

History of Nebraska
An overview
Part 1

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To Nebraska College M.S.R.I.C.F.

The first American expedition to visit Nebraska in 1804 to 1806 was led by Meriwether Lewis and William Clark, who traveled up the Missouri River and explored the state's eastern edge. In 1806, Lt. Zebulon Pike visited south-central Nebraska as part of a U.S. government program to explore the Louisiana Purchase.

The Spanish-American trader Manuel Lisa established trading posts along the Missouri River between 1807 and 1820. One established in 1812 was near the site where Lewis and Clark held council with the Indians, in present-day Washington County.

In 1819, the U.S. Army established Nebraska's first military post, Fort Atkinson (located near the present-day community of Fort Calhoun in Washington County) to protect the frontier. The fort, with more than 1,000 people, also became the site of Nebraska's first school, library, grist-mill and brickyard before it was abandoned in 1827. The village of Bellevue, founded on the Missouri River in 1823, became Nebraska's first permanent white settlement.

In 1820, Maj. Stephen Long, with a 20-man party, traveled from the Missouri River up the Platte River, to the South Platte headwaters near Denver, Colo. In his reports, Long described the land including western Nebraska a "barren and uncongenial district," and "almost wholly unfit for cultivation, and of course uninhabitable by a people depending upon agriculture for their subsistence." A map drawn by the cartographer of Long's expedition labeled the region a "Great Desert."

In the early 1830s, Nebraska's Platte River valley began to play an important role in the "Great Migration," the westward movement of thousands of pioneers. They followed trails crossing Nebraska, including:



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The Oregon Trail, which followed the Little Blue and Platte River valleys

The Mormon Trail, which started from present-day Omaha and traveled along the north bank of the Platte River

The Denver Trail, which extended from the Missouri River to Denver the "steam wagon road" or Nebraska City Cut-Off, which led from Nebraska City up the West Blue River to the Platte River and on to Denver.

These trails were traveled extensively until railroad construction reached the Pacific coast. Between April 3, 1860, and October 24, 1861, Pony Express riders also followed the Platte River valley, carrying mail to the west coast. Fort Kearny was established near the present-day city of Kearney to protect travelers crossing Nebraska along trails.

In 1832, the steamboat Yellowstone began the first annual fur-trading voyages up the Missouri River, stopping at points along the Nebraska border. Steamboats were important forms of transportation until the construction of railroads in the 1860s, with 40 to 50 steamboats involved in river trade.

Until Nebraska became part of the Nebraska Territory in 1854, the U.S. government designated the area as Indian country, refusing to allow white families to settle there. Between 1830 and 1854, rugged frontier conditions prevailed in the state. The only two white settlements of any size were Fort Kearny and Bellevue.

Ft. Kearny, near the present-day city of Kearney, was founded in September of 1848. Yet this early military outpost was not the first Ft. Kearny in Nebraska. Two years earlier, the original Ft. Kearney had been located on the Missouri, in what is now downtown Nebraska City. The first fort had as its purpose the protection of traffic on the overland trail. Soon most of that traffic bypassed the Missouri location, so a new site was selected some 97 miles further west. The new Ft. Kearny rapidly developed into one of the most important stops on the way West. Literally thousands of emigrants passed by it each year. Ft. Kearny was viewed as the jumping-off place to the great unknown. The route to the east was fairly safe and settled, but west of the Fort lay Indian country, and the



geographic wonders of the West. By 1871, railroad lines connected the country, and the Indian troubles had moved further west. Ft. Kearny was abandoned, having served its purpose well. .

The word "Nebraska" first began to appear in publications of 1842, when Lt. John C. Fremont explored the plains and mountains of the western U.S. His report mentions the "Nebraska River," the Oto Indian name for the Platte River. The term was taken from the Oto word "Nebrathka" meaning "flat water." U.S. Secretary of War William Wilkins, in his report of Nov. 30, 1844, stated: "The Platte or Nebraska River being the central stream would very properly furnish a name to the (proposed) territory."

President Pierce appointed Francis Burt of South Carolina as the first governor of the Nebraska Territory. When Burt died two days after his inauguration on Jan. 16, 1854, the territory's secretary of state, Thomas Cuming, became acting governor. Cuming organized the territorial government and took a census so that legislative elections could be held.

The First Territorial Capitol was a modest two story brick structure 33' x 75', fronting east on 9th Street between Farnam and Douglas. The Building had been provided by the Council Bluffs and Nebraska Ferry Company without a cost of one single dollar.

The House of Representatives met on the first floor, and the council or upper house met on the second floor. Both chambers were fitted out with school desks. The curtains were made of red and green calico. It was the only brick building in Omaha City and was distinct in the landscape as the capitol today.

The capitol was extremely divided. Many of the delegates were not from Nebraska as some were from Iowa and as far away as Michigan. Many tried to bring the capitol to Bellevue but Acting Governor Cumming was too well entrenched and Omaha City won out. Cumming died in 1858 or his grandiose plan of using the Territorial Capitol to build Council Bluffs might have succeeded.



In 1856 the New York Times gave this description of the Legislature: "It is a decidedly rich treat to visit the general assemble of Nebraska. You see a motley group in a small room, crowded to overflowing, some behind their little school-boy desks, some seated on top, some with feet perched on their neighbor's chair or desk, some whittling, half a dozen walking about. A lobbyist stalks inside the bar, and from one to the other he goes, talking the advantage of his bill. A fight starts up in the Secretary's room and away goes the honorable body to see the fun. Then a thirsty member moves an adjournment and in a few minutes the drinking saloons are well patronized." Some cynical observers might wonder if the old adage is true, "The more things change, the more they stay the same."

A struggle between the new town of Omaha and the old town of Bellevue to be the territorial capital was decided in favor of Omaha by Cuming, who called the first session of the legislature to meet there. However, the issue was not settled until Nebraska achieved statehood in 1867, when the capital was moved to Lancaster, now known as Lincoln.

Nebraska Territory came into being on May 30, 1854 when President Franklin Pierce signed the Kansas-Nebraska Act, passed by the Senate on May 25th and the House on March 3rd. On February 22, 1855 a resolution to place the Second Territorial Capitol in Omaha was passed. Governor Izard appointed James C. Mitchell to locate the site to build the capitol. On March 17th 1855 he reported that it would be built in the center of Capitol Square, where present day Central High School sits at 20th & Dodge. By December the foundation was complete. It was in use as the Territorial Capitol from approximately 1858 to 1867 when Nebraska became a state and the capitol was removed to Lincoln. The Territorial Capitol was 137' x 93' with the Supreme Court, Library and government offices on the first floor. The Legislative and governor's offices were on the second floor. In 1869 the building and grounds were presented to Omaha. By 1872 it had been completely torn down and replaced by Omaha High School.

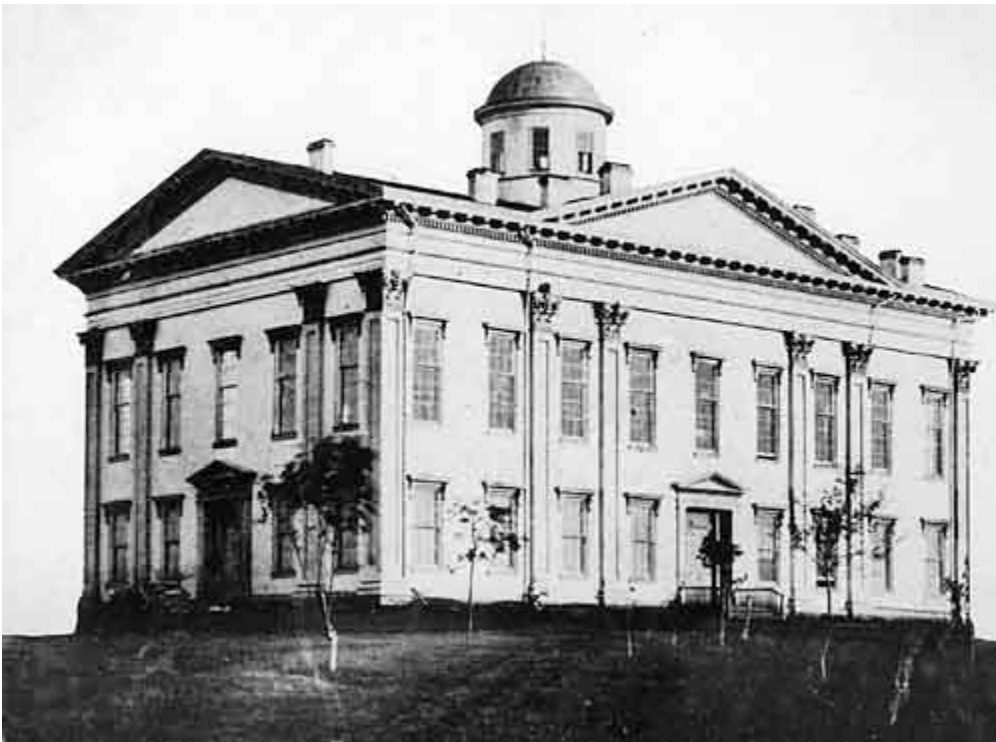
During Nebraska's early territorial days, settling the countryside, land and currency laws, the proposed transcontinental railroad, the capital's location, the rivalry between north and south regions of the Platte River,



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the Republican Party formation and the defeat of the first efforts to make Nebraska a state were the prevalent issues of the time. The territories population grew 2,732 in November 1854 to 28,841 in 1860.

The First Territorial Capitol 1854 - 1858



Second Territorial Capitol



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