

# WABASH VALLEY

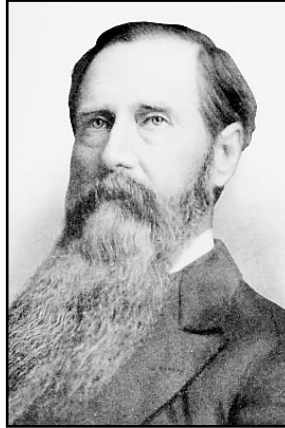
P R O F I L E S

*A series of tributes to hometown people and events that have shaped our history.*

## William Kirkpatrick Edwards

**O**n May 30, 1853 — 30 days after a special election transformed the town of Terre Haute into a city — William Kirkpatrick Edwards was selected as mayor.

He was born Dec. 26, 1820, the son of affluent Louisville residents John and Hetty (Steele) Edwards. However, his mother died when he was an infant, so his care was entrusted to “Aunt Aggie,” an African-American servant William cherished. Receiving his basic education at Professor Robert Smith’s exclusive classical school for boys, he matriculated to Indiana University, where he graduated in 1841 at age 20. He earned a law degree from Transylvania University in Lexington two years later.



William’s decision to settle in Terre Haute in 1843 was spurred by his sister, Mrs. John Reinhard, owner of the Spinning Wheel, a local general store. He quickly earned respect for his exactness and integrity. In 1845 he was elected to the Indiana House and was re-elected four successive times before being urged to become the city’s first chief executive. He served two one-year terms. He was also president of the Terre Haute Draw Bridge Co., the private venture which erected a Wabash River toll bridge that survived until 1905.

Meanwhile, he was elected IU Alumni Association president. When Joseph Sherburne Jenckes of Terre Haute resigned as university trustee in October 1855, Edwards replaced him and on Dec. 4, 1855, was elected president of the IU board. Citing other duties, Edwards resigned Aug. 3, 1857, but was implored to return in 1861 and served on the board until his death. In 1858, he was elected to the Indiana House for the sixth time, avoiding active politics during the Civil War to assist Internal Revenue Service District Collector James M. Farrington. Though he did not serve in the military during the war, he was given the honorary designation of “colonel” sometime thereafter.

In 1865 Chauncey Rose urged Edwards to become his special counsel and business agent, a position he retained until Rose died. As a result, he became a director of the Terre Haute & Indianapolis Railroad, the Terre Haute & Chicago Railway and the First National Bank of Terre Haute and first secretary of the Rose Polytechnic board of managers. Elected for the seventh time to the Indiana House in 1872, bachelor Edwards was chosen speaker by his colleagues. Co-founder of Terre Haute Lodge No. 51 of the Independent Order of Odd Fellows in 1849, he was elected Grand Master in 1853 and in 1877 was chosen Grand Patriarch, the I.O.O.F.’s highest station.

Following his sudden death Sept. 26, 1878 at the Terre Haute House — his residence for 32 years — dignitaries from throughout the Midwest arrived to pay their respects. At least 2,000 people took part in a grand two-mile funeral procession and, according to the *Terre Haute Gazette*, “fully 20,000 people” filled Woodlawn Cemetery. The *Indianapolis Journal* said it was “a public demonstration of respect unequalled in state history except for the funeral of Governor Morton.”

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