

**ERASTUS M. BENSON**

**AND HIS WABASH & ERIE CANAL CONNECTIONS**

By Charles Davis

The last time I wrote about Mr. Benson, it was published in the *Canal Society of Indiana Newsletter* March 1997. Since then I have compiled a lot more information on this man, his activities with the Wabash and Erie Canal, his business partners and his family. Of course, Montezuma is one of my favorite canal towns to research since it is so rich in history.

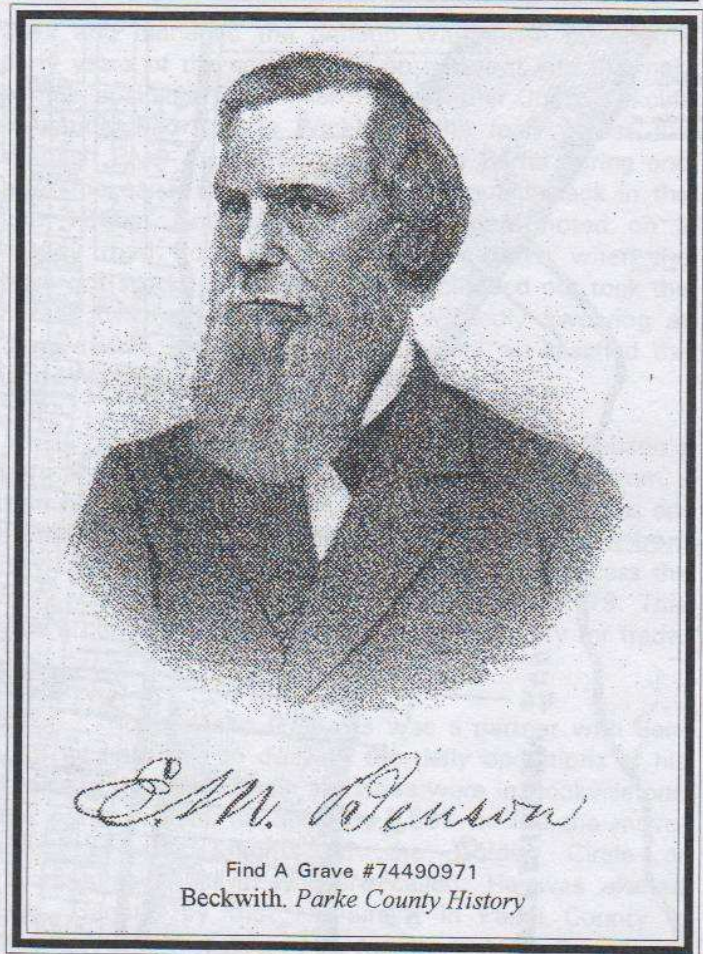
Col. Benson was born in Accomoc county, Virginia on October 26, 1813. He was the second son of William W. and Gertrude Benson. In 1823 his parents moved to Hamilton County, Ohio and remained there until 1827, after which they came to Parke County, Indiana and purchased a farm near Rockville. According to deed records, Wm W. Benson bought the W½ of NE¼ 80 acres Sec. 25-T15R7W on March 14, 1827. Deed Record 5/218 Then on May 29, 1833 he bought 80 acres in the W½ of SE¼ Sec. 25. D. R. 5/217 This farm is one mile southeast of the New Discovery Cemetery or about 4½ miles southeast of Rockville on county road 550E going south ½ mile. I [Charles Davis] visited this site in October 2011 and nothing exists of this farm. It is now only a field.

Erastus lived on this farm from the age of 14 to 21, worked on it and attended common schools. In his 22nd year he taught school for 6 months. Mr. Benson's aim in life was to become a merchant and to this end he went to Rockville and was employed by Judge Walter C. Donaldson and Mr. Lowe. He clerked for them one year and then bought Mr. Lowes' interest in the business and formed a partnership with Mr. Donaldson, which lasted for four years. In 1839, when only 26 years old he was appointed by the commissioners as county treasurer. For one term in 1841-42 he was enrolling clerk of the state legislature. In September of 1843 he formed a partnership with Gen. Arthur Patterson and Isaac Jarvis Silliman. He set up a dry goods business at Armiesburg for three years. See *Indiana Canals*, Vol. 11, No. 4, Fall 2000, "Armiesburg and Its Wabash and Erie Canal Connections" by Charles Davis.

In 1846 Erastus moved to Montezuma to take advantage of the Wabash & Erie Canal, which was under construction at this time through Parke County. On August 7, 1847, he formed a partnership with John Givin Davis. See John G. Davis and His W & E Connections in *The Hoosier Packet* September 2008 by Charles Davis. This agreement states "partnership of merchandising, trading in produce in the town of Montezuma, style of 'Benson and Davis' each putting up \$4000 in that Benson agrees to give said firm his undivided personal attention." D.R. 10/257

Benson began purchasing property.

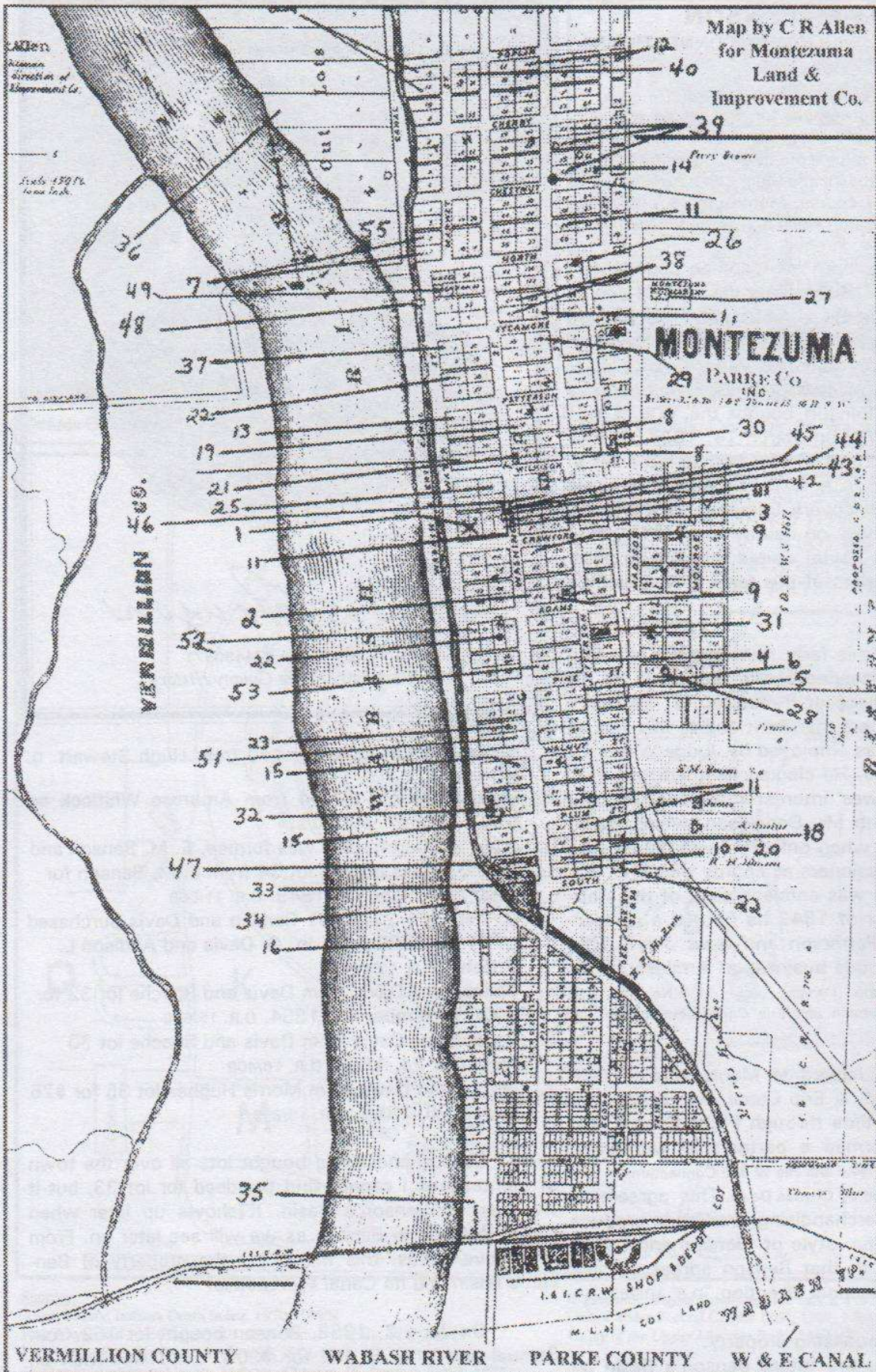
1. He bought lot 32 on the future Benson's Basin on



2. November 11, 1846 for \$70 from Hugh Stewart. D. R. 10/223
3. Next he bought lot 34 from Ambrose Whitlock on May 11, 1847. D.R. 10/224
4. After the partnership was formed, E. M. Benson and John G. Davis bought lot 34 from E. M. Benson for \$600 November 19, 1849. D.R. 11/509
5. On February 22, 1851 Benson and Davis purchased lot 31 for \$200 from Jn. G. Davis and Addison L. Roache. D.R. 13/15.
6. Benson and Davis from Davis and Roache lot 32 for \$200 November 17, 1854. D.R. 15/608
7. Benson and Davis from Davis and Roache lot 30 December 24, 1856. D.R. 16/409
8. Benson and Davis from Morris Hughes lot 35 for \$25 on July 26, 1858. D.R. 18/353

Benson and Davis bought lots all over the town of Montezuma. I cannot find the deed for lot 33, but it was part of Benson's Basin. It shows up later when Davis sells out to Benson as we will see later on. From the above deeds, this makes up the property of Benson's Basin and its Canal Warehouse.

On June 2, 1853, Benson bought lot 152 from Samuel and Wm. S. Hill for \$300. D.R. 11/444 Then on



- MONTEZUMA, IN**  
 compiled by Charles D. Allen
1. W & E Warehouse
  2. Carriage factory
  3. John H Watkins
  4. Gus Bailey
  5. William McIntosh
  6. Thomas N. McIntosh
  7. Obriest Woolen Mill
  8. John Naylor
  9. John Arn
  10. Phoebe Streetmocker
  11. Noah Deer
  12. Israel Armstrong
  13. Hugh F. Feency
  14. Charley & Lucy Peer
  15. Elijah Finnell
  16. Saw Mill
  17. Frank B. Machledt
  18. Gun Shop
  19. Jarvis H. Davis
  20. Brewery
  21. Dr. Adkins & J. Jacobs
  22. Morris Hughes
  23. John Link
  24. John X. Ireland
  25. Ezra Marvin
  26. First School
  27. Montezuma Academy
  28. Old Mont. Cemetery
  29. St. Palais
  30. Presbytery Church
  31. Methodist Episcopal Ch.
  32. Bowsher Grist Mill
  33. Bensons Basin
  34. Lower Steamboat Land.
  35. Bensons Slaughterhouse
  36. Upper Steamboat Land.
  37. L. Henderson O. Lemon
  38. Thomas Doran
  39. Thomas & Jane Doran
  40. Isaac Shane
  41. Sylvester Store
  42. Stacy Marble Yard
  43. M. Hughes Grocery
  44. E. G. Wilson
  45. Harness Shop
  46. Young Store & P. O.
  47. No. 80 Bridge over canal
  48. No. 79 Bridge over canal
  49. Wilson (Phoenix) Hotel
  50. Village Well
  51. George Fisher
  52. Andrew Tenbrook
  53. Simon Smith
  54. George Krets
  55. Joseph Burns Ferry

June 13, 1853 he bought lot 151 from Morris Hughes for \$1100. D.R. 14/445 These lots are where Mr. Benson permanently resided in Montezuma. From what Jim Reeder told me, Bensons' house was a fine mansion. It stood at the corner of Crawford (US 36) and Jefferson Street on the site of today's Janet's Restaurant. There are still steps on Jefferson Street that led up to this house. I erred in the 1997 story that Benson lived on lot 124, which he owned on Wilkinson Street.

On August 7, 1853, Mr. Benson married Louisa M. Fairchild of New Orleans. I know nothing of how they met. Perhaps it was by his trading in that locality.

Benson and Davis also ran a pork-packing business. The *Parke County Whig* of February 14, 1856 says in that winter, they produced 2,800 lbs. of pork. The lot on which they processed pork was on the Wabash River north of the future railroad in Wabash Township, one acre 29 rods of Fraction 2. This business was one of the largest slaughter houses in western Indiana. Hogs from Putnam, Vigo, Vermillion, Montgomery and Fountain counties were driven to Montezuma for market. The killing capacity was around 350 hogs per day. The meat was cured and then shipped by flat boats to New Orleans or by canal boats to Toledo, Ohio and other towns en route.

On October 15, 1857 Benson bought 90.80 acres on the SE½ of Section 26. D.R. 17/122 This land was afterwards called "Benson's Woods." Part of the Oakland Cemetery occupies this once woods. A few old oak trees within it are all that's left. A note here shows what the woods was like as described by Fred A. McIntosh, who grew up in Montezuma in the 1860-70s.

"At one time this same woods was a picnic grounds where our celebrations were held on July 4th. There we would hear the Declaration read, and some speaker give an address. At the conclusion we were turned loose I guess, just to see how miserable we could make it for other people."

Myself, I always wondered where the Miami buried their dead for their village was at the south end of Montezuma before it was a town. The *Montezuma Enterprise* of April 5, 1889 gives an indication of where the burial grounds were located. John H. Watkins and P. J. Hunt were walking through the Oakland Cemetery and noticed a mound, dug it up and found the skeleton of an Indian. Watkins said the bones were very large, especially the legs and skull. The bones were estimated to have been buried over 50 years ago and the grave was only 6 inches deep. The Wabash & Erie Canal is located at the west border of the cemetery.

Septimus Vanlandingham (1821-1906) was the

clerk and managed the Benson Warehouse during the early years of the canal. Later on he went into the mercantile business for himself. His brother John Wyckliff Vanlandingham (Uncle Wick) ran the ferry across the Wabash River at Montezuma for Joe Burns during and after the canal era. Wick also ran a public hack in the late 1860s. One of Wick's passengers noted on a muddy road from Rockville to Montezuma when the hack got stuck, "The driver having climbed out took the horses by the heads, and after wickedly swearing at them awhile, we rose up, up, up until we reached the land. Wick apologized."

The Wabash River ferry was owned by Benson's partner, John G. Davis. Davis bought the ferry from a man named Haskinson in 1833. D.R. 1/127 Joe Burns operated it for Davis for many years then bought it from Davis on November 14, 1860. D.R. 24/301 To access the ferry, one would cross canal road bridge No. 79. This was a convenience to reach Vermillion County for trade, etc.

Though John G. Davis was a partner with Benson, he had little to do with the daily operations of his interests there. His main activities were in Rockville and the public offices he held. By 1860 he led the movement of the Knights of the Golden Circle or "Copperheads" as they were called. He was elected Brig. General by that movement in Parke County in March 1864. *Parke County, the Civil War During the Canal Era* by Charles Davis, 83 pages published in 2007, in the Rockville library.

Benson also ran a shingle and blind factory in Montezuma. As of this date I have lost the deed for its location.

Mr. Benson and his wife Louisa had 3 children in the early 1850s that died as infants. Only two of their children survived—their son Harry H., born 2-8-1857 and their daughter, Gertrude, born in February 1860.

On May 19, 1862 Benson's wife Louisa died in their residence of consumption at the age of 27. Erasmus never married again and raised their children to adulthood by himself. Louisa and the infants are buried in the old Montezuma Cemetery. As of 2011 their headstones are broken. They lay in a pile in the southwest corner of the cemetery, which is in bad condition due to years of neglect and vandalism.

The Wabash & Erie Canal did a booming business at Montezuma in the 1860s and early 1870s. Once the railroad reached the town in 1873 the canal waned and was closed in 1875. Benson's partner, Mr. Davis was so involved in politics and the "copperhead" movement that the locals had enough of him and his threats around the county. On November 19, 1864 he sold his

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interests in the Warehouse on the Basin, stores, lots and land to Benson D.R. 22/298 and moved to Terre Haute, Indiana to establish a dry goods business.

It should be noted that Benson and Davis bought land on the east and west side of the canal in Section 1 in Wabash township. I do not know what type of business they had there. The land was purchased from Wea Chief Christmas "Noel" Dagenet's son Edwin R. on September 17, 1858. D.R. 18/252 It was located one mile south of the Reserve township line on the canal road.

Two stores stood on lots 27-28 that were in connection with Benson's Basin warehouse. They were located just north across the street from the warehouse on the canal on the southwest corner of Water and Plum Streets. Benson sold these lots to Joseph Bowsher for \$1000 on April 15, 1867. D.R. 25/535 Bowsher built a steam powered grist mill on lot 28 that was a show place in town. It was a large frame building that stood three and a half stories high facing the canal. It had a large warehouse in connection with it. A cooper shop was run on lot 27 next to the mill. The miller's name was Captain Kidd. The engineer was Captain Andrew Brown, who was killed on duty when his clothes were caught in the fly wheel. The mill used the old Buhr system. Bowsher lived on a farm in Liberty township near the Bowsher Ford covered bridge. His home still exists today in 2011.

On September 14, 1875 Bowsher sold the mill and shop to Dr. George McCune for \$6000. D.R. 31/496 A Mr. Murphy from Paris, Illinois was head miller until his death. Then George Cole operated the mill with Dick Bailey as his able assistant. The mill burned down in the early 1880s, which was one of the saddest blows the town had because the grist mill was instrumental in bringing thousands of dollars to Montezuma.

In the 1850s there was a woolen mill in the old town of Bloomingdale. It was an outgrowth of the carding and fulling mill established by Mahlon Reynolds and Jeremiah Siler. In the 1860s this factory, which was conducted by John M. O'Brist and Nathan Davis, did considerable weaving. They operated at that place until 1869. Their factory was on Leatherwood Creek, which failed to supply enough water for power, thus they set out to find a more suitable place. They found it in Montezuma. They bought the Montezuma Woolen Mill from Daniel A. Jones and his wife, Harriet, of Chicago, Illinois for \$2000. They purchased lots 1,2,3, and 4 in the Griswold and Roache addition on November 23, 1858. D.R. 26/366 They built a new mill on the above lots facing the canal with a driveway for wagons between the mill and the canal boat dock.

The canal boats would bring in cargo of raw ma-

terial, reload with the finished product, and ship it to Toledo, Ohio. The southern terminal was Terre Haute, Indiana.

According to Mrs. Fred Machledt's story in the *Rockville Tribune-Starr* on April 8, 1941, "Col. Benson had two white mules, which were used to pull his canal boats. Operators of the boats were James Mushett (first one to arrive on the canal to Montezuma 1848), Roland Bently (both he & Mushett are buried in Oakland Cemetery), and Tom McIntosh, the latter an uncle of Dick McIntosh and Mrs. Will Morris."

On April 20, 1871, O'Brist and Davis sold the factory to Erastus M. Benson for \$7000, listing lots 1,2,3 and 4, woolen factory, carding machines, steam engines, and scales. The mill was on lots 1 and 2. The store was on lots 3 and 4. On April 28, 1871, Benson sold ½ of his interest in the factory to William N. Akins for \$3500. D.R. 28/222 The factory burned down later that year. The engineer, George Quinn, was partially blamed for the conflagration. There also was a canal boat at the dock that was consumed. Its name was "The South Bend." Today, 2011, Joseph Leon Hann lives on the site of the woolen factory and he mows the canal prism in his back yard.

The woolen mill had to be a great loss for Benson, but at this time he was still doing very well with his various businesses including the slaughter house. Benson got his lard kegs from David Connelly, who made them in Annapolis, Parke County, Indiana.

Benson also held other positions. By 1874 he was a director in the Rockville National Bank, the E. T. H. & C. Railroad, the I. I. C. Railroad, and was president of the Montezuma Land and Improvement Company.

In 1880, the railroad car shop and engine house burned down. That caused job and growth losses to Montezuma.

On September 9, 1884, Benson sold one of his stores on lot 77 to his son, Harry, for \$700. D.R. 44/584 This brick store stood on the southeast corner of Washington and Wilkinson Streets and was razed a few years ago. It was at this time that Benson accumulated a lot of debt from his vast holdings. He hired John Osborn and David H. Maxwell as trustees to sell off most of his holdings to pay off his debts. This extensive sell off is recorded in December 24, 1884. D.R. 45/98 The result of the sell offs and the names of persons who were owed money and what settlements they received is recorded on January 27, 1887. Probate Book 12/265 The deed starts as follows: "I Erastus M. Benson of Montezuma being embarrassed and failing circumstances for the securing all my bonafide

creditors," etc. etc.

The *Rockville Tribune* on August 27, 1885 shows what one of Benson's children was doing. "Gertie Benson was appointed Post Master of Montezuma."

On Monday March 12, 1889, Col. Erastus M. Benson died of pneumonia and his funeral was held at his home by Rev. Thos. Griffith. "Although for many

years a wealthy man he died poor, business reverses having overtaken him in recent years, a man who had the respect and confidence of all his neighbors."

An advertisement in the *Montezuma Reporter* of January 18, 1889 says, "Harry Benson, dry goods, notions, groceries, flour, meal, hardware and queensware. Miss Gertie Benson, at the post office is the authorized agent for the Indianapolis and weekly *Journal*, Cincinnati daily and weekly *Enquirer*, or any newspaper magazine or periodical published in the United States. See her before subscribing." Again on July 26, 1889, "New Post Mistress appointed, Gertie Benson retired as Post Mistress, Post Office was in Harry H. Benson's store and was moved to Baily's millinery store, Agnes Baily being the new Post Mistress." Then September 13, 1889, "Harry Benson's sale of household goods, and merchandise. Next week Gertie and Harry will probably leave Montezuma." Before they left, Gertrude sold the Benson home to James Quinlan. D.R. 49.512 Again on September 20, 1859, the newspaper says, "Harry and Gertie left on the 11 o'clock train Tuesday for the west."

ERASTUS M. BENSON 1813-1889 Wrong birth year on stone  
B. 10-26-1813 D. 3-12-1889 Photo Charles Davis



In tracing Gertrude and Harry, I found them in

PARENTS & SIBLINGS OF ERASUS M. BENSON

William W. Benson	B.	1785	D. 12-21-1866	Buried New Discovery Cemetery	
Wife Gertrude	B.		D.		
Wife Rachel Osborn	B.	1803	D. 2-28-1868	Buried New Discovery Cemetery,	
Children:					
Erastus M. Benson	B.	10-26-1813	D. 3-12-1889	Buried Oakland Cem. Montezuma, In.	Married
Wife Louisa M. Fairchild	B.	10-27-1835	D. 5-19-1862	Buried Old Montezuma Cemetery	8-7-1853
Children:					
Infant son	B.		D. 185?	Buried Old Montezuma Cemetery	
Infant daughter	B.		D.	Buried Old Montezuma Cemetery	
Infant son	B.		D. 5-08-1854	Buried Old Montezuma Cemetery	
Harry H. Benson	B.	2-08-1857	D. 1-04-1924	Jackson Co, Missouri	
Gertrude Benson	B.	2-??-1860	D. 4-24-1926	San Francisco, California	
Husband Thomas B. Mohler			D. 7-10-1936	Los Angeles, California	
L. K. Benson	B.	1830	D. 12-07-1852		
Wm. W. Benson	B.	1831	D. 2-17-1853		
Mahala J. Benson	B.	12-03-1833	D. 10-05-1918	Indianapolis, buried Blake Cem. Parke Co. IN	Married
Husband Samuel E. Blake	B.	1838	D. 10-10-1886		4-3-1864
Children					
Wealthy Blake Wimmer	B.		D.	Of Liberal Kansas	
Charles Blake	B.		D.		
Laura Blake Crooks	B.		D.	Step-daughter	
R. L. Benson	B.	1835	D. 5-15-1854	Buried New Discovery Cemetery	
Oliver P. Benson	B.	1838	D.		Married
Wife Mary F.	B.		D.		

the 1900 census in Upper Township, Sebastian County, Arkansas. Gertrude is listed as head of the family and as a bookkeeper, Harry as a brother.

The 1910 census of Buckman County, Missouri shows Harry as a patient in the Washington Hospital called State Hospital NO. 2 and says he hasn't a trade. Gertrude is not listed. The 1920 census from Prairie Township, Jackson County, Missouri lists Harry as an inmate in the Jackson County home and labor as his trade. I obtained his death certificate from the Missouri Board of Health.

The *Rockville Republican* May 6, 1926 gave me the clue as how to locate Gertrude, and said Gertrude died and was of San Antonio, Texas. The San Antonio Public Library looked at census records, which "according to the 1910 federal census" said she was married to Thomas B. Mohler and they lived in Pasadena, California. In 1920 they were still living in California, but they had moved to Alameda. In the 1930 census, Thomas is living in S. Pasadena, California with his

sister Grace. The San Francisco Public library shows that Gertrude died in San Francisco on April 4, 1936 in Los Angeles County, California. With this ends the family line of Col. Erastus M. Benson.

Drilling for gas began in 1890 on the south end of Benson's Basin. The *Montezuma Reporter* of March 24, 1890 it states that the well was down to 1300 feet and was producing artesian water. The Montezuma Mineral Springs Company was formed and bought Benson's Basin on June 30, 1905. D.R. 75/128. A large hotel and pool was built in 1906 and was called the Montezuma Sanatorium and Hotel. An arsonist set it on fire and it was destroyed on March 28, 1907. *The Hoosier Packet* March 2001, Charles Davis.

Eventually Benson's Basin was owned by Joseph A. Reeder and his wife, Bernice. It was leased to the town of Montezuma for several years for a public park known as Reeder Park. Their two sons deeded the park to Montezuma for \$1.00 on December 6, 1991. D. R. 177/58 One of the provisions states, "The name Reeder Park will be displayed in a prominent place at all times." I have played music in this park many times during the 4th of July. I have a picture of us playing music there dated July 4, 1971. In talking with James Reeder several years ago he said, "We never even got a thank you for donating the park to the town."



Benson's Basin, Montezuma, Indiana filled by July 2003 flood. Looking north was Benson's warehouse. Photo by Charles Davis

Photos of Erastus M. Benson's father, mother and wife's markers were taken by Charles Davis in New Discovery Cemetery in Parke County, Indiana.

Left: William W. Benson

Born 1875

Died 12, 21-1866

Center: Rachel Benson

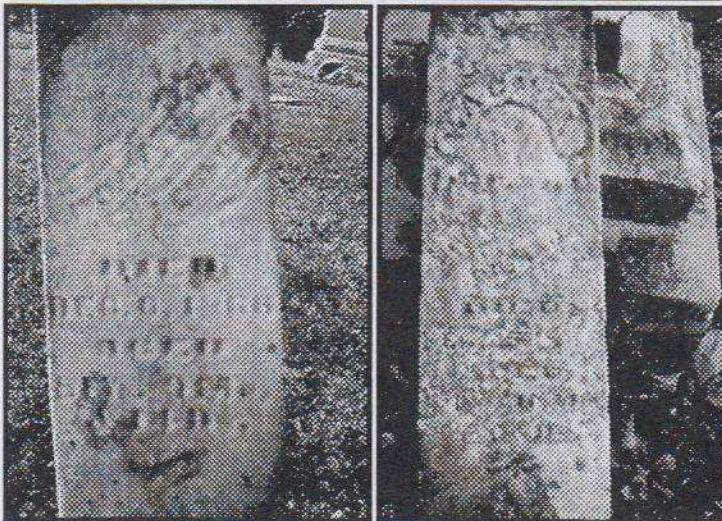
B. 1803

D. 2-28-1868

Right: Louisa Fairchild Benson

B. 10-27-1835

D. 5-19-1862



# THE HOOSIER PACKET—APRIL 2012

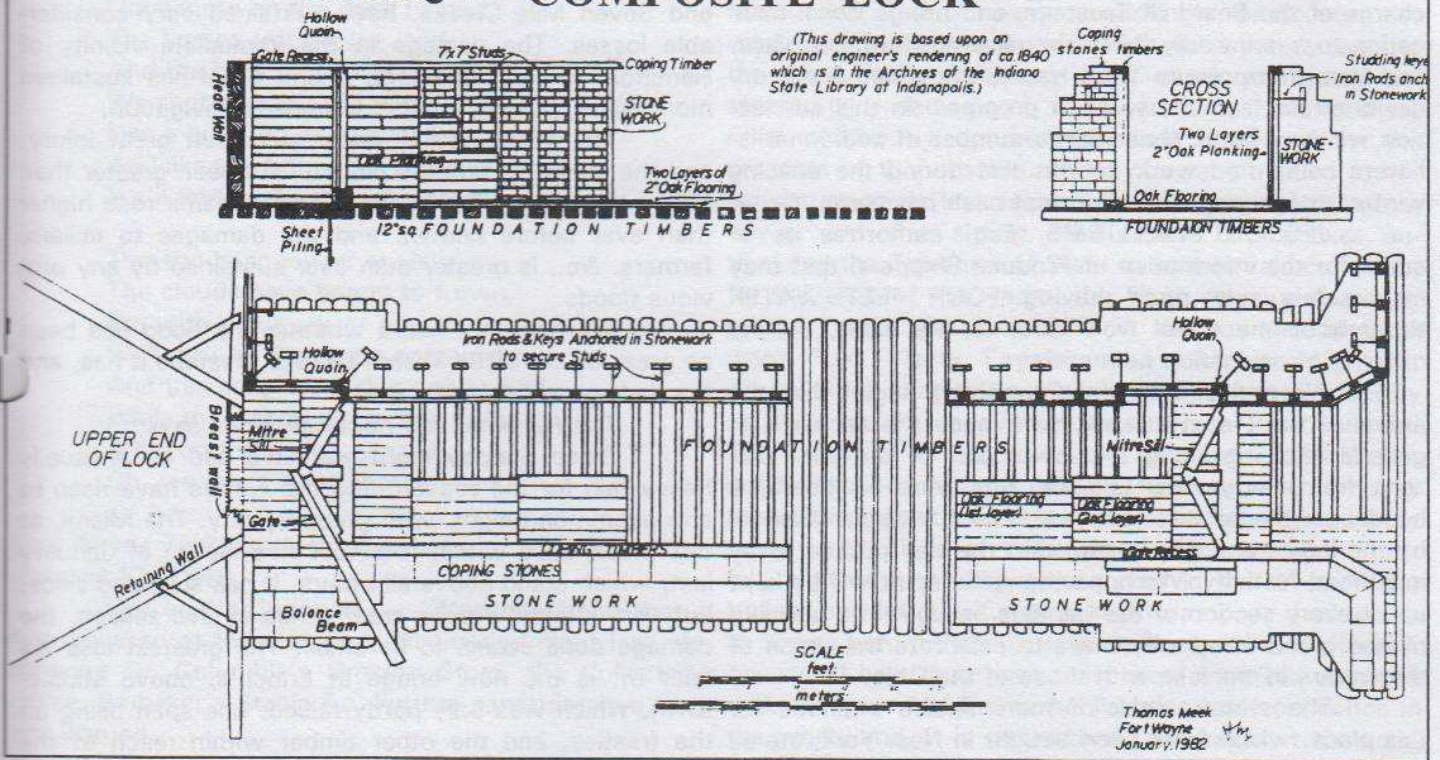
**Sources:**

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*mbined Atlas 1874-1908-1916 Isaac Straus Centennial*. Parke County, Indiana pp. 40 and 51.  
 1850-60-70 Parke County census  
 1874 *Parke County Plat maps*  
 Genealogy Collection, Civic Center, 100 Larkin Street, San Francisco, CA94102.  
 April 24, 1926 *San Francisco Examiner*. Obituary of Gertrude J. (Benson) Mohler R 14  
 Genealogy and Local History Branch 317 W. 24 Highway Independence, Missouri 64050  
 Death Certificate of Harry H. Benson  
 1900 Census of Sebastian County, Arkansas  
 1910-1920 census of Jackson County, Missouri  
*Montezuma Enterprise*  
 March 7, 1940. "1928 Reminiscences of Early Montezuma" by Fred McIntosh.

*Montezuma Reporter*

March 15, 1889 Obituary E. M. Benson  
 January 18, 1889 News of Harry H. and Gertrude Benson and home  
 New Discovery Cemetery dates recorded of Wm. W. Benson family  
 Rockville Court House  
 Deed Records from Recorder's Office  
 Probate Records  
 Probate Order BK 12/265 E. M. Benson  
 Will Record of Wm. W. Benson 1866  
 Warranty Deed Vol. 177 p. 58. Reeder Park to The People of the Town of Montezuma December 6, 1991, land with lots 29,30,41,32,33,34,35,36, 1,2,3,4,5,6,8,9,12,13,BK 6  
*Rockville Republican*  
 May 5, 1862 Obituary of Louisa M. Fairchild  
 March 13, 1889 Obituary of E. M. Benson  
*Rockville Tribune*  
 April 21, 1914 Interview of John Wykcliff Vanlandingham and Dr. Benjamin Franklin Hudson, "Old Times in Montezuma"

## Drawing 1 COMPOSITE LOCK



## A COMPOSITE LOCK

Indiana's Whitewater Canal has many finely cut stone locks two of which can be seen in Metamora, Indiana. The canal also has many composite locks for good stone was hard to find and building a cut stone lock was more expensive than a composite lock. Some of these can also be seen not far from Metamora.

In *Canal Terminology of the United States* by Hahn and Kemp a composite lock is described as:

An inexpensive lock constructed of dry stone or mortared walls made watertight by nailing thick wooden planks horizontally to vertical timbers (studs) bolted to the Masonry wall. Each wall was then covered with a sheathing of vertical planks nailed closely together to prolong the life of the lock, "kyanized" wood was sometimes used. Some masonry was used in the gate recess area.

To "kyanize" was to treat wood with a solution of mercuric chloride to inhibit decay. The process was invented by J. H. Kyan before 1850.