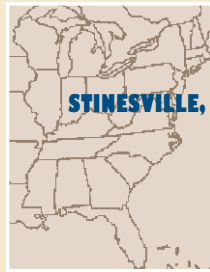


AMERICAN PLACES



STINESVILLE, INDIANA

Bringing Back Stinesville

BY NANCY HILLER

IN THE WELL OF A LUSH VALLEY in the heart of limestone country, 14 miles northwest of Bloomington, lies the little town of Stinesville, Ind. Founded in 1855, Stinesville was a hub of the state's stone industry for decades. The quarrying, milling and carving that sustained the town's inhabitants and gave them a distinctive culture contributed to such Indiana landmarks as the 1902 State Soldiers and Sailors Monument, which stands at the center of Indianapolis, and Chicago's Tribune Tower, completed in 1925.

The story of Stinesville parallels that of countless rural settlements that once were thriving centers of regional culture but fell on hard times when, for one reason or another, their centers failed to hold. In Stinesville's case, the bottom dropped out when the Hoadley Limestone Mill, the town's primary employer, was destroyed by fire in 1916, casting the town into a classic cycle of decline.

With the chief provider gone, subsidiary businesses left town or closed, and their employees moved away. The population, which had once

PHOTOGRAPHY BY MARK LONGACRE, EXCEPT WHERE NOTED



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THE LITTLE TOWN OF STINESVILLE, IND., LIES ON STINESVILLE ROAD (MAIN STREET, IN TOWN), OFF OF STATE ROAD 46, 14 MILES NORTHWEST OF BLOOMINGTON.



WITH THE AID OF A LOW-INTEREST LOAN FROM BLOOMINGTON RESTORATIONS, INC. (BRI), A LOCAL PRESERVATIONIST RESTORED THE QUEEN ANNE-STYLE CHURCH UP MAIN STREET FROM THE STINESVILLE MERCHANTILE.

reached a high of around 1,500, dropped sharply. Abandoned houses fell into serious disrepair; many eventually decayed and collapsed. Even those that were maintained suffered such indignities as trash skipping down the streets where children had once played and junked cars sprouting in abandoned kitchen gardens.

By the early 1990s, the population had stabilized at around 200. But, with its main-street “Merchantile,” a striking limestone storefront dating back to 1886, the town still had a recognizable center that embodied its twofold heritage of quarrying and small-town Midwestern architecture.

When Jim and Kay Wright-Kaiser happened upon the place in 1994, they fell in love with it. They bought a home and opened an eclectic whole-foods restaurant, the Quarry Diner, in a limestone building across from the Merchantile that had once been a gas station and grocery. The diner offered such savory dishes as eggplant parmesan, quiches and hearty, wholegrain gridle cakes. The mix of good food and small-town

surroundings drew patrons from as far away as Indianapolis, an hour to the north.

In the words of the town’s longtime postmaster, though, “it wasn’t Stinesville food.” Pam Bayne, who with her husband, James, has owned the Merchantile store-cum post office since 1992, says local residents have historically been “meat-and-potatoes folks” who, when offered espresso, would politely decline. “They’d rather drink Folgers or Maxwell House,” she says. After a run of more than five years, the restaurant closed; operating a service business in such a rural location ultimately proved just too hard.

An Unexpected Legacy

But the Quarry Diner bequeathed Stinesville a valuable legacy: it had introduced the town to hundreds of outsiders—among them members of Monroe County’s preservation group, Bloomington Restorations Inc. (BRI), whose affordable housing committee is dedicated to seeking out promising remnants of small-town culture.

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BRI was founded in 1976 as a not-for-profit foundation dedicated to historic preservation in Monroe County. For most of its history, BRI has been run by determined and industrious volunteers.

“Though the organization has faced more than its fair share of challenges and opposition, it has had some memorable successes,” says executive director Steve Wyatt. “Members played a key role in saving the county courthouse, which had been slated for demolition and now, some 30 years later, is cherished as Bloomington’s most famous architectural symbol. BRI also helped

restore Bloomington’s former Carnegie Library, which now houses the Monroe County Historical Museum.”

For BRI, Stinesville invited dreaming: *What if this enchanting little town could be brought back to life?* The Merchantile and the Queen Anne–style church a block away at the top of the hill could anchor the project, providing stature and coherence. Revitalizing the town would take vision, money and a lot of hard work, but the organization’s preservation and housing specialists believed it might be possible. Stinesville’s historic poverty had kept most of its houses small, which meant they could still be purchased at (comparatively) modest prices. Although the cost of restoration would ordinarily make the properties too expensive for low-income buyers (the town’s median per capita income in 2000 was less than \$12,000, while that of Indiana as a whole was just under \$20,400), the houses could be kept affordable if BRI could obtain a state grant designed to encourage such rehabilitation.



THE HOADLEY HOUSE, ABOVE CENTER, WHICH HAD BEEN THE HOME OF THE OWNERS OF STINESVILLE’S LIMESTONE WORKS, WAS THE FIRST OF THE TOWN’S HISTORIC STRUCTURES TO BE RESTORED (A SIMILAR HOUSE IS AT LEFT). THE TOWN’S OLD DOCTOR’S OFFICE, NOW ALSO RESTORED, (ABOVE, RIGHT) IS A DIMINUTIVE, 450-SQUARE-FOOT HOME THAT WAS SOLD IN 2006 FOR \$45,000.



Beginning Again

As it turned out, they did get the funding — from the Indiana Housing and Community Development Authority. BRI completed its first Stinesville project with the restoration of the historic Hoadley House, which had been constructed near the end of the 19th century for the family whose limestone works had contributed so centrally to Stinesville’s one-time prosperity.

“We chose to do the Hoadley House first because one of our volunteers, Peggy Shepherd, had seen that it was for sale and almost decided to buy it herself, then decided instead to bring it to our attention,” says Steve Wyatt, BRI’s executive director.

Peggy, a hard-working preservationist who died last summer in her mid-50s, introduced many people to Stinesville (and the Quarry Diner) over the years. She moved from one old house to another, restoring each building’s structural fabric and creating interiors that were always sensitive to the houses’ architectural characters. Her most recent project entailed dismantling an old timber-framed barn and moving it to the countryside close to Stinesville, where she had it reassembled, then transformed it into an energy-efficient home — still perfectly

recognizable foremost as a barn — that stands as a monument to the historic architecture of rural Indiana. (See photo, below.)

“Peggy knew that the Hoadley House was exactly what we were looking for — a landmark



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historic property in need of substantial repair,” says BRI’s Steve Wyatt. Guided by a 1912 photograph, the BRI team created a diminutive three-bedroom home that today, with its artfully rebuilt front porch, positively shines in the morning sun.

BRI also managed the restoration of the town’s old doctor’s office. A tiny frame structure with kicked eaves and a cozy front porch that once functioned as an outdoor waiting room, the office was built in the 1890s. After being restored



and made habitable, the 450-square-foot cottage was sold to a local social-service worker in 2006 for \$45,000.

BRI then stepped in to save the Queen Anne–style church, whose congregation had long since moved on, by buying it then turning around and putting out the call for someone else to buy and restore it. That call was answered by Mark Stoops, a local preservationist. With the aid of a low-interest loan from BRI, he converted the structure into an open-plan residence. He left the ground floor close to its original lay-

out, partitioning off just enough space for a small bathroom (furnished with a salvaged clawfoot tub and pedestal sink) and kitchen. He commissioned a local metalsmith to weld up a space-saving circular staircase and created a bedroom loft overlooking the church’s main floor. In 2006, with most of the work complete, a young couple bought the property.

BRI’s affordable-housing effort in the town includes an ambitious infill development that will feature three small bungalows designed by Bloomington architect Marc Cornett, a longtime advocate of the bungalow as a worthy genre for new construction. (Cornett’s bungalow designs were used for the South Dunn Street development in Bloomington, reported on in AB No. 52, Winter 2006.) Like the other homes, these new ones will be sold to buyers with incomes at or below 80 percent of the county median.

THE BIG CREEK LIMESTONE COMPANY, ABOVE, CONTINUES STINESVILLE’S HISTORIC QUARRYING HERITAGE. A NEW BUNGALOW, LEFT, IS ONE OF THREE THAT MAKE UP A SMALL INFILL DEVELOPMENT OF AFFORDABLE HOMES.



PAM AND JAMES BAYNE STAND IN FRONT OF THE STINESVILLE MERCHANTILE STORE AND POST OFFICE WITH THEIR DOGS LUCY AND STUBBY. THE MERCHANTILE AND THREE ADJOINING STOREFRONTS ARE UNDERGOING RENOVATION. THE COTTAGE BELOW IS ONE OF AN INCREASING NUMBER OF HISTORIC HOMES THAT STINESVILLE RESIDENTS HAVE RESTORED ON THEIR OWN, ENCOURAGED BY SIGNS OF THE TOWN'S RENEWAL.

Reviving the “Merchantile”

Like so many others, James Bayne found Stinesville by chance. A young insurance agent with a sizable region to service, James decided one day in 1976 to look for a shortcut between clients through a couple of northwest Monroe County towns. His route took him through Stinesville, and he was instantly taken with the little village with its quaint homes and impressive country store. When he and his betrothed, Pam, married, they settled here.

In 1992, the Postal Service offered early retirement to the Merchantile’s then-owner and postmaster, and he put the building up for sale. The Baynes, who had fantasized about owning the building when they first came to Stinesville, bought it, and Pam took over as postmaster. They still operate it today.

The two-story Merchantile itself has been substantially restored, but the adjoining single-

story storefronts still await rehabilitation. While pursuing its residential projects, BRI has been using the results of an Indiana Department of Commerce Community Focus Fund Planning Grant to work with the town council and a group known as Stinesville Renaissance to fix up the group of buildings for adaptive reuse.

Signs of Renewal

Downtown, gardens of shrubs and flowers have replaced jacked-up cars. Encouraged by the unmistakable signs of renewal, several individuals have privately worked their own transformations. One family restored a small cottage, now painted sage green with burgundy doors and cream-colored trim. A neighbor up the street chose red with spruce-green trim for her Queen Anne cottage. In a world where claims of “New!” and “Better!” are almost deafening, Stinesville’s quiet renewal after nearly a century of decline is proof that new isn’t always better. Sometimes, old can work. 🏠

Furniture maker and writer Nancy Hiller lives in Bloomington, Ind. Her last article for American Bungalow, “Miracle on South Dunn Street,” appeared in the Winter 2006 issue.

