

Rush County Bicentennial
“The Father of Rush County”
By John D. Wilson

This is the third writing concerning the Rush County Bicentennial in 2022. The subject for today is William Beattie Laughlin, “The Father of Rush County”. I’ve consulted several local history books to glean a composite of information about Laughlin.

William Laughlin was born in Washington County, Pennsylvania in 1778. At the age of 14 he became an apprentice to a hatter to learn the trade of making men’s felt hats.

In 1799, at the age of 21, Laughlin attended Jefferson College, and one year later he married Ruth McKinnon.

Laughlin spent six years studying at Jefferson College. He studied surveying, law, and medicine. One of his professors was Dr. Benjamin Rush, former Surgeon General for General George Washington during the Revolutionary War. Rush was a signer of the Declaration of Independence, and he was an avid student of mental health needs and practices.

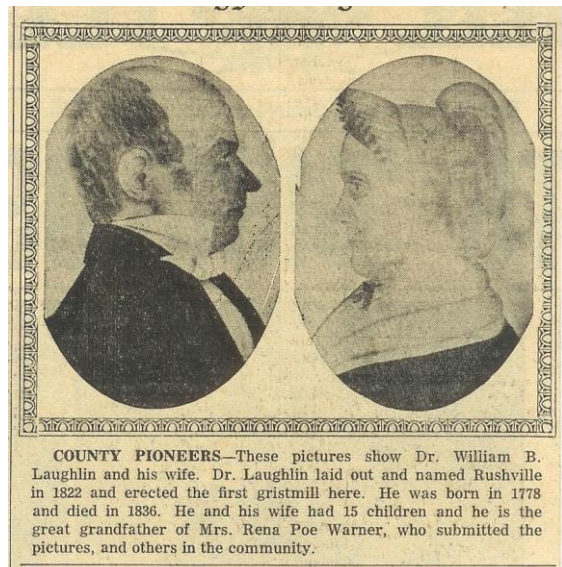
By 1812, Laughlin, Ruth, and seven of their eight children moved to Scott County, Kentucky. (The first born, Alison, had died in 1803). William taught school there for four years before deciding to move north to the Northwest Territory where land was being sold for \$2.00 per acre.

In 1816, Laughlin, Ruth and their nine children moved to Brookville, Indiana. He supported his family by making hats and teaching school. While teaching there he taught three of Indiana’s early governors – Ray, Noble, and Wallace.

In his “spare time” at Brookville, William Laughlin passed the local examination to become a medical doctor, and he became qualified to practice law in Franklin County. Also during his stay in Brookville, Laughlin was selected to travel to Corydon to assist in the effort of writing Indiana’s Constitution.

By 1820, the New Purchase area of Indiana was opened for purchase at the Federal Land Office in Brookville. Dr. Laughlin and two of his sons, Harmony and Cicero, surveyed the area west of Brookville today known as Rush County. Laughlin himself bought 160 acres of bottom land on the Flat Rock River for \$1.25 per acre.

In 1820, Laughlin, Ruth, and their eleven children moved to the Rush County area. By 1821, Indiana passed an enabling act to create out of Delaware County a new county. It was called Rush at the suggestion of William Laughlin in honor of Benjamin Rush, his instructor at Jefferson College. From 1821–1824, Laughlin had served as a State Senator.



COUNTY PIONEERS—These pictures show Dr. William B. Laughlin and his wife. Dr. Laughlin laid out and named Rushville in 1822 and erected the first gristmill here. He was born in 1778 and died in 1836. He and his wife had 15 children and he is the great grandfather of Mrs. Rena Poe Warner, who submitted the pictures, and others in the community.

The Laughlin home in Rush County was two log cabins built side by side with a “dog trot” between them. The location of the cabins was where the Mr. Freshie Doughnut Shop recently used to be. Today the new USLA Bank occupies the location. William built a grist mill on the south side of the Flat Rock just across from his new home. Timbers from clearing the land were used to build a dam across the river and maintain a constant water level to run the mill.

Dr. Laughlin and his wife Ruth decided to give 25 acres of their land for a new town to be named Rushville. The present courthouse square was part of the gift. Nathaniel and Melinda Hodges of Brown County, Ohio, gave an additional 45 acres. Zachariah Hodges of Brown County attested to the transaction. So the acreage for the original town was 70 acres.

Laughlin was hired by the county to survey the town into no less than 150 and no more than 200 building lots. He surveyed 151 city lots plus the courthouse. The layout was similar to what had been done at Connersville (each block had eight lots with north/south and east/west alleys). Each lot was 1/3 of an acre. There was room to build a cabin and small barn. The barn (later carriage house) would usually be located on the back alley.

So how did the new county pay for the survey? The lots were auctioned off to the highest bidders. Laughlin was paid \$4.00 per lot for having done the surveying. Let us do the math: Laughlin initially paid \$31.25 for the 25 acres he gave for the town. He was paid \$604.00 for surveying 151 city lots on the 70 acre site. That meant an overall profit of \$572.75.

Obviously the town of Rushville was small going only as far north as today’s Fifth Street and framed by Morgan Street on the west and Julian Street on the east. Starting from the Flat Rock River, Water Street became exactly that....a mill race. First Street was called Noble Street, Second Street was Ruth, Third Street was Elizabeth, and Fourth Street was Jennings.

In 1827, Laughlin, Ruth, and their children remained in Rush County. Actually only 12 of their 15 children remained in 1827, as three had passed away.

Again in his “spare time” William Laughlin built and financed the first school and started a library in conjunction with the school. He was a lay preacher for the Presbyterian Church and gave money to build a church. He was a member of the Whig Party, he was a Mason, and from 1832–1836, he served on the Board of Directors of Indiana University.

Obviously Dr. William B. Laughlin, like many of our early leaders, was a Jack-Of-All-Trades. His trades and professions included: hatter, teacher, doctor, lawyer, surveyor, miller, farmer, librarian, preacher, legislator, and last but not least, real estate developer and founder of Rushville.

Dr. Laughlin, his wife Ruth and their family are buried in the Lower Cemetery at the south end of Jackson Street next to the old river bed. A plaque marks the location. William Died in 1836, and his wife Ruth died in 1851.

As I did research for this article there was a difference of opinion concerning how many acres were actually given by the Laughlins for the city. Two county history books said 75 acres. The Collected Works of Jim Scott said 25 acres as did Sketches of Rush County. So I contacted the Rush County Recorder Kevin Spilman and Rush County Surveyor Marvin Rees. After some considerable digging by Kevin Spilman and help from Becky Garner, the deed verifications were found and the correct number was 25 acres. Marvin Rees helped with the description of the lots in Rushville. Thanks

to all these people for their help. The marker at the Lower Cemetery says 75 acres, so it will need to be changed.

Today Dr. William B. Laughlin and Ruth are remembered with the performing arts center at Rushville Consolidated High School named in their honor. The Laughlin Center was added to RCHS in 1984.