

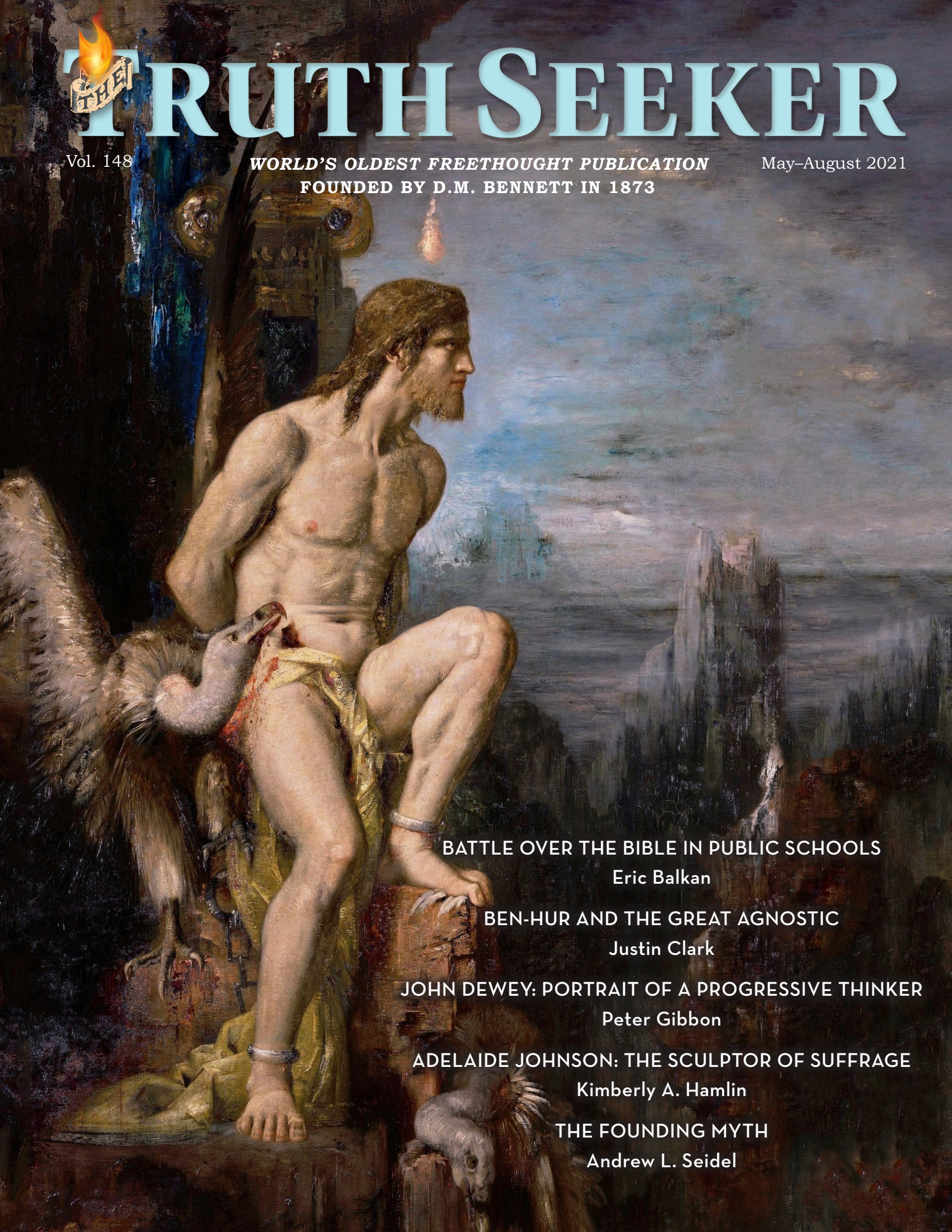


TRUTH SEEKER

Vol. 148

WORLD'S OLDEST FREETHOUGHT PUBLICATION
FOUNDED BY D.M. BENNETT IN 1873

May–August 2021



BATTLE OVER THE BIBLE IN PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Eric Balkan

BEN-HUR AND THE GREAT AGNOSTIC

Justin Clark

JOHN DEWEY: PORTRAIT OF A PROGRESSIVE THINKER

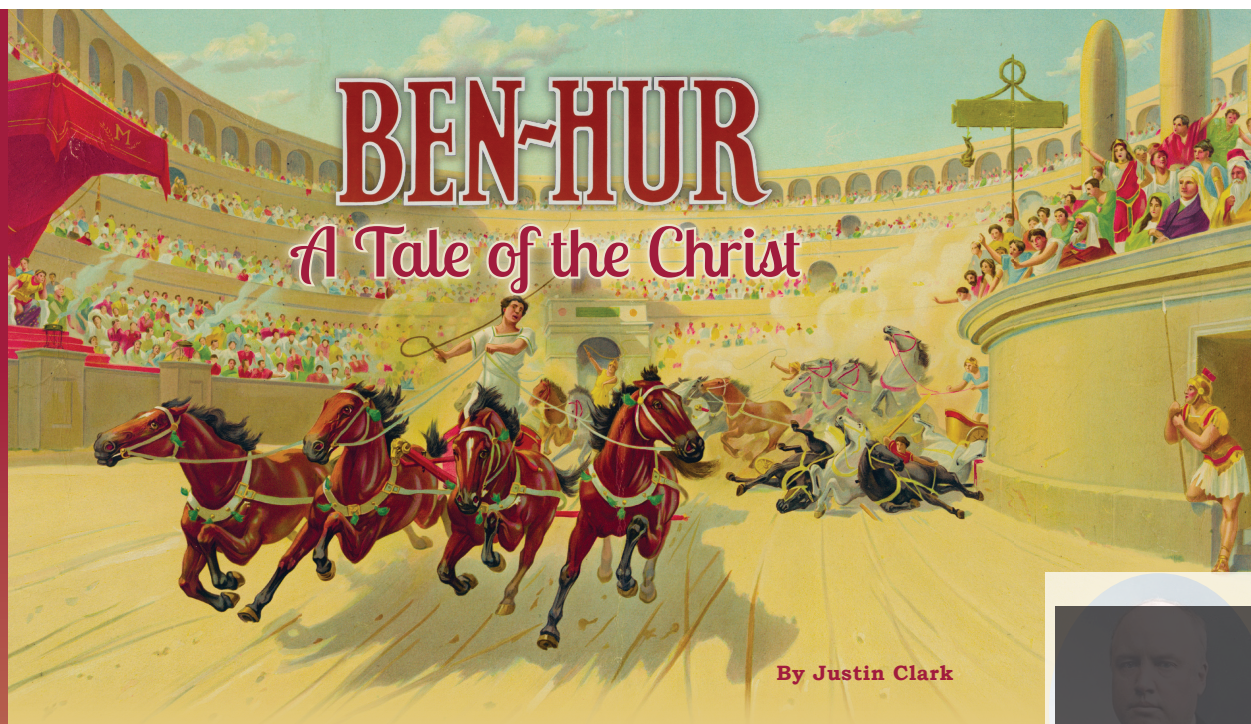
Peter Gibbon

ADELAIDE JOHNSON: THE SCULPTOR OF SUFFRAGE

Kimberly A. Hamlin

THE FOUNDING MYTH

Andrew L. Seidel



Inspired by Robert Ingersoll... or just another tale?

During his legendary career as an orator, freethought activist, and lawyer, Robert Green Ingersoll met with many iconic figures of history, from socialist labor leader Eugene Victor Debs to abolitionist Frederick Douglass.

However, one particular story continues to engender responses from both believers and non-believers alike: his train ride with author Lew Wallace — Indiana native, Civil War general, and author of the novel *Ben-Hur* (the inspiration for three film adaptations, most notably the 1959 film starring Charlton Heston). As biographers Robert and Katharine Morsberger noted, Wallace “had written the story [*Ben-Hur*] partly to refute Robert G. Ingersoll’s agnosticism. . . .” The story surrounding this influence is near legendary to scholars of both Ingersoll and Wallace. It has been told countless times over the years in newspaper articles, advertisements, and docu-

mentaries. If you visit the General Lew Wallace Study & Museum in Crawfordsville, Indiana, you will hear some version of it. Yet, despite Wallace indicating the story’s veracity in both his writings and numerous newspaper articles, uncovered research done at the University of Southern Illinois Carbondale challenges whether it ever happened at all.

The story, as recounted by Wallace in a preface to his book, *The First Christmas*, goes something like this. On September 19, 1876, both Wallace and Ingersoll supposedly shared a train ride to Indianapolis for the Third National Soldier’s Reunion; both had served in

the Union Army during the Civil War and fought in the battle of Shiloh (Ingersoll was a Colonel and Wallace a General). Wallace recounts the highlights of their conversation:

There was a great mass Convention of Republicans at Indianapolis in ’76. I resolved to attend it, and took a sleeper [sic] from Crawfordsville the evening before the meeting. Moving slowly down the aisle of the car, talking with some friends, I passed the state-room. There was a knock on the door from the inside, and some one [sic] called my name. Upon answer, the door opened, and I saw Colonel Robert G. Ingersoll looking comfortable as might be considering the sultry weather.

From there, Wallace asked Ingersoll if he believed in the afterlife, the divinity of Christ, and the existence of God, with the “Great Agnostic” answering in the resounding, “I don’t know, do you?” Then, Wallace asked Ingersoll to

present his best case against the doctrines of Christianity, which the infidel did with such “a melody of argument, eloquence, wit, satire, audacity, irreverence, poetry, brilliant antitheses, and pungent exhortation [concerning] believers in God. . . .” Ingersoll’s views of both theological and biblical skepticism shook Wallace to the core, with the latter remarking that, “I was in a confusion of mind unlike dazement.”

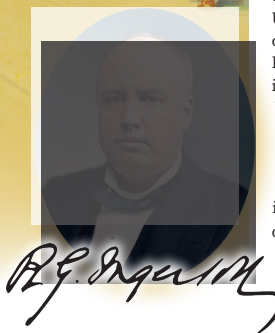
Lew Wallace’s own theological confusion, what he called “absolute indifference,” seemed spurred into action by Ingersoll’s words: “. . . as I walked into the cool darkness, I was aroused for the first time in my life to the importance of religion.” Thus, Wallace began his own investigation into the doctrines and traditions of Christianity, culminating in the authorship of *Ben-Hur*

and a “conviction amounting to absolute belief in God and the divinity of Christ.” According to Wallace’s account and its echoes in newspapers, his evening with Ingersoll led to a full conversion to Christianity and the writing of one of the most successful religious novels of the period. As an aside, it is worth noting that the version told in *The First Christmas* was published in 1899, the year Robert Ingersoll died and over twenty years after the event supposedly took place.

The earliest known newspaper version of this story appeared in the *Indianapolis News* on September 15, 1883. This article described its source as an “intimate personal friend” of Wallace and recalled the story as it was in *The First Christmas*, with the train ride (year not indicated) Wallace’s own skepticism, and Ingersoll’s agnosticism regarding the divinity of Christ. “After parting, Wallace turned the matter over in his mind and determined to give it the most thorough investigation,” the article indicated, and “for six years he thought, studied and searched. At the end of that time *Ben-Hur* was produced.” However, according to historian Jon Solomon and his book, *Ben-Hur: The Original Blockbuster*, Wallace had worked on the novel from 1873-1880, long before his alleged encounter with Ingersoll and the subsequent *Indianapolis News* article was published. Nevertheless, the story gained momentum in popular culture through Wallace’s own recollections and newspaper articles published throughout the 1880s and 1890s.

One point of contention is obvious: is there any source indicating this event took place in 1876 and that both men attended? The answer is a resounding yes. Newspaper articles in the *Terre Haute Weekly Gazette* and the *Indianapolis News* reported the Civil War veterans reunion and noted that both Lew Wallace and Robert Ingersoll attended. In fact, the *News* wrote that Ingersoll gave a “comprehensive, eloquent, and inimitable” speech at the reunion’s conclusion on September 21, 1876 that “justified all expectations.” This speech became one of Ingersoll’s most legendary orations, known to history as the “Vision of War” speech. Here’s the most memorable passage from his iconic address:

The past rises before me like a dream. Again we are in the great struggle for national life. We hear the sounds of preparation — the music of boisterous drums — the silver voices of heroic bugles. We see thousands of assemblages, and hear the



“THE BEN-HUR CHARIOT RACE” BY E. CAMERON. PUBLISHED BETWEEN 1880 AND 1890. LIBRARY OF CONGRESS.

According to Wallace's account and its echoes in newspapers, his evening with Ingersoll led to a full conversion to Christianity and the writing of one of the most successful religious novels of the period.

appeals of orators. We see the pale cheeks of women, and the flushed faces of men; and in those assemblages we see all the dead whose dust we have covered with flowers. We lose sight of them no more. We are with them when they enlist in the great army of freedom. We see them part with those they love. Some are walking for the last time in quiet, woody places, with the maidens they adore. We hear the whisperings and the sweet vows of eternal love as they lingeringly part forever. Others are bending over cradles, kissing babes that are asleep. Some are receiving the blessings of old men. Some are parting with mothers who hold them and press them to their hearts again and again, and say nothing. Kisses and tears, tears and kisses — divine mingling of agony and love! And some are talking with wives, and endeavoring with brave words, spoken in the old tones, to drive from their hearts the awful fear. We see them part. We see the wife standing in the door with the babe in her arms — standing in the sunlight sobbing. At the turn of the road a hand waves—she answers by holding high in her loving arms the child. He is gone, and forever.

According to this same article, Lew Wallace also gave an address along with many others at the reunion's closing that evening, "until the rain late at night stopped proceedings." It is not far-fetched

to assume they may have run into each other — even listened to one another's speeches — but that does not provide definitive evidence that their train ride actually happened.



Ingersoll himself saw the story in a completely different way, as indicated by a September 1, 1887 letter to lawyer and future Mississippi Governor James K. Vardaman, published in the August 13, 1921 issue of the *Truth Seeker* and found in the Gordon Stein Collection of Robert Green Ingersoll at Southern Illinois University at Carbondale. At that time, the *Truth Seeker* published transcriptions of Ingersoll's letters by his daughter, Maud Ingersoll Probasco. (One point of clarification is needed here; when the transcription of the letter was completed, Vardaman's name was incorrectly written as "Jos. K. Vardaman," wrongly indicating his name was Joseph.) In this brief but historically-relevant piece of correspondence, Ingersoll wrote that he was "never well acquainted with" Wallace and did "not remember ever to have had a conversation with him on the subject of religion. . . ." He ends the letter with this unequivocal passage: ". . . all that your letter contains in reference to my having done anything in concert with Gen[er]al Wallace, or by agreement, is without the slightest foundation." Additionally, *The Works of Robert Ingersoll*,

a twelve-volume compendium of his writings compiled by his publisher, C. P. Farrell, includes no mention of

Lew Wallace and their time together on the train. Ingersoll wrote extensively about his interactions with notable figures of the era, of which Wallace would have been one, so the fact that nothing is included in Ingersoll's works about the author of *Ben-Hur* is telling.

Finally, Wallace's own *Autobiography*, published in 1906, provides a vague recounting of events, with no mention of Ingersoll at all. This relevant section, originally written in 1893 for a magazine called *The Youth's Companion*, reads:

It is possible to fix the hour and place of the first thought of a book precisely enough; that was a night in 1876. I had been listening to discussion which involved such elemental points as God, heaven, life hereafter, Jesus Christ, and His divinity. Trudging on in the dark, alone except as one's thoughts may be company good or bad, a sense of the importance of the theme struck me for the first time with a force both singular and persistent.

Gone are the details regarding the veterans reunion, the train ride, and Ingersoll; we are only left with "elemental points" about God and Christ's divinity. Additionally, he writes, "In 1875 — the date is given from best recollection — when I was getting over the restlessness due to years of service in the War of the Rebellion, it occurred to me to write the conceptions which I had long carried in my mind of the Wise Men." Now, he originally envisioned this story as a magazine serial, but it did end up in *Ben-Hur* and in the excerpted volume discussed earlier, *The First Christmas*. One other tidbit needs mentioning. A year earlier, an obituary for Wallace in the February

25, 1905 issue of the *Truth Seeker* noted that "in an interview published not long ago General Wallace denied the story [of his encounter with Ingersoll], but it will probably outlive his denial." This all lends credence to the idea that he had conceived of writing these stories long before he supposedly met with Ingersoll on the train that September day.

So, did this take place? Based on the sources, it's best to remain agnostic, pun intended. Ingersoll may have met with Wallace on the train, discussed religion, and forgot about his interaction years later. Wallace may have *thought* he was talking with Ingersoll on a train when it was actually someone else. They could have chatted at the city circle in Indianapolis before giving

their respective speeches at the end of the veterans reunion, rather than on the train. Or, it never happened at all. We may never know for sure. Regardless, the story's enduring following among Wallace scholars speaks to Ingersoll's rhetorical power and personal popularity, while providing the faithful with a compelling story of a non-believer inspiring a Christian epic. For skeptics,

it reaffirms that an apocryphal tale, told continually over the years and with gusto, can be accepted as fact decades later. **TS**

To Jos. K. Vardaman, Esq., Greenwood, Miss.
40 Wall Street, New York, Sept. 1, 1887.
MY DEAR SIR: I write on the back of your letter so as to avoid the trouble of repeating what you have said, in order that I may deny it.
There is not one word of truth in the reports contained in your letter, except in this: I do not know whether General Wallace was ever an Infidel or not. I was never well acquainted with him—do not remember ever to have had a conversation with him on the subject of religion; but all that your letter contains in reference to my having done anything in concert with Gen'l Wallace, or by agreement, is without the slightest foundation.—
Very truly yours,
R. G. INGERSOLL.

Opposite LEW WALLACE CIRCA 1900. LIBRARY OF CONGRESS.

Above INGERSOLL'S SEPTEMBER 1, 1887 LETTER TO JAMES K. VARDAMAN PUBLISHED IN THE TRUTH SEEKER ON AUGUST 13, 1921.

JUSTIN CLARK is a public historian and serves as the Digital Initiatives Director at IHB, a division of the Indiana State Library. He holds a B.S. in History/Political Science from Indiana University Kokomo and an M.A. in Public History from Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis. His graduate research focused on orator Robert Ingersoll and his contributions to Midwestern freethought. You can contact him at justinclarkpubhist@gmail.com or follow him on LinkedIn at <https://www.linkedin.com/in/justinclarkph/>.

Portions of this article originally appeared on the Indiana Historical Bureau's blog.