



Bentonsport National Historic District

*Nestled in beauty
Immersed in nature*

Platted 1839

Bentonsport Heritage

Nestled between a limestone bluff and the lower Des Moines River is the village of Bentonsport. The beauty of the area and its water and forest resources were the reasons three developers chose this site in 1838 to lay the groundwork for a community to support settlers heading west, as well as local residents.

Over the next 25 years, grist and flour mills and a paper mill were built and powered by diverting river water through their stone foundations. Hotel operators, store keepers, black smiths, furniture and wagon makers, brick layers, and many other trades opened their doors for business. Settlers arriving by steamboat and rail bought wagons, ox teams, furnishings and supplies of all types before continuing west.

For the local settlers, a bank, academy, and four churches supplied funds and places to instruct minds and souls.

Across the river a village named Vernon grew similarly.

When the Civil War ended in 1865, Bentonsport's population peaked at about 650. The railroad terminus soon moved further west and trains no longer stopped at Bentonsport. Steamboat travel on the Des Moines River was decreasing in favor of the more reliable railroad transport. After WWI ended, Bentonsport's population began to fall as people moved elsewhere to find employment. Vernon was affected much the same way.

Today Bentonsport has a population of around 40 friendly people. Many live in 1840s homes, lovingly restored. The village has become a hub for working artisans and tourists seeking a beautiful place for respite. Steamboats and trains have been replaced by kayaks, four-wheelers and Amish black buggies.

One original building left in Vernon is its schoolhouse, originally designed by architect Riley Cass in Italianate style. It stayed in use until 1960. Later renowned artist Wendell Mohr used the building as his studio and home. Today it is a private residence.



Vernon school

Things to do

First of all: relax. Then, go fishing or paddling in a nearby lake or on a stretch of the Des Moines River, visit our museums, take in the sites of the county. Find a spot along the river to paint or draw.

Maybe you would enjoy weaving a rug, baking artisan bread, or making a wheel-thrown bowl.

Several Bentonsport artisans teach classes for the Villages Folk School. To find out more go to villagesfolkschool.com.

Over 251 bird species migrate to, visit, or live year round in Lake Sugema-Lacy Keosauqua Bird Conservation Area, just a few miles from Bentonsport. Bring binoculars to watch kingfishers, eagles, and herons **capture fish and frogs.** You'll hear red-headed, downy, hairy, red-bellied, and pileated woodpeckers drumming the trees and making their repetitious chirping calls as they fly through the woodlands. Crack the window **open at night to listen to owl calls: the great horned's** lonely wail, the eastern screech owls haunting warble, **and the barred owls' caterwauling that starts with an** ear piercing scream, changes to a comical guttural exchange and may end with purring.

There are many other activities to enjoy in warm weather close to Bentonsport: horseback riding in Shimek State Forest, swimming in Lake Lacey in Lacey-Keosauqua State Park, or playing golf at the Keosauqua Public Golf Course.

Check villagesofvanburen.com/calendar for upcoming events in all the villages of Van Buren County.



This brochure was created and produced by the Bentonsport Improvement Association, dedicated to maintaining and restoring the historical properties it owns, as well as supporting the vitality of the Bentonsport community.

Contributing photographers are members Mavadene Kennedy, Sandi Dimmitt and Mindy Kralicek. To learn more about Bentonsport, go to Bentonsportheritage.org.

Walking Paths

1840s Historic Walking Tour

Take a walk with the Bentonsport Self-guided Tour booklet and appreciate the 1840-1860 homes and buildings still in use. Stop to smell the roses in the Bentonsport Rose Garden situated within the rock walls of what was once the mill pond for water-powered mills that lined the river bank. Several bronze sculptures by renown sculptor Chris Bennett are featured here. An adjacent butterfly garden is planted inside a mill foundation. Stroll across the Des Moines River via the 1883 iron wagon bridge (now a pedestrian walkway) to the village of Vernon.



The Bentonsport Nature Trail



This 1.36 mile trail is a steep walk up from the J40 trailhead, but at the top of the hill the trail splits into forest and prairie loops. The prairie loop goes by a recently renovated

pond. It contains fish habitat and is stocked with bass, blue gill and catfish. The nature trail may also be accessed from the Ridge Road hill above Bentonsport where there is vehicle parking.

The Bill Richards Nature Trail

This short 0.3 mile trail is on the railroad right of way east of Bentonsport Campground. At the trail's east end is a vertical limestone outcrop that becomes a waterfall when it rains.

Many visitors explore the countryside walking the gravel roads. A walk at dusk is the best time to sight wild animals.

Museums



Indian Artifact Museum

Tony Sanders has collected more than 5,000 Indian arrowheads and artifacts, as well as prehistoric mammoth bones in southeast Iowa.

They are displayed in a log building in cases and mountings Sanders put together from native woods using a coping saw. There is no cost to tour the museum, which is open weekends, by chance or appointment during warm weather. To make an appointment to see the museum, call the Greef General Store at 319-592-3579.



Museum cases in Greef General Store



The Indian and other artifact collections in these museum cases belonged to L. E. Simmerman. As a youngster, Simmerman collected Indian relics from small mounds along Tom Creek and the Sioux River in 1900 near Granite, Iowa.

As an adult, Simmerman was in show business for a number of years, touring opera houses with repertoire companies and collecting more artifacts along the way.

In 1966 Simmerman moved to Bentonsport and displayed his collection at the Odd Fellows Building. The collection was cataloged with descriptions of each item, given to the Van Buren County Conservation Board, then moved to its present location.

Also on display in the Greef General Store are early Bentonsport and Vernon artifacts contributed by local residents.



Odd Fellows Museum

The Bentonsport Odd Fellows Hall was built prior to 1840 by John B. Grover, specifically to house one of the earliest Iowa chapters of the Odd Fellows on the second floor. The first floor became a furniture factory and store.

In settlement days, the Odd Fellows promoted personal and social development for



members and helped those in need by visiting the sick, relieving the distressed, burying the dead and educating orphans. Their symbol of three

interlocking rings with the letters F, L and T stand for Friendship, Love and Truth.

Although this chapter of the Odd Fellows has closed, the upstairs meeting hall is now a museum showcasing the symbols, principles, and artifacts of Iowa chapters. The museum can be viewed on days the Odd Fellows Woodshop is open or make an appointment by calling 319-592-3385. (The shopkeepers are not affiliated with the Odd Fellows organization.)



Shelter House

The Bentonsport shelter house is used for reunions, picnics, school visits and gatherings. It has seven picnic tables, electricity, modern bathrooms and showers. The shelter is located in the park along the river and has a play area nearby. Walk-ins welcomed. To secure a reservation, call Van Buren County Conservation at 319-293-3589.

Lodging

Bentonsport guest accommodations are open throughout the year and are spacious and comfortable. Reservations are recommended.

Mason House Inn



This historic hotel built in 1846 has been remodeled so each of its nine rooms has a private bath. A full country breakfast is included and

every room has a cookie jar with freshly baked cookies. It is decorated with many of the original Mason House possessions. The place is ideal for reunions, retreats, murder mysteries and get-a-ways. Free wireless Internet.

For an unconventional choice, try the converted 1950s **Caboose Cottage with satellite TV. It's an intimate escape.**

For reservations phone 319-592-3133 or email Stay@MasonHouseInn.com. View the accommodations at MasonHouseInn.com.

Alexander's Cottage

This 1840s story and a half home was completely renovated into a two bedroom, one and one-half bath guest cottage. Decorated with antiques, the cozy accommodations include a full kitchen with open living and dining area, WiFi, Smart TV, and sleeps up to four people. Relax in the quiet surroundings on the deck or front screened porch. Call 319-592-3152 or (cell) 515-975-4179. Email: alexande@netins.net. View interiors at showcase.netins.net/web/Alexander.



Bentonsport Village B&B



This 1847 home was faithfully restored to its former beauty, plus an addition blends seamlessly with the original footprint. Guest quarters are upstairs: two beautifully appointed rooms, each has a private bath. A third room with twin beds is available for overflow. A delicious breakfast is served in the formal dining room on the first floor. Relax with conversation, a movie or a good book in the downstairs library. Free Wi-Fi. Visit bentonsportbb.com or call 319-592-3191.



*Took a book to read on the porch.
Never read a page.
I found something more
valuable – peace of mind.*

Church Retreat



The 1857 Methodist Church was renovated in the 1990s into a spacious, beautiful retreat that sleeps 10 to 11 people. It has a fully equipped kitchen, Dish network and WiFi, and dining table that seats 10 comfortably. The large loft overlooking the living area has a king bed, bunk beds, trundle beds, a single bed and a ¾ bathroom. On the first floor is a queen bed, queen-size foldaway bed and a large full bathroom. Outdoors is a spacious backyard and a shady side yard with outdoor seating and a wood-burning fire pit. Great for family reunions, a gathering of friends, or anyone looking for a roomy place to stay. Reservations required. Call 319-592-3203.

Bentonsport Campground

Owned and operated by Van Buren County Conservation, this shady campground along the river has 23 modern sites with gravel camp pads, fire rings, picnic tables, 30–50 amp electricity and pit toilet.

Sites 13–23 are next to the river bank; sites 1-6 are pull through.

An adjacent picnic shelter with nearby playground has bathrooms and showers open 24/7 during warm weather.

Walk ins are welcome on non reserved sites. Reserve a site at mycountyparks.com. If problems or questions, call the Conservation office at 319-293-3589, email Cheryl@netins.net or visit vbcountyconservation.com/bentonsport-campgrounds.



Stone House Meeting Place

Originally a two-story duplex constructed in the early 1850s, the stone house was recently rebuilt

into a modern community facility. It's a great place year-round for receptions, family gatherings, meetings or classes. It has a meeting room and full kitchen with two



large ovens, tableware, folding tables, chairs, and restrooms. Its capacity is 80 people. It is accessible, and has wireless access to the Internet. For rental information contact

319-592-3222. Bentonsport Improvement Association owns and maintains the building.



Bentonsport Shops

Before you wrap up your stay, visit the specialty shops for that unique souvenir or work of art to remind yourself to relax – like you did in Bentonsport. The artists demonstrate their arts by appointment and during special events. Stores are open mid-April to mid-December.

Historic Greef General Store

Herman Greef built the Federal style Greef General Store in 1853 as a one-room frame building. Business boomed, and soon a two-story brick building was erected. A wide assortment of goods were sold, including dry goods, hardware, clothing, and drugs. In 1865, an additional building was built onto the rear of the store making it the largest general store in the county.

Today, antiques, jewelry, crafts, repurposed furniture and home goods are sold in the Greef General Store. Addie May Fudge, made with real cream and butter, operates in the rear of the store. The irresistible fudge is available by piece or pound. For more information call 319-592-3579 or email greefstore@gmail.com.



The She Shed



used to move it.

The She Shed is run by a collaborative of artisans. Each day a craft is demonstrated, including (but not limited to) stained glass, wool appliqué, floral arranging, and quilting. Kits for various projects are for sale. Classes are also offered. Call 319-288-1042 for information.

The She Shed is operated in the Ira Corn house. Corn made a living as a millwright and farmer in the 1850s. Around 1926, the house was moved from north of Bentonsport to Main Street and converted into a store. A team of horses and a stump puller were



Carriage House Quilts

Located at 21937 Marion Street next to the 1840s home of Dr. Chester W. Cowles, the original carriage house has been converted to Carriage House Quilts. The shop carries name brand quilting fabric, hand and mill-dyed wool, embroidery thread, patterns, kits and gift items. Long-arm quilting service is available. Call 319-288-1042 for information.

Iron and Lace



Lace. The building is not historic, but it is special. The wood is reclaimed from three historic barns in Van Buren County. It was designed by the owners to demonstrate and accentuate their arts. The gallery and gift shop offers hand woven rugs, original artworks, one-of-a-kind jewelry and pottery. Call 319-592-3222 for more information.

Odd Fellas Woodshop

The Odd Fellas Woodshop operates on the first floor of the Odd Fellows Building on the west end of Bentonsport. A wood carver and traditional woodworker offer works for sale including carved walking sticks, sculptured busts, decorative pieces, wooden spoons, and gift items. For more information, call 319-592-3385.



A blacksmith and potter noted for her Queen Anne's Lace pottery are the artist-proprietors of Iron and

Bentonsport Bank Building

Known as the Bentonsport bank, a burglary attempt in 1895, involving nitroglycerin and gunpowder, blew up the vault and demolished the bank interior. Rebuilt in the years after, the building is now one quarter the size of the original.

A new business is coming to this location.



It's so quiet here. You can hear nature's sounds, like leaves fluttering in the breeze and far off bird calls.



Historic Presbyterian Church

Of the churches that served early Bentonsport, only the Presbyterian Church remains as a house of worship. The structure has been maintained just as it was when constructed in 1855. During warm seasons church services are held Sundays at 9 a.m.

The acoustics of the building are exceptional, making it popular for private uses such as musical



programs and weddings. Call 319-592-3222 to reserve the church for your special event.

The building is open from May 1 to mid-Oct. It is not heated or air-conditioned. Bentonsport Improvement Association owns and maintains the building.



Venue for Weddings, Anniversaries, Reunions

Looking for a scenic charming venue to exchange vows, or to gather with friends and relatives?

Some romantic places in Bentonsport for a wedding ceremony are the Rose Garden by the river, the Historic Presbyterian Church on the hill, and the iron truss pedestrian bridge.



The Stone House Meeting Place is the perfect space to prepare or serve catered meals and hold a reception for 80 guests.

Bentonsport has lodging for up to 40 overnight guests. There are more accommodations within eight country miles.

The best time to visit Bentonsport is...

Spring: The greenery is gorgeous. Fishermen cast their lines in the river and nearby lakes. Frogs and toads ramp up their peeps, creeks, trills, and chuckles in the evenings. Birds build nests and defend their territories.



Summer: Fledglings leave their nests. Fawns explore their home range. Raccoon kits explore and get scolded. Fox kits play at dens and venture into open fields for a quick chase. Eagles and turkey vultures cast roaming shadows. Fireflies blink.



Fall: Insects trill frantically before frost hits. Gray and fox squirrels gather nuts from oaks, walnuts and hickories.

Farmers ready for harvest. Woodlands are in autumn splendor.

Hunting Season: Van Buren County has dense populations of deer, and turkey and pheasant are plentiful. Check iowadnr.gov/hunting/hunting-season-dates to plan your hunting. There are over 2200 acres of public hunting in the county with 60 acres adjacent to Bentonsport. Get permission in person to hunt on private land.

Winter: Lift your spirits during cold weather. Go snowshoeing along river roads and in the state park. Follow animal tracks after snowfall. Look for squirrel, opossum, bobcat, fox, coyote and raccoon tracks along a creek or pass through. Under trees, birds leave delicate foot and feather tracks as they drag their wings or push off from snow with their tails.

Stargaze during a cold snap. It's worth the energy expended to bundle up.



During settlement Bentonsport trees were cleared to provide wood for construction of buildings and for railroad ties. The trees are back and contribute to the tranquility of this river village.