

# The Iron Horse arrive at the Bay

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By 1860 Ashland and field were bustling communities and ports, but were dependent on a small and undeveloped local economy. With the construction of the St. Mary's river canal underway, these sites appeared to have the potential to become important ports in the Great Lakes commerce system. But without railroads to connect the sites to the cities, farms, people, and resources of the hinterland, this potential would not be realized.

Railroad development in Wisconsin took place in the context of the rapid growth of a national rail system.

Between 1840 and 1850, national railroad mileage increased from 3,328 to 8,879 miles, or by or 167%; and from 1850 to 1860 there was a further

continuous increase to 30,026 miles, or by 245%.

By 1850 what might be called a railroad network had developed in New England and the mid-Atlantic states, with lines penetrating westward as far as Buffalo.

On the Great Lakes, lines ran from Cleveland and Sandusky to Cincinnati, and from Detroit to Michigan City just short of Chicago, with short segments elsewhere.

In Wisconsin, the first operational railroad was the Milwaukee, Waukesha, and Mississippi, opened from Milwaukee to Waukesha in February 1851. By the end of 1856, the state possessed a developing rail network of 395 miles, 263 miles of which had been constructed in that and the previous year. The network connected with Illinois railroads and Chicago through Beloit,



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Janesville, Lake Geneva, and Milwaukee-Racine-Kenosha, but extended northward only to Fond du Lac, Waterford and other points within the Wisconsin-Fox rivers boundary.

The prospective benefits of railroads to Lake Superior had long been recognized, and had resulted in numerous meetings, urgent petitions and memorials to the Legislature and to Congress, newspaper editorials, and other forms of "railroad agitation." In Congress in the fall of 1851 and summer of 1852, James D. Doty, the representative from Wisconsin's third district, introduced several bills and petitions providing for grants of land to aid in the construction of railroads from Chicago to Lake Superior. And by 1856, several railroads had been chartered by the Legislature to build from various towns in southeastern Wisconsin to points on Lake Superior from St. Louis Bay to Ontonogan. The St. Croix and Lake Superior, chartered in 1854, was authorized to build a road from Hudson or vicinity to the St. Louis River, with a branch

"running to some point at or near La Pointe" and another branch "to some point at or near Iron Bay."

In February of 1854, a railroad land grant bill for Wisconsin was introduced in Congress, passed the Senate but was tabled in the House. The bill was introduced again in the next Congress in May 1856, passed the Senate and then the House by a margin of sixteen votes. The 1856 act granted Wisconsin "every alternate section of land designated by odd numbers for six sections in width on each side" for two routes: "from Madison, or Columbus, by the way of Portage City to the St. Croix River or Lake between townships twenty-five and thirty-one, and from

thence to the west end of Lake Superior, and to Bayfield; and also from Fond du Lac on Lake Winnebago, northerly to the State line," the total grant exceeding two million acres. This land was withdrawn from the market, while the price of the even-numbered sections retained by the government was doubled to \$2.50 per acre. The act provided that when a company had completed twenty continuous miles of construction along an authorized route, the Governor would so certify to the Secretary of Interior, who would patent (give the company title to) up to 120 sections of land within that twenty miles to the company, which would then be free to sell it. The law further provided that the roads must be completed within ten years, or all unsold land would revert to the Federal government.

On October 8th 1856 the Wisconsin Legislature approved a bill accepting the Federal grant, and several memorials were quickly received from companies interested in obtaining grants. After vigorous competition between the contending companies, the Legislature awarded the grant for the northwestern route to the La Crosse and Milwaukee. Soon after the grant had been made to the La Crosse and Milwaukee, rumors began to circulate that bribery had been involved. A reluctant Legislature was finally forced to investigate, and its report revealed that more than \$800,000 in cash and bonds had been paid to members and officers of the Legislature, to the Governor, and even to newspaper editors to secure the grant for the La Crosse and Milwaukee. Byron Kilbourn, president of the company, was heavily implicated by the investigation, but neither he nor any of the others involved were punished except at the bar of public opinion.