

Troubled Crossings

Local History and the Built Environment in the Patoka Bottoms

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Invisible things are not necessarily not-there.

-TONI MORRISON¹

This article was prompted by a wish to call into question the criteria regulating the admission of sites to the National Register of Historic Places. I have attempted to move beyond my own originating critique of mainstream mechanisms for “historic preservation,” however, and toward a different kind of narrative of “site significance.” My goal has been to tell the story of a specific locality that focuses on the interconnected traces left by its local history, both in situ—as structures in the

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¹Toni Morrison, “Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature,” *Michigan Quarterly Review* 28 (January 1989), 1-34.

built environment—and in county archives and personal records left by inhabitants of the place. Might we tease out of the symbiosis of a specific site, its structures, and the local archive documenting them, a kind of biography of place as “written by” the community itself?

Three controversial interventions, undertaken over a period of about a hundred years in a small rural place on the border between Pike and Gibson Counties in southwestern Indiana, inform this article’s effort to do just that. These interventions all either resulted in, or are strongly associated with, extant structures in the place’s built environment. They include, in chronological order: the southern extension of the Wabash and Erie Canal; the alleged operation of a small cell of Underground Railroad activists, as recalled by one eyewitness many years later; and two closely related early twentieth-century experiments to drain the Patoka Bottoms. My narrative offers no new scholarly discoveries concerning these interventions, although their juxtaposition in the same account may strike some readers as novel. This juxtaposition has been, I argue, authored by the place itself.

What I wish to evoke here are not the temporal patterns of continuity and change, presence and absence that these interventions and their repercussions may have inscribed on the land and on the memories of its residents. I want instead to foreground the geography of the place itself, a sprawling wetland in the Patoka River watershed that—perhaps more dramatically than many other sites of historical significance in Indiana—has loomed as a formidable non-human actor, influencing the structures built on it and the events associated with it. Or at least so it would appear in the traces left by those inhabitants who responded to it with words and material constructions.

Underlying this effort is the idea, borrowed from the discipline of historical geography, that one might write a history of place that speaks in a nuanced way about the relation of the land to the cultural meanings ascribed to it. As John A. Jakle has written, there are “messages embedded in the environment” that “help define places as appropriate contexts for action.”² From my earliest encounters with the Patoka Bottoms I have been fascinated by the striking frequency of conflict

²John A. Jakle, “Toward a Geographical History of Indiana: Landscape and Place in the Historical Imagination,” *Indiana Magazine of History* 89 (September 1993), 187.

among the people who live there. I wanted to understand those perennial contentions in terms of the community's relations with physical elements of the land itself. From such a perspective, both the built and the natural environments might be understood as interlocutors in an exchange that is at once symbolic and material. In that sense, this article addresses the manner in which time and place have engaged each other in the Patoka Bottoms.

Of course other large forces besides the land—some global in scope—also figure as principal “actors” in a history of this place—in particular, the constant, inexorable pressure of a market economy. Certainly the values attached to notions of capitalist economic development and technological progress implicitly link all three of the major interventions highlighted by this narrative: slavery; the mass exploitation of immigrant laborers in the construction of the canal; and the push to alter the wetland environment in order to enhance transportation and agricultural development. Rather than trying to explore those larger social institutions through their local manifestations, I have deliberately chosen to remain rooted in the local itself. This choice reflects my original fascination with the assumptions that are too often and too easily obscured from view in conventional historic-site evaluations. Hence my interest in highlighting individuals whom the reader is unlikely to encounter elsewhere: ordinary, mainly unremarkable farmers; transients; petty exploiters of the local dispossessed; as well as voices from the written archive that might in other contexts be justifiably dismissed as merely antiquarian or anecdotal. Hence, too, my attention to structures and objects that fall outside the usual categories favored by the National Register. In short, I want to tell a story about how the community in the Patoka Bottoms has imagined itself and the place in which it lives.

The place was—and, in a manner of speaking, still is—south of the intersection of County Roads 300 West and 200 South, approximately eleven miles below Petersburg in Pike County, Indiana. If you were to turn west from State Road 57 onto County Road 200 South, just north of the Gibson County line, and follow that road till you come to the first crossroads, you could turn again—south this time—and find yourself, as I did ten years ago, on what the late nineteenth-century histories of Pike and Gibson Counties call “the old state road.”

The road's origin is difficult to pinpoint. A survey of *Pike County Commissioners Reports* (1817 -1826) suggests that it may have been constructed



The Ropp farm, established by Gustaf H. Ropp in 1893, sits atop a hill along County Road 200 South, Logan Township, Pike County.
All photographs are courtesy of the author

as early as 1825.³ Until it was bypassed in 1936 by State Road 57, it served as the main route between Petersburg, the Pike County seat, and what is now Oakland City in eastern Gibson County. Ultimately, the road led to Evansville. As you follow it south from this crossroads, it soon plunges you into a wide floodplain flanked on either side by crop fields. An old set of oil well storage tanks stands off to the left, just beyond where the road makes a short switchback along the bluff as it drops into the broad valley of the Patoka River's South Fork. During the spring, the acreage on either side of the road takes on the aspect of a wide, shallow lake. A decade after the Great Flood of 1913, the roadbed was built up to form a low causeway with culverts to allow the passage of floodwaters east to west. The Ropp bottoms, just to the west, provide a temporary home for hundreds of seasonally migrating "dabbler" ducks, species that thrive on bodies of water too shallow for deep diving waterfowl.⁴ Here the road runs between two discrete parcels of the Patoka River National Wildlife Refuge. In less than a mile it crosses two historic bridges—a steel Camel-back bridge built in 1924 (Pike County Bridge #81) spanning the straight channel of Houchins Ditch and, a quarter-mile beyond that, a cast- and wrought-iron Pratt through-truss variation, built in 1884 (Pike County Bridge #246).⁵ The iron bridge, with its lacy guardrails and trusses, and nameplates adorning both its portals, crosses the muddy, meandering banks of the Patoka River's South Fork. As recently as two years ago, this road—shoulder-less and gone back to gravel in many places—gave way on either side to thick stands of sycamore, cottonwood, willow, and swamp oak that crowded up to form an overarching canopy. Even now, if you come when the leaves are off the trees, you can see dimly through the understory, just to the east, the abrupt mound of the Wabash and Erie Canal

³Pike County, *Indiana Commissioners' Reports*: Book A, as copied by June Hale, 1986, p. 64, Barrett Memorial Library, Petersburg, Indiana. Original books in Pike County Courthouse, Petersburg, Indiana. The road easily predates Alfred T. Andreas's *Illustrated Historical Atlas of the State of Indiana 1876* (1876; Indianapolis, Ind., 1990), the earliest available map of the area that details roads. In both the 1876 *Atlas* and the *Atlas of Gibson and Pike Counties, Indiana* (Philadelphia, 1881), the roadbed follows the same trajectory that it does today.

⁴William McCoy, Refuge Manager, Patoka National Wildlife Refuge, interview with author, June 20, 2003.

⁵Cataloged in Mead and Hunt, *Indiana Historic Bridge Inventory, Volume 4: List of Select and Non-Select Bridges* (December 2010), online at http://www.in.gov/indot/files/Volume_4_-_List_of_Select_and_Non-Select_Bridges.pdf.

embankments. There the elevated canal bed, empty of water, still forms a ridge running diagonally northeast to southwest across the bottomlands, a good twenty to thirty feet higher than the floor of the floodplain. Pass over the iron bridge, climb a steep, short rise, and you come out in Gibson County. There are—or were—open fields to the west and south, and a few small houses and mobile homes east—all that is left of a short-lived canal port that bore the Sudanese name Dongola.⁶

Had you come here a couple years ago, you might have felt that you were crossing unusually storied ground. The place had that kind of aura about it. The first time she drove across the Patoka Bottoms, my friend Jean Smith felt it so strongly that she backtracked, stopped her truck, and simply sat still between the two bridges for half an hour before phoning me, ninety miles away, to tell me I needed to come down and take a look.

THE PATOKA BRIDGES HISTORIC DISTRICT

This essay grew out of research conducted in the wake of that phone call. From 2002 to 2005, I volunteered my interest in historic preservation with Citizens for Appropriate Rural Roads (CARR), the Bloomington-based grassroots organization that was then—and still is, at this writing—vigorously opposing the Indiana Department of Transportation's (INDOT) plans for a new-terrain route for Interstate 69 from Evansville to Indianapolis. Among other things, CARR was worried about the potential impact of the I-69 project on historic southern Indiana properties. The road builders had hired, as they are required to do, a historical consultant to conduct the Section 106 survey of structures lying within the proposed highway's "Area of Potential Effect." That consultant compiled a draft report on the history of the affected counties, highlighting properties that might require further review to determine their eligibility for listing on the National Register of Historic Places. Federal law requires that such properties—as well as those already listed on the Register—receive at minimum a "good faith effort" on the part of any federally funded project manager to determine the project's impact on them. Although neither

⁶Ronald L. Baker, *From Needmore to Prosperity: Hoosier Place Names in Folklore and History* (Bloomington, Ind., 1995), 115. Dongola persists as a place name for two extant communities—in Letcher County, Kentucky, and Union County, Illinois, the latter in the extreme southern part of the state, an area still sometimes referred to as "Egypt." The original "Old Dongola" (Dunqulah) was a Nubian city on the upper Nile (ca. 590-1314), not to be confused with the contemporary city of Dongola in modern-day Sudan.



The Patoka River bisects this detail of Gibson and Pike Counties, in the state's southwest corner. Towns that figure in this story—Patoka, Princeton, Petersburg, Oakland City, Hosmer, and Winslow—occupy the center of the image.

From "State Highway System of Indiana, September 30, 1932," courtesy Indiana University Libraries.

National Register eligibility nor listing guarantees a property's protection from privately financed alteration or even demolition, federally funded projects that affect them may be required to implement "mitigation of adverse effects."

CARR members and property owners in the interstate's several proposed paths also conducted their own informal inventories of sites that might be deemed eligible for nomination to the National Register. Pike County presented a special challenge to such "windshield surveys" as one of only two counties in the state for which no Interim Report on historic sites and structures had been published. Despite their obvious age, integrity, and unusual proximity to each other, the pair of historic bridges at the Pike-Gibson County line was *not* included in the draft *Section 106 Report* of June 25, 2002, nor in the more comprehensive *Section 106 Finding* published by INDOT and the Federal Highway Ad-

ministration the following spring.⁷ For this and other reasons, we felt sure that we should contribute to the work of assessing the site's historic significance ourselves.⁸

My three-year research odyssey in Pike and Gibson Counties was by no means a solo voyage. Although I organized the field visit made by chief staff members of the Indiana Department of Historic Preservation and Archaeology (DHPA) to the Patoka Bottoms on July 25, 2003, and authored the National Register nomination that we eventually presented to them, I received substantial help from a number of other interested parties, in particular Duncan Campbell and James Cooper, two historic preservation professionals who donated their time and expertise pro bono.

The bridges' architectural significance was palpable. What was crucial for the purpose of preparing a National Register nomination was the expertise of someone knowledgeable about historic bridges. Cooper, an emeritus professor of history at DePauw University and a well-known expert on historic iron, metal, and concrete bridges, belongs among the state's living treasures—not only for his hands-on knowledge of Indiana's historic bridges, but also for the sheer number of unpaid hours he matter-of-factly devotes to their preservation. Duncan Campbell, now retired as associate professor of architecture and executive director of the Center for Historic Preservation at Ball State University, accompanied Cooper and me on the DHPA's site visit and provided much-needed strategic advice on conceptualizing and editing my nomination of the district. My own work largely amounted to digging for information on which to build a contextualizing narrative about the historic significance of the built environment and community surrounding the bridges. I often dug alone, sifting through county

⁷See Indiana Department of Transportation, *I-69: The Evansville to Indianapolis Study Section 106 Report (Tier 1)*, draft June 25, 2002, pp. 14, 22; and *Federal Highway Administration Documentation of Section 106 Finding of Potential Adverse Effects: I-69 Evansville to Indianapolis, Indiana* (March 2003), DES no. 9906000, Appendix H, online at <http://www.i69indyevn.org/corridor-wide-technical-reports>.

⁸If we had not done so, it is possible the bridges would have remained overlooked. None of INDOT's published surveys of historic resources in Pike County from 2002 and 2003 contains any mention of the Patoka bridges. INDOT did not add the bridges to their list of potentially eligible properties until the publication of the Tier 1 Final Environmental Impact Statement (FEIS) in March 2004, online at <http://www.i69indyevn.org/corridor-wide-technical-reports>. In other words, INDOT omitted the bridges from their lists of properties in need of Section 106 review until well after the Department of Historic Preservation and Archaeology made a site visit in July 2003 at my invitation. I was invited by the highway consultants to become a "consulting party" to the Section 106 surveys in May 2004.

records, histories, archived newspapers, and surveyors' reports. Just as often, I enjoyed the good company of local residents in the public libraries and courthouses at Petersburg and Princeton and on the backroads of Logan and Columbia Townships. Some of the older residents neighboring the Patoka Bottoms carried living memories of its early twentieth-century past. Their memories proved as critical to my understanding of the area's historical significance as did evidence uncovered in the archives and the built environment.

For more than 160 years, the area immediately surrounding the Patoka bridges witnessed an unusual concentration of agricultural- and transportation-related interventions. The built traces left by this sequence of intense human activity reveal diverse aspects of the first century and a half of white settlement in the Patoka valley. The two bridges—built within a few decades of each other—represent only a small, though nicely iconic part of that history. Besides the bridges and the old road connecting them, this tiny corner of two counties also includes an intact segment of the raised embankments, towpath, and profile of the Wabash and Erie Canal's Patoka valley section; the site of the canal's Patoka River aqueduct; and a section of the seventeen-mile-long Patoka River "new channel" (locally known as Houchins Ditch). Residents hotly contested the construction of the ditch in the early 1920s, and its completion resulted in the loss of many small neighboring farms whose owners were unable to meet ditch assessments. There is also the large and tidy 300-acre former Ropp farmstead (1893-present) with its extensive mid-twentieth-century earthen levees.

Some of these very visible sites themselves encompass or obscure the presence of other, even older sites. The 1884 Pratt through-truss iron bridge replaced an earlier bridge at Dongola, a mid-nineteenth-century wooden covered bridge that figured colorfully in local accounts of Underground Railroad activity between Petersburg and what is now Oakland City. On a knoll at the north end of the Ropp farm sits a small cemetery dating to the 1860s, associated with Pike County farmer and alleged Underground Railroad "conductor" Basil Simpson. Additionally, the Dongola bridge site, as well as the remnants of the Wabash and Erie Canal throughout the Bottoms, may prove archaeologically significant for their connection to the history of nineteenth-century manual labor in southwestern Indiana. The wetland terrain on which these sites cluster protected the integrity of the place by limiting dramatic changes. That integrity would be rare enough in its own right, but it is all the more precious since many other sites have vanished or been irrevocably altered by the extensive strip mining opera-



Ropp farm, Logan Township, Pike County. Gustaf H. Ropp established the 139-acre farm in 1893 and acquired nearly one hundred additional acres over the next forty years. Despite threats from flooding, economic depression, and the coal industry, the Ropp farm remains in operation today.

tions that have played so large a role in the twentieth-century economic development of Pike and eastern Gibson Counties.

My metaphorical digging uncovered far more than enough information with which to nominate the two bridges and the road between them to the National Register. But how to construct a single, thematically neat narrative about the place's history when that history was fundamentally about moving so disparate an assortment of things and people—boatloads of produce, fugitive slaves, excessive water—into and out of the place? In a number of ways, the site itself reveals the National Register's limitations as a means for officially recognizing the importance of locales that fall outside conventional narratives of historical significance. Archaeologist Mark P. Leone's critique of the Register's standards for articulating "site significance" states the problem succinctly:

The integrity of the built environment comes first; what happened there comes second, often. The effect of this process compromises

small, ephemeral, poorly built, hard to identify, recent, dilapidated places. These are the places that are easily torn down but also, where all those sought by historical archaeology once lived. And still might.⁹

For me, the problem was at least twofold. First, there was the issue of what counted as elements of the built environment. Though clearly man-made, structures like the Wabash and Erie Canal's earthen embankments occupy a conceptual grey area that more complex structures like a bridge or a house do not. Simply put, the National Register is a covenant made to honor historically significant structures. As Leone notes, the Register usually predicates a structure's inclusion on its physical integrity. The Register privileges structures that literally body forth the lifeways of an earlier era—and so places a premium on those that illustrate the past “faithfully.” But how does one assess the physical integrity, let alone the social historical significance, of an earthen embankment or a line of levees?

And what about the marriage of historical meaningfulness and physical integrity found in that massive, community-funded drainage project known as Houchins Ditch? The ditch looks and operates today much as it did soon after its completion in the early 1920s: as a placid, canal-like backwater whose function has always been questionable at best, and whose fraught beginnings and ongoing deleterious effects continue to rile its contemporary neighbors. Typically, the National Register has no interest in narratives that draw primary significance from the events that attended the building or maintenance of the structures it honors. Leone's suggestion that “Site significance could derive from exploitations in the past that living descendants now want to know about,” offers an alternative that the Register has been reluctant to embrace.¹⁰ Yet the Patoka Bottoms exemplify precisely this type of significance in multiple ways. The place has been witness to the labor of hundreds of Irish immigrant canal workers; to the alleged vigilantism of a small cell of anti-slavery activists; and finally, to a contest of wills between early twentieth-century advocates of wetland drainage and the small farmers who paid the price for their ill-planned experiments.

A second problem with the nomination process was largely rhetorical in nature. Because we sought to preserve the Bottoms as a district rather

⁹Mark P. Leone, *Critical Historical Archaeology* (Walnut Creek, Calif., 2010), 43-44.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, 44.



Houchins Ditch. In the early 1920s, residents contested the construction of what engineers optimistically named the “New Channel” of the Patoka River. Its 1924 completion resulted in the loss of many small neighboring farms whose owners were unable to meet ditch assessments.

than a collection of discrete and unrelated sites, I faced the challenge of creating a coherent narrative of the place that could demonstrate how each of its surviving elements contributed to the illustration of a particular theme or set of interrelated themes in the place's past. Too many disparate events have happened in the Bottoms. I could find no coherent thematic framework, acceptable under National Register criteria, on which to hang a single, clear picture of the place's historical significance as a set of structures integrated by an identifying theme. The closest I could come was to wrap the story of the road and its two bridges together into an acceptable package. In this, we succeeded. In March 2005, the National Register listed the two bridges and the quarter-mile fragment of the old state road connecting them as the Patoka Bridges Historic District.¹¹ As a

¹¹I am grateful to Frank Hurdiss, Chief of Survey and Registration at the Indiana DHPA, for recognizing the significance of the site as nominated. His judgment on the proposed district was more than reasonable within National Register guidelines.

result, the I-69 project managers have had to vet and implement plans for “mitigation of adverse effects” on the district which, happily, now includes major funding from INDOT and the Federal Highway Administration for the rehabilitation of the two historic bridges.¹²

Yet other tales about the area clamor to be told. The story of the Wabash and Erie Canal through the Patoka Bottoms, of its costly construction and its almost immediate demise, still lies outside the National Register’s official recognition of the place. The hidden traffic that the Bottoms may have facilitated—escaping slaves, abolitionist “conductors,” and slave-hunting posses—though acknowledged by the Register as a defining element in the place’s significance, has also been excluded from scholarly histories of the Underground Railroad, and for sound reasons. Given the generally covert nature of Underground Railroad activities, and the peculiar flaws of existing narratives detailing its operation in eastern Gibson County, we may never be able to verify locally generated stories. A third story line, linking Houchins Ditch and the Ropp levees to the broader context of agricultural development efforts and their negative impact on the farming communities of the Patoka watershed, also awaits a fuller telling and a wider audience.

Rather than retell what has now become the official history of the Patoka bridges and the road between them, I have another kind of story to tell. It is a ghost story of sorts, a tale of what sociologist Avery Gordon might call the “seething presence[s]” that documents like National Register nominations omit.¹³ Like any official document—historical or otherwise—the Register form includes some kinds of information and excludes others. The “presences” that I wish to conjure here found no place there—not because they constitute information that the Department of the Interior refuses to hear, nor because they cannot be documented, but

¹²“Memorandum of Agreement between the Federal Highway Administration and the Indiana State Historic Preservation Office regarding I-69 Evansville to Indianapolis Project,” Section 2, January 2010, online at <http://www.i69indyevn.org/corridor-wide-technical-reports>. As a result of the National Register listing, Pike County commissioners were able to apply for and win monies from FHA through the Historic Bridge Programmatic Agreement. The bridges qualified in part because of the recognition conferred on them by National Register listing, and in part because both bridges were listed as “Select” for preservation in Mead and Hunt, *Indiana Historic Bridge Inventory, Volume 4*, online at http://www.in.gov/indot/files/Volume_4_-_List_of_Select_and_Non-Select_Bridges.pdf.

¹³Avery Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (Minneapolis, Minn., 2008), 17.

simply because they did not fit the kind of narratives recognized by the Register. My hope is that this fuller account might render visible something of what still—invisibly—demands our attention in the Patoka Bottoms.

THE WABASH AND ERIE CANAL

The brief, troubled career of the Wabash and Erie Canal in southwestern Indiana reached its climax of cost overruns and human complications in the Patoka Bottoms in the decade before the Civil War. In 1850, William J. Ball, resident engineer for the canal's southern extension, described the Patoka River valley as "wide and expensive (*sic*)."¹⁴ Because of the extensive lowlands surrounding the Patoka and the quantity of small creeks—Hurricane Creek, Buck Creek, Keg's Creek—with wide valleys feeding into the river near Dongola, Ball devised a series of massive embankments designed to raise the canal for much of the stretch between the point where it entered the Patoka valley on the north (just beyond the deep cut at Patoka Summit, about a mile north of Hosmer in Pike County) and the beginning of the deep cut at Pigeon Summit (about two miles southwest of the Gibson County hamlet of Francisco). An aqueduct would carry the canal's waters across the Patoka River.

In hindsight, it appears that the canal's southern extension testifies to nothing so much as the sheer momentum of *the idea* of an interstate waterway connection between Lake Erie and the Ohio River—an idea whose realization disastrously coincided with its own obsolescence. The excessive costs required to complete the Terre Haute-to-Evansville segment of the canal would ultimately be ill-compensated by its scant seven years of functionality.¹⁵ Although the state had accomplished some of the labor for certain sections by 1838-39, officials stalled work on the southern division for twelve years while they struggled with the financial ruin brought on by over-borrowing for earlier transportation-related construction in northern Indiana.¹⁶ By 1850, canal ventures in other parts of the nation

¹⁴*Annual Report of the Trustees of the Wabash and Erie Canal to the General Assembly of the State of Indiana*, 1850 (Indianapolis, Ind., 1851), 176.

¹⁵As Paul Fatout notes, "The southern division...ended its brief and spasmodic life with a deficit close to \$1 million. [South of] Terre Haute, the ditch was a costly mistake." Paul Fatout, *Indiana Canals* (West Lafayette, Ind., 1972), 168. See also, Ronald E. Shaw, *Canals for a Nation: The Canal Era in the United States, 1790-1860* (Lexington, Ky., 1990), 230.

¹⁶Logan Esarey, *History of Indiana From Its Exploration to 1850* (1914; Indianapolis, Ind., 1970), chapter 16, "Systematic Internal Improvements," gives a lucid account of the financial debacle of the "Mammoth Internal Improvements" program of 1836.

were losing out to railroads in the competition for interstate transport of freight and passengers.¹⁷ Even in Evansville, Indiana, some former boosters began to wonder whether canals were not out of date. But others, including the editor of the *Evansville Journal*, defied the signs of the times and promoted the Wabash and Erie Canal extension as a means for increasing commerce at Evansville and within the traditionally agrarian hill towns of southern Indiana.¹⁸

Of all the sections on this already costly division of the canal, those through the Patoka Bottoms would exact perhaps the greatest toll on the canal builders themselves. On September 6, 1850, the firm of Samuel Forrer, Solomon Sturges, and S. R. Hosmer of Ohio contracted to raise this part of the canal an average height of twelve to twenty-one feet above the floodplain. In addition, an aqueduct with a width of eighteen feet would carry the canal across the Patoka River itself.¹⁹ At 194 feet in length, the new aqueduct was the fourth longest of eighteen such structures along the canal.²⁰ Like others of its length or shorter on the canal, the Patoka aqueduct was an open-trunk line. What distinguished it, and the canal as a whole through the Patoka Bottoms, was the extent to which these structures had to be elevated, not only above the river itself, but also the river's wide and marshy floodplain.

The following figures convey some idea of the exorbitant expense of the Patoka River valley to Pigeon Summit sections of the canal.²¹ A distance of just over twenty-one miles separated Petersburg from the south end of

¹⁷Shaw, *Canals for a Nation*, 234-35.

¹⁸Cited in Fatout, *Indiana Canals*, 145-46. We should not let hindsight obscure the complexity of Indiana's "canal mania" in the 1850s. Historians of the Wabash and Erie Canal in Indiana frequently note that the reason the trustees and the state went ahead with what appeared to some an unwise venture had to do with the land grants made to them by the federal government on the understanding that they would complete the canal to Terre Haute and finally Evansville. The grants that gave rise to the argument that the project *required* completion, since the lands had already been ceded by the federal government. Less noted and peculiar to the financing of the canal's Terre Haute-to-Evansville extension was the added incentive of a federal grant of all unsold lands still held in 1849 by the federal land office at Vincennes. Ralph D. Gray, "The Canal Era in Indiana," in *Transportation and the Early Nation: Papers presented at an Indiana American Revolution Bicentennial Symposium* (Indianapolis, Ind., 1982), 123.

¹⁹*Annual Report of the Trustees of the Wabash and Erie Canal to the General Assembly of the State of Indiana*, 1850, 175-76; 1853, 865-66.

²⁰The longest was the roofed and sided White River aqueduct north of Petersburg. With six spans, stone abutments and piers, it was 557 feet long. Also roofed and sided was the 240-foot aqueduct at Sugar Creek.

²¹"Sections" were about a mile long and sometimes shorter where the work was especially heavy—as at Dongola.

Pigeon Summit (not including the Patoka Summit deep cut, contracted out in 1848). Its estimated cost in 1850 was \$398,301. By contrast, the approximately thirty-three-and-one-half-mile distance between the south end of Pigeon Summit and Evansville (including the cost of the Pigeon Creek reservoir) was estimated at only \$145,948. The total estimated cost of the entire stretch from Petersburg to Evansville—\$561,341—made it, as the trustees pointed out to the Indiana General Assembly in 1850, “the most costly division of the Canal.”²²

Nor, as it turned out, could its cost be measured in dollars alone. Cholera outbreaks among the canal laborers on the southern division slowed construction for four consecutive years, from 1849 through 1852. The second most severe of these epidemics struck Gibson County between Dongola and Pigeon Summit in 1852, when the trustees reported that “cholera prevailed on the line from the 25th of June to the 20th of July . . . and the deaths were over one hundred.”²³ Gil Stormont’s *History of Gibson County* (1914) relates that “victims of the disease were left lying for days before being given burial and it was almost impossible to secure men to do this work. A few of the Irish workmen stayed with their stricken friends and these few men braved danger by burying the bodies in long trenches near the reservoir.”²⁴ Other victims were found in isolated “shanties” along the canal, several days after death, so decomposed that burial was not attempted. Instead, “the torch was applied to the building and the remains incinerated.” Stormont’s *History* locates the 1852 mass grave of Irish canal workers somewhere “near the [Pigeon Creek] reservoir.”²⁵ But interviews I conducted with residents in the Oakland City area turned up local legends of another mass grave much closer to Dongola. Alvetta Wallace, retired Gibson County historian, spoke of stricken canal workers who had been

²²*Annual Report of the Trustees of the Wabash and Erie Canal*, 1850, 147, 178.

²³Cholera had first broken out among canal laborers working north of Terre Haute in 1849. By fall of 1853, when the Terre Haute-to-Evansville division of the canal was finally opened through to Evansville (one year behind schedule), the epidemic had run its course. *Annual Report of the Trustees of the Wabash and Erie Canal*, 1849, 34; 1850, 146, 173; 1851, 247; 1852, 331-32, 345-46. See also, George Sutton, “A Report to the Indiana State Medical Society on Asiatic Cholera, as It Prevailed in the State in 1849-50-51-52,” *Proceedings of the Fourth Annual Meeting of the Indiana State Medical Society* (1853), 109-75.

²⁴Roy P. King, “Cholera Epidemics in Gibson County,” in Gil R. Stormont, *History of Gibson County, Indiana* (Indianapolis, Ind., 1914), 272.

²⁵*Ibid.*, 273, 277.

interred in the embankments themselves, close to where State Road 57 now crosses them, northeast of the Patoka Bridges Historic District.²⁶

The workers who built the canal were men who, in their time, had been treated as replaceable things—unimportant but for the value of their labor. Once dead, all trace of their existence—aside from the embankments that they built—drops from view, though not from local memory. The very fact that dozens of workers died, their bodies or torched bones interred in places unknown, itself carries great historical significance, at least to the people of southern Pike and eastern Gibson Counties, who still haunt themselves—and us—with stories about where those remains might be.

The 1852 outbreak brought construction to a standstill for more than two months before another labor force could (by means of “extraordinary inducements”) be gathered together and “set to work.” The Patoka Bottoms sections demanded particularly heavy labor—the huge embankments were dug by hand. Crews of four men with four carts, working under bosses who each oversaw ten crews, shoveled earth into carts and hauled it by horse or mule an average of two hundred yards to the embankments. Irish immigrant laborers were generally assigned shoveling duty; native-born Americans employed in these sections worked on cutting and dragging timbers for culverts and bridges. Whiskey flowed freely along the lines. “Jigger bosses” supplied laborers with free shots four times a day as they worked. Violent outbreaks among the laborers were common.²⁷

Crowded and unsanitary, flimsy “shanties” provided the standard means for boarding laborers throughout the Bottoms and beyond. One source estimates that the largest of these were eighty feet long, with bunks for fifty or more workers; at least a hundred boarding shanties stood in the Patoka watershed between Hosmer and Francisco.²⁸ Shanty towns were

²⁶Alvetta Wallace, interview with author, June 20, 2003.

²⁷William M. Cockrum, “Railroads and Transportation,” in Stormont, *History of Gibson County*, 97-98. Violent outbreaks among canal laborers plagued progress on the canal farther north as well, but those quarrels seemed typically to stem from clan and county rivalries among the Irish themselves. See also Shaw, *Canals for a Nation*, 169-72.

²⁸Cockrum, “Railroads and Transportation,” in Stormont, *History of Gibson County*, 98. The estimate of at least a hundred *boarding* shanties is probably exaggerated, but there would have been other structures besides those housing laborers. In general, the number of buildings is in line with the size of the work force in the Bottoms. In 1851, the resident engineer reported that the company began the season with approximately 1,200 men, but during the last half of the year (following the annual warm weather cholera outbreak), that number had dropped to an average of 1,050 men. *Annual Report of the Trustees of the Wabash and Erie Canal*, 1851, 247; see also Stan Schmitt, “Census Records as a Canal Information Source,” *Indiana Waterways* 3 (Winter 1984-85), 3-4.

served by “doggeries,” whose proprietors “supplied the thirsty with Patoka water and whiskey mixed.”²⁹ The especially busy section of the canal that ran across the Bottoms and through Dongola created a denser than average concentration of single men and resulted in an unusual number of such “drinking dens” along the river. County historians, writing several decades after these events, did not hesitate to name longtime members of the local community who exploited these conditions, and who themselves numbered among the rowdier elements in the Dongola area. Bev Willis—“from a good family, but . . . a wild fellow,” according to Cockrum, operated a small “shanty boat . . . situated near where the present [1884] iron bridge spans the river at Dongola.”³⁰ In Cockrum’s descriptions of the canal and Underground Railroad at Dongola, Willis preyed on Irish laborers as he did on escaping African American slaves (see below). Willis’s depredations among the Irish laborers brought him into conflict with William H. Stewart, whose firm, Stewart and Rockefeller, had subcontracted the job of building the Patoka aqueduct and the section of the canal on both sides of the river. Stewart complained that Willis was corrupting his labor force with excessively cheap whiskey. Gathering several of his best men to converge on the shanty boat, he gave Willis one week to leave Dongola. Willis absconded to California, but his operation was quickly replaced by another “dogger.”³¹

After three years, three cholera epidemics, and hundreds of lives lost, the Wabash and Erie Canal entered into its fitful seven-year run of “full operation” through the Patoka Bottoms. The southern division opened for navigation through to Evansville a year behind schedule in late September 1853, the same year that saw the completion of the Evansville and Crawfordsville Railroad through to Terre Haute (via Princeton, in Gibson County).³² From the start, the southern division more than fulfilled its

²⁹William M. Cockrum, *Pioneer History of Indiana Including Stories, Incidents and Customs of the Early Settlers* (Oakland City, Ind., 1907), 585.

³⁰Cockrum, “Railroads and Transportation,” in Stormont, *History of Gibson County*, 96-97.

³¹This is the same William H. Stewart who bought the Hazel Rough after the Civil War and turned it into a farm. See Cockrum, “Railroads and Transportation,” in Stormont, *History of Gibson County*, 96-98; and below, note 68.

³²The first canal boat to navigate the entire length of the canal from the Ohio state line to Evansville was the *Pennsylvania*, which arrived in Evansville on September 23, 1853. *Annual Report of the Trustees of the Wabash and Erie Canal*, 1853, 848.



The 1884 through-truss iron bridge crosses the Patoka River's South Fork at Dongola. It replaced a mid-nineteenth-century wooden bridge that figured colorfully in local accounts of Underground Railroad activity between Petersburg and what is now Oakland City.

detractors' worst financial predictions.³³ During its first two years of operation, shipments of merchandise on the canal as a whole *decreased* by over 50 percent due to railroad competition and disruptions to navigation.³⁴ Besides becoming, in some respects, a stunning investment failure, the canal's southern division excited a continuous, seemingly unstoppable flurry

³³Shaw argues that while the Indiana canals in general were "an unquestioned failure" in terms of immediate commercial returns to the investors, "they may have been a developmental success" because they opened channels of trade for agricultural products in the hinterlands and fostered urban growth in certain canal towns. Shaw, *Canals for a Nation*, 230. Such a case has been strongly made for Indiana canal ports from Fort Wayne to Lafayette, but the canal towns south of Terre Haute seem to have gained little. This includes especially Evansville, where the completion of the long-awaited Wabash and Erie Canal was at best anticlimactic. As Fatout notes, "It was ironical that Evansville, which had been utopian about improvements, should have waited longer than any other place, then have received a waterway obsolescent before it was finished, and not even have got that on schedule." Fatout, *Indiana Canals*, 147. See also, Edwin Maldonado, "Urban Growth During the Canal Era: The Case of Indiana," *Indiana Social Studies Quarterly* 31 (Winter 1978-79), 20-37.

³⁴*Annual Report of the Trustees of the Wabash and Erie Canal*, 1856, 3-4.

of localized opposition. North of the Patoka, repeated acts of vandalism at the Birch Creek reservoir in Clay County in 1854 and 1855 disrupted navigation southward for the summer and fall in two successive years.³⁵ South of the Patoka, the Pigeon Creek reservoir in Gibson County also became the focus of litigation against the canal trustees in 1851 and again in 1854.³⁶ In both Clay and Gibson Counties, citizens' opposition sprang from their not wholly unwarranted belief that the stagnant water of the reservoirs, especially water that surrounded standing timber—which the canal contractors repeatedly failed to clear despite repeated promises to do so—created the conditions that bred malaria and cholera.³⁷

By 1856, expenses for canal repairs and maintenance exceeded revenues. In that year, the trustees finally began clearing the offending Clay County reservoir of timber, a decision that put the southern division out of commission for yet another year.³⁸ In November 1858, a year in which navigation south of Petersburg had been suspended more than 113 days due to breaches (both natural and deliberately perpetrated) in the line above Petersburg, the bondholders resolved to “stop the working of the Canal south of Terre Haute.” The resident engineer's report filed in the same year listed structures requiring repair or replacement, including the Patoka embankments and the Patoka aqueduct with its guard gates, newly completed only six years before.³⁹

³⁵Ibid., 5-6. See also James E. Fickle, “The ‘People’ versus ‘Progress’ in the Old Northwest: Local Opposition to the Construction of the Wabash and Erie Canal,” *Old Northwest* 8 (Winter 1982-83), 314-24, for a detailed account of the vandalism perpetrated by the “Birch Creek Regulators” and the trustees' questionable efforts to address it appropriately.

³⁶Beginning in summer 1851, Gibson County residents sought legal injunctions to “stay the Wabash and Erie Canal Trustees from closing the [Pigeon Creek] Reservoir before clearing the standing timber.” “Great Excitement,” *Princeton (Indiana) Democratic Clarion*, August 23, 1851. Two months later, the editors of the *Clarion* and of the *Vincennes Gazette* weighed in on the side of the citizenry. *Princeton Democratic Clarion*, October 18, 1851, and “Reservoir Difficulty,” excerpted in the *Princeton Democratic Clarion*, October 25, 1851. In November, the *Clarion* reported that the request for injunction was refused by Judge Hovey at Evansville. “Judge Hovey's Decision,” *Princeton Democratic Clarion*, November 15, 1851. Another suit was brought against the trustees regarding the Pigeon Creek reservoir beginning in 1854. See Fickle, “The ‘People’ versus ‘Progress’ in the Old Northwest,” 318.

³⁷Scientists did not identify the cholera bacterium until 1883. Until that time and even afterwards, various theories about the cause of the disease and its transmission abounded, including a widespread belief “that the cause of cholera lay in the atmosphere.” Charles Rosenberg, *The Cholera Years: The United States in 1832, 1849, and 1866* (1962; Chicago, 1987), 3-4, 165-77.

³⁸*Annual Report of the Trustees of the Wabash and Erie Canal*, 1856, 4-6.

³⁹*Annual Report of the Trustees of the Wabash and Erie Canal*, 1858, 294, 311, 319.

For a few years, local entrepreneurs tried with minimal success to keep sections of the canal operating for strictly local transport. In March 1859, the entire Wabash and Erie Canal was divided into three sections and leased to private companies for four years, with most of the southern division (from Point Commerce to Evansville) falling to the Southern Indiana Canal Company headed by Ziba H. Cook, Marvin A. Lawrence, Goodlet Morgan, and others. Lessees, however, quickly abandoned the Terre Haute to Newberry section in 1860. As a link in an interstate system connecting Evansville to Terre Haute and markets north and east, the southern division of the canal was now officially dead. What of the orphaned sections of the canal south of Newberry? Despite an 1860 tornado that blew trees into the canal and broke the banks in several places, navigation limped along, with three or four boats making weekly round trips from Petersburg to Evansville via Dongola throughout the 1860 season. In 1861, however, with the company finding it increasingly difficult to make repairs and to collect from its subscribers, navigation ceased for good between Newberry and Pigeon Creek.⁴⁰ So ended Dongola's life as a canal port.

What remains? In 1936, part of State Road 57 south of Petersburg was built on top of the canal towpath up to a point just north of the Gibson County line. A historical marker is planted in the prism of the canal just to the west of the roadway as State Road 57 leaves the canal bed and proceeds due south toward Oakland City. From there, the embankments run diagonally southwest, heading to a point a few hundred feet east of County Road 300 West and the 1884 bridge. They rise approximately twenty to twenty-five feet above the floor of the Bottoms (thirty feet at the site of the aqueduct) and span roughly seventy feet in width at their base as they traverse the floodplain towards the Patoka River South Fork. The imprint of the canal's prism and towpath remain on the top surface of the embankments, although trees have grown up in the now-dry canal bed. I found no visible remains of the Patoka River aqueduct, its timber abutments, or its guard gates, but a more thorough inspection of the site may reveal traces of the aqueduct that I have been unable to detect.⁴¹

Of equal if not greater significance is what cannot be seen without some literal digging in this corner of the Bottoms. Aside from the stories

⁴⁰Fatout, *Indiana Canals*, 164, 166-67.

⁴¹A fairly recent publication by the Canal Society of Indiana states that there are still timber remains of the Patoka aqueduct "under the mud" at the site. Carolyn I. Schmidt, ed., *Wabash and Erie Canal: The Final Link* (Fort Wayne, Ind., 1998), 27.

about mass graves for Irish canal laborers who died of cholera, other less macabre traces of those same laborers' lives may well be recoverable from this place. Given the length of time it took to construct these sections of the canal, the presence of more than a thousand laborers in the area for those three years, and the reports of a high density of shanties and doggerys along the banks of the Patoka River at Dongola, the areas surrounding the canal embankments and the Dongola side of the river could likely qualify as archaeologically significant sites. As Indiana University archaeologist Cheryl Munson points out, "Short term occupations provide the best material time capsules...and no other [such] workstation is known to me in southern Indiana."⁴²

DONGOLA, THE OLD DONGOLA BRIDGE, AND THE UNDERGROUND RAILROAD

We move now from resources that are only dimly visible to traces of events that were meant to be, and still are, more or less invisible, episodes that live on in tales published by an old white man some sixty years after his 1850s boyhood—constructs of memories and words, not earth or metal. We start from something that is still there. Stand on Pike County Bridge #246, that delicate wrought- and cast-iron antique spanning the side-winding curves of the Patoka River's South Fork, and imagine what may have been there when the canal was operating. This bridge's immediate predecessor seems to have been a covered wooden bridge on the old state road known simply as the "old Dongola bridge."⁴³

Dongola, the vanished canal port that gave the now-vanished timber bridge its name, was platted on March 10, 1851, by Willard (a.k.a. William) Carpenter and Issac Street (a.k.a. Steele).⁴⁴ Situated along the old state road

⁴²Cheryl Munson, email to the author, August 4, 2003. Tom Castaldi, the current county historian for Allen County and a noted historian of the Wabash and Erie Canal in Indiana, points out that the canal construction camp at Delphi, Indiana, has undergone archaeological study. Quoted by James Cooper in an email to the author, December 10, 2012.

⁴³A photograph of the wooden bridge appears in William M. Cockrum, *History of the Underground Railroad As It Was Conducted By the Anti-Slavery League* (Oakland City, Ind., 1915), 32. James Cooper questions the authenticity of this photo, though he finds Cockrum's assertion that a covered bridge existed at least close to where the 1884 bridge now stands believable. He notes that there is no mention of a covered bridge at Dongola in the county commissioners' records for the early 1880s when the construction of the current iron bridge was in the planning stages. Email to the author, December 10, 2012.

⁴⁴Stormont, *History of Gibson County*, 303.

on the high ground of the river's south bank, the town sat just downriver from the point where the Wabash and Erie Canal aqueduct crossed the Patoka.⁴⁵ Founded on commercial expectations engendered by the construction of the canal, Dongola prepared itself from the start for a prosperous future. Surveyors laid out twelve "broad, avenue-like streets," 74-76 feet wide. They named the east-west streets Cambria, Columbia, Locust, Cherry, Walnut, Basin, Mulberry, and River; north-south streets were designated Penn, Willard, Main (the state road), and Fox. A thirteenth, Canal Street, paralleled the southeast side of the Wabash and Erie Canal, which ran at a northeast-to-southwest angle through the town. A public square marked the center of town between Cherry and Walnut Streets, where a schoolhouse stood.⁴⁶ A number of business owners established houses along the canal. James Cockrum, then about to begin his second term as representative to the Indiana legislature, built a packing and shipping house for pork and tobacco. Pork-packing at Dongola, a feature of flatboating commerce on the Patoka since the 1830s, boomed as never before (and never since). A post office established there on September 9, 1851, would serve patrons in Dongola and northern Columbia township for the next eleven years.⁴⁷

About fifty years after the Civil War, Colonel William M. Cockrum, James Cockrum's son, published a history of the Underground Railroad in eastern Gibson County based largely on boyhood memories of exploits in which he himself participated.⁴⁸ The younger Cockrum mentions by

⁴⁵More precisely, Dongola occupied a portion of the northeast quarter of Section 6, Columbia Township, in Gibson County, and a small corner of the southeast quarter of Section 31, Logan Township, in Pike County.

⁴⁶For a detailed map of the town's layout, see *Atlas of Gibson and Pike Counties, Indiana*, 22.

⁴⁷J. David Baker, *The Postal History of Indiana* (2 vols., Louisville, Ky., 1976), 2:927.

⁴⁸Cockrum also authored the chapter on "Railroads and Transportation" in Stormont's *History of Gibson County* (1914) cited above for its descriptions of the Wabash and Erie Canal at Dongola. Cockrum's own *Pioneer History* included a number of the accounts of Underground Railroad activity that would later be incorporated into both Stormont's chapter on the underground in his *History of Gibson County*, and Cockrum's own *History of the Underground Railroad* (1915). Stormont's chapter—aside from its excerpts of Cockrum—are corroborated by William Still, *The Underground Railroad* (Chicago, 1872) which refers to the Gibson County "station" kept by David Stormont (cited in Stormont, p. 224). While Still's and Stormont's accounts of the Underground route through Princeton are still regarded as reliable records for reconstructing the operation of the Underground Railroad in southwestern Indiana, Cockrum's accounts have generally raised more questions than they answer. In what follows, I read Cockrum's work for its value as a memoir of the period 1851-1854 in Columbia Township, where Cockrum lived as a boy aged 12-15.

name other locals who aided his father and him in specific efforts to foil the machinations of local bounty hunters and to facilitate the passage of slaves fleeing through Dongola. Among many other local men mentioned, Cockrum highlights Willard Carpenter and Issac Street, co-proprietors of Dongola, as abolitionists willing to act on their conviction that the treatment of escaping slaves as stolen property was heinous. Traces of Carpenter, an Evansville man, can be found in many sources—he was active in business and politics throughout southwestern Indiana after immigrating to the area from New England in the late 1830s. Besides promoting the southern extension of the Wabash and Erie Canal, he invested in several local railroad ventures, including the unsuccessful Evansville, Indianapolis, and Cleveland Straight Line Railroad, begun in 1854, but abandoned for 25 years after 1856.⁴⁹ Of Street, who lived and kept a store in Dongola until at least 1860, Cockrum wrote, “He was a very quiet old Quaker and thoroughly in sympathy with the anti-slavery party. He and his good wife, Aunt Rachel, had many times fed and secreted the poor negroes as they were making their way to the North and liberty.”⁵⁰ Other local notables Cockrum associates with Underground Railroad activity in the vicinity include John Hathaway, founder of the town of Winslow in Pike County, and owner of a mill on the Patoka downriver from that town. Hathaway also owned a farm on the Wabash and Erie Canal just north of the Patoka River and Dongola.⁵¹

Cockrum claims that eastern Gibson County harbored an active enclave of “Anti-Slavery League” members and sympathizers led by William’s father James, Ira Caswell of Warrick County, and Dr. John Posey of Pike.

⁴⁹Stormont, *History of Gibson County*, 104-105. Frank M. Gilbert, *History of the City of Evansville and Vanderburg County* (1910; Evansville, Ind., 1988), 122-26, gives an unusually encomiastic review of Carpenter’s character, history, and philanthropy without, however, mentioning any connection with Underground Railroad activity.

⁵⁰Cockrum, *Pioneer History of Indiana*, 586; and Cockrum, *History of the Underground Railroad*, 129. The latter source contains an extended story about Carpenter’s and Street’s collusion to aid five fugitive slaves, pp. 128-52. For more on Street’s Underground Railroad activities, see also pp. 42-43 and 204-205; on Aunt Rachel Street, pp. 132-38. Cockrum describes Issac Street’s store as located on the north side of the canal at Dongola, about forty feet from the towpath, and fitted with a cellar where escaping slaves were sometimes hidden. Census records confirm that Street was living in Dongola in 1850 and engaged in “merchandising”; but by 1860, he had removed to Evansville where it appears he and his wife (Sarah, not Rachel) were running a boarding house.

⁵¹Goodspeed Bros. & Company, *History of Pike and Dubois Counties* (Chicago, 1885), 354; and Cockrum, *Pioneer History of Indiana*, 583.

The existence of this “Anti-Slavery League” has been discounted by Fergus W. Bordewich, who finds no evidence to support Cockrum’s descriptions of a Gibson County branch of a nationally organized anti-slavery network, although he does characterize the book as a generally credible eyewitness account of how the Underground Railroad operated in one locality.⁵²

Given that Cockrum’s narratives do not stand up as either balanced historical analysis or as conscientious accounts of events recorded soon after their occurrence, in what ways can they enlighten us about the role of eastern Gibson County residents in the traffic in fugitive slaves through southern Indiana? Although leading scholars, beginning with Emma Lou Thornbrough, and continuing more recently to Bordewich, caution against the book’s “inaccuracies and elaborations” and “puzzling assertions,” both authors regard it as a useful memoir—rendering an “essentially accurate” picture of, among other things, the “dangers under which free Negroes lived” in the decade running up to the Civil War. For Bordewich, the volume well reflects the “semi-frontier quality of society in [southwestern] Indiana as late as the 1850s...[as well as] the increasing atmosphere of violence that deepened in the United States throughout that decade.” He also notes that the Underground Railroad in southwestern Indiana was marked by “intimate family and church relationships” among anti-slavery activists—a characteristic it shared with underground activity in border regions generally, where the danger of reprisal by pro-slavery elements was high.⁵³

Cockrum’s remembrances certainly bear out what Bordewich elsewhere documents as a general willingness among anti-slavery activists of the 1840s and 50s to use violence, as well as the particularly virulent brand of racism then prevailing in Indiana.⁵⁴ Cockrum’s rhetoric distinguishes him from

⁵²“Cockrum can generally be trusted when he is describing people he knew personally, events he participated in, and conversations that he was a part of.” Roxanne Mills, “An Interview with Fergus W. Bordewich,” *Journal for the Liberal Arts and Sciences* 8:3 (2004), 47-48.

⁵³Emma Lou Thornbrough, *The Negro in Indiana Before 1900: A Study of a Minority* (1957; Bloomington, Ind., 1993), 105, n. 21; and Mills, “An Interview with Fergus W. Bordewich,” 47-48.

⁵⁴In reference to the stoning Frederick Douglass received during a speaking tour in Indiana in 1843, Bordewich writes, “Douglass was used to the racism of the East Coast, but he was unprepared for the savagery that he met with in Indiana...[where] there was even racism among Quakers.” Fergus M. Bordewich, *Bound for Canaan: The Underground Railroad and the War for the Soul of America* (New York, 2005), 229.

earlier Quaker and/or evangelically minded white abolitionists who tended to be, as Bordewich phrases it, “exhilarated by the conviction that they were doing what faith demanded of them.”⁵⁵ Though Cockrum occasionally presents himself as a spokesman for the moral necessity of abolition, his foreword locates the origins of anti-slavery activity in eastern Gibson County squarely in a kind of proto-Libertarian politics and anti-southern sentiment.⁵⁶ Omitting any mention of Indiana’s own racist legislation of the 1850s, he opines that “the anti-slavery people would not have organized...if the South had not caused a law to be spread on the statutes of the U. S. that gave them domineering privileges over the North.” Cockrum implies that the germ of slavery, in the form of the federal Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, emanated like an insidious disease out of the South. The domineering attitude of the southerner was “catching,” a form of misbehavior that might, and sometimes did, spread like a contagion. He casts local bounty hunters as bestial—not the usual “wolves” but apes: “The local slave catchers and kidnappers of this section tried to ape the southerner and in many cases went much farther in their boastful, threatening way.”⁵⁷

And yet, except for a certain reverence toward Quaker Issac Steele and his wife, Cockrum seldom paints himself or his accomplices in pious colors. His language conflates his boyhood self with his late-life identity as a respected Civil War veteran and member of the Grand Army of the Republic. It also bespeaks the distance afforded by his own racially privileged perspective: besides being “apes,” the bounty hunters were also merely “bullies”; the local abolitionists, men and boys eager to “teach these bullies a lesson”; and the fleeing slaves, “poor Negroes.”⁵⁸ Cockrum

⁵⁵Ibid., 140.

⁵⁶See, for example, Cockrum, *History of the Underground Railroad*, 74.

⁵⁷Ibid., v-vi.

⁵⁸Ibid. While Cockrum does include in his accounts valuable record of activities by local free African Americans, as well as several Kentucky slaves who worked with the underground, the real subject of his memoir may be discerned from his dedication of the book to five named local white leaders, and by the book’s subtitle, which highlights “Those Aiding the Slaves to Escape and Those Trying to Recapture Them.” William’s father James Cockrum’s politics regarding “the Negro question” can be discerned as well from his harboring of three free African American boys whom he eventually helped repatriate to the new colony in Liberia in 1853. Cockrum, *History of the Underground Railroad*, 242-44. The identity and passage to Liberia of the three Stephenson boys and their father has been verified in independent sources. See Randy Mills et al., *Report to the Indiana Department of Natural Resources Department of Historic Preservation and Archaeology... Concerning Underground Railroad Activity in Southwestern Indiana* (Indianapolis, Ind., 2001), 2.

remembers most of the anti-slavery men and boys—for about half of those he names were teenagers in the 1850s—as gun-carrying creatures of the place, whose coarse sympathies fell with those victimized by or defiant of federal and state law, rather than with those who sought to profit by it at the expense of fleeing slaves and local free blacks. Their sort did not shy away from inventing and administering their own brand of justice to local slave hunters. In one instance that Cockrum recalls, he and his accomplices—who included five free African American activists, one a neighboring farmer and the other four men recruited from Lyles Station—branded the captured kidnappers on the shoulder with the sign of the cross. In another incident, they cut off their captives' left earlobes to mark them permanently as slave catchers.⁵⁹

That young William Cockrum felt himself linked by intimate family and community relationships to his confederates in the local underground is easy to see from the narratives he weaves as an old man. Just as striking, though less often noted, is how well he appears to have known specific local members of the slave-hunting posses that he and his friends confronted. Cockrum's reminiscences are rich with the names of men and boys on *both* sides of these altercations. The picture that emerges from his work is that of a very small community violently at odds with itself. And yet—and this is part of what marks Cockrum's accounts as tailored for the same community sixty years later—none of the principal players gets killed or even seriously injured, and almost all of the fleeing slaves pass through unharmed. The essentially sunny tone of Cockrum's tales contrasts starkly with, to cite another example from the time, Stormont's tale of the tragic failure of Seth Concklin, a Gibson County free African American abolitionist, whose attempt to guide four Alabama slaves through Indiana resulted in the recapture of the slaves and Concklin's own death.⁶⁰

What of Cockrum's claims regarding a specific route for fleeing slaves through eastern Gibson and southern Pike Counties? As early as 1898, historian Wilbur H. Siebert had identified three main trunk lines of the Underground Railroad in Indiana, and his research has remained a touchstone for later historians attempting to piece together the geographical trajectory of anti-slavery activism in Indiana.⁶¹ Cockrum's route does not

⁵⁹Cockrum, *History of the Underground Railroad*, 60-68, 271-72.

⁶⁰Stormont, *History of Gibson County*, 224-32.

⁶¹Thornbrough, *The Negro in Indiana*, 40.

form part of any of these “trunk lines.” And yet, as Bordewich, echoing Thornbrough, points out: “The Underground Railroad is often visualized as a fixed system that, once established, was rarely altered. In actuality, routes were always in flux. Even as new routes were opened, old ones became too dangerous, or no longer practical, and were abandoned.”⁶² Cockrum recalls an incident dating to sometime around or just after 1853, when an unusually large number of fugitives were brought to his father’s barn after the regular route through Princeton had become too dangerous.⁶³ Equally suggestive of eastern Gibson County’s Underground Railroad connections to the trunk line extending from Evansville to Princeton, and then north-west toward Vincennes and the Wabash, are Cockrum’s several matter-of-fact references to the “Cherry Grove neighborhood,” including extended accounts of free black activists from that area who aided Cockrum and his friends in capturing and punishing local slave-hunting posses.⁶⁴ Cherry Grove, about four miles west of Princeton, is better known as Lyles Station: a community of free African Americans whose Underground Railroad work in central Gibson County is now well recognized.

Whether or not we assume that Cockrum’s corridor was one of the “numerous cross routes and variations on the main routes” that Thornbrough described, we might ask why Cockrum’s account includes such a concentration of Underground Railroad activity at Dongola. At the moment in 1850 when the Fugitive Slave Act and related legislation at the state level made the position of even free African Americans in Indiana more precarious than it had ever been before, this corner of the two counties was about to become the site of a raw, rowdy boom town. Cockrum provided approximate dates for most of the incidents, and many of those for which he gave no specific date can be roughly dated based on their relation to events dated in the memoir. By my count, Cockrum’s *History* details some thirty-three specific incidents of Underground Railroad activity involving residents of eastern Gibson and southern Pike Counties. Cockrum himself recalls participating in at least eighteen. Of those,

⁶²Bordewich, *Bound for Canaan*, 230. “In addition to [the three main routes] there were...numerous cross routes and variations on the main routes. Continued use of the same route or stations might become dangerous if they became known to persons hostile to the activities of the underground, and different routes would then become necessary.” Thornbrough, *The Negro in Indiana*, 40-41.

⁶³Cockrum, *History of the Underground Railroad*, 171.

⁶⁴“Kidnappers Kidnapped,” and “John Davenport,” in *Ibid.*, 60-68, 265-76.

fifteen involve Dongola, with most of them occurring between 1851 and 1853—the years during which the canal was under construction between Petersburg and Evansville.

In Cockrum's stories, the combination of canal port and wetland topography seems less a setting than a full-fledged player in the unfolding of events. The Dongola bridge stood at a crucial but difficult crossing of the Patoka between two safe havens on a route whose Gibson and Pike County trajectory Cockrum describes in some detail. From James Cockrum's farm in what is now Oakland City, south of Dongola, fugitives had to move toward the coal bank owned by Dr. John Posey outside of Petersburg in Pike County.⁶⁵ Between the two lay the sloughs and wetlands that filled the Patoka Bottoms, and at the heart of that darkness, the new boom town of Dongola. Here we might speculate that Dongola's topographical difficulties (or advantages) were enhanced by the area's unusual demographic profile in the years 1851-1853. These years saw the greatest construction activity in the Dongola area, and during the warm months in all three years, cholera outbreaks among the canal laborers, and/or "general sickness" made that corner of the two counties a place that most citizens not connected to the area would wish to avoid.

As already noted, canal construction brought an unusual number of transients and opportunists into the area for three years. Around Dongola, as Cockrum elsewhere recalls, "shanties for the people and rough stables for the horses and oxen were scattered so thickly it looked like a string town for many miles along the canal."⁶⁶ If the congestion of that "string town" with its drunken boats banked along the nearby river was not daunting enough, the elevation of the canal through the Bottoms might have given one pause. The right-of-way plans for the southern divisions of the canal required a sixty-five-foot-wide swath of deforested land surrounding it for

⁶⁵James Cockrum's farm was located in what is now Oakland City. Though the barn no longer exists, the nearby house of William Cockrum has been restored and houses the university's Alumni Affairs office. Local historians have made some headway in documenting Cockrum's identification of a specific path of the Underground Railroad through eastern Gibson. The route William Cockrum describes ran from a crossing of the Ohio River above the mouth of Little Pigeon Creek, northeast and then northward through Ira Caswell's farm in Warrick County, James Cockrum's farm in eastern Gibson, and Posey's coal bank in southern Pike County. For detailed information on Ira Caswell's farm, and maps that indicate the location of the Posey coal bank, see Randy Mills et al., *Report...Concerning Underground Railroad Activity in Southwestern Indiana*, 6-10, 23-24.

⁶⁶Cockrum, quoted in Stormont, *History of Gibson County*, 98.

its entire length.⁶⁷ Denuded of trees and elevated like an open corridor above the floodplain and the state road, the towpath could not afford safe passage even under cover of moonless dark.⁶⁸

Bushwhacking across pathless terrain near Dongola was also not an option. Those who have no firsthand experience of the difficulty of passing through wetlands on foot must exercise a bit of imagination here. The Dongola bridge and the old state road were nearly impossible to avoid. To do so, the fugitive and his or her guides would have had to thread a boggy path through the sprawling maze of low-lying thickets that then lay on either side of both the Patoka and the canal. While these thickets could provide temporary cover, roaming bands of ill-tempered feral hogs further complicated passage. Close to the Dongola bridge and the state road, but thickly covered with hazel brush, the massive slough known as the "Hazel Rough" provided a convenient if perilous place for escaping slaves to hide until signaled that the Dongola bridge was clear.⁶⁹ Ordinarily, few ventured into the Hazel Rough. Thus the Dongola bridge and the Hazel Rough became the settings for no less than fifteen of the eighteen incidents in which Cockrum participated.

In later life, William Cockrum became a leading member in Gibson County business and educational circles, like his father and some of the other local notables whom he mentions as leaders of the Underground Railroad. Most of the friends whom he recalls from his boyhood adventures in the underground, on the other hand, were men who left no lasting marks

⁶⁷Andrew L. Clark, *The Wabash and Erie Canal: The Lower Divisions* (Mount Vernon, Ind., 1999), 60-61. Clark notes that specifications for the width of deforested right-of-way could and did vary from section to section. The figure quoted above reflects the specifications for Section 110, which Clark regards as typical for the southern divisions of the canal.

⁶⁸Cockrum's history contains only one account of slaves passing through southwestern Indiana by means of the Wabash and Erie Canal towpath (the story of John and Pete Munday, fugitive slaves from Webster County, Kentucky). These men had been instructed in Evansville to travel only at night, and to get off the towpath should anyone approach. They were intercepted by a free African American activist north of White River and steered away from the towpath entirely, as that route was considered too risky. Cockrum, *History of the Underground Railroad*, 226-29.

⁶⁹The Hazel Rough was just south of the Wabash and Erie Canal, opposite Dongola in the southeast quarter of Section 12, and the northeast quarter of Section 13, Columbia Township, Gibson County; the bottoms of Buck Creek were a short distance to its west. Cockrum notes that "after the canal was finished in this section, Mr. W. H. Stewart, the father of Dr. W. H. Stewart, of Oakland City, bought the immense thicket . . . and made a large farm. That farm is now [1907] owned by Frances W. Bullivant's heirs and Thomas Spore." Cockrum, *Pioneer History of Indiana*, 587. See also *Atlas of Gibson and Pike Counties, Indiana* (1881), 48.

on the community. Basil Simpson, who figures in about half of Cockrum's stories, exemplifies the ordinary, ad hoc, and decidedly unheroic nature of most of the anti-slavery men. The few details Cockrum relates cast him as a quintessential creature of the place, one who "lived on the bluff but a little way west of the [Dongola] bridge and...was thoroughly in sympathy with the anti-slavery people."⁷⁰ Born in North Carolina around 1807, Simpson had married in Pike County in 1829 and acquired acreage north of the Patoka River from the U. S. government before 1836. Like many of his generation in Pike County, Basil never learned to read and write.⁷¹ He traded in hogs and farmed, but by the early 1850s, now in his midforties, was "lame, and had learned the shoemaker's trade."⁷² Cockrum's account links Simpson's role in Underground Railroad activities to the latter's proximity to the old Dongola bridge. His name comes up repeatedly as a spy who kept watch on the bridge for intelligence about the movements of slave hunters. Occasionally he figures as an agent carrying messages between James Cockrum and John Posey, and coordinating transfers of fugitives across the Dongola bridge between the two "stations" that those men operated.⁷³

Cockrum's rendering of Simpson is laconic and unsentimental, but something of the trickster figure also emerges from his sketches. In two separate incidents, because of his greater age, Simpson leads raids against slave-hunting posses. The first of these, in the late summer of 1851, involved stealing the hidden horses of slave hunters lying in wait at the Dongola bridge, attaching fused, flammable materials to the horses' tails, and driving them, tails lit, across the bridge. The second raid relied on an elaborately theatrical ruse on the part of eight "Anti-Slavery League sympathizers" who operated out of Issac Street's store in Dongola, and availed themselves of a marvelous fire-powered contraption concocted by Obadiah Naley, "said to be a Quaker," who, like Jerry Sullivan—another transient

⁷⁰Cockrum, *Pioneer History of Indiana*, 588.

⁷¹"Pike County Marriages 1817-1859, Part I: Grooms," bound typescript volume, n. d., p. 38, Barrett Memorial Library, Petersburg, Indiana; U.S., Bureau of the Census, *Seventh Federal Census, 1850*, Pike County, Indiana, 98; U.S., Bureau of the Census, *Eighth Federal Census, 1860*, Pike County, Indiana, 120; see also below, n. 96.

⁷²For a description of Simpson's mark for hog's ears, see *Stock Marks of Pike County, Indiana*, undated handbound book held by the Barrett Memorial Library, Petersburg, Indiana. Cockrum, *History of the Underground Railroad*, 131. For other references to Simpson, see pp. 31-32, 53, 71-72, 82, 91, 131-38, 180-81.

⁷³Cockrum, *History of the Underground Railroad*, 181-82.

who figures colorfully in an earlier raid at the Dongola Bridge—"drifted into town with the workers on the Canal." Basil Simpson, the oldest man present, was again the chosen leader. Blackening their faces with wet powder, Simpson, his son [John] Wesley, a thirteen-year-old William Cockrum, and five others posed as "Cherry Grove free negroes," under which guise they attacked a band of twelve armed slave hunters who were aware that Street was harboring fugitives in his cellar. The band in black face, led by Simpson, ran the slave hunters all the way to Hawthorne's mill across the Patoka in Pike County, about three miles north of Dongola on the old state road—or so Cockrum remembers.⁷⁴

None of the underground activities recorded by Cockrum dates from later than 1854. Is this in part because things quieted down at Dongola once the canal laborers and subcontractors moved on? In 1856, Cockrum married and began fathering children; in 1861, he marched off to fight real Southern "bullies." Along with the failure of even local segments of the canal by 1861, the prospects of Dongola's commercially minded abolitionists and bounty hunters alike had been further dimmed by the failure after 1856, of the Straight Line Railroad, which would have passed just east of Dongola, linking the town to Evansville and Indianapolis. Willard Carpenter lost a great deal of money in the ill-fated railroad venture, as did many other smaller, local subscribers, to whom its failure, according to one county historian, "brought wreck and ruin."⁷⁵ The Louisville, Evansville and St. Louis Railroad (the Air Line) was not completed through Gibson County until 1872; it totally bypassed Dongola, running instead along an east-to-west line through Oakland City, Francisco, and Princeton.⁷⁶

The dream of a thriving town in this particular corner of the two counties gradually faded away, following a trajectory of dwindling commercial returns and a reversion to small, scattered farms and smaller-scale hopes. The Dongola post office closed on March 24, 1862, its patrons absorbed by

⁷⁴Ibid., 29-37, 128-37.

⁷⁵Ruth Miley McClellan, ed., *Pike County History, Bicentennial Edition 1776-1976* (Petersburg, Ind., 1976), 306. Was Issac Street one of the financial casualties of this investment fiasco? In 1850, the *Seventh Federal Census*, Gibson County, Indiana, shows him as owning \$2000 worth of personal property in Columbia Township. In the *Eighth Federal Census*, 1860, Vanderburg County, Indiana, he is listed as worth only \$500 and living in Evansville, where he and his wife are "landlord" and "landlady" in a residence that houses, in addition to their remaining five children, nine or ten other unrelated people.

⁷⁶James T. Tarrt, ed., *History of Gibson County, Indiana* (Edwardsville, Ill., 1884), 37.

the new post office at Oakland City, itself newly platted in 1856. Dongola, as another county historian put it, “died with the canal.”⁷⁷ By 1884, when the wrought-iron bridge was completed, the only business still operating at Dongola was a sawmill owned by Ferdinand Knier.⁷⁸ Meanwhile, farmers in the Patoka Bottoms still contended with the river: muddy and slow most of the time, it was capable of becoming something swirling and awful, devastating crops when it flooded in the spring.

HOUCHINS DITCH

As early as 1884, when the wrought-iron bridge was completed, Gibson County historians wrote in glowing terms of the “advantages of tile draining” as a method of reclaiming for agricultural purposes the “many small and several large, ponds and lakes in the county.”⁷⁹ But it was not until 1911 that locals began agitating for systematic drainage of the Patoka Bottoms. The initiative came from Pike County entrepreneurs, under the impetus of Monroe Township residents Charles Washington Luff and W. W. Shy. The dredging operations, completed in 1914 at the cost of \$39,088.88, deepened and widened fourteen miles of the South Fork of the Patoka River in Monroe Township, well to the south and east of Dongola.⁸⁰

In 1915, emboldened by the apparent success of their neighbors to the south, Devore C. Houchins (Pike County) and Samuel Morrison (Gibson County surveyor) petitioned the county commissioners to initiate work on a new, perfectly straight channel for the Patoka River from Winslow in Patoka Township, Pike County, through the village of Wheeling, in Gibson County, and as far west as the Wabash River. Although in the end, the operation proceeded no further west than Wheeling, the new channel bypassed thirty-six miles of lazy meanders and oxbows in the Patoka’s old channel, shortening the distance between the two villages to seventeen miles. The project was designed to allow high water a means of flushing rapidly through the bottoms, shifting the course of the river entirely, and thus draining the

⁷⁷Stormont, *History of Gibson County*, 305.

⁷⁸Tartt, *History of Gibson County*, 213. Dongola is listed as “now defunct” in Stormont’s 1914 *History of Gibson County*, 303.

⁷⁹Tartt, *History of Gibson County*, 36.

⁸⁰Anson Luff, “Dredging the South Fork of the Patoka River,” in Ruth Miley McClellan, ed., *Pike County History and Families, 1816-1987* (Petersburg, Ind., 1987), 46.

old channel and reclaiming an estimated 100,000 acres of floodplain for crop fields. Its estimated cost of \$500,000 would come from assessments levied against farmers who stood to benefit from the drainage.⁸¹

Houchins Ditch was the most extensive of the early twentieth-century efforts at wetland reclamation in the Patoka Bottoms. Its impact on the area's natural and built environment as well as on its social history, has been mixed, to put it mildly. Announcement of the plans provoked an immediate outcry among local landowners. Nine hundred "remonstrators" appeared on the courthouse square in Princeton to protest the ditching, stalling further plans for a couple of years. But pro-drainage sentiment prevailed, especially in Pike County where the relative success of the Patoka River South Fork dredging was still recent.⁸² After a lengthy court case against the ditch was decided in May, 1920, digging finally began in 1921, with two dredges operating simultaneously—one moving westward from Winslow, the other eastward from a point south of Wheeling in Gibson County. Spoils sidecast from the dredges created earthen berms on both sides of the channel that were expected to double as checks on high water, even during spring floods. The digging took three years to finish. By the time the two dredges met in mid-course, just north of Dongola, the project's fatal miscalculations had become evident. The dredge moving west (towards the Wabash) had dug a deeper channel than the eastbound dredge.⁸³ The bowl-shaped topography of the floodplain in this section of the Patoka Bottoms exacerbated the reverse fall-and-slack water conditions that the dredges had created.⁸⁴ Instead of draining 100,000 acres, the project reclaimed only 5,000.

⁸¹Petition for Drainage in Pike and Gibson Counties by Devore C. Houchins and Others, case no. 3966, Pike County Courthouse Records (1915), Petersburg, Indiana.

⁸²"Ditch Case Decided," *Pike County Democrat*, May 28, 1920. According to the *Winslow Dispatch*, May 28, 1920, the trial was "the biggest ditch trial ever held in this section and one of the longest trials ever held in Pike County...[the decision] settles a long drawn out controversy...as both those who wanted the ditch and those opposed had strong supporters."

⁸³After completion of the ditch, one of these dredges was abandoned in an oxbow of the original Patoka River, just west of where State Road 57 now runs. William McCoy, interview with author, June 20, 2003. In my June 20, 2003, conversation with Alvetta Wallace, she suggested that though parts of the dredge may have been salvaged for scrap metal during World War II, it may still be somewhere just east of what are now the boundaries of the Patoka Bridges Historic District.

⁸⁴William McCoy, interview with author, March 17, 2003; U.S., Department of the Interior, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, *Patoka River National Wetlands Project Final Environmental Impact Statement* (1994), 95, archived at Patoka River National Wildlife Refuge, Oakland City, Indiana, and in public libraries in the affected counties.

Houchins Ditch was created at a time when planners still largely misunderstood the effects of ditching and other means of artificial drainage on agriculture and the environment in general. As one midcentury geographer noted, this lack of information was “strikingly apparent in the Wabash Lowlands where it played a part in the Houchin’s (*sic*) Ditch fiasco. This project would not have been attempted if it had only been known that the drainage gradient and outlet would prove inadequate.” As late as the mid-1950s, engineers and agricultural interests continued to labor without sufficient information on the impacts of inadequate or unwise drainage.⁸⁵

The social and economic cost of “the Houchins Ditch fiasco” weighed heaviest on small farmers along its banks, an untold number of whom eventually lost their farms or their bottomlands due to “delinquent ditch assessments.”⁸⁶ Small family farms averaging eighty acres had been the norm throughout the Patoka Bottoms before the 1920s.⁸⁷ With the added financial strains created by ditch assessments, many of these small farmers were squeezed out entirely or absorbed into larger, more prosperous farms. Ditch assessments created hardships for farmers on well-drained land as well, since they too, under the “common enemy rule with regard to surplus water,” were also assessed to help farmers on low wetlands improve their holdings (even if those holdings might have been bought on the cheap—as some alleged—because they were considered disadvantageous wetlands).⁸⁸ The relatively large Ropp farm, bordering the north bank of Houchins Ditch, survived these hardships.

Functional or not, there the ditch was, larger than life and necessitating construction of the 1924 steel Camelback bridge. The Patoka River “New Channel,” as its engineers optimistically named it, maintains its sixty-foot width more or less uniformly throughout its seventeen-mile

⁸⁵James Woodall Taylor, “Ditch, Tile, and Levee: The Significance of Wetlands and Their Drainage to the Wabash Lowlands of Indiana” (Ph.D. diss., Indiana University, 1955), 113-15.

⁸⁶My survey of the *Pike County Democrat* for the years 1917-1924 reveals almost weekly notices of lands being sold out from under farmers due to “delinquent ditch assessments.” See, for example, *Pike County Democrat*, January 18, 1924, p. 4, c.1. The heaviest number of sales is of lands affected by Houchins Ditch (24 separate notices), but lands affected by the earlier “successful” dredging operations of W. W. Shy in Monroe Township are also high (9 notices).

⁸⁷William McCoy, interview with author, June 20, 2003.

⁸⁸Taylor, “Ditch, Tile, and Levee,” 120.



The 1924 Camelback bridge. After completing Houchins Ditch, engineers built this bridge to allow passage across the sixty-foot-wide channel.

run from Winslow to Wheeling, Indiana. Its impact on the flow of water through the bottoms differed from what the ditch diggers had intended. Within fifteen years of construction, the Indiana State Highway Commission reported that the “dense growth of willows” lining the banks of the new channel had “a retarding effect during high water.”⁸⁹ Today, during periods of flood, the waters in Houchins Ditch crest the berms, flooding the surrounding bottoms and the isolated oxbows of the river’s original channel. The old channel thus remains watered nearly ninety years after ditching, although water exchange between it and Houchins Ditch occurs only at times of flood, when heavy sediment loads increase silt deposit in the original meanders. Over time, isolated parts of the river’s old channel have become shallower and less able to hold water for long periods—a eutrophication that has a negative impact on the wetland wildlife habitat once provided by the old channel.⁹⁰

⁸⁹Indiana State Highway Commission, Survey Books, “Bridge #969,” p. 14, “Bridge #970,” p. 3, Records of the Indiana Department of Transportation, Indianapolis, Indiana,

⁹⁰U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, *Patoka River National Wetlands Project Final Environmental Impact Statement*, 92-93.

After the ditch's construction and into the mid-1940s, farmers and Civilian Conservation Corps workers continued to carry out construction and dredging operations aimed at flood control, drainage, and reclamation of bottomlands for crop fields in other parts of the lower Wabash watershed. In Pike County, with the notable exception of the Ropp farm levees (visible from the 1924 bridge), most of these efforts fell far short of their goals. Houchins Ditch does indeed still bypass the snaking twists and turns of the original Patoka River (now called Patoka River South Fork), but to what end?

Mechanized means for extracting resources from the earth were in full swing by the time Houchins Ditch was dug. Coal mining had begun to leave its mark on southern Pike County during the decade before World War I, but the Patoka Bottoms largely evaded the dramatic alterations caused by strip mines that so scoured the rest of the county—in part because of the swampy terrain, but also, in the case of the upland portions of the Ropp farm, because of the Ropp family's conservative land stewardship.⁹¹ Not all farmers in the Patoka Bottoms were beaten down by ditch assessments and the Great Depression; some, it might be argued, batted on the failures of their neighbors' farms. Notable among those Patoka Bottoms residents who not only survived but amassed further acreage after the completion of Houchins Ditch was Gus Ropp, the father of Doctor Howard Ropp—the latter still well-remembered as late as 2003 by his neighbors and patients in southern Pike County and in Oakland City.

In 2005, the Ropp farm included 299.25 acres within a half-mile of the Patoka Bridges.⁹² The farm was bordered on the south by Houchins Ditch and wetlands held by the Patoka National Wildlife Refuge, on the

⁹¹Gene Pflug, Pike County farmer, interview with author, June 20, 2003. According to Pflug, who had leased land for farming from the Ropps since 1992, "Doc' Ropp [Howard N. Ropp] was violently opposed to what the coal companies were doing." County Road 200 South, which passes along the northern edge of the Ropp farm, is the only road of its kind in the area to be governed by an ordinance prohibiting the passage of coal trucks between 6:00 p.m. and 6:00 a.m. The ordinance is a Ropp family legacy, according to Pflug. But Pflug also noted Howard Ropp didn't like the [Patoka National] Wildlife Refuge. He saw both Peabody Coal and the refuge as threatening to individual property owners' rights.

⁹²Section 31, Township 1 South, Range 8 West in Logan Township, Pike County, Indiana. Howard Ropp's holdings included all of the northwest quarter, and parts of the northeast, southwest, and southeast quarters of Section 31. When Howard Ropp died in 1995, the farm went into a trust managed for Howard's widow by A. J. Shultz, an attorney who had longstanding ties to the Ropp family. Pflug, interview with the author, June 20, 2003.

southeast by the old state road (County Road 300 West), and on the north by County Road 200 South. Earthen levees constructed by the Ropp family beginning in 1946 and added to over the next decade defined the farm's western and southern borders. The farmhouse, barn, and six outbuildings all sit on a twenty-six-acre parcel facing County Road 200 South, a little more than half a mile northwest of the 1924 Camelback bridge. The house and its wooden barn occupy the highest point of a hill on the south side of the road, with a commanding perspective of crop fields to the east, south, and west. North of the farmstead, the land continues to rise to the crest of a knoll crowned with a small grove of oak trees.

Gustaf H. Ropp established the farm in 1893, when he bought from Rebecca G. Wilson 139 acres of land in Section 31 of Logan Township, Pike County. The farm was almost twice as large as average neighboring farms in that part of the Patoka Bottoms in the 1890s. Over the next forty-two years, Ropp went on to amass a total of 237 acres, creating a farm that spanned parts of Sections 30 and 31 of Logan Township, as well as forty acres in Section 26, farther west. The latter acreage consisted of two twenty-acre parcels purchased by Ropp during the height of the Depression from Citizens Trust and Savings Bank of Princeton. They were probably bank foreclosures that Ropp bought at auction. That he was able to acquire further substantial acreage during the Depression reinforces local lore concerning the Ropp family's shrewd land and money management.

Locals know the low-lying fields in the south and southeast edges of the farm as the Ropp bottoms—a part of the Patoka River floodplain adjacent to Houchins Ditch that floods annually. The levees on the southern and western borders of these bottomland fields provide protection principally from erosion, not floodwaters *per se*. When the ditch floods, the sluice gates on the levees are deliberately opened to equalize pressure, and the fields are also flooded. A stationary diesel-engine-powered pump, installed in the 1940s at the time of levee construction, draws floodwaters out while the levees conserve the rich silt deposited with floods.

Longtime residents and farmers in the area recall that the pump was “Doc’ Ropp’s pride and joy,” the crucial element that rendered his levees effective while those of neighboring farms to the south and west—not provided with pumps—failed.⁹³ In fact, some argue, Ropp’s pump had an immediate negative effect on farms south of Houchins Ditch, which then

⁹³William McCoy, Gene Pflug, and Bob Phillips (Pike County farmer), interview with author, June 20, 2003.



Ropp bottoms before and after flooding. Lying in the Patoka River floodplain adjacent to Houchins Ditch, the bottoms flood annually. In the 1940s, Gustaf Ropp's son, "Doc" Ropp, purchased a diesel-powered pump to protect his crop fields.

took the brunt of the floods. Pumps came into use on neighboring farms in the 1960s and 1970s, when high-capacity, tractor-driven pumps became available. In Knox and Vincennes Counties, levees with tax-supported pumping came into use post-World War II, but except for the Ropps, no farmers in Pike County had the foresight or the capital to install their own pumps until the last half of the twentieth century.⁹⁴

The rich bottomlands of the former Ropp farm along Houchins Ditch were still being farmed in 2005 with the aid of the long earthen levees that the Ropps built north and northwest of Houchins Ditch in the 1940s. Serviced by diesel-engine-powered pumps, the levees keep Patoka flood waters from eroding crop fields. The farm and its levees are historically significant because they preserve field patterns and flood management techniques that have been in place in the lower Wabash watershed since at least the 1940s. At this writing, the former Ropp farm sits on the west side of I-69, the east end of its southern levees abutting the right-of-way of the I-69 “twin bridges.” County Road 200 South, paved now, rises up to pass over the highway, while County Road 300 West—the old state road, and the farm’s closest connector to Oakland City—ends abruptly just north of its intersection with County Road 200 South

EPILOGUE

There is a small burying ground on the top of that oak-crowned knoll just north of the former Ropp farm. Known as both the Logan Public and the Simpson Cemetery, it offers a sweeping view of the Patoka Bottoms and the farmland west of there.⁹⁵ In it rest the children and grandchildren of Bazil Simpson, the lame shoemaker whose crafty use of fireworks and minstrel-show tricks invest him, in Cockrum’s *History*, with an almost, but not quite, mythic quality. Simpson appears in those tales as a liminal figure, reconstructed from memory and launched toward a future that hesitates to recognize him: an illiterate, white man in black face, a watcher at the bridge, a conductor of souls moving between worlds. Soberer documents

⁹⁴Gene Pflug, interview with author.

⁹⁵The Logan Public Cemetery, a.k.a. the Old Public Cemetery, or Simpson Cemetery is located in the southwest corner of the southeast quarter of Section 30, Township 1 South, Range 8 West, Logan Township—about .2 miles north of the former Ropp farmhouse on County Road 350 West. Seven simple limestone headstones with legible inscriptions remain. All but two of the stones reveal children’s graves. The site is significant because it provides the only extant material evidence of the Bazil Simpson family in Pike County.



Various referred to as the Logan Public Cemetery, the Old Public Cemetery, and Simpson Cemetery, this Pike County burial ground holds the descendants of Basil Simpson.

affirm only that he both bought and sold land in this corner of Pike and Gibson Counties during the troubled years leading up to the Civil War. A decade after the war Simpson repurchased some of what he had earlier lost: the cemetery parcel in which his descendants still lie.⁹⁶ I have yet to find any record of Basil's own death or place of burial, but reading the stones that commemorate his children and grandchildren, I am inclined

⁹⁶Simpson bought the ground on patent from the U.S. government as part of a 40-acre parcel in what was then Madison Township, sometime before 1836. He subsequently sold the land, but bought it back in 1874. Judging from cemetery records and the extant stones, the cemetery was in active use for about a decade during the late 1860s and 1870s, and seems to have been used exclusively by members of the extended Simpson family. Only one known burial took place there after the 1870s, and that was of Basil's daughter, Indiana Simpson Anderson, who was buried next to her husband, John Anderson. The rest of the graves are all children's, and all of them the offspring of Basil's three children, Indiana, Virginia [Young], and John Wesley. The first burial took place in January 1867, two months before the Simpsons legally contracted to buy the land back from Robert Logan, suggesting that the Simpsons were farming or otherwise occupying the land as tenants of Logan before the purchase. Joan Woodhull and Marjorie Mallot, eds., *Pike County Indiana Cemetery Records*, vol. 1, Part IV (Owensboro, Ky., 1980), 29. *Tract Book of Lands in Pike County, 1822-1866*, pp. 176-77; *Pike County Land Transfer Book (Grantor) Deed Index D*, p. 67; *Pike County Land Transfer Book (Grantor) Deed Index E, Deed Record Book 3*, p. 204. Original books kept at Pike County Courthouse, Petersburg, Indiana.



I-69 from the 1924 bridge over Houchins Ditch.

to imagine how much he loved the land that nurtured him and that still cradles the bones of his offspring. One daughter he named Virginia, after the slaveholding state that he passed through on his way here from North Carolina; another daughter he named Indiana, for the state that he helped to settle. A long story about the self-inventions of this part of southwestern Indiana—longer even than the one I have set down here—could be spun from the sights one sees strolling the old roads from here to Dongola.

The trouble is, no one will be strolling anywhere near here, now that the highway builders have had their way with the place. The “twin bridges” that carry the north and southbound lanes of I-69 across the Bottoms are nearly a mile long, and pass some thirty-three feet above the entire place from what was once Dongola to County Road 200 South on the former Ropp farm. At its nearest point, the highway passes within 176 feet of the Patoka bridges.⁹⁷ Given the four-foot-high solid concrete guardrails and the seventy-mile-an-hour speed limit, this is too close for the old bridges even to be glimpsed from the windows of most passenger cars.

Stand on either one of the Patoka Bridges today and throw a stone west. It will land on the edge of the I-69 right-of-way. County Road 300

⁹⁷Staffan Peterson, cultural resources manager at INDOT, letter to the consulting parties for the I-69 Evansville to Indianapolis Tier 2 Studies, March 8, 2012.



Simpson Cemetery, Pike County.

West is barricaded at both the north and south ends of the district, and dead-ended completely just north of the intersection with County Road 200 South, where the interstate cuts across this corner of Pike County. A recent visit showed the wetlands just beyond the old state road still littered with construction debris, and occupied by a cadre of highway builders finishing up their work. Completely razed a year and a half ago, the floodplain beneath the I-69 twin bridges is still rough and disturbed. A diminutive northern white cedar hedge planted to mitigate adverse visual impacts struggles to maintain a foothold in the wet earth.

Can anything further be done here by those who care about what is passing from view? Colleagues have suggested to me that the remains of the Wabash and Erie Canal in the Patoka Bottoms may yet be eligible for National Register listing. Such designation would be well worth the relatively small effort required. The work of preserving, of *re-membering* such places is important because what we have built is so much a part of who we have been, and who we continue to be. This essay will have done its work if even one reader sees in it a map for his or her own digging. It is a map meant to be elaborated, in the hope that others can dig deeper than I. There is so much we *can* recover, given enough care and persistence, even if those who prefer to forget have already obliterated what they could on the edges of this place.

