

CANAWLERS
AT REST

MAJOR-GENERAL
MILTON
STAPP

Find-A-Grave #41812673

b. July 14, 1792
d. August 2, 1869

By Robert F. & Carolyn I. Schmidt



Mentioning the name Milton Stapp to those familiar with Indiana's canals conjures up the image of financial fraud and associates his name with Isaac Coe. Both men were Fund Commissions for Indiana's mammoth improvement project. Although the nature of their conduct was completely different, both of their actions contributed to Indiana's financial woes during the 1840s. Coe actively pursued illegal actions in accepting bribes and personal financial gain whereas Stapp was only guilty of using poor judgment in placing Indiana bonds in eastern banks. (*The Hoosier Packet* May 2003 – "Canawlers At Rest: Dr Isaac Coe" pp. 3-5)

Milton Stapp was born in Scott County, Kentucky on July 14, 1792. He was the fifth child of Achilles and Margaret (Vawter) Stapp. His father, a soldier in the Revolutionary War, had migrated from Orange County, Virginia into Kentucky in the 1780s.

As a farm boy Milton had only a rudimentary elementary education and by age 11 was assuming a major role on his family farm. He joined the local militia group as a musician at age 16. During this time Indian raids into Kentucky required vigilance and militia to protect the small settlements.

Shortly after the death of his mother in April 1813, Milton, a five-foot nine-inch-tall, blue-eyed, light-haired, twenty-year-old youth with a florid complexion and a large dimple on his chin, enlisted in the ongoing War of 1812. His company became part of Colonel Richard M. Johnson's

regiment. Troops were raised to defend the country from the British threat in northern Ohio.

Johnson's units served under William Henry Harrison at Fort Meigs and Fort Stevenson. In the Battle of the Thames on October 5, 1813, Johnson lead his troops in a bold cavalry charge against the British line, with the cry "Remember the Raisin." The British and their Indian allies were routed and Richard Johnson is credited with the killing of the Indian chief Tecumseh. During this battle Milton was wounded in the neck. He soon recovered and marched back with his company through Indiana Territory on his way to Kentucky where the unit was disbanded in November 1813.

Richard Johnson, a congressman at the time, later went on to become Vice President of the United States under Martin Van Buren from 1837-41. Johnson was a friend of another Indian fighter, Andrew Jackson. Jackson was responsible for getting Johnson on the Van Buren ticket.

In December 1813 Milton's father, Achilles, then age 58, married Anna Mills Delph, who was only 28. They started another family.

Back in Kentucky, Milton at age 21 began courting Elizabeth Branham. His being a military hero was not enough for her. She said she would only marry him when he had a farm of his own. With this incentive he acquired land in Franklin County, Kentucky and built a small cabin. Elizabeth kept her word and they were married on March

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Milton Stapp's Family

Name	Birth	Place	Death	Place	Marriage	Place
Achilles Stapp	12-22-1755		9-04-1849	Scott Co., KY	11-27-1782	Orange, VA
m1. Margaret Vawter	10-15-1763		4-29-1813	Scott Co., KY	11-27-1782	Orange, VA
Elijah Stapp	1783		1842			
Elias Stapp	1-04-1786		2-01-1867			
m. Susan	3-01-1789		5-15-1859			
Nancy Stapp	11-10-1788		3-31-1818			
m. Robert Branham	9-20-1787		1-27-1860			
Milton Stapp	7-14-1792	Scott Co., KY	8-02-1869	Galveston TX	3-10-1814	Scott Co., KY
m. Elizabeth E. Branham	1792		10-29-1884	Madison, IN	3-10-1814	Scott Co., KY
Howard Stapp	1820		1880	Texas		
m1. Mary E. Peyton	1825				1845	
m2. Mary F.	1840		1900		1869	
Harriet Stapp	1826					
William B. Stapp	1828		1876			
Susan L. Stapp	1831		1927			
m. John A. Markley				Illinois		
Margaret Stapp	5-01-1832		1863	Van Buren AR		
m1. William Hendricks						
m2. Carpenter						
Carella (Caerella) Stapp	1833	Madison, IN	1856			
m1. Benjamin G. Quinn					9-01-1853	
m2. William F. Hinshaw					1-15-1878	
Robert Branham Stapp	11-30-1834	Madison, IN	5-16-1905	Madison, IN	1-08-1857	
m. Elizabeth Lizzie Houston	7-11-1839		4-21-1865			
James R. Stapp	1838	Madison, IN				
Silas Stapp	1795		1866			
Mary "Polly" Stapp	1797		1871			
Meriah Stapp	1800		1847			
Jameson Stapp	1803		1834			
Jeptha Stapp	1805		1806			
m.2 Anna Mills Delph					12-2-1813	
Eliza Ann Stapp	1814		1908			
Maletha Stapp	1816		1910			
Martha Stapp	1818		1912			
Martgaret E. Stapp	1820		1850			

Many of these dates have been calculated from census records and others found in Ancestry.com Public Member Trees or Find-A-Grave.

16, 1814.

Perhaps when remembering his march through Indiana, Milton decided to move his family to Madison, Indiana in 1816, the year of Indiana statehood. At that time Madison, located on the Ohio River, was one of the leading cities and the home of leaders for the new state. Perhaps as a harbinger of future events in his life, Milton made some bad investments and lost most of his cash. He then decided to pursue the law. He studied the law under James F.D. Lanier, Indiana's famous lawyer and later financier. This relationship helped Milton as he began his political career.

In 1820 he was commissioned a Colonel in the local militia. Continuing his military interest in January 2, 1822 he was commissioned a Major General over the regional counties of Indiana. Milton was quite a dandy and loved to drill the militia in Madison. In his *Biographical and Histori-*

cal Sketches of Early Indiana, William Woolen comments about the militia saying, "To see them on their prancing steeds, their white plumes waving in the air, their swords flashing in the sunlight, was enough to drive Jupiter to cover and Mars to his temple. The General's renown as a militiaman spread throughout the land, and did much to bring him into public notice." He also received his license to practice law in 1822 and was elected for a term in the Indiana legislature from Jefferson County.

In 1823 Milton was elected to the Indiana Senate from Jefferson and Jennings counties. Reelected in 1824 and 1825, he became President *pro tem* of the Indiana Senate in December 1825 replacing James Ray, who had become Governor in an unusual set of events. Ratliff Boone had resigned as Lieutenant-Governor in January 1824 to represent Indiana in Congress. He was followed by William Hendricks, who resigned as Governor in January 1825 when

he was selected by the legislature to be Indiana's Senator in Congress. James Brown Ray became Governor of Indiana in February 1825 and served until 1831.

In 1826 Governor Ray appointed Milton Stapp as Prosecuting Attorney for the 2nd Indiana Circuit, where he served for one year. In 1827 Milton was again back in the Indiana legislature representing Jefferson County. In 1828 he was elected Lieutenant-Governor on the ticket to reelect James B Ray for a second term and served with Ray from 1828 – 1831.

After eight short years in politics, Milton Stapp was ready to take a shot at the Governor's office. In the election of 1831 Milton ran on an independent ticket against the popular Whig, Noah Noble, and the Democrat, James G. Reed. Stapp received only 4,422 votes compared to Noble's 17,959 and Reed's 15,168.

Returning to Madison, Milton was appointed cashier for the Madison branch of the State Bank of Indiana. In a short time he resigned to become President of the Madison Savings Institution. This was his background for dealing with financial affairs. This later led to another higher level appointment by the state of Indiana.

Milton Stapp was again elected to the Indiana legislature in 1835 and 1837. He also tried to be selected by the Indiana Senate for the United States Senate but was defeated. During the 1830s Milton had argued for a Madison to Indianapolis railroad without initial success. However in 1836 the Mammoth Improvement Bill, which funded canals, railroads and roads in the state, was passed.

By 1837 Indiana's internal improvements project had run into financial difficulties and by 1839 work had come to a grinding halt except for the Wabash & Erie Canal, which was largely funded by land sales. Those serving on the three person board of Fund Commissioners in 1838 were: Isaac Coe, Samuel Hanna and Jeremiah Sullivan. Due to the financial problems and the suspicion of fraud, Governor David Wallace replaced these commissioners with a new two-person board composed of Milton Stapp and Lucius H. Scott of Terre Haute. The hope was that they would be able to extricate the State from the financial crisis that was underway.

Paul Fatout states in his book *Indiana Canals*, "Among those who became aware of the facts of economics were the new fund commissioners, Scott and Stapp. A fresh start like New Year's Day, offers a hope of better things,

but changing the personnel of loan negotiators did not change careless and unwise methods. Each of the pair contracted for loans on their own responsibility, Stapp conducting the larger share of the business and being far more reckless."

"His self-esteem, allied with credulity, hurt Indiana a great deal. Milton Stapp was an earnest, industrious, honest man who meant well, but his ways of doing business were more scatterbrained than those of Dr. Coe, and his childlike misjudgment pushed the state into a mess that merely enlarged the muddle the doctor had created. Stapp, like his predecessor, sold bonds on credit, trustingly turned over state securities to ramshackle thieving concerns, and tangled himself in manipulations with officers of insolvent banks, as well as other shysters who cost Indiana dearly. Unlike Dr. Coe, however, Stapp was not guilty of fraud, but only of lamblike gullibility that made him easy prey for financial wolves."

Although Milton had considerable legislative experience he had failed as a financier of the state affairs. The legislature in December 1941 abolished the fund commission and undertook an investigation of internal improvements and their funding. Coe was charged with fiscal malfeasance. Lucius Scott, Samuel Hanna, Jeremiah Sullivan and Nicholas McCarty were found innocent. Milton's financial transactions were too complicated for the committee to follow and they recommended further investigation.

In 1843 the Agent of the State determined Milton owed the state \$107,187 but allowed him a credit of \$41,492. A committee from the House allowed him an additional \$40,169, leaving a balance of \$25,536, which Milton settled with interest for \$27,175.

In 1844 in the race for state legislature, Milton declared to the electorate that his debt to the state was settled although he had been robbed of earnings, his good name assailed and his character attacked. The public accepted his statement and he was elected in 1844 and 1845 by the citizens of Jefferson county.

In 1848 Milton was a delegate to the Whig convention that nominated Zachary Taylor for President. He was the only Indiana delegate to vote for Taylor. There was talk that Taylor would appoint him as Governor of Minnesota Territory, but the promise went to another political appointee. He was also hoping for a foreign appointment, but that too went up in smoke.

Just as Milton Stapp was ready to give up on poli-

tics, the people of Madison, who loved and admired him, asked him to run for mayor. He was elected to that office in 1850 and served one term. In the 1853 election he lost due to a controversy with the German Catholic element over changes he was making in the city's school system.

Again in 1852 he was a delegate to the last Whig convention that nominated Winfield Scott. Scott promised Milton that if he would stump the state for him he would appoint him as Governor of Kansas Territory. However, Scott was defeated by Franklin Pierce, who carried Indiana. Milton again was left hanging. He vowed to leave politics and return to his other pursuits such as part owner in the local *Madison Banner* newspaper and his law practice.

Later he writes about the years 1852-1856 in his memoirs as follows:

"Time has rolled on through the years 1853, 54, 55, and it is now 1856. I am poor, having quit the practice of law and have nothing to do. The broken-down Whig party have in a great degree coalesced with the Abolitionist and Free Soil parties and are about to hold a convention in Indianapolis. My old friends insist on my going out, but I decline. They assure me that to beat the Democrats, that done they will return to their old principles, but I fear to do evil that good may come. I still refused. They meet, form the Republican Party, send forth their platform. It is abolition and free-soil. I am sick of politics. Fremont is nominated by the Republicans, Fillmore by the Knownothings, and Buchanan by the Democrats. Although I am not and never have been a Knownothing Filmore is my choice but I say, hands off. I am done."

It is difficult for a politician to avoid the public arena. A friend encouraged Milton to speak his feeling on the slavery controversy that was tearing the nation apart. In 1856 he gave a speech at Shelbyville, Indiana. He said, "I would believe with you that slavery is a curse to our country, but I have no right to impose my beliefs upon those who believe differently from me and force them to sacrifice their property to my opinions of their interest. The Constitution does not prohibit slavery in the sovereign states that wish to hold the slaves in bondage; it is with them to hold them in bondage; it is with them to hold or free slaves; and it is none of our business."

In March 1856 Milton was elected Assessor for the city of Madison, an office he really didn't want or seek. By 1857 he had decided that he would leave the Hoosier state and relocate in Texas. Previously he had considered Kansas

or Missouri but felt conditions there were too unsettled and dangerous. Letters from his contacts in Texas assured him that he could get a charter for a new railroad line there with little difficulty. He arrived in Austin only to find out that the offered charter was not available. He went on to buy land on Manhuila creek in Goliad County to farm. He was not suited for farming and his crops failed.

In April 1861, the Civil War had begun and his neighbors, despite his protests, considered him a Yankee and made his life miserable. Securing the necessary passes he traveled by wagon with his family to Missouri and then by rail back to Madison, Indiana..

After the war's end in 1865 Milton returned to Texas with the appointment as Collector of Internal Revenue for the Galveston district. While performing his duty as collector he was crossing a stream between Goliad and Galveston. The water was rising very rapidly and he was only able to save himself by crawling up a tree. There he was stranded overnight as no boat was available to rescue him. It rained all night and when he was finally saved from the raging river, he was burning up with fever. Taken by the rescue party to Galveston he continued to deteriorate and soon died on August 2, 1869 from "Congestion of the Brain."

Milton's remains were shipped back to Madison where his funeral was held in the Baptist Church. It was attended by many of his friends and local citizens. He was buried in the center grave, West ½, Lot 1, Plat 1 of Springdale Cemetery in that city. "He now rests from his labors and his works follow him."

Milton and his wife Ann had several children, some of them died young while others lived to adulthood. Information on the children is conflicting and incomplete but a general family genealogy is included with this article. One of his daughters married a William Hendricks. Was this Governor Hendricks' son? Both families were from Madison, Indiana.

Milton Stapp was a dedicated public servant. Although his life was filled with ups and downs he conducted himself in an honorable way. As a great supporter of internal improvements, it was this part of his career that brought the greatest pain and detraction from his public service. Due to his personality he was loved by those who knew him and they continued to elect and appoint him to public service positions.

SOURCES:



Milton Stapp died at age 77 on August 2, 1869 and was buried in Madison's Springdale Cemetery. Photo by Sharon Dean

Ancestry.com

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