Blair, Nebraska, So Many Ways to Get There! By Water, Rails or Trails.

BY ZACHARY BOSWELL
Introduction

This book is about the transportation of Blair, Nebraska. Blair, Nebraska is a town in eastern Nebraska in Washington County with a population of about 8,000 people. In my book you will first learn about road improvements, the railroads and depots in Blair & John I. Blair. Second, I will talk about the Lincoln Highway in Blair. Third, there is a chapter about the brick streets. Finally there is a chapter about river transportation in Blair.

This is Blair, Nebraska in Washington County.
If you could see a picture of the roadways from the past 155 years, there would be a fairly clear history of a need for improvement.

The earliest roads could have been an old, worn Indian trail, then the covered wagons came along and deepened them into ruts. After the covered wagon came, the stagecoach came clattering through the countryside from Omaha to Fort Calhoun. This route would soon be extended to DeSoto, to the Halfway House at Cuming City and later to Decatur. The stagecoach road would stop abruptly in front of the post office where people were waiting for mail. The ruts made by the stops were visible around the Fort Calhoun Hotel well over fifty years after they were created. Thank goodness the railroads, boats & the paving of roads came through Blair, NE. These much needed improvements in transportation were true progress!

This is a picture of the dirt roads of Blair’s main street.
The Railroads of Blair, Nebraska

There have been four railroad companies that traveled through Blair.
History of the Railroad

The railroad in Blair dates back to February 1868 when the Sioux City & Pacific Railroad finished a line from the Missouri River to Fremont, Nebraska. When John I. Blair, the founder of Blair, declared he was extending the Sioux City & Pacific Railroad from the Iowa side of the Missouri River westward where it would connect with the Union Pacific Railroad in Fremont, Nebraska, the nearby towns of DeSoto & Cuming City became excited rivals for the railroad builder’s favor because the railroad would secure the future of both towns. Carter Valley, which ran through the heart of what is now Blair, was chosen because it was the easiest passage through the bluffs that surround the river. The town of Blair was born because of that decision.

Four different railroads ran through Blair. The Chicago & Northwestern Railroad, the Fremont, Elkhorn, Missouri Valley Railroad and the Sioux City & Pacific Railroad all ran on the east/west line through Blair. The north/south line that ran through Blair only had one railroad company on it, the Chicago, St. Paul, Minneapolis & Omaha Railroad. Today the only railroad company that runs through Blair is Union Pacific.
The Railroad **Depots**

of Blair

There have been three railroad depots in Blair. Two of the depots were wood and the other one was brick. Pictures of all three depots are on the next page.

In March of 1869, the first railroad depot in Blair was finished. It was used as a hotel and a depot for freight trains. It was located near the intersection of Front St. and Walker Ave. (present day 16th St.) It was torn down sometime after 1902.

The second railroad depot was built in 1880 by the Chicago, St. Paul, Minneapolis, & Omaha Railroad and the Sioux City & Pacific Railroad. It was used as a passenger depot. It was first built at the intersection of the Chicago, St. Paul, Minneapolis, Omaha, and the Sioux City and Pacific Railroad lines, or 14th and Front Streets.

The second depot was moved three times in its life. It was moved west two blocks and used for storage and freight. Then it was moved another time across the tracks and over to 16th St. and to the west where it sat unnoticed. In 2007, it was moved again to where it rests still today at Lyons Park. This past summer, it was **remodeled** by the Blair Historic Preservation Alliance to save this part of Blair’s history.

In 1910 the third depot was built. It was made of brick and was built at the same location as the 1880 depot after it was moved. The depot was built to accommodate both lines. It’s interior had tiled floors and served many passengers before the last passenger train came on June 3, 1950. It sat empty on the Union Pacific lot from then until it was suddenly torn down on April 19, 1987, without much say from the citizens of Blair.
Question 1 of 3

How many different railroad companies ran through Blair in the late 1800’s?

- A. 200
- B. 4  [Correct Answer]
- C. 12
- D. 8

This is a picture of the original railroad depot from 1869. It was also known as the Blair House Hotel.
John I. Blair

John I. Blair was born on August 22, 1802 on the banks of the Delaware River at Four Rift, New Jersey. He was the fourth of ten children of Scottish immigrants John Blair and Rachel Insley. John was not a very well educated man, only attending school in the winter through age 11. He had many interests in manufacturing and sales. He was the postmaster of Blairstown, New Jersey for 40 years. John’s nickname was Plain John I. He died December 22, 1899 in his home in Blairstown, New Jersey.
The town of Blair, Nebraska was founded and named by John I. Blair. It was platted May 10, 1869. John platted 11 other cities, all in Iowa, including Woodbine, Missouri Valley, Dunlap, River Sioux, Mondamin, LeMars, Ames, Sloan, Blairsburg, Ogden, and Montana. John I. Blair may have never gotten off the train at Blair and many of the other towns he platted. Blair’s estate was valued at about 75 million dollars at the time of his death, one of the half dozen greatest fortunes at the time. John was a very wealthy man. He was a very frugal, fiscally responsible man and emphasized ownership of land. At one point in time he owned two million acres of land.

The Man of Townships

How many other towns did John I. Blair platt, not including Blair?

- A. 12
- B. 23
- C. 15
- D. 11

Correct Answer: D. 11
The Lincoln Highway of Blair, Nebraska

This is a picture of the Lincoln Highway marker at the corner of 10th St. & Jackson St.
The Lincoln Highway was dedicated in 1913. It was the first *transcontinental* highway in America. It runs from Times Square, New York to Lincoln Park in San Francisco. The original Lincoln Highway route went through Omaha, Elkhorn, and Fremont, Nebraska. Then, after the Abraham Lincoln Memorial Bridge was built in Blair to cross the Missouri River in 1929, people started using the bridge as a shortcut to Fremont from Council Bluffs. That shortcut would save drivers about 30 miles. In 1930, a year after the bridge was dedicated, the Lincoln Highway was officially *re-routed* through Blair. The *controversial* change came about when the Lincoln Highway Association ordered several crews to move Lincoln Highway markers from the original route through Council Bluffs to the new one through Blair in the middle of the night.

Map of the Lincoln Highway
In what year was the Lincoln Highway established?

A. 1980
B. 1929
C. 1913
D. 1489

This is a map of the 1930 route of the Lincoln Highway through Blair.
Chapter 3

The Brick Streets of Blair, Nebraska

This is a picture looking west at the intersection of 16th & Washington Streets.
The brick streets of Blair, Nebraska were laid in 1921. A brick street can last a long time, but no one knows how long they last. The brick streets in Blair are over 90 years old, and the city has no recorded maintenance of them. They are rarely replaced. There are about 10,000 bricks in a brick street. There are also no potholes in brick streets. There are about 2 1/2 miles of brick streets left in Blair. Over time brick streets are cheaper than paving the streets, because asphalt has to be replaced every 15 years and brick streets don’t have to be replaced as often. The brick streets on Washington Street were paved over in 1971, most of the bricks were left under the pavement. The bricks were pulled up when it was redone again in 2006.
The Missouri River runs on the east side of Blair. The **headwaters** are near Three Forks, Montana. It flows into the Mississippi in St. Louis, Missouri. The Missouri is the longest river in North America. The Mississippi flows into the Gulf of Mexico near New Orleans, Louisiana.
Ferryboats provided early Nebraska travelers a means of crossing the shifting sands and changing currents of unbridged rivers.

The first ferryboat to operate in the region was at Ft. Atkinson in the 1820’s. Early diary accounts mention the operation of a ferry across the Missouri, probably part of activities at the fort. The early ferries were large flatboats propelled by sweeps. In the 1860’s, steam ferries replaced many of the original ferryboats. Standard rates for a ferry trip were 75 cents for a wagon and horses, 40 cents for a horse and buggy, 5 cents for “footmen”, 10 cents a head for cattle, horses, and mules, and 3 cents a head for swine and sheep. The first sign of spring along the Missouri River was not the first Cardinal, but the first steamboat that made it’s way up the river. When the boat blasted its whistle, every normal thing that was going on stopped. Then the people would rush to the waterfront to greet the captain and the crew. Finally they would collect the supplies the ship had brought to replenish their stocks after the long winter.

By the 1880’s, bridge-building had progressed. Even the wide, unpredictable Platte River had a bridge built over it. The ferryboat was a must have for every town along the Missouri River because it looked at itself in the future as “The Gateway to the West.” River boats in the 1860’s, could have been lined up for a half mile or more at DeSoto.
Some ferryboats continued to operate into the 20th century, but most just disappeared because of the bridges that were built and the services of the ferries were no longer needed.
When winter came in eastern Nebraska, it meant that the Missouri River would freeze solid, and they lost the all important steamboat. However there was an advantage to the river being frozen. Nebraska had a bridge to Iowa. Sometimes when the river was frozen there was a steady stream of wagons across the ice. The railroads even ran trains across the ice until the bridge was completed in 1873. They used the ice bridge as transportation in the mid-1800s.
Today we are spoiled by the transportation we have, because it is so much easier to get around. Travel is so much different than it was in the late 1800’s & early 1900’s, as you learned from this book. Today you can travel from coast to coast on Interstate 80 or fly anywhere in the world very easily. If you ever come through Blair and drive down our main street, you will be driving on the historic Lincoln Highway, also known as Highway 30.

This is a picture of Highway 30 through Blair taken in 1973.
Credits

1. River Ferry Picture
   http://blairhistory.com/landmarks/blair_bridge/BRG0052.htm

2. Washington St. Blair, Nebraska
   http://blairhistory.com/landmarks/main_street/DWT0011.htm

3. Main Street Panorama
   http://blairhistory.com/archive/photo_archive/gallery_subject.asp?Subject=Downtown

4. Nebraska Map
   http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Nebraska_counties_map.png

5. Washington County Map
   http://www.co.washington.ne.us

6. 1869 Train Depot
   http://blairhistory.com/landmarks/depot/1869Depot.htm

7. 1880 Train Depot
   http://blairhistory.com/landmarks/depot/1880depot.htm

8. 1910 Train Depot
   http://blairhistory.com/landmarks/depot/1910depot.htm

9. Plat Map
   http://www.blairhistory.com/projects/plat_map/towns/Blair.htm

10. Train Picture to the Washington County Historical Museum

11. John I. Blair Photos
    http://blairhistory.com/archive/biographies/John_Blair/john_i_blair.htm

12. Lincoln Highway Marker

13. Lincoln Highway Map
    http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:LH-Map-75.jpg
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<td>19. 17th &amp; Washington Picture</td>
<td>24. River Ferry With Multiple Cars</td>
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25. Missouri Ice Bridge Picture from Bostwick-Frohardt Collection

http://durhammuseum.contentdm.oclc.org/cdm/ref/collection/p15426coll1/id/1664

26. Highway 30 Picture

http://blairhistory.com/archive/photo_archive/gallery_subject.asp?Subject=Downtown
Blair

A town in Nebraska.

Related Glossary Terms
Drag related terms here

Index

Chapter 1 - The Railroads of Blair Nebraska
Controversial

Giving rise or likely to give rise to public disagreement.

Related Glossary Terms

Drag related terms here

Index

Chapter 2 - The Lincoln Highway
Depots
(de-po)
place for the storage of large quantities of equipment, food, or some other commodity.

Related Glossary Terms
Drag related terms here

Index
Find Term
Chapter 1 - History of the Railroads
Ferryboats

A boat that carries people, animals, cars and many other things over a small body of water like a river.

Related Glossary Terms

Drag related terms here

Index

Chapter 4 - History & Facts About Ferryboats
Fiscally Responsible

To be good with money.

Related Glossary Terms

Drag related terms here

Index

Find Term

Chapter 1 - John I. Blair
Footmen

Men/women who are on foot on the ferry.

Related Glossary Terms

Drag related terms here

Index

Chapter 4 - History & Facts About Ferryboats
Frugal

Sparing or economical with regard to money or food.

Related Glossary Terms
Drag related terms here

Index
Find Term

Chapter 1 - John I. Blair
Headwaters

The input stream of a river close to or forming part of its source.

Related Glossary Terms

Drag related terms here

Index

Find Term

Chapter 4 - The River in Blair
**Platted**

To make a plot of land.

**Related Glossary Terms**

Drag related terms here

**Index**

Find Term

Chapter 1 - John I. Blair
Postmaster

A person in charge of a post office.
Re-routed

To move a path somewhere else after it has been designated at least once, and can be re-routed again.

Related Glossary Terms
Drag related terms here

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Find Term
Chapter 2 - The Lincoln Highway
Remodeled

To rebuild with a different design.

Related Glossary Terms

Drag related terms here

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Chapter 1 - History of the Railroads
Rivals

A person or thing competing with another for the same objective or for superiority in the same field of activity.

Related Glossary Terms
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Chapter 1 - History of the Railroads
**Sweep**

Giant paddles that move the boat.

**Related Glossary Terms**

Drag related terms here

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**Index**

Find Term

Chapter 4 - History & Facts About Ferryboats
Swine

Another name for pigs.

Related Glossary Terms
Drag related terms here
Transcontinental

Something that crosses from one side of a continent to the other.

Related Glossary Terms

Drag related terms here

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Find Term

Chapter 2 - The Lincoln Highway