

## **The History of Fort Wayne's Bars and Taverns: From the Jesuits to World War II**

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For most Questers, when we reflect fondly on the bars and taverns of Fort Wayne we will be considering those that were popular after World War II. Older Questers may recall the original Trolley Bar, the Berghoff Gardens, or the elegant bar in the Van Orman Hotel. If you lived on the South side of Fort Wayne, you may have frequented the McKinnie Tap. As a member of Most Precious Blood Church, you probably knew the Green Frog. If you were Lutheran, you may have found friends at the Acme. Were you a fan of supper clubs, you may have been a regular at the Sands Supper Club or the Embers. Prefer a seedier establishment? We may have found you at the Cat's Meow or the Terrace on Jefferson. If you came of age in the '70's you might have frequented Mother's. As a journalist or part of the theater crowd you probably hung out at Henry's. For those a decade younger, Mother's became Columbia Street West. O'Sullivan's Italian Pub became popular, and you may have gone dancing at J&B's, Bill's Bistro, or perhaps Pierre's. Today, if you are hitting the hotspots, you could be found at J.K. O'Donnell's, The Dash-In, Main Street Bistro, The Chop's Wine Bar, or perhaps Early Birds. But despite our varied memories, the golden age of bars and taverns in Fort Wayne preceded even the oldest of us. For it was in pre-prohibition Fort Wayne that the hooch bird sang his loudest.

Bar. The term dates to the late 16<sup>th</sup> century and, according to the 1828 edition of Webster's, refers to "The inclosed place of a tavern, inn or coffee house, where the landlord or his servant delivers out liquors, and waits upon customers."

Tavern, dating from the late 13<sup>th</sup> century, is defined by Webster's 1828 edition as "a house licensed to sell liquors in small quantities, to be drank on the spot. In some of the United States, tavern is synonymous with inn or hotel, and denotes a house for the entertainment of travelers, as well as for the sale of liquors, licensed for that purpose."

The term saloon, dating back to 1728 as an anglicized version of salon, was defined in the 1828 Webster's as "In architecture, a lofty spacious hall, vaulted at the top, and usually comprehending two stories with two ranges of windows. It is a state room much used in palaces in Italy for the reception of ambassadors and other visitors." Yet by the 1840's, a saloon was the generally accepted term for a public bar in Fort Wayne.

We may imagine that the earliest European visitors to Fort Wayne, the French couriers du bois and French Jesuit missionaries of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, may have brought some small quantity of alcoholic beverages with them either as brandy in a flask or sacramental wine. The French built their first post at the confluence of the three rivers about 1680. They would maintain substantial control over the region for the next eighty years until it was ceded to the British in 1760. Early in this occupation, the French restricted the "introduction of intoxicants" to the Indians and it would only be in the later years of occupation that this began to break down. Historian, Francis Parkman, referring to the portage wrote that "Two or three Canadians, or half-breeds, ... would carry the canoe on their shoulders or for a bottle of whiskey, a few Miamis might be bribed to undertake the task." We know the British, during this period did substantial trade with the natives to win their favor and allegiance. We can assume that this influential trade included alcohol. According to Griswold's History of Fort Wayne, "the passing of the 'golden era' of the French occupation marks the coming of the Indian's deadliest enemy – whiskey." The British, in addition to having whiskey and rum for trade, required it for the rations of their troops.

The traditional daily ration was a gill of whiskey or rum. A gill is approximately the equivalent of three jiggers or shots. This ration was maintained by the British through the colonial period and with the American military until 1830.

The years between 1760 and 1789 were full of skirmishes between the Miami (and other tribes), British soldiers, and French settlers in the area. There was considerable movement of people and goods.

Alcohol undoubtedly played a significant role in the life of the young village. While documentation is limited, we do have the writings of a Henry Hay of Detroit who visited Miami Town the winter of 1789-90. His diary includes accounts of trading rum to the Indians in exchange for meat despite it being against the orders of the Major and of rum being very dear and hard to acquire. Despite all of this, he enjoys a week of celebration from Christmas to the welcoming of the New Year. He writes of eating a Christmas meal of venison and raccoon and then getting "infernally drunk" with Mr. Abbott and Mr. Kinzie. His celebration continued with the consumption of corned pork accompanied by a bottle of Madeira the following day and drinking grogg with a Frenchman the 27<sup>th</sup> of December. He shared Madeira with Little Turtle on the 28<sup>th</sup>. While no specific mention of alcohol is made on New Year's Day, he is awakened at three o'clock in the morning and there is considerable celebration and he mentions "kissing all the ladies young and old."

It is significant to note that the first liquor law to impact this city was passed in 1790. The Northwest Territory prohibited selling liquor to soldiers or furnishing liquor to Native Americans. The law would later be repealed in 1795 but the provision against the furnishing of liquor to Native Americans would persist through the territorial period. The problems of intoxication among the natives was not lost to Little Turtle, who in 1797 traveled to Philadelphia and appealed to the Society of Friends to use the church's influence to stop the shipment of liquor into Indian territories. He later made a similar appeal

to President Jefferson in person and to the legislatures of Ohio and Kentucky asking for their help in the suppression of sale of whiskey to the Indians. He stated, "This liquor that they introduce into our country is more to be feared than the tomahawk. There are more of us dead since the treaty of Greenville than we lost by the wars before, and it is owing to the introduction of this liquor among us."

In the years between the construction of the first Fort Wayne in 1794 and the construction of the second in 1815, Fort Wayne was a challenging place to live with constant threat of violence from the native population. The destruction of homes during the war and particularly the siege of 1812 actually reduced the population of settlers for a time. In 1816 Indiana would become a state and Indiana would pass its first state liquor laws - forbidding the sale of liquor on Sunday, the sale of intoxicating beverages to minors under the age of 16, and the sale of same beverages to intoxicated persons. On April 19<sup>th</sup>, 1819, the last of the troops garrisoned at Fort Wayne, left for Detroit. It was also in 1819 that a young man named Samuel Hanna arrived in the settlement, saw a future here, and built a log house at what would become the northwest corner of Barr and Columbia. Here he opened a trading post and in 1820 became postmaster.

This period was particularly devastating to the tribes of the region. During the annual distribution of annuities in 1820, Captain James Riley observed, "There were at least one thousand whites here, from Ohio, Michigan, New York and Indiana, trading with the Indians. They brought a great abundance of whiskey with them, which they dealt out to the Indians freely, in order to keep them continually drunk and unfit for business; their purpose being to get the best of them in trade. Horse-racing, gambling, drinking, debauchery, extravagance and waste were the order of the day and night."

In 1822, Colonel Alexander Ewing arrived in Fort Wayne from Troy, Ohio and established Fort Wayne's first real tavern immediately to the south of Samuel Hanna's trading post at what would become the southwest corner of Columbia and Barr Streets. It was here in 1823 at Ewing's Tavern, known as Washington Hall, that the federal government conducted the first sale of land around Fort Wayne. The following year on April 1<sup>st</sup>, 1824 Allen County was established. Samuel Hanna and Benjamin Cushman were elected to serve as associate Circuit Court judges that year as well. The court and the meetings of the county commissioners were held in Ewing's tavern as the first courthouse wasn't built until 1831.

While Ewing's tavern, Washington Hall, was the first tavern in Fort Wayne, a second, was quickly built on the corner diagonally opposite by William Suttentfield in the same year. The Suttentfield tavern also became an official government meeting place as well as a place of dining, drinking, and entertainment. In 1822, Fort Wayne's Baptist minister, Reverend Isaac McCoy organized the first temperance society in Indiana. It failed to flourish.

The County Commissioners were given the task of licensing the taverns and setting the rates charged by tavern keepers, as established by state law in 1816. The annual tavern license cost \$12.50. Meals were set at a rate of 25 cents; keeping a horse night and day at 50 cents; lodging at 12 ½ cents; whisky, per half pint, 12 ½ cents; brandy, per half pint, 50 cents; gin per half pint, 37 ½ cents; porter, per bottle, 37 ½ cents, and cider, per quart, 18 ¾ cents.

In their first session of circuit court in November 1824, Judges Hanna and Cushman heard many cases of illegal liquor selling. Seven more were heard at the second session in April of 1825 involving prominent citizens. Apparently, pioneer entrepreneurs found it more lucrative to sell liquor without a license and pay the \$3 fine than to buy a license.

In 1829, Fort Wayne became incorporated as a Town and in 1832 construction began on the Wabash and Erie Canal. The population of Fort Wayne was estimated at 300. The construction boom brought hundreds of men to the town, a large number of whom were Irish immigrants. Malaria was common during the construction of the canal and the accepted treatment and prevention was whiskey. Every gang of workmen had a “jigger boss” whose duty it was to carry a large tin pail of whiskey along the line and issue a small drink or jigger whenever it seemed needed. His judgment was the only limit or guide. When interviewing a former jigger boss, the reporter exclaimed, “Why those workmen must have been drunk all the time?” He replied, “You wouldn’t expect them to work on the canal if they were sober would you?” The Indiana Temperance Society was established in 1830.

The 1830’s saw not only a rapid expansion of the population with the construction of the canal, but an equally rapid expansion of the city economically as well as geographically. A dozen new hotels were built including The Lafayette, The Franklin House, The City House, the National Hotel, and the Spencer House, to name a few. These early hotels were true taverns in the historical sense, providing lodging, dining, drinking, and entertainment as well as meeting spaces. One of the grandest and largest of the hotels built in the 1830s was the Rockhill House. Built in 1838, at the southwest corner of Main Street and Broadway, it wasn’t completed for many years and was known as Rockhill’s Folly because it was so far from the center of the city of that time. Finished in 1854, it had 65 guest rooms on three floors. It would only remain open for fourteen years before closing and being incorporated into St. Joseph Hospital.

By 1840, the town’s population had multiplied almost seven times to 2,080 people. Taverns still remained a center of social activity. The February 12, 1842 edition of the Fort Wayne Sentinel had the

following announcement: "United States Saloon. The subscriber respectfully informs his friends and the public that he has rented the above establishment, situated on the south side of Columbia Street; and having renovated and furnished the same in a neat and comfortable manner earnestly solicits a share of patronage. His table will at all times be furnished with the choicest viands the country affords. His bar with the choicest wine and liquors. His stable abundantly supplied with hay and grain and an experienced hostler." The Democratic Party chose the United States Saloon as the location for their city convention December 10, 1842. After eleven years of construction, celebration of the completion of the Wabash and Erie Canal was held July 4, 1843. Taverns were overflowing with guests. The small town enjoyed parades, speeches, feasts, and revelry for several days. In 1843, too, Indiana's first drunk driving law was passed – applying to stage coach drivers only. During the 1840's there was a story of a land buyer who, on his way west, stopped at the Post House, a brick tavern on the north side of Columbia Street. He was reported to have been carrying a great deal of cash and disappeared during his stay. Many years later, a skeleton was found buried in the basement of the Post House with a large nail driven through the eye socket. No one remained at the hotel from that earlier period and the matter was forgotten. The Hedekin House, built in 1843 on Barr Street between Columbia and Main, was noted as being unique because it *didn't have a bar* and liquor was not sold there.

The 1850's continued the boom period in this Midwestern town with the arrival of the railroad and hundreds more people streaming into the city. The Fort Wayne Times and Peoples Press announced the opening of Brackenridge's Ice Cream Saloon and advertised it as the place "to get something cool." "It is the most pleasant retreat in the city, fitted up with both ladies and gentlemen's saloons." And in December is the announcement of the opening of the new Oyster Saloon in the basement of the Spencer House. "Prepared at all times to serve up Oysters in the best style. The best of wines and liquors at the bar. Families furnished with fine fresh Baltimore Oysters by the can or keg." The following

year, a letter to the editor states, "The proprietors of the oyster saloon on Columbia Street are requested to keep their place shut on Sunday or they will be compelled to. And that the Sheriff is requested to stay at home and attend to his business and not go there and get his keg so full" signed an Officer and Friend of Temperance. An issue of Dawson's Fort Wayne Daily Times from July 16<sup>th</sup>, 1855 demonstrates the attitudes of the time. One post, under the heading "Nice Gentlemen", reads as follows: "It comes authentically to us that two certain gentlemen, of uncertain age, boarders at a Hotel in this city, are in the habit of coming to quarters late nearly every single night, giving much evidence that they have 'each passed the posy.' The business entrusted to the one, and the position held by the other demand *sobriety* and exemplary conduct. Names are withheld with a strong hope that if moral considerations avail nothing, the fear of public exposure may." In contrast, the next column has the following report, "A Mr. Irishman Welch was hauled up before squire Waters, of this township, and fined \$20 and costs for violating the liquor law. This is the same dirty Irishman who professed to keep a boarding house last spring in order to get to vote in the city election." The growing discrimination against foreigners and intolerance for public drunkenness leads to a statewide prohibition of alcohol sales in 1855. This law, largely ignored, would be repealed in 1858.

By the late 1850's, the numbers of saloons are growing and we start to find distinction within city directories. There are Hotels, Restaurants, Billiard Saloons, Bowling Saloons, Lager Saloons, Dining Saloons, Oyster Saloons, Ice Cream Saloons, and even taverns referred to as Oyster *and* Ice Cream Saloons. By this time there are four breweries with accompanying tap rooms. In 1860, with a population of 10,388 people, there are 25 saloons. By 1866 there are 60 and by 1872 there are 75. There is a tripling of the number of saloons while the population of Fort Wayne in 1870 is only 17,718. Inexplicably, saloon listings disappear from the city directories for a period after this as though if they



aren't listed, they don't exist. However, newspapers of the 1850's, '60's, and '70's are regularly filled with tales of drunkenness.

By 1894 The Fort Wayne Sentinel reports the presence of 188 saloons in the city. The turnover of businesses in general is staggering. The four block length of Columbia Street alone has been estimated to have had over 2,500 businesses come and go during its first 130 years and by the 1890's while saloons continued to pop up in the outskirts of the city, many of the early hotels and taverns had become rough and tumble places. The old City House, built in the center of the business district in 1858, would become dilapidated and a house of "ill repute" by 1890. By 1903 it was home to the Fort Wayne Rescue Mission.

By the 1890's the temperance movement is gaining steam. The population of Fort Wayne has reached 35,393 people with a saloon count of approximately 180. That is a saloon for every 194 people. To put that in perspective, that would be the equivalent in 2010 with a population of 253, 814 of 1,308 saloons today. In 1898 the Indiana Anti-Saloon League is formed. And by 1903, the saloons and liquor industry of Indiana are compelled to form the Knights of Fidelity to fight the temperance movement. The Knights of Fidelity News, argued, "A State Legislature is to be elected, and it is up to the liquor-men themselves to see that individuals who would if they have power crush their businesses out of existence do not secure seats in that body. By working shoulder to shoulder they can demonstrate their strength to the two great political parties, and secure the defeat of men of this stripe at the primaries." In his book, *The Saloon Problem and Social Reform*, published in 1905, John Marshall Barker of Boston University argues, "the saloon element cares nothing for any political party except in so far as it advances the sale and consumption of liquor. It is the embodiment of selfishness, and is freighted down with evil and evil consequences. The chief reason why saloon politics subsist today grows out of its organized system of

political patronage and its cohesive power of public plunder... Wherever the saloon is most strongly entrenched, there knavery, plunder, graft, and bad government are most rampant.”

In the first years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, more restrictive laws are passed against saloons and liquor stores. Local governments may cast votes against liquor licenses, forcing businesses to close. There is a rise in illegal sales of liquor and in 1907 a “blind tiger” law is passed which allows search and seizure as well as a mandatory jail sentence for businesses or individuals selling liquor without a license. A county option law is passed in 1908 – Sixty nine counties cast votes to go dry. Saturday February 10<sup>th</sup>, 1912 the Fort Wayne Daily News reports that the city will celebrate an Anti-Saloon League Field Day in sixteen protestant churches in the community with local and national dignitaries speaking. The July 20<sup>th</sup>, 1916 Journal Gazette reports that drug stores and grocery stores are operating illegally as “blind tigers”, selling beer and whiskey without a license everyday including Sundays, and Holidays. They report that the police know about it, but turn a blind eye.

Prohibition arrives in Indiana April 2, 1918. Twenty one months later the Eighteenth Amendment goes into effect and national prohibition begins. The amendment prohibits the manufacture, sale, transportation, importation, and exportation of alcohol. The law is devastating to the saloons of Fort Wayne as well as to its two major breweries who are significant employers in the community. Some continue as restaurants, lunch counters, “soft drink saloons”, or become confectionaries. Most close. A few scofflaws continue to sell liquor and beer illegally and surreptitiously. Many drug stores became surreptitious drinking places. The law, although successfully passed, is extraordinarily unpopular among the general citizenry, after all, they had supported over 240 saloons in Allen County at the time prohibition was enacted. Legal challenges ensued at both the national and local level. Frequent arrests were made, but usually the judges were lenient. Many police officers chose to “look the other way”

when dealing with illegal liquor sales. Speakeasies and Roadhouses cropped up and individuals took to brewing beer and distilling whisky in the privacy of their homes. In the first couple of years of prohibition, newspapers published many unusual stories of its impact. Here are just a few:

From the Journal Gazette after one year of prohibition: "There is one outstanding and generally agreed fact. The United States is not dry. Even the most ardent supporters of prohibition agree that it is not...Liquor in one form or another can be purchased most everywhere. "

The News Sentinel Reports March 28<sup>th</sup>, 1922: An undercover prohibition officer, spending a week with bootleggers and moonshiners organizes a raid of the C.W. Didley Pool Hall. Someone is tipped off and the raiding party finds "not a drop of anything intoxicating."

The April 13<sup>th</sup>, 1922 Journal Gazette reports a most unusual legal case. "Prohibition is blamed for breaking up a happy home...Mrs. Brennan states in her complaint that her husband was never known to be drunk until the advent of prohibition. But that since that time he has come home drunk repeatedly and that he is constantly drinking vile mixtures of intoxicating liquors....Mr. Brennan was a kind and loving husband, but recently she alleges, he has threatened to kill her while under the influence of intoxicating liquor.

And in a remarkable editorial in the Fort Wayne Sentinel of October 9, 1922 we read, under the title "The Propaganda of the Devil", "There is a studied and decidedly interesting propaganda... to the effect that prohibition is a failure and that more booze is now being consumed than ever before. Here in Fort Wayne we once had several hundred saloons, and two breweries – all doing a big business. Will it be contended for a single instant that the bootleggers sell as much liquor or a tenth part of it in Fort Wayne

that these places sold?...The big fact remains that the great army of our citizens no longer have temptation thrust upon them at every turn and that the average boy is safe. Oh, we'll grant that a certain bunch of unlucked cubs now carry liquor on their hips because they think it cute to be lawless and brazenly drink at parties and dances, but only the few smart alecks and naturally lawless come in for this. The normal children of normal parents keep out of it. Don't forget that there was lawlessness in plenty in the days of the saloons, too, and that drunken men and women daily staggered through our streets, that little children were debauched, and that homes were wrecked and ruined by the thousand where one falls under the curse today... Prohibition is here and here to stay...It is well to remember too, that the men engaged in the liquor traffic are all of them scoundrels and outlaws. They are the rascals who are willing to poison and debauch their neighbors in order that they themselves may profit. They are the ignorant foreigners who without morals or conscience come into America...to get money by trampling our laws under foot. They are the women of the underworld who have added a new department to their unspeakable calling...this branch of business is made up of thoroughly bad and desperate men and women, the jackals of society and anarchists who seek to undermine our laws that they may be enriched."

Eventually, due to the unpopularity and ineffectiveness of the law, and more significantly, the loss of an estimated \$11 billion dollars in federal revenue, prohibition was repealed in December of 1933.

In Fort Wayne, the repeal of prohibition results in the nearly immediate return of bars and taverns to the city but never to the number nor proportion in relation to population that they held pre-prohibition. By 1940, the Home Telephone Directory lists 80 "Beer Taverns" and 130 by 1950. Over the years with the suburbanization of the city, the effects of urban renewal, and other misguided blight elimination programs, and the more recent smoking ordinances, the number of taverns has diminished dramatically.

The current Frontier phone directory, to the extent that it is accurate, lists about sixty taverns in the city. A far cry from the golden years of bars and taverns in the Summit City.

So what are the oldest remaining taverns? As for Allen County, there really is no contest for the oldest tavern. In Marion Township, at the intersection of Flat Rock Road and the old Piqua Road (currently US 27), was a settlement known simply as Root. At this intersection, John Karn opened a tavern in 1837. The Piqua Road, a major corridor for early settlers, was known for being muddy and treacherous. This, combined with becoming a stagecoach stop, made Karn's Tavern an important respite for travelers. In 1850, John Holmes acquired the tavern and rebuilt it in the popular Greek Revival style. It was renamed the Nine Mile House, as it was exactly nine miles from the Allen County Courthouse. It became an important hub for the settlers and travelers of southern Allen County, providing drinking, dining, lodging, and a convenient meeting place. As it changed hands over the years it added and lost various additional services including acting as a post office and gas station. Today, although remodeled and expanded, one can still see the bones of the 1850 structure. If you haven't been there, stop by, enjoy some excellent tavern food and a pint or two in a welcoming atmosphere. Tell Joe, David sent you, and you will be served in the same manner as everyone else.

Although records of some of Fort Wayne's oldest taverns are spotty, the oldest bar in operation in the city of Fort Wayne is believed to be The Oyster Bar. As with most saloons in Fort Wayne, the bar changed hands frequently, but we have a fairly complete record of its history. The original saloon was opened at 1830 South Calhoun in the summer of 1888 by Ferdinand Oetting. It was purchased in 1890 by W.T. Harvey, a fireman for the Pennsylvania Railroad. Four years later, in 1894, Joseph Schnee, a bartender of Harvey's, bought the saloon and Joseph and his wife, Rosina, lived above it for the next 16 years. They operated the bar up until 1918 when prohibition became law in Indiana. During

prohibition, the front room continued to operate as a restaurant. It is rumored that the back room became notorious as a speakeasy where liquor and gambling occurred.

Although it is nearly impossible to find accurate information about all of the older bars and taverns in Fort Wayne, I believe a strong candidate for second oldest continuously operating bar in Fort Wayne is The Redwood Inn. Located at 1432 W Main Street, the Redwood began its life in 1893. It was known at various times as the Hammerle Tavern, the Evelyn Robbins Restaurant, and the Home Lunch, which was a café that served alcohol. During prohibition, liquor was served in coffee or in coffee cups and The Home Lunch was open 24 hours a day, seven days a week. In 1955, Joe Bankert bought the tavern and renamed it Joe's Tap Tavern and the Lug A Jug Liquor Store. Wes Stewart bought the tavern in 1962 and renamed it The Redwood Inn. Dan and Jeanne Bixby bought the tavern in 1977 and in September of 2014 Mark Nei became the latest owner. If you have never visited the Redwood, it is famous for its pizza and sausage rolls.

Other continuously operating taverns that probably have a prohibition history include the Brass Rail at 1121 Broadway which was previously known as Frank Briggs Restaurant and the R&B Nip and Sip Tavern. The Brass Rail was known for years as being one of the roughest bars in Fort Wayne. Today, it is popular with 20 somethings and regularly has live music. The River Tavern, located at 1201 W Main Street is also one of the oldest bars. Located on the edge of the old Camp Allen neighborhood, The River Tavern was also known for having frequent fights, stabbings, and other trouble for its entire life. It recently came under new ownership first as the Berlin and currently as Skeletunes. While it is popular now among the heavily inked set, you will find it friendly and tame even if you don't share the patrons taste in music and décor. Stop in. Have a pint or two of your favorite craft beer and enjoy some of Laura's pork tacos. Finally, in 1924, August and Otto Halfmann opened the A&O Sweet Shop at 1734 High Street. Although

listed as a confectionary shop in the city directory, I've heard many rumors of the A&O selling liquor during prohibition. When prohibition ended they immediately started selling beer and liquor openly. Despite my attempts to nail down the detailed history of this place, it has evaded me. Just as the A&O Sweet Shop seems to have evaded the local smoking ordinance.

We know that the tavern, now known as O'Sullivan's, referred to itself as a confectionary and operated as The Palace of Sweets during prohibition. It was raided in 1922 and fined for serving alcohol. From my research, I cannot establish that it has operated continuously. Early post prohibition neighborhood taverns that have retained much of their original character include The Rock, The Broadway Grill, and the Hitchin' Post. All three of these have a strong reputation for crime and violence. Safer bets for early neighborhood taverns include The Acme, the Shady Nook, and the Latch String.

I've decided end my paper at the entrance of the US into World War II. There were dozens of wonderful taverns that made an appearance in the later years and I'm certain many Questers have stories to tell.

Many, whose names intrigue me, like The Bavarian Village, Christ's Place, The Copa Bar, El Morocco, and the First and Last Thirst, I regrettably, will never have the opportunity to visit.