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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 Stroyn 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.

“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.

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 of 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 languages.

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).

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

Windows (continued from page 25)

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, they applied 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 color 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 fine sculpture. 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 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.”

Stroyn 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 provides 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.”
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