

Lew Wallace

Essay prepared by IHS staff

The United States minister to Turkey in 1885 found himself in a quandry. He had just prepared a telegram offering his resignation to Democratic President Grover Cleveland, whose party affiliation he did not share. Writing to his wife back home in Crawfordsville about his plans for the future, he told her that he was sure he would not be going back to his old law practice, terming it "the most detestable of human occupations." Instead, he dreamed of building a study where he could "write, and . . . think of nothing else. I want to bury myself in a den of books. I want to saturate myself with the elements of which they are made and breathe their atmosphere until I am of it. Not a book worm . . . but a man in the world of writing--one with a pen which shall stop men to listen to it, whether they wish to or not."

Lew Wallace got his wish. More than a decade after sharing his dream of a study with his wife, Susan, Wallace began building in Crawfordsville what *The Chariot* magazine called "a harmonious mingling of Romanesque, Greek and Byzantine architecture." The study, which contributed greatly to Crawfordsville's designation as "the Athens of Indiana," is maintained today as the Gen. Lew Wallace Study and Ben-Hur Museum. The study and grounds, once part of the Major Isaac Compton Elston estate, were declared a National Historic Landmark by the federal government in 1977.

The Study's eclectic architectural mix matched the remarkable diversity of its builder's own career. At various times in his life Wallace was a lawyer; Indiana state senator; a major general during the Civil War; vice president of the court-martial that tried the conspirators behind the assassination of President Abraham Lincoln; New Mexico Territory governor; American minister to Turkey from 1881 to 1885; and, the role for which he is best remembered today, author of the classic historical novel, *Ben-Hur: A Tale of the Christ* (1880). One of Wallace's biographers, Irving McKee, noted in his book "*Ben-Hur*" Wallace that the Hoosier Renaissance man was "never content with the ordinary business of existence--working for dollars, rearing a family, snatching at comforts and petty advantages. He dreamed grandly of adventure and sought it, adventure fit for the American hero as well as the foreign knight."

Wallace's grand dream of what he called "a pleasure-house for my soul" came to life in Crawfordsville, where he and his wife had lived on and off since 1853. The study's construction began in 1896 and was finished three years later at a cost of \$35,000--not an insignificant sum in nineteenth-century Indiana. Working under specifications drawn up by Wallace himself, architect John G. Thurtle produced what one newspaper called "the most beautiful author's study in the world . . . a dream of oriental beauty and luxury."

The study featured a dizzying array of architectural styles, including an entrance modeled on the abbey of the church of St. Pierre in France; a forty-foot-high tower with arched windows designed from the Cathedral of Pisa; and a copper dome and stained

glass skylight that reflected the mosques Wallace had come to know while U.S. minister to Turkey. Also, a limestone frieze, which included likenesses of characters from Wallace's novels, ran around the tower and study. Although the building elicited a mixed critical reaction, the study was perfect for Wallace. According to McKee, "its eclecticism is American yet foreign, as Wallace was American yet foreign; he loved passionately his country and his State, yet lusted for distant, unattainable realms."

Wallace had only a short time to enjoy the stately structure he created, dying at his Crawfordsville home on 15 February 1905. Before his final illness, the Hoosier Civil War veteran had noted the passing of a fellow soldier by commenting: "He is but a day's march ahead of us; we will overtake him soon." Following his death, Wallace's beloved study was under the care of his family. In 1941, however, the Community House, an organization established by the women of Crawfordsville, purchased the study and grounds from Lewis Wallace, the general's grandson, and presented the property to the city for use as a memorial to Wallace's life.

Today, the study features an impressive array of Wallace memorabilia, which is maintained by the city's Park & Recreation Department. The three and a half acres of grounds surrounding the study include a bronze statue of Wallace, which is a duplicate of the one in the United States Capitol in Washington, D.C. The statue is west of the study and stands in place of a beech tree under which Wallace wrote much of *Ben-Hur*. The grounds also feature a monument to Wallace's father, David Wallace, who was Indiana's sixth governor.

The inside of the study features such relics from Wallace's career as the arms, shield, and charm taken from an Apache chief who was killed by Wallace's bodyguards when the general was on an inspection tour while governor of the New Mexico Territory; a sword presented to Wallace by his fellow Montgomery County citizens in honor of his gallantry at the Battle of Fort Donelson; a horseshoe from "Old John," Wallace's war horse; a Confederate cavalry flag captured during the Battle of Monocacy and solid shot from that battlefield; and a complete outfit for a Roman soldier, including cape, helmet, armor, and sandals, used in the 1959 movie *Ben-Hur*.

The Gen. Lew Wallace Study and Ben-Hur Museum is located on Pike Street and Wallace Avenue in Crawfordsville, Indiana. For more information, call (317) 362-5769, or 364-5173.