White River in Morgan County
(See following article)
White River—Historical Influences Observed in Morgan County

James R. Anderson*

White River, compared to the Ohio and the Wabash, is little known but nevertheless has been important in Indiana's history. Rising near the Ohio boundary the East and West Forks of this river cross south-central Indiana diagonally, joining northeast of Petersburg (Pike County), and then flowing southwestward to empty into the Wabash just below Vincennes.

Lying astride the West Fork of White River approximately midway between its headwaters and its mouth, Morgan County has felt the pulse of the river since the first influx of white settlers shortly after 1816. Long before then the Miami and other Indian tribes had used it as a means of transportation and a source of food. Early French fur traders likewise found it the most convenient means of penetrating the dense forests of its region. ¹ Since the coming of the first settlers, the river and its valley have served as an avenue of trade and transportation, as a fertile agricultural region, and as a place for the building of homes and towns. This has been true not only in Morgan but in Owen, Greene, Daviess, and Knox, downstream from Morgan, and Marion, Hamilton, Madison, Delaware, and Randolph, upstream. Especially in the more rugged downstream counties, of which Morgan is the most northern, the river has been a source of both strength and weakness. Its floods have wrought repeated destruction; many will recall the disastrous floods of 1930 and 1913. ² Especially high floods also occurred in 1828, 1847, and 1875.³ Yet floods have brought fertile alluvium, which spreading out over the floodplain, remarkably wide and level in many places, has long yielded good crops for White River Valley farmers who have persisted. In Mor-

* James R. Anderson is a member of the department of Geography at the University of Maryland, College Park, Maryland.

¹ Elmore Barce, The Land of the Miamis (Fowler, Indiana, 1922), 87.


³ Stephen S. Visher, Climate of Indiana (Bloomington, Indiana, 1944), 262; Indianapolis, Indiana, Journal, August 6, 1875.
gan and downstream counties, this floodplain, lying as it does between rough, relatively infertile uplands, has been a land of comparative plenty.

It is the story of this river that we relate here. Its place in the history of Morgan County may well reflect a similar role in the development of other river counties in southwestern Indiana.

There have been three fairly distinct periods in the growth of Morgan County, and in each of these the river has played a significant part. The first, extending from 1818-1853, was a period of rapid settlement when good land was cheap and plentiful. The White River Valley first served as one of the primary routes of entrance into the county, and shortly afterwards agricultural products moved down the river to markets at New Orleans.

The second period was ushered in with the coming of the first railroads in 1853 and was logically terminated by an initial population decline shortly after 1910. Most of the good land had been taken by the time of the Civil War, and by 1900 much of the best timber had been cut. Other economic endeavors such as the clay products plants at Martinsville and Brooklyn, the furniture factories, and the commercial use of mineral waters at Martinsville maintained a population increase until World War I started an exodus to the army and to larger industrial areas. Many never returned because of relatively greater opportunities elsewhere. It was the valley rather than the river itself during this second period which offered a comparatively easy route for a railroad from Indianapolis to Vincennes. A map of Indiana railroads and rivers reveals how strikingly near to the river the railroad clings through rough hill lands which commence in central Morgan County north of Martinsville.

The period since World War I has been one of decline in population, although the "back to the farm" movement stimulated by the depression of the 1930's brought numerous families back to Morgan County, some to abandoned farms. Just as the period between the Civil War and World War I was the age of railroads so has post World War I in Morgan

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4 *Fourteenth Census of the United States, 1920, Population, 1, Table 53, p. 411.
5 *Sixteenth Census of the United States, 1940, Population, 1, Table 4 (Indiana), 344.
County seen the coming of the improved highway, with the automobile and freight truck. Again the river seemed almost irresistible, for engineers laid their roadbeds on the level valley floor most of the way from Indianapolis to Vincennes.

So it is that the river has repeatedly made itself felt. Further glimpses into the relationship of the river to the people of its hinterland illustrates why many who live within its reach find it both friend and enemy. Let us examine these historical relationships more closely.

In two important respects the White River influenced the flow of settlers into Morgan County. First, it was the easiest accessible route from the already populated portions of southwestern Indiana into the wilderness of “The New Purchase.” Many who had settled earlier in Knox, Pike, Daviess, Gibson, Greene, and other downstream counties made their way along the valley into Morgan.⁶

Almost equally influential in the early advance of pioneers into the County was Whetzel’s Trace named after Jacob Whetzel who in 1818 had led a party of men through the forests from the Whitewater County of southeastern Indiana. It was Whetzel’s intention to open up an established route of communication between the Whitewater Valley and the settlements to the west. The most feasible plan was to clear a path through what are now Rush, Shelby, Johnson, and Morgan counties to the White River, which would then offer a relatively easy approach to Vincennes and other settlements on the Wabash.⁷ Whetzel decided to terminate his “trace” at a site since known as The Bluffs, previously named by the French, Port Royal, a point of contact in their fur trade with the Indians.⁸ This site consists of prominent bluffs rising abruptly from the river at a point about one and a


⁸ The Bluffs vicinity was considered by the commissioners appointed to select a site for the State Capital as a logical location for the Capital. At that time (1820) some location near the geographic center of the State on the banks of the White River was viewed as the ideal location. Morgan County was favorably situated, since it was more accessible to steamboats coming from New Orleans and other southern points than the present site of Indianapolis. Furthermore, Morgan was more centrally situated than Marion County in relation to the population of Indiana in the early 1820’s. Apparently, the deciding point against the Morgan County site under consideration
half miles northeast of Waverly. These offer a view both upstream and downstream and were a logical western terminal of the trace.⁹

Upon entering Morgan County the early settlers located in what appeared to be suitable places. As nearness to a stream was important in the wilderness, the first settlements were made along the White River and on the larger creeks. The streams were also important as a source of power for local flour and gristmills. Good springs were much prized by the early farmers not only for the water, but as a crude "ice box" in hot weather. The "lay of the land" and the presence of any small unforest ed spots were likewise influential in locating farms. Topography was particularly important because slightly rolling land was more suitable to early farming conditions than was flat land. Consequently, it was not the land immediately along the river that was first settled and tilled, but rather the second bottom land.¹⁰

As the early settlers usually came in groups, small clusters of farmsteads developed which encouraged the establishment of small villages as trading centers. The first of these were all relatively near to the White River, generally near the mouth of one of its tributaries. The two earliest settlements were made in 1819. One was located on Lamb's Creek in the southern part of Jefferson Township; the other in Green Township along what is now Stott's Creek. James Stott and six others, coming up from Lawrence County, located farms in this vicinity. Another early settlement was on Butler Creek about one mile north of White River in Ray Township near the present village of Whitaker. None of these three early communities developed into towns, but they served as important early centers of settlement.¹¹

The settlements that grew into the two most important populated places, Martinsville and Mooresville were favored in their growth by conditions not entirely geographic. Mar-

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tinsville owes much of its early growth and subsequent development to its choice as county seat. Two sites were under consideration, the present one and one in Clay Township just north of the river where Centerton is now situated. The Centerton site is nearer the center of the County and is otherwise favorably located. The longer established residents near the Martinsville site, however, were apparently more free in offering some of their land; consequently Martinsville (named after the oldest member of the board of commissioners) was established as the county seat in 1822.\(^\text{12}\)

Mooresville is much indebted to the man in whose honor it was named, Samuel Moore. This ambitious trader and merchant realized the advantages of having a trading center near the confluence of the main branch and the East Fork of White Lick Creek, a tributary of the White River, and then navigable by flatboat for much of the year. The immediate vicinity of Mooresville was also good for early farms.

The townships along the White River were settled first and had a more rapid growth in the early decades than the non-river townships. What have since become the townships of Washington (with Martinsville), Clay, Madison, and Brown (with Mooresville), were first settled in 1820. Harrison, Green, and Jefferson were settled a year earlier, Ray a year later. All, except Brown, border the White River. Four townships farther from the river, Monroe, Adams, Baker (near the river but more isolated because of rugged terrain), and Gregg, were settled between 1822-1825, while Jackson Township because of its distance from the White River or any stream big enough to serve as a suitable highway was the last to be settled. The settlement of Adams was also much delayed by distance from a navigable stream and poor local drainage.

By 1830 the county had a well-scattered population, but with more people concentrated in the river valley, the White River became the principal artery of trade. The golden era of the flatboat was at hand. Its rise and decline on the Ohio admirably described by T. W. Records\(^\text{13}\) offers a corollary to its place on the White River as a mode of getting farm products to market from 1830-1853, especially during

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the decade of the 1840's. The steamboat, which became its competitor on the Ohio, never really encroached upon the flatboat trade moving down the White River.

Noah Major, a pioneer of Morgan County, writing in his memoirs about 1900 graphically describes the trade as follows:

White River, though crooked and turbulent and abounding in snags, drifts, and abrupt cut-offs, was destined to be the great thoroughfare for Morgan county produce, and to convey on its restless bosom many thousands of dollars' worth of pork, corn, wheat, flour, mess beef, and lumber on their way to the Southern markets—generally to the city of New Orleans, a city then of 150,000 inhabitants and one of the best markets in the United States. The distance from Martinsville to New Orleans is computed at 1,800 miles by water.

The rivers are all crooked, and none more so than White River. A trip to the Crescent City and return was usually made in about six weeks, though there were one or two trips made in less than four weeks. These short trips were made by running day and night after reaching the Ohio river. There were instances where the cables were never tied between the mouth of the Wabash and the landing at the City. At other times the winds were so high that the boats were drifted ashore and tied up for a day or two at a time. At the time of year (March and April) when the boats were on their voyage, they often encountered thunderstorms and fearful winds, which made it rather uncomfortable for a nervous boatman. Boats and crews were known to be sent to the bottom together by such warring of the elements, though the number was small considering the apparent danger, and none were lost in this manner from our county.

It was soon learned that lard, bacon, and bulk pork, were the most profitable products to ship from Morgan county. Although considerable quantities of corn, wheat, flour, and lumber were shipped in an early day, not much of it was done toward the last. The reason is obvious enough, when a thousand pounds of the pork products would bring $50 in New Orleans, while the same weight in corn would in no case bring more than $8 or $10. Morgan county was always, practically, the head of navigation on White River, and more so after the building of the feeder dam at Waverly.

True it was, in 1824, a little stern-wheel steamboat, firing with fence rails and driftwood, penetrated the wilderness by the meandering of the river as far as Indianapolis, but she had to "crawfish" back as far as main White river before she could "about face." This settled the question of steamboat navigation, and left it all one way with the "flats," and that was down stream. Thus we could export by the "flats," but we had to import by wagons over the dirt roads from the Ohio river. From 1840 to 1853 was the golden era of flatboats. During that period Morgan county stood third in the State for the production of corn and hogs. Farming was then pre-eminently the business of this county. No succeeding epoch ever proved more satisfactory to our enterprising farmers than this one.
The magnitude of flatboating will be better understood by the following estimates which, I think, are within the bounds of reason. Counting an average of fifteen boats per annum from 1829 to 1853, we have a total of 345 for the twenty-three years.

There were not less than 4,500,000 feet of lumber used in constructing these boats, three-fourths of which were of the finest poplar trees that grew near White river. This lumber was worth at least $10 per thousand feet, or $45,000; 345 boats at a cost of $240 per boat, $82,800. The cargoes, estimated at $4,000 each, $1,380,000.14

From these accounts it is apparent that the flatboat trade was significant in stimulating the growth of Martinsville and to a lesser degree, Mooresville. Similarly, it was indispensable to the farmer for they were much in need of a market for their surplus pork and grain in order that they could acquire needed supplies of salt, tools, and other articles not produced locally.

Ranking in importance with the flatboat trade were the early mills for the grinding of grain. These were generally located on the creeks emptying into the White River, for water was the primary source of power. Small though these early mills were, they were of utmost importance to the early farmer. The sawmills too were important in furnishing the necessary lumber for the building of houses to take the place of the original log cabins.15

Canals affected Morgan County only indirectly. The projected Central Canal, which was not completed, was to follow the White River through the county and connect with the Wabash and Erie Canal near the southwest corner of Owen County.16 At most this canal would only have prolonged for a short while the flatboat trade with New Orleans.

Then came the railroads. Most important in the county’s railroad history has been the Indianapolis and Vincennes road, commonly known as the I. and V. One of three railroads in the county, it was originally started by the New Albany and Salem Company before the Civil War. It was, however, not opened until 1869, by which time it was controlled by


the Pennsylvania Railroad, the present owners.\textsuperscript{17} Until about 1930 this road was a most important transportation facility affording much local freight and passenger service. Towns and villages along it thrived as centers of local trade and industry. But with the coming of the automobile and freight truck, the railroad traffic has dwindled, and now this railway is mainly a significant connection between Indianapolis and the coal mines of southwestern Indiana.

With the coming of the railroads, the river became only a minor transportation route. New Orleans became a distant city by flatboat. Cincinnati for a short while figured in the county's trade largely because the first railroad to enter Morgan County was from the southeast with Cincinnati as its ultimate southern terminus. With Indianapolis, however, rapidly growing as the commercial and political center of Indiana, this was an unnatural orientation and hence the dominant trade and transportation routes soon turned northeastward. Then the river valley became important as a transportation route northeastward. The trade flow had been reversed, but the White River Valley in Morgan County remained the gateway between Indianapolis and the downstream counties.

The presence of rough terrain on both sides of the White River in western Morgan County, and the considerable wideness of the valley there, plus the fact that it is subject to frequent flooding have combined to make a definite transportation funnel through Ray Township. In locating the railroad, engineers tried to keep away from the rough terrain on the one hand and the treacherous flood plain on the other. This restriction has made for a concentration of traffic flow and has somewhat isolated the northwest and southeast parts of the county.

The railroad age brought changes in the settlement pattern of Morgan County in several of which the river figured prominently. Rural communities, villages, and towns adjusted to its "pull." Approximately 40 per cent of the total population of Morgan County is within the White River Valley which makes up only 10 per cent of the total area. Martinsville, which had been the center of the pork and grain trade during the days of the flatboat, took the lead in manufactur-

\textsuperscript{17} Henry V. Poor (comp.), \textit{Manual of the Railroads of the United States} (50 vols., New York, 1868-1917), XI (1878), 675.
ing and commerce when the railroad became the principal link with Indianapolis. The smaller towns of Paragon, Center- ton, Whitaker, Brown’s Crossing, also served as trading centers. The trading pattern definitely centered upon the valley because it was the easiest and most direct route for outgoing farm commodities and incoming manufactured goods.

The early rural settlement in the valley was concentrated in the second bottoms. These bottoms were better drained and thus more suitable than were the more fertile but less well-drained first bottoms. Consequently, the first farmsteads were grouped on the outer fringe of the valley, frequently along a tributary stream. By the Civil War, the more suitable second bottoms had become well filled, and farmers approached the river. These first bottoms were used as sites for new farmsteads as well as for additional cropland. In western Morgan County where the valley is widest, this encroachment upon the river is evident from traces of former home sites. Before the removal of much of the forest cover from central Indiana watersheds the flood hazard was less than at present and homes were more safely built in the lower bottoms.

The flood of 1913 halted settlement of the floodplain nearest the river. Deserted houses and barns, fruit and shade trees, and traces of chinaware mark the sites of former homes near the river. Now few homes remain between the river and the railroad, which follows approximately the margin of the 1913 flood.18 The coming of the improved highway (now State Road 67) stimulated this retreat, which was culminated in 1940 when a new highway was completed in the flood-free part of the valley north of the railroad.

With the advent of the automobile and the improved highway the river lost much of its former great influence but by no means all. Two of Indiana’s leading highways follow the valley through a portion of the county. It offers part of the most feasible route for a highway to Bloomington (State Road 37) and also for one to Vincennes (State Road 67). Along it passes an average daily flow of traffic well exceeding two thousand vehicles on State Road 67 alone.

Since World War I, there has been less reliance upon

the small town. The little village of Whitaker which once boasted a sawmill, post office, freight depot, and two stores has now only the sawmill and one store. No longer is the post office a meeting place of the community. Likewise other valley towns and villages are dying. The sites of Brown's Crossing, Elk, The Bluffs, and Exchange are recognizable only to those familiar with the valley's past. Paragon, Centerton, and Waverly also are shrinking villages situated relatively near the river.

In summary, the following historical influences are most significant: (1) the river was a primary entrance route for early settlers; (2) most of the early settlements were in the second river bottoms and along major tributary streams; (3) flatboating stimulated agriculture considerably until about 1850; (4) railroads and highways have used the river valley as the most accessible route to southwestern Indiana; (5) following the Civil War, settlement pressed upon the first bottoms only to retreat as floods became more frequent.