



Samuel Wilson Parker

Sept. 9, 1805—Feb. 1, 1859

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## SAMUEL WILSON “JUDGE” PARKER:

### His Life And Whitewater Canal Years

By Carolyn Schmidt

Elizabeth Miller Parker gave birth to her first child, Samuel Wilson Parker, on September 9, 1805 near Watertown, Jefferson county, New York and named him for his father, Samuel Parker, who had passed away on August 2, 1805, a month before her baby’s birth. About March 1806 she married Joseph Wadley and had six more children, Sylvander, Charles, Maria, Caroline, Catherine and James Wadley, who were half brothers and sisters of Samuel W. Parker.

Around 1815 when Samuel was ten years old, he and the Wadley family moved to Cincinnati, Ohio. Three years later they moved to Oxford, Ohio. There Samuel attended school and finished his education at Miami University graduating at the head of his class in 1828. While at the university he was a member of the Miami chapter of Alpha Delta Phi Fraternity.

Shortly after his graduation, Samuel moved to Connersville, Indiana where in November 1828 he opened a private school and taught there for several terms. When the Connersville Seminary opened in 1829 Samuel was its president. He resigned from this position in April 1830 to work for the Connersville newspaper. During his teaching and newspaper years he spent his spare time studying law in the office of Oliver Hazard Smith. Samuel was admitted to the bar in August 1831 and practiced law in Connersville.

1834 was a busy year for Samuel. On July 16, 1834 he was married to Susannah B. Watton of Connersville. Samuel was 28 years of age and Susannah was 18. He also founded The Watchman, a Connersville newspaper that year and edited it until 1836.

In 1836-38 Samuel was appointed Prosecuting Attorney for the sixth Circuit Court of Indiana and in 1839 he was elected for another seven years. His salary was \$150 and perquisites (something additional to regular profit or pay resulting from one’s position or employment).

After the passage of the Internal Improvements Bill in 1836, which provided for the White Water Valley Canal to extend from Hagerstown to Lawrenceburg with the sum of \$1,400,000 appropriated for its completion, a celebration was held on the evening of January 18, 1836 in Connersville, Indiana. The Connersville courthouse was lighted from its basement to its steeple by lanterns. Samuel W. Parker and Oliver H. Smith addressed those gathered there and many toasts were drunk. The group then went to the river bank where bonfires blazed. At dusk the town’s cannon was hauled out to the canal line. Six shots were fired to honor the governor, the senator, one for each county representative at the General Assembly, and one to the Whitewater Valley Canal. Unfortunately a piece of artillery exploded prematurely leading to the death of Alexander Saxon and badly injuring Joseph Clark, Abiather Williams and Willian Worster.

On September 13, 1836 canal contracts were let at Brookville. Participating in the “ground breaking” ceremony were Gov. Noah Noble, ex-Gov. James B. Ray, Dr. Drake of Cincinnati and George H. Dunn, Esq. of Lawrenceburg. One of them loosened the dirt with a pick for a few feet, another trundled the wheelbarrow along the future canal path, the third filled the wheelbarrow, and the Hon. David Wallace, the orator of the day, wheeled it off.

On December 15, 1837, the superintendent of canal construction reported that the Lawrenceburg-Brookville section was half completed by 975 men at the cost of \$18 per month per man. December 20, 1838 this section was completed, but it was not until June 8, 1839 that the “Ben Franklin,” an old canal boat from Ohio’s Miami and Erie Canal, reached Brookville from Lawrenceburg.

In 1839 Samuel began his service in both branches of Indiana’s General Assembly. He was a member of the Indiana House of Representatives from 1839-40, the Indiana Senate from 1840-43, and in the 28th session of the Indiana House of Representatives in 1843.

Indiana completed the canal from the Ohio River to Brookville (\$664,665) and about one half of the work between Brookville to Cambridge City by 1839. Unfortunately the state had to abandon all public works when its debts rose to \$14,000,000. On August 19, 1839, the canal commissioners reported that the state was unable to spend another cent on its canals. The citizens found this financial collapse hard to believe. No work was done on the White Water Canal from the fall of 1839 until the summer of 1842.

The Indiana Legislature in its 1841-42 session sold the canal to Henry S. Valette, a wealthy man from Cincinnati, Ohio, and chartered the Whitewater Valley Company with \$400,000. in capital stock. Samuel W. Parker and J. G. Marshall, then members of the Legislature, were active in securing the charter.

On July 28, 1842, over 10,000 persons attended a barbecue in Cambridge City to celebrate the commencement of operations by the canal company. Samuel W. Parker dug the first wheelbarrow of soil and gave a witty speech (his more formal address was never completed due to a huge thunderstorm) and the Hon. John T. Elliott of Newcastle dug the second.

The White Water Canal Company that was headquartered in Connersville acted under state charter from January 20, 1842 and had James Conwell as its first president. In 1843 the company purchased a building built in 1842 and began using it as its headquarters. It became known as the “Canal House.” Samuel Parker was elected its second president in 1843 but resigned in 1847 due to the contested election for the board of directors in 1848. (Two ticket factions arose at that time – the John Newman ticket and the Samuel Parker ticket. Newman prevailed and he was the third president for five years. His salary was set at \$1,000.) In 1848 the ownership of the “Canal House” passed to Samuel W. Parker, president of the company, when the company had financial difficulties.



White Water Canal Company Headquarters

Photo by Bob Schmidt

The White Water Canal was completed from Brookville to Laurel by October 1843. Another celebration took place with one hundred persons boarding “The Native” in Brookville at twelve noon with cannons booming, bands blaring and crowds shouting huzzas as the boat headed up the canal. It was delayed at Yellow Banks by a log raft that was jammed in the lock and arrived in Metamora two hours later. There the team of mules was replaced. However, the team broke the tow line and bolted off into the darkness below Laurel and “gallant gentlemen” had to tow the “Native” upstream into Laurel.

The following morning the tired party boarded the boat at ten o’clock and arrived at Metamora by one o’clock. But eight miles later they discovered the canal banks had slipped during the night and the canal was closed for repairs. They had to either walk or be transported by carriage to Brookville.

The canal was completed to Connersville by June 1845 and to Cambridge City by October 1845 at a cost of \$473,000 to the company. The distance from Lawrenceburg to Cambridge City was sixty-eight miles.

Although Samuel W. Parker was often mentioned in Brookville’s newspaper, little was found of anything he wrote to the paper. In 1845, after citizens began questioning canal matters, Samuel wrote the following letter to the editor and in turn the editor wrote a column about the concerns. These articles addressed who was responsible for maintaining the bridges over the canal and why the canal company wasn’t receiving its own paper for tolls and water rents. The canal company had issued promissory notes to pay contractors and workers that circulated as cash since there was a lack of hard gold and silver currency. These notes had become so devalued that one dollar was only worth about 20 cents in merchandise. The company would no longer take the notes in payment and demanded real money. These show just a few of the many problems Parker faced as President of the canal company.

9-19-1845 Brookville American

**“The Canal Co., &c.**

“CONNERSVILLE, In., Sept. 19, 1845

“MR. CLARKSON—*Dear Sir:* In the two last numbers of the “American” I find enquiries for information concerning matters interesting to your readers and involving the section of the *White Water Valley Canal Company*. Being called upon by name in one of the articles referred to, I address you this note.

“I have no authority from the Company to speak as to these matters, in their name —and must not be considered as so presuming to speak. But I have been with the Company, from first to last, in all things—think I understand their positions and views—and, anxious as I have always been, for the success of the great enterprise that brought the Company into existence—I am no less anxious that they have the good will of the public, and especially of the citizens of this valley. And I have the most abiding confidence, that all, who fully understand the attitude of the Company, will cordially yield them this good will. Those who do not understand, if they are honest, will wait, as you have, until they do before they condemn.

“The first enquiry is, whether the Company will repair and reconstruct the dilapidating “Canal Bridges” of Franklin county? If they do so in Franklin, they must in Dearborn, Fayette and Wayne, as a matter of course. Had the State retained the Canal, she would not have kept up the canal bridges—nor will she keep

them up when she resumes the Canal—an event which I do not believe to be many years in the future—excepting those bridges on that part of the line within the limits of Ohio—these are to be kept up by special compact, as a part of the consideration for the right of way granted by Ohio to Indiana.

“It has not been, nor is it now, the policy or practice of the State to keep up the *Road Bridges*, any more than the *Farm* bridges, across her canals. And it is not understood that such is the policy or practice of any State in the Union, having Canals. In this behalf, I understand the charter of the Company, to place them, whilst they may retain the canal, where the State was, and will be—and that they cannot legitimately assume any other position.

“If the Company continue in use for “Change Bridges” such as are also designed for public travel—they ought to do a fair part in keeping them up—and I have no doubt they will.

“Should the proper authorities of Franklin or any other county, desire to test this question before the Courts—as now constituted, I am satisfied the Company will at any time promptly and fairly make an amicable case, that will determine the matter to the satisfaction of all who still feel that they owe allegiance to the laws of their country. And it cannot be doubted that such is the feeling of all the citizens of all the counties in this valley.

“The other enquiry is as to a rumor that the Company have determined to refuse their own circulation for *Tolls* and *Water Rents* after the 1st of Oct. next. I do not know the Rumor ever told the truth—certainly her mendacious reputation is retained in this instance.

“At the last session of the Board, after much , and anxious consideration, it was ordered that from and after the date aforesaid, all Toll Collectors be required to discount 30 per cent from the existing tariff of tolls, and require them to be paid in Bankable funds. *Water Rents* are unmolested, and I presume will be, from the fixed nature of the contracts. And let me suggest in those having such rents to pay, and desiring to pay the same in the circulation of the Company—they had better get those funds now, if they can—for they will find them scarcer than gold and costing as much within six months from this date. Very little more will be issued by the Company; and of the forty odd thousand dollars now out, full one half is already taken up by three men who will hold it up, and get as much more as they can until the Company is prepared to redeem the whole. And my opinion is, that the whole will be retired by the 1st of March next.”

“S.W. PARKER”

The editor of the Brookville American responded to Parker’s letter as follows:

9-19-1845 Brookville American

**The Canal Company.** —In another column will be found a clear and lucid exposition of the doings, intentions and position of the White Water Canal Company, by S. W. Parker, Esq. It will be read with profit by our readers.

“When we first received the news of the offer, refusing to take their own circulation for tolls, our feelings partook somewhat of that of the people generally. And had we at the time indulged in remarks in accordance with our feelings, we should have said some hard things. But in view of the great and lasting blessings this company had conferred upon the people of this valley —began and carried on amid pecuniary gloom and despondence, it is well to be slow in our reprehension. And notwithstanding we doubt the propriety, or even the honesty of the “order,” yet we are willing to let the matter go to the people without comment. There are strong and abiding prejudices in the public mind against corporations and companies, and we have found ourselves sometimes indulging toward them uncharitable thoughts. We are old enough to know better, and do better, but there is so much of *human nature* about us, that we have to be watchful.

“The position, which Mr. Parker supposes the Company will take relative to the Canal Bridges, is reasonable. Let the question be fairly tested by the Courts of the country, and if against the citizens of the county, we shall use all our influence to have them abide the laws peaceable and quietly. It will be a grievous burden upon us, and many of the bridges will necessarily have to be abandoned, and the roads changed. But we hope ever to find the citizens of the county obedient to the law, of their country.

“The people generally, boatmen, and shippers of produce, have no right to complain of the “order.” It is only the holders of the money — those who have received it in good faith as contractors and laborers. Of the amount in their hands, Mr. Parker is better able to judge than ourselves.”

“5-8-1846 Brookville American

“CANAL DEBTORS. – All persons indebted to the White Water Valley Canal Company, on any account whatever, will be expected to pay by the 1<sup>st</sup> of June next. The Company have determined to close up all cases of the kind, as soon as possible. Further indulgence need not be expected. Delinquent Stock will be sold as provided by the Charter, to the highest bidder – and any deficit not supplied by such sale, will be collected from the subscriber, at once by due course of law.”

“S. W. PARKER, Attorney for the Co. April 13, 1846”

The Whitewater Canal was originally to go as far as Hagerstown. When the Hagerstown merchants learned the Whitewater Valley Company was not going to build to canal to their town, they banded together and formed the Hagerstown Canal Company about 1846. Through their initiative the canal was completed from Cambridge City to Hagerstown in 1847.

In January of 1847, the aqueducts across Symon’s Creek near Cambridge City and across the West Fork of the Whitewater River at Laurel were washed out by a freshet. Huge channels were cut by the fast flowing water around the feeder dams at Cambridge, Connersville, Laurel, Brookville, Cases, and that at Harrison. The repairs were estimated at \$90,000. Then once again in November 1848 a flood did another \$80,000 in damages. The canal was repaired and operated for several years. Its total cost was reported in 1848 as \$1,920,175.13, much more that the canal ever received in tolls during its years of operation. The last boat to pass through the entire canal (1849) was the “Union” owned by David McCarty.

Samuel W. Parker was not reelected President of the White Water Canal Company in 1847 according to the following article:

“1-8-1847 Brookville American

“Canal Election. – The annual election of Directors of the White Water Canal took place on Monday last. The old board was re-elected. We regret to learn that Samuel W. Parker’s place in the company has been given to Miles Murphy of Henry Co. . Mr. Parker has given life, energy, and credit to the company, and has made an efficient and popular President, and however active Mr., Murphy may be, he cannot expect to be as beneficial to the company. But Parker has a noble soul, and every good work will have his aid, counsel, and supports, no matter what station he may hold.

“We believe Mr. Parker would not consent to serve the company as President and attorney for the

salary he received the past.”

In 1850 Samuel purchased Elmhurst, sometimes called “Indiana’s Little Whitehouse,” for his residence. It was built in 1831 by Oliver H. Smith, then Caleb B. Smith, Samuel’s brother-in law, took up ownership, followed by James Shaw in 1838, and Nicholas Patterson in 1842. Samuel was the first to remodel Elmhurst. He paneled the lower front rooms with solid cherry. He landscaped the grounds planting dwarf Catalpas and other trees. He hung a bell by his front porch from which he could see canal boats passing over the Whitewater Canal that ran in front of his home. As canal boats passed by his residence on their way between Cambridge City and the Ohio River, their captains would toll their bells to salute “the boss,” Samuel Parker, and often he would ring his in return. To the rear of the house he dedicated the Parker cemetery where he built his family tombs of solid flagstones with brick lining the bottoms and gravel for drainage. He wished that his remains never be disturbed. In 1881 Elmhurst was sold to James H. Huston by Mrs. Susannah Parker.



Elmhurst - Home of Samuel W. & Susannah Parker 1850-1881

The Whitewater Canal was located in front of the fence.

Photo by Bob Schmidt

Samuel’s first election to the House of Representatives of the 32nd United States Congress was in 1850. He represented the 4th district, which included Fayette, Union, Wayne and Henry counties in Indiana. Due to the 1850 Census there were 10 districts at the time of his first election and 11 at his second selection. By re-election he served from March 4, 1851-March 4, 1855. He declined to accept the renomination for a third term. He was the leader of the Whig party in Indiana for twenty years. He was constantly in demand as a campaign speaker throughout the country.

Returning to his Connersville practice of law, he also became one of seven directors for the Junction (Ohio and Indiana) Railroad in 1856. He became the president of that railroad. From then on until his death he divided his attention between the practice of law and his various railroad interests.

Samuel W. Parker died at his residence in Connersville, Indiana on February 1, 1859 of pneumonia after a short illness. He was only 53 years old. He was laid to rest in the Parker Cemetery in Connersville. The Fort Wayne Weekly Republican of February 9, 1859 carried a short obituary saying that he was a long distinguished citizen of Indiana. He was a “gentleman of fine talents; as a lawyer he stood high—as an orator he had but few superiors. His loss will be keenly felt all over the West.”

### **Samuel W. and Susannah B. (Watton) Parker’s Family**

Samuel married Susannah Watton who had moved with her family of six sisters and two brothers from Dayton, Ohio to Connersville about 1821. Five children were born of this union: John Marshall Parker (1836-1854), Walter Scott Parker (1840-1862), Samuel B. Parker (1842-1863), Quincy A. Parker (1845-1901), and



Preston W. Parker (1849-1850). Three of the children died between ages of 18-22, one died at about 1 year old, and only Quincy lived a full life for that time.

Susannah's sister Elizabeth married Caleb B. Smith, a member of Congress for three terms and Secretary of the Interior under Abraham Lincoln. Smith served in the Legislature from 1833-40 and was Speaker of the House In 1835-36. Her sister Mary married Joseph Justice a druggist in Connersville. Her sister Letitia married Robert G. Hedrick and was his first wife. The fifth and sixth sisters were twins: Melissa married James A. Wadley, a dry goods merchant, and Eliza, after Letitia had died, became the second wife of R.G. Hedrick. Susannah's two brothers were William and George Watton.

Susannah passed away at age 87 at approximately 2 a.m. on April 2, 1903 in Indianapolis, Indiana surviving Samuel by 44 years. She was laid to rest in Parker Cemetery in Connersville, Indiana.

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