

A Brief History of Chesterton



(All historical photos courtesy of the Westchester Township History Museum)

Location: The town of Chesterton is located in Westchester Township, Porter County, Indiana and is about 50 miles southeast of Chicago, close to the southern shore of Lake Michigan and the sand hills known as the Indiana Dunes.

First People: Part of a great continental crossroads, the area was for thousands of years home to a succession of early people attracted to its rich animal and plant life. The Miami and Potawatomi of the Great Lakes Woodland Culture were the last of the Native American cultures to hunt and farm the area's densely forested land.

Contact with the French fur traders known as voyageurs began about 1650. The resulting fur trade was initially beneficial to both cultures, but ultimately disastrous for the Potawatomi who, after selling their land to the U.S. government, were forcibly removed from Indiana to the Kansas Territory in 1838.

Wars and Conquest: Control of the Great Lakes region passed to the British in 1763 with the victory over the French in the French and Indian war, and to the new nation of the United States at the conclusion of the American Revolution in 1783. What would later become Chesterton formed part of the Northwest Territory until the creation of the Indiana Territory in 1800, and then the state of Indiana in 1816.

Founding Families: In 1822 Joseph Bailly, a French-Canadian fur trader, moved with his wife Marie and their family to land that would be part of Westchester Township. He established a trading post on the Little Calumet River, the primary waterway in the township. The Bailly Homestead is now one of two historic homes included within the Indiana Dunes National Lakeshore.

In 1833 Jesse and Jane Morgan and their seven children settled in the area southeast of the present town of Chesterton. They established a stage house on the Detroit to Fort Dearborn (now Chicago) stagecoach road (now Porter Ave.), cleared their land and began farming. They were followed in the next year by the Thomas family, founders of Chesterton, and shortly thereafter by an influx of pioneers from the eastern and southern states.

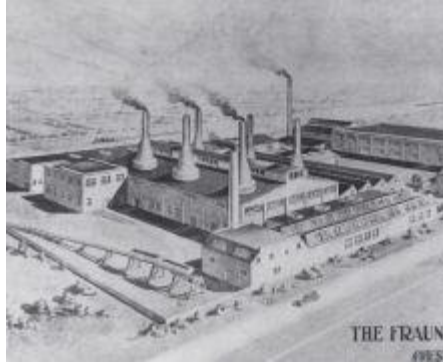
Founding of Chesterton: The community of Coffee Creek, named after a nearby stream, was settled in 1834 by the Thomas family. The town was renamed Calumet in 1850 and in 1852 was platted for the first time. In 1870 the town's name was changed to Chesterton because of the confusion caused by another town named Calumet on the same railroad line.



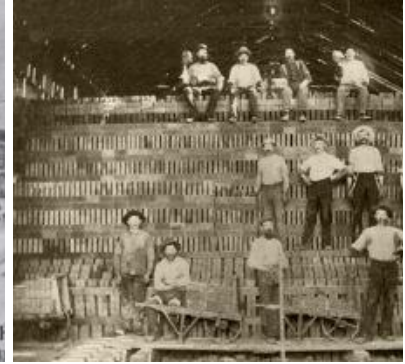
Railroads, Immigration and Growth of Industry: The building of the Lakeshore and Michigan Southern through Chesterton in 1852 transformed the little village from a strictly agricultural community into a thriving rail center for far more than just agricultural products. Immigrants from Ireland, Germany, Sweden and other countries were attracted to the area to help build and maintain the railroads and later to work in the brick, organ, glass and china factories that were established in the area.



Chesterton Depot



Chesterton China Factory



Brickyard Workers



Population and Cultural Growth: Between 1850 and 1910 the population of Chesterton grew to 1,400. The town incorporated in 1869 and again in 1899, after the first incorporation failed. Numerous churches were established in town and the original schoolhouse was replaced by a brick building in 1879. The Chesterton Tribune was founded in 1884 and the Chesterton State Bank in 1890. A great variety of civic and social groups were founded during the same sixty-year period.



St. John's United Church



First United Methodist Church—1914



First United Methodist Church



St. Patrick's Church



St. Patrick's Church Interior



Chesterton Grade School



Chesterton Tribune Baseball Team



Men's Parade—1909

Two devastating fires destroyed much of the Chesterton downtown in 1888 and 1902 and resulted in the creation of the Chesterton Fire Department and the rebuilding of the commercial area in brick.



Chesterton Fire Department



Merchant's
Carnival—1893



Town Hall and Fire Station

In 1906 the founding of US Steel in Gary brought well-paying jobs for many Chesterton residents.

In 1908 the opening of the South Shore and South Bend Railroad, close to the shore of Lake Michigan, brought Chicago tourists to the Indiana Dunes and helped to establish the area as a recreational destination. Members of the Prairie Club helped to draw attention to the beauty and importance of the Dunes. Their efforts to save the dunes from commercial exploitation eventually helped to create the Indiana Dunes State Park in 1923.



Depression and World Wars: The period from 1910-1945 was one of great hardship but also new opportunities for area residents.

From 1911-1922 the Gary Interurban Railroad provided public trolley service for Chesterton residents traveling to LaPorte, Gary and Valparaiso.

By 1920, Chesterton women had gained the right to vote (August 26, 1920) and began to work outside the home in area factories and small businesses. The town's residents were for the first time enjoying such features of modern life as the automobile, electricity, and telephone service and band concerts in the town's new bandstand in Thomas Park (1924). The 1920's also saw the opening of the Indiana Dunes State Park and the newly constructed Dunes Highway (Rt. 12), the first paved east-west road through Westchester Township.

Although the Great Depression caused hardship to many residents of the town, local businesses such as the Chesterton Tribune and Chesterton Bank survived the Depression. New Deal programs such as the WPA and the CCC brought relief to those who were most in need.

The opening of Littleville, Chesterton's miniature town, brought delight to area children and adults, as well as visitors from surrounding states.

While many local men and some women served in the military during the two world wars, citizens on the local home front contributed in efforts to increase farm production and worked in area factories and steel mills to produce parts for the military.

The opening of the 440-seat Aron Theatre on Broadway in 1942 provided much needed recreation for war-weary citizens.



Gary Interurban on Broadway



Smith Store Interior



Bartel's Hardware Interior



Waugh Brothers Garage



Leslie Pratt at Chesterton
Dry Cleaners



Chesterton Bank

Chesterton Bandstand



Littleville

HF Carlson Grocer



New York Central Train
Wreck—1941



World War II Scrap Drive



Aron Theatre

1945-2000: Following World War II, Chesterton experienced tremendous population growth as new residents flooded into the area to take advantage of new industrial jobs, including Bethlehem Steel's Burns Harbor plant, north of Chesterton, on the shore of Lake Michigan. The Indiana Toll Road 80/90 (1955) and Interstate 94 (1972) were built north and south of Chesterton tying it closer to both Chicago and to the eastern states.

To meet the needs of the expanded population, new schools and a new library were built, a YMCA founded, new businesses opened and many new housing developments were constructed. In 1952 Chesterton commemorated the centennial of the first platting of the town with a week long celebration. The first Chesterton Art Fair was held seven years later in 1959. The 1970's saw the beginnings of the area's Oz Festival and the summer Friday night films in Thomas Centennial Park.



Thompson Dairy



Centennial Parade—1952



Turtle Races

In 1962 Bethlehem Steel began construction of its Burns Harbor plant, and in 1967 the town of Burns Harbor was established. The creation of the Indiana Dunes National Lakeshore in 1966, although criticized by a small minority of local citizens, was applauded by most as a means to safeguard and preserve the unique beauty of the Indiana Dunes.

Citizens debated the Equal Rights Amendment, the Vietnam War, civil rights, and the environmental movement, but generally supported the successful campaign to defeat the construction of the Bailly Nuclear Plant on the shore of Lake Michigan, just west of Dune Acres in the 1980s.

In 1998 the Westchester Township History Museum was created as a cultural and educational service by the Westchester Public Library. Chesterton's downtown was added to the National Register of Historic Places as a Commercial Historic District in 1999.

Beyond 2000: The new century began with a major crisis, the bankruptcy of Bethlehem Steel and the closing of the Burns Harbor plant. Chesterton residents were hit hard as the ramifications of the loss of the area's largest employer and tax payer resulted in layoffs of steel workers and major financial hardships for area businesses, town government, the Westchester Public Library and the Duneland School Corporation.

Beginning in 2003, with the purchase of the Burns Harbor plant by I.S.G., the area slowly recovered. Unemployment decreased and the local economy began to grow again. ArcelorMittal, a major international steel corporation, purchased the steel mill in 2008, contributing to area citizens' confidence in local employment.

With the national recession of 2008 and 2009 many Chesterton residents faced layoffs, unemployment and hardship, but an array of dedicated local civic organizations stepped up to help relieve the challenges caused by the financial crisis as the local economy slowly recovered.

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Westchester Township History Museum,
An educational service of the Westchester Public Library

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To learn more about the history of Westchester Township visit the

**Westchester Township History Museum
In the Historic Brown Mansion**

700 W. Porter Avenue
Chesterton, IN 46304
(219) 983-9715

Exhibits, Research, Tours, and Museum Store

Hours:
Wednesday-Sunday 1-5pm

Admission is free of charge; group tours arranged by appointment.

Website: www.wpl.lib.in.us/museum

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