

Holcomb Estate

A Short History

Holcomb Estate is a special place to live in Indianapolis: close to downtown but with geographic and architectural qualities unique to central Indiana. What follows is a short history of Holcomb Estate to peak interest in living here.

The Early Years

James Irving Holcomb was born in LaSalle, Illinois on May 1, 1876. Between 1901 and 1962 (when he died) JI (as he was known) along with his partner Fred Hoke made his fortune manufacturing and selling everything from cleaning brushes and supplies to commercial refrigerators, peanut roasters, and folding doors. The two even invented the movie theater popcorn machine.

JI and his wife Musetta bought the land we know as Holcomb Estate shortly before the start of World War 1 and named it Woodvale with the intention of building an extensive house on a bluff overlooking the White River to showcase his passion for art and landscape architecture. At that time there was a small school house near Cold Spring Road which they enlarged and converted into their residence until the Mansion House was built in 1926.

The Middle Years

JI lived in Woodvale until his death and undertook a life long pursuit of art and landscape architecture. He collected art from around the world for display in his home including Louis the 13th tapestries, Asian artifacts, and an English stone fireplace from the 13-15th century. The grounds were also influenced by world culture and included Japanese gardens, a ravine garden, a meadow, a lit cave network, greenhouses, ponds and waterfalls, and a collection of rocks from his world travels. The bank of the White River contained boat docks, landing spots, and fishing holes. He was also an avid collector of plants, and his gardens included many evergreens, flowering trees and shrubs, and other plants.

JI and his wife were also avid philanthropists, supporting many Indianapolis institutions. Their greatest such endeavor was with Butler University, starting with donations for campus beautification in 1932. He served on the Board for more than two decades and provided the funding for the Holcomb Botanical Gardens and Holcomb Lake, the Holcomb Observatory and Planetarium, and the Musetta Holcomb Memorial Carillon Tower. He also oversaw the initial planning for Lilly Hall, Clowes Memorial Hall, and the Irwin Library.

Upon his death JI willed Woodvale to Butler University with the stipulation that the estate was to remain intact as a record of his way of life. For 20 years the University retained the property (now called Holcomb Estate) as an investment and utilized the

Mansion as a dance studio for the Jordan College of Arts. However, the University trustees realized the school could never fulfill Holcomb's wishes and decided to sell the property in 1982 to a private developer.

Today

In many ways the condominium development that emerged from the sale of Holcomb Estate has fulfilled JI's wishes: a peaceful oasis he launched nearly 100 years ago on the near northside of Indianapolis preserving a calming way of life amid the hustle and bustle of one of America's larger cities. But our intention is to perpetuate, not just preserve. In so doing we launched a series of multi-year efforts to renovate building and grounds in ways that would make J. I. Holcomb proud of his legacy.

More recently Holcomb Estate has joined forces with the residents of the town of Spring Hill (where Holcomb Estate is located) to expand these preservation activities to the entire town including: Spring Hill's history and legends, its urban forest, and its natural habitat—more sources of pride for JI's heritage.

