

# THE PALIMPSEST

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## Burlington Westward

Highways — the arteries of commerce and communication — have always contained the life-blood of community growth and prosperity. To increase and improve such facilities promotes the general welfare. Conversely, to cut off or stifle the normal flow of commerce spells ruin. These axiomatic principles were well understood by the alert founders of river towns along the eastern border of Iowa. From the beginning of settlement road building was inseparably associated with the development of the Commonwealth.

When, in the spring of 1833, the first settlers crossed the Mississippi to make their new homes in the Black Hawk Purchase, the only semblance of roads they found were the Indian trails. Since these paths usually followed the most practicable routes, they became the wagon roads of the pioneers. As settlement increased, the problem of locating new roads and improving those already well established attracted much attention.

Most of the main highways were provided by law. For example, on January 25, 1839, the Territorial legislature appointed Enoch H. Sexson and Daniel Strong of Des Moines County and Grinder Wilson of Henry County, to lay out a road, "commencing at Burlington, in Des Moines county, thence to Trenton, thence to Joseph York's, thence to Lee's, and then west to the Indian boundary line." Such "Territorial roads" followed the most eligible route between settlements, regardless of section lines. Indeed, most of the land had not yet been surveyed.

In a sense the Territorial highway from Burlington westward was the actual beginning of the great "Burlington Route" westward. On January 17, 1840, the legislature appointed a commission to review the route of this road in Des Moines County and recommend improvements. At an extra session in the following summer, the Legislative Assembly directed the Governor to "appoint a competent surveyor, or engineer, whose duty it shall be to relocate" this Territorial road "as nearly on a straight line" from "the northwest corner of the public square in the old town of Burlington" to the western boundary of the county, "as the nature of the route will permit". The route led west to the road through "Dutch Town"; thence, in a northwesterly direction to a

point where it turned due west into Middletown; thence, again in a northwesterly direction to where it crosses the line between Des Moines and Henry counties, in section 31, Pleasant Grove Township. It is probable that this point of entrance into Henry County was not far from the place where the present United States Highway 34 now crosses the county line.

Even before 1839, there was doubtless considerable travel in this same general direction between the river and such fast-growing pioneer settlements as New London and Mount Pleasant, for, in 1837, when New London and Center townships in Henry County, through which this road was located, were first surveyed by United States Deputy Surveyor Charles H. Fish, he marked off on his field maps a distinct trail across the open prairie, commencing near this point on the Henry County line, passing through New London, on out to Mount Pleasant, and beyond, roughly paralleled by the Territorial road legally established in 1839. However, between New London and Mount Pleasant the old "pre-survey trail" seems to have run, in places, from a half to possibly a mile farther north. This, no doubt, was due to the necessity of keeping on higher ground, as there were no grades or bridges over the creeks and gullies intersecting the route.

The decade from 1840 to 1850 was a period of exceptionally rapid internal development. But the building and improvement of the highways did not keep pace with the times. In the brief span of a few years, many of the small pioneer villages grew into towns of importance. This was particularly true of the "Port of Burlington", through which thousands of eastern immigrants were continually entering the Iowa country. Often the ferries were swamped with business for days at a time, while the highways were fairly choked with the slow-moving traffic of the pioneers' wagons. During wet seasons, the muddy highways made travel almost impossible.

Toward the end of the decade, as the traffic multiplied almost four-fold, the inadequate transportation facilities became intolerable. Complaint abounded. Newspaper dispatches and travelers from the east spoke of wonderful highway improvements in the older sections of the country. Miles of road, they said, were paved with planks.

In the vicinity of Chicago the "plank road" fever became something like an epidemic. The apparent success of this type of hard-surfacing was a direct challenge to the people of the trans-Mississippi region. Indeed, one such road pointed finger-like from Chicago toward Burlington for a distance of nearly sixty miles.

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