

WHY Store

FROM THE HUNTINGTON COUNTY HISTORY AND EDUCATION CENTER

A brick anchor at the downtown crossroads

* Sixth in a series

This week continues our series about the enterprises shown on the 19-by 8-foot mural depicting early 1940s commercial life on Huntington's North Jefferson Street that Robert Fettinger painted on one of the museum's interior walls in 2006. Today we cross Market Street to the northwest corner with Jefferson, where the WHY Store was located.

The front entrance of that store was on a diagonal, with a very prominent "WHY" sign over the door. The door's peculiar angle prompted some to give it a West Market Street address, rather than 400 North Jefferson Street. The Huntington location was actually a part of a small chain of WHY outlets specializing in mostly discounted men's clothing and shoes.

Homer "Buddy" Webster (1891-1955) was born in Wabash County and married Lucile Bensing of Huntington in 1913. He worked for 15 years at the Huntington Shoe and Leather Company and another 12 years as a salesman for the E. C. Rogers store before becoming manager of the Huntington WHY Store for 25 years. Webster was a popular Huntington citizen and active in Democratic politics. He served one term on City Council and was up for election for another term when he died. Much of his popularity undoubtedly came from being part of the "Harmony Four" men's quartet, which entertained numerous events for 25 years.

The WHY Store opened on Saturday, February 23, 1929. An advertisement at the time called it "America's Greatest Cut Price Stores" and featured men's "All Wool Worsted Suits-the kind of material that will hold a crease-\$19.85. Guaranteed Work trousers from \$1.79 to \$2.49. Triple stitched overalls. All sizes. 98 cents. Work Shirts, triple stitched, 49 cents. Clothing and Shoes for the Family." Max Risser recalled that the WHY Store was a very popular place and after Homer died in 1955, his son, Ben, operated the store for a time before it became Menstown, managed by Don Carpenter.

HomeCraft, owned and operated by Matt and Sara Wilcox, occupies the building today.

Of considerable significance is the history of the building which housed the WHY Store. It is known as the Moore-Corlew Building and was listed on the National Registry of Historic Places in 1982. Information from the Registry is that Moore-Corlew is among the oldest buildings anywhere in the city, the only federal-style structure in the downtown business district, and the oldest brick structure erected in Huntington.

The bricks were fired locally about one-fourth mile north of the building by John Sheets and were the start of the Montgomery Brick Yards. The building was built in 1844-45 for Samuel Moore by John Kenover, and both men played an important part in the history and development of Huntington as members of the first families to settle here.

Samuel Moore was born in Lancaster, Pa., in 1809, and worked as a teamster between Tippecanoe and Fort Dearborn. Teamsters in 1800s meant a yoked oxen and wagon — not a diesel truck! Moore (1809-1877) once had the opportunity to trade his oxen and wagon for

some Illinois swampland. Not seeing much promise in that swampland, he turned down the offer. That swampland is now called Chicago!

Moore came to Huntington as a fur buyer. He opened his business at the Forks of the Wabash, selling provisions to construction workers on the Wabash and Erie Canal. In 1834, he voted in the first election held here and, in 1837, his marriage to Mary Foxlater was the first recorded here.

Moore was the director of a company that built a plank road to Liberty Mills. In 1838, he was elected to the Board of Justices and in 1849 was appointed postmaster.

John Kenower (1820-1914) was born in Pennsylvania in 1820 and came to Huntington in 1841 as a laborer, carpenter, and cabinet-maker. In 1850, he established a lumber yard which, in its first 10 years, shipped over two million board-feet of mostly highly prized black walnut to markets in Chicago and New York.

Frank Bash, in his 1914 book, "History of Huntington County, Indiana," states: "No other enterprise ever established in Huntington County had more to do with the rapid setting up of the community than that of which Mr. Kenower was founder."

The building was later bought by Nathan Levi in 1866, then sold to George R. Corlew in 1869. Corlew added to the original building, which made it 102.5 feet long along North Jefferson with additional addresses at 410 and 418 North Jefferson. Locally, it was known as "the Corlew Block." The addition to the building allowed many businesses to call it home in years to come, including Sanborne Drugs (1912), Kindler and Young Tailors (1920), Model Cleaning, Walter and Sullivan Radios, WHY and Eisenhower Watch Repair (1929), WHY and Market Street Liquor (1937), WHY and Home Appliance Shop [1949], among others.

The building remained in the Corlew family until after the death of Corlew's daughter, Jennie Buzzard, in 1947. It changed hands several times after that and several modifications to the building that ensued. To much local acclaim, Dr. Willard J. Harman, an optometrist, purchased the building about 1982 and he and his wife, Zona, restored the building to the original appearance we see today. Willard Harman and his son and successor in the optometry trade, Dr. Eric Harman, gained renown outside of Huntington by winning the Chicago Yacht Club's annual Chicago to Mackinac Race for sailboats four times in the 1990s!

Visit YOUR History and Education Center for a closer look at 1941 enterprises on Fettinger's amazing mural.

— Researched and compiled by Dr. John Regan

The Huntington County History and Education Center, 315 Court Street, is closed to visitors from now through the month of January and into early February. Regular business hours — 10 a.m.-4 p.m. Wednesdays, Thursdays, and Fridays and Saturdays by appointment — will resume Wednesday, Feb. 4, 2026. Information on the collection, tours, room rental, and how to become a member of the Huntington County Historical Society is available from History and Education Center Executive Director Barbara Rupley at (260) 356-7264 or www.huntingtonhistoricalmuseum.com

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Artlines:

HomeCraft occupies the Moore-Corlew Building on the northwest corner of North Jefferson and Market streets today.