The Midas of the Wabash

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Published by Purdue University Press

Kriebel, Robert C.
The Midas of the Wabash: A Biography of John Purdue.
Purdue University Press, 2019.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

During 1867 the Indiana Agricultural College trustees did sell the federal land to five buyers for $212,238.50. That came to just
over sixty-four cents per acre.\textsuperscript{32} After investing the money in U.S. bonds at six percent interest, the trustees could achieve nothing more until the legislature chose a campus site. The 1867 General Assembly adjourned, pushing site selection ahead to the agenda for 1869.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The proposed board-of-regents bill never passed, and the Purdue University trustees, sometimes with John Purdue’s help, sometimes in spite of his protests, went about their work. On May 6, 1873, the trustees asked their presidential choice, Richard Owen, to draft a plan for university organization. On August 26 Owen delivered his report. Topping termed it “an unmitigated dis-
aster, compounded when the trustees ordered one hundred copies made without first reading it."

Titled *A Scheme of Education Appropriate for the University*, it seemed to Topping to be a “masterfully detailed exercise in irrelevancy and minutiae, punctuated by occasional bursts of trivia.” It largely ignored intellectual requirements, omitted the academic and administrative organization of departments and schools, and contained neither long-term nor overall financial plans. Critics wailed, and the angered and defensive Owen considered the document to have been no more than a private first draft for the sake of further discussion and refinement. The trustees had expected a display of progress, a final, polished document ready for copying and widespread distribution to newspapers and the public-at-large.

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

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

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

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

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

In May, John Purdue presented to the trustees for credit toward his $150,000 pledge a list of expenses totaling $65,519 covering the period from December 1, 1870, to May 1, 1872. These included $32,000 for the dormitory; $24,000 for land acquisition; $3,000 for the Hougham house and barn; and reimbursement for travel, lumber, stone, and opening two water wells. Purdue also paid $9,481 in cash. Trustees thereupon approved total credit of $75,000, which retired the payments Purdue had pledged for 1870, 1871, 1872, 1873,
and 1874. Purdue’s claim even had included $1,363 for 194,844 bricks (101,000 still stacked on campus for future use) that he had ordered from Miller through Lafayette contractor Joshua Chew.\footnote{Having learned brick and stone masonry from his father in Virginia, Chew had reached Lafayette in the 1850s, worked as a bricklayer, then started a kiln and brickyard. In 1871, as university construction commenced in earnest, Chew began brick and masonry contracting. He and his men worked on the first seven buildings.}

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

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

The fall of 1874 marked a tilting of power away from John Purdue in favor of the other trustees and the forceful Shortridge. In October, trustees approved a resolution giving the new president “general authority and supervision of and over all matters connected with the management of the affairs and employees of the university.” Purdue University thus moved beyond being a nominal hobby for the well-meaning gang of four (Purdue, Peirce, Stein, and Coffroth) from Lafayette.
John Purdue then began to miss certain meetings ostensibly to avoid being overruled and outvoted, citing poor health as his reason. In the eyes of Shortridge, Purdue came across not so much an s.o.b. as a “hard-headed man of business with intense convictions on subjects of which he knew nothing,” and a fellow who “needed to be treated with tact and deference, and yet with firmness.” The trustees are known in Shortridge’s first months to have endured tense, stormy, belligerent meetings, with John Purdue the lightning rod. But the official record—the minutes of the trustees’ meetings—“reveal almost nothing of their animus, and are formal to the point of banality,” to quote Hepburn and Sears, who added: “It would appear . . . that Shortridge and faculty must have fought a right joyous fight against [John Purdue’s] powers of ignorance and darkness.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

35Purdue University hastened the end of the Stockwell and Battle Ground collegiate institutes John Purdue had helped years before. In its heyday Battle Ground’s busy collegiate department had charged tuition ranging up to $8.50 per semester, and $5 for its normal school, run in six-week stages. But in 1875, situated so near the new state university, it abandoned the education field. A Methodist Camp Meeting Association bought the vacant building and grounds. Methodist owners used the main building as a hotel, then added a tabernacle and cabins for religious encampments, rallies, revivals and outings. Stockwell Institute dropped college-level courses a few years later.
belt of hostility surely choked off much of his joy. He did render important service and influence in construction matters, he did enjoy a free hand in choosing sites, and he did use his “visitorial” powers well. But on the educational side, according to Hepburn and Sears, “his opinion had less value, though of this he could not be persuaded. Selection of the faculty and determination of a course of study lay outside his experience . . . he was prone to interfere. Friction grew so serious that for several months he absented himself from all meetings of the board.” At one point the dismayed trustees learned that the science hall, copied from Brown University, had been built on plans drawn not by Lafayette architect W. H. Brown but by A. C. Morse, Brown University’s retainee from Providence, Rhode Island. The plagiarism came to light when Morse placed a bill for the science hall plans in the hands of his lawyer for collection from the university. Topping saw this as further evidence that the first years of the Purdue University building program lacked experienced leadership.36

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Man is on a higher plane. To me the future looks cheerful. This institution has had a small beginning. My purpose is to educate. I looked over the country in different places with a view to locating a university. I finally concluded that no place needed educational advantages worse than they do just here.

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

The state laws governing the university are imperfect. In most institutions the duties of the officers and trustees are laid down. It
ought to be so with this institution. Rules to protect the morals of the students should also be made. The Board of Trustees will perhaps do better next year, and remove all the evils that exist. We don’t get on very nicely.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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