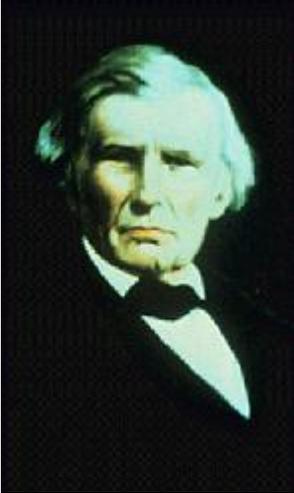


Conner's Choice: **William Conner and Traders Point, Indiana**



By Ross Reller

Author's Note: In the early part of 2005 a nexus was discovered between William Conner and Traders Point, Indiana. A casual review of early land records by this writer revealed the name William Conner as the first land patent owner in Pike Township. A review of the legal description and the township map revealed an exciting clue as to what may have attracted Conner to the area. If the reader agrees, Traders Point should be marked as a place in Indiana history.

“William Conner, for most of his forty-six years, had performed a precarious balancing act between two worlds: Red and White. He spoke the words of both worlds, lived and dressed as both did. He continually walked the knife-edged path dividing the two divergent cultures, never, seemingly, wholly a part of either. As a result, he had intimate knowledge of both societies-- and how they interacted with one another. William and his older brother John arrived in Indiana during the winter of 1800-1801 as agents for a Canadian fur trader named Angus Mackintosh. To anyone else it might have been a daunting and foreboding venture, but to the Conner Brothers it must have seemed the reawakening of a vestigial memory. Once again they were beyond white settlement, living and trading among Native Americans. William appears to have eschewed any official role prior to 1811, but increasing conflict and the War of 1812 drew him into government service. The man who had lived and worked with Native Americans most of his life, who had married a Delaware woman, whose children were certainly more "indian" than "American," became a soldier, scout, interpreter and spy for those who were arguably his family's enemies. Among the services rendered by William Conner were maintaining Delaware loyalty during the war and identifying the body of Tecumseh following the Battle of the Thames, the defeat which essentially sealed the fate of Native Americans east of the Mississippi.”¹

“For over half a century the Conner family played an important role in treaty making and the removal of Native Americans.”²

Traders Point, Indiana barely exists today. Even in its heyday its census population was less than 100 residents. But several area churches, two operating dairies, and an annual

horseshow are named for this place in northwestern Marion County, Indiana. Nestled within a triangle of three interstate highways; (I-65, I-465 and I-865), Traders Point had a name with unclear roots. Now

the origination of this name has been linked to one of the most colorful historical figures of Indiana history: William Conner. The connection between Traders Point and William Conner deserves exploration.

William Conner was the first property owner in Pike Township of Marion County. His choice of a single 80 acre parcel on Eagle Creek in the far northwestern corner of Marion County of Pike Township, an area later known as Traders Point, is curious for a host of reasons. By the year 1822, the year of his Marion County patent, Conner had already acquired 160 acres in Hamilton County. He would eventually acquire thousands of acres in Hamilton County and dozens of parcels in other Indiana counties.³ But this was to be the prominent land baron's only patent in Marion County. Surprising when one considers that Marion County was the center of the speculative fever that Conner would practically pass on it. As the site for the state's new capitol, Conner may have stayed away from other Marion County parcels out of a sense that he was too late to participate in the land speculation occurring near the new center of commerce and government in the mile square of Indianapolis. Or he may have believed he was too inexperienced. Although he would speculate in land until 1857, he was just getting his feet wet in 1823. He seemed to prefer his backyard of Hamilton County.

His Marion County purchase is also curious because it reveals the contrast between the settler and the speculator in acquiring land. Unlike one who needs the land to provide a place for building a home, farming and

raising a family; Conner had no real need for the land he was acquiring. Just as the fur he had traded was more a commodity than a necessity for warmth, the land to Conner was prized more for its currency than its utility in farming.

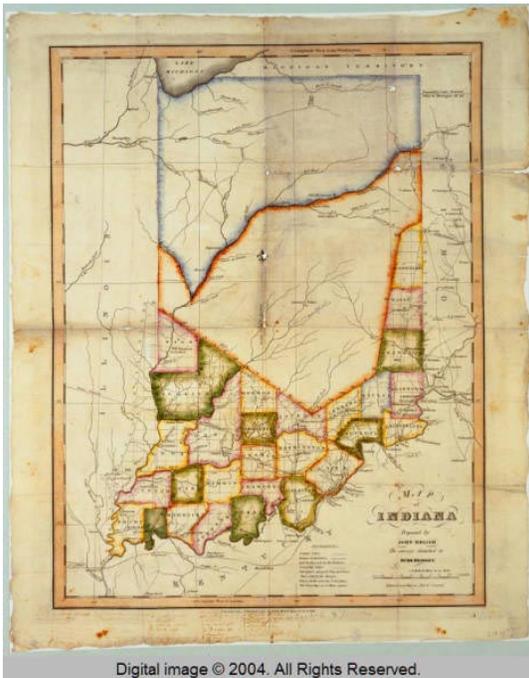
It is also curious for its ability to illustrate Conner's keen skill in locating the exact spot where trade might be conducted with the remaining Indians, or where commerce with the settler could grow anew.

And there is an aspect of insider trading. It is curious for an illustration of how people with access to information that was not widely available to the general public could act on it for personal gain. Referred to now as "insider trading", we can presume that one could profit immensely from the relationship if one knew a county commissioner or a county surveyor. The ability to review section maps before they were published, or to know of proposed road projects before they were announced, could mean the difference between a mere profit and a windfall to the land investor. For Indiana's first generation of settlers and speculators the rules had not yet been written.

But perhaps most curious in hindsight is that we can guess (in an educated fashion), that Conner already knew this area quite well; from navigating the area's Indian trails as a trader. He saw the site from the perspective of a man who lived in two worlds: Red and White.

To fully appreciate the significance of William Conner's choice of any parcel in Central Indiana, it will be necessary to review the climate of the times and a few facts about the process of acquiring land in pioneer Indiana.

By 1800 negotiations between the United States and the Indians were starting to transform the wild Indian country into a New American settlement area for the white man. In 1801 William Henry Harrison became Governor of the Indiana Territory, serving 12 years. (He would later become the 9th President of the United States). The Miami Indians struck a deal with Harrison to sell their Indiana land for \$.02 per acre. His prime task as governor was to obtain title to Indian lands so settlers could press forward into the wilderness. When the Indians retaliated, Harrison was responsible for defending the settlements. Conner's brother John was closely aligned with Harrison and few knew the wild unsettled Indian lands of the new state better than the Conner brothers.



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Indiana in 1816

These new settlement areas presented an opportunity for William Conner. By 1822 more Indiana counties, including Marion, were being divided into townships. And this new

concept of awarding “patents”⁴ of land was working its way into more of the state, attracting to Indiana some of the sturdy pioneers of the westward migration. It was also creating opportunities for land speculators and Conner transitioned from trading fur to trading land.

Although the land office wanted to award whole sections, half sections and ¼ sections to encourage settlement of new areas, Conner was evidently not interested in staking such a large position. He was quite content to settle for 80 acres, a mere 1/8 of a section (or 1/288 of the township, a very small fraction indeed! It would be the only patent of land ever awarded to Conner in Marion County. Why would this fur trader, navigator, Indian scout, businessman and real estate entrepreneur want an 80 acre parcel so far removed from his major assemblage in Hamilton County? Conner was an experienced, knowledgeable scout. A skilled horseman who had come to Indiana at the request of Canadians interested in establishing trade with Indians, William, like his brother John, was comfortable in the wildest and least civilized parts of Indiana. He had lived among the Indians to gain their trust as a trader. He had learned their languages and would assist them in negotiating trades and treaties. He had many years earlier taken a Delaware chief's daughter as his wife. And in 1820 he had accompanied her and their mixed children to the Illinois border after conceding that they could not stay in a *post-Indian* Indiana.

For Conner the opportunity to patent a site in Pike Township of Marion County may have been like buying stock in a high flyer stock like Amazon or Google before everyone else found out and bid up their value. It must have been like being offered the best lot in a prime subdivision

with thousands of beautiful lots, each practically guaranteed to appreciate in value the minute they hit the market and became known to others? It must have been like being in on the ground floor of an opportunity to buy land at a bargain price (although many times per acre what the Indians had been paid). And for Conner, like any investor, the reward appeared to exceed the risk.

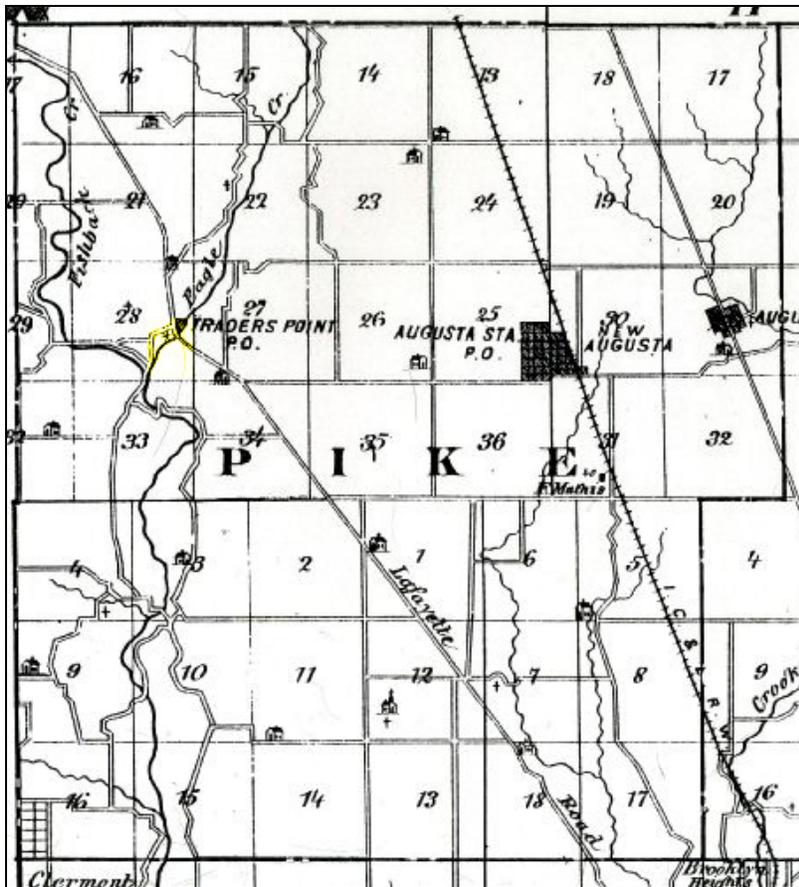
So the question for Conner, knowing of the plans to plat the township, and facing a township of twenty three thousand and forty brand-new acres, never before owned or improved by the white man, was: “*Out of all that I know, out of all of this opportunity, which parcel do I pursue?*” A related question was how many acres do I want to acquire?

Almost any parcel would have the potential to raise horses, or cattle, or corn, or to be subdivided, or held for future gain. As the owner of plenty of land in Hamilton County, Conner was not a settler seeking a site for a homestead. So it should not be surprising that Conner chose a parcel with characteristics undesirable to the settler. Conner’s methodology was driven by other considerations.

First, he chose a parcel that was not entirely tillable. In fact, it was cut nearly in half by a creek running through it; meaning that what land was not in the creek would certainly be affected by it. The rains and runoff from upstream would make even less of this parcel usable; forever changing with every rise and fall of the water level. And he shrewdly chose a site that was about to have its farming utility further reduced.

With Eagle Creek coming into the northeast corner of his parcel and leaving near the southwest corner of his square, a new road was being planned that would enter his parcel on the southeast corner and exit on the northwest corner. Although not formally constructed as a road, Conner knew this parcel was already quartered like an “x” by an Indian trail and it was only a matter of time before this trail might become a road. He must have smiled when in 1831 the county commissioners chose a route for the first highway across the township. It was no coincidence that William Conner’s parcel was at that one point in the township where navigable Eagle Creek intersected a busy horse trail.

Today we know this site is where Eagle Creek runs underneath Lafayette Road. For William Conner, his only choice of land in Marion County was a *Traders Point*.



Townships

Thanks in part to a country founded by surveyors like George Washington, the poor property boundaries like stones and fences also known as “metes and bounds”, were replaced with the accurate measurement system we have today based upon meridians, baselines, townships, and ranges.

A county was comprised of townships and townships were divided into 36 sections, each section being exactly 1 mile by 1 mile, and containing 640 acres. To facilitate settlement of this new real estate, the Federal Government established an orderly sale of various size parcels based upon quartered portions of sections.

By 1822 the Marion County Commissioners had ordered the platting of Marion County’s Pike Township and in September of 1823 the first patent⁽⁴⁾ in Pike Township, was awarded to William Conner.

¹ <http://www.connerprairie.org/HistoryOnline/connbiol.html>

² <http://www.connerprairie.org/HistoryOnline/furdoc.html>

³ For a complete listing of Conner’s Land Patents: <http://www.glorerecords.blm.gov/PatentSearch/>

⁴ <http://www.blm.gov/nhp/facts/index.htm#history> The first generation of Indiana property owners received rightful ownership of their property through a “patent” awarded by the federal government’s Bureau of Land Management, (BLM). The BLM’s roots go back to the Land Ordinance of 1785 and the Northwest Ordinance of 1787. These laws provided for the survey and settlement of the lands that the original 13 colonies ceded to the Federal government after the War of Independence. As additional lands were acquired by the United States from Spain, France, and other countries, Congress directed that they be explored, surveyed, and made available for settlement. In 1812, Congress established the General Land Office in the Department of the Treasury to oversee the disposition of these Federal lands. As the 19th century progressed and the Nation’s land base expanded further west, Congress encouraged the settlement of the land by enacting a wide variety of laws, including the Homesteading Laws and the Mining Law.