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A Home for Major Powell

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A Home for Major Powell

Epitomizing the spirit of Illinois Wesleyan, a great explorer holds an honored place in The Ames Library.

At first glance, it may seem incongruous to feature John Wesley Powell, the daring explorer of Western wilderness, seated in the center of a peaceful campus library, shielded from the great outdoors that he loved so much. However, IWU Librarian Sue Stroyan insists that having a life-sized sculpture of Powell on permanent display in The Ames Library's first-floor rotunda is actually a perfect fit.



In addition to his work as an explorer, Powell is considered a pioneer in the field of ethnographic field research for his studies of Native American peoples of the West. Unlike most white people of his era, Powell had great respect for Native Americans, an insatiable curiosity about their culture and languages, and a conviction that they had a right to live according to their own traditions. In 1879, Powell helped push for the founding by Congress of the Bureau of Ethnology and under his management the agency sponsored important anthropological research, including a classification of Native American languages and a dictionary of Native American

Sculptor Rick Harney approached his work in several stages before making a final bronze cast. First, he constructs a "skeleton" of the figure out of wood and cardboard (above right) and then sculpts the clay around this support (right).



"It really embodies the way we teach on this campus," she explains. "Here we have this great explorer, his maps spread out on his lap and his arm is extended, as if he's reaching out to students. And the way the sculpture is set up, with him sitting and other chairs nearby, everyone is on the same level. It demonstrates that at this institution, everyone has something to contribute to the educational experience."

Powell taught at Illinois Wesleyan for just two years in the 1860s, but had enormous impact on the institution. He created the university's motto and seal and helped establish the school's reputation for scientific exploration, which continues to this day in the form of undergraduate research. While at Illinois Wesleyan, Powell taught several courses, including chemistry, botany, zoology, anatomy, mineralogy, and geology.

A Civil War major who lost his right arm in the battle at Shiloh, Powell didn't let his disability prevent him from becoming one of America's greatest explorers. In 1867, he led three IWU students through the Dakota Badlands and Rocky Mountains in a field trip that was one of the first of its kind in the history of U.S. higher education. Later, Powell became famous when he led an expedition on a treacherous, 900-mile journey down the Colorado River and through the Grand Canyon.



Vic Armstrong Jr. '64 (at left with grandson Mark) and his siblings commissioned the statue to honor their parents, Flora Harris Armstrong '43 and husband Victor.

Photo by Lori Ann Cook, courtesy of the Pantagraph

tribes. Powell also served as second director of the U.S. Geological Survey and was one of the founders of the National Geographic Society.

With such a distinguished resume, it was only natural that Powell was selected as the central figure to grace the two-story, first-floor rotunda, where practically everyone visiting the library would have an occasion to encounter this historical and inspiring figure.

"This was a great professor, and we wanted to convey to our students here that this is a person who represents the quality of the education they're receiving," says IWU Director of Development Ben Rhodes '69. He adds that because Illinois Wesleyan gave Powell an honorary doctorate degree, he is also considered an alumnus.

The sculpture honors Flora Harris Armstrong '43 and husband Victor of Scottsdale, Ariz., who were surprised last October by the announcement that their children Victor Jr. '64, Brian '65, both of Bloomington, and Margo Brinsley of Stuart, Fla., had commissioned and purchased the statue to commemorate their parents' 60th anniversary and 80th birthdays.

The bronze Powell figure was created by Rick Harney, an artist and sculptor from Normal, Ill. Harney is probably best known locally for his sculpture of Abraham Lincoln on the east side of the McLean County Historical Society (formerly the courthouse) in downtown Bloomington. He is currently working on a sculpture of Adlai Stevenson for the Central Illinois Regional Airport, also in Bloomington.

Harney was selected to do the work among several candidates because his model proposal demonstrated a clear understanding of Powell and his contribution to Illinois Wesleyan. "We wanted a piece that conveyed a sense of history and would also be interactive," Rhodes says. "Rick also displayed considerable sensitivity in depicting the missing limb."

Harney received his degree from Illinois State University, where he acquired the skill of mold-making, which is critical for making life sculptures. In preparation for the Powell sculpture, he did research at local libraries and viewed a PBS *American Experience* program about Powell's explorations of the Grand Canyon.

"Powell was a great teacher, but I sensed that he probably became restless in

Some, with a basic design, were rather simple to replace. But others, with complicated patterns and paintings, required much more thought, planning, and careful execution. To tackle these, Garbe took a photo of the damaged piece with a digital camera. Once displayed on a computer screen, he and his staff examined the image and experimented with various designs and drawings until they arrived at what they considered the most faithful rendition of the original panel.

Then, using rare and expensive cylinder-blown glass from Europe and rare metallic oxides as the stain, Garbe and his colleagues carefully reproduced the damaged pieces. They applied the color one layer at a time, then fired the glass in a kiln for eight hours to make the paint permanently adhere to the glass. When the piece of glass was done, it was removed and allowed to cool before another color was applied. For some pieces, this process was repeated four or five times.

Ironically, part of the restoration process actually involves "aging" the glass, which entails a recreation of the dirt and grime that formed on the windows, compliments of the sooty London air of the Industrial Revolution. "In addition to the beautiful stained glass, that mineralized patina of dirt is also part of the character of these panels," explains Garbe, who formulated an olive-green stain to provide the appropriate look.

The project was finally completed and the last of the stained-glass panels were installed in February. "Everything we make we fully expect to last centuries," says Garbe, "but these panels were special. They were in horrible condition and we brought them back to life."

the classroom," explains Harney. "He preferred to do most of his teaching outdoors. So even though I have him sitting, with the maps on his lap, he's reaching out and engaging, rather than quiet and pensive."

Stroyan says the sculpture not only contributes a sense of history and prestige to The Ames Library, but also, as a work of art, underscores the facility's role as a learning environment that pro-

vides a place to study, research, socialize and work with others.

"A library is more than a collection of books," she says. "If that were the case, all we'd have to do is put up a warehouse or Morton building. But a library is much more than that. We wanted to have a comfortable, pleasant place to study—a home away from home that also provides a sense of history. And this sculpture helps create that feeling." ■



Restored window honoring playwright Francis Beaumont (1584-1616).