



Vermilyea House
a return to splendor

By
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Forward

Current interest in preservation of historic structures and sites is on the rise in Indiana and throughout the country. Likewise, interest has increased in early transportation systems such as the Wabash & Erie Canal – the second longest manmade waterway in the world after the Grand Canal in China – that helped settle the State of Indiana and beyond. Its influence on the lives of Hoosiers today established the routes we travel daily to our workplaces and play places, and the State of Indiana's Constitution has been amended based on the lessons learned during the Internal Improvements of the nineteenth century.

Two new interests join to celebrate the past. The vision, hardships endured and work ethic of those who carved a canal through a wilderness as they carved out a young state has not been fully appreciated. So much of that long ago era has disappeared and has been forgotten. It is a rare opportunity to visit an inn that served the canal travelers and step back into a time into an artifact such as the Vermilyea House.

Since the house was first constructed in 1839 by Jesse and Maria Vermilyea, this site has served people from around the world traveling here and there on canal boats. It served its local community well as a safe haven and as a post office. Subsequent owners lived agricultural-based lives and later rescued the structure from certain disaster when the house was nearly lost to decay. Benjamin and Mary Ruffner improved the commercial viability by expanding canal services. Daniel and Amanda Simmers were hopelessly enamored with the valley setting and extracted pleasure from the simple gifts of the house and the land. Earl and Olive Darling struggled to keep the place "alive" at a most difficult time in our nation's history as preservationist resources needed were required to win a world war. Jim and Ruth Ellis lovingly restored and stabilized the old inn, raised a family, treasured its history and cautiously sought an heir to carry on a long tradition of stewardship. An extraordinary owner was found in Todd and Cathy Freeland. With youthful energy, careful planning, respect for history, the Vermilyea House was expanded and returned to a new splendor for a new era.

Tom Castaldi, May 21, 2004

Vermilyea House a Return to Splendor

Jesse Vermilyea and his wife Maria arrived in Allen County Aboite Township Indiana, in 1832, shortly after their marriage in Brownstown, Indiana. First the couple took up residency in a treaty house built for Miami Chief White Raccoon until a double log cabin was completed on their newly purchase acreage, located thirteen miles southwest of Fort Wayne, Indiana, on present-day U.S. 24. By 1839 Vermilyea had built the grand old mansion, which stands today at 13501 Redding Road, as an example of thoughtful preservation that celebrates the pioneer people of Allen County. They excavated the substratum of clay under the rich black loam on their farm, which was very good for brick making, and was used to construct the home. The Vermilyea home was by far the most luxurious in the township. Fine old walnut woodwork had been rubbed down and polished to a soft glow reflecting the hospitality of its owners. Known far and wide, many a merry party from Fort Wayne enjoyed gala days there, and it was a center of social life in the settlement.

Taking advantage of the Wabash & Erie Canal that opened in 1835 from Fort Wayne to Huntington, in four short years the canal was navigable from between the Ohio-Indiana state line through Logansport, Indiana. Although land-locked the Vermilyea couple was aware of the long term plan. By 1843 a great celebration took place at Fort Wayne on the Summit Level of the canal connecting Lake Erie at Toledo, Ohio, with the head of steamboat navigation on the Wabash at Lafayette, Indiana. A once unimaginable flow of immigrants and boat loads of cargo came past their front door.

From the start, access to Vermilyea House was a convenient place to reach. Jesse kept a small stock of merchandise he used to trade with the American Indian people of the area. At the same time Vermilyea was appointed Postmaster. Over the years he held that position and conducted his service using a built-in desk that remains in the house today. Because of the canal wharf south of the house only a few yards distance, the house was built to face the expansive bottom land of the Little Wabash River. In later years, after U.S. 24 was constructed, a new portico was added to the north side to face the new highway that replaced the canal as the preferred way of travel. This addition came during the "Darling Restoration" period of 1944 and 1945. It was when Earl and Olive Darling became the new owners and were critical in the process of having saved the old home.

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Visitors are welcomed into a hallway that traverses the historic home from north to south. A large double-thick walnut door with its brass lock faces to the south and the old Wabash & Erie Canal. Near the north entrance along the large hall is a guest closet, which has a spent bullet imbedded in the door. Although left undisturbed as part of its historic past, the lead slug is an anomaly since violence has never been associated with the house. Nine large rooms provided ample space for the canal traveler and locals who visited could be made comfortable during cold winter days when seven fireplaces warmed the expanse. Woodwork throughout the house is of black walnut except for the master's bedroom on the second floor where "white walnut" or butternut wood trims the space.

West of the hall are twin parlors twenty feet deep and thirty feet in length with double sets of windows on either end. Each room has matching marble-faced fireplaces and between the south wall and the fireplace is the walnut letter box used by Postmaster Vermilyea. Large doors swing on old English hand-wrought hinges that open to create the feeling of one room. In the north parlor on the west wall closets border the fireplace and the one on the left has recently been re-created. Above the fireplace is a painting of Maria. In a touch of pleasing balance, over the fireplace in the south parlor hangs the likeness of Jesse. Attributed to painter Horace Rockwell, the original oils are held in the Allen County Fort Wayne Historical Society collection. Another smaller painting of the third daughter named Ann Eliza, as a four year old child, hangs in the north parlor.

To the east side of the entry hall is a large dining room where on the south wall double windows are repeated. A large brick-faced fireplace has been refurbished to return it to its period appearance. This room opens on the east to the original kitchen now used as a sitting room. An iron oven door, date stamped "1832", is built into the fireplace and reveals the room's original intent. From here a new room to accommodate twenty-first century style living has been added. The passage from the original kitchen to a new kitchen is framed with finely finished walnut panels that swing open to reveal the interior walls of the old structure. Here can be viewed the brick and timber of the eighteen inches of wall that once served as the east elevation. A warm inviting extension of the historical spaces, a transformed period kitchen flows into a charming family and pet receiving area then onto a new garage. In the hall is a staircase that accesses the second floor and a beautifully appointed bath room.

Returning to the entry hall and the mystery of learning what lies above after ascending the walnut staircase has at last arrived for the curious visitor. Charles

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McCulloch, son of Abe Lincoln's Secretary of the Treasury Hugh McCulloch, recalled his days as a youngster sliding down the banister when romping with the Vermilyea children. Upstairs, directly above the twin parlors are duplicate sleeping rooms with their marble-faced fireplaces. Massive walnut doors are used to divide the rooms. To the southwest is the master bedroom with its butternut wood finish and closets that have the original wood pegs in place for hanging garments. Throughout the house the closets are narrow affairs making modern-day clothes hangers impractical. To keep the integrity of the rooms intact, presently an armoire provides closet space.

Across the hall are two additional bedrooms, one of which has a fireplace. At the end of the hall a bathroom has been incorporated into a space whose original use is not known. Because the ceiling heights were low in the bedrooms, the first room's rafters have been reduced to provide adequate head space. Today, the second room serves as the master bedroom and opens into a newly constructed bath room above the newly added kitchen below.

At the top of the staircase, a hallway door opens to steps to a third floor. Its narrow staircase leads to two restored rooms, one of which has had its wall plaster removed to reveal nineteenth century lath work. In both quarters are small compartments in the eaves. Features such as these have given rise to a myth that they may have been hiding places to secret away refugees from slavery while awaiting movement on the canal towpath north to Canada and freedom.

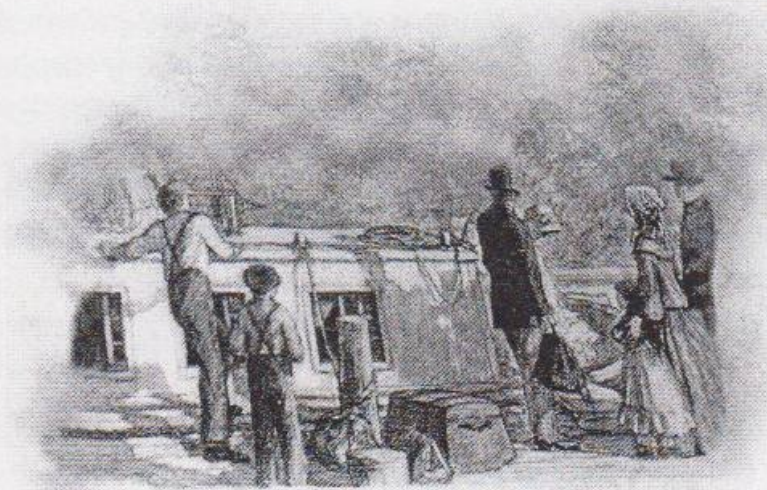
A large room over a car garage was added to the west end of the house by previous owners. The room is spacious, including a walk-in closet with ample storage space, and a recreational area for children.

All through the home, the Freeland family has carefully added new structural additions, selected period furniture and acquired furnishings for accurate interpretation. Details that add charm to the exterior walls include wooden muntins for windows, sills replaced with limestone, custom-made shutters constructed with associated hardware. Innovative storm window designs protect window glass as well as conserve appearances, and modern new rooms have hidden electrical outlets. Overall the new construction is in balance with the old and the smallest detail inside or out does not go unnoticed. It can best be described as, "Spectacular".

Aboite and Its First Settlement

Aboite Township probably takes its name from the Aboite River that flows through the southwestern section of Allen County. It encompasses much of the Wabash-Aboite moraine, the Little Wabash River basin and the swamp called the *Marais du Perches*, or the "Marsh of Perches". Some have speculated that the name "Aboite" comes from the French word *Abattoir* meaning, "slaughter house" referring to the 1780 battle that took place between the Indians and the French. Others say that the name comes from a *Bouette* which, in French, translates as "river of minnows." Still another fish-related story suggests that it is French for *Boite*, that is, a box or a container in which fish are retained. Like the term "Hoosier," it is difficult to find two people who agree on a definition, and today it is safe to say that no one knows the real meaning of "Aboite".

In the spring of 1833, the "Maryland Settlement" was established in Aboite Township consisting of thirty or so persons who settled in the area of present-day Timbercrest Addition. It was a party of hearty pioneer families that included names such as Enoch Turner, Richard Andrew, William Gouty and Richard Clark, all of whom arrived from Maryland. About the same time Jesse Vermilyea and his family arrived from Brownstown, Indiana. Later in 1834, Lott S. Bayless and Benjamin Rogers came with their families to the Maryland Settlement followed by William Hamilton, George Bullard and Rayburn Beeson. All have been described as industrious, economic and hard working people.



A Splendid Legacy

Jesse and Maria Vermilyea



*Jesse Vermilyea*¹

Jesse Vermilyea was born in Dutchess County, New York, on May 18, 1809, to Edward and Joanna Wright Vermilyea the tenth of thirteen children. Edward Vermilyea moved his family in 1818 from Delaware County to Salem, Indiana. On July 17, 1818, Joanna died and her husband Edward followed her in death on October 16, 1818. Jesse's eldest sister married David Burr in 1818. Burr served as one of the first Canal Commissioners in 1828, with Samuel Hanna and Robert John. It was Burr and Hanna who surveyed a feeder line above Fort Wayne from the St. Joseph River and demonstrated that a water source was available to construct the Wabash & Erie Canal. It was a tireless endeavor and their engineer John Smythe actually died of the fever while on the project. David Burr collapsed from exhaustion. However, their survey and report was enough to convince the legislature to build a canal.

Arriving in Grant County in the early 1830s, Jesse was elected Clerk of the Circuit Court. Anna Vermilyea, another of Jesse's sisters married James Sweetser in Grant County in 1837, and maintained close ties throughout the years.



*Maria Vermilyea*²

Maria was born into the respected McTaggart family in 1810. Her brother J. H. McTaggart was described as a young man of sober habits and respectability charged with the responsibility of the Potawatomi Mill on the Tippecanoe River. He had served as Circuit Court Clerk and Auditor of Grant County before resigning on May 8, 1832. Maria married Jesse Vermilyea in Brownstown, Indiana, on July 4, 1832.

Shortly after the Vermilyea's wedding they moved to Aboite Township in 1832 and acquired the two room brick house that was built as a treaty house, which was a gift for Chief White Raccoon as a part of the 1826 Treaty at Paradise Springs. Presently, the site of

1. by Horace Rockwell c. 1840 – Courtesy Allen County – Fort Wayne Historical Society.

An oil painting on canvass, it features a young man with bushy hair wearing a dark jacket and a necktie.

2. by Horace Rockwell c. 1840 – Courtesy Allen County – Fort Wayne Historical Society.

A portrait in oil of a young woman wearing a dark dress with puffed sleeves, shear white cap and collar, brooch at the neck.

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W-W Gravel quarry, the house was built on the Allen-Whitley county line with half of the rooms in one side and half in the other. In 1839 a large brick house on the hill was constructed that became known as the Vermilyea House. After moving into the new house, they continued to use a two-room brick house for their hired help and as a dairy house.

Maria had given birth to a son in the spring of 1833 and named him David Burr Vermilyea. Infant David died during the autumn at three months of age. Subsequently, four daughters were born to the couple: Marietta on August 19, 1834, Adaline on December 30, 1837, Ann Eliza on May 16, 1840, and Jesse Maria on July 15, 1843. Later a young Irish boy was adopted when the Vermilyeas learned that the child's father was rarely at home and during one of the father's drunken sprees the boy's mother died. The boy lived with his adopted family for a few years and died at a young age.

After arriving in Allen County in the early 1830s to engage in farming and trading with the Indians, Vermilyea became one of the influential and active citizens during the early canal days. As one of the original directors of the Fort Wayne Branch bank, he also was a contractor on the Middle Division of the Wabash and Erie Canal and a builder of a pioneer plank road. In his later years he operated the famous Vermilyea House on the canal. Judge Samuel Hanna assumed the personal responsibility for the construction of the Lima Road, which was extended fifty miles to the north. Jesse Vermilyea was active in the construction of this first important road accessing Fort Wayne. Samuel Hanna sent him to learn how Canadians were building their roads, and Jesse's favorable findings earned him a seat as a director on the Plank Highway System. When the Huntington Road was the only highway before the movement for better roads began in 1843, Jesse Vermilyea and Captain Mahon were appointed as a committee to secure subscriptions.

Jesse Vermilyea, along with Samuel, Hugh and Joseph Hanna, John Tipton, Alexis Coquillard, W.G. and G.W. Ewing, was considered one of the Wabash land speculators who brought up the public lands of northern Indiana. At one time Jesse owned 2,690 acres much of which was a part of the Canal and Michigan Road lands.

Little is recorded of the Vermilyea couple's personal lives, however, one horrific event occurred after Maria walked into their old brick smoke house to collect meat for a meal. The smoke house once stood north of the house but was removed probably at the end of the nineteenth century or beginning of the twentieth. Overhead along the cross-ties sharp hooks were attached to hang the cuts of meat. Maria was not too tall in stature, and that day the meat she was after was a little out of her reach. She had to leap up a few inches in an

attempt to dislodge a ham from a hook, but as she descended the hook pierced the palm of her hand. Her weight caused the hook to run through her hand and held her suspended from the overhead rafter. Her cries for help were not heard. Ignoring the pain, she clenched the offending hook with her impaled hand. With desperate effort she pulled herself up until she could grasp a beam with her free hand and pull away from her predicament.

A description of Jesse's character was recorded shortly after the canal opened while he and his wife were operating a hotel in their log cabin home. Elijah Hackleman traveling to the Fort Wayne land office to enter a track of property in Wabash County wrote, "Monday May 16, 1836, We soon began inquiring of the French and Indians Whom We met, Where We could be accommodated through the night and were informed that We would have to make Vermiliars (sic) Tavern, where we arrived some time after dark. We found Mr. Vermiliars Double log house to be pretty well filled by travelers before our arrival. But we were 'cold and hungry and he took us in.' We found him to be a very clever Gentlemanly hoste(sic)."

As the Wabash & Erie Canal progressed, the Vermilyea House flourished serving as a favorite stopping place along the line. John W. Dawson described the inn this way: "Our pleasure rides for gallantry and past-time, were taken on horseback, in summer, and extended up the St. Mary's river to Chief Richardville's five miles, and in winter on the Canal in sleighs ten miles west to Vermilyea's." Dawson had this to say about its owners: "Mr. Jesse Vermilyea and lady, who were, I speak from knowledge, quite as competent to do the graces of host and hostess as any persons I have ever met. The 'bill of fare' was always equal to the occasion, and prepared in the very best style. This gentleman and lady were equally matched."

Susan Man McCulloch supported Dawson's comments when she wrote, "Next week Mr. Hamilton has a party invited to go for a ride on the Canal. They are only going down to Mr. Vermilea's (sic) to dinner & back in the evening. I think it will be very pleasant & shall go if possible." Susan's husband Huge McCulloch is said to have stopped here over night while traveling to and from Indianapolis on official business.

Jesse Vermilyea died August 8, 1846, during the cholera epidemic and he preceded his wife's death who died January 29, 1848. Both he and Maria are buried in Lindenwood Cemetery. Historians remember Jesse as a prominent man in the township who took an active part in its development and improvement. He had a kind, social disposition and gained friends who clung to him during life.

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Because the children were so young at the time of their parents' death, they were sent to live with their Aunt Anna and Uncle James Sweetser in Grant County. Ann Eliza married Marvin Robinson and moved to Peru and later to Terre Haute. The youngest daughter of the house became the wife of Stephen B. Bond, late president of the Old National Bank, of Fort Wayne. She was a universally beloved woman famed for her deeds of kindness and love.

Philo and Rebecca Rumsey

Philo Rumsey operated the Vermilyea place after marrying William Rockhill's daughter Rebecca on March 7, 1838. Philo was a Fort Wayne restaurateur and served for a time in local government on the city council. In 1849, Rumsey opened the Vermilyea House as an inn or tavern to continue serving boat travelers. It was not until the early 1850s and the coming of the railroads that packet travel began to diminish on the canal. With passenger traffic slowing, Rumsey was faced with closing the Vermilyea House. He moved to Fort Wayne to manage the Rockhill House, which his father-in-law had started building in 1838, completed in 1851 and opened as a hotel in 1854. Located where today's St. Joseph Hospital stands on the west side of Fort Wayne, canal passenger traffic was drying up and the Rockhill House placed its hopes on attracting Fort Wayne guests from the downtown section some blocks away. It operated until 1867 then sat idle for nine years until 1878 when the St. Joseph Benevolent Association purchased the property.

Benjamin and Mary Ruffner

Benjamin and Mary Ruffner purchased the house on January 8, 1853, from the Vermilyea Estate. Canal officials prepared a widewater section in the canal channel to be used as a turning basin, loading and unloading cargo and otherwise a good place to keep a docked boat out of the way of the busy boat traffic. A warehouse was erected by Ruffner on the widewater that was located southwest of the house. It became known as Ruffner's Basin. It was clearly visible until the channel and basin were filled in by the traction line that laid its rail bed on the towpath.

According to records preserved by Jim Ellis, the abstract of the property passed from Ruffner to John W. Brice and James L. Birkley on April 20, 1855. However, by July 23, 1855, the property reverted back to Benjamin and Mary Ruffner. Ruffner was the owner until a sale was made to Charles W. and Julia D. Moore in February 1861. Due to financial difficulties the Vermilyea House property was sold at a bankruptcy auction on the courthouse steps in Fort Wayne, Indiana, on August 5, 1864, to Nathaniel B and Julia Hogg.

It was during the Civil War that Nathaniel Hogg of Pennsylvania took title to the Vermilyea House, however, it has been speculated that he never made a visit. At some point in time, Mr. Hogg sold an acre of ground to the county for the price of \$75.00 to build a school. He stipulated that it must have a six-foot board fence around the school yard. Thereafter, the school was known as Hogg School. Although no longer standing it was one of eight, one-room schoolhouses that once served Aboite Township.

Daniel and Amanda Simmers

Civil War veteran Daniel Simmers who was recruited in 1863 to serve in the 51st Ohio, saw action with Sherman's army during the siege of Atlanta. After the war, having participated in fifteen battles, he returned home and with his parents moved to Indiana. His first land purchase was a one-hundred acre tract of bottom land and about 1900, he acquired another two hundred acres that included the Vermilyea House. Dan Simmers delighted in telling the tales of the vicinity. One referred to the LaBalme massacre near Aboite Creek in 1780, and the legend of his small force of soldiers who were taken by surprise and annihilated. Simmers enjoyed contemplating the deep depression that formed a lake a few hundred yards to the north of the residence with its deep banks and narrow outlet that extended back into a woods of oaks, maples, poplars and beeches. He and his wife Amanda cherished the broad vista to the south, the picturesque hills and valleys, the peculiar formations made by nature in the glacial age, the big trees in the woods and the little lake on the ridge.

Angie Quinn, in her research of the Underground Railroad in Allen County has recorded the chain of Vermilyea House ownership from Daniel and Amanda Simmers. Daniel and Amanda purchased the property at about the turn of the twentieth century. Next the title transferred to Earl and Olive Darling who were the proprietors from 1944 to 1963, then to Jim and Ruth Ellis who were the title-holders from 1963 to 2000, and to the current owners Todd and Cathy Freeland from 2000 to the present.

Earl and Olive Darling

When the Earl and Olive Darling purchased the home from the Simmers' Estate in 1944, it had stood unoccupied for a few years. Because of the remote location, vandals had had their way with the place breaking windows and looting furnishings. Holes in the roof, rotting floors, stair rail damage, carvings in the woodwork and every door knob was either missing or broken. Mrs. Darling said during World War II, "it is slow work restoring a 110 year old

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home with a scarcity of materials." At one time the underbrush nearly covered the front of the house but the Darlings envisioned how the large brick house might have looked. The couple worked for two years to make the place livable, added a garage and constructed the north portico. They reported that there was a shallow and musty tunnel that opened into the basement sealed with a large boulder and used as a feature on the Underground Railroad.

Jim and Ruth Ellis

Jim and Ruth Ellis bought the home in February 1963, by which time much of the acreage had been sold off and Vermilyea House sat on twelve and one half acres of the original plot. A gentele couple, they could easily be described as John Dawson did when he wrote about Jesse and Maria as a, "gentleman and lady (they) were equally matched" - thoughtful, gentle, caring people who during their stewardship of the property did their full share. Both are active in the Canal Society of Indiana always expressing an eagerness to learn more and selfless in their sharing knowledge about the canals that served early Hoosier pioneer families. It was Jim and Ruth Ellis who found that the Vermilyea grave plot in Lindenwood Cemetery had no marker to identify the site. As a part of their affection for this family that linked their heritage, acquired a proper stone and had it placed to remember the couple that gave the community the Vermilyea House.

Todd and Cathy Freeland

Present owners Todd and Cathy Freeland picked up the torch making this their home and having completed what can best be described as a world-class restoration. Already completed work, and that which may yet evolve, it is an example of a unique respect for the past that celebrates the pioneer spirit. Just as those first settlers worked to make a better life for themselves, they were building functional and productive communities that provide us a comfortable place to live and work. Now Todd and Cathy are demonstrating how new construction can be combined with quality preservation and returning the spirit of the old Vermilyea House to its original splendor. An example to all, they are paving the way for others to learn about the satisfaction, pride of ownership and joy that are inextricably tied to preservation of our heritage.

The Vermilyea House is here to enjoy today and stands as a testament to those who have owned and helped to preserve the structure. After the Vermilyea family's home and land was purchased by Nathaniel Hogg, the absentee landowner, Daniel W. Simmers and his wife Amanda B. (Michaels)

Simmers acquired the three-hundred acre farm when it was described as "hoary with age and rich in tradition." Earl and Olive Darling bought the house and began to restore it after it had been neglected for years. Jim and Ruth Ellis acquired the house and continued a loving restoration. Todd and Cathy Freeland now are carrying on that splendid legacy.

The Underground Railroad... Vermilyea Station?

*W*hat about the persistent oral history that claims that Vermilyea House was a stopping place for refugees escaping to the north from the bonds of slavery? Was this a station on the Underground Railroad? Certainly this region lies along the corridors of that secretive system that passed escapees from one abolitionist to the next. Vermilyea House is on the north south route from Richmond, Indiana, through abolitionist Levi Coffin's well known station. Another alleged active route came from the southwest up the canal towpath. Sympathizers of the movement were frequent visitors to Vermilyea House making the setting a real possibility. Documenting Underground Railroad activity is scant and virtually non-existent because of the Fugitive Slave Act that made it a crime to help escapees along the way.

Since the days of the Darling family, owners have heard the tales and sought the evidence. In the extensive investigation made by both Jim Ellis and Todd Freeland, no sign of a clandestine tunnel from the house basement to the old canal channel has been found. No signs or artifacts were discovered that would indicate the presence of people on their way to freedom. However, the stories continue. William Dafforn, born in England's Midlands in 1840, came to America in 1855, and homesteaded land in nearby Lafayette Township. Before he died in 1915, he told his grandson, Loyall Weist, that the Vermilyea House was a place that harbored fugitives escaping to the north. Angie Quinn has interviewed several persons and has traced people who had ties to the Underground Railroad. Her report of Garl Jennings, who was born at the turn of the last century, includes his conversations with Jim Ellis. Jennings has stated that he had known the Vermilyea House was an Underground Railroad site all

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his life. Because the canal towpath was a landmark route from the Ohio River north, it could have served as a direct line for fugitives from slavery heading north. So far no proof has been found indicating that the Vermilyea House, although a likely station, served in such a humanitarian role. Garl Jennings said that he saw the tunnel. He also recalled that rather than a passageway leading to the canal it opened in a field west of the house out of the prying eyes of boat travelers and crews. In a study that everyone agrees proof is virtually impossible to produce, the evidence strongly suggests that Vermilyea House is a prime suspect for playing a role in a spectacular movement that held freedom as its cause.

Wabash & Erie Canal... an Overview

By an act of Congress on March 2, 1827, every alternate section of land equal to five miles in width on both sides of the line surveyed for the Wabash & Erie Canal was granted to the State of Indiana to help offset the cost of building a canal. Originally, the plan called for a canal that extended from the mouth of the Auglaize River on the Maumee to the mouth of the Tippecanoe River on the Wabash. Land office commissioners closed the sales until the state could select which of the land under the grant it preferred. About 250,000 acres was in Ohio, which was eventually ceded after Indiana consented with the proviso that the canal should be completed according to the original grant and that it should be sixty feet wide on the surface and five feet deep instead of forty feet wide and four feet deep. A board of canal commissioners was created during the legislature of 1826-27 with the responsibility of determining if there was enough water to service an inland waterway. Commissioners Samuel Hanna, David Burr and Robert John met in Indianapolis on July 14, 1828, to receive maps, surveys and other notes produced by Colonel Moore's 1826 survey party. They were given a budget of \$500 to complete their assignment. Next the board met at Fort Wayne in 1828, but with no engineer, level or instruments for surveying to complete their work. Samuel Hanna made a trip that was considered a very short time to New York City and return to

Fort Wayne with the necessary tools. The \$500 was not nearly enough to cover the bills, so the surveying instruments were personally paid for by Judge Hanna. With the aid of a newly hired engineer, John Smyth of Miamisburg, Ohio, the work began. Smyth became ill and soon died leaving the work to the commissioners to complete. Using Colonel Moore's estimates, by the end of September they completed the work of locating a feeder from the St. Joseph River, six miles to the main line at Fort Wayne. With a due date of December 26, 1828, both Hanna and Burr worked tirelessly. So intense was the effort that Colonel Burr fell ill from exhaustion, and the task was left to Judge Hanna to make the case to the State legislature where the project was approved. Under an act of January 25, 1829, the canal lands were located by the commissioners and sales opened at Logansport in October 1830, followed by a second office opened in October 1832, in Fort Wayne.

A large number of prospective buyers was attracted to the Logansport sale, and many immigrants moved into the region. Due to the liberal terms of credit the sale did not produce much operating capital, however, it was enough, and the movement for the canal was put in motion and could not now be altered.

Ground was broken in Fort Wayne on February 22, 1832, when Jordan Vigus representing the canal commissioners placed his shoe on a ceremonial spade and began pressing it into the soil. He proclaimed, "I am now about to commence the Wabash and Erie Canal, in the name of and by the authority of the State of Indiana." Among those gathered that day were Judge Samuel Hanna, Captain Elias Murray and Charles W. Ewing who delivered an appropriate address.

Jesse Vermilyea and William Rockhill were among the first to be awarded contracts let by the State as the project moved forward. However, contractors were faced with a new problem when it was discovered that there were not enough laborers to meet the scope of such a project. At first Hoosiers were expected to leave their farms and do the work, but when the demands of planting, cultivating and harvesting called, the boys left the line and returned home. As a result Irish and German workers were recruited in great numbers. It was said that there were over one thousand at work between Fort Wayne and Huntington by 1834, and by 1835, the line was completed to Huntington.

Maribah Hawley was a passenger on the *Indiana*, the first boat to make the initial trip from Fort Wayne and back from Huntington. "It was on the 3rd of July, 1835, and we returned next day on the 4th. There were about twenty-five of us in the party, and that took pretty near the whole town, for it was very small those days. Some of the passengers were Mr. and Mrs. Murray, Dr. Merrill and wife, Mr. and Mrs. Johnson, Mr. Burk, Mr. Barker, Dr. George Fate and

others. The only sights along the way were the wilderness woods, prairies covered with water, and in places there were wolves, deer and Indians. I remember we stopped a few miles east of Roanoke, at the Vermilyea hotel, for dinner. They changed horses there. We had no music on board. Music was scarce in those times, but there was a great deal of fun kept up, going and coming. Dr. Fate shot a cannon off every few miles. He was a strange man."

When the *Indiana* came by that first time it created a great stir of excitement, and for years after became a favorite of all who watched her gracefully glide through the water. In later years, the *Indiana* gained a new reputation for a musical entertainment experience. Two of the crew sat on board one playing the clarinet and the other the violin allowing their strains to drift on the breeze for miles around.

Functioning on the principle that water seeks its own level, a canal can cover a great distance by connecting a series of long level channels one with the next. To contain the water within each level a lock is constructed that lifts or lowers canal boats along the way. Each of the seventy-three locks on the Wabash & Erie was ninety feet long and fifteen feet wide and every one acts as its own level channel in a diminutive way. By closing and opening large gates on either end of the lock, water is allowed in and out of the structure. In turn, a boat riding on the water rises to the top or descends to the bottom of the lock as water is allowed in or drained out. The level on which Vermilyea House is located is called the "Summit Level". Lock No. 3, known as "Moots Lock", located between Glasgow and Anthony in east Fort Wayne controlled the water held or released flowing to the east from the Summit. "Dickey Lock" was designated No. 4 at Roanoke, and it did the same with water flowing to the west. The feeder line served by the St. Joseph River provided enough water to keep the level well supplied.

The Summit Level contained other important mechanical structures including, road bridges, culverts and aqueducts. When the canal intersected with a road, a bridge had to be built to accommodate traffic flow. When the canal encountered a stream, a culvert was required to allow the creek or draining ditch to pass under the canal. For wider or deeper streams, an arch usually of cut limestone could be constructed. In the case of a river an aqueduct, often appearing much as a covered road bridge, was built for boats to cross.

On the Summit Level two aqueducts were necessary to make the crossings over the Saint Mary's River in Fort Wayne and the Aboite River west of the Vermilyea property. Known as Aqueduct No. 1 on the Saint Mary's river this structure was constructed in 1835 and rebuilt in 1871. It featured two eighty feet spans to reach from bank to bank, had a width of seventeen feet, rested on a pier and

two abutments made of cut stone. It was designed by Jesse L. Williams and built by Henry Lotz. Fort Wayne elected Lotz in 1843 as its third mayor to complete the term of Mayor Joseph Morgan before Lotz was reelected on his own in 1844. Today the Saint Mary's Aqueduct site can be visited by walking along the River Greenway a few yards downstream from the Main Street Bridge. Immediately south of the railroad bridge the curved hammer-dressed limestone wall that served as an abutment can be seen on the west bank of the river. At low water the central pier can often be glimpsed.

Beyond the Saint Mary's Aqueduct is the Fort Wayne "Nebraska Neighborhood". It received its name when a merchant named A.C. Hutzell opened a store on the country road that later became West Main Street. People of the day thought that it was so far west of the St. Mary's River that the locals joked that Hutzell had moved out west to Nebraska. So Hutzell took advantage of a branding opportunity and named his business, "The Nebraska Store" and the name stuck. Near here to the west is the point where the Saint Joseph River Feeder joined the main line and took a decidedly southwest course passing Lindenwood Cemetery. Further west a waste weir at *Marais du Perches* had to be fashioned to keep the marsh from interfering with the canal water. A one hundred and fifty feet long wooded structure with ten sliding gates measuring three and one-half feet square were capable of being hoisted in times of flooding. It was designed to pass a stream it intersected, but also served to discharge surplus water coming down from the Summit. There were a couple of small culverts and a Road Bridge No. 11 to serve the Vermilyea property before the canal reached the Aboite River Aqueduct No. 2.

From U.S. Highway 24 heading west, today a traveler can turn south onto Redding Road. Along the south side of Redding, the old channel's prism is visible past a number of houses that have been erected. Unfortunately in places, the channel has been filled in and the historic artifact lost. Farther west stands the Vermilyea House. Frank S. Bash interviewed Daniel W. Simmers in 1930 for a Huntington, Indiana, *Herald Press* story titled, "Old Vermilyea House Above Roanoke Rich in Pioneer History". Bash wrote, "In the canal just below the house the channel widened out into a spacious basin in which the boats could be turned or docked for loading and unloading." This is the Ruffner's Basin that was graded over when the traction line was constructed.

At the point at which the canal passes the Vermilyea House a wharf for loading boat passengers, mail and cargo was a busy place, but was there a lock nearby? A group of local historians thought that perhaps there must have been a lock at this popular stopping off place. They reasoned that at Dickey Lock in Roanoke the elevation is 735 feet above sea level making it thirty-five feet below the Summit. Was it not logical that there were at least three locks

between the mouth of the feeder in Fort Wayne and the Huntington County line to handle the difference in elevation? Official reports documenting the condition of each mechanical structure does not mention these locks. Were these additional structures removed before the official Documentary Journal report of the Chief Engineer to the legislature was made in 1847? Were the locks removed earlier because they were not needed? While the "three lock theory" historians have a good beginning to support their position, it must remain conjecture until documented evidence can be confirmed.

A short distance to the west, the canal crossed over the Aboite River. Aqueduct No. 2 was described by Jesse Williams in 1833: "The aqueduct trucks are all formed of timber." The aqueduct is built on a gravel bottom but made secure by a platform of hewn timber extending over the whole space between the abutments as well as under them. Those timbers and the cut limestone abutments are visible at the Aboite River crossing point.

By 1843, the Wabash & Erie Canal had reached Lafayette, Indiana, to the west and it had been completed to Toledo, Ohio, at Lake Erie. On July 4th that year, it was time for a grand opening celebration and Fort Wayne, "The Summit City", proudly served as the host city. Thousands of people crowded into town, and along the canal route in other ports of call people lighted candles to place in windows and raised bon fires. It seemed that everyone let loose with emotional excitement at the notion that now the canal had been freed from its land lock prison. No one could know that by 1853 the canal would be extended to Evansville, Indiana, and have access to the Ohio River. No one could know that the legislature would authorize charters to the railroads to build their lines parallel with the towpath. No one thought that rails were capable of any thing other than to terminate a railhead at a Wabash & Erie landing or on the Ohio River. No one thought that the tolls and the expense of maintenance would keep the canal from earning a profit. No one thought that the railroads would dramatically increase their operating speeds and sweep away passenger traffic from canal packets. No one thought that the railroads would undercut the freight boat rates in the warm summer months and make up their losses during the cold winter months when the canal water was frozen solid. No one considered that the courts would order the canal closed in 1876. All anyone knew for sure was that in 1843, the Wabash & Erie Canal was connected to the world's peoples and its markets. As a project it was *spectacular*.

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