WILLIAM GASTON COFFIN And His Wabash & Erie Canal Connections Revisited By Charles Davis

William Gaston Coffin was born in New Garden, Guilford county, North Carolina on February 26, 1811 to Elihu and Jane Starbuck Coffin. For the era in which they lived, Elihu was a wealthy man. His estate consisted of shares in railroad stock, monetary funds, 240 acres of land in Ringgold county, Iowa and his personal property estate in Guilford county. It isn't known where our subject William received his education, but he was well educated and possibly had an apprenticeship where he was reared. This family was very religious and was of the Quaker faith.

William married Semira (Semirah, Sarah) Hunt on May 20, 1834 at New Garden, the place of his birth. He and his new bride moved to Parke county, Indiana, in the spring of 1835 buying up land in sections 3, 4 and 9 of Penn township on April 20. Deed Records 2/288, 2/205 and 2/204. At that time he and his brother, Thomas Chalkley Coffin, and partner Joseph Woody formed the firm of Coffin, Woody and Company, Thomas being the company. These men began to build the Sugar Creek iron foundry in a hollow later named Foundry Hollow. Mr. Woody died in 1836 and was replaced by William Rubottom. Then Samuel Harvey replaced Rubottom. The firm became Coffin, Harvey and Company.

It should be noted here that when I, Charles Davis, wrote of William in 1999 and 2005 the middle name Garten was used. In his biography published by the state when he was in the Indiana legislature Garten is also used. His family genealogies give his middle name as Gaston, thus it will be used here.

"The Foundry" consisted of the foundry, blacksmith Illinois, as far south as Vincennes shop, stave saw mill, and finishing shop on 34 acres with 2 ville, Indiana. Other articles made acres containing the pork house and boat yard. At this site, some which held up to sixty gallo about a quarter of a mile west of William's home, at least three log homes were built for workers' living quarters.

William also built two steam saw mills, hewing the timber, doing the carpenter and millwright work and building all the engines except the boilers. The boiler used in the foundry was hauled from Cincinnati, Ohio by a six horse team.

Although the iron used at The Foundry was procured mostly from Cincinnati and the blast furnaces in Ohio and Kentucky, this area of Parke County had the clay necessary for the construction of the smelting furnace. It also had



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> The Foundry did an extensive general foundry business and plow manufacturing for those times, the products going as far north as Logansport, as far west as Danville, Illinois, as far south as Vincennes, and as far east as Danville, Indiana. Other articles made were chains and kettles, some which held up to sixty gallons. Plow shares replaced the wooden plows of the pioneers.

> Thomas Chalkley Coffin, William's brother, was the principle moulder. William was also a moulder, pattern maker, foundryman, machinist, blacksmith, carpenter, millwright and engineer.

> North of the foundry on Sugar Creek, William built from three to eight flatboats a year on a two acre plot. His pork house that shipped pork on the flatboats was also built there. For twelve years he ran two flatboats per year to New Orleans. He quit these trips in 1848, which was the windup period for flatboating.



A PARTIAL MAP OF PARKE COUNTY, INDIANA

- 1. Foundry Hollow—Sugar Creek Iron Foundry
- 2. William Gaston Coffin's home
- 3. Mr. Aetna Manufacturing Company—Pottery making
- 4. Coke Oven Hollow-site of Clay, Coke Ovens
- 5. Sugar Creek Feeder Dam for Wabash & Erie Canal—where canal boats locked into the feeder canal
- 6. Flatboat yard and Pork house—2 acres

his mansion. In the Rockville Tribune, Thursday, September tures. 16, 1897, the house is described as: "Built of bricks (the foundation and basement were made of sandstone blocks quarried on Sugar Creek nearby) and painted stone color, sawed all the lumber that was used in the construction of the green shutters finish the big, old fashioned windows and a Sugar Creek Feeder Dam. The dam was built across Sugar double veranda with white pillars and green iron railing Creek below Coke Oven Hollow to supply water for the give it the look of an old Kentucky or Virginia mansion." The same paper reported on April 17, 1930, that the home was destroyed by fire started from a pile of trash that was being burned. It was speculated that a spark from the fire quarried sandstone from the bluffs of Sugar Creek north of was carried to the roof. The owner of the home at that time The Foundry. They shipped it by wagon and canal boat was T. C. Rockwell.

In 1840 William stumped for the Whig party elections. Then in 1842 he was nominated for the Indiana House Indiana Senate and served three terms. After his first elec- "Paul Jones," and hailed from Sugar Creek. It was regison December 26, 1842. D. R. 11/452 This included the flat- sus. boat yard and pork house. Thomas left Parke county at this time and moved to Paoli, Orange county, Indiana. He later went to Iowa enlisting in the Civil War.

Parke county in 1844 bringing more business opportunities for the Sugar Creek Foundry. Franklin Rayl was general

This wicket from the Sugar Creek Aqueduct was made at The Foundry and saved by James Johnston, a canal superintendent who lived in Montezuma. It was donated to the Indiana State Museum by James Reeder in 1940. Photo by Chuck Huppert



During the early busy years, William and Thomas moulder. Alexander Burke made the patterns for the moulds built frame homes from the lumber produced by their saw that were used in shaping the articles. These men made the mills. Sometime in the late 30s, William decided to build iron wickets for the locks and aqueducts and other iron fix-

> Nelson McClure operated the saw mill, which canal.

> John Newlin Carter and his brother, Thomas Carter, south to points along the canal and to Terre Haute for canal structures.

William G. Coffin is listed in the 1850 census of of Representatives. That year he was elected to the Indiana Parke county as a merchant, who also shipped his foundry House and served two terms. In 1844 he was elected to the articles and coke by canal boat. His canal boat was named tion, he and Thomas sold The Foundry operations to their tered on May 19, 1850. The Commander of it was Granville brother Albert Gallatin Coffin and Franklin Rayl for \$6,000 S. Clark, an engineer by trade, according to the same cen-

While in Parke county, William studied law under Judge William P. Bryant, who later in 1850 was Chief Justice of Oregon. After serving in that office, he came back to The Wabash and Erie Canal began construction in Parke county to be the county judge until his death.

> William Gaston Coffin practiced as a lawyer in the county in a small way. He even practiced dentistry and occasionally dealt out medicine to his sick neighbors. In his own words, "I may safely say I never was a great success or entire failure at anything."

> William was truly a Jack-of-all-trades and provided locals with jobs in a big way before and during the canal era. Adding to the jobs near The Foundry, William sold 40 acres to David P. Rayl, Albert G. Coffin, David F. Huggins and Nathan A. Hunt to erect a pottery called "The Aetna Manufacturing Company" on May 15, 1843. D. R. 8/167 This company was located just west of The Foundry. James S. Gapin came into this operation and continued the business at that place until 1855 when he, in company with his brother of Middletown, Indiana, took their departure for the California gold fields. While en route they became sick and died while aboard a vessel. They were consigned to a grave at sea. In the meantime, the Aetna establishment with closed doors and windows finally fell into decay.

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After serving Indiana in the legislature, William years. bought back The Foundry with the pork house and flatboat yard for \$6,000 as sole owner on July 9, 1847. D. R. 11/453 He continued this operation while his children were being Fox treaty meeting and was one of the witnesses that signed educated.

raphy in the History of Idaho: The Gem of the Mountains by Hawley states in Vol. 2, that Henry was educated at the Bloomingdale Academy of Parke county, Indiana, and in the public schools of Kansas when a youth at Leavenworth. county in which I, Charles Davis, live. One such Indian was He was quite successful in business and in Republican poli- Wea Chief Christmas Noel Dagenet of Armiesburg who tics. He climbed the ladder from being a cashier of the First helped remove several of the Wea/Miami to Missouri and National Bank of Boise, Idaho, to that of Idaho's state treasurer.

The Parke County Whig of May 19, 1854 states that William was appointed Agent for the Cleveland and St. Louis Railroad for the counties of Vermillion, Parke, Putnam and Montgomery in Indiana. Anyone desiring to transact business with said railroad in the named counties was to contact him.

By 1860, William was stumping for the Republican party, which he had joined, in several Parke county towns giving speeches and backing Abraham Lincoln for president. Again he as well as his son Oliver were nominated to run for the Indiana House of Representatives. However, this time both he and Oliver were defeated. Because of William's loyalty to the newly elected president and his party, President Lincoln appointed him Superintendent of Indian Affairs for the Southern Superintendency in 1861.*

Before leaving Parke county, William sold Coke Oven Hollow to Robert Addison Coffin on August 21, 1862. D.R. 20/351 Although we have no proof, it is speculated that The Foundry continued its operations until the canal closed here in 1875.

Serving as Superintendent of Indian Affairs necessitated his removal to Leavenworth, Kansas, where he resided during the period of the Civil War discharging the duties of his position in a most competent manner. In 1865 he was appointed for the same position for another four

On October 8, 1864 William attended the Sauk and the treaty. Other various Indian Nations were there such as the Wea, Piankeshaws and Western Miami Nations with William's son, Henry Nelson "Hal" Coffin's, biog- their representatives also signing the treaty. These are all Miami, just different sub-branches of the tribe.

> Wea villages were numerous in the area of Parke Kansas and then settled in Miami county, Kansas himself. Indian Treaties and Councils. Collections of Kansas State Historical Society 1923-25 Vol XVI p 767.

> After William had served as Superintendent of Indian Affairs, he was hired as a U.S. Government Officer in charge of copper mining operations on Lake Superior. While he was in Washington, his wife, Samira died on July 2, 1883 at the age of 71 in their home at the corner of Pine Street and the South Esplanade in Leavenworth, Kansas.



William G. and Semira Coffin's home on the corner of Pine Street and South Esplanade in Leavenworth, Kansas.

Semira Coffin was an honored member of the Society of Friends, was the originator of the Home for Friendless Women, and held the first meeting to organize an association for that purpose in the parlor of her home. "Colonel" Coffin arrived home from Washington in time to attend the

*RG Entry 41: Records of the Office of the Secretary of the Interior, 1833-1964, Records of the Appointments Division, 1817-1922, Confirmed Executive Commissions, NAC 1861-07-17 for Transcription of text in document.

More about this appointment can be found in:

Cutler, William G. "Kansas in the Civil War" History of the State of Kansas.

Holman, Tom. "William G. Coffin, Lincoln's Superintendent of Indiana Affairs for the Southern Superintendency" Kansas Historical Quarterly, Vol. 1 XXXIX (Winter 1973) pp. 502-3.

Ancestry.com Abraham Lincoln Papers, Series 1 General Correspondence 1833-1916, letter William G. Coffin to Brig. Gen. James G. Blunt, September 28, 1862, hand written.

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ceremonies. Rockville Republican July 18, 1883, Christian Worker that stream in the prosperous days of the Wabash and Erie July 19, 1883, Leavenworth Times July 4, 1883.

Newlin of Parke county. The last paragraph of his letter says, "As a beggar I write all the Friends yearly meetings in the world, but once as a beggar I raised nearly twenty-four thousand dollars for the building of the Kansas yearly meeting house and after all the vicissitudes of fortune, hairbreath escapes, I am still hearty, hale and stout, stand up straight, walk with a light, springy step, at the age of nearly 83, with a reasonable prospect of some years to come, if it please my great Lord and master to continue His wondrous goodness and mercy to one so utterly unworthy even to bow with submission and obedience to His will. Very Truly your friend, W. G. Coffin."



In this circa 1900 photo William G. Coffin is seen in a suit with a monocle in his right eye. On the left is Wm. Coffin Penfield, his grandson. On the right is Jane Coffin Penfield. Behind William G. is Edna J. Penfield and on the right Alice Penfield, Jane and Wm. Penfield's daughters, William's great granddaughters.

The 1895 Census of Lawrence, Douglas county, residence at 811 E. Hancock from 1895-1901.

January 9, 1904. He was buried beside his wife in Mt. Mun- as 10-13 films a year. cie Cemetery, Lansing, Kansas.

"An old canal boat near where the Feeder dam stood is be- Picklock," "Judge Roy Bean," "Death Valley Days," and ing uncovered by the changing current of Sugar Creek. Wyatt Earp," His last credited role was in Disney's Many of our older citizens remember the activity of trade of "Barefoot Executive" in 1971. He died in 1990.

Canal. The recent death in Lawrence, Kansas, at the age of 93, Wm. G. Coffin, who once had an iron foundry and July 5, 1893 William Gaston Coffin wrote to Exum burned coke on his farm northwest of Annapolis, recalls the days when coke was hauled to Cincinnati and Richmond, Indiana. This was before the completion of the canal through this part of the state, with the building of railroads trade on the canal declined."

After Charlie Davis sent this story to CSI Head-

quarters, Bob Schmidt, CSI president, found more information on Ancestry.com and Find-A-Grave to add to Charlie's genealogy pages that follow this article. He found that two of the grandsons of William's brother, Thomas Chalkley Coffin, became men of national note. The first, also named Thomas Chalkley Coffin, became the mayor of Pocatello, Idaho 1931-33 and a U.S. Congressman from 1933-34. The second, Tristram Chalkley Coffin became a movie and TV personality.



Thomas Chalkley Coffin Tristram Chalkley Coffin

Tristram (Tris) Chalkley Coffin was born in the silver mining town of Mammoth, Utah in 1909 to Edwin and Elizabeth (Christensen) Coffin, where his father was the superintendent of one of the largest silver mines in the world. Tristram grew up in Salt Lake City, became interested in drama, and graduated from the University of Washington.



He was a radio announcer in Boston, Massachu-Kansas, Ward III, Wm. G. Coffin is listed as a practicing setts, but his good looks soon took him to Hollywood where lawyer, age 84. The Lawrence City Directories show his he was a heavy in westerns. He worked opposite Tex Ritter, Range Busters and Rough Riders, Gene Autry, Roy Rogers, Rex Allen, etc. in westerns and with Charlie Chan, Jungle William Gaston Coffin died at the age of 92 on Jim, and the Bowery Boys in other movies making as many

His work on television included "Lone Ranger," The Rockville Republican of March 9, 1904 states, "Cisco Kid," "Kit Carson," "Cowboy G-Men," "Wild Bill

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COFFIN FAMILY GENEALOGY Coffin. Elihu	m. Starbuck, Jane	Coffin, Duncan Cameron	Coffin, William Gaston	m. Hunt, Semirah "Sarah"	Coffin, George B.	1m. Hammond, Sarah Brown	Coffin, Nellie R	m. Sampson, George Palmer	Coffin, Ida M	m. Clark, Elias Stover	Coffin, Cora B	Coffin, Olive A	m. Stark, Joseph S	Coffin, Clara Louise	m. Cornish, Percy Gilette	Coffin, William L	Coffin, George Hammond	m. ? Etta M	Coffin, Benjamin Rush	Coffin, Aletha Myrtle	m. Marine, Rufus Howard	2m. Hutchinson, Mary A	Coffin, Semira Hunt	m. Wilson, John McDonald	Coffin, Alice	m. Jones, Hayes Z	Jones, Hayes Z Jr	Coffin, Paul Starbuck	m. Green, Leona P	<u>Coffin, Elihu E.</u>	1m. Smith, Mary	Coffin, Sybil	Coffin, Dewey	2m. Smith, Katherine A	Coffin, Jessey	Coffin, Max	Coffin, Carl

	THE HOOSIER PAC	CKET - MAY 2015
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'에 귀 아 때 이 데 이 데 더 가 이 것 이 것 이 가 아 가 이 가 나 다 나 나 나 나 나 나 나 나 나 나 나 나 나 나 나 나 나	02/11/1840 1863 07/03/1819 10/06/1847 05/19/1855 11/09/1855 11/09/1855 11/09/1855 01/15/1848 03/31/1909 08/13/1909 08/13/1912 08/13/1912 02/12/1860 01/04/1860 01/04/1860 01/04/1860 01/04/1860 01/03/1861 12/13/1862 01/02/1891 02/12/1863 01/02/1893 01/25/1887 1886 10/25/1887 1898 10/21/1863 01/25/1887 1898 10/21/1863 01/25/1887 1898 10/21/1863 01/25/1887 02/12/1863	0001 ج 10/15/1853 1874
Coff	m. Craig, Roger Frank Craig, Roger Frank 2m. Myers, Sarah Coffin, Laura Coffin, Laura Coffin, Laura Coffin, Edwin Chapie m. Furey, Charles Hughes Coffin, Edwin Chapie 1m. Lany, Fanny Wing 2m. Eldredge, Esther Coffin, Eldridge Sunderlin 3m. Christensen, Eliz Christy Coffin, Eldridge Sunderlin 3m. Christensen, Eliz Christy Coffin, Boyd Starbuck Coffin, Boyd Starbuck Coffin, Boyd Starbuck Coffin, Manford Howard m. Anderson, Amelia Coffin, Manford H. Jr m. Spivey, Snow Coffin, Sherman Myers m. Phelps, Jessie Coffin, Vesta Phelps Coffin, Vesta Phelps Coffin, Vesta Phelps Coffin, Charte Greenwood m. Logan, Leonard Logan, Helen m. Hart Irving Warren Coffin, Adeline m. Gardiner, Benjamin m. Gardiner, Benjamin	<u>contin, momas vestai</u> m. Hart, Nancy Ann "Anna" <u>Coffin, Charles Ronamus</u> m. Roberts, Flora Pauline

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<u>Location</u> Urbana, IL Urbana, IL Nantucket, MA	Greensboro, NC Greensboro, NC	Los Angeles, CA Los Angeles, CA Los Angeles, CA Los Angeles, CA	Oregon	Holton, KS Greensboro, NC Pawhuska, OK Pawhuska, OK Faribault, MN	Faribault, MN Holton, KS ? Holton, KS Monrovia, IN
<u>Cemetery</u> Mt Hope Cem Mt Hope Cem	New Garden New Garden	Rose Hill Mem Rose Hill Mem Rose Hill Mem Rose Hill Mem		Holten Cemetery New Garden Pawhuska City C Pawhuska City C Maple Lawn Cem	Maple Lawn Cem Holton Cem ? Holten Cemetery West Union
<u>Mariage</u> 1885 1885					
<u>Death</u> 07/04/1926 1905 12/30/1854	08/04/1840 09/20/1852	12/25/1903 11/08/1921 12/25/1949 06/02/1954	03/05/1867	07/28/1897 11/07/1883 1929 01/26/1916 12/19/1948	01/02/1917 05/26/1928 ? 1898 1898 04/01/1863
Greensboro, NC	Greensboro, NC Greensboro, NC	Greensboro, NC Greensboro NC Richmond, IN	Greensboro, NC	Greensboro, NC Virginia Scotland Iowa	lowa Greensboro, NC
<u>Birth</u> 02/1857 1851 09/16/1817	06/01/1820 06/06/1823	11/12/1825 09/02/1821 03/3//1857 07/01/1869	05/25/1827	05/13/1829 03/01/1829 10/06/1854 01/22/1844 9/1856	07/17/1856 11/1859 ? 1847 1847 05/15/1833
<u>Aame</u> <u>Coffin, Flora</u> m. Reed, Rice Coffin, Vestal Wolcott	Coffin, Benjamin Rush Coffin, Ester Jane	Coffin, Dr. Samuel Dwiggins m. Newlin, Mary Ann <u>Coffin, William Vestal</u> m. Nicholson, Sarah	Coffin, Sally Ann m. Tinbrook,	Coffin, Warner Mifflin 1m. Hobbs, Maria Jane <u>Coffin, Mary Roxanna</u> m. Furgusson, John Mc Intosh <u>Coffin, Phoebe J</u>	m. Rogers, Dr Arthur Curtis <u>Coffin, Thomas</u> 1m. Adams, Rebecca 2m. ?, Martha J 2m. ?, Martha J Coffin, Nathan Hunt