Continuous Transformation
The Social and Economic History of Richmond

The social and economic history of Richmond and Wayne County is filled with all of the great transformations, expansions, migrations and innovations — and plagued by the same contradictions, conflicts and depressions — that animate the history of the entire country. It is this complex history that defines our present moment early in the 21st century, and that shapes our community’s decisions as we move collectively toward future transformations.

The Earliest Settlers

When the first European settlers arrived in the area now known as Wayne County in the beginning of the 19th century, they came upon a land that for many centuries had been part of complex and highly evolved civilizations. The Shawnee, Delaware and Miami Native American tribes all used this land, particularly the Whitewater Valley, and shared hunting and fishing grounds directly prior to the establishment of the settlement that would become Richmond. In the decades after the Revolutionary War, an expanding population in the Eastern states caused more and more families to push westward, looking for new land to create new communities. This expansion led to increasing friction between tribes such as the Shawnee, Delaware and Miami, and the migrating settlers that were supported by the new U.S. federal government and its army.

When the army commanded by General Anthony Wayne (after whom Wayne County was named) decisively defeated the army of the Western Lakes Confederacy at the Battle of Fallen Timbers in 1794, near present-day Toledo, Ohio, the decade-long Northwest Indian War came to an end. In 1795, the Treaty of Greenville was signed, whereby the Confederacy gave up claim to most of Ohio and a sliver of Indiana. The treaty line in fact ran just west of Richmond along what is now Salisbury Road. In 1811, the Battle of Tippecanoe in Western Indiana broke the back of another alliance of tribes and accelerated their migration further west. By 1816, a constitutional convention was held and Indiana became the 19th state in the Union. By 1840, the last of the Miami people, the tribe that had been most numerous in the Richmond region, were forcibly removed from Indiana.

The first substantial group of white settlers were Quakers, following pioneering Friends such as David Hoover, John Smith, Jacob Meek and Jeremiah Cox, who all settled here in 1806. Throughout the first decades of the 19th century they migrated mostly from North Carolina, finding in Wayne County abundant water, timber and building rock, along with fertile soil. Richmond was established as a major Quaker community in the United States. Whitewater Monthly Meeting was established in 1809 and soon had more than 800 members. The Friends Indiana Yearly Meetinghouse was the largest brick building in the region, erected in 1824, and a long-standing community dream was fulfilled in 1847 with the establishment of the Friends Boarding School, which would eventually become Earlham College.

As Quakers settled in the area, so too did many freed African Americans. Earlham Professor of History Thomas Hamm remarks that the history is somewhat unclear as to whether or not these people were descendents of slaves that Quakers emancipated in North Carolina, but it is clear that many “Freedmen” took common Quaker family names, signaling some relationship between the two groups. At the least, a substantial African American population was drawn to Richmond by the presence of the antislavery-minded Quakers. The Society of Friends, while certainly
not without racism of its own, was indeed much more racially enlightened than other contemporary white populations. Another example of this enlightenment can be seen in the Levi Coffin House (now a Museum) in Fountain City, one of many important Underground Railroad stops that existed in the region.

Growth and Development

Essential to Richmond’s continued growth and development as a market and manufacturing center were the components of its transportation system. Reaching Richmond in 1827 and crossing the Whitewater River in 1834, the National Road — the nation’s first federally financed road project — connected the community to established population centers in the East and growing ones to the West, allowing for products and people to enter and leave Richmond with greater ease. The failed attempt to connect Richmond to Cincinnati and the Ohio River through the Whitewater Canal in the late 1830s only brought more migrants, mostly of German and Irish descent, who came to work on the massive project. From the 1820s onward, Richmond had become a racially, religiously and ethnically diverse community.

Perhaps the development most important to the growth of Richmond was its location on various railroad lines. Trains not only brought people, raw materials and finished goods into the city, but they also offered a means for local farmers and manufacturers to ship their products elsewhere, whether sending hogs to Cincinnati meatpacking establishments, agricultural implements to the expanding western fields, or furniture and coffins to Dayton, Indianapolis, Chicago and other communities around the nation. Arriving first in the 1850s, the railroad undoubtedly played a huge role in making Richmond the city that it is today.

With fertile land, growing manufacturing and easy access to eastern markets via the railroad, Richmond had become the largest and wealthiest city in Indiana by the 1860s. It had emerged as the commercial, manufacturing and financial center of the region, and when it finally became obvious that the county seat should switch from Centerville to Richmond in the 1870s, it became an intellectual and political center as well. This period saw the further development of a substantial and stylish city center, along with an increased broadening of Richmond’s economic base.

After the Civil War, Wayne County gradually began to lose some of its preeminence in the state as population growth shifted both north and west, but it remained both a viable and vibrant community. Migrants continued to come into the city, mostly from the surrounding countryside to work in the growing manufacturing industry. Rural population growth caused a land crunch and technological developments in agriculture made it harder to break even financially while farming a modestly-sized lot. By 1920, Richmond made up 55.6 percent of the county’s total population, and it was still the 12th largest city in the entire state.

This continued success and prosperity through the first half of the 20th century was largely due to a strong local industrial and entrepreneurial spirit. From roller skates to automobile parts, from greenhouse-grown flowers to railway safety equipment, from pianos to caskets, from machine tools to flour milling and baking, Richmond nourished a rich blend of locally owned, thriving businesses and enterprises initiated by outside investors attracted by the city’s labor pool, shipping facilities, cultural character and other financial efforts to make the city more appealing to investment. Richmond was undoubtedly a manufacturing town, with 18.5 percent of its entire population being industrial wage earners in 1920.

The foundational industries of metalworking and woodworking remained prominent through the turn of the cen-
tury, although undergoing important changes. Wayne Agricultural Works moved to Richmond, producing wagons, grain drills and seeders along with several nonagricultural items. Lawn mower manufacturing mushroomed during this time period, with five different firms combining to reputedly make the city the largest producer in the world. The J.M. Hutton and Richmond Casket companies were largely responsible for the city’s reputation in 1910 as the world’s leading producer of burial caskets, while Starr Piano Works had to increase its production to meet the demand of an expanding market. During the prewar years, many companies shifted to automobile manufacturing, including Wayne Works, which produced the “Richmond,” a top-selling car of the time. Additionally, the Westcott, Pilot and Davis firms all made well-known automobiles, further establishing Richmond as a city with an outstanding industrial reputation. While change would continue in the decades to come, the community was in a solid position to maintain its success and prosperity well into the future.

The buildings from this time period conspicuously show its residents’ level of wealth. Looking at the Courthouse, Gaar House and East Main Street — also known as “Millionaires Row” — one can see Richmond’s past affluence. Out of this affluence grew Richmond’s present-day extraordinary cultural resources. Although Wayne County has only 70,000 residents, it supports an art museum and a history museum, a professional orchestra and a civic theater, as well as other arts opportunities that many larger cities would envy.

From approximately 1917 through 1970 there was a great wave of migration north from southern states as communities such as Richmond boasted largely stable and growing economies, especially during the postwar eras. Of course, the Depression, a notable exception to this stability, devastated Wayne County’s agricultural and industrial economies. Nonetheless, many white migrants came to Richmond from Kentucky and Tennessee, bringing with them to the town a rapidly expanding religious diversity. Many African Americans also moved north to find manufacturing jobs and live in larger communities together. Some relocated to Richmond, attracted by a vibrant black community that contained many large, influential black churches and a local black newspaper, on top of the expanding economy.

However, the vast majority of African Americans went to larger cities such as Dayton, Indianapolis, Cleveland, Detroit and Chicago. While some white Richmond residents had been historically friendly to the black community, African Americans were aware that the ugly scourge of racism did not leave this community unscathed. During the 1920s, Indiana had the strongest Ku Klux Klan organization of any state in the country, and records show that Richmond was a Klan stronghold, with up to 45 percent of all white, Protestant men having been KKK members at one time. This darkest of periods would quickly pass, but official segregation and unofficial discrimination would persist through the 1960s. Many Richmond residents have continuously worked and fought to rid their community of this horrible prejudice, and while certainly not perfect, Richmond is undoubtedly a much more tolerant, inclusive and hospitable community now, due to these extraordinary efforts.

**Recent History**

By the time this period of migration ended, Richmond was well into the middle of a particularly painful economic transformation brought on by both labor conflict and changes to the national and global economies. Bitter strikes beset the large International Harvester Plant near the railroad depot, leading to the plant’s closure in 1949. In the 1950s, Wayne Works became Wayne Corporation, a well-known bus manufacturer, and moved away from the city center to a site adjacent to I-70 in 1967. A leader in school bus safety innovations, the company was closed in 1992 during a period of industry consolidation. These were just two of many companies with deep roots in the community that either relocated or closed their doors. Like many other Midwestern cities, both big and small, Richmond has faced the
difficult task of seeking new sources of employment and prosperity in this new economic era of globalization.

The difficulty of this large-scale transformation was made worse when tragedy struck the city in 1968. On a sunny day in early April, a gas explosion shook the downtown area along Main Street. The effects were devastating: several blocks of downtown were destroyed or damaged, 41 people died and over 100 people were injured. The small size of Richmond meant that the entire community acutely felt the tragedy, and it took years for the survivors to recover. Many of the destroyed stores never reopened, and the struggles confronted by downtown in the face of a changing economy were exacerbated; for several decades the downtown had a very difficult time rebounding. Recently the movement to revitalize the city center, renamed Uptown, has gathered momentum. Residents, students and visitors continue to notice and enjoy the unique little shops lining the Uptown promenade.

Since 1970, the population of Richmond and Wayne County has stagnated as economic difficulties have proven difficult to overcome. Nevertheless, there is another migration to Richmond currently in progress. According to Howard Lamson, Earlham professor of Spanish and Hispanic Studies, Richmond’s Latino population was quite small prior to the 1990s, fluctuating between 15 and 50 people. In the past two decades, however, the local Latino community has grown to around 1,400 residents, the vast majority of them coming from Mexico. During the 1990s, a severe downturn in the Mexican economy combined with a booming U.S. economy led to massive Mexican immigration to communities all across the country, including Richmond. Like the Quakers, African Americans, Germans and Irish before them, the Mexican population has contributed greatly to the social, cultural and economic fabric of the community.

Optimism exists in the economic realm, as Richmond does its best to build upon its strong manufacturing legacy while expanding into other industries. The opening of the new Reid Hospital on the north end of the city will cement Richmond’s status as the health services center of the region, and many professionals are moving into the community.

In 2006, Richmond celebrated its bicentennial anniversary. In the past 200 years of migration and innovation, conflicts and depressions, this city has undergone many transformations, and it will see many more. Despite the difficulties of the last half century, Richmond has high hopes for itself. As it looks toward the future, the city continues to build upon a strong foundation of diversity, creativity and community.