INDIANA AT 200

A CONVERSATION ABOUT THE FUTURE

KEIRA AMSTUTZ
In 1825, just nine years into statehood, Indiana underwent a major governmental change for the sake of shifting demographics. Actually, the shift was set into motion five years earlier when a group of men met in a tavern on the banks of the White River in the area that became Indianapolis. Recognizing that Indiana’s growing population was migrating to the north, these men believed it made sense to relocate the capital from Corydon to the center of the state—more specifically, to the area around the tavern where they were meeting.
There was just one problem: Others wanted the state government to remain in Corydon. In fact, that faction was so determined—and apparently so aware that a move might be proposed—that, as they helped write the constitution in 1816, they included a clause saying the capital could not move for nine years. Of course, we know how this tug of war played out. As soon as the constitutional ban on moving the capital expired, our state government relocated to Indianapolis.

While this story offers an interesting nugget of Indiana history, it also foreshadows a question we face today: Will we, like those men in John McCormick’s tavern, recognize and embrace a shifting reality, and the opportunities it presents, or will we, like those who inserted Article 11, section 11 into the 1816 constitution, resist looming change?

At its core, history focuses on moments like those—times when people and change collide. Think about it: Our history books say little about eras when change was not a factor. They do not give us page after page about people living in calm and steady times. Instead, we learn about people who provoked change, or those who harnessed it, leveraged it, or overcame it. On the other hand, we also hear of those who were undone, overwhelmed, or defeated by change.

In part, it is this notion of history as the relationship between people and change that inspired Indiana Humanities to partner with the Indiana Historical Society during this bicentennial year and to contribute to this issue of Traces. It is a partnership that makes sense: The IHS collects, preserves, and shares the state’s history, and Indiana Humanities convenes and facilitates, encouraging Hoosiers to think, read, and talk about matters that are important to our state and its communities. In these roles both organizations strive to examine and understand times of change in Indiana’s
history and then hold that history up as a means for strengthening Indiana in the present and future.

And what do we find when we look for such stories in our past? We find pioneers who carved out a civilization from the wilderness and farmers who coaxed increasing bounties from the land. We find makers and manufacturers, artists and innovators. We find patriots, statesmen, and citizens who acted out of love for their state. We find people who were seldom on the cutting edge but, as a result, seldom suffered the setbacks that visit those who plunge blindly forward. We find people who are fiercely independent and yet fiercely loyal to the communities in which they live.

In each of these cases, we see people who confronted or created change and left the state a better place as a result. Now we live the lives that future generations will call history. And we face our own defining changes. The question is, what kind of stories will future generations tell? What will they say about how we dealt with change?

Certainly, as we walk through our era of change, we should look to our past for guidance. For example, with an immigrant population that has more than doubled in the last fifteen years—with Burma, Mexico, and India sending the most immigrants to Indiana—we should consider what can be learned from Indiana's early twentieth century, when European immigrants arrived in droves. As we address resource limitations, we should study the way Hoosiers responded in the early 1900s, when natural-gas shortages led manufacturers to leave the state. And in a time of transportation innovation—think bicycle lanes, car shares, mass transit, and driverless cars—we should examine the state's experiences with canals, railroads, the advent of the highway, and the interurban.

Inset: Aerial view of the Soldiers and Sailors Monument under construction, circa 1892, taken from atop a building on South Meridian Street in Indianapolis. Above: A modern view of the Soldiers and Sailors Monument looking down Market Street from the Indiana Statehouse.
As we see our population migrate from rural to urban areas, leaving small towns struggling for resources and vitality, we could look to the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when industrialization pulled workers away from farms and into cities. Maybe we can look to those same times for lessons about how to deal with a marketplace where blue-collar manufacturing jobs become scarcer, as they are replaced by jobs requiring more education and technical skills.

And as our lifestyles change—as we reconsider the kinds of neighborhoods we want to live in and the ways we want to travel from place to place—we should think about what we can learn from the era when Hoosiers first started to own cars, or from the days when suburbia first blossomed around Indiana cities.

Our history, the stories people will tell about us, will be shaped by how we respond to these changes. So how do we shape this future? How do we ensure that we look like a people who saw change as opportunity and not people who simply resist inevitable change?

- **WE LEARN.** We immerse ourselves in knowledge, insights, wisdom, and interpretation of our past, present, and future.

- **WE ENGAGE.** We talk, connect, debate, and discuss. We think, read, and talk.

- **WE DREAM.** We imagine what we want our future to be and what we want future Hoosiers to know about us.

- **WE ACT.** We participate in our communities, we vote, we speak out, we explore, and we stake out new territories of thought, business, commerce, and art.

Hoosiers take great pride in their history. We admire our forebearers and appreciate our ancestors. That is good and appropriate. But we must also take pride in the history we are creating, and we must be aware that the state’s future will be shaped in large part by the ways we tackle the change confronting us.

In Indiana’s earliest days, two groups of men got a glimpse of Indiana’s future. They saw a state that was moving northward. One group’s response was to defend its position; the other’s was to seize opportunity.

I challenge Hoosiers to seize opportunity. To learn, engage, dream, and act. To recognize the lessons of the past and write the history of tomorrow. And to leave a legacy that will encourage future historians to say, “They faced change and they made the most of it—and they left the state a better place as a result.”

Keira Amstutz is president and CEO of Indiana Humanities, which is encouraging Hoosiers to think, read, and talk about the Next Indiana.