

CANAWLERS AT REST

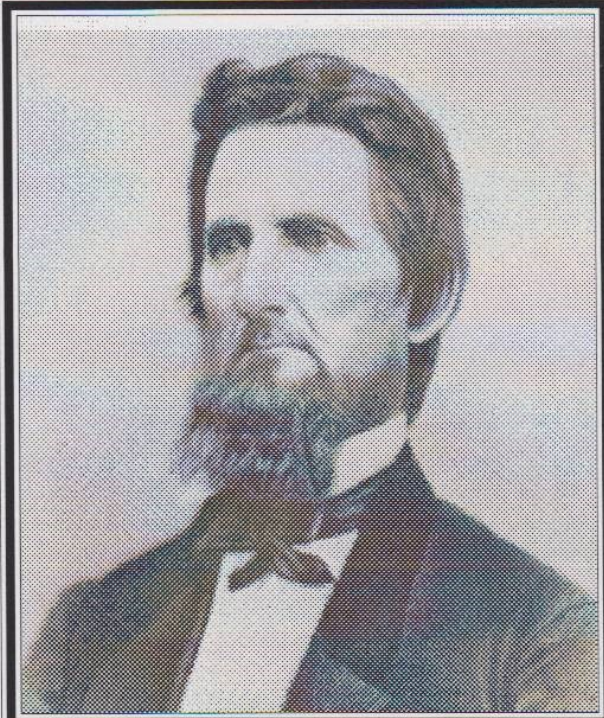
MAJOR STEARNS FISHER

b. Nov. 25, 1804

d. July 26, 1877

By Cynthia Powers

Photo courtesy of Wabash County History
Wabash County Historical Society



The Wabash and Erie Canal, as it progressed across Indiana, was blessed with some extraordinary men who served as construction superintendents. The Fort Wayne area had Jesse Lynch Williams; his counterpart in Wabash County was Stearns Fisher. Both men had reputations for competence, hard work, and personal integrity.

The librarians of the Wabash Carnegie Public Library recently located the obituary of Stearns Fisher in the *Wabash Plain Dealer* for July 27, 1877. (Fisher died on July 26.) It is as follows:

“Stearns Fisher was born near Dover, Windham County, Vermont, on the 25th day of November, 1804 and died in Wabash, Indiana, July 26th, 1877. He emigrated with his father, Jonathan Fisher, to Newburgh, Cuyahoga county, Ohio, in 1816, and assisted in the arduous labors and participated in the fatigues and privations of the early settlement of that part of Ohio. With the exception of the somewhat limited advantage of schools the Green Mountain State afforded during the first twelve years of his life, there were next to no opportunities for obtaining even a limited education to one situated as he was. Hence his, such as it was, was the result of his own personal exertions, picked up at odd times, from books read by the light of the evening fire and at occasional evening schools, the labor of all who were able to work being required, every moment of daylight, to secure a scanty livelihood. With such opportunities, however, and unflagging energy and industry, he had acquired, at the age

of sixteen, sufficient knowledge of the rudiments of an English education to enable him to engage as a clerk in a store, in the village of Newburgh, Ohio, and, before he was eighteen, to be able to teach school, to the satisfaction of the then unexact public. About this time began the work of building the Ohio canal, and as its northern terminus was in the immediate neighborhood of his father's farm, that enterprise exerted a marked influence upon his subsequent life. He first engaged in the work upon it as a laborer, next as an axe-man in its survey, and, as that proceeded, next as rod-man. While engaged in this capacity he conceived the idea of becoming an engineer, carrying his rod in the day time and pursuing mathematical studies far into the night. It was while thus engaged that he made an acquaintance which exerted a marked effect upon his whole history. Hon. Alfred Kelly, who at one time, if not then, was Chairman of the Ohio Board of Public Works, had his office in a hotel near Mr. Fisher's sleeping room. One night long after twelve o'clock, wishing to strike a light (matches were then unknown), and seeing none except in young Fisher's room, opened his door and walked in. Finding the young man reading in his bed, Mr. Kelly said to him: “Reading a novel, are you?” “No, sir.” “What then?” “I am studying algebra.” From that hour they were firm friends. Mr. Kelly assisted and advised him, and superintended his mathematical education. It was through his influence that he afterward became one of the Assistant Engineers, during the survey

and construction of the great thoroughfare which united the waters of the Ohio river with those of the great Northern lakes, and thro' his influence and that of others which his good words had brought him in contact with, Mr. Fisher received the employment in the State of Indiana which gave her one of the best and most useful men she ever contained.

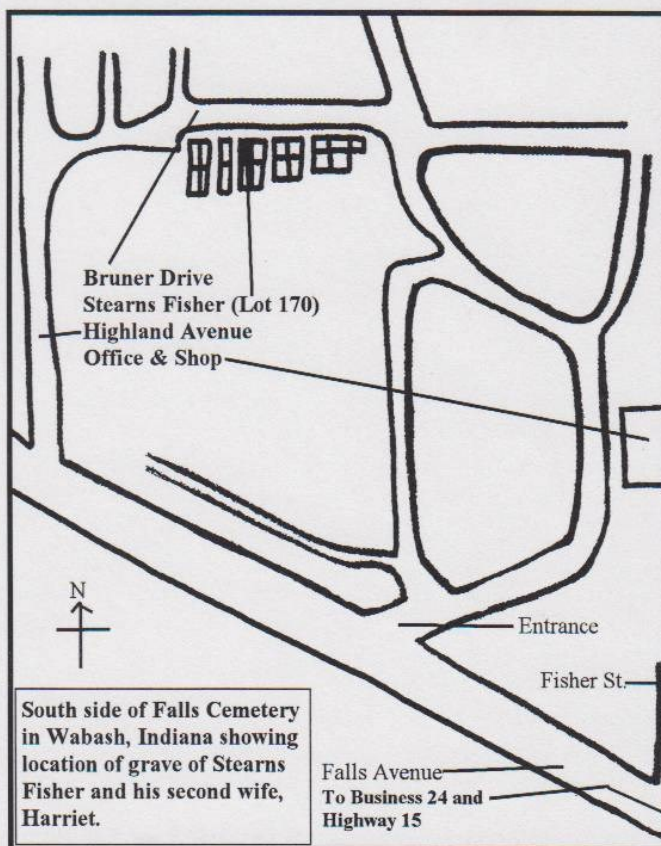
While engaged in the southern part of Ohio he made the acquaintance of Miss Susan Ingersoll, and in the year 1831 they were married, at Piketon, Pike county, Ohio. Having found employment on the Wabash and Erie canal, he bought the land now owned and occupied by Mr. Allen Craft, four miles west of this city, and in the fall of the year 1833 removed to it with his then small family. With this wife he lived happily until April 1843, when she died of consumption, leaving four children, three daughters and one son, all of whom, except the latter, still survive. From the time of his arrival in this State until a very few years ago, he was scarcely ever out of the public service. His first employment after his arrival was as resident engineer, in the construction of that part of the canal lying between the lock in this city and a point four miles west of Peru. Later he received the appointment of General Superintendent of the Wabash and Erie canal. In this capacity he had control of all canal construction, and of all the State Land offices. While thus engaged about a million and a half of dollars passed through his hands. For his faithful execution of this trust there was no security except a bond for twenty thousand dollars and the honesty of the man with whom it was entrusted; yet there was never the shadow of a suspicion that a single cent of the public treasure ever failed to reach its honest and proper destination.

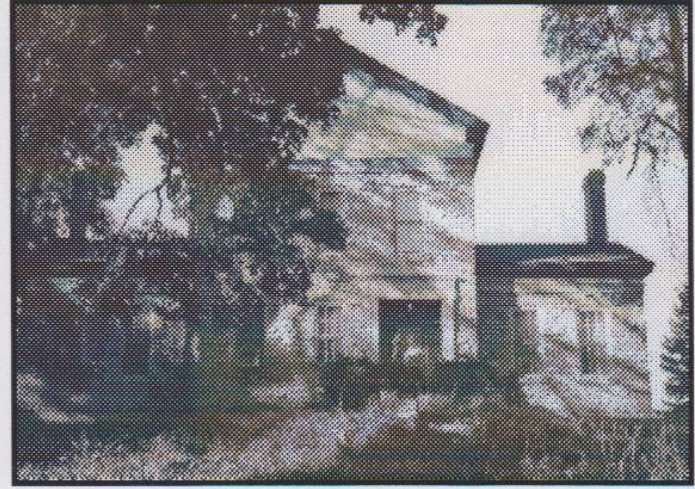
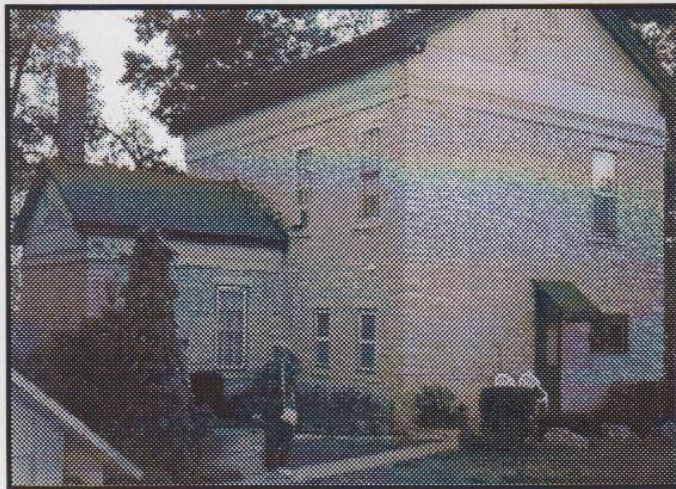
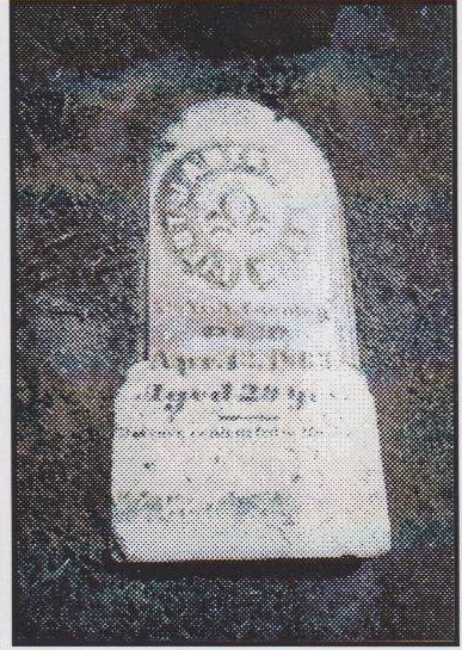
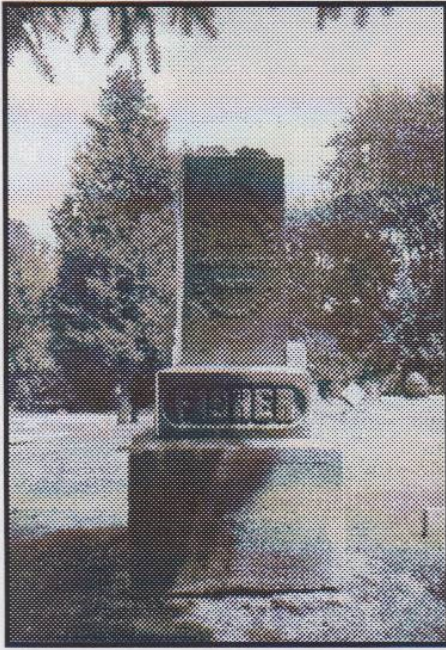
In October, 1845, Mr. Fisher was married to Mrs. Harriet L. Woods, formerly Loveland, who survives, and, with the children above mentioned, deeply mourns him. There were no children as the result of this last-mentioned union; but for near thirty-two years it was ever harmonious and pleasant.

In the year 1846, the office of General Superintendent of the Wabash and Erie canal, which had been held for a short time by Colonel Lucas, became vacant. The Legislature, which was to fill the vacancy, was Democratic in both its branches, and though Mr. Fisher was and always had been an outspoken Whig, such was his acknowledged ability and honesty that, unprecedented as it then was, and ever since would have been, he was elected to the place almost, if not entirely, without opposition. In one capacity or another Mr. Fisher continued to be employed in connection with the public works of the State until about the year 1850."

The obituary goes on to say that Mr. Fisher became a member of the inner circle of advisers to Governor Oliver Morton "and the other most trusted friends of the Union, during those days when its peril was the greatest, and his opinion was highly prized by all of them, when plans were considered for the frustrating of the treasonable schemes of the bad men who conspired to overthrow the Government." This probably referred to the plot by Lambdin P. Milligan and his fellow members of the Knights of the Golden Circle to kidnap Governor Morton. (See the book for the 1996 "From the Forks to Paradise" tour for more on this plot.)

My husband, Ed, and I, with the help of a friendly cemetery employee who was mowing the lawn located Stearns Fisher's grave in Falls Cemetery, in Wabash. Although it is right along one of the driveways, his name is on the side of the marker perpendicular to the road, so it might not be noticed if you are coming from the "wrong" direction. His second wife, Harriet, is buried there too. Next to the large family marker is a smaller one for James Fisher, who died in 1863 at age 29, of "Disease contracted in the army." He would have been born in 1834, and therefore is probably the son of Mr. Fisher and his first wife, Susan, mentioned above as being the only child who did not survive Mr. Fisher. Thus did the Civil War exact a terrible price from the Fisher family, who staunchly supported the Union.





Top Left: Grave marker for Stearns Fisher in Falls Cemetery, Wabash, IN. Top Center: His wife Harriet is recognized on the side of his marker. Top Right: Lt. James Fisher (son?) Photos by Cynthia Powers
Bottom Left: Back of the Stearns Fisher home on Wabash & Erie Canal near Richvalley, IN. Bottom Right: The front of his home facing the canal. Photos by Bob Schmidt

History of Allen County 1880 mentions an earlier home of Stearns Fisher on page 93: "SW Corner of Main & Barr (Ft. Wayne) in the old yellow frame still standing there, lived Stearns Fisher, then Engineer-in-chief of the Wabash & Erie Canal, and now of Wabash Co., IN since deceased."

