

## CANAWLERS AT REST

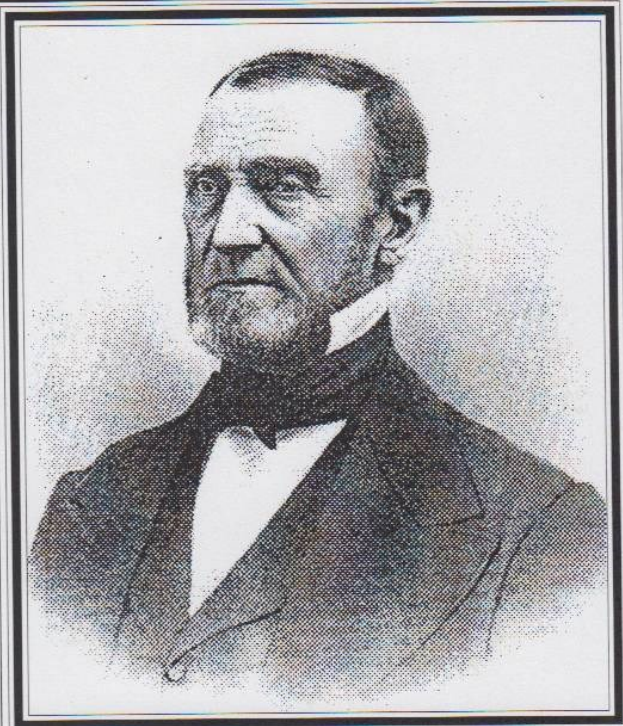
# JESSE LYNCH WILLIAMS

### Indiana's Chief Engineer

**b. May 6, 1807**  
**d. October 9, 1886**

By Thomas E. Castaldi

Portrait courtesy Allen Co. Historical Society



Among that special-interest group who enjoy nineteenth century canal history, Jesse Lynch Williams is considered a giant. His achievements in advancing Henry Clay's plan for internal improvements in the United States included canals, railroads and turnpikes. It was during Williams' career that Abraham Lincoln gave a new sense of priority to public improvements as the Civil War was coming to a close.

Jesse Williams came along at a time when the nation was facing the challenge of solving its traffic problems. Historian H. S. Knapp wrote that Mr. Williams passed the bounds of local limits, and became national. Beginning in Ohio working on canals, Williams ultimately rose to national prominence as a director for the transcontinental railroad. As for the State of Indiana's Internal Improvements efforts, arguably no other person achieved his level of accomplishment. That his work was significant is suggested in a letter written to him by the President of the New York Board of Canal Commissioners:

We are impatiently awaiting the completion of your great Wabash canal, anticipating from it results not less important than those we have actually experienced from the Ohio canal. In truth we may well expect a larger accession of trade from the Wabash than from the Ohio canal. We look upon the unprecedented development which is going on in Ohio and Indiana, as a most interesting fact in the history of American civilization, and fraught with consequences of the gravest magnitude. The

granaries of Indiana are destined to exercise a commanding sway over the manufacturing and commercial interest of the Atlantic states; but we cannot make our people actually feel that fact, until the boats commence running from the Wabash to Lake Erie.

The man who engineered the project of such a magnitude that others saw as, "a most interesting fact in the history of American civilization..." was perhaps embarrassed to see it reprinted in the January 30, 1841, *Peru Gazette*, extracted from the *Logansport Telegraph*. That said, it was a well deserved compliment.

Born on May 6, 1807 near Danbury, North Carolina, Jesse Lynch Williams was the youngest son of Jesse and Sarah Terrell Lynch. Young Jesse was the grandson of Judge John Lynch, the founder of Lynchburg, Virginia. The Judge's name became associated with the term "Lynch Law" due to his summary treatment of Tories during the Revolutionary War. On his father's side, young Jesse Lynch Williams' grandfather, Richard Williams, married Prudence Beales and together produced eleven children. Among them was a son named Jesse, and a daughter they christened Prudence. This elder Jesse married Sarah Terrell Lynch and sister Prudence married Levi Coffin Jr. The Coffin union produced a son, Levi Coffin, later to become "president" of the Underground Railroad in Indiana. Thus, Jesse Lynch Williams was the first cousin of the famed abolitionist Levi Coffin and there are indications that some of the Quaker values had an influence on



young Jesse's life. As new research reveals more about Indiana's Underground Railroad that all inclusive name given to the various routes for conducting fugitives from the American slave states to freedom in the north in the early and mid nineteenth century, the more we learn of the role played by the Wabash & Erie Canal line as a likely landmark leading northward. By 1819, Jesse Lynch Williams' parents moved to Cincinnati, Ohio, and shortly thereafter moved on to Wayne County, Indiana. Young Jesse studied engineering at Lancaster Seminary for two years in Cincinnati.

Some biographers note that in early 1824, Jesse went to work with the Corps of Engineers under the supervision of Civil Engineer Samuel Forrer to make the first survey of the Miami & Erie Canal from Cincinnati to Maumee Bay. However in an interview, Jesse said that after his brother, Micajah T. Williams, was able to get him a position as rodman earning \$9.00 a month on the Miami & Erie Canal he assisted Thomas J. Matthews to run the first level between Cincinnati and Dayton.

Biographers also report that in 1828, the Chief Engineer of Ohio, David L. Bates, appointed Jesse Williams to take over the work of the final location of the canal from Licking Summit, to Chillicothe, along with the Columbus side-cut. Further, that after the line was located and placed under contract, Jesse took charge of the construction between Circleville to south of Chillicothe. Then in 1830, the Canal Commissioners of Ohio appointed a Board of Engineers to examine and decide the problem of supplying the summit level of the Miami & Erie, either by an artificial reservoir or by feeder. Williams recommended what later was constructed and became known as the Mercer County Reservoir.

In the interview Jesse Williams stated that his next assignment was pushing through the wilderness in the region of the Auglaize River. At this point Thomas Matthews returned to Cincinnati to assume the position as professor of Mathematics at Transylvania University in Lexington, Kentucky. Jesse's new boss was Francis Cleveland. Williams said of these two mentors: "Matthews and Cleveland were, both of them, fine mathematicians. They were always solving some difficult problem, and it was from them that I got my start in the study. Whenever it rained so that we had to remain in our tent, they would keep me to work solving some problem, laying down the principles so clearly and concisely that I could never forget them."

At the age of twenty-five years, Jesse faced pursuing one of three career options: superintendence for the Miami & Erie, taking charge of the construction of one of Ohio's state buildings in Columbus, or relocating to Fort Wayne, Indiana, and serving as chief engineer of the Wabash & Erie Canal.

Jesse Williams accepted the Indiana position in 1832 and moved to Fort Wayne with his wife, Susan Creighton. The two had been married in Chillicothe, Ohio, one year earlier. Indiana's 1832 House Journal includes a report of Williams' June 18, 1832 employment explaining that he was: "to take charge of the superintendence of the Canal, in Indiana, as principal Engineer for a salary of \$1,800 per annum, his engagements to last three years, and be continued as much longer as the service may require for the same compensation....he has had in the construction of the Ohio Canals, the creditable manner in which the important and extensive works were completed, which had been under his superintendence, with his character for sound judgment and business habits, affords the best assurance, that his acceptance of the engagement, will be a valuable acquisition to the State."

His wife, the former Miss Creighton was a strong advocate for temperance in this country, and was the daughter of the Hon. William Creighton, who served in Congress during the War of 1812 and later became Ohio's Secretary of State. Susan was the granddaughter of David Meade, who once hosted Lafayette at his estate near Lexington, Kentucky. As young men, Meade with his brother had traveled from Virginia to England to live with the grandfather of William Makepeace Thackeray and are said to have been the inspiration of the heroes in Thackeray's novel, *The Virginians*.

In 1834, Jesse, along with William Gooding, was appointed an associate engineer to survey a canal from Lawrenceburg, Indiana, on the Ohio River through the Whitewater valley. Next, Mr. and Mrs. Williams moved to Indianapolis in 1835 and by 1836 Jesse was named Chief Engineer of the Indiana canal system. In September of 1837 another appointment gave Williams an additional responsibility of Chief Engineer for railroad and turnpikes. As State Engineer, his supervision embraced more than 1,300 miles of public works. Later when the authorizing powers had been changed, he was chosen by the State Legislature to the same position and continued until 1841 when all public works except the Wabash & Erie Canal was suspended. Susan and Jesse returned to Fort Wayne in 1842 as the pall of financial concerns fell over the Indiana internal improvement projects. During their years together the Williams' marriage produced three sons Edward P., Meade C. and Henry M. Williams. Rev. Moffat gave a description of the Chief Engineer stating: "His wonderful energy now showed itself. A single exploring party, engaged under his directions, in ascertaining in advance of the surveyors, and for their guidance, the relative heights of various summits, and of the water courses for the supply of the canal, ran accurately a continuous line of levels 600 miles in extent, between early spring and the succeeding autumn. And when the Legislature met in December, 1835, more than



500 miles of definite location of canal lines, with estimates thereof, were reported to that body by the engineers under his charge, the whole having received his personal attention."

By 1837 as Indiana's Chief Engineer, he was known as being a tireless worker, riding all day on horseback and spending evenings solving the numerous engineering problems of the canal. In addition, Jesse Williams' handling of the account books, correspondence and reports to the legislature that the great project demanded, are clearly and concisely written.

Some thirteen contracts for public projects under the Board of Internal Improvements were let in the fall of 1838. They were placed at several sites throughout the state and separated by two weeks travel by horseback. During the course of three months in 1838 he traveled about 3,000 miles, which suggests that he was in good physical condition to withstand the experience. So, from 1836 through 1842 Jesse Williams had the responsibility for all the public works in the State including the continued construction of the Wabash & Erie Canal. Because of the Financial Panic of 1837, followed by a financial upheaval, public projects in the United States came to a halt. From 1842 through 1847, Jesse Williams was engaged in the mercantile and manufacturing businesses in Fort Wayne. When the State abandoned the Wabash & Erie in 1847, an arrangement for completing the project to the Ohio River was made with the responsibility resting upon a Board of Trustees. The Board was comprised of representative from the State and from among the bondholders. Under the trust arrangement, "a Chief Engineer of known and established character for experience and integrity" was specified and the position was offered to Jesse Williams.

Williams was known for his individuality, "a combination of intense vital and volitional energy." According to words spoken by D. W. Moffat, "His temperament made idleness intolerable misery to him, and, with a strong physical constitution habits of industry and a tremendous capacity for work, when his will was bent on the accomplishment of a purpose, he worked tirelessly often sixteen or eighteen hours a day til it was accomplished." He managed to stay above all the charges of corruption, venality, incompetence and theft that public works projects suffered during the 1840s as the canal's financial woes deepened.

In 1854, Jesse Williams was appointed Chief Engineer for the Fort Wayne & Chicago Railroad and held that position until 1856 when the company merged with the Ohio & Pennsylvania and the Ohio & Indiana Railroads. From 1856 until 1871 he was a director of the Pittsburg, Fort Wayne & Chicago Railroad. He became a trustee of this line that evolved into the Pennsylvania

Railroad.

In July 1864, President Abraham Lincoln appointed his friend Jesse Williams as a government director of the Union Pacific Railroad. His selection with the great transcontinental railway project meant serving a one-year term that required an appointment annually. As a matter of record, Jesse was reappointed through the year 1869 by presidents Andrew Johnson and Ulysses S. Grant. He held that position with honor long after the Union Pacific met the Central Pacific at Promontory Point in 1869, which gave Americans their first railroad line across the west. His job included establishing a route and preparing a report for the railroads through the Rocky Mountains. His account revealed how the project could save millions of dollars in construction costs and led to investigations of the original proposals. Most importantly it disclosed, in part, the great scandal known as "Credit Mobilier: involving the corruption of contractors as well as highly placed politicians.

During January of 1869 he was named Receiver of the Grand Rapids & Indiana Railroad Company by the United States court for the Western District of Michigan. His immense capacity and energy probably is what saved the business from failure and afterward the court ordered that he be authorized and directed to build and place in operation the remaining two hundred miles of rail line.

A work of three hundred and twenty miles duration, this project connected Fort Wayne, the region farther south, with Little Traverse Bay and the Straits of Mackinaw. Congress had granted lands to the State of Michigan and the work had been started many years previous. A failure to negotiate its bonds had caused the State serious financial embarrassment, and suspension of the construction left a mere twenty miles that could be operated. Rivals were observing and hoping that the project would fail in order to assume the valuable grant of land. Under state law twenty additional miles was to be completed by July 1, 1869, or suffer forfeiture of the grant valued at seven millions of dollars. Construction had to take place in a near wilderness environment and winter freeze was a mere fifty or so days away. The courts ordered Williams, as the Receiver, to borrow money by pledge of the land and build the railroad as required by the law. It was an enormous challenge with no provision made for a second chance to recover the land grant if the project exceeded even one day. Eight days before the deadline, Jesse Williams was able to telegraph the governor of Michigan stating that, "The last rail of the twenty miles was laid last evening."

The court then authorized Jesse Williams to direct and build the remaining two hundred miles of line between Fort Wayne and the Muskegon River. In



addition to his fiscal responsibilities for the Grand Rapids & Indiana Railroad he had the duties of Directing Engineer to accomplish. The rail line was open for business in October, 1870. Because of the pressing obligations of the job, he resigned in October as Government Director of the Union Pacific and devoted his full attention to the Grand Rapids helping move it a rate that was comparable to the speed at which the Union and Pacific lines were completed.

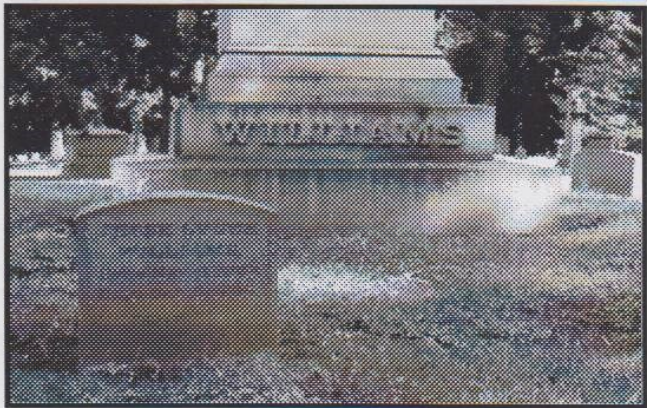
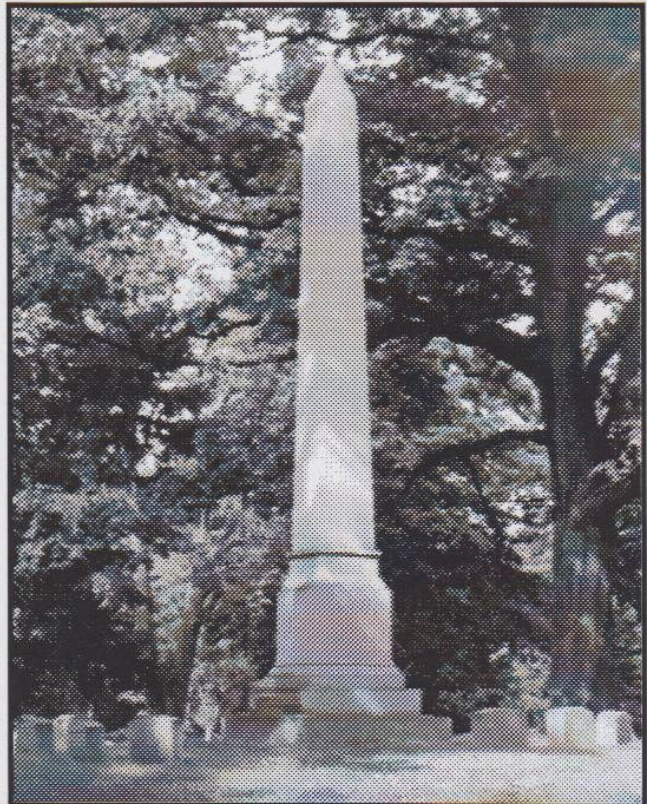
In 1871 he was appointed Chief Engineer for the Cincinnati, Richmond & Fort Wayne Railroad. His assignment was to connect the remaining sixty miles with Cincinnati, through the Grand Rapids road, with the Michigan forests, and the Straits of Mackinac. In 1876 after the sale of the Wabash & Erie Canal was ordered by the court, Jesse Williams' official relation with that project came to an end.

During his career, Jesse Williams was a devoted member of the First Presbyterian Church and elected an elder of his Fort Wayne congregation. In fact, his home in Fort Wayne was the Presbyterian headquarters for the surrounding region. It was a refuge for missionaries and elders where they were made welcome with food to eat as well as room for overnight guests.

Always resting on Sundays and a staunch opponent of alcohol, Jesse Williams, whenever possible, would forbid contractors from issuing strong spirits. He took great pride telling others of having managed the construction of the State's longest dam, the Wabash Dam No. 4 at Pittsburg, Indiana, on the Wabash & Erie Canal system without the use of alcohol among the laborers.

Spending his last days in Indiana, Jesse Williams died on Saturday October 9, 1886, just before noon, at the age of seventy-nine years and five months. He was buried Wednesday morning of the following week on October 13<sup>th</sup> in Fort Wayne. At his funeral service, Dr. Moffat related the words Jesse had written in his 1831 journal, wherein, he gave a minute account of his reconciliation with God. He noted that he had received religious instruction and advice from his parents as a child. They had the wish that he would, "enjoy all the advantages of religious meetings, society and reading. And in his earlier years he frequently experienced 'the strivings of the spirit'" by which he was convinced of the necessity to amend his life. After leaving home, for some years in the course of business, he was separated from the influences of his early training often times surrounded by those he described as thoughtless and irreligious people. He sometimes attended his church but never with any conviction.

Williams' journal reads: "It is true that I was not



Above: The Williams' family plot at Lindenwood Cemetery. Below: The Williams' family marker with Jesse Lynch Williams' gravestone on the lower left. Photos by Tom Castaldi

a gambler, nor a drunkard, nor very profane in conversation, yet it was not from any fear of God or love to Him that I avoided these vices. It was from motives purely selfish. It would be well for those who expect to be saved in consequence of their morality, to look into their own hearts and ascertain by what motives their conduct is regulated; whether it proceeds from a love or fear of their Creator, and whether they would not act just as they do if they believed there was no God."

During the year of 1832 he happened to hear a sermon on the effects of the Spirit on the hearts of men

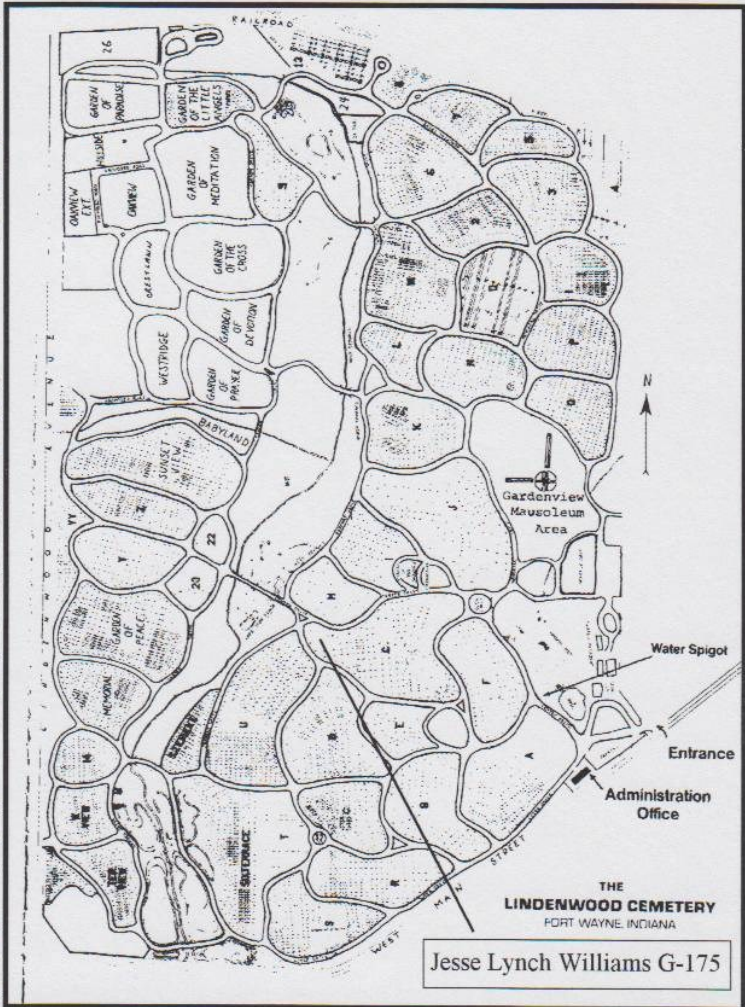


that reminded him of his early experiences, but soon forgot what he had heard after returning to his working life. A friend, who had recently converted his ways, introduced the subject of religion giving an account of his own experiences. For some reason a feeling of solemnity overtook Jesse Williams and subsequently he claimed that is why he returned to church. In doing so he was attracted to the Presbyterians.

At his funeral, the pall bearers were J.K. Edgerton, John Cochrane, Calvin Anderson, W.H. Hoffman, J.D. Nuttman, R.P. Randall, L.M. Ninde and Judge John Morris, all friends and part of the old citizens of Fort Wayne. The funeral procession left the First Presbyterian Church on a pleasant autumn morning and moved slowly through the city. His cortège rolled over streets of his adopted home and along the line of the old canal; down a carriage road, which he supervised building; and into Lindenwood, a cemetery he had helped to establish. There in the presences of his wife, three sons and their wives, four grandsons and several nephews and nieces, he was committed to eternal rest.

Today in Fort Wayne, there is a street dedicated to his memory as well as an entire neighborhood. The site of his home later served as the parking area for the Third Presbyterian church, which is now the Templo Aposento Alto. His home that once stood in a small portion of his extensive landholdings comprises the Williams Woodland Park Historic District. It was first designated as a private park opened for public use by the Williams family in the 1879s. After Jesse's death, the family made repeated offers to the city to sell the property at half the appraised value. The city turned down the opportunity and Henry Williams and his co-heirs platted the area in October of 1903 selling sixty-six Williams Park lots to Realtor Louis Curdes. When the streetcar lines reached the neighborhood from downtown Fort Wayne lots sold well. Curdes sold the remainder of the lots by lottery one evening at the Fort Wayne Commercial Club with the idea that incorporating development-wide deed restrictions would enhance the property value. Presently it is a proud part of Fort Wayne and features a uniform character and current park-like atmosphere as a direct result of the thoughtful layout for the addition. Noticeable among attractions is the retention of existing trees, consistency among houses in size, scale, and style, uniform setbacks, and together they create a pleasing rhythm along the district's streets.

In 1874 a newspaper described Jesse Williams as one of the most prominent men in the West, yet today he is largely unknown by the general public. It is



especially unfortunate that those not familiar with Jesse Lynch Williams are the beneficiaries of his work. His energies and talents have given this nation a transportation system that knits together our economy, unites us with our jobs, friends, and families and fuels businesses everywhere.

This article for *The Hoosier Packet* was taken from a manuscript that Tom Castaldi has written as a Wabash & Erie Canal companion piece for the Wabash & Erie Canal Interpretative Center in Delphi, IN and for the 2004 Allen County History Book project.

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### JESSE LYNCH WILLIAM'S HOME ~ 330 W. WAYNE STREET

The home of Jesse Lynch Williams built around 1850 was razed in 1951 for a parking lot for Fort Wayne's First Presbyterian Church, which was being built at that time. His home stood on the north side of Wayne Street between Webster and Ewing streets. Jesse passed away in 1886 after living a full life. After helping his brother Miciah build canals in Ohio he came to Indiana to oversee the building of the Wabash & Erie Canal and eventually became the Chief Engineer of all of Indiana's canals. He was a ruling elder in the Presbyterian Church.

Shortly after moving to Ft. Wayne in 1831 Jesse and his new wife, Susan Creighton Williams, joined the Presbyterian church, which met in store buildings on East Columbia Street at that time. Several years later a church building was erected on East Berry Street.

Jesse's grandson, who remembers playing inside the home, said in a 1951 *News-Sentinel* article that the home had been beautiful. It had horsehair sofas and elaborate gas lights. Susan Williams entertained church members there while Jesse worked in his office located at the back of the house. They also hosted Presbyterian ministers who came to town. Clipping from Sue Simerman, CSI director, Ossian, IN