beautiful demonstration” on streets that were “tastefully decorated” before a crowd that was “well behaved.”\textsuperscript{33} The parade was organized by the Order of United American Mechanics to honor “some
of our best and most skilled mechanics." Over 5,000 men marched along a route lined not only with spectators but with tables set up on pavements to promote the sale of cakes, candies, lemonade, and political party badges.

Featured prominently in the parade was a wagon drawn by four horses that carried miniatures of the "five great inventions": the steam fire engine, the telegraph, the printing press, the sewing machine and the reaper. Flags and banners with references to republican virtue played a large part in the festivities as did American eagles, stars, and portraits of Lincoln and Washington. A horse-drawn wagon displayed carpenters at work while another featured saddlers. Less commonplace, perhaps, were wagons that represented the manufacture of picture frames and John Best’s boilermakers. Still other wagons carried a tin shop, coopers at work, and printing presses.

The custom of the Labor Day parade continued in Lancaster with some allowances for variations. For example, in September of 1892 when a Labor Day excursion to York was planned, mechanics held their parade earlier. Marchers were instructed to wear a black derby, dark clothes, and badge—and to carry a cane. All of this, of course, intended to remind onlookers of the dignity of those who worked with their hands. In brief, the Labor Day parades were a major manifestation of cohesiveness and clearly an activity in which many artisans were interested.

Another institution that mechanics of the Red Rose City took some interest in was labor unions. This, admittedly, was limited to a few occupations. The town had never been a hot-bed of organized labor, and extended artisanal persistence may have precluded the need for some union activity. Nevertheless, a few groups showed interest in organizing. Carpenters were organized and conducted a strike as early as 1836, but beyond that date their union activity went unrecorded for some time until listings appeared in city directories for the Carpenters and Joiners of America, Union #208 in 1888 and 1892. Another group that appeared with some consistency in the directories was the Typeographers Union #70, listed in 1866, 1888, and 1892. A certain Blacksmiths and Machinists Union appeared briefly in 1866 and is not listed again. Quite possibly this union became part of the Iron and Railway Workers Union that was listed in Lancaster directories during the 1870s. Thus while organized labor did not enjoy great success in the community, it was important to selected occupations.

Of far greater significance were the social, fraternal, and benevolent associations that dotted the town. Artisans and mechanics were attracted
to four lodges and two encampments of Odd Fellows in addition to four tribes of Red Men. The Order of United American Mechanics, with three senior and one junior council, was a conservative fraternal and benevolent group that should not be mistaken for a union. Roman Catholics were likely to join one of five Catholic Beneficial Associations while veterans were drawn to two posts of the Grand Army of the Republic. Here mechanics found camaraderie and masculine fellowship. Just as important, no one sought to make them into something loftier than they were. Weekly or monthly gatherings served as an excuse to get out of the house, and modest dues conferred not only membership in good standing but also—in some instances—death benefits. The 19th century fraternal organization provided fellowship and also a reasonable alternative to some of the more sordid excesses lurking in the shadows of urban life.

Finally, two building and loan associations established in the late 1860s carried names suggesting a direct connection with mechanics: the American Mechanics' Building and Loan founded in 1869 and the Lancaster Workingmen's Savings Fund and Building Association instituted in 1868. Names can be misleading and there is no reason to assume an ironclad tie between these institutions and local artisans. The latter organization, for example, was headed by attorney Daniel Baker and two substantial manufacturers: coachmaker Samuel B. Cox and combmaker Dana Graham.

In response to the question, what kinds of institutions did artisans and mechanics care about and join, this writer concludes that fraternal and benevolent societies together with the social life they generated were deemed most vital. Parades, though obviously infrequent, were enormously important when they did occur. Here was an opportunity for artisans to celebrate themselves, to march with dignity through the city, to carry banners, to create displays—to take their case to the public in a way that almost no one else could. By contrast, labor unions served but a small portion of their potential market in Lancaster. Like the Mechanics' Institute, there just did not seem to be much interest in whatever labor unions were providing.

CONCLUSION

In her 1972 study Arlene Elliott argued that mechanics' institutes did well in the Pennsylvania industrial centers of Philadelphia, Lancaster, and Pittsburgh and less well in Carlisle, Columbia, and Harrisburgh. Furthermore, these institutions gave young men the scientific back-
ground necessary to succeed in engineering. Thus, at least the successful mechanics' institutes provided a foreshadowing of our early engineering schools. This conclusion places Lancaster in the wrong category, but it is useful in so far as it makes the claim that institutes propelled mechanics into engineering. The idea of pushing artisans and mechanics into some "higher calling," as noted earlier, is at the heart of what went wrong with the Mechanics' Institute of Lancaster.

Patricians who contributed to the organization in its early years fell into the trap of believing the lofty rhetoric that was in the air regarding the artisan and mechanic of the early republic. Accordingly, they moved the Institute in the direction of books, programs, and goals that failed to appeal to the intended constituency. Annual reports from the Mechanics' Institute at mid century and beyond reveal bitterness on the part of those running the organization; but, alas, perhaps it is the artisans and mechanics of the Red Rose City who should have been bitter!

NOTES


3. Ibid.


6. Sinclair, X.

7. See Elliott, 149.

8. See "Historical Sketch of the Mechanics' Society of Lancaster" read before the Lancaster County Historical Society by D.C. Haverstick, November 3, 1905.

9. Ibid.

10. Minute Book, Lancaster Mechanics' Institute, October 25, 1830. This Minute Book, currently housed in the Rare Book Room of the Lancaster County Public Library, provided the major insights in this study. As a source of information it is far more detailed and complete than the Elliott dissertation.

11. Ibid, February 20, 1832.

12. Ibid.

13. See Haverstick, "Historical Sketch."

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15. Ibid, December 12, 1839.
17. Ibid.
18. Minute Book, December of 1844 through March of 1846.
20. Ibid., December 20, 1852
22. Ibid., 162.
23. Minute Book, November 24, 1862.
25. The Librarian’s Report for 1865 was published in the local newspapers and summarized in the Minute Book in January of 1866.
26. The Librarian’s Report for 1866, that provided such a scathing review of Lancaster Countians, was published in the local newspapers and summarized in the Minute Book in January of 1867.
27. Minute Book, January 20, 1868.
28. Minute Book, one of a limited number of entries for 1885.
29. See Minute Book for 1886. A copy of this new constitution dated January 18, 1886 can be found in the manuscript collection of the Lancaster County Historical Society, North President Avenue, Lancaster.
30. See Minute Book for the 1890s. The volumes that originally were part of the library of the Lancaster Mechanics’ Institute are now preserved as part of the rare book collection of the Lancaster County Public Library.
32. For an excellent discussion of what people who work with their hands do with their leisure see Roy Rosenzweig, Eight Hours for What We Will: Workers and Leisure in an Industrial City, 1870-1920 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983). Rosenzweig focuses on saloons, holiday celebrations, parades, fraternal and benevolent societies, picnics, parks and playgrounds.
33. The Lancaster Intelligencer, September 12, 1868.
34. Ibid.
35. Lancaster Labor Leader, August 27, 1892 and September 3, 1892. This newspaper provides a lot of information on workers and mechanics in late 19th century Lancaster. Unfortunately, it appeared for only a few years in the 1890s.
37. Lancaster City Directories exist for 1843 and 1857 to present.
38. Ibid.
39. Ibid.
40. Elliott, 309.