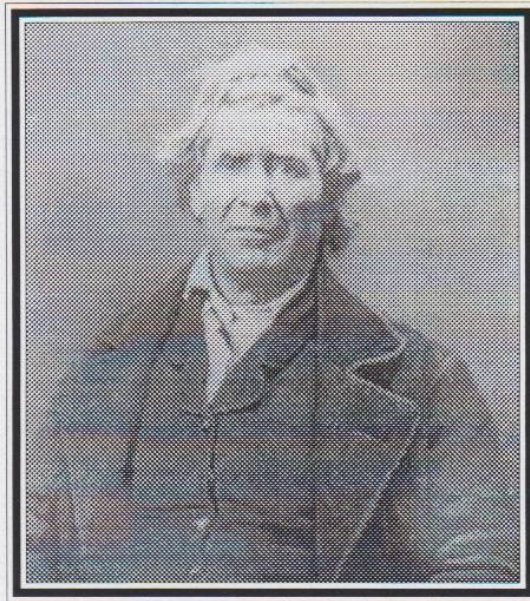


CANAWLERS AT REST

WILLIAM DIGBY

b. 1802
d. May 23, 1864

By Robert F. Schmidt
Portrait by George Winter



Those who came to the Wabash Valley in the early 1800s faced many risks but, as the War of 1812 ended and the Indians were defeated at the Battle of the Thames in 1813, life became more tolerable. Adventurers moved in to take advantage of land sales as the federal government negotiated land from the Indians. William Digby was one of these persons. He was born in Newport, Kentucky in 1802, just across the Ohio River from Cincinnati. He moved to Ohio and as a young man began plying the rivers and streams of western Indiana. His travels as a trader along the Wabash gave him familiarity with the navigation of its waters.

William, a gambler and speculator, remaining single throughout his life, was able to spend his time exploring the rivers with an eye to making economic gain. Indiana had become a state in December, 1816, and new territory was continually being added for development by treaty negotiations with the Miami and Pottawattomi. The Treaty of St. Mary's Ohio in 1818, negotiated by Judge Benjamin Parke and General Lewis Cass, opened up much of the remaining Indian lands south of the Wabash River to settlement. This was the so called "New Purchase" and eventually resulted in 37 new counties being formed. In 1820 the Delaware Indians, moving west, vacated the central portion of the state, allowing more settlers to move in.

In the fall of 1824 Indiana's capital was moved from Corydon to the banks of Fall Creek. This town was named Indianapolis. A land office was opened at Crawfordsville that same year. It was at this office with the first land sale on December 24, 1824, that William Digby, age 22, filed a claim for the site that was to become Lafayette. He purchased 84 acres for which he paid \$231.63. The land lay on the east side of the Wa-

bash just a few miles south of the ferry operated by John Davis and the old French trading post of Peter Longlois. Lafayette's Ninth Street today leads north out of town toward Davis Ferry Rd and Davis Ferry Park, just south of Battle Ground.

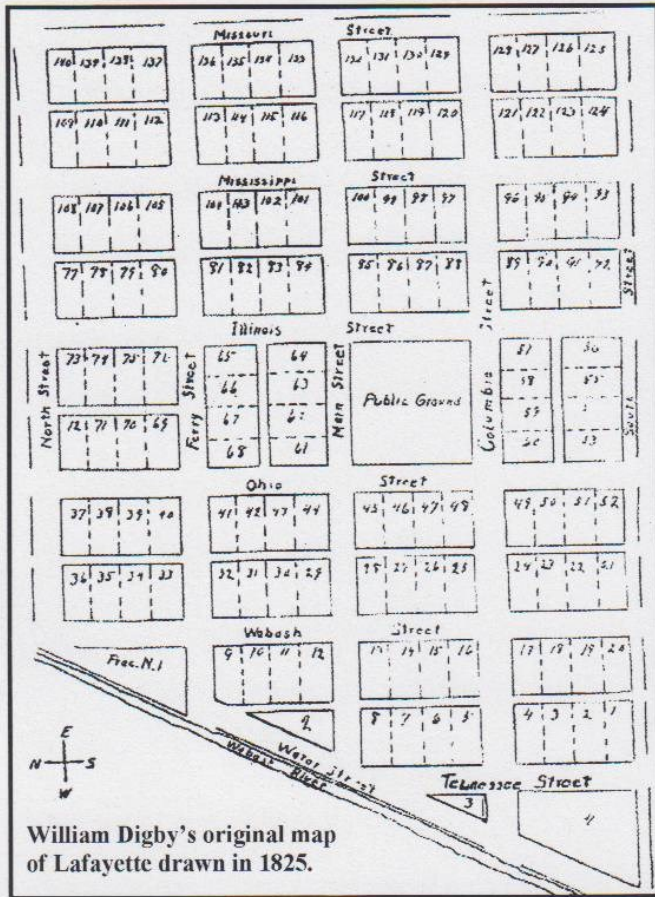
Why did Digby chose this site.? It was primarily because he thought that this would be the head of steamboat navigation on the Wabash. Steamboats had made it as far as Terre Haute by 1823. Based on navigational improvements the state was then making on the river Digby felt that the steamboats could come further up stream. Digby was strictly investing for gain. He employed a Crawfordsville inn keeper, Robert Johnson, to accompany him in the spring of 1825 and together they laid out the initial city of Lafayette. It consisted of 140 lots along the Wabash from today's South St to North St and east to 6th St, which he called Missouri St. His public square was located where the courthouse is today.

Three days after establishing the town he sold most of his holdings to Samuel Sargeant. Digby retained 20 acres, a ferry landing and a small plot in the town. The selling price was \$240. Sargeant in turn wanted to enhance the likelihood that the town would become a county seat so he sold 5/8ths of the odd numbered lots to leading businessmen in Crawfordsville - Isaac C. Elston, John Wilson and Jonathan W. Powers - for \$130. These too were speculator/investors. Elston went on in 1832 to layout Michigan City, IN.

Why did Digby choose the name Lafayette for his new town? We must remember that his objective was to make a profit so he wanted to promote the site.

What better way to draw public attention, than to name your town for a famous Revolutionary War figure. The Marquis de Lafayette was touring the country at the time. There was already plenty of excitement in the state from the anticipated visit of this French hero. In fact his steamboat, *Mechanic* hit a submerged ledge in the Ohio River and he was shipwrecked at Cannelton, IN

tion. In 1827 Isaac Shelby plotted a town 11 miles southwest of Lafayette on the high ground above the west side of the Wabash, which he named for Marquis de Lafayette's home, LaGrange. At one time LaGrange was a bustling river town of 40 property owners that held promise of rivaling all of the other area cities including Lafayette. However, when the Wabash & Erie Canal arrived at Lafayette, LaGrange found itself on the wrong side of the river leaving the town diminished and eventually vanished. It was located on CR 950 in Shelby Township where there is a historical marker today. Even Granville, another rival town, which was located on the canal south of Lafayette near Wea Creek, once challenged Lafayette but today only a marker stands at the site.



Again Digby's speculative vein can be seen in his next scheme. On March 2, 1827, the US Congress passed a bill that provided a land grant bill to Indiana if it agreed to build a canal connecting the waters of the Maumee and the Wabash rivers. The land grant was for alternate sections (1 square mile each) of land on either side of the canal route from the Tippecanoe River in Indiana to the AuGlaize River at Defiance Ohio. Indiana accepted the grant on January 5, 1828, negotiated with Ohio to build a canal and began breaking ground on February 22, 1832. In 1832 when Indiana began the Wabash & Erie Canal, Digby quickly moved to layout a town on the east side of the Wabash just opposite where the Tippecanoe River enters the Wabash. Assuming that this was going to be the head of steamboat and canal intersection, he plotted out the town of Americus, choosing a patriotic name to enhance the prestige of the town. This time it didn't work.

Canal Commissioners determined that Lafayette would be a better terminus and more accessible by steamboat. The cost for the 14 mile 5 chain extension was estimated to be about \$204,000 and offered a better port. In 1834-35 the General Assembly agreed and authorized the extension. The town of Americus never realized much potential but it does remain today with a restaurant and a few homes along the Wabash.

on May 9, 1825, a few weeks before Digby laid out Lafayette on May 25th. Indiana Governor James B. Ray welcomed Lafayette at Louisville in grand style but the war hero never came to his namesake city in northwestern Indiana.

Sargent succeeded in gaining support. In Jan 1826 Tippecanoe County was established with Lafayette as the county seat. On April 24, 1826, President John Quincy Adams appointed Samuel Sargent as the town's first postmaster. In the summer of 1826 the first steamboat, the *Bold Eaton*, arrived at Lafayette as Digby had anticipated and shortly thereafter a wharf on the river was built to accommodate river traffic. From 1826-27 Digby ran a trading store on his plot of land at the foot of Main St.

William Digby, a bachelor, was not only a riverman and land speculator he also made a profession of playing cards. "Old Digby," as he was called, loved to play a game called "old sledge." This was a very popular 19th Century game for two or three players. It was also called "All Fours" or "Seven Up." There is a famous account of him and Judge John Pettit playing all night. In this midnight marathon Digby lost his home in the game. Pettit put the house on wheels and rolled it through town to a lot he owned. Later Judge Pettit made this house his law office. Digby's gambling got him into the county court as early as 1827 and many times thereafter. He was often in the courtroom de-

The town of Lafayette was not without competi-

fending himself against charges related to his weakness for gambling or selling of liquor without a license. In 1906 a history researcher, Alva O. Reser, described Digby as " a great man to playcards... an all-round fellow liked by all classes of people... always ready to fight or do anything in support of what he believed to be right."

close observation, marked him as a man of more than ordinary intelligence. He was generous to a fault, credulous, confiding and was oftener sinned against than sinning. Whatever of human frailty there might have been that marred his early manhood, it should all be forgotten in the blameless character of his riper years."

In the early 1850's, Digby went west to the California gold fields, probably to gamble rather than dig for gold. Apparently his luck was not too good as he returned shortly to Lafayette. In 1858 he was employed as a watchman for the Wabash Railroad at the bridge across the Wabash River at Attica, Indiana. The 1860 US Census shows him listed as a Bridge Tender.

Digby's sister, Mary West, as well as his mother also lived in Lafayette. His mother, Catherine Bailey Cook Digby, died in 1849. All three are buried in Greenbush Cemetery. A tulip tree and a marker were placed beside Digby's tombstone in 1925 at the 100th anniversary of the founding of Lafayette.

Digby lived an interesting life of gambling, speculation and carefree living. He died on May 23, 1864 at age 62, when he was living at the home of W. H. Watson in Lafayette.

Mark Jenners, an early resident of Lafayette describes Digby as follows:

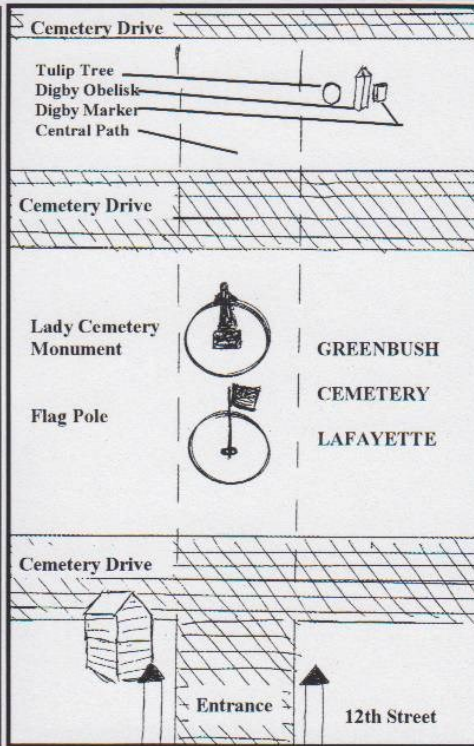
His obituary in the *Lafayette Courier* is as follows:

"I knew William Digby very well. He was a big man in every way. He was six feet tall and weighed 200 pounds. He never married. He lived in Lafayette with the family of W. H. Watson [located at 10th and Heath Streets]. He was a great man to play cards. Seven-up was his favorite game. He used to go on flat boats to New Orleans. He was captain of these boats and would play cards all the way down on the flat boats and then he would come back on steamers and play cards all the way back. He was an all 'round old fellow and was liked by all classes of people He was inclined

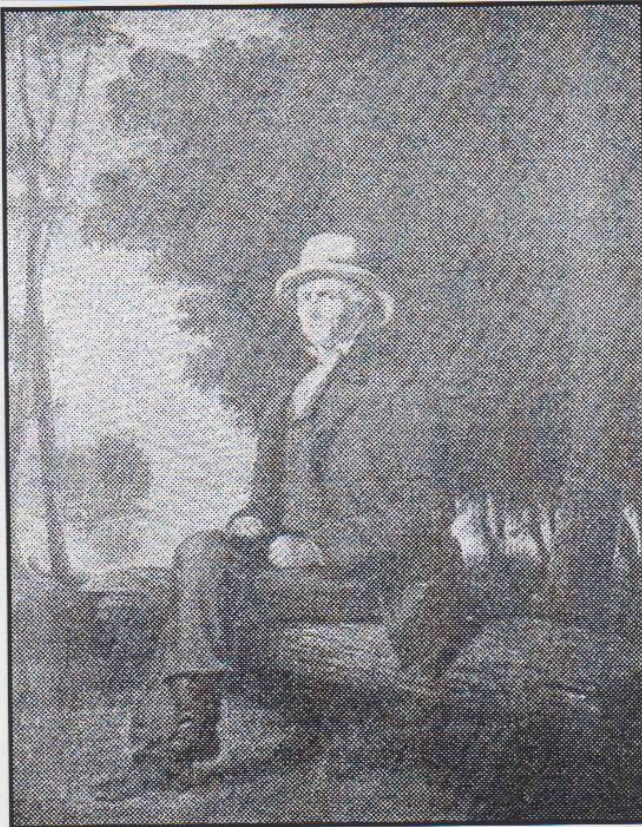
He was an improvident man, and lost his advantage (referring to the profit he made by selling land at Americus) by luckless ventures...He had enjoyed only a limited education, but his practical common sense, and

to be light complexioned and had light hair. I don't believe he was much of a hunter but he liked to fish. He was a regular frontier all-around man. He was always ready to fight or do anything in support of what he believed to be right."

William Digby's date of birth and death are inscribed on the right-hand-side of this obelisk in Lafayette's Greenbush Cemetery located to the right of the central path by a tulip tree and a marker to its left was placed on his grave in 1925 at the time the tree was planted. Photo by Bob Schmidt



Although Digby was never really a canawler as such, he played an important role in establishing Lafayette, which became an important port on the Wabash & Erie Canal. There are two portraits of William Digby, by George Winter, who also lived in Lafayette until his death in 1876. A picture of Digby sitting on a log was painted in 1852 and hangs in the Lafayette County Public Library. A bust portrait shown on the first page of this article was painted later and hangs in the Tippecanoe County His-



Portrait of William Digby painted in 1852 by George Winter from a postcard printed for the 1925 celebration. Postcard from the collection of Carolyn Schmidt

torical Museum.

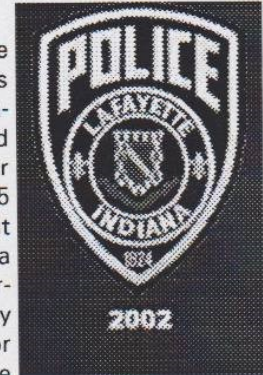
Digby also is remembered on an octagonal artesian monument that stands about twenty-five feet high and was erected in 1887. On the east side of the monument is a bas relief portrait of William Digby and is inscribed below, "In memory of William Digby, founder of the city of LaFayette, May 27, 1825, born 1802, died 1864.

For the 1825 Centennial Celebration of September 27-30, postcards were printed with Winter's painting of Digby sitting on a log. Beneath the picture the text reads: William Digby, Founder of Lafayette, Ind. From painting by George Winter, 1852. "The original Town of Lafayette was laid out May 25, 1825, by William Digby. Two days later he filed a copy of the original plat in the United States Land Office at Crawfordsville. He named the town after General de Lafayette, a French General, who aided this country in obtaining its independence."

He is also portrayed on one of the four busts on the second floor of the Tippecanoe County Court House along with William Henry Harrison, John Purdue and Te-

cumseh. They were created by Susan B. Graham Wilde as part of the 150th celebration of the founding of Lafayette.

The current badge of the Lafayette Police Officers reflects William Digby's influence on Lafayette. Police Officers started wearing shoulder patches after 1943 and since then have had 5 different designs. The current patch designed in 2002 contains a center shield & banner from a portion of the family crest used by the Marquis de Lafayette for whom the city was named. The gold Fleur-de-lis represent the early French exploration and settlement in the Wabash Valley. The date of 1824 is the year the city was conceived in the mind of William Digby, its founding father.



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