

A photograph of a red stagecoach pulled by a team of white horses on a dirt road. The stagecoach is ornate with wooden wheels and a red body. The horses are harnessed and pulling the coach. The background shows a wooden building with a dark roof.

Dixon: The Great Stagecoach Transfer Station

The Role of the Stagecoach
in Northwestern Illinois
1828-1855

By Tom Wadsworth

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By Thomas R. Wadsworth
Dixon, Illinois

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*“There is a romance about the stagecoach that will never die.
Its jolly driver with his six-in-hand, the merry passenger
with his jokes and stories, and the stations along the road
where we used to stretch our tired limbs
will long linger like a pleasant dream.”*

- Col. Jared Sanderson, pioneer stage owner.
A quotation found on a historical marker in Olathe, Kansas.

Foreword by the Author

A few months ago, I read Jim Dixon's fascinating story of "The Dixons of Dixon." One particular detail of Jim's research into local history captivated my attention: the story of Father John Dixon's stagecoach business. Even though I've been a local history buff for decades, I previously knew nothing about the role of the stagecoach in local history. After some investigation, I learned that no one has written a detailed investigation of this topic.

When I think of a stagecoach, I think of John Wayne movies and the old Westerns that feature stagecoaches carrying frontier passengers on their trek through dusty roads west of the Rockies. But I now realize that stagecoaches were constantly streaming through the Rock River Valley as well.

Eager to learn more about this aspect of local history, I did a deep dive into about 20 history books about the area and its counties. A good example is the *History of Lee County*, published by H. H. Hill and Company of Chicago in 1881. As this massive 873-page volume stated on its title page, its information was "gathered from interviews with old settlers," as well as from county and township records and files.

These county historians knew that they needed to talk to these fast-fading pioneers to collect the valuable and accurate details of the difficulties they faced to travel to northwestern Illinois and create a civilization. In other words, these history books contain a vast storehouse of "primary source" material of first-hand information from eyewitnesses and original documents.

Realizing that these histories sometimes contain conflicting details, I have endeavored to include footnotes that cite most of my sources. To minimize the distraction of footnotes, I have often used short-form citations for books cited. The reader can find fuller citation data in the bibliography at the end. While my documentation efforts do

not rise to the level of a PhD dissertation, I hope that these footnotes will help future researchers as they attempt to refine the truth of “what really happened” in these formative years.

So, what follows is my chronicle of Dixon’s stagecoach era. Since Dixon was connected—often by stagecoach—to other cities and towns throughout northwestern Illinois, this summary also covers the greater Lee County area. I hope that my research will be useful, not only to those who love Dixon history, but to those who are fascinated with the history of area towns and counties.

Tom Wadsworth
December 2022

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Chapter One

1828-1831: Blazing the Stage Trail

It is said that life's three necessities are food, clothing, and shelter. But before you can find food, clothing, and shelter, you need to get to the place where they are found. In frontier Illinois, that's where the stagecoach enters the story.

All stagecoaches need a trail. So, our story begins with the first trail that was carved through the (future) Dixon area: a trail leading from Peoria to Galena. This trail was built because of the attraction of potentially lucrative endeavors at the Galena lead mines, which were booming around 1825 to 1830.

The trail was also known as “the old Sucker trail,” and it likely followed trails that the Indians had established. At the time, Illinoisans were called “suckers” after the sucker fish that swam upstream in the spring and downstream in the fall. Illinoisans were similar because they migrated north to Galena in the spring to mine during good weather, and then returned south in the fall to avoid the harsh Galena winters.¹

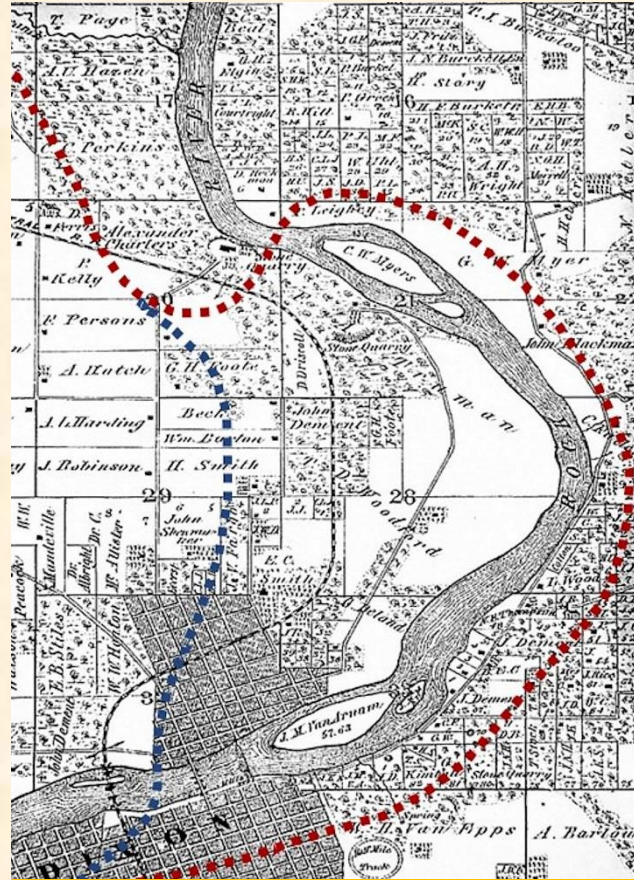
Many Galena-bound newcomers arrived there by steamboat, chugging up the Mississippi from St. Louis. But when these travelers originated at Peoria or Chicago, they needed an overland route. That's how the site of today's Dixon enters our story.

Before John Dixon arrived at the Rock River, his brother-in-law Oliver Kellogg (who married Rebecca Dixon's sister) had already trekked through the hills, trees, and rivers of the area, which was

¹ *History of Jo Daviess County* (1878), 247; *History of Carroll County* (1913), 633.

completely unpopulated at the time. In 1827 Kellogg blazed the trail from Peoria to Galena.² However, Kellogg's Trail crossed the Rock River, not at the modern-day Dixon site but about three miles upriver, "probably at the head of Truman's Island" (later known as Myers Island), crossing into the future site of Hazelwood and Walgreen's Estate.³

John Boles came along in 1828 and refined Kellogg's Trail by crossing the river "a little above the present crossing of the Illinois railroad bridge" at Dixon.⁴ Boles' Trail also straightened some of Kellogg's



The red dotted line shows the approximate path of Kellogg's Trail in 1827, while the blue line shows an estimate of Boles' Trail in 1828. The map is the Lee County 1872 Plat Map.

² Some early histories cited 1825 as the year when Kellogg blazed his trail, such as Boss, *Sketches of the History of Ogle County* (1859), 31; *History of Ogle County* (1909), 646, 741 (yet, this same history also said it was 1827 on p. 937); Stevens, *History of Lee County* (1914), 27, 393 (yet, Stevens also said it was 1827 in his history of *The Black Hawk War* (1903), 129, 176; Way, *The Rock River Valley* (1926), 146, 573, 730. However, several other histories said that Kellogg blazed his trail in 1827. See John K. Robinson, "Early Times at Dixon's Ferry," in *History of Dixon and Palmyra* (1880), 71; Matson, *Reminiscences of Bureau County* (1872), 291; *History of Stephenson County* (1880), 221, 249; *History of Lee County* (1881), 33, 175; *History of Bureau County* (1885), 112; *Recollections of the Pioneers of Lee County* (1893), 240; Stevens, *The Black Hawk War* (1903), 129, 176; *History of Ogle County* (1909), 937. One source said the date was 1826: *History of Carroll County* (1913), 633.

³ *History of Lee County* (1881), 34.

⁴ *History of Lee County* (1881), 176. Some historians said that Boles made his trail in 1826. See footnote 2.

unnecessary curves to shorten the journey to Galena.⁵

The trail used by the early stagecoaches could not properly be called a road. “Path” would be more accurate. One early traveler, Juliette Kinzie, described the trail in 1831 just north of Dixon. “The trail, it must be remembered, is not a broad highway, but a narrow path, deeply indented by the hoofs of the horses on which the Indians travel in single file. So deeply is it sunk in the sod which covers the prairies, that it is difficult, sometimes, to distinguish it at a distance of a few rods.”⁶

1828-1830: In the Beginning, There Was Mail

The evidence indicates that the earliest stage routes in the area started around 1828 as mail runs. Generally, the mail was carried by horse alone, but on occasion, two horses were used, with the mail carrier riding one horse that led another mail-toting horse in tow. For heavier loads, the mail carrier had a horse and wagon, probably a small one, as it was sometimes called a “road-cart.”

Carrying mail by horse was easy enough ... until the rider needed to cross a river. Before a ferry was established, the mail carrier could ford a shallow spot of the river. But with deeper rivers, like the Rock River near Dixon, the carrier was forced to swim with his horse(s) across the river, keeping the mail elevated and safe from water damage.

⁵ *History of Dixon and Palmyra* (1880), 71; *History of Lee County* (1881), 34.

⁶ Juliette Kinzie, *Wau-Bun, the Early Day in the Northwest* (1856), 143.

But when the carrier had a mail *wagon*, he generally needed a ferry to cross the river. Before Joseph Ogee established his ferry at “Dixon” in 1828, local Indians would offer ferry service in a novel way. The two right-side wheels of the wagon would be lifted into one canoe, and then the two left-side wheels would be hoisted into another canoe. The two parallel canoes acted like a pontoon boat, enabling a dry but shaky transfer over the water.⁷



John Dixon's mail stage was probably a primitive version of this wagon from the late 1800s.

John Dixon's Mail Stage

“Father” John Dixon was one of these early mail carriers. In the 1828 and 1829 *Miner's Journal*, a weekly newspaper that served the Galena area, John Dixon was mentioned as the proprietor of the “U.S. Mail Stage.” One of these citations said that Dixon's route ran between Galena and Peoria, another said the route went to Springfield, and yet another said it went all the way to St. Louis.

Many of these early mail carriers soon became stagecoach drivers who carried passengers along with the mail. Benjamin Franklin, the first U.S. Postmaster in 1775-1776, has been credited as the one who “introduced the use of stagecoaches as mail carriers between Philadelphia, Boston, and New York.”⁸

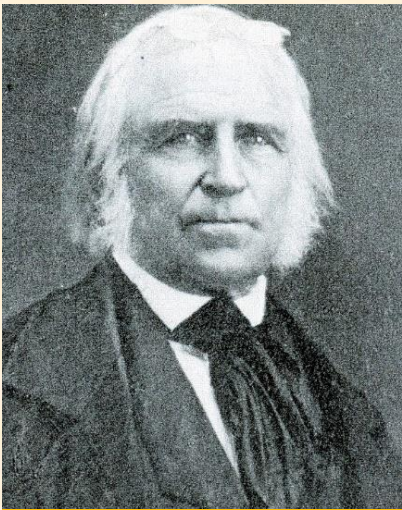
⁷ *History of Dixon and Palmyra* (1880), 71.

⁸ Lee County Historical Society, *Memories of Yesteryear*, Vol. 2 (1994), 21.

The evidence indicates that John Dixon was one of these mail carriers who also drove a stagecoach. A *Miner's Journal* ad in 1828 said that Dixon's "Mail Stage" charged an \$8 fare for Galena to Peoria and \$3 for Peoria to Springfield. An \$8 "fare" likely referred to the cost of carrying a passenger on his "mail stage."

William Barge, a prominent Dixon attorney and the great-grandson of Father John Dixon, investigated the details of John Dixon's mail contract. He cited federal records showing that it was actually E. B. Clemson who had the Galena-to-Peoria mail contract for all of 1828 and 1829 (for a salary of \$580/year). However, Barge also had evidence that Clemson paid John Dixon \$225 for carrying the mail for at least some of that time. So, Dixon was a subcontractor, carrying the mail for Clemson.

John Dixon, Mail Subcontractor



John Dixon, ca. 1852

This fact is confirmed by a letter that John Dixon wrote in 1830, asking the U.S. Secretary of War to reimburse him for a horse that the Indians stole from him in 1829. Dixon wrote, "During eighteen months previous to January last, I was engaged as subcontractor for carrying the mail from Peoria (Fort Clark) to Galena (Lead Mine)." So, according to John Dixon himself, he was a subcontractor mail carrier.

Dixon's letter also noted that his (mail) horse was stolen in October 1829 from Oliver Kellogg's stables, "one of the night stands about half way from Rocky River to Galena." These stables were likely used for replacing and refreshing tired horses along the Galena mail run.

Dixon added that he had fifteen horses. Such a large number of horses would be appropriate for someone running a 2- or 4-horse stagecoach that would need to keep several fresh horses on hand to relieve horses along the route. Father Dixon's large stable of horses testifies to his significant investment in his mail/stage business.⁹

Operating from “Dixon’s Grove”

At this time, John Dixon did not live in “Dixon.” Around 1828 John Dixon moved from Peoria to a site about 30 miles north of Peoria directly on the stage route and southwest of Princeton. Former Dixon Mayor Jim Dixon noted that this area was originally known as “Dixon’s Grove,” where Father Dixon’s log cabin was also a tavern and a way station for stage travelers.¹⁰

The 1872 Bureau County history said, “Mr. Dixon had a contract for carrying the mail from Peoria to Galena, once in two weeks.” So, before moving to the Rock River, John Dixon spent some of his time on the road as a mail stage driver in addition to farming and keeping tavern.¹¹

By 1830, Dixon’s other brother-in-law, Charles S. Boyd, settled at the same site, took up farming, and his home soon became the stage station. Dixon’s Grove then became known as Boyd’s Grove, near the southern border of Bureau County. The area is now called Milo, an unincorporated settlement of a few houses, but the Boyd’s Grove name is still attached to a cemetery and to the Boyd’s Grove Methodist Church, which was established in 1851.

⁹ The entire letter is reprinted in Way, *The Rock River Valley* (1926), 612-614. You can also see John Dixon’s mailbags in the Loveland Community House and Museum in Dixon.

¹⁰ James E. Dixon, “The Dixons of Dixon” (2022), 24.

¹¹ Matson, *Reminiscences of Bureau County* (1872), 174.

A Vexing Problem

John K. Robinson's (aka Robison) "Early Times at Dixon's Ferry" mentioned a time, probably in early 1828, when James P. Dixon, John Dixon's son, operated the "mail wagon." Arriving at Rock River, either coming from or going to Galena, James Dixon called for the Indians to assist his ferrying across the river. However, the Indians, who at the time offered ferrying service, did not reply.

"Vexed at their delay and their arrogance when they did assist, he boldly unchecked his horses, so as to give them a chance to swim, and crossed the river with the mail and wagon in safety," said Robinson. The story did not record how the wagon crossed the river. If light enough, perhaps the wagon floated, being directed by rope or pole.¹²

At the time, James P. Dixon was only 16 or 17 years old and was probably carrying the mail on behalf of his father, who lived in Dixon's (Boyd's) Grove. It's likely that John Dixon later remembered his son's vexation, which soon became motivation for the elder Dixon to move his family to the "Dixon" site and solve the ferry problem. As is well known, Joseph Ogee attempted the operation of a ferry there from 1828 to 1830, but his service was unsatisfactory.

John D. Winters, Stage Operator

Starting in 1830 John D. Winters was paid \$800 per year for the U.S. mail contract for the Galena-to-Peoria route (through Dixon). This contract covered all of 1830, 1831, 1832, and 1833.¹³

¹² In *History of Dixon and Palmyra* (1880), 71. A similar report of James P. Dixon driving the stage in 1827 or 1828 is found in Boss, *Sketches of the History of Ogle County* (1859), 35.

¹³ Barge, *Early Lee County* (1918), 48-52.

Winters was frequently mentioned as a stage driver in county histories throughout northwestern Illinois. His house was about 13 miles east of Galena on a site that would soon become Elizabeth.¹⁴ These county histories also identified at least four other men who drove the stage for Winters. So, Winters had the Galena-Peoria mail contract, but several others worked for him as stage drivers, and John Dixon was likely one of them.

1830-1831: John Dixon Operates His Stage from Dixon



John K. Robinson

April 11, 1830, is now known as “Founder’s Day,” the day when John Dixon moved to present site of Dixon. John K. Robinson’s history said that Father Dixon’s objective in moving to the Rock River from Boyd’s Grove was “to occupy a more central position for his mail contract.”¹⁵ Robinson’s testimony is helpful because he was an early and long-time friend of the Dixons, a teacher of the Dixon children, and an eyewitness to many events from 1832 onward.¹⁶ In a move that brought greater stability to the mail run, John Dixon bought Ogee’s ferry and converted it from an unreliable pole ferry to a rope ferry.¹⁷

Since Winters certainly had the Peoria-to-Galena contract for 1830, John Dixon must have served as a subcontractor for Winters. In any

¹⁴ *History of Lee County* (1881), 34; Stevens, *History of Lee County* (1914), 34; *History of Jo Daviess County* (1878), 586.

¹⁵ *History of Dixon and Palmyra* (1880), 71.

¹⁶ *History of Lee County* (1881), 35; *History of Dixon and Palmyra* (1880), 75.

¹⁷ *History of Lee County* (1881), 38; Stevens, *History of Lee County* (1914), 35, 42.

case, Winters and Dixon were certainly acquainted. John Dixon's account books reveal a number of charges by "J. D. Winters" in the 1830-1835 era, including charges for shoeing a horse, mending a harness, and "ferriage" across the river.¹⁸ Winters likely incurred these charges while operating his mail stage.

Traffic Backup at Dixon's Ferry

Robinson recorded a story from early 1831 that happened "while Father Dixon carried the United States mail from Springfield to Galena." He wrote, "On one of the longer routes during this memorable winter, Father Dixon and some of the stage passengers were so benumbed with cold and nearly frozen, as to be unable to get out of the conveyance. After a good warming and hot coffee, however, all were able to resume their journey."¹⁹ This story implies that Dixon was the stage driver, and he climbed into the cabin with his passengers to maintain some warmth.

In 1831 the stage trail at Dixon could be very busy with travelers lined up on the river bank, waiting their turn to be ferried across. In



This sketch of John Dixon's cabin appears in the 1893 *Recollections of the Pioneers of Lee County*.

¹⁸ "Father" John Dixon's *Account Books and "The Man Who Lost Everything"* (1993), 15.

¹⁹ *History of Dixon and Palmyra* (1880), 73; cf. Stevens, *History of Lee County* (1914), 252.

that year, Lt. Jefferson Davis (the future president of the Confederacy) was stationed at Fort Winnebago and had cause to come to Dixon's Ferry. There, Lt. Davis "found the mail coach and numbers of wagons with persons going to the lead mines detained at the river."²⁰

This memory matches other stories of the frequent backlog of miners waiting to cross the Rock River at Dixon. The 1880 *History of Dixon and Palmyra* recalled that, from 1829 to 1835, "five to twenty teams a day" would utilize Dixon's ferry on their way to Galena in the spring and on their way south in September and October.²¹

So, by the end of 1831 some key trails had been blazed into and out of Dixon's Ferry, and a few stagecoaches were taking advantage of these developing pathways. As yet, most people were just passing through, using these trails to reach their final destination. But a terrorizing event was about freeze all movement throughout all of northern Illinois.

²⁰ Varina Davis, *Jefferson Davis: A Memoir by His Wife*, Vol. 1 (New York: Belford, 1890), 76.

²¹ *History of Dixon and Palmyra* (1880), 72.

Chapter Two

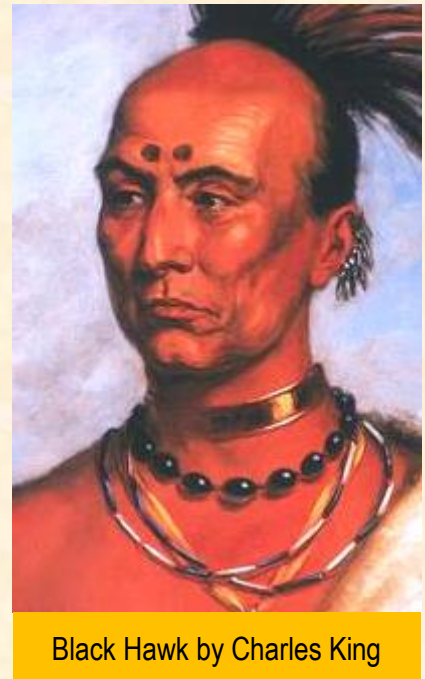
1832-1834: Stopping and Starting the Stage Lines

At the beginning of 1832, mail and stage runs through Dixon's Ferry virtually stopped.

In early 1832 Black Hawk of the Sauk tribe amassed a large band of Indians,²² and they crossed the Mississippi from Iowa, marching up the Rock River. Crossing the Mississippi into Illinois was an alarming move. In June 1831 Black Hawk had signed a treaty agreeing to never recross the Mississippi.²³ Black Hawk initially complied with the treaty, but it now appeared that he had second thoughts about the deal.

So, many settlers promptly fled from northwestern Illinois, believing that the Sauk leader had hostile intent. After all, between Galena and Peoria, there were no communities that had more than 100 people, Dixon's Ferry included. Thus, all these settlers were virtually defenseless to a band of hundreds of warriors.

During the "Black Hawk War," which involved Dixon's Ferry and Fort Dixon on its north bank, bloody battles erupted along the Galena-to-Dixon stage route. The war brought such notables to the area as future



Black Hawk by Charles King

²² This book uses 'Indians' to refer to the people who previously inhabited this area of Illinois. This term was seen as the proper designation throughout the 1800s and 1900s; it is frequently used by Indians themselves; and it is not inherently a derogative term.

²³ Stevens, *The Black Hawk War* (1903), 97.

U.S. presidents Zachary Taylor and Abraham Lincoln, future Civil War generals Winfield Scott, Albert Sidney Johnston, Joseph E. Johnston (no relation), and Robert Anderson, future Confederate president Jefferson Davis, and then-Illinois Governor John Reynolds. Hostilities began near Dixon (at modern-day Stillman Valley) on May 14, 1832, and for four full months, fear gripped the entire area.

The Stage Horn No More

Up and down the Galena-to-Peoria trail, mail and passenger travel ceased. As one historian said, “The great Galena road ... to and from the lead mines was now deserted; no traveler would risk his life in passing through a country then thought to be full of hostile savages.”²⁴

Even the southern section of the trail, from Dixon’s Ferry down to Peoria, was vacated, along with most of the area’s settlers. As the Bureau County history reported, “During the Black Hawk war, every settler within the limits of Bureau county left the country for a place of safety ... (and) the welcome sound of the stage horn was no longer heard.”²⁵ (The stage horn was a horn that the stage driver would blow to announce his arrival in a town. See Chapter 4.)

Charles Boyd, John Dixon’s brother-in-law (Boyd married Elizabeth Dixon, John Dixon’s sister), was one Bureau County man who stayed. But Boyd sent his wife and small children to Peoria for protection. Boyd and three sons, ages 12-17, bravely remained at their Boyd’s Grove home to plant and raise a crop for the 1832 growing season.

²⁴ Matson, *Reminiscences of Bureau County* (1872), 76.

²⁵ Matson, *Reminiscences of Bureau County* (1872), 179.

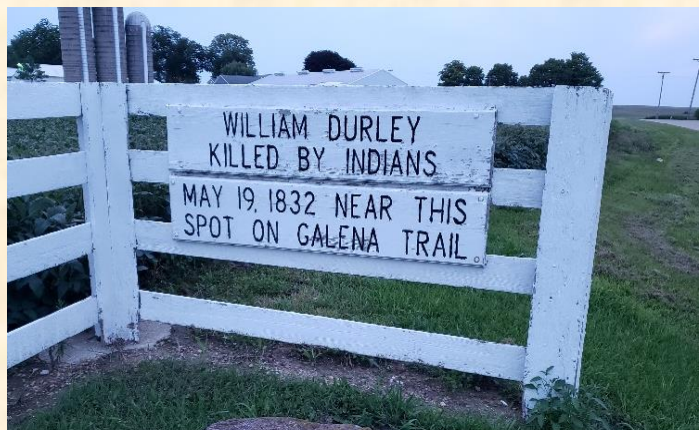
The risk was almost too great. One day, while Boyd was away, the boys were outside their home, cleaning their rifles. One renegade Indian quietly advanced and raised his rifle to shoot the oldest boy, with the likely plan to tomahawk the younger ones after firing the weapon. But the Indian's gun misfired, which alarmed both the Indian and the boys. The Indian fled, while the boys scrambled back into the house for safety.²⁶

John Dixon, who was friends with Black Hawk, also stayed at his post at Dixon's Ferry, but he sent his wife, Rebecca, and the younger children to Galena for safety. Oliver Kellogg, his other brother-in-law, who was then living at Buffalo Grove (near Polo), also sent away his wife and children for refuge.²⁷

Battles along the Route

Kellogg's risk, too, was almost too great. Black Hawk's movements from Dixon's Ferry included a deadly battle at Kellogg's Grove, where Major John Dement, of later Dixon fame, resisted several relentless bloody charges by Black Hawk's warriors.²⁸

During the four-month war, the Galena-Peoria stage made only two trips, but it had to be accompanied by a file of soldiers. However, even after the guarded stage



William Durley was guarding the stagecoach when he was killed at Buffalo Grove, as noted on this historical marker one mile west of Polo.

²⁶ Matson, *Reminiscences of Bureau County* (1872), 182-183.

²⁷ Stevens, *The Black Hawk War* (1903), 174, 176.

²⁸ Stevens, *The Black Hawk War* (1903), 199-200.

was attacked by Indians at Buffalo Grove, all stage and mail travel was suspended.²⁹

That summer, Black Hawk was chased into southwestern Wisconsin, pursued by the U.S. Army and the Illinois militia. Finally, on Aug. 2, 1832, Black Hawk and his warriors were defeated at the Battle of Bad Axe, about 110 miles north of Galena near the Mississippi River.

With the hostilities ended, all those who had fled their homes now felt safe to return. The stage lines were reopened, and the coaches resumed their regular runs throughout the greater Dixon area.³⁰

The Frink & Walker Stage Line

Around 1832³¹ an enterprising man named John Frink Jr. started his stagecoach business in the tiny village of Chicago, which then had a population of about 200. Frink's timing was perfect. When the war ended, a pent-up demand for westward expansion began to erupt from this gateway location. His business would eventually dominate stagecoach travel in Illinois and throughout all of northern Illinois.

Around 1826 Frink had started operating a stage business in Massachusetts. There, he had access to the latest invention in stage travel: the Concord Stagecoach, which had begun mass production around 1827 in Concord, New Hampshire. So, Frink was armed with intelligence about stagecoach operations, the latest stagecoach model,

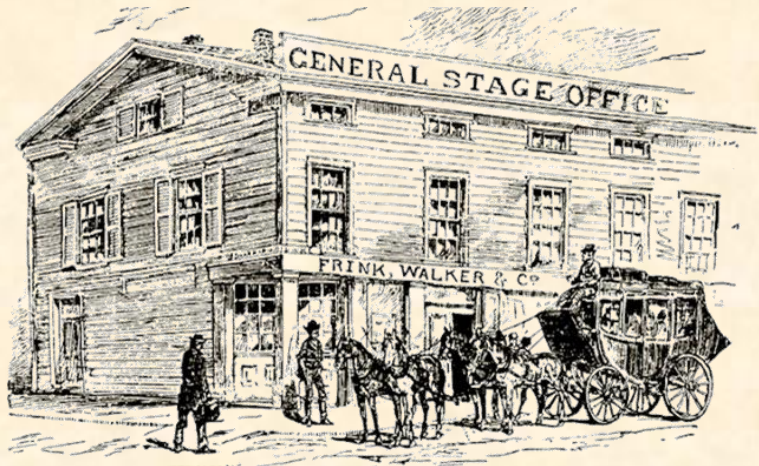
²⁹ Matson, *Reminiscences of Bureau County* (1872), 180.

³⁰ *History of Lee County* (1881), 57.

³¹ Neil Gale, "Stagecoach Travel in Early Chicago and Illinois" (Nov. 21, 2019). Gale argues that Frink came to Chicago in 1832, but Roger Matile contends that Frink didn't start Illinois operations until 1836, in Roger A. Matile, *By Trace and Trail: The Stagecoach Era in Northern Illinois* (Oswego: Oswegoland Heritage Association, 2000), 24. My research indicates that Matile may be right.

and an ambitious mind for business expansion, and he saw great opportunities for growth in the burgeoning West.

Frink, Bingham & Co. soon began operating stage runs heading west from Chicago.³² As historian Neil Gale said, Frink's stages were based in a "shanty-like building" at the corner of Lake and Clark Streets. Frink later moved two doors west, to the corner of Lake and Dearborn. In 1840 he took on a new partner, Martin O. Walker, and the business became Frink, Walker & Co. or, more popularly, just "Frink & Walker."³³



Frink & Walker main station
at Lake & Dearborn in Chicago, ca. 1845

Frink & Walker would become a household name even in northwestern Illinois, 100 miles away. Knowing the continuing appeal of the Galena lead mines, the firm established a stagecoach line from Chicago to Galena. This was the northerly route, about the same as people would take today, going northwest from Chicago to Rockford, then straight west through Freeport to Galena.

From Chicago to Rockford, to Dixon, to Peoria

In 1832 no one resided in Rockford; its first permanent settlers didn't arrive until 1834-1835. In 1832 this "rock ford" was simply a spot on the stage road where one could "ford" the "Rock" River to get to

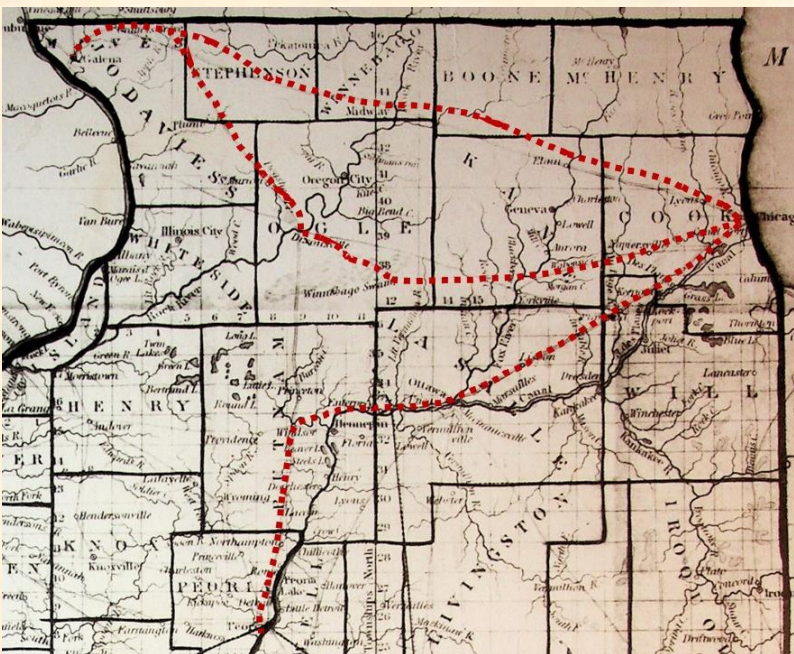
³² Neil Gale, "Stagecoach Travel in Early Chicago and Illinois" (Nov. 21, 2019).

³³ Neil Gale, "Stagecoach Travel in Early Chicago and Illinois" (Nov. 21, 2019).

Galena. In 1834 the first name of the town was Midway, because it was “halfway between Galena and Chicago on a line of four-horse coaches.” The name was changed to Rockford in 1837.³⁴

This northerly route to Galena had two advantages over a route through Dixon. At the “Rock ford,” the river could be waded through, being more shallow than at Dixon. Plus, the route through Rockford was about 10 miles shorter than the route through Dixon. However, by 1834, a new route opened up from Chicago to Dixon.

The 1835 surveyor’s plat of Dixon showed that the town covered only 40 acres from the river south to Third Street and from Peoria Avenue east to Ottawa Avenue. These blocks were only sparsely developed, containing perhaps six families and a handful of single men. But the town was significant enough to attract the attention of Frink & Walker, which added its second stage route to Galena running through Dixon. That trail officially opened on Jan. 1, 1834.³⁵



An approximation of Frink & Walker’s main stage lines, ca. 1836

Frink & Walker also had an early stage line running from Chicago to Peoria. At that time, the village of Peoria was also rather small, with a population around 1,000. But Frink & Walker saw the growth potential of establishing this critical transportation network from

³⁴ Jane Addams, *My Friend, Julia Lathrop* (2004), 10; *History of Winnebago County* (1877), 399.

³⁵ *Recollections of the Pioneers of Lee County* (1893), 184.

Chicago to Galena, Chicago to Dixon, and Chicago to Peoria. Their crystal ball was right on target. The stagecoach era had begun in earnest in northern Illinois.³⁶

Stage Line Competition

But Frink & Walker had competition. After the 1832 war, John D. Winters moved to “the hill just east of the site of Elizabeth,” where he continued to direct his stage line and establish a tavern for a stage station.³⁷ Soon, he also added a Galena-to-Rockford route to his business, probably using the same route that had opened from Chicago in 1832. His wife drove his stage at times, sometimes bringing along their two small children. “On one occasion, it is said, some Indians attacked her, whereupon she used her long stage whip so vigorously that the Indians fled, exclaiming as they ran, ‘Brave Squaw!’”³⁸

Isaiah Rucker, who lived at Buffalo Grove near Polo, started driving stage for Winters in 1834, as did Shedrach Claywell of Elizabeth.³⁹ Other drivers for Winters in 1834 included Lyman Chase and Paul D. Otis.⁴⁰ Claywell also carried mail weekly “for Mr. Dixon” on a route from Chicago to Dixon in 1834.⁴¹ While “Mr. Dixon” might normally be understood as a reference to John Dixon, other sources indicate that this “Mr. Dixon” is James P. Dixon, Father Dixon’s oldest son.

³⁶ Gale, “Stagecoach Travel in Early Chicago and Illinois” (Nov. 21, 2019).

³⁷ *History of Jo Daviess County* (1878), 584.

³⁸ *Bicentennial History of Ogle County* (1976), 44.

³⁹ *History of Ogle County* (1909), 742; *History of Jo Daviess County* (1878), 771.

⁴⁰ Samuel Preston, “Pioneers of Mt. Carroll: History of Carroll County,” (1894) <http://genealogytrails.com/ill/carroll/carrollhistsp.html>.

⁴¹ *History of Jo Daviess County* (1878), 771.

At the beginning of 1834 James Purdy Dixon (1811-1853) was only 22 years old, but he was already an enterprising hard worker who had been running the “mail stage” for his father as early as 1828. “Upon arriving at manhood,” said an 1892 Lee County history, James P. Dixon “became agent for the Fink (sic) & Walker stage line running from Galena to Rock Island and Chicago.”⁴²

The 1881 *History of Lee County* noted that James was “for a long time agent for Flint (sic) & Walker’s stage line, and in the latter years of his life was in the livery business.”⁴³

Running a livery was a natural extension of his years of experience in running stagecoaches. An essential part of running a stagecoach was feeding, shoeing, and caring for horses, which were the same functions provided by a livery business.



James P. Dixon, 1811-1854

Dixon: The Great Transfer Station

James P. Dixon’s involvement in the stage business indicates why Dixon’s Ferry was an ideal location for running mail and stagecoaches. After all, the war did nothing to change the central hub location of Dixon’s Ferry. If anything, Dixon’s renown as a famous site of the war could only increase its popularity to attract settler travel.

In time, other stage routes also proceeded through Dixon. Besides being a key stop on the Galena-to-Peoria route and the Galena-to-

⁴² *Portrait and Biographical Record of Lee County* (1892), 268.

⁴³ *History of Lee County* (1881), 196; see also J. D. Boardman, article in *The Rock River Farmer* (September 1871) as quoted in Swarbrick, *The Story of John Dixon: Foremost Citizen of Northern Illinois* (2006), 29.

Chicago route, Dixon also became a part of the Dixon-to-Ottawa line, the Dixon-to-Rock Island route, as well as the Dixon-to-Grand Detour line, which would become part of a Dixon-to-Rockford route.

The 1881 *History of Lee County* had good reason to say: “Dixon was the great transfer station on the stage lines that traversed the country.”⁴⁴ As a major transfer station, Dixon’s Ferry would generate business for a livery, a blacksmith, as well as taverns that offered food, drink, and lodging.

John Dixon’s original log cabin served as a tavern, even though Dixon himself moved to his farm southwest of town

“Dixon was the great transfer station on the stage lines that traversed the country.”

- History of Lee County, 1881

in 1835. That same year, anticipating future growth, John Dixon’s cabin was converted into a tavern “for the accommodation of the traveling public.” In early 1836, Chapman and Hamilton opened a store “in the ‘block’ part of this building.” As a result, “Dixon could now boast of a post-office, store, and a house of public entertainment.”⁴⁵

In 1837 Dixon included only 10 or 12 families but showed much promise, according to an 1838 book about the budding state of Illinois. In Dixon “the stage-roads from Chicago by Napiersville, from Ottawa by Troy Grove, and from Peoria by Windsor and Princeton, all concentrate, and pass on to Galena.”⁴⁶

⁴⁴ *History of Lee County* (1881), 57.

⁴⁵ *History of Lee County* (1881), 59.

⁴⁶ *Illinois in 1837 & 8*, (Philadelphia: S. Augustus Mitchell, 1838), 95.

By the end of 1837, several hotels had opened in Dixon, such as the Western Hotel, the Huntley House, and the Rock River House, which soon became the Phenix Hotel.⁴⁷ The stagecoach was undoubtedly the primary vehicle that brought all these lodgers to Dixon.

Melugin's Grove Station

In 1832 one of the soldiers in the Fort Dixon garrison was Zechariah Melugin, who had become "warm friends" with Abraham Lincoln and Father John Dixon during the war. After Melugin was mustered out of military service, he remained at Dixon's Ferry.

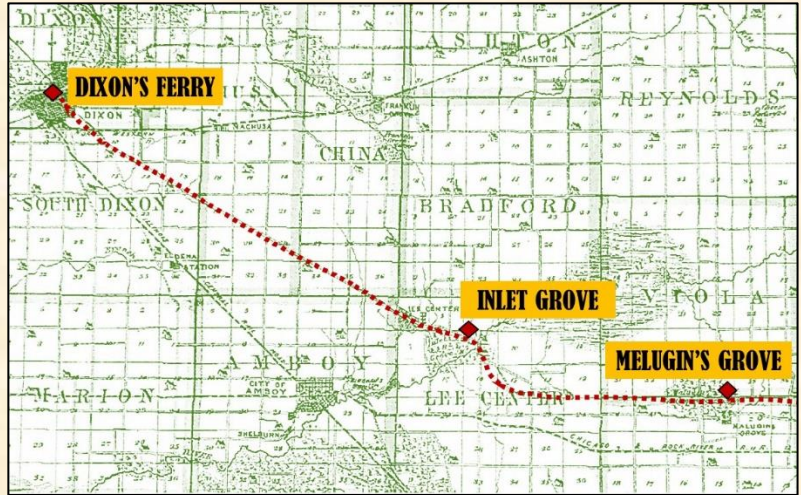
In 1833 Capt. Joseph Naper of Naperville surveyed a new stagecoach route running from Galena to Chicago through Dixon's Ferry.⁴⁸ Word quickly spread in the small village of the new mail and stage route that would commence on Jan. 1, 1834. Realizing the various business opportunities of the new line, Father Dixon persuaded Melugin to establish a stage station along the route.

So, on New Year's Day of 1834, Zechariah Melugin of Dixon's Ferry hopped on the first stage that came from Galena. Melugin rode that stagecoach east until it came to a site that was deemed a suitable stage stop. The site, from thence called "Melugin's Grove," seemed perfect. A grove of trees there would provide abundant wood for constructing his log cabin. It also featured a stream for water, and best of all, it was about 24 miles from Dixon.

⁴⁷ *History of Dixon and Palmyra* (1880), 5, 32.

⁴⁸ *History of Lee County* (1881), 47.

What was the appeal of 24 miles? Historian Frank Stevens said that it was “the desire of the Frink and Walker people to make no more than twelve miles at a time.”⁴⁹ So, a stop around the 24-mile mark would be ideal for the second stop out of Dixon’s Ferry to refresh the horses and let the passengers stretch their legs.



This 1872 map shows the likely sites of Inlet Grove and Melugin’s Grove on the Dixon-Chicago stage route, ca. 1834.

Adolphus Bliss had already laid claim on a stage-route spot in the Inlet Grove area, just east of the eventual site of Lee Center, where he erected a log “stage house.” He called it “The Travelers Home,” which included barns where the stage horses were changed. Bliss’s tavern was about 13 miles out from Dixon, and Melugin’s Grove was about 10 miles from Bliss.⁵⁰ On today’s maps, Melugin’s Grove is called “The Burg,” about a mile north of modern-day Compton.

By the end of 1834, stage stations had been established at strategic intervals from Dixon’s Ferry all the way to Chicago, from Dixon to Peoria, and from Dixon to Galena. It was just in time, because “the Great Migration” was about to bring a wave of settlers from the East.

⁴⁹ Stevens, *History of Lee County* (1914), 376.

⁵⁰ *Recollections of the Pioneers of Lee County* (1893), 183-184; *History of Lee County* (1881), 376, 405; *Portrait and Biographical Record of Lee County* (1892), 184.

Chapter Three

1835-1839: The Great Migration

The year of 1835 is widely regarded as a time when the flow of new settlers to the greater region around Dixon's Ferry significantly increased. After all, the fear of Indian uprising had now passed. Ferries or fords were established up and down the Rock River. Stage trails had been blazed to all the key points. Public land in the area became available for settlement, and the first land sales for this northern region were registered in 1835, as reports spread of "good, cheap land selling for as little as \$1.25/acre."⁵¹

In April and May 1835 several articles appeared in eastern newspapers, saying that "The New Country" along the Rock River "is attracting the particular attention of emigrants." The articles said that the land around the river is "not surpassed" for agricultural and mechanical purposes, noting that a mill had been established about 30 miles above Dixon's Ferry to aid home construction throughout the area. Newspaper articles in Pennsylvania, North Carolina, and Tennessee reported, "Without doubt the borders of Rock River are destined to be the richest as they are already the most beautiful part of Illinois."⁵²

Consequently, as one Ogle County historian said, "The tide of emigration set in strong during 1835."⁵³ The 1881 and the 1914 Lee County histories echoed the significance of 1835, adding that the

⁵¹ Patricia L. Goitein, "Meet Me in Heaven: Confronting Death along the Galena Trail Frontier, 1825-1855," <http://www.galenatrail.com/history/meetmeinheaven.html>.

⁵² *The Franklin Repository* (Chambersburg, Pa.) (April 17, 1835), 3.

⁵³ *History of Ogle County* (1909), 742.

influx of settlers “came almost entirely from the East along the Dixon mail and stage road.”⁵⁴

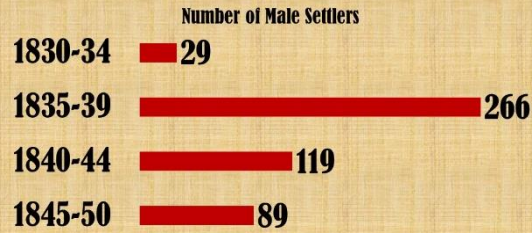
Leading the Migration

While this flood of emigrants contained a large number of settler families, certain professionals were in their number. The 1881 Lee County history identified ministers, lawyers, “and blacklegs (i.e., swindlers) whose name is legion.”⁵⁵

While some of these professionals could afford stage travel, it was common for the early preachers to travel on foot or on horseback, “carrying in their saddlebags a pocket bible, a hymn book, and a change of linens.” Their hardships were many, and they “preached free salvation, almost without money and without price.” Traveling alone, without the protection of a stagecoach, they were “frequently swimming streams, sleeping in the open air, and suffering from cold and hunger.”⁵⁶

The Great Migration of 1835-1839

When the Old Settlers Arrived in Dixon



From Whence They Came

Top Six States		Top Six Countries	
New York	119	Germany	30
Pennsylvania	90	Ireland	28
New Hampshire	39	Canada	18
Ohio	21	England	15
Kentucky	16	Jamaica	3
Maine	16	Scotland	3

Data source: *History of Dixon and Palmyra from 1827 to 1880* (1880), 49-55. This source identified 503 male settlers “of Dixon and vicinity.”

⁵⁴ *History of Lee County* (1881), 44; also Stevens, *History of Lee County* (1914), 44.

⁵⁵ *History of Lee County* (1881), 36.

⁵⁶ Matson, *Reminiscences of Bureau County* (1872), 35-36.

1835: Settling the Rock River Valley from Dixon

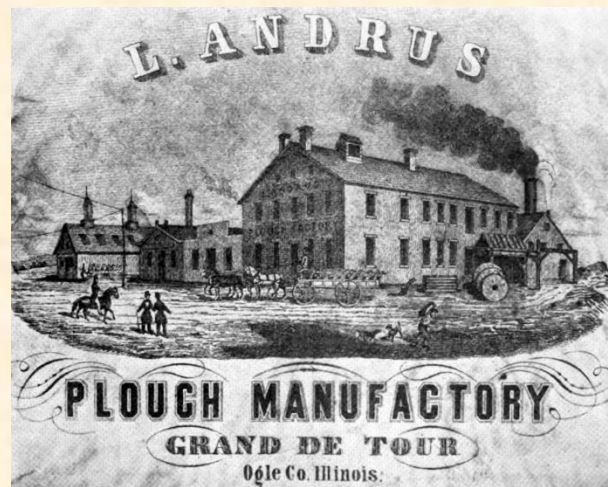
Starting around 1835 the lead mines in Galena were no longer the primary attraction of northwestern Illinois. As the stagecoaches brought more and more people, many of them chose to settle in the picturesque village of Dixon, while others proceeded north to Grand Detour, west to Fulton and Savanna, or southwest to Rock Island.

The story of 29-year-old Major Leonard Andrus founding Grand Detour is legendary. In 1834 he went on a “prospecting tour through northern Illinois, having heard something of the beauty of that country.”⁵⁷ After Andrus arrived at Dixon’s Ferry, John Dixon reportedly suggested that Andrus look for a site up the Rock River to the north.

So, Andrus went upriver “in a canoe paddled by Indians” in search of a place to put down roots. When he came to “the great bend,” he was stunned by this unique location. After making a claim, Andrus returned east to settle some business. He returned in 1835 when he paid \$1.25 an acre for his claim.⁵⁸

The Dixon & Andrus Stage Line

The Biographical Record of Ogle County (1899) reported that Andrus’s first employment was being “associated with Flint (sic) & Walker, proprietors of the old stage line.” But this connection was brief. In 1843 Andrus famously partnered with John Deere to form the Grand



This depiction of the factory is found in Way's *The Rock River Valley* (1926).

⁵⁷ *Biographical Record of Ogle County* (1899), 318.

⁵⁸ *History of Ogle County* (1909), 645; Duane Paulsen, *Grand Detour Stories* (2016), 8.

Detour Plow Company.⁵⁹ Deere, a blacksmith, had arrived in Grand Detour in 1836, and his projects included iron work for wagons and stagecoaches in addition to inventing a certain steel plow in 1837.⁶⁰

Before Andrus was involved in the plow company, he was pursuing several business opportunities. In 1837 he also started “the upper ferry” at Grand Detour, which not only aided commerce, it also opened up a route for stagecoaches from Dixon.⁶¹ Then in 1838 Leonard Andrus started a mail and stage line that ran for many years between Dixon and Rockford through Grand Detour and from Grand Detour to Freeport.⁶² Some sources say that his stage line ran all the way from Rock Island to Rockford, while another source said it ran south to Peru.⁶³

Two Lee County histories testified to a Dixon & Andrus stage line that was “an opposition line” to the Frink & Walker line. One of the histories indicated that this stage line didn’t start until 1845.⁶⁴

But neither source indicated whether “Dixon” refers to John Dixon or to his son, James P. Dixon, who was known to be involved in the stage business. In Grand Detour stands a historical marker erected in 1937. In addition to citing Andrus’s business accomplishments, the marker says that he was a “carrier of mail and travelers,” a distinction shared by John and James Dixon.

⁵⁹ *Bicentennial History of Ogle County* (1976), 113.

⁶⁰ *Bicentennial History of Ogle County* (1976), 112.

⁶¹ Kauffman, *History of Ogle County* (1909), 778.

⁶² *Recollections of the Pioneers of Lee County* (1893), 334, 434; *History of Ogle County* (1878), 609.

⁶³ *History of Lee County* (1881), 314; George Lamb, *Historical Reminiscences* (1970); Stevens, *History of Lee County* (1914), 277.

⁶⁴ See *History of Lee County* (1881), 314; cf. Stevens, *History of Lee County* (1914), 277.

By the 1860s the stagecoach stop in Grand Detour was at the stone building on the east side of today's Illinois Route 2. That building later also became part of Stan Hack's Landmark Restaurant. The stone building also served as a grist mill in its early days.⁶⁵

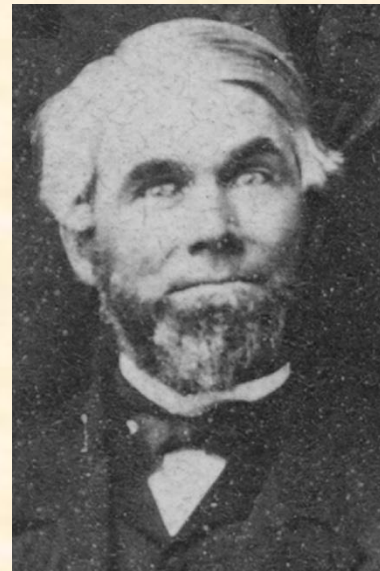
Whenever the Dixon & Andrus stage line started, and whatever the nature of this partnership, it makes sense. Andrus and the Dixons were leading figures who had a vested interest in facilitating travel to and from the area.

The Stage from Grand Detour to Dixon

One more story about Leonard Andrus and his stagecoach should be mentioned. In 1838 Joseph Wallace of "Oregon City" had written glowing letters to J. T. Little of Maine, telling him about the beauty of the Rock River country. These letters enticed Little to leave it all behind and head west. After visiting his friend in Oregon, Little "came down the river in the stage with Leonard Andrus from Grand Detour."

Little later recalled that he would "never forget the beautiful vision of his first glimpse of Dixon" from Andrus's stagecoach. "There never was a prettier place for a town, and within two years it will be almost a paradise," he then wrote.

A staunch Baptist, "Deacon Little" was also encouraged to see what appeared to be a church steeple on the riverbank. But upon closer examination, he found it to be the chimney of a whiskey distillery on Water Street. Nonetheless, Little stayed in Dixon



J. T. Little, ca. 1870

⁶⁵ *Bicentennial History of Ogle County* (1976), 279.

as a respected Christian and prominent merchant for the rest of his life, until his death in 1902.⁶⁶

... and Oregon and Byron

The stagecoach between Dixon and Grand Detour neither begins or ends at those points. In 1835 John Phelps, regarded as the founder of “Oregon City,” established the first ferry across the Rock River at that location. His Oregon ferry would become a key link for stage lines coming from the east (Chicago), from the south (Dixon and Grand Detour), and from the northwest (Galena).⁶⁷

Like John Dixon’s and Leonard Andrus’s ferries, the toll rates at Phelps’s ferry were fixed by law to eliminate price gouging. For example, a pedestrian paid 12-1/2 cents, a man and horse paid 25 cents, while a “two-horse pleasure carriage” paid \$1.⁶⁸

These ferries and the stage line were crucial for towns like Oregon and Byron. For example, before 1837 when the stagecoach first came to Byron,⁶⁹ its residents had to travel to Dixon, 26 miles down the river, to get their mail, usually once a week. But after Frink and Walker established their stage line between Dixon and Rockford, Byron finally received mail in town.⁷⁰

An old stage tavern still stands today (as a private home) between Oregon and Stillman Valley. Built in 1846 it is known as the old Weld home, and it sits on Weld Park Road across from the Weld Memorial

⁶⁶ *Recollections of the Pioneers of Lee County* (1893), 334.

⁶⁷ Kauffman, *History of Ogle County* (1909), 723.

⁶⁸ Kauffman, *History of Ogle County* (1909), 804.

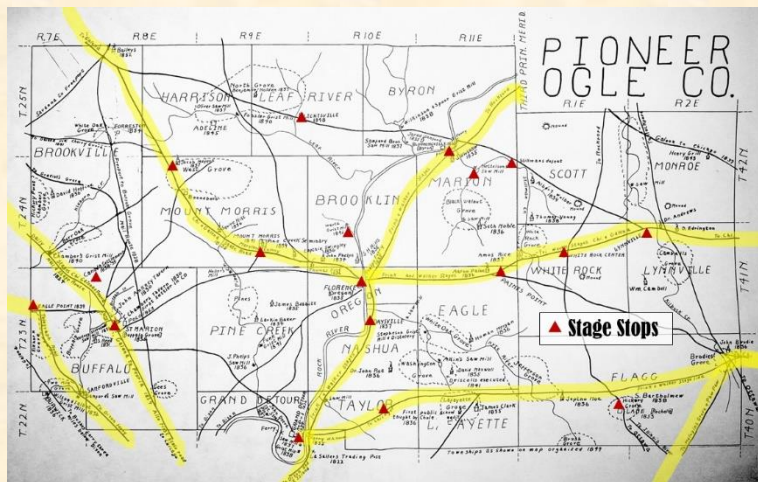
⁶⁹ *Bicentennial History of Ogle County* (1976), 224.

⁷⁰ Kauffman, *History of Ogle County* (1909), 751.

Park. Daniel Weld settled in this area in 1844,⁷¹ and the home served as a stage stop, store, and post office.

From the Weld home, “the stage route ran southwest over the prairie toward Oregon and Daysville and angled to the northwest toward Byron and the Kishwaukee road. The fence lines still follow the pattern of the stage trail and also some of the roads.”⁷² Ned Bushnell, who owns some of the area property today, told me that, in the spring, remnants of the stagecoach tracks can still be seen proceeding south out of the park toward Oregon.

As the years went by, several stage routes developed through the area as the U.S. Postal Service increased the number of places where it picked up and delivered the mail. The *Bicentennial History of Ogle County* identified several other stage stops in that county, such as at Canada Settlement, Eagle Point, Lightsville, West Grove, Lynnville (Lindenwood), Weldtown, Stillman Valley, Daysville, Paynes Point, Wertz Mill, Carhage (Taylor), and White Rock Grove.⁷³ But several of these stops weren’t established until the 1840s or 1850s.



This map, drawn by Russell Poole of Polo (stage stops added), shows stage trails and stage stops in Ogle County, ca. 1860.

⁷¹ *History of Ogle County* (1878), 830.

⁷² *Bicentennial History of Ogle County* (1976), 326.

⁷³ *Bicentennial History of Ogle County* (1976), 201 (Canada Settlement), 217 (Eagle Point), 295 (Lightsville), 304 (West Grove), 316 (Lynnville), 325-326 (Weldtown and Stillman Valley),

Stagecoaches running along the river had to contend with occasional flooding that affected their normal route. For example, a flood in June 1851 caused the river to overflow its banks, pouring two feet of water onto the stage road around Grand Detour. On June 18 a stagecoach attempting to pass through the flooded area suddenly plunged into 10 feet of water, drowning all the horses.⁷⁴

Gazing Out the Stagecoach Window

When Easterners rode the stagecoach to the Rock River Valley in search of their new home, they must have gazed intently out the stagecoach window, especially as they entered the territory of their final destination. “Should I stake a claim on that hill, in that grove, next to that stream?” Many only knew that land was available, but they also knew that others were snatching up claims quickly.

Samuel Preston, in his 1894 history of Carroll County, tells the story of his father who rode John Winters’ four-horse stagecoach from Princeton through Dixon’s Ferry into the (would be) Carroll County area in January 1836. He had booked fare to Galena, where he planned to offer payment at the land office to secure a claim in Bureau County.



George Tattersall's "Forest Road" (1836)

However, he was deeply impressed with the land surrounding a particular spot around the Mount Carroll area. So, at the next stop, he asked the stage driver if land was available near that site. The driver

346 (Mt. Morris), 369 (Daysville), 404 (Paynes Point), 420 (Wertz Mill), 427 (Rochelle), 436 (Carthage), 440 (White Rock).

⁷⁴ *History of Lee County* (1881), 24.

said yes, but he recommended that better land could be obtained nearer the Mississippi River from that point.

Preston's father then abandoned his seat on the stagecoach and started walking west toward the Mississippi. He finally found about 40 acres, the minimum purchase, surrounded by beautiful timber in Woodland township, northwest of Mount Carroll.

But now, he was stranded in January, and he needed to return to civilization so that he could place an official claim for the land. So, he started walking east and finally made it to Dixon, where he waited for the next stage. After months of haggles over competing claims, he finally secured the land of his heart's desire. Such were the challenges faced by these stage travelers in search of a new home on the frontier.⁷⁵

The Winter Stagecoach

“Neither snow, nor rain, nor heat, nor gloom of night stays these courageous couriers from the swift completion of their appointed rounds.” For centuries this old saying has been applied to those noble carriers of the mail. Since the stagecoaches carried mail, the saying also had some application to their carrying of passengers.

Traveling during the winter in the 1830s was not for the timid. Drivers, when traveling after—or during—a good snow, had an ongoing problem of losing the trail. E. B. Washburne, who traveled the Galena-to-Springfield stage many times, recalled “a certain sense of danger crept over us that the driver might lose the track.”⁷⁶

⁷⁵ Samuel Preston, “Pioneers of Mt. Carroll: History of Carroll County,” (1894) <http://genealogytrails.com/ill/carroll/carrollhistsp.html>.

⁷⁶ John Dixon and E. B. Washburne, “Letter of E. B. Washburne to John Dixon,” *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society* (July 1913), 221.

For the passengers, the stagecoach offered some protection from the cold and snow, but not much. While the stage driver could generate some internal warmth by the constant exertion of energy, passengers had to sit for long stretches in a bouncing wooden coach that seemed to get only colder.

Stranded in the Snow

Shedrach Claywell, a stage driver for John D. Winters from 1835-1840, recalled one such cold night on the Galena-to-Dixon stage route. Claywell was resting comfortably at a stage tavern that winter night when a nearly frozen stage driver burst into the hotel, having arrived with his horses but not his coach. While driving through a blizzard, his coach became hopelessly stuck in a snow drift. Seeking to save himself and his horses, he left his passengers—a man, his wife, and three children—to pass the night in the coach in the bitter cold.

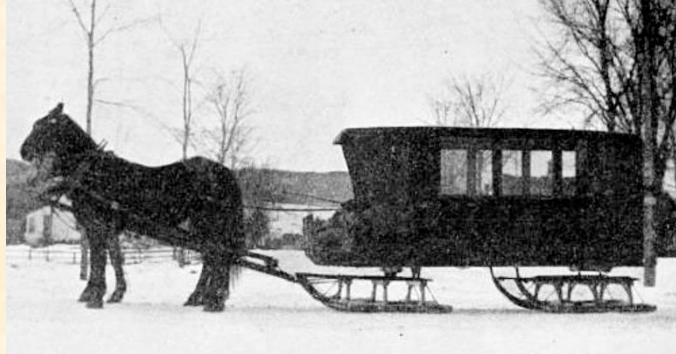
The story, recorded in the 1878 *History of Jo Daviess County*, noted that the family had “no ray of hope to cheer, but snow drifting over the bleak and houseless prairie; the wind whistling around them, every sound of which seemed like a death knell or wailing requiem.” When Claywell heard the plight of the passengers, he could not allow himself to sleep. He immediately went out to the barn, harnessed his four horses, and proceeded into the merciless nighttime snowstorm.

In time, he found the stranded passengers. Hitching his horses to the coach, he “drew them from their snowbound prison” and forged ahead through the drifts to return to the tavern. There, the frigid passengers found life-saving warmth at a glowing “hospitable fire that snapped and crackled as it sent its cheerful sparks heavenward through the chimney.” The historian surmised, “The joy of that

father's heart and the rapture of that mother's soul can only be imagined."⁷⁷

A Better Winter

Winter traveling was not always such an ordeal. A unique description of the view from the stagecoach window comes from the elegant pen of Charles Fenno Hoffman, an author who traveled the Peoria-to-Galena Trail in 1834-1835. For this trek, Hoffman was riding a four-horse stagecoach sleigh, “a low clumsy pine box on a pair of ox-runners” that glided over the winter snow.



A winter stage from Dalton, Mass., in Alice Morse Earle's *Stagecoach and Tavern Days* (1900)

The stage made an overnight stop at Boyd's Grove in southern Bureau County, where a few log cabins had been constructed. It was the only civilization for many miles. The stagecoach departed the next morning, blessed with good crisp weather and high flat prairie. Along this stretch, the trail featured “not a stick of timber, one broad snow-covered plain, where you could see the dark figure of a wolf for miles off, as it stood in relief against the white unbroken surface.”

The stage trail was at an elevation of not more than 20 feet, but “it commanded a prospect of as many miles. It was like looking from the edge of a snow-covered desert upon a frozen lake.” Hoffman's story demonstrates that stage travel, even in winter, could have its pleasurable moments.⁷⁸

⁷⁷ *History of Jo Daviess County* (1878), 771.

⁷⁸ Hoffman, *A Winter in the Far West*, Vol. 1 (1835), 287-292.

Memories of the winter stagecoach, however, are not usually so pleasant. A few years later, E. B. Washburne was traveling in a frigid winter in a sleigh stagecoach along the same route but going from Princeton to Dad Joe's Grove near modern-day Ohio, Illinois. Washburne, who later became the U.S. Secretary of State (1869) and the U.S. Ambassador to France (1869-1877), was a Harvard-trained lawyer who settled in Galena in 1840 and often needed to travel to Springfield, the state capital. Constantly going through Dixon, he became close friends with Father John Dixon.



Elihu B. Washburne

In an 1874 letter to John Dixon, Washburne recalled, “The piercing wind swept over the long bleak unsettled prairies with a tremendous power. When we at length reached Dad Joe’s log cabin, passengers, driver, and horses had well nigh perished.”⁷⁹

By the arrival of 1840, stagecoach travel was quite common throughout the greater Dixon area. Travelers endured the bumpy rides in summer and winter, through rain and snow, and even through the dark of night.

⁷⁹ John Dixon and E. B. Washburne, “Letter of E. B. Washburne to John Dixon,” *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society* (July 1913), 221.

Chapter Four

Stagecoach Specs

Before our story steps into the decade of the 1840s, it would be helpful to take a closer look at the details of stage travel. What were these stagecoaches like? How fast did they go? How much was stagecoach fare? What was it like to enter a stagecoach station? Where were the specific stagecoach stops in the area?

Stagecoaches of the mid 1800s looked much like they do in the movies. The driver directed the horses with reins and a whip as he sat atop the front of the coach. Depending on its size, the typical four-horse coach would generally carry up to six passengers, but larger six-horse models could seat up to 12 or more. Baggage was usually strapped to its flat roof or secured in the back.

In the 1820s, it's likely that the northern Illinois coaches were relatively basic, lacking additional features and elements of luxury. But by the late 1830s, as the stagecoach companies grew with increased demand, the degree of luxury and refinements increased.

Finding Light and Warmth

The frequent overnight stagecoach routes raise the question, "How could they see in the darkness?" The answer is "stage-lamps." These mounted lanterns held lighted wicks that acted like headlights, illuminating the paths for a stage's frequent night-time travel.

The author Charles Fenno Hoffman, who traveled the Galena Trail in 1834, described his stagecoach's night arrival into a Cleveland



A stagecoach lamp

station. He said, “The light of the stage-lamps (were) the only ones, by the by, which shone through the sleeping city.”⁸⁰

Hoffman mentioned cushioned seats along with another coach accessory that made cold winter travel a little more tolerable for older ladies. “Some heated stones (were) brought from the house and placed beneath her feet just as we started. No grandmother could sit more comfortably in her cushioned pew in old Trinity.”⁸¹

The Red and Yellow Concords

I tend to think of stagecoaches as colorless conveyances, probably because of their appearance in the old black-and-white westerns. But, in the 1914 *History of Lee County*, Mrs. James Shaw recalled “the old red and yellow stagecoaches” that would travel on the old Chicago road past her home near Lee Center. For me, her description transformed my mental image of the stagecoach into a world of vibrant color.

“They were of the old Concord type, rounding up front and rear,” she added. Their design provided some shock absorption “because they rested on leather springs, layered together in fourteen layers.”⁸² These “leather springs” were essentially long leather straps suspended under the coach from front to back. When the stagecoach hit a rock or a hole, the coach would bounce on the straps, thus avoiding hard jolts for the passengers and the horses.

⁸⁰ Hoffman, *A Winter in the Far West*, Vol. 1 (1835), 88.

⁸¹ Hoffman, *A Winter in the Far West*, Vol. 1 (1835), 257.

⁸² Stevens, *History of Lee County* (1914), 377.

The Concord model, made by the Abbott, Downing Company of Concord, New Hampshire, became a national phenomenon. When mass production began in 1827, the Concord's front wheels were 40 inches high, while the back wheels were 60 inches high (5').



A classic red-and-yellow Concord stagecoach. Note the leather straps that served as shock absorbers.

While the Concord model certainly became common, stagecoaches came in different models, sizes, and with varying “horse power.” The early St. Louis-to-Galena stage in 1830 was a “two-horse stage.” Later, this coach was “drawn by four stout horses.” As the number of travelers increased, the larger four-horse coaches became standard, sometimes extending to six horses or more.⁸³

The 1878 *History of Carroll County* said, “When the first ‘stage coach and four’ made its appearance in Mount Carroll, it was made an occasion of general rejoicing. The people went wild with enthusiasm, and the old ‘Concord’ was received with ... much glee and good feeling.” This occurred in 1846 when the stage stop changed from Cherry Grove to Mt. Carroll.⁸⁴

Carrying a Rail

Stagecoach passengers were occasionally required to “carry a rail.” These rails were like 8-foot 2x4s, probably stored on the top rack, and used when the stagecoach got stuck. For example, the 1892 Lee

⁸³ Bradsby, *History of Bureau County* (1885), 175, 271.

⁸⁴ *History of Carroll County* (1878), 336-337.

County history explained that the Chicago-to-Galena stagecoach weighed “3300 pounds, and when weighted down with prairie mud and passengers, probably amounted to several pounds more.” Passengers “had to carry a rail half the time ... to pry the stage out of the sloughs it had to pass.”⁸⁵

E. B. Washburne, in his 1874 letter to John Dixon, while speaking of “those dreadful stage rides,” cited an old saying that stagecoach “passengers walked and carried fence rails.”⁸⁶ The saying was clearly an exaggeration, but it conveyed an occasional reality of stage travel on roads that were distinguished only by two ruts on the ground—no paving, no gravel, no flat 8-foot-wide pathway. While splashing through creeks and streams and heavy rain, stagecoaches were certainly prone to getting “stuck in the mud.” Also, when failing to conquer stumps, fallen trees, bulging tree roots, holes, and rocky terrain, the coach would need to be pried free by a rail. The prying would be performed by the passengers while the driver directed the horses.

Dixon Judge John Crabtree recalled arriving in the area by stagecoach in 1848. “He had heard of a man who had heard of a man who had ridden in these stages and didn’t understand at first why they had first, second, and third class tickets. When they came to a place where they were stuck in mud, he learned the reason. The driver’s orders were: ‘First class passengers keep your seats. Second class, get out and walk. Third class, get a rail and pry the stage out of the mud.’”⁸⁷

⁸⁵ *Portrait and Biographical Record of Lee County* (1892), 404-405.

⁸⁶ John Dixon and E. B. Washburne, “Letter of E. B. Washburne to John Dixon,” *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society* (July 1913), 220.

⁸⁷ *Biographies of the Citizens of Lee County*, Book 2, Vol. 1 (2004), 91.

Riding Shotgun

As a child, I often would try to beat my brothers to sit in the front car seat next to my dad, declaring, “I got shotgun!” I didn’t realize that the saying originates with the stagecoach era. “Riding shotgun”



Luggage, strongboxes, and other valuable items would be stored on top of the stagecoach, right behind the driver, or in the back.

was a phrase used to describe the guard who rides next to the stagecoach driver. The guard was typically armed with a shotgun to defend the stage from bandits or hostile Indians.⁸⁸

In the 1820s and 1830s, the only land office for all of northwestern Illinois was in Galena. But in 1840 the land office moved to Dixon, a more central location. At the land office, settlers would plunk down their money to purchase their land claims. Soon, this large sum of accumulated cash would need to be transported to a larger and more secure federal office or bank.

Thus, stagecoaches, besides transporting valued luggage and U.S. mail, often carried land office money in a strongbox. Bandits, watching closely the movement of these strongboxes, would then plot to ambush the stagecoach. The guard who rode shotgun was the stagecoach’s primary protection against these wily outlaws.

⁸⁸ “Riding Shotgun,” Wikipedia.org.

When the coach lacked a strongbox of valuables, a guard was not needed, and the “shotgun” seat was available. C. F. Hoffman once availed himself of this treasured opportunity. “I climbed to the coachman’s box and took the traveller’s favourite seat by his side.”⁸⁹

This “preferred seat of male passengers” could be reserved, but permission to sit there could be revoked by the all-powerful stage driver who needed to maintain total control over his vehicle.⁹⁰

“A Man of Consequence”

The power and prestige of these stage drivers became well known wherever they went. Throughout northwestern Illinois, everyone who lived around the stage stations knew the driver by name, and they knew when to expect him to bring the stagecoach rumbling into town. As I read through all these county histories of our area, I was surprised how the names of the stage drivers were so well known.

The driver was sometimes called “the whip,” because of his signature whip and his acute control over all things related to the stagecoach. It’s possible that the political position known as “the whip” was taken from the stage driver, who knew how to motivate his team of horses to move in a unified direction.

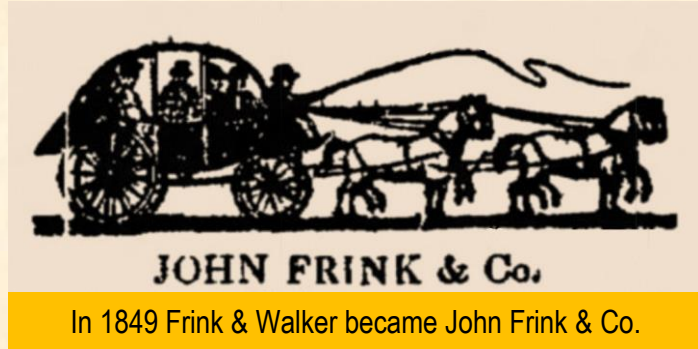
“The stage driver was a man of consequence in the community, and he never omitted an opportunity to impress this fact upon all with whom he came in contact,” said historian Neil Gale. “He carried a trumpet which he loudly blew to announce the arrival of the stage at a tavern, and both arrival and departure were made with his four-

⁸⁹ Hoffman, *A Winter in the Far West* (1835), 88.

⁹⁰ Alton Pryor, “Stagecoach Drivers and Their Whips” www.legendsofamerica.com/we-stagecoachdriverwhips.

horse team lashed into a run.”⁹¹ Royal Way, another historian, said the stage driver “was a marvelous expert in handling the reins, the whip, and several brands of profanity.”⁹²

Worcester A. Dickerman recalled the glory of the stage drivers in Rockford in 1844. “Before going down on Main Street we hear the stage-driver’s horn. Frink, Walker & Co.’s tri-weekly mail stage is coming in from Galena. See that skilled driver cracking his long whip over his horses! How beautifully he drives down State Street! He is the admiration of all the boys, as he reins up his prancing horses at the Winnebago House.”⁹³



The Sounding of the Stage Horn

Local histories from the 1800s often mentioned “the stage horn.” These accounts, like Neil Gale’s (above), indicate that this horn was a trumpet or bugle that the driver would blow. But it appears that the driver had one horn signal for arrival and another for departures. Gale added that the driver “blew a horn gaily when the stage was pulling out, and played a fanfare on its arrival to notify the idlers that the stage was in with the mail and passengers.”⁹⁴

⁹¹ Gale, “Stagecoach Travel in Early Chicago and Illinois” (Nov. 21, 2019).

⁹² Way, *The Rock River Valley* (1926), 549.

⁹³ Way, *The Rock River Valley* (1926), 489.

⁹⁴ Way, *The Rock River Valley* (1926), 489.

The sounding of the horn was a thrilling and memorable event for the townspeople and for those living around the remote stage stations. In the 1885 Bureau County history, E. Strong Phelps, who settled in Princeton in 1836, recalled how the children in the early days used to run for the stage as soon as the driver sounded his horn. “What shouts and eager faces greeted it as it passed,” he added.⁹⁵ The 1913 *History of Carroll County* added that travelers who were waiting for the coach inside the station also “listened for the toot of the horn.”⁹⁶



A depiction of the arrival of the stagecoach in the 1830s, in Alice Morse Earle's *Stage-Coach and Tavern Days* (1900)

The 1877 Whiteside County history reported a similar reaction, but it described the horn as “the winding of the stage horn.” However the horn was sounded, it “was sure to attract a large number to its stopping place, as it not only always brought a full complement of passengers, but also the mails.”⁹⁷

The horn was not only a signal that the mail had arrived. At Dixon’s Ferry, the sounding of the horn on the north bank of the river signaled John Dixon to arise from slumber and pull the ferry across the river. At an old settlers’ event in Dixon in 1886, the former U.S.

⁹⁵ Bradsby, *History of Bureau County* (1885), 104.

⁹⁶ *History of Carroll County* (1913), 694.

⁹⁷ Bent, *History of Whiteside County* (1877), 115.

Secretary of State E. B. Washburne recalled first coming to Dixon by stagecoach from Galena in 1840.

Washburne said that his coach left Galena at 3 a.m. and arrived at the north bank of the Rock River at 3 a.m. the following morning. That's when the driver would "sound the stage horn loudly to call Father Dixon from his slumbers that we might be ferried over."⁹⁸ After being transported across the Rock River, the passengers would "finally roll out half asleep and half awake at the old stage tavern where we were always welcomed by a genial fire and a warm room."⁹⁹

Bells were another audible accessory on some stages. These, however, were not for people but for horses approaching from the opposite direction. In his stagecoach travels in the 1830s, C. F. Hoffman noted, "The leading horses are often ornamented with a number of bells suspended from ... their collars, originally adopted to warn these lumbering machines of each other's approach, and prevent their being brought up, all standing in the narrow parts of the road."¹⁰⁰

Stagecoach Speed

Many of the books and articles about local history mention the speed of these stagecoaches, but some of the testimony differs widely from others. For example, C. F. Hoffman wrote in 1835 that the stagecoaches "go about twenty miles a day." He later said that, on a rough trail, "We made hardly more than two miles an hour."¹⁰¹ The 1892 Lee County history said that Frink & Walker's 80-mile stage

⁹⁸ "Half Century," *Dixon Evening Telegraph* (Sept. 4, 1886), 1.

⁹⁹ John Dixon and E. B. Washburne, "Letter of E. B. Washburne to John Dixon," *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society* (July 1913), 221.

¹⁰⁰ Hoffman, *A Winter in the Far West* (1835), 43.

¹⁰¹ Hoffman, *A Winter in the Far West* (1835), 43, 224.

journey from Melugin's Grove (Compton) to Chicago took "five to seven days." All three of these statements point to a stagecoach covering only about 10-20 miles a day.¹⁰²

However, Dr. Neil Gale's research, which was quite extensive, said that the Frink & Walker stage would make the Chicago-to-Peoria run (175 miles) in two days. He also said that the Chicago-to-Galena northern route (160 miles), and the southern route (170 miles, presumably through Dixon) would also consume two days. At that rate, the stage could make 80-90 miles a day.¹⁰³

Gale's estimate of 80-90 miles a day matches testimony from the 1881 *History of Lee County*, which said the stage trip from Chicago to Lee Center required "a day and a half."¹⁰⁴ The 1909 *History of Ogle County* cites a similar but slower pace, probably describing the journey from Chicago to the city of Oregon: "The stage coach in good weather and by relays of horses made 60 to 75 miles a day, and the travel, while slow, was in some respects delightful. In times of mud, however, all pleasure vanished and nearly all progress."¹⁰⁵

The best testimony comes from the Springfield newspaper of 1842, which advertises the 250-mile Frink & Walker stage run from Springfield to Galena through Dixon's Ferry. The ad said the stagecoach left Springfield at 4 a.m. on Tuesday, making the full trip in three days. The ad implies that the stage made overnight stops at Peoria and Dixon's Ferry.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰² *Portrait and Biographical Record of Lee County* (1892), 187.

¹⁰³ Gale, "Stagecoach Travel in Early Chicago and Illinois" (Nov. 21, 2019).

¹⁰⁴ *History of Lee County* (1881), 377.

¹⁰⁵ Kauffman, *History of Ogle County* (1909), 646.

¹⁰⁶ *Sangamo Journal* (Nov. 4, 1842), 1.

Doing the math, this coach averaged about 80 miles per day. Springfield to Peoria is about 75 miles; Peoria to Dixon is 90 miles; and Dixon to Galena is 80 miles. This 1842 newspaper advertisement is rather specific, and it is giving real-time information about stage travel during that very week. Plus, it matches with Gale's estimate of 80-90 miles a day. Assuming that the stage endured 16 hours a day on the trail, it would average about 4-5 miles per hour, which is consistent with the above schedule for stage travel in the West of the 1850s.

The idea of "20 miles a day" begs several questions. Was that particular trail more difficult than others, encountering ferries, fords, or hilly terrain? Were they traveling in winter or summer? Was the stage traveling on the primitive trails of 1835 or on the well-worn trails of 1855? How long did they stop at each station? If they stopped to give passengers a full sleep, did they stop for 6 hours or 10 hours? These factors can affect the time schedule significantly.

All the testimonies noted that the stage could be delayed for many hours after encountering the many unforeseen difficulties on the trail. But as a general rule, it seems that 80-90 miles a day is a relatively reliable average for stagecoach travel.

Stagecoach Fares

Determining the cost of a stagecoach trip is also a moving target with several variables. But stage fares are mentioned less frequently in these early histories.

No. 1.] [Sep. 16th, 1858,

OVERLAND MAIL COMPANY.
THROUGH TIME SCHEDULE BETWEEN
ST. LOUIS, MO., MEMPHIS, TENN. } & SAN FRANCISCO, CAL.

GOING WEST. GOING EAST.

LEAVE	DATE	Hour.	Distance of Trip.	Time allowed.	Days of the Week.	LEAVE	DATE	Hour.	Distance of Trip.	Time allowed.	Days of the Week.
St. Louis, Mo. & Memphis, Tenn.	Every Monday & Thursday.	8:00 A.M.	100	10	16	San Francisco, Cal.	Every Monday & Thursday.	8:00 A.M.	100	10	16
F. R. Terminus.	" Monday & Thursday.	6:00 P.M.	100	10	16	Fresno's Ferry.	" Tuesday & Friday.	11:00 A.M.	100	10	16
Springfield.	" Wednesday & Saturday.	7:45 A.M.	143	37 1/2	32	Yanilla.	" Wednesday & Saturday.	6:00 A.M.	82	15	4 1/2
Fayetteville.	" Thursday & Sunday.	10:15 A.M.	100	20 1/2	32	Pl. Tejon, (via Los Angeles).	" Thursday & Sunday.	9:00 A.M.	127	28	4 1/2
Fort Smith, Ark.	" Friday & Monday.	3:30 A.M.	65	17 1/2	32	San Bernardino.	" Friday & Monday.	5:30 P.M.	150	32 1/2	4 1/2
Sherman, Texas.	" Sunday & Wednesday.	12:30 A.M.	205	45	4 1/2	Fort Yuma.	" Sunday & Wednesday.	1:30 P.M.	200	44	4 1/2
Fort Belknap.	" Monday & Thursday.	9:00 A.M.	146 1/2	33 1/2	4 1/2	Gila River, Arizona.	" Monday & Thursday.	7:30 P.M.	135	30	4 1/2
Fort Chaffourn.	" Tuesday & Friday.	3:15 P.M.	126	30 1/2	4 1/2	Pecos.	" Wednesday & Saturday.	3:00 A.M.	141	31 1/2	4 1/2
Pecos River, (via Comanche).	" Thursday & Sunday.	3:45 A.M.	165	36 1/2	4 1/2	Soldier's Farewell.	" Thursday & Sunday.	8:00 P.M.	184 1/2	41	4 1/2
El Paso.	" Saturday & Tuesday.	11:00 A.M.	248 1/2	55 1/2	4 1/2	El Paso, Tex.	" Saturday & Tuesday.	5:30 A.M.	157	33 1/2	4 1/2
Soldier's Farewell.	" Sunday & Wednesday.	8:30 P.M.	150	33 1/2	4 1/2	Pecos River, (via Comanche).	" Monday & Thursday.	12:45 P.M.	249 1/2	55 1/2	4 1/2
Tucson, Arizona.	" Tuesday & Friday.	1:30 P.M.	184 1/2	41	4 1/2	Fort Chaffourn.	" Wednesday & Saturday.	1:15 A.M.	165	36 1/2	4 1/2
Gila River.	" Wednesday & Saturday.	9:00 P.M.	141	31 1/2	4 1/2	Fort Belknap.	" Thursday & Sunday.	7:30 A.M.	136	30 1/2	4 1/2
Fort Yuma, Cal.	" Friday & Monday.	3:00 A.M.	135	30	4 1/2	Sherman.	" Friday & Monday.	4:00 P.M.	146 1/2	32 1/2	4 1/2
San Bernardino.	" Saturday & Tuesday.	11:00 P.M.	200	44	4 1/2	Fort Smith, Ark.	" Sunday & Wednesday.	1:00 P.M.	205	45	4 1/2
Pl. Tejon, (via Los Angeles).	" Monday & Thursday.	7:30 A.M.	150	33 1/2	4 1/2	Fayetteville, Mo.	" Monday & Thursday.	6:15 A.M.	65	17 1/2	3 1/2
Yanilla.	" Tuesday & Friday.	11:30 A.M.	127	28	4 1/2	Springfield.	" Tuesday & Friday.	8:45 A.M.	100	20 1/2	3 1/2
Fresno's Ferry.	" Wednesday & Saturday.	5:30 A.M.	82	15	4 1/2	F. R. Terminus.	" Wednesday & Saturday.	10:30 A.M.	145	31 1/2	3 1/2
San Francisco, Cal.	" Thursday & Sunday.	8:30 A.M.	163	27	6	(Arrive St. Louis, Mo., & Memphis, Tenn.)	" Thursday & Sunday.	1:00 P.M.	10	16	16

This Schedule may not be exact—Superintendents, Agents, Station-men, Conductors, Drivers and all employees are particularly directed to use every possible exertion to get the Stages through in quick time, even though they may be ahead of this time.
If they are behind this time, it will be necessary to urge the animals on to the highest speed that they can go, without injury.
Remember that no allowance is made in the time for ferries, changing teams, &c. It is therefore necessary that each driver increase his speed over the average per hour enough to gain the necessary time for such changing teams, crossing ferries, &c.
Every person in the Company's employ will always bear in mind that each minute of time is of importance. If each driver on the route loses fifteen (15) minutes, it would make a total loss of fifteen and one half (15 1/2) hours, on the best part of a day.
The entire route of every day (24) hours, or more than one day. If each one loses ten (10) minutes it would make a total loss of fifteen and one half (15 1/2) hours, on the best part of a day.
On the contrary, if each driver gains the amount of time, it leaves a margin of time against accidents and extra delays.
All hands will use the great necessity of promptness and dispatch, every minute of time is valuable as the Company are under heavy loads if the mail is behind time.
Conductors must note the hour and date of departure from Stations, the causes of delay, if any, and all particulars. They must also report the same fully to their respective Superintendents.
* The Route marked on the Gila River, is 30 miles west of Sherman, Wash.

JOHN BUTTERFIELD,
Pres't.

This 1858 chart identifies the average miles per hour of each stagecoach run, which was typically 4.5 MPH.

John Dixon's 1828 "Mail Stage" charged an \$11 fare for travel from Galena to Springfield. In 1842, 14 years later, the stage trip from Galena to Springfield was \$13, which computes to 5.4 cents per mile.¹⁰⁷ This matches well with Roger Matile's estimate that typical stagecoach fare in the 1830s and 1840s was five cents per mile.¹⁰⁸ Neil Gale said the fare for the Galena-to-Peoria stage route was \$10 in winter and \$8 in summer, but he doesn't mention the year these rates were charged.¹⁰⁹

The 1878 *History of Jo Daviess County* was rather specific about rates in June of 1840. Frink & Walker's rate for Chicago to Galena was only \$5, while John D. Winters charged \$13 for Chicago to Galena (about 8 cents per mile).¹¹⁰ The difference between Frink & Walker's fare and Winters's fare is significant, but Neil Gale reported that Frink & Walker often conducted fare wars to drive competitors out of business.¹¹¹

In terms of the 1830s economy, stagecoach travel was expensive. If the average laborer made \$10 a month in 1840, such travel would cost more than a month's wages.¹¹² Considering that the government was selling land for \$1.25/acre, a traveler could buy 10 acres of land for the same price as a stagecoach trip from Peoria to Galena.

¹⁰⁷ *Sangamo Journal* (Nov. 4, 1842), 1.

¹⁰⁸ Matile, *By Trace and Trail* (2000), 38.

¹⁰⁹ Gale, "Stagecoach Travel in Early Chicago and Illinois" (Nov. 21, 2019).

¹¹⁰ *History of Jo Daviess County* (1878), 482.

¹¹¹ Gale, "Stagecoach Travel in Early Chicago and Illinois" (Nov. 21, 2019). Matile says Frink's fare wars once cost him \$10,000 a month, in Matile, *By Trace and Trail* (2000), 30.

¹¹² *History of Carroll County* (1913), 705.

The Services of a Stagecoach Station

An essential part of stagecoach travel was the stagecoach station, which was the place where the stagecoach stopped. But it appears that there were two kinds of stations. In one station, sometimes called a “swing station,” the stagecoach stopped for several minutes, long enough to bring in fresh horses and drop off the mail. A full stage station also changed horses and received mail, but the facility was usually a “tavern” that offered sleeping quarters, a warm fire (during winter), and food and drink. Both kinds of stations needed a livery, where horses could be sheltered, fed, and watered.

The old westerns often depicted prostitutes in these taverns, but I found no evidence of prostitution in any of the frontier stage stations of northwestern Illinois. Rather, the ladies of these taverns were usually the station owners’ wives, who were known for their cooking and mending. In general, these women introduced refinements to a rough and uncultivated lifestyle, and they were known to advocate for religion, Christian virtues, schooling, and were often involved in the temperance (anti-alcohol) movement.

Rebecca Dixon, John Dixon’s wife, was a good example of the matron of a stage station who welcomed all into her establishment. Mr. and Mrs. J. T. Little, who knew “Mother Dixon” well, wrote about her in the 1893 *Recollections of the Pioneers of Lee County*.

“No man, however low his instinct, could be in her presence a moment without feeling awed and subdued by her queenly dignity and *perfectly ladylike* presence,” wrote the Littles. “Though a frail, slight woman, probably never weighing more than ninety pounds, ... she neither feared or failed to adhere to her strict temperance principles in the presence of the roughest traveler who asked shelter in her home. If he attempted to bring liquor into the house, she took it

from him, saying simply: ‘This is forbidden here,’ or, ‘We cannot have this,’ and poured it on the ground.”¹¹³

Food and Drink at Stage Stations

One stage driver, traveling north around 1840 with two other drivers on a coach from Peoria, arrived at Princeton where he lamented that he could obtain “not a drop of oh-be-joyful.” After spending a quiet night there, he drove his coach to Dad Joe’s tavern near Ohio. Stopping for breakfast, he was again disappointed that no liquor was served. The other drivers explained that the “strictarians” in these parts were “too religious.”¹¹⁴

Yet, alcohol was likely a common provision in many stage houses. Charles Hoffman described the ambiance at a stage station in Cleveland in 1834, which must have been similar to some stations around Lee County. “The flavour of last night’s potations still hung around the scene . . . and the fragrance of more than one recently smoked cigar stole, charged with the aroma of whiskey, upon the senses.” However, passengers who took advantage of the time to rest—or drink—always needed to be alert for the call of the stage driver that the coach was leaving.¹¹⁵

Passengers at these stations were sometimes starved for a warm meal, which was an expected service. But such expectations were not always fulfilled. Hoffman once arrived quite late at a stage station in Michigan, and the passengers were acutely hungry. Hoffman wrote, “Mine host, who does not seem to be the most accommodating person in the world, has refused to provide supper for myself and

¹¹³ *Recollections of the Pioneers of Lee County* (1893), 269. Italics are original.

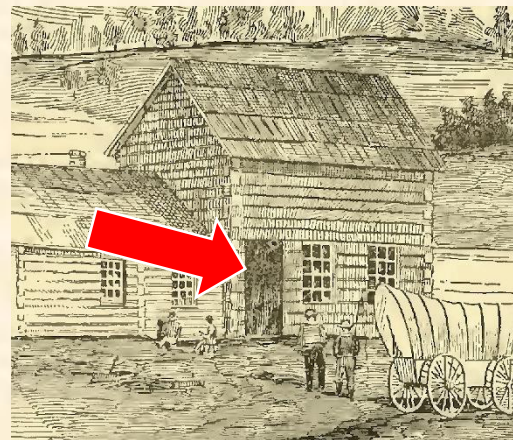
¹¹⁴ *Peoria Register & Northwestern Gazetteer* (July 22, 1842), as cited in *Galena Trail Newsletter* (Aug. 30, 2004).

¹¹⁵ Hoffman, *A Winter in the Far West* (1835), 87, 95.

two other gentlemen at so late an hour, assigning as a reason, that ‘his women are not made of steel.’”¹¹⁶

What kinds of meals were served? Here again, Hoffman’s record provides some rarely mentioned detail. “The usual settlers’ dinner of fried bacon, venison cutlets, hot cakes, and wild honey, with some tolerable tea and Indian sugar (maple syrup), was soon placed before us.” The elements of all these items could be grown or obtained in the immediate area of the station.¹¹⁷ In an 1839 journey from Chicago to Freeport, the stage tavern breakfast for a Mrs. Oscar Taylor consisted of “Rio coffee, fried fat pork, potatoes boiled with their jackets on, with hot saleratus (baking powder) biscuits, the color and odor of which warned us what to expect in flavor.”¹¹⁸

John Dixon’s famous log cabin at Dixon’s Ferry included a trading post and a stage station that offered food and lodging. The first floor of John Dixon’s two-story cabin contained four beds, one in each corner, for travelers and hired help. “The floor was often covered (with sleeping travelers) in both rooms, and the hall filled to overflowing,



with these hastily and easily prepared beds,” said the 1881 Lee County history. “Floor room was not always of sufficient proportion to accommodate the entire party; the remainder encamped all about the premises, there was room enough out doors for all.”¹¹⁹

¹¹⁶ Hoffman, *A Winter in the Far West* (1835), 217.

¹¹⁷ Hoffman, *A Winter in the Far West* (1835), 225-228.

¹¹⁸ Milo M. Quaife, *Chicago Highways Old and New* (Chicago: Keller and Co., 1923), 99.

¹¹⁹ *History of Lee County* (1881), 36.

In Father Dixon's account books from 1830, he charged two men \$1.25 for supper, lodging, and breakfast. The books also contain separate transactions for whiskey, but these purchases appear to be from the trading post section of the same building. It's not known whether Rebecca Dixon knew of or approved such sales.¹²⁰

¹²⁰ "Father" John Dixon's *Account Books* and *The Man Who Lost Everything* (1993), 3-4.

Chapter Five

The Stage Routes and Their Stops

For most of the local stage routes, the local histories commonly identify the specific houses or towns that featured a stage station. In many cases, the stage station was the first structure in a locality, and the town gradually built around the station.

In general, the early stage stations were homes that were expanded to become “taverns.” So, these structures were not only the drop-off point for the U.S. mail, they also accommodated sleeping space for travelers as well as food and drink. Beds were usually provided, but not always. In the earlier stage routes, it was enough for the weary stage passenger to curl up in the corner of a log cabin that provided shelter from the cold.

The 1881 *History of Lee County* noted that early settlers, by necessity, were known for their hospitality to travelers. “Every dwelling house was a place of entertainment, and the hospitable dwellers of the then hastily erected houses, most of which were of logs, were always ready to furnish the weary traveler with the best that the country afforded.”¹²¹ As time marched on, the stage stops became more refined.

So, what follows is my best attempt to identify the specific stops along the various stage routes that emanated from Dixon. The early histories do not identify every stop that was established over this early period. Furthermore, when a certain stop is identified, the history doesn’t always mention *the year* when that stop existed. The stage stations along a given stage route often changed over the years.

¹²¹ *History of Lee County* (1881), 57.

Dixon to Chicago

Today, when going from Dixon to Chicago, a traveler would drive straight east on I-88. But the first stage route to Chicago went southeast out of Dixon along the route now known as U.S. Route 52. This stage route opened on Jan. 1, 1834, following the 1833 surveying work of Joseph Naper, who is credited with founding Naper's Settlement (now Naperville) in 1831. In 1832 Naper served as a captain with the Illinois militia in the Black Hawk War, through which he likely became familiar with Dixon's Ferry and Fort Dixon.

The Inlet Grove Station

In keeping with the general principle of having stage stops every 12-15 miles, the first stop was established at Inlet Grove, about 13 miles past the station at Dixon's Ferry and about a mile past modern-day Lee Center. Adolphus Bliss, seeing "the opportunities afforded by the stage road for making a little ready money by keeping tavern," established the Inlet stage station when he settled there in 1834. At times, Inlet Grove was also known as Bliss's Grove.¹²²

Bliss's station was a "long log cabin" located on the west side of "Inlet creek," which is the same as today's Green River. In that day, however, "Inlet Swamp" encompassed about 30,000 acres all around this area, making stage travel



This map, built on an 1872 map, shows the Inlet Swamp and the three stage stations east of Dixon on the Chicago Road.

¹²² Stevens, *History of Lee County* (1914), 371; *History of Lee County* (1881), 416, 423-424.

difficult at times. As John K. Robison (aka Robinson) reported in his *Early Times at Dixon's Ferry*, "Mail stages were three times submerged and ruined in Inlet." The swamp problem wasn't resolved until 1888 when a major effort was launched to drain the swamp.¹²³

Outside Bliss's cabin, he nailed a sign on a rough board that read "The Travelers Home," etched in irregular lettering. While the cabin served as Bliss's home and a stage station, one room of the tavern was used as a schoolhouse in 1836, which was a common use for these early stage stations.¹²⁴

In 1846, due to the bad reputation incurred by the activity of bandits in Inlet Grove, the village of Lee Center was established just west of Inlet on the Chicago Road. It appears that the Inlet Grove station was soon discontinued, and a new station established in Lee Center. At that point, "Inlet left the map."¹²⁵ For more about the bad reputation of Inlet Grove, see the section in Chapter 6 on "The Banditti and Inlet Grove."

The Melugin's Grove Station

The next stop on the Dixon-to-Chicago route was Melugin's Grove, established by Zechariah Melugin in 1834 as a stage stop. Melugin's Grove was about 10 miles beyond Inlet Grove, an ideal location to change horses, which was done, at some point in time, at John Gilmore's place.¹²⁶ The Gilmore name is still well known in that area.

¹²³ As recorded in Stevens, *History of Lee County* (1914), 371.

¹²⁴ Stevens, *History of Lee County* (1914), 371, 375, 382.

¹²⁵ Stevens, *History of Lee County* (1914), 371, 375.

¹²⁶ Stevens, *History of Lee County* (1914), 376.

Today, Melugin's Grove is now referred to as "The Burg" (about 2 miles north of Compton) and is located along Shaw Road. About a quarter mile east of The Burg, Shaw Road today becomes Chicago Road, which was likely the name of the entire stage trail through all of Lee and DeKalb counties.

Going east, Chicago Road becomes Galena Road near Little Rock in Kendall County, which may reflect the early name of the road from the perspective of the towns closer to Chicago. After all, the Chicago-to-Dixon route was actually the Chicago-to-*Galena* route, and Dixon was just a stop along the way.

The Paw Paw Grove Station

After Melugin's Grove, the next stop was at Paw Paw Grove, known today as Paw Paw. The first stage house/tavern was built on the Chicago road by Isaac or Asahel Balding. It may be hard to imagine today, but there were originally two Paw Paws: West Paw Paw and East Paw Paw. Balding's station was "about midway between the two Paw Paws," but the station was also specifically identified with West Paw Paw.¹²⁷

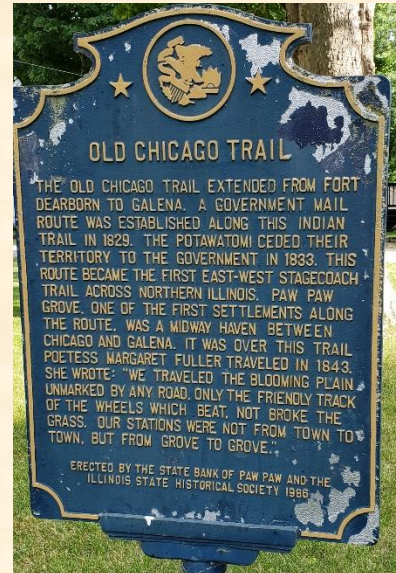
While a few Paw Paw settlers had come and gone before 1834, Paw Paw was more permanently settled in 1834 after the stagecoach road was established. James Goble, my 3x great grandfather, settled in Paw Paw Grove, on June 28, 1837, and built a log cabin there the following year. He lived in this cabin "as happy as could be" until he was elected Lee County sheriff and moved to Dixon in 1848.¹²⁸

¹²⁷ Stevens, *History of Lee County* (1914), 376, 501; *History of Lee County* (1881), 647.

¹²⁸ *History of Lee County* (1881), 191.

The reputation of the Paw Paw stage station became somewhat tainted. Israel Hallock, who settled in Paw Paw around 1840 and was a deacon of the Paw Paw Baptist Church, said that this stage tavern was “a place where blacklegs congregated.” (The term ‘blackleg’ likely refers to a swindler in general or possibly to a swindling gambler.) Hosea Town, a leading early citizen, added that the next three owners of the stage station were “regular bandits.”¹²⁹ For more on the area bandits and the stagecoach, see Chapter 6 and “Stagecoach Bandits.”

Today, road signs in Paw Paw note its inclusion on the “Stagecoach Trail.” On Chicago Road, on the west side of Paw Paw, stands a historical marker with a description of the “Old Chicago Trail.” The marker mentions that poetess Margaret Fuller travelled over this trail in 1843.



Historical marker in Paw Paw

Other Routes to Chicago

This book will only cover the stage stops closest to Dixon. But you can safely assume that the Dixon-to-Chicago route—and all area stage routes—included temporary stops about every 10-15 miles, and an overnight stay about every 80 miles.

It’s worthy to note that one of the stage stations after Lee County was the Pre-Emption House in Naperville, about 45 miles from Paw Paw. Joseph Naper, the surveyor who marked the Dixon-to-Chicago trail in 1834, built the Pre-Emption House as a stage station/tavern in that same year. Even though the original Pre-Emption House was torn down in 1946, its re-created structure stands at Chicago Avenue and Main Street, where it serves as Naper Settlement’s visitor center.

¹²⁹ *History of Lee County* (1881), 647.

The Dixon-to-Chicago stage route also spawned other routes that accommodated other area towns near the trail. For example, in 1836 the U.S. Postal Service sought a mail contractor to take the mail from Dixon's Ferry to Joliet, branching off from the Dixon-to-Chicago trail at some point. This Dixon-to-Joliet stage route was required to leave Dixon every Monday at 6 a.m. and arrive at Joliet by 6 p.m. on the next day.¹³⁰

At some point on the Chicago-to-Dixon trail, another branch was soon developed that went through St. Charles and Sycamore, before crossing the Rock River at Phelps's Ferry in Oregon. This route bypassed Dixon. From Oregon, the route proceeded west to Mount Morris, then to Polo, and on to Galena. The 1909 Ogle County history also mentioned stage stops that were later added at Flagg Centre and Holcomb.¹³¹ At some point on the eastern end of this trail, this through-Oregon route reunited with the Chicago-to-Dixon stagecoach trail.

Dixon to Galena

The Dixon-to-Galena route was probably the earliest stage route in northwestern Illinois, first marked out around 1827 by Oliver Kellogg, John Dixon's brother-in-law. John Dixon and his son, James Dixon, were early drivers on this run around 1828-1831, but John D. Winters of Elizabeth in Jo Daviess County was a dominant stagecoach owner on this line for many of these early years. Isaiah Rucker, who lived at Buffalo Grove, ran the route for Winters from 1834 to 1837.¹³²

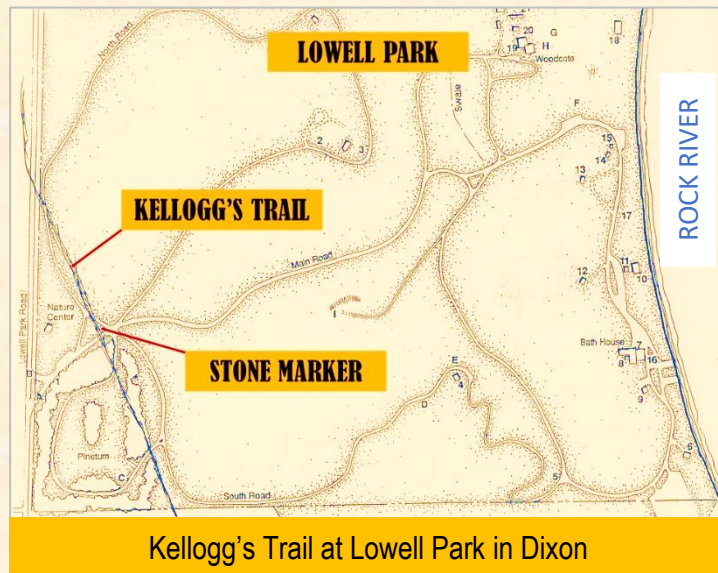
¹³⁰ *Belmont (Wis.) Gazette*, (Nov. 23, 1836).

¹³¹ *History of Ogle County* (1909), 646, 762, 785.

¹³² *History of Ogle County* (1909), 742, 1007.

When Rucker drove the stage on this route, the traveler from Dixon to Galena would stop at Buffalo Grove, (just west of Polo, 12 miles from Dixon), Swaggert's Tavern at Cherry Grove (near Shannon, 18 miles from Buffalo Grove), Oliver Kellogg's place at West Plum River (12 miles from Cherry Grove), Winters' Tavern (at Elizabeth, 12 miles from Plum River), and then at Galena (15 miles from Elizabeth).¹³³

Initially this trail also went through today's Lowell Park, following Kellogg's Trail of 1827. The Lanphier 1941 history of Lowell Park noted that the stagecoach ruts were still visible in the park's Pinetum in 1941, somewhat parallel to the upper part of the Hairpin Road.¹³⁴ A stone marker, placed on the



park's upper plateau, next to the main road down to the river, marks the spot where Kellogg's Trail passed through the park.

The Buffalo Grove Station

The 1909 Ogle County history said that one of the first taverns in the county was in Buffalo Township, “where the relays of horses were kept for the use of the government stage, and the carrying of United

¹³³ “Old Trails in Lee County Illinois,” American History and Genealogy Project, <https://www.ahgp.org/ill/old-trails-lee-county-illinois.html>.

¹³⁴ Lanphier said the ruts belonged to Boles' Trail, describing them as “the physical feature on the (Lowell) land of greatest historical importance.” Beatrice Howell Lanphier, *History of Lowell Park and the Dixon Park System* (1941), 5.

States mail.” In 1909, that site was on the Charles Noble farm.¹³⁵ Travelers today could easily miss Buffalo Grove, but it still exists less than a mile west of Polo.

In 1830 John Ankeny accused Isaac Chambers of jumping his claim at Buffalo Grove. The two then vied for the coveted distinction of being the stage trail tavern at Buffalo Grove. Ultimately Chambers and Ankeny became good friends, but for a time, Buffalo Grove had two “rival roadhouses.” Ankeny’s cabin was on the stage trail on the north side of Buffalo Creek, while Chambers’ cabin was on the same trail on the south side of the creek, only one-half mile southeast of Ankeny.¹³⁶

As noted earlier, Oliver Kellogg’s home was in Buffalo Grove in 1832 when a six-man detail was ambushed by Indians, which halted the movement of all stage and mail traffic for the duration of the war.¹³⁷ William Durley was killed in that ambush, as is described on a well-maintained historical marker there.



Historical marker at Buffalo Grove, one mile west of Polo

This stretch of road, now known as “Galena Trail” Road, has three different historical markers in less than one mile. All of them pertain to the significance of Buffalo Grove along the Peoria-to-Galena stage trail.

Until 1835, Buffalo Grove residents had to travel to Dixon’s Ferry to retrieve their mail. But that winter, a post office was established at

¹³⁵ Kauffman, *History of Ogle County* (1909), 975.

¹³⁶ Kauffman, *History of Ogle County* (1909), 740.

¹³⁷ Matson, *Reminiscences of Bureau County* (1872), 180.

Buffalo Grove, which meant that the stagecoach would deliver mail directly to the new post office there.¹³⁸

In 1837 six government surveyors, on a stagecoach journey from Michigan to Dubuque, crossed the Rock River on John Dixon's ferry and then came to Buffalo Grove. An account of that journey noted that the prairie between Dixon and the grove was "some of the finest prairie from the river to the grove that we saw in the whole of our journey," wrote one of the surveyors.

"Arriving at the grove we found a log tavern and stage station, a small grove of timber very pleasantly situated," said the surveyor, who was probably referring to Chambers' tavern, which was already hosting a stagecoach that was headed to Dixon. The writer added, "A stage load of passengers from each way, together with our six, filled the little town too full for convenience."¹³⁹ Apparently, the town was still so small that the number of people in both stagecoaches rivaled the size of the town itself.

A Rough Ride

The stage route from Dixon's Ferry through Buffalo Grove and Cherry Grove was reasonably smooth, but the northern half to Galena was a different story. E. B. Washburne, reflecting on his stage ride from Galena in 1840, said it was a "particularly hard ride" from Cherry Grove up to Galena. "It was all up and down hill, and the roads were simply horrible," he wrote.

But between Cherry Grove and Buffalo Grove, it was mostly prairie. He added, "For many years after I began travelling over that route,

¹³⁸ Boss, *History of Ogle County* (1859), 54. Boss adds that Rockford did not have a post office in 1835.

¹³⁹ *Bicentennial History of Ogle County* (1976), 103.

there was not a farm or a human inhabitant on that prairie.”¹⁴⁰
Washburne is clearly not including the inhabitants at the stage taverns along the way.

One of the settlers of Buffalo Grove was John W. Frisbee, who taught school in the second story of Isaiah Wilcoxon’s house around 1849. The first floor was used as a post office and a stage station.¹⁴¹ But as time advanced, Buffalo Grove was eclipsed by Polo, which eventually had its own stage station and enjoyed a visit from Abraham Lincoln in 1856.

At some point, probably between 1835 and 1850, the town of Woosung also obtained its own stage station. In 1838 John Peek, the brother-in-law of John Deere (their wives were Lambs), came to Ogle County and first lived in Grand Detour, where he presumably worked for John Deere. But, a few months later, Peek moved to a farm in Woosung township. The 1899 Ogle County history said, “The old Galena and Dixon stage road used to cross the farm.”¹⁴² To this day, Peek Home Road runs right by the old Peek property.

Other Routes to Galena

With the “great migration” that began in 1835, stage stops were established in other towns in northwestern Illinois. As noted earlier, there was a separate stage road running from Chicago to Rockford and then to Galena. For example, the 1878 *History of Jo Daviess County* mentions a stop at Freeport. Shedrach Claywell, a stage driver for John Winters from 1835-1840, was the first to carry mail from

¹⁴⁰ John Dixon and E. B. Washburne, “Letter of E. B. Washburne to John Dixon,” *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society* (July 1913), 222.

¹⁴¹ Kauffman, *History of Ogle County* (1909), 744.

¹⁴² *Biographical Record of Ogle County* (1899), 331; Lee County Historical Society, *Memories of Yesteryear*, Vol. 3 (1996), 21.

Galena to Freeport, “blazing his track with a hatchet to Burr Oak Grove.”¹⁴³

This reference to Burr Oak Grove may refer to a spot halfway between Lena and Winslow, about 17 miles northwest of Freeport. But “Burr Oak Grove” may also be the same as Kellogg’s Grove in Kent Township of Stephenson County, about 15 miles due west of Freeport.¹⁴⁴

Northwest of Freeport, today’s Stagecoach Trail Road is a 40-mile historic route through northern Jo



Today's Stagecoach Trail Road

Daviess County and western Stephenson County. Stagecoach Trail connects Galena and Lena through the communities of Scales Mound, Apple River, Warren, Nora, and Waddams Grove.¹⁴⁵

In 1836 the influx of settlers was the likely reason that prompted the U.S. Postmaster to seek bids for a contractor to carry mail from Dixon’s Ferry to “Savannah” (sic).¹⁴⁶ Assuming that a stage company (John Winters?) won this contract, this route likely used the original Dixon-to-Galena stage route before branching off at some point northwest of the Buffalo Grove station proceeding directly west into

¹⁴³ *History of Jo Daviess County* (1878), 771.

¹⁴⁴ *History of Stephenson County* (1880), 196, 210.

¹⁴⁵ “Stagecoach Trail,” Wikipedia.org.

¹⁴⁶ *Belmont (Wis.) Gazette*, (Nov. 16, 1836).

Savanna. From Savanna, a traveler could catch another stagecoach running north to Galena along the Rock Island-to-Galena trail.

Dixon to Peoria

The Dixon-to-Peoria stage line was equally as old as the Dixon-to-Galena line, since these two segments were originally parts of the longer Peoria-to-Galena trail. Around 1835 when the stagecoach left Dixon's Ferry heading south, it first stopped at Dad Joe's Grove (18 miles), then Henry Thomas's cabin (15 miles), and Boyd's Grove (15 miles).

South of Boyd's Grove, according to one historical account, there were stops at Northampton (aka North Hampton) and at Silliman's tavern on the Illinois River (probably near Mossville), before finally reaching Peoria.¹⁴⁷

Dad Joe's Station

Of special interest for our study is the renowned Dad's Joe's Tavern, the area's earliest stage station that still stands today. It can be seen about 1-3/4-mile northwest of Ohio, Illinois, only 1/2-mile west of Route 26. Local histories are sprinkled with several colorful stories of "Dad Joe," whose real name was Joseph Smith (not the Mormon leader).

¹⁴⁷ "Old Trails in Lee County Illinois," American History and Genealogy Project, <https://www.ahgp.org/ill/old-trails-lee-county-illinois.html>.

Dad Joe came from Kentucky to Fort Clark (Peoria) around 1825. He lived in Galena and Rock Island for a time but eventually settled in the northwest corner of Bureau County. There, in the spring of 1830, he built a cabin on a high elevation near a grove of trees that became known as Dad Joe Grove. At that time, the Kellogg Trail had been beaten down for a few years “by droves of cattle and hogs, with emigrant and mining wagons, as well as a daily mail coach ... which made it one of the great thoroughfares of the west.”¹⁴⁸



But there was a problem. This early trail passed by Red Oak Grove, about three miles west of Dad Joe. So, he staked out a new road that came by his cabin, which he made into “a house of entertainment” for travelers on the Peoria-to-Galena trail.¹⁴⁹

Dad Joe got his name from Joseph Ogee of Ogee’s Ferry fame. Ogee, who spoke broken English, had difficulty distinguishing between Joe and his son, Joseph Smith Jr. So, Ogee called the father “Dad Joe” and the son “Young Joe” or sometimes “Young Dad Joe.”¹⁵⁰

As a stage tavern owner, Dad Joe was a memorable character. Having “a very powerful physical frame,” he was described as a fearless “tower of strength, with a capacity of voice that has never been equaled in this part of the world.”¹⁵¹ The 1881 Lee County history

¹⁴⁸ Matson, *Reminiscences of Bureau County* (1872), 292.

¹⁴⁹ Matson, *Reminiscences of Bureau County* (1872), 260-261.

¹⁵⁰ *History of Bureau County* (1885), 119.

¹⁵¹ *History of Bureau County* (1885), 117.

said that Dad Joe could be heard calling his hogs in the morning from 20 miles away.¹⁵² However, the 1914 Lee County history said he could be heard from 30 miles away.¹⁵³ (Somehow, over those 33 years between the 1881 history and the 1914 history, Dad Joe’s voice became 10 miles louder.)

The early histories always describe him in glowing terms, as a man who had no enemies. “His heart was as kind as his exterior was rough,” said the 1885 Bureau County history. Dad Joe was a “strong temperance man and a good judge of a horse.” He was “never profane in his language” and was known for frequently saying, “God bless you” to all.¹⁵⁴

In 1830 Dad Joe’s cabin was one of very few along the entire length of the Peoria-to-Galena road. “Only six cabins were built along its entire length, and these stood 15 or 20 miles apart, so as to entertain



Dad Joe’s Tavern in 1925 and 2022. The top photo is from the Oct. 1925 issue of the *Journal of the Illinois Historical Society*.

¹⁵² *History of Lee County* (1881), 39.

¹⁵³ Stevens, *History of Lee County* (1914), 353.

¹⁵⁴ *History of Bureau County* (1885), 119.

travelers,” wrote the Bureau County historian. This 15-20-mile interval was useful as suitable stage stations for changing horses.¹⁵⁵

These “six cabins,” identified from north to south, may refer to the cabins of Oliver Kellogg at Kellogg’s Grove, Isaac Chambers at Buffalo Grove, John Dixon at Dixon’s Ferry, Dad Joe, Henry Thomas (4 miles north of modern-day Wyanet), and Charles Boyd at Boyd’s Grove. “Besides these six cabins, no marks of civilization could be seen between Peoria and Galena, and the country through which it passed was still in the possession of Indians.”¹⁵⁶

The Stop at East Grove

The 1881 Lee County history mentioned that the home of Fenwick Anderson at East Grove (just north of the Bureau County line) had also been a stage stop before Anderson bought the place in 1849. This volume said, “This house, a rude log structure, was for a number of years a stage depot on the Galena and Peoria road.”

When was this “rude log structure” built? The local county history books indicate that log cabins were much less likely to be built after the 1830s. Frame houses were deemed less crude and more desirable by the emigration wave of 1835. So, it seems likely that this stage depot was built in the early 1830s.

Since this stop and Dad Joe’s stop must have been within 1-3 miles of each other, it seems unlikely that both places would be stage stops at the same time. Dad Joe moved closer to Princeton in 1836.¹⁵⁷ So,

¹⁵⁵ Matson, *Reminiscences of Bureau County* (1872), 292; cf. Bradsby, *History of Bureau County* (1885), 421.

¹⁵⁶ Matson, *Reminiscences of Bureau County* (1872), 292; cf. Bradsby, *History of Bureau County* (1885), 421. One weakness of identifying these six particular cabins is that it leaves a 34-mile stretch of no cabins between Boyd’s Grove and Peoria.

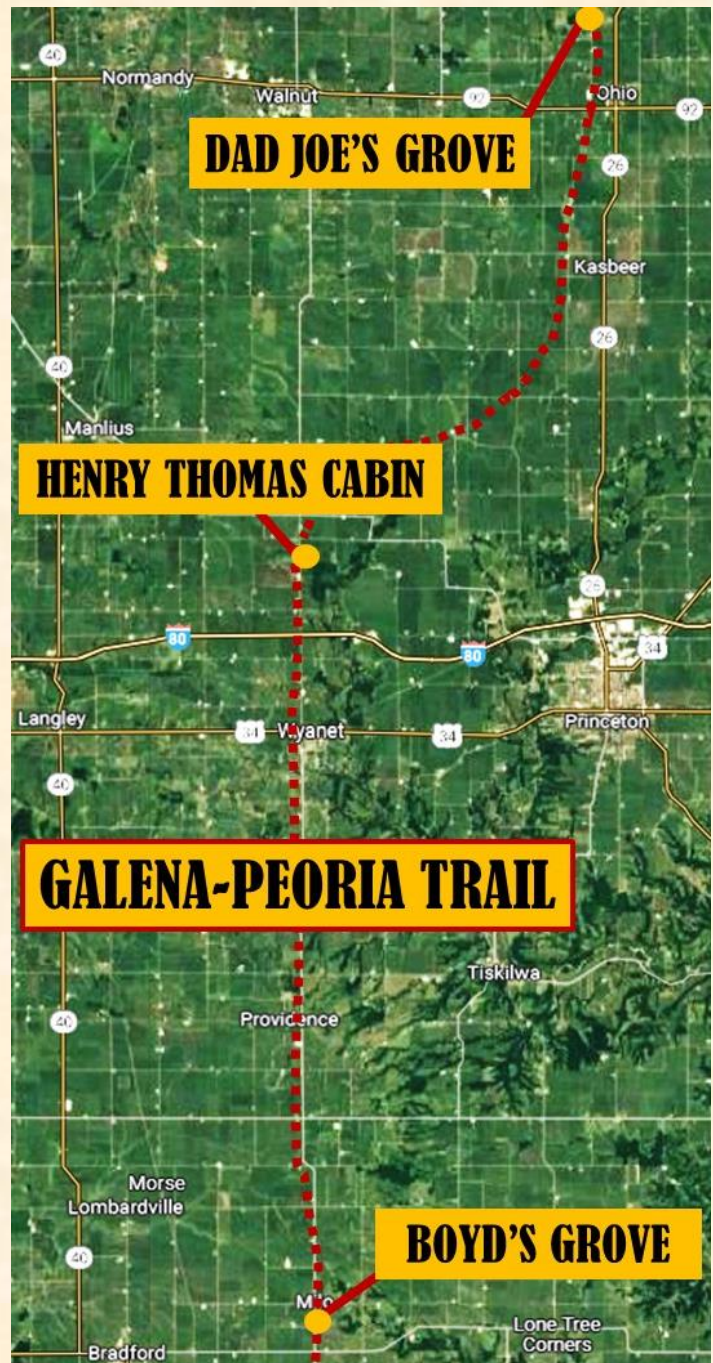
¹⁵⁷ Matson, *Reminiscences of Bureau County* (1872), 261.

“Anderson’s” depot could have replaced Dad Joe’s, or the historian may have confused the Anderson place with Dad Joe’s place.¹⁵⁸

Other Stops to Peoria

Heading south, the next stage stop after Dad Joe’s Grove was the cabin of Henry Thomas four miles north of Wyanet.¹⁵⁹ As is noted on his gravestone at the Corss Cemetery north of Wyanet, Henry Thomas (1800-1843) was the first permanent white settler in Bureau County, on May 4, 1828, and he was also the first postmaster in 1831.

The 1885 Bureau County history reported that, in 1827, Thomas had been “engaged in selecting the most eligible stage route between Peoria and Galena.” Thomas had followed “the route that the two wagons and Boyd’s party had taken from Galena to Peoria, crossing at Dixon and passing along down the timber of Bureau Creek ...” After staking his claim on West



¹⁵⁸ *History of Lee County* (1881), 632; cf. Stevens, *History of Lee County* (1914), 354.

¹⁵⁹ Matson, *Reminiscences of Bureau County* (1872), 247.

Bureau Creek in 1828, his home became a regular stop along the stage route. “Thomas’ house and Boyd’s Grove and Kellogg’s Grove were soon widely known as ‘stage stands,’ and here man and ‘beast’ were entertained with the best the country could then afford.”¹⁶⁰

After the Thomas cabin, the southbound stage would then come to Boyd’s Grove. Charles Fenno Hoffman wrote about his stagecoach journey making an overnight stop at Boyd’s Grove during the winter of 1834-1835. Boyd’s cabin was originally built around 1828 by John Dixon until he relinquished the dwelling to his brother-in-law, Charles Boyd, when Dixon moved to Ogee’s Ferry in 1830. Charles Boyd and “Boyd’s Grove” then became fixtures in Bureau County history until Boyd died in 1881.

The 1872 *Reminiscences of Bureau County* noted that the stage road had a few changes in its early years. Princeton became the county seat in 1837 and was soon preferred to the Henry Thomas site, which attracted few settlers. Similar reasons likely caused the Boyd’s Grove stop to be replaced (or supplemented) by a stop at Tiskilwa.¹⁶¹

Dixon to Peru

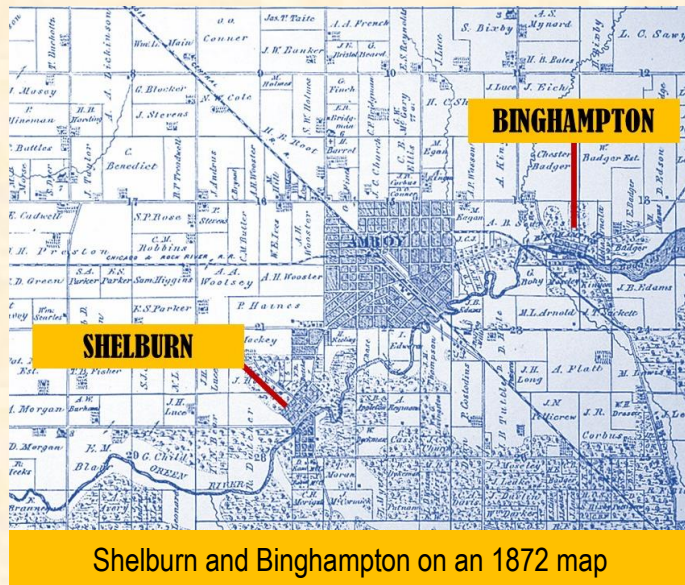
Even though the Dixon-to-Peoria path was the earliest stage route, a second route soon developed from Dixon to Peru. This new 45-mile Peru route provided quicker access to the Illinois River than the 90-mile Peoria route. Instead of traveling 45 miles via a slow, bumpy, and dusty stagecoach, the traveler could float smoothly down (or up by steamboat) the Illinois River to (or from) Peoria.

The Dixon-to-Peru stage route opened new opportunities for stage stations between Dixon and Peru. An ongoing rivalry developed

¹⁶⁰ Bradsby, *History of Bureau County* (1885), 83-84.

¹⁶¹ See Matson, *Reminiscences of Bureau County* (1872), 292.

between Shelburn, which is 1-1/2 miles west of Amboy, and Binghampton, which is 1-1/2 miles east of Amboy.



“When the mail route was changed from Peoria to Peru, Shelburn became the stage headquarters. Two lines were run, one by Frink and Walker and another by Dixon and Andruss. But the Binghamton (sic) people outgeneraled their rivals at every turn and finally secured the stage lines.”¹⁶²

Frank Stevens’s reference to the stage line by Dixon and “Andruss” is a likely reference to the stage line operated by John (or James) Dixon and Leonard Andrus of Grand Detour. (See the Chapter 3 section on “The Dixon & Andrus Stage Line.”) The misspelling of Andrus’s name may be due to another Andruss, an early Amboy merchant who spelled his name with a double ‘s’ but had no involvement in stagecoaches.

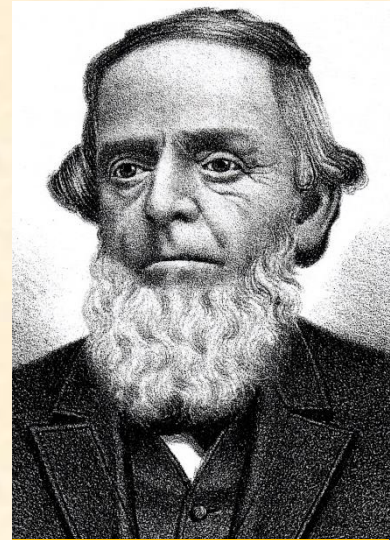
A Common Pathway

Regardless of the Shelburn-Binghampton rivalry, the Dixon-to-Peru stage route became a common pathway for pioneers who came via river from the East in the 1830s, 40s, and 50s. This was true for many Dixon-bound pioneers as well as Ogle County settlers. “The pioneers came here either overland by wagon, on horseback, or by wagon to

¹⁶² Stevens, *History of Lee County* (1914), 277.

Pittsburg (sic), then down the Ohio River and up the Illinois to Peru, thence by stage the remainder of the way.”¹⁶³

Christopher Wadsworth, my 3x great grandfather, would likely have taken this very route in his trek to Dixon from Maryland in 1845. He started his journey by taking the National Road from Frederick, Maryland, to the Ohio River near Pittsburgh where he secured a steamboat heading west down the Ohio. At Cairo, the boat turned up the Mississippi River to just north of St. Louis where he caught the Illinois River to Peru. He and his wife, Matilda, then hauled their belongings and their three children, probably by stagecoach, to their final destination in Grand Detour township.¹⁶⁴ It is unknown whether they used the Dixon ferry or the Grand Detour ferry to cross the Rock River.



Christopher Wadsworth

In 1849 two individuals who were implicated in a Lee County crime were apprehended in Peoria. “They were ironed and placed upon a steamer for Peru, there to take the stage for Dixon.” However, they never made it to the stagecoach at Peru. Shortly after steaming north from Peoria, the two threw themselves overboard as their irons helped to facilitate their suicide by drowning.¹⁶⁵

Dixon to Ottawa

Probably in the mid 1830s a stage route was established from Dixon’s Ferry to Ottawa, which is about 17 miles east of Peru. This 55-mile

¹⁶³ Kauffman, *History of Ogle County* (1909), 645.

¹⁶⁴ *Ogle County Republican* (July 6, 1922), 1.

¹⁶⁵ Stevens, *History of Lee County* (1914), 359.

stagecoach journey offered the same advantage of access to the Illinois River, but it is unknown whether this stage route passed through Peru and turned eastward to Ottawa, or bypassed Peru going directly to Ottawa. Either way, the 1880 *History of Dixon* stated that the Dixon-to-Ottawa route passed through Troy Grove, 15 miles north of Peru.¹⁶⁶

In 1836 the U.S. Postmaster sought bids for a reliable contractor to carry mail from Ottawa to Dixon, leaving Ottawa every Monday at 6 a.m. and arriving at Dixon's Ferry the next day by 11 a.m. As usual, this mail contract was open to stagecoach companies, which may have already been operating between Dixon and Ottawa.¹⁶⁷

Dixon to Rock Island

Although the exact year is unknown, a stagecoach also regularly traveled between Dixon and Rock Island, probably in the 1830s. Like Dixon, Rock Island was an early settlement at a key river location, and both towns filed their original city plat in 1835. At that time, the city was named Stephenson, but it was renamed Rock Island in 1841.¹⁶⁸

The 1877 Whiteside County history noted that the “celebrated Frink & Walker stages” traveled on the Dixon and Rock Island stage road, which was “the first road” between those two frontier settlements. The Whiteside history did not mention the stage stops along this route.

This route likely proceeded directly west from Dixon's south side without using Dixon's ferry. After all, the entirety of Dixon was on

¹⁶⁶ *History of Dixon and Palmyra* (1880), 33.

¹⁶⁷ *Belmont (Wis.) Gazette* (Nov. 30, 1836), 4.

¹⁶⁸ “Rock Island, Illinois,” Wikipedia.org.

the south side in the 1830s; the north side had little or no development. Also, the road from Dixon's south side toward Rock Falls is still called the "Rock Island Road," a name that likely hails back to the stagecoach days.

Rock Falls didn't exist in the 1830s, so the stage route likely continued to Prophetstown, which had been an Indian settlement on the south bank of the Rock River until it was destroyed in the Black Hawk War of 1832. The stage probably crossed the river at Prophetstown where a ferry had been established as early as 1829.¹⁶⁹ That ferry crossed Rock River "a little above Prophetstown," serving the north-south Lewistown (aka "Lewistown") trail that ran from Springfield to Galena.¹⁷⁰

Having crossed Rock River, the stage then continued to Rock Island through other settlements, which were all on the north side of the river.



"This old stage route is now known in our southern townships as the Lyndon and Erie road," said historian Charles Bent in 1877, "and passes by the farms of Solon Stevens, M. M. Potter, J. M. Pratt, Samuel A. Thompson, and those of the Fenton and Peters' estates in

¹⁶⁹ An 1829 map of northwestern Illinois shows a "Ferry & Tavern" at today's Prophetstown location on the Lewistown Trail to Galena. See also *History of Whiteside County* (1877), 477.

¹⁷⁰ *History of Whiteside County* (1877), 58; *History of Carroll County* (1913), 633.

the township of Fenton.” Lyndon, Erie, Fenton, and Rock Island are all on the north side of the Rock.¹⁷¹

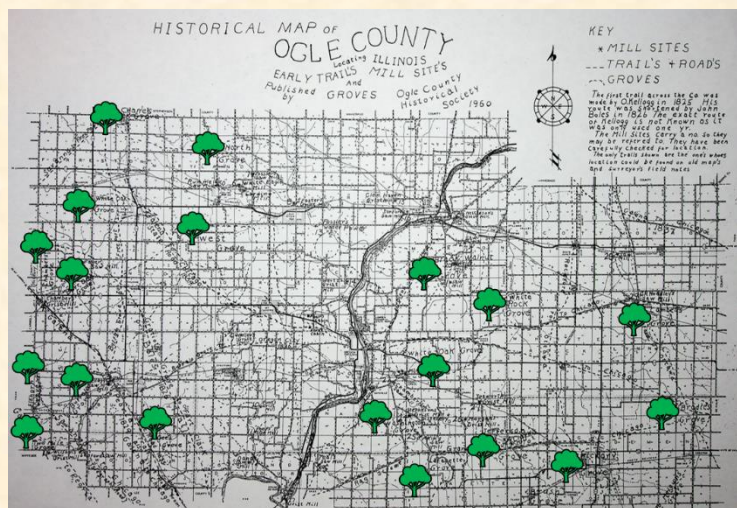
Stage Stations and Groves

On Chicago Road, on the west side of Paw Paw, stands a historical marker about the stagecoach trail that runs through town. It says:

It was over this trail Poetess Margaret Fuller traveled in 1843, she wrote: “We traveled the blooming plain unmarked by any road, only the friendly track of the wheels which beat, not broke the grass. Our stations were not from town to town, but from grove to grove.”

Indeed, the number of local villages that had “Grove” in their name is remarkable, and the stage ran through many of them. The list of local “grove” stage stations includes Melugin’s Grove, Kellogg’s Grove, Dad Joe’s Grove, Boyd’s Grove, Buffalo Grove, Troy Grove, Burr Oak Grove, Inlet Grove, Cherry Grove, Red Oak Grove, Bliss’s Grove, Paw Paw Grove, and probably more.

In addition to these stage stations, the area included many more local “Groves” that were not early stage stations, such as Franklin Grove, Sugar Grove, Gap Grove, and Deer Grove. One map of early Ogle County includes almost 20 named groves, such as Hickory Grove (Rochelle), Burr



Early Ogle County had 19 named groves.
Map by Russell Poole, Ogle County Historical Society, 1960

¹⁷¹ *History of Whiteside County* (1877), 195.

Oak Grove, Crane's Grove, Elkhorn Grove, Washington Grove, Black Walnut Grove, Brodie's Grove, and many more. Even John Dixon, before he moved to Dixon, established "Dixon's Grove," which later became Boyd's Grove.

Why Settle in Groves?

Why did local pioneers settle in groves? The local histories provide a few clues. "Settlements sprang up at first at the crossing of the streams and at beautiful groves," said the 1913 *History of Carroll County*, "as it was then believed people could not live through the winters in the open prairies."¹⁷²

The statement indicates that groves were thought to provide some protection from harsh weather. When John and Elizabeth Roe settled near Daysville in 1836, they built their cabin at the edge of a grove. Elizabeth later wrote that the location "made a nice shade in summer and a good shelter in winter."¹⁷³

Groves also provided some protection from the "autumnal fires" of prairie grass. In these early years, the prairies were not cultivated and transformed into miles of cornfields like today. As Frank Stevens reported in his 1914 *History of Lee County*:

During the fall of the year, after the grass had been killed by frosts, magnificent prairie fires prevailed until snow came; the flames at night, when there were high winds, lighting up the sky with surpassing grandeur, enabling a

¹⁷² *History of Carroll County* (1913), 633. See also *Recollections of the Pioneers of Lee County* (1893), 498.

¹⁷³ Elizabeth A. Roe, *Recollections of Frontier Life* (Rockford: Gazette, 1885), 129.

person to read by the light miles away, and being visible for a distance of nearly one hundred miles.¹⁷⁴

The earlier 1881 Lee County history said that these “prairie fires were the scourge of the settlements” for many years.¹⁷⁵ These fires, often sparked by lightning, could sweep quickly through the tall dry grass, which was “knee-high to a horse everywhere.”¹⁷⁶ While groves were not immune to fires, the large trees would be ignited more slowly than the dry prairie grass, giving the settlers more time to fight the blazes or flee to safety.



Photo by Jon Wadsworth

In the earliest history of the greater Dixon area—written in 1859—Henry Boss wrote, “When settlers first arrived here, there was no underbrush in the groves, as the spring fires always kept it down, and one could see almost as far in the groves as on the prairies.”¹⁷⁷ Today, most of these groves are thick with underbrush, which might seem prohibitive to settlement. But if these groves were as free of underbrush as Boss suggests, settlers would have found these forested areas to be even more appealing for the erection of their first cabins and homesteads.

In addition to protection from weather, groves provided wood for warmth (firewood) and construction of homes, fences, tables, and other basic furniture. The groves were also wildlife habitat for hunting game such as deer and rabbit, and the trees offered the

¹⁷⁴ Stevens, *History of Lee County* (1914), 39, 222.

¹⁷⁵ *History of Lee County* (1881), 246.

¹⁷⁶ Kauffman, *History of Ogle County* (1909), 622.

¹⁷⁷ Boss, *Sketches of the History of Ogle County* (1859), 54.

production of syrup, fruit, and nuts, rich soil for planting, and they were often found near a source of water.

Whatever the reason, early settlers clearly preferred groves of trees. But when Jacob D. Rogers came to the Paw Paw area in 1837, he did something odd. “He was the first to settle out in the prairie, west of the grove, and was ridiculed for it.”¹⁷⁸ Ironically, today, the flat tillable prairie land is highly prized by farmers, and land covered with trees is less desirable, commanding only a fraction of the price-per-acre of farmland. Few today think that homes in the “open prairies” are somehow less survivable.

¹⁷⁸ *History of Lee County* (1881), 649.

Chapter Six

The Stagecoach Routes Inside Dixon

Since this investigation centers on the town of Dixon, let's zoom in to take a closer look at exactly where the stage ran within the town itself. In the early 1830s, when "Dixon's Ferry" had few inhabitants, the stagecoach certainly stopped at John Dixon's trading post (near today's First & Peoria). After all, John Dixon not only ran the stage, he served as the postmaster from 1830 to 1837, which required him to exchange mail with the stagecoach.¹⁷⁹ In addition, his cabin was known to be a lodging place for travelers. So, his "tavern" had to be the first stage station in the fledgling village where coach passengers would rest for the night.¹⁸⁰

But the location of the stage station must have changed in the mid 1830s. Peter McKenney built the Western Hotel on Hennepin Avenue in 1836-1837, the Rock River House on River Road went up later in 1837, and the "famous old Dixon House" was erected around 1840 "on First Street at the southeast corner of the alley between Galena and Hennepin avenues."¹⁸¹ Since John Dixon's rustic log cabin was probably not constructed (by Ogee) specifically for travelers, one of these hotels may have replaced the cabin as the town's main stage station.¹⁸²

The Nachusa House also became a stage stop, but it didn't enter the picture for several more years. Construction of the Nachusa House began in 1838, but due to the recession of 1837 and funding delays, it

¹⁷⁹ Stevens, *History of Lee County* (1914), 42.

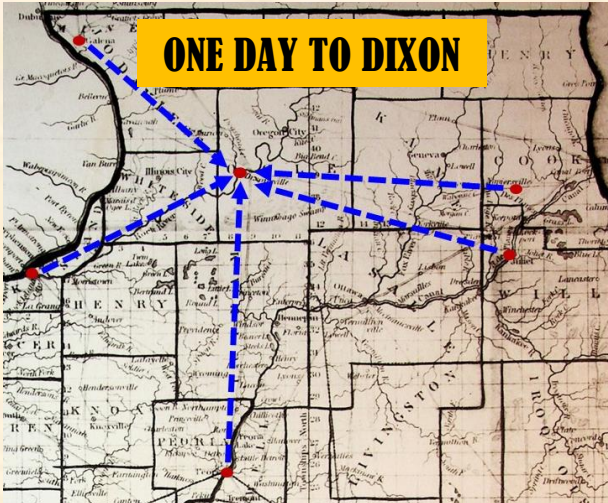
¹⁸⁰ *History of Dixon and Palmyra* (1880), 27.

¹⁸¹ Stevens, *History of Lee County* (1914), 336.

¹⁸² *History of Dixon and Palmyra* (1880), 5; *History of Lee County* (1881), 63.

wasn't finished until 1853. It then became "primarily a stopover on the stagecoach routes from Chicago to Galena, and Peoria."¹⁸³

It is remarkable that three of Dixon's earliest buildings were hotels. Even in the 1830s, stagecoaches were streaming into Dixon's Ferry



Dixon was a full day's stage trip from five key locations, making it an ideal site for hotels.

from every direction: Rock Island, Galena, Grand Detour, Chicago, Ottawa, Peru, and Peoria. Most of these coaches needed to stop in Dixon to wait their turn to cross the river by ferry. In addition, since Dixon was a full-day's stage ride (80-90 miles) from Galena, Peoria, Rock Island, Naperville, and Juliet (Joliet), Dixon hotels were an ideal place to bed down for the

night before continuing a journey to any of these cities. So, it makes sense that the hotel business would be so prominent in Dixon's first decade.

Saturdays at the Hole-in-the-Wall

When the stagecoach brought the mail to town, area residents would come into town at Dixon's Ferry to pick up their mail and chat with other locals. One old-timer from the Palmyra/Gap Grove area recalled such gatherings when Frink & Walker's stagecoach would arrive in Dixon on Saturdays with its weekly mail delivery from the East.

"All who expected letters went to Dixon that day for the mail: first to the post office and then to the hole-in-the-wall, a log saloon ..."

¹⁸³ "Nachusa House," Wikipedia.org.

Every one was called on to drink ... Any excuse was sufficient to call for a drink and to refuse was to give mortal offense; there were very few scruples to a dram in that day.”¹⁸⁴

The “hole-in-the-wall saloon” was “a little building near the ferry.”¹⁸⁵ E. B. Washburne’s 1874 letter to John Dixon recalled a stage ride to Dixon from Galena, probably in 1840. Washburne said there was only one house on the north side of the river at that time. His coach waited there until the ferry could take them to the south side, where they would be welcomed at “the old stage tavern.”¹⁸⁶

This “old stage tavern” of 1840 may have been the “hole-in-the-wall” saloon, one of the hotels, or John Dixon’s tavern. Even though John—and especially Rebecca—would not have approved of drinking at their establishment, they had moved south of town around 1836, and their tavern was then managed by Horace Thompson and Peter McKenney.¹⁸⁷ The Dixon cabin and tavern were torn down in 1845.

The Route on Dixon’s North Side

Stevens’s 1914 history provides helpful clues to the route of the stagecoach on the north side of the river. Stevens referred to the sketch of John Dixon’s cabin, describing the stage route path around Fort Dixon (on the north side). After the northbound stagecoach crossed the river by ferry, the stage road to Galena “ran to the westward along this south embankment (around the fort) and between (the fort) and the river. Then it turned at the southwest

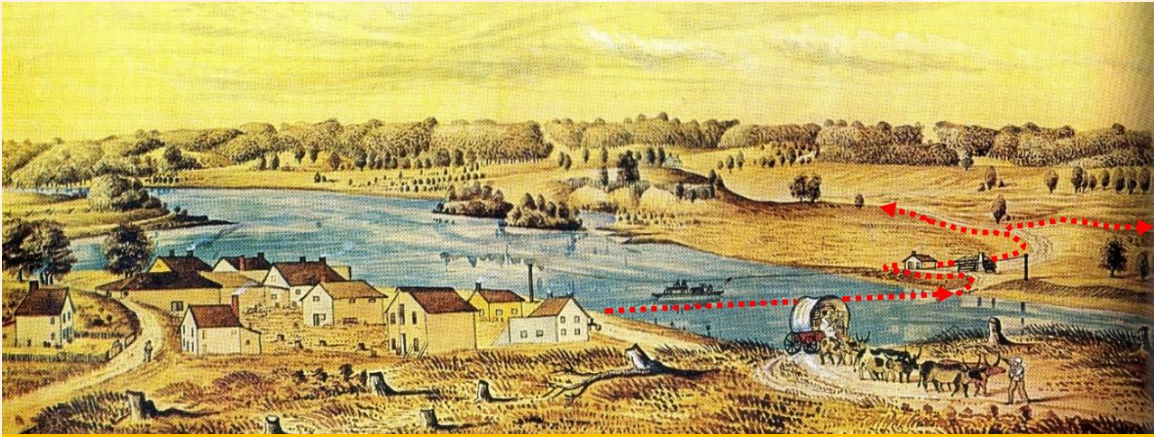
¹⁸⁴ *Recollections of the Pioneers of Lee County* (1893), 487-488.

¹⁸⁵ *History of Dixon and Palmyra* (1880), 69.

¹⁸⁶ John Dixon and E. B. Washburne, “Letter of E. B. Washburne to John Dixon,” *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society* (July 1913), 221.

¹⁸⁷ Stevens, *History of Lee County* (1914), 334, 336; *History of Dixon and Palmyra* (1880), 5.

corner of the embankment and traversed a northwesterly course” to Galena, he said.¹⁸⁸



This painting of Dixon by Henry F. Ainslie in 1842 is held by the Chicago Historical Society and appears in David Lavender, *The American Heritage History of the Great West* (1982), 194. The red dotted line shows the apparent path of the trail.

This route seemed strange until I noted that Henry F. Ainslie’s 1842 painting of Dixon (above) traces that road almost exactly as Stevens described it. Ainslie’s painting, which should not be assumed to be precise, also shows the northside trail running between the river and Fort Dixon, which stood until 1843. The trail then headed west with a branch that appears to head north. The west trail proceeds behind the bluffs, west of today’s armory, and seems to go up “Lord’s Hill” toward Gap Grove, which was certainly settled by 1842.

So, assuming that today’s Lincoln Statue stands where Fort Dixon stood, the stagecoach would exit the northbound ferry somewhere between Galena Avenue and Ottawa Avenue, immediately turn left, running west along the riverbank until it passed the Fort Dixon grounds. Then the stagecoach would turn right (north) near today’s North Hennepin Avenue and proceed toward Galena. The 1881 Lee County history noted that the stage road then proceeded “through

¹⁸⁸ Stevens, *History of Lee County* (1914), 333.

the opening in the forest on the northwestern hills from the city.”¹⁸⁹
The “opening in the forest” may be the pathway up Lord’s Hill to Gap Grove/Palmyra.

The Routes on Dixon’s South Side

The 1835 surveyor’s plat of Dixon’s Ferry identifies three of the key streets that ran from north to south: Peoria, Galena, and Ottawa streets. It seems likely that these three streets (renamed as avenues in 1891) marked the original stage routes: Dixon to Peoria, Dixon to Galena, and Dixon to Ottawa.

Peoria Street Goes to Peoria

The early Dixon-Peoria stage route essentially commenced at John Dixon’s cabin, which stood “directly across the old trail from Peoria, now Peoria avenue.”¹⁹⁰ When the stagecoach from Galena emerged from its ferry ride across the river, it came directly to Dixon’s cabin, where the coach dropped off the mail to postmaster John Dixon.

From this historic cabin, the stage likely proceeded straight south out of Dixon on Peoria Street. The trail likely did not angle toward Galena Avenue as it does today at West 10th Street, nor was its original path blocked by the railroad, which wasn’t built until 1854-1855.

Today, south of Dixon, the continuation of Peoria Avenue is Dutch Road, which has segments that are called “Peoria Road,” including where it runs past Dad Joe’s Tavern near Ohio. In several places south of Dixon, signs on this road today also identify it as “Coach

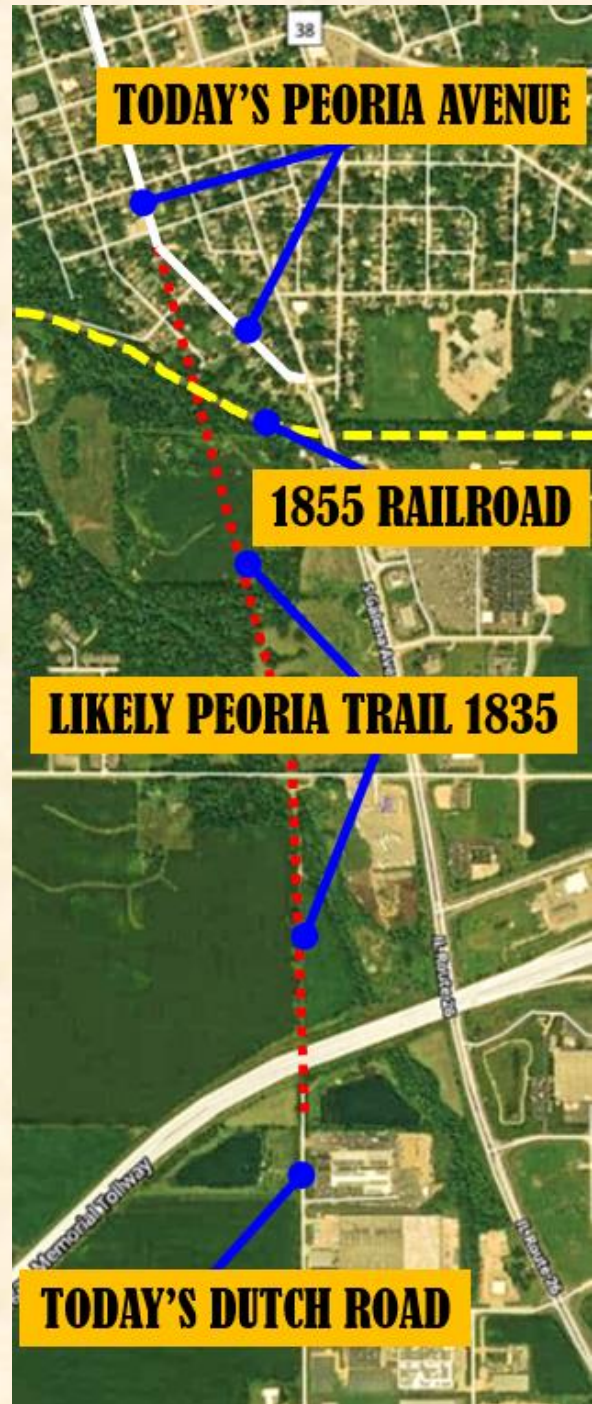
¹⁸⁹ *History of Lee County* (1881), 176.

¹⁹⁰ Stevens, *History of Lee County* (1914), 334.

Road” or the “Galena Trail and Coach Road.” But it all starts on Peoria Avenue in Dixon.

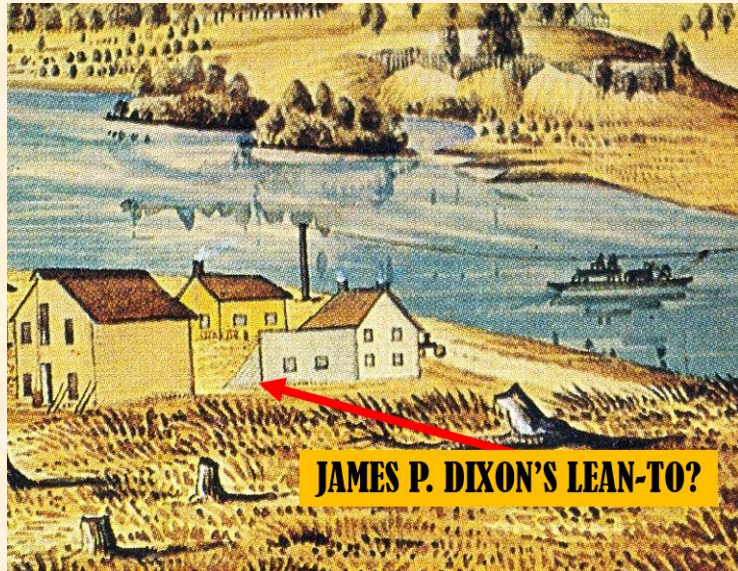
Today’s signs for the Galena Trail and Coach Road follow an odd path from Dixon to Peoria. This trail’s path starts at River Road and South Hennepin, heading south toward Peoria. However, the path inexplicably turns west on West First Street, heading west toward Rock Falls. The path continues almost a full mile west before it finally turns south on Lincoln Avenue, which turns into Pump Factory Road south of Dixon. This purported path continues 17 miles south of Dixon on Pump Factory Road before turning east on Easy Road. After proceeding east for 1.5 miles, the path finally turns south and reconnects with Peoria Road.

In my opinion, the 1835 stagecoach trail to Peoria did not turn west out of Dixon (where no one lived) and never went down Pump Factory Road. It doesn’t make sense for a slow-moving stagecoach to travel a mile out of its way when a direct southbound path was likely available. It seems more likely that Dixon’s Peoria Street of 1835 went directly south toward Peoria out of Dixon and connected with the “Peoria Road” that runs by Dad Joe’s Tavern, just northwest of Ohio.



Ottawa Street Goes to Ottawa

In 1834 James P. Dixon built a log cabin on the south side of First Street, positioned between Galena and Ottawa Streets. On the side of this structure, Dixon added a lean-to about 10' by 10' that was used as a post office where area residents could walk up and collect their mail.¹⁹¹



It is noteworthy that Ainslie's 1842 painting includes a lean-to in this very area. (See page 85 for the full painting.)

As has been noted, James P. Dixon had served as a stage driver and agent for many years, and he later ran a livery business close by, near the base of Hennepin Avenue at River Street.¹⁹² His involvement as postmaster and livery owner were closely connected to the operation of a stage business. It seems highly likely that the stagecoach regularly stopped at Dixon's home and post office. The Dixon-to-Ottawa stage route likely then continued southbound on Ottawa Street (as it was known prior to 1891) to Ottawa, which was a key Illinois city in the early 1830s. In other words, Dixon's Ottawa Street may have been so named because of the Dixon-Ottawa stage route.

Ottawa, the county seat of LaSalle County, was laid out in 1830, the same year that John Dixon arrived at Ogee's Ferry. In 1835 Ottawa's population had already sprouted to 4,754, likely because of its

¹⁹¹ Stevens, *History of Lee County* (1914), 244-245, 334; *History of Lee County* (1881), 56; *Recollections of the Pioneers of Lee County* (1893), 332.

¹⁹² *History of Lee County* (1881), 196.

strategic location at the confluence of the Fox and Illinois rivers.¹⁹³ From Ottawa's central location, stagecoach passengers could gain passage on steamboats, and passengers disembarking from the steamboats could continue their journey on stagecoaches trekking into northeastern or northwestern Illinois.¹⁹⁴

The destination of Ottawa already had prominence for people in Chicago as early as 1831, when the Cook County board established its first westward road. "The first stagecoach to run west of Chicago" went to Ottawa. By 1834 Chicago had two stage routes going to Galena, but it had three routes going to Ottawa.¹⁹⁵



In Dixon the southbound Dixon-Ottawa stage route started at its base on Ottawa Street at the river, soon merging with Chicago Road (today's Route 52) at a point near its intersection with Fifth Street (see map above). In other words, the original Chicago Road continued in a straight line from the southeast until it intersected with Ottawa Street just slightly south of Fifth Street. It is likely that Chicago Road also got its name from the Dixon-Chicago stage route that opened in 1834. The Dixon-Ottawa stagecoach likely stayed on

¹⁹³ *Illinois in 1837 & 8* (1838), 49.

¹⁹⁴ By the mid 1830s there were about 300 steamboats providing transportation on the Mississippi River and its tributaries, according to *Illinois in 1837 & 8* (1838), 30.

¹⁹⁵ Roger A. Matile, *By Trace and Trail: The Stagecoach Era in Northern Illinois* (Oswego: Oswegoland Heritage Association, 2000), 14-15; Carlton J. Corliss, *Trails to Rails: A Story of Transportation Progress in Illinois* (1937), 20.

Chicago Road until it branched southward toward the Binghampton-Amboy-Shelburn areas, much as Route 52 does today.

It is worth noting that the first bridge across Rock River was built in 1846 at the bottom of Ottawa Street.¹⁹⁶ That first bridge, a toll bridge, washed away with the spring ice, as did several of its successors. Up until 1857, all of Dixon's bridges crossed Rock River at Ottawa, not Galena.¹⁹⁷ The location of these bridges, the site of James P. Dixon's log cabin/post office, and the early renown of the town of Ottawa all added to the prominence of Ottawa Street and the Dixon-Ottawa stage route.

Rock Island Road and Grand Detour Road

Besides Chicago Road, Galena Street, Ottawa Street, and Peoria Street, two other notable streets likely received their names from early stagecoach trails. One is the Rock Island Road, which must have proceeded west out of Dixon, starting from John Dixon's cabin at Peoria and First Street. The point at which this trail left Dixon is not known; the trail may have continued on West First Street or eventually merged with Fourth Street and proceeded out of Dixon as the Rock Island Road does today.

The other stage trail is Grand Detour Road, which today is better known as Illinois Route 2 and as River Road (east of Dixon). As noted in Chapter 3, this stage route was operated by the Dixon & Andrus stage line, which may have started as early as 1837 when Leonard Andrus started his ferry service at Grand Detour. In the 1800s and even as recently as the 1940s, this road from Dixon to Grand Detour was known as "Grand Detour Road."

¹⁹⁶ *History of Dixon and Palmyra* (1880), 9.

¹⁹⁷ *History of Dixon and Palmyra* (1880), 38.

Here again, Ainslie's 1842 painting (see p. 85) may offer insights about this trail. On the right of the painting is a trail that may depict the pathway from Dixon's Ferry to Grand Detour. From that location the trail leads eastward up the hill, which matches well with the location of "KSB hill" today.

Chapter Seven

1840-1850: Stagecoach Wars

After the decade of the 1830s the stage routes expanded and often changed. Some of these changes were due to “machinations of interested parties” and sometimes due to action by the U.S. Postmaster General. In some cases, the selection of stage routes and/or stage stations was influenced by political pressure intended to give advantage to certain people or places.¹⁹⁸

Stage Station Rivalries

On the one hand, when a community lost the status of having a stage station, it could be a devastating blow that led to the extinction of the town. Conversely, gaining a stagecoach station could be a major boon to a town since stagecoach traffic inevitably brought commerce and growth. For example, in 1846 when the new stage station opened in Mount Carroll, “the people went wild with enthusiasm.”¹⁹⁹

Some communities battled for the distinction of having a stage station. George Lamb, a noted Dixon historian of the 1960s and 70s, said that Shelburn (one mile west of Amboy) became the stage stop on the Frink & Walker line in 1842. However, when Binghampton “procured the removal of the post office and later even the diversion of the stagecoach line, open fighting almost took place.”²⁰⁰ Frank

¹⁹⁸ Stevens, *History of Lee County* (1914), 401.

¹⁹⁹ *History of Carroll County* (1878), 336-337.

²⁰⁰ George Lamb, *Historical Reminiscences* (1970).

Stevens recorded that it was 1850 when Binghamton “secured from Shelburn the stage headquarters and the post office.”²⁰¹

The rivalry between the two communities eventually died in 1855. That’s when the Illinois Central chose Amboy as the site for its railroad headquarters. As Stevens said, “When the Illinois Central was built, Shelburn and Binghamton (sic) collapsed and became deserted villages.”²⁰²

The Stagecoach and the Underground Railroad

In the 1840s and 1850s, the slavery issue increasingly became a heated national conflict that prompted the so-called underground railroad. Along stagecoach trails, an “underground station” was not literally under the ground, and it was not a stage “station” or a



The Owen Lovejoy home in Princeton, Ill., includes a crawl space where Lovejoy may have hidden escaped slaves.

“railroad.” Even in the greater Lee County area, some local efforts joined a widespread movement to provide safe lodging and passage for runaway slaves from the South to escape to Canada.

For example, Owen Lovejoy, a Congregational minister in Princeton, Illinois, and a friend of Abraham Lincoln, was famously involved in these efforts.

Lovejoy’s 1838 home still stands today in Princeton as a reminder of his ardent support of escaped slaves. In the 1840s and 1850s,

²⁰¹ Stevens, *History of Lee County* (1914), 276.

²⁰² Stevens, *History of Lee County* (1914), 277.

Princeton even became known in abolitionist circles as “the head center of abolitionism for the West.”²⁰³

In 1846 another Congregational minister named John Cross of Lamoille in Lee County “posted bills in Mr. Bliss’s bar room” at his stage station in Inlet Grove. John Cross’s bills (fliers) promoted that he was “keeping a (nearby) underground station for the assistance of negroes into Canada.” His bills were placed “side by side with Frink and Walker’s stage route advertisement.”²⁰⁴

Stage stations were ideal places for posting fliers for the underground railroad. These fliers would be readily seen by stagecoach passengers and area residents who came to the station to pick up mail.

More Coaches, More Runs

As time went on, the stagecoach trails became well worn, resulting in faster and more-reliable stage runs. In the 1840s, the stagecoach companies were not only adding new routes, they were also adding more coaches and making more runs along their regular routes.

For example, on June 17, 1840, Frink & Walker announced that their stage from Chicago to Rockford would complete the route in only one day and would run three times a week. They also dropped their fare to only \$5. This move put pressure on J. D. Winters’ stage company, which was charging \$8 for the shorter route from Rockford to Galena.²⁰⁵

By 1846, these tri-weekly Chicago-to-Galena stages were not only running through Rockford but through Dixon as well. The Frink &

²⁰³ Matson, *Reminiscences of Bureau County* (1872), 364.

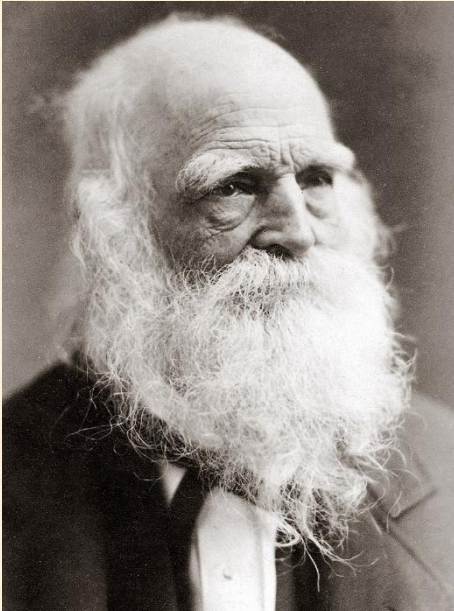
²⁰⁴ *Recollections of the Pioneers of Lee County* (1893), 108; Stevens, *History of Lee County* (1914), 381.

²⁰⁵ *History of Jo Daviess County* (1878), 482.

Walker headquarters in Chicago became a busy hub, as arrivals and departures there numbered eight daily, and each coach reportedly carried an average of 15 passengers (which seems like an unrealistic number).²⁰⁶

More Inexperienced Drivers

The increase in coaches and runs brought an increase in inexperienced drivers. In 1846 the poet William Cullen Bryant was an unhappy passenger subjected to one of these fresh drivers on a stagecoach going from Chicago to Peru. The coach was overloaded with 12 passengers, nine riding within, and three riding on the outside.



William Cullen Bryant, 1794-1878

Coming upon the Illinois canal, south of Joliet, “the blundering driver” attempted to ford the canal but came too close to the foundations of a former bridge. “The coach-wheels on one side rose upon the stones and on the other sank deep into the mud, and we were overturned in an instant,” wrote Bryant. The three exterior passengers “were pitched head-fore-most into the canal,” while the rest were flooded inside the coach. Fortunately, no one was hurt or drowned; the men waded out, and the women were carried out.

At that moment a farm wagon had just forded the canal with no problem. The wagon then took the drenched females to the next farm-house, about a mile away. The men retrieved the baggage, which was completely soaked, and righted the carriage while standing

²⁰⁶ Lee County Historical Society, *Memories of Yesteryear*, Vol. 1 (1993), 3.

waist high in the mud and water. All spent the night drying out and resumed the journey the next day.²⁰⁷

As Many Stage Drivers as Lawyers

Experienced or not, more people found employment as stage drivers. In Lee County the number of stage drivers in 1850 equaled the number of lawyers. According to the 1850 U.S. Census, Lee County had 1,432 males aged 18 and up, and about 1,000 of them were farmers. Of the remaining 400, 10 were stage drivers, 10 were lawyers, 11 were doctors, and 13 were ministers.

The increase in the stagecoaches also meant more stage-related businesses. The same 1850 census counted 11 wagon makers. When settlers had their own wagon, they could conduct their own travel and transport. Lee County also had 42 blacksmiths, an occupation crucial to repairing coaches and shoeing horses.²⁰⁸

Plank Roads: A Failed Solution

In February 1849 the Illinois legislature passed a law for the construction of plank roads around the state, which aided the potential speed of stagecoaches. Single-track plank roads were eight feet wide; double-track roads were 16 feet wide. However, their construction was lacking; the ends of the planks were not “pinned or fastened in any way whatever.”²⁰⁹

²⁰⁷ William Cullen Bryant, “Journey from Detroit to Princeton, July 31, 1846,” in *Letters of a Traveller* (1850).

²⁰⁸ Lee County Historical Society, *Memories of Yesteryear*, Vol. 4 (1996), 12.

²⁰⁹ Way, *The Rock River Valley* (1926), 233.

In northern Illinois, these new wooden roadways began in Chicago and spread north, south, and west. Royal Way, a historian writing in 1926, said, “Freeport, Rockford, and other points in the upper district, were especially active in the extension of plank roads in every direction.”²¹⁰



This plank road near Belleville, Ill., is planked on the right side only.

Warring Stagecoach Companies

Another effect of the increased stagecoach traffic was increased competition between stage lines. When E. B. Washburne wrote his 1874 letter to John Dixon, he said, “You must recollect the sharp competition that was long up between different stage companies in the year 1841, 1842, 1843, as the travel increased between Galena and Chicago.” The fare war between Frink & Walker and J. D. Winters was one example of stagecoach rivalry.²¹¹

As Washburne recalled, Winters “became furious and a stage war was inaugurated which raged with a terrible violence.” People who lived along the stage routes took sides, as those nearer to Galena were mostly on the side of Winters. After all, Winters was “an old settler and had brought their mails to them for so many years.”²¹²

²¹⁰ Way, *The Rock River Valley* (1926), 233.

²¹¹ John Dixon and E. B. Washburne, “Letter of E. B. Washburne to John Dixon,” *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society* (July 1913), 222.

²¹² John Dixon and E. B. Washburne, “Letter of E. B. Washburne to John Dixon,” *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society* (July 1913), 222.

Winters' natural boisterous personality helped to fuel the competitive fire. "(Winters) was impetuous, sometimes violent, very pronounced in his opinions and always expressing himself in language of great vigor," said Washburne. "He was a vehement Democrat and never failed to make known the faith which was within him." On the other hand, Frink was a Whig "but more careful in expressing his opinions and subordinating politics to staging."²¹³

Winters' proud, feisty, and defensive nature revealed itself many years earlier in a confrontation with Dad Joe Smith. In 1833 Winters, Dad Joe, several Peoria County commissioners, and a large crowd had gathered in Peoria to mark the occasion of starting the official survey of the Galena-to-Peoria state road. Dad Joe was one of the commissioners, and J. D. Winters was there because he was operating the stage line on that road.

People were joking and laughing until the topic of conversation turned to "old Pat," Dad Joe's favorite horse for the last 20 years. Winters seemed to take offense at the idea that Dad Joe had an excellent horse, probably because Winters had a full stable of horses for his stage business. So, Winters bet Dad Joe that if Winters could take down Dad Joe, Joe would have to give up old Pat. If Winters couldn't, he'd give Joe the choicest horse in his corral. The jovial Dad Joe laughed and took the bet.

Remember, "Dad Joe was a thick, heavy-set man, of remarkable physical power," said Matson the historian. Winters, however, was "a great champion in wrestling," and at that Peoria event he wore "a pair of fine cloth pantaloons, made tight in accordance with the fashion of the day."

When Dad Joe said he was ready for the contest, Winters rushed at Joe, attempting to knock out his feet from under him. Instead, big

²¹³ John Dixon and E. B. Washburne, "Letter of E. B. Washburne to John Dixon," *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society* (July 1913), 224.

Dad Joe just used his strong arms to raise Winters off the ground and held him there as he kicked and struggled. “At the same time (Winters’) tight pantaloons burst open, exposing his person to the gaze of the laughing crowd.” Winters gave in, begging Joe to let him down. Dad Joe released his hold, and old Pat remained safely in Dad Joe’s care.²¹⁴

Trash Talk

Winters never lost his competitive nature nor his bragging. In the 1840s, when his rivalry with John Frink was reaching a fever pitch, Winters unleashed a barrage of insults against his business opponent. Since Frink came from Massachusetts, Winters openly condemned Frink’s company as “damn Yankees” because of its New England roots. From Winters’ perspective, Frink’s extensions into northwest Illinois were an “invasion by the Yankees.”

At one point, Frink & Walker upgraded their stagecoaches to include a brake for the back wheels. The driver applied this brake by simply pressing a foot plate. Winters, however, “denounced it as a ‘Damn Yankee contrivance,’ saying he wanted nothing to hold his horses back in going down the hill.”

But John Frink wasn’t one to ignore a direct insult. He ridiculed Winters’ “old broken down horses.” The trash talk wasn’t just verbal; it spread into print as handbills and posters appeared in stage houses throughout the area. The intense enmity between the two companies even resulted in “a violent personal assault by Winters” who attacked John Frink in the bar room of the old American House at Galena.²¹⁵

²¹⁴ Matson, *Reminiscences of Bureau County* (1872), 293-294.

²¹⁵ John Dixon and E. B. Washburne, “Letter of E. B. Washburne to John Dixon,” *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society* (July 1913), 223.

The Winner of the Stage Wars

Ultimately, Frink & Walker won the stage wars. In 1844 Frink & Walker had 160 horses on the road between Chicago and Peru alone, “with extra horses always in readiness” to handle an influx of passengers. In addition to Frink & Walker’s superior size, they also had more political and business connections at the state and federal level. To ensure a continuing flow of mail contracts, Frink spent much of his time in Washington, D.C., currying the favor of politicians.²¹⁶

In the 1830s Winters had tried to extend his stage lines to include runs from Chicago to Ottawa and from Galena to St. Louis. But Frink eventually outmaneuvered Winters at almost every turn, winning mail contracts that left Winters out in the cold.²¹⁷

As Chicago grew in size and importance in the 1840s, a business from tiny Elizabeth simply could not compete. Chicago’s population grew sevenfold from 4,400 in 1840 to 30,000 in 1850, while Elizabeth never had more than 800 people, even to this day. For Frink, the larger population meant greater notoriety and better connections with people in power.

Fare reduced & Speed increased.
FROM Springfield to Peoria, Ill., and thence via Peru, Ottawa, Juliet, and Lockport to Chicago; through in three days without riding nights. Fare to Peoria \$4, to Chicago \$12.—Coaches leave daily, except Sunday’s, at 4 o’clock A. M.
Also, from Springfield via Peoria, Knoxville, and Oquaka, Burlington and all parts of Iowa Territory. Coaches leave every Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday, at 4 o’clock, A. M. Through in 2 days, and fare only \$9.
Also, from Springfield via Peoria, and Dixon’s Ferry, to Galena and all parts of Wisconsin Territory. Coaches leave every Tuesday, Thursday, and Saturday at 4 o’clock A. M., through to Galena in 3 days. Fare to Dixon \$9, to Galena \$13.
Books kept at the American House, Springfield, where passengers can secure seats by any of the above lines in first rate (Troy built) 4 horse post coaches, and may rely on finding as good stock and accommodations as can be found in the West,
FRINK, WALKER, & CO.
Agents and Proprietors.
Springfield, July 15, 1842.
N. B. Residents of the city will be called for by leaving directions the evening previous.
1—lv. F. W. & Co.

Frink & Walker frequently advertised their superior services, as in this 1842 ad in the *Illinois State Register*.

²¹⁶ Gale, “Stagecoach Travel in Early Chicago and Illinois” (Nov. 21, 2019).

²¹⁷ “Western Mail Transportation,” *Illinois State Register* (Springfield, Illinois) (June 6, 1850), 2; “Were Pa, Adam, Hoss, and Little Joe from Illinois?” (March 17, 2014) <https://historyonthefox.wordpress.com>.

The Fate of John D. Winters

Finally, in 1848 John D. Winters “gave up, sold out, and moved his family west to California.”²¹⁸ But for someone with such business drive and competitive vitality, he soon generated even greater success in California than he experienced in Illinois.

Having arrived in California when the Gold Rush started, Winters first made a fortune by putting his family and transportation skills to work in hauling supplies to the gold fields. Their freight business soon became known as the Winters Express.

Keeping aware of credible rumors of gold strikes, Winters soon bought an 1/18th share in a new mine called the Ophir, near the California/Nevada state line. That mine became a part of what is now known as the Comstock Lode that eventually generated millions of tons of gold and silver ore. In 1862 Sam Clemens (alias Mark Twain) said, “An eighteenth of the Ophir was a fortune to John D. Winters.”²¹⁹

Winters’ Bonanza

The Winters family became wealthy and prominent in California and Nevada. The remarkable similarities between the Winters’ family and the Cartwrights (Ben, Adam, Hoss, and Little Joe of “Bonanza”

²¹⁸ “Were Pa, Adam, Hoss, and Little Joe from Illinois?” (March 17, 2014), <https://historyonthefox.wordpress.com>.

²¹⁹ “Were Pa, Adam, Hoss, and Little Joe from Illinois?” (March 17, 2014), <https://historyonthefox.wordpress.com>.

fame) have caused many to think that the popular TV show of the 1960s was based on the Winters family.

In an online post in 2017, Jason Hartung, the 3x great grandson of John D. Winters, said, “We have always been told the show was ... inspired by the family’s history.” He added, “The show was shot on the very land the family once owned.”²²⁰



“Bonanza” (1959-1973) was NBC’s longest-running western television series.

Meanwhile, back in Illinois, John Frink & Co. was free to grow and expand with little opposition. He soon expanded his stage lines into Wisconsin, Iowa, Minnesota, Missouri, Michigan, and Indiana. He dominated the stage business so much that the company was occasionally accused of having a “huge monopoly,”²²¹ that generated a whopping \$150,000 per year in mail contracts alone.²²² By 1850, it could be said that “Frink & Walker’s line of stages comprised the only extensive transportation system in Illinois.”²²³

Stagecoach Bandits

Many old Western movies depict attempted stagecoach robberies, with the stage driver cracking his whip to get the horses to run at full speed to elude pursuing bandits as guns are fired by would-be

²²⁰ “Were Pa, Adam, Hoss, and Little Joe from Illinois?” (March 17, 2014), <https://historyonthefox.wordpress.com>.

²²¹ Gale, “Stagecoach Travel in Early Chicago and Illinois” (Nov. 21, 2019).

²²² “Western Mail Transportation,” *Illinois State Register* (Springfield, Illinois) (June 6, 1850), 2.

²²³ Way, *The Rock River Valley* (1926), 234.

robbers and by defenders on the stage. But did bandits target stagecoaches in northwestern Illinois?

“Generally the Galena Trail was a safe road to travel, and I have yet to read of a stagecoach robbery or any significant incidents of crime involving travelers along the Trail,” wrote Patricia Goitein, who has researched and written much about the Galena Stagecoach Trail.²²⁴

Goitein may be right about the Galena-to-Peoria Trail, but area histories provide evidence of a stagecoach robbery or two on other trails in northern Illinois. Additionally, it is known that would-be robbers kept a close eye on the stage station at Dixon in particular.

Why would stage robbers focus on Dixon? Two words: *Land Office*.

The Land Office and the Stagecoach

In 1840 Father John Dixon went to Washington to get the United States Land Office moved from Galena to Dixon. In his visit to the nation’s capital, he met with Gen. Winfield Scott, an old friend from the Black Hawk War who had spent time in the Dixon home. Gen. Scott introduced Dixon to President Van Buren, who then issued the order to move the land office to Dixon. Col. John Dement was appointed the receiver at the Dixon land office, a position he previously held in Galena.²²⁵

Having the federal land office in Dixon was a major boon to the town. The land office meant that anyone who wanted to buy area land from the government had to come to Dixon to render payment. The (substantial) accumulated funds then had to be transported to

²²⁴ Patricia L. Goitein, “Meet Me in Heaven: Confronting Death along the Galena Trail Frontier, 1825-1855,” www.galenatrail.com.

²²⁵ *History of Lee County* (1881), 69, 398; Way, *The Rock River Valley* (1926), 153-154.

the federal treasury bank in St. Louis. The cache of monies first went to Peru and then to St. Louis by boat.²²⁶ In later years, funds from the Dixon land office were sent to Chicago.

The Dixon land office was located on the northwest corner of Ottawa and Second streets, which today is a parking lot next to the Baptist Church. This location was significant in 1840. It was just steps away from James Dixon's home on the southwest corner of Ottawa and First. Since Dixon's place served as the post office, land office funds could be easily and securely placed on the U.S. mail stage.

With so much money being transported so frequently from the Dixon land office, would-be robbers began to see the potential of making a big score at this vulnerable location. In 1840 Dixon's population was only 725, and the land office was probably not as secure as one in a larger city. As William Cullen Bryant wrote when he visited Dixon in 1841, "The thinly settled populations of Illinois were much exposed" to criminal activity.²²⁷

Defeating Dement

In September 1843, one of Frink & Walker's four-horse stagecoaches was robbed while full of passengers. This coach had been to Dixon and was four miles from Rockford, on its way to Chicago. "Without doubt, the robbers were after a large sum of money which was known to have been deposited at the land office at Dixon," said historian Royal B. Way.

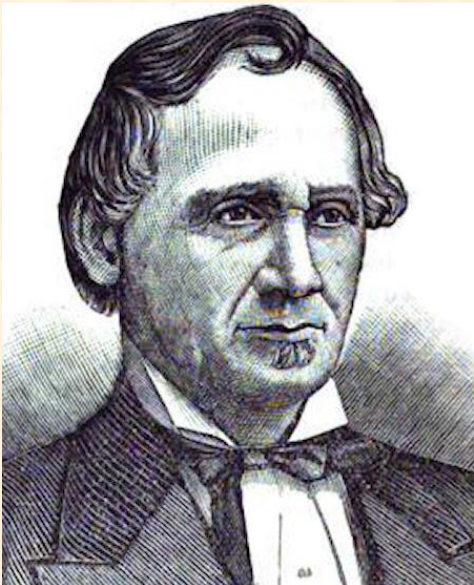
²²⁶ *History of Lee County* (1881), 84; Stevens, *History of Lee County* (1914), 391.

²²⁷ *History of Lee County* (1881), 73, 94; William Cullen Bryant, "An Excursion to Rock River: Princeton, Illinois, June 21, 1841," in *Letters of a Traveller* (1850).

However, the bandits were mistaken; the stolen trunks and baggage belonged to the passengers. The next morning the trunks were discovered near the road, broken open, and their valuable contents gone.²²⁸

Edward Bonney referred to the same heist in his famous 1850 book, *The Banditti of the Prairies*. Bonney wrote: “A plan had long been on foot to rob the Dixon Land Office,” which was to be accomplished by robbing the stagecoach that carried the deposits to Chicago.

Bonney, who had infiltrated the Banditti by posing as a counterfeiter, added, “One of the gang, in order to ascertain the particulars and the



Col. John Dement, 1804-1883

precise time of its removal,” bluntly asked Col. John Dement when he intended to take the funds to Chicago. Dement, however, “being upon his guard, and a prudent man, set the time one week later than he intended to start, and thereby baffled the preconcerted schemes of the robbers.”²²⁹

Stevens’ 1914 *History of Lee County* reported that “many plots” were made to rob Dement’s shipments from the land office, “but none succeeded.”

Dement had the advantage of several years of experience in the Galena land office. “It ever was his habit to study means to thwart the plans of the banditti, and they expressed marvel at the vigilance which could defeat them.”²³⁰

²²⁸ Way, *The Rock River Valley* (1926), 479; Stevens, *History of Lee County* (1914), 372.

²²⁹ Bonney, *The Banditti of the Prairies* (1890), 9.

²³⁰ Stevens, *History of Lee County* (1914), 391.

The Banditti and Inlet Grove

The notorious “Banditti of the Prairie” were active primarily in the 1840s around the Rock River and the upper Mississippi River valleys. Bonney, who worked for months to investigate and trap key leaders of the gang, described the bandits as “reckless and blood-stained men” who pursued “their nefarious and dangerous trade.” Their lawless activities included horse-thieving, a “thousand robberies and scores of murders.”²³¹

Around 1840 “these desperadoes were so numerous as to be able to control elections in (Ogle) county, and often procured some of their own number to sit on juries, by which means they were acquitted of all charges.” This gang of villains even burned down the new courthouse and murdered John Campbell, who had opposed the gang.²³²

The banditti were also known to have infiltrated the stage station at Lee County’s Inlet Grove, where Adolphus and Hannah Bliss had operated the stage station since 1834. In that area, Daniel Miller Dewey had been elected magistrate (judge), and Charles West was elected constable (the sole police officer), each receiving 17 votes. It appeared that Bliss, Dewey, and West developed something of a partnership in devious activities. In time, this suspicious alliance came to be known as “Bliss, Dewey, West & Co.”²³³

The alliance was perfect for plotting, conducting, and covering up criminal activity. At the stage station, Bliss could pick up rumors of area residents or travelers who had an attractive stash of money. From thence, the crime could be plotted and carried out.

²³¹ Bonney, *The Banditti of the Prairies* (1890), 7-8.

²³² Boss, *History of Ogle County* (1859), 57-59.

²³³ Stevens, *History of Lee County* (1914), 372, cf. 56.

As historian Frank Stevens described it, “If (Judge) Dewey issued a writ against a member of the gang, Constable West never was able to find the offender. But he always provided himself with a very large supply of information as to the point in Iowa, Wisconsin, or Indiana the culprit had fled.”²³⁴

Vigilante Justice

In 1844 concerned citizens around Inlet Grove were furious about the dominance of the banditti in the area. A large group of citizens met and drafted a document

“Inlet Grove has been a resting-place and depot for the numerous rogues that infest the country.”

establishing “An Association for Furthering the Cause of Justice.” Their charter said, “Inlet Grove has been a resting-place and depot for the numerous rogues that infest the country.” All these citizens vowed to report any and all hints of criminal activity. The association’s actions might have been considered “vigilante justice,” but at the time, the banditti problem had struck terror throughout Lee County and beyond.²³⁵

In the end, the outrage of the Inlet Grove community proved to be effective. Charles West was arrested and agreed to disclose the members of the banditti in exchange for a lesser sentence. His confession and disclosure led to several searches and arrests, and considerable stolen property was recovered.²³⁶

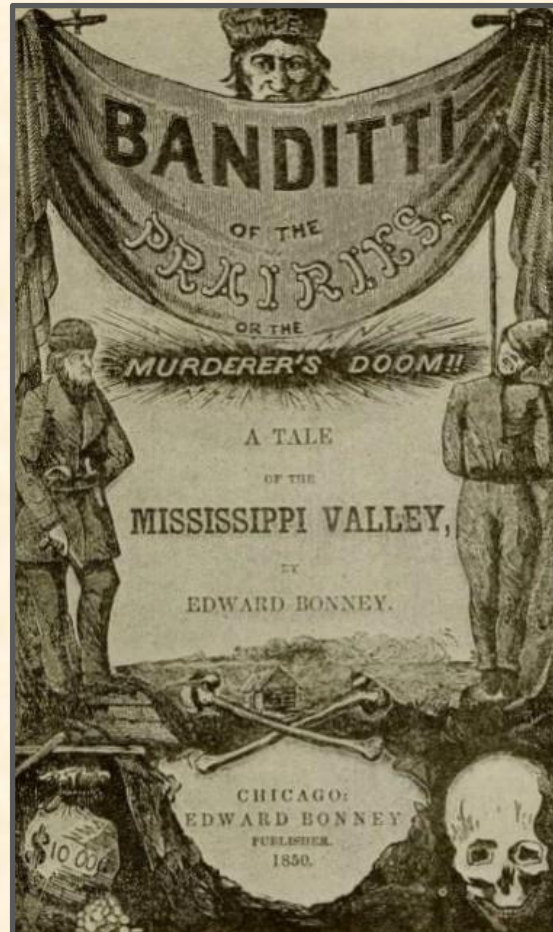
²³⁴ Stevens, *History of Lee County* (1914), 372.

²³⁵ *History of Lee County* (1881), 298.

²³⁶ *History of Lee County* (1881), 298.

One negative result of this vigilante group was the arrest, conviction, and sentencing of Adolphus Bliss, the owner of the Inlet stage tavern, who was later determined to be (mostly) innocent. Tragically, Bliss died in the state penitentiary at Alton while serving his 3-year sentence for burglary and larceny.²³⁷ Although Bliss was an unfortunate consequence of the local outrage, the actions of this vigilante group helped bring an end to the local banditti problem by 1850.

The topic of the banditti makes for fascinating reading, but this chapter has covered its primary connection with the stagecoach. For more information on the “Banditti of the Prairie,” see the article by that title at [Wikipedia.org](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Banditti_of_the_Prairie).



Bonney's 1850 book disclosed insider details of banditti operations.

²³⁷ Stevens, *History of Lee County* (1914), 375.

Chapter Eight

1850s: The End of the Stagecoach Era

As the decade of the 1850s dawned on Dixon, the growing village was on the verge of entering modern society. In the first issue of the *Dixon Telegraph*, on May 1, 1851, publisher Charles Fisk drafted a few lines about the appeal of Dixon to newcomers. He noted that the city's location along the banks of the Rock River was "truly delightful ... surpassed by few, in any part of the world." Two churches had organized in town: the Methodists and the Baptists. Each had a finished church edifice, and the Methodists even had a bell.

The town's vitality and progress were evidenced by its land offices, a courthouse, three hotels, a livery stable, a saw mill, a new dam "furnishing one of the best water powers in the state," a good rope ferry operating night and day, and measures were underway to reconstruct a reliable bridge. Fisk said that all these attractive features were served by the stagecoaches that "meet here from almost every direction." So, even in 1850 Dixon was still "the great transfer station on the stage lines that traversed the country."²³⁸

But in that first *Telegraph*, Fisk added that a major development was on the horizon. A branch of the much-heralded Illinois Central Rail Road was soon to pass through Dixon on its way to Galena.²³⁹

"The Iron Horse"

This innovation would bring vast changes to the community, and a primary result would be the end of the stagecoach era. The common

²³⁸ *History of Lee County* (1881), 57.

²³⁹ *The Dixon Telegraph and Lee County Herald* (May 1, 1851), 1.

nickname for the train, “the iron horse,” reflected the fact that it replaced the stagecoach. While a stagecoach would be led and powered by a team of horses, the train would be led and powered by an “iron horse.”

Throughout the country, Americans recognized the superiority of the railroad for carrying mail, passengers, and freight. As the historian of Peoria County noted, “When the greatest innovation of the present century, the railway, shoved the mail coaches aside, . . . the ‘tea-kettle on wheels’ became the great motor.”²⁴⁰

Mail By Rail

As early as 1835, the U.S. Postmaster predicted that the railroad would eventually replace the stagecoach as the primary vehicle to carry the mail. In his 1835 annual report to President Andrew Jackson, Postmaster General Amos Kendall said, “The multiplication of rail-roads will form a new era in the mail establishment. They must soon become the means by which the mails will be transported on most of the great lines of intercommunication.”²⁴¹

Kendall reported that 65% of daily mail deliveries in 1835 were performed by “four-horse post coaches and two-horse stages,” while 34% were carried by steamboats and horses. Only 1% was carried by rail. But Kendall knew that the new railroad to be built in 1836 between Philadelphia and Baltimore would provide much greater speed than the slow-moving stagecoaches that had to stop overnight, incurring many “tavern bills” for its passengers.²⁴²

²⁴⁰ *History of Peoria County Illinois* (1880), 530-531.

²⁴¹ Amos Kendall, “Report of the Postmaster General,” (Dec. 1, 1835), in *The Executive Documents: Twenty-Fourth Congress, First Session 1835*, 394.

²⁴² Amos Kendall, “Rail-Road Documents,” (Oct. 31, 1835), in *The Executive Documents: Twenty-Fourth Congress, First Session 1835*, 403.

It took 20 years, but that rail service finally reached northern Illinois. A train could easily and quickly haul to Dixon much larger, heavier, and vast quantities of mail and freight, such as building materials and supplies. The train could also bring passengers by the hundreds, instead of only six to 12 at a time in a stagecoach. And the train could bring all these passengers, mail, and freight in any weather year-round. In time, trains were also used to ship mass quantities of harvested grain from areas like Dixon to cities like Chicago.

In essence, the U.S. Postmaster had given life to the stagecoach in the 1820s. But by 1855, the Postmaster was ready to take it away.

Everyone in the state could see the handwriting on the wall: the stagecoach represented the past; the railroad represented the future. The renowned Professor J. B. Turner, in an address to the Illinois State Fair on Oct. 14, 1853, said, “Stage coaches are all out of date, quite behind the times, and even the comets will scarce come round to visit us without a locomotive.”²⁴³

The Obituary of John Frink

Even John Frink, the driving force behind the Frink & Walker stagecoach empire, could see that the days of his business were numbered. In the summer of 1854, just before the train came to Dixon, Frink sold all his interests in the stage business in Illinois and elsewhere. Frink’s sale was deemed as sad news by almost no one.

²⁴³ “The Millenium (sic) of Labor,” *The Dixon Telegraph* (Nov. 5, 1853), 1.

The *Ottawa Free Trader* newspaper greeted Frink's sellout "with a feeling akin to religious joy." Its story added, "Few men in his day have caused more hard swearing, and received fewer blessings to counterbalance the curses, than this Napoleon of western staging."²⁴⁴

Four years later, in 1858, Frink died of "paralysis" in Chicago at age 60. While reporting his death, the *Chicago Tribune* said, "John Frink has probably been more heartily cursed by weary and impatient travelers than any other man between the Atlantic and Pacific." Yet the obituary also praised Frink's entrepreneurial savvy and his "unequaled administrative ability" to build a successful empire in a business fraught with immense difficulties.

Frink's business savvy was evident in his final years. The *Tribune* added that after "his coaches were superseded by railroad trains, ... (he became) a large stockholder in an important (rail) line."²⁴⁵ So, in spite of Frink's strong competitive and protective nature for his business, he still knew that his business was doomed. In essence, he followed the old adage, "If you can't beat 'em, join 'em."

DEATH OF JOHN FRINK.

John Frink, whose dangerous illness was mentioned in this paper a few days ago, died in this city, on Sunday afternoon. His disease was paralysis; his age was about sixty-four years.

John Frink was one of the most remarkable men of the West. With limited opportunities in early life for the acquirement of an education other than what is implied in ability to read and write, he proved himself, in later years, capable of successfully conducting an immense business, with great profit to himself and with untold advantages to the West. Coming here at an early day—in 1838, we believe—he engaged extensively in mail-carrying, as a contractor under Government, and for almost a quarter of a century was the head of that great Stage Company which, under his executive management, performed the mail service for half a dozen Western States.—What difficulties there were to encounter—what patience, courage and endurance were necessary for its successful prosecution—every old settler knows; and though John Frink has probably been more heartily cursed by weary and impatient travelers than any other man between the Atlantic and Pacific, now, when we can look back upon his labors, his obstacles and triumphs, we feel assured that no other man could have carried through what he did. The States of Illinois, Wisconsin, Iowa, Missouri and Indiana owe more to his unequalled administrative ability, for their early settlement and mail facilities, than to the labor of any living soul. He continued in the business to which he was bred until his coaches were superseded by railroad trains; and then, with the enterprise which was a part of his being, at once interested himself largely in the new method of travel, becoming, as he was when he died, a large stockholder in an important line.—*Chicago Tribune*, May 25th.

Bloomington (Ill.) *Pantagraph*,
May 29, 1858

²⁴⁴ "John Frink," *Ottawa Free Trader* (July 29, 1854), 2.

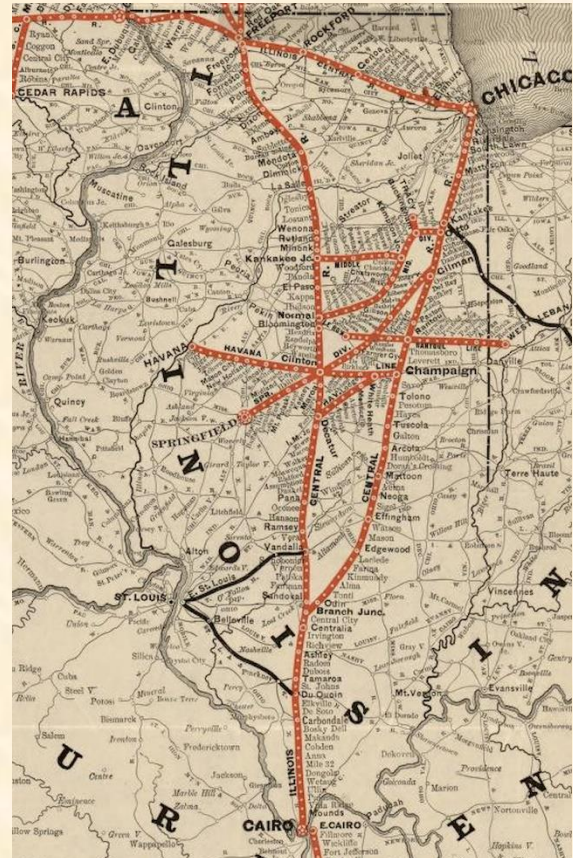
²⁴⁵ "Death of John Frink," *Chicago Daily Tribune* (May 25, 1858), 1.

Bringing the Railroad to Illinois

In Illinois the advent of the railroad era had been anticipated for almost 20 years. As early as 1836 the Illinois legislature had actively authorized the building of several railroads throughout the state. One of its key projects was the Illinois Central Rail Road, which would link Cairo at the far south with Galena at the far north, running through Dixon. However, various issues delayed the project for more than a decade.²⁴⁶

Railroads were being built throughout the eastern states in the 1830s and 1840s, a process that revealed several funding, logistic, and mechanical issues. But by the late 1840s, many of the bugs had been worked out, and the long-awaited Illinois railroad projects were ready to capitalize on “a proven technology capable of serving most places with dependable, all-weather service.”²⁴⁷

Before the railroad, northern Illinois had attempted to solve the problems of stage travel by building plank roads and the 97-mile-long Illinois & Michigan Canal that opened between Chicago and LaSalle



This 1892 Rand McNally map identifies all the Illinois stops of the Illinois Central Rail Road.

²⁴⁶ H. Roger Grant, “The Iron Horse Comes to Illinois, 1835-1860” *Illinois History Teacher* 15:1 (2008), 3.

²⁴⁷ Grant, “The Iron Horse Comes to Illinois” (2008), 6.

in 1848. However, plank roads and the canal lacked the potential speed and reliability of a train running on railroad tracks.²⁴⁸

Following the Stage Line Script

The railroad came to northwestern Illinois in a way that was similar to the arrival of stage trails 20 years earlier. The rail lines and the stage lines were both built from south to north and from east to west, with Galena being the primary northern destination. As such, crossing the Rock River at Dixon was deemed an essential building block for stage lines and rail lines. But unlike a stagecoach, a train could not cross the Rock on a ferry; a special railroad bridge needed to be built.

Another key difference between the 1830 stage routes and the 1850 rail routes was the growing prominence of the city of Chicago. While Chicago barely existed in 1830, the town had mushroomed to 30,000 people by 1850 and was rapidly growing every day. Consequently, the drive to build east-west rail lines from Chicago was significant. Chicago had 10 different rail lines by 1856 when the city became known as “the nation’s railroad hub,” a distinction it continues to hold today.²⁴⁹

The Galena & Chicago Union Railroad was the first railroad built out from Chicago, commencing operation in 1848. That particular line took a northern route, reaching Rockford in 1851 and Freeport in 1853. While the Chicago-based east-west tracks were being laid, the Illinois Central Rail Road was advancing northward from the south. When progress stalled on the Galena & Chicago Union Railroad, the Illinois Central company came in to complete the Freeport-to-Galena

²⁴⁸ Grant, “The Iron Horse Comes to Illinois” (2008), 1-4.

²⁴⁹ “Chicago,” Wikipedia.org.

route in 1854. That final leg of the rail line to Galena followed the stage route that had been established by Frink & Walker.²⁵⁰

All this railroad progress was closely watched in Dixon. From the first issue of the *Dixon Telegraph* in 1851, coverage of railroad construction was regularly on its front page and in newspapers throughout the state. In the early 1850s, Dixon's stagecoach lines continued to be active. But instead of bringing people to and from cities like Chicago, the stage routes often began at the terminus points of the newly constructed railroad.

By December 1851 the northern rail lines from Chicago reached as far west as Marengo, St. Charles, and Aurora, and the southern railroad tracks reached Ottawa, Peru, and LaSalle. Consequently, passengers from Chicago to Dixon could enjoy the comfort and speed of a train from Chicago to LaSalle (or St. Charles), and tolerate a slow, cramped, bumpy, and dusty stagecoach for the remainder of the journey to Dixon.²⁵¹

1855: The Iron Horse Comes to Dixon

The Dixon train station was not an extension of the northern rail line of the Galena & Chicago Union. Instead, the G&CU railroad started a new line, the "Dixon Air Line" that commenced from West Chicago, reaching DeKalb in 1854. That line finally reached Dixon in January of 1855, within days of the date when the Illinois Central reached Dixon, coming up from the south through LaSalle, Mendota, and Amboy. This flurry of construction activity included the 1855 completion of the railroad bridge across the Rock River at Dixon.

²⁵⁰ "Galena and Chicago Union Railroad," Wikipedia.org.

²⁵¹ *Dixon Telegraph* (Dec. 17, 1851), 2. This Galena & Chicago Union line was initially called the "Dixon Air Line Railroad," which eventually merged with the Chicago and North Western Railway in 1864-1865.

On Monday, Jan. 15, 1855, the Illinois Central introduced Dixon to the latest travel technology by offering a free ride to all the citizens of Dixon, allowing them to experience the speed and comfort of a ride to Galena and back. Scores of Dixonites jumped on board and were amazed and pleased. Even the few naysayers could plainly see the advantages of the train over the stagecoach.²⁵²



The Illinois Central Bridge at Dixon, looking south, ca. 1880

While a stagecoach from Dixon could reach Chicago in a day and a half or two days, the Dixon-to-Chicago train could reach the city in 4-5 hours without a costly overnight stay. In those days, trains could average 20-25 miles per hour, which included some stops along the way.²⁵³

Rail speeds gradually increased. When Horace and Rebecca Kauffman wrote their history of Ogle County in 1909, they said, “Handsome well-appointed and luxurious railway cars (could) speed over the prairie and across rivers in all seasons of the year at the rate of 35 to 60 miles per hour.” And this convenience was achieved “for no more cost per passenger than was paid in the 1830s and 1840s for the slow, uncertain, and tiring travel by stage.”²⁵⁴

²⁵² *Dixon Evening Telegraph* (Jan. 20, 1855), 8.

²⁵³ *Quincy Daily Whig* (April 14, 1856), 2.

²⁵⁴ Kauffman, *History of Ogle County* (1909), 646.

Early Accidents

Modern travel had come to Dixon none too soon. On Jan. 19, 1855, the Dixon-to-Rock Island stagecoach tipped over only 1-2 miles from Dixon, breaking the arm of “a lady passenger.”²⁵⁵ But now that smooth travel on a sturdy train had commenced, the days of rocky stage rides were coming to an end.

But the railroad brought its own kind of accidents. On Jan. 15, in the ICRR’s first days of local operation, a devious individual “displaced” some rails between Dixon and Amboy, causing the passenger train to be derailed. No one was injured, but the ICRR offered a \$500 reward for information leading to the arrest of the guilty party.²⁵⁶

A few months later, on April 22, 1855, “six Irishmen” came to Dixon from Polo, riding on a hand car along the Illinois Central tracks. That morning, they purchased a keg of whiskey and spent the day drinking in Dixon “until all reason was destroyed, and (they were) insensible to all danger.”

While thoroughly intoxicated and heading back to Polo on their hand car, they collided with the southbound train “under full headway” about three miles north of Dixon. Three of the men were sober enough to leap from the hand car just before the collision. The hand car was destroyed “into splinters,” one man was severely injured but thrown clear of the tracks, while the other



The cow-catcher on the 1848 Pioneer, Chicago's first locomotive, now at the Chicago History Museum

²⁵⁵ *Dixon Evening Telegraph* (Jan. 20, 1855), 3.

²⁵⁶ *Alton Weekly Courier* (Feb. 15, 1855), 1.

two were killed. Two or three men were needed to extricate their mangled bodies from the train's "cow-catcher."²⁵⁷

The Railroad's Rapid Westward Expansion

Railroad construction continued to chug west at a remarkable rate. By July of 1855, the rail line opened to Sterling, then to Morrison by September and to Fulton by December.²⁵⁸ In April of 1856 the first railroad bridge across the Mississippi River was built, connecting Rock Island and Davenport. By 1857 Dixon was receiving two trains per day from Chicago.²⁵⁹

In 1850 there had been only 111 miles of railroad in Illinois. But by 1860 Illinois could boast of 2,790 miles of tracks.²⁶⁰ Chicago was the major beneficiary, as its population soared to 100,000 by 1860 and to 1,000,000 by 1890.²⁶¹

For Dixon, the railroad enabled easy migration of eastern settlers to its picturesque haven along the Rock River. In 1855 alone, as more people streamed into town, 130 new buildings were erected in Dixon. The growth was such that "the prosperity of the town was no longer a matter of conjecture, but an established fact." Before the close of that momentous year, Dixon's population would soar to 3,000.²⁶² By 1870, Dixon would surpass 4,000 inhabitants.

²⁵⁷ "Terrible Casualty," *Dixon Telegraph* (April 28, 1855), 4.

²⁵⁸ Stennett, *Yesterday and Today: A History of the Chicago and North Western Railway System* (1910), 27.

²⁵⁹ *Dixon Telegraph* (June 20, 1857).

²⁶⁰ Grant, "The Iron Horse Comes to Illinois" (2008), 6.

²⁶¹ "Chicago," Wikipedia.org.

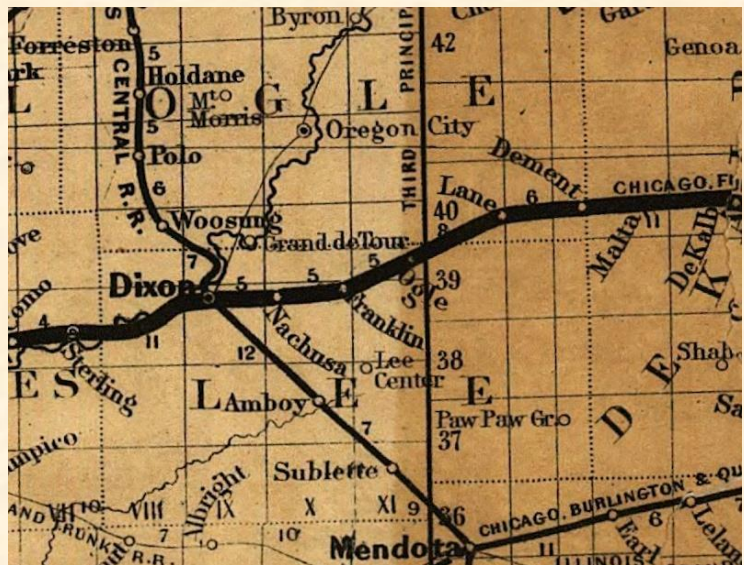
²⁶² *History of Lee County* (1881), 109.

The Effect on Stage Towns

While the railroad brought prosperity and growth to Dixon, the 1855 arrival of the railroad spelled doom for all the small towns that had enjoyed the distinction of hosting stage stations. The new rail routes often followed a different pathway than the stage routes, resulting in the abandonment of several stage stations.

While stage trails tended to have frequent turns to avoid rivers and hills, the railroads were usually built in a (mostly) straight line between two destination cities like Chicago and Dixon. In addition, the train had no need to stop in a town to refresh horses every 12-15 miles. Consequently, many stage towns were left to wither and die without a daily influx of passengers and commerce.

On the Chicago Road east of Dixon, the stage stations at Lee Center (Inlet Grove), Melugin's Grove, and Paw Paw were good examples of stage towns that were negatively affected by the new rail routes. The 1855 Galena and Chicago Union Railroad completely avoided these towns, running instead through Rochelle, Ashton, Franklin Grove, and Nachusa, about 10-20 miles north of the stage route.



This 1862 map shows the towns along the main railroads through the area, bypassing stage stops in Grand Detour, Lee Center, and Paw Paw. ("Lane" is Rochelle.)

Grand Detour's "Great Mistake"

On the Dixon-to-Rockford stage line, the Grand Detour stage station was another victim. "The great mistake made by the citizens of Grand Detour was to oppose the coming of the railroad under the

mistaken idea that its business and manufacturers would thereby be dissipated among various upstart towns,” said Royal B. Way, the historian of the Rock River. “So the railroads all passed her by, and left her almost a deserted village.” Instead, the railroad went to the nearby towns of Rochelle, Dixon, Polo, and eventually Oregon.²⁶³

Grand Detour’s lack of a railroad crippled the potential of the Grand Detour Plow Company, started by John Deere and Leonard Andrus in 1837. In 1848 Deere foresaw the potential transportation and shipping problems of the Grand Detour location. He then left the company for Moline, while Andrus and the plow company stayed in Grand Detour. By 1869, however, the lack of railroad access forced the company to move to Dixon’s Dement Town, immediately next to the railroad tracks of the Illinois Central and the Chicago and North Western lines.

Amboy Wins

Along the Dixon-to-Peoria trail, the Illinois Central Rail Road was built far from Dad Joe’s Grove and Boyd’s Grove, running instead through Mendota, Sublette, and Amboy, about 15 miles east of the stage trail. Essentially, the Illinois Central (ICRR) railroad *created* the city of Amboy, which was also blessed with a depot station and a hotel. After the station and hotel burned down in 1875, the ICRR built a new brick headquarters there in 1876. Today, even though the Illinois Central railroad is gone, the majestic Amboy Depot still stands today as a museum.

“At all events the railroad took all the business to Amboy and in the face of the life which at once appeared in Amboy, Lee Center could

²⁶³ Way, *The Rock River Valley* (1926), 572.

not stand,” said Frank Stevens.²⁶⁴ The same fate befell the stage stations at Melugin’s Grove, Dad Joe’s Grove, and Boyd’s Grove.

When a new train route was planned through the center of Lee County in 1869, a glimmer of hope appeared for Melugin’s Grove and Lee Center. However, when that new route (the Chicago & Rock River Railroad) was completed in 1872, it went through Paw Paw, Compton, and Amboy. Amboy again won, Paw Paw was saved, but Lee Center and Melugin’s Grove lost, even though Compton was only a mile south of the Grove.

The Horn and Whip No More

Frank Stevens aptly summarized the loss to Melugin’s Grove: “All the glamour and tradition of the old grove and the stage route and stage coach days disappeared. One by one the Grove people moved over to the railroad and Compton. One by one the buildings were moved over to Compton. Love for the old place was strong and the ties were hard to break, but the last had to give way, and to this day the entire population of prosperous Compton are descendants of the old Melugin’s Grove stock.”²⁶⁵

So, the railroad caused some Lee County towns to grow while others withered. But the stagecoach itself was the one enterprise that was most negatively affected by the invasion of the railroad. The major nail in the stagecoach coffin was the fact that mail contracts now went to railroads not to stage lines. As the Lee County historian wrote in 1881, “The Illinois Central railroad ended forever the usefulness of the stage coach in Lee County.”²⁶⁶

²⁶⁴ Stevens, *History of Lee County* (1914), 389.

²⁶⁵ Stevens, *History of Lee County* (1914), 410-411.

²⁶⁶ *History of Lee County* (1881), 393.

Today, even though many of the rail lines have been abandoned, the railroad still exists, as it has for 170 years. But the crack of the stage driver's whip and the blare of the stagecoach horn have not been heard in the county for more than a century and a half.

The Emergence of the Horse and Buggy

After the 1855 introduction of the railroad, a few stagecoaches probably still ran in the Dixon area, but references to stages in the post-1855 era are lacking in local newspapers and history books. Since the mail contracts were now going to the trains, the stagecoaches were choked out of business. Besides, if the trains could not take people to local towns, a purchased or rented horse-and-buggy (a carriage) could now take them there.

Even in Dixon, four years before the trains came, James P. Dixon's livery stable ran ads in the first issues of the *Dixon Telegraph*, announcing that he had "good and pleasant carriages constantly on hand . . . attended by careful and attentive drivers."²⁶⁷ So, instead of taking a stagecoach to a nearby locality, people could either drive themselves in their own buggy or rent a carriage as needed.

Livery Stable.

THE subscriber would respectfully inform his friends and the public generally, that he still continues in the above business; and is prepared to furnish on reasonable terms,

CARRIAGES,

Horses and Buggies to all who may favor him with a call;

Good and pleasant carriages constantly on hand for families and parties, attended by careful and attentive drivers.

He is also prepared for carrying Emigrants and their baggage to any part of the surrounding country.

He subscribes embraces this opportunity to return his thanks to his regular customers and the public, for the very liberal patronage bestowed on him; and hopes by continued efforts to please and accommodate, to merit their favor:

J. P. DIXON.

No. 21 51.

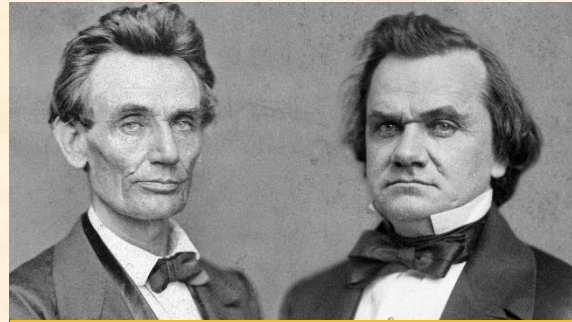
Dixon Telegraph, Dec. 10, 1851

The Stage-less Lincoln-Douglas Debates

The famous Lincoln-Douglas Debates of 1858 provide a good test case to see whether stagecoaches were still in operation in Illinois at

²⁶⁷ *Dixon Telegraph* (Dec. 10, 1851), 2.

that time. In 1908, on the fiftieth anniversary of the debates, Dr. Edwin Erle Sparks authored a 700-page book about the seven famous slavery debates held throughout Illinois. The book, which extensively quotes from 1858 newspaper articles, frequently mentions how Lincoln, Douglas, and the crowds traveled to each debate site, and stagecoaches are never mentioned. Instead, the primary transportation method was the train, while steamer ships, wagons, and horseback took a lesser role.



Abraham Lincoln and Stephen Douglas

For example, in the Freeport debate on Aug. 27, 1858, Lincoln arrived “by the Dixon train,” which included “twelve cars crowded full” of delegations from Lee, Ogle, and Whiteside counties.²⁶⁸ The Galesburg debate on Oct. 7, 1858, attracted 22 rail cars from Chicago with over 2,000 people and another 12-14 rail cars “filled to overflowing” from Burlington.²⁶⁹

“That Relic of a By-Gone Age”

A search through local newspapers for references to the stagecoach in the 1860s and 1870s reveals that stage traffic had essentially come to an end throughout the entire state. These newspapers contained basically two kinds of stories about stagecoaches. One kind was news stories of stagecoach robberies and accidents that were happening west of the Rockies or in regions where the railroad had yet to arrive. The other kind was nostalgic stories of local memories in which the

²⁶⁸ Sparks, *The Lincoln-Douglas Debates of 1858* (1908), 192-193.

²⁶⁹ Sparks, *The Lincoln-Douglas Debates of 1858* (1908), 379, 383.

word “stage” was often preceded by “old,” as in “the old stagecoach days,” “the old stage routes,” or “the old stage driver of yesteryear.”

A comparable news story appeared in the 1860 *Chicago Tribune*, reporting about a new railroad to connect Sheboygan and Fond du Lac in Wisconsin. The story said the new Chicago and North Western rail line would be greeted heartily by the residents in Sheboygan because “few are now willing to travel by that relic of a by-gone age, the stage coach.”²⁷⁰

What Had Been Lost?

In the 1860s and 70s few would disagree that Dixon had gained much with the arrival of the Iron Horse. The ability to travel and ship comfortably, quickly, and reliably were significant gains that benefited everyone.

But, with the demise of the stagecoach, what had been lost?

This question was addressed in an essay from Philadelphia titled “How To Be Happy,” published in the *Dixon Evening Telegraph* in 1888. The writer made the case that there is more “coziness, more warmth, and more home-like friendliness” in small spaces than in large spaces. That’s where the stagecoach entered his argument.

“In the days of the blessed old stagecoach the passengers could not ride together and be jolted against each other and tossed from side to side without getting acquainted,” he wrote. Such small spaces thus become “the breeding places of friendship and the brooding places of love.”

By contrast, he said, one can travel in comfort by rail “in seclusion in a parlor car” and still be depressed, sad, and lonely. Such large spaces

²⁷⁰ “Sheboygan and Fond du Lac Railroad,” *The (Chicago) Press and Tribune* (Feb. 9, 1860), 2.

separate, silence, and subdue its inmates because they lack “the elbow touch of companionship.”²⁷¹

In a separate 1887 article, another writer opined that a 300-mile ride in a railcar would provide fewer glimpses into the character of one’s fellow passengers than “would be afforded by a ride of ten miles in a stagecoach.”²⁷²

Prodding Us to Connect

So, what had been lost? As with many modern conveniences, what is lost is close personal connection with other humans on life’s road. People tend to pull together when they jointly experience suffering, trials, and “privations,” as the early historians called them.

While huddling together to withstand inevitable hardships, as in a stagecoach, people are forced to connect and relate. When troubles arise that halt the progress of all, some grab a rail and pry the group out of the difficulty. Even in times of constant progress, the close quarters offer the opportunity to build relationships, if only by commiserating.

The clashing of knees, shoulders, and elbows prods us to connect with each other. Such was the daily experience of the pioneers who settled the Rock River Valley. Whether rocking about on a stagecoach or seeking shelter during a storm, illness, or calamity, the early settlers were

The clashing of knees, shoulders, and elbows prods us to connect with each other.

²⁷¹ *Dixon Evening Telegraph* (Feb. 18, 1888), 2.

²⁷² *Dixon Evening Telegraph* (Jan. 8, 1887), 3.

forced to relate to one another and rely on one another. In many cases, it was a literal matter of survival.

As the settlers built these relationships, they built homes and barns. They paved the roadways. They raised their families. Merchants and entrepreneurs established their companies. Christians built churches for the faithful, and citizens erected schoolhouses for their children. In the end, they built a community.

In Dixon it all started with a rough journey, often a stagecoach ride, to find that one place on earth where tenacious settlers cleared their land, constructed their cabins, and sank their roots deep into the soil of the Rock River valley.

And it all happened when Dixon was the great stagecoach transfer station for Northwest Illinois.



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Tom Wadsworth is a sixth-generation Dixonite who has lived in Dixon most of his life. He holds a BA, MTh, ThM, and PhD, all in biblical studies. His work in communications, broadcasting, and writing have earned national recognition. In 2016 his investigative journalism won the Stephen Barr Award, the “crown jewel” national writing award from the American Society of Business Publication Editors (ASBPE).



Locally, his articles on local history have appeared in *Dixon Living* magazine, *Sterling-Rock Falls Living* magazine, and other local publications. He is also a lifetime member of the Lee County Historical and Genealogical Society.

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