

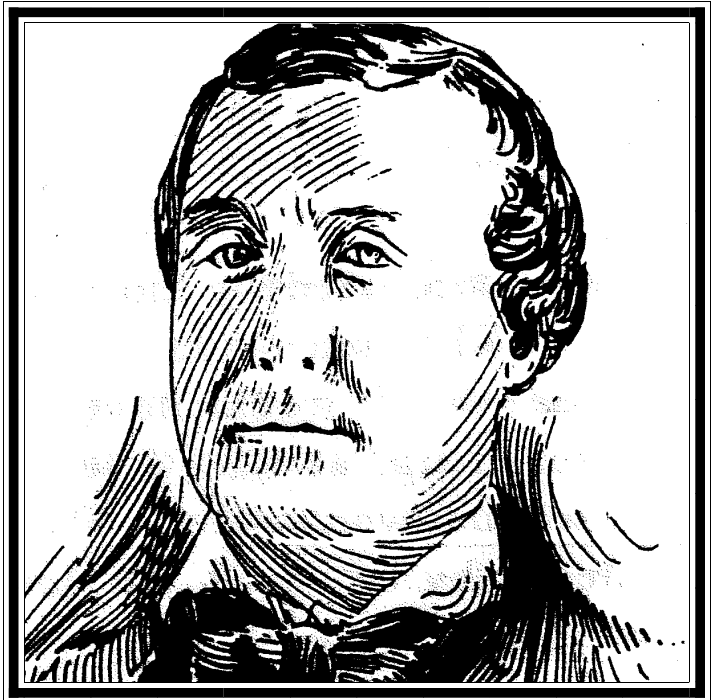
CANAWLERS AT REST

BENJAMIN ROSE EDMONSTON

b. March 8, 1807

d. August 16, 1855

FG Barker Farm Haysville



On July 31, 1847 Indiana's Governor James Whitcomb transferred the assets of the Wabash & Erie Canal to the bondholders. On page 6 is a summary of persons who served on the Board of Trustees of this canal until it was sold. Some of them may be familiar as they have been covered in other issues of *The Hoosier Packet*, but most are just names on paper. "Canawlers at Rest" is written to show you the individual lives of those who worked so hard in attempting to make the Wabash & Erie Canal an economic success. In this issue we will learn more about Benjamin Rose Edmonston, of Dubois county, who served as a canal trustee from January 18, 1854 until his death on August 16, 1855.

When the Wabash & Erie Canal was transferred from state ownership to a Trust with the headquarters located at Terre Haute, a Board of Trustees was established. It consisted of three persons. Two of the members were elected by the bond holders and the third one was appointed or elected by the State of Indiana. Charles Butler was elected President of the Board and served the whole period 1847 to 1876.

Thomas Blake of Terre Haute, Indiana was also selected by the bondholders and served until he died from cholera in Cincinnati, Ohio on November 28, 1849. The bondholders quickly replaced Blake with Thomas Dowling, also of Terre Haute, who served from 1850 until the canal was auctioned off in 1876. Blake and Dowling were located in Terre Haute handling the day to day management of the canal while Charles Butler remained in New York to deal with the creditors during his term of service.

The third Trustee's job was to monitor the state's interest, which had largely been transferred to the private bondholders. This third member was described by Paul

Fatout in his book *Indiana Canals* as "supernumerary rather than important." Nathan B. Palmer was appointed by Governor Whitcomb to fill this position. He served from July to December 1847. Palmer, a prominent politician, had previously been Indiana's State Treasurer from 1835-1841.

The next man to be elected a trustee was Austin Puett of Parke Co. who began a three year term in 1848. See March 2005 *The Hoosier Packet* "Puett" At that time hopes were high that the canal would at last be completed to Evansville and the position of Trustee was desired by several persons. In fact it took twenty-five ballots before Puett was finally selected by a Senate majority. His selection made sense since canal construction was proceeding through Parke County at the time. The canal had reached Lodi in 1847, but didn't reach Terre Haute until 1849.

Austin Puett was followed by another politician from Parke County, William R. Nofsinger. Nofsinger later became State Treasurer 1855-57 during Governor Joseph Wright's second term.

The fourth trustee to serve in the state selected position was our subject Benjamin Edmonston, another farmer/politician, who came from Dubois County rather than Parke County. Although Dubois County (Jasper/Huntingburg) was not even located on the canal it is in southern Indiana and should have pleased those living there. However, the people at the canal's terminus in Evansville still would have preferred to have selected someone from their own Vanderburgh County.

Bazil Brooke Edmonston, his wife Hannah Rose, and some of their ten children moved from near Asheville, Buncombe County, North Carolina to Indiana in 1808. They settled near the White River three miles from

Haysville in Dubois County. The town is located on the old buffalo trail (Buffalo Trace) that extended from Vincennes to Jeffersonville, Indiana. Bazil was a Democrat and soon became involved in local politics. In 1824 he was elected a county judge. He was also the first postmaster at Jasper. At the time of his death in 1841 he was probate judge for Dubois county. His sons were also very active in local affairs serving in such positions as county clerk, sheriff and in the Indiana state legislature. The entire Edmonston family was outstanding socially and politically for half a century.

The original settlers in Dubois county were Scotch/Irish and predominately Whigs. However, with the influx of German Catholics around 1839 the county became mostly Democratic and has remained so to this day.

Benjamin Rose Edmonston, our subject, was born in North Carolina on March 8, 1807, and was the youngest son of Bazil and Hannah. When an adult he stood six foot tall and had a large physical frame. He had red hair, a florid complexion and was usually seen in a red flannel shirt. His friends nicknamed him "Red Rover."

Benjamin had more than an average intellectual ability, even though he had had only the scant education the public schools of that day afforded. He was a good mixer, a good story teller, a good "stump orator," and a very successful debater. His political speeches were spiced with his own solos, for he was a good singer and loved music.

As a Democrat, Benjamin was a political opponent of Simon Morgan and George Proffit, both whom were Whigs. Both had mercantile interests in Portersville, the first county seat, which moved to Jasper in 1830. Benjamin

Edmonston's first step into statewide politics came in 1835 when he was elected to the state legislature. The next term he was defeated by his political adversary, George Proffit.

George Proffit, after serving several sessions in the Indiana legislature, went on to become the congressman for the First U.S. Congressional district 1839-43. He lived in Petersburg and was an avid supporter for internal improvements.

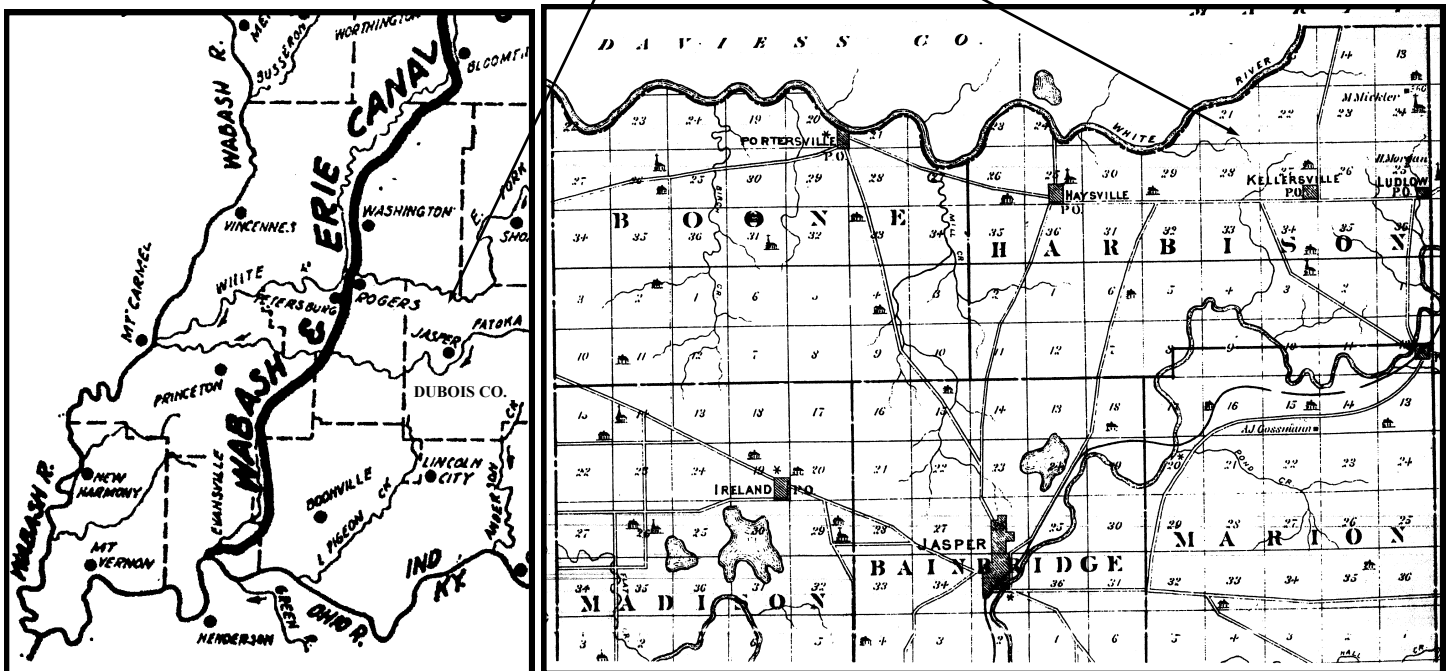
Proffit's ally, Simon Morgan, was clerk of Dubois county from its original organization, but was dislodged by the Edmonston family. Simon was the father of Goodlet Morgan of Petersburg. Goodlet Morgan married George Proffit's daughter Emily in 1848. *The Hoosier Packet* Feb 2009

With George Proffit out of the Indiana legislature, Benjamin's fortunes began to rise. He was elected a state representative again in 1839 and served for several different terms. He was on the committee on canals and internal improvements in both the Indiana House of Representatives and Senate.

Benjamin served in the Indiana House and Senate for a total of eight times from 1835-1848. He was a delegate to the Indiana State Constitutional Convention of 1850-51. There he proposed biennial sessions of the legislature instead of the annual session then held. This was adopted and is still in today's constitution.

Details of Benjamin's family are somewhat sketchy. His first wife was Caroline Inman Strother of North Carolina. This marriage was recorded in North Carolina on February 27, 1834, when Benjamin was almost 27. Her age is unknown.

BENJAMIN ROSE EDMONSTON lived near Haysville, in Harbinson township, Dubois county, Indiana. He is buried on a sand hill about six miles east of Haysville on the northeast quarter of the southeast quarter of Section 21, Township 1-North, Range 4-West.



Wabash & Erie Canal - Board of Trustees After Jul 31, 1847

The Board of Trustees consisted of a 3 person board. 2 members were selected by the bondholders & 1 person by the State of Indiana which was generally a 3 yr term that began on Jan 18th

Year Served	Name	County/Loc	Occupation	Misc Information	Hoosier Packet	Birth / Death
<u>Selected by Bondholders</u>						
1847-76	Charles Butler	New York	Lawyer			1802-1897
*1847-49	Thomas H. Blake	Vigo	Lawyer/Judge	Died 28 Nov 1849		1792-1849
1850-76	Thomas Dowling	Vigo	Newspaper Editor	Repl Blake Apr 1850		1810-1876
<u>Appointed</u>						
<u>By Gov.</u>						
1847	Nathan Palmer	Marion	State Treasurer	July - Dec 1847		1790-1875
1848-50	Austin M Puett	Parke	Farmer / Politician	1st Term	Mar 2005	1803-1879
1851-53	William R. Nofsinger	Parke	Politician	State Treasurer		1815?-1880?
*1854-55	Benjamin R Edmonston	Dubois	Farmer / Politician	Died Aug 1855		1807-1855
1855	Austin M. Puett	Parke	Farmer / Politician	Sep 1855- 1856	Mar 2005	1803-1879
1857-58	Gaylord G. Barton	Daviess	Physician	2 yr term	May 2010	1809-1884
1859-61	Richard Raleigh	Vanderburgh	Banker/ Businss			1809-after1869
*1862-64	Joseph S. Hanna	Tippecanoe	Banker/ Businss	Died Aug 1864		1803-1864
1864	Lot S. Bayless	Allen	Farmer / Canal Contr	Dec1864-Jan 18 1865	Oct 2006	1802-1880
1865-67	David M. Dunn	Cass	Banker/ Businss		May 2012	1818-1884?
1868-70	Robert H. Milroy	Carroll	Lawyer	Civil War General		1816-1890
1871-72	James V. Mitchell	Morgan	Lawyer	2 yr term		1842-1915
1873-76	James S. Hinton	Marion	Legislator	Black/ Term began 1873		1834-1892

* Died during term in office

Employed by the Trustees

1847-76	Jesse L. Williams	Allen	Chief Engineer	W&E Canal	Apr 2004	1807-1886
1847-76	Jacob H. Hager	Vigo	Chief Clerk-Hdqs	Terre Haute Office	Oct 2011	1815-1876
1847-72	William J. Ball	Vigo	Resident Engineer	Southern Div	Aug 2004	1814-1874
1847-49	Chauncey Carter	Miami	Superintendent	Western Div	Aug 2006	1796-1864
1847-49	Stearns Fisher	Wabash	Superintendent	Eastern Div	Dec 2002	1804-1872

These positions were selected by the Board of Trustees and served thru the period indicated

Caroline's parents were John Strother, a prominent land surveyor and land agent in western North Carolina who died in August 1815, and Flora Inman. Her sister, May Ann Strother was married to Ninian Edmonston, Benjamin's older brother, who had remained in North Carolina.

Caroline Strother Edmonston died before 1840. Apparently she and Benjamin had no living children. Shortly thereafter, in about 1841, Benjamin married Catherine Guin Hayes, the widow of a William Hayes. She had a son William, who was born about 1835.

Benjamin and Catherine had a daughter, Rachel Hannah, who was born on August 30, 1842. In 1859 Rachel became the wife of Clement Doane, editor of the *Jasper Courier*. The Edmonston's also had a son, Bazil Benton, who was born in 1844. Catherine died four years later in February 1848.

In a third marriage on December 27, 1849, Benjamin wed Jane Polson, who was a relative of the prominent Dr John T. Polson of Jasper. She appears to have been married before as there were three children listed in Benjamin's household in the 1850 census with the last name of Polson — Susannah E., James T. and John. Other names on the census are William Hayes, Catherine's son, and Rachel & Bazil Edmonston.

With a new marriage and a mixed family it is no wonder that 1848 was the last time Benjamin sought a position in the legislature. He retired to farming and raising his family.

In January 1853 the legislature selected him to serve a term as trustee on the board of the Wabash & Erie Canal for the period January 18, 1854- January 17, 1857. The prior 2 terms had been served by Austin Puett and William Nofsinger both of Parke county. Joseph Wright, who was the Democratic governor at that time, probably preferred to have a good Democrat in this position. Since Edmonston, who had been retired from the legislature for several years, had at one time served on the canal and transportation committee he appeared to be a qualified candidate. He served as a trustee of the Wabash & Erie Canal from 1854-1855.

During this period the canal was at its high water mark in business. Other than freshets and breaks in aqueducts and feeders most of the construction issues had been resolved earlier. Even so, there probably was some stress with the job. On August 16, 1855 Benjamin Rose Edmonston died, probably of a heart attack, in the middle of his term as canal trustee.

Benjamin was buried in a rural graveyard on a sandy hill of a farm. His gravesite was visited on July 11, 1924 by Mayor George P. Wagner, of Jasper, George Gol-

ler, owner of the farm at that time, and William Barker. They found his headstone broken down by a fallen tree that was partially burned and had brambles entwined in its unburned limbs. After learning the story of Senator Edmonston's life, Mr. Goller volunteered to restore the grave, cover it with concrete and set the broken tombstone flat on the concrete. The stone is four feet and three inches high, twenty inches wide, and two inches thick — a conventional marble slab of the 1850s with a weeping willow and the following words carved upon it:

"IN MEMBORY OF BENJAMIN R. EDMONSTON
WHO DIED AUG. 16, 1855, AGE 48 YRS. 5 MO.
AND 8 DAYS.

Almighty God, 'tis night, 'tis just
That earthly frames should turn to dust
But O! the sweet transporting truth
The soul shall bloom in endless youth."

At the foot of the grave is a marble footstone with the letters "B. R. E." Found nearby were two other markers showing the place was used as a burial ground before and after it was purchased from the Canal Company. This high, dry spot overlooking two counties was probably selected by Jasper's first postmaster, Judge Bazil B. Edmonston, Sr., who is also buried there but has no headstone.

The people of Evansville became furious when Governor Joseph Wright again appointed Puett, the governor's brother-in-law, to complete Benjamin's term. The *Rockville True Republican* said that since Governor Wright was completing his second term and could not be re-elected he probably "felt no compulsion to appoint a trustee from Evansville." The Puett appointment was short lived. In January 1857 Gaylord G. Barton May 2010 *The Hoosier Packet* "Barton" was appointed by Indiana's new governor, Ashbel P. Willard.

During Barton's two year term, the Wabash & Erie Canal, which had been completed to Evansville more than 10 years earlier, was now plagued with repairs, reservoir destruction and continual financial failure. During his time the Trustees were working on a plan to lease the canal to private investors in three sections: Ohio state line to Terre Haute, Terre Haute to Newberry, and Newberry to Evansville.

Barton served until January 18, 1859. When the legislature met in early January of that year, the struggle between the Evansville supporters and Parke County supporters erupted again. It took six ballots before Richard Raleigh, an Evansville businessman, was selected over the Parke County candidate, Dudley G. Coffin. Richard Raleigh of Vanderburgh County was elected by the Senate for a three year term 1859-61. The proposed plan for three separate leases of the canal was pursued and contracts were signed in early March – May 1859 by Thomas Dowling and Richard Raleigh. In 1861, also during Raleigh's term, the

portion of the canal south of Terre Haute was closed.

A series of later trustees served during the final years of the canal. Of note was the last trustee James S. Hinton, a black Hoosier legislator from Marion County. He began his term one year early by asking James V. Mitchell to yield the last year of his term. See p. 6

Those who served on the Board of Trustees all did their best to support the completion and maintenance of the canal. Despite their efforts tolls declined as the legislature authorized rail lines that competed side by side with the canal. Canal maintenance costs rose as timber dams, aqueducts and locks reached their normal life expectancy and required replacement. Breaking the whole canal into leased segments after 1859 was only a temporary fix. The canal was sold in segments by Circuit Court Judge Samuel B. Goodkins in the Vigo County (Terre Haute) courthouse on February 24, 1876.

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