Old Wooden (Main Street) Bridge

The exact date of construction of the Main Street bridge is unknown. Based on old Rolla Express newspaper ads, it was in existence by 1862. Available records point to a less than reliable past. During its first fifty years, the bridge was condemned and rebuilt at least three times by Frisco crews. Despite “bad press”, the bridge served more than a functional purpose for the citizens of Rolla. Touted as “Rolla’s Greatest Summer Resort” it served as a location for individuals to congregate to enjoy the breezes, a rendezvous point for couples in love and a setting for summer concerts for the “Old Town”. In 1997, Burlington Northern proposed removing the bridge to eliminate further maintenance of the structure. However, at the request of the City of Rolla, the two organizations partnered to convert the bridge to a pedestrian walkbridge, thus saving one of Rolla’s last remaining Civil War era landmarks.
Phelps County Courthouse

“Unlike many of the counties in southern Missouri, Phelps County’s public buildings survived the Civil War.” “Edmund Ward Bishop donated the land for the county seat and supervised construction of the first Phelps County Courthouse.” “Contractors Malcolm & Lynch began construction of the Phelps County Courthouse in 1860. Under roof but unfinished when war began, the Union army used the building as a warehouse, office, and hospital before returning it to county control in 1863. The courthouse was completely refurbished in 1881 when the vaults (the one on the west side is visible here) were added for storage of county records.” “With various additions and alterations, the structure served as the seat of justice from 1860 to 1994. It is one of the most significant historic buildings still standing in Rolla and Phelps County.”

“Old Town” Rolla

“...the first train rolled into Rolla on December 22, 1860.”
“...war arrived and seven years passed before another rail went down. Rolla’s temporary status as a railhead lent the young town an enormous strategic importance. Federal troops seized it in June 1861 and remained at the railhead for four years.” “Railroad, freight, and army supply operations drew the business area away from the courthouse and created the “downtown” business district that lasted for a century.” “In 1860, Rolla consisted mostly of hotels and shops catering to railroad construction workers, freighters, wholesale merchants, and land agents at the end-of-tracks boomtown. After the war, the area centering on Fourth and Main streets became known as "Old Town" to distinguish it from the new business district along Eighth and Pine.”

(right) Central Elementary, later renamed Pershing Elementary, became home to the Rolla Public School Administration in April of 1979 and remained such until being destroyed by fire in early 2002. (photo courtesy: Western Historical Manuscripts Collection, University of Missouri-Rolla Archives.)

Central Elementary

"After losing the Rolla Building, the public school occupied a former army commissary office at Ninth and Elm streets until it was destroyed in the Great Fire. Central School, shown here under construction and with a basketball game in progress, opened on Main Street between Fifth and Sixth streets in 1882."

“Government surplus properties included wagon repair sheds and blacksmith shops with multiple forges and chimneys in a cluster along Rolla Street between Sixth and Eighth streets. The buildings became the Gerrish and Strobach wagon factories in the 1870’s. In 1884, the Fraizer Brothers began manufacturing wagons in the former Gerrish plant at the northwestern corner of Eighth and Rolla Streets. The wagon factories were among the largest of Rolla’s home industries, and paid good wages to craftsmen. The crew at Fraizer Brothers, shown inside the wagon shed, enjoyed regional reputation for fine wagons, buggies, and plows until the business failed in 1902.”

(above) ‘The intersection of Pine and Eighth streets remained the downtown hub. This 1947 postcard view to the north shows the principal buildings (clockwise from top right: the Ben Franklin department store in the Schuman building; Hotel Edwin Long; Scott’s Drugs; and the Grant Building).’

Downtown Business District

“By the end of World War Two, Rolla was bursting at the seams and about to double in population to broach the 10,000 mark.” “The business district downtown extended from Sixth Street northward as far as Tenth Street. The business district still remained oriented to the railroad, but never extended much east of the tracks.”


(left) “This photograph from the top of the Edwin Long building shows the northwestern edge of the downtown business district, circa 1940.”
Hotel Edwin Long

“Beyond the woman entering the National Bank is the southeastern corner of Eighth and Pine streets and the Central Drug Store, circa 1885. The Hotel Edwin Long replaced the drug store in 1931. Contractor M.E. Gillioz rushed the Hotel Edwin Long to completion in March 1931 so that it could serve as the headquarters for the Route 66 celebration. The hotel featured 65 guest rooms and the offices of the National Bank of Rolla. With its electrically-lighted sign on the roof, the building was a Pine Street landmark. It remains so today as the home of Phelps County Bank.”

Scott’s Drugs

“The Schuman Brothers erected a new building on the southwestern corner of Eighth and Pine streets in 1902. Briefly the home of the Central Drug Store, it was better known later as Scott’s Drugs. For nearly seventy-five years, townspeople and students bought medicines, books, and music at Scott’s.”

Grant Hotel

“The quartermaster depot building at the northwest corner of Eighth and Pine streets was among many others in Rolla built by the Union army for its supply apparatus. Sold after the war as government surplus, the quartermaster building became the Grant Hotel, shown here circa 1875.” (upper left photo)

“Mr. and Mrs. Hiram V. Shaw purchased the original Grant Hotel on the northwest corner of Eighth and Pine streets in 1870 and replaced the frame building in 1876 with this brick edifice. The hotel, outbuildings and grounds ultimately encompassed the whole block.” (lower right photo)

Rolla’s Second Depot

“The Frisco built the town’s second railroad depot at a new location east of Eighth Street in 1882. Passengers, mail and express materials arrived at this station until 1928.”


“A dozen passenger trains daily served Rolla through the first half of the Twentieth Century. Passenger traffic had declined enough for the railroad to substitute self-propelled railcars on local runs, as shown here about 1928.”

Rolla’s Third Depot

“Even as ridership began to decline, the Frisco built a new Spanish Mission-style station, dedicating it in January 1929. The depot outlasted passenger service (it ended in 1967) as well as the Frisco itself. Passenger traffic briefly peaked during World War Two on trains such as the Leonard Wood, the daily accommodation to the sprawling military post in Pulaski County, but automobiles, truck freight, and Route 66 ultimately diminished Rolla’s connections to the railroad.”

Crandall House

“Built in 1882, the Crandall House (later the Imperial, Baltimore, and El Caney) was a first-class hotel and an impressive addition to downtown. Shown here looming above the depot, the mansard-roofed hotel provided the first glimpse of Rolla to travelers getting off the trains.”

Rolla’s First Depot

“Rolla was but a fledgling county seat village when war began in Missouri in June 1861. By chance, however, it was the railhead of the South West Branch of the Pacific Railroad and one of the most strategic points in the southern part of the state. The first depot in Rolla, between Seventh and Eighth streets, was built in 1860.”

Public Works and Utilities

“Work on the water and sewer system began in 1907 with construction of the brick building on east Eighth Street. The municipal power and water building housed the water system’s pumps and also dynamos for electric power.”


“The city began paving streets with vitrified brick in 1908. Eighth Street from the railroad tracks to Pine Street was the first to be paved, followed by Pine Street between Sixth and Eighth in 1910.”

Rolla High School

“Most of Rolla’s schools were built east of the railroad tracks after 1900. The first high school was erected on Cedar Street between Eighth and Ninth in 1915. A major addition about 1927 doubled its size. It served into the 1960’s before becoming the Public School Administration Building and was razed about 1980 to make way for parking at the new high school.”

John F. Bradbury, Jr., Rolla The Old Town (St Louis: G. Bradley Publishing, Inc., 2002), p. 43. bottom photo courtesy Western Historical Manuscripts Collection, University of Missouri-Rolla Archives

Historic Plaque #15
Pennington-Gilbert Shoe Company

“The Pennington-Gilbert Shoe Company factory opened east of the tracks in 1926 between Seventh and Eighth streets. The city provided the site after a vigorous campaign to bring the industry to Rolla that included sales of lots in the Frisco Addition and donations by private citizens. The factory meant wage-paying jobs, especially for women, many of whom entered the workforce for the first time. The shoe factory had a tough time in the Depression, closing in 1932. Later it reopened under management of the Johnson-Stevens and Shinkle Shoe Company.”

Rolla Mills

“Joseph Campbell established Rolla Mills across from the depot on the east side of the tracks between Seventh and Eighth streets in 1871. It was an important commercial enterprise for both townspeople and rural residents of the county, and was among the first efforts to maintain Rolla’s importance as a regional commercial center after the soldiers went home and the rails moved on.”

Historic Plaque #18

National Bank

“Cyrus H. Frost, David W. Malcolm, Joseph Campbell, Edmund Ward Bishop, A.S. Long, and others organized the National Bank of Rolla in 1871. The offices were in the Malcolm Building, on the north side of Eighth Street (now part of the parking lot next to Alex’s Pizza) until 1931 when the bank moved into the new Hotel Edwin Long. The bank withstood hard times during the Panic of 1873, but failed in 1932.”

“Whiskey Row”

“The block of Eighth Street from the railroad depot to Pine Street led to the business district. The string of saloons on Eighth Street between the railroad tracks and Pine Street was known as "Whiskey Row" during its rowdy days. The Baltimore Hotel is the largest building in this 1908 postcard of the north side of Eighth Street. The fourth building from the left (now T.J.'s Bar and Grill), built in 1881, is the oldest structure in downtown Rolla in 2007.

Rollamo Theater

“The Rollamo Theater opened on west Eighth Street in June 1931. Lantern slides had been shown in the Shaw Opera House and downtown “air-domes”, and silent movies in the Lyric Theater on Pine Street, but the Rollamo Theater was the first modern movie house. Two other theaters, the Ritz (on Rolla Street) and the Uptown Theater (on North Pine) opened in 1940 and 1941, respectively.”

Campbell Building

“The Campbell Building, on the southwestern corner of Seventh and Pine streets, was the centerpiece of Joseph Campbell’s economic prominence at the turn of the century. The building housed the Rolla State Bank (Campbell was founder) and, until 1915, the U.S. Post Office.”

Watering Fountain

“The drinking fountain at Sixth and Pine streets, erected in 1910, lasted only a few years before the draft animals it was meant to refresh had largely disappeared from Rolla streets. The city council ordered it removed in 1925 and at the same time petitioned the Frisco railroad to open Pine Street under the tracks, a development that never occurred.”

Elkins Chapel Methodist Church

“Elkins Chapel Methodist Church, on the northwest corner of First and Elm streets, was the heart of the African American community in Rolla. It was named after Peter Elkins, the first black minister to come to Rolla. In 1935, black and white citizens alike gathered to celebrate the 70th anniversary of the founding of the church.”

Lincoln School

“In December 1882, Lincoln School for African American students opened at First and Pine streets.” African American “students were required to attend high school in Jefferson City until 1954. Many never returned to Rolla, gradually reducing the numbers of the historic black community.”

"Black" USO  
(United Service Organization)

“The USO had a substantial operation in Rolla during World War Two, serving thousands of soldiers on leave looking for recreation and an opportunity to get away from military life at Fort “Lost-in-the-Woods”. The need for appropriate, and segregated, facilities led to construction of two nearly identical USO buildings on Ninth Street in 1942. A building for “black” soldiers on east Ninth Street near the railroad depot became the public library and the home of Rolla Municipal Utilities after the war. It is now part of the Rolla City Hall complex.”

Rolla Post Office

“The new Rolla Post Office, on Pine Street between Ninth and Tenth streets, was a significant addition to downtown. It opened in 1915, and is still in use as the Rolla Public Library.”

(bottom photograph) “Mayor Louis H. Breuer and four MSM professors were the first Rolla men to join the military during World War One. Another 1,056 Phelps Countians were drafted. Fifty-two men lost their lives to combat and to Spanish influenza. The war ended before the last group of selectees, shown here on Pine Street in front of the U.S. Post Office, donned army khaki.”

“White” USO
(United Service Organization)

“The USO had a substantial operation in Rolla during World War Two, serving thousands of soldiers on leave looking for recreation and an opportunity to get away from military life at Fort "Lost-in-the-Woods". The need for appropriate, and segregated, facilities led to construction of two nearly identical USO buildings on Ninth Street in 1942. The “white” USO, erected on the southeast corner of Ninth and Rolla streets, became the home of the Missouri Geological Survey from the end of World War Two until 1962. It is now the University of Missouri-Rolla’s Buehler Building.”

Missouri School of Mines

Missouri School of Mines “first rented the upper floors of the Rolla building in the northern suburbs of town, built in 1871 by the Rolla Board of Education.” “By 1889, the School of Mines campus included (from left to right in top photo): the dormitory, now the chancellor’s residence, the chemistry building, and the Rolla Building. The chancellor’s residence and Rolla Building still stand on the campus of the University of Missouri-Rolla”, now Missouri University of Science and Technology.

1870s Rolla

“Wartime development along the railroad tracks caused the main business district to move away from the courthouse and Old Town to Eighth and Pine streets. By the 1870s, Rolla had an emerging skyline that signified its importance as a growing town. It would be a few more years before the trees grew back in the pastures around town.”

John Webber Homestead

“John Webber and his family were the first to settle and homestead on land (1844) that would give birth to the city of Rolla, Missouri, almost seventeen years later.” “We are unable to establish the exact date of the arrival of the family, but it can be stated with complete accuracy that the log home had been erected and the Webbers were residing there during the fall of 1845.”

Missouri Trachoma Hospital

“The Missouri Trachoma Hospital was one of two hospitals in the United States devoted to the treatment of this eye disease. The building was equipped with 70 beds and was completed in 1939 at a cost of $137,000. The grounds were donated by the Rolla Chamber of Commerce. State and Federal funds financed the project.”¹

“The Missouri Highway Patrol took over the former Trachoma Hospital as its training academy in 1957. The troopers here are parked very near the site where John Webber built his cabin along the Springfield Road.”²

Route 66

“These postcard views from the late 1930’s and early 1950’s show the intersection of Highways 66 and 63 with Sixth Street, looking east from Kingshighway. Wartime restrictions held back development along this line until 1945, when a flurry of construction filled in prime commercial properties along the highway. Klinefelter Ford and International Harvester were among the largest businesses at what had become a very busy intersection on the western edge of town.”

(right) Rolla Building during ice storm - photo courtesy Western Historical Manuscripts Collection, University of Missouri-Rolla Archives

The Rolla Building

“Not all residents were pleased with Rolla’s fortunes during the Civil War, but the town actually prospered. After the war, Radical Party adherents were powerful enough to bring the Missouri School of Mines to Rolla. The institution first rented the upper floors of the Rolla Building in the northern suburbs of town, built in 1871 by the Rolla Board of Education. The college acquired the building in 1875 after the school board experienced financial problems.”

Engine 1501 and Passenger Car

In 1953, communities began asking Frisco Railroad to make the old Frisco steam locomotives available as historic attractions for cities located along the old Frisco line. Dr. Clair V. Mann, secretary/historian of the Phelps County Historical Society and former historian for Frisco led the campaign for Rolla and the Phelps County area. On January 25, 1955, Phelps County was granted the 1501. In addition, requests for an order board and passenger coach were included as a package deal to be located at Schuman Park, former site of a Frisco water tank. For more information or group tours, contact Rolla Parks and Recreation Department at 573-364-4278.
Frisco (Schuman) Pond

“The view from the mill elevator shows the outskirts of town. There wasn’t much eastbound beyond the depot and water tank except Frisco pond and the stockyards. The railroad built livestock pens across from the pond in 1873. There were also sidetracks enough to handle forty cattle cars at once, although the trade never developed to that extent. To accommodate longer trains, in 1917 the Frisco removed the water tank to a site on Twelfth Street near Frisco Pond.”

Historic Plaque #36

(above) “After Pine Street was paved in 1929 to meet Route 66, commercial buildings such as the Kroger store gradually replaced residential properties between Ninth and Twelfth streets. South of Tenth on Pine Street, the business district was already well established.”

(above) “In this view past the intersection of Tenth and Pine streets, Crumpler’s Store had replaced Kroger (the latter had moved out on Kingshighway) on Pine, the A & P Grocery had opened on the northeast corner of Tenth, and the main thoroughfare boasted two stoplights by the time this photograph was made in the early 1950’s.”

Pine Street and Downtown Rolla

“The highway helped sustain Rolla during hard times and war, but also brought increased traffic and stoplights, and, finally, new road construction. In just over a decade, traffic through town became heavy enough that the main stem of Route 66 was incorporated with U.S. Highway 63”. “The junction of Highways 66 and 63 with Kingshighway became a major intersection, while Pine Street became City Route 66.”

Pine Street and Downtown Rolla

“The automobile age in Rolla began about 1905.” “The city began paving streets with brick in 1908, filling rutted paths and deep holes on Eighth and Pine streets...”. “Local support for better roads coincided with national and regional promotions. Considerable improvements around Rolla had already occurred by the mid-1920s on Route 14, the main state road, but they paled in comparison with the ramifications of U.S. Highway 66. The great all-weather highway from Chicago to the Pacific, authorized by Congress in 1926, ran down Pine Street before turning west on sixth Street. The city finished paving Pine Street to the north and Sixth to the west to meet the highway.”