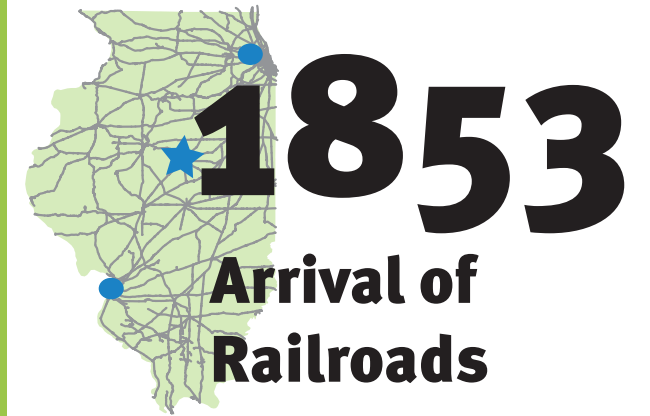


# 1

## HISTORIC CONTEXT

History helps us understand aspects of the community that puzzle residents and policy makers. For example, why do we have industrial operations in the midst of some residential neighborhoods? Records of an earlier Bloomington explain: the railroad once crossed through those neighborhoods, and adjoining areas were filled with industries that needed the railroad. That railroad is gone, and its land has a new purpose, but the patterns of land use it created are still with us. Knowing our history not only explains how our city grew, but how we can plan for future neighborhoods and anticipate a new Bloomington we can only imagine.

March 2  
**1839**  
**Incorporated**



**1922**  
**Founding of  
State Farm**

A photograph of a State Farm building with a sign in the foreground that reads 'State Farm' with the logo.



## KEY FINDINGS

The arrival of the railroads in 1853 gave Bloomington a whole new place in the world. In an era when roads were rough and horsepower wasn't a metaphor, rail connections made travel to Chicago and St. Louis and closer destinations like Peoria and Springfield a manageable undertaking. The bounty of farms and the expanding ranks of manufacturers could find their way to new markets, and people and products from across the world arrived in Bloomington on the rails.

Highly productive farmland wasn't the only resource waiting to be discovered under the tallgrass prairie that surrounded Bloomington. In 1867, coal was discovered on the west side of the city, close to the Chicago & Alton railroad corridor. The present-day highway interchange at West Market Street and Interstates 55 and 74 sits atop the excavated area where coal was mined in Bloomington for sixty years.

Over time the working places for some of Bloomington's residents shifted from the hard physical labor of the 19th century workshop, factory and coal mine, and moved towards life in the shop front or office. A growing and prosperous middle class could afford to hire workers for jobs they might once have done themselves, and the founding of State Farm and the expanding insurance industry continued the shift to white collars from blue.

Bloomington neighborhoods are a case study in changing patterns of development. From the simple grid streets of a 19th-century prairie village, Bloomington accommodated new arrivals, such as railroads and highways into the structure of the City. In the post-war boom years from the 1950s onward, Bloomington has tried variations on the modern suburb, replacing short blocks and right angles with long winding streets fruited with clusters of cul-de-sacs.

## EXPLORATION & SETTLEMENT

In the early 1820s, as settlers of European origin migrated into the area that would become Bloomington, they encountered a region already altered by 17th century exploration that followed the Mississippi tributaries north to Lake Michigan, eventually to the future site of Chicago at Fort Dearborn. French explorers established outposts along the Illinois River, including Fort Crevecoeur and later Fort Clark at Peoria.

Down the Illinois and Mississippi rivers, St. Louis was an established city of ten



Figure 1.1. Map of Illinois, 1820  
John Melish; digital image  
© 2000 by Cartography Associates

thousand, with a history of Spanish and French control. The monumental land transfer of the Louisiana Purchase in 1803 elevated St. Louis as the capital of the Louisiana Territory.

These new settlers to central Illinois were drawn to a forested area that came to be called Blooming Grove. The groves, timbered areas that grew along rivers and streams crossing the prairie, were desirable locations to both the settlers and the Native American groups in the area. However, peaceable interactions with Native residents meant Blooming Grove could grow as a town, not a fort.

The groves signaled the presence of water, and the timber provided building material and fuel. The wooded areas and prairies were also rich habitats for wildlife, a food source for Native and settler families alike; their remnants still draw hunters today.

Although the early settlers could not have fully understood their good fortune, in their new home they found a balance of factors that proved the foundation for the community's future success. The presence of necessities and the resources soon to be discovered supported the new settlement.

Adapting the prairie landscape for farming revealed that local geology, hydrology and biology had melded to create some of the most productive agricultural land in the world. The wealth of this land became the basis for the wealth of the communities that it fostered. Other resources were pres-

ent; in the 1860s, coal was discovered, and was mined at the city's western edge for sixty years. The location of Bloomington between Chicago and St. Louis would trigger the mix of geography and politics that brought the railroad to the city, making possible the ever-increasing flow of people, materials, products and cultures that still characterize Bloomington today.

Bloomington's development into a stable city began with sixty acres of land offered by settler James Allin to create the core of the new city and include a site for the McLean County courthouse, establishing Bloomington as the county seat. Mr. Allin's generosity to his new community bore immediate fruit, as the lots were quickly purchased and the first courthouse was built in 1832.<sup>1</sup> Within five years a more imposing courthouse would be built, and be frequented by Abraham Lincoln.

Bloomington's early years saw residents arriving at a steady rate. Dozens of residents became hundreds, and by the 1850 Census Bloomington's population was about 1,600 persons. Population growth was



Figure 1.2 Detail of 1850 Illinois Central Railroad map

gradual compared with central Illinois cities such as Peoria, which had easier access to the movement of people and goods via river traffic, but growth was comparable to other communities developing in the expanse of prairie between the Illinois and Sangamon rivers.

Despite relative isolation, new enterprises were establishing themselves in Bloomington, adding to the attractions that would draw new residents. In one notable instance, Illinois Wesleyan University was founded in 1850, bringing a new level of educational and cultural resources to enrich the community.

## THE RAILROADS ARRIVE

The Illinois Central and Chicago & Alton railroads both began service to Bloomington in 1853.<sup>2</sup> The Chicago & Alton rail corridor exists today as the Union Pacific rail line through west Bloomington. The Illinois Central line has been remade as a part of Constitution Trail, just west of the Clover Lawn estate of David Davis, and immediately east of Evergreen Cemetery.

The introduction of railroad service to the City had immediate impact. By 1860 the population more than quadrupled. In 1870 Bloomington boasted nearly ten times as many residents than in 1850, after only seventeen years of railroad access to the City.

Footnotes:

- 1) As illustrated in Fig. 1.3, "Map of Bloomington, 1838," prepared by the McLean County Historical Society from oral histories.
- 2) The Chicago and Alton railroad operated under several names related to destinations.



Figure 1.3 Bloomington in 1838  
Source: McLean County Museum of History

Beyond population growth, the advent of rail service brought changes to the physical structure of the City. Bloomington, before the railroad, adopted and maintained a traditional city plan common to many towns and cities throughout the Midwest. The courthouse had pride of place in its square at the center of the City, and streets were arranged in a regular grid, oriented to the compass. The city pattern echoed the surveying standards established in the 18th century for territories west of the original colonies, including the Northwest Territory from which Illinois was created.

This urban design was efficient for its users and simple to construct and navigate no matter what type of travel was needed. Pedestrians, equestrians or users of wheeled vehicles could make their way through the street grid easily. Occasional exceptions to the grid pattern, such as the old Springfield Road, signaled that a traveler was heading into less regulated territory. The introduction

of the railroad introduced a new component to the City's pattern, one that created physical constraints on City residents and the City itself.

Railroads required infrastructure to support their operations and provide access for passengers and freight customers. Keeping the trains running also required facilities for manufacturing, maintenance, repair and storage of equipment and materials. Railroad tracks also imposed traffic limitations, both to insure safety and, in the case of the Chicago & Alton, by drawing a diagonal line through the street grid.

These needs made a permanent mark on Bloomington's pattern of residential and industrial development. The Chicago & Alton rail yard and workshops on the west side were already a presence in the 1867 plan of the City (Figure 1.5), and remain with us today. The neighborhoods surrounding the rail yards, and the coal mining operations located nearby, developed to accommodate the needs of increasing numbers of workers employed by the industrial concerns that located in the rail corridor. These included ethnic neighborhoods of railroad workers and their families.<sup>3</sup>

The Illinois Central Railroad generally followed a north-south path through Bloomington, but areas adjacent to the line were needed for railroad facilities such as storage and depots, and also became home to a host of commercial and industrial business. Lumberyards, warehouses, coal hoppers, factories and others clustered along the railroad, alongside the rail offices and work areas. These busy (and noisy) locations sat very

near the east side neighborhoods of handsome houses belonging to the upper levels of Bloomington society. As noted earlier, this effect on land use persists today, although in the case of the Illinois Central Railroad corridor, the rail itself is long gone.

## IMMIGRATION

Advances in technology such as the railroads, and the steel plows brought to market by John Deere, helped to sustain Bloomington's growth and the prosperity of McLean County. Improved access to the outside world, greater manufacturing and agricultural productivity, and the exchange of goods and materials thus continued to expand through the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Immigrants carried out much of the labor of these new enterprises, many arriving in the United States from Europe; in central Illinois, there was substantial immigration from Ireland and Germany. These immigrants became the backbone of the labor force building railways through Central Illinois.<sup>4</sup>

As immigrants made their homes in Bloomington, neighborhoods evolved to



Figure 1.4 Railroad Workers, 1854  
Source: Bloomington & Normal Trades and Labor Assembly

reflect their specific concerns. In a pattern familiar in immigrant communities across the history of the United States, new arrivals sought to live among others who shared their countries of origin, their language, and the experiences that led them to a new life in America. Neighborhoods also formed around a common religious heritage, as families sought connections through their churches.

These emerging ethnic neighborhoods, often developing near employment, continued the traditional neighborhood design that characterized 19th century Bloomington. Churches, schools and shops would define a neighborhood meeting place, and be surrounded by smaller homes on streets arranged in a grid. The structure of some neighborhoods, such as those adjoining the west side rail corridor, was modified to accommodate large-scale industrial or transportation infrastructure.

African-Americans arriving in central Illinois both before and after the Civil War were generally constrained to neighborhoods on Bloomington's west side, a pattern which persisted for many decades. These neighborhoods organized around churches as a unifying force, providing social and economic support as well as spiritual sustenance. Churches and other social organizations provided a path to employment and educa-

Footnotes:

- 3) "Irish 'Forty Acres' Speaks to City's Railroad Past," Bill Kemp, *The Pantagraph*, September 18, 2011.
- 4) *Immigrants in the Valley: Irish, Germans and Americans in the Upper Mississippi Country, 1830 - 1860*, Mark Wyman, Rowman & Littlefield, 1984.



Figure 1.5. Bloomington, Illinois, 1867  
Source: Library of Congress

tion when residents were denied opportunity in the community at large.

Over time the ethnic origins of neighborhoods or institutions might fade from memory, or not be known by present-day residents, but the form and function these areas influenced remains in place.

### A TURNING POINT

Bloomington in the last hour of June 18, 1900 was a prosperous city of more than

23,000, with a downtown business district surrounding the courthouse. Early on June 19th, fire broke out on East Monroe Street, and spread to the north side of the square. Multiple blocks burned and collapsed. The courthouse was gutted, and would be judged beyond repair and demolished.<sup>5</sup>

With quick recovery as the primary goal, rebuilding was begun. The County replaced the courthouse which served for 75 years before becoming the Museum of

History. The rebuilding did not change the physical layout of downtown Bloomington, but rather created new components in the existing pattern of the city.<sup>6</sup>

### MODERN TIMES

As Bloomington moved into the twentieth century, variations in the pattern of development were introduced. The 1893 Columbian Exposition in Chicago had modeled the City Beautiful to the world, and inspired the development of the 1909 Burnham plan for Chicago. The garden city movement was influential in rethinking the nature of residential development, and moving away from the dominant street grid pattern to emphasize the integration of large natural areas within the city, wide boulevards and curving streets that resonated with natural features.

In Bloomington, the development of White Place and the adjoining Clinton Boulevard were prime examples of this style of residential neighborhood.<sup>7</sup> The development of Miller Park also incorporated concepts from the new thinking in landscape design and planning. Although the rectilinear street pattern remained the norm, some residential areas began to incorporate elements of the new design ideas.

### SUBURBAN DESIGN STANDARDS

Bloomington shared in the optimistic postwar boom period, and over the next fifty years entered a period of sustained growth in population and incorporated area. Residential development during this period is characterized by several factors. Houses built



Figure 1.6. 1868 Courthouse



Figure 1.7. 1868 Courthouse After 1900 Fire  
Source: McLean County Museum of History

### Footnotes:

5) "Bloomington's 'Great Fire' of 1900 Quickly Swept Through 45 Buildings," Bill Kemp, *The Pantagraph*, June 14, 2008.

6) *Bloomington, Illinois: Before and After the Great Fire of June 19, 1900*, Corn Belt Printing and Stationery, c. 1900.

7) "White Place One of Bloomington's Signature Neighborhoods," Bill Kemp, *The Pantagraph*, June 27, 2010.

during these years became larger; through the 1940s the typical single-family house had less than 2,000 square feet of space, and often the standard was 1,500-1,750 square feet. During the residential building boom from 1960 to 2005, the size of single-family homes steadily increased, with houses well over 2,000 square feet becoming commonplace. In some neighborhoods, square footage of 3,000 square feet is the norm.

Although lot size did not expand along with house size, neighborhood design did change. In place of the rectilinear street grid, neighborhoods were organized around a central collector street, with smaller streets connected only to that collector, many cul-de-sacs, and few connections to the larger street network. Residents thus have longer trips to and from home. Recently the City has required that subdivision design allow for better connectivity. Generally, though, this style of subdivision for residential use remains the primary form of development in Bloomington.

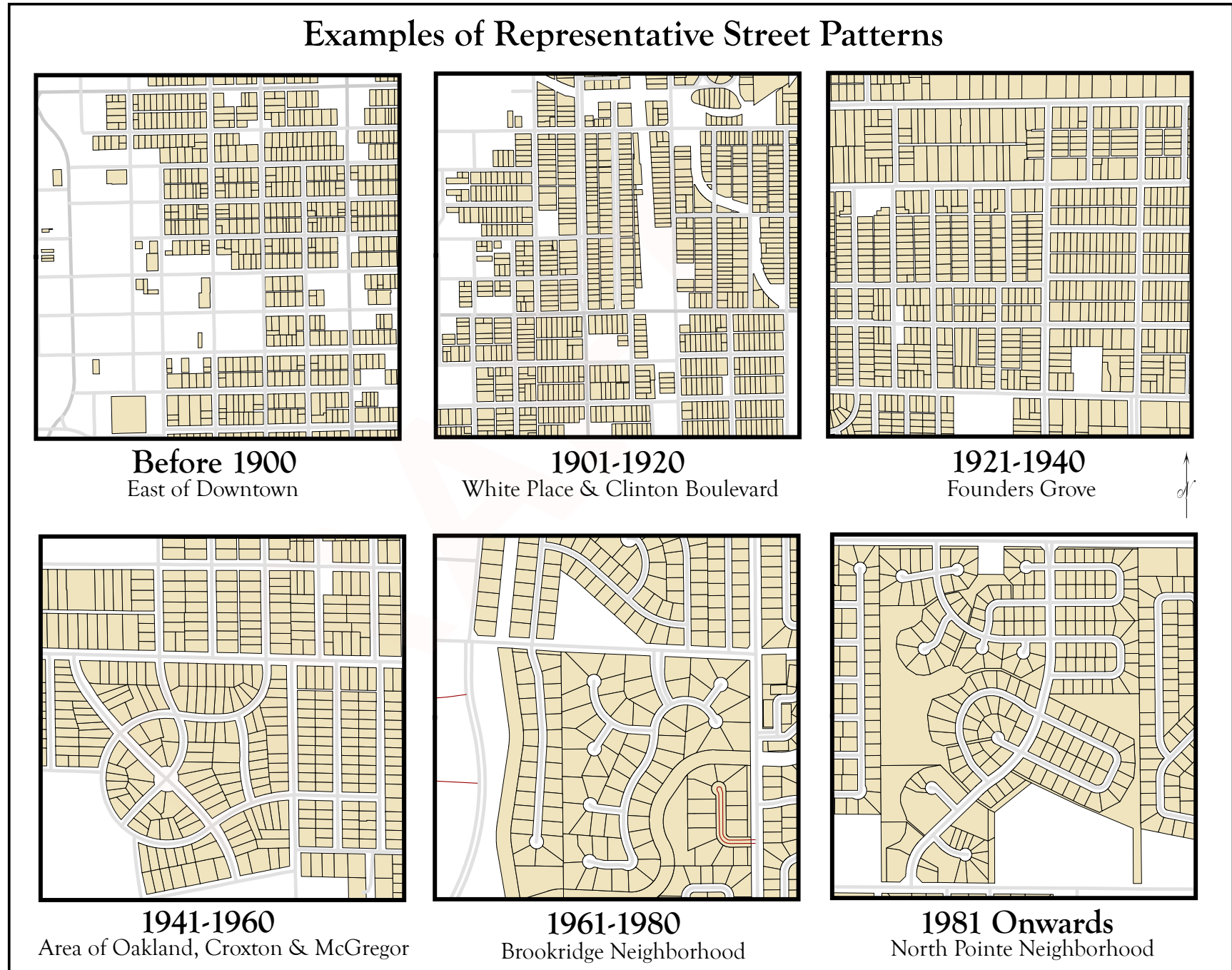


Figure 1.8 Examples of Representative Street Patterns

# Bloomington Population Growth, Major Events & Milestones

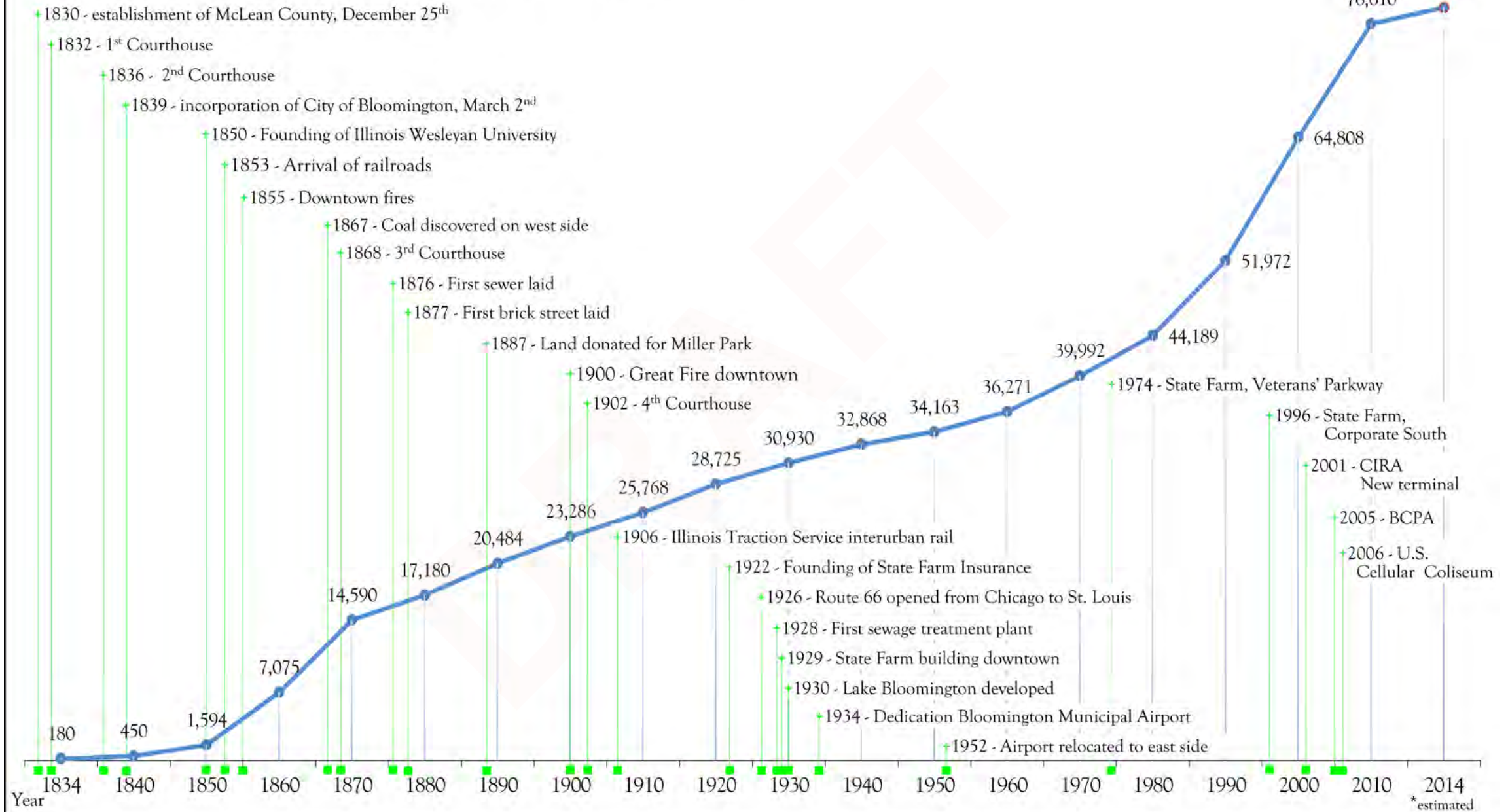


Figure 1.9 Bloomington Population Growth, Major Events & Milestones  
 Source: U.S. Census, MCRPC

