

Railroads reach Bloomington in 1853 marking most momentous event in city history



This 1860 lithograph is the earliest known image of an Illinois Central Railroad 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.

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.”

Many goods and services floated up and down the Illinois, Mississippi and Ohio rivers, so 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 central 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 (IC) 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 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-19th 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?’”