

## CANAWLERS AT REST

# WILLIAM S. EDSALL

**b. Apr. 1809**  
**d. Nov. 29, 1876**

**By Cynthia Powers**

Drawing by Morris R. Perry from  
"Pioneers Resting in Lindenwood."

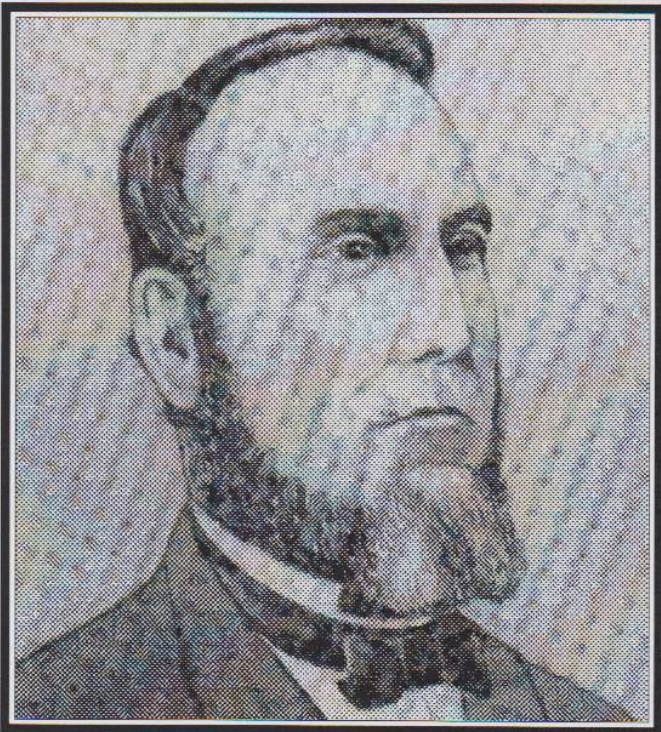
"Sad and Troubled Was His Life.  
May His Rest Be Sweet."

So reads the tombstone of William S. Edsall in Lindenwood Cemetery in Ft. Wayne, IN. The inscription probably alludes to his financial ups and downs, and to the fact that his wife, Louisa, had died almost 20 years before. Mr. Edsall's canal connection is that he was a surveyor for the canal from 1826-28, before becoming a trader and a partner in constructing the plank road from Fort Wayne to Bluffton about 1850.

Librarians at the Allen County Public Library found Mr. Edsall's obituary in the **Fort Wayne Sentinel** of Friday, December 1, 1876. I quote from it now:

"Mr. William S. Edsall, esq., who was stricken with paralysis in the county clerk's office last Saturday noon, lingered until Wednesday evening at 8:27 (illegible) when his death took place. From the time of his attack until the end he was in an unconscious condition. Everything was done for him that medical skill could devise or the affection of devoted relatives suggest, but all in vain, for the hand of death was upon him. The following carefully prepared sketch of his life will be of interest to all who knew him.

.....A sketch of his life is really a sketch of Fort Wayne from the time that she was a mere Indian trading post to the present day.



Edsall was born in April, 1809, in Orange county, New York, and was the fourth son of Peter and Catharine Edsall. They, with their four children, emigrated from New York in 1812, proceeding as far as Pittsburgh in wagons, and thence in a flatboat on the Ohio River to Cincinnati. Here they landed, and fastening the boat to a large tree on the south bank of the river, encamped for the night. Before morning a heavy wind storm came up which tore up the tree by the roots, hurling it upon the flatboat, which was lost, together with the entire outfit of the Edsalls, including the Bible which contained their family record.

From this point, nothing daunted, they proceeded to Montgomery county, O., where they "farmed" rented land for two years.

Whence they removed to Darke county, Ohio, and afterwards to St. Mary's, O. At that time the Indian treaties were being made at those points, calling together a great many people, and the Edsall's, by keeping a boarding house, accumulated sufficient means to purchase eighty acres of land at Shane's crossing. At this latter point the father of our subject died in 1822, leaving a widow and nine children who removed to this point, arriving here in 1824, fifty-two years ago.

The sons then selected their avocations for life. Samuel, the eldest, who died here in 1865, was apprenticed to Col. Hugh Hanna as a carpenter and joiner; John became a tailor, and Simon, who still lives here, engaged in farming.

Our subject, Wm. S. Edsall, in 1826 joined the corps of United States topographical engineers who were

detailed to survey a route for the Wabash and Erie Canal. In June of that year the survey was commenced at Fort Wayne, but the entire corps was prostrated by sickness and the chief, Col. James Skinner, died in the old fort. He was succeeded by Col. Asa Moore, who prosecuted the survey to the mouth of the Tippecanoe, and he, too died at his post in 1828. Mr. Edsall remained with this corps until Col. Moore's death and suffered much from the prevalent diseases.

...The widow Edsall occupied a cabin on the St. Mary's River, near the site of the present county jail. When the Indians came here to trade they encamped on the opposite bank of the river, and young Edsall, having an eye to business, established a ferry for the purpose of carrying the Indians and the traders across the river. While thus engaged he met the late W. G. Ewing, who conceived a liking for him, and employed him to assist in their extensive Indian business. He entered their service in 1826 and remained with them until 1832, passing the last two years with G. W. Ewing at Logansport. In that year, having attained his majority, the Ewings purchased a stock of goods for him, and he engaged in business at Huntington, they sharing the profits of the venture. In the same year he was appointed postmaster in Huntington, and in 1833 was chosen clerk and recorder of Huntington, Whitley and Wabash counties. In 1836 he resigned these positions, closed up his business, and returned to Fort Wayne, where he engaged in mercantile pursuits in partnership with his brother, Maj. Samuel Edsall until 1839. In that year he again formed a connection with G. W. and W. G. Ewing, taking a third interest in the firm, which was known as Ewing, Edsall & Co. They did a very extensive business in furs, covering territory as far west as the Mississippi River. In 1839 Mr. Edsall made a business tour on horseback to Chicago, Joliet, Ottawa, Rock Island, and Dubuque, thence to Galena, and Madison, Wisconsin. In this trip it is said he frequently rode thirty miles without finding a human habitation.

By reason of ruinous competition with the American Fur Company, Ewing, Edsall and Co. lost heavily, and in 1841 the firm dissolved.

In 1840 Mr. Edsall was elected a member of the first common council of the City of Fort Wayne. The other members were Wm. Rockhill, Thos. Hamilton, Madison Sweetzer, Samuel Edsall, and Wm. L. Moon, none of whom survive.

In 1840 Mr. Edsall was appointed register of the United States land office in Fort Wayne, which position he held until 1847. In 1846 (1848? the obituary was very blurry) he again formed a partnership with Maj. Edsall in the mercantile and milling business, which was maintained until 1849. (again barely legible)

About this time he, in company with Judge Hanna,

Samuel Edsall and others, organized the Fort Wayne and Bluffton Turnpike Company, and built the plank road from Bluffton to this city, which enterprise proved a great benefit to Fort Wayne. (This road cost the businessmen \$40,000.)

In 1863, the Messrs. Edsall made a contract for the grading, masonry, and ties of the Lake Erie, Wabash and St. Louis RR (now the T. W. and W.) from the Ohio state line to the Wabash River, a distance of forty-three miles. This enterprise they prosecuted with vigor, and notwithstanding a great financial crisis, which prevented the company from meeting its obligations, and the cholera which swept over the country, they completed their contract in the spring of 1856. By means of their energy and good credit they were enabled to pay laborers in full, although the company had failed to pay them.

Mr. Edsall was also one of the contractors for building the Wabash and Erie Canal, and did a great deal of work on that important enterprise.

From 1856 to 1865 Mr. Edsall was engaged in the commission and produce business in Fort Wayne. In 1865 he moved to Chicago, and embarked in similar pursuits. In 1868 he returned here and in 1870 was chosen without opposition to the office of county clerk, which he filled until 1874. Since that time he has enjoyed a well-earned respite from labor. For the past year his health has been gradually failing, and he himself has realized that his time was drawing nigh.

It will be seen from the above that Mr. Edsall has filled a large place in our local \_\_\_ (illegible), and has been outdone by few in his successful efforts to built up Fort Wayne and advance her material interests. His career has been a checkered (sic) one, and has been subject to many hutstions (?) of fortune. In the various enterprises in which he was engaged he made and lost vast sums of money, but fortunately in his declining years he enjoyed a handsome competence, and he leaves a goodly amount of property.

Mr. Edsall never had any schooling, and it was to his unflagging industry, his indefatigable energy, and his active mind that he owed the prominence he attained. He was kind hearted, generous to a fault; every ready to assist the needy, to help the unfortunate or to sustain a friend. He was of a very affectionate and forgiving disposition and though quick to anger, was just as quick to forget his grievance, and to shake hands with one who had wronged him. ....

He was married, early in life, to Miss McCarty, daughter of Gen. McCarty, with whom he lived happily until her death in 1857.

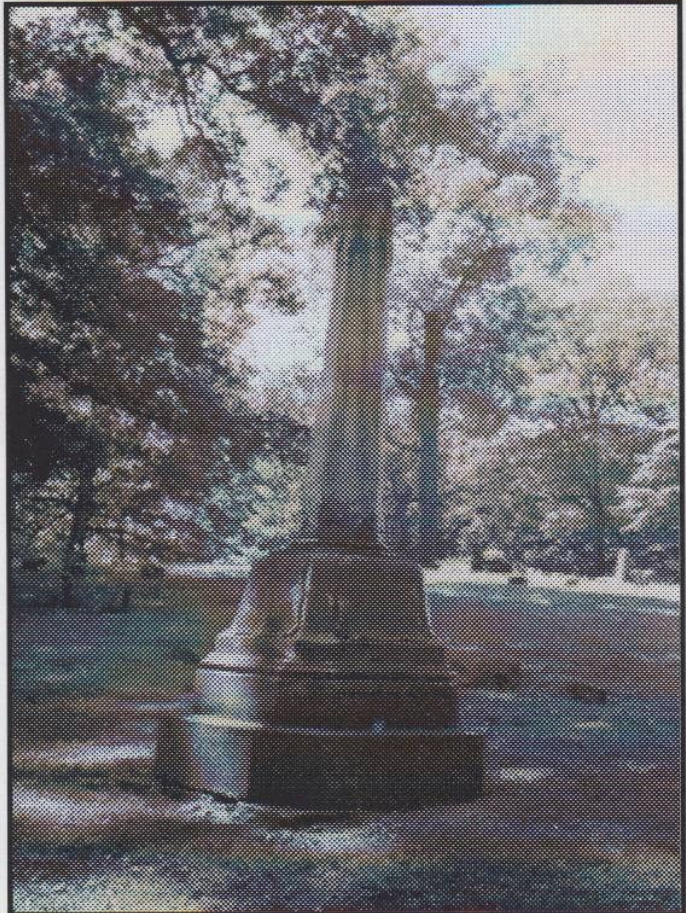
He leaves four children, C. W. Edsall, Jos. W. Edsall, Mrs. Willis D. Maier and Mrs. Henry Colerick; a brother, Simon Edsall, esq., and two sisters, Mr. Wm. H. Coombs and Mrs. Rugg."



The article goes on to say that Mr. Edsall's funeral was going on at press time. It took place at his home, still standing at the corner of Main and Cass Sts. The service was conducted by Rev. M. Crosley, of the Universalist Church. In the 1800s there were several small Universalist churches in Allen County, including one in Hometown and one in Yoder. They believed in universal salvation. Although all the Universalist churches died out in Allen County, the denomination merged with the Unitarians in 1961. One of Mr. Edsall's pallbearers was a Unitarian: Hugh McCullough, who had just served as Secretary of the Treasury under Presidents Lincoln and Johnson (and of whom no mention is made in the Lincoln Museum in Fort Wayne!)

Mr. Edsall's grave, and that of his wife Louisa (of whom so little mention is made in his obituary;) is in Lindenwood cemetery section F lot 62, near the entrance. Along with the inscription mentioned in the title, other sides of the monument say: "gone forever, living in the heart left to mourn" and "seperated (sic) in life, in death they are united." It says that Louisa McCarty Edsall died March 13, 1857, aged 38 years, 8 mos., 19 days. Her parents are listed on the stone: Desdemona Harrison and Jonathon McCarty.

The House of William S. Edsall by Thomas J. Cramton states that Edsall died insolvent with the mortgage company foreclosing on his two story brick home that faced Main Street shortly after his death. Apparently after his brother Samuel, who was his financial advisor, died in 1865, William soon acquired heavy financial debts and lost the Edsall house to a banker in 1866 for \$106 in delinquent taxes. He moved to Chicago leaving his family with relatives who paid off the mortgage. He returned in 1874, regained possession of the home and completely refurbished it. His funeral was conducted in its east parlor. "When his estate was finally settled in 1887, Edsall's personal estate amounted to \$97.15; he had no real estate, and his debts were \$5302.12, plus about nine years' interest."



William S. Edsall's grave is located on Lot 62 Section F of Lindenwood Cemetery in Fort Wayne, IN. Photos by Cynthia Powers Map of Lindenwood Cemetery from "Pioneers Resting in Historic Lindenwood."

