

## Episode 4: William Conner with David Heighway

### Transcription:

**Easton:** Welcome everyone to another episode of the This Is Problematic podcast, brought to you by Conner Prairie Museum. I'm Easton

**Hannah:** And I'm Hannah.

**Easton:** We're so excited to have you here as we take another dive through some problematic history.

**Hannah:** Today we're going to be sitting with Hamilton County historian Mr. David Heighway. He also works with the Noblesville Diversity Coalition and is an expert in Hamilton County and Indiana history.

**Easton:** A historical powerhouse today!

**Hannah:** Indeed! So we're going to really be asking him to take a deep dive with us into the story of William Conner. Here on the Prairie we have been working hard to diversify the way that we are telling his story and also to make sure that we're bringing in other stories alongside it to show the complexities of his life and the story of our Prairie here. So we're going to start today with William Conner, and then the next two parts of the series are going to take us through his first wife, who was Lenape - Mekinges. And then we'll also dive into the story of Pete Smith. Today's episode, we're going to give a rating of E for everyone. It's a lovely chat with Mr. Highway, and everyone can have a listen.

**Easton:** And, be sure to follow us on Apple Podcasts, Spotify, the Conner Prairie website, and everywhere you get your regular podcasts.

**Hannah:** So given that you've had experience here on the Prairie, going back to did you say the late seventies was kind of your initial?

**David:** First job here was in 1979, senior year in high school. Then I came back and worked again 1985/86, then left the town and left the area for a while and then eventually came back. As Hamilton County Historian. Of course I constantly worked with the museum and worked with a lot of different projects that you guys have done.

**Hannah:** Awesome. So I think given that experience and then given my experience working out there and our experience here today and in the last few years, let's talk about how the way that we have portrayed Conner has changed over time. It's my understanding at one point people were in first person out there. He (William Conner) was never portrayed I don't believe.

**David:** He was not, he was not. I remember those days because I was around in that time. So yeah, Mr. Conner was always away because we actually did the Conner house first person, which was a little goofy but cheesiness was not a thing that we drew back at. One of the things was when I was first there was 1979, Eli Lilly had died just a couple of years before that, 1977. And so as a result there was this still sort of great man, great event image of history.

The 1970s, we had just gotten started on what we called back then the new social history, which was we were starting to explore common life, common folk things like that. And so that was kind of edgy new history back in those days. And so as a result it was kind of like we were right on that cusp of, okay, we don't, you know, this is kind of the Mount Vernon, George Washington, great man kind of a thing and starting to go into, well, who else was here? What else did they do? What, what did they kind of do? And a lot of it was pretty basic sorts of, well, let's just churn butter or something like that and kind of do the historic arts and crafts and things. And then they start to experiment with the first person. And the thing is, because they picked the year 1836, I remember from all my time there, the big thing was, is that nobody quite knew when that was because it wasn't American Revolution, it wasn't Civil War, it was just kind of in the middle of nowhere.

And you talk about Jacksonian America and most people kind of get this blank look on their face. And so as a result, you spend a certain amount of your time whenever you're doing that, that kind of interpretation is backstory in kind of explaining, Okay, this is where we are, this is, this is the money and where the money is coming from and things like that. So that's, that's, that was kind of the attitude there. By the eighties, we'd really kind of gotten that down to a pretty good format there. But still, nobody wanted to step on the William Conner myth. That was still kind of a key point there. I mean, we knew by that point in time the whole Mekinges

story, we hadn't discovered Pete Smith yet. That was that was still in the, actually, that was more me than anything else back in the 1990s.

**Easton:** And we thank you.

**Hannah:** Yeah, your document was our starting point. So full credit there.

**David:** So, so yeah as we're starting to discover this and as we're willing to confront these issues that before now you just didn't didn't confront. I mean people started to do Black history. They started to Native American history years ago. But the fact that you're going to start challenging these kind of the basics where you're talking about people like Jefferson and Washington, as slave owners and kind of saying, okay, yes, they did these things, but they also did this. And so now we can do that with William Conner and people are more comfortable with it. People are more kind of like, oh, yeah, this is good.

And then, of course, the county demographics, that's one of the things is just kind of the regional changes. Back when we were doing that in the 1970s, the suburban boom had started, but there was still a large core of Old County here and they had their myths and you didn't stomp on their myths whether it was Chief Straw or anything like that. And you can maybe deal with that in another show. But 1980s, the demographics are changing. We're getting lots and lots of new people. People are willing to hear a slightly different story. Now you get up here to 2022 and the county demographics are just totally changed and it is all people who have moved here in the last 40 or 50 years. And so as a result they don't have to worry about those myths. You can throw anything you want to at them and they'll pretty much just nod their heads and kind of say yeah, this is okay, we can deal with this. So...

**Hannah:** I will say one thing that I think has been interesting and starting to have this conversation more. So, to kind of bring us up to where we're at now, I would say the 1993 restoration they start to move into blue shirt. So, they restore the house again by the late 1990s. They're in what we call blue shirt, which is third person, modern day context looking back as historians do and discussing and then 2016, they redo the house again the bicentennial.

**David:** Yeah, yeah. The state bicentennial.

**Hannah:** Yeah. The state bicentennial. Yeah. And so the state bicentennial they redo the house and we get new exhibit pieces and that's when we see Mekinges the story being highlighted a little bit more and Pete Smith and so we're really continuing that work.

But what's interesting is when I started in 2020, early 2020, you know, we had a lot of staff who've been here for a long time, a lot of awesome volunteers who have been here for a long time. And they did still have a great deal of attachment to this man. And we even see that with our guests too, because they have come here on their fourth grade field trip. And they'll have heard this story and they kind of love him. He is still a little bit heroized, not just a little bit, actually quite a bit heroized. And so I do still think there's work to be done in breaking down that myth. So that's why we're so excited to have you here and as historians do, just get a dig into it a little bit. Right?

**Easton:** So we're all sitting here at the beautiful Conner Prairie, and it's important to know where our namesake comes from. So William Conner, a controversial figure, was born in Lichtenau, Ohio. In approximately 1777. But this is based off of a baptismal record. At this time his parents, Richard and Margaret, who are originally from Pennsylvania, were living in a community of Moravian missionaries.

At some point during his childhood, William was moved with the rest of the family to Michigan. He came to Indiana with his brother, John Connor, whom Connersville is actually named after. And the question arises, why Indiana? Why did he choose to settle here? So the area at the time was populated by a number of native communities, including the Potawatomi, Shawnee, Kickapoo, and Lenape, of course, also sometimes referred to as the Delaware. They had called these lands home for varying periods of time. William came here for similar reasons to other white colonizers. It was land, it was money, and it was opportunity.

**Hannah:** So we know when William came here, he came here primarily to work in the fur trade. He was employed with a fur trading company from up in Saginaw Bay in Michigan. So he would buy furs from indigenous communities and trade those furs for items like dishware, weapons and spices. In Indiana, we know that William's connections were close to the Lenape community. He married Mekinges, his first wife, who was Lenape in 1801. It is believed she was from Anderson Town, now known as Anderson. And, it's speculated that they met there. Together they settled here on the White River and began their married life and what's now Fishers, Indiana on the Conner Prairie Grounds and that's where Conner Prairie's story as we know it today really gets its start. There is speculation still as to where the original cabin of Mekinges and William is as we know that it was somewhere on the grounds and there is a monument to a location down by the river off of the guest grounds that we think may have been a site, but it hasn't been confirmed at this point.

Business records suggest that the Connors trading post was a really busy location, and maps even suggest there was a larger settlement around that trading post in the early 1800s referred to as Connors Town. We know from records a number of Lenape villages also existed along the same stretch of river. And so we start to get this picture of a remote, yet relatively busy and bustling community of trading and interactions going on.

We also start to see an involvement in politics as we start to move from Indiana being a territory to Indiana becoming a state in 1816. So, John Conner was repeatedly interacting with the territorial and U.S. government. We see William enter into the political sphere with the war of 1812 he served as an interpreter to native communities, a guide, a spy and a soldier. And his involvement in local politics only continued when he became involved in treaty drafting. The pinnacle of this work was his signature on the 1818 Treaty of St Mary's. This treaty is really important for a number of reasons and one of which because it actually removed William's first wife, Mekinges and their six children from these lands along with their greater community. So we will dive into that more deeply in Mekinges' episode, but we will also include links to the treaty and the map of displacement on the website.

**Easton:** So, three short months after Mekinges' disappearance or departure rather, William remarried a woman by the name of Elizabeth Chapman, who was 25 years his junior, and together they had ten children. Initially they lived together in the same log cabin that he had shared with his previous wife. This cabin is where commissioners met in 1820 to decide Indiana's permanent seat of government and Indianapolis was chosen at Fall Creek later. Based on land maps the era William owned upwards of 1000 acres at least 648 of those were here on the White River.

Some were given along with Josiah Polk to create the town of Noblesville, also Alexandria and Strawtown, the brick home that still exists here, which a lot of you who have come to Conner Prairie know as Conner House was completed in 1823, the house went on to serve many functions, including Hamilton County's first courthouse and the first U.S. Post Office north of Indianapolis. William himself became increasingly involved in the country and the county throughout the 1820s and thirties. So business ventures included a horse mill, a distillery went into action in 1823 and farming. William was growing and selling over 200 acres of wheat, rye and corn. More on that later. William served three terms in the Indiana State Legislature here from 1829 to 1837. We know that the Connors moved out of the house here by the 1840 census. Most likely in 1837 and he was still involved in community life like July 4th celebrations.

**Hannah:** He was a founder of the Indiana Historical Society as well in that era. This becomes an interesting era in William's life that has been slightly less examined and so we definitely

want to talk about it. A little bit today. The panic of 1837 brought economic instability to a lot of people throughout the region as well as did the resulting depression of 1839. And evidence starts to show that there was some impact happening on Conner's business life. He had become frequently involved in legal proceedings over land, and he was actually giving away significant chunks of land to pay for these legal proceedings. Past this point as well, his major venture in life was just a small store in Noblesville, which is quite scaled back from the level of business he was taking part in previously.

If we look to one of the few historiographical sources that we have the words of Larsen and Vanderstall, we can hear that he was displaced in the 1840s as a fountainhead of local politics, and they even suggest he kind of became more of a historical curiosity by this point to the people of Hamilton County, than, that cornerstone of the community that we often talk about him being. He died on August 8th of 1855 and is buried in Crownland Cemetery which still exists in Noblesville today. He chose not to leave behind a will and there's significant speculation as to why. We can certainly talk about that somewhat today and it did lead to a court case that took place between the families and so we can also talk about that a little bit.

Okay. So those are the real bare bones of William Conner's life. And, I think one of the ways that we have really been working to reframe this in training staff, in talking out at the Conner house is there were men like William Conner all over the country. Right? He's not unique. There were people who were motivated by power and money, and there still are. And so he is a great window into that because I think one of the questions that comes up when you do take away the reverence a little bit and you peel back that heroic status is people start to ask then, why would we even talk about him? But there's still so much to be understood. And he did have influence. Did he have as much influence as maybe sometimes we think he did? We can talk about that. But there was still an impact even from that aura that we do have to disassemble. And so I think that's, that's the big thing that we like to dive into. What were his motivations? How was he harming others? And then what can we learn from him?

**Easton:** Yes. So speaking of his motivations regarding finances.

**Hannah:** Yeah.

**Easton:** We just spoke about the panic of 1837 and the 1839 depression. So when all of this was happening, this man, William Conner, sold corn to the Noblesville settlers and you would think he would be a little bit more understanding because at the time the town was being ravaged by malaria and farmers could not produce enough to feed everyone. So while people in the community like Pete Smith were helping, you know, helping a man whose wife had died

to help harvest the crops, everything like that, William Conner sold corn at one dollars a bushel, which was the price of a full deerskin. To take advantage of this supply and demand, push and pull. And one of the stories that we tell people, of course, is about Pete Smith. Pete Smith, black man, born free a beloved member of the Noblesville community.

He served as a bridge between the Lenape. The people of the Lenape community who he lived with and lived alongside and the settlers there. And he ends up being taken away into slavery in what they call early 1821. William Conner did nothing to stop it. He was at this point dipping his toes into political ventures and he was doing land dealings with the Kentucky plantation owner and enslaver and this Kentuckian, saw Pete on one of his ventures up here who had never been enslaved and went back south to obtain a writ and return to take him with him. The townsfolk, the townsfolk at this time were so fond of Pete, they actually showed up in force to the point where many believe that they would have lynched the enslaver. But William elected to follow the law rather than interfere and told the townsfolk to follow suit. And Pete was taken away. And he'll, of course, have his own episode where we'll venture into his story. Because most stories here that we tell end with he was never heard from again. And we don't know if that's necessarily true. You know who can say?

But William was also highly credited in maintaining the "calm". And I'm using air quotes here, maintaining the calm between white citizens and Native Americans in the wake of the Fall Creek massacre. So that was when a band of six white men engaged in a day of heavy drinking and killed nine Seneca and Miami men, women and children who were camped on Fall Creek in nearby Madison County to hunt. Three of the six men responsible were hanged, making it the first time a white man ever received capital punishment for killing Native Americans. One of the surviving three was imprisoned on manslaughter instead of murder, served two years in prison and a fine of \$100. Another escaped and was never, ever found. And their teenager was actually pardoned in dramatic fashion as they were putting the hood on him at the gallows. Governor James M Ray galloped in on horseback and saved this, this teenager. And William Conner is definitely inserted into that story, maybe a little bit pompously as he "kept the peace". And he kept things from getting any worse. And Mr. Heighway you seem to have a reaction to that. I want I need I want to hear your thoughts. I really do.

**David:** You have to forgive me. I'm laughing a little bit here.

What it is, is Conner got a lot of credit for things that he didn't necessarily do. I mean, going back to actually the very first settlement back in the 1930s. They started talking about this thing called the Conner Trail, which was allegedly the route from Connersville to William

Conner's cabin. Actually, that is a combination of two ancient, ancient game trails that had existed for centuries.

One was north-south, going from roughly Clarksville to Fort Wayne. The other one was east-west, going from the Cincinnati area, Whitewater Valley, New Castle, Anderson, and then crossing the White River here in Hamilton County, going up to Lafayette. And there was an enormous amount of traffic on there. So, so calling it, you know, the Conner Trail is little like calling Highway 69 after me or something.

No that that's there, guys. As a matter of fact, it is interesting that there's some sources that talk about a Frenchman named Michel Brouillet, whose home is down in Vincennes since having actually a post up at Strawtown itself. Strawtown was the main Delaware village in this area. Well, Anderson was the key village. Strawtown was kind of a secondary village.

And then you have the smaller villages in the area. So that was, that was a major intersection right there. And as a result, so, by the time William Conner got here, things were already established, things were already rolling. Brouillet was already there at the, at the prime spot at Strawtown. So William Conner had to go down river a couple of miles there to Jordan's Ford, which is where we are, and set up his post right there.

So as a result, yeah, whenever they talk about the Conner Trail is like, nope, sorry. He is Johnny come lately really in some senses of the word. So yeah. So there was a lot of kind of previous traffic like that. Conner simply stayed on. That was his thing. Brouillette eventually left. There was a lot of other Native Americans.

Eventually they left as well. And so as a result, Conner hung on after the initial settlement, after the Treaty of St Mary's, the establishment of the county in 1823. We've got our bicentennial next year, by the way. So and so he stayed on there. And it's interesting because you were talking about him moving as well to Noblesville. Well, the thing is of course Eighth Street and Allisonville Road were the remnant of that ancient game trail, which really is kind of why you had all that traffic.

So his house which was on what is today, Eighth Street, the property is still there. I did a lot of research on it a while back. The house itself has been gone since about the 1860s but so he, he kind of stayed on that whole route thing, even though when he got to Noblesville he was getting elderly and he couldn't quite do the the stuff that he used to do.



Of course, he still had his fingers in lots of pies. The first railroad into the county. 1851. He was definitely a part of that. As a matter of fact, Calvin Fletcher, the Diary of Calvin Fletcher, which I'm sure you guys know very, very well. Talks about how they had a big celebration in downtown Noblesville in 1851 and part of that was going to visit Conner and all this kind of stuff.

It's too bad they didn't understand the technology at the time because they put the railroad right down the middle of the street because they thought it was going to be handy for bringing goods to individual buildings, not realizing that railroads were going to get huge and smoky and dirty, which is why Conner and all of his family eventually moved out of that area.

So, Conner himself didn't. He died in 1855, by the way, he was originally buried in Riverside Cemetery, but when they built Crownland Cemetery in 1868, they wanted to sort of upgrade the neighborhood as it were, and kind of encourage people to bury their people there. Actually, this happens in cemeteries, apparently in Paris they do this. Where you find a local celebrity, dig him up, bring him up, replant him and go ahead and then say, Look, he's buried here so that's why he's buried in Crownland somewhere in the 1870s.

They, they, they dug him and Elizabeth, whatever was left, took them up the hill to Crownland Cemetery and dropped them in there. So. So yeah.

**Hannah:** That's interesting. So like, do you think he just got this celebrity status simply because he stayed? Like you were saying, he stayed and other people didn't. He kind of controlled the narrative.

**David:** That's a good way to phrase it. He was here. He understood connections. For instance, the naming of Noblesville. There's a goofy old story in some of the old histories about how supposedly it was Josiah Polk that named it, named it for his, his fiancée. And then she left him because he planted a garden with a name spelled out in cabbages.

So just goofy stories now probably named for the Noble brothers, James Noble, who was a senator at the time. Noah Noble, of course, would go on to become governor. And Conner, Conner was aware of this stuff. People have been recently asking me, for instance, about naming it Hamilton County. And I said, Conner is a hard core Alexander Hamilton person.

He named one of his own sons, Alexander Hamilton. So he understood this whole kind of like, okay, I am business oriented. We are going to do things that are going to benefit us in a, in a business kind of a way. And virtually every connection that he makes, I always look at it as kind of like, okay, he had a reason for this.

This was not something that was just done. This was something that started being a part of the original historical society. I'm kind of thinking, Okay, here's a guy who drove the Native Americans out. Why on earth would he be doing this? Obviously, it's a nice connective thing to be doing. It's a nice kind of that sort of thing.

So that, that tends to be my suspicion. Is that there was, there was a basic, crass sort of purpose behind each one.

**Hannah:** I think. Yeah, I completely agree. I mean, in talking with staff and guests, because I worked at the Conner House for a long time, I oversaw the Conner House last year, and then I was out there a lot because the pandemic.

And so I'd be out there talking to people. And one of the questions we would get a lot, you know, is about was he an honest person? Was he a good person? And I would always say to them, you know, honesty, I feel like is a feeling you get from someone. It's trust, right? And, and I didn't know him as a human being, but you can read a lot into the decisions he was making.

And you're completely right. He made them all to make money and to navigate his way. And I think when we talk about him choosing to stay behind when Mekinges left, that's always the read I get of that situation is he knew he wouldn't be able to do what he was doing if he went. He created that network here.

Yeah. Okay.

**David:** In a sense, sort of used to Mekinges as much as anything else. Because she was, in fact, of course, a daughter of Chief Anderson. I mean, he, he married up, so to speak. So although, of course, as you'll talk about with the Native Americans they don't decide lineage through the father. It's actually a matrilineal, matrilineal group.

So, yeah, with, with Conner, it's the man left very little paper trail. Right. So you're sitting there constantly trying to figure out, okay, what, what is the reason for this? And there is, there is some reports of kind of friendly interaction and things like that. But it's at the same time, it's it is very pragmatic and I don't know if it has to do with the way he was raised or any of that kind of stuff.

**Hannah:** I was going to ask that actually about the paper trail. Do you think it tells us anything that he didn't leave documents behind? Do you think that was purposeful in some ways, or do you think he just didn't write much down or they didn't think to keep it.

**David:** I mean, just from a historical preservation point of view, I'm sure a lot of it's disappeared through the years.

I mean, and I guess to the point where nobody really cares anymore, I mean, Dad's business records, you pitch them out and stuff. So, so there's that kind of a thing. But it is kind of interesting how a lot of the stuff just kind of happens without any sort of paper trail or things like that, like the acquisition of a lot of that land.

Of course, Horseshoe Prairie, which is just south of Noblesville, which is where those first settlers, the white settlers, came in that actually had been a Delaware village. They moved out, white settlers came in. It was good property, things like that. And then after Pete Smith left one of the first things that happened is John Conner grabbed all of that land out, basically out from underneath them, which happened a lot in those days.

But you would kind of think that that would be a questionable thing to be doing.

**Hannah:** So our amazing collections manager, they, they got a wallet that he had with papers and she just scanned them. So we actually haven't had the time to go through them yet, but I know she has them.

**David:** I want to see those scans.

**Hannah:** Yeah.

**David:** It's interesting. That is some of the few business records that we have of Conner; there's very little in the way of stuff like that. And I know the guy who donated them. That was Steve Schwartz, of course. And one of the things I recommended to him is, okay, you're talking about the wallet and the papers and I'm talking about the information that's on there because that's going to be interaction.

For instance, you know, who were his business partners? Who was he selling stuff to? How much did he sell stuff for? One of the first African-Americans in the county after Pete Smith was a guy by the name of Thomas Murphy. And Murphy actually worked there for a little while. So some of his signatures may be on those things.

So that'll be kind of interesting to kind of follow up on. So there will be useful information there, but it's going to take a little bit of statistical work. It's going to take some, some spreadsheet type stuff, but there will be some things there.

**Easton:** Right. From what I have seen, there's a lot of chicken scratch and a little uh.

But, but what struck me as very interesting is in some cases he would draw little pictures of the person. So he knew, so there would be a signature and then a little crude drawing of this individual. You know, you recognize them when they come back. If you know they're taking a loan from you or you need to get back in touch with them about some money or goods.

So it was definitely lucky we have that.

**David:** Yeah, I would like to see them. Yeah. Because, because Conner in his business - you'll see stuff about the Conner store. That was actually where Uptown Cafe is today. Actually, the building itself may have existed until like the 1920s.

**Hannah and Easton:** Oh wow.

**David:** When they built that building, they actually, it was a frame structure.

They took it down and they moved it to another part of Noblesville and I was desperately tracking it, wondering if the William Conner store might actually physically still exist. But apparently in the 1920s it finally just disappeared completely. So, so close, so close. But yeah, so, but there's accounts- Thomas Murphy talking about working there, there's a guy named Joseph Ross who was another early settler and he wrote some reminiscences in the 1890s and things like that of being a young man and, and spending some time there and he talks about working in Conner, well Conner and Stevenson, Conner and Cole, he had a variety of business partners.

So while he was in Noblesville there, I mean he was elderly obviously he's not going in to do it himself. He's got other people that can kind of cover that ground there. So actually it's funny, I occasionally also bother the people about someday doing an archeological dig at the site of his old house. Now there's a new one on top, well 1875, so new is relative, but there was another house built on top of it.

But it was, it was right there on, on Eighth Street.

**Hannah:** Well we talked, we've talked quite a bit about this that I feel like one of the areas we've lacked in telling his story is those interactions with the community and with other people, his story has really been told for so long in a vacuum and nothing happens in a vacuum like he was part of this big flourishing community.

And so one of the one of the conversations we've started to have is what happened to the house after him. And we've kind of create a timeline of all the people that the house passed through. And, and it's it just tells such a broader American story of what was going on through these different eras, what has the house seen and what can we see as guests and historians through this house as opposed to who was this "amazing man"?

Um, and nothing else. You know, it's a, that's a boring story. There's a more exciting story underneath. So there's an excellent point about how Stephenson was actually one of the later owners of the house. And so there did seem to be business interactions between himself and the sons between I believe it was William H. owned it, and then maybe Alexander Hamilton.

There were two sons that went back and forth owning it, and then it left the family's hands and came back, and it kind of ping-ponged. And so that definitely seemed to continue.

**David:** Well, it was sort of excess material after a certain amount of time. It's interesting. Railroad comes through in 1851 and Conner's town is on the maps in on the early 1830s maps it's definitely on there but when the railroad came through in 1851 Conner's town is a little off there.

So what do they do? They take all of that economic activity, move it straight east and establish the town called New Britton. You can literally see it's just a straight line straight across there. So which also actually was not in a really great spot. It wasn't until 1872 when the officials realized that hey I can put one here at the intersection of this main road and we'll call it town of Fishers.

So kind of working its way around there. But yeah, when the railroad came through that kind of took all that activity away from the Conner area, Conner himself had of course moved to, to Noblesville and so all of a sudden that's just an old house back there, so who cares? So just some good land. You work the land and, and you know, if the house falls in, that's nobody's problem.

**Hannah:** I mean the interest in it seems to go up and down as well. Like there is um I'm currently trying to remember the couple's names, but there is a petroleum baron basically that

owns it in the early 1910s and their interests seem to be that historical interest and then it kind of goes back to being a tenant run farm and then obviously Lilly takes it on and interest really picks up about the historical interest and so that interest seems to grow very kind of gradually.

**David:** Yeah yeah well a lot of that has to do with kind of the growth of Allisonville Road as well. Allisonville Road became sort of a place for summer homes, for instance. You've got what's called the Ambassador House, which has now been moved around, down in Fishers That was, that was originally at 96th and Allisonville and that was Addison Clay Harris taking an older home, upgrading it and using that as kind of a summer hobby farm as much as anything else.

Harris himself being a wealthy Indianapolis judge, ambassador to Austria-Hungary for a little while, a political appointee and not very successful at that. But for a while there, Allisonville Road had many big homes on it, they're virtually all gone now. There's the one that's now the Third Phase that's just south of Noblesville, but there were many homes, a lot of them, interestingly, had tunnels that went from the house to the river.

We think that was a kind of a ventilation thing because it's really it's, it's very 20th century. It's like turn of the century or something like that. But we think of some way of maybe piping cool air in from the thing. But people have talked about people have seen it and I think there might even be one under the, under the Lilly house.

So, but who knows? And don't go looking for it.

**Hannah:** I have heard that though, because I've heard that they were used for bootlegging, too.

**David:** That would be the second choice.

**Hannah:** And there's a it comes out you can see the output of the tunnel on the hill underneath the.

**David:** Yeah, I have seen I think it's got a big iron door.

**Hannah:** It does. Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah.

**David:** But yeah, actually, White River was the route for bootleggers in the 1920s, so it makes a certain amount of sense that that was an alternative use for these things. But they did exist back at the turn of the century. So there was, there was a lot of big homes like that, but they were modern quote unquote.

We're talking 1900, 1910, 1890s maybe at best. So something like Conner Home, that's one of those old places, that's, that's an old house with old bricks and things like that. So you give that one to the tenant farmers, you get the nice quote unquote new home there. So, but as I say, all of those are gone.

**Hannah:** Now I'm pulling up the name of that owner.

Um, that owner was, oh, the, I made a mistake. The petroleum baron was Longnecker in 1906. He was not the one that used it as a summer home. That was Mr. Darrach, Eugene H. Darrach and his wife. And they had DAR parties there and they, they very much used it in that way as a summer home.

**Easton:** Mr. Heighway, I do want to hear your thoughts about why there's been kind of a lack of academic study on William Conner, because we really don't have anything outside of the Sons of the Wilderness.

And then the Agent of Empire, we really don't have any anything else that delves into him really as not just a figure, but as a person. And I just wanted to know maybe why you think that is as we're talking about this whole folklore glorification of this, this person beyond what he actually was.

**David:** Yeah, that's a great thing to look at.

Yeah. Because actually, to be real honest, I consider Agent of Empire to be the first academic stuff because, yeah, Sons of the Wilderness has a lot of problems. I mean, granted, they did some, some good work and they put together, for instance, that nice map of where the Native American villages were and some things like that. And, and so there's, there's a lot of good information in there.

But yeah, the attitude left a lot to be desired and when Agent of Empire came in and started to really ask some hard questions and well, it's like she was saying earlier, there's a lot of these guys all over the place and they have a variety of, of impacts and influences on the various communities and counties and things.

So, so, Conner, it's interesting. Conner, number one, the house was saved and eventually Lilly turned it into this, this historic site, which is wonderful. But at the same time, you know, it's there, there are other people that could get picked out as well. So but yeah, so that that's kind of the start of it there. And of course, there was that attitude of when this was all going on.

A lot of this kind of let's glorify the, the great white males I mean, we're talking about turn of the century up into the twenties in Indiana. You're talking Klan era, you're talking all sorts of things like that. So naturally, finding the big white guy that's that's the important one, that's that's who you're going to talk about and you're going to make him just as as noble as you can and write cheesy pageants about him.

And there, there are some that were written for the centennial of the county, and we have that and it's just cringe inducing. So, so yeah. So that, that was kind of the thing. He was a nice convenient hook for a lot of these attitudes. There is that one marker which talks about him building his thing here, that, that stone marker that was put up.

**Hannah:** It's like an obelisk.

It's like huge.

**David:** Yeah, huge. And it and what is it on a moonlit night or something?

**Hannah:** With a French-Canadian

**David:** Only the help of a French-Canadian

**Hannah:** Yes!

**David:** Cheesy dialog. Cheesy dialog. But this is what they actually wrote on the thing. And it actually originally when they installed it, it had gold leaf on the lettering. They were going to make this thing fancy.

So, so yeah. And so this whole kind of like let's, let's glorify and I have the, I don't have the date right off the top of my head of when it was installed, but we're talking 20th century stuff.

**Hannah:** Yeah, I think it was the twenties, I want to say it was the 1920s which would make, like you said, with what was going on politically and socially, it makes 100% sense.



The other thing that is really fun to talk about with that marker is people have raised this point, a couple of different people we've talked to about it. It's in a terrible place. It would have flooded. So like most likely that's not where the cabin. Hmm. That wouldn't make sense to put your cabin there.

**David:** Yeah. Really? Yeah. Conner was a little bit more aware of that, I think.

I mean, he'd lived here. He was not stupid. I mean, that is, that is absolutely one thing. He, he was pretty clever because like, for instance, when he built Noblesville, he actually built it on the bluffs. When he and Polk established Noblesville, it's on the bluffs up above the river. I mean, he didn't understand, you know, mosquitoes and malaria and stuff like that, because originally when they were down on Horseshoe Prairie, that's when they were in the malarial, infested area where you get the ague, as they called it.

So Conner was smart enough to say, Okay, I'm going to establish my town. We're going to take it up here on the bluffs. We're going to get it out of mosquito heaven down there. Even though he had he didn't know this. I mean, this was not medical knowledge at the time. So he he he was not a stupid man.

But as I say, he just had an attitude towards the way things were being done there. So.

**Easton:** Right. And one area of our research that has shifted about William is that people at Conner Prairie used to say that, you know, William died wealthy, very successful, very, very well-to-do, you know, peacefully surrounded by loved ones. But between his business records and legal records, community narrative and the press we see that he was actually struggling financially a great deal.

I wanted to hear your thoughts on this and perhaps if that could have played into why he didn't leave a will behind.

**David:** That's, that's a good question. I don't have a lot of information on that. It was by that point in time, it was kind of like what '55? Yeah, there were changes happening in the area and things.

And his kids had kind of gone off there. Actually, a lot of them had moved down to Indianapolis, kind of leaving the sticks behind here. So, um.

**Hannah:** And that's where Elizabeth ends up too.

**David:** She ends up down there. It's interesting the land is bought in '66 from the family by a local developer guy named Leonard Wild and he's the one who actually demolished Conner's house, built a new house was going to develop the property which actually did not succeed for many years because there was really no economic activity there that didn't happen until 1887 with the gas boom.

So yeah the whole you know obliterating the Conners I mean they were still living up here they were involved in the community, they were involved in business and things like that, but they were just sort of here as much as anything else. They were just regular businessmen. There was not fabulous wealth as you say.

**Easton:** I love the way you put it, obliterating the Conners. I love that because you know, as we do research myself and Hannah included, where we've come to this question repeatedly about is it okay to still call this place Conner Prairie, given what he's done? Why is the name up there? And, and we've asked many people and gotten many different answers. Some people say yes, some people say no.

We are trying to recenter the narrative on the Conner family and their significance. His Native children, his Native connections. Not, not just this isn't the William Conner Prairie. Come see his fancy house. This is the Conner Family Prairie and how this story fits in here. So do you think, you know, given our history of somewhat glorifying him, and adding to that, do you think any mention of William Conner is already too much?

Or do you think that the family is, is what should be, what should be taking center stage here now as we, as we move forward in our history telling?

**David:** Yeah, I well, the family, of course, important because, I mean, they were they were constant involvement. And actually one of his sons, William W. Conner, was highly respected locally in the community.

And we have great stories of him being involved in things like baseball games and stuff like that. So they, they, they loved him. So I think there may have been and the kids may have gotten more from Elizabeth than from William. So there might have been some impact like that. But I mean, the guy was here and he had an impact, and he his actions did have an impact.

I mean, we don't have to say it's great stuff. You know, there there are all kinds of people like that. You do have to talk about them, though. I mean, he could still have an impact. It's an interesting little twist, something I found out quite recently. The county may not actually own the land that the courthouse sits on I was doing some research on that and it turns out that in the 1870s before they built the courthouse, that's there today.

The new courthouse is, my brain works in strange ways but the courthouse that's there today, the other one that had been there previously was basically falling apart, had been really poorly constructed. And they were desperately trying to raise enough money to do that. There was even an offer to move the county seat to Westfield because Westfield was able to, the Quakers there had financial acumen and they were able to be, able to actually build a good courthouse.

However, there was a vote held and no, it was going to keep it in Noblesville. So it was actually the people of Carmel that decided to keep it in Noblesville. So but along the way is they're doing all of this research. They find out that when William Conner signed the land over to the county to use as the courthouse land and as kind of municipal land there, he didn't actually give it to them.

He said, we're going to turn this square over to the county for use as a, you know, for courthouse and jail and whatever else is going on here. But if the county leaves, it goes back to my family and as far as anybody knows that that contract is still in force.

**Easton:** Wow.

**David:** And the thing is, he just said family.

He did not say, you know, my white kids or Elizabeth or anything like that. So honest to goodness, if the county moved out of the old county courthouse, descendant, Native American descendants of his could come back and claim it.

**Hannah:** Wow.

**David:** How's that for a legal twist? So.

**Hannah:** That's awesome.

**Easton:** Blew the roof off.

**David:** Um, so so that I mean, obviously, it would need to go to court there'd be, need to be a lot of discussion made.

But yeah. Conner, Conner did some interesting choices. And there's no reason why they might not still have an impact today.

**Hannah:** Well, and we found it super interesting. So we spent a bunch of time last year going through the court case that took place about the 640 acres on the White River. Right. And the, the, the Lenape kids came back and argued their case that they,

So when the land was deeded and we'll, again, we'll talk about that more in Mekinges' episode, but when the land was deeded, it was deeded to William, Mekinges and their children, not just to him and basically the court's decision was it was an illegal marriage in their opinions and these weren't legitimate children and so the land didn't belong to them.

And it was given to the quote unquote "legitimate children" which were the second set of Conner descendants. And so that adds a whole interesting additional piece into it that whilst in some ways it seems like that court case was put to bed in the 1860s, there are still ramifications from his misdeeds, as we may have called them today, and his decision not to leave a will because that really leaves everything open because he didn't say these are my wishes.

**David:** Yeah.

**Hannah:** Ever.

**David:** Yeah. It's interesting though. There are legal documents that kind of get around that I don't know if you've ever looked at his pension papers that, that's kind of an interesting thing there. I went to the National Archives in D.C. and pawed through them for a little bit. And also when Elizabeth applied for the pensions afterwards, it's interesting, they claimed all sorts of battles during the war of 1812 that I'm not terribly sure he was involved in, but still they kind of claim them.

But there was one, one part of the pension records where Elizabeth is applying and she's represented by no less than Josiah Polk and she is insisting that there is no previous marriage. So it wasn't just William, it was the society in general that was doing their best to kind of make really sure that these people just kind of disappeared there.

**Hannah:** For sure. And I've seen, I've seen her ones, but are there original ones from him? As well at the National Archives?

**David:** They're mostly hers.

**Hannah:** Okay. Because they're, they've been published. And so we were also there like 120 pages long. There's so much in there um.

**David:** She, she was gunning for the major. They actually even asked for, I think a pension for his service during the Black Hawk War which is hilarious.

Because of course of the story of the Bloody Three Hundred. I don't know if you guys talk about that much? Okay. Basically what happened is Black Hawk War comes up and Conner gets together 300 good, brave Hoosiers and they all go marching up to Chicago to participate in the war and do the thing well. They get up there and that piece has already been settled.

So they just spend a couple of days drinking then and head back to Indianapolis. And so afterwards that group was known as the Bloody Three Hundred just because of their total ineffectiveness during this whole thing. And needless to say, they had nothing at all to do with the war. So when you're going through the pension papers and you see him asking his wife asking for a pension from his service in the Black Hawk War, you're going, you have got to be kidding me.

**Easton:** Doing what? Going there and drinking?

**David:** Really! It's just what they did. Nothing. So but yeah, it was kind of like they that's why there's so many pages there. They're trying to get what they can.

**Hannah:** I mean she gets all these affidavits and she's like, look at all this proof I have. Like, she's. Yeah, she's hamming it up as much as she can.

**David:** Yeah. So, I mean, he did serve in the War of 1812. He was at The Battle of the Thames because he was the one who identified Tecumseh and I think he said that he was at the Battle of Tippecanoe. There may be some evidence that he was actually having to do with a couple of Noblesville street names. There's a couple of streets originally named Brock and Harrison and there are settlers here in the county, Elijah Brock and Caleb Harrison.

They're actually buried in various spots who are veterans of Tippecanoe. And I'm just sitting here going okay, that's kind of coincidental. They might have been buddies of Conner and so as a result there might have been some, some interaction there, but it's hard to say. It's hard to say because of course all of his service was, you know, he was a scout, spy, translator.

He was never part of the actual army. So it's really tough to track down some of that service.

**Hannah:** I actually think I'd love to ask a question then jumping off of that and ask you, we talked about it a little bit, but I want to hear your thoughts on this. So how influential was William Conner really on what became Hamilton County, what became the state of Indiana?

And do you think his influence has been overstated?

**David:** Oh, that's an interesting question because I, I actually don't think he had much of an impact in a sense because I think he was in it for the money. Once he sold the land, he could care less what happened because starting 1830s we had a huge wave of immigration the Quakers in Westfield, the Free Blacks at Robert Settlement, Catholics up in the northern part of the county and things like that.

And they just kind of went their own way and they, they, you know, they establish their communities. They did their sort of thing there as the time when along Hamilton County became kind of a reformist sort of an attitude. Big on temperance, big on abolition actually had the first women's suffrage group in 1869. So this was the Quakers once again.

So as a result, you know, Conner himself had no impact on that. The fact that, you know, his attitudes, whatever it was that was, that was not something that influenced, it was really just kind of like I guess, you know, he sold the land, he was done, he was a developer basically not his problem anymore. So. So so yeah, I think, you know, other than that slight mythos that grew up around him, just that convenient hero myth that people had other than that his personal opinions, what we can tell of them other than just sort of a crass commercialism, you know, that, that, that really had nothing to do with with how the county eventually started to form.

**Easton:** I want to talk from your own writings on historical myth making and myth analysis. That you posted that I read on the Hamilton County business website. I'm, of course, very interested in what you have to say about our flawed figure, William but really about the whole historical myth making sector, because I'm not from Indiana. I actually am from Cincinnati, Ohio.

Best city in the world. And what's interesting is that going to college there and you're in the history department, they sometimes bus you out to go visit some of these tiny towns, Mansfield and Ripley and things like that. We can't say some ways or other ways because, of course, the Underground Railroad wasn't a legal thing. It's not easy to get the history.

But what we've talked about, Conner, I know that that's a place and William Conner is a person, but what we talked about is how, you know, you don't step on other people's myths and you certainly don't. There's just so much that we're never going to know. And some people seem to take that as to think like you know, you can't, you can't stop it.

So we're going to keep telling it. And I just want to know what your thoughts are. And maybe if you want to talk more about the mythmaking aspect of this.

**David:** Yeah. Underground Railroad, of course, huge myths there. And we're dealing with it in the county actually, the way we're dealing with that actually is to go back and kind of reexamine the whole thing.

And we're looking more at the African-American story themselves. We are going back and because we have names we actually have names of people. And we're saying this is the angle we're going from. We're going to quit with Grandma's root cellar. We're done with that. And that is, that is no longer valid. You can't prove it. We cannot justify this.

We can prove this other stuff. So we have that right there. And although one of the things I did write about the myths is that what they prove is kind of a nice jumping off point sometimes for tackling this, for being able to go ahead and say the, the myth, for instance, that struck town was almost the state capital that one did not happen.

We have the records. But nevertheless, it is interesting to bring that up and kind of say, look, Strawtown was a thriving community. It was, it was a thriving community when Indianapolis was just ink on a map. So it's, it's a sort of thing that you can take that myth and kind of say, okay, it was not on the long list.

Or not on the short list. It might have been on a slightly longer list. They might have brought it up in conversation. But no, it did not happen. However, this is, this is, you know, this, this came from this idea that there was a thriving community there at one point in time. So a lot of this myth making, there's oftentimes a kernel of reality there and you got to find that kernel.

And then you can go back and kind of say, okay, why, why did this happen and why did these decisions get made and stuff like that? So that's, that tends to be what we deal with. And yes, I say part of my job as county historian is either prove the myths or shoot them down. And trust me, people don't like them shot down.

But you still you find a reason to do that. You find a way to present that.

**Hannah:** Then I think at this point, what we can do is just see, do you have anything you feel like we haven't touched on that we should have?

**David:** Oh, mercy. There is so much new stuff that's coming up now because we're willing to ask these questions.

I have sent you some things already. They're discussing problematic history is a good thing. And Conner, of course, this, this will come up constantly in the future. But still, it's it's it's it's an interesting discussion.

**Hannah:** Well, if you would be up for it since we're going to have so many of these discussions we would love you to come back.

**Easton:** Yes, we would love for you to come back and join us.

**Hannah:** This is so wonderful.

**David:** Always happy to.

**Hannah:** You have taught us so much and this has just been phenomenal. We also want to make sure you all know that are listening, that everything we have talked about, the articles, we've talked about anything, we will make sure to share that with you so that you can dive into the sources that we've talked about today. And do your own reading and follow up research.

**Easton:** Thank you, Mr. Heighway. We really appreciate you.

**David:** Thank you for inviting me.



**Hannah:** Well, we thank you as always, for spending some time with us and listening to our conversation. You can find us on all of your normal podcast places, Spotify, Apple Music, all of those places. Feel free to check out the website and our social media sites.

**Easton:** Until next time.