

Conner Prairie Pioneer Settlement and Museum*

Lorna Lutes Sylvester

Indiana Territory was just over two years old in August, 1802. Carved from the Northwest Territory in May, 1800, the new area included all but a sliver of the present state of Indiana, all of Illinois and Wisconsin, about half of Michigan, and a tiny section of Minnesota. The territory's white population of approximately 6,500¹ lived mainly in Kaskaskia, Cahokia, Mackinac, Detroit, Clark's Grant, Vincennes, and a few other "scattered and isolated islands" of settlement "entirely surrounded by a wide sea of green forest."²

By 1802 settlements in the area eventually to become the state of Indiana formed a narrow crescent beginning in the lower Whitewater Valley in the east, south along the Ohio River, and up the Wabash to Vincennes in the west. Except for the sizable Vincennes Tract, surrounding the town of Vincennes; the 150,000 acre Clark's Grant, opposite the falls of the Ohio; the wedge shaped Gore in the east, which would be added to Indiana Territory in 1803; and isolated patches of land granted to the whites by the Treaty of Greenville in 1795, the future Hoosier State in 1802 was entirely Indian country. Here and there roamed the Piankashaw, Miami, Shawnee, Wea, Kickapoo, Potawatomi; and in the territory's midsection, between the two forks of White River, were the peaceful Delaware. The estimated Indian population ranged from 5,000 to 25,000; whites numbered about 2,500.³ The country which is now central and northern Indiana was, in 1802, "a continuous primeval wilderness . . . There were no roads other than Indian trails and buffalo traces, no boats except the softly gliding Indian canoes, no towns other than straggling Indian villages, no inns between the white settlements. . . It was veritably the haunt of wild beasts and savage men."⁴

*This is another in an illustrated series of articles about interesting locations and events in Indiana. Conner Prairie Pioneer Settlement and Museum is located on Allisonville Road (Highway 37-A) south of Noblesville, Indiana. During the spring and fall seasons, when the settlement is open to the public only on Saturday and Sunday afternoons, the guides are members of the Conner Prairie Pioneers, a local volunteer organization which participates in activities of the museum. During the summer the settlement and museum are open Tuesdays through Saturdays and Sunday afternoons, and guides are college students. Special rates for group tours by appointment only. Further information concerning Conner Prairie may be obtained by writing Conner Prairie Pioneer Settlement and Museum, Conner's Lane, Noblesville, Indiana 46060. Special thanks are extended to Richard A. Sampson, director of the Conner Prairie Museum, for his assistance in answering questions about this article.

¹ U.S., *Second Census of the United States, 1800* (unpagged).

² John D. Barnhart and Donald F. Carmony, *Indiana: From Frontier to Industrial Commonwealth* (4 vols., New York, 1954), I, 97.

³ U.S., *Second Census of the United States, 1800* (unpagged).

⁴ Charles N. Thompson, *Sons of the Wilderness: John and William Conner* (Indiana Historical Society Publications, Vol. XII; Indianapolis, 1937), 41.

Two missionaries to the Delaware on White River further attested to the isolation of the area in 1802, "the Delaware towns, of which there are nine in all, lie from four to five miles apart, and are scattered along the river. After these towns come other settlements of Indian nations as for instance, the Nanticoke, Schawanos and others. After that there is nothing but meadowland as far as the eye can reach, until the banks of the Wabash."⁵

In this wilderness in the Delaware Indian country, about four miles south of the present site of Noblesville, Indiana, "on a beautiful moonlight night, August 12, 1802 . . . with only the aid of a French Canadian," William Conner completed the construction of a double log cabin which was to serve as a home for his Indian wife and children and also as a trading post.⁶ Located on the eastern side of the west fork of White River at a point where the stream made a horseshoe bend, the cabin soon became a landmark in the area. For several years Conner's trading post was the central market place for Indians in the vicinity, and hundreds of furs left there for Cincinnati via Conner's Trail to John Conner's store a few miles below Brookville, Indiana.⁷

John and William Conner were brothers who had come to the Delaware country from Detroit during the late eighteenth century. Both had married Delaware women—William's wife being Chief Anderson's daughter, Mekinges—both had been licensed traders to the Indians even before building their respective posts, and both were to be extremely influential in the development of Indiana Territory and the Hoosier State. They served as guides on military and diplomatic missions, were interpreters and advisers for many of the treaties removing Indian title to the land in eastern Indiana Territory, fought in the War of 1812, served in the state legislature, helped select the site of Indianapolis, founded towns, and operated numerous businesses in addition to the fur trade.⁸

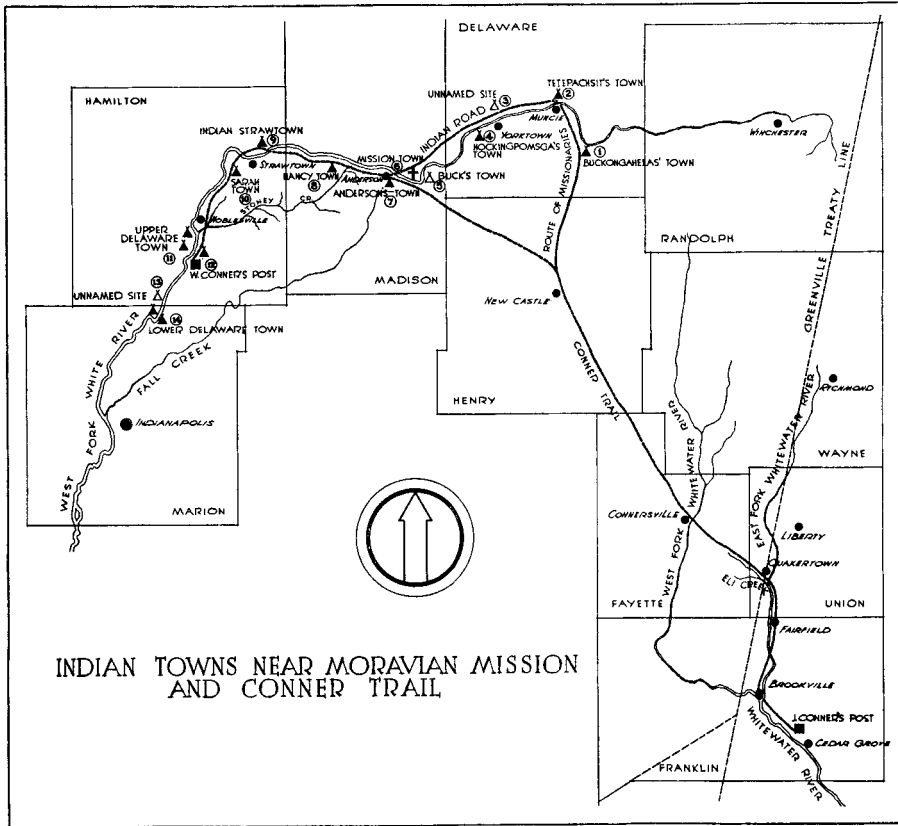
The Conner brothers had spent most of their lives in an Indian environment. Their parents, Richard and Margaret Conner, were adopted members of the Shawnee tribe, Margaret having lived with the Shawnee from childhood. John, William, their brothers, and their sister were raised among the Christian Delaware in the Moravian mission towns in Ohio and Michigan. At the end of the Revolutionary War the Conner family was living near Detroit where Richard Conner had acquired vast acres of farm land. Before the turn of the century, however, John and William left their father's farms for the Indian country in what was to become the state of Indiana. While

⁵ John Peter Kluge and Abraham Luckenbach to Jacob Van Vleck, September 24, 1802, in Lawrence Henry Gipson (ed.), *The Moravian Indian Mission on White River: Diaries and Letters, May 5, 1799, to November 12, 1806* (Indiana Historical Collections, Vol. XXIII; Indianapolis, 1938), 476.

⁶ Quoted in Thompson, *Sons of the Wilderness*, 46.

⁷ Thompson, *Sons of the Wilderness*, 46-50. For map of Conner's Trail see below, p. 3.

⁸ Thompson, *Sons of the Wilderness*, 40, 42-43, and *passim*.



Reproduced from Charles N. Thompson, *Sons of the Wilderness: John and William Conner* (Indianapolis: Indiana Historical Society, 1937.)

John eventually chose to locate in the Whitewater Valley near the border between Indian and white territory, William and his wife, Mekinges, settled in their double log cabin on the west fork of White River near the Delaware towns. Here scores of Indians came to trade their beaver, fox, raccoon, mink, otter, muskrat, and other pelts for the Hudson Bay blankets, trade axes, knives, beads, and similar paraphernalia which Conner stocked. Here Mekinges cared for their six children. From here William left to serve with General William Henry Harrison as guide, interpreter, and soldier during the War of 1812. And to this primitive log cabin in 1820 came Governor Jonathan Jennings and ten commissioners appointed to select a site for the permanent seat of government in the four year old state of Indiana.⁹

The location selected was at the confluence of Fall Creek and White River approximately fifteen miles south southeast of the Conner cabin. By the Treaty of St. Mary's (New Purchase Treaty) at St. Mary's, Ohio, in 1818, the United States had removed Indian title to the land in central Indiana in which the Conner cabin and the capital site were located. Both the Conner brothers had been extremely influential as interpreters and advisers in securing Indian agreement to this treaty. Indeed, according to two of the United States commissioners, Jonathan Jennings and Lewis Cass, the Conners "had it in their power to have prevented any purchase of Indian title to land on the waters of the White river . . ."¹⁰ The Treaty of St. Mary's was particularly significant for William, for by it the Delaware agreed to leave Indiana for lands provided by the federal government west of the Mississippi River. According to tribal law an Indian wife must remain with her people, thus Mekinges and the six children would leave with them. Conner himself could have accompanied his wife—some white men married to Indian women did so—but William chose to remain in Indiana.¹¹

The Delaware had been given until 1821 to leave the state, but during the late summer of 1820 most of the tribe gathered at the Conner cabin preparatory to departure. They left for the West in August or September, accompanied by Mekinges and her children.¹² Approximately three months later, on November 30, 1820, Conner married Elizabeth Chapman, step-daughter of John Finch who had moved to the west fork of White River in

⁹ *Ibid.*, 9-12, 16-36, 40, 46-51, 68-82, 117-21.

¹⁰ Jonathan Jennings to Senator James Noble, January 27, 1827; Lewis Cass to Senator James Noble, January 20, 1823, in U.S., *Senate Documents*, 20 Cong., 2 Sess., Report 25, pp. 5-6.

¹¹ For text of the Treaty of St. Mary's see *United States Statutes at Large*, VII, 188-89. Possibly Conner could have arranged for his wife and children to remain in Indiana had he and/or she wished to do so. Indeed, there is some evidence that he attempted to persuade Mekinges to stay, but she apparently decided to go with her tribe. William Marshall, Conner's partner, accompanied his Delaware wife to the lands west of the Mississippi. Thompson, *Sons of the Wilderness*, 109-14, 121.

¹² Vincennes *Indiana Centinel & Public Advertiser*, November 4, 1820, cited in Barnhart and Carmony, *Indiana*, I, 210n. At the time of departure Mekinges took with her sixty ponies, and Conner had agreed to purchase her and the children's interest in the 640 acres of land on White River. Thompson, *Sons of the Wilderness*, 123-25.

the summer of 1819. Conner had first met Elizabeth on a trip to Connersville earlier in 1819. According to one writer, whose wife was a great granddaughter of John Conner, William was attracted to her even at this time, and the attraction became mutual after Elizabeth moved to the White River country with her stepfather. The fur trader and his new wife moved into the double log cabin which he had built for his Indian family eighteen years before.¹³

Three years later, however, Conner built a new home for Elizabeth—a two story, brick structure, one of the first such buildings in the New Purchase area. Located approximately one mile south of the cabin site and back from the river, the brick house sat on a small hill overlooking rich river bottoms and the semicircular sweep of White River itself. According to one historian the house was considered “elegant” and “remarkably handsome” at the time of its construction, and he describes it as follows:

A center hall divides the house, disclosing at one end the broad sweep of the prairie farm and providing at the other the usual mode of entrance from the land which leads to the main road. On entering the yard the old well first meets the eye. . . . Spacious rooms with a fireplace in each, open from the hall, and from it a graceful stairway leads to the second floor, where there is a similar arrangement of rooms with a fireplace in each. . . . Adjoining the dining room on the south side of the hall is an old-fashioned kitchen containing a spacious fireplace with an oven on one side. A staircase . . . leads to a loft-like room above the kitchen.¹⁴

William and Elizabeth Conner lived in this home until 1837 when they moved to a 150 acre farm adjoining Noblesville, Indiana. The circuit court of Hamilton County—formed in 1823—also held its early sessions in the brick house, as did the Board of County Commissioners.¹⁵

Conner's interests in the new state of Indiana were by this time myriad. In 1823 in conjunction with Josiah F. Polk he platted and founded the town of Noblesville which soon became the county seat of Hamilton County. After John Conner's death in 1826 William maintained the operation of his brother's store in Indianapolis, his mills in Hamilton and Fayette counties (including wool carding, gristmill, sawmill, and distillery), his two farms and two town lots. William also served as a member of the Association for the Improvement of Common Schools in Indiana, as commissioner to lay out a road from Indianapolis to Fort Wayne, and as a charter member of the Indiana Historical Society. He still saw occasional service as an interpreter in treaty negotiations with the Indians. He also served in the state House of Representatives for three terms (1829-1830, 1831-1832, 1836-1837) and accompanied the Indiana militia as a guide during Black Hawk's War in 1832.¹⁶

¹³ Thompson, *Sons of the Wilderness*, 113, 116, 126-28.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 133-34.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 135-36, 175-76.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 135-36, 158-75; Dorothy Riker and Gayle Thornbrough, *Indiana Election Returns, 1816-1851* (*Indiana Historical Collections*, Vol. XL; Indianapolis, 1960), 202, 208, 232; *Proceedings of the Indiana Historical Society, 1830-1886* (*Indiana Historical Society Publications*, Vol. I, No. 1; Indianapolis, 1897), 13.

When Conner and his wife Elizabeth moved from their brick home on White River to Noblesville in 1837, he liquidated many of his businesses. Until approximately the time of his death in 1855, however, he maintained his interest in internal improvements in Indiana—roads, canals, and railroads—operated a saw- and gristmill about four miles north of Noblesville, conducted a general store on the west side of the public square in that town, and managed nearly three thousand acres of land which he owned in Hamilton, Cass, Wabash, and Marion counties. When Conner died at the age of seventy-eight, he was survived by his wife, nine of their ten children, and a burgeoning state which owed more to his resourcefulness, enterprise, and energy than most of its citizens would ever realize.¹⁷

Not until May, 1855, about three months prior to his death, did Conner become sole owner in fee simple of the land on White River on which he had built his first cabin and brick home. He had settled there while the area was still Indian country, but when the land passed to the federal government by the Treaty of St. Mary's, the Conner homestead should have been reserved to him, as similar acreage was to other individuals in like situations. Conner, however, when assured that the government would make adjustments later, agreed to postpone his claim. "Later" proved to be thirty-seven years and many legal maneuverings in the future.¹⁸

After Conner's death the land on White River had a number of owners, and during the twentieth century the house was allowed to deteriorate. This neglect and the passage of time almost erased the original dignity and simplicity of the Conner homestead. In 1933, 110 years after its construction, Eli Lilly, then president of the Indiana Historical Society, purchased the brick house and surrounding acres. After careful and painstaking restoration of the original structure the house was opened to the public on a limited basis. Guests there could see the Jacob Cox portraits of William and Elizabeth Conner as well as furnishings and memorabilia of the Conners and of the period in which they lived. In 1964, after further restoration, Mr. Lilly presented the Conner Prairie Settlement to Earlham College to be operated as a permanent historical museum.

Visitors to Conner Prairie today enter the settlement through a pioneer museum which houses a 150 year old dugout canoe, exhibits depicting frontier farming and the life of William Conner, and a collection of early farm implements, a gift of the Purdue Agricultural Alumni Association. From the museum, guides—dressed in apparel typical of the early 1800s—conduct tours through a log barn, containing a covered wagon and other farm equipment of the period, and a log cabin and log trading post representing the double cabin and trading post which Conner had during the

¹⁷ Thompson, *Sons of the Wilderness*, 175-79; Richard A. Sampson to Lorna Lutes Sylvester, January 30, 1969.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 106-10.

early nineteenth century.¹⁹ As the tour is routed, next come a log distillery and springhouse and a board and batten loom house, which contains all the equipment needed by the pioneer housewife to card, spin, and weave her cloth. (The log buildings in Conner Prairie Settlement were moved there from Brown County, Indiana; the loom house came from the south edge of Carmel, Indiana.) In these buildings Conner Prairie guides demonstrate the uses of the items on display. Visitors can see how an early flintlock rifle was loaded and how candles were dipped, how flax or wool was carded, spun on the old spinning wheels, then woven into cloth on the large looms. In the kitchen of the brick house meat will probably be roasting on the fireplace spit, and possibly bread will be baking in the unique beehive oven. Only in the old distillery—which was plugged by the State Alcoholic Beverages Commission—will there be no demonstrations.

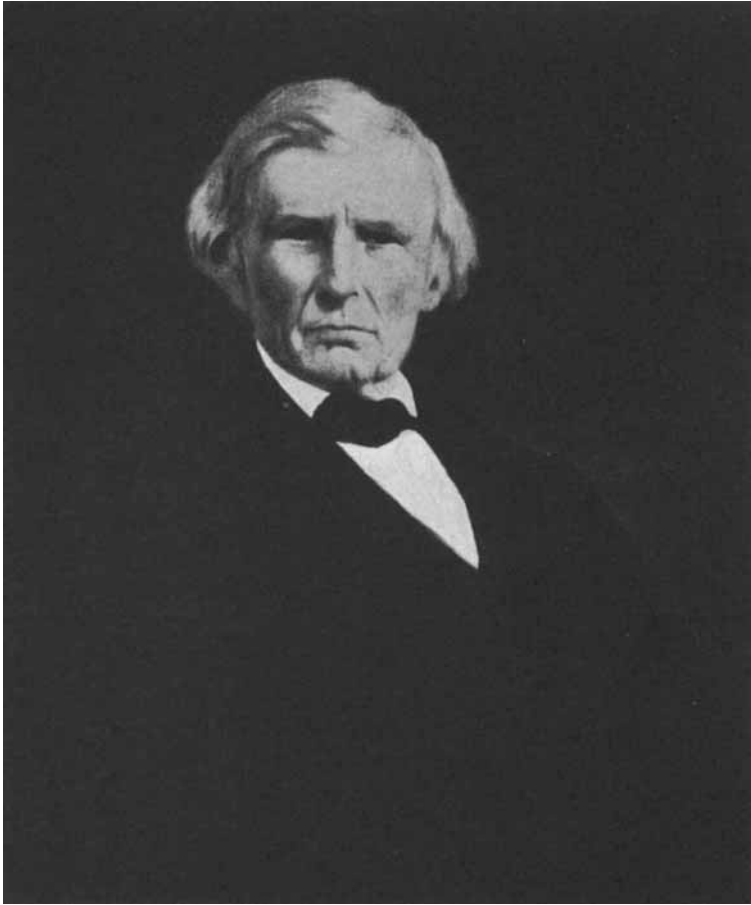
And as the present day guests step out of the old brick house onto the front veranda—added at the time of the restoration in the 1930s—they may well agree with an earlier visitor to the Conner home who wrote, “I never beheld a more delightful scene than when I looked down . . . on a field of three hundred acres of waving corn, some two feet high, with fifteen or twenty merry plowmen scattered over it at work.” This writer entered the house “out of nature’s forest, only broken by the occasional cabins and small patches of cleared land of the early settlers.”²⁰ Today’s visitor enters from the hurried and harried activity of the twentieth century, but the peace, dignity, simplicity, and beauty of William Conner’s homestead has endured for almost 150 years and is still there to touch him.

¹⁹ Although Conner’s trading post and home were apparently in one double log cabin, they are represented by two separate structures in Conner Prairie Settlement today.

²⁰ Nathaniel Bolton, *A Lecture Delivered before the Indiana Historical Society on the Early History of Indianapolis and Central Indiana . . .* (Indiana Historical Society Publications, Vol. I, No. 5; Indianapolis, 1897), 173.

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The pictures on the following pages illustrate various aspects of the Conner Prairie Pioneer Settlement and Museum. They were selected and provided by Richard A. Sampson, director of the Conner Prairie Museum. Pictures on pages 9 and 10 were reproduced from Charles N. Thompson, *Sons of the Wilderness: John and William Conner* (Indianapolis: Indiana Historical Society, 1937). Photographs on pages 11-15, 17, and 19-20 are by Ralph Satterlee, Warner Gear Division, Muncie, Indiana. The photograph on page 17 is by Emil Pierdos; that on page 18 courtesy of the Indiana Department of Commerce. The picture on page 22 was photographed by Edward Matney; that on page 23 was first used in the *Lilly News*, a publication of Eli Lilly and Company.



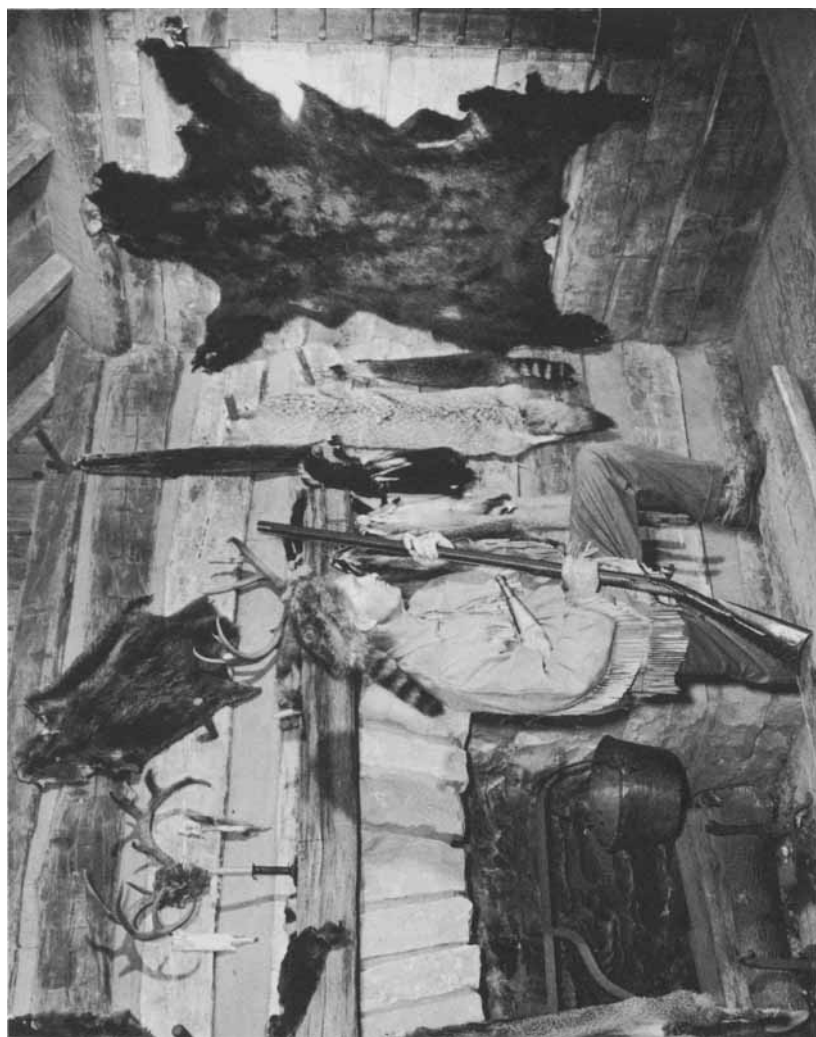
William Conner



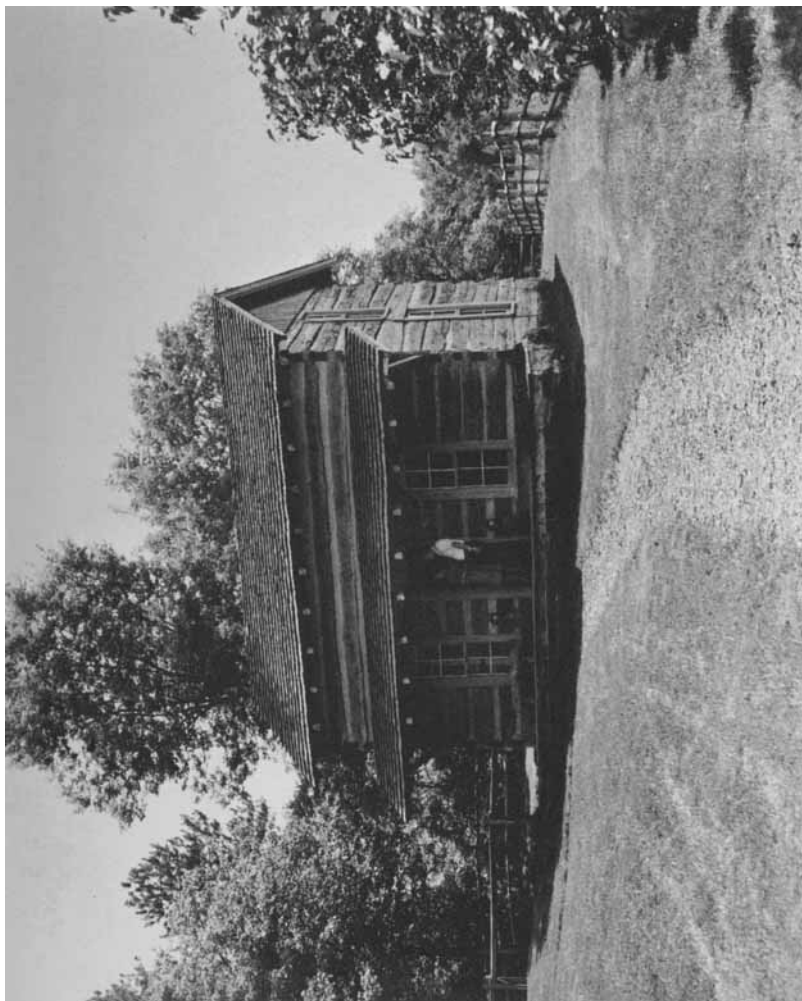
Elizabeth Chapman Conner



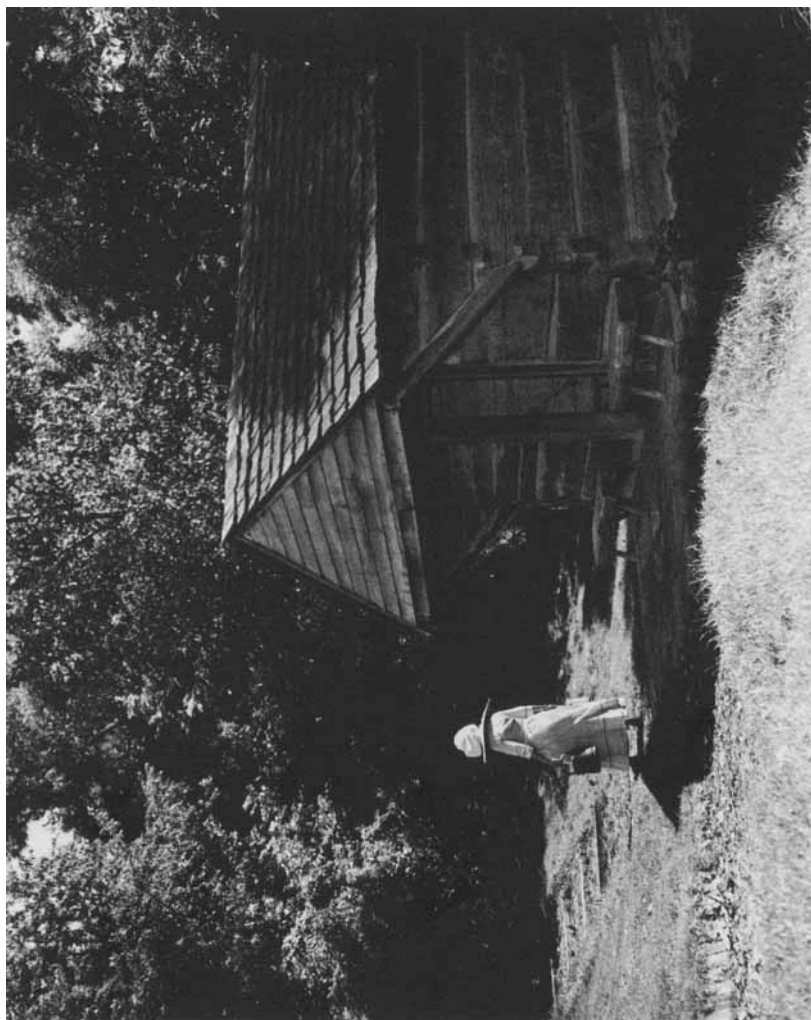
LOG TRADING POST AND DOUBLE LOG CABIN TYPICAL OF THOSE USED DURING
WILLIAM CONNER'S EARLY LIFE ON THE FRONTIER.



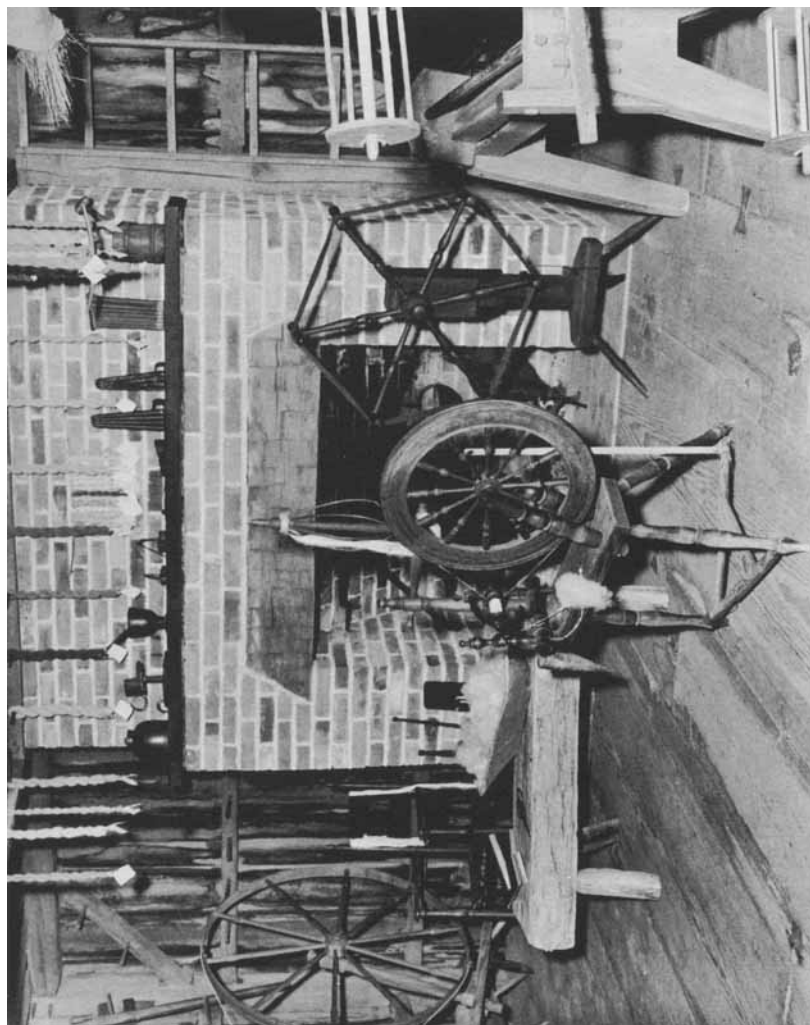
INTERIOR OF TRADING POST SHOWING EXAMPLES OF FURS TRADED IN
CENTRAL INDIANA DURING THE FRONTIER PERIOD.



CONNER DISTILLERY IN WHICH CORN WAS CONVERTED TO WHISKY
FOR TRADE WITH THE INDIANS OR EXPORT.



MILK AND OTHER PERISHABLE FOODS WERE KEPT IN THE COOL SPRINGHOUSE.



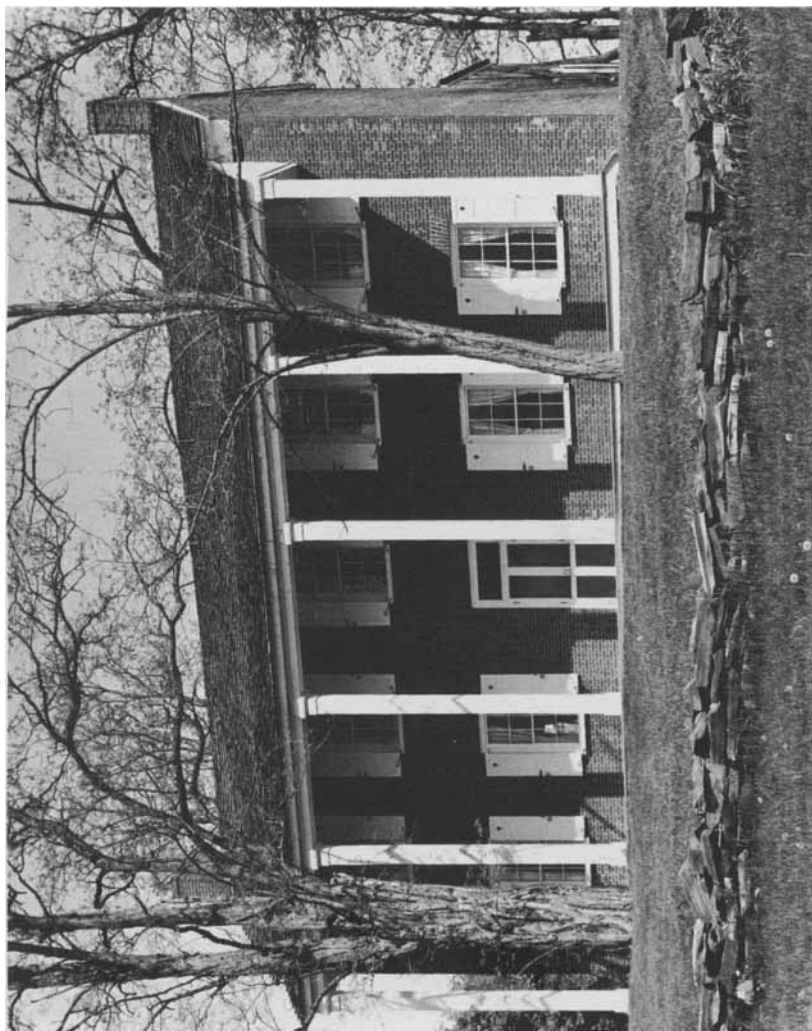
INTERIOR OF CONNER LOOM HOUSE.



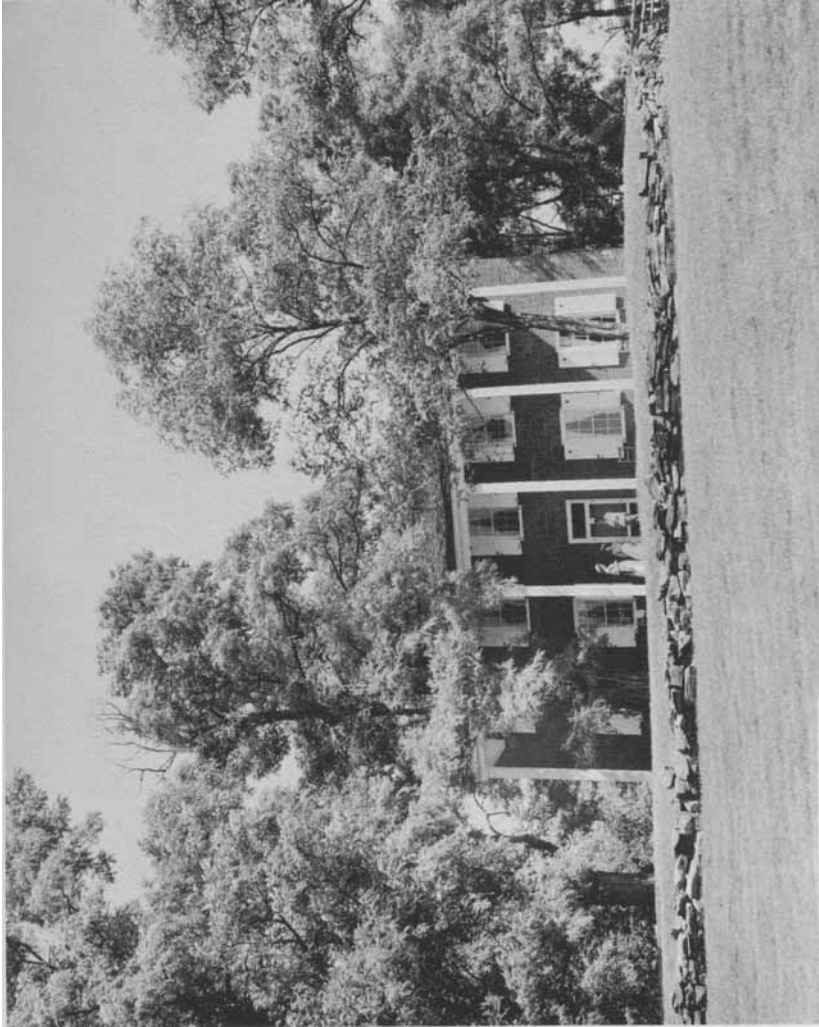
SORTING WOOL FOR SPINNING ON THE LOW WHEEL.



WEAVING ON THE TWO HEDDLE RUG LOOM IN THE LOOM HOUSE.



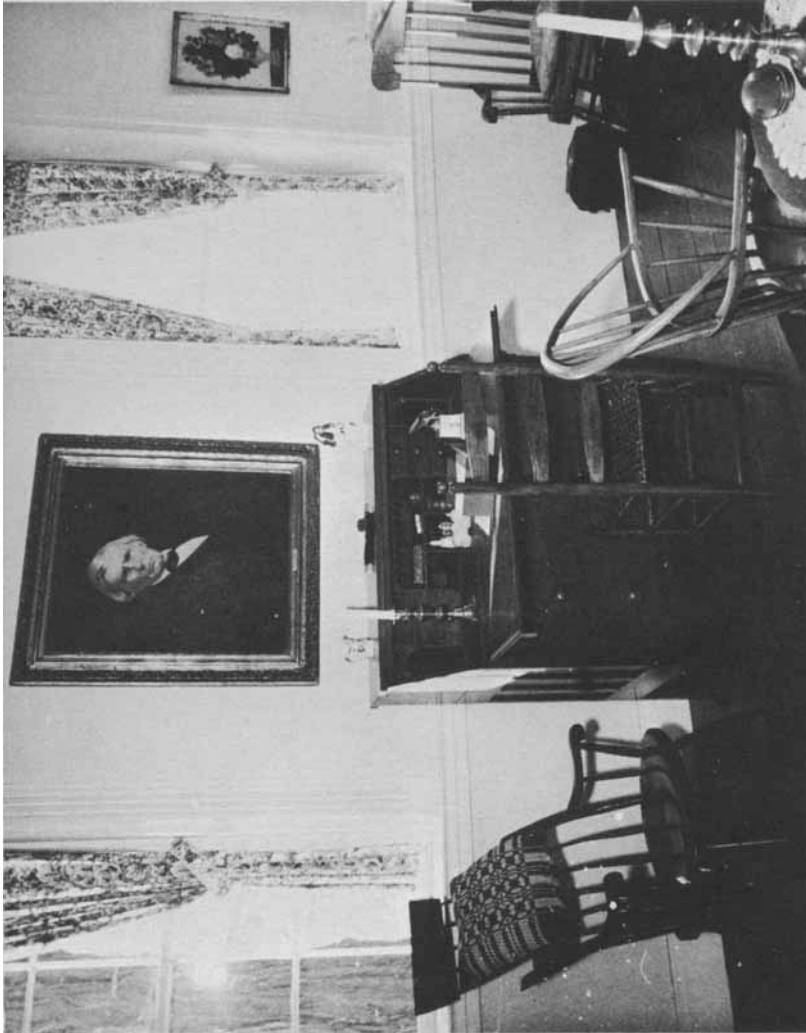
WILLIAM CONNER HOMESTEAD, BUILT IN 1823 DURING THE EARLY FEDERALIST PERIOD.



ANOTHER VIEW OF THE WILLIAM CONNER HOMESTEAD.



INTERIOR OF CONNER HOMESTEAD KITCHEN.



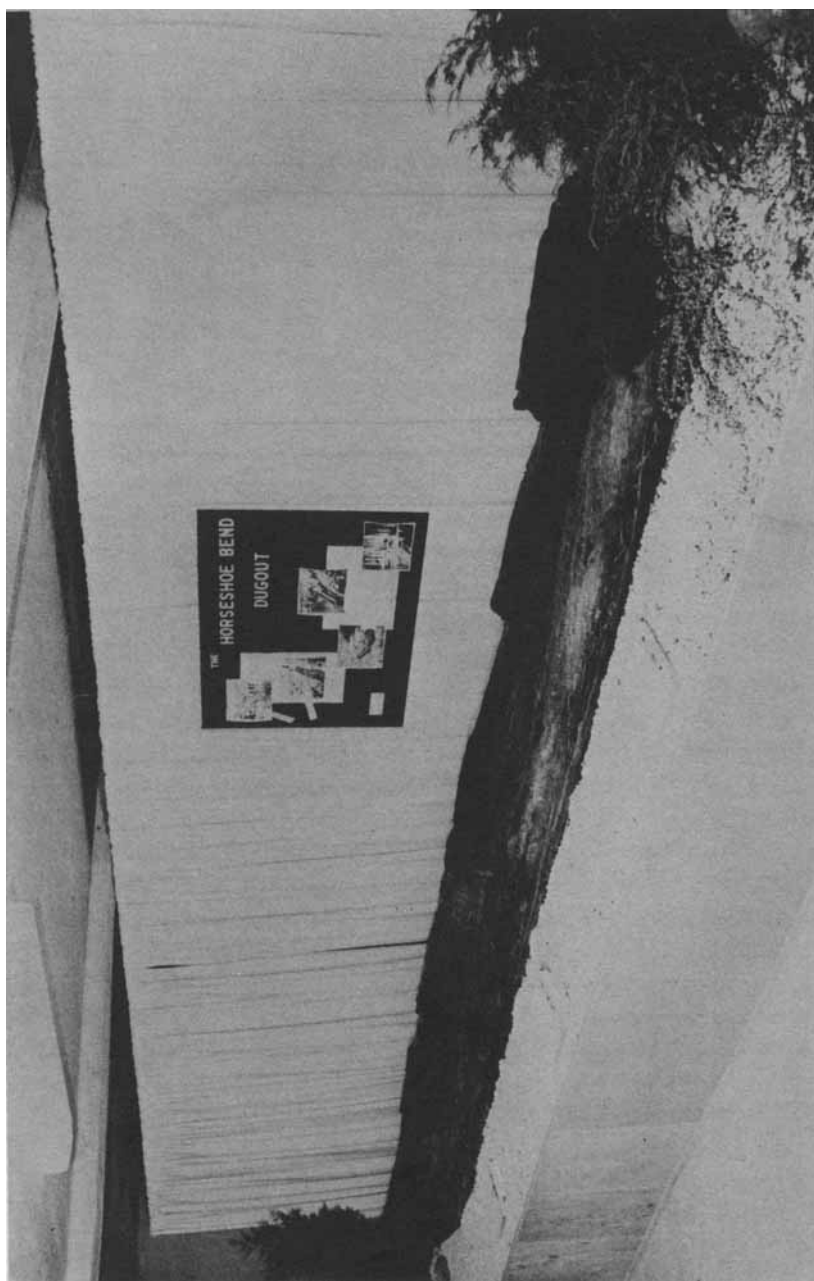
INTERIOR OF LIVING ROOM, SHOWING CONNER PORTRAIT BY JACOB COX,
AN EARLY HOOSIER ARTIST.



CHILDREN'S BEDROOM IN CONNER HOME. PORTRAIT ABOVE MANTLE IS BY JACOB COX.



CHILDREN'S BEDROOM IN CONNER HOME, SHOWING TRUNDLE BED.



150 YEAR OLD DUGOUT CANOE DISCOVERED JUST NORTH OF THE CONNER PRAIRIE
PROPERTY AND HOUSED IN THE CONNER PRAIRIE MUSEUM.