

Our Highways, An Indian Heritage

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Before the coming of the white man, Indiana was an impenetrable wilderness. It was heavily forested, the forests choked with a dense cover of undergrowth and then entwined with wild grape vines. In the north and central parts, swamps were widespread, and the whole area inhabited by wild beasts and a few tribes of semi-nomadic Indians.

Because land transportation was so difficult, the earliest routes of the white man into Indiana were the waterways. Along the south, the Ohio gave access from Pennsylvania, Virginia, and the Carolinas. The Cumberland Gap was an easy passage from the Carolinas and Eastern Tennessee to Kentucky, down the Kentucky River to the Ohio and to one of the major crossings of the Ohio at Madison. The crossing above the Falls at Louisville was the route followed by George Rogers Clark into Indiana. There was a third crossing at Evansville and one at Lawrenceburg. Some of the early settlers continued on down the Ohio to the Wabash, and up the Wabash. The early history of Vincennes and New Harmony are well known.

In the northern part of the state, the St. Joseph was one of the early transportation routes up the river from its mouth at Benton Harbor, or La Salle's Fort Miamis, to the big bend at South Bend, then across a short portage to the headwaters of the Kankakee, down the Kankakee, the Illinois and Mississippi rivers to the Gulf. This was the route followed by La Salle in his journey to the mouth of the great "Father of Waters."

Another water route was by way of Lake Erie, the Maumee River, a short portage from the Maumee to the Little Wabash, and down the Wabash to the Ohio. All streams of any size were used by Indian canoes, and the White and Whitewater Rivers were later opened to heavier traffic by canals—the Whitewater canal, which gave access from the whole southeastern part of the state to the markets of Cincinnati, and the White-Erie canal, connecting Noblesville with the Maumee at Fort Wayne. (Fig. 1.)

Land travel in the early days was especially difficult, as has been stated. It is said that the Indians had a rather complex system of trails connecting their own settlements—they were friendly, and accustomed to easy visiting back and forth. That system of trails would be impossible to reproduce, but we have definite evidence of some of the major routes.

There seems to have been an easy ford across the White River near its junction with Fall Creek, toward which trails from all directions converged. Kentucky was a no-man's land at the time of the coming of the white man, left open as a hunting ground for the surrounding Indian tribes, and several of the major trails led from the north into Kentucky. After converging at the ford, the major trails followed down the Scottsburg lowland to Jeffersonville, roughly along the present Pennsylvania railroad and Highway 31. From the north converged the old trail of the

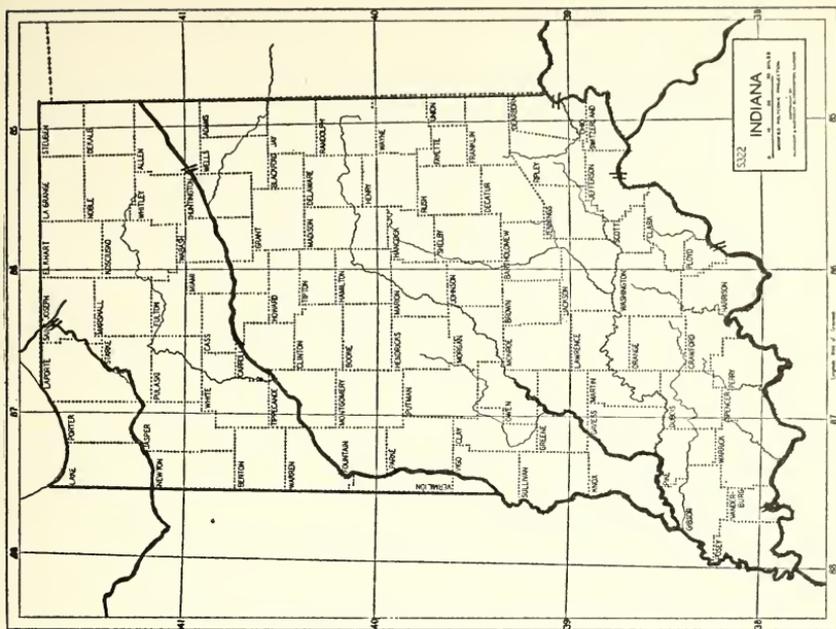


Fig. 1. Waterways Leading into Indiana in the Period of Exploration.

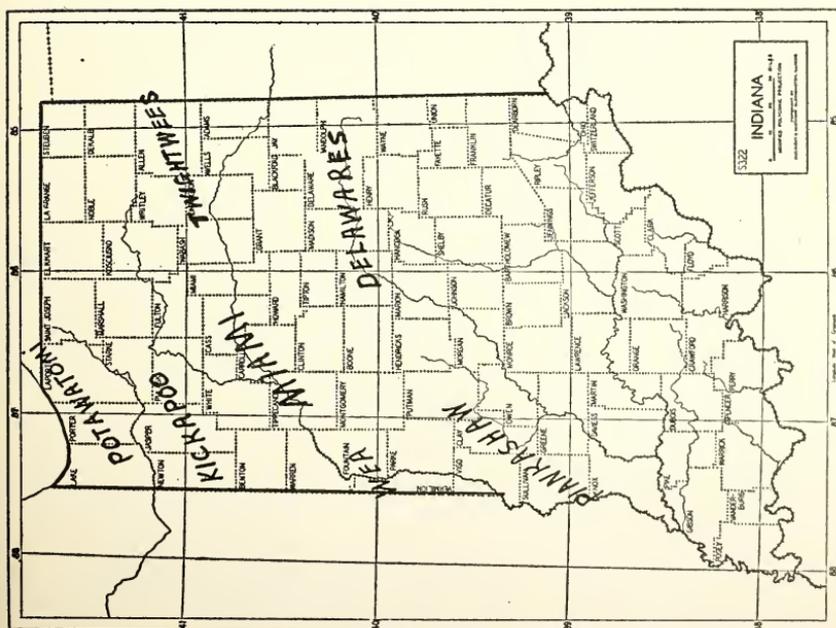


Fig. 2. Indian Tribes.

Pottawatomi, Kickapoo and Miami from near and north of the present Lafayette.

Another trail followed White River from the Delaware territory in the east central part of the state. It seems to have been the forerunner of our present Highway 32. The trail from Muncie and Winchester to Greenville lay along the south bank of White River, now only a locally travelled macadam road. Our present highway lies on the north side of the river and has been straightened. The Indian trail from Greenville down the Mississinewa to Peru on the Wabash is not exactly the present Frances Slocum Trail, but roughly parallels it. The Wayne trail, followed by Mad Anthony crossed the prairie in Grant County, from Fort Wayne, Huntington and Warren, to Summitville, Alexandria and the bend in the White River above Noblesville and on to the ford, roughly our present Highway 37.

The earliest highway to the north was the old Michigan trail, from Michigan City, South Bend, and Logansport to Indianapolis. It ran somewhat to the west of our present Highway 31. The old Conner trail, from John Conner's trading post on the Whitewater, to William Conner's trading post on the White, below Noblesville, was cut through what seemed to be a trackless wilderness to the white man, but along a route fairly distinct to the Indian. Highway 38 seems to be the modern highway nearest to the old trail. It forked at New Castle, one branch continuing to Muncie. There was a trail from Indianapolis to Vincennes, along the lower White River, our present Highway 67. Another came in from Ohio and the Whitewater Valley along the present Pennsylvania Railroad, our National Road. One came up to Indianapolis from Madison. Others could be traced.

"The earliest pioneers were benefited directly by the aboriginal trails; for not only did they follow them from one place to another through trackless wilderness in search of desirable regions, but their rude "traces" for subsequent ingress and egress were frequently only an improvement on the red man's narrow footpath." Straightened and shortened, they form our present highway system. (Figs. 2, 3, 4.)

The state road system of Indiana was not begun until four years after the state was admitted to the Union. Meanwhile, other trails provided routes for or were developed by the white man. One, a buffalo trace, crossed Dubois County and south Orange County, but it is almost obliterated today. The herds of buffalo in Indiana and southern Illinois crossed Dubois and Pike counties, Orange County down to the Ohio Falls and to the salt licks of Kentucky. Interestingly, the first white settlements in Dubois and Pike counties occurred along this trail in the northern part of the counties. Many other such traces existed.

There seems to be an interesting correlation between the sites of Indian villages and our towns and cities. Some writers tell us that Indian villages and towns were not permanent, but some, perhaps many of them, appear to have become so. Fort Wayne is one of the best illustrations. The Indian village was a Miami village and was called Kekionga. The settlement located on the present site of Lafayette consisted of five villages, almost continuous. Fort Quiatanon is best known. Les Gros was on or near the site of the present Lafayette.

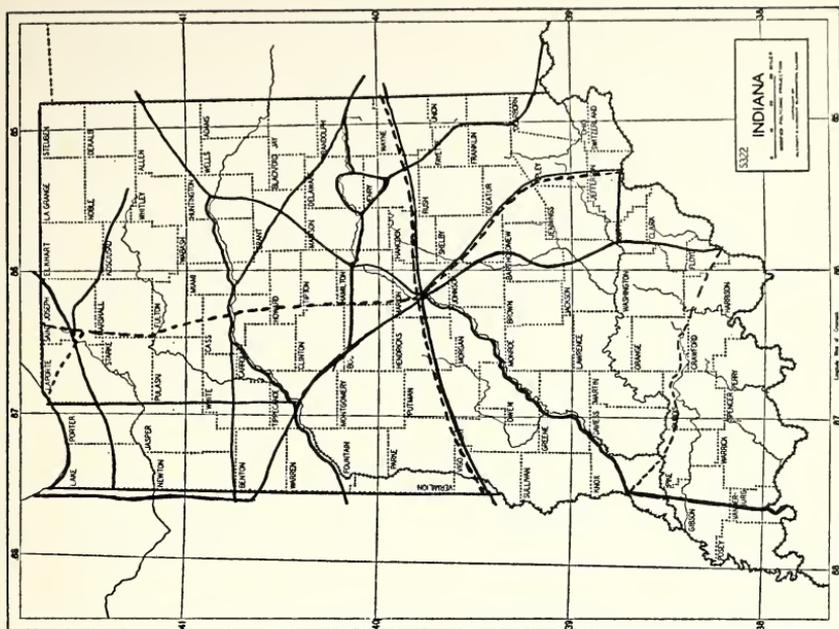


Fig. 3. Pattern of Indian Trails and Early Highways.

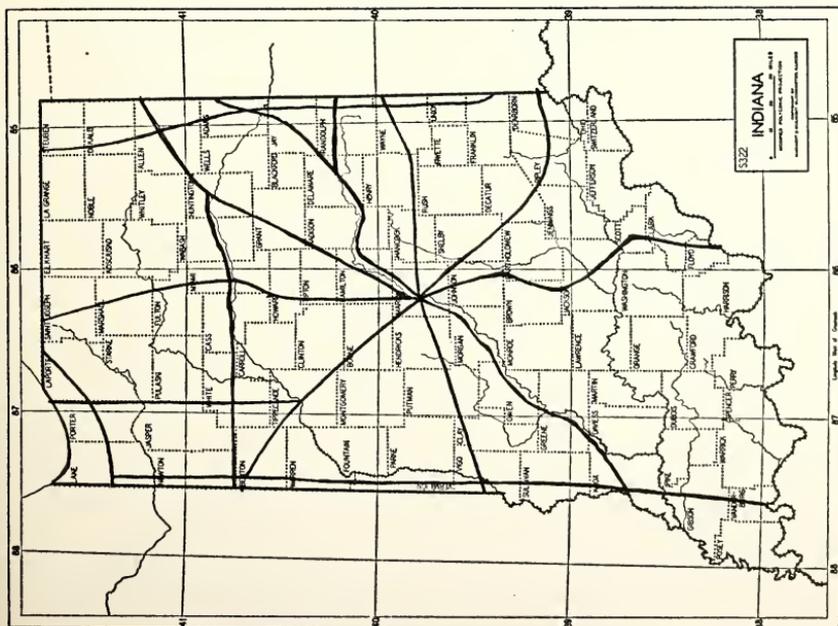


Fig. 4. Pattern of Present Highways.

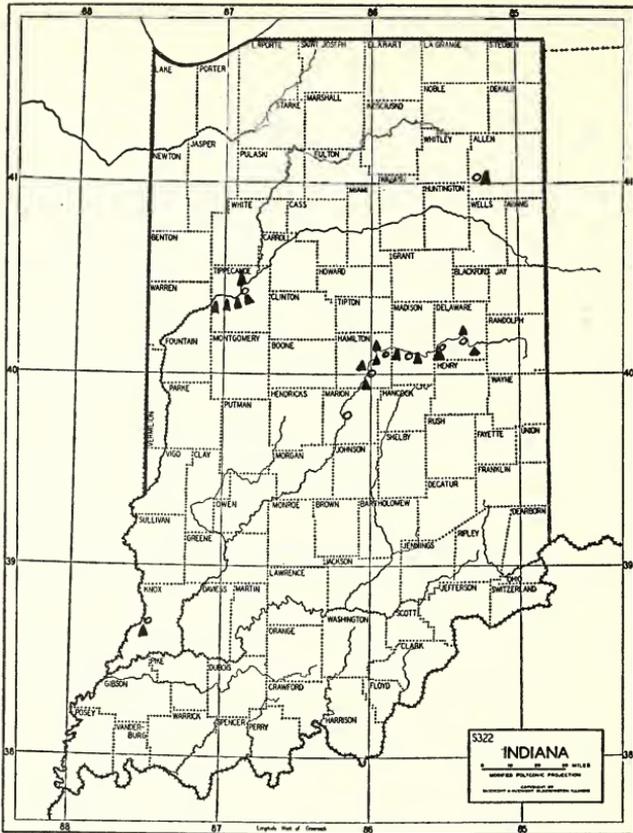


Fig. 5. Relation of Delaware Villages along White River to our Cities and Towns.

The labor involved in developing these early trails into highways was tremendous. It was difficult in the southern part of the state, and the poll tax took the form of two days of labor annually on the roads. In the north where swamps made the laying of corduroy and plank roads a necessity, it was more difficult. Four days of labor annually were demanded. Eventually toll roads became popular.

The Delaware villages on the White River make a good example of the relationship of the two types of settlements. The easternmost was near the bend of the White, about three miles below Muncie; Muncytown on high land north of the big bend in the river where the statue "Ode to the Great Spirit" is located. There was another village near our present Yorktown; Andersontown on the present site of Anderson; Nancytown, Indian Strawtown, Saratown, Upper Delaware Town and Lower Delaware Town. Noblesville was located between the last two. (Fig. 5.)

There was no settlement on the present site of Indianapolis. The Indians chose high land, overlooking streams or rivers. Indianapolis is on low land, in an unhealthy area. It was located near the boat landings

on the river, but most of the settlers became ill within the first year, and many died. The settlement persisted in spite of unhealthful conditions and has become our most populous city, our state capital, the hub of our transportation systems, a cultural, manufacturing, and trading center.

In conclusion, the rectangular road pattern in Indiana is overlain by another pattern which has no relation to the first. The second pattern is very similar to the pattern of old Indian trails. One wonders if the geographic factors which influenced the Indians in the location of their trails are still operating today; whether the influences operating today are largely man-made; or whether our main highway system is a simple heritage from the Red man who formed his trails by travelling single file along the easiest routes through a trackless wilderness.