

The Whitewater Valley in southeastern Indiana tells a story of growth during westward movement across the United States. The Whitewater Valley encompasses approximately 80 miles between Hagerstown in Wayne County and Lawrenceburg in Dearborn County. The gently rolling landscape, and the surviving structures of the built environment, work hand-in-hand to showcase a story of 19th century progress in America.

The wooded landscape attracted pioneers and soldiers to the former lands of the Miami and Shawnee. Treaties were signed here. The trees slowly turned into towns and retreated from fields with rich loamy topsoil. New States were created. The Whitewater Canal was built to take produce and manufactured goods to markets in Cincinnati, Lawrenceburg and other points along the Ohio and Mississippi rivers. The canalway was soon sold to the faster railroad. Yet, despite this initial rapid development and important position in America's growth, the region remains primarily rural. The slow pace of modern development provides a unique experience, combining surviving historic architecture and scenic rural beauty. These remnants tell the story of development that intertwines the natural environment with the man-made tools of progress, primarily the Whitewater Canal. There is much to be discovered within the route of the [Whitewater Canal Scenic Byway](#).

The Valley is a living history of the natural environment and how it has changed over time. The rolling wooded hills and valleys surrounded by fields flattened by glaciers, provide an interesting dichotomy rarely seen across the state. The melting Wisconsin ice cap created the Whitewater Valley basin as we know it today. When starting at Hagerstown in central Indiana, one sees prairies, now farmlands, which were flattened by the glacier. This flattened landscape is generally considered the predominant landscape of Indiana. But head south of current day Connersville and the terrain turns to low, undulating hills, where the glaciers stopped. Go further south along the valley to Metamora, Brookville where the hills open upon low grassy valley and cliff faces as you approach the Ohio River.

Just as the Ohio River brought pioneers westward, so did the Whitewater River marked a natural way to move those pioneers northward. The valley is defined by the Whitewater River, which rises from two main branches that start in Randolph and Wayne Counties. While the east branch meanders through Richmond, then Liberty in Union County and eventually to Brookville, the route of west branch is important to the story of the Whitewater Canal. The canal followed the route of the West Branch from Hagerstown through Cambridge City in Wayne County, then Connersville in Fayette County, into Franklin County through Metamora to Brookville.

In Brookville the two branches of the Whitewater River join, and the river continues southward joining the Great Miami River near Elizabethtown, Ohio. The Great Miami flows through Ohio emptying into the Ohio east of Lawrenceburg. This connection to the Ohio River is incredibly important, as this was one of the early primary entry points into Indiana from the eastern colonies. This natural scene sets the backdrop to the human story that has transpired in this region.

Pioneers coming from the eastern seaboard may have made their way over the Appalachian Mountains to early settlements near Pittsburgh, where then they would follow the Ohio River down to Cincinnati. They would essentially reverse the route of the Whitewater Canal and follow the Whitewater River northward into Indiana Territory. Even those coming from the south would eventually find their way to Cincinnati, which, due to its prime location, quickly became one of the most important interior ports in America. Using the waterways, settlers in places that may seem as remote as Cambridge City, would be connected to places as far off as New Orleans to trade their goods.

Lewis and Clark used the Ohio River to begin their expedition into the west, and it was partially due to their findings that President Thomas Jefferson commissioned the construction of a national road in

1806. This was the first time federal dollars would be used for a public internal improvement, and by the mid-1820s, the Whitewater Valley was connected on two ends by two very important transportation routes, the Ohio River and the National Road. This prime location opened the area up for increased settlement and helped lead to improving the newly designated (1816) state of Indiana.

Settlers faced hardships posed by nature, weather, fellow citizens and Native Americans. However, it was through the creation of industry that they built their towns. Numerous water-powered mills along the river ground corn and wheat, sawed lumber and served other important trades for the area. In order to transport these products, planning for the Whitewater Canal began in 1823, but construction did not begin until 1836, when the official groundbreaking was held in Brookville. Only three years later was the canal completed between Brookville and Lawrenceburg, making the connection to the Ohio River, Cincinnati and the nation. The canal was lengthened to Hagerstown by 1847. In addition, a connecting canal was built from Harrison, Ohio to Cincinnati which created increased commercial potential.

The cost of the canal between Hagerstown and Lawrenceburg was \$1,164,665, totaling 76 miles at \$15,000 per mile. Seven feeder dams and 56 canal locks were constructed to handle the change in elevation in the landscape, as the total fall is 491 feet. The development of the canal increased the population of the area, and established the Whitewater Valley as an important contributor to the commerce in Cincinnati. The development of the Valley built the rural foundation of the country that Thomas Jefferson imagined; a nation of agricultural roots that supported industry and trade, of common people taking opportunity to support a greater good, of building a country from the ground up rather than from the top down.

Brookville native Governor Jennings advocated for the construction of the canal. Although he continued the work, Governor Ray, another Brookville native, actually foresaw the importance that roads would take in America, and commissioned the construction of the Michigan Road to connect the Ohio River and Lake Michigan. For his investment and interests in roads and rail, he was ridiculed and was not elected to another term. Unfortunately for Governor Ray canals were the popular method of travel, but it was not long before rail and road came to dominate.

Although roads are the primary routes of transportation today, it was the canals and railroads in the late 1800's that created the conditions to support early industrial and agricultural commerce in the valley. At the turn of the century, roads became the focal point in transportation across the nation. The National Road north of the valley and the Brookville Road that bisected the valley became the new east to west corridors for transportation in the region, pulling business away from the canals. These roads would experience greater usage especially at the start of the 20th century. During this period, the Good Roads Movement took root and the government improved roads from mud filled paths to wide concrete paved lanes for bicycles and newly mass-produced automobiles. The National Road became US 40, the Brookville Road became US 52 and US 50 was created in the southern part of the Whitewater Valley.

Despite the valley remaining an important thoroughfare for transportation, development and growth in the region would be limited, especially by the mid-1900's. After World War II, President Eisenhower created the US Interstate system and local roads in this area were soon bypassed with the construction of I-70 and I-74. Just as the road and route system pulled commerce away from the railroads and canals, the interstates pulled commerce to the prime destination points such as Indianapolis and Cincinnati, and away from the smaller towns in between. Therefore, the larger towns in the valley such as Connersville, Brookville and Lawrenceburg remained smaller and less developed.

The diversion of modern development away from the Whitewater Valley in many instances is the secret to what has preserved the area, making it such a little known gem of Indiana. While time and change

have not completely bypassed the region, and the 21st Century is making its mark, the valley still holds a significant part of its architectural past and natural beauty.

Quaint small towns such as Brookville or Hagerstown still boast largely intact streetscapes of Greek Revival and Italianate commercial structures that date as far back as the 1820s. At Scout Lake in Wayne County, the Roots building in Connersville, or at the State Historic Site near Metamora, important sections and stories of the original Whitewater Canal can be seen and touched; an experience rarely available across the country. Likewise, the natural environment that has so intricately impacted this region can still be experienced. The Whitewater River continues to meander through the region providing many recreational opportunities for both residents and visitors. Modern sprawl has not completely scarred this area yet, and the space between towns is still defined by rural and natural environments, recalling the experience one may have had in the 1840s while traveling the canal or riding on the Brookville Road.

Despite its close proximity to one of the largest metropolitan areas of the country, and due to its distance from the metropolitan center of Indiana, the Whitewater Valley has somehow escaped being highlighted as a premier destination. Yet its connection to the beginning roots of the state and its contribution to the development of the country is a significant story to preserve and promote. In some ways, the history that occurred in this region can be pointed to as a cross-section of the American experience. The number of State and National Historic sites designated within this region, and the quantity of Indiana Historic Bureau historic markers in place, testify to the importance of this area. It is a microcosm of the development of the nation to where it has evolved to today. It is for this that the historic and natural resources located in this region should be conserved and protected.

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