

Gender differences in intercity commuting patterns in the Fox River Valley, Illinois, 1912 – 1936

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ABSTRACT

A limited number of studies examine journey to work travel in the United States prior to 1940. These efforts, however, focus on commuting to central cities from their adjacent suburbs; the journey to work of residents living on the periphery of metropolitan areas remains unexamined. This paper analyzes commuting behavior of residents in three suburbs 35 miles west of Chicago between 1912, the year prior to Ford's introduction of the automobile assembly line, and 1936, the year after the Works Progress Administration was established. Although the majority of employed Tri-City (St. Charles, Geneva, and Batavia) residents worked in their home city, this research demonstrates that workers engaged in suburb-to-suburb commuting prior to World War II. Furthermore, it reveals that frequently more workers commuted to suburban locations than to central city. It also finds that commuting patterns varied by city of origin, year, and gender, with more men, but a greater percentage of women, commuting to work.

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The journey to work is the crucial link between sites of production and reproduction. While many researchers have documented post World War Two commuting patterns and the gendered division of labor in the United States,¹ prewar journey-to-work patterns from the suburbs to the city center have not been examined extensively; and prewar commuting on the urban fringe remains essentially unexplored.² To partially redress the paucity of research, this paper examines the journey-to-work patterns of residents in three small cities on Chicago's periphery between 1912 and 1936.³

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¹ E.J. Christopher, M. Rogus, and S. Sööt, Changes in the direction of urban travel for the Chicago area, 1970 to 1990, *Transportation Research Record* 1477 (1995) 48–57; A.E. Pisarski, *Commuting in America: A National Report on Commuting Patterns and Trends*, Westport, 1987; A.E. Pisarski, *Commuting in America, III: The Third National Report on Commuting Patterns and Trends*, Washington, 2006; D.M. Levinson and A. Kumar, Density and the journey to work, *Growth and Change* 28 (1997) 147–172; A. Kessler-Harris, *Out to Work: A History of Wage-Earning Women in the United States*, New York, 1982; R.L. Daniel, *American Woman in the 20th Century: The Festival of Life*, New York, 1987; S. Hanson and G. Pratt, *Gender, Work, and Space*, New York, 1995.

² S.B. Warner, *Streetcar Suburbs: The Process of Growth in Boston (1870–1900)*, second edition, Cambridge, 1962; V.A. Bloomfield and R. Harris, The journey to work: an historical methodology, *Historical Methods* 30 (1997) 97–109; R. Harris and V.A. Bloomfield, The impact of industrial decentralization on the gendered journey to work, 1900–1940, *Economic Geography* 73 (1997) 94–117.

³ Commuting patterns derived from residential and employment data published in the *Tri-City Directory*, Elgin, for the years 1912, 1917, 1920, 1928, 1932, and 1936.

St. Charles, Geneva, and Batavia, Illinois, all of which were settled in the 1830s, straddle the Fox River, halfway between the larger satellite cities of Elgin and Aurora (Fig. 1). These cities, all in Kane County, are situated approximately thirty-five miles west of Chicago. They developed independently from Chicago until connected by rail in the late nineteenth century. Beginning in the 1890s, workers in the three cities — known locally as the Tri-Cities — were subject to successive rounds of investment and disinvestment decisions by local, regional, and national firms; this process continued throughout the study period.⁴ Local employment growth and contraction, combined with interurban rail connections between the cities, created opportunities for the development of a regional commuting shed.

This research investigates three questions. First, did regional commuting patterns develop? Second, did commuting patterns

⁴ P.J. Ashton, Urbanization and the dynamics of suburban development under capitalism, in: W. Tabb and L. Sawyers (Eds), *Marxism and the Metropolis*, second edition, New York, 1984, 54–81; D.M. Gordon, Capitalist development and the history of American cities, in: W. Tabb and L. Sawyers (Eds), *Marxism and the Metropolis*, second edition, New York, 1984, 21–53; E.V. Miller, Industrialization on Chicago's periphery: examining industrial decentralization, 1893–1936, *Journal of Urban History* (2015) 720–743; M. Robinson and J.D. Schielke, *Gustafson's Historic Batavia*, Batavia, 1980; *Tri-City Directory*, Elgin, 1920; T.A. Mair, *Batavia Revisited; The Batavian Historian*, <http://www.batavia.lib.il.us/historian-vol-1-25/the-batavian-historian-vol-8/volume-8-number-4.aspx>, last accessed 2 May 2016.

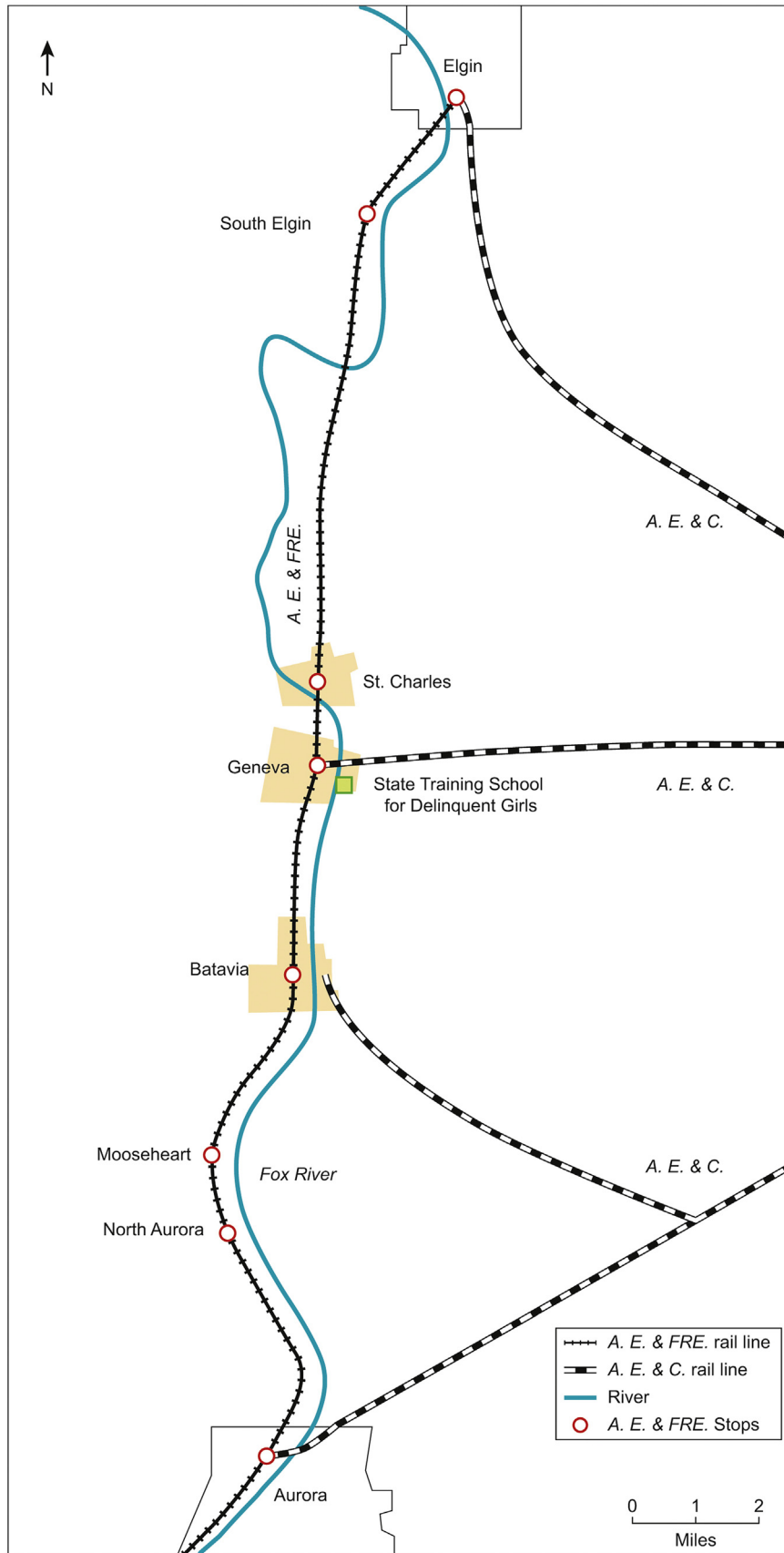


Fig. 1. Fox river communities between Elgin and Aurora. Source: Author.

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