

FACTORS RESTRICTING URBANIZATION  
IN  
VAN BUREN COUNTY, IOWA

An Abstract of a Thesis  
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by  
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## ABSTRACT

Van Buren County was one of the first counties of Iowa Territory to be organized and settled, and it was the most populous county during territorial days. The county evolved through three stages: The Era of River Transportation (1833-1860), the Railroad Era (1860-1905), and the Era of Agriculture and Population Decline (1905-1960).

The purpose of this study is to determine the factors that have contributed to or have been responsible for the failure of all planned settlements in this county to increase sufficiently in population to attain urban status. Crossed by Iowa's largest river, the county was blessed with easy, cheap transportation; fertile land; and abundant natural resources. A corridor of emigration into Iowa was established through Van Buren County. In spite of these advantages, Van Buren failed to produce an urban center from among 66 proposed settlements, most of which materialized on the landscape.

This study has found that there are various complex reasons for the failure of towns to grow to urban status in Van Buren County, as follows:

(1) Of the 66 proposed settlements, 29 were paper towns or towns of short duration. Some towns were abandoned, some failed because of poor design, and others merged with near by villages.

(2) The distribution of the nonfarm population was among a large number of settlements which prevented concentration of the population.

(3) Flooding of towns along the Des Moines River discouraged many residents, and the threat of future flooding prevented growth.

(4) The declining farm population caused business failures and prevented industry and population from developing well in the county.

(5) Functional changes interrupted the growth of towns. When the

large number of temporary settlers left Van Buren County for places further west, businesses and industry that catered to these people were disrupted. Once river traffic ended in 1870, river towns were forced to ship by rail, which was not as well developed as in other counties. The declining farm population lessened the need for rural cross-roads centers that had supplied farmers with their immediate needs. Another functional change resulted when the railroads ceased operation. The remaining villages became service stations in an effort to remain alive.

(6) The new settlement outside of towns and along the river has helped maintain county population but has not helped villages to grow. This new settlement (since 1960) has been because of Van Buren's rural attractions. Emphasis now is on retaining this rural nature.

A conclusion of this study is that the river has been both an asset and a detriment to Van Buren County. It has attracted people for various reasons during the past 150 years, and it will continue to attract some newcomers. The river has been a detriment because of the flooding, and because residents relied on the river as the main transportation artery. Without the river transportation, the towns were isolated and could not compete with thriving urban centers in surrounding counties.