

“To Make War against the Whiskey Ring”

Anti-Saloon Sentiment and Extralegal Violence in Southwest Indiana, 1874-1875

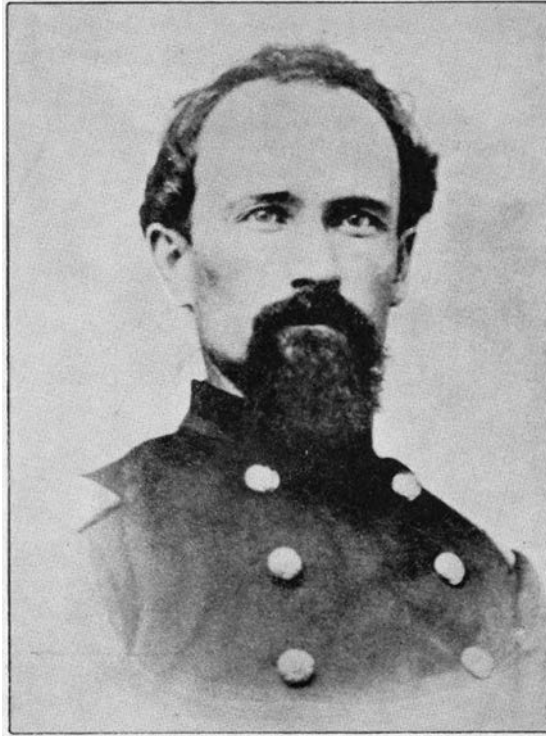
RANDY MILLS

In the early 1870s, the quaint village of Oakland, Indiana, lay safely tucked away in the far eastern edge of Gibson County.¹ Its peaceful climate was a source of pride for its residents, who boasted that Oakland was “the most moral and healthiest place” within the county.² In the early morning hours of April 15, 1875, however, Oakland’s peaceful world was shattered when an unidentified assailant hurled a powerful incendiary device into the home of community leader Colonel William M. Cockrum. The explosion and ensuing fire were so fierce that Cock-

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¹The village was originally named Oakland but was renamed Oakland City when it incorporated in the 1880s.

²Letter to the editor by unnamed author, *Princeton Clarion*, June 24, 1875.



William Cockrum—a military hero who rose to the rank of lieutenant colonel during the Civil War—became one of the most prominent leaders of the anti-saloon movement in Oakland, Indiana.

Courtesy, Oakland City University

rum, his wife, and their children barely escaped the burning house with their lives.³

At first glance, the attack on the Cockrum household seems today difficult to understand. Cockrum, a military hero who had risen to the rank of lieutenant colonel during the Civil War was—after his father, James Cockrum—the town’s most highly regarded businessman and church leader.⁴ Who would so viciously attack such a prominent

³The *Princeton Clarion* carried a detailed article about the attack in its April 22, 1875, issue. Other articles about the attack also appeared in later issues.

⁴William Cockrum came to be recognized for three major accomplishments: two important books on Indiana history, and his founding of what would become Oakland City University. See William M. Cockrum, *History of the Underground Railroad as it was Conducted by the Anti-Slavery League* (Oakland City, Ind., 1915); and Cockrum, *Pioneer History of Indiana* (Oakland City, Ind., 1907). For his role in the founding of Oakland City College, see Betty Shirley, *History of Oakland City College, 1885-1957* (Oakland City, Ind., 1985).



William Cockrum's father, James Cockrum. The elder Cockrum's fearless work on behalf of runaway slaves is chronicled in his son's work, *History of the Underground Railroad*.

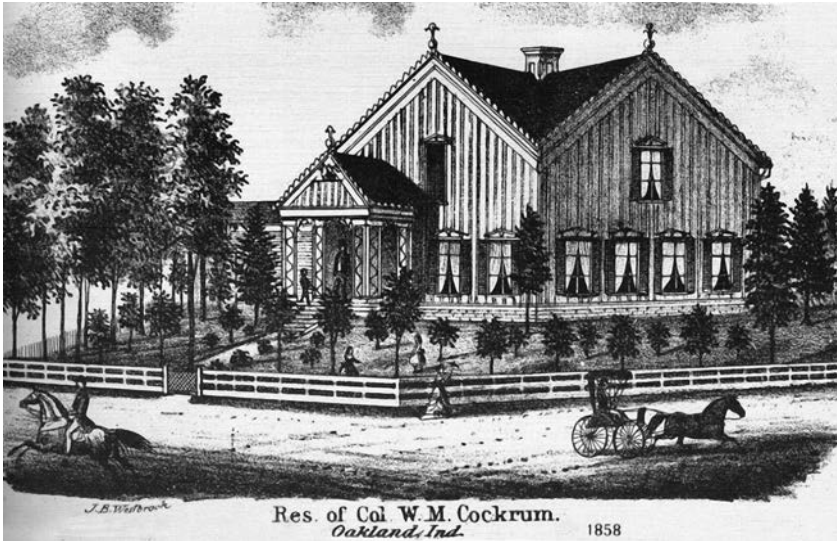
Courtesy, Oakland City University

family, and why? A deeper investigation of this violent act of terror against this Civil War hero, however, reveals another side of the seemingly law-abiding man.

A few months prior to the firebombing of the Cockrum home, William Cockrum had led a savage extralegal attack against an Oakland saloon.⁵ The saloon assault resembled three other vigilante anti-saloon strikes in the Gibson-Pike county area, in two of which Cockrum may have had a hand. These dramatic attacks and their context have yet to be investigated by historians in any depth.⁶ The Cockrum story, however, is important, as

⁵*Princeton Clarion*, April 23, 1875.

⁶Similar attacks in the nearby communities of Otwell, Dongola, and Francisco, Indiana, were also reported in newspapers. Anne Hesse Ford compiled a list of vigilante movements and episodes in Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Minnesota, Ohio, and Wisconsin, but the events in southwest Indiana during the 1870s were not mentioned. See "Necessary Lawlessness: The Northern Illinois Regulators in the American Vigilante Tradition," (unpublished paper, Middlebury College, January 29, 2010), 57-59.



William Cockrum's Oakland, Indiana, home, seen here in an 1858 sketch, was firebombed on April 14, 1875.

Courtesy, Oakland City University

William Cockrum's aggressive actions reflect an often ignored set of cultural tensions in the southern tier of the Old Northwest Territory during the mid- to late 1800s. This essay will address the context of these tensions and place Cockrum's behavior within them.

William Cockrum's assaults on his fellow citizens and their private property represented the long tradition of vigilantism in some rural American regions. Historian Richard Brown believed that violent vigilante activities came primarily in response to the prevailing lawlessness of the American frontier. At the heart of most of these episodes lay a desire to enforce the social morals of a dominant culture among unruly, lower-level groups.⁷ Interestingly, except for studies looking at the Klan movement in the 1920s, few scholars have investigated the many scattered episodes of vigilante violence in Indiana.

Accounts of vigilante incidents appeared with some frequency in Hoosier newspapers and in personal accounts found in diaries and journals. Englishman William Faux, for example, reported one such act of

⁷See Richard Brown, *Strain of Violence: Historical Studies of American Violence and Vigilantism* (Boston, 1975).

violence as early as 1822.⁸ Accounts of “white cap” vigilante incidents in the southern part of the state appeared with some frequency in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.⁹ Through the period, Hoosier vigilantes responded to a variety of transgressions, including horse stealing and other types of thievery, cursing in public, gambling, intoxication, and wife beating.¹⁰ Some Indiana vigilante episodes, however, such as those carried out by William Cockrum and his followers in 1875, seem to have involved only one issue: temperance.

For many years, opponents of alcohol sales and consumption fought an uphill battle in both the nation and in Indiana. W. J. Rorabaugh, in his study of the nation’s drinking patterns, argued that alcohol consumption, as well as the acceptance of the practice, reached an all-time high around the early 1830s.¹¹ Favorable sentiment towards drinking, at least on the national level, began to change in the 1830s with the coming of temperance reform movements.¹² The 1850s witnessed a further increase in temperance efforts with the passing of the so-called Maine Law, which prohibited alcohol sales and consumption in that state. Thirteen other states soon followed Maine’s example.¹³

While Indiana experienced the same problems of alcohol abuse that faced other states, Hoosiers seemed especially slow to warm up to temperance reform.¹⁴ Much of Indiana’s early resistance to the temperance effort was likely rooted in the culture of the state’s initial white population.

⁸See William Faux, *Memorable Days in America: Part II, November 27, 1818-July 21, 1820* (1823; Carlisle, Mass., 2007), 282. In this account, Faux told of one situation in which a “Yankee” man accused of stealing was captured, tied to a tree, and nearly whipped to death in Princeton, Indiana. His attackers demanded he leave the state or face another whipping “as a warning” to other “Yankees” in the area.

⁹Brian Butler, *An Undergrowth of Folly: Public Order, Race Anxiety and the 1903 Evansville, Indiana Riot* (New York, 2000), 164. For a brief discussion of “white cap” vigilantism in nineteenth-century Indiana, see Paul Musgrave, “‘A Primitive Method of Enforcing the Law’: Vigilantism as a Response to Bank Crimes in Indiana, 1925-1933,” *Indiana Magazine of History* 102 (September 2006), 193.

¹⁰See Madeleine Noble, “The White Caps of Harrison and Crawford County, Indiana: A Study in the Violent Enforcement of Morality,” (PhD diss., University of Michigan, 1973); and Musgrave, “‘A Primitive Method of Enforcing the Law,’” 187-219.

¹¹W. J. Rorabaugh, *The Alcoholic Republic: An American Tradition* (New York, 1979). See also, Thomas Pagram, *Battling Demon Rum: The Struggle for a Dry America* (Chicago, 1998).

¹²For a general discussion of reform movements in America and the religious forces that drove them, see James Morone, *Hellfire Nation: The Politics of Sin in American History* (New Haven, Conn., 2003).

¹³Catherine Gilbert Murdock, *Domesticating Drink: Women, Men, and Alcohol in America, 1870-1940* (Baltimore, Md., 1998).

¹⁴See Charles E. Camp, “The Temperance Movement in Indiana,” *Indiana Magazine of History* 16 (March 1920), 3-37, and 16 (June 1920), 112-51.

Most of the first white settlers to Indiana were, as Richard Power has pointed out, Upland southerners who came from the Piedmont region where alcohol use was more than tolerated. As a result, the southern area of the state in which they settled “more than any other area of the north... became an outpost of southern folkways,” including the acceptance of high alcohol consumption.¹⁵ One outside observer traveling through Indiana in 1827 noted that Uplanders consumed whiskey “like water.”¹⁶ William Faux opined that Uplanders’ constant drinking bouts often turned these backwoodsmen into “Rowdies” over whom “the law has no influence.”¹⁷

Eventually, attitudes toward drinking in the state did begin to change. Indiana witnessed its first major crusades against alcohol abuse in the 1850s, during the fight to establish a prohibition act similar to the Maine Law. Unfortunately, with the rising devotion to temperance came extralegal violence. During the “Hatchet Crusade” of 1854, for example, fifty women “went forth at Winchester [Indiana] and destroyed several saloons.”¹⁸ Yet, not all Hoosier citizens supported such behavior. Leading Indianapolis businessman and church leader Calvin Fletcher, who thoroughly supported temperance, deeply pondered its enforcement though extralegal action. After watching attendees at a temperance meeting in Indianapolis discuss “destroying whiskey groceries by mob,” Fletcher wrote in his diary that “I dread insubordination and mob law in any shape. Its mischiefs are not to be calculated or foreseen. It is wrong. I cant encourage or participate.”¹⁹

¹⁵Richard Power, *Planting Corn Belt Culture: The Impress of the Upland Southerner and Yankee in the Old Northwest* (Indianapolis, Ind., 1953), viii-ix. See also Nicole Etcheson, *The Emerging Midwest: Upland Southerners and the Political Culture of the Old Northwest, 1787-1861* (Bloomington, Ind., 1996).

¹⁶Samuel Judah, in *Travel Accounts of Indiana, 1679-1961: A Collection of Observations by Wayfaring Foreigners, Itinerants and Peripatetic Hoosiers*, ed. Shirley S. McCord (Indianapolis, Ind., 1970), 134. In his memoirs, the famous Methodist circuit rider Peter Cartwright recalled how Upland frontier people, even Methodists, used an abundance of alcohol: “From my earliest recollections drinking drams in families and social circles, was considered harmless and allowable socialities.” W. P. Strickland, ed., *Autobiography of Peter Cartwright, The Backwoods Preacher* (New York, 1856), 212. Religious historian William W. Sweet also examined this cultural tendency among Upland frontier people, especially Baptists in *Religion on the American Frontier, 1783-1830* (New York, 1964). See also Randy Mills, *Christ Tasted Death for Every Man: The Story of America’s Frontier General Baptists* (Poplar Bluff, Mo., 2000), 126-28.

¹⁷Faux, *Memorable Days in America*, 260.

¹⁸Camp, “The Temperance Movement in Indiana,” 23.

¹⁹Gayle Thornbrough, Dorothy L. Riker, and Paula Corpuz, eds., *The Diary of Calvin Fletcher*, vol. 5: 1853-1856 (Indianapolis, Ind., 1977), 26.

It is difficult to assess how William Cockrum responded to the Indiana temperance struggles of the 1850s. He was only a young teenager at the time, and his father's immersion in secret Underground Railroad activities required the Cockrum family to lie low regarding not only the slavery question but other controversial public issues.²⁰ By 1875, however, both William and his father James were ready to take a physical stand against alcohol, as evidenced by William's attack on the Oakland saloon.

"WE HAVE UNFURLED OUR BANNERS"

The most immediate impetus behind Cockrum's 1875 saloon attack was the sudden increase in temperance sentiment stirred by the Women's Crusade in 1874. The Women's Crusade was a national phenomenon that eventually encompassed thirty-one states, and was especially powerful in the Midwest.²¹ This short-lived but potent effort included "hundreds of thousands of women, in a paroxysm of activity and prayer," who "closed thirty thousand saloons and initiated a generation of female leadership in the temperance movement."²² Indiana soon became caught up in the exciting movement in 1874 as well. Town after town in the state witnessed spirited and aggressive demonstrations by women Crusaders to shut down or limit alcohol sales.²³ The crusade came to Princeton in Gibson County, Indiana, in the early part of April 1874. The Republican newspaper, the *Princeton Clarion*, took an especially fierce anti-saloon position at this time, publishing numerous articles that followed the endeavors of the Women's Crusade and recorded their dedication to the cause of temperance.²⁴ For instance, one article reported that, "Our ladies feel much encouraged that their labors and prayers have not been in vain, and are strengthened to preserve in their

²⁰Cockrum, *History of the Underground Railroad*, 69. Cockrum explained that his father, James Cockrum, was so successful in helping runaways because he "was believed to be in favor of slavery." Thus, the Cockrums "found it best to do little [public] talking during the exciting times." James Cockrum's running for and serving in the state assembly from 1848-1852 may also have tempered the Cockrums' true feeling regarding temperance and slavery in the heavily pro-South area in which they lived.

²¹A year later, this effort morphed into the Women's Christian Temperance Union. See Susan Dye Lee, "Evangelical Domesticity: The Woman's Temperance Crusade of 1873-1874," in *Women in New Worlds: Historical Perspectives in the Wesleyan Tradition*, eds. Hilah F. Thomas and Rosemary Skinner Keller, 2 vols. (Nashville, Tenn., 1981), 1: 293-309.

²²Murdock, *Domesticating Drink*, 18.

²³Camp, "The Temperance Movement in Indiana."

²⁴Since the *Clarion* also provided the main source of local and area news for the community of Oakland, William Cockrum frequently wrote a column for the paper about events in Oakland.

work. Rumors had been circulated that our pickets were to be withdrawn from the saloon doors as the heat of the summer advanced. This is not true.” One steadfast Princeton woman proudly proclaimed, “We have unfurled our banners to the breeze and mean to march till victory crowns our efforts.”²⁵

Another boon to Indiana’s 1870s-era anti-saloon movement was the so-called Baxter Law. This legislation, passed by the Republican-controlled legislature in 1873, had attempted to limit the advancement of saloons in the state. To secure a liquor license, an applicant had to produce a petition signed by a majority of voters in the ward or township in which alcohol was to be sold. Further, the applicant had to post a \$3000 bond.²⁶ William Cockrum, like many Republicans, felt that the law was too easily circumvented, forcing proper citizens to “continually fight [saloon owners] in our courts, which was attended to with a great sacrifice of time and money.”²⁷ Nevertheless, Cockrum conceded that the law was likely the best option for which temperance supporters could hope.

The Baxter Law became the following year’s top political issue, with Indiana Republicans fearing the power of an elected Democratic majority to weaken or destroy the law. This fear had an ethnic aspect as well. Much of the energy behind the party’s anxiety resulted from concerns about the increasing power of the state’s German American population. Indiana’s German Americans were largely Catholic Democrats who, not incidentally, maintained a strong drinking culture. Republicans and evangelicals feared German Americans could change the balance of social and political power in the state’s communities.²⁸ Hoosier cities with a high concentration of Germans—such as Evansville, Indianapolis, and Richmond—experienced intense, targeted temperance efforts to tamp down drinking. In the end, however, the solid cohesion and aggressive core population of German American citizens in these communities ensured that violence on the part of evangelicals would be muted and that the German American drinking

²⁵*Princeton Clarion*, June 4, 1874.

²⁶Edward Moore, *A Century of Indiana* (New York, 1910). This law was likely the cause of the Republican Party’s defeat in the 1874 election, and the law was repealed in 1875. For other opinions regarding the Baxter Law, see the June 6 and July 2, 1874, issues of the *Clarion*.

²⁷*Princeton Clarion*, February 8, 1875.

²⁸See James Sellman, “Social Movements and the Symbolism of Public Demonstrations: The 1874 Women’s Crusade and German Resistance in Richmond, Indiana,” *Journal of Social History* 32 (Spring 1999), 561. For an examination of the cultural importance of beer drinking in German American communities in Indiana, and how these communities “formed a network of institutions based on churches, saloons, schools and families” to ensure their culture, see Aaron Hoffman, “German Immigrants in Dubois County, Indiana and the Temperance Movement of the 1850s” (Master’s thesis, Ball State University, 1997), 264.

culture would be sustained.²⁹ On the other hand, in Indiana communities such as Oakland, where few German Americans lived, temperance efforts faced a different set of difficulties.

Republican Protestants in non-Catholic communities contended with other Protestants who continued to be a part of a long-established Upland frontier drinking culture. The pro-drinking group was made up of hard-core, old-line Democrats of the Jacksonian type and was mainly Baptist in religion.³⁰ Articles promoting temperance in the *Princeton Clarion* in the early 1870s, especially near elections, often employed anti-Catholic and anti-German rhetoric in their effort to convince such old-line Democratic Baptists to embrace the temperance position.³¹ One *Clarion* article in 1874 offered the opinion, for example, that “the better class Democrat” should support the anti-alcohol position against the German “saloon-keepers, liquor-dealers, and German [newspaper] editors of Indiana.”³²

Ultimately, this Protestant-unity approach failed. Most Indiana Republican temperance candidates went down in defeat in the 1874 election, demonstrating, perhaps, that the Upland drinking culture in southwest Indiana and its strong Democratic bias was as resistant to change as the German American one.³³ The *Clarion*, in its post-election publication, lamenting that the Democrats had “used whiskey liberally in this place on election day, and effectively too,” asked “Will our temperance friends in the Democratic Party always continue to support their part in such an evil practice?”³⁴

As the *Clarion's* rhetoric suggested, 1874 marked a difficult year in Princeton and in many parts of the state, as various groups fought fiercely over the temperance question and its interrelated issues. Typically, aggressive action on the part of anti-saloon forces took the form of women pick-

²⁹Butler, *An Undergrowth of Folly*.

³⁰In Indiana, the Methodist element of the Democratic political ranks thinned out by the time of the Civil War. Bruce Bigelow noted how originally “the Methodists in Indiana were very rural, [Upland] Southern and Democratic. However, over the half-century leading up to the Civil War, the Methodists gradually become more urban [and] mixed more with northerners who tended to be more Republican in sentiment. . . . Many Indiana Methodists, especially those involved with leadership positions, came to support Republican policy,” including anti-slave sentiment and temperance. Bruce Bigelow, “The Demographic and Cultural Prominence of the Methodist Episcopalians in Indiana, 1801-1865,” *Journal for the Liberal Arts and Sciences* 17 (Fall 2012), 34.

³¹This was probably a practical tactic, given the powerful anti-Catholic position taken by Baptist churches at that time.

³²*Princeton Clarion*, June 6, 1874.

³³While German Americans preferred beer, other drinkers primarily consumed locally-made whiskey.

³⁴*Princeton Clarion*, October 15, 1874.

eting establishments which sold liquor. But by the end of 1874, residents of Indiana would see the movement's more volatile side.

“FREE FROM THE CURSE OF THE DEVIL'S RECRUITING SHOP”

The establishment of a saloon in the village of Otwell, just northeast of Oakland, in Pike County, revealed the extent of anti-saloon sentiment in the area. “Fights are a most daily occurrence at Otwell since the opening of a saloon at that place,” reported the *Clarion*, and the building was eventually burned to the ground.³⁵ The structure was soon replaced, however, by another saloon, prompting the anti-saloon element once again to take drastic action. On December 17, 1874, a “howling” mob of several leading citizens “in a violent and tumultuous manner destroyed the property by pouring out barrels of whiskey, kegs of beer and other liquors, destroying boxes of tobacco, cigars and Christmas toys, then and there the property of John McCarty.” The mob, after hurling all the store goods to the ground, burned down this building as well.³⁶

A short court session quickly followed the plundering of the McCarty saloon. The rioters were all convicted and given small fines. As often happens in the wake of extralegal violence, retaliation followed. The next year, John McCarty, the saloon owner, was involved in a shooting of the man who led the Otwell vigilantes.³⁷

Violent anti-saloon outbreaks also took place in other nearby communities that shared Oakland's largely Upland southern population. In late May 1874, the *Clarion* reported that a saloon in Francisco, just west of Oakland, “was blown up by means of gun powder last week.” The paper's editor noted that such actions were not to be greatly condemned since a saloon was taken out of business: “We undertake to say it is almost as bad as ‘sparking’ in a graveyard or robbing a grave of its flowers.” In early 1875, another “doggerly” saloon at Dongola (in Gibson County) was burned to the ground.³⁸ But it was the anti-saloon violence in the community of Oakland, Indiana, that drew the most attention.

³⁵Ibid., May 28, 1874.

³⁶*Evansville Journal*, February 10, 1875.

³⁷Ibid., April 4, 1875.

³⁸*Princeton Clarion*, May 28, 1874 and February 4, 1875. The Francisco area, seven miles east of Oakland, was the original home of the Cockrum family, and their influence was still great there; see Cockrum, *Pioneer History of Indiana*. The Cockrum family also exerted great influence in the nearby village of Dongola: Cockrum's father James shipped pork by flatboats out of the Wabash and Erie Canal port located there.

While tensions simmered in much of the rest of the Indiana in the summer of 1874, the *Princeton Clarion* correspondent from the little hamlet of Oakland reported nothing but idyllic conditions resulting from the community's lack of alcohol sales.³⁹ Lacking the excitement to be found at the rowdier county seats at Princeton (Gibson County) or in nearby Petersburg (Pike), citizens of Oakland proudly sang their own praises. Cockrum, writing under the name "Columbia," bragged in a letter published in the *Princeton Clarion* newspaper on June 18, 1874, about Oakland's normal college, the Oakland Institute. The writer encouraged potential students to "come to Oakland and you will find it, with the additional advantage of good churches and Sabbath Schools, to be free from the curse of the Devil's recruiting shop (the whiskey saloon), for we have none in this town."⁴⁰

The Cockrum family's involvement with the town's primary church proved an important element of Oakland's more conservative ways. The Oakland City General Baptist congregation was a part of a regional Baptist sect founded in southwest Indiana in 1823.⁴¹ This sect had broken away from the region's more Calvinistic frontier Baptist groups over the General Baptist emphasis on free will, open communion, its pro-missionary efforts and, later, its temperance efforts.⁴² Several other Baptist practices likely influenced the Cockrums' beliefs and behaviors as well. In the 1800s, Baptist churches served as powerful community moral arbitrators, functioning "as a court according to well established rules of procedure."⁴³ Church members could face charges if accused of dancing, swearing, gambling, assaulting, or being overly intoxicated in public. If charges were not resolved to the satisfaction of the church, offending members could

³⁹The town was somewhat isolated at the far eastern end of the county, and, like Otwell, Francisco, and Dongola, contained a primarily Upland south population with few German Americans in the immediate area. See Jas. T. Tartt, *History of Gibson County, Indiana* (Edwardsville, Ill., 1884). Tartt related that the first settlers in this area came from Tennessee, Virginia, and the Carolinas, and they were primarily of Scotch-Irish descent. Family names included Cockrum, Framer, Dill, Reavis, Wallace, Hargrove, Williams, and Wilson, among others.

⁴⁰*Princeton Clarion*, June 18, 1874.

⁴¹See Mills, *Christ Tasted Death for Every Man*, and "The Struggle for the Soul of Frontier Baptists: The Anti-Mission Controversy in the Lower Wabash Valley," *Indiana Magazine of History* 94 (December 1998), 303-322.

⁴²Although it would be two decades before General Baptists came out totally against distilled spirits, the founder of the General Baptists, Benoni Stinson, was the son of an alcoholic and had always spoken out strongly against drinking.

⁴³John Cady, "The Religious Environment of Lincoln's Youth," *Indiana Magazine of History* 37 (March 1941), 18. See also Randy Mills, "And Their Fruits Shall Remain": The World of Indiana Frontier Baptists," *American Baptist Quarterly* 25 (September 2006), 119-36.

be dismissed. The threat of such a dismissal was a powerful tool of social control in small, rural communities. Church records and newspaper accounts clearly indicated that Oakland City General Baptist Church, under the leadership of the Cockrum family, served to shape the social/moral activity of the small town.⁴⁴

The Oakland Institute proudly mentioned in the *Clarion* article was the result of the work of William Cockrum's father, James. In the late 1860s, the elder Cockrum had donated the land and the majority of the money required to construct the school's building.⁴⁵ James and William were also instrumental in bringing a denominational newspaper, the *General Baptist Herald*, to the town.⁴⁶ William was made editor of the *Herald's* agricultural and temperance sections. The paper's circulation would soon grow to over seven hundred subscribers.

The saloon-free college town soon became the center of Sabbath School conventions, which, as the *Clarion* reported, "are making war against King Alcohol." At weekly temperance meetings in the General Baptist church, the Cockrum clan and others discussed "the interests of temperance" and "the evils of intemperance."⁴⁷ Unfortunately, the Cockrums' perceived success in purifying the town may have contributed to a dangerous sense of hubris.

"A LOW-DOWN DIRTY DOGGERY"

The year 1875 began on an upbeat note in the town of Oakland City. Both the town's college and its recent newspaper endeavor were going well. Moreover, unlike nearby Princeton, where, according to the *Clarion*, social disorder—in the form of drunken fights, petty robberies and malicious damage to private property—was the order of the day, Oakland reported very little trouble. The community, however, was about to receive a terrible shock.

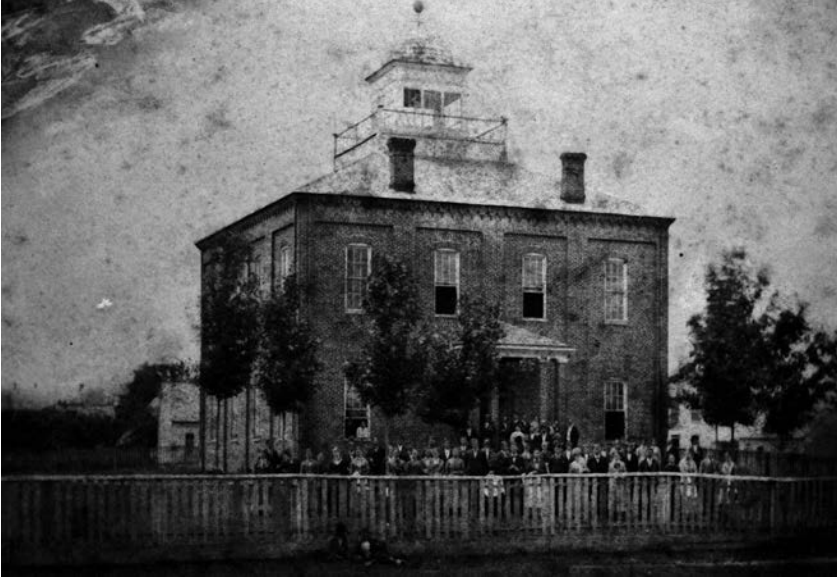
In early 1875, Andrew Evans, from nearby Winslow in Pike County, began selling whiskey by the quart and allowing gambling out of a rented house on Oakland's main street. The saloon stood two blocks from the

⁴⁴See, for example, Minutes of the Oakland City General Baptist Church, January 27, 1866, Oakland City General Baptist Church archives.

⁴⁵See Shirley, *History of Oakland City College, 1885-1957*.

⁴⁶*Princeton Clarion*, June 13, 1874. The *Clarion* reported on this exciting development, explaining that "James W. Cockrum, and W. M. Cockrum of Oakland agreed to guarantee that thirty-five hundred dollars . . . would be raised at Oakland, provided the paper was located there."

⁴⁷*Ibid.*, June 3, 1875.



The original Oakland City College (Oakland Institute). The school went defunct upon the unexpected death of James Cockrum in 1875.

Courtesy, Oakland City University

Cockrum family's church. Like the Cockrums, the Evans clan was of Upland origin, having left Tennessee for southwest Indiana in the early 1800s. Winslow's Captain Nathan Evans, a relative of Andrew, was a well-known Civil War veteran who served as a justice of the peace there.⁴⁸

A few other rough-looking Pike County young men helped Andrew Evans keep the saloon, but this was not the first time Pike County rowdies had plagued Oakland. The town had also been invaded by Pike County men just a year before the saloon was established. In May 1874, when the General Baptist Church was dedicated, a group of drunken young Pike County men "drove through the street at a breakneck speed and indulged in shocking profane language."⁴⁹ This rowdy crowd soon left, however, under threat by William Cockrum. Cockrum also used the occasion to complain in the Princeton paper about gambling at the Pike County fair.

⁴⁸For a brief biography of Captain Nathan Evans see, *History of Pike and Dubois Counties, Indiana* (Chicago, 1885), 419-20.

⁴⁹*Princeton Clarion*, May 28, 1874.

"I never in my life have seen any gambling to surpass what was carried on there," he wrote.⁵⁰

With Andrew Evans's unexpected enterprise opening just down the street from the General Baptist church, Oakland lost its claim of being Gibson County's only saloon-free town. In mid-January 1875, the *Clarion* carried correspondence from Oakland, lamenting this unexpected and stunning turn of events.

Pike County has spewed out one of its contemptible demons in human shape upon us, and he has started a low down dirty doggerly in our little town, to sell [alcohol] by the quart, and he is being visited by the scum of society here to spend whatever change they may have for poison to benumb their already deadened and brutish sensibilities, whilst their poor families (God be merciful to them) at home are shivering for want of sufficient clothing and food to sustain them.⁵¹

Oakland leaders threw their hearts into the task of getting rid of the saloon. The aged James Cockrum joined a newly formed Oakland City Temperance Union, which quickly elected him treasurer. The *Clarion* reported that "the objects of the society are to further the interest of temperance and to make it lively for the dirty dog who has invaded the quiet of our peaceful village."⁵²

Oakland citizens were now clearly at war with the "dirty dog" saloon owner. Oakland's correspondent wrote to the Princeton paper soon after the opening of the unwanted saloon, explaining how town leaders dealt with one unfortunate Oakland whiskey buyer's choice: "One fellow who has more voice than brains got to cutting a whiskey man's 'highland fling' last week, which caused him to be arrested and tried for taking the name of God in vain. Fine and cost in two cases, \$12, with a ring left in his nose to be pulled if he don't walk straight hereafter."⁵³

⁵⁰Ibid., September 10, 1874.

⁵¹Ibid., January 14, 1875. The Oakland writer may have been correct in his disapproval of Pike County. The *Petersburg Press* reported in that same month that "It is a great annoyance to have people drinking in our [newspaper] alley. There is never a Sunday cold or warm but 25 to 50 go in or out for the purpose of emptying their bottles." See *Petersburg Press*, January 29, 1875.

⁵²*Princeton Clarion*, January 14, 1875.

⁵³Ibid., February 4, 1875.

UNDER CENSURE OF THE CHURCH

The Cockrums' hatred of alcohol use, couched publicly in pious terms, included a darker impetus. Records indicate that James Washington Cockrum's father, James Wallace Cockrum, suffered from alcoholism, and that the effects of the disease long haunted the family. Insights into the family's hardship with James Wallace's hard drinking are revealed in the business minutes of the Providence Regular Baptist Church, an early Gibson County, Indiana, congregation.⁵⁴

While Baptist churches on the frontier frowned upon public intoxication, they more than tolerated alcohol use. Many frontier Baptist churches, for example, paid their ministers in whiskey. Frontier Baptists were often referred to as "forty-gallon Baptists," a reference to the size of the whiskey barrels used to hold the locally made whiskey.⁵⁵ Baptist groups embraced temperance only later, but they did take strong action against anyone who exhibited long-term destructive drinking problems.

James Wallace Cockrum's actions, as they emerge in the Providence Regular Baptist Church minutes, place a real and disturbing face on the degenerative process of alcoholism. They also suggest why the Cockrum clan may have developed such powerful feelings against alcohol use. Church minutes in August 1823, for example, reveal that James Wallace's anger issues already troubled the community. Late the following winter, the congregation "took up a charge against bro James Cockrum for getting intoxicated and striking a man in Princeton." After another bout of heavy drinking, Cockrum was declared "no more a member of the church" in March 1824.

The Providence Church, like most frontier churches, was quick to forgive. Minutes show that the older James Cockrum was back in the fold by September 1825. Soon, however, the former drinking and fighting patterns reemerged. The minutes show that in December 1826, "the church say they are grieved with Bro James Cockrum from information." A more detailed story unfolded in the minutes of the following March:

It appears of record that the church is and has been hurt with
brother James Cockrum on account of an unfavorable report that

⁵⁴The Providence Baptist Church is located near Francisco, Indiana. It was one of the earliest Baptist congregations in the state and still operates today. The church minutes of this congregation stand as important documents for helping scholars understand American frontier religion. Copies of the original minutes can be found at the Princeton, Indiana, Public Library. See also Randy Mills, "And Their Fruits Shall Remain."

⁵⁵See Sweet, *Religion on the American Frontier, 1783-1830*, 37.

has reached the church about his conduct in Princeton on the last Saturday in December 1826. The church say they are hurt with said brother for being intoxicated and for being riotous and quarrelous in Princeton on said day. Brother Cockrum acknowledged he quarreled in a riotous manner and that his conduct was like that of a drunken man, that he possibly told some of the brethren that he had drunk but one dram on that day in Princeton, but if he did meant no such thing that he always intended to be understood that he drank three or four drams on said day.

Remorseful, Cockrum threw himself once more on the mercy of the church, telling the members that he had “pierced his own soul through with many sorrows. . . . That he believes God has been gracious to him and has forgiven his sins.” The church heard his confession but responded negatively. “A vote being taken there was a majority opposed to him being restored he therefore lies under censure of the church (at present). Sister Cockrum applied for a letter of dismissal.”⁵⁶

Regardless of the shame that James Wallace Cockrum’s alcoholism may have brought on the family, most of his immediate descendants worked hard to prove their worth.⁵⁷ By the 1850s, for example, his son James Washington Cockrum had platted the land for Oakland and was on his way to becoming the town’s primary leader. By that time the General Baptist denomination, which James Cockrum belonged to and held high positions in, had begun to move from tolerating alcohol use among members to prohibiting almost any use of alcohol.⁵⁸ The teetotaling James Cockrum served in the Indiana state legislature as a Whig, and later became an important force in the local and state Republican Party. He also earned a commission as a lieutenant colonel in the 4th Indiana militia.

⁵⁶Providence Regular Baptist Church Minutes; Emmett E. Cockrum, *A History and Genealogy of the Cockrum Family in America: From the Seventeenth Through the Twentieth Century* (Owensboro, Ky., 1980). Tartt’s *History of Gibson County* (p. 160) showed that James Wallace Cockrum was operating a tavern in Princeton, Indiana, as late as 1828. He then moved to the Mississippi frontier to escape his affliction, taking most of his family with him.

⁵⁷That the Cockrum family was ashamed and tried to hide the story of James Wallace Cockrum’s alcoholism for at least two generations is suggested in a 1940 interview by William Cockrum’s oldest daughter, Ella Wheatley. She stated that she had once been interested in writing about her family’s genealogy “until I ran into something I didn’t want to find and quit.” See Cockrum, *A History and Genealogy of the Cockrum Family in America*, 164.

⁵⁸By 1841, for example, the General Baptists had banned their members from using or selling “ardent spirits.” This position, however, did not prohibit the use of beer or hard cider. See Mills, *Christ Tasted Death for Every Man*, esp. chap. 6.

By the time of the Women's Crusade turmoil in 1874, James Cockrum had gained both high social stature and wealth. He was involved in real estate and church work, and he was a successful farmer and politician.⁵⁹ His successes, however, were not gained without support. A quarter-mile west of the James Cockrum homestead sat the large wood-framed home of William Cockrum, James's oldest son by his second wife. The structure had been built around the year 1858, and its size and elegance hinted at William Cockrum's own successes in farming.⁶⁰

By the 1870s, a peaceable kingdom of sorts existed in the sleepy town of Oakland, built up by the father James and son William Cockrum. The hard work and accomplishments of these two men over several decades had perhaps gone a long way toward eradicating any family embarrassment that may have been prompted by James Wallace Cockrum's alcohol problems. Unfortunately, that perfect world was rocked in early 1875 by the appearance of the Evans saloon on Main Street.

"BY EVERY MEANS POSSIBLE"

The saloon that opened so unexpectedly in Oakland got its start in a devious fashion. According to the local newspaper, Andrew Evans had rented a house from an unsuspecting town citizen under the pretense of opening a family grocery store. Evans soon set up a saloon and gambling establishment instead, operated by a Pike County barkeeper named Lafayette Gibson, whom William Cockrum described as "looking like a mean dog just after being caught in the act of killing sheep."⁶¹

The Cockrums quickly organized an aggressive but peaceful effort to rid the town of the operation. William Cockrum explained: "The citizens went to these parties and tried by every means possible to get them to move their dirty den away from here. The owner of the house even offered to pay them back the money paid him and the money for the license; also that he would move their things back to Winslow." This effort failed, and the owner bragged openly about his ability to keep a saloon in Oakland City.⁶²

In truth, Evans and his bartender had the law on their side. They possessed a liquor license and broke no laws. In this regard, Pike County's

⁵⁹Gil R. Stormont, ed., *History of Gibson County, Indiana: Her People, Industries, and Institutions* (Indianapolis, Ind., 1914), 392-93.

⁶⁰A sketch of the elegant house can be found in Jack Dye and David Lamb, *Oakland City Centennial: Acorns to Oaks, 1856-1956* (Oakland City, Ind., 1956), 9.

⁶¹*Princeton Clarion*, February 8, 1875.

⁶²*Ibid.*, February 18, 1875.

saloon incursion into Oakland City in 1875 and the use of an unpopular law to establish saloons may have been a painful reminder for the Cockrums of the difficult Underground Railroad days. During that earlier time the Cockrum family found themselves in a near state of war with many locals who favored slavery and the South and used the Fugitive Slave Law Act to try and carry out the kidnapping of local free blacks.

Interestingly, despite proud proclamations about Oakland's purity, Evans and company soon found themselves doing a lively business in the quaint little town, perhaps drawing in the nearby Pike County crowd. Frustrated town leaders, under the direction of the Cockrums, pushed harder against the saloon. Discovering that barkeeper Gibson carried outstanding legal charges, they turned the law on him. The strategy worked and Gibson fled the town. But the situation only festered as each group hastened to defend its honor. The stubborn Andrew Evans replaced the fleeing Gibson with a relative, George Evans, and informed the locals "that if interfered with [he] would burn the town."⁶³ The stage was now set for a dramatic confrontation.

James W. Cockrum, the town's unspoken leader, was no stranger to violence or to taking the law into his own hands when he believed a higher law should prevail. As noted, he had participated in violent Underground Railroad activities in southwest Indiana during the 1850s. Helping runaway slaves at this time was an activity which violated the federal Fugitive Slave Act. Nevertheless, Cockrum and others had no qualms about levying savage beatings and death threats against those trying to recapture their slaves or those trying to kidnap free blacks and sell them into slavery. William Cockrum, who had been a teenager during these times, later recalled carrying out such violent punishments as branding and earlobe removal to permanently mark the hated slave-catchers.⁶⁴

⁶³Ibid.

⁶⁴Cockrum, *History of the Underground Railroad*, 60-68, 271-72. The accuracy of Cockrum's book should probably be taken with a grain of salt. In her study of blacks in Indiana before 1900, for example, Emma Lou Thornbrough found some of Cockrum's claims to be suspect. See Emma Lou Thornbrough, *The Negro in Indiana: A Study of a Minority* (Indianapolis, Ind., 1957), 105. Fergus Bordewich, while researching and writing his study of the American Underground Railroad, grappled with this problem as well. See Roxanne Mills, "An Interview with Fergus Bordewich," *Journal for the Liberal Arts and Sciences* 8, no. 3 (2004), 46-52. More recently, Edith Sarra has argued that Cockrum's history was not necessarily written to be accurate but rather "tailored" for an audience sixty years after the events. See Edith Sarra, "Troubled Crossings: Local History and the Built Environment in the Patoka Bottoms," *Indiana Magazine of History* 109 (March 2013), 2-44. See also Randy Mills, "By Axe or by Pen: The Element of Social Order in William M. Cockrum's History of the Underground Railroad," *Traces of Indiana and Midwestern History* 26 (Spring 2014), 36-43.

There was probably more to James Cockrum's vigilante impulses than a sense of moral right. Growing up on the Indiana frontier, Cockrum learned how to fight to protect what was his, what was right, and what was honorable.⁶⁵ Nicole Etcheson argued that Upland men like James Cockrum "existed in a world where the importance of honor made it vital to sustain that honor," even if doing so brought public violence.⁶⁶

William Cockrum proved to be as tough as his father. Unflinching in the face of danger, he too placed honor and manliness high on his personal priority list. He had risked great physical harm as a young teenager when he helped his father with Underground Railroad missions. During the Civil War, he had been severely wounded while leading his men in a charge during the battle of Chickamauga.⁶⁷ His bravery and leadership earned him the rank of lieutenant colonel. Church records also revealed that William possessed a temper that could sometimes get the best of him. In one case, he came forward in front of the Oakland Baptist congregation in 1866 and confessed to "getting into a difficulty with a person" and that he "got angry and struck him but was sorry for what he had done." The minutes concluded of the issue: "The church forgave him."⁶⁸

All in all, James and William Cockrum could be a formidable team when stirred to fight for what they considered to be a just and moral cause, even if the law of the day deemed otherwise. Their aggressive Underground Railroad activities in the 1850s—aimed primarily at the pro-South Upland elements in the area—had given them a strong taste of success in extralegal endeavors. The Cockrums were, in this sense, ready when the young, brash Pike County native Andrew Evans once more raised a moral challenge.

The February 8, 1875, issue of the *Princeton Clarion*, noting the community had just experienced some "lively times in our midst," reported a violent vigilante attack on Evans's Oakland saloon. That Thursday evening,

⁶⁵Joseph Lane, the first governor of Oregon, told of how he once witnessed James Cockrum in the 1830s threaten to kill a brutish foreman at a Mississippi River plantation. See Cockrum, *Pioneer History of Indiana*, 512-13.

⁶⁶Etcheson, *The Emerging Midwest*, 30. For the importance of manly honor among Upland frontiersmen, see Elliott Gorn, "Gouge and Bite, Pull Hair and Scratch: The Social Significance of Fighting in the Southern Backcountry," *American Historical Review* 90 (February 1985), 18-43; and Randy Mills, "I Wish the World to Look Upon Them as my Murderers: a Story of Cultural Violence on the Ohio Valley Frontier," *Ohio Valley History* 1 (Fall 2001), 21-30.

⁶⁷*Oakland City Journal*, September 10, 1894. William Cockrum was left for dead for several days on the battlefield, then placed in a prisoner of war camp for several months.

⁶⁸Oakland City General Baptist Church minutes, Oakland City General Baptists archive, Oakland City, Indiana.

the article explained, “Some 25 or 30 masked men . . . literally demolished the [saloon] and its contents by cutting the house down and spilling the liquors, and then as suddenly disappearing.”⁶⁹ A later history claimed that members of William Cockrum’s church made up the bulk of this force.⁷⁰

The disheveled bartender, George Evans, shouted that he would “shoot and drag out every man that came near.” However, as the masked crowd advanced on the saloon, he was soon overpowered, tied “head to foot” and brought outside, where he was forced to watch as the raiders chopped the house to pieces with their axes. In his later correspondence to the *Clarion* about the violence, William Cockrum confidently explained that “the people here that are of any interest to the country, approve the act, and indeed in town there is but one or two that oppose it.”⁷¹

The next day members of the Evans family, including Captain Nathan Evans, traveled from Winslow to Oakland to seek out the men who had tied up George Evans and to regain what property they could find. They departed with “two headless whiskey barrels and left for the classic banks of the Patoka [River].” In a tip of his hat to a fellow Civil War veteran, William Cockrum did point out that Captain Evans “was considered a fair man.”⁷²

It was soon made clear that William Cockrum was the force behind the vigilante episode. On the next Saturday, Andrew Evans and Lafayette Gibson returned to the ruins of their saloon, “pulled out a bottle of liquor and drank a toast: ‘Here’s to the doggery and Col. Bill Cockrum, G-d damn him.’”⁷³

Several papers reported the disturbing extralegal episode as well. The respected Captain Evans, in an article in the Pike County *Democrat*, called out the people of Oakland by noting that a “good license law” would have been better than “mob law.”⁷⁴ The *Evansville Journal* speculated that the gang who tore down the Oakland saloon represented “regulators” inspired by the Princeton, Indiana, Women’s Crusade group: “From Princeton we get information of an outrage perpetrated by a band of regulators in the

⁶⁹*Princeton Clarion*, February 8, 1875.

⁷⁰Dye and Lamb, *Oakland City Centennial*, 44.

⁷¹*Princeton Clarion*, February 18, 1875.

⁷²*Ibid.*

⁷³*Ibid.*, February 8, 1875.

⁷⁴*Ibid.*, February 11, 1875.

guise of crusaders upon a saloon keeper of Oakland. . . . The regulators chopped [the saloon] in pieces and brought the house to the ground in a terrible crash."⁷⁵

The *Princeton Clarion* responded to the Evansville paper's claim, declaring that "the *Journal* was either misinformed, or committed a mistake through gross carelessness, for we have no organized band of regulators here. . . . The [Oakland] job was evidently monopolized by home talent and muscle."⁷⁶

As complaints about the action grew in the region, William Cockrum continued to defend the deed. He argued that "the citizens of this community cause as little trouble as those living in any other section of the county; nor are they in favor of mob law or violence in any way." But the saloon problem in Oakland City, Cockrum claimed, "couldn't be got at by law." He went on to assert that "we have 800 inhabitants in our town and out of that number you can't find five men in favor of a [saloon] being here." That the troublemakers came from Pike County only intensified the bitterness of the typically law-abiding folks of Oakland. "We don't want to have any trouble with any of them," Cockrum asserted, but "our rights are sacred to us. And we will defend them."⁷⁷

A HIGHER LAW

William Cockrum's arguments for the actions taken against the Oakland saloon were echoed in his 1915 account of his and his father's violent Underground Railroad activities in the 1850s. The struggle between pro-South and anti-slavery forces demonstrated that the region's seemingly homogeneous Upland settlers did not always possess similar social and political values. Edith Sarra, in her recent evaluation of Cockrum's *History of the Underground Railroad*, believes that the book revealed "a very small community violently at odds with itself."⁷⁸ Cockrum noted that his father's and others' efforts were "in direct opposition to the laws of the United

⁷⁵Evansville *Journal*, February 9, 1875.

⁷⁶*Princeton Clarion*, February 12, 1875.

⁷⁷*Ibid.*, February 15 and 8, 1875.

⁷⁸Sarra, "Troubled Crossings," 28. Nearby Pike County seemed to provide the majority of the pro-South men with whom the Cockrums butted heads in the 1850s. Most striking of the hard-living bounty men of the 1850s was Jack Kinman, the owner of a hotel in Petersburg, Indiana. His establishment, according to Cockrum, became a gathering place for slave catchers.

States” and that those helping escaping slaves “fully understood the severe penalties which would be meted out to them if they were caught in the act of violating the law.” Nevertheless, there were men who were “willing to engage” in such activities in order to serve a higher law.⁷⁹

The book also offered an interesting insight into the Cockrums’ position on slavery and the family’s obsessive concern for social order.⁸⁰ Nowhere in the beginning of his book on local Underground Railroad activity does William Cockrum directly deal with the plight of the slave. Instead, Cockrum’s passionate concern has to do with what Sarra labels “a kind of proto-Libertarian politics and anti-southern sentiment.”⁸¹ The essential problem for southwest Indiana, as presented by Cockrum, was the weakening of social order in the local community and region brought about by the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850. In his opening chapter, Cockrum argued that “the anti-slave people would not have organized the Anti-Slavery League if the people of the South had not caused a law to spread on the statutes of the United States that gave them domineering privileges over the North.” More specifically, “the favored provisions that the south had received by that law were taken advantage of by many [local] men who never had owned a slave or been in a slave state.”⁸²

According to Cockrum, this particular local pro-South group—many of them Pike County residents known to be heavy drinkers, gamblers, and fighters—were emboldened by the new law. “I well remember them,” Cockrum related, “with their whips, handcuffs, and ropes tied to their saddles, and their pistol belts around them. They were continually riding over the country and when they would come to a field where men were working they would call them to the roadside and ask if they were opposed to slavery, and if they knew of anyone harboring runaway slaves.”⁸³

One sees the concern for social order played out in dramatic fashion in most of the book’s chapters, including “Kidnappers Kidnapped,” which emphasized the harsh punishment meted out to the local “boasting bullies”—many of them from Pike County, who received “a lesson in

⁷⁹Cockrum, *History of the Underground Railroad*, 13.

⁸⁰Mills, “By Axe or by Pen.”

⁸¹Sarra, “Troubled Crossings,” 27.

⁸²Cockrum, *History of the Underground Railroad*, v, 10.

⁸³*Ibid.*, 60.

retaliation that they would remember for awhile,” while the free blacks involved in the encounter barely figured into Cockrum’s narrative.⁸⁴

TO MAKE WAR ON WHISKEY AS LONG AS HE HAS BREATH

Extralegal actions did not stop with the destruction of the Oakland saloon. Later that same month, a “doggery” in nearby Dongola—a small village much influenced by the Cockrum family—was burnt to the ground. The younger Cockrum wrote happily to the Princeton paper about the event. “I don’t know whether any of its ashes were bottled up for a keepsake or not, but no doubt the owner of some old toppers shed many bitter tears because they could not get the usual bloom from their noses during the cold weather of last week.”⁸⁵ Such hubris certainly invited payback, and William Cockrum was not the only one who could resort to sudden and unexpected violence to settle a matter of honor and manliness.

Early on the morning of April 14, 1875, a blinding flash and a horrific “crackling of flames” lit up the darkness as “an incendiary” struck Cockrum’s wood-framed house. Cockrum “rushed to the [room] of his two sleeping eldest daughters and only in time saved them from a horrible death, for the flames had reached their room and in a moment more would have rendered their rescue impossible.” Cockrum’s family was saved, but the house and most of its contents were lost. Savage retribution had been rendered, and the *Clarion* surmised that

Col. Cockrum, who lost his house last week, is such an earnest outspoken opponent of the whiskey traffic that it is thought his house was spotted to be burned soon after the destruction of the saloon at Oakland City last winter. It may be, for whiskey argument is not always of the most kind and conciliatory character. He affirms, however, that he is determined to make war with the whiskey ring as long as he has breath, [even] if they burn him out every year.”⁸⁶

⁸⁴*Ibid.*, 61.

⁸⁵*Princeton Clarion*, February 11, 1875.

⁸⁶*Princeton Clarion*, April 25, 1875. This event indicated that the violence over temperance worked both ways. For examples of pro-drinking forces fighting back against vigilantism, see Jason Lantzer, “Prohibition is Here to Stay”: *The Reverend Edward S. Shumaker and the Dry Crusade in America* (Notre Dame, Ind., 2009), 34-35.

Cockrum and his wife, Lucretia, also made a statement in the Princeton paper “to say thank you to our friends who so nobly and bravely assisted us in securing our family and goods from the flames of our burning home.”⁸⁷ The Oakland couple also reported that they would move quickly to build another dwelling place, to which the *Clarion* responded: “We trust that the Colonel and his excellent family may enjoy their new dwelling without the fear of being again burned out by the whiskey dealing incendiary.”⁸⁸

William Cockrum continued to present Oakland as an especially upstanding and saloon-free community, even as he labored to rebuild his home. Writing in the *Clarion*, he asserted that

this little town assumes the manners and customs of a place of larger dimensions—The prospects for the Evansville, Washington, and Chicago R. R. are good—The Baptist Herald, an organ of the General Baptist, has thrown down its third [issue]. It is neatly printed and respectable in dimensions, and is an honor to our place—These two influences have infused new life and energy into its citizens. Oakland is already considered the most moral and healthiest place in Gibson County.

The article went on to describe the town’s father, James W. Cockrum, in especially glowing terms. “Old Col. Cockrum, one of its respectable and time honored citizens, has hugged the bear and sent the whizzing bullet through the panting deer on the very spot where now stands the celebrated city of Oakland.”⁸⁹

Other correspondents to the *Clarion* soon began making fun of these wildly proud pronouncements. “Where is Oakland,” wrote one detractor, “that delightful city where nobody ever dies . . . And [where] Col Cockrum, with his unerring rifle, will keep the city secure from the depredations of furious animals?”⁹⁰

Despite the cynicism surrounding Oakland’s reputation, positive things were happening in the town. The elder Cockrum began writing memoir pieces about frontier life for the *General Baptist Herald* and the

⁸⁷*Princeton Clarion*, April 22, 1875.

⁸⁸*Ibid.*, October 28, 1875.

⁸⁹*Ibid.*, June 24, 1875.

⁹⁰*Ibid.*, July 15, 1875.

Clarion.⁹¹ The Oakland Institute continued to prosper, gaining more teachers and students. The General Baptists held their yearly General Association meeting at the Cockrum family's church in Oakland in November 1875, during which they announced that William Cockrum would give ten acres for a new college that would be directed by the General Baptist denomination. James Cockrum would buy up the debt of the Oakland Institute, then give the school to the denomination.⁹² The elder Cockrum's ongoing financial support would also enable the *Herald* to continue to operate in Oakland City. Associational minutes and news articles demonstrate how important William and James were to the General Baptists in particular and to Oakland in general.⁹³ Unfortunately, repercussions from William Cockrum's earlier brash vigilante actions loomed on the horizon.

DARK DAYS

It is impossible to say to what extent the 1875 turmoil of the saloon fight in Oakland—along with the arson of William Cockrum's house and near loss of his granddaughters—affected the health of the aging James Cockrum. During the summer of the same year, the elder Cockrum had also suffered great financial losses in the heavy flooding of his fields near Oakland.⁹⁴ Nevertheless, by early November, the old settler was “lying low with lung fever,” and he died on November 11, 1875, followed a few days later by his wife, Judah.⁹⁵ The *Clarion* reported upon James Cockrum's death, observing that “the sad occurrence of the death of Col. J. W. Cockrum and his wife Judah P. Cockrum, has cast a deep gloom over the town.”⁹⁶

⁹¹On July 29, 1875, the *Clarion* announced that this series of articles would be called “Pioneer Reminiscences.”

⁹²*Minutes of the Sixth Annual Meeting of the General Association of General Baptists* (Oakland City, Ind., 1876).

⁹³*Ibid.* Records also show William Cockrum was a prime leader in the county's Sunday School movement. See *Princeton Clarion*, June 4, 1874.

⁹⁴The *Clarion* reported, “Col. J. W. Cockrum sustained heavy losses by the late freshets,” August 5, 1875.

⁹⁵*Ibid.*, November 8, 1875.

⁹⁶*Ibid.*, November 9, 1875. That James Cockrum's life had been powerfully shaped by his father's alcoholism can be seen in an obituary in the *General Baptist Herald*. The piece noted that the elder Cockrum's hatred of alcohol remained to the end: “The only enemy that our aged brother ever had . . . were men who desired to demoralize [their] neighbors with alcohol. To his dying day, the old frontiersman had been bitterly opposed to dram-shops,” *General Baptist Herald*, December 2, 1875.

The sudden deaths of the Cockrum couple brought a wave of change to Oakland and the General Baptists. Money that James Cockrum and his wife would have given to the Oakland Institute, the *General Baptist Herald*, and the General Baptist denomination now went to the many Cockrum heirs. General Baptist historian D. B. Montgomery noted that just before the elder Cockrum signed the papers to allow a large part of his estate to go to the Oakland Institute, “He was taken suddenly ill, became delirious and remained so until death relieved him. This disorganized the whole plan and the [Institute] property fell back to Col. Cockrum’s heirs.”⁹⁷ A. D. Williams, in his history of the General Baptists, lamented that these were “dark days for the paper—dark days for the ‘Oakland Institute’—dark days for the General Baptists.”⁹⁸ Without James Cockrum’s support, in short order, the Oakland Institute folded, and the *General Baptist Herald* was moved to another town, supported by a new benefactor.

After his father’s death, William Cockrum also seemed to lose some of his zeal for sustaining community morals, as suggested by his refusal to run for a state political office. After being endorsed by the Princeton paper in July 1876 for a state assembly seat, Cockrum wrote back. “A few weeks back you suggested me as a suitable one for the nomination of representative for this county. I have received a number of letters from over the county asking me to head the ticket this year. . . . I truly appreciate the compliment [but] I cannot get the consent of my mind to become a candidate.”⁹⁹

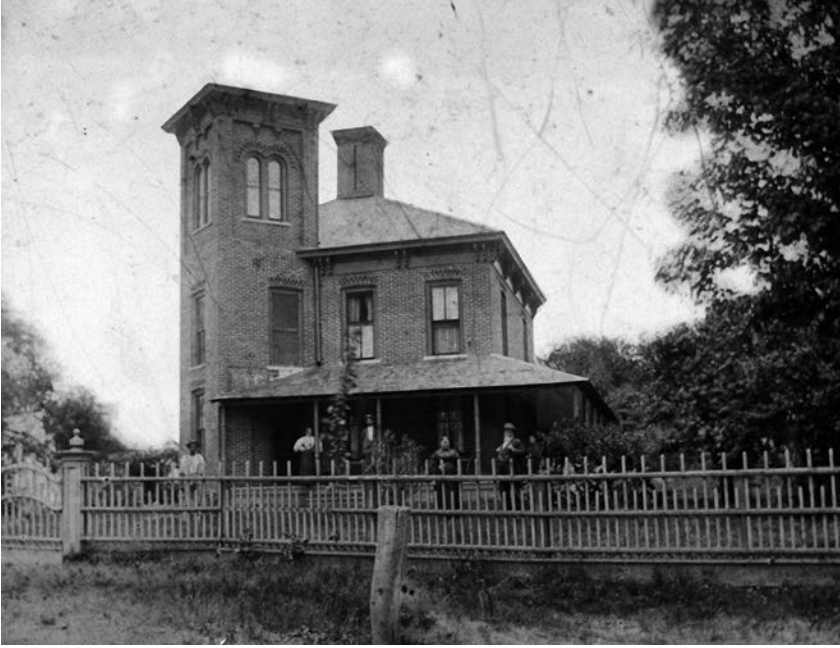
Despite the loss of James Cockrum, William and other residents of Oakland took some comfort in the construction of the new Cockrum home that was to replace the structure destroyed by the firebombing. The Princeton paper noted in October 1875 that “Col W. M. Cockrum’s brick residence is approximating completion very rapidly. The building, when completed, will be one of the handsomest and convenient known of hereabouts.”¹⁰⁰ The unique two-story Italianate structure, complete with a three-story watch tower, may have served as a statement that the Civil War veteran would be forever on alert to protect his family and property.

⁹⁷D. B. Montgomery, *General Baptist History* (Evansville, Ind., 1882), 405.

⁹⁸A. D. Williams, *Benoni Stinson and the General Baptists* (Owensville, Ind., 1892), 202.

⁹⁹*Princeton Clarion*, July 6, 1876.

¹⁰⁰*Ibid.*, October 14, 1875.



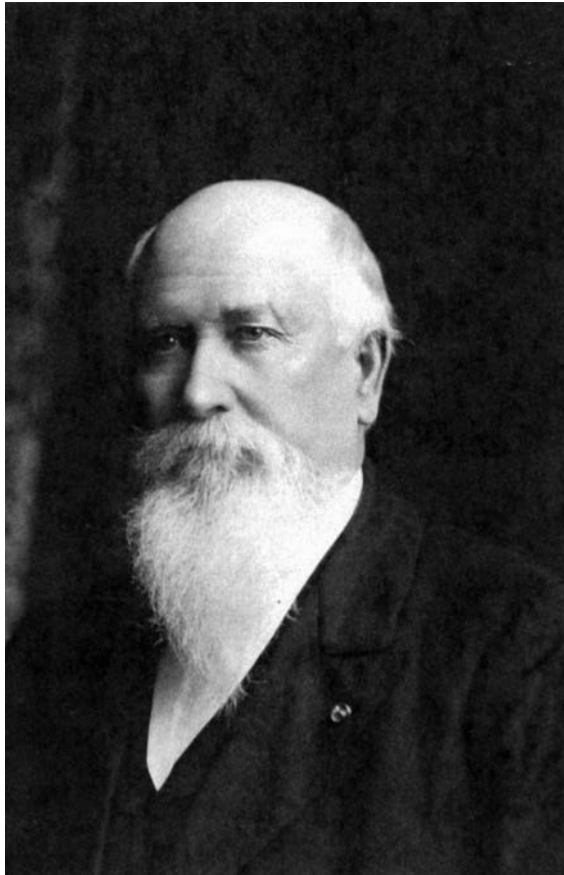
William Cockrum built his distinctive Italianate mansion to replace the home destroyed by angry saloon men in 1875.

Courtesy, Oakland City University

On February 10, 1876, the *Clarion* announced the Cockrum house had been completed. “Col. Wm. Cockrum has finished his superb brick residence. It is located in a commanding eminence and can be seen a long way in the distance. The architecture and style of the building evince considerable taste. We must say the Col. is a gentleman of rare intellectual endowment and may he live long to enjoy unalloyed happiness with his interesting family.”¹⁰¹

The family would indeed soon note happier times. The first celebration in the pleasant and picturesque new structure was the wedding of Cockrum’s daughter, Ella. The *General Baptist Herald* reported, “After the

¹⁰¹Ibid., February 10, 1876.



William Cockrum as an older man, at around the time that he wrote his
History of the Underground Railroad.
Courtesy, Oakland City University

usual ceremony, the guests were ushered into the dining-room where one hundred and three people partook of a sumptuous repast.”¹⁰²

MEN FROM ANOTHER COUNTY

The Women’s Crusade movement, along with the interrelated political conflicts between Anglo and German Americans, may explain much of the

¹⁰²*General Baptist Herald*, October 14, 1877.

social conflict present in Indiana in the early 1870s. It is more difficult, however, to understand the explosive eruptions of brutal temperance vigilantism in areas of the state where ethnic Germans were few and Upland South culture predominated. The Cockrums' violent actions in 1875, for example, seemed completely disconnected from the Women's Crusade. What forces, then, drove the law-abiding James and William Cockrum to take violent extralegal actions?

The Cockrums' rash and vicious measures do fall into a known pattern of violence. Similar to vigilante activity in other rural areas, the family's extreme actions in Oakland, and perhaps two other Indiana communities, seem to have been motivated by the perceived failure of secular law to protect and promote what has been labeled "moral discipline."¹⁰³ The Cockrums, like other vigilantes before them, apparently felt fully justified as an "elite attempting to establish control over unruly elements lower in the social order."¹⁰⁴ William Cockrum's comments about teaching "lessons" to "bullies" in his *History of the Underground Railroad*, like his comments in the Princeton paper in 1875 regarding the destruction of the legal saloon in Oakland, underscore this sentiment.

It can also be argued that James and William Cockrum had moved, as many successful Midwest farmers would, from being farmers to elite entrepreneurs.¹⁰⁵ In this process, as some farmers grew wealthier, they changed in their political, social, and religious beliefs. In the southern tier of the Midwest, these successful farmers came to identify less with their Upland Jacksonian Democratic heritage and came to identify more with the business elite and with the Whig and then the Republican Party.¹⁰⁶ That James Cockrum would ally himself with a group outside the local Upland culture to help in the Underground Railroad and serve as a Whig

¹⁰³See, for example, Christopher Waldrep, "'So Much Sin': The Decline of Religious Discipline and the 'Tidal Wave of Crime,'" *Journal of Social History* 23 (Spring 1990), 536.

¹⁰⁴Edgar F. Raines maintained all vigilante groups shared this position. See "The Ku Klux Klan in Illinois, 1867-1875," *Illinois Historical Journal* 78 (Spring 1985), 44.

¹⁰⁵Dennis S. Nordin and Roy V. Scott, *From Prairie Farmer to Entrepreneur: The Transformation of Midwestern Agriculture* (Bloomington, Ind., 2005), 2-3. According to Nordin and Scott, this was a process that began for many farmers around 1850.

¹⁰⁶Paul Kleppner also suggested this process occurred in the upper Midwest as well. Republicans often claimed their candidates represented an educated, "better class of men," and that the Democratic Party was more backward and sponsored candidates who supported "'the saloon interests,' 'toughs,' and 'gamblers.'" Paul Kleppner, *The Cross of Culture: A Social Analysis of Midwestern Politics, 1850-1900* (New York, 1970), 17.

in the state assembly certainly suggested that the elder Cockrum had begun moving in this cultural direction in the early 1850s.

By the early 1870s, newspaper accounts indicated that the Cockrum family had created a private world in the Oakland area, one in which horse racing, gambling, cursing, and alcohol were heavily policed. Here, the local Baptist church—under the leadership of the Cockrum family—controlled social behavior in the same manner that Baptist churches had in isolated frontier communities. Of course, this perfect world eventually ended with the invasion of “men from another county”—rowdy Andrew Evans and others like him from nearby Pike County.¹⁰⁷

The ensuing violence from this invasion added one last ironic element to the story. The Cockrums’ brutal measures in 1875 against the saloon can themselves be seen as representing a primal behavior pattern of male Upland South culture, a culture the Cockrums had long tried to disclaim. This pattern involved protecting one’s honor and demonstrating manliness at all costs, and the Cockrums revealed they had not lost this particular cultural practice.

Whatever complex forces motivated the Cockrums to take vigilante measures, their actions should not be dismissed lightly. Brian Butler, in his study of vigilante violence during the 1903 Evansville race riot, noted the irony of vigilante actions carried out by men who wished to protect social order: “Nineteenth-century concerns for public order were so ingrained [in America] that defense of good order could itself result in violence.”¹⁰⁸ One could argue, however, that leadership does count. There were many more Indiana communities that struggled with tensions similar to Oakland, but did not experience the same kind of vigilante violence led by prominent local citizens. One can look, for example, at Indianapolis temperance man Calvin Fletcher’s leadership in standing against such violence during the turbulent 1850s temperance initiatives. Fletcher’s political, social, and religious views strongly mirrored those of James and William Cockrum in Oakland, but he publicly turned away from extralegal actions.

OUT OF THE ASHES

Despite the traumatic firebombing of William Cockrum’s house in April 1875, the fight to keep alcohol sales out of Oakland continued. In early

¹⁰⁷*Princeton Clarion*, February 8, 1875.

¹⁰⁸Butler, *An Undergrowth of Folly*, 9..

1876, one citizen gloated that over the New Year's holiday, "not a drunk was seen during the entire week."¹⁰⁹ Temperance meetings continued to flourish in the town, according to one newspaper account, "every Monday night in the General Baptist Church." Here, "the interests of temperance are discussed and the evils of intemperance are portrayed. . . . Never mind the late reverses, if they may be called such. They should stimulate us in new enthusiasm, develop conscience and courage by adversity, and thus prepare the way for victory."¹¹⁰ Victory, however, was not to be.

The Cockrums were able to keep saloons out of Oakland until 1881.¹¹¹ By this time, the area's emerging coal fields had brought in new populations, some of whom possessed strong drinking cultures. These groups included poor whites from the South, German Americans, and recent Eastern European immigrants.¹¹² An 1884 listing of businesses in Oakland City showed three saloons, two of them operated by saloon keepers (Bock and a Mr. Wahnseidler) with identifiably German surnames.¹¹³ By 1886, several more saloon enterprises were operating in the city. The Princeton paper lamented, "Oakland City [now] has six saloons, and five of them are selling whiskey without any town license."¹¹⁴ The saloon men had finally won the day.

Despite losing the temperance battle, William Cockrum left a lasting legacy in Oakland. In 1885, he gave ten acres of land to restart a college in town, as well as money and labor to build its first structure. The school secured a charter from the state and was recognized as an institution of higher education. A February 1886 article in the *Princeton Clarion* noted that "Brick-making for the college will begin as soon as the weather

¹⁰⁹*Princeton Clarion*, January 1, 1876.

¹¹⁰*Ibid.*, June 3, 1876.

¹¹¹Stormont, *History of Gibson County, Indiana*, 393.

¹¹²Tartt noted in 1884 that the county had "Coal of excellent quality in abundance sufficient to supply any possible demand." See Tartt, *History of Gibson County*, 42. The growing mining culture, with its emphasis on drinking and rowdy behavior, was certainly of great concern to the Cockrum clan. William's son, for example, the editor of the local newspaper, got into some hot water for his elitist comment that "Oakland City rests in the hands of a very low type of citizens, mostly coal miners." See *Oakland City Journal* newspaper clipping, Oakland City University Library Archives.

¹¹³Tartt, *History of Gibson County, Indiana*, 214.

¹¹⁴*Princeton Clarion*, January 28, 1886. The same article blamed the city's town board for the final success of the saloon forces. "It seems as though the Oakland City town board is exercising a leniency towards the saloon men that is detrimental to the town and in direct opposition to the wishes of the good people there."



The William Cockrum house is today a part of Oakland City University.

Courtesy, Oakland City University

permits.”¹¹⁵ The school, named Oakland City College, would soon evolve into a successful institution of higher education and eventually gain university status. Over the years, the school has produced a vast number of future teachers in the state and the region.¹¹⁶ In 1962, after Cockrum’s last child, Zoe Aldrich, passed away, the elegant Cockrum house with its unusual watch tower was given to Oakland City College.¹¹⁷

Today, standing at the edge of the Oakland City University campus like a faithful sentry, Cockrum Hall offers a testimony to William Cockrum’s stubborn, unflinching, and occasionally misguided commitment to helping his community keep social order as he saw fit. William Cockrum claimed to have been motivated by moral conviction. His violent actions, however, suggest a moral lesson gone horribly wrong.



¹¹⁵Ibid.

¹¹⁶Randy Mills, *Enter to Learn, Go Forth to Serve: The Oakland City University Story* (Poplar Bluff, Mo., 2002).

¹¹⁷It is worth noting that this article was written in the author’s office located in Cockrum Hall.