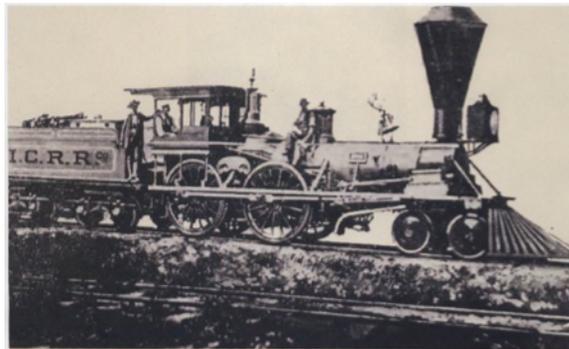


# Railroad Town: The Iron Horse Comes to Mattoon, Illinois, 1855 to 1870

Justin Wardall

Around noon on June 9<sup>th</sup>, 1855, a crowd of nearly three thousand people gathered to watch as the first train rolled down the tracks across the crossing of the Terre Haute-Alton line and the Illinois Central line. The crowd cheered as the steam billowed and the boilers roared while the train crept its way down the tracks; cheering for the man who stood atop the train's only freight car. Announcing to the crowd that he had brought with him an endless supply of beer and whiskey, the spectators cheered his name, the name of William Mattoon.

It may have been difficult for Mattoon to believe that the town that would eventually bear his name had sprung up in less than a year. The population had already risen to a few hundred settlers by that summer day in June. A host of businesses were providing goods and services for the citizens of this newly established village even before the first train rolled down the tracks.



*Figure 1: One of the first engines that ran through Mattoon, Illinois, in late summer, 1855. (Alex Summers. Mr. Mattoon's City: 1855-1955)*

But for the town of Mattoon, growth was only just beginning. Within a few short years, the two railroads brought not only tremendous growth in the population, but also dynamic social, economic, and cultural change. The railroad would be at the center of the ebb and flow of the community's fortunes for years to come.

### **History of the Railroad Crossing and the Founding of Mattoon**

The coming of railroads to and across Illinois made a faltering beginning in the 1830s and '40s. That they were equated with prosperity there was no doubt. In the 1830s the state of Illinois clamored to be a part of the new craze: of railroading. In 1837, the Illinois General Assembly passed the Internal Improvements Act, which authorized the issuance of ten million dollars in bonds, with nine million authorized for railroad construction in the state. According to Craig Sanders in *Mattoon and Charleston Area Railroads*, "this included \$3.5 million for a central railroad between Cairo, at the confluence of the Mississippi and Ohio Rivers, and Galena in northwestern Illinois."<sup>1</sup>

Shortly after the passage of the act, in the Panic of 1837, those plans collapsed. Only one railroad had been built by 1841 when the program was cancelled. It would be another twelve years before Illinois would approve a charter for the Illinois Central Railroad (IC).<sup>2</sup> Around the same time, the state had chartered the Terre Haute and Alton Railroad (TH&A). Both railroads were to pass through east-central Illinois, with the IC running north-south and the TH&A running east-west. As early as 1852, the point where the two railroads crossed was rumored to be ten miles west of

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*Justin Wardall is from Pana, Illinois, and recently completed his MA in history at EIU. "Railroad Town: The Iron Horse Comes to Mattoon, Illinois, 1855 to 1870" was written for Dr. Terry Barnhart's Nineteenth-Century U. S. Cultural History seminar in the summer semester of 2013.*

<sup>1</sup> Craig Sanders, *Mattoon and Charleston Area Railroads*, (Charleston, SC: Arcadia Publishing, 2008), 7.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

Charleston, Illinois, on empty prairie land. By 1854, it was official: the route would in fact pass through this location.<sup>3</sup>

Almost immediately, a group of six enterprising capitalists realized the opportunity that lay before them. If the railroad meant progress, then a town set up at the crossing would be a very lucrative endeavor. Upon the earliest rumors in 1852, the group, consisting of Elisha Linder, Ebenezer Noyes, James T. Cunningham, Stephen D. Dole, John L. Allison, and John Cunningham purchased the section of land where the crossing was rumored to take place. Paying \$2.50 an acre, they immediately decided to place a town on the spot.<sup>4</sup> However, since the fixed location of the crossing was not certain until sometime in 1854, the site was not staked off until 1855.<sup>5</sup>



Figure 2: Crossing of the Illinois Central and Terre Haute & Alton lines (Craig Sanders, *Mattoon and Charleston Area Railroads*, (Charleston, SC: Arcadia Publishing, 2008)).

Early in 1855, the area developed the name of “Pegtown” since the majority of the area was simply staked off plots of land.<sup>6</sup> By the spring of 1855, houses and buildings were already being set up in the area. Two years later, in 1857, the town would officially be renamed Mattoon, after the man who supervised the building of

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<sup>3</sup> Alexander Summers, *Mattoon, Origin and Growth: A Concise Historical Sketch of Mattoon and Coles County With a Special Chapter on Banking*, (Mattoon: The National Bank of Mattoon, 1946), 3.

<sup>4</sup> William Henry Perrin, *History of Coles County – 1879* (Chicago: Wm. LeBaron, Jr. & Co., 1879), 353.

<sup>5</sup> Summers, *Mattoon*, 6.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

the TH&A, although it would come to be called Mattoon as early as late 1855. Coincidentally, as if he knew the way that progress would affect the community, Charles Floyd Jones, a land speculator in the railroad industry, suggested that instead of Mattoon the town should be named “Excelsior,” Latin for “ever upward.”<sup>7</sup>

Due to the law at the time, whichever railroad company made it to the crossing of the two roads second, had to pay for the upkeep of the crossing. In what historians would later call the “Race to the Crossing,” the TH&A arrived at the crossing in the summer of 1855, and shortly after, the IC made it to the crossing.<sup>8</sup> Building the crossing resulted in a dramatic rise in land prices, from only sixty-nine cents an acre before the crossing, to twenty-five dollars per acre afterwards.<sup>9</sup> In one year, from 1855 to 1856, over one hundred buildings were built within the village, and by 1857, voters passed an act to incorporate the village, and Mattoon became an official town.

### **Mattoon on the Map**

Contemporary maps show that railroad literally put Mattoon on the map. The first maps of Coles County make no mention of the area. Obviously, even the railroad itself did not exist in 1836, and a contemporary map of proposed canals and roads only show the nearby cities of Shelbyville and Charleston.<sup>10</sup> An 1856 map of the state of Illinois shows the railroads and their crossings, but still Mattoon is not shown.<sup>11</sup> It is not until 1857 when voters approved incorporation that the village became an official town. The town of Mattoon first appears on “Chapman’s Township Map of Illinois” published in 1857.<sup>12</sup>

### **Population**

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<sup>7</sup> Charles Floyd Jones, “Letterbook, 1850-1855”.

<sup>8</sup> Perrin, *History of Coles County*, 353.

<sup>9</sup> Summers, *Mattoon*, 6.

<sup>10</sup> “A New Map of Illinois with its Proposed Canals, Roads & Distances from Place to Place Along the Stage & Steamboat Routes,” (Philadelphia: H.S. Tanner, 1836).

<sup>11</sup> “A New Map of the State of Illinois,” (Philadelphia: Charles DeSilver, 1856).

<sup>12</sup> “Chapman’s Township Map of Illinois,” (Milwaukee: Dyer & Pasmore, 1857).

By the time Mattoon became an incorporated town, it already had a population of 500.<sup>13</sup> By 1858-1859, the population had doubled, and by 1860, just three years after the founding of Mattoon, the number nearly tripled, with roughly 1500 citizens in the town, while 1,946 resided in the township.<sup>14</sup><sup>15</sup> By 1870, 4,967 people lived in the township, surpassing the county seat, Charleston, by nearly 500 citizens.<sup>16</sup>

Statistics for the population increase between 1860 and 1870 show that the railroad was bringing a significant amount of people in from other places, effectively creating a more diverse community. By 1870, a little over ten percent of the population of Mattoon Township was foreign born, compared to Charleston's three percent.

In the 1879 *History of Coles County*, William Henry Perrin included biographical sketches of prominent members of the community of each township. Included in the sketches are the biographies of M. Alshuler, the owner of a staple and dry goods store, from Bavaria, Germany, William Burgess, a manufacturer and dealer of boots and shoes, from Devonshire, England, J.K. Donnell, a wholesale grocer, from Tyrone County, Ireland, Matthias Everharty, the proprietor of West Broadway Meat Market, who was born in Coblenz, Prussia, G.T. Kilner, the town druggist, from Manchester, England, the Kahn brothers, Mark and Moses, who emigrated from Germany, and J.W. Moore, a lumber merchant, who was born in Kent County, England.<sup>17</sup>

Many foreigners, and perhaps some of the people listed above, were often enticed by the IC to emigrate from their homes in Europe to the state of Illinois. Due to the intense need for labor, the Illinois Central Railroad Office published a pamphlet in 1861 for distribution across Europe. It explained the seemingly endless opportunities available in the state of Illinois. Extolling the virtues of Illinois farmland, the pamphlet made immigrating to Illinois

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<sup>13</sup> Summers, *Mattoon*, 8.

<sup>14</sup> *Illinois State Gazetteer & Directory: 1858-1859*, (G.W. Hawes).

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>16</sup> Perrin, *History of Coles County*, 699.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 539-553.

sound like a very prosperous endeavor. Acknowledging the current state of agriculture in Europe, and promising immigrants the opportunity to purchase land, the pamphlet claimed that the Illinois Central Railroad Company had over 1,400,000 acres of land for sale of selected prairie and woodlands, for sale at prices ranging from eight to fourteen dollars per acre. The pamphlet also mentioned that in many of the railroad towns, like Mattoon, the railroad had lots that could be bought for a decent price for those interested in entering a mercantile or industrial trade as opposed to agricultural trade.<sup>18</sup>

As well as trying to sell immigrants on the idea of moving to Illinois, the pamphlet also offered advice to immigrants on how to make the best out of this opportunity: mainly, working in a trade or industrial job for three years before buying land for farming. And even then, buying small parcels of land instead of large holdings that would lead to debt. The pamphlet also compared the health conditions in Illinois to those in Europe, showing that Illinois farmers and laborers were much better off than peasants and laborers in Europe. The pamphlet must have lead many Europeans to see Illinois as a land of opportunity, and the pamphlet even offered prospective immigrants the easiest routes to Illinois, with prices for travel included. In this fifty-page pamphlet, Europeans found a handbook for immigration that brought a great many to towns like Mattoon.

The railroads also brought a larger population of African-Americans to the area. In 1860, only nineteen African-Americans resided in Mattoon Township, but by 1870, that number had risen over 800% to 174 African-Americans living in township.<sup>19</sup> While they remained a small percentage of the population, black residents nonetheless found work in both the railroad industry and businesses within the community.<sup>20</sup> The railroads definitely had an effect on the diversity of the Coles County area, especially in Mattoon.

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<sup>18</sup> "A Guide to the Illinois Central Railroad Lands," (Chicago: Illinois Central Railroad Office, 1861).

<sup>19</sup> Perrin, *History of Coles County*, 699.

<sup>20</sup> Sanders, *Mattoon and Charleston Area Railroads*, 11.

### **Economic Impact**

Perhaps the biggest impact that the railroads had on Mattoon and the surrounding area was the economic and cultural changes that occurred in those railroad towns. The 1850s was a decade of tremendous economic growth within the state of Illinois. The railroads, like the coming of canals before them, truly opened the state up to the outside world, allowing for a more rapid transit of agricultural produce to new markets. Local economies were linked to an increasingly integrated national market of railroad born commerce, and Mattoon was no exception.

Situated 172 miles from Chicago and 130 miles from St. Louis, transport of agricultural goods was a burden for farmers during the early years of settlement in Coles County. With no railroads travelling from the area to the large urban markets of Alton, Chicago, and St. Louis, farmers had to take their harvest by the wagonload several hundred miles to reach the larger markets. Then, the sold grain would usually travel down the Mississippi River to New Orleans or down other river and canal systems from Chicago to make it to the East.<sup>21</sup> However, by 1860, shipments of grain were travelling on the railroad to cities like Chicago and St. Louis, allowing farmers to grow more. The *Mattoon Weekly Gazette* listed the grain harvests for October through November of 1860 on Dec. 7<sup>th</sup>, 1860, showing that Chicago had received 575 bushels of corn; St. Louis had received 1,550 bushels, and New Orleans, directly connected to Mattoon through the IC, had received 12,221 bushels of corn for the month alone.<sup>22</sup> Furthermore, in 1873 the Decatur, Sullivan, and Mattoon line opened between Decatur and Mattoon, giving Mattoon yet another outlet for the transportation of goods.<sup>23</sup>

For the year 1867 to 1868 an agent for the Indianapolis & St. Louis Roads<sup>24</sup> reported that 164,130 bushels of corn had been

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<sup>21</sup> Charles Ward, *Historical Encyclopedia of Illinois & the History of Coles County*, (Chicago: Munsell Publishing Company, 1906).

<sup>22</sup> "Oct-Nov Grain Shipments," *Mattoon Weekly Gazette*, Dec. 7, 1860.

<sup>23</sup> Summers, *Mattoon*, 9.

<sup>24</sup> In 1856, the Terre Haute & Alton's name was changed to the Terre Haute, Alton, and St. Louis to emphasize Terre Haute-St. Louis Traffic. The line later

shipped, while the IC reported that they had shipped 324,561 bushels during the period. This was a tremendous growth rate compared to the earlier days of shipping grain by wagonload. Furthermore, grain elevators made loading grain onto trains much more convenient, and Mattoon was set up with an elevator as early as 1855, although it was located too far from the city's center and was soon abandoned and another elevator, closer to the city took its place.<sup>25</sup>



Figure 3: Map of Mattoon Il., circa 1855-1860 (courtesy of The Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library, Springfield Il.)

In addition to the one hundred plus buildings built in Mattoon between 1855 and 1856, over one-hundred-and-fifty houses were built within the town between 1858 and 1859. According to the *Illinois State Gazetteer & Directory: 1858-1859*, a large brick Methodist Church, a “fine hotel” the Essex, and a very large business house were built between these years. A map of Mattoon, circa 1855-1860 (fig. 3) compared to one circa 1869 (fig. 4) shows that in just ten years the town more than doubled in physical size as more and more people flooded into the area.

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defaulted on its bonds in 1859 and was then reorganized as the St. Louis, Alton and Terre Haute. Later, a Cincinnati group leased the StLA&TH and placed it under the management of the Indianapolis and St. Louis Railroad, accounting for the name change. (Sanders, *Mattoon and Charleston Area Railroads*, 8.)

<sup>25</sup> Perrin, *History of Coles County*, 367.

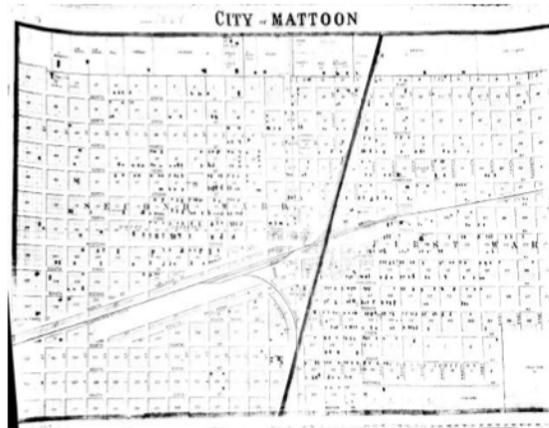


Figure 4: Map of Mattoon Il., circa 1869 (courtesy of The Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library, Springfield, Il.)

As the economy changed rapidly, businesses had to keep up with changing demands. A pork-house built in 1855 became a hominy-mill in 1861, a plow-factory in 1864, and in 1866-1867 became a corn-meal mill. Businesses, especially warehouses and factories, within the city of Mattoon often lasted only a few years before either becoming some other type of business, offering different products to suit changing needs in the economy of Mattoon, as well as the changing economy of Illinois and the United States.<sup>26</sup>

Professions and businesses within the town also saw tremendous growth as more people moved to the area and the demand for more professional occupations emerged. Between 1858 and 1859 the *Illinois State Gazetteer & Directory: 1858-1859* lists thirty-four professions or businesses in the town, including grocers, attorneys, real-estate agents, jewelers, and general stores.<sup>27</sup> Eight years later, in 1866-1867, there were 187 professions/businesses, an increase of 450%.

In 1879, a new profession entered the scene in Mattoon when the Indianapolis and St. Louis railway built a machine shop.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 367.

<sup>27</sup> *Illinois State Gazetteer & Directory*.

<sup>28</sup> See footnote 24.

Used to repair and perform maintenance on locomotives and cars on the line, the business employed two hundred workers in Mattoon. Railroad employees, who together earned \$23,000 a month, a significant sum in 1879, spent nearly all their earnings in Mattoon.<sup>29</sup> Stores in Mattoon profited tremendously from the boost to the economy brought about by the railroad industry.



*Figure 6 Machine-shop workers posing in front of a steam engine in the 1870s (Craig Sanders, Mattoon and Charleston Area Railroads)*

According to the ledger of the Ogden Patton General Store, for the months of September-October of 1862, the store averaged nearly sixty transactions a day, with the exception of Sundays. This shows only a small percent of the number of transactions that took place in Mattoon for any given day. Furthermore, by 1866 there were ten dry goods stores in Mattoon, which in itself is only a small portion of the stores that lined Mattoon's streets. Railroad commerce and necessary machine-shop repairs translated into hardware stores, carpenter-shops, harness-makers, and blacksmiths in large numbers. One especially popular business was the saloon, with ten saloons in 1866. Ironically, there were only four less saloons than there were grocers within the city.<sup>30</sup> Economically speaking, Mattoon businesses boomed from 1855-1870. While

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<sup>29</sup> Perrin, *History of Coles County*, 369.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 372-373.

building and businesses slowed down during the Civil War, they picked back up immediately after for another five years, before slowly tapering off again.<sup>31</sup>

### Cultural Impact

While the economic impact of the railroads was certainly more visible, the railroads also contributed culturally to the area. In 1856, as railroads came into Coles County, and ultimately, Mattoon, telegraph lines came with them. Alliances between railroad companies like the Chicago, Alton, & St. Louis and the Telegraph Company were quite common. While they were helpful in assisting the movement of trains, telegraphs also brought news to the burgeoning city; no longer was Mattoon, or Coles County for that matter, isolated. While communication used to take days or months, now it only took a few moments.<sup>32</sup> This allowed for better news coverage than was known in the past. Instead of waiting days or weeks for newspaper articles that came from larger cities on the East Coast to be printed locally, the citizens of Coles County could now enjoy news not long after it left the presses in more urban areas.

During the mid to late nineteenth century, Mattoon had four newspapers, *The Mattoon Weekly Gazette*, *The Mattoon Daily Journal*, *Mattoon Commercial* (which later would be renamed to *The Radical Republican*) and *The Mattoon Morning Star*. Each presented their own coverage of the news to the citizens of Mattoon.<sup>33</sup> This allowed citizens of Mattoon to be more knowledgeable of life outside their community, whether it was coverage of the war with the South, politics in the East, even the “Bleeding Kansas” fiasco in the West. In fact, the town of Mattoon was one of many that sent relief to Kansas, holding relief drives to support their fellow free-soil advocates in the West.<sup>34</sup>

*The Mattoon Weekly Gazette* had a large number of advertisements for anything from lumber to watches (so one could

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<sup>31</sup> Summers, *Mattoon*, 9.

<sup>32</sup> Ward, *Encyclopedia*, 659.

<sup>33</sup> Perrin, *History of Coles County*, 382-389.

<sup>34</sup> “Relief Drives for Kansas,” *Mattoon Weekly Gazette*, January, 1861.

make sure they made the train on time). In fact, advertisements often took up 2-3 pages of *The Mattoon Weekly Gazette*, which in its entirety only consisted of four-six pages in length each week. While consumer culture is thought to have developed later in the nineteenth century, in railroad towns consumer culture seems to have developed much earlier.

The railroad also brought new experiences to the citizens of Mattoon and communities located on or near rail lines that they would not have experienced otherwise. For instance, during the 1860 St. Louis agricultural fair, the railroad offered half fares to St. Louis to attend the fair. This allowed farmers who could not necessarily afford the fare to travel to St. Louis to see new types of agricultural methods that might prove to be a benefit to their farming. What was good for agriculture was good for the railroads and vice versa. Agricultural fairs make that important connection obvious.

Culture often follows commerce. More than goods and services exchange hands when trade becomes more than a local concern. The railroads transformed communities socially and culturally as well. The constant influx of new people to Mattoon exposed the community to a variety of different cultures and backgrounds. According to Ward, in his 1906 *History of Coles County*, being in touch with the eastern states marked the beginning of a new era for Mattoon. "Very soon," he said, "the 'Yankee School Marm' – that civilizing and polishing influence from "way deown East" – began to take hold of sons and daughters of our Kentucky, Virginia and Tennessee-born pioneers, and turn their faces about, so that they might catch new views of life."<sup>35</sup> Surely, the cultural beliefs and attitudes of the people who had lived in Coles County before the railroad were drastically changed, not only by this influx of migration/immigration, whether it was from other countries, or from other parts of the nation, but also by being connected to a larger world, one from, prior to 1855, they had been isolated.

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<sup>35</sup> Ward, *Encyclopedia*, 658.

## Conclusion

The railroad industry had an enormous impact on Mattoon from the mid to late nineteenth century. As railroads swept across Illinois, Mattoon likewise caught railroad fever. By 1889, four rails either went through Mattoon or terminated in Mattoon, and the city would keep growing. By 1900 the city population would be roughly 10,000 people. The railroad industry would continue to be an important part of Mattoon's economic and cultural livelihood until the 1950s, when steam engines were entirely phased out and railroad companies began using the more efficient diesel engines. Mattoon began to experience a decline in its railroad economy as many of the machine shops were simply no longer necessary, and trains could pass straight through a town without stopping for repairs. However, the legacy of the railroad remains with Mattoon today.

If one walks the streets of Mattoon today, one can still see the imprint of the railroads. One can see the different layout on the eastern and western sides of the city as they were parceled out in the 1850s according to the orientation of the community on the rail lines; the bike trail that sits astride the grading of the old Terre Haute & Alton road; even the buildings on Broadway, which today face the street, show that at one time several buildings were oriented toward the depots once located behind them. The front of many of the buildings on Broadway at one time were actually the back. The coming of the Iron Horse to Mattoon and its ultimate decline over time changed the community physically, economically, socially, and culturally. This essay may best be ended with a quote from the *1879 History of Coles County*: "Its growth has been rapid and wonderful beyond the wildest dreams of the pioneers who first set foot within its borders."<sup>36</sup> Such Whiggish odes to progress and the pioneers were by no means unique to Mattoon. They were a keynote in the history of many railroad towns. The coming of the Iron Horse was Prometheus unbound to those who sang its praises.

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<sup>36</sup> Perrin, *History of Coles County*, 223.