# A Chronicle of Real Estate Development Along White River From 10th to New York Using Insurance Records: 1876-1956

**Mark Carrel**

**1820-1880's**

In February 1820, John McCormick arrived at the confluence of Fall Creek and the White River. It is there, that the first white settlement of what would become Indianapolis began. In the History of the Medical Campus, by Thurman Rice, published from 1946-48, we find a description of this land as it looked prior to the levy and other subsequent development.

> In the early days all the area now occupied by the Medical Center except a narrow strip of high ground along the east side was an impassable swamp. The river with very low banks ran about where it does now, but Fall Creek emptied in a series of channels on a delta-like flat spreading from its present mouth about one mile down the river to the place just above the site of the McCormick cabin, which was near the east end of the Washington Street Bridge over the river. The three or four poorly marked channels changed their courses from time to time, and in high water the entire "delta" was covered. When the water was low the area was covered with a dense thicket of willows and such other brush as commonly covers terrain of this nature. (Nov. 1948 pg. 261)

Also found in the History of the Medical Campus, is a map of the area from 1820. This map shows the course of Fall Creek as it flowed south, across what would later be the IUPUI Campus, and into the White River (Appendix A1).

Fifty-six years later the city of Indianapolis had blossomed into one of the fastest growing cites in the country. The land east of the White River where it met Fall Creek

was still unsettled and considered by most to be swamp. In 1876, Baskin, Forester and Co. published the Illustrated Atlas of the State of Indiana. This also contains maps of the state counties and the Plan of Indianapolis. The Plan of Indianapolis shows the divergence of Fall Creek west into the White River and the clear flow of Mill Race south into the White River. All the land between these waterways seems to be uninhabited, except for one building on the west bank of Millrace, where it meets the White River. The number 149 appears next to the building but indicates the insurance lot number rather than a building identification. There are four names that appear as landowners of this property, S.J. Patterson, C.B. Parkman, T.B. Elliott, and J.C. & C.E. Geisendorf. To the east of Mill Race, City Hospital is shown clearly on the map, but there are no other indications the land is being used by industry or residence. In fact, the History of the Medical Campus, refers to it as "malarial swamp" (Nov. 1948, pg. 161)

In 1821, there was a malaria outbreak in the little prospering settlement where Mill Race diverged from Fall Creek and went south. Residence of the settlement decided that the site was uninhabitable and moved farther east and south of the river. The abandoned homes were left to deteriorate and were later inhabited by the families known as "Tribe of Ishmael." The Rev. O.C. McCulloch wrote a great deal about this group of families in the 1880's. "They are a wandering lot of beings, marrying, intermarrying, cohabitating, etc. They live mostly out of doors, in the river bottoms, in old houses, etc. They are largely illegitimate, subject to fits… They are hardly human beings." (Encyclopedia of Indianapolis, pg. 1341). McColloch was a great advocate of the eugenics movement, which promoted sterilization and planned breeding programs to create a better society. His research of the Tribe of Ishmael reflects more bourgeois

Indianapolis culture than it does this group of people. In 1977, Hugo Leaming created a study of the group and found that they were the opposite of McCollogh's thesis and that they were in fact "a pioneering clan of African, Native American, Muslim origins, a lost-found nation in the wilderness of North America" (Encyclopedia of Indianapolis, pg. 1342). Although they do not show up on the map, the Tribe of Ishmael are the first permanent residents of the area between Mill Race, Fall Creek and the White River. Jeannette Matthew reported in her Evolution of a Campus Site, "this communal group continued to thrive on the Fall Creek bottoms until sometime about 1920". (Matthew 1981, pg. 16)

In the late 1870's, a new channel was dug for Fall Creek, setting it into its present course. A levee was also built along the south bank of the channel. "It was not high enough to keep out the flood waters… and as a result the area would fill in the spring and would continue as a morass during most of the rest of the year" (History of the Medical Campus, Nov. 1948, pg. 261).

**1880-1887**

Rascher's Fire Insurance Atlas from 1883 shows a detail of the city of Indianapolis. The index page shows that in 1881-1883 there were no buildings on the East side of the White River until just east of Dry Mill Road. In the Sanborn maps from 1887 there appears more industrial and residential use of the land. In the Sanborn map index you can see lot 45's position next to what is labeled as "Mill Race." In lot 45 you find the Indiana Warp Mill, Landers and Co. Pork Packing, a Cooper's shop, and the Hoosier State Mills (flour mill). These businesses have a number of residential neighborhoods next to them.

**1898-1908**

The Sanborn index map from 1898 shows more streets build out into the future IUPUI campus. There are more surveyed maps around the river but they primarily deal with the west side of the river. The lot 45 from the 1887 map is now Lot 1. In addition, Mill Race does not appear on the map at all. Lot 1 shows the Indianapolis Bleaching Co., Brower and Love Bros. Cotton Mills, S. Kaufman & Sons Fertilizer Ware House, and the Hoosier State Flour Mills. The residential neighborhoods that appeared before are still there and growing. On the west side of the White River between 10th and New York is the Linseed Oil Co. but everything on the other side of the river is shown as vacant. The homes of the Tribe of Ishmael and any other evidence of squatters or settlers are overlooked. There is evidence that the land owned by S.J. Patterson in 1876 and then Isaac N. Richie Jr. in 1908 is primarily cornfield after the levee is built along Fall Creek. A description written in 1915 by Miss Nellie Brown, who worked at Long Hospital.

> "To the North there was cornfields, a few cottonwood trees and unused land to Fall Creek. Hiawatha Street on the east was thickly settled with small houses inhabited largely by Negroes, with the exception of one large house on the west side of Hiawatha, which I believe was the farmhouse belonging to the first people who had originally owned most of the property in that area" (History of the Medical Campus, Nov. 1948, pg. 263).

Matthew reports that the fields west of campus had become a city dump, in an effort to fill in the swamp. "For nearly 25 years this field was of Millrace became a city dump" (Matthews 1981, pg. 17).

There are a number of maps that confirm the vacancy of any industrial development along the White River until sometime between 1898 and 1908. The Baist's

Real Estate Atlas, Survey of Indianapolis, from 1908 show's the arrival of the Indiana Gravel Co. along the river just south of 10th Street. North of the gravel company and along the Fall Creek river till Millrace is still vacant on the survey maps from this time period.

The 1898 Sanborn Fire Insurance maps show Walnut and North Streets going east and west to the river with north south streets intersecting them. Unfortunately, there are no detailed surveys of these early neighborhoods.

**1908-1956**

In 1913 the White River and Fall Creek once again overflowed their banks. "At the height of the 1913 flood, earthen levees along White River, Fall Creek, Eagle Creek, and Little Eagle Creek failed, sending torrents of water rushing through the city, especially the are formerly known as West Indianapolis (roughly bounded by West Washington Street, White River Parkway, Raymond Street, and Belmont Avenue)" (Encyclopedia of Indianapolis, pg. 582). The Encyclopedia of Indianapolis goes on to state that the flood destroyed everything along the White River. Three years later, in 1916, Baist's Real Estate Atlas shows how much was changed by the flood. Everything along the river from Michigan to 10th (now called West Fall Creek Parkway) and East away from the river to the new street White River Parkway, is blue flood plain. The Indiana Gravel Co. appears on the 1908 Baist's map and again on the 1914 Sanborn map is gone in 1916. Just south of Owosso Ave. where the maps showed the Bleachery and the Bemiss Bros. Bag. Co. prior to 1914 there now appears a new gravel company, White River Sand and Gravel.

During the 1920's and 30's, the hospital campus continued to expand beyond Millrace, westward toward the river. The 1934 Sanborn maps lists the tract of land once owned by Isaac Richie Jr. in 1908 as Hospital Park. This included the landfill area used as a city dump. South of the hospital park and West Michigan road there are now defined streets and neighborhoods. Matthew's, reports that this neighborhood was considered an ugly slum and that sidewalks there were made up of rotted planks of wood that people often fell through. The population in the neighborhoods around this area south of W. Michigan road to the river and around the Hospital Park area were from all over the world. "People of many nationalities located here: Irish, Germans, Blacks, Jews, Macedonians, Greeks, Romanians and others" (pg. 30). The future IUPUI campus was a virtual United Nations made primarily of blue-collar workers.

The 1956 Sanborn map shows the further expansion of the hospital park and the future hospital campus. The Veteran's Administration Hospital, the Larue D. Carter Memorial Hospital, Winona Village Veteran's Housing, and Indiana State Board of Health can now be seen in the area referred to as Hospital Park in the 1934 Sanborn map. The neighborhoods south of the hospital campus were still primarily blue collar and there is little industrial development left. The Indiana Sand and Gravel Co. mentioned before on the 1916 Baist's map is gone and the area is all residential tract land.

**1956- Present**

In 1969 began the initiative to develop Indiana University Purdue University at Indianapolis. During the 1970's, the university began building the campus into what it is today. The residential neighborhoods that once populated the area along the river south of W. Michigan road became absorbed by the campus and developed into the IUPUI

campus. Almost 30 years later, it is one of the largest campuses in the state with a renowned medical school, highly regarded business school, law school, engineering school, and undergraduate education programs. Since 1820, this area of land has seen a dramatic change from malarial swamp to an educational Mecca for Indianapolis.