

## The History of Mount Vernon, Iowa: An Introduction

### The Historical Eras of Development and National Register Historic Districts

*One way to understand the history and uniqueness of Mt Vernon is to see our history as a series of “eras” that place our development in the context of the Westward Movement and the transportation revolutions that enabled that movement to succeed. This website includes many historical sources and writings about the town. This arrangement of “eras” is a simple organization that the Historic Preservation Commission uses in its visual documentation of the history of the city. A full visual/architectural history of the town is currently found in the Council Chambers at City Hall.*

*The site also includes text of a walking tour of each of the three National Register of Historic Places Historic Districts in the city.*

In the beginning -----

At the end of the Black Hawk War of 1832 a treaty ceded a 50 mile strip of land on the Iowa side of the Mississippi River to the US government as part of a required payment for war damages done by the Black Hawk band of the Sac and Fox tribes. The far western boundary included what was to become Mt. Vernon. Thus, the location was within the first area opened to white settlement on the trans-Mississippi frontier.

As the Iowa territory began planning for statehood a new capitol city was laid out along the Iowa River and named Iowa City. To protect the new capitol from Native Americans immediately to the west Congress commissioned a trail be marked from the largest city in the territory, Dubuque on the Mississippi, to Iowa City in order to move troops as rapidly as possible from Ft. Snelling (St.Paul) to protect the capitol in Iowa City. They could move quickly from Ft. Snelling to Dubuque on the river and by then going overland could cut the distance by a land route and avoid the many rapids on the river south of Dubuque. The Army Engineers mapped a trail and a contract offered to a man who dug a furrow to clearly mark the trail over the vast grassland between the two cities.

The highway, known locally as the *Military Road*, quickly became a major transportation artery for settlers, and connected the largest city (Dubuque) to the new state capitol. The trail traversed a small but steep hill north of the Red Cedar River crossing. The crest of the hill was an ideal place for travelers to rest their animals and secure supplies or services for their wagons. Thus, Mt. Vernon (first known as Pinhook) was born as a resting place or service point along Iowa's first major highway. The original settlers on the hill were merchants, leatherworkers, wheelwrights, and blacksmiths servicing travelers. **The era of the MILITARY ROAD** is marked architecturally by many small wooden-framed homes and stores similar to those they left behind in Illinois, Indiana and Ohio. **By 1838 some 50 persons resided on the hill.** Several farm settlers arrived and took some of the rich low-lying land along small creeks flowing into the Red Cedar River. The small community on the hill soon became an area trade center for an increasing number of farm settlers as well as serving the wagons and stagecoaches.

An unusual visual feature of the town was the number of brick homes on the hilltop before 1850. The availability of clay, sand and water and a talented mason and brick maker provided small Greek Revival Homes, stores, and school buildings along the hill. Some suggest this early settlement period could be called the era of LOCAL BRICK.

The new community was fortunate that an early **railroad arrived in 1858** and crossed the entire state by 1860 proving a vital link to both the east and west. It was also a boon to the new college founded in 1853 by laymen, a charismatic minister and supported by area Methodist. **By the Civil War** the town was well established with a growing merchant class and boasting an institution of higher education. The interrelationship between the town and college was evident from the beginning of the college and has continued to help shape the destiny of both town and college. The era of the Military Road (1840-64) was short and followed by the *overlapping period* called the **CORNELL ERA and the RAILROAD ERA** (1858-1914).

The period from the Civil War to WWI was one of slow consolidation and expansion of the college and the town. The **railroad-building era** to link the American oceans soon brought a bridge across the Mississippi River at Clinton and opened direct lines to both the east and west cities and ports. Connecting lines along the north south axis put the city in easy reach of St. Paul and St. Louis. This new efficient transportation system took the rich crops of the Midwest to larger markets encouraged by urban industrial growth. The same system made Cornell easily attractive to students from the growing urban areas of the entire region. It also made available cheap building materials and mail order goods. In many ways the isolation of the area was quickly being overcome and new styles in clothing and domestic building more rapidly came into fashion. The railroads brought to the city and college undreamed of cultural attractions including nationally known personalities in a broad range of fields. One of the most popular cultural attractions was the regular appearance of the Chicago Symphony who played annually for sixty years (1903- 1963) at King Chapel. The members enjoyed the hospitality of the entire community. They stayed with host families and were royally entertained before returning to Chicago after their annual swing to the west coast.

At the end of the Civil War the city gained control over its destiny by **officially incorporating**. Despite national and regional economic recessions both the city and college increased in population and the city moved towards many civic improvements. The area was slowly drawn into the agricultural industrial development of the now larger city of Cedar Rapids, 14 miles to the west. Public schools expanded, as did the number of churches and members. A gift by Andrew Carnegie to both Cornell and the city provided a fine library that served both. Just before WWI an electric railroad connected to the Cedar Rapids streetcar system served Mt. Vernon and made trips to the city easy and reasonable. Agricultural prosperity between 1900- 1918 brought generous benefits to Cornell and the city and the college achieved a truly regional reputation and a geographically diverse student body that continued to grow steadily and slowly.

This period of expansion and prosperity is evident in the built environment of the college and city. Large homes were constructed not only because of available money and general family size but also because the expanding college encouraged students to find rooms with local residents. Nearly all the large homes built in this era were used as rooming houses at one time or

another. Increasing the student body and faculty as well as strong college funding, encouraged building by college employees. Brick fireproof commercial buildings on the main street replaced older wooden structures. A series of **disastrous fires in the 1880s and 90s** speeded this movement. Most of **The COMMERCIAL HISTORIC DISTRICT** is from this period from 1880-1910. Many of the finer homes in this period are found in the **ASH PARK HISTORIC DISTRICT** or well documented in the **CORNELL-MT. VERNON HISTORIC DISTRICT**. In the overall historical development they can be considered part of the larger **Railroad Era**.

Established before WWI but developed seriously after the war was the coming of the **LINCOLN HIGHWAY – the first marked auto road from NY to San Francisco**. The route selected was the main street of the town, bring with it many recreational and long distance auto travelers. As in the early period these travels needed services. Blacksmith shops became service stations for cars and many home became Tourist Homes with small cabin courts to follow. While there are few structures in town that clearly reflect **this era (1914-1929)** the route contributed to the general prosperity of the community and helped maintained the historic character of the commercial area. As the federal highway system developed in response to the growing number of auto travelers much of the Lincoln Highway route became US #30. It was not until the great highway building era and the bypass system in the 1950 that US #30 was moved to the south edge of town. The connections to Cedar Rapids were improved to then modern standards. The city was drawn even deeper into the commuter's world and the By-pass area threatened to move local commerce from the old main street to new strip malls.

The contemporary town of the Post WWII era had its beginning during the war as wartime needs created a great demand for labor in Cedar Rapids, particularly for the new Collins (now Rockwell) Avionics plant, enlarged food processing plants, and several heavy manufacturing companies. This demand accelerated the already developed system of commuting to work or looking outside the town for employment. The postwar expansion and diversification of the industrial base of Cedar Rapids brought urban sprawl that spread the city in all directions. Today Mt. Vernon counts among its residence many **commuters** who enjoy the benefits and charm of the small city with fine schools and strong cultural life in a rural setting. The growth of the college to nearly 1200 students adds to the economic and cultural health. The combined population of citizens and students stands at over 4000 souls in 2006. The advent of good **air transportation** has not bypassed the city as it is about 25 minutes from the regional airport and thus closer in time to that facility than many parts of Cedar Rapids.

Among Iowa's small towns Mt. Vernon is listed with the strongest. It still maintains its identity and relative independence from Cedar Rapids. Its historic and present growth has been slow and accommodated without sacrificing its charm and vital community life. Its strong educational system, civic and religious organizations, and alert business community supported by a weekly newspaper all contribute to a remarkable quality of life. Cornell College and Mt Vernon celebrate a long symbiotic relationship in which both have prospered and shared in the successes and disappointments of the other.

Few small towns in the nation can boast three historic districts recognized by the National Register of Historic Places. Cornell College was the first and still one of the few campuses to be listed in its entirety. The establishment of the city Historic Preservation Commission under the

Certified Local Government Program in 1980 clearly expresses the intention of the town and college to preserve the historic and architectural heritage of this City on the Hill.

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