

ATHERTON ISLAND, PARKE AND VIGO COUNTIES, INDIANA

John O. Whitaker, Jr.¹ and **Linda Castor²**: Department of Biology, Indiana State University, Terre Haute, IN 47809 USA

The mission of Ouabache Land Conservancy (OLC) is to set aside land in perpetuity, both for the owners and for the population at large. Recently, on “Atherton Island” near the ridge just northeast of Lyford, Indiana, 76 ha (188 acres) in three separate donations were made to OLC. It has been named the “Atherton Island Natural Area,” and is on the south central portion of the island. The town of Atherton, and Atherton Island itself, are named for a geologist named Atherton (Baker 1995).

Few people locally know about Atherton Island which is located mostly in western Parke County but includes 8–10 km² (3–4 mi²) of northern Vigo County. The village of Atherton, located 0.8 km (~0.5 mi) east of Route 41 on the Vigo/Parke County line, is at the western edge of the Island. Atherton Island begins about 3.2 km (2 mi) south of Atherton and approximately 6.4 km (4 mi) north of Markle’s Dam on the eastern edge of North Terre Haute (Fig. 1). These hills extend northward for about 19 km (12 mi), ultimately reaching approximately 4 km (2.5 mi) north of Mecca. As an interesting historical aside, in 1816, the year Indiana became a state and when Markle’s Dam was built, the Atherton Island area remained Indian country.

It is possible to drive around the boundary of most of the Island via the following route: take Rt. 41 northbound from Terre Haute towards Lyford. Route 41 lies on the immediate west side of the Island until it turns sharply eastward toward Big Raccoon River Valley. Instead of turning to the east on Rt. 41, follow 600W northward. This traces the immediate western edge of Atherton Island. About 6.5 km (4 mi) north of the Rt. 41/600W junction and 0.4 km (0.25 mi) south of Raccoon Creek, turn right (east) on Coxville Road (originally Armiesburg Road). This skirts the northern edge of Atherton

Island. In roughly 0.8 km (0.5 mi) the road turns south, and in another 0.4 km (0.25 mi) reaches the northeast corner of the island. Coxville Road continues south through Mecca and Coxville and outlines the immediate east edge of Atherton Island. Rosedale lies south of the most southeastern projection of Atherton Island.

Why is it called an Island when it is not surrounded by water? Approximately ten thousand plus years ago the Wisconsinan glaciers were melting to the north forming a much larger Wabash River than today. The glacial Wabash flowed south on both sides of Atherton Island, the main part of the river to the west, and a smaller part to the east where the northern section of Raccoon Creek now flows. Raccoon Creek originally flowed southwest from the Bridgeton area and entered the Wabash River south of Atherton Island. However, the area northeast of North Terre Haute became blocked so that Raccoon Creek could no longer flow south. It was forced to divert its course to the north for about 16 km (10 mi) and enter the Wabash River north of the Island. Although there are several ideas about how this blockage and reversal came about (Dryer 1913; Bartle 1924; Fidler 1948), no single hypothesis adequately explains the chain of events (Wayne 1966). It is likely that the blocking of the valley northeast of Terre Haute was initially by ice. Outwash gravels and till filled this area later thus permanently blocking it. Finally, sand settled upon this area; deposited by water first and then by wind resulting in the formation of dunes.

As the glaciers thawed, the Wabash River eventually lowered to its present level and Atherton Island was no longer surrounded by water. It is now a raised hilly area with Raccoon Creek on the east and flowing north, the Wabash River some two miles to the west flowing south. You might find it interesting to take a trip around Atherton Island as described above.

¹ *Corresponding author:* John O. Whitaker, Jr., 812-237-2383 (phone), 812-237-3378 (fax), John. Whitaker@indstate.edu.

² Produced the map.

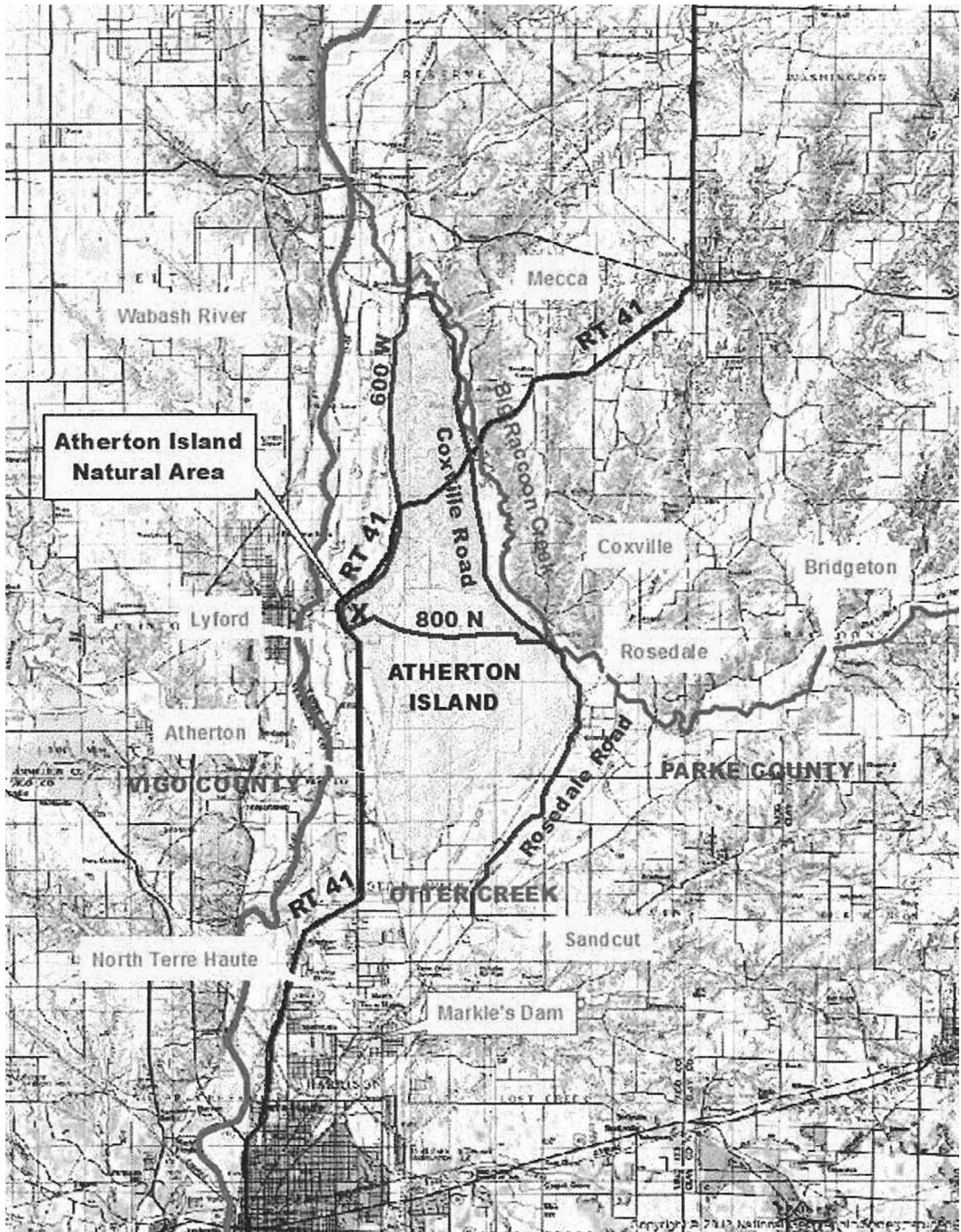


Figure 1.—Map of Atherton Island and surrounding area in Parke and Vigo counties. (Map by Linda Castor)

LITERATURE CITED

- Baker, R.L. 1995. From Needmore to Prosperity: Hoosier Place Names in Folklore and History. Indiana University Press, Bloomington, Indiana. 371 pp.
- Bartle, G.G. 1924. A change of drainage of Raccoon Creek, Parke County, Indiana. *Proceedings of the Indiana Academy of Science* 34:63–68.

- Dryer, C.R. 1913. Wabash Studies. Proceedings of the Indiana Academy of Science for 1912:199–213.
- Fidlar, M.M. 1948. Physiography of the Lower Wabash Valley. Indiana Geology Survey Bulletin 02, Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana. 112p.
- Wayne, W.J. 1966. The reversal of Raccoon Creek at Atherton Island, west-central Indiana. Proceedings of the Indiana Academy of Science 75:167–174.
- Manuscript received 26 September 2018, revised 17 December 2018.*