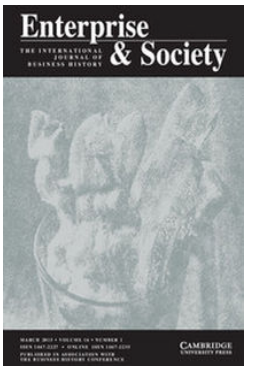

Hinterland Dreams and Midwestern Rails: Public Power and Railroading in Nineteenth-Century La Crosse, Wisconsin

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Hinterland Dreams and Midwestern Rails: Public Power and Railroading in Nineteenth-Century La Crosse, Wisconsin

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Historians of the nineteenth-century American Middle West typically pay scant attention to the financial and regulatory role that smaller cities played in forging a regional railroad network. This article, however, explores railroading in La Crosse, Wisconsin, to demonstrate that politicians and boosters in such cities often took advantage of municipal power to shape the course of railroads in unexpected ways. In 1853, 1864, and 1876, for example, local boosters convinced city aldermen to fund railways and help forge commercial links to Milwaukee, Minneapolis, Chicago, and other markets in the East and West. The city's influence over railroading did not start and stop with public investment. Beginning in 1883, after state lawmakers had amended the city's charter and given municipal officials new police powers, aldermen forced railroad executives to clear city streets, prevent damage to private property, and guarantee the personal safety of local residents. Moreover, even when La Crossers lost a fight with railroads, as they did when they waged a holy war over the location of a Mississippi River bridge in the 1860s and 1870s, they forced

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railroad men to pay attention to their concerns. In the end, the case of La Crosse suggests that historians need to pay much greater mind to people and governments in small, hinterland cities before they can fully grasp the rich history of railroading, and of capitalism more generally, in the nineteenth-century Middle West.

Perhaps more than anyone else in La Crosse, Wisconsin, a bustling frontier city on the banks of the Mississippi River, Thomas Benton Stoddard recognized the intrinsic overlap between the worlds of government and railroads in the nineteenth-century Middle West. Stoddard had long navigated both worlds. On the one hand, he had been born into politics in 1800. Stoddard's father, Richard, had served as the first sheriff of Genesee County, New York, and been a leading member of the Federalists, an influential political party devoted to the idea of greater federal intervention in the American economy, in the western part of the Empire State.[1] As a young man, Thomas honed his political skills when he lived among the Seneca Indians, learned their language and culture, and helped the tribe negotiate its claims with federal agents. Moreover, after he arrived in southwestern Wisconsin in 1851, he worked with state politicians to organize La Crosse County. In 1856, grateful voters of the new city of La Crosse elected him mayor. Stoddard was thus more than a little familiar with the often-ticklish ways of federal, state, and local government in nineteenth-century America. On the other hand, he was well versed in the mind-boggling intricacies of western railroading. In 1864, he won land concessions from Minnesota legislators, and convinced local city council members to invest public money in his railroad company, the Southern Minnesota. As a result, on November 18, 1870, gleeful La Crossers welcomed the railroad home.[2] Ultimately, the Southern Minnesota helped link La Crosse to an emerging regional railroad network, which eventually transformed the city into a hub of western commerce in the second half of the century.

Historians typically describe the efforts of Stoddard and other Midwestern railroad boosters in small cities as a tale of high hopes but ultimately broken dreams.[3] Beginning at mid-century, as this conventional narrative goes, Midwesterners like Stoddard recognized that

1. For a useful discussion of the origins of Federalist economic policies, see Elkins and McKitrick, *The Age of Federalism*, 257–302.

2. *History of Northern Wisconsin*, 473.

3. See, for example, Wade, *The Urban Frontier*, 184, 334–35; Goodrich, *Government Promotion*, 261–62; Fishlow, *American Railroads*, 163–204; Mahoney, *River Towns in the Great West*, 248–49; Cronon, *Nature's Metropolis*, 55–93; Teaford, *Cities of the Heartland*, 33–40; Engelhardt, *Gateway to the Northern Plains*, 37–105.

winning a rail line could determine whether their community flourished or failed. For this reason, they took whatever steps necessary to attract trains: boosters across the region sang their town's economic prospects, haggled with company agents, and lobbied aldermen to sell municipal bonds and invest in railroad projects. In many cases, these efforts were successful. Yet as railroad corporations expanded their lines and became ever more powerful, hinterland communities began to lose their ability to compete in the grand chess match of tracks and trains. Time and again, railroad men ignored or disregarded the concerns of hinterland city residents and made vital business decisions, such as bypassing a desperate town or raising shipping rates, that magnified their profitability at a small city's expense. Even worse for hinterland urbanities, railroad regulation was largely futile in the Middle West. Railroads bullied or bribed lawmakers and undermined public schemes to protect passengers and consumers. By 1900, wealthy railroad corporations had forged a vibrant, wide-ranging transportation network centered on Chicago that integrated the Middle West into the national economy. Yet, they had done so largely on their own terms. According to this familiar story, rather than framing Midwestern railroading until the end of the century, people in many smaller, hinterland communities watched as iron tracks, steaming locomotives, and commercial life passed them by.

This narrative of wealthy railroad corporations disregarding the concerns of small cities certainly has truth to it. Railroads were incredibly powerful creatures that regularly remade commerce and the built environment in hinterland communities. Yet, Stoddard's tale, and the often colorful story of La Crosse railroads more broadly, offer intriguing clues about the dynamic ways in which smaller Midwestern cities continued to influence railroading until the century's end. Time and again, La Crossers used the machinery of municipal government to leave their mark on railroads. In 1853, 1864, and 1876, for example, Stoddard and other boosters convinced city aldermen to fund railways and help forge commercial links to Milwaukee, Minneapolis, Chicago, and markets in the East. La Crosse's influence over railroading, however, did not start and stop with public investment. Beginning in 1883, after state lawmakers had amended the city's charter and given municipal officials new police powers, aldermen forced railroad executives to clear city streets, prevent damage to private property, and guarantee the personal safety of local residents. Moreover, even when La Crossers lost a fight with railroads, as they did when they waged a holy war over the location of a Mississippi River Bridge in the 1860s and 1870s, they forced railroad men to pay attention to their concerns. In the end, the case of Thomas Stoddard and La Crosse suggests that historians need to pay much greater mind

to people and governments in small, hinterland cities before they can fully grasp the rich history of railroading, and of capitalism more generally, in the nineteenth-century Middle West.

From Rivers to Railways

By the middle of the nineteenth century, La Crosse was well situated to become a thriving commercial hub in the Middle West. Like many other communities that took root and bloomed in the region, its environment determined its economic potential. Most important, the settlement sat at the meeting point of three rivers: the Black, the La Crosse, and the Mississippi, that linked its residents to a larger world and paved the way for local commercial growth.[4] Following these waterways, La Crosse loggers gained access to the fertile timberlands of northern Wisconsin, while local merchants sold and purchased their wares in river ports to the north and south. As La Crosse's lumber- and merchant-based economy began to flourish, more and more American and European migrants flocked to the settlement in search of fame and fortune. In 1853, one local newspaper reported that the town's population, which had numbered just a handful of traders a decade before, had spiked to 548 residents.[5] Moreover, a rough outpost of just a few rickety buildings in the 1840s had blossomed into a bustling merchant community home to groceries, dry goods stores, taverns, law offices, apothecaries, and an assortment of other shops and trades.[6] By the early 1850s, La Crosse's riverine advantages had defined it as a western town on the make.

Yet many La Crossers, like many residents of similar communities seeded across the Middle West, had far more ambitious booster dreams. Many, in fact, recognized that although rivers had made their prosperity possible, railroads would ultimately determine whether their city would grow into a thriving commercial mecca or remain a relatively remote economic satellite. Midwesterners had good reason to celebrate the transformative power of the iron horse. Since the early 1800s, when American inventors and entrepreneurs first experimented with steam-powered locomotion, railroads had revolutionized the nation's economy. East of the Appalachians, railroad corporations laid track that compressed distance, shortened travel

4. Even before the first American settlers migrated to the region, these waterways helped make the site a colonial crossroads for Ho-Chunk travelers, French voyageurs, British traders, and other migrants eager to exchange their wares or share news.

5. Sanford and Hirsheimer, *A History of La Crosse*, 60.

6. Spencer Carr, *A Brief Sketch*, 15.

time, and, in so doing, lowered shipping costs.[7] In the process, they bolstered the financial clout of eastern cities such as New York and Baltimore.[8] It also became evident that a mountain range, no matter how vast or imposing, could not contain the explosion of railroad building for long. By the middle of the century, westerners were eager to draw railroads into the heart of the continent and establish fresh commercial ties with the Atlantic seaboard. Chicago boosters enjoyed the most profound success. In 1852, when the Galena and Chicago Union line forged an iron bond between Chicago and Rockford, Illinois, it became evident that the Windy City would eventually become the great terminus of the trans-Appalachian West.[9] The rise of Chicago as a frontier railroad hub offered inhabitants of the region's hinterland towns and cities a rather unsettling lesson: either win a railroad or watch as commercial growth and history pass you by.

La Crossers embraced this lesson as much as any westerners at mid-century. In 1853, for example, one local journalist confidently asserted that if the river town could fashion a new railroad link to Milwaukee, it "would secure the main business of the upper Mississippi. . . which, great as it now is, is but a trifle to what it will be in the course of a few years."[10] Such bold predictions, however, did not answer the fundamental question of exactly how a small settlement like La Crosse could attract a railroad in the 1850s. In response, many of the town's ambitious merchants, potential financiers, and cheerleading journalists began to look to their aldermen to deal with this incommodious challenge. In so doing, they set the stage for La Crosse to exercise influence over the course of western railroading.

Financing the Future

Perhaps the greatest challenge La Crosse boosters and their rivals in other similar towns faced was the awesome expense of forging links with distant merchant cities. The cold fact was that constructing railroads was enormously costly in the nineteenth century. Such steps as surveying possible routes, securing land, buying materials, hiring workers, and purchasing rolling stock and machinery were often prohibitively expensive for investors in small, or even large,

7. Cowan, *A Social History of American Technology*, 112–18.

8. On the railroad's impact on New York City, see Burrows and Wallace, *Gotham*, 563–86, 655–56. For a discussion of railroads and Baltimore, see Stover, *History of the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad*, 1–97.

9. Cronon, *Nature's Metropolis*, 67–68.

10. "Milwaukee and La Crosse Railroad," *La Crosse Democrat*, April 26, 1853, 1.

communities. Even railroad boosters in a city like Chicago initially relied on capital from New York, Boston, and investors back east to weave their iron web in the 1850s and after.[11]

In the face of these financial and technical challenges, La Crosse boosters, much like their fellow urban promoters in the Middle West and across the country at the time, turned to their governments for fiscal help. The problem, however, was that Wisconsin's constitution barred the state legislature from directly investing public money in railroads and other internal improvements. That it did so was not surprising at mid-century. Most of the delegates who attended the 1848 constitutional convention and ultimately rejected public financing were committed Democrats who embraced the political rhetoric and principles of Andrew Jackson. In the 1820s and 1830s, Jackson had criticized federal funding of transportation projects, growing corporate power, and what he believed was the unjust influence of elite Americans.[12] In 1828, this ideology had carried him to the White House where he thundered against corporations and banks over his two terms in office. Furthermore, Jackson's effort to destroy the Bank of the United States convinced many politicians and voters around the country anxious about corporate power and the growing influence of wealthy commercial elites that Old Hickory was a true defender of American democracy. Jackson's message was so potent, in fact, that it rippled across the nation and eventually transformed politics in Wisconsin and other Midwestern places in the years to come.[13]

Not surprisingly, then, when Wisconsin's delegates convened to debate a state constitution in 1848, many Democratic members rejected public investment in railroads on ideological grounds. The most articulate to do so was George Gale, a lawyer from Walworth County, located in the southeastern corner of the territory. Gale attacked public funding as inherently undemocratic. Like a good Jacksonian, he was concerned that it would benefit some residents at the expense of others. To highlight this concern, he described a hypothetical railway that ran from Milwaukee to the Mississippi River. The prospect of such a line through the most populous part of the state would almost certainly gain the backing of a majority of state voters. Lawmakers, however, would have to raise taxes on every state

11. Cronon, *Nature's Metropolis*, 81–93.

12. In 1830, for example, Jackson vetoed a federal bill authorizing construction of the Maysville Road, a highway intended to run through Lexington, Kentucky, and become a key link in a national transportation system, on the ground that the federal government did not have authority to invest in local projects. For a sharp discussion of this veto, see Howe, *What Hath God Wrought*, 357–59.

13. For a thorough discussion of Jacksonian ideology and American politics during the antebellum period, see Watson, *Liberty and Power*.

inhabitant to fund the project, no matter where these people lived. Yet, for Gale, raising taxes on all Wisconsin residents to benefit some, even a majority of the state's population, was antithetical to democratic governance. In his words, "it was the duty of the government to make the benefits to be derived from taxation as equal as the burthens... Without following this principle the great objects of civil government would be lost."[14] For Gale and other state politicians who continued to embrace Jackson's alluring critique of centralized government power and wealthy elite influence, the idea of public investment in railroad projects seemed to imperil the state's democratic soul.

Opponents of state-level investment in railroads also had more practical financial concerns: they knew that neighboring states had invested heavily in canals and railroads in the decade before and faced alarming fiscal problems in the 1840s. In 1836 and 1837, Ohio, Illinois, Michigan, and Indiana had sunk huge sums in internal improvements. By the 1840s, these plans had plunged each state into pecuniary distress. Indiana provided a particularly alarming example of the fiscal danger of such projects. By 1847, Indiana's Wabash and Erie Canal was years away from completion and would never come close to meeting its final construction and management costs.[15] Public railroad projects had fared little better in the Hoosier state. In 1843 the Indiana legislature, which had spent more than $1,600,000 on a railroad that linked the towns of Madison and Lafayette, was unable to pay its creditors and eventually turned over control of the line to a private corporation, the Madison and Indianapolis Railroad Company.[16] Defending Jacksonian principles was one thing. But for convention delegates such as George Gale, who "hoped that no one would attempt to force into the constitution any provision which would allow our state to plunge into the gulf of internal improvements, which had swallowed up the credit and prosperity of so many of our sister states," maintaining Wisconsin's fiscal health was just as important.[17]

14. Wisconsin State Constitutional Convention, *Journal of the Convention*, 348.
15. Taylor, *Transportation Revolution*, 138–41.
16. Taylor, *Transportation Revolution*, 91.
17. Not every delegate viewed state financing with equal disdain. Some, in fact, argued that prohibition on funding internal projects was an ill-advised overreaction that would hurt the people of the state in the long run. One of the most assertive voices was that of Dane County physician, William H. Fox. Using colorful imagery, Fox argued "if other states had been imprudent or unfortunate in carrying out systems of internal improvements, it was no reason for prohibiting them among us, but only for greater caution. He did not think that because one man got drunk, that the making of brandy should be prohibited." Tenney, *Memorial Record*, 220; Wisconsin State Constitutional Convention, *Journal of the Convention*, 345, 347.

In the end, fifty delegates supported Gale's vision to limit the legislature's power to invest in internal improvements with only fifteen members opposed.[18] As a result, Wisconsin's 1848 constitution decreed that state lawmakers "shall never contract any debt for works of internal improvement, or be a party in carrying on such works."[19] When it came to public investment, Wisconsin's constitution was a product of the heated political and economic concerns of the day. It grew out of a Jacksonian trepidation that unfettered corporations undermined democracy and a hard headed realism that even the most enlightened state government that tried to fund transportation projects with public money could face potentially crippling financial problems. By banning state funding for expensive internal projects, Wisconsin's constitutional delegates sincerely believed they were protecting the democratic rights of their fellow citizens and the financial stability of their future state.

Yet within five years entirely new economic realities challenged the notion that state investment in internal improvements, and particularly railroads, would imperil democracy and fiscal responsibility in Wisconsin. As transportation and communication over great distances became more critical to the state's economy in the 1850s, many state lawmakers, like countless politicians in other towns and cities across the Middle West, sought after railroad connections. Some, such as Byron Kilbourn, who had supported Gale's stand against state funding as a convention delegate in 1848, but become an eager railroad booster and the founder of the La Crosse and Milwaukee Railroad in the 1850s, recognized that links to a booming Chicago or Minneapolis would increase trade, boost property values, enrich investors, and bring home needed private capital.[20] Kilbourn and others, however, also understood that railroads did not always have the capital necessary to build new lines. In the absence of such assets, political and business leaders urged the use of public money to entice private railroad corporations to build in the state. Yet they faced a thorny legal problem: how could they encourage public funding in a state founded on core constitutional principles that limited their legal power to directly finance internal improvements? In the 1850s, Wisconsin lawmakers began to search for solutions to this dilemma. And as they did so, they plumbed both the exciting possibilities and frustrating limitations of divided government power and its ability to remake the lives of nineteenth-century Americans.

18. Wisconsin State Constitutional Convention, *Journal of the Convention*, 360.
19. Wisconsin State Constitutional Convention, *Journal of the Convention*, 614.
20. Tenney, *Memorial Record*, 230–31; Hunt, *Law and Locomotives*, 6–7; Wisconsin State Constitutional Convention, *Journal of the Convention*, 360.

Ironically, state legislators eventually found the authority to finance railroads in Wisconsin's brand new constitution.[21] The key that unlocked the coffers of public money was the constitution's definition of the financial relationship between the legislature and municipalities. Although the document outlawed state funding of internal improvements, it granted state legislators power to regulate municipal "taxation, assessment, borrowing money, contracting debts, and loaning. . .credit, so as to prevent abuses in assessments and taxation, and in contracting debts by such municipal corporations."[22] Ostensibly, the constitution gave this power to the state legislature to prevent counties, cities, and towns from recklessly raising taxes and issuing bonds.[23] After 1850, however, state lawmakers used this authority in a different way: to grant cities like La Crosse leeway to sell bonds, invest public money in private corporations, and construct a railroad network in the state. A liberal interpretation of this section of Wisconsin's constitution gave state lawmakers the power to tap a valuable reservoir of potential revenue for new railroad projects, while also upholding the core democratic principles articulated by the document's framers in 1848.[24]

In 1853, in a concerted effort to generate capital enough to invest in railroads, the state legislature began to pass special laws that granted counties and cities the power to sell bonds and invest in railroad projects and that became a model for future legislation.[25] The first act to do so authorized Columbia County to sell bonds and invest in a railroad that would run from Milwaukee west to Portage City.[26] State lawmakers included three important provisions in this act. First, they defined how much money the county could invest in

21. On the growing ability of American municipalities to gain greater autonomy from state lawmakers, see Teaford, *The Unheralded Triumph*. For an interesting theoretical exploration of ways to enhance municipal power in the United States, see Frug, *City Making*.

22. Wisconsin State Constitutional Convention, *Journal of the Convention*, 616.

23. For an excellent discussion of the legal debates that occurred in Wisconsin over public funding and the relationship between the state and its municipalities during the second half of the nineteenth century, see Meyer, "Early General Railway Legislation," 336–88.

24. This effort was not wholly altruistic. As historian Robert C. Nesbit points out, Kilbourn and other self-interested railroad investors were more than willing to bribe state lawmakers to support their commercial plans and boost their railroad corporations. Nesbit, *Wisconsin*, 206.

25. Wisconsin was far from the first state to charter private railroads. Maryland was the first state to do so when it chartered the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad in 1827. Larson, *Internal Improvement*, 230–32.

26. Wisconsin, Legislature, An Act to authorize the County of Columbia to aid in the construction of certain Railroads, *Private and Local Acts Passed by the Legislature of Wisconsin in the Year Eighteenth Hundred and Fifty-Three* (Madison, WI, 1853), 198–201.

railroads and how it would issue any bonds. It gave the Columbia County board authority to loan up to $300,000 to private corporations to build and maintain the line.[27] Second, the law declared that private companies engaged in the project had to fulfill a set of fundamental requirements before they received county funds. Most important, the Milwaukee and Watertown Railroad Company and the La Crosse and Milwaukee Rail Road Company, the corporations interested in building the new road, could only receive county aid if they finished construction within a set period of time. If these companies failed to fulfill their legal commitments, then the Columbia County board could withhold or channel the money to other private companies willing and able to finish the project.[28] Third, the act decreed that a majority of the county's eligible voters had to agree to fund railroads before the county board could issue bonds.[29] Throughout the 1850s and 1860s, Wisconsin lawmakers continued to pass special laws that followed the legal blueprint laid out in 1853.[30]

By the early 1870s, however, requests for state authority to raise public money for railroad projects began to overwhelm Wisconsin legislators. The legislature had rarely passed more than a handful of such special acts annually in the 1850s and 1860s.[31] This trend changed after the Civil War as legislators spent more and more time debating

27. The state legislature declared that every bond would be issued for the amount of $1,000, would have a repayment term of not less than 10 or more than 20 years, and would have a yearly interest rate of 7 percent. Wisconsin, An Act to authorize the County of Columbia, 198.

28. The act stated that the county could transfer public aid to another railroad company if the Milwaukee and Watertown Railroad Company failed to comply with its terms within 18 months. It further stipulated that the La Crosse and Milwaukee Company would not receive county aid unless it could finish construction of its portion on the railroad within three years from passage of the act. Wisconsin, An Act to authorize, 200–1.

29. The act, much like every similar law that would follow in the next two decades, declared that "No Bonds shall be issued in pursuance of the provisions of this act, until a majority of the legal voters of said County, voting upon said question shall vote in favor of the same, at an Election called by said Board of Supervisors for that purpose." Wisconsin, An act to authorize, 200.

30. Legislators made two modifications that gave municipalities greater flexibility to raise money over the next several decades. First, they increasingly authorized them to raise local property taxes to help finance railroad construction. Second, as early as 1853, they stipulated that municipal boards would appoint a local railroad commissioner to attend stockholder meetings and cast one vote for every share of stock held by the community. This second change gave towns and counties greater say over railroads that they had helped finance. For the most part, however, the 1853 law empowering Columbia County remained the blueprint for future legislation.

31. With the exception of 1853, when the state legislature passed eleven acts authorizing municipal railroad funding, and 1857, when they passed nineteen acts, the number never reached double digits before 1866.

municipal requests for permission to invest in private railroad corporations. Between 1866 and 1872, the legislature passed eighty-six special acts that granted villages, towns, cities, and counties across the state the power to issue bonds and raise property taxes to fund railroads. Furthermore, as more people settled in Wisconsin in the second half of the nineteenth century, state lawmakers began to realize that requests for authority to raise money for railroads would only increase. In 1872, they decided that the best way to solve this problem was to stop debating special acts altogether and to pass a general law that applied to every Wisconsin community that sought permission to invest money in railroads.[32]

Ultimately, by 1872, Wisconsin lawmakers believed that they had constructed a legal framework that solved the difficult dilemma of how to encourage railroad building in a state with a constitution that limited state funding for internal projects.[33] Authorizing cities to invest public money in private railroad companies seemed to be an effective way to build a rail network that linked La Crosse and other of the state's burgeoning cities to growing metropolises such as Minneapolis and Chicago without violating the letter of the state constitution. Furthermore, common councils from across Wisconsin eagerly applied these new financial powers: in 1880, in fact, the Wisconsin Railroad Commissioner, an office created by the legislature in 1874 to investigate the financial practices of railroads and tabulate the results, reported that eighty-four individual municipalities and

32. To lessen the burden of special legislation, Wisconsin lawmakers passed an act that allowed cities to help finance railroad projects on March 25, 1972. This act freed lawmakers from spending valuable time drafting and debating special acts for individual municipalities and counties that, in many ways, duplicated earlier laws, and gave municipalities greater power to make their own financial decisions. Wisconsin, Legislature, An Act to authorize municipal corporations to aid in the construction of railroads, *General Laws Passed by the Legislature of Wisconsin in the Year 1868, Together with Joint Resolutions and Memorials* (Madison, WI, 1868), 261–67. Wisconsin was not unique in its movement toward general charters. See, for example, Gunn, *The Decline of Authority*, 222–45.

33. Even with tight restrictions, Wisconsin lawmakers could not guarantee that every village, town, city, and county that sold bonds and invested in railroads would enjoy prosperity. As the legislature granted more municipalities power to raise public money, some of these communities faced fiscal problems as they mortgaged their economic security to try and become players in railroading. During the 1870s and 1880s, no city suffered more than Watertown, a small community in southeastern Wisconsin. By 1879, the city was more than $600,000 in debt and, one year later, the state railroad commissioner questioned whether it would be able to retire this amount in ten years. Wisconsin Railroad Commissioner, *Sixth Annual Report*, 312; and Wisconsin Railroad Commissioner, *Seventh Annual Report, 1880,* xxxiii.

ten counties around the state had authorized nearly $8,000,000 to invest in private railroad corporations.[34]

La Crosse was one community that benefited tremendously from these laws. Voters got their first taste of this new financial power in 1853 when the state authorized the La Crosse County board of supervisors to sell $100,000 in bonds and use the proceeds to purchase stock in the Milwaukee and La Crosse Railroad or any company that built a railroad through the county.[35] Businessmen in the city took quick advantage of this act to rally support behind the project.[36] Between October 19 and October 21, a group of railroad boosters from La Crosse journeyed north along the Mississippi River rounding up support and soliciting subscriptions in the stock of the new railroad. The *La Crosse Democrat* reported the group gained pledges of $12,000 in the town of Pierce, over twenty thousand dollars from the village of Sparta and the town of Leon combined, and between two and three thousand dollars from the village of Neshonoc. Boosters also tried to win over popular opinion in La Crosse. On September 29, supporters convened at the city courthouse and resolved to "use our utmost exertions to help the good work, by taking stock subscriptions ourselves, and by influencing others to do the same; that we are not afraid to pledge La Crosse and vicinity as good for a subscription of $50,000" in the railroad.[37] By the end of 1853, traveling parties of local boosters

34. All data on railroad investment is from Wisconsin Railroad Commissioner, *Seventh Annual Report*, xxxix, 344–47. Although communities pledged money for railroads, the amount actually invested never reached the amount authorized. According to the Wisconsin Railroad Commissioner, "A considerable portion [of municipal and county money authorized for railroad construction] was never earned by the companies to whom it was voted, and no bonds were issued; another portion was paid in cash or scrip; some of the bonds were protected by the companies earning them, and the communities were not required to pay them; some were compromised, and others still were contested." In other words, the fact that a village, town, city, or county in Wisconsin authorized public money for railroad construction did not necessarily mean it would actually invest that money. Wisconsin Railroad Commissioner, *Fourth Annual Report*, xxxiv. On the creation and evolution of the Commission, see Hunt, *Law and Locomotives*, 101–02, 163–66.

35. This railroad later became known as the La Crosse and Milwaukee Railroad. Wisconsin, Legislature, An Act to authorize the county of La Crosse to aid in the construction of the Milwaukee and La Crosse Railroad, *Private and Local Acts Passed by the Legislature of Wisconsin in the Year Eighteenth Hundred and Fifty-Three* (Madison, WI, 1853), 598–99.

36. "La Crosse & Milwaukee Rail Road," *La Crosse Democrat*, October 25, 1853, 2.

37. According to state law regulating municipal finances during the 1850s, the residents of La Crosse would have needed to gain special permission from the state legislature to issue bonds to invest money in railroad stock and fulfill such a bold pledge. However, the pledge to raise $50,000 was not legally binding in any way and was likely an effort by La Crosse residents to encourage their neighbors to individually invest in the railroad. "Turn Out!" *La Crosse Democrat*, October 4, 1853, 2.

had persuaded many people in the county that a new railroad was an economic necessity worth fostering. Although railroad boosters in La Crosse had great success rallying public support behind the project, construction on the railroad stalled for two years. In 1856, however, the La Crosse and Milwaukee Company combined with two other companies to push through to Portage.[38]

When the new railroad finally opened on October 14, 1858, many residents predicted great things.[39] Mayor Theodore Rodolf applauded local people for attracting a road that would alter the city's prospects. According to Rodolf, La Crossers had much to be proud of. The railroad was "one of the great triumphs. . .of the indomitable energy. . .which is so peculiar to the people of this country, which has enabled us to shake hands this evening with our friends from Milwaukee and Chicago, which has brought us within a few days travel of the great commercial emporium of the new worlds, yea, which has even succeeded in throwing across the Atlantic an iron band, which, sooner or later, is bound to lead old Europe captive to Young America."[40] By securing the required state legislation and then investing public money in company stock, La Crosse's political and business leaders had taken a big step towards transforming their sleepy river town into a frontier mecca.

The history of state-sponsored railroad funding in the city, however, did not end with the opening of the La Crosse and Milwaukee road. Other local boosters also relied on the state to bring railroads to La Crosse. One of these boosters was Thomas Benton Stoddard.[41] Stoddard believed that a second railroad tying La Crosse to the scattered farming communities of southern Minnesota would make the city even more prosperous. In 1855, he organized the Root River Valley and Southern Minnesota Railroad Company to raise money, acquire land, and construct such a road.[42] Early on, this company seemed in good financial shape. In 1857, it sold bonds and began laying track in Minnesota. The devastating economic panic of 1857, however, crippled the fledgling company's ability to continue the project. In 1860, it defaulted on its bond payments and Minnesota state officials began to sell off company property to reimburse investors.[43] Just five years after Stoddard had pledged to build a new railroad and tap the

38. Katharine Wesson, "Early Overland Routes," 26–27.

39. "Railroad Jubilee," *La Crosse National Democrat,* October 12, 1858, 2.

40. "The Opening of the La Crosse and Milwaukee Rail Road," *La Crosse Independent Republican,* October 20, 1858, 3.

41. For an account of Stoddard's life, see *History of La Crosse County*, 457–58.

42. For a discussion of Stoddard's efforts to found the Root River Valley and Southern Minnesota Railroad, see Sanford and Hirsheimer, *A History of La Crosse*, 145.

43. Rogers, "Recollections of T. B. Stoddard," 51.

agricultural wealth of the Middle West, his company appeared on the brink of financial ruin and the project was in real danger.

The railroad's fortunes changed in 1864 when Stoddard leveraged government power to prop up its sagging finances. First, he appealed to state legislators to resuscitate his cash-poor company. In 1864, he rechristened it the Southern Minnesota Railroad and Minnesota lawmakers granted him a new corporate charter and tracts of public land to resume railroad construction across the state's southern counties.[44] Stoddard also turned to Wisconsin's legislature for help. In another of those special pieces of legislation, on April 2, 1864, Wisconsin lawmakers granted La Crosse's common council authority to call a citywide vote to determine whether they should issue bonds, raise $50,000, and invest the proceeds in the railroad.[45] Stoddard next focused on mobilizing political support behind the project. In November 1864, he and two partners submitted a petition signed by nearly one hundred residents, including many of the most influential businessmen in the river city, which urged the council to call a vote on the question of funding for the Southern Minnesota.[46] Such lobbying paid off; the council scheduled a vote for February 23, 1865, and on this date voters authorized their aldermen to issue city bonds and invest in railroad stock.[47] Once again, Stoddard and his supporters had rallied the aid of government, in this case, La Crosse's common council, to save his road. Finally, on November 18, 1870, city residents celebrated the opening of the Southern Minnesota.[48]

44. Minnesota's legislature granted a new corporate charter to reorganize the Southern Minnesota Railroad on March 4, 1864. Minnesota, Legislature, An Act to facilitate the construction of the Southern Minnesota Railroad, and to amend and continue certain acts in relation thereto, *General and Special Laws* (St. Paul, MN, 1864), 147–63. Minnesota lawmakers also distributed public land to the corporation. Minnesota, Legislature, An Act to accept the grant, and in execution of the trust made and created in and by section seven of an Act of Congress, approved May 12, 1864, entitled "An Act for a grant of lands to the State of Iowa, in alternate sections, to aid in the construction of a railroad in said State," *General Laws* (St. Paul, MN, 1865), 48–50.

45. The act did not specify a particular railroad corporation that would receive public money from La Crosse. Instead, it gave the Common Council authority to fund any Minnesota railroad that terminated on the western bank of the Mississippi River across from La Crosse and approached or went through the city. The timing of the act, however, suggests clearly that it was passed to help finance the Southern Minnesota Railroad. Wisconsin, Legislature, An Act to authorize the city of La Crosse to aid in the construction of railroads, *Acts of a General Nature* (Madison, WI, 1864): 423–24.

46. "Southern Minnesota Railroad," *La Crosse Weekly Republican,* December 7, 1864, 1.

47. Sanford and Hirsheimer, *A History of La Crosse*, 145.

48. "Railway Opening Celebration!" *La Crosse Evening Democrat,* November 18, 1870, 3.

Well into the 1870s, city leaders considered measures to fund private railroad companies. In March of 1876, the common council accepted a petition from the Green Bay and Minnesota Railway Company requesting $75,000 in public money to help defer the cost of building a branch line between La Crosse and Onalaska, a city five miles to the north.[49] Previous experience had apparently hardened local people to the reality of railroad negotiations. From the start, residents asked tough questions about the proposed deal. One of the biggest concerns was the overall cost of the project. Critics maintained that the Green Bay and Minnesota could build the road for far less than $75,000 and they worried that such a sum would encourage fraud and graft.[50] Others feared that investing in the project would bankrupt the city. One anonymous commentator noted acidly that if local inhabitants "blindly vote for the proposition we will find our city chained fast by a bonded debt amounting in principal and interest to nearly $200,000."[51] Money was not the only concern. Many opponents were unwilling to trust the railroad's genial promises. One letter to the editor of the *La Crosse Daily Republican and Leader*, pointed out that the Green Bay and Minnesota "proposition. . .does not say how often trains are to be run, nor that this is to be made the western terminus of the road, and leaves open a wide field of conjecture as to what advantages we are to gain while absolute certainty exists as to the amount donated."[52] In the end, however, La Crosse voters were unwilling to pass on the chance to invest in the Green Bay and Minnesota road and open another channel of commerce. On March 21, 1876, a majority of the city's voters cast ballots to approve the bond request.[53]

The railroad funding debates that gripped La Crosse during the 1850s, 1860s, and 1870s reveal a great deal about how state and municipal governments framed railroading in this period. In the cases of the Milwaukee and La Crosse, the Southern Minnesota, and the Green Bay and Minnesota railroads, Thomas Stoddard and other municipal politicians embraced a vision of local activism and took advantage of state legislation to rally behind the cause of public funding, call elections to consider the question, and allow local voters the opportunity to support these projects. In this way, they made vital choices that helped them draw railroads home. Although this money was a small

49. Truth, "The Green Bay & Minn. R. R. Proposition," *(La Crosse) Daily Republican and Leader*, March 13, 1876, 4.

50. Truth, "Seventy-Five Thousand," *(La Crosse) Daily Republican and Leader*, March 10, 1876, 4.

51. Vote it Down, "The Green Bay & Minn. R. R. Proposition," *(La Crosse) Daily Republican and Leader*, March 14, 1876, 1.

52. Citizen, "More Objections," *(La Crosse) Daily Republican and Leader*, March 11, 1876, 4.

53. "The Result," *(La Crosse) Daily Republican and Leader*, March 21, 1876, 1.

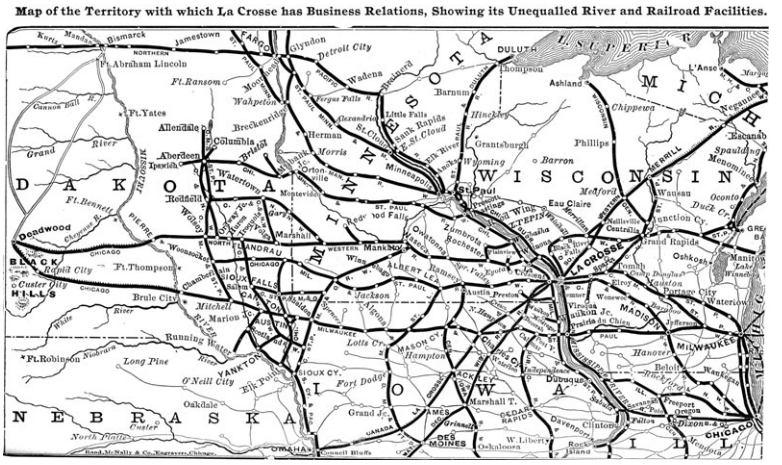

Figure 1 Weaving an Iron Web. By the end of the nineteenth century, La Crossers had invested public money in private railroad corporations that extended their lines into town and helped establish the city as an important railroad destination in the Great West. The city's rail hinterland, as this 1898 map demonstrates, reached from the Black Hills of the Dakotas in the West to Chicago in the East. Murphy Library, University of Wisconsin La Crosse.

portion of the total capital required to lay new track and run trains, it was often just enough to cover the cost of local construction and may also have provided city inhabitants with a sense of ownership of the road. This twisting tale of the politics of public railroad financing in nineteenth-century La Crosse offers some tantalizing clues about how hinterland city dwellers may have had a profound, yet often overlooked, impact on the creation of a vast railroad network in the Middle West.

In the end, La Crosse's common council took advantage of state policies to help tie their river city into the iron web that became a sturdy latticework for the emerging Midwestern economy. By the 1880s, Wisconsin lawmakers had granted local politicians and business leaders vital financial powers that helped them draw new railroads to town and forge critical ties with Milwaukee, Chicago, and other important markets to the east and west (see figure 1).[54] As a result, the amount of freight flowing into and out of the city by rail

54. In 1885, these railroads included the Chicago, Milwaukee and St. Paul, which first entered La Crosse in 1857; the Green Bay and Western, which entered the city in 1876; the Chicago, Burlington and Northern; and the Chicago and Northwestern, which both began operations in town in 1886. These railroads often began as independent lines with different names and many were purchased and renamed as part of larger railroad networks. Doering, "Grand Excursion La Crosse," 101–3.

Figure 2 Bird's Eye View from 1867. In the years following the Civil War, railroads helped establish La Crosse as a city on the make. New trains opened La Crosse to eager travelers who established new businesses and boosted the local population from barely 3,900 in 1860 to more than 20,000 a decade later. This image of city viewed from across the Mississippi River in 1867 depicts a bustling river community. Wisconsin Historical Society Image ID #11427.

increased. Between 1879, when the city's Board of Trade began tabulating local commerce, and 1900, total freight received in town increased from 150,600 tons to more than 294,000 tons.[55] Aside from boosting business, these railroads attracted migrants to La Crosse. Between 1865 and 1890, the city's population increased from just 5,000 to 25,000.[56] And when these people made their way west, they built new businesses and diversified city commerce. In 1890, La Crosse was home to factories that employed 8,000 workers and produced goods worth $16 million.[57] The city was also physically larger than it had been in the middle of the century (see figures 2 and 3). Ultimately, by

55. Board of Trade, *Annual Report 1879*, 23; Board of, *Thirty-third Anniversary*, 27.

56. Wisconsin, Legislature, *Message of the Governor of Wisconsin, Together with the Annual Reports, of the Officers of the State* (Madison, WI, 1866), 107; Wisconsin, Secretary of State, *Tabular Statements of the Census Enumeration and the Agricultural, Mineral, and Manufacturing Interests of the State of Wisconsin* (Madison, WI, 1895), 57.

57. Board of Trade, *Annual Report 1890*, 18.

Figure 3 A Thriving City. By the 1880s, the arrival of trains had transformed La Crosse from a small community in the outer orbit of Chicago to a thriving industrial city with an agricultural hinterland of its own. This bird's eye view indicates just how much the city had grown by 1887. Urban construction had reached east to the surrounding bluffs while railroads with smoking engines reached into the city's down town business district. Wisconsin Historical Society Image ID #11429.

using state-sanctioned financial power, La Crossers helped transform their remote frontier outpost into a busy commercial hive and one of the most important mercantile communities in the Mississippi River Valley. In this case, La Crosse's municipal government was a driving engine of railroading and capitalism before 1900.

Regulating the Iron Horse

As La Crossers relied on their city's state-sanctioned financial power to invest in railroads, they also benefited from state decisions that gave their aldermen new authority to regulate trains in town. The question of railroad regulation became increasingly heated in La Crosse during the second half of the century as inhabitants learned a crucial lesson: the arrival of the iron horse transformed their lives in strange and often unsettling ways. La Crossers were not alone in this recognition. By the 1850s, people across Europe and North America had long wrestled with the darker consequences of railroading. The truly awesome speed and immense power of trains, for example, helped make the railroad one of the most lethal inventions of the industrial age. Time and again, railway workers lost fingers, careless engineers ploughed into unseen pedestrians, runaway trains careened off bridges, and sparks from train wheels lit buildings and fields afire. Even if trains did not injure bystanders or damage private property, they often

invaded and upset the traditional worlds of Europeans and Americans in other ways. Inhabitants of small towns certainly felt uneasy as new railroad tracks and works redrew familiar neighborhoods and business districts, while train whistles and smoke stacks disrupted comfortable routines. Even in world capitals like Paris the arrival of the iron horse threatened to wipe away centuries of encrusted urban history.[58] Finally, railroading had deep economic consequences. Many farmers and merchants who relied on trains to ship goods to market accused railroad men of pillaging them with unfair passenger and shipping rates. Progress to modernity, it seemed, came with a price.

La Crossers shared many of these concerns. They knew for example, that train engines and cars were terribly dangerous vehicles that could easily maim or kill innocent people.[59] During one particularly ghastly two-month period near the end of 1870, local railroad workers suffered a variety of agonizing job-related injuries, from amputated legs to smashed hands.[60] Running trains also imperiled domestic animals and, in turn, the livelihood of La Crosse farmers. In 1870, one city newspaper reported that a doomed calf that had tried to outrun a moving train car "was caught by the cow catcher, which killed the careless animal in the most approved manner of the Sandwich Islanders, by taking his heart out slick and clean, apparently doing no injury to any other portion of the body. The body lay at one side of the road, and the heart in the centre of the track and kept beating for some seconds after it left the body."[61] At the same time, La Crossers understood that railroad construction blocked city streets and slowed traffic for hours or days, speeding trains could crack house foundations, and railroad corporations sometimes redirected rivers and marred private property in town in a drive to finish projects.[62] By the 1880s, La Crosse

58. Schivelbusch, *The Railway Journey*, 178–87; Deverell, *Railroad Crossing*, 3.

59. For an excellent account of railroad accidents and liability law in Progressive-era America, see Welke, *Recasting American Liberty*.

60. "Hand Badly Smashed By a Car," *La Crosse Evening Democrat*, October 27, 1870, 4; "Accident—Leg Broken," *La Crosse Evening Democrat*, November 3, 1870, 4; "Hand Crushed by Cars," *La Crosse Evening Democrat*, November 14, 1870, 2; "Railroad Accident," *La Crosse Republican*, November 26, 1870, 3; "This morning as the train," *La Crosse Republican*, December 10, 1870, 2; "Fearful Explosion," *La Crosse Evening Democrat*, December 12, 1870, 4; "There has been two accidents," *La Crosse Evening Democrat*, December 23, 1870, 4.

61. "On Monday as the morning passenger train," *La Crosse Evening Democrat*, November 17, 1870, 4.

62. La Crosse residents raised this very issue in 1895. See John Schaefer et al., Petition for Damages Claimed to Have Sustained by Residents along the Right of Way of the C. B. and N. R. R. Cos Tracks on North Side Caused by Reason of Building Trestle and Embankment, June 10, 1895, Chicago, Burlington, and Northern Rail

residents recognized the commercial value of railroads. Yet they, like many fellow Americans in the late nineteenth century, also knew that the business of railroading almost always came with serious, and occasionally gruesome, economic and social costs.

Even more galling to many La Crossers, and many Americans generally, was that state governments had only mixed success when they tried to regulate the behavior of big railroads during the nineteenth century.[63] The spirit to tackle such challenging problems as train safety and shipping rates was clearly alive in state capitols across the nation. Led by Charles Francis Adams and other regulatory pioneers, Rhode Island, New Hampshire, Connecticut, Massachusetts, and other states established railroad commissions to monitor and regulate such difficult issues as rail safety and rates. Yet, such agencies often lacked the authority, resources, or fervor needed to effectively carry out their responsibilities. The problem of enforcement and the political power of railroads were just as clear in the Middle West. In 1876, Wisconsin solons eviscerated an earlier law that had limited maximum shipping rates and gave railroads almost free reign to determine their fees.[64] Wisconsin lawmakers were far from alone in this effort to unshackle the iron horse. Although the United States Supreme Court recognized the right of state-level agencies to regulate railroads in 1877, legislatures in nearby states actually repealed most rate-control laws.[65] To many people in La Crosse and elsewhere, elected officials in places like Wisconsin appeared either incapable or unwilling to prevent powerful railroads from running roughshod over their lives.

Regardless of the political and economic might of railroad corporations, many La Crossers did not abandon the dream of limiting their excesses during the late nineteenth century. When state lawmakers failed to act, in fact, they turned to municipal officials for help. By the

Road Company File [hereafter CBN], Committee on Railroads, Resolutions and Reports, 1858–1932, Common Council, City of La Crosse, La Crosse Public Library Archives, La Crosse, Wisconsin [hereafter CoRR].

63. On the struggles of state-level governments to regulate railroads, see Miller, *Railroads and the Granger Laws*; Hunt, *Law and Locomotives*, 167–75; and Caine, "Why Railroads Supported Regulation," 175–89. On the failure of federal railroad regulation, see Kolko, *Railroads and Regulation*, 3; Martin, "The Troubled Subject of Railroad Regulation in the Gilded Age," 343; Skowronek, *Building a New American State*, 161–62; Klein, "Competition and Regulation," 318; and Dunlavy, *Politics and Industrialization*, 239–45. Together, the works of these scholars highlight the numerous challenges of state and federal railroad regulation, but they say little about whether or not municipal authorities in Wisconsin or elsewhere tried to rein in railroad corporations in the late nineteenth century.

64. Hunt, *Law and Locomotives*, 99, 140–41.

65. Miller, *Railroads and the Granger Laws*; McCraw, *Prophets of Regulation*, 57–58.

1880s, the idea of municipal regulation had enjoyed a lengthy history in La Crosse. The city's first charter in 1856 had vested council members with authority to regulate a range of activities, from food vendors to gambling.[66] Yet, the council did not gain power to control railroad corporations until 1883. In January of that year, shipping magnate and lumberman Donald A. McDonald, a newly elected Democratic state senator from La Crosse, introduced a bill to amend the city's charter.[67] On March 13, Wisconsin lawmakers ratified McDonald's bill and granted aldermen new authority over railroads.[68] First, they gave the city power to prevent rail engines and cars from blocking traffic on city streets. Second, they gave the council the legal clout to force railroad corporations to keep their local property and works in good repair. Third, lawmakers entrusted aldermen with authority to compel railroad corporations to build and mend railroad crossings and to ensure that these safety measures would protect pedestrians.[69] Together, these new measures augmented the city's traditional police authority. In amending the city charter in 1883, state legislators fundamentally redefined the relationship between municipal government and big railroad corporations and guaranteed that the issue of local railroad regulation would remain a top priority for the city's politicians and for its residents in the decades to come.

La Crosse council members eagerly embraced this new regulatory power in the 1880s.[70] In 1885, attorneys representing two railroads—the Chicago, Burlington and Northern and the Chicago and

66. Wisconsin, Legislature, An Act to incorporate the City of La Crosse, *Private and Local Acts Passed by the Legislature of Wisconsin* (Madison, WI, 1856), 274–79. La Crossers were far from alone in their willingness and effort to regulate a wide range of local economic activities during the nineteenth century. Instead, they were part of a chorus of Americans who embraced the notion that state legislatures and courts had vested cities with police power necessary to govern their granular commercial affairs. For an evocative study of municipalities as centers of American regulatory power that undercuts conventional scholarly and popular notions that nineteenth-century America was a stateless society, see Novak, *The People's Welfare*. For a comprehensive study of law ordering the Wisconsin timber industry, see Hurst, *Law and Economic Growth*.

67. Bryant, *Memoirs of La Crosse County*, 343–44; "Wisconsin Legislature," *(Madison) Wisconsin State Journal*, January 10, 1883, 1; "Wisconsin Legislature," *(Madison) Wisconsin State Journal*, February 1, 1883, 1.

68. "Wisconsin Legislature," *(Madison) Wisconsin State Journal*, March 14, 1883, 1. Why state solons did this remains murky. In the 1880s, the state legislature did not keep a journal of legislative debates.

69. Wisconsin, Legislature, An Act to amend the charter of the city of La Crosse and to confer certain additional powers upon the common council of said city, *Laws of Wisconsin* (Madison, WI, 1883), 855–57.

70. La Crosse's common council first issued an ordinance granting a railroad corporation—the Green Bay and Minnesota Railroad Company—the right to build a line in the city in 1876. The legislation, however, did little more than dictate where the line would run and protect the city from liability claims filed by angry

Northwestern—petitioned the council for permission to operate trains in the city. In both cases, Aldermen agreed to the request and passed ordinances granting each railroad right of way. At the same time, however, they also mapped out a set of strict regulations that reflected their new police power. The council ordered both of the railroads to keep open city streets and to keep their tracks and operations in good repair. Furthermore, it required that each take measures to guarantee the safety of city residents. In particular, the council compelled the Chicago, Burlington and Northern to hire a watchman for its Main Street crossing and ordered the Chicago and Northwestern to build bars and gates at its Fourth Street crossing to prevent accidents.[71] In both instances, La Crosse's council granted privileges to the railroads, but also regulated them in ways that influenced the choices that railroad executives made in the 1880s and after.[72]

La Crosse aldermen also used their new police power in an even bolder way: to rein in powerful railroad corporations that had been operating trains in the city long before the charter amendment of 1883. The council's chief target was the Chicago, Milwaukee and St. Paul, the descendent of the Milwaukee and St. Paul, which dominated railroading in the state by the 1880s.[73] In 1886, the Chicago, Milwaukee and St. Paul asked the council for permission to build a new track from its city terminus. Aldermen agreed to this request, but also used the opportunity to apply their new regulatory powers to exercise a measure of control over the corporation and its operations in La Crosse. As in the case of the 1885 laws, the Chicago, Milwaukee, and St. Paul

property owners who did not want the line to violate their private holdings. La Crosse, Wisconsin, Common Council, *Special Charter and Ordinances of the City of La Crosse Together with a Compilation of State Laws Pertaining to Cities Under Special Charters* (La Crosse, WI, 1911), 156–57.

71. La Crosse, Wisconsin, Common Council, *Special Charter and Ordinances of the City of La Crosse Together with a Compilation of State Laws Pertaining to Cities Under Special Charters* (La Crosse, WI, 1911), 256–63.

72. The council also required that both railroads gain its approval before expanding their operations in town. In 1886, the aldermen amended the Chicago, Burlington and Northern ordinance and allowed it to build tracks across streets and alleys on its depot grounds. La Crosse, Wisconsin, Common Council, *Special Charter and Ordinances of the City of La Crosse Together with a Compilation of State Laws Pertaining to Cities under Special Charters* (La Crosse, WI, 1911), 267. In 1890, the council took similar steps when it amended the original Chicago and Northwestern ordinance to give the corporation permission to establish a new sidetrack. La Crosse, Wisconsin, *Ordinances of the City of La Crosse* (La Crosse, WI, 1891), 53–54. For a compelling discussion of how municipal regulation of slaughterhouses in New York, Jersey City, and Chicago remade the meatpacking industry in the nineteenth century, see Rosen, "The Role of Pollution Regulation," 297–347.

73. On the influence of the Chicago, Milwaukee and St. Paul railroad in Wisconsin, see Hayes, "The History of Transportation," 33–35; and Nesbit, *The History of Wisconsin*, 90–91.

ordinance asserted municipal power over the railroad. It required the corporation to move any train cars that obstructed city streets, keep its operations in repair, and pay for any damages to private property.[74] In effect, council members granted the railroad the right to lay new track and increase its profits in the city, but also asserted their authority and forced the corporation to alter its business practices.

These three ordinances and their amendments created a regulatory framework that the common council worked hard to enforce between 1883 and 1900. Council members flexed their regulatory muscle in three ways during the 1880s and 1890s. First, they pressured railroads to make sure that engines and cars were not clogging public streets and blocking traffic. Time and again, council members investigated citizen complaints and issued bold resolutions ordering railroads to make it easier for pedestrians to navigate their tracks and works.[75] In 1888, for example, they demanded that the Green Bay and Western Rail Road install new crossings over Market, Ferry, and Madison Streets.[76] In 1896, aldermen directed the Green Bay and Winona to open crossings on eight major streets that ran through the heart of town.[77] Sometimes the debate over who controlled public thoroughfares took a nasty turn. In 1897, the council informed the Chicago, Milwaukee, and St. Paul "to be more careful in the future not to stop their Passenger Trains on Mill St. Crossing And That They are not as yet sole Owner of our Public Street Crossings."[78] The threat of legal action was occasionally enough to force railroads to behave. On October 18, 1887, the council reported that after residents had submitted a petition calling on the Chicago, Burlington and Northern

74. La Crosse, *Special Charter* (1911), 265–66.

75. On four different occasions between 1885 and 1901, La Crosse residents submitted petitions accusing railroads of violating local ordinances by blocking city streets. A. Hirsheimer et al., Petition of A Hirsheimer and of Others, November 17, 1885, Chicago and Northwestern Railroad File, CoRR; Paul Wagner et al., Petition in Regard to Crossing of the G. B. & W. R. R. at 13–14 & 15 Sts, October 14, 1887, Green Bay and Winona Railroad File [hereafter GBW], CoRR; Daniel Roberts et al., Petition in Regard to Obstructions on Front and Pine Sts Referred to the Committee on Streets & Alleys, March 9, 1888, Chicago, Milwaukee and St. Paul Railroad File, 1872–1903 [hereafter CMS], CoRR; John O. Neil et al., Petition for Abatement of Mill Street R. R. Crossing, April 16, 1901, CMS, CoRR. These petitions were often enough to convince the common council to investigate the activities of railroads in town.

76. La Crosse, Wisconsin, Common Council, Resolution Requiring G.B. R. R. Co to put in crossing on Market Ferry and Madison Streets, March 9, 1888, GBW, CoRR.

77. La Crosse, Wisconsin, Common Council, Committee Reported on and Report & Resolution Adopted, February 14, 1896, GBW, CoRR.

78. La Crosse, Wisconsin, Common Council, Resolution Board of Public Works to Notify the C. M. and St. P. Ry. Co Not to Obstruct Mill St. Crossing, December 10, 1897, CMS, CoRR.

Rail Road to plank its street crossings for pedestrians, the company "did all the work petitioned for at once so it was unnecessary to bring the matter before the council."[79] Together, council investigations and resolutions forced railroad companies to alter their practices and open city streets in La Crosse after 1883.

Second, La Crosse aldermen tried to prevent railroad corporations from inadvertently lowering property values in town. This issue came to a head in the 1890s when the city considered whether to regulate the Chicago, Burlington, and Northern Rail Road Company. At the time, the Chicago, Burlington and Northern was a local branch of the Chicago, Burlington and Quincy railroad, one of the most powerful corporations in the Middle West. The Chicago, Burlington and Quincy controlled a vast network of track that stretched from Chicago to the Pacific Northwest, employed 25,000 workers, and had operating revenue of $30 million.[80] The commercial muscle of the Chicago, Burlington and Quincy, however, did not intimidate the city's inhabitants. On October 18, 1893, a group of thirty residents submitted a petition to the council that accused the Chicago, Burlington and Northern of "running their trains at an unusual high rate of speed" and "endangering our property which being subjected to such heavy jarring, will make our homes dangerous to reside in and terminate the usefulness of our houses in a much shorter period than is usually allowed good substantial buildings."[81] Shortly after the council received the petition, city aldermen warned the company to slow its trains within the city's limits or "face the consequences."[82] Six days later, the railroad's managers agreed to do everything in their power to carry out the council's instructions.[83] Furthermore, between 1895 and 1899, residents submitted three separate petitions to the city council that accused railroads of blocking the La Crosse River, flooding their streets, ruining their gardens, cutting them off from municipal services, and, as a result, lowering the value of their land and homes. After an investigation, the council members issued a special report concluding that the city could not provide a legal remedy to salvage falling property values. It did, however, encourage petitioners to sue railroads in state courts. The report further stipulated that as business increased near the La Crosse River, it might be necessary for council

79. "City Government," *La Crosse Morning Chronicle*, October 19, 1887, 3.

80. Overton, *Burlington Route*, 192–96, 229, 377.

81. John Zahn et al., Petition in Regard to Chicago, Burlington, and Northern, October 18, 1893, CBN, CoRR.

82. La Crosse, Wisconsin, Common Council, Resolution Regarding the Speed of Trains, October 20, 1893, CBN, CoRR.

83. D. Cunningham, Chicago, to W. T. Symons, La Crosse, October 26, 1893, CBN, CoRR.

members to take action to protect the property interests of residents living in the area.[84] Even when council members believed that the city lacked authority to order railroads to pay damages, they assumed that their constituents had the legal footing to sue the companies in court. Aldermen also reserved their own right to punish these same companies in the future. In each case, city politicians used the machinery of municipal government to force a wealthy railroad corporation to reconsider some of its business practices and to act in what local officials considered the public interest.

Finally, La Crosse officials constantly demanded that railroads run safely through town. During the 1880s, many residents blamed the Chicago, Milwaukee and St. Paul for endangering their lives. On January 25, 1887, representatives from the neighborhood of North La Crosse asked the council to order the railroad to build and maintain crossing gates at North Third Street in the interest of safety: "The steadily increasing travel over this crossing, and the very narrow escapes from terrible accidents, that have occurred at this point, show that it is most necessary for the protection of the interests of both the Public, and the Railroad Company that gates be put in."[85] Although it is unclear whether the council agreed to this particular request, on May 28, it did order the Chicago, Milwaukee and St. Paul to erect street crossing signs at Caledonia, Hagar, and Avon Streets.[86] That same year, Frank J. Toeller, the city attorney, pressured the railroad to erect crossing gates at Mill Street.[87] A decade later, the common council expanded its focus and ordered all railroads in the city to build passenger platforms that protected local travelers from rain and snow.[88] In the 1880s and 1890s, La Crosse aldermen successfully leveraged railroad corporations to take new measures that would help prevent injuries and deaths in town.

84. Schaefer et al., Petition for Damages Claimed, CBN, CoRR; Christ Kiel et al., Petition from Property Owners Along C. B. and N. Ry Cos Right of Way on the North Side Complaining of the High Trestle as Being a Damage to Their Property, July 10, 1897, CBN, CoRR; and Wendell A. Anderson et al., Petition for Relief from Surface Water Resulting from Floods and Back Water from La Crosse River, July 14, 1899, Chicago, Burlington and Quincy Rail Road Company File, CoRR.

85. H. P. Magill to the Mayor and common council of La Crosse, January 25, 1887, CMS, CoRR.

86. La Crosse, Wisconsin, Common Council, Resolution to Compel the C. M. and St. P. R. R. to Construct Crossings on Caledonia, Hagar, and Avon Streets, May 28, 1887, CMS, CoRR.

87. W. G. Collins, Milwaukee, to F. J. Toeller, La Crosse, August 28, 1887, General 1860–1890 File, CoRR.

88. La Crosse, Wisconsin, Common Council, Resolution Railroad Companies to Build Suitable Platforms at Depots for the Protection of Passengers from Climatic Conditions, December 17, 1897, General 1891–1924 File, CoRR.

Thomas Stoddard died in 1876, seven years before Wisconsin lawmakers saw fit to amend his city's power to police railroads. As a railroad man, he might have viewed the idea of public regulation with an uneasy eye. In important ways, however, the effort of La Crosse aldermen to rein in railroads was a creative extension of Stoddard's vision of public and private power converging to solve an important problem related to the iron horse. In the 1850s, Stoddard and other civic boosters turned to municipal government for help in financing railroads. By the 1880s, local concern had shifted from the question of investment to that of regulation. Time and again, city elders navigated the intersecting political and commercial worlds and ordered railroads to open city streets, limit damage to private property, and protect passengers and pedestrians from runaway locomotives and natural hazards. In so doing, La Crossers demonstrated that their city government provided them with potent legal tools to rein in railroads and craft their economic future in exciting ways.

The Great Bridge Fight

In the case of funding and regulation, La Crosse's municipal government was an arena in which local boosters, politicos, newspapermen, and other residents fought over and influenced railroad development in town. The reality, however, was that inhabitants were not always successful in their efforts to mobilize city power to this end. One incident, in particular, demonstrates the challenges that the city and others like it faced before 1900. In 1869, executives of three separate railroad companies asked the common council for an investment of $200,000 to help build a new line between La Crosse and Mineral Point, a prosperous Wisconsin mining town situated 100 miles to the southeast.[89] These requests unleashed a wave of public support for railroad investment. Advocates were convinced that if local government could help draw a new line home it would increase competition and force the Milwaukee and St. Paul Railway, a company that had taken control of the Milwaukee and La Crosse Railroad in 1863 and maintained a huge influence over shipping prices, to lower rates.[90]

89. The three entities involved were the La Crosse, Viroqua and Mineral Point Rail Road Company; the Prairie du Chien and La Crosse Rail Road Company; and the La Crosse, Vernon, Richland and Mineral Point Rail Road Company, "$200,000," *La Crosse Daily Republican*, April 16, 1869, 1; The Dunleith & St. Croix River Shore Railroad Company also held a charter to build a similar road, but did not petition the city for money in 1869. "Railroad Report," *(La Crosse) Daily Democrat*, May 19, 1869, 1.

90. "Down a Little," *(La Crosse) Daily Democrat*, May 22, 1869, 1.

One journalist urged the council to "Let the citizens vote on giving aid, and at the same time vote which route they wish to open. Do something at once, or be surrounded. And do it boldly, promptly, liberally, then good will come and profit follow."[91] Council members were just as eager to resolve the issue. On May 18, a special committee of aldermen reported to the full council that only one of the companies, the La Crosse, Viroqua & Mineral Point, could actually finish the line. The committee also encouraged the full council to submit the railroad funding question to a public vote.[92]

For reasons that remain sketchy, however, the common council refused to act on this recommendation. This decision baffled many journalists. A writer for the *La Crosse Daily Democrat* noted in September that the council had done nothing to boost the road: "No election has been ordered and the whole project is likely to fall through, and only by the negligence of our common council. . .This delay of the Council is sapping our city's greatness."[93] And almost a year after the initial railroad report, the paper's editor warned that "It is no benefit to La Crosse that she be the 'Gateway City' so long as her people stubbornly refuse to open the gate."[94] For many reporters, it seemed as if city aldermen were wasting a golden opportunity to invest public money in a promising railroad project and enrich the city.

They were right about one thing. Something interesting was afoot in La Crosse railroading in 1870. Rumors began swirling in town that the Milwaukee and St. Paul was planning to expand its lines and link up with the other nearby railroad, the Southern Minnesota.[95] This enticing possibility may have encouraged the council to abandon its Mineral Point plan. Whatever the reason, by the summer of 1870 residents had largely forgotten the La Crosse, Viroqua, and Mineral Point petition and were now buzzing about the potential ramifications of this new arrangement. Many people urged this proposed wedding of railroads, at least early on. On June 13, 1870, La Crosse's mayor and a small delegation of local boosters entertained the Milwaukee and St. Paul's directors and sang the commercial praises of their town.[96]

Relations between the company and the city, however, quickly began to fray. As part of the plan to merge the two railroads,

91. "La Crosse and Her Railroad Wants," *(La Crosse) Daily Democrat*, April 20, 1869, 1.

92. "Railroad Report," 1.

93. "We Need More Railroads," *(La Crosse) Daily Democrat*, September 15, 1869, 4.

94. "Our Railroad Matters," *La Crosse Evening Democrat*, March 30, 1870, 1.

95. "Excursion of Railroaders," *La Crosse Daily Republican*, June 11, 1870, 1.

96. "Railroad Interests," *La Crosse Daily Republican*, June 14, 1870, 1.

representatives of the Milwaukee and St. Paul wanted to erect a brand new train depot in La Crosse. In June of 1870, S. S. Merrill, the general manager of the Milwaukee and St. Paul, informed city leaders that the railroad would build its depot downtown and had a plan to purchase property and acquire the right to run its trains along the river.[97] Just days later, aldermen replied that they would set the conditions upon which the railroad could extend its track in town and also handle any property negotiations between the company and Mississippi riverfront property owners.[98] Tensions increased in August, when council members, after meeting with private owners, issued resolutions blocking the railroad from building along the riverfront and decreeing that it could only lay track through the city.[99] In response, the company built a depot north of La Crosse. This contentious battle with the city was not the culmination of a brief political struggle. Instead, it was a sign of troubles to come in town.

Events came to a head when the Milwaukee and St. Paul began planning to bridge the Mississippi River. During the 1860s, boats and ferries had provided the only physical link between La Crosse merchants and southern Minnesota farmers.[100] Boosters realized that a permanent bridge would ease transportation and make it more affordable, but they disagreed about where to erect a bridge. In 1868, Congress, which maintained authority over interstate transportation, authorized the Southern Minnesota Railroad to construct a bridge in La Crosse.[101] When the company failed to begin work on the span within five years, federal officials granted a new bridge charter to the Milwaukee and St. Paul.[102] The situation grew increasingly contentious when company officials chose a site two miles outside the city limits.

This decision angered many people in La Crosse who believed that the railroad had violated the city's trust and was making choices that would eventually cripple local business. Indignation reached a fever pitch when the company rejected outright the city's offer to pay them to relocate the bridge in town. In response, residents

97. "Depot Matters," *La Crosse Daily Republican*, June 25, 1870, 1.

98. "The Railway Connection," *La Crosse Daily Republican*, June 30, 1870, 1.

99. "No Railroad on the River Front," *La Crosse Daily Republican*, August 19, 1870, 1.

100. Sanford and Hirsheimer, *A History of La Crosse*, 151.

101. An Act to authorize the Southern Minnesota Railroad Company to construct and maintain a Bridge across the Mississippi River and establish a Post Route, *U.S. Statutes at Large* 15 (1868): 37.

102. An Act to authorize the Construction of a Bridge across the Mississippi River at or near the Town of Clinton, in the State of Iowa, and other Bridges across said River, and to establish them as Post-roads, *U.S. Statutes at Large* 17 (1872): 46.

revisited Thomas Stoddard's lesson from the decade before: they tried to mobilize government power to control the railroad. First, they petitioned the federal government for aid. In 1872, local officials requested that William W. Belknap, the United States Secretary of War, send engineers to assess the bridge location. After this visit, the federal government supported the city's position. In response, the Milwaukee and St. Paul turned to state-level officials in Minnesota and Wisconsin for permission to begin construction at their original site north of the city.[103] The company ultimately convinced Minnesota lawmakers to grant them right of way, but the reality was different in Wisconsin. On March 18, 1873, Governor Cadwallader C. Washburn, himself a former La Crosser, vetoed a proposed law that would have granted the railroad power to build a bridge on the ground that doing so would nullify Congress's power to control navigable waterways.[104] On March 30, many residents welcomed Washburn to town as a conquering hero who had single-handedly outmaneuvered a domineering railroad corporation and preserved the true spirit of American democracy in the Badger State.[105] Soon after, lawmakers upheld the veto.[106] In response, buoyant city inhabitants tried to strike while the iron was hot. Aldermen scheduled an April vote to determine whether to invest $150,000 in the La Crosse Transit Railway, a company organized in 1872 and charged with building a bridge in the heart of town.[107] When city officials computed the final tally, 1,665 out of 2,315 voters had supported the bonding.[108]

By the middle of 1873, it appeared as if people in La Crosse had mobilized three levels of government and won a dazzling victory over a powerful railroad corporation. Yet, when the smoke finally cleared, the Milwaukee and St. Paul eventually prevailed in its fight with the city. In March of 1874, Wisconsin lawmakers (after much lobbying by the railroad) switched course and authorized the company to bridge the river wherever it saw fit.[109] In 1876, the Milwaukee and St. Paul spanned the river and allowed Southern Minnesota trains to use its bridge. When everything was said and done, La Crosse had lost the great bridge war.

103. "La Crosse," *La Crosse Daily Liberal Democrat*, October 9, 1873, Supplement, 1.

104. "The Veto Message," (*La Crosse*) *Daily Republican and Leader*, March 19, 1873, 1

105. "Serenade to Gov. Washburn," (*La Crosse*) *Daily Republican and Leader*, March 31, 1873, 1.

106. *History of La Crosse County, Wisconsin,* 591–92.

107. "The Bridge," *(La Crosse) Daily Republican and Leader*, April 14, 1873, 4.

108. "The Result," *(La Crosse) Daily Republican and Leader*, April 16, 1873, 4.

109. Wisconsin, Legislature, An Act to authorize the Milwaukee and St. Paul Railway Company to erect a bridge across the Mississippi river, and to ratify the location of said bridge as made, *Laws of Wisconsin* 27 (Madison, WI, 1874): 450.

The heated Milwaukee and St. Paul bridge war demonstrates that La Crosse boosters, like those in many Midwestern communities in the nineteenth century, were not always able to mobilize government to influence railroads. In this case, city residents ran up against a formidable corporate foe with deep pockets, well-established political ties, and a long history of winning government support and expanding its commercial influence. Yet, the city's effort to deploy state power in its interest made an impact on the Milwaukee and St. Paul. The road had to hire lobbyists, employ a team of lawyers, and litigate its case for five years before ultimately winning the fight. Even in defeat, La Crosse boosters could make their presence felt in the chambers of the railroad's board of directors.

Reimagining the Place of Small Cities

By 1900, Thomas Stoddard was an apparition of La Crosse's primordial past. Yet, his vision of La Crossers using municipal power to control railroad corporations survived his passing in 1876. It did so because it was both straightforward and liberating: rather than sit quietly as an emerging railroad network remade the city from within and without, residents could turn to their municipal government for help boosting and reining in the iron horse. After 1850, city inhabitants carried through on his vision in a variety of ways. They lobbied Alderman to invest public money in private railroad projects that would anchor their city in the emerging railway system of the Middle West. From the point of view of many La Crossers, public money had been critical in turning their small river city into "THE GATEWAY TO AND FROM ALL OF THE GREAT WEST lying north of the 42nd parallel of latitude."[110] Yet public financing was just one issue that showed how local people mobilized municipal institutions in an effort to steer western railroads. As residents began to recognize that the arrival of trains often came with steep economic and social costs, they also turned to their municipal leaders to regulate railroads in town. After 1883, aldermen heard this call and made it clear to corporate managers that the city would have final say over where railroads were built, what obligations they owed to the community, and how they would behave in town. They chastized railroad executives and forced them to yield the right of way on public streets, account for property damage, and ensure passenger and pedestrian safety. As the epic Mississippi River bridge fight of the 1870s

110. La Crosse Board of Trade, *Thirty-third Anniversary*, 39.

demonstrates, La Crossers were not always successful in their efforts to command western rails. Yet even this failed struggle reveals that smaller, hinterland cities had the potential to influence nineteenth-century Midwestern railroading in unexpected and often meaningful ways.

Stoddard's tale, and that of railroading in La Crosse more generally, also raises intriguing questions about urbanization and capitalism beyond the river city. Historians often contend that a Midwestern community's geographic location and the quality of its boosters, more than anything else, determined its commercial fate during the nineteenth century. Yet, if municipal power provided residents a means through which to influence powerful railroad corporations, then perhaps it also vested them with the authority to shape their city's economic history in other ways before 1900. Ultimately, if we can integrate smaller, hinterland cities into the region's history, we may discover that such local states played a much more dynamic role in the making of the Middle West than scholars have suspected.

This story, however, is significant for a second reason: it can help us measure how sweeping political and economic transformations in nineteenth-century America colored the experiences of people on the local stage. La Crossers may not have shared their sidewalks with Jay Gould or other crafty railroad men. They may never have hosted huge Populist rallies or brushed elbows with crusading reformers such as Charles Francis Adams or acerbic social critics like Frank Norris. Yet, they were products of the same national culture and their experiences can help us see how grand political issues often had lasting local implications. Andrew Jackson's seductive rhetoric of the Common Man, for example, constrained the financial power of Wisconsin lawmakers and, as a result, helped determine the strategies La Crossers used to attract railroads. Moreover, as Stoddard and others like him moved to the river city, they carried with them an effervescent booster ethos that had gripped the nation and convinced their neighbors that they had an almost irresistible power to order their commercial world. Furthermore, when La Crossers tried to regulate railroads, they joined in an energetic national dialogue driven by Progressive reformers eager to control powerful corporations and preserve their idealized version of American democracy. The case of La Crosse, then, matters not simply because it reveals how people in small, hinterland cities used municipal power to craft western railroading. It also matters because it can help us glean how these people reflected broader political and economic trends that defined the United States as a dynamic industrial nation before 1900.

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