

The Whitewater Canal and Canal House

While many businesses had flourished in Fayette County in the early days, there was no practical way to transport goods or people in or out of the community. The Internal Improvement Bill for the State of Indiana in 1836, including the Whitewater Valley Canal Bill, was the beginning of a new era.

Work was immediately begun, and the canal reached Connersville in the fall of 1845. The first boat to reach Connersville, "The Patriot", was piloted by Gayle Ford, and the arrival was met with great celebration.

Ford (1815-1894) and his wife, Elizabeth (1819-1887), were members of two of the county's founding families. She was the daughter of Hiram Woodcock, who built, in 1838, the first practical bridge over the Whitewater, near where the bridge on East 5th Street is now located. Gayle's father, Silas, was one of the town's first innkeepers.

Goods immediately began to flow in and out of town. By the end of November of 1845, the exports included fifteen hundred bushels of wheat.

Although the canal brought settlers, merchants, and goods to Connersville, it wasn't without its problems. The canal, powered by water diverted from the Whitewater River, was affected by droughts and floods. The company failed and went into receivership by 1854.

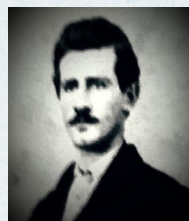
The railroad also added to the obsolescence of the canal system. The present day Whitewater Valley Railroad offers excursions between Connersville and Metamora. The rails were built on the towpath formerly used by the mules to pull the canal boats.

Two notable citizens had served as president of the canal company: Samuel Parker (1805-1859), a local attorney and member of Congress, and businessman Meredith Helm (1796-1859). Canal House was among the assets disbursed when the

canal failed. Both men were involved in the transition of the building to the Savings Bank of Indiana in 1854.



Hon. Samuel Parker



Capt. Gayle Ford

In 1857, the building was sold to attorney Elisha Vance. It became the home of the Vance family, including a son, Dr. Samuel Vance. Upon buying the property, Elisha Vance added the kitchen on the south side of the house.



In 1936, the Vances sold the house to Finly Gray (1863-1947) and his wife, Alice (Green) Gray (1865-1943). Mr. Gray was a two-term mayor of Connersville and served as Representative to the U. S. Congress. Mr. Gray was largely responsible for the implementation of rural electrification. He also was the driving force, as mayor, for sanitary sewers and a safe water supply at a time when people still used the canal as a source of both drinking water and waste disposal.

The Grays modernized the house and changed the appearance by adding fireplaces inside and a balcony to the front porch.



In addition to their property in town, the Grays owned several hundred acres of farmland in the southwestern part of the county. Their only child, a daughter named Mary, passed away prior to the deaths of her parents. When Alice died, part of the farm was donated to the Audubon Society. At Finly's death, more land and Canal House were bequeathed. The land is now known as the Mary Gray Bird Sanctuary.



Alice, Finly, and Mary Gray

The society chose to sell the house. It was owned by the local Veterans of Foreign Wars for a time and was sold to Historic Connersville, Incorporated in 1971. Restoration was finished in 1973.

While many local volunteers took part in the restoration of Canal House, Bob Gray, Finly's nephew, took the lead in bringing it back to its original appearance.

The house is one of the finest examples of Greek Revival architecture in the state. The beautiful, fluted Doric columns on the front porch are made of native yellow poplar.

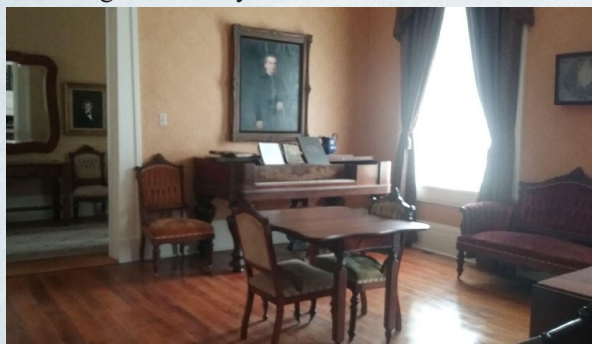
The door and window frames inside are tapered, giving the illusion of added ceiling height. The vaults in the two main lower rooms were built with

continued on reverse

two sets of heavy metal doors to secure the assets of the Canal Company. Each vault has a lock that weighs seventeen pounds.

Many of the furnishings in the house belonged to the Grays, including the ornate dining table, the china, and the rocking chair in the dining room, and the grandfather's clock in the parlor.

The parlor set in the sitting room is an heirloom of the Lake family from Jackson Township. The square grand piano is said to be the first to come to the county. It was bought for Susan Goodlander by her father in the 1850s. The portrait above the piano is Thomas Clarke, a fourteen-year-old who showed great bravery in the Civil War.



There are also examples of various Connersville industries on display. The large mirror in the foyer was made by the French Mirror Company, and a bedroom suite by the Connersville Furniture Company graces the upstairs.

Most of these items have been accumulated through the generosity of donors who were pleased to share items with the community and place them in an appropriate setting.

The flower garden behind the house features part of the original brownstone Clio Fountain, brought here after it was replaced with a marble replica.

Canal House is open during special events. Tours can be scheduled at other times by contacting Historic Connersville.



Historic Connersville also owns and maintains the Fayette County Historical Museum at 200 W 5th Street and the First Ward Hose House, the remaining one of the city's original three fire houses, located at 7th and Washington Streets. We are a non-profit, all volunteer organization which is solely funded by dues and donations. Your support is appreciated.



The museum is open Saturday and Sunday
10 a.m. until 3 p.m.

Tours at other times are available upon request
by calling (765) 825-0946
For more information, see Historic
Connersville on Facebook or
visit www.historicconnersville.org.

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Tourism Bureau www.tourconnersville.org



Canal House



111 East 4th Street
Connersville, Indiana

Circa 1842

Owned and Maintained by
Historic Connersville, Incorporated

Canal House was built as the headquarters
of the Whitewater Valley Canal Company.

Added to the National Register
of Historic Places 1973