

Wabash Plain Dealer

Founded: 8 August 1859

Location: 27 West Canal Street, Wabash (1859–); 9 West Canal Street (1869); 25 West Canal Street (1897); 40 West Market Street (1904); 98 West Market Street (1912, 1919); East Market Street (1920s); 168–174 South Wabash Street (1932); corner of Wabash and Canal Streets, 2–4 West Canal Street (1939–69); 123 West Canal Street (1969–)

W. C. McGonigal launched the *Wabash Plain Dealer*, a Democratic party weekly, on 8 August 1859. Success came quickly, and by the end of September approximately six hundred people subscribed to the work. As with many newspapers in the mid–nineteenth century, the *Plain Dealer* changed hands often. Seven months after the first edition McGonigal sold the journal to Orris Blake, but remained at the post of editor for the publication. Blake switched the paper’s political allegiance in August 1860. The first office of the *Plain Dealer* was on the third floor of the Simon Brothers Clothing Store. The first issues were seven columns wide, much of the news presented came off of the Associated Press wire, and a year’s subscription cost \$1.00.

Blake sold the weekly to S. M. Hibben in November 1860. Sometime in early 1866 Hibben bought the *Wabash Gazette-Intelligencer* and merged it with the *Plain Dealer*. The *Wabash Gazette* was the oldest newspaper in the county, began in 1847 by George E. Gordon as a pro-Whig organ. After two fires destroyed the buildings and equipment of the paper, it was merged in 1858 with the *Intelligencer*, another Whig/Republican party supporter.

In 1866 the *Plain Dealer* suspended publication for two months, but was revived by Meredith H. Kidd in August that same year. Eight months later Kidd sold the weekly to Alanson P. Ferry and Thad Butler. A little more than a year afterward, John L. Knight acquired the journal, promptly selling half of a share in the concern to J. R. Randall.

Frank Calvert bought Randall's interest in February 1869, purchasing Knight's part in the concern in September. Under Calvert the paper was an eight-column folio that included poetry on its first page, as well as a series of biographies on famous people. The editor tried to inform his 1,248 subscribers of proper gardening techniques and on what the area's churches were doing on Sunday. Moral teachings came in the form of Sunday school lessons printed in the back pages of each edition, while political news and commentary could be found in the middle of the paper.

Calvert sold the journal to Henry H. Robinson in February 1870. Robinson changed the name of the weekly to the *Wabash Republican*, continuing to edit and publish the periodical until February 1872, when Ferry and Butler reacquired the weekly. Robinson enlarged the paper to nine columns, but kept the subscription price at \$2.00 a year. He instituted a "Children's Column" that supplied adolescents with tales of moral heroism and an "Items" section that provided neighbors in area towns with news on what was happening in the personal life of their fellow citizens. Ferry and Butler quickly restored the paper's original title to its masthead. They welcomed John Knight as a partner in February 1876. Knight stepped down as editor in 1879 and sold his share in the concern to Theron P. Keator.

In the early 1880s the paper could boast of a circulation of twenty-five hundred. Advertising sometimes filled half of the front page, and a mixture of personal and political news filled each eight-page, six-column edition. Ferry, Butler, and Keator launched a daily edition of the *Plain Dealer* during the 1880 political campaign, but afterwards the journal reverted to a weekly. Keator left the partnership in May 1881 and was replaced in July by B. M. Holman. In February 1882 the partners sold the paper to J.

H. McClung, G. C. Bacon, and H. F. Harris. In August 1885 McClung sold his stake in the firm to C. H. Newell. Two years later the trio sold the business to the Plain Dealer Company. Charles S. Haas became the paper's editor, and Warren Bigler served as the company's president. In 1902 the company bought its first Linotype machine, offering more complex printing options and a quicker printing speed.

The year 1887 marked the beginning of a period of stable ownership for the Wabash paper. A daily edition was launched on 1 July 1891. Haas remained the editor of the tabloid until February 1914, when Fred I. King took over both the post of president, also vacated by Haas, and the editor's chair. King did not serve as the editor of the journal as long as Haas, turning the duty over to Morton Stults in February 1919. During these years several changes took place in the format of the paper. Column headlines became larger and by 1912 stood out in bold contrast to the rest of the print. With the daily edition the journal reverted back to four pages per issue, and the number of columns shrank to seven. With the sports craze gaining ground, sports news began making the front page by the early 1890s. Advertising continued to be seen on the front page until after 1900. Political news, with a Republican party tint, continued to dominate the paper throughout the Plain Dealer Company era. By the 1910s the paper was more organized and divided into sections of interest, with society, sports, and editorial pages, and a classified section. Personal notes from around the county concerning marriages, visits, lawsuits, and vacations, offered the scoop on county gossip at least once a week.

The Plain Dealer Company went into receivership in May 1919. C. E. Dittmer purchased the daily, but ultimately could not make it a profitable business, and the paper fell back into receivership in December 1922. Donald M. Nixon purchased the paper in

March 1923. Three years later Nixon merged another of his newspapers, the *Wabash Times-Star*, with the *Plain Dealer*. Nixon kept the format of his predecessors, adding serials, cartoons, movie and theater notes, and gardening tips to the political and social news exhibited before 1923. National and international items were condensed into short news briefs, and pictures helped illustrate the tabloid. The price of a year's subscription rose to \$4.00 by 1924.

Both the *Times* and the *Star* had been Democratic party papers before they merged in 1903. The *Times* dated to 1884 and had been printed in the offices of the *Plain Dealer* in 1892 while its office, which had been destroyed by fire, was rebuilt. Nixon continued to run the paper until an auto accident took his life in 1934. Eugenia Nixon, later Eugenia Honeywell, ran the firm with the help of their two sons, John R. and Joseph H. By the early 1930s a large, bold headline that stretched across the entire front page greeted readers every day. Under the Nixons the size of the paper increased to eight pages per issue and the paper did not offer support to either major political party.

The mother and sons team formed Nixon Newspapers, Inc. in 1934. Merrit Sills served as the paper's editor from 1931 to 1964. Under Sills the number of columns per page increased to eight. Serials continued through the early 1940s, and personal notes remained a part of the journal until the mid-1960s. During World War II a "Men and Women in Service" column supplied the area with news of the movements, promotions, and happenings of soldiers and support staff. After World War II medical and personal advice columns made their debut in the *Plain Dealer*, and syndicated columnists reported on the events in Washington, D.C., and in Hollywood. Beginning in the 1950s the editors

considered the daily an “independent Republican newspaper,” but that label had disappeared by the late 1960s.

In 1969 a new Plain Dealer building was opened, and the old letterpresses were left behind. New offset machines were installed at the new quarters. Five years later Eugenia Nixon Honeywell died, and John R. Nixon rose to the post of president of Nixon Newspapers, Inc. At the same time Joseph Nixon stepped down as president of the *Plain Dealer*, a post he had held since 1955, so that his son, Donald M. Nixon II, could claim the presidency of the Wabash newspaper. In the mid-1970s the paper shrank to six columns and went to a paragraph block or modular format in which the news was delivered to its 8,100 subscribers in short sections rather than in a column that ran down the entire length of the page. A desire to keep the Wabash community informed of local events, and the spread of other media forms that disseminated national and international news, led to a concentration on local news by the mid-1980s. In the late 1990s a “Neighbors” column, which provided short biographical information on individuals, helped area residents get to know one another and provided a sense of intimacy that was lost after Wabash became more than a small town.

In the spring of 1998 the Paxton Media Group of Paducah, Kentucky, bought the Nixon chain. In 1999 the *Plain Dealer* employed forty people, expected sales of more than \$1 million, and had a circulation of 6,412. Don Swartz served as publisher. Joseph Slacian, a Highland native and an Indiana University journalism graduate, went to work for the Nixon chain in 1981 and was chosen as the editor of the *Plain Dealer* in 1994, a post he continued to hold in 1999.