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
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 rail-
way, 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 of-
fice 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’ 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-Nothingism. 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
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 petitioner’s 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—indepenence. 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, unrepentant 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 con-
sider 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 Car-
roll 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, Oc-
tober 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, nomi-
nated 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 re-
sult 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 sup-
posedly 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 as-
semble any full picture:

- On July 25, 1867, the *Warren Republican* contained a legal no-
tice 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 prof-
its for a term not exceeding seven years of the plaintiffs’ en-
tire 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 con-
cluded, 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 sug-
gested that the same scheduled sheriff’s sale had been post-
poned 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 grand-nephew 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).

—28Peirce 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

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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

30Others 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

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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.

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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.