

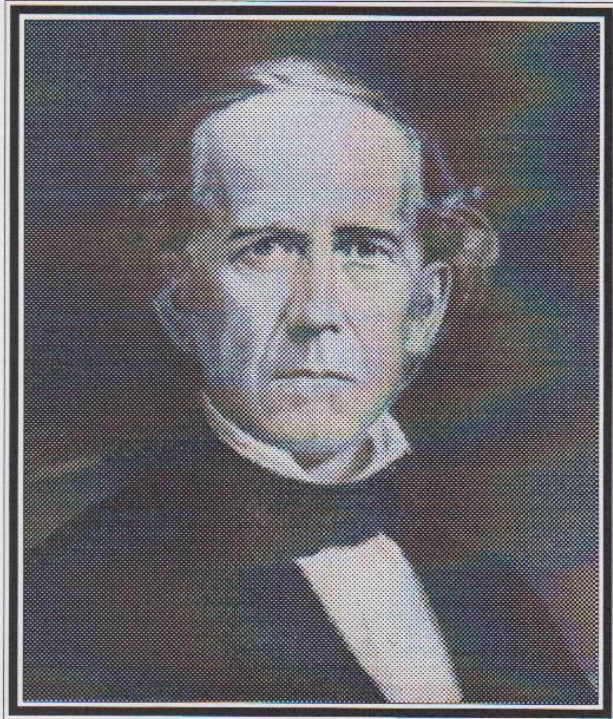
CANAWLERS AT REST

JOSEPH ALBERT WRIGHT

b. April 17, 1810

d. May 11, 1867

**By Carolyn Schmidt & Mark Smith
Portrait by Jacob Cox**



Joseph Albert Wright was born at Washington, Washington County, Pennsylvania on April 17, 1810, to John (a brick manufacturer) and Rachel (Seaman) Wright. While still a youth, his family moved to Bloomington, Monroe County, Indiana. The family was poor and his father died when Joseph was 14 years old. They could not assist in securing him the education he desired.

Joseph was ambitious and determined to succeed. While working at odd jobs he attended common school whenever possible. Whenever possible he questioned his elders during conversations seeking information and read books. Through this hard work he qualified for entrance to Indiana Seminary (Indiana University), and studied law. He financed his two years there and the books he needed by being a janitor, bell-ringer, working at carrying off brick from a brick yard and gathering nuts from the woods. He had been trained to use a trowel and did small jobs around the premises. Extracts from the university's records say:

"Friday, May 6, 1828.

"*Ordered*, That Joseph A. Wright be allowed for ringing the college bell, making fires, etc., in the college building during the last session of the College Seminary, the sum of \$16.25; also, for a lock, bell-rope and brooms, the sum of \$1.37½, and that the treasurer of the State Seminary pay the same."

"Bloomington, Friday, October 31, 1828.

"*Ordered by the Board of Trustees*, That Joseph

A. Wright be and he is hereby allowed the sum of one dollar for repairing the top of one of the college chimneys, and that the treasurer pay the same."

"November 18, 1828

"Joseph A Wright is allowed for repairing arches in the small seminary building and kitchen the sum of \$1.25."

Defraying his expenses in these humble ways, he left the college and as a student entered the law office of Judge Hester. Joseph passed the bar in 1829. He was almost 20 years old. He began to practice law at Rockville, Parke County, Indiana. He also worked on farm implements.

In 1830 Joseph was badly in need of money to supplement his work as a young lawyer. He bid \$334 per year to deliver mail once a week on route No. 10 from Brownstown to Terre Haute, IN., a distance of 134 miles. The contract was awarded to Alfred J. Athon who bid \$398. Joseph was not well enough known for Postmaster General Barry to regard his bid.

In 1831 Joseph married Louisa Cook. They had one child. Louisa died in 1852.

Joseph's ability became widely noted and by the age of 23 in 1833 he was elected to the Indiana House of Representatives and became actively engaged in politics. While there Robert Dale Owen reports an amusing incident that he witnessed when Joseph was

talking "on the duty of Indiana toward the children on the State—her best treasurers—when his eye was arrested by a chubby little fellow of seven or eight, son of one of our members, who had been sitting on his father's knee and had strayed off, coming down the center aisle toward the orator."

"Ah, there!" said Wright, extending his arms to the boy, who stopped, abashed at the sudden address. 'Look there! I am reminded, when I gaze upon that little one, of a pleasant story from the annals of Rome, in her old republican days. It is related of the mother of the Gracchi, when several of her lady friends were exhibiting to her, somewhat vauntingly, no doubt, their costly ornaments, while she, simple in her tastes, had little to show them in return, that she turned to her children, playing in the room, and exclaimed, 'These are my jewels!' Let us learn wisdom, gentlemen, from the mother of the Gracchi.'

"The mother of the what?' exclaimed, in an under-tone, a rough young country member, named Storm, and whom, because he seldom opened his lips except to move the previous question, we had nicknamed 'Previous Question Storm.' His exclamation was addressed to the member next to whom he was sitting, Thomas Dowling, of Terre Haute. Now, of all things, Dowling loved, from his heart a good joke; and this was too good a one to be lost. So, composing his features, he replied gravely to Storm: 'Why, don't you know her? It is a noted old woman in Parke county, where Wright comes from. Everybody knows her there. You get up and ask Wright, and no doubt he'll tell you all about her.'"

He was re-elected to the House in 1836. He was a prosecuting attorney on the 1st circuit in 1838-1839.

In 1839 Joseph was elected to the Indiana State Senate to complete the term of William Perkins Bryant, who had resigned September 23, 1839; however, Joseph only served until 1840 when Samuel H. McCord was elected to complete the term.

Then in 1843-45 Joseph served a term as a Democratic Representative in the United States 28th Congress. Edward W. McGaughey defeated him by 171 votes in his attempt to be re-elected in 1845.

In 1849 the Democratic party nominated Joseph for governor of Indiana. His never being at a loss for words, ready wit, forceful speaking and ability to come directly to the point made him an excellent campaigner. He defeated John A. Matson and was elected for a three year term 1849-1851. At his inaugural address at the close of 1850 he reported on public works by saying,

"We are progressing rapidly with works of public improvement. In the past season we have completed four hundred miles of plank road, which have cost from twelve to fifteen hundred dollars per mile. There are some twelve hundred miles additional surveyed and in progress. We have two hundred and twelve miles of railroad in successful operation, of which one hundred and twenty-four were completed the past year. There are more than one thousand miles of railway surveyed and in a state of progress."

According to a "Historical Sketch of Parke Co. IN" that appeared in a combined atlas "When Joseph A. Wright was elected Governor, he moved his household goods through to Indianapolis by wagons, George Smith, Levi Smith, Simeon Smith and Joseph Smith hauling them across the country. On Little Raccoon (Creek) about three miles E. of Rockville, they stopped and seemed to be having some trouble. Alex. Puett being not far away went to where they were and found they were having trouble with a barrel of soft soap that had sprung a leak. The night they arrived in Indianapolis, Gov. Wright, who had preceded them with his family and was in office, gave a reception and all of these plain, honest, worthy teamsters, who were always his friends and supporters, were in attendance at that reception and received every attention that could be given them to make them feel at ease and enjoy the occasion."

Simeon Smith was the great-great-great-grandfather of Mr. Mark A. Smith, CSI member, and Joseph was the great-grandfather of same. These two were also the ancestors of Karen Bazanni Zach, Parke and Montgomery County historian and genealogist.

As Governor, Joseph contributed a block for the monument to George Washington in Washington City (Washington, D.C.) as per the request of the Washington Monumental Association. The native block of marble was quarried at Saluda Landing in Jefferson County, Indiana. Joseph wrote the inscription inscribed upon it: "Indiana knows no East, no West, no North, no South, nothing but the Union."

Governor Wright served during a formative period in the history of Indiana as it recovered from the economic depression and internal improvements fiasco. He was very active in its development. He endorsed a compromise measure on the slavery question that was acted on by Congress in 1850. At the end of the year he remarked, "Indiana takes her stand in the ranks not of *Southern destiny*, nor yet NORTHERN DESTINY. She plants herself on the basis of the constitution, and takes her stand in the ranks of AMERICAN DESTINY."

During his first term the State held the second Constitutional Convention in 1850-51 and a new

constitution was formally adopted which stipulated that the governor would serve a four year term. In 1851 Joseph appointed a commission to codify the laws so that they were in harmony with the new constitution. Also education was seen to be of utmost importance and the first State Board of Education was established and educational matters taken over by the regular township trustees. Collection of taxes for educational purposes was begun by Indiana cities and townships. Also that year the first State Fair was held in Indiana.

During this first term, the Cross-Cut Canal, the portion of the Wabash & Erie Canal extending from Terre Haute to Point Commerce (Worthington, IN) was being engineered. It was to cross a "summit divide" between the Wabash and Eel River for a length of 49 miles and a cost of \$718,672. Water was to be supplied south of the Eel River by Splunge Creek Reservoir, a 3900 acres manmade body with a feeder at Rawley's Mill. Resident engineer William J. Ball felt a second reservoir in the Birch Creek valley on the north side of the summit was need. In his report he says, "I cannot too strongly recommend the immediate construction of this work, as without it, the Division south of Terre Haute must be comparatively valueless during the dry season. The cost of the reservoir and feeder is estimated at \$24,358., exclusive of damages for the land occupied, and making provision for clearing off 250 acres of the timber."

Birch Creek Reservoir was opposed by residents during the survey period. They threatened to destroy any reservoir built because it would "jeopardize the community's health." Although 100 acres would be covered by water, Chief Engineer Jesse Lynch Williams recommend that only 250 acres be removed. Driftwood and timber standing in water were believed to be responsible for cholera.

Citizens met a Saline City and passed a resolution protesting the reservoir's construction and filed it with Governor Wright. He contacted lawyers James McLean Hanna and John Palmer Usher of Terre Haute and told them to take steps to prevent the canal trustees from "injuring residents' health." Although Hanna and Usher worked diligently to prevent the construction, their efforts failed and the reservoir was completed early in 1852.

In March 1853, the State legislature passed a bill directing a Physicians' Commission to study the canal reservoirs in Clay (Splunge and Birch Creek) and Gibson counties (Pigeon Creek). They sent Joseph reports denying that reservoirs were detrimental to public health. They said that the Birch Creek Reservoir was harmless and, since the area was a swamp, "an infinitely worse state of things would follow, if the timber be cut away and the direct rays of the sun let in upon its surface."

Many residents, who suffered from ague, chills, and fever refused to believe the report. One wrote, "We have some little confidence left in the office of governor; at least enough to cause us to hope that if he ever takes the trouble to read the report, he will see what a farce has been enacted."

Area newspapers described unhealthy conditions says the fish in the reservoir had no scales after they had been "shaken off by the chills." Fear was probably a greater force than actual disease in arousing the citizens. At the time cholera was common and the Irish, who constructed the reservoirs, were susceptible. Many of them were buried in Clay County's Old Hill Cemetery. Even Canal trustee Thomas H. Blake succumbed to the disease in 1849.

Joseph was re-elected Governor in 1852 after defeating Nicholas McCarty. Under the new constitution, his second term was for four years making him the first governor to serve a four year term 1852-1857. That year he assisted in organizing the State Board of Agriculture, served as its first president, and was re-elected the following two years. Joseph was not a farmer but agriculture was a hobby of his. He quoted Horace Greeley saying "the man who makes two blades of grass grow where but one had grown before, is a public benefactor." His political opponents told an untrue story about him saying that in one of his speeches he advised farmers to buy hydraulic rams to improve their sheep! However, the following true story occurred: "Some one brought him a bunch of hog bristles, taken from the paunch of a cow. He exhibited this as a great curiosity, and was wont to descant upon it for the edification of his farmer friends. At last it was discovered that the cow from which the bristles were taken was in the habit of browsing near a pork-house where hog's hair was spread to dry. While eating grass she had swallowed the bristles, and, as they were indigestible, they remained in her stomach until she died. This discovery spoiled the Governor's lecture on the cow."

Joseph entered into a bitter fight with the State legislature over banking laws and their wish to charter a new state bank. He vetoed both bills, but the Free Banking Law was passed and the charter for the bank of the State of Indiana was granted. Many abuses arose from this law. Currency was expanded "a delusive idea of wealth prevailed and, as a consequence, much injurious speculation was indulged." Joseph took the case to the Marion Circuit Court but was defeated. He then appealed to the Supreme Court, which affirmed the judgment of the previous court. However, he exposed many of the free banks, which had little financial stability, and they eventually disbanded.

The Clay County reservoir was continued. The public was invited to a meeting in the Union Meeting House at Bowling Green, Indiana, on February 23, 1854, to "consult upon the interests involved in the erection and maintenance of reservoirs, dams and pools of water in this county." They adopted a resolution that only legal means should be used to oppose the construction of Birch Creek Reservoir until all timber was eliminated. This resolution was soon made void when at midnight on June 22, 1854, the embankment of the reservoir was cut and its water drained. For the next two years there were several such mob actions.

Although some claimed that everything that was considered reasonable had been done to satisfy those living near the reservoir, the citizens asked what was being done to "protect the public interest in the future against the lawless acts of midnight desperadoes?" Residents said their timber removal requests had been ignored and said the reservoir was built "in such a manner that it would depopulate the whole surrounding country.

Every time the banks were cut, the Wabash & Erie Canal between Terre Haute and Evansville was paralyzed. The reservoir water was necessary to keep the canal navigable. The *Terre Haute Journal* said, "If the State authorities have not the power to prevent and punish such lawless acts of outrage, it is time the public should know it."

The citizens claimed they condemned the "mob-temperament", they "believed that a man has a right to defend his life and property." Hanna tried to squelch this renewed struggle by holding a meeting at the Eel River feeder dam on July 28, 1854 "To consider the best means of arranging difficulties which exist in regard to the Reservoir." Present were Thomas Dowling and two trustees of the Canal Company. The meeting resulted in a compromise with the trustees agree to remove all timber from Birch Creek Reservoir and the citizens promising to no longer commit further damage.

Thomas Dowling spent over \$1,000 to have laborers clear out the reservoir and repair the embankment. A short two months later on September 9, 1854, the feeder dam was burned to the water's edge. The "Reservoir Regulators" were credited with the deed, but it was never proven. This led to a loss of confidence in the canal and a loss of \$20,000 in revenue. Once again repairs were made and a few boats actually made the trip to Terre Haute from Evansville. Then, just as regular trips between these cities were scheduled and trade resumed, 200 men with blackened faces carrying guns and pistols broke the reservoir's embankment and waved the American flag over the gap on May 8, 1855. The war continued and was reported in

the *Terre Haute American*.

Governor Wright issued a declaration on May 24, 1855, which offered a \$5,000 reward for information leading to the arrest of the dam-breakers, and led residents to believe he would employ a force to keep the "promises of the State of Indiana." He was greeted with posters warning him to to employ men to repair the breach when he arrived at the reservoir.

In June 1855 the Regulators partially wrecked the aqueduct across Birch Creek, demolished all the buildings used by the workmen and stole all their tools. Residents claimed they had no knowledge of who was responsible for the destruction and said that the offenders probably came from outside of the county. This act was the last straw. It drove the laborers away and repair work stopped.

Joseph rebuked the Clay County Sheriff for malfeasance and other authorities. He called out 50 militia under General Dodd of Marion County and Colonel Nees of Clay County and asked for volunteers. About 60 men came increasing the militia to 100 men. Most of the latter were from Evansville.

Canal trustees agreed to removing all timber from the canal as soon as possible at a meeting held on June 21, 1855. By then seventeen men had been arrested and charged with arson and malicious trespass. They questioned and released. Joseph sent the troops away. And on August 1, 1855, the *Clay County Citizen* called for assistance in clearing timber from the reservoir without draining off the water.

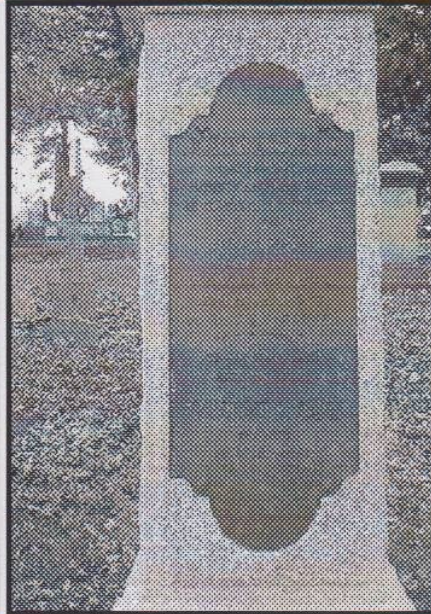
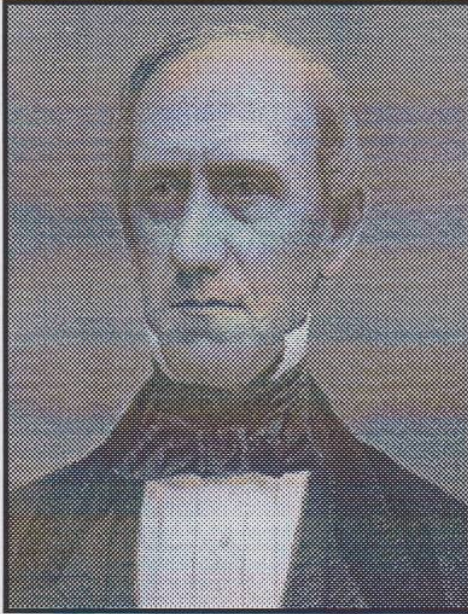
On June 29, 1855, there was another attempt during the night to cut the reservoir embankment and other efforts failed. Then again the aqueduct was severally damaged in August, 1857.

In a last ditch effort, Miller and Hedges tried to keep open the Cross Cut portion of the Wabash & Erie Canal from Terre Haute to the Eel River Dam in 1860. Terre Haute provided \$1,000 to help them, but, within a short time their efforts were abandoned. The railroad was quickly replacing the canal probably much to Joseph's relief.

During Joseph's term as Governor the old Whig party in Indiana died. The Know Nothing party was born and died. The Republican party was formed.

In 1854 Joseph married for the second time. This wife was Harriet B. Burbridge.

In 1857, when Joseph's second term as Governor expired, he was appointed as Envoy



JOSEPH A. WRIGHT
 OF INDIANA
 HAVING SERVED HIS STATE
 AS GOVERNOR, HIS COUNTY
 IN U.S. CONGRESS
 DIED IN BERLIN
 MAY 11, 1857
 DURING HIS 2ND OFFICIAL
 TERM AS U.S. MINISTER
 TO THE COURT OF PRUSSIA
 IN THE TRIUMPH
 OF CHRISTIAN FAITH
 AGED 57 YEARS
 CAROLINE R. DAVIS
 HIS WIFE
 BORN FEB. 4, 1812
 DIED APRIL 17, 1896

Left: Hon. Joseph A. Wright, Governor of Indiana, first President of the Indiana State Board of Agriculture and U. S. Minister Plenipotentiary at Berlin engraved by J. C. Buttre from a photograph. Woolen 1883.

Center: Gravestone of Joseph A. Wright and his wife Caroline R. Davis courtesy of Mark Smith, CSI member, Brookston, IN.

Extraordinary and Minister Plenipotentiary to Prussia (1857-1861) by President James Buchanan and was sent to Berlin, the capital. He served as Minister for four years.

In 1860 Joseph supported Stephen A. Douglas, the Democratic candidate for President of the United States. In 1861 Joseph returned to Indiana. He became the leader of the War Democrats, who favored alliance with the Republicans in attempting to lay aside political struggles until the Civil War was over. He joined the Union Party.

In 1862, Governor Oliver P. Morton appointed Joseph as a Unionist to the United States Senate to fill the vacancy left after his enemy Jesse D. Bright was expelled. He served in this position for one year, February 1862-January 1863..

In 1863 President Abraham Lincoln appointed Joseph as Commissioner to the Hamburg Exposition. Then in 1865 President Andrew Johnson re-appointed him as Envoy Extraordinary and Minister Plenipotentiary to Prussia (1865-death 1867). He served in this capacity until his death at Berlin on May 11, 1867.

Joseph was a zealous Methodist and supported the Sunday school. Many citizens thought he used his church connection to advance his political career.

A tall and raw-boned man, Joseph had a large head and an unusually high forehead. He had light thin

hair, blue eyes and a prominent nose and mouth. He spoke simply and earnestly. He was influential in matters concerning the public welfare. He set a good example by being a moral, religious, honest and economic man.

Married three times, Joseph was the father of four children. The grave and marker for Joseph Albert Wright and Catherine R. Davis, his third wife, can be found in Greenwood Cemetery in Brooklyn, New York.

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