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Ever True: 150 Years of Giant Leaps at Purdue University

John Norberg

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“Ever True . . . the compelling story about the first 150 years of Purdue University. Written with concise historical perspective, and mixed with humor and wit, this quick read tells the stories of the people who have made Purdue into the outstanding University it is today. This book is laced with appreciation and respect, as only this accomplished ‘Hall of Fame’ author could do. Thank you, John Norberg!”

—Vanessa J. Castagna, Board of Trustees, 2013–Present, Purdue University

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“Take a long, thrilling ride on the Boilermaker Special with chronicler John Norberg. With wit and humor, Norberg captures the spirit, the adventure, the stories, and the achievements of one of America’s oldest and most admired institutions of higher education. You will feel that you are living the legends that inspire Boilermakers everywhere. You will meet the people who have made a lasting impact on a university that is both respectful of tradition and welcoming of new ideas. The world’s oldest Big Bass Drum is summoning you to spend some time with this delightful history, which marches through 150 years of famous competitions on the gridiron to inspiration from Nobel Laureates.”

—France A. Córdova, President Emerita, Purdue University

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“Among its stories of alumni and faculty giants, Ever True illuminates the role students have played in shaping the University, and the book reads as a familiar and telling account of what students prize. It grounds the reader in what truly exemplifies being a Boilermaker—that the bold spirit present in many members of the Purdue community today is nothing new, but rather to be expected and cherished.”

—Samuel Eschker, Student Body President, 2017–2018, Purdue University

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“John Norberg’s Ever True: 150 Years of Giant Leaps at Purdue University is an engaging, inspiring, and beautifully written history of one of America’s most distinguished public universities. It tells the story of Purdue from its humble origins through to its emergence as a preeminent research university. Purdue’s relentless commitment to excellence is captured in the personalities and stories of its leaders, its faculty, its
students, and its remarkably devoted alumni. Norberg artfully captures the excitement and progress of the time period after 2000 that I have personally experienced at Purdue. This wonderful book is a must-read for all who love this great University.”

—Martin C. Jischke, President Emeritus, Purdue University

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“With captivating storytelling, drama, and wit, John Norberg has compiled the most comprehensive history of Purdue University to date. His account brings history to life by focusing on the people who shaped Purdue. Written as a series of vignettes, each chapter illuminates a major event or tradition, always with the human element at the forefront. Through diaries, interviews, and other rare sources, Norberg offers a variety of perspectives that define the identity and character of the institution via the personalities involved. Even the most die-hard Purdue fan will find something new to learn and savor in *Ever True*.”

—Sammie L. Morris, University Archivist, Purdue University

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“*Ever True* is a very good read! Anyone who approaches this book believing the old myth that history is dull and uninteresting will be pleasantly surprised. This book is a gift of great value to the Purdue community—now and as long as there is a Purdue University.”

—Betty M. Nelson, Dean of Students Emerita, Purdue University

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“Norberg skillfully walks readers through time in this fascinating, comprehensive history of Purdue. His relatable descriptions contain something for everyone to learn. We as students should be proud to be part of this rich history, and *Ever True* provides us with a sense of what it means to be a Boilermaker: a hardworking, humble individual who has the potential to make an enormous impact. I am ever grateful to the Boilermakers in this book who have made Purdue what it is today. As a trustee, I feel even more compelled after reading *Ever True* to ensure that Purdue’s future is as fruitful as its 150-year history. Hail Purdue.”

—Daniel Romary, Student Trustee, 2017–2019, Purdue University
The Founders Series
To all the voices singing “Hail Purdue”
who shaped its past and herald its future
ever grateful, ever true
Teaching Us How to Think

“I remember going to aerodynamics class taught by professor Merrill Shanks. In the first day of class he gave an assignment to read pages 62 to 69 which was Bernoulli’s Law and the assignment was to criticize it. It was right then that I realized they weren’t teaching us facts and information. They were teaching us how to think. And that turned out to be extremely important in many of the situations I encountered through my life.”

—Neil Armstrong, Aeronautical Engineering ’55, fall of 2004 interview with Raymond Cubberley, broadcast media senior producer, Purdue Marketing Photo and Video
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Those among us of a certain age will never forget the moment Neil Armstrong stepped onto the moon. July 20, 1969, is a day the world remembers and to which every Boilermaker feels a special connection.

The iconic footprints Neil left endure as symbols of human advancement, exploration, and scientific and technological progress. Images of his steps are recognizable across cultures and generations in a way unsurpassed in human history.

As we celebrate that history and the 50th anniversary of that day, we cannot forget that he was not unique in taking, as he described it, a “giant leap for mankind.” For the last 150 years, countless Boilermakers have made their own marks, often in the form of scientific discoveries, best-selling books, works of art, patents, new companies, World Food Prizes, Nobel Prizes, or other great achievements. There will only ever be one first lunar landing, but the impact other Boilermakers have made over the last century and a half is no less real.

As with Neil’s, these moments didn’t just happen. They came only after hours in the lab, office, or library, often after many setbacks and failures, and coaching by great mentors. More often than not, they started at Purdue.

The book you hold tells that story. It documents the history of a university that has shaped countless lives and prepared generations of Boilermakers to create their own success. It is a history of the place where giant leaps begin.

The first of so many such leaps began a century and a half ago, when John Purdue made a substantial gift to create a university in Tippecanoe County, Indiana. Few would have appreciated at the time what this small step would come to mean for our state and the advancement of knowledge across the globe.
As we commemorate this milestone and celebrate our past, we pause to consider the new leaps Boilermakers might achieve in the next 150 years.

Will a project, underway as this volume appears, lead to Purdue being known as the birthplace of the first scalable quantum computer? Who among us will cure diseases, develop lifesaving medicines, or find better ways to feed our growing population? How many future Nobel Prize winners or World Food Prize winners are presently young Boilermaker scholars?

In the next 150 years, will Purdue become known for institutional leaps as well? We have entered an era of great transition in higher education. Questions about the future of the sector abound: Which schools will survive the growing popularity of online education and employers advancing their own programs? What should a land-grant university, with a mission to serve all Americans, do about the disturbingly large portion of the country not currently reaping the benefits of a college degree? How can we reverse the recent spike in pessimism among the public about the value and relevance of a college education and earn back America’s trust? (And, of course, why does it cost so much?)

To prepare for an uncertain future, Purdue has taken several initial steps, which have generated their own questions.

Will we maintain our unequivocal commitment to true freedom of speech and inquiry in an era when a new authoritarianism is at least temporarily on the rise? Somehow, we must ensure that in the decades to come, Purdue will always be a place where independence of mind and critical thinking are cultivated rather than stifled.

Can we continue to disprove the common belief that a university like ours cannot both invest in excellence and hold the line on costs? We aim to offer higher education at the highest proven value, and this requires progress in both quality and affordability.

Can we take full advantage of the recent conversion of a leading online university into the Purdue system to equip our residential campuses with the skills and technology they may need to thrive in the digital era? Can we utilize this new addition to expand access to higher education for the millions who are unable to come to West Lafayette? Can we evolve to be not only a top-ranked residential university but a provider of learning throughout a Boilermaker’s lifetime? In the twenty-first century, any land-grant university that fails to address these needs is unworthy of its history.

Constantly looking to the future and asking such questions is part of what it means to be a Boilermaker. Our faculty and administrators had the future in mind when in 1962 they created the country’s first computer science department. When Purdue’s sixth president, Edward Elliott, hired Amelia Earhart to become one of the nation’s very first career counselors for women, he had the future in mind. And
Purdue’s many feats in aeronautics, engineering, agriculture, drug discovery, and so many other areas have been by definition driven by thoughts and dreams of the future. Among the dominant lessons of Purdue history is the principle that great histories begin with great aspirations. May this chronicle of a century and a half’s small steps and giant leaps provide inspiration to you and future generations. *Hail Purdue!*

Mitchell E. Daniels, Jr.
President of Purdue University
2018
A full-body portrait of John Purdue hangs on the back wall of the reading room at the University’s Virginia Kelly Karnes Archives and Special Collections Research Center. The painting stretches floor to ceiling and captures the nineteenth-century man in a black suit, white shirt, and black tie, his hand on the white knob of a black cane. The only color comes from the pink of his hands and face and his blue eyes that watch people sitting at desks in the Archives reading room.

Working on *Ever True: 150 Years of Giant Leaps at Purdue University*, I’ve spent many long hours in the Archives with John Purdue staring over my shoulders. Sometimes I even hear him speak to me: “No, no, you’ve misunderstood. You have it all wrong.” That’s when I think maybe it’s time to take a break. So I get up, walk back to the portrait, and look into those clear blue eyes, searching for answers, listening for voices that speak through the centuries to tell us their stories.

The Virginia Kelly Karnes Archives and Special Collections Research Center is a portal through which the past speaks to us, where people long gone reach out to tell us who they were, how they lived, what they thought, and what they did. Every box from the Archives is opened with anticipation of the wonderful things to be found inside.

The John Purdue death mask is in the Archives along with the china dishware he presented to celebrate a friend’s wedding. Some of his letters are there, showing his struggles with grammar and the brevity of a businessman who had no time or patience for small talk. He did math on the back of used envelopes rather than waste fresh paper.

Called the founder of the University, John Purdue didn’t create it. The U.S. Morrill Land-Grant Act of 1862, and a decision by the governor and the Indiana General Assembly to take part in it, created the University. Purdue was the founding
benefactor. What he did was provide the additional money needed to get the University started, and in return he stipulated he would serve on the board and that it would be named for him and located where he lived. Without his gift the state’s engineering and agricultural college would still exist today. But it would be part of Indiana University in Bloomington, or perhaps placed at the center of the state’s government and business in Indianapolis. Or maybe it would be in Battle Ground, about eight miles outside Lafayette, and that historic town would be a very different place.

John Purdue was not a complicated person. Born in poverty, he was a self-taught businessman who worked methodically and amassed a fortune. He lived simply, found fulfillment in making money, not possessing it, and gave it away prudently where he believed it would make a difference. He never married. He had no children. He wanted to be remembered. He fathered a university.

Personal recollections of John Purdue in the Archives provide a picture of a man who, while known in his later years for being difficult, was actually kind and generous. He wasn’t always “early to bed and early to rise”—although he mostly was. He was also described as a bon vivant who sometimes loved being with friends, eating large quantities of oysters, even sipping the occasional glass of aged brandy. John Purdue comes back to life in the Archives. And that’s as it should be. His spirit is alive on our campus today. “The past is never dead,” William Faulkner wrote in Requiem for a Nun. “It’s not even past.”

As Purdue University reached its 150th anniversary in 2019, this book was authorized to tell the stories of people and events that shaped it from nothing on flat, treeless farm fields into one of the greatest institutions of learning, discovery, and engagement in the world. In the twenty-first century Purdue faculty and alumni reach into every corner of the globe, impacting life, business, engineering, agriculture, health, science, art, theater, literature, education, government, and much, much more—building, developing, creating, leading the way into the future. It’s far different from the University at its meager beginning, when thirty-nine students showed up and only thirteen of them were qualified for college studies. The rest were placed in a preparatory program where the six members of the learned faculty, including the president, in addition to teaching the college curriculum did double duty conducting classes for students who were hardly even qualified for high school.

The history of Purdue University is the story of people. They aren’t flat and lifeless, one-dimensional figures staring at us from paintings and black-and-white photographs. They are people who lived and breathed, laughed and cried. They succeeded and they failed, and to understand what they did for Purdue and why requires knowing them as friends, not historical data. Ever True tells the stories of Purdue through its people—presidents, trustees, faculty, students, alumni, and more. It provides glimpses
of how the University looked and what students and faculty experienced through the decades. What was it like to be a student at Purdue in 1874, 1917, 1945, 1969?

- Who were the Dorm Devils?
- Why was Harvey Wiley, one of the original and best members of the Purdue faculty, publicly reprimanded by the board of trustees?
- Who was Amos Heavilon?
- What university launched the state’s first medical school?
- Which president said he would never spend “one damn penny” on music at Purdue?
- Why did Purdue and Indiana Universities create regional campus systems?
- Was the Chocolate Shop a speakeasy during Prohibition?

This book describes the culture of Purdue at a time when nineteenth-century couples planned clandestine meetings at the Old Pump; when male students ambushed their friends on their way to those romantic encounters and cooled them off under the waterspout, once accidentally drenching a University president. *Ever True* tells stories of fraternities serenading sororities, soldiers home from war living in rows of bunk beds crowded into campus attics, student protesters holding a “live-in” at the Memorial Union, and lots more that happened in between.

The book notes the progress of African American and female students as well as Jewish people who were subjected to discrimination and anti-Semitism but persevered not only to achieve their own goals, but to open the doors of opportunity for those who followed. Among the heroes of Purdue are people who saw wrong and righted it. Their stories are an integral part of the University today.

*Ever True* was a challenging project. History has been made at Purdue every day for the past 150 years. Hundreds of thousands of people have passed through. They impacted Purdue and Purdue impacted them. Their stories are fascinating and insightful, and they all deserve to be part of this narrative. But if every person who played an important role in the story of Purdue were mentioned in this book, there would be space for nothing more than a list of names. Placing 150 years of Purdue into a single book is like trying to fill a thimble with water gushing from a fire hydrant.

There is a wealth of information about Purdue and its people in other books that tell its history, many with a more narrow and detailed focus. Robert Topping wrote the last comprehensive history of Purdue, published in 1988. He also wrote books on Purdue president Frederick L. Hovde, the Purdue trustees, and popcorn king and Purdue alumnus Orville Redenbacher. Robert Kriebel wrote many books and *Journal and Courier* newspaper columns on Purdue and Tippecanoe County people
and history, including the lives of John Purdue, David Ross and George Ade, John Stein, and many more. Angie Klink provides amazing insights into Purdue, and more than any other author and historian, she tells the story of women at Purdue through the changing times. Fred Whitford, Andrew G. Martin, and Phyllis Mattheis have written important books on people in Purdue agriculture. Irena McCammon Scott has written a fascinating book that focuses on her relative John Purdue, the family stories about him, and her search to learn more. University Relations Vice President Emeritus Joseph L. Bennett wrote a book about Purdue Musical Organizations. There is much more, all footnoted and included in the bibliography of *Ever True*. But with all of this, there are no books on the five most recent Purdue presidents, so chapters 29 through 44 in part 3 have a strong focus on them and their accomplishments.

On May 6, 2019, Purdue will be 150 years old. The University is celebrating its sesquicentennial from Homecoming 2018 to Homecoming 2019. Also in 2019 Purdue will celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of alumnus Neil Armstrong placing the first human footprint on the moon. Linking the two celebrations, the University’s sesquicentennial theme comprises two of Armstrong’s famous words as he first stepped on the moon: *Giant Leaps*. These words have been incorporated into the title of this book. Continuing the theme, *Ever True* includes more than forty profiles of Purdue people who have made giant leaps in research performed at Purdue and in life. The profiles appear between the chapters. This is not an exhaustive list. Thousands of people from today and from the past 150 years could have been profiled. The purpose is to give readers an inkling of the amazing accomplishments of this land-grant university and the impact its people have made on our nation and world.

Many people contributed to this work. Thank you to everyone in Purdue University Archives and Special Collections, with special mention of University Archivist Sammie Morris, Barron Hilton Archivist for Flight and Space Exploration Tracy Grimm, Archivist Stephanie Schmitz, Digital Archivist Neal Harmeyer, and Archivist for University History Adriana Harmeyer. Thanks also to Kelly Lippie and all the people in the Tippecanoe County Historical Association for their assistance, including bringing out a pair of John Purdue’s trousers to determine his height and weight. Purdue Black Cultural Center Director Renee Thomas also played an important role in this work, along with alumni James Bly, Leroy Keyes, and Eric McCaskill.

Thank you to Jeanne Norberg, my wife, for support, advice, suggestions, her historical knowledge of Purdue, and help with research including genealogy; David Hovde, whose knowledge of Purdue history is as rich as the history itself; Katherine Purple, Bryan Shaffer, Lindsey Organ, and Kelley Kimm, along with everyone at Purdue University Press who played an important role in this book.
Alumni Association Senior Advisor John Sautter, Dean of Students Emerita Betty M. Nelson, and Head of the Purdue Department of History Doug Hurt, along with David Hovde, Joseph L. Bennett, Fredrick Ford, and Angie Klink, provided wonderful suggestions for this book. Purdue Broadcast Media Senior Producer Raymond Cubberley made important contributions, including the quote from Neil Armstrong at the beginning of the book from one of his interviews. College of Agriculture photographer Tom Campbell and Mark Simons, senior photographer, Marketing and Media, along with several other photographers, provided assistance and great photos for the book.

Vice President for Public Affairs Julie Griffith, Executive Vice President for Communication Dan Hasler, Vice President for Development Amy Noah, Purdue Alumni Association President and CEO Ralph Amos, and Community Relations Director Mike Piggott supported this project, along with many others at Purdue, including Deputy Chief of Staff and Senior Communications Strategist Spencer Deery.

Tippecanoe County Recorder Shannon Withers and her staff went out of their way to assist me with research. My special thanks go to President Mitchell E. Daniels, Jr., for his support and participation in this project and his vision for the Giant Leaps profiles, along with his chief of staff, Gina DelSanto.

As a matter of transparency, I have personally known the last six presidents of Purdue and many other people at the University. As a reporter and columnist for the Lafayette Journal and Courier beginning in 1972, I enjoyed opportunities to talk with Hovde. I knew Art Hansen and I know Steve Beering very well. I was employed at Purdue in University Relations and Development from 2000 until retirement in 2013, and I worked closely with Martin Jischke and France Córdova, and briefly with Mitch Daniels. I have great respect for them all. Much of the history in part 3 of this book I witnessed firsthand.

A university is a very special place. It’s where we go when we leave home and venture into the world for the first time, pursuing our dreams. It’s a place where we mature, establish values and beliefs, make lifelong friendships, fail, succeed, fall in and out of love and back in love again. And most of all, it’s a place where we discover how to learn and to think.

The common thread that runs through 150 years of Purdue University is the love and loyalty of its people, who from the beginning through today have always been ever grateful for the incredible opportunities they received. As the words to “Hail Purdue” proclaim, they remain—and always will be—Ever True.

John Norberg
2019
Part One

1869 to 1900
It should have been the greatest day of his life.

It wasn’t.

There was no hint of happiness on the round, clean-shaven face of John Purdue as he rose from his chair and prepared to speak at the first commencement of the University that shared his name. He was a bachelor who had never married. The nine-month-old University and its students would be his only progeny. And he knew it.

It was June 17, 1875, and Purdue had not yet reached his seventy-third birthday. Standing about five feet, seven inches tall and weighing some 240 pounds, he was an imposing presence, not so much for his stature as for his prominence.

One of the wealthiest businessmen in Indiana, Purdue was dressed that day in his standard attire—a black bow tie and a white shirt. His vest, suit coat, and pants were black. Only in the warmth of midsummer did he occasionally switch to stylish white linen trousers purchased in New York City. He often carried a black cane with a white knob as a fashion statement, not as a necessity for walking. His graying hair was short for the time, parted on one side, combed back and across the other. His eyes
were clear blue. He often cocked his head to one side as he spoke and listened.

Everyone in Purdue’s hometown of Lafayette knew him, if not in fact, by reputation. They called him “Johnny,” but not to his face. He was sometimes referred to as “Judge Purdue,” or “Esquire,” although he was not an officer of the court. “He was clean [honest] after his time and kind,” Chase Osborn, a student from 1875, remembered. The University had “a worthy founder.”

There was a rainstorm the morning of commencement. Weather cut into the number of people attending the ceremony on the treeless campus located on a sparsely populated bluff across the Wabash River from Lafayette, where many of the county’s thirty-four thousand residents lived. But all the people who were required or expected to attend were there. The University’s president, Abraham Shortridge, who had just arrived on campus nine months earlier, was present, but not scheduled to speak beyond introductions. Also attending was Indiana governor Thomas Hendricks, a former U.S. congressman, a former U.S. senator, and a future vice president of the United States. Members of the Purdue University Board of Trustees attended, along with all five members of the faculty in addition to Shortridge, who taught moral science and psychology. A small group of students and a smattering of business and civic leaders from the community attended. In addition, “quite a number of our most prominent ladies braved the storm and graced the occasion,” the Lafayette Daily Courier reported in its evening edition.

Two wooden covered bridges that connected downtown Lafayette to the west bank of the Wabash momentarily spared people traveling to commencement from the downpour. When they reached the west bank, horse hooves and buggy wheels threw mud into the air as travelers proceeded away from the river that in those days was described as “clear and translucent.”

There was great local pride in the growing community. The Daily Courier described Lafayette as a “jewel” set in “a grand amphitheater,” its hills carved out by the Wabash, “a beautiful stream [that] for miles above and below Lafayette abounds in inexhaustible resources.” Eight railroad lines cut through Lafayette, north, south, east, and west, allowing boot and shoe manufacturers, woolen mills, and builders
of agricultural equipment to ship their goods around the state and nation. “In the manufacture of sash, blinds, doors and moldings we compete with Toledo and Chicago,” the Courier boasted. “In cooperage [barrel making] we have the largest establishments in the state. Large quantities of pork and beef are packed here. Three large flouring mills send their products to Baltimore and the seaboard. A single distillery is said to buy more corn than is raised in the whole state of New Jersey.”

There were grand homes such as the Gothic Revival mansion built by John Purdue’s former business partner, Moses Fowler. “Nothing seems to be wanting to make Lafayette a desirable place of residence and every element seems combined for her material prosperity,” the Courier said. “We have the best Opera House in the west. Our public schools are splendid specimens of architecture.”

In addition to church-affiliated schools, there were five public schools in Lafayette, along with a segregated “colored school” at 156 Ferry Street. Lafayette was home to twelve banks, twelve barbers, five bakers and confectioners, fifteen blacksmiths, forty retailers, twenty-one cigar and tobacco manufacturers and dealers, five dentists, twelve dressmakers, sixty-four retail grocers, eighteen meat markets, forty-four lawyers, fifteen hotels, ten restaurants, twenty-five churches, and sixty-three saloons. Among the churches was an African Methodist Episcopal congregation located on Ferry Street between Eighth and Ninth. It had been established in a wood frame building in 1849. Temple Israel, at 17 South Seventh Street, served the Jewish community. It had also been formed in 1849.

There were four much disparaged “music saloons” in Lafayette where women danced on four-by-eight-foot stages while customers sat and drank at tables. Adjacent to the dancing rooms were “wine rooms” where men could meet the dancers between acts. The women were paid according to how much the patrons drank.

A University rule required students to have permission before visiting Lafayette in the evening—a virtual prohibition. Saloons were off-limits, drinking alcohol forbidden.

As visitors on what later would be named State Street approached the University that first commencement day, they saw a white fence along the north side of the road running the length of the campus. The buildings were few.

A boarding house for faculty and their families faced south and was located just west of where Stone Hall would later be built. It had a 120-foot front and a depth of 68 feet. It was an Italianate structure with two beautiful cupola towers.

On November 11, 1874, the Lafayette Daily Journal said, “This building presents a very cheerful and home-like appearance. The hall and stairways are elegantly carpeted and all the appointments are exceedingly neat and tasteful.” It included a kitchen, a laundry, a dining room, and an icehouse.
Other campus buildings were rather plain in design. Directly north of the boarding house was a four-story dormitory built to accommodate 120 young men. The campus was all male in the spring of 1875. Plans called for two boys to share a suite of three rooms—a study about sixteen feet square and two bedrooms about eight by twelve feet. The building was divided in two by a firewall and included eight bathrooms with zinc-lined tubs and hot water. The rooms were steam heated and lighted by gas. The accommodations were better than some of the boys had at home.

Between and behind the dormitory and boarding house was a laboratory building for scientific research and teaching. Next to it the Power Plant provided steam heat, gas, and water for the campus. It also housed a tower with a bell that woke the students in the morning, signaled lamps off in the evening, and marked the start and end of classes and chapel. Military Hall, where commencement was taking place, was a one-story wooden building on the north edge of the University. A workshop that was also a horse barn and contained water closets was between the Power Plant and Military Hall. From the higher elevations of Lafayette, John Purdue could see his campus buildings.

There was only one graduate at that first commencement, John Bradford Harper, a chemistry student who had transferred from North Western Christian University in Indianapolis, soon to be renamed Butler University.

The formal program for the 1875 commencement listed only a narration by Harper, “The Search for Truth,” and several songs by an Indianapolis Glee Club.
Harper’s talk concluded that people had historically placed boundaries on human knowledge, only to see those boundaries surpassed. “Who dares to place a limit on human intellect?” he asked. “Who dares to say when the search for truth in this world shall end?”

Following those lines, Governor Hendricks came forward and presented Harper with his diploma. “This is just one step in your career,” Hendricks told him, unable to resist an opportunity to lecture a youth. “If you stop here and content yourself with this achievement, your life will be a failure. You must go on.”

Near the end of the commencement program, Shortridge introduced John Purdue, who rose stiffly and delivered what appeared to be unprepared remarks lasting about three minutes. As was his custom, he spoke what was on his mind:

I do not intend to make an address. . . . I merely desire to say a few words. This institution is still in its infancy. I hope that it will grow to become a man. Universities to educate the people, the youth of the people, are very necessary. It is necessary that the people be educated. I found, on looking back to the time of Moses, that education did not do much good because there was little of it. But when the printing press was established and schools, colleges, and universities sprang up, the scales fell from our eyes. And today man is clear of all those evils. Man is on a higher plane. To me the future looks cheerful.

This institution has had a small beginning. My purpose is to educate. I looked over the country in different places with a view to locating a university. I finally concluded that no place needed educational advantages worse than they do just here. The state has named this child after me and the state will take care of it and cherish it.

As the institution has grown, certain evils have had to be overcome. It has been organized in a hurry. The trustees and professors have been selected in a hurry and, of course, they have made some blunders. Those who have, I expect, will leave us. And even if there has been a bad set of men this year there can be good ones the next.

The laws governing the university are imperfect. In most institutions the duties of the officers and trustees are laid down. It ought to be so with this institution. Rules to protect the morals of the students should also be made. The Board of Trustees will perhaps do better next year and remove all the evils that exist.

We don’t get on very nicely.

With that, Purdue stopped speaking. Either overcome with emotion or intending to end on that sour note, he stopped talking and returned to his seat.
No one with knowledge of the inner workings of the University was surprised. It was well known that Shortridge and Purdue did not get along. Purdue did not get along with some of his fellow board members. The faculty had split into factions, and the president and the faculty had disagreements with one another and with the students, who felt some of their professors were not qualified.¹⁸ The faculty, their wives, and their children, all living in the single boarding house where they worked and ate together and even slept in close proximity, day in, day out, had taken to bickering.¹⁹ Things were not going well.

But much would change—and soon.
“Who dares to place a limit on human intellect,” John Bradford Harper said in his 1875 commencement address when he became the first graduate of Purdue University.

Thirty-three years later in his obituary, the Los Angeles Times noted Harper’s lifetime “monument” was a dam he had engineered and just completed in New Mexico after four years of work. A college chemistry major who made his career as an engineer, he placed no limits on his intellect and abilities.

Harper was born in 1856 in Fort Madison, Iowa. After the Civil War his family moved to Indianapolis, where he enrolled at North Western University (Butler) to study chemistry. The family rented a room to Professor Harvey Wiley, who taught chemistry at North Western.

In the fall of 1874, when Wiley was hired among the first faculty at Purdue, Harper followed him to the new campus, completed his senior year, and became the sole member of its first graduating class. He was a founding member of Sigma Chi, the first fraternity at Purdue, and played baseball on campus. According to one story, a baseball thrown by Wiley hit Harper in the face and drove a cigar down his throat. He survived, but mostly likely never again smoked while playing baseball.

After graduation Harper became an engineer for railroads. He worked in mining and hydraulic engineering, according to David M. Hovde, retired Purdue associate professor of library science. He served on the board of a Durango, Colorado, company that operated streetcars, became an engineer for the U.S. Department of the Interior, was named superintendent of irrigation general, and finally designed and oversaw construction of the hydraulic earth-fill Zuni Dam on a Native American reservation in New Mexico—at the time the biggest enterprise of its type in the nation.

Near the end of the project, Harper fell ill with pneumonia. He never fully recovered and refused to leave his work for recuperation until it was completed. “Few men have accomplished a task of such magnitude under conditions so unfavorable,” the Los Angeles Times said in his obituary. While praised for his work, the dam was not as beneficial as hoped.

With completion of the dam, Harper moved to be with family in Los Angeles and died there six weeks later, on March 25, 1908. He was fifty-two years old.

A plaque in his honor placed at the structure he built, now known as the Black Rock Dam, remains in the twenty-first century.