

CANAWLERS AT REST

JOHN ROCHE

b. October 3, 1817

d. October 15, 1894

Find-A-Grave #71867245



The construction of the Wabash & Erie Canal was begun in June of 1832 north of Fort Wayne with the building of a feeder dam across the St. Joseph River and a 6½ mile canal feeder to the mainline near today's Rumsey and Wheeler streets. Work proceeded west toward Roanoke and Huntington from 1833-1835.

Martin Roche, the father of our subject, John Roche, had emigrated with his family of eight children from Wexford Co. Ireland in 1830. Upon arrival in New York city he booked passage for them on another ship and arrived in Baltimore, Maryland on December 3, 1830. He and his family farmed in Baltimore for about 2 years. In the Spring of 1833 they moved west by wagon along the National Road to Zanesville, Ohio. This was a three week journey. They remained in Zanesville during 1833 and learned of the need for workers on the Wabash & Erie Canal in Indiana. Engineers and supervisors who worked on Ohio's canals were being recruited by Indiana. The most famous of these was Jesse Lynch Williams, who was the chief engineer at that time in Indiana.

In May 1834, just as other Irish workers were arriving for work on Indiana's canal, the Roche family moved to Huntington, Indiana. John, who had been born in 1817, was only 17 at the time. He and his father Martin, age 50, quickly found employment in farming and on the canal. Tragedy soon hit. Martin died in October of that year either from an accident or illness. This left John, who was the oldest son, to be the principal supporter of this family. .

John was in the Huntington area when the first canal boat arrived from Fort Wayne on July 4, 1835. It was the packet "Indiana," which was captained by Asa Fairfield. There was a lively celebration in town that day when the dignitaries from Fort Wayne came to inaugurate the waterway's first achievement.

The Irish Catholics, "Corkonians," working west of Huntington near Lagro were not celebrating but planning to drive the Irish Protestants, "Fardowners," from their work near Wabash. This uprising of Irish workers was to culminate on July 12, 1835, the celebrated anniversary of the "Battle of the Boyne," (July 1690) between Catholic and Protestant forces in Ireland. Militia was sent out from Fort Wayne and Logansport to quell the potential riot. Several of the ring leaders were captured and sent to Indianapolis. John Roche was Catholic so we can assume he was sympathetic to the members of the more popular "Corkonians," but he wasn't directly involved. That same month of July, John was promoted to the Engineer Corps on the canal and continued in that position until 1841.

He continued working on the canal as it proceeded west toward Lafayette. Along the way, due to hard work, dedication and an eagerness to learn, he advanced to rodman or assistant surveyor. When canal construction was completed he became a Superintendent of Repairs in the area west of Huntington. He ended his canal work about 1843.

In March 1843 John was appointed to an open position in the county Treasurer's office in Huntington. He demonstrated his ability in this office. Either earlier or during this period he became acquainted with Francis La Fontaine, chief of the Miami Indians. He attended the same Catholic church as the chief.

Chief Richardville ran a trading post at the Forks of the Wabash just 3 miles west of Huntington until his death in 1841. At that time his son-in-law, Chief La Fontaine, took it over and soon found he needed someone to assist in the financial portion of his newly acquired business. He knew of John's abilities and that he had participated in some treaties and annual payments with the Indians. He hired John as a clerk in 1844. At that time John left the

county treasurer's office after less than a one year term. His new job as clerk was much more detailed than what we think of for a clerk today who just sells things over the counter. John was a bookkeeper, secretary, legal advisor and interpreter. His experience in the treasurer's office helped in this venture.

The relationship between John and the chief worked so well for both parties that they entered into a business partnership in 1845. They moved the store into Huntington from the Forks. John not only assisted Chief La Fontaine in his financial affairs, he also helped him in negotiations with the government and with the chief's land acquisitions.

In October 1846 most of the Miami Indians, who were not land owners, were transferred by canal boat from the area. At that time Chief La Fontaine and his family members were allowed to stay due to their property ownership. However, the chief did travel out to Kansas to help in the affairs of the Indians that were moved there. On his return trip back to Indiana in 1847, La Fontaine became seriously ill and died in Lafayette, Indiana.

John Roche then assumed the management of Chief La Fontaine's sizeable estate and assisted Father Julian Benoit and the chief's widow, Catherine, in the final affairs and settlements. In effect he took over as the acting Miami chief. He was the guardian of six of the La Fontaine children and the administrator of the estates for the Richardville heirs. He had to certify annual payments to around two hundred Miamis in Indiana and had to settle numerous individual Indian debts. He continued operation of the chief's trading post. In 1852 the firm of Roche and La Fontaine had assets of \$39,373.23, which included notes or loans of \$8,817.98. John operated the store until 1859. After that year he turned his attention to farming and the purchase, improvement, and sale of real estate.

In 1848 the town of Huntington, Indiana was incorporated. Its first mayor was Dr. Able M Lewis, its first recorder was A. F. Stewart and its first trustees were John Roche, F. W. Sawyer, Albert A. Hubble and D. S. Meyers. In 1849 Huntington established its first board of health. On it were doctors Thayer, Lewis, Sawyer and Messrs. Roche & Crum. Asiatic cholera soon took the lives of Thayer and Crum.

The Federal Census of 1850 shows John with his last name incorrectly spelled as Roach as the head of the household. His mother Mary Roach (Roche) age 60 is living with him along with his siblings Mary Roach age 27, James Roach age 24, Thomas Roach age 20, and Bridgett Roach age 18.

John Roche had come a long way from a common Irish laborer on the canal. He became quite a wheeler-dealer in real estate both for himself and others in the Huntington area. He knew how to buy good property,

improve it and sell it at the right time. He even platted the Roche Addition to the town of Huntington.

John came to the attention of Hugh McCulloch of Fort Wayne. Both men had dealt with Miami Indian financial transactions. They became joint partners in a 460-acre land purchase near Lagro in 1856. They then acquired additional property in Wabash County speculating on the planned railroad routes in the county. In 1863 when McCulloch went to Washington to become U.S. Comptroller of the Currency and was later appointed U. S. Secretary of the Treasury by Abraham Lincoln in 1865, John Roche was given power-of-attorney by McCulloch to transact joint business for them. At one time John's real estate and that which he held jointly with McCulloch was worth about \$110,000.

He was part of an eight person committee that met on June 23, 1852 to layout the route of the Lake Erie, Wabash & St. Louis Railroad between Huntington and Logansport. John was in favor of the route along the Little River and Wabash River, which was finally selected over the route along the Eel River. John was asked by the eastern capitalists if the subscribers could be relied upon for the \$22,000 for which they had subscribed in order to get the railroad to pass through their town. All it took was his word that they were good for it and the capitalists agreed. Later he became a director with this railroad. He was also selected to be a director in the Erie Railroad, which was begun in 1873 and completed through the county in 1890.

John became involved in banking and helped form the Huntington County Bank. It had a capital of \$50,000. In 1854 he became its President. Unfortunately the bank only lasted until 1857 due to the financial crash. However, the bank redeemed its outstanding circulation in full, dollar for dollar. Later in 1863 he helped incorporate and was on the board of another bank, the First National Bank of Huntington. It also had capital stock of \$50,000.

An act that made specific appropriations for 1855 was approved by the Indiana General Assembly on January 4. In it Joseph Wiley, Joseph Cheesborough, Samuel Mahon, S. J. Johnson, W. Norton, John Roche, Wm. C. Smith and Samuel Milligan were each allowed \$33 for their mileage when serving as witnesses for the Huntington county contested election case.

Several of John's land deals brought about legal problems. One of these situations was a case before the Indiana Supreme Court. It concerned the inheritance of land, which involved the legality of Miami Indian marriages not formalized by the State of Indiana. The conclusion was that a contract of marriage between residents of the State of Indiana had to conform to the laws of Indiana in order to be recognized by the state. Marriages by tribal custom alone would not be recognized. One of the lawyers in this case was Lambdin P. Milligan.

Other law suits in which John was involved dealt with foreclosure and various property disputes. Milligan, who was a prominent Huntington lawyer, was frequently employed by John to handle his legal problems.

The Federal Census of 1860 shows John Roche as a land dealer and living with him are his mother Mary Roche age 74 and his siblings James Roche, age 35; Bridget Roche, age 28; and Thomas Roche, age 30. James is a farmer and Thomas a clerk. Also in his household are Catarina Gunnip and Catharine Smith.

In 1863 the Knights of the Golden Circle, a pro-southern group in Indiana, was planning to steal Union weapons, invade Union prisoner-of-war camps, liberate the Confederate soldiers, and use them to help fight against the Government of Indiana and free other camps of Confederate soldiers. They also planned to take over the state governments of Indiana, Ohio, and Michigan. Lambdin P. Milligan and four others of the organization were rounded up in October 5, 1864 by General Alvin P. Hovey. They were sent to Indianapolis, tried by a military tribunal and sentenced to be hung on December 10, 1864. However, their execution was not set until May 1865, so they were able to argue the case after the Civil War ended.

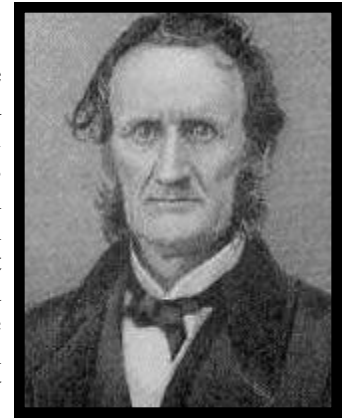
John Roche and others went to Indianapolis as character witnesses at their trial. The U.S. Supreme Court set aside the conviction in one of the most important decisions on civil rights when it ruled in *Ex Parte Milligan* that the defendants' rights to a civil trial had been violated. Milligan was released and set off for Huntington. On April 12, 1866, John Roche, Charles H. Lewis, Samuel F. Day, John Ziegler and the Rev. R. A. Curran along with John R. Coffroth and George R. Curlew, who were originally sent to bring Milligan's remains back to Huntington, met his train at Peru, and accompanied him home. Upon arrival at the depot in Huntington on April 13, they were met by the Huntington mayor, the common council, a brass band, cannon fire and a crowd of people. Milligan returned as a hero to his legal practice in Huntington.

John Roche testified that Milligan was a "Peace Democrat" working for peace at a time when some citizens believed that anyone not voting Republican was disloyal. John also said that Milligan personally had supported needy soldier's families and, as one of the county's largest taxpayers, had supported appropriations for the war effort.

John became a large owner of farm land and took an active interest in improving farm methods and agricultural studies. He raised thoroughbred trotting horses and kept careful records on their breeding. He had Blue-grass on some of his land. When asked about it by Luther Cummings, who said that it had a favorable effect on the soil leaving it loose and mellow, John reported that some

winters before he turned his brood mares into a field of Blue-grass, "let them graze their living, having a shed in the field for shelter, and in the spring they appeared in good order and were as sleek as it they had had the best grooming." John was treasurer of the third Huntington County Agricultural Society organized in 1868.

In 1875 Indiana's state geologist, E. T. Cox, reported the seventh annual geological survey of Indiana. In it he tells how John Roche helped him with his survey and how John pointed out the exact spot where Mr. Backus found specimens he thought to be gold. It turned out to be iron pyrite that had partly decomposed on the surface and filled isolated cavities in the cherty, magnesian limestone. He credited John Roche as the primary person who ditched and drained the immense swamp that was along the southeastern border of Huntington county. This is one of many improvements he made to land that he owned.



Lambdin P. Milligan
1812 - 1899

In 1877 the Huntington County Commissioners appointed a committee to prepare an Historical Sketch of Huntington County. On that committee were John Roche, James R. Slack, L. P. Milligan, H. B. Sayler and Jas. Baldwin.

John never married. He was a close friend of the Catholic Church and often expressed the desire to build a second Catholic Church in Huntington that would have English services instead of just German ones. As plans for this church were underway John died on October 15, 1894. He was laid to rest in Section D Lot 43W of Mt. Calvary Cemetery in Huntington, Indiana. His parent's Martin Roche (b.11-12-1783, d.10-20-1834) and Mary Druhan Roche (b.2-16-1787, d.5-7-1871) are also buried in Mt. Calvary Cemetery.

Bridget Roche, John's unmarried sister, inherited his huge estate estimated to be about \$500,000. She continued John's dream by giving financial support to the project. A site was selected next door to John's old home for the new church.

St. Mary's Catholic Church was completed and dedicated on Oct 11, 1896. The building is sixty-eight and one-half feet in width and 147 feet in length. The main tower is 130 feet high. The smaller tower is nearly ninety-four feet high above the foundation. The ceiling in the center of the nave is fifty-seven feet from the floor. Upon Bridget's death substantial bequests were made to the Fort Wayne Catholic Diocese and church schools in Indianapolis and Terre Haute.

Patrick Gorman received \$2,000 from John's estate. John had taken Patrick as his foster son. When Patrick was old enough he became John's business assistant. He was the administrator of John's estate. At the time of Bridget's death in 1909, Patrick Gorman became her principal beneficiary.

From Irish immigrant and canal worker to one of



Mt. Calvary Cemetery, Huntington, Indiana
 Top: John Roche 1817—1894
 Bottom: Roche plot marker with cross on top says:
 Martin Roche, Born Nov. 12, 1783 Wexford, Ireland, Died Oct. 20, 1834 RIP
 Mary Druhan, wife of Martin Roche Born Feb. 16, 1787, Died May 7, 1871 RIP
 Small matching stones for their family say:
 Front row: Back row:
 John A. Dalton 1886-1929 Mary Frayne 1844-1933
 Thomas Roche 1782-1836 James Roche 1824-1897
 Martin Roche 1784-1834 John Roche 1817-1894
 Mary Roche 1786-1872 (1871?) Bridget Roche 1832-1908
 Anne Roche 1828-1838
 Katherine Roche Smith 1814-1846

Photos by Bob Schmidt



the wealthiest persons in Huntington, John Roche was an example of the American dream. He had become the owner of ten thousand acres of land and a stockholder in a newspaper and other enterprises. He was described by those that knew him as "a short, stocky man, who could be seen nearly every day riding horseback to supervise the workers on his farms and who carefully fortified himself for the trip by one 'after breakfast nip' of whiskey." He truly was a founding father and principal benefactor of Huntington.

Sources:
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Top: John Roche's home is next to the church his money helped to build.
 Bottom: St. Mary's Catholic Church's services were conducted in English.
 Photos by Bob Schmidt

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Township Library, Huntington, Indiana for permission to photograph the picture of John Roche.

Special thanks to Joan Keefer, Indiana Room, Huntington Public City-

CONTRIBUTIONS TO CSI ARCHIVES

Don Haack, CSI member from Fort Wayne, has contributed the following items to the CSI archives:

Old maps of:

- Fort Wayne, Indiana
- Fort Wayne vicinity and Allen County
- Suburban and Rural Additions Fort Wayne, IN 1966
- Salamonie Lake, Indiana
- The Upper Mississippi River... nine-foot channel, 1962
- Where to Go in Indiana: Official Lake Guide 1938

Panama Canal Centennial Weekend 2014

We thank Don for these additions to the archives. Don also sent in a postcard of the U AL in the Westminster [Westminster] Canal in Westminster, UK for publication.

The Regent's Canal connects Paddington to Limehouse Basin in London's Docklands via Camden, Islington, Hackney and Mile End. The Westminster section runs around the north side of Regent's Park, opposite the zoo.

