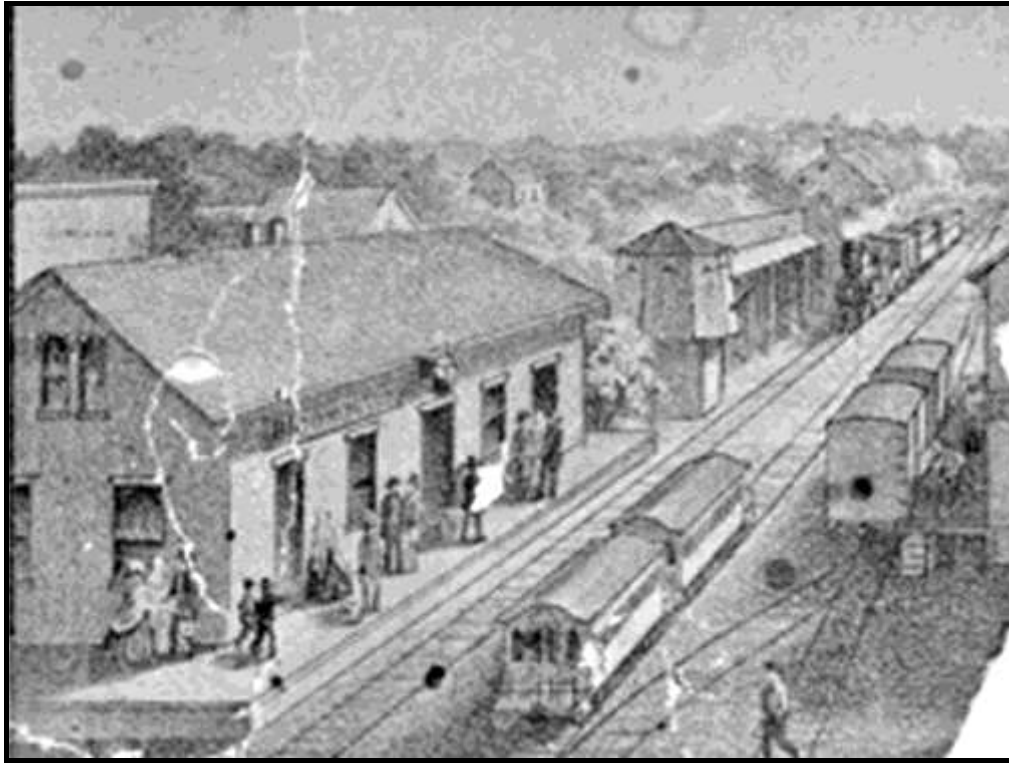


Railroads' arrival in 1853 momentous event in city history



This 1860 lithograph is the earliest known image of an Illinois Central passenger depot in Bloomington. Both the passenger and freight depots were located between Grove and Washington streets near what is today the Beer Nuts Inc. plant (image courtesy of McLean County Museum of History.)

A good case could be made for dividing the history of Bloomington into two distinct eras: “Before Railroads,” or B.R., and “After Railroads,” or A.R.

Railroads first arrived here in 1853—the Illinois Central in May and the Chicago & Mississippi (later known as the Chicago & Alton) in October. One would be hard pressed to conjure up a more earth-shaking event in the subsequent 134 years of city history.

A Landlocked Bloomington, B.R., often relied on river “packets” (regularly scheduled riverboat steamers) that ran between Peoria-Pekin and St. Louis to reach the wider world of commerce. In early 1853, the “new, fast-running” steamer Garden City could make it to St. Louis and back in about five days, “touching at all the intermediate ports along the river.” Since so many goods and services floated up and down the Illinois, Mississippi and Ohio rivers, the economic outlook of Central Illinois had a decided southern tilt. For instance, the pages of *The Bloomington Intelligencer* newspaper (a predecessor to *The Pantagraph*) published in the early 1850s were filled with advertisements for firms in St. Louis, Louisville, and Cincinnati.

Today, given the ascendancy of the automobile and over-the-road trucking, it’s difficult to fully appreciate how the railroad changed everything and everyone almost overnight. Railroads, remarked historian Ron Ziel, brought “radical change, unmatched in human history.” The steam

locomotive, with its ability to move people and freight vast distances at tremendous speed, irrespective of the season, marked a sea change in humankind's relationship with the natural world.

The railroad reshaped the Cornbelt's political and cultural landscape in countless ways. Carload after carload of pine from the North Woods, to cite one example, reached the countryside where wood-starved farmers erected fences, outbuildings, and farmhouses. In return, farmers used the railroad to ship corn, hogs, and other commodities to Chicago and elsewhere, connecting this stretch of Illinois to national and even international markets.

New towns, such as Towanda, McLean and Gridley, popped up along rail lines, while some established settlements, such as Pleasant Hill and Lytleville, which were stranded a mile or two from the new iron highways, withered and died.

The steam locomotive also remade the world of business and finance. For most Central Illinois residents, the railroad represented their first contact with corporate capital on a scale—both in size and complexity—heretofore unimaginable. Heyworth, a community that owes its existence to the Illinois Central, is named for Sir Lawrence Heyworth, one of the road's famous stockholders from Great Britain.

As one would expect, much fanfare greeted the arrival of the first Illinois Central locomotive into Bloomington. Monday, May 23, marked the start of regular express, freight and passenger service on the line between Bloomington and LaSalle. "The throbbings of the great hearts of the commercial world will henceforth send their pulsations into our midst!" enthused *The Intelligencer*. "None of us are prepared for the changes which are soon to be affected by this great triumph."

Though the IC ran north to LaSalle (the southbound connection to Clinton would not be completed until March 14, 1854), it greatly facilitated travel between the West's two great commercial centers, St. Louis and Chicago. From St. Louis, one could now board a Chicago & Mississippi Railroad steamer (this was before railroad bridges spanned the mighty Mississippi) to Alton and then take a C&M train to Springfield. In the spring of 1853, the C&M north of the state capital was still under construction, so one had to travel by stage—mile by jostling, spleen-splitting mile—to Bloomington. From there, one could board an Illinois Central train to LaSalle, and thence east to Chicago on the Chicago & Rock Island Railroad. Though such a journey comes across today as a daunting, grueling endeavor, for the mid-nineteenth century traveler, it was nothing short of a miracle.

Five months later, in October 1853, the Chicago & Mississippi (today the line used by Union Pacific and Amtrak) reached Bloomington, having come north from Springfield. "The connexion is had! The work is consummated!" announced *The Intelligencer*. The stretch from Bloomington to Joliet, though, would not be opened until the following year.

Even so, with the C&M's Springfield-to-Bloomington link complete, passengers could travel entirely by rail all the way from Alton on the east bank of the Mississippi River to Chicago and onward to New York. If all went well (an admittedly precarious assumption given the vagaries of

train travel in the antebellum period), such a trip could be accomplished in 50 hours. Several decades earlier, that same journey would often take weeks.

“What a mighty achievement!” marveled *The Intelligencer*. “How striking the commentary on the age we live in! In the language of one commenting on the past and speculating on the future, we may well exclaim—‘What’s next?’”

Telegraph brought profound changes to Bloomington



In the latter half of the 1850s, this woodcut was used by The Pantagraph as an illustration for its column of news arriving via telegraph. Curiously, this image probably shows an English telegraph office, given that the machine under the clock appears to be a needle telegraph, which was not used in the United States. This woodcut is what we could call clipart today. (courtesy McLean County Museum of History).

In the mid-1850s, Bloomington was thrust squarely into the machine age. Railroads arrived in May and October of 1853 (the Illinois Central and Chicago & Alton respectively). In January the following year, the city received its first telegraph message. Although the transforming effect of the railroad is self-evident, even in today's automobile-dominated age, it's difficult for us to appreciate the impact of the telegraph on mid-nineteenth century society.

“The telegraph was a landmark human development from which there could be no retreat,” noted Maury Klein, historian of American business. “For the first time messages could routinely travel great distances faster than man or beast could carry them.” In many ways, telegraphy was the first Internet, remaking everything before it, including the newsgathering business, politics, transportation, financial markets and even warfare.

Although the idea of transmitting information via electricity dated to the mid-1700s, it took advances in electromagnetism and other fields to make the telegraph a practical tool for communication. Working with inventors on both sides of the Atlantic, American Samuel Morse made important refinements, though none greater than the creation of a simple-to-learn

“alphabet” of short and long electrical pulses sent through a wire. Morse’s system of long pulses (“dashes”) and short pulses (“dots”) became known as Morse Code. It was a breakthrough of startling simplicity (the letter “A” represented by a dot followed by a dash; the letter “B” by a dash followed by three dots; and so on), though one with monumental consequences on a global scale.

On May 24, 1844, Morse sent the first communication over a U.S. intercity line, from the Supreme Court chamber in Washington, D.C. to Baltimore. He tapped out a message appropriate to the occasion: “What hath God wrought?”

A little more than nine years later, in August 1853, John D. Caton came to Bloomington. As president of the Illinois and Mississippi Telegraph Company and one of the early movers and shakers of the industry, Caton called on city leaders to pony up \$1,000 in stock to make certain Bloomington would be a “point” on the line between Springfield and Chicago. Charles P. Merriman, publisher of *The Intelligencer* newspaper (and later *The Pantagraph*) purchased two shares at \$50 each. A who’s who of city fathers picked up one share apiece, including Kersey H. Fell, William F. Flagg, and Asahel Gridley. “We may reasonably expect soon to be in electrical connection with the ‘rest of mankind,’” enthused Merriman’s paper.

The Bloomington telegraph office opened on January 24, 1854. Four days later, the editor of the *Illinois Journal* of Springfield addressed the first message to Merriman: “May the new communication by telegraph, so auspiciously opened, continue for ages.” *The Pantagraph* (which had succeeded *The Intelligencer* as Bloomington’s leading paper) could now receive same day news from as far away as New York. The telegraph also served as a proto-email for local businesses and residents, who could now send a “wire” to the wider world.

With the telegraph a way of life was at an end. In the 1840s, Abraham Lincoln and other lawyers of the Eighth Judicial Circuit traveled Central Illinois from county seat to county seat on horseback or horse-drawn buggy, corresponding with clients and family by hand-written letter. A decade later, Lincoln and his peers were traveling by passenger trains and making expert use of the telegraph.

The city’s first telegraph operator was Matthew L. Steele, and the first office was in Major’s Hall on Front Street, where the Lincoln parking deck now stands. In 1866, Steele left to become telegraph operator and dispatcher for the Chicago and Alton (C&A) Railroad, where he remained for some twenty-five years. Not only did the main telegraph lines often parallel railroad right-of-ways, but telegraphy proved indispensable in the management of passenger and freight traffic. By 1879, there were about twenty full-time telegraph operators in Bloomington, most working for the C&A, the city’s largest employer.

In the summer of 1883, a strike by Western Union telegraphers forced many local businessmen to turn to the new technology of the telephone. “The recent disturbances,” the local press noted, “has ably demonstrated the value of the telephone to commercial men.” Although voice communication held obvious advantages over messages sent Morse Code, long distance phone calls were technologically tricky and prohibitively expensive compared to the telegraph. By 1901,

the volume of telegraph traffic was such that there were more than forty wires strung along the main line paralleling the C&A from St. Louis to Chicago.

The telegraph remained a viable means of communication well into the twentieth century, used by local residents, businessmen like grain brokers, and the railroads. Back in 1969 or 1970, local resident Bill Dunbar, who worked for the Alton and then the Gulf, Mobile and Ohio Railroad, sent the last train order via telegraph from Bloomington.

In 1858, The Pantagraph published the poem "The Telegraph," by John Greenleaf Whittier. One stanza in particular addressed the remade world of the telegraph.

From clime to clime, from shore to shore,
Shall thrill the magic thread;
The new Prometheus steals once more
The fire that wakes the dead.