Vincennes and the Old Northwest
By Governor Paul V. McNutt

In the closing pages of Plato's Republic, there is found the story of the prophet of Lachaesis, who addressed the souls of men who were coming back from the other world to take up once more human form: "Let him who draws the first lot have the first choice, and the life he chooses shall be his destiny." The life which was chosen on this spot; the life which was chosen in the Legislative Hall one hundred yards from where we sit; the life which was chosen at Fort Sackville, became the destiny of the United States of America.¹

I wonder if those of us, who are close to this pioneer life in Indiana, realize what a great region we have here. It is not merely that we have preserved these places, it is that the spirit which was born in them has persisted through the years. It is a splendid thing that we have the tangible reminders of the fact that history was made here and that policies were adopted, and faiths announced, which have been kept through the years.

I have never been able to understand why those who have undertaken the task of writing the history of the United States have not laid greater stress upon the important events which happened in this community. And while this is speaking a bit out of turn, as a member of the State Board of Education, I think it might be in order for the Board to suggest that those who offer their histories for use in the public schools of Indiana pay some attention to the real history which was made here.

From all walks of life, the eyes of the nation must be turn-

¹ This address of Governor McNutt was delivered in Harrison Park, Vincennes, on Friday, May 26, 1933. The occasion was the historic site recital which was under the direction of Ross Lockridge of Bloomington, Indiana. A regional, historic field day was planned which drew teachers, students and historians from a wide area.
ed upon this spot. We have seen this afternoon an example of one of the developments in the course of training for citizenship, in the form of this splendid unit from the Reserve Officers' Training Corps at Indiana University.² You perhaps merely look upon uniformed men. Do you realize that you see in them a symbol of the duty which rests upon every able-bodied man, namely, the defense of the nation in any hour of need? They likewise take you back from the modern exemplification of duty to the earlier exemplification of duty in George Rogers Clark and his intrepid band. They made history. The attack they carried out here, the capture of Fort Sackville, comes down in the annals of our nation. It was a brilliant campaign under a daring and resourceful leader.

Many other places in this part of the country laid claim to the national memorial to Clark. But, here he accomplished a most brilliant feat; here he made his most important contributions to the future welfare of the nation. No man knows what the development of the United States might have been were it not for the fact that Clark and his men brought about the surrender of Fort Sackville. It is appropriate that the nation itself recognize this in placing here at Vincennes this beautiful national memorial.

May I remind you, that in the building across the street (Legislative Hall),³ actions were taken, more far-reaching, more important than have been taken in any building in this whole nation, except in the Capitol Building in Washington. More land was controlled through that office, more important policies were adopted by that Legislature of thirteen members, which met in the upper room of that building, than in any other state or territorial capital. The thought came to me this afternoon as I walked through that upper room that it might be well to have a legislature of thirteen once more. It is always easier to settle matters in one room through close personal contact with those who are charged with the responsibilities of government.

I wish at this time to point out a very important thing, which has to do with this community and to offer a suggestion. The region between the Ohio and the Great Lakes, part of the

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²The Indiana University Band and the Pershing Rifle drill squad participated in the field day exercises.
³The building in which the territorial legislature met still stands. It was this old structure which the Governor mentioned and to which he directed the attention of his auditors at several points in his speech.
Province of Quebec before the Revolution, was ceded to the United States in the Treaty of Peace negotiated at Paris on behalf of the United States by Benjamin Franklin, John Adams, and John Jay. That treaty was signed on September 3, 1783. I think that it would be a fitting thing for us to center the eyes of the nation upon Vincennes, upon this memorial, upon this Legislative Hall, on the one hundred and fiftieth anniversary of that signing on the third day of September of this year. I shall be more than glad to use the powers of my office to invite the attention of the rest of the nation to the importance and significance of such a celebration and I feel confident that you who are present here will be willing to join me.

I want to call your attention to the unique significance in the history of the United States of the territory ceded to the United States by Great Britain in 1783, the Old Northwest. Do you realize that this was the first acquisition of territory made by the United States as a nation? That it was more important than the Louisiana Purchase, more important than Florida or Texas—more important than the Oregon country or the far Southwest. It was the heart of the continent then, it is the heart of the continent now—the center of our population, the place where true Americanism and the pioneer spirit reign supreme. Without this territory, the United States might have remained a small seaboard nation.

The second thing that I wish to call to your attention at this time is this: At that time the territory was claimed by Virginia, by Massachusetts, Connecticut and other eastern seaboard states. Those states generously surrendered their claims and made this territory a common possession, belonging to all. It was almost the only common possession of the whole people of the United States, and it was a bond which held the states together when the very existence of a federal government was seriously threatened.

There is a third thing to which I wish to invite your attention: It is that the organization by the United States of these territories was an important step between national domain and statehood. It is not generally understood today how important that step was in the development of the nation. This territory might have been treated as government property to be held as a colony for the benefit of the original states
of the Union. On the other hand, the expansion of the United States might have taken place through the extension of some or all of the original states. It was through conflict of opinion and of interests, it was through serious thought and gradual development, that the idea of a temporary territory controlled by the federal government was adopted. The American “territory” which thus came into being differed from the British colony chiefly in the fact that it was temporary and not permanent. The way was provided for statehood, for complete equality in due time with the original charter members of the Union.

The Ordinance of 1787 has long been regarded in American history as second in importance only to the Constitution of the United States. Emphasis has long been placed on the general principles of religious freedom, public education and prohibition of slavery incorporated in that document. But in reality, the establishment of these principles and their realization were effected not so much by the Ordinance of 1787 as by the development which took place in the territories themselves. It is not of so much importance that these principles were written into the document; it is of importance that they were carried out by the people who came to the Northwest Territory.

The provisions for the governmental organization of the territory and the subsequent creation of the resulting states, to be taken into the United States on the same basis as the original states, was the most important thing that came out of that entire development. For it was in the Northwest and Indiana Territories that the principles governing the expansion of the United States were worked out under Arthur St. Clair and William Henry Harrison, the most important of all our territorial governors. They were more than governors. They were empire builders.

The laws established for the Northwest Territory, and the laws enacted by the territorial legislature that sat in that building (Legislative Hall) and the procedure our government adopted then, were of prime importance and served as precedents for all subsequent times.

May I also invite your attention to a fourth thing? That the pioneers of this great Ohio valley, that the pioneers of the Northwest and Indiana Territories, really developed American democracy. Conditions were similar throughout the region
between the Alleghanies and the Mississippi, and they were different from those prevailing anywhere else. The privations with which our forefathers contended, the ever present malaria, the difficulty of travel by the wilderness trails, the log cabins which spotted this part of the country, the clearing and cultivating of farms by the hardest of toil, all marked the life of our pioneers. In that pioneer life of the Old Northwest they developed social and political equality, pride of citizenship, and the resourcefulness which have made this nation what it is.

I want to pay tribute to the foresight of those men who made the first Constitution of the State of Indiana—men who had the courage to provide for a system of public education, wherein tuition should be gratis, from the primary school up to and including the university. They planned with a vision of equality of opportunity for all of the children. I add this one thing today, my fellow citizens; despite the crisis which is upon us; despite this great shadow of economic depression under which we have been living, it is still one of the primary duties of an enlightened government to give adequate support to public education. If you expect anything to come from the future years, you must provide education for the children. They grow up in times of depression as well as in times of prosperity. Roads and buildings can wait, but not these children—don’t forget that.

The last thing to which I wish to call your attention is this: It was this region that decided the question of slavery and the outcome of the Civil War. The five states of the Old Northwest threw their great weight into the scale on the side of freedom and national unity, and both were won. From this region came President Lincoln and General Grant, the two greatest figures of the War. These States have led also in the rebuilding of the nation and since the fourth day of March, 1861, this region has given to the nation eight of the fourteen men elected to the presidency of the United States.

This land between the Ohio and the Great Lakes, won for the United States in the War of the Revolution and in the Treaty of Peace which terminated it, and these memorials of our historic past, well merit, this year, an especial measure of our respect and reverence. They have for us an inspiring significance. Here in the heart of the nation, in our beloved State of Indiana, cannot we in the presence of these tangible
symbols take on some of the spirit of the pioneer, recognizing the power which is in us to overcome any crisis, however great, and keep the faith, not only the faith of our forefathers, but the faith which our children have in us.