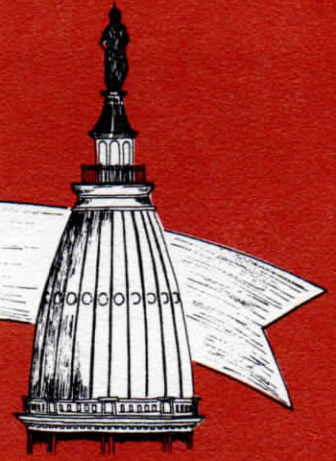


Tippecanoe



Tales

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Canal's Heyday

By PAUL FATOUT

Hoosiers called it "Lay-fay-et-ty." In 1826, when the village became county seat of Tippecanoe County, John Scott's *Indiana Gazetteer* observed that the locality had a great future as crop-producer and commercial center. The place, said Scott, would benefit by "the grand canal that will, at no distant day, form the most convenient . . . link between the great northwestern lakes and the lower Mississippi."

The region was promising but isolated. No roads led from Lafayette to anywhere, only meandering wheel tracks that became impassable loblollies in wet weather. An overland journey to a remote destination like Indianapolis was a hazardous adventure. The traveler was likely to mire down hub-deep, get lost, spend a night or two in the woods, and trudge the last long miles on foot, lugging his carpet sack and wondering if he was headed in the right direction.

A canal loomed as a blessing that would improve communication and bring prosperity. Prospects brightened in 1827 when Congress granted to Indiana over 500,000 acres for the purpose, stipulating that construction should start within five years, else the land grant would revert to the federal government. The Indiana legislature, beset by factional conflict, shilly-shallied for almost the entire five years while Wabash Valley editors wrote long editorial protests against inaction and irate citizens fulminated against dilatory politicians. Finally, in the nick of time, 1832, State House solons authorized construction of a canal that eventually became the Wabash and Erie.

The legislative action set off spontaneous demonstrations along the proposed line. Impromptu parades were cheered in towns alight with bonfires, uproarious as cannon boomed and muskets banged, joyful as merrymakers gathered around the flowing bowl or swigged Forty Rod whiskey out of jugs upended on the elbow. In Logansport a man was hoisted by a premature explosion, and in Lafayette a worthy citizen celebrated with such abandon that he shot off his hand.

In the summer of 1832 digging began on the summit section at Fort Wayne. By that time Lafayette had grown

somewhat, but it was still a nondescript clutter of log cabins and shacks, besides a number of frame houses, several hotels of dubious merit, and a two-story brick courthouse on the square. So-called streets were like cow paths, full of stumps, deep in dust in dry seasons, muddy quagmires in rainy spells, short stretches of wooden sidewalks here and there. Hogs and cattle wandered about, flies were numerous, and the civic air had a heady tang of horse and decaying garbage.

A New England visitor in the 1830s commented upon the rawness of Lafayette, which was certainly not as picturesque as an orderly hamlet in Massachusetts or Vermont. He also remarked upon the slovenly appearance of inhabitants here, especially women, some of whom, he said, "may wear \$5.00 worth of jewelry and yet their hands, faces and apparel (*sic*) are so filthy that they appear disgusting." No doubt. Laundering, whether of person or apparel, was too laborious to be indulged in lightly.

Lafayette was neither handsome nor citified, but it was energetic and aggressive. Steamboats from Cincinnati and elsewhere, often with keelboats in tow — *Republican, Nimrod, Ceres, Rover, Lady Byron, Sylph* and others — testified to a lively commerce. Three railroad companies had been chartered: Ohio & Lafayette, Indianapolis & Lafayette, Lafayette & Danville. None of them showed any sign of becoming a going concern, but their imagined reality brightened the dreams of visionaries.

Brief, Bawdy

Two weekly papers, the *Mercury* and *Free-Press*, short on local news, printed columns of political fustian when they feuded with each other during hot campaigns. A theatrical troupe called The Thespians staged plays now and then — "Heir at Law," "The Curfew," "The Blue Devils" and others, obliging with comic songs to ease the tension of heavy drama. In the 1830s Lafayette had an author, Henry William Ellsworth, who wrote a book, published in New York and entitled *Valley of the Upper Wabash, Indiana, with Hints on Its Agricultural Advantages*.

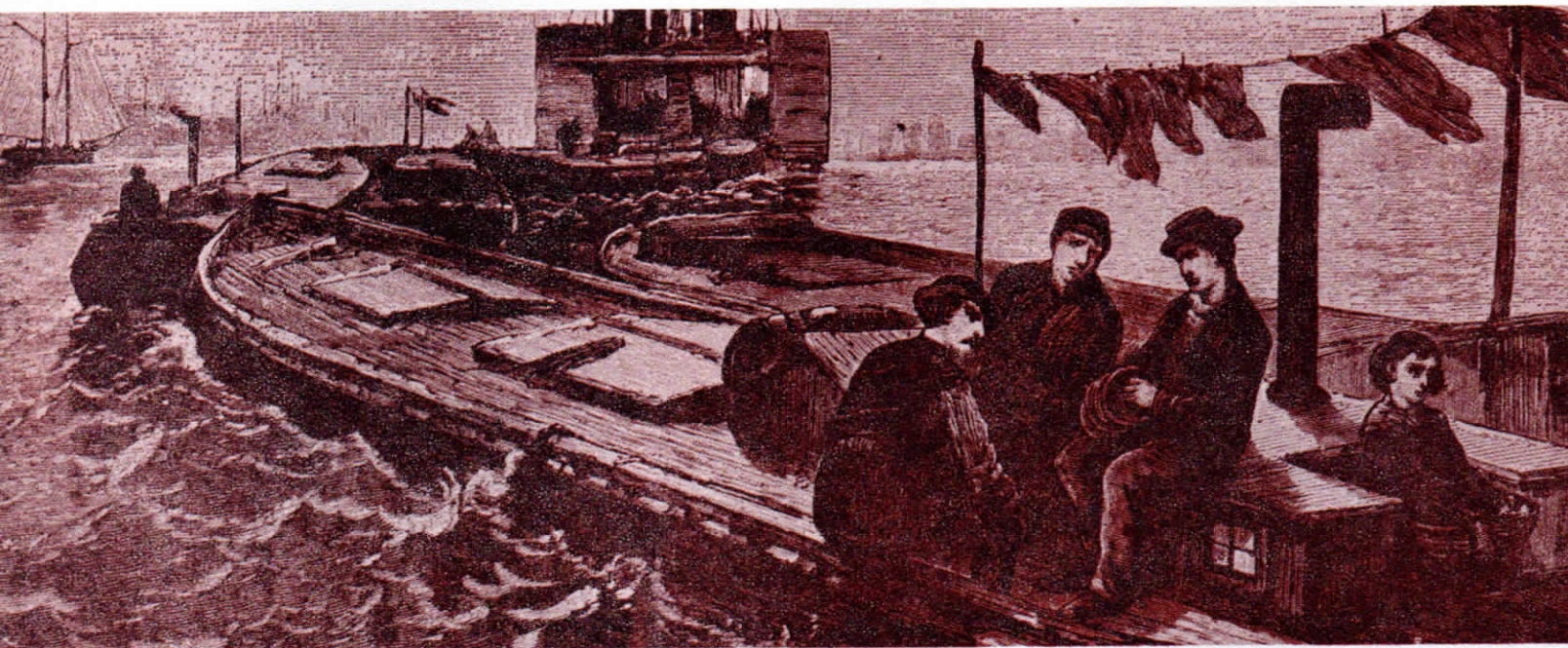
Outcroppings of literacy and culture, together with the prestige of being the county seat, made our town think well

of itself and say so. The local press also boasted that Lafayette was head of navigation on the Wabash River, although the claim was warmly disputed by Delphi and Logansport. Hometown pride, publicized without coy modesty, seemed merely unwarranted bumptiousness to envious neighbors, who referred to the would-be metropolis of Tippecanoe County as "Lay Flat" and "Laugh At." When some booster coined the name "Star City," an Indianapolis editor jeered that such a remote place was only "a fixed star . . . of the 6th magnitude."

Slurs were minor irritations to a town on the make, expecting great things from the approaching canal. The cut moved down slowly past the new village of Wabash, then inched toward Peru. In 1836, public morale soared when the legislature authorized a mammoth system of improvements: 1,300 miles of canals, turnpikes and railroads designed to put all sections of Indiana in touch with each other and with the faraway world of New York and New Orleans. The Wabash and Erie Canal, already under construction, would be the main stem of the network.

apparent that the elaborate public works would cost at least twice ten millions, probably more. Other blights, endemic in human affairs, affected the operations of bureaucrats proceeding without adequate restraints. Credulous fund commissioners sold state bonds on credit to swindlers and wildcat bankers who did not pay up, inept officials bungled, embezzlers dipped into the till, and misdirected effort wasted money and materials.

The result was that progress on the mammoth system ground to a halt in late summer of 1839. The collapse left Indiana stony broke and faced with a debt of some \$12,000,000, the total increasing with each semi-annual failure to pay interest on large loans. Work stopped permanently on all lines except the Wabash and Erie, which kept on moving down. To keep it going, the legislature authorized treasury notes — a sort of I. O. U. — thereby adding a million and a half to the state debt in a flurry of deficit spending. The notes, known as scrip, White Dog, Blue Dog and Blue Pup, depreciated about as fast as they came from the printer, but canal shovelers accepted them in lieu of



Canal grain boat, 1874. From
Frank Leslie's Illustrated Weekly.

The estimated cost was \$10,000,000, to be borrowed at 5%. The sum, no small one for Indiana in the 1830s, seemed negligible to propagandists who had proved, on paper, that income from the system would not only liquidate loans within a few years, but also make a profit for the state. A few croakers dimly predicted ruin ahead, but they were drowned out by a chorus of hosannahs resounding throughout Hoosierdom. Editors wrote panegyrics about the dawning of a new era, and in communities on lines proposed by the great scheme the populace erupted in celebrations that surpassed in noise and vinous hilarity all previous occasions. The record does not tell us how Lafayette responded, but we can imagine that Star City dreams of future wealth and eminence immediately became grandiose.

Work on the system began with tremendous fanfare and a furious tearing up of the earth in a dozen places. Prospects looked rosy, but within a year or two it became

hard cash.

The canal reached Lafayette in 1840, although surviving copies of local papers, full of political bombast, do not report the event. It was the year of the "Log Cabin and Hard Cider" campaign of William Henry Harrison, who had never lived in a log cabin. In October, a great Whig rally in our town attracted everybody for miles around, chiefly because the principal speaker was Colonel R. M. Johnson, a fiery orator known as "The Old Tecumseh Killer." To attend the jamboree, the first canal boat sailed from Delphi, carrying a fife and drum corps and Colonel Gridley's smart military company. The boat ran aground a mile or so above Lafayette, but the detachment marched in bravely, disdainful of mud, fifers and drummers spiritedly piping and ruffling.

Thus the inauguration of canal traffic was inauspicious, but before long enough water to float boats came down. The Wabash and Erie Transportation Company announced a daily line of packets and freighters, and Tippecanoe County shippers began to export corn, wheat,

pork and other products.

In 1843, when Ohio completed its part of the waterway, a through line from Lafayette to Toledo ushered in the brief heyday of the Wabash and Erie Canal. Lafayette became a bustling port. The population had grown to 2,000, although general appearance had not greatly improved. Fewer stumps perhaps, more frame buildings, even several brick ones, but roaming cattle and hogs as usual, likewise dust and mud. There was a new courthouse, small and simply designed, dignified by two Doric columns framing the front door, and protected from roving livestock by an iron fence all around. A few houses in the style of the Greek Revival, like that of Nathan Stockwell on Columbia Street, suggested aspirations toward an image more pleasing than a slatternly facade.

If most of our citizens seemed indifferent to esthetics, they were probably too busy pursuing the almighty dollar. A visitor commented that the chief topics of conversation around here were "corn, the 'canawl,' and five percent." The town had forty stores, commission merchants and forwarders, and other business firms like Lauman & Bansemer, which sold cordage for bow and stern lines, also towlines of Pittsburgh manufacture. Purdue & Fowler were dealers in sugar, salt, molasses, nails and coffee. Dave Johnson's livery stable catered to canal horses, and a drydock at the turnaround basin cared for boats.

The Troy & Erie Line guaranteed to transport merchandise from eastern cities "to Lafayette (Indiana), or any port on the . . . Wabash and Erie Canal." Dickey, Doyle & Dickey started a daily line of packets scheduled to make Toledo in the fast time of 60 hours, fare \$7 including meals. One innovation was daily mail service, via canal, between the two terminals.

A weekly Boat Register, compiled by forwarders Benbridge & Mix, recorded arrival and departure of canal boats, sometimes as many as fifteen or more a day: *Hoosier, Defiance, Red Bird, Henry Clay, Fleetwood, Woodsman, Lafayette, Wayne, Nathan Hale, Nick of the Woods, Huron* and others. Packets (passenger boats) made a gay show of white paint trimmed in green, horses well groomed, brass harness fittings polished. Line boats (freighters) were less smart and slower, but as heavy duty workaday craft they were very useful. Several hundred wagons, loaded with produce for export, rolled into town daily.

Occasionally a boat made a through trip from Manhattan, or arrived from somewhere east of the Alleghenies, having been hauled in sections on flatcars over the Pennsylvania mountains, floating down the Ohio River to Cincinnati, then towing up the Miami Canal to the junction with the Wabash and Erie. As a Logansport paper exclaimed, "This beats!"

The editor of the *Tippecanoe Journal & Lafayette Free Press* purred with satisfaction. "Lafayette is looking up," he said. With "New York at our door . . . the prospect ahead is quite cheering, and all indications go to designate Lafayette as *The City of the Wabash Valley*." Self-praise had long annoyed our neighbors, but this time the facts supported the boast. Measured by cold statistics, Lafayette was the most profitable port on the line. It exported annually, on the average, 21,000 barrels of flour, 200,000 bushels of wheat, 1,130,000 bushels of corn, 4,260,000 pounds of lard and bacon, and 2,700 barrels of whiskey, besides pork in barrels, hides, tanbark, apples and so forth. Tolls collected here were always greater than those of any

SHIPPED IN GOOD ORDER, AND WELL CONDITIONED, BY

on board the good *Boat* *G. S. Orth* whereof is master
for the present voyage, *to Logansport* now lying in the Port
of Lafayette, and bound for *Logansport* the following ar-
ticles, marked or numbered as below, which are to be delivered without delay, in like good order, at the port aforesaid, the unavoidable dangers
of the Navigation or Fire excepted, note by *Contract* or to his or their
assigns; he or they paying freight for the said goods, at the rate of
hundred pounds. *Ten Cents per 100 pounds.*

In Witness Whereof, The owner, master or clerk of the aforesaid has affirmed to
one of which being accomplished, the other to stand void.
Dated at Lafayette, this *9* day of *May* 1848

NAME.	ARTICLES.	WEIGHT.
<i>A. P. Healy Logansport</i>	<i>2 Sacks buffa</i>	<i>330#</i>
<i>Calhoun M. Carter Logansport</i>	<i>2 Sacks buffa</i>	<i>320#</i>
	<i>Freeman Knapp</i>	

Bill of lading of the firm of Reynolds & Fowler for goods shipped on the canal boat "G. S. Orth," May 9, 1848.

other place on the canal except Fort Wayne, and more than half the time Lafayette receipts exceeded those at the larger port up north.

The record might have been better had traffic not been stalled by broken canal banks that drained the channel and by dry spells that grounded boats. Press and shippers continually denounced bungling management and shiftless superintendents for not preventing breakdowns. The Wabash River sometimes overwhelmed the canal with disastrous floods that put the ditch out of action for weeks. Human saboteurs could be as damaging as natural agents. Obstreperous citizens of Delphi once destroyed a dam, and now and then evil-doers malevolently cut canal banks. All was not plain sailing, yet the waterway, during its best days, carried a tremendous tonnage, a good share of it from Lafayette.

Of our town otherwise, the *Free Press* smugly reported: "The religious and moral character of our citizens will, we believe, compare with that of any other place of equal population." The remark suggests that the moral character here was about the same dingy shade as that of Logansport, Peru, Huntington and Fort Wayne. Lafayette, infused with rugged canalers and equally rugged rivermen, was no doubt as rough and tough as any.

Brawls were so common and cracked heads so frequent that the legislature sought to establish a Boatmen's Infirmary here, to be supported by a tax on boat crews. But the tax proved too difficult to collect, the infirmary did not materialize, and canalers nursed their injuries at popular saloons like George Ten Eyck's Exchange on the canal at the foot of Main Street. The City Saloon, uptown, advertising "purest imported Liquors and Segars," was more respectable, befitting upright citizens, and Hoyt's Hacienda, a sort of spa, was even more elegant, offering "something that will refreshen both mind and body." For natives and transients, bar girls and trollops of varied degrees of competence, if not glamor, were in adequate supply.

The press seldom reported fights or noisy drunks, perhaps because they were too routine. One story tells of an altercation "between two gentlemen," one of whom "took occasion to stop the other's jaw by breaking it short off, by kicks and other rough usage, whilst the head of his opponent lay upon a log." Another is of a man who staggered out of a saloon on the canal bank, stumbled aboard a boat snubbed up there, lurched to the stern and blindly plopped off into the canal. He floundered across, then had to wade back, swearing steadily the while, and all on a chill November night. The reporter observed archly, "There is a dive-in-ity that shapes our ends."

While Lafayette was enjoying years of prosperity, the Wabash and Erie moved down to Attica, then to Covington and Terre Haute. A more ominous movement was that of the Lake Erie, Wabash & St. Louis Railroad, which extended its right of way southwesterly from Toledo on a route that paralleled the canal. Promising faster transportation and winning shippers by low freight rates, the railroad forecast the end of canaling.

When the Wabash Valley line reached here in 1854, canal traffic began to decline, although it remained alive for the next twenty years. In 1872 the *Lafayette Journal* said that "the daily arrival and departure of boats reminds one of ye olden time, before railroads were thought of." Boatmen were still pushing off for Toledo, although the chances of getting there grew slimmer by the week as the canal fell into disrepair. Nevertheless, a Covington boat builder launched several new boats, among them the *David Webb*,

The Silver Bell was painted silver
and was pulled by silver gray
mules at speeds up to 8 m.p.h.!
(From a painting by J. E. McBurney)

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H. T. Sample and John Purdue.

Canal men were stubborn optimists, but they could not prevail against railroad competition. In 1874-75 traffic on the Wabash and Erie ceased for good, and the long channel became a relic of shreds and patches, of stagnant water, locks falling apart, bridges collapsing, towpath overgrown.

Lafayette, a town of about 10,000, was somewhat more orderly and less primitive than it had been forty years before. But streets were muddy sloughs, as usual, and on roads roundabout the gumbo was so thick that only a four-horse hitch could pull through. Hogs and cattle still roamed at will all over the place.

Yet there was evidence of improvement. Telegraph poles had been removed from Main Street, thus, as the *Journal* put it, depriving loafers of favorite leaning posts. Gravel roads were slowly coming into being here and there. Affluence was apparent in substantial houses like the Gothic Revival residence of Moses Fowler (now the Tippecanoe County Historical Museum). The French Mansard home of Robert W. Sample (razed some years ago) was a stately structure of tower, arched entrance and porch. These and others testified to prosperity that came, partially at least, by way of the canal.

The Star City was not yet a city, but it was making sporadic gestures toward becoming one.

