

CANAWLERS
AT REST

**WILLARD
CARPENTER**

**b. March 15, 1803
d. November 6, 1883**

By Carolyn I. Schmidt

Photo from At The Bend In The River by
Kenneth P. McCutchan



Willard Carpenter Sr. (b. April 3, 1767, d. at Strafford November 14, 1854) and Polly Bacon (b. March 15, 1769, d. at Strafford March 4, 1860) were married at Woodstock, Connecticut on February 23, 1791. They had twelve children including Willard, all born and reared on the same farm in Strafford, Orange County, Vermont. Polly lived to see twelve children, fifty-two grand-children, fifty-three great-grand-children, and one great-great-grand-child. This totaled 118 lineal descendants.

It almost seemed from the time their son Willard was born that he would lead a remarkable life. He spent his boyhood days on the pioneer farm in Orange County where his father was one of the first settlers. The family cabin was in the forest. With the help of Willard and the other boys they cleared the land and conducted the farm. At the time children received little schooling. Three months a year were devoted to training them mentally to read, write and cipher. Willard helped his father until he was eighteen years old and picked up odd jobs to earn a few pennies.

Banking was learned early. Willard made his first twenty-five cents digging snake-root and selling it to his uncle. He immediately put the money into the bank where it earned six per cent interest. He kept adding to the account until he had accumulated seven dollars. That seemed a powerful lot of money and Willard decided to "go west." He made his way to the Mohawk River with a pack on his back, passing through Troy, NY around the time of the "fire of 1822" and reached

Albany where he purchased a stock of Yankee notions with his seven dollars. He proceeded up the Mohawk valley to Buffalo, NY, went down the shore of Lake Erie and on into Salem, OH, where, having disposed of his purchases, he visited an uncle and rested.

In the summer and fall of 1822, he joined forces with two other men and cleared eighty acres of forest. They received five dollars an acre in notes payable in grain, because money was scarce. He started teaching a district school and by spring had earned \$140, which again was paid in grain notes. He learned tanning and shoemaking, but gave it up after six months.

At about age 20, he got rid of all his effects and bought a horse and watch. With the remaining sixteen dollars he was ready to journey forth. En route to Buffalo he ran into some "sharpers" who won his watch and all but \$1 of his money. Four of the dollars were returned to him, and he was glad to get on his horse and ride away. This was not his only problem before reaching Buffalo. He became seriously ill, but with determination he continued on passing through Buffalo to Manlius, a town located to the east, where he found an old schoolmate and remained with him for a few weeks to regain his health.

He then assisted in floating a raft down the Mohawk river to Schenectady, NY. Although he was to receive \$16 for the trip, when he arrived the raft was attached for debt and Willard was not paid. He had left his horse with his friend and walked back to Manlius to

get it. Upon his arrival he learned that the horse had died while he was away.

Willard found work on the Erie Canal. He, along with 1,000 Irishmen and Ben Wade, of Ohio, put their muscles to work using pick and shovel. Although the wages and work were fair, the living accommodations were not endurable. He sought other employment after working only a short time.

At Glenfield Corners, NY, he was offered a teaching position at the school where the previous teacher had been "ejected" by the larger, unruly boys. Willard took the job and managed to subdue the ringleader, who was older and larger than himself, using strategy and force. He had no further trouble.

In 1824 his father tried to entice him back home giving him a farm and, when he refused that, offering him \$600, but Willard refused both. In 1826 he visited his father and then he and his brother John went to Troy, NY and engaged in merchandising. Willard was bold and vigorous in his business interest, so much so that he dismayed his brother and they dissolved their partnership. Ephriam, another brother who was more like Willard, took John's place and they continued the business in Troy for 10 years.

In 1837 A.B. Carpenter asked Willard to come to Evansville, Indiana and work with him in the wholesale dry goods and notion business. Although the business promised to be good at first, the financial crash of 1837 took its toll. Sharp work had to be done if they were to get anything out of the accounts before the county correspondents got to them. Willard arrived in Evansville on a Sunday, learned that a group of merchants were leaving for the upper country viz Vincennes and Terre Haute, saw that his only chance was to outstrip them, and left Evansville at nine o'clock that night. At Vincennes he employed Judge Law to take charge of his business there, pushed on to Terre Haute, employed Judge Farrington there, and by Tuesday morning, at daybreak, was with an attorney in Danville, IL. Starting back to Evansville, he met the other merchants en route between Vincennes and Terre Haute on Wednesday at noon. By getting to the attorneys before the others, the Carpenters received their claims in full, while the others only received about ten cents on the dollar. This is one example of his energetic spirit and his subsequent conduct.

The following February, he married Miss Lucina Buralow. She was from Saratoga county, NY. They had 5 children

After the failure of Indiana's internal improvement system and the state's great debt, Willard violently

opposed every suggestion of repudiation and prominently sought a way of providing means to honorably satisfy all obligations.

In 1842 a public meeting was held in Evansville where it was resolved to ask an appropriation of lands to aid in the completion of the Wabash & Erie Canal. Willard circulated petitions for this purpose in seventeen different states and through five different legislatures. He defrayed his expenses out of his own pocket. The bill was passed by both houses of congress after much opposition and then was sent to the legislature to be ratified. Once again it received much opposition. Again Willard made himself useful in advancing the public good.

Willard was one of the principal movers in promoting and subscribing to the Evansville and Terre Haute Railroad. He took more stock than any other two men in the county. It was intended that this road should run through the White River valley to Indianapolis. Willard resigned as its director to enter into an agreement with Senator O.H. Smith in 1853 to build the "Straight Line," a railroad from Evansville to Indianapolis. Willard proceeded using his entire intellectual vigor and procured over \$900,000 for the line. He himself subscribed \$65,000. Grading the road progressed rapidly and soon the bed was completed for fifty-five miles.

Willard went to Europe to purchase the rails. At this point opposition sprang up. A pamphlet that contained many misrepresentations was published and distributed to banks and rail-makers in London, Paris and Wales. When the negotiations were completed with all except some minor details, Willard was stopped in his great undertaking. He then called upon Vorse, Perkins & Co., a commission business for railroad companies in America that had offices in London and New York. He contracted with them agreeing to pay \$12,000 of mortgage bonds per mile upon the road-bed, \$100,000 worth of real estate bonds, and \$100,000 of Evansville city bonds, which the city had subscribed, but not then delivered. He had all but the Evansville bonds with him. They were to be handed over to the commission-house in July of the same year. Willard wrote the vice-president of the Evansville city council, H. D. Allis, and urged him to immediately call together the council and deliver the \$100,000 bonds to Vorse, Perkins & Co. in New York. Those opposed to the railroad influenced the city council and it refused. Willard then offered to secure them by mortgaging all the real estate he held in the city and county, which was extensive, indemnifying the city, so that the road should be built and cars running over the first fifty-five miles to the Ohio and Mississippi crossing by December 1859 if they would consent to his proposal. The council refused owing to the selfishness of the opposition party. Thus the "Straight Line" failed, a

great detriment to Evansville and a blow to Willard, who had spent five years of his time, a trip to Europe, and 14 trips to New York, all at his own expense. Later the businessmen of Evansville realized their great mistake and built the railroad.

his own protest.

In 1851 Willard Carpenter was elected a member of the legislature. He served during the long term of the 1851-52 session. He was active in getting through several important measures, among them bills for the equalization of taxation; for lowering the salaries of county officers and for raising those of state officers.

Willard became knowledgeable of men and affairs as the village of Evansville developed into a town. He learned that the life of a republic in which every man is a sovereign depends on the education of the masses. He saw a need for a library where citizens of all classes might have access. He wrote the following letter to Thomas E. Garvin, Alexander Gilchrist, Henry F. Blount, John Laval, Matthew Henning and Charles H. Butterfield because he had personal knowledge of their "fitness for the important trust."

Evansville, August 23, 1876

GENTLEMEN: I have intended for many years to devote to some public use, a portion of the property and means which I have acquired by a long life of labor. I have, at various times, endeavored to benefit the community in which my life has been mostly spent, by inaugurating various enterprises. Legal difficulties and other obstacles, have intervened to render inoperative, schemes for the public good which I have at various times undertaken to put in operation.

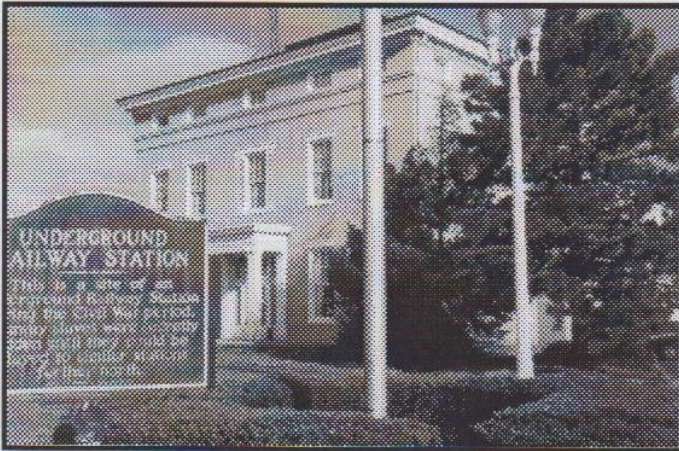
After consultation with many gentlemen of this city, I have concluded without further delay, to establish and endow a public library, to be located in a public park, on land owned by me, situate in the city of Evansville. I am induced to do this in the well-grounded hope that such an institution may become useful toward the improvement of the moral and intellectual culture of the inhabitants of Evansville, and collaterally to those of the state of Indiana; and also toward the enlargement and diffusion of a taste for the fine arts.

The city of Evansville has reached in population and commercial importance a period in which such a scheme should, and I have no doubt will, meet with the hearty approval and assistance of the municipal authorities and all private citizens.

In presenting to you the object I propose, I wish you to understand that the details proper to its organization and government, left to your judgment and discretion, and the perpetuity of that control I confide to you and your successors, to be appointed in the manner prescribed in this letter.

But I desire to present my views in general of the object and purpose of the proposed institution, in order that by no possibility shall the property hereby donated ever be diverted to any other purpose; and that the result of much thought and labor on my part, shall be commensurate with the high objects to be attained; and as a guide, and, as it were, an organic law for you, in the discharge of your duties.

I have directed skilled attorneys to prepare a deed



Willard Carpenter home with Indiana State Format Marker for Underground Railway Station. Photo by Bob Schmidt

Willard began construction on the Carpenter homestead, situated on Carpenter St. in Evansville, in 1848 and completed it in 1849. At the time it was probably the most imposing home in that section of the state. Many people came to view its southern style of architecture with a center broad hall, extensive piazzas and porches. All materials except the brick was shipped from Lawrenceburg, IN. Furniture was purchased by the Carpenters in New York and shipped to Evansville via New Orleans. It was the most substantial building in the city at the time. The Carpenters lived there until their deaths. It was once a stop on the underground railroad. A historical marker on its lawn reads: "Underground Railway Station: This is a site of an Underground Railway Station during the Civil War period. Runaway slaves were secretly hidden until they could be relayed to similar stations further north." The building is now a home to a television station.

In 1865 the Christian Home was founded through Willard's donations. A large, new, twelve room house was built on grounds. This was a home to reform homeless girls who had gone astray. Willard donated \$10,000 and the churches of Evansville contributed over \$14,000.

In 1840 he erected a building upon his own land and established a poor house system. Paupers were kept there at a great saving to the county. This was during his five year service as County Commissioner. Willard also contributed liberally from his own means to repair and corduroy roads. His contributions were so greatly appreciated that he was elected for a second term over

conveying to you the property therein described, estimated by me to be worth the sum of \$400,000; the said deed to be signed and executed by my wife and myself. The property thereby conveyed lies in the limits of Evansville or contiguous thereto.

I desire and direct that the building for the public library hereby proposed shall be located on that portion of the property designated in said deed which is generally known as Carpenter's field. The remainder of said tract of land known as Carpenter's field shall be forever kept as a public park. It shall be, at the discretion of the trustees, enclosed by a neat fence; and fountains, flowers, trees, grass-plants, and all the usual accessories of a park shall be provided and kept in order, so as to make the park a resort for the people for all time to come.

I desire that the co-operation of the city in this scheme of a public park shall be secured, so that the square now owned by the city adjoining this tract of land shall be made subsidiary to the general purpose of promoting public health and popular recreation. The control of the said public park under proper municipal regulations, shall remain with the trustees hereby appointed. You and your successors will constitute forever, a board of trustees, seven in number, to be maintained in perpetual succession for the accomplishment, preservation, and supervision of the purposes for which the library and park are to be established. To you and your successors, therefore, by virtue of the said deed and this instrument, I give full and exclusive power to take, receive and hold in fee simple, the said real estate in said deed particularly described, and to sell and convey in fee simple, at such times and for such prices as may be deemed advisable, all the said real estate except that which is particularly set apart for the said library and park, and out, of the proceeds of such sale to erect a suitable building to improve, ornament and adorn said park, and to purchase books, maps and works of art for the use of the people of all classes, races and sexes, free of charge, forever. A permanent fund shall be created out of the proceeds of such sale for the support of the institution.

The gentlemen accepted the trust and on August 23, 1876, the deed for the property was executed and soon placed on record. The public asked that the institution be named "The Willard Library" and the park named "The Willard Park." Willard agreed. He hoped to see the library in successful operation and immediately started implementing the plan.

James and Merritt Reid, architects of the famous Hotel del Coronado in San Diego, designed the building in the Victorian Gothic Revival style. It has pointed arches, an off-center tower, a steep roof, and terra-cotta owls, which symbolize wisdom, on the side gables. It cost approximately \$80,000. It was erected under the personal supervision and direction of Willard, who visited the building constantly and within two months of his death climbed to the very top of its walls.

Willard Carpenter died on November 6, 1883, before the library was opened to the public. The building



The Willard Library is the oldest public library building in Indiana and specializes in genealogy. Photo by Bob Schmidt

was near completion and the trustees finished it, improved the grounds and held appropriate ceremonies before opening it to the public.

His endowment for the Willard library is an example of the success of Willard's noble life's work. Built in 1885, it is the oldest public library building in Indiana. Now listed on the National Register of Historic Places, it is a regional genealogy center and houses Carpenter's collection on abolition and slavery.

The library is said to be haunted by the "Lady in Grey." Probably Louise, a daughter of Willard and Lucina, the apparition was first noticed by a library employee in 1937 as he fired the furnace in the basement of the building. He saw a veiled lady dressed in glowing grey with grey shoes. Apparently she was jealous of the money her father left for the library, wanted the building and sued its Board Of Trustees for influencing her father in establishing the library when he was of unsound mind. Some claim she will continue to haunt the library until it is turned back to Willard's living heirs. Many staff members have seen the grey shadow of a female that appears suddenly and then vanishes. She has ridden the elevator, flung books from the shelves and turned on the faucet in the second floor bathroom twice. Two genealogists smelled her strong perfume. She followed one employee home where a cold draft of air, a strong perfume and an unseen presence was felt. The library now has a Ghostcam.

Willard Carpenter invariably threw his influence in favor of what was right and advantageous for all the community. He took an active part in all questions of the state and county policies. He devoted his latter years to philanthropic purposes. He was unpretentious, unassuming, and generous. He led a noble life.