From the Director:
Barn Progress

It was a summer of excitement and frustration for those of us anxiously waiting for the barn project to get underway. Beginning in July there was activity focused on preparing the site: tree stumps were pulled and construction fencing was brought in. But July also brought the discovery that not all of the utility easements had been dealt with, and as anyone who has ever experienced a major building project knows, dealing with utility companies is often one of the most difficult and frustrating aspects of a project like this. I won’t go into all the details here, but will just say that it took over three months to get all of the utilities moved. Neidigh Construction did what they could to work around these delays however. In early August they removed the cinder block room addition on the north end of the Annex so that they would have a place to pile some of the excavated dirt that will later be used to fill in the hole that will be left when the Annex is demolished. On September 1 they installed the erosion control around the perimeter of the construction site, and on September 2 (see below), they broke ground. If you heard some whooping and hollering on that day, it was us celebrating! Things progressed rapidly until September 11 at which point all work pretty much stopped for three more weeks while waiting for power lines to be removed from a pole that was sitting right where one corner of the basement needed to be dug. Once that was done, excavation work began again. Luckily, beneath the many feet of dirt they found loose boulders

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rather than solid bedrock. While some of these are enormous (see photo), they could at least be removed with just the backhoe.

By the time this newsletter goes in the mail, the construction crew will probably be dismantling the barn and pouring the basement foundation. But as of this writing, they are still excavating and haven’t yet begun to disassemble the barn. All of the unexpected delays mean that we will not be in our new quarters by the time we open again next March. Therefore, we have decided to forego a couple of our normal activities and events. We will not have our traditional December candlelight open house, nor will we have the quilt exhibit open house in early March. And because our annual seed sale cannot be held here this coming March, it will be moved to Harmony School (see page 5).

Otherwise, we have had a busy and productive year. We have seen a significant increase in the number of group tours to the museum. Large groups can be a challenge for us to handle for a variety of reasons, from parking issues to trying to shepherd 25-45 people through the house at one time and still have a meaningful and educational experience. But we are grateful to the local school teachers, IU faculty, and regional event planners for thinking of us and working with us to make it possible. Both Sherry and Bridget have made presentations outside of the museum which is another good way for us to reach a wider audience. Meanwhile, I have continued my work transcribing the Wylie family letters. Currently, I have over 3700 pages of transcription, including nearly 100 pages from letters held by IU Archives that had never before been transcribed. That’s an enormous amount of material, and another 25 years’ worth of letters await me!

To top things off, we had a little touch-up work done to the house this past summer as well: two exterior door thresholds had deteriorated to the point where we had to replace them, the exterior hand rails were repainted, and there were a few places where the paint on the exterior trim of the house had to be refreshed. We also asked the IU carpenters to come check all the windows and replace any broken or frayed sash cords. The next major project will be to add clear UV filtering film to all the windows. When maintaining a historic structure, it seems there is always work to be done!

-Jo Burgess

From the Garden

The 2009 gardening season got a jump start last fall when volunteers helped clean the beds, spread manure, and work the soil. That allowed us to plant cool season crops of arugula, endive, lettuce, radish, and spinach right after our annual seed sale in early March. Six weeks later, however, following a cold, wet spring, seedlings were still only an inch tall. When the weather finally warmed, those plants bolted resulting in a failure of all those early crops.

Late spring and summer continued to be a challenge in the garden. Too much rain and cool night temperatures adversely affected the warm season vegetables. Squash vines grew but produced no fruit. Hills of cucumber and melon rotted. One lonely pepper dropped from the stunted plants. I won’t even mention the damage done by the family of rabbits who took up residence!

Several late season crops did thrive despite the unfavorable weather conditions. New England pie pumpkins, Sieva lima beans, giant primrose sunflowers, to name only three, produced plenty of seed. While we may not have quite as many varieties of seed for sale in 2010 as we do in a good gardening year, there will still be approximately 60 varieties to choose from, including flowers, vegetables and herbs. Seed Saver Exchange seed will supplement the Wylie House selections as they have in the past.

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New Carpet
Room-sized rugs in the nineteenth century were oftentimes made by weaving strips approximately 30 inches wide and as long as you needed. These strips were then sewn together by hand to form a large area rug or even a wall-to-wall carpet. Approximately twenty years ago, some local weavers made a room-sized rag rug in this manner that was laid in the boys’ bedroom. We noticed about a year ago that the cotton warp of that rug was rotting, creating a tripping hazard for visitors walking across it, so we took it up. I then commissioned a Brown County weaver, Sarah Noggle (http://www.browncountystudiotour.com/saranoggle.htm) to make a new rug for the room.

We discussed the idea of Sarah making another simple cotton rag rug, but when she asked if I would like to consider a “Venetian” wool rug such as those popular in the early nineteenth century, I jumped at the opportunity. A Venetian carpet is typified by brightly colored striping produced by what is known as a warp-face weave structure, which means that there are more warp threads per inch than weft threads per inch. In fact, the wool warp threads are so close together that they completely cover the weft. The only place you see the weft threads are at the selvedge edges, and once the panels are joined, you don’t notice those at all. This weave structure makes it possible to have a finished product that is striped long-ways. (see photo) Sarah will soon be stitching the panels she has woven together so that we once again have a beautiful area rug in the boys’ bedroom. And this one, being made of wool and so tightly woven, should last much longer than the former rag rug with cotton warp. We are so pleased with Sarah’s work that I have commissioned her to weave a Venetian carpet stair runner for the front stair as well. We hope to have that in place by summer 2010, depending on how soon she can get to it.

Quilters’ Temporary Move
Since the room in the Annex where the quilters were used to working was demolished to make room for the barn, they had to find a temporary home until the construction project is completed. The North Central Church of Christ very kindly provided a room for them to work in until they can come back home to Wylie House, and they are making good progress on a log cabin quilt for the museum. We gratefully acknowledge this accommodation. When the barn is completed, we will move their quilting frame from the church to the multi-purpose room on the ground floor of the barn and welcome them back. We’ve missed seeing them every week!

From the Garden (continued from page 2)

Our 2010 seed sale event will be held on Saturday, March 6 at Harmony School, and the hours will be 9 a.m. to 2 p.m. (see announcement on page 5).

One day this summer, after collecting seeds in the garden with a volunteer, we stopped to look at the site of the new education center. My attention was drawn to something blue on the surface of the huge pile of soil that had been excavated. It was an old enamelware pot with handles. That aroused my treasure-hunting instinct and on closer inspection, I spotted shards of china, glass bottles and crockery. A little digging done while work was stopped, waiting for utilities to be moved, turned up some other interesting items: a bone toothbrush (minus the bristles of course, which long ago rotted), a clay marble, rusted horse shoes, and a skeleton key. I found enough china shards that we have been able to identify and date some of the patterns, and I’ve even been able to piece together nearly entire cups, plates, and bowls. These items will make an interesting and educational exhibit when our barn/education center is completed. It was nice to have such a fun project during what was a very challenging gardening season!

Sherry Wise--Outdoor Interpreter
Elizabeth Breckenridge was 67 years old when she died on September 25, 1910. “Lizzie,” as she was known by the Wylie family, was born in Bedford, Indiana in 1843, and had worked since the age of 13 as a domestic servant for Theophilus and Rebecca Wylie. A life-long member of the Reformed Presbyterian Church, she is one of approximately half a dozen African Americans buried in the Covenanter Cemetery located at the intersection of High and Hillside Streets. Assembling extant traces of her life and those of her immediate family has been an intermittent but remarkably intriguing journey over the past two years. Census records between 1860 and 1900 and the City Directory of 1900 list Ms. Breckenridge as living at 307 E. Second St. We cannot say for certain, but it is very likely Elizabeth lived with the family in the main house rather than in one of the outbuildings. We are fortunate to have several photographs of Ms. Breckenridge that we believe were taken by Theophilus A. Wylie or other family members.

The thread that began our far-from-finished tapestry of Breckenridge’s life was a 1903 “Special to the Indianapolis News” article. It featured a story about Ms. Breckenridge submitted as part of a contest run by the paper for “the house-keeper or woman servant who has been longest employed in one household in Indiana.” The article mentions that Elizabeth’s father was an ex-slave who settled in Bedford and worked as a shoemaker before relocating his family to Bloomington in 1852. A review of the 1850 census records for Lawrence County, however, showed no listing for Elizabeth’s mother and father. This document revealed the first name of Elizabeth’s father (Edmund).

Census records after 1850 no longer show a Hannah Breckenridge in either Lawrence or Monroe counties but we suspected a connection between a Hannah McCaw in Bloomington and Elizabeth. The link was confirmed when Jo found a family letter that clearly identified Hannah McCaw as Elizabeth’s mother. Hannah had remarried sometime around the mid-1850s and had another three children with Henry McCaw. Hannah, Henry, and two infant McCaw children are also buried in the Covenanter Cemetery—right next to Elizabeth Breckenridge.

One of the most important recent discoveries about Elizabeth’s life occurred at the Monroe County Recorder’s Office where I was able to confirm that Elizabeth Breckenridge did, in fact, “die in her home on S. Washington St.” as mentioned in her obituary. This brief phrase was the only evidence we’d seen that suggested Elizabeth did not end her days living at Wylie House. Shortly before she died, she had purchased a small home across from what is now known as “The Rise.” The structure no longer stands, but was immediately south of the house that still exists at #404. This was an exceptional accomplishment for a single African American woman who made her living as a housekeeper during that time period in Bloomington.

Documents related to birth, marriage, death, veteran’s affairs, probate, etc. are exciting and necessary for making the case of how you know what you know. Hopefully, they will lead to other sources that provide a more nuanced understanding of one’s life. We know from the Indianapolis News piece, for instance, that Theophilus Wylie taught Elizabeth to master reading and writing, that she “had a wonderful range of general knowledge” but was “particularly interested in astronomy,” that she read the “choicest books” and judged “good literature with taste.”

The work continues and I hope to collaborate with interested educators and community groups to help put the historical context of her life to work in the present day. --Bridget Edwards

My thanks to the following for their help with this research: Caina Bohr (Genealogy/Indiana State Library), Jo Burgess (Wylie House), Lawrence and Jean Curry (Sextons, Covenanter Cemetery), Liz Knap (Monroe Co. History Center), Kyle Sturgeon (Monroe Co. Auditor’s Office), & Mike Szakaly (Monroe Co. Recorder’s Office).
Seed Sale--IMPORTANT ANNOUNCEMENT

We had to find a new venue for our annual March seed sale due to the fact that the room where we held our seed sale in the past is no longer. On Saturday, March 6, 2010, gardeners who want to purchase Wylie House Seed should make their way to Harmony School at 909 E. 2nd Street, Bloomington rather than to the Wylie House Annex. Harmony School and the Bloomington Winter Farmers' Market have very kindly cooperated with us to make this possible. As many of our local readers know, the Winter Market is held in the Harmony School gymnasium on Saturdays from 9 a.m until 12 noon, January through March (http://www.localgrowers.org/wintermarket.html). We will be a one-time vendor on March 6 and we’ll set up in the main floor hallway. You will be able not only to buy our seed, but also fresh, locally grown produce and even a hot lunch! The hours of our seed sale will be slightly longer than the market, extending until 2:00 that day. Parking will be available on the street, in the Harmony School parking lot and also in the Atwater Street IU parking lot (free on weekends), which is just a short walk away.

December Events

Because of the uncertainties of our construction project, we have decided to cancel our traditional December candlelight open house this year. We know that many people will be disappointed by this, but it seemed the best option. We have put a note on our web site to this effect and would appreciate our readers’ help in spreading the word. Rest assured that this popular event will be back in 2010.

There will, however, be a free concert in the house on Saturday, Dec. 5 at noon. Presented by IU students under the direction of Michael McCraw, Chair of the Early Music Department, this woodwind concert is sure to please all who attend.

Coverlets and Quilts

Visitors who tour the museum this fall will see some of our beautiful 19th century hand woven coverlets on all the beds. The quilts have been temporarily put away so that we can exhibit these wonderful bed coverings that were so common to homes one hundred and fifty to two hundred years ago. Jacquard, overshot, and double weave patterns predominantly colored indigo, white, and madder, give the bedrooms a very different feel than our colorful cotton quilts. In recent years we have had a month long special exhibit of antique quilts in March with a three day open house to coincide with the Indiana Heritage Quilt Show at the Convention Center. Not knowing what state we will be in by March due to the construction, we decided not to have that exhibit this coming March. Instead, we will continue to show our coverlets until sometime in April when housewives would traditionally put away the winter bedding.

Volunteering

• Do you like history, antiques and a pleasant, tranquil setting? Learn to be a docent at the Wylie House.
• Have limited time? Help with special events at the museum.
• Do you prefer to spend your time in the garden? Lend a hand in our heirloom garden.

If you live in the Bloomington area and would like to become more actively involved with the museum, please call or e-mail us to chat with us about the opportunities. Our e-mail address is libwylie@indiana.edu

Docents and volunteers

Susan Baker, Jane Clay, Roseann Dodds, Anthony Eller, Mary Emison, Ann Fierst, Jane Harnett, Catharine Haralovich, Naomi Lawlis, Mary Anne Miller, Sarah Noggle, Kylene Parobek, Cindy Smith, Carla Williams

Garden volunteers

Pat Blevins, Ross Hill, Lee Ridge, Floyd Richards, Eve Schultes-Ridge, Barbara Seal, Martha Tarbah, Kathie Wallskog

Quilters

Marjorie Clayton, Diamond Mather, Virginia Miller, Ellen Pittman
Molly Biehn, a second year SLIS student from upstate New York, is our graduate intern this semester. Molly is interested in archives work, and has been given the opportunity to work with primary documents while here. In addition to the thousands of 19th century letters we have from the Wylie family, we also have a small collection of letters written by the Bradley family. Molly has been transcribing letters written by Morton C. Bradley, Jr. to his family in Boston during 1934 and 1935 while he was studying in Europe. We are very pleased, indeed, to have this insight into Mr. Bradley’s early years and are finding the letters fascinating and entertaining, as he wrote with great wit and humor.

We have a new graduate assistant from the School of Library and Information Science for this academic year. Her name is Amy Jankowski and she hails from Illinois. Amy is very interested in museum work and has some experience working in museums at the University of Illinois where she did her undergraduate work, so this is a happy fit for both her and Wylie House. She has so far been working with our Wylie family letters database and our photo collection. She also helped select coverlets to put on display for the winter months and wrote up a very informative piece for our docents to read so that they can include the coverlets when giving tours to visitors. When working in an upstairs room in the Annex, Amy has a ring-side seat for watching the construction out a back window!