

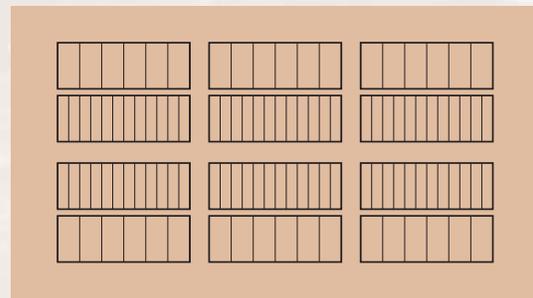
CIVIC GEOMETRY



Frontier Forms of Minnesota's County Seats

IN THE FALL OF 1843 four itinerant lumbermen, led by John McKusick, founded the Stillwater Lumber Company and established a sawmill at the head of Lake St. Croix. Although the site eventually became the nucleus of Stillwater, one of Minnesota's earliest towns, it had few natural advantages. A historian reflecting on the town's beginnings observed, "The place seemed wholly undesirable, being but a marshy, bowl-like enclosure." It was even inadequate for sawmilling until a canal was built to carry water from a nearby lake to the mill.¹

Stillwater's original 1848 plat reflects both its incongruous site and its origins as a mill town. The plat reveals irregular lot and block sizes and a haphazard, truncated Main Street that eventually had to be elevated 12 feet above its original height because of flooding. The linear business district developed as the town core along Main Street parallel with the St. Croix River shoreline—a common pattern in midwestern towns founded along a major transportation artery. When bustling Stillwater became the Washington County seat in 1849, the county courthouse was built at a peripheral location on the western margin of the townsite.² Although similar linear towns would be platted in Minnesota through the next two decades, their heyday was passing. Sweeping economic and technological changes would have a profound impact on frontier urbanization and town forms in Minnesota and the rest of the western Midwest.



Tom Schmiedeler

Tom Schmiedeler teaches geography at Washburn University in Topeka, Kansas. His primary research interest is the origins and evolution of forms of county seats across the midwestern frontier.

Overleaf: View of Stillwater, 1880, taken from the Washington County courthouse on the western margin of the bustling river town

As the development of Stillwater shows, comparing a town's original plat to its actual built form can cast new light on the process of settlement and urban development. Town form has two telling components: the initial land subdivision shown in the original plat map and land use, or the actual location of commercial, residential, and public buildings as the town evolved. When studied together, these two elements reveal not only the intentions of town planners but also the extent of their power to implement their visions. The locations of various forms throughout a state can also show how town planners' ideas and power changed as settlement progressed.

Town forms are enduring features on the cultural landscape. Buildings come and go, but much of the

master plan, which assigned public and private space in a town's frontier period, remains today at the core of most midwestern settlements. Once trained to spot the essential components of town design, observers can "read" a contemporary townscape, interpret its origins, and contemplate how forces have since shaped it.

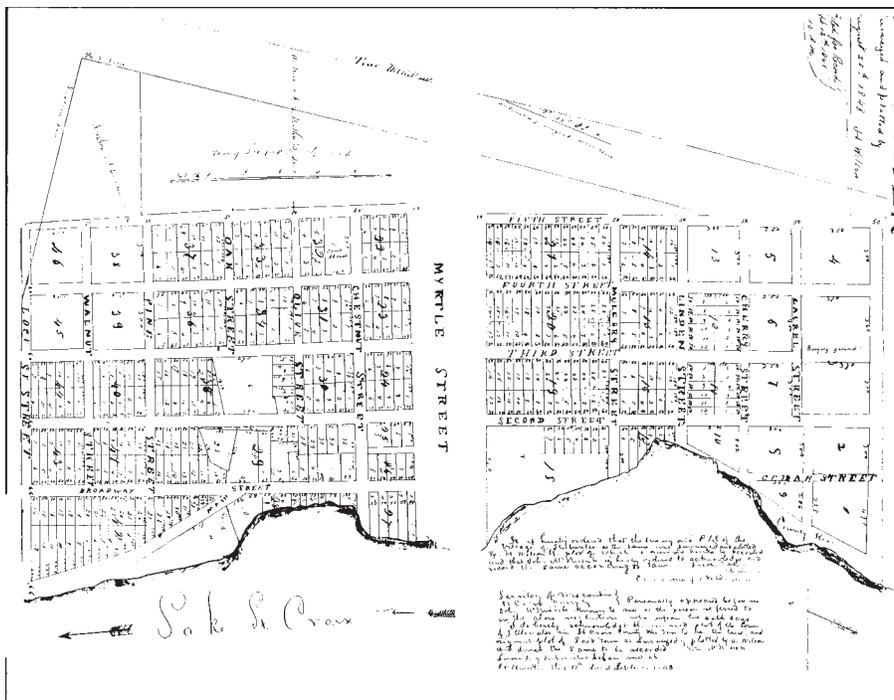
Many scholars have examined frontier urbanization processes, emphasizing factors influencing early town growth such as market specialization, interregional trade, and transportation developments.³ Researchers generally have not focused, however, on what can be learned from the regional distribution of town forms.⁴

MINNESOTA'S 87 COUNTY SEATS, platted between 1848 and 1904, offer a good overview of what town forms can reveal about frontier settlement and early town development. The state's history of Euro-American settlement may be divided into two periods, roughly separated by the Civil War, during which urbanization based on commercial river traffic was later supplanted by that based on railroad networks. Minnesota's unusually high number of company towns created by lumbering and mining interests complicated the second stage of urbanization.

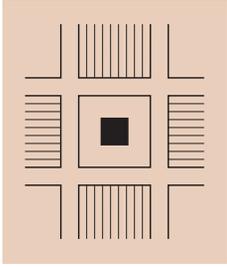
Traditionally, county seats provided services including administration of judicial functions, record keeping, property assessment, and maintenance of the

peace. Settlements founded to be county seats typically reserved prominent, centrally located lots for this kind of public use. But in Minnesota, the idea of making an already prospering town into the county seat sometimes competed with the desire to establish a new town to serve as a center for local government. This phenomenon helps account for the diversity in county-seat town forms.

Minnesota's county seats embody the three principal classes of town forms that evolved in the



Original plat of Stillwater, August 25, 1848, surveyed by Harry Wilson and platted by John McKusick



Central Courthouse Square

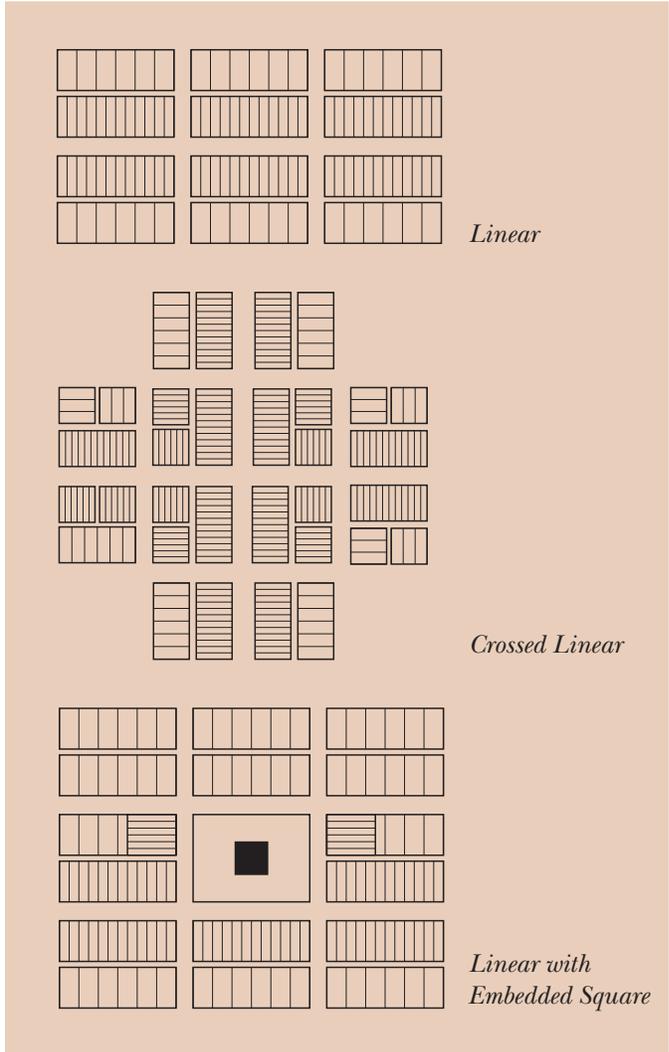
Midwest: central squares, linear plans, and railroad plans, each with several subtypes. The basic central-square plan consists of a block surrounded by a town's principal business district.

Elsewhere, such as in neighboring Iowa, nearly all county seats of this design evolved with the courthouse centered on the square. By modifying the street pattern leading to the square, planners created at least nine subtypes. In Minnesota, central-courthouse squares proved to be the least popular town form. In fact, only one developed: Preston, in Fillmore County.⁵

In contrast, business districts occupied the core of linear or "Main Street" towns such as Stillwater. In the standard linear plan, businesses face each other along a single street. But sometimes—either by design or because of expansion—the business district evolved along two intersecting, perpendicular streets, making a crossed-linear pattern. Two county seats developed as interesting hybrids of central-courthouse-square and linear forms, so-called embedded squares. In these, one side of a courthouse square was fully integrated into a linear business district. Forty-seven of Minnesota's 87 county seats are linear towns.

Tracks, right-of-way, and the depot comprised the core of the third class of town forms, railroad towns. The relative location of the business district to the core determined four subtypes.⁶ The most common was the T-town, in which the business district extended from one side of the tracks in more or less a T-shaped configuration. Other designs included the orthogonal plan, in which tracks bisected the business district; the symmetric plan, in which the tracks were within and parallel with the business district; and the parallel plan, in which the business district was parallel with but a block removed from the tracks.

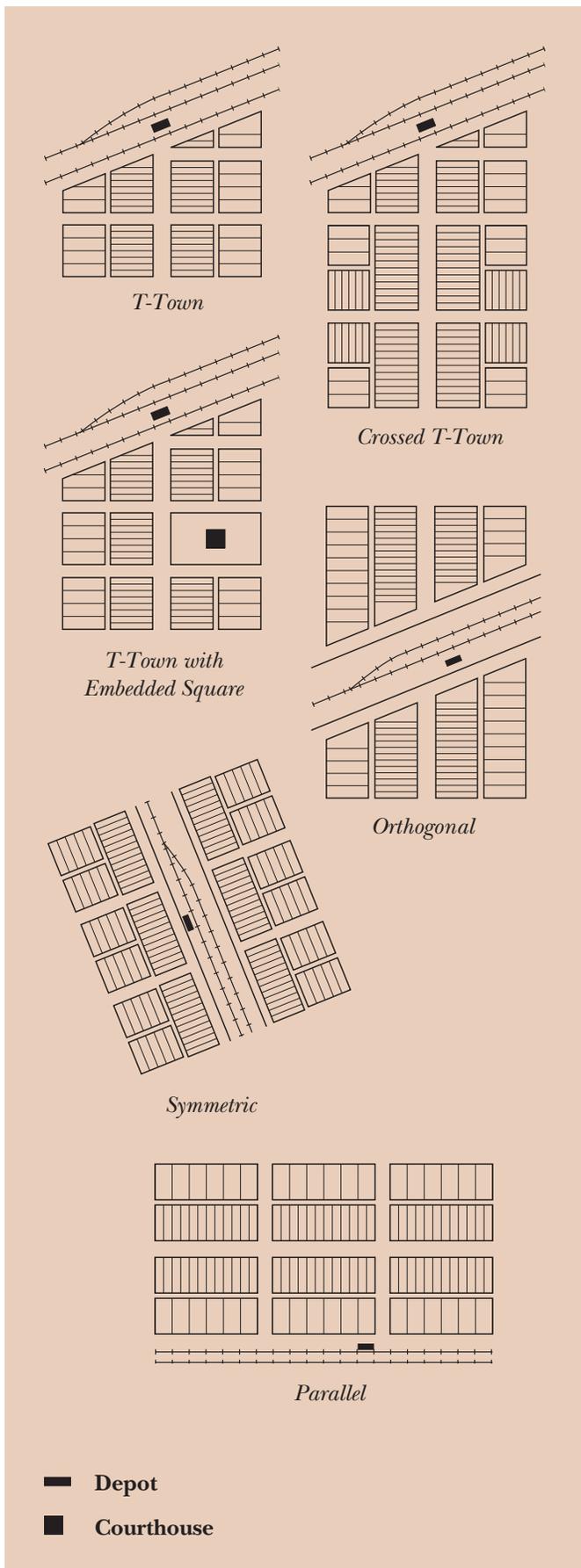
THE INTERPLAY OF CULTURAL planning traditions, physical geography, and the timing of settlement helped determine how a town would develop. As geographer Carl Sauer wrote: "No groups coming from different civilizations and animated by different social ideals have reacted to frontier life in identical fashion. . . . The nature of the cultural succession . . . in any



Linear Town Plans

frontier area was determined by the physical character of the country, by the civilization that was brought in, and by the moment of history that was involved."⁷

In Minnesota direct links between town forms and planners' cultural backgrounds are difficult to establish. Original town plats identify proprietors and surveyors, but neither the plats nor local historians typically reveal who designed the town. Nor, as geographer Edward T. Price lamented, do those sources supply us with "accounts of the debates that must have set forth the advantages and disadvantages of different proposals for the town plan."⁸ Moreover, many town planners traveled widely and were thus exposed to a variety of planning traditions. Despite these complications, we



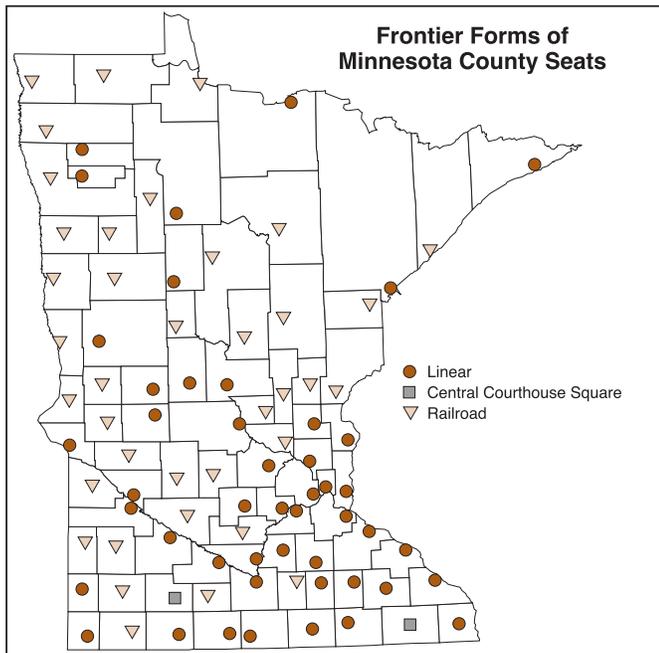
can, at least, see the association between one regional planning tradition and one class of town forms in Minnesota.

People from the Yankee culture region predominated in the territory's and early state's non-Indian population. In 1860 nearly 80 percent of Minnesota's American-born residents were from New England and New York, with the latter contributing more than half of the total Yankee population. Of the approximately 100 surveyors and proprietors of Minnesota's county seats whose origins can be identified, at least 65 percent were born in the Yankee culture region. New Yorkers were the most numerous, but Maine also contributed a substantial number, perhaps in response to the opportunities for lumbering in the expansive white-pine forests of northeastern Minnesota.⁹

To the Yankee planner, the business district, not the courthouse, was the focus of the county seat because in New England the town was far more important than the county as a unit of local government. Most settlements in New England originated as trade centers, not political hubs, springing from early, rural meeting-house locations. Most had irregular forms, conditioned by the centripetal road network leading to the meeting-house. Migrating Yankees brought with them the model of a town as a commercial center. This important fact is sometimes overlooked because the irregular form of most Yankee towns did not move west.¹⁰ Instead, the regular, standardized grid introduced by the Land Ordinance Survey of 1785 became the dominant physical control over town form.

Minnesota's linear county seats, mainly concentrated in the southeastern region of the state, suggest the dominance of Yankee planning traditions with their commercial emphasis. Yet physical geography and the timing of settlement were also crucial influences. Regardless of their cultural roots, planners of river towns throughout the Midwest nearly always chose linear designs. The transportation advantages of waterways helped towns prosper as trade and processing centers. In them, economic activity most frequently evolved in a linear business district that was parallel and a block or so from the waterway. Physical geography made business districts more accessible to commercial river traffic and allowed for expansion along level floodplains.¹¹

Railroad Town Plans



The timing of settlement also accounts for the linear form of some county seats platted before the railroad era. International Falls, Pipestone, Red Lake Falls, and Thief River Falls were established several years before they became county seats. Since this political function played no role in their origins, these towns developed with linear business districts and no assigned public space—regardless of who platted them. On the other hand, acquiring county-seat status was very important for settlements that lacked the commercial advantages of river towns. People employed in the various courthouse offices enriched the town’s economy, as did citizens who traveled to the county seat to conduct courthouse business.

In addition, county-seat status meant higher values for commercial and residential lots, and platting—or subdividing the land—was essential to selling the lots. About 60 percent of the 30 non-river towns that became county seats were so designated within a few months of being platted, suggesting that the prospect of being a government center spurred platting. Some of these towns became seats as larger counties were subdivided (Grand Marais, Red Lake Falls); others because they were more centrally located (Buffalo, Caledonia, Le Center); still others because the original county seat failed to prosper (Rochester, St. Peter). Regardless of why they became county seats, the ori-

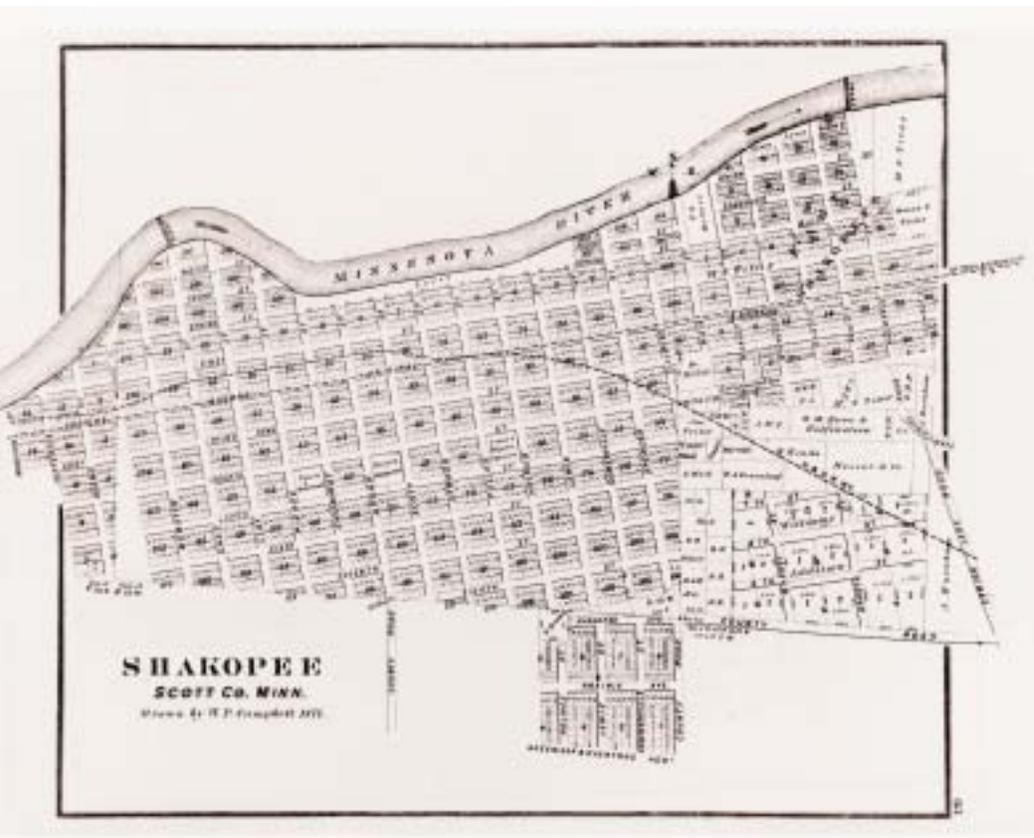
ginal plats of most of these towns assigned space as “courthouse squares” or as “public squares.”

Nevertheless, in the spirit of the Yankee commercial towns, it was the business district that occupied the town core. Planners placed about two-thirds of the courthouses an average distance of two blocks from the business district. Most of the remainder evolved on its margins.

MOST OF THE LINEAR county seats concentrated in Minnesota’s southeastern quadrant are river or lake towns such as Stillwater, Hastings, Mankato, Minneapolis, St. Cloud, St. Paul, Shakopee, and Wabasha. The plan of Shakopee, platted on December 26, 1855, is typical. The original plat shows a very large townsite with blocks and lots oriented to the river rather than to the cardinal directions. The business district evolved on First Street parallel to and one block from the river. The courthouse eventually found its place on the designated square three blocks to the south. Minnesota historian Theodore Blegen, commenting on how promoters had engaged in “frenzied townsite speculation,” noted that towns had more than eight times the number of lots needed for the population of 1860.¹² Shakopee’s plan—and those of most other river towns—illustrates this observation.

Shakopee’s surveyor, Edmund Hood, may have designed the town, since plat records indicate that between 1855 and 1858 he surveyed and was a proprietor of two more county seats: Chaska, just across the Minnesota River from Shakopee in Carver County, and Blue Earth, in south-central Minnesota’s Faribault County. The plans for all three are similar, but whereas Blue Earth and Shakopee remained linear towns, Chaska evolved into a crossed-linear form, suggesting that its business district exceeded original hopes by spreading in both directions down the centrally located lateral street.¹³

Lacking rivers, some linear county seats evolved along the developing road network. Red River traders had laid out the region’s first wilderness roads in the early nineteenth century, but these provided only limited access to the agricultural interior. In 1849 Henry Hastings Sibley helped procure federal funding for road construction. Designed to help protect the frontier, the resultant government roads assured regular services to some inland communities. But historians agree that, like the earlier wilderness roads, “they did



Shakopee, from *An Illustrated Historical Atlas of the State of Minnesota, 1874*, showing the original plat and early additions

not lead the people to the land.” During the 1850s settlers, often in conjunction with the state legislature, augmented the government roads by laying out roads that either connected towns or generated new ones.¹⁴

Alexandria, seat of Douglas County, exemplifies the towns built on newly created roads. Its origins also tell the entrepreneurial story of frontier settlement. The town evolved in linear form from a stockaded stage station along a road constructed in 1859 between St. Cloud and Fort Abercrombie in the Red River Valley. Brothers William and Alexander Kincaid (the town was named for the latter) selected the site on the banks of Lake Agnes and organized a town company to promote it.¹⁵

Henry Titus Welles, a Connecticut Yankee who moved to Minnesota in 1853, platted Alexandria in 1863. “An educated man much respected for business ability and probity of character,” according to historian William Watts Folwell, he was a lumber manufacturer

and one of the proprietors of St. Cloud, platted in 1855. A decade after Alexandria, he also platted Breckenridge on the St. Paul and Pacific Railroad line. Welles eventually became a Minneapolis banker and government official.¹⁶ His career as a town founder illustrates the connections of frontier settlements with the more monied, peopled eastern part of the state.

Planners were generally successful in implementing linear town designs. While most county seats laid out with standard linear plans developed accordingly, about 20 percent evolved into subtypes, the most popular of which was the crossed-linear plan.

Two of Minnesota’s non-river county seats evolved with elements of embedded squares, hybrids of the linear and central-courthouse-square designs. (More embedded squares can be found in northern Iowa within the transition zone between Yankee and Midland culture regions.) In Minnesota,

Austin (Mower County) and Le Center (Le Sueur County) represent outliers of this pattern. The greater width of Main Street on the Austin plat suggests that it was designed as a linear town, but the plat also shows a public square near the midpoint of Main Street with lots on surrounding blocks oriented to the square. A bitter fight with Frankford, the original county seat, may have prompted Austin’s proprietors to locate a public square at such a prominent site. As a historian of the period noted, “The location of the county seat at this place, early gave it a decided advantage over the other towns in the county, and since that time it has grown rapidly.”¹⁷ Austin’s plan illustrates the importance of county-seat status in town founding and form.

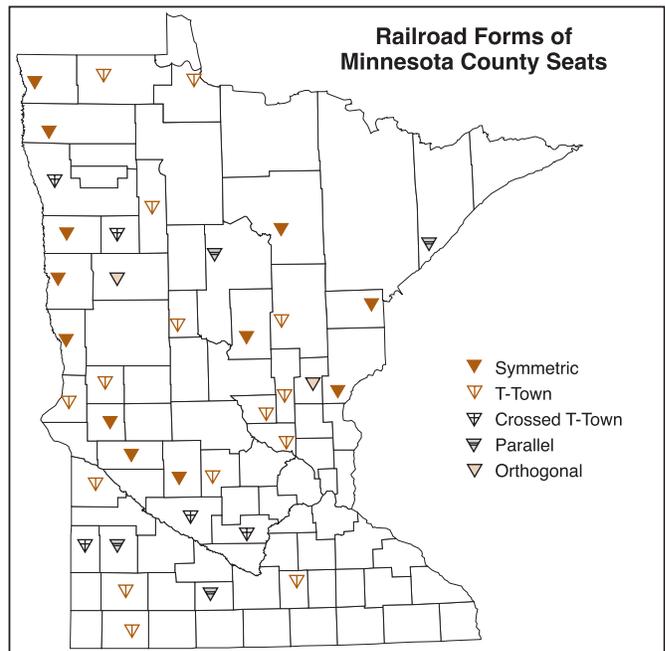
Le Center was the beneficiary of a county-seat relocation because, as its name suggests, it was centrally located. Its evolution as an embedded square seems idiosyncratic, however. Curiously, its planners, the Le Sueur Center Land Company, seemed indifferent to the

potential of county-seat status. They did not designate a square for the courthouse, nor did they indicate the location of the business district by street width. The courthouse block eventually was incorporated into the western part of the business district. Thus, Le Center became a hybrid of linear and central-courthouse-square plans without either of their key design elements.

ALTHOUGH RAILROAD TOWNS in Minnesota can be linked to substantial amounts of Yankee capital, their forms more likely resulted from corporate planning than Yankee culture. The timing of rail construction—along with corporate ambitions to sell land and town lots efficiently and to control farm-commodity, timber, and ore movements—were the most critical factors in siting and platting railroad towns.

Proposals for railroad construction in Minnesota began in the late 1840s. Serious discussions regarding possible routes were not forthcoming until 1857, however, when Congress, through the Minnesota Enabling Act, authorized conveying congressional lands to railroad companies. Shortly thereafter, the territorial and state legislatures began granting charters to railroad companies to construct lines. Construction began on a few lines, but the lack of capital, a problem compounded by the Panic of 1857, produced many failures.¹⁸

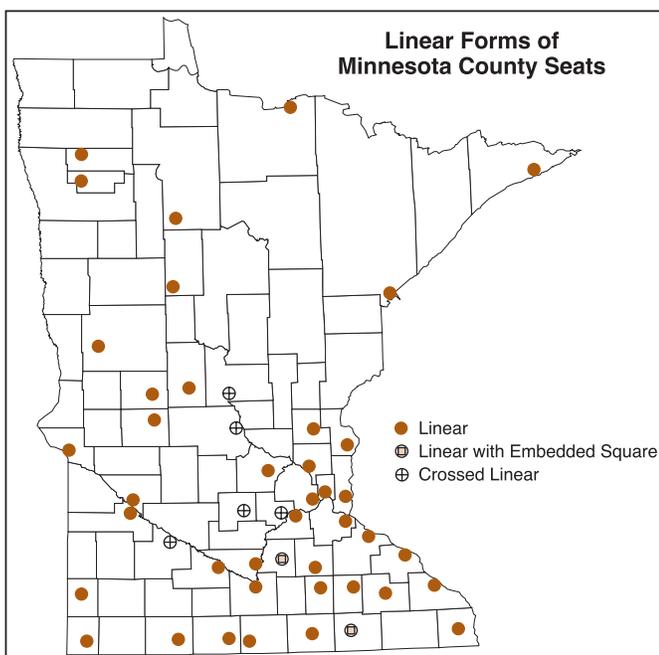
These events delayed the eagerly anticipated rail-



road construction in Minnesota until the late 1860s, when building accelerated across the southern, central, and western parts of the state. By 1880 railroads had laid more than 3,100 miles of track and had moved well beyond the agricultural frontier.¹⁹

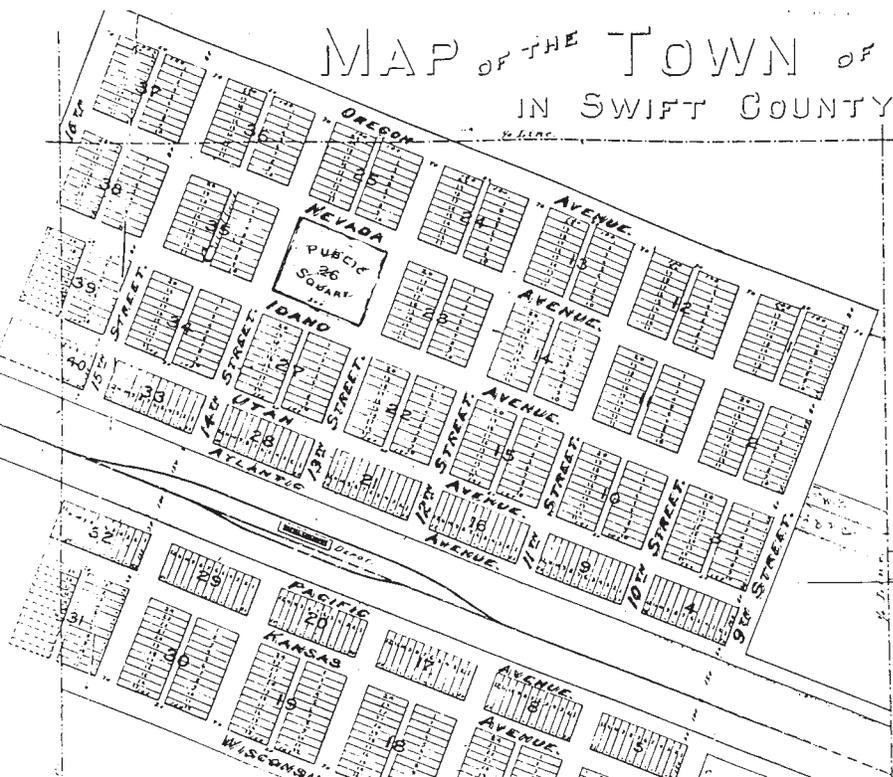
Competing keenly among themselves, railroads instituted colonization efforts. They promoted land sales by advertising in pamphlets and circulars. They platted townsites as part of a comprehensive system, locating individual towns by projected trade areas and by the placement of towns along rival lines. The immediate goal was profit from the sale of town lots, but, in the long run, larger profits were anticipated from commodity shipments channeled through the town. As geographer John Hudson observed, 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.”²⁰

How did the corporate vision of systematic, planned, profit-driven settlement influence the look of railroad towns that became county seats? One might expect highly standardized town forms, making for many identical towns sprinkled along railroad routes. Indeed, the pivotal corporate symbols of tracks, rights-of-way, and depot were the universal elements of the railroad-town core. Expanded urban rights-of-way were particularly important because they created space for storing and





Original plat of Benson, 1870, which evolved as planned into a symmetric railroad town, and postcard view, 1908



MAP OF THE TOWN OF BENSON IN SWIFT COUNTY,

No. 10 undesignated parcels of the Town of Benson do hereby certify that the same laid out per Town pages 255 as herein stated and no design give the Avenue, Street, Highways and Block A-26 as shown on last plat for the Public use. We further certify that said Town is located on the South West Quarter of Section 2, Town 121 North Range 39 West Swift County Minnesota.

The First Division of the St. Paul & Pacific West Coast Company by Geo. L. Becker, President and Samuel J. Reed Secretary of the First Division of the St. Paul and Pacific West Coast Company, to me personally known to be the persons described in and who executed the foregoing instrument and severally acknowledged that they executed the same freely and voluntarily for the uses and purposes therein expressed and as the act and deed of said Company.

State of Minnesota } S.S.
County of Ramsey }
I, J. C. Walker, Clerk of said County, do hereby certify that on this 15th day of August A.D. 1870 personally seen before me Geo. L. Becker, President and Samuel J. Reed Secretary of the First Division of the St. Paul and Pacific West Coast Company, to me personally known to be the persons described in and who executed the foregoing instrument and severally acknowledged that they executed the same freely and voluntarily for the uses and purposes therein expressed and as the act and deed of said Company.

Johnnie Platt
Notary Public
Ramsey County.

I hereby certify that the above plat is a correct plat of the Town of Benson as surveyed, and that said Town is located on the South West Quarter of Section 2, Town 121 North Range 39 West, Swift County, Minnesota.

Chas. M. Morris
Chief Engineer & Surveyor
Office of Register of Deeds
County of Ramsey State of Minnesota
I hereby certify that the above plat was filed in the office for Record on the 15th day of August A.D. 1870 at 4 o'clock p.m. and was duly recorded in Book A of Town Plats on page 2.

Office of Register of Deeds
County of Swift
State of Minnesota.
I hereby certify that I have carefully examined the above plat, the original Map of the Town of Benson in Swift County, which was filed for Record in Chapter 10, Vol. 1 on the 7th day of October A.D. 1870 at 4 o'clock a.m. and find that the within plat is a true copy of same.

J. C. Walker
Register of Deeds
Swift County
Minnesota.

handling the commodities and resources that railroads were vying to control.

Along the tracks of the St. Paul and Pacific Railroad (later the St. Paul, Minneapolis, and Manitoba and then the Great Northern) running from St. Anthony to Breckenridge in the Red River Valley, planners did, indeed, use highly standardized town designs. For example, Charles Morris, who surveyed at least four railroad towns, employed a standard symmetric plan for Willmar, Benson, and Morris, named in his honor. Benson's original plat is typical. It shows half blocks subdivided into 12 business lots and full blocks subdivided into 20 residential lots, all of which are oriented to the tracks. Benson's business district evolved facing the tracks along Atlantic and Pacific Avenues, the names of which, as well as the general design of the town, were replicated in Morris and Willmar as well as in Hallock and Ada (surveyed by Nathan Butler).

The relatively late period of accelerated railroad construction in Minnesota, though, meant that the roads and their affiliated companies platted only about 40 percent of the railroad towns that became county seats. By the 1880s railroads had to lay much of their track through settled areas where private planners, whether individuals or members of town or land companies, frequently platted towns on the newly constructed lines. Nearly all of these new towns later became county seats because they had the railroad and the original county seat did not.

Although private proprietors respected the pre-eminence of the railroad core, they varied street patterns, block orientations, and the number of lots per block. They favored the T-town plan because it kept business districts free from the congestion caused by having tracks in the middle of town, a nagging problem with orthogonal and symmetric plans. Whereas railroads or affiliated companies usually platted standard versions of T-town plans with the business district perpendicular to the tracks, private proprietors usually opted for the familiar grid pattern oriented to the cardinal directions.

Regardless of who platted them, only about 60 percent of the railroad towns that became county seats developed according to their plans. Most divergent forms evolved because railroads and their affiliates, wanting to capitalize on widespread speculation in lot sales, platted towns with far more business lots than needed. Frequently, the corporations also failed to nurture their towns, focusing instead on other profitable

aspects of their operations.²¹ Thus, orthogonal plans evolved into T-towns and symmetric plans developed as half-symmetric towns because their business districts fully evolved only on one side of the tracks. The result was a medley of railroad town forms (for example, Ada, Hallock, Milaca, Pine City, and Windom) unparalleled in its regional diversity.

The county seats that the Sioux City and St. Paul Railroad platted along its line from St. Paul up the Minnesota River Valley to Mankato and then to the southern boundary of Minnesota also illustrate this diversity. The railroad's president, Elias T. Drake, who had moved to Minnesota in the early 1850s after a successful stint with Ohio railroad construction, eventually platted four county seats along the tracks.²² First, in October 1870, he platted St. James, which became the seat of Watonwan County, about 35 miles from Mankato. Its original plat shows blocks oriented to the railroad with business lots along First Avenue, one block from the tracks. St. James, at least, evolved according to its design into a parallel plan.

In 1871 the railroad contracted to complete the line from St. James to a junction with the Iowa Falls and Sioux City Railroad at Lemars, Iowa, about 25 miles from Sioux City. Drake was also president of this line, and along its route he platted Windom and Worthington in Minnesota and Sibley in Iowa. Alexander Beach, who surveyed Windom, Worthington, and, most likely, Sibley, probably planned all three.²³ While their plats are highly standardized—only varying in number of blocks and an additional open square on the margins of Sibley—the towns developed different forms, probably because the copious number of business lots presented several options.

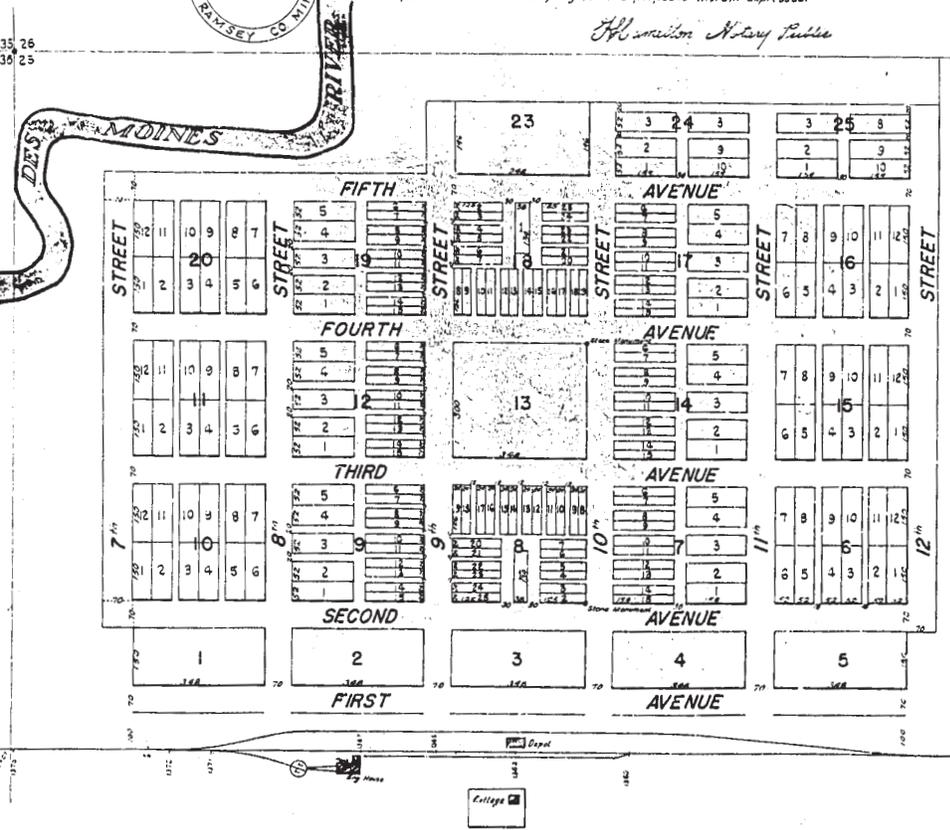
The original plat of Windom, notarized on April 22, 1872, shows blocks oriented to the tracks with business lots surrounding a central square identified as block 13. Additional business lots extend away from the central square on Ninth and Tenth Streets. Whether intended or not, the central square became a park, perhaps because it was too low and frequently too wet to be suitable for the courthouse. It survived as a park square through its frontier period but later, in 1905, the city and county exchanged sites for park and courthouse, most likely because the neglected park had become an eyesore.²⁴ On the other hand, Worthington's central square became a courthouse square embedded in a T-town design. Here the business district

At Testimony taken April 22d 1872
 The Lake Superior and Puget Sound Company, organized by Elias F. Drake, its President, hereby certifies that a plat of the town of Windom, Minnesota, as shown hereon has been made by said Company and its authorized agents and filed in accordance with the requirements of "An Act authorizing for the record of town plats" in force. The streets and lots indicated on said plat are dedicated to the use of the public for streets and lots and no other appropriation of any such streets or lots by any competent authority, the revision and file in the books of said State of Minnesota or any other State, Territory, County or other authority, is hereby received and declared not to be in said Company and the fee of any such authority is declared not to be included in the cost of any lots hereon.

Elias F. Drake Test.

E. F. Drake, President of the Lake Superior and Puget Sound Company personally appeared before me this 22nd day of April 1872 and acknowledged that he executed the foregoing certificate signed by him as the act of said Company for the purposes therein expressed.

J. H. Swanton Notary Public



Detail of original plat of Windom, 1872, showing a central-park-square plan. When a new courthouse was built on the square in 1905, Windom became Minnesota's second town with a central-courthouse square.

extended from the tracks along Tenth Street. Why Beach chose his Minnesota plans is not apparent, but the prominent central square in each was atypical—both for a railroad town and for this region of the Midwest.

Among the railroad-affiliated companies active in Minnesota, the Lake Superior and Puget Sound Company, associated with the transcontinental Northern Pacific Railway, was the busiest townsite promoter. Based in New York City, the 15-member board of directors was full of Yankee capitalists including Thomas H. Canfield, president, and Frederick Billings, vice-president.²⁵

The company platted Aitkin, Brainerd, Wadena, and Moorhead—four of the five county seats along the

main line of the Northern Pacific. Their plans were far less standardized than those of the railroad towns in south-central Minnesota or the Red River Valley. In Aitkin, the Lake Superior and Puget Sound Company had to work with landowners Nathaniel Tibbetts and his wife. Tibbetts, a Maine lumberman who moved to Minnesota in 1850, owned part of the southeast section of the townsite, including six lots fronting Main Street, parallel and one block north of the tracks. The company platted Aitkin as a parallel town in 1873 and finally sold its first lots on Main Street in 1879. The business district eventually evolved as a T-town, however, on Fourth Street perpendicular to the tracks. Lots here sold for an average of \$75. By the time of the last sale in 1888, the company had realized only about \$6,000 in lot sales.²⁶

In contrast, Brainerd was a fantastically successful business venture, and the large size of its original plat, compared with Aitkin's, indicates that it was designed to be so. The company used nonstandardized symmetric plans for Brainerd, Moorhead, and Wadena, with Front and Main Streets parallel to one another and adjacent to the tracks. Whereas Brainerd and Moorhead developed as half-symmetric towns with businesses mostly along Front Street, Wadena

evolved as a T-town. Sales records show that the Lake Superior and Puget Sound Company sold 22 lots of block 47 in Brainerd in 1871 at an average price of \$250. By 1890 the company had sold more than \$100,000 worth of lots.²⁷

Apparently, Brainerd became a highly profitable townsite because railroad officials expended time and money on its early development. They began implementing their well-organized strategy when Lyman White, the company's townsite agent from Vermont, arrived at "The Crossing," the point where the proposed rail route bridged the Upper Mississippi River. Railroad surveyors attracted speculators from Little Falls who also realized the spot's potential as a townsite. Although the railroad was forced to acquire title from some of these

“claim jumpers,” their presence undoubtedly boosted the value of the location, as did the railroad’s rapid construction of Headquarters Hotel, a three-story depot, a general office building, and a car-repair shop.²⁸ As if to stamp their seal of approval on the townsite, officials gave the town the maiden name of the wife of company president John Gregory Smith.

LAND, LUMBER, and mining companies also platted towns that later became county seats along railroad lines. Two Harbors and Milaca provide good examples of how the interplay of urbanization forces—resource extraction, rail transportation, and townsite promotion—influenced town forms. Two Harbors originated as a shipping center with the development of the Vermilion Iron Range by the Minnesota Iron Company in the late 1880s. Charlemagne Tower, a Pennsylvania industrialist who was the driving force behind the company, purchased 17,000 acres and resuscitated the Duluth and Iron Range Railroad to which the state legislature had granted land in 1875 to build a road from the iron range to Duluth. In 1884 the Minnesota Iron Company first constructed the line from Tower to Two Harbors, some 20 miles from Duluth at the terminus of a shorter, more desirable route to Lake Superior.²⁹



Northern Pacific Railroad surveyors at Brainerd, 1871

Richard Henry Lee, brother-in-law of Charlemagne Tower, surveyed the townsite in the fall of 1884.³⁰ As in many river and lake towns, a small business district evolved during the frontier period along First Avenue between Cedar and Poplar

Brainerd, called “The Crossing” in 1870 when this stereograph was taken, soon became a highly successful railroad town and the Crow Wing County seat.



PLAT OF

Filed for record the 21st of February 1885
St. Paul, Minn.

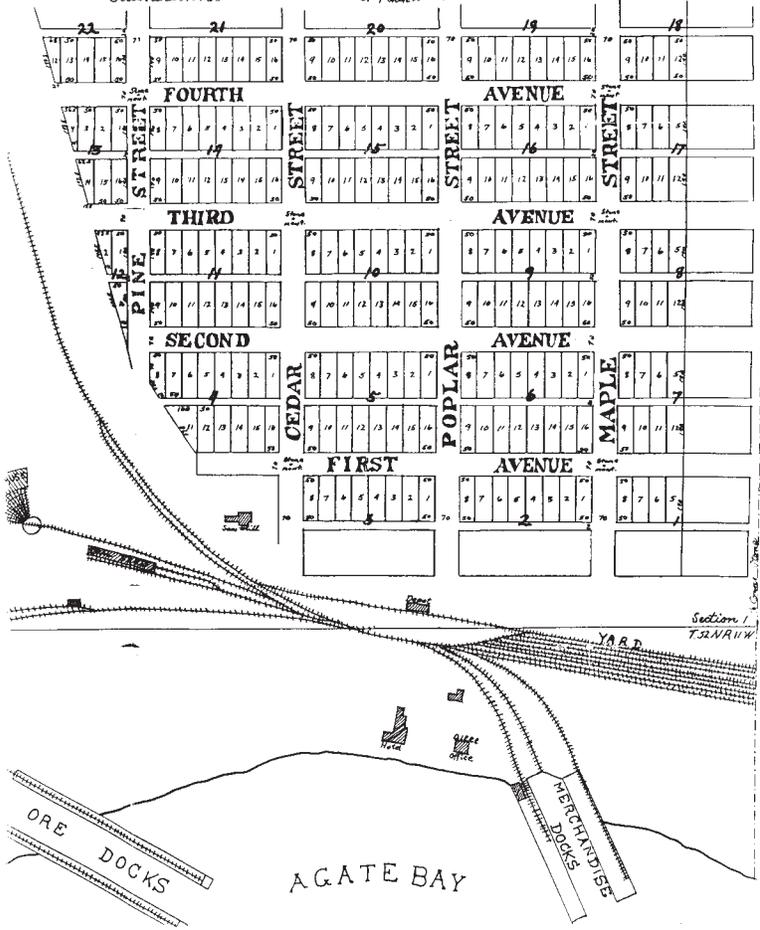
TWO HARBORS

Lake County

Scale 1 inch = 200 feet

All Streets 70 Feet Wide
All Alleys 20 Feet Wide

6 Feet Front by 140 Feet Deep
of Streets due East and West
" " " South and North



Two Harbors's original plat, 1885, which specified "All Streets 70 Feet Wide, All Alleys 20 Feet Wide."

Two Harbors evolved as a nonstandardized parallel town.

pany town with logging, a lumber mill, a company store, and a land company located at Oak Park, where the Minneapolis and St. Cloud Railroad crossed the Rum River. Hill's favorable response led to the incorporation of the Mille Lacs Lumber Company on July 1, 1882.³¹

In December 1885 Charles Keith, a Maine lumberman based in Princeton, the original county seat, surveyed the Milaca townsite. Keith's simple plan shows only four blocks and intersecting streets oriented to the tracks of Hill's St. Paul, Minneapolis, and Manitoba Railroad. Business and residential lots, undifferentiated by width, are not oriented to the tracks, suggesting an orthogonal town plan. Milaca, however, evolved as a T-town, as its principal business blocks developed on South Second Avenue. Although intended to be the cornerstone of company operations, the town struggled as mismanagement, a lack of expertise among company officials, and fraudulent land purchases by Kennedy's nephew precluded success.³²

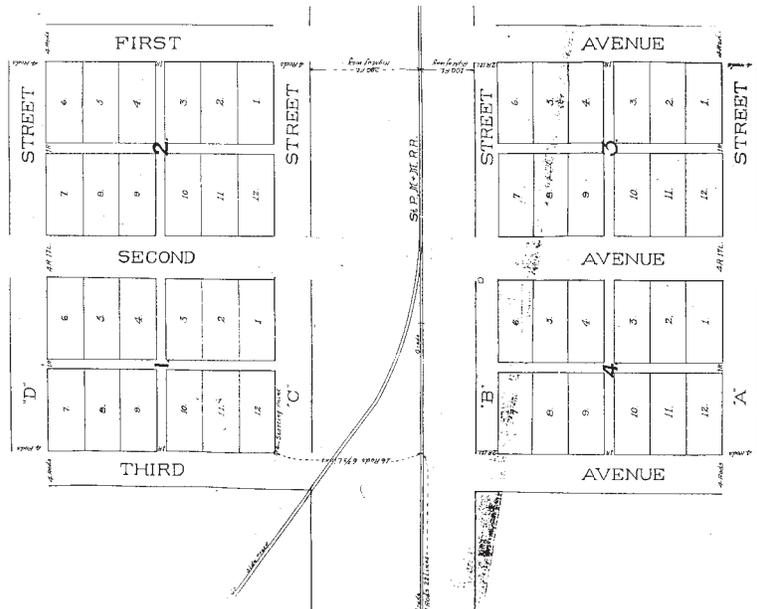
Milaca's original plat, 1886, a simple orthogonal design.

Although a few businesses developed north of the tracks on Second Avenue (later Main Street) and along B Street, Milaca evolved as a T-town with most commerce based on Second Avenue south of the tracks.

Streets parallel with and one block north of the shoreline. Yet Two Harbors is best classified as a parallel railroad town because its business district runs parallel with and one block north of the tracks, which intervened between the shoreline and the town.

Apparently, proprietors of the Minnesota Iron Company never intended to realize large profits from the sale of townsite lots. Lee's unassuming plan lacks the hallmarks of a speculative townsite; the business district on the relatively small plat was not defined by street or lot width. Moreover, like nearly all county seats with railroad plans, it lacks a designated square. After officials moved the county seat here from Beaver Bay in 1888, the courthouse eventually found a home on the southeast corner of block 15.

Milaca, seat of Mille Lacs County, originated as a company town 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 com-



Like Two Harbors's plat, Milaca's modest one suggests that county-seat status was immaterial to the lumber company; the courthouse was eventually located in an addition east of the original townsite. Townsite development, too, appears to have been considered secondary to business operations. Milaca's plat lacks the sophistication of those of Ada and Hallock, towns that Hill's railroad planners had platted earlier in the Red River Valley. The key is probably Milaca's relatively late development. By 1885 railroads had discovered that simple grid plans would suffice because most of their towns would never become great cities. As geographer Thomas Harvey 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."³³

IN SUMMARY, all but two of Minnesota's 87 county seats evolved with linear or railroad-town forms, testimony to how commerce and corporations have shaped the urban landscape. In the earliest stage of settlement, linear towns dominated in southeastern Minnesota along commercially viable waterways. The few non-river towns platted before they became county seats also tended to have linear forms focused on their business districts. The majority of non-river county seats, however, were most likely platted after winning this status. While most of these plats show public spaces for courthouses, their locations were nearly always secondary to the business-district cores that characterized Yankee towns. Preston stands as the lone representative of the central-courthouse-square town, whereas Austin and

Le Center evolved into hybrids of central courthouse squares and linear forms.

Railroad town forms came into vogue on the Minnesota frontier after 1870. Railroads could best implement their corporate ambitions in sparsely settled or unsettled regions, and the distribution of railroad county seats outlines those areas. Yet the era of intensive railroad development in Minnesota coincided with advancing settlement, allowing private proprietors to found towns along railroad lines as well. As a result, railroad towns in Minnesota exhibit diverse forms. Private proprietors—whether working with rail officials or independently—varied blocks, lots, and street patterns, primarily to relieve congestion created by the tracks. Railroad companies also contributed to this diversity by speculating in lot sales without, in most cases, a long-term commitment to the economic growth of the towns. The result was that many towns, including a number of county seats, did not evolve as planned.

The distribution of town forms seen in this sample of Minnesota's county seats presages a shift in the ability to shape urbanization on the frontier. As time passed, individuals who saw towns as commercial centers were superseded by corporations that viewed towns as modules of an expanding system devised to control development and profit. The exercise of corporate power in creating railroad and company towns ascended to new heights in Minnesota, even though numerous private proprietors somewhat moderated corporate impact. Later, railroads achieved even more control over urbanization processes on the western frontier, which was significantly shaped by their urban molds. □

NOTES

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1. Emma Glaser, "How Stillwater Came To Be," *Minnesota History* 24 (Sept. 1943): 197–99, 202–03.
2. Glaser, "Stillwater," 203; Warren Upham, *Minnesota Place Names: A Geographical Encyclopedia* (3rd ed., St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2001), 620.
3. See, for example, John Borchert, "American Metropolitan Evolution," *Geographical Review* 57 (July 1967): 301–23; Michael P. Conzen, "A Transport Interpretation of the Growth of Urban Regions: An American Example," *Journal of Historical Geography*, vol. 1, no. 4 (1975): 361–82; Timothy R. Mahoney, "Urban History in a Regional Context: River Towns on the Upper Mississippi, 1840–1860," *Journal of American*

History 72 (Sept. 1985): 318–39; Edward K. Muller, "Regional Urbanization and the Selective Growth of Towns in North American Regions," *Journal of Historical Geography*, vol. 3, no. 1 (1977): 21–39; Allan R. Pred, *Urban Growth and City Systems in the United States, 1840–1860* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980); Anne Mosher Sheridan, "The Development of Nucleated Settlement Systems: The Case of the Upper Mississippi Valley, 1800–1860" (master's thesis, Pennsylvania State University, 1983); James E. Vance Jr., *The Merchant's World: The Geography of Wholesaling* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1970).

4. An exception is Edward T. Price, "The Central Courthouse Square in the American County Seat," *Geographical Review* 58 (Jan. 1968): 29–60. See also, Michael Conzen, "The Morphology of Nineteenth-Century Cities in the United

States,” in *Urbanization in the Americas: The Background in Comparative Perspective*, ed. W. Borah, J. Hardoy, and G. Styster (Ottawa: History Division, National Museum of Man, 1980); Richard V. Francaviglia, *Main Street Revisited* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1996); John C. Hudson, *Plains Country Towns* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985); John W. Reps, *Town Planning in Frontier America* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1980); Carole Smith Zellie, “Nineteenth-Century Townsite Plans in Southern Wisconsin: A Typology and Analysis” (master’s thesis, University of Wisconsin, Madison, 1989).

5. The most popular subtype was the Shelbyville square, in which streets intersected at the corners of the block. Preston is a Shelbyville square, although the original plat suggests that this was not what planner John Kaercher intended. For a discussion of prototype forms, see Price, “Central Courthouse Square,” 30–36.

6. For a detailed discussion of three of the four subtypes, see Hudson, *Plains Country Towns*, 88–90.

7. Carl Sauer, “Historical Geography and the Western Frontier,” in *Land and Life: A Selection from the Writings of Carl Ortwin Sauer*, ed. John Leighly (Berkeley: University of

California Press, 1965), 49.

8. Price, “Central Courthouse Square,” 29.

9. John G. Rice, “The Old-Stock Americans,” in *They Chose Minnesota: A Survey of the State’s Ethnic Groups*, ed. June D. Holmquist (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1981), 58; Theodore C. Blegen, *Minnesota, A History of the State* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1963), 175; Warren Upham and Rose B. Dunlap, comps., *Minnesota Biographies, 1655–1912*, Collections of the Minnesota Historical Society, vol. 14 (St. Paul, 1912). In the lumbering and mining regions of northern Minnesota, a substantial Canadian-born component mixed with the Yankee; see John C. Hudson, “North American Origins of Middlewestern Frontier Populations,” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 78 (Sept. 1988): 407, 410.

10. Joseph S. Wood, *The New England Village* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 114–34; James Vance, *This Scene of Man: The Role and Structure of the City in the Geography of Western Civilization* (New York: Harper’s College Press, 1977), 255.

11. See Tom Schmiedeler, “Frontier Forms of Iowa’s County Seats,” *Annals of Iowa* 57 (Winter 1998): 19–22.

12. Blegen, *Minnesota*, 176.

13. Five of the six Minnesota county seats with crossed-linear forms evolved from simple linear town designs.

14. Arthur J. Larsen, “Roads and the Settlement of Minnesota,” *Minnesota History* 21 (Sept. 1940): 229–34.

15. Larsen, “Roads and Settlement,” 235; Constant Larson, ed., *History of Douglas and Grant Counties, Minnesota* (Indianapolis: B. F. Bowen, 1916), 1: 125–26.

16. William W. Folwell, *A History of Minnesota* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society, 1961), 2: 337; Upham and Dunlap, *Minnesota Biographies*, 836.

17. Schmiedeler, “Frontier Forms,” 25–27; A. T. Andreas, *An Illustrated Historical Atlas of the State of Minnesota* (Chicago: Lakeside Publishing Co., 1874), 248.

18. Richard S. Prosser, *Rails to the North Star* (Minneapolis: Dillon Press, 1966), 2–4.

19. Richard V. Francaviglia, “Some Comments on the Historic and Geographic Importance of Railroads in Minnesota,” *Minnesota History* 43 (Summer 1972): 58; Harold F. Peterson, “Early Minnesota Railroads and the Quest for Settlers,” *Minnesota History* 13 (Mar. 1932): 25.

20. John C. Hudson, “Towns of the Western Railroads,” *Great Plains Quarterly* 2 (Winter 1982): 42. See also Thomas Harvey, “Railroad Towns: Urban Form on the Prairie,” *Landscape*, vol. 27, no. 3 (1983): 27.

21. Harvey, “Railroad Towns,” 27.

22. Robert E. Nahlovsky, “A Construction History of the St. Paul and Sioux City Railroad, 1855–1872” (master’s thesis, Mankato State University, 1969), 11.

23. Judson W. Bishop, “History of the St. Paul & Sioux City Railroad, 1864–1881” in *Collections of the Minnesota Historical Society*, vol. 10, pt. 1 (St. Paul, 1905), 404. Sibley’s surveyor is unidentified on the original plat. In Worthington, Beach surveyed blocks 1–25, containing the town’s central square;

TOWNS ONLINE

To view a chart listing each of Minnesota’s 87 county seats, its town form, intended town form, proprietors, surveyor, and date of original plat, visit the Minnesota Historical Society’s website:

<http://www.mnhs.org/market/mhspress/mnhistmag/seatlist.html>

Readers interested in exploring the history of counties, towns, and geographical features named in this article will enjoy browsing MHS’s new place-names website:

<http://mnplaces.mnhs.org/index.cfm>

It is an online version of the revised and enlarged third edition of Warren Upham’s *Minnesota Place Names, A Geographical Encyclopedia*, published by MHS Press (718 p., cloth, \$49.95). The searchable, illustrated website offers a wealth of fascinating information and trivia about the state’s more than 20,000 place names.

Thomas Gere surveyed the rest of the original townsite. See Arthur P. Rose, *An Illustrated History of Nobles County, Minnesota* (Worthington: Northern History Publishing Co., 1908), 155.

24. *Windom Reporter*, Jan. 4, 1935, p. 1, 6.

25. *Charter and By-Laws of the Lake Superior and Puget Sound Company* (New York: The Company, 1880), 2, 4, copy in Minnesota Historical Society (MHS) Library, St. Paul.

26. Upham and Dunlap, *Minnesota Biographies*, 784; *Sales of Lots at Aitkin*, Land Records, Lake Superior and Puget Sound Co., vol. 19, Northern Pacific Railway Co. Records, MHS.

Railroads frequently made arrangements with landowners, commonly purchasing land for the townsite for \$1 and sharing profits from the sale of lots with the owner.

27. *Sales of Lots at Brainerd*, Land Records, Lake Superior and Puget Sound Co., vol. 22, Northern Pacific Records.

28. Carl Zapffe, *Brainerd, Minnesota*,

1871-1946: *Seventy-Fifth Anniversary* (Brainerd: Civic Association, 1946), 3-5.

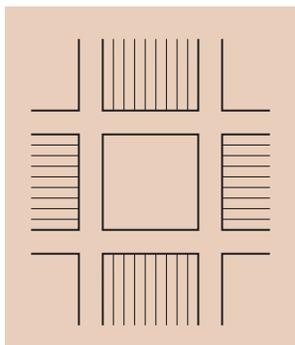
29. Folwell, *History of Minnesota*, 4: 8-17. See also George H. Primmer, "Railways at the Head of Lake Superior," *Economic Geography* 13 (July 1937): 269-80.

30. William A. McGonagle, "Early Recollections of the Duluth & Iron Range Rail Road," manuscript, p. 3, copy in MHS Library.

31. Norma Jean Hervey, "A Company Town Becomes a Community: Milaca, Minnesota, 1880-1915" (Ph. D. diss., University of Minnesota, 1990), 1-35.

32. Upham and Dunlap, *Minnesota Biographies*, 393; Hervey, "Company Town," 26-35. For photographs of Milaca's early business district, see *Milaca, Minnesota, 100 Years, 1886-1986* (Milaca: Milaca Centennial Committee, 1986), 22-25.

33. Harvey, "Railroad Towns," 33.



The town-form drawings and distribution maps are by Darin T. Grauberger, University of Kansas, Lawrence; the original plats of Stillwater (Washington Co.), Benson (Swift Co.), Windom (Cottonwood Co.), Two Harbors (Lake Co.), and Milaca (Mille Lacs Co.) are courtesy each county's Recorder of Deeds office. All other illustrations, including the Shakopee plat from A. T. Andreas's Illustrated Historical Atlas of the State of Minnesota, p. 63, are from MHS collections.



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