The Midas of the Wabash: A Biography of John Purdue

Robert C. Kriebel

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The Midas of the Wabash
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Preface

This will be brief and to the point.

A four-story, nineteenth-century brick building that is still standing in downtown Lafayette once housed the Lafayette Milling Company, millers of flour. More recent owners rehabbed it for offices. Every noon, for a couple of years, its basement filled with the chat and clatter of lunch-hour patrons of The Milling Company restaurant, later renamed Hunters Pub.

There, one noon in early 2000, a county judge, a writer, a retired Purdue University vice president, and an advertising executive munched on chips and sipped iced tea while waiting at their table for the sandwiches to arrive.

“What can you tell me about John Purdue?” the writer asked the vice president.

“Not much,” the vice president said, “except that he must have been an s.o.b. to work with!”

As it happens, that analysis was not completely wrong or right, as this volume will show.

The vice president didn’t need to know better; he only needed to know more.

-Robert C. Kriebel
Lafayette, Indiana
The author wishes to recognize and thank the following persons, listed alphabetically, for their assistance in providing and/or interpreting facts about John Purdue’s life story:

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In all their books, articles, and unpublished studies, historians packing assorted credentials have left a blurred and faulty account of all the good works and talent of the Indiana businessman John Purdue (1802–1876).

Sure, the stunning beneficence that led to the opening of Purdue University in 1874, the act of giving, which alone raised John Purdue to hall-of-fame status, has been rehashed again and again. But in truth Citizen Purdue, who was a merchant of wealth, also should be hailed for forty years of canny investing, fair play, and boundless generosity. He should be known as a plodding, self-made man who had acquired intelligence and taste. He also should be remembered as a visionary with diverse interests and admired as a chap for whom honesty became a passion. He should be exalted as a role model for any who master business and finance then give of their gains to help their fellow citizen.

In their odd track record of selective worship and broad neglect, past writers also have left a rocky trail of facts, even on such foundation stones as the date and place of John Purdue’s birth. For example:

- Ella Wallace, writing in a Lafayette newspaper eleven years after Purdue’s death, reported that his life began on “Oct. 3,
1801, near Shepardsburg, Pennsylvania.” Wrong date, wrong year, no Shepardsburg.
• Purdue University historians William Hepburn and Louis Martin Sears in a 1925 book opted for “Oct. 31, 1802, in Huntington County, Pennsylvania.” Right date, right year, but no Huntington County. (It’s spelled Huntingdon.)
• University staffers Thomas R. Johnston and Helen Hand in a book in 1940 chose “Oct. 31, 1802, at Germany near Shepardsburg, Huntington County, Pennsylvania.”

It remained for Robert W. Topping, in his 1988 university history A Century and Beyond, to hit the bull’s eyes. John Purdue had been born October 31, 1802, the only son among the nine children of Charles and Mary Short Purdue. Their eighteen-by-twenty-four foot log cabin home stood on the eastern lower slope of Blacklog Mountain, in the Alleghenies, in Germany valley, near Shirleysburg, in Shirley Township of Huntingdon County, Pennsylvania.¹

Charles Purdue could have reached the valley from Maryland, Virginia, England, or even Scotland. The name Purdue, of vague and arguable origin, could be deciphered in any of a dozen ways in handwritten public ledgers that predate the typewriter. A grandnephew of John Purdue, C. P. Thompson, in a monograph sent to Purdue University probably in the late 1920s, wrote with misleading certainty that:

John Purdue’s father . . . came from Scotland to Pennsylvania. It is said there were quite a colony of the Purdue family in Scotland, and that they originally were from France but had intermarried with the Scotch.

But that’s only Thompson’s story. Researcher Robert Hartley Perdue found in 1934 that the 1790 census of Pennsylvania listed Peter Perdow and John Purdon in Philadelphia; William and John

¹Robert Hartley Perdue, curious about possible blood relationship to John Purdue, further described Germany in 1934 as a “village located between two low mountain ranges.”
Purdy in Montgomery County; Silas Purdy in Northampton County; Leonard Purdy in Chester County; Robert Purdy in Lancaster County; James Purday, Patt Purday, and Archibald Purday in York County; and William Purday and John Purday in Mifflin County.

Ten years later the Pennsylvania census registered a certain Charles Purdin in Shirley Township, Huntingdon County, as head of a family of one adult male, one adult female, and three females under age ten. The next census, that of 1810, listed a C. Purdoo in Shirley Township, head of a family of two females between sixteen and twenty-six; one male under ten; four females under ten. “Charles Purdin and C. Purdoo were apparently the same person and undoubtedly the father of John Purdue,” Robert Hartley Perdue concluded. He further searched Pennsylvania probate court, as well as tax and deed books, but found no mention of Charles Purdue with that spelling; unless, of course, Charles Purdue was camouflaged in other bewildering public records scribbled in handwriting as Perdue, Perdew, Pardew, Perdiu, Purdue, Pedeu, Peden, Pedan, Padian, Pedan, and Podau.

“The family is known to have had migratory tendencies as far back as the bellfounders in England in the early 1600s,” Robert Hartley Perdue wrote, stating no source.2

Hepburn, in 1962 when he was Purdue University’s librarian emeritus, compiled a twelve-page essay on “The Name of Purdue.” In it he reported that Purdue is considered to be English, traceable in England to the late 1500s. But inconclusive theories about its origin also hold that the name derives from the Latin per deum or from the French par Dieu or perdu. “The only safe conclusion one may draw about the ancestry,” Topping wrote with admirable frankness, “is that it seems rife with confusion.”

Other details about the Charles Purdue family of Shirley Township, Huntingdon County, Pennsylvania, are only slightly more

2Admitting that his data “leads nowhere,” Robert Hartley Perdue further opined that “it seems unfortunate that a university of such high standing . . . should not know the ancestors of its founder. That . . . is said in the hope that it may interest someone to make the effort.”
accessible and reliable, and they often are contradictory. By some accounts, the family seems to have had to struggle to stay well fed and comfortably housed, and the parents accumulated only meager savings. Charles Purdue is said to have worked at several jobs. These likely involved sharecropping or farming on rented land in a region that produced wheat, oats, corn, buckwheat, barley, and maple syrup. Some say Charles also fired charcoal furnaces at an iron smelter. The latter is especially intriguing if, in fact, he descended from English bellfounders.

Elmer E. Anderson, a distant relative in a short John Purdue biography compiled in about 1929, described Charles Purdue as a “poor, hard-working, honest pioneer” who “lived in a log cabin . . . with a family of eight [sic] children.” Robert Hartley Perdue pictured Charles Purdue as a “poor, hard-working, honest pioneer. Times were hard and [the young son] John was early on the list of ‘hired help.’ At age eight he was first sent to a country school where he at once evinced his natural taste for intellectual culture.”

But in 1953 George Wesley Munro, a retired Purdue University electrical engineering professor who compiled John Purdue lore as a retirement hobby, sketched a far different picture: “The family lived [near rivers] which furnished power to make iron, a chore not yet taken over by the steam engine. [Charles Purdue] was gainfully engaged in the iron-making process . . . The old tradition that people living in log houses in small clearings were so poor that starvation continually stared them in the face followed [John Purdue] for a hundred years. It can be tossed out the window and forgotten. Charles and Mary Purdue were well fed, comfortably housed, and had a savings.”

Munro referred to the Blacklog and Juniata Rivers. The Blacklog empties into the Juniata northwest of Blacklog Mountain near the spot where the Purdue cabin stood. Within the cabin’s log walls between about 1793 and 1815 Mary Short Purdue gave birth to the one son, John, amid a parade of eight daughters. Here is a scorecard:

- **Catherine**, born January 14, 1793.
- **Nancy**, believed born in 1795.
Sarah, in 1798.
Eliza, in 1800.
These were the older sisters of John Purdue, who arrived in 1802. Then came:
Margaret, December 15, 1803.
Susan, November 30, 1806.
Mary, called Polly, July 5, 1810.
Hannah, 1815.

Hepburn and Sears supposed, in their book published to mark Purdue University’s first fifty years, that: “The circumstances of [John Purdue’s] early life developed the steadiness, persistence and independence so marked in later years.”

Well, maybe; maybe not. Clearly some influences or other, sometime, somewhere, did instill in the boy those very traits. But Topping admitted that “most of the details of Purdue’s early life were either not recorded or lost.”

Purdue as a boy began absorbing whatever one-room schooling was available there in Germany valley. But his formal education scarcely extended beyond that school’s chinked and drafty walls and oil-papered windows. Practical education coupled with formal schooling became a far stronger factor in his life. In the classroom, the boy is said to have excelled in “the English branches of study,” to quote Robert Hartley Perdue. Outside of school, the lad was educated by observing, as well as in hands-on daily practice—farming, business matters, and perhaps also iron smelting.

Another detail of John Purdue’s life that was not recorded or was lost has to do with the family’s move more than three hundred miles west into south-central Ohio. The destination was Adelphi, which is found today on few road maps, barely inside the north-east corner of Ross County.³

Topping fixed the year of this family move as the summer of 1823, before John Purdue turned twenty-one. But Munro, working

³Adelphi is northeast of the county seat, Chillicothe, which is about sixty miles south of Columbus.
with the same skimpy source material, although he ventured to
specify no year, guessed the move to have taken place in about
1813, when John was but a boy of ten.

Munro, alone among John Purdue monographers, advanced
the supposition that Germany valley had offered nothing in the
way of schools where “a boy needed to learn to read, write and
cipher.” Munro further reckoned that “with eight daughters up to
age eighteen, there needed to be eligible men around.”

Another Purdue family descendant at work on genealogy, Jane
Murrow Atherstone, of Hemet, California, compiled a report in
December 1981, to the effect that the 1820 census of Pennsylvania
still listed Charles Perdew [sic] living in Shirley Township, Hunt-
ingdon County. This lends credence to reports that the family did
not leave for Ohio until 1823. And so does her conclusion that
“Charles is believed to have died in about 1823 at the age of 58.”

Still, as Munro insisted on the basis of the 1813 move: “The tide
of passing young men was already being diverted to Pittsburgh
where opportunities were better. Clearly getting that group of girls
out on the main highway was a must. Already two were of mating
age. Why Adelphi, on Salt Creek, was chosen has never been men-
tioned. Probably relatives of neighbors had gone before and sent
back the usual glowing accounts.”

One is left to suppose that Charles Purdue planned to resume
some aspect of farming in Ross County, Ohio. Many farmers were
moving their families west in those days, after all. The immigrants
were renting or buying cheaper land in a somewhat milder climate
for producing what in south-central Ohio had become a tradition
of vegetables, wheat, barley, corn, hay, cattle, and hogs. But for the
Purdues, the venture west proved to be doubly tragic.

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4If Topping’s report is true that the move came in 1823, then there is something
glaringly wrong with Munro’s arithmetic, and therefore, wrong with his premise.
In 1823, John Purdue no longer would have been a “boy” who “needed to learn
to read, write and cipher.” As for the ages of his sisters—in 1823 they stretched
up to almost age twenty-eight instead of eighteen.
The daughter Nancy died, cause unknown, during that horse-and-wagon trek across Pennsylvania valleys, a strip of Virginia (later West Virginia) mountains, and southern Ohio hills. Charles Purdue is said to have died soon after settlement in Ross County. Dates, motives, and specifics are not to be found. But it’s been written that after Charles Purdue’s death the surviving family, or at least the youngest members of it, surely in some degree of an emergency mode, moved again. This time the widow Mary Short Purdue moved her youngest and unwed daughters to Worthington, Ohio, a northern suburb of modern-day Columbus, or possibly to Westerville, in Franklin just northeast of Columbus. The Franklin County, Ohio, census listed Mary Perdew in 1830 and Mary Purdue in 1840.

Munro theorized: “Mary Short Purdue was on her own with one son and seven daughters in her brood. . . . Worthington, fifteen miles north of Columbus, was where individuals took to the woods. Mary saw that pioneer boys would soon be pioneer farmers and in need of pioneer wives. Without hesitation she apprenticed John to an Adelphi merchant and with seven daughters went on to Worthington.”

Six of the seven living daughters married. To what degree it was necessary for the mother to support the youngest, for how long, and by what means is unknown.

- **Catherine** married John P. McCammon and then a man named Sinkey, and lived until July 23, 1882.
- **Sarah** first married John Prosser, then James Roff (or Rolfe or Raff), and lived until April 28, 1879.
- **Eliza** never married, gave birth in October 1829, to a daughter she named Eleanor, known as Ellen, and died September 21, 1878.
- **Margaret** married John H. Haymaker, then a man named Beever (or Beaver), and lived until July 17, 1892.
- **Susan** married John Thompson and died October 24, 1892.
- **Polly** married John Miller and died in 1893.
- **Hannah** married Joseph K. Clark and died in 1890.
John Purdue opted not to marry. It is probable and consistent with character traits revealed later that, perhaps as an apprentice merchant, John did in some ways help support his mother and the youngest and most needing of his sisters, however modestly. But at the age of twenty-one, which would be in late 1823 or early 1824, he left his mother’s house, his skill in “the English branches of study” in hand, and for about ten dollars a week took up teaching in a one-room school. He did so because, at least in the combined visions of Hepburn and Sears, it had become “necessary for the only boy to earn his own living and to assist the other members of the family.” It became clear later that John showed no interest in dirt farming beyond ownership and bossing hired hands, but had somewhere, somehow learned the ways of making an easier living by buying and selling.

As a teacher, Purdue at first ventured from Adelphi across the Ross County line into Pickaway County, Ohio, and taught in a private school, probably in the county seat of Circleville, some twenty-five miles south of Columbus.5

Although most writers on the subject have recorded that Purdue’s earliest jobs involved teaching school, the maverick Munro’s study of the family story differs widely. It begins with his report, given without citing sources, that his mother apprenticed John to an Adelphi merchant. This mentor, to hear Munro tell it, provided work of the kind John “most needed to do, sent him to school . . . gave him a home . . . and released him as one of the best businessmen in the country.”

By that time, Munro said, road and canal construction created boom conditions in middle Ohio. The camps of laborers required a steady food supply. “Here John Purdue found his field,” according to Munro, “gathering surpluses from farmers. . . . For some fifteen years he rode from one small settlement to another, stopping at each to bargain for available supplies and encouraging more production for the next trip.” Munro reckoned that Purdue earned and saved a lot of money. During winters he taught school.

5Several writers have mistaken Pickaway County for Piqua, an Ohio town thirty-five miles north of Dayton, as a place of Purdue’s residence. Pickaway is correct.
An obscure, but perhaps apocryphal, 1936 newspaper story written by Esther O’Keefe and published in Decatur, Michigan, although highly interesting, is perhaps overly dramatic, and it collides head-on with mainstream accounts of John Purdue’s life in the 1820s. O’Keefe reported that in 1827 Purdue, carrying a bundle of belongings tied to a stick over one shoulder, approached LeGrand Anderson, a school official in Circleville, Ohio, about a teaching job. Anderson gave the twenty-four-year-old applicant the job. When Purdue claimed to have only twenty-five cents to his name, Anderson gave him room and board in the Anderson home. “Evidently,” the O’Keefe article concluded, “it suited young Purdue very well, for he remained a member of the Anderson household” until 1832.

This article reported that later, when the Anderson family opted to move from Circleville to the Decatur area in southwest Michigan, Purdue resisted the temptation to join them. O’Keefe’s article also contains the only known report of Purdue having attended “Athens college.”

Most but not all biographies agree that in the Circleville school, one of John Purdue’s brighter pupils, fourteen years old when Purdue was teaching at age twenty-seven, was a Pickaway County farmer’s boy, Moses Fowler. By most accounts, Purdue taught in one or more schools in that area for four to six years. Another single source does say that Purdue was recommended—perhaps by the aforementioned LeGrand Anderson—for a teaching job in 1831 at Little Prairie, south of Decatur, Michigan, and that Purdue taught there for a part of that year.

Wherever in Ohio or Michigan his jobs may have taken him, Purdue is reported to have labeled his teaching years as “the happiest of my life.” Whether he really said that; whether he really meant that; whether he taught for four, or six, or seven threadbare years; and whether it was in Ohio or Michigan defies proof. It also is

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6Evidently a reference to Ohio University, founded in Athens, Ohio, thirty-five miles southeast of Adelphi, in 1804. Current Ohio University records, admittedly incomplete for the 1820s, do not confirm John Purdue’s enrollment.
immaterial. That is because in about 1831 Purdue seems certainly to have abandoned teaching for his far more lucrative and productive life in business. The author of an undated, two-page, typewritten outline of Purdue’s life reported that “after several years as a most successful teacher, his health having failed, he decided to exchange his profession for outdoor exercise . . . he saved a little money and went out into the world to try his luck at speculation.”

The phrase “his health having failed” is intriguing, but cannot be explained. From time to time through the years, Purdue did refer to his health in letters, but only superficially (i.e., “have been indisposed for several days but am feeling better now”). In later life, a condition obscurely described as “nervous chills” kept him from daily duties. A stroke caused his eventual death.

Again we encounter the absence of a precise date, motive, or means. However, by about 1831–1832 John Purdue had saved (or had become able and willing to borrow) enough money to buy a 160-acre farm. This land lay in Marion County, Ohio, some fifty miles northwest of Columbus and was convenient to Purdue’s mother’s abode in Worthington.

As Hepburn and Sears reconstructed it, without elaboration: “[Purdue] already had obtained an introduction to the commission business out of which his fortune grew. His first adventure in this business bore testimony to his ability and character. For on very short acquaintance his farmer neighbors entrusted four hundred hogs for him to market. He took them to New York, sold them profitably, satisfied the owners, and cleared a margin for himself. The transaction was a revelation of the possibilities in a commission business.”

A Sunday newspaper article in the Columbus (Ohio) Dispatch in 1960 concurred with the New York destination and agreed that “hog-driving” gave Purdue insight into the commission business. Topping, however, pieced together a different scenario. In his version, Purdue bought the land for $900, paid $450 down, farmed the land for one year and sold it in 1832 for $1,200. “During that year,” according to Topping, “his reputation for shrewd but honest dealing brought neighbors to him with a request that he market their
hogs. He took four hundred animals to market, probably at Cincinnati, collecting a three-hundred-dollar commission.”

Whether this hog-drive took Purdue 600 miles to New York or 100 to Cincinnati, the episode earned for him in a few weeks $300 that would have required thirty weeks of schoolteaching. “From that adventure,” Topping wrote, “Purdue developed a farm-products brokerage that covered the area [encompassing] Adelphi, Worthington and Columbus.”

Hepburn and Sears did not—probably could not—explain the basis for their supposition that Purdue had gained an “introduction to the commission business.” One must only speculate about when, where, or how Purdue ever apprenticed to be a merchant in the period that ended in 1831. Maybe he did work summers in a store and winters in a schoolroom. Maybe he did roam central Ohio as an itinerant merchant as Munro described. Maybe, maybe, maybe. But there can be no maybes about what he learned.

Simply put, wholesale or retail merchants buy things and then sell them at a profit. But commission merchants do not buy—sellers bring their products, the merchant finds buyers and, per previous agreement, peels off a percentage of the transaction for the marketing fee.

Moreover, being any type of merchant involves more than buying and selling. The successful merchant must master assorted people skills in hiring, educating, training, directing, and compensating the labors of employees—at the same time dealing with suppliers and customers and conducting these affairs in a way that builds a good reputation against ever-present competition. To make a business grow, a merchant needs certain intangible street smarts; a mastery of arithmetic and bookkeeping; and a familiarity with invoices, receipts, and all manner of related paperwork. Additionally, a merchant must have a knack for judging how, where, and when to advertise; how to find a good location for a store; and how best to stock and arrange wares in a building. There must also be a sense of what the public is buying, an awareness of new products; and a comprehension of how competitors are operating. Further, a competitive merchant needs to have a thorough
knowledge of packing, shipping, and choosing the most dependable freight carriers and the best rates.

Purdue, it appears, aspired at first to make big money to provide security for himself, his needing mother, and his sisters. Years later, those goals having been reached and his own comfortable lifestyle secured, he seemed to delight in helping individuals and his home community by being a genuine civic leader, hackneyed as the term may be.

To his credit, John Purdue’s reputation for honesty and fair dealing spread by word of mouth, but apparently swiftly, across central Ohio and then by mail to other states. Purdue the commission merchant also became uniquely popular among his Ohio farm neighbors who knew no better place to take their pasture, field, and garden products. “His friendships were lifelong,” as Munro analyzed it, “[but] a young man riding a horse over half a state leaves no tracks that can be followed after a dozen decades, especially if he refrains from real estate transactions.”

In 1833, as Purdue passed the age of thirty and his success snowballed, he invited eighteen-year-old Moses Fowler to join him in a venture. They opened a general merchandise store in Adelphi—at least that is the way most accounts have stated it. Whether Purdue stayed out on the road or returned to call Adelphi his home, he seems to have lived frugally. A handwritten receipt kept in Purdue University Special Collections shows that on November 26, 1834, Purdue paid the treasurer of Ross County, Ohio, twenty cents “for tax for 1834 due on one horse.”

Just two weeks later Purdue for the first time became acquainted and involved with Tippecanoe County, Indiana, more than 200 miles northwest of Adelphi. On December 9, 1834, a Purdue and Fowler customer named Jesse Spencer, who appears to have run businesses in Adelphi and Chillicothe, sold Purdue 240 acres in Indiana. In their handwritten contract, Purdue agreed to pay the $850 purchase price with $316 “in store goods and groceries such as Spencer may choose at cash price out of Purdue’s
Adelphi store,” then $267 in cash on July 1, 1835, and the balance on July 1, 1836. Purdue retired that debt six months early.

The level, tillable acreage that Purdue bought in Indiana lies northeast of the present-day intersection of Creasy Lane and McCarty Lane on the east side of the Tippecanoe County seat of Lafayette. Records show that Spencer and his wife Catherine had bought that tract at a federal land office in Crawfordsville, Indiana, for $850, the amount for which they sold it.

Another oft-quoted paragraph about John Purdue that was written in some Tippecanoe County histories appears to be in error. Although Purdue took possession of the Spencer land in 1836, there is no evidence that he yet resided outside Ohio. Still, writers of several volumes parroted the assertion that “the first regular banking house established in Lafayette was the branch of the State Bank of Indiana, given a twenty-year charter in 1834. The first board of directors, half appointed by the state, consisted of William F. Reynolds, John Purdue, Samuel Hoover, William K. Rochester, Israel Spencer, Joseph S. Hanna and Elizur Deming.”

Reynolds, Hoover, Rochester, Spencer, Hanna, and Deming, the latter a physician who later ran for governor, indeed stood tall as men of leading pedigree in Lafayette. But the accuracy of Purdue’s name on the list in 1834 is unlikely. It is believed that Purdue never even inspected his Tippecanoe County land until 1836, while he was on a business trip to Illinois.7

Earning $300 for driving hogs, selling his Marion County land to clear another $300 in a year, and enjoying as much as a twelvefold profit in twenty years on Tippecanoe County land are but a few

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7Purdue owned this land for twenty years during which time he added to it contiguous acres and farm buildings. He rented it for farming to Flavius McCarty. In November 1857, he sold the much-improved property for $10,000 to McCarty’s son William. The east-west public road bordering the land continues to be known as McCarty Lane.
examples of how John Purdue became rich. He was a man of character, honesty, and almost Puritan morals, too. During his travels in the 1830s, Purdue bought and kept newspapers about politics, business, education, national affairs, philanthropy, and abolition of slavery. Publications that were found in his effects included 1837 and 1838 issues of the *State Journal and Political Record* from Columbus, Ohio; 1834, 1835, 1837, and 1838 copies of the *National Intelligencer* from Washington, D.C.; an 1838 *Journal and Register* from Columbus, Ohio; a *People’s Monitor and Warren Democrat* from Warren, Pennsylvania, in 1838; *The Philanthropist* (a weekly published by an Anti-Slavery Society) in Cincinnati, Ohio, in 1838; the *Northwestern Gazette and Galena Advertiser*, from Galena, Ohio, in 1837; and an 1838 *Ohio Common School Directory* published in Columbus, Ohio.

One of his most interesting letters also happens to have survived from this period. A typist interpreted the handwritten date on the script as December 29, 1836, although 1838 may be correct. Either thirty-four or thirty-six years old and staying in Columbus, Ohio, at the time, the bachelor Purdue wrote the letter to—we might speculate—a possible romantic interest, Miss Ann Knauere, of Columbus. Perhaps she was the daughter of a business associate or customer, or maybe a friend of one of Purdue’s sisters. In any event, the document is a rare opportunity to read John Purdue’s own words. They amount to a pontifical essay on why single ladies should avoid men at night after bedtime. Purdue’s single sister Eliza had given birth out of wedlock to her daughter Ellen in October 1829, and this might explain the moralistic tone when Purdue addressed the possible damsel-in-distress Ann Knauere.

The writing style in the letter confirms John Purdue’s general ability in the “English branches of study,” but it also showed lapses of broken or awkward Germany valley English. For instance, he says “recollect” in place of “keep in mind.”

I have reflected considerably since I saw you on the impropriety of young ladies keeping the company of gentlemen at night after the family has retired to bed and I have come to the conclu-
sion that it is a habit that ought to be abandoned by every young lady that had any claims to respectable society.

Rcollect that few men are what they profess to be. Whenever a gentleman calls to spend the evening with you and inclines to tarry after the family retires you have then cause to suspect his motives. Few men have any regards, strictly speaking, for the reputation of young ladies and it is in the dark houses of night when all evil men carry their designs into effect. The adulterer waiteth for the night and baser than the vilian [sic] on the highway betrays the honor of his bosom friend. Deep layed [sic] crimes hide their odious heads in day and haunt the seats of society at night when they think all is safe that no eye sees.

The gentleman seeking a wife would make choice of one who never kept night company with any man. The reverse is also true, the gentleman that seeks the company of a young lady to enjoy her society at night is not seeking a wife. Every fallen monument of female reputation I believe had its origin in keeping night company. And every woman that has wept and mourned over their own sad misfortune and ruined character will tell you the ill misspent time of keeping night company was the only cause of her wretchedness and misery today.

Earlier in the text the letter also revealed something of Purdue’s lifestyle and certain of his other attitudes:

Not having much to do at present but read, write, talk, etc., concluded I would scribble a few lines for your amusement. I did expect when I left Old Delphi [Adelphi, Ohio] two weeks ago I should likely be at Lafayette, Indiana, ere this. A part of the time the weather was so extremely cold that I could not form a resolution to face the coldness of the west winds, therefore I am still in Columbus and its vicinity amusing myself sometimes in the busy crowd about the taverns of Columbus at other times in the smaller circles in the country; disposing of time as cheap as possible and with as much ease as convenient.

Mr. Havens [a mutual friend] was married on yesterday to a Miss Squires, a very pretty young girl. This was disposing of another bachelor in the right way: the way that I should like to see a few more go; right into the arms of a fair young lady.
There is another important fact that ladies and gentlemen both neglect too much [and] that is reading. Reading good authors on such subjects as is calculated to instruct the mind and to aid in forming correct principles is highly necessary and it is the duty of everyone to attend to it as much as lies in their power.

There is nothing appears so beautiful in a young lady as to have a mind well based on correct principles and have some knowledge of the different leading topics that pertain thereto. Everyone has not time to read as much as he should like to, but everyone has time to read more I think than what we do. . . .

My trunk has never arrived [from Adelphi.] As soon as it comes or very soon afterwards I will move for the west without [i.e., unless] the weather should be very bad. I think very long to get [i.e., have long thought about going] west and I presume I shall think as long to get back. If I can return against [again] the first of March I will. My respect to any of my friends that enquire of me and you see proper to give. My health is reasonable [sic] good. My friends are well. You must write to me direct to Lafayette, Indiana. Receive my best wishes to yourself and others. Your sincere friend, John Purdue

Other surviving correspondence written in John Purdue’s hand, composed much later, mostly deals with cold business matters. His letters reflect no tendency toward “small talk” or warmth or humor even among family. Letters to sisters, nephews, and grandnephews all begin and end in the same stiff tones—“Dear Sister”—“Dear Sir”—“Yours Very Truly”—“Respectfully Yours” and are signed “John Purdue.” As Topping analyzed it, Purdue “devoted his life to tangibles. He was not an erudite individual who could have voiced philosophy beyond simple Christian beliefs.”

Purdue’s first visit to Tippecanoe County, Indiana, whether in 1836 or 1838, clearly impressed the merchant side of him, which was the dominant side of him, and did so because of economic tangibles. Lafayette, with a population of about 1,500 in a county of 7,167 as of the 1830 Indiana census, had grown rapidly ever since. It stood at the northern limit of steamboat navigation on the Wabash River.
This connected its merchants and brokers, via its public wharf, by steamer and flatboat downstream to such major riverside commercial centers on the Ohio River as Louisville, Cincinnati, and Pittsburgh and to the Mississippi River ports at St. Louis, Memphis, and New Orleans. The Wabash River, by emptying into the Ohio River, thus simplified and encouraged merchandising, importing, and exporting in Lafayette. The city offered future promise, moreover, because it was on the route being dug for the Wabash & Erie Canal. The canal by 1841 offered low-cost, albeit slow, freight shipping from Lafayette to and from Toledo, Ohio, the Great Lakes, the St. Lawrence River, and the Erie Canal across northern Ohio and upstate New York, the Hudson River, and the Port of New York City. Tippecanoe population, by census time in 1840, would grow to 13,724 inhabitants.

Topping reckoned that John Purdue “could not have overlooked the coming of the canal to Lafayette.” Topping and others have recorded that as early as the summer of 1837, in discussion with Fowler, Purdue decided that the appeal of doing business in Lafayette was strong enough for them to liquidate their Ohio concerns and move. One clue about their decision, although the timing remains confusing, survives in a letter dated August 5, 1837. In it, Purdue wrote to a man in Prophetstown, near Rock River in northwestern Illinois, about land that Purdue had sold and over which a dispute had arisen about taxes that were due:

Am inclined to think you are under some mistake . . . at least the person from whom I bought the land informed me that they had paid the taxes until thirty-four [1834] and had receipts for same. . . . There has been some dishonest management in some of the land agents or officers of the state. . . . I have closed my business in Ohio and am nearly ready to leave the state for good.

Purdue advised this correspondent to write to him next at Lafayette, where he planned to spend time in the fall of 1837 and to “be located permanently next spring.”
The year of John Purdue’s arrival as a resident and merchant of Lafayette, Indiana, remains unclear. Although his letters from Ohio seemed to set a target date of spring, 1838, the consensus of written history without explanation postpones the move to 1839.8

Purdue and Fowler opened their Main Street dry goods business in rented space in businessman and bank director Joseph S. Hanna’s commercial buildings on the north side of the public square. In 1840 they moved a few doors west to the newer, larger Taylor Corner at Third and Main. There Purdue soon added retailing and commission sales to his dry goods wholesaling. The Taylor Corner belonged to an Ohioan from the Cincinnati area, merchant John Taylor, who had reached Lafayette in 1826.

It stands as no great problem if the Purdue-Fowler move to Lafayette occurred in 1839, except that it makes a mystery out of how the partners spent 1838. Most likely, they remained in business in Adelphi, Ohio, for one more year, but that is speculation.

8Text in the 1878 Historical Atlas of Tippecanoe County, Indiana, said 1839. Ella Wallace in 1887 wrote that Purdue “first visited Lafayette in 1837, but did not permanently locate there until 1839. Hepburn and Sears concurred that Purdue began calling Lafayette home in 1839 and wrote that he “at once became a leading citizen [who] took an active part in the life of the community.”
Assuming the 1839 move—and the weight of evidence supports it—Topping marveled that Purdue and Fowler had “displayed superb timing.” In 1839 they would have set up shop shortly before the Wabash & Erie Canal opened north from Lafayette. The canal greatly enhanced commercial ventures, warehousing, freight-shipping, boating, milling, and farming.9

The new storekeepers Purdue and Fowler “made the then-squalid Wabash River town their lifelong home,” Topping reported, “contributing mightily along the way to its eventual civility and domestication.” One of the Purdue, Fowler, and Company’s first Lafayette newspaper advertisements revealed in 1840 that they stocked more than dry goods. The ad in the *Free-Press* offered “200 bbl. of sweet cider—just received for sale cheap.”

Munro imagined that Purdue “would give something for anything, and take something for anything.” Many documents support this thesis. One Purdue ad in February 1842 offered “150 bbl. Kanawha Salt for sale at 56 cents a bushel by the barrel.” Another said that the partners would sell “Juniata Nails and Iron for cash,” or take “wheat or flax seed in trade.”

It may be that Purdue’s eagerness to take something for anything at least once, by accident, placed him at odds with the law. Tippecanoe Circuit Court, in *State of Indiana v. John Purdue*, found Purdue guilty in 1841 of selling half a pound of imported tea, in violation of some archaic statute. Judge Isaac Naylor, however, seemingly regarded it the slightest of misdeeds when he fined the merchant one penny plus costs.

This judicial wink and wrist-tap may, in fact, have reflected the rising respect already being accorded Purdue as a civic booster, merchant, and donor of goods, money, and time. Early on, he had joined Joseph S. Hanna, John Taylor, storekeeper Thomas T. Benbridge, and tanner Henry T. Sample in an elite and beneficent cadre which, as it added members, elevated Lafayette from riverbank mud to what boosters called the “Star City of the Wabash.”

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9The canal opened north from Lafayette between the fall of 1840, and the spring of 1841; south to the Ohio River in 1853.
Indeed in the U.S. census of 1840, Tippecanoe County had boasted a swelling population, perhaps as many as 3,000 of whom lived in the “Star City” proper. These numbers would double by 1850 to 6,129 in Lafayette toward a total of 19,377 in the county.

In his first fifteen years in Lafayette, Purdue played a visible if not always leading role in building a Wabash River bridge, extending a railroad to Lafayette from Indianapolis, starting the city’s first public cemetery, and serving on the first public school board.

As he pieced together his version of John Purdue’s life story, Munro also told how the one-time roving merchant had secured important “family friendships” back in Ohio—connections that paid off later for him and for Lafayette. For one example, Munro believed that Purdue had developed a “lifelong friendship and intimacy with the young son Dan of the Mace family.”

Daniel Mace (1811–1867) left Ohio with his father, a former judge, for Warren County, Indiana, in about 1829, and then moved over the county line to Lafayette in 1839 to practice law with the first of several partners. In 1851 and 1853, Mace won elections to Congress as a Democrat. Then as an anti-slavery Republican, he won again in 1855. The extent to which Purdue encouraged or supported Mace’s political campaigns is unknown.

Munro said that Purdue also guaranteed credit and use of his name to a newly arriving Ohioan named G. J. Leet, when Leet started a Lafayette business in 1843. Further, Purdue lent money so emigrant Ohioan A. P. “Bird” Holabird could start a distillery two miles south of the courthouse. Munro classified these as “friendly associations” innocent of profit motives. “Most of us use money as a rough measure of success,” Munro said. “Worse, many men use dollars in estimating their own success. Not so John Purdue. I [never found] a transaction in which his principal object seemed [to be] pecuniary gain. Four or five of his ventures were to provide opportunity for young men.”

The fact that Purdue sustained a bachelor life, lived alone for some thirty-seven years in a Lafayette hotel suite, and provided opportunities for young men fairly opens for speculation, in today’s no-holds-barred society, about his sexual orientation. Simply
put: No documentation is known to exist that ever hinted at homosexuality on the part of the merchant John Purdue. He was a smart, conservative, disciplined, fully honorable bachelor, and enjoyed the economies, freedom, and rewards of that lifestyle.

In his monograph completed in 1934, Robert Hartley Perdue determined that “John Purdue lived an honest, upright life. He seized every opportunity of doing good as it presented itself . . . His words of counsel were always characterized by appeals for honesty and integrity. These principles he admired above all else. He was a careful reader of the Holy Bible, and had in his library numerous works relating to the Scriptures.”

No one kept score as to which Lafayette donor gave what, how much, when, or to whom. But John Purdue could be relied upon anytime to dispense dollars to help, say, the new Agricultural Society in 1839, the new Library Club in 1840, the new City Band in 1842, the new Thespians, the men’s debate group, or congregations of any size or creed wishing to rent, buy, remodel, or build a church. Better yet, Purdue donated time, know-how, judgment and energy to selected, vital public works. Some writers of his story have been led to report that Purdue sat on Lafayette’s town board for a while in the 1840s. Munro, for instance, wrote that Purdue “served unwanted terms on the City Council and the School Board and gave freely to calls of a civic nature.”

For motives unknown, in an atmosphere immeasurable because of missing data, Moses Fowler parted with John Purdue to go out on his own in 1844. Reasons generally given are that Fowler wished to “pursue other business interests, among them banking, railroading and farming.” This may be so; although Purdue him-

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10 Purdue’s involvement with an appointed public school board in the early 1850s is a matter of record, but service as an elected official or appointee on the town board is not. The Lafayette Courier’s obituary in 1876 parrotted that “Mr. Purdue was a member of the City Council in 1840,” but this should be regarded as probable error. Not until 1853 did Lafayette elect a mayor and seven-man City Council to succeed the three-man town board of pioneer days.
self delved into banking, railroading, and farming in years to come, making it doubtful that these were issues over which he and Fowler ever seriously quarreled.

Fowler was about twenty-eight and Purdue forty-one when they split. There is room for much supposition. In letters to young men in ensuing years, Purdue stressed the importance of gaining a knowledge of business by apprenticing in a “good house” before going off on one’s own. He may have recalled his own valuable apprenticeship to a merchant-mentor in Ohio. He may well now have taken pride in Fowler’s experience in Purdue’s own “good house” and in his role in teaching Fowler the fundamentals. He may even have put up money for Fowler’s first ventures—as a silent partner—for a limited time. Purdue sometimes conducted business that way. Fowler, on the other hand, perhaps felt bored and restricted, dreading a prolonged future as junior partner or apprentice, and believed that he had earned his own space without Purdue’s monetary support or tutelage. That theory is supportable in light of how well both men fared over the next thirty-some years.

Their differences decidedly did include looks, methods, and manners. Purdue, in three painted portraits and one photograph known to exist, is serious, cool-eyed, pinch-mouthed, round-faced, cane-wielding, and baronial. One imagines him to have been slow-moving, and short of breath. The more wiry Fowler developed a classically chiseled, almost presidential face with quick, hawkish eyes and well-groomed beard. Fowler aggressively, almost ruthlessly, made money with money, as a banker, lender, investor, railroad magnate, and farmland owner, but Purdue through the Civil War years stayed his old reliable course of buying and selling.

After leaving, Fowler for a while competed with Purdue by selling dry goods and general merchandise. In the spring of 1846, for instance, Fowler advertised “a very general assortment of dry goods, groceries, hardware, queensware, glassware, iron, nails, steel, etc.” He further offered 225 barrels of molasses, 31 hogsheads of sugar, 50 tons of iron, 200 kegs of nails and 200 bags of coffee “at the old stand” on the corner of Third and Main. Fowler bought
molasses, sugar, and coffee in New Orleans, and iron in Pittsburgh. Later Fowler joined two other men—one was his brother-in-law Adams Earl—in grocery wholesaling. During the next forty-plus years as merchant, cattle baron, landowner, real estate trader, railroad scion, and banker, Fowler reputedly became one of Indiana’s three wealthiest men and, in that respect, left Purdue in the dust.

But Fowler along the way fomented resentment to the point of outrage. In a long, viciously blunt diatribe printed only days after Fowler died in 1889, the short-lived Boswell Argus, in Benton County—where Fowler profited from renting to tenants thousands of acres of cattle-feeding farms—trashed him to the extreme. The paper claimed that Fowler had no friends and valued men only as a jockey values his horse—for the service that could be obtained “and when no longer useful cast [them] off with indifference.” The Argus editor concluded that “the most conspicuous failure is the failure of Moses Fowler to be what God intended, a blessing to his fellow kind.”

Meanwhile the kindlier Purdue, just as he had nurtured young Fowler, went on teaming with other promising chaps who were on the way up. In October of the year Fowler left—and perhaps this had been a bone of contention between them—Purdue began buying downtown Lafayette real estate. His plan was to stop renting from John Taylor and to construct upon four city lots forming half of a city square a long brick-and-timber “Purdue Block.” It would house a dozen adjoining business places—rather an early version of the strip mall.

The lots bore numbers 17, 18, 19, and 20 in William Digby’s original plat of the city. The four fronted on the west side of Second Street between South Street and Columbia Street. An alley to the west separated them from Lots 1, 2, 3, and 4 held by other owners in the same city block. Borrowing money to make money struck no fear in John Purdue as he neared age forty-two. On October 4, 1844, he bought half of Lot 19 from Joseph Stoner, then mortgaged that half to Stoner to secure the payment of three notes of $100 each due in twenty days, twelve months, and eighteen months, respectively. Then on October 9, 1844, Purdue mortgaged to merchant Nathan Stockwell all of Lot 19 along with other lots he had ac-
quired to help secure payment of three notes, one for $5,000 due in
nine months, one for $5,000 due in nine and one-half months, and
one for $10,000 due in ten months. This supply of cash enabled
Purdue to start building.

Typical of Purdue, he carried out his plan to the letter over two-
plus years. An overhead stone mortared into the brick front wall
of the building still bears the carved date, 1845. Purdue moved his
dry goods business into the structure first, in March 1846. In
somewhat awkward wording, Purdue advertised his move that
spring, referring to himself in the third-person as he invited cus-
tomers to his

large block on [Second] Street where he is prepared to deal out
such bargains as have been seldom met with in the City of the
Wabash. He is determined to “astonish the natives” a great deal
more with the cheapness, quantity and variety of his goods, if pos-
sible, than his neighbors on the public square [who] will be as-
tonished, one of these days, to find that [Second Street] has
become the [Third Street] of Lafayette, and Purdue’s Block the
headquarters of that business avenue. He would just say to any
who may be disposed to doubt his sincerity, that if they will give
him a call, he will dissipate their doubts into “thin air” in a way
that will be perfectly satisfactory.

In the years that followed Fowler’s departure and Purdue’s
move to the Purdue Block, Purdue hired as helpers young William
Stacy, Lazarus M. Brown, Samuel Curtis, and Oliver Hazard Perry
“Mack” McCormick. Eventually, each in turn became a partner
with Purdue as a predecessor left, like Fowler, to go into business
on his own or with another house. In the beginning, however, all
languished as very secondary characters—mere trainees. In mid-
August 1847, Purdue, while in New York City on a buying trip for
their store, sent several commands, in rather a condescending
tone, back to Brown, whom he addressed as “L. M. Brown, Esq.”
followed by his typically formal “Dear Sir:"

I have been here little over a week and have not made any
purchase yet but I am going to begin next week and shall buy the
goods in your name and ship them to you also and I intend to buy you a pretty nice little stock of goods. You had as well invoice the goods if you have time before this month is out and about the first of September look out for goods marked L. M. Brown, Lafayette.

Still employing samples of his clumsy Germany valley English, Purdue then directed Brown to dispose of two matters for a particular customer:

Caldwell’s large brine tubs have them painted as he desires [and have] his scales cleaned. My health is good. Yours truly, John Purdue.

Builders completed the Purdue Block in 1847. When it was fully occupied, some ballyhooed it as being the “largest business block outside New York City.” That was a low-risk boast, for who kept score? But the structure did in any event generate provincial prestige for the “Star City” as a business center. It offered professional office space, commercial retail, wholesale, and even warehousing or storage room. Each of the twelve compartments gave tenants about forty-four feet of width and sixty-plus feet of depth, with Second Street frontage and alley access in the rear.11

When it was fully open, the Purdue Block enhanced John Purdue’s importance and influence in Lafayette. However, he was beginning to do so with assorted public-good efforts as well. Merchants had wished for a Wabash River bridge at Lafayette since the 1830s. Historian George Gould found that in 1837, 1841, and 1843 private companies had received state charters with permission for

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11In his 1978 application for designation of the Purdue Block on the National Register of Historic Places (as the only remaining local example of the Federal Style architecture), Peter Goelzer, president, Architeam, Inc., Minneapolis, Minnesota, described it. “Built in the Federal Style with simple, rectangular, window and door openings and gable roof, the buildings were rectangular in plan and [each] measured about forty-five feet north-south and sixty-five feet east-west,” he said. “The original building was three stories in height plus cellar, with stone foundation walls and load-bearing, brick masonry exterior walls in running bond. The floor structure at all floors was wood joists with wood flooring. The roof was
Bridge construction. At last in 1845 a company formed by John Purdue, Nathan Stockwell, John L. Reynolds, Robert Heath, and Dave Ross came up with enough money—about $20,000. It would be a toll bridge, financed, built, and run by the five merchants who held all the stock in their Lafayette Bridge Company.

After their election as directors and officers, the five men placed a newspaper advertisement, over Purdue’s signature, soliciting an engineering plan for a 600-foot wooden structure. The bridge opened in 1847. The identity of the contractor is uncertain. Historian Richard P. DeHart in 1909 credited Hiram L. Kilborn, but Gould’s research showed that Kilborn was only fourteen years old in 1847. Because the bridge was privately owned, no public record of its business dealings are known to exist.

A bird’s-eye-view map of Lafayette drawn in 1868 depicted the bridge as having eight spans. The west span was about 150 feet long; the next was short and said by some to be a turn-span to let riverboats chug upstream. Spans 3, 4, and 5 each measured about 150 feet long and rested on stone piers. Span 6 ran from the last pier in the river to one on the east bank, Span 7 arched over the east river bank, and Span 8 went over the Wabash & Erie Canal. The bridge connected Lafayette’s Brown Street with an earthen levee built across west-bank lowlands to higher ground where “west side” homes and small businesses soon flourished and multiplied.

It is of equal importance that John Purdue helped build one of the three railroad extensions that reached Lafayette in the 1850s.

Wood sheathing on wood roof joists. The original roof was apparently cedar shingles.”

Front windows were equally spaced with three rectangular openings at each business room at the second and third floors. Each window opening had a shale stone lintel and sill. Windows were double-hung wood sash with a six-over-six arrangement of panes. On the first floor were three rectangular door openings equally spaced across each room and centered below each window. A continuous shale stone lintel with protruding stone cap ran across the entire building above the door openings while continuous stone sill seven and one-half inches high extended the full width of the building below the door openings. The wooden doors were paired, inward swinging, with four glass panes in each door.
Purdue’s involvement began on June 1, 1846, when Indiana Governor James Whitcomb appointed a panel of commissioners to sell stock on behalf of a new Lafayette & Indianapolis (L & I) Rail Road Company. The company would buy land, engines, cars, and equipment, and build depots, bridges, trestles and sixty-some miles of track connecting the cities through parts of Marion, Boone, Clinton, and Tippecanoe counties.12

Tippecanoe County, because of its population and projected track mileage, qualified to have eight L & I Rail Road Company stock sellers. The governor named John Purdue, Jacob Walker, William F. Reynolds, William Heaton, James H. Major, Joseph S. Hanna, John McCutcheon, and Philip Foresman. When enough L & I stock had been sold, the buyers of it met in Boone County on October 4, 1847, and elected Purdue, Hanna, Reynolds, Henry L. Ellsworth, Albert S. White, Thomas Truxton Benbridge, and William Heath to the board of directors, to serve with directors elected from the other three counties. Purdue’s selection occurred in absentia. He again had left Lafayette in August for one of his periodic trips to New York City to buy and ship inventory to sell in his dry goods store.

The purpose of this New York trip, however, marked a further expansion of Purdue’s business world. No longer was he merely buying eastern dry goods. He now also was selling to New York buyers random western items shipped from Lafayette. He had begun marketing, on a commission basis to eastern buyers, processed pork (i.e., sides and slabs of salt-cured or brine-immersed meat, smoked ham, and bacon) pigskins, lard, corn, corn meal, wheat, and flour from Tippecanoe County fields and mills.13

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12Another railroad underway at the same time, to which John Purdue had no known connection, linked Lafayette, via Crawfordsville, to New Albany on the Ohio River. One connecting Lafayette to St. Louis and Detroit, also without Purdue’s help, began serving freight customers and passengers in 1856.

13It’s probable that this marketing venture began with agreements between Purdue and his fellow townsman Henry T. Sample. Sample had started butchering hogs in 1833 for a few customers of his Lafayette tannery. In 1842 Sample joined the grocer Joseph Hanna in packing pork and beef for local sale and export. Their
Topping wrote that Purdue’s 1847 trip involved finding buyers for an estimated $100,000 worth of meat he had contracted to ship, in the fall-winter butchering season. Purdue returned to Lafayette in October 1847, after his election to the railroad directorship.

Purdue’s New York trips became more frequent as his company’s meat-selling volume rose, but dry goods remained the backbone of Purdue’s business affairs. That is because meatpacking in days before reliable refrigeration and fast transportation was mostly a cold-weather occupation. In all seasons, however, Purdue seemed ready to help Lafayette grow. In the fall of 1847, he had joined another committee of fellows-of-means to buy land that led, in early February 1848, to the formation of the Greenbush Cemetery Association. On this land, the association opened Lafayette’s first (and sorely needed) public burial ground.

In 1848 Purdue promoted to partnership his protégé William Stacy. Shortly, advertisements for Purdue, Stacy & Company—occupying space No. 1 in the Purdue Block—courted retail as well as wholesale dry goods customers. In that space, the men soon added retailing and commission sales to their wholesale dry goods trade.14

Men of business in Lafayette experienced an odd mix of good and bad during 1849. The advent of telegraph service in January made possible instant communication with financial centers such as New York City. This sped the placing of orders and arrival of shipments, but Tippecanoe County survived a serious cholera epidemic in the summer of that year. Estimates of the death toll surpassed 100. For some weeks, so many residents fled as to render export business steadily grew via river and canal freight service. It would thrive further by means of Purdue’s entree to eastern markets, and still more when the railroads opened.

14Those who leased space in the Purdue Block came and went without distinction, except one. He was a young physician, William W. Mayo, practicing with his mentor, Dr. Elizur Deming. Deming moved his lectures and other teaching chores connected to the Northern Indiana Medical College from LaPorte, Indiana, to the Purdue Block in February 1850. Mayo left soon thereafter, and years later he and two sons founded the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota.
Lafayette a ghost town. Merchants had fewer customers until the arrival of germ-killing, frosty weather; relief from cholera; and a return to normalcy. By October 1, having somehow avoided contracting the disease, Purdue left by stagecoach on another buying trip to New York City. A letter from him to Lazarus Brown and a hireling named Howe soon revealed the scope of Purdue’s business affairs, management style, focus, terse writing style, fumbling efforts with German valley English, and attention to detail:

I would like to purchase those calf skins for you but they are high [expensive] and have to be bought for cash. [Cash is] an article that I am quite scarce of at present. Mr. Weaver tells me that Mr. Dodge keeps every thing of that kind [calfskins] and sells at a very small profit. That he has some on hands and they cannot realize any profit out of them. Mr. Wild’s cooper tools I have not been able to find as yet. Should I find them I will buy them. If you want me to buy you any sugar at Cincinnati on my way home send me some funds to Cincinnati in the care of Coram, Tweed & Company, Pearl Street grocers. It can reach them before I get there. I shall not be able to leave here until next week and will stop a day or two in Ohio and collect fee to old overcharges on freight contract $1.44 per 100.

Purdue’s letter referred to fellow Lafayette merchants Erasmus Weaver and Nathan Dodge, and to a customer named Wild.

Abstract-of-title records show that Purdue adroitly used his Purdue Block holdings as collateral to borrow money for other ventures. One record, for instance, shows that on October 1, 1850, Purdue again mortgaged Lot 19 to his reliable lending source Nathan Stockwell to secure four notes for $5,000 each due on July 1, July 15, August 5, and August 15, respectively, in 1851 and payable to a bank in New York City. Then on October 27, 1851, Purdue mortgaged Lot 19 to Stockwell for $20,000 in four notes of $5,000 each due in November and December 1851.

A letter Purdue wrote from New York City to Lazarus Brown on June 2, 1851, provides another glimpse of his business habits and the range of his dealings. In the letter he referred to Lafayette mer-
merchant John Ball, for whom he apparently was trying to find a New York buyer of flour, and to a customer named Caldwell connected with Henry Sample’s tanning and pork-processing business:

I have forgotten a little memorandum book I think with a red cover that has memorandum of flour and corn in it that you can enclose and send by mail if no person is coming [to New York City] immediately. In one of the old memorandum books of last winter you will find an account against L. Caldwell for making a new cutter block, [and] repairing furnace and [at?] the [Sample’s] pork house. Copy the items into the little book as [i.e., so that] I get the account in full. I sent you three hundred dollars from Toledo for [illegible, but evidently a reference the purchase of real estate.] If he has made the deed I will send him the balance of the money any time. Write me soon. Respectfully yours, John Purdue

I wish you would tell John Ball that all of his flour that was marked with P was scratched as No. 2 which will reduce the price below superfine about 37 cents per bbl. I will get the inspector’s receipt and send to him as soon as I return to Buffalo.

Business boomed in the Star City of the Wabash. In the 1851 good-weather shipping season on the river, as many as thirty-one steamboats bound for Evansville, twenty-five to Cincinnati, and twenty to Pittsburgh docked at Lafayette. More churned up from Louisville, St. Louis, and New Orleans. Extension of the Wabash & Erie Canal from Lafayette south to the Ohio River in 1853 further increased the volume of shipments from, to, or through Lafayette on the slow, mule-drawn freight packets.

During the canal’s heyday, Tippecanoe County farmers, tanners, millers, and meatpackers annually exported more than forty thousand barrels of flour and pork, more than one million bushels of corn, more than four million pounds of bacon and lard, plus huge quantities of wheat, oats, butter, soap, cheese, potash, hides, and tanbark. Lafayette supported a dry dock for boat-building and repair and a boatmen’s infirmary. Among the commission houses, Purdue’s continued to be called the largest west of New York City.
In common with many merchants, John Purdue at times grudgingly accepted something other than cash to settle an account. Topping noted that Purdue “loaned money or paid delinquent taxes to help friends or colleagues about to lose all” but that his charity at times dumped in his possession “unneeded canal dockage, warehouses, a paper mill, two hotels, and scattered parcels of real estate toward which he was indifferent.”

The Lafayette Courier on February 2, 1851, said that Purdue had become sole owner—probably through dealings just described—of the Lafayette House, a small hotel at Third and South streets. The Courier, aware of Purdue’s track record of civic-mindedness and progressive thinking, expressed editorial hope that he would upgrade the hotel. In the process of making this appeal, the Courier also thought to praise the futurist Purdue for persuading the town board to try MacAdamizing selected streets.15

In all matters, however, Purdue did not excel, and maybe never tried to excel. His connection with the hotels and paper mill, for instance, ended as soon as he could sell them. And while city streets did improve at a slow pace in subsequent decades, Purdue neither earned nor sought credit for it.

An artist who did not sign or date his work painted an oil portrait of John Purdue at about age fifty, judging from his looks.16 This and other likenesses in any medium—oil, crayon, black-and-white photography—revealed Purdue in subsequent years as a stern, cool-eyed, well-tailored, heavy-set man. Topping found instances in which Purdue had been described as a “valiant trencherman,” his favorite menu items including brandied peaches, mince pie, and oysters. “In season,” Topping reported, “he reputedly had a barrel of oysters shipped from the East Coast for stag dinners

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15 At the time, MacAdamizing was a promising, new, patented scheme in which wagonloads of gravel or finely crushed stone were spread over dirt roadways with a powder, sand, or other binder, then compressed into a smooth surface by rolling.

16 The painting turned up by surprise in 1969. See Chapter 7.
lasting until early hours of morning. . . . Purdue’s portly figure in later years seemed to bear out his penchant for food.”

Opening the Lafayette & Indianapolis and the Crawfordsville & Lafayette railroad extensions late in 1852—less than four years after the telegraph—further boosted the economy in Tippecanoe County. Railroads offered faster, efficient, freight delivery and passenger routes. This commercial advantage grew as more rails were spiked into place across the Midwest and East. Before many years, Lafayette shippers or travelers could connect with Chicago, St. Louis, Detroit, or New York City. The railroads gained patrons quickly, and forced Wabash River steamboats out of service first. The last steamer left Lafayette’s wharf in 1861. Managers sadly closed the Wabash & Erie Canal in stages leading to full abandonment in 1874.

Purdue, Stacy & Company advertised in the Lafayette Journal at about the time the railroads opened as being “wholesale dealers in foreign, domestic, staple and fancy dry goods, brown and bleached sheetings, cloths, oil cloths, carpets, matting, etc., in the Purdue Block.” Company ads offered for sale a vast catalog of cashmere, alpaca, poplin, prints, ginghams, printed shawls, long and square shawls, Irish linen, mulls, laces, edgings, inserts, towels, napkins, diapers, silk cravats, German and English cotton and silk threads, silk hosiery, gloves, mitts, shirts, jeans, linseys, brown and bleached sheetings and shirtings, brills, bed ticks, bagging and bags, cotton and wool flannels, apron checks, cotton yarn, cotton warp, batting, wicking, buttons, combs, brushes, pins, needles, hooks, eyes, spun cotton, cotton and patent pound thread, domestic carpeting, rugs, and floor mats.

Some ads invited rural dealers to stock their village, township, or crossroads store shelves from the big Purdue inventory.

When delegates elected to a convention at Indianapolis in the winter of 1850–1851 revised Indiana’s 1816 Constitution, one of several landmark changes they wrought called for free public schools. In
1852, carrying out the convention’s mandates, the state legislature empowered governing bodies in Indiana cities and counties to appoint boards of public education. These boards would oversee the new system of public schools and levy local taxes on real estate, business, and personal property to support them. Other reforms abolished Indiana’s old Seminary Law and transferred its funds to a new state Common School Fund.

On October 20, 1852, Lafayette city officials appointed John Purdue, Israel Spencer, William P. Heath, Jacob Casad, and Samuel Hoover as the city’s first public school trustees. This blue-ribbon board soon levied fifty cents per one hundred dollars worth of taxable private property for schools. This tax, authorized in the new laws, became singularly unpopular as it took effect statewide.

John Purdue volunteered to serve as a committee-of-one to find places to build three schools. This mission provided a welcome outlet for his business talent, influence, and wealth in support of education. Purdue’s passion for schooling, Topping reckoned, had been “influenced by his school-teaching years, and by his frequent spoken regrets that he had not had more formal education himself.” It may be, too, that Purdue found such a short supply of well-educated hirelings for his own businesses that he became a friend of formal as well as job-training education.

There is evidence, though, that Purdue functioned impatiently in groups of his peers. Years of habit had made him a dictator in business. For years Casad told a story about the first school board which squares with most but not all other facts: “At the first meeting held in John Purdue’s room, Mr. Purdue presented specifications for a fine school building, but the other members rejected the plan because there was no money on hand with which to build. Mr. Purdue did not like this, and resigned from the board.”

Some years later a second version of the story elaborated: “As there was no money in the treasury the other members voted [John Purdue] down. This made ‘Uncle Johnny’ huffy, and he resigned from the board, saying: ‘I will not serve with a lot of old fogies who think they cannot erect a school building without the money in hand.’”
This made good newspaper reading and material for the raconteur, but the part about Purdue quitting is doubtful. A reliable atlas published in 1878 listed Purdue as having remained on the school board until March 1855, when all the original five members’ terms expired. In his history of Lafayette’s public schools, Cecil S. Webb also listed Purdue’s board membership as ending in 1855, when seven new board members replaced the original five. In fact, instead of quitting, Purdue spurred the board during 1852 to start Southern School and open it near Third and Romig streets in 1853. During 1853 the board also contracted with builder Strother Moore for Eastern School on Elizabeth Street and Central School at Sixth and Brown. For $11,000 Moore built and finished both of those in 1854.

When a new Western School also opened in 1854, the four schools combined could house up to eight hundred students, if needed. However, during 1855, defects in the state school laws provided objectors with grounds for lawsuits. School taxes levied in 1854 could not be collected. Lafayette schools, in common with many, closed for lack of funds in 1855, even though John Purdue and others privately underwrote their operations for a while.

Repeated litigation challenging school boards’ powers to tax paralyzed the growth of the state’s public school system until the spring of 1860. Nevertheless, helping Lafayette schools where and when he could, given the limits imposed while he was encircled by “old fogies” and stalled by court injunctions, occupied much of John Purdue’s time during 1852–1855.

As Purdue reached and passed the age of fifty, approaching the peak of his working and benevolent life, one profits from hearing Ella Wallace’s analysis of his success published eleven years after his death. She wrote that those who knew him best considered Purdue to be most characterized by “fixedness of purpose,” a polite paraphrase for stubbornness. To them he came across as a man who “attended strictly to the end in view and no threats, ridicule or persuasion could turn him aside. He kept his eye fixed on his object, never losing sight of it though often compelled to pursue it through a crowd of distracting cares and perplexities.”
Nor was Purdue one to fly from one pursuit to another when confronted by obstacles. His motto was “never give up” and as a rule he succeeded. “The card party, the wine room, and the promiscuous dance never entrapped him,” Wallace said. “Rising with the sun and toiling with a persistent and resolute spirit, each day was a step forward. Instead of patronizing the horserace, or racking his brain [about] how he could make a fortune in an hour, he toiled daily and hopefully in the line of legitimate business.” Some contemporaries, envious of Purdue’s success and esteem, called him lucky. “So he was,” Wallace concluded. “But it was the luck which fortune always gives to those who obey her laws.”

Lafayette in general, and the Purdue Block in particular, continued to be the center of John Purdue’s business life. In November 1855, Purdue, Erasmus Weaver, Moses Fowler and John O’Mara, who by that time owned all eight lots in that full city block, wished to expand the twenty-eight-foot north-south alley into a public street behind their common properties. They gave about fifteen feet off each lot so the width of the alley could be expanded to fifty-eight feet. This cleared an avenue wide enough for freight wagons and drays to maneuver at the back doors of the various Purdue Block enterprises. The owners wished to name the new thoroughfare Corn Street. But that name never caught on; it remained only a wide alley paralleling First and Second.

As his business trips to New York City continued, John Purdue encountered and considered any number of profitable opportunities there, and met prospective partners in assorted merchandising ventures. He may have been reluctant to attempt to sustain businesses in two cities 800 miles apart unless and until he could find capable partners, but suitable ones came forth toward the end of 1855. Lyne Starling and I. W. McColloh asked for and received Purdue’s backing in a general commission house in New York City, with Purdue as a silent partner. The three agreed to try an arrangement for one year, Starting December 1, 1855. Purdue invested $30,000, Starling $20,000, and McColloh $10,000 in a firm called
Starling McColloh & Company. Purdue received half the profits of the operation, the other partners one-fourth each.

Purdue’s involvement with Starling McColloh ended cordially after that first year, however, because he embarked on a more promising New York venture which came to be known as Purdue, Ward and Company.
With a twenty-five-year-old protégé named John Ward, John Purdue in 1856 started a venue for commission sales in New York City. Thus, at age fifty-three, Purdue doubled his workload and probably more than doubled his profits. Purdue, Ward and Company found buyers for the “western products” Purdue had been placing with eastern retailers in rising amounts since 1847.

Ward had worked with J. B. Thompson and Company, New York pork packers and inspectors. During the next ten years in business with Purdue, Ward also took a position at the Corn Exchange and helped start a New York Produce Exchange.

Purdue, Ward and Company conducted business at 391 Pearl Street in lower Manhattan, a few blocks from the East River and the future site of the Brooklyn Bridge. New York city directories listed Purdue, Ward and Company through 1865, identifying Purdue simply as “merchant.” Purdue never gained prominence in New York business or society publications of the day, because Purdue regarded Lafayette as home. Purdue did rent hotel living quarters in New York City, and for a decade lodged alternately there and in his Lahr House suite in Lafayette. He remained in both locales and domiciles a low-key man of simple wants. Robert Hartley Purdue, however, divined a measure of glory: he wrote that in New York Purdue displayed “wonderful business foresight, unflinching
integrity and substantial rewards—so much that Purdue’s name became a tower of credit in that city. He was truly the king of the produce merchants during his business residence there.”

Back in Lafayette the newspapers began reporting his train depot departures and arrivals as news events, and referred to him as “the Honorable John Purdue.” “John Purdue, Esquire” or “Judge Purdue.” Only the heroes, the elite, the great, the feared, or the envied in a community rated such admiring titles. Purdue in most ways matched his reputation, too. Munro estimated that Purdue “always dressed in clothes of the best quality always fitted to the occasion.” The fawning writer of one Lafayette newspaper item once even admired the width of one of Purdue’s hats which had been made “in New York style.” 17

Enjoying his prosperity, Purdue built a library of about three hundred good quality and sophisticated books, many on religious or biblical subjects. 18

New York City photographers are believed to have made John Purdue portraits, perhaps as gifts for his sisters and their families, customers in New York, partners, patrons, or friends in Lafayette. Purdue also visited art studios and purchased a few oil paintings

17 Munro said the sale of Purdue’s gold watch for one hundred seven dollars in an estate auction in 1877 “bears testimony to his regard for quality.”

The Tippecanoe County Historical Association in the 1920s acquired a stovepipe hat, hat box and shawl, together with a pair of pearl-white, summer-weight linen trousers said to have been tailored for Purdue in the summer of 1862. The trousers had been fitted with brass buttons bearing the imprint of “O. A. Porter and Co. New York.” Made to be worn with suspenders and no belt, the pants featured a buckle and strap in the back to be used to adjust the waist. The dimensions of the garment reveal a stouter-than-average wearer: forty-four-inch waist, thirty-one-inch inseam.

18 Purdue University Special Collections houses several remnants from Purdue’s private library. One is a book about Mexico published in 1822 in London, England. It is Political Essay on the Kingdom of New Spain by Alexander von Humboldt, translated from French, Volume I. The university also possesses Volumes 2 through 9 and Volume 16 in the Humboldt series of twenty-three. A German naturalist, traveler, and statesman, Humboldt (1769–1859) wrote about travels in South America, Cuba, and Mexico.
either for himself or as gifts. He gave numerous other top-quality items from New York shops to friends or business associates.

When he did spend seasons in Lafayette, Purdue maintained a reputation for generosity that Munro described as “pocket deep.” Purdue showed a soft spot in his heart for youngsters. His first concern was their education; but beyond that he gave many a Lafayette boy his first pocketknife. When he would ask the wife or daughter of some male friend to round up a carriage full of children and chaperon an outing, Purdue himself might drive the team of horses to the country and back, then pay for ice cream, cake, and candy. The daughter of Joseph S. Hanna, for one, described Purdue as “the merriest, happiest person in the crowd” during such events. She also claimed that Purdue once confided in her that not marrying had been a mistake.”

In 1856 Purdue purchased a 250-piece set of china in New York City. The set contained platters of varying sizes, coffee and tea cups, pitchers, custard cups with covers, a teapot and sugar bowl, a spoon holder, and a covered butter plate. Purdue shipped the china to Lazarus Brown and his bride in Lafayette as a wedding gift.

While running businesses in Lafayette and New York City, Purdue continued to buy, sell, borrow, mortgage, and repay, sometimes still using his four Purdue Block lots as collateral. On November 3, 1857, records show that for $3,500 he sold one third of Lot 19 to John O’Mara and Thomas Toberty, who planned to open a grocery and liquor business in the space. Munro understood that

19Purdue and Moses Fowler had rented their first Main Street Lafayette business space from Joseph S. Hanna in 1839.
20A descendant of the Browns gave the transparent white china to Purdue University in 1923. The pieces are interesting because of their graceful shapes, fluted handles and raised decoration in leaf form culminating, in the larger pieces, in cover handles, shaped like a pomegranate with one side bursting open to show the seed. The letter H on some pieces indicates that they were made by Haviland, renowned manufacturer in Limoges, France. Purdue University also acquired in the 1920s a soup tureen given by Purdue to his business partner Samuel Curtis. Similar to the Haviland in color and style, the tureen features an unopened pomegranate design in its handle.
when called upon to help a friend in business, Purdue usually offered a loan that was sometimes secured by a mortgage or in a deed form. This “enabled Purdue to help his friend and retain his friendship, a large factor in his philosophy.”

Despite his frequent sojourns in New York City during the 1850s and 1860s, Purdue also remained a social figure at home. He paid all the customary calls to friends in Lafayette at Christmas-time, dispensing gifts or words of cheer. “Humbug!” never entered the vocabulary of Lafayette’s anti-Scrooge. And, contrary to Ella Wallace’s estimate that Purdue passed up fun for business, Topping declared that as age came on, Purdue “liked to play an occasional game of cards, usually whist, a forerunner of bridge,” and that he was “a gracious host and an appreciative guest.”

His presence in these Christmas rituals labels Purdue as some manner of Christian, perhaps most accurately a “closet” believer, although affixing any religious label upon him would be guesswork. Indeed, he may have read books on assorted religious themes and donated in response to appeals from church committees, but he appears not to have been a churchgoer, even with many churches from which to choose. Protestant congregations dated to 1828 in Lafayette; Catholic to 1843; African Methodist Episcopal to 1849; Jewish to 1851. A diversity of races and nationalities could be found in the Star City. A few blacks and Chinese had lived in the town almost since the days of its platting. The first settlers of English and Scottish descent became intermixed with Irish in the 1830s, Germans in the 1840s, Holland Dutch, Swedes, and a second immigration of Germans in the 1870s. While his upbringing seems to have been Protestant, Purdue never seemingly played denominational favorites, nor was he reputed ever to have voiced or practiced prejudice against any religious, national, ethnic, or racial minority.

Self-education and support of schools to educate others seems to have become his love interest and his religion during John Purdue’s mature years. One early clue had been his sometimes-trying 1852–1855 school board membership. Another was that in 1857 he bought stock in, and agreed to serve as trustee for, the Battle
Ground Collegiate Institute. Bishop E. R. Ames and Elder Benjamin Franklin Winans of the Northwest Indiana Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church began planning that school in 1856 and opened it December 16, 1857. Ames and Winans influenced platting of the Tippecanoe Township village named Battle Ground on land near the site of the Battle of Tippecanoe fought in 1811, then laid out the adjoining preparatory school. At first, Battle Ground Institute occupied a remodeled refreshment stand where battlefield tourists had sipped lemonade. But shortly, with funding from tuition, fees, cash gifts, and loans from money-angels like John Purdue, the Institute graduated into a two-story frame and later still a larger, brick, main building.

Consistent with Purdue’s actions, he also is said to have bought stock in an academy in the rural Montgomery County village of Alamo southwest of Crawfordsville, Indiana. The published mentions of Alamo seem, however, to be in error. A two-volume History of Montgomery County, Indiana, published at Indianapolis in 1913, told of no academy at Alamo. Purdue more likely supported the Presbyterian Church’s academy which operated from 1849 to 1879 at Waveland, in Montgomery County, Indiana.21

Beyond those questionable reports that John Purdue occupied a town board seat in the 1840s, he is known to have had little to do with politics in Ohio, Indiana, or New York City until 1858. In April, the daily Lafayette Courier mentioned Purdue (perhaps to his surprise) as a possible Republican candidate for election to Congress.

A precocious wheeler-dealer, William S. “Bill” Lingle, who had run the Courier since early 1857, launched that sudden Purdue-for-Congress trial balloon. Just twenty-five years old in 1858, Lingle had moved to Lafayette from southern Indiana in 1854, and worked on the pro-Republican daily Lafayette Journal. He jumped at the chance to buy the Courier and make it a second Republican voice in Lafayette. Lingle soon established himself as a prodigy in business, editorial writing, civic leadership and political hardball.

21Baptists founded Ladoga Institute and the Christian Church sponsored Haw Creek Institute also in Montgomery County in those days.
Politics is infamous for hiding its motives, and the political historian often is left guessing what they are. Lingle may have boosted Purdue because Purdue, who seemed entirely “elected,” would give Lafayette a hometown presence it lacked in Congress. Tippecanoe, Clinton, Montgomery, Fountain, Boone, and Carroll counties formed Indiana’s Eighth Congressional District at the time. To Lingle’s chagrin, obscure and ineffective James Wilson, from one of the small counties, held office.

Purdue, his business life already spread thin as he shuttled between New York City and Lafayette, seems never to have warmed to Lingle’s idea about running for Congress in 1858. His old friend former congressman Daniel Mace may have whispered warnings to him as a consultant. In any event, Purdue stayed put, and Congressman Wilson stayed in office two more years. Lafayette attorney Albert S. White then won the U.S. House seat in 1860, and Lafayette attorney and insurance executive Godlove S. Orth took the 1862 election. Both were Republicans.

Purdue’s rejection of the political overtures might be explained by action he took in late 1858, when he added farming to his workload. He acquired—and how is not really clear—eleven parcels totaling about 1600 acres of well-developed farmland in Prairie Township in Warren County, Indiana, the next county west of Tippecanoe. The seller is listed in public records as Charles Heigh, a man who was getting on in age and financially strapped. Explanatory data is missing. A few of his personal letters imply that Purdue bought the land intending for his nephew John Prosser, in Ohio, to come and manage it. Young Prosser and an acquaintance also considered starting a grocery business, using Purdue’s money and coaching, somewhere in Warren County, probably West Lebanon about eight miles from the farm. Purdue’s letter to Prosser on November 2 contains these clues:

> Between now and spring [of 1859] if nothing happens I will be able to get my means together so as to be able to [go] into the grocery business and I think if you were to sell off all your stock so as
to have no incumbrance and not much to see to and go to Columbus and get the privilege [of] staying in [a] wholesale grocery there until I was ready for you to come to Lafayette, it would save time and advance our interest very much.

[Tell the owners of the wholesale] house that you wish to help them awhile and you won’t ask them [for] any wages and if you had learned anything when you would leave it would be all right. See you have to [have] some knowledge of the business in some way and it will be better to learn it in some man’s house than to leave it at the disadvantage of handling one’s own before understanding anything about it. If you have no means to carry through the winter I will [help] some. You had better board at a hotel or boarding house.

Tell Stepan Thompson that I would like to see how much he is going to learn this winter and if he learns pretty well I will then help him to go to a better school next season. I will be going east in about six weeks and [if] you are in Columbus then I will call and see you. Write me on return mail.

John Prosser was the son of Purdue’s sister Sarah. “Stepan Thompson” was nephew Stephen J. Thompson, son of Purdue’s sister Susan in Ohio. The prospective third party backed out and Purdue and John Prosser amended their plans, per a letter from John Purdue in Lafayette dated November 18, 1858:

Yours of the 14th is at hand. Better take proper time to do all your work up in good order. The man I had in view appears to be unwilling to engage in the business except [i.e., unless] there was a second man as well acquainted with the business as himself and consequently I will have to hold on a while until I can get someone else and if you can get a [grocery] house [of] good standing to go on to a while it will be so much time gained. I shall want you to come here next summer anyhow and if we cannot commence the grocery business will try and do something else.
Prosser found a position with a man named Hanes. Whereupon Purdue advised Prosser further in a letter from New York City in December:

I think you better go to Mr. Hanes and do for him what you can. It will instruct you and learn you something about the business and give you some idea of the quality of goods and you can in the meantime improve your writing and general business education to some extent. A man should have a general knowledge of business. It always helps him and as soon as you get insight enough into the business then I will start [you] in business for yourself.

Young Prosser seems to have flubbed his part of their plans, however, for on January 27, 1859, Purdue wrote to him from Lafayette:

I was sorry to learn that you had not got into the situation you expected. You had better if you can get into some business house of some kind so you will be learning something of its value for as soon as you get a pretty good hang of business there I will start right. I cannot make up a business house out of new men. They must have some business knowledge and I should think if you was in some good house about a year you could get along quite well with someone who had been in the business all their lives.

I will leave on Monday for New York and will not return until near April, then I will call and see you. Then I want to send Marion Thompson to some good ladies’ school and Stephen should there be any hope of making anything out of him. I feel like trying some of the younger set to see if anything could be made out of them. If you get a situation write me to New York. Direct your letter to 391 Pearl St. 22

On May 7, 1859, Purdue obtained a handwritten receipt from Charles Heigh for $4,995, “it being the balance due me [Heigh] in

22“Marion Thompson” cannot be traced. Stephen Thompson had a sister and a cousin Mary. A family history prepared by one of John Purdue’s grandnephews, C. P. Thompson, Delaware, Ohio, lists no Marion Thompson.
full on 1,600 acres of land sold him about January 1, 1859, in Warren County called the Walnut Grove Farm.” Further documents of clarification or confirmation are not to be found. Evidence suggests that Purdue took over at least indirect management of Walnut Grove Farm that winter, and that John Prosser soon arrived with a wife and two sons to run it on a daily basis.

Letters from his rich uncle imply that Prosser was as much a novice about farming as about business, for whether he needed it or not, he received continuous mentoring. Warren County records show that Purdue added land during 1860 by acquiring four parcels in a sale conducted by Sheriff H. S. Jones. Purdue’s letter to Prosser dated January 17, 1860, confirms that Prosser had come to Indiana in 1859 and that the family still was “settling in”:

Gather all the rent corn upon all the lands of Charles High [Purdue’s spelling] no difference who farmed them nor where the land lies and keep an account of the quantity and see how much [there] will be. Alvin High of Williamsport [Warren County seat] can tell you all about it I suppose as he is his father’s authorized agent.

What is John McCammon doing, how does he get along and what does he say. What would he like to do best and when is he coming to Lafayette. I would like to have him come up soon and help the boys move. How does your wife like the grove [Walnut Grove Farm] and have you got [it] fixed pretty will [well] or not.

John Purdue’s nephew John McCammon, who lived near Galena, Ohio, was a son of Purdue’s sister Catherine. Whether John McCammon ever came to Lafayette is unknown. By late March 1860, Purdue mailed more directives to John Prosser at “the grove”:

I recd. your letter saying that you only got one horse. So I will have [?] another sometime soon. I almost wish you had taken another horse of some renterman [sic] it would have saved paying money for one; an article [money] that is quite scarce. See how much clover seed you will want and how much timothy seed and how soon you will want both. I have bought three plows which I will send today or tomorrow. Write me by return mail. Tell your
wife I cannot get the dining table until next week. These plows will be all ready to hitch to. I [also will] send a couple sets of gears.

In the middle of June, Purdue again discussed farming matters:

I shipped you last week two hair mattresses to day I ship you a mower and rake four forks two rifles and whetstone. This mower is calculated to mow uneven ground if understood how to manage it. And you had better get a man if you can who has some experience with these mowers and help you to get started. We say here that ten acres a day is only a common day’s work and a rake will gather 20 acres a day easy but you can tell better when you get at it. It appears to me you had better let [i.e., rent or lease] a part of the meadow to some good man if you can let it right. It would save some expense in cutting and putting it up.

I bought a lot of cattle about fifty miles north of this [Lafayette]. There are to be 31 or more head in the lot and they are to be delivered at the grove free of charge. They come from Sapers S. Smith & Co. There will be two hands with them only and put them [cattle] in any of the pastures you like and salt them as they should be and give the men of the S. Smith & Co. a receipt for the number you receive.

I have been detained and will not be ready to leave before the last of the week. These cattle are to leave their place a week from tomorrow and it will take about four days to get through.

It has every appearance of a dry season consequently keep the plows running steady on the corn on that account. If you don’t your crop of corn will be light. What you lose from drouth you can partly make up by more plowing and stirring. The ground gathers some moisture from the dews and [the corn] may make [mature and ripen] if it is dry. Write me how you are getting along about meat.

Purdue evidently dashed off this undated postscript about the mowing machine on the same day:

I like to forgot I sent you likewise a gallon of lard oil to grease the machine. Before you put it up [i.e. store it away] you must grease the blade or knife all along where it works so as it will play
easy and every joint and every wheel must be kept greased. The main wheels you will find a hole a [?] the spokes to put oil in and you will find little cups with covers over them that you can lift the lids up and fill with oil. And every place where any [part] moves or works at all you will have to keep oiled. You had better get some man in the neighborhood who has had one of these in use and he will help you start it.

Recollect [i.e., bear in mind that] lard oil is the right thing and no other does well. The knives you can grind like all other sythes [cq]. They must be kept sharp and when you put them in oil them well. See that you make no mistake about this machine.

Purdue wrote to Prosser from Lafayette on July 2, 1860:

I leave Wednesday morning for New York. I hope you are getting along well with both hay and corn. Better keep the plows running until pretty late so as the weeds won’t start up soon. Those cattle I spoke [of] will reach Walnut Grove next week if nothing happens. Have you found Bossey or Bomey [possibly a reference to stray livestock]. I have not heard from you since you was here. Plenty of rain here now and I am afraid there will be too much if it don’t slack up soon.

Purdue postponed his business trip to New York until August, likely because of the death of his mother in Ohio. Mary Short Purdue had reached the age of ninety, and her burial took place in Union Smith Cemetery in Plain Township, Franklin County, Ohio. That family bereavement over and affairs mostly settled, John Purdue returned to Lafayette and on August 22, 1860, sent Prosser further instructions:

I expect to leave this evening for N.Y. The boys [employees in Lafayette] will ship you in a few days 25 bushels of cloverseed. You must not sow it until after the dry weather is past. Your McCormick [a Walnut Grove neighbor or hired hand] was here and says he wants to put in some wheat. I told him he might do so but would have to sow it on the west end of the farm where you
John Purdue: The Midas of the Wabash

would designate and he might stay on the place another year but
would ask something for pasture[?]. So you will know how to talk
to him and if he did not remain on the place another year I would
allow him something for his wheat. Recollect [i.e., keep in mind]
that piece of land east of the house [is] where we agreed to sow in
clover seed for a clover pasture . . . so as we can turn hogs on it
next summer.

Obviously Purdue took Walnut Grove Farm seriously, seemed
knowledgeable about the minutest details of agriculture, and gave
it large amounts of his time and thought.

Meanwhile in Lauramie Township of Tippecanoe County, fifteen
miles southeast of Lafayette, the needs of another new school beck-
oned and Purdue responded. He became involved with it as a
donor after a committee of his close Lafayette friends had platted
and developed a railroad town. The friends were Moses Fowler,
Fowler’s wholesaling partners Robert Stockwell and William F.
Reynolds, and attorney Albert S. White, former U.S. Senator and
U.S. House member. Their well-capitalized company surveyed
and sold lots by the Lafayette & Indianapolis Railroad tracks for a
town they named Stockwell. By 1860 they had put up an academic
building next to an eighteen-acre hardwood grove and opened
Stockwell Institute.

Purdue is said to have given five hundred dollars in cash to
promote instruction in mathematics, chemistry, and philosophy,
and probably much more for other uses. Like the Methodist-
sponsored Battle Ground Collegiate Institute, the one at Stockwell
first offered college preparatory courses. It then added curricula
and faculty and elevated itself to “collegiate” status when it opened
an Academic Department for 100 registrants on January 2, 1861.

Early in 1861, Purdue’s Lafayette business connection with
William Stacy ended, circumstances unknown. Purdue reorga-
nized by making a full partner of Samuel C. Curtis. Lazarus M.
Brown remained an important employee with “Mack” McCormick
the chief salesman. From its familiar space in the Purdue Block the
firm still wholesaled “foreign and domestic, staple and fancy dry goods, ready-made clothing, notions, hats, caps, bonnets, &c., &c.,” to quote an advertisement.

The four-year Civil War, which erupted in April 1861, wrought social and economic changes throughout the country beyond imagination. John Purdue greatly profited from the war, through the luck of being in the right businesses in the right cities at the right times. In the eyes of some, this tarnished his reputation because the phrase “war profiteer” could so demonstrably be linked to men like him. Yet the war, at least on the Lafayette homefront, created unexpected and drastic needs in support of President Abraham Lincoln and the preservation of the Union. These were needs to which Purdue readily responded with influence, vision, generosity, and good cheer.

Purdue was fifty-eight years old when the war began, too old to fight or to lead troops. But he proved to be wealthy enough, and willing, to pay huge sums in special war taxes and to make loans and outright gifts to help the Union’s war effort. His iron-disciplined dedication to business changed—he abandoned commission and retail selling for wholesale activity only. Nine other commission-sale firms competed in that aspect of local business. Purdue, Curtis and Company now focused on dry goods wholesaling to local retailers named McHugh, True, Tuttle, Howe, Ross, Shaffner, Berry, Ewry, and Wise.

In the summer of 1862 the salesman “Mack” McCormick’s illness—perhaps a nervous breakdown in modern parlance—created a crisis. From New York City Purdue wrote to Curtis in language that again required some translation from Germany valley English:

Mack at home ere this and I do hope he has recovered from his attack of despondency and hope his mind has gotten its usual balance. We will have to keep the store moving in some way whether Mack is able to do anything or not. If we can get along this fall it will all be plain enough sailing after that. If it should be so that you can leave home it might be best for you to come East
yourself and with my help we might pick up what goods we need this season. I want you to arrange the best way you can. Let me hear from you again.

On August 11, 1862, Purdue again wrote to Curtis:

Yours of the 4th is at hand and all you say about goods fully noted. You can do just as you think best about buying goods. Suit your own time exactly and do just what seems right to yourselves and I will not complain whether you buy few or many goods nor when you buy them if it is not some weeks or even months but get all the old debts out as fast as you can and make as few new ones as possible.

I should be home before the first of September without the weather gets much cooler than it is at present. Like to hear from you often. I am glad to hear Mack is all right again. If he will only remain so it will be a blessing for his family and friends.

People in wartime Tippecanoe County mainly harbored pro-Union sentiments, but political unrest simmered while divided loyalties flared at times. These factors led to fear, fueled by occasional episodes and frequent reports of vandalism and thievery. Confederate sympathizers threatened sabotage, and rumors bubbled about planned rebel incursions into Indiana. Such tension led to the formation in many a city, town, and township of militia devoted to home-guard duty. In Lafayette John Purdue sensed that his Purdue Block, his dry goods inventory, and numerous other holdings—especially during his absences in New York—might be vulnerable to night raids by “copperheads” who might set fires, loot, or otherwise damage pro-Union morale. His absences in New York City were long, because Purdue and Ward became increasingly busy procuring pork and other provisions for the armed regiments who were fighting for Lincoln’s War Department in the South.

Making money was the least of Purdue’s problems during the Civil War; securing his property, especially in the Purdue Block, was among his greatest worries. This wartime letter from New York to one of Purdue’s associates in Lafayette explains:
The windows in No. 5 [of the Purdue Block] you say the boys broke out the glass and broke in. Well, if you would nail up the windows with boards on the outside might do but it might be better to make shutters at once and these pretty strong. It appears to me there have been shutters to those windows though I may be mistaken about that. You can see if there is any shutters about the premises that will do but have it closed the way you think best and it will be all right.

Such events caused Purdue to spend his own money in about September 1862 to start a volunteer protective force in Lafayette. Purdue also welcomed donations from others who felt vulnerable enough to help support the “Purdue Rifles.” One newspaper item on April 4, 1863, said that Purdue would equip the men with state-of-the-art Enfield long rifles. Within a year the volunteer force’s roster, partly filled by senior citizens too old for war, or scrawny boys too young to drill in state regiments, totaled about one hundred. Trained, uniformed, and equipped, the Purdue Rifles staged marching and arms-handling exhibitions.

It was serious business, the Purdue Rifles, no mere advertising gimmick. Fully 300 miles from the nearest bloody fields of war, Tippecanoe County could boast of enough strategic military importance to justify the armed security force. The county’s three railroads, rolling stock, bridges and trestles, wharf, grist mills, steam-powered sawmills, flour mills, warehouses, fields, silos, and barns all helped the Union war effort. The Purdue Rifles remained intact for two years, operating at times as state militia called the Indiana Legion, guarding Confederate prisoners, rounding up deserters, or quelling civil unrest.

The Purdue Rifles organized as a private (i.e., not a state-supported) company. The first commander is unknown. It may have been wholesale grocer Joseph J. Reynolds, home on leave after resigning his 1861 brigadier-general commission in early 1862.23

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23Reynolds, a U.S. Military Academy graduate, left Lafayette a second time for widespread and distinguished field service later in 1862 and finished the war a major general.
In January 1863, the Purdue Rifles elected Captain Christian “Chris” Miller to command. Miller had survived near-fatal wounds in 1861 with Indiana’s three-month Tenth Infantry Regiment in Western Virginia. Although he suffered while healing, his leadership helped the Purdue Rifles gain a reputation as one of the state’s better home-guard units.

An exchange of letters between Purdue and his sister Eliza (Purdue spelled it Elisa) in Ohio showed that even in tense and busy wartime he seemed never too busy to help family. The letter dated January 11, 1863, encouraged Eliza to buy a farm near a home she had been renting. “If it suits you, and you like it, why, buy it,” Purdue urged. “I shall have the money ready for you any time you want it. . . . Is there any farms for sale on the same side of the creek that [sister Margaret] Beever is on? I want to get one for [sister] Hannah Clark.”

The Purdue Rifles, unlike many Indiana Legion units, did see some war action. In July 1863, the company rushed by train to the Ohio River where the men served for two weeks as guards for Brigadier General Mahlon Manson. Manson, from Crawfordsville, Indiana, commanded Union forces along the river upstream from Louisville, Kentucky. At Twelve Mile Island near Louisville, the Purdue Rifles reportedly captured “nineteen rebels and forty horses” and earned a commendation from Manson. The Purdue Rifles returned to Lafayette on August 1, 1863, welcomed by cheers at the depot and a testimonial dinner.

Before long, duty summoned the Purdue Rifles to a sadder event. On September 28, 1863, a casket reached Lafayette containing for burial the iced remains of Colonel William B. Carroll, a Purdue Rifles alumnus. The highest ranking Tippecanoe County officer killed in the Civil War, Carroll had commanded Indiana’s reorganized, three-year, Tenth Infantry. He died in a hospital after being wounded in battle at Chickamauga, Georgia, on September 20. The Purdue Rifles escorted Carroll’s coffin from a depot to
the courthouse where his body lay in state until morning. Burial took place in Greenbush Cemetery. The Rifles’ thirty-four-star, regimental-sized American flag, entwined in black crepe, lay at the head of the casket.

Off and on for three years after Colonel Carroll’s burial, friends solicited private donations for the stone monument that honors him in Greenbush Cemetery. John Purdue readily gave one hundred dollars toward the cost.

In 1863 Purdue elevated Lazarus Brown to full partnership. As Purdue approached the age of sixty-one, he mentioned failing health in a letter and asked about Brown’s health. Samuel Curtis’s departure, if one reads between the lines of Purdue’s letters from New York City to Brown in June and November 1863, had been tarnished by bookkeeping and other transgressions:

I have not heard a word from home since Sam left here not even heard how his purchase of stock went off. Now suppose you write me and tell me what kind of a purchase he made and how they are working off and what kind of a trade you have and whether goods are selling freely or not and how is your own health and how you feel. I have been a little indisposed a day or two [in June] but feel pretty well again.

Yours of the 12th [November] came to hand this morning only. I did not intend to move the privy this fall. Not until I was going to commence the building. As to the lumber there is no necessity or hurry for it at present may as well stand until winter when they can get logs out better. . . .

Two of John Purdue’s big-business colleagues in Lafayette, wholesale grocers Adam Earl and William Hatcher, had ordered the unique flag to be made by a Chicago firm in April 1863 as a token of their support and appreciation of the Purdue Rifles. Stars painted on the 74-by-72-inch silk flag appear from top to bottom in the field of blue in rows of six, five, six, five, and six. The Lafayette Journal said the flag arrived new on about May 28, 1863, and went on display in the show window of one of the Purdue, Curtis and Company’s customers on the public square.
You are right in the fact that if Sam [Curtis] had done his duty the old debts would have been in a better condition. This [business climate in 1863] is the best time there has been for some years to settle up all debts and what cannot be settled this year will be pretty hard to do much with. . . . Nothing else at present. I am glad to hear you say that you are quite well.

Late in August 1863, the Lafayette Courier published a report about the amount of money raised by a three percent wartime income tax imposed in Union states by the Lincoln Administration. The Courier said that Lafayette’s aggregate income of $800,000 had raised $24,000 for the war effort. John Purdue had reported income of $50,000 (probably for the fiscal year ending June 30, 1863) and had paid the most tax—$1,500—in Tippecanoe County. Purdue had filed as a resident of Indiana rather than New York, although the amount he paid would have been the same in either state.

Purdue seized another chance to boost the war effort in December 1863. Public debate at that time examined from many angles the question of the extent to which bounties ought to be paid to men who volunteered for army service. The federal government gave an enlistee three hundred dollars. In Indiana some counties were adding fifty-dollar bonuses. “Citizen bounties” of up to one hundred dollars, from the private sector, were legal, too. By giving them, a rich man could pay a poor one to enlist in his place to avoid being drafted. In Lafayette the City Council in the

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25The public tax reports bore out street-talk that Purdue was but one of several giants of business, finance, and industry profiting in wartime Tippecanoe. Adams Earl in wholesaling; Moses Fowler in wholesaling, cattle-raising, and farming; and James Spears in banking and farming also paid taxes in four figures. Others in the highest bracket were banker and wholesaler John L. Reynolds, wholesale grocer Robert Hatcher, and the meatpacking and leather processing scion Henry T. Sample and his sons John and Robert. Samuel Favorite, in real estate and insurance sales, Samuel Curtis and Nathan Dodge, both now partners of Earl’s, wholesale grocer Oliver W. Peirce, and his foster father, banker Martin L. Peirce, also ranked among the leading county taxpayers.
fall of 1863 also voted to tax for a “city bounty fund” from which recruits could receive still more money. But a county judge, before protest litigation ever reached his docket, advised that any “city bounty” overstepped the state law. There followed a substitute effort to build a $10,000 fund of private donations so as to give each of the next 100 Tippecanoe recruits an extra hundred-dollar “citizen bounty.” The money could be used to help ensure that all townships met enlistment quotas set by federal and state military powers without resorting to a draft. John Purdue plunked down the first $1,000—ten percent of the goal—to start the campaign.

In the spring of 1864, Purdue again stepped forth, this time to help the local government. A little-remembered downside of the Civil War was the extent to which it drained the public treasuries of cities, towns, townships, and counties in Union and Confederate states alike. The pressure of mounting war debts—the bulk of it support payments to families of dead or active-duty soldiers and veterans—caused Tippecanoe County’s commissioners on May 2, 1864, to vote to borrow $10,000. John Purdue lent it, at the common rate of six percent interest per year.

Amid all his serious undertakings, however, evidence continued to mount of John Purdue’s generosity to friends and family. There had been two old chums from the Ohio days named William E. “Billy” Nagle and his wife Elizabeth. The Nagles had come to Tippecanoe County—maybe even before Purdue and Fowler in 1839—and had taken up farming in Shelby Township seven miles west of Lafayette. In 1843 they had named a newborn son John Purdue Nagle.

On December 13, 1863, the lad enlisted as replacement Private John P. Nagle with a Benton County company—Company D of the 10th Indiana Infantry Regiment—in the Civil War. However, in just five months Nagle died, probably of disease, at twenty-one. John Purdue is said in local lore to have paid Lafayette marble worker John W. Pampel to carve the dead soldier boy’s seven-foot monument, still conspicuous in the northeast corner of Montmorenci Cemetery. Pampel chiseled “J. Pampel” in half-inch letters on one
of the base stones. Certain other words and the last four lines in an eight-line poem remain legible today:

A TRIBUTE TO A VOLUNTEER

He died not on the battlefield
But His death was not less brave,
He freely gave his life away
His native land to save

In mid-May 1864, under Captain Leroy W. Greene (Chris Miller having had to resign for reasons of health), the Purdue Rifles volunteered for “hundred days” service as a company in the 135th Indiana Infantry Regiment. Indiana was raising several regiments from the ranks of local militia for nonhazardous duty at the time. On this their second tour of duty, the Purdue Rifles guarded railroads in Tennessee and northern Alabama. This freed experienced combat troops for General William Tecumseh Sherman’s offensive against Atlanta, Georgia. The hundred-day commitment would expire in late August, after which, with the tide of war favoring the Union, the Purdue Rifles would disband.

While the Purdue Rifles served in the South, and after certain political factors had fallen into place, a new Purdue-for-Congress movement sprang to life. Certain business and political friends (former Congressman Mace among them) persuaded Purdue to run on the Republican ticket which, in wartime, took the name Union Party. The Purdues, however, wanted no dirty hands; theirs was a genteel appeal to hand the office to Purdue on the proverbial silver platter—a naiveté that shortly vanished.

Republicans in Congress had struggled against a Democrat majority since 1862 with across-the-board public enmity, and bouts with President Lincoln were the bottom-line result. Congressman Godlove S. Orth, tarred by this same general brush,
ther miffed Republicans by allying with a faction that advocated a brutally hard line against the rebel Southern states. President Lincoln himself preferred a more humanitarian, forgiving rapprochement. Orth brashly ran for a second term anyway, in defiance of the voices crying that incumbents ought to be tossed out of Washington.

To block Orth’s renomination, to be boosted by a county Union Party primary on Saturday, July 16, leading to a congressional district Union Party convention on July 20, the Purdue-for-Congress committee formed in early June 1864. It drafted a glowing announcement for Lafayette newspapers and signed it WABASH. To their dismay, the pro-Lincoln Courier’s Lingle condemned the maneuver as being divisive at an hour when Union Party unity must prevail, and the supposedly Republican Lafayette Journal, for the moment run by an apolitical team of businessmen and practical printers, Seth Woolworth, W. H. Schuyler, and J. L. Batchelder, ignored Purdue’s candidacy and did not publicize it.

Surprisingly, editor Ransom Hastings’ pro-Democrat Lafayette Argus did print Purdue’s note of candidacy with an explanation: “That portion relating to Mr. Purdue as a citizen and one worthy to receive any honor his party may desire to confer upon him is pre-eminently just.” Clearly Hastings admired Purdue as a man-above-politics, noting that “as the fight is none of ours, and the circular is not being issued to catch Democrat votes... we are indifferent.”

The Purdue-for-Congress tract—for the few who read it—reviewed Purdue’s “long residence and extensive business” in Lafayette. It said that he was “emphatically a self-made man” unaided by family or the support of influential men or monied corporations. He built up his business “by his plain honest manner.” Purdue recently had “closed up this business in the most honorable and satisfactory manner” in Lafayette so as to engage in the “more hazardous and uncertain business of buying and selling on a large scale the products of the country” with success in New York. His boosters noted that Purdue always had shown patriotism and had been a “true friend of education.” The announcement claimed that no one had done more than Purdue to improve Lafayette.
“Many who never paid a poll tax are loud-mouthed about oppressive taxation levied to grade streets, make walks and otherwise beautify the city, yet Mr. Purdue, a large taxpayer, never complained but paid cheerfully.”

The announcement said that when the Indiana Supreme Court in the late 1850s had ruled against the special tax to support free schools, Purdue “in his wonted liberality stepped forward and contributed largely to keep [Lafayette’s] in operation.” The boosters cited the Purdue Rifles, formed “to prevent outbreak and mobs which [Purdue] plainly saw brewing” and other evidences of his wartime support of the Union, saying that “he has poured out his money like water.” The drafters of the message privately admitted that Purdue was a poor public speaker when compared to Orth, but they reasoned that men who “glibly abuse somebody or some party, say hard things and often coarse things and let it go out on the [news] wires to his constituents and the country then publish it elaborately in pamphlet form and frank it to his constituents” have no weight in the “solid work of Congress.” This work, Purdue’s backers insisted, ought to be “done by wise, far-seeing men in committee rooms.” The nation’s problems during the Civil War required “wise, just and honest legislation.” To frame such laws “will not be the business of flippant, stump speakers,” but will be done by the labor of “men of large minds and of tried and acknowledged financial abilities.”

For a few weeks the high-powered-operator Orth and Purdue forces sparred, seeming to be feuding at times then denying it in the interest of “party unity.” In the primary, Orth won seven Tippecanoe County townships by 339 votes. Purdue carried five townships by 174. The Courier sympathized with the novice Purdue against the political pro Orth in one instance: “It is understood that the hundred-day men at the front from this county held an election the other day and all went for Purdue, through the influence of the Purdue Rifles. This would probably give Mr. Purdue the county. The hundred-day men are entitled to vote, as they will be home in time for the [October] election.”

Lingle reported that on July 20 when the congressional district counties all met, Boone County “presented an olive branch of
peace” in a candidate named Doherty because so many voters were “disgusted with the disgraceful wrangle” between Purdue and Orth in Tippecanoe. Lingle insisted that the Courier’s only goal was success for the Union Party. “The contest between Orth and Purdue has developed animosities bitter and unrelenting,” he said. “The party has been well nigh crucified between the two. To nominate either would be suicidal folly.” The Journal, less interested in the matter, dismissed Purdue’s forces as Union Party “disorganizers.”

The district’s eight counties sent 253 delegates to attend the nominating convention. The Courier reported that “after two or three [counties] had voted, on motion Orth was declared the unanimous choice amid the loud cheers of the crowd.”

Placing Orth’s name on his front-page masthead as his paper’s choice for Congress, Lingle commented: “Orth’s renomination was at once so unanimous and enthusiastic that we defer all personal preferences to the popular choice and endorse his nomination as fit to be made. The claims of Mr. Purdue have been amply vindicated. His friends have no reason to complain. . . . We had thought a third man indispensable to success, but the popular demonstration in favor of Orth demonstrates his hold upon the confidence of the people.”

In the summer of 1864, the federal government raised the special wartime income tax to five percent. The Lafayette Journal printed a new list of Tippecanoe taxpayers, noting that John Purdue again paid the most—$2,500 on taxable income of $50,000. There is no testimony, nor documents nor other evidence to suggest that Purdue ever protested or tried to avoid payment. Because Purdue, Ward and Company was such a runaway moneymaker in New York, Purdue’s income rose further.26

26Figures published in the summer of 1865 listed Purdue’s taxable earnings as $90,000. Moses Fowler paid tax on $80,404, Spears $58,820. By that time Adams Earl had surpassed Purdue as the county’s biggest moneymaker and reported $103,000.
All the revealing income and tax data made Purdue and the other top-bracket community leaders targets for appeals for donations, loans, or invitations to invest. Lafayette interests, for instance, proposed to develop a lecture hall, reading room, and library “for the benefit of young people” during 1865. They solicited John Purdue who offered to buy one third of the stock. He is said to have asked, however, that they name it the Purdue Institute. For reasons unknown, the campaign never developed. Still, this brief episode gives pause to wonder, because:

1. Hepburn and Sears wrote that in his later years John Purdue’s confidence and independence “came to be regarded as egotism and obstinacy.”

2. Topping estimated the size of Purdue’s vanity as being “as wide as the Wabash River.”

3. The Courier’s Lingle wrote that in 1866 Purdue’s head became so filled with “the vanity of three peacocks as to match the size of the courthouse dome.”

The Purdue Institute matter at least suggests a starting point for this sad trend.

As the end of the war neared, Purdue dabbled in a few more farm real estate deals in Warren County. In 1864 he acquired two parcels from a certain Henry Smith; in 1865 he deeded four parcels, one to John Brisco and three to the widowed Elizabeth Heigh.

When the Civil War ended in April 1865, John Purdue, free of business demands, rich beyond measure, embraced change.
Hepburn and Sears maintained that John Purdue’s confidence and independence “came to be regarded as egotism and obstinacy.” They didn’t say how, but they did repeat an oft-quoted (albeit unsourced) Purdue boast that “I never made a mistake in business.” Regardless of whether Purdue ever dared to say such a thing, he would not have said it for long after the Civil War.

That is because so many things changed—his personality, career, luck, physical health, mental health, and reputation—beginning in 1865 when Purdue returned to Lafayette. At the time, however, his net worth of possibly a million dollars stood intact. He was a stout, silver-haired, icy-eyed sixty-two years old—“an old man according to the time scale of his day,” to quote Munro—respected, admired, envied, and beholden to no one. He had left Pearl Street and Manhattan behind because the booming profit in pork had vanished into the stillness at Appomattox. Back in Lafayette, with free time and leisure honorably earned, Purdue bade farewell to merchant life, having sold all to Adams Earl, and turned his adventures elsewhere. Instead of gold, it seemed the adventures of the Midas of the Wabash mostly sank in swamps of trouble.

Not one but several aggravating episodes stained the good name of Purdue and in the next eleven years rendered his estate, to quote Topping, “an executor’s nightmare.” That is because, in
John Purdue: The Midas of the Wabash

rapid succession and sometimes concurrently, Purdue became en-meshed in congressional politics again, newspaper ownership, implement manufacturing, silver and gold mining, cattle farming, banking, and railroading. Somehow in the middle of it all, he founded a state university.

A few subtitles would seem to be in order.

**1866: Purdue for Congress**

Lafayette Republicans wished to unseat Democrat Mayor Thomas Ward. Before the city elections in May 1865, they invited the regal Purdue to run against the dark-bearded, square-jawed thirty-year-old upstart lawyer. In criticism of Ward’s four years of stewardship and as inducement for Purdue to face this new challenge, the party insisted that Lafayette needed a public library, city hall, street railway, union station for the three railroads, and better streets. To their dismay, Purdue opted not to run, disillusioned perhaps by his loss to Orth in 1864—or miffed that a fund-raising committee would refuse to name the proposed Purdue Institute in his honor—or perhaps his friend the former congressman Daniel Mace again whispered “no.” It may be that Purdue had become spoiled by being his own boss for forty years. It could be, too, that he could not countenance the thought of courting a city council’s or voting public’s advice and consent for all his notions as mayor. In each scenario, a damaged or threatened ego played a role.

After Purdue’s snub, the party nominated a noted German émigré for mayor. He was George Ulrich, former city treasurer, who in 1864 had served the Lincoln Administration as U.S. Consul in Venezuela. Ulrich defeated Ward 1,123 votes to 783 and took office in mid-May. It was a victory that Purdue might just as surely have enjoyed, but Purdue stayed busy anyway. His reputation for wealth and generosity brought propositions—like moths to the lamp—from the sincere, the fraudulent, and the misguided alike.

Then in 1866, Purdue again seems to have pictured himself as a force in the U.S. Congress. This time Mace must have whispered “yes.” Again the chief foe was Godlove Orth. In 1864, facing a
little-known Democrat named Harney, Orth had carried Tippecanoe County by 650 votes and Warren by nearly 600 enroute to triumph by nearly 1,500 in the seven counties of the 8th District.

Orth again expected to win in 1866, but again heard whining from critics of his record in Washington. There Orth had remained with the radical forces of Thaddeus Stevens of Pennsylvania. Stevens’s Republican wing favored harsh, punitive treatment of the defeated South after the Civil War. Stevens led the “rads” in urging confiscation of Southern planters’ land. He favored tariffs, banking laws, and railroad subsidies tilted in favor of Northern business. After Lincoln’s assassination Stevens led a movement to impeach President Andrew Johnson. In Orth’s eyes, the martyred Lincoln and his successor Johnson had been too timid, too humane, and too easy on the defeated secessionist states and their leaders.

Orth, who was forty-nine years old in 1866, descended from Pennsylvania Moravians. He was once described as “portly in gait, confident in step, large in stature, rotund in shape, florid in complexion, complaisant in manners, well-dressed, the picture of health and good digestion.” He had been a lawyer, party chairman, and state legislator long before reaching Congress. Elected as a Whig to the Indiana Senate at age twenty-six, Orth had denounced slavery and preached national unity, which were mainstream views to be sure. Yet events in the 1850s turned him paranoid of Catholics, Mormons, foreigners, and nonwhites. As the Whig Party faded from power because of division within, Orth tiptoed into the short-lived, secret ranks of Know-Nothings. For a time he chaired that movement in Indiana. Know-Nothings sought political power through such unAmerican methods as bias and secrecy. Although they favored the widely acceptable goals of abolition of slavery, America first, temperance laws, and Protestantism, they opposed Catholics, Mormons, Jews, and foreigners.

Reformists in the pro-Union states, appalled by Know-Nothing tactics, founded an American Party, which would soon merge with the People’s Republican Party, then emerge as the Republican Party. In Indiana, the People’s Republican Party with the political butterfly Orth created a coalition for survival. In fact, Orth
John Purdue: The Midas of the Wabash

presided at Tippecanoe County’s first People’s Republican convention in 1854.

Against this background, the political novice John Purdue failed in 1864 but decided in 1866 to try more wholeheartedly than before to block Orth’s return to Congress subject to election on October 9. Orth again ran on a Union State (i.e., Republican) ticket. Democrats, labeling themselves the National Union Party, nominated no one to oppose the powerhouse Orth. But this time Purdue, backed by local fame, high-powered friends, his own lumpy bankroll at hand, and contempt for reconstruction platforms proposed by both of the major parties, took a different approach. By-passing the Union Party primary and district nominating convention—the process that betrayed him in ’64—he solicited (maybe paid) enough petitioners to place his name on the 8th District ballot as an Independent.

Purdue counted on help from his Ohio homeboy Mace, who unfortunately also liked and mentored Orth. In March 1866 (in Orth’s law office), a stroke crippled but did not quite kill Mace. Orth then nominated Mace for President Andrew Johnson’s appointment as Lafayette postmaster in May.

Purdue faced other obstacles. He enjoyed little name recognition in the other counties in the district other than Warren. He was considered to be a low-profile Republican, but he now openly preached compromise and treating of political foes with respect. Purdue said that he would “rather vote for a good Democrat than a bad Republican.” This admission of fragile partisanship, when quoted and cunningly whispered about by Orth and his forces, cost Purdue staunch Republican support in Lafayette, Covington, Crawfordsville, Delphi, Frankfort, Williamsport, and Lebanon, the seven courthouse towns in the district that were served by newspapers. Moreover, even Purdue’s best friends conceded that he was a hopeless public speaker with zero charisma. In person he now looked like a rich, gruff, overdressed, pompous, old fat man leaning on an expensively gilded walking stick. Even after all the years living away from the remote Germany valley, which he pronounced Chermany, Purdue never shook that region’s Deutsch-
English style, which was still visible in the wording of his letters. His political foes swiftly caught on and ridiculed Purdue’s clumsy phrases. By comparison, Orth seemed to be a soaring, star-quality orator, who packed such formidable reserve ammunition as the Congressional franking privilege.

In the way of further trouble, Purdue’s independence, which was seen by rising numbers of friends to be a rampant ego, repelled William S. Lingle, who was the mind, voice, and flannel-gray eyes of the afternoon daily Lafayette Courier, nor did Lingle lead applause for Orth, whom he still counted among the most radical of rads. It nettled Lingle that, at one rally early in 1866, Orth had bragged that his cohorts in Washington had pinned President Andrew Johnson down and were “rolling over him.” Lingle saw all the Thaddeus Stevenses and Orths as divisive forces in the Republican Party and sensed that there was wide disgust with smooth-talking pros like them. But when Purdue chose independence—to be managed by no one, a puppet of no one, listening to no one, obligated to no one, subject neither to platform nor party discipline, seeing good among all in politics—Lingle reached a wrenching decision. He and his influential newspaper declared support for any true and dependable Republican, even if he turned out to be “the devil hoofed and horned.”

1866–1876: The Lafayette Journal

To counter the prospect of Lingle using his Courier to boost Orth’s campaign, Purdue—wallet at the ready—tapped his assets for a reported $30,000. He bought control of the Courier’s morning rival, the Lafayette Journal, which had so disappointed him with its indifference in 1864. In this swift and brazen transaction, effected on July 1, 1866, Purdue uncaringly took over a historical treasure—the city’s oldest paper. True, the Journal had undergone several name changes since its debut as the Free-Press and Commercial Advertiser in 1829, but it sustained the proud claim of being the first.

The Journal deal showed Purdue’s hell-or-high-water resolve to win this election. Records are unclear as to chapter and verse of the
purchase. But it appears that Purdue paid James P. Luse and Seth B. Woolworth, who were partners at that time in what had been The Journal Company. With his potential ally Mace at the same time ill and obliged to be politically neutral in his new federal office of postmaster, Purdue, as much a novice in newspapering as in politics, employed James R. Ellis for “editorial work.” This included Journal management, strategic political advice, editorial, and speechwriting.27

Boarding the Purdue-for-Congress bandwagon and the Journal three months before the 1866 election slapped a “hired gun” label squarely upon Ellis, but also it added a credible Republican to Purdue’s effort. Financial terms of the Ellis hiring are unknown; however, Ellis was quality merchandise who labored for a premium price that Purdue didn’t mind paying.

There rapidly developed Courier versus Journal and Lingle versus Ellis subplots to the Orth versus Purdue campaign. Ellis in the Journal impishly referred to Courier editorials as having been written in “Linglish.” Lingle countered by calling Ellis’s paper the Daily Purdue.

Inept in many aspects of campaigning, John Purdue proved to be a master only at one thing—independence. Toward that end, he threw political savvy, logic, and common sense to the winds. Lingle proved to be a master, too—of slash-and-burn political journalism. One afternoon he wrote in the Courier:

Daily we have evidence of that wonderful intellect which in colossal grandeur o’ertops the small statesmen of the day. Mr. Pur-

27Ellis, a forty-six-year-old Ohioan, had started an 1840s newspaper in Goshen, Indiana, and had moved to Lafayette in 1850. He had taken over the pro-Democrat Courier in early 1851 and had run it as a party organ. But in the spring of 1854, Ellis, in a bold move that paralleled Daniel Mace’s, broke with the Democrats over slavery, reversed the Courier’s political support and, as the new Republican Party emerged, made the Courier one of the party’s early megaphones. Ellis sold the Courier to Lingle in 1857 and, cashing in on his admiration among Republicans, won elections in 1858 and 1862 as Tippecanoe County Clerk. During the Civil War, Ellis at times also helped Lingle weather manpower crunches at the Courier.
due says himself... that as he grows older his brain expands, and he takes “enlarged views,” not visible to the clouded comprehension of weaker minds. The expansion of his brain is such that in filling an order for a campaign hat the other day the hatter took the measure of the courthouse dome and it fit [Purdue] exactly.

1866: The Purdue-Orth Campaign

The campaign sizzled and sometimes flared. Lingle in print called Purdue “as illiterate as a pig” and declared him to be “as independent as a hog on ice.” Lingle would not forgive Purdue for breaking Republican ranks or buying the Journal, and he labeled the purchase price of $30,000 “the moral equivalent of thirty pieces of silver.” Dipping deep into his store of invective, Lingle set about to negate Purdue’s respected image of Honest John Purdue, the Honorable John Purdue, Judge Purdue and portrayed him as a vain, stammering, past-his-prime, corrupt old man who foolishly thought that he could buy his way into elected office.

Purdue, mostly through Journal articles ghostwritten if not completely created by Ellis, projected himself as a moderate statesman who sailed along above politics. With slavery broken by the 1863 Emancipation Proclamation, Purdue reasoned, the battles for universal freedom and equal protection of the law were nearly won. Except in a few minor ways, the secessionist states had been restored to the same basis as the loyal ones. As a businessman, Purdue said that he believed commerce deserved better representation in Congress and other levels of government.

Indebted neither to Republican nor Democrats, Purdue naively insisted that in the ordinary transactions of life, mutual concessions were routinely made by any and all honest and sincere men who wanted to do right. Therefore, in government, statesmen should strive to reconcile differences in that same spirit, seeing and accepting the good in opposing views. Purdue asserted that no political party had a monopoly on truth; that it was wise to learn from a foe. Purdue sprinkled these idealistic views across the district’s seven counties by having Ellis fill columns of reading
matter in the *Journal* with them. Purdue then hoped for agreement and copying by Republican and Democrat newspaper editors alike in 8th district newspapers. His high hopes were met only with disappointment. He knocked on no doors, and he stammered his way through only a few painful speeches. Purdue did not mince words regarding his disgust of politics or politicians. He insisted that, since the days of George Washington, politicians had led the United States down a path of corruption and even had caused the Civil War. He assailed polished politicians who were skilled in debate, tricky, and self-seeking—Orth being the ready example—and who outwitted honest, working people who knew ten times as much.

In Orth’s behalf, Lingle cast Purdue as “the independent money candidate” who possessed “more vanity than three peacocks.” Lingle contended that Purdue “spent money like water” trying to buy votes and that Purdue bought support from a “motley crew of renegade Republicans, venomous Copperheads, unpentent rebels, and political bounty jumpers.” Lingle further accused Purdue of importing and paying unregistered voters from Louisville, Kentucky; Logansport, Indiana; and Chicago—even from coal mines near Danville, Illinois, in “the most corrupt campaign in the history of American politics.”

In late afternoon on election day, before any polling places closed or any votes had been counted, Lingle even planted this sarcastic notice in his paper:

> We shall be at the *Courier* office from 9 to 10 o’clock each morning and from 4 to 6 o’clock each afternoon during the next 10 days to receive hats won by us on the election. We shall open a hat store about November 1.

Typical of the 1860s, it took several days to count and judge the validity of marked paper ballots in seven counties. While waiting, Lingle confidently wrote in the *Courier* of October 10 that “the unbought and unpurchaseable rads are in the majority. The returns are not all in, but there are enough to indicate the result. Orth is
elected by at least three hundred majority, which, when we consider the corrupt means and appliances of the most disgraceful movement in the history of American politics, is satisfactory.” In the end, Orth won by 205 votes.

Purdue won in Tippecanoe, Fountain, Montgomery, and Carroll counties, lost badly in Warren and Boone, and fell by four votes in Clinton. Although Orth drew just 50.34 percent of the district votes, 14,933 to 14,728, Purdue requested no recount. Ellis and Purdue crafted their essay of concession Thursday morning, October 11, in a *Journal* analysis headlined “Mr. Purdue’s Defeat—The Reasons Why.”

It claimed that fear of being called deserters of their principles deterred hundreds of Republicans from voting for Purdue. This despite the fact that Purdue’s credentials “should have been enough to satisfy any and every person that he was as good a Union man, as true a Republican, as any man in the district.” The concession article also protested that Orth imported “hundreds of illegal voters,” especially into Clinton and Carroll.

“The strong hands of party ties is another reason to assign for Mr. Purdue’s defeat,” the analysis continued. “Had it not been that the Democrats and Republicans had, early in the season, nominated party tickets for state and county offices . . . hundreds of men who voted for Orth would have voted for Purdue. The fear of losing the state or county ticket, the fear of breaking up ‘our’ party, deterred many from voting their honest sentiments. [But] the result in Tippecanoe shows that on a straight test between Orth and Purdue, where they are both equally well-known, Orth would be overwhelmingly defeated.”

For Purdue’s defeats in Carroll and Clinton counties his *Journal* singled out for blame “illiterate nincompoops” who edited supposedly pro-Democratic newspapers in Delphi and Frankfort, but printed little about Purdue, Orth’s only foe. In the *Courier* later that day, Lingle riposted: “Illiterate nincompoops is good, and when we consider the eminent talents and attainments of the Purdue [Journal] editor and proprietor—it [illiterate nincompoops] is first rate—the best thing of all the humors of the campaign.”
John Purdue lost an election, money, assorted friends, and respect. He shortly even lost Dan Mace. Enduring a life lately turned dismal by his stroke, Mace committed suicide with a pistol in August 1867. Yet, after such losses, so rare and so public in his life, old John Purdue recovered and barged into bold and diverse new adventures.

1865–1876

**Walnut Grove Farm**

Purdue’s involvement in cattle raising is an important yet confounding phase of his life. It appears that he began acquiring land from Charles Heigh in 1858–1859. For reasons and by means that remain unclear, Purdue accumulated hundreds of acres in addition to the original Walnut Grove Farm in southeastern Warren County. Land transaction books in the Warren County Recorder’s office show that Purdue acquired eight parcels from Heigh’s widow, Elizabeth, in 1866, eight from Heigh’s son Alvin in 1867, eleven in a sale conducted by Sheriff Harmon M. Billings in 1868, six from the guardian of William Heigh in 1870, six from Jacob F. Marks in 1871, and one from Sheriff M. J. Haines’s sale in 1872. He eventually owned about 2,020 acres in four townships, and it became collectively known as the Walnut Grove Farm—the centerpiece being the original 1,695-acre grain and livestock farm, most of it in Prairie Township.

How it all came together remains a mystery. On one hand, Purdue seems to have bought the main farm from Charles Heigh in 1858–1859; however, a legal advertisement published in the *Republican* on November 22, 1866, announced an administrator’s private sale of land known as the “Walnut Grove Farm” to be held on December 27. The long, legal description named twelve parcels totaling 1,695 acres. Levin T. Miller, administrator of the estate of Charles Heigh, said in the ad that the Common Pleas Court of Warren County had ordered the farm to be sold to pay debts against Heigh’s estate. Miller would take bids for the parcels “in a body, as
one farm” and sell it “subject to a specific lien on the lands of $30,401 payable on March 1, 1868, to John Purdue, of Lafayette, Ind.” Whether Heigh sold Purdue the land and then tried to buy it back but could not is unknown, but it is a possibility.

This still leaves unanswered the question of how Heigh had come to be so heavily in debt to John Purdue. Again, only speculation can fill the vacuum of facts. He might have borrowed from Purdue to buy the land back, but could not farm it profitably enough to maintain payments. Heigh might have incurred the debt for himself, a friend, or a relative to stock and start up a dry goods store in Warren County or to buy expensive imported cattle and could not make a go of it. The debt, with interest, would have kept mounting, leading to litigation.

According to the legal ad, Heigh had used the land for several years as one entire livestock farm that was twenty-five miles southwest of Lafayette, ten miles northwest of Williamsport, and eight miles north of West Lebanon, the latter town situated on the Toledo, Wabash & Western Railroad. The land consisted of meadows and pastures of timothy, clover, and bluegrass. The actual grove contained three hundred fifty acres of walnut, white oak, burr oak, hickory, elm, and hackberry timber that were preserved because lumber for buildings, fencing, and other improvements to the farm had been hauled in from elsewhere.

Heigh, whose name also appears as High in public records, had divided the farm into pastures and meadows of “convenient size,” to quote the sale ad. An abundance of springs watered all pastures. An orchard contained grafted fruit trees “of the ordinary fall and winter varieties.” Two orchards of young fruit trees had begun to bear. One “substantial” brick house and three “good frame houses” were used as dwellings, in addition to two other small frame houses. The farm contained six wells “with plenty of good water for the use of the dwellings and stock kept in barns . . . there are good barns, stables and carriage houses, outhouses, etc. The whole farm is under excellent fencing, a great part of which is almost entirely new.”

Interestingly, the ad emphasized that the sale would “be made for not less than the appraised value, one-fourth of the purchase
money down, one-fourth in six months, one-fourth in twelve months, one-fourth in eighteen months.” Details of John Purdue’s acquisition, or reacquisition, of the property are lost portions of the puzzle. The following facts-in-hand provide too few clues to assemble any full picture:

- On July 25, 1867, the *Warren Republican* contained a legal notice of a forthcoming sheriff’s sale ordered by the Boone County Circuit Court in Lebanon, Indiana, in settlement of a case in which the widow Elizabeth Heigh lost a complaint against John Purdue. On Wednesday, August 14, 1867, at Williamsport, Sheriff Billings would sell “the rents and profits for a term not exceeding seven years of the plaintiffs’ entire interest . . . in 1,354 (sic) acres in Warren County known as the Walnut Grove Farm.” The Boone court had ordered the property—owned by Elizabeth Heigh and thirteen others, six of them minors—to be seized and sold to satisfy the judgment rendered in favor of Purdue. “And on failure to realize the full amount of judgment, interest and costs,” the notice concluded, the sheriff would “sell plaintiffs’ entire interest in the land or as much as will satisfy the execution.”

The information suggests that:

1. The widow Heigh and others, probably family members and members-in-law, had retained possession of the land at the sale of December 27, 1866.
2. Mrs. Heigh and the others had been unable to retire any of the debt to John Purdue, who threatened to sue to recover his loan.
3. Mrs. Heigh and the others filed some sort of action to block Purdue from suing.
4. *High v. Purdue* had been venued to the Boone County court where Purdue’s side had prevailed.

- On August 29, 1867, a *Warren Republican* legal notice suggested that the same scheduled sheriff’s sale had been postponed until September 21, 1867. It appears, although proof
cannot be found, that Purdue gained permanent possession of the land at that time, and that, as part of a presumably friendly agreement, Mrs. Heigh negotiated with Purdue to keep her home and eighty acres while he took over all of her former property around it.

John Purdue’s presence in Warren County grew more inexplicable when on December 29, 1870, the Warren Republican in a list of delinquent property taxpayers for 1869 showed Purdue owing $50.38 for thirty-three acres in Section 2 of Jordan Township, and more than $700 on seven parcels in Sections 35 and 36 in Prairie Township. Applying the same general tax levy, the seven delinquent parcels in Prairie appear to have totaled about four hundred sixty acres. These delinquencies may have been oversights, for Purdue easily could have afforded to pay and never was known to dodge or even complain about property taxes. Still, such oversights did not become such a skilled businessman and model citizen.

Eventually Purdue did send to Columbus, Ohio, for the grandnephew John W. Prosser to come and run the Warren County property. Purdue is said to have built an additional home for young Prosser, his wife, and sons on Walnut Grove Farm. When the nephew died of illness, Purdue supported the surviving widow, paid to educate the sons Franklin and Charles, and arranged to keep the farm profitably productive of livestock and grain by hiring other tenants. The widow Prosser remarried in 1867 to Joshua Anderson. Later Purdue bought some two hundred fifty more acres and expanded all operations.

One Warren County atlas from the period described Purdue’s holdings as lying in a well-fenced area in which “no stock is allowed to run at large,” adding that the Walnut Grove Farm comprised “a tract of beautiful land containing enough for half a dozen farms.” When viewed at its maximum size, Purdue’s holdings appear to have included eighty acres in Section 31 of Pine township, one hundred sixty-eight acres in Section 2 of Jordan Township, three hundred thirty-two acres in Section 1 of Liberty Township, and 1,360 acres in all or parts of Sections 25, 35, and 36 in Prairie Township. Mrs. Heigh retained eighty acres in Section 35.
Despite the flourish of John Purdue’s personal interest and legal activity in his Walnut Grove Farm, the legacy was relatively short-lived. A township map from the period showed the walnut grove sprawling across parts of Sections 35 and 36. The same map marked a prominent “mound” at the grove’s south edge, near “stock scales” situated on a graded public road. A Walnut Grove post office, later abandoned, stood at a road junction half a mile from the nearest Purdue property. There never was so much as a town, a store, maybe never even a house by the post office, however. A Warren County history published in 1882 mentioned many obscure crossroads communities but no Walnut Grove post office, no Walnut Grove Farm and, for that matter no John Purdue. His farming adventure, in the great scheme of things, was but a blink of an eye in Warren County lore.

Elsewhere

In Ohio, meanwhile, family called. From the Spencer House in Cincinnati, Purdue in English that needed to be deciphered, offered money and plans to a nephew whom he addressed as “John W. Prosser Esqr., East Orange, Delaware County, Ohio:"

I thought I would say to you that if [a] lot of ground above Thompson’s could be bought for 12 or 1300$ [$1,200 or $1,300] and you put some of your outstanding debts in and [i.e., then] I would furnish you the balance of the money to pay for it and let the property then belong to you instead of me and let your mother [Sarah Purdue Prosser] and William [John W. Prosser’s younger brother] have it to live on during her life time provided you would like to do so.

Very respectfully, John Purdue

Beyond his ongoing good works, if Purdue indulged any real extravagance outside of dining it was train travel, and Walnut Grove Farm ultimately played a role in that. He was known to leave his permanent home in the Lahr House in Lafayette any time whim or business dictated. Munro’s studies caused him to report
that Purdue regularly traveled to Ohio, Connecticut, or New York; occasionally to Minnesota, Denver, or Cincinnati, and in some seasons made almost weekly trips to Walnut Grove Farm. “The train ride to West Lebanon was short, but it sufficed,” Munro said. “It was one real estate holding in which he evinced interest and showed pleasure in ownership.”

In his travels Purdue added to his library, too, and enjoyed newspaper reading. Periodicals found in his estate show particularly his interest in religion: an 1865 copy of *Christian Witness* from Columbus, Ohio; an 1864 *Gospel Herald* (The Organ of the Christian Denomination in the West) from Eaton, Ohio; the *Herald of Gospel Liberty* from Dayton, Ohio.

In December 1866, Purdue sold two thirds of his stake in the Lafayette *Journal* to Dundy James and Charles C. Emmons, who began running the paper as James, Emmons and Company. Purdue continued to wield business and editorial influence, however. It may be that he kept his share of ownership as a business investment as well as a power source. Soon he used the cash from the sale of the paper for another adventure.

**1867–1875: The Lafayette Agricultural Works**

In the fall of 1867 John Purdue invested thousands of dollars in a struggling implement factory he renamed the Lafayette Agricultural Works. Henry M. Carter, an implement dealer; Cyrenius Johnson, hardware, implement, and seed retailer; John G. Sample, officer in his family’s meatpacking plant; and Relief Jackson, merchant tailor had run the business as Carter, Johnson and Company. Their men had been bolting together wood and iron components to make mechanical reapers and selling them from buildings near Third and Mechanic Streets. But on October 10 Purdue and a tight ring of friends—attorneys William C. Wilson and Hiram Chase and banker Martin L. Peirce among them—formed a stock company over which Purdue presided. Carter stayed on as factory superintendent. Carter, Johnson and Company swapped the land,
buildings, machinery, and tools they had been using for $30,000 worth of stock in the Purdue group’s new Agricultural Works.

After contracting for construction of more factory space, the Purdue company secured the rights to make and sell patented Buckeye brand reapers, mowers, and smaller implements. A supportive story in Lingle’s Courier of December 11—the 1866 political attacks on Purdue either forgiven or forgotten—provided a glimpse of the new operation’s “busy hum.” Purdue’s group had built a brick office and storeroom and converted an old office into a repair shop. The new owners also remodeled a warehouse for a paint shop. The complex contained a machine shop, moulding room, wood shop, and blacksmith shop, all of which reportedly moved “like clockwork.” The workers had begun assembling eight hundred Buckeye reapers and mowers.

Lafayette city directories listed Purdue as president of the Lafayette Agricultural Works from 1868 to the mid-1870s. By that time Purdue also had obtained rights to make and sell Planet as well as Buckeye machinery. The Works appears to have at least broken even for a few years, but it succumbed to competition and/or poor management and workmanship, compounded by a lawsuit filed by Purdue against Carter in 1875. Topping tersely dismissed the venture as having been one that “produced equipment farmers seemed not to want,” and one that skimmed more money from Purdue’s fortune. Hepburn and Sears opined that “incompetence and extravagance of [Purdue’s] associates wrecked this business.” But these are oversimplifications. The Agricultural Works actually outlived John Purdue by several years. His estate was able to sell it for $19,000. Its demise as a Lafayette industry, however, soon followed.

1868–1869: Springvale Cemetery

John Purdue contributed money and lent his time and name in December 1868, when important business friends, Martin Peirce and Relief Jackson among them, organized the Springvale Cemetery
Association. The ownership syndicate bought wooded and ravined acres along and north of Linnwood Gravel Road two miles northeast of Lafayette. The founders contracted to clear surplus timber and to fence and gate the grounds. Laborers shoveled in gravel walks and a carriage drive called Central Avenue and built a bridge over a ravine. Dedication took place at Consecration Dell near the bridge on October 17, 1869. Purdue served as Springvale Cemetery Association president for seven years, succeeded by Peirce. Jackson was vice president; John Levering secretary, treasurer, and superintendent. Also in early 1869 four other concerns called Purdue’s attention to the workings of the Indiana General Assembly when it convened at Indianapolis. The four had to do with politics, banking, railroading, and higher education.

1869: Lafayette Savings Bank

Republicans controlled the 1869 Indiana House and Senate by large majorities, but the majorities quickly became embroiled in an intraparty squabble over the election of a successor to U.S. Senator Thomas A. Hendricks. Democrats in control in 1863 had elected Hendricks for a six-year term. In 1869, after the Republican deadlock strained nerves for four days in January, one Indiana newspaper suggested John Purdue for the job. The editorial said that Purdue “has always taken a most lively interest in public affairs—and upon vital issues has generally advocated the cause of the people. . . . As a financier he has no equal in the state. . . . Strictly honest and upright . . . Mr. Purdue [would] give us a senator of whom we can all be proud. Let ‘Honest John’ be the watch word.”

The identities of that newspaper and writer are unknown. Yet the article is genuine, preserved in the Alameda McCollough Library of the Tippecanoe County Historical Association. Nevertheless, the legislators bypassed the anonymous advice to select Purdue and instead chose Daniel D. Pratt, a Logansport lawyer.

The General Assembly, meanwhile, considered a second matter that had gained John Purdue’s support, advice, and leadership.
A cadré of Lafayette elite interested in starting a new sort of bank had, as early as April 1868, named Purdue as their president. At that time no Indiana law provided for savings banks. Purdue’s friend Martin Peirce, who had been in banking since 1853, suggested that Purdue and the rest of the would-be founders lobby for a permissive law. Peirce envisioned a limited-service bank designed only to receive small sums on deposit, to lend them at interest, and to return them on call with interest. Attorney Hiram W. Chase wrote the bill to authorize such banks. Senator John A. Stein, a Republican attorney from Lafayette, guided the bill through the 1869 legislature. As a result, the Lafayette Savings Bank opened for business on July 1, 1869. During the bank’s first two years, Purdue presided.\(^{28}\)

In 1871 Purdue retired from the presidency, understandably because he was chin-deep in other pursuits. One of these had to do with trying to start a state college of agriculture, military science, and mechanical arts. A much-repeated story holds that Purdue and Peirce, while they were buggying in the new Springvale Cemetery, rolled by one man’s ornate stone monument that was rumored to have cost $25,000. Purdue condemned it as a shameful waste of money. Peirce remarked that a more suitable, lasting, and useful monument for a person of John Purdue’s stature would be a college bearing Purdue’s name.

1869–1875: Lafayette, Muncie & Bloomington Railroad

During the same spring and summer that Purdue eyed the statewide bidding for the new college, another venture touched his public spiritedness—and siphoned his money: the Lafayette, Muncie & Bloomington Railroad Company (LM&B).

\(^{28}\text{Peirce and Rudolph S. Ford, retired teacher, merchant, meatpacker, church leader, and long-time school board member, filled vice presidencies. Attorney Will S. Peckham because the new bank’s secretary-treasurer.}\)
Some of the biggest names in Lafayette business, industry, and banking backed the LM&B and populated its highest ranks. These men believed that profit and long-range community good would come from completing an east-west railroad from Muncie, Indiana, to Bloomington, Illinois, by way of Lafayette. This route made at least some sense, because on February 28, 1867, an Illinois charter had authorized formation of a Lafayette, Bloomington, and Mississippi Railroad Company. This company set about to build eighty miles of track from Bloomington eastward in the direction of Lafayette. The track ended at the Illinois-Indiana state line, at the southwest corner of Benton County, Indiana, with the expectation that an Indiana stockholder group would extend track to Lafayette. At about the same time Ohio investors began linking Sandusky on Lake Erie with Muncie. So Muncie-to-Bloomington tracks would connect north-central Indiana with Great Lakes shipping and with the Illinois Central railroad leading north to Chicago and south to New Orleans.

In early 1869 the Indiana General Assembly voted to boost the state’s economy by encouraging the building of more overland roads, bridges, and railroads to woo industry and create jobs. With this goal in mind, legislators passed a significant amendment to railroad laws. It enabled city and county governments to give public money to railroad builders or to invest public money in new railroad stock, if referenda showed majority consent. Laws of the 1840s already provided ways to organize railroad companies, obtain charters and rights-of-way, invoke the power of eminent domain, raise money, contract, build, and enter into business. The 1869 law added a useful new way of raising capital aside from selling private stock.

In Lafayette after passage of the law, discussions took place on June 10, 1869, in the law office of Hiram Chase and John Wilstach. Three men connected with Lafayette banks, flouring mills, or other enterprises—Adams Earl, Robert Breckenridge, and Henry S. Mayo—accepted the offices of president, secretary, and treasurer, respectively. On July 13, they incorporated the LM&B in Indiana. John Purdue readily gave $5,000 in an expression of “patriotism” for Tippecanoe County. He would give much more.
The LM&B prepared petitions in Delaware, Madison, Tipton, Clinton, Tippecanoe, and Benton counties (principal cities included Muncie, Alexandria, Tipton, Elwood, Frankfort, and Lafayette) for referenda on whether these counties would invest public tax money. Under terms of the new law, the amount invested could not exceed two percent of the value of taxable property, less the amount of any bonded debt already owed by a county. Benton County voted 607 to 98 in favor of subscribing $45,000 (soon trimmed to $40,000 to fit the debt limit), and certain well-heeled citizens of Benton gave $60,000 more.

Government in the more populous Tippecanoe County could invest up to $373,000 in the stock and stay within its debt limit. Brisk public debate about doing so ensued. The county commissioners scheduled the Tippecanoe referendum for Saturday, August 28, 1869. Railroad meetings as they were called—some stacked with LM&B backers, some with foes, and some with both—took place before the vote in rural towns and townships.

On August 18, the Lafayette Courier published a long notice prepared by eight of the leading Tippecanoe investors in the LM&B. They were John Purdue, his former protégé Moses Fowler, Purdue’s banking partners Martin Peirce and Hiram Chase, merchant Adams Earl, contractor and merchant Owen Ball, and meatpackers J. H. Telford and Henry T. Sample. In their notice, these “big eight” businessmen urged voters to approve Tippecanoe County government investment LM&B stock on August 28.

In their joint statement, the big eight further pointed out that about 42,000 miles of railroads existed in the nation with 2,700 miles of them in Indiana. They declared that farm and other property values had soared after being given railroad service and that east-west railroads were doing “good business,” while some north-south routes suffered. The LM&B would provide Tippecanoe County with “advantageous connections.”

The route from Muncie to the Illinois line would require about one hundred fifteen miles of mainline track, plus switching areas, wait zones, and spurs. In their notice, the big eight predicted rising local property values, larger profit for existing businesses, and
the arrival of new businesses and industries along the finished LM&B. They lamented that apathy had nipped other recent railroad proposals and warned that "a little more folding of the arms, and Lafayette will be a finished town."

Tippecanoe voted to purchase stock and left the amount to be decided by the county commissioners, but the referendum reflected sharp division between heavily populated townships (for) and lightly populated or distant townships (against). Four precincts in Fairfield Township (Lafayette) backed LM&B investment by a vote of 2,833 to 288. Shelby Township, squarely on the route of the rails, supported investment 160 to 24. The "nays"—voters who were further from the proposed route or on the tracks of other railroad lines—carried Washington Township (Buck Creek, Colburn, Americus) 259 to 8, Tippecanoe Township (Battle Ground) 363 to 17, Lauramie Township (Stockwell, Clarks Hill) 124 to 23, and Perry Township (Monitor) 179 to 24.

Construction of the LM&B began in central Indiana in late summer 1869. The railroad should have opened in 1871, but litigation over land acquisition, building contracts, management decisions, and other issues raised costs and delayed the opening until 1874. Infighting persisted from the beginning.29

When the Indiana tracks were ready, Toledo, Wabash & Western Railroad officials tried to run their trains on them. Their "Wabash" line, which had connected Detroit and St. Louis via Lafayette since 1856, also owned (by the 1870s) the tracks from Bloomington, Illinois, to the state line. By running trains over the new Indiana sections of the LM&B, the Wabash would establish a standing in court in a bitter lawsuit that followed. In fact, the bitterness set in before the lawsuit. The Indiana track-builders at

29In his history of Benton County that was published in 1928, Jesse Setlington Birch reported that neither his county’s public treasury nor any individual subscribers "ever received a dollar in return for money given." Birch blamed "chicanery and theft" under the guise of "high financing." He noted that the LM&B changed owners several times and nearly became a subdivision of the Toledo, Wabash & Western.
times would learn that at a certain hour the Wabash would try to cross the state line and run a train to Lafayette. An LM&B special would leave Lafayette and pick up armed men at each station until 300 could be delivered to the state line. The arrivals would dig a deep ditch and wave shotguns to block the Wabash shovelers and hammerers from connecting the rails.

Meanwhile, shortly after the shiny new Indiana tracks crossed Benton County a rival Cincinnati, Lafayette & Chicago (CL&C) extension opened to Chicago. This line diverged from the LM&B at Templeton in southeast Benton County and ran northwest to Kankakee, Illinois. Moses Fowler, Adams Earl, and others backed this route for their own reasons.

The CL&C and the LM&B fought over use of one set of tracks from Lafayette to Templeton. At one time seven or eight trains owned by the companies stalled in the level country between Otterbein and Templeton, blockaded from coal and water and unable to turn a wheel. Armed LM&B men also guarded switches at Templeton. Rival train crews sometimes hopped down from their engines and cabooses to battle with sticks, clubs, and fists.

Fowler and Earl—notable investors in the LM&B and CL&C—fomented the control and policy problems within the LM&B. They owned an estimated 45,000 acres of swampy grassland in central and northern Benton County. After draining and fencing it, they broke the sod, planted corn, and began making fortunes feeding cattle for market. Hiram Chase, Henry Sample, and his banker son, Robert, employed similar business strategies on Benton County acreage. The LM&B crossed Benton County too far south of their land to suit Fowler, Earl, et al., so they built their CL&C northwest from Templeton.

Earl, like Purdue and Fowler, had migrated to Indiana from Ohio. He had farmed southwest of Lafayette as early as 1837, then built flatboats for use on the Wabash River, delved briefly in distilling, then in feeding beef cattle for sale to Eastern markets. He then joined his brother-in-law Fowler in a Lafayette grocery wholesaling business, leaving others to run his 1,600-acre Shade-
land Farm. Earl and Fowler even capitalized and opened a banking office in connection with their wholesaling. They began buying their Benton County land, and when it was ready, they stocked it with cattle to be fattened for Eastern buyers. A man named Gustavus Ricker joined Earl and Fowler in building the section of the CL&C that linked Lafayette with Indianapolis to the south and Kankakee, Illinois, to the northwest. Earl and Fowler insisted that the LM&B and the CL&C freely share common track from Three Mile Switch east of Lafayette to Templeton—track that LM&B men had built. LM&B managers, on advice from John Purdue and others possessing sound business sense, refused to share for free. This ignited a lengthy, expensive legal battle.

Fowler and Earl became so powerful in rural Benton County that they were able to influence county commissioners to move the county seat from Oxford, on the LM&B, to the town Fowler and his wife, Eliza, platted on the CL&C and named Fowler. Fowler and Earl even paid $40,000 toward building the new courthouse in Fowler. Earl became an importer from England of purebred Hereford cattle, which he kept at Shadeland Farm and on his 20,000 Benton County acres.

Hiram Chase, who was associated with the LM&B, the Lafayette Savings Bank, and other ventures involving John Purdue, owned several thousand acres in southern Benton County. The LM&B community of Chase bears his name. The Samples bought 7,800 acres in Benton County. Lafayette banker and businessman Joseph Heath, who was an LM&B officer for a while, held 4,000 acres.30

30 Others on the roster of Hoosier “cattle barons”—none from Lafayette—were Anson Wolcott, Cephas Atkinson, Parnham Boswell, James Goodwine, LeRoy Templeton, and Alexander Kent. The crossings, depots, and towns of Wolcott, Atkinson, Boswell, Templeton, and Kentland echo and honor their names. From this level northwestern Indiana area cattle at first had to be driven overland to New York buyers. The grazing land lay far from any viable railroads and seemed so waterlogged as to be dismissed by many as hopeless swamp. This flat, prairie land could be bought for as little as a dollar an acre.
The rapid growth of the cattle-feeding industry in the prairies of Indiana after 1850 occurred because of a plentiful supply of cheap corn, a growing demand for beef in the East, and the treeless, horizon-to-horizon grassland that at first invited open-grazing—free and accessible to anyone’s livestock. Fowler and Earl started with native-grade Indiana cattle. However, by 1868 they were fattening better-quality stock from Texas; by the 1870s, they were raising English Herefords.

Starting in the 1850s the various “barons” hired men to drive their cattle overland to New York. This ended, however, with arrival in Benton County of the LM&B and CL&C. With livestock cars available, a railroad shipment of cattle could reach New York in three days instead of a month, with minimal loss of life or weight.

Understandably, Fowler and Earl took a monetary and leadership interest in building the second railroad. Theirs opened in 1872, two years before the LM&B fully crossed Indiana. From Three Mile Switch east of Lafayette, the LM&B veered east to Muncie, and the short line (a nickname for the CL&C) connected to older track that led southeast to Indianapolis.

Fowler and Purdue, who had been friends and partners for so long, clashed over the proposition that the CL&C pay a lump sum or an amount based on usage for using the crucial nineteen miles of track. A clique led by Fowler and Earl failed to take over the LM&B. Undaunted, they devised other schemes to run the line into bankruptcy, then take it over by court order. During this battle in the early 1870s, stockholders voted John Purdue—a powerless and angered spectator with a big investment—on then off the LM&B board of directors as the battle for control ebbed and flowed.

Apart from the rivalry with the CL&C builders, lawsuits piled up between the LM&B and certain of its unpaid contractors. The LM&B flung more lawsuits at property owners from which it obtained right-of-way. When the LM&B finished grading and bridging eighty-three miles between Lafayette and Muncie, it owed contractors more than $150,000. It eventually came to light that during this brushfire John Purdue, foolishly it seemed even at the time, had signed personal notes totaling a staggering $600,000 that guar-
anteed bank loans to finish the LM&B construction. Purdue’s help estranged him from Fowler, Earl, and their allies. But Fowler eventually agreed to lease the nineteen miles at issue from the LM&B.

Perhaps it was John Purdue’s love of railroad travel, his fear of having invested in a losing proposition, or a desire to save face that motivated him to recklessly contract on his own to build some of the LM&B track between Lafayette and Tipton, Indiana. He may have had the ego and the money to do so, but he lacked the know-how, the connections, and the style that were needed to deal with a number of impatient and at times angry underlings or hirelings under stress, not to mention contractors and critical or suspicious stockholders. As Hepburn and Sears tiptoed over the situation, Purdue “incurred heavy responsibility” by signing his respected name to secure so many notes to pay LM&B construction loans.

As time passed, other friendships became bitterly strained. Purdue doggedly held on as president of the Lafayette Agricultural Works for more than two years. Then in 1870 John Sample and Moses Fowler, with heavy investment from Henry Sample, opened Lafayette Manufacturing Company. Its factory hands built plows, corn planters, and other implements and competed for sales directly with reapers and mowers made at Purdue’s Lafayette Agricultural Works.

Amid these aggravations and setbacks, Purdue also remained tangled, albeit invisibly, in the management of the Journal. On January 1, 1869, James and Emmons, to whom Purdue had sold two-thirds interest in 1866, conveyed their interest in the paper to Septimius Vater and Ben Barron. After Barron’s death in 1871 the management firm began to be listed as S. Vater & Company. Even then, Purdue retained one-third ownership, presumably with full rights to question and complain.

1870–1875: Gold and Silver Mining, Etc., Etc.

In about 1870, John Purdue embarked on still another stressful, tangled, and expensive adventure. Doctor Anderson Moore, a Lafayette dentist, presided over a scheme which welcomed Purdue’s dollars
and borrowed his honored name: the Purdue Gold and Silver Mining and Ore Reduction Company. Moore and certain other Lafayette men of means expected to profit from mining a claim 8,500 feet above sea level in the Rocky Mountains. Their claim lay near Georgetown, Colorado, fifty miles west of Denver. When it was purchased, the Lafayette group’s holdings were said to contain valuable underground silver deposits in a formation known as the Dives Lode. Some extravagant estimates valued extractable ore from the property as being worth up to $5,000,000. Lafayette attorneys John Coffroth and Samuel Baird teamed with Doctor Moore as officers in the company. Coffroth, in fact, presided over a second venture known as the Oshkosh Silver Mining Company, but there was no payoff for John Purdue or the “Purdue Company,” and litigation even developed over access to the Dives Lode.31

* * *

All the while, Purdue left behind more examples of his generosity and his interest in education. In 1872 he gave Buchtel College (later the University of Akron), in Akron, Ohio, $1,000, payable at his death, for a scholarship.

“No less creditable than his more spectacular gifts,” according to Hepburn and Sears, “was the cheerfulness with which Purdue, one of the heaviest taxpayers in his county, always met assessments on the [local public secondary] school tax. . . . Beneath a somewhat gruff exterior he had a warm heart,” especially where family was concerned.

31Purdue did receive one modest cash windfall in 1875. Tippecanoe County government bought the Brown Street and the Main Street bridges from their private ownership companies for $50,000 and made both bridges toll-free. Purdue also made money, as he always seemed to have, in real estate deals. On April 26, 1873, to cite one example, he sold one third of Lot 19 in the Purdue Block for a business space for $3,500.
In one of the few existing examples of his writing, dated March 2, 1873, he advises his sister Eliza to sell some Ohio land and invest the proceeds. Property is excellent collateral, he counseled, but “money loaned at fair interest is better than property.” In the same letter Purdue, at age seventy, revealed that “I have not been well this last year but am pretty well again.” It was obvious to his closest friends that his physical as well as mental health was slipping.

The pressure of stressful involvements could account for the failing health. Purdue became so busy in one year that Munro devoted an entire section of his monograph to John Purdue in 1874. In it Munro said that Purdue “was a man of many interests and diverse activities . . . [and] was very close-mouthed about his affairs. Only a fragmentary knowledge of those scattered activities can now be secured.” Two examples of the “scattered activities” are to be found in newspaper items from February 1874.

- Purdue and C. H. Kirkpatrick, who was probably Henry Carter’s assistant superintendent at the Lafayette Agricultural Works, attended a convention of inventors at Indianapolis, where Purdue advocated new regulations having to do with licensing patents.
- A week later Purdue spoke up, probably at a Lafayette City Council meeting, about a Fourth Street bridge that needed to be replaced.

It was a busy and presumably profitable year at the Agricultural Works. The Lafayette Journal on March 10, 1874, said that during the previous week one hundred twenty-five factory
workers had drawn wages averaging nine dollars each. The *Journal* (one-third still owned by Purdue) then ventured the buttered opinion, probably Vater’s, that “a few more such establishments as this, and a few men with as much practical public spirit as John Purdue, its builder and proprietor, would be vastly to the advantage of our city.”

Purdue profited again by selling space in the Purdue Block. On June 8, 1874, he dumped another one third of Lot 19 for $8,000; and on April 15, 1876, one third of another lot for $2,500.

* * *

On another occasion Purdue generously bailed his pals in the Springvale Cemetery Association out of a knotty problem. It seems that part of the association’s one hundred fifty acres, when surveyed, lay too near a stagnant pool that was once a storage and turnaround reservoir on the abandoned Wabash & Erie Canal. The land could never wisely or prudently be used for anything related to a cemetery, so Purdue relieved the association of Lots 5 and 6, totaling about twenty acres, for $5,000. Purdue’s largess in this instance amounted to a $5,000 refund for land the association should never have bought, and for which Purdue had no use.

* * *

Juggling so many affairs, Purdue also sustained his business and management interest in the Walnut Grove Farm. A *Journal* item published May 7, 1874, reported that nine railroad carloads of Texas cattle purchased by Purdue and a farm manager named Gaddis had been unloaded at West Lebanon and driven north to Purdue’s pastures eight miles away. While he did own more than 2,000 acres devoted to cattle feeding, Purdue never seems to have wished to compete with Fowler, Earl, the Samples, and the other Indiana “barons” of that period. He simply saw the honest profit that could be made by feeding cattle for market. It was a way of diversifying his business portfolio, and a way that he enjoyed.
By 1874, meanwhile, four years after Purdue’s initial investment, the Purdue Gold and Silver Mining and Ore Reduction Company began causing more trouble than it was worth. A rival Pelican Mining Company owned land next to the Lafayette group’s claim. Evidence mounted that Pelican laborers, digging underground, were undercutting the Purdue Company claim and tapping the Dives Lode. Coffroth and Baird sought a court injunction to stop Pelican’s alleged infringement. Pelican countersued for an injunction against the Purdues. This cost the Purdues time and expense as the lawyers made trip after trip to Denver, then on to Georgetown, to prosecute their case.

Then in the late summer of 1874, Purdue’s relations with Henry Carter at the Lafayette Agricultural Works devolved into another long, costly, bitter, complex lawsuit. In September Purdue sued Carter, a minority stockholder who had been fired as the factory superintendent. The suit opened the whole question of a minority stockholder’s rights, and forced a public accounting of the affairs of the company. The Courier reported on October 7 that Purdue had won the dispute in a court order.

Next Purdue came to the aid of Lafayette’s First Church of Christ. Fire consumed the congregation’s twenty-four-year-old house of worship. With donations of cash from a number of leading citizens who could afford to help, Church of Christ members bought Methodist property at the northwest corner of Fifth and Ferry streets for $7,500, and spent about $3,000 more in improvements. The amount of Purdue’s gift is unknown, but the congregation acknowledged gifts from Purdue, Adams Earl, and commercial printer John Rosser of Lafayette, none of whom were members of the church.
“Generous though he was,” Topping wrote, Purdue had come to rub more and more people the wrong way with “a vanity as wide as the Wabash River.” Doctor Harvey W. Wiley, an associate during the last two years of Purdue’s life, once described it in writing as a “vanity as innocent as that of a child. . . . [Purdue] was certain that any opinion he had was the only correct one on any subject.” Wiley confirmed that although Purdue joined no Lafayette church, he gave freely to many a religious and philanthropic cause, including $1,000 toward construction of a Second Presbyterian Church. Having been invited to attend that congregation’s dedicatory service, Purdue entered the sanctuary late as worshippers rose to sing the first hymn. Thinking that they were honoring his arrival, Purdue bellowed, “Keep your seats, ladies and gentlemen; don’t mind me!” Perhaps stories such as this are why people more than a century later think that “he must have been an s.o.b. to work with.”

In the spring of 1875, the Purdue Gold and Silver Mining and Ore Reduction Company prevailed against the Pelican Company in a Colorado court. On April 23, the Lafayette Courier reported that a Colorado chief justice had dissolved a previous injunction that the Pelicans had obtained against the Purdues, but the story continued. In late May 1875, Relief Jackson telegraphed from Georgetown that the Purdues again enjoyed possession of the Dives Lode even though a dozen Pelican employees had taken up positions in the mine “to hold it at all hazards.” Law enforcement authorities prepared to call in troops and force an entrance. But then, the newspaper said, “wiser counsels prevailed, and instead of an assault a siege was determined upon. A sheriff and his forces sat at the entrance of the mine and vigilantly watched the hole to cut off supplies. At length the garrison capitulated.”
John Purdue’s juggling act between business affairs continued without respite. He spent about ten days in September 1875 in Colorado, to hear the Journal tell it, “for his health.” The financial health of affairs at the Dives Lode may more accurately describe the purpose of that trip. Purdue returned after his health had “much improved.”

Although John Purdue’s health might have been sliding, he clearly had survived a tumultuous decade after the Civil War. His fates in politics, newspapering, manufacturing, mining, farming, banking, and railroading proved that even John Purdue could win a few and lose a few.

Yet at age seventy-three, he was poised to score the greatest victory of his life.
Starting in 1851, the new Indiana Constitution contained ways for the legislature to create a state college for agricultural education. That year David Holloway, a congressman and publisher from Richmond, Indiana, first campaigned for an “ag-school” in his Indiana Farmer. A statute that took effect in 1852 would have permitted Indiana University at Bloomington to add an agricultural department and satisfy the need. But apathy prevailed. In a speech at the 1853 state fair in Lafayette, Horace Greeley, the New York newspaper scion, challenged Indiana to match his state by starting a “people’s college that would teach the useful arts.” Nothing came of that, either. A State Board of Agriculture spent the rest of the 1850s in vain efforts to rally college support through displays, exhibits, speakers, even an essay contest. Still the public dozed. Another decade passed without an Indiana initiative for formal, quality instruction in that field.

The disinterest seemed so national in scope that U.S. Senator Justin Morrill, a Republican from Vermont, needed four years for one of his ideas on the subject to get serious study in Congress. His proposed Morrill Act would let qualifying states sell vacant federal land that they would be given in acreage amounts based on their population. Interest accruing on the investment of money from the sale of the land would be used to start and run state
colleges for practical instruction in agriculture, mechanical arts (i.e., engineering), and military science.

When the Morrill Act at last cleared Congress in 1862, Representative Albert S. White, of Lafayette, alone in the Indiana delegation, supported its 90 to 25 passage in the U.S. House. White, truth to tell, might have harbored an ulterior motive: the Stockwell Institute he helped start would bid to be the site of Indiana’s future land-grant college.

The Morrill Act mandated that a participating state sell its grant of land, situated mostly in remote areas of the Far West, and invest the cash at not less than five percent interest. The principal sum must remain a “perpetual fund forever undiminished.” The interest from the investment of it needed to be “inviolably appropriated to the endowment, support and maintenance of at least one college.”

Bills designed to qualify Indiana for a Morrill Act land grant cleared the state General Assembly in 1863. One measure authorized formation of a board to sell the land and manage the money it received. The state’s superintendent of public instruction backed another bill that would separate the new school from Indiana University (IU). Bloomington legislators countered with a bill to add the new college to IU. It was the first of much intrastate competition on the subject. Other lawmakers supported a bill backing Northwestern Christian (later Butler) University at Indianapolis. Tippecanoe County, represented in 1863 by Republican House members Joseph M. Hershey and Samuel Mustard and by Senator Moses C. Culver, made no college bid, not even for Stockwell. The 1863 legislature adjourned having achieved nothing more on the issue beyond preparing to take and sell the federal land.

Between then and the start of the legislature’s biennial sixty-one day session in 1865, rival contenders for the college had time to build their cases. Republican John L. Miller succeeded Mustard in the Indiana House and joined an effort on behalf of Tippecanoe. Bloomington and Indianapolis continued lobbying. One short-lived compromise bill would have sprinkled a dozen small “ag schools” about the state to quell the heated lobbying. The number of interested bidders for the new college rose. Stockwell Institute,
through the new Tippecanoe County legislative team, offered its eighteen acres and its one building, and pledged up to one hundred forty-two more acres. The Stockwell effort lost momentum, however, after the death of the influential Albert S. White in 1864. Former Congressman White had lived in Stockwell and had helped start the Institute. Meanwhile twenty miles from Stockwell the Methodist founders of Battle Ground Institute drafted their own inducement package of land and money, estimated to have been worth $100,000, for the state college. The City of Indianapolis added cash and bonding power to its Northwestern Christian proposal. Bloomington and surrounding Monroe County sweetened their joint 1863 deal by adding a collection of geological and biological specimens and a farm. This package, which was wrapped in a measure called the Dunning Bill, nearly prevailed.

The State of Indiana accepted 390,000 acres (30,000 for each of the state’s thirteen members of Congress) in 1865, but the General Assembly adjourned that year without choosing a campus site. The best it could do was to prepare to sell the land and invest the proceeds, through incorporation of an interim board of “Trustees of the Indiana Agricultural College.” By starting a State Normal College (later Indiana State University) at Terre Haute, the 1865 legislature did at least reduce the curriculum needs and some of the geographic rivalry stalling progress toward an ag school.

In the same 1866 elections in which John Purdue lost his second bid for a seat in the U.S. House to Godlove Orth, Tippecanoe County voters sent to the Indiana Senate thirty-four-year-old John A. Stein, attorney and former Civil War captain; and to the House, they sent Republicans John Rosser and Miller. Because of the Stein-Rosser-Miller team, Tippecanoe interest in hosting the state college gathered force. Soon after taking office in January 1867, Stein introduced a bill to put the agricultural college at Battle Ground, but he couldn’t rally the 26 votes that were needed for a Senate majority. The same problem faced Miller’s and Rosser’s bill favoring Battle Ground in the House, where passage could require 51 votes with all 100 members present.

During 1867 the Indiana Agricultural College trustees did sell the federal land to five buyers for $212,238.50. That came to just
over sixty-four cents per acre. After investing the money in U.S. bonds at six percent interest, the trustees could achieve nothing more until the legislature chose a campus site. The 1867 General Assembly adjourned, pushing site selection ahead to the agenda for 1869.

In January 1869, Stein returned to the Indiana Senate for the second half of his four-year term. Republicans Robert Breckenridge and Reuben Baker began representing Tippecanoe County as newcomers in the Indiana House. Marion, Monroe, and Tippecanoe county interests quickly backed a new round of contentious ag-school bills in the first week of the session. To its 1867 inducement package, Monroe added $50,000 in county-guaranteed bonding power. Marion added twenty-seven acres and $100,000 in county bonding, and soon boosted the bonding by $75,000 more, raising the value of its total offer to nearly $300,000. To Tippecanoe’s previous offers of the combined assets of Stockwell Institute and Battle Ground Institute, the Stein-Breckenridge-Baker legislative team offered the state three hundred twenty acres in Jackson Township. Farmer Jesse Meharry owned that property near the legend-rich and geologically interesting Shawnee Mound formation. In addition, if lawmakers chose any Tippecanoe site for the new college, the civic-minded Meharry and certain of his rural neighbors pledged $50,000 more, and county government agreed to sell up to $50,000 in bonds for college use. Still the General Assembly treaded water on the ag-school issue, because no offer seemed to have majority support in House or Senate.

At this point John Purdue, virtually out of the blue, lumbered into the picture like a kindly Santa with a bulging sack of money. On March 2, 1869, Purdue sent Stein a letter to be read to the Senate; the two had become acquainted in 1867 when Stein pushed Purdue’s Lafayette Savings Bank legislation. In the letter Purdue added $100,000 of his personal fortune to the Tippecanoe County

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*32*Participating states realized a wide range of income from land sales. Kentucky sold its land grant for about fifty-five cents per acre; Cornell University in New York realized nearly five dollars per acre much later.
package. He insisted on two conditions: (1) That the college be put at Battle Ground, and (2) that his surname be “associated with the name of the college” by law, (i.e., Purdue Institute, Purdue College, Purdue Academy).

A committee of legislators intrigued by this offer met with Purdue in Lafayette. At their dinner meeting on March 24, 1869, Purdue urged the visitors to tour Battle Ground Institute. By that time Tippecanoe County commissioners had approved not merely bonding authority, but also a grant of $50,000 in five annual payments of $10,000 to enrich Purdue’s offer. Nine days later Purdue’s Lafayette Journal associate Septimius Vater presided over a town meeting in the courthouse to solicit even more public donations and pledges. The legislature, required by law to meet only for sixty-one days every biennium, ran out of days. It adjourned in late March 1869 without picking a college site, but Governor Conrad Baker, sensing a breakthrough near, voiced willingness to call a special session, despite inconvenience for legislators and expense to the state, to reach an agreement.

At 2 a.m. on April 2, 1869, a messenger from John Purdue wakened Senator Stein. The courier carried urgent handwritten amendments that Purdue wished to make in his first offer. The message and a copy mailed to Governor Baker requested:

Locate the said college at such point in Tippecanoe County as may be decided upon by a majority of the present board of trustees of the Indiana Agricultural College, to whom I [Purdue] be added as a member.

Name the Institution by an irrepealable law “Purdue University.”

Provide that [John Purdue] be a member of the Board of Trustees [and/or] be retained as an advisory member thereof, and have visitorial power over the University during [his] lifetime.

In return for these new conditions, John Purdue agreed to pay $150,000 in ten yearly installments. He also promised to give the trustees one hundred acres to be used for a campus or a research
farm. When Governor Baker summoned legislators back to Indianapolis, many foes of Tippecanoe assailed and censured Purdue, accusing him of gross vanity by wishing to saddle the new state school with his name. They might have preferred Indiana A & M, as certain other states were naming their land grant colleges, reflecting the school’s agricultural and mechanical emphasis. While John Purdue’s critics wailed, however, the calm, polished, literate Senator Stein responded with deft eloquence:

I am surprised to find [the offer] the subject of censurous criticism on this floor. It has been stigmatized as selfish vanity for Mr. Purdue to ask that the institution be named Purdue University.

It strikes me as a vanity worthy of all honor and imitation. His is the vanity of all the genuine philanthropists of our race. It is the honorable and praiseworthy vanity which associates itself with the cause of education and public morals. We can look with contempt upon the selfish vanity of the Egyptian monarch who sought his immortality in the everlastingly worthless pyramid. But he who seeks his fame in the advancement of his fellow men, in the dedication of his fortune and his efforts to mental enlightenment and public virtue, appeals to every sentiment of admiration and respect which can animate the human mind. To call this a selfish vanity is to misname things. May the kind Providence which has ever kept the destinies of our commonwealth in friendly keeping, shower down such vanity bountifully upon our people. I shall always be delighted to assist and encourage it.

On May 4, 1869, by a vote of 32 to 10 on the fourth ballot, the Senate approved Stein’s amended Purdue University bill. On May 6, the House concurred 76 to 19. Baker signed Senate Bill 156 into law on May 8. The question of where to put the campus remained, and formidable deadlines to pick a site, start construction, hire teachers and administrators, and begin instruction soon followed.

The Purdue University trustees met at Indianapolis on May 25 and reported that they possessed upwards of $450,000 in cash, land, or pledges. The Lafayette Journal in which John Purdue still held part ownership reported on June 2, 1869, that there was a
“wide celebration” of the legislature’s decision favoring Tippecanoe. To hear the clearly biased Journal tell it, many joined in praising John Purdue for his gifts and influence in the matter. As for where to build the university, Vater in the Journal said that John Purdue’s judgment ought to be trusted and his largess praised because so many other “wealthy men of Lafayette are not public spirited.”

Senate Bill 156 required the trustees to choose a campus site before January 1, 1870. With that deadline in mind, members met on June 8, 1869, in the Lahr House. They looked at possibilities in Battle Ground, Stockwell, Shawnee Mound, and the Wayne Township community of West Point. By now, university fever was sweeping Tippecanoe County. The prospect of a Purdue institute, as many called it, became the talk of Lafayette, but the trustees were finding fault with each place they visited, especially remote Shawnee Mound because of its distance from any railroad.

After their June tours, the trustees set aside all previous alternatives and decided that the college should occupy an entirely new campus to be located within two and one-half miles of Lafayette, thereby taking advantage of its hotels, churches, doctors, three railroad depots, and other urban amenities. Some campaigned for the school to go into Lafayette proper. Street talk led one to believe that “the heights” (the forested ridge east of Lafayette) and the “second bank” (the high, level land west of the Wabash River) had become finalists. But John Purdue, invoking rather egomaniacal leverage, insisted on an additional hundred acres and a $50,000 gift from Lafayette city government in exchange for selecting any land within the city limits.

The trustees assigned the job of finding a campus site to Purdue and Henry Taylor, a Lafayette lumber dealer and state land-grant college commission member since 1863. Purdue and Taylor secretly chose the “second bank” site, which was just west of Chauncey yet barely more than a mile from the courthouse in Lafayette.

Obtaining the land was the next step. Rachel and Hiram Russell donated ten acres from the east end of their ninety-acre Wabash Township farm to Purdue and Taylor as agents for the
trustees. That parcel formed the western limit of the campus for several decades. Later in the fall of 1869, John Opp and Nicholas Marsteller sold 51.25 acres just east of the Russell land to the trustees; Silas Steeley conveyed 38.75 acres. The civic-minded sellers agreed to accept half-price “in consideration of the location of Purdue University.”

On the morning of December 22, 1869, the Journal speculated that the trustees soon would announce that they had selected part of the Stockton farm, that was managed by the heirs of J. M. Stockton and located a mile and half west of the courthouse. Land on the neighboring Jesse B. Lutz and Silas Steeley farms would have the potential to be acquired for future expansion. The Courier that afternoon recommended that Lafayette annex this university land; provide police and fire protection, piped artificial gas, graded streets, and a free bridge over the Wabash; and extend its mule-powered street railway. When trustees announced their final decision, the Stockton farm was not the actual site. It was the next farm west of the Russell land. But rumors about it, even in error, gave people a general mind’s-eye picture of where Purdue University would one day take root.

It is not clear how much John Purdue paid for the Opp, Marsteller, and Steeley land. That is because other public-spirited citizens are believed also to have given. A list of donor names was never preserved, but some were identifiable by signatures on a petition in the spring of 1871 urging that the first buildings be built near the easternmost side of the campus, nearest Chauncey. Those names included Opp’s, Marsteller’s, Steeley’s, the Russells’, Daniel Royse’s, J. H. Pender’s, Lafayette lawyers and real estate managers Will Peckham’s and Roswell Smith’s, and certain heirs of Henry L. Ellsworth, of N. C. Chauncey and of E. Chauncey. The Chaunceys had been absentee landowners from Philadelphia. Purdue and Taylor presented, and university trustees accepted, deeds for the first hundred acres on December 22. Trustees then named John Purdue, at age sixty-seven, to a committee of one to consider plans and specifications for a building program. This time-consuming, argumentive process lasted for more than two years.
In 1870, Taylor resigned as a trustee to run for Stein’s seat in the Indiana Senate, but John Purdue gained three important allies when Governor Baker appointed Stein, Lafayette attorney John Coffroth, and banker Martin Peirce as trustees. Trustees who hailed from elsewhere about the state—Lewis Burk of Richmond, Smith Vawter of North Vernon, Joseph Tuttle of Crawfordsville, Thomas Bowman of Greencastle—soon fell into the easy habit of deferring to Lafayette’s four resident trustees in all big decisions. Even so, the job of selecting building sites generated much debate. New committees repeatedly were appointed, reported disagreement, then stood aside so John Purdue, who seemed to be growing increasingly testy, could have his way.

Although trustees put Purdue in charge of construction, unspecified “health problems” caused him sometimes to postpone his campus responsibilities. He remained, however, a formidable presence, and his stubbornness carried many a day, but his reputation as “an s.o.b. to work with” gained steadily. The trustees held twenty-three meetings before coming to any conclusion about siting the first building. In one resolution, exasperated trustees on January 4, 1871, rescinded all previous action on sites and resolved that “John Purdue is authorized to deliver the materials for the college buildings on any part of the grounds he pleases.”

Senate Bill 156 had required that the first Purdue University building be finished by July 1, 1871. That proved to be impractical. During 1870 John Purdue, as president of the trustees, and Lafayette school architect W. H. Brown did look at buildings at Cornell and Brown universities and at Vassar College in New York and Rhode Island. Back home Brown drew a plan for a first building that would measure 108 feet long and 50 feet wide. In December 1870, certain carried-away trustees, encouraged by Peirce’s always sunny outlook, predicted to the governor that classes would start in 1871. Construction squabbles swiftly and deeply buried that pipedream.

At a meeting in April 1871, Coffroth proposed that board chairman Purdue be given “authority to select a site at such point upon the university grounds as he sees fit for the university building
[about to be] built, but the motion lost, with only Coffroth and Purdue favoring it. “At this time,” minutes state, “Mr. Purdue vacated the chair and retired from the meeting.” So the remaining trustees elected Peirce president, replacing the thoroughly insulted John Purdue.

When the trustees next met in May members asked Purdue to report on two matters he had been requested to pursue. Still irritated, Purdue stiffly replied that he was not ready to report on either matter. He even asked to be relieved of one of them: securing a right-of-way for an eighty-foot-wide avenue that would surround the campus. Pierce agreed to take that job.

Purdue clearly felt that authority was being taken from him. Minutes of the same meeting say that “Mr. Purdue verbally offered, if the board would give consent, that he would build a university building such as he thought proper and on such part of the grounds as he saw fit and if, when completed, it should not suit the board, he would pay for it himself.” The other trustees defeated that motion, too.

In a hurried and premature ceremony, officials broke ground for a “first building” on August 9, 1871. Peirce turned the first shovelful of soil because John Purdue skipped. As Topping reconstructed it: “Governor Baker had asked the General Assembly to relieve the governor of ex-officio duties on the board of trustees and to add a new member to replace him. Instead the legislators named three members. Purdue was furious. From his perspective [it] diluted his power on the board to one-ninth. [So] Purdue refused to attend the groundbreaking ceremony. Of course, at that time Purdue was mad at everybody about almost everything that was happening. He found it impossible to reconcile his belief that it was his university with the fact it belonged to the State of Indiana and its citizens.”

That groundbreaking merely wasted time. Shortly after the ceremony, trustees moved site plans to the new tract acquired north of State Street. The majority desired that the original 100 acres south of State Street be reserved for a future conservatory, chapel, or museum. But defiant John Purdue reused materials salvaged from foundation work that was suspended after the first groundbreak-
ing. With the recycled stone, bricks, and lumber he supervised construction south of State Street of a barn, and of a brick residence for the university’s first professor, John S. Hougham.

By the end of 1871, with site plans still pending, the trustees requested John Purdue to acquire up to two hundred more acres north of State Street nearer the village of Chauncey. Money Purdue paid for the land would be credited toward the $15,000 installments he had pledged. He was able to buy eighty-four acres for an average of $185.71 per acre, and deed it to the trustees on April 23, 1872. The trustees that day also voted to offer the presidency of Purdue University to William Clark of Massachusetts Agricultural College. Clark declined.

A second fact-gathering trip involved Hougham and Peirce. They visited the New York and Massachusetts campuses of Brown, Amherst, and Massachusetts Institute of Technology. As a result, the Purdue University building program came to include designs for a boarding hall and men’s dormitory from Amherst and a science building like Brown’s.

On August 13, 1872, construction began on the science building, and the trustees hired the state geologist, Richard Owen, a practical farmer, as Purdue University’s first president. Unfortunately, the trustees soon learned that a small corner of the science hall was being built on land for which they had no deed. The hall’s foundation invaded property owned by a minor heir of the Stocktons. Neighboring farmer Jesse B. Lutz was that heir’s guardian. Dealing with Lutz, the trustees paid the Stockton estate $2,500 for the embarrassing, two-and-one-half-acre mistake.

After their eastern tour Peirce and Hougham recommended immediate construction of a dormitory and laboratory. A majority of the trustees agreed to reimburse them for their trip expenses, thus overriding John Purdue’s “nay” vote and widening the estrangement.

Before the 1873 General Assembly convened in Indianapolis, there was talk of placing all state colleges under a single board of regents. John Purdue vehemently opposed that idea, too, because it would have stripped him of all power. More illness—recurring
problems vaguely described as “nervous chills”—kept him from attending the trustees meeting on November 12, 1872. But he sent trustees a letter voicing his opposition to (1) the board-of-regents proposal, (2) being in any hurry to fill faculty positions at Purdue University, or (3) begging the legislature for any money:

I respectfully submit that the law regulating Purdue University and all laws of similar character hereafter to be enacted, should be so shaped as to allow any person, corporation, municipality giving aid to any institution of learning in any form, control over such institution in proportion to the aid given. . . .

I [also] respectfully suggest that it would [not] only be a manifest and profligate waste of the public money, but also an act of useless folly [to hurry with hiring of a faculty.] In no event does the university need any professors until it is ready to be put into active operation.

. . . We have an abundant fund on hand to answer all our wants for the next two years. Economy, not waste, is our duty. Agricultural colleges are yet in their infancy, and, as yet, we scarcely know what is needed, and there is greater danger in making too much haste than too little. I think I hazard nothing in reminding the Board that we are better informed now than we were two years ago; and that decisive action then would have resulted in very bad mistakes.

Despite Purdue’s go-slow advice Coffroth proposed that the trustees seek $100,000 from the legislature. The outnumbered Purdue would continue until his death accepting and later shirking responsibilities for hiring a farm superintendent, digging a well, and a number of other assignments. He was much more accustomed to giving orders than taking them, especially from trustees of the university that bore his name.

The proposed board-of-regents bill never passed, and the Purdue University trustees, sometimes with John Purdue’s help, sometimes in spite of his protests, went about their work. On May 6, 1873, the trustees asked their presidential choice, Richard Owen, to draft a plan for university organization. On August 26 Owen delivered his report. Topping termed it “an unmitigated dis-
Titled *A Scheme of Education Appropriate for the University*, it seemed to Topping to be a “masterfully detailed exercise in irrelevancy and minutiae, punctuated by occasional bursts of trivia.” It largely ignored intellectual requirements, omitted the academic and administrative organization of departments and schools, and contained neither long-term nor overall financial plans. Critics wailed, and the angered and defensive Owen considered the document to have been no more than a private first draft for the sake of further discussion and refinement. The trustees had expected a display of progress, a final, polished document ready for copying and widespread distribution to newspapers and the public-at-large.

By the end of summer, the first phase of construction, helped by modest state appropriations, neared its end. The boarding hall would cost $40,000; the dormitory, long known as Purdue Hall, $32,000, the science lab $15,000. John Purdue paid most of the bills with the understanding that his payments would be credited to his pledge. He ordered Phillip Miller, who ran a brickyard on Morehouse Gravel Road a few miles northwest of the campus and later moved it to Lafayette, to mold special bricks for the dining hall and men’s dorm. These bricks measured eight inches long, three and three-fourth inches wide, one and three-fourths inches thick.

Encouraged by the construction progress, the trustees directed Professor Hougham to start instruction on October 1, 1873. They assigned three of the resident trustees—Stein, Purdue, and Peirce—to oversee the opening of classes. But the three reported in November that school never began because all buildings remained unfinished. One glaring reason for delay surfaced at the meeting on November 11. The trustees’ minutes noted that although the dorm contained 32 suites with accommodations for about 120 residents, it had neither a chimney nor a heating system. The architect understood that steam piped from a central power plant would provide heat, but no power plant had been built.

Again ignoring John Purdue’s counsel, the trustees, working with President Owen in most instances, gradually began to hire
faculty to join the fifty-year-old Hougham. In early January 1874, decisions were made to hire professors in mathematics, natural sciences, military tactics, veterinary science and surgery, an assistant professor in natural sciences, and a teacher for bookkeeping, arithmetic, geography, and English grammar. Governor Thomas A. Hendricks, Peirce, and Purdue accepted appointments to a committee to carry out the plan. The board also sought contracts for gas lighting and artesian well drilling, which were crucial to opening the university.

Though trustees had hoped for a much earlier start, it became impractical for a second good reason: President Owen, seeming since day one to have been out of step with the trustees and never any pet of John Purdue’s, abruptly quit in March 1874. Purdue, through a ghost writer (probably Vater) had nipped at Owen in the pages of the Journal before Owen signed his letter of resignation March 1. Trustees accepted the letter on March 12. Undaunted, they authorized more building: a military hall and gymnasium costing $6,500, and the desperately needed boiler and gas house for $25,000. And of course, they started looking for another president.

Hougham conducted fifteen weeks of tuition-free courses for a handful of enrollees from March to June 1874. It was in fact a dry run. There was little advance publicity about it and—because John Purdue opposed starting classes so prematurely—no opening ceremony. Reports that instruction commenced with twenty-one students, fourteen from Lafayette, later had to be trimmed to eighteen and twelve. The official start of Purdue University waited until September. To that end, meanwhile, faculty hiring continued. The trustees on May 5, 1874, appointed William B. Morgan of Indianapolis as professor of mathematics.

In May, John Purdue presented to the trustees for credit toward his $150,000 pledge a list of expenses totaling $65,519 covering the period from December 1, 1870, to May 1, 1872. These included $32,000 for the dormitory; $24,000 for land acquisition; $3,000 for the Hougham house and barn; and reimbursement for travel, lumber, stone, and opening two water wells. Purdue also paid $9,481 in cash. Trustees thereupon approved total credit of $75,000, which retired the payments Purdue had pledged for 1870, 1871, 1872, 1873,
and 1874. Purdue’s claim even had included $1,363 for 194,844 bricks (101,000 still stacked on campus for future use) that he had ordered from Miller through Lafayette contractor Joshua Chew.\(^{33}\)

In June, John Purdue proudly led a campus tour for a visiting Episcopal Church delegation from the Lafayette area. In off-the-cuff remarks, Purdue conceded that he was “unaccustomed to speech-making in public,” and would “have to be excused for trying anything of the kind.”

On June 3, John Hussey, of Lockland, Ohio, joined the faculty to teach botany and horticulture. Nine days later the trustees hired Abraham C. Shortridge, superintendent of Indianapolis public schools, as university president. At this meeting Governor Hendricks; trustees Peirce, Stein, and Coffroth; Benjamin Shaw of Indianapolis; Austin Claypool of Connersville; and John Sutherland of LaPorte all voted for Shortridge. John Purdue sullenly stayed away, thus casting no vote and committing no support of record to the new president. Shortridge once had opined that the presidency ought to be worth at least $10,000 a year, but he accepted $3,000 for the job. This soon placed him at odds with faculty members who were earning only $1,500 to $2,000. In July, in a hastily drafted plan for study that differed in several ways from Owen’s, Shortridge proposed and trustees approved the creation of four schools: engineering, natural sciences, agriculture, and military science.

The fall of 1874 marked a tilting of power away from John Purdue in favor of the other trustees and the forceful Shortridge. In October, trustees approved a resolution giving the new president “general authority and supervision of and over all matters connected with the management of the affairs and employees of the university.” Purdue University thus moved beyond being a nominal hobby for the well-meaning gang of four (Purdue, Peirce, Stein, and Coffroth) from Lafayette.

\(^{33}\)Having learned brick and stone masonry from his father in Virginia, Chew had reached Lafayette in the 1850s, worked as a bricklayer, then started a kiln and brickyard. In 1871, as university construction commenced in earnest, Chew began brick and masonry contracting. He and his men worked on the first seven buildings.
John Purdue then began to miss certain meetings ostensibly to avoid being overruled and outvoted, citing poor health as his reason. In the eyes of Shortridge, Purdue came across not so much an s.o.b. as a “hard-headed man of business with intense convictions on subjects of which he knew nothing,” and a fellow who “needed to be treated with tact and deference, and yet with firmness.” The trustees are known in Shortridge’s first months to have endured tense, stormy, belligerent meetings, with John Purdue the lightning rod. But the official record—the minutes of the trustees’ meetings—“reveal almost nothing of their animus, and are formal to the point of banality,” to quote Hepburn and Sears, who added: “It would appear . . . that Shortridge and faculty must have fought a right joyous fight against [John Purdue’s] powers of ignorance and darkness.”

In July 1874, Harvey W. Wiley, physician and food chemist, left the faculty of Northwestern Christian University in Indianapolis for the professorship in chemistry at Purdue University. Eli F. Brown arrived in August from Richmond to teach English literature and drawing.

Although there seemed no basis for predicting any number, the trustees expected 200 or more registrants to show up in September. Instead only thirty-nine, mostly from Tippecanoe County and Lafayette High School, arrived to sit in the tuition-free classes. Again there was no opening day ceremony owing, presumably, to another John Purdue sulk. The new students first filled out entrance exams, but this process identified only thirteen who were academically prepared for college-level study. The initial trustee, state, and public reaction was disappointment, yet Shortridge urged plunging ahead. The faculty hurriedly designed a series of classes for all who had flunked. The resulting sub-college operation became loosely known as the Purdue Academy or Preparatory Academy.34

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34 A future governor of Michigan, Chase S. Osborne, recalled that in the fall of 1874 “there was a scurrying for students and any material obtainable was taken. I was in the first year of Ford High School in Lafayette. . . . There was common talk
By October 31, 1874, on John Purdue’s seventy-second birthday, the trustees had spent more than $200,000 for land, buildings, furnishings, scientific apparatus, books, farm implements, livestock, and landscaping. Trustee Peirce had labored singularly to create a “campus environment” out of the old rumpled cornfields. He had donated for campus landscaping all of his $600-a-year salary as the trustees’ treasurer. This funded the start-up of a nursery for trees and shrubs, and Peirce personally laid out hedges of arborvitae, cedar, and hemlock.

Shortridge continued to regard John Purdue as generous but cantankerous. “He argues too much about matters he knows little about,” Shortridge complained. “He and I do not get along at all. But then no one gets along with Judge Purdue except his downtown cronies [i.e., Coffroth, Stein, Peirce]. No matter; the path ahead looks smooth and firm.” Enrollment reached forty-six by November; sixty-five in the spring of 1875.35

Away from his several other battlefields—the LM&B Railroad, the Lafayette Agricultural Works, the Purdue Gold and Silver Mining and Ore Refinement Company—John Purdue might have found solace in the opening of Purdue University, but the surrounding

when I entered that John Purdue had made the requirement that the institution he was to endow should function as a school by a certain date. In order to coincide with that and in no way jeopardize the endowment there was a hasty mobilization of ‘students’ before there were adequate buildings. . . . I think the college did not become co-educational for a year or two after it opened, and I do not know whether that was contemplated by Old Johnny Purdue, as we called him, or not.”

35Purdue University hastened the end of the Stockwell and Battle Ground collegiate institutes John Purdue had helped years before. In its heyday Battle Ground’s busy collegiate department had charged tuition ranging up to $8.50 per semester, and $5 for its normal school, run in six-week stages. But in 1875, situated so near the new state university, it abandoned the education field. A Methodist Camp Meeting Association bought the vacant building and grounds. Methodist owners used the main building as a hotel, then added a tabernacle and cabins for religious encampments, rallies, revivals and outings. Stockwell Institute dropped college-level courses a few years later.
belt of hostility surely choked off much of his joy. He did render important service and influence in construction matters, he did enjoy a free hand in choosing sites, and he did use his “visitorial” powers well. But on the educational side, according to Hepburn and Sears, “his opinion had less value, though of this he could not be persuaded. Selection of the faculty and determination of a course of study lay outside his experience . . . he was prone to interfere. Friction grew so serious that for several months he absented himself from all meetings of the board.” At one point the dismayed trustees learned that the science hall, copied from Brown University, had been built on plans drawn not by Lafayette architect W. H. Brown but by A. C. Morse, Brown University’s retainee from Providence, Rhode Island. The plagiarism came to light when Morse placed a bill for the science hall plans in the hands of his lawyer for collection from the university. Topping saw this as further evidence that the first years of the Purdue University building program lacked experienced leadership.

Then another problem arose. W. H. Brown believed that he had been retained as the university’s architect. After paying him off, the trustees hired James K. Wilson of Cincinnati to design what became University Hall. John Purdue soon complained that Wilson’s idea of building something 135 feet by 54 feet was too grandiose, but he agreed eventually to contract for it and supervise construction.

Although the autocratic Shortridge achieved much by way of opening the university’s doors in 1874, he antagonized faculty, trustees, and students, not to mention John Purdue himself. Before long a contingent of faculty and students prepared a written protest. They accused Shortridge of having failed to investigate their claims of insulting treatment by Professor Brown. Brown,

36 Morse’s attorney retained Lafayette lawyers Hiram Chase and John Wilstach—John Purdue’s LM&B Railroad friends—to collect Morse’s fee. Admitting culpability, the university trustees delegated Peirce and Stein to settle with Morse as affordably as possible. When Peirce and Stein begged off, Purdue paid Morse $590.
among other things, had had to enforce a particularly despised rule that prohibited any student from leaving the campus for Chauncey or Lafayette after sunset. Wiley, in a letter to Hepburn in 1924, discussed the process of putting the first Purdue University faculty in place during 1874–1875 and Shortridge’s demise:

The purpose was to have each of the prominent protestant churches represented in the faculty. I was appointed because I was a Campbellite. Professor Hougham was chosen because he was a Baptist. Prof. Hussey because he was a Presbyterian. Prof. [William B.] Morgan because he was a Quaker.

The Campbellites got a little the better of the deal I think because President Shortridge was also a member of that church. Up to 1875 there was no Methodist in the faculty, when a committee of trustees asked me to find them a professor of Latin who was a Methodist. I recommended John Maxwell, of Moore Hill College, and he was appointed to represent the Methodist Church.

I don’t think they cared much for the ability of the members of the faculty; just so they were ecclesiastically properly distributed. Brown was not a professor of the college, but was principal of the [preparatory] academy. I do not know what church he belonged to.

Hougham was the most urbane of all the professors; exceedingly polite and diplomatic. . . Hussey, Herron and Hougham represented the “old guard” on the faculty. They were not at all acquainted with any of the new features of college administration and teaching. They were all splendid men.

[But] There was a grand row in the institution before the end of Shortridge’s short term, leading to his resignation. Professors Hussey and Hougham were President Shortridge’s particular bête noires. Professor Herron and I were not involved in the attitude of opposition to Shortridge. In fact, I considered Shortridge a very able man.

I think the trouble with Shortridge was a lack of diplomacy. Had he had Hougham’s urbanity and diplomacy I think he would have been President as long as he lived. The great part of the trustees, including John Purdue, were against Shortridge and in favor of the rebellious members of the faculty.
The university entered January 1875 with the trustees hoping that John Purdue would simply pay a $15,000 cash installment, due on May 1, instead of asking for credit for expenses. Paying cash, Munro wrote, had become “something [Purdue] had shown a consistent aversion to doing.” Munro excused the dodge, however, in part because Purdue in 1875 “was busy with [a] lawsuit against the Lafayette Agricultural Works.”

At the first Purdue University commencement on June 16, 1875, Governor Hendricks presented the lone graduate, Bradford Harper, of Indianapolis, with a bachelor of science degree in chemistry. President Shortridge invited the small audience to tour university buildings. The Courier summarized John Purdue’s good intentions while reflecting his clumsiness at public speaking during the ceremony:

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 next.

The state 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.

The report concluded by saying that “either overcome by his feelings, or intending to conclude,” John Purdue took his seat. The trustees, in a meeting while they were together for commencement in mid-June, approved Shortridge’s plan for the next term to open September 16, 1875, and to close on December 22 after fourteen weeks. The second term would open January 11, 1876, and end March 4, 1876, after twelve weeks. The third term would open April 4, 1876 and close June 16, 1876, after eleven weeks. This schedule provided vacations of nineteen days at Christmas and one month in the spring.

In August 1875, eight trustees took up the need to elect a board president for a two-year term. John Purdue wanted and expected to win back the position he had once abdicated in anger, but to his humiliation, he received no more than two votes on any ballot. Coffroth won on the eighth round.

Before the second academic year began in September, the trustees debated the pros and cons of admitting women as students. Faculty had denied admission to eight young women in the fall of 1874. But the trustees now rescinded that practice, evidently without protest from John Purdue. Sixty-six students registered in September—sixteen in college-level courses, one special student in drawing, and forty-nine in the preparatory curriculum. Again most hailed from Tippecanoe County. The first women to be enrolled, both of them as Preparatory Academy seniors, were Lora Rosser, sixteen, of Battle Ground, and Hattie Taylor, seventeen, of Chauncey. Trustees by that time had hired the first woman faculty member as well. She was Sarah Allen Oren, widow of a Civil War soldier. Trustees paid her $1,000 a year—lowest on the faculty—to be “female teacher,” a title later changed to “assistant professor of mathematics.”

Classes began, but trouble brewed. Shortridge in late 1875 felt more stinging criticism from several quarters. John Purdue, for
one, never warmed up to the president. Faculty and student unrest continued. Failing in health and losing his eyesight, Shortridge did the best he could. As Hepburn and Sears summarized it: “The foe within the household [John Purdue] proved too powerful and Shortridge resigned in December, 1875, after 18 months. . . . The comment of the Indiana School Journal on the significance of the resignation was not far from true: ‘Mr. Purdue, who has given the institution a great deal of money, is a very peculiar man and knows but little of school matters, and yet he assumes to direct and control everything.’ Certainly John Purdue held the fort, to which no doubt he was entitled.”

Virtually forced to do so by the trustees, Shortridge quit, effective December 31. Broken in health, spirit and means, he went on living for a while in the university boarding house. While John Purdue had been his antagonist, Purdue relieved Shortridge’s grief and embarrassment with a loan of two thousand dollars in 1876. This remained a well-kept secret until after Purdue’s death.

It happened, meanwhile, that during December 1875 a writer, noted speaker, and eminent educator from Columbus, Ohio, named Emerson Eldridge White had arrived in Lafayette to conduct a Tippecanoe County Teacher Institute. John Purdue and Cofroth visited White days before Shortridge left office to ask whether he would be interested in the Purdue University presidency. Although White said yes, he requested a salary of $3,500 instead of Shortridge’s $3,000 and the same boardinghouse privileges as other faculty. Trustees elected White on February 17, 1876, and he arrived to take office in May.

On bad terms with past presidents Owen and Shortridge, John Purdue in the first months of White’s tenure seemed to show interest and a cooperative spirit. However, to a great extent, Purdue’s work was done. He played virtually no role in trustees meetings beyond collecting the three-dollar per diem paid to all members of the board. The spotlight gradually swung toward President White, the faculty, and the student body.
On June 16, 1876, at the university’s second commencement, Purdue spoke only briefly about the importance of honesty and morality in education. White made perfunctory remarks as well, but in his inaugural address delivered on July 16, 1876, White “came out swinging,” as Topping analyzed it, with an address “epochal in the university’s history” because it “laid the philosophic foundations for the academic thrust and direction as an engineering-agricultural institution.”

In White’s first year, the university began teaching only one senior, one junior, six sophomores, and eight freshmen. Preparatory Academy registrants included thirteen seniors, twenty-two juniors, fourteen underclassmen, and one special student, but White considered the future bright and the financial resources secure. The Purdue University endowment fund, having reached $300,000, yielded $20,000 per year in interest for campus operations. Land, buildings, equipment, fixtures, and furnishings had accumulated a value estimated at $250,000. John Purdue still owed about $75,000 in five annual payments, and state appropriations were averaging $13,000 per year.

During the summer of 1876, however, John Purdue’s many responsibilities and problems at the university and elsewhere seemingly caught up with him. He again complained of “nervous chills” and suffered occasional episodes of dizziness. His absences from meetings of the trustees became more frequent.

And then, perhaps sensing the seriousness of matters, in early August he mortgaged about two thousand acres of his Warren County holdings to the State of Indiana “for the benefit of Purdue University trustees.” It was a guarantee to be admired: Live or die, John Purdue would make good on the balance of his $150,000 pledge. Documents in the Warren County Recorder’s office show no appraised value of the land, but presumably it was enough to cover the $75,000 Purdue still owed. Under terms of the mortgage document, the State, upon showing default of promised payment, would simply get a deed to the land, sell it as needed to meet the
pledge, and give proceeds to the university trustees. The mortgage covered land Purdue owned in Section 1 of Liberty Township, Section 31 in Pine Township, and Sections 25, 35, and 36 in Prairie Township.

At about the same time, Purdue left his Lahr House home for sanctuary in the Lafayette Hygienic Institute. Doctor Joseph J. Peret operated the Institute in a remodeled house at 360 South Seventeenth Street. Rest, diet, and hot medicated baths helped strengthen Purdue as he approached his seventy-fourth birthday. He took books from his library along, lived in comfort, slept well and, according to the Courier, “was improving until ... financial complications growing out of his unfortunate connection with the LM&B Railroad began to prey on his mind.”

On September 12, 1876, in a carriage driven by his grandnephew, Thomas Park, Purdue visited the Agricultural Works, then crossed the Wabash River for a whirl about the university campus.37

It was opening day of classes for the third academic year. The Courier, Purdue’s nemesis a decade before in congressional politics, waxed warm and friendly: “It was a proud day for the good old man. He was feeling quite well and, shaking off the burdens of his cares, visited the university, chatting pleasantly with the professors and students.”

Purdue inspected freshly mortared foundation stones at University Hall and after a campus walk rode back to the Lahr House. In the lobby he complained of chills. His friend and caregiver Otho Weakly, the Lahr House proprietor, urged him to lie down for a rest. Attendants lit a fireplace and after a while Purdue asked for oyster stew. He ate heartily and Weakly left him to nap. Half an hour later Weakly found that Purdue had ordered Thomas Park to buggy him back to the Hygienic Institute about one-half mile away.

37Thomas Park was city editor of the Journal at the time. Another grandnephew, Samuel Park, kept books at the Agricultural Works. The Park brothers, who roomed and boarded at the Bramble House hotel, were grandsons of Purdue’s sister Margaret.
There Purdue, still feeling chilly, sipped tea, walked about flower beds and lawn, then retired to his room. Shortly after that, two staff attendants came to his door to inquire about his needs and found him face down on the floor.

As the Courier reconstructed it: “A horse was mounted in hot haste and a messenger dispatched to the city. Otho Weakly, John Sample, and other cherished friends were brought quickly, and all that medical aid could do was on hand. But the spirit had departed.”
Funeral and Estate

On the morning of September 13, 1876, twelve of the late John Purdue’s closest Lafayette friends and peers met in Moses Fowler’s bank boardroom to plan the Purdue funeral. Together there with Fowler were seated:

- John Coffroth, attorney and Purdue University trustee, who presided.
- Martin Peirce, president of the university trustees and of First National Bank.
- James Spears, banker and merchant.
- Otho Weakly, Lahr House manager.
- John Levering, insurance and real estate agent, banker, and superintendent of Springvale Cemetery.
- John Sample, banker and co-owner of his father’s meatpacking plant.
- Henry Taylor, lumber yard owner, former university trustee, and state senator.
- Daniel Royse, Chauncey attorney and president of Second National Bank.
- William C. Wilson, attorney and former Civil War colonel.
- Hiram Chase, attorney, cattle raiser, and venture capitalist.
- William S. Lingle, owner of the Courier.
The twelve agreed, as a committee-of-the-whole, to ride in carriages to the Hygienic Institute at 3 p.m. that day and escort John Purdue’s remains to Spears’ spacious home on South Street near Fifth. There Purdue’s remains would lie in state for public visitation from 10 a.m. until 2 p.m. on September 14. The committee left the remaining funeral details to Levering. Wilson agreed to invite Lafayette Mayor Elias Glick, and members of Glick’s administration and City Council, regardless of political affiliation, to attend the funeral as a group. Sample and Lingle arranged for floral decorations to be placed in the Spears home and in the Purdue University Chapel. Fowler, Spears, and Royse prepared to ask the university’s president of four months, Emerson E. White, to deliver a funeral oration in the chapel. By coincidence, White joined the meeting in progress. He consented to make the speech and to join Coffroth, Peirce, and John A. Stein on a subcommittee to choose a suitable burial place on the campus.

The full committee also chose twelve pallbearers. They designated four men from Lafayette to be “honorary” out of respect for their advanced ages: former Civil War general and congressman Mahlon D. Manson, a university trustee from Crawfordsville; merchant Cyrus Ball; meatpacker Henry T. Sample; and merchant-banker William F. Reynolds.

Coffroth; Fowler; Peirce; Spears; Weakly; capitalist, former bookkeeper, and LM&B Railroad director Robert Heath; jeweler Thomas P. Emerson; and merchant Owen Ball—all of whom were from Lafayette—accepted roles as the active pallbearers.

The funeral committee invited Lafayette Guards, militia members, and musicians in tobacconist Andrew A. Laird’s military band to march in the cortege from the Spears home to the chapel. Four Lafayette clergymen agreed to conduct religious phases of the funeral. They were, in alphabetical order, John W. T. Boothe, pastor of First Baptist Church; William C. Dickinson, of Second Presbyterian; Hillary A. Gobin, of Trinity Methodist; and Robert Mackenzie, of First Presbyterian.

Wilson, Weakly, and Royse transported a full-length framed portrait of John Purdue from President White’s campus office to
the chapel. The committee planned for religious exercises in the Spears home to start the next afternoon at 2 p.m., with Mackenzie reading from scripture and Gobin leading a prayer. Those in attendance would sing a hymn. Then under Levering’s marshalling, all would ride in horse-drawn carriages to the university chapel, where a prayer would be offered by Dickinson, followed by White’s oration. Boothe would conclude the service with a prayer and a benediction. Afterward, only next-of-kin and selected friends would attend the private burial.

Later in the morning of September 13, members of the Tippecanoe County bar met in Judge Thomas Ward’s Superior Court. The lawyers resolved to ask the Circuit and Superior courts to adjourn on September 14 so all bar members could attend the funeral in a group. A committee composed of attorneys Coffroth, Stein, Wilson, John A. Wilstach, Godlove O. Behm, and Jay Adams drafted the obligatory resolution lauding John Purdue’s life and public service. The seven-paragraph document declared, in part, that it “might truthfully be inscribed in granite surmounting Purdue’s tomb” that

Here reposes, in the midst of the scenes of his ambitions and his labors, one of the successful citizens of Lafayette, the friend of industry, the patron of the arts and sciences, and the munificent benefactor of education.

The *Journal* on that morning of September 13 contained a long and detailed account of John Purdue’s last hours, his biography, and Vater’s eulogy:

No man in Lafayette was more widely known, or more entirely identified with the interests and prosperity of our thriving young city. . . . His fortunes have been closely linked with those of Lafayette, and have risen as she has thrived. . . . Few important enterprises have been undertaken with which he has not been in some way identified. His name has been on the subscription list of nearly every meritorious project in the history of the city and county. Public schools and the young university which bears his name have been the favorite objects of his benefactions. He
adopted [the university] as the child of his old age, and its prosperity was dear to his heart.
   In short, he was a useful, public-spirited citizen.

   Even before noon on September 13, White, Coffroth, Peirce, and Stein chose a grave site east of University Hall, the excavation for which still was being walled with mortared stones. Early that afternoon, a representative of the trustees, probably Coffroth, contacted John Purdue’s Colorado-mining associate Anderson M. Moore, the dentist. For the trustees, for posterity, and for a fee of twenty-five dollars, Moore made a plaster death mask of John Purdue’s face and head. The finished work resembled a chalk-white sculpture.

   Further carrying out its plan, the ad hoc funeral committee in mid-afternoon of September 13 escorted John Purdue’s remains to the Spears residence. Uniformed and armed men selected from the Lafayette Guards, of which Purdue had been an honorary member, and a squad of university students chosen by President White stood watch at the wake.

   Levering directed that the casket be placed in the center of an east drawing room. A framed black-and-white photograph of Purdue, believed to have been made in the 1860s in New York City and now draped in black cloth for the occasion, occupied a conspicuous place on a mantel overlooking the casket.

   Frederick Dorner, who ran a Lafayette greenhouse and retail flower shop on Underwood Street near Seventeenth, provided vases of fresh-cut flowers. At the head of the casket, Dorner placed an alabaster column supporting a crown of fragrant white tuberoses. Across the lid of the closed casket, more of Dorner’s creations depicted a cross, anchor, and a heart, which were symbols of faith, hope, and charity, respectively. A floral monument, pedestal, column, and cross—each fashioned from white blossoms from Dorner’s and others’ conservatories—completed the Spears home décor.

   The September 13 afternoon edition of Lingle’s Courier, owing perhaps to their momentary political clashes in 1866, presented a
less sanguine review of John Purdue’s life than had Vater’s morning *Journal*. While Lingle conceded that “no citizen of Lafayette was widely known,” he added:

> In view of possible pecuniary embarrassment growing out of the railroad matter [John Purdue had] secured the remainder [of his pledge to Purdue University] by a mortgage on his Warren County farm. His high sense of honor could not bear the thought of any failure in the full payment of his donation. He has long since made liberal provisions for all his surviving sisters and their children. Two grandnephews, Thomas and Samuel Parks, have been with him for a year or more at Lafayette. He made no will—at least his attorneys have no knowledge of any.

The “railroad matter” remained a sensitive topic among Purdue’s close, protective friends, as well as a curiosity to casual but poorly informed acquaintances. However, there seemed to be no immediate hard feelings toward the deceased among the LM&B hierarchy. Toward evening, LM&B trains rolled through the city behind locomotives draped in black.

On September 14, the morning of the funeral, the *Journal* said that Purdue’s life “sets up a model which many of the wealthy citizens of our own and other communities might with advantage follow. To the young, it furnishes an incentive to diligence, application, industry. . . . The death of John Purdue, the rich man, would have produced scarcely a comment. But the death of John Purdue, the patron and founder of Purdue University, has called forth a general expression of sorrow.”

Responding to the *Courier*’s September 13 mention of Purdue’s garbled financial affairs, which the *Journal* had opted to omit from its morning-after-death coverage, the *Journal* indulged on September 14 in a bit of damage control:

> The *Courier* paves the way for a little plain speaking; and, in fact, leaves us no other alternative. It is not necessary to enlarge upon a subject so well understood in this community. Suffice it to
say, the *Courier*, or rather the ring for which it is a weak apologist, are deeply concerned in the destruction of the Muncie [LM&B] Railroad enterprise, and the breaking down of the credit of those who are holding it up.

The reasons for this are well understood. Having failed in every other direction, the sudden death of Mr. Purdue opened up a new avenue to possible success; and before his remains were cold they were plotting to secure the manipulation of his estate, counting confidently upon being able to persuade his legal representatives that the best way to get his eggs out of the basket in which he had placed them would be to smash eggs, basket and all. This is all very deplorable, but it is true.

As to Mr. Purdue’s business connections with the LM&B Railroad we know nothing. It is none of our business, nor of the editor of the *Courier*. But we do know that his sympathy with the policy of the present management was of no recent growth. Judge Purdue was the first to point out the bad faith which lurked behind the proposition to give the [CL&C] the use of the track to Templeton for nothing.

To his keen business mind the whole scheme which has since been developed was at once apparent, and he vehemently opposed it on the spot; nor was that lease effected until he had been kicked off the board at the ensuing election. From that time forward his earnest sympathy has been with every effort to reclaim the LM&B enterprise, and undo the mischief which was done by the old management. And if it should indeed prove—as is not likely—that he had gone too far, and imperiled his whole private fortune that the enterprise might not fail, the fact would impose upon a swindled community a debt of gratitude greater than even that generous act which has linked his name immortally in the endowment of the college which bears his name.

Three undertakers—Caleb Scudder and the partnership of Theodore Creager and William Folckemer—served Lafayette in 1876. However, Topping reported that, for reasons never explained, they performed upon John Purdue’s corpse “none of the embalming and preservation techniques usually associated with funerals.” This explains one newspaper’s disguised mention that
“the condition of the remains did not warrant the full program of exercises” first planned by the funeral committee.

Consequently at 2 p.m. on September 14, without the formalities of scripture, prayer, or hymn-singing, the entourage of Laird’s military band, the Lafayette Guards, and a who’s-who of 105 mourners left the Spears home and followed the wheeled, horse-drawn hearse on the mile-long route to the university chapel. President White met the arrivals, among them three of John Purdue’s sisters from Ohio and a number of members of their families. White, faculty members, and students followed the casket to the chapel. There, a platform hung with black and decorated with more of Dorner’s blossoms stood ready.

J. W. Ruggles, a private music teacher in Lafayette, directed a seven-member choir projecting the voices of Clara Thornburgh; the wife of Courier foreman Charles A. Reynolds; physician John S. Wood; lawyer Charles Groenendyke; Albert Smith, a baking powder company bookkeeper; and Lafayette ingénues Mary and Julia Bruce.

Reverends Boothe, Dickinson, Gobin, and Mackenzie carried out their assignments. The *Journal* observed that “three sisters of the deceased with their husbands and other relatives sat in front. Some of the family are of the Dunkard faith, and, in accordance with their mode of worship, sat with their hats on.”

“I am called to an unusual duty under the pressure of a hundred other duties demanding attention,” White began his oration. “I consented to fill the place assigned me on the assurance of the committee that only a few remarks would be expected. My poor words add but little interest to this solemn occasion.”

The Spanish have a proverb that “silence is golden and speech is silver,” but there is no silence so golden as the silence of death. This occasion is itself eloquence. The form before us speaks for me

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38As members of the Church of the Brethren, the Dunkard sect practiced adult baptism by triple immersion (i.e., “dunkers”), opposed oaths and military service, and observed severe simplicity of dress and speech.
today. This scene will be remembered, whatever may be true of my words, and this gives me courage. What I say will soon pass from memory, but this audience will never forget what he did. . . .

He began life as an humble teacher, and nowhere did he fail to leave the impress of his character on his scholars. An honored citizen of our city [Moses Fowler] who was his pupil and has been a lifelong friend bears testimony to the fact that his early teaching was characterized by a great interest in his pupils and his great desire was to impress truthfulness upon them. . . .

He used his wealth in a large-hearted manner, and churches and schools and every other agency for the good of the community received his support. . . .

His business enterprise will long be felt in Lafayette, but the one act that crowned that life and makes the name of John Purdue immortal was his munificent donation to the university. That one act will never fade out; it will live and grow brighter as years pass, and generations to come will rise up and call him blessed.

In looking over the biographies of the noble patrons of learning, the fact is noticeable that their great acts of benevolence are remembered while all their other acts have been forgotten.

John Harvard, the nonconformist, after a short life of thirty years, accumulated a competency and left about four thousand dollars to found a school at Cambridge, Massachusetts. All his other acts in life have faded and been forgotten. But as long as Harvard University does its beneficent work every student within its walls will cherish his memory.

So it was with Elihu Yale, who was the chief patron and founder of Yale University; and as long as Yale University does its grand work, that name will never fade.

Ephraim Brown, who founded Brown University, and others who have given of their means to found institutions of learning have by their donations made their names immortal.

So I might refer to George Peabody, that noble philanthropist whose great donations have filled two continents with his praise. As long as Peabody Institute in Baltimore and institutions elsewhere erected through his munificence shall stand, the American people will cherish his name and bless his memory.

I may also mention the name of Ezra Cornell, as well as that of Commodore Vanderbilt, who recently founded a great institution
in the South. His management of the New York Central Railway will soon pass out of memory, but Vanderbilt University is the monument that will ever perpetuate his name.

The gift of our friend—of one hundred and fifty thousand dollars—will make the name of John Purdue live just as long as learning lives and people keep their civilization. Those similarly blessed with wealth will do well to imitate Judge Purdue’s noble example instead of leaving their possessions to spoil their children or to be lost in conflict. Means were never taken out of a private fortune for the good of others without blessing the giver as well as the receiver.

It then came as a shock to many at the funeral when White, for the first time, publicly and unblinkingly aired the daring theory that senility, eroding mental health, or both had turned John Purdue from Midas-to-Madman in his last year:

In the five months of my acquaintance with him, I have wondered that Mr. Purdue attempted to do business; that he did not throw off all business care and live in peace. But his early habits of active industry urged him forward in every duty.

In the last few years of Mr. Purdue’s long life there have been conflicts, and I cannot be misunderstood when I say that whatever has disturbed the serenity of his old age has been the result of a breaking down of his mental powers. If in the future it should turn out that his later business ventures were not judicious, it will be attributed to the infirmity of age. [But] his errors in business were, in my judgment, largely due to the failure of the brain to do its part.

The “errors in business” which led to “failure of the brain” obviously involved the LM&B, the mining venture in Colorado and the Agricultural Works, all of which sapped energy and wealth; tarnished John Purdue’s supreme pride; and, to hear White tell it, pushed him toward insanity. White’s tribute concluded:

We may engrave upon brass and rear temples, but they will crumble into dust. But he who writes upon the tablet of the human soul does that which no time can efface—which will grow brighter throughout the age of eternity.
The *Courier* late that afternoon of September 14 contained a hurried account of White’s speech, hedging that it was “not a verbatim report, but embraces all the main points.”

After burial of John Purdue at sunset, groups of university students, possibly some who never had seen him until that last day of his life when he visited the campus, stood at the new grave and, according to the *Journal*, “gave silent tribute to one who had been to them a benefactor and a friend.”

The *Courier* on the afternoon of September 14 also contained Lingle’s rebuttal to Vater on the touchy subject headlined “Judge Purdue’s Mental Condition:”

It was a matter of common notoriety and has been on everybody’s lips for months. President White . . . could no more ignore it than he could ignore any other fact touching the characteristics of Judge Purdue.

It was part of the personal history of the man and involving, as Mr. Purdue had [feared], his entire fortune, had evidently preyed upon and, to some extent, shattered his faculties. . . . Mr. Purdue’s mental condition has been for some time a subject of serious solicitude to his friends—the more [because] while all his long life [he had acted with] abundant caution, he had become personally liable for an immense sum of money. When [some weeks ago] he was asked how much he had become liable for, he answered with the simplicity of a child, “I don’t know. I signed everything they brought me.”

The *Courier* had learned from Reverend Boothe that on his last carriage ride to the Agricultural works Purdue had dazedly or-

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In later years, the “silent tribute” gave way to good-natured joshing among the students who portrayed “Old Jawn Purdue” in posters, placards, effigies, and the like. Lafayette resident Mary Potter Chapin (1863–1946) even recalled a late-1870s Purdue University graduation ceremony: “A second-floor room in one of the oldest buildings was large enough to hold the audience at commencement time, and the decorations were little more than the buttonhole bouquet which irreverent students were wont to pin onto the lapel of John Purdue’s portrait at the back of the platform.”
dered his grandnephew at the reins to drive to Eleventh Street instead of Third. “He was so possessed of the hallucination that it was not until he had been taken to Eleventh Street that he would consent to be taken in the proper direction,” the Courier reported. “All this is very deplorable, but it is true, and touching the point of his capacity to transact business to the reckless jeopardy of his private fortune, is a matter of public concern.”

On the next afternoon the Courier of September 15 dropped all pretense of sentimentality, nostalgia, or praise to focus on a pressing and practical matter: “The death of Mister Purdue was unfortunate in that he had a contract to complete University Hall now in progress. There is law prohibiting the university’s borrowing money, but the trustees will no doubt devise some plan by which the work can go forward.”

It thus became obvious that Purdue had incurred substantial debts to the university—because of his half-met, ten-year pledge—and to the LM&B and that both entities—together with Purdue’s sisters and their families—stood keenly interested in how executors might settle the estate of such a wealthy man who bought no life insurance and made no will. It appeared, the scenario prompted people to remark for years, that John Purdue was one of those people who was convinced that he would never die.

Disputes about settlement of Purdue’s affairs first surfaced on September 27 in Judge David P. Vinton’s Tippecanoe Circuit Court. According to the Courier, on recommendation of next-of-kin, James J. Perrin and J. Herman Wiebers petitioned to be appointed as administrators of the estate.40

Lafayette attorneys Jay Adams and William C. Wilson represented Perrin in the petition, and attorney R. P. Davidson spoke for Wiebers, but John Coffroth rose to be heard as attorney for Purdue University. He objected to Perrin and Wiebers and ignited an

40Perrin was a respected Lafayette hardware merchant, land developer, and school board member; Wiebers was a Lafayette Agricultural Works bookkeeper, insurance and express agent, merchant, and notary public.
intriguing argument. Under the law in 1876, when someone died without a will, next-of-kin could administer the estate if they applied within thirty days, but neither Perrin nor Wiebers were next-of-kin. If no next-of-kin qualified in thirty days, then representatives of the estate’s largest creditor—the LM&B or Purdue University in this case—could settle the estate.

After oral arguments, Vinton put off naming any executors until October 12, thirty days after Purdue’s death. Vinton did uphold Coffroth’s contention that the right of the next-of-kin to administer did not imply the right to nominate anyone else (i.e., Perrin and Wiebers). However, at the expiration of thirty days, Vinton said, he as a general rule would respect the wishes of next-of-kin. Coffroth had maintained that failure of any next-of-kin to qualify as executors entitled the university to nominate because Purdue’s unpaid pledge of some $75,000 made the university the estate’s largest creditor. This point, however, remained arguable. There lingered the nagging fear that, when Purdue’s private business files and records were exposed, the LM&B Railroad might have the largest claim.

After court, the university trustees huddled on the Chauncey campus. They passed a resolution stating that because Purdue died intestate owing them about $75,000, if his next-of-kin failed to apply within thirty days, then attorney Daniel Royse and hotelkeeper Otho Weakly should be named executors. The trustees then contracted to rush the stone foundation of University Hall to completion; to cover it with tarpaulin to minimize damage by weather, thieves, or vandals; and to complete the building in the spring of 1877.

A silver lining to the swiftly thickening cloud over John Purdue’s estate was a report received by the trustees and passed on to readers by the Courier on September 30. Eighty students by that time had registered for fall classes, and applications-in-hand prompted projections of enrollment surpassing one hundred by October. Of the eighty, thirty-nine students (nineteen freshmen) sat in university-level classes, and forty-one studied in the Preparatory Academy in September.
It appears from all that transpired next that attorney Davidson, in a letter to one or more of Purdue’s relatives in Ohio, explained what he had learned about naming executors, and reported what Judge Vinton had ruled. For on October 4, Purdue’s sister Margaret Beever, seventy-one years old, appeared in Tippecanoe Circuit Court. This time, upon the collective advice of lawyers Adams, Wilson, and Davidson, Mrs. Beever applied to join Perrin and Wiebers in settling her brother’s estate. The three petitioners each posted bonds of $400,000. This amount may be presumed to have been a consensus estimate of the value of the estate. Judge Vinton then appointed the three and, according to a subsequent item in the *Courier*, “they will enter at once upon the administration [of the estate].”

This marked the beginning of an exhausting, stressful, argumentative, litigious paper chase that existed for more than five years. Perrin and Wiebers led the estate-settlement effort which came to involve lawsuits, complaints, negotiations, motions, summonses, public auctions, private sales, and out-of-court deals. Family members who hoped to be beneficiaries tried to get shares of John Purdue’s reputed fortune. Creditors demanded payment. Perrin and Wiebers sued for payment of debts owed the estate. Banks, insurance companies, railroads, and individuals joined in the milieu that reached courtrooms in Tippecanoe, Boone, and Warren counties. Hepburn and Sears summarized the outcome: “Mister Purdue illustrated that it is easier to found than to conserve a fortune... He had invested heavily in the Agricultural Works [and in] building of a railroad line from Lafayette to Muncie. As a result... there was little left for the heirs except a mass of uncollectible accounts and notes.”

John Purdue’s death affected many people. Stockholders of the Lafayette Agricultural Works needed immediately to replace him as president of their board of directors. So at a meeting on October 10, 1876, they added the grandnephew Thomas M. Park, the newspaperman, as a director. Thomas joined Martin Peirce, William C. Wilson, Herman Wiebers, William Clark, Hiram Chase, and
Thomas’s brother Samuel on the board. The board then elected Wilson as president, Wiebers as secretary-treasurer, and Samuel Park as bookkeeper of the Agricultural Works.

Early on, the executors needed to compile a complete list of potential heirs, an accurate inventory of John Purdue’s assets, and a summary of all legitimate claims against the estate. Early in the fall of 1876 the list of heirs stood complete:

- Eliza Purdue, Mary Miller, Hannah Clark, Sarah Prosser Roff, Margaret Beever, and Susan Thompson, surviving sisters.
- Ellen Horn, married daughter of Eliza Purdue.
- William Prosser, son of Sarah Prosser Roff.
- Sarah Rogers and Mary Ann Sellers, daughters of Sarah Prosser Roff.
- Frank Prosser, grandson of Sarah Prosser Roff.

The inventory of assets proved to be a large but comparatively easy job. The assets included personal property; farm and city real estate; livestock; farm equipment; cash; U.S. bonds; bank, railroad, and other capital stocks; commercial buildings; liens: loans; and mortgages payable to the estate. The total value of the assets came to about $200,000, an amount that disappointed the heirs and surprised their lawyers because it was no larger. Perrin and Wiebers filed the inventory in Circuit Court on December 1, 1876. Tippecanoe County Probate Book 21 contains a brief entry and refers to an attached list deposited in the court’s “inventory record.”

The liabilities, meanwhile, were quite another dismal matter. Soon after the administrators took over the estate they made the stunning discovery that Purdue had, in assorted combinations with Robert Heath, Martin Peirce, and other LM&B directors, signed his name to guarantee bank notes in excess of $500,000. Topping more specifically reported that the executors “were appalled to discover that [Purdue] had incurred debts . . . by signing

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41 The court “inventory record” with the detailed list does not appear to have been retained, so line-item details of the Purdue estate are unknown.
notes indiscriminately in the last year of his life in a desperate move to raise money for the LM&B.”

Before the executors could sell any of the assets to begin to pay the creditors, they at times had to establish proof of ownership. They began to nibble away at this daunting job in late October 1876. The court authorized Perrin and Wiebers to sell 200 shares of John Purdue’s stock in First National Bank to pay off a $20,000 note about to fall due on November 1 to a bank in Boston, Massachusetts. One guesses that Purdue signed as surety on the note to keep the LM&B in business. In December the executors sold 146 more bank shares—presumably worth about $14,600—and unspecified “personal property in Warren County” to settle other debts.

Beyond that, surviving records from Tippecanoe Circuit Court and the university are incomplete and at times contradictory and confusing. Settlement of Purdue’s pledge to the university is a prime example. On December 14, 1876, the Courier said that the university trustees had “arranged to petition the next legislature for an appropriation to complete the new college building. The administrators of the Purdue estate decline to make further payments on Mr. Purdue’s subscription, [so] an order was passed by the [university] board directing the foreclosure of the mortgage on the Walnut Grove farm by which the balance due is secured.” Later documents, however, whether they be university trustee meeting minutes, court docket entries, or newspaper reports, fail to confirm foreclosure.

It came as no great surprise, although it may have riled the Purdue University trustees, when on December 26, 1876, Margaret Beever petitioned Circuit Court to accept her resignation as an executor. This left the settlement work to Perrin and Wiebers, whom Coffroth had challenged on the university’s behalf three months earlier. Although the court readily consented, the reasons for Mrs. Beever’s abdication are not specified in records.

Purdue University trustees met in late December without benefit of a successor to John Purdue. Outgoing Governor Thomas A. Hendricks evidently wished to defer the appointment to Governor-Elect James D. Williams, who took office in January
1877. But Williams, presumably because Purdue had in the first place been named as an “extra” to the board to satisfy his demands in 1869, opted not to replace.

So Coffroth, John Sutherland (LaPorte), Mahlon Manson (Crawfordsville), Joseph E. Ratliff (Richmond), Reuben Wells (Jeffersonville), and Robert P. Haynes (Daviess County) comprised the board with Stein as secretary and Peirce as treasurer. The Courier said that a portion of their December meeting had to do with courtesy expressions of praise for John Purdue. Coffroth, the paper reported, “looks to the legislature for appropriations, and estimates that the institution needs money to erect more buildings for various improvements.”

Two weeks later the Courier opined that “Purdue University prospers and waxes strong under president White” and reported, in another column, that “a handsome monument will ere long mark Mr. Purdue’s grave on the university grounds.” The university trustees on February 8, 1877, did approve payment of twenty-five dollars to Doctor Moore for the plaster death mask, and voted to deposit the mask in a First National Bank vault. But they did nothing more by way of any “handsome monument”—ever.

By early 1877, it meanwhile had become clear to the executors that untangling John Purdue’s financial affairs with the LM&B would take some doing. That is because the money-losing LM&B itself was involved in one of its several struggles for control. In connection with this, in Muncie, the Delaware Circuit Court judge had ordered the taking of depositions from Lafayette LM&B directors Alexander Wilson and Joseph Heath. The Lafayette Courier at one time reported that Heath had answered 149 questions over two days about LM&B operations when he, Purdue, Peirce, John W. Heath, and James Falley were directors. Joseph Heath said that he, like Purdue, had “signed many notes in blank” and “did not remember how many or in what amount.”

In Tippecanoe Circuit Court, Perrin and Wiebers shortly sued LM&B directors Richard Healy, Falley, and John W. Heath, accusing them of relocating a stretch of track on two Lafayette land tracts upon which Purdue had held a mortgage and claiming that
this reduced the value of the land the estate wished to sell. The
LM&B had appraised the two properties at about $450 while the
Purdue executors wanted $2,500. The court, however, after exam-
ing documents ruled that the land had been deeded to Falley,
who was a Lafayette boot and shoe manufacturer and dealer, so
the Purdue estate received nothing.

For a while the Agricultural Works stood as another obstacle to
settlement of the estate. In early March, Tippecanoe Circuit Court
approved an adjusted estate valuation of $250,000 in assets to be
balanced against an estimated $700,000 in liabilities, most of the
latter in LM&B and Lafayette Agricultural Works debts.

Then the *Journal* reported on March 15 that “the matters at
issue between the Lafayette Agricultural Works, Judge Purdue,
and the stockholders [have been] amicably and satisfactorily com-
promised between all the parties interested. The innumerable law-
suits that have been in our courts for the past two years in regard
to the same are all terminated by being dismissed.” In the agree-
ment the estate bought all stock in the company, most of it held by
Henry Carter. This enabled the estate, by owning it outright, to run
the factory or to sell it without interference. The *Courier* com-
mented on March 16 that “even lawyers, who by common scandal
have been suspected of a selfish desire to promote litigation rather
than compromise, have in this case manifested a disposition to se-
cure an equitable compromise.”

This agreement enabled Perrin and Wiebers to focus more upon
John Purdue’s unpaid pledges to Purdue University. The *Journal*
of March 19, 1877, said that the two had asked Judge Vinton to autho-
rize a settlement-of-debt agreement with the university trustees. The
paper, presumably in the words of Vater, praised the executors for
“showing a disposition to avoid litigation” and voiced the hope that
“as soon as they are authorized [they] will proceed with the work of
completing University Hall. . . . A force of men will commence work,
the walls will soon rise and the building will be under roof in time
for holding school at the first term of the next collegiate year.”

Wiebers’ lawyer, Davidson, conferred with the university
trustees on March 23 about settling the pledge. The issue proved
to be more complicated than it looked. Board minutes show that the trustees agreed to allow interest to be additionally credited to John Purdue’s previous payments, but they then negotiated with Davidson an unspecified interest rate to be charged against any overdue installments as each May 1 due date came and went.

How much had Purdue really paid so far? There were discussions about that, too. In the Journal of March 26, Vater explained that the university trustees claimed that $65,000 worth of credits demanded by Purdue during 1869–1874 had never been audited or allowed by the board. Trustees further insisted that there existed a much larger sum unpaid on overdue installments, plus interest, than Perrin and Wiebers were willing to allow. Wiebers and Perrin argued that Purdue’s claims for credit had been “practically” allowed by the trustees, reported to the governor January 1, 1876, and acquiesced in by the board. Vater reported that as a result of talks on these issues, the university trustees agreed to the estate’s figures but then claimed $3,000 in interest on past-due installments. Perrin and Wiebers offered $1,500. The parties settled upon $1,700 subject to court approval. “If this adjustment be made, work upon University Hall will move forward at once; a consummation devoutly to be wished for by the community at large,” Vater said via the Journal. “We hope nothing may befall this prospect of so happy an adjustment.”

Indeed by the end of April 1877, construction had resumed at University Hall, with Perrin and Wiebers paying frequent visits. Meanwhile, shovel-bearing landscapers were encircling John Purdue’s grave, scarcely two hundred feet from the building’s foundation stones, with twenty small evergreen trees arranged in the shape of a heart pointing east.

The Journal erred, however, when it had asserted months before that “a suitable monument will be erected at no distant day.” No such monument materialized. On some occasion, probably in 1877, trustees did authorize placement of a plain headstone at the west end of John Purdue’s grave. The marker measures a modest thirty-two inches tall, fourteen inches wide, and ten inches thick. It contains no carving, fully ignoring the resolution of the Tippecanoe County Bar, members of which had suggested a glowing inscription in granite.
April warmed into May. A newspaper item on May 6, 1877, said that “Perrin and Wiebers are pressing construction of University Hall with dispatch.” The finished building would be sixty-five feet wide and one hundred thirty-five long, with basement, three stories, and a mansard roof. It would contain eight recitation rooms twenty-five by thirty feet; two library rooms twenty-seven by forty-one feet with a gallery on three sides, and a thirty-one-foot-high ceiling.

All the while, the endless troubles of the LM&B compounded matters for Perrin and Wiebers. In late May the Oxford Tribune in Benton County bitterly complained that a judge had named a receiver for the railroad “when he knew nine-tenths of the people along the line of the road were opposed.” The paper labeled the appointee, E. H. Waldron, “a man who twenty days ago tried to steal track and equipment belonging to the road . . . simply a tool in the hands of Moses Fowler, Adams Earl and others who spent the last five or six years trying to bankrupt the LM&B . . . in order to buy eighteen miles of it for their road.” With Waldron in charge, “Fowler, Earl and the CL&C accomplished what they failed to do while John W. Heath was managing the LM&B.”

Purdue University’s third commencement program, the first since John Purdue’s death, took place in June 1877. The speakers neither uttered words nor performed acts of praise for the deceased founder. On September 6, 1877, the university trustees voted to borrow $8,000 from interest on the state’s Morrill Act endowment for current expenses, repairs, and furnishings, to be returned to the state “as soon as any monies from the estate of John Purdue come into the treasury.”

The patience of the university trustees wore thin through the balance of 1877 as they waited for a breakthrough that would bring them the Purdue estate’s sorely needed cash. On January 1, 1878, with Mahlon Manson now presiding over the trustees, Manson joined Peirce and Stein on a new committee “to adjust and settle with the administrators of Mr. Purdue’s estate the interest accounts against the estate, with full power to act.” The trustees also voted to again tap the Morrill Act endowment interest—for $5,000 this time—to complete University Hall. They would repay
it by foreclosing on a “proportionate part of the mortgage executed by John Purdue to the State of Indiana for use of the trustees,” a reference to the Walnut Grove Farm in Warren County.

Battling their own set of aggravations in February 1878, Perrin and Wiebers emerged eminently victorious from crucial talks with John W. Heath and other officers of the LM&B. The Lafayette Dispatch reported that for the settlement of about $590,000 worth of notes that the confused, misled, and senile Purdue had signed as surety for the railroad, Judge Vinton approved a compromise heavily favoring the estate. The estate (1) gave Heath forty-one of John Purdue’s LM&B bonds of $1,000 face value, (2) paid the LM&B $2,000 in cash and (3) gave Heath and associates a release of any and all claims the estate might legitimately have lodged against the LM&B. Heath in turn agreed to remove Purdue’s name from all the LM&B notes he had signed as surety on bank loans. As a result, on February 8, in First National Bank, the Dispatch said that “$560,000 of Mr. Purdue’s paper was cancelled in the presence of the contracting parties.”

Perrin and Wiebers learned of Eliza Purdue’s death in Ohio on September 21, 1878, at the age of seventy-eight. Greatly unburdened by their LM&B settlement, the executors next set about to dispose of John Purdue’s investment of twelve years’ standing in the Lafayette Journal. The sale itself was simple, but the answer to the question of who bought it posed an intriguing riddle. The Courier on October 14, 1878, said that the sale had taken place that afternoon. Lafayette attorney John S. Williams had started the bidding at $8,300; Vater countered with $8,350; Williams bid $8,400. “This continued,” the Courier said, “till Vater bid $9,450. So Vater keeps the Journal.” 42

42Unable to buy the Journal, Williams six months later introduced the Lafayette Sunday Times. Offering detailed community news coverage and employing bright writing and innovative use of woodcut illustrations, the Sunday Times existed until 1904.
Next morning, in what appeared to be confirmation of the *Courier’s* story, the *Journal* contained a notice signed by “S. VATER” to the effect that the *Journal* “was yesterday sold to the undersigned by the Purdue administrators. Price $9,450. The purchaser invokes the assistance of every friend and well wisher to give him their patronage, be it much or little, that he may be enabled to repay the advances of the kind friends who have put it in his power to keep the *Journal* ‘at home.’”

That afternoon, the *Courier* claimed that the sale had been made “to President White, of Purdue University, who makes the purchase for his son, Albert. Vater, whose lease extends until some time this winter, will retain an interest—one-third or one-half—and will unite with the junior White in the management of the paper.”

Then on October 17, the *Journal* said that Judge Vinton confirmed that Vater had bought the paper for $9,450. And then “Vater sold one-third interest to Albert B. White who will enter into possession thereof on February 8, 1879. The business until that time will be carried on as heretofore by Mr. Vater alone.”

At Purdue University, all the while, the Manson-Peirce-Stein committee of trustees further suffered in silence and cooled its collective heels in dealing with Wiebers and Perrin. Meeting minutes make it clear that the university trustees on October 21, 1878—more than two years after John Purdue’s death—remained restless for action. At a meeting on that date they instructed Peirce “to confer with the administrators of John Purdue’s estate in reference to the indebtedness of the estate to the university and its payments, and to invite a meeting with the trustees.”

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43Lafayette citizens curious since 1866 about John Purdue’s true role in the *Journal* probably found little fiscal sense in all this garbled reportage. When Purdue bought the paper in ’66, the purchase price had been estimated at $30,000, causing the rival *Courier*’s Lingle to liken it to “thirty pieces of silver” in the heat of a political campaign. The 1878 reports now implied that Vater had bought full interest for $9,450, then sold one-third to White, presumably for something like $3,150. The numbers do not add up: the value of the newspaper could not have plunged by 1878 to only one-third of its value in 1866 unless Purdue, insistent upon buying, foolishly paid three times too much in the first place.
While the Purdue estate’s tangles with the university trustees, the LM&B, the Agricultural Works stockholders, and the *Journal* represented major battlefields for Perrin and Wiebers, the two men also found it necessary to sell numerous pieces of less valuable real estate assets. One was a five-acre parcel in north Lafayette near what later became the Monon Shops railroad complex. The estate also still possessed deeds, rented, or held leases for some of the twelve business sections in the Purdue Block—and that was not all. Volunteer researchers in the 1900s who combed real estate grantor-grantee books in the Tippecanoe County Recorder’s office traced many more of John Purdue’s transactions. Their findings show that the dry goods merchant became an active “land merchant” as well—buying dozens of properties to lease, rent, or sell for profit. Between 1836 and 1840 he owned land at the northwest corner of Third and South, the southeast corner of Second and Ferry, and the acreage he had purchased from Spencer back in Ohio. He bought or sold ten other parcels between 1840 and 1849; fifteen between 1850 and 1859; twelve between 1860 and 1869; and ten between 1870 and 1876. Another handwritten note of unknown origin and accuracy states that over the years Purdue bought and sold rural acreage in Warren and Cass counties. Divestiture of at least some of these land holdings fell upon the beleaguered Perrin and Wiebers.

The most that Peirce could achieve on behalf of his fellow university trustees through the balance of the fall of 1878 occurred in meetings with the two executors. Peirce later summarized their agreements in a report to the trustees on December 11. Peirce said that as of October 14, 1878, the day of the *Journal* sale, the estate still owed the university $1,448.05 overdue since May 1, 1875; $15,000 overdue since May 1, 1876; $15,000 overdue since May 1, 1877; $15,000 overdue since May 1, 1878, and, per agreement with the executors, owed $2,258.20 in accrued interest—a total debt of $48,706.25. Peirce agreed to credit the estate for $30,500 in construction work and for two bank notes of $3,150 and $2,000 converted to cash and paid over by the estate on October 14, 1878. This left $13,056 still overdue, a debt of $558.20 identified in minutes only as “by account allowed,” and a final $15,000 pledge install-
ment that would come due on May 1, 1879. Peirce, Perrin, and Wiebers, by some application of logic, then agreed upon a total remaining debt of $27,498.

Minutes of the university trustees show, however, that another hiatus extended for ten more months. During that time Purdue’s sister Sarah Prosser Roff died at the age of eighty. Not until September 4, 1879, could Peirce, acting on fresh authority given him by the trustees and with Stein and others concurring, reach a final settlement.

This was made possible, according to Peirce, only after Wiebers and Perrin welcomed and accepted a buyer’s offer to buy the Lafayette Agricultural Works for about $19,000 up front, $10,000 in cash, the balance with a six percent loan. This enabled the two executors of John Purdue’s estate to offer to pay the university the full purchase price (i.e., $19,000) plus $5,000 in “good notes—lately taken on real estate sales” and to pay the balance of the university’s claim (about $3,500) in three months. Peirce, for one, considered this “the best settlement we could hope for.” Purdue trustee meeting minutes state that Stein, for another, advised Peirce to pursue that deal “by all means.”

Despite Peirce’s best efforts to pursue, however, the matter dragged on. Perrin and Wiebers, still struggling toward a finish line as yet out of sight, informed Judge Vinton in early September 1880 that personal property left in John Purdue’s estate was estimated to be worth $17,000 and that unspecified debts of $32,000 remained to be paid. Their petition noted, on the other hand, that the estate did still own certain unforeclosed amounts of the Warren County land—the bulk of Walnut Grove Farm—estimated to be worth $50,000.

Records in Warren County do show that Perrin sold one of Purdue’s land parcels to Matthias Luppold in 1880, Wiebers sold two parcels to Joseph Rabb in 1881, and Perrin conveyed one parcel to William Miller in 1882.

On November 6, 1880, the executors auctioned two more Lafayette city lots Purdue had owned for $1,600. Then on November 29 Wiebers and Perrin filed in Tippecanoe Circuit Court an appraisal of the Warren County land made by Philip W. Lewis and
Gordon B. McClain. The appraisers listed twenty-six parcels—valued at between $1,000 and $2,800 each—totaling $54,000.

Purdue University trustees, however, seemingly had their collective doubts about getting their Purdue estate money from the land sale, or else they were simply tired of waiting for it. On December 17, 1880, the trustees directed Peirce to satisfy any lingering debt by foreclosing on more of the mortgage Purdue gave the State in 1876.

Just two days after that meeting, Judge Vinton authorized Wiebers and Perrin to sell those remnants of the Walnut Grove Farm at public auction in Williamsport. The sale began on the courthouse steps at 10 A.M. on Friday, February 11, 1881. A complete record of the results of the sale cannot be found. But four days after the sale, Perrin and Wiebers did inform Judge Vinton of having sold two parcels to Fred Haffner for $6,000; one to Jonathan McCord for $3,075; one to Eynon Dysert for $3,650; one to James H. Keys for $2,700; and one to Samuel Horn for $5,050.44

Dismantling of the Walnut Grove Farm marked the nominal end of the grueling task of settling John Purdue’s estate. Tippecanoe County Probate Book records show that on November 21, 1881, Perrin and Wiebers, with their attorneys Wilson and Adams (for Perrin) and Davidson (for Wiebers) filed a report of final settlement.

The report indicated, in substance, that the remaining heirs of John Purdue had united in granting power-of-attorney to Frank H. Prosser, William Prosser, John McCammon, and Thomas Park. Judge Vinton relieved Wiebers and Perrin of further responsibility.

The fourteen close relatives, at that juncture, were shown to be

- Margaret Beever, Mary Miller, Hannah Clark, and Susan Thompson, all sisters of John Purdue residing in Ohio.
- John McCammon, son and guardian of John Purdue’s sister Catherine McCammon Sinkey, both living in Ohio.
- Ellen Horn and her husband the Reverend Samuel Horn.

44Horn, a Church of the Brethren minister from Ohio, had married Eliza Purdue’s daughter Ellen.
• Mary H. Sellers, residing in White County, Indiana, a descendant of Sarah Prosser.
• Julia Prosser Ginn, evidently a daughter of Sarah Prosser Roff, living in Ohio.
• William Prosser, son of Sarah Prosser Roff.
• Sarah Prosser Rogers, daughter of Sarah Prosser Roff, living in Ohio.
• Frank H. Prosser, a grandson of Sarah Prosser Roff, living in Benton County, Indiana.

According to at least one Ohio newspaper report (Columbus Dispatch, Sunday, October 9, 1960) the “final business affairs” of the estate had been ironed out in December 1881, when all or most of those relatives met in Westerville, Ohio, at the home of John McCammon. Their deliberations were not a matter of public record. Nor did their meeting generate widespread joy among them. Peirce signed and sent a release of the Warren County farmland mortgage from the university to the heirs on December 30, 1882. However, a letter known to have been written in 1884 by John McCammon, complained that more than a million dollars’ worth of silver had been taken from the Purdue mine in Colorado since 1872, and that only low-grade ore was left while “not a dollar has ever been received by the Purdue [heirs].” Perrin and Wiebers, it appears, did not feel that they still had legal authority—nor the energy—to pursue the Colorado matter. Neither, it seems, did the heirs.

The Ohio heirs, however, were still prosecuting at least one lawsuit in the spring of 1885, and Perrin appears to have acted on their behalf. A newspaper item published in Williamsport on May 14, 1885, advertised a sheriff’s sale to be held June 6, 1885, at the Warren County Courthouse, of the rents and profits for up to seven years from the southwest quarter and the southeast quarter of the northwest quarter of Section 29 Township 23 north range eight west, all in Warren County.

“And on failure to realize the full amount of judgment, interest and costs,” the notice said, “the sheriff will offer for sale the
fee-simple to that real estate.” The ad indicated that the property had been taken from one John T. Briscoe et al. after a certain court judgment in favor of “James J. Perrin, administrator of John Purdue deceased.”

Purdue’s sister Catherine Sinkey died July 23, 1882, at age eighty-nine. Hannah Clark died in 1890 at age seventy-five. Margaret Beever passed away July 17, 1892, at age eighty-eight. Susan Thompson died October 24, 1892, at eighty-five; and Mary “Polly” Miller died at eighty-three in 1893.

John Purdue’s death in 1876 marked the end of an exciting era for Lafayette. New banks, a hospital, and an orphanage opened. Waterworks pipes were installed. Soon electric lights would wink on, telephones would ring, and bicycle wheels would roll. Lafayette would enjoy decades of progress through the rest of the nineteenth century, through all of the twentieth and into the twenty-first, centered always around that survivor of its own growing pains, that crown jewel of the old Star City, Purdue University.
Since John Purdue
Since John Purdue’s passing, events reminiscent of him continue.

1881

On April 14, the university trustees voted to move Doctor A. M. Moore’s plaster death mask of John Purdue from its sanctuary in a Lafayette bank vault over to a new university building “as soon as the latter is ready for its safe custody and preservation.”

1887

On the northeast corner of the grounds of a Tippecanoe County Courthouse opened in 1885, the City of Lafayette contributed a twelve-foot monument to community history. Still standing, it honors the “heroes of the Battle of Tippecanoe” fought in 1811, the county’s early pioneers, and Civil War dead. A statue of the Marquis de Lafayette stands on top. Its base is relieved by four medallions representing the Indiana state seal, Lafayette founder William Digby, the Battle of Tippecanoe, and John Purdue.

A then-unknown young sculptor in Chicago, Lorado Zadoc Taft, who later gained national eminence, created the molds for the statuary. Taft (1860–1936) had opened a studio at age twenty-six in Chicago. Thus, his creation for Lafayette was one of his first in a series of statues, busts, and other major works. These came to include the colossal “Fountain of Time” in Chicago in 1922. Presumably the plaster death mask of John Purdue made in 1876 proved to be a useful guide when Taft sculpted Purdue’s likeness for his statue.
Also in 1887, as if to justify John Purdue’s face on Taft’s monument, newspaper writer Ella Wallace contributed a long Lafayette Journal sketch. Excerpts of it follow:

To crown it all he was a man of sterling integrity. From the beginning of his business career to the day of his death no man ever questioned his honesty. Both at home and in the markets of the East his word was as good as his bond. His name behind any enterprise gave it credit and inspired unbounded confidence. . . .

By these same methods every boy and girl in this free land of ours may mount to independence and respectability, if not to distinction and power. . . .

That he possessed faults and weaknesses is doubtless true; that he did not achieve all the good of which he was capable may be admitted; but that his virtues outweighed his faults, and that his achievements outshone his failings and gave color to his life, will be conceded by all.

Without his aid the university would never have been founded among us. He has opened here a fountain of learning that shall deepen and widen with time. He has started an influence that is rapidly changing and purifying the atmosphere of the entire community. As long as the seasons come and go his influence will be felt.

Shakespeare knew whereof he spoke when he said, “the good that men do lives after them, the evil is buried with their bones.”

In time, Mr. Purdue’s faults will wholly disappear in the obscuring of the past while his virtues and his work will live to bless his memory.

1888

The 826-page Biographical Record and Portrait Album of Tippecanoe County contained only scant, and partly erroneous, information about John Purdue. It wrongly listed him as a bank board member in Lafayette in 1834 and placed his schoolteaching career in Piqua instead of Pickaway County, Ohio.
1894

Purdue University’s graduating class paid for installation of the circular fountain still functioning west of John Purdue’s grave. The base of the fountain was carved to read “Class of ’94.” Meeting minutes indicate that the seniors offered the university trustees a fountain “to cost not less than $200 provided the university would furnish the basin and piping.” In accepting, the trustees also authorized spending “an equal amount with the senior class if found necessary.”

1909

Lafayette attorney Richard P. DeHart privately published a two-volume history, Past and Present of Tippecanoe County, Indiana. For perhaps three generations it stood as the definitive work on the subject. However, DeHart (1832–1918), a trial attorney, community benefactor, and a brevet Civil War brigadier general, shortchanged the memory of John Purdue. His hundreds of pages contained only three-paragraphs about its founder in a chapter about the university, and repeated the error that Purdue had taught in Piqua, Ohio.

1915

During a meeting on June 9, a vastly changed cast of Purdue University trustees appointed Lafayette attorney Charles B. Stuart and noted author-playwright George Ade, who lived near Brook, Indiana, to join President Winthrop E. Stone in an effort to “secure a proper marker for the grave of John Purdue.” These efforts came to naught, probably because their inquiries convinced them that Purdue had wished for no more than the plain stone placed in 1877.

1923

Around another conference table of new faces at a meeting of the trustees on June 12, President Edward C. Elliott, who had succeeded Stone in 1922, voiced interest in providing “a suitable
memorial to John Purdue.” Minutes of the meeting declared that the subject arose because heirs of Purdue’s business partner Lazarus M. Brown had offered a deal: For $350 the university could buy several pieces of furniture that Purdue had given to Brown sixty or more years before.

Professor William Murray Hepburn, the university librarian, recommended the buy using budgeted library funds. Hepburn told the trustees that he also anticipated that gifts of furniture that was actually used by John Purdue—plus a crayon portrait of Purdue, and several oil paintings owned by Purdue and given to Brown—might be donated to the university. The trustees approved the furniture purchase.

Five weeks later the trustees, on Elliott’s recommendation, named a committee to review and report on the unsightly problem of the dying hedge surrounding the Purdue grave and, while they were at it, to see about the construction of an “appropriate stone coping.” Trustees Henry W. Marshall, Lafayette newspaper publisher, and Virginia Meredith, operator of farms near Cambridge City, Indiana, joined President Elliott on this mission.

1924

At the trustees’ meeting on October 10, Virginia Meredith reported that the committee “examined the dying hedge . . . and recommend that it be replaced as soon as practicable by another hedge, to be of a variety of dwarf evergreen that requires neither trimming nor clipping.” Cyrus May Hobbs, nurseryman from Plainfield, Indiana, in his fourteenth year as a trustee, supplied a solution. In June the other trustees approved Hobbs’s offer to plant a hardy variety of juniper around the grave, and do so in late fall.

1925

A fresh chance to acquire relics of the John Purdue era came the way of the university on June 3. That is when President Elliott received a letter from Blanche Brown Johnson, daughter of Lazarus
M. Brown, and from her sons Harold Brown Johnson (Purdue Class of 1911) and Maxwell Oscar Johnson (Purdue Class of 1913). On June 8 Elliott briefed the university trustees about the Johnsons’ wish to donate a crayon portrait of John Purdue. Purdue was said to have chosen it as his “best portrait” when he gave it to Lazarus Brown. Envisioning the future establishment of some sort of “Purdue Room” on the campus, as an exhibition venue, Mrs. Johnson offered to lend or give the university several more items:

- A Jacobean armchair that John Purdue had used in his Lahr House rooms and later had given to Lazarus Brown.
- A small dress that John Purdue gave her when Mrs. Johnson was a child.
- A washstand.
- Certain oil paintings from Italy that John Purdue bought in New York City and gave to Lazarus Brown.
- A mahogany secretary and bookcase.
- A rosewood parlor suite.
- Marble vases and a set of china that John Purdue gave to Lazarus Brown and his bride as a wedding gift in 1856.

Then in October 1925, the university trustees received from the session of Central Presbyterian Church in Lafayette what meeting minutes described as a framed “cabinet photo” of John Purdue that was once owned by Moses Fowler and later his son, James M. Fowler.

Just as previous Tippecanoe County histories had minimized or bungled the subject of John Purdue in accounts of his life and work, one of two new ones committed the same omissions. The Centennial Book, compiled by Lafayette newspaperman Paul W. Mavity to celebrate the city’s hundredth anniversary, contained a full-page support advertisement from the university. The ad made no mention of John Purdue. About two pages of text in the book proper traced university history, and displayed a full-length portrait of John Purdue holding a cane. The text did gush about the growth
and importance of the university, but of its founder it contained only this slightly off-center summary: “At first Battle Ground was considered because of its historic significance; but as citizens of Lafayette and vicinity, including John Purdue as the principal donor, offered a gift of $150,000 in cash and 100 acres of land, its site in West Lafayette, then known as Chauncey, was chosen.”

In fairness to Mavity and other contributing writers of The Centennial Book, it should be said that they may have known that the university also was about to elaborate on its founder in greater detail. This appeared with the publication of Purdue University: Fifty Years of Progress. Coauthors William M. Hepburn, the librarian, and Louis Martin Sears, professor of history, devoted five pages to an accurate though cursory John Purdue biography, and mentioned him frequently in chapters on the university’s early years. Hepburn and Sears commented: “In John Purdue, the modern young American who is an individualist at heart has a benefactor worthy of respect. A pioneer in early associations, and through his life a successful individualist, John Purdue was a sturdy, yes a noble, representative of his times.”

1929

The Tippecanoe County Historical Association came into possession of several personal belongings of John Purdue, and a two-page typewritten biography said to have been obtained “from History of Indiana published in 1875, from letters written by John Purdue, and from Elmer E. Anderson.”

The belongings included a hat, hat case, shawl, and a pair of white linen trousers. Anderson at the same time gave the university “letters written by Mr. Purdue which were of interest relating to agriculture at the time he [owned] Walnut Grove Farm.” The university also acquired a few books from John Purdue’s library.

Elmer E. Anderson was the son of Joshua Anderson, who had married the widow of John Prosser in 1867. The late John Prosser had been one of the sons of Purdue’s sister Sarah, thus a nephew
of John Purdue. This explains why Elmer Anderson, something on the order of a “great-grand-step-nephew-in-law” of John Purdue, donated Purdue’s effects.

1931

Compilers of a Dictionary of American Biography desired to include a profile of John Purdue and sent a request for one to the university. On March 9, President Elliott approved and signed a one-page, single-spaced typewritten sketch. In it, he mentioned:

It is related locally that John Purdue, shortly before his death, made known three desires: that he be buried on the campus of the new university that carried his name; that the grave have an unmarked stone; and that the flag staff of the institution be close to the burial place. These desires were fulfilled and the visitor will note in front of University Hall the low-lying juniper hedge at the foot of the tall flag mast. Only a careful observer will take account of the small marble headstone inside the hedge. . . . In the case of John Purdue, the grave marks his monument. This monument is Purdue University.

1934

At their meeting on April 18 President Elliott told the university trustees of a “unique and very interesting” new gift. It was one of the molds used in making the bricks John Purdue had ordered from Phillip Miller in the early 1870s. Miller’s 72-year-old son, Michael, of Lafayette, informed Elliott that he had helped make the bricks and put up the buildings. Most of the bricks came from the brickyard on Morehouse Gravel Road. Michael Miller’s daughter, Mrs. O. A. Lee of Indianapolis, joined Michael Miller in making the donation. Hepburn exhibited the mold in a temporary “John Purdue Room” in the Purdue Library.

Robert Hartley Perdue, of Cleveland, Ohio, compiled a fourteen-page typewritten document based on descendants of
Dr. William Perdue, who settled in Chester County, Pennsylvania, in 1737–1738, and on ancestors of Lucinda Maria Smith Perdue. Perdue deposited a copy of the study, which contained considerable biographical material about John Purdue, more than thirty years later in the Purdue University Libraries’ Special Collections.

1939

During meetings on April 18–19 university trustees voted to accept the gift of a black-and-white photograph of John Purdue from Mrs. C. P. Thompson, of Delaware, Ohio. She was the wife of a grandnephew of John Purdue.

1940

The university commissioned staff members Thomas R. Johnston and Helen Hand to compile a book titled *The Trustees and the Officers of Purdue University 1865–1940*. At the time, Johnston was the university publicist and Hand was the top executive secretary.

In their 428-page volume, published in November, the coauthors discussed John Purdue’s role in the founding years, published a black-and-white reproduction of one of the portraits of him seated in a chair, and three pages of biography.

1942

President Elliott in the spring reported to the university trustees that he had ordered one of several stored-away portraits of John Purdue to be hung in the main lobby of the Executive Building and planned to hang others in the foyer of the Hall of Music. He referred to buildings opened between 1937 and 1940, connected by the foyer and later renamed the Frederick L. Hovde Hall of Administration and the Edward C. Elliott Hall of Music.
1946

George Wesley Munro, a Purdue engineering graduate in 1897 and professor emeritus of electrical engineering, finished compiling “John Purdue and Purdue University: A Study of the Relations Between Them from Its Origin Until His Death.” The 222-page typescript evolved from research in an estimated 4,500 issues of several Lafayette newspapers printed between 1869 and 1876. Writing about the project later, Munro explained: “Primarily this is source material and may prove of value when a complete history of the university is prepared. [By itself] it has only slight popular appeal.”

1947

Late in the year Fred C. Kelly prepared to start writing a book about John Purdue. Kelly, sixty-five, who was a noted author, journalist, correspondent, and syndicated columnist, lived in semi-retirement in Kensington, Maryland, and Peninsula, Ohio. Starting with The Human Nature of Business in 1920, Kelly had written more than a dozen books of national interest. Among them were biographies of the Wright brothers and Purdue University legends George Ade and David E. Ross. Kelly wrote in December 1947 to Purdue President Frederick L. Hovde, who had succeeded Elliott as Purdue president in 1946: “I believe [enough] research has been done for a start on the actual writing of the biography. . . . I’m a little worried about the advanced age of the few people who knew [John Purdue], and I’d like to talk with them soon.” Hovde responded: “Will write you after the January meeting of the trustees about the John Purdue project.”

1948

The idea of a John Purdue biography by Kelly vanished, however, in a fog of misunderstanding. When the trustees met during January 21–22, 1948, university vice president Frank C. Hockema
pointed out that Professor Munro had assembled “a great deal of material on John Purdue after long and careful investigation, material which needs only the editorship of, perhaps, a capable member of the Department of English staff.” Trustees debated the advisability of contracting with Kelly for a John Purdue book, then bumped the matter back to Hovde “for further study and report to the board.”

Hovde never reported back, perhaps for several reasons. For one, Kelly soon became enmeshed in three other book projects—Miracle at Kitty Hawk published in 1951, Kin Hubbard, a biography of an Indiana cartoonist and humorist in 1952, and How We Invented the Airplane (with Orville Wright) in 1953. Kelly lived until 1959. The subject of John Purdue perhaps escaped Kelly’s further interest, too, because of his weak arithmetic. He had hoped to interview “people who knew” John Purdue. But seventy-one years after Purdue’s death, no living person even of advanced age could claim to have known him.

Meanwhile, unknown to Hockema, Hovde, and the trustees, the Munro manuscript fell far short of being a book, even given “editorship of a capable member of the Department of English.” Hockema probably never had seen it. Nor had Hovde. So it remained as Munro described it, “source material [having] only slight popular appeal.”

1953

The November issue of The Purdue Alumnus contained Munro’s article “John Purdue.” Munro had been the first editor of the Alumnus in 1912–1914 and a former treasurer of the Purdue Alumni Association. In 1946, after finishing his long study of the relationship between John Purdue and the new university, Munro disclosed in paragraphs accompanying the article: “I responded to an inner urge to go on and find out something about Mr. Purdue. . . . For five years, assembling material was an exciting hobby. [But with] a hundred or so pages of manuscript in hand, no real progress toward a fair understanding of the man appeared on them. Then the old clock on the tower struck [the age of] eighty-one—it was getting late. I . . . started a little picture of John as I
know him—then condensed it so it might find a printer. The *Alumnus* fell for it—or rose to the occasion.”

**1962**

Hepburn, by now the university librarian emeritus, from his retirement home in Richmond, Indiana, compiled a twelve-page typescript titled “The Name Purdue.” In it he traced John Purdue’s family name to possible sources in England, Scotland, and France. His study is on file in Purdue Libraries Special Collections.

**1965**

In December the Lafayette *Journal and Courier* (a merger of the two old newspapers of the John Purdue era) contained a photo-story about furnishings on display in the Krannert Library. The library is housed in the Krannert Graduate School of Industrial Administration building on the Purdue University campus. The items included:

- A blue velvet settee used by John Purdue in his Lahr House rooms. Lafayette attorney William A. Dresser is said to have bought it from the executors of Purdue’s estate, then given it to the university.
- Three brocaded parlor chairs given by John Purdue to Lazarus M. Brown in the 1860s. These were the gift chairs accepted by President Elliott and the trustees in 1923. A storage room fire destroyed the fourth chair in the set before it could be restored.

**1966**

The university trustees voted to stop allowing “relation scholarships” effective September 12, 1976, on the 100th anniversary of John Purdue’s death. It is not clear when, or because of what influences, the custom had begun providing tuition-free enrollment for relatives of John Purdue and their descendants.
The December issue of *Campus Copy*, a university periodical circulated among faculty, contained H. B. Knoll’s article “John Purdue Runs for Congress: 1866.” A century after the fact, Knoll, a Purdue University professor of English, told of the political campaign when Godlove Orth narrowly defeated Purdue in Indiana’s 8th Congressional District. Knoll, perhaps unaware of it, mentioned nothing in the article about the Purdue-Orth campaign for nomination in 1864.

1969

An oil portrait of John Purdue painted by an artist who did not sign or date his work turned up in a little-used basement storeroom in Lafayette’s 1927-vintage Wells Memorial Library. Thelma Wootton, head librarian; William Baugh, director of the Tippecanoe County Historical Association (TCHA); H. B. Knoll, professor of English at Purdue University; Alameda McCollough, curator of TCHA’s Fowler House Museum; and Lafayette attorney Cable G. Ball reached no conclusion beyond certain suppositions that follow:

- The picture of a man resembling John Purdue *could* have been painted by Ball’s ancestor, George Winter, from England, or by Jacob Hegler, a Swiss immigrant who lived in Lafayette from 1849 to about 1853. Hegler and Winter painted portraits, and Winter is known to have painted another of John Purdue in 1860. (Purdue is said to have refused to accept the latter because Winter had so well portrayed certain facial blemishes.)
- The mystery painting moved McCollough to connect the facts that the contents of the new Wells Memorial Library building had been moved from the library being vacated in the South Street home that was once occupied by James Spears where Purdue’s funeral had been conducted. McCollough therefore speculated that the painting had been made for Spears, or given to Spears as a gift from Purdue, then had been moved from the Spears’s home with library property stored there.
• Judging from the figure and style of clothing worn by the artist’s subject, McCollough also dated the painting in the 1850s.
• Baugh compared the painting with one rendered by H. L. Plummer (hanging in the East Lounge of the Purdue Memorial Union) and said that the figures were comparable.
• Knoll declared that “it is John Purdue there is no doubt about it,” and that it could be the “earliest painting of John Purdue.”

William A. McGill, professor of art history at Purdue University, cleaned and revarnished the portrait and it went on display in a library reading room.

1975–76

The *Heritage 75–76 Commemorative Book of Tippecanoe County* appeared when the county and the City of Lafayette jointly observed sesquicentennials. Allen Hayman, a professor of English at Purdue, served as editor of the colorful, illustrated, hard-cover book of one hundred pages. A five-member editorial board helped compile the book, published by the Greater Lafayette Chamber of Commerce. The *Commemorative Book* contained eight pages of Purdue University history on which twenty-two photographs appeared. A portrait of John Purdue stiffly seated in an armchair, (probably dating to the 1860s) appeared with a brief, factual outline of his work in the institution’s first years.

And in the Courthouse rotunda, Lafayette-born sculptor Susan Graham Wilde produced busts, displayed in facing wall niches, of John Purdue, William Digby, William Henry Harrison, and Tecumseh.

1980

In downtown Lafayette only four of the original twelve brick-and-timber business spaces in the Purdue Block, dating to 1845, remained intact. Sgt. Preston’s of the Yukon, a bar and restaurant,
opened in what had been Rooms 3 and 4 at the surviving south end starting in November. The space had required extensive renovation after occupation by a thrift shop since 1958.

1981

Renovation of the two remaining sections of the Purdue Block met with unexpected problems. In August a partial collapse seriously delayed work and led to litigation by the Sgt. Preston’s owners. Kenneth Glenn had operated his Glenn Electric Service in part of the damaged space since 1920, but had moved before the collapse.

1983

In the spring certain university alumni installed near John Purdue’s grave a self-explanatory plaque, dated April 22. It contained the following wording:

John Purdue
Graveside Restoration
Every five years since its silver anniversary in 1977, the Class of 1953 makes a contribution to the Purdue landscape. The restoration of the John Purdue gravesite was initiated in 1983 by the class of 1953 and other classes celebrating their reunion that year.

Participating Classes:
1938 1943 1948 1953 1963

The collapse during Purdue Block renovation in 1981 led to filing of a second lawsuit for damages in Tippecanoe Circuit Court in the summer. Sgt. Preston’s Development, owner of the restaurant space, sought $15,000 plus interest from six defendants, some of them contractors, citing loss of revenue.

On July 15 the owners of the damaged building, Lafayette businessmen Dennis D. Dunn and Edwin F. Hargitt, had sued for $460,000 from similar defendants and had a suit pending in U.S. District Court for nearly $1.3 million in damages from an insurance company as a result of the collapse.
The Purdue Block damage eventually was repaired, and part of it opened for business offices and a community meeting room. Situated on the west side of Second Street between South and Columbia, four of the original twelve business units in the Purdue Block still stand, albeit after much reworking and strengthening in the interest of public safety and the meeting of modern codes, for commercial use.

1984

In August, Jane Murrow Atherstone, of Hemet, California, compiled a one-page typewritten “Update on John Purdue’s Family” for assorted descendants. It quoted Pennsylvania and Ohio census reports between 1800 and 1840 showing the family name to have appeared as Purdin, Purdoo, Perdue, Perdew, and Purdue. The research also provides approximate if not specific birth, death, and marriage records for John Purdue and his eight sisters. Mrs. Atherstone descended from Purdue’s sister Sarah Prosser Roff.

1988

Purdue University Press published Robert W. Topping’s university history, *A Century and Beyond*. It contained the most thorough accounts to date of John Purdue’s life, and his role in starting the university, including one twenty-five-page chapter of biography. In his preface, which covered four and one-half pages, Topping singled out for credit “the gift by Mrs. Robert F. Munro of the prodigious amount of material about John Purdue written by her late father-in-law, Professor George W. Munro, who came as close to being a university ‘historian’ as anyone.”

In a foreword to *A Century and Beyond*, John W. Hicks, senior vice president emeritus of the university, speculated on where the university would be located and what its name would be had it not been for John Purdue: “Would it have been Indiana Agricultural College at Battle Ground? Would it have been the Indiana A&M in
Indianapolis? Or would it be part of Indiana University at Bloomington? . . . But old John did exist, and through his grace and that of the General Assembly, everything turned out for the best.”

1994

On October 6 the Journal and Courier contained writer Kevin Cullen’s photo-story based on an interview with Ruth Martin, who lived on a farm near Wingate, Indiana. The great-great granddaughter of Eliza Purdue, she told of her collection of documents, including one letter, related to her famous great-great uncle John Purdue. Martin and two daughters had attended the university tuition-free, so the trustees’ decision later to eliminate “relation scholarships” after 1976 irritated her.

Still, with one granddaughter having graduated and another attending the university, Martin remained proud of the university and John Purdue’s role in it. “Once in awhile when we walk across campus, I think about what he would think if he could see it all now,” she said. “He’d really be amazed. It amazes me that he had foresight enough to do what he did.”

1997

Purdue University’s class of 1946 dedicated several improvements around John Purdue’s grave on April 22. A new, bronze plaque located fifty feet east of the grave explains:

To John Purdue—a man of vision who shared a dream and shared his name to give life to our beloved university—this graveside plaza and fountain restoration are dedicated with everlasting respect and deep admiration by the Purdue University Class of 1946.

The grim shadow of a world at war marked our days at Purdue. May the Class of 1946 World War II Memorial Scholarship—established during our fiftieth reunion year—bring the light of knowledge to deserving Purdue students in the decades ahead as we remember those of our class who sacrificed to cast off the darkness of war and forge a more peaceful world.
Gravesite improvements included yew and juniper plantings, concrete work, inlaid brick walks, metal handrails, an aluminum flagpole, clusters of enameled metal benches with backrests, and assorted shade trees. Thousands of walking, biking, book-toting students began daily to pass the inviting, triangular enclave en-route to and from classes.

1998

The Purdue Rifles are believed to have disbanded in the fall of 1864. Nevertheless, the American flag which they displayed while marching survives. Rediscovery of the flag in the Special Collections rooms of Purdue University Libraries in March seemed fortuitous. Found in the bottom of a filing cabinet—folded in a plastic bag—the flag posed a riddle because so little was known about it. One guess is that it was presented to the university by the descendants of a Purdue Rifles member, possibly Captain Chris Miller. Research by Mark Jaeger, on the Special Collections staff, later established that the seventy-four-by-seventy-two-inch silk, regimental-style flag had been ordered from Chicago by Lafayette businessmen Adams Earl and William Hatcher. This probably occurred in April 1863, as a token of their esteem for the then-new Purdue Rifles militia.

2000

In May an entity of county government—the Tippecanoe County Millennium Committee—published Tippecanoe at 2000, the most complete history to date. Subtitled A Hoosier County Recalls Its Past, the illustrated 269-page book contained two photos of John Purdue and eight other references to his role in county history. The book’s four coauthors also enshrined Purdue, with a paragraph of biography, in their selections for a Tippecanoe County Hall of Fame.

In late August on the West Lafayette campus, Purdue University announced record enrollment of 37,871 students from all over the world, and Dr. Martin Jischke took office as the twelfth president.
Today

When viewed along with the available facts—sketchy as some may be—anyone who casually dismisses John Purdue as a mere “s. o. b. to work with” cannot do so without being haunted by his myriad good deeds or his history of risk-taking, civic-mindedness, honesty, and fair play. As egos go, it appears that they can create, and just as easily destroy, a legacy of wealth. It would seem that this credo likewise applies to a person’s reputation. As with the mythological Midas, John Purdue would surely have acted differently given the power of foresight.

For that matter, wouldn’t we all?
Many institutions have been rooted in the provisions of the Morrill Act of 1862, which gave to the states federal lands for the establishment of colleges offering programs in agriculture, engineering, and home economics as well as in the traditional academic subjects.

Another provision of the Act called for the establishment of a military training program, now part of the Reserve Officers’ Training Corps (ROTC), at every land-grant college. Although the Act itself did not stipulate that the training be compulsory, nearly every state had made it so by the 1920s. After World War II, however, ROTC was generally put on an elective basis.

The Hatch Act (1887) expanded the land-grant program by providing federal funds for research and experiment stations; the Smith-Lever Act (1914) granted federal support for extension work in agriculture and home economics. Because of the Morrill Act’s stress on the practical arts, the land-grant system has come to include most of the nation’s agricultural colleges and a large number of its engineering schools.

In 1994, twenty-nine Native American tribal colleges gained land-grant status, bringing the total number of land-grant institutions to 105.
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All that remains of the birthplace of John Purdue is this pile of stones which was photographed in 1962.

The dry goods merchant John Purdue believed in advertising, as this message from the 1860s attests. At the time his chief partner was Lazarus M. Brown. Associates Samuel C. Curtis and O.H.P. “Mack” McCormick also are named.
One of several oil portraits of John Purdue, date and artist unknown.

A photograph of John Purdue which is believed to be a detail of an image created in New York City c. 1865.

This detail shot of a full-length color portrait of John Purdue, preserved on the university campus, was rendered in a medium known among artists as oil crayons, probably in about 1870.
Photographed at commencement in 1903, Purdue University Graduates formed a procession between University Hall and John Purdue’s modest gravestone, near the flagpole.

John Purdue’s deteriorating health is shown by comparing his handwriting on Purdue University Trustees minutes. Purdue signed the clearer version in December, 1870; the indecipherable scrawl a few months before his death in 1876.

An image of John Purdue, date and artist unknown.
Three views of the death mask of John Purdue

Born 31 October, 1802
Died 12 September, 1876