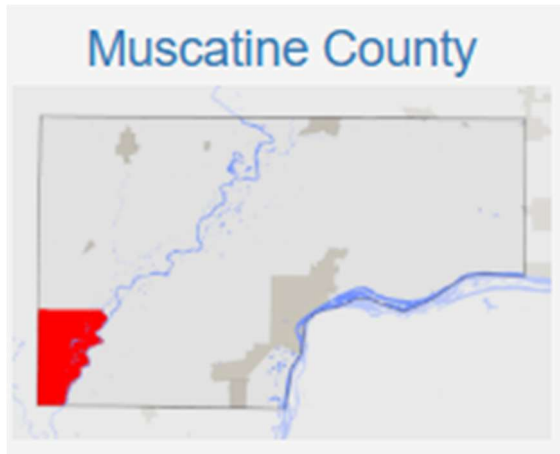


Conesville Area Truck Farming and the BCR&N Railroad

Source: *Survey of the Historic Fruit & Vegetable Industry of Muscatine County, Iowa; Fruitland, Orono, and Pike Townships*

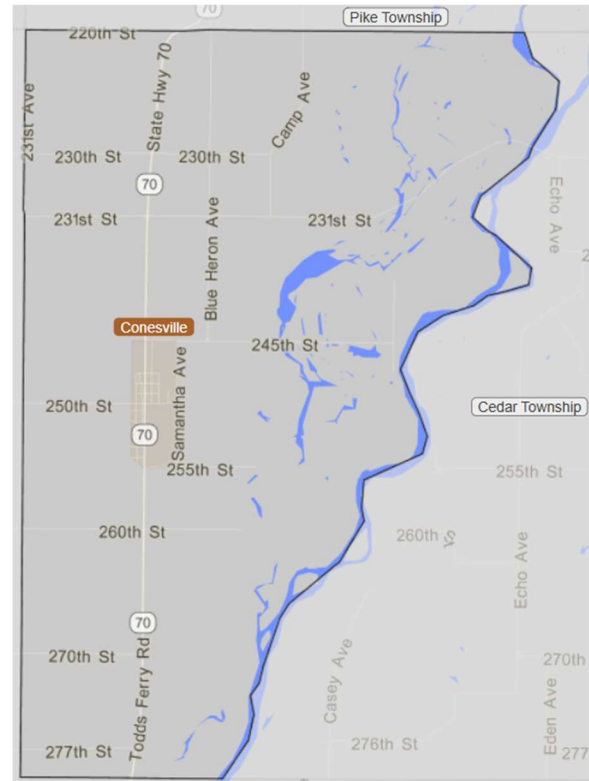
CLG Grant #202412-13072; HADB# 03017; Prepared by Jennifer A. Price, PhD; Principal Investigator, *Price Preservation Research*



**Orono Township in Southwest
Muscatine County**

**City of Conesville
in Orono Township**

Source: <https://statisticalatlas.com/>



4.1. Conesville: The County's Other Truck Farming Region

Conesville, located at the confluence of the Iowa and Cedar rivers in Orono Township, Muscatine County, emerged in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as a leading center for truck farming in Iowa. Its strategic location and fertile soils made it particularly suited for cultivating watermelons, cantaloupes, and sweet potatoes—crops that came to define the region's agricultural identity.

The town was formally platted in 1870 following the extension of the Burlington, Cedar Rapids & Minnesota Railroad (later the Burlington, Cedar Rapids & Northern). In return for a depot at the site, local landowner Beebe S. Cone donated property to the railway, and the new station was initially known simply as "Cone." Incorporated as Conesville in 1878, the town soon supported a robust commercial sector that included a mill, general stores, blacksmiths, and a hotel.³⁴⁹

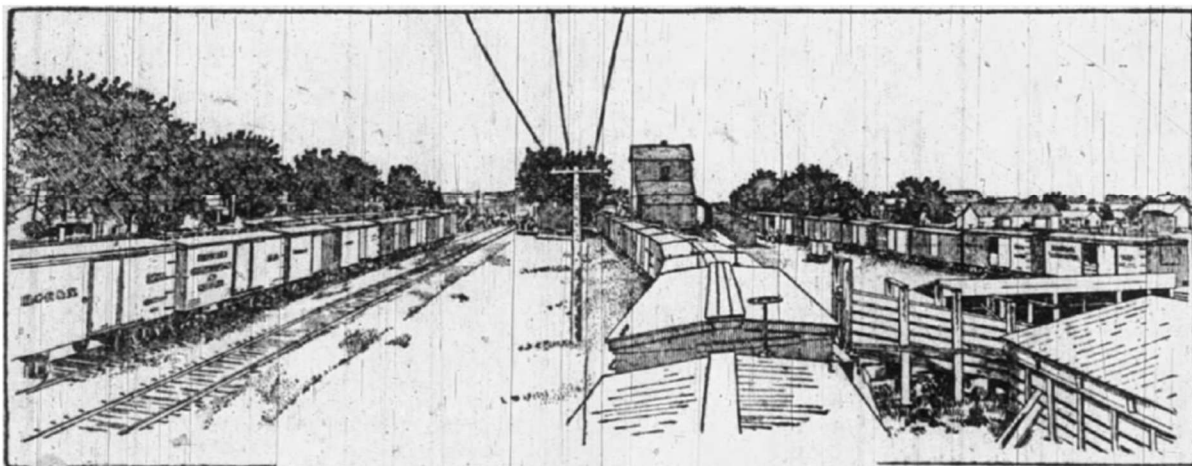


Figure 50. Hundreds of Cars Waiting for Melons at Conesville, 1900. Source: *Muscatine Journal*, December 15, 1900

By 1911, Conesville had become “the center of the most prominent watermelon and sweet potato producing section of the state,” its reputation bolstered by favorable soil and transportation advantages.³⁵⁰ The sandy lacustrine soils of the surrounding plain, deposited in ancient lakebeds, were prized for their friable structure, high porosity, and early warming characteristics—qualities ideal for vegetable crops. Although these soils were poorly suited for field corn or hay due to their lower moisture retention, they allowed for early and successful planting of melons and sweet potatoes.³⁵¹ A 1932 survey by the Muscatine County Farm Bureau confirmed this specialization: of 754 acres of truck crops near Conesville, 335 were planted in watermelons, 205 in cantaloupes, and 214 in sweet potatoes.³⁵²

This truck farming concentration was further supported by the natural soil series prevalent in the area—primarily Bremer, Calhoun, and Buckner—whose fertile but poorly drained characteristics necessitated drainage tiles to ensure consistent yields.³⁵³ Local variation in soil texture meant that Conesville's soils were

³⁴⁹ Mable Estle Brown, *The Fork of the Rivers: History is People/History and Partial Genealogy of Oakland–Orono Townships, Louisa–Muscatine Counties* (1978), 112–14.

³⁵⁰ Richman, *History of Muscatine County, Iowa*, 249; U.S. Census Bureau, *Census of Iowa, 1905–1930*, cited in G. W. Schlesselman, *The Geography of the Lake Calvin Region of Iowa, with Emphasis on Land Utilization* (PhD diss., University of Nebraska, 1935), 23.

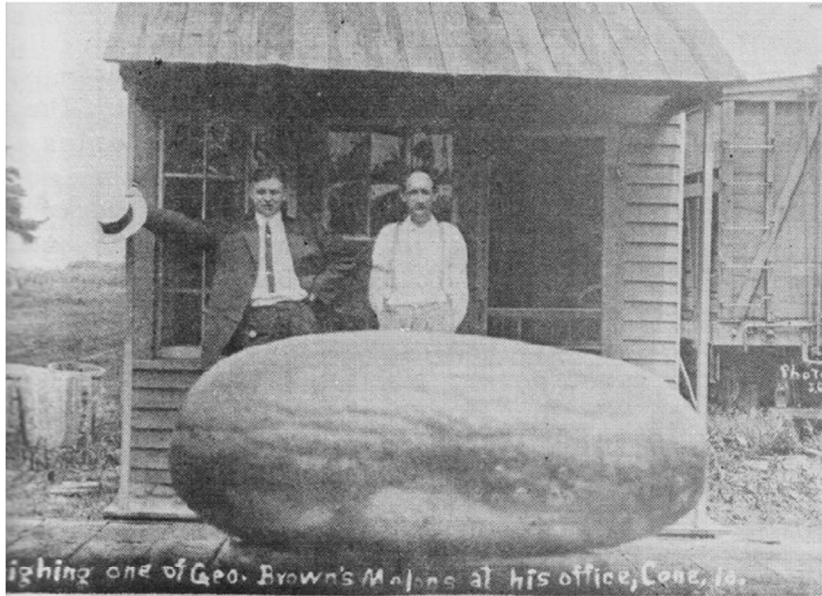
³⁵¹ W.H. Stevenson, P.E. Brown, and H.W. Johnson, *Soil Survey of Iowa: Report No. 3—Muscatine County* (Iowa Agricultural Experiment Station, April 1918), 5.

³⁵² Erwin, Shepherd, and Morgan, *Marketing Iowa Cantaloupes*, 110.

³⁵³ Schlesselman, *Lake Calvin Region*, 63.

often more loamy and organic-rich than those on Muscatine Island. As a result, while muskmelons from the Island might ripen a week earlier, Conesville produce retained a reputation for quality and abundance.³⁵⁴

Conesville's agricultural transformation became especially visible around the turn of the twentieth century. In 1900, the *Muscatine Journal* described a surge in activity as a "veritable Klondyke boom," driven by rising crop demand and shipping volume.³⁵⁵ Officials of both the Rock Island and the Burlington, Cedar Rapids & Northern Railroads visited Conesville, concluding that "improvements in the facilities at that point were imperative."



They soon authorized construction of additional sidings, "affording loading facilities of one hundred cars per day."³⁵⁶ These officials "expressed themselves as greatly impressed with the growing importance of the melon and sweet potato industries," recognizing that "the village is well titled to the improvements that will be made."³⁵⁷

Figure 51. Postcard, c.1910 – "Weighing one of George Brown's melons at his office, Cone, Iowa." Source: Brown, 1978

Annual shipments of produce and livestock from Conesville exceeded 1,200 cars in 1899, with

predictions of surpassing 2,000 by the next year.³⁵⁸ To meet rising demand, local capital funded a new storage sweet potato house with a 9,000 to 10,000 bushel capacity, offering dry storage infrastructure critical to stabilizing prices and maintaining quality.³⁵⁹ The economic boom drove real estate values sharply upward: "Land which eight years ago sold for from \$12 to \$20 per acre at present commands a price ranging from \$35 to \$55 per acre, the increment being largely due to development of the melon and sweet potato industry."³⁶⁰ The Iowa Telephone Company also extended service to Conesville by 1900, constructing a toll line to Muscatine and Columbus Junction to improve regional communication.³⁶¹

Shipping and storage capacity continued to expand. By 1920, the Cone Commission Company erected a community sweet potato storage house, providing a vital buffer for growers during periods of market fluctuation.³⁶² In particularly productive seasons, Conesville growers shipped out hundreds of carloads of melons. While exact figures varied, early postcards claimed up to 3,000 acres of melons grown in the vicinity. In a notable year, 837 carloads of watermelons were shipped—an extraordinary volume for a small town.³⁶³ Cantaloupes, or muskmelons, also saw increasing commercial production, typically shipped in crates.

³⁵⁴ Schlesselman, *Lake Calvin Region*, 63.

³⁵⁵ "Conesville Boom," *Muscatine Semi Weekly News Tribune*, May 1, 1900.

³⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

³⁶¹ *Ibid.*

³⁶² Brown, *Fork of the Rivers*, 54.

³⁶³ *Ibid.*

CONESVILLE, IOWA.
 and vicinity has justly had the reputation for raising melons, sweet potatoes, etc., that are of exceptional quality. Growers of these products are keen to maintain this reputation, naturally with each passing year this interest has raised the quality. If you want the best on the markets—buy from the following dealers.

GEORGE BROWN
 Boxed Sweet Potatoes.

Honts & Orr
 Melons and Sweet Potatoes.

Wolford Bros. Company (Inc.)
 Growers, Shippers, Receivers
Fruits and Vegetables.

A. U. JEAN
 Cantaloupes and Sweet Potatoes.

L. C. BABBITT
 Sweet Potatoes and Melons.
 By Bushel or Carloads.

Max Fuhlman
 — Melons and Sweet Potatoes. —

M. L. BROCKWAY
 Melons and Sweet Potatoes
 One Bushel or Carload.

The *Conesville Courier* noted in 1916 that George Brown shipped the first carload of Osage muskmelons that year, highlighting the expanding diversity of the town's truck crop output.³⁶⁴

Conesville's natural advantages, bolstered by infrastructure and market access, positioned it among Iowa's premier truck farming regions by the 1930s. Though later decades would bring challenges such as blight and economic contraction, its early twentieth-century success left a lasting imprint on the region's agricultural landscape.

Figure 52. Advertisement for the leading truck growers and dealers in Conesville in 1922: "CONESVILLE, IOWA and vicinity has justly had the reputation for raising melons, sweet potatoes, etc., that are of exceptional quality. Growers of these products are keen to maintain this reputation, naturally with each passing year this interest has raised the quality. If you want the best on the markets—buy from the following dealers." Source: *Muscatine Journal*, September 7, 1922

By 1918, the primary crops grown were watermelons, cantaloupes, sweet potatoes, and asparagus. Watermelons yielded between one-fourth to half a carload per acre, and cantaloupes had similar yields. Both crops achieved higher yields in seasons with well-distributed rainfall and through the use of irrigation. The distribution of moisture during the growing season significantly influenced the quality and flavor of cantaloupes and watermelons. The estimated total yield of melons included not only the amount shipped out of the county but also those sold at local markets, used for seed, and those left on the ground at the end of the season.³⁶⁵



Figure 53. (Left) Shipping melons on the BCR&N, 1900; (Right) Crated cantaloupes ready for shipment on the Rock Island Railroad, 1930. Source: Brown 1978: 131, 55

³⁶⁴ Brown, *Fork of the Rivers*, 54..

³⁶⁵ Stevenson, Brown, and Johnson, *Soil Survey of Iowa*, 5. Sandy soils were also found in the vicinity of Moscow in the northern tier of townships in Muscatine County.

4.2 The Wolford Brothers of Conesville

About 1898, Hal C., Ray V., and Clyde L. Wolford—styling themselves Wolford Brothers—entered the fruit and vegetable growing business in Conesville, just prior to the town's truck farming boom.³⁶⁶ By 1900, the Wolford Brothers had established Conesville, Iowa, as one of the state's premier watermelon shipping stations. While previously unknown in St. Louis markets, Hal personally introduced Conesville melons there, noting their quality and shipping potential: "We will be on this market with our melons early next season and if the few days I have spent here this year is any criterion to go by, we'll do exceedingly well." One shipment averaged 48 pounds per melon, and the firm also operated a newly completed dry storage house with a 10,000-bushel capacity for sweet potatoes, aiming for year-round supply to the trade.³⁶⁷

The Wolfords were simultaneously cultivating 75 acres of sweet potatoes, expecting yields of 150–200 bushels per acre.³⁶⁸ By the 1901 season, their acreage had expanded to 130 acres of sweet potatoes and 120 acres of melons. They developed a specialized machinery attachment for sweet potato transplanting, which was later adopted by manufacturers—"Wolford Bros. made a very valuable improvement in the way of an attachment... incorporated in the planter as now regularly made."³⁶⁹

In 1903, W.S. McKee joined the firm, purchasing a half interest in 310 acres of farmland adjoining Conesville and entering into the newly renamed Wolford Bros. & McKee. The operation expanded to control 600 acres across multiple crops: "They will put 150 acres in sweet potatoes and 75 in melons. The balance will be put in corn and vegetables."³⁷⁰ The firm built an 8,000-bushel warehouse and planned to operate across 12 states, including southern buying trips during the melon season.³⁷⁰

By 1920, the Wolford Brothers had become nationally recognized for record-breaking sweet potato yields. With 30 acres under cultivation, they harvested over 8,000 bushels—averaging 265 bushels per acre. This yield far exceeded norms for the corn belt, where 20-bushel corn ground was now producing over 150 bushels of sweet potatoes.³⁷¹ Storage capacity on the farm was expanded to hold 8,000 to 10,000 bushels. The brothers' confidence in sweet potatoes was so high that they planned to increase their plantings to 150 acres the following season.³⁷² C.V. Holsinger, a vegetable specialist from Iowa State College, praised the Wolford operation, noting that sweet potatoes "serve the people of that country in much the same way that the Irish potato does in the northern states." He warned, however, that sweet potatoes required careful attention to climate, sandy soil, and maturity windows. The crop did best in sandy bottoms like those near Burlington, Keokuk, and Muscatine, where Iowa's warmest conditions prevailed.³⁷³

That same year, the *Lone Tree Reporter* declared that the Wolford Brothers were "striving to make the sweet potato industry a profitable and leading enterprise" and reported that yields had reached up to 175 bushels per acre, with gross returns of \$300 to \$350 per acre. The potatoes were selling for \$2 per bushel, packed in hampers and ready for shipment, at a time when prices for corn remained stagnant.³⁷⁴ In January 1920, Hal C. Wolford addressed the Muscatine Lions Club as president of the Iowa Vegetable Growers' Association, advocating for Iowa farmers to adopt "California methods of marketing," including better packaging, branding, and coordinated selling. "They produce a first-class product, put it in packages which are uniform and easily

³⁶⁶ "Conesville Boom," *Muscatine Semi-Weekly Tribune*, May 1, 1900.

³⁶⁷ "Farm and Market," *Muscatine Journal*, September 21, 1900, 4; "Conesville Melons at St. Louis," *Muscatine Semi-Weekly News Tribune*, September 25, 1900, 4.

³⁶⁸ "Conesville Wolford Sweet Potatoes," *Muscatine Journal*, April 25, 1901, 5.

³⁶⁹ "Wolford and McKee," *Lone Tree Reporter*, March 13, 1903, 5.

³⁷⁰ "Wolford Bros. Conesville," *Muscatine News Tribune*, February 11, 1903, 5.

³⁷¹ "Conesville Expert Raises Great Crop of Sweet Potatoes," *Muscatine Journal*, January 14, 1920, 5.

³⁷² *Ibid.*

³⁷³ "Growing 'Sweets': Conesville Firm Breaks Record Growing Sweet Spuds," *Muscatine News-Tribune*, January 17, 1920, 5.

³⁷⁴ "Wolford Brothers of Conesville," *Lone Tree Reporter*, March 13, 1920, 5.

handled, label it and then advertise it... The Iowa growers must adopt the California method if returns are to be secured commensurate with the value of the product," he said.³⁷⁵



Figure 54. Woford Brothers: "Spraying fifty acres of melons per day at Conesville with a large orchard sprayer . . . The man in the foreground is showing by contrast how to use a little blow-gun or atomizer in the home garden," 1916.
Source: *Transactions of the Iowa State Horticultural Society*, vol. 51, 1916

By 1924, the Woford Brothers had emerged as the leading figures in Iowa's cantaloupe trade. Hal C. Woford told students at the Iowa State College short course that "Iowa can put California out of the cantaloupe market," and recounted earning more than \$6,000 from ten carloads shipped to Chicago. He emphasized that Iowa growers could deliver ripe melons to Chicago within 24 hours—unlike California shippers, who faced five-day freight hauls and had to pick green.³⁷⁶ To compete nationally, Woford Brothers adopted California-style marketing methods: uniform packaging, branding, and rapid delivery. As Hal explained to the Muscatine Lions Club that spring, "The Iowa growers must adopt the California method if returns are to be secured commensurate with the value of the product." He argued that Iowa crops were as good or better than those from California but were often undervalued due to inconsistent marketing and poor presentation.³⁷⁷

In March, Hal C. Woford launched a unique branding initiative by commissioning a distinctive round-label cantaloupe design called the "Oasis" brand. Designed by Mrs. Clyde Woford, the logo featured a desert motif with a sphinx and palm tree, combining visual appeal with marketable identity.³⁷⁸ The brothers also made and labeled 25,000 crates for the 1924 season using local Iowa timber. Their 50-acre cantaloupe planting was

³⁷⁵ "Conesville Man Addresses Lions," *Muscatine Journal*, January 14, 1920, 5.

³⁷⁶ "Iowa Melon Grower Can Beat California," *Columbus Gazette*, February 7, 1924, 5.

³⁷⁷ "Conesville Man Addresses Lions," *Muscatine Journal*, March 13, 1924, 7.

³⁷⁸ "Woford Plans Label for Oasis Brand," *Lone Tree Reporter*, March 6, 1924, 8.

supported by an in-house sawmill operation, ensuring full supply-chain control.³⁷⁹ By midsummer, Wolford Brothers' cantaloupes had "topped the Chicago market" with ten carloads in custom-labeled crates, fetching \$500–800 per carload and netting a profit of over \$3,000 from just thirteen acres.³⁸⁰ That year, Conesville shipped as many as 700 carloads of melons and cantaloupes—a figure unmatched elsewhere in the region. Hal C. Wolford served as vice president of the Iowa State Vegetable Growers Association and was elected incoming president, reinforcing his role not just as a grower but as a statewide agricultural leader.³⁸¹

Despite their marketing triumphs in early 1924, the Wolford Brothers were not immune to agricultural setbacks. That fall, unseasonably wet and cold weather devastated Muscatine County crops. Watermelons failed entirely, and cantaloupes fell below the commercial standard.³⁸² Still, the Wolfords projected that they would harvest and store between 60,000 and 65,000 bushels of sweet potatoes—approximately half their normal yield.² Prices remained favorable, hovering around \$2 per bushel, thanks in part to improved packing and long-distance shipping capacity.³⁸³

Hal C. Wolford continued to champion professionalized marketing strategies in public forums. In a year-end article for the *Muscatine Journal*, he emphasized the importance of understanding buyer preferences and tailoring production accordingly. "The varieties grown and the grading, picking, and packing methods have not been up to the standard required by buyers in the larger centers," he wrote. "Enough acreage should be planted to load car lots daily... the means must be properly graded and packed in standard packages."³⁸⁴ He also introduced a new cooperative contract model wherein Wolford Bros. supplied seed and technical oversight to local farmers, while managing grading, packing, and marketing through their Conesville plant.³⁸⁵

By spring 1925, the Wolford enterprise had reached a new scale. The brothers operated approximately 200 acres of cantaloupes and contracted additional acreage from nearby growers.³⁸⁶ They experimented in collaboration with Iowa State College to increase yields and minimize crop failure risk, believing that Conesville could rival the famed California melon districts in both volume and quality.⁴ A reporter visiting the farm remarked on the family's meticulous operations: "Wolford Bros. have devoted a lot of effort and have carried on a lot of experimental work... they are demonstrating that fact every season by experiments that help to increase yields and eliminate hazards."³⁸⁷

That September, the Wolford packing shed processed more than 40,000 crates of cantaloupes. Workers packed crates late into the evening to meet rail schedules, ensuring next-day arrivals in Chicago. Each shipment had to be perfectly timed: "This necessitates picking at exactly the right time," a local reporter noted.³⁸⁸ Hal C. Wolford's brand had become so well-known that "their brand is carried in the commission house lists along with Colorado cantaloupes," a testament to Conesville's new status on the national market.³⁸⁹

By 1926, the Wolford Brothers were applying scientific rigor to every phase of their sweet potato operations, from seed treatment to storage. Hal C. Wolford described seed sanitation as essential: "Seed treatment is not a cure for all evils, but... we can in time practically eliminate black rot from our seed." The company operated sixteen treatment barrels, immersing potatoes in a corrosive sublimate solution to prevent disease, a process

³⁷⁹ "Wolford Cantaloupe Acreage and Crates," *Brighton Enterprise*, July 10, 1924, 1.

³⁸⁰ "Wolford Topped Chicago Market," *Des Moines Register*, April 12, 1924.

³⁸¹ *Ibid.*

³⁸² "Melons Dismal Failure," *Des Moines Register*, October 4, 1924.

³⁸³ "Sweet Potato Crop Half of Normal," *Muscatine Journal*, September 30, 1924.

³⁸⁴ Hal C. Wolford, "Truck Crop Marketing Methods," *Muscatine Journal*, December 31, 1924.

³⁸⁵ *Muscatine Journal*, December 31, 1924.

³⁸⁶ "Great Possibilities in Cantaloupes," *Muscatine Journal*, April 22, 1925, 9.

³⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸⁸ "More Than 40,000 Cases to Be Shipped," *Muscatine Journal*, September 3, 1925.

³⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

they scaled to treat seed for 125 acres.³⁹⁰ Their operation included 12,000 square feet of hotbed space across four beds, each 200 feet long, with construction costs totaling \$2,500.³⁹¹

Despite their meticulous preparation, the 1926 growing season brought disaster. In June, fierce sandstorms destroyed over 75 percent of sweet potato plantings in the Conesville district. Crops had been replanted after a storm earlier in the week, only to be obliterated again days later. Hal Wolford estimated that 90 percent of cantaloupes and 50 percent of watermelons had to be replanted, and added, "Rain would enable us to start over again... We have replanted as late as July 4."³⁹² Windbreaks like rye rows helped in some cases, but the loss was severe.³⁹³

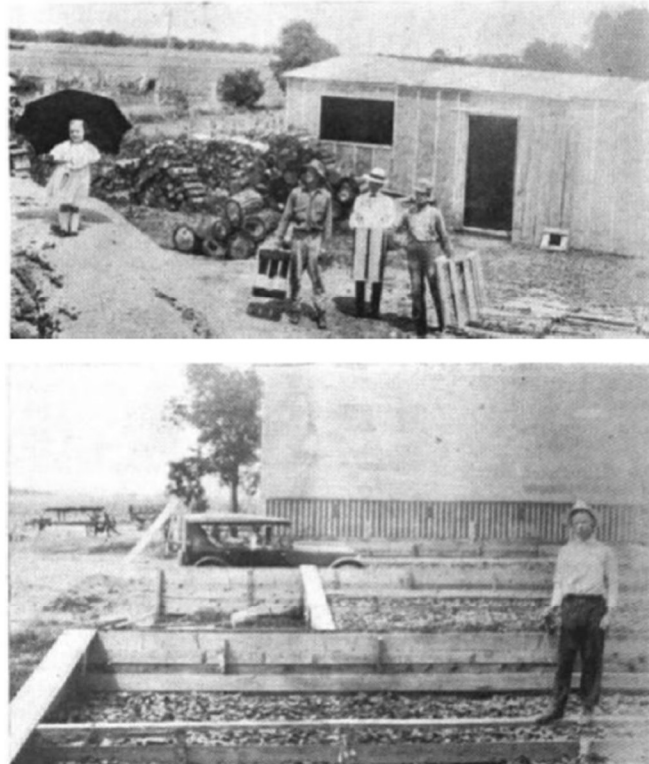


Figure 55. (Top) The Saw Mill on Wolford Brothers' Place, 1921. "The men are holding a bushel box for sweet potato handling and curing, a flat crate for Iowa Cantaloupes, and a cabbage crate. Wood used is mostly red birch and elm. Wolford Brothers learned in the South the great advantage she has in local box material and local mills. This is the French system—in France almost all lumber and fuel is produced locally." (Bottom) Hal C. Wolford and Wolford Brothers' 500 feet of hot beds for producing sweet potato plants. Source: *The Potato Magazine* (August 1921)

Yet, the Wolfords pushed ahead. By 1927, they were active partners in Iowa's broader agricultural modernization effort. Conesville was selected as a key location for experimental collaboration with Iowa State College. Hal C. and Ray Wolford hosted field trials for sweet potato varieties and contributed to the Conesville sub-experiment laboratory.³⁹³ A September 1927 tour featured more than a thousand watermelon crosses and experimental sweet potato plots on the Wolford farm, with state leaders from Ames and Illinois agricultural institutions in attendance.³⁹⁴

³⁹⁰ "Sweet Potato Seed Treatment," *The Des Moines Register*, May 9, 1926.

³⁹¹ *Ibid.*

³⁹² "Sweet Potatoes Destroyed by Wind," *Muscatine Journal*, June 7, 1926.

³⁹³ "Truck Growers Will Inspect Experiment Plots," *Muscatine Journal*, September 2, 1927.

³⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

One of the most promising results was a new African melon variety that exhibited resistance to both wilt and anthracnose.³⁹⁵ The substation in Conesville also studied Hal C. Woford's discovery of a white variant of the Bermuda sweet potato, considered a promising mutation with market potential.³⁹⁶ In this period, Hal Woford and his brother were no longer just growers—they were research collaborators, employers, marketers, and civic leaders. The company regularly advertised for laborers to harvest sweet potatoes and hosted large-scale demonstrations to promote agricultural best practices.³⁹⁶

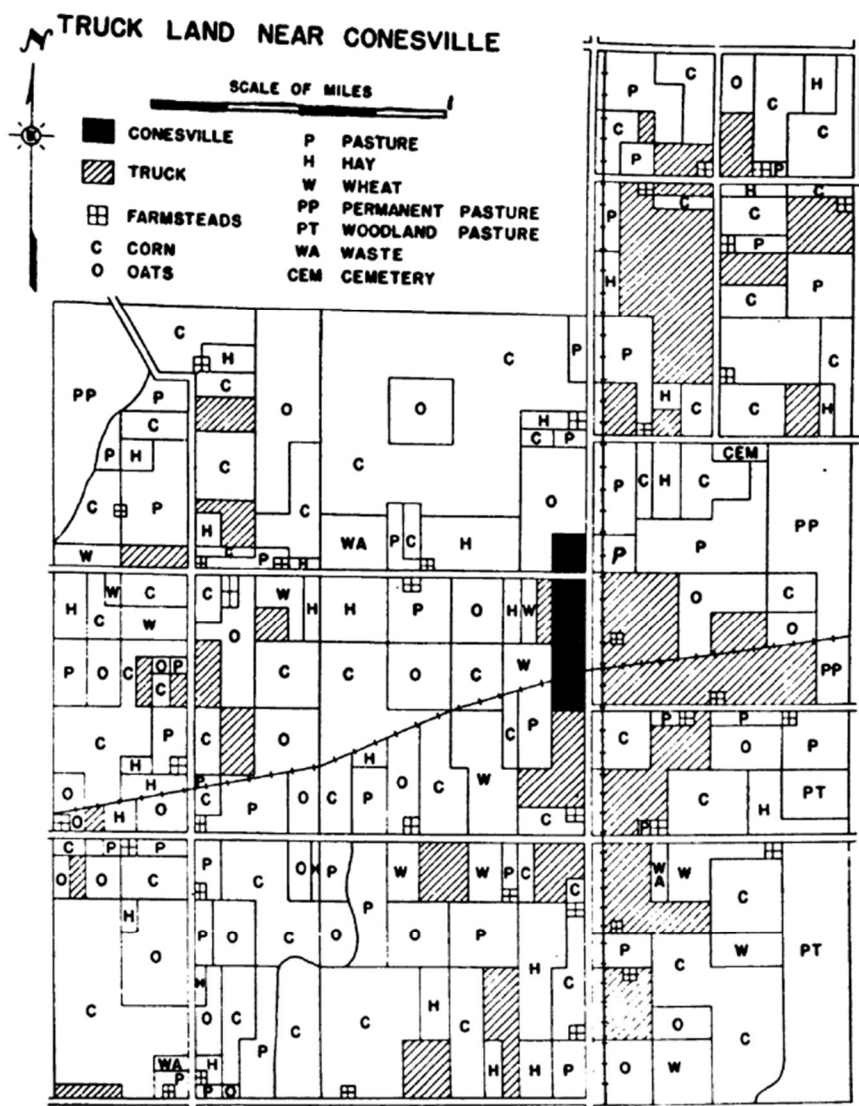


Figure 56. Map showing land dedicated to truck-farming in and around Conesville in 1935. The town was at the junction of two railroads: the BCR&N and the Milwaukee Cut-Off, and Primary Highway 70. Truck farming in Conesville had grown in importance due to easy access to Muscatine and its canning and pickling establishments.³⁹⁷

Source: Schlesselman, 1935

³⁹⁵ "Truck Farmers in All Day Tour," *Muscatine Journal*, September 8, 1927.

³⁹⁶ "Men Wanted to Harvest Sweet Potatoes," *Muscatine Journal*, September 30, 1926, 13.

³⁹⁷ Schlesselman, *Lake Calvin Region*, 63.

Following the establishment of Conesville as a research hub for sweet potatoes and melons in 1927, the Wolford Brothers continued to serve as key partners in agricultural experimentation. In October 1928, their farm was one of several in Muscatine County selected for official testing of sweet potato yields and seed

performance by C. L. Fitch of Iowa State College. These trials aimed to identify the best varieties for yield and disease resistance under local conditions.³⁹⁸



Figure 57. Hal C. Wolford (left) and brother Clyde Wolford of Wolford Brothers (growers and dealers of sweet potatoes and cantaloupes in Conesville) pose with their “Hill of Priestly Sweets,” a variety of sweet potato developed by New Jersey farmer, Henry Priestly. This was just one of three varieties raised by the brothers, the other two being Yellow Jerseys and Prolific Big Stems. According to the Wolford Brothers: “It isn’t enough for us to know that our sweet potatoes are good when they leave here; it isn’t enough to know they are good when they reach the wholesaler and the retail merchant: we are not satisfied until we know that their quality is good when they reach the table of the consumer.” Source: *Cedar Rapids Gazette*, October 21, 1928

In 1929, Wolford Bros. planted approximately 150 acres of cantaloupes and 160 acres of sweet potatoes.³⁹⁹ While the melon harvest began promisingly, drought and wilt reduced the total yield to about 30 carloads—half of the previous year’s total.⁴⁰⁰ Yet the Wolfords pressed forward, continuing to brand their produce under the now-established “Oasis” label. Their sweet potatoes, packed in oval hampers rather than shipped in bulk, were distributed to fourteen western and Midwestern states.⁴⁰¹

In 1930, drought again threatened melon production. Hal Wolford noted that “unless a heavy rain is received... there will be few carloads of watermelons shipped from the Muscatine Island and the Conesville melon districts.”⁴⁰² Sweet potatoes and cantaloupes, which required less moisture, became more dependable. “We have replanted as late as July 4 and would do so this year,” Wolford said, expressing optimism despite challenges.⁴⁰³ The cantaloupe crop thrived that season, with fields yielding enough to average 100 crates per day over two weeks. The Wolfords shipped two straight refrigerator cars of melons to nearby cities under refrigerated conditions and marketed the fruit under their recognized label, which guaranteed uniform grading and handling.⁴⁰⁴

The summer of 1930 also saw strong prospects for both cantaloupes and sweet potatoes. Hal Wolford reported that “conditions in the Conesville melon section lead raisers to predict one of the largest crops in ten years.”⁴⁰⁵ With 150 to 200 acres planted, shipments were expected to begin in early August and might exceed the usual 30-carload average.⁵ Meanwhile, Iowa State College continued experiments on wilt-resistant

³⁹⁸ “Continued Tests on Potato Plots,” *Muscatine Journal*, October 9, 1928.

³⁹⁹ “Wolford Bros. Ship Under ‘Oasis’ Label,” *Washington Evening Journal*, September 17, 1929.

⁴⁰⁰ “Melon Season Nears End at Conesville,” *Quad-City Times*, September 15, 1929.

⁴⁰¹ *Washington Evening Journal*, September 17, 1929.

⁴⁰² “Watermelons Threatened by Drought,” *Muscatine Journal*, August 14, 1930.

⁴⁰³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰⁵ “Record Crop of Melons Forecast,” *Quad-City Times*, July 10, 1930.

watermelons, with Wolford cooperating in variety trials.⁴⁰⁶ Through the 1930s and into the early 1940s, the Wolford Brothers continued to lead Iowa's vegetable agriculture not only through their scale of production but also via cooperation with state research institutions and consistent varietal innovation.

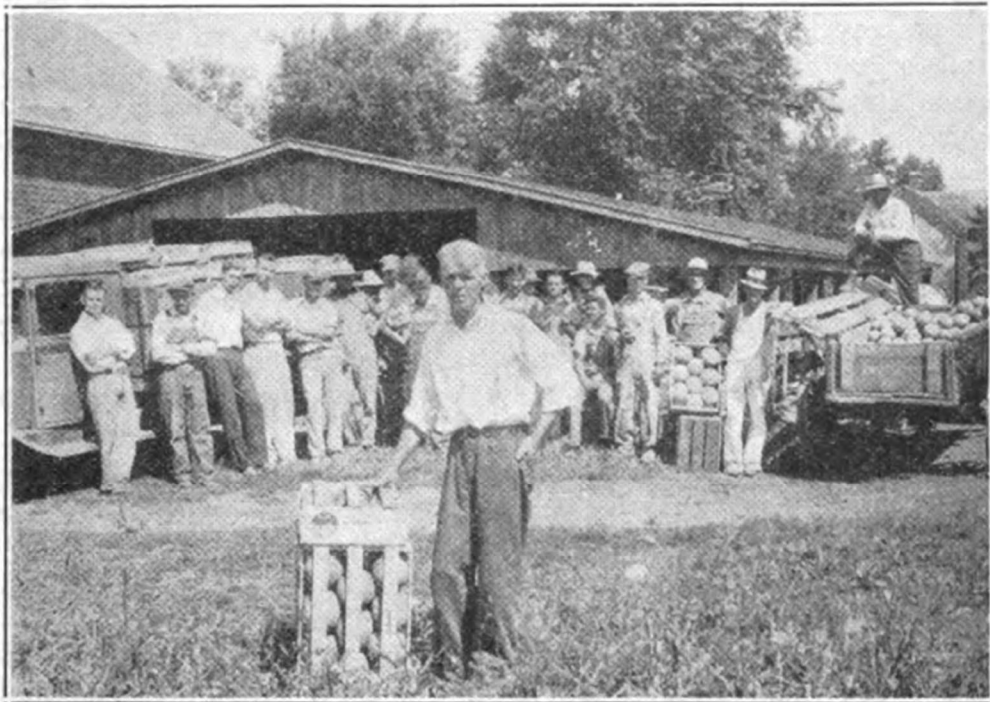


Figure 58. "Here is the packing crew and shed of Wolford Brothers at Conesville, about September 1st last. Clyde Wolford and two crates of 'Oasis' brand Hales' in the foreground." Source: Iowa State Vegetable Growers Association, 1932:217

By 1932, the Conesville and Fruitland experimental substations were prominent field laboratories affiliated with Iowa State College. The Wolford farm hosted numerous research projects on sweet potato and melon cultivation. One study tracked the development of wilt-resistant melon varieties while another analyzed modern market trends and regional productivity.⁴⁰⁷ These institutes, co-sponsored by the Iowa Melon Growers' Association and Muscatine Farm Bureau, often featured Wolford-led discussions on practical farming methods.⁴⁰⁸ In 1933, the Wolford Brothers' hotbeds produced over two million sweet potato plants annually, shipping 75 percent of them across the country. On their home farm, they planted 95 acres of sweet potatoes and 63 acres of cantaloupes, with wide rye windbreaks protecting the vulnerable seedlings from sandstorms.⁴⁰⁹

In 1935, the Conesville substation had become central to Iowa's agricultural research infrastructure. J.J. Wilson of the Muscatine County Extension Office lauded the area's agricultural potential, noting "there are 30,000 acres of sandy soil in Muscatine County that could be used for profitable trucking."⁴¹⁰ Research at the lab and on the Wolford farm directly contributed to the development of a wilt-resistant watermelon strain that would benefit all of southeastern Iowa.⁴¹¹

⁴⁰⁶ *Quad-City Times*, July 10, 1930.

⁴⁰⁷ "Conesville Experimental Work Discussed," *Muscatine Journal*, February 19, 1932, 14.

⁴⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰⁹ "Wolford Farm Profile," *West Liberty Index*, June 8, 1933, 4.

⁴¹⁰ "County Praised for Agricultural Potential," *Muscatine Journal*, May 28, 1935, 5.

⁴¹¹ *Ibid.*

In 1939, the Wolford Brothers managed over 200 acres of sweet potatoes, harvesting between 20,000 and 25,000 bushels—a record-breaking yield. The harvest began earlier than any other season in 15 years, and yields from test plots reached 115 bushels of Grade 1 potatoes per acre.⁴¹² “Sweet potato harvest for storage will likely not start before Sept. 25,” Hal Wolford noted, reflecting their two-phase harvest strategy. Meanwhile, they also harvested watermelon seeds to prevent loss from overripe fruit, expanding their operation into seed supply.⁴¹³

Even amid wartime labor shortages and transportation constraints, the Wolford farm introduced new melon varieties to market. In 1942, they grew a new strain called the “Queen of Colorado,” which proved exceptionally successful. “One of the best ever grown in this area,” the *Muscatine Journal* reported, noting that a truck from Atlanta, Georgia, traveled to Conesville specifically to purchase the melons.⁴¹⁴ That same season, they also produced a high-quality hybrid watermelon, further showcasing their role as horticultural innovators.⁴¹⁵

The Wolford Brothers remained among Iowa’s most reliable and innovative truck farmers through the late 1940s. In the summer of 1949, they began regular cantaloupe harvesting in early August, operating a daily picking schedule for the duration of the season. “The quality of the cantaloupes in the Conesville area this year is reported to be the best for some time,” observed the *Columbus Gazette*, noting that both yield and fruit condition were “better than average.”⁴¹⁶ Their packing and grading line—used for sorting and crating melons for market—was given a trial run in advance of full-scale shipping. Most melons were packed in crates and delivered to urban markets by truck the following morning. Some were sold in bulk within the district.⁴¹⁷ The 1949 watermelon crop also appeared strong, with ripening timed for a 30-day harvest window. Sweet potatoes matured earlier than usual, and the Wolfords anticipated “one of the best crops in years,” with harvesting set to begin in late August.⁴¹⁸

The Wolford Brothers: Iowa Truck Farming Celebrities

In addition to their innovative truck farming business, the Wolford Brothers of Conesville became key voices in statewide vegetable grower networks. Hal C. Wolford, the most public-facing of the brothers, was regularly profiled in agricultural media and newspapers. In a 1921 article in *The Potato Magazine*, he was described as a man whose operation “handles two or three times the produce they grow,” leveraging business acumen and agricultural skill to become a statewide leader in sweet potato production. He was also a fixture at Iowa’s State Vegetable Growers’ meetings and was praised for his leadership and “constant attendance” at industry conferences.⁴¹⁹ Their influence extended to infrastructure and policy. In the winter of 1919–1920, Hal Wolford helped spearhead the construction of a \$10,000 community sweet potato storage house in Conesville, after publicly advocating for it at a town meeting. As one article noted, “Wolford Brothers were prime movers in that forward step, and they will be in many another progressive step in their town and county.”⁴²⁰

In a 1928 feature, Hal made clear the brothers’ commitment to quality and consumer trust: “It isn’t enough for us to know that our sweet potatoes are good when they leave here... We are not satisfied until we know that their quality is good when they reach the table of the consumer.”⁴²¹ This focus on consistent product quality was complemented by an ability to rapidly adapt and market new varieties. The Wolfords were instrumental

⁴¹² “Sweet Potato Crop Exceeds 20,000 Bushels,” *Cedar Rapids Gazette*, August 30, 1939.

⁴¹³ *Ibid.*

⁴¹⁴ “New Muskmelon Grown by Wolfords,” *Muscatine Journal*, August 21, 1942.

⁴¹⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴¹⁶ “Melon and Sweet Potato Crops Good,” *Columbus Gazette*, August 11, 1949, 1.

⁴¹⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴¹⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴¹⁹ C. L. Fitch, “Hal C. Wolford, Sweet Potato Grower,” *The Potato Magazine*, August 1921, 8, 14.

⁴²⁰ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁴²¹ Ray Anderson, “Conesville Growers’ Success is Due to Three Sound Business Policies,” *Cedar Rapids Gazette*, October 21, 1928.

in popularizing the Priestley sweet potato, a variety with superior storage and disease resistance, which they shipped to over 14 states in the Midwest and West.³

The Wolfords' agricultural prominence also aligned with cutting-edge research. Hal collaborated closely with university scientists such as Dr. L. E. Melhus of Iowa State College to combat plant disease and improve yields. Hal commended Melhus's watermelon wilt work: "He did it in four years which is good work," acknowledging the rapid improvement in viable watermelon acreage under expert guidance.⁴²²

Hal's 1934 interview with the *Cedar Rapids Gazette* provided a rare personal glimpse into his philosophy and leadership. "We see something every month in the year except in July," he stated, illustrating how diversified and constant their operations were, from early peas in March to sweet potatoes into November.⁴²³ Their operations spanned over 230 acres, operated both owned and leased land, and included storage, machinery, and housing for labor.

Hal C. Wolford, the eldest brother and a central figure in the business, died in 1950, followed by Clyde L. Wolford in 1957, and Ray Vaughn Wolford in 1966.⁴²⁴ The end of Wolford Brothers' dominance in Conesville marked the beginning of a steady decline of truck farming as an industry in and around Conesville through the late twentieth century.

4.4 Conesville Melon Days

The annual "Melon Day" celebration in Conesville, Iowa, emerged in the early twentieth century as an expression of agricultural achievement and community identity. Originally designed to highlight the region's prolific watermelon and cantaloupe production, the event evolved into a central cultural ritual for Muscatine County. During the 1910s, the town's Melon Day celebration was both a commercial showcase and a festival of abundance.



Figure 59. Scene from the one of the early Conesville Melon Day celebrations, 1913. Source: Brown, 1978

Melon Day's popularity surged during the 1910s and 1920s, often drawing thousands of visitors. In 1914, over 3,000 attendees consumed "two car loads of melons, 300 pounds of beef and 3,000 buns," all distributed freely by local growers. "All of the schools of Orono township were dismissed and the entire day was given over to

⁴²² *Cedar Rapids Gazette*, October 21, 1928.

⁴²³ Ray Anderson, "What's What Out on the Acres," *Cedar Rapids Gazette*, September 10, 1934.

⁴²⁴ "Hal C. Wolford Dies," *Muscatine Journal*, April 17, 1950; "Arrange Rites for C. L. Wolford of Conesville," *Muscatine Journal*, May 25, 1957; "Ray Vaughn Wolford," *Muscatine Journal*, March 3, 1966.

pleasure.⁴²⁵ Conesville's streets were packed with parades, two baseball games, two horse races, wrestling matches, and political speeches.⁴²⁶ The 1916 Melon Day focused heavily on sports, especially baseball. "Volger's Reliable Jewels" of Muscatine, amateur champions for the third consecutive year, were the highlight, playing rivals from Wapello. Negotiations for a regional championship series were launched on the spot.⁴²⁷



Figure 60. Watermelons galore at Conesville Melon Day, 1918.
Source: Brown, 1978

In 1919, the agricultural achievements of Conesville farmers were showcased with particular pride. A watermelon "tipped the beam at sixty pounds," while Wolford Brothers' sweet potatoes yielded an average of 242 bushels per acre on their sandy fields. Footraces and horse races added a local thrill, drawing crowds despite bad roads and rain.⁴²⁸

Figure 61. Although Conesville's festival was local and agricultural in intent, the use of African American caricatures demonstrates how normalized racist tropes were across American society. Promotional ads from 1922 and 1936 featured caricatured images of Black children eating watermelon—a common racist trope in American advertising. Scholar Allison D. Black notes that such imagery was used to "infantilize and dehumanize Black Americans by associating them with laziness, ignorance, and simple-minded pleasure."⁴²⁹ Even in rural Iowa, Melon Day absorbed and reproduced these visual codes. Sources: (left) *Muscatine Journal*, September 7, 1922; (right) *Muscatine Journal and News-Tribune*, September 3, 1936

⁴²⁵ "Annual 'Melon Day' Gala Event for Cone," *Muscatine Journal*, September 22, 1914, 6.

⁴²⁶ Ibid.

⁴²⁷ "Jewels Play on Cone Melon Day," *Muscatine Journal*, September 18, 1916, 6.

⁴²⁸ "Races Feature Cone Melon Day," *Muscatine Journal*, September 22, 1919, 6.

⁴²⁹ Allison D. Black, "Watermelon Stereotypes," *Journal of American Folklore*, Vol. 128, No. 509 (Summer 2015): 275–299.

By 1923, the celebration was embedded deeply in Conesville's cultural calendar. "People of this section of Muscatine county give thanks for the marvelous product wrested from the sand," the *Muscatine Journal* wrote. One display featured a watermelon "as long as a man is tall," and sweet melons raised on the famed Hoopes and Wolford fields. The picnic lunches, civic speeches, parades, and a nighttime concert with illuminated floats all contributed to an overwhelming sense of local pride.⁴³⁰ The 14th annual Melon Day in 1925 featured a formal program of events and drew statewide attention. Advertisements proclaimed: "ALL THE MELONS YOU CAN EAT—FREE!" and listed horse races, farm exhibits, band concerts, and a keynote address from U.S. Senator Smith W. Brookhart.⁴³¹

After a hiatus caused by melon wilt, Melon Day was revived in 1931. That year, organizers prepared over 5,000 melons to serve visitors, marking the festival's return as a symbol of recovery and agricultural renewal.⁴³² A 1934 celebration broke all previous records: over 8,000 people gathered in Conesville, with 3,500 consuming melons by 10:30 a.m. alone. The event featured a display of wilt-resistant "Dixie Belle" melons developed at the local experiment plots.⁴³³

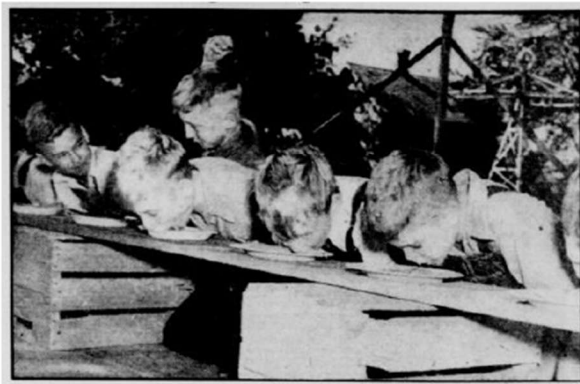


Figure 62. (Left) Watermelon-Eating contest at Conesville Watermelon Day, 1941; (Right) Boys enjoying watermelons at Melon Day (a.k.a. "Homecoming Day") in Conesville, 1942. Sources: *Muscatine Journal*, September 6, 1941, and *Quad-City Times*, September 13, 1942

Throughout its history, Melon Day functioned as both a celebration and an agricultural showcase. The Wolford Brothers were essential to this success. Their adoption of crate shipping, branding under the "Oasis" label, and production of high-quality melons and sweet potatoes gave Conesville national visibility.

In the 1960s, Melon Days were revived by a new generation of Conesville organizers. In 1963, truck grower Polly Singleton estimated that "about 2,000 melons were already gathered" ahead of the weekend celebration, which he called the first since 1942. "If we have good weather," Singleton said, "we'll have to go to the fields for more."⁴³⁴ The 1963 celebration included a fish fry, carnival, parade, ball games, and a hootenanny. Local church groups sold hamburgers, hot dogs, pie, and potato salad, and the Citizens for the Betterment of Conesville operated food booths throughout the event.⁴³⁵

In 1971, the *Muscatine Journal* reported that "over 2,000 persons attended Watermelon Days" in Conesville. Highlights included the crowning of a watermelon queen, a carnival, and the giveaway of free melons. The

⁴³⁰ "13th Melon Day of Cone Marks Another Historic Event for Tiny Village," *Muscatine Journal*, September 14, 1923, 4.

⁴³¹ "Cone Melon Day," *Muscatine Journal and News-Tribune*, September 8, 1925, 10.

⁴³² "Melon Day at Cone Planned," *Mid-West Progressive*, August 31, 1931, 9; "'Melon Day' at Cone Saturday," *Mid-West Progressive*, September 4, 1931, 10.

⁴³³ "Melon Day Celebration at Cone Breaks Record," *Muscatine Journal*, September 10, 1934, 8.

⁴³⁴ "Plenty of Free Melons at Cone," *Muscatine Journal*, September 27, 1963, 12.

⁴³⁵ "Food Stands to Operate at Conesville Melon Days," *Muscatine Journal*, August 29, 1964, 5.

event was still enthusiastically received but increasingly took the form of a nostalgic tradition—marking the culmination of a cultural legacy rather than a dominant agricultural force.⁴³⁶

⁴³⁶ "Big Crowds at Cone Watermelon Days," *Muscatine Journal*, August 30, 1971, 12.

BCR&N Railroad at Conesville

There were two depots at Conesville; one right in the town to serve the BCR&N RR, and one at the south edge of Conesville for the Milwaukee Road.



Cone BCR&N Railroad Depot, c.1900.

Source: Rock Island Railway Historical Society

Burlington, Cedar Rapids & Northern Railway (1869; 1876-1903) - During the construction, bankruptcy, and the formation of a new railroad company to take over, the M&M's planned third northwesterly line – the road to Cedar Rapids – had been all but forgotten. Instead, other railroad interests formed to take over this project: 1) the Cedar Rapids & St. Paul Railway; and 2) the Cedar Rapids & Burlington Railroad, which was to go from Cedar Rapids through Iowa City to Burlington. Eventually backers of both of these companies united as the Burlington, Cedar Rapids & Minnesota Railway in 1868, with headquarters in Cedar Rapids. Iowa City was dropped from the route plans in favor of West Liberty, crossing the main line of the Rock Island Railroad in that town. Construction started in 1869, as reported by the *Muscatine Weekly Journal*:

The first tie on the Burlington, Cedar Rapids and Minnesota Railroad was put down on the levee at Burlington on the 14th inst., and a force of seventy-five men at once set to work track laying. The first shipment of iron is at Chicago, and will reach Burlington this week. The Hawk-Eye, from which we gather the above, says "that everything is in readiness and a sufficient force on hand to put down from a mile to & mile and a half per day."³¹⁴

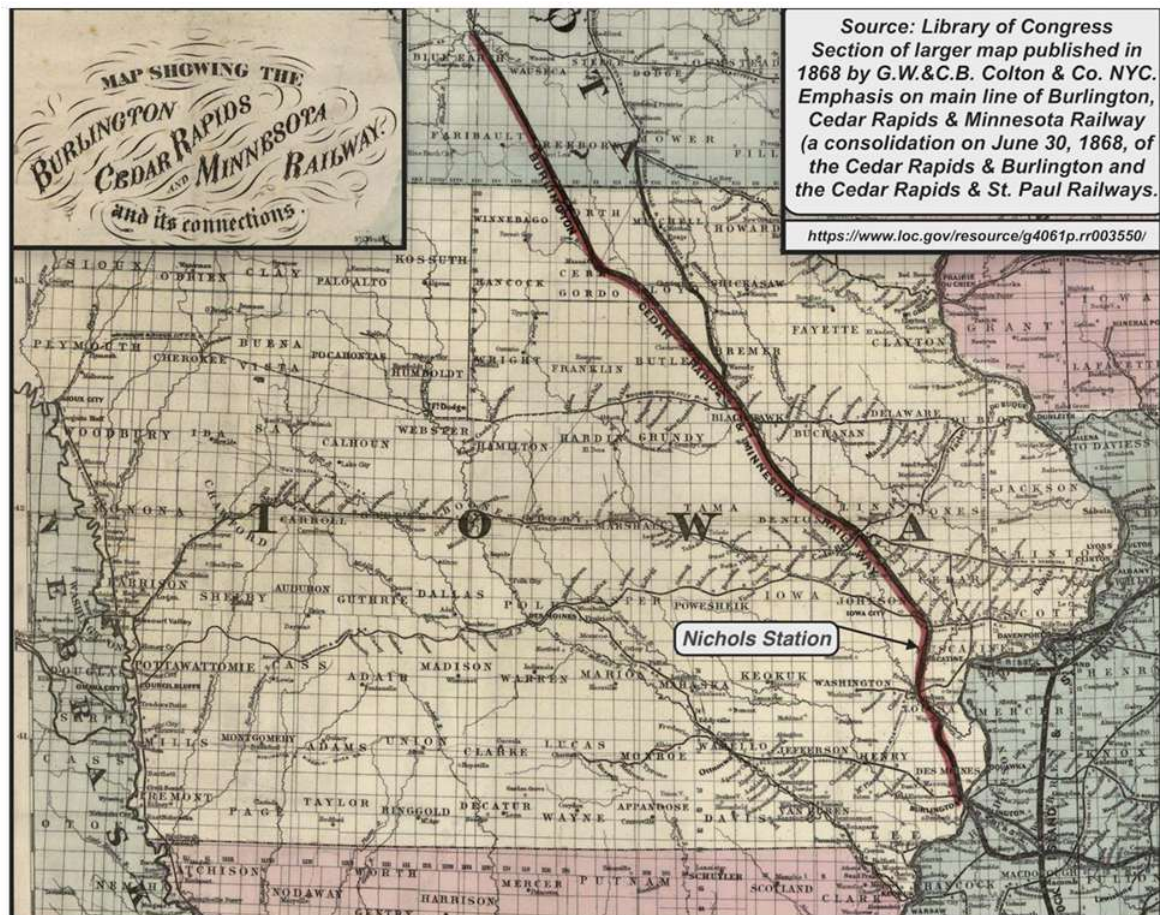
Tracklaying proceeded from Burlington through Columbus Junction (Louisa County) and into Orono Township of Muscatine County at Port Allen (nonextant county-line post office/station), then north through Conesville, through Pike Township and newly platted Nichols Station, then north through Wapsinonoc Township and West Liberty. From there, the BCR&M continued

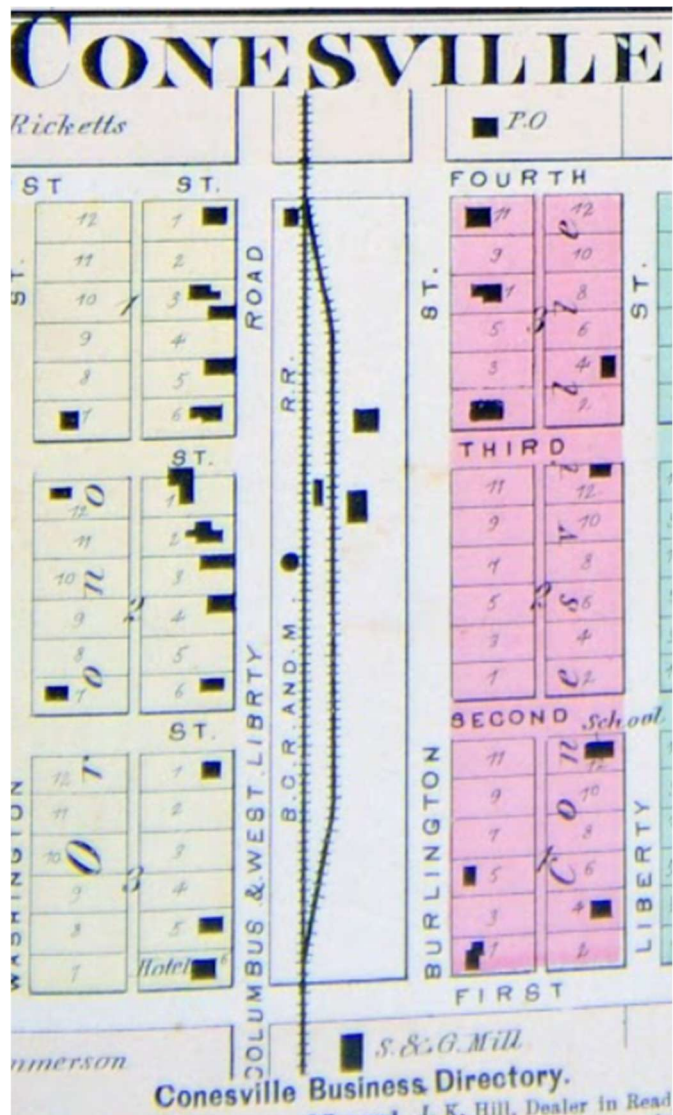
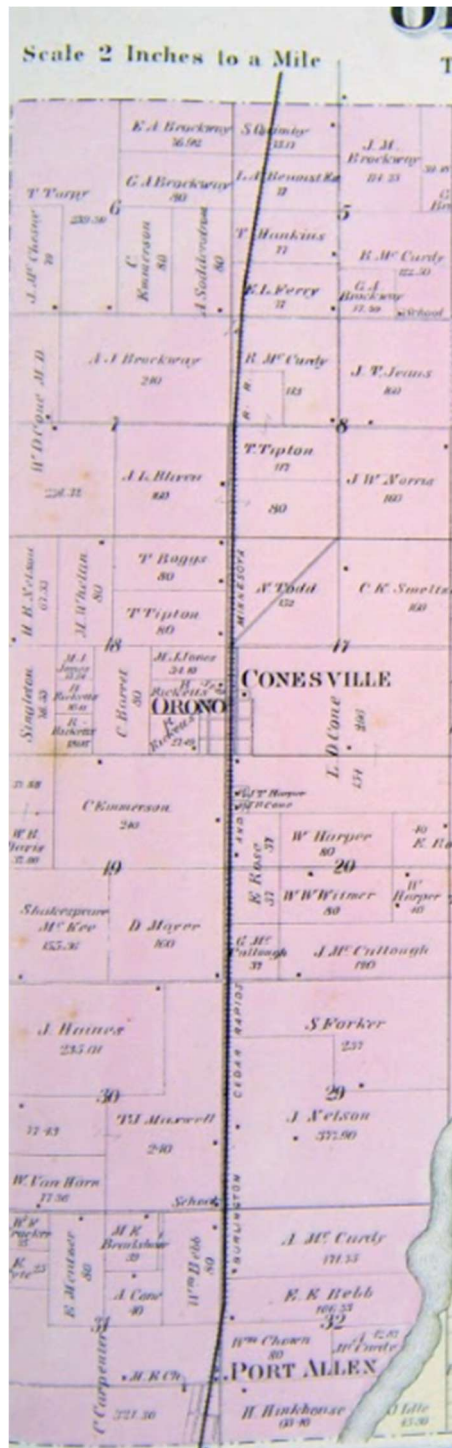
through Cedar County, Linn County and Cedar Rapids. **Conesville** was surveyed and platted in 1870 in anticipation of the BCR&M Railroad. It was located in Section 17 of Orono Township, and was named for its founder, Beebe S. Cone. The railroad built one of its signature two-story depots and the station was known as “Cone.”³¹⁵ In 1878, the town was incorporated as Conesville, and the little railroad town was thriving. Businesses in the late 1870s included: a mill, three general stores, a clothing and boot and shoe store, two blacksmith shops, a wagonmaker, a grain business, a hotel, and two physicians.³¹⁶

³¹⁴ *Muscatine Weekly Journal*, June 25, 1869.

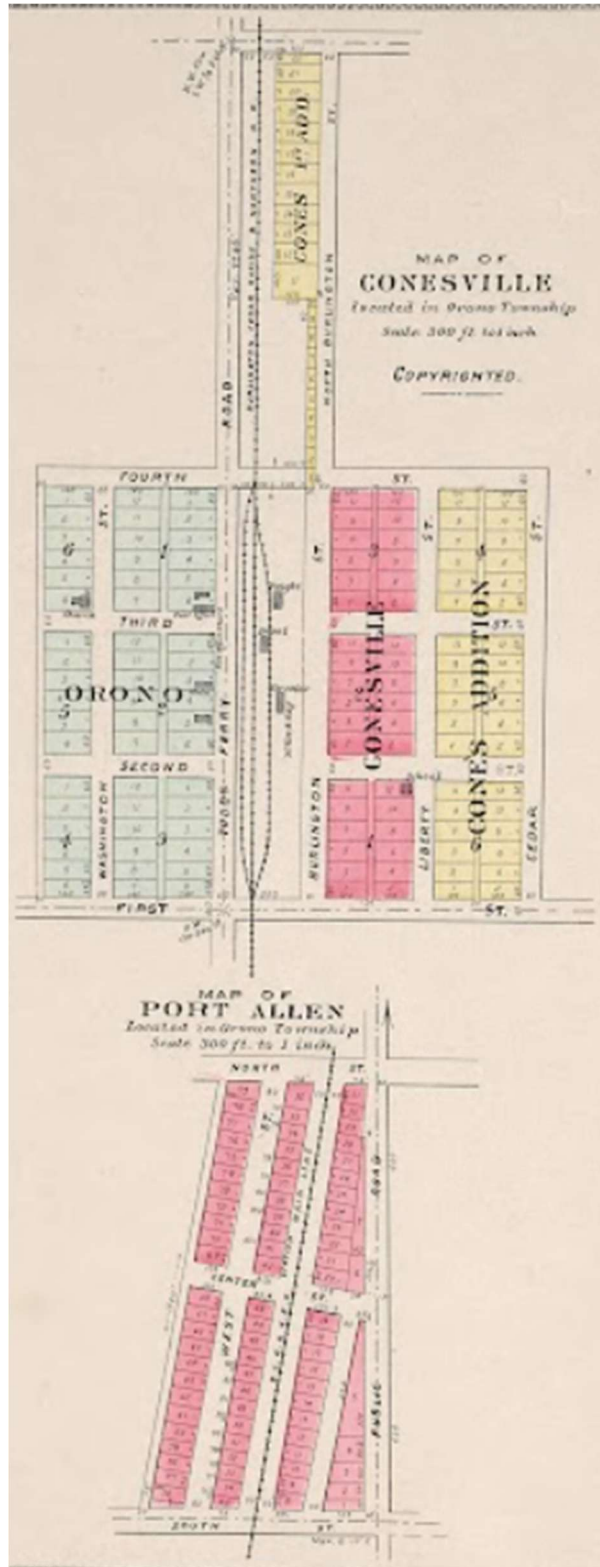
³¹⁵ Bekker, *Heritage Vignettes*; Rogers, *County Schools and Churches Survey*, 11.

³¹⁶ *History of Muscatine County, Iowa*, 595-586; Rogers, *County Schools and Churches Survey*, 11.

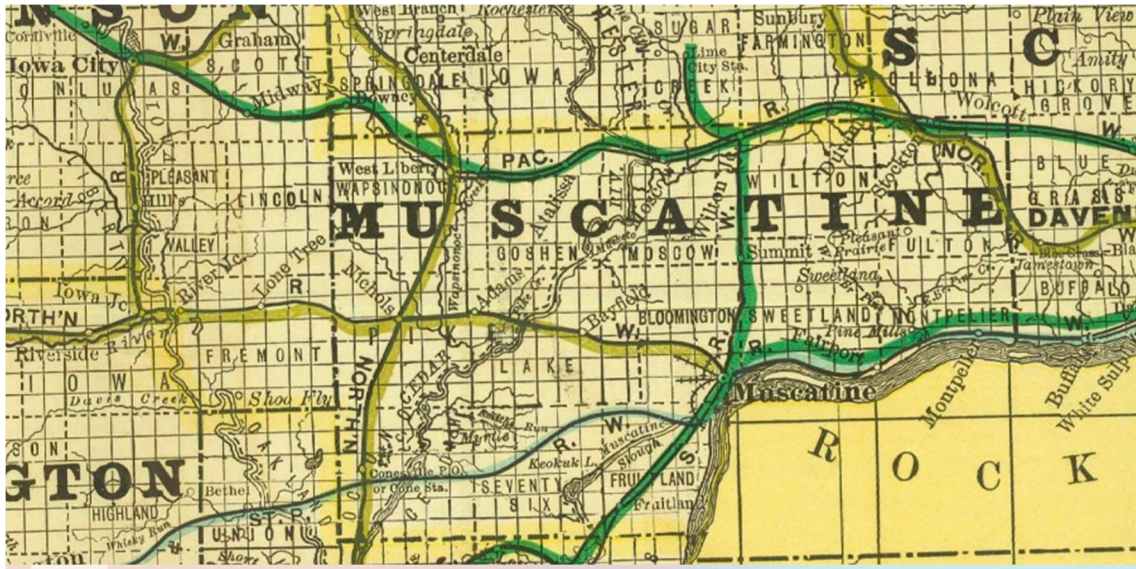




1874 Atlas shows Burlington, Cedar Rapids & Minnesota RR traversing West Liberty N/S, then Nichols NNE to SSW, then Conesville N/S, and on to Columbus Jct. The BCR&N Depot is between the two tracks.



1899 Atlas shows the BCR&N RR with its depot in Conesville and further south in Port Allen.



1902 Map shows the Burlington Cedar Rapids & Northern going north-south through Conesville and the Milwaukee Road right-of-way coming from Muscatine to Conesville and further southwest.



1904 Map shows the route of the Milwaukee Road RR through Orono, Cedar and 76 Townships.



1916 Atlas shows the BCR&N (north-south RR) changed to Chicago Rock Island and Pacific RR. The east-west RR is the Chicago Milwaukee & St Paul (Milwaukee Road). The 1930 Atlas shows both Railroads as the same as 1916.