Marker Texts


Report
The markers commemorating Paul Dresser (born Dreiser) have been reviewed because their files contained inadequate primary sources to verify the marker texts. This report also provides additional information about Dresser and the significance of his song “On the Banks of the Wabash.”

Both markers report Dresser’s birth date in 1859, but sources disagree and claim that he was born in 1857, 1858, or 1859.¹ The U.S. Federal Census for the years 1860, 1870, and 1880 all list his birth year as “about 1858.” Both the 1860 and 1880 census records place him in Terre Haute, Indiana, but newspapers disagree on the exact location of his birth.² A pamphlet issued by the Vigo County Historical Society states that the house he reportedly grew up in was moved to Fairbanks Park on Dresser Dr. in Terre Haute in the 1960s, where it still stands today.³

The rest of the text is accurate for both markers, but each omits quite a bit of detail regarding Dresser’s life. As a young man, Dresser left home to work as an entertainer with a medicine show and later became a traveling minstrel.⁴ He eventually moved to New York, where he joined a music publishing company.⁵ During the late 1800s, he wrote many ballads, including “Just Tell Them That You Saw Me,” “The Letter That Never Came,” “My Gal Sal,” and his most popular song, “On the Banks of the Wabash.”⁶ Published in 1897, “On the Banks of the Wabash” brought fame and fortune to Dresser.⁷ The song reminisced about life along the Wabash River and achieved national popularity at the end of the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth century.⁸ The Indiana General Assembly adopted it as the official state song on March 14, 1913.⁹

The marker accurately states that Theodore Dreiser was Paul’s brother and that he wrote An American Tragedy, among other novels.¹⁰ Paul Dresser died on January 30, 1906 and was buried in Chicago.¹¹

Further Information
The “Gay Nineties” is a nostalgic term coined in the 1920s, referring to the 1890s as a period of fun and frivolity. The 1890s are a part of the larger and more commonly referenced Gilded Age.¹²

To learn more about music and popular culture at the turn of the twentieth century, see John Ogasapian, Music of the Gilded Age (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2007), preview available through GoogleBooks; and Joel Shrock, The Gilded Age (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2004), preview available through GoogleBooks.

*All newspaper articles were accessed via NewspaperArchive.com unless otherwise noted.


The 1870 census places Dresser and his family in Sullivan, Indiana. The 1880 census lists his name as Paul J. Dreiser. Other sources report that he changed his name from Dreiser to Dresser when he took up theatrical work.

3 *Birthplace of Paul Dresser*; “Niece on Visit to Paul Dresser Home Here,” *Terre Haute Star*, September 1, 1961, 1; *Vigo County Interim Report*, June 1984, 40-41.


Medicine shows featured traveling showmen who peddled miraculous cure medications in between a variety of entertainment acts. For general information about them see “Here Today, Here Tomorrow: Varieties of Medical Ephemera – Medical Show,” *U.S. National Library of Medicine*. The 1880 census reports that Dresser was working for “Agt P. Medicine,” and his obituaries state that he performed songs and comical acts as part of the medicine show.


“On the Banks of the Wabash” was published in 1897. According to an April 1898 article in the *Logansport Daily Reporter*, by that time, Dresser had already earned over $50,000 in royalties on the song.
For Indiana Code IC 1-2-6-1 and lyrics to the song, see “Indiana State Song,” Indiana Historical Bureau.

In his book, Twelve Men, Dreiser wrote that he helped his brother Paul come up with the idea for the song “On the Banks of the Wabash” and that he penned the lyrics to the first verse and chorus. Other sources, including a 1967 Terre Haute Tribune article and a 1970 article published in the Indiana Magazine of History, question this claim and state that although Dreiser may have suggested the idea, Paul likely wrote the lyrics. For more information on the debate, see Richard Dowell’s article, “‘On the Banks of the Wabash’: A Musical Whodunit,” cited above.
