

**Program:** An Interview with John Purdue, interpreted by speaker (via Zoom)

**Speaker:** John Norberg, retired Director, Communications for Development, Purdue University

**Introduced by:** Steve Springer

**Attendance:** 94

**Scribe:** David Culp

**Editor:** Bonnie Carter

Today's recording of the presentation can now be accessed at:

[www.scientechclub.org/zoom/457.mp4](http://www.scientechclub.org/zoom/457.mp4)

John Norberg acted the role of John Purdue in a very engaging and humorous portrayal. John is the author of the book "150 Years of Giant Leaps at Purdue University" and is a staff writer for the Lafayette Journal Courier.

John Purdue was one of the richest men in Indiana at the time of the founding of Purdue University. However, he was not the "founder" as people often think, but the "founding donor." He was born on October 31, 1802 to a very poor family in Pennsylvania. They lived in a 360 square foot log cabin. He had nine sisters and it was they who "educated" him, as he had no formal education. His family then moved to Ohio. John started his career as a school teacher. It didn't pay enough so he switched to marketing hogs and later started a dry goods store south of Columbus, OH. When he heard about the Wabash and Erie Canal being built close to Lafayette, IN, he decided to move there to take advantage of it. It turned out to be a great business decision.

He started another dry goods store there in what he called the "Purdue Block," made his fortune there, also in banking, farming and marketing hogs. During the Civil War, he lived in New York City and sold hogs to the Union Army. He was known as "The King of Pork."

After he made his fortune, he wanted to give money to charity, especially education, and wanted to start a university. He thought that Lafayette had a great need for education. In 1862 the Land Grant Act passed Congress. This act was designed to help states start public universities that would teach practical things like science, technology and agriculture. Before that most universities were private

and designed for the "elite" to make them into "gentlemen." The Land Grant Act opened up universities for the "masses."

Many cities in Indiana wanted to become the home of this Land Grant university, including Indianapolis, Bloomington and Greencastle. But the state of Indiana had gone broke from building canals and so had no money for it. John Purdue called his state senator offering \$100,000 to start the university in Battleground, IN. However, when the Fifteenth Amendment passed Congress, giving African American men the right to vote, the entire Indiana Legislature resigned and went home. Governor Conrad Baker called for new elections within one month. Then John Purdue upped his bid to \$150,000, offering 100 acres of land which he didn't own but got donations to purchase. This offer was accepted. The board of trustees started with John Purdue on it, and he said there were many arguments especially between two philosophies: John Purdue's and everyone else's.

Purdue University started classes in 1874 with a class of 36, all men. The next year, 1875, women were admitted. In 1876 John Purdue gave a talk to the students on the first day of class, and died later the same day of a stroke. He is buried on the campus.

The speaker related many stories about Purdue, including the story of Heavilon Hall which burned to the ground four days after it was dedicated; it was rebuilt nine bricks taller. Then there was the story of the battle between Purdue and IU over the building of the first medical school in Indiana

between 1900 and 1906. Purdue was originally allowed to build it, but IU was so upset that they built their own and threatened to duplicate everything Purdue was doing in engineering and agriculture. So rather than let that happen, Purdue President Winthrop Stone decided to let IU have the medical school. This was the start of cooperation between Purdue and IU on everything except sports. John Hurts was a pharmacist and doctor who founded the Purdue School of Pharmacy. He was also the head of the Board of Health and was known for his tough decisions, especially to force many businesses to shut down during the 1918 flu epidemic. The flu pandemic killed more Americans than were killed in battles in WWI.

Purdue University is known as the home of astronauts. It has produced twenty-five to date, including the first man on the moon, Neil Armstrong. Armstrong was headed to MIT but changed his mind after witnessing Purdue upset Ohio State in a football game in Columbus.

There were several other stories, but too many to include here. Thanks to John Norberg for a very interesting and entertaining talk. (Ed. note – read Norberg's book *Ever True: The First 150 Years of Purdue University*)



**John Norberg**