



### THE FIRST 150 YEARS: A Brief History

The Wagner Free Institute of Science is a rare survival—a museum and educational institution that remains nearly unchanged from the nineteenth century. Its free public education courses on science, now in their 157<sup>th</sup> year, are the oldest program devoted to free adult education in the United States. In recognition of the importance of this free education mission and of its contributions to science education and research, the Institute was designated a National Historic Landmark by the United States Department of the Interior in December of 1990.



William Wagner

Formally incorporated in 1855, the Institute had its inception in a public lecture series begun in the early 1850s by founder William Wagner (1796-1885), a noted Philadelphia merchant, philanthropist, gentleman scientist, and lifelong collector of natural history specimens. Believing strongly that education in the sciences should be available to everyone, Wagner began offering free lectures on science at his home, Elm Grove, a colonial farm estate then on the outskirts of the city. To illustrate the lectures, he drew on the vast collection of specimens he had gathered since his childhood, including many he had acquired during the years he spent traveling around the world as an agent for the well-known Philadelphia financier Stephen Girard. These lectures became so popular that by 1855 he moved them to a public hall to accommodate the rapidly growing audience, and appointed a faculty to teach six evenings a week on subjects ranging from paleontology and chemistry to botany and architecture. All the classes were offered free of charge with an open admission policy that allowed women as well as men to attend. Based on the success of earlier lectures, in 1859 Wagner began construction on a building that would become the



William Wagner by Thomas Sully, 1836

the permanent home for his collections and his educational program. Designed by local architect John McArthur, Jr., who later designed Philadelphia's City Hall, the building was completed and opened to the public in 1865.

Wagner continued to lecture and lead the unique institution he had founded until his death in 1885. Direction then passed to a Board of Trustees who appointed Dr. Joseph Leidy, a biologist of international reputation, to head its scientific and educational programs. Joseph Leidy's appointment ushered in an active and productive era in which the Institute's mission and programs were greatly expanded. He invigorated the public lectures by retaining some of the most noted scientists and explorers of the day for the faculty. Leidy also added original scientific research to the Institute's programs and organized its earliest field expeditions. The results of this work were published in the Institute's own publication, *The Transactions of the Wagner Free Institute of Science*.

Leidy's most lasting and significant contribution to the Institute, however, was his reorganization of the museum. Wagner's original collections had been greatly enlarged by specimens collected in the field and through purchases and acquisitions. Leidy personally developed and supervised their reorganization into a systematic display in which specimens and cases were arranged so that visitors moved from simpler to more complex organisms and through geologic time as they walked through the exhibition hall. This new display opened in 1891 and little has been altered since Leidy's time, making the Institute an exceptional example of a Victorian science museum.

By the turn of the century, the Institute was a leading force in public education in Philadelphia. It was an early participant in the groundbreaking University Extension movement in the city and in 1892, the Institute opened the first branch of the Philadelphia public library system. Owing to heavy usage of the library, in 1901 the Institute added a west wing to its building for use by the Free Library.

Today, the Wagner Free Institute of Science is widely recognized as one of Philadelphia's historic treasures. While preserving its historic building and collections for future generations to enjoy, the Institute also serves as a rich educational resource for programs on science, natural history, and the history of science from the nineteenth century to the present.

## THE MUSEUM



*Case 81*

The Wagner Institute's natural history museum contains more than 100,000 specimens illustrating the various branches of the natural world. The Museum includes founder William Wagner's mineral collection - one of the oldest in the country - and his fossil collection, representing many important European and American localities and collecting sites of the nineteenth century. Mounted animal skeletons, skulls, and skins; birds; an extensive regional entomological collection; and shells from around the world are on display, along with fossils collected on Institute-

sponsored expeditions to the American South, Northeast, and Mid-Atlantic regions, as well as the Caribbean. Specimens collected on Institute expeditions include many "type specimens," the first identification of a new species. Perhaps the best-known of these specimens is the North American saber-toothed cat, *Smilodon floridanus*, discovered in 1886 on an Institute expedition to Florida. These fossils are on display in the exhibition hall near dinosaur bones collected by noted paleontologist and Wagner lecturer, Edward Drinker Cope. All specimens are displayed in the cherry wood cases constructed for them in the 1880s, and many retain the original handwritten curator's labels.

The specimens are arranged especially for study. The exhibit is one of the largest systematically-arranged collections on display in the country. It also serves as a resource for scholarly research.

The Museum is open to visitors Tuesday through Friday, 9 AM to 4 PM for self-guided tours. Schools and organized groups of more than six people are asked to phone in advance for reservations by calling 215-763-6529, ext. 17. Reservations should also be made in advance of a visit by researchers requiring special access to the collections (ext. 14). Children under the age of 18 must be accompanied by adults. Admission is free; donations are encouraged.

*Filming and photography are not permitted in the Institute. Exceptions are made for researchers, the press and other professionals on a limited basis, but arrangements must be made in advance. A fee may apply. To inquire about these policies email: [photorequest@wagnerfreeinstitute.org](mailto:photorequest@wagnerfreeinstitute.org) or call 215-763-6529, ext. 14.*

## GUIDED TOURS

As part of its educational programming, the Institute offers tours of its historic museum and lessons on a range of topics in the natural sciences to school classes, after-school programs, scout troops, homeschool groups, camps, and science clubs (see page 8 for more information about lessons for children's groups).

Guided tours of its National Landmark building are available by appointment. These tours include a slide presentation in the lecture hall where Joseph Leidy, Edward Drinker Cope, and Margaret Mead once taught, and a guided walk through the reference library and museum exhibits. The Institute's interior is nearly unchanged since the 1890s and offers a unique encounter with the past - an unparalleled experience of a Victorian science collection.



*The Exhibition Hall, circa 1900*

### **The Wagner Free Institute of Science**

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[www.wagnerfreeinstitute.org](http://www.wagnerfreeinstitute.org)