

**The  
Indiana**

*A Magazine Exploring Indiana History*

**Historian**



*Canal Mania in Indiana*

This issue and the next—September 1997—focus on Indiana canals of the nineteenth century. This issue provides general background about canals and internal improvements. It focuses on what travel on a canal boat was like and the economic effects of canals. The September issue will focus on how canals were constructed.

On page 3 is a map demonstrating the long interest in canal building in Indiana, from 1805 through 1915.

On pages 4 and 5, there are brief overviews of Indiana's internal improvements efforts and canals in Indiana and nationally. Space has limited coverage to the Wabash and Erie Canal and the Whitewater Canal.

Two personal narratives are then used (pages 6-9) to demonstrate what it was like to travel by canal boat in Indiana in 1851. Both accounts describe travel on the Wabash and Erie Canal, but travel on other canals would have been similar.

The economic impact of canals is then discussed (pages 10-13). The interview of a

Whitewater Canal boat captain—who played an important part in the economy—demonstrates also the enthusiasm and spirit of the canal era.

The spirit of that era is continued in the present-day organizations and people who study and commemorate canals. The Canal Society of Indiana has been helpful in our quest for materials. Paul Baudendistel, a

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travels (see article) to demonstrate the effect of canals on the

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*The Indiana Historian* provides resources and models for the study of local history to encourage Indiana's citizens of all ages to become engaged with the history of their communities and the state of Indiana.

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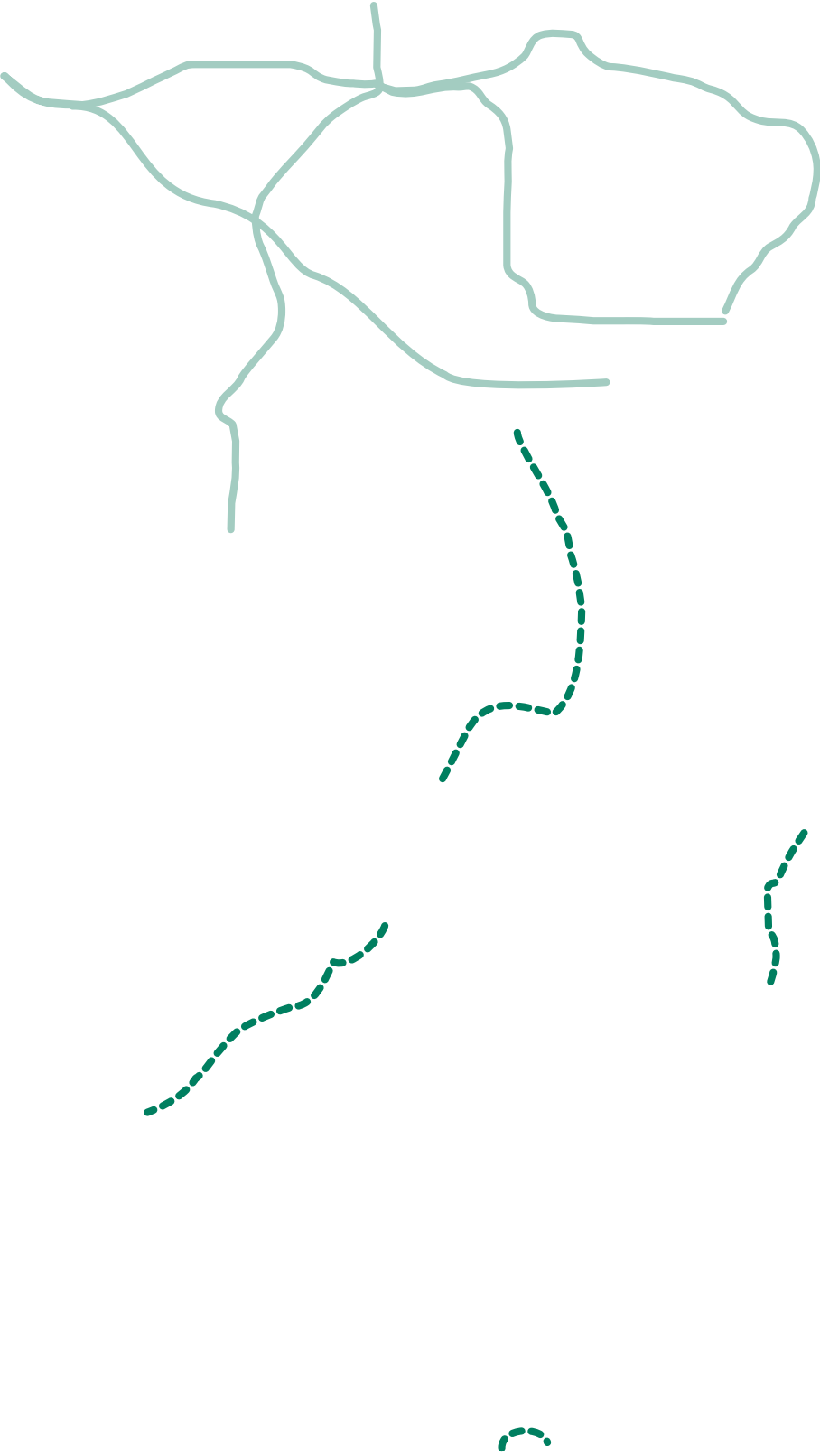
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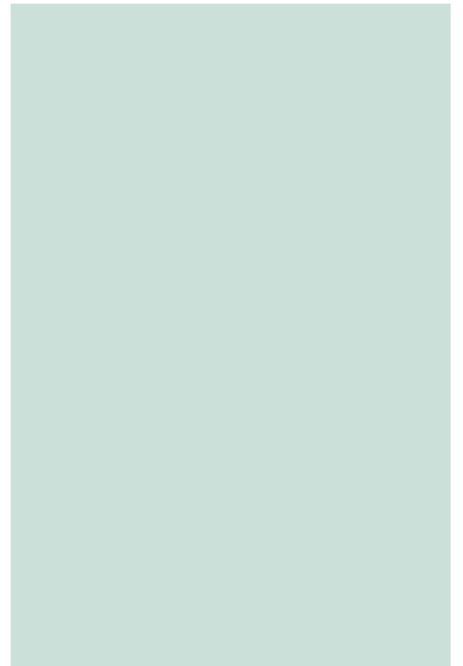
# Indiana Canals





Most references to Indiana's canal era emphasize the failures. The canal era and canals, however, need to be studied as "a once

!



Indiana author Maurice Thompson in his 1898 work *Stories of Indiana*, noted that “Many old people now living remember the peculiar experiences of voyaging on board a canal boat” (217). Thompson presented the following summary:

The canal boat was a long, low, narrow structure built for carrying both passengers and freight. Its cabin and sleeping berths were of the most primitive description, ill-ventilated and dimly lighted. The boat looked like an elongated floating house, the height of which had been decreased by some great pressure. It was drawn by one or two horses hitched to a long rope attached to the bow of the boat. The horses walked on a path, called the towpath, at the side of the canal, and were driven by a man or boy, who sometimes rode, sometimes walked. The boat had a rudder with which a pilot kept it in its proper place while it crept along like a great lazy turtle on the still water. Surely there never was sleepier mode of travel. Thompson, *Stories of Indiana* (New York: American Book Company, 1898), 217-18.

As the boat diagrams throughout this issue illustrate, the construction of canal boats varied. The dimensions were limited by the standard lock size of approximately fifteen feet wide by ninety feet long. Locks on the Whitewater Canal varied in size. As with every mode of travel, passengers (many thousands) who traveled on these boats had differ-

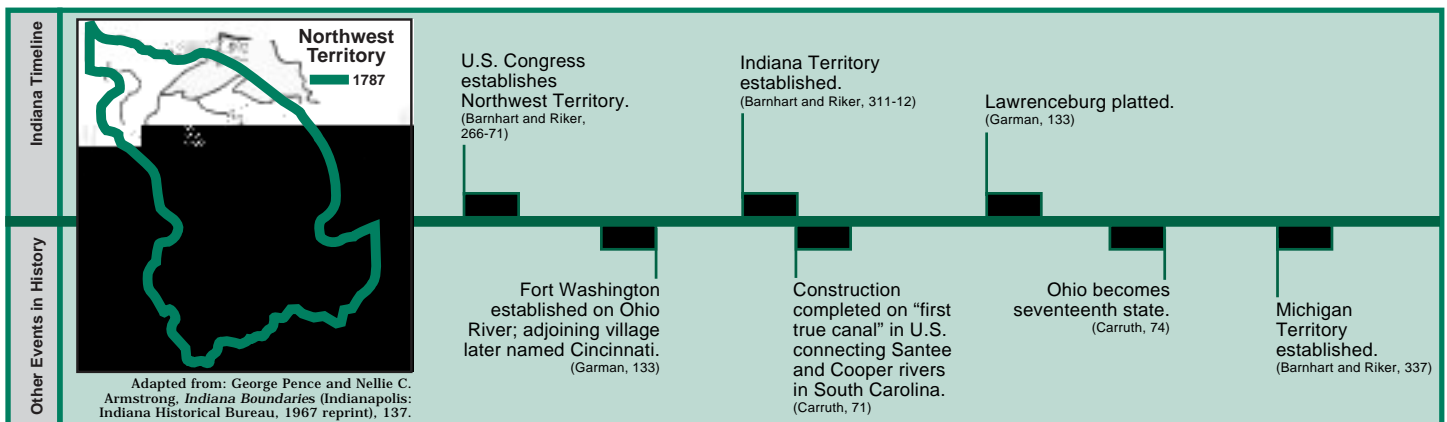
ent reactions to the speed—reports vary from three to eight miles per hour—and the comfort. Overall, however,

Compared to stage or wagon, canal boat travel was smooth, seemed effortless, and the close banks or forest enhanced the sense of speed. Day and night travel changed the concept of distance. Shaw, 106.

A 1912 source provides the comparison below to prove that canal boats were a great benefit over stagecoaches to the traveler or business person.

... the round trip from Brookville to Cincinnati was regularly made between Monday evening and Wednesday morning at the following expense: Passage to Cincinnati and back, including board, \$4; dinner at Cincinnati, fifty cents; one day lost (worth), \$1; total \$5.50. This amount is

thus compared with the expense of the trip by stage, causing the loss of four days on account of them only running tri-weekly, and occasioning the following items of expense: Passage to Cincinnati and back, \$6; dinner on road going and coming, seventy-five cents; fare at ordinary house for three nights and two days, \$5; four days lost (worth), \$4; total \$15.75; making a saving of \$10.25 for one trip. Henry Clay Fox, editor, Moss account of ufs.stthrough04 traveled oug \$4dsel,



Thompson quotes from a series of letters in July 1851 by “a young lady of Louisville, Kentucky.” He does not explain the origin or location of the letters from which he quotes. Tom is her brother. This excerpt is from Thompson, 218-23.

We went on board, by way of a board, a gangplank, that is, and soon found ourselves in a dark, hole-like room, where it was hard to breathe and impossible to see plainly. . . . We presently went up a steep little stairway and came out upon the top of the boat, which was already in motion,—very slow motion, though,—and the dingy houses which was alreoo andleg r06 1 TD 10 Twn or locationo see plad to breat impossiisville, ich hat,8.8000taiho m0 0gom,him-1. -1.irw (where it was hard to1lle, ic03 Twrlaer)T52 laetow. leg r06wrlaees

<p>Indiana territorial legislature charts Indiana Canal Company to build a canal around the Falls of the Ohio; Indiana General Assembly charts Ohio Canal Company in 1817; canal started but not finished. (Buley, 1:435-36)</p>	<p>Engraving of the <i>Clermont</i>.</p>	<p>Brookville platted. (Barnhart and Riker, 420)</p>	<p>Indiana Timeline</p>
<p>U.S. Congress provides for road from Cumberland, Maryland to Ohio; becomes known as Cumberland or National Road. (Buley, 1:446-48)</p>	<p>Robert Fulton's steamboat <i>Clermont</i> makes first voyage from New York to Albany. (Carruth, 80)</p>	<p>War of 1812 begins; ends in 1815. (Carruth, 86, 90-91)</p>	<p>Other Events in History</p>

Bennet Woodcroft. *A Sketch of the Origin and Progress of Steam Navigation*. (London: Taylor, Walton, and Maberly, 1848), opposite p. 60.

J. Richard Beste came to the United States with his wife and eleven children. He became ill in Terre Haute, and his youngest daughter died there. Beste published a narrative of their trip as *The Wabash: or Adventures of an English Gentleman's Family in the Interior of America* (2 vols., London, 1855; reprint 1970). Journal entries by his children are placed throughout his account. Entries by two of his daughters are included in this excerpt from volume 2, pp. 191-213.

TUESDAY, 12TH AUGUST. At five o'clock in the afternoon, we stepped from the little quay at Terre Haute on board the Indiana canal boat. Three horses were harnessed to a rope, about fifty yards ahead of the boat; they started at a moderate trot; and the town . . . was soon lost to our sight. No other passengers were on board: and we wandered over the vessel, well pleased with the promise it gave us of tolerable accommodation. The captain, a very young man, was very civil and attentive to our wants: and told us that tea could be served at seven o'clock . . . .

The construction of the canal boat was—in miniature—much the same as that of the lake and river steamers. There was no hold or under-deck; but, on the deck at the stern, were raised the kitchen, steward's room, and offices; in the centre of the boat, was the large saloon—the sitting room of all by day, the sleeping room of male passengers by night; adjoining it was the ladies' saloon; beyond which again, was a small cabin containing only four berths. This cabin was separated by a doorway and curtain

from the ladies' saloon, and on the other side opened upon the bow of the vessel. In it, was a looking-glass, a hand bason, two towels, a comb and a brush, for the use of the ladies. It was a rule in the boats that no gentleman should go into the ladies' saloon without express invitation from the ladies; consequently, the third little room was sacred to the female sex unless entered from the bow . . . .

A flat roof spread over the whole of the saloons; and on it was piled the luggage; and here passengers walked up and down or sat to enjoy the view.

.....

Our children had wondered where the ladies' saloon was by night;

the deck of the boat was raised up at the stern, where the kitchen, steward's room, and offices, in the centre of the boat, was the large saloon—the sitting room of all by day, the sleeping room of male passengers by night; adjoining it was the ladies' saloon; beyond which again, was a small cabin containing only four berths. This cabin was separated by a doorway and curtain from the ladies' saloon, and on the other side opened upon the bow of the vessel. In it, was a looking-glass, a hand bason, two towels, a comb and a brush, for the use of the ladies. It was a rule in the boats that no gentleman should go into the ladies' saloon without express invitation from the ladies; consequently, the third little room was sacred to the female sex unless entered from the bow . . . .



Vincennes Western Sun, March 18, 1820.





The important economic impact of the Wabash and Erie Canal has been studied extensively. The 1912 work by Elbert Jay Benton is still cited by modern scholars. Benton noted the many towns that were founded because of the canal. He also noted that some died with the canal while

Other cities, more fortunate, grew up with it and with the coming of the railroads have continued to control the traffic of their respective localities. Ft. Wayne, Huntington, Wabash, Peru, Logansport, Delphi, Lafayette, Covington, and Attica are conspicuous. Benton, 101-102.

Benton cites two examples of trade at these canal centers where wagons waited

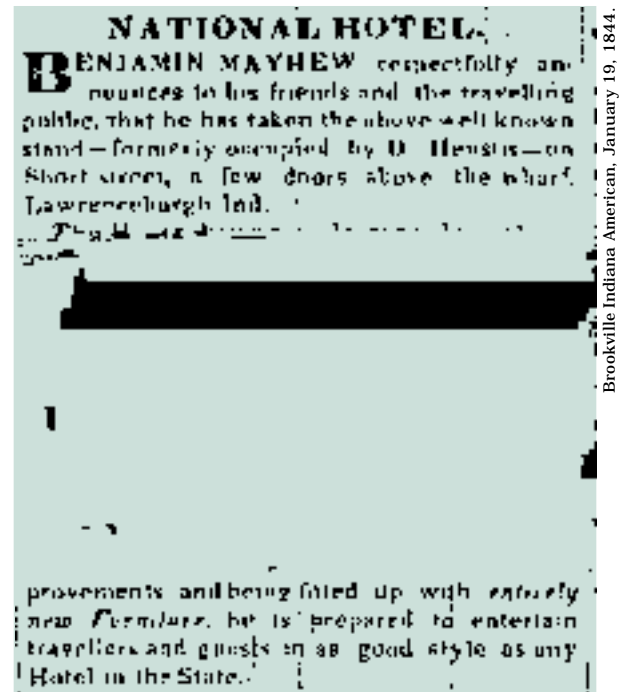
for their turns to unload the products of their farms, bound to the eastern markets. Four hundred wagons unloading in Lafayette during a single day of 1844 were counted by one of the pioneers. Another, speaking of the business at Wabash, says it was a common occurrence to see as many as four or five hundred teams in that place in a single day unloading grain to the canal. Benton, 101.

The Whitewater Canal has received less scholarly attention than the Wabash and Erie Canal. Shaw, a modern author, indicates that “the Whitewater Canal, which had wielded such political leverage, proved to be almost inoperable” (Shaw, 95).

The supporters of the Whitewater Canal, however, remained faithful to keeping the canal operable against the highest odds, especially flooding. The extension of the canal into downtown Cincinnati in 1843 brought the Whitewater Valley into the national trade network.

Various illustrations throughout this issue provide samples of the economic enterprises related to the Whitewater Canal. The canal lines, the builders of boats, the warehouses, the mills, the hotels, new and expanded towns, the various companies formed to build parts of the canal, and the workers who kept the canals running found at least short-term success as part of Indiana’s canal era in the Whitewater Valley.

The remnants of the Whitewater Canal are reminders of the many people who succeeded and failed with the canal. Here, too, with the coming of the railroad, some towns and businesses

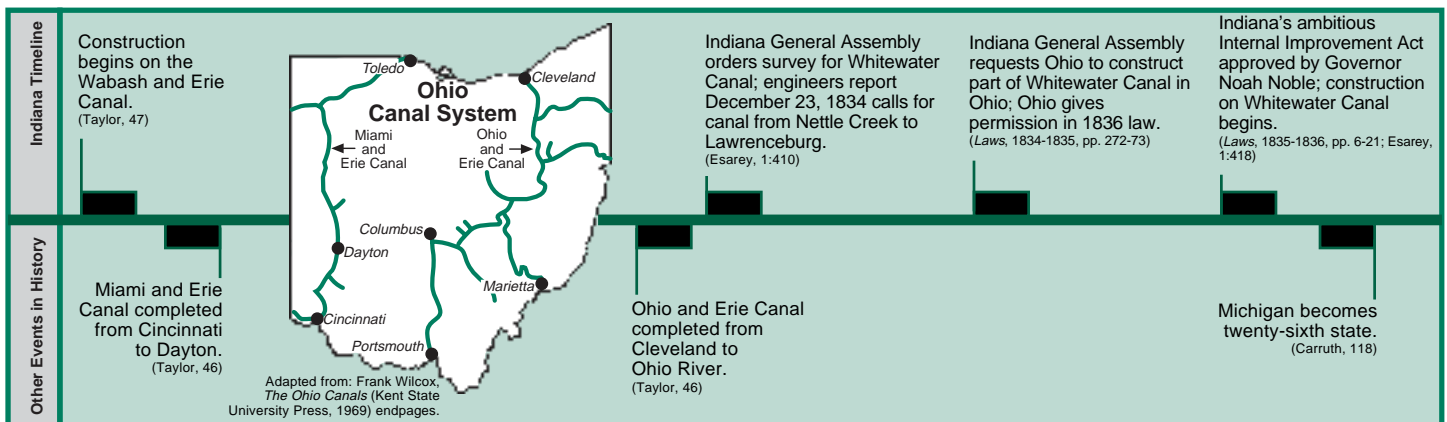


Brookville Indiana American, January 19, 1844.

This hotel was close to both canal and steamboat landings and clearly was expecting the patronage of a better class of travelers. What early accommodations existed for travelers in your area?

were able to adapt. As George S. Cottman put it,

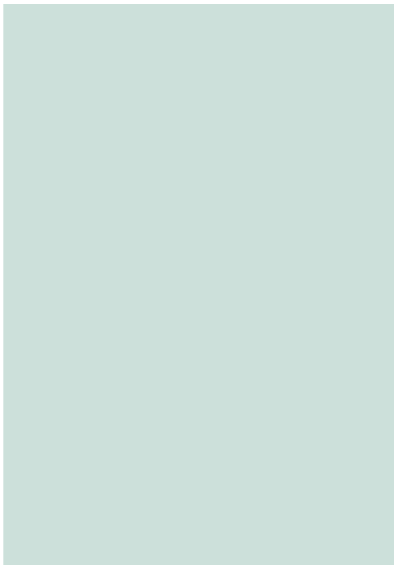
This was a promise of commercial prosperity and a new lease of life to the Whitewater region. . . . Towns sprang up along the proposed route and lay in wait, and as the canal, crawling northward, reached them successively, making one and then another the head of navigation, each flourished and had its day. *Indiana Magazine of History*, 1:4 (1905), 207.



Canal completed between  
Brookville and  
Lawrenceburg; state  
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Captain Joseph M’Cafferty was a canal boat captain on the Whitewater Canal during the 1840s. According to Reifel, “Some years before his death he [M’Cafferty] talked reminiscently” concerning his canal days. This excerpt is from August J. Reifel, *History of Franklin County, Indiana . . .* (Indianapolis: B.F. Bowen & Company, Inc., 1915), 254-56.

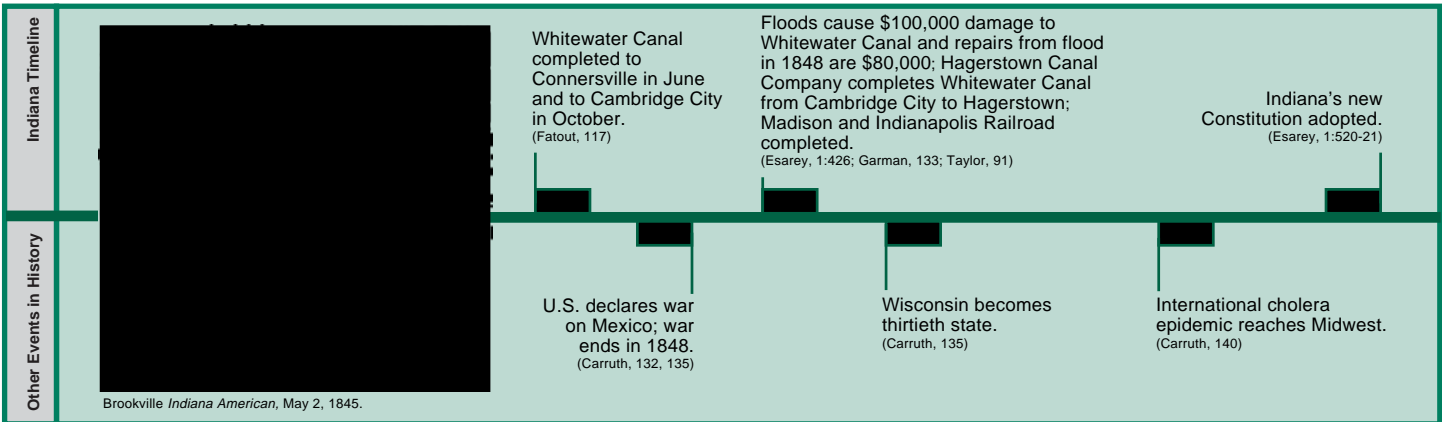
Captains and their canal boats were an important part of the economy. They generally were independent and paid tolls to use the canals for passenger and



merchandise transportation. Note that some of the people and incidents M’Cafferty mentions are also referred to in illustrations on pages 12-13.

‘The first boat was the ‘Ben Franklin.’ She had been running on the Miami canal for a number of years, and it was decided to bring her over here. She was dropped down from the Miami canal to the Ohio river and floated to Lawrenceburg and put into the White Water canal. I bought her and changed the name to ‘Henry Clay’ . . . . I built a number of boats to sell, and always got good prices for them. The first boat built at Cedar Grove was called the ‘Native,’ and when she started on her first trip there was a good deal of excitement all along the canal. The ‘Native’ was a passenger and freight boat and was fitted up in a manner that was gorgeous for those days. There were two cabins and large state rooms ranged on the side, the same as is now seen on passenger steamers. Stephen Coffin was the builder and captain . . . .

‘Finally I built a boat called the ‘Belle of Indiana,’ and there was nothing on the canal that touched her anywhere. The





"Behind the Scenes" presents some aspect of how the Bureau staff produces each issue of the magazine. The focus may be, for example, the research process, an interpretation problem, etc. It also enables us to thank our partners and demonstrate that research is a collaboration with often unexpected twists and turns.

My knowledge of Indiana History was text book. This was real. I thought a002Is was the first pnerion todiscovern



**A Note Regarding Resources:** Items are listed on this page that enhance work with the topic discussed. Some older items, especially, may include dated practices and ideas that are no longer generally accepted. Resources reflecting current practices are noted whenever possible.

