

**NORBOURN THOMAS**  
AND HIS WABASH & ERIE CANAL CONNECTIONS  
By Charles Davis

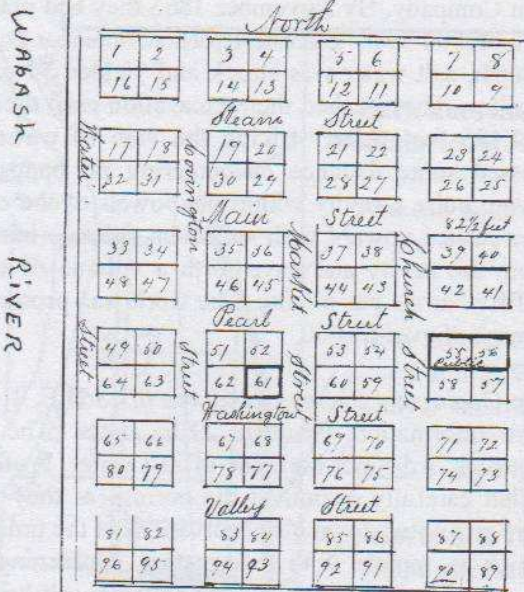
"Norbourn Thomas was born March 8, 1804. In 1829 he married Maria Morris in Fayette county, West Virginia. In 1830, they removed by Keel boat to their home on Silver Island in Fulton township, Fountain county, Indiana. They made their start there in a log cabin, raising a truck patch that became a splendid farm and home with much happiness."

Norbourn established his farm on June 9, 1830, when he and his brother, both of Fountain county, bought 75 acres in the south-half of section 34. Deed Record 9/314 His brother, Lewis, entered the SWst fraction of section 34 on the west side of the Wabash river in Vermillion county on September 3, 1831 consisting of 100.11 acres. Then on April 1, 1832 Norbourn bought one-half interest in the Thomas's ferry across the Wabash from his brother for \$500. The deed says, "one-half of the NEst fraction of section 3, 50 acres and 25 acres off the SWst fraction of section 34, including the ferry," recorded October 11, 1835. D.R. 4/162 This completed his ownership of land on both sides of the Wabash river at the ferry crossing. The ferry homesite was located on the east side of the Wabash in Fountain county.

On May 18, 1832, Norbourn and Lewis platted the town of "Coal Land" along the Wabash river, just above the Parke county line in Fountain county. This was the location of the ferry and was later called "Whitetown" when Milton H. White began running the ferry in 1858. The ferry house was about 300 feet north of the old iron river bridge. The ferry deed shows Norbourn was living in Kanawha county, West Virginia. Evidently he left home after establishing his farm. By 1833 recorded deeds show he is back in Fountain county. On October 25, 1832, Norbourn expanded his farm to several hundred acres. D.R. 5/409 He sold some of it later in the 1840s.

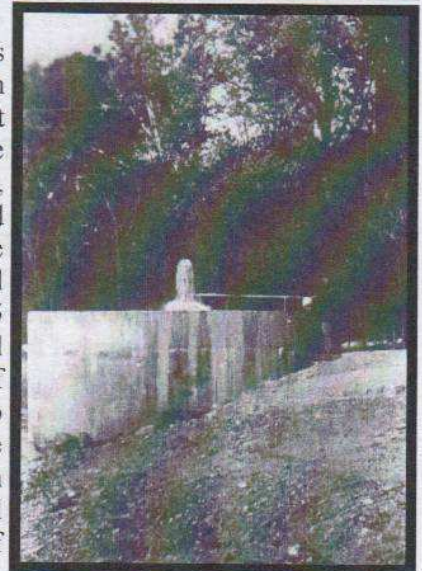
He soon began boring for salt and was succeeded in obtaining a well from the water of which he could manufacture twenty bushels of salt per twenty-four hours. He then dug the same well as before to a depth of over 500 feet where he found a vein of water yielding fifty bushels of salt per twenty-four hours. His brother Lewis Thomas accompanied him and aided in all this work. They continued the work until their well reached the depth of over 700 feet, the deepest in the state of Indiana at that time. He bought the land on which the well was situated from Wm. H. Wann on September 14, 1864. D.R. 26/513 The deed reads as follows: "Part of Est 1/2 of the NWst 1/4 of section 35, 6 acres, which is located the artesian well,

**THE TOWN OF COAL LAND**  
Fountain County, Indiana  
Later known as Whitetown, Shirk's Grove  
or Silver Island Park



*Received May 18, 1832*  
The beginning corner of this Town plat is at the Northwest corner of Lot number one near the bank of the Wabash River, 67 Poles and 7 links North of the line dividing the Counties of Fountain & Parke, its bearing is South 31° East, the size of the Lots are 66 by 82 1/2 feet, Main Street is 82 1/2 ft all others 66 ft. wide, except water street which is 33 ft. Lots number 55 & 56 are donated for the use of the Town for Public purposes. Lot number 61 is donated for the use of a market house.  
May 18, 1832, Lewis Thomas  
Norbourn Thomas  
Dorothy Thomas  
Deed Record BK 3 p. 310

commonly known as the Thomas Well, begin at point on the east bank and line of the Wabash and Erie Canal, 20 feet west of said well, go Nth along the East line of the canal 255.62, go east 511.25 feet, go south parallel with said east line of said canal 511.25 ft., go west 511.25 feet to the canal, go north with east line on canal 255.62 to the place of beginning."



THE THOMAS WELL

A group of individuals formed a company and wrote up the Articles of Association on February 25, 1856. Misc. Record 1/110 The first directors were Norbourn Thomas, Samuel C. Wilson, Addison L. Roache, James M. Allen, and Wm. H. Nye with 15 share holders having 4,500 shares of stock. It was called the Wabash Mining and Petroleum Company. By November 1865 they had reached the depth of 900 feet. *Rockville Republican* November 29, 1865 At this depth, salt water was struck and yielded 17 oz. of salt per gallon. They pushed their excavation until the well reached 1,135 feet. After striking the vein of water the auger passed some distance encountering no opposition thus proving quite a cavity within the bowels of the earth. The water rushed upward with sufficient force to hurl the auger from the cavity and gave forth a volume of water equal to fifty barrels per minute. The work was prosecuted at an expense of over \$5,000.

In *Geological Survey of Indiana in 1869* E. T. Cox relates this information. On page 29 he states "The well passed through 5 distinct horizons of salt water. Professor John Collett carefully examined the borings as they were brought up and noted down his observations at the time in a book which is replete with information concerning the material passed thru." It goes on to say "the salt brine is equal to that of Kanawha, West Virginia," note this is the place where Norbourn Thomas came from to Indiana. There were three salt wells drilled in Fountain county, Indiana in Fulton, Wabash and Troy townships to the depth of 600 to 1000 feet in the vicinity of Coal creek or its branches.

The *Rockville Republican* of August 7, 1867 gives this romantic tale of the well, "The well is between 1100 and 1200 feet deep, when not obstructed, about two feet above the surface, sparkling under the rays of the sun with diamond like brilliancy, issuing is estimated at one barrel a second or 864,000 barrels per day."

Salt was made at the Thomas Well and shipped by Norbourn on the Wabash and Erie Canal. His canal boat was called the "N. Thomas." He did this for many years and eventually suspended operations in consequence of not having sufficient manufacturing facilities to compete with the salt works of Michigan and New York, which, at that time, were sending salt to northern Indiana at an extremely low rate of freight by means of the Wabash and Erie Canal.

On page 129 of the above mentioned book, it says, "The Thomas Well still produces a good flow of brine, which at the time of my visit, was pumped by hand, and made into salt on a limited scale by a man who was permitted to use the Company's kettles, nine in number, free of charge. He collected the fuel used under the kettles

from the fallen forest trees, and carried it to the works upon his shoulders, pumped the water, and in fact did all the work about the establishment himself, and was making about one barrel of good white salt per day."

"Thomas Well" became a famous resort for decades. When Mr. Thomas died, the 6 acre tract was sold to Mrs. F. Safely on September 5, 1883. See *The Hoosier Packet* Vol. 5 No. 1 January 2006 p. 2 "Thomas Well and Its Wabash and Erie Canal Connections" by Charles Davis

Norbourn Thomas was active in the affairs of the town of Lodi. He and his wife Maria, donated Lot 46 to the trustees of the Zion Church of United Baptist on December 9, 1867. Services were held there until church purchased the Lodi school on June 11, 1945. The school was deeded to the Liberty township trustees on May 4, 1855. The frame building was used until 1897 when it was removed from the site and the new brick school building was built. *Rockville Tribune* August 1897

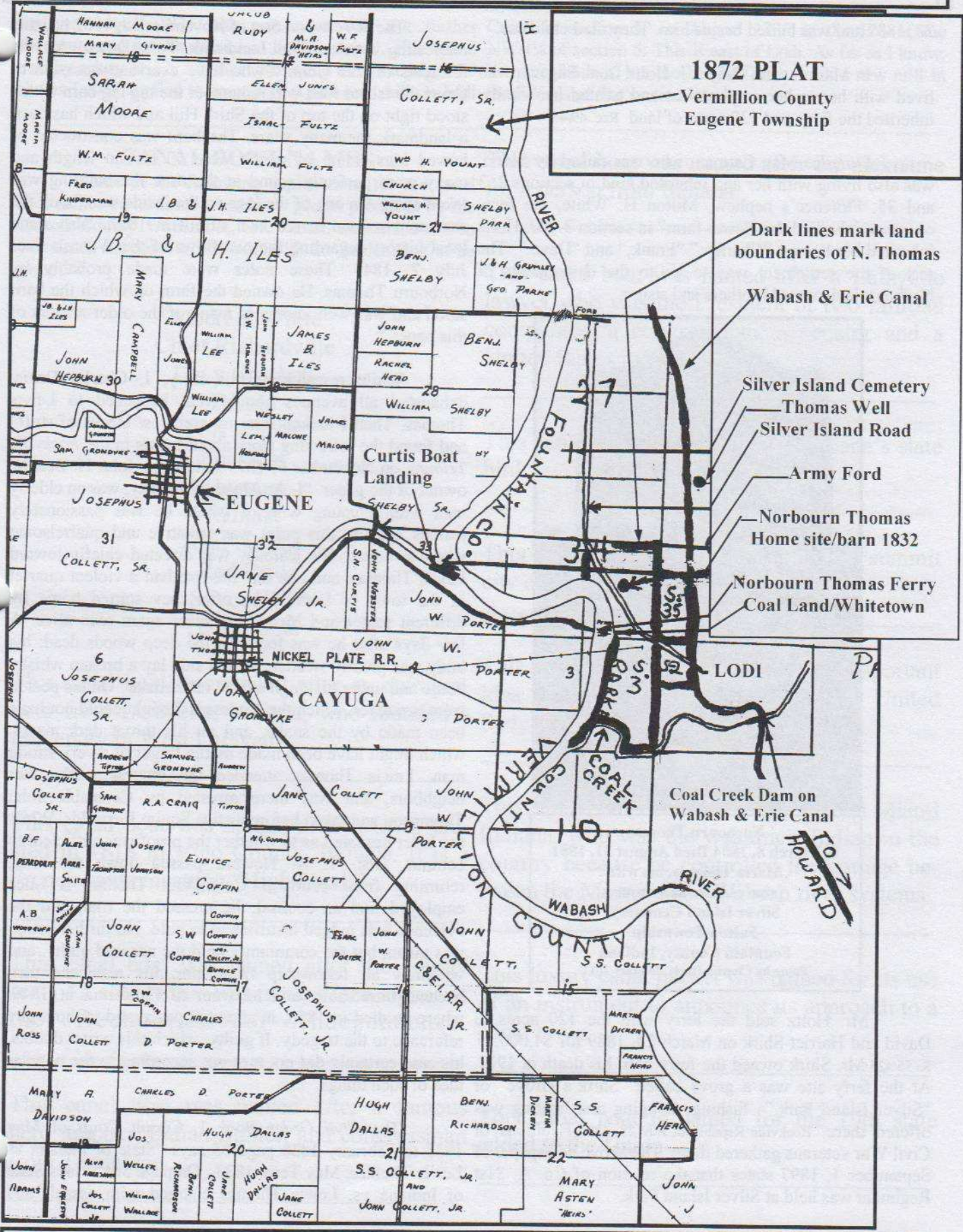
On November 1, 1830 Norbourn entered the Wst<sup>1/2</sup> of the NWst<sup>1/4</sup> of section 35, 80 acres. He started a coal mine to the east of Silver Island on the above land stripping coal from the outcrop. It was located about 200 yards north west of the Thomas Well and the Wabash and Erie Canal. By 1869, a coal company was mining at this location that paid Thomas a royalty of a half cent per bushel. They shipped this coal, reputed to be steam and grate coal, by the canal at the rate of about ten tons daily to Lafayette.

A trial of the relative heating value and capacity for generating steam was made between the Danville, Illinois coal and the Thomas "Silver Island" coal in a steam mill at Lafayette in July 1869. The test showed that "seventy bushels of Silver Island coal was equal to one hundred bushels of Danville coal."

In October 1866 Norbourn Thomas bought 17.50 acres in the NWst<sup>1/4</sup> section 2 in Parke county. D. R. 25/438 and 466 This adjoined his coal land property to the north in Fountain county. This land too had a large amount of coal. This is in and along the "Swale." Those on the Canal Society of Indiana tour through this area in 2004 saw this. By the early 1900s the mine to the north was called the "Blue Goose" and another nearby was called the "Mud Hen."

On May 17, 1876, Norbourn and his wife were living in Terre Haute, Indiana. Misc. Record 2/587 He leased his entire farm and operations to John M. Givins for a period of five years.

Norbourn Thomas died on August 31, 1881 and was buried in the Silver Island cemetery. Maria died March



28, 1887 and was buried beside him. They died childless.

In Maria's will, Robert J. Holtz from Eugene, who lived with her in her employment and treated her kindly, inherited the ferry and 120 acres of land. Rec. 49/43

Florence May Carman, who was raised by Maria, was also living with her and inherited land in sections 2, 3 and 35. Florence's nephew, Milton H. White, the ferry operator, inherited the "lower farm" in section 3. Mr. Holtz inherited her horses, "Charley," "Frank," and "Dave." The rest of the settlement was to go to the descendents of Norbourn's deceased brothers and sisters.



Norbourn Thomas  
 B. March 8, 1804 Died August 31, 1881  
 Maria Thomas, his wife  
 shares this same stone.  
 Silver Island Cemetery  
 Fulton Township  
 Fountain County, Indiana  
 Photo by Charles Davis, January 2011

Mr. Holtz sold the ferry with the 120 acres to David and Harriet Shirk on March 28, 1889 for \$4,000. D. R. 55/425 Mr. Shirk owned the ferry until his death in 1912. At the ferry site was a grove called "Shirk's Grove" or "Silver Island Park." Fishing, camping and boating was offered there. Rockville Republican July 28, 1897 Reunions of Civil War veterans gathered there. The above newspaper of September 1, 1897 states that the reunion of Co. A. 31st Regiment was held at Silver Island Park.

The *Silverwood Sun* of November 12, 1902 has this interesting article, "Old Landmark Tom Down. All the residents of this vicinity who have ever had occasion to travel the Island road will remember the big log barn which stood right on the top of the Shirk Hill and which has been a landmark for many years. The barn was constructed of hewed logs, some of which were 60 feet in length and many were perfectly sound at the time the building was taken apart. On one of the logs on the inside was found the statement written in red keel, 'Built in 1832,' also some local history regarding the overflows of the Wabash river July 7, 1844. These notes were made probably by Norbourn Thomas. He owned the farm on which the barn stood and was well known to many of the older readers of this paper."

While researching this story, I, Charlie Davis, exhausted all avenues about what happened to Lewis Thomas. Then I looked into my archives/"stacks of stuff" and found the following story about Lewis in the *Rockville Tribune* on November 6, 1879 written by John H. Beadle, owner of the paper. "Luke Mead, of Liberty, was an elderly man with a young wife of whom he was passionately jealous, and on this point was talkative and quarrelsome when in liquor. His jealousy was directed chiefly toward Lewis Thomas, and one day the two had a violent quarrel in the town of Lodi. Soon after they started home by different routes and Mead was never again seen alive. A few days after he was found in the deep woods dead; his body was greatly swollen; by his side lay a broken whisky bottle and under his thigh a dead rattlesnake? On his person were scratches, which the witnesses thought could not have been made by the snake, and on his throat dark marks, which might have been made by the finger of a very strong man. Lewis Thomas attended the inquest, with other neighbors, and was there arrested by Constable John Thompson and taken before justice Squire Reynolds. While the latter hesitated as to whether the proof was sufficient to commit, Gen. T. A. Howard passed down the road, returning from court at Covington. Thomas at once employed him as counsel; he pressed the trial, and the evidence was judged insufficient to hold. No further action was taken, but the community held the accused guilty, and withdrew all fellowship from him; his residence then became intolerable, and he went to California in 1849, where he died in 1850, in apparent peace and without any reference to the tragedy. If guilty, which this writer doubts, his case certainly did not turn out according to the popular idea of such things."

The *Civil Order Book* 1, Circuit Court of May 1833 to February 1838 page 35 says "State of Indiana vs Lewis Thomas, May Term 1833. On page 301 it says State of Indiana vs. Lewis Thomas charged with assault and

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battery, August 1836, the prosecutor will not further Creek in section 5, on August 1836 in the E $\frac{1}{2}$  of the prosecute and for the defendant be discharged. This was a NWst $\frac{1}{4}$  of section 5. This is east of Lodi. As far as I know, trial by a jury of 12. Another interesting thing on page 370 he never built it, but the Bright family built a saw mill in shows Lewis applied to erect a grist and saw mill on Mill the SWst $\frac{1}{2}$  of that section later on.