

HISTORIC ELMHURST



Elmhurst is a combination of Federal and Greek Revival Architecture
and was added to the
National Register of Historic Places in 1977.

BUILT 1831
779 S State Road 121
Connersville, Indiana

Home of
Warren Lodge #15 F. & A. M.
and
Connersville Chapter #346 Order of the Eastern Star

HISTORY OF ELMHURST

One of the most beautiful sites in Fayette County is the picturesque home and surrounding grounds now known as Elmhurst, though its early history is recorded under the name of “The Old Elm Farm”. Situated on the west side of the Whitewater Valley, along the former path of the Whitewater Canal and adjoining the south edge of the city of Connersville, it played a prominent role in the development of this section of the state. It was the home of men who were responsible for the early growth and advancement of the city, as well as the state of Indiana.



Oliver Hampton Smith (1794-1859)

All of the historic building was not constructed at the same time. The nucleus of the present structure was erected in the year 1831 by the Honorable

Oliver H. Smith, then a member of Congress. His contribution to the magnificent building consisted principally of four rooms. The brick home was two stories with immense chimneys at each end. A frame structure on the back was used as the kitchen and dining room. It is said that he chose this particular spot because of the choice view it afforded of the valley and the fact that the old Indian Trail passed directly in front. The trail continued past the house to a well known spring which was often used by the Native Americans who often visited on their trips through the valley. The trail then branched off to the west to Jenny's Point, the highest point in the city, where the Native Americans maintained fire bowls for their signal fires. Smith was very friendly with them and befriended them at every opportunity. He wrote several books, but is best known for his “Early Indiana Trials and Sketches” which was published in 1857. In it, he refers to his purchase of this property as follows: “I bought the fine farm of one hundred and sixty acres, adjoining Connersville, the same now the residence of my friend Samuel W. Parker, of John Adair, of Brookville, for \$9

dollars per acre, in three installments without interest”. This transaction was recorded on January 3, 1831.

It isn't known how long O.H. Smith lived in his new home, but he shortly afterward purchased a pretentious home in the heart of the village of Connersville and moved there. Elmhurst then became the home of Caleb Blood Smith, member of Congress for three terms and Secretary of the Interior under President Lincoln. He also served his state in the Legislature 1833-1840 and was Speaker of the House 1835-1836. He was one of most eloquent and powerful stump-speakers in the United States. C.B. Smith died in Indianapolis in 1864. It was his wish to be buried at Elmhurst. However, his involvement in the war on slavery resulted in threats by Confederate sympathizers to exhume his remains and “drag him through the streets”. His family buried him in an undisclosed location .It remains an unsolved mystery to this day, despite the exhumation of at least one grave in Connersville's City Cemetery which proved to be that of a brother in law.



Caleb Blood Smith
(1808-1864)



Elizabeth Watton Smith
(1813-1878)

Coincidentally, there is a connection between Elizabeth, wife of Caleb, and a lady who was to live at Elm Farm within a few years. Elizabeth Smith was the sister of Susan Parker. They were the daughters of William and Rachel Watton. Elizabeth Watton Smith was notable in her own right. During their time in Washington, Elizabeth converted her husband's offices into a hospital ward for Union soldiers and tended to them. She was highly regarded among the troops as an angel of mercy.

Elm Farm also played a part in the story of abolition. The trail of the Underground Railroad forked here, with the west prong leading toward what is now Harrisburg in Fayette County, and the east fork going toward Centerville in Wayne County. A brick building on an adjoining farm, then part of Elm Farm, is said to have been a stop for escaping slaves.

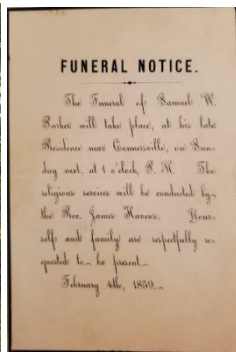
The estate next became the property of James Shaw on November 13, 1838, then Nicholas Patterson on February 14, 1842.

On February 23, 1850, Elm Farm was purchased by the Honorable Samuel W. Parker. Parker was a member of Congress from 1851 to 1855, and a resident of Connersville from 1828 until his death at Elm Farm in 1859.

Upon his return from Washington, Parker divided his attention between his law practice and his railroad interests. He was president of the Junction Railroad Company and, for several years, the president of the Whitewater Canal Company, headquartered at the Canal House, 111 E. 4th, in Connersville. Remnants of the canal can be seen across the highway from Elmhurst. It is said that the canal boats would toll their bells upon passing his home. Parker would respond by ringing the bell he had installed in front of his home. Parker also gave his support and rendered valuable aid to the career of Henry Clay. It is believed that Clay was entertained at Elmhurst.

Parker is given credit for beautifying the grounds at Elm Farm. It is said that, at one time, there was a specimen of every tree native to Indiana planted in the yard. The first remodeling of the house was begun by Parker. Among other things, he installed the solid walnut paneling which graces the lobby of Elmhurst.

At the Agricultural Fair of 1858, held in Connersville, Parker received first premium for the best improved farm that year. Parker dedicated a place on the hill behind the house as Parker Cemetery. Upon his death in 1859, he was buried there.



Parker Cemetery

Funeral Card

Samuel W. Parker (1805-1859)

A son, Walter Scott Parker, died in the Civil War, and his body was returned to his mother to be buried here with his father and three brothers.

As was the custom of the time, funerals of family members took place at the house. The funeral card pictured is the invitation to Samuel Parker's services. Many newspapers were only printed weekly, so news of a death was

often delayed. Funeral cards were printed upon demand and hand delivered to family and friends. The arrival of a messenger holding a small envelope trimmed in black was always the harbinger of sad news.

The Parker family eventually became destitute, owing to the mismanagement of Quincy, the one remaining of the five sons, the other four having died young. Susan Watton Parker died in Indianapolis at the Home of the Little Sisters of the Poor in 1903. She is buried in the Parker Cemetery.

The farm was purchased by James Huston through a foreclosure sale in 1881. Under his ownership, the house was extensively renovated, being patterned after the design of the White House in Washington, and was often referred to as the “White House of Indiana”. He expanded Elm Farm to include over eight hundred acres.

Huston had massive fireplaces built on both the upper and lower levels. Most notable is the fireplace in the area now used as the lobby. It is made of carved sandstone and polished granite. On one side is the likeness of Indian Joe, a member of the Shawnee tribe, who remained in the valley after the relocation of the Shawnees. He was well known throughout the area and is said to be buried somewhere on the land that was once Elm Farm. The sculptor used an old tin type to obtain his likeness. The other side depicts an African American stable boy who often whistled while watching the progress of the carving of Indian Joe. The sculptor, whose identity is lost to time, asked permission to balance the fireplace by carving the whistling boy into the opposite side.



Indian Joe

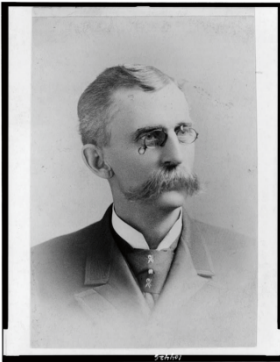


Whistling Boy

Huston added massive porch columns and wings at both the north and south ends of the original house, as well as continuing the paneling that was started by Parker. He was also responsible for the addition of the beautiful oak stairways. Huston spent \$44,000.00 to remodel the home.

James N. Huston served in both the House and Senate of the Indiana Legislature. He became close friends with Benjamin Harrison who, with his 1st wife, Caroline Scott Harrison, was a frequent visitor at Elm Farm. It is said that a bedroom was reserved exclusively for their use and decorated to their tastes, and the room north of the lobby is known as the Harrison Room.

When Harrison ran for president, Huston was his political manager. Upon Harrison's election, Huston was appointed United States Treasurer.



James N. Huston
(1849-1927)



Benjamin Harrison
(1833-1901)



Caroline Scott Harrison
(1832-1892)

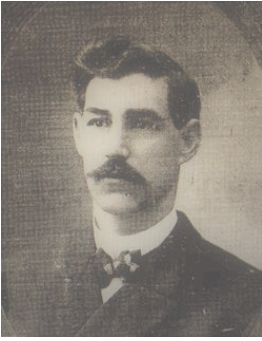
Alonzo W. Daum bought the building in March of 1901. Daum added the north wing, known as the Daum Annex, consisting of twenty six rooms. It became a nationally known sanatorium. Dr. Daum soon endeared himself to the community, not only as a doctor, but also as a humanitarian and a deeply religious man. There is a tale of how he contracted a rare disease on a trip abroad, but the accounts of his illness and death give no support to the theory. He died at Elm Farm in 1901 at age thirty three and was buried in the Parker Cemetery.

Charles Chambers and Ella Porter purchased the property from the Daum family and operated a sanitarium under Dr. W. J. Porter. The Elm Farm was subsequently divided and sold, with one hundred forty acres and the house being retained and renamed "Elmhurst". This property was sold to the Connersville Sanatorium Company in 1903.

In June 1906, the property became the summer home of George B. Markel of Hazelton, Pennsylvania.

In 1909, the Elmhurst School for Girls was established, directed by Isabel Cressler and Caroline Sumner, for the purpose of giving girls of the Midwest educational opportunities equal to those available in Eastern schools. Elmhurst was unique in that the original enrollment was limited to twenty four

residents, although the total enrollment was as high as forty at one time. The entire one hundred and forty acres was put to use to allow for a combination agricultural/domestic science course, an idea unheard of in the education of females of the day. While the school was non-sectarian, it was permeated with a religious atmosphere.



Dr. A W. Daum
(1869-1902)



Elmhurst School for Girls (Postcard)

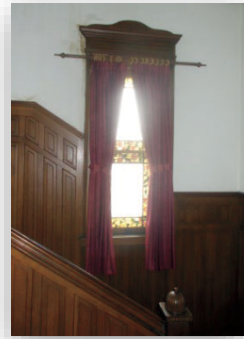
Daughters of wealthy and prominent families were educated here. The drinking fountain in the dining room was presented to the school by a family whose daughters were enrolled at the school.

The school closed in 1929, and the estate came under the control of Manfred Dale. It stood vacant until it became, for about a year, the Pennington Military Academy under a Mr. Lewis. This was followed by an attempt by Herbert Bard, a professor from an Eastern college, to open a private school in 1931. That endeavor also failed.

Except for a caretaker, Robert Ungersall, the building stood idle until its 1939 purchase by Warren Lodge to be used as a Temple for the Lodge.

For many years, there was a large pond in front of the house, and the magnificent grove of trees still filled the lawn. While those have disappeared with time, the building still stands, and the legends of the people who walked within its walls endure.





Compiled 2022 by Donna Schroeder, Fayette County Historian
and Aimee Brumfield, Elmhurst Historian
Funding for printing provided by Fayette County Tourism Bureau
401 Central Avenue Connersville IN 47331



www.tourconnersville.org