

Inspiring loyalty: The education and preservation of T.C. Steele

Great artists are tortured. They don't quite fit in. They suffer from bipolar disease, schizophrenia, or depression, and they often struggle with personal relationships

That's the perception, anyway, and proponents of this theory cite Van Gogh, Hemingway, Schumann, Gauguin, and Woolf, among other troubled geniuses. But the reality is, the link between mental illness and creativity is more correlation than causation, although there's no doubt that an artist's mind sees things a little differently.

Take, for example, Theodore Clement Steele.

T.C. Steele, as he's known, was an American Impressionist. He's one of the five members of the renowned Hoosier Group of artists and the progenitor of Brown County, Indiana's arts scene. He's an all-too-rare example of an artist who was celebrated during his lifetime. And yet, the expected tales of self-indulgence don't exist, and he had a lifetime of support.

I'd first seen T. C. Steele's paintings at the [Haan Mansion Museum of Indiana Art](#) and I was struck by the luminous quality of his Indiana landscapes. I wanted to learn more about the man behind the brush, and the best place to do that was at the T. C. Steele State Historic Site in Brown County.

We drove the winding two-lane road on a Sunday morning, passing yellowed beech leaves fluttering in the March breeze and winter-bare oaks. As we neared, we saw a double-arch whose entrance was blocked by stanchions, and beyond that, a red house at the top of a hill. It was a bucolic setting, but we soon learned it wasn't quite so idyllic in 1907 when Steele and his wife, Selma, moved to Brown County and forever changed this part of Indiana.

"We are running away from towns and people, for the hills and woods and sky, and we can get people when we need them."

T.C. Steele, 1907

What *was* idyllic, comparatively speaking, was T. C. Steele's evolution from saddle-maker's son to successful and influential artist, beloved by friends, community, and not one, but three formidable women.

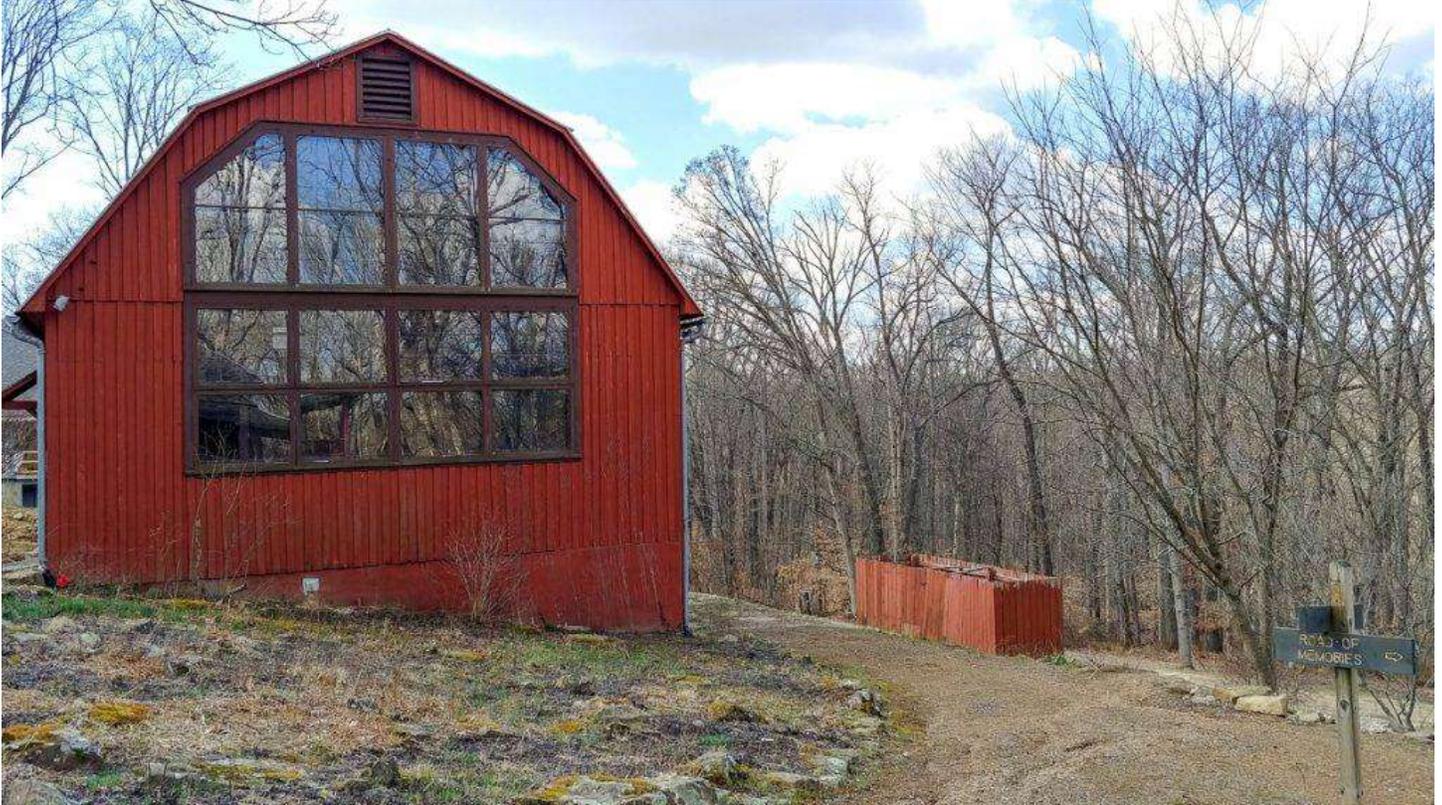
The early years of T.C. Steele

The *Early life and education* and *Marriage and family* sections in Steele's Wikipedia entry are sparse, limited to names and dates. He was born in Gosport, Indiana, on September 11, 1847. You can find out where he went to school and when, who he married, when their children were born, when his first wife died, and when he married his second. It's a just-the-facts recitation, and that's fine - it is Wikipedia, after all - but it doesn't provide the story of how this farm boy grew up to be the most influential artist in Indiana.

A visit to the T.C. Steele State Historic Site fills those gaps between births, deaths, and marriages with stories of dedication and timely patronage.

Inspiring loyalty: The education and preservation of T.C. Steele

Our tour of the [Indiana museum](#) with Cate Whetzel, Program Developer, began in the Large Studio. We entered the barn-like structure bathed with natural light from the wall of windows, and Cate described the artist's childhood. His father was a saddle-maker and a farmer, and when T. C. was five, the family moved to Waveland, partly because the community had an academy and the Steeles wanted their children to receive an education.



T. C. Steele Large Studio

In 1852, Indiana had been a state for 36 years and most of it was still the frontier. That meant service providers would travel by wagon from town to town. One of those services was sign painting. At the time, paint was a rare commodity; John G. Rand invented portable tubes in 1841, but they weren't exactly something you'd pick up at the general store.

Enter the itinerant sign painter.

T. C. had already shown an interest in light and colors. As he helped his father in the fields, he'd tie colored ribbons to the handles of the plow so he could study their movement in the wind. When the traveling artist arrived in Waveland, the intrigued farmer's son followed the painter from job to job. Apparently the young Steele was so charming (or persistent) that the sign painter gave him his second-best paints.

It's not clear when exactly the wandering painter bestowed this gift, but T. C. showed such an aptitude that when he ran out, his uncle ordered more paints. He began taking classes at the Waveland Academy, now

Inspiring loyalty: The education and preservation of T.C. Steele

known as the Waveland Collegiate Institute, and by the time the burgeoning artist turned 13 he was promoted to Teacher of Arts.

Imagine, Cate prompted, being so talented at that age that your teachers think you should also be instructing students.

Then, sadly, his father died in 1861. Sam was 38 years old and T. C. was just fourteen. His mother, also 38, was now alone with a farm and five children, the youngest of which was only one month. Harriett had given birth to nine, but in that rough time and place, four had died.

Despite that hardship, this formidable woman, the first in T. C.'s life, told the young man that he would be able to pursue his art; for now she needed him to help around the farm, but only until his brothers were old enough to take over.

His mother must have been true to her word, because T. C. continued his studies at Waveland and, while there, met Libbie Lakin. The couple married in 1870 and moved to Battle Creek, Michigan, where T. C. made a living by painting commissioned portraits and, like the man who got him started, commercial signs.

The Steeles had a boy and named him Rembrandt, followed two years later by a girl they named Daisy. With two children in tow, the family moved to Indianapolis, and a few years later their third child and second son, Shirley, was born.

T. C. continued painting portraits because they paid the bills, but soon his art, and life, would change forever.

Inspiring loyalty: The education and preservation of T.C. Steele



Portrait of Shirley holding an orange

Inspiring loyalty: The education and preservation of T.C. Steele

Patronage and creation of the Hoosier Group

We stood in front of a wall of T. C. Steele's early works and Cate set the scene. The post-Civil War cycle of boom/bust/boom/bust exhausted the heavily-German population of Indianapolis. Many of them had fled Europe after the failed revolution of 1848, and their ethos of social responsibility and pride in the capital city, the third for the state, led them to determine that Indianapolis *must* have a thriving arts and culture scene.

To achieve that, Herman Lieber asked T. C. Steele what he needed to truly be a great artist. T. C. replied, "Formal education." So, Lieber and other prominent businessmen sent him to the Academy of Fine Arts, Munich, under one condition: that he return to Indianapolis.

From 1880 to 1885, the family of five lived in Munich while T. C. learned. With fellow Hoosiers J. Ottis Adams, Carrie Wolf, August Metzner, Samuel Richards, and later, William Forsyth, he trained at the academy and studied Old Masters. The students also gathered around Boston landscape artist J. Frank Currier, becoming known as "Currier's boys."

It was during this period that T. C. fell in love with plein air, and once he returned to Indiana that love became more and more evident in the vibrancy of his work.

Unfortunately, no one bought it.

Americans simply did not want paintings of their home, especially in Indiana. "Why would I buy *that* when I can just look out my window?" was the thought.



Inspiring loyalty: The education and preservation of T.C. Steele

T. C. took every single portrait commission he could get. The family would spend their winters in Indianapolis, and his paintings of prominent citizens funded the other three seasons. Once spring came, the Steeles piled into his custom studio wagon, a modified version of that traveling sign painter's rig, and would head for the country.

This isn't to say T. C.'s art was ignored. In fact, he exhibited at New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art. He founded the Indiana Art School. His work was displayed at the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago, in the same gallery as Monet, Renoir, and Pissarro.

In 1894, Chicago critic Hamlin Garland saw an exhibit by Steele; J. Ottis Adams and William Forsyth, who had both been with him in Munich; and Otto Stark and Richard Gruelle. Their collective works impressed Garland so much that he brought the exhibition to Chicago and dubbed the artists the "Hoosier Group."

The name stuck.

The public follows critics, and it seemed everything was coming up daffodils. T. C. was respected among his peers, respected by critics, respected by collectors. Slowly, his landscapes began to sell.

And then tragedy struck. In 1899, his beloved Libbie died.

Cate stopped in front of a painting distinguished from the others by its lack of light, depth, and complexity. The painting offends her because, she said, "It's almost naive in its skill level."

For an artist of T. C.'s talent and stature, this was an affront. It was also a visual representation of his grief.



Inspiring loyalty: The education and preservation of T.C. Steele

The artist continued to paint every day after Libbie's death, but he struggled. So, his daughter, Daisy, took him on a journey to California and Oregon. This 1902 train ride, with its foreign vistas of snow-capped peaks and endless ocean, revitalized T. C.

They repeated the trip in 1903, and after they returned, Daisy met Gustave Neubacher and they married in 1905.

Gustave had a sister. A remarkable sister. Selma Neubacher took herself to the Bronx when she was in her early 30s. After ten years of teaching elementary school in Indianapolis, Selma decided to attend the Pratt Institute in New York, the first college that accepted students regardless of race, gender, or class.

Selma graduated, returned to Indianapolis, and became the assistant supervisor of art for public schools. This was during a time, Cate pointed out, when women in Indiana had no rights. It was so bad that if a couple got divorced, the husband could put the kids up for adoption and their mother could do nothing about it. And yet, Selma could design the whole art curriculum for the state's capital city.

She also taught at the John Herron Art Institute, which, coincidentally, was located in a former home of T. C. Steele's. The now-famous artist had been on the faculty, but it was because of the connection through his daughter and her brother that the two became friends.

Despite the age difference of 23 years, they married, which meant Daisy's sister-in-law became her step-mom and T. C.'s son-in-law was also his brother-in-law.

Artists.



Inspiring loyalty: The education and preservation of T.C. Steele



The Brown County Years

In the corner of the Large Studio sits a three-dimensional still life. A tall cabinet and a shorter case are filled with items an artist might use. Some of the artifacts, like the palettes haphazardly stacked on the table and the brushes stuffed into a pottery bowl, actually were used by the artist.

Selma, Cate explained, kept everything. Even his cigar butts.

Cate pointed out a brush whose bristles had been worn to nubs, and a glance from that tool to the works created with it provided an intimate connection with the artist and the woman who preserved everything of her husband's she could.

T. C. and Selma married in 1907 and promptly moved to the remote hills of Brown County, Indiana. To call it remote is like saying T. C. was a painter: the description fits, but doesn't begin to describe.

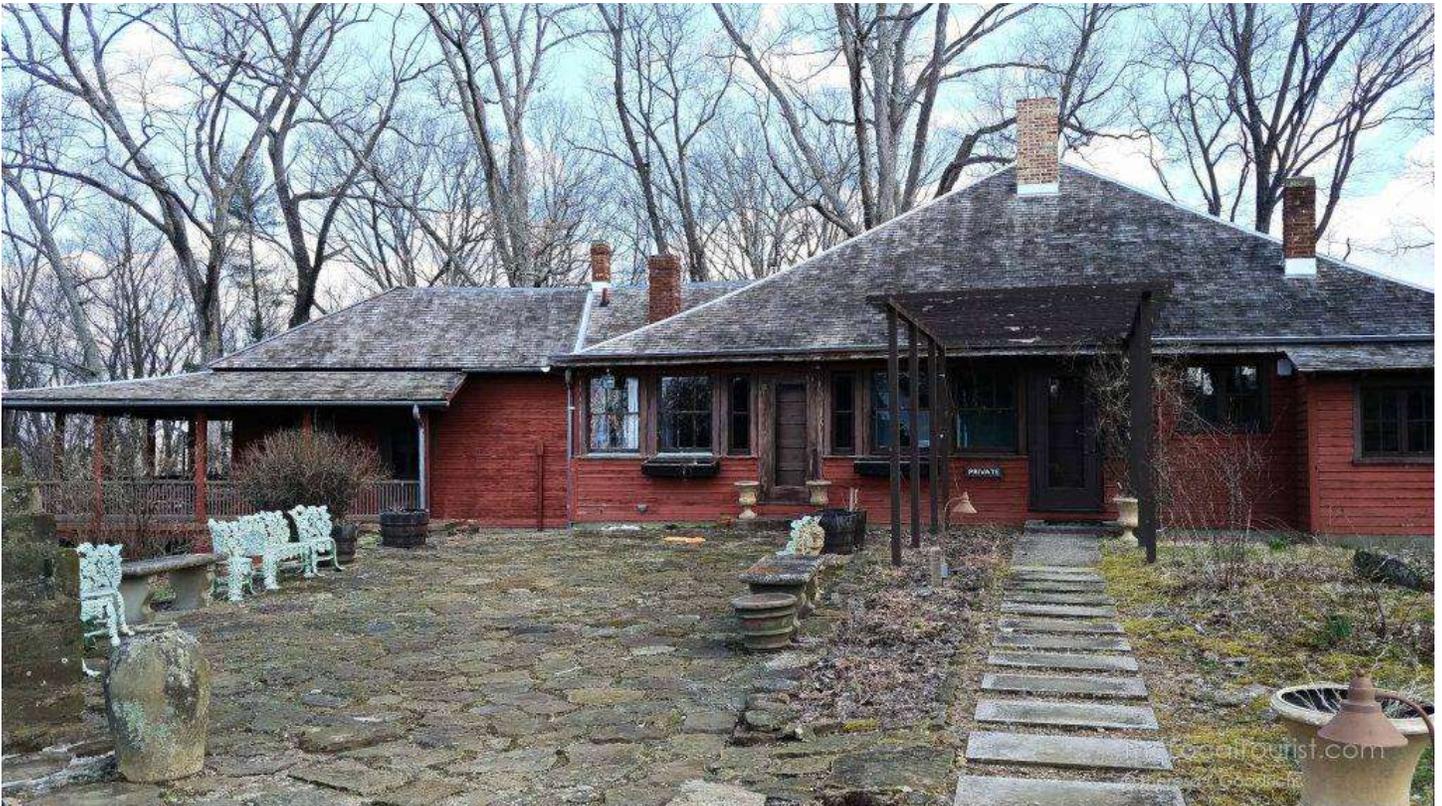
Despite being just twenty miles from Bloomington, Brown County was forty years behind that college town and the larger city of Indianapolis to the north. Where there had once been old-growth forests, the hills in 1907 were bare due to clear-cutting. That meant erosion of the thin soil covering the bedrock, which meant

Inspiring loyalty: The education and preservation of T.C. Steele

treacherous roads, which meant locals couldn't go very far. Considered a "village in amber," there was no industry and those who could, left.

This is where T. C. and Selma, his cosmopolitan and educated wife, chose to build their home and studio, on the top of a tree-less hill with rutted roads and a two-mile hike to the closest water source.

It sounds like a recipe for disaster, but as we left the studio and entered the House of the Singing Winds, so named for the whistle made by its metal screens, we found a home.



Because Selma kept everything, walking into that red building is to walk into how they lived, and it was very different from anyone else in Brown County.

Hundreds of books, books they pulled from the shelves and read, lined the walls. A Victrola and player piano sat silently, but we could imagine neighbors hiking up the hill to listen to recorded music for the first time.

In the corner a stuffed peacock sat on a pedestal, which confounded the neighbors: why would anyone stuff something you can eat and keep it inside the house?

Elegant Victorian furniture and oriental rugs welcomed their guests. Selma could afford both of those luxuries because, at the time, Queen Victoria was out of style. The intricate rugs weren't popular, but their neighbors with looms would get down on their hands and knees to see how the floor coverings were made.

Inspiring loyalty: The education and preservation of T.C. Steele



Selma also installed a closet, and it was the first built-in closet in Brown County. People would stop by just to see that wonder.

And stop by they did. Every day. From locals checking out their neighbors to fellow artists that also heeded the siren call of the "Little Smokies," it was a never-ending stream of people come a'calling. Even members of the Palette & Chisel club in Chicago would take the train down to Helmsburg and make their way to the House of the Singing Winds.

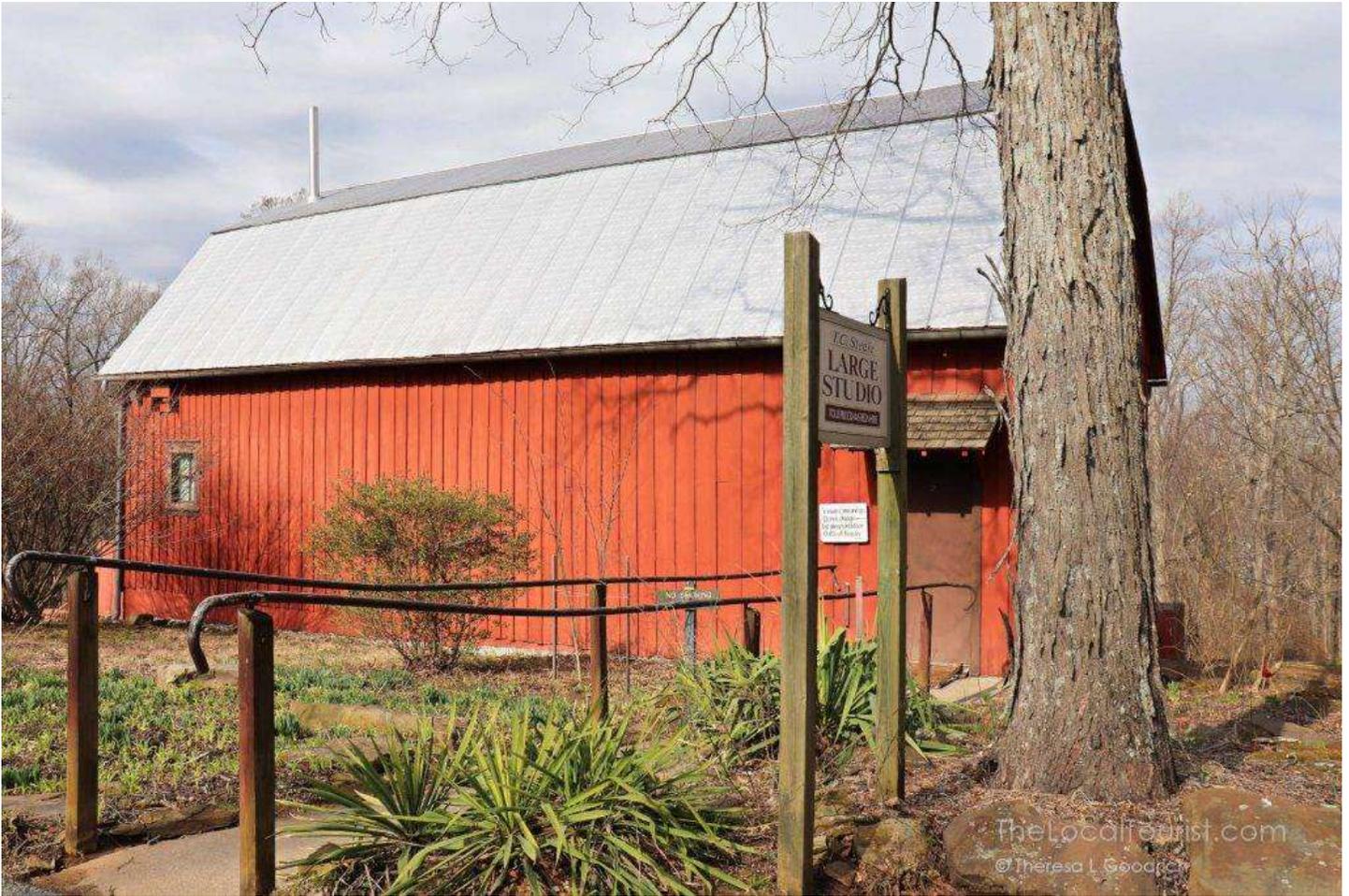
Selma tried to funnel visitors to one day a week, calling it Sundays at Home and creating special programs.

It didn't work.

They had moved there so T. C. could paint, and at first, he set up his easel in the living room. When that proved impossible because of the frequent visitors, the Steeles built a wing with emergency studio space. Then he added a small studio in a separate building.

Finally, in 1916, he moved his studio into the large barn-like structure with its wall of windows and they opened their grounds to the public (officially).

Inspiring loyalty: The education and preservation of T.C. Steele



Despite having this impressively large space in which to create, most of the time T.C. painted outside, continuing to pursue his love of plein air. Selma encouraged him by planting elaborate gardens, specifically so he'd have more subject matter.

For the first few years, the couple traveled back to Indianapolis for the winters, but by 1912 they lived in their house on the hill year-round. This lasted for a decade, when in 1922 Indiana University invited T. C. to be its first artist in residence. After that honor, the couple spent their winters in Bloomington, but they returned to their home and gardens once the daffodils bloomed.

Inspiring loyalty: The education and preservation of T.C. Steele



Preserving the legacy of T. C. Steele

T. C. Steele died July 24, 1926. Selma stayed on the hill, even through the great depression. To survive, she rented cabins and sold produce on the side of the road. She sold some her husband's paintings, but kept many.

Importantly, she kept the house and studio the way they were, and when she died in 1945, she bequeathed the entire estate and more than 300 of his paintings to the Indiana Department of Conservation (now the Indiana Department of Natural Resources) with the explicit purpose of establishing an historic site. Because of her vision, nearly a century after T. C. Steele's death, you and I can see how this remarkable couple lived.

We left knowing there must have been something truly special about T. C. Steele. He began his life with a mother who supported his art, and then met and married two women who believed in him enough to follow where ever his passion took them. He inspired an itinerant sign painter to give up some of his precious supplies, an uncle to buy him more, a school to invite the teenager to teach, and a community of businessmen to send him across the ocean so he could receive the training he needed.

Inspiring loyalty: The education and preservation of T.C. Steele

He inspired his contemporaries and they followed him to a hidden region of the country, turning it into the haven for artists that it is to this day.

T. C. Steele's story seems, from this distance, to be of a wonderful life. As Cate said, it's a biography with no apologies. There are no tales of narcissism, or abuse, or misanthropy.

Just loyalty, dedication, and gorgeous, enveloping art.



Inspiring loyalty: The education and preservation of T.C. Steele

Visiting T. C. Steele State Historic Site

The T. C. Steele State Historic Site covers the original 211 acres of the homestead. Visitors are invited to hike any of the five trails, four of which Selma designed. You can also:

- Explore her gardens, which were restored to their original state in 2017. You'll see the same gardens T. C. painted.
- Set up an easel and paint your own masterpiece
- Visit the 1875 Dewar Log Cabin, moved to the grounds by Selma in the early 1930's to preserve its Brown County history.
- Take a guided tour of the Large Studio* and the House
- Bring home a piece of Brown County from the gift shop

**The Large Studio is temporarily closed. It's getting a "refresh" and its opening will coincide with the new Singing Winds Visitor Center, ~June, 2019.*

How much does it cost to visit T. C. Steele Historic Site?

It's free to roam the grounds. Tours of the Large Studio and Home are \$7 for adults, \$6 for seniors (60 and up) and \$4 for children (3 - 17).

Are there self-guided tours?

Only of the grounds themselves. Guided tours of the Large Studio and Home take place at quarter past the hour from 10:15am until 4:15pm.

When is T.C. Steele Historic Site open?

This Indiana museum is open Tuesday through Sunday. It's closed every Monday as well as Easter Sunday, Thanksgiving Day, and Christmas Day.

Where is T.C. Steele Historic Site located?

4220 T.C. Steele Road
Nashville, IN 47448

Visit the [T.C. Steele Indiana State Museum website](#) for information on upcoming events and programs.