University of Nebraska–Lincoln

Virtual Nebraska
Nebraska...Our Towns

Nebraska...Our Towns

Wayne –– Wayne County

Wayne, 1886.   (image.php?image=1)

Wayne County's courthouse, called the "Castle on the Cornfield," was built in only four months, 1899. It is now on the National Register of Historic Places.   (image.php?image=2)

Wayne's main street, 1907.   (image.php?image=3)

Same view of main street 50 years later, 1957 (image.php?image=4)

Aerial of "State Teachers College" at Wayne, ca. 1930s (image.php?image=5)

The first settlers to this part of Nebraska arrived in the spring of 1869 from Lee County, IL, and were joined by a second group in 1870. The prairie village of Wayne, however, didn't see its beginnings until 1881, when the Chicago, St.Paul, Minneapolis & Omaha Railroad extended a line through the county, linking Norfolk and Sioux City.

Originally named "Brookdale" by railroad officials, the settlers persuaded them to rename it "Wayne" for General Anthony Wayne of Revolutionary War fame, for whom the county had been named.

The first house was built in 1881. Nearly all the Main Street buildings were shacks covered with tar paper. The tracks into town had been laid on frozen ground that fall. The trains had to move so slowly over the uneven rails that some people walked the 20 miles to Emerson to save the $8 fare. (They felt they could make equally as good time as the train!) When spring arrived and the road bed leveled out, trains proved to be the inducement for which many had moved to the new town.

The first county seat was LaPorte (1870–82). When the railroad missed that settlement, voters petitioned to have the seat of government moved. A bitter contest ensued. In the election held in 1882, Wayne won by a substantial margin. Many homes and businesses were hauled or sledded overland to Wayne and the town of LaPorte was abandoned.

By February 1884 the influx of families provided Wayne with a population of 200, enabling it to be incorporated as a village. County fairs began in 1885. By 1889 the population had grown to 1,130. Early industries included a brickyard, flour mill, and incubator factory, all long since gone out of existence.

After a major fire destroyed six buildings on Main Street in 1894, a fire department was organized. Telephone service started in 1897, and a power plant was built in 1898, giving only evening service at first.

The city hall (now the fire station) and a library were built in 1912. Main Street was paved in 1920, the first of many brick streets for which the town is noted. During the Depression, federal funds financed the building of a post office and an auditorium.

The center of community activities in early days was the opera house, built in 1889. Show troupes from back east, local plays, band concerts, and campaign speeches, provided cultural enrichment and entertainment. Today the revived Wayne Community Theater presents a musical and play each year. The college's Black and Gold Series brings in national and international entertainment.

Wayne County's first newspaper started in 1875 at LaPorte and moved to Wayne when the county seat did. For a time, three newspapers were published. Today, a semi-weekly "Wayne-Herald" can trace its beginnings back to those early publications.

The desire to provide opportunities for higher learning prompted efforts to found a college. A Lutheran academy was established in 1887, but closed in 1889. Interest continued, so with the help of a number of local citizens, Professor J.M.Pile opened the Nebraska Normal College in 1891. This marked the beginning of what is now Wayne State College. From one small building and seven students, the college has grown to a 127-acre campus, a faculty of 151, support staff of 100, and 2,876 students.

By 1940 Wayne's population was 2,719. During the war the municipal airport and hanger were completed as part of the defense effort. Industry began its emerging role in the late 1960s with an industrial park. Companies now manufacture and ship refrigerated trailers, modular homes, bank components, athletic training equipment, waterbed mattress pads and pillows, and farm equipment, all over the United States.

Wayne now has 5,280 residents. A hospital built in 1935 was replaced in 1974 and has the services of five doctors. There are 15 churches, an AM/FM radio station, an 18-hole golf course, and a swimming pool.

Since its very beginning, Wayne's citizens have worked to develop a good balance between agriculture, education, and industry, providing a stable environment for all three.

By Loreta Tompkins, Wayne County Historical Society, 420 Douglas, Wayne, NE 68787. Chuck Hackenmiller of "The Wayne Herald" for current pictures.

ADDITIONAL MATERIAL: History of Wayne County , 1938, by Dorothy Huse Nyberg; Wayne County Nebraska History, 1981, sponsored by the Wayne County Historical Society.