

Wabash River

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The Wabash River is in the northern central part of the United States. The Wabash rises in western Ohio, flowing mostly across southwest Indiana, then turning and flowing along the Indiana-Illinois border before flowing into the Ohio River. Its western northern boundary lines are regular, but on the east, the Wabash river, flowing in an irregular south westerly course, cuts off nearly two sections from the northern corner and nearly three from the southern corner, leaving the central range, however, nearly complete. The southern line is about two miles and a half long in a direct line, but the regular outline is broken by the addition of the section on which the village of York is situated. The River is 824 km (512mi) long. The river has a drainage area of more than 85,000 sq. km (more than 33,000 sq. mi.)

People who lived near the river never called it by name, it was simply " the river" or "the King." It flowed comparatively straight from the point where it became the boundary between Illinois and Indiana. Then it suddenly made a big loop to the west. This loop was called an ox-bow loop.

The early flow of emigration coming up the Wabash River reached the territory of what is now Clark County. At the close of the War of 1812, the favorite site for immigration was the Wabash valley, and settlers from all parts of the country came here to live. The first family to settle in the present town of York was Thomas Handy and his family. Many of the early members of the community that gathered here were persons of culture and wealth. A society grew up in this vicinity that for years dominated the county.



The early settlers found the "bottoms" of this land well wooded. Sycamore and walnut trees made up the main growth. The soil of the bottomlands is a rich deposit enriched by the overflow of the river. The soil is a sandy loam, and is extremely productive. The river bank nowhere exceeds a height of twenty feet above the ordinary surface of the water, and from this the bottomland extends from one to three quarters of a mile, where a gentle rise brings one to the level expanse of Union Prairie.

According to Mrs. LaVenia Jones, the river froze completely over once. The ice was so thick that farmers hauled loads of corn from the Indiana side to the Illinois side of the river. Every few years the river would rise and take all the crops. The Illinois side built a levee which protected all the crops for Darwin, but it turned out that the levee pushed all the flood water to the Indiana side, ruining their crops, and some of their homes.

In 1901, the Wabash River was dredged. The purpose of this was to keep the river flowing more smoothly, and also to clean it out. A couple of years later, a much bigger project was proposed. The project was to cut a new channel for the river, doing away with the big bend. When the river

was cut into its new channel, the bend diminished perceptibly. The bend gradually grew less, and at last there was a dry riverbed.

The general surface of York township is level, with a slight inclination in the central part. This marks the line of drainage through Mill Creek, which, entering the northwest corner, passes diagonally to the Wabash a mile above York village. The creek has of late years formed a new channel, which operates from the old bed about three and a half miles from its mouth, and takes a more southerly course and empties into the Wabash River.

Terre Haute grew up along side the Wabash River, a river that was, in the past, a major transportation route. As the city of Terre Haute grew and business prospered, the demand for a bridge came about. The first wooden bridge opened Christmas Day, 1846, at the foot of Ohio Street supplementing the Farrington Ferry. The second and third bridges were located at the foot of Wabash Avenue, and the current twin structures are off Cherry and Ohio Streets. The purpose remains the same; only the designs and the materials used in construction have changed.

Until the railroads came into this area, all roads led to the Wabash River. There were many prosperous river ports, Darwin and York among them. Many steamboats carried freight as well as passengers, and some were built at the river ports to hold the merchandise that came up the river from New Orleans. Storekeepers from miles inland came to Darwin and York for stock for their general stores, coffee, tea, sugar, tools, muslin, furniture, and lanterns. All sorts of materials were transported on the Wabash River.

The last ferry still being used on the Wabash River operates at Darwin. This ferry operated until dark during the farming season. The last person to own the Darwin Ferry was Ted Snaverly. When he decided move south and abandon the Ferry, local farmers took over. The Darwin Ferry has been at its exact location for approximately 60 years.

Flat boats had no engines, were not propelled by oars, but simply floated down the Wabash, the Ohio, and the Mississippi to the New Orleans. Going back up the river was harder and was done by foot. Then the steamboat came along. This ended the need for people to walk up the River; they simply rode back up. The boats were very well furnished. Delicious food was served, and there was music and dancing. One of the first steamboats to navigate the Wabash River was the Victor. Its last trip to Terre Haute was in 1905. It sank soon after, but no one has been able to learn the details of the sinking. The fabulous era of flatboats and steamboats is gone but certainly not forgotten.

The Wabash River made great contributions to everyone and its surroundings. The boats were very useful to the nearby neighborhoods as well as the neighboring towns. The Wabash River will continue to contribute to transportation and also history.