A Changing College:
The Impact of The Chicago, Burlington & Quincy Railroad on North Central College

By Luke A. Kerber '09

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Introduction

A decision by the Evangelical Association to locate and build a college in Plainfield, Illinois in April of 1861 marked the beginning of North Central College. The founders saw Plainfield as an adequate location since a plank road passed through the town. Plainfield’s location was at the crossing of Lockport, Oswego, Aurora, and Chicago plank roads, which was seen as a definite transportation advantage at the time. However, railroads were the future of transportation. The first ‘iron horse’ appeared in Chicagoland on October 10, 1848, with the completion of the first section of the Galena & Chicago Union Railroad from Chicago to Oak Park. The railroad age in Illinois had begun. The founders of Plainfield College failed to sense the advantages of locating along a railroad line. Their mistake was obvious only four years after the College was founded. It was apparent that the lack of access to a railroad would subsequently impact the growth and future of the new college.
Plainfield College

The opening years of the College in Plainfield were cherished by students and faculty. However, it was quickly realized, by not only the Board of Trustees, but students as well, that the College’s location made it hard for students to travel to and from school. The College’s newspaper stated that Plainfield, “although a beautiful village whose citizens ranked above the average of such country towns in intelligence and moral character,” had a very real problem: it was hard to get to “in spite of the much-vaunted plank road to Joliet.”\(^1\) Students soon discovered the difficulties traveling to school. Plainfield had no railroad and the closest town that contained a railroad was Joliet. A mail and passenger coach made the trip every day between the two towns, connecting with the Chicago-Rock Island Railroad at Joliet, but it was a dreadful eight miles away. “As the college gained popularity and attracted many

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students from out-of-state, the Board of Trustees became frustrated by Plainfield’s isolation from transportation.”²

Because of this, the Board of Trustees quickly realized the importance of the railroad; without it, Plainfield would become progressively more isolated. Moreover, the lack of a railroad “would be a serious drawback to the growth and progress of the institution.”³ Therefore, “it was not long after the founding of the college at Plainfield until the Board of Trustees were considering the possibility of changing the location.”⁴ Among the locations considered were South Bend, Indiana and Naperville, Illinois.⁵ At the end of 1869, the College had decided on a location. The College relocated the following year to Naperville, Illinois, where a station along the Chicago, Burlington & Quincy Railroad had opened 1864. (South Bend was discarded as a possible location due to concerns

³ The Annual Catalogue of North-Western College: 1913-1914, NCC Publications, College Archives, North Central College Archives
⁴ College Chronicle, October 22, 1935, NCC Publications, College Archives, North Central College Archives
⁵ A Shared History, 3.
about the transfer of the College’s Articles of Incorporation across state lines.)

**Relocation to Naperville**

The relocation to Naperville, Illinois in 1870 was a new beginning for the College. From 1870 to the early 1900s, the railroad was an essential component of the College’s success. Student life was greatly affected by the railroad. School trips, sporting events, and student group events are only some of the ways in which the railroad was used by students. As a result of the College’s relocation along a major railroad line, numerous opportunities abounded for the students and faculty.

The advantageous location was not only along the main line of a transcontinental railroad, but near to the centralized transportation hub of Chicago. This put the College easily within reach of students from all over the U.S. and Canada. The railroad would greatly influence the College in Naperville as a whole.

Like Plainfield, Naperville was located along a plank road, specifically the Southwest Plank Road which connected Chicago, Naperville, and Oswego in 1851. Many residents questioned the
need for a railroad. Ann Keating, a co-editor of *The Encyclopedia of Chicago*, identified one such Napervillian who questioned the railroad. Joseph Yackley remembered when:

> They built the Plank Road, it was left to Naperville whether or not they would have the Plank Road or the railroad. Surveys had been made by the railroad and if they had built it, they would have followed the present line of the Burlington to Naperville. But you know we had so much traffic at Naperville that the traders were afraid the railroad would take their business away from the[m], and finally decided that they would rather have the Plank Road than the railroad, so they let the North-Western go [north through Wheaton instead] and took the Plank Road, expecting thereby to hold the traffic at Naperville, but they made a big mistake.6

After they declined the Galena and Chicago Union Railroad and the rail line instead went to Wheaton, Naperville and its citizens realized their mistake. Nevertheless, the town was able to rectify their mistake by allowing the Chicago, Burlington & Quincy Railroad to run its line through town in 1864. Incidentally, in this very year the Board of Trustees changed the institution’s name to North-Western College because they felt that Plainfield was too local a name. This

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marketing strategy was essential, for the College would be relocating only six years after the renaming.

The ‘railroad age’ had come, and North-Western College soon found a new home in Naperville, Illinois. With the donation of an eight-acre land grant and the promise by the local citizens to raise $25,000, the construction of the College’s first academic building was begun in the spring of 1870. On May 17, 1870, the cornerstone to Old Main was laid, roughly three blocks from the Naperville train station.

William Huelster, the treasurer of North-Western College, was one of the men appointed to the Building Committee in charge of constructing Old Main. Huelster was empowered by the Board to obtain an architect in Chicago who would design the blue prints for the College’s first building in Naperville. The railroad made it possible for Huelster to carry out his business. In his journal, he noted his constant travels to Chicago to meet with John Mills Van Osdel, the Chicago architect selected to build Old Main. On March 2, 1870, Huelster wrote that at, “8:20 this morning I took [the] train for Chicago, arrived there safely. Went to the architect” to go over
Huelster’s business was not only conducted in Chicago. He consistently traveled by train to Aurora where he would meet with the mason contractor about the construction on Old Main. On March 3, 1870, he “took the train to Joliet and from there [took] plank [road]… [to] North Western College.” The College was months from being relocated to Naperville, and Huelster’s trip to Plainfield was “terrible- only 9 miles- and that far from the Railroad.” His testimony and experience of traveling to the College illustrated that locating the College in Plainfield had been a vital mistake.

Additionally, the Chicago, Burlington & Quincy Railroad facilitated Old Main’s construction by moving much of the supplies destined for the building. Huelster reveals in his journal that supply shipments would arrive via the train; “Today several car loads of lumber arrived and I secured teams and men to have them unloaded and hauled to the building [Old Main].” The Chicago, Burlington

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7 William Huelster, Personal Journal, 1848-1883, Faculty, Individual Papers, William Huelster, College Archives, North Central College Archives, 124.
8 Huelster, 124-125.
9 Huelster, 125.
10 Huelster, 157.
& Quincy Railroad even reduced their freight rates for the transporting of building materials to Naperville for Old Main.\textsuperscript{11} Moreover, the railroad would serve as the source of transporting coal to local businesses that the College would purchase in order to heat their facilities. The Board of Trustees noted that on March 1, 1875 they had “paid D. Frost a coal bill of 11 tons” an amount totaling $55.50.\textsuperscript{12} The completion of a centralized heating plant in 1908 caused coal consumption by North-Western College to quickly increase. The College became even more dependent on the railroad.

The railroad was essential during the early years of North-Western College. From William Huelster’s travels to Chicago, Aurora, Joliet, and other locations in which he conducted business regarding the construction of the College in Naperville, to the delivery of supplies and materials, the railroad was a vital source of transportation. The Board of Trustees had made a good decision with the new location of Naperville.

\textsuperscript{12} Board of Trustees, Financial Journal, March 1, 1875, Board of Trustees Records, College Archives, North Central College Archives.
There were many other colleges in the Chicago area that were constructed along railroad lines, including those in Wheaton, Evanston, Hyde Park, Lisle, Elmhurst, Naperville, and Lake Forest. Beyond Chicago, public universities throughout the state of Illinois were also being built along railroad lines, such as the University of Illinois, which was founded in 1867, along the Illinois Central Railroad. Colleges that sprang up along the North Shore of Chicago and along the Chicago, North Shore & Milwaukee Railroad were in the towns of Evanston and Lake Forest. Colleges in Monmouth, Knox, and Aurora (moved from Mendota in 1912) were other institutions along the Chicago, Burlington & Quincy Railroad. The railroad was influential in these towns and their schools. In part, a major reason for the growth and success of such colleges was their chosen locations along major railroad lines, linked to the country’s central hub, Chicago.

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The Great Chicago Fire of 1871

Aside from the use of the railroad for conducting business affairs and shipping material and supplies, students and faculty used this modern source of transportation to visit the city of Chicago. By 1870, Chicago was on its way of becoming one of the country’s most industrialized cities. However, a tragedy struck the city in October 1871, and the gleaming city of Chicago was illuminated by flames. The Great Fire nearly crippled the entire city. By the time the flames had finally been extinguished “250 people were known dead—2,000 acres of city homes and businesses were scorched wastelands; 18,000 buildings were gone; and 90,000 of the city’s 298,000 people were homeless.”

What is remarkable is the fact that the railroad did not shut down. Students and faculty of North-Western College traveled into the city to view the aftermath. Two faculty members of the College wrote their testimony. William Huelster was in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, when he learned of the fire.

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Here we heard that it was impossible to travel through the streets of Chicago. I went through to Chicago arriving at the North Side [via the Chicago & North Milwaukee Railroad] at 11am. It was a terrible awful sight as I look back from the Northwest depot to the Chicago, Burlington & Quincy on southwest side… On each side of [the] street…all buildings in ashes, men standing bowing their heads in agony saying ‘there are the ruins of a life time of labor and business all in ashes.’\(^{15}\)

The same day Professor Henry Haessler Rassweiler revealed in his diary, “Most of the male members of our school and hundreds of others went to Chicago to behold the ruins.”\(^{16}\) The railroad was still accessible even during this major crisis. Just four days after the fire, the General Conference of the Evangelical Association met in Naperville at North-Western College. Members from in- and out-of-state traveled by railroad to attend the conference. Even after the devastation of Chicago, the railroad still ran strong. Rassweiler wrote on the General Conference in his family diary revealing, “Most of the delegates are on hand. People came from all over the country.”\(^{17}\)

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\(^{15}\) Huelster, 12.
\(^{16}\) Henry Haessler Rassweiler, Family Journal, October 10, 1871 Presidents, Rassweiler Family Papers, College Archives, North Central College Archives.
\(^{17}\) Rassweiler, October 12, 1871.
On November 2, just under a month after the fire, Huelster took the train into the city with his wife and nephew. In his words, he describes what he witnessed.

We walked several miles through the devastated streets, a sad sight. We took a large bundle of clothes along for the sufferers. Oh what a sight of woe!... [We] walked over more streets where all houses had been destroyed and already here and there temporary huts were erected to shelter some of the homeless… May God have mercy!18

The testimonies by both Huelster and Rassweiler not only confirmed the catastrophic damages to Chicago, but also proved that the railroad lines stayed open, allowing faculty and students to witness history.

World’s Columbian Exposition of 1893

After suffering a huge blow, Chicago quickly bounced back. The World’s Columbian Exposition of 1893 was organized to commemorate the 400th anniversary of Columbus’s arrival in the New World. The Exposition was held in Chicago because of its economic achievements and most importantly the city’s location, which had become the centralized hub for railroad networking in the

18 Huelster, 15-16.
country. Chicago, Burlington & Quincy Railroad was only one of the many railroads that ventured into the city. Because of the Chicago, Burlington & Quincy Railroad link between Chicago and Naperville, students and faculty of the College were able to travel into the city to witness the World’s Fair. Fannie Smith, the granddaughter of the former College President Augustine A. Smith and an avid journalist, recorded in great detail the experience she had at the World’s Fair. Visiting the Fair eleven times, Miss Smith did not miss one attraction. On her eighth visit in August 1893, she took the “6:54 train. Such a crowd at the station.”

In fact, all the students of the College were able to attend the World’s Fair when the College administration granted a day off classes, which they called “World’s Fair Day”, giving students and faculty the opportunity to travel, via the railroad, to the city and experience for themselves such an historic event. This “World’s Fair Day” was on Friday, October 27, 1893. The College’s student newspaper, the *College Chronicle*, identified the day in great detail.

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19 Fannie Smith, Journal, 1893. President A. A. Smith Family Papers, College Archives, North Central College Archives.
Moreover, because of the “proximity of our location to Chicago made it convenient for students to spend [even] their Saturdays at the fair without a great expense or loss of time.”

After the visit, made by most of the student body, writers of the *College Chronicle* shared their experiences. The experience of a lifetime was made possible by the College’s Naperville location and its ready access to the railroad.

**Student Use of Railroad**

The railroad was an essential source of transportation for students. “What would our grandmothers have said to posting their girls off to school, a distance of ten to twenty miles, expecting them home in time for dinner, daily?” asks the *College Chronicle*. No longer did students have to travel the long distances to college. Instead there is “a splendid train schedule… offered in the ten trains that stop from the east and twelve from the west, northwest and

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21 “Going to School by Rail.” *College Chronicle*, December 1873. NCC Publications, College Archives, North Central College Archives.
The experience students gained from their travel by train stretched further than just their destination. As one student wrote, traveling to college, via the railroad, “gives us an excellent opportunity for the study of human nature; probably an hour each day spent on the railroad train.” And as another student wrote in the 1915 *Spectrum*, a new student would imagine “sitting in the train with his eyes and ears open to everything, that all is so new.” As the train arrives at the Naperville Station “there is a sudden jerk, and then amidst the jabbering and laughing of the crowd on the platform, he steps down into a new and wonderful part of his life.” There to greet the new students were members from the YMCA student organization who “meet all trains at the opening of the term to welcome new students, furnish them with copies of the Handbook and give any info.”

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23 “Going to School by Rail”
The railroad even allowed the families of students the possibility to visit the campus. Seen in Fig. 1 is a family that came to visit a student of the College. This photograph from a student’s scrapbook (which dates to the 1920s) depicts the accessibility that the railroad provided to students and their families. The railroad allowed families and their students to periodically stay in touch.

The location of the College in Naperville, along a major railroad line, was highlighted in the College’s annual catalogues and the student handbooks. North-Western College printed a series of annual catalogues, which were provided to the student body, and others interested in obtaining information about the College. At the end of the catalogues, a train schedule and a map of the depot district in Chicago were provided. In the 1913-1914 catalogue, an entire page is dedicated to describing the school’s significant location along the Chicago, Burlington & Quincy Railroad. The
student handbooks, which contained much of the same information, were also given to incoming students.

Students traveling from other states and even other counties used the railroad line to reach North-Western College. The Board of Trustees’ urging to relocate the College along a railroad line had paid off. No longer was the student population primarily local citizens, as it had been in Plainfield. Of the 528 students attending the College in 1930, half were from out-of-state and fourteen were from foreign countries.\(^{26}\) For a small, private, Evangelical college located in Naperville, such a number is remarkable. This ideal location was acknowledged on the back page of North-Western’s annual catalogues with a map of the Midwest and the railroads networking to Chicago. The caption below the picture that sold the institution’s superior location read, “There is no more advantageous College location in the United States.”\(^{27}\)

\(^{26}\) “Distribution of Students by States.” College Chronicle, October 1929. NCC Publications, College Archives, North Central College Archives.

\(^{27}\) Circular of North-Western College, Map and caption, 1887. NCC Publications, College Archives, North Central College Archives.
Student Organizations Use the Railroad

The student body was growing (for which the College could thank its location in Naperville, along the railroad line) and with this growing student body, came the push for clubs and sport activities. The College clubs took advantage of the railroad. The Men’s Glee Club was organized in 1895 and conducted the first recorded tour for any College musical group. The railroad allowed the Club to visit cities as far as East Niagara Falls. The Glee Club continued to tour the country annually, and in 1906, the group traveled on a tour extending from Minnesota to New York.28 On another tour, they even performed for U.S. President William McKinley in his private railroad car. The President enjoyed the performance and wrote a letter of appreciation to the group.

The Y.M.C.A. (established in 1873) and Y.W.C.A (established in 1875) organizations promoted religious work on the campus. Both groups set out on a trip in January of 1885, to Bloomington for a conference via the railroad. As the College Chronicle reports there was a “blinding snow storm” at the time of

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28 Roberts, 166-167.
the conference. The railroad allowed the group to arrive at their destination in a speedy, yet safe manner.

The railroad also supported the College’s state booster clubs. These clubs were organized to bring together students and faculty from the same state for social activities such as hayrides, sports nights, and special dinners at boarding clubs, tableaus, and floats in booster and homecoming parades. One example was the Canada Booster Club. Organized in 1909, the purpose of this group was to have meetings where they might be at liberty to discuss vital questions of their church work and stay tuned to other issues pertaining solely to Canada. Probably the most important purpose of the Canada Booster Club, along with the rest of the state booster clubs, was to keep people back at home in touch with the College and gaining prospective students by creating interest in the College.

Athletics Use of Railroad

In addition to the student organizations use of the Railroad, the College’s athletics program also made extensive use of the

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29 “The Trip to Bloomington.” College Chronicle, January 1885. NCC Publications, College Archives, North Central College Archives.
30 A Shared History, 22.
railroad for transporting teams to their contests. The earliest documented athletic team activity of the College was baseball games between College students and local Napervillians, held at the town’s athletic field. The earliest athletic contests actually held at the College were the field day events occurring each spring on the lawn of Old Main. The first field day event was held in the spring of 1891, during cornerstone day celebration. Evoking the original cornerstone day celebration of 1870, the 1891 event celebrated the completion of the south tower addition to Old Main. These competitive sporting events were not intercollegiate. Students and town members could participate in any number of athletic contests, comparable to track and field events today.

By the early 1900s, the College had organized a number of sports teams including football, track and field, basketball, and baseball. The College built its first athletic facility, Nichols Gymnasium, in 1902. The College’s proximal location along the railroad line provided athletic teams with a convenient source of

![North-Western Basketball Team](image_url)
transportation to scheduled events. A photograph (Fig. 2) of the basketball team shows them at the Naperville depot on their way to a game.

Although the outdoor sports of football and track and field had been established in the late 1890s, the College lacked an athletic field for more than a decade. It was not until 1912 that the Chicago, Burlington & Quincy Railroad Company donated a block of land south of the depot to the College as an athletic field. Ultimately, the land was too small to construct a baseball diamond or a football field, so the College exchanged the land with the town for a field north of the railroad and west of Washington Street. This new field served as the College’s athletic field from 1914 until 1926 and was know as Seager field in honor of College President Seager.31

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lot that the railroad had donated became a park, and today remains as Burlington Park.

A football craze hit the campus in 1897. The first games were played locally against the Naperville Athletic Association. In November, 1898 word reached authorities that students had participated in a football game with an Aurora team without obtaining permission by the College.32 This prompted the College authorities to organize an athletic program. The following year, 1899, the first regular scheduled football games were organized to play teams outside Naperville. In 1906, the College decided to abandon football (due to a rash of serious injuries nationwide) and sold the school’s equipment to a high school in Kansas for the sum of $26.00. Year after year students pleaded and signed petitions to bring the sport back. The student’s voices were finally heard in 1916, when the Trustees approved the reinstatement of the football program that would stay with the College to this day.

32 Roberts, 151.
Many of the teams that the College football team challenged were along a major railroad line. Their locations along railroad lines made them easily accessible, which the map in Fig. 4 demonstrates. The railroad allowed the football team to travel long distances in a short period of time, something that the plank roads did not allow. From Naperville, the football team and spectators could travel via the Chicago, Burlington & Quincy railroad to games in towns to the west, like Aurora, Knox, and Monmouth, as well as Chicago, to the east. In Chicago, there were a number of schools the College played, including Lewis Institute, University of Chicago, Morgan Park Academy, and DePaul University. For games played in Evanston (Northwestern University) and Lake Forest (Lake Forest College), the team and its spectators would travel to Chicago (via the Chicago, Burlington & Quincy Railroad) and then transfer to the Chicago, North-Western Railroad in order to reach these towns. When the team played the University of Wisconsin, the athletes took the Chicago, North-Western Railroad to Milwaukee and then traveled on the Chicago, Milwaukee & St. Paul Railroad to Madison. While it is not known exactly how the team traveled to
Beloit, Wisconsin (Beloit College), it seems highly probable that the railroad was the fastest and most plausible way. At the time, the car did not yet dominate transportation and students would not have ready access to an abundance of cars to travel the long distance. Therefore, it seems that the railroad was the source of transportation to Beloit.

Fig. 4: Map of Towns/Cities that North-Western College’s Football Team Traveled to for Scheduled Games: 1899-1906 and 1916
(Original map -“CPRR.org”edited for clarity and emphasis)
While the car was becoming more popular by the 1920s, the railroad was still in demand and provided transportation for the College’s students and sport teams. In 1924, the football team played Lake Forest College in what was called the North-Western Special. In fact, the name of the event, “Special” was the name of the railroad cars that took the students to their destination and back. Students were to take the train into Chicago where they would parade to the North-Western Depot. The College Chronicle promoted the event by stating, “Here we will embark in another special which will take us directly to Lake Forest...After the game, a Victory Special will return us to Chicago where we will be met by another train to bring us safely” home.33 Fig. 5 shows a train

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33 “North-Western Specials,” College Chronicle, October 7, 1924. NCC Publications, College Archives, North Central College Archives.
full of students leaving the Naperville Depot on their way to Lake Forest.

**Chicago Term**

North Central students and faculty still travel via the railroad today. Many faculty members live in Chicago and commute to the College via the Burlington Northern-Santa Fe Railroad. Students take weekend trips into Chicago for entertainment. The railroad provides a source of transportation to those students who decide not to bring a car to campus. Classes too, depend on the railroad’s accessibility. The College’s first “Chicago Term” or “Urban Term” occurred on February 2, 1971. This 10 ½-week course allowed a select number of students to live in Chicago’s Northwest side and combine field experiences at several organizations. The “Chicago Term” has been reincarnated and today uses the railroad to transport students to classes and experiential learning opportunities in Chicago.

**Impact of the Automobile**

Eventually, the railroad was largely supplanted by the car as the primary means of transport. By the late 1920s more then 20
million motor vehicles were registered, the automotive age had begun. Left in the dust of the automobiles was the railroad. But the railroad would never perish. The use of the car became even more prevalent on campus by the 1920s, and the railroad was no longer the essential or speedy source of transportation. However, students and faculty did still use the railroad and desired that convenience to get to and from the College. The College had become well known throughout the country because of the proximal location of the campus along a vital railroad line.

**Conclusion**

In Plainfield, the lack of the railroad would have been devastating to future growth of the College. By relocating to Naperville, North Central established itself along a major railroad line that would significantly shape the College. Students from all around the country were able to experience the wonders that the College had to offer because of its location along a rail line. While the railroad has moved away from the significance it once held, it is still a vital source of transportation and opportunities for the students and faculty of North Central College.
By looking into the past, it can be agreed that the decision to relocate the College along a major railroad line resulted in the growth and prosperity of North Central through its history.

Understanding our past allows us to decipher how things came to be. In looking at North Central’s past, the railroad has played a vital part in the formation of the College; it has provided many opportunities for the College and its students and continues to do so to this day.
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