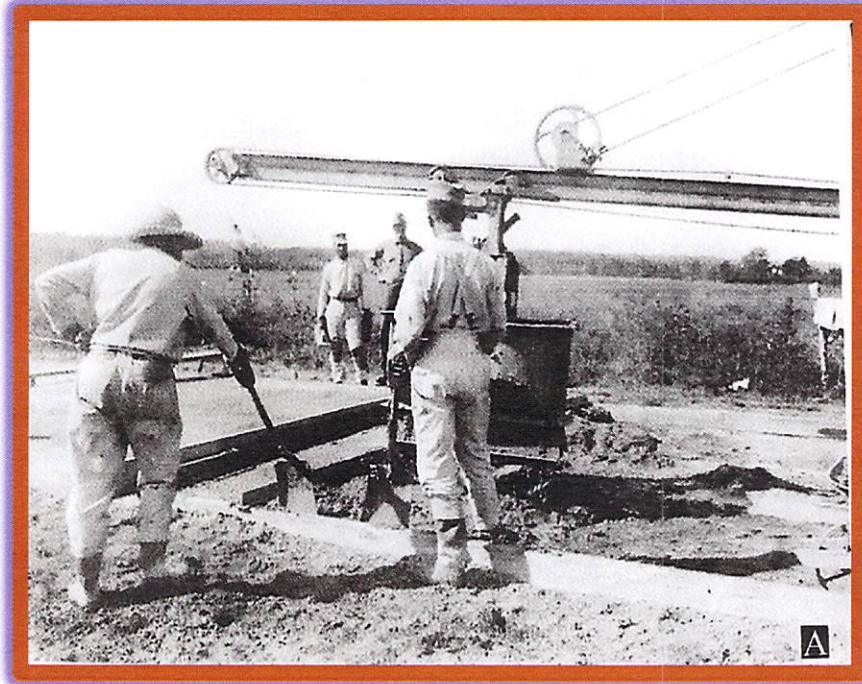


SANDS

of time

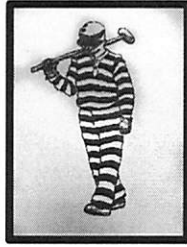
Louisa Convict Road



*A collection of stories and details for a project to historically
remember the 1914 Concrete Road in Louisa County, Iowa built
by Convict labor to cross 1.5 miles of impassable sand*

"A First in the Nation"

SANDS OF TIME



SANDS OF TIME

- Louisa Convict Road -

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INTRODUCTION



Convict Road Logo

In 2017 a committee working through the Rural, Louisa County Iowa Hometown Pride of Louisa, started the task of historically remembering the 1914 Convict-built concrete road in their community. One of the first in the nation.



This very interesting collection of materials and stories was gleaned from a survey made to determine interest, ideas and historic stories about it and the convicts involved. We were pleased with thoughts given through stories and verse. Romance. Adventure. And a little humor.

The Convict Road was a vital section in four major registered highways through Iowa. It was built because of about a mile and one half of impassable sand located east from the Iowa River running through Fredonia - Louisa's oldest incorporated community.

The historical significance of the Convict Road is that it is likely one of the first such type of highways built, certainly with convict labor, outside a city. Not only that, but the financing was made possible by local merchants and government under the direction of the Iowa Department of Transportation. The materials and equipment used were in their infancy.

This project has many interesting aspects besides the science and cost of road building. The social aspect of using prisoners for labor was certainly one of them as expressed in the original introductory poem, ***LEGACIES***, written by local Mary Masonholder Wilson.

Finally, we must remember how important it is for every community to preserve their culture - their own distinct and historic identity. Louisa is doing that with this project.

Thank you to the Louisa community and so many others for helping get this historic project underway.

Enjoy!!

Compiled by: Tom A. Woodruff, PE
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AN ODE TO THE CONVICT ROAD

LEGACIES

Mary Masonholder Wilson

**And their bodies dripped with sweat
As they strained against the sand
Making the earth solid to hold the concrete.
Would not it wash away?**

**But they were convicts.
It was not theirs to think or question.
It was theirs to build:
A road of concrete over the sand near Fredonia to the highway, now 92.
It was Louisa County, Iowa. The year was 1914.**

**They were twenty strong and determined
Convicts from State Reform:
Paid 20 cents an hour;
Not bad for a convict, and the work was outside!**

**One hundred and three years later, this road still stands.
Little did they know it would survive the test of time and hug the earth;
Almost hidden from human eye now
Beneath weeds, dirt and of course sand.**

**Today, the year 2017, help is needed in finding old pictures,
stories or any other information
To restore this piece of history.
Mix your sweat and toil with those of yore.
Restore the road and restore their honor and their legacy.**

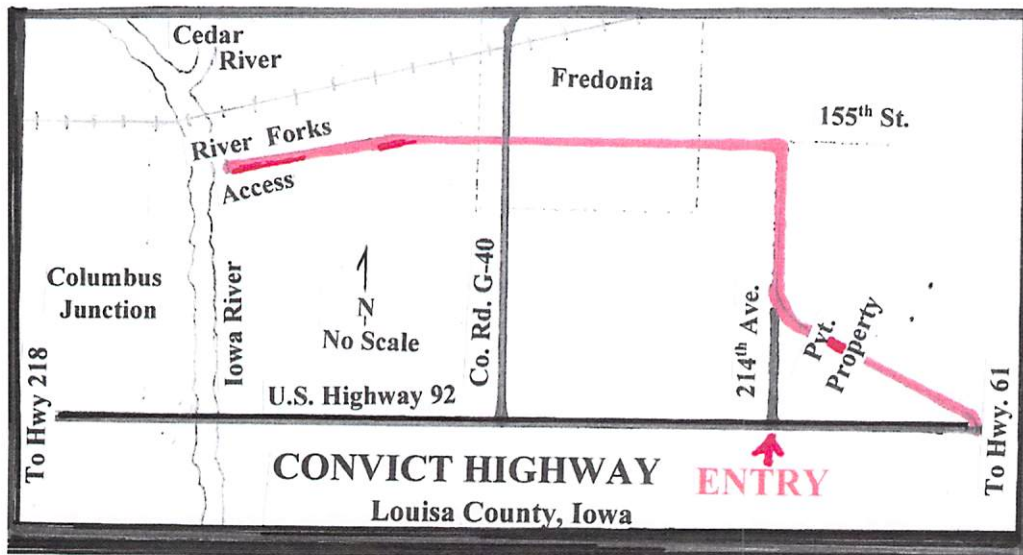
**Make the Convict Road a source of pride
For Louisa County and the State of Iowa.
Make this road(and memories) last another 103 years.**

**Feel the presence of the twenty departed convicts;
Follow in their steps and leave YOUR mark upon the earth.**

**Join the many footprints in the sands of time along this road.
Make it your LEGACY too.**

CONVICT ROAD LOCATION

Louisa County, Iowa



The Convict Road in Louisa County in southeast Iowa, is located just north of Highway 92 and east of the Iowa River and Columbus Junction. It connects to Highway 92 by entering 214th St. and then runs north and west through the incorporated village of Fredonia, then on east to the River Forks recreational area at the intersection of the Cedar and Iowa rivers.

Fredonia's Convict Labor Concrete Highway 1914 - A first for the State of Iowa

By Tom Woodruff

Columbus Junction, Iowa may have been called Sand Bank prior to taking its official name in 1870, but the real "sand bank" was east across the Iowa River at Fredonia and Alimeda.

That east "sand bank" was the primary reason the Louisa County Board of Supervisors decided to try an innovative and costly solution to the road problem. As you will see by the 1914 Columbus Safeguard reports and the articles by William H. Thompson in his Historical Summary of Transportation in Iowa, this concrete paving decision was a significant historical decision and not without problems.

A little background: to reduce road building costs and force prisoners to help pay confinement costs, Iowa's 34th General Assembly authorized the use of convict labor on approximately 50 miles of roads. These were to be roads through and adjacent to state lands at all state institutions. Funds were to come from the general funds of the state.

Twenty convicts were used to build two miles of roadway at Iowa State College in 1914 and 1915, and about 100 were engaged in building roads and culverts at other institutions. They were to be paid at the rate of 20 cents per hour.

Records were not found to show how the Louisa County Board of Supervisors and the then new Iowa Highway Commission were able to have convict labor provided to them when the law made clear they were to be used at state institutions. We do know, however, that Louisa County footed most of the bill.

A little more background on just how innovative this Fredonia concrete pavement was. The use of concrete appeared to have started with a half block in LeMars in 1904. In 1909, Mason City and Davenport laid 6,000 square yards within their cities. In 1911, a quarter mile, 14 feet wide, was built near Eddyville with materials supplied by local people. In 1913, a mile was built west of Mason City and extended into the city in 1915. An "experimental" section called the "seedling" mile was built in 1918 on the Lincoln Highway in Linn County, Iowa.

It appears quite clear that Louisa County was the first to have used convict labor on a county project in a road building project of this length. While concrete roads were practical in certain situations, construction expenses of \$30,000 per mile certainly was a deterrent. Can't you just imagine the arguments late

into the night at the court house on this extravagant expenditure?

The Columbus Safeguard files offer some insight:

September 24, 1914 - Our Concrete Road - Chance for County to save big sum of money to taxpayers - Local citizens offer aid.

"C.B. Clark took C.W. Hannan, F.H. Bierman and this writer (?) over to the other side of Fredonia where they were putting in concrete roads last Friday afternoon. He loaded us into his nice automobile and we made the round trip in a few minutes time.

"The work had been completed from the McDaniels corner up to the cemetery road, and it is sure going to be some highway when open for traffic. The convicts camp has been moved to a place below the road just east of the East River bridge and the work has commenced on that end of the job.

"The work is not progressing very rapidly on account of the workman being unable to get material fast enough. The Muscatine company which furnishes the gravel has caused the loss of lots of money on the job because of their failure to furnish material as agreed to. Maybe they are doing the best they can, but they ought to get a move on them and make the wheels go around.

"We understand it is going to take more money than has been raised to complete the job undertaken over there and the matter is being taken up by the Board to see if the capital cannot be furnished by the county to finish the job now instead of waiting another year and go to the big expense of getting the machinery and everything back on the job again.

"At least a thousand dollars can be saved by finishing the work now and the local banks have agreed to take up the warrants and the men who will be benefited most by the road will put up the money to cover the interest on the funds for another year. As a rule, people are not opposed to saving money, especially when the savings is in chunks of this size.

"Later - the Board voted to allow the additional appropriation unless they reconsider. Jones favored the expenditure, Wilson agreed to vote for it if the other two agreed, and Nelson talked some in looking over the situation but voted against it."

October 1, 1914 - Will Complete Road - Board of Supervisors reconsider and vote to com-

Fredonia's Convict Labor Concrete Highway (cont.)

plete concrete road - Saves county a snug sum.

"The Fredonia concrete road job will be completed at once and local people are elated over the decision by the Board of Supervisors.

"Voters all over the county expressed the opinion that it would be the proper thing and economical thing to do and members of the Board met here Tuesday to reconsider their former vote on the subject. Lew Dallmeyer secured about fifty names Monday in Concord Township, all but one man approached signing the document. About the same per cent of taxpayers in other parts of the county were giving their approval."

November 5, 1914 - Road is completed - Finishing touches placed on bit concrete job - All open for traffic soon.

"The concrete road, nearly two miles in length, at Fredonia, was completed the latter part of the week and engineer Baird and his crew of convict laborers departed Monday for Ames to do some work there at the experiment station, or under the direction of the highway commission.

"Both ends of the road are open for travel, but it will be a few days before the entire stretch will be ready for use, thorough drying being necessary.

"Many people have come long distances now to see this fine piece of concrete road, one of the most expensive pieces of road work ever completed in the state. The highway commission has had a "good roads" moving picture film made to be used to advertise Iowa highways and what Iowa is doing in the way of good road building, and they inform us that the Columbus Junction road pictures are to be added to this feature.

"The road is permanent, or at least we hope it is, and its cost has far exceeded the expectations of those who contemplated it. It will probably be the last piece of concrete road Louisa County will build, owing to the almost prohibitive cost, but in spite of the cost, Louisa County people can point to it with pride. It will serve as a monument to its builders, the taxpayers and the generous contributors to the work.

"This is the beginning of better road building in Iowa. We are not going to say permanent road building because the material for permanent road building has, in our opinion, not been discovered. It must be a material less expensive and more serviceable than concrete, with all due respects to the opinion of the Chief Highway Officials of this and some states.

"The Columbus Junction concrete road has already been advertised far and wide and the step Louisa County and our citizens have taken in the building of it

will be a wonderful influence with the people of Iowa in the campaign for better highways.

"When the road is entirely opened for traffic, Columbus Junction and Fredonia people will welcome a visit from admirers of good roads. Come and take a run over it."

The old Fredonia Convict concrete highway still survives eighty four years later in spite of the Safeguard Editor's predictions. It is truly of historical significance to Louisa County.

We MUST see that this first-of-a-kind convict labor built concrete highway is historically preserved, marked, and credit given where appropriate.
THE FREDONIA CONCRETE CONVICT LABOR HIGHWAY - A FIRST IN IOWA!!

Ralph remembers early Iowa Paving

Reprinted from the Muscatine Journal.

By Linda Giles

An early encounter with convicts has left a lasting impression on Ralph Snyder of Fredonia, Iowa. "Some of those convicts were nice fellows to talk to," says Ralph.

Snyder was referring to when, as an 11-year-old, he rubbed shoulders with convicts encamped in Fredonia.

The youngster even struck up a friendship with one of them - a Hickory Creek, Miss. man - and received a letter from him when the convict got out of prison.

But who were these convicts, and what were they doing in Fredonia? They were prisoners at the men's reformatory in Anamosa and were used as laborers to build one of the first stretches of paved road in Iowa. The road, a 1 1/2 mile strip of concrete built from the old bridge across the Iowa River through Fredonia and southward to Highway 92, still stands.

Snyder's story of the construction is like a trip down memory lane. The paving was laid in 1912, when he was just a schoolboy, but he remembers the event like it was yesterday. "Everything went on just the same," he says. The road was built because, according to Snyder, "the sand wouldn't hold up the traffic." Area farmers and businessmen had lobbied for it, because they had trouble negotiating the sandy section of highway leading into Columbus Junction with a team and wagon. The highway, known as the Great White Way, later Highway 2, was the main artery of travel east and west into and out of Columbus Junction.

Fredonia's Convict Labor Concrete Highway (cont.)

Fredonia's paving project was done in cooperation with the state, and was a test strip for open country roads. Several residents of Fredonia and Columbus Junction worked on the pavement, but convict labor from Anamosa did most of the work, greatly reducing costs. The convicts, chosen because their terms were about to expire, were housed in a large tent in a pasture where the Kingsbury Inn now sits. There also was a cook tent.

"The kids in town always walked to the river," Snyder says. "We weren't allowed to walk down to their camp." However, they stood on a hilltop and looked down at the tents, the guards and the watchdogs. The convicts, he also notes, were brought to Fredonia about six at a time, allowed to buy at the Farmers Co-op store, and sit out and eat.

Snyder, who was born about a block and a half away from the house in which he now lives with his wife, Doris, remembers one convict in particular, because he used to visit his home. The convict came in to cook meals for a regular worker who boarded at the Snyder household, and he was the man who later wrote to the young boy.

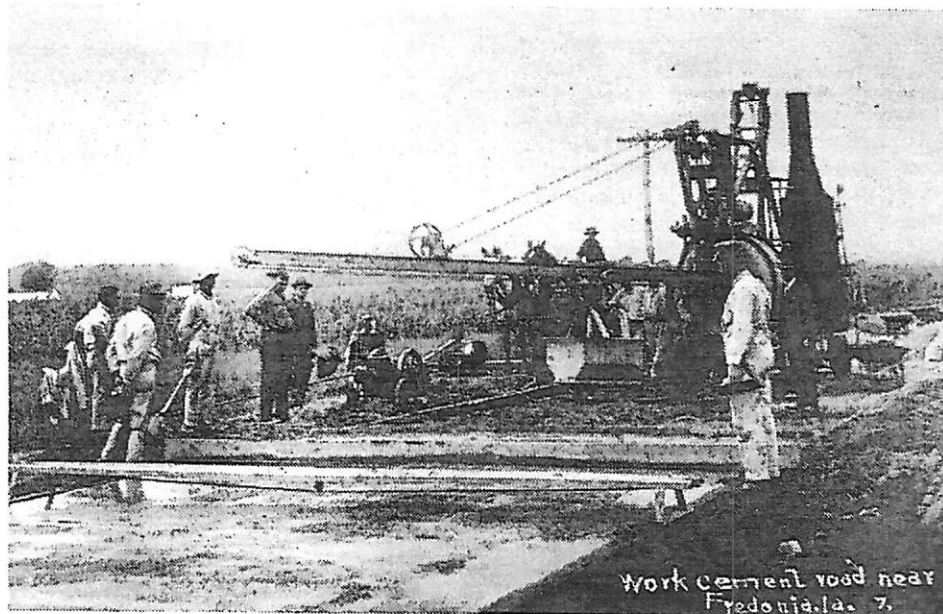
It took approximately three months to lay the concrete paving. "They had to haul everything with teams and wagons, Snyder recalls. Gravel, sand and ce-

ment were shipped in by railroad, and scooped out on the wagons from sidings to the road. "The cement was shipped in box cars in 80-pound bags," he adds.

Men reportedly were paid 40 cents an hour for their work. Snyder says they started on the east end, paved to the main street intersection, then resumed at the south end, to meet at the intersection. The cement supposedly was poured to a thickness of eight inches at the center of the road, and seven inches at the edges. In addition, steel to be used in the dividing sections between stretches of concrete was reported to have been late in arriving at Fredonia. Weather board was used in the interim. Another feature of the road was its square corner, east of Fredonia.

"They'd Drive from Muscatine to test the road"... Ralph Snyder

The completed project was the talk of the town. "They'd drive clear down from Muscatine in their Model T's to test this road out," Snyder says. These old time hot rodders, like the convicts before them, made a little bit of history. Fredonia, which had been incorporated in 1874 and then unincorporated, re-formed its city government in 1922 to control speeders on the cement highway.



Work cement road near
Fredonia, Ia. 7.

Work on the "Convict Highway" near Fredonia, Iowa

IOWA MENS REFORMATORY HISTORY

The Convict Road's Labor Source - A Summary

Since much of the labor force used for the Convict Highway came from the State Reformatory, it may be helpful to know a little about those reformatories.

The Territorial Legislature approved January 25, 1839, a penitentiary to be located in the town of Fort Madison, Lee County, Iowa. For thirty years this institution dealt with the problem of what to do with criminals in Iowa. During this period, convicts were let out to contractors for a term of ten years to reduce prison costs.

As the prison population continued to grow, a site was selected in 1872 in Anamosa where good quality limestone could be quarried to build a new facility able to accommodate 60 prisoners.

In 1907, a by-law was passed that changed Anamosa from a Prison to a Reformatory for first offenders who were 16-30 years of age. A significant societal change toward prisoners.

During the depression years the inmate population was at an all time high of 1489. When WW-2 came the population had decreased to 400 men. What an effect that Great Depression had on us. Today, Febr. 2017, the population is 880 with another 175 in other Iowa locations.

At present Anamosa has nine Industries shops; farm, license plates, custom wood, cleaning products, braille shop, metal furniture, auto body and signs. The Kirkwood Community College (Cedar Rapids) is on contract to maintain classes from primary levels to second-year college.

Over the 145 years of operation, a significant change has been made in Iowa's prison purposes from one of imprisonment to one of reform. It's of interest to note that almost all of the Iowa counties in their original charters made provisions for debtors to pay off such things as taxes and some other minor debt problems in lieu of confinement.

Repeating some earlier information about using Convict Labor. To reduce road costs, Iowa's 34th General Assembly authorized the use of Convict Labor on approximately 50 miles of road. *These were to be roads through and adjacent to state lands at all state institutions. Funds were to come from the general funds of the state.*

How Louisa came to skirt that law and use them for roadways that did not apply is not clear. What is clear, funds were not state funds - they came from the Louisa taxpayer. Wouldn't you have liked to have heard the conversation between the Supervisors and bankers at the time?

Registered Highway Routes in Louisa - Convict Road

CH - Reg Hwy/mkrs

SIGN POST MARKERS

• For the

Iowa Registered Highways using the Convict Highway

(Said to be most one of the most important and traveled roads in nation at the time)

#7 - Blue Grass Road - Originated in Burlington and ended in Council Bluffs a distance of 310 miles. This portion through Louisa was the NE connecting extension to Davenport. Was of military importance. One Blue horizontal stripe.



#28 - Great White Way - Extended from Davenport to Council Bluffs a distance of 340 miles. White post



#34 - I.O.A. Shortline - Extended from Davenport to Council Bluffs a distance of 330 miles. It's interesting to note the letters I.O.A. had no significance other than they sound like the name of Iowa. Red, white then red - 3 vertical stripes.



#64 - Southwest Trail - The starting point was in Kansas City and ended in Chicago covering a distance of 540 miles. Follows much of the Great Whiteway through Louisa. Black letters - SW.



IOWA CONCRETE ROAD MILES 1900-1948

Table 2. Iowa Primary Roads System-Concrete Surfaced Road Miles: 1900-1948

Year	Gravel	Mileage Paved	Grade	Year	Gravel	Mileage Paved	Grade
1900		0		1925	2,461	569	1,796
1901		0		1926	2,818	650	1,732
1902		0		1927	3,226	940	1,417
1903		0		1928	3,221	1,625	1,114
1904		0		1929	3,137	2,317	715
1905		0		1930	2,863	3,272	513
1906		0		1931	3,070	3,804	281
1907		0		1932	3,067	4,086	117
1908		0		1933	3,083	4,202	52
1909		0		1934	2,933	4,313	175
1910				1935	3,297	4,374	92
1911				1936	3,030	4,546	63
1912				1937	2,890	4,818	50
1913				1938	2,690	5,090	52
1914				1939	2,661	5,135	51
1915			462.7	1940	2,592	5,208	22
1916			625.2	1941	2,335	5,459	36
1917			879.97	1942			
1918				1943			
1919	624	25	800	1944			
1920	792	67	1,021	1945	2,471	6,316	34
1921	1,157	236	1,448	1946	2,377	6,382	38
1922	1,558	334	1,761	1947			
1923	1,889	419	2,001	1948			
1924	2,164	502	1,934				

(ISHC 1918a:2, 1921a:3-9; Thompson 1989:183)

Highway Accidents in 1916 - A Perspective

Highway Accidents. Increased use of automobiles resulted in railway crossing accidents and caused injury and fatalities on Iowa's highways. Speeding vehicles went over embankments, "turned turtle" or ended upside down, collided with each other and with bicycles and buggies, struck people, ran into trains and were hit by them (Table 1) (ISHC 1915h, 1915r-s, 1916b:3, 1917a:3-10). As early as 1915, there were proposals to prohibit the sale of high speed automobiles in Iowa (Thompson 1989:100). In 1916, there were 2,574 accidents which killed 199 people and injured 2,834 (Thompson 1989:105). Safety had become a primary goal for Iowa's road designers. Some cities flirted with establishing their own signage and speed limits (ISHC 1915:13). Table 1 gives the accident counts from 1916 (ISHC 1916b:3).

Table 1. Accident Counts taken from actual 1916 ISHC Bulletin

Can Appalling List of 1916 Highway Fatalities Shock Iowans Into Saner Driving in 1917?

1916 HIGHWAY FATALITIES (Compilation based entirely upon newspaper clippings.)			
Month	Total Deaths	On Highways	At Crossings
January	2	1	1
February	4	0	4
March	5	4	1
April	4	4	0
May	15	13	2
June	29	21	8
July	37	21	16
August	35	28	7
September	18	14	4
October	26	22	4
November	8	6	2
December	16	12	4
Totals	199	146	53

AUTO ACCIDENTS WHERE NO FATALITIES OCCURRED Record for Seven Months—June-December	
128 Autos over embankments.....	175 persons with broken bones
250 Autos over embankments.....	436 persons cut and bruised
107 Autos turned turtle.....	270 persons with broken bones
478 Autos turned turtle.....	466 persons cut and bruised
165 Auto collisions.....	162 persons with broken bones
308 Auto collisions.....	344 persons cut and bruised
204 Autos collide with buggies.....	244 persons injured
71 Autos collide with street cars.....	28 persons injured
105 Autos collide with bicycles.....	42 persons injured
176 Autos into obstructions in road.....	288 persons injured
286 People struck by autos.....	282 persons injured
90 Autos struck by trains.....	97 persons injured
202 Auto accidents where auto was wrecked and no one hurt	
4 Engines through bridge	
Total accidents.....	2574
Total number of people hurt.....	2834

(Source ISHC 1917a:3-10)

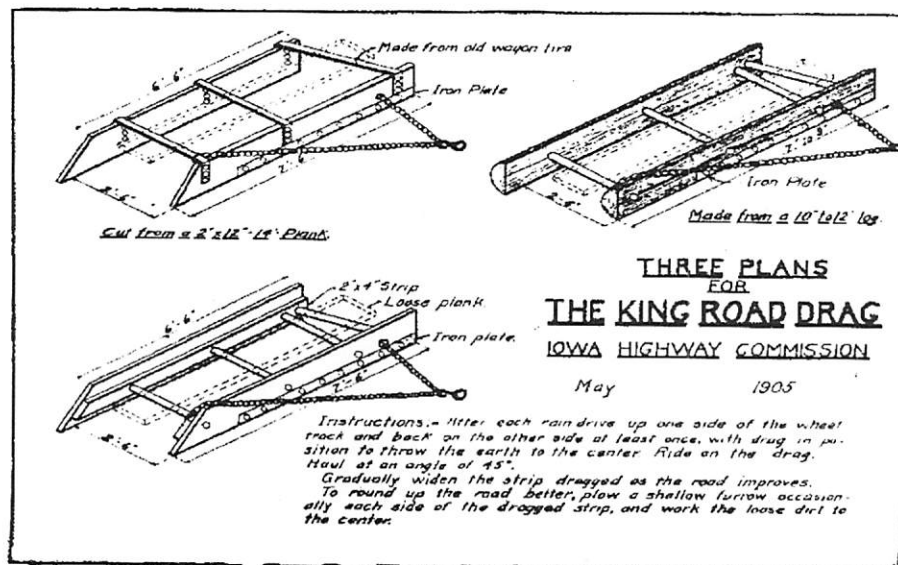
PICTURES

CONVICT ROAD PICTURES
LOUISA COUNTY, IOWA



Figure 37. A to D. Washington County road crews at work along or near the Red Ball Route using horse-drawn elevating graders and other equipment (Photos B #5075 and D #4325, Iowa DOT Library).

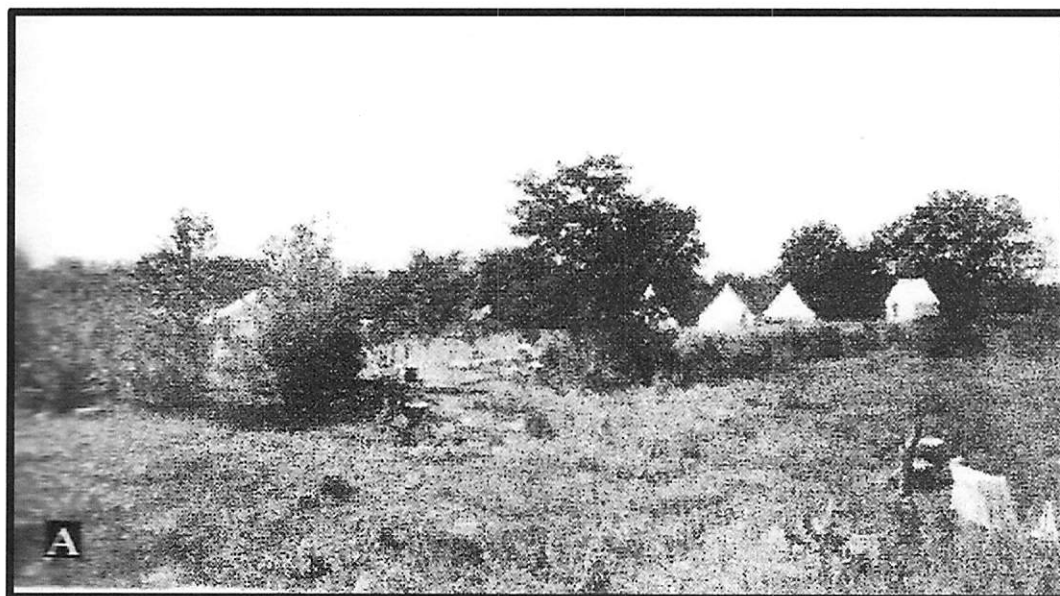
Typical Period Horse Drawn Graders



Road Drags - 1905

CONVICT ROAD PICTURES
LOUISA COUNTY, IOWA

Convict Camp at the Iowa river - 1914



CONVICT ROAD PICTURES LOUISA COUNTY, IOWA



Present use



Curb profile



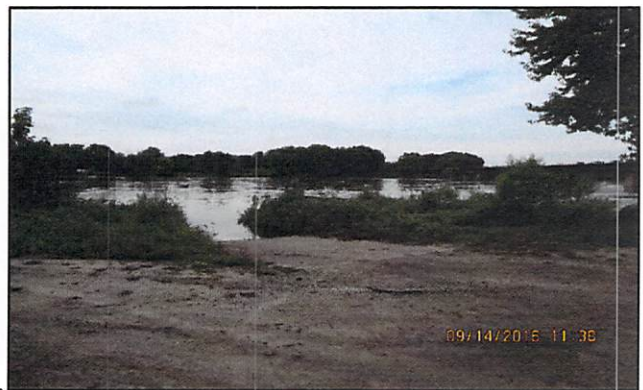
Expansion Joint/Concrete Mix



Looking West into Fredonia

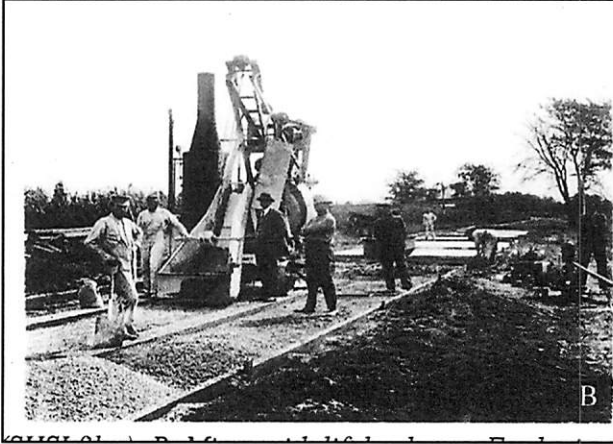


90 d. Corner east Fredonia



Terminus at Iowa river (former bridge)

CONVICT ROAD PICTURES LOUISA COUNTY, IOWA



PERSONAL STORIES

Stories - Personal

WALKING TO SCHOOL
On the old Convict Road

From: Betty Jo (Foster) Weisskopf Indian Trail, NC

When I was attending grade school in Fredonia, I used to walk part of the way *home from school on the “convict” road. Most of the Fredonia students walked home on the road north of town but the “late” Bob Hesseltine and I walked the convict road. Once in a while he gave me a ride on his bicycle.



Later, after he was in high school, I walked with Ann and Darlene Reid and my “little” brother Lee Foster.

My grandmother told me that local farmers also helped build the road. She said that my grandfather A.J. Foster provided a team of horses and “slip” to move dirt. Then I didn’t like to say that my grandfather had helped build it because it was known as the convict road.

That road was also known as an all-weather lovers lane where people parked after dark. When my parents and I came home from Columbus Junction in the evening we would try to see if we recognized any of the cars parked there.

**Betty lived straight east of Fredonia about a mile*

Old Burma Shave sign;
*Don’t make love along the highway late,
Love is blind but the neighbors’ aint!*

Story - Personal

RACING MOTORCYCLES

On the old Convict Road

Tom A. Woodruff Davenport, Iowa

My father Rex was born in the Louisa neighborhood into a family of nine. Relatives all over the place. His mother Pearl was said to Mid Wife more kids than all the doctors in the county. They were family and personally connected to everyone. This included the Fredonia area Morrison boys.

We grew up being familiar with the Convict Highway because of a story that dad told on occasion. The story - *he and Jiggs(Jigger) Morrison would race motorcycles on that highway* because of its relative smoothness. A community drag strip before they were ever heard of.



Picture from the time period

The surrounding area and mode of racing were both well adapted for this purpose too. Farms were relative flat with many connecting roads such that they could easily see and get away from oncoming authorities. Even an escape route across at impassable sand-burr infested field made it impossible for cops to follow.

This had to be the years around 1922, eight years after the highway was built.

Personally, I always thought dad was exaggerating because the story got bigger each time he told it to the boys around that old pot bellied stove at the Cairo general store.

Lo and behold, while reviewing historic records related to the Convict highway, it was discovered that the town of Fredonia was re-incorporated in 1922 after the Convict Highway was built for the purpose of adding speeding controls over it.

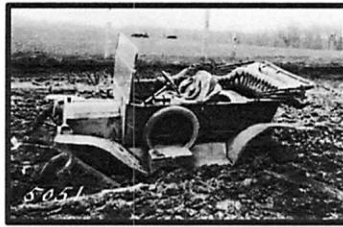
Keep in mind, no official records were found to support dad's yarn other than a published story contributed to Ralph Snyder. I never met Mr. Snyder but if he lived in Fredonia that's good enough for me.

Stories - personal

GRANDMA REMEMBERS
From: Lee Foster Columbus Junction

I lived all but four years of my seventy plus years within a quarter mile of the Old Concrete Road. I still live about that distance now but along highway 92 from its connection to US Hwy 92. We never referred to it during my early years as a Convict Road although all knew it was built with convict labor.

My best memories came from my grandmother Foster who lived about a mile east. They often wondered why it was necessary to build such a road (expensive?) when there were roads of clay all over the county that were just as impassable. They thought perhaps it was because of the narrow rimmed wheels on the farm wagons at the time. Narrow rims mired quickly into the sand.



Car tires were narrow too whether in sand or clay!

Grandma told about many of the area farmers who helped with getting sand from the Iowa river area and hauling it to different sites along the roadbed to be mixed with gravel and cement. How they mixed it and equipment used is uncertain - probably lots of pictures around to help with that.

When I was four, dad bought a farm straight east out of Fredonia and one quarter mile east of the 90d turn to the south. We walked that old road every week into grade school.

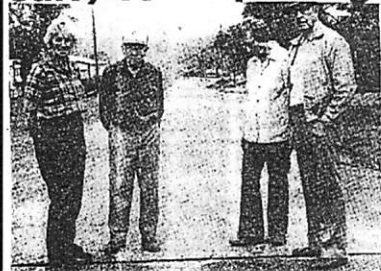
I do not recall anyone meeting with the Convicts. We were always told they camped down by the river by what later became Kingsbury Inn. We do not know anyone who had a relationship with them either. Mrs. Blivens book about Fredonia may have more information.

There are certainly other stories and events we remember such as Bonnie Frisk falling though the old Iowa river bridge extending over the Iowa at the east end of the Convict highway. I think that was around 1937.

The present Fredonia Town Hall has a special memory too as it was originally built by the Township Trustees as a meeting and voting location.

Ralph Snyder Remembers

Ralph remembers early Iowa paving



Ralph Snyder, second from left, was a schoolboy when convict labor laid the 1½ mile strip of concrete paving leading through Fredonia. Valen Ziegenhorn, by Linda Giles of the Journal

FREDONIA — An early encounter with convicts has left a lasting impression on Ralph Snyder.

"Some of those convicts were nice fellows to talk to," says the 85-year-old Fredonia native.

Snyder was referring to when, as an 11-year-old, he rubbed shoulders with convicts encamped in Fredonia.

The youngster even struck up a friendship with one of them — a Hickory Creek, Miss., man — and received a letter from him when the convict got out of prison.

But who were these convicts, and what were they doing in Fredonia?

They were prisoners at the men's reformatory in Anamosa and were used as laborers to build one of the first stretches of paved road in Iowa.

The road, a 1½ mile strip of concrete built from the old bridge across the Iowa River through Fredonia and southward to Highway 92, still stands.

Snyder's story of the construction is like a trip down memory lane.

The paving was laid in 1912, when he was just a schoolboy, but he remembers the event like it was yesterday.

"Everything went on just the same," he says.

The road was built because, according to Snyder, "the sand wouldn't hold up the traffic." Area farmers and businessmen had lobbied for it, because they'd trouble negotiating the sandy section of highway leading into Columbus Junction

left, vice president, Louisa County Historical Society, Doris Snyder, and Bill Matthews, LCHS president, inspect the work.

Journal photo by Linda Giles

It took approximately three months to lay the concrete paving.

"They had to haul everything with teams and wagons," Snyder recalls. Gravel, sand and cement were shipped in by railroad, and scooped out on the wagons from sidings to the road.

"The cement was shipped in box cars in 80-pound bags," he adds.

Men reportedly were paid 40 cents an hour for their work. Snyder says they started on the east end, paved to the main street intersection, then resumed at the south end, to meet at the intersection.

'They'd drive from Muscatine in Model Ts to test the road'

There also was a cook tent.

"The kids in town always walked to the river," Snyder says. "We weren't allowed to walk down to their camp." However, they stood on a hilltop and looked down at the tents, the guards and the watchdogs.

The convicts, he also notes, were brought to Fredonia about six at a time, allowed to buy at the Farmers Co-op store and sit out and eat.

Snyder, who was born about a block and a half away from the house in which he now lives with his 81-year-old wife, Doris, remembers one convict in particular, because he used to visit his home.

The convict came in to cook meals for a regular worker who boarded at the Snyder household, and he was the man who later wrote to the young

The cement supposedly was poured to a thickness of eight inches at the center of the road and seven inches at the edges. In addition, steel to be used in the dividing sections between stretches of concrete was reported to have been late in arriving at Fredonia. Weather board was used in the interim.

Another feature of the road was its square corner, east of Fredonia.

The completed project was the talk of the town.

"They'd drive clear down from Muscatine in their Model Ts to test this road out," Snyder says.

These old time hot rodders, like the convicts before them, made a little bit of history. Fredonia, which had been incorporated in 1874 and then unincorporated, re-formed its city government in 1922 to control speeders on the cement highway

POETRY

Poetry

Traditions

By; Mrs. Bertha Lord Bliven
(A poem oft recited in Fredonia during periods of drought)

O Fredonia land, sweet Fredonia land,
As on the burning soil (sand) I stand.
I look away across the plain
And wonder why it never rains.
Till Virgil doth his trumpet sound,
And says the rain has passed around!

* Can be sung to the tune of the religious song, "Oh Beulah Land, Sweet Beulah Land"

--

Convict Road Sand Bank (with apologies to Joyce Kilmer)

I think that there shall never be,
A Sand Bank so maligned as thee.
A highway that in content wear,
A mix of minerals in it's lair.
A natures gift to all for slow,
To travels 'long it's highway go.
But with that sand did cement mix,
Add Convict Labor, slow now fix.

--

Convict Road Bliss

A gal from Fredonia tis said,
Lived life 'long highway 'til dead.
She'd married a con
Who helped highway spawn,
And never regretted a day they were wed.

--

Un-Canny Farmer

A (Fredonia) farmer exceedingly canny,
One morning remarked to his granny.
A farmer can grow -- anything to 'scape po,
But never turn sand into money!

Yes Sir, You Betcha*

There once was a place called Fredonia
Where sand did always surround ya.
But problem resolved
When concrete evolved,
And convicts said "yes sir ya betcha".

* For you of Swedish ancestry - Swen)

-17-

Along the old Convict Road

(Tale oft-repeated during the CJ Economart coffee hour)

One very dark night with moonlight a lackin',
Some scamps from Louisa went melon a hackin'.

Their plan was to steal, no borrow, some melons,
From fields 'round Fredonia, with nobody knowin'.

But Sheriff and Marshall got word of their deed,
And vowed to arrest them carrying ill-gotten seed.

They hid in a cornfield with car out of sight,
And waited in sand burrs and their painful bite.

Their prey soon arrived and looked over the site,
The coast seemed all clear their plan was alright.

Into the patch they carefully went
And gathered up melons the large ones intent.

On signal - the lawmen fired into the night
And shouted, "*We've got you, come out w/o fight*".

But as in most plans developed and carefully made,
A slight hitch occurred in their pre-ventive raid.

There just happened to be a road under construction,
With lots of fresh concrete awaiting the dryin'.

Around this fresh substance the culprits safely traversed,
But not so the cops who had no plan for reverse.

-So today -

So today... If you drive that old highway with eyes firmly fix,
You'll see melon seeds --- in the old concrete mix. Honest.

(and maybe a sand burr or two)

(Who would drive the first vehicle on it?)

T'was a day in the fall, A time finally here.
The Convict Highway's complete, It's time to make cheer.

Yes, the Concrete is dry, That traverses the sand.
The long waited highway, Finally, ready for band.

The church bells were toiled, The sun brightly shone
No 21st Amendment, For the pious condone.

The Mayors were all decked In authoritarian robe.
And the Convicts wore (respectable) gray, For their last episode.

A problem arose! Who drives the first vehicle?
Over fresh cured concrete, Would this the event stricken?

Feelings ran high, Remembering Court House abuse,
Who would drive first, Was not just a ruse.

So they all met at Kingsbury, With its magnificent brew (view).
And elected a council, A decision to rue.

(Now it gets complicated)

Which city should rule? Which vehicle driven?
And who should propel it, If they reached a conclusion?

Like the OK Corral, High noon had a-risen.
Still no decision, From the elected with mission.

Then suddenly down highway, Came a horse-drawn big surrey,
Carrying some locals, The Lord had answered with fury.

The government photo now, Shows very clearly,
That the first vehicle on Highway, Was horse-drawn by a *Carey.
*(*Subject to interpretation)*

Ode to the Iowa River

Louisa has this river through,
We call it I-O-WA.
T'was said it'd start a truthful man
Into lying every day.
For if you once it's waters quaff,
It's sure to prove your bairn,
You'de ne'er forsake that blasted stream,
Or tell the truth again!

A Night With The Convicts

Into the night went a young 'donia lad,
To spy on the life of the Convicts so bad.
The fall moon was shining no need for a light,
Their camp by the river no problem to sight.
Then suddenly a dark figure arose at his back,
And over his head went an old *gunny sack!
He struggled so mightily but all was in vain,
Into the night never heard from again!
The Gazette gave his absence full total view,
But for reasons unknown - nobody knew?
Still today, yet today, at that fork in the river
His nightly heard calls still make visitors shiver.

* NOTE: The gunny sack was reported to have been found later in Alameda near a chicken house after an interrupted robbery - the Friday night before the regular Saturday night Kingsbury Inn Chicken Special.

Love on the Old Convict Road

Two lovers parked on the old highway
To share a love that would for-ever stay.
She looked up in-to his longing eyes
And remarked what a beautiful night was the skies.
But alas this young farmer was slow on the trigger,
He remarked that astronomy was not in his ledger.
Besides said the lad in his own country way,
If even I were, I'm in no position to say.

* This may need a little explaining to the Columbus City lads.

APPENDIX

EXPANSION JOINTS (BAKER Type) - A FIRST USE

identifying characteristic of early, local, private, or idiosyncratic highway pavement construction. The following day's pour was abutted to the previous day's pour with no expansion joint. It was not deemed necessary to use expansion joints except in specific circumstances. They were costly, often unavailable, and needing individual fitting. By the 1910s, due to both state plan review and federal-aid project requirements, expansion joints were being used. While other types were developed, the iron Baker-type joint was used until the 1930s. The U-shaped iron with tabs held the bitumen-based material in its groove.

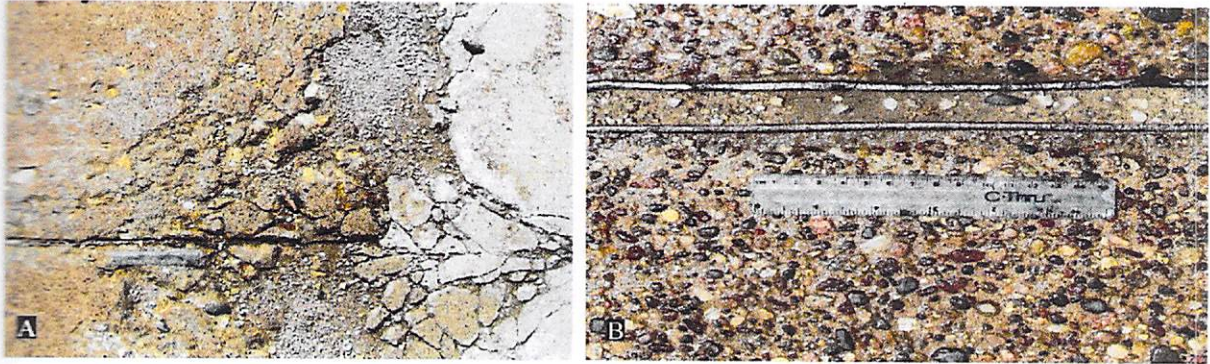


Figure 34. A. Hand cut, 1914, Baker-type steel expansion joint on Fredonia to Columbus Junction Road segment of the North Diagonal section of the Blue Grass Road. B. Detail of same. Note absence of tar paper filler in channel. 2003 survey photos with 6" ruler.

The Fredonia to Columbus Junction road exhibits one of the first applications in the introduction of iron expansion joints known to the author. Begun in 1914, it used lengths of U-shaped iron or steel with bendable tabs sticking out of it horizontally. It was used between both the lanes and the section ends. These metal joints were innovative at the time and are still in place today, but had drawbacks. One was that as iron units they had to be individually cut and installed by hand and this was no easy task. Another problem was that work was often delayed because the expansion joints were not available. Several joints on the Fredonia to Columbus Junction convict-built road exhibit hand cutting, fitting, and the absence of pieces in some sections. A third disadvantage was that their U-shape allowed them to quickly fill with wet dirt and detritus limiting their effectiveness and life span. Iron or steel expansion joints came in several variations, and a cut-off segment of Iowa 2 through Cantril also displays iron expansion joints placed ca. 1927 when the road was poured (Thompson 1989:155). A final problem was the use of relatively poor quality iron, which rusted and allowed water to get between and under the pavement. Often the iron expanded as it oxidized further spreading the joints and splitting the concrete. Apparently no sealant was used with the iron to waterproof the pavement gaps or to prevent seepage. Projecting pieces of poorly set, displaced, or broken iron expansion joints could puncture tires and be a potential hazard.

It may be assumed that the use of expansion joints did not occur widely until long sections of concrete roadway were being constructed. From 1900 to around 1910 the miles of concrete road construction were so few that expansion joints were not considered important or even necessary. Highway paving at this early time with lengths of half a mile were very rare. Like sidewalks some early road sections were

CH - *Fredonia Cemetery

Fredonia Cemetery is one of six (6) cemeteries and is moderately maintained in Concord township. It one of the 62 cemeteries (other than some small family cemeteries) in the 12 townships in Louisa County, Iowa. It is located ½ mile south of Fredonia along and south of Highway 92.

Since the 1850's, approximately 190 souls have been buried there.

The requirement for **Pioneer Cemeteries** in Iowa is that there must have been 12 or fewer burials recorded in the last 50 years(1967-2016). There were 9 recorded burials there from 1967 - 2009(42 years) when the last cemetery inventory was found (in my file). It is likely it would be on the edge of being considered Pioneer.

Some interesting historical observations may be:

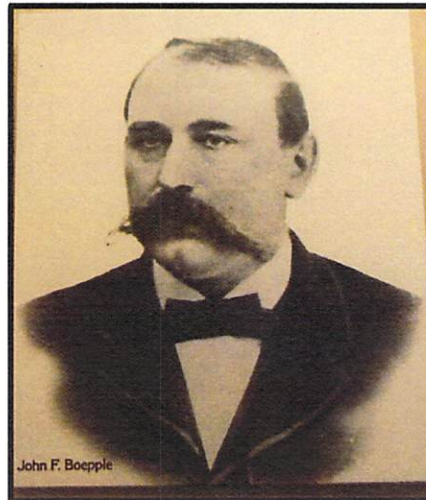
- Seven(7) Civil War veterans are buried there
 - The predominate families buried there are the Mickeys(13) and the Reaneys(9).
-

** Information taken from Cemeteries in Louisa County - 1990 and updates through 2009.*

TAW - 12.13.16..

BOEPPLE - FOUNDER OF THE PEARL BUTTON INDUSTRY

A german born researcher who established various facilities to study fresh water clams and their different species promagalation from different species of fish. It is said that one of his facilities was on the Iowa River at Fredonia.



Pearl Button Industry

John F. Boepple arrived from Germany in the 1880s and, using the abundant fresh water mussel shells from the Mississippi River, founded the region's button industry. From Boepple's first factory in Muscatine, pearl button factories spread to the Quad Cities and beyond, up and down the river. Muscatine alone had thirty firms working to meet the garment industry's demand for buttons. Eventually the pearl button was replaced by plastic buttons and zippers, bringing an end to the river-based industry.



Convict Road Information

- * Approx. 1.5 miles of concrete road was built with local funds (\$30,000/mi.) in 1914 at local taxpayers' expense with convict labor provided from the Iowa State reformatories.
- * Convict labor was legally approved, at the time, but only at or within State-owned facility boundaries (?) and under the supervision of the Iowa Dept. of Transportation
- * Approved and built because of the impassable sand banks through Fredonia, Iowa, easterly from the Iowa River. This route was deemed critical to the western expansion of Iowa and the west
- * The Convict road is part of the Iowa Historic Registered Highway system and is on the routes of the:
 - 1) Great White Way (#28)
 - 2) IOA Short Line (#34)
 - 3) Southwest Trails (#64)
 - 4) Blue Grass Rd. (#7)

- SPECIAL NOTE -

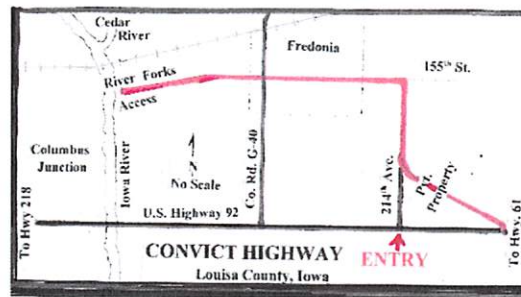
The Convict Road fits the National Historic Roads, "Omaha Declaration" of 2009 stating: "Historic Roads are vitally important cultural resources that embody significant developments in engineering, design and social history."

PROJECT

This is a project by the Rural, Louisa County Hometown Pride Committee.



Info - Contact: Katie - lccb@lccb.org
or Tom - Apwood70@aol.com



The Convict Road is located immediately north of Iowa Highway 92, east of Columbus Junction and the Iowa River.

Project Sponsored by: Louisa Development Group's
Rural, Louisa County Hometown Pride Committee.
And supported by - Louisa County Board of Supervisors
- Louisa County Historical Society
- Louisa County Conservation Board
- Eastern Iowa Tourism Association
- U of Iowa CEE College
- Portland Cement Assoc.
- Iowa Concrete Paving Association

Visit other Cultural & Historic sites in Louisa County

- *Swinging Bridge - Columbus Junction
- *Louisa County Heritage Center - Wapello
- * Toolesboro Mounds, National Historic Landmark
- *Six Littleton Brothers Civil War Memorial - Toolesboro
- * RFD Museum and Lora Rock Art Gallery - Morning Sun
- Oakville Museum - at the Post Office in Oakville
- Columbus Junction Heritage Museum - Columbus Junction
- * Water and Bike Trails on/along the Great River Road
- *Port Louisa National Wildlife Refuge

A-d

Celebrate

Louisa County, Iowa's Historic

1914 Convict-Built Concrete Road



Visit and learn about one of the earliest concrete roads built in the nation and likely the first public roadway built with Convict Labor.

**Louisa County,
IOWA**

TECHNICAL STUFF



Paving Gang



Mixer/lift bucket. Note mixer sizes/ water pump



Convict Camp by Iowa River

Materials/Construction

Dewey Portland Cement, Buffalo, IA.
River stone, Muscatine, IA. Sand, Fredonia, IA.
Length - Approx. 1.5 miles
Width - 16'
Thickness- 6"-8"
Baker Expansion joint spacing -30'
Mix & pour on site

ROUTE / EQUIPMENT



West terminus - Iowa River



Curved Intersection - 214 St



Expansion joint - Baker Type

SOME TALK AROUND TOWN in 1914

- * "Ain't no bottom to this stuff (sand)"
- * "Grandpa remembers the campfires seen from CJ"
- * "Records not found to show how the County Board of Supervisors were able to have convict labor provided..."
- * "Convicts allowed to dress in respectable gray"

Sept. 24, 1914 - Louisa Safeguard - "Clark, Hansen, Bierman & I (Editor) drove over to Fredonia. Work about done, convict camp moved to the river area, Muscatine Company furnishing supplies has failed to provide materials needed so men used weatherboard for expansion joints in the interim."

Later - "The Supervisors voted 2-1 to allow additional appropriations (\$1000 from local banks) - unless they reconsider - Jones favored additional expenditures, Nelson talked sane in looking the situation over but voted against it."

November 5, 1914 - "Road completed. A (Good Roads) moving picture made. Road permanent, or at least we hope it is, Probably be the last piece (concrete) in Louisa County because of cost."

Ralph Snyder Remembers - "Some of these men were nice fellows to talk to. Kids in town walked down near their camp and saw guards, tents and watchdogs. One convict came to cook meals for a regular worker who lived nearby. Prisoners brought in six at a time. Men paid 40 cents/hr. "Completed project the talk of the town. Fredonia was incorporated in 1874, but re-formed in 1922 to control speeders on the cement highway!"

Other Reading:

- * Fredonia's Convict Highway - Woodruff, (LOUISA'S hiSTORY)
- * Fredonia History - B.Bliven
- * Historical Summary of Transportation in Iowa - Thompson
- * History Anamosa Reformatory -Prison Industries Museum
- * Iowa's Historic Automobile Roads - U of I Archeological Dept.
- * Olde Roads, Corners & Hills in Louisa - Woodruff

SURVEY AND RESULTS - February 2017



A Committee working with Rural, Louisa County Hometown Pride, conducted a survey in early 2017 to determine interest in the Convict Road and also attendance at other County points of historical interest. It was placed, along with a short story about it, on Facebook, the LCCB website, in five area newspapers and in three county libraries. The number of responses surpassed other surveys made in the past. Following are the questions and results.

QUESTIONS

1. Have you heard about the Convict Road? (131 Responded)

80% yes

20% No

2. If Yes, when or where did you hear about it?

Almost all from family or friends

30 respondents live or have lived along or near it

3. Can we contact you to learn more?

9 offered more info than given on survey. Contacts were followed up.

4. Which other historic sites have you visited in Louisa? 251 Responded

34% (86) - Toolesboro Mounds

26% (65) - Louisa Heritage Center, Wapello

12% (31) - Littleton Brothers Memorial, Toolesboro

9% (23) - RFD Museum, Morning Sun

7% (15) - Heritage Museum, Columbus Junction

5% (13) - Swinging Bridge, Columbus Junction

4% (11) - Lora Rock Gallery, Morning Sun

3% (7) - Other (Garner House, Cairo, Old CJ Library etc.)

0% (1) - None

CONCLUSIONS: No doubt we have the area interest to add the Convict Road to our Counties list of *“places to see and visit.”* But, based on their visits to other Louisa historic sites, we’ll need to work at it to encourage them.