



Michael Homoya photo

THIS WAS INDIANA

How the natural landscape of 1816 differed from today's

By Michael Homoya

“Men still live who, in their youth, remember pigeons. Trees still live who, in their youth, were shaken by a living wind. But a decade hence only the oldest oaks will remember, and at long last only the hills will know.” Aldo Leopold, 1947

Today no one remembers passenger pigeons as living creatures.

And it's a rare tree that has memory of them.

But when Indiana was a fledgling state, the now-extinct bird was a charter member of its landscape. Other species were too, forming a natural collection that today exists in Indiana only as museum specimen or words on paper.

Once upon a time in Indiana there really were “lions and bison and bears,” and that's no joke. Black bear, American bison (better known as buffalo), Carolina parakeet, elk, gray wolf, mountain lion, porcupine and prairie chicken were part of the living menagerie present during Indiana's 1816 leap into statehood. For most people today, thoughts of these animals elicit images of elsewhere—northern woods, western plains, mountains, or perhaps even the Deep South. But not Indiana, at least not the Indiana of today. These animals are absent from here as wild beings, and Indiana's landscape is no longer suitable for most of them.

Indiana was different before the proliferation of European settlement, especially in terms of amount and quality of habitat. Imagine verdant forests seemingly without end, tall-grass prairies festooned with brilliantly colored wildflowers, streams and rivers sparkling and pure, and wetlands expansive enough to conjure visions of the Florida Everglades.

That was the landscape of early Indiana.

To be clear, in 1816, portions of Indiana were not empty wilderness devoid of people and their impacts. Various groups of American Indians were present. So were about 70,000 Euro-Americans. But by today's standards

much of what became the state was wild land with uninhabited areas. We know this in part from the journal writings, art and publications of the period's early travelers and settlers.

Not all sources of information about Indiana's early landscape are dated 1816 or before. Later sources are also informative because much of the state remained relatively unaltered for decades. This is especially true for areas that were not particularly productive or easily altered by man, such as dry, rocky hills and deep wetlands.

An 1832 Karl Bodmer painting shows the mouth of the Fox River near New Harmony. The work illustrates the riverbank landscape where the Fox empties into the Wabash River. The large sycamore trees, with their mottled white bark, are draped with native grapevines upon which sit Carolina parakeets. These colorful birds were common in the state during the early 1800s. Now they are extinct.

Possibly the earliest visual depiction of the Hoosier landscape is a 1778 sketch made by the British military leader Henry Hamilton. While traveling down the Wabash, Hamilton encountered and drew a prominent rock precipice near modern-day Logansport. Although some changes have happened over the years, the cliff, on the edge of what has been known as Cedar Island or Rock Island, looks much the same today.

Not surprisingly, more writings of early Indiana exist than artwork. They often provide interesting reading but most furnish only general descriptions of the landscape, calling it “forest” or “prairie,” or some kind of wetland. Determining the landscape's species composition and precise location is often not possible. In some cases, however, the reader may be able to



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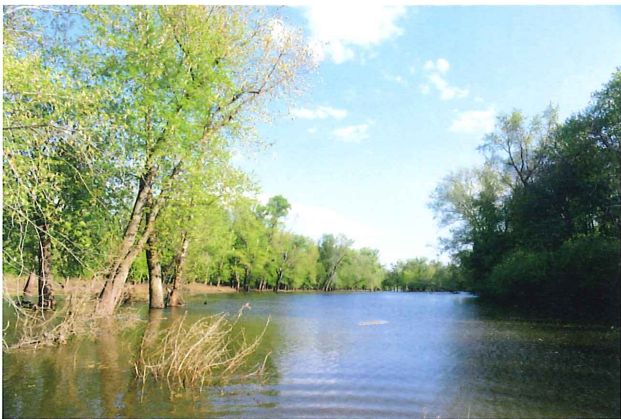
(Opposite) American basswood favors moist, rocky slopes, as shown along the Little Blue River in Crawford County. Almost 90 percent of early Indiana was forest when Indiana became a state. (Above) Passenger pigeons once flew in massive flocks that darkened the sky.



MS Eng 509.2 (32), Houghton Library, Harvard University



Frank Oliver photo



John Maxwell photo

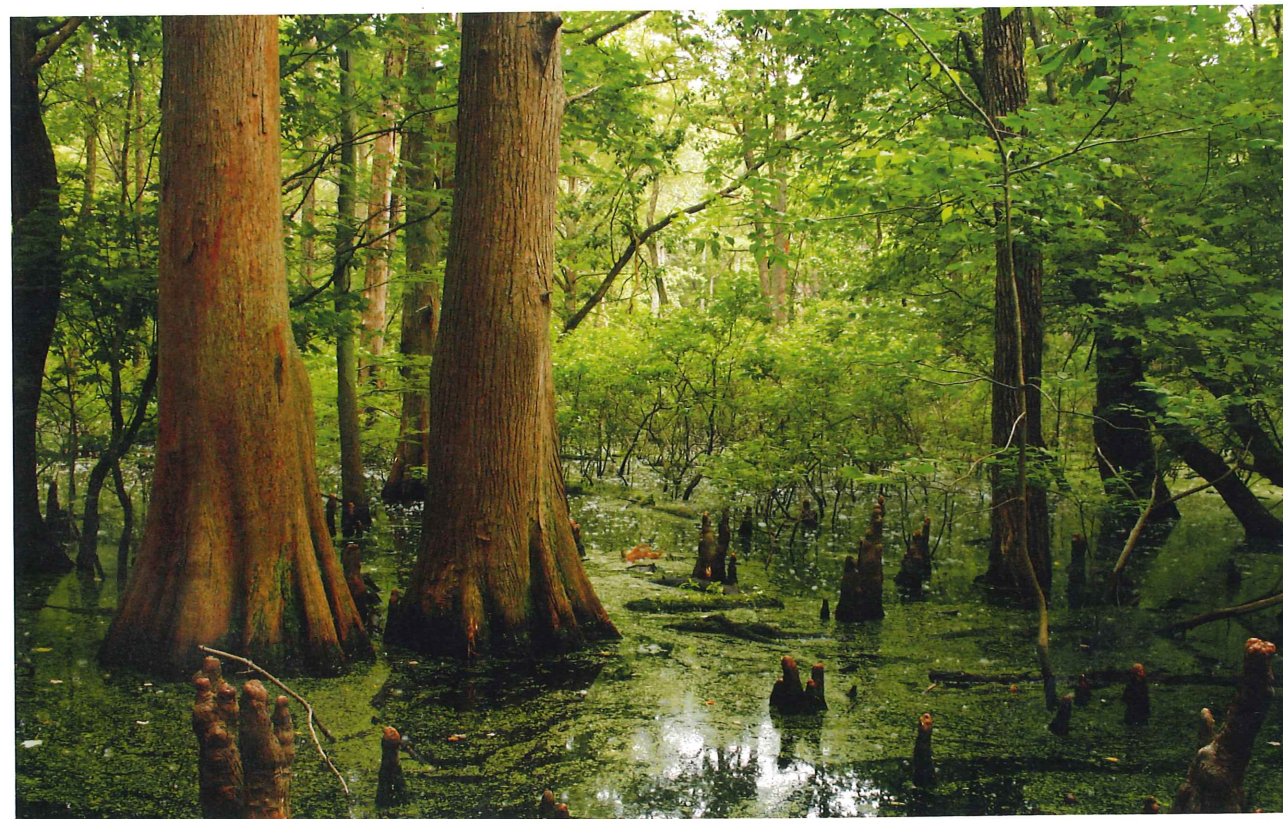
(Top and middle) Some early Indiana landscape scenes remain recognizable today. Compare the drawing and recent photo of Rock Island in the Wabash River near Logansport. The 1778 sketch by Henry Hamilton may be the oldest visual depiction of Indiana's landscape. (Bottom) This photo is from the same viewpoint as Karl Bodmer's 1832 painting (right) of the Fox River emptying into the Wabash River near New Harmony. Note the Carolina parakeets perched on the grapevines.



Karl Bodmer (Swiss, 1809-1893), Confluence of the Fox River and the Wabash, 1832, watercolor on paper, Joslyn Art Museum, Omaha, Nebraska, Gift of the Enron Art Foundation, 1986.49.63



(Above) Native grasslands are now extremely rare in Indiana. Remnants such as this one in Lake County are like natural wildflower gardens. (Below) As if transplanted from the Deep South, these bald cypress trees exist naturally at Twin Swamps Nature Preserve in Posey County. Bald cypress swamps occur as far north as Knox County, making those examples among the northernmost in the world. (Opposite page) KJ Kahnle's bison drawing, "Ready for Battle," kjkahnle.com.



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figure out the location from the description that fits a feature that still exists.

Consider the 1816 account by David Thomas of what is likely Hindostan Falls in Martin County.

"Last evening we heard the noise of falls at the distance of a mile or two over the hills; and on approaching, I found the water to pitch down about four feet over level sand rock, extending straight across the river. The thick woods on the opposite shore, the clear sky, the smooth expanse of water, the foam of the cascade, and the unbroken quiet, formed one of the sweetest scenes of solitude."

Not everyone had such sublime experiences. André Michaux offered an unfavorable opinion of Indiana's landscape in 1795 (see Plant Feature, page 11 in this issue). While traveling a portion of the Vincennes Trace, Michaux said:

"Of all the journeys I have made in America in the past 10 years this is one of the most difficult owing to the quantity of trees overturned by storms, to the thick brushwood through which one is obliged to pass; to the numbers of flies by which one is devoured, etc."

The most valuable and trustworthy information concerning Indiana's landscape comes from notes provided by the Public Land Survey. The surveys started in Indiana in the late 1700s and ended in the mid-1800s. The U.S. Government commissioned teams of surveyors to plat the entire state into townships. A township has 36 sections, each composed of 640 acres. Surveyors followed section lines to rate the land's quality for farming and indicate dominant vegetation and other notable features. The beauty of these notes is that the survey lines can be retraced on the ground. This allows comparisons to be made between the surveyor's notes and today's landscape.

The survey notes confirm the presence of things that are essentially absent today. They tell us American chestnut was common on the hilly knobs north of New Albany. They show bald cypress sloughs and impenetrable cane brakes—a type of bamboo—occupied thousands of acres along the lower Wabash and Ohio river lowlands. And they reveal the precise location of the Limberlost and Loblolly swamps near the home of Gene Stratton-Porter, author of "A Girl of the Limberlost."

Indiana was (and still is, to a lesser degree) a highly diverse state. Making a generalization about its historic landscape runs the risk of oversimplification. With that caveat in mind, a review of the survey notes shows that nearly 90 percent of Indiana was forested. Naturally, there were many types of forests, and the differences were typically controlled by soil nutrition and moisture, and topographic position.

The rest of the state was covered mostly by prairie and other treeless natural communities. Like the forests, there were different types of prairie. Each reflected differences in growing conditions, similar to those producing different forest types. The main difference was the presence of frequent fire. Fire and soil conditions are thought to have been major factors in keeping trees from invading and dominating the open prairie. There are

several early references to annual fires being set in autumn by indigenous people. Lightning, of course, also brought fire.

Most of the prairie occurred in the western half of the state. This was particularly true of the northwest, where Indiana's prairie was the eastern extension of the U.S. heartland's Grand Prairie. Within Indiana's portion of the Grand Prairie was Kankakee Marsh, an area famous for its extensive marsh and wet prairie lands that were filled with massive numbers of waterfowl and other game. But almost every county had some small areas of prairie. An example is Hamilton County's Conner Prairie.

In certain places the non-forested areas were identified as barrens. These typically were found on poor sandy or rocky soil and had grasses intermixed with scattered shrubs and stunted trees. One particularly large area of barrens, about 82,000 acres, was located on the sinkhole plain in the central portions of Harrison and Washington counties. A small Harrison County town is still known as Central Barren.

Another area of historic barrens, though much smaller, was southwest of Huntingburg in Dubois County. Within the barrens surveyors set a post along the section line describing the location: *"This post in a Pigeon roost where the ground is covered with dung and the trees generally stript (sic) of their branches."* For a nearby area along the survey line they wrote: *"An impassible briar thicket of unknown extent."*

The thicket was likely caused by passenger pigeon droppings. That was in 1805. A recent visit to the site revealed no post, and the roost and thickets have been replaced by neat rows of corn and beans. The passenger pigeon is considered by many to be the most numerous bird species ever to live on Earth. It became extinct in 1914.

Wild Indiana, beautiful as it was to some, invited others to change or "tame" it. The result is the Indiana we see today. Our predecessors would not recognize much of it. And most of us have no idea what was here.

Today only a handful of acres of prairie remain. Most wetlands, if present, have abnormal water levels. The percentage of remaining forest is relatively higher, thanks mostly to being protected by rugged topography. But much of our forest has been hurt by invasive exotic plants and diseases.

But there's good news, too. Our natural heritage survives in some places. Some even closely resemble their 1816 appearance. The DNR Division of Nature Preserves strives to identify, protect and maintain the best examples of these natural lands. As detailed at dnr.IN.gov/naturepreserve, the DNR has dedicated nearly 270 nature preserves throughout the state, approaching a total of 50,000 acres.

These nature preserves are for us and those who follow to benefit from and enjoy.

What better gift can there be to future generations than "original" Indiana? □

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KJ Kahnle artwork