

“1850-1860: The Ten years before Rolla, Missouri’s Incorporation”

**Dr. Donald B. Oster’s Key-Note Remarks at
Rolla’s Sesquicentennial Kick-Off and
150th Birthday Celebration on Jan. 25, 2011**

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Between 1850-1860 the state of Missouri underwent substantial development. The state’s population increased 73.3% during the decade (from 682,044 to 1,182,012). The increase came through natural increase, migration from both southern and northern states, and from immigration.

In 1850 no railroads existed in the state, although railroads started to be built in the 1830s in America. In the 1840s railroads spread eastward, but Missouri had to wait. It was a Western state, and it took a great deal of money to build railroads.

In the decade of the 1850s, over 770 miles of operational railroad were built in the state through 36 of the state’s 113 counties. There were seven railroads; five of them were substantial lines. Four of the lines emanated from St. Louis into the interior of the state. By the end of 1860, the Pacific Railroad of Missouri (popularly known as the Missouri Pacific) had been built to the new town of Sedalia in Pettis County. The North Missouri Railroad took a sharp right north; Macon was the railhead. The St. Louis & Iron Mountain Railroad went south, ending at Pilot Knob in the mining area of the state. (The Hannibal & St. Joseph Railroad ran across the state in the north; it had a connection with the North Missouri at Macon).

The fourth line that started at St. Louis, the Southwest Branch of the Pacific Railroad, used the tracks of the Pacific Railroad until it reached the town of Pacific in eastern Franklin County. Then it headed off in a southwest direction, toward the western border of Missouri; it planned on passing through Springfield.

It is the Southwest Branch of the Pacific Railroad that is important in the history of Rolla. The groundbreaking ceremony for the line occurred in 1852, but construction did not begin until 1855. One of the subcontractors to build the line was the J. Stever Co. Five men owned and oversaw the work of the company: Jacob Stever, James Lea, William Morill, E.Q. Harding and Edmund Ward Bishop. It is Bishop that we are interested in.

The Stever Company’s construction obligation was the 31 miles from Crawford County (future Leasburg) to the Gasconade River at what was at that time part of Pulaski County. Its job, which was a considerable one, was to clear and grade the 31 miles in preparation for the laying of the tracks. To help accomplish that task, the company built a two-story building of oak logs which they faced with boards. The building would serve as the company’s office and living quarters. (It was built on the site of the present U.S. post office in Rolla.) The building was placed at that spot in order that it would be close to some anticipated major cuts in the terrain that would have to be made immediately to the west in order to reduce the grade for trains traveling from the west (Coleman’s Cut).

By 1857 Bishop had had enough of the railroad construction business. The company of which he was a partner was not getting paid on time. Often the payment from the parent railroad company came in the form of land (which had been given to it by the U.S. government through the land grant given to the Pacific Railroad of Missouri. The land would not have been immediately transferable into money, for the general area was lightly populated.) And generally, the money that the parent Pacific Railroad of Missouri did have went into the construction of the main line, which was being built toward the Kansas City/Independence area.

Bishop decided to become a town speculator. In so doing he was following a common endeavor in capitalistic America. Literally hundreds of American towns had been founded by people over the past few decades. In Missouri in the 1850s at least 111 towns were founded. Seventy of those communities, ranging from little more than railway stations to full blown towns, were

founded along the tracks of the railroads being built in the state. (Those same railroads ran their tracks through already existing towns: Jefferson City and Chillicothe would be examples).

Bishop's project was one of the 70 new railroad towns. (Kirkwood and Sedalia would be other examples.) With the cooperation of his ex-partners, Bishop took his assets out of the company. He was paid off with land, land that Stever Co. had received from the parent railroad company. Bishop also received ownership of the two-story office/residence building. In addition, Bishop bought additional governmental land that was located in the general area of the building. He started preliminary work to lay out a town into blocks and lots.

At the same time, in the midst of a controversy about where the seat of government of the new county of Phelps (carved from parts of Crawford, Pulaski and Maries) would be located, he offered 50 acres of his land to the county government if the county courthouse was located on it. The offer was accepted. Even though the final decision to place the courthouse on the 50 acres was not made until 1860, that did occur. The county government subdivided the 50 acres into town lots and put them up for sale; they used the funds raised to help pay for the construction of the county courthouse. So both Bishop and the county government had lots for sale in the same area. Together, by 1858-59 the place became known as "Rolla."

Feeling his town project had been started, Bishop took some time off and journeyed back to his birthplace area, Poughkeepsie, N.Y. At 38 years of age (1858), he married Jane???? And brought her back to Rolla. (She may have been several years younger than Edmund. They had their only son, Edmund W. Bishop, (Jr.?) in 1867, nine years after they were married. It can be assumed that they possibly had other children during that nine year period, daughters, but there is no evidence of that. It could be that Jane went back to New York during the Civil War. What is known for sure is that the son died on July 11, 1889, at the age of 22; at least that is what his tombstone says; it is next to his father's tomb in the Rolla Cemetery; Jane is not buried there. After Edmund Bishop the town-founder died on April 24, 1895, at the age of 75, after living in his town for 40 years, Jane may have moved to the state of California. Did she have a daughter or daughters living there?

As of late – 1860, Rolla was a community of perhaps 600, with 75 structures, including the brick courthouse being built by the Malcolm & Lynch firm (Andrew Malcolm, who would be one of the town's first councilmen, was a native of Scotland). It was part construction camp, for some clearing and grading of the projected line of the railroad had been done west of Rolla. Irish-American construction workers and possibly even their families lived in the community. In addition, there were merchants and artisans and land agents. At the same time Phelps County had a population, according to the U.S. Census of 1860, of 5,714. Within that population there were over 800 foreign-born persons and 84 African American slaves.

At this point the Civil War interjected itself in the history of Rolla on December 20, 1860, the state of South Carolina seceded, left the Union. On December 22 the first train reached Rolla. On December 31, 1860 the first regularly scheduled passenger train arrived in Rolla. On Jan. 19, 1861 the state of Georgia seceded. On Jan. 25, 1861 the state of Missouri granted and incorporation charter to the town of Rolla, thus giving it the right to have its own government and its own ordinances. On Jan. 26, the state of Louisiana seceded. On Feb. 4 the first city council of Rolla met, and it met again on Feb. 9. The council consisted of Mayor Daniel Parsons, and Edmund Bishop, John Webber, Andrew Malcolm, Henry Andrae, F. Hartje, John Dunivin and E.G. Evans. They had their first meetings in the "Tiffany House," a building at 4th and Main, (close by the north end of the present wooden foot bridge over the railway tracks close to the present court house.) On March 4, 1861 Fort Sumter was shelled for the first time. War had begun. On May 10, 1861 the first physical event of the war occurred in Missouri, in St. Louis, with the Camp Jackson Affair. Then on June 11 in St. Louis, negotiations between the Missouri state administration and the federal government broke down. Governor Claiborne Jackson went back to Jefferson City and federal forces led by General Nathaniel Lyon went after him. On June 14 a federalized militia army from St. Louis got off the train a mile north of Rolla, marched into the community, and started protecting the railhead of the Southwest Branch from possible Confederate control. Union forces would occupy Jefferson City. On June 17, confederate forces were defeated at Boonville in Cooper County.

Edmund Ward Bishop, the principal founder of Rolla, unlike some town speculators, lived in the town he created until his death in 1895. He evidently tended to the land he owned in the town. In the process, he gave some lots to Christian congregations. He gave a double lot to the Methodist. (He and Jane were Methodists.) Later, about 1880, he gave a corner lot at the northeast corner of 10th and Main to the Episcopalians; they built there in 1882.

Edmund Bishop placed the foundation to what has become a substantial place 150 years later. It is interesting to note, however, that Rolla's growth was not impressive in the late decades of the 19th Century. In 1870 it had a population of 1,354. In 1900 it had grown only to 1,600. At the same time Phelps County had 10,506 inhabitants in 1870 and 14,194 in 1900. There was growth in the twentieth century. In 2000 (the latest official census figures I have), Rolla had a population of 16,367. That ranked it the 8th largest non-metropolitan town in the state. Phelps County had a population of 39,825. That ranked it the 9th largest in the 93 non-metropolitan counties in the state.

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