

Retro Riley #2 for April 2024 – William Fortune buys the Riley home

One thing has slipped from prominence on William Fortune's (1883-1942) long list of remarkable lifetime achievements as a successful Indianapolis entrepreneur, businessman, and civic leader (see photo). Fortune's staggering career of accomplishments included being a reporter, editor, publisher, and co-founder of the Indianapolis Press Club; president of 12 independent telephone companies during a time in which he actually made the first dial telephone call; and founder of the Commercial Club, forerunner to the Indianapolis Chamber of Commerce and the Indianapolis Chapter of the American Red Cross. That **one thing**? William Fortune bought a house, not just *any* house, but the house, the home where James Whitcomb Riley once lived.

During the last 23 years of his life, James Whitcomb Riley, who Fortune came to know as well as other Indianapolis civic leaders through his early days as a journalist, lived as a paying guest at the 528 Lockerbie Street home of Charles and Magdalena Holstein (see 3 Riley home photos). The house, built in 1872, was previously owned by Magdalena Holstein's father, John Nickum and was designed by architect Robert Platt Daggett, father of Robert Frost Daggett, the original architect for Riley Hospital for Children. Magdalena Holstein died on October 18, 1916, nearly 3 months after Riley died on July 22, 1916 (see photo). Her will, filed for probate 3 days later, stipulated that her 528 Lockerbie Street home would be sold and proceeds of the sale divided among heirs at law. Her will also provided for Katie Kindell, long-time housekeeper and nurse for Mrs. Holstein and Mr. Riley, who was to receive \$10,000, the gift of household property, a Lockerbie house and lot across from the Riley home, and the privilege to live for the next three years in the home at 528 Lockerbie Street.

Reports differ on what year the Riley house was sold. Historian Elizabeth Van Allen recognizes that Fortune bought the house from the estate of Magdalena Holstein in 1917. Newspaper accounts also report the sale of the house in late October 1919 by the Union Trust company, executors of Mrs. Holstein's estate, to a purchaser who requested his name not be made public as it was understood that he made the purchase for a committee which was trying to have the property preserved as a memorial to Riley. The three-year time period stipulated in Holstein's will for Katie Kindell to live at the house expired in mid-October 1919 and negotiations for the sale of the property could not be carried out until after that date. Regardless, what is known most assuredly is that William Fortune, bought the house to "save the property" and Fortune went on to hold the property in trust until the Riley Memorial Association (now the Riley Children's Foundation) could be formally incorporated, which took place in April 1921.

In 1917, Fortune was among the prominent friends of James Whitcomb Riley who announced plans to honor the Hoosier poet's legacy by building a children's hospital. World War I interrupted those plans and Fortune did his part by leading a public movement that raised \$4 million to support World War I relief and other public needs in Indiana. After WWI, plans to build the dream for a Riley Hospital for Children resumed. Elizabeth Van Alen chronicles the sequence of actions leading to the sale of the house by Fortune to the Association. She writes in *Keeping the Dream* that Fortune was a member of a committee organized by the Association in December of 1920 to accomplish the goal of preserving the Riley Home. As Fortune was the owner of the property, Hugh McK Landon, President of the Association, met earlier with Fortune in October of 1920 to discuss sale of the home to the Association. In April 1921, William Fortune was one of twenty-one Incorporators for the Association. In October 1921, the Association purchased the original furniture of the home from the estate of Katie Kindell, the Holstein's long-time housekeeper to whom the home's contents had been willed. All that remained was securing

the house itself. And in February 1922, Fortune sold the house that he had retained in trust to the Association for exactly the amount he paid for it.

With their purchase of the house from Fortune, the Association moved quickly and a new committee was formed to make necessary improvements at the house to ready it for opening as a museum. The James Whitcomb Riley Home opened with great fanfare and celebration – two months after its purchase by the Association – to the general public.

The dedication and opening of the Riley home on April 13, 1922 was a springboard for increasing public awareness and launching a statewide campaign to raise additional needed funds to complete the \$2,000,000 needed to at that point in time build the James Whitcomb Riley for Children with fundraising quotas being set for each county. Association leaders convened a luncheon and conference at the downtown Claypool Hotel that day and talked of plans that contributed to the successful opening of the hospital on November 19, 1924. Fortune's grandmother, Elizabeth Sinclair (about 1773-1849) is remembered among the 120 names shown on the stained-glass memorial window in the hospital's original lobby found today near the chapel and the Edward A. Block Family Library.

Katie Kindell, Mrs. Holstein's housekeeper and nurse, was named by the Association on March 15, 1922 to be caretaker and supervisor for the Riley home at 528 Lockerbie Street, a role in which she served until retiring in 1933. The James Whitcomb Riley Home was designated as a National Historic Landmark in 1962 and included in the National Register of Historic Places in 1966. Thanks to William Fortune's good foresight to buy the home at 528 Lockerbie Street, generations of visitors have been able to learn more about James Whitcomb Riley and what life was like in the late 19th century when the Hoosier poet lived there, a life carefully preserved for all today.

References:

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Riley Admirers dedicate Poet's Home, *Indianapolis Star*, April 14, 1922, p. 1, accessed through Indianapolis Public Library.

Riley Medals Arrive: 400 go to Birthday Dinner Guests, *Indianapolis Star*, March 31, 1917, p. 2, accessed through Indianapolis Public Library. *Note: Fortune received the first Riley medal as he was chairman of the Executive Committee that arranged the Riley 65th Birthday celebration Dinner in 1915.*

Elizabeth J. Van Allen and Omer H. Foust, eds., *Keeping the Dream: Commemorating 75 Years of Caring for Indiana's Children—James Whitcomb Riley Memorial Association*, James Whitcomb Riley Memorial Association, Indianapolis, 1996, pp. 15, 36, 96-97, available at James Whitcomb Riley Collection, IUPUI University Library Special Collections and Archives:

<https://iuidigital.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/JWRiley/id/3209/rec/38>

James Whitcomb Riley Home, Indy Encyclopedia: <https://indyencyclopedia.org/james-whitcomb-riley-home/>

Photographs:

James Whitcomb Riley with Children, June 1916/Indiana State Library:

<https://indianamemory.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/p16066coll13/id/4035/rec/6>

Credit Line: General photograph collection, Rare Books and Manuscripts, Indiana State Library



Digital Indy/James Whitcomb Riley Collection/James Whitcomb Riley leaving home in Lockerbie with Edmund Henry Eitel, his nephew (1915): <https://www.digitalindy.org/digital/collection/riley/id/193/rec/3>

Credit Line: Note – copyright is undetermined.

Source: Digital Indy/James Whitcomb Riley Collection



James Whitcomb Riley House/Indiana Historical Society

Credit Line: Bass Photo Co Collection, Indiana Historical Society.



Photo courtesy Indiana State Library. Mrs. Holstein is sitting with Riley's dog, Lockerbie on her lap. Standing is Mary Wyatt, Mrs. Holstein's cousin.



Photo courtesy Riley Children's Foundation. William Fortune.