

# CANAWLERS AT REST

## WILLIAM FLEMING

b. June 17, 1828  
d. January 13, 1890

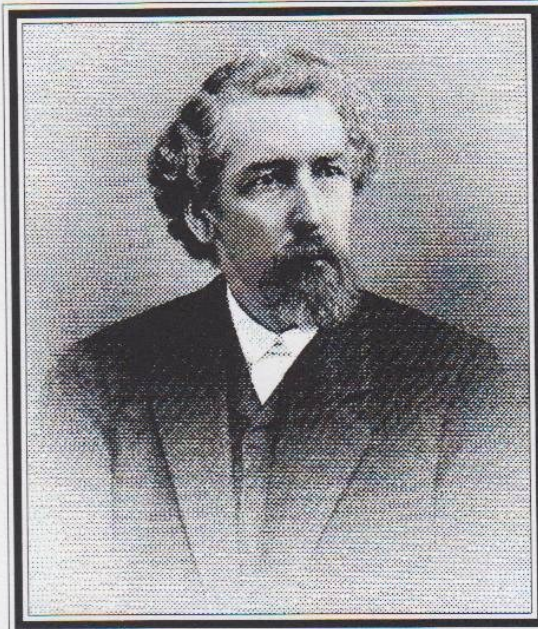
By Thomas E. Castaldi

### WILLIAM FLEMING BOUGHT THE CANAL AND BUILT A RAILROAD

William Fleming of Fort Wayne, Indiana, purchased the portion of the canal from the Indiana-Ohio state line to Lafayette, Indiana, on March 29, 1876. Several notable Fort Wayne industrialists joined Fleming as lead man, including Oscar A. Simons, John Bass, Ronald T. McDonald and others. The sale included the St. Joseph River feeder line, which the investors hoped would become the source of water supply to their city. The group had no interest in operating the canal only for its potential as an open transportation route.<sup>1</sup>

A native of Wicklow, Ireland, not far from Dublin, Fleming was born on June 17, 1828. He entered national school and when he turned fourteen years of age, he was sent to finish his academic work in Dublin. In 1848, William came to America via Quebec with his parents Luke and Sarah Holt Fleming. After they reached Canada, his father and four of his siblings became ill and died during the quarantine time while tied up in the harbor at Quebec.

Sarah Holt Fleming brought William and his three surviving brothers to Fort Wayne. After his arrival, he taught school and worked as a stonecutter among other employment until he took a position as deputy sheriff under Richard McMullen. When Sheriff McMullen died Fleming assumed the position. He became interested in politics and re-election,<sup>2</sup> Fleming served twice in that office as a Democrat; he was also elected City Clerk for eight years and in 1878 as Indiana State Treasurer. He lost his bid for reelection as State Treasurer in 1880 when the balance of the ticket went down in defeat.



William Fleming  
1828-1890

The man who bought the rights to the  
Wabash & Erie Canal.

Fleming regularly counseled his party and was often a delegate to the Democrat National Convention.<sup>3</sup>

He married Ann McLaughlin in January 1850, becoming the parents of Luke M. and Mary E. Shortly thereafter in 1854 Ann McLaughlin Fleming died. Their daughter Mary E. later married Dr. L.J. Willien of Terre Haute, Indiana. His second marriage on July 7, 1859, was to Helen F. Mayer daughter of George and Catherine Hiller Mayer of Germany. Helen's father operated Fort Wayne's Mayer House hotel. To this union were born: Catherine S. who married Dr. Dinnen; Helen G. whose husband was A. B. Trentman; Georgie F. the wife of William McKinnie; M. Celeste, Stephen B.; Sister Mary Helen of St. Mary's of the Woods; William and Sadie Marie.<sup>4</sup>

Fleming's homestead stood on the southwest corner of Rockhill and Berry streets — a three-story home believed to have originally been built by William Rockhill in 1857. After purchasing the place, Fleming changed the front entrance to face Berry Street and did a fine job of remodeling leaving no hint that the house originally "fronted" on Rockhill Street. The great home contained an English basement, a cupola and a hand-operated elevator. On the west end of the parlor, during December, a fourteen-foot high Christmas tree was an annual tradition. At the Christmas holiday season, guests were invited to an annual celebration. Gentlemen escorted their ladies to the former Rockhill Street entrance before they drove their buggies around back to



the carriage barn where stablemen blanketed the horses against the winter's cold.<sup>5</sup> A red satin gift bell hung in the front hall accented with greens, holly and mistletoe throughout the main floor, creating a true nineteenth-century "Holiday House."

From the cupola mounted atop the roof, William Fleming easily could have kept an eye on canal boats. Here was a clear view of the canal basin west of the St. Mary's river and north of Main Street.<sup>6</sup> Fort Wayne's *Daily Sentinel* on February 5, 1874, recorded Mary E. Fleming's marriage to Dr. Leon J. Willien. After the marriage ceremony at the Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception, "the bridal party with a few invited friends repaired to the palatial residence of the bride's father.<sup>7</sup> William Fleming's home and property was purchased by St. Joseph Hospital some time during the 1980s and 1990s along with several of the neighboring houses and was razed to the ground. When it was determined that the space was not to be used, the hospital officials supported moving the Dr. Hiram VanSweringen (*circa* 1878) home originally located at 633 West Wayne to the property at 1023 West Berry vacated by the Fleming home.<sup>8</sup>

A man of many accomplishments, Fleming was the founder of the New York, Chicago & St. Louis Railroad, which became the Nickel Plate Railroad. Later he helped bring it to Fort Wayne and served on its board of directors until the railroad was sold to the Vanderbilt people. He served as Treasurer of the Indiana School Book Company; President of the Salamonie Mining and Gas Company; Vice President and Acting President of the First National Bank of Fort Wayne; President of the Hartford City Paper Company, as well as a stockholder and director of several businesses not to mention the many years of giving to his community.<sup>9</sup>

Publishing was another interest. In 1873, W.H. Dills and I.W. Campbell had merged the Fort Wayne (Indiana) *Daily Sentinel* with Campbell's Fort Wayne's *The Times* forming the *Times and Sentinel*. On January 15, 1866, they sold the paper to E. Zimmerman and Eli Brown who changed the name to *The Democrat*. Several others directed *The Democrat*, and in 1873, R. D. Dumm and William Fleming took control and restored the name to its former *The Sentinel* that S.V.B. Noel and Thomas Tiger had given it when they started the paper on July 6, 1833. Six men underwrote the business risk: Henry Rudisill, Lewis G. Thompson, Joseph Holman, E. Ewing, Allen Hamilton and Frances Comporet. In 1874, The Sentinel Publishing Company was organized to manage the business. William Fleming purchased *The Sentinel* in 1877 and became its sole owner until April 16, 1879, when he sold to William Rockhill Nelson and Samuel E. Morss. In 2006 the *News-Sentinel*, a direct descendant of *The Sentinel*, continues to publish a daily newspaper.<sup>10</sup>

By 1874 the Wabash & Erie Canal did not re-open on schedule and many mechanical structures were in need of repair. As early as 1859, private citizens had put up the money to keep open the canal. Private operation was no more successful than previous attempts and in 1866 a stock company was formed agreeing to operate the canal until July 1, 1878. Trustees maintained control over the tariff of through tolls. After 1869 the company lost money and by 1873 it was no longer possible to travel the entire length of the canal.<sup>11</sup> Canal trustees were well aware that the failure of the canal was in part due to the State legislature's intentional chartering railroads paralleling nearly every mile of tow-path.

So poor was the condition of the canal that in 1874 some sections were disconnected and backers demanded a resolution. Jonathan K. Gapin of New York, representing the bondholders filed in United States circuit court for Indiana, on November 19, 1874, a bill in chancery against the Trustees asking that the canal lands be sold and applied to the debt owed to the bondholders. In effect, the suit called for placing the canal in bankruptcy demanding that the Trustees produce an accounting of what was owed investors. A decree was obtained in 1874 for the canal to be sold beginning February 12, 1876.<sup>12</sup> Interestingly, February 12<sup>th</sup> is the birth date of our popular President Abe Lincoln. The irony is in the ground breaking of the Wabash & Erie that took place on February 22, 1832. It was initiated on President Washington's birthday and brought to an end on Lincoln's.

An auction took place on February 24, 1876, during which potential bidders listened to Judge Samuel B. Gookins, special master, list the sections to be sold.<sup>13</sup> Historian Bert Griswold has written that Fleming purchased the portion of the canal from the Indiana state line to the west locks of Lagro on March 29, 1876, joined by Oscar A. Simons, John Bass, R.T. McDonald and others. Further he noted that the sale included the St. Joseph River feeder line hoping to become the water supplier to Fort Wayne.<sup>14</sup> However, historian Ben Stuart says that the canal from the Indiana-Ohio line to Evansville was sold to Gapin on March 29, 1876 for \$85,000. Paul Fatout, author of *Indiana Canals*, agrees, but says the sale was for \$85,500, and added that the sections below Lafayette bid in by Gapen, J.H. Shirk, Solomon Claypool, A.N. Dukes, H.H. Boudinot and others brought \$11,760, while canal reservoir lands, locks and quarries produced another \$50,976 for a total of \$160,096. He also states that within the year re-sales took place for various parts of the line to new owners.<sup>15</sup> On March 29, 1876, Trustee Thomas Dowling sold all of the canal from west of Lafayette to the Indiana-Ohio line to William Fleming for \$85,000. Next Fleming on April 22, 1876, sold to Elbert H. Shirk of Peru, led a group of in-



vestors composed of Aaron N. Dukes of Peru, Jacob Dritt, Charles B. Knowlton and Rufus Magee of Logansport, all of the canal from the west line of Lafayette to the lower lock of Lagro for \$83,500.<sup>16</sup>

The claim that Fleming purchased the canal bed from Lafayette to the state line is supported by a *Fort Wayne Daily News* story that mentions Fleming prominently explaining several deeds of conveyance: "The date of the first conveyance is July 31, 1847, and for the bed of the canal from the Ohio state line to Evansville, including the banks, margins, tow-paths, side cuts, feeders, right of way, basins, locks, dams, water-powers and structures. This conveyance is from the state of Indiana to the trustees of the Wabash and Erie Canal.

"The second deed of conveyance is from the district court of the United States to William Fleming, and is for the bed of the canal from the western boundary of the city of Lafayette to the Ohio state line." It states that the price for the bed, all banks margins and so on was \$85,000.

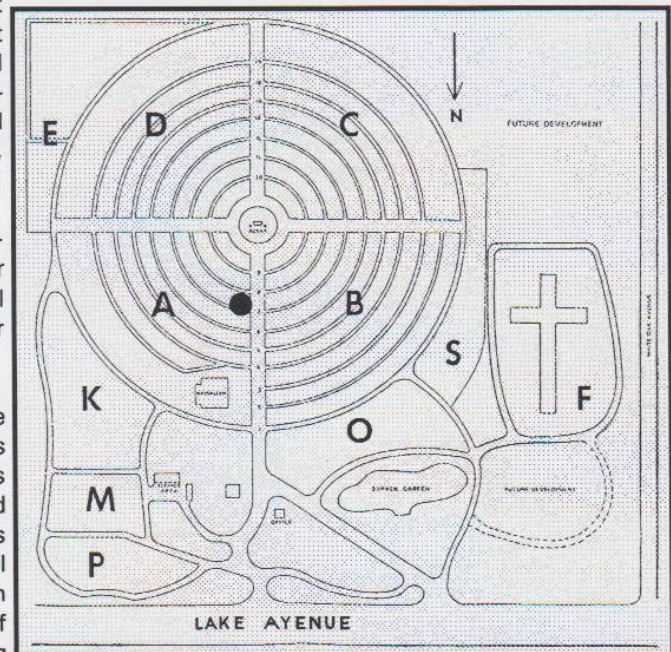
The third deed, "is for the canal feeder from its intersection with said canal west of the city of Fort Wayne to its source, the feeder dam, the mill lots in Fort Wayne now occupied by the City Mills and Orff's Mill and all the appurtenances thereto belonging. The consideration for this property is \$50,000 and it is transferred from William Fleming and others to William B. Howard, trustee."

Finally a fourth deed of conveyance, from Fleming and others to William B. Howard, trustee, was for \$100,000. "The property transferred was the canal from the Ohio state line to the west end of the lower lock in the town of LaGro."

*Fort Wayne Daily News'* reporter writing for the strongly Republican, June 22, 1882 article, mentions the Democrat Fleming and concludes by stating, "This then is a true history of the ownership of the canal, and shows the handsome profits Mr. Fleming and his friends have made. The deeds from Mr. Fleming do not, it will be observed, include that portion of the canal between LaGro and Lafayette, which is a separate matter of profit. Howard represents the Seney syndicate building the N.Y.C. & St. L. R.W. (New York Chicago & St. Louis Railroad) along the tow path of the canal from New Haven to the western limits of the city of Fort Wayne." As such Fleming is remembered as a founder of the N.Y.C. & St. L. RR, which became the Nickel Plate Railroad. Later he helped to bring it to Fort Wayne and served on its board of directors until the railroad was sold to railroad magnate William H. Vanderbilt.<sup>17</sup>

It should be noted that the Nickel Plate departed Fort Wayne's west side at about the site where the feeder met the main line of the canal at present-day intersection of Rumsey and Wheeler streets if both were extended to the railroad tracks. The main line's towpath that now is replaced by West Main Street along Lindenwood Cemetery was not used by the railroad. Rather, a street car line occupied a portion of that route to a turn-around terminus near Lindenwood Cemetery according to rail historian Paul Willer. The towpath was unused for a short portion of West Main street since the interurban came west on Taylor Street and turned onto the tow-path toward Huntington, Indiana.<sup>18</sup>

William Fleming died on January 13, 1890. He is buried in a modest plot in Fort Wayne, Indiana's Catholic Cemetery. To find the cemetery, drive north on Anthony Boulevard and turn east or to the right onto Lake Avenue. To find the Fleming family burial plot within the cemetery enter the East Gate off of Lake Avenue, pass the mausoleum building and immediately to the south of the mausoleum is Section A. Lanes are numbered that mark the rows of headstones. Proceed to "Lane 7 Plot 88" and watch for the modest Fleming markers to the east of the cemetery road.



Fort Wayne's Catholic Cemetery  
3500 Lake Avenue is the site of  
William Fleming's grave.

Remembered as having been industrious, enterprising, and one of the wealthy men of the state, Fleming was also known to have been a true and faithful member of his church rendering it faithful service and





Above: Fleming Family Cemetery Plot is easy to locate on the east side of main drive to the center circular drive. It is officially listed as Section A, Plot 7, Plot 88.

Left: William Fleming Marker is the stone on the left and nearest the north south drive into the Catholic Cemetery. Photos by Tom Castaldi

## WILLIAM FLEMING

stantial financial support. Throughout his life he made friends easily with a warm and genial nature. He possessed many estimable qualities of character and left a lasting impression on his adopted city, country and state.<sup>19</sup> As a canal fan, William Fleming will be remembered as the man who bought the canal and made it the catalyst for the improved technology of steam railroading.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Griswold, *Pictorial History of Fort Wayne*, p. 394.  
<sup>2</sup> Griswold, p. 417.  
<sup>3</sup> Col. Robert S. Robertson, *History of the Maumee River Basin*, Indianapolis: Bowen & Slocum, vol. 3, 1903, p. 208.  
<sup>4</sup> Robertson, p. 209.  
<sup>5</sup> *Fort Wayne Journal Gazette*, January 1, 1961.

<sup>6</sup> Peter Certia, *The Fleming Homestead of Fort Wayne, Indiana*, Fort Wayne: Allen County Public Library, 1964.

<sup>7</sup> Staff of Public Library of Fort Wayne and Allen County Historical Society in Fort Wayne 1870-1900, "The Gilded Age in Fort Wayne 1870-1900," 1955.

<sup>8</sup> Conversations with Harold Lopshire, Fort Wayne presentation historian.

<sup>9</sup> Griswold, p. 417, also, Robertson, p. 209.

<sup>10</sup> John Beatty, ed. *Allen County History*, Fort Wayne: Allen County Historical Society, 2006, Vol. II, p. 52.

<sup>11</sup> *Documentary Journal*, 1874. Also, E.J. Benton, *Wabash Trade Route*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1903pp. 85.

<sup>12</sup> Logan Esarey, *Internal Improvements in Indiana*, Indianapolis: E.J. Hecker, 1912 p. 153. Also, Donald F. Carmony, *Indiana 1850: The Pioneer Era*, Indianapolis: Indiana Historical Society, 1955, p. 761. Also Benj. Stuart, *History of Wabash and Valley*, Logansport: Longwell-Cummings, 1924, p. 55.

<sup>13</sup> Paul Fatout, *Indiana Canals*, West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 1972, p.176.

<sup>14</sup> Griswold, p. 394.

<sup>15</sup> Fatout, p. 176.

<sup>16</sup>Stuart, pp. 55 - 56.

<sup>17</sup>*The Fort Wayne Daily News*, June 22, 1882. Also, Griswold, p. 496.

<sup>18</sup>Conversations, with Paul Willer, rail historian. September 2005

<sup>19</sup>Robertson, p. 209.