

Thomas Dowling

Find-A-Grave #15565889

By Carolyn Schmidt

Thomas Dowling was born December 21, 1809, in Ballinrush, County Carlow, Ireland, to Peter and Katherine (Fenelon) Dowling. He was their fourth son. He came to America in 1814 with his parents and located in Washington City (Washington D.C.). His parents died shortly thereafter leaving a family of six small children.

Thomas apprenticed himself to Gales & Seaton, publishers of the Washington *National Intelligencer* when he was eight years old. He served out his time and worked himself up to an editorship. He worked there for 14 years, or until he was twenty-two years of age.

On March 13, 1827 Thomas married Phebe J. Serrin in Washington City. He was seventeen years old. Hettie Phebe "Jane" was born in Delaware in 1811.

He moved West after thoroughly learning the newspaper business and gaining practical knowledge of political events. He located in Terre Haute, Indiana. There he bought out the *Register* office from Col. John Osborn on June 13, 1832 and established the *Wabash Courier* as its successor. It was a morning paper and favored the Whig party. It eventually absorbed the *Western Register & Terre Haute General Advertiser*. While under Thomas' editorship it became "Tylerized." It later became known as *The Star*. Thomas published it until 1840 when he sold it to Judge Jesse Conrad. He made an agreement with Conrad that he would not start another paper in Terre Haute for five years.

In 1836 Thomas was a member of the Indiana House of Representatives serving until 1838. He later served in this position from 1840-41, 1843-46 and 1848-49.

Thomas was an excellent horseman. He owned Truxton, a brown colt, who set many records on the Terre Haute Central Turf Club Track in 1837-38.

In 1838 Thomas was Aide-de-Camp to the Indiana militia. In several county histories he is listed as Col. Thomas Dowling. He likely attained that rank during his service.

In November 1840 prominent Terre Haute businessmen were selected to compose a committee to submit a resolution to the 1841 Indiana legislature to urge completion of the Cross Cut portion of the Wabash & Erie Canal. The legislature authorized \$80,000 in six percent bonds to be issued to complete the canal from the Eel River feeder dam in Clay County to the Wabash River within 18 months. Thomas saw the urgency to finish the work and published an editorial supporting it in the *Wabash Courier* on June 19, 1841:

"Flour was selling at Cincinnati on [June] 13th at \$3.75. Price at Terre Haute [is] \$6.00. If our Cross Cut Canal was finished, wheat would go up and flour come down in price. The farmer is now at the mercy of one or two buyers and the consumer has to 'stand the racket' the other way. How long shall these things continue? Shall old Vigo remain [a] tributary to others for the

prime necessities of life and pay seventy-five percent additional for what she consumes? The law of last winter providing for the completion of the Canal is nearly a dead letter and is suffered to expire for the want of manly effort. Those who have the means won't do anything and those who would do something Can't for a want of them. That's just the whole secret."

After the regular lodge of Free & Accepted Masons in Terre Haute, organized in 1819, lapsed from 1832 until 1845, ten Master Masons petitioned the Grand Lodge for a dispensation to assemble and work together as a regular lodge. One of the signatures on that petition was Thomas Dowling. The lodge was re-established and flourished. It had a membership of 561 in 1891.

Even though Thomas had agreed with Judge Conrad not to start a paper for 5 years, temptation was too great. To get around the agreement he sent for his brother, John Dowling who was living in Washington, D. C., to come to Terre Haute in 1842. Shortly thereafter the new *Terre Haute Express* was published by John Dowling as publisher and editor. As soon as the 5-year agreement with Conrad had expired, Thomas' name appeared as editor and proprietor. Thomas published the *Weekly Express* up to February 1845 when he sold it to David S. Donaldson (Danaldson). A year or two later Thomas established the *Wabash Express*. He published it until February 1845 when he sold it to David Donaldson (Danaldson), who was its editor and proprietor until November 9, 1853. When Thomas retired from managing the *Wabash Express* the *Ft. Wayne Times & Press* ran the following on February 22, 1845:

"Thomas Dowling Esq., after a connexion [sp] of near fifteen years with the press in Indiana, retires from the management of the *Wabash Express*. His valedictory is a neat and feeling production—just such a one as we should expect from a mind of fine sensibility, upon taking leave of a list of generous patrons who had, for so long a period, stood by him "through good and evil report." Mr. Dowling is a gentleman of fine talents, and his paper has always been a favorite. Personally, we have not the pleasure of his acquaintance, but may be permitted, nevertheless, to wish him health and prosperity in his retirement."

On May 6, 1846 Thomas Dowling "was awarded a contract for \$55,000 to move the remaining Miami Indians in Indiana to designated western lands in Kansas," according to Mike McCormick's *Terre Haute Through the Canal Era*. "The figure included salaries for all personnel and all expenses for the Miamis at their new location during the first year. After extraordinary adversity due to the Indians' desire to stay, Dowling used the contract as security for a \$6,000 loan and sold the contract to Robert Peebles of Pittsburg. Peebles later hawked the contract to four men: William and George Ewing and Samuel Edsall, all of Fort Wayne, and Alexis Coquillard of South Bend. Coquillard was the designated "active partner."

"Coquillard successfully corralled enough Miamis to fill three canal boats at Peru on October 6. The party followed the Wabash & Erie Canal to its junction with the Miami & Erie Canal in Ohio and, then, passed through Dayton and Cincinnati. There, the group was transferred to the steamer *Colorado* for a trip down the Ohio River. The Miamis reached their Kansas destination in November."

Thomas then assisted in building the Wabash & Erie Canal. In November 1849 he took over as its Resident Trustee or manager in Indiana following the death of Thomas Blake from cholera.

He served in this position from 1849 until the company wound up its affairs in 1874.

In the 1850s he purchased a thousand acres of farm land in White county near Monticello, Indiana. He operated this farm for ten years.

As Resident Trustee of the Wabash & Erie Canal he wrote a letter to the speaker of the Indiana House of Representative in 1852 in relation to Canal Bridges, etc. He divided the bridges over the canal into two general divisions. "First, as to the bridges built and under contract for construction on the portion of canal remaining unfinished at the commencement of the Trust, extending from Coal creek to Evansville; and second, as to bridges rebuilt or repaired on that portion of the canal, which was received from the State as finished, extending from Coal creek to the State line, north." It lists where all the bridges were built or rebuilt and what they cost.

A break out of cholera in early 1852 aroused people living near canal reservoirs that were being constructed. They thought stagnant water caused the disease.

On September 10, 1853 Hettie Phebe "Jane" Serrin Dowling, Thomas' wife, died in Terre Haute. She was buried in Woodlawn Cemetery. She went by the name Jane on the cemetery records. At that time Thomas had his name withdrawn from the United Methodist Church in Terre Haute. Hettie Jane Serrin, Thomas' mother-in-law, earlier had died in 1850 in Vigo county. Since both Jane and her mother had same name, Jane sometimes went by the name Phebe J. on the census records.

By January 1854 sentiment against the reservoirs was so high that a public meeting was called and held at Bowling Green, Indiana on February 23, 1854. There residents openly opposed work on Birch Creek Reservoir until all timber was eliminated. However, they didn't wait to stop construction legally. They cut away the reservoir embankment and drained out the water on June 22, 1854.

A meeting was held on July 28, 1854 at the Eel River feeder dam "to consider the best means of arranging difficulties which exist in regard to the Reservoir." Two trustees of the Canal Company, including Thomas, were invited. The resulting compromise was that if all timber would be removed from the Birch Creek Reservoir the citizens promised no further acts of violence.

According to McCormick, "Dowling hired laborers to clear out the reservoir and repair the cut in the embankment at a cost of over \$1,000. All went well for two months when, on the night of September 9, 1854, the feeder dam was burned to the water's edge. The origin of the fire was never determined but credit for the deed was given to the 'Reservoir Regulators,' as the opponents were called. The Resident Engineer estimated the loss in revenue to the Canal Company to be \$20,000 besides 'the loss of confidence in the stability of the canal.'"

The canal was repaired and rewatered by the spring of 1855. Then on May 8, 1855 the embankment of Birch Creek Reservoir was again broken open. On May 24 Governor Wright offered a \$5000 reward for information leading to the arrest of the perpetrators. But in early June, the aqueduct over Birch Creek was wrecked and the buildings used by the canal workmen and their tools were demolished or stolen. At another meeting on June 21, 1855 the canal trustees said

they would have all timber removed as soon as possible. However, during the night of June 29, 1855, there was another, though unsuccessful, attempt to cut the reservoir's embankment. Then in August 1857 the aqueduct was again severely damaged. Although attempts were made to keep the Cross Cut portion of the Wabash and Erie Canal open from the Eel River Dam to Terre Haute, shortly thereafter the venture was abandoned. It was replaced by the railroad.

On March 27, 1856, Thomas married Sarah J. Sibley, the daughter of John and Elizabeth (May) Sibley, who lived near New York city. Her father, a native of Vermont, was one of the first settlers in Indiana. He first lived at Ft. Harrison where he sought protection from the many Indians living in the area. But, before long he left the fort and developed a farm in the wilderness.

Thomas Dowling was 50 years old when he married Sarah, who was almost 17 years old. Sarah was born on August 16, 1839 and died on December 19, 1904 surviving Thomas by many years. Over the years they had five children:

John Sibley Dowling (May 1858-)

m. Nellie Fee

He was the secretary to Thomas in the office of the Wabash & Erie Canal for two years. He was associated with various railroads thereafter eventually living in Greencastle, Indiana.

Mary Dowling Hallman (1861-)

m. John Palmer Hallman

They lived in New York City.

Jennie Dowling Brower (1863-)

m. Arthur H. Brower of New York

Fenelon E. Dowling (November 1866-April 12, 1912)

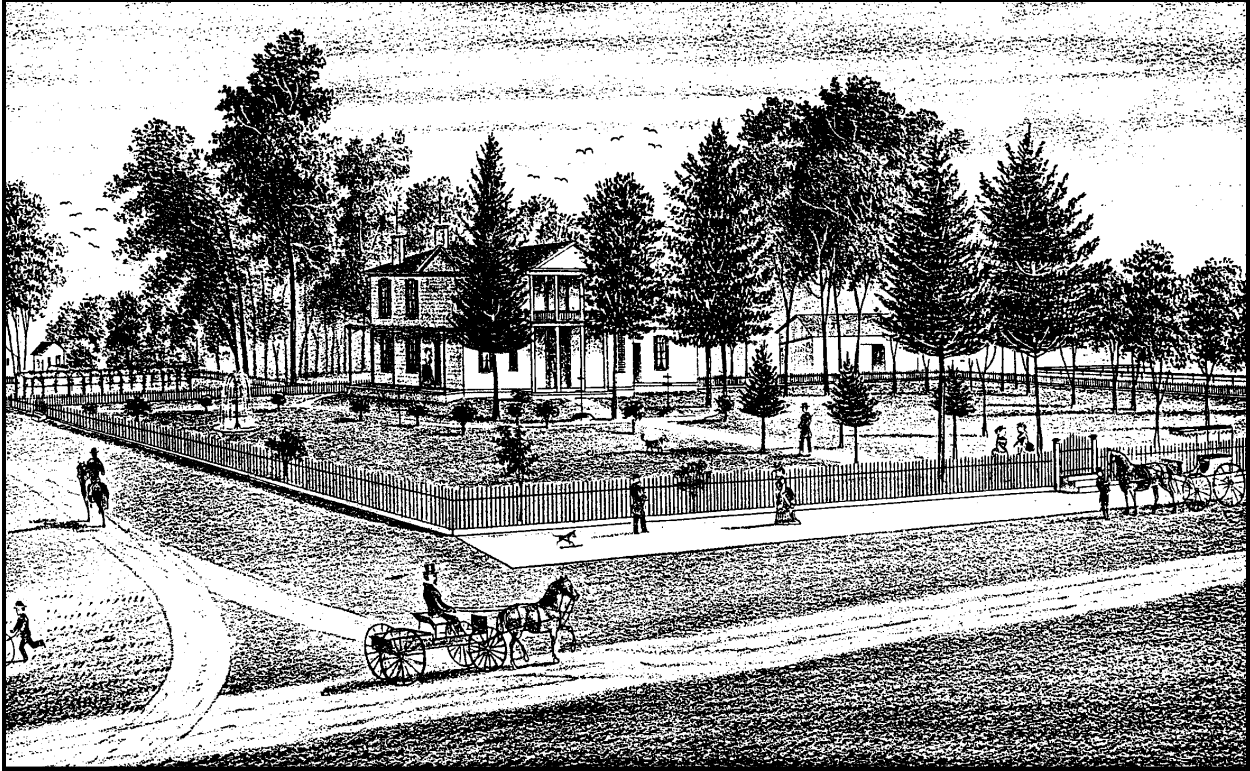
He was employed by the government in Honolulu, Sandwich Islands. He died in Hawaii and was buried in Woodlawn Cemetery in Terre Haute.

Elizabeth "Lizzie" Dowling Hampton (1872-)

m. H. C. Hampton

They lived in Terre Haute, Indiana

In February 1859, when the abandonment of the Wabash & Erie Canal was being considered, Thomas Dowling, serving as Canal Trustee, wrote a letter to the Indianapolis newspapers. A legislative committee had set forth a lengthy description of the advantages of the canal and the evils that must necessarily result from its abandonment. Thomas answered some of the questions and charges of those opposed to Legislative interference. He stated that the Canal paid well from 1846 to 1854; that about that time the State allowed a company to build and put in operation a Railroad along the line of the Canal, in violation of the spirit of the contract with the Bondholders; that the Trustees lost by this \$220,000 in two years at the Lafayette and Fort Wayne offices, and in like proportion along the whole line, in consequence of which the Trustees were authorized to abandon the whole, or any part of the Canal; and that nothing but the interposition of the State authorities could prevent the Canal from going into disuse. A newspa-



The residence of Col. Thomas Dowling at the head of 5th Street in Terre Haute, Indiana.

per article stated that he said, “What the hired scullions of a bankrupt and dishonest Railroad, which has swindled hundreds of people of Indiana out of their stock and sunk it in the capacious maw of ‘First Mortgage Bondholders’ may say, does not concern him.”

In 1864 many Terre Haute citizens complained that they needed a public hall large enough to meet the growing demands of the city. They canvassed businesses but found no means of financing it. Thomas stepped forward with \$60,000 and built Dowling Hall. It opened on December 15, 1864. It was located on North Sixth Street, was 60 ft. x 140 ft. in size, had the largest stage in Indiana, seated 1,200 people, and was adorned with paintings and statuary. It was a fine theater at the time and for many years the only place of amusement in Terre Haute. It held both theatrical performances and lectures. Once it was completed, Thomas moved the Wabash & Erie Canal headquarters there.

The Terre Haute Savings Bank was incorporated on November 10, 1869. Its founding officers were: Thomas Dowling (President), Lucius Ryce and Robert Hudson (Vice-Presidents), and John Beach (Secretary/Treasurer). Its first day of business was December 1, 1869.

In December 1871 the Vigo Board of County Commissioners ordered that all paupers being cared for at the county poor-house, be visited, examined and their condition reported to the board every three months by an appointed committee. Appointed to the committee were C. H. Allen, Thomas Dowling, James B. Edmunds, Curtis Gilbert and Chauncey Rose.

When alleged extravagant schemes were put forth to burden the people of Vigo county with

useless and enormous taxation for public improvements, the citizens of the county placed Thomas up for election to the Board of County Commissioners in June 1873. He was unanimously elected, served at the head of the board, and carried the county through a political storm.

In 1875 there was a movement in Vigo county to organize an old settlers' society since 1876 would be the centennial year for the United States. On July 8, 1875 Thomas Dowling, Henry Fairbanks, Charles Thomas Noble, Henry Ross, and George K. Steele met in Dowling's office in Dowling Hall. Thomas Dowling was the chairman and Fairbanks was the secretary. They decided to put notices in the daily papers advertising a meeting on Saturday July 12, 1875 to organize an "Old Settlers' Association." At that meeting Thomas Dowling was elected one of its many vice-presidents.

On February 24 and 25, 1876 all canal lands were put up for auction at the Vigo County Court House. The sale was handled by Samuel Barnes Gookins as Special Master. Sitting beside him throughout the proceeding was Resident Trustee Thomas Dowling. Little did Thomas know that this was his final official job as resident trustee. He died about nine months later.

Thomas was a very successful business man and was one of the influential men of Vigo county and that area of the state. He was a Freemason. He was a brilliant writer and wielded a potent influence through the columns of his paper, always taking a stand for what he saw and understood as being right. He was interested in the development of his community. He was first a Whig and later a Democrat. He was prominent in state politics and was elected to the Indiana State Legislature. He was a member of the national Democratic committee from Indiana when he died on December 5, 1876.

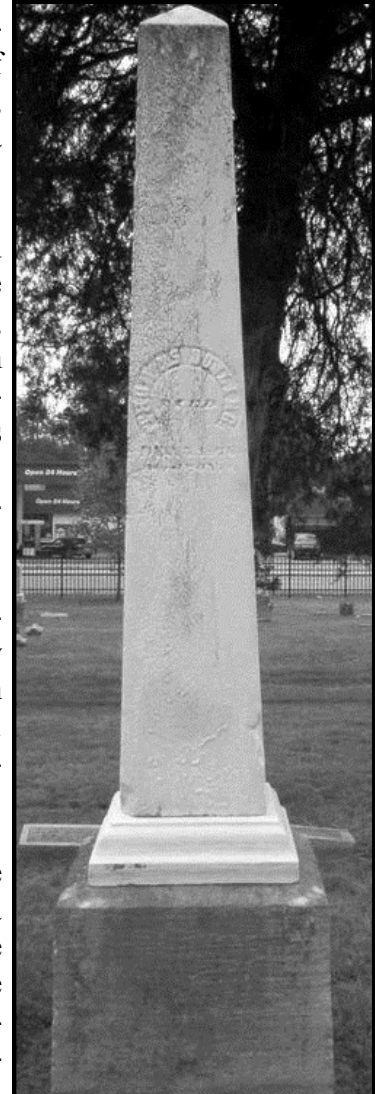
Despite a blinding snow storm on the day of his funeral, December 8, 1876, city officials, police and firemen marched to his home and then to his grave in Woodlawn Cemetery as a group. Among the dignitaries present were Governor Thomas Hendricks, Canal Trustee James Sidney Hinton and U. S. Senator Daniel W. Voorhees. He was laid to rest in Division 47, Block 25, Lot 5 of Woodlawn Cemetery in Terre Haute, Indiana.

Seven years after his death, Thomas' wife, Sarah Sibley Dowling, married William Riley McKeen (1829-1913) in Vigo County, Indiana on September 27, 1883. She died in December 19, 1904.

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THOMAS DOWLING
Woodlawn Cemetery
Terre Haute, IN
Photo by Mark W. Neice

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Thomas Dowling's Legacy

After writing the article about Thomas Dowling, I (Carolyn Schmidt) received an article from Sam and Jo Ligget, CSI director and wife from Terre Haute, Indiana, entitled "The Legacy of Thomas Dowling" by Mike McCormick that appeared in the Terre Haute *Tribune Star* on Sunday October 14, 2018. Further information about Dowling is quoted from the article:

"The city council was scheduled to meet on the night of his [Dowlings'] death, but all regular business was postponed until the next meeting. Dowling was a member of the council representing the Fourth Ward at the time of his death. He served as a Vigo County Commissioner in 1873.

"Major James Edmunds, who worked for Dowling at the Courier in his youth, spoke of Dowling's 'unstained character'. The mayor pointed out that several men occupying high positions in public life and as newspaper editors worked under Dowling.

"Resolutions were passed regarding attendance of the funeral at 2 p.m. on Friday Dec. 8, [1876] directing the police force and fire department to attend as a body. Council chambers and all city offices were to be draped in mourning for 30 days.

"Col. Robert N. Hudson, a member of the Savings Bank board, said succinctly: 'Large in experience, clear in judgment and careful in his acts, it seems that we have lost the one whose absence will be more seriously felt and whose place will be the most difficult to fill.'"

Funeral services were held in Dowling's home, which later became the Chancey Rose Home for Aged Women. Officiating at his funeral was the Reverend Allen A. Gee of Lafayette, Dowling's long time friend.