

CANAWLERS AT REST

PATRICK O'BRIEN

b. March 20, 1820
d. February 1, 1904

By Carolyn I. Schmidt



PATRICK O'BRIEN
Huntington City Engineer & Ex-City Treasurer
Combination Atlas map of Huntington County, Indiana 1879

Patrick O'Brien was born in Wexford County, Ireland on March 20, 1820 to William O'Brien (1785-1865) and Mary (Brady) O'Brien (1780-1872). His siblings shown on census records were Ellen O'Brien, Mary O'Brien and Dennis O'Brien (1834-1892).

Patrick emigrated to New York in 1849. There he found employment on public works, which might have been on the canal or railroad since he later worked on both. He then drifted westward and arrived in Huntington County, Indiana in the fall of 1850. On his application for citizenship he listed his arrival as 1850, perhaps he thought they meant his arrival in Huntington.

The Indianapolis & Peru Railway was under construction and in February 1851 he found employment working on it as superintendent of works and as a civil engineer. In the latter part of that year and in 1852 he superintended the construction of the Huntington Liberty Mills Plank Road. Then in 1852-53 he returned to working on the Indianapolis & Peru Railway until it was completed. In 1853-1857 he was employed in locating the Tiffin, Fort Wayne and Western Railroad and finally returned to Huntington in 1859.

In 1860 Patrick became the boss of repairs on the second division of the Wabash & Erie Canal and the 1860 census lists his occupation as Canal State Boat Captain. A canal state boat kept the canal free of debris and repaired leaks in its banks due to rodents, uprooted trees, freshets, etc. It also made minor repairs to canal structures such as locks and aqueducts. Since the canal was first owned by the state, it was the state's boat that kept it repaired. After 1847, when the canal was transferred to the bondholders, the repair boat still retained the name of state boat. Patrick served the canal

in this manner through 1865. In 1866 he was appointed Superintendent and Paymaster of the second division of the Wabash & Erie Canal serving in this capacity until 1874 when the canal was sold to private investors.

Over twenty years later a reporter from the *West Lebanon Gazette* interviewed Patrick about his days spent with the canal. The complete article with Patrick's observations follows:

West Lebanon Gazette
March 18, 1896

Wabash and Erie Canal

There is no more interesting monument of early days in the Wabash Valley than the bed and banks of the Old Wabash and Erie Canal. The towpath is still discernible at many points, and in the summer its shady banks, where the forests have not yet disappeared, and its decaying locks often make a pretty and picturesque piece of scenery. In the cities the site of the canal is frequently obliterated — in some places by imposing business structures, while in others the ditch has been filled up and comfortable homes cover the spot.

There are still living a few citizens who recall the balmy days of the old ditch — remember the big packet passenger boats, the freight boats unloading and receiving freight at the warehouses, and it has never ceased to be a wonder to them that the canal was abandoned.

The history of this great thoroughfare is interest-

ing. In 1827 the United States granted to the State of Indiana every alternate section of land five miles in width along the proposed canal, the conditions being that "said canal, when completed, shall be and forever remain a public highway for the use of the government of the United States, free from toll or other charges whatever, for any property of the United States or persons in their service, and that said canal shall be begun within five years and completed within twenty years." Subsequently, by acts of the state legislature in 1830 and 1832, the canal lands were offered for sale by canal commissioners appointed for that purpose. The prices ranged from \$1.50 to \$3.50 per acre, and the inducements were such as to bring a large influx of population all along the line, and the large amount of money expended by the state in construction of waterways, feeding dams, canal locks, etc., resulted in the rapid building up of several thriving villages. The formal work of breaking ground for the canal occurred near Ft. Wayne in March 1832 [February 22, 1832], just within the time limited in the land grant by congress. July 3, 1835, the water of the St. Joseph River reached Huntington in the canal, and the same day the canal boat *Indiana* in command of Captain Fairfield, arrived from Ft. Wayne, landing east of the city. The boat brought with it an enthusiastic crowd of gentlemen from Ft. Wayne, who were greeted by an equally enthusiastic party of Huntington citizens. The arrival of the boat was celebrated by the booming of a small cannon procured for the occasion and local traditions affirm that both guests and hosts united in making a night of it.

Although the work of construction was begun in 1832, the canal was not completed through the [Huntington] county until 1836. It was finished to Lafayette in 1841, to Terre Haute in 1849, and to Evansville in 1852. Its length was 375 miles in Indiana and 84 miles in Ohio, the total length being 459 miles [468 miles]. The receipts from tolls for several years were something over an average of \$100,000 annually, and the expenditures annually about \$35,000. Its management was a board of directors, but how selected we are not advised. But with the completion of the Wabash Railroad its prosperity began to wane, and it received its finis when other crossroads were built, and after a few

years of unprofitable operation in the early seventies was, in 1874, finally and permanently abandoned, tolls being no longer sufficient to keep up repairs. The bed of the canal was sold at auction to pay the debts of the canal. The purchasers were speculators, and there has been more or less litigation as to their title, but they have at last succeeded in establishing their claim in the courts. In the cities this land has become valuable, but in the country of no particular advantage. It has always been believed that the purpose of the speculators making the purchase was to convert the bed of the canal into a railroad, and the fact that the Vanderbilts are interested in the deal has seemed to confirm the supposition, but up to the present time nothing has resulted. Patrick O'Brien, a pioneer resident of Huntington, was closely connected with the management of the canal the last fourteen years of its operation. Speaking to a reporter on the subject, he said:

"Yes, I was connected with the canal management as superintendent and paymaster of the second division from 1860 to its abandonment in 1874. Colonel Colton, of Lafayette, was the general manager. A. P. Edgerton, of Ft. Wayne, J. U. Puett, of Wabash, and Herman Sterne, of Peru, were among the members of the board of directors. The duties of my position were largely to see to repairs, and it was expected that I would answer all calls in person, day or night. It was expected that all repairs be made before navigation set in, in April, and a break in the bank was a great calamity to the boatmen. These boatmen were a rough class, but good hearted, and I do not recall ever having had any trouble with them. In the latter years of the canal, the locks gave me much trouble, as many of them needed to be rebuilt rather than to receive temporary repairs.

As a last effort to maintain the canal, the legislature passed an act by which the counties in which it was located were required to appropriate \$5,000 each for its maintenance. The money was subject to call upon the presentation of bills for work done in the county making the donation, and in such amounts as the superintendent presented bills. None of the counties on my division were called upon for the full appropriation. The canal was too near dead for resurrection even with that

PARENTS & SIBLINGS OF PATRICK O'BRIEN

<u>NAME</u>	<u>BORN</u>	<u>PLACE</u>	<u>EMIGRATED</u>	<u>DIED</u>	<u>PLACE</u>	<u>BURIAL</u>
William O'Brien	@1785	Ireland	1852*	Spring 1865	Huntington, IN	
Mary Brady	@1780	Ireland	1852*	@1872	Huntington, IN	
Patrick O'Brien	3-20, 1820	Ireland	1849-50	2-1-1904	Huntington, IN	Mt. Calvary Cemetery
Ellen O'Brien		Ireland	1852*			
Dennis O'Brien	3-25-1834	Ireland	1852*	3-20-1892	Ft. Wayne, IN	Catholic Cemetery B405
Mary O'Brien		Ireland	1852*			

*(Another source says they emigrated in 1854)

aid.

The level between Lagro and Wabash was kept filled with water several years after the canal was abandoned, for the purpose of supplying that city with water power. At that time I had three boats in my charge — the state repair boat, dredge boat and tender boat. These remained in the level named until they rotted down. The machinery was reclaimed by the Buffalo firm who sold it to the canal, and was probably all they got for their debt. The money invested in boats, horses, mules, etc., by boatmen, was largely lost. Some of the boats were taken to the Ohio Canal, where they sold for a song; some rotted down at wharves where they were tied up in the hope that the canal would be reopened. Many of the boatmen were ruined. Having been on the canal for years, they were apparently unfit for anything else. When I was city treasurer, years after, I saw one of the old captains with a gang of tramps who sought shelter in the city caboose. At first he refused to recognize me, but finally did so. He had been comfortably fixed at one time, but little by little lost all he had. I offered to help him, but he wouldn't even let me buy him a railroad ticket to Peru, where he had relatives. The old canal was a good thing in its day, but there was no reason why it should be longer maintained. The day had gone by when freight was held over until navigation opened. When spring came around there was little stuff left by the railroads for shipment. The railroads could and did reduce their freight rates during the summer months so that boating was unprofitable. It was to their interest to ruin the canal and they succeeded. It was even hinted and many of the boatmen believed it, that certain canal officials were in the pay of the railroad companies, and that there was a conspiracy to play into the railroad's hands, but if there was any proof of it, I never knew it."

As the Wabash & Erie Canal was waning in the fall of 1873 Patrick was elected as a councilman for the 1st ward in Huntington, Indiana. The following spring of 1874 he was elected Huntington's treasurer without opposition and in 1876 was re-elected again without opposition.

In the spring of 1874 he was appointed Huntington's Civil Engineer. According to a Huntington County history published in 1887 he was still serving "with great credit to himself" in this capacity.

In 1877 the county commissioners appointed him to locate and prepare plans to construct free gravel roads. They were built between 1877-1879.

Serving the public was not always easy for Patrick because of his position as treasurer for the city and as city engineer. He was named in several legal suits.

The content of the lawsuits are not so important, but the cases do document Patrick's public service and how it was very trying at times.

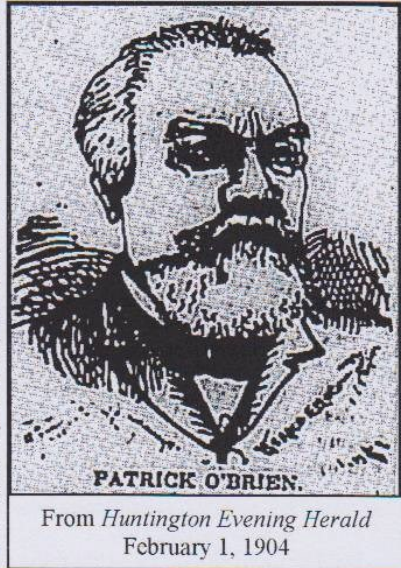
In 1879 a suit was brought before the circuit court of Huntington county by George W. Stulz, Patrick O'Brien, William A. Berry, Henry W. Rosebrough, George Gray, Cyrus E. Bryant, William J. Campbell and Theodore Shaffer seeking reversal of an earlier trial in which they had been found guilty of usurping the State of Indiana and causing great damage to the State and its citizens by apportioning land into wards, assessing and collecting taxes, seizing and selling property, real and personal, borrowing and issuing bonds having exclusive power of streets, highways and bridges and requiring them to be improved, repaired, opened, changed and widened, etc. etc. This was one year after Huntington had been incorporated as a town. The case, was reversed in their favor.

In 1883 a law suit against the city of Huntington and Patrick O'Brien, its civil engineer, was filed for their improvement of a public street by extending the improvement to include a strip of the appellant's land. This suit was ruled in favor of the city and Patrick.

Probably the most troublesome case concerned mortgaged lands. It ended up in three different trials. The first trial ruled against John Mishler, Patrick O'Brien and William Ewing. In the second case, they sought to have it reversed. On December 29, 1885 the Supreme Court of Indiana reversed the judgments, with costs; one-third to be taxed against named members of the Mishler family, one-third against Patrick O'Brien; and the remaining one-third against William Ewing. Then it raised its ugly head again in 1893 in a case of O'Brien versus Moffitt. It concluded with Patrick O'Brien, William Ewing and John Mishler each being owed \$1,285.11 by Patrick Moffitt and Thomas Roche.

We do not know when Patrick retired from public service. His interview with the *West Lebanon Gazette* was in 1896 at age seventy-six.

Patrick O'Brien passed away at his home on North Poplar Street in Huntington, Indiana on February

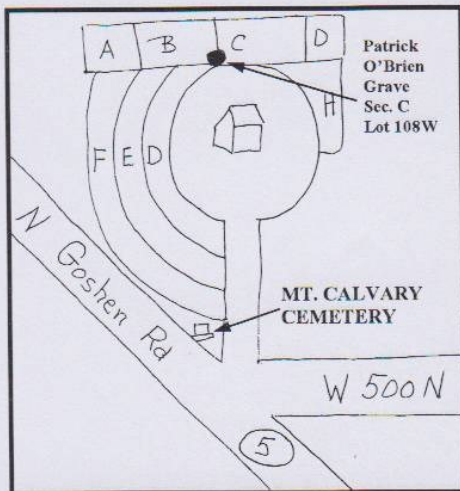


1, 1904 at 2:45 p.m. He was almost eighty-four years old. His death occurred following a critical illness that lasted several days and was due to "infirmities of age." Rev. Quinlan had administered the last holy sacraments earlier that day.

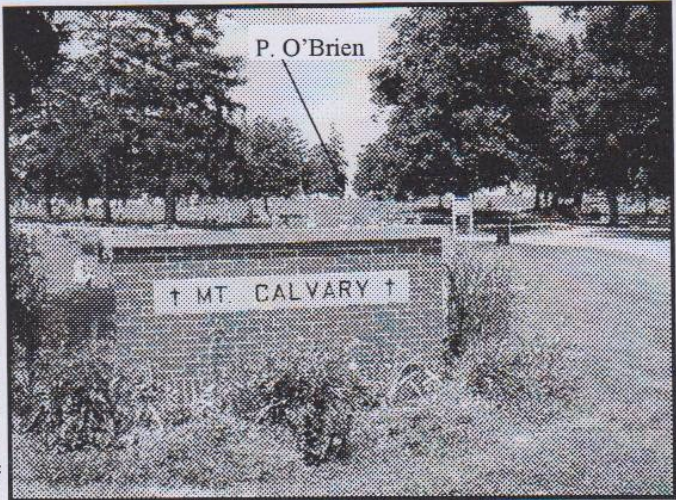
Patrick was a man of importance and held the respect of his community. Following his death, his obituary and reports of his funeral appeared in the following three Huntington newspapers: *Daily News Democrat* 2-1-1904, *Huntington Evening Herald* 2-2-1904 and 2-5-1904, and *Hunting Herald* 2-5-1901. Through these we learn that his funeral was conducted on Thursday February 4, 1904 at 10 o'clock in St. Mary's Catholic Church with a solemn requiem high mass. Rev. Father Quinlan being the celebrant, assisted by Rev. Father Zircher of St. Peter and Paul's Catholic church of Huntington, Father Mongovan of Fort Wayne and Father Quinn of Lagro. One paper said Rev. Quinlan's discourse was one that "may be considered the ablest and most impressive of any he has yet delivered....The scripture quoted afforded opportunity for valuable counsel and admonition to the living, the speaker succeeding in drawing from it may lessons, ending in an eloquent tribute to the memory of the dead."

Patrick's obituaries describe him as a "popular and capable gentleman" in his duties and that he was "noted for his conscientious fidelity." He was an "ardent believer in the Catholic faith and always true to his church" and "a self-made man of more than ordinary mental capacity." Another obituary said that Patrick had "started poor, but, by industry and honest dealing with his fellowman, had accumulated much of the world's goods."

Pall bearers were Henry Pfeifer, Daniel Brodrick, Patrick McCarty, Patrick Gorman, Ed Skilly, John Kandler, Henry Ufhell and Joseph Ufhell. Burial was in Section C Lot 108E in Mt. Calvary Cemetery on the north-side of Huntington, Indiana.

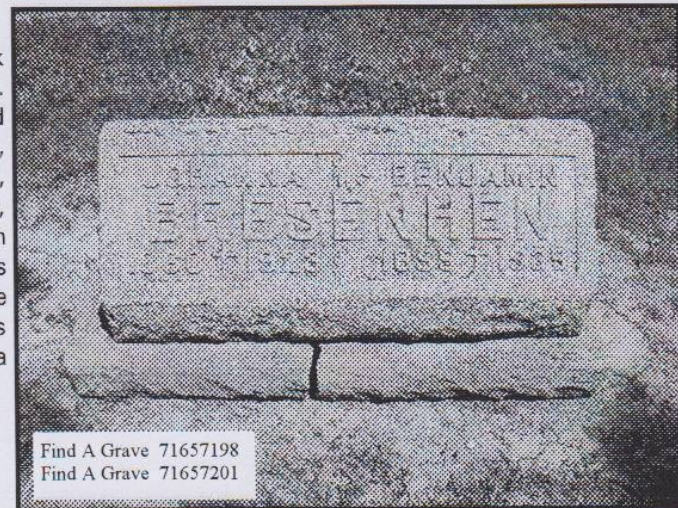
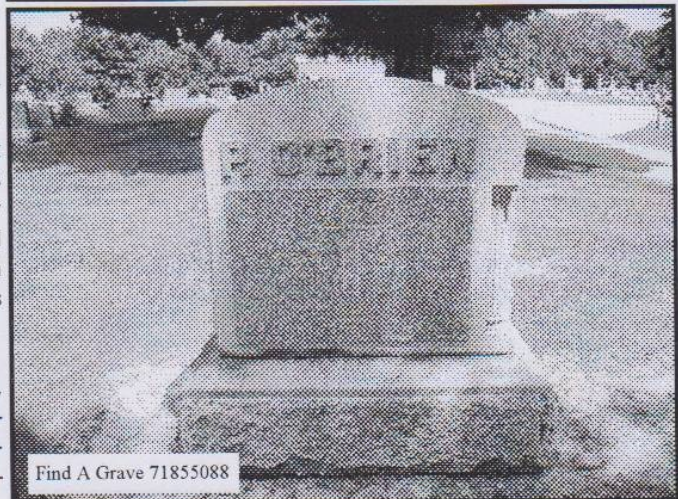


Patrick was unmarried. He was survived by his sister, Mary O'Brien, and his niece, Mrs. Benjamin Bresenhen. His grave is beside that of his niece, Johanna Bresenhen.



Patrick O'Brien is buried in Mt. Calvary Cemetery. His grave marker has been replaced with a new stone that sits to the left of his niece's and her husband's stone. Photos by Bob Schmidt

P. O'Brien 1820—1904
 Johanna Bresenhen Benjamin Bresenhen
 1860 1923 1855 1935



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Special thanks to:

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