

THE PALIMPSEST

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The Oskaloosa Road

Maps of Iowa show a diagonal road extending southwest from Iowa City to Wellman, a distance of over twenty miles. Among the different names applied to it, "the angling road" is one of the most common. On the earlier county maps, it is called "the Oskaloosa Road". When the Iowa Territorial legislature authorized the construction of this highway, it was designated as a "Territorial road from Iowa City to the Seat of Justice of Mahaska County."

Although at least a part of the road in Johnson County was surveyed as early as 1841, it was in February, 1844, that the act providing for the Territorial road became a law. The first section of the act stated: "Be it enacted by the Council and House of Representatives of the Territory of Iowa, That James Walters, Daniel McFarland and William Grimsley, be and they are hereby appointed commissioners to locate and establish a territorial road, from Iowa City, thence to Was-

son and Walters' mill, on English river, in Washington county; thence to the seat of justice in Keokuk county; thence to the seat of justice of Mahaska county."

The commissioners were to meet at Iowa City on the second Monday in June, or any other date within six months thereafter, for the discharge of their duties. They were to receive two dollars per day for their services, and the chain carriers and markers one dollar and fifty cents a day. The surveyors were to receive the legal rate established in an act of December 29, 1838.

Claims against Johnson County for the surveying of the road within its jurisdiction were allowed by the county commissioners in October. Included were claims by the surveyors, chainmen, flagmen, stake makers, stake drivers, and teamsters.

Perhaps the surveyors did their work in Johnson County during July or August, for in the *Capital Reporter* of September 14, 1844, a news item from Mahaska County stated, "A few weeks since, locating commissioners appointed for that purpose, commenced at this place the location of a road, connecting Sigourney, the county seat of Keokuk, and Ouskaloosa, the county seat of Mahaska, with this place. We understand that the location can be made on good ground, and will

require but little labor to render it one of the best roads in the Territory. This road will at no distant day be one of the most important in the Territory, as it will be extended from thence to the Raccoon Forks of the Des Moines."

That it was not very long until the road was being used is indicated by the April 5, 1845, *Capital Reporter*, which stated that a large number of new mail routes were being opened in Iowa Territory, one of which was from Iowa City to the county seat of Mahaska County. As Oskaloosa, the county seat of Mahaska, was laid out only a short time before, on May 11, 1844, the mail to that place was probably not heavy.

Clarence R. Aurner, in his *Leading Events in Johnson County*, estimated that the distance between Iowa City and Oskaloosa was seventy miles. The agent of this route was scheduled to "leave Iowa City at four a. m., on Wednesday and arrive at Mahaska court house the next day at eight p. m.; leave Mahaska court house every Friday at four a. m. and reach Iowa City Saturday at eight p. m."

Early maps of Iowa do not agree on the exact location of the road from southwestern Johnson County on to Oskaloosa. The first section of the road is located with a fair degree of accuracy, however, in Road Book 4, p. 73, of Johnson

County. This record states that the road commenced "at the west door of the Capitol in Iowa City, Johnson County, Iowa Territory; thence west across Iowa River, thence down said river under the bluff on the west side, thence across large bottom prairie, thence up a ridge, thence over rolling prairie across Seahorn's Creek on bridge; thence across bottom prairie across Old Man's Creek on a bridge; thence up a ridge of timber; thence through timber to William Fry's; thence across prairie to Deer Creek timber; thence across Deer Creek; thence up a ridge in prairie to County Line, as per field notes herewith returned."

Colton's Township Map of Iowa, for 1855, shows the road passing through Franklin Pierce, South English, Sigourney, Rose Hill, and thence into Oskaloosa. On maps before 1857, the road missed Wassonville, which was located on the English River in northwestern Washington County. The road on Chapman's map of 1857 misses that village, too, but the map by Henn, Williams and Co., of Fairfield, for the same year, has the highway passing through Wassonville. Colton's Map of 1863 shows the road passing through Franklin Pierce, Amish, Wassonville, South English, Webster, Sigourney, Rose Hill, and into Oskaloosa.

Before the coming of the railroads, the villages along the Oskaloosa Road were lively places. Franklin Pierce, Amish, Wassonville, and others, have their traditions and interesting stories of pioneer days. Wassonville with its dam and grist mill was an important community center for many years. Amish with its Sixteen Mile House entertained many visitors, who found it to be at a convenient distance out of Iowa City for a night's rest. Although the Sixteen Mile House is no longer standing, its old open well has been used continuously for perhaps three quarters of a century.

Perhaps few of the tourists who speed along the modern, graveled highway leading through Franklin Pierce, Amish, and Wassonville visualize the road as it appeared in the fifties. Besides the mail coach and other local traffic, hundreds of settlers in wagons, carriages, and on horseback filled the road. Some hardy fortune-seekers were headed for the gold fields of California. The writer's grandfather, David Reber, who lived on this road when he came to Iowa, often related that at times as far as one could see northeast and southwest there was a continuous stream of covered wagons, on their way to the West.

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