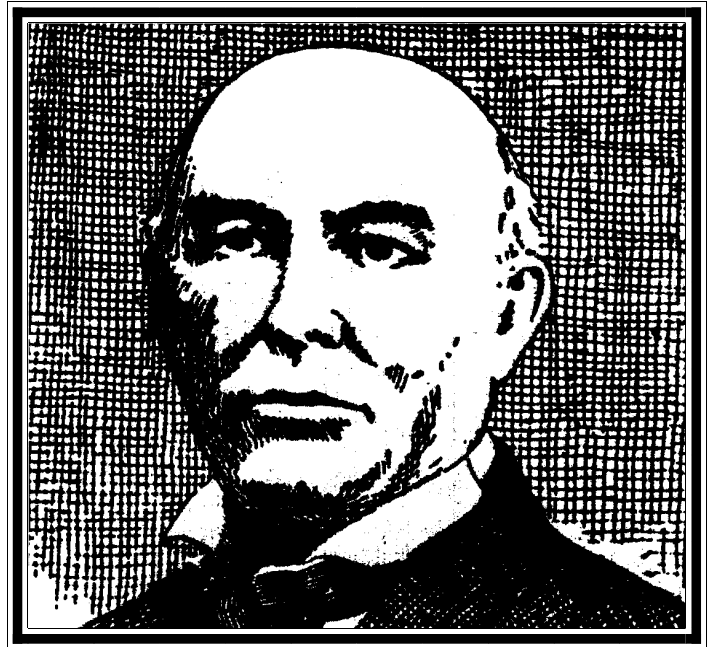


CANAWLERS AT REST

OEHMIG BIRD

b. March 19, 1813
d. January 21, 1878

Find A Grave #53317426



During the canal era in Fort Wayne the name of Oehmig (Ochmig) Bird was well know and respected. Everywhere he turned he was involved in building community structures and serving in political offices. He was in the circle of Fort Wayne's founders like Sam Hanna, Jesse Williams, Pliny Hoagland, Alfred Edgerton and many others. His name had a unique sound and also a variety of spellings. In this article I will use the older spelling Oehmig in order to clearly differentiate him from a younger relative Ochmig Bird, who lived Aboite township, Allen county

Both of these Bird families originally were located in Wyoming county, Pennsylvania, which is just north of Wilkes-Barre. Oehmig was born there on March 19, 1813. Little is known of his early life or lineage, but later we will speculate on other family members that came to Fort Wayne.

In 1832, at age 19, Oehmig worked for a dollar a day as an ax-man on the North Branch Division Canal southwest of Wilkes-Barre that fed into the Pennsylvania Mainline Canal. At this time there was extensive promotion of the western canals and requests for labor on the Wabash & Erie especially after the groundbreaking in February 1832. Oehmig decided to move west and arrived in the Fort Wayne area about 1834. He soon gained employment on the Wabash & Erie Canal as a rod-man or engineer, working with Jesse Williams on the route from Fort Wayne to Huntington.

Oehmig used his canal wages to begin acquiring land in Allen county, Indiana. In 1838 he purchased 80 acres in Monroe township just southwest of Monroeville. (East half of NE quarter of Sec 19 - Township 29N Range 15E).

During these early years of canal work he became acquainted with a prominent pioneer family, William & Laura Suttentfield, who had been in Fort Wayne since 1814 and who had actually lived in the old fort. William Suttentfield, a non-

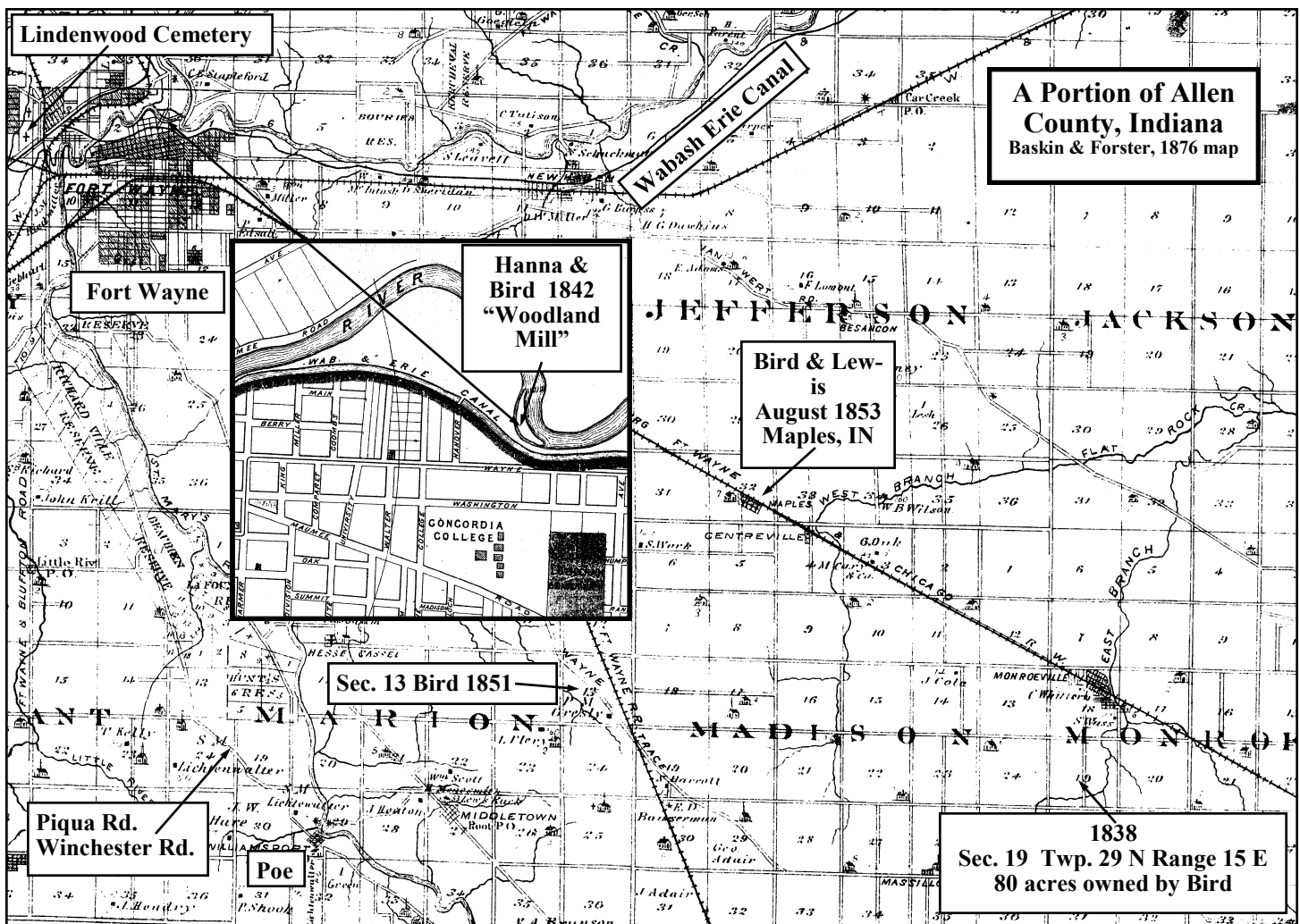
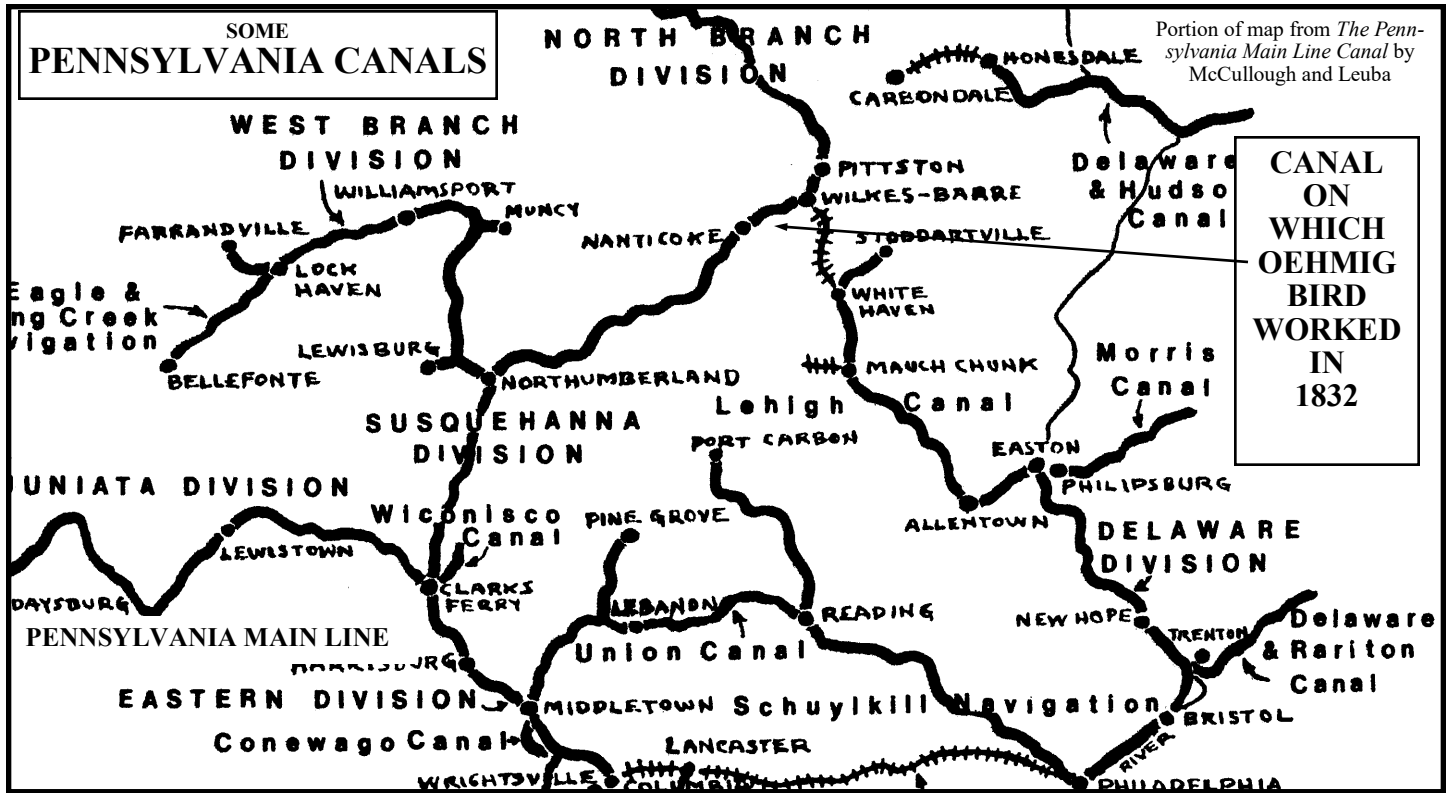
commissioned officer at the fort, had the job of bringing supplies from Piqua, Ohio. He died in 1836.

Oehmig became especially found of young Ann Suttentfield perhaps while assisting the family after William's death. On October 9, 1838 in Marion township, Oehmig Bird, age 25, married Ann Suttentfield who had just turned 18. William's widow, Laura (Taylor) Suttentfield born in Boston on November 1795, lived with the Bird's after 1850 until their deaths. She became a local historical celebrity by living to age 91. She outlived both her daughter Ann and Oehmig.

In 1842 Oehmig went into partnership with Samuel Hanna and acquired the saw mill and the "Woodland" flouring mill from Marshall Wines, a canal contractor who died that same year. In 1848, these partners built another larger flouring mill at the site, which was capable of producing 50 barrels of flour per day. This property was located near Hanover Street on the south side of the Maumee River, but on the north side of the Wabash & Erie Canal. This portion of the canal had been constructed east to the Ohio state line from 1837-40. The mills were sold by Hanna & Bird in September 1858 and then transferred through several other owners. The flour mill burned in March 1871.

Another important event occurred for the Birds in 1842. Their son, James O. Bird was born on January 22, 1842. There may have been earlier births but James was the first son who lived on to maturity, dying in 1906 and buried in Lindenwood Cemetery in Fort Wayne.

On March 10, 1845 Oehmig Bird purchased a mill and dam from John Howenstine, which he apparently didn't own very long. It was on the St Mary's river near Williamsport (Poe), which is in Marion township south of Fort Wayne. Williamsport was platted in 1848 and originally named for its founder William Essig. Its name was changed later to Poe by the post office so as



not to be confused with the town of Williamsport in Warren county.

During this period Oehmig became involved in city politics. All through his life he was a Democrat. Fort Wayne had grown from a village of about 900 residents when he first came in 1834 to about 1200 by 1840. From 1842-43 he served as City Surveyor, followed in 1844-45 as City Engineer. The canal opened in 1843 to Toledo, which really helped to stimulate the growth of the city, and by 1850 the population had reached about 4200.

In July 1847 the Wabash & Erie Canal was transferred from state ownership into a trust owned by the bondholders. Jesse L. Williams was retained by the Board of Trustees composed of Charles Butler, Nathan Palmer, and Thomas Blake, to remain as Chief Engineer. The commitment of the trust was to complete the canal to Evansville. This meant that the Cross-Cut canal, originally started in 1836 would become part of the Wabash & Erie Canal and new contracts would be let to refurbish old works and build a new canal. In 1847 and 1848 Oehmig Bird contracted for sections 18, 69, 163 and building some lock gates.

Also about the same time Bird was assigned responsibility for the Fort Wayne area canal. Newspaper reports tell of his work:

Fort Wayne Times & Press
January 8, 1847

"During the past week the water has been higher than it was ever known to be before. -- The old aqueduct across the St Mary's was at one time considered (to be) in great danger, but through the untiring efforts of Mr. Bird, the engineer in charge of this portion of the canal, in keeping a strong force to clear away the drift, it was saved."

Fort Wayne Times & Daily Press
December 13, 1849

"On Tuesday night last, a serious break occurred at the west end of the Aqueduct, near the city. -- If it is not repaired, before high water comes, the Aqueduct will be destroyed without fail; and in that case navigation will be suspended until next September the best way it can be fixed. It is very unfortunate that Mr. Williams and Mr. Bird are both absent, and no one here with authority to take charge of the work"

A week later:

Fort Wayne Times & Daily Press
December 20, 1849

"A strong force is at work on the break at the Aqueduct under the direction of P. (Pliny) Hoagland, Esq., Engineer; and all will be done that it is possible to do, in speedily repairing it. -- We would not speak in a captious or faultfinding spirit, and we only reiterate the universal expression when we say that Mr. Bird ought to be here. He has charge of this portion of the canal

with a suitable salary. In addition to this duty, the good people of Allen county, in their wisdom, thought proper to impose upon him the duties of Representative, leaving the canal in the care of no one. The consequence was that when the break occurred, no one here had authority to meddle with it, and several days were lost in obtaining authority from Indianapolis."

As the article states Oehmig wore many hats and was elected to the state legislature in 1849-50. Of course the legislators, even today, are only temporarily involved in a legislative session as they hold other jobs so this is not unusual for citizen legislators.

When the canal reached Terre Haute in 1849, the operating canal was divided into 6 sections with superintendents assigned to each. Oehmig was appointed as the Superintendent for Section 1 that extended from the Indiana/Ohio line to Peru, Indiana and served as paymaster. One of the persons working for him was Herman Schwegmann, who worked as a cook on a state repair boat. Schwegmann spoke highly of Bird's work saying that Oehmig was engaged in public service with scrupulous fidelity. (See November 2011 Hoosier Packet).

In 1848 James & Matilda (Eick) Bird came with their three children from Wilkes-Barre to Fort Wayne. On September 11, 1849 a son, Oehmig L. Bird was born in Fort Wayne. The names are too similar and the ages suggest that perhaps James was a brother or close relative of our subject Oehmig Bird. The names of other family members also suggest a close relationship.

Oehmig and Ann lived at 23 E Main St, Fort Wayne, next to O P Morgan, the canal toll collector. He also owned considerable land in Marion township. The assessment of 1851 shows him owning 320 acres of land in Section 13 of this civil township.

After being elected to the state legislature, this was a very busy period in Oehmig's life. In 1851 he was elected to the Fort Wayne city council for a two year term (1851-52) and on May 11 his daughter, Eliza Jane Bird, was born. In 1852 he was assigned as one of three special agents of the county for the transaction of business connected with the railroad, voting in stockholders meetings etc. He was active buying and selling property for its mill rights or timber.

While Oehmig was traveling around Indiana buying timber, Henry Baker asked him to look for a young boy named Patrick Daugherty whose parent's couldn't care for him due to the death of his mother. Michael Hedekin and his wife had adopted Patrick. Patrick's older sister Mary was adopted by the attending physician, a Dr. Sturgis. When his wife Ann died Michael felt incapable of properly caring for the young lad so he sent him to an Orphan's Home in Vincennes. From there Patrick was soon bound out to a French farmer with a large family. Patrick was expected to work hard with little care. After Michael Hedekin's

death in 1872, Henry Baker, who had married Mary Daugherty, asked Oehmig Bird to be on the lookout for the lad. Bird had remembered conversations with Hedekin about Patrick. During his travels Oehmig found him. He told Henry Baker, "Henry, I have found your boy. Your wife had reason to worry. The little fellow plows ten acres of corn and is half fed and he has never felt a bed but has slept on the straw and under old rags, washes the diapers for the small children, has no clothes." Baker left town without telling Mary where he was going, found the boy, and reunited the boy with his sister, Mary (Daugherty) Baker.

In August 1853 Oehmig and J. Bowser platted a town along the railroad in Jefferson township called Maples. Two streets extending Northwest to Southeast were Church St. and Holmes St.. Southwest to Northeast streets were Bird St. in honor of Oehmig, Lewis St. for Lewis Maples who had established a sawmill engine there in 1852, and Washington St.. With access to good transportation the town grew as the timber was harvested but then faded once the timber was exhausted. In 1871 the Lewis and Bird families donated land for Maples United Methodist Church, which still stands today at the southwest corner of Bird and Church streets in Maples.

Oehmig was the Fort Wayne city Treasurer from 1853-54, then in 1856-60 he served as county Treasurer. In 1857 he owned 195 shares of the Fort Wayne branch of the State Bank of Indiana. It was at this time that the Wabash & Erie Canal was declining. As activity decreased, toll revenues fell, most the land had been sold, and the demand for repairs and maintenance were increasing. The trustees decided to establish three leases to private companies. The 226 mile Eastern division from Terre Haute to the State line was leased by Alfred Edgerton, Hugh McCulloch, Pliny Hoagland, Oehmig Bird and others in May of 1859. After limited success the consortium renewed for another three years.

On July 5 1859 Oehmig Bird was part of a group of distinguished Fort Wayne citizens, who purchased land west of town to establish Lindenwood Cemetery. Members of the group included Jesse Williams, Hugh McCulloch, Allen Hamilton, Pliny Hoagland and others. Eventually most of the bodies in the old Broadway Cemetery were moved to Lindenwood. Only Indiana's past governor, Samuel Bigger, remained and still lies in what is now McCulloch Park.

Allen county continued to grow and prosper. In 1860 bids were let for a new courthouse since it had outgrown its old

one. Oehmig Bird was part of a group composed of Samuel Edsall, Louis Wolke, and Virgil Kimball that received the bid to build the structure. The actual work was eventually done by David J. Silver. One of the three county commissioners was upset about the way contracts were let. He saw that there were lower bids and that none of the three men were contractors themselves. He said "the whole proceedings from the getting up of the plans to the letting of the contract is a farce and has been subject to influence of persons not members of the board -- I would respectfully enter my protest to the whole proceedings and as it is customary to insert a stone in the building in a conspicuous place with the names of the Commissioners, I hereby forbid the use of my name in connection with it." -- Theron M Z Andrews.

From 1863-65 Oehmig served both his community by becoming a member of the Fort Wayne school board and his state as a state representative 1862-64. This was during a period of national conflict.

We normally think of the Civil War as a conflict between the North and the South, but there was also conflict within the North and South as to the support of the war. Lambdin P. Milligan, a lawyer from Huntington, Indiana, was arrested for his support of vigorous opposition to the war and a plan to cause an insurrection in the north. Oehmig Bird, a Democrat, was called as a witness to Indianapolis on November 24, 1864. In support of Milligan he said, "As a Democrat, I think the President of the United States has exceeded his power in requiring the abolition of slavery, as the right to hold slaves is guaranteed by the Constitution to every person who holds slaves. I think the Emancipation Proclamation is unconstitutional; outside of this proclamation I am in favor of the suppression of the rebellion, though I am by no means strenuously in favor of the war, for I believe in settling the difficulty by conciliation and compromise."

It is interesting to note that James A. Garfield and future Indiana governor Albert G. Porter were part of Milligan's defense team. In the case of *Ex Parte Milligan*, the United States Supreme Court eventually decided that Milligan, although guilty of planning insurrection against the state of Indiana and the nation, had been tried by a military tribunal verses the civilian courts that were still in effect. He was released from prison.

In October 1867 Oehmig was again with a group of investors, this time they were looking to establish a toll road for two miles on the old Piqua road. Their plans were to improve the roadway and then charge a toll. The County commissioners approved the venture.

From 1869 to 1874 Oehmig Bird represented Allen & Adams counties as a state senator. During this period there were several key pieces of legislation that were controversial, none more so than the ratification of the 15th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. "The right of citizens to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of race, color, or previous condition of servitude." -- ratified 1870.



Maples United Methodist Church Photo by Bob Schmidt

In the legislative session of 1869 the Democrats opposed ratification and so, to delay or postpone the ratification, it was agreed that eleven of the senators whose term ended in this 1869 session should resign so that there would not be a quorum. On May 13th sixteen Democrats resigned and one of these was Oehmig Bird. Although they resigned, they remained in the Chamber so the doorkeeper was ordered to lock the doors. The Republicans said they hadn't seen all the necessary papers of resignation so a quorum was present and the 15th amendment passed the Senate and eventually the House. This process is similar to the Indiana legislative process of 2011 when the Democrats went to Illinois to avoid voting on bills effecting government employee unions' bargaining rights.

In the election of 1870 Oehmig was opposed by John Sarnighausen, the publisher of the *Indiana Staatszeitung* in Fort Wayne, for Indiana state senator. The election was very close with Sarnighausen initially winning. Oehmig contested the election and won. Oehmig went on to be re-elected for 1873-74. Sarnighausen was later successful in the 1874 election and served from 1875-80.

The Wabash & Erie Canal Company was organized in 1866 with subscriptions of \$158,000 in another attempt to save the northern portion of the canal by repairing and restoring it. Counties along the canal were asked to help in repairing structures. Oehmig Bird was a friend of the canal from beginning to the final days. As a final gesture he introduced a bill in 1871 to appropriate \$50,000 to make necessary repairs, but it failed to pass the legislature, which had by then turned its back on the canal. The Wabash & Erie Canal Company surrendered its lease on January 1, 1874. In February 1876 the old canal was sold at auction in Terre Haute.

In 1874, at age 61, Oehmig retired from political life. His daughter, Eliza Jane 19 had married Martin L. Bulger on November 22, 1870. Bulger 38 was a store clerk and became a lawyer. He apparently had been married before with a son named Frank T. Bulger. Martin is buried with his first wife Georgia in Lindenwood while Elizabeth is buried with their son Edward W. in the Bird plot.

In the 1870s Oehmig Bird moved from his Main street home to 146 W Berry in Fort Wayne. He continued to live in Fort Wayne until his death on January 21, 1878. One of his obituaries reads:

"Mr Bird was identified with the Masonic fraternity. He made no religious professions. He had his faults, like every human being and, like all who live an active life, he had some enemies. But he also had hosts of warm friends, who were greatly devoted to him and who praise him for his kindness of heart, his charity and many other excellent qualities which they discovered."

Another says:

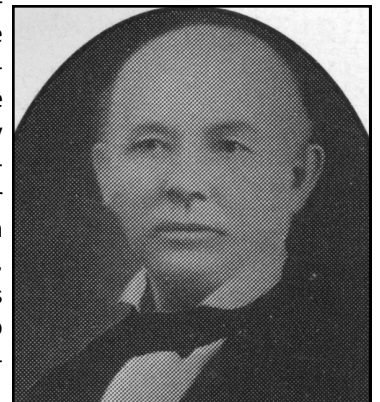
"In his death Fort Wayne loses one of the best friends, the county an old and respected citizen, the state a man whose name will ever be held dear, and the Democratic party a staunch and noble supporter."

Oehmig's wife Ann died the next year on October 12, 1879. Both are buried in Lindenwood Cemetery. Laura Suttentfield, his mother-in-law, lived seven more years. She died on November 25, 1886 and is buried with them in Section F Lot 133.

When Oehmig died, his daughter, Eliza Jane (Bird) Bulger found among the papers in his desk a warranty deed for a land patent from the War of 1812. The land was located in Gainesville, Florida and had originally been issued to Benjamin Metzger. The deed had been signed over by his heirs in 1857 with a blank assignment and duly witnessed. Eliza Jane had assigned the land in 1905 to Edwin W. Spaulding. A cancellation of this original warrant was requested by S.I. Jones but the United States Government land office denied his request holding for the transfer to Spaulding. It ruled:

"From the long-continued possession of the warrant by Bird, it may reasonably be presumed that he came into possession of it by delivery from the heirs of Metzger under their assignment either directly or by delivery from their immediate assignee, there being no circumstances or facts shown by the record to rebut or weaken such presumption."

This concluding chapter of the life of Oehmig Bird clearly demonstrates the great variety of business transactions in which he was involved. His life impacted the Wabash & Erie Canal, Fort Wayne area communities, and the state of Indiana. His large family plot is in Lindenwood Cemetery. Those buried in it are shown on its records, but none of the graves have any markers.



Oehmig Bird
Courtesy Fort Wayne/Allen County Public Library

Sources:

Beatty, John D. *History of Fort Wayne & Allen County, Indiana 1700-2005*. Evansville, IN: M. T. Publishing Co., 2006.
Brice, Wallace A. *History of Fort Wayne*. Fort Wayne, IN: D. W.



Laura Suttentfield

Jones & Son, 1868.
 "Death's Doings," *Fort Wayne Weekly Sentinel*, January 23, 1878.
 Fatout, Paul. *Indiana Canals*. West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 1972.
Fort Wayne Daily News, January 22, 1878
Fort Wayne Daily News, January 23, 1878
Fort Wayne Daily News, October 13, 1879
Fort Wayne Times and Peoples Press, March 28, 1846.
Fort Wayne Times and Press, January 8, 1847.
Fort Wayne Times and Daily Press, December 13 and 20, 1849,
 Griswold, B. J. *The Pictorial History of Fort Wayne, Indiana*. Chicago, IL: Robert O. Law Company, 1917.
 Hazard, Samuel. *Hazard's Register of Pennsylvania, Devoted to the Preservation of Facts and Documents, and Every Other Kind of Useful Information Respecting the State of Pennsylvania*. Philadelphia, PA: Wm. F. Geddes, Printer, January to July, 1832.
 Hesselman, George J. *Decisions of the Department of the Interior and the General Land Office in Cases Relating to the Public Lands*. Vol. 37. Washington, D. C. : Government Printing Office, 1909.
Indiana Marriage Records.
Journal of the Indiana General Assembly, Senate. Journal Print, 1870.
 Marion Township, Allen County, Indiana Minute Book
 McCullough, Robert and Leuba, Walter. *The Pennsylvania Main Line Canal*. York, PA: The American Canal and Transportation Center. 1973.
 Orders, Rules, Regulations and Rates of Toll. Terre Haute, IN: Office of the Board of Trustees of the Wabash and Erie Canal. 1850.
 Pitman, Benn. *The Trails For Treason At Indianapolis, Disclosing the Plans for Establishing a North-Western Confederacy*. Cincinnati, OH: Moore, Wiltach & Baldwin, 1865.
 "The Ratification of the Fifteenth Amendment in Indiana," *Indiana Magazine of History*. Vol. IX No. 3. Bloomington, IN: 1913.
 United States Federal Census: 1850, 1870, 1880, 1900, 1910.
 Valley of the Upper Maumee River. *Madison, WI: Brant & Fuller, 1889*.
 "Wines Mill," *Old Fort News*, Vol. 7, Ft. Wayne, IN: Allen County Fort Wayne Historical Society, 1942.

sse.dll?db=blmlandpatents
 &h=183798&ti=0&indiv=try
<http://trees.ancestry.com/tree/643846/person/660067920>
<http://trees.ancestry.com/tree/10068164/person/162590285>
<http://www.genealogycenter.info/print.php?printpage=032&book-mariontwpminutebkdb=blmlandpatents&h=183790&ti=0&indiv=try>

Internet

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lambdin_P._Milligan
<http://search.ancestry.com/cgi-bin/>

