

# CANAWLERS AT REST

## ELBRIDGE GERRY VINTON

**b. July 11, 1824**

**d. Dec. 16, 1913**

## VALENTINE

## SELL

**b. Jan. 1819**

**d. Mar. 26, 1902**

## SARAH

## SELL

**b. July 18, 1827**

**d. Mar. 1918**

**By Phyllis Mattheis**

Have you ever walked into an old building and said, "If these walls could only talk"? Let's consider the Vinton House Hotel in downtown Cambridge City:

"If these walls could talk,  
What stories they could tell  
About an innkeeper named Vinton  
And a canal boat captain named Sell."

This story is about two men and their wives who were history makers in east central Indiana.

Let's start with Elbridge Gerry Vinton, who was born at Boston, Mass. on 11 July 1824. When he was a teenager, his parents, Joseph and Sukey Vinton, joined a group of 41 Yankees heading for Iowa. When the colony reached western Wayne County, Indiana, in 1844, it stopped for a few days. The Vintons decided to

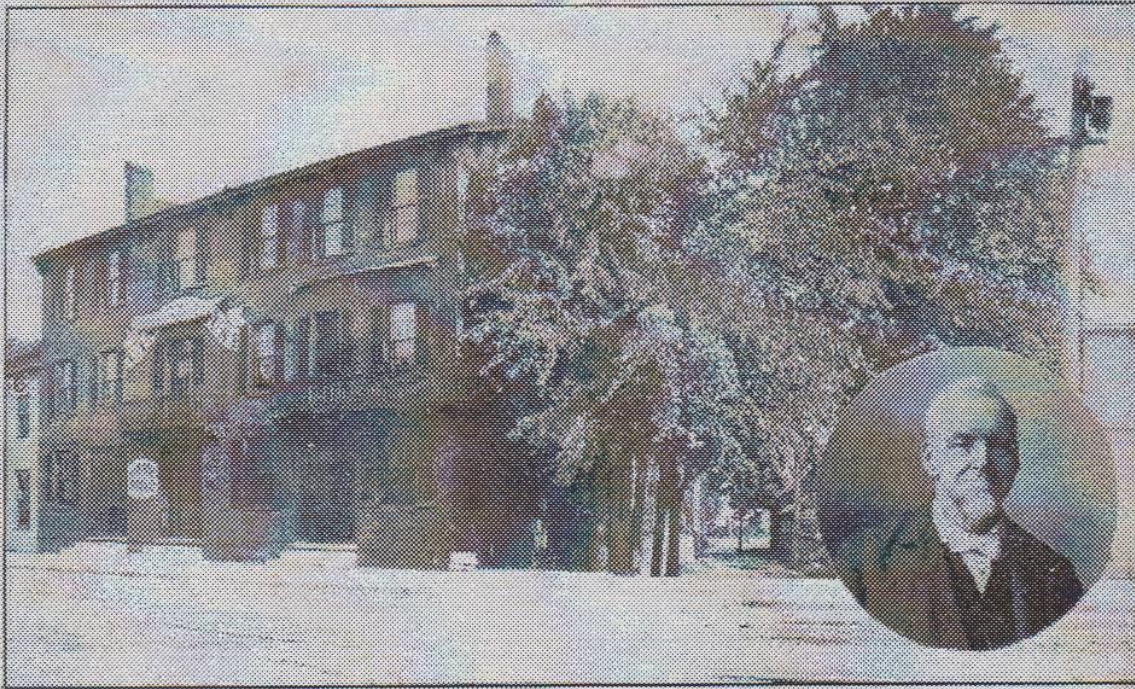
settle on a small farm in the East Germantown area and Elbridge went to work for Solomon Meredith (later to become a Civil War General), who was running the Blue Hall Hotel, located at the southwest corner of Main and Jones Streets in Cambridge City.

These were exciting times in Cambridge City! The first federal road, called the Cumberland or National Road (now U.S. 40), had been surveyed through the area about 1827 and construction was completed across Indiana by about 1834. The National Road connected Indiana to the east across Ohio, West Virginia, Pennsylvania and Maryland, and brought stagecoaches, Connestoga wagons and gold seekers.

In 1836 the Indiana legislature passed the Mammoth Internal Improvements Act which funded the survey for the White Water Canal to extend about 70 miles north from Lawrenceburg on the Ohio River to the National Road in east central Indiana. Expecting progress and prosperity, businesses began locating at the junction of the two methods of transportation, resulting in the platting in October of 1836 of greater Cambridge City, which included the first 1824 settlement of Vandalia--just a quarter of a mile north on the east side of the West Fork of the White Water River-- and also the earlier East Cambridge, which had developed about 1830 along the National Road on the east side of the double-laned covered wooden bridge.

By 1839 the canal was completed between Lawrenceburg and Brookville, but construction was halted when the state's funds were depleted. The state was forced to sell the uncompleted canal. In 1842 a private White Water Valley Canal Company headquartered in Connersville was chartered, which resumed work on the canal, much to the joy of Cambridge City merchants. Finally, the canal opened to Cambridge in the fall of 1845, the packet boats bringing settlers and travelers from the Ohio River, and freight boats bringing goods from the east and returning to Lawrenceburg and Cincinnati with products from the fertile farms of the area.

And now Elbridge Vinton enters the scene. On 9 May 1846 twenty-two year old Elbridge married seventeen year old Catharine Johnsonbough, the daughter of Frederick and Elizabeth, who had a dry goods store, plus "fish and groceries, hardware, queensware and the finest liquors." Catharine had been born on 9 April 1830 in Centre County, PA. That same year her parents came west and settled on a farm just south of nearby East Germantown, so they were already here when the Vinton family arrived and decided to become neighbors. At the time of their marriage Vinton was renting Meredith's hotel and took his young wife there to live. Their only son was born on 15 September



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VINTON HOUSE,

ELBRIDGE VINTON.

This postcard of the Vinton House and Elbridge Vinton is courtesy the Cambridge City Library.

1847 but died at the tender age of two years. Then three daughters blessed the marriage.

Seeing opportunity for profit to be made in providing lodging for the waves of people passing through this crossroad, in 1847-48 Aaron Reisor and his father-in-law (or step-father) John Sowers built a grand three story brick United States Hotel on the east bank of the canal on the south side of Main Street, in the middle of the block between Center and Foote Streets on lot 7. This Federal style structure has a trapezoid shape plan with an ell to the rear (south). The unique footprint of the building directly relates to its building site at the intersection of the east-west National Road and the north-south White Water Canal. The front (north) elevation aligns with the National Road and the street grid of the town. The west elevation aligns with the turning basin once immediately adjacent to the building. A later two-story wood frame addition and exterior stair fit between the main building and the ell. The hotel's location made it the center for much activity as settlers moved into Indiana or on west; thus it played a substantial part in America's early transportation history.

Flooding plagued the White Water canal nearly

from the beginning, yet the Hagerstown Canal Company completed the northernmost eight miles of the canal between the two towns in 1847. The 491 foot drop in the White Water Valley between Cambridge City and Lawrenceburg caused any slight increase in the flow of the river or its tributaries to rush recklessly down the canal, destroying banks and structures. There were four devastating floods in a six year period, and the last boat reached Hagerstown in 1861. The water of the canal continued to serve a number of mills, and the water of the section between Milton and Connersville was used for hydro-electric power for almost a century.

Perhaps the flooding contributed to Aaron Reisor's decision to join the gold seekers in California. On July 4, 1849, he rented his new 36 room hotel to the enterprising young Elbridge Gerry Vinton.

Two daughters were born to the Vintons in 1850 and 1852. Lillie Ore and Florine told of sitting on the hotel's back steps as little girls, watching for the arrival of the canal boat Aetna, operated by Captain Valentine Sell. His wife and boat cook, Sarah, treated the girls to her fresh baked bread with butter and jelly. The canal boats turned around in the basin at the back door of the

Vinton House for the return trip to Cincinnati, or the passengers and boat-men could enter the hotel for a meal or a drink through doors on the west elevation that were at canal level, below street level. The hotel contained an elegant dining room and bar, serving superb food and wines, and a ballroom for the social scene. The boat bell used to call the hotel guests for meals can be seen today in the History Room of the library, just across the street from the Vinton House.



This bell was used at the inn in early days.

The Vinton family was close-knit, warm and affectionate. Catharine was known far and wide as a true friend. People went to her for advice or just to talk.

This clipping of the boat bell on display in the library is courtesy of the Cambridge City Library.

In 1867 she served on a committee of lady citizens that began the drive for a better cemetery to replace the old Capitol Hill Cemetery, poorly located south of the railroad. Located about a half mile north of the National Road, Riverside Cemetery opened in the fall of 1868, the same year that Elbridge became the owner of the hotel and changed the name to the Vinton House. County records show that title was transferred from William and George Sowers to Vinton for lots 7 and 12 in Block 3.

Married for 41 years, Catharine died on 1 June 1888 at the relatively young age of 58 after a brain tumor operation in December, which for a time appeared to be successful. Catharine had been in ill health for a couple of years, but her death was a severe blow to the Vintons. Lillie and Flo, who were bright and delightful belles, put away some of their finery and cared for their grieving father. It's written that the two girls' names appeared in the social columns of the papers for years and that they often set forth in their carriage with ruffled, flowered and beribboned dresses for a ride about town, with a Negro coachman standing behind and another driving. These two daughters never married but helped their father in the hotel business and carried it on from the time he "suffered paralysis" in 1902 and after he died more than ten years later. Wisely, Elbridge transferred ownership of the property to his two daughters in December of 1907.

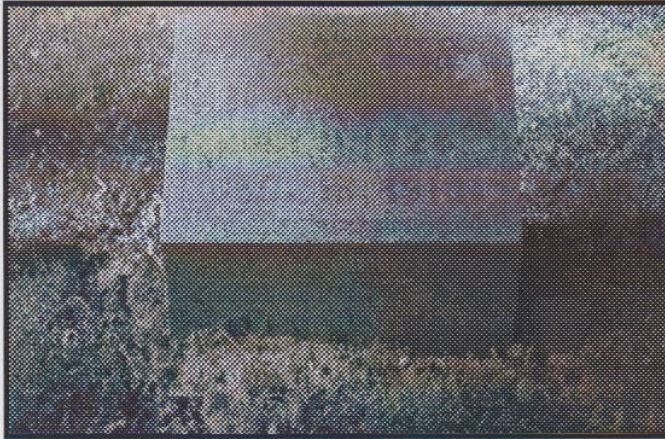
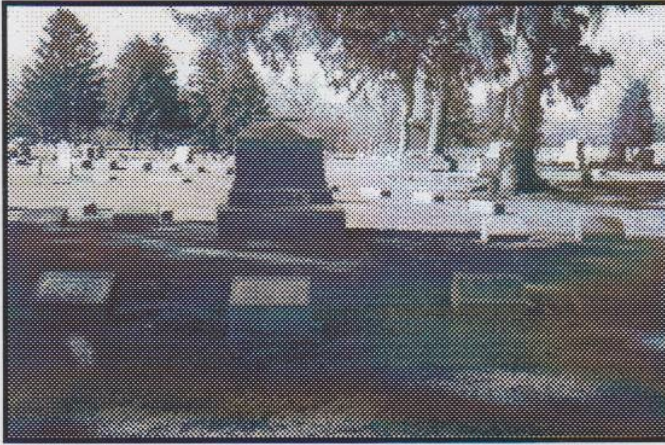
Their older sister, Ida, was married to George Stoddard and lived in Ohio, but the five year old son of

this couple, Thomas Vinton Stoddard, died on 11 January 1875, and is buried in the family plot at Riverside in Cambridge City. Ida and George must be buried in another location.

Obituaries of the time are long and flowing. Catherine's tell us that she was "a woman whose aims were always high and whose services great in helping those who needed her assistance and wise counsel. As a wife she was loving, faithful, true and helpful. As a mother she was an ideal and to her children has imparted her native grace of mind, her inherent culture, her scrupulous neatness and her unexampled thrift and industry. As a friend she knew fully what friendship meant and displayed in her character the conviction of her conception. She was always willing to inconvenience herself for the advantage of others who were finding life a hard battle. Always considerate, always kind, always tender with no word of reproach or accrimonious criticism against one who had fallen by the wayside. Her conception of life was to be happy herself and to make others happy, and that her life was a success is evidenced by the hundreds of friends who feel aggrieved as though her death were a personal loss. It is the death of such a person that creates new ties between earth and heaven and brings them nearer together. Whatever is excellent is enduring and though her heart will become dust, yet the kindly influence it shed in life will endure as long as grateful memories."

Vinton operated the Vinton House hotel for more than 64 years and "gave the Vinton House a name as widespread as the United States." No doubt Vinton was the best known hotel keeper in Indiana, since his house was the rendezvous for all the traveling salesmen. Many of the construction contractors for the Pennsylvania railroad boarded there when the railroad was built to Indianapolis. The newspaper reported when redecorating took place and when new furniture was purchased to "maintain the spirit of elegance". The enterprising hotel man also was the agent for the stage-coach, telegraph company and U.S. Mail. Over the years he catered to travelers on every method of transportation: road, canal, railroad, bicycle, auto, bus, train, plane. The local newspaper carried reports on Vinton's health over the years. "He never held or sought political office and was not active in church or lodge life, but spent his time and efforts at keeping a creditable hotel". Vinton died 16 December 1913 at the grand old age of 89, after living 69 years in western Wayne County, Indiana. "His cheery smile, his general intelligence, his good citizenship, his companionship at home and abroad, his wide acquaintance, his courtesy and gentlemanly bearing, all had a part in our town life."





Elbridge Gerry Vinton's grave in section 6 of Riverside Cemetery has a small footstone with a larger monument to the Vinton family in the center of the plot. Photos by Bob Schmidt

she married John Gonzales and had one son, Enoch Gonzales. After her husband's death, Sarah began working on a packet boat on the Miami Canal, meeting her second love, Valentine. After their marriage, Sarah became the stewardess and worked for five years, cooking for the crew and also standing her trick at the tiller. It's written that there was no better steers(wo)man on the canal! She said in a newspaper interview that she was on the last boat that ran on the canal, operated by her husband.. She also declared that the canal here was not kept up and there were many breaks in the bank.

In 1865 the Civil War ended and the White Water Canal property was sold to the railroad for nearly \$150,000. Valentine continued to run his boat only to Connersville, but finally sold it and quit the business to become a dealer of horses.

Railroads brought about the decline of both the canal and the National Road. Rails were laid on the old north-south tow path and others parralled the east-west National Road, soon criss-crossing the state and the country, carrying travelers and freight at far greater speeds year-round. However, today visitors can have a taste of canal life by touring the village of Metamora and taking a boat ride on part of the 15 miles of waterway that have been preserved at this state memorial. The restored wooden aqueduct over Duck Creek is the only one in the nation.

And now let's meet our boat captain, Valentine Sell, born in Pottsville, PA in January of 1819, with his boyhood days spent on a farm. First he worked on a Pennsylvania canal between Altoona and Holidaysburg, then came to the Miami Canal of Ohio between Dayton and Cincinnati, where he worked on a boat owned by the Dittenhaver family. He fell in love with a young woman cook on the canal but hadn't the means to marry. So he came to the White Water Canal late in the 40's to work. In a few years he became master of the Aetna and sent for Sarah. They married in 1861 (the year the Civil War began) when Val was 42 and Sarah 34.

The Aetna ran between Cambridge City and Cincinnati in two-week round trips. Almost 20,000 barrels of flour and over a million pounds of pork were shipped from Cambridge City to Cincinnati up to the 1860s.

Sarah had been born on 18 July 1827 in Newark, New Jersey to Mr. and Mrs. John Vroom, natives of Holland. When she was five years old, they came west and settled at a little village just north of Cincinnati. Here

Val's boat was caught in the basin here by the Indiana Central railroad bridge and shut off from going south. For this reason his boat was purchased by the railroad company. He then purchased the Grey Eagle livery stable, in the rear of a furniture store. Later Val purchased a barn and occupied it as a livery or training barn. For more than twenty years he was engaged in the retail liquor business and at the same time he was an extensive dealer in high class light harness horses, developing some fast race horses, which gave him a national reputation. "He was a good husband and an honorable citizen, dealing fair at all times in his business methods and commanding the respect of all who had dealings with him. His religion was morality, honesty, fair dealing, always speaking in the best terms of those he knew, paying strict attention to his own business and respecting the opinion of his neighbors." Val died unexpectedly on 26 March 1902 at the age of 83. He'd been feeling fine and had worked about his house, then went to his training stable. His death was sudden and happened while seated at his training barn chatting with friends, according to his obituary.

In August of the year of Val's death, the Indianapolis News interviewed Sarah when she was 75 years old. In telling of her early life she said that she had followed her twin sister, Mrs. Henry Dittenhaver, to the

Miami Canal to become a cook. She said the boats would race occasionally but there was no fighting on the White Water, like on other canals.

After the canal ceased to be used, boats were stripped of their useable timbers. Sarah said that the skeleton of the Aetna sat between the river and the canal for several years. Town records show that boat skeletons were buried in the basin, which was filled in to make the wide east-west Church Street one block south of the National Road. In 1956 when sewer work was under way, a four foot solid oak section of a boat keel was dug up at the intersection of Church and Center Streets. This heavy remnant of canal days is in the Wayne County Historical Museum in Richmond.

Sarah was known as Aunt Sally and lived in town for many years. She was seen walking to the Vinton House almost every day to reminisce with the Vinton sisters. She passed away at the age of 91 in March of 1918. Her obituary tells us that "Mr. Sell left her a competence to guard against the evil days that too often come in the sunset of life. She lived alone a long while, although she was urged to make her home with her son at Hamilton, Ohio. But she liked Cambridge City, and its people and its churches...she lived here so long that she became a part of the town's history, since it covered almost 60 years."

Sarah was survived by her son, two grandsons and one great granddaughter. She and Valentine are buried in the same section at Riverside as the Vintons. Their gray obelisk stone with a ball on the top of the pyramid has only their names and birth and death years, but footstones tell us that Valentine was known as Volly. And behind them is buried Sarah's twin sister, Margaret Dittenhaver, who died the year after Val, in 1903.

And so our two "history making" couples with White Water Canal connections died in Cambridge City during the thirty years between 1888-1918 after the canal had closed to traffic. First, Catherine Vinton in 1888, then Valentine Sell in 1902, followed by Elbridge Vinton in 1913, and lastly Sarah Sell in 1918. They are all buried at Riverside Cemetery in round Section 6, where the vault building is located.

But what became of Lillie Ore and Florine? Lillie's obituary says that in the fall of 1920 they went to the Home Lawn sanitarium at Martinsville to recuperate their health. "The Misses Vinton assisted in an amateur entertainment at the home less than a week before Lillie's death and were apparently in improved health. Miss Lillie, however, who had practically been a shut-in for several years past from a broken limb, was frail from her long sickness, and when her heart failed she was unable to build her strength and quietly passed away."

Lillie was 70 years of age.

Can we assume that the sisters had continued operating the hotel until they went to Martinsville? They were 63 and 61 when their father died. Florine was 68 when her dear older sister passed away on 14 November 1920.... could she have handled the guests and also taken care of her sister up until that time? Lillie's obituary tells us that their brother in law, George Stoddard, came from St. Louis for her funeral, which was held in the Vinton House with many friends in attendance.

In 1926 the National Road became U.S. 40 with two paved lanes, and the increasing popularity of the automobile brought travelers to the front door of the Vinton House again, especially folks driving to the Indianapolis 500 Race. The grand old hotel was sold in 1929 to Ernest McGraw. Florine died on 18 February 1936 at age 83. No obituary was found in the local paper. The city has a record that her ashes were interred in the family plot at Riverside...the end of the colorful story of two pioneer families in the life of our town.

The Vinton family plot is marked with a large red granite marker, and nine smaller red granite individual markers, the earliest being little son Charlie in 1849, who likely was originally buried in the old Capitol Hill cemetery. Many of those burials were moved to Riverside by 1908. Vinton's young grandson Thomas and father Joseph both died in January of 1875. Catharine is next in 1888, her mother-in-law Sukey in 1889, then our innkeeper in 1913 and his two daughters Lillie Ore in 1920 and Florine in 1936. Catharine's parents, the Johnsonboughs, her brother John and sister Elizabeth are on the adjoining lot. Interestingly, Frederick Johnsonbaugh is recorded in 1848 as an owner with John P. Sowers of Lot 12, Block 3, on the east side of the same block as the Vinton House..

But wait...here is a puzzle! In the Vinton plot is a ninth red stone with the name Elbridge Vinton House, born 29 August 1878, died 21 January 1879. Who is this infant named after our innkeeper, with the last name of House??

The Vinton House Hotel was owned by Elmer and Esther Schwegman from November to December 1989, only the second owners after the Vintons. They raised their family of five children on the second floor while renting out rooms on the third floor. A grocery store, telegraph office, tax service and bus stop were on the first floor. Then the building at 22 West Main Street had a checkered history but was rescued by Western Wayne Heritage, Inc. when the non-profit preservation group purchased it in December 1998 with the plan to stabilize it enough for an investor. This brick building is

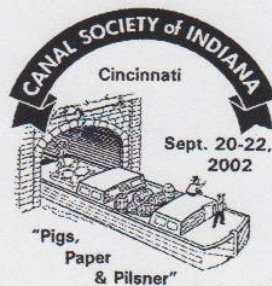


Above: The Vinton House today is being restored by Western Wayne Heritage  
Photo by Bob Schmidt

one of the few still standing that provided food and lodging to those using or working on the canals, the National Road, and the railroads. The local owners have great pride in what they've accomplished and would reluctantly relinquish it to only a person of great vision toward the future of Cambridge City and the National Road.

Sources: Cambridge City Public Library, History Room and microfilm, City Building, Riverside Cemetery, Wayne County Health Office and Courthouse, Morrison-Reeves Library in Richmond.

AQUEDUCTS  
BARLEY FIELDS  
BASINS  
BEER GARDENS  
BREWERIES  
CANAL TUNNEL  
FEEDER CANALS  
HYDRAULIC CANALS  
ICE PONDS  
INCLINES  
LOCKS  
MILLS  
OVERFLOWS  
SUBWAY



TOUR OF  
THESE  
SITES

## CANAL BALL INVITATION FOUND

John Belongie recently found an invitation to a ball in an old leather bound album containing Civil War photos and families in "turn of the century Victorian dress." The invitation is a hand written document in ink on a folded note card that measures 3.75 inches wide by 5.5 inches tall. The edges of the card have an embossed design. There is some light foxing which resembles a small brown stain, common on old paper. The foxing is a spot on the back and lighter on the front right corner no bigger than 1/4 inch and very light in the front. He hopes to sell it for \$45. The invitation reads as follows with those parts that were difficult to read in quotation marks:

### *May Day Ball*

*You are respectfully invited  
by the  
Contractors &  
"Officers or Officers"  
of the  
Wabash & Erie Canal  
to attend a  
Ball  
to be given at the  
Mansion House  
in Princeton  
on Fri-day Evening  
April 30th.*

*"DR Hosemun" "Jo. Nelson"  
"LW Wattns" "LS Hutehinson"  
"W Ragan" "RB Lawnee"  
"J Gallaghn" "Chas Slaybaek"*