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Burlington Plans a Railroad

On December 18, 1851, the people of Burlington and Mount Pleasant were celebrating. They had just completed a three-year project — the Burlington and Mount Pleasant Plank Road. The completion of anything on the frontier of the 1850's called for a celebration, with feasting and speaking the order of the day, and with some orator sure to submit a list of "resolutions" for enthusiastic approval. Among the resolutions adopted on that December day in Burlington was one declaring that with the completion of what was "emphatically the farmer's highway to market and prosperity," they now "ardently looked for the time when the Mississippi shall be connected with the Missouri by railway. . . ."

The word "railway" had magic in the 1850's. No other decade of the nineteenth century saw so much enthusiasm for railroads. Steam trains, which had been pushing their way westward ever since 1830, were mostly sponsored originally by individuals and groups with more optimism than

money. People did not wait for someone else to grade the right-of-way, lay the track, and supply the locomotives and cars, in those days. "Paper" railroads were planned everywhere. A group of men would gather in a Midwestern town, draw up articles of incorporation, give their railroad a name, and then set about finding the money to realize their dream.

As 1852 dawned, such a group in Burlington set out to implement the resolution passed at the plank road celebration. Fourteen months before that date — in October of 1850 — another group had met at Iowa City to organize the "Davenport and Iowa City Rail Road." So far, this plan had remained on paper; not until December of 1852 would it approach reality with the incorporation at Davenport of the Mississippi and Missouri Railroad, forerunner of the Rock Island in Iowa and perennial rival of the Burlington Route to the south. Rivalry was the spur to the men in Burlington in January, 1852.

On January 7, James W. Grimes of Burlington, soon to be Governor of Iowa, had addressed the citizens in the council chamber, telling them that he had received a letter from Washington with encouraging news of land grants for railroads. Ever since the fiery little Senator from Illinois, Stephen A. Douglas, had succeeded in procuring the land grant for the Illinois Central Railroad in 1850, communities all over the Middle West had in-

creased their pleas for additional grants of the seemingly limitless public domain. Now word had come that an Indiana Representative in Congress, Daniel Mace, would soon introduce a bill for a grant for the building of a railroad which would connect the Wabash and the Missouri rivers. Such a road would naturally pass through Burlington. There was now no time to waste. On January 15, 1852, forty-six men met in Burlington to draw up articles of incorporation for "The Burlington and Missouri River Rail Road Company."

The forty-six were not impractical dreamers. They were lawyers, businessmen, and public officials of Burlington and vicinity. William F. Coolbaugh, soon to be elected president of the road, was a merchant and one of the active builders of the plank road. David Rorer, attorney of Burlington, would for many years serve as attorney for the new railroad and, later, for the Chicago, Burlington and Quincy. Joseph T. Fales was Iowa's first State Auditor, serving from 1846 to 1850. Charles Mason, Thomas W. Newman, and Jonathan C. Hall were judges; J. F. Abrahams, A. W. Carpenter, Lyman Cook, A. D. Green, Thomas Hedge, J. G. Lauman, F. J. C. Peasley, J. S. Schramm, William Sunderland, John G. Foote, Denise Denise, and J. F. Tallant were merchants. There were plenty of lawyers in Burlington, and several of them were among the incorporators of the new railroad: George Frazee, J. H. Rauch,

Henry W. Starr, and James W. Woods. In addition to these, there were R. S. Adams, Francis Barsch, J. J. Child, Joshua Copp, T. D. Crocker, William Endsley, J. C. Fletcher, J. A. Funk, Jarret Garner, William S. Graff, Levi Hagar, E. H. Ives, John Johnson, G. P. Krieschbaum, J. G. Law, O. McClelland, Alphonsus Martin, T. L. Parsons, John Pierson, C. H. Snelson, Thomas Sperry, J. P. Sunderland, J. M. Swan, and P. C. Tiffany. The name of James W. Grimes, a man so important to Iowa railroad history and to the Burlington in particular, is missing from the list, but his partner, Henry W. Starr, is there. These were the men who laid the plans for a "paper" railroad which would one day become a part of the famous Burlington system across mid-America.

Two days later, on January 17, the forty-six met again and elected nine of their number as directors. These nine, in turn, elected William F. Coolbaugh president and appointed a committee to instruct James W. Grimes to go to Washington and work for a land grant for the road. This was the first consideration. The company's pocketbook was, however, quite empty. The city of Burlington came to the rescue with \$500 in city scrip, worth about eighty cents on the dollar, to pay Grimes's expenses. The next step was to open subscription books and to go about the countryside seeking men to risk their capital in the new venture.

In the eleven counties through which the B&M would undoubtedly run there were less than 50,000 persons in 1852 — 47,739 to be exact. But to Des Moines, Henry, Jefferson, Wapello, Monroe, Lucas, Clarke, Union, Adams, Montgomery, and Mills counties the incorporators looked for financial aid, either from individuals or from the counties and towns. Since over 85 per cent of the people in this region were in the four easternmost counties of Des Moines, Henry, Jefferson, and Wapello, it was there that the salesmen of railroad shares concentrated their attention for the time being. During 1853 these four counties came through handsomely — on paper. Des Moines County citizens voted a bond issue of \$150,000; Henry County, \$100,000; Jefferson County, \$100,000; and Wapello County, \$100,000. But even the promise of \$450,000 would not build much of a railroad. A mile of railroad cost at the very least \$25,000 to build and equip. The seventy-five miles between the Mississippi and the Des Moines rivers — between Burlington and Ottumwa — would thus cost at least \$1,800,000. Even a land grant would not bring immediate cash into the till of the B&M. Thus the founders turned to the East, to New York and Boston, where they hoped to find the money they needed.