

IOWA HISTORY



(Courtesy Library of Congress)

A dirt road in the center, a plank road on the left

Mount Pleasant to Burlington Plank Road

Muddy, sticky quagmires when it rained. Slippery, icy slopes when it snowed. Rutted, ridged pathways when weather was pleasant.

Iowa's roads in the 1850s were challenges for horses, oxen or humans regardless of the season. There were plenty of waterways for travel—especially the two big ones that embraced the eastern and western borders—the mighty Mississippi and the Missouri rivers. And the railroads were beginning to snake their way into the state. But farmers, business owners and the general public needed safe, convenient roads to get crops to market, products to stores and people to their destinations.

Other states had experimented with plank roads and found them to be quite satisfactory. They were sturdy, almost impervious to bad weather, and they could be money makers. Farmers saw immediate benefit by having the ability to haul livestock and crops to market more easily using fewer horse or oxen in the hitching teams. Plank roads were promoted as favorable over the old macadamized roads (a type of gravel surface). And revenue could be realized by charging tolls for use of the plank roads.

James Grimes, a man who would become governor, was a great promoter of the plank system of roads. "We have a great railroad and plank-road fever here now," he wrote in reference to his home in Burlington in 1851.

The Iowa state legislature had included appropriations for the design and construction of a system of plank roads in the state. The intent was to devise a plan for convenient travel throughout the young state. Iowa had just become a state in 1846 so a reliable transportation system was imperative to the settlement and development of the area.

By 1849 Burlington was indeed in the midst of “plank-road fever.” The city leaders were doing their homework. They asked residents along the proposed route to keep journals of current road activity for three days in March. Here’s a sampling of what they recorded:

March 24:

three 1-horse wagons
twenty-two 2-horse wagons
eight 8-yoke ox teams
six 4-yoke ox teams

March 25:

Twenty 2-horse wagons
six 3-horse wagons
26 riders on horseback
six 1-yoke ox teams

March 26:

five 1-horse wagons
thirty-three 2-horse wagons
18 riders on horseback
two 1-yoke ox teams

All that traffic warranted a plank road in the eyes of the city planners. After attending the Mass Plank Road Convention at New London, planners got serious about building a road from Burlington to Mount Pleasant. Legislation was passed granting right of way for a plank road between the two towns. Land owners were contacted and everyone was on board.

The Burlington and Mount Pleasant Plank Road Company was organized in 1849 and officers were elected. Surveying began. In July ground was broken on the west edge of Burlington for the new roadway. The company was looking for contractors who could furnish a total of 647, 200 feet of oak, walnut, or yellow pine in 8-foot long and 3-inch thick planks. Bids would be received for 20 days. The materials had to be delivered at the landing in Burlington or along the line of the road in part by October 1 with the balance by November 1.

By 1851 James Grimes, president of the plank road company in Burlington, was able to report: “We have nearly completed a plank-road 30 miles west of this place. I think it will pay well.”

Although the Burlington and Mount Pleasant Plank Road Company was successful in constructing their plank road, most Iowa communities dropped the ball when it came to plank

road development. The Iowa legislature had authorized about 600 miles of plank road construction across the state, but ultimately only about 50 miles of it was built.

Sources

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