



PHOTOS COURTESY OF KATHERINE RODEGHIER

Beaux Arts architecture is on display inside the Allen County Courthouse.

Find your roots in Fort Wayne

Visit The Genealogy Center on a getaway to Indiana's second city

By Katherine Rodeghier
Daily Herald Correspondent

I found my great-grandmother in Fort Wayne, Indiana.

Actually, she didn't live in Indiana but on an island in the Baltic Sea. After years of searching for her birthplace, experts at the second-largest genealogical research collection in the U.S. did what even a genealogist I met in Germany could not do. They found my family's roots firmly planted on Germany's largest island.

And they'll help you find your roots, too.

The Genealogy Center at the Allen County Public Library ranks second

only to the Family Search Library (formerly the Family History Library) in Salt Lake City, Utah, in its collection of genealogical sources. More than a million physical items cover the size of a football field. Too overwhelming? Make an appointment for a one-on-one consultation with a professional genealogist. It's free.

And while you're geeking out on ancestry, what will your travel companions do?

Plenty. Indiana's second-largest city, the fastest-growing metro area in the Great Lakes region, has attractions matching a wide range of interests making it a great place for a getaway.

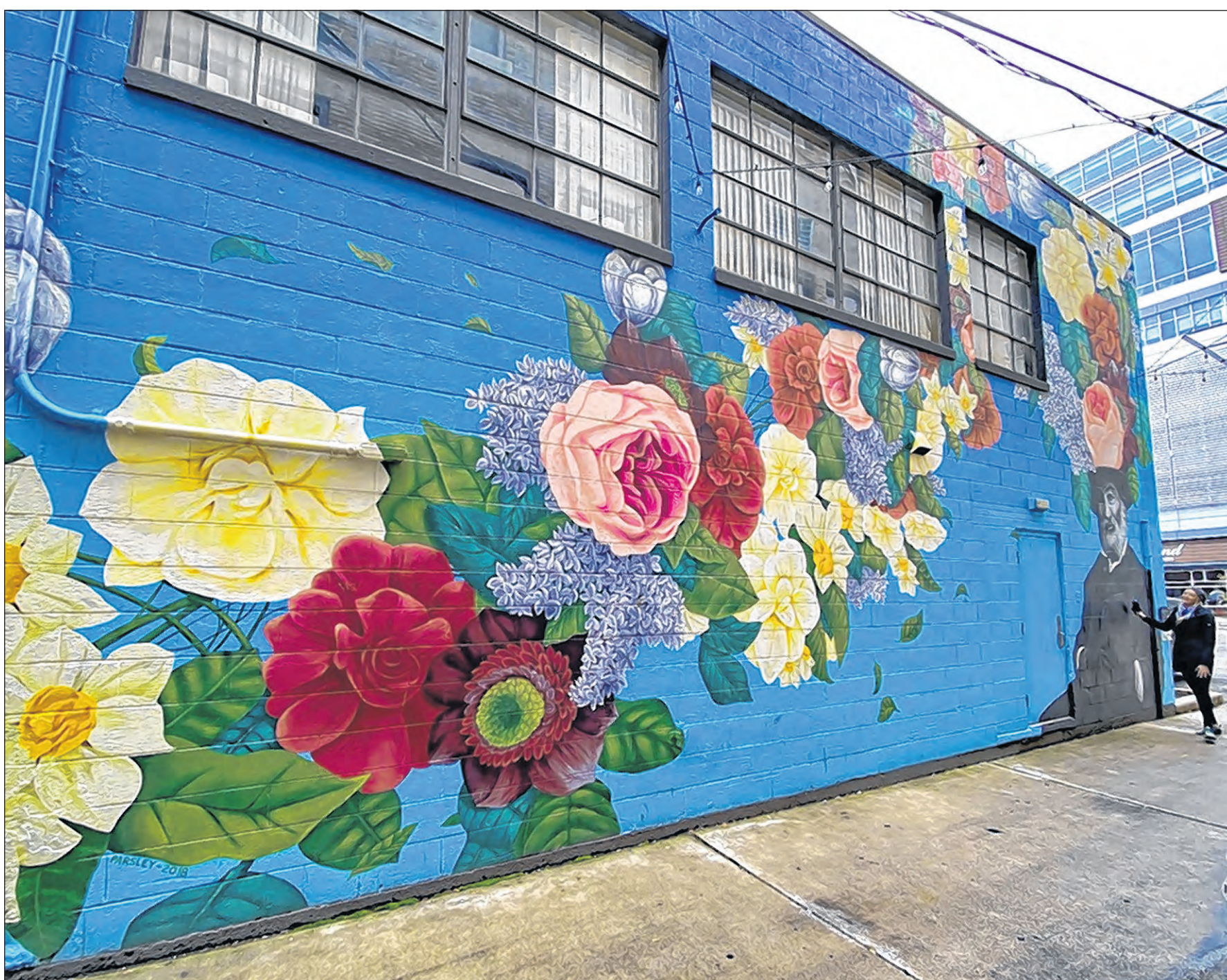
You'll be tempted to extend your stay to join them.

How it works

When you enter The Genealogy Center, you'll find two of its seven genealogists at the front desk to help you find your way around the center and start your research. Browse row after row of documents and access the top seven licensed genealogical databases plus databases available only to libraries. View hundreds of thousands of files on microfilm and access holdings from the Family Search Library in Salt Lake City. Dive

into census records, family histories, passenger lists, Native American and African American records, military records dating back to the Revolutionary War and more city directories than any other facility in the nation, including at the Library of Congress.

"We have watched more jaws drop than one would in most libraries," said Curt B. Witcher, the library's director of special collections. Nearly 70,000 visitors a year came to the center in downtown Fort Wayne before COVID-19 shut down public buildings, he said. He anticipates the pace will pick up as the pandemic wanes.



Murals on the Public Art Trail brighten streets and alleys in downtown Fort Wayne, Indiana.

Plan ahead

Before you visit, do your homework. Start at the center's website, genealogycenter.org, to plan your visit and use online resources to add to your own research. If you have a question about the collection, email Genealogy@ACPL.Info. Most responses to general questions are returned in 48 hours. If you want to schedule a free, 30-minute, in-person consultation, make an appointment by email or phone, (260) 421-1225. An expert will sit with you shoulder-to-shoulder to evaluate your research and help you create a personalized research plan.

But don't come empty-handed. Bring your notes and documents, a USB drive to save images and text, dollar bills for the copy machines, comfy shoes and a light sweater or

jacket to wear in chilly document rooms. Bring your laptop or use one of center's 28 public computers.

The Genealogy Center began at the Allen County Public Library after a former library director recognized public libraries typically weren't welcoming places for ancestor research. Amateur genealogists are "power users," said Witcher. "They use a lot of materials, they ask a lot of questions and they stay all day." A separate area dedicated to genealogy makes the search for roots more productive and enjoyable.

The library and the center are funded by a portion of property taxes often much greater than in other municipalities, said Witcher. "This community has been in a 125-year love affair with this library."



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Attractions within walking distance

Plan a visit to Fort Wayne long enough for genealogists and/or their travel partners to take in some of the sights. A few within walking distance of the library:

- **Foellinger-Freimann Botanical Conservatory:** Permanent gardens include the Tropical and Desert Gardens. The Showcase Garden features four different exhibitions throughout the year.

- **Fort Wayne Museum of Art:** Art from the 1800s to the present. Across the street, Artlink has a gallery full of local art and unique pieces.

- **Allen County Courthouse:** A National Historic Landmark and fine example of Beaux Arts architecture, the restored Allen County Courthouse boasts art glass, murals and intricately patterned tile floors. Self-guided tours; docent-led tours by appointment, (260) 449-4246.

- **Fort Wayne Public Art Trail:** Innovative sculptures and murals span whole alley walls downtown. Pick up a map from the visitor center.

- **Minor league baseball:** The TinCaps, the High-A affiliate of the San Diego Padres, play at downtown Parkview Field.

- **The Old Fort:** Replica of an 1815 military fort with living history exhibits and demonstrations.

- **Promenade Park along the Riverfront:** The park's 4.2 acres include a pavilion, playground, amphitheater, cafe and plaza for foosball, corn hole and other games. It's the departure point for excursions on Sweet Breeze, a replica 1840s canal boat. Across the river, Fort Wayne Outfitters & Bike Depot rents canoes, kayaks and stand-up paddleboards.

Attractions outside downtown

- **Fort Wayne Children's Zoo:** Forty acres of animal habitats, rides and hands-on experiences, including hand-feeding giraffes.

- **Sweetwater:** Inside the headquarters of the nation's top online music retailer, you'll find a nearly 40,000-square-foot store with the largest on-site inventory of musical instruments, supplies and equipment in the country.

- **Vera Bradley Annual Outlet Sale:** After a three-year hiatus due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the sale resumes June 14-18 at the Allen County War Memorial Coliseum. Shoppers may receive 40% to 60% off retail prices on handbags, totes, luggage and accessories. Tickets go on sale March 28 at Ticketmaster.com and are required to attend the first three sale days.



PHOTOS COURTESY OF KATHERINE RODEGHIER

Parents and kids glide over the grounds of the Fort Wayne Children's Zoo on the Sky Safari ride.



Re-enactors take visitors back to the 19th century at The Old Fort.



Curt B. Witcher, director of special collections at the Allen County Public Library, takes visitors to one of the document rooms in The Genealogy Center.