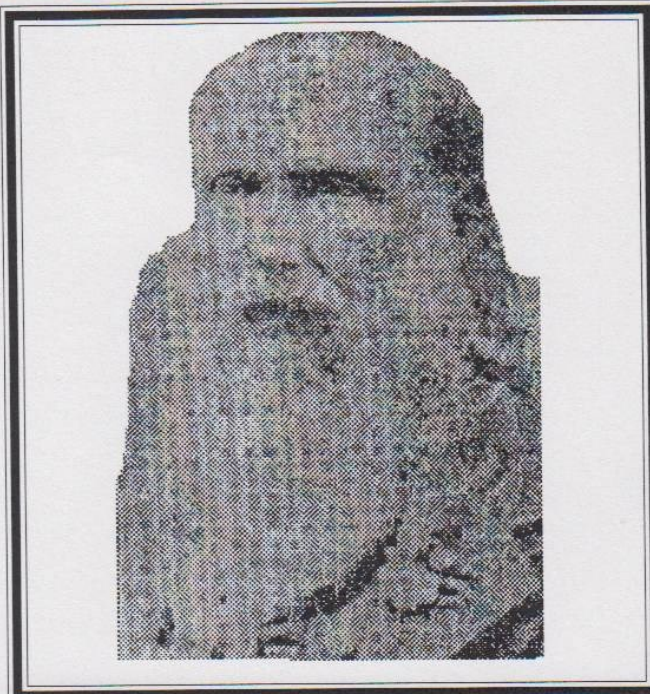


CANAWLERS AT REST

ABRAHAM B. CONWELL

b. August 15, 1796
d. November 1, 1886

By Carolyn Schmidt
with help from
Phyllis Mattheis



Abraham B. Conwell was born in Lewiston, Delaware in 1796 to William and Nancy A. (King) Conwell of English and Welsh decent. Also of interest is that A.B. was named after his grandfather Abraham Conwell, who married the daughter of Betsy Ross, the maker of the first American flag.

At age fifteen A.B. was apprenticed as a tanner and continued in that trade for five years. In 1817, at the age of 21, he and James, his brother, left Washington City (D.C.) on foot heading west. When they arrived at Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, James went into a shipyard, but A.B. continued on to Kentucky and resided in the little settled country for two years.

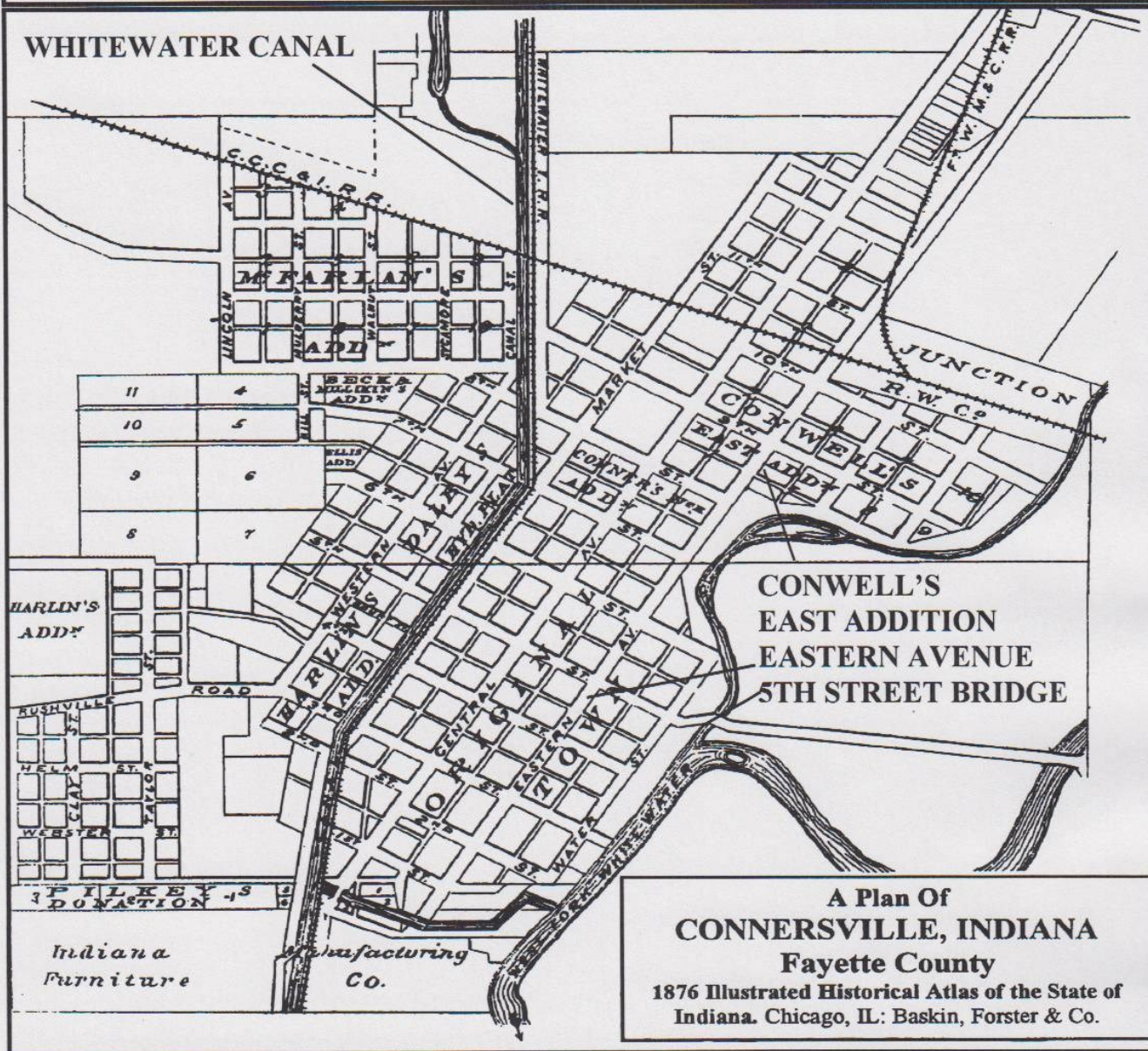
In 1818, three of A. B.'s brothers, James, Isaac and William, who were already in the West, made a six-months tour on horseback through much of the Northwest. They searched for the most advantageous location to settle and determined that if the Whitewater Valley in Indiana was not worth settling, then they might as well go back East. This was the place to live. James, a Methodist minister, selected Laurel in Franklin County. Issac made Liberty in Union County his home. William chose Cambridge City in Wayne County.

In 1819 A.B. followed their advice and settled at Connersville in Fayette County. The county had a population of 3,950 in 1820. Connersville was a growing community around which much of the population was centered. There A.B. adopted the motto, "Desire and ye shall receive—knock and it shall be opened unto you."

In a newspaper article written by Kate Herron in recent years, she says that A. B. came with \$10,000 and bought much government land at a small price per acre. Earlier histories report that he began by buying one acre of land from Mr. John Conner, the founder of Connersville, on which he started a tannery and once again was in the tanning business. The tanyard was interesting to the local boys and young adults who frequented the place. A treadmill was used by a pet bear that labored faithfully to pump water, which filled the vats. The tanyard was not far from the grist-mill owned by Conner. Conner later sold the mill to DeCamp, who in turn sold it to A.B., who ran it until it was worn out.

On February 22, 1821, A.B. married Elizabeth Sparks, daughter of Matthew Sparks, formerly of Maryland, but later of Franklin County, Indiana. The newlyweds lived in Connersville.

A county press in the 1870s carried reminiscences by a writer known as "Rambler." He says: "The old mill was familiar to all the pioneers for many miles around. Going to mill was a task in those days, and often a trip of forty or fifty miles on horseback. Each grist was numbered, and frequently was several days awaiting its turn, while a number of the customers would be in camp close by. The Saturdays of our boyhood days were spent in ramblings, and as a guest of Lafe Conwell (A. B.'s son Lafayette), our school mate at that time, the old mill was examined with boyish curiosity, and its mysteries solved. In after years, when there with grists, we were more interested in seeing the miller manipulate



the toll dish. The honesty of the miller is proverbial, but they were sometimes absent-minded, and would repeat the operation of taking toll, and have been known to forget that important proceeding, as I have received, as the product of a grist, a range of from twenty-eight pounds to forty-six pounds of flour to each bushel of wheat at that same old mill."

Although the tanyard prospered and is included in an 1821 list of Connersville businesses, A.B. decided to abandon the business and engaged in the mercantile or dry goods business for a while. Calico was brought over the mountains from Baltimore by horse and wagon and sold at 75 cents per yard. Hands received about 25 cents per day for their labor. Corn was almost given away.

The Conwells built and lived in what in its day was a fine house. It was located a little way north of the Conwell mill.

A subscription paper was circulated on Christmas Day in 1833 to raise funds to purchase a bell for the County Seminary's cupola. They raised \$24. A.B. contributed \$1.00 toward the bell. It weighed seventy-five and a half pounds, cost 40 cents per pound for a total of \$30.20. Others must have later contributed to its purchase price.

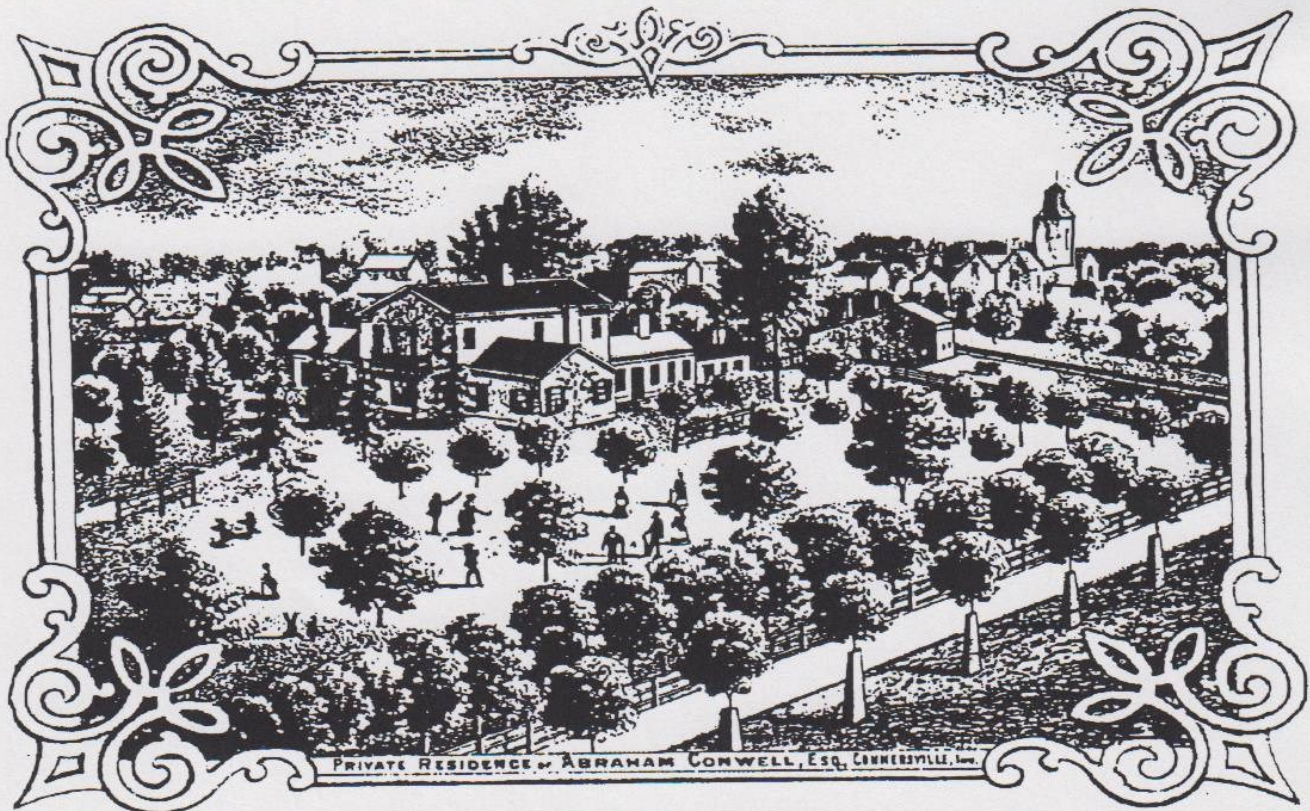
Samuel Little wrote "Pioneer Days in Fayette County in 1879 that described conditions when he arrived there in 1833 as follows:

"That portion of the county lying east of the 'old boundary line' being settled ten years earlier than the west side, had nearly passed the stage of log-cabins. Every farm had its occupant, many had comfortable frame or brick dwellings, and some had barns and fruit-bearing orchards; but nearly all the improvements on our western border were of a primitive character, and it is mainly of this part of the county, in which I (the author) lived for fifty-three years, I would speak.

"Farms ranged in size from a forty-acre tract to a quarter section, and nearly all of them had some improvement. The log-cabin was the prevailing dwelling, and it was almost always surrounded by a cleared patch, or deadening, ripening for the fire, by whose agency it was cleared up for the plow. So dense was the forest that the only evidences of other occupied farms near by was the sound of the axe, the crowing fowls or barking watch-dog.

"Paths leading from cabin to cabin passed around large trees or logs and over streamlets, led us through the tangle of spice-wood or pawpaw in our neighborly visits, and highways were marked out and corduroy bridges bore us over marshes on our way to market, public worship, or to mill in our wagons, up hill and down the same, and through streams, which were all without bridges. The stumps, roots and logs gave the beaten track a serpentine direction, which required great

skill in the teamster. If Levi Conwell were here he could tell you all about it, or if you ask Uncle Billy Simpson how he used to freight A.B. Conwell's whisky and flour to Cincinnati and return with a load of store goods, he can describe it better than I can. Pork and the articles named were our staple productions. Cincinnati was our only market. Our pork was driven on foot, requiring an average of eight days to reach our destination, three to close out the sale, and two more to return, The entire trip consumed about two week's time. Wheat sold in Cincinnati in 1834 at 50 cents per bushel, flour for \$2.75 per barrel, and Uncle Abe (Abraham Conwell) can give you the price of whisky; as I did not handle it my memory is at fault. We got but little money, and we spent little. Our food grew on our farms, and our clothing was mostly home-made, growing in the flax patch or on the sheep's back, and its manufacture was mostly domestic. The flax-pulling and wool-picking were frequently done by combination or neighborhood frolics, and were occasions of great social pleasure. There are mothers present who would tell how they used to race with their sweet-hearts at the flax-hullings, and some of them recollect how the points of their fingers ached after pulling the burrs and stick-tights out of the wool. Yes, and how they enjoyed their trip on foot to the spelling-match or singing-school with their beaux by their side, just to help them over the fences and mud holes. Or, perchance, they rode behind on the same horse, so that if the horse stumbled they could hold on?..."



Source: An Illustrated Historical Atlas of Fayette County, Indiana 1875. Chicago, IL/Higgins, Belden & Co.

A. B. invested heavily in the Whitewater Valley Canal, which promised so much for Connersville. He invested in real estate. The canal, begun by the State of Indiana in 1836, ran into difficulties. When the question of completing the canal arose in 1839-40, Conwell was one of the leading promoters of a new Canal Company, which eventually secured the rights to complete the canal in 1842. He was the heaviest stockholder in the company. A million dollars had been spent and the canal had only been completed as far as Brookville in Franklin County. The Canal Company completed it as far as Laurel in 1843, to Connersville by June 1845, and to Cambridge City shortly thereafter spending another half a million dollars.

The First Presbyterian Church in Connersville was organized in 1824 and built its first church in 1833. This old building was sold to George Fryberger. On April 14, 1845, A.B. sold land to the church for a new building.

Shortly after the completion of the canal in 1846-47, A.B. built a new larger flouring-mill, which was located on North Eastern Avenue. He installed the latest and most improved machinery. He was engaged in the milling business for years and operated one of the most extensive flouring-mills in that section of the State. It had the capacity of manufacturing from 150 to 200 barrels of flour per day. Farmers awaiting their turn to have their grists ground would camp on the green. The mill was carried on in the Conwell name until its cessation in 1866, when its water-power was destroyed by the great freshet of that year. After that the building was used by the Triple Sign Company until it caught fire. As of 1917 a part of the mill was still standing.

Pork-packing engaged the attention of many Connersville citizens for about 25 years following the completion of the canal. For a time hog-slaughtering and pork-packing were the leading industries and were carried on in several extensive factories. Prior to the canal hogs were driven to market. In 1822 it required the production from about three counties to make one drove of 250 hogs. A.B. went into buying hogs, grain, etc. and, in time, became a very extensive pork packer. He purchased a lot of 1,500 hogs in 1828 at 75 cents per hundred. By 1846 and the use of the canal there were 6,000 hogs packed in Connersville.

In the late 1840s or early 1850s A.B. built the Merrill block in Connersville for his pork packing business. In 1852 Conwell & Sons killed for Daniel Hankins. That year 25,000 hogs were slaughtered in the town. By 1856 about 11,000 hogs were slaughtered, packed and sold by just the firms of A.B. Conwell & Sons and J. Holton & Co. alone for \$6 per hundred. Conwell's transactions sometimes amounted to over \$600,000 a

year. This was a huge sum of money for the time.

A.B. was buying up land in Fayette county. At one time he owned about fifteen hundred acres. He was able to have several business ventures going at a time—his store, flour mill, pork-packing establishment and hundreds of acres of farming land..

The canal was a failure. In less than two years two of the most extensive aqueducts were swept away, several feeder dams nearly destroyed, and many minor injuries sustained by heavy floods. However, the Canal Company in a little less than a year had repaired the canal and navigation was resumed. Almost immediately there was another flood. Such repeated disasters disheartened the Company. Shareholders became disgusted with the high assessments. The canal was abandoned. The railroad took over the towpath for its iron rails.

When the canal began sinking, A.B. invested heavily in railroad enterprises. He took part in raising funds to build the branch of the Cincinnati, Indianapolis & Western Railroad that connected Dayton and Rushville. He invested \$60,000. Since the railroad eventually turned into a failure like the canal, he got little in direct returns, the appreciation of the real estate, of which A. B. was one of the largest holders in the county, paid off.

The county commissioners put the old court house, Clerk and Recorder's office and the old jail up for sale on January, 1849. A.B. purchased the court house and jail for \$575. The other building was sold to Sherman Scofield for \$96.

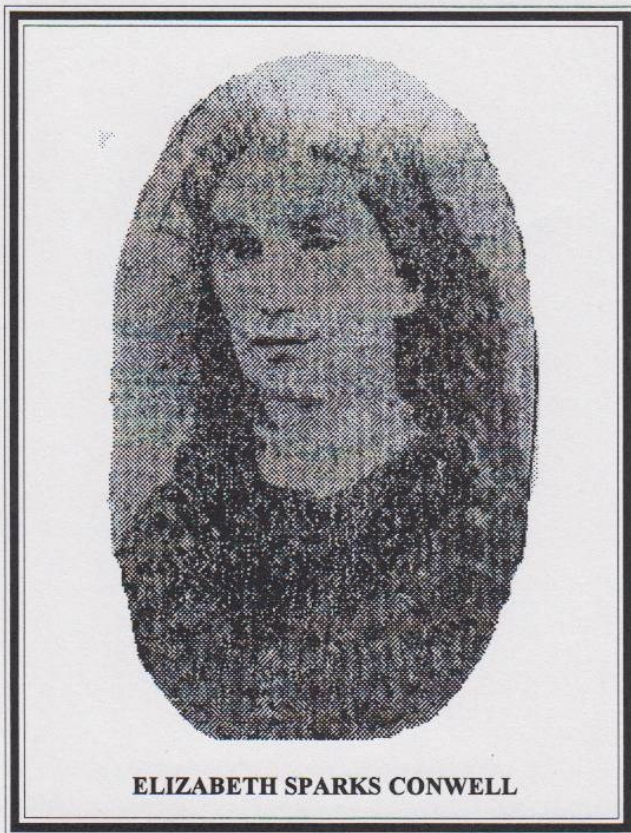
In August 1850 land was purchased on which to build a church for St. Gabriel's parish. The location of the site seemed very far from the Connersville business section. A.B. generously gave money and made acquiring the land possible. The church was built between 1851-1853. In later years the wisdom in selecting the site became evident. It was north of the Cincinnati, Indianapolis & Western tracks, on Eastern avenue and the town eventually expand to that far north.

The Bank of Connersville was organized in 1852. It started with twice as much capital as any of the other fifteen banks organized in the state under the May 18, 1852 act providing for state banks. Its original stock was \$400,000. Its first president was George Fryberger. It was located in the rear of Fryberger's store, which stood at the southwest corner of Central Avenue and Fifth Street. It built a three-story brick building on Central Avenue between Fourth and Fifth Streets. A. B. Conwell followed Fryberger as its president in 1853.

A.B. was a charter member of the first Masonic

lodge established in Connersville. Although a life-long Jacksonian Democrat, he never consented to become a candidate for public office. He took a hearty interest in the welfare of the community and community decisions such as the location of the bridge across the Whitewater River. Colonel Hankins and others wanted to place it as the end of Third Street facing out from the Rushville road. Conwell and others owning property and businesses two squares up the street wanted it leading from Fifth street. Conwell offered extra inducements. George Frybarger, stepped into the intersection of Central avenue and Fifth street on the day the question was to be decided, drove a nail into the earth and said, "Gentlemen, for years to come these four corners will be the center of the town," and the bridge was placed where A.B. suggested. He focused his energy in the business word. His integrity was unquestionable.

One historian refers to A.B. Conwell as the last of the four Romans—one who lives between the past and present—and says he was a man of wonderful natural intellect and judgment. He was known for his wise forecast as well as for his quiet success in all his business and speculations. He was recognized as the most prominent merchant of Connersville and was identified with its history from 1819 to 1886—a citizen who contributed to the advancement of the different phases of growth of Fayette county.



ELIZABETH SPARKS CONWELL

A. B. and Elizabeth had three children:

Lafayette, who was associated with his father in business but died before A.B., married Anna D. Conwell and had 6 children:

William D.
David T.
Annie C.
Cornelia
Lafayette
Rose M.

Anna K. became the wife of William Merrill, a banker and merchant of Connersville on November 1, 1840. William died before A.B. died. They had 9 children:

William, who was the only Democrat that served as city councilman for many years

Charles

Frank P., who was the proprietor of a restaurant in Grass Valley, California

Conwell, a farmer

Sarah Elizabeth, widow of Dr. George Garver, a prominent physician

John, a farmer who lived with his mother in the old homestead

Emma, wife of William Havens of Rushville

Minnie, wife of Andrew A. Norman of Cincinnati

Anna M., wife of McIlheny of New York city

Charles K. died in 1876 before A. B.

Elizabeth Sparks Conwell, A.B.'s wife died on February 12, 1876. She is listed as Betsy in the City Cemetery book.

Abraham B. Conwell died on November 1, 1886. He was ninety years old. A.B. owned Lot 57 in Section 1 of City Cemetery, which is located at 13th and Grand Avenue in Connersville. His grave is in Lot 57 along the south side, about ten rows west of the middle drive in the southwest section.

Today Lot 57 is mostly bare ground. The few stones there are no longer readable. One recent stone stands for Fritz Conwell, who was buried in 1958. According to the cemetery's records, there are eleven Conwells in Lot 57, including the two sons. Daughter Anna is buried with the Merrills.

No obituary was found in the *Connersville Times* for A. B. Conwell, but a later undated article about the "kin" of Betsy Ross in Indiana was found in the Conwell file at the Fayette County Public Library. It carried the pictures of Abraham and Elizabeth used in this

publication and the following story:

"Another of Betsy's 'close of kin' in Indiana was Abraham B. Conwell, of Connersville. He accumulated considerable wealth and although not like James (another of Betsy's kin) in religious bent, found pleasure in giving sites for churches in his Indiana home. He also was a public benefactor in other ways, having contributed to the establishment of rights of way for the Lake Erie & Western and the Junction railroads, the latter afterward being known as the Cincinnati, Hamilton & Dayton railroad. He gave eleven acres of land to the furtherance of the Junction railroad. When Abraham, or Abram as many called him, died in 1886, five ministers, Catholic and Protestant, walked at the head of his funeral procession, thus recognizing his qualities of heart and citizenship.

"Genealogists have record of fifteen descendants of Betsy Ross still living in Indiana, all from the Conwell line. Among them is Miss Laurel Conwell Thayer, attached to the probation division of the Marion county courts. Others are Mrs. J. Ellison Fish, Russell Fish, Miss June Cotton, Frank Merrill, George Garver and Clyde Lewis Garver, of Indianapolis; Mrs. John Frazee, Walter Smith, Dr. Hale Piercy and Dr. Horace Piercy, of Rushville; Lafayette Conwell, Miss Cornelia D. Conwell and Fritz Conwell, of Connersville, and Will Merrill, of Richmond.

The Connersville Times also recorded some of the Conwell family's activities following his death:

November 3, 1886 - Mrs. William (Anna) Merrill is making improvements to the old Conwell homestead.

November 24th, 1886 - The old Conwell Mill is being leased as a stock room by McFarlan Carriage Co.

December 8, 1886 - Connersville and Milton Turnpike will be made a free road as of 1 January 1887.

December 15, 1886 - William Merrill and Dave Conwell are thinking of going to the golden state.

Sources:

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NEW CANAL BOOKS

CANALS by Robert J. Kapsch has just been published by the W. W. Norton & Company of New York and London in association with the Library of Congress as part of its series of visual source books in architecture, design and engineering. The 310 page book is the largest source of material on American canals and is full of black and white photographs and diagrams of canal structures throughout the United States. A CD-ROM accompanies the book and has these images on it. The book has an introduction to American canals, which is followed by a capsule tour of over three dozen U.S. canals with a description and illustration for each one. There are chapters on canal structures, the Morris Canal and the Chesapeake & Ohio Canal.

Larry Turner, CSI member from Ohio, tipped off headquarters and we purchased the book. It was well done with the exception that it missed some of the smaller canals. Headquarters verbally recommended it to other members who have purchased it and found it interesting.

Wedding of the Waters: The Erie Canal and the Making of a Great Nation by Peter L. Bernstein also published by Norton was reviewed in the Ft. Wayne Journal Gazette on January 8, 2005. The article said that the Erie Canal is probably the most written about transportation system in U. S. history and is often considered the most influential. Today the canal is little more than a tourist attraction. Bernstein gives the story of its conception, construction, drama, and how it inspired a burst of progress in America. He shows how it made New York City the greatest city in the nation and perhaps the world. The 448 page book puts the canal into perspective.

CSI headquarters was given the book review by Tom Castaldi, CSI member from Fort Wayne. It was also favorably reviewed in Preservation magazine. It said "Bernstein freshens it up by setting it within the larger saga of a young nation striving to find its way...The Canal is a monument to ingenuity...(it was) the Internet of the era."