Place and Process: The Environment and Urban Expansion in Early Indianapolis

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Place and Process: The Environment and Urban Expansion in Early Indianapolis

Abstract
In 1820, the state legislature of Indiana, operating from the Ohio River city of Corydon, voted to move the capital of the four years young political entity to Indianapolis. While the vast majority of the state's 150,000 residents lived in the southern portion of the state, the population of the “disjointed mechanism” that was Indiana were loath to work together. Since the earliest settlements, Hoosiers in the eastern Whitewater and western Wabash River Valleys needled each other over the rights to internal improvement funds from the state and insisted that one was trying to strangle the others' opportunity. In order to assuage cries of favoritism, the authorities sent surveyors to look for a location that would treat all aspects of the state equally and provide “the advantages of a navigable stream and fertility of soil” to all residents...

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In 1820, the state legislature of Indiana, operating from the Ohio River city of Corydon, voted to move the capital of the four years young political entity to Indianapolis. While the vast majority of the state’s 150,000 residents lived in the southern portion of the state, the population of the “disjointed mechanism” that was Indiana were loath to work together. Since the earliest settlements, Hoosiers in the eastern Whitewater and western Wabash River Valleys needled each other over the rights to internal improvement funds from the state and insisted that one was trying to strangle the others’ opportunity. In order to assuage cries of favoritism, the authorities sent surveyors to look for a location that would treat all aspects of the state equally and provide “the advantages of a navigable stream and fertility of soil” to all residents. \(^1\)

The quest for centrality, transportation and fertile soil forced to the commissioners to choose a site in the central, as yet unsettled, portion of Indiana. Hoosier leaders hoped to provide governmental support to all sections of the state and avoid politically paralyzing regional conflicts. Yet, the search for navigable streams and fertile soils indicate other motivations for choosing Indianapolis as the new capital. Hoosiers were convinced that their state was on the path toward agricultural dominance of the West and boosters of cities around the state boasted of their fertile soils and outstanding future prospects. In Marion County—home to Indianapolis—this trend is most easily seen by examining newspaper articles that promoted the natural advantages of the region. An 1826 article published in the *Indiana State Gazette* noted that “The

\(^1\) Jacob Piatt Dunn, *Greater Indianapolis: The History, the Industries, the Institutions and the People of a City of Homes.* (Chicago: Lewis Publishing Company, 1910), p. 7.
almost unrivalled advantages of [Indianapolis’] position, are beginning to attract that general share of attention…possessing the advantage of roads leading in every direction, it is a rallying point for travelers and emigrants; which gives a great impulse to its prosperity.” The article continued by noting that “Indianapolis in addition to its being the capital of the State, is in the heart of a country well watered and not surpassed in point of fertility of soil by any region in North America, and capable of sustaining an agricultural and manufacturing population as dense as that of France or Germany. The country has been settled by a class of farmers, remarkable for their industry, agricultural knowledge and enterprise; and as enlightened, liberal and moral as those of any other section of the Union.”

Clearly, newspaper editors were promoting their city because it would draw new residents to the area—and presumably more subscriptions—but, newspaper editorials represented the desires of local publishers and leaders. The mindset of the “voiceless” residents of Marion County can best be seen by examining the records of the Marion County Commissioners office which provide a relatively detailed look at the work done by individuals at the local level to harness the economic power of their agriculture. The record shows an immediate and sustained push to build roads and establish local transportation networks that mirrored the enthusiasm shown by newspapers. Unfortunately and unsurprisingly, the language of these petitions is exceedingly dry. For example, at the May 13, 1822 meeting, the commissioners heard a petition from local farmer William Townsend, “signed by a number of resident citizens and free holders of this County, praying for a new road to be viewed ‘Beginning at the north end of Pennsylvania Street in the Town of Indianapolis, thence the nearest and best

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2 “Indianapolis,” Indiana State Gazette, October 22, 1829.
However, while dull, the simple government business of building roads was a major aspect of development in Marion County—and other rural areas throughout the United States—during the early years of settlement. Establishing a basic road system allowed Hoosiers easier access to various local necessities including mills, brickyards and tanneries as well as different local settlements. The striking thing about these petitions is not the language, but the frequency in which they occur. The first ten years of the record are riddled with requests for roads while remonstrances against proposed pathways are virtually nonexistent. Local residents of Marion County were more than happy to invest in roads because they recognized the usefulness in increasing the efficiency of their operations and the resulting security for their families. Looking at the record from this perspective shows us why the viewers of roads like Isaac Pugh, James Miller and Martin Martindale were focused on surveying roads on “as high and good ground” as possible. They were constructing strong infrastructure for an economic network that allowed the community access to the necessary commercial structures and would permit them to increase their profitability when shipping their goods to mills or downriver.

However, environmental realities prevented Hoosiers from realizing their dreams. Droughts, muskrats and occasional malaria outbreaks all conspired to prevent Euro-Americans from mastering the trans-Appalachian north. But the most significant barrier to early development in Marion County was the shallowness of the White River. While boosters defended the state’s assertion that the White River was “navigable by law,” the environment had the final say in matters of navigation. Frequent complaints noted that the riverbed was so

3 May 13, 1822, Commissioners’ Record, Vol. 1, 1822-1827, Marion County, IN. Indianapolis: Indiana Historical Records Survey, 1941.
4 February 9, 1824, Commissioners’ Record, Vol. 1, 1822-1827, Marion County, IN. Indianapolis: The Indiana Historical Records Survey, 1941.
shallow that riverboats ran aground “two or three times per mile.”\textsuperscript{5} The only boats that could make the trip to the Ohio were flat- or keel-boats that rode spring rushes downstream. Farmers and merchants were forced to pull any shipments back north on expensive wagons thereby limiting any profits.

Moreover, Marion County suffered from watershed problems in the North. During the 1830s, the Mammoth Internal Improvement Act pushed to improve the Wabash River and connect it with Lake Erie, hoping to use the recently completed Erie Canal and shorten the route from East to West. Unfortunately for Hoosiers, the Maumee River—which flowed from Northern Indiana into Lake Erie—also flowed through Ohio. Ohioans had reservations about allowing a direct western competitor access to Lake Erie and were accused of dragging their feet on purpose in order to arrest the growth of their western neighbor. For Hoosiers, holding ideal agricultural land was of little use if they could not export their products due to political and environmental limitations.

Not until the railroad connected Indianapolis with the Ohio River did Hoosiers in central Indiana have any real economic success. The Panic of 1837 had crippled the state financially and forced residents to abandon any hopes of completing internal improvement projects. The canals were never finished and railroads faltered before they could even start. Only resumed national economic activity in the early 1840s allowed for railroad construction in central Indiana that would eventually propel the area to economic success by the end of the century. Hoosiers could not realize their visions of economic success until they divorced themselves from the transportation barriers posed by the environment.

\textsuperscript{5} Paul Fatout, \textit{Indiana Canals}, (West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 1976), 30.
Ultimately, the story of an urban area bending to the will of the natural world is far from special. The important point to collect from this presentation is that Indianapolis is an ideal setting for historians to begin reexamining the methodologies used to understand the development of the American West. This paper argues that historians will benefit from combining two of the main methods used by Western historians to understand American development. By combining Frederick Jackson Turner’s assertion that American development was a process that repeated itself as settlers moved across the continent with Walter Prescott Webb’s concept that place is the defining factor in national growth, historians will be able to recalibrate the study of national development to comprehensively examine how the process and place interact with each other.

For decades, these two methods were considered at loggerheads to each other. The disciples of Turner and Webb fought vigorously against one another in academic journals to promote one approach or the other. Only recently, have historians began to understand the combination of both process and place when examining American development. Most famously, Patricia Nelson Limerick’s *Legacy of Conquest* challenged the uni-methodological approach toward understanding American development by insisting “the history of the West is a study of a place undergoing conquest and never fully escaping its consequences.” She argues that historians must examine the processes of change in the West in order to understand how the region has remained a conquered portion of the American nation. Significantly, she suggests that historians should examine the processes that occur in specific places—especially how cultural myths grow and mutate—to understand how the West explains American development.

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Limerick’s argument from 1989 has made significant historiographical waves. The “New Western History”—rightly—dominates the field of western studies because of its multidisciplinarianism and intellectual flexibility. However, the limits of this method are geographical and chronological. The modern historiography of the American West has limited its geographical scope to lands west of the Mississippi River—mostly focusing on the Plains, Mountain West and Pacific Slope. Few major works discuss Minnesota, Iowa or Louisiana, and even fewer discuss the western characteristics of states east of the Mississippi River. Stephen Aron’s *How the West was Lost* is the best recent book to examine the processes of change in the trans-Appalachian frontier. But his focus is on what did not happen. For Aron, equal land distribution, continuing common rights and pioneering homesteading privileges were the lost opportunities of the West.7

My dissertation on the integration of Indianapolis into the national economy seeks to bring the historiographical approaches of the New Western History to the Old Northwest. In 1816, Indiana was on the western periphery of American statehood and was attempting to develop its natural resources like any other state in the Union. By examining the ways in which the geographical “place” affected the chronological “process” of development—in the case of Marion County, the failure of the White River as a navigable stream and its effect on the local economy—I hope to bring the New Western History east of the Mississippi River and recalibrate the history of western studies to account for temporality. Throughout American history, westerners have felt that they were being unfairly treated by eastern power brokers and politicians. Nathaniel Bacon and Daniel Shays led violent rebellions aimed at creating a more equitable society for those on the outskirts and Jacksonian claims against eastern, aristocratic

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7 Stephen Aron, *How the West was Lost: The Transformation of Kentucky From Daniel Boone to Henry Clay*. /
privilege—and his subsequent landslide victory in 1828—show that Americans in the Old Northwest felt as “conquered” by the East Coast in the antebellum era as citizens from Colorado, Arizona or Utah during the late nineteenth century. By understanding the shared experiences of westerners across time and space, historians will be able to enrich our understanding of the American experience and provide continuity with the past.

For instance, if we look at land values in other nineteenth century urban centers, we see that Marion County clearly lags. In 1850, Marion County soil was worth $18/acre while Jefferson County, KY was worth $34/acre and Hamilton County, OH was worth $83/acre. The average farm value in Marion County was a slight $2,189 while Cincinnati average farm values were three times as much at $6,706 and Louisville average farm value was $6,150. Meanwhile, Franklin County, OH land was worth $24 and the average farm value was $2,367. It was not until 1870 that Indianapolis caught up to Louisville in terms of land value at $85 and $84/acre respectively. But Marion County, remained far short of Cincinnati or Pittsburgh, which had land prices at $138 and $145/acre.

What these numbers show is that—unsurprisingly—landlocked cities dawdled behind their riverbed brethren into the second half of the nineteenth century. Instead of being a panacea that immediately brought a rail city into the national market, urban centers in the Old Northwest experienced a significant lag time when integrating into national markets in much the same fashion that Des Moines, Wichita or Lincoln experienced. These are not the only numbers that show how the decision to place Indianapolis on the White River hurt the city. But they are effective reminders of the way that Turner’s “process,” however faulty, can still provide a useful interpretive model if we begin to construct our analyses in more creative ways. I hope to bring the “process” and the “place” together in a new analytical push in order to get the East
reacquainted with the West in the Middle Ground of the Midwest and refocus attention on the region that continues to be “America’s Heartland.”