

History of Nebraska Part 2

An overview

When Nebraska territory opened to settlement in 1854, mail was delivered haphazardly. Anyone crossing the Missouri, usually on their own business, might be asked to carry the mail. When there were enough settlers to justify the expense, a contract for mail service was awarded to John B. Bennet and his brother, William. The contract provided for mail to be carried from northeast Kansas to the mouth of the Iowa River, northwest of Sioux City. The Bennets received \$3500 a year for the service. Settlements had their own postmasters--usually anyone responsible who could be convinced to bother with the duties. Pay depended on the number of stamps cancelled at the post office. 20 or 25 dollars a year was average. Mail might be kept in a cigar box, or even an old hat. Once a month a long list of "uncalled for" letters would appear in the local paper. By the 1870s, many places had postmistresses. Few men wanted to bother with the position. But the job was ideal for women because they could locate the post office in their homes-- often dugouts or soddies. No home delivery--everyone came to the post office to get the mail.

Overland freighting was a major business in the days of Nebraska territory. Gold-mining settlements in Colorado and Montana imported most of their goods via Nebraska, and were willing to pay high prices. No railroads had yet been built, so wagon trains hauled the freight. Special wagons were constructed for crossing the Plains. They were wide-tracked, heavy-tired, and used five or six yoke of oxen. A wagon load averaged about seven thousand pounds. A freight train usually consisted of twenty-six wagons. Trains traveled an average of 17 or 18 miles a day. Freight loads ranged from corn, to the cats miners desperately needed to control their mice population. Staples such as flour, sugar, salt, bacon, coffee, and whiskey made up the common loads. Enterprising freighters often manufactured their own liquor to supplement the load. Freighting remained an important part of the Nebraska economy until the completion of the transcontinental railroad in 1869.



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In early 1867, Congress passed an act admitting Nebraska to the Union, provided that certain changes were made in its constitution. President Andrew Johnson, convinced that this stipulation violated the U.S. Constitution, vetoed the act, but Congress overrode his veto. Johnson, a Democrat, also did not want Nebraska admitted to the Union because the territory had a Republican majority.

Nebraska joined the Union as the 37th state on March 1, 1867. The people elected David Butler as the first governor and the state capital was moved to Lincoln on July 29. A state university and agriculture college were established on Feb. 15, 1869. In 1872, Nebraska became the first state to celebrate Arbor Day - a special day for planting trees - largely due to the efforts of Nebraska City publisher J. Sterling Morton.

When President Andrew Johnson signed the bill making Nebraska a state on March 1, 1867, a fierce struggle was already raging over the location of the new state's capital. Amid angry charges of lack of legislative representation from those living south of the Platte River, and despite frequent challenges, the seat of Nebraska's territorial government had remained at Omaha since 1854, the year in which Nebraska Territory was created. Although the then current Omaha capitol building, built in 1857-58, was apparently sturdy enough to house legislative sessions for several years and was well located in relation to Nebraska's 1867 population, it was still north of the Platte. Forces from the south launched a major verbal and legal initiative to move the seat of government to their part of the state.

During the last territorial legislature the battles over reapportionment and capital removal raged so hotly that at one point fists and guns were brandished. When the removal issue finally came to a vote before the first State Legislature meeting in Omaha, however, there was little protest from north of the Platte. A last-ditch attempt to steer Democrats living south of the river away from the bill came from Omaha Senator J. N. H. Patrick, who attempted to revive Civil War hatreds by moving that the name "Capital City" be removed from the bill and "Lincoln" (for Abraham



Lincoln) substituted. Although the new name was accepted, the ploy failed and capital removal became a fact.

The removal act also called for the formation of a Capital Commission, to be composed of the three principal officers in the new state government: Governor David Butler, Secretary of State Thomas Kennard, and Auditor John Gillespie. The commission was directed to locate the capital site on state-owned land within an area that included the "County of Seward, the south half of the counties of Saunders and Butler, and that portion of the county of Lancaster lying north of the south line of township nine." The commissioners were then to have the land platted and sold to provide funds for the construction of a new capitol building. Finally, they were to oversee the building's construction.

Their tour of sites began July 18, 1867. They looked at Ashland, rural Butler County, Milford, Camden, Yankee Hill (Saline City), and Lancaster. By July 29 they were back in the Salt Creek Valley and the village of Lancaster for a second look. According to their official report the commissioners found the land gently undulating. Its principal elevation being near the center of the proposed new site, the village already established being in the midst of a thrifty and considerable agricultural population. Rich timber and water power was available within short distances. The center of the great saline region was within two miles; and, in addition to all other claims, the especial advantage was that the location was at the center of a circle of about one hundred and ten miles in diameter. It was along or near the circumference of which are the Kansas state line, directly south, and the important towns of Pawnee City, Nebraska City, Plattsmouth, Omaha, Fremont, and Columbus.

The "great saline region" referred to by the report was apparently quite significant to the commissioners. The salty basin was well-known to Indians and fur traders, and as early as 1857 the Crescent Salt Company had sent Captain William Donovan to investigate the possibilities of developing it. Twelve years later Governor Butler, speaking before the 1869 State Legislature, stated that the Salt Creek basin "will be directly and indirectly a source of wealth to the state whose great value no one can fully estimate." Even though these great hopes for salt fortunes were doomed to disappointment, the optimism of the time was apparently a



decisive factor to Kennard. When the first ballots were cast for a new capital site, Butler, who was apparently influenced by the opinion of his secretary of state, also voted for the Salt Creek Valley. Gillespie voted for Ashland, but switched to Lancaster on the next ballot to make the decision unanimous. On August 14, 1867, their decision was formally announced. Lancaster was to become Lincoln, capital of the new state of Nebraska.

At the time of its designation as the state capital, Lancaster was composed of two stores, one shoe shop, six to seven houses, and approximately thirty residents. Forces opposed to capital removal now focused their invective on Lincoln. "Nobody will ever go to Lincoln, who does not go to the Legislature, the lunatic asylum, the penitentiary, or some of the State institutions," said the Omaha Republican. "It is founded on fiat, no river, no railroad, no steam wagon, nothing. It is destined for isolation and ultimate oblivion," said another. Governor Butler feared that unless the new capitol was completely built and ready to receive the State Legislature in January 1869, Lincoln would lose its capital status, and the removal plan would fail after all.

The purchase price of the first lot was indicative of the trend for the rest of the first day's sales. The lot had an appraised value of \$40 and sold for twenty-five cents. Sales on September 17 averaged only 10 percent of the expected price. To raise the money essential for construction of the capitol, more aggressive action would be necessary. That evening the three capital commissioners and a group of Nebraska City businessmen led by James Sweet reached an agreement. To encourage other buyers, the Nebraska City group agreed to bid \$10,000 worth of lots up to at least their appraised value. In return the commissioners would show their faith in the new town by buying lots as well. So far the commissioners had kept out of the bidding, apparently to avoid conflict of interest charges. With the pump thus primed, a very successful auction followed, resulting in a total collection of \$34,342.25. Commented the Lincoln Statesman: "If Governor Butler, John Gillespie, Tom Kennard and James Sweet had not come up with the scratch and bid off lots at prices above appraisements, Lincoln would have fizzled-died aborning."



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Meanwhile, the commissioners and Nebraska City businessmen were not the only ones to come up with the "scratch." Newcomers arrived rapidly and on October 9, 1869, the Nebraska State Journal could report that 110 dwellings and business places had been erected, an average of four buildings a week. Lincoln's future was to remain uncertain until after the depression years of the 1870s.

Difficulties in obtaining an architect, contractor, and suitable building materials for the capitol were met and solved by the commissioners, and by December 1, 1868, the building was ready to receive the next month's legislative session. With this job finished the commissioners could turn their attention to the construction of their private residences. Kennard and Gillespie bought the north half and south half, respectively, of Block 153, bounded by H, G, Sixteenth, and Seventeenth streets, while Butler purchased 120 acres southwest of the original Lincoln plat. By June 12, 1869, Kennard was excavating his lots in preparation for construction, and by July 17 John K. Winchell, a Chicago architect, had completed designs for the three similar homes. Joseph Ward, contractor of the newly completed capitol, served as contractor for both the Butler and Kennard houses, while D. J. Silver and Son erected the Gillespie home.

According to the Nebraska Statesman, the three residences were to cost between \$8,000 and \$15,000 and were to "exceed in tastefulness of design any private dwellings in the State." Thus in their private lives, the commissioners continued to exhibit confidence in the new city. In later years it was recognized that the psychological impetus given to Lincoln residences and investors by the construction of these three mansions in the raw prairie capital had been an important factor in the struggling city's ultimate success.

Architect John Keyes Winchell was twenty-seven when he submitted his designs for the commissioners' residences. At the same time he was also serving as architect for the Nebraska Insane Asylum in Lincoln, his plan for which had been accepted by the commissioners the previous June. Winchell's career was apparently plagued by ill luck. Only six buildings have specifically been attributed to him, four in the Lincoln area and two in Chicago. Two of the major ones, Lincoln's \$137,000 state asylum and Chicago's \$425,000 Bigelow House (planned as the city's most costly and



lavish hotel), were soon to be destroyed by fire. The asylum had been completed less than a year when it burned in April of 1871, and the Bigelow was lost in the great Chicago fire of October 1871 on the night before it was to have celebrated its grand opening. Little is known of the Statehood Memorial architect's life after 1873, but he died young, possibly after several years of illness.

One of the many unsubstantiated rumors current during the impeachment proceedings against Governor Butler in 1871 was that some state funds budgeted to the asylum had indirectly gone into the construction of Butler's and Kennard's private residences. Apparently the only incriminating circumstances were that both the architect and contractor for the asylum were, at the same time, involved in the construction of the two commissioners' houses.

In constructing Kennard's house, contractor Joseph Ward used both local and imported materials. The house was built prior to the completion of the first railroad to Lincoln in July 1870, and it is believed that all original lumber in the house was hauled overland from Nebraska City and Omaha by ox-drawn freight wagons. Bricks were made from local clays, and the sandstone for the foundation was quarried along Antelope Creek in the vicinity of today's Folsom Children's Zoo. In one of its first uses west of the Missouri, Frear Stone, a forerunner of modern concrete, was used for the window heads and sills.

Lincoln's attitude toward Frear Stone was characteristic of the way in which frontier America actively anticipated joining the East in gaining the advantages of technological change. During the Kennard House construction patentee Joseph Frear visited Lincoln, and local newspapers generated excitement over the possibilities of the new artificial stone. According to the Nebraska Statesman, it was composed of "sand, Louisville cement, gypsum, oxide of iron and a small mixture of chemicals." A Frear Stone manufacturing plant was established in Lincoln, and in an attempt to popularize the product the manufacturers offered to sell it to the state at the cost of production for use in their private dwellings. Frear Stone was used in the construction of all three commissioners' residences and the state asylum. There were apparently



rumors of the material's lack of durability, but the Nebraska State Journal refused to believe them. "The material looks firm," the newspaper said, "and we'll bet high on it ." Later it noted: Some fools, who have nothing else to occupy their minds occasionally start sensational reports about "faulty walls," and the breaking of Frear Stone, & c. These silly tales are simply malicious falsehoods . . . The Frear Stone has yet to crack, crumble or scale, in the least degree.

Within a few years, however, the rumors apparently became fact, and about 1878 all the Frear Stone window heads and sills of Kennard's house were covered with the galvanized metal that remains today. The arch over the main entrance has been uncovered and here the original Frear Stone can still be seen.

On January 8, 1870, the Nebraska State Journal noted that Auditor Gillespie and his family had arrived in town to take possession of their newly completed home. Secretary Kennard, it noted, would "follow suit immediately upon his return from Washington." Kennard had moved to Lincoln in the fall of 1868; prior to the completion of their homes, both Kennard and Butler lived for some time in the newly constructed state capitol building.

