

# THE PALIMPSEST

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## Burlington and Missouri River

The Burlington was not the first railroad to build across Iowa, nor was it the last. But it was the only Federal land grant railroad to span the state that did not go bankrupt in the process. It came in third in the trans-Iowa race—and solvent. As a matter of fact, the Burlington is outstanding in that it is one of the very few roads in Iowa which has never been in receivership.

The story of the Chicago, Burlington & Quincy Railroad in Iowa begins with the river town on the Mississippi from which it derives its name. Burlington in the 1850's had no railroad. The people in that community, however, were clamoring for better transportation. To this end they formed the Burlington & Mount Pleasant Plank Road which was completed in December 1851. But this was not enough—the town had developed “railroad fever.”

Meanwhile, Davenport also was agog with plans for a line due west to the Missouri River. This was the forerunner of the Rock Island, which



later crossed Iowa. Clearly, Burlington must look to the railroad or fall behind.

Mindful of this fact, two exponents of the plank road now turned their sights on an iron road. William F. Coolbaugh, a local merchant, and James W. Grimes, lawyer and businessman, along with other Burlingtonians incorporated the Burlington and Missouri River Rail Road on January 15, 1852. Coolbaugh headed the enterprise. Grimes, who was soon to be governor of Iowa, was sent to Washington to seek a land grant.

The astute Grimes, by a felicitous chain of events, got the so-called "Boston Group," under the leadership of John Murray Forbes, interested in his "paper railroad." This group, with Forbes furnishing the capital, James F. Joy, the legal talent, and John W. Brooks, the operational "know-how," was pushing the Michigan Central on to its Chicago destination. They were also quietly acquiring a group of Illinois railroads, from which was to emerge the Chicago, Burlington & Quincy. Grimes found Forbes and his associates interested. On the other hand they looked with greater favor on building across more populous Missouri to St. Joseph and Kansas City.

What clinched the matter for Grimes, however, was the discovery by the Boston Group that Rock Island Railroad interests had secured a charter to build across Iowa. The Rock Island, it may be added, was promoted by the Michigan Southern,



which was racing its northern competitor, the Michigan Central, into Chicago! Messrs. Forbes, Joy, and Brooks saw the light. From that time on the Boston Group backed the Burlington and Missouri River project. In 1853 John Brooks became president of the B&M. On March 17, 1855, the Burlington reached the Mississippi and the stage was set for construction across Iowa.

Brooks and Joy dispatched Hans Thielsen, a Danish-born civil engineer on the Michigan Central, to survey the Iowa line from Burlington to Ottumwa. They also sent Alfred Hebard, a Yale graduate, to select the best route from Ottumwa to Council Bluffs. Although born in Vermont, Hebard had lived in Iowa for sixteen years and knew the terrain well. Finally, Forbes persuaded his brother, Robert Bennet Forbes, to make a trip across Iowa and report his findings.

On New Year's Day, 1856, the citizens of Burlington cheered at the sight of a brass-trimmed, wood-burner puffing along a few miles of track in town. Then, on May 15, President Franklin Pierce signed the Land Grant Act of 1856 giving aid to four east-west lines in Iowa. The B&M's share was about 300,000 acres.

The road was built to Mount Pleasant by July of 1856. Yet, by the end of the following summer, it had only reached the hamlet of Rome on the Skunk River, five miles beyond Mt. Pleasant. The Panic of 1857 stalled further construction.



Meanwhile Forbes, desiring to have a man on the spot who could keep close tab on the finances, selected 23-year-old Charles Russell Lowell for the job. Nephew of the poet, young Lowell was appointed assistant treasurer with headquarters in Burlington.

It was soon apparent that Lowell had too much work for one person. Besides his treasury duties he was responsible for managing the land department. In choosing a competent assistant, Forbes picked Charles Elliott Perkins, a mere boy of eighteen, who hailed from Cincinnati where he was clerking in a local wholesale fruit store. The lad was a second cousin of Forbes, at whose house Lowell had made his acquaintance.

Perkins eagerly took the job at \$30 a month. Early in August 1859, he came to Burlington and gladly accepted Lowell's invitation to share his cottage. A brief sketch of this remarkable young man is in order, for he was to head the entire Burlington system by 1881; and for nearly two decades thereafter he shrewdly and conscientiously guided its phenomenal growth. Moreover, for the rest of his life he proudly regarded himself as an Iowan: a Burlington man from Burlington.

Charles E. Perkins was born in Cincinnati November 24, 1840. The oldest of five sons of a Unitarian minister, Perkins learned to accept responsibility early, for his father committed suicide when he was nine. Finishing high school at six-



teen, he set out to support the family by working in a Queen City wholesale fruit firm.

Having reached Iowa in time for the "Grand Railroad Celebration" in Ottumwa, Perkins no doubt thrilled to what the Iron Horse meant to the town, and what it would mean to the growing West. The festivities to honor the arrival of the B&M were held on September 1. About 12,000 visitors swarmed the streets for the occasion. With all passenger coaches filled to capacity the pioneer line resorted to flat cars fitted with benches to take care of the overflow. Not to be outdone by the bountiful spread Fairfield had put on with a 986-foot table to celebrate the B&M's coming the previous year, Ottumwa countered with eight tables of delectable food each 460 feet long.

Under the helping hand and friendly counsel of Lowell, Perkins learned railroading. The two became good friends. Lowell, who graduated from Harvard at the head of his class, would sometimes spend an evening reading the *Philosophy of Immanuel Kant* or the latest works of Charles Darwin. Perkins more than likely got a smattering of philosophy by osmosis, sitting nearby under a sperm-oil lamp. The perceptive and inquiring mind of Perkins nevertheless matched the cultured and scholarly intellect of Lowell. Both were hard workers, keen students, energetic railroaders. But late in 1860 Lowell decided to return to the iron business, in which he was earlier asso-



ciated. Before resigning, however, he highly recommended Perkins for his job. And so, not yet twenty, Charles Perkins became assistant treasurer and land agent at a salary of \$800 a year.

Much to the disappointment of Perkins, the railhead continued to remain at Ottumwa. While the B&M was marking time its competitors were not. Ottumwa was also served by the Des Moines Valley Railroad. It had built up from Keokuk and passed through Ottumwa on its way to Des Moines. Ultimately to become a secondary branch of the Rock Island, the Des Moines Valley was of considerable importance in its earlier days. Meanwhile, running parallel to the B&M on the north were the rapidly advancing extensions of the Rock Island and of the North Western. Each line had its own bridge spanning the Mississippi—the Rock Island completed in 1856 and the North Western in 1865. The B&M, on the other hand, still relied on ferries to make the crossing.

Would the Burlington & Missouri River be relegated to an inconsequential local line? No, insisted Perkins. Made superintendent in 1865, he now had more say in management. Although Brooks was replaced by the more energetic James F. Joy as president in 1866, it was Perkins who got action from Boston. Tactfully, yet persistently, the youthful executive outlined the dilemma of the road. Forbes understood, but had trouble convincing his New England associates. But in the



end he won them over to his point of view.

Spurred on by fresh capital, tracklaying went on with vigor following the Civil War. The Burlington reached Chariton in the summer of 1867, and Woodburn by the end of the year. It was now halfway across Iowa. Trains steamed into Osceola late in January 1868, and on November 12 the railroad was in Red Oak.

In the meantime, the Chicago, Burlington & Quincy board of directors had finally authorized a bridge across the Mississippi at Burlington. Completed in 1868, the iron span measured 2,237 feet, with a drawbridge in the center. It linked the rails of the CB&Q with those of the B&M.

The Mississippi bridge proved a boon to Burlington track construction in Iowa. Track laying redoubled as the company pushed eastward from East Plattsburgh. On November 26, 1869, the Burlington rails met at Hastings. There was no formal ceremony. Superintendent Perkins, on hand to witness the event, wrote in his notebook, "Last rail laid and spiked at noon today—went through with special train to Plattsburgh."

On January 3, 1870, regular service was established into Council Bluffs by the way of Pacific Junction over the rails of the St. Joseph & Council Bluffs Rail Road.

FRANK P. DONOVAN