

## CANAWLERS AT REST

### JOSEPH L. SLOAN

b. 1801  
d. 1872

By Robert F. & Carolyn I. Schmidt

Normally when we think about the economics of canals we focus on the costs of building and operating them. However, canals influenced lives of those who lived along them, worked on them, received shipments via them, etc. For example, some merchants who operated along the canal routes were very successful but others faced considerable losses as the canals failed. One such merchant was Joseph L. Sloan.

Joseph L. Sloan was born in New Jersey about 1801. By the early 1820s he had located in Indianapolis, the new state capital. He became associated with a merchant there by the name of Daniel Yandes. Yandes was impressed with the pleasing manners of young Joseph and offered him a job.

At about the same time the Indiana General Assembly, after determining there were enough pioneer communities in Montgomery county and the Wabash New Purchase in Indiana to carve out a new county, approved an Act for its creation on December 30, 1825. There were several proposals as to where the new county's seat would be located and it became quite a contest. Although Attica had been platted on March 19, 1825 prior to the Act, it was not deemed suitable for the county seat. Some thought the geological center of the county near the forks of Coal Creek would be appropriate while others wanted it high on a bluff over the river at Portland. Isaac Coleman, who knew the Wabash river would provide an avenue of transportation, entered 80 acres of land on which Covington was later platted. He laid out a town and attempted to have it named the county seat by offering to donate lots for schools, a piece of ground for a cemetery, and four out of five of all the remaining lots if his donation would become the "permanent" seat of justice. However, if Covington became the county seat and later the county seat was

moved elsewhere, Coleman's donation could be seized by his heirs with all its fixtures because his will to the county had been broken.

This area officially became a county on April 1, 1826 and was named for Kentucky Major James Fountain, who was killed at Harmar's Defeat on October 22, 1790 near Fort Wayne. Coleman along with David Vance, Sheriff of Montgomery County, and John Wilson, Clerk of the Court of Montgomery County, who also were proprietors of the town, were successful in getting the county seat on July 25, 1826 at a meeting of the authorities. At that meeting the county agent was ordered to re-survey the town site, correct it and present a plat to the "Board." It's county seat was named Covington, probably after a town in Virginia, Coleman's home state. At the time there were only a few squatters in the town — John Gilliam, a poor man with a large family who lived in a small log cabin on ground where the jail was later built, and Joseph Griffith with his son Barton. Covington was not officially platted until September 1, 1828 by Joseph L. Sloan and David Rawles.

Daniel Yandes, being a rising merchant in Indianapolis, saw an opportunity to be one of the first to establish a branch business outlet in the new county so he sent Joseph Sloan to Covington with a small stock of goods. Sloan arrived in October of 1826 after making his way through the wilderness, often having to chop through dense woods. He had to quickly erect a log "business house" to protect his merchandise from the weather. Settlers located nearby and others from farther away were eager to help build Covington's first business establishment. Joseph Baum, James Bilsland, John Gilham, Joseph and Barton Griffith, Lucas Nebeker, Joseph Shelby, John Steeley, and James Whitley worked on its construction and Anderson White brought his ox team seven miles from Coal Creek to help. The building was about 14 ft. x 18 ft., was constructed of un-hewn logs, and was daubed and plastered. Iron nails were used to build the shelving. Nails were a popular but very scarce item on the frontier. Sloan's business soon out grew the structure and a small frame building was erected, which he used for several years. It occupied a portion of lot 93. He also built a dwelling on lot 94 soon after his arrival. It later was owned by Wm. C. B. Sewell, his brother-in-law.

Sloan hired Barton Griffith as clerk for his store. Griffith largely managed the business. The store immediately became the gathering spot for the surrounding farmers.

At this time rivers such as the Wabash and the Ohio served as the major transportation routes because there were no good overland roads or no canals. But the Wababsh also a problem with the rapids just below Vin-

cennes on the Wabash River. Spring time was when most of the flat boating occurred since the water was high enough to pass boats over the rapids. The flat boats could only go one way and that was down river to New Orleans to sell their produce and farmers then walked or rode back on horseback. You will recall that Abraham Lincoln took such a trip as a young man. These trips were filled with potential peril, either coming or going. As part of his job at Sloan's store, Barton Griffith made such a trip to New Orleans with flat-boats carrying produce, was hit with a severe attack of dysentery, and died upon returning. His "bright, energetic spirit" was a loss for the fledgling community.

With the advent of the steamboat various attempts were later made to reach the upper stretches of the Wabash River. The little steamer "Republican" finally made it as far as Logansport on July 4, 1834, but it was soon realized that Lafayette was the practical boating limit up the Wabash. Even then most of the trips had to be made in the spring.

Another person arriving on the scene by keel boat at about the same time (1826) was David Rawles from the Terre Haute area. Rawles, who brought his family with him, immediately began building the first one story hotel with the aid of those who had helped Sloan. It was about 16 ft. x 24 ft. with round logs, a clapboard roof and a puncheon floor. Rawles purchased the few nails he used in its construction from merchant Joseph Sloan and boards for a door from Anderson White. Mrs. Rawles cooked in a small rail pen covered with clapboards that was attached to the hotel. Joseph Sloan and Barton Griffith, were its first boarders with others such as Andrew Ingram and Daniel Rogers, attorneys; John McKinney, tanner; Frank Merrill, the second shop keeper; Dr. Hamilton; and sometimes farmers. Before long a group of 12 men organized the "Callisumpkin Society," a moot court assembled for their amusement. Its "Dispenser of Justice" was David Rawles, its attorneys at the bar were Ingram and Rogers, and its constable was James Whitley. They would arrest their best friends for slight misdemeanors and conduct court well into the night to decide on a fine. The law breaker's fine was usually to dig up one of the stumps or brush that covered the town. In that way much of the land was cleared. One of the misdemeanors commonly tried was brushing flies from one's face when there were fewer than one dozen of them trying to spoil his appetite or comfort. Although this type of amusement seems silly today, the society really contributed a great deal toward the development of Covington. David Rawles died in 1879.

Again in 1826, the first post office for Covington was secured and Joseph L. Sloan became its first postmaster. The stage line between Terre Haute and La-

fayette ran about twice a week bringing the mail. Sloan was later succeeded by his good friend, David Rawles.

Sloan & Yandes' mercantile business was very popular with the locals and held the county's first stationery account. When this account was liquidated it had a total of \$1.37½.

In the spring of 1827 Sloan and Yandes chartered a steamer the "Lawrence" to bring 125 tons of goods from Cincinnati down the Ohio and up the Wabash. The river boat arrived in Covington on March 18, 1827. As Covington rose as a center of commerce, its population grew. By 1830 it had reached about 200 inhabitants.

Although religion was important to the early settlers, for the first few years they met in groves of trees or in homes of individuals and managed without a church building. The two-story county jail with a lower floor of 10 feet x 12 feet and an upper floor of 8 feet by 12 feet of oak timber on a stone foundation was one of the first county structures required and was constructed in 1827 for \$181.50.

Covington, as the county seat, soon needed a court house. The first building erected for this purpose was built in late 1827 to early 1828. It was a two story frame structure about 16 feet x 30 feet and was built across from the jail. The contractor for the court house was Joseph L. Sloan. The jail and courthouse together cost \$516.50. In July 1828 the board of justices ordered a brick chimney with two fireplaces be added to the courthouse and in September ordered Samuel Rush to move the court house for \$4. Then in March 1829 the board decided they wanted a brick court house and authorized the county agent to contract for 120,000 good bricks. The brick court house was not completed until 1833 because there was conflict over where the county seat should be located. It burned down in 1856.

Fountain county is bordered on its western edge by the Wabash River and extends about 15 miles to the east. Attica is also located on the Wabash at the northern end of the county. Veedersburg (Chambersburg) is much more centrally located on the banks of Coal Creek about 8 miles east of Covington. In 1831 there was agitation to move the county seat to Chambersburg. The legislature authorized a commission to study the issue, but they concluded that the county seat should remain in Covington. This battle continued over the years. Another attempt was made in 1851 by Chambersburg, now called Veedersburg, and another as late as 1913.

The first treasurers for the county were appointed. The first two were James Prevo and William Hopkins, who served for brief periods. Soon in 1828,

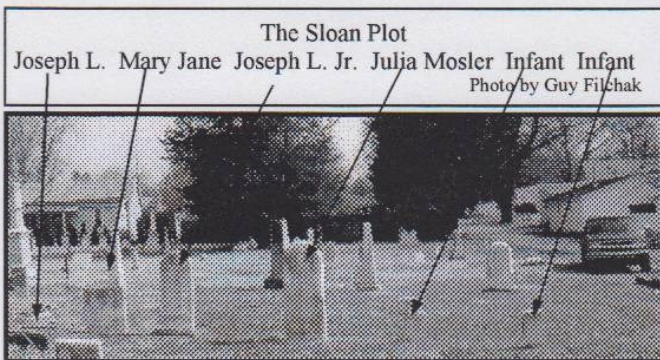
Joseph Sloan was appointed. Due to his integrity he was annually reappointed until Aug 1841 when the position became an elected one. His pay for the period was \$20 per year. His collector was John Hamilton. Later in 1852 Joseph L. Sloan ran against James W. King for county treasurer. He was defeated by King, 1126 votes to 917 votes. He ran again for treasurer in 1858 against King and was defeated, 1644 votes to 1570 votes.

The U. S. General Land Office Records show that in 1831 Joseph L. Sloan owned land in Section 30 Township 20-N Range 8-W at the 2nd prime meridian in Fountain county. The Indiana Marriage Collection, 1800-1941 has his marriage date.

On November 25, 1832, Joseph Sloan married Mary Jane Sewell (1813-1872) in Covington. Their children were:

- Elmira Sloan (1833, ?)
- Joseph L. Sloan, Jr. (1841, 4-17-1872 )
- Julia L. Sloan Mosler (1846, 1-22-1873)
- Mary E. Sloan (1858, ?)
- Harriet L. Sloan (?,?,) tombstone leans on tree
- Infant son (?,?,)
- Infant daughter (?,?,)

All their children are buried in the Sloan plot at Oak Grove Cemetery in Covington, Indiana except for Elmira and Mary E.. They probably married and we do not know their last names.



Little is know about Joseph L. Sloan's family, but his wife's family apparently moved from Ohio to the Covington area about 1825. David Sewell and his wife Mary (Crain) Sewell raised their family in Fountain County. Their oldest son, William C.B. Sewell (4-21-1815 to 7-2-1891), became a merchant and substantial citizen of the community. When Joseph Sloan got into financial difficulties, William was there to help out.

On Wednesday December 19, 1832 Edward Hannegan presented a petition of J. L. Sloan and others, praying the location of a State road from Covington, in Fountain County to Russellville, to intersect a State road on a direction to Greencastle, to the seventeenth ses-

sion of the Indiana General Assembly. The petition was read and referred to a select committee of Messrs. Hannegan, Puett, and Sands. Joseph led others to get better access to their community through projects such as this state road, a later bridge, a plank road, etc.

The first saw mill in Covington was built in 1834 by Joseph L. Sloan. Sloan employed many men to run this mill, which served the county for miles around. Near the mill he also had a distillery. Both were destroyed by fire.

By 1835 Sloan's store had outgrown its frame building. He erected a two story brick building that occupied the full sixty-six front of lot 93. It was divided into a tavern and a store-room. He later sold it to McMannomy and McMahon, who rented it to different parties. The entire business block burned in 1878.

In January 1837 it was decided that Fountain County needed a new jail. Wm. Titus received the contract for \$1,700 and completed the jail in January 1838. Then in December 1850 the commissioners decided to build a one story high, dressed stone jail with three cells, a front hall and a three room dwelling-house attached to the jail. The contract, which was not let until March 1851, was held by Joseph L. Sloan. It specified that "he should not begin work until after the first Monday in the following April, when the vote upon relocation was to be taken. This vote resulted in favor of Covington, and Mr. Sloan completed his contract at a cost to the county of about \$3,129. The cells in the jail were 6 feet by 10 feet, the hall was 8 feet by 24 feet, and the building's dimensions were 25½ feet by 27 feet. The dwelling house was 20 feet x 25½ feet. This jail was used until it was replaced in 1873.

Covington really began to grow when it learned that the Wabash & Erie Canal would pass through it. As canal digging was taking place in the county, a bone of a mighty mastodon was unearthed. It weighed about 700 pounds and was 17 feet long. This further increased the excitement. The bone was given to Wabash College and later sent to the state museum in Indianapolis. There is no record at the museum showing that it was found in Covington while digging the canal.

Once the Wabash and Erie was completed through Fountain County, Covington was made a toll collection point and the town experienced a great period of prosperity. A wide street was built alongside the canal as it ran through town. On the opposite side of the street was a packing business, conducted by Hardy, Sloan and Sewell, one of the largest and most important businesses at the time. Their business required packing cases and barrels making the cooper's trade profitable. Hoop poles were cut around Coal Creek and used at the

Barkley Cooper Shop. There was a pottery, a brick kiln, a tannery, an iron foundry, a woolen mill, grist and flour mills, hotels, taverns, even a straw hat maker. Stages carried canal boat passengers from the packets at the landing at the foot of Pearl street. Even moonlight packet boat "parties" were held. Covington was booming, but its merchants were accepting Canal Scrip in exchange for their goods. The Scrip soon depreciated in value.

Joseph Sloan was an honest merchant as described here in *History of Fountain County*. "About 1842 excavation for the Wabash & Erie Canal began at La Fayette, and by 1846 was finished to Covington [and through Fountain County by 1847]. Money being scarce, a large amount of canal scrip was issued, which the Covington merchants promised to accept at par for goods till the canal was finished to this point. This scrip depreciated till it was worth but forty cents on the dollar. While it was worth and brought but this [40¢] in other places, the business men of Covington fulfilled their promise. Those who had large sums of money loaned out were obliged to give a receipt in full, when, virtually, but two-fifths of the amount was received. Joseph L. Sloan weathered the gale, with destruction to his fortune from which he never recovered."

Although Covington grew rapidly while the canal was being built, the failure of the canal was a disaster. Dr. Hamilton also lost thousands of dollars when the canal failed and others smaller amounts.

An Act to Incorporate the Covington Draw Bridge Company was approved by the Indiana General Assembly on January 26, 1847. Joseph L. Sloan along with William Patterson, William Piatt and Joseph Ristine were appointed commissioners and were ordered to publish notice of the company in one or more Fountain County newspapers.

Also in 1847 Joseph Sloan erected a hotel in Covington that was run by P. B. Brown. Brown, a blacksmith from New York and a hero in the War of 1812, had engaged in business in Wood county, Ohio around 1835, moved to Indiana in 1840, and kept a hotel in Lafayette before moving to Covington. After five years in Covington, Brown moved to Terre Haute and kept a hotel there for five more years before becoming a salesman. In 1862 he was a clerk for the interior department at Washington, D. C. and employed by the government until 1873 when he returned to Covington to once again run the Sloan Hotel. It burned down in 1876.

The United States Federal Census of 1850 shows Joseph a merchant age 49 from New Jersey having assets of 20,000. His wife Mary J is 37 years old and his children Elmira is 13, Joseph is 9, and Julia is 4.

Living in his household are John Stuart age 24 and James M. Glover age 35.

In 1851 Joseph also became involved with the Covington and Danville Plank Road Company. The Indiana legislature authorized the company on February 7, 1851. Others involved were John Billsland, Edward A. Hannegan and John McMannomy, and Samuel J. Weldon. The capital stock was eight thousand dollars, divided into shares of fifty dollars each. It is unclear if this plank road was ever begun much less completed. Another plank road was built from Covington to Crawfordsville, Indiana with a branch to the southeast to near Wallace. This was a toll road and the toll keeper at the crossroads would charge a team coming from Wallace, thirty-five cents. It was a regular stage route.

Plank roads were thought to be a great idea since there was an abundance of timber to provide a continuous wooden roadway. The first ones built were very slippery for the horses when wet. The planks rotted in about 4 years, leaving holes and soft spots that were worse than a dirt road. The concept of plank roads popular in the late 1840s were soon abandoned in the 1850s. The railroads were making their introduction on the Hoosier landscape at this same time.

In order to meet his various financial obligations Sloan borrowed money from a variety of local people. In September of 1854 he and his wife transferred land sold by the local marshal sale to his old business partner David Yandes, who had bid on the property. It appears that Sloan remained on this property even though Yandes owned it. In June 1859 Yandes sold the property to Sloan's wife's brother, William C.B. Sewell, who had also purchased other Sloan property. A lawsuit, *Parmlee et. al. v Sloan et. al.*, was brought forth by other creditors saying that Sloan bribed people not to bid at the marshal sale and that he conveyed other properties to business partners and relatives in order to shelter the lands from creditors. Other property also had been purchased by David Rawles, Sloan's business partner in Covington. Although these transactions looked somewhat suspicious, after extensive cross examination the original trial by jury found for the defendant Sloan, that no malfeasance was involved. An appeal trial reaffirmed the verdict for Sloan. A full review of the case can be found with a Google Book search in the 1873 *Reports of Cases Argued and Determined in the Supreme Court of Justice of the State of Indiana*, pages 469-484.

Mary Jane (Sewell) Sloan died on February 28, 1857 possibly from child birth. This was before the various lawsuits were finally settled in 1873. She is buried at Covington in the Oak Grove Cemetery.

The 1860 Federal Census shows J. L. Sloan age



MARY J.  
Wife of J. L. Sloan  
DIED Feb. 28, 1857  
Photo by Guy Filchak

59 with his children Joseph L. age 18, Julia J. age 13, and Mary E. age 2, almost 3. His older daughter Elmira was no longer living at home.

In 1869 the Indianapolis, Bloomington & Western Railroad was built through Fountain County. It began to bring life back to the county that had been lost and the Wabash & Erie Canal faded away. One of the last canal boats recorded

by toll collector Dave Webb at the toll house in Covington was the "Rocky Mountain" coming from Lodi on her way to Toledo, OH. on October 26, 1872. "Goodman" was the last little packet to travel from Lodi to Lafayette on November 13, 1875. Even local traffic on the canal soon stopped. This caused accompanying business such as boats, breweries, locks, mills, packing houses, warehouses, and woolen factories to fall into disuse.

The 1870 Federal Census shows Joseph L. Sloan age 69 with his children Joseph Sloan age 29 and Julia Sloan age 22 living with him. His personal estate is valued at \$250 while property of his son Joseph is valued at \$750. He and son, Joseph L. Jr., are shown as farmers and his daughter as keeping house.

Joseph L. Sloan died in 1872. He was buried alongside his wife Mary Jane and children in Oak Grove Cemetery in Covington, Indiana. His tombstone has been removed.

Probably due to the court cases, Hiram W. Beckwith in his *History of Fountain County, Indiana* writes: "It may be truthfully recorded of him (Joseph L. Sloan) that he was an honest man, and faithful in the discharge of the duties of his office, and while he died poor in this world's goods, he was rich in the esteem of those who knew him, and took with him to the life beyond the grave more than will any another who has been successful in accumulating wealth at the expense of the public, and by prostituting official position."

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