

History of Stone Railroad Bridge in East Iowa City – The Lindemann Hills Neighborhood

Note: *It is difficult to track exactly what year and by which railroad (RR) the actual branch line between Iowa City and Elmira (“the plug”) was built. Perhaps as many as four RR’s had a part in the construction. We know several bond issues failed in Iowa City that would have provided taxpayers funds needed to finish the RR. It may be that private funds finally accomplished the task. Remember this was following the Civil War and the country, state of Iowa, and local towns had a lot of economic concerns.*

So it is this author’s best researched guess that the following chronology may help with history on the stone RR bridge. The history being intermittent may also explain why I believe the “plug line” began service about 1873, but the stone abutments bear the date 1892.

Chronology

1865

Railroad history documents the Cedar Rapids and Saint Paul Railway Company as being incorporated in the late 1865’s. The RR was consolidated into the Burlington, Cedar Rapids, and Minnesota Railway Company on June 30, 1868. (See Exhibit #1; map of 1875 with RR coming from the north into Johnson County, and a proposed RR from Iowa City with a junction at Lennox [later Elmira].)

The mission was to have a RR coming from the south, to the city of Burlington via Wapello, West Branch, Cedar Rapids, Vinton, and Waterloo; and into the state of Minnesota. Plans moved forward – branches were built along the way until September 1873, when all construction stopped due to financial panic. Bonds were defaulted and the RR fell into receivership in May 1875 and was sold to the Burlington, Cedar Rapids, and Northern RR on June 19, 1876.

1870

The Burlington, Cedar Rapids, and Northern RR came to West Branch from the east. Rail stations were at Morse, Centerdale, Oasis, and Elmira. Elmira was the junction for the branch or “plug line” into Iowa City. (*See Exhibit #2 – photo of station*) Elmira was never a town, only a busy RR center. At Elmira the Burlington, Cedar Rapids, and Northern RR connected with two other RR’s - one to Clinton and the other to Minneapolis.

The town of Elmira does not exist today. (*Exhibit #3 for 1900 Atlas map*) At its peak it was made up of a hotel with a lunchroom, and also a water tower.

1873

The BCR & N Branch- called the “plug line” began service from Iowa City to Elmira in October 1873. This was approximately 8 miles to the northeast of Iowa City, and was between Oasis and Morse. The primary importance was the connecting line and a way to get to Cedar Rapids or on to Saint Paul.

The Plug Line depot in Iowa City was where the Iowa City Recreation building stands today. The official name was the Burlington Street Depot or “Plug” Depot. (*See photo Exhibit #4*)

The tracks ran parallel to the Ralston Creek under the College Street bridge; then diagonal northeast across Washington Street, and Iowa Avenue to Jefferson Street. On Jefferson Street the street was shared for three blocks with horse drawn vehicles. Then diagonal, southeast across College Street and 7th Avenue. With continuation across Court Street, south of City High.

East Iowa City was platted for W.F. Main as a factory town for employees of the large Puritan Factory. It was platted in 1898 as a separate town. This was a jewelry company. Later the building housed Borner-Fry Extract Company, which manufactured cosmetics. Next was a model airplane factory. In 1917 a sizable chair factory took over the building. The last occupant was the National Hybrid Seed Corn Company of Anamosa in 1937. A

terrible fire in December of that year completely destroyed the building and it was never rebuilt. The lot is still vacant today and owned by Carl Chadek. The Plug RR ran along the north side of this factory square, with a siding into the factory to handle car loads of coal and supplies.

The Plug Line continued east and then northeast through Scott and Graham Townships of Johnson County, to Elmira. (Elmira called Lennox on early maps, post office called Ives; *1990 Atlas Exhibit #3*) The RR was paralleling the south branch of the Ralston Creek. Before leaving Scott Township on its way to Elmira, the Plug made a platform stop at Graham Station (later called Digby) to pick up passengers going north or south. (note Digby on map)

I recall my grandfather, Nate S. Moore (1883-1966) telling stories of riding the Plug to Digby from Iowa City as a teenager working as a farm laborer for Lewis L. Smith. It was at this time that he met and courted the younger sister of Lou Smith, Jane. Nate and Jane were married in October 1903 and remained their entire lives in east Johnson County. (*See photos of Elmira and Digby Exhibits 5-11.*)

1879

The Plug Line extended service south through the siding of Hills to What Cheer. This was in keeping with the original mission of the Burlington, Cedar Rapids, and Minnesota RR.

1903

The Burlington, Cedar Rapids, and Northern Railway Company of Iowa became part of the Chicago, Rock Island, and Pacific Railway Company.

1904

The Crandic Line (Cedar Rapids and Iowa City) or Interurban started in 1904 with hourly service to Cedar Rapids. In Johnson County the Interurban passed through Swisher, North Liberty, and

Coralville. Thus the need for the Plug Line, as the only way to get to Cedar Rapids no longer existed. The automobile was to have an impact also.

1920

The Burlington, Cedar Rapids, and Northern branch (The Plug) was discontinued in the late 1920's. The Burlington Street depot was used by the Railway Express Agency for many years however.

My brother Fred G. Moore recalls tearing up some of the remaining track left at the depot site when he was with the Iowa City City Engineers' Office in the early 1960's.

Today

The stone bridge over one section of the south branch of Ralston Creek is all that remains today of the Plug Line. (Substantial remains anyway) The stone bridge is located in Scott Township, and consist of three abutments (*Photos Exhibit #12*). The date 1892 is clearly visible on the end of one abutment. Iowa City annexed this Lindemann farmland in the 1980's, and a subdivision named Stone Bridge Estates was started in 2003 by Arlington Development, Incorporated. The developer has dedicated 1.5-1.75 acres that include the stone bridge abutments to Iowa City for a neighborhood park and trail site. There will be public access to this area from the west side and from Lower West Branch Road on to the trail.

It is my vision that the Plug Line will be in use again on a walking/biking bridge for future generations to admire and enjoy. Thanks to the farmers and developers for preserving this piece of Iowa City history.

Florence Moore Stockman

Resources

Leigh Ann Randek, Curator, Johnson County Historical Society

Charles Scott, State Historical Society, Iowa City

Herger, Mike, “Elmira, Elmira, Wherefore Art Thou, Elmira” A History of the Plug- Iowa City” Unpublished materials State Historical Society, Iowa City

Mansheim, Gerald, “Iowa City - An Illustrated History”, 1989.

Weber, Irving B., “Historical Stories About Iowa City” Volumes I, II, IV, and VI.

Northeast Planning District Plan, Adopted June 29, 1999, Department of Planning and Community Development, City of Iowa City.

Special collections of the University of Iowa Libraries. Collection of Albert N. Harbert on railroading material.

Authors own personal recollections and family interviews. Florence Moore Stockman, 132 Eversull Lane (Part 4 – Stone Bridge Estates), Iowa City. Photos by Mary Moore Werch.

EXHIBITS

- 1) 1875 map of a portion of Iowa City.
- 2) Railroad station at Elmira
- 3) 1900 Atlas of Johnson County
- 4) Burlington Street Depot
- 5) Hotel and Lunchroom at Elmira
- 6) Railroad platform and wagon; passengers waiting in Elmira.
- 7) Engine #549 at Elmira
- 8) Depot and water tower at Elmira, undated.
- 9) Train, water tower, and depot, Elmira, ca 1910
- 10) Train, passenger platform, and young woman – Digby
- 11) 14 passengers and one dog waiting – Elmira
- 12) Current photos – stone abutments; shown date “1892”.
- 13) Current photos – Stone Bridge Estates, neighborhood children.

#1 – 1875 map of a portion of Iowa City

#2 and #8 - Railroad station at Elmira, Iowa

#3 – 1900 Atlas of Johnson County, Iowa

#4 – Burlington Street Depot, Iowa City, Iowa

#5 – Hotel and lunchroom at Elmira, Iowa

#6 – Railroad platform and wagon;
passengers waiting in Elmira, Iowa

#7 – Engine #549 at Elmira, Iowa

#9 – Train, water tower, and depot. Elmira, Iowa ca 1910

#11 – 14 passengers and one dog waiting – Elmira, Iowa

#12 – Stone abutments, shown date “1892”

Fred G. Moore and Janet Moore Organ
At the remaining bridge abutments

Bryce Hunger and Haley Smith

Jaymi Smith, Braxton Bell, Abbie Smith,
Haley Smith, Katie Smith, Brock Hunger

Brock Hunger, Jaymi Smith, Braxton Bell, Abbie Smith

Neighborhood children living in Stone Bridge Estates
on and at the remaining abutments