

# Key to the City

## Richard Ford Shaping Wabash's Future

By Symone Salisbury

**N**ame a project taking place in Wabash and chances are Richard Ford is involved in it. In the tradition of his grandfather Edwin (founder of the Ford Meter Box Company, which manufactures water meter equipment) and great-grandfather James (a Civil War surgeon who started a home-based physician's practice), Ford has become a community leader. He is known for his tireless commitment to the arts, historic preservation and economic growth.

Accomplishments and volunteer service include his role as past chairman for the National Trust for Historic Preservation, designation as an "Indiana Living Legend" by the Indiana Historical Society, two Sagamores of the Wabash and recognition as a Distinguished Citizen of both Indianapolis and Wabash.

A philanthropist whose actions have produced state, national and international benefits, Ford's accomplishments are exceeded only by his humility. This was learned firsthand when he treated BizVoice® to a tour of the city and a luncheon at his residence with several key community leaders.

### Background

It's shortly before 10 a.m. when we arrive at Ford's residence – the same house where he grew up, just north of downtown. Joining us is Beth Stein, executive director of the Charley Creek Foundation founded by Ford.

Pulling out of the stone driveway, Ford points to the surrounding homes he purchased to promote artistic workshops, provide lodging for partners of Charley Creek Foundation projects and preserve his family history (one house he bought previously belonged to his grandparents).

In 1961, Richard graduated from Indiana University with a bachelor's degree in business. He later helped his alma mater establish the Ford-Crawford Hall, an auditorium in the Jacobs School of Music.

En route to our first destination, Ford begins to describe his early career experiences.

After graduating from college, he moved to Washington, D.C. where he held a sales position. "I wasn't cut out to be a salesman," he recalls.

His 19 years in Washington were highlighted by a stint with the United States Environmental Protection Agency, including work in historic preservation. After returning to Wabash, he focused on giving back to his hometown.

### Wabash County Historical Museum

"Hello, it's just us," Ford calls out when we enter the museum.

It boasts two floors with many interactive exhibits. Featured are an archaeological dig site display, commerce by rail gallery, canal boat exhibit and a 25-foot, three-dimensional sculpture chronicling the ice age. Plus, it contains an archives center, gift shop and meeting space.

In the 20th century, a Sears & Roebuck department store occupied the museum building.

"When I was growing up, it (Sears downtown) was a big deal," Ford remembers wistfully.

"When Sears did away with a lot of retail, they closed the store and it (the condition of the building) went downhill from there. The museum collection we have was in the basement of the county courthouse and when the

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After two years of restoration led by Richard Ford, the Dr. James Ford Historic Home opened in 2005.



## Indiana's Leader

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county expanded courthouse space, we had to find a new home for the collection. That's when we began talking about (founding) the Wabash County Historical Museum, using this old building and saving it."

Privately raised funds made the transition a reality. Work on the museum began in 2001, with the first floor opening in 2005 and the second in 2006.

Fondly looking at the building, he proudly declares, "We made it into what some say is the finest county historical museum in the state."

### A lost art

"You're very passionate about the arts. Do you play any instruments or write?" I ask Ford as we approach our next stop.

"No," he responds without hesitation. "But I just wrote a letter," he offers with a laugh.

He explained that while we were in the museum's theater viewing a film about Wabash County and he stayed behind in the lobby, he was drafting a letter to the National Trust for Historic Preservation proposing that it hold an annual conference in Indiana.

"I write notes all the time," Ford stresses. "It's getting to be so rare that you get something with a stamp on it that (when you do), people pay more attention to it."



An exhibit at the Wabash County Historical Museum showcases the city's distinction as the world's first to use electric lights.

### Riverwalk

"This was a used car lot," Ford observes, motioning to land he purchased along the Wabash River. Mentioning the economic and cultural importance of the current riverwalk at Paradise Spring Historical Park, he reveals, "My plan is to give this (land) to the city parks department – if they are willing to accept it – for a riverwalk extension. The longer the trail, the more things you can attract and the more popular they are."

Ford's contribution would supplement \$1.2 million in state funding the city will receive in 2009 to lengthen the

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[www.jamesfordmuseum.org](http://www.jamesfordmuseum.org)

## WABASH COUNTY Historical Museum

The Wabash County Historical Museum is no ordinary county museum. In fact, it has been called the best county museum in the State of Indiana! With two floors of interactive exhibits, an extensive research and archive area, and a spacious meeting room, this museum is one of our state's great treasures.

**Admission:** Adults - \$5 • Seniors and ages 6 to 12 - \$3  
Under 6 - Free



## DR. JAMES FORD HISTORIC HOME

In his book and in other writings, Dr. James Ford chronicled his nineteenth century life as a family man, surveyor, agronomist, architect, and Civil War surgeon. His 1841 home was expanded to become a 4,000 square foot residence by the 1870s. The restored home includes period flower and vegetable gardens and a stone barn with buggy and sleigh.

**Admission:** Adults - \$3; 15 and under - \$2



Performers from throughout the country come to Wabash and the Ford Theatre.

existing half-mile riverwalk from Huntington Street to the Carroll Street bridge.

### Stone age

Across the street from the new YMCA (the building is under construction) is a skate park and the site of a future bike park. Previously occupying that area was Mafcote-Wabash Paper Coating, Inc.

“The foundation is limestone,” Ford says as he gestures to a piece of the factory wall. “I had them keep the corner of the factory building. That will be kind of a memorial (at the skate park) to our lost limestone buildings.”

Ford notes that most of the houses built in Wabash during the 1950s employed limestone because the city was built on a limestone reef.

### Honeywell Center

Established in 1952, the Honeywell Center is the cultural centerpiece of downtown. What started as a social gathering place for young adults has evolved into one of the region’s premiere performing arts and conference centers.

Ford is a lifetime member of the Honeywell Foundation, Inc., which manages the facility.

Eagerly, Ford takes us from room to room. When we reach the Ford Theatre, added in 1994 and seating up to 1,500, he nostalgically reflects on childhood memories of the Honeywell Center.

“My father was the first head of the Honeywell Foundation,” he states. “Our factory (Ford Meter Box) was down the road. He would bring me in here as a kid as it was being built. He would make it kind of a Saturday (excursion) to see the progress. It was a lot of fun.”

When we step into the Olivette Room, which replicates industrialist Mark Honeywell’s yacht, we’re greeted with murals and dioramas depicting a typical day on the ocean

in the community he helped develop near Miami in the 1930s. Hailing from Wabash, Honeywell introduced the first hot water heating system in the United States and never forgot his roots.

Ford worked for several years to acquire pieces from the Olivette yacht (the Honeywell family no longer owned it).

As the tour winds down, he steps away briefly and returns with a picture he purchased the prior evening at an art show.

“Isn’t that a nice picture?” he remarks about his acquisition before enthusiastically commenting, “This way I can support the (IU) Herron School of Art.”

### Dr. James Ford Historic Home

Considering the host of initiatives Ford has been involved in, I wondered which has been his favorite.

His response: “The most recent project.”

One project with personal ties is restoration of the Dr. James Ford Historic Home, which belonged

to his great-grandfather, a Civil War surgeon and physician who treated patients at his residence.

Beaming, Ford emphasizes, “I’m very proud of this.”

Prior to restoration, the home was divided into a duplex. Now finished, it offers a glimpse into daily life in the 1800s. Visitors can learn about common chores, entertainment options and technology by walking through the home. Additional attractions are a Victorian-era flower garden, as well as vegetable and medicinal herb gardens.

Stepping into the Civil War display room, Ford shares another way Dr. Ford contributed to the town – he was also an architect and designed the Wabash Christian Church standing across the street.

In addition, he made history in the education world by

Along the riverwalk at Paradise Spring Historical Park are 1800s-era cabins similar to those standing when the United States signed a peace treaty with the Potawatomi and Miami Indians in October 1826.



serving on the board of commissioners that established the North Western Christian University (which became Butler University) in Indianapolis.

Stein reflects, "Because there was so much (detailed information kept by Dr. Ford) and subsequent generations passed that to the next generation, it (the museum) is not only authentically Ford family, but also pioneer Wabash."

Outside, Ford shows us a stone barn where the doctor's horse lived. He describes how Barney was the transportation for Dr. Ford on house calls, on trips to North Western Christian University and twice to the Civil War.

"They had quite a relationship, and I think it calls for a children's book," he suggests.

### Charley Creek Gardens

Spanning six acres, the Charley Creek Gardens demonstrate Ford's love of horticulture. Bus tours take place throughout the summer.

As we drive past the Charley Creek Gardens Greenhouse, I'm reminded of a conversation we had at the Honeywell Center regarding the two-story gardens that once sprawled across the Honeywell estate.

"Unfortunately, they (the gardens) got tore down in the 1960s," he said. "I'd like to make a replica in my garden someday with the hope that, as the pace of life has gotten faster, there is

a need for gardens in the middle of the city. People could take their picnic lunch, listen to the creek go by, learn about horticulture and get away from the pressures of everyday life."

### Party of 12

The luncheon Ford arranged included a cross section of people in the community. They ranged from business owners to those with interests in historic preservation and economic development, including Wabash Mayor Robert Vanlandingham.

The mayor discussed working with the state on aspects of the trail extension and about other topics facing the community. Evident was a sense of camaraderie among community members, who spoke of challenges but also opportunities.

### Impact

"It's pretty remarkable that Wabash has someone like him," Stein comments when discussing some of the projects Ford has led.

Mike and Angie Beauchamp, owners of Modoc's Market in downtown Wabash, agree.

"He challenges us," Angie proclaims.

Mike asserts, "It is just unbelievable what he means to this town and it's hard to imagine just what kind of legacy this may leave. He has set the foundation for benefits to occur for decades and decades. There's no question we'd be less of a town without Richard."



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