

# MCGUFFEY AND HIS READERS

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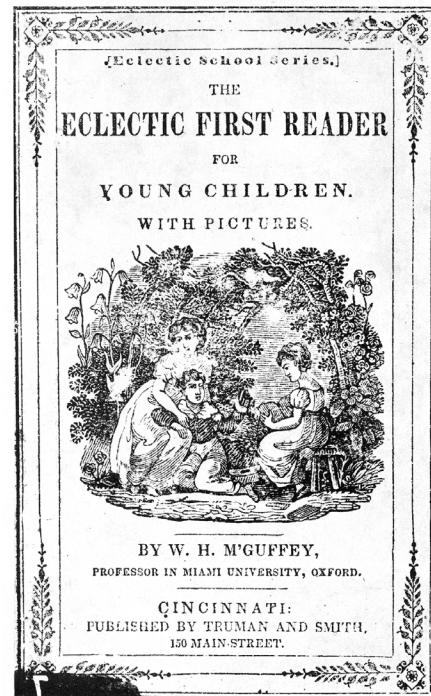
## William Holmes McGuffey: Schoolmaster to the Nation and a "Bright Ornament" at Miami University

On June 14, 1826, Miami University professor John Witherspoon Scott congratulated 26-year-old William Holmes McGuffey on obtaining a position as a professor of ancient languages at Miami. "That it [Miami] may take its station in the first rank of literary institutions, and that yourself may be one of its brightest ornaments is my sincere wish," Scott wrote.

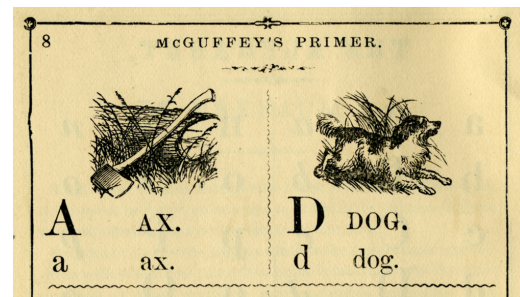
Scott's wish was prophetic; McGuffey became a "bright ornament" in both American education and in the history of Miami University.

**William Holmes McGuffey** (1800-1873) began teaching school at 14. From 1826 until his resignation in 1836, he was a professor of ancient languages at Miami University. In 1829, McGuffey was ordained as a Presbyterian minister.

During his years at Miami, McGuffey was invited to write a series of readers for schoolchildren that eventually sold over 125 million copies. He was assisted by his brother, Alexander Hamilton McGuffey (1816-1896), who also compiled a speller and had sole responsibility for the Fifth Reader.



After leaving Miami, McGuffey served as president of Cincinnati College (1836-1839) and Ohio University (1839-1843). Later, he taught at Woodward College (1843-1845) and the University of Virginia (1845-1873).



*McGuffey's Third Reader  
Revised, 1907*

## Impact of the McGuffey Readers

Besides being tremendously popular, McGuffey's Readers were significant to children's educational and cultural development. His selections of prose and poetry taught them to read, influenced their taste in literature, and contributed to the development of their character and morals.

## McGuffey Reader Illustrations

Before 1879, children could not often relate to McGuffey Reader illustrations. However, in 1879, Reader illustrations began to show more familiar childhood activities.



Several well-known 19<sup>th</sup> century artists got their start by illustrating McGuffey Readers. For example, Cincinnati artist Henry Farny (1847-1916) became best remembered for his paintings of the American West, while John George Brown (1831-1913) was a popular painter of urban genre scenes, often featuring children who worked as newsboys, bootblacks, or fruit vendors. German-born wood engraver John Karst (1836-1922) was best known for his illustrations to the 1879 and 1880 editions of the McGuffey Readers.

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“Remember, my dear son, to read a portion of your Bible every day, and do not forget daily, and steadily to pray to God to keep you from evil, and to prepare you for the duties of life and for the hour of death. Think often of your departed Mother, and often ask yourself how she would advise, and what she would think of any course you are about to pursue.”

-- William Holmes McGuffey to his son,  
Charles S. McGuffey, October 3, 1850

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## McGuffey Family Letters and Journals

Miami University’s William Holmes McGuffey Family Papers collection can lead to other insights about McGuffey. Consisting primarily of McGuffey’s correspondence dating from 1826 to 1873, the

collection also includes contracts, receipts and reprint permission letters pertaining to the McGuffey Readers, manuscripts of two of McGuffey’s sermons and an unpublished manuscript that McGuffey wrote in 1871 regarding mental philosophy.

Journals and reminiscences kept by McGuffey’s daughter, Henrietta McGuffey Hepburn, from 1853 to 1910, and two diaries belonging to his grandson, Charles McGuffey Hepburn, provide details of McGuffey family life.



## The William Holmes McGuffey Museum

A registered National Historic Landmark since 1966, McGuffey’s Oxford home is a museum open for public tours. One of the items on display is the eight-sided cherry wood rotating desk on which McGuffey wrote the first edition of the Readers. Its drawers and cubicles allowed McGuffey to organize what he needed to write his stories and lessons. John Karst’s engraving tools can also be seen at the museum.

For more information about the McGuffey Museum, call 513-529-8380, e-mail [McGuffeyMuseum@muohio.edu](mailto:McGuffeyMuseum@muohio.edu), or visit <http://www.units.muohio.edu/mcguffeymuseum/>.

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