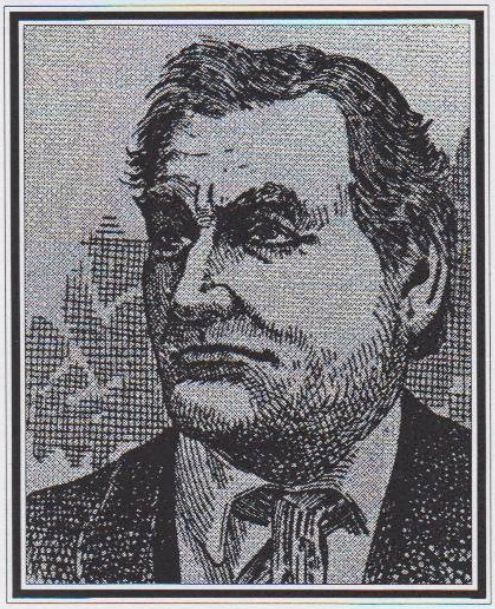
CANAWLERS AT REST

PETER KISER

b. August 10, 1810
d. October 4, 1890

By Robert F. Schmidt

Drawing from ***Pioneers Resting in Historic Lindenwood***



Peter Kiser was the son of Richard Kiser, a soldier with General Hull's force that surrendered at Detroit in August in the War of 1812, and Rebecca Mossland Kiser. Richard was born in Rockingham County, Virginia, and Rebecca was from Cape May, New Jersey. They moved to Montgomery County, Ohio, and were married there in 1800.

Peter was born on August 10, 1810, in Greene County not far from Dayton, which is in Montgomery County. He was of German decent.

In 1822 his family moved to a frontier settlement called Shane's Prairie in Mercer County, Ohio. There were no schools for Peter to attend. He obtained a job as a hand on flat-boats, which at that time conveyed the products of the Northwest to New Orleans. He also made his first trip to Fort Wayne driving several head of hogs that year.

The little village around the fort was just beginning to grow. The fort that Anthony Wayne had established in 1794 had been moved and rebuilt in 1800, and again rebuilt by Major Whistler in 1815. This US military post was finally abandoned in 1819 when troops were withdrawn after the threat of Indian siege and British invasion had disappeared. The Indian Agency, which remained in Fort Wayne, had been consolidated in April of 1818 with the Piqua agency headed by Col. John Johnson. By 1820 Benjamin Stickney, who was the Indian Agent for 9 years, had moved to Port Lawrence (Toledo). The Indian Agency in Fort Wayne, which was responsible for Indian relations and annuity distributions, passed through Dr William Turner, John Hays, and Benjamin B. Kercheval. Finally, in 1823 John Tipton was appointed Indian Agent by President James Monroe.

When the county was being organized in 1823 it was John Tipton who suggested the name Allen in honor of the man who had help lift the siege of the fort in 1812 and who died a hero at the Battle of the Raisin (John Allen of Kentucky 1772-1813 age 40). Counties in Ohio and Kentucky are also named for Allen.

Apparently Peter did a good job driving hogs because he was contracted in 1825 by General John Tipton, Indian Agent in Fort Wayne, to supply meat rations for the Indians while treaties and affairs were being negotiated. He also conveyed provisions to the emigrants' Indian Mission at Niles in the Michigan Territory. Other future agents employed him to supply meat until 1846.

In 1828 Peter joined Wayne Lodge of Masons. The organizations records were lost. He was a worthy and accepted member. He later was present at the reorganization of Wayne Lodge No. 25.

Peter Kiser may have made several trips to Fort Wayne, but he didn't permanently locate here until 1832 (age 22). Having grown up with hog raising it was natural that he became a butcher. He was a blunt, six-foot-tall, stocky young man later weighing 300 pounds and could easily handle the task of slaughtering.

The Temperance Society was organized by Reverend James Chute in the spring of 1832 after finding two similar groups had already been organized. One was for people of all classes and the other for young men. Chute held weekly society meetings at which he tried to encourage the influential men of Fort Wayne to prevent the issuing of whiskey to canal workers. Not everyone agreed on what temperance was. Did it mean total abstinence or temperance in the use of alcohol? Was it a moral issue or a legal one? The immigrants were espe-

cially opposed to temperance of any kind. Peter Kiser also opposed the movement and asked the temperance leaders "to be temperate in all things and not denounce their fellow man so intemperately." By September of that year Chute had 112 members. However, his efforts were of little consequence with the German and Irish who came to work as laborers in Indiana.

In 1833 Peter was associated with Francis Comparet in the pork and provision business. He became a leading merchant in the town selling everything from buttons to grindstones. At that time one of the greatest threats to any business was fire, so it was only natural that Peter should become a member of the fire company, which had been organized in 1834. He is included on their membership list of 1839. This was the forerunner of the famed "Anthony Waynes," which organized in 1841.

Peter erected Fort Wayne's first market-house in 1835. It was said that since he was the first and only butcher in Fort Wayne, when he slaughtered there was fresh meat and when he didn't the people would be eating processed meat such as cured bacon or salted pork.

A major event in Peter's life came at age 32 on October 2, 1842, when he married a Well's Co. girl, Rebecca Snyder, age 22, (b. Sept. 1820, d. Feb. 17, 1893). They were married for 48 years.

Peter and Rebecca had eight children - all boys. One was named Charles. In *Reminiscences of Old Fort Wayne,* Charles states, "I can well remember when the packets used to run here on the Canal, and I recall my great anxiety to have a chance to ride on one of them. They seemed grand to us then. Talk about your Pullman packets, they had them in those days, but they were pulled by mules. They made on an average about three miles an hour, depending upon the stages of water. If the water was low, they could not go so fast. The packets had a bell on them and a tin horn. They would ring the bell on coming into the city. The lock and bridge tenders were notified of the coming of the boat by means of the horn." Another son, Peter, was born on Aug. 19, 1846 and died May 22, 1866 at age 20. His grave stone is near those of his father and mother.

Peter, our subject, never received a proper education. He could neither read nor write, but he did not let that keep him from becoming a successful merchant. At one time he was the Market Master at the Barr Street market in Ft. Wayne where stalls could be rented for $5 per year. He oversaw weights, measures, and vendors activities.

In his establishment at 617 Calhoun Street in Fort Wayne, Peter used a system of marking characters on the joists of his building to keep accounts. One day a customer came in to settle his account with cash. While tallying the characters, Peter added "you also got some cheese." The client replied "no, I did not, it was a grindstone" Kiser replied " that's right. I forgot to put a hole in the center." The system worked and the customer settled his account with cash.

Alexander Comparet, the son of Peter's associate Francis Comparet, related the following interesting account concerning canal scrip and how Peter as a merchant dealt with it: "Kiser stepped out of his store and went up Columbia Street for a short stay, I remaining to look after the business. A man with a yoke of cattle drove up to the store and came in and wished a barrel of flour. I said, 'all right.' He wanted to know the price of the flour. I said, 'five dollars.' He ordered a barrel and I rolled it out on the walk where handed me this scrip just from the mint. We rolled it on his cart and he pulled out. Kiser soon returned and I handed him the bill received. He said, 'What did you sell for that?' I said, 'a barrel of flour.' He said 'we cannot sell flour for white dog!' nicknaming it. I told him the [name of the] man who was well known and Kiser started out and overtook him on Berry Street, where he had stopped to transact some business. Kiser got other money for his flour, and after returning told me that 'white dog' was only worth 40 cents on the dollar. It was good at its face value only for canal lands.

Apparently Alexander Comparet learned a valuable lesson, because later he relates how he went to Logansport with hard cash to pay for some canal land for Thomas Hamilton. While in Logansport he was able to negotiate with a script trader. He obtained some script in an exchange, paid for the canal lands and was able to save $25, which Mr. Hamilton allowed him to keep since he had his land in full value. Alexander had earned the extra money by careful negotiation.

As a supporter of canals, Peter Kiser offered to provide a free barbecue dinner for the July 4,1843, grand canal celebration in Fort Wayne. In preparation for this event he traveled to Lafayette. There on the Wea prairie just south of the town he acquired two oxen (castrated bulls) for the roast. His plan was to load them on a canal boat and transport them to Fort Wayne where they would be slaughtered and roasted. The oxen must have learned of his plan for they refused to board the canal boat. Peter was undaunted. He drove them for 120 miles in 11 days along the Wabash & Erie Canal towpath to Fort Wayne. They arrived in time and a great feast was enjoyed by the exuberant crowd gathered on the Swinney grounds. This event reveals Peters persistence at whatever he undertook and his generosity.

Peter Kiser was involved with many other civic

activities. In 1841 the Fort Wayne Guards was organized as a military organization and Peter was the standard bearer. In 1847 Peter as a Democrat was elected to the state legislature. He fulfilled that term. In 1867 he once again served in the legislature. He was active in promoting the free school system of Indiana. He also was a Mason. He was regarded as a local dignitary.

In the Fort Wayne city election of 1851 Peter was elected to the Board of Alderman along with Oliver W. Jefferds, Ochmig Bird, James Howe, D. P. Hartman and Robert Armstrong. All six men were re-elected in 1852.

The 1860 Census for Fort Wayne, Allen County, Indiana lists the Kiser residence as including:

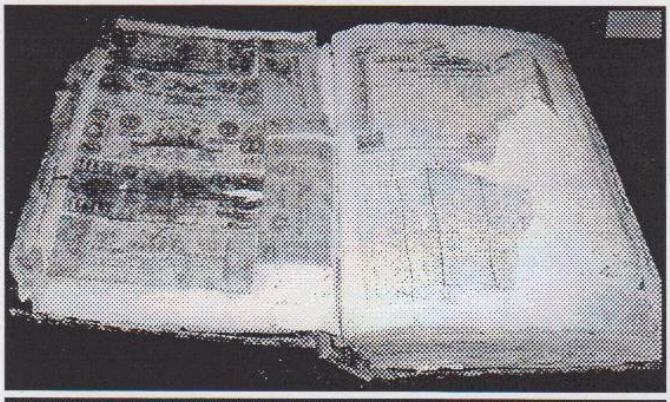
Name	Age	Sex	Occupation	Real Estate Value	Personal Estate Value	Place of Birth
Peter Kiser	50	M	Dry Goods Market	10000	3000	Ohio
Rebecca "	40	F				do
Charles "	16	M	Clerk			Indiana
Peter "	14	M				do
Ellis "	12	M				do
Bryson "	10	M				do
Wayne "	7	M				do
Francis "	5	M				do
Catherine Murray	20	F	Housemaid			Ireland
Hiram S. Wells	24	M	Clerk			Mass.

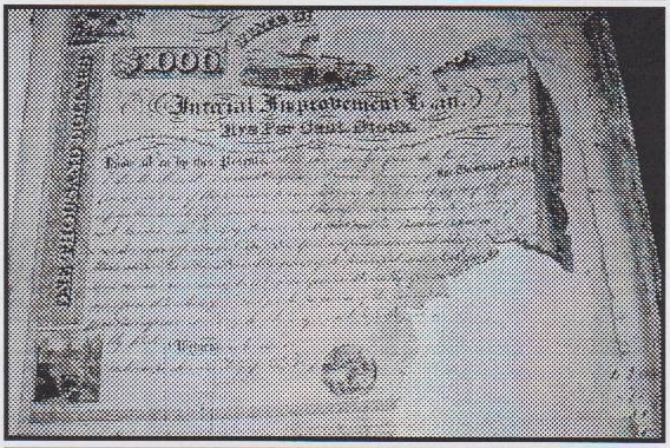
"On April 7, 1875 the *Fort Wayne Weekly* Sentinel reported: FOUND DROWNED - In the Canal Bed, between Here and New Haven - A Wagon on Top of the Dead Man - The Supposed Cause of the Accident

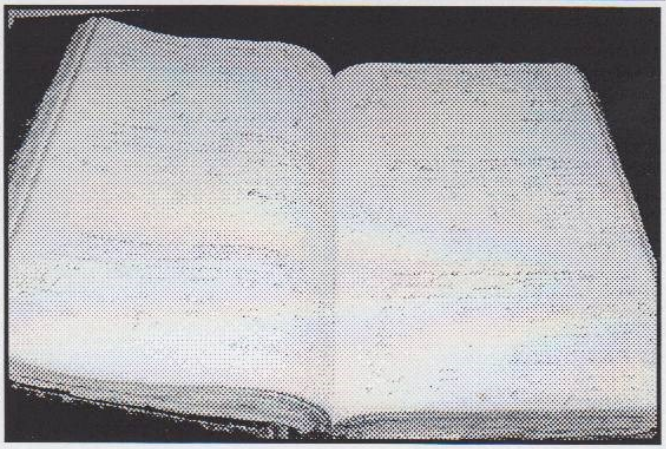
"Early this morning Coroner Webb was informed that a man had been found drowned in the canal, between here and New Haven. He went over to the place designated, and there discovered the person to be one Dracher, who lives some four or five miles the other side of New Haven. A horse and wagon stood near by, the latter having been found in the canal, and, under it, the body of Dracher. At this point on the tow path a large quantity of dirt had been thrown up, and in driving along at night, it is supposed the obstruction overturned the wagon and threw the driver into the canal, from whence he was unable to get out - the vehicle being on top of him.

"The body was brought to the city and place in the morgue. Coroner Webb empanneled (sic) a jury, and Dr. Dills was summoned to make an investigation. He being called away, the inquest and examination was postponed until this evening.

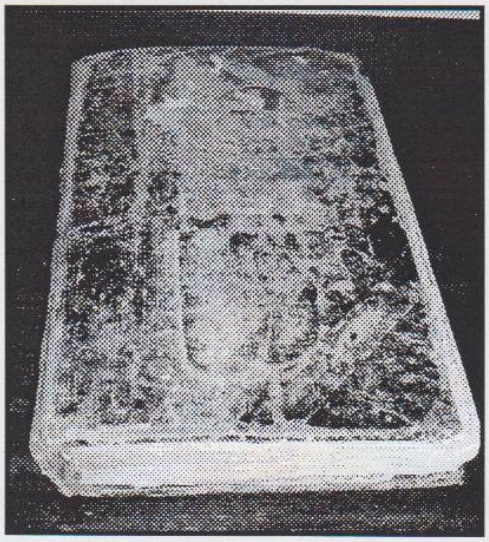
"On the person of the dead man was a new coat, his dress generally being very good. Some $6 and over was also found in his pocket. In the wagon was a new stove which deceased was seen purchasing at a hardware store on Columbia street yesterday. He also bought his coat at Peter Kiser's establishment the same day, and toward evening set out for home. Why he should drive on the tow path is not clear, unless to avoid toll, though the toll gate keeper states that Dracher was not a stingy sort of a man, and would not probably endeavor to avoid the payment of so small a sum. The coroner brought back the horse and wagon and the contents of the latter, to the city. Further facts will doubtless appear at the inquest."







Top: Peter Kiser pasted one, two, five and one hundred dollar canal notes on the left hand side and a one thousand dollar 5% stock certificate on the right hand side of the old toll book.
Center: This one thousand dollar Internal Improvement Loan for 5% stock is one of several within the toll book.
Bottom: Toward the back of the book the old toll records can still be seen. These give the date, the captain, where the boat originated, show the cargo, give the weight and the toll.
Photos by Bob Schmidt



Top: This old canal toll book was carried in parades by Peter Kiser.
Center: Peter Kiser's Masonic apron was donated by his son Charles Kiser to the History Center. It is 14 inches by 15 inches in size and has a gold wire fringe around its border. The Masonic emblem is embroidered in gold and red thread. There is also gold printing on the apron that has turned brown. The apron is disintegrating. Photos by Bob Schmidt

In 1885, ten years after the above incident, Peter Kiser gave up his business on Calhoun Street. It was successful for forty-one years.

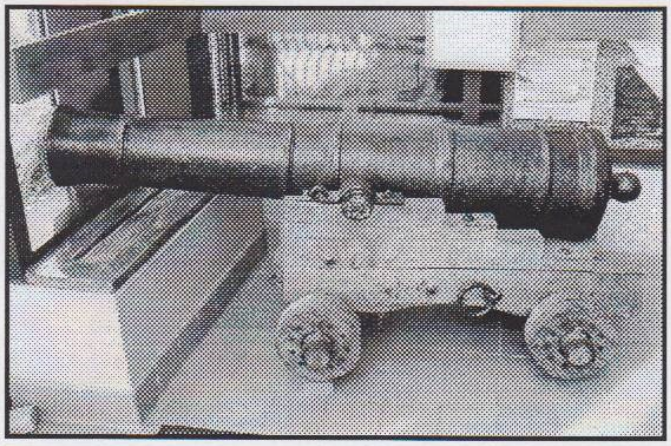
As the canal era came to an end Peter was still proud of his association with the great waterway. Whenever there was a parade, he could be seen walking with pride, carrying an old Fort Wayne canal toll book under his arm. He had filled the book with memorabilia such as bonds with coupons attached, bill of ladings, flyers etc., which he had collected from the canal era This book can still be seen today in the History Center in Fort Wayne. Also saved was Peter's well preserved Masonic apron and the cannon that was fired during the 1843 opening ceremony of the Wabash and Erie Canal.

Peter died on October 4, 1890. Rebecca followed him in death around two years later. Both are buried in Fort Wayne's Lindenwood Cemetery - Sec J Lot 95. A large stone marks the Kiser family plot with smaller head stones for Father (Peter), Mother (Rebecca) and Peter (their son).

In a biographical sketch in the *History of Allen County Indiana* the Hon. Peter Kiser is described by F.P. Randall as follows:

"By a close attention to business, he has secured a competency for himself and family. A man of strict honesty and integrity; in business affairs his word was a good as his bond; at heart one of the kindest of men; his charity and benevolence will be long remembered by many of the poor and needy of the county, who have received food and clothing from his liberal hands, and when asked from us to go up higher few men will be more kindly remembered than Peter Kiser."

Peter Kiser represents an ordinary citizen, who loved his community and strove for success despite his lack of formal education. He will be remembered for his many endeavors to make Fort Wayne a better place. Peter truly represents the commercial spirit of the canal. Rest in peace, Peter Kiser.



This artillery piece, (often called a six-pounder because the cannon ball weighed six-pounds) was cast at the Carron Foundry in Scotland. It was on one of the British ships off Put-in-Bay Island in September 1813, when Perry was victorious during the Battle of Lake Erie. After the War the cannon was brought to Fort Wayne. In 1843, it was fired during the opening ceremony of the Wabash and Erie Canal. Later, the cannon served as a hitching post at the Randall home. In 1916, the cannon was given to the City of Fort Wayne to be used as a memorial. In 1960, the cannon was given to the Allen County-Fort Wayne Historical Society. Photo by Bob Schmidt

Sources:

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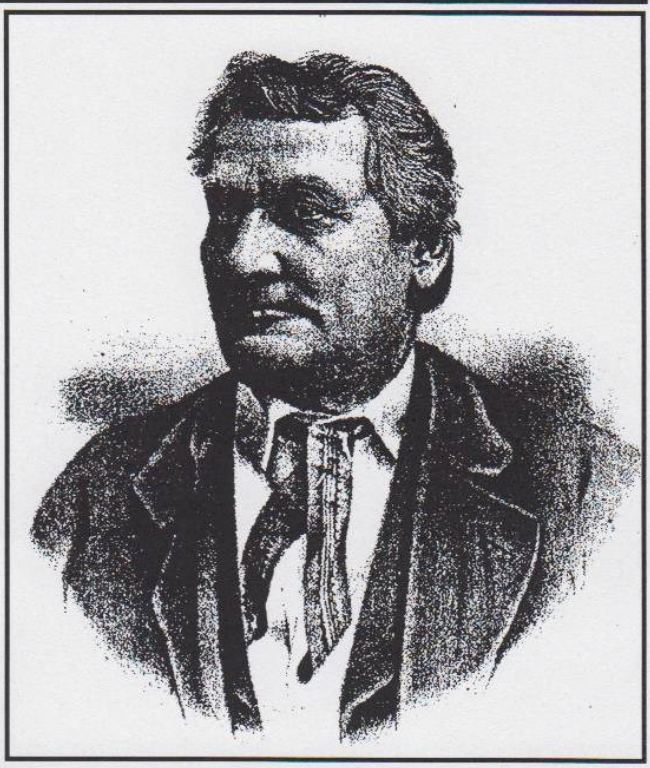
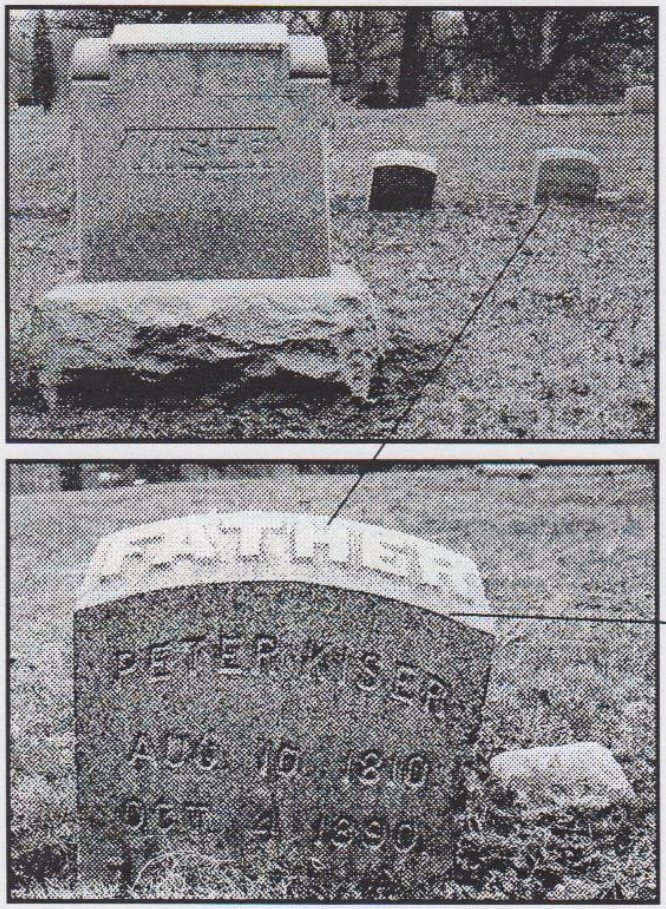
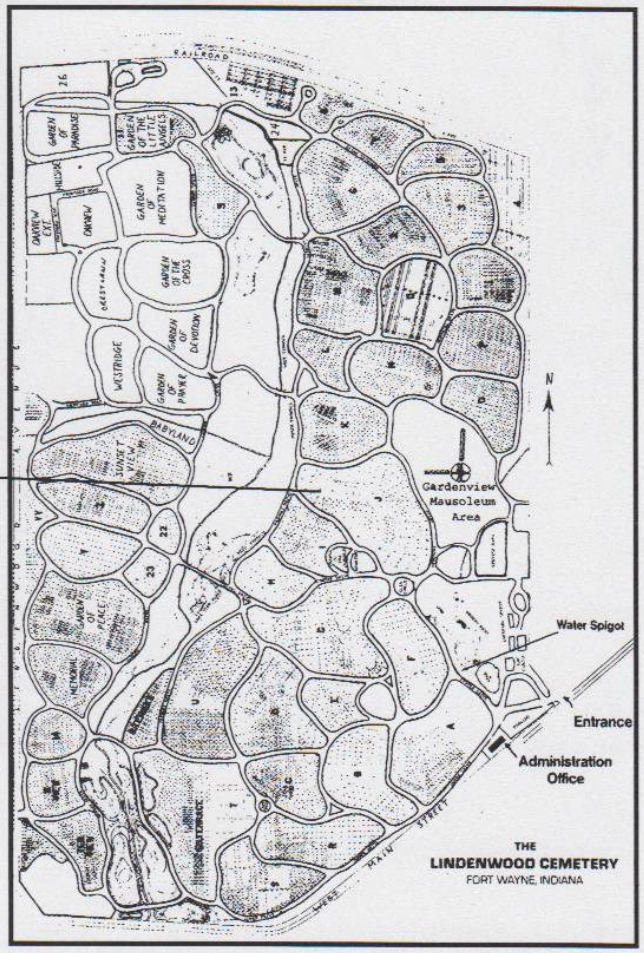
With special thanks to Randy Elliot, who spent his time accessing the Kiser items in storage at The History Center in Fort Wayne, and to The History Center for allowing them be published.





Top: The Kiser plot marker is in Section J of Lindenwood Cemetery in Fort Wayne, Indiana. Peter Kiser's head stone is on Lot 95. His wife's headstone is to the left of his. His son Peter's headstone if further to the left of her stone.

Photos of the Kiser and Father markers by Bob Schmidt