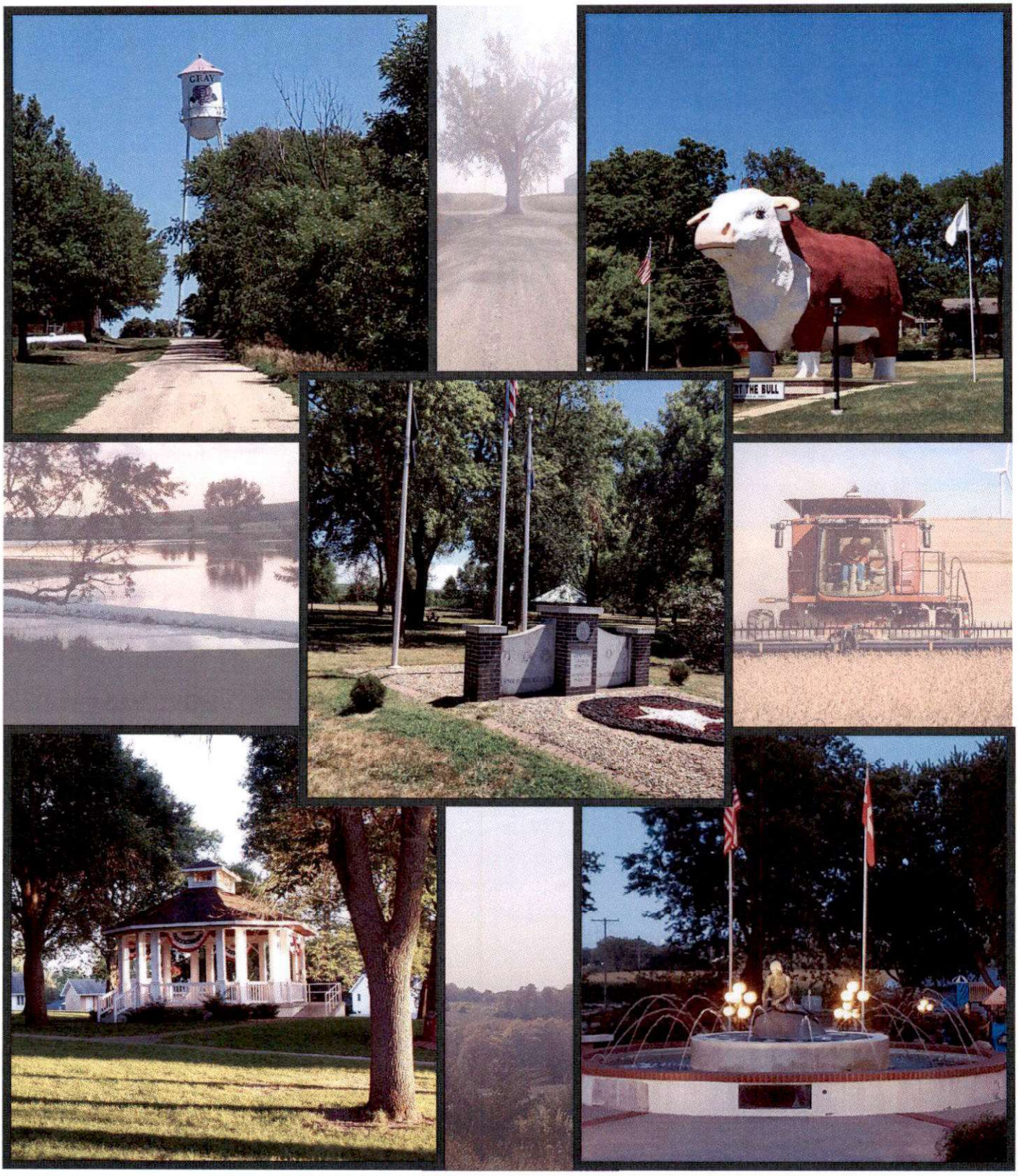

AUDUBON COUNTY
2022 COMPREHENSIVE PLAN

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CHAPTER ONE
INTRODUCTION

Audubon County, located in west central Iowa, is a quiet, rural county consisting of rolling hills, scenic views, and quality people. Within the county there are five cities and one river. The cities include Audubon, Brayton, Exira, Gray, and Kimballton as well as two unincorporated villages; Hamlin and Ross. The East Nishnabotna River and its tributaries provide drainage for the county. The river runs from the north central part of the county to the south parallel to U.S. Highway 71. The northwestern part of the county is drained by the tributaries of the West Nishnabotna River. The county is located equidistant to the two large metropolitan areas of Des Moines and Omaha. It is approximately 60 miles west of Des Moines and approximately 60 miles to the east of the Omaha area. Sioux City is also approximately 140 miles to the northwest.

The county has quality transportation access with U.S. Highway 71 and Iowa Highway 44 and the southern part of the county's close proximity to Interstate 80. There is also a good system of county highways that provide transportation from farm to market. There is an airport in the city of Audubon that is used by small aircraft. There is no rail service in the county.

The county also has a variety of recreational areas such as the T-Bone Trail which is planned to run from Audubon to Atlantic as well as Littlefield Recreational Area near Exira. There are several other city and county parks and tourist attractions scattered throughout the county.

Planning and zoning are two important tools for cities and counties to use to provide a high quality of life. Planning assesses the current conditions in an area and identifies strengths to build on and weaknesses to improve. It also sets out an implementation program that specifies when actions are to be taken.

Predominantly rural counties like Audubon are not usually concerned with many of the issues identified in the Iowa Code such as overcrowding, adequate light and air, traffic congestion because they are not faced with any of those problems and will likely stay that way for years to come. However, there are some issues that are very relevant to Audubon County. Concerns of farmland preservation, safety from fire, flood, panic and other dangers, and protection of soil from wind and water erosion are key issues for the county. Without a comprehensive plan and zoning ordinances, development could occur anywhere which would increase the chances for farmland to be wasted, erosion to occur, or the resident's quality of life to threatened.

This comprehensive plan will address the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats gathered from public input. The issues Audubon County is facing as well as issues county officials and residents foresee will be discussed throughout the sections of this plan. Ideas for the county's future are included in this plan and this comprehensive plan will set the goals and policies necessary to bring the ideas to reality. Finally, the plan will serve as the legal basis for zoning, which will guide the way land is used as stated in the Iowa Code, Section 414.3:

"The regulations shall be made in accordance with a comprehensive plan and designed to preserve the availability of agricultural land; to consider the protection of soil from wind and water erosion; to encourage efficient urban development patterns; to lessen congestion in the street; to secure safety from fire, flood, panic, and other dangers; to promote health and the general welfare; to provide adequate light and air; to prevent the overcrowding of land; to avoid undue concentration of population; to promote the conservation of energy resources; to promote reasonable access to solar energy; and to facilitate the adequate provision of transportation, water, sewerage, schools, parks, and other public requirements. However, provisions of this section relating to the objectives of energy conservation and access to solar energy do not void any zoning regulation existing on July 1, 1981, or require zoning in a city that did not have zoning prior to July 1, 1981.

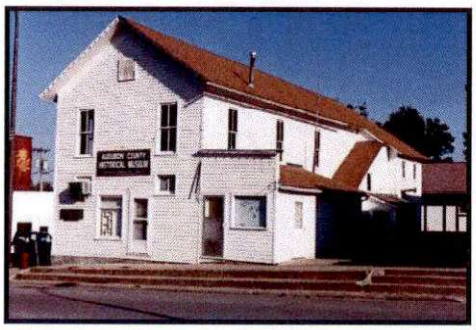
"Such regulations shall be made with reasonable consideration, among other things, as to the character of the area of the district and the peculiar suitability of such area for particular uses, and with a view to conserving the value of buildings and encouraging the most appropriate use of land throughout such city."

A combined effort from the steering committee, County Supervisors, Audubon County citizens, the planning and zoning commission, and Region XII Council of Governments, this plan will meet the law stated previously. This document is intended to be a working tool for the county to use for years to come. With some hard work and commitment, the visions identified in this plan will become reality, making Audubon County a viable place to live and work for many years.

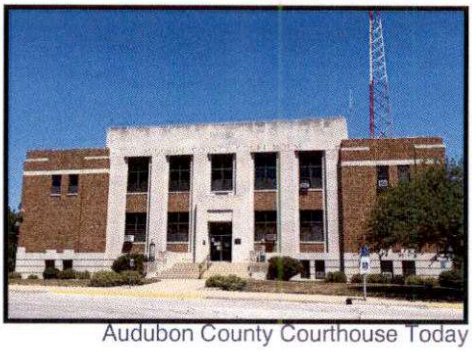
CHAPTER TWO

HISTORY

Audubon County was named after John James Audubon, who was a naturalist and artist. After he died in 1855, admirers named the new county in his honor. Throughout the early history of Audubon County there was a lot of conflict and battle over the location of the county seat. One report stated the original county seat was in Hamlin's Grove. Another report has the original county seat in Dayton in 1856 until the residents realized that Dayton would never survive as a town. The following year, it was moved to Viola, which is now called Exira. Ten years later in 1871, the first courthouse was built in Exira.


Original Audubon County Courthouse in Exira
Source: traveliowa.com

Exira, Oakfield and Louisville battled over the location of the county seat for years, but it remained in Exira. In 1871, the Board of Supervisors approved construction for the courthouse in Exira. Once again, dispute over the county seat erupted. Between 1872 and 1873, Hamlin residents petitioned in attempt to regain the county seat, yet it remained in Exira.


Audubon County Courthouse Today

In 1878, the Rock Island Railroad linked Atlantic to the new city of Audubon. A year later, an election was held to determine the site of the county seat and Audubon was the winner. Several years after the move, Audubon received a grant to assist in the construction of a new courthouse, which was completed in 1939. Today, Audubon County is home to five incorporated cities: Audubon, Brayton, Exira, Gray, and Kimballton. There are two unincorporated areas which are still recognized by county residents: Hamlin and Ross.

CITIES OF AUDUBON COUNTY

The City of Audubon is named for John James Audubon. The City was laid out by the Chicago, Rock Island, and Pacific Railroad on September 23, 1878. The railroad was completed on December 6, 1878 and by ten days later, there were over 50 houses, 26 retail/commercial establishments, and a school house. During the same year, due to rapid growth, there was talk of moving the county seat from Exira. In 1879, residents of Audubon County voted to move the county seat to Audubon during the general election.

In the 1870s, the Rock Island Railroad was being built in Iowa. Original plans for the railroad were to be built west of Brayton in Oakfield, but the proposed landowner, I.P. Hallock refused to allow the railroad to cut through his land. Citizens of what was not yet incorporated as the City of Brayton (John S. and John T. Jenkens) staked out their land and offered the railroad company $500 to build the track across the land. The railroad accepted the offer, and constructed the railroad. The articles of incorporation were filed for record on August, 29, 1899 by the county recorder. During the early 1900s, the city was a thriving, busy town with businesses being built and changing hands quite rapidly. The City was devastated by a fire in 1929 which destroyed nine buildings. Then, two years later, the theater was destroyed by a fire. Also destroyed by fires was the Old Juhl Hall, a machine shop, a gas station, a warehouse and oil tanks. In 1930, Highway 71 was paved through Brayton and ten years later, the City built the town hall. Old Glory Park was constructed from a patch of ground on the south end of town which had been filled with weeds, old machinery, old cars, and an abandoned house. The park was built with a large amount of volunteer effort.

Exira is the oldest town in Audubon County and was founded in 1857. The town was named for Exira Eckman, daughter of Judge John Eckman from Ohio, who agreed to purchase a lot of property in the town if the town was named for his daughter. The mainline railroad never went through Exira, but the railroad was the reason the town was established. In 1856, Congress granted large amounts of land in Iowa to railroad companies to aid in the development of railroads across the state. The land where Exira now stands was granted to the Mississippi and Missouri Railroad Company to aid in the development of a railroad from Davenport to Council Bluffs. A few years later, the rights were transferred to the Chicago, Rock Island, and Pacific Company. Before the railroad was built through Exira, the path changed and the railroad went through Atlantic instead. On July 2, 1958, Exira was flooded by the East Nishnabotna River. This flooding destroyed 75 homes, 20 businesses, and was the cause of nineteen deaths. One year later, in 1959, the City was home to one school. In 1861, the City of Exira held their first Fourth of July celebration and every year since, the community has held an event celebrating the Fourth of July.

The City of Gray was laid out on August 10, 1881 by George Gray and was named for him. This was the year that the railroad was built from Carroll to Audubon, and during this year, Gray boomed. In a short time the town boasted of two grain buyers, a hotel, drugstore, hardware, three grocery stores, a blacksmith shop, three saloons, and a dancing hall. When it was decided Gray needed a schoolhouse, it was decided to move the old Packard school building from northwest of Gray into town. Seven yoke of oxen were hitched to the building, and it was snaked in. In 1922 a fire destroyed the entire business district on the north side of Main Street. Chicago and Northwestern train service passed through Gray until June 14, 1952 when the last train passed through town.

Hans Jensen Jorgensen founded Kimballton in 1883 when he opened a post office at the site. It wasn't until 1888 that the town was officially established and 1908 when the town became incorporated. In 1978, the iconic Little Mermaid statue, which is a replica of the mermaid in Copenhagen, Denmark, was sculpted out of fiberglass and installed. Kimballton is one of the two largest rural Danish settlements in the United States.

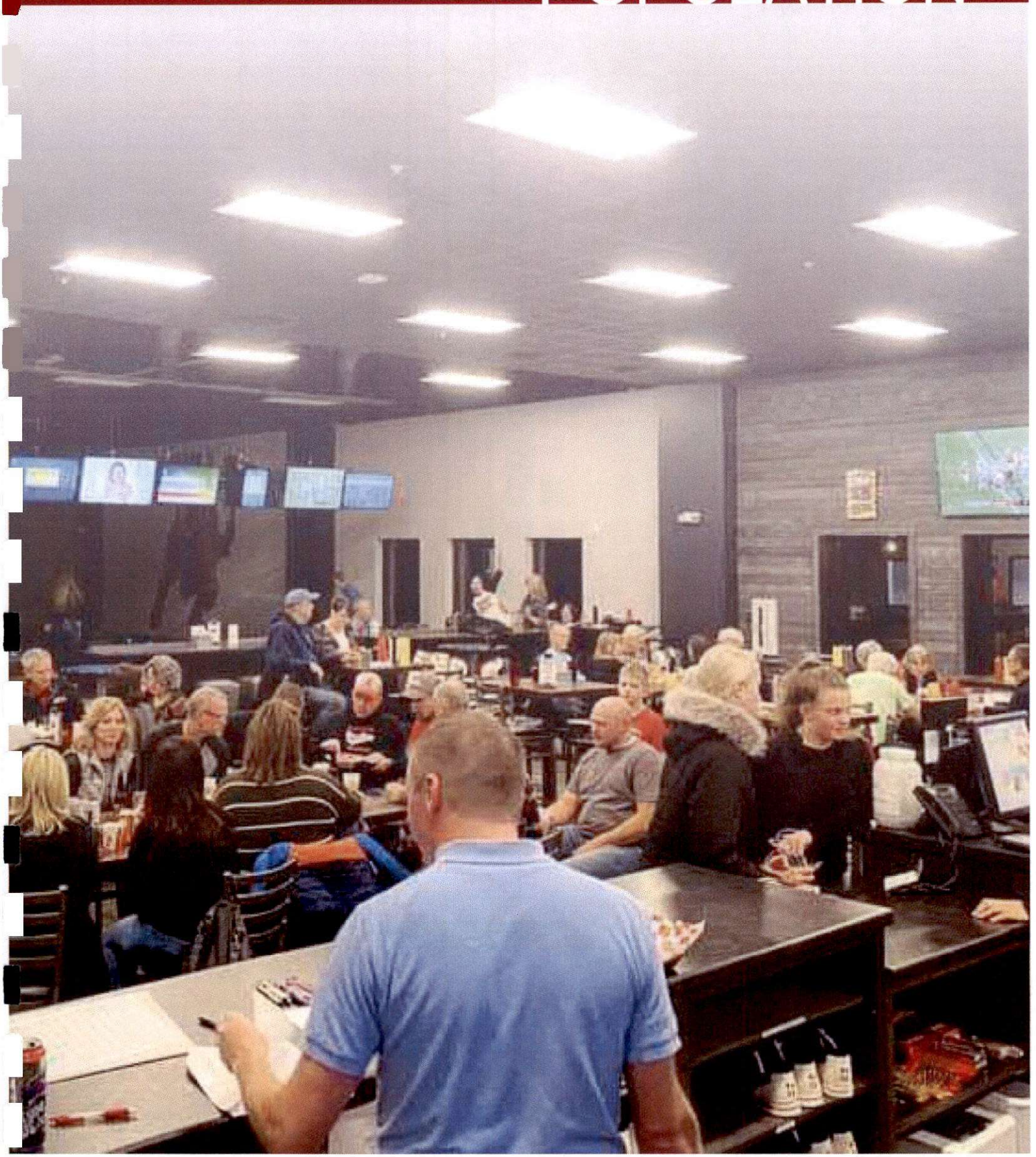
UNINCORPORATED AREAS OF AUDUBON COUNTY

The unincorporated community of Hamlin was laid out in 1872. The community was named for the pioneer settler named Nathaniel Hamlin. The community had a hotel, several stores, and a number of residences. After the community was defeated for the county seat, it declined. Today, Hamlin is most widely known for being home to "Darrell's Place," a local restaurant most widely known for their breaded pork tenderloin sandwich.

The unincorporated community of Ross was laid out and platted in July 1882 by the Western Town Lot Company. The community was named in for a nearby farmer according to the book "A History of the Origin of the Place Names Connected with the Chicago & North Western and Chicago, St. Paul, Minneapolis & Omaha Railways." In the early days of the community there was a post office (established in 1883), a blacksmith shop, a lumber yard, a general store, a hardware, and the Ross Grain Elevator. In 2018, the Ross Grain Elevator was listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

CHAPTER THREE

POPULATION



HISTORIC POPULATION

The first recorded decennial census population for Audubon County was in 1890 with a population of 12,412. Since then, Audubon has seen one small increase from 1890 to 1900. After 1900, the population has been continually declining. The 2020 Census counted Audubon County's population at 5,674 residents. Figure 1.1 shows Audubon County's historical population since 1890. Population decline throughout rural Iowa over the last half of the twentieth century is a common trend. This is due to industrialized agriculture, and younger populations seeking education, jobs, and amenities in larger markets.

Figure 1.1: Audubon County Historic Population, 1890-2020

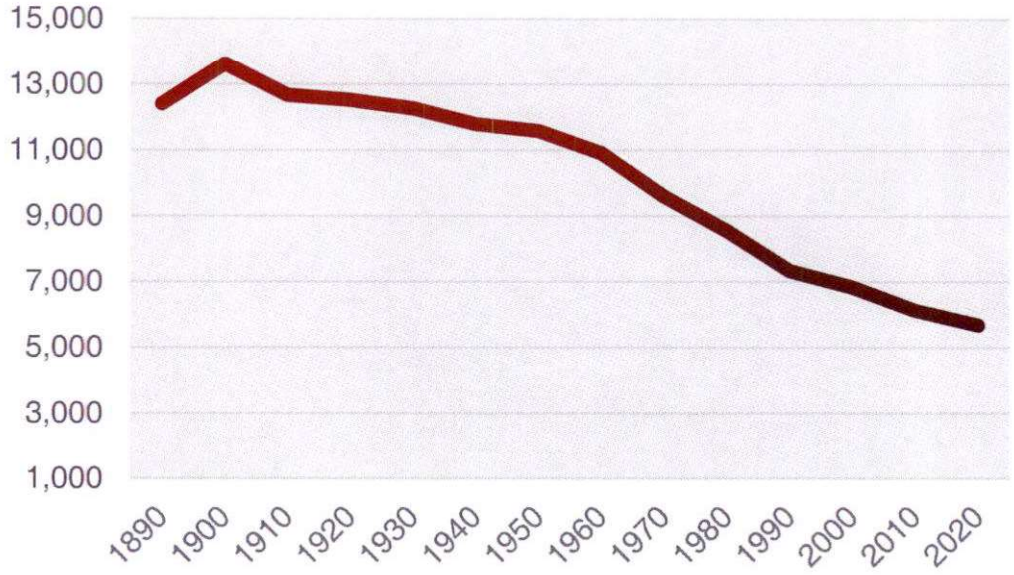


Figure 1.2: Audubon County Population Distribution by Jurisdiction, 1890-2018

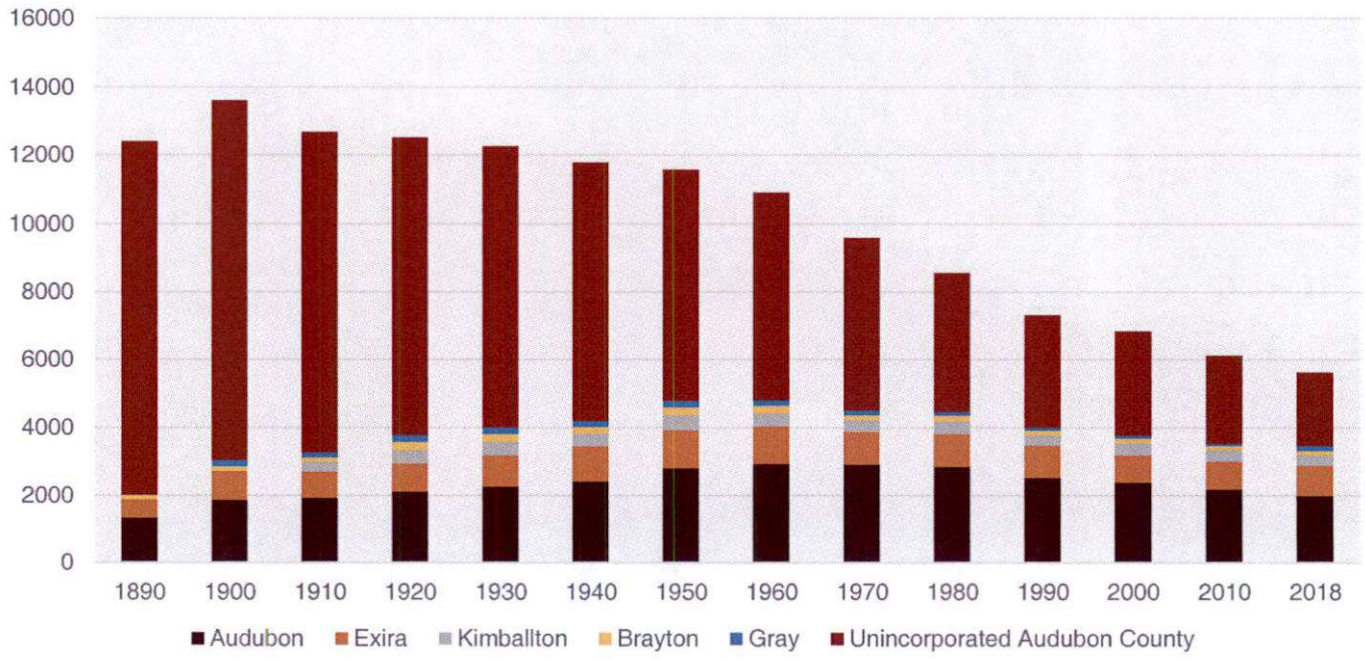


Figure 1.2 shows the population of each of Audubon County's cities and the unincorporated portions of the County. It is important to understand that the trends show that a large number of citizens are moving from rural homes into the County's cities. This is shown in Figure 1.2 where the population of rural citizens continues to decrease and the number of those residents living in the cities is growing.

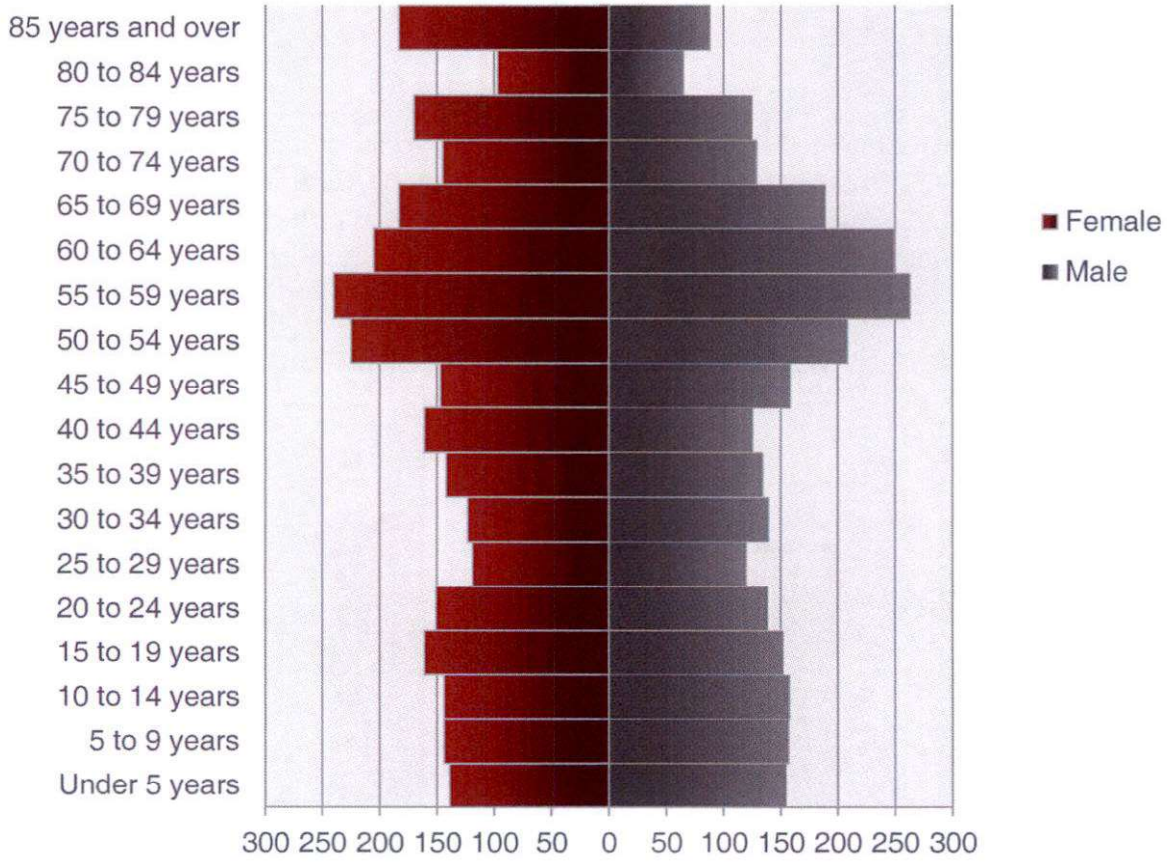
POPULATION COHORTS

Figure 1.3 is Audubon County's population "pyramid" for 2018. This figure breaks the population down into five-year age groups to present a more in-depth analysis of the city's population. Audubon County's "pyramid" is very similar to other rural parts of Iowa. A large majority of rural Iowa has a spike in residents aged 45-65 years.

There are pretty equal parts male and female in most age ranges which can potentially mean that a large majority of the older population are married. Comparing these ranges with the number of 15-19 year olds can possibly mean that these cohorts (45-49, 50-54, and 55-59) are parents.

It is also important to note the population aged 50 and over. During the lifespan of this comprehensive plan, many of these individuals will be retiring either within the county or other locations. This trend will likely affect the services in which the community has to offer to this particular demographic.

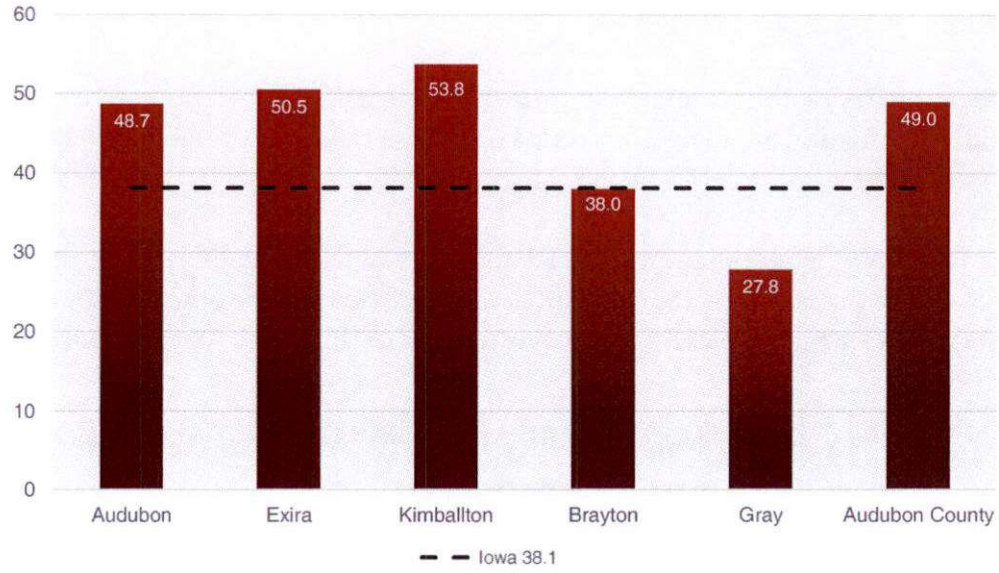
Figure 1.3: Audubon County Population Pyramid, 2018



MEDIAN AGE

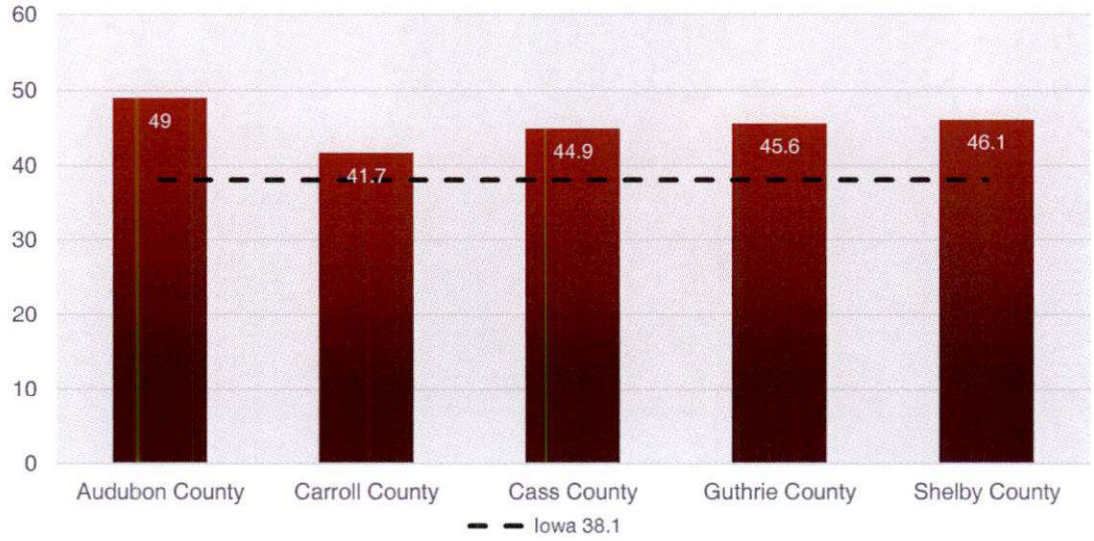
The median age is an important factor when comparing cities and counties as it provides community insight as well as how the cities in Audubon County compare to one another. Figure 1.4 shows how Audubon, Exira, Kimballton, Brayton, Gray, and Audubon County compare to each other and the entire State of Iowa. Kimballton has the highest average age in Audubon County, and is higher than both the County and the State averages. The only two cities that fall below the State average (38.1) are Brayton (38.0) and Gray (27.8).

Figure 1.4: Median Age Comparison (Cities), 2018



The figure below (1.5) compares the median age of Audubon County to other surrounding counties. Audubon County has the highest median ages (49.0) followed by Shelby County (46.1), Guthrie County (45.6), Cass County (44.9), and Carroll County (41.7). Audubon County has an average age of 49.0, which is also higher than the State average of 38.1. The easiest thing to infer is that there are not as many younger residents as there are older residents to bring the average age above the State average.

Figure 1.5: Median Age Comparison (Counties), 2018



RACE

In 2020, over 96% of Audubon County's population identified as white. It is important to note that Hispanic and Latino populations are a specific Census subset of white. In many rural Iowa communities and counties, people of Hispanic or Latino descent help stabilize otherwise falling populations. In Audubon County, the Hispanic or Latino population has grown slightly since the 2010 Census according to the 2020 Census counts. The counts show that the Hispanic or Latino population has increased by nearly 50 residents since 2010. The Table 1.1 documents the race responses from Audubon County and shows that the county did not experience any major changes in the makeup of the population within their respective boundaries.

Table 1.1: Race and Hispanic Origin, 2010 & 2020

	Audubon County		
	2010 Census	2020 Census	2020 Percent
Total population	6,119	5,674	100.00%
White	6,032	5,469	96.39%
Black or African American	10	17	0.30%
American Indian and Alaska Native	8	5	0.09%
Asian	25	5	0.09%
Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander	1	1	0.02%
Some other race	6	30	0.53%
Two or More Races	37	147	2.59%
Hispanic or Latino (of any race)	37	86	1.52%

EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT

The highest level of educational attainment for Audubon County's population aged 25 and over has not changed significantly since the 2010 Census. The percent of population, for Audubon County which has less than 9th grade as their highest educational level has decreased since the Census. This trend was more noticeable when families required more help on the farm. This same circumstance affected those who attended high school but did not receive a diploma, which is shown through a decrease in the percentage of high school dropouts in the county.

Since the 2010 Census, there has been an overall decrease in the population which has completed high school, whereas some college and Associate's degrees has increased. Audubon County has seen a decrease in the percentage with Bachelor's degrees, but saw an increase in Graduate or professional degrees.

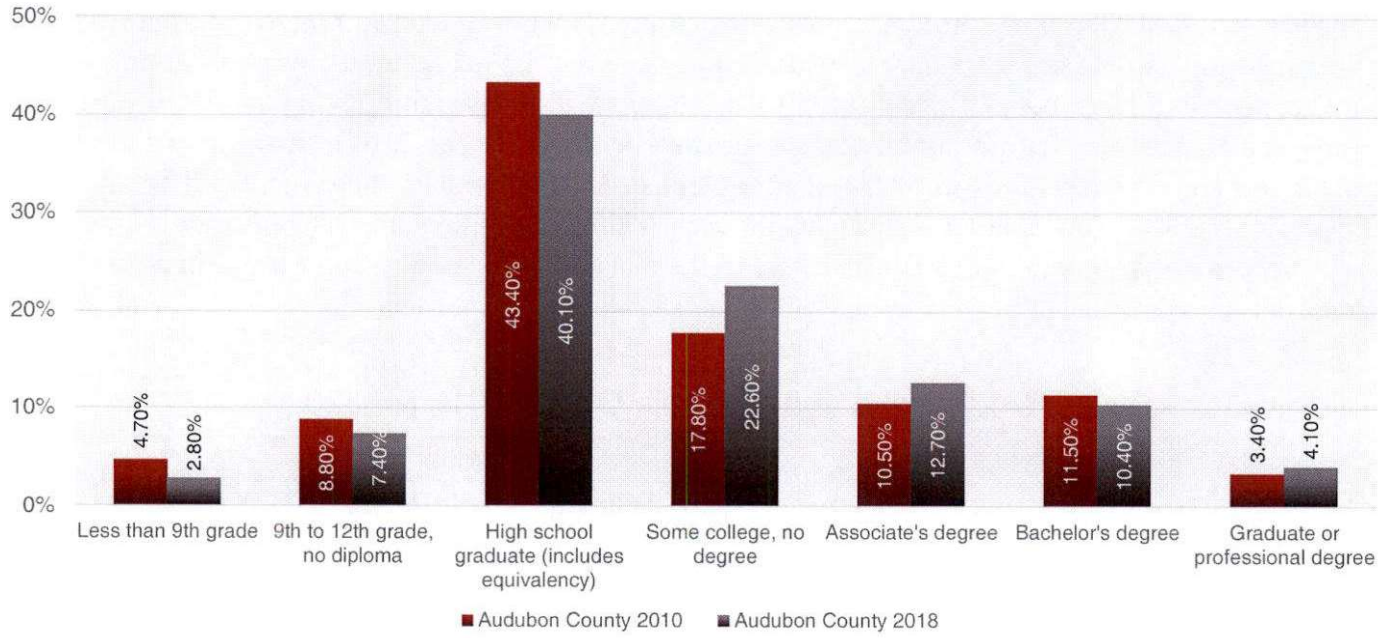



Figure 1.6: Audubon County Education Attainment, age 25 and over, 2010 & 2018