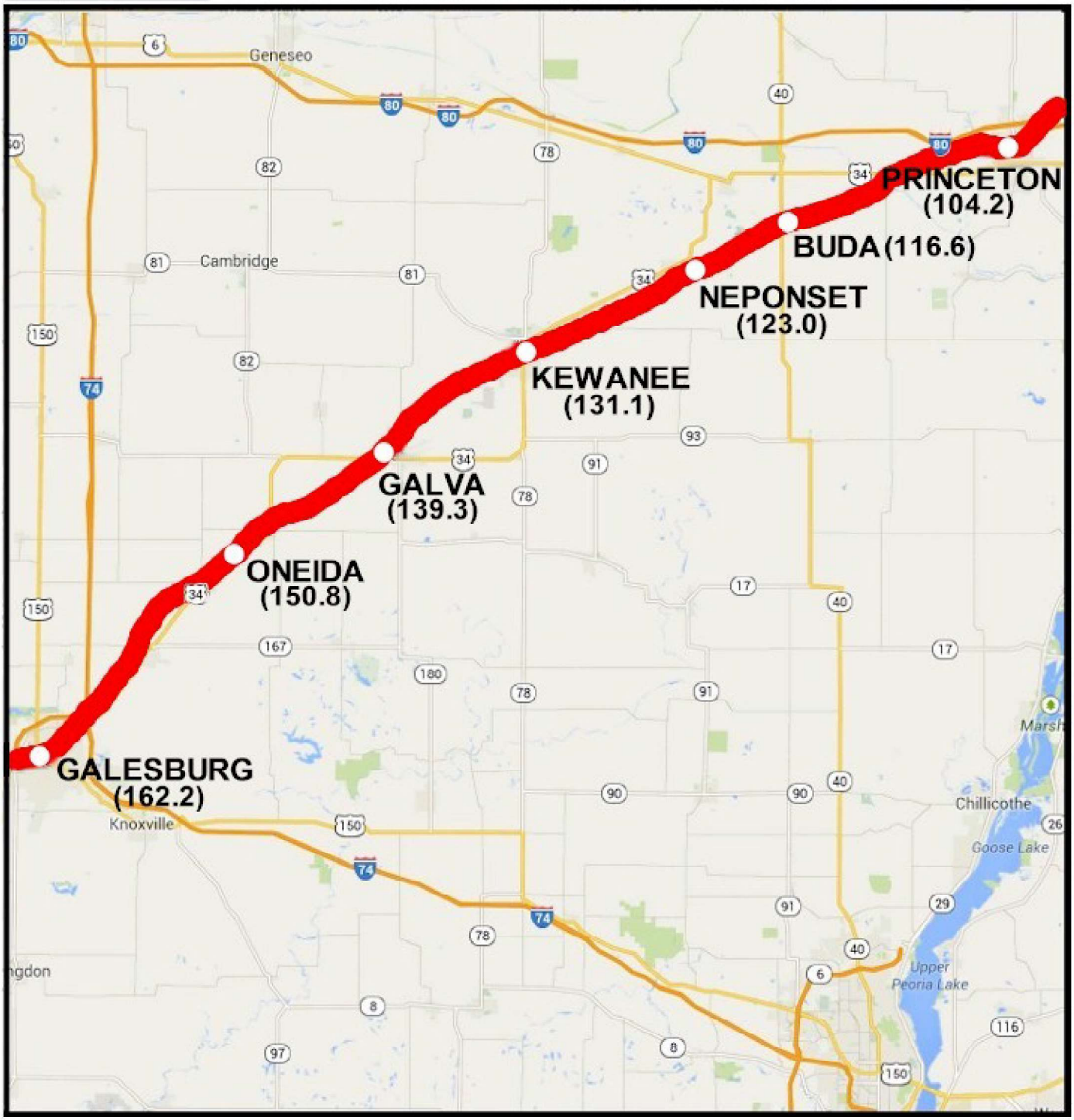
CHAPTER

5

OUTSIDE THE RAILS

CHICAGO TO LA PLATA, MO RAILROAD ROUTE GUIDE

PRINCETON to GALESBURG



ROUTE GUIDE SYMBOLS

- Site Visible from Train
- Historical Information
- Geology or Geography
- Railroad Information
- River Crossing
- Agricultural Information
- Animal Sighting Possible
- Amtrak® Train Station

LEAVING PRINCETON

Traveling westbound out of Princeton, the BNSF rail line used by the *Southwest Chief* takes a jog to the northwest for just a couple of miles, before curving towards the southwest.

One of Princeton's water towers (Robert Tabern photo)

The very first high school in the state of Illinois was built in Princeton between 1866 and 1868, with the first commencement taking place in 1870. Unfortunately, this building was destroyed by fire in 1924 and was replaced by the present building in late 1925.

At one time, Jostens, Inc. operated a manufacturing facility here in Princeton. They made championship rings for sports teams, including the Chicago White Sox (in 2005), Chicago Bulls (multiple years), and for the Chicago Bears (in 1985).

EPPERSON RUN

(Milepost 105.2) (41.3897° N, 89.4860° W)

A mile west of the Amtrak station, the train passes through a grove of trees and crosses Epperson Run. This small stream begins just north of Princeton and flows into Big Bureau Creek on the far southwest side of town. Even though this is a relatively small body of water, it is still popular with locals for fishing, especially for carp and catfish.

Aerial map showing Epperson Run crossing (Public domain photo)

Historical journals, written in 1830, recount Native Americans gathered where Epperson Run meets Big Bureau Creek for the purpose of holding their annual feast. Chiefs from all around were in attendance. The Natives had killed a number of their favorite dogs and roasted them, on which they feasted. In the midst of their encampment, an altar was erected, on which sacrifices were burned and offered up to the Great Spirit.

PUMPKIN PATCH
(Milepost 106.3) (41.3934° N, 89.5012° W)

After crossing Epperson Run, the train crosses Epperson Road (MP 105.87). About a half-mile past this, towards the north, passengers can see a small pumpkin patch.

The authors visit Al Siebert's Pumpkin Patch (Robert & Kandace Tabern photos)

This pumpkin patch is cared for by Al Siebert, who runs the nearby metal shop. He actually loves gardening and has grown pumpkins here for the past decade or so; it's really more of a hobby than anything though. Al says he plants his pumpkin seeds around the second week of June; around early October, the pumpkins are ready. Al charges between two and five dollars and will let you roam his patch and choose your favorite. If it's early in the growing season you may see strawberries here instead.

Just west of the pumpkin patch, Interstate 80 becomes visible once again, to the north. You may be able to get a glimpse of some of the trucks and cars heading between Chicago and the Quad Cities (55 miles to the west).

BIG BUREAU CREEK BRIDGE
(Milepost 106.6) (41.3918° N, 89.5075° W)

About two miles west of Princeton, the train crosses a 400-foot-long bridge above Big Bureau Creek. This river crossing attracts the attention of passengers because the bridge is on a high trestle over the stream below; this is uncommon on a train route in Illinois.

The old BNSF Bridge over Big Bureau Creek (Courtesy: Steve Conro)

Big Bureau Creek flows for 73 miles; it begins near Compton, Illinois (north of Mendota) and empties into the Illinois River, near Henry.

Going back 200,000 years, geologists say that Big Bureau Creek was actually an ancient channel of the Mississippi River. Ice sheets from the ancient Nebraskian Glacier caused the Mississippi River to be diverted into a relatively narrow band of water near preset-day Fulton, Illinois. From there, the river flowed down through Big Bureau Creek and the Illinois River, to near Alton.

MAP SHOWING ANCIENT AND CURRENT CHANNELS OF THE MISSISSIPPI RIVER

The BNSF bridge over Big Bureau Creek has gotten a much needed facelift. The 1899 bridge that was built by Lassig Bridge & Iron Works of Chicago was replaced in late 2014, after 115 years of use by freight and passenger trains.

Construction crews working on a new bridge (Courtesy: LaSalle News Tribune)

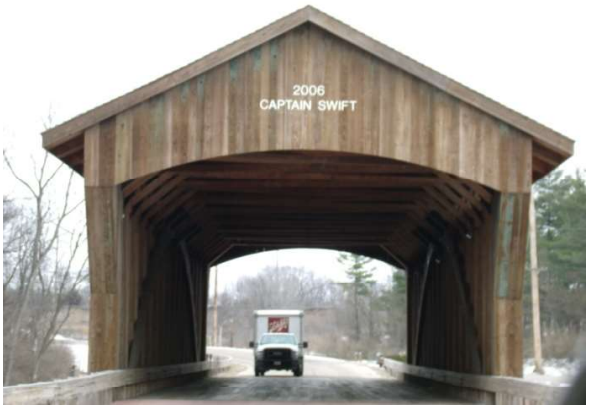
Most land surrounding the banks of the Big Bureau Creek is privately owned. Canoeing on the creek is possible in some areas and there have been reports of class II and III rapids in high water. Brush buildup, beaver dams, and submerged rocks are always points of concern.

Although not visible from the train, the Big Bureau Creek is well-known here in the Princeton area for the two covered bridges that cross it; one is north of the BNSF line and one is situated just to the south. This is significant considering there are only six covered bridges remaining today in all of Illinois.

Built in 1863, the 149-foot-long Red Covered Bridge is three miles north of the tracks. This bridge was originally designed to be covered so that livestock wouldn't be frightened as they crossed over the river, and to protect the lower wooden parts from weather damage. The sign still posted over the entrance reads, "Five dollar fine for driving more than 12 horses, mules, or cattle at one time, or for leading any beast faster than a walk on or across this bridge." This bridge spans Big Bureau Creek where the Galena Trail used to cross the river. The Galena Trail was the first state road in northern Illinois and it connected the city of Peoria on the Illinois River with the lead-mining town of Galena in the northwestern corner of the state. The trail passed through Princeton where Main Street is now located. The bridge remains open to car traffic today.

Co-author stands on the Red Covered Bridge (Robert Tabern photo)

The most modern covered bridge in Illinois is located about a mile south of the tracks, also spanning Big Bureau Creek. Built in 2006, the 128-foot-long Captain Swift Covered Bridge was built to modern highway standards. Made entirely out of wood, the Captain Swift Bridge is the only two lane covered bridge in Illinois.



Captain Swift Covered Bridge (Kandace Tabern photo)

WEST BUREAU CREEK BRIDGE
(Milepost 110.2) (41.3687° N, 89.5713° W)

About three-and-a-half miles west of Big Bureau Creek, the train crosses another high 400-foot-long trestle; this time we pass above West Bureau Creek. This stream begins about ten miles northwest of here, and empties into Big Bureau Creek near Tiskilwa, Illinois. This waterway is much younger than Big Bureau Creek. Geologists say this was not an ancient channel of the Mississippi River; it was likely caused by water flows during the last advance of the Wisconsinan Ice Age.

Southwest Chief crosses West Bureau Creek (Courtesy: Steve Conro)

Much like its sister BNSF rail bridge, this bridge over West Bureau Creek has also gotten a recent facelift. The 1899 bridge that was built by Lassig Bridge & Iron Works of Chicago was replaced in late 2014.

In May 1832, a fort was built on the banks of West Bureau Creek, four miles north of where Wyanet is today. It was named Fort Thomas, in honor of Henry Thomas, one of the first white settlers of the area and on whose land the fort was built. Historical records indicate that Fort Thomas consisted of a block house surrounded by 15-foot-high barricades. There were approximately 140 men belonging to the battalion that served at Fort Thomas during the Black Hawk War. Historical diaries report that during their stay, they killed and ate some of Thomas' cattle, used his crib of corn, and burned his rails for fuel, besides robbing some of the settlers' cabins. It is said while here they drank two barrels of whiskey, had 17 fights among themselves, and returned to their homes without having seen an Indian.

WYANET
(Population 968; Elevation: 607 feet)
(Milepost 110.8) (41.3652° N, 89.5808° W)

Just after the West Bureau Creek bridge, the train passes through Wyanet. The village's history dates back to 1821 when it started as a small settlement called Center; it was named by an Indian trader named Bulbona. Center was the first area inhabited by non-native families in what is present-day Bureau County. Eventually more settlers arrived during the late 1830's after the Black Hawk War, including Ellis Mercer and Amos Leonard who built a saw and flour mill. The Chicago, Rock Island & Pacific Railroad was built near Wyanet in 1853. When this occurred, the name of the community was changed to Kingston, in honor of land donors Henry and Mary King. The CB&Q Railroad arrived two years later, in 1855, and gave the village its current name, Wyanet, Native American for "beautiful".

Wyanet's blue and white water tower (Robert Tabern photo)

View of downtown Wyanet and the BNSF line (Kandace Tabern photo)

Coming into downtown Wyanet, passengers will see some grain silos on the south side of the tracks. Just after this, we once again cross U.S. Highways 6 and 34 (known locally as Main Street). The city's blue and white water tower is a few blocks north of the tracks.

THE HENNEPIN CANAL
(Milepost 111.7) (41.3599° N, 89.6138° W)

Less than a mile southwest of Wyanet, the train will cross a bridge over the Hennepin Canal, which at one time, was also known as the Illinois and Mississippi Canal.


The BNSF bridge over the Hennepin Canal (Robert Tabern photo)

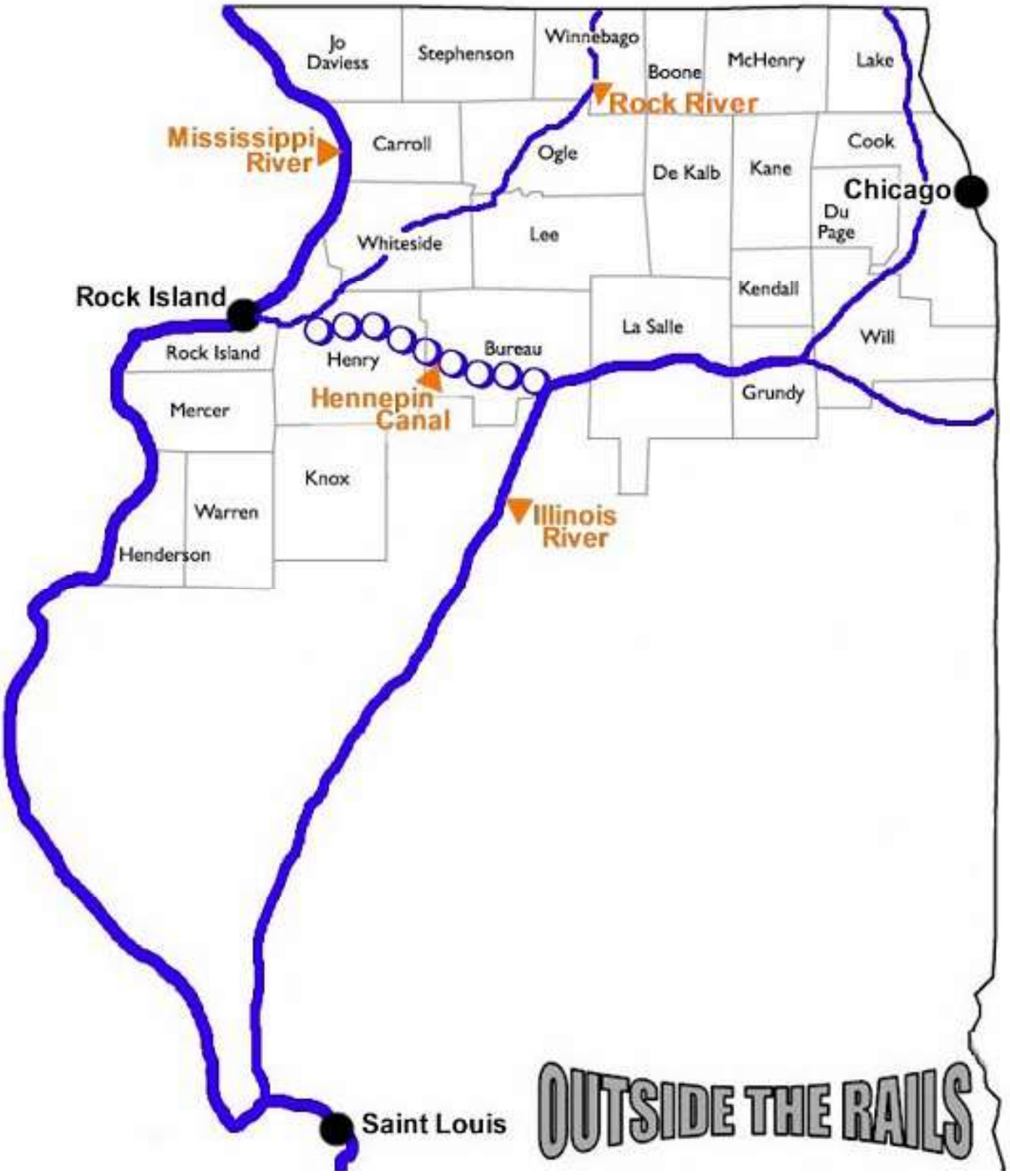
The map on the following page provides a good overview of the area in central Illinois where the Hennepin Canal was built through. The purpose of the 75-mile-long main section of the Hennepin Canal was to provide a significant short cut for boats traveling the Mississippi and Illinois Rivers. In fact, the canal reduced the shipping distance for river traffic between Chicago and Rock Island by 419 miles. Instead of having to travel down the Illinois River almost all the way to Saint Louis and then back up the Mississippi, boats could continue due west, saving time and money.

The first proposal for building the Hennepin Canal dates all the way back to 1834; however, financial problems delayed many public works projects in the state of Illinois, including this one. Congress decided to fund the preliminary survey for the project in 1871 when pressure began to mount for transportation alternatives that were cheaper than railroads. Construction did not actually begin until 1892, with the first boat going through the canal in 1907.


A 1907 historical photo of the Hennepin Canal (Public domain photo)

During the 15 years it took to build the canal, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers widened the locks on the Illinois and Mississippi Rivers. With lock chambers now much narrower than the rivers it connected, the Hennepin Canal was essentially obsolete even before the first canal boat made its maiden voyage.

MAP OF THE HENNEPIN CANAL AND OTHER REGIONAL WATERWAYS



By glancing at the maps on the previous pages of this reference manual, you may notice the Hennepin Canal closely parallels the bed of the ancient Mississippi River between Rock Island and Hennepin. The builders of the canal took advantage of this natural low area to construct the canal. Crews also used a 29.3-mile-long feeder canal from a manmade lake to water the Hennepin Canal as it needed water to actually flow 'uphill'.

Even with the issue of outdated locks, the Hennepin Canal was used for a few decades to transport coal from the mines of central Illinois to Rock Island. It was also used by the Morton Salt Company, which sent a total of 3,200 tons of salt from Chicago to Davenport, Iowa. Plus, International Harvester had canal boats move steel and scrap iron to Moline, Illinois.

A postcard from the Hennepin Canal (Public domain postcard)

Unlike some other canals in the United States, there was actually no cost for boats to use the Hennepin Canal. Ice cut from the canal's frozen waters was sold during the winters to help pay the canal's maintenance costs.

The Hennepin Canal remained open to boat traffic until 1951. Today, the canal is used for recreational purposes only. A trail, which can be seen from the train, allows people to walk along the canal's former tow path. Most of the trail is gravel, making it impractical for most cyclists, especially those using a road bike. During the winter months, the trail is heavily used for snowmobiling. Fishing is popular; swimming is prohibited. There are 33 locks on the canal which served the purpose of raising and lowering canal boats between stretches of water of different levels. All are now visible, but the first one, on the Illinois River, had been underwater from the 1930's until recent times. Lock #1 is only accessible on foot during the winter months.

If you are ever near the Hennepin Canal during the winter months, keep an eye out for bald eagles. Sometimes the water surrounding the BNSF bridge or the old locks, located just south of the crossing, don't freeze as quickly as the open areas of the canal, providing the eagles easier access to fish.

Two bald eagles fly above the Hennepin Canal (Rita Tabern photo)

Every winter, Illinois presents visitors with the opportunity to see more than 3,000 bald eagles in their natural habitat - more wintering American bald eagles, in fact, than in any other state outside Alaska. The first eagles of the season are spotted in Illinois in December and remain in residence until they migrate back north in March, with January and February the optimal time for visitors to see eagles. You may also see eagles along the Mississippi River, especially near locks and dams.

IOWA INTERSTATE RAILROAD
(Milepost 112.2) (41.3558° N, 89.6045° W)

One half-mile southwest of Hennepin Canal, the double-tracked BNSF line used by the *Southwest Chief* crosses a bridge over the single-tracked Iowa Interstate Railroad (IAIS).

Map of BNSF bridge over the Iowa Interstate (Public domain map)

This was where the CB&Q crossed over the mainline of the Rock Island Railroad between Chicago and Omaha. The Rock Island was in operation from the mid-1850's until 1980. The Iowa Interstate Railroad formed in 1984, using the former Rock Island tracks from Bureau, Illinois, west through the Quad Cities and Des Moines into Council Bluffs, Iowa. In addition, the Iowa Interstate Railroad operates a branch line connecting Bureau to Peoria, Illinois.

While there was never a connecting track built between the CB&Q and Rock Island railroads here, there was a jointly-operated train depot (see photo in the opposite column). Historical records refer to the station as being one of the oddest junction depots in the country because it was known by a double name. On the folders of the CB&Q it was named "Rock Island Crossing"; while in the time cards of the Rock Island it was listed as "CB&Q Crossing". The lack of any real town near this junction might explain why no official name was established. Passengers who transferred between railroads would use either an outside or inside stairway; baggage was moved by a crude elevator. Since the station was located two miles away from the nearest community (Wyanet), the station agent's wife would often serve meals to waiting passengers. The joint depot burned down in February 1910 and was never rebuilt because the CB&Q and Rock Island decided to dissolve their partnership here.

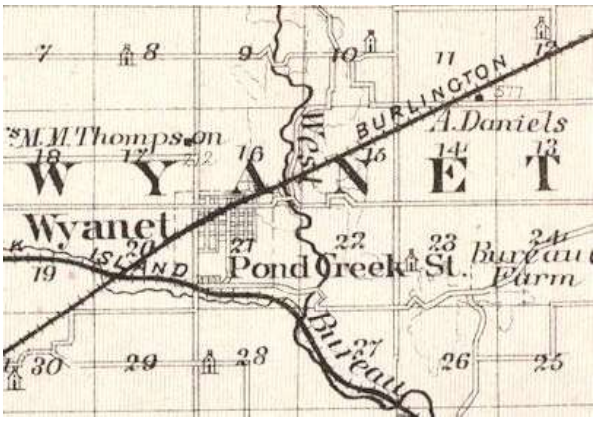

Historical view of Rock Island/CB&Q crossing (Public domain photo)

1879 Rock Island ticket issued at CB&Q Jct. (Public domain photo)

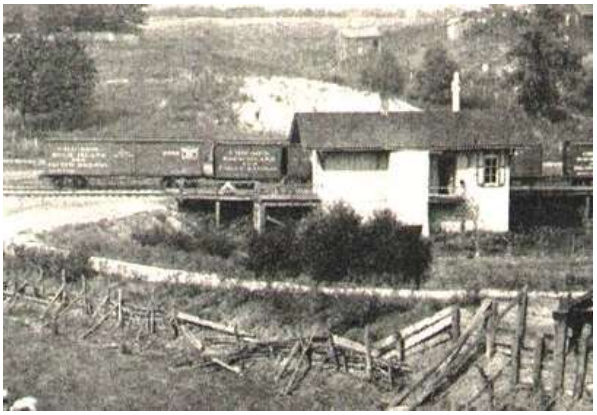
This junction may get a facelift in the coming years. Illinois is planning to restore passenger train service to the Quad Cities; when this happens, a connector track is expected to be built here. Trains would run on the BNSF from Chicago to this junction, then switch off on to the Iowa Interstate and use that rail line for the remaining 53 miles to Moline, Illinois.

POND CREEK
(Milepost 112.3) (41.3551° N, 89.6058° W)

About 400 feet past the Iowa Interstate Railroad bridge, the train crosses Pond Creek. This small stream begins near Buda and flows into West Bureau Creek, southeast of Wyanet. There was a settlement along the banks of this stream that was also named Pond Creek; it was located east of where the BNSF line crosses the creek today. Pond Creek was established before Wyanet; it was here Amos Leonard built the first flour mill and Ellis Mercer built a saw mill. Pond Creek was also a stop on the Rock Island Railroad. Today, the area where Pond Creek once stood has been incorporated into the the village of Wyanet.



Historic railroad map – Wyanet & Pond Creek (Public domain map)


Rock Island Railroad's Pond Creek station (Public domain photo)

OLD WOOD BRIDGE – EAST OF BUDA
(Milepost 115.4) (41.3368° N, 89.6598° W)

Northeast of Buda, the train crosses under an old wood bridge that allows the farm, located north of the tracks, access to County Road 1300N, located south of the tracks.

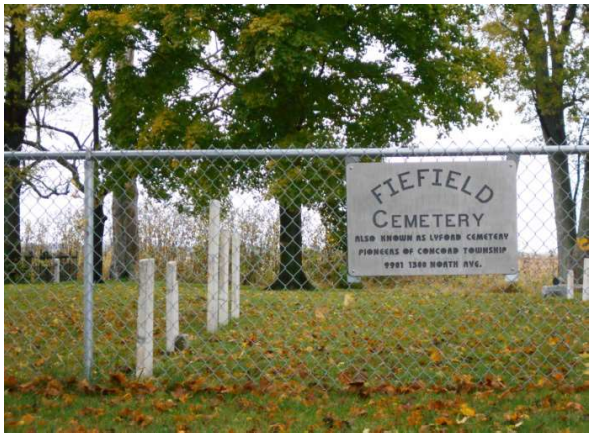

An old wood bridge, east of Buda on the BNSF (Robert Tabern photo)

For the majority of the route between Chicago and Kansas City, the BNSF line used by the *Southwest Chief* runs at a southwest-northeast angle, the most direct route possible. However, land parcels are typically allocated in squares, resulting in farmers' fields being bisected by the train tracks. When needed, the railroad has built a private bridge, so farmers can more easily access all portions of their property.


The surface of an old wood bridge near Buda (Robert Tabern photo)

HISTORIC FIEFIELD CEMETERY
(Milepost 115.6) (41.3357° N, 89.6648° W)

Immediately west of the old wood bridge, the train crosses over unpaved 1300N Avenue (MP 115.61). Just past the crossing, historic Fiefield Cemetery briefly comes into view towards the north; look for grave markers and trees enclosed by a silver fence.



Historic Fiefield Cemetery, near Buda (Kandace Tabern photo)

This is truly a pioneer cemetery, containing the graves of Bureau County's earliest settlers. There have actually been no new burials here since about 1905. This cemetery was an overgrown jungle full of trees and weeds for many years, but has recently been restored by the descendants of some of these families. Many stones were damaged by fallen trees.

Fiefield Cemetery is also sometimes referred to as Lyford Cemetery. Joseph Lyford, who is buried in this cemetery, was born in New Hampshire and moved his family to Illinois in a wagon drawn by oxen back in the mid-1830's. Lyford was one of the first founders of Neponset, a village the train will pass through about eight miles west of here.

Unfortunately, of Bureau County's more than 100 identified cemeteries, more than 40 are now inactive or have disappeared completely.

BUDA
(Population 525; Elevation: 699 feet)
(Milepost 116.6) (41.3237° N, 89.6801° W)

On the east side of the village of Buda (actually pronounced BEW-DAH); the train crosses Main Street (MP 116.65). South of the tracks is an 81,000-square-foot factory owned by Van-Packer Company; they are a producer of chimney and exhaust systems. The company has been located in Buda since 1944.

Van-Packer's factory and Buda's water tower (Robert Tabern photo)

From the train, most of Buda's downtown area and grain elevator can be seen to the north of the tracks; a white and brown water tower is located to the south.

Buda's water tower can be seen from the train (Robert Tabern photo)

Amtrak's Southwest Chief, as seen in Buda (Kandace Tabern photo)

Buda, originally called Lost Grove, was laid out along the CB&Q line in 1854; there was a small roundhouse and turntable here. Companies set up shop in Buda to profit from people flocking to the jobs at the coal mines in this area of Illinois. Early businesses included a mattress factory, beer brewery, numerous restaurants, and a brothel.

In the early 1900's, the mayor of Lost Grove was from New York, and got approval to change the town's name to Buda, after the town of Buda, New York, which in-turn was named for the capital of Hungary, Budapest.

Buda flourished until the Cherry Mine Disaster of 1909. New laws and labor practices in the coal mining industry were put into place after this, making coal mining in central Illinois less profitable. This meant fewer jobs and miners having to move to find work elsewhere.

Buda's CB&Q train station (as seen above) was torn down in 2007 (Public domain photo)

CANNON BALL TRAIL
(Milepost 117.2) (41.3205° N, 89.6851° W)

On the outskirts of Buda, the train crosses a bridge under Illinois Route 40. This highway runs in a north-south direction for 112 miles between East Peoria and Mount Carroll.

Just after Illinois Route 40, look to the south where a paved county road (1140N Avenue) begins to parallel the tracks. This road was part of the historic Cannon Ball Trail, an auto trail that ran from Kansas City to Chicago, via Quincy, Illinois and Hannibal, Missouri. A branch of the route connected the Missouri section of the highway to Des Moines, Iowa.

Construction of the Cannon Ball Trail (Public domain photo)

The old Cannon Ball Trail closely parallels the routes of the present-day *Southwest Chief* and U.S. 34 between Galesburg and Chicago. This stretch near Buda is a good example of what the original roadway looked like. The route was included in the 1917 Map of Marked Routes provided by the Illinois State Highway Department, a precursor of the modern-day Illinois Department of Transportation. The Cannon Ball Trail was a response to America's rapid change from horse-drawn to motorized transportation in the early 1900's. By 1925, much of the Cannon Ball Trail was paved; this pre-dated the formal system of numbered U.S. highways by a year or two.

U.P. CROSSING
(Milepost 117.8) (41.3169° N, 89.6933° W)

BNSF line (on bridge) crosses a U.P. rail line (Kandace Tabern photo)

Just about one mile southwest of Buda, the double-tracked BNSF line used by the *Southwest Chief* crosses a bridge over a single-track branch of the Union Pacific Railroad. This line runs from Saint Louis, Missouri to Nelson, Illinois, where it joins the railroad's main route between Chicago and Omaha. Several coal trains per week operate on this line. Today, the Union Pacific is the largest railroad in the United States. The line we cross outside of Buda was originally built by the Chicago & North Western (C&NW) in the early 1900's. In 1944, the C&NW replaced its mechanical signal tower here outside of Buda with an automatic interlocking. The junction located here is at Milepost 34.1 on this Union Pacific subdivision; we are 34.1 miles south of Nelson, Illinois, or 46.2 miles north of Peoria.

A historic C&NW map showing the Buda line (Public domain map)

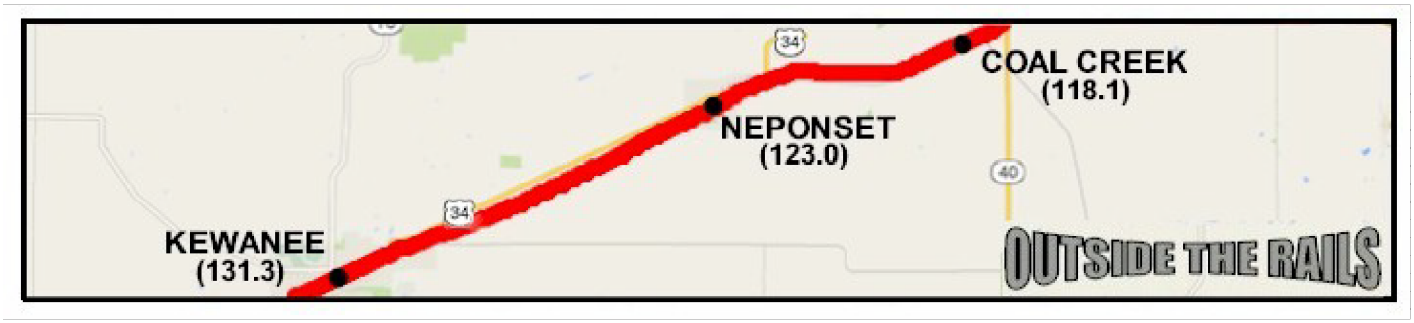
COAL CREEK
(Milepost 118.1) (41.3142° N, 89.6999° W)

About one-fourth of a mile past the U.P. Crossing, the train will travel over another bridge – this time a stream called Coal Creek. Coal Creek begins about three miles southeast of Buda and flows into King Creek near Mineral, Illinois. The steel stringer style railroad bridge is 140 feet long and was built in 1987 by Vierling Steel Works of Chicago.

BNSF bridge over Coal Creek, near Buda (Robert Tabern photo)

The first discovery of coal in Bureau County occurred in late 1834, outcropping from the banks of Coal Creek near Mineral, Illinois, about eight miles northwest of here.

Back in the early 1900's, a large percentage of residents in Bureau County over the age of 15 were either employed in coal mines or performed services that supported the mines (including leisure opportunities and various food establishments). The 1900 census reveals that work opportunities back in the day had a lot to do with one's ethnicity. If you were Italian, two professions were open to you: coal mining or saloon-keeping. In a similar way, the Irish were mostly coal miners, although some were also saloonkeepers, and to a lesser degree, blacksmiths and merchants.



CENTRAL ILLINOIS ROLLING HILLS
(Milepost 120.0) (41.3029° N, 89.7321° W)

Between the bridge over Coal Creek and the village of Neponset, the train continues to roll through west-central Illinois farm land. Near Milepost 120, the train crosses a small county road (650E Street). At this point, look out the north side windows for a glimpse of a series of gently rolling hills; this is somewhat in contrast to the very flat terrain that we have experienced since leaving Chicago. These rolling hills are continued evidence that the land was shaped by glaciers over 10,000 years ago. This part of central Illinois was part of a vast shallow sea going back millions of years.

Two glaciers covered the area near Neponset, the last being the Wisconsin Glacier, which shaped the land as we know it today.

Speaking of shaping the land, it should be noted that from this point until just after Galva, a city located 20 miles southwest of here; we will be traveling at an elevation of just over 800 feet. While this may not appear significant compared to elevations reached by the train further west in the Rocky Mountains, we are now almost 300 feet higher than downtown Chicago (120 rail miles to the northeast) and also 300 feet higher than where we cross the Mississippi River at Fort Madison, Iowa (97 rail miles to the southeast). This is the highest stretch in Illinois on this BNSF line.

Northeast of Neponset, a series of rolling hills can be seen to the north (Kandace Tabern photo)

NEPONSET
(Population 457; Elevation: 817 feet)
(Milepost 123.0) (41.2981° N, 89.7908° W)

This sign greets travelers to Neponset, Illinois (Robert Tabern photo)

The first settlers of this area arrived from England in 1836. William and Ann Studley staked a claim in the region originally known on the map as Barren Grove; it was located two miles north of what is now Neponset. More English settlers arrived in the 1840's, and perhaps a bit homesick, named their new settlement Brawby, for the town in England which they had left to come to America.

The beginnings of a community at the site of present-day Neponset occurred back in 1855 when the newly completed CB&Q Railroad built a station here. Soon afterwards, the U.S. Post Office moved from Brawby to this new location to be able to receive shipments by rail instead of just horse and wagon. These factors spelled the death of Brawby and the rise of Neponset; many residents also made the move to be closer to trains. Neponset was officially named as such in 1866; it is derived from the name of the Massachusetts hometown of Myron Lee, the railroad's first station agent at Neponset. In Native American, Neponset actually means, "There, where there is the crossing". This likely refers to the Lower Falls, located in Dorchester, Massachusetts.


Neponset's water town, seen from the tracks (Kandace Tabern photo)

There is not much to see as the train goes through Neponset. The main downtown area, which is just a few blocks long, as well as an old white water tower, can be seen south of the tracks. There is a grain elevator (MP 123.05) and silo that has part of the structure built over the BNSF line used by the *Southwest Chief.*

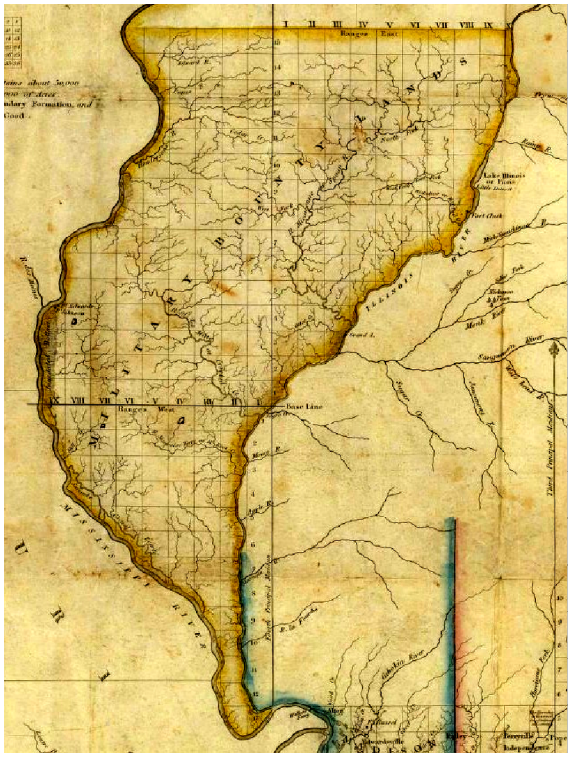

The BNSF line and grain elevator at Neponset (Kandace Tabern photo)

ILLINOIS MILITARY TRACT OF 1812

In the 94-mile stretch of track we travel between Neponset and the Mississippi River, the *Southwest Chief* crosses land that was part of the Illinois Military Tract of 1812.

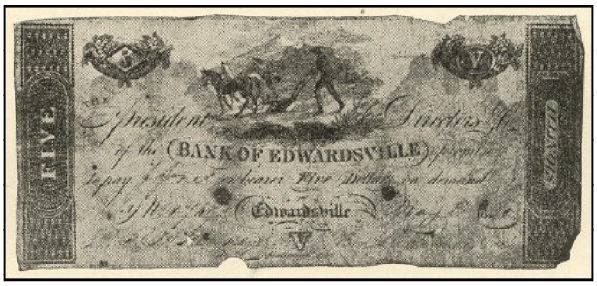
During the Revolutionary War, a land-rich and cash-poor Continental Congress promised land as an incentive for people to join the military; this practice continued until 1855 for all wars in which the United States became engaged in.

In 1812, Congress passed a resolution giving all non-commissioned officers and soldiers who served more than five years, or their heirs, 160 acres of farm land in the Territories of Michigan, Illinois, and Louisiana. More than 3,500,000 acres in west central Illinois were set aside for this purpose; the map on the following page shows the route of the train and what present-day counties were included.



An 1820 survey of the Illinois Military Tract (Public domain map)

Despite the area being set aside for soldiers in 1812, Congress failed to provide funds for the survey of these lands until 1815. Surveyors then ran into problems with Native Americans who claimed part of the tract as their hunting grounds. It was actually necessary to send soldiers from St. Louis to protect the new surveyors. A treaty was finally agreed to with the Potawatomi in August 1816, in which they gave up their land laying south of a line from the southern tip of Lake Michigan due west to the Mississippi. Surveyors worked rapidly and land distribution began in October 1817. By January 1819, the government issued over 17,000 patents in the new state of Illinois.

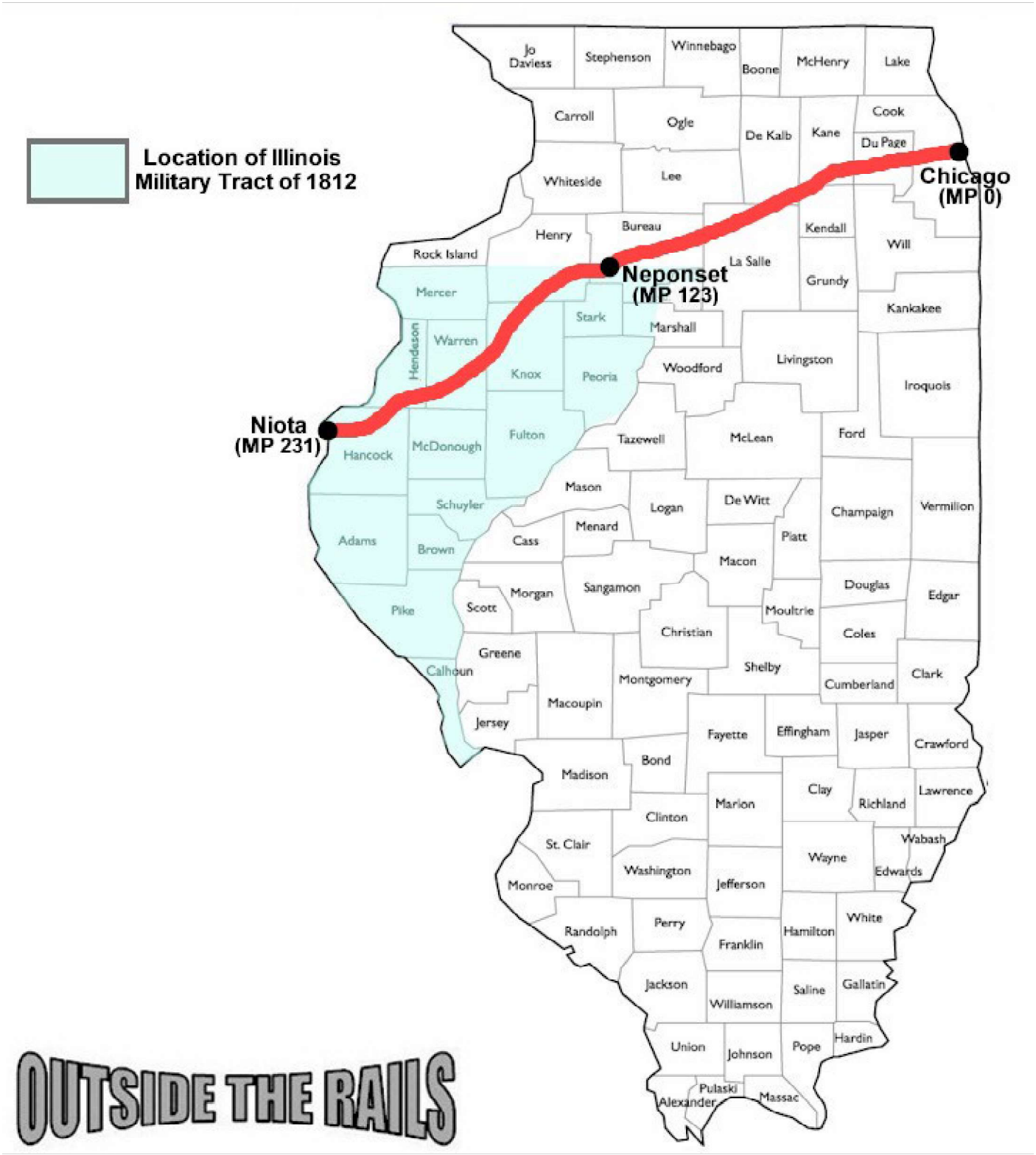


Bank bill issued from Illinois in 1821 (Public domain photo)

Even though veterans had the option to move to Illinois, most soldiers or their heirs decided against moving great distances to take up their claims. Instead, they sold their land rights to speculators. One company was able to acquire as much as 900,000 acres of land. Such large-scale land holdings created hostility on the frontier between those who settled here and the many absentee speculators. Squatters ended up settling on whatever land they wanted to, ignoring titles and rights. In the end, because of continued fear of Indian attacks that stretched into the 1830's, many speculators were unable to make a quick profit and lost their titles or sold their land at a loss.

Despite problems with speculators and Native populations, the white population of Illinois exploded following the War of 1812, reaching 50,000 in 1820 and 150,000 in 1830.

MAP OF THE ILLINOIS MILITARY TRACT OF 1812



HENRY COUNTY, ILLINOIS
(Milepost 127.0) (41.2729° N, 89.8572° W)

Four miles southwest of Neponset, the train begins its journey through Henry County, Illinois. Traveling westbound, we have spent nearly the last 41 miles traveling through Bureau County, a distance greater than any other county in Illinois. Henry County was named for the Revolutionary War statesman Patrick Henry. The slogan, "give me liberty, or give me death" is attributed to Henry, who was also a member of the Continental Congress and served as the first governor of Virginia.

The train and U.S. 34 enter Henry County here (Robert Tabern photo)

EAST KEWANEE
(Milepost 129.5) (41.2563° N, 89.9010° W)

A sign welcomes travelers to Kewanee (Public domain photo)

About two miles west of the county line, the train passes through the eastern outskirts of the city of Kewanee, which is a Winnebago word meaning "prairie chicken".

The founding of Kewanee at its current location in 1854 was the result of two separate developments: the establishment of a village called Wethersfield and the building of the railroad – and really the failure of the two to come together. Wethersfield was settled in 1836; it was situated about two miles south of where the train travels today. The population grew to over 500 residents by 1850. However, when the railroad was built through here a few years later, engineers decided the tracks would bypass Wethersfield because of adverse terrain located just to the west of the community. When they heard this would be happening, businessmen, who knew the importance of the railroad, actually put their buildings on rollers and moved their establishments to be closer to the tracks. By 1860, Kewanee had a population of 1,500. Development of Wethersfield was stunted by the significant drop in population; it would remain a residential area that would eventually annex itself to Kewanee in 1921.