

## *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 of 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 the first practical bridge over the Whitewater in 1838, 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 U.S. Congressman, and businessman Meredith Helm (1796-1859). Canal House, built as the canal's headquarters, 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. The bank ceased operations prior to 1857.



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). While serving two terms in the U. S. House of Representatives, Mr. Gray was largely responsible for the implementation of rural electrification. As a two term mayor of Connersville, he was the driving force behind 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 above the front porch.



The Grays, both members of local pioneer families, 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 in memory of Mary. At Finly's death, more land and Canal House were bequeathed. The land is now known as the Mary Gray Bird Sanctuary. The Audubon Society chose not to accept the house, so, pursuant to the Grays' wishes, it was sold at auction, and the proceeds were donated to Riley Hospital

for Children in Indianapolis. The house was purchased by the local Veterans of Foreign Wars in 1947. It was then sold to Historic Connersville, Incorporated in 1971 and used for the organization's meetings for about forty years.



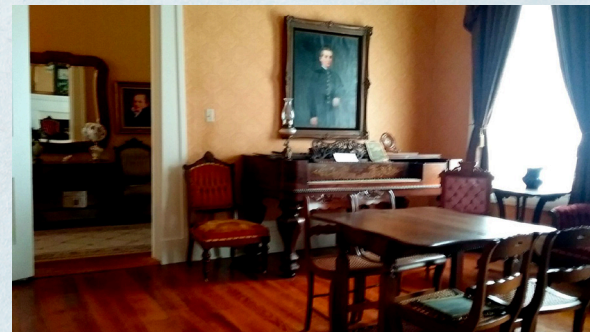
Alice, Finly, and Mary Gray

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, as are all the doors and woodwork inside.

The interior door and window frames are tapered, giving the illusion of added ceiling height. The vaults in the two main lower rooms were built to protect the Canal Company's assets. Each vault has two sets of heavy metal doors and 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 a rocking chair in the dining room. The grandfather clocks in the parlor and upstairs bedroom were owned by the Grays, as well as a pier mirror upstairs. Examples of Alice's artwork are displayed, as are Mary's china dolls.

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.



The large mirror in the foyer was made by Connersville's French Mirror Company. Most of these items have been accumulated through the generosity of donors who were pleased to share them and have them placed in an appropriate setting.

*continued on reverse*



## Restoration of Canal House

When Historic Connersville, Inc. acquired the house, Bob Gray, a nephew of Finly, took the lead in bringing the exterior back to its original appearance, as well as restoring many of the interior features.

In 2012, in preparation for Connersville's 2013 Bicentennial, the downstairs of Canal House was redecorated, while the upstairs remained unchanged. The second story had been converted into one large space by the VFW in the late 1940s and had later served as the meeting room for Historic Connersville, Inc. and a gallery for the Whitewater Valley Arts Association.

A generous grant from the Fayette Community Foundation in 2023 made restoration of the second floor possible.

It is most likely that the building was originally four rooms, two on each floor, with hallways extending front to back.

A description of the house written by Alice Gray reveals that, by the time the Grays bought the house, there were six rooms. This suggests that the north half of the upstairs hall had been converted to a bedroom and was probably done in order to accommodate the Vances' large family.

Mrs. Gray also describes the cupboards that divided the two main rooms. These were situated above the vaults located on the first floor and were removed when the upstairs became one large space. The smaller room was converted into a kitchen area by the VFW.

During the 2023-2024 restoration, the upstairs kitchen was removed, and the cupboards were re-created. The kitchen area is now staged as a nursery.



The upstairs features Connersville built bedroom furniture. Colonel James Roberts was co-owner, along with Herman Munk, in the firm known as Munk and Roberts. Mr. Munk had previously co-founded the Valley Furniture Company with William Newkirk in 1869. Col. Roberts bought Mr. Newkirk's interest a few years later. In 1898, Munk and Roberts, with others, formed the Rex

Buggy Company which was housed in the former location of the furniture factory on Western Avenue.

James Roberts was a highly successful businessman. He was also very fond of the city and the community. His various business ventures employed many people. In 1902, he shared his good fortune by donating Roberts Park to the citizens of Connersville as a place for people to gather for activities such as the Fayette County Free Fair, dances, concerts, and other events.

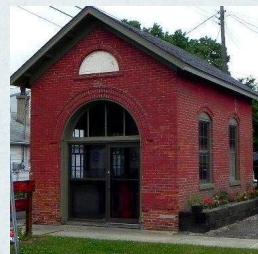
Other pieces upstairs were manufactured by the Connersville Furniture Company and the Connersville Cabinet Company. Coverlets woven by local woolen mills in the 1840s and 1850s are on display.

The flower garden behind the house features a section of the original brownstone Clio Fountain. This piece was placed in the garden after the original was replaced with a marble replica.

Canal House is open during special events. Tours of the house and the Fayette County Historical Museum can be scheduled at other times by contacting Historic Connersville, Incorporated at (765) 825-0946.

Historic Connersville owns and maintains the Canal House, the Fayette County Historical Museum at 200 West 5th Street, and the 1870 First Ward Hose House, the remaining one of the city's original three fire houses, located at 7th and Washington Streets.

Historic Connersville, Inc. is a non-profit, all volunteer organization which is funded solely by dues and donations. Your support is appreciated.



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



For more information,  
visit Historic Connersville on Facebook  
or at [www.historicconnersville.org](http://www.historicconnersville.org)

Funding for this brochure provided by  
Fayette County Tourism Bureau  
[www.tourconnersville.org](http://www.tourconnersville.org)



Information compiled by Donna Schroeder, Fayette County Historian

# Canal House

**HISTORIC CONNERSVILLE, INC.**



*111 East 4th Street  
Connersville, Indiana*

*Built Circa 1842*

*Added to National Register of Historic Places 1973*



The Garden at Canal House