2. Cultural Resources

2.1 Prehistory and Indigenous Peoples

Human habitation in central Iowa can be traced almost as far back as the end of the glacial period some 14,000 years ago. Paleo-Indian hunters visited central Iowa between 13,000 and 10,500 years ago, followed by the more settled Archaic populations from 10,500 to 2,800 years ago. Pottery-making Woodland people followed, from 2,800 to 1,000 years ago; this culture is distinguished by the low burial mounds they constructed for their dead. The Great Oasis culture evolved out of the resident Woodland communities, with villages established across northwest Iowa from A.D. 900 to 1100. Great Oasis village and cemetery sites have been found along the Des Moines and Raccoon Rivers; a significant cemetery was discovered in West Des Moines in 1963.

The subsequent Oneota culture, which included the Ioway tribe that gives Iowa its name, occupied villages around Des Moines by 1200 A.D. By the time of the first European contact in the late 17th century, the Ioway tribe were gradually being supplanted in the Des Moines region by the Sauk and Mesquakie tribes, who had moved west across the Mississippi in response to pressure from the French and their Indian allies to the east. Other tribes, such as the Illini, Missouri and Sioux, also passed through and sometimes settled in the area.

2.2 Frontier Era

In 1673, Louis Jolliet and Father Jacques Marquette, the first white men on the Des Moines River, ventured some six miles upstream from its confluence with the Mississippi. They found two Indian villages along the river, one occupied by the Moinguena, an Illini tribe. Written on their map was “la riviere des Moingona,” believed to be the original language which on later maps evolved to “River de Moines.”

In 1824 a temporary trading post was opened at “Dirt Lodge,” the junction of the Raccoon River and River de Moines, by trader Maurice Blondeau. This is the first evidence of European settlement in the territory that would become Polk County.

The Red Rock Line along the Des Moines River divided the areas open to settlement to the east from the Indian-held lands to the west.

The Sauk and Mesquakie tribes were gradually moved westward. By the treaty known as the Sac and Fox Cession
of 1842, all the tribal lands west to the Mississippi were relinquished. The tribes also agreed to move west of the Red Rock Line until October 11, 1845, and to Kansas territory thereafter.

Fort Des Moines No. 2 was moved upstream on Des Moines River to the Raccoon River Fork on May 20, 1843. The original Fort Des Moines was located in Lee County near the Mississippi. Keel boats could bring supplies upriver to the post. The new fort was also about the same distance from the Mississippi and the Missouri.

At midnight October 10, 1845, a land rush began as the land west of the Red Rock Line was opened to settlement. The area that was to become Polk County filled quickly. The population of the County was 1,792 in 1847 and 4,214 by 1849. Fort Des Moines was ordered abandoned in February 1846. The buildings and land, 160 acres, were ceded by Congress to Polk County to develop the townsite for Fort Des Moines.

Some Indians did not leave, but encamped at a site upstream near the present town of Madrid. History records that a party of Dragoons, including Lt. R.S. Granger, was sent to remove the Indians to Kansas Territory.

Polk County was named for James Knox Polk, eleventh President of the United States (1845-1849). Polk County was officially established by the Iowa Territorial Legislature on January 13, 1846. The county seat was to be Brooklyn, a town laid out on the east side of the Des Moines River by Dr. Thomas K. Brooks.

Opponents, however, remained in Iowa City as the Brooklynites returned home confident in their legislative victory. Four days later, on January 17, 1846, the Fort Des Moines advocates were successful in securing a supplementary bill which borrowed 144 square miles from the territory of Warren County and placed Fort Des Moines nearer Polk County’s geographical center. As a result, in May 1846 Fort Des Moines became the county seat.

Polk County was originally divided into four townships: Des Moines, Madison, Camp, and Skunk on February 2, 1847. On January 4, 1848 Allen, Four Mile, and Saylor Townships were organized. Beaver Township was organized in 1850, Jefferson, Bloomfield and Elkhart Townships in 1851, Lee Township in 1857 and Douglas Township in 1858. Walnut Township was created from Jefferson and Des Moines Townships in 1860. Finally, in 1870 Crocker and Lincoln Townships were formed from parts of Madison, Saylor and Lee Townships, and Skunk Township was absorbed by Washington, Elkhart and Franklin Townships.
In 1853 the Iowa Legislature restored the “borrowed” townships to Warren County, except for few sections north of the Des Moines River in Camp Township. This is why Polk County’s southeast boundary is not a straight line, but follows the river. Today, the county’s land area is 594 square miles.

The county’s first road, Four Mile Road, connected Apple Grove and Rising Sun with Fort Des Moines via Peter Newcomer’s bridge over Four Mile Creek. In 1845, a second road connected the County with Iowa City. It crossed the Skunk River in Beaver Township. In 1857 when Des Moines became the state capital, nineteen new roads were authorized, all leading to the capital or intersecting with a road that did. The Town of Avon in southeast Polk County, platted in 1856, was situated on the road to Knoxville.

Since bridges across rivers were rare, ferries were an important part of the early transportation network. The Des Moines River had ferries at Des Moines, Dudley, Adelphi, and Freel.

It was not until 1856 that the first bridge was opened. A pontoon bridge was built on Sycamore Street (now Grand Avenue) and a toll bridge was built on Court Avenue. Due to flooding the pontoon bridge washed out two years later, however, a second trestle type toll bridge at Market Street had been added in 1857, so river crossing became much easier.

The 1850’s were peak times for river travel. At least 41 steamboats docked in Des Moines in this decade. Some boats traveled as far north as Fort Dodge. The river, however, was too shallow and winding, and could be negotiated only during high water periods. With the arrival of railroads after the Civil War, the steamboat era ended.

The Iowa General Assembly decreed in 1854 that the state capital would move to Polk County, but it was not until November 1857 that the first Capitol building was occupied by state offices, and January 1858 by the Legislature. The first Capitol was used for 26 years until the present Capitol was built and ready for occupancy in 1886. The site of the first Capitol is now occupied by the Soldiers and Sailors Monument. In this era the Capitol grounds were much smaller, about 9 acres. It was in 1914 that Governor George Clarke enlarged the grounds to 93 acres.

In June 1846, A. D. Jones started his survey of the town of Fort Des Moines, using a rope instead of a chain, and lots went on sale July 15, 1846. The area was bounded by the Des Moines River on the east, Eighth Street on the west, the Raccoon River on the south, and Locust on the north.

George Beebe settled in Madison Township in 1846. The next year he helped build a road past his place, and in 1850 he platted a town, Polk City, on the site of an Indian village named Waconsa.

Adelphi was a bustling river and railroad town that was platted in 1856 but never incorporated. It was located along present day Vandalia Road between Des Moines and Runnells. Two coal mines, two sawmills, a rock quarry, a blacksmith shop, and the Beattie Store were the principle businesses. Located further northwest along Vandalia Road was the town of Hastie where the Granite Brick Company was principle employer. Adelphi succumbed to the Red Rock Reservoir in the 1960’s.
Figure 2.1.A. This 1875 map of Polk County shows the arrangement of townships at that time as well as the major railroad lines, the original courses of the Des Moines and Skunk rivers, and many now-vanished towns, including Ashawa, Commerce, Ottowa, Wahkonsa, Andrews and Peoria City.
Image of residential Altoona, 1875

Second Polk County Courthouse, 1861-1901

Des Moines City Limits, 1875

Images this chapter courtesy of William Colgan Page
On January 28, 1857 with the adoption of a city charter, the name of the county seat was changed from Fort Des Moines to Des Moines. The Sixth General Assembly granted a special charter to Des Moines on March 7, 1857. The first mayor and council were elected at-large. The population of the town was 3,800.

### 2.3 Railroad Era

The railroad supplanted all other forms of transportation and dominated the landscape after the Civil War. The Keokuk, Fort Des Moines and Minnesota Railroad (Des Moines Valley Railroad) arrived in Des Moines in August 1866. The trip time from Keokuk to Des Moines was reduced from 3 days to 7½ hours. One year later the Chicago, Rock Island and Pacific arrived. Also in 1867, the Northwestern Railroad connected with Council Bluffs and became the first railroad to span Iowa. By 1885 fourteen rail lines entered Des Moines.

Fifteen new towns and stations were created in the railroad boom. Ashawa (now part of West Des Moines), Campbell (incorporated in Clive in 1987), Nobleton (south of Mitchelville), and Loring (northern Washington township) existed only a few years. Remnants of Santiago, Commerce, Farrar, and Crocker still exist today. Others such as Altoona, Ankeny, Bondurant and Grimes have become thriving incorporated cities.

John F. Ankney, a speculator and railroad investor, platted 71 lots in 1875 along the route of the Des Moines & Minneapolis Railroad between Des Moines and Ames. In his new town, which he named Ankeny, he built a hotel and general store, but he never lived there.

Another investment company, the Union Land Company, was incorporated by F.M. Hubbell, Jefferson Polk and others to develop depot sites. The rail stops of Runnells, Grimes, Clive and Sheldahl all began with investments by these entrepreneurs.

In 1883 a wealthy farmer, Alexander Bondurant, gave right-of-way from his farm to the Chicago Great Western Railway. He also donated a church site and offered free commercial lots to new businesses. Today,
the City of Bondurant continues as his legacy.

Berwick, Mitchellville, Avon Station, Elkhart, and Grimes all grew from existing communities that failed to gain railroad connections. They moved to the railroad. Mitchellville moved twice. Grimes moved from the Dallas County town of Osprey to its present location to enjoy the railroad benefits offered by the Union Land Company. Other pre-railroad towns that did not get rail connections did not grow. Some of these towns were Rising Sun, Ivy, Polk City and Saylorville.

The Panic of 1857 caused bank failures, depressed crop prices, and resulted in a period of economic stagnation in Iowa. This was followed by the Civil War, which began in 1861. Iowa regiments raised in Polk County fought at Pea Ridge, Fort Donelson, Shiloh, Vicksburg and Corinth. They also marched to the sea with General William Tecumseh Sherman, brother of Des Moines businessmen Hoyt and Lampson Sherman, and guarded Iowa’s western borders.

### 2.4 Boomtown Era

In 1880 Des Moines’ population was 22,408; by 1900, twenty years later, it had grown to 62,139. Wholesalers of groceries, building supplies, printing and paper supplies, and farm implements built warehouses near the rail lines of Court Avenue. Retail business also thrived with the department store, a new innovation of the 1850’s. In Des Moines, Mandelbaum’s, Harris-Emery, Younkers, and Wilkins were examples of such commerce.

By 1883 Des Moines was known as “the Hartford of the West.” F.M. Hubbell founded the Equitable Life Insurance Company in 1867. By 1888, 11 insurance companies had home offices in Des Moines. This grew to 44 insurance companies by 1910.

The golden era of agriculture also contributed to the economy in Polk County. There were sixteen implement dealers in Des Moines by 1881. George C. Baker manufactured barbed wire in Des Moines. “Baker Perfect” was the most popular wire used in Iowa. On Court Avenue the Des Moines Saddlery manufactured 55 types of saddles, harnesses, horse collars, and leather fly nets. The Central Oil Works processed flax seed into linseed oil at their plant on East Fourth Street. Three farming journals were also published in Des Moines: *Iowa Homestead, Wallace’s Farmer* and *Successful Farming*.

Coal mining also flourished during this period. Opening in 1850, No. 2 Hall’s Coal Bank was probably the first commercial coal mine in the county. However, it was not
until 1873 that Wesley Redhead opened a large-scale mine at the south end of the Seventh Street Bridge. George Carver’s Giant Mine #2 was located at East 20th and Grand; and the Watson Company had a mine at East 15th near the Rock Island Railroad. In all 15-20 mines produced 1.5 million tons per year during the period from 1908 to 1920.

As mines were depleted, companies moved. Oralabor, Marquisville, Carney, Enterprise, Norwoodville, and Carbondale were once mining camps, as were Windsor Heights, Beaverdale, and Valley Junction.

In 1889 Carbondale Coal Company opened the first of its four mines in Polk County. This mine, three miles south of the Fairgrounds, was located in present day Pleasant Hill. It was worked until 1908.

By the 1890’s the interurban electrically powered streetcar replaced walking, horse-drawn streetcars, and steam locomotives as a preferred means of transportation. The streetcars helped spur the expansion of Des Moines’ boundaries to 55.9 square miles. The towns of North Des Moines, University Place, Greenwood Park, Sevastopol, Gilbert (Chesterfield), Grant Park, Easton Place, and Capitol Park all became part of the larger city.

Interurban routes extended to the west to Valley Junction and Urbandale, Altoona, Mitchellville and Colfax to the east, and Ankeny, Alleman and a series of mining camps to the north. Soldiers went on the interurban to Camp Dodge and Fort Des Moines to prepare for World War I. Perry was the end of the line for the northwest route. Jefferson Polk and his son, Harry H. Polk, founded and managed the Interurban Railway Company.

The Panic of 1893 was fatal to many businesses, but with innovation others came forward. The Mason Motor Car Company manufactured the “Hill Climber” between 1905 and 1910. By 1927 Des Moines has 5 department stores, 46 auto dealers, 225 filling stations, 15 banks with $62.7m. in deposits, and 40 insurance companies with $100 m. in annual income.

The Golden Era of Agriculture, the period from 1900 to 1918, replaced the depression of the 1890’s with a time of unparalleled affluence in Iowa. Crop prices were high and demand for agricultural products was strong. Both rural and urban areas experienced a prosperity that has not been equaled since.
The laissez-faire attitudes of the Boomtown Era resulted in great contrasts of wealth and poverty, and continuing environmental degradation, particularly along the largely industrial rivers. Progressive Era reforms culminated in the establishment of the “Des Moines Plan” form of government in 1907, based on an elected mayor and four commissioners who were each responsible for city departments. During the same period, the Des Moines Women’s Club helped develop the downtown riverfront into the present Civic Center district of public buildings, a type of reform that was typical of the City Beautiful movement.

2.5 World War And Depression

Camp Dodge in Johnston, built as a National Guard facility, was one of the central training sites for the soldiers headed overseas in World War I. In 1917 nearly 2,000 structures were built at the camp. The third Fort Des Moines, reestablished as a cavalry post on the south side of Des Moines in 1903, was the training center for the Provisional Army Officer Training School and trained over 1,200 officers for black infantry and cavalry units.
In 1921 a farm crisis followed the war. When wartime demands for food and fiber declined, farm overproduction complicated by farm debt resulted in a strong economic depression in agriculture. This depression occurred despite the relative well being of the rest of the economy during the 1920’s.

In 1923 Henry Wallace partnered with George Kurtzwell of the Iowa Seed Company to distribute the first corn hybrid, “Copper Cross.” The first Copper Cross seed crop was produced on Kurtzwell’s father’s farm near Altoona.

Some notable construction did take place in this era. The Equitable Life Insurance Building at 604 Locust became the state’s tallest building in 1923. A new Federal Court House was completed, and the Veteran’s Hospital opened in 1932.

The economy was improving when World War II began in 1941. An unprecedented mobilization for the war replaced the Depression Era. Des Moines hotels and portions of Drake University became barracks as Fort Des Moines mobilized to train the Women’s Army Corps. In 1942 the US Rubber Company opened a cartridge-making ordnance plant just south of Ankney which at its peak employed 19,000 people. The wartime economy shifted to a peacetime boom soon after, with the German and subsequent Japanese surrenders in 1945.

2.6 Postwar Years

In the years following World War II, government investments and the postwar baby boom contributed to massive suburban growth and the decline of downtown Des Moines. Federal funds, which had been used to build bridges, river walls and civic buildings during the Great Depression, now went to projects like the Saylorville and Red Rock Dams, which brought flood control measures as well as recreational facilities to the region.

A profound shift in the transportation system was the massive investment in the interstate highway system, beginning in the 1950s. The intersection of the east-west Interstate 80 and the north-south Interstate 35 to the north and west of Des Moines linked Polk County with the nationwide interstate system and established a new suburban locus for growth. In 1958 plans were announced for construction of what is now I-235, linking Des Moines to the western suburbs and interstates. Population growth and commercial development quickly followed in the western suburbs of Windsor Heights, West Des Moines, Clive, Urbandale and Johnston. Construction of the Merle Hay Plaza Shopping Center in 1959 in a

Des Moines: successive eras of annexation through the 1950s
formerly rural area brought a new type of retailing that quickly drew shoppers and retailers away from Downtown. Meanwhile, a variety of urban renewal and improvement projects were undertaken in an effort to revive Downtown Des Moines, from low-income housing projects to new civic buildings.

Civic projects abounded in the 1970’s. The Des Moines Center of Science and Industry opened in 1971. A new Post Office at 2nd and University was opened in 1971, and Polk County changed the Old Post Office on Court Avenue into an Administrative Building. Bridges, airport improvements and transit facilities were built. The Saylorville Dam was completed in 1975. Terrace Hill had been renovated and was opened as the new Governor’s Mansion in 1978. In 1979 a new County Jail was approved by the voters, the Des Moines Civic Center opened, Nollen Plaza was dedicated and the Botanical Center was opened.

Amid all this activity it was hard to see the trends, but signs were there. Riverview Amusement Park located at Sixth and Corning closed in 1979 and most of the rides were moved to Adventureland near Altoona. Massey-Ferguson closed its Bell Avenue plant and 700 jobs were lost. The history of this period records many central city buildings being dynamited and demolished: the Montgomery Ward Building, Paramount Theatre, Valley National Bank Building, and the Ginsberg Furniture Building. The 1980 census showed a Polk County population of 303,170 with all the growth being in the suburbs; Des Moines declined 5.2% in population during the 1970’s.

Office development in Des Moines began to revive during this decade, however, with construction of the 25-story Financial Center and the 36 story Ruan Center, which opened in 1974 as Iowa’s tallest building.


Alleman, the last town incorporated in Polk County, became a town on May 18, 1973, although it had existed since the railroad era as an unincorporated settlement.
2.7 Contemporary Lifestyles

The first European settlers in the area of the central Des Moines River had limited choices in terms of where and how they settled – what we now term “lifestyles.” The vast majority came to Iowa to farm, although river towns, coal mining camps and small farming towns quickly sprang up during the early settlement period from 1850 to 1880. Railroad transportation boomed in the 1880s and offered new commercial and travel opportunities, thus expanding employment and housing choices. By 1900 Des Moines was a city of 62,139 people offering a full urban experience, with electric streetcars, a commercial downtown, and a variety of housing types. During the 20th century, lifestyles in Polk County were influenced by the rise of the automobile, the expansion of farm-to-market roads and interstate highways, the passing of coal mines, and expansion of farm size.

At the turn of the 21st century Polk County residents’ lifestyle choices are greater than ever. At the risk of losing nuance, we can categorize current lifestyle choices into five groups: rural, small town, rural residential, suburban, and urban. The following profiles describe each of these lifestyles in broad terms of how people live, work and play.

Rural

Many sources lament the loss of a “traditional” farming lifestyle in the United States. This often means the loss of small, family farm operations. According to the U.S. Census of Agriculture, the number of farms in Polk County decreased from 886 in 1997 to 764 in 2002; while the average farm size has continued to rise, increasing in size from 270 acres to 297 acres over the same period. In addition, more and more farm families are turning to non-farm sources of income to supplement farm income. Iowa State University Sociologist Paul Lasley characterizes rural communities as changing through occupational shifts and greater linkages to urban areas. The presence of highly-productive agricultural soils in Polk County, however, supports the continuation of farming and a rural lifestyle over the life of this plan and beyond.

Small Town

To the average person, living in one of the small towns or unincorporated villages in Polk County means living in a single-family home, driving to work in another community (generally an urban or suburban one), and sending your children to a local elementary school. Small towns in Polk County include Granger, Alleman, Elkhart, Runnells, Mitchellville, Sheldahl, Polk City and Carlisle. Residents in
many of these small towns have limited commercial and retail opportunities. Agricultural elevators and feed and chemical sales are a major feature of farming-dependent communities such as Alleman and Elkhart.

Some of these communities offer dining, convenience retail, banking and other services. At least two of these cities, Polk City and Carlisle, are in a rapid transition to suburbs, as new single family subdivisions are developed in and around these cities. These are cities where the commute to work may be a greater distance, but the ambience of small town living outweighs any inconvenience. Involving new households in civic and community life can present a challenge. Comprehensive plan policies should address the viability, vibrancy and expansion of small towns in Polk County.

Rural Residential

Single-family, large-lot developments dot the landscape in Polk County. The rural residential lifestyle is a continuing option in this area of Polk County. This rural residential lifestyle involves commuting to the metropolitan area for jobs and depending on the urban and suburban retail nodes for shopping and leisure activities. The area around the Saylorville Reservoir exemplifies the rural residential pattern, with large estate lots surrounding natural amenities and regional parks, as are the wooded areas along the Skunk and Des Moines Rivers in the northeast and southeast portions of the County. Recreation opportunities are frequently found in immediate proximity to housing. This lifestyle frequently involves the raising or keeping of animals such as horses.

Suburban

The suburban Polk County lifestyle is typified by post-war single-family developments on lots of one-half to one acre. Suburban development has expanded from Des Moines and surrounded the centers of older established communities such as Windsor Heights, Clive, West Des Moines and Urbandale. Like rural residential, the suburban lifestyle is automobile-dependent. Street patterns, large lots and commercial areas in enclosed malls or strip malls reflect the use of the automobile in the suburban area. Most residents in suburban areas commute to another community for employment. Johnston, Altoona, and Pleasant Hill are growing suburban communities which are contiguous to Des Moines. The line between Ankeny, once a freestanding community, and Des Moines is blurring; while second-ring suburbs, such as Bondurant and Grimes in Polk County and Waukee in Dallas County, are growing rapidly.
Each of these suburbs is likely to have a high school at the center of activities.

**Urban**

Since the 1880’s, Des Moines has been the center of urban life and development in Polk County. Urban lifestyle choices include multiple options for housing, employment, and recreation. The urban lifestyle can be found in Des Moines as well as the core areas of some suburbs. During the day, many people work in the bustling downtown and Capital area, leaving in the evening to return to urban neighborhoods or to the suburban, small town or rural areas. The urban lifestyle places a broad range of income levels and diversity within single cities and neighborhoods. Recreational activities, venues for learning, and a wide variety events offer significant opportunities for all ages. Redevelopment in the 1990s brought a renewed high-density residential lifestyle option to downtown Des Moines. Downtown residential renewal has been accompanied by increased commercial, retail and entertainment opportunities.

**Sources, Cultural Resources**
