

3

Pioneers and Politics

“At this time was the expression first used ‘Root pig, or die.’ We rooted and lived and father said if we could only make a little and lay it out in land while land was only \$1.25 an acre we would be making money fast.”

— Andrew TenBrook, 1889

The pioneers who settled in Indiana had to work hard to feed, house, and clothe their families. Everything had to be built and made from scratch. They had to do as the pioneer Andrew TenBrook describes above, “Root pig, or die.” This phrase, a common one during the pioneer period, means one must work hard or suffer the consequences, and in the Indiana wilderness those consequences could be hunger. Luckily, the frontier was a place of abundance, the land was rich, the forests and rivers bountiful, and the pioneers knew how to gather nuts, plants, and fruits from the forest; sow and reap crops; and profit when there was a surplus.

The Westward Movement

Thousands of people crossed the Appalachian Mountains and traveled the rivers and trails to the new state of Indiana in the first decades of the nineteenth century. This westward movement featured three general streams of migration. The largest stream was from the South. Next in size were pioneers from the Mid-Atlantic states, mostly Pennsylvania and New York. Smallest was the movement from the New

England states. Southerners tended to settle mostly in southern Indiana; the Mid-Atlantic people in central Indiana; the New Englanders in the northern regions. There were exceptions. Some New Englanders did settle in southern Indiana, for example.

Pioneers filled up Indiana from south to north like a glass of water fills from bottom to top. The southerners came first, making homes along the Ohio, Whitewater, and Wabash Rivers. By the 1820s people were moving to central Indiana, by the 1830s to northern regions. The presence of Indians in the north and more difficult access delayed settlement there.

Because they came earliest and in the largest numbers southerners from Virginia, North Carolina, and Kentucky were especially important in early Indiana, many of them Scots-Irish from the Appalachian Mountains. Their way of speaking, preparing food, and building barns made these Hoosiers different from those who would come later to the north. Although they were from the South, most were not plantation aristocrats. They knew nothing of breezy verandas or fancy balls. Most, like young Abe Lincoln’s family, were too poor to own slaves.

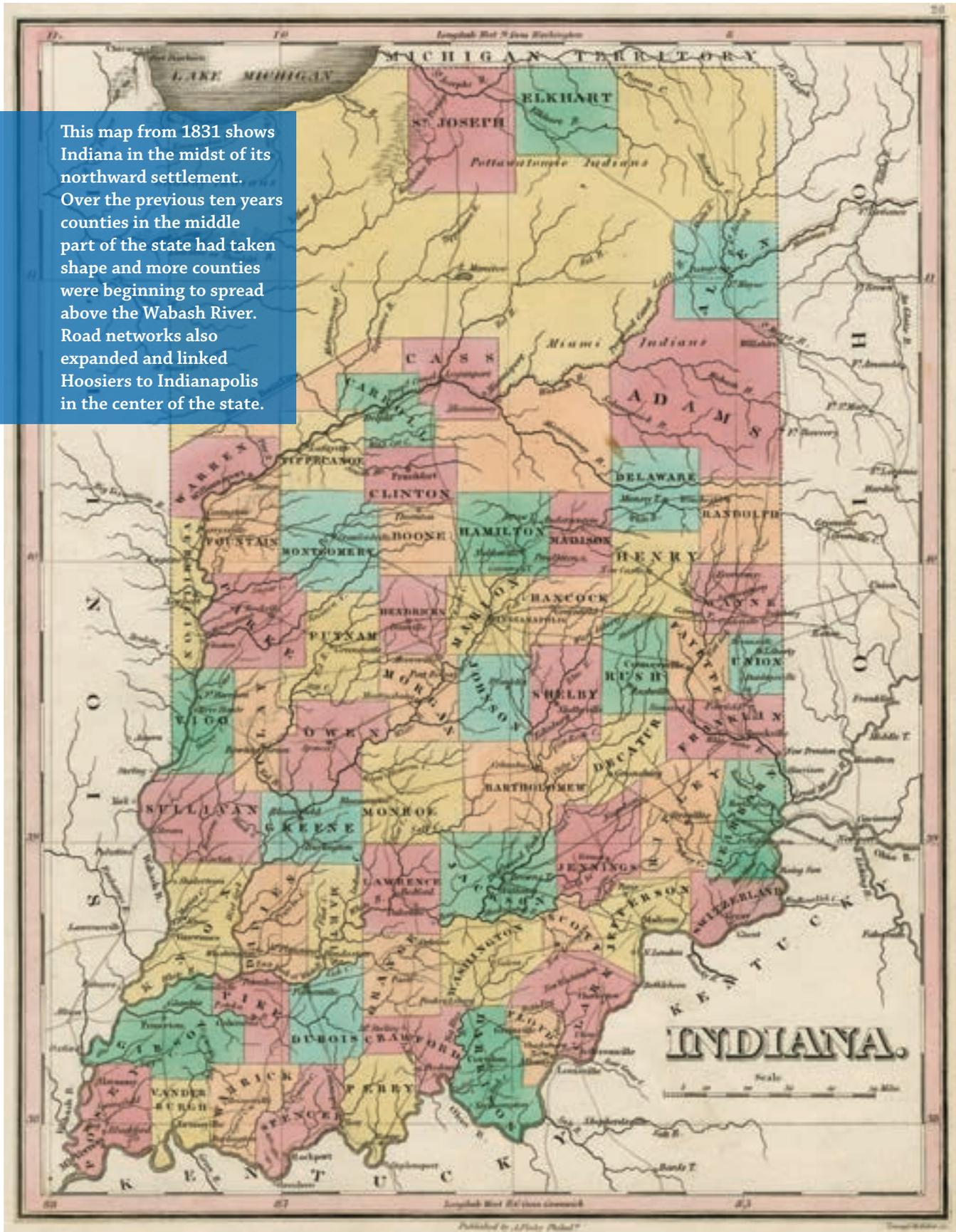
Abraham Lincoln Mural

This section of the mural that Thomas Hart Benton painted for the 1933 Chicago World's Fair shows a young Abraham Lincoln alongside other notable Hoosiers and episodes from Indiana's history.



Settling Indiana

This map from 1831 shows Indiana in the midst of its northward settlement. Over the previous ten years counties in the middle part of the state had taken shape and more counties were beginning to spread above the Wabash River. Road networks also expanded and linked Hoosiers to Indianapolis in the center of the state.



Nearly all came because they had heard that Indiana had abundant, cheap, and fertile land. Most settlers agreed with the fictional pioneer woman who told her husband as he went off to buy land, “Git a plenty while you’re a gittin’,” figuring that land would probably never be cheaper than it was at that place and time.

Many pioneers believed that land would not only provide their living but also lay the foundation for freedom, equality, and democracy. Those American ideals were important to pioneers. After crossing through southern Indiana in 1818 Englishman Morris Birkbeck concluded, “The simple maxim, that a man has a right to do any thing but injure his neighbour, is very broadly adopted into the practical as well as political code of this country.”

Among those seeking a better life in Indiana were African American pioneers. Free blacks and escaped slaves sought the same opportunities as white pioneers. Many black families moved to Indiana from the same neighborhoods in Kentucky or North Carolina. The process of moving from one place and settling together in another place is called chain

migration. White pioneers also moved as links in a chain.

African Americans knew that many Quakers were against slavery and that some had a dedication to their freedom and well-being. Thus, black pioneers sought out Quakers and created all-black communities near them. The Beech Settlement in Rush County had a population of nearly four hundred African American settlers by the 1830s. In 1831 one black farmer wrote back to relatives in North Carolina that his hogs had increased in number from four to fifty in a year, boasting, “If you could be here I could go with you in some fields that would make you open your eyes.”

Other black communities included Roberts Settlement in Hamilton County, Lyles Station in Gibson County, and the Huggart Settlement in Saint Joseph County. In addition to creating lives of their own, some of these settlers helped slaves escape on the Underground Railroad.

Making Homes in the Wilderness

The movement west was family centered. Brothers, sisters, and cousins often settled in the same county.

Most new settlers were young men and women. Childbearing began as early as age seventeen. A new baby every other year meant a high birth rate and large families. Couples had no reliable birth control. As important, children were needed as workers on the family farm.

Shelter was one of the pioneer family’s first concerns. Log cabins became homes and the symbol of pioneer life. Men cut logs, often of

Pioneer Quilt

During Indiana’s pioneer period women sewed quilts from whatever fabric was at hand. This double-nine patch-pieced quilt was sewn by a woman in the Crawfordsville area between the 1820s and 1850s.



COLLECTIONS OF THE INDIANA STATE MUSEUM AND HISTORIC SITES

tulip poplar—later named the state tree—and notched them at the ends so that corners were secure. In the spaces between the logs a mixture of clay, mud, and smaller pieces of wood filled the gaps. Along one wall they cut a door and sometimes a window, and along another wall they built a fireplace and chimney. The floor was dirt. Pioneers built log cabins with few tools and no nails, yet they offered good shelter. Within the log walls could be heard the everyday sounds of life—laughter and anger, work and storytelling, dying and giving birth.

Food was also a primary concern. Without any store-bought food, men hunted deer, wild turkeys, and small game such as squirrels. The wild game that women prepared for most meals was supplemented by nuts, berries, honey, and other food from the forests.

Clearing the land of massive trees to plant crops was the pioneer's hardest work. The ax was an essential tool. Families planted vegetables as well as flowers near their cabins. Corn, which grew well in Indiana, was the most important crop. Women turned corn into all kinds of dishes such as corn pone, a flat bread made from corn meal and water, cooked in a skillet over a fire; mush made from corn meal and water or milk to a consistency much like grits or porridge; and Johnny cakes, which were like corn pancakes. Many pioneers grew weary of eating these corn dishes. More appealing to some was whiskey, which also was made from corn, although one traveler complained that it "smells somewhat like bedbugs."

Hogs were everywhere on the frontier—wild and domestic—and deserve a place alongside the log cabin as central to pioneer life. The pigs that pioneers kept as livestock also ate corn and grew fat. Early winter butchering was a time for celebration because families knew they would have fresh meat for weeks. They salted or smoked most of the pork so it lasted for months.

Pioneers made their own clothing. Early settlers wore deerskins, much like Native Americans. One later wrote: "I recollect of wearing one pair of buckskins winter and summer Sundays and

all times for two years." Later, women made clothing from flax and wool. The sounds inside cabins often included the hum of a spinning wheel. Women also made quilts for warmth in the winter. These quilts are now some of the most cherished of pioneer handicrafts. Men made shoes for their families, too, with no difference between left and right, one reason pioneers often went barefoot. Few early pioneers wore underwear.

The Pioneer Legacy

Pioneers wanted a better life than they had back in Pennsylvania, Massachusetts, or Virginia. By and large, the Indiana frontier was a place of success for most. The woods, streams, and fertile land provided food, clothing, and shelter for those willing and able to work. Pioneers believed progress was achieved through hard work. Few starved. Most wanted to move as soon as possible from crude log cabins and corn mush to better lives.

By the middle of the nineteenth century the pioneer era was nearly over. Hoosiers had cleared and planted most of Indiana's land. Those who could afford it had built and moved into brick homes. Stores were built, and the new Hoosiers bought shoes, underwear, and many other items. Immigrants had built canals and railroads, connecting Hoosiers to people far away and increasing commerce. A cookbook published in New Albany in 1851 is suggestive of this emerging way of life in Indiana. It contains recipes for oysters and lemon punch.

Moldboard Plow

Like the quilt, the plow was an essential item for a pioneer family. Moldboard plows, such as the one shown here that was used to farm near Frankfort in Clinton County, helped pioneers plant crops such as corn that fed not only the family but also the livestock on their farm.





PAINTING IN THE COLLECTIONS OF THE INDIANA STATE MUSEUM AND HISTORIC SITES

The Hoosier's Nest

Marcus Mote (1817–1898) painted *The Hoosier's Nest*, based on an idyllic pioneer scene depicted in a poem of the same title by John Finley, published widely in 1833. When Finley wrote his poem, people were already beginning to feel nostalgic about the passing of pioneer days. Celebrating

the promise the pioneers felt coming to the Indiana frontier, Finley wrote:

*Blest Indiana! In thy soil
Are found the sure rewards of toil,
Where honest poverty and worth
May make a Paradise on earth*

Finley went on to describe how a pioneer:

*Erects a cabin in the woods,
Wherein he stows his household goods.
At first, round logs and clapboard roof,
With puncheon floor, quite carpet proof,
And paper windows, oiled and neat, His
edifice then complete.*

*When four clay balls, in form of plummet,
Adorn his wooden chimney's summit.*

Settlers from the three migration streams: from the South, the Mid-Atlantic in the East, and New England in the Northeast mixed with immigrants from Germany and Ireland to create a distinctive culture for the nineteenth state. Together, they became Hoosiers, with nuances that made them different than people from other states. Later generations would celebrate Indiana's pioneers as heroic people. However, most were not so different from people of our own time. Some were lazy or selfish; some had bad luck; but most lived good lives.

Pioneer Hoosiers set down the patterns and beliefs that persist to our day. They believed in freedom. They wanted the democracy and good government that had been promised in Indiana's 1816 Constitution and later in the Constitution of 1851. Pioneers wanted progress, which sometimes required government help, as in the Internal Improvements Act of 1836 that initiated the building of canals and roads. Hoosiers also wanted opportunities for their children. Some Hoosiers, such as Caleb Mills, thought a public school system would provide opportunities for generations to come.

3.1

Abraham Lincoln, Hoosier

We reached our new home about the time the State came into the Union. It was a wild region, with many bears and other wild animals still in the woods. There I grew up.

— Abraham Lincoln autobiography, 1859

The Lincolns Move to Indiana

Among the early pioneer families to move to the new state of Indiana in 1816 was the Thomas Lincoln family. Thomas, his wife Nancy, daughter Sarah, and son Abraham “Abe” had been living in Kentucky. They came to Indiana because it was easy to claim its abundant, rich farmland and because the state prohibited slavery. Thomas disdained the institution of slavery as would Abe when he matured.

The Lincolns crossed the Ohio River with their meager belongings in November or December when their son was seven years old. After crossing the river, they traveled about twenty miles by horse-drawn wagon through the wilderness. There were no roads to Spencer County, Indiana, where Thomas had secured 160 acres near Little Pigeon Creek. The trip took two weeks. When the Lincolns reached their destination, their first priority was to build a log cabin, which they did with the help of their pioneer neighbors.

The area around Little Pigeon Creek was teeming with wildlife. Passenger pigeons, now extinct, were then so plentiful the area was named after them. There were also wild turkeys, raccoons, deer, and many other animals that ended up on the Lincolns’ table at mealtime. Thomas taught Abe, who was tall and strong for his age, how to wield an ax, as every set of capable hands was essential to prospering in the Indiana wilderness. Abe also knew how to use a rifle, but he soon discovered that he disliked killing. When he was around eight years old, he shot at some wild turkeys through a crack in the wall of the family’s log cabin. He killed one of them and never after “pulled a trigger on any larger game.”

Early Life and Loss

Abraham Lincoln’s experiences growing up may sound strange and exotic today, but his boyhood was typical for his place and time. Like all boys on the Indiana frontier, Lincoln did his share of grueling manual labor, and he was familiar with the perils of living in the wilderness. In the early 1800s, Hoosiers had fresh memories of the bloody altercation with the Indians at the Battle of Tippecanoe. Wild animals were also a clear and present danger. In an 1846 poem, the future president wrote about his Indiana experience, depicting a frightful place:

*When first my father settled here,
‘Twas then the frontier line:
The panther’s scream, filled night with fear
And bears preyed on the swine.*

Life expectancy in Lincoln’s Indiana was much shorter than it is today, due to disease and poor medical care. One of the greatest tragedies in Lincoln’s tragedy-filled life occurred in October 1818, almost two years after his family moved to Indiana. At the age of thirty-four his mother, Nancy Hanks Lincoln, contracted milk sickness and died. We now know the disease is caused by drinking contaminated milk from a cow that has eaten white snakeroot plant, which produces a fatal toxin. The week before, Nancy’s aunt and uncle, Thomas and Elizabeth Sparrow, who had migrated to Indiana and lived near the Lincolns, also died of the disease. Milk sickness claimed the lives of thousands of people in the Ohio River Valley in the early nineteenth century. When Lincoln helped his father build his mother’s coffin, he was just nine years old. Today, thousands of people each year visit Nancy’s grave at the Lincoln Boyhood National Memorial in Spencer County.

A year after his mother’s death, Lincoln had a near-death experience of his own when a stubborn horse kicked him in the forehead at a nearby mill. So severe was the blow, the miller thought the boy was dead and summoned Thomas Lincoln, who took his seemingly lifeless son home. After lying unconscious for a day, Abe regained full command of his faculties. The accident had a profound impact on him, and he referred to it often in his adult life.

An Education “by littles”

Nancy Lincoln had kindled a love of learning in her son that was nurtured by his stepmother Sarah “Sally” Bush Johnston, who married Thomas Lincoln the year after Nancy’s death. Sally quickly recognized Abe’s exceptional intelligence and encouraged him to read and feed his insatiable curiosity. Sally brought a few books of her own to the Lincoln home, which her stepson devoured, often reading late into the night. She saw to it that he took advantage of every opportunity to attend school, although the chances to do so were few and far between. In frontier Indiana, children were most likely to attend school only a few weeks in the winter, when farm chores were not pressing. In an

1859 autobiographical sketch, referring to himself as “he,” Lincoln wrote of his education, “The aggregate [combined total] of all his schooling did not amount to one year. He was never in a college or Academy as a student; . . . What he has in the way of education, he has picked up.”

In Indiana, Lincoln attended school “by littles,” meaning he only went to school intermittently between the ages of eleven and seventeen. He was fortunate to have a few teachers who recognized his intellectual abilities and took special interest in him. It was probably a teacher who loaned him *The Life of Washington* by Mason Locke Weems, a book that greatly influenced the future president. Teacher Azel Dorsey, who

was a resident of Spencer County, helped Lincoln master mathematics. One of the most important artifacts we have today from Lincoln’s early life is the 1824–26 sum book in which he wrote his multiplication tables. A leaf from Lincoln’s sum book is in the collections of the Indiana Historical Society and another is at Lilly Library at Indiana University.

Later in his life, Lincoln regretted what he referred to as his “defective” education while growing up in Indiana. He compensated for the lack of educational opportunities by reading everything he could. He once told his friend Joshua Speed, “I am slow to learn and slow to forget what I have learned—My mind is like a piece of steel, very hard to scratch any thing on it and almost impossible after you get it there to rub it out.” During Lincoln’s lifetime, Indiana would make considerable strides toward creating a free public education system available to all Hoosier children.

Westward Moving Settlers



This map illustrates how settlers from different portions of the country moved into Indiana. Where they settled in their new state often reflected where they had come from. New Englanders tended to settle in the north while settlers from the Mid-Atlantic states settled in the central part of Indiana. Pioneers such as the Lincoln family from the Upland South—Kentucky, Tennessee, Virginia, and the Carolinas—tended to settle in the southern part of Indiana. The arrows indicate that the larger migration stream was from the South followed by settlers from the Mid-Atlantic states. The fewest pioneers to Indiana during this period were from New England.

A Life-Changing Adventure

In January 1828, a few weeks before Lincoln's nineteenth birthday, his almost twenty-one-year-old sister Sarah, who had married Aaron Grigsby in August 1826, died in childbirth. She and her stillborn child were buried near Little Pigeon Primitive Baptist Church in what is now Lincoln State Park. Lincoln and

Sarah were always extremely close, and her death was another devastating blow.

Several months after Sarah's death, a local storekeeper hired Lincoln to travel with his son by flatboat to New Orleans to sell grain and cured pork. Lincoln jumped at the chance. The two young men began their trip on the Ohio River near Rockport. It was Lincoln's first venture away from the lands of his childhood, Kentucky and Indiana, and it exposed him to parts of the country that he only knew about through his voracious reading.

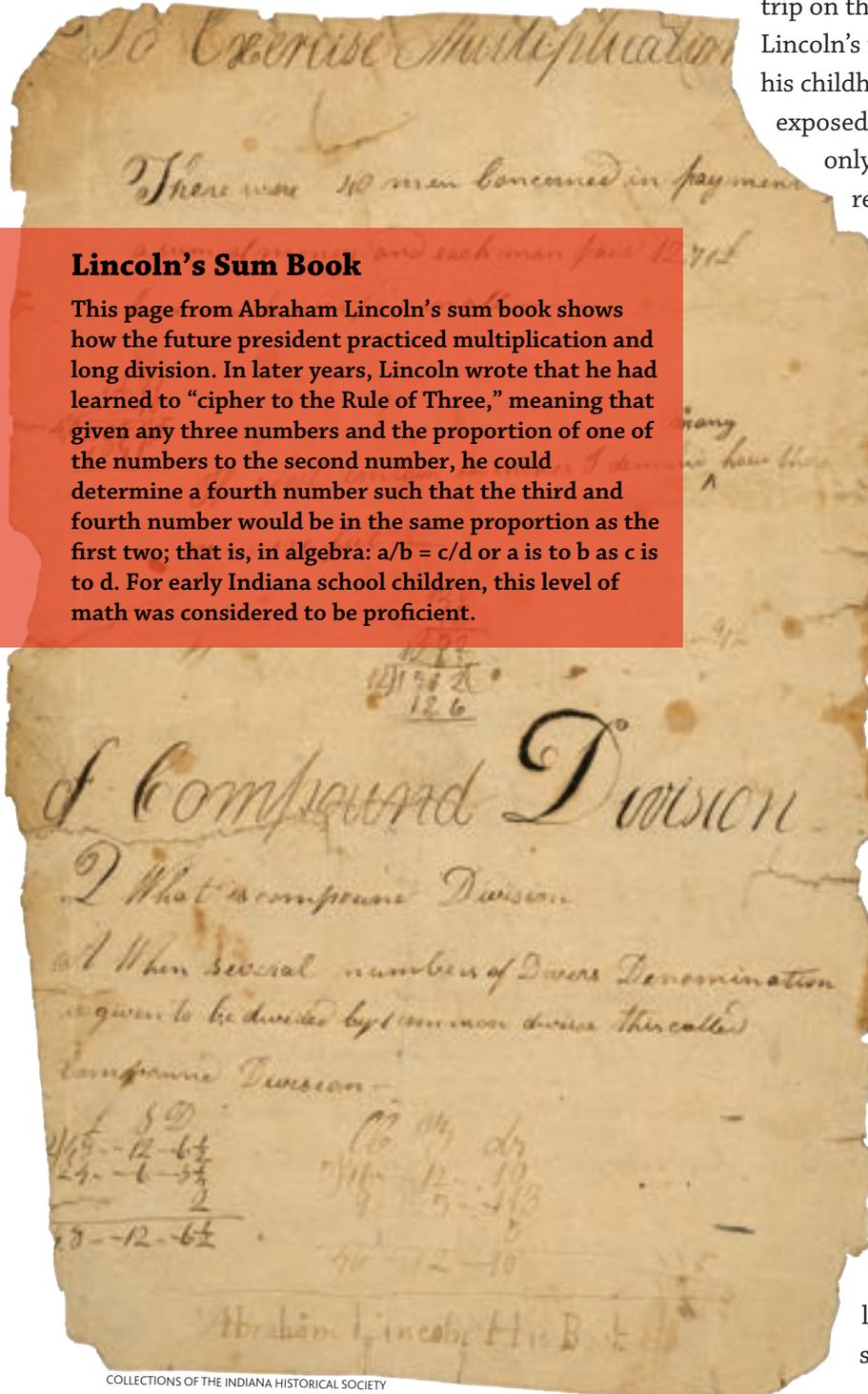
Lincoln found the two-month-long flatboat journey exciting, eye-opening, and at one point, dangerous. Along the coast of Louisiana, thieves attacked the flatboat, but Lincoln and his companion scared their assailants away by pretending to have guns.

New Orleans was a bustling, multi-cultural city, unlike anything the two Hoosier lads had ever experienced. Before they went home, they explored the city. Lincoln did not leave a written account of what he saw there, but most of his biographers believe that he must have seen slave markets as they were a common scene in this major southern port. The young men returned to Indiana by steamboat, which added another dimension of excitement to their adventure.

In March 1830 Thomas Lincoln sold his land in Spencer County and moved his family to Illinois. Abe, now an adult of twenty-one, decided to accompany them. The Lincolns crossed the Wabash River, swollen by spring rains, at Vincennes and settled on the Sangamon River near

Lincoln's Sum Book

This page from Abraham Lincoln's sum book shows how the future president practiced multiplication and long division. In later years, Lincoln wrote that he had learned to "cipher to the Rule of Three," meaning that given any three numbers and the proportion of one of the numbers to the second number, he could determine a fourth number such that the third and fourth number would be in the same proportion as the first two; that is, in algebra: $a/b = c/d$ or a is to b as c is to d . For early Indiana school children, this level of math was considered to be proficient.



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Decatur, Illinois. Lincoln would live in Illinois for three decades, until he left in 1861 for his inauguration as the nation's sixteenth president. He visited Indiana only once before that time, to campaign for Henry Clay, the Whig presidential candidate in 1844. The visit made a powerful impression on Lincoln, inspiring him to write a ninety-six-line poem that begins:

*My childhood home I see again,
And gladden with the view;
And still as mem'ries crowd my brain,
There's sadness in it too.*

As Lincoln's poem attests, Indiana had a profound impact on him. He moved here when he was seven and

lived here until he was twenty-one, the ages when his intellectual, moral, and psychological foundations were formed. Although he was six feet four inches tall, Lincoln looked like a stereotypical Hoosier with his long muscular arms. Walt Whitman, the American poet who wrote "O Captain! My Captain!" about Lincoln, also said of the president's appearance, "He has a face like a Hoosier Michel Angelo, so awful ugly it becomes beautiful." Many people wonder how Lincoln the young pioneer from Indiana became Lincoln the great leader in the darkest episode in our nation's history. There is no simple answer, but as one historian has remarked, "Although Lincoln left Indiana behind, his life as a Hoosier pioneer never went away."

Lincoln Boyhood National Memorial

The Lincoln Boyhood National Memorial in Spencer County, about forty-five miles east of Evansville, is the site of the farm where Abraham Lincoln lived with his family from 1816 to 1830. In Indiana, Lincoln grew from boy to man, acquiring the convictions and strength of character that equipped him to lead the United States through the Civil War and distinguish him as one of the nation's greatest presidents.

The State of Indiana preserved and administered Lincoln's boyhood home for decades. In 1962, one year

before his assassination, President John F. Kennedy signed a bill authorizing that Lincoln's boyhood home be designated a national memorial.

The visitor center in Lincoln Boyhood National Memorial features five sculptured limestone panels depicting scenes from Lincoln's life. Artifacts pertaining to frontier life are also on exhibit. Visitors can walk trails leading to a working pioneer homestead called the Lincoln Living Historical Farm, the burial site of Lincoln's mother, Nancy Hanks Lincoln, and the Lincoln cabin site.



3.2

Connecting Indiana: Building Early Roads and Canals

The road traveled over today was execrable. At all the creeks there are steep precipitous banks of hard clay, which are really dangerous. I was twice thrown out of my wagon at these pitches, and many places were so bad that I dared not ride at all.

— J. Gould, twenty miles from Indianapolis, journal entry, 1839

There was nothing romantic about being a pioneer. The first settlers in Indiana were generally subsistence farmers, meaning they used much if not all of the crops and livestock they produced for food, clothing, and other items for the family. This could mean that their needs were only minimally met. However, pioneers did not want to just scratch out a living. After they were settled, Hoosiers began producing a surplus of corn and hogs. These commodities were in demand outside of Indiana, but first the pioneers had to find a way to reach those markets. Hoosiers also wanted the same conveniences and comforts that people in the East enjoyed. Isolation of its citizens from the rest of the country was one of the biggest obstacles the young state of Indiana had to overcome. Consequently, connecting Hoosiers with each other and with the rest of the United States became a critical public goal between statehood in 1816 and the Civil War in the 1860s.

The Crossroads of America . . . Not!

In the early 1800s, Indiana transportation routes were extremely crude and slow. Many roads were nothing more than dirt trails that followed animal paths, such as the Buffalo Trace from New Albany to Vincennes or the Old Sauk Indian Trail across the Calumet Region. Some routes had been hacked out of the wilderness by soldiers during expeditions against Indians.

After statehood, citizens expected government to take action to improve roads. The federal Enabling Act of 1816 promised Indiana three percent of the proceeds from the sale of public land within its borders to be used for transportation infrastructure. In 1821 the state general assembly allocated the money to build two dozen state roads, many reaching to Indianapolis, the new state capital. This plan spread the limited resources too thin. It might have been better if the state had planned a few main roads than a lot of inferior ones.

Michigan Road was a main highway that brought better north-south transportation to Indiana. The Potawatomi Indians gave up a strip of land north of the Wabash and additional parcels of land to construct the road in 1826. Ironically, this made it easier to remove the Potawatomi in 1838. It also stimulated white settlement in Northern Indiana. Fully opened in 1836, the road connected the northern harbor of Michigan City to centrally-located Indianapolis and to the booming town of Madison on the Ohio River.

The National Road was the other major road that served Indiana. Started in 1811 by the federal government, it stretched from Cumberland, Maryland, to the West. It reached Wheeling, Virginia (now West Virginia), in 1818, moved through Ohio, then crossed into Indiana in the 1830s, connecting Richmond, Indianapolis, Terre Haute, and many smaller towns. Much of it today is U.S. 40.

Even major roads such as Michigan Road and the National Road were often in bad shape, with tree stumps protruding. In spring and fall rainy seasons, mud made the roads impassable. One traveler on horseback from the Ohio River to Bloomington wrote that his journey took him through “the most ill-looking, dark-coloured morasses, enlivened by streams of purer mud crossing at right angles” and that his goal was to find mud that had “at least some bottom.”

The extreme Indiana seasons helped or hindered transportation depending on the mode. Hot dry weather favored road travel but hindered travel by river or other streams; whereas wet seasons were good for water travel, but made roads largely unusable.

River Travel

Like the Indians before them, Hoosier pioneers were river-centric. They built their first farms and towns near the Ohio, Whitewater, Wabash, and White Rivers, and along the streams that flowed into these major rivers. Rivers were the best way for farmers to get their goods to market, but Indiana's rivers were little help in getting goods to the largest markets on the East Coast. The Appalachian Mountains blocked the way east, and many of the rivers flowed in the wrong direction—south-westward. As a result, few Indiana goods reached markets in New York and Philadelphia.

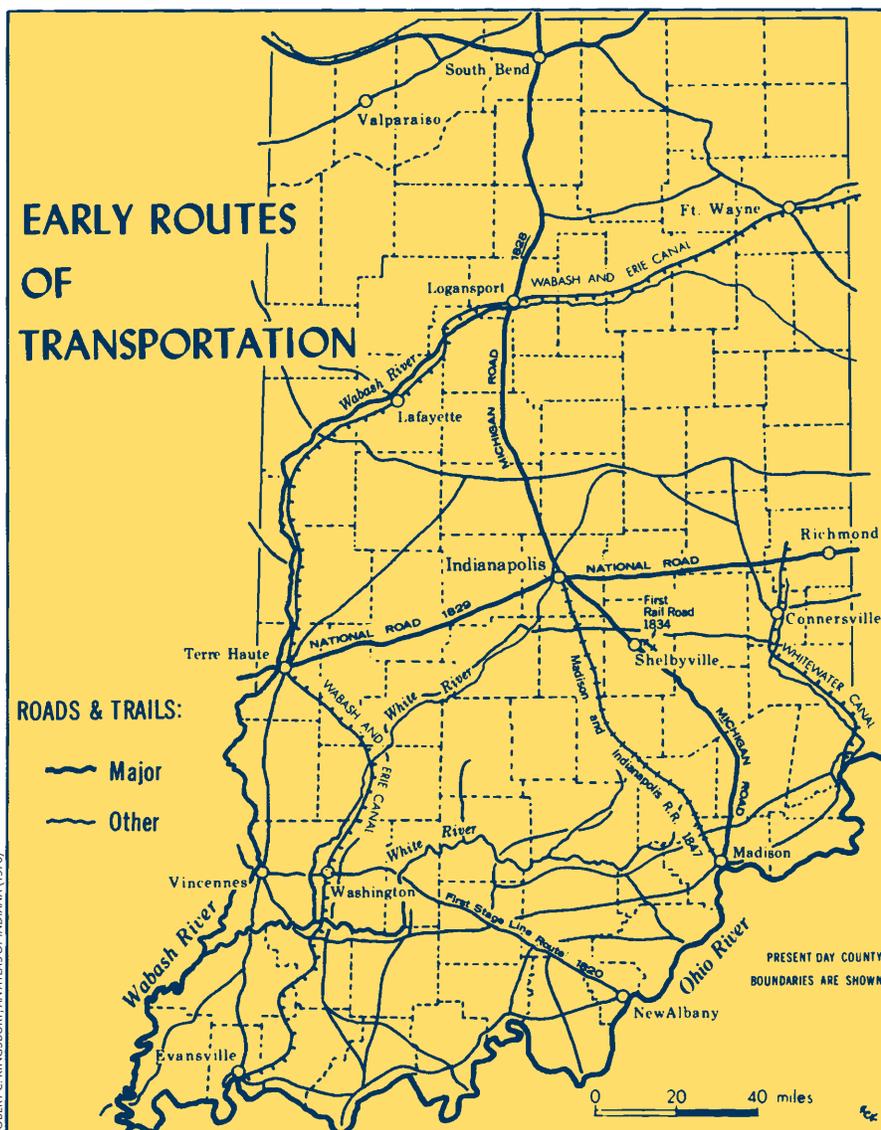
Early trade from Indiana mainly moved south to New Orleans via flatboats (wide, rectangular boats with flat bottoms) on the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers.

A trip from Indiana to Louisiana by flatboat could take two or three months, depending on the weather and depth of the rivers. From New Orleans, sailing vessels took goods up the coast to Atlantic seaports. Flatboats provided Indiana's main tie to the national market until the mid-nineteenth century. Flatboats were temporary, one-way craft. Once a flatboat reached its destination and the crew sold the goods, they dismantled the boat and sold the lumber. The flatboat crew, usually Hoosier farm boys, such as young Abe Lincoln, then took the opportunity to see the sights in New Orleans before they set off for home. Keelboats provided some upriver navigation. Strong crewmen with poles painstakingly navigated these sturdy, flat-bottomed

vessels with pointed prows (front of boat). Transport by keelboat was limited to lightweight or valuable goods, such as coffee, sugar, salt, and molasses. No other cargo was worth the hassle.

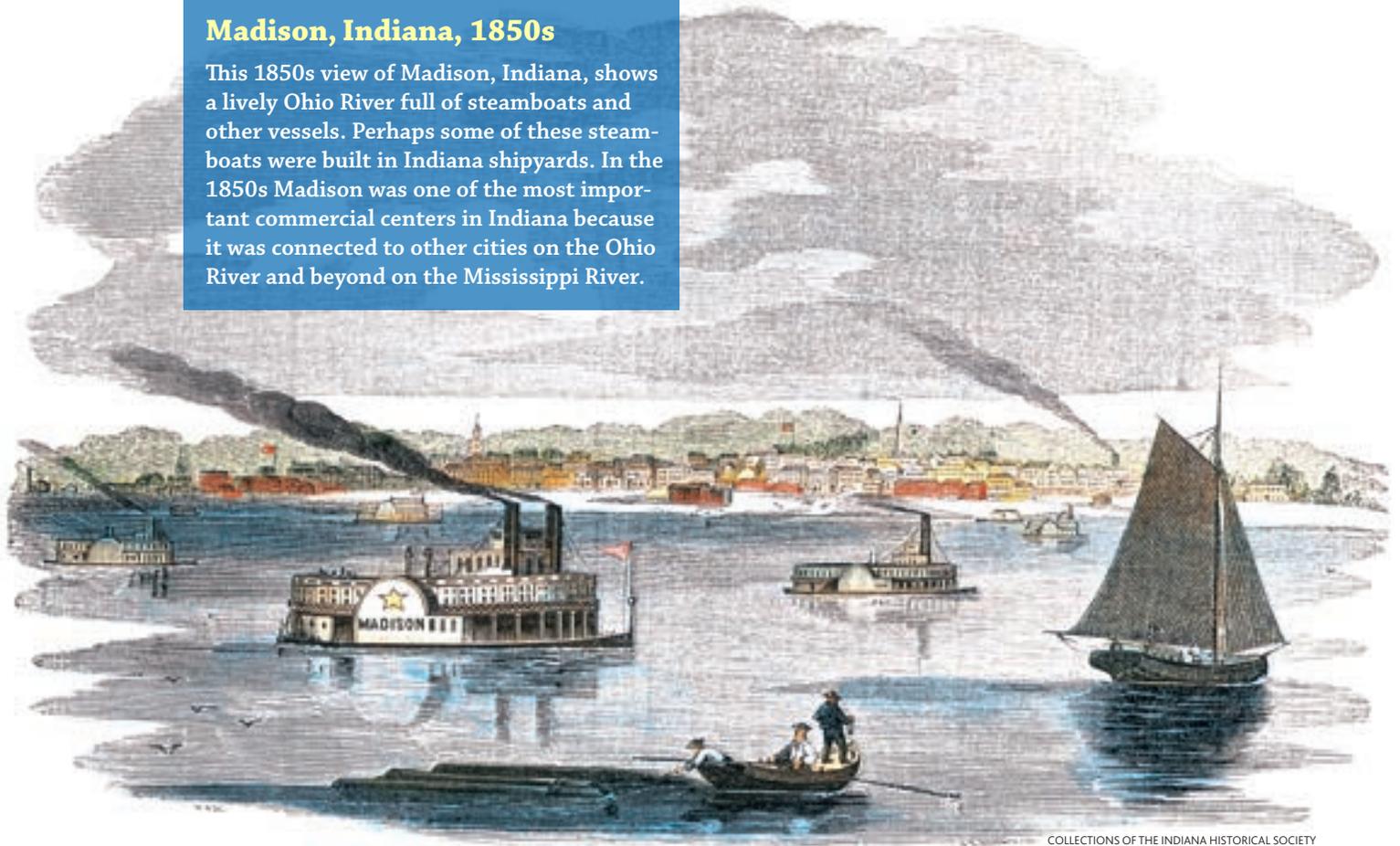
After the War of 1812, the revolutionary technology of steamboats provided transportation. Steamboats could travel upriver and navigate shallow waters. They were also much faster than flatboats or keelboats, making the trip from New Orleans to Indiana in eight days. Steamboats on the Great Lakes contributed to the growth

This map illustrates road, railway, and canal networks across Indiana as well as the major rivers. Rivers provided one way to transport goods and people. In the 1820s and 1830s many main roads were laid followed by canals in the 1830s through 1853. However, the ambition of connecting Indiana by water was never fully realized due to the state's economic difficulties. By the 1840s railroads were adding to Indiana's transportation network.



Madison, Indiana, 1850s

This 1850s view of Madison, Indiana, shows a lively Ohio River full of steamboats and other vessels. Perhaps some of these steamboats were built in Indiana shipyards. In the 1850s Madison was one of the most important commercial centers in Indiana because it was connected to other cities on the Ohio River and beyond on the Mississippi River.



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of cities in northern Indiana including Michigan City and South Bend, the latter connected to Lake Michigan by steamboats on the Saint Joseph River. Ohio River towns such as Madison and Evansville also grew because of steamboat traffic.

However, steamboats did not solve all of Indiana's water transportation problems. It was still almost impossible to reach Indianapolis by water. In 1831 one steamboat was left high and dry when it got stuck on a sandbar in the shallow White River trying to reach the state capital.

Canal Mania

Indiana's growing population demanded that the government do something about improving transportation in the state and increasing access to the outside world. In New York the Erie Canal had been completed in 1825. This event started a canal boom in the Old Northwest. Indiana dreamed of connecting Lake Erie with the Ohio River via the Wabash and Maumee Rivers.

In 1827 the federal government financed Indiana's first major canal project, the Wabash and Erie Canal. Work began on the project in the Fort Wayne area in 1832 and moved downstream along the Wabash River. Jesse L. Williams, the chief engineer, supervised skilled artisans who built locks, culverts, and aqueducts. More than a thousand laborers, many of them Irish immigrants, performed the backbreaking work of digging and moving dirt with pickaxes and shovels. Fighting frequently erupted between the Catholic and Protestant Irish workers, reenacting Old World feuds between the two groups. The several jiggers of whiskey they received each day in pay, along with their monetary wages, may have helped fuel the hostilities.

The opening of the Wabash and Erie Canal as far south as Huntington was marked on July 4, 1835, with a grand celebration of speeches and toasts. Canal mania spread throughout the state. Every region wanted its own canal.

**2,000 LABORERS
WANTED
ON THE CENTRAL
CANAL
Of Indiana.**

THE great Central Canal of Indiana is intended to connect the waters of Lake Erie and the Ohio river, and will be about 400 miles in length. In addition to that part already completed and under contract in the middle and northern part of the state, **TWENTY** miles commencing at Evansville, on the Ohio river, its southern termination, and extending into the interior, were put under contract in November last; since which time the work has been steadily progressing.

No section of country holds out greater inducements to the industrious laborer than the state of Indiana, and particularly that portion of it contiguous to the Central Canal, from the fact that there is much of the land belonging to the general government remaining unentered, which may be purchased at one dollar and twenty-five cents per acre; affording to those who are desirous of doing so, an opportunity of securing to themselves, with the avails of a few months' labor, a permanent home in this flourishing and rapidly growing state.

The contractors are now paying \$20 per month, and the fare and lodgings furnished, is of the most comfortable character. It may not be amiss to say that the acting commissioner reserves, by an express provision in all contracts, the right to see that every laborer receives his just dues; therefore, no man need lose one dollar of his wages, if he pursues a proper course.

It is probable that more of this Canal will be put under contract during the coming fall or spring, when an opportunity will be offered to those who show themselves qualified of proposing for work.

Laborers coming from the south can take passage to Evansville, and find immediate employment upon their arrival. By order of **JOHN A. GRAHAM, Act. Com.**
Canal Office, Evansville, May 1, 1837. **C. G. VOORHIES, Res'd Eng.**

OF COURTESY OF THE INDIANA HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Recruitment Poster

This 1837 advertisement calls for laborers to build the Central Canal, which was part of the Internal Improvements Act of 1836. The plan was for this canal to go from Peru in the northern part of the state, through Indianapolis, to Evansville on the Ohio River in the south. Canal construction required massive amounts of work: from the first surveys of the land, to engineers designing bridges, to laborers removing trees and digging out the canal. Canal laborers worked long hours and were exposed to the natural elements and disease. Yet for the many workers who were new immigrants in Indiana, the ad also held out the possibility of a permanent home in the “flourishing and rapidly growing state.”

The Internal Improvements Act of 1836

In 1836 the state legislature passed the Internal Improvements Act, to-date the most daring piece of legislation passed in Indiana's history. The goals outlined in the act were ambitious, optimistic, and, in retrospect, unrealistic. But had the act achieved everything it set out to do, it would have catapulted Indiana out of its pioneer condition of isolation. The act laid the plans for three major canal projects:

- 1 Extending the Wabash and Erie Canal from Lafayette to Terre Haute
- 2 Building the Whitewater Canal in the southeastern part of the state, to link the National Road and the Ohio River
- 3 Constructing the Central Canal, which would run from the Wabash and Erie Canal near Peru southward to Indianapolis and down to Evansville

The Act also promised a paved road from New Albany to Vincennes and the construction of a railroad from Madison to Lafayette via Indianapolis.

To pay for all these projects, the legislature authorized ten million dollars to be borrowed at five percent interest. With East Coast and British investors on board, the prospects for revolutionary transformation looked promising.

All of the projects initiated by the act came to a screeching halt in 1839 when the nation experienced a financial panic and severe depression. Consequently, the projects that the Internal Improvements Act of 1836 had promised were left incomplete. Even worse, by 1841 Indiana was bankrupt and could not even pay the interest on its internal improvements debt. Unhappy creditors hired lawyer Charles Butler to negotiate repayment. In 1847 the state legislature and Butler reached an agreement, stipulating that Indiana would pay half of its debt and the creditors would take stock in the canal projects.

The episode heaped embarrassment and international scorn on Indiana. A London newspaper denounced the state as “the land of promise for all the knavery and thievery in the known world.” Hoosiers were so horrified by the outcome of the Act of 1836 that they inserted a clause in the Constitution of 1851 that restricts the state from going into debt.

Even though the 1836 projects were not completed and caused the state's financial ruin, they did have some positive consequences. It turned out that even unfinished canals were better than none. During the 1840s and 1850s large quantities of goods and passengers were transported on the Wabash and Erie Canal, and it provided a means for northern Indiana to ship goods to northeastern markets. When it was finally completed in 1853, the Wabash and Erie Canal was 468 miles long, which made it the longest canal in the country. It stimulated the growth of many Indiana cities, including Fort Wayne, Peru, Logansport, Delphi, and Lafayette. The Whitewater Canal, completed in 1846, was less advantageous to the state, but it did increase farmers' profits and helped develop towns such as Connersville, Brookville, and Lawrenceburg.

The “can do” spirit behind the Internal Improvements Act of 1836 was part of the pioneer optimism that had stimulated Indiana's development in the first half of the nineteenth century. The unfortunate timing of the country's economic crash and other factors derailed an over-ambitious plan that had envisioned sweeping improvements across the state. It was perhaps the last time that Hoosiers would place such immense faith in the hands of government. After the 1836 debacle, Indiana preferred to limit government and allow private enterprise a wide berth—an attitude that persists today.

3.3

Development of Indiana's Educational System

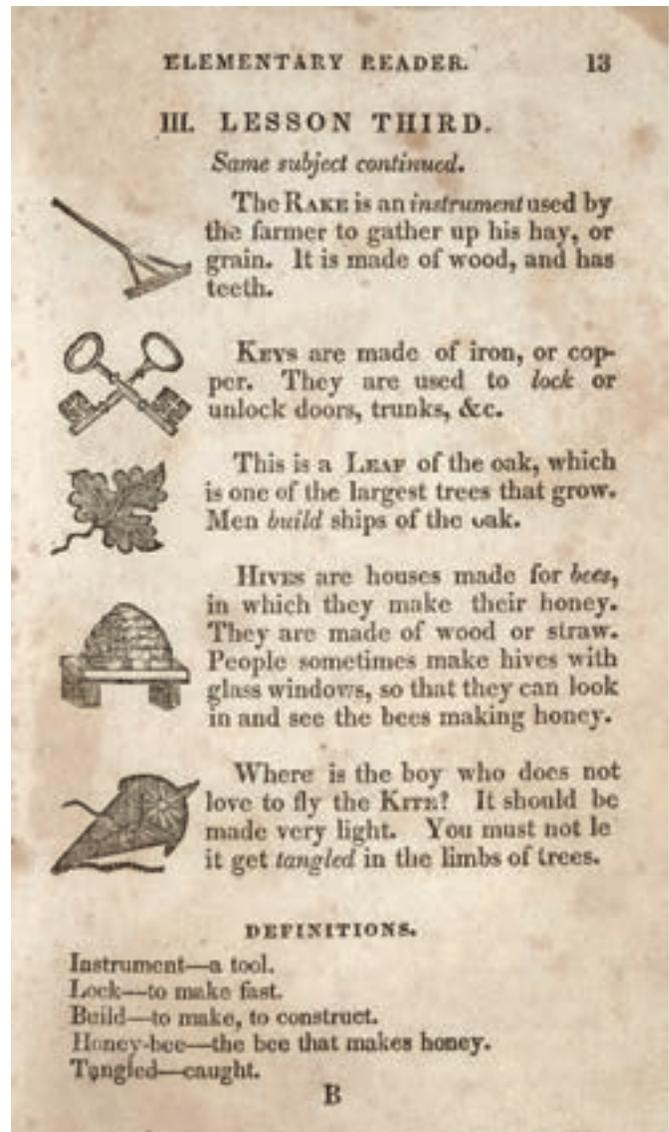
It shall be the duty of the General assembly, as soon as circumstances will permit, to provide, by law, for a general system of education, ascending in a regular gradation, from township schools to a state university, wherein tuition shall be gratis, and equally open to all.

— 1816 Indiana State Constitution, Article IX, Section 2

Early Pioneer Education

In the first half of the nineteenth century, Hoosier pioneers had limited access to schooling. Most of them were lucky if they learned the “3 Rs”—reading, ’riting, and ’rithmetic. As in so many other aspects of pioneer life, the family’s economic progress was the central focus. Children learned the basics of farm life such as hunting, building shelter, planting and harvesting, spinning and sewing, and cooking from their parents. Parents might also have taught their children how to read, write a few words including their names, and do simple arithmetic.

Church and Sunday school were places where children were able to learn and practice reading and writing. Sermons, hymns, and scripture introduced young people to words and concepts that became, as in Abraham Lincoln’s case, permanent parts of their vocabulary and thought. The first Sunday schools appeared in Indiana in the 1810s, and by 1829, the state had more than one hundred of them. Religiously motivated individuals and groups got them up and running, believing that the frontier sorely needed both Christianity and education. Protestant denominations—Methodists, Baptists, and Presbyterians—led the way with Sunday school education. Methodists were the greatest in number, but Presbyterians, often educated in the East, made a big impact on not only religious education but education in general. In Indiana education reformer Caleb Mills was the most influential Presbyterian in this regard.



Elementary Reader

This page from *The Elementary Reader to Accompany Webster's Spelling Book* (1835) shows the kind of textbook young Hoosier children studied if they were able to go to school. This book taught spelling and reading using illustrations for words and definitions. As students progressed, they moved on to readers with moral stories and poems to read aloud with emphasis on proper pronunciation, enunciation, and pauses.

Books were scarce on the frontier, so the Bible may have been one of the only books that a Hoosier pioneer child ever read. There was a void in secular, or non-religious, Indiana educational opportunities. Even though the 1816 state constitution had promised that the state would create a general education system

that would be open to all citizens, progress was slow to non-existent at first. Common schools, similar to today's public schools, were locally created and funded, meaning they were funded by the town or township, not the state. Nowhere were they free and open to all. There were no state standards, nor were there schools to train teachers. Therefore, the ability of teachers varied greatly, and they received very low pay. Schooling was catch-as-catch-can for Hoosier children. In 1840 the state discovered how serious an educational problem it had.

The 1840 Census

"The name Hoosier [remained] the synonym for ignorance."

— Author Charles W. Moores, 1905

The federal census of 1840 revealed that less than one-quarter of Indiana children between five and fifteen attended school. Additionally, about one in seven adult Hoosiers could not read or write. Indiana's literacy ranked eighteenth among the twenty-eight states in the Union—lower than all northern states and four southern states. In part, Indiana's high illiteracy rate was due to the scant education in the Upland South—Kentucky, Tennessee, and the Carolinas—which had been home to many Hoosier pioneers. Not surprisingly then, southern Indiana counties had the highest illiteracy rates since many of the settlers in the area had come from the Upland South. But in the broader sense, the state's illiteracy was the result of its failure to deliver on the promise of free education for all in its 1816 constitution. The 1840 census was a call to action for education reformers, who began an energetic campaign to create a true system of public education.

Caleb Mills, "One of the People"

"Let us shut our eyes no longer to the teachings of experience. Let us have a system based on the broad and republican principle, that it is the duty of the State to furnish the means of primary education to the entire youth within her bounds."

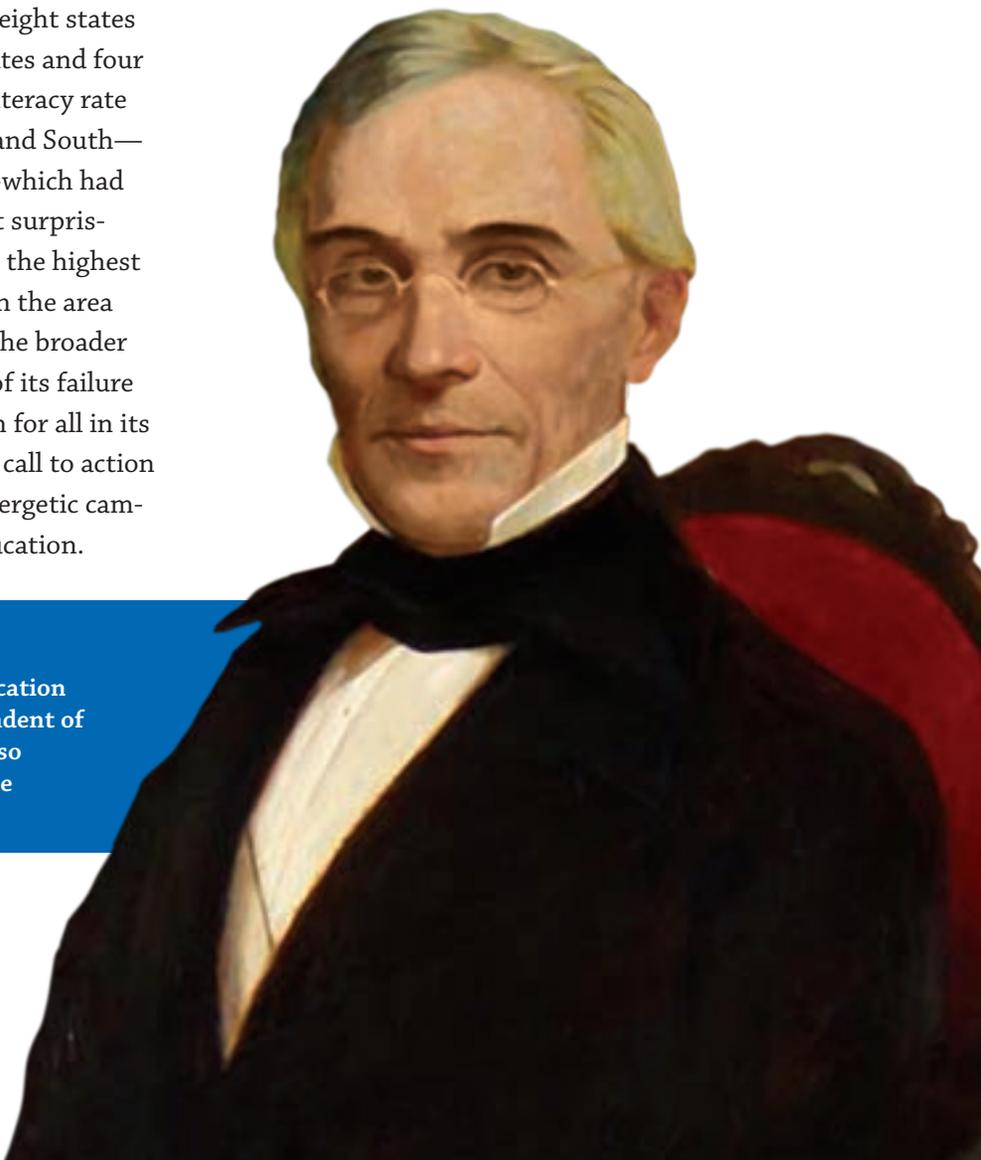
— Caleb Mills, to the Indiana General Assembly,
December 6, 1847

Caleb Mills, a New England Presbyterian missionary, was determined to bring both religion and education to the frontier. A graduate of Dartmouth College and Andover Theological Seminary, he arrived in Crawfordsville in 1833 to head a Presbyterian school that became Wabash College. Although Mills had been an advocate for public education before the 1840 census revealed the embarrassing statistics about Hoosier education, he emerged as the leading advocate of a state system of public education after the census report was published.

Caleb Mills (1806–1879)

Caleb Mills, one of Indiana's greatest education reformers, served as Indiana's superintendent of public instruction from 1854–55. Mills also helped establish Wabash College, where he taught Greek for forty-four years.

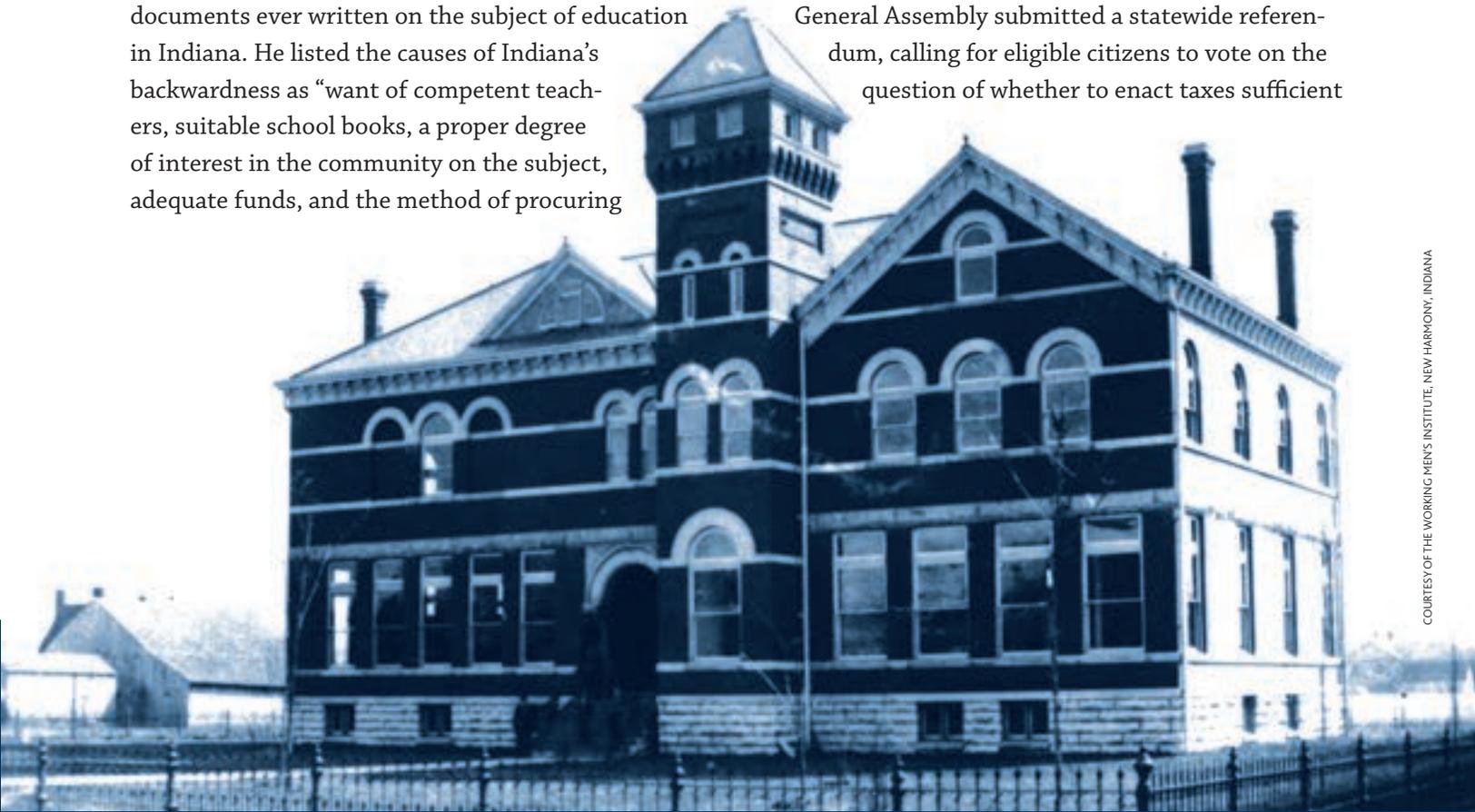
COLLECTIONS OF THE ROBERT T. RAMSAY JR. ARCHIVAL CENTER, WABASH COLLEGE, CRAWFORDSVILLE, INDIANA



Between 1846 and 1852 Mills wrote and distributed six eloquent and elaborately argued messages to the state legislature and signed them simply as “One of the People.” They are arguably the most important documents ever written on the subject of education in Indiana. He listed the causes of Indiana’s backwardness as “want of competent teachers, suitable school books, a proper degree of interest in the community on the subject, adequate funds, and the method of procuring

such funds.” He argued for the necessity of state and township school taxes, stating, “There is but one way to secure good schools, and that is to pay for them.”

Pressured by Mills and other reformers, Indiana’s General Assembly submitted a statewide referendum, calling for eligible citizens to vote on the question of whether to enact taxes sufficient



COURTESY OF THE WORKING MEN'S INSTITUTE, NEW HARMONY, INDIANA

New Harmony

New Harmony on the Wabash River in what is now Posey County presented an intriguing alternative to the values and lifestyle of frontier Indiana. From 1814 to 1827 two utopian groups that believed in the perfectibility of society settled in New Harmony, one after the other. The first group, the Harmonists, were Christians who believed that the second coming of Christ was near. They also believed in and practiced free education, but it is the second utopian group that has had a lasting influence on Indiana’s education.

In 1824 industrialist Robert Owen bought New Harmony and traveled from England to the fledgling state of Indiana, intending to create a new way to educate and better society. The Owenites, as his followers were

called, believed in abolishing private property and in equality between white men and women. Their plan required that all members work and contribute as they were able and equitably divide the material and cultural rewards. Though the community quickly failed economically, some of its ideas were implemented in Indiana by a couple of the community’s members. Owen’s son, Robert Dale Owen, advocated strongly for publicly funded schools, served three terms in the Indiana state legislature (1836–38), and was a delegate at the constitutional convention of 1850–51.

William Maclure, often referred to as the father of geology, came to Indiana as a business partner with Robert Owen and stayed when Owen left.

Maclure supported education that was free and open to all, and he led the New Harmony schools. In 1838 Maclure founded the Working Men’s Institute, seeking to provide a place where laborers and their families could further their knowledge. He went on to establish Working Men Institutes across Indiana. Although none but the original remains, the others were often the first free public libraries in their communities and provided the base for many of the public libraries in Indiana today.

The Working Men’s Institute in New Harmony, Indiana, is now the oldest operational library in Indiana and is also a museum. Though the library was originally housed in a church, it was moved to this building in 1894.

to provide at least three months of free, common-school education for all children. The 1849 referendum did not pass by a landslide, but it did pass. The referendum had a loophole that required a majority vote in each county to approve it in order for it to take effect in that county. Sixty-one counties approved it, and twenty-nine rejected it. This mixed response hindered the efforts to create a statewide common school system.

Mills's efforts impacted Indiana's 1851 constitution, which established a system of common schools and resulted in the passage of the 1852 Free School Law. The 1852 law mandated that counties statewide provide at least three months of free common-school education and set up a system to administer it. The law also levied a state tax to help fund public education equally throughout the state. Unlike the 1849 act, this law had no loophole or escape clause to let individual counties opt out. Scholars and educators alike consider the Free School Law of 1852 the most significant accomplishment of Indiana's common-school movement. Mills became the second superintendent of Indiana public schools in 1854.

The Persistence of Pioneer Thinking

While many school supporters regarded education as the means to provide equal opportunity for all Hoosiers, many of Indiana's pioneers viewed state-supported education as a step that would lead to a more centralized government. They reasoned that this would result in less local control over communities and eventually to a loss of individual freedom. Some pio-

neers even argued that taxes were the greatest obstacle to what they considered was their God-given right to pursue prosperity freely.

Formal education was also not necessarily met with a welcoming attitude regardless of who paid for the schools or how; some pioneers felt that it was not practical for life on the frontier. But Mills and other reformers knew that in order for Indiana to move beyond the pioneer era and toward a more sophisticated society and economy, skills other than rudimentary farming skills were needed.

In twenty-first century Indiana, there is a sense of déjà vu about the arguments for and against school funding and public schools. Many aspects of public education that vexed pioneer Indiana resonate every time today's Hoosiers face a new school referendum. As citizens weigh the pros and cons of raising taxes to support public schools, they question whether taxes are the best way to balance the school budget. Some voters ask if cutting subjects that they consider less essential, such as art and foreign languages, would accomplish the same thing.

Some parents resent being told what subjects their children must study or which schools their children must attend. Many of these parents educate their children at home. Other voters support school vouchers that allow parents to choose their children's schools, while pulling money away from less desirable schools. Thus, even with a statewide school system, the questions of how young Hoosiers should be taught and who should do so remain open for debate.

3.4

1851 Constitution

TO THE END, that justice be established, public order maintained, and liberty perpetuated; WE, the People of the State of Indiana, grateful to ALMIGHTY GOD for the free exercise of the right to choose our own form of government, do ordain this Constitution.

— Preamble, Indiana State Constitution of 1851

Indiana’s Constitution of 1816 served the pioneer generation well, but by the 1840s, Hoosiers felt that it needed revising. All other states carved from the Old

Northwest were rewriting their constitutions, beginning in the 1840s, and Indiana had specific concerns it wanted to address. Hoosiers thought the general assembly could function more efficiently. They were also still reeling from the internal improvements investment of 1836 that had bankrupted the state. In the 1849 election a clear majority of voters favored a new constitution, with a vote of 81,500 for and 57,418 against.

The Constitutional Convention of 1850–51

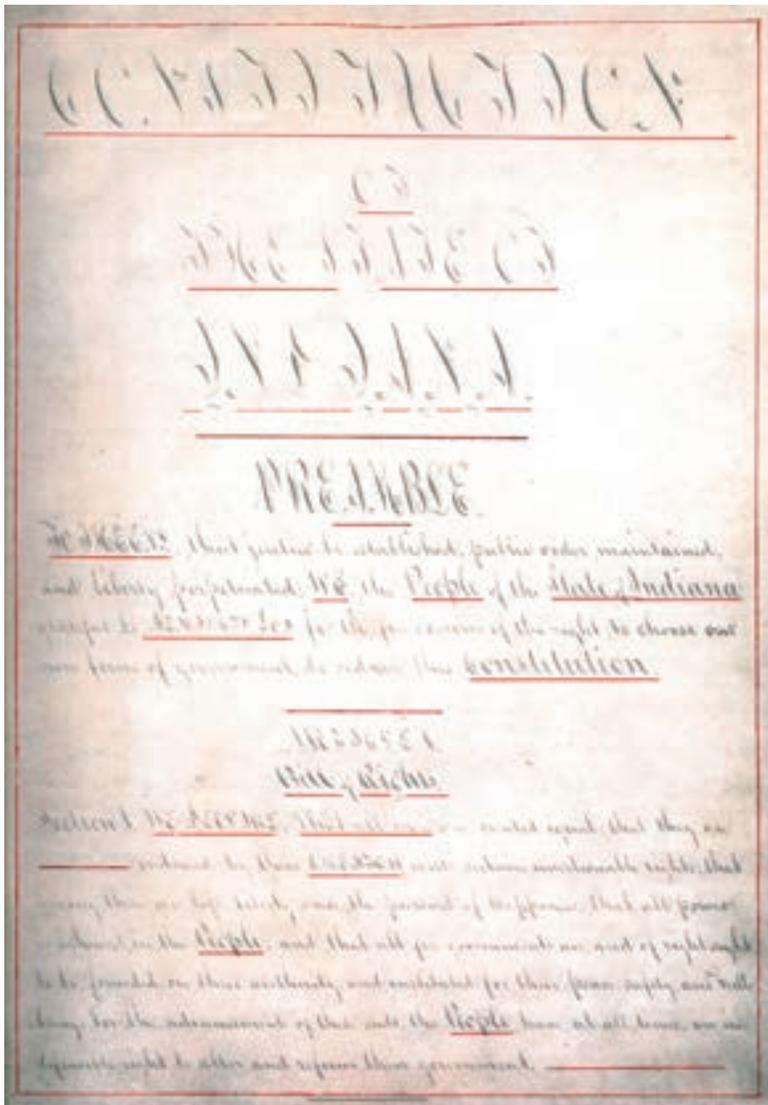
On October 7, 1850, 150 elected delegates met in the Hall of the House of Representatives in the state capitol in Indianapolis for the constitutional convention of 1850–51. The composition of the convention largely mirrored the state’s population at the time, except that the delegates were all white men. Since Indiana was an agrarian, or farming, state, 42 percent of the delegates were farmers. One-fourth

Indiana’s 1851 Constitution

Much like the Constitution of the United States, Indiana’s 1851 constitution contains a Bill of Rights that follows the preamble quoted at the beginning of this section. Indiana’s Bill of Rights begins:

WE DECLARE, That all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their CREATOR with certain unalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness; that all power is inherent in the People; and that all free governments are, and of right ought to be, founded on their authority, and instituted for their peace, safety, and well being. For the advancement of these ends, the People have, at all times, an indefensible right to alter and reform their government.

Does the first line of Indiana’s Bill of Rights sound familiar? It should; it directly quotes the Declaration of Independence. The constitution of 1851 reflects how men and women were seen differently at that time. In 1984 the phrase “all men are created equal” in Indiana’s Bill of Rights was changed to “all people are created equal.”



COLLECTIONS OF THE INDIANA STATE ARCHIVES

were lawyers, and there were a few doctors and people from other walks of life. Of the 150 delegates only 13 were native Hoosiers; 74 were born in the South, 57 in other northern states, and 6 in foreign countries. Because the Democratic Party was strong in Indiana, two-thirds of the delegates were Democrats and one-third were Whigs.

The four-month convention was a lively affair. The delegates worked hard, but they also had fun. Many told jokes and stories, a favorite Hoosier pastime. One newspaper reported that the delegates spent “hour after hour . . . in fun, revelry, vulgar anecdotes, stamping, hallooing, &c.”

When the convention ended on February 10, 1851, after 127 days, the resulting document did not significantly alter state government, but its revisions had lasting impact. The voting public approved the new constitution in the election of 1851, and it immediately went into effect. The 1851 Indiana State

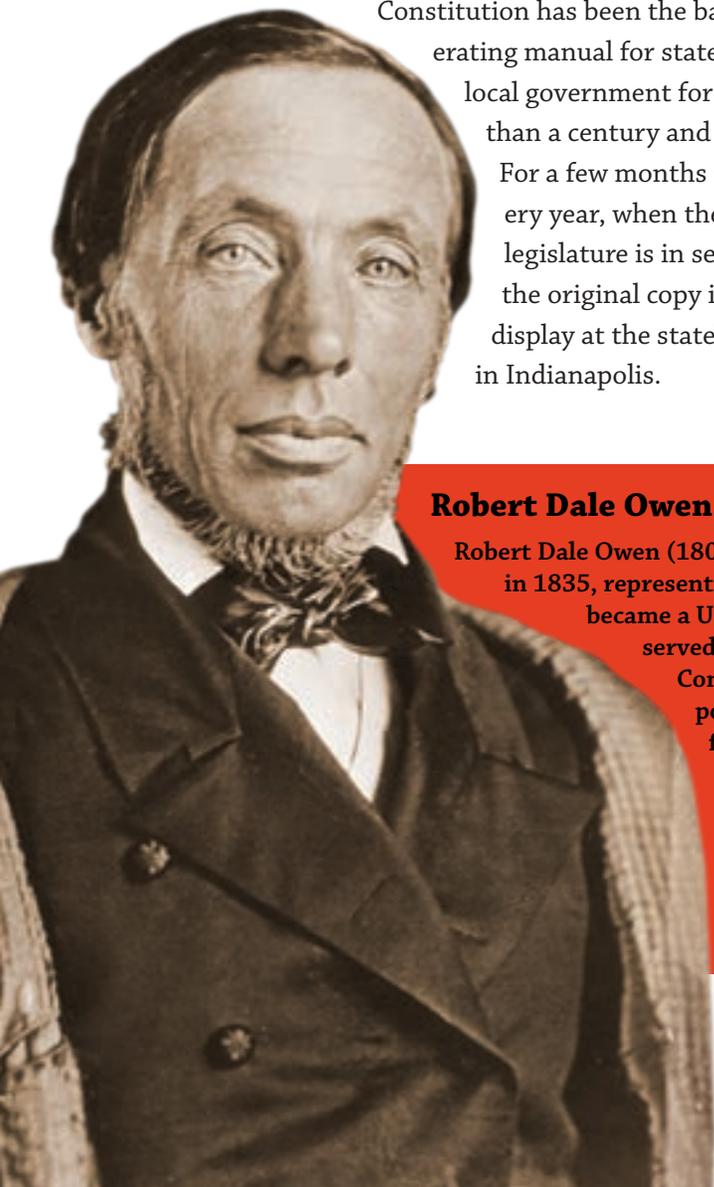
Constitution has been the basic operating manual for state and local government for more than a century and a half. For a few months of every year, when the state legislature is in session, the original copy is on display at the statehouse in Indianapolis.

1851 Constitution and Public Will

The new constitution addressed a variety of issues. Confirming the basic Hoosier distrust of government power and enthusiasm for local control, it provided for popular election of state judges rather than political appointments. It granted the vote to immigrants who expressed intent to become citizens and who had resided in the United States for one year and in Indiana for six months. The constitution also reinforced the desire for popular, common sense democracy by proposing that all bills and resolutions “be plainly worded, avoiding as far as may be practicable the use of technical terms in Latin or any other than the English language.”

Most important, the 1851 constitution addressed two issues on the public radar in the 1840s—the state’s massive debt caused by the Internal Improvements Act of 1836, and the need for better public education as indicated in the 1840 census data that revealed Indiana’s high illiteracy rates. Because the state was still in austerity mode, delegates established biennial (every other year) legislative sessions of sixty-one days to save money. The delegates also wrote a provision in the new constitution prohibiting the state from incurring debt, a provision that would limit options in changing times in the future. The delegates’ sentiment was so strong on this point that there was little room for compromise. Democrat delegate Daniel Read, an Indiana University professor, argued that the state’s credit should never be risked on another

massive project. He stated that business should be put in the hands of private companies, and not in what he perceived to be the incapable hands of the government. Read said, “Public debt is a hydra [multi]-headed monster, which is always springing forth in some new form, and under some new pretext. Cut it off in the



Robert Dale Owen

Robert Dale Owen (1801–1877) first entered state politics in 1835, representing Posey County. In the 1840s he became a U.S. congressman, and in 1851 he served as a delegate to the Indiana State Constitutional Convention. Owen supported amending the constitution to fund common schools and to grant property rights to married women. Later, Owen would help to centralize and fund common schools in the Free School Bill of 1852 and speak out against slavery leading up to and during the Civil War.

nation,—straitway, it shoots forth in the States—cut it off in the States—it comes forth in the counties—cut it off in the counties—and it steals forth in the form of town or city bonds.”

Another delegate, Schuyler Colfax, a Whig journalist from South Bend, who later served as Ulysses S. Grant’s vice-president, stated that the only way Indiana should go into debt again was by a vote of the citizens in the state. Colfax explained, “The past history of our State is the best argument in favor of this amendment . . . as we have suffered more than other States from the results of imprudent debt, which still hangs over us, impairing our prosperity, and impeding our progress and advancement as a State.”

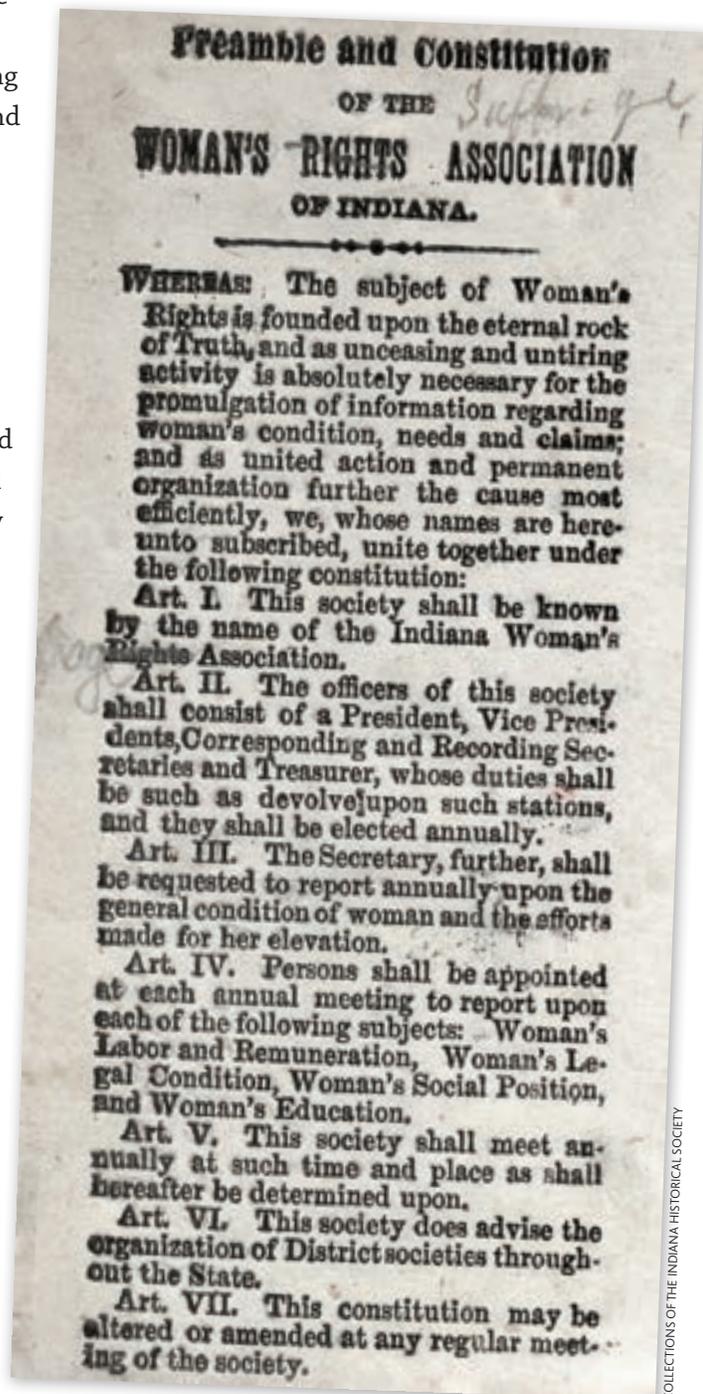
Thanks to the efforts of Caleb Mills and other education reformers such as convention delegate Robert Dale Owen from New Harmony, public endorsement of state-wide common schools was finally strong enough that the new constitution established a permanent fund to support schools and provided for a state superintendent to head the school system. The 1851 constitution paved the way for the 1852 Free School Law, and a new day dawned for Indiana public schools.

Woman’s Rights Association of Indiana

In 1851 the Woman’s Rights Association of Indiana was founded on the principle of women’s suffrage, the right to vote. In 1852 the association passed resolutions that affirmed women should have the same opportunities as men including education, equal pay for employment, and basic citizenship rights. In 1859 Dr. Mary F. Thomas and Mary Birdsall addressed the Indiana General Assembly to petition for these rights. Thomas stated that women should “assert their right to the elective franchise, and the privileges growing out of it, as the basis of all other rights.” However, the General Assembly did not seriously debate the possibility of suffrage until the 1880s.

Women’s Rights or Lack Thereof

The new constitution left large parts of the state’s population out of the equation. Only white men could vote, and married women were barred from owning property. At the convention, Robert Dale Owen proposed an amendment to grant married women the right to own property. Opponents warned that social chaos would result if women had equal property rights; they argued that women should remain in the home and raise children. Delegates cited biblical scripture to



refuse women equal rights, “Paul says that the husband is the head of the wife even as Christ is the head of the Church, and that wives are to subject themselves unto their husbands.”

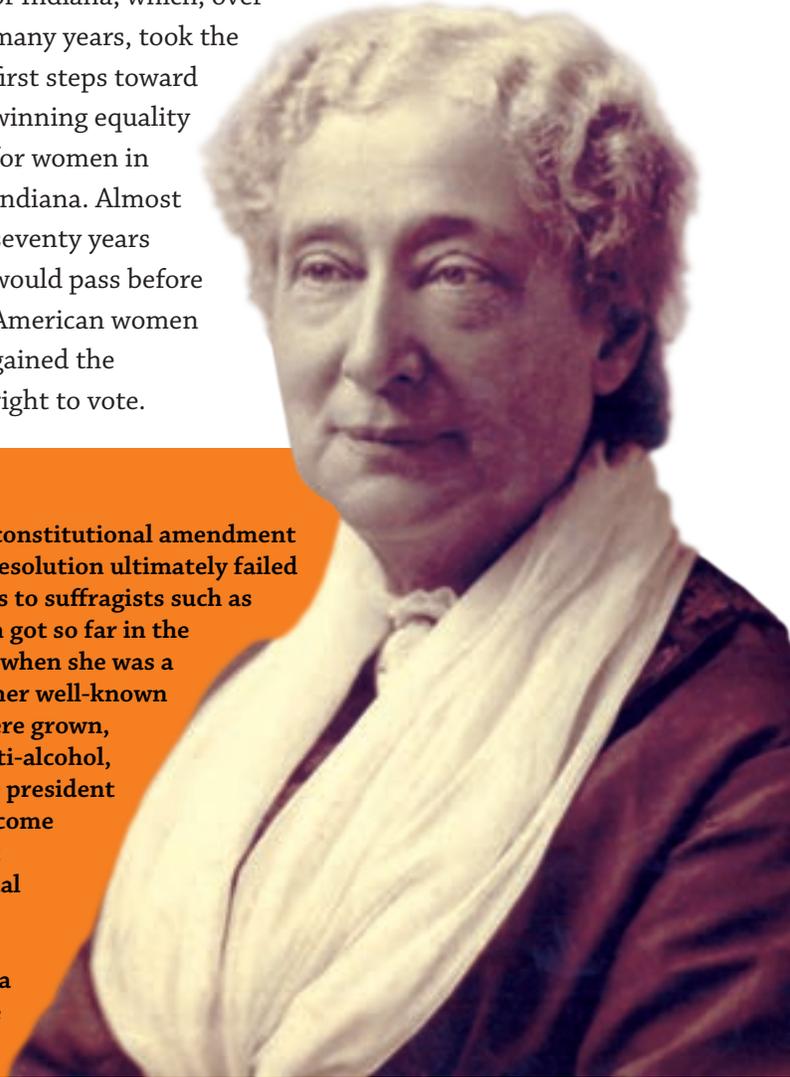
Women in the visitors’ galleries witnessed Owen’s proposal go down in flames, but they were grateful for his efforts. Fifteen women led by Sarah T. Bolton, a noted poet, honored Owen with a testimonial. They presented the New Harmony reformer with an engraved silver pitcher on the floor of the House, the first time women were allowed in the space.

Although newspapers mocked the gesture of the women who honored Owen, more women began to be involved in the fight for equal rights. At an anti-slavery meeting in Henry County, Amanda Way, a young Quaker woman, changed the subject from slavery to women and called for a meeting to discuss women’s rights. In October 1851 Hoosier women gathered in

Dublin, Wayne County, for the state’s first women’s rights convention. Way told the convention: “Unless women demand their rights politically, socially, and financially, they will continue in the future, as in the past, to be classed with negroes, criminals, insane persons, idiots, and infants.” The convention resulted in the formation of the Woman’s Rights Association of Indiana, which, over many years, took the first steps toward winning equality for women in Indiana. Almost seventy years would pass before American women gained the right to vote.

Zerelda G. Wallace (1817–1901)

In 1881 the Indiana General Assembly voted to approve a constitutional amendment granting voting rights, suffrage, to women. Although the resolution ultimately failed to become law after a second round of voting, it was thanks to suffragists such as Zerelda Wallace and May Wright Sewall that the resolution got so far in the assembly. Born in Kentucky, Wallace came to Indianapolis when she was a young woman. She married and raised a family, including her well-known stepson Lew Wallace (see Chapter 4). After her children were grown, Wallace became active in the Suffrage and Temperance, anti-alcohol, Movements. The sexism, or prejudice, she faced publicly as president of the Woman’s Christian Temperance Union led her to become an ardent suffragist. In 1878 Wallace and other prominent Indianapolis men and women formed the Indianapolis Equal Suffrage Society. Wallace also served as president of this organization, which lobbied Indiana legislators to support suffrage before the 1881 vote. Wallace remained active on a national scale following this defeat; but unfortunately, she did not live to see women gain the right to vote in 1920.



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Essential Questions

- 1 What was the pattern of pioneer migration into Indiana? Where did settlers to Indiana come from, and what attracted them to the state?
- 2 Describe the conditions on the Indiana frontier.
- 3 Why was the development of transportation routes such a critical need in pioneer Indiana? Name at least two important land and/or water route improvement projects.
- 4 How did the Internal Improvements Act of 1836 get the state of Indiana into trouble? What is a lasting consequence of this situation?*
- 5 How did education reformer Caleb Mills attempt to strengthen Indiana's education system and realize, or achieve, the ideal of free public education set forth in the 1816 constitution?*
- 6 What lasting impacts did the Owenites, a utopian community in New Harmony, have on Indiana?
- 7 How did the 1851 constitution address the issues of public debt and free public education?
- 8 How did the 1851 constitution fail Hoosier women?*

*See student activities related to this question.

Three Key Issues in the 1851 Constitution

Chapter three relates the trials, triumphs, and tribulations that Hoosiers experienced during the pioneer era. As more people flooded into Indiana, the state needed to develop a stronger infrastructure, such as roads and canals. Indiana also needed institutions, such as public schools, to serve the people of the state. As Hoosiers attempted to build transportation and educational systems capable of serving the growing population, it became clear that the 1816 constitution needed to be updated.

The revised 1851 constitution addressed important issues, such as public debt and free public education, but it also brought into question the state of civil rights for female Hoosiers. Through the activities below, which can

be completed individually as self-contained mini-lessons or together as a group project, you will take a look at what Indiana's 1851 State Constitution has to say about the issues, and you will take a stand on the issues yourselves.

Activity 1: Public Debt

- ▶ Reread section 3.2 of chapter three, which addresses the Internal Improvements Act of 1836. With a partner, discuss how this piece of legislation impacted Indiana.
- ▶ Now, read Article X, Section 5 of the 1851 constitution, which states:

No law shall authorize any debt to be contracted, on behalf of the State, except in the following cases: to meet casual deficits in the revenue; to pay the interest on the State debt; to repel invasion, suppress insurrection, or, if hostilities be threatened, provide for the public defense.

- ▶ Talk with your partner about how this provision was designed to prevent a situation similar to the canal debacle.

Much has been made recently of the size of the national debt. Some people argue that government spending is out of control and programs such as Medicare (the federal health insurance program for people age sixty-five and older) must be slashed to rein in the national debt. Others argue that while spending should be scrutinized, increasing revenues—for example, through higher rates on the highest tax brackets—is a solution that helps address the problem without harming society's disadvantaged.

- ▶ What do you think? Should the federal government follow Indiana's lead (more than 160 years later) and amend the U.S. Constitution to stipulate that the federal government cannot incur any new public debt? Why or why not? Discuss this with your partner or write an individual journal entry in which you answer these questions and reflect on how Article X, Section 5 of Indiana's 1851 constitution helps to shape Indiana's budget today.

Activity 2: Free Public Education

- ▶ Reread section 3.3 of chapter three, which addresses the development of Indiana’s educational system. With your partner, reflect on the state of the educational system in Indiana in 1840 as reported in the census of that year. How does the reality of 1840 compare with the ideal set forth in the 1816 constitution:

It shall be the duty of the General assembly, as soon as circumstances will permit, to provide, by law, for a general system of education, ascending in a regular gradation, from township schools to a state university, wherein tuition shall be gratis, and equally open to all.

- ▶ Consider the implications of the lack of a public education system.
 - 1 Who receives an education when free schooling is not available?
 - 2 How would the lack of an educational system affect the development of the state at large?
- ▶ Article VIII, Section 1 of the 1851 constitution states:

Knowledge and learning, generally diffused throughout a community, being essential to the preservation of a free government; it shall be the duty of the General Assembly to encourage, by all suitable means, moral, intellectual, scientific, and agricultural improvement; and to provide, by law, for a general and uniform system of Common Schools, wherein tuition shall be without charge, and equally open to all.

In Article VIII, Section 2, the constitution also sets aside money from various state and township funds and authorizes the levying of “Taxes on the property of corporations, that may be assessed by the General Assembly for common school purposes.”

- 1 What provisions did the 1851 constitution make for schools?
- 2 Do you think that making further provisions for free public schooling should have been a priority for the drafters of the 1851 constitution? Why or why not?

- ▶ The wording of the educational sections of the 1851 constitution reflected the success of reformer Caleb Mills’s campaign to strengthen the commitment to free public education. It also set the stage for the passage of the 1852 Free School Law, which made it mandatory for the state to provide at least three months of free, compulsory common-school education. In addition, the 1852 law levied a state tax to help fund public schools.

- 1 What arguments were offered against a government-controlled educational system?
- 2 Do you agree with these arguments? Why or why not?

- ▶ Today, education reformers are looking for ways to improve the public school system. The use of school vouchers to allow students to attend private schools using public tax money has become a hot-button issue. Some support this move, saying Hoosiers should have the right to decide what schools their children attend and that the tax money set aside to educate a student should follow him or her to the parents’ school of choice. Others say these provisions weaken public schools by diverting funds away from them.

- 1 What do you think Caleb Mills would think about school vouchers?
- 2 What would those Hoosiers think who were opposed to the education provisions of the 1851 constitution and the 1852 Free School Law?
- 3 Choose a side of this issue to argue in a debate and work with a partner who will argue the other side of the debate. Acting as someone from 1851—either a supporter of common schools such as Caleb Mills—or a person who opposes a statewide system of public schools—prepare your pro or con arguments. Share these with your partner so that he or she can provide feedback that may help you strengthen your statements. Then, come back together for a class debate with one-half of the class representing the pro position and the other half representing the con position. Let your teacher determine which side presents a more convincing argument.

Activity 3: Women’s Civil Rights

Introduction: The convention that gathered to draft Indiana’s 1851 constitution was composed exclusively of white men. Not only were there no female delegates to the convention, Hoosier women at the time lacked suffrage, meaning that they, like the state’s African Americans, did not enjoy the right to vote. Furthermore, married women could not own property. Upon marriage, a woman’s personal property legally passed to her husband.

Hoosier women found an ally in Robert Dale Owen from New Harmony, who introduced a section to the 1851 constitution that would have allowed married women to own property. Owen’s proposal was adopted three times, but each time was recalled and eliminated. Although married women finally achieved the right to own property in 1853, the 1851 convention did not take this step. The 1851 constitution extended suffrage to white male immigrants who had been in the United States for at least a year and living in Indiana for at least six months and were professing an intention to become a U.S. citizen. However, Hoosier women did not achieve the right to vote until 1920.

▶ **With a partner, discuss how the 1851 constitution failed to afford Hoosier women equal opportunities.**

- 1 Do you think that the 1853 law that awarded married women property rights could have been achieved without the groundwork laid by Robert Dale Owen’s proposed section of the 1851 constitution? Why or why not?
- 2 Why do you think some Hoosiers opposed allowing married women to own property?

The published report of the debates of the constitutional convention includes remarks made by both Robert Dale Owen in support of married women’s property rights as well as remarks by William R. Haddon against such rights. Owen indicated that the right to acquire, possess, and protect property was specifically mentioned in the U.S. constitution and applied to American women as well as men. Haddon said that bestowing this right created a slippery slope to the rights of representation and suffrage for women. He argued that women did not possess “the necessary degree of political knowledge” because their domestic duties directed their attention elsewhere, limiting “their knowledge in matters of civil government.” (*Report of the Debates and Proceedings*, 462–70)

- ▶ **Create a poster urging Convention delegates to vote for or against property rights for married women. Make sure that your poster uses images that express visually the arguments of the side you are representing.**
- ▶ **Imagine a conversation between Owen or a Hoosier woman and Haddon about this issue. With your partner, create a short skit representing this conversation. Perform your skit for the class.**

Activity References

Fowler, H., convention reporter. *Report of the Debates and Proceedings of the Convention for the Revision of the Constitution of the State of Indiana*. Indianapolis: A. H. Brown, 1850. Internet Archive, <https://archive.org/details/report-debatesan00indigoog>.

Kettleborough, Charles. *Constitution Making in Indiana: A Source Book of Constitutional Documents with Historical Introduction and Critical Notes*. Vol. 1. 1916. Reprint, Indianapolis: Indiana Historical Bureau, 1971. Indiana Historical Bureau and Indiana Supreme Court, 1816 constitution, <http://www.in.gov/history/2460.htm>; 1851 constitution, <http://www.in.gov/history/2473.htm>.