

Collection #
P 0429

**JAMES A. ALLISON
PHOTOGRAPH ALBUMS, 1914, 1982**

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Indianapolis, IN 46202-3269

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COLLECTION INFORMATION

VOLUME OF COLLECTION:	2 photograph albums
COLLECTION DATES:	1914, 1982
PROVENANCE:	Clay Conner Family, Indianapolis, IN; 27 January 1983; Alexander M. Bracken Library, Ball State University, Muncie, Indiana, 1987
RESTRICTIONS:	None
COPYRIGHT:	
REPRODUCTION RIGHTS:	Permission to reproduce or publish material in this collection must be obtained from the Indiana Historical Society.
ALTERNATE FORMATS:	Indiana Historical Society Digital Image Collections
RELATED HOLDINGS:	James A. Allison House, Bass Photo Collection (P 0130); Latham and Walters Records (M 0550)
ACCESSION NUMBER:	1982.1233; 1987.0676X
NOTES:	

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

James Ashbury Allison was born 11 August 1872 in Marcellus, Michigan. He was the second son of Noah and Myra Allison. Noah moved the family to South Bend, Indiana, in 1874 and to Indianapolis, in 1880. He operated the Allison Coupon Company, printing coupon books for coal mine company stores. James went to work at the age of twelve, and took over the family business when his father died in 1890. While operating the coupon company, James grew increasingly frustrated with his writing instruments and invented the Allison Perfection Fountain Pen, beginning his career of innovation.

Allison's rise to fortune started with the partnership with his friends Carl Fisher and Percy Avery and their quest to perfect the car headlight. They began manufacturing carbide gas-based headlights, and despite the very real danger of the carbide gas exploding, the lights were a big success. The Prest-O-Lite company grew quickly and made its owners rich.

Allison's partnership with Fisher, Arthur Newby, and Frank Wheeler had a lasting impact on the city of Indianapolis and the sports community. In 1910 they opened the Indianapolis Motor Speedway on the west side of town. The group was excited about the track but soon grew bored with the usual brief races. Allison suggested that they hold a race of endurance and on 30 May 1911 the first 500 Mile Race was held. In 1915 Allison founded the Indianapolis Speedway Team Company. During the First World War, Allison turned operation of his company over to the U.S. government in an effort to support the war and to garner the respect of Indianapolis society. This company was later called the Allison Experimental Company, which General Motors purchased after James Allison's death.

James Allison married Sarah Cornelius in 1907. In 1910 they began planning a grand estate called Riverdale on sixty-four acres of land on Cold Springs Road near the White River. In 1911 construction on Riverdale began under the leadership of architect Herbert Bass of Bass, Knowlton, and Company. Provoked to envy when he visited his friend and neighbor Frank Wheeler's estate, Allison fired Bass and hired Wheeler's architect William L. Price to finish the interior of his own house. Allison also hired European artisans to ensure the highest quality in design and structure. He spared no expense. An entire species of tree went extinct when the only forest that it grew in was harvested to mill wood for Riverdale's Great Hall. During the last winter of construction, Allison had a huge wooden barn-like structure built over his partially-completed house, allowing workers to continue construction in inclement weather.

The early 20th century was the great era of landscape architecture and the American Country Place. In this era, the grounds of an estate were almost more important than the house itself. Famous landscape architects such as Frederick Law Olmstead and Jens Jensen created residential paradises for their wealthy clients. Allison sought out the talented Jensen to create a beautiful landscape for Riverdale and also to capitalize on Jensen's status as a great artist. Jens Jensen grew up in Slesvig, Denmark, and had immigrated to the United States in 1884 at age twenty-four. He began his career in Chicago's park system,

working his way up from manual laborer to superintendent of Humbolt Park, and later the West Park District's chief landscape architect. Jensen emphasized the creation of "place" using native plants, light, and grand views. Wealthy clients including Henry Ford hired him to design their grand estates, and by 1911 Jensen was one of the premier landscape architects in the country. In designing the landscape of Riverdale, he emphasized the natural beauty of area contrasted with formal European elements. He gave the estate formal gardens, a performance theater, a rose garden, a vegetable garden, an orchard, and greenhouse. Jensen designed five spring-fed ponds and two grand staircases leading from the house on the hill to the ponds below. Allison used the ponds to satiate his passion for canoeing. Jensen also designed the meadow beyond the ponds and also created a river to provide a tranquil country atmosphere.

Riverdale reached completion in 1914 at a cost of over \$2 million. The house boasted a great hall, dining room, music room with a two-story pipe organ, marble aviary, billiard room, indoor pool, automatic lighting closet, and a central vacuum system. Sarah Allison indulged her passion for exotic birds in the beautiful aviary. She allowed her birds to fly freely in the room and also had a goldfish pond built into the floor with a glass globe into which the fish could swim. The house also had a number of bedrooms, a breakfast room, sleeping porches, and grand kitchen. The Allisons were proud of their new home and hosted grand parties, entertaining their guests in the performance theater in the formal garden. Allison held infamous gambling sessions in his card room, which had its own vault to safeguard the vast sums of money that changed hands over the gaming table.

Allison continued his business ventures while he was in residence at Riverdale. He invested heavily in Miami Beach, building a hospital and aquarium there. He also formed the Allison Engineering Company. His marriage to Sarah ended in divorce in 1928 and he remarried his former employee Lucile Musset a month later. James Allison contracted pneumonia and died in the summer of 1928 at the age of 56, just one week after this second wedding. He is buried in Crown Hill Cemetery.

After his death, Sarah, Lucile, and Allison's mother Myra fought bitterly over who should inherit the estate. Myra won. She lived in the house until her death. The house stood vacant for six years until the Sisters of St. Francis bought it and transformed it into Marian College in 1937. The college also bought the neighboring estates of Allison's partners Carl Fisher and Frank Wheeler.

The Allison house has undergone numerous transformations since then. While the college operated inside it, the sleeping porches served as art studios for the students, and the music room became the school's chapel. In 1971 Riverdale was listed on the National Register of Historic Places, and it was Indianapolis' show house in 1991. In the last few years, the college has restored the interior of the house, and the ponds below the house now serve as an outdoor biology lab.

Sources:

Dodson, Kenneth. *The Allison Commission: Jens Jensen at Riverdale, 1910–1911*. [Muncie, Ind.]: K. Dodson, c1994. General Collection: SB470.46 D62 1994

Frank, Sally. "Decorating for Dollars," *Indianapolis Star*, 26 April 1991. Clipping file, Indiana Historical Society Library

Kalleen, James L. "Raceway History House: The Allison Mansion and the Man Who Created It," *Indianapolis Home and Garden*, no date. Clipping file, Indiana Historical Society Library

Maloney, Michael, and Kenneth J. Remenschneider, *Indianapolis Landscape Architecture*. Washington, D.C.: Landscape Architecture Foundation, 1983. General Collection: SB470.54.I6 M35 1983

Sonnenburg, Paul, and William A. Shoenburg. *Allison: Power of Excellence, 1915–1990: Allison Gas Turbine Division, General Motors Corporation*. Malibu, CA: Coastline Publishing, 1990. General Collection: HD9709.U54 A557 1990

SCOPE AND CONTENT NOTE

The collection consists of two photograph albums of "Riverdale," James Allison's estate in Indianapolis.

The first album contains 30 8x10 photographs and dates from the 1914. The photographs were taken by the Bass Photo Company between January and August 1914. The Herbert L. Bass & Company Architects is listed on the front cover and the L.S. Ayres & Company takes credit for the home's interiors on the inside front cover.

The second album was presented to the Indiana Historical Society in 1982 by Henry Clay Conner III, Jack Thomas Conner, James Hilton Conner, and Thomas Hamilton Conner. It contains copy photographs of the mansion along with text from Sarah Allison's "The Building of Riverdale." The text discusses the building process and Sarah's memory of each room. There are thirty-eight photographs of the house with exterior views of the landscape and formal gardens, and interior views of the great hall, music room, dining room, bedrooms, breakfast room, sun porch, sleeping porch, the master bathroom, library, card room, and aviary. Many of these copy photographs appear in the 1914 album.

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Album 1

[Cover Title]

“Estate of James A. Allison, Esq.
Herbert L. Bass & Company
Architects / Indianapolis”

[Inside Cover Title]

“L.S. Ayres & Company / Interior Decorators
Interior Woodwork, Marble Lighting Fixtures and
Furnishings”

Album 2

[Cover Title]

“James A. Allison”

[Title Page]

“Riverdale / The Home of James A. Allison
Indianapolis, Indiana / 1914-1928”
[1982 album with copy photographs and Sarah
Allison’s commentary on the “Building of Riverdale”]

CONTAINER

Album Storage:
Album 1, PAC

Album Storage:
Album 2, PAC

CATALOGING INFORMATION

For additional information on this collection, including a list of subject headings that may lead you to related materials:

1. Go to the Indiana Historical Society's online catalog:
<http://opac.indianahistory.org/>
2. Click on the "Basic Search" icon.
3. Select "Call Number" from the "Search In:" box.
4. Search for the collection by its basic call number (in this case, P 0429).
5. When you find the collection, go to the "Full Record" screen for a list of headings that can be searched for related materials.