The Location of Indiana Towns and Cities

Stephen S. Visher*

The reasons for which each town was established where it was and what conditions favored its growth are significant aspects of local history. Most Indiana towns started as trading or exchange centers for the people of their locality. Consequently, when most Hoosiers lived near the White-water, the Ohio, or the lower Wabash, most towns were located in those areas. A number, however, were established along early routes partly to serve travelers, some near the crossing of rivers, others at convenient distances between older and often larger settlements. In the early years when the Ohio and lower Wabash were major routes of travel, villages and towns were located on their banks at points having some local advantage, such as higher, better-drained land, or the presence of a tributary valley.1

By 1830 more than three dozen towns were established on the Ohio River, including Lawrenceburg, Aurora, Rising Sun, Vevay, Madison, Jeffersonville, New Albany, Cannelton, Tell City, Rockport, Newburgh, Evansville, and Mount Vernon. Madison was Indiana’s largest town in 1830, second in 1840, third in 1850, and seventh in 1860. New Albany was the state’s largest urban center in 1840 and 1850, while Evansville was the second city from 1870 to 1900, then third to 1920. On the lower Wabash was Vincennes, the oldest town in Indiana and territorial capital from 1800 to 1813, third largest in 1880, possibly tenth in 1850, and thirteenth in 1870. Nearer the mouth of the Wabash was New Harmony, highly significant in the 1820’s and culturally important for decades. North of Vincennes was Terre Haute, fourth or fifth city from 1870 to 1920. On the upper Wabash, Lafayette, Logansport, Peru, Wabash, and Huntington became sizable during the late 1880’s and the 1890’s, when the

* Stephen S. Visher is professor of geography at Indiana University.

1 There were few towns in much of south central and central Indiana until after 1825, and few in northern Indiana until after 1840; indeed, considerable parts of northwestern Indiana had few towns until after 1850. See Indiana, a Guide to the Hoosier State (New York, 1941), passim; Indiana Review, Pictorial, Political, Historical (Indianapolis, 1938), 286-382; John D. Barnhart and Donald F. Carmony, Indiana... (2 vols., New York, 1964), I, 418; R. Carlyle Buley, The Old Northwest, Pioneer Period, 1815-1840 (2 vols., Indianapolis, 1950), passim.
Wabash and Erie Canal was being constructed. Lafayette, at the head of steamboat navigation on the Wabash, was the state's fourth city in 1850. Many a village was established where a stream could be crossed by a ford, ferry, or bridge. Examples are Jeffersonville, New Albany, Rockport, Evansville, Vincennes, Newport, Williamsport, Gosport, Lafayette, and Logansport.

The presence of potential waterpower was a significant influence in locating numerous grist, flour, and saw mills, and in the growth of a village nearby. For instance, the settlement that grew into Evansville reputedly started because of the availability of a mill site on Pigeon Creek, which flows into the Ohio there. Other settlements which grew up near waterpower sites include New Albany, Elkhart, South Bend, Mishawaka, and Logansport.

Since few Indiana springs yielded enough water to supply several homes, few villages grew up by such springs; however, two that did grow into cities were Huntington at Flint Springs and French Lick, by a spring of mineral water.

Water supplies from streams helped establish many early settlements and have been highly significant in the growth of most Indiana towns. In recent decades the runoff from numerous streams has been retarded by dams, creating reservoirs of great value for urban water supplies. Lake Michigan was a major factor as to the cities thereon, important as a source of water and as a transportation barrier as

---


4 Visher, Economic Geography of Indiana, 196.
The Location of Indiana Towns and Cities

well as a highway. On the shores of numerous smaller lakes, communities having a considerable recreational element have developed in recent decades.5

Minerals played a minor role in locating towns in Indiana, for the state's output of gas, oil, and coal came predominantly after the areas yielding these minerals were well peopled; however, many places grew notably after mineral wealth was exploited, as in the coalfields of the western and especially the southwestern parts of the state. Towns in the east central area which yielded relatively large amounts of gas and petroleum in the late 1880's and 1890's boomed. Moreover, the exploitation of limestone has notably stimulated city growth in the Bedford-Bloomington limestone belt, and locally elsewhere, as for example near Monon, Mitchell, and Speeds.6

Local topographic advantages notably affected the start and growth of most Indiana villages and towns except those on essentially level land. Terre Haute is, as its name declares, on relatively high land, on the Wabash River, as are also New Harmony, Vincennes, and Lafayette. Most other towns along rivers are on land less subject to flood than are nearby tracts. Numerous other towns are in valleys. Valleys had increased significance in this respect when railways were built, as many railways follow valleys. In contrast, most of the early trails and many early roads followed uplands and drainage divides so far as feasible, as the crossing of even small streams was often difficult before bridges were built.7 Railways could come only after bridges were constructed.


7Harlow Lindley (ed.), Indiana as Seen by Early Travelers (Indianapolis, 1916), passim; this is vol. III of the Indiana Historical Collections. George R. Wilson, "Early Indiana Trails and Surveys," Indiana Historical Society Publications (Indianapolis, 1895- ), VI (1919), 349-357; Logan Esarey, "Internal Improvements in Early Indiana," ibid., V (1911), 47-168; George R. Wilson and Gayle Thornbrough, "The Buffalo Trace," ibid., XV (1945), 183-246; Esarey, History of Indiana, II, 714-737; Elfrieda Lang, "Conditions of Travel Experienced by German Immigrants to Dubois County, Indiana," Indiana Magazine of History, XLI (1945), 327-344, mentions various difficulties of early travel and maps the chief early trails and roads.
Local topographic features of scenic prominence played only a small role in establishing towns in Indiana. Grand View on the Ohio is the best example. Vevay was established in 1803 by immigrants who were attracted by the resemblance of the area to that of their home town, Vevay, Switzerland. Palestine, Lawrence County, was established on a hilltop commanding so fine a view that its promoters expected it to be the chief town of the county. But the fine view did not compensate for relative inaccessibility by road and for inadequate water supply. Hence, after an epidemic, Palestine lost the county seat and soon became a "ghost town." Scenic features have, however, stimulated the growth of towns near the state parks, and Marengo Cave.

Numerous villages and towns grew up where early roads or railways crossed or converged. Most of the towns which have grown into cities are served by more than one railway, and by several roads. Hence conditions that conspicuously affected the location of roads and railways help to locate numerous towns.

Railway towns are necessarily located on railroads, most of which were planned to connect certain cities, for example, Cincinnati and St. Louis, Cincinnati and Chicago, Cleveland and Chicago, Cleveland and St. Louis, Chicago and Louisville. Although railway location in Indiana strongly reflects that major objective, a considerable number of lines were deflected to serve established Indiana cities, notably Indianapolis, or sizable areas ill-served by other railways. Indianapolis had eight railways in 1854. Topography caused some deflections; for example, the Baltimore and Ohio line across southern Indiana follows for some distance the valley of the East Fork of White River. Likewise the Monon from Louisville to Chicago follows for a considerable distance in southern Indiana the less rugged "limestone belt." Similarly, the Wabash Valley is followed locally both in central and in southwestern Indiana. Details of the location of railway towns reflect also the federal land survey system by which the land was subdivided into townships and sections. This survey was significant partly because many roads were laid out on section or half-section lines, and most titles to real

---

* *Handbook of Indiana Geology*, 48-58.
The Location of Indiana Towns and Cities

The estate strongly reflect the survey. Moreover, it was widely considered desirable to have the town center well within a township rather than divided by township lines. This was partly because most survey townships became units of civil government, including units for schools and assessment for taxes.

The numerous villages established on roads owe their location in a fundamental respect partly to the location of the roads. When roads were first laid out, most were local, township, or county roads. Except in the most rugged areas, a predominant percentage of their milage was along section lines, or half-section lines of the federal land survey. Most streets of towns were also laid out with respect to the federal land survey lines. Hence an understanding of the locations of Indiana towns is augmented by knowledge of the land survey system. For all of the state except small areas at the southeast (especially Clark's Grant) and southwest (the Vincennes lands), the survey base used was an east-west line located six miles south of Paoli in Orange County, from which the townships were surveyed and numbered northward and southward. The north-south base line, called the principal meridian or the range line, is just east of Paoli. From it the townships are numbered east and west. For example, Lafayette is in Township 23 north, Range 4 west.

More than half of the 92 county seat towns and cities of Indiana were planned as county capitals. Many additional townsites were laid out in the hope of their being chosen as county seat, but when another site was selected, most of them failed to develop. Centrality in the county was an important factor as to county seats; repeatedly it was specified in the legislative act creating the new county. Hence the location of the county boundaries helped locate many Indiana towns and cities. Most of Indiana’s counties are approximately 20 miles square. This size was popular when most of the counties were established partly because it was possible for a taxpayer to travel from the margin of a county of that size to a centrally located county seat and return the same day. This would not have been feasible then from the margins of a notably larger county. Counties considerably

---

10 George Pence and Nellie Armstrong, *Indiana Boundaries, Territory, State, and County* (Indianapolis, 1933), 146; this is vol. XIX of the Indiana Historical Collections.
smaller than 400 square miles were impracticable because the taxes collectable then from a notably smaller area would have been insufficient to pay the legally prescribed salaries for the various county officers. In those years local taxes were predominantly on real estate, little of which had much value, as money was scarce. Moreover, there was a constitutional provision against reducing existing counties below 400 square miles in area. Counties were not much larger than 400 square miles also partly because of the active desire of the people of each sizable area to have their own local county government and a nearby county seat.11

The struggle between rival sites to obtain the county seat was often fierce. In addition to centrality, important considerations were relative quality of the land, the number of settlers, local advantages such as water supply, and at least fair drainage. Important also in numerous cases was an offer by the townsite owners to donate a suitable tract of land for the courthouse in case that townsite was selected.12

If with the growth of population a city not centrally located and not the county seat became sufficiently large, the county capital was generally shifted thereto. Two striking examples are Jeffersonville getting the county seat from Charlestown in 1878, and Richmond getting it from Centerville in 1873. Both Jeffersonville and Richmond are on the margin of their county. In Lake County, the county seat has continued at centrally located Crown Point despite the fact that most of the county's people live in the northern part of the county. The rivalry between Gary, East Chicago, and Hammond has so far prevented the northward shift of the county seat. An example of the relocation of a county seat to a more central location is afforded by Madison County, where Anderson replaced Pendleton in 1827.13

11 Ibid., 83 and passim; Ernest V. Shockley, "County Seats and County Seat Wars," Indiana Magazine of History, X (1914), 44-46.
12 Numerous examples of these struggles are reported in county histories and in Shockley, "County Seats and County Seat Wars," Indiana Magazine of History, 1-46.
13 Indiana, A Guide to the Hoosier State, 349, 391; Pence and Armstrong, Indiana Boundaries, 286, 850, 574.