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The Stagecoach Comes to Iowa

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The author, a former editor of the ANNALS, has done considerable research on the relatively unknown story of the stagecoach era in Iowa. The University of Iowa Library kindly permitted an extended loan of his master's thesis on this exciting period in Iowa history, from which the following article was adapted. Mr. Colton has spent several years teaching in Japan since World War II, and is currently working for the Department of State in Washington, D.C.

Stagecoach transportation followed the rapidly advancing frontier in the early decades of the nineteenth century because of a demand for its relatively swifter, more dependable, and more capacious form of overland travel. The first essential to such a demand was a population whose size, concentration, or specialized character created a need for such a service, and would support it. In none of these aspects of population could the Iowa District of the Territory of Wisconsin fully qualify before 1837. And not until one or more of these were realized did staging successfully come to Iowa.

The Iowa District had only a population of 10,000 in 1836, scattered along the west bank of the Mississippi River over an area fifty miles wide from the Dubuque lead mines on the north to the Half Breed lands and Keokuk on the south. It had no village or town with a population in excess of 500. Nor did its resources attract a significant populace with specialized interests, such as the gold mining centers of the West at a later period, whose traffic in fortune hunters and precious dust were able to adequately finance stage service. The lead mines at Dubuque failed in this respect as shown in the following pages.

Overland transportation and communication systems had a serious competitor for the public's attention—the water highways. With the Mississippi River washing the whole length of the narrow Black Hawk Purchase, river transport loomed far more important in the eyes of the first settlers than did land travel. Steamboats had begun plying the upper Mississippi in 1823; they brought the larger share of the early settlers to Iowa, via the Ohio River and the city of St. Louis. Emigrants that did come overland through the waving seas of grass on the Illinois prairies, traveled in the typical "Movers" conveyance, the ox-cart or wagon, and hence were not dependent upon the stagecoach.

So long as the first settlers clung to the banks of the Mississippi and other streams hopefully believed to be navigable, the main attention of early residents in the mid-west remained centered on river boats, rather than on developing stage lines. Every newspaper of the day confirms this logical attitude. Regular coach travel, therefore, had to wait until the population had grown and developed needs which the steamboats could not fully or adequately supply.

There was one want, which from the very first directed attention to overland travel and land communication—the mail; and delivery of the mail was a function of the federal government. Stagecoaches first came to Iowa as a means of transporting a growing volume of mail, not to satisfy a need for public travel. This close relationship between the stagecoach and the Post Office Department not only characterized the first days of the era, but remained the most single important factor down to the end of the stage in Iowa.

Iowa, like practically all the other territories west of the Appalachians, was not able to finance a system of public transportation by private means alone. Stagecoach service was the result of a union of public and private demands, arising out of the settlers' desire for fast, dependable delivery of mail, and realized in the

performance of the federal government of its obligation to provide such service to its citizens.

Settlers who moved westward one hundred or a thousand miles, had left homes, friends, and the amenities of civilization to stake their claims and futures in the cheap lands on the frontier, universally felt an imperative need to maintain contact with their old homes. They wanted books, government documents and reports, home newspapers, magazines, and most important of all, letters from relatives and associates. The United States Constitution designated the postal service a monopoly of the federal government, hence settlers looked first to Washington and the Post Office Department for help.

The delivery of mail by horseback no longer sufficed as the population increased. Individual citizens and complaining newspaper editors soon were urging government certification of mail routes as stage lines because they wanted a swifter and more certain means of bringing in *all* the bulk mail instead of only what the meager saddle bags of the horses could promise.

This, then was the pattern found repeatedly in Iowa: first, the designation of a post road; then the introduction of mail service by horse; next, a gradually growing demand, which became more and more urgent and vocal, for a stagecoach conveyance. And after communities obtained mail via stage their efforts were directed toward securing ever more frequent schedules, from semi- to tri-weekly and from tri-weekly to daily deliveries. Furthermore, the multiplying wants of a community, real or fancied, were sure to produce a clamor for a change from the two-horse hack mail to the four-horse post coach.

These developments also benefited the traveler, for though the coach or hack allowed by the four-year government mail contract was granted only when it was deemed necessary to convey bulky mails, room for a cramped passenger could usually be found in the coach.

It is well to remember, however, that the government

had another interest in staging other than merely satisfying the loudly expressed wants of the frontier. Effective administration is measured by time, not in miles. Speedy means of expediting the news and business of the federal government with its various state and territorial offices and servants, and these latter with the citizenry, was a necessary and desirable means of promoting efficiency. Thus, the first stages in Iowa centered around the seats of the territorial governments of Wisconsin and Iowa.

A map will help to show how stages came to Iowa. In the more numerously populated states of Illinois and Missouri, the former a state since 1818, and the latter admitted into the Union after some delays in 1821, stage-coaches were not unfamiliar vehicles by 1836, the date the first stage appears in Iowa records.

In Missouri the first stage line was not established until 1824. Many thousands of early western settlers came by way of the broad and turbulent Mississippi River, joined at Cairo, Illinois by the Ohio from the east; and Missourians were naturally more interested in the steamboat with its hundreds of passengers and tons of cargo than in the stage with its tens of travelers and few hundred pounds of express freight. Illinois does not claim to have had many regularly operating stage-coaches until Robert Allen, a large mail contractor from the east, located at Springfield in 1831. The first stage line west of Chicago is generally credited to a hack driven by Dr. John Temple one hard winter from Chicago to a southern Illinois town on the Mississippi in 1836.¹

¹ *American State Papers*, Postal Documents, No. 66, p. 146. "In Illinois alone, the mail is now carried in stage coaches by different routes, more than 800 miles. From Galena, a village but just founded in the North West corner of this state, 500 miles above St. Louis . . . there is a regular line of stages, connecting with the great mail routes which extend throughout the Union." *American Monthly Magazine*, 1830, Vol. II, pp. 35-36. "Reception of Col. R. M. Johnson at Springfield, May 19, 1843," *Journal of Illinois History*, Vol. 13, p. 197, fn. 2, 3; Reuben Gold Thwaites, "The Story of the Black Hawk War," *Wisconsin Historical Collections*, 1892, Vol. 12, p. 228. Illinois had 15 stage mail routes in 1832 with a total yearly grant of \$210,314, see 23rd Congress, 1st Session, Report 422. The most important route for Iowa was that from St. Louis to Peoria to Galena.

The very ease with which shallow steam craft crossed the lower and upper rapids of the Mississippi, bringing many travelers to the western banks, discouraged earlier extension of stage lines in Illinois. However, the river was not only a highway; it was also an obstacle to westward expansion, as many hundreds of settlers lined up on the eastern bank awaiting their turn at the few ferries.

A venturesome coach may have made its way into Iowa from Illinois or Missouri before 1837, the date of the first regularly operating stage line in Iowa. Possible routes could have been up along the Mississippi to Keokuk while the river was temporarily closed for navigation, through southern Illinois to Fort Madison, or through the mud and sloughs of western Illinois to Burlington, Davenport, or Dubuque.

The first evidence of stages in Iowa, however, comes as a complaint heard in 1836 at Dubuque, the lead mining center in the northern half of the Black Hawk Purchase or Iowa District. The editor of the *Dubuque Visitor* was prompted to complain of the poor postal facilities because mail meant news and news was life. This was one of the first of the typical newspaper complaints which characterized the stagecoach period. Editor Judge John King failed to understand why "the Mail comes on Horseback, in wagons, big and little, in carriages, occasionally in stages." The explanation was that this was a contracted horseback mail service from Galena fifteen miles away. Any stages used to bring mail to Dubuque were "extras" on the Chicago-Galena stage route demanded by special necessity.²

Thus, Dubuque obtained the first temporary stage service, though the first regular lines were soon established in southern Iowa. A daily stage operating from Jordan's Ferry on the east shore of the Mississippi opposite Dubuque, to Belmont, the temporary capital of

² Edward L. Burchard, "Early Trails and Tides of Travel in the Lead Mine and Black Hawk County," *Journal of Illinois History*, Vol. XVII (January, 1925), pp. 599-600; *Iowa News* (Dubuque, Upper Mississippi Lead Mines, Wisconsin Territory), June 1, 22, 1836.

the recently created Territory of Wisconsin, was available to eastbound travelers as early as October, 1836. It probably operated only through the first session of the Wisconsin Territorial legislature meeting in Belmont. Such a stage service had political importance quite aside from its commercial and mail convenience, for Dubuque during that session quite zealously pushed her claims as the next capital of the territory. The legislators were vigorously entertained by competing towns, Dubuque among them. Yet the new stage was more aggravating in its temporary existence than of genuine help since Belmont was connected only with the Prairie du Chien-St. Louis route south.³

Dubuque had lusty ambitions to be the leading city of the new and growing Iowa District on the west bank of the mighty Mississippi, and was anxious to secure the seat of government for the Territory of Wisconsin. She was mindful of the advantages of an easy communication and transportation system with more established communities, and devoted the next two years to a futile effort to secure a regular stage mail from the Post Office Department, either south or east. There remained in 1837 the horseback mail south to Fort Des Moines and the mail east to Galena. Hopes ran high when a Post Office Department official made an inspection trip to the western frontiers that summer. But these hopes became dashed and bitter when the sought-for recommendations were not forthcoming. Dubuque was even more disappointed in hearing the news of the success of her southern neighbor, Burlington, in securing mail contracts for four new stage lines that fall. At the urging of Wisconsin's territorial delegate in Congress, George W. Jones, whose connections with Dubuque were extremely close, a meeting was held in the Methodist log chapel, February 19, 1838, to promote a similar service for Dubuque. Petitions drafted at that time accurately reflect the relative importance attached to stage routes by people on the frontier. They asked for a daily four-

³ *Iowa News*, Oct. 19, 1836.

horse mail coach to Chicago, a tri-weekly coach service to Milwaukee, and the same tri-weekly stage service south down the Iowa side of the Mississippi, in addition to some strictly horse-mails. These petitions were in vain, but they did represent the procedure adopted by most communities seeking improved transportation.⁴

The southern half of the Iowa frontier was successful in getting the new capitol of the Territory of Wisconsin located at Burlington, and did not lag behind its northern neighbor in petitioning for the stagecoach to supplant the horse-mails. One of the earliest was prepared by a Des Moines County convention at Burlington, September 16, 1837, which called for a territorial convention in November to consider the creation of a Territory of Iowa. Several of the resolutions presented criticized the inadequate postal facilities and requested the establishment of stage mail service. These and many other such resolutions complained that the delay or non-appearance of mail was due to a possible conspiracy between the mail contractors and nature, in which conspiracy the contractor usually received the blame.⁵

It is not known whether the Post Office Department was influenced by this meeting at Burlington in September, 1837, but the contracts awarded that year did authorize four stage-mail routes for the newly designated territorial capital of Wisconsin, the legislature meeting there for the first time in November, 1837.

The southern part of the Iowa District, closer to the more populated parts of Illinois and nearer the borders of the settled state of Missouri, derived greater benefits from traffic on the Mississippi than the northern part. Even the rapids forming obstacles to river traffic at Keo-

⁴ *Iowa News*, August 26, 1837, complained that "there is not one hundred miles of stage line in operation, while on the east, stages are run in almost every direction." Added to the extra distance in traveling over the Galena-Peoria-St. Louis stage line to southern destinations was the admonition that "it is never fare for a person to start through who is not able to walk half the distance and pack a fence rail on his shoulder," certainly no inducement to land over river travel. *Iowa News*, February 3, 17, 24, 1838.

⁵ *Iowa News*, Sept. 30, 1837; report of the meeting in Burlington.

kuk and Davenport worked to the advantage of the more southerly settlements. It was perhaps inevitable that that region was more heavily settled at an earlier date than its northern neighbor. It is, therefore, not surprising that the first four stage routes in Iowa were centered at Burlington, the largest village in the territory.⁶

Burlington was naturally favored. It became the second capital of the Territory of Wisconsin in 1836, the result of a compromise between speculating real estate interests at Belmont, and since a new territory would likely be created from the vast Wisconsin region soon, Burlington was the leading candidate for the capital of the prospective Territory of Iowa.

The first of the four government mail contracts awarded in 1837 called for a twice-weekly two-horse stage from Burlington to St. Francisville, Missouri by way of Gibson's Ferry, Fort Madison and Fort Des Moines (Montrose), a distance of forty-five miles, to be covered in eighteen hours. The second line was to run from Burlington to West Mount Pleasant, thirty miles west, on a once-a-week schedule allowing sixteen hours for the distance. The third route ran from Burlington to Davenport, hugging the shore line most of the way, the eighty-one miles to be covered in thirty-seven hours. A fourth stage began twice-weekly trips between Burlington and Macomb, Illinois. Only two of these four routes were all-Iowa stage lines because Burlington was only an extension point for two of them.⁷

The Post Office Department authorized the Burlington-St. Francisville line to begin operations October 1, 1837, three months before the date specified in the advertised bids. This was done for several reasons: it recognized that with the opening of the second session of the territorial legislature in November, the territorial capital had special demands and rights; the rapid growth of population at Burlington had brought a consequent

⁶ Letter from United States Post Office Department, Dec. 19, 1838; *Iowa News*, July 29, 1837; *House Executive Documents*, Serial 341, 25th Congress, 3rd Session, Doc. No. 254, pp. 125-126.

⁷ Congressional Doc., *op. cit.*

increase in the demand for mail; and it was evidence that the national Democratic administration was not unmindful of the requirements of practical politics. Richard Land of Burlington and Samuel Hearn of Lee County submitted identical bids and received a joint contract for \$1200 per annum. The legislators were thereby assured of postal service during the winter months when the river would be closed to navigation.⁸

The other three stage routes contracted in October, 1837, were in operation by the first week in January, 1838. The Macomb, Illinois-Burlington, Wisconsin Territory route ran from Macomb, Illinois through Muddy Lane, Bedford, Honey Creek, and Shokoken, to the Mississippi River and Burlington. It was also a twice-weekly two-horse line, the only condition being to cover the forty-one miles in thirteen hours. The contractor, Morton M. McCarver, also successfully bid for the stage route from Burlington to Davenport, with stops at post offices in Jacksonville (Yellow Springs), Florence, Black Hawk (Toolsborough), Wapello, Harrison, Grand View, "Mouth of Pine," Muscatine (then Bloomington), Geneva, Wyoming, Iowa (Montpelior), and Clark's Ferry (first Glendale and later West Buffalo). Two valuable mail pouches finally arrived in Davenport and were delivered to D. C. Eldridge, the postmaster, thirty-seven hours after leaving Burlington. The significance of this route to Davenport for residents of the west bank of the Mississippi was the connection at Stephenson with a stage line to Galena, which was more importantly linked with the Chicago stages at Dixon's Ferry. This gave southern Iowa acceptable postal communication with Chicago on the north, St. Louis on the south and Macomb, Illinois, on the east, in addition to the mail carried by the steamboats.

The fourth regular mail stage to institute service in January, 1838, was a route thirty miles west from Burlington to West Mount Pleasant. The stage itself never

⁸ Letter from U. S. Post Office Dept., *op. cit.*; Congressional Doc., *op. cit.*; *Iowa Territorial Gazette and Burlington Advertiser*, Aug. 25, 1838; Reed, *History of Lee County*, Vol. I, p. 129.

actually went through to Mount Pleasant, stopping instead at Richland, twelve miles west of Burlington. The remainder of the route was covered by horse-mail. Samuel Newland, the original contractor, performed the service for the first five months, but gave way June 1 to William S. Viney.⁹

The people of Dubuque were becoming impatient, seeing stages bringing mail and passengers as far north as Davenport, so near and yet so far. They didn't even get a stage east to Galena when the Phileo service was discontinued. This was especially frustrating because the advertisements asked for stage mail bids, though that service was not put into operation in 1838. Dubuque, being quite indignant with S. R. Hobbie of the Post Office Department for rejecting its petitions, held a town meeting of its own in February, 1838. The department had available funds and it was felt that a mail stage to Davenport would be well worth the cost.¹⁰

Rebuffed by the federal government, residents of the northern section of the territory turned their entreaties for a southern stage-mail to the legislators of the newly created Territory of Iowa meeting in Burlington in the winter of 1838. Temporarily they met with better success.

A motion made December 3, 1838 and the report of a special committee then appointed, adopted by both houses on December 13, authorized a two-horse mail stage to make twice-weekly trips between Davenport and Dubuque for the remainder of the session. The legislators requested the postmaster at Davenport to institute such a service, because they said,

many of the letters, public documents, and newspapers, from members of the Territorial Assembly, now in session at Burlington, to their constituents in the northern district, cannot in this manner (by a weekly horseback mail) be conveyed in due time,

⁹ Congressional Doc., *op. cit.*

¹⁰ Letter from U. S. Post Office Dept., *op. cit.*, *Iowa Territorial Gazette and Burlington Advertiser*, Jan. 13, 1838. Congressional Doc., *op. cit.*; *Iowa News*, Feb. 3, April 21, Oct. 27, 1838.

but remain at the Davenport Post Office from week to week. . . .

A. C. Donaldson of Davenport made nine such runs under the authority of this resolution. The territorial legislature did not intend to reimburse him, but counted on Congress heeding their memorial and providing the necessary funds from the federal Post Office Department, ex post facto. However, Congress did not take the desired view of the matter, and Donaldson and his assignees were never paid the \$30 per trip agreed upon for the service despite numerous petitions and representations made to Washington.¹¹

Burlington was thus reaping the rewards that came with being named the territorial capital, while Dubuque had to be content with horse-mails. Even the run by horseback to Davenport was only a tri-weekly connection, the Post Office Department refusing to authorize any more frequent schedule.

Overland travel in Iowa was still haphazard and uncertain at best, even with four stage routes in operation—five, counting the occasional Galena stage. If possible travelers usually took passage on river steamers; but they were crowded, lacked privacy and the services offered were meager. There was also the constant danger of being snagged by a submerged log, or blown apart by the high pressure boilers fiercely competitive captains used. Yet, land travel held no allure either.

Roads were still merely designs on paper, rough clearings through wooded sections marked by blazes on the trees, or trails across the open prairies indicated by stakes set 100 yards apart. Muddy sloughs, snow and cold made travel unattractive and fatiguing even in a cart or wagon. People often obtained a conveyance together or else had to depend upon "such vehicles as could be procured at either end of the route, and at such prices as could be obtained, without assurances of passengers

¹¹ *Journal of the House of Representatives*, Territory of Iowa, 1838-1839, Dec. 3, 11, 1838, *Journal of House and Senate*, 1839-1840, H.R. File 115 and S.F. 18, *loc cit.*; *Memorials and Petitions*, 5th Territorial Assembly, 1842-43, Public Archives Division, Iowa Dept. of History and Archives. \$100 was finally paid on the claim of \$270.

on the return trip." Sometimes carriages or wagons were unavailable or impractical, and one had to ride his horse or make the journey on a "horse purchased, in many cases, for no other use than their present trip." When the Mississippi steamboat failed to appear, one northern resident chose to make a dangerous canoe trip instead of traveling overland.¹²

People planning a trip by wagon usually solicited passengers before starting. Ebenezer Cook wrote to Laurel Summers from Davenport in January, 1839, asking whether he could pick up a load of passengers going back if he came to Burlington. He did not mention what he would charge them. J. A. Burchardt, Jr., making the longer trip from Burlington to Dubuque that year, was willing to accept fifteen dollars per passenger. Burchardt also agreed to take anyone as far as Davenport for "half price" if none wanted to go to Dubuque. A correspondent of Summers, was willing to take him from Rockingham to Burlington for a non-specified "half-price" fare.¹³

Means of cross-country travel were not only very uncertain but the demand for such service was relatively small. Communities inland from the larger river towns, without roads and with little desire for better transportation facilities, lacking in many cases even a regular horseback mail, must have been almost completely isolated.

The year 1839 brought two new regular stagecoach lines to Iowa shores. Dubuque, served only by the irregular eastern stage and the Donaldson mail in 1838, at last obtained her first regular stage connection. George O. Karrick, an interested lead mine prospector, received a mail contract to link the Dubuque and Galena Post

¹² The principal road between Davenport and Burlington "is often impassable for the want of proper bridges . . . This road has never been improved." To make the proper repairs the memorialists estimated would require \$30,000. See H.R. File 121, 2nd Territorial Assembly, Territory of Iowa, Public Archives Division, Iowa Dept. of History and Archives.

¹³ *Laurel Summers Manuscript*, 1839, Manuscript Division, Iowa Dept. of History and Archives.

Offices, and began service in January, covering the fifteen rolling miles in four hours, three times a week.¹⁴

The second new stage line established in Iowa that year benefited Burlington once again. A semi-weekly two-horse mail stage between Peoria and Burlington, by way of Middle Grove, St. Augustine, and Ellison's Creek, was begun by William H. Holcomb in July, 1839. The schedule of this important cross-linking route was soon increased to a tri-weekly level. It is evident that the territorial legislature was again tempted to meddle in the affairs of the United States Post Office Department that winter. Resolutions filed by Isaac Lefler of Des Moines County and adopted by the assembly indicate that the improved service undoubtedly had its origins in the real or imagined needs of the territorial officers at Burlington. These officials convinced Holcomb that he should combine two of his eastern routes and that the post master general would surely "sanction the change after [sic] understanding the great advantage it would confer without additional expense . . ." The change was approved in this instance though the postal authorities insisted upon certain safeguards for the mail.¹⁵

Dubuque, having only the one stage to the east, again sought to obtain a mail stage south to Davenport. The mails for one week were carefully weighed in an effort to prove the pressing need for such a mail hack, but it proved of no avail. Congress failed to authorize even a temporary stage during the legislative session though the 1839 legislature petitioned for it in contrast to the brash action two years before.¹⁶

¹⁴ *House Executive Documents*, Serial 368, 26th Congress, 1st Session, Document No. 220, p. 429; *House Executive Documents*, Serial 384, 26th Congress, 2nd Session, Document No. 85, p. 307.

¹⁵ Congressional Doc. 220, *op. cit.*, pp. 152, 499, 500; *Journal*, 2nd Territorial Assembly, House of Representatives, Territory of Iowa, pp. 217, 222, 227, 263-264; *Iowa Territorial Gazette* (Burlington), March 28, 1840.

¹⁶ *Iowa News* (Dubuque), Aug. 24, Sept. 14, 1839; H.R. File 98, Second Territorial Assembly, Public Archives Division, Iowa Dept. of Hist. & Archives. Also see *Journal of the Council*, 1839-1840, pp. 11, 125. House Resolution 19 asked for a twice-weekly post coach between the two points.

The growing number of petitions received by the legislature testified to a growing population and rising demand for overland travel, especially in the number of stage mail routes requested by interior districts. This made certain of the river towns all the more anxious to become the hubs of prospective stage routes in order to maintain their commercial dominance of the territory.¹⁷

Davenport saw that she would benefit from a north-south stage along the Mississippi and supported Dubuque's agitation for such a line. A sparsely attended town meeting was held in Davenport late in December, 1839, to prepare a futile petition for a route along the west side of the river all the way from Dubuque to St. Louis. Davenport businessmen probably acted in defense of their own interests, as other Dubuque recommendations included a stage to the newly located territorial capital at Iowa City and on to St. Louis, possibly by-passing Davenport. Dubuque actually suggested two alternative interior routes: one to run inland to Iowa City and then back to the Mississippi at Burlington where there were stage connections to St. Louis. The other projected on south from Iowa City through Van Buren County re-joining the river route to St. Louis at some point in northern Missouri.¹⁸

Davenport's newspaper editor wanted the proposed stage to run north from St. Louis along the east bank of the Mississippi, cross over to the Iowa side at Davenport, and then on to Dubuque. This suggestion, if adopted by the postal authorities, would have given Davenport two stage routes to St. Louis, one on each side of the river. However, no additional stagecoach service was authorized for either Dubuque or Davenport in 1839.

River towns competed for inland stage routes partly because such facilities would help to attract immigrants and travelers. Business and trade followed the develop-

¹⁷ *Ibid.*; *Journal*, House of Representatives, Territory of Iowa, Dec. 19, 1839.

¹⁸ *Iowa Sun and Davenport & Rock Island News*, Dec. 18, 25, 1839, Jan. 22, 1840.

ment of better communication. These factors, no doubt, were some of the reasons why Bloomington, which later became Muscatine, put forth arguments that winter for a line through that Iowa settlement direct to Chicago.

Little improvement or addition to stage routes in Iowa is noticeable in 1840. The inhabitants of the new territory paused to take breath, and to recover from the effects of the panic of 1837 as well as to adjust to the removal of the capital from Burlington to a site on the prairie fifty miles west of the Mississippi. The steamboat was still preferred to overland travel in most parts of the territory. But even the more rapid delivery of mail by boat often took ten days at the risk of blowing up the boilers. Low water and the rapids were also hazards to river passage. Overland travelers on the other hand had to contend with sloughs, well named "despond," in every newly opened section of the territory. Roads everywhere were such that "only a liberal donation from the federal government could correct them so as to silence the universal complaints." Common experiences of travelers included swollen rivers, bridges swept away by sudden spring freshets, and the "ice bridge" over frozen rivers which became treacherous during warm spells. The difficulties of travel were real and not exaggerated, especially in areas not served by the water highways.

The dominance of the southern section in the early years of the territory is in part explained by the fact that fully two-thirds of the 43,000 people in the Territory of Iowa located there. And population was an important factor in the westward extension of stage lines.

The southern part of Iowa continued to develop its stagecoach services in 1841. Another new route connected Fort Madison with the main stage lines in southern Illinois, passing through Commerce (Nauvoo), Appanoose, Carthage, DeKalb, St. Mary's, Plymouth, Augusta, Pulaski, Huntsville, Camden, and Farmersville before reaching the junction at Rushville, Illinois. The contract for a second and less important semi-weekly line

linking Toolsborough to New Boston, Illinois was awarded and service initiated in August of that year.¹⁹

But a more important development in 1841, and one which emphasized the greater importance of the southern half of the territory, proved more than anything else the increasing tempo of life and business in Iowa—the inauguration of a private non-subsidized daily stage-coach service between two of the leading southern Iowa river towns. The enterprising proprietor of the “Wilson Line of Daily Stages,” William Wilson of Fort Madison, began operations between Burlington and Keokuk in the spring of 1841. Burlington residents were delighted, and hoped he might receive sufficient patronage to warrant extending a daily run to Davenport in the near future. They even toyed with visions of a stage from Burlington to Peoria and Chicago, a line that would be especially valuable when the Ohio River was low, it was remarked.²⁰

Wilson had other problems besides the “roads” and an uncertain public. One of the more serious was a disastrous fire in July, 1843, which, originating from a spark, destroyed his Fort Madison stables and the adjoining building. The loss was estimated at \$1,500, but Wilson’s stages were soon reported “running regularly upon their old routes.”²¹

In addition to the three regular lines, temporary stage connections were also established in 1841 to meet the special demands of the territorial legislature which assembled in Iowa City for the first time in December of that year. At least three different routes were begun as a result of the increased business expected from the legislative sessions held in Walter Butler’s hastily erected clapboard hotel and those in town to work for or against the lawmakers.

¹⁹ Letter from U. S. Post Office Dept., *op. cit.*; *Executive Documents*, Serial 423, 27th Congress, 3d Session, Document 180, p. 627.

²⁰ *Burlington Hawkeye and Iowa Patriot*, April 15, 1841; Newhall, *Iowa in 1841*, p. 113. Cf. Aphia D. Smith, “A Trip to Iowa in 1841,” *Palimpsest*, Vol. XVII, (October, 1936), p. 329.

²¹ *Fort Madison Courier*, Aug. 6, 1841.

One of the opportunists who sensed the possibilities of the situation may well have been William St. John, a hustling young livery stable proprietor at Bloomington. He informed the public early in April that he was ready to transport passengers "in any direction without regard to mail routes or stage hours." Captain Frye, a hotel proprietor of Bloomington with a sharp eye for earning an honest penny, brought an "excellent nine-passenger four-horse Troy-built post Coach" to Bloomington by May of 1841, and announced he intended "running it between Bloomington and Iowa City as often as may be required." But no regular stage other than these semi-occasional ones operated between Bloomington and Iowa City. In November, 1841, a month before the legislature was to assemble in Iowa City, thirty miles west, the editor of the Bloomington (Muscatine) *Herald* publicly lamented the lack of stage facilities. He took occasion to urge consideration of another Bloomington stage, to run between Bloomington and Marion, Iowa, by way of Moscow, Rochester and Tipton. But even the convening of the legislature in December did not bring dependable service between Iowa City and Bloomington. The mail contractor did run a two-horse carriage to the territorial capital. However, the heavy mails during the session frequently took all available space leaving no room for passengers.²²

Iowa City was more fortunate with other towns. Burlington was the first to establish a stage connection with the new seat of government. A Mr. Downing started a regular semi-weekly stage over a wandering route from the former territorial capital to Iowa City in November, 1841. It was an immediate success, and he soon increased the run to three times a week. Moreover, it was "supported without any of Uncle Sam's purse," according to the proud editor of the *Iowa City Standard*, though he hoped the Post Office Department would not refuse their request for a tri-weekly mail contract be-

²² *Iowa Standard* (Iowa City), Nov. 19, Dec. 11, 1841, advertisement dated Bloomington (Muscatine), April 2, 1841; *Bloomington Herald*, May 28, Nov. 12, 1841.

tween the two towns for that reason because the service was obviously needed.²³

Another route opened in the fall and winter of 1841. It also was apparently organized in anticipation of business from the legislative session, although not a direct connection with Iowa City. This line was in operation by November 27, 1841, and provided Davenport with its first regular stage to Dubuque since the ill-starred Donaldson hacks of 1838-39. The proprietor, John Grace, reported that he had procured "good carriages," and was prepared to carry passengers to Dubuque once a week through "one of the very best and finest agricultural regions of Iowa, offering great inducements to the enterprising farmer—passing through Vandeburgh, Clinton county seat and Andrew, the county seat of Jackson county, thence to Dubuque." Grace offered to cover the seventy-five miles in two days time, departing on Monday and returning from Dubuque on Thursday!! His announcement, as well as the schedule publicized by Wilson lines, suggests that the commercial or social traveler was becoming important.²⁴

The next year, 1842, was an important one in the annals of the stagecoach in Iowa. The young territory had full opportunity to participate in the Post Office Department quadrennial contracts for the second time. It also further demonstrated the dependence of stage travel upon government subsidy.

Bloomington was the only one of the three towns enjoying a stage connection with the territorial capital at Iowa City to secure a federal mail subsidy in 1842. All available evidence indicates the Burlington-Iowa City and Davenport-Iowa City lines were discontinued after the end of the legislative session in February. The Grace hacks probably ceased regular schedules too. Thus,

²³ *Burlington Hawkeye and Iowa Patriot*, April 29, 1841, quoting A. H. Miller, LeClaire House, Davenport, advertisement dated April 29: "Persons wishing to visit Chicago, Galena or Iowa City [N.B.] can do so from this place by tri-weekly or weekly stages." *Iowa Standard*, Nov. 12, 1841.

²⁴ *Iowa Sun and Davenport & Rock Island News*, March 5, 1842, advertisement dated Nov. 27, 1841.

except for the Bloomington coach, the only stages to Iowa City from Burlington and Davenport were those remaining "on call" and "extras" that livery proprietors or operators of the north-south river lines chartered to groups and special travelers.²⁵

In four years the population of the territory increased from 22,000 in 1838 to over 45,000; but postal authorities reacted slowly to the growing demand for improved postal service as indicated by the fact that they awarded only one other new mail contract in Iowa in 1842 besides the one for the Bloomington-Iowa City line. It gave Davenport and Dubuque two long-delayed regular mail stages. This grant was not anticipated in advertisements of the bids, as neither route stipulated a stage conveyance. One, closely following the course of the Mississippi River, failed, but Otho Hinton, a former partner in the powerful Ohio Stage Company received the contract for a more successful two-horse semi-weekly line that veered westward from the river. John Frink, later prominent in Iowa stage history, was to find him a resourceful and dogged competitor in Illinois. Hinton's low bid of \$1,000 compared favorably with the \$900 contract for mail delivered on horseback held the previous four years by Parker and Donaldson.²⁶

There were only two other changes effected by the new contracts. The Burlington-Macomb line was extended on to Rushville, Illinois, and the Burlington-Davenport run was divided into two routes with Bloomington the division point.

It is quite evident from the postal records of 1842 that the business of carrying government mails in Iowa was attracting increasing attention. Twenty-five and thirty-nine separate bids were received on each contract in contrast to the six, eight and ten filed in 1838. Moreover, Iowa stage routes were attracting large operators too. They included Otho Hinton, a well-known partner in the Neil, Moore & Company's Ohio Stage Company,

²⁵ Congressional Doc. No. 180, *op. cit.*, pp. 178-180, 232-245.

²⁶ Congressional Doc., *loc. cit.*, p. 235.

who in being eased out of that concern was casting his eyes on western territory. John Frink bid on three routes, winning only one, yet in doing so gave notice of future intentions. And Peter Beers, a successful mail contractor in Ohio and Indiana, filed bids for nine of the fourteen horse- and stage-mails placed in Iowa. A former partner in the successful J & P Vorhees Company which handled the Indiana end of the Ohio Stage Company's system, he was also active in Michigan and Kentucky.

Some familiar figures dropped out of contention. William Holcomb, who had operated three stage routes touching Iowa, Abraham Tolles, Richard Land, and others failed to retain their old contracts. W. S. Viney, however, continued his line, extending it all the way to Mt. Pleasant under the new contract.

A population rather well concentrated in southern Iowa was now served by regular stages as far north as Dubuque, and two lines running westward thirty and fifty miles respectively. It was at last possible to seriously consider a consolidation of the river routes. The appearance of known prominent operators from eastern states indicated the beginning of a long struggle for control of the stagecoach business in Iowa.

William Wilson of Fort Madison, operating daily stages from Keokuk to Burlington, was the most likely Iowa candidate in this fight for supremacy. By extending his Burlington line to Bloomington to connect there with his run to Iowa City, he could provide service over the most heavily traveled routes in the territory. Wilson probably did link his routes at Bloomington, but he failed to gain control of staging in Iowa.

The next four years is a confused story of attempts by several operators to secure a firm grip upon the staging business in the territory. The records are fragmentary and often confusing. It appears that the first effective competition to Wilson was offered by a co-partnership formed in the early fall of 1842 which united the ambitions of William St. John, a young recently

married livery stable proprietor at Bloomington, and the stage experience and knowledge of the veteran Peter Beers. They were ready for business over the entire existing network of stage routes in Iowa by September, 1842—from Dubuque to Keokuk, Muscatine to Iowa City and Burlington to Mt. Pleasant.

It is apparent that this partnership sought to drive its rivals out of business with the fares they charged on routes where the strongest competition might be expected. The rate for the Davenport-Dubuque link of the river route was only \$4; the thirty-mile run from Bloomington to Iowa City cost but \$1.50 instead of the customary \$3 or \$4. A more normal fee of \$3 was charged over the Burlington-Keokuk line on the southern route.²⁷

These signs of competition were encouraging. The eleven mail stage lines the federal Post Office Department authorized for Iowa, still only four years old in 1842, represented a significant increase over the single route of 1837 and the mere four lines permitted in 1838. The State of Missouri, favored by a broad relatively efficient waterway, could boast of no more than eleven federal mail contracts in 1842, and Wisconsin had only six. Youthful Iowa then could take some pride in ranking next to Illinois in the extent of its stagecoach service, the latter possessing forty-six government supported mail routes in addition to a number of privately operated stage lines.²⁸

There was other evidence of healthy growth. Established the previous year, the success of William Wilson's daily stage over the forty-odd miles from Burlington to Keokuk augured well for the future, since he did not have a hitherto valuable and, in many cases, necessary government mail contract. And the Indian treaty signed at Agency City, Iowa, October 11, 1842, in which the Red Men agreed to permanently abandon all their Iowa hunting grounds within three years, opened up tre-

²⁷ *Bloomington Herald*, Oct. 28, 1842, advertisement dated Sept. 16, 1842.

²⁸ Congressional Doc. 180, *op. cit.*, "Illinois" and "Missouri."

mendous possibilities for stagecoach travel in the territory.

Despite these optimistic developments the capital city of the territory had almost the same problem at the opening of the legislative session in the winter of 1842 that had confronted Burlington five years earlier. Iowa City, too, was a new settlement. It also had only one stage connection with the "outside" world. The government naturally specified that the heavy mail sacks should take preference over the more profitable human freight, and prospective passengers still had to contest the limited space available.

Inadequate travel facilities to and from Iowa City in 1842 were no doubt improved temporarily in much the same manner as the year before, though not quite so impetuously as the territorial assembly at Burlington in 1838 and 1839. No records have been found, but it is safe to assume that horse-drawn vehicles of some description again connected Davenport and Burlington with the capital of the territory. C. Teeple ran a stage from Iowa City to Burlington during these particularly busy months, charging four dollars for the ninety-odd mile trip which took thirty-six hours. Chauncey Swan, proprietor of "Swan's Hotel" in the capital city, one of the more popular local hostelries, informed all and sundry in December, 1842 that he kept "the stage office for the different lines of stage in operation to and from the city in addition to the hotel." It isn't known whether Swan's office served the Teeple line, their competitor, Beers & St. John, William Wilson's Bloomington stage, or others possibly operating from Davenport and Burlington.²⁹

Reliable data is not available, but Beers & St. John appear to have forced William Wilson off the Bloomington-Keokuk run by the middle of 1843, and perhaps the Iowa City route as well. Otho Hinton, however, seems to have offered stouter resistance though he too

²⁹ Benjamin F. Shambaugh, *The Old Capital Remembers*, State Historical Society of Iowa, Iowa City, 1939, p. 217; *Iowa Capitol Reporter*, Dec. 3, 1842, dated Nov. 26, 1842.

curtailed operations in 1844. The Beers & St. John partnership also began to show signs of cracking. Their extended lines and cut rates on the river route south from Dubuque all the way to Keokuk, and west to Iowa City, made them a serious threat to rival operators, but at the same time left them a dangerously narrow margin of profit. This factor may have contributed to the failure of Beers & St. John, as well as Wilson and Hinton. The partnership was apparently dissolved early in 1844. Peter Beers continued the business for about twelve months before disposing of the stock and equipment to William H. Holcomb, who had linked his Illinois stages with Iowa river towns as early as 1839, and unsuccessfully bid on Iowa mail contracts in 1842. Bennett and Lyter of Davenport carried stage mail north to Dubuque and south to Burlington in 1844, and may have taken over some of the contracts held by Beers & St. John.³⁰

An obscure struggle for control of the river lines lasted some years. Iowa City during this period had no stage at all when the legislature was not in session, except for the occasional weatherbeaten, mud-bespattered coach which rolled in from Bloomington and Burlington. Travelers to and from Dubuque once again had to rely upon private wagons or carriages. The mail was carried horseback. Even this mode of communication was suspended when it was reported, "late freshets have washed away all the bridge." Southern and eastern routes fared no better. Hopes for improved stage connections to the territorial capital were spurred in 1843 by a legislative petition requesting a more direct mail route from Illinois via Bloomington, to eliminate dependence upon the Burlington-Peoria or St. Louis mail for eastern dispatches. But Congress took no action. The necessity

³⁰ *Executive Documents*, Serial 465, 28th Congress, 2nd Session, Document 104, pp. 3, 6, 7; Franc B. Wilkie, *Davenport, Past and Present*, Luse, Lane & Co., Davenport, 1858, p. 100; *Peter Beers for the use of W. Jones & H. E. Bridges vs. Wm. H. Holcomb, Fleak vs. Beers, George Cornwell vs. Beers & St. John, James Wilson vs. Peter Beers, Peter Beers, vs. William St. John*, Court records, Clerk's Office, Des Moines County District Court. Cf. *Lee County Democrat* (Fort Madison), February 24, April 27, 1844.

for transferring mail from the east at Burlington remained. It was often delayed as long as a week before a stage departed for the fifty-mile trip through Bloomington to Iowa City.³¹

Iowa City benefited from a short-lived two-horse stage to Dubuque in 1845. It gave rise to a proposed tri-weekly four-horse line to Keokuk. The editor of the *Iowa Capitol Reporter* cried, "we want, can have, and must have a tri-weekly mail from Keokuk to Dubuque, passing and re-passing through Iowa City." However, his willingness to settle for a mere six months' schedule indicates that an actual need for this stage did not exist. There was more than just ambition in the demand for this route. If it had become a reality in 1845, river boat passengers stranded at the lower rapids of the Mississippi near Keokuk could have been directed overland to Iowa City and then on north. The supplying of goods and services to these travelers would have been quite a boon to the merchants of the small frontier town. It was several years before there actually was a regular stage to Keokuk.³²

For some years before and after 1845 the stage and mail routes demanded by western settlements were more "prospective" than immediate necessities. The pioneers naturally turned to the Post Office Department for delivery of their mails and somewhat magnified transportation problems. More than one community felt that "a tithe of the public spirit which was brought to bear in making a president last fall" could secure "a line of four-horse post coaches" for their village or town.³³ The tithe, however, frequently failed to produce the desired results, or was not offered at all.

Iowans were still largely dependent upon private conveyances for overland travel in 1845, four years after William Wilson started the Burlington and Keokuk

³¹ *Iowa Territorial Gazette & Advertiser*, Jan. 14, 1843; *Iowa Capitol Reporter*, May 6, June 24, 1843; H. R. File 110 (100?), 6th Territorial Assembly, Public Archives Division, Iowa Dept. of History and Archives.

³² *Iowa Capitol Reporter*, Nov. 19, 1845.

³³ *Ibid.*

stage. Heavy wagons or occasionally a buggy were most commonly used to cross the sloughs and stumpy stretches of timber. Towns on the rivers and smaller inland streams still had faith that steamboat passage would soon relieve their mail and transportation problems. Light draft boats such as the Ione and the Ripple could navigate on a "heavy dew," but their roariouly welcomed trips up the rivers of eastern Iowa were relatively few and far between.

New postal laws adopted in 1845 had an important effect upon stagecoach development in Iowa. The Post Office Department was henceforth required to award all mail contracts to the lowest responsible bidders, stipulating only that the mails be carried with "safety, celerity, and, security." The department could no longer prescribe a standard means of transporting mail. Congress' action sharply curtailed the extension of stage lines on the frontier. The removal of restrictions on the type of conveyance used to carry mail had further repercussions. It encouraged more competition from livery stable proprietors, making profitable operations more difficult for all concerned and especially for the small contractors.

This legislation indicated a change of policy in addition to being an obvious act of economy. The assumption that the Post Office Department was delegated to go considerably beyond just the transportation and delivery of mail in aiding the development of the territories no longer held true. Thereafter, the cloak of "governmental unity and more efficient administration" could not be used to authorize the financing of public transportation systems in regions where private enterprise hesitated.

The first period in the history of the stagecoach in Iowa came to a close with the amendment of the postal laws in 1845. None of the hard-pressed operators fighting for control of all major stage lines in the territory was in a position to dominate the picture. Most of them lacked sound financing. At the same time the years from 1837 to 1845 saw stagecoach interests in Illinois become

largely concentrated in the hands of the partners of the Frink, Walker & Co., later known as the J. Frink & Co. Equally dominant in Wisconsin, they were soon to extend their lines into Iowa with the same success. The next phase in the history of the stagecoach in Iowa is almost entirely the story of this company's consolidation of stage operations in Iowa where Wilson, Hinton, and Beers & St. John had heretofore failed.

Iowa Invaded

Intelligence [has] arrived that a party of Missourians . . . invaded Appanoose county and burned a small town on the border. From what we can learn, the facts of the case are about these: The secessionists in Putnam, Dodge, Scotland and Sullivan counties, have concentrated their forces in large numbers, preparatory to resist the Federal forces, and are driving the Union men out of the State. Milan and Centreville, county seats of two of these counties, have been burned, and the people along the State line are greatly excited and alarmed.

We can learn of no actual invasion of Iowa soil, but a system of depredations and robbery will undoubtedly soon commence.—*Iowa State Journal* (Des Moines), July 19, 1861.

Horse Stealing

A gang of horse-thieves ran through Des Moines this week, taking along with them a pony of J. & I. Kuhn's. Upon getting near Adel, they tied their plunder in the brush, and were probably frightened away, as the horses were found there the next morning. There are a plenty of these fellows about, and we warn our farmer friends against them.—*Iowa State Journal*, July 19, 1861.

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