

Welcome to a Self-Guided Tour of  
**Historic Bentonsport**



*Artwork by Wendell Mohr*

Platted in 1839  
A National Historic District

# Historic Bentonsport

Benton's Port, named for Missouri Senator Thomas Hart Benton, was platted in March 1836 by Francis Church, Charles O. Sanford and Giles O. Sullivan. Sullivan settled here in December 1834, locating his double log cabin at the foot of Sullivan (now Walnut) Street. His cousin, Shapley P. Ross, joined him in 1835. John Bending, Charles O. Sanford and H. P. Graves laid out the first addition to Bentonsport in 1837. They resurveyed the whole village in 1839 for the Bentonsport Association. Across the river, South Bentonsport was first platted in 1837 by Isaac Reed and Henry Smith. Its name was legally changed to Vernon in 1852 after the post office established there.

Bentonsport's loss of the county seat election to Keosauqua in September 1838, failed to slow its growth. The first lock and dam was authorized by the territorial legislature of Iowa in 1839 and the villages soon hosted two grist mills, two ferries and a saw mill. The Green brothers built the first paper mill in Iowa at Bentonsport in 1852. It supplied local newspapers and even shipped paper to Des Moines. *The Vernon Democratic Mirror* was published from December 1855 to December 1857. It was followed by *The Valley Weekly* from January to April 1858. Across the river, the *Bentonsport Signal* was published from 1865 to 1868.

Before joining the '49ers in the California gold fields, James Clark reportedly established a pottery in South Bentonsport. The 1850 Census listed James Johnston and Isaac Boyer as the potters in Vernon. Robert M. Dickson arrived in 1852; and in 1854, he purchased the site of Dickson's Pottery, the best known pottery in the county.

The Keokuk, Fort Des Moines and Minnesota Railroad reached Bentonsport in 1857, but the financial panic of that year halted construction. The money shortage during the Panic caused the village to issue "Bentonsport Script" redeemable for U.S. dollars at the Bentonsport Treasurer's Office. Keosauqua issued a similar script. These scripts facilitated trade between area farmers and village merchants.

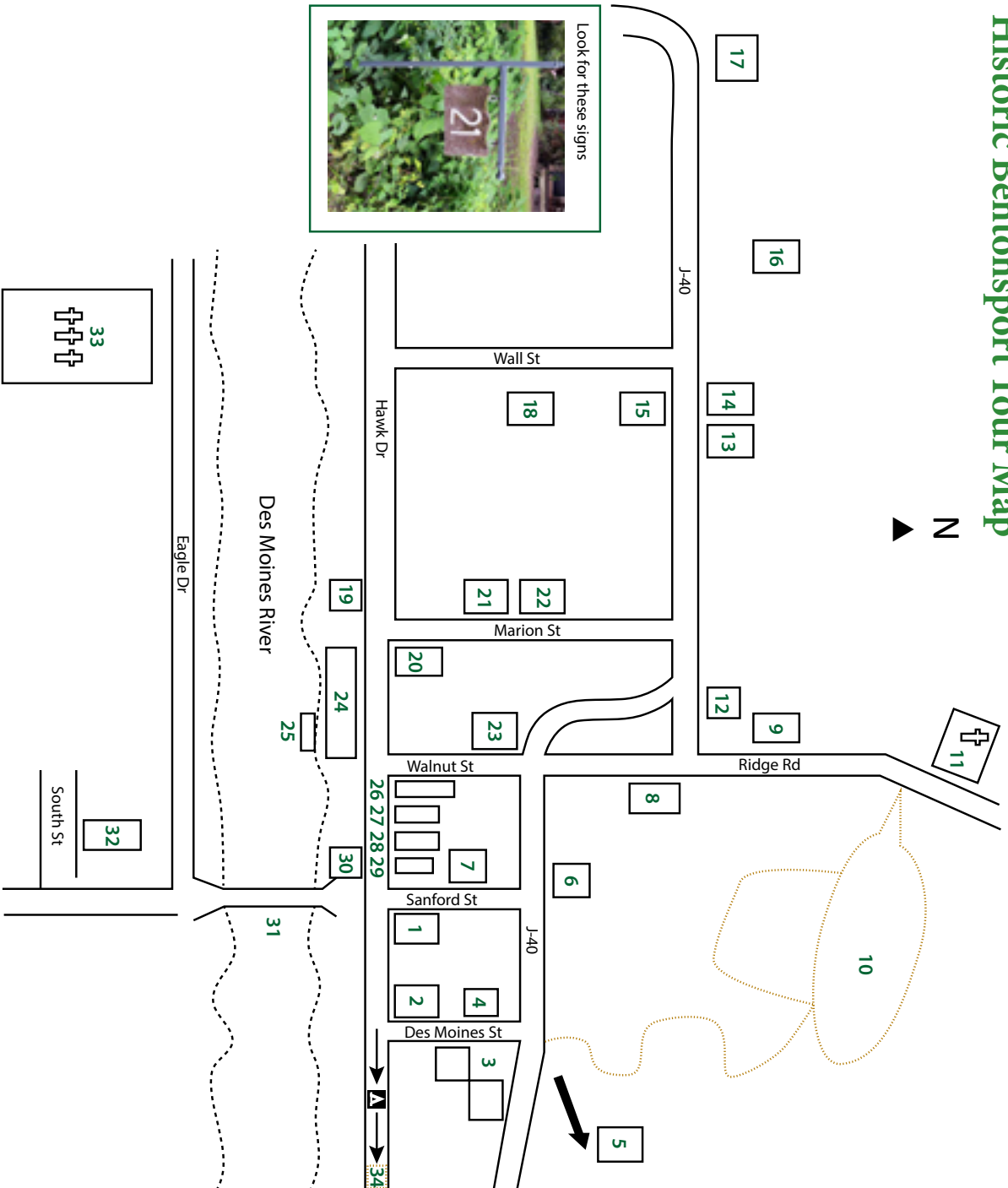
Bentonsport's heyday as a steamboat port ended when the railroad was completed to Des Moines in August 1866. The river was declared non-navigable in 1870, so the dams and locks were neglected as bridges spanned the river. The dam at Bentonsport failed in 1879 and the Bentonsport bridge opened in 1883. It is the oldest wagon bridge of its type remaining on the Des Moines River.

The paper mill moved to Kansas and over the years neglect, fires and floods destroyed the remaining Bentonsport mills. Fires, not all of them natural, continued to ravage the two villages, accounting for the scarcity of frame buildings today. A National Historic District was established in Bentonsport in 1972.



***Use this brochure to experience the history of Bentonsport as you tour the village. Many of these buildings are private residences and are not open for tours.***

# Historic Bentonsport Tour Map



Look for these signs





### 1. Mason House Inn

The Mason House, first known as the Ashland House, was built in the late 1840s when Mormons were making their westward trek. It served steamboat passengers and other travelers under a number of owners. After the Panic of 1857, Lewis J. Mason came to Bentonsport, assumed control of the business and changed its name to the Phoenix Hotel. Later it came to be known as the Mason House. Its barn reportedly sheltered run-away slaves on the Underground Railroad. The building is now a bed and breakfast with nine bedrooms furnished in 19th century antiques. The Mason House Inn is open year round and tours are given by appointment. For more information, call 319-592-3133.



### 2. Hotle House

Built before 1848, the Hotle House was purchased by Margaret McVinty in 1854. She lived here until 1905 when she sold the house to Eli W. McKinney, one of the last surviving Civil War veterans from Van Buren County.



### 3. Harrisburg Township Hall and Log Home

The white building is the township hall and school once located northeast of Bentonsport in Harrisburg Township. The log house is original and unstable.



### 4. Indian Artifacts Museum

Tony Sanders, a longtime collector of Native American artifacts, owns the Indian Artifacts Museum in Bentonsport. He designed and built the museum which features inlaid woodwork and display cases holding over 5,000 items. The museum is open by chance or by appointment. For an appointment, call the Greef General Store at 319-592-3579.



### 5. Samuel Paine House

Samuel Paine kept a general store in Bentonsport and built his house on top of the hill east of the village in 1856. He platted Oakland in 1857. He was a captain in the 19th Iowa Infantry during the Civil War. His son, Albert Bigelow Paine, was a friend and official biographer of Samuel Clemens. Albert published *Mark Twain, A Biography* in 1912.



### 6. The Stone House

Constructed between 1851 and 1854, this limestone building was originally a two-story duplex for local businessmen Edward D. Colton and David N. Gardner. After extensive renovation in 2013, it is now a village meeting place. To schedule the Stone House for wedding receptions or other meetings, call 319-592-3222.



### 7. Herman Greef House

This Federal-style home was built in 1863 with the entrance facing the river. When the two-story bay window was built, the entrance was moved to the east side of the house. The windows have interior shutters that fold up into the butternut woodwork. Herman Greef co-owned the Greef General Store (28) and the Bank of Bentonsport (29) with his brother Julius and Ira Pergrin. They also operated one of the two ferries across the river between Bentonsport and Vernon. Upon Herman's death, his son Frederick succeeded him in the business.



### 8. Capt. Frederick Hancock House

In 1839 H. P. Graves sold this lot to mill owner James A. Brown for a “Valuable Consideration in Lawful Money.” Brown built the present house c.1847. This Federal-style house is constructed of native woods, primarily oak, walnut and cherry. Frederick Hancock purchased the property for \$1,600 in 1853, and Brown moved to his new brick home west of Bentonsport (17). Hancock was an abolitionist, a local merchant, a captain during the Civil War and served in the territorial legislature of Iowa. The home is now the Bentonsport Village Bed and Breakfast. Call 319-592-3191 for reservations.



### 9. Presbyterian Church Building

The Bentonsport Presbyterian church with its mix of Gothic and Neoclassical architecture was built in 1855. The interior’s live acoustics make it ideal for musical events. The Prairie Harmony Shape Note Singers recorded their Bentonsport Sessions CD in this church. This CD is available at Iron and Lace (26). The church was restored by the Bentonsport Improvement Association and is often the site of weddings. It is open to visitors May to October, 10 AM to 5 PM. To reserve the church for weddings or musical events, call 319-592-3222.



### 10. Bentonsport Nature Trail

This 2.5 mile trail is maintained by the Van Buren County Conservation Board and Bentonsport volunteers and is accessible from either J40 or Ridge Road. It’s a steep walk up from the J40 trailhead, but the rest is an easy hike.



### 11. Bentonsport Cemetery

Maintained by the Bentonsport Cemetery Association, this cemetery is the final resting place for many of Bentonsport’s founding fathers and mothers.



### 12. George L. Moore House

Built in 1865 for George L. Moore, this house, like the Stone House (5), was once two stories tall. Moore was a dry goods merchant and notary public in Bentonsport. In August 1854, he married Hannah A. Brown, the daughter of mill owner James A. Brown (17).



### 13. Methodist Church Parsonage

Built in 1858, this building was the parsonage for the Methodist Church next door. Local handyman, Eddie Alexander, added the concrete front steps and banister to the house in the 1940s.



### 14. Methodist Church Building

Built in 1857, this was one of four churches serving the people of Bentonsport. After operating continuously for 131 years, it closed in 1988. The church is privately owned and operates as a short-term vacation rental. Call 641-919-9414 for reservations.



### 15. Sanford House

Built in 1851 by John D. Sanford, this Federal-style house has a sawtooth brick frieze. Iron stars on the walls anchor the ends of the metal tierods through the building. Sanford was a dry goods merchant and once operated an inn at Bentonsport.



### 16. Bentonsport Academy

The Bentonsport Academy was authorized by the territorial legislature of Iowa in 1839 with Seth Richards and H. P. Graves among its founding members. This building was constructed in 1851 at the cost of \$3,000. Attending the first session in the new building was the daughter of the Rev. Abner Kneeland, the last person imprisoned for blasphemy in Massachusetts. Kneeland sought religious freedom on the frontier, founding the town of Salubria, just below Farmington. School was held in this building until 1951.



### 17. James A. Brown House

This two-story, Federal-style home was built in 1853 as the residence of James A. Brown and his family. Designed with 12-foot high ceilings and nine large rooms, it provided spacious living quarters for a family with nine children.



### 18. Albert S. Bigelow House

This house was once owned by Albert S. Bigelow, a friend of Samuel E. Paine (5) and the namesake for Samuel's son. The front half, which has 11-foot ceilings, was probably built by Seth Richards as a business house in the mid-1850s. It is the only house with a gothic window in Bentonsport. The back half was likely added in the 1870s when Joseph Montgomery owned the property. The Bigelow House is a private residence, but Alexander's Cottage next door may be rented by calling 319-592-3152.



### 19. Odd Fellows Hall

Probably built before 1840 by John B. Grover, the Odd Fellows Hall once housed a furniture factory and store on the first floor. The second floor was home to one of Iowa's earliest Odd Fellows chapters. The building will house a canoe, kayak and bicycle rental business in 2016. The building is owned by the Van Buren County Conservation Board.



### 20. Old Blacksmith Shop

This blacksmith shop was built by the 1850s when Seth Richards owned the property. Later, it was operated by Moses Springton for many years before falling into disrepair. In the 1970s, it was renovated and used as a smithy until 1987.



### 21. Chester W. Cowles House

This home was built for Dr. Chester W. Cowles on land he had purchased in 1841 from Benjamin Franklin Pearson, a pioneer builder in Van Buren County. The home has walnut woodwork and a kitchen fireplace complete with a bustle oven. Dr. Cowles lived here until 1891. B. F. Pearson's own home in Keosauqua is now the Pearson House Museum owned by the Van Buren County Historical Society.



## 22. Julius Greef House

The original one-story house, made of brick with wood additions, was probably built by Joseph C. Fenton in 1848. Julius Greef purchased the house in 1862 and lived there with his wife Kate and their ward, Millie Pergrin. In 1867 he added the two-story brick addition and moved the entry door to the south side of the house. Julius was the junior partner in Greef, Pergrin and Greef that operated the Greef General Store (28) and the Bank of Bentonsport (29).



## 23. Cowles-Montgomery House

Originally built for Erastus Cowles before 1843, this house was purchased by Joseph Montgomery in 1883. Montgomery was co-owner of the Bentonsport Mills with Joseph Scott. The house was extensively renovated in the 1970s, but still retains its original character.



## 24. Rose Garden

The rock walls of the triangle-shaped Rose Garden enclosed the mill pond for the water powered mills that lined the river bank in Bentonsport. The adjacent rectangular-shaped garden just downstream lies within the foundation of J. A. Brown's five-story mill. The gardens of heritage roses are maintained by volunteers. To schedule the Rose Garden for weddings, call the Greef General Store at 319-592-3579.



## 25. Lock and Dam #6

Keelboats and later steamboats plied the Des Moines River with passengers and cargo for the developing towns of the new territory. Bentonsport was the site of Government Lock and Dam # 6 built to facilitate navigation on the river. Steamboats and the railroad competed for passengers and freight traffic until the river was declared non-navigable and bridges were built across it. The mills at Bentonsport continued to use the water from the stone-filled log dam until it was breached in 1879. The remaining walnut foundation timbers, which are pinned to the limestone river bed, are evidenced by the ripples in the water near the remains of the outer lock wall.



## 26. Iron & Lace Shop

Built in 1990 using 100-year-old posts and beams salvaged from old barns in Van Buren and Lee counties, Iron & Lace was constructed by Bill and Betty Printy as a pottery and blacksmith shop. Bill makes hand-forged, artistic iron and conducts blacksmithing classes for the Village Folk School. Betty conducts classes in rug weaving, bread making and pottery making. The store carries iron work, hand woven rugs and Betty's trademark Queen Ann's Lace pottery. It is open from April through December. During the off season, call 319-592-3222 for an appointment.



## 27. Ira Corns House

This 1 1/2 story frame building originally stood west of the Bentonsport Academy. Around 1926, it was moved with a team of horses and a stump puller to Main Street and converted into a store. There was a barber shop in the upstairs room for many years. It is owned by the Van Buren County Conservation Board and is home to the Bentonsport Quilting Company. Call 319-592-3149 for more information.



### 28. Greef General Store

Built in 1853, the Greef General Store was once the largest in the county. The store now carries antiques and crafts in the consignment shop and houses a museum with Native American artifacts, old Bentonsport pictures and other memorabilia such as the small flat-bottomed boat recovered from the mud of the Des Moines River during an archaeological excavation. Owned and operated by the Van Buren County Conservation Board, the store has an information center and public restrooms. It is open 10 AM to 5 PM every day except Mondays, from mid-April through mid-December. Call 319-592-3579 for information about the store or to rent county-owned facilities and camping sites.



### 29. Bank of Bentonsport

When originally built, this building had two stories and extended to the Greef General Store. The lower level housed the bank owned by Greef, Pergrin and Greef and had an internal stairway that lead to the Masonic Hall on the second floor. Owned and restored by the county conservation board, it currently houses the Bentonsport Artisan Co-op.



### 30. Bentonsport Post Office

The Bentonsport Post Office building was built of solid walnut in 1852 and moved to this site in the 1980s. The post office at Bentonsport was established in October 1838 as the seventh one in Iowa. Seth Richards was the first postmaster and Minnie Fulton was the last postmistress when the office closed in the early 1940s. The building houses Forever Sweet Creations, open seven days a week from Memorial Day to mid-December.



### 31. Bentonsport Bridge

The wagon bridge at Bentonsport was opened to traffic in 1883 replacing the ferries that once linked Vernon and Bentonsport. It is the one of the oldest iron wagon bridges remaining on the Des Moines River. The center span, however, was replaced after the Flood of 1903 destroyed it. Renovated in 1984 by the Bentonsport Improvement Association, it is open to pedestrian and bicycle traffic. It is owned by the Van Buren County Conservation Board.



### 32. Vernon School House

Designed by architect Riley Cass in Italianate style, the school house was built in 1868 and used as a school until 1960. Later, well known print and watercolor artist Wendell Mohr used it as his studio and residence. Today it is a private residence.



### 33. Vernon Cemetery

Maintained by the Vernon Cemetery Association, this cemetery is the final resting place for many of Vernon's founding fathers and mothers.



### 34. The Bill Richards Nature Trail

This 0.3 mi. trail located east of the Bentonsport Campground follows the right of way of the original Keokuk, Fort Des Moines and Minnesota Railroad route through Bentonsport and Oakland. After the route was abandoned in the 1960s, William Richards donated the land to the Bentonsport Improvement Association which built and maintains the Nature Trail. After seasonal rains, there is a waterfall at the trail's eastern end.

*We hope you have found this self-guided tour informative and relaxing. You are welcome to keep this brochure as a reminder of your visit, or you can return it to the Iron & Lace store for use by others. Thank you.*