

# A MISSION TO PRESERVE WHITESTOWN'S HISTORY

## One Resident's Quest to Create a Virtual Museum



Hancock Family, 4 Generations

A quick introduction. My name is Mike Hancock and for years now, I have been on a mission to preserve Whitestown's history. I am a lifelong resident of Whitestown, Indiana and a descendant of the William Laughner family, who came here from Greene County Tennessee and settled in the area of Worth Township in 1849. This area would later become Whitestown in 1851. My ancestors were business owners, pharmacists, bankers, farmers, weathermen, and they were strong contributors to the community in which they lived and raised their families. My parents still live in the home built by Ambrose Laughner in 1866; the same home where my dad was born.



My ancestors were witness to this town's earliest history and were a part of its first growth spurt with the coming of the railroad. They had a firsthand knowledge of the things I now seek to preserve. They played a part in building this town, and they

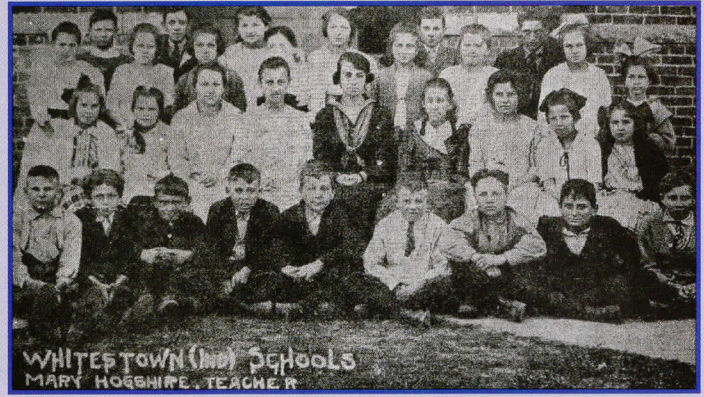
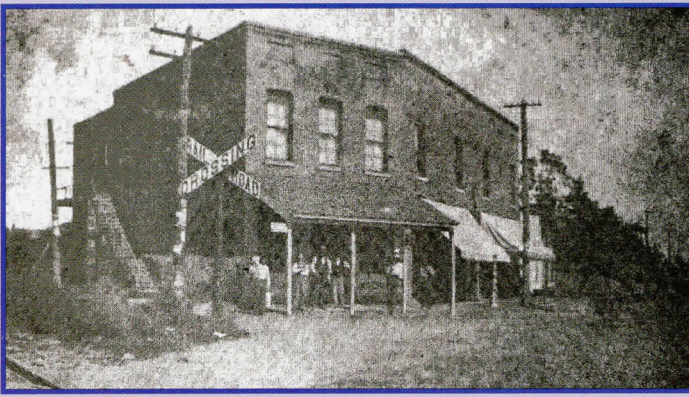


even bore witness to history as Abraham Lincoln's Inaugural Train passed through Whitestown in 1861, then again as his Funeral Train passed through during the night of May 1, 1865. It is said that about 100 people gathered around a single bonfire at 1:00 A.M. to witness the train's passage through town. In my mind, I can picture my ancestors standing around that fire in anticipation of the train's arrival.

I am certainly not the first person who sought to preserve Whitestown's history. Other names that immediately come to mind are Ralph Stark, Toby McDaniel, Janice West, Lois Lindley, Patty Anderson, and my grandmother Mary Louise Hancock (may those who have passed rest in peace knowing their work continues). All of them, and others, have contributed to the preservation of local history, but their work remains unknown to many, especially those new to the community. I think one of my biggest advantages in that respect is the availability of modern social media to gather and share information.

I was pleasantly surprised to see the occasional questions popping up on Facebook, asking about the town and some of its history. It was fun to read





the responses from some of the “old timers”, and I found it rewarding when I was able to share a photo to go along with a story. It was at this time that I thought it would be cool to gather together Whitestown information from various sources and make it available to everyone in one convenient place, a virtual museum of sorts, and that’s when the [Whitestownhistory.com](http://Whitestownhistory.com) website was born. The website is nothing too fancy and I haven’t even settled on a final layout yet, but I wanted to make the information available and I wanted to make it user-friendly.

I have been collecting Whitestown memorabilia where and when I can find it for the last several years, but the real spark for creating the website comes from the revelation that our town is experiencing tremendous growth and a boom in population as people move into the area from other locations. It was my fear that Whitestown history could be forgotten, and possibly lost forever, in the shuffle. So, you can probably imagine my excitement when the Town Council appointed me to serve on the Historic Preservation Commission beginning in January of 2018. I quickly learned that having a desire to preserve the past was the easy part - putting it to practical use would be a challenge. Yes, this old dog needs to learn some new tricks, and I began by signing up for a “basics of archives” course to gain knowledge and insight.

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I tend to be a visual person and I enjoy learning via the things I see and not just what I read, and that is reflected in my website, which includes many images.

Reading about the past is a good way to learn history, but looking into an old photograph provides a window to another time and makes it feel so much more real. They say a picture is worth a thousand words, but a picture can also convey emotion and a sense of being witness to an event. It’s like a time machine to our own backyard. Ansel Adams once said “A photograph is usually looked at - seldom looked into.”

It hasn’t always been easy to track down historical information, and it has proven even more difficult to gather physical items and memorabilia from days gone by, even after its location has been determined.

Janice West and her previous research have proven to be a valuable asset to my quest. Janice started researching Whitestown history in the 1970s, and has put much of her findings in written format, which I now make available on the website with her approval.

The ultimate goal is to establish a physical museum for the town, and some progress is happening toward making that a reality. A historic farm home has been identified that could one day house the Whitestown memorabilia that I, and others, have been collecting and storing on our own for decades. To that end, I have been in contact with David Ruffer Ph.D. at the Sullivan-Munce center in Zionsville and he has offered his assistance as someone who has already undertaken the process of establishing a museum. Mr. Ruffer told me that “Keeping the memory of a community is a responsibility inherited by each generation as a legacy to future generations.”





And I completely agree.

While I would like to see a museum right away, logistics dictate that the establishment of a brick and mortar museum is no easy task. Consideration must be given to temperature and humidity control, fire and theft prevention, protocols for acquisitions of items, preservation, storage, and proper display of items which may be irreplaceable. Policies and procedures need to be put into place to safeguard physical items for future generations, despite the fact that many of these items have been stored in less than ideal circumstances for the past decades.

The logistics and arduous task of establishing a physical museum is part of what makes a virtual museum such an attractive option. A website is cheap and relatively easy to update. It doesn't require specific atmospheric conditions. It's not going to burn down. It creates an everlasting digitized copy of the collection. And the entire collection can be on display and available 24/7.

In closing, the time is right to secure items and information significant to the history of our town lest they be lost forever. The task will not be easy but its impact will be long lasting and the reward will be the preservation of a simpler time and days gone by.

A motto once described Whitestown as a "Bridge to the past, gateway to the future" I believe a museum project embodies that very spirit and unites humble beginnings with modern growth, without ignoring the significance of either.

I am #WhitestownProud

Mike Hancock

