

Riverside City: Muncie's Forgotten Father

by

Jake Bottiglieri & Joe Ferguson

Abstract: The Riverside Historical District has its roots as the Delaware County suburb of Riverside City. This area has influenced the expansion of Muncie as a community and has had a great effect on present-day life in Delaware County, helping to bridge the gap between its modern college atmosphere and its original, turn-of-the-century aesthetic.

All the major towns in Delaware County, Indiana have their roots in the formation of Munseytown, which was laid out in 1826 by Goldsmith Gilbert, Lemuel Jackson and William Brown. The next four decades saw this area grow relatively slowly until 1886 when Munseytown, like many other areas of Indiana, was greatly effected by the discovery of natural gas in the area. At the time, many religious organizations thought they had inadvertently stumbled upon the mouth of Hell because of the fumes that emanated from the ground due to the gas. It, of course, was not Hell. In fact, for some time, this discovery of natural gas was a major boon to the area. Although this “gas boom” drew a lot of prosperity to East Central Indiana as industrial and manufacturing companies set up shop, it was short lived. In just fifteen years, the surrounding industries depleted all of the natural gas reserves. The industry in the area rebounded however, as the 1910’s and 20’s brought an increased demand in manufacturing due to World War I.

These occurrences did many things to sow the seeds of Riverside City. The area in Munseytown, north of the White River, which would eventually grow into Riverside, was first settled around 1887, directly following the start of the “gas boom.” The area became host to a whole slew of transplants seeking to find their fortune working using the area’s resources. With the floodgates open, there was an increased demand for suburban housing that was slightly removed from the densely populated city center of Muncie. Riverside was officially platted in April 1893. Buyers of these new suburban lots were offered a free trip to the Chicago World’s Fair as a purchasing incentive. [1] Riverside was initially developed solely as a suburb of Muncie and, at the time, had very little commercial development of industry. With Muncie being the core area of activity in Delaware County at the time of the “gas boom,” Riverside was developed to cater to the

needs of people that wanted to settle away from this feverous activity after a long day of work. Around 1892, before Riverside was even officially platted, a local newspaper contained a discussion that suggested that a university would be an appropriate addition to the neighborhood¹. [2] Over the next few years, additional residential sections were opened up in Riverside to the east and north of the original plat, making the area a popular middle class residential area.

At the turn of the century, Riverside City's streets, sidewalks, and other infrastructure elements needed to be repaired and modernized. Lacking the funds from the state to do these repairs, the town looked to voluntary assistance. Around this time, both Muncie and Normal City (a suburb just west of Riverside) began to eye this "beautiful suburb to the north" covetously. Muncie became very interested in annexing Riverside. During the period of industrial stagnation following the "gas boom," Muncie was anxiously looking for a way to increase its tax base. In May 1903, Riverside City was incorporated to both avoid annexation by rival towns and to enable taxation to help fund these civic improvements. Riverside City was divided into five wards and was administered by five trustees, a clerk, a treasurer and a marshal. [3]

In March of 1919, General Motors announced that it was going to construct a plant in Muncie. Anticipating a population spurt because of this plant, Muncie officials moved to annex all the platted territory within the township with the hopes to increase the number of taxpayers within the city limits. Days after General Motors' announcement, Riverside City was annexed by the city of Muncie. This mass annexation also increased

¹ Had this plan been realized, this "Riverside University" would have beaten out Ball State's inception by more than 25 years.

Muncie's bond limit, pushing it into the category of second-class city. This allowed Muncie to keep pace with places like Ft. Wayne, Terre Haute, and South Bend which was very important to city officials in this age of intense civic pride and boosterism. [4]

However, Riverside City's residents attempted to fight this annexation, filing a remonstrance (a formal protest) in the process. Many residents supported an autonomous Riverside, citing the suburbs lower tax rates and solvency, as well as the negative moral influence of the big city. Riverside's whole inception was to cater to those that preferred to reside away from the hustle and bustle of, what was at the time, a big city. For many residents, this annexation seemed to negate the very reason they moved to Riverside in the first place. Annexation supporters in Muncie argued that Riverside residents were already enjoying all the benefits of being around a bigger city without helping to pay any of the costs. This battle of infrastructure lasted three months and in June 1919, Riverside City officially became a part of Muncie.

Riverside's infrastructure is an example of early suburban development. Before the invention of the automobile, traffic from Riverside into Muncie was predominantly pedestrian and the class boundaries were, more or less, flat. Rich and poor lived side by side and there were no major distinctions between "good" and "bad" neighborhoods. As roads and methods of transportation improved however, upper and middle class residents were able to move away from the crux of the city while the poorer residents remained downtown. The advent of streetcars in Riverside City, around the time of its incorporation in 1903, helped all residents travel to the edges of town. [5] The industrialization that swept much of Delaware County at this time led to an increase in

noise and pollution, causing many residents to migrate to the suburban areas of Muncie and Riverside.

Although not normally common during this time, this migration led to a greater separation of residential and industrial areas. As mentioned, suburbs of this time functioned primarily as they do today, offering residents a sanctuary away from the bedlam of a major city while still maintaining a close proximity to allow easy access to services the city had to offer. The pinnacle of this idea was the garden suburb of the early to mid 1900's. Filling the gaps between residences with lush greenery and open spaces helped give off the illusion of country living to people that felt put upon by the chaotic way of living in the city. Ultimately, Riverside represented a transition phase between city and garden suburb living in terms of both time and style. Land came in spacious lots on tree-lined streets, but the city itself was constructed into a rigid grid of street synonymous to the layout of a city. This divide between city and rural living attracted a wide array of social classes to the area as well. Despite being always seen as a middle class neighborhood, Riverside has always had a diverse population. Houses large and small, along with more and less prosperous residents, have always been intermingled throughout the neighborhood; therefore, it represents a typical middle class suburb of the past and the present.

Although Riverside City lost the battle of its annexation, its influences continue to touch the Delaware county community to this day. The district has remained a residential area through all of its existence. Although years before Ball State University graced the Muncie community with its presence, the university Riverside City was close to developing may have turned the entire area into a collegiate suburb. Had the university

been constructed, the institution could have given Riverside City the leverage it needed to remain sovereign. Muncie could have very easily suffered the fate of Riverside had it not annexed all adjacent towns when it did. Although Riverside is now a mere district of Muncie, it has become the paragon for how Middle America, more specifically, the “rust belt” was effected by the burst of the industrial bubble and years of economic downturn. Still, the district shows the importance of having a strong communal infrastructure.

Riverside’s importance cannot be understated. It would seem that presently, we live in a time obsessed with looking towards the future, and how we can continue advance towards it faster and faster. In this age that favors this veritable “running” towards future technological and social advancements, we tend to gloss over the things that shape the towns and communities as we live in them today. America, in its current state, isn’t that old of a country; there aren’t thousand-year old ruins left over from ancient civilizations. We don’t have archaic castles jutting out from cliff-sides like in Western Europe. What we do have are remnants of the industrial age that are just as rich in historical importance as any other culture’s artifacts. American life has changed drastically since the days of Riverside City, but one of the things that has always been a constant in America’s history is a dependence on a strong willed working class to keep the gears of society in motion. From the days when plants and factories lined the corners of Delaware County, to today where people work retail jobs, the working class has never left the Riverside District. As stated before, Riverside is still very integrated in terms of class, and these workers have formed the backbone of industry since people began to settle here in the 19th century. Had certain events in time shifted, Riverside could possibly have its rich, historical significance in the limelight of Hoosiers across the state.

Welcoming a collegiate atmosphere, as stated before, could have been the tipping point. Before Ball State became a part of Muncie history, Riverside City was offered its own college. The kind of prestige and community standards that surround a university must have been enticing to the residents of the district. Bringing a college into a community changes its atmosphere indefinitely just as Ball State has done for the Muncie community.

Now that it has become a Historic District, the future of Riverside depends heavily on the future of Muncie. With the American economy just barely beginning to rebound after the 2008 Economic Crisis, things may begin to move forward across the rust belt. With new plants and other factories beginning to open up in the Midwest, a second industrial boom would have the potential to bring much prosperity back to Muncie and all of its districts contained therein. More people are going to college now than ever before, and Ball State University has attracted a wide population of students from across the United States that have diversified the community's culture and zeitgeist. With a continual flow of undergraduates, Riverside's recognition as a historically rich, cultural artifact will continue to grow amidst this ever-expanding collegiate community.

Sources Cited:

1. Advertisement, Muncie Morning Star (July 8, 1893), 8.
2. "Riverside: Residents Want to Locate an Educational Institution in this Beautiful Suburb," Muncie News. August 11, 1892, p.1.
3. "Now 'Riverside City,' Incorporation Wins," Muncie Morning Star (May 19, 1903), 3.
4. "Opposition in Suburbs Not Feared," Muncie Evening Press. (March 22, 1919), 8.
5. Emerson's Muncie Directory. 1903-04, p.21.