

UNDER THE CUPOLA



“Mark Twain in Batavia”

In November 1868, Samuel Langhorne Clemens, alias Mark Twain, launched a major lecture tour, “The American Vandal Abroad,” which recounted his adventures on the very first major pleasure cruise across the Atlantic in U.S. history. The performances were a rousing success.

As part of that tour, Clemens, then 33 years old, gave an evening lecture “to a crowded house” in Batavia on Tuesday, 26 January 1869, nearly 150 years ago.

Unfortunately, the “crowded house” was not named, but it could have been Revere House, which regularly accommodated large audiences for events; or the assembly hall in West Side School; or Dorn’s Hall, on the third floor of the Dorn Block; or any of several other public gathering places.

The short-lived Batavia Lecture Association sponsored the lecture course that included Twain, who was then anticipating the publication of *The Innocents Abroad* in July 1869.

There is a commonly held yet erroneous belief that Clemens was not overly impressed with Batavia, solely because of this excerpt from a letter to his soon-to-be fiancée, Olivia L. Langdon: “... to-day this sad-looking village makes me feel ever so friendless & dreary,”

In fact, the balance of that sentence proves otherwise: “... & behold, the picture is so overflowing with friendliness, & tries so hard to come out of the case to me, that I grow contented & glad again, in spite of the sad village & its solemn surrounding. I wouldn’t part with the picture for the world.”

Twain was using contrast, a rhetorical device, to highlight and emphasize the difference between his so-called dreary surrounding (Batavia, simply a coincidence of location) and the light in his life (Olivia), represented by the photograph she recently sent him, in order to make his argument stronger and more memorable.

One Book, One Batavia, a community-wide reading program, was launched in 2003 with *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, an homage to Mark Twain. Clemens’ visit is commemorated, as well, by a statue at the Library’s entrance, given by the Swanson family in honor of longtime library director, Miriam H. Johnson.

Join us in January 2019 to celebrate the sesquicentenary of Mark Twain’s visit to Batavia.

George H. Scheetz
Director