

# Special series Town founder Whitlock gave a lot to gain a lot'

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The Montgomery County courthouse, although it has lost the major part of its tower, dominates downtown Crawfordsville. Even without the benefit of a square as at Lafayette or Rockville, this structure marks the center of town for most residents. Like most Indiana courthouses, it is by far the most expensive and architecturally ambitious building in town. Hoosiers are accustomed to a magnificent courthouse dominating county seat towns.

In other areas of the United States, the courthouse does not play this predominant role in townscapes. Think of the New England town — its heart is the green and the green's focal point is normally a church. Hoosiers do not love justice more than New Englanders, nor do New Englanders love God more than Hoosiers do, though the contrast of their townscapes might suggest this. The magnificence of our county courthouses represents many aspects of our community's history including the particular subject of this article: land speculation and the principle of "give a lot to gain a lot."

Today we think of a frontiersman as being one-third hunter, one-third farmer and one-third dreamer. Only a dreamer could envision cornfield as he surveyed the virgin wilderness; only a vivid imagination heard the lowing of cattle and saw roads while wandering amid the Indian paths and forest noises. However, this division sells the most famous frontiersmen short. They envisioned all this and more. More often than farms, they dreamed of towns and fantasized constructing a new Philadelphia or Cincinnati in their part of the wilderness or, to put it in their grandiose terms, a new Athens. The land speculator's imagination required the supporting skills of the hunter, the courage of the soldier and the land sagacity of the farmer.

Daniel Boone's physical exploits were typical of this breed when he cut the Wilderness Trail from the Cumberland Gap to the Kentucky River. Typical also was the way he claimed, platted and founded Boonesboro, Ky., at the terminus of his trail. Boone unfortunately lacked the money and political power to make his land claim good and others reaped the rewards as the village grew.

A man cut from the same cloth as Boone was Maj. Ambrrose Whitlock, founder of Crawfordsville. This soldier, Indian fighter and road builder, however, had the financial resources and political skill to be successful.

Maj. Whitlock's army career brought him to the attention of an important politician, William H. Crawford of Georgia. Their acquaintanceship grew while Crawford was Secretary of War and climaxed while he was Secretary of the Treasury. Aiming for the presidency, Crawford used his offices to improve his chances by appointing his friends to government positions. Crawford ran the U.S. land office and he named Maj. Whitlock a receiver of public money in Indiana. John Q. Adams, who defeated Crawford in the 1824 presidential election, wrote that the receivers of public money and registers of the land office were "the most active electioneering partisans in Crawford's cause..." Our town's name lends credence to President Adams' comment.

Maj. Whitlock's government position provided a golden opportunity for town founding. With impressive speed the major purchased his site from the land office, laid it out as a town and established his office therein. The town flourished as monied "strangers," many of whom were dreaming of being as successful as Maj. Whitlock in town founding, transacted their land office business in Crawfordsville.

William Crawford's career peaked in 1823, the year our town was founded. Poor health contributed to his defeat by Adams in 1824. In 1828 Andrew Jackson won the White House and Major Whitlock lost his government job. He was not surprised. He wrote:

"The change of these offices have been talked of by a rabble rousing set in the country for six months past and it was bruited about previous to the presidential election that every man in office who did not vote for Gen. Jackson would be turned out. I merely mention this occurrence to show you what kind of juggling the wiseacres make use of in the country to ride on big men's shoulders, & give them the office, and they will swear allegiance to any man or party of men with whom they can succeed."

Jackson, like Crawford, believed in the spoils system. Whitlock, however, had

prepared for the act. He knew that the land office eventually had to move with the frontier and thus could not always be in Crawfordsville.

Whitlock's dreams of founding a major metropolis failed for many reasons. But he was one of the less than 100 Indiana town fathers who founded a county seat. Many thousand towns have been laid out by land speculators in Indiana and the safest, surest way to insure success has been to be a county seat. The land speculators knew this and the fierce struggles to achieve this distinction in Indiana's early history testify to the fact.

The process of county seats election entailed both houses of the Indiana legislature. First, the legislature had to establish the new county's boundaries. Secondly, it appointed a five-man committee to choose the site of the seat and then reviewed their decision. Both aspects of this legislation were important. By tradition, one which reflects practicality, county seats were expected to be close to the county's geographical center. Thus, the setting of the boundaries predetermined the general location of the victorious townsite. The selection of the five men, who were supposed to be a "disinterested" body, was a task too important for the contesting speculators to leave to uninformed legislators. The lobbies of the statehouse were filled with men who could propose many citizens whose "disinterest" was hopefully most intense when it came to rival townsites.

With the boundaries known and the "disinterested" men appointed, the last competition began. The men visited the various possible sites, which usually were not larger than 40 acres. They listened to the site owners, studied the geography and compared the deals offered by the contestants. When they reported their discussion to the legislature, their "disinterest" was reviewed, an evaluation made by legislators who had usually not seen the sites but who could easily compare the offers presented to the committee.

What were these offers from the various speculators? Maj. Whitlock's was relatively

standard. Owning all of the town, he, like William Conner of Conner Prairie when establishing Noblesville and Maj. Isaac C. Elston when establishing Lafayette, proposed to give one-half of the town's building lots to the county. The county could then sell these to provide funds for its governmental needs. Some counties would use the town lots' revenue to build the courthouse or jail or to endow a public library. Montgomery County used the money to fund public schools. Whitlock was too powerful a figure to be required to offer more than half of the platted town. But other counties ended up with cash, promises of labor and materials for the necessary public buildings, or even ownership of existing buildings as the speculators made their offers competitive.

Montgomery County profited by the early establishment of a public school system which attracted settlers and which laid the foundation for much of the future prosperity of the area. Crawfordsville, profited by the lawyers the court attracted, the newspapers the court, in part, supported, and by the permanence and prominence it gave the town. The county came to town to use the court but also to purchase necessities.

Needless to say, Major Whitlock prospered too: land purchased for \$1.25 an acre, when divided into lots in a courthouse town, were valuable. The county, when it appointed William Ramey in charge of the sale of its half of the town, made him give a bond of \$10,000. The county set its minimum price at \$10 a lot. When the sales opened, choice lots close to

the courthouse went for \$25. In short, Whitlock turned \$1.25 real estate into a successful, long term investment, with the naming of Crawfordsville as the Montgomery County seat in 1824. To pun, "he gave a lot to gain a lot."

NOTE — Adams and Whitlock are quoted in Malcolm J. Rohrbough's "The Land Office Business: The Settlement and Administration of American Public Lands, 1789-1837," (Oxford U. P., New York, 1968), p. 191, 274.