
Grenville Mellen Dodge

Hanging on the south wall in the secretary of state's executive office, there is a painting of a venerable man who is resting in a saddle on his horse. Many people visit the Iowa Capitol. Fewer venture into the secretary of state's office. Fewer still recognize the man who sits in that saddle.



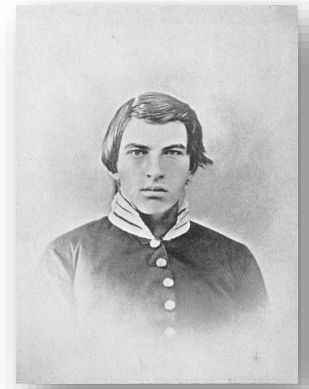
Painting of General Grenville Dodge later in life.

<https://www.dodgehouse.org/>

This Pieces of Iowa's Past will give a glimpse into the life of a man who was instrumental in the United States' westward railroad expansion, was a master of espionage during the Civil War, and was influential in Iowa and Washington, D.C.

Beginning

Grenville Dodge was born on April 12, 1831, in Danvers, Massachusetts. At the age of 13, Dodge was working on a neighboring farm where he met Frederick Lander, the farmer's son who had just completed two years at Norwich University, a private senior military college in Vermont. Grenville helped Lander survey a new railroad spur in Massachusetts, and consequently followed in Frederick's footsteps by attending Norwich, majoring in civil engineering. In 1851, after graduating, the young and ambitious civil engineer moved to the growing frontier town of Peru, Illinois, surveying land for the Illinois Central Railroad. Dodge took advantage of the Western railroad boom by purchasing property near the railroads being constructed in Illinois.



Young Dodge as a cadet at Norwich University.

Railroad

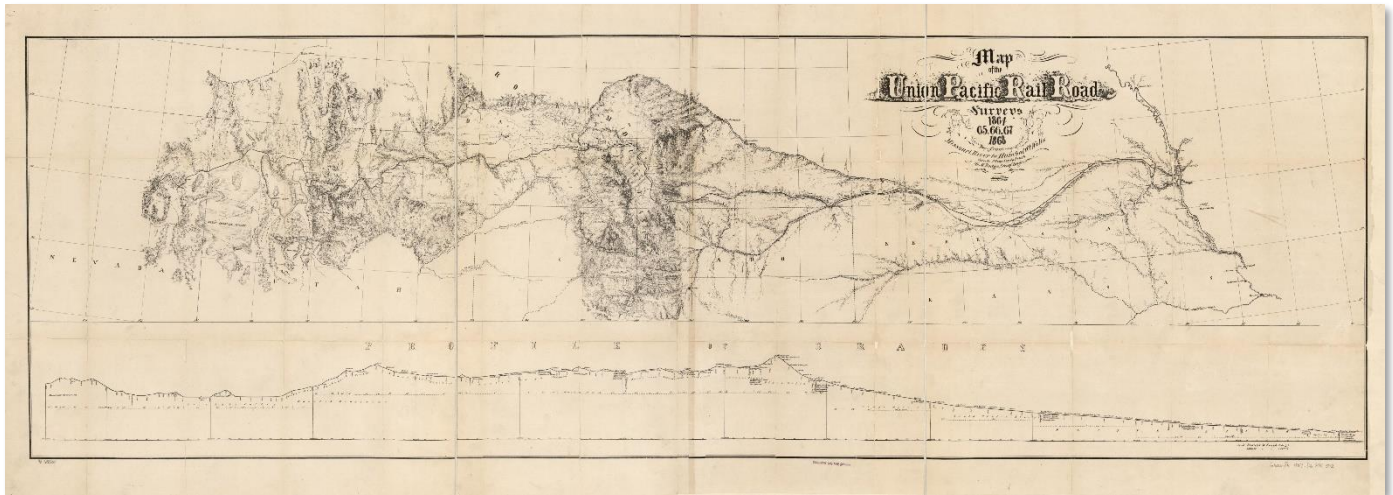
In 1852, Dodge secured a position on the Rock Island Railroad and was assigned to Peter Dey, one of the finest engineers in the country at the time. Shortly after, Dodge was made principal assistant to Dey and was responsible for surveying central Iowa to locate an end point for the Rock Island Railroad along the Missouri River. In November 1853, Dodge settled on Council Bluffs, Iowa, as the railroad's terminus. Council Bluffs was also where he would raise his family in 1855.

After further exploration and numerous discussions with travelers, he drew maps showing the best paths from Council Bluffs to Utah, California, and Oregon and indicating places where travelers might rest and find food and water. Dodge could later brag that the routes he selected were adopted by the chief engineers of the first transcontinental railroad.

With seemingly endless energy and ambition, Dodge opened a bank and real estate office with influential businessmen, John Baldwin; Benjamin Pegram; and John's younger brother, Caleb Baldwin, a lawyer and judge on the Iowa District Court. These men, along with Dodge, would later play a significant role in the location of the state Capitol in Des Moines.

[Council Bluffs Public Library
Special Collections](#)

Dodge was an intelligent and savvy man. When news spread that the Mississippi and Missouri Railroad (M&M) was going to resume construction west of Iowa City, Dodge seized the opportunity to purchase land along the route he surveyed and used his leverage to ensure the M&M passed through his specified route to Council Bluffs.



Topographical strip map of the Union Pacific Railroad and surveys from 1864 through 1868 between Council Bluffs, Iowa, to west of Great Salt Lake, Utah, showing located and experimental lines.

[Library of Congress](#)

Abraham Lincoln

Dodge continued to research and talk about transcontinental railroad routes. In August 1859, Abraham Lincoln, then an attorney from Springfield, Illinois, traveled to Council Bluffs to survey land that was offered to him as security for a loan. On this trip, Lincoln attended an event where he spoke on slavery, and, among the other speakers, Dodge talked about a railroad route all the way to the Pacific Ocean.

Lincoln shared sympathies with Dodge on the importance of a transcontinental railroad and later spoke with him personally about the topic.

Civil War

At the onset of the Civil War, Dodge offered his services to the state of Iowa, utilizing his military education from Norwich. At the beginning of the war, Dodge handled the difficult task of finding weapons for Iowa's volunteer soldiers. After successfully securing 6,000 muskets, he was appointed as colonel of the Fourth Iowa Infantry Regiment and was responsible for the unit's recruiting and training.



Photo taken of General Dodge sometime between 1860 and 1865.

[Library of Congress](#)

Dodge and his regiment saw combat at the Battle of Pea Ridge near the northern border of Arkansas. For his services at the battle, as well as private campaigning from prominent connections back home and in Washington, D.C., he was promoted to brigadier general. General Ulysses Grant personally appointed Dodge to commander of the Second Division of the Army of the Tennessee, ultimately guarding Grant's left flank and aiding General Tecumseh Sherman.

Espionage

What would prove to be immensely valuable during the Civil War was Dodge's intelligence system. In March 1862, Dodge's spies saved the Army of the Southwest from annihilation by reporting the approach of Confederate Generals Sterling Price and Earl Van Dorn.

By the midway point of the war, Dodge was directing intelligence missions across the Western Theater. Dodge managed a network of over 100 spies consisting of Union sympathizers, women, and former slaves. Although about half of his spies were captured, not one betrayed the North. Dodge went to great lengths to protect and financially compensate his spies. Operations were funded from captured Confederate cotton to keep the names of his operatives out

of Union pay records.

Perhaps the most important intelligence achievement occurred during the siege at Vicksburg, Mississippi, in 1863. Dodge's spies gained access to Confederate defensive positions, allowing Grant to concentrate his artillery and infantry on strategic points. Dodge's spies were also able to track Confederate reinforcements to the city resulting in Grant's ability to leave the bulk of his army at Vicksburg and divert fewer forces to General Joseph Johnston's reinforcements, achieving a decisive victory in the war.

Transcontinental Railroad and Congress

Late in the fall of 1864, under Grant's request, Lincoln, who had since been elected president of the United States, made Dodge commander of the District of Missouri, which expanded to include departments of Kansas, Nebraska, and Utah. Now, Dodge's troops were fighting Native Americans across the central plains, protecting the construction of the Union Pacific Railroad.

In 1866, Dodge was made chief engineer of the Union Pacific Railroad by Thomas Durant, vice president of the Union Pacific Railroad, and was elected to represent Iowa in the U.S. House of Representatives. As chief engineer, Dodge helped extend the line toward the track of the Central

Pacific working its way east from California. Simultaneously, as congressman, he lobbied for railroads and increased his sway within the state of Iowa.



Golden Spike Ceremony in Promontory Summit, Utah, May 10, 1869, completing the first transcontinental railroad. Samuel Montague, representing the Central Pacific Railroad (left center), shakes hands with Grenville Dodge, Union Pacific Railroad (right center).

[Yale University Libraries](#)

By 1870, Dodge had great influence and wealth from his banking, real estate, railroad, military and political enterprises. That year, Dodge had built a three-story, 14-room home with walnut woodwork, Italian marble fireplaces, antique furniture, valuable paintings and relics, and a garden. From the house's library, he could see each of the eight railroads that ran through Council Bluffs.



Dodge home in Council Bluffs, Iowa.

[Library of Congress](#)

Later Life

Dodge remained active in the construction of other railroads across the United States after he left the military. He was a recognized figure in Iowa as well as in Washington, D.C., with friendships among presidents, military leadership, and celebrities. One of his dearest friends was Grant. Grant had been suffering from cancer and, although expected, his death in July 1885 stunned Dodge. Held on August 8, 1885, in New York City, Grant's funeral procession surpassed any public demonstration in the country up to that time. Interestingly and symbolically, Grant requested an equal number of Union and Confederate pallbearers echoing his longing for unity within the country. Grant's body was placed in a temporary tomb until his final resting place was completed 12 years later in New York on a hill overlooking the Hudson River. Dodge's painting, the one that hangs in the Secretary of State's executive office, features Grant's tomb in the painting's background.

Conclusion

Since Dodge traveled to Iowa as a young man, much had happened to the country and the man himself. Council Bluffs was no longer the frontier, the United States transformed into an industrial nation, the country fought a civil war, Native Americans were forced onto reservations, and railroads connected the country from ocean to ocean.

Dodge, born into a humble family, was now rich and famous. His portrait hanging in the secretary of state's executive office holds within it a story of a man who made his fortune through the railroad and his legacy in war and politics.