

JACK BABER: HIS STORY

By

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“I am sorry I did not get to see my friend Jack Baber when he was in town. He MUST be a great man—he is said to be the greatest man in Clay county. He reads and writes all the love letters in Lewis township, reads law, preaches, corresponds for several important periodicals—the *Brazil News* for instance—is the confidential advisor of President Buchanan, Post Master general for the section of the country in which he lives, plays ‘Arkansas Traveler’ in the most approved style—and is an old bachelor on the hunt of a wife.”

Being sorry that I missed Jack Baber too, this is an attempt to reconstruct his life although without the satisfaction of learning how his later years played out. It is a diagram from his own words, microfilm copies of nineteenth-century newspapers, family and public records. I hope it serves as a memorial which would in style and content please its subject.

The editor’s good-natured ribbing about Jack’s many facets appeared in the *White River Valley Times*, Worthington, Indiana in 1857. In that paragraph are gems of truth about A. J. Baber.

By his own account, Andrew Jackson Baber was born February 10, 1821 at dinner time. Hoosiers know that dinner is served at straight-up noon. He was the second of three sons born to Robert and Katharine “Katy” Whiles Baber of Pulaski County, Kentucky who came to Indiana when the State was barely out of its diapers and into its britches. Their families had come to Kentucky from the old southeast. The departure to Indiana may have been because Kentucky land titles were an intolerable mess, slavery was an issue, or just because greener pastures beckoned. For whatever reason, they migrated to form a new network of family and some former neighbors in the Richland-Highland area of Greene County.

Jack’s grandparents were Revolutionary War veteran William Baber and Susannah Southern Baber and Thomas and Catherine White Whiles. Joseph and Thomas Whiles in Clay County were probably Katy Whiles Baber’s brothers.

Jack and his older brother “Wash”(George Washington) were first educated, he writes, in Highland township in a round-log, dirt-floor school with greased paper window and puncheon desks, all features common to construction in early colonial times. To indicate how near their colonial roots the Greene countians were, Jack wrote that his Grandmother Baber attended all public gatherings and sold gingercakes at fourpence each.

Robert and Katy Baber had their third son William Whiles Baber in Highland township in 1822. There was a sister whose early death is the only mention Jack makes of her. In 1832, another sister, Emeline, is born. On September 30, 1819, Martha “Patsy” Craig and John Fires were married near the confluence of Eel and White Rivers; a

passing band of Indians joined the celebration. The Craig-Fires marriage produced Thomas Jefferson Fires who became Emeline's husband. At this time in the story, Indiana was still growing from the bottom up, had not reached its half-way mark in cleared and settled land, but the price of \$1.25 an acre in 1820 was an incentive for further development.

From the 1820's to 1840 when Jack was a young man, there isn't much to be found about him, but the social matrix of Greene, Owen, Clay and Sullivan counties underwent a transition from raw frontier to flourishing communities. Jack's perambulations took him to these places. Robert Baber bought land in Clay County. Traditional dates and recorded dates conflict, but the White River Babers moved to become Eel River people. For the remainder of their lives, Lewis township, Clay County, was the home of Robert and Katy, and Jack writing about his life says he lived there for forty-five years and "had more fun than fifty boys will ever have again."

The Coffee community consisted of scattered small farms and cottage industries. If Coffee had a main street it surely was the Terre Haute and Worthington Road. Robert Baber's home was the first Coffee post office, and also probably served as a store and tavern. Lore has it that when the post office was approved in 1842, the proprietor was asked for a name and was about to jot "coffee" on a grocery list. Made postmaster in 1842, Jack handled the mail from that base which an 1861 gazatteer describes as a "small post village one mile west from Eel river and on the Worthington and Terre Haute stage route, eighteen miles from Bowling Green, the capital of the county..." In that publication, Jack is listed as a farm implements dealer and also "A. J. Baber", real estate agent.

The area that was Coffee viewed on a hot August day or during bleak December makes one wonder where all those small farms were. It is still farmland and grows more crops than any farmer of that day could have envisaged.

(Later in Greene County, Jack witnessed the waning of old Point Commerce, the development of Worthington a half a mile from the Point, and the establishment of the town of Jasonville in the corner of the meeting of Greene, Clay, and Sullivan counties. He saw old river towns give way to those served by railroads.)

Roads for the delivery of mail were the subject of legislation. In the House of Representatives, December, 1837, the Committee on the Post Office and Post Roads was to inquire into the expediency of establishing a post road from Spencer, Owen County, through New Brunswick, Clay County, thence via Thomas Springer's to Merom in Sullivan County, as well as a post road from Bedford, Lawrence County, via Mr. Short's on Indian Creek to Bloomfield, Greene County, thence via Scaffold Prairie to Bowling Green in Clay county. It's not beyond reason to suggest that Jack may have hitched rides on the weekly mail hacks.

Road building and maintenance was the required obligation of able-bodied males. He put in his service and held the position of supervisor for some time.

By 1850 John and Martha Craig Fires and growing family were trying their luck in Mississippi after having lived in Illinois. Later Martha and three children returned to Clay county. Emeline Baber married Thomas Jefferson Fires in 1853 and the couple evidently had a kind of partnership with her brother Jack. At some time T. J. Fires also served as the Coffee storekeeper and postmaster, raised hogs, and made bricks.

The 1850's were tumultuous for the Baber family. The census shows twenty-nine-year-old Jack still living with his parents. He is a stringer and subscription agent for several weekly newspapers in addition to his other pursuits. His mother died in 1855 and was buried on the crown of the hill of Woodrow Bluff (now Sanders) cemetery, about a mile from the homeplace. George Washington Baber died in 1856 at the age of thirty-seven. Jack reported the death of William Baber's young son who fell off a log onto a knife in 1856. This is probably the little boy George whose broken stone in the family plot is near his grandmother Katy and other cousins. Thomas and Emeline Fires buried their seven-month-old daughter Martha in 1856 and stillborn son Thomas in 1858. In 1859 the widowed Robert Baber married Anna Grumer.



The Fires Babies

There are happy events sent to the newspaper. Jack, referring to them as his "infernal kin" reported the marriages of widow Polly Ann Baber and Samuel Shuler, Lucinda Baber and William Patterson; Milly Baber and Alexander Stewart, "both being of age, no objections were made by the infernal kin on either side, or anybody else." After the Patterson union, he wrote, "This ends the chapter of my infernal kin/within the last three weeks they all pitched in/all

are married and gone home with their men/ and I am going that way but I can't tell when."

Jack lived within walking distance of the cross-cut canal between Terre Haute and Worthington but no mention is made of his having boarded a packet in his roving unless there is a wonderful story lost forever, as many are, in the missing issues and entire editions of the old rural newspapers. He did speak of the canal's existence in a tongue-in-cheek accounting of Lewis township in 1856:

"The Banner Township: Old Lewis Township, Clay county, Indiana foots up the following account current: Officers—Calvin Reed, County Commissioner, third district; Thomas C. Neal, Assessor; John Neal, Deputy; Geo. L. Hooker and Wm. L. Buckalew, Justices; Mahlon Neal, James Briley and Peter Stark, Trustees; John G. Edmondson and Wm. H. Weatherman, Constables; R. M. Stark, Clerk; and J. T. Liston, Treasurer.

"Five supervisors for five road districts; five school houses for five districts, five Sons of Temperance, five men that get drunk, five preachers, five widowers, five old bachelors, five widows, five old maids, five Know Nothings, and five men that mind their own business.

"Three churches, three pair of twin children, three school teachers, three carpenters, three fiddlers, three crazy persons, three men over seventy-five years old and 'seven subscribers' for the 'White River Valley Times.'

“One river, one canal, one canal boat, one village, one store, one blacksmith shop, one mill, one post office, one family of colored people, one mid-wife and one woman over seventy-five years old.

“No loafers, no lawyers, no doctors, no doggeries and no paupers.

“Two families, James Briley and Robt. Baber, have lived in the township upwards of thirty years. The voters now number about 165, and there has never been a fight, a quarrel, or the lie passed at any election in the township, all peaceable, quiet and social neighbors for thirty years.

“Jack Baber, Coffee P. O., June, 1856”

A year later, the Coffee postmaster reports, “At our April election, we polled 45 votes only. Twenty-five men and one woman were voted for. Nine men were elected and the woman beat the hindmost man three votes for Constable.”

Jack as a township trustee seemed to have pursued no other political office. Perhaps it is as a trustee that he was made guardian of two members of the Wolfe family. It would appear he was guardian of property and not of person.

Jack as a “common farmer” (his designation) was known for his interest in the promotion of agriculture. He was one of the earliest instigators of local fairs and some of the first were held on the Baber farm. In 1855, Thomas Dillon, the 20-year-old editor of the *Clay County Citizen* at Bowling Green stated, “We are indebted to our friend Jack Baber at Coffee for some fine large apples, one of which weighed a pound and nine ounces. Mr. Baber reads more newspapers, kills more coons and raises bigger corn and apples than any other man in Lewis township and through his instrumentality we hope the *Citizen* will soon be extensively circulated in that vicinity.” (Sadly, young Dillon, who was later praised for his journalistic talent, died in his early twenties.) That these early fairs were successful is summed up by Dillon in October, 1855: “Our second county fair, held at Bowling Green...a crowd assembled around the Court House to see the productions of our county. Nor were they disappointed for there were horses, cattle, jacks, mules, hogs, poultry, pumpkins, beets, turnips, sweet potatoes, corn, apples, needlework of all descriptions, fancy articles, paintings, drawings, butter, honey, preserves, penmanship, quilts, counterpanes, &c. &c.” Lengthy detailed results of entries and awards were reported following each of these autumn celebrations.

Agronomist Baber editorialized that summer: “I notice a statement going the rounds of the press in regard to a certain box containing six ears of extra fine Wabash corn, sent by Messrs Rogers & Reynolds of Lafayette to Mr. Bates, the American partner in the house of Baring Brothers & Co., London, for a wager of a public dinner with Lord John Russell, First Lord of the Treasure &c. According to the statement, the tables were turned against Lord John on account of the great number of rows on each cob which is set down at these figures—Two ears, twenty-nine rows each; two ears, thirty-one rows each and two ears thirty-two rows each, making four ears of corn with an odd row on each cob. The *Bloomington News Letter* also claims to have received an ear containing fifteen rows some time since. There must be a Know Nothing wigwam somewhere. Now, as I am an obscure farmer in the backwoods of Hoosierdom, and a corn-grower on a small farm, I propose to wager a public dinner for the members of the Agricultural Society of any county in the State of Indiana, that no person or firm can produce five ears of corn, of

good form and solid growth, with an odd row on each cob. The corn to be present at the next Agricultural Fair in the county where the corn is produced and the dinner to be got up at that time and place, for the members of the Society.”

(The Know-Nothings, a secret organization opposed to immigrants and Catholics, were often the target of Jack’s barbs.) In 1858 there was a public hanging at Greencastle in Putnam County. Perhaps if the execution had happened closer to home, Jack would have been there to add his comments. In the tenor of the times, the Worthington paper carries the complaint, “a tumbled-up hoop-skirt is an awful sight to see.” Store-bought medicines are challenging herbal home remedies for fever and ague, cholera, typhoid and the common childhood diseases.

One Spring Jack tells the editor, “On Saturday morning...I found myself at an early hour enroute to Worthington. I had not proceeded far until I met Messrs. Broome and Anderson with a large lot of cattle bound for Minnesota. I have been informed that most of these cattle were purchased in Greene County, and I had scarcely passed them before the large and beautiful plantations of Scaffold Prairie burst almost suddenly upon my view. The farmers here are industrious and enterprising and are becoming wealthy.”

Jack wrote to the *Times* in December, 1857: “it is somewhat out of my line of business to discuss the affairs of our present Banking system...” Notwithstanding this hindrance, he takes on the system decrying the “cupidity” of those who “devise various means for increasing irresponsible shin-plaster or bank paper of their own make.” (A banking scandal at Gosport, Owen County, comes to mind.) He wrote, “Certain of our State Stock Banks declare dividends as high as twenty-nine percent annually...” Jack’s explanation for this: “Jack goes to the bank and offers a note with unquestionable endorsement and is told...that it cannot be discounted...he goes to the broker and offers the note for one hundred dollars. Mr. Broker tells him to call in one hour and he will see what can be done for him. Jack goes out and the broker goes into the bank and makes an arrangement to let Jack have the money---the bank charging fifteen percent and the broker three. When Jack calls the second time, Mr. Broker bargains to discount the note at eighteen percent per annum, or one and a half per month and gives Jack a check on the bank for the money and he gets the money of the bank—the bank really discounting the note at a high figure to say nothing of the broker’s profit.”

Nothing has turned up to document Jack’s particular religious bent. In 1858, he reported chilly salvation when a Worthington “*Times*” March issue announced “The 7th inst., there were fifteen hundred persons present at the baptising on Busrow Creek in Sullivan county, two miles south of Centreville, where the Baptists were holding a protracted meeting. After cutting and clearing away the ice, which was five inches thick, Rev. Mr. Crist and Rev. Wineing proceeded to administer the right of immersion to 17 young gentlemen and 28 young ladies—making forty-five persons, all of whom were put under the water in the short time of thirty-five minutes, and it was not a good day for baptising at all. Jack.” Was it the printer’s devil or Jack who used “right” for “rite” and the phonetic spelling of Busseron?

Again, wondering if the reader is being “had” by the reporter, here is an 1866 report of an immersion, this time in the gentler month of May: “Rev George W. Marlow administered the ordinance of baptism to 35 persons on Sunday, the 13th inst. at Slate Lick Creek in Wright township. There were 22 males and 13 females, all immersed. The crowd in attendance numbered 987, and 804 persons went to the water, a distance of 3

miles. There were 63 wagons and buggys in line, and 226 persons on horseback. Everything passed off in the best of order without an accident or any disorderly conduct during the day. This occasion will long be remembered by the congregation as one of the brightest days of the Baptist Church.”

Jack also visited Bloomfield, the Greene County seat, on court days. With Twain-like observation, Baber reported on his day at the courthouse: “Bloomfield is realizing the advantage of a regular healthy spirit of improvement in everything except ‘picayune’ lawyers and One Cent cases in court. I learned that several Informations were filed in the Common Pleas Court against some of the patriotic ladies of Bloomfield for betting on elections—while a great number of men and boys were held to answer in Court for selling and drinking ‘bust-head’ whisky by less than the jug full. John Wilkes, the capitol of Wright township, together with a goodly number of her inhabitants were in attendance at Squire Patterson’s Court on Friday, as witnesses in a case wherein a simple-minded girl claimed the attention of the Justice to decide between her and a married man as to the legal protection of common property.

“A certain fellow was on trial one whole day for public ‘indecenty’ occupying the time of the Judge, four attorneys and twelve jurors at considerable expense to the taxpayers...and the verdict was ‘guilty’ and the fine was ONE CENT and imprisonment in the county jail for a period of five minutes. Now I undertake to say, that a guilty man should be fined more than one cent and if innocent he should be kept out of the county jail for all time to come.

“Considerable dissatisfaction was exhibited by several good old farmers who had been subpoenaed as witnesses to appear before the judge of the ‘one horse’ court on the first day of term, Monday—and by the Judge failing to call Court until Tuesday morning, they paid a tavern bill and lost one day waiting on the legal ‘powers that be’ at Bloomfield occasionally. And a great many outside parties took some exception to the Judge giving preference to all newly instituted cases for selling ‘bust-head’ whisky over old Probate business that had been on the docket “five years” to the great expense of Guardians, Orphans and Administrators who had to wait upon the little buck of a Prosecutor who was as patient as Job’s turkey.”

The Bloomfield trip was enlivened by “the Bloomfield Band .. out at night and gave us a few tunes...” “Papaw Bend,” “Old Mother Logo,” “Arkansaw Traveler,” “Barbara Allen,” and a little touch of “Uncle Sam’s Gals Won’t Stay at Home.”

In 1860, Jack is living with his sister and brother-in-law, Emeline and Thomas Fires. Thomas Fires’ mother Martha is living next door. The census that year lists Martha and Emeline as weavers. Other trades and professions indicate the growth of the community, although most residents are engaged in farming as well. Real estate transactions in county records do not explain why Jack did not maintain his own residence. He exchanged deeds with his father, he owned lots in New Brunswick. In 1860, he owned real property worth \$1,010. For the fairs and barbecues he held, there must have been sufficient space. Obviously he enjoyed a crowd. In the late 1850’s Jack was busily promoting public interest in permanent fairgrounds.



A Coffee horizon

Several farmers of Clay, Sullivan, Greene and Vigo counties met at Centerville in the spring of 1860 to organize an agricultural society. “Major” Jack Baber was chosen secretary. I suspect the editor of granting Jack another title. Jack was among the speakers at the meeting. The summer meeting for reports of committees was to be held at the barn of Thomas Rush, at the crossroads on the south side of the old Splunge Creek Reservoir in Clay

county. History recognizes both “Splunge” and “Plunge” as the name of this reservoir which figured in the infamous canal disputes when disgruntled Clay folks opened dams and did what they could to keep the cross-cut out of their neighborhoods. If Jack commented on these events, the remarks are in lost publications.

As Coffee postmaster, Jack performed his duty in announcing to the papers that fraudulent lottery letters have been circulating for six months indicating those who are refusing any letters and mentioning that “some have left their work and some have walked three miles” to get the letters and circulars.

A faithful Democrat, Jack reported a meeting held at the Mattox School House on July 14, 1860 wherein Lewis Puckett Jr., moved to send four delegates to the Congressional convention to be held at Terre Haute; Chosen were J. T. Liston, Judge John Hungate, Daniel Goble Jr., and James Buckalew. Baber moved to add Joseph Puckett and Jephtha M. Ellington. Calvin Reed deemed it necessary to have an odd number and Lewis Puckett Jr., was added, to make seven delegates. The political agendas of the time were engrossed with the Dred Scott Decision and the “Kansas affairs.” These topics would fill the pages with heated arguments along with the discord among the populace as to who in the communities were southern sympathizers as the Civil War years ensued.

In another instance where missing newspapers make the tracking of Jack Baber difficult, an item appears in the *Weekly Hoosier Patriot*, Bowling Green, April 19, 1860: “Some two or three weeks ago this gentleman came out in a lengthy and well-written letter in the *Clay County Democrat* in favor of Senator Douglas for President. The letter was published in the ‘Democrat’ with his comment by the editor in the same issue of that paper as that in which the communication appeared. The article under the title of ‘Political Prospects’ was handed us by the gentleman whose name is attached to it with the request to publish it strikes us rather forcibly that we have read either that or a similar article before, but we may be mistaken. It is a well written article, let the author be who he may. In our issue of that week, we asked the editor of the Democrat if he intended by that article to dispute that Mr. Baber was the author of the letter, to which we have received no answer and of course Mr. Baber and all authors must necessarily presume that he did and still does intend to say by that that Mr. Baber is not the author of the letter, but is guilty of appropriating to his own advantage the intellectual production of another man. If the article was written by anyone else, we have not in our recollection noticed it. We think it is treating Mr. Baber very grossly indeed to say that he is not the

author of an article under his signature and if the charge is made that he is not, it is at least due Mr. Baber that the charge be satisfied in some satisfactory manner. We therefore now ask it of the editor of the *Clay County Democrat* that he explain this matter by answering our interrogatory.”

The *Patriot* explained with a pick-up from the *Sullivan Democrat*: “Jack Baber of Coffee P. O., Clay county, has again emerged from his retirecy and has appeared in public prints with a letter declaring himself for Douglas for President. The delegates to Charleston will please make a note of this.” In response, the “Patriot” replies, “Yes, he is out for Senator Douglas, and is there anything wrong in that? The *Sullivan*, like the *Clay County Democrat* seems to make light of the letter recently written by Mr. Baber. How is this, gentlemen?”

Unfortunately the issue of the *Sullivan* paper or any other area weekly which published Jack’s letter campaigning for Stephen Douglas no longer exists.

On another political note, the *Clay Democrat* later would give Jack and the party a plug: “In our next issue will appear Jack Baber’s Democratic Platform election returns from Lewis township etc. etc. Jack says by the next general election there will not be to exceed five men in Lewis township who will vote against the Democratic Ticket. Good for Lewis!” (April, 1862)

It isn’t difficult to discern that Jack was a social creature. As to his being a bachelor in hunt of a wife, it may be that his single life while boarding with others provided him the means to be a free spirit without the price of solitude. Despite the “infernal kin”, he was obviously close to his extended family, and in giving himself the sobriquet “Uncle Jack Baber,” he made himself fictive kin to all his readers. Despite hints to the contrary, he did not seem to be in the market for marriage. A long article in the *White River Gazette* by an anonymous author is titled “Why I Remain a Bachelor.” In fairness to Jack, it only has the earmarks of his brand of humor and none can say he wrote it. However the subject is “Uncle John” who finds his lady friend in the embrace of another.

Waxing superfluity, Jack gives consumers a look at Shryer, Harrah & Miller’s emporium. “...feeling as though I had been brought hither by enchantment. The gorgeous piles of fine cloths, prints, hats, caps, boots and shoes..almost everything else was overwhelming. Here the temptation to buy something was irresistible...If you have a scolding wife and cross children, you will find a remedy for their ‘ills’ by taking your ‘better half’ to town and giving her a few dollars to spend with the above firm---she will no longer have the heart to scold and your children will quit crying because mamma whips them.” This visit to Worthington also brought him to the offices of Dr. Smydth and Dr. Hutchings who also received free advertising compliments of Jack Baber, one-man Chamber of Commerce.

In 1860 Emeline Fires gave birth to Amos Jefferson Fires who became a prominent judge in Texas. Thomas Jefferson Fires and Emeline and their young adult son migrated to Texas and all died there. My family tradition says that John Davis Craig, son of Thomas J. Craig, lived a part of his youth in the home of Emeline and T. J. Fires. It is my belief that T. J. Fires’ mother, Martha Craig Fires, was a sister of my great-great grandfather Thomas J. Craig, and aunt of John Davis and Thomas Alexander Craig, my great-grandfather. John D. Craig’s grave is directly behind Jack’s in Sanders Cemetery.

The Union Agricultural Fair at Howesville October 30, 1860 brought out a crowd of participants. The detailed report in the *Gazette* lists familiar names from the history of

Clay and Greene counties. A. J. Baber won a prize for the best Jonah gourd, Robert Baber for the best fresh fish and William W. Baber for the best double-barrel gun. On the distaff side, Sarah Hungate was awarded for the best ten yards of flannel, and best 10 yards of flax linen; Clementine Butler won for the best homemade cotton cloths. Thirteen women rode in the ladies riding match and some of those were Mary Jessup, Amanda Neal, Isabella Buckelew, and Celia Maxwell. The premium list is a “who’s who” of the area.

Jack dropped in at the Point Commerce post office and “found my friends...all discussing the great National questions of the day, and a Justice of the Peace sitting hard by, asking each loafer that happened to drop in, to state to the Court what he knew about the fight between Kerlina and Uncle Sam—the prospect of the weather, and other fool questions. I had supposed that a suitable place to expound the great questions of law would be in a Squire’s office but a Justice of the Peace was certainly out of his place holding Court in a village Post office, unless he goes there for protection under the present Administration. While there (Worthington), I heard several hard things said by the would-be great men against the Commissioners of Greene county, concerning the management of the Eel River’s one bridge. I also learned that some witnesses up at Indianapolis before the Federal Court give rather a bad coloring to the fair fame and good name of the inhabitants of your county which she has heretofore enjoyed...” The reporter then promises a better offering next time and signs off “in the language of Artemus Ward, ‘adoo.’ JB Coffee P.O.” (Just a dozen years later, the *Times* reports that only four of the original inhabitants of Point Commerce are still in the vicinity; they are James M. H. Allison, John F. Allison, Wm. S. Bays and Robert Scott.) But during the time of this particular visit of Jack in Worthington, the ladies of the Christian Church advertised an oyster and ice cream supper to be held February 5; feathers were selling at thirty-five cents per pound, coffee at sixteen to eighteen cents, and notice given that several unlicensed houses selling liquor in Greene county would probably be closed due to the Supreme Court decision that the License Law of 1859 was Constitutional in its provisions prohibiting Sunday sales and sales to minors. The paper gives small space to the admission of Kansas into the Union.

In other matters of litigation, Jack complained that poor farmers who had suits in court were kept waiting some for two weeks, at considerable expense waiting for “justice to be dealt out to either party, but the Court adjourned and several suits were ready and could not be tried. One suit, total sum in dispute, Eighteen Dollars, costs sixty-seven dollars, and not yet permitted to go to trial. That is justice with a vengeance.”

The *Democrat* came to Jack’s defense in an item that begs further details: “We desire to state in behalf of A. J. Baber that his name was on the bogus ticket presented by the Republicans and without his knowledge or consent and that he publicly denounced the ticket at his precinct on the day of election before the opening of the polls and voted against it. (October, 1862) A month later, it is announced that “on final settlement with the Post Office Department, there is a balance of \$28.60 in favor of A. J. Baber, Post Master at Coffee in this county. Uncle Jack has been a No. 1 Post Master for the past fifteen years. Besides discharging the duties in the office to the entire satisfaction of the people, he has kept his hands out of Uncle Sam’s pocket.”

At Jack Baber’s District Fair at Worthington that Fall, the report stated an attendance “by a large number of people. The show of horses was very good, the fruit and all kinds

of vegetables exhibited was most excellent. We noticed among other articles two ‘cuts’ of 700 cotton, raised and spun this season by Mrs. Dr. John A. Pegg of Fairplay township.” (Cotton was a successful crop in the area. Enterprising merchant John F. Allison in 1863, obtained and offered for sale 120 bushels of ‘choice upland’ cotton seed.)

These are the Civil War years, and the newspapers report casualties, troop movements and battles. There is a strife among the locals, all who have their own reasons for taking sides. This is another story. Jack did not write about the war per se, and in his book he makes the astounding reference (either as writer or editor) I thought only used by stereotypical genteel southern ladies: “the late unpleasantness.”

On August 22, 1862, the Democrat gives the Lewis Township Statistical Enrollment of militia as reported by trustee Baber:

Men over 45 years - 45
 Able bodied men at home – 104
 Volunteers now in service – 98
 Invalids, officers and cripples – 24
 Total 271
 Citizens subject to exemption – 21
 Enumeration of children:
 Whole number in township – 388
 No. of boys 197
 No. of girls 191

Some families in Lewis township have five or six young men at home, subject to draft, while other families have four or five sons gone to war as volunteers.” he added.

Among those who were serving were Jack’s brother William, brother-in-law, T. J. Fires, his brother Robert, and my great-grandfather Thomas “Alec” Craig, as members of Company K, 85th Indiana, whose captain, Lewis Puckett, was also a Lewis township resident. Company K became a part of Coburn’s Brigade.

The war didn’t hinder Jack’s agricultural drive. “Verlin Jessup invites citizens of Worthington and Point Commerce to call at the Market House usually occupied by him and they can see Jack Baber’s premium beef. Doors open at 6 o’clock on Saturday morning. Entrance free. This Fall event was preceded by an announcement in June, 1862 that Jack had resigned as Coffee postmaster and that the office was to be “removed one mile north.” Jack was reappointed in 1866, according to the Worthington news.

The Worthington-based fair in the Fall of 1863 is titled “The Young America United States Fair.” Jack announced the fair ground and produce tables were free of charge. “Premiums will consist of fine silk ribbon and a correct publication of the List of Premiums in the county papers. The committee reserves the right to charge peddlers, auction wagons, and eating or drinking tables 50 cents each and each swing will be taxed \$2.00—the proceeds applied to the payment of the Band of Music. No intoxicating liquors or gambling tables allowed on or near the ground...Good order and morality will be preserved...” In the same issue, “We have been informed by those who visited the State Fair, that it was a complete failure. Jack Baber’s fair at this place...will no doubt beat the State Fair, particularly in the show of people.” This issue of the newspaper reported the Greene County casualties from Chickamauga.

While Jack’s father’s small tub mill had fizzled out, Joseph Woodrow purchased

a mill seat on Eel River a mile and a half from Jack and moved his machinery from White River to that site in 1866, and left "Woodrow" as a geographic term.

In January, 1873, the *Times* reports "Uncle Jack Baber, President of the U. S. Fair at Kansas, Edgar County, Illinois, has been visiting his friends and 'infernal kin' in this county, during the past week." Jack may have been the out-of-town expert consultant in this instance, or perhaps visited former Hoosiers, including some Craigs, who had moved to the southeastern Illinois counties bordering the Wabash. His modest description of himself from his book was published in Wabash College's early volume of Indiana Authors and Their Books, and reads in part: "Uncle Jack Baber is a common farmer and market gardener, and has recently established a first-class agricultural fair ground and exchange trade, for all kinds of choice poultry, fine hogs, evergreen shrubbery and ornamental trees, at Worthington...." In April, 1873, it was announced that "Uncle Jack Baber has purchased of Judge Franklin the old dwelling house together with two lots just north east of the depot for which he paid \$600.00. Then the *Times* reports on May 1 that "Uncle Jack Baber intends supplying farmers in this section with any amount of hedge plants. He's in the business and will push things lively." The 1873 Worthington fair promised to be an exciting one with a great live catfish and two buffalo calves from Owen County to be exhibited, and "the lady who exhibited three infant sons at Jack Baber's fair in this place a few years ago is again prepared to visit the Fair this fall. We understand she is now the mother of seven children, six of whom had an existence at two births. If any lady in the land can make a better showing, let her be on hand in October, and compete for the premium."

Just when Jack made the move from Clay back to Greene county is uncertain, but surely the move was an economic one. His sister Emeline and Thomas Fires had relocated to the Worthington area. The Worthington Fair became a stock company, with Uncle Jack Baber, E. M. Long, William L. Green and others advertising the subscription of a joint stock fund of Five Thousand Dollars, being a hundred shares at Fifty Dollars each to maintain a fairground for a term of not less than twenty years. Jack would live to see that twenty years out.

Jack's crowning achievement and lasting legacy is his book, the handwritten manuscript in the possession of a collateral descendant has just recently crumbled away. He might have had a glimpse of the future value of his collection of information but he could not have realized how far and wide it would go and how many people it would benefit. Anticipating the centennial of the United States, a movement to interview "old settlers" was launched, and in 1874 neighboring Owen County was publishing the memoirs of its pioneers in the *Owen County Journal*. I have found no data to show when Jack began collecting, but the amount of material he published could hardly have been amassed in a year. The exact title: The Early History of Greene County, Indiana. As Taken from the Official Records, and Compiled from Authentic Recollections by Pioneer Settlers. Embracing All Matters of Interest Connected with the Early Settlement of the County. From 1813 to 1875, Including Brief Sketches of Pioneer Families, Giving Marriages, Births and Deaths with Names of Creeks, Roads, Ferries, etc., etc., by Uncle Jack Baber. Worthington, Ind., 1875

Jack managed to insert into the Greene County data a little capsule of Lewis township history. No doubt he had his own contacts in the various Greene county townships, but this takes nothing away from his individual stamp on this work. He ended the book with

a desire to revise and enlarge it, and in an apologetic tone wrote that he was bound by a “scarcity of time and failure on the part of numerous correspondents on whom we depended for information.” There was no revision, but he would have been gratified to know that Baber’s history was reprinted by the *Worthington Times* several times and is still in demand.

Repeating my deep regret that so much newspaper history has disappeared forever, and believing that the small-town newspaper is the life-story of a community, I have no other source for Jack’s last years. The final entry I located was another real estate transaction, “Uncle Jack Baber has purchased the gate-way lot at Mrs. Spainhower’s garden, about 300 feet square. Price \$300 cash. Deed to be made when money is paid in 90 days. – adv.” Nine months after this, Uncle Jack went back home to Lewis township. Ed Butler, at whose home he died, may have been a relative of his cousin Susan Butler.

Jack Baber’s obituary appears in only one extant newspaper. Of course the news would have been carried by papers in all the counties where he was known. The surviving newspaper of that month, July, 1895 that tells of the death is the *Clay County Enterprise*. On July 25, 1895: “JACK BABER DEAD A. J. Baber, better known as ‘Uncle Jack’ died last Saturday night, July 13, 1895, at the residence of Edward Butler, a short distance southeast of Coffee Postoffice in Lewis township, this county. ‘Uncle Jack Baber’ has been well known in Clay, Sullivan, Greene and Owen counties for a number of years, and although somewhat unfortunate and peculiarly eccentric, he possessed many admirable traits which insured him a host of warm friends wherever he went. Mr. Baber owned a good farm at one time, but from some cause he became involved in debt and lost about all the property he formerly possessed. The first fair ever held in the town of Worthington was managed solely by Uncle Jack Baber and for several years the sum of Mr. Baber’s ambition seemed to resolve itself in the empty honor of presiding over the destinies of neighborhood and township fairs. At one time Uncle Jack turned his attention to the matter of gathering information with a view to bringing forth and giving form to an early history of Greene county. In this enterprise, as in many others, he experienced a sad financial failure and also made the mistake of involving a number of friends who consented to assist him in the work. But after all, has not the life of Uncle Jack Baber been of much greater benefit to humanity in general than that of many men who through greed and selfishness have piled up riches in abundance? Uncle Jack was unselfish. -- *Clay City Reporter*”

To vindicate Jack Baber’s losses, I can report that his nephew Judge Amos J. Fires wrote in retrospect of his own boyhood that his father Thomas J. Fires was a victim of the panic of 1873, having an over-supply of hogs and scarcity of feed. After settling up his business, “everything was gone,” the judge wrote. This likely parallels the fortunes of Jack Baber. The financial crash of 1873 was precipitated by broad speculation and the over-zealous building of railroads. Banks and railroads failed and the nation-wide depression didn’t begin to abate until 1878.



Jack's Grave

I speculate that A. J. Baber was a man ahead of his time, an entrepreneur, an adventurer, a visionary, a dreamer. People blessed with these attributes are at risk for being labeled eccentric. He was creative with a pen and a spade. He found bliss in a well-turned phrase, a well-tuned fiddle, a calf not dry behind the ears and a crop of corn knee-high by the fourth of July. He surely loved being an observer of human nature. There's no doubt of affection for a broad community and the people he recorded.

"Greene County offers greater inducements to the farmer or mechanic than almost any other place of its size in the Western States...certainly one of the largest and finest agricultural counties in the Hoosier State and for good water, good timber, good land and good health she will compare favorably with any county in southern Indiana...emigrants going west, or seeking homes in a new country, should give Greene and Clay counties a

favorable consideration before locating elsewhere....Lewis township includes all that portion of Clay county lying on the west side of Eel river, from the line of Greene county to the Plunge Creek Reservoir, about ten miles in length and about five miles wide and is just about one half prairie and the other half good timbered land; and for real friendship and sociability among her people, she is just the banner township in the state." (1857)

There must be untold stories about Andrew Jackson Baber, particularly of his generosity. It shows in the last line of his obituary. "Uncle Jack was unselfish." It shows in the almost illegible inscription on his weathered gravestone: "Here lies one who was truer to his friends than to himself." Long after that inscription can no longer be read, people centuries ahead will be reading and appreciating the priceless history saved by Jack Baber.

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Notes:

Uncle Jack Baber's Early History of Greene County... is the purpose of this article; it is a must read, and the starting point for any research of people, places, and events before 1875. The dearth of information re the Civil War is explained by its having been too recent; undoubtedly that would have been covered in a revised volume. See an excerpt from Uncle Jack Baber online.

The Baber family is documented online at the Baber Family Tree, administered by Joe Baber. This is a comprehensive history. Babers are also found in these publications:

Lewis township history: a History of Lewis Township, produced as a school project in 1916 and recently reprinted by The Clay County Genealogy Society, Inc.,

Center Point, Indiana; in William Travis's History of Clay County, Blanchard's 1884 History of Clay County.

Blanchard's 1884 History of Greene County includes some of Jack's history. (Blanchard's regional histories are in reprint.)

Richard Irwin's history of Jasonville, Indiana published in *The Jasonville Leader* in 1923 borrows from Jack as did Ben Sink in his 1958 centennial history of Jasonville.

Newspapers(on microfilm at the Indiana State Library, Indianapolis): *Clay County Citizen, Clay County Democrat, Clay County Enterprise, Weekly Hoosier Patriot, Democratic Archives, Bowling Green Review, White River Gazette, White River Valley Times, Worthington Times, Jasonville Leader, Sullivan Democrat, Bloomfield Democrat* (partial list of papers searched.)

Gazetteer: George W. Hawes, editor, Indiana State Gazetteer and Business Directory, second ed., Indianapolis, 1861

Mark Fires, DVM, of Texas, a descendant of Judge Amos J. Fires, provided valuable information.

Max Griffith, Jasonville retired postmaster and historian, led a Coffee tour and answered questions.

Ella (Mrs. Floyd) Hall of Bloomington, whose husband was a William W. Baber descendant, owns Jack's personal copy of the history, and had handwritten notes; her daughter Barbara Reynolds of Springville shared information.

Records in Clay and Greene counties checked included census, deed, probate, marriage and deaths.

Traditional and recorded dates for the Craig-Fires wedding differ; however I believe Martha Fires would have remembered, and that a later date was when the marriage was entered into record.

Dates on Jack's gravestone are February 10, 1820 and July 12 1895. Having seen many incorrect dates on stones, and having Jack's own testimony as to his birth year, 1821 seems correct. As to the death date, the newspaper obit gives the day as Saturday, July 13, 1895; the 13th did occur on Saturday that year.

When encountering discrepancies and inconsistency in Jack's 1875 history, readers should consider that much material originated from oral tradition and faulty human memory, and use their own interpretive techniques.



The Author