



West	Star	East
South	South	South



Adam

*My days, my weeks, my months,
my years, fly rapid, like the
whirling spheres, around the
steady pole.* From the hymn "On the swiftness of Time"

Not unlike the words of the old hymn he recorded in his diary, the watercolors of Adam Hodam (or Hodom; Fig. 2) are often aswirl—with weather vanes, bells, flowers, and towering vines exhibiting the freedom and balance of a Calder mobile.¹ The bases are secured and structured on stacked lateral planes with repeating upright teeth—solid blocks of color delineate space and give foot to overtly geometrical compositions. This article examines Hodam's watercolors, taken from a recently discovered cipher book he kept in Gallia County, Ohio, in the early 1800s. Together with the diary entries and geographical record he later left behind in Spring Creek, Roane County, West Virginia, they provide a fascinating picture of the life of a simple yet complex man.

Hodam was the grandson of Johannes Hothem (d. c. 1780), who came to America in 1770 from the German principality of Hesse Darmstadt. Hothem became Hodam, and Johannes settled in Pendleton County, Virginia (now West Virginia), and married Anne Barbara Fultz. They had one child, John (1778–1862), who, with a land warrant for his service in the Virginia Light Horse Calvary in the War of 1812, cleared a farm and settled with his wife Phebe Mouse (d. 1858) in Nicholas County, Virginia (now West Virginia).² In 1829 they moved with their son Adam and daughters Rebecca Mouse and Anna Barbara to nearby Hacker Valley. Adam recalled that his parents were particularly impressed that the area had an English-

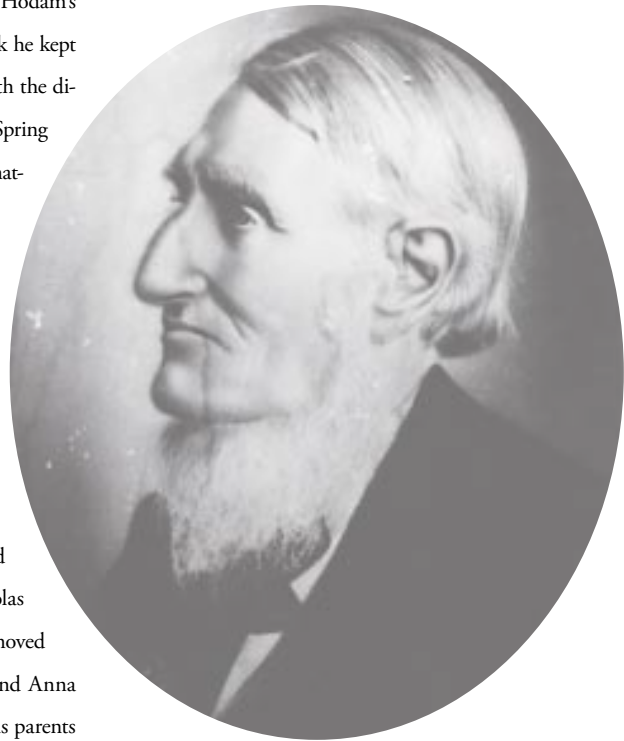


Fig. 1. *The planet Saturn* and details of other pages from the cipher book of Adam D. Hodam (or Hodom; 1821–1903), c. 1837–1839. Ink and watercolor on paper, each page 6 1/8 by 7 5/8 inches. *The drawings illustrated are in the collection of the author.*

Fig. 2. Hodam in a photograph of c. 1880. *Collection of Sherry L. Sowards.*

Hodam's cipher book discovered

By Steven S. Powers

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speaking school; as an incentive to sway his young German-trained tongue to learn English, they promised him a new coat.³ The Hodams moved across the border to Gallia County, Ohio, in 1832, settling first in the township of Green and then, after

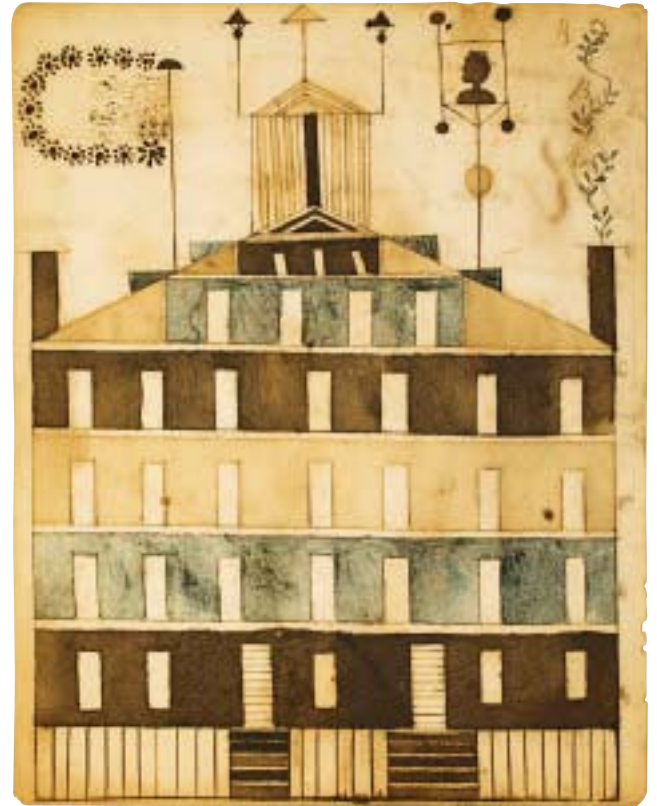
swapping farms with one Samuel Campbell, in Walnut Township.⁴

Gallia County is located in the south-southeast portion of the state, with the Ohio River forming a natural border with West Virginia. The formation of the county originated with a land speculation scheme that preyed on French citizens wishing to flee the Revolution in 1789. The Scioto Company sold parcels of land to hundreds of Frenchmen who, after an arduous transatlantic journey, learned that the land was not owned by the Scioto Company, but by the Ohio Company of Associates. Those who stayed had to pay for the land a second time. In 1803, when Ohio became the seventeenth state, Gallia County was formally recognized. Soon, the area saw influxes of Virginians, New Englanders, Welsh, and Germans.

Not much is known of Hodam's time in Walnut or about the school where he executed his cipher book, which also included pages with arithmetic problems, German-to-English word translations, a couple of well-drawn maps, miscellaneous family information, and other notations. He is known to have had a

large library and to have been an avid reader of Samuel Goodrich's Peter Parley stories, which surely fostered his interest in a well-rounded study of the natural and mathematical sciences, literature, and history.⁵ Though later in life he became a habitual diary writer, Hodam's interest in illustration appears to have been particular to his youth, for the later diaries do not include any similar drawings or artistic references.

The autobiographical text page from the cipher book (Fig. 3), though lacking the representational geometrics and flourishes that define the following pages, grabs attention with its bold irregular faux woodblock-printed font. If it were not clear that it was written by hand, one might think it was a theatrical ransom note—composed and pasted of mismatched letters. In fact, it looks a great deal like the

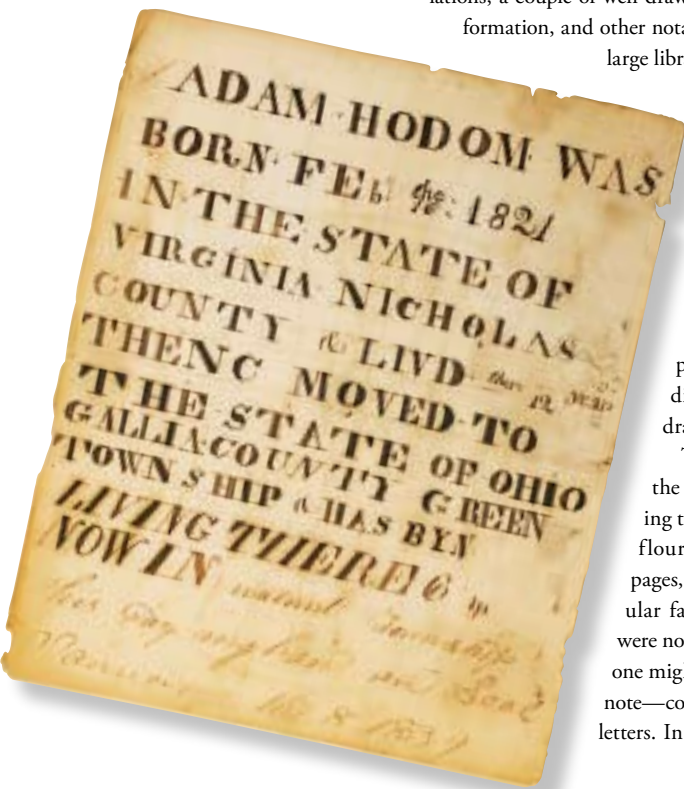


printing of the fraktur artist Samuel Bentz (1792–1850), also known as the “Mount Pleasant Artist,”⁶ and may therefore be seen as a reflection of Hodam's German heritage. The three central figures, set in a ruled music-staff grid, on the page in Figure 5 are also akin to Bentz's work, while the large, colorful flowering vines and stylized tulips in bloom provide additional evidence of Hodam's familiarity with fraktur decorative motifs. Dressed in heavy black robes, the figures—two wear powdered wigs, and one dons an eccentric top hat—look to be part of a panel sitting in judgment. Hodam attempts to provide dimension by rendering harsh “shadows” around their faces.

The drawing in Figure 6 shares the tonal weight and style of figures of the previous two. Judging by the inscription “Jim Crow and his wife,” it conceivably represents a marriage, with the two central figures rendered hand-in-hand clasping a chain and in

Fig. 3. Page from Hodam's cipher book with his “autobiography,” dated January 8, 1839. Ink on paper, 6 1/8 by 7 3/8 inches.

Fig. 4. Page from Hodam's cipher book with a depiction of a five-story building, c. 1837–1839. Ink and watercolor on paper, 6 1/8 by 7 3/8 inches.



stylized formal dress—the woman with an outlandish trifold hairdo that resembles a sumo wrestler’s; and at the upper right, within a heavily framed window, a lone figure whose dark robe suggests he could be a minister or justice of the peace. To the left of this figure and seemingly unrelated to the rest of the composition is a nine-box compass grid.

Hodam was clearly fascinated by geometry and science—his architectural renderings are precisely laid down, and the drawing of Saturn in Figure 1 is complex in design and careful in execution. His notations on the latter are almost absolutely accurate, recording that: “[Saturn] is 29 years, 164 days, 7 hours, and 19 minutes revolving around the Sun.” This sheds some light on the quality of education he received, not only in its mathematical acuity but also that he was learning that the planets (including Earth) revolved around the sun, which was “in direct conflict with Bible teaching Joshua 10:13, as was believed by many honest people of the day.”⁷

The architectural renderings in Figures 4 and 7 combine realistic geometrical likenesses and organic fantasy. Both are built of alternating stories of dark and lighter tones—the horizontals receiving complexity and vertical balance from the repetition of large single-pane windows. The top floors give way to the sky



above and to Hodam’s imagination—fish and human weather vanes, directional wind and smoke, potted chimneys with climbing vines, and vents with plumed florals resembling cotton candy. The iron gall ink lends a certain truth and weight to the sheet-iron vanes, while the spherical elements on the far-extending rods provide the compositions with both balance and kinetic energy.

The watercolors of the United States Capitol in Washington (Fig. 8) and what Hodam identifies as Saint Peter’s in Rome (Fig. 9) were likely copied from print sources, revealing another aspect of his education. Though it does not look much like the Capitol today, his view reflects the building as completed to the designs of Charles Bulfinch (1763–1844) in 1829. To fit his vertical format, he compressed the building’s length and exaggerated the scale of the three domes. In the rendering of Saint Peter’s, some of the whimsy found on other pages is gone, though the huge bell (looking like the famous Bell Systems logo designed in 1969 by Saul Bass [1920–1996]) is a wonderful addition. He

Fig. 5. Page from Hodam’s cipher book dated July 29, 1837. Ink and watercolor on paper, 6 ½ by 7 ¾ inches.

Fig. 6. *Jim Crow and His Wife* from Hodam’s cipher book, c. 1837–1839. Ink on paper, 6 ½ by 7 ¾ inches.

inscribed the work “engraved by A. D. Hodom”, and on the back recorded: “St. Peter’s is the most beautiful church in the known world, but you have to remember that all its worshippers are Roman Catholics.”

Not long after executing the drawings in the cipher book, nineteen-year-old Hodam married twenty-eight-year-old Eliza Ellen Grant (1811–1885) of Gallia County on March 26, 1840. In the late summer of 1844, they and the first two (of ultimately five) children moved as pioneers to an area now known as Spring Creek in Roane County, West Virginia, nine miles north of the town of Spencer.⁸ In good time they owned over three hundred acres of timberland, part of which was cleared for a fine house, barn, and farm. The eldest son, James (1841–1903), later wrote of this period: “[the family] persevered in the midst of obstacles common to all new frontier settlements that the present generation can scarcely understand. There

Like every American living in the mid-nineteenth century, the Civil War was omnipresent in Hodam’s thoughts

was no schools, no churches, no roads fit for wagons nor mills to grind grain.”⁹ Known in the community as a “Hio-man” (Ohio) and for his “book larnin,”¹⁰ Adam Hodam founded a local school in 1844, where “his scholars ranged from the little toeheads to grown men and women.”¹¹ He was named a justice of the peace in 1852, became the area’s first postmaster in 1855 (the Boggsville Station as it was called was actually located on the Hodam homestead),¹² and the following year he had a voice in setting up the government of the newly formed Roane County.¹³ In 1857 he deeded part of his property to the Methodist Episcopal Church South and built Hodam Chapel and Cemetery (the latter still exists);¹⁴ a year later he was ordained and started

preaching and teaching Sunday school, recalling in his diary, “Upon this lot was built a large and commodious log church...for many years we had a large and flourishing class and an excellent Sunday School.”¹⁵ Reflecting



on the wonders of his faith on his thirty-sixth birthday, Hodam wrote: "Through these years I have experienced the mercies of God in many ways and this morning, I had an evidence of his protecting power, one of my boys accidentally discharged his gun and the bullet buried itself in the ground at my feet."¹⁶

Like every American living in the mid-nineteenth century, the Civil War was omnipresent in Hodam's thoughts (his son James was a Confederate sergeant). Regarding going to war, he wrote, "I believed that the states had the right to decide for or against slavery and not the Federal power. Although believing slavery to be a great evil for which both the North and South was responsible, I opposed the Abolition Anarchies of that day...So in May 1861, when Virginia decided to withdraw from the Federal Union, I cheerfully voted for secession."¹⁷

For a number of years after the war, Hodam maintained his farm and continued to preach. But sometime around 1880 he saw the Hodam Chapel burn down, and by then many around him had fallen: "here at Hodam Chapel Grave Yard, I have seen my father, mother, sister Rebecca, my faithful wife, and my daughter Phebe and three grandchildren laid away till God shall

call them."¹⁸ He delivered his last sermon in the fall of 1899, and soon thereafter, suffering from weak health, he moved to Gifford, Illinois, where he lived with James until his death on December 3, 1903. "I had hoped to rest by my beloved companion's side. But, God wills it otherwise, and I feel it is just as near to Heaven and my departed friends from the prairies of Illinois as the hills of West Virginia."¹⁹

¹ The opening quotation is from an old hymn as recorded in the diary of Adam D. Hodam, parts of which are reprinted from the Spencer, West Virginia, *Times-Record*, October 11, 1956, as "Adam Hodam's Own History of Early Spring Creek Community: Early History Written By Early Settler Preserved for Use Today," *Roane County [Historical Society] Journal* [hereafter *RCHS Journal*], vol. 11 (Winter 2004), vol. 12 (Spring 2005), and vol. 13 (Summer 2005). The hymn appears in vol. 12, p. 53. ² *The Journal of James H. Hodam: Sketches and Personal Reminiscences of the Civil War as Experienced by a Confederate Soldier*, ed. Robert P. Hodam (privately printed, Eugene, Ore., 1995), p. 2. ³ B. M. Mollohan, *By The Banks of the Holly: Notes and Letters From the Desk of Bernard Mollohan* (iUniverse, New York, 2005), p. 44. ⁴ See http://lawrence-countyohio.com/families/k_p/kouns.htm, and <http://rootsweb.ancestry.com/~ohgallia/query13.htm>. ⁵ *Journal of James H. Hodam*, p. 6. ⁶ For examples of the work of Samuel Bentz (the Mount Pleasant Artist), see Donald A. Shelley, *The Fraktur-Writings or Illuminated Manuscripts of the Pennsylvania Germans* (Pennsylvania German Folklore Society, Allentown, Pa., 1961), pl. 220; and *Fraktur and Related Works on Paper: The Pioneer Collection of Dr. and Mrs. Donald A. Shelley*, Pook and Pook, Downingtown, Pa., October 8, 2004, p. 69, Lot 85. ⁷ Quoted in *Journal of James H. Hodam*, p. 7. ⁸ "Adam Hodam's Own History of Early Spring Creek Community," *RCHS Journal*, vol. 11, p. 44. ⁹ *Journal of James H. Hodam*, p. 3. ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 5; and "Adam Hodam's Own History of Early Spring Creek Community," *RCHS Journal*, vol. 11, p. 45. ¹¹ *Journal of James H. Hodam*, p. 5. ¹² *Ibid.*, p. xii. ¹³ "Adam Hodam's Own History of Early Spring Creek Community," *RCHS Journal*, vol. 12, p. 52. ¹⁴ *Ibid.* ¹⁵ *Ibid.* ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, vol. 13, p. 78. ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, vol. 11, p. 45. ¹⁸ *Ibid.*, vol. 12, p. 52. ¹⁹ *Ibid.*

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Fig. 7. *State house...* from Hodam's cipher book, c. 1837–1839. Ink and watercolor on paper, 6 1/8 by 7 5/8 inches. Because the inscription is illegible, it is not known what building Hodam was depicting.

Fig. 8. *The Capit[o]l of the U. States at Washington* from Hodam's cipher book, c. 1837–1839. Ink and watercolor on paper, 6 1/8 by 7 5/8 inches.

Figs. 9, 9a. *Picture of St. Peter's Church at Rome* from Hodam's cipher book, c. 1837–1839. Inscribed "Engraved by A. D. Hodom" at lower right (after title) and "St. Peter's is the most beautiful church in the known world, but you have to remember that all its worshippers are Roman Catholics" on the back. Watercolor and ink on paper, 6 1/8 by 7 5/8 inches.

