# Transitions in the forms of Midwestern county seats on the American frontier

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**Abstract.** *In the American Midwest three classes of town forms – central squares, linear and railroad plans – evolved from town planning traditions established on the Eastern Seaboard. The geography of these classes, based on street- and land-use patterns, is identified and interpreted for county seats in two key Midwestern states – Iowa and Minnesota – to determine their origins and the processes by which they were implemented. Planning traditions, physical geography, local government and railroads, all operating within the context of the timing of settlement, shaped the patterns of the forms. Several county seats, representing the three classes, are discussed to evaluate how these factors influenced the forms of the towns. The patterns represent a temporal and spatial shift in the control over Midwestern urbanization from local governments and individuals to corporate entities in the form of town companies, railroads, and land and extractive companies.*

*Key Words: urban form, planning, local government, town, companies, nineteenth century, American Midwest*

The magnificent drama performed on the American frontier generated a cast of actors – fur trappers, buffalo hunters, cowboys, cattle barons, and pioneer yeoman farmers – of mythic proportions. As vanguards in the sequential stages of frontier expansion expounded by Frederick Jackson Turner (1920), they have become enshrined in American folklore. Subsequent scholarship, however, has argued that the frontier stage of American cultural development belonged as much to ordinary people who created thousands of new places that in most cases either preceded or evolved simultaneously with the opening of lands for rural settlement (Bridenbaugh, 1938; Larsen, 1978; Reps, 1981; Wade, 1959). Factors influencing the early growth of these places, such as evolving transportation systems, inter-regional trade and market specialization have been persistent research themes (Borchert, 1967; Conzen, 1975; Mahoney, 1985; Muller, 1977; Vance, 1970; Whebell, 1969), but more recently urban historians, planners and geographers have utilized a variety of methods to analyse the forms of frontier towns. The comprehensive and detailed surveys of the urban historian John Reps (1965, 1979), described a variety of individual town plans at national and regional scales. Other studies determined the distribution of town forms or their elements in specific regions or states (Conzen, 2006; Hudson, 1985; Pillsbury, 1970; Sears, 1979; Zellie, 1989) or analysed changes in town forms over time (Conzen, 1980, 2001/2002). Still other studies have utilized a systematic

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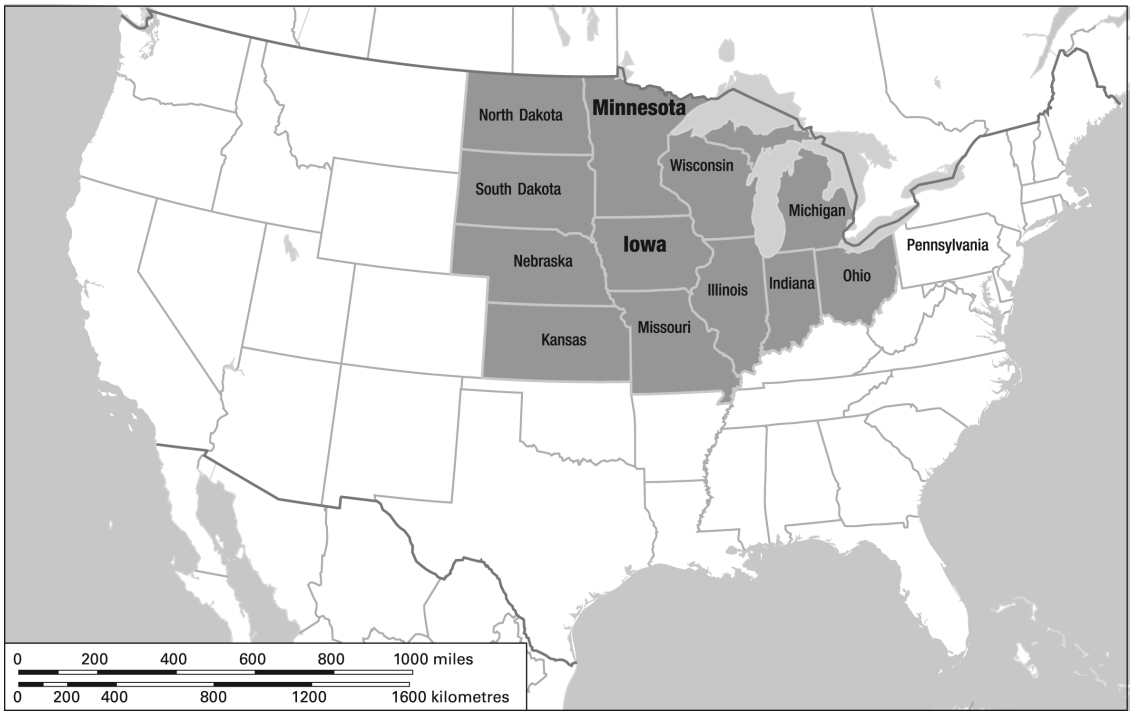


**Figure 1. Iowa and Minnesota in the twelve-state Midwestern region.**

approach, emphasizing the distribution of types of town forms, such as courthouse squares (Price, 1968; Veselka, 2000), linear towns (Francaviglia, 1996; Rifkind, 1977) and railroad towns (Harvey, 1983; Hudson, 1982).

This study examines patterns of town forms in the American Midwest, a twelve-state region extending westward from Ohio to Kansas and northward to Canada, which is widely regarded as the nation's cultural core (Shortridge, 1989; Sisson, 2007). This designation can be attributed in part to the melding of diverse cultural groups who settled this fertile land throughout the nineteenth century (Hudson, 1988). Members of these groups were mostly Europeans and Americans from New England, Middle Atlantic and Southern cultural regions, who brought with them town-planning ideas that had evolved in their respective eastern hearths. With westward settlement these traditions were exposed to an amalgam of environmental, political and economic conditions that 'encouraged a morphological divergence from past traditions' (Conzen, 1980, p. 119). The consequence was the emergence of new and distinctive varieties of central squares, linear plans and railroad plans. This paper discusses how these patterns, as exemplified by forms of county seats in two key Midwestern states (Iowa and Minnesota), can shed new light on how representative ideologies governing the processes of frontier urbanization changed with westward settlement (Figure 1). Ultimately, this change manifested a shift in the power to control these processes from local governments and individuals to corporate entities in the form of town companies, railroads, and land and extractive companies.

The interplay of two principal elements of urban form – initial land subdivision, as shown by what is called in most Midwestern states the 'original town' plat, and actual land use, as evidenced by the location of evolving commercial, residential and public space – provides a basis for identification and classification of forms in the two states. The fusion of these elements created urban forms that still remain at the core of most Midwestern towns. Basic knowledge of the essential components of town forms allows the casual observer to 'read' a contemporary

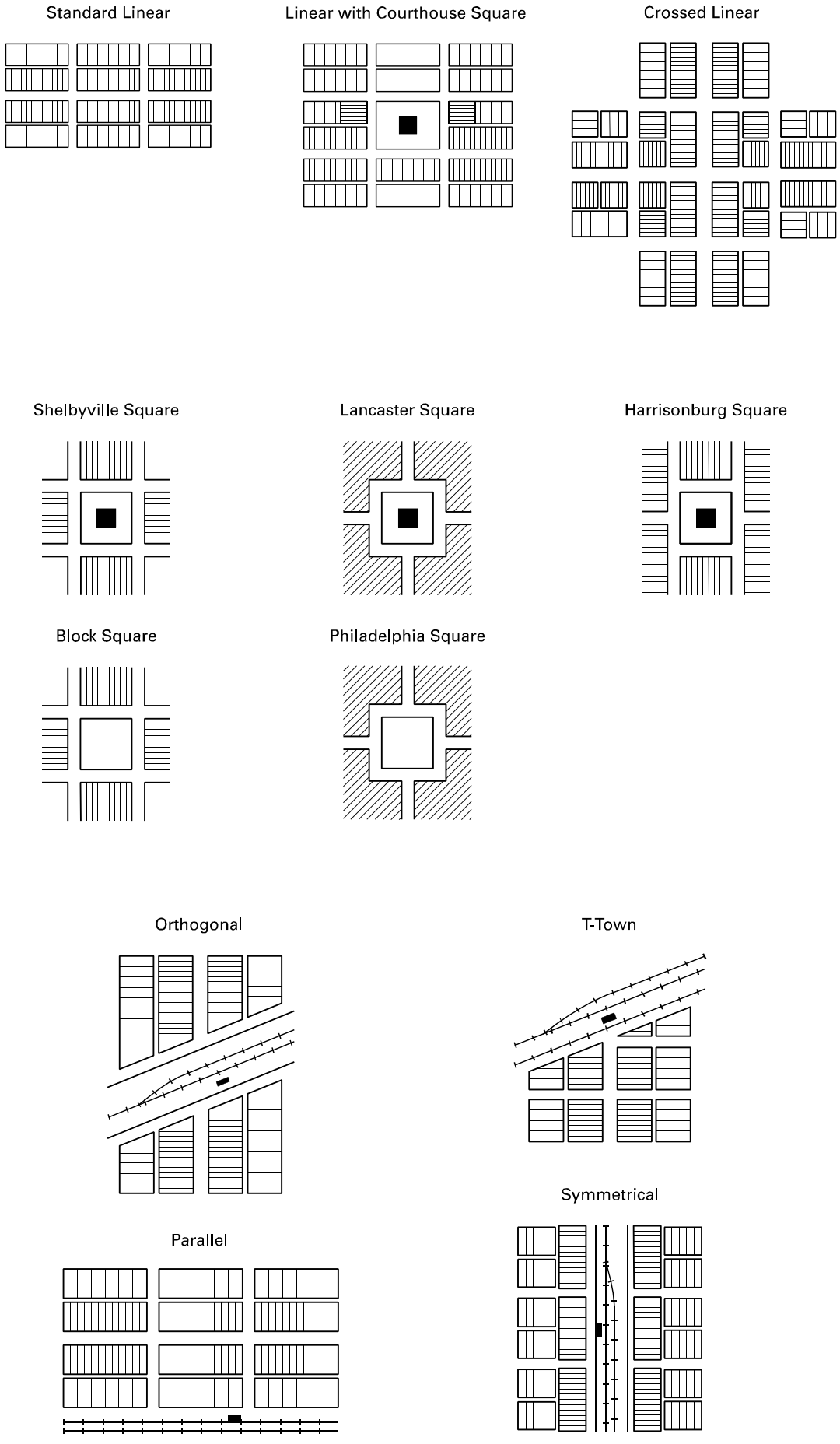


**Figure 2. Frontier forms of county seats in Iowa and Minnesota.**

townscape, interpret much about its origins, and contemplate how forces may have led to alterations (Schmiedeler, 2001).

## Classes and associations of Midwestern town forms

The basic central-square plan that evolved in the Midwest consists of a square or rectangular space surrounded by streets along which lies the town's principal business district. Variation in the patterns of streets intersecting the square gave rise to numerous sub-types including the *block square*, where streets intersect the corners of the square, and the *Philadelphia square* (also known as the *diamond square*), where streets intersect the midpoints of the sides of the square (Figure 2). Land use varied in these squares. Some evolved into parks, but many others acquired courthouses more or less central to the square. The block square with a courthouse is a *Shelbyville square*, named after its prototype in Shelbyville, Tennessee (Price, 1969). Its simple design and ease of survey made it the most popular central-courthouse-square form in the Midwest. The Philadelphia square with a courthouse is a *Lancaster square* after Lancaster, Pennsylvania, where it first appeared. Another central-courthouse-square form, the *Harrisonburg square*, evolved as a hybrid of the street patterns of the Shelbyville and Philadelphia squares (Price, 1969).

In contrast to central-square towns, the core of linear or 'Main Street' towns is the business district. The *standard linear* plan consists of businesses facing each other along a single street of the grid, but sometimes, either by design or by expansion, the business district evolved along two perpendicular streets that intersected in a *crossed-linear* pattern. A hybrid form of central-courthouse-square and linear town designs, in which a courthouse square is incorporated into what is essentially a linear business district, also evolved in Iowa and Minnesota. This form is identified as *linear with courthouse square* or, if the courthouse is absent from the square, *linear with square*.

Instead of main street businesses or a courthouse, the core of a third type of Midwestern town consists of the tracks and depot of a railroad. The location of the business district relative to these core elements determines four sub-types (Hudson, 1985; Schmiedeler, 2001). The most common, the *T-town*, has the business district extending from one side of the tracks in a more or less T-shaped configuration. Other railroad designs include the *orthogonal* plan, in which tracks bisected the business district; the *symmetrical* plan, in which the tracks were within and parallel to the business district; and the *parallel* plan, in which the business district was parallel to the tracks but a half block or full block removed from them.

The map of patterns of forms of frontier county seats in Iowa and Minnesota shows dominance of central square plans in southern Iowa, linear plans in the Mississippi Valley, northern Iowa and south-eastern Minnesota, and railroad plans in north-western Minnesota (Figure 3). A relatively mixed zone of these forms occurs in north-western Iowa and south-western Minnesota. Throughout the entire region, several factors – all of which operated in conjunction with the timing of settlement – interacted to develop and diffuse these patterns. The cultural traditions of town planners is one. Others include the role of state and local government, the physical geography of town sites, and the expansion of railroads.

Urban historians and geographers have identified aspects of the planning traditions established in eastern cultural hearths, but it is difficult to link these traditions directly with individual town planners of Midwestern county seats. As the American geographer Edward Price noted, most original town plats identify proprietors and surveyors, but neither they nor local historians typically reveal who designed the town (Price, 1969). Moreover, many town planners travelled widely and were thus exposed to a variety of planning traditions, further complicating associations. At best, one can assess the impact of planning traditions only indirectly by comparing the general distributions of the forms of county

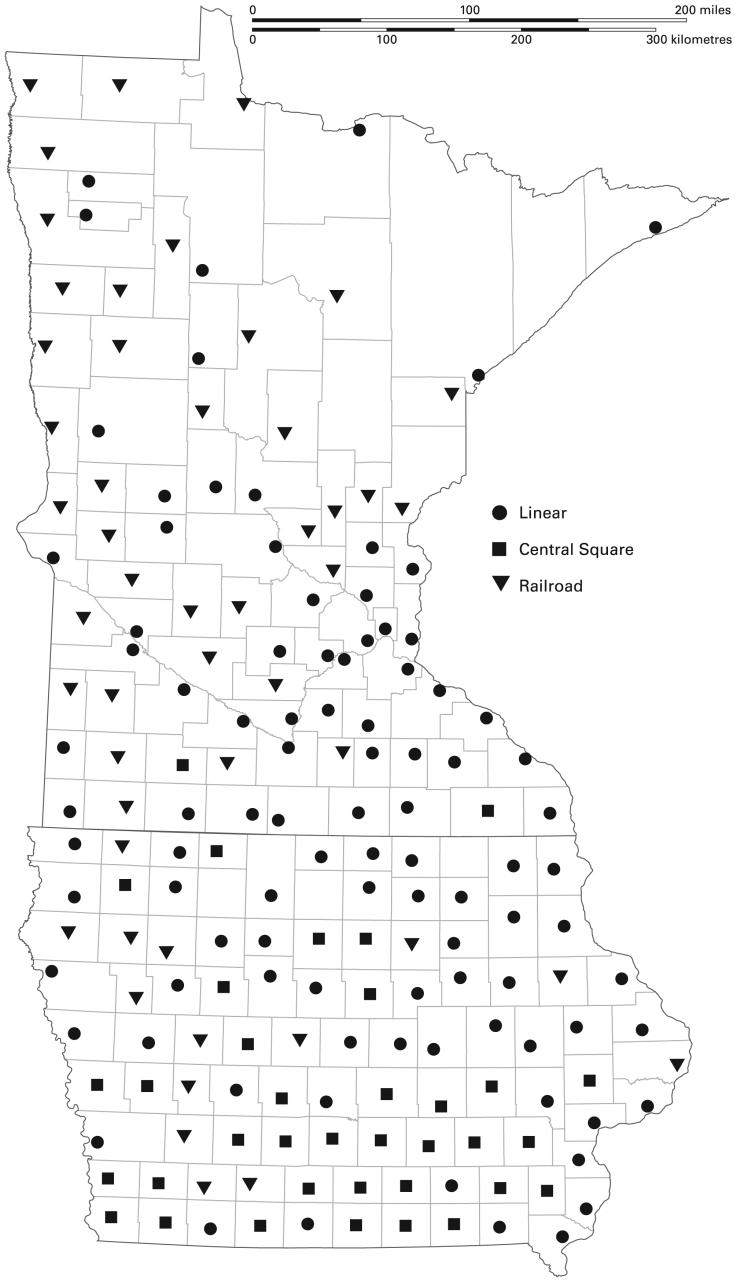


**Figure 3. Central square, linear and railroad town plans of Midwestern county seats.**

seats with cultural regions established during settlement of the two states.

Studies of migration into Minnesota and Iowa indicate that people from the Yankee cultural region – principally New England and New York – and their second-generation descendants from Michigan and Wisconsin, dominated the immigrant stream in the northern two tiers of counties in Iowa and throughout Minnesota. These were joined by a substantial Canadian-born component in the lumbering and mining regions of northern Minnesota. On the other hand, second-generation Midlanders from southern and central Ohio and central Indiana, with ancestral roots in the Midland hearth (Middle Atlantic) of south-eastern Pennsylvania, settled the southern half of Iowa. A transition zone

between these two distinctive cultural regions spans the length of central Iowa (Hudson, 1988).

To the Yankee planner, the business district, not the courthouse, was the focus of the county seat. This was because in New England the town was far more important than the county as a unit of local government and because most urban settlements in New England originated as centres of trade, not political centres (Vance, 1977, p. 255; Wood, 1997, pp. 114-34). Migrating Yankees brought with them their model of a linear or Main Street town as a commercial centre, and this conceptualization was reinforced by lumbermen who located many river and lakeside towns at their mill sites, often before counties were organized. The irregular street pattern characteristic of most linear towns in New England did not move west with these northern migrants, however, because of the influence of the Land Ordinance Survey Act of 1785. This legislation, first implemented in Ohio, established the great American grid pattern of townships and ranges and imposed a high degree of uniformity on town designs.

Though incomplete, studies of planning traditions that originated in the Midland cultural hearth of south-eastern Pennsylvania reveal a character of considerable complexity. Richard Pillsbury (1970) mapped the distribution of four types of street patterns: irregular, linear, rectilinear and Linear-R, a variant of the rectilinear plan in which a Philadelphia square was laid out at the intersection of two main streets. This study is helpful in understanding the emergence of urban planning in what has been defined as the Pennsylvania Culture Area (Zelinsky, 1977), but his classification scheme lacks an assessment of land-use patterns that matured within the street systems. It is therefore less useful for evaluating the contributions of the region's planning traditions to the patterns of forms that evolved in the parallel Midland culture region of Iowa. Additionally, his assertion that the geography of rectilinear and Linear-R plans – those he designated as 'geometric' patterns – can serve as a basis for defining the Pennsylvania Culture Area has been severely criticized (Conzen, 1971; Zelinsky, 1977).

However, urban historian John Reps has linked the widespread use of the geometric or grid pattern and the diamond square in Pennsylvania towns to William Penn's plan for Philadelphia. Although acknowledging a number of possible European sources for Philadelphia's grid and square – most notably Newcourt's plan for the rebuilding of London – he argued that 'for many of the towns that were built later during the westward march of urbanization Philadelphia served as the model. The regular pattern of streets and one or more public squares were features that became widely imitated ... In Lancaster County alone at least six communities use the Philadelphia square as a central motif' (Reps, 1965, p. 174). The namesake seat of Lancaster County had a courthouse on its Philadelphia square for at least part of its history and became the prototype for this particular central-courthouse-square form. Central courthouse squares, whatever their type, were not common in Pennsylvania (Price, 1969), however, so one must look elsewhere for the source of the great running stream that flowed into southern Iowa.

A logical place to begin is Ohio, the first Midwestern state to be settled and directly in the path of Midland migration into the heart of the country. On the basis of characteristics of form, including land use, frontier urban planning of the state's 88 county seats is eclectic and random. Private proprietors, acting most frequently as individuals but also as small groups, platted nearly all county seats. Sixteen town forms are represented, a remarkable diversity, especially considering that only one county seat developed as a railroad town. Sixty-five of the seats evolved as linear towns but only 22 of these had standard linear designs. Planners incorporated full, half-block and quarter-block squares with and without courthouses into linear and crossed linear designs in the majority of towns. Additionally, twenty county seats evolved with courthouses on lots within linear business districts. Geographically, the most significant aspect of Ohio's county seats is the emergence

of a discernible though somewhat anaemic pattern of true central-square towns in the broad heart of the Midland zone within the middle third of the state (Hudson, 1988). About one-third of the county seats in this zone evolved with Philadelphia, Lancaster, Shelbyville and Harrisonburg squares, with the Philadelphia model being most common.

Ohio marks the beginning of an exuberant pattern of central squares that extends across central and southern Indiana and Illinois, and into Missouri and southern Iowa. Unlike in Ohio, the pattern in these states is primarily, though not exclusively, the result of the influences of local government on urban planning. In the American county system of local government, county seats provided a variety of services to residents, including the administration of justice, record keeping, property assessment and maintenance of the peace. These services assured that any town that became a county seat would survive among the numerous competitors created in the 'mania' of town-site speculation that accompanied settlement on this frontier. Private proprietors aspiring to plat county seats regularly reserved prominent public space or 'public squares' for the sought-after court-house which, in addition to the courtroom, would house the offices of all the other county agencies.

Local government had a more direct and authoritative influence on patterns of forms in several Midwestern states, including Iowa, when county officials – agents, commission-ers, and judges – themselves platted county seats immediately after county formation. Territorial and state legislatures or governors of these states usually fixed the location of a temporary county seat in a newly created county and then would appoint a commission of three to five people from adjacent counties to locate the permanent seat of justice. As these 'locating commissioners' canvassed the county, some landowners, keen on speculation, lobbied for the merits of their property, but as a rule, locating commissioners chose neutral sites with a moderate to high degree of centrality. In fact, some of the legislative acts required commissioners to locate the seat within a certain distance of the county centre, typically less than a few miles. Although legislation might further stipulate that the proprietor of the land selected as the town site donate the tract – 40 acres was common – arrangements were highly variable. For example, in Iowa locating commissioners sometimes obtained sites as donations, but they also purchased town sites with money (typically $200 for 40 acres @ $1.25 per acre) borrowed from county residents, who were then reimbursed with interest from the proceeds of initial sales of lots. Joint ownership of the new town site between government agents and the original landowners also occurred. After the locating commissioners selected a site, newly elected county officials or their appointees actually platted the town. In Iowa these were the first elected county commissioners until 1851, when the state changed to a highly centralized county judge system. However the town sites were acquired and regardless of cultural roots, these county officials usually chose a central-courthouse-square plan for their towns because it accentuated and validated the civic authority brought by local government to the frontier. From a practical perspective, it also provided four blocks of high-value lots, the profits from which could be used to construct the court-house. In practice, corner lots commanded the highest prices at periodical lot sales held during the first year or two of the town. Demand for lots, and therefore their value, varied considerably among county seats throughout the Midwest.

A different process ensued among most county seats platted along the principal lakes and rivers of the Mississippi Basin. Regardless of who platted these towns or when, physical geography was the dominant factor in creating patterns of urban forms. For example, county seats along the Mississippi River, such as Davenport and Fort Madison in Iowa, and Stillwater and Winona in Minnesota, evolved as trade and processing centres in which economic activity developed along a linear business district that was adjacent to, or a block from, the waterway. This geography gave businesses access to river

traffic and allowed for the linear expansion of commercial space along level flood-plains or terraces. Though less common, commercial districts perpendicular to the river also evolved where ferries or crude bridges funnelled traffic onto commercial arteries (Burlington, Iowa; Elkader, Iowa). Whether perpendicular or parallel in form, the early growth of such trading centres along waterways that became county boundaries often led to a classic American frontier confrontation – county-seat wars – between peripheral river towns whose advantageous transportation favoured a rapid integration into an evolving regional economy, and inland towns whose advantageous centrality supported local accessibility.

Although the era of railroad towns began in the 1850s when the 'Associates', a group of entrepreneurs associated with the Illinois Central Railroad purchased land along the line from Centralia to Chicago and from Centralia to Galena and platted several towns with standard symmetrical plats (Reps, 1965, pp. 389-93), most railroad construction in Iowa and Minnesota was delayed until after the Civil War. By then, 'an increasingly larger share of the wealth generated by the Middle West's agricultural surplus was channeled through the region's leading urban centers, which processed or trans-shipped the commodities and performed manufacturing and wholesaling functions for the smaller towns linked to them by railroads'. Much of the wealth generated by such economic activity was then invested in new railroad construction for recently settled or unsettled areas. The opportunities after 1865 for railroads to appropriate the process of frontier urbanization were so substantial that in fact, 'town platting thus became the function of railroad corporations, or their designated townsite agents and the opportunities for individual townsite speculators was decreased commensurately' (Hudson, 1985, p. 10).

Although railroad towns soon became competitors for county seat designation, their proprietors hardly created them for that purpose. Corporate ambitions to sell land and town lots efficiently and to control farm-commodity, timber and ore movements were more critical factors. In heated competition among themselves, railroads planned town sites as part of a comprehensive system, locating individual towns by projecting trade areas while considering town placement along rival lines. The immediate goal was profit from lot sales, but in the long run, larger profits were anticipated from commodity shipments through the town. As John Hudson (1982, p. 42) has noted, each town was 'a component of corporate ambitions to manipulate people and resources, to command space and consolidate position in order to maximize profits for the company'.

How did the corporate vision of systematic, planned, profit-driven settlement influence the look of railroad towns that became county seats in Minnesota and in Iowa? One might expect that town forms would be highly standardized, and indeed the corporate symbols of tracks, rights-of-way, and depot were highly standardized. The conjunction of intensive railroad development with other settlement, however, often allowed private proprietors to partake in town-founding processes. This produced a modicum of diversity as private proprietors, whether working with railroad officials or independently from them, varied blocks, lots and street patterns primarily to relieve congestion created by the tracks. Railroads themselves also contributed to the diversity of forms by speculating in town lot sales without, in most cases, a long-term commitment in time and money to the economic growth of the towns. The result was that many towns, including a number of county seats, did not evolve as they were planned (Schmiedeler, 2001).

## Representative processes and plans

Most county seats with central squares are located in the southern four tiers of Iowa counties with a solid core area in south-central Iowa where county commissioners were proprietors of nearly all towns. The founding of Chariton, the county seat of Lucas County, exemplifies the process. In a special act approved on 15 January 1849, the Iowa


**Figure 4. Original plat of Chariton, Iowa, which evolved as planned into a Shelbyville square town. From Lucas County Recorder's Office, Chariton, Iowa.**

Second General Assembly organized the county, and in August of that year voters elected the county's first commissioners. Shortly thereafter, locating commissioners fixed the county seat within a mile of the centre of the county and filed their required report on 11 September 1849. The next day, elected commissioners appointed William S. Townsend agent 'to lay off the county seat, and to sell lots', which were eventually offered for public sale in early November. Townsend hired a surveyor, William Webb, but his work was so unsatisfactory that the board of commissioners, in April 1850, ordered the county surveyor, Nelson Wescoat, to resurvey the town site (*History of Lucas County, Iowa*, 1881, pp. 404-6). Wescoat's plat is fairly typical of central-courthouse-square towns in Iowa (Figure 4). Sixteen outlots and nineteen regular street blocks, each with eight lots, surround a public square. Business lots around the square were undifferentiated by size but oriented to the square. With one exception, central-courthouse-square plans of other commissioner towns varied only by the size of their plats and the number of lots subdividing each block.

Less than a year passed between the organization of Lucas County and the sale of town lots. In most counties organized between 1839 and 1851, during which period Iowa's county commissioners dominated the processes of county-seat formation, the framework of local government was established with similar speed, leaving little opportunity for private town site ventures. Commissioners, through their appointments of agents charged with selling lots (four in the case of Chariton within the first 2 years), remained active in development well after the initial platting of the town (Schmiedeler, 1998).

The predictable process of locating and platting commissioner county seats created an exception to the rule of dominance of central-courthouse-square towns in southern Iowa. A group of eleven town site speculators, incorporated as the Appanoose Rapids Company, anticipated the creation of Wapello County in the heart of Iowa's central-court-house-square country. Prior to county organization in 1844 and shortly after organization of the company, investors shrewdly placed their town site, Ottumwa, at the 'Appanoose Rapids' of the Des Moines River and within half a mile of the county centre. They knew that Wapello County and others within its tier were to measure 18 x 24 miles, the same size as Jefferson County immediately to the east. By May 1843, John Arrowsmith, a man hired by the company, had completed a partial survey of the town site. As an inducement for locating the county seat at their town site, the company offered the county every alternate lot up to a maximum of 160 acres (*History of Wapello County, Iowa*, 1878, pp. 461-7). The newly elected county commissioners, perhaps pleased with the town site because of its centrality and available water, agreed to the proposal and platted the town jointly with the town site company. Ottumwa developed in the characteristic pattern of a river town with a linear business district on Second Street parallel with, and one block from, the river (Schmiedeler, 1998).

In 1851 the Iowa legislature adopted a highly centralized county judge system of local government. As individual representatives, county judges exercised far less control over county seat formation in the 1850s than did commissioners during the 1840s. County judges platted only one-quarter of the 40 county seats established during the decade, and only five of those evolved as central-court-house-square towns. Thus, the 1850s represented a transitional period in urban planning in Iowa, as control over county seat formation shifted from commissioners to county judges and to private individuals and corporations. As Yankee and Midland settlers moved into central and north-west Iowa, their plan of choice was increasingly linear. The heyday of the central courthouse square in Iowa was over.

In Minnesota and Iowa most of the linear county seats that dominate the valley of the Mississippi River and its major tributaries had relatively large plats which, according to historian Theodore Blegen (1963, p. 175), were the result of 'frenzied townsite speculation'. The plan of Shakopee, Minnesota, is typical (Figure 5). Shakopee's surveyor, Edmund Hood, probably was responsible for the town design. He surveyed and was the proprietor of Chaska, just across the Minnesota River from Shakopee in Carver County, and Blue Earth in Faribault County of south-central Minnesota. The plans for all three towns are similar, but Chaska, though not designed as such, evolved into a crossed-linear form when the business district apparently exceeded expectations by spreading in both directions down a centrally located lateral street.

A few inland towns, particularly in Minnesota, came into existence on early road networks several years before they became county seats. County-seat status played no role in their origins, so these towns were destined to have linear business districts without assigned public space regardless of who platted them. On the other hand, planning opportunities arose throughout the Midwest when original county seats failed to prosper or, more frequently, when state legislatures subdivided counties as they became more densely settled. In this latter situation, original county seats were no longer located centrally within the new county boundaries, a development that was frequently detrimental to their survival. In taking advantage of these opportunities planners recognized that acquiring county-seat status was important for any inland town that lacked river transportation. Such status would command higher values for commercial and residential lots, and so surveyors typically were instructed to assign space in the form of public squares for county buildings. In the spirit of the Yankee commercial towns, however, the business district was at the town core. Public squares were usually on the margins of the business

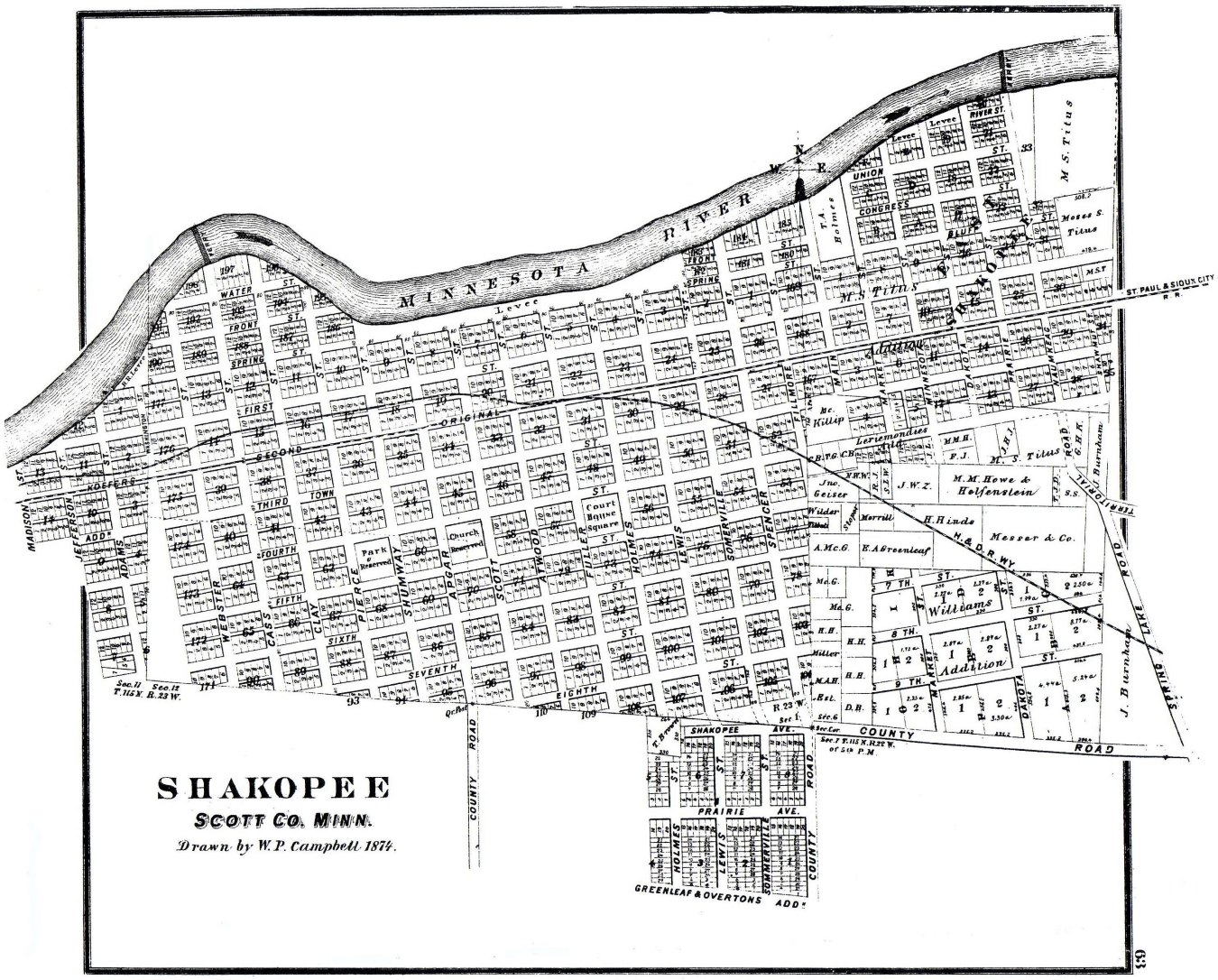


**Figure 5. Plan of Shakopee, Minnesota, from *An illustrated historical atlas of the State of Minnesota*, 1874, showing the original plat and early additions.**

district or in residential areas. Minnesota, for example, has only one central-courthouse-square town.

Interspersed among the linear and central-courthouse-square towns in north-western Iowa are several county seats with railroad forms. John Insley Blair, the most influential railroad town site promoter in western Iowa, was responsible for most of these towns. Born in New Jersey, Blair acquired experience with railroad operations as director of the Delaware, Lackawanna and Western Railway and later moved west after realizing the potential for railroad development in unsettled regions. Blair eventually owned about one-sixth of the stock of sixteen companies operating in Iowa and Nebraska, and his railroads constructed more than 800 miles of track in the state (Ludwig, 1948). These lines were popularly known as 'Blair Roads'.

Blair's towns include the county seats of Boone, Carroll and Ida Grove along the Cedar Rapids and Missouri River Railroad, and Storm Lake and LeMars on the Iowa Falls and Sioux City line. The founding of Boone in Boone County is instructive of how railroads manipulated county officials and citizens to their financial advantage. Before reaching Boone County in the summer of 1865, officials of the Cedar Rapids and Missouri River had

persuaded Congress to allow the company to change its proposed route to the Missouri River to one that was 'better and more expeditious'. According to one historian, 'the real object was to make the location of the line uncertain in order to extort money, land and privileges from the counties and towns through which the road was to pass' (Republican Atlas of Boone County, Iowa, 1902). To build to Boonesboro, a Shelbyville square town platted as the original county seat by the Boone county judge in 1851, the railroad induced the county to donate its swamp-land funds and unsold swamp lands, which were ceded by the U.S. Congress to states ostensibly for the purposes of reclamation, plus 20 acres for railroad grounds. The county also agreed to pay the railroad 10 000 dollars in cash and notes. However, when the notes could not be guaranteed within the 3-day limit imposed by Blair, he and his associates established a depot and new town site on land purchased about a mile east of Boonesboro. Blair's reason for refusing to build to Boonesboro seems spurious in light of the fact that it would have been easier still for his railroad to lay its track down Honey Creek and across the Des Moines River south of both Boone and Boonesboro. Of course, the real incentive for platting a new town site was the profit that would accrue from residential and commercial lot sales. Considering the nine additions to Boone, all platted by Blair, these must have been quite substantial. Boonesboro retained the site of the county seat but not its status as a separate town; it was incorporated into Boone in 1887 (Barkley, 1921, pp. 541-2).

Because the surveyors differed from place to place, the plats of most of Blair's towns were variable. Most evolved into crossed T-towns. Railroad planners used more standardized designs for their towns in the Red River Valley of Minnesota. For example, Charles Morris, who surveyed at least four towns along the tracks of the St. Paul and Pacific Railroad (later the Great Northern), used a standard symmetrical plan for Willmar, Benson and Morris, his namesake town. Benson's plan was typical (Figure 6). Morris subdivided half blocks into twelve business lots and full blocks into twenty residential lots, all of which were oriented to the tracks. Benson's business district evolved on Atlantic and Pacific Avenues facing the tracks. The names of these streets and the general design of the town were replicated in Morris and Willmar as well as in Hallock and Ada, surveyed by Nathan Butler (Schmiedeler, 2001).

The Lake Superior and Puget Sound Company was one of the railroad-affiliated corporations that operated in Minnesota in conjunction with the transcontinental Northern Pacific Railway. This group, led by a 15-member board full of Yankee capitalists, platted Aitkin, Brainerd, Wadena, and Moorhead, four of the five county seats along the main line of the Northern Pacific. Plats of these towns were less standardized than in the Red River Valley. In Aitkin, company officials had to work with Nathaniel Tibbets, a Maine lumberman who owned part of the south-east section of the town site. The company platted Aitkin with a parallel plan (see Figure 2) but the town developed as a T-town on Fourth Street. Lots here sold for $75 but the company realized only $6000 in lot sales by 1888, the year of the last recorded sale (Schmiedeler, 2001).

Milaca, seat of Mille Lacs County, originated in the mid 1880s after John S. Kennedy, a New York City banker and business associate of railroad magnate James J. Hill, proposed creating a town with a lumber mill, company store and land company offices at Oak Park, where the Minneapolis and St. Cloud Railroad crossed the Rum River in east-central Minnesota. Hill authorized the incorporation of the Mille Lacs Lumber Company there but in this case what he touched did not turn to gold. Mismanagement, a lack of expertise among company officials and a fraudulent land purchase by Kennedy's nephew precluded success (Hervey, 1990, pp. 26-35). From the perspective of town planning the failure seems justified. The original plat shows only four blocks subdivided into twelve lots with cross alleys in a configuration that can be loosely interpreted as an orthogonal design (Figure 7). An absence of public space

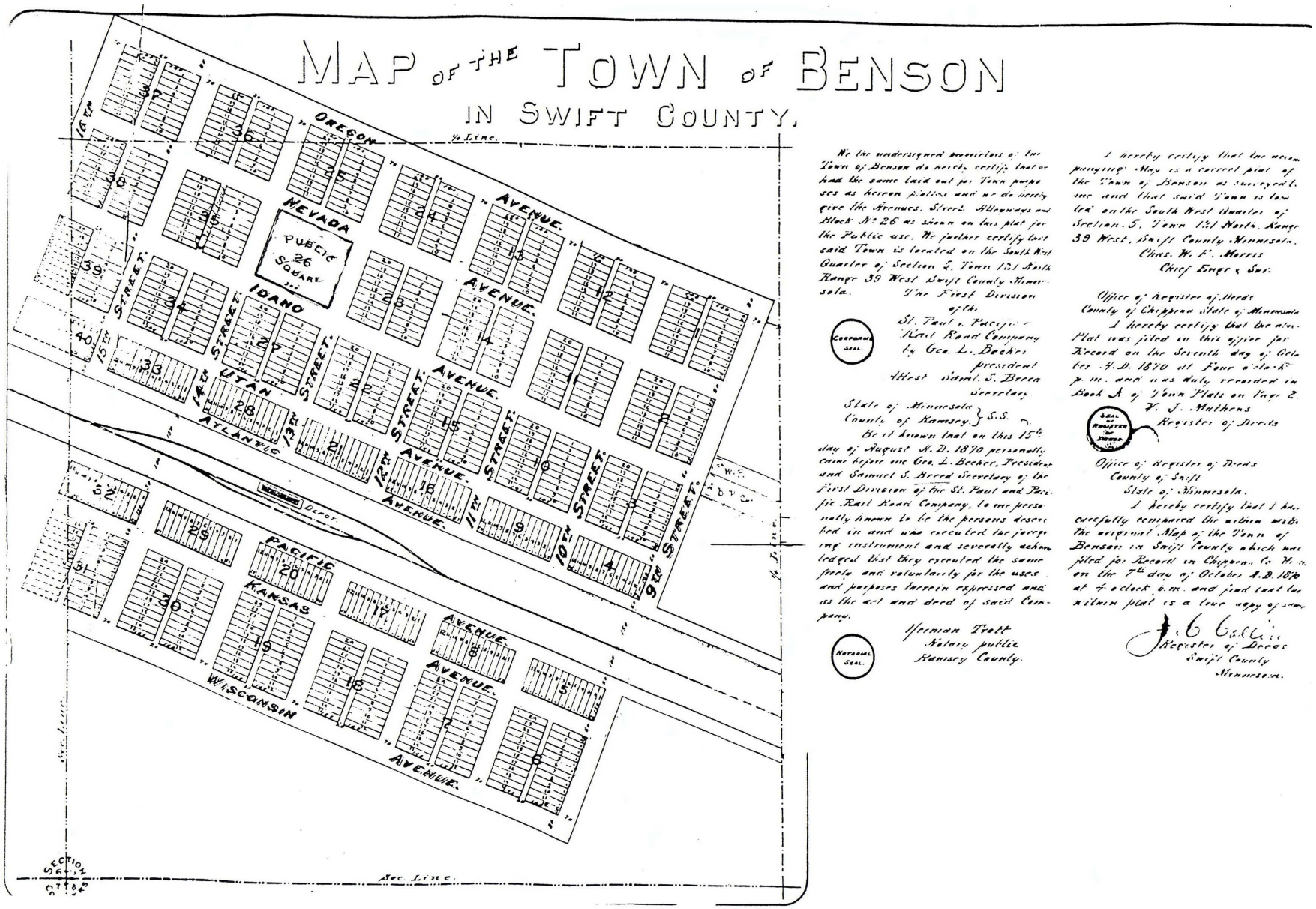


**Figure 6. Original plat of Benson, which evolved as planned into a symmetrical railroad town. From Swift County Recorder's Office, Benson, Minnesota.**

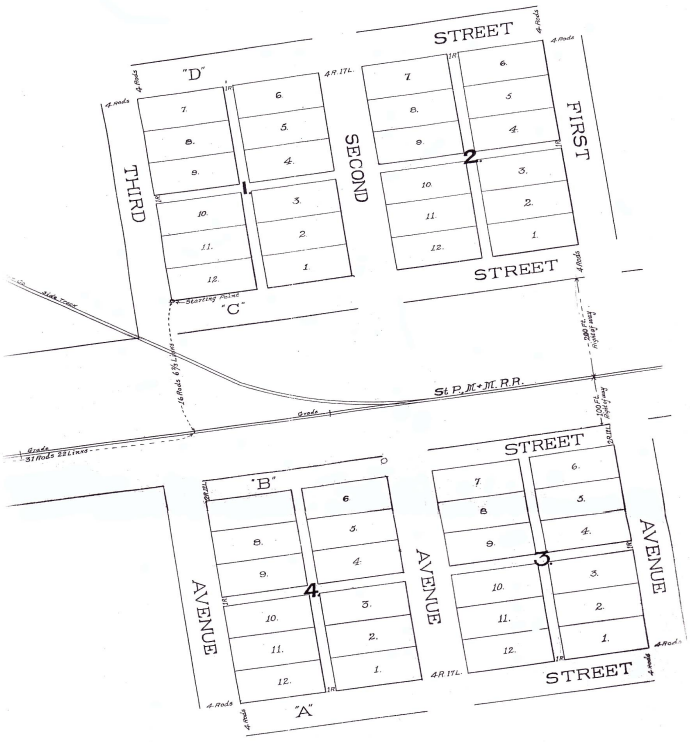


**Figure 7. Original plat of Milaca, Minnesota, 1886: a simple orthogonal design. Milaca evolved as a T-town with most businesses on Second Street between 'C' and 'D' Streets. From Mille Lacs County Recorder's Office, Milaca, Minnesota.**

suggests that the acquisition of the county seat was immaterial to officials of the lumber company (although the courthouse was eventually relocated here from Princeton, the original county seat). The modest business district, which eventually developed to form a T-town south of the tracks on Second Avenue, also suggests apathy on the part of proprietors. The key factor here, however, is probably timing. As Thomas Harvey (1983, p. 33) observed about the majority of towns in the Red River Valley, original plats became smaller and smaller, until towns of two or four blocks were common.

## Summary and conclusions

This study reveals that the patterns of town forms of county seats in Iowa and Minnesota have explicit links with the groups of proprietors who created them. For example, by first locating and then platting county seats, government officials were primarily responsible for the pattern of central-courthouse-squares in the study area as they were throughout most of the rest of the Midwest. Individuals in the study area who platted county seats utilized central-courthouse-square forms far less than linear forms, but their choice to do so was most likely conditioned by their perception of the ideal form of a county seat – the central-courthouse square – that had been established previously by government officials in Indiana, Illinois and Iowa. The association of patterns of central-courthouse-square towns with government officials in the Midwest suggests that government had a greater role in frontier urbanization than in just 'a few planned cities on public land' and that private developers did not determine the location and design of all towns (Reps, 1979, p. 33). However, political forms like the Shelbyville square veiled the

relationship between the county officials who platted the town and the private land owners who often, but not always, donated the town site for speculative purposes (Conzen, 2001/2002). That relationship, however, is beyond the scope of this research.

The pattern of linear county seats in Iowa and Minnesota can be attributed to three factors. Regardless of who platted them, towns along major waterways had a focus on business districts that evolved mostly parallel to the waterfront. This geography increased accessibility to the commercial river traffic and allowed for expansion along flood plains or terraces. This linear town geography is conspicuous in the core of central-courthouse-square country throughout the southern part of the Midwest and into the South. The timing of settlement also influenced the development of linear towns. Towns established ahead of county formation on early 'inland' roads were not created as county seats and thus developed as linear towns often without any assigned public space. Yankee planners, too, preferred linear business districts for their towns. Their planning model relegated courthouse space to peripheral locations, usually within residential areas away from the business district. As settlement progressed westward onto the plains of the Midwest, linear town forms became the dominant choice of 'town companies', groups of town planners who created towns for speculative gain. Preliminary research suggests that federal and state legislation in the form of a series of so-called Town Site Acts enabled widespread speculation by town companies, but their relationship to the pattern of dominance of linear forms needs further analysis.

As time passed, individuals and their ideas of towns as political and commercial centres were superseded by a corporate view of towns as modules of an expanding system devised to control frontier development. Railroads could best implement their corporate ambitions in sparsely settled or unsettled regions and the distribution of railroad county seats generally reflects this (Schmiedeler, 2001). In these regions private proprietors sometimes platted towns along railroad lines or they shared ownership of the town site but only where railroad officials allowed them to do so. Railroads were, and still are, powerful institutions: they did what was most economically advantageous to them, as the evolution of Boonesboro shows. Indeed, the central and northern Plains are not only replete with railroad county seats, most of which evolved as T-towns, but they also are littered with the skeletal remains – street patterns and dilapidated buildings – of inland towns, as testimony to the absolute control of railroads over urbanization processes. Railroad officials, though, created too many towns and in time many of them would join the list of ghost towns on the western frontier that was so significantly shaped by their urban moulds.

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