

CANAWLERS AT REST

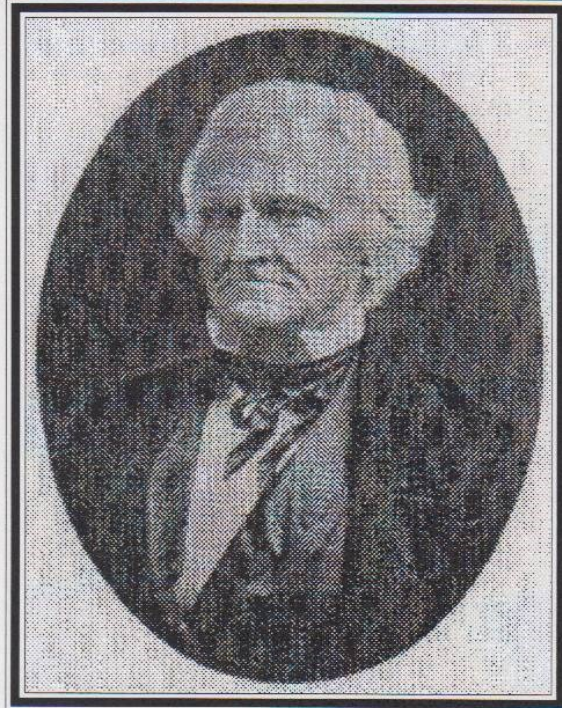
DR. ISAAC COE

b. July 25, 1782

d. July 30, 1855

By Charles B. Huppert

Photo courtesy Indiana Historical Society



The Infamous Dr. Coe

Our country has had its share of thugs. A quick thought brings to mind those who were involved in the Tea Pot Dome scandal, the New York Mafiosi, those who flourished in Chicago in the 1930's, like Al Capone, and even presidents such as LBJ, RMN and WJC have left unfavorable marks on our history. Narrowing our aim to Indiana, while they are fewer, the foremost that comes to mind is Isaac Coe, M. D.

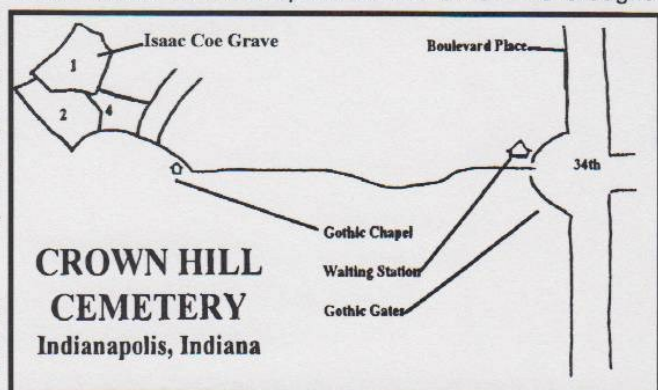
There is no more despicable character in Indiana's early transportation history than that of this medical professional and avid religious advocate who successfully and clandestinely raped Indiana's coffers as his adopted state's citizens were attempting to create commercial waterways, roads and railroads for the development of its interior.

This writer often journeys to Crown Hill Cemetery in north central Indianapolis where, seeing Coe's crumbling tombstone, he soundly kicks it, aiding in its disintegration but causing unfavorable results. In fact, this writer has had consultations with a friendly podiatrist within the last few months. It is unfortunate that his burial plot shares the same section of Crown Hill as canal enthusiasts Nicholas McCarty and Governor Noah Noble.

Yet here his monument stands and most who view it scarcely realize it is of one of Indiana's arch villains. Coe wasn't always buried in Crown Hill. The

first lots in Crown Hill were sold on June 8, 1864, almost ten years after the good doctor died. He kicked the bucket on July 30, 1855, and his remains had resided since in Greenlawn Cemetery. On that first day of sales of lots in Crown Hill, someone paid \$625.00 for Lot 67 in Section 1. It was a goodly sum for those days. But the doctor had probably left his earthly bounds for warmer climate leaving sufficient funds for his eventual permanent resting place. Actually, he was not buried at Crown Hill Cemetery until June 1, 1867, after moldering for nearly twelve years at Greenlawn Cemetery, Indianapolis' public burial ground of which he was an administrator, as were Nicholas McCarty, James M. Ray, Daniel Yandes and other local businessmen.

How did he get here? He came upon this earth in Dover, New Jersey, on July 25, 1782. In May, 1821 he migrated to Indianapolis at age 38. There was only one other doctor in Indianapolis at this time. "He brought



with him a large supply of Peruvian bark – quinine in the rough – and wine” according to Anna Nicholas, biographer of Crown Hill. These substances he used to treat the large number of citizens who were suffering from illnesses, such as malaria, caused by the swampy conditions and newly turned soil. Between ages of 38 to 51 Dr. Coe appeared as an ideal citizen of the City. There was hardly a board or committee on which he did not serve. In 1822 he helped organize the First Presbyterian Church and was soon elected an elder in 1823. He served as an elder until 1853, two years before his death. He lived fashionably on the Circle next to Christ Church, Lot 12 of Block 35.

Dr. Coe started the first Sunday School for children in Indianapolis. It met in a cabinet shop, and because most children could not read, the school’s principle goal was a general education rather than a religious one, although religion was interspersed within the teaching framework. Children were taught to read from the Bible.

As a physician, he was less educated than other doctors that had come to Indianapolis. While he was possibly the most effective in treating malarial types of diseases, during his first period of practice (his allopathic) he was criticized for over medicating his patients. One physician, Dr. Jonathan Cool who was well schooled at Princeton, protested loudly against the type and quantity of medicines administered by Dr. Coe. He even wrote a poem about it:

“Oh, Dr. Coe! Oh, Dr. Coe!
Why do you dose your patients so?
Slow to cure, and quick to kill;
There is no man alive can tell
The awful power of calomel,
And dead men tell no tales.”

Apparently, Dr. Coe took some of this criticism to heart. He eventually became a homeopathic practitioner. Thus instead of administering large doses of drugs which were suppose to cause the body to react in a manner which would drive out the disease, he administered small doses of medicines on the “like cures like” principle. That is, the medicines caused in a patient reactions which were similar to the disease being treated.

Dr. Coe over the years became a friend and colleague with many of high political stature in both the state and local government. So, when it was decided that internal improvements were necessary to ensure the growth of the state in its wilderness areas and to provide transportation to markets, Dr. Coe saw an opportunity. In 1834 he was appointed Clerk of the Fund Commissioners. These officials were in charge of generating capital for the financing of the Wabash and

Erie Canal. Less than two years later, in January 1836, the mammoth Internal Improvement Act was passed, and within a few months Coe was appointed by Governor Noah Noble to replace Nicholas McCarty as a Fund Commissioner who had resigned. During his time as Clerk Coe learned the ropes well. The other two Fund Commissioners, Jeremiah Sullivan and Samuel Hanna, so appreciated him that when they failed their jobs in peddling the State’s bonds on the east coast, they returned home leaving Coe alone to negotiate the sales.

It was during this time, probably even before Coe was appointed Commissioner, that his ethic began to turn south. Should the reader of this short biography think that it is written in an overly critical manner, one should take up Paul Fatout’s Indiana Canals. The Coe saga of corruption begins on page 79 and continues through page 107, where Fatout concludes by calling the good doctor a thief.

One may ask what was it all about. To try to understand the enormously complex activities would take considerable time and effort. Although nine different reference volumes were used to author this short monologue, no clear image of all that Coe did in his corrupt effort emerged. Some things done were no more than examples of negligence such as leaving trunks of Indiana bonds in the vaults of banking companies with whom he was trying to negotiate sales. One of the most grievous malfeasances involved selling Indiana bonds for eighty-eight cents on the dollar to the Morris Canal and Banking Company. The Banking Company then turned around and sold the bonds to others, many of whom were over seas investors, for 96 cents on the dollar. The difference or profit was divided between the Company and Coe. It is suggested that Coe “earned” more than \$100,000 in this manner during the three years he was a Fund Commissioner. By the Fall of 1836 Coe had used some of his ill-gotten money to purchase stock in none other than the Morris Canal and Banking Company, thereby creating a conflict of interest which went ignored. It wasn’t the only conflict.

Coe also sold the bonds on credit. As a result, while Coe’s back pocket got warmer and warmer, the coffers back in Indiana remained cold, dank and empty. Few funds made it back to Indiana for its canal and road projects.

In addition to the Morris Canal \$1.2 million debacle, Coe, again selling on credit, deposited state securities valued at \$100,000 to the Staten Island Whaling Company, of which he again was a shareholder; securities valued at \$300,000 to the Bank of Western New York; securities valued at \$100,000 to the Bank of Erie County, New York; and, securities valued at \$100,000 to the Detroit and Pontiac Railroad, a

company which at the time had one foot in bankruptcy and one foot on a banana peel. The funds that Indiana was to receive turned out to be more mythical than real.

By August 1839, Coe was no longer a Fund Commissioner, and the Morris Canal and Banking Company, as well as others, had defaulted on the contracts with Indiana. This sounded the death knell for further canal and other internal improvements. By the end of the year most all projects under the 1836 Internal Improvement Act had been abandoned. Only the Wabash and Erie Canal project continued, it being significantly funded from the sale of land given to the State for that purpose by the Federal Government.

Early in 1842 the General Assembly determined how the corruption that helped lead to Indiana's insolvency had been committed. As a result two suits were instituted - one against Coe for his handling of the Detroit and Pontiac Railroad and Bank of Erie County transactions and the other against Coe and the Morris Canal and Banking Company. Calvin Fletcher, an Indianapolis lawyer, banker, civic leader and farmer whose diaries provide significant insight into Indiana history, was a surety on Isaac Coe's interim bond from the Spring of 1836 through the 1836-37 legislative session when he was confirmed as a Fund Commissioner. It is natural that Fletcher would have noted in his diary his exposure as surety on this bond. He specifically states (Nov. 8, 1843) that the suits were for "applying mony [sic] unjustly to [Coe's] own private use when engaged as Fund Commissioner & while acting as clerk to the board of Fund Commissioners in N. Y. while selling bonds & raising mony [sic] for our abused system of Internal improvements." When he was confirmed by the legislature in January 1837, Coe provided another bond of which Fletcher was not a surety. Apparently Fletcher would have been found liable on Coe's bond only if Coe had been convicted and only if his "malversations" were committed during the time when Fletcher was surety. The suits, however, didn't come to much. The first was tried before a jury that hung, and on a re-trial in 1847 the defendants were acquitted. The other was earlier dismissed in 1846. Thus Coe got out of all his chicanery scot-free.

Coe spent his later years in the Northwest with his sons where he died. His dead, cold, stiff body was returned to Indianapolis for burial, probably the only condition in which his body would have been accepted by those who remembered how he had ravaged his fellow Indiana citizens.

An article from the *Evansville Courier & Press* of 3-16-2003 entitled "Indy-bound?" says the NCAA tournament isn't the only thing to do in the Hoosier capital. It is paraphrased here. Estella Henze, CSI member, Evansville, IN. →

INDIANAPOLIS - A DESTINATION TODAY

Indianapolis, the swampy, malaria ridden town of Dr. Coe's day, grew into a large city, replaced urban blight with the attractive White River State Park, museums and a Central Canal walk and is a destination for vacationers today. Besides being the home to National Collegiate Athletic Association, RCA Dome, Conesco Fieldhouse and NCAA Hall of Champions with its theater presentations and exhibits about basketball pioneers and displays about NCAA champions in 22 other sports, there are many other attractions within White River State Park. This spring new exhibits and programs are offered by the following: The Indianapolis Zoo has dolphin shows and train rides in addition to its wild animals. White River Gardens has native and exotic butterflies. The Indiana State Museum features "Brain: The World Inside Your Head." IMAX is showing "Lewis and Clark" and "The Lion King." The Eiteljorg Museum of American Indians and Western Art has a free-flowing glass exhibit by Dale Chihuly, a "don't miss" feature in the eyes of your editor, who saw a fantastic exhibit by him in Fort Wayne last year.

The Central Canal Walk, which creates a "garden-like oasis" with its large fountains, antique-style lamps, pedestrian bridge, murals of Indiana life, and walking/jogging paths amid beautiful landscaping, passes many museums and other attractions in White River State Park. The Indiana Historical Society has a Cole Porter music room, library, changing exhibit hall telling the story of Indiana's past and a terrace cafe along side the canal. On its east bank is the USS Indianapolis Memorial, a granite structure built to honor the last U.S. ship to sink in World War II and those who died on board. On its north bank is the Medal of Honor Memorial listing 3,432 recipients of our nation's highest military honor.

Following the original Central Canal towpath visitors see The Indianapolis Museum of Art's artwork from Africa, China and Europe, a sculpted garden, botanical gardens, greenhouses, wildlife refuge, and restaurant located on the 152-acre donated Lilly estate. They also view flowering trees and ducks in Holcomb Gardens behind Butler University.

Around town they visit the Children's Museum, Indianapolis Motor Speedway Hall of Fame Museum, City Market, Christ Church Cathedral, Scottish Rite Cathedral, Crown Hill Cemetery, Garfield Park & Conservatory, Indiana War Memorial Plaza, Soldiers & Sailors Monument and Civil War museum below, 1888 State Capitol, and homes of President Benjamin Harrison and James Whitcomb Riley. Circle Centre Mall and varied restaurants lure tourists inside.