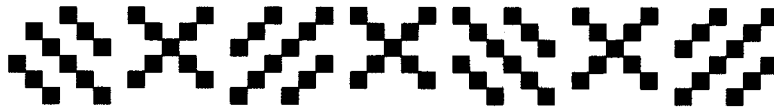


Agent of Empire:  
William Conner on the Indiana Frontier,  
1800-1855

*John Lauritz Larson  
and  
David G. Vanderstel\**



Two hundred miles southwest of Detroit, deep in the virgin forests of central North America, the placid, winding White River slowly drained ancient woodlands. In these dense forests, river valleys like this one had made homes for fur-bearing animals and for people who hunted them, time out of mind. Here, about 1800, the Delaware Indians were establishing new homes. They had been pushed out of Ohio by the relentless advance of American white settlers. A century of resistance had ended in disaster. Now they were well inside the region that was protected “forever” as Indian country by a treaty with the United States, and they hoped for peace through accommodation. The Delawares were a people not easily moved from the land of their fathers, but the country they entered was superficially like that they had left. Along the White River they found natural prairies—treeless floodplains that broke the beech and maple canopy with brilliant patches of sunlight—which made excellent sites for villages of farming women and hunting men. At least here they could resettle themselves far from the press of American pioneers.

In the autumn of 1800 the Delawares welcomed into their midst William Conner and his brother John, sons of a white trader who had lived among them in missionary towns in Ohio and a

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French woman who had lived from infancy with the Shawnees. The younger Conners were fur traders connected with that vast commercial network centered around Detroit, which exchanged the natural products of forest and stream for the manufactures of modern society. The Delawares trusted the Conners as friends. They were not yet fully aware that the very presence of white traders guaranteed once more the destruction of Indian peace, for the Conners were servants of a commercial advance that thrust outward from frontier centers and brought the "wilderness" within the system of American enterprise, and eventual conquest, long before the arrival of farming pioneers.

The United States was born of a colonial society. By the time of independence the colonizing process was habitual to generations of Americans of European descent. The process had always begun with adventurers, traders, and missionaries mingling among the natives in their own "primitive" world. These first intruders carried powerful features of expansive European culture into the wilderness; chief among these alien forces was dynamic commercial capitalism. Since the first purchases of corn, made at gunpoint in seventeenth-century Jamestown, trade with American Indians had been unequal and often involuntary. By the nineteenth century the permanence of white Americans and their aggressive culture had routinized the exploitation. In the national period the early pioneers, agents of a new American empire, brought the Indians more peacefully into dependency on white society's trade goods, its markets for furs and forest products, and its mysterious credit systems.<sup>1</sup>

In the colonial period British policy had been aimed at restricting intrusion on the Indians' domain. American independence, however, loosed a vigorous new nation whose ambitions would not be checked. As federal policy took shape in the early nineteenth century, Indian removal quickly proved to be the only suitable response to white pressures for land and space. The commercial penetration of Indian society led, not to permanent co-existence (as the British had once hoped) but to further colonial expansion: the interaction of white traders with Indian communities undermined the independent structures of native culture while erecting new structures of trade and enterprise that made life in the wilderness possible for white pioneers. With the final

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<sup>1</sup> See Francis Jennings, *The Invasion of America: Indians, Colonialism, and the Cant of Conquest* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1975); for an older interpretation see Albert K. Weinberg, *Manifest Destiny* (Baltimore, Md., 1935); for the language of empire see R.W. Van Alstyne, *The Rising American Empire* (New York, 1974; orig. 1960).

confrontation over possession of the land, Indians found themselves corrupted and inextricably linked to the white man's systems.<sup>2</sup> It is in this larger process of expansion and subjugation that the frontierspeople—men and women—found their historical importance. True, they were often heroic individuals who struggled with harsh conditions and succeeded through extraordinary personal exertion, but they were also agents of the advancing empire, outriders for an expansive culture. They carried the instruments of empire forward, deep into Indian country. Some were Christian missionaries, more were agents of trading companies, while a few were simply misanthropic adventurers. All were engaged, however, in pushing back the American frontier.<sup>3</sup>

William Conner was one of these agents of empire, and his story reveals with unusual clarity the central role of enterprise as the primary constant in a frontier life that offered wrenching changes. While his individual contribution was not grand, his role in a larger network of traders and intruders illustrates the actual dynamics of frontier advance. Conner was born on the late colonial frontier, the son of an earlier commercial pioneer. He grew up in communities of Christian Indians led by Moravian missionaries; he took to commerce with the Indians as his natural occupation; and he settled eventually among the Delawares of the Indiana Territory. For nearly twenty years Conner lived with the Delawares, keeping house and making a family, trading white man's goods for furs and skins, yet all the while serving as an agent of the eventual removal of his Indian hosts. When that day came, Conner's Delaware wife and children departed with the tribe; William stayed in Indiana, exploiting his considerable wealth and invaluable head start to become a natural leader in the new white community. Another twenty years saw the completion of that dramatic process of community building for which the frontier is justly famous. Only then did William Conner retire from his place at the center of his fast-growing local community.

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<sup>2</sup> See Robert D. Mitchell, *Commercialism and Frontier: Perspectives on the Early Shenandoah Valley* (Charlottesville, Va., 1977) for one analysis of this subject. The importance of cross-cultural trade in forming Indian policy has been argued recently by Robert A. Trennert, *Indian Traders on the Middle Border: The House of Ewing, 1827-1854* (Lincoln, Neb., 1981). See also Francis Paul Prucha, *American Indian Policy in the Formative Years* (Cambridge, Mass., 1962).

<sup>3</sup> Frederick Jackson Turner's classic statement of the significance of the frontier in American history clearly recognized this collective, structural contribution by the pioneers; however, subsequent glosses on Turner have often emphasized the abstract individual in contest with the elements, leaving an impression that heroic individuals, not the commercial system, conquered the American wilderness. See Frederick Jackson Turner, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," *Annual Report of the American Historical Association for 1893* (Washington, D.C., 1894), 199-227.

William was not the first pioneer Conner, for in many ways his life paralleled that of his father, Richard. The elder Conner was born in 1718 in colonial Maryland. As a young man in his twenties Richard Conner entered the Pennsylvania wilderness in Lancaster County, possibly engaged in the fur trade. There he married Margaret Boyer, a young white woman held captive since childhood by the Shawnee Indians. Conner ransomed his bride for two hundred dollars and the promise to give their firstborn son to the tribe. Theirs was an Indian marriage without Christian documentation, and the Conners continued to live among the Shawnees for several years to come. Born in 1771, their first son, James, was delivered to the Indians. By 1773 Richard and his wife were living in southeastern Ohio in a Shawnee and Delaware settlement known locally as Connerstown.<sup>4</sup>

According to the Reverend David Jones, a Christian missionary traveling through the Indian country in 1773, Richard Conner kept a "sort of tavern" in a village otherwise composed of Indian lodgings, some of them "good log houses well shingled with nails." Conner seemed quite thoroughly established, and he indicated he was about to "proceed to farming." Jones reported that Margaret Conner was a sister of the white wife of "the chief Indian of this town," and he assumed that explained Conner's presence in an alien place. He found Richard to be a tough man, one who seemed "not to fear God" nor "regard man." In sum, Jones concluded that Conner was "not what he should be, yet he was kind to me."<sup>5</sup>

Not long after Jones's visit, David Zeisberger, a leader of Moravian missions to the Indians, spent an evening with the Conners. They talked "half the night about salvation and all that is involved." It is impossible to tell what this encounter might have had on young Margaret or her much older, hard-bitten husband, but events and feeling conspired quickly to bring the Conners into a close and lasting alliance with Zeisberger and his missions. When renewed warfare between Americans and the Shawnees drove the Conners from their home, they resettled in February, 1775, at Zeisberger's mission in Schoenbrunn, Ohio.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Charles N. Thompson, *Sons of the Wilderness: John and William Conner* (Indiana Historical Society Publications, Vol. XII; Indianapolis, 1937), 9-13.

<sup>5</sup> Reverend David Jones, *A Journal of Two Visits Made to Some Nations of Indians on the West Side of the River Ohio, in the Year 1772 and 1773* (New York, 1865), 87-88, quoted in Thompson, *Sons of the Wilderness*, 12-13.

<sup>6</sup> Edmund De Schweinitz, *The Life and Times of David Zeisberger, the Western Pioneer and Apostle of the Indians* (Philadelphia, 1870), 425; Thompson, *Sons of the Wilderness*, 14-16. The quotation is from the Diary of the Moravian Mission to the Indians, Schoenbrunn on the Muskingum, May 4, 1775, cited in Thompson, *Sons of the Wilderness*, 14.

The presence of the Conners at Schoenbrunn was extraordinary. Zeisberger's towns were strictly reserved for Christian Indians and their ministers—a rule made absolutely necessary by the interracial strife that plagued the region. Only rarely were whites permitted to settle in Moravian towns, and few of these were invited to stay after a year of probationary residence. But the worlds of David Zeisberger and Richard Conner and his sons intermingled for the next thirty years. John Conner (1775) and William (1777) were born at Schoenbrunn and baptized into the congregation. James Conner (1771), the firstborn son, was ransomed from the Shawnees and brought there to live as well. Richard and Margaret participated in the life of the settlement apparently without reservation, even moving with the Moravians from town to town. Still Richard's position in the community was never clear. He seemed to be a farmer and a trader, and he may have served as an interpreter. He did not become a preacher, but the Moravian missions somehow had become Richard Conner's point of connection with the Indians of the territory northwest of the Ohio.<sup>7</sup>

During the American Revolution Zeisberger's Moravians—and with them the Conners—were driven north by the British into Michigan country. The Conners followed the Moravians to the Clinton River, north of Detroit, where they remained through the war. When the missionaries returned to their labors in Ohio, however, the Conners stayed in their Michigan home. Why Richard stayed is not certain, but apparently whatever commitment he felt toward Zeisberger was overcome by the lure of opportunities on the edge of the new United States. Conner bought over four thousand acres of land and helped establish what was later Macomb County, Michigan. He was instrumental in creating the town of Mt. Clemens, and he set up an important trading post for southeastern Michigan. Richard Conner lived another twenty years in Michigan. He died in 1807 at the age of eighty-nine, leaving his family well connected and possessed of a frontier fortune in virgin land.<sup>8</sup>

So much of the father would not be relevant if it did not foreshadow the story of the son. William Conner's life bore a

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<sup>7</sup> Thompson, *Sons of the Wilderness*, 16-22; De Schweinitz, *Life of David Zeisberger*, 371-73, 375-76.

<sup>8</sup> Thompson, *Sons of the Wilderness*, 35-36; Eugene Bliss, trans. and ed., *Diary of David Zeisberger, a Moravian Missionary among the Indians of Ohio* (2 vols., Cincinnati, 1885), I, 265-66, 434; *History of Macomb County, Michigan* (Chicago, 1882), 200-212, 522; Henry A. Ford, "The Old Moravian Mission at Mt. Clemens," *Pioneer and Historical Society of Michigan Collections*, X (1888), 114-15; Robert F. Eldredge, *Past and Present of Macomb County, Michigan* (Chicago, 1905), 562-63, 567-68.

ghostly resemblance to his father's, though played out on a newer frontier. The Conner brothers received parcels of Michigan land from their father around 1796, but William would not yet be confined to the farm. At about age eighteen William Conner settled in the Saginaw Bay region of Michigan and began to trade with the Indians. Little is known of his whereabouts until the winter of 1800-1801, when he turned up exploring the central forests of Indiana Territory.

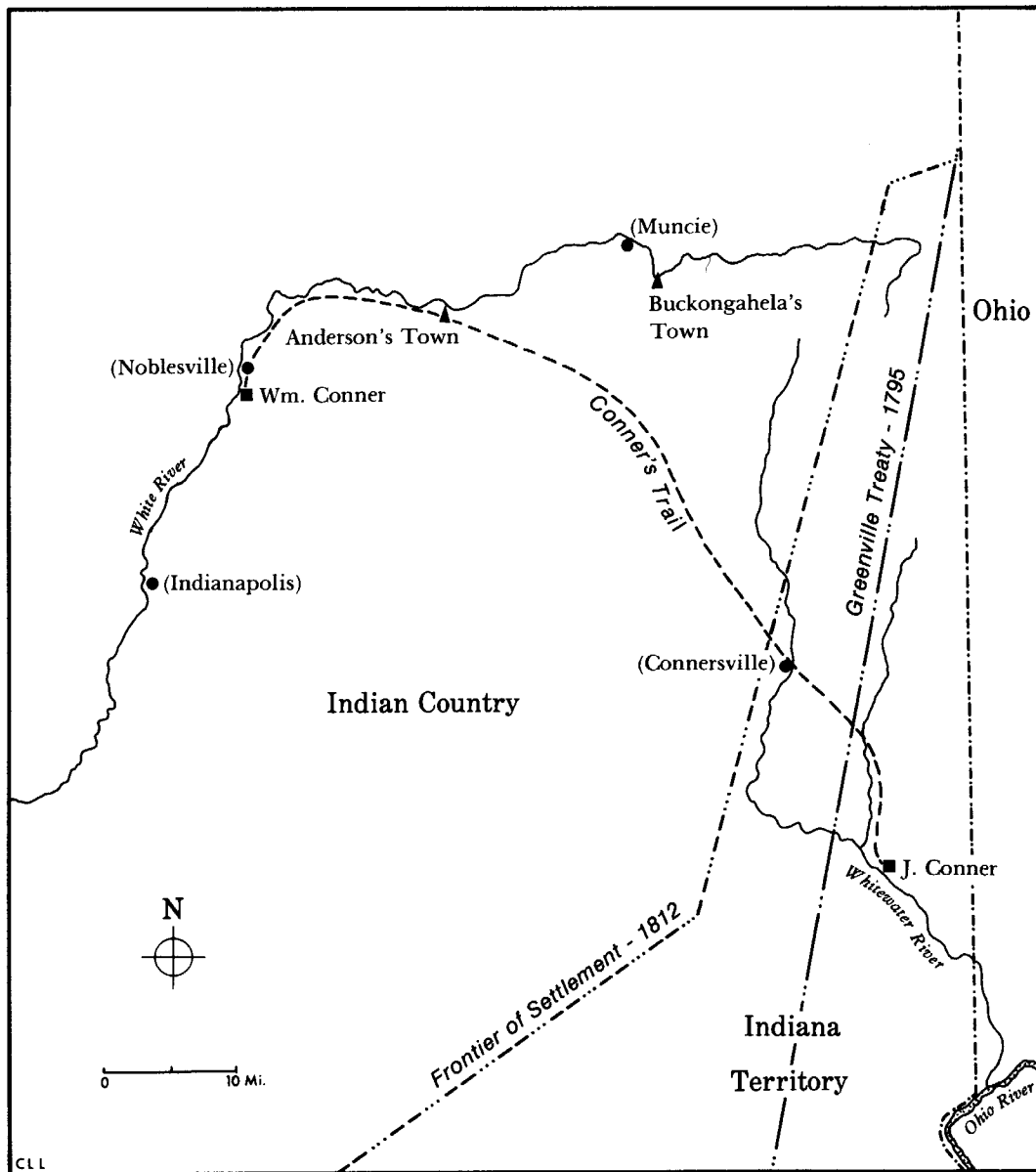
William Conner and his brother John apparently moved to Indiana as agents for Angus Mackintosh, a Canadian fur dealer located at Sandwich, Ontario, near Windsor. In October, 1800, they took up residence among the Delaware Indians along the west fork of White River, where there was "a good appearance of a hunt . . . this season." Mackintosh seemed pleased to have the Conners establish themselves in this area. He urged John to watch the competition and to "run about among the Indian Camps" as the other traders did. In January, 1801, Mackintosh reiterated his confidence in the Conners, but by spring their business connection was dissolved. When Moravian missionaries resumed their ministry to the Delawares in May, 1801, John and William were already settled among them. John resided in Buckongahela's Town (see map on page 307); William possibly lived nearby in Chief Anderson's village.<sup>9</sup>

By November, 1801, the Conners were licensed to trade with the Indians at the Delaware towns along the west fork of the White River. Their location was not accidental. They had explored the region for perhaps a year, and they knew its potential for furs and trade. The presence of the Delawares and their Moravian ministers simply reproduced the environment in which the boys had grown up. John had already married a Delaware woman and adopted the Indian life. In 1802 William followed suit, marrying Mekinges, the daughter of Chief William Anderson, and moving to a site twenty-five miles downstream from her father's village. This would remain his home for thirty-five years. Whatever it was that brought harmony and profit to this triple alliance of Moravians, Delawares, and Conners was at work once more.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Angus Mackintosh to John Conner, July 3, 1800, October 18, 1800, January 13, 1801, Mackintosh to William Conner, June 30, 1801, Burton Historical Collections (Detroit Public Library). See also "Autobiography of Abraham Luckenbach," in Lawrence Henry Gipson, ed., *The Moravian Indian Mission on White River: Diaries and Letters, May 5, 1799, to November 12, 1806* (Indiana Historical Collections, Vol. XXIII; Indianapolis, 1938), 605; and Thompson, *Sons of the Wilderness*, 43-46.

<sup>10</sup> Thompson, *Sons of the Wilderness*, 43-50.



WHITE RIVER COUNTRY, CA. 1812. TOWN NAMES IN PARENTHESES  
INDICATE FUTURE SITES.

Map prepared by Cathryn L. Lombardi and adapted from  
N. Thompson, *Sons of the Wilderness: John and William*  
(Indiana Historical Society Publications, Vol. XII;  
Indianapolis, 1937).

In 1803 John Conner moved back toward civilization to the Whitewater Valley, just inside the frontier of settlement. Now the commercial network was complete. William collected skins and pelts from the interior Indian settlements and shipped them out to brother John, who sold the furs and supplied his brother with the trade goods and whiskey required by his customers. The Conners frequently supplied the Moravians as well. Finally, it was during this period that John Conner began serving as an interpreter between the Delaware Indians and the rapidly encroaching American government.<sup>11</sup>

The Conners appeared to have immersed themselves in the culture and lifestyle of their Indian friends, but their very presence among the Delawares and their increasing role as liaisons to the white society guaranteed the destruction of Indian civilization in the White River country. The Indian trade was never an equal exchange. The fur trade placed powder and ball, iron tools, blankets, decorative trinkets, and addictive whiskey into Indian hands. Dependency and corruption inevitably resulted. Furthermore, the trade brought white people into Indian country and induced further immigration. Regardless of their intentions (which cannot be verified) William Conner and his brother undermined the fragile civilization which the Delawares had so recently transplanted to White River. John Conner's relocation in 1803 to the Whitewater Valley—a white settlement where federal restrictions on Indian trade did not extend—gave him an added advantage in exploitative commerce. Straddling the line between two cultures, John now played an active role in the final exploitation of the White River tribes. William's place, however removed from the scene of the confrontation, was only superficially less disastrous to the Indians' future.

In the larger scheme of American history from 1800 to the War of 1812, a number of factors ensured repeated conflict in the western territories. Land hunger and the accelerating migration of United States citizens into the interior had already produced two new states in the West by 1800 and would produce two more by 1812. Thomas Jefferson's purchase of Louisiana in 1803 secured forever the mouth of the Mississippi River, the natural outlet for interior travel and commerce. The Treaty of Greenville

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<sup>11</sup> Charles B. Lasselle, "The Old Indian Traders of Indiana," *Indiana Magazine of History*, II (March, 1906), 6; Augustus Finch Shirts, *A History of the Formation, Settlement and Development of Hamilton County, Indiana* (Noblesville, Ind., 1901), 6-7, hereafter cited by the title on the binding, *Primitive History of Hamilton County*; Frederick J. Barrows, ed., *History of Fayette County, Indiana* (Indianapolis, 1917), 153.

in 1795 had opened much of the future state of Ohio for white settlers, while it set aside the rest of the Northwest Territory as an Indian reservation. Far from ending displacement, this treaty set the stage for future cessions and the steady removal of the Indians from the trans-Appalachian region. Finally, the continued presence of the British in North America, and their pragmatic alliance with Indians hostile to American immigration, lent an international dimension to interior conflict.<sup>12</sup>

Resident whites in Indian country were essential participants in the process of Indian removal. William Conner did not officially act as government servant until 1811, although his brother John often served territorial governor William Henry Harrison in either a military or civilian capacity after 1807. William did profit from the lucrative new business that accrued from negotiations with local tribes for cessions of land in return for annuities, payment of debts, and travel supplies. It was in response to intense pressure for land cessions from Governor Harrison that the Shawnee holy man, The Prophet, began organizing resistance among the resident Indians. The Delawares maintained their confidence in the Conners through these troubled years before the War of 1812, and they tried desperately to stay out of hostilities. It is ironic that the Indians placed their faith in the men who had sold them whiskey, aided their enemies, and brought such pressure to bear on their crumbling freedom. On the other hand, their alternative was to follow The Prophet in an ill-starred resistance that would surely fail and might yield no payment at all for their lands.<sup>13</sup>

The irony of their situation was not lost on the Indians; yet their white neighbors seemed strangely untroubled by contradictions. With no apparent sense of conflict William Conner could leave his Delaware wife and children, in 1812, to ride with General Harrison at the Battle of Mississinewa, and he could help identify the body of Tecumseh, the great Shawnee leader who was triumphantly slain in 1813 at the Battle of the Thames. Conner served variously as a scout, spy, interpreter, guide, and briefly

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<sup>12</sup> See Malcolm J. Rohrbough, *The Trans-Appalachian Frontier: People, Societies, and Institutions, 1775-1850* (New York, 1978), chapters 1-6.

<sup>13</sup> William Henry Harrison to Henry Dearborne, September 25, 1807, in Logan Esarey, ed., *Governors Messages and Letters: Messages and Letters of William Henry Harrison* (2 vols., *Indiana Historical Collections*, vols. VII, IX; Indianapolis, 1922), I, 242, 247; Photostatic Copies of the Muster, Pay and Receipt Rolls of Indiana Territory Volunteers or Militia of the Period of the War of 1812, Deposited in the Office of the War Department of the United States Adjutant General's Office, II, 393-96, III, 464-66; John Johnston to Secretary of War William Eustis, October 6, 1809, in Gayle Thornbrough, *Letter Book of the Indian Agency at Fort Wayne, 1809-1815* (*Indiana Historical Society Publications*, Vol. XXI; Indianapolis, 1961), 70-71. See also Trennert, *Indian Traders*, chapters 1-2.

as a private in the army. After 1813, when he was released from regular army service, he remained in the pay of the federal Indian agency as an interpreter for treaty negotiations. Over the next several years eight treaties were signed at which William Conner was present as an interpreter or witness. Each document ceded Indian lands to the whites and removed the original owners to ever-smaller reservations or to the trans-Mississippi West.<sup>14</sup>

Logically, men like William and John Conner might have feared the advance of the frontier, for with the arrival of the immigrants came the end of the fur trade and the easy life of white men in Indian society. Yet the Conners were increasingly active in the removal of Indians from central Indiana. The reason can be seen in the roles they played, roles that plausibly connected their original "agency" with the process of displacement that they now furthered. Although force was often used and always threatened, persuasion was the preferred instrument of American Indian removal. Government policy dictated almost endless rounds of negotiations resulting in treaties that promised certain lands in exchange for others—at least until the next time. Like the Indian trade itself, these negotiations were unequal exchanges: the language and the law were strictly American. Interpreters to the Indians often held the key to federal success because they alone could "persuade" the tribes to ratify the treaties. Furthermore, despite federal regulations to prevent exploitation, resident traders had usually ensnared the Indians in credit purchases that left them virtually "mortgaged" to their American suppliers. When negotiations began for cessions of land or removal of tribes, Indian traders like the Conners, who had lived among the natives, knew their languages, enjoyed their confidence, and carried large debts in their behalf, were at once intermediaries and interested principals at the bargaining table.<sup>15</sup>

Conner's life among the Delawares was coming to an end, and a personal contradiction inherent in his life and work would

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<sup>14</sup> Treaty with the Wyandot, Greenville, Ohio, July 22, 1814; Treaty with the Wyandot, Rapids of the Miami in Ohio, September 29, 1817; Treaty with the Potawatomi, St. Mary's, Ohio, October 2, 1818; Treaty with the Delaware, St. Mary's, Ohio, October 3, 1818; Treaty with the Miami, St. Mary's, Ohio, October 6, 1818; Treaty with the Potawatomi, Mississinewa, Indiana, October 16, 1826; Treaty with the Miami, Mississinewa, Indiana, October 20, 1832. Treaty with the Potawatomi, Camp Tippecanoe, Indiana, October 20, 1832. These treaties may be found in Charles J. Kappler, ed., *Indian Affairs: Laws and Treaties* (5 vols., Washington, D.C., 1904-1941), volume II.

<sup>15</sup> Trennert, *Indian Traders*, chapters 1, 2, 4, gives a detailed account of the dependency of the Indians and the influential role of the resident traders in shaping government policy, based on a large collection of private papers and correspondence.

soon be manifest. The War of 1812 had broken forever the Indians' military resistance; with the return of peace Indiana joined the Union in 1816. Most of this new state was still legally Indian country, and the federal government immediately moved to secure clear title to the whole area occupied by Delawares, Miamis, Potawatomis, and Weas. Negotiations were extremely complicated. As Indiana Governor Jonathan Jennings explained in 1818 to Secretary of War John C. Calhoun, the "claims of the several tribes . . . were so interwoven by treaty and tradition" and such "clanish [*sic*] jealousies and suspicions" existed among the Indians, that the government was required to strike a separate bargain with each tribe.<sup>16</sup> The governor identified only half the problem. Adding to the confusion were the needs and ambitions of white traders who held Indian debts (often fraudulently padded), sought rich contracts for provisioning the departing tribes, and demanded private reservations of land for friendly chiefs, mixed-bloods, and others who later could be persuaded to sell these tracts to their "friends" for a few cents per acre. The whole complicated issue was taken up at the general conclave held in 1818 at St. Mary's, Ohio. It was here that William Conner helped his family and friends decide the terms of their removal.

Considering the complexity of the claims and the inevitability of removal for the White River Delawares, Chief Anderson's confidence in his son-in-law William Conner was still the best advantage he possessed. At the same time, it seems clear from fragmentary evidence that Conner worked in close cooperation with Governor Jennings and the leading white politicians who were guiding negotiations to a favorable end. On October 3, 1818, relatively early in the convention, the government concluded an agreement with the Delawares. All Delaware claims to Indiana land were extinguished at the end of three years' time. The Indians were promised land in southwestern Missouri on the James Fork of another White River. The United States pledged to pay fair value for improvements on the Delaware farms, to supply provisions and transportation for the journey west, and to pay perpetual annuities to the Delaware people. Given the narrow limits of possible debate, the bargain was probably a good one. It ensured an orderly and planned removal while providing for rapid and steady immigration by impatient white settlers.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Jonathan Jennings to John C. Calhoun, October 28, 1818, quoted in Thompson, *Sons of the Wilderness*, 105.

<sup>17</sup> C.A. Weslager, *The Delaware Indian Westward Migration* (Wallingford, Pa., 1978), 214; see Article 2, Treaty with the Delawares, St. Mary's, Ohio, October 3, 1818, in Kappler, *Indian Affairs*, II, 170.

For William Conner the Treaty of St. Mary's marked a private crisis the dimensions of which we cannot know. His dilemma was shared by every frontiersman who entered native society as a guest and emerged as a conqueror. Private life and public action inexorably diverged; regardless of personal motives, the crisis had to come. Conner's effective choices were two: he could go with the Delawares and recreate his role as resident trader and American agent in their new Missouri home; or he could remain on the White River and join in building a permanent white society. That Mekinges might stay was probably ruled out by the unrelenting racism that would surely make her an outcast in the eyes of the oncoming pioneers.

The best clue to Conner's attitude toward Delaware removal lies in his decision to stay. He might have gone with his family; his business partner William Marshall made that choice, but Conner did not. Instead, like his father before him, he chose to exploit new opportunities as the frontier caught and passed him. He probably profited from the Treaty of St. Mary's as a creditor and as an interpreter, although evidence of his payments has not been found. In February, 1820, six months before the Delawares left, Conner petitioned Congress for a grant of land "to remain at the place" where he had been living "for the purpose of raising his family (half breeds)." The petition was based on conventional appeals going back to a Wyandot treaty in 1817, in which reservations of land were first allowed for the white husbands of Indian women. Did he mean for Mekinges to stay? Was he belatedly seeking free land by false pretense for his own enrichment? Or did he intend to share the value of that donation, as he reportedly did his cash wealth, with Mekinges and the children at the time of their departure? It is impossible to know because Conner's petition was tabled in the House. It was not until two years later that he was given an imperfect title to his homestead in common with his now distant Indian wife and heirs—a gesture that was worthless to him.<sup>18</sup>

In all, for Conner, the removal of the Delawares was probably an inevitability without moral dimensions. He probably shared with his contemporaries those assumptions about race, culture,

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<sup>18</sup> Jonathan Jennings to the U.S. Senate Committee on Public Lands, December 21, 1819, petition of William Conner addressed to the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States, February, 1820, William Conner Papers (Conner Prairie Pioneer Settlement, Noblesville, Indiana). Copies of additional documents bearing on this request are also in the Conner Papers. See Thompson, *Sons of the Wilderness*, 112-15.

and economic progress that characterized Indians as savages, doomed to flee the advance of energetic white civilization. Eventually he came to articulate his position among the Delawares as a benevolent visitor, a protector, and a friend. In 1829 in a petition begging once more for clear title to the land around his White River farm, Conner explained how "during the last war, before and since, he had lived among the Indians, and fed them when they had not the means to do it; and at all times was engaged in preparing their minds for the sale of their lands to the United States." To remove any hint of personal exploitation Conner insisted that Mekinges had gone west with her people "in spite of his persuasions that she should remain."<sup>19</sup> At least in public language, Conner had found that exquisite ambivalence from which the United States as a nation treated individual Indians with decorum, respect, and legal pretense, while destroying their collective existence. In his own mind, he had lived sincerely among them, had traded fairly with them, and had even secured for them the best possible bargain for their removal; but he was a white man and a trader, not a member of Delaware society but an agent of the American advance. As if to punctuate his choice, Conner married a white woman not three months after the Delawares left. Without breaking stride the old frontiersman became a builder in a new community.

Elizabeth Chapman Conner was the seventeen-year-old stepdaughter of a recent settler named John Finch. In 1820, when William Conner proposed marriage, she was very possibly the only eligible woman in residence among the handful of immigrants to the White River country. Conner's marriage to Elizabeth proved that, despite his age (forty-four) and his long immersion in Delaware culture, he intended to start life anew among his own people. The marriage forged an intimate link between the recent settlers and the first pioneer, lending continuity to the process of frontier development across two distinct phases. For two decades change had come rather slowly to Conner's outpost on the river, but the frontier would vanish before the next score years had passed. Having thrived on the passing of one civilization, Conner now sought his fortune in building up another.

Much of William Conner's importance in the White River country derived from his early residence. Until 1820 Conner's place was identified with a series of Delaware towns that dotted

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<sup>19</sup> Petition of William Conner to the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States, [c. January, 1829], Conner Papers.

the riverbank from Conner's house north and east toward Anderson's Town and beyond the present site of Muncie. With the removal of the Indians, Conner's two-room log house was about the only landmark left that white persons might recognize. When the state commissioners set out to choose an interior site for the new capital of Indiana, they first met at Conner's house. It was a place that many persons had seen before, and there at least they would find shelter and hospitality while they prepared to explore the unsettled forests.<sup>20</sup>

Located on a large natural prairie created by a great bow in the river, Conner's home was a landmark for strangers as well. The original survey of Hamilton County showed seven little triangles (possibly dwellings) on the site called "Conner's Town." Other early sources identified "Conner's Station" and "Conners-town" as a landmark on the White River. When postal service finally began in December, 1823, it was Conner's house, not the new town of Noblesville, that first received the mail.<sup>21</sup> Here was a destination for new immigrants: the first newcomers to White River followed a trail, however primitive, leading to Conner's door. In March or April, 1819, Solomon Finch and his family, Israel Finch, Charles Lacy, George Shirts, Amasa Chapman, James Willason, and William Bush all left Connersville (John Conner's town in southeastern Indiana) and headed for William's trading post. All but Shirts established themselves at Horseshoe Prairie, upstream two miles and across the river from Conner; Shirts set up house on Conner's farm. Later that summer the new settlement grew with the arrival of John Finch, his wife, and stepdaughter Elizabeth Chapman.<sup>22</sup>

At least one of these immigrants, George Shirts, went directly to work for William Conner, and the others quite probably called upon him for help or supplies as they struggled to make their new homes. When the food ran out late in the summer of 1819, the

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<sup>20</sup> William Cockrum, *Pioneer History of Indiana* (Oakland City, Ind., 1907), 404; Nellie Armstrong Robertson and Dorothy Riker, eds., *The John Tipton Papers* (3 vols., *Indiana Historical Collections*, vols. XXIV-XXVI; Indianapolis, 1942), I, 211.

<sup>21</sup> *Indianapolis Gazette*, February 25, 1822, and December 30, 1823; Nathaniel Bolton, *Early History of Indianapolis and Central Indiana* (*Indiana Historical Society Publications*, Vol I; Indianapolis, 1853), 172-73; J. David Baker, *The Postal History of Indiana* (2 vols., Louisville, Ky., 1976), I, 64.

<sup>22</sup> Shirts, *Primitive History of Hamilton County*, 9; J. G. Finch, "What I Recollect of the Early Settlement of Indiana," manuscript reminiscence in Conner Papers.

settlers bought corn from Conner's crib—at a dollar a bushel according to one, a steep price by any standard. In 1821, according to J. G. Finch's remembrances of his childhood in the White River settlement, at least one of the Finch families relocated in order to work on the Conner farm. A black farmhand was reportedly there already, together with George Shirts and his family.<sup>23</sup>

Conner was clearly a resource for this infant community. He was "victualer" to the immigrants, a role shared by all early frontier residents. New settlers often provided the only market for the surplus products of the pioneers, and immigrants soon learned to carry money and buy their provisions rather than haul bulky goods over bad forest roads. When local production outran demand, Conner secured a keelboat from Indianapolis to carry off the surplus.<sup>24</sup> As the established man in the new country, William Conner inevitably took the lead in these first few difficult years.

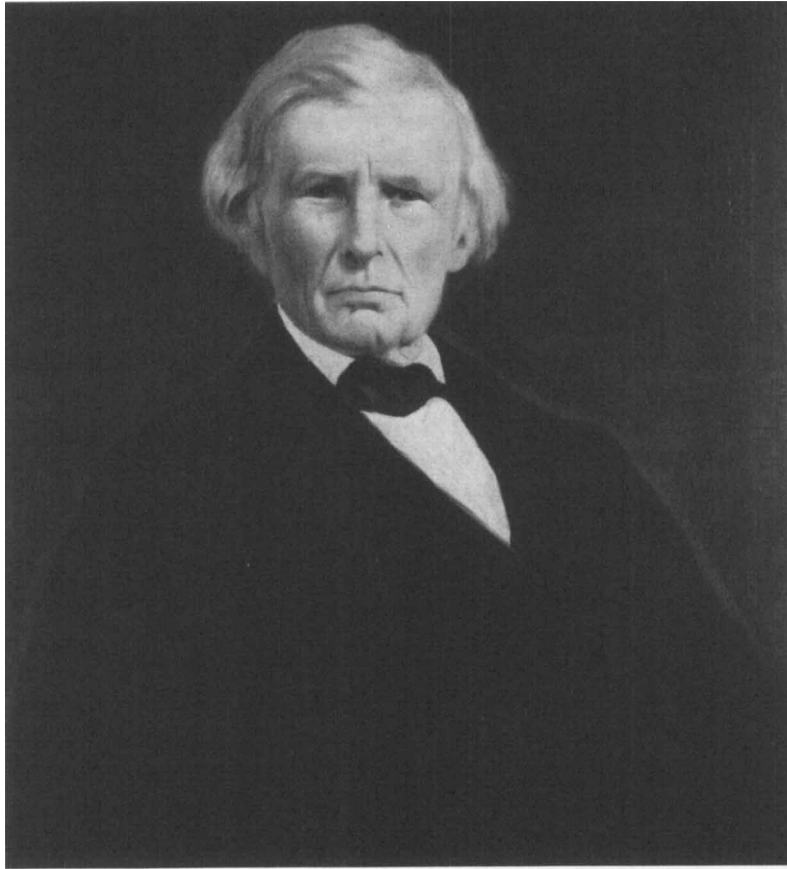
Land was the object of every settler's ambition. By their early industry, the first settlers hoped to gain an advantage in selecting new public lands. However there was risk in being first. "Squatters" who ran ahead of required government surveys enjoyed no protection of their property. The country around William Conner's home was first surveyed in 1821; the auction was scheduled the following year at Brookville, Indiana.<sup>25</sup> For the Finches and others at Horseshoe Prairie the sale was potentially threatening. They had built a few cabins and perhaps some fence, and they had buried some loved ones already; but all could be lost if they failed to purchase the tracts on which they lived. For Conner the prospect was even more chilling. He had lived two decades on his large natural farm. He would not lightly be turned off his land.

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<sup>23</sup> Finch, "What I Recollect"; Robert B. Duncan, "Old Settlers" (*Indiana Historical Society Publications*, Vol. II, No. 10; Indianapolis, 1894), 377-78; J. G. Finch to F. M. Finch, March 1, 1896, and February 1, 1899, Conner Papers.

<sup>24</sup> J. G. Finch to F. M. Finch, March 1, 1896, Conner Papers. See also Mitchell, *Commercialism and Frontier*.

<sup>25</sup> The original survey of the Conner farm was done by W. B. Laughlin in 1821 and recorded in the Indiana state auditor's office, Indianapolis (see *Original Survey*, Vol. 3, p. 80; *Field Notes*, Vol. 14, p. 281 ff). A copy of Laughlin's drawing is in the Conner Papers. First sales were recorded in the register of government land receipts, a copy of which is in the Archives Division, Indiana Commission on Public Records, Indianapolis. Both this record and the deed records in the Hamilton County recorder's office, Noblesville, verify that the first entries came in autumn, 1822. See Logan Esarey, *A History of Indiana: From Its Exploration to 1850* (Indianapolis, 1914; reprint 1970), I, 347, for a discussion of early land sales, although Esarey accepts an apparently erroneous newspaper account of auctions in 1820, 1821, and 1822 in Indianapolis rather than Brookville.



WILLIAM CONNER, PAINTED BY JACOB COX, DATE UNKNOWN

Courtesy Conner Prairie Pioneer Settlement,  
Noblesville, Indiana.

Facing the prospect of losing his farm at the auction, William Conner exercised his rights under the congressional act of May 7, 1822, which granted him a section of land on behalf of his Indian wife and children. On August 31, 1822, he entered a claim to the land comprising his fields. Not satisfied with the security of this estate, however, he purchased within the next month a total of 785 acres near his home and along the river. By the end of 1822 his investments in land had grown to nearly one thousand dollars. Unlike most of his neighbors, Conner had ready money; his dealings with the Indians and with their removal had left him sufficient cash to buy this virgin land. As the largest holder in



ELIZABETH CHAPMAN CONNER, PAINTED BY JACOB COX,  
DATE UNKNOWN

Courtesy Conner Prairie Pioneer Settlement,  
Noblesville, Indiana.

what soon became Hamilton County, Conner made permanent that advantage that came from being there first.<sup>26</sup>

In contrast to Conner, the Finches and their friends at Horseshoe Prairie did not fare well. John Conner, then living in Connersville, immediately purchased the Horseshoe Prairie. The Finches and Shirtses claimed that John Conner suppressed news

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<sup>26</sup> Quantification of Conner's landholdings is taken from abstracts of Hamilton County deeds prepared by Katherine Mandusic McDonell for Conner Prairie Pioneer Settlement. See Katherine Mandusic McDonell, "Landholding Patterns in Hamilton County, Indiana, 1821-1840" (unpublished report, Conner Prairie Pioneer Settlement, 1982), for an analysis of these records.

of the auction until he had bought up their land, but the charge cannot be substantiated. Conner intended to build a large mill at the site, and he may have taken some pains to ensure his possession of the property. The Finches remembered being evicted without payment for their improvements.<sup>27</sup> Such displacement of squatters was a recurrent hardship on the moving American frontier, but the era of illegal settlement along the White River was too brief for the squatter's presence to make an impression. Except for Conner, the Horseshoe Prairie settlers, and a small number of families along the river, settlement followed the advent of institutions of government and control.

Hamilton County came into legal existence on April 7, 1823. Indiana Governor William Hendricks appointed a sheriff and charged him with holding elections for county commissioners, judges, and other needed officers. John D. Stephenson was named clerk of this new democracy, and William Conner served as treasurer. On May 12, 1823, the commissioners first met to lay out the boundaries of the county and set in motion the machinery of local government.<sup>28</sup>

Typically in a new country, the first residents figured prominently in the formation of civil government. From a relatively small pool came the framers of organic documents and first institutions. It was a feature of the nineteenth-century frontier, however, that the fluid period was very short. Whatever equality the wilderness imposed on the pioneers quickly gave way to a hierarchy of power. Government, politics, land, industry, and commerce all offered ready opportunities for profit and advancement that were more dramatic than their counterparts in established society. But freedom and equality notwithstanding, men like William Conner often played a larger role because they were known leaders with resources to devote to community growth. For example, the first commissioners' court met in May, 1823, at Conner's log house; and while not all county functions took place at Conner's, his large brick home, finished in late 1823, was the regular courtroom for both circuit justices and county officials for at least two more years.<sup>29</sup> Public facilities were capital burdens not easily shouldered by a new community on the frontier, and prominence often went to those who had the wherewithal to be generous at the start.

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<sup>27</sup> Shirts, *Primitive History of Hamilton County*, 18.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 45-47.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 47, 60-62.



THE CONNER HOUSE, BUILT 1823

Courtesy Conner Prairie Pioneer Settlement,  
Noblesville, Indiana.

William Conner and his brother John were probably the only men in early Hamilton County who boasted long connections with Jonathan Jennings and the Whitewater faction that ruled early Indiana; these relationships contributed to their early power. The Conners were influential in the very creation of the new county, in the location of its seat of justice, and in the appointment of its first officers. John Conner had served for four sessions in the Indiana senate before he moved in 1822 to the Horseshoe Prairie. Once there he used his influence to secure legislation permitting a mill dam across the White River. In 1825 John returned to the general assembly as a representative to the house. William Conner served in various county offices through the 1820s before winning a seat in 1829 as a state representative. William served for three sessions, none of them consecutive, with undistinguished results.<sup>30</sup>

Politics for William Conner was a means to an end, never an end in itself. If he wanted the power of government to advance

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<sup>30</sup> Rebecca A. Shepherd *et al.*, comps. and eds., *A Biographical Directory of the Indiana General Assembly*, Vol. I: 1816-1899 (Indianapolis, 1980), 75-76. See also Indiana, *House Journal* (1829-1830), (1831-1832), (1836-1837); and Thompson, *Sons of the Wilderness*, 166-68, 172-75.

an enterprise, to build a road, or to authorize some public work, William Conner knew how to get it. He was faithful to his friends in the Whitewater faction—Jonathan Jennings, James Noble, James M. Ray, and others—following them first into Henry Clay's National Republican party and then the Whig party of the 1830s and 1840s. In 1831 Conner attended the first Whig nominating convention ever held in Indiana, and he was a regular delegate to his party's conventions for two decades thereafter.<sup>31</sup> But aside from securing useful influence, Conner left politics to the new breed of professionals who understood the game.

At the fringes of politics lay a field in which Conner kept a more prominent role: Indian affairs. Although nearly all the Delawares moved west between 1820 and 1823, the Indian presence was hardly gone from central Indiana. Conner often labored to relieve the occasional hostilities that erupted between new settlers—who had never lived among the Indians—and friendly natives who resided in Indiana or had come from the north to trade. He also helped mediate property claims between local Indians and white settlers. Nevertheless, corruption of the Indian culture continued apace as eventual removal loomed. In 1827 Conner lent his support to John Tipton's scheme for removing the federal agency from Fort Wayne, where dealers in whiskey were debauching the natives until "riot and drunkenness" ensued, too often terminating in "cruel murders." Superficially cast in terms of protecting the resident Indians, the change of location really set the stage for a new round of negotiations, land cessions, contracts, debt payments, land speculations, and other profiteering associated with Indian removal. Conner still served at times as interpreter for the government, as in an 1826 treaty with Potawatomis and Miamis, for which Conner received another donation of land. By 1832 he was seeking appointment to a new federal commission that would settle the terms for the final removal of the Indiana tribes.<sup>32</sup>

William Conner was undoubtedly a trusted friend of the Indians of central Indiana; but it was profit, in the final analysis, that governed his continuing role as an Indian liaison. Whenever

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<sup>31</sup> Indianapolis *Indiana Journal*, November 12, 1831; Thompson, *Sons of the Wilderness*, 167. Conner is consistently listed in the *Indiana Journal* through the 1840s as a delegate to Whig conventions and other functions.

<sup>32</sup> William Conner *et al.* to James Barbour, [December, 1827], quoted in Trennert, *Indian Traders*, 29; Oliver H. Smith, *Early Indiana Trials and Sketches* (Cincinnati, 1858), 51-53; Thompson, *Sons of the Wilderness*, 144, 156-57; Kappler, *Indian Affairs*, II, 273-77; Indianapolis *Indiana Journal*, April 25, 1826; Indianapolis *Indiana Gazette*, April 18, 1826. See also *Tipton Papers*, II, 508-509, 535, 589, 613, 644, and 650, for relevant correspondence.

he served the government in its dealings with the Indians, Conner profitted in several ways. He was compensated directly for his services, either by payments in money or donations of land. Conner was usually a creditor to the Indians, and he filed claims of this sort for bills that would likely otherwise never be paid. Finally, the treaties promised payments to the Indians in money and goods as well as provisions for their trek west. Conner was often a bidder for contracts to supply the Indians at government expense. In 1827, for example, he offered to provide two hundred hogs for two hundred dollars below the estimate given in a treaty with the Miamis which he had helped to write just months before.<sup>33</sup> To the end, Indian removal proved to be a good business for Conner.

Profit was the one continuity in William Conner's otherwise eclectic life. Whatever role he played as Indian liaison, politician, and founder of Hamilton County, Conner was above all else a capitalist. His overwhelming importance in the infant economy of the White River country stemmed from wealth he accumulated during his years with the Delaware people. Whether from furs, whiskey, or padded claims for unpaid Indian debts, Conner gathered up money in the early 1800s. Among the first settlers, he alone could buy large amounts of land and still have the capital to bring it into production.

Capital formation on the frontier was a chronic problem which few men could solve.<sup>34</sup> The prairie itself—over two hundred acres of treeless fields—was Conner's first economic advantage. Newcomers would spend years cutting timber and grubbing stumps before they could boast so much arable land. Probably under fence and producing wheat, rye, and corn as early as 1823, Conner's farm was easily the largest in the county and provided a living for a number of tenants or employees as well as the Conner household. About 1825 Conner built a distillery that allowed him to export corn more economically as whiskey. In buying grain for this purpose he created a market for the small surplus product of his struggling neighbors. Conner bought large amounts of land which, although no records survive, he probably rented to farmers on shares. Such tenancy often allowed families to defer their in-

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<sup>33</sup> William Conner to John Tipton, March 1, 1827, and April 19, 1827, William Conner to B. B. Kerchaval, April 20, 1827, Smith to Lewis Cass, April 27, 1827, Conner Papers. See Trennert, *Indian Traders*, for more details on profits from Indian removal.

<sup>34</sup> For two recent discussions of frontier capital formation and community development see John D. Haeger, *The Investment Frontier* (Albany, N.Y., 1981); and Don H. Doyle, *The Social Order of a Frontier Community: Jacksonville, Illinois, 1825-70* (Urbana, Ill., 1978).

vestment in land and concentrate their capital on clearing and planting. Conner's own farming operation continued to be large until 1837, when he sold his White River farm and moved his family to Noblesville. Among his working assets at the time of the sale were numerous horses, brood mares, and "several yoke of work Oxen."<sup>35</sup>

Mills for grinding grain and sawing lumber were the first industrial plants required by a new community. Once more the Conners were involved. Around 1824 John Conner invested his own wealth in a mill at the Horseshoe Prairie. Fitted with grindstones, a saw, and a carding engine, Conner's mill produced vital services for the farmers of the area. Even the construction of the dam and millrace created jobs for the community. For most families a few days of paid labor brought in the scarce cash required to buy land, pay interest on borrowed money, and pay taxes. After John Conner's death in 1826, William operated the mill at Horseshoe Prairie through tenants or partners. In 1844 the factory was entirely remodeled, fitted with the latest machines, and placed in the hands of an Englishman who was hired to run them. Conner advertised his mill as offering the "most modern" services for low prices payable in wheat, flaxseed, beeswax, tallow, feathers, Ginseng, corn, oats, rye, rags, and wool!<sup>36</sup>

The variety of exchange accepted at Conner's mill points to another key feature of the American frontier: there was never enough money and seldom enough division of labor to support a totally cash economy. Storekeepers often became clearing agents for complex exchanges that fell somewhere between primitive barter and urban commerce. Like most other western merchants, William Conner found that by keeping a retail store he could participate in trade at almost any level, maximizing his opportunities for profit while retaining flexibility in a quickly changing market. Merchants like Conner became produce vendors, import-export jobbers, retailers, wholesalers, credit agents, and money-lenders in their tireless search for ways to exchange the surplus of the frontier for the products and services of civilization.

Many early western merchants, including William Conner, approached storekeeping in "ventures" the way a coastal importer

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<sup>35</sup> Indianapolis *Indiana Democrat*, February 22, 1837. See Shirts, *Primitive History of Hamilton County*, 25. John Tipton was a landholder of similar proportion to Conner and routinely used tenants on his land, employing various terms. See *Tipton Papers*, II, 395, 670-72, III, 72-73, 220-21, 271-72 for examples.

<sup>36</sup> Noblesville *Little Western*, April 27, 1844; Shirts, *Primitive History of Hamilton County*, 21; Indianapolis *Indiana Journal*, February 29, 1840; Thompson, *Sons of the Wilderness*, 132-60. The records of the court of county commissioners for Hamilton County, September, 1838, p. 332, mention another mill owned by Conner, John D. Stephenson, and Bicknell Cole, located just north of Noblesville.

might invest in a single ship's voyage. Each spring—and sometimes again in the fall—the merchant called in his accounts, collected his money, and went east to purchase “a stock of goods.” When the merchandise arrived, the storekeeper advertised it for sale “at the best prices.” Ideally the goods were sold for cash, but most merchants took produce in trade and extended book credit to regular customers.<sup>37</sup> In this manner the merchant accumulated the small change of the country as well as the surplus of the small farmers. Much of what little silver there was in Hamilton County might have flowed into Conner's hands each spring when he collected his accounts. As a merchant of standing, Conner probably paid for his eastern purchases with bank paper or bills of exchange, so the specie need not have left the country. The same silver then passed once more into many hands as Conner bought hogs and corn in the autumn, or paid wages to workmen at the mills or on his farms. As early as 1822 and continuing at least into the 1840s there is evidence of Conner buying hogs and grain in large quantities, sometimes borrowing money from the State Bank of Indiana to finance these agricultural speculations.<sup>38</sup> As the markets fluctuated and the seasons progressed, Conner invested in produce, livestock, and retail goods—taking credits and debits of different description, trying to realize a profit at each conversion, and increasing the circulation of money and wealth through the infant economy.

Conner's storekeeping was almost always carried on with a partner. This was doubly convenient. Conner usually stayed home to supervise his many enterprises while the partners traveled to the East, and he gained a measure of financial protection against agents and employees who did not share in the risk. In 1826 John Conner's death left William in charge of John's store in Indianapolis, a partnership formed with Alfred Harrison. This partnership dissolved in 1833, although Conner kept the real estate. In 1824 William first acquired a license to trade groceries and imported goods in Noblesville. With various partners he kept a store in that city throughout his active life. As late as 1838 the firm of Conner, Stephenson & Cole kept an open account with John Jacob Astor's American Fur Company in New York, indicating a per-

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<sup>37</sup> Numerous advertisements of Conner's ventures appear in the local newspapers: see for example *Indianapolis Indiana Journal*, October 17, 1826; *Indianapolis Indiana Democrat*, April 9, 1829; *Indianapolis Indiana Journal*, July 23, 1831; *Indianapolis Indiana Democrat*, May 5, 1832; *Indianapolis Indiana Journal*, June 9, 1832; and *Indianapolis Indiana Democrat*, May 11, 1833.

<sup>38</sup> *Indianapolis Gazette*, October 9, 1822; *Indianapolis Indiana Journal*, October 29, 1829; William Conner to Hervey Bates, November 24, 1838, and December 25, 1840, Conner Papers.

petuation of old trading patterns alongside the new. Finally, Conner appeared as a partner in small country stores in surrounding towns such as Eagle Village, Boone County, where his involvement was probably limited to capital investment and a creditor's interest in management.<sup>39</sup>

Partnerships often served as a means of investing in another man's business at a time when retail banking was locally underdeveloped. In 1837, for example, William Conner and John D. Stephenson entered into a partnership with John J. Will, a shoemaker in Noblesville.<sup>40</sup> It seems unlikely that Conner or his rich colleague Stephenson spent much time at the cobbler's bench; rather, their interest was that of lenders, and the partnership served in place of a long note or mortgage paper. Such expedient solutions to capital shortages were typical in frontier communities, but institutions of modern capitalism were quick to replace them. As early as 1834 William Conner was a subscription agent for the proposed Lawrenceburgh & Indianapolis Railroad—one of the first business corporations in the region.<sup>41</sup>

Land was the bedrock of frontier wealth, and Conner's great holdings provided him with the best foundation among his peers. From the date of the first auction Conner steadily accumulated property in Hamilton County and elsewhere. By the time he left his White River farm in 1837, he owned some four thousand acres in Hamilton County alone. He had paid the government minimum of \$1.25 per acre for almost every parcel, so over time the accrued value of his holdings must have exceeded his investment. In addition to this Hamilton County acreage, Conner owned urban real estate in Indianapolis, Noblesville, and surrounding towns, and he owned considerable amounts of unimproved land in other counties as well. He continued buying land at least through 1840, selling very little except for lots in towns that he founded.<sup>42</sup>

Among local speculators Conner was supreme. He owned over twice as much Hamilton County land as the next largest holder, and his operations outside the county placed him in a category

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<sup>39</sup> Indianapolis *Indiana Journal*, April 25, 1826, and August 10, 1833; Shirts, *Primitive History of Hamilton County*, 50; Thompson, *Sons of the Wilderness*, 176; Samuel Harden & George Lee Spahr, comps., *Early Life and Times in Boone County, Indiana* (Lebanon, Ind., 1887), 109. We are indebted to Carl P. Russell for the reference to Conner's account with the American Fur Company (Russell to H. Roll McLaughlin, January 24, 1962, a copy of which is in the Conner Papers).

<sup>40</sup> Noblesville *The Newspaper*, November 16, December 7, December 14, and December 21, 1837.

<sup>41</sup> Indianapolis *Indiana Journal*, March 29, 1834.

<sup>42</sup> Data are taken from deed records in the Recorder's Office, Hamilton County, Noblesville, Indiana; see McDonell, "Landholding Patterns," 65.

above any of his neighbors. It is not clear, though, how Conner intended to profit from his speculation in land. He borrowed money from banks for buying hogs and farm produce, and he may have secured such debts with land. He may also have used his land informally as evidence of his wealth when raising personal notes, commercial credits, and bills of exchange. No personal account books survive in which transactions might have been recorded, but he may have sold farms on credit, retaining the deed until the obligation was paid. Finally, for Conner, land may have been a savings bank. In the highly inflationary and cash-short economy of the Jacksonian West, there were few places to store wealth where it would not rapidly erode. Conner's buying habits reflected a steady increase in his riches that outran his opportunities for reasonable investment—or his willingness to risk anymore!

Town founding was a special form of land speculation, and the successful investors in new western towns were dramatically rewarded. In 1823 William Conner and Josiah F. Polk platted Noblesville, the new county seat, on land they purchased from the federal government for \$1.25 per acre. They laid out streets and public areas, donated numerous lots for public buildings, mechanics, industries, schools, churches, and later railroad depots. Their original generosity helped bring the struggling village to life, and in the second decade the proprietors were routinely accepting fifty dollars and more for lots that had cost them twenty-five cents. Town founding, however, was not always so fruitful. Responding in 1836 to the promise of the Central Canal, Conner invested in the Madison County town of Alexandria; but the canal was never built, and the town failed to take off. Similarly in 1837 Conner platted Strawtown on the site of an old Delaware village along the original trace between his trading post and his brother John's. Once again the site failed to prosper. Nevertheless, Conner's profits from Noblesville alone were magnificent.<sup>43</sup>

By 1840 William Conner had been on White River for almost four decades. For half that time he had lived practically unmolested in the wilderness beyond the American frontier. In the last twenty years the frontier had arrived and surged beyond. In 1840 ten thousand persons lived in Hamilton County, and scarcely a section of public land was left for sale. Conner had entered the

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<sup>43</sup> McDonell, "Landholding Patterns," 16-18, 63-70; Shirts, *Primitive History of Hamilton County*, 22, 123; *History of Madison County, Indiana* (n.p., 1880), 114. Original plats are in the deed record books at the Recorder's Office, Hamilton County. Conner's profits cannot be figured from the information on the deeds; but given five lots per acre, and assuming even a very conservative return of ten dollars each, the gross return on investment was above 4000 percent.

wilderness and adopted the "savage" ways of the American natives. He had used his own adaptability to conquer the forest and its people, to extinguish the claims of the original residents, and to pave the way for American settlers with their farms and villages, commerce and industry. He had demonstrated in his life how freedom of enterprise motivated men to push back the American frontier.<sup>44</sup>

Life in the wilderness was intensely individualistic, but frontiersmen like Conner never escaped the systems of government and enterprise that linked them to organized society. On the contrary, they were most often bearers of white culture and social institutions. During his early years among the Delaware Indians William Conner was as far outside white civilization as a man might willingly go; yet his reason for being there flowed from America's commercial penetration of the Indian world. Except as an agent of the American empire Conner makes no historical sense. His business depended on exploiting the difference in values between the Indian and white trading systems. His importance to the Delawares derived exclusively from his ability and willingness to provide them with goods and negotiate for them with the advancing aliens. The government's forbearance in letting men like Conner live outside white jurisdiction—and frequently outside the law—came from their usefulness as liaisons to the resident tribes. Without the profits of the fur trade, without the eventual removal of the Indians and the arrival of white settlers, Conner's presence in the West would have been a curiosity. Of course, Conner labored in his own behalf: his life was governed most of all by the free pursuit of private gain. But in his freedom and his enterprise William Conner brought the powerful new systems of expanding America into the harassed and fragile Delaware world.

It was Conner's decision to stay when the Indians left that helps to clarify his role as an agent of frontier advance and development. Many traders never made the transformation back to white civilization; for these men the role of intruder in a strange world carried its own rewards. That was not enough for William Conner. He stayed to parlay his winnings from one period into the next, and his bets continued to pay. His wealth, his understanding of the place, and simply his being there first all con-

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<sup>44</sup> Lee Benson argued this point in 1950 in an essay tracing Achille Loria's influence on the young Frederick Jackson Turner. See Lee Benson, *Turner and Beard: American Historical Writing Reconsidered* (Glencoe, Ill., 1960), and a recent essay, "The Historian as Mythmaker: Turner and the Closed Frontier," in David M. Ellis, ed., *Frontier in American Development* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1969), 3-19.

tributed to an early leadership that made him the founder of Hamilton County. He seized natural resources that were practically free to firstcomers, he applied his capital to improvements, and he matched opportunities with needs in the developing community. Ironically the success of his efforts as a local developer hastened the passing of the frontier conditions that nourished the old pioneer.

The panic of 1837 and the depression that followed in 1839 marked the end of the frontier period in much of central Indiana. Primitive economic structures went down in the wreckage and were replaced by more sophisticated institutions of modern urban commercial society. The western land bubble burst, and the chain of credits that rested on the rising value of unimproved land collapsed. William Conner and other speculators suffered large paper losses as their primary form of investment became a drug on the market. Conner's ability to raise cash was severely curtailed by the depression. Time and again he forfeited property to judgments and sheriff's sales because it was easier to give up land, for which there was no market anyway, than to raise cash to pay money debts. The swirl of bankruptcies that began in 1839 continued to dominate business affairs in central Indiana well into the 1840s, and in his seventieth year William Conner was still party to legal proceedings both for and against him.<sup>45</sup>

Conner was far from ruined by the depression of 1839, but he was finally displaced in the 1840s as a fountainhead of local power. Despite his advanced age he continued to keep a store in Noblesville, but his ledger for 1847-1849 records an old-fashioned country trade that was little changed from the earlier pioneer days. While younger merchants built large inventories, opened branch stores, and even specialized in a few lines of goods, Conner still sold "mdse" in exchange for wheat, currants, feathers, and fowls. As late as 1850 he laid in a "stock of goods" from Philadelphia to be sold "at a small advance" on the original eastern price, but business was surely no longer his main preoccupation.<sup>46</sup>

In his final years William Conner exchanged his role as leader and local developer for that of historical figure, a living connection

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<sup>45</sup> William Conner to Bates, November 24, 1838, December 25, 1840, John D. Stephenson to Calvin Fletcher, August 24, 1845, Conner Papers. See Noblesville *Little Western*, August 31, 1844; Indianapolis *Indiana Journal*, October 12, 1839, August 16, 1843; Indianapolis *Indiana State Journal*, October 15, October 28, and November 5, 1846, June 15, and October 11, 1847. See also William Conner to Richard J. Conner, May 4, 1849, Conner Papers.

<sup>46</sup> William Conner account book, 1847-1849, Conner Papers; William Conner to Richard J. Conner, January 6, 1849, and May 4, 1849, *ibid.* See also Noblesville *Plain-Dealer*, December 26, 1850.

with a frontier past. Several times Indianapolis lawyer and speculator Calvin Fletcher stopped at Conner's Noblesville home, where talk turned to the early days, the Indians, and the hardships of making a home in the forest. Recurrent political squabbles over who killed Tecumseh at the Battle of the Thames brought back into focus Conner's early life, his great knowledge of Indian customs and languages, his success as a trader, the confidence with which he walked in Indian society, and his service to the advancing United States.<sup>47</sup> By midcentury there were over twelve thousand residents in Hamilton County. Most of these people had not lived in the region of Indian occupation; for such new "pioneers" the exploits of a man like Conner took on heroic proportions. The old frontiersman must have enjoyed his last role as a sage of the forest and principal authority on Indian life and lore.

On August 28, 1855, William Conner died. Seventy-eight years was a generous life-span, even more remarkable for one who had lived in a "primitive" style more than half that time. He left a large estate, two families of children, and no last will and testament. The Delaware Conners did return and sue for a share of their father's fortune, but predictably the courts disallowed their claims. One unwritten condition of Conner's reentry into white society was the renunciation of Indian ways: agents like Conner could not have their forest idylls and empire too. By the time of Conner's death the Delawares were the alien people in a Hamilton County courtroom, and recognition of their continuing presence could not be sustained.<sup>48</sup> The transformation of the Indiana wilderness was complete, the empire now spanned a continent, and the contest between native peoples and white settlers continued in the hands of new agents farther west on the moving American frontier.

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<sup>47</sup> See Gayle Thornbrough, Dorothy Riker, and Paula Corpuz, eds., *The Diary of Calvin Fletcher* (9 vols., Indianapolis, 1972-1983), V, 161-62; also Richard J. Conner to Josiah F. Polk, September 24, 1851, Conner Papers.

<sup>48</sup> Affidavit of Fabius Maximus Finch, Marion County, State of Indiana, April 9, 1895, Conner Papers.