



Literary Ohio

Learn about Ohio's literary tradition, the accomplishments of the state's authors and the development of Ohio's libraries.

Libraries

Ohio is fortunate to have an extensive library system. Its origins began early in the state's history; there was a public library in Belpre near Marietta as early as 1796. The books were kept at the home of Esquire Isaac Pierce, the librarian. The second library was organized on February 13, 1802, at Yeatman's Tavern in Cincinnati. Subscribers taking shares included Arthur St. Clair, governor of the Northwest Territory, and John Reily, who may have been the first teacher in Ohio. This library started operation on March 6, 1802, with Lewis Kerr serving as librarian. In 1802, the first Cincinnati library opened and the famous Coonskin Library began circulating materials in Ames Township, Athens County. The library was originally assembled from books donated by area settlers. Thereafter volumes were added with the profits from sales of raccoon skins. Paying annual dues of \$2.50 entitled subscribers to borrow books. Many times dues were paid in coonskins.

The State Library of Ohio was established in 1817 with a collection of 509 books. Its goal was to "provide information to state officials." In 1895, the collection was opened to the citizens of Ohio. The library's responsibilities were gradually expanded by the General Assembly to include working with Ohio libraries, planning and developing services.

The number of libraries grew quickly. By 1840, at least 140 libraries were incorporated in Ohio, although most were not circulating collections open to the public. Most were subscription libraries whose members paid dues to borrow books. In 1890, the Cleveland Public Library became one of the first metropolitan libraries to adopt the "open-shelf" plan, allowing patrons to browse the stacks rather than asking librarians for specific titles.

The Ohio public library system grew larger in its second century. In 2002, the system provides service to all of Ohio's 88 counties. Its total circulation among its over 400 branches is 90 million items per year. In addition, Ohio boasts over 100 specialty libraries owned and operated by private companies and institutions such as hospitals. These libraries most often house information that is essential to employees and their jobs. One of the most interesting specialty libraries is located in Canton, Ohio, at the Professional Football Hall of Fame. It is a research center that contains scrapbooks, program guides, news releases and other assorted football ephemera.

Publishing

Early in its history, Cincinnati became the publishing center of the West, especially for schoolbooks. However, Dayton, Springfield, Canton, Akron, Columbus and Cleveland also had strong publishing centers. *Maxwell Code*, a book on the laws of the Northwest Territory was published in 1796, becoming the first book printed in Ohio. Another early work was Dr. Daniel Drake's *Picture of Cincinnati* issued in 1815. The first published history of Ohio was Salmon P. Chase's work *Preliminary Sketch of the History of Ohio* (1833). Caleb Atwater



followed this with his work *History of the State of Ohio* in 1838. Literary and philosophical societies began to grow in popularity, as did the sales of literary magazines, popular ladies' magazines and poetry.

As the library system of Ohio has grown, so has the business of publishing. Early in the 20th century, Ohio was home to at least 20 publishing companies. As the century progressed, however, publishers began to move out of Ohio and into larger cities, such as New York and Chicago. During the 1980s, the state lost big name publishers from both Cincinnati and Cleveland.

Notable Publishers

Isaac Funk (1839-1912) from Clifton (Greene County) was a successful publisher and half of Funk and Wagnalls publishing company.

Dard Hunter (1883-1966) was a Steubenville artist who authored over 20 books on papermaking. His most famous work is *My Life with Paper*.

John Kilbourn (1787-1831) of Worthington published Ohio's first best seller, *The Ohio Gazetteer*, in 1816.

Albert N. Marquis (1855-1943) of Brown County began publishing *Who's Who in America* in 1899.

William Norton (1891-1947) of Springfield started the publishing company W. W. Norton & Company.

Newspapers

Newspapers were the main source of information during much of Ohio's history. The first newspaper published north of the Ohio River was the *Centinel of the North-western Territory*, published November 9, 1793. The business was small and according to William Coggeshall, a "wheelbarrow would have moved all the types, cases and stands which this pioneer establishment contained." The paper's motto was "open to all parties, by influenced by none."

The newspaper industry thrived throughout much of Ohio's history. More than one hundred periodicals were published in the Ohio Valley prior to 1860, with more than 90 printed in the state. Although Cincinnati and Hamilton County boasted sixty newspapers in 1880, by 1900 only six of those survived. One of those six was the Cincinnati *Enquirer*, which was founded in 1841 and is still being published today.

By the 1850s, there were strong papers in each of Ohio's main cities. Newspapers were frequently influential in politics. For example, Charles Hammond, editor of Cincinnati *Gazette* used the paper to attack Democrats and the Cincinnati *Enquirer* became the leading Democratic paper in the 1840s.



Despite the advent of both the radio and the television in the 20th century, the newspaper remained the greatest tool for mass communication. In Ohio, the largest dailies, the Cincinnati *Enquirer*, the Columbus *Dispatch* and the Cleveland *Plain Dealer* all maintain large circulations today. These three largest newspapers are a few among many. There are more than 80 daily newspapers in Ohio, which together total 2.5 million subscribers. Even more numerous are the 220 weekly newspapers that are published in Ohio.

Notable Journalists

Charles Hammond (1779-1840) was born in Baltimore, Maryland, and graduated from the University of Virginia. Hammond came to Ohio and started the *Ohio Federalist* in Belmont County. He later became a member of the state legislature and editor of the Cincinnati *Gazette*.

Whitelaw Reid (1837-1912), editor of the New York *Tribune*, was born in Xenia, Ohio, and educated in Oxford, Ohio. He was the candidate for vice-president on the unsuccessful 1892 Republican ticket and later became the U.S. Minister to France. His work *Ohio in the War* became the definitive work on the subject.

Januarius Aloysius MacGahan (1844-1878) of New Lexington, Ohio, was a war correspondent who became a national hero of Bulgaria. His articles about the Turkish atrocities aided Bulgarian independence. His monument in New Lexington is still visited by Bulgarians.

Lafcadio Hearn (1870-1904), the "grandfather of today's new journalism," was born in Cincinnati in 1870. His descriptive detailed articles about Cincinnati's back alleys made him a star reporter. He became known worldwide for his writings on Japan. Cincinnati *Enquirer* editor John Cockerill wrote that Hearn "prowled about the dark corners of the city, and from gruesome places he dug out charming idyllic stories."

Anne O'Hare McCormick (1880-1954) was born in England but moved to the United States as a child. Educated at St. Mary of the Springs in Columbus, McCormick enjoyed a long and successful career with the New York *Times*, mainly covering foreign affairs. In 1937, she became the first woman to win a Pulitzer Prize in journalism.

Erma Bombeck (1927-1997) of Dayton became a popular syndicated columnist, writing about her life as a homemaker and a woman in a light and humorous style. By the time of her death, her column was published in more than 500 different newspapers weekly.

Janet Cooke (b. 1954) of Toledo won fame and adulation in 1981 for her article, "Jimmy's World," about an eight-year-old heroin addict, published in the *Washington Post*. She won infamy later that year when after receiving the Pulitzer Prize for the article, she confessed that there was no "Jimmy," that he was a composite character, and her story was fiction. She returned the prize and resigned her post at the newspaper.



Notable Authors

Fiction Authors

Harriet Beecher Stowe (1811-1896) arrived in Cincinnati in 1832. Her most famous work was the 1852 novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.

William Sydney Porter (1862-1910) arrived at the Ohio Penitentiary in Columbus in 1898 and started writing while incarcerated for embezzlement. He created the pen name O. Henry so his daughter would not know he was in prison. O. Henry wrote short stories with ironic twists, such as *Gift of the Magi*.

Sherwood Anderson (1876-1941) was born in Clyde, Ohio, in 1876. He wrote short stories that tried to "hear and tender the voices of the common people." His most famous work is *Winesburg*, his portrait of small town life that infuriated most residents of his own hometown.

Paul Laurence Dunbar (1872-1906) was born in Dayton to former slaves. William Dean Howells wrote that he was "struck by the beauty of the verse" and mentioned Dunbar in *Harper's Weekly*. Dunbar's ambition was to "interpret my own people through song and story, and to prove to them that after all we are more human than African."

Zane Grey (1872-1939), born in Zanesville is considered the "Father of the Adult Western." *Riders of the Purple Sage* is his most well-known work.

Earl Biggers (1884-1933) was born in Trumbull County. He graduated from Harvard in 1907, but found his greatest success in his series of novels featuring the "amiable, patient Chinese" detective Charlie Chan. The series of novels (six in all) spawned movies, television plays, and a comic strip.

Jim Tully (1888-1947) was born in St. Mary's, Ohio. Inspired by a novella of Joseph Conrad, Tully began to write in his mid-30s. He was, at first, scorned by the major writers of the day (Upton Sinclair refused to read any of his work), but soon found commercial success writing blunt, glib, hard-boiled novels. His monetary success led him to move to Hollywood and he began to write film scripts and, for a short time, served as the press agent for Charlie Chaplin.

Ben Ames Williams (1889-1953) was born in Macon, Mississippi. At the age of five, the Williams family moved to Jackson, Ohio, where they had already established firm roots. Two of Williams' grandparents moved directly from Wales to Ohio and his father and mother met at Ohio University. After becoming a regular short story contributor to the *Saturday Evening Post*, Williams began to write novels. *Owen Glen* (1950) is a novel that details the story of a Welsh community in late nineteenth century in Ohio.

Louis Bromfield (1896-1956) was born in Mansfield, Ohio. After two aborted attempts to enter schools in New York, Bromfield entered into World War I as an ambulance driver. While New York remained his home immediately after the war, Bromfield eventually moved back to Ohio and purchased a farm "Malabar," which pioneered experimental farm practices that helped reclaim what were once thought dead lands. His literary works dealing with both the



farm and Ohio, in general, are renowned for both their economy of prose and general insight into the world of 20th-century farming.

Jerome Siegel (1914-1996) of Cleveland, Ohio, teamed with Joe Shuster to create the comic book hero Superman for DC Comics. The pair signed away the rights to Superman to DC comics soon afterwards and had two protracted legal battles in the 1940s and 1970s to gain proper reimbursement for their creation.

Toni Morrison (b. 1931) was born in Lorain, Ohio. She is considered one of the most significant novelists of the 20th century. In 1993, Morrison won the Nobel Peace Prize for Poetry and the National Book Foundation's Medal for Distinguished Contribution to American Letters. Morrison's fifth novel *Beloved* (1987), about the legacy of slavery, won a Pulitzer Prize in 1988. Her most successful novel, *Song of Solomon*, written in 1977, sold 3 million copies and was on the *New York Times* bestseller list for 16 weeks. The novel re-emerged on the bestseller list in 1996 when Oprah Winfrey chose it for her television book club.

Poets

Alice Cary (1820-1871) and **Phoebe Cary** (1824-1878) were born near Mt. Healthy, Ohio. Alice authored *Pictures of Memory* that received praise from Edgar Allan Poe, while Phoebe was known for hymns and witty parodies.

Coates Kinney (1826-1904) was a poet, lawyer, editor, soldier and state senator who completed the *Ohio Centennial Code* in 1888. Kinney's *Rain on the Roof* was his most popular poem.

John James Piatt (1835-1917) moved to Columbus at the age of ten. He was educated at Capital University and Kenyon College. Piatt worked with William Dean Howells at the *Ohio State Journal*. They jointly published *Poems of Two Friends*.

Hart Crane (1899-1932) was born in Garrettsville, Ohio. Crane's career was solidified upon the publication of *The Bridge*, a poem written as an American response to T.S. Eliot's *The Wasteland*. Crane committed suicide shortly before he was to complete an epic length poem about Montezuma and Cortes.

Herman Fetzer (1899-1936), better known as Jake Falstaff, is regarded as a veritable literary jack of all trades. Fetzer was admired by Carl Sandburg for his poetry and was courted by many New York magazines to make his home in the large city. Fetzer chose to remain in Ohio, but died unexpectedly at age 36 of pneumonia.

Rita Dove (b. 1952) of Akron was the daughter of the first black research chemist who, in the 1950s, broke the race barrier in the tire industry. In 1970, she was invited to the White House as a Presidential Scholar, one of the hundred most outstanding high school graduates in the United States that year, before attending Miami University in Oxford, Ohio. In 1993, Dove was appointed poet laureate of the United States and consultant in poetry at the Library of Congress, making her the youngest person—and the first African-American—to receive this



highest official honor in American letters. Dove now holds the chair as Commonwealth Professor of English at the University of Virginia in Charlottesville.

Nonfiction Authors

William Dean Howells (1837-1920), born in Martin's Ferry, was considered the "Dean of American Letters." He served as the editor of *Atlantic Monthly*, *Harper's* and *Cosmopolitan*. This versatile writer published over 60 different works of biography, history, travel, fiction, criticism and poetry. His non-fiction works include works include *the Life of Abraham Lincoln* and *Life of Rutherford B Hayes*, *Ohio Stories*, *My Year in a Log Cabin*. He contributed to the *Cincinnati Gazette* and *Cleveland Herald*. His most famous works are his novel "Rise of Silas Lapham" published in 1885 and "Criticism and Fiction" wherein he argues for realism.

Ambrose Bierce (1842-1914) was born in Meigs County, Ohio. He is considered the first significant writer of black (dark) humor. His most famous work is the *Devil's Dictionary*, published in 1906.

Charles Waddell Chesnutt (1858-1932) of Cleveland showed the struggles of African Americans in such works as the *Life of Frederick Douglass* and the novel *Wife of his Youth*.

Irving Babbitt (1865-1933) from Dayton was a literary critic hailed as the leader of "new humanism."

James Grover Thurber (1894-1961) of Columbus was an author, cartoonist and humorist. Thurber attended Ohio State and frequently wrote about the University and the city in his essays and, most notably, in his autobiographical work, *My Life and Hard Times*. He achieved his greatest notoriety by his writing of articles and the penning of cartoons of the *New Yorker* from 1927 to 1961.

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