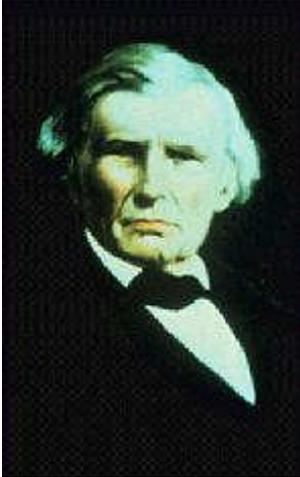


THE LIFE OF WILLIAM CONNER

Timothy Crumrin



William Conner

William Conner lived his life in two different worlds. He lived and dressed both as a white settler and as a Native American. Because he lived as both a White man and an American Indian, William Conner understood the two different ways of life and how they affected each other.

William was born near Lichtenau, Ohio in 1777, to parents Richard and Margaret Conner. His father was a trader and tavern keeper. They lived with Moravians in Schoenbrunn, Ohio. Moravians were missionaries among the Delaware Indians. The Conners traveled with them to Michigan where William grew up. Then the Moravians and Delaware decided to return to Ohio. Richard Conner and his family stayed in Michigan. He established a trading post and helped others settle in the area.

By 1795, at only eighteen years old, William was trading with the Native Americans in Michigan. In the winter of 1800-1801, William and his brother John came to Indiana to become fur traders.

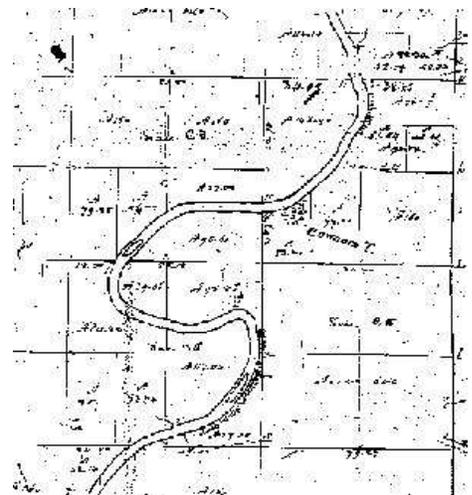
SETTLING IN

Both men settled among the Delaware and married Delaware women. According to legend, William's wife, Mekinges, was the daughter of Chief Anderson, but no one can be certain. Traders often found it helpful to marry into the tribes they traded with. For Conner, it gave him more power and control over the tribe's actions. It also meant that the other Delawares trusted him more. Like Conner, traders often became the link between Indians and the white world.

William Conner built a log home and a trading post. He began his family with Mekinges. Conner traded with the Delaware. His brother John had a store in Connersville that sold the goods William received in trade. As with most Native American relations, the new white settlers first wanted what the land provided. Then they wanted the land itself. The same thing that happened over and over again in the East happened in Indiana. The Indians depended on trade. The government took advantage of their dependence to convince the tribes to give up their land.

VARIED ACHIEVEMENTS

Even though Conner was married to an Indian wife and lived among the Delaware Indians, he did many things to help the American government during the War of 1812. He became a soldier, scout, interpreter and spy for the government. Among his duties were keeping the Delaware loyal during the war and identifying Tecumseh's body after the Battle of the Thames.



Map of Conner's New Settlement

During these times, Conner continued his trading and farming activities. His home on the White River became a gathering place for Native Americans. It was also a stop for white travelers. Even the people choosing Indiana's new state capital met at his cabin.

THE GREAT NEGOTIATOR

Meanwhile, Conner's family and success continued to grow. He made money from trading and participating in treaties. Conner had been a part of eight treaties with the Native Americans. One was the Treaty of St. Mary's in 1818, where the Delaware gave up their land in Indiana for land west of the Mississippi River.

William Conner helped figure out what it would take to get the tribes to accept the treaty. He also helped convince the chiefs to accept the treaty. Conner made money from the removal by providing the Delaware with supplies for the trip. When the Delaware signed the treaty, they were agreeing to leave Indiana.

The Delaware gathered at Conner's trading post in the summer of 1820 to prepare for their journey. When the Delaware left, Conner's wife Mekinges and their six children left as well. He provided his family with horses and goods. Conner's family and the Delaware began their trek in the summer of 1820. William Conner rode a day with his family, then said goodbye and returned to his land.



Elizabeth Chapman

STARTING OVER

Three months after his family left, Conner married 17-year-old Elizabeth Chapman. She was probably the only young unmarried white woman in the area. With this, Conner took steps to move into the white world. He did so by building his brick home in 1823, which became the center of activity in the growing area. It was a stopping point for many travelers, businessmen, and politicians. Indianapolis lawyer, Calvin Fletcher, thought the home and surrounding lands were beautiful. The Conner home was also the center of the newly formed Hamilton County government. It hosted the County Commissioners, Circuit Court, and served as a "post office."

These activities strengthened Conner's role in the white world. He helped others settle in the area. He bought and sold land and became a rich man. With the help of Josiah Polk, Conner mapped out the town of Noblesville in 1823. Later, Conner and Polk mapped out, or platted, the towns of Alexandria and Strawtown. At one point, Conner owned about four thousand acres in Hamilton County. In addition to farming, he also owned or invested in stores, mills, and a distillery.



Conner Home, built in 1823

LATER LIFE EXPERIENCES AND ACCOMPLISHMENTS

Conner had become a respected figure. He was involved in politics as a Whig and served three different terms in the state legislature from 1829 to 1837. He was also a founding member of the Indiana Historical Society.

Conner continued living in the world of both American Indians and White settlers. William kept working as an interpreter for treaties between the government and Indian tribes, working with the Miami and Potawatomi. He helped ethnographer C.C. Trowbridge with his study of Delaware Indian culture. Conner also served as a guide for a group of Indiana militia in the Black Hawk War.

Seven of William and Elizabeth Conner's ten children were born in the brick home now owned by Conner Prairie. In 1837, at the age of sixty, Conner and his family moved to Noblesville. Here he continued to oversee his business, but allowed others to do much of the work that he had done before. When Conner died in 1855, many of the trails he walked had become roads and many of the forests he traveled had been cut down to build towns.