1981

David D. Banta's Memorial to John R. Kerr, Blind Printer and Pioneer Editor in Johnson County, Indiana

John V. Bergen
Western Illinois University

Follow this and additional works at: http://www.repository.law.indiana.edu/banta

Part of the Legal Biography Commons, and the United States History Commons

Recommended Citation
http://www.repository.law.indiana.edu/banta/23

This Writing about Dean David Banta is brought to you for free and open access by the Law School Deans at Digital Repository @ Maurer Law. It has been accepted for inclusion in David Banta (1889-1896) by an authorized administrator of Digital Repository @ Maurer Law. For more information, please contact wattn@indiana.edu.
John R. Kerr, though blind, introduced the first local newspaper to the people of Johnson County, Indiana, in 1845. Kerr's Franklin Examiner was probably not the best small-town newspaper in the state, but the six-year run of the weekly while it was under Kerr's editorship provides a partial yet significant record of life in a county-seat town and rural community at the middle of the nineteenth century. As a local historian in the later nineteenth century, Judge David D. Banta of Franklin was responsible for preparing the only known biographical sketch of John R. Kerr and for preserving copies of the Examiner for later use and eventual microfilming. Before featuring below Banta's memorial essay about Kerr and his Examiner, it is important to establish a background concerning the principals involved in this episode in local history.

---

* John V. Bergen is professor of geography and university map library curator at Western Illinois University, Macomb. He is director and editor of an atlas-history project (in progress) for the Johnson County Historical Society, Franklin, Indiana.

1 George S. Cottman found some 250 Indiana periodicals to have been in print in 1850, but he did not cite the Franklin Examiner among several selected examples described in "The Early Newspapers of Indiana," Indiana Magazine of History, II (September, 1906), 197-21. James Hannan Butler refers to at least two dozen papers not including the Examiner in his "Indiana Newspapers, 1829-1860," Indiana Magazine of History, XXII (September, 1926), 297-333. The Examiner and its editor are recognized briefly in Ronald Beathard, Cyndi Lach, and Mark Popovich, comps., Indiana Newspaper History: An Annotated Bibliography (Muncie, Ind., 1974), 1-55.

2 The weekly Franklin Examiner, published from December 13, 1845, to February 13, 1852, is available on microfilm at the Indiana State Library, Indianapolis, and the Franklin-Johnson County Public Library, Franklin, Indiana.

3 "Sketch of the Life and Times of John R. Kerr, the Blind Printer," Indianapolis Daily Sentinel, February 17, 1884, p. 12. The writer first found the Banta "sketch" as a typescript copied in the 1930s from the original publication by a grandson of Judge David D. Banta. A search of the newspaper microfilm revealed that not only was the reference to the original article in the Sentinel...
John R. Kerr claimed a 160-acre tract of public land in central Indiana in October, 1833 (see Figure 1). He and his wife had come to settle near relatives and friends who had preceded them from eastern Tennessee into Johnson County, which reflected a predominant migration from Kentucky. The Kerrs soon moved to the county seat, Franklin, where a few years later Kerr opened a print shop. Having learned as a child the value of reading, Kerr cherished the printed word and must have been deeply grieved by the deterioration and eventual loss of his eyesight. This misfortune he overcame to a remarkable degree, his major achievement possibly being his successful publication of the *Examiner*. His dedication to the weekly newspaper continued for more than six years before he moved to Gosport, an aspiring White River town in Owen County. He established that town's first newspaper, the *Chronotype*, which had a briefer existence than did the *Examiner*; no known copies survive. Various state gazetteers list John R. Kerr as postmaster in Gosport until about 1872 and as a bookseller until shortly before he died in 1880.

incomplete but also that the date was incorrect. This typescript and numerous others are included in the Banta Family Papers, David Demaree Banta Indiana Collection, Franklin College Library, Franklin, Indiana.

4 The Tract Book of the United States Land Office at Indianapolis shows that on October 26, 1833, John R. Kerr, of Greene County, Tennessee, entered a 160-acre tract of land in the NW 1/4 Section 31, Township 13 North, Range 5 East. This tract was located about one mile east of Hurricane Creek and one-and-one-half miles west of Little Sugar Creek in eastern Johnson County. Indianapolis Land District Tract Book No. 5 (bound copy incorrectly titled Crawfordsville Land District Tract Book No. 7), Microfilm Reel Number A-8, p. 384 (Archives Division, Indiana Commission on Public Records, Indianapolis.) Copies of the original entries are also listed in Entry Book B (Tract Book), County Clerk's Office, Johnson County Courthouse, Franklin, Indiana.

5 The 1850 manuscript federal census for Johnson County identifies John R. Kerr as a head of household in Franklin on the "14th August 1850." He was described as age forty-one, an "Ed. & Publisher of paper," and "Blind." Living with him were his wife Mary; Elizabeth Kerr, age sixty-four, possibly his mother; his cousin Francis M., age twenty-four and a "printer"; and a nine-year-old girl and a seventeen-year-old boy who could have been wards or orphans. U.S., Seventh Census, 1850, population schedules for Johnson County, Indiana (National Archives Microfilm Publication No. M-432, roll 155), p. 150.

6 According to an 1884 Owen County history, "Several papers have been published in Gosport at different times, the first of which was the *Chronotype*, established in 1852 by John R. Kerr, who formerly edited a political paper in Johnson County. The *Chronotype* was a small sheet, Democratic in politics, and devoted principally to the moral and educational interests of the town. Mr. Kerr edited the paper about seven or eight years, when he sold it to [Frank] Kerr, who continued it but a short time." Charles Blanchard, ed., *Counties of Clay and Owen, Indiana: Historical and Biographical* (Chicago, 1884), 714.

7 John R. Kerr is listed both as postmaster and bookseller in Gosport by the first comprehensive business directory issued for the state of Indiana. James Sutherland, comp., *G.W. Hawes' Indiana State Gazetteer and Business..."
JOHNSON COUNTY, INDIANA ca. 1850
AS KNOWN TO JOHN R. KERR AND HIS FRANKLIN EXAMINER

Figure 1

Courtesy John V. Bergen.
Because relatively few small-town weekly papers are available in any form for Indiana in the 1840s, the layout and content of the Examiner and Kerr's comments about his struggle to edit and publish a country newspaper are significant. Kerr obviously tried to give his Johnson County readers a wide-ranging selection of news and literature in his Democratic paper. At the same time his political and social biases received extra attention. For example, Kerr reserved considerable space for the history and activities of the American Colonization Society, in which he and other prominent Franklinites were active locally. He advocated local participation in national and international causes, notably African (Liberian) colonization, famine relief for the Scots and Irish, the American Sunday School Union, and the Mexican War.

From big-city papers Kerr reprinted articles of national significance on such topics as the Mexican War, the Mormon migration, European unrest, the Oregon question, the concerts of Jenny Lind, and congressional activity. He included presidential addresses and especially anything relating to Democratic politics. The editor also selectively included the sensationalism of the "penny press" by reporting human tragedies—fire, murder, scandal—sometimes following a story for several weeks. Selections from papers that might not have found their way directly to Franklin were apparently taken from Indianapolis newspapers, notably the State Sentinel.

For state and regional news Kerr depended heavily upon such papers as the Madison Courier, Madison Banner, Louisville Courier, Louisville Journal, Indianapolis State Sentinel, Indianapolis Indiana Democrat, papers from neighboring counties, and occasionally other Indiana papers. Small-town papers, which nearly all espoused a political philosophy, often concentrated on such public issues as the Indiana Constitutional Convention of 1850. Kerr, who followed the convention elections and proceedings carefully in 1850 and 1851, published the Constitution and editorially urged readers to study it and vote.

Directory for 1858 and 1859 (Indianapolis, 1858), 110. Kerr is also listed in Hawes's directories for 1860-1861, 1862-1863, and 1864-1865 as well as in succeeding state directories published by other companies every two or three years.

* An interesting commentary on the hardships experienced by early Indiana editors is included in Butler, "Indiana Newspapers," 303-13.

* For an appreciation of a pioneer editor in the important Ohio River town of Madison, see Frank S. Baker, "Michael C. Garber, Sr., and the Early Years of the Madison, Indiana, Daily Courier," Indiana Magazine of History, XLVII (December, 1952), 397-408.
For women and the family, Kerr reprinted feature stories from popular magazines, several of which also advertised in the *Examiner*. Kerr occasionally published serials and excerpts from such national journals as *Godey's Lady's Book*, *Graham's American Monthly Magazine*, *Peterson's Ladies National Magazine*, *Saturday Evening Post*, and *Arthur's Home Magazine*. Seldom an issue passed without a feature on some scientific topic—geology, carbon, rain, wind, vulcanism—and on some special place and/or event, such as Lake Superior copper and California gold discoveries. The editor thus supplemented the teaching of the local schools, academies, seminaries, and the young Franklin College, whose intellectual happenings and financial troubles were also featured frequently in the *Examiner*.

Kerr did report on local issues, sometimes writing his own editorial comments and sometimes publishing letters to the editor. Among the oftentimes heated and lengthy exchanges of letters were many debates about Christian attitudes toward temperance in all things—drinking, dancing, and other moral issues. Kerr's editorial notes related to such varied local discussions as plank roads and turnpikes, railroads, mail service, fire protection, sanitation, Sabbath schools, gold in Brown County, and a local agricultural society. Occasionally Kerr acted as a "Chamber of Commerce" by writing a brief but glowing account of the advantages of "Our Town" for industry and trade. This feeling of pride and confidence was a direct result of the completion of the Madison and Indianapolis Railroad as well as the Franklin and White River Plank Road (turnpike) before 1850 (see Figure 1). Kerr may well have included such comments as inducements to his many advertisers to continue their support of his efforts to put Franklin "on the map"; no doubt he also anticipated that readers far beyond Johnson County might see such notes reprinted in their local newspapers; yet, he made no major attempt to engage in a promotional scheme as had been practiced in newspapers elsewhere.10

Throughout Kerr's years as publisher, the *Examiner* was generally a four-page paper. On the first page Kerr printed his "Terms," sometimes letters to the editor, and articles reprinted from other papers (see Figure 2). On page two he typically

---

FRANKLIN EXAMINER

Published by J. R. KERR.

FRANKLIN, IND. JANUARY 31, 1846.


TERMS OF THE PAPER.

In advance, $1.00.

After six months, $1.50.

Annual subscriptions, paper or hand, three insertions for five dollars, and for each extra

South Sea Company.

This extraordinary commercial speculation originated in 1720, and eventually led to one of the most numerous attempts at delusion, under the name of the "South Sea Scheme," that ever was conceived, in any age or country.

From the incorporation of the South Sea Company, until the proposition of the scheme was stepped up, and the amount of 200,000,000 was increased, the insanity, madness, and delirium of the debtors became a public byact in a bleeding condition.

The history of the South Sea Company is not the history of the speculative art, but the history of the South Sea Scheme. It has been passed in the current of the public mind in this country, under the name of the "South Sea Scheme," which, by the South Sea Company, is the name of the "South Sea Company."

The South Sea Company was formed on the 31st of January, 1846, and the first subscription was received on the 1st of February. The first subscription was received on the 1st of February. The first subscription was received on the 1st of February. The first subscription was received on the 1st of February. The first subscription was received on the 1st of February. The first subscription was received on the 1st of February.

The South Sea Company was formed on the 31st of January, 1846, and the first subscription was received on the 1st of February. The first subscription was received on the 1st of February. The first subscription was received on the 1st of February. The first subscription was received on the 1st of February. The first subscription was received on the 1st of February. The first subscription was received on the 1st of February.

The South Sea Company was formed on the 31st of January, 1846, and the first subscription was received on the 1st of February. The first subscription was received on the 1st of February. The first subscription was received on the 1st of February. The first subscription was received on the 1st of February. The first subscription was received on the 1st of February. The first subscription was received on the 1st of February.

The South Sea Company was formed on the 31st of January, 1846, and the first subscription was received on the 1st of February. The first subscription was received on the 1st of February. The first subscription was received on the 1st of February. The first subscription was received on the 1st of February. The first subscription was received on the 1st of February. The first subscription was received on the 1st of February.

The South Sea Company was formed on the 31st of January, 1846, and the first subscription was received on the 1st of February. The first subscription was received on the 1st of February. The first subscription was received on the 1st of February. The first subscription was received on the 1st of February. The first subscription was received on the 1st of February. The first subscription was received on the 1st of February.

The South Sea Company was formed on the 31st of January, 1846, and the first subscription was received on the 1st of February. The first subscription was received on the 1st of February. The first subscription was received on the 1st of February. The first subscription was received on the 1st of February. The first subscription was received on the 1st of February. The first subscription was received on the 1st of February.

The South Sea Company was formed on the 31st of January, 1846, and the first subscription was received on the 1st of February. The first subscription was received on the 1st of February. The first subscription was received on the 1st of February. The first subscription was received on the 1st of February. The first subscription was received on the 1st of February. The first subscription was received on the 1st of February.

The South Sea Company was formed on the 31st of January, 1846, and the first subscription was received on the 1st of February. The first subscription was received on the 1st of February. The first subscription was received on the 1st of February. The first subscription was received on the 1st of February. The first subscription was received on the 1st of February. The first subscription was received on the 1st of February.

The South Sea Company was formed on the 31st of January, 1846, and the first subscription was received on the 1st of February. The first subscription was received on the 1st of February. The first subscription was received on the 1st of February. The first subscription was received on the 1st of February. The first subscription was received on the 1st of February. The first subscription was received on the 1st of February.

The South Sea Company was formed on the 31st of January, 1846, and the first subscription was received on the 1st of February. The first subscription was received on the 1st of February. The first subscription was received on the 1st of February. The first subscription was received on the 1st of February. The first subscription was received on the 1st of February. The first subscription was received on the 1st of February.
D. D. Banta's Memorial to John R. Kerr

237

ALPHABET OF SHORT RULES

A. BEAM nor your business.
B. Be punctual in your engagements.
C. Be true to your promises.
D. Be brave in your duties.
E. Be true to your calling.
F. Be true to your conscience.
G. Be true to your character.
H. Be true to your friends.
I. Be true to your neighbors.
J. Be true to yourself.
K. Be true to your principles.
L. Be true to your country.
M. Be true to your God.
N. Be true to your own happiness.
O. Be true to your own peace.
P. Be true to your own honor.
Q. Be true to your own integrity.
R. Be true to your own virtue.
S. Be true to your own rights.
T. Be true to your own interests.
U. Be true to your own duties.
V. Be true to your own conscience.
W. Be true to your own principles.
X. Be true to your own obligations.
Y. Be true to your own character.
Z. Be true to your own honor.

Figure 2
featured a variety of notes on Democratic politics, including the names of candidates for office. He frequently published editorial notes on this page; for example, his May 26, 1849, issue contained an editorial calling for "A Fire Engine" plus a reminder for people to clean "cellars and other noxious places." Page three was generally informational with a number of short items—both facts and suggestions. As might be expected in a rapidly developing farm community, Kerr often published features, news items, and advertisements relating directly to agriculture. Also on page three of the May 26, 1849, issue he reprinted the "Town Regulations," wherein the Board of Trustees called for a careful cleanup so that in "the sickly season" Franklin might avoid disease, especially cholera. More than two columns on page three and page four were usually devoted to advertising, including illustrated national advertisements for disease remedies.

Kerr offered his Examiner to subscribers "at One Dollar a year in advance, or within six months." At least once a year he renewed his plea for support of what he reckoned to be "among the cheapest papers in the State." On April 23, 1846, for example, he discussed competition with the cheap eastern papers heavy with literary writings and sensationalism:

Though it is impossible for country newspapers to compete in respect to cheapness with those we have mentioned, their utility we believe to be incomparably greater to the community. . . . There are certain things in all communities which can be supplied along by a local paper. . . .

[It] should not be forgotten . . . that an editor does not know by intuition, of all that is transpiring in the community around him. . . . To be useful a paper should be a medium for the interchanges of practical observations on all subjects connected with science, rural economy, etc.

To keep his costs down Kerr encouraged advertisers as well as readers. On July 28, 1846, he wrote:

See here neighbors! Can you tell how Dr. Peggs [dealer in staple and fancy dry goods, all kinds of wares, drugs, medicines, and clocks, etc.] comes to sell off goods so fast lately?

Yes; that is easily accounted for. He has just advertised his stock in the paper, and it goes to families in all parts of the county, and is read by all members of the family. Each one finds something named in the advertisement that they want. The old farmers, especially those that have daughters, have these articles pointed out, and his memory so repeatedly refreshed on the subject, that he comes to town with two or three daughters under convoy; then a terrible reckoning takes place among laces, ribbons, parasols, bonnets, shawls, lawns, jaconets, etc. That is the way it works. Those who advertise will sell.\(^{11}\)

\(^{11}\) In 1846 Kerr offered advertising space by "one Square, or less; three insertions for One Dollar; and for each subsequent insertion, Twenty-five
Despite his financial struggles Kerr maintained a sense of humor; witness his reminder published on January 23, 1849: "WOOD UP! Those in arrears for last year, or wishing to pay their subscription in wood this year, would accommodate us, and perhaps save the county the cost of an inquest, by sending it in before we freeze."

Kerr frequently commented on his reasons for publishing the *Examiner* and couched his pleas for support in less open terms. Near the end of the first year (November 17, 1846) he thanked his patrons: "One important object which we had in view in the undertaking was to test the practicability of the establishment of a paper at this place; and we are satisfied from the limited experiment made, that the enterprise is not impracticable, though promising no very enticing reward for the labor necessary to its prosecution." At the close of his third volume (January 9, 1849) he wrote half a column reiterating some of his struggles and even apologizing for any errors which might have appeared. Inviting his patrons to procure additional subscribers, he noted that he would "feel amply rewarded if it yields us a reasonable compensation . . . and withal that our efforts have been productive of some benefit to the community in which we live."

Early in 1850 Kerr moved his newspaper office from his home in Franklin to a second-floor room on the north side of the public square (see Figure 3); his comments about the plight of a country newspaper continued. In his "Prospectus of the Fifth Volume" (January 19, 1850) he repeated a familiar refrain with a rare reference to his own handicap: "Such an enterprise, always perplexing and difficult in a new place, shut out from the advantages of the natural light, we have found peculiarly so. But we have thus far met with encouragement and support sufficient to keep us from sinking under impending embarrassments . . . ." A year later, on February 8, 1851, he wrote:

If five years of toil—without so much as a day's relaxation from our avocation—entitles us in any degree to the confidence of the community on the score of perseverance, then we may claim that confidence; and if our general course has been such as to meet the approbation of our political friends and candid minds generally, it may be the best guaranty we have to offer for the future.

Cents." By 1849 he offered discounts on long-term rates—three months for three dollars, six months for five dollars, one year for nine dollars. A whole column cost twenty dollars per year.
Figure 3

Courtesy John V. Bergen.
Without previous warning in print, Kerr on February 7, 1852, sadly announced his termination as editor:

Continued ill health, combined with other circumstances calculated to render the responsibilities attached to our present position peculiarly burdensome, has induced us to make arrangements for retiring at the end of the present volume, from the charge of the Franklin Examiner, which will pass under the control of Messrs. W. J. Hays & J. H. Williams. No interruptions in the business will result from the transfer. Our engagements to those having paid their subscriptions in advance will be filled by our successors—otherwise we will refund. The paper will continue to be radically Democratic.

Kerr must have touched the lives of many local citizens in the six years his Examiner circulated, but perhaps no one was more impressed than David Demaree Banta, who himself later became a local journalist and historian as well as a prominent lawyer. Apparently all issues of the Examiner were preserved by Banta, who as a young farm lad had purchased the newspaper with his own hard-earned money. Born on May 23, 1833, in Johnson County, Indiana, Banta earned a law degree at Indiana University in 1857, practiced law in Franklin, and at the same time pursued his beloved avocation of writer and journalist. As a young lawyer with a passion for Democratic politics, he became editor, in March, 1860, of the Franklin

Evidence is fairly convincing that in addition to Kerr’s publication many, if not most, of the pre-1870 Johnson County newspapers that have been preserved were at one time in the possession of Banta. His handwriting appears on the margins of some pages, and countless articles and editorials in the 1860s have the notation “DDB” handwritten at the end. Analysis of the content and style indicates that Banta was, indeed, the author of those items, including some that may have embroiled him in social and political controversy in the local community.

Among numerous biographical sketches written about David Demaree Banta some were “authorized” by the judge himself. See, for example, J. H. Beers & Co., pubs., Atlas of Johnson County, Indiana . . . (Chicago, 1881), 82; Brant and Fuller, pubs., History of Johnson County, Indiana . . . (Chicago, 1888; reprint edition, Johnson County Historical Society, 1968), 582-86; Thomas W. Woollen, “Banta, David D.,” in Charles W. Taylor, comp., Biographical Sketches and Review of the Bench and Bar of Indiana . . . (Indianapolis, 1895), 675-79. Woollen was Banta’s law partner and friend for more than forty years. Among numerous accounts published at the time of Banta’s death are: “Death of Judge Banta,” Indiana University Indiana Student, XXII (April 14, 1896), 258; Robert J. Aley, “Judge David D. Banta,” Inland Educator: A Journal for the Progressive Teacher, II (June, 1896), 257-68; “Some Distinguished Alumnus: David D. Banta,” Arbutus, IV (Indiana University Yearbook, 1897), 14-16; and Elba L. Branigin, History of Johnson County, Indiana (Indianapolis, 1913; reprint edition, Johnson County Historical Society, 1973), 139-41. A number of twentieth-century biographical sketches also exist and include Jacob Piatt Dunn, “David Demaree Banta,” Indiana and Indianans: A History of Aboriginal and Territorial Indiana and the Century of Statehood (5 vols., Chicago, 1919), III, 1372-74; “Banta, David Demaree: 1833-1896,” in Richard E. Banta, comp., Indiana Authors and Their Books, 1816-1916 (Crawfordsville,
Democratic Herald, for which he had written extensively since its inception in November, 1859. Although he continued to write regularly for the Herald until 1863, when the newspaper office was burned by incendiaries, he relinquished the editorship in March, 1861, in deference to the demands of his law practice and his work as district prosecutor of the Common Pleas Court. After a second term as prosecutor and a year as deputy recorder, Banta again became an editorial and feature writer for the revived Democratic paper, reorganized as the Johnson County Press and published from 1865 to 1868. Small-town law practice being neither so time-consuming nor so lucrative as it became later, Banta supplemented the family income by serving as school examiner for Johnson County (1865-1868), a position for which his college degrees and two years as a teacher must have served him well; as an official assessor (1866-1868); and as trustee for the city schools of Franklin (1867-1869).

From 1870 to 1876 Banta gained stature and reputation as judge of the Twenty-eighth Judicial Circuit. Upon completion of his term as judge, he returned to private law practice; at the same time (1877), he was appointed to the Indiana University Board of Trustees. He served on the board until 1889 when, after seven years as board president, he was persuaded to become dean of the reconstituted Law Department at Indiana University. During this time his renown as an orator led to his being chosen annually to give a Founders' Day lecture on the
early history of Indiana University. His abiding interest in education resulted also in a series of articles on pioneer schools in Johnson County and Indiana.

While serving as editor of the Franklin Democratic Herald, Banta published in a full column (February 7 and 14, 1861) his own prospectus for writing a history of Johnson County. This dream by the young writer-lawyer was interrupted by the Civil War as well as later personal and professional obligations. Although he continued to gather materials and to give numerous historical orations, Banta's long-held desire to publish an integrated history came to fruition only when he was invited in 1880 to be the local historical writer in a Johnson County atlas being prepared by one of several Chicago-based publishers of subscription books. His historical sketch of the pioneer settlement was considered so well done that J. H. Beers and Company risked printing it in the form of a small book as well.

---

16 Banta's six lectures covering the years 1820 to 1850 were published first in Indiana University Alumni Quarterly, I (January, April, August, October, 1914), 2-24, 142-65, 272-92, 369-86, and II (January, April, 1915), 5-17, 99-110. They were included as the first six chapters in James Albert Woodburn, History of Indiana University (Bloomington, 1940), 1-124.

17 These lively articles were originally published in the Indianapolis News, January 6, 18, 20, 27, February 3, 10, 17, 24, March 16, 23, 1892. They were reprinted as "The Early Schools of Indiana. From the Papers of D. D. Banta," Indiana Magazine of History, II (March, June, September, December, 1906), 41-48, 81-88, 131-38, 191-94.

18 Most of the local histories and county atlases published in the Midwest during the first fifty years following the Civil War were the result of the notorious subscription business. Enterprising publishers, based primarily in Chicago, sent canvassers out across the countryside to sell the more prosperous farmers and businessmen on the worthiness of an atlas or history project. For a specified amount of cash, the prospective buyer could have a lithographic view of his farm, a portrait, or a biographical sketch published in the "beautiful" volume. The use of Judge Banta's name was a typical selling point to lend an air of authenticity to the proposed book; and, in fact, Banta's works might otherwise not have been published in book format. The uses and abuses of the subscription book business were discussed in 1879 in a fascinating little book published ironically (or purposely?) by the Fidelity Press of Chicago. See Bates Harrington, How 'Tis Done: A Thorough Ventilation of the Numerous Schemes Conducted by Wandering Canvassers Together with the Advertising Dodges for the Swindling of the Public (Chicago, 1879). While preparing and editing materials for an atlas-history, the present writer analyzed for Johnson County all such publications as well as newspaper notices and editorials about them. From this and other assessments, one can conclude that the value of the printed record far outweighs the errors, embellishments, and prejudices obviously contained in these works. There seems to be no reason to suspect that Banta was anything but honest in his attempt to establish a lasting record of pioneer history in Johnson County.
as a major part of the illustrated county plat atlas. His reputation established as local historian, Banta was invited again in the late 1880s to be the principal local contributor to the History of Johnson County, a publication typical of the spate of bulky county histories sold by subscription in most counties of the Midwest. The five chapters Banta prepared for this 1888 volume were revisions of his earlier Historical Sketch of Johnson County, and they in turn were embellished for use in a series on pioneer history for the Indianapolis News in 1888. Perhaps because his portrait is included in the frontispiece of the History of Johnson County, this latter volume is often erroneously called the "Banta History." His writings have been quoted countless times in later historical essays.

Banta obviously used old newspapers, Kerr's Examiner among them, during the course of his historical research. In a chapter entitled "Indian History" in History of Johnson County, for example, the judge commented on the excavation of buried aboriginal hunters and quoted Kerr's "Lines on seeing human bones of extraordinary size taken from an excavation at the Johnson County Seminary" as "the first poetical effusion ever written or printed in Johnson County." In his Historical Sketch Banta frequently cited "the blind printer" on many matters, including the execrable road conditions of the 1840s.

During the decade of the 1880s, when he was writing much of his local history, Banta penned a memorial to Kerr and the Examiner. Implicit in the sketch is Banta's appreciation of his early exposure to politics and journalism—indeed reading—in the Examiner and of his use of the paper as a historical source. Originally printed in the Indianapolis Daily Sentinel


20 Brant and Fuller, History of Johnson County.


22 Brant and Fuller, History of Johnson County, 281; Banta, Historical Sketch of Johnson County, 78-79.

23 Another Franklin attorney and a protege of Banta, Elba L. Branigin, was also aware of the importance of newspaper reports as source material for local history. His 1913 History of Johnson County, Indiana includes extensive quotations from Banta's works. In 1913 Branigin had been unable to locate the files of the Franklin Examiner, which Banta had obviously used. In the late 1920s or early 1930s he discovered the collection in the Indiana University Library, where the newspapers had been placed either by Banta himself while
on Sunday morning, February 17, 1884, "Sketch of the Life and Times of John R. Kerr, the Blind Printer" is reprinted below as a tribute to a man who overcame an enormous personal handicap in order to fulfill a desire to stir the political, economic, social, and moral thought of a people still emerging from the frontier wilderness.

The lives of Kerr and Banta spanned that remarkable period when central Indiana was transformed geographically from a primitive wilderness of forest and swamp to a man-made landscape with its tile-drained fields, prosperous farms, lively rural and village communities, multifunctional town and city trade centers, integrated transport networks, and burgeoning commercial-industrial facilities—yet some years before the automobile, the airplane, the radio. Banta's memorial was written in part as a reminiscence for those of his own generation who also had witnessed the closing of the Indiana frontier. The essay reveals something of midwestern rural and village life at midnineteenth century by focusing on a pioneer editor who captured in print a portion of the otherwise elusive records of life in the newly developing, oftentimes struggling, communities. From the present perspective of another one hundred years, the Banta sketch also is an indirect commentary on the life of a talented small-town lawyer and writer who served as Kerr's biographer.

he was dean of the Law School or by his family after his death. Branigin acquired the papers for the Franklin Public Library where they remained until they were microfilmed in 1950 by the Indiana State Library. In a series of four articles published in the Franklin Evening Star, November 12-16, 1932, Branigin makes pertinent comments about the strengths and weaknesses of Kerr's pioneer publishing venture.
From East Tennessee there\[^2\] flowed into Central Indiana during the pioneer days no inconsiderable stream of population. Of this, Johnson County received its share. Among those who came from that quarter was John Robinson Kerr, the founder and publisher of the first newspaper printed in the County, who deserves to be remembered not only because he was the County's first printer, editor and publisher, but because he won success in spite of physical infirmities calculated to appall the stoutest hearted; and did his work with a degree of fidelity worthy of all praise.

John R. Kerr was born in Green[e] County, East Tennessee, on the 22nd of February 1809. He was undersized both as boy and man, weighing but fifty pounds when he was ten years old, and so low in stature when he went to the printer's trade, at the age of fifteen, that he was compelled to mount a box that he might reach the case. Notwithstanding his parents were in moderate circumstances even for the times in which they lived, they managed nevertheless to give him such an education as fell to the lot of comparatively few men of the day. Fortunately they lived no more than two miles from Tusculum College,\[^3\] and

\[^1\] Banta's memorial to John R. Kerr was published as a five-column feature article in a daily newspaper; thus, a strong possibility for typographical and editorial error exists. The original handwritten manuscript does not survive, and it seems fair to assume that the obvious errors and other apparent mistakes are the responsibility of the Indianapolis Daily Sentinel rather than the author, who was a notably literate gentleman. These "misprints" have been corrected in the following transcript. For example, inconsistent punctuation and capitalization (as in the case of political party names) have been changed either to correct errors or to enhance the meaning of a statement. Certain spelling errors, particularly in the case of proper names, have also been corrected. Ten paragraph indentations have been created in order to improve readability. Titles of books and newspapers have been italicized to distinguish them from the rest of the text, as Banta had apparently expected the printer to do.

\[^2\] This is the first example of what may be either an inadvertent writing error by Banta or an error by typesetter and editor in the Indianapolis Sentinel.

\[^3\] At the time John R. Kerr attended Tusculum "College" it was Tusculum Academy. Tusculum College dates from 1794 when Greeneville College was chartered in Tennessee Territory as the twenty-eighth college founded in the United States; today it is the oldest college related to the United Presbyterian Church in the United States of America. Tusculum Academy, located about two miles from Greeneville College, was founded in 1818 (just before Kerr enrolled) by the Reverend Samuel Doak, a graduate of Princeton University (B.A., 1775). He and his son, the Reverend Samuel W. Doak, conducted the work of the academy, which was incorporated by the Tennessee legislature in 1842 and as
entering that college at the age of ten, he attended regularly for five years boarding in his father's house all the time. He must have gone through the Sophomore studies if not the Junior, but he never graduated. At the age of fifteen he left college a respectable Greek and Latin scholar, a fair mathematician and with a love of scientific reading that never left him.4

His parents were members of the Cumberland Presbyterian Church—a Church then in its infancy and which had split off from the Presbyterian, mainly because the synods refused to admit any but those having scholastic acquirements equal to the college and [seminary],5 to ministerial privileges, but which, while it asserted a less rigorous rule in that particular, nevertheless founded colleges and encouraged an educated ministry.6 Some of its schools made great reputation in the South and under Doctor Doak, the president of Tusculum, celebrated as a theologian and educator,7 John R. Kerr had excel-

Tusculum College in 1844. After the Civil War the neighboring schools were consolidated as Greeneville and Tusculum College, whose corporate name was changed finally to Tusculum College in 1912. Allen E. Ragan, *A History of Tusculum College, 1794-1944* (Bristol, Tenn., 1945). Also see introductory pages in the biennial catalog, *Tusculum College Bulletin.*

4 Banta does not identify all his sources for the biographical information about Kerr, but he implies that much of it came from Mrs. Kerr and other relatives.

5 The word "seminary" is added here as the most logical choice to give meaning to the full statement which, in the published article, includes no word following "equal to the college and . . . ."

6 The Cumberland Presbyterian Church took its name in 1910 after several years of disagreement between churches in the Cumberland Presbytery and the larger Presbyterian body in the Kentucky Synod. John R. Kerr's family apparently was caught up either philosophically or geographically in the controversy that set many Presbyterian churches in the former Cumberland Presbytery apart from other Presbyterian churches in Kentucky and Tennessee. B. W. McDonnold, *History of the Cumberland Presbyterian Church* (second ed., Nashville, Tenn., 1888). See especially the first 154 pages pertaining to the early period of the church in Kentucky and Tennessee. As a lifetime Presbyterian, Banta was well versed in local and national Presbyterian church history, and he understood the reasons for the separate Cumberland Presbyterian Church.

7 As one of the early southern opponents of slavery, Samuel Doak developed strong views which led him to free his slaves and send them to Ohio. Several young men who trained for the ministry under Doak became activists in the antislavery cause in their Presbyterian ministeries in Kentucky, Ohio, Illinois, and Missouri. See Andrew E. Murray, *Presbyterians and the Negro—A History* (Philadelphia, 1966), 89-95. Kerr's support of the American Colonization Society during the time he served as editor of the Franklin Examiner could have been influenced by Doak at Tusculum Academy. Incidentally, Banta's implication that Tusculum College was associated with the Cumberland Presbyterian Church is erroneous since the school has always had ties with the mainstream Presbyterian Church, i.e., today, the United Presbyterian Church in the United States of America.
lent opportunity for acquiring sound learning for his day and generation.

It was, no doubt, the purpose of his pious parents for him to follow the ministry, and more than likely he shared in that purpose; but as his mind matured, his inclination drifted from the pulpit to the printing press, and at the age of fifteen, he abandoned college and went to Green[e]ville, at that time the most noted town in East Tennessee, where he went into the office of the Green[e]ville Register [and] where he learned the printer's trade under Benjamin Lundy.8

At the end of two or three years he [Kerr] left the Green[e]ville office9 and for the following six or seven years was in some sort a roving printer, but confined his tramps to eastern Tennessee up to 1829, when he joined the family of an uncle that was moving to Owen County, Indiana. At Louisville he left his uncle's family and tramped through southeastern Indiana, working here and there in the little printing offices he came across in the way and finally came to Hamilton, Ohio, where he worked a short time. Leaving there very soon, he went to Cincinnati, where he remained until the winter had spent its force and then returned on foot to Tennessee.

---

8 Benjamin Lundy (1789-1839), Quaker humanitarian, was the leading figure in the American antislavery movement before 1830. From Mt. Pleasant, Ohio, he moved in 1821 to Greeneville, Tennessee, where he continued to publish his new monthly antislavery paper, the Genius of Universal Emancipation. East Tennessee was the center of considerable antislavery sentiment in the very early 1800s. Lundy was invited to the area after the death of Elihu Embree who had established the first abolition newspaper in America, the Emancipator, in 1819-1820. In Greeneville, Lundy rented Embree's printing office where he learned to be a printer as well as a writer. In addition to publishing the Genius, he established a weekly newspaper, the Greeneville Register, and a monthly agricultural journal. He moved the Genius to Baltimore in the summer of 1824 in order to benefit from better mail service. See Richard Harrison Doughty, Greeneville—One Hundred Year Portrait, 1775-1875 (n.p., 1975), especially pp. 43-48. See also Thomas Earle, comp., The Life, Travels and Opinions of Benjamin Lundy . . . (Philadelphia, 1847; reprint, New York, 1971), especially pp. 20-23; and Merton J. Dillon, Benjamin Lundy and the Struggle for Negro Freedom (Urbana, Ill., 1966), especially chapters 3-5.

9 Kerr's birthdate (February 22, 1809) as given by Banta is verifiable from cemetery records at Gosport, Indiana, and the year is verifiable from the 1850 manuscript census for Johnson County. If John R. Kerr did not go to the Greeneville printing office until he was fifteen years old, that is, in 1824, then he may have had a very brief experience with Lundy who left Greeneville in the summer of 1824. Kerr undoubtedly read Lundy's nationally circulated monthly paper, and he probably worked for the weekly Greeneville Register. During the 1840s Kerr's Franklin Examiner espoused the American Colonization Society which, by that time, abolitionists criticized as a hypocritical approach to the evils of slavery. Murray, Presbyterians and the Negro, 82; Gerald Sorin, Abolitionism: A New Perspective (New York, 1972); and P. J. Staedenuus, The African Colonization Movement, 1816-1865 (New York, 1961).
In August 1831 he married Miss Mary Greene [Green], a native of his own county, and then turned School Master, teaching for some time near his old town, Greene[ville]. During this time the infirmity of his life—the failure of sight—began to manifest itself and thence on for twelve years, there never was a day that he did not look tremblingly forward to a time when a worse than midnight darkness would settle down on him forever.

In October 1834 [1833?], being at the age of twenty-six [twenty-four], with his young wife and her brother and sister, he set out in a four-horse wagon for Indiana, traveling by way of the Cumberland Gap, Crab Orchard, and Louisville [Kentucky], the great road along which thousands came into the State of Indiana. His first stop was made on the east side of Sugar Creek in Shelby County, where he entered a tract of land and remained a little over two years and made considerable headway clearing his farm.

In January 1837 [1834], finding that his infirmity of

---

10 The consistent omission of the third "e" in the town name "Greeneville" may have been perpetuated either by the printer or by Judge Banta. Marriage records from Greene County, Tennessee, identify John R. Kerr and Mary Green (without a final "e") as having taken out a marriage license on August 17, 1831. Marriage Records, Book A, Record 3284, County Clerk's Office, Greene County Courthouse, Greeneville, Tennessee.

11 Banta's informant, probably Mrs. Kerr, erred on the geography and possibly the chronology of Kerr's first land ownership in central Indiana. He entered his tract on October 26, 1833. As recorded in the introduction above, note four, the 160 acre tract in NW¼ Section 31, Township 13 North, Range 5 East is in Johnson County (see Figure 1) rather than "on the east side of Sugar Creek in Shelby County" as Banta wrote. Apparently no other tract in either county was entered by Kerr. Courthouse records indicate that Kerr sold his claim in Section 31 to D. Farnsworth on June 5, 1834 (the deed recorded April 2, 1835). This latter record suggests further that the Kerrs must have arrived in Johnson County at least as early as 1833 but stayed less than one year on the "farm." Deed Entry Book C, page 327, County Clerk's Office, Johnson County Courthouse, Franklin, Indiana.

12 Again the date given by Banta may be in error. Although the Kerrs sold their farm in 1834, they did not buy a town lot until December 31, 1838. Quite possibly they rented or lived with relatives during their first three or four years in Franklin. Furthermore, John R. and Mary Kerr were among seventeen organizing members of the Shiloh Cumberland Presbyterian Church, which "was organized about the year 1835, in a school-house one mile north of the present site of Amity village ..." Brant and Fuller, eds., History of Johnson County, Indiana ... (Chicago, 1888), 844; see also typescript report of Shiloh Cumberland Church Session Book dating from 1874 and including a transcription of the members from the missing original church records. The latter is available in the Fort Wayne-Allen County Library, Fort Wayne, Indiana; or in the David Demaree Banta Indiana Collection, Franklin College Library, Franklin, Indiana. Kerr's location in Franklin, rather than on the tract four miles northeast of town, would have been more accessible to the only Cumberland Presbyterian Church in the county, located some three miles southeast of Franklin. See Figure 2.
sight was growing on him, he moved to Franklin where both himself and wife had relatives living. Again he turned his attention to teaching. The old log Court House was yet standing, and in that he taught the Franklin boys and girls the rudiments of knowledge for several quarters. How long he may have wielded the birch in Franklin I do not know, but it is said "for two or three years," though I think it could hardly have been so long. During the time he trained his hand to bookkeeping and clerking in a kinsman's "store," and about this time he was elected to the office of Justice of the Peace.

Johnson County was yet [1840] in the woods and Franklin was a log village containing perhaps 350 souls all told. In the country it was rare indeed that the master of one cabin could see from his own door the cabin of another, so dense were the intervening forests. But sparse as was the population of both town and country, there began nevertheless to be developed

---

13 If Kerr came to Franklin in 1834 instead of 1837 (see footnote twelve), then he certainly could have taught school "for two or three years."

14 John R. Kerr is identified as a clerk in a list of business people prepared for the year 1841 by a physician who was in Franklin at the time. The list appears in Brant and Fuller, *History of Johnson County*, 506-507. The 1840 U.S. manuscript census for Johnson County shows Kerr to have been employed under the category "Commerce." Attached to the same 1840 manuscript is a statement signed "Nov. 16th" by "John R. Kerr, J. P.," which gives his testimony as "Justice of Peace" to the enumeration of the county by one "William C. Jones." U.S., Sixth Census, 1840, population schedules for Johnson County, Indiana (National Archives Microfilm Publication No. 704, roll 84), V, 275-76, 322.

15 The published census for 1840 reported only a county total—9,352 persons, the same figure given in the manuscript census. Although the manuscript gives no easy clue to the population of Franklin, Banta's estimate of "350 souls" seems quite reasonable. The published census for 1850 listed 12,101 persons in Johnson County and 882 in Franklin city. Although no county totals are actually recorded in the manuscript census, the addition of subtotals given after each township enumeration or in recapitulations for each of two census districts yields totals of 12,060 and 12,228 respectively. A review of all individual entries today indicates 12,101 persons, thereby suggesting that someone checked the totals before publication. However, it is virtually impossible to verify figures for the county-seat town of Franklin because no distinction is made in the manuscript between in-town and open-country dwellings in Franklin Township. The manuscript census reported 1,057 persons in 162 dwellings compared to the 882 persons listed in the published census. The manuscript census includes no street or lot identification, and no contemporary map exists (see reconstructed map, Figure 3). A reexamination, based in part upon consideration of the occupation of the head of the household, reveals a possible 961 inhabitants in 172 living units including boarding houses and hotels. U.S., Seventh Census, 1850, population schedules for Johnson County, Indiana (National Archives Microfilm Publication No. M-432, roll 155), 302; U.S., Sixth Census, 1840, population schedules for Johnson County, V, 325; U.S., Sixth Census, 1840 (Washington, D.C., 1841), 357; U.S., *Seventh Census*, 1850 (Washington, D.C., 1853), 787.
some demand for a printer. The nearest printing office was at Indianapolis and the storekeepers and others, who from time to time wanted hand bills or posters to distribute or put up, found it exceedingly inconvenient to go or send [for them] to Indianapolis—twenty-two or three miles off, when the roads were good and an awful day's ride when roads were bad . . . .

Population was increasing slowly and the demand for a printer growing, and so Mr. Kerr determined to purchase a press and types and [to] open a job office. But before he had time to mature his plans, his increasing defectiveness of vision became more and more alarming. Whether in the hope of finding relief in travel or not, I am not aware, but sometime in 1837 he returned to East Tennessee on a visit to his friends. About the same time, he went to Cincinnati where he remained a few months under treatment of the then celebrated Dr. Muss[ely], who, finally, told him that blindness was his ultimate fate. The nerves of sight were yielding to paralysis, he said, and there was no hope. In spite of the impending calamity, however, the little job office was bought and moved into one of the two rooms of his house which stood on the west side of Water street, hard by Abdallah Thompson's Carding Machine, and within a stone's throw of the present [1884] High School building [see Franklin map, Figure 3]. Here the little machinery was adjusted and the types distributed in the cases with his own deft hands, and over the door was put up the first sign of the kind ever seen in Johnson County—PRINTING OFFICE.

By the time all this was done, one eye had failed entirely, and it was so evident that Dr. Muss[ely]'s prediction of a state of total blindness was fast approaching fulfillment that whatever of hope the unfortunate printer may have indulged before now gave way; and, hence forward, he never ceased to look without a ray of hope his immitigable fate full in the face.

How many are there, who would not have become discouraged as the darkness came in and have given up to a hopeless

---

grief over such a misfortune? Not so with John R. Kerr. Speaking of this very time in his life to the writer, many years after, he said, "The one eye, defective as it was, served me very well for reading and working and I managed quite well to get along with it." And so he went on bravely and even cheerfully at his work. He printed hand bills, circulars, addresses, tickets and whatever else his customers asked for. It must be remembered there was no local newspaper to be circulated in the county at that day, nor for that matter was there any circulation of newspapers at all. A few were no doubt taken and read—more likely to be under, than over, a dozen in all. The legal advertisements were printed in the Indianapolis papers, as the old files of these papers in the city library bear testimony; but the merchant who wanted to advertise his wares, the candidate who wanted to distribute a circular letter among his friends and all others, who had a private enterprise to blazon forth in printer's ink, went to John R. Kerr's printing office. And the work to be done was not inconsiderable.

For several years Mr. Kerr, with one eye gone and the other defective but still answering his purpose for reading, setting his types, and printing his forms, kept on with his job work. The eclipse of one eye prolonged the sight of the other most likely and, while it lasted, he determined to make the most of it. He worked on and read on. Customers were never turned off and every spare hour he gave to his books. He was one of those men who hungered for the printed page, and let those who love their books think how keenly he must have felt his approaching misfortune on that account.

It would no doubt be an interesting sight to most of us, if to-day, we had in our little book case the books in their old bindings, owned and red [read] by John R. Kerr. The faithful wife who survives as his widow and who sacrificed her own vision in her unselfish devotion to him, remembers some of the books that were in that case, the titles of which are printed here in italics; and we may guess at the others. Doubtless a few stray copies of Scott's Novels17 had found their way into the Hoosier villages at that early day, and although it is said that Mr. Kerr "had no taste for trash," we may assume that he read every one of these books he could get hold of. And as Miss

17 The works of Sir Walter Scott (1771-1832), famous Scots novelist and poet, were available widely in the United States in the 1830s and 1840s.
Edgeworth’s tales were quite fashionable about that time and were looked upon as very moral tales at that, it is [not] unfair to assume that he read some of them also. Of course he read Milton, the Course of Time and the Night Thought, for they were not only fashionable but their semi-religious cast would commend them to him. But he did not confine himself to religious poetry altogether, for we know that Byron, wicked as the Lord was reputed to be even then, and Shak[es]peare, were among his favorites.

And next we have the essayist. What cultured gentlemen of the last generation did not own and read too The Spectator, The Rambler and kindred works? Certainly he owned The Spectator and I have no doubt his was the only copy in the county at that time.

Now, what histories? Josephus was one. His aged widow does not put that in her list, but her memory is at fault, I’ll be bound! Everybody made a pretence of reading Josephus fifty years ago. That was accounted a religious book and even less than fifty years ago, good old Presbyterian mothers allowed their boys to read it on the long Sabbath afternoons; and we may rest assured that John R. Kerr read it from cover to cover. Let us pity him!

---

18 Maria Edgeworth (1767-1849), born in England and matured in Ireland, was a novelist whose works focused upon Irish life. Her Novels and Tales, full of commonsense observations and moral commentary, were published in an eighteen-volume collection in 1832. Many editions of her works were circulated in America.

19 John Milton (1608-1674), famous English poet, is best known for his Paradise Lost which first appeared in ten books in 1667. Numerous editions were published in the United States in the first half of the nineteenth century, usually entitled Paradise Lost: A Poem in Twelve Books.

20 Robert Pollok (1798-1827) was a Scots theological student when he wrote The Course of Time, considered no mean achievement for a young person but needing many refinements. The author died shortly after the first publication, but the work appeared in the United States in more than twenty editions, usually entitled The Course of Time: A Poem in Ten Books.

21 Edward Young (1683-1765) was a prominent English poet whose chief work was entitled in full The Complaint; or Night Thoughts on Life, Death and Immortality. Night Thoughts was published in several parts and numerous editions during Young’s lifetime and went through many American editions in the 1800s.

22 Essays by Joseph Addison (1672-1719) issued in serial form in the Spectator (London, 1711-1714) were gathered into volumes published in several later editions. The Rambler, essays imitating the Spectator in serial form (1750-1752) by Samuel Johnson (1709-1784), went through many editions in the nineteenth century.

23 Flavius Josephus (ca. 37 A.D.-95 A.D.) was a Jewish historian and soldier who wrote the famous Antiquities of the Jews. His complete works have appeared in many English editions.
He read, perhaps, Pitkin's History of the United States, and maybe Ramsey's History of the American Revolution, and, for aught I know, Robertson's History of America. About that time those two last named works were printed as serials in a Columbus, Ohio, newspaper. However, whether he read them or not, we may rest assured he did read Weem's Washington, Harry's [Horry's] Marion, Eaton's Jackson, and Flint's Boone; and we know that he read Hume, Tytler [Tytler],

---

24 Timothy Pitkin (1766-1847), statesman, historian, and economist, wrote A Political and Civil History of the United States of America From the Year 1763 to the Close of the Administration of President Washington (2 vols., New Haven, 1828). Pitkin also produced A Statistical View of the Commerce of the United States of America . . ., published in various editions from 1816 to 1835.

25 David Ramsay (1749-1815), American physician and historian, wrote several histories, but his most ambitious project was History of the United States from Their First Settlement as English Colonies, in 1607, to the Year 1808 . . . (3 vols., Philadelphia, 1816-1817). The best-known editions were published posthumously, though earlier editions were in print. These volumes were also included in his Universal History Americanized, published in twelve volumes in 1819.

26 William Robertson (1721-1793), Scots churchman and historian, wrote The History of America, published originally in 1777 and in numerous editions with two, three, or four volumes. After about 1835 the work was published in Britain and the United States as a one-volume edition entitled History of the Discovery and Settlement of America.

27 Mason Locke Weems (1759-1825), American writer, book agent, and Episcopalian clergyman, wrote many moralizing tracts along with several biographies of famous men. The most notable of his oftentimes fictionalized biographies was The Life of George Washington: With Curious Anecdotes, Equally Honourable to Himself and Exemplary to his Young Countrymen (Philadelphia, 1st issued ca. 1800).

28 The Life of General Francis Marion, a Celebrated Partisan Officer, in the Revolutionary War, against the British Tories in South Carolina and Georgia (Philadelphia, 1809) was written by Mason Locke Weems in collaboration with Brigadier General Peter Horry. This was perhaps the second most popular of Weems's highly embellished biographical sketches.

29 John Henry Eaton (1790-1856), American lawyer and politician, wrote The Life of Andrew Jackson, Major General in the Service of the United States (Philadelphia, 1817). The book was begun by John Reid, who wrote chapters one through four before he died. Later editions (1828ff) were published as Memoirs of Andrew Jackson, Late Major-General and Commander-in-Chief of the Southern Division of the Army of the United States. Having married Myra Lewis, a ward of Andrew Jackson, Eaton remained devoted to the general and president throughout his life, which included service as senator from Tennessee (1818-1829); governor of Florida, appointed by Jackson (1834); and minister to Spain (1836-1840).

30 Timothy Flint (1780-1840), American frontier missionary and author, wrote the Biographical Memoir of Daniel Boone, the First Settler of Kentucky: Interspersed with Incidents in the Early Annals of the Country (Cincinnati, 1833, 1836ff), published later as The First White Man of the West; or The Life and Exploits of Col. Dan'l Boone . . . (1840s and 1850s) and The Life and Adventures of Daniel Boone . . . (after 1868).

31 David Hume (1711-1776), Scots philosopher and historian, wrote the monumental History of England (1754-1772), which became the standard account for many years.

32 Patrick Fraser Tytler (1791-1849), Scots historian and writer, produced
Gibbon,33 and Rollin.34

Now add the Bible, the *Hymn Book* and the *Pilgrim's Progress*.35 This last, he read, no doubt, as devout people read their Bibles fifty years ago—he read it and he re-read it till he knew it like some of us old fellows knew the elementary spelling book in our schoolboy days. It is a book which is still read some and always will be, but, in our pioneer days, the preachers read it from the pulpit and made it the basis of Sunday afternoon lectures; and in all Indiana newspapers, according to the testimony of Mr. Woollen in his admirable *Biographical and Historical Sketches of Indiana*,36 it was published as a serial. Of course, John R. Kerr read the *Pilgrim's Progress*—read it for the story as well as for the theology it contained.

And now we have rather a formidable list of books after all, but it must be remembered that with one or two exceptions, John R. Kerr owned the largest private library in all of Johnson County.37

Pleasant as it may be to linger among these old books and call up visions of their time-stained pages and their clumsy
bindings, there came a day when a sight of them no longer gladdened the heart of their owner. On the 4th day of January 1844, without pain, without an immediate warning of any kind the light went out for him, forever. John R. Kerr was blind and the loved books were piled up on their shelves, and never read more by him.

Now what was he to do? He was thirty-five years old and dependent upon his press and types for a livelihood for himself and wife. After the first flurry has passed by he begins to recognize that his affliction had come upon him merciful in its manner. For years and years he has been in a slowly deepening twilight and has been literally feeling his way all the time. Had he been suddenly struck blind like Saul of Tarsus, he would have been helpless as he, but his years of twilight had been years of schooling. He had been training himself to do without eyes. He had been educating the hand, the ear, the foot, to serve him in perpetual darkness. Mayhap, he had been developing another and hitherto latent sense—a sense unknown to the schools, for he went right on with his printing work the same as ever. His was the only place where printing could be done and the people continued to come for their bills, their posters, their circulars, their "cards to the public"; and the blind printer went on with his type setting, his form making, his press work. Happily, his patrons were as uncritical as they were generous, and his work gave satisfaction and John R. Kerr continued to eat the bread of industry.

Up to 1840 party lines were scarcely established with any certainty in Johnson County. Every presidential majority had been cast for Democratic electors and every gubernatorial majority save one had been cast for the Democratic candidate, and that exception was for David Wallace, the Whig candidate in 1837. But when it came to candidates for local offices, men were much in the habit of voting for those they liked best, regardless of partisan politics. Samuel Herrnott (Herriott), who, while serving a term as Clerk of the Circuit Court attended thirty-two log rollings one Spring, and who went to all the house and barn raisings for miles and miles around, never failed of an election when he offered himself as a candidate, outspoken a Whig as he was. Neither did old John Smiley.38

38 John Smiley was appointed in 1823 by Governor William Hendricks to be the first sheriff of Johnson County. Smiley operated a mill on Sugar Creek (see Figure 1) for many years but also remained quite active in Democratic politics. See David D. Banta, Historical Sketch of Johnson County, Indiana (Chicago, 1881), 28-31 and 117-18.
But in 1840 party lines were laid down so broadly and clearly that there never after was any getting over them. That year was one of the remarkable years in American politics. Its history has never been adequately told. A Democratic editor would have said the people were insane; a Whig, that they were wild with excitement. When the future psychologist comes to discuss the laws that produce and govern the contagion of sentiment, he will give as an example of the existence of such contagion, the "Log Cabin and Hard Cider" campaign of 1840. "Tippecanoe and Tyler too" run [ran]39 like wild fire from one end of the country to the other, and when the contagion had spent itself and men dropped back from their state of political exaltation into a normal condition, they found nearly everywhere that many lasting political changes had taken place meanwhile. Many an old Whig hulk was left high and dry by the receding flood of that year.

Excitement ran high in Franklin as elsewhere, and out of it came a bit of political bravado, accompanied by a [long-remembered] fight between two Franklin citizens, Henry Banta, a Whig, and John Ritchey, a Democrat.... The Democrats had run up a flag on the Court House steeple, after which the Whigs run [ran] one above it. This engendered bad blood and while the Democrats were preparing to lower the Whig flag, threats were openly made of shooting the man who attempted it, and as there were a plenty of rifles in the crowd and a great deal of whisky, the cooler heads on both sides were uneasy. Fortunately, Banta and Ritchey became involved in a controversy over the affair which led to a fight between them, and during their engagement the inflamed crowd turned aside to see the result.

In those days there were but few Johnson County men even who would not look with a good deal of complacency at an old fashioned fist fight. No one ever anticipated any very serious issue to such a battle. It was expected that a belligerant would knock with his clenched fist with all his might and main; he might in a pinch, bite, would be quite apt to scratch and if the worst came to worst, he would gouge at an eye; but no one every dreamed of a knife or pistol being used, and so most men looked on complacently till one or the other cried "Enough!" That was the case on this occasion, and there came

---

39 The letter "a" in Banta’s handwriting easily could have been mistaken for "u" in this case and in the next paragraph.
such a funny ending to it all that the crowd forgot the flags and got in a good humor. There were mud holes sometimes in those days to be seen even in the public square of Franklin, and it happened there were some on this occasion.

During the battle the two belligerants rolled into one [mudhole], of such a depth of soft and slippery mud, that they were compelled to give up the contest and scramble out to dry land to avoid smothering, and when they got out they presented such a pitiable sight in their oozy coats and their ardor was so manifestly cooled, that the crowd, already restored to the best of humor, gave way to uproarious laughter. In the meantime the flags had been so adjusted as to float from a common height, and all were satisfied. To this disturbance old men long afterwards attributed the beginning of that strict drawing of party lines, so long a feature in the political history of Johnson County; but it is evident to my mind that the disturbance was a result not a cause. It was due to the same forces that brought about the era of strict partisanship. At any rate, from 1840 on, men "voted the ticket" in Johnson County with a unanimity that seldom failed to gratify those old "wheel horses," [Judge] Franklin Hardin and Dr. James Ritchey, and the Whigs held no more offices ever after.

In 1844 Mr. [James K.] Polk was made President and his administration was marked by many questions of national significance that demanded public attention. The Oregon boundary question, crystallized in the alliterative "Fifty-four forty or fight," and the Mexican question may be mentioned as the two most prominent. Since the administration of Mr. [James] Madison with its War of 1812, no such universally interesting questions had been presented to the people of this country.

Blind as he was, John R. Kerr kept abreast of the times. His devoted wife read books, papers, pamphlets for him, and no man discerned the signs of the times more accurately than he. He was a Democrat and in full sympathy with every Democratic measure and in the latter half of 1845, the thought

---

40 Judge Franklin Hardin came to northwestern Johnson County in 1825 as a teenage youth and became a frontier lawyer and judge. Active in law and politics for more than fifty years, Hardin contributed many reminiscences to Banta's *Historical Sketch of Johnson County*. An extensive biography, probably written by Banta, is found in J. H. Beers & Co., pubs., *Atlas of Johnson County, Indiana* . . . (Chicago, 1881), 81-82, and in Brant and Fuller, *History of Johnson County*, 899-901.

41 Dr. James Ritchey was one of the first two physicians to settle in Johnson County. See Banta, *Historical Sketch of Johnson County*, 117, and Brant and Fuller, *History of Johnson County*, 506-507.
occurred to him that the time was propitious for him to establish a Democratic paper in Johnson County, and he at once made it known to the public, and met with such encouragement, that on the 13th day of December 1845 he issued the initial number of the Franklin Examiner, the first newspaper ever printed in the County.

Three hundred and fifty subscribers at one dollar each had been procured by interested personal and partisan friends. The writer retains a vivid recollection of the drumming for subscribers in his neighborhood. He was a boy then [aged twelve], and subscribed for the paper—the first paper he ever subscribed for and the first that ever came regularly to the house—and twenty-five cents of the subscription money which was not paid in advance, came from a coon skin, which was taken from a hollow ash tree whither its owner had been tracked in a February snow. That coon skin the writer valued at half a dollar, half the price of his paper, but the rascally fur-buyer talked it down to a quarter, mainly on the ground that it was "February fur"; and so the subscriber had to look to the hens for the remainder of his subscription money.

Those were punitive days. But two men in all "Shiloh" (a Johnson County neighborhood) up to that time, ever "took" a paper—are [one], the Presbyterian, and the other, the Liberty Hall Gazette. But more than a dozen Examiners, done up in a square packet and smelling strongly of printer's ink, were laid upon the little cherry wood table that stood beneath the old unpainted box pulpit in the old Shiloh log Church every Sunday morning; and every subscriber walked proudly up and took

---

42 Banta's considerable involvement in Democratic politics, especially as a writer and sometime editor in Franklin papers from about 1859 to 1870, undoubtedly prompted him to set the political stage for the introduction of Johnson County's first newspaper. The time was ripe and John R. Kerr was in place.

43 The Presbyterian, with some variations of title, was published continuously from 1831 to 1948, when it was absorbed by Presbyterian Life. The magazine, published in Philadelphia, served the main body of American Presbyterians.

44 From December, 1815, to October, 1857, the Liberty Hall and Cincinnati Gazette was published as a weekly in Cincinnati. The paper was a combination of two weekly papers founded in 1804: Liberty Hall and Cincinnati Mercury (1804 to 1809), which became simply Liberty Hall in 1809, and Cincinnati Gazette (1804 to 1813?). From 1825 to 1840 the weekly and the Cincinnati Daily Gazette were edited by one of the outstanding editors of the time, Charles Hammond. R. Carlyle Buley comments: "Under the editorship of Charles Hammond, 1825-40, this paper had no peer in the Northwest; its cover [sic] of politics, agriculture, education, and general affairs was excellent; its editorials were widely copied." See R. Carlyle Buley, The Old Northwest: Pioneer Period, 1815-1840 (2 vols., Indianapolis, 1950), II, 635; see also pp. 515-16.
out his own paper—especially so walked every boy subscriber [see Figure 1 for location of Shiloh].

How many newspapers were received by citizens of Franklin at the time the Examiner was projected, is not known . . . . In 1841 Dr. Pierson Murphy and Fabius M. Finch the lawyer, were subscribers to the Louisville Weekly Journal; William H. Overstreet, Jesse Williams and Samuel Herriott the Indianapolis Journal and the latter the Philadelphia Dollar Weekly in addition; Dr. James Ritchey and George King the Indianapolis Weekly Sentinel; Alexander Wilson and Abdallah Thompson the Emancipator; the Rev. David Munfort [Munfort] the Presbyterian Standard; Dr. Dannel McKee the Greensburg Repository and John R. Kerr the Knoxville Register. Other persons were subscribers no doubt, and other papers may have been taken at the time, but the list of both

---

45 Shiloh neighborhood was Banta's boyhood home in western Johnson County.
46 The Louisville Weekly Journal was published from 1831 to 1868, when it was joined with the Louisville Courier to form the well-known daily Louisville Courier-Journal.
47 In Indianapolis the Daily Indiana State Journal was published from 1842 to 1853 and the Indiana State Journal was published as a weekly and/or tri-weekly from 1842 to 1904.
48 The Philadelphia Dollar Weekly was published also as Pennsylvanian (1832-1854) and as Dollar Weekly Pennsylvanian (1854-1861).
49 George King was the prime mover in the organization of Johnson County in 1822 and in the establishment of the county seat at Franklin where he was an original settler. King became one of the county's biggest landowners and sometime land speculator. Although a prominent Presbyterian, he donated land for the establishment of the Baptist-related Franklin College. King died in 1869 in the brick house he built in 1828 (see Figure 3). See Banta, Historical Sketch of Johnson County, 24-27, 119; also see Banta in Brant and Fuller, History of Johnson County, 307-15.
50 The paper in the 1840s was entitled the Indiana State Sentinel and was issued as a weekly from 1841 to 1896.
51 The Emancipator was published by the American Anti-Slavery Society or Free Soil party from the 1830s to the 1850s.
52 It is probable that the Reverend David Monfort, minister of the Franklin Presbyterian Church (Old School) from 1830 to 1850, took the Presbyterian. See footnote 43. The Union List of Serials lists the Presbyterian Standard as a publication in Charlotte, North Carolina, from 1858 to 1931, which is after both Kerr and Monfort had departed Franklin. Kerr, a Cumberland Presbyterian, was a neighbor and apparently a close friend of Monfort (see Kerr and Monfort houses, Figure 3) for they shared official duties in local endeavors, e.g., American Colonization Society and Johnson County Bible Society. Monfort received more recognition in the Examiner than other local clergymen, and his farewell sermon was noted especially in an editorial on November 2, 1850.
53 Dr. J. H. Donnell was another early physician who held an important piece of land, known as Donnell Hill, in the center of the county (see Figure 1).
54 The Greensburg [Indiana] Repository was in existence as a weekly during the 1840s.
55 The Knoxville [Tennessee] Register would have given Kerr a tie with his old home state.
given is believed to be fairly complete. Facts like these, signify much, when we come to make up our estimates of pioneer times in our State. There is more than one man living in Franklin to-day [1884] who subscribes for more periodical reading matter, than was taken by the entire town at the time of which I am writing.\footnote{Banta must have had some personal files which provided information on periodical subscriptions. Having written several chapters for Brant and Fuller, \textit{History of Johnson County}, he probably also helped gather data for other chapters. On pages 506-507 of Brant and Fuller's book, a list of businessmen in Franklin is identified as coming from Dr. J. H. Donne\footnote{In 1841, the date Bank gives for the above list of periodical subscriptions.} (see footnote 53) in Franklin. This gave one mail a day, each way, and more than that, Franklin had never had. A "cross mail," as John R. Kerr}

When the publication of the \textit{Examiner} was begun, work on the Madison Railroad had been in progress for nine years, and the cars had reached Edinburg the September before. It was nearly two years, however, ere the track was laid to Franklin [see Figure 1].\footnote{Kerr frequently reported in the \textit{Examiner} on the progress of the railroad.} They built railroads slowly in those days, but if we bear in mind the general indifference of the people to such an enterprise, not to mention the positive opposition shown by some, we need not wonder at it. There were men—men of character and prominence at that—in Johnson County, as well as in other counties along the line, who grew eloquent in picturing the evils that would follow the advent of the locomotive. The teamsters, who were many, would be impoverished; the blacksmiths and the wagon makers would be bankrupted, and the merchants would put up the price of the things they had to sell and put down the price of the things the farmers had to sell, and the latter would, in consequence, be ruined.\footnote{The Franklin \textit{Examiner} also reported and/or anticipated some positive effects of the railroads and turnpikes. In an editorial (August 25, 1849) entitled "Our Town," Kerr stated: "The plank road will shortly be constructed, connecting us more intimately with the rich district of country in the direction of Mooresville, which will doubtless turn a much larger amount of trade to this point, from that quarter." In a later editorial (June 7, 1851) also entitled "Our Town," Kerr prodded enterprising citizens saying "no point that we know of, at this time presents a more eligible site for manufactures of various kinds, in which steam may be employed as a motive power. ... We occupy a position highly advantageous for the distribution of commodities of general consumption in the interior of the State, having railroad or plank road communications in nearly all directions" (see Figure 1).}

The stage coach carried the mails and travelers from the end of the railroad to Indianapolis, passing, of course, through Franklin. This gave one mail a day, each way, and more than that, Franklin had never had. A "cross mail," as John R. Kerr
afterwards called it in his paper, belongs to a later age. Not infrequently neither paper nor letter would be left at the Franklin office. Men did not take many papers as we have seen; neither did they write many letters. For various reasons they had not the knack of writing letters as we have it. There were no pens except goose quill pens, no inks except homemade ink, no envelopes and paper; and postage was dear and money scarce. About this time a citizen of Franklin, a young doctor, received two newspapers from an Iowa friend, who wrote a little message on the margin of one of them. The Franklin P. M. got wind of the affair and notified the young doctor that unless he paid fifty cents letter postage on the two papers he would report his Iowa friend to the Department; and so, to save the friend, the doctor paid his fifty cents—and his last fifty cents at that, over to the postmaster. Then he took his revenge on the Iowa man. He wrote him a letter, admonishing him to no more violate the postal laws by writing on the margins of newspapers, and sent it, well knowing that it would take all the money his Iowa friend had to redeem the letter—a quarter of a dollar.

The population of Franklin at the time Mr. Kerr began the publication of the *Examiner* was about 550. There were about

---

59 Kerr wrote an editorial entitled "A Cross Mail" on October 27, 1846, pointing out a problem in Franklin's geographical location: "It must appear somewhat singular to others as well as it does to us, that Franklin has never succeeded in getting a cross mail. The routes running east and west, crossing above and below this place, seem as if they might have been established almost with a view to avoid Franklin. At present we have no direct mail communication with three out of five adjoining counties. All letters, and papers from this place for Shelbyville—the nearest county seat, distance about 17 miles—must travel by mail at least 40 miles before they reach their destination. And the route to Martinsville the nearest county seat on the other side, is no shorter. . . . And a mail route from this place to Morgantown, or to Georgetown in Brown Co. is as much needed as either of the others, as upon it, a post office might be established affording facilities to a large number of citizens in the south-west part of the county, who at present, as to mail communications are to us almost as inconveniently situated as the inhabitants of Maine or Georgia. We believe as a commercial point, this place is of sufficient importance now, to make some additional mail facilities necessary, for the benefit of citizens here, as well as those of the country east and west of us." Four years later (September 7, 1850), after north-south rail connections had been completed (in 1847), Kerr again commented in the *Examiner* about the lack of a cross-mail route and the irregularity of the mail service in general. Although various turnpikes were being completed, the long-discussed rail connection from Martinsville and Morgantown to Franklin was not completed until 1853 and the rail link with Shelbyville not until 1866 (see Figures 1 and 3).

60 Banta was fond of story telling, sometimes embellishing historical incidents in literary or journalistic style. He may have known about this incident since his family and other relatives had moved to Iowa. Banta himself spent more than a year in southeastern Iowa in 1852 and 1853 before returning to Franklin College and then to Indiana University.
100 dwellings and eight or ten business houses in the town all of which (excluding the court house, the seminary and the college) were frame or log houses, save three [see Figure 3].

From December 13th 1845 to February 13th 1852, John R. Kerr continued with commendable regularity to issue the Examiner. When for any reason he failed to publish at the time appointed, he always got out an extra which he never counted against his subscribers, but printed fifty-two full size papers for a volume. John R. Kerr was a thoroughly honest man and would have scorned the tricks resorted to by some publishers of country newspapers in those degenerate days, to cheat subscribers out of their just dues by false numbering.

I have before me files of these old Examiners—the only files I apprehend in existence, and when I sat down to write this paper, it was my purpose to make the matter—selected, and the editorial, contained in these old papers a sort of text by way of illustrating some of the great changes that have taken place in newspaper make-up during the last forty years; but these accumulating sheets warn me that I have not the space. I will say, however, (but without reference to any parallelism between the ancient and the modern,) that John R. Kerr never forgot the fact that through his paper he was a teacher. He recognized the power of the press for good or evil, and most worthily he strove to make it for good.

The second courthouse, replacing the original log structure, was completed in 1832 as a two-story brick building. See Brant and Fuller, History of Johnson County, 687. This structure served well until destroyed by fire on May 18, 1849. Kerr reported in the Examiner about the fire, which destroyed eight buildings. In the paper of May 19 Kerr reported that the "Great Fire" was started by an incendiary in a cabinet shop. An article and editorial gave details on all the buildings destroyed, noting that courthouse records were saved. In the next issue (May 26, 1849), Kerr printed on page one a letter suggesting ways to improve community preparations for fire, on page two an editorial entitled "A Fire Engine," and on page three an advertisement by a businessman seeking honesty in paying bills due at his burned-out store.

One such delay in printing resulting from a paper shortage was explained in the Examiner on March 2, 1847: "A few articles on the outside of our paper have stood in type until they are a little old, as we could not issue last week for want of paper. We have however received some paper at last, and the carriage on it from the depot at Edinburg to this place, (10 miles) cost us just $225 per hundred." The perennial problem of paper shortages for early Indiana editors is discussed in Butler, "Indiana Newspapers," 303-306.

This statement further verifies that Banta did indeed preserve the papers which were later microfilmed.

Kerr's striving to serve the public trust is captured in his newspaper motto in the 1850s:

"Determined Still As Reason Gives Us Light,
To Throw Our Influence In the Scale of Right."

Twice he printed his "Alphabet of Short Rules" for the good life, the second printing (June 9, 1849), being very slightly revised. For example, under "P" in
As I look over the old frayed, dog-eared, yellow files before me, I am struck with the good sense, the educated judgement, and the strict morality characterizing all of his editorial work. Of editorial writing, he did but little. It was not the fashion in his day for country newspaper editors to do much with the pen. The local editor was unknown and local items only now and then appeared. When Mr. Kerr did write a leader, he was truthful, temperate, manly, and sensible, and in making his selections, he was careful, prudent and conscientious. I do not think he ever wrote a scurrilous line concerning an opponent in his life, although he was capable of defending himself and his cause with vigor, when occasion demanded it; and he never permitted an obscene paragraph or jest to foul the pages of his paper. And for all this the people of Johnson County owed him a larger debt than the one they paid in dollar subscriptions for his paper. The judgement and the good taste he exercised in the selection of prose and poetry, of story and anecdote, of scientific article, historical paper, and record of travel, had much to do in building up and fostering a literary taste in many Johnson County families, that is felt to this day. I know this is a high encomium, but I believe it to be a just one, and I therefore make it. For nearly seven years he continued weekly to distribute his papers to his subscribers, and for his faithful consecutions work during those years, he is entitled to our remembrance.

John R. Kerr's editorial life was an uneventful one. He was a home stayer, as indeed nearly all men from necessity were, in January 31, 1846, he wrote: "Pay in advance for your newspaper" and in 1849 he wrote "Postpone nothing you can do to-day." In 1846 he finished by saying "Zealously pursue the path of duty & you will be happy," whereas in 1849 he wrote "Zealously pursue the right path & success will attend you."

Kerr did include numerous short reports plus accompanying editorial notes, e.g., the editorial on "A Fire Engine" and health problems. In one of his last issues Kerr alluded in one column to reports in another column of two meetings the same night (January 17, 1852): "Fire Meeting" and "Rat Meeting." The town had lost several business houses and the courthouse in the "Great Fire" of May, 1849, and had just endured another business fire on January 15, 1852. And the town had yet to solve a ten-year-old battle with the Norway rat, the arrival of which seemed to parallel urban development. John V. Bergen has compiled from available Franklin newspapers a nineteenth-century review of "The Rats of Franklin," published in Nostalgia News (The Johnson County Historical Society Museum), No. 5 (April 1, 1978), 10-11.

On July 7, 1846, Kerr was induced to print a polite but bitter reaction to a degrading remark about the Examiner attributed to a visiting big-city journalist. Upon discovery that the comment was the result of a hoax perpetrated by one of his own friends, he published a retracting statement.

This appears to be an obvious example of error in typesetting, possibly because of illegibility in Banta's handwritten manuscript.
his day. Seldom, indeed, did any man leave the County, after the railroad was completed, save the merchant, who went to distant towns to buy his goods for many years. Few men went to Indianapolis save the "member of the Legislature," the lawyers and the delegates to the conventions. There are a good many men living in Johnson County to-day (1884) who were born here, or else were brought to the County when quite young, who never saw Indianapolis until they were grown. Of course the locomotive changed all this, but it took time—took years. John R. Kerr not only stayed at home because it was the fashion of the times, but also because of his infirmity. There was for him no inducement to go from home. He attended no conventions, made no journeys; but week in and week out was at his post superintending the publication of his Examiner. Nevertheless he enjoyed a sort of fame, the fame that followed in the wake of success achieved as a printer, in spite of blindness. Far and near he was known as the "Blind Printer." Newspapers at home and abroad spoke kindly words of him and his neighbors and patrons, appreciating in some sort the difficulties he had to overcome, not only gave him an appreciative support for the poverty of the times but generously overlooked faults in his printing that they would doubtless have criticised in others.

In the management of his office there was nothing that he could not turn his hand to except, perhaps, mailing his papers. He always kept one or more assistants, one of whom, his cousin Frank Kerr, was with him many years. The "boys" in the office read the exchanges to him and he was thus enabled to make up his selected matter. Sometimes he wrote his editorials, using for the purpose a machine devised for use of the blind, but usually he put his editorials in type without writing. While a boy, I often visited his printing office and saw him "sticking type." If he was working on "copy," Frank Kerr would line out a sentence, which he would slowly reduce to type and when the sentence was finished his Mentor would read another; and thus his work was done at the case.

By reason of the long continued illness of his wife, he sold the Examiner in 1852 and moved to Gosport where he and Frank Kerr, soon after embarked on the publication of the Gosport Chronotype which they conducted for three years, but

---

68 Frank Kerr is listed in the 1850 manuscript census as Francis M. Kerr, aged twenty-four, occupation printer, and living with John R. and Mary Kerr. U.S., Seventh Census, 1850, population schedules for Johnson County, p. 150.
with no great success. In 1854 President [Franklin] Pierce appointed him postmaster at that place, an office which he satisfactorily filled for about sixteen years—through three years of Pierce's, all of [James] Buchanan's, [Abraham] Lincoln's, [Andrew] Johnson's, and up till in the third year of [Ulysses S.] Grant's administration when he was removed to make place for a Republican placeman. In connection with the post office he kept a stock of books and stationery, being assisted in his work by his wife and two nieces.

As a rule the ease with which the blind go from place to place and the manual dexterity they exhibit is astonishing to those in full possession of the sense of sight. John R. Kerr not only was dexterous as a printer but carried his cleverness in his other avocations. I copy from a letter written by John R. Kelley a kinsman who knew him well in the last years of his life:

"It was wonderful how much he could do for himself in handling the mail, and finding any book he wanted. He knew where everything was, and kept the money so that he was always correct in making change. He never forgot where he put anything, and could find anything when the rest failed.

Mr. Kerr kept a partial set of carpenters tools and could make better use of them, than many persons with the use of eyesight. For years he sawed and split all the fire wood used in the family and carried in all the coal and wood.

With use of a straight-edge he could spade a bed in the garden and do it well. He could drive a nail with as much certainty as any one.

During the war he secured a Bible in eight volumes printed in raised letters, which he read through three times before he died.

In 1876 his wife's sight failed her, and she became a sharer in his blindness. Never more could she read to him as for more than thirty years she had been doing, and as she sacrificed her own sight by doing, but, thence on the reader read for her as well as for him.

Sometime in 1879 he had a paralytic stroke and though he recovered measurably from the effect of it, he was never afterwards well. Gradually his vitality left him, until in the summer of 1880, dropsy was developed and it was then apparent that his end was near. He kept on his feet, however, up to the 18th of October, maintaining his habitual cheerfulness all the time, and was able to go the polls at the October election that year and cast his vote for the Democratic candidates. On the 21st of the month he died, being in the seventy-first year of his age.

It is needless to say that John R. Kerr was a deeply religious man. He never forgot his early training and never ceased to maintain his Church relation. He died in the communion of the Southern Methodist Church, the Church of his first love not having an organization accessible to him during his last year[s]."

---

69 This is another printer's error and/or problem in reading manuscript.
70 The original letter does not survive. The unusual spelling of the name "Kelley" most likely should be "Kelley."
71 Although there is no closing quotation mark, it appears that this is the end of the Kelley letter. The existence of the Cumberland Presbyterians in...
Here I end. I have written this brief sketch as a labor of love. I had little personal acquaintance with the subject of it—never talked with him face to face but twice in my life, but I cannot forget, that when books, and especially books that boys love to read, were scarce, and when newspapers were rarely found in any country household, John R. Kerr, through the *Examiner*, did much to enable me to gratify a budding love of reading and if it be sound reading, much toward that. He was not a great man, perhaps not a talented man, as that word now-a-days goes, but he was a true man, a faithful man, an earnest man, a pure man, a conscientious man, an honest man; and is deserving of remembrance by those he benefitted. For all, I bring this tribute and offer it upon the altar of his memory.

Franklin, Indiana, Jan. 30, 1884.

Gosport is suggested by notes on church history found in Blanchard, *Counties of Clay and Owen*, 719-20.