

**HISTORICAL SKETCH OF THE ILLINOIS-  
CENTRAL RAILROAD, TOGETHER WITH  
A BRIEF BIOGRAPHICAL RECORD OF  
ITS INCORPORATORS AND SOME OF ITS  
EARLY OFFICERS**

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Historical Sketch of the Illinois-Central Railroad, Together with a Brief Biographical Record of Its Incorporators and Some of Its Early Officers by William K. Ackerman

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**WILLIAM K. ACKERMAN**

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BY  
WILLIAM K. ACKERMAN.

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*Transcribed*

## INTRODUCTORY.

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THE following sketches contain a statement of facts and incidents, which have occurred for the most part within the recollection of the writer—who was connected with the company, in various capacities, for a period of nearly thirty-two years—or have been gathered from reliable sources, relating to an important work in the history of the State which seem to him worth preserving. He trusts that they will prove of interest to the class of readers who will be likely to peruse a paper of this character. Though frequent reference has been made in the past, in various forms as to the effect upon the physical and financial resources of Illinois by reason of the construction of the Illinois-Central Railroad at a critical period in the history of the State, still it is doubtful whether such stress has been laid upon the subject as either to do justice to the projectors, or enable the people of Illinois to realize fully, the present and prospective benefit conferred. Portions of this paper have already appeared in a pamphlet entitled "Early Illinois Railroads," but in order to preserve the chronological order of events in treating of the Illinois-Central Railroad, proper, it was deemed necessary to repeat them here.

WM. K. ACKERMAN.

CHICAGO, July, 1890.



# ILLINOIS-CENTRAL RAILROAD:

HISTORICAL SKETCH

AND

BIOGRAPHICAL RECORD OF INCORPORATORS.

By WM. K. ACKERMAN.

IN undertaking a brief sketch of the origin of the Illinois-Central Railroad, it is necessary to refer somewhat in detail to the correspondence of two men closely identified with its early progress, and whose names stand out prominently in the history of the State; I need hardly say that these are the Hon. Sidney Breese and the Hon. Stephen A. Douglas. In writing upon the subject, if one were to confine himself to the contentions indulged in by these two gentlemen, for the credit of either originating or advocating the scheme, considerable time and space would have to be given up in the endeavor to reconcile their respective claims. From the most careful examination made of the correspondence that passed between them upon the subject, it does not appear, however, that either of these gentlemen actually originated the plan of a central road; indeed Judge Douglas lays no positive claim to this, but Judge Breese, in his letter to the *Illinois State Register*, Dec. 23, 1850, says: "I must have the credit of it, for I originated it in 1835." And in his famous letter to Judge Douglas, written Jan. 25, 1851, to the latter at Washington, while in the senate, he says, "I claim to have first projected this great road in my letter of October, 1835,"—meaning his letter to Judge John York Sawyer of Oct. 16, 1835. But even in this letter, he gives credit for the plan to "an intelligent friend in Bond County," who was William S. Waite of Greenville, and who proved himself an ardent supporter of the road until its final completion. These claims of Judge Breese are referred to by Judge Douglas in a somewhat sarcastic as well as a facetious manner in the voluminous correspondence\* which was carried on during 1850 and 1851, but the latter modestly abstains from claiming any connection with the meas-

\*"Early Illinois Railroads. By W. K. Ackerman. Chicago, 1884."



ure until December, 1843—the year in which he entered the house of representatives and the same year in which Judge Breese entered the senate—or any exclusive credit for the consummation of the scheme. What Judge Breese did claim, was undoubtedly true, *vis.*: that he had “said and written” more in favor of the plan than anyone else, and for this he was entitled to great credit.

The daily *Illinois State Register* of Dec. 19, 1850, published an article, quoted from the *Benton Standard*, stating that Judge Breese favored what was known as the “Holbrook charter,” to which particular reference will be made hereafter. This stirred Judge Breese to a reply in which he stated that he was in favor of accepting the release of the Cairo company on condition that their rights were to be respected. In the same letter, he claimed that he was entitled to the credit of the whole scheme of a central road, having “originated it in 1835.” The editor of the *Register*, while willing to accord him all due credit, reminds him that the efforts of Senators Douglas and Shields, and Representatives Wentworth, McClernand, Richardson, Bissell, Young, and Harris, must not be overlooked: that they all did their duty and were deserving of praise. On Jan. 5, 1851, Senator Douglas replied to Judge Breese in the columns of the *State Register*, assuring him that no injustice was intended to be done him, and reminding him of the fact that when the people of Chicago tendered him and Gen. Shields a complimentary dinner for the part they had taken in procuring the grant of land from the general government, they modestly declined it, and in their letter declining the honor awarded the principal merit to their colleagues.

To go back of the claims of both of these distinguished gentlemen, I suppose it is an historical fact that although Judge Breese brought the plan prominently before the people of the State by newspaper publications and letters to prominent men, still the credit of originating it really belongs to Lieut.-Gov. Alexander M. Jenkins when in the State senate in 1832.\* This was three years before the intelligent friend from Bond County

\* One year after the first act relating to the construction of railways was passed by the general assembly of the State of Illinois, Jan. 28, 1831.

whispered in Judge Breese's ear. Senator Jenkins' plan was to build the road from Cairo to Peru. Judge Breese's plan contemplated a line from Cairo to Galena, but when the plan was fully developed, Judge Douglas wrote Chicago as the northeastern terminus. Judge Breese said that the reason for this was because Judge Douglas had been investing in Chicago real estate and on that account wanted the road extended to that point. This was an unfair imputation, but a natural one, for Judge Breese to make, because his plan of a central road which was a local one, did not contemplate a branch to Chicago. Many opposed the enterprise in the central part of the State, fearing that a north-and-south line would divert traffic that that section might derive from an east-and-west line through the State. It must be borne in mind, that the prevailing idea at that time was to have the products of Illinois shipped to the South *via* Cairo and the Mississippi River; but Judge Douglas, who took a broader view of the enterprise, saw the necessity of connecting the lakes with the Mississippi, and the St. Lawrence with the Gulf of Mexico, as well as a connection at Chicago with the various railways then projected or in process of construction from the principal cities of the East, so that the measure would commend itself to congress as a national work tending to benefit the whole country and not a local enterprise for the particular benefit of the State of Illinois. Only in this way could the votes of the members of congress from Pennsylvania, New York, New England, and other portions of the Union be secured, as they did not of course favor any proposition having for its tendency the diversion of trade from the upper Mississippi toward Mobile alone.

Judge Breese was named as an incorporator in the first charter granted by the State in 1836 for a central road and having taken so deep an interest in the subject, he felt a commendable pride in the ultimate success of the measure. He was naturally jealous of his position in the matter, hence he could not brook a younger and more active rival. But he was entirely too sensitive in supposing that Judge Douglas had not properly recognized his early efforts in the matter. This feeling he describes in one of his letters to Douglas, in which he says, "In the outset, I will

candidly confess that, upon the subject of the [Illinois-] Central Railroad, with all its concomitants, I am very sensitive, the more especially since I thought I had discovered a studious endeavor on your part and on the part of those with whom you have acted, to conceal from the public my agency in bringing the measure into favor and in opening the way for successful legislation in regard to it. In none of your speeches and letters you, and others who have enjoyed your confidence, have made and written, has there been the least allusion to the part I have acted in the matter, nor in any of the papers in the State, supposed to be under your influence. Seeing this, and believing there was a concerted effort to appropriate to yourselves, exclusively, honors to which I knew you were not entitled, I deem it my duty, for the truth of history, to assert my claim, and in doing so, have been compelled, much against my will, to speak of myself and of my acts in regard to it. My whole life will show that it is the *first* time I have ever exposed myself to the charge of egotism, and under the influence which actuated me, I may have claimed too much."

The first act incorporating an Illinois-Central Railroad Company was passed by the legislature of the State of Illinois, Jan. 18, 1836. It was a special charter and granted many valuable privileges. It contemplated rail communication only as far north as the Illinois-and-Michigan Canal. The scheme proved an utter failure.

Under the internal-improvement act passed Feb. 27, 1837, its construction was undertaken by the State, without success, as there was neither credit to ensure, or capital to complete it. The appropriation under this act, \$3,500,000, was in any event totally inadequate.

The Cairo City-and-Canal Company was incorporated March 4, 1837. It was authorized to hold real estate in Alexander County, but more particularly the tract of land incorporated as the City of Cairo. They were to proceed to lay it off into lots for a town to be known as the City of Cairo; they were also empowered to construct dykes, canals, levees, and embankments, for the security and preservation of said city; also to construct a