After growing up in Pennsylvania, and working in mail contracting there, Stephen Miles was lured to the western mail contracting market and moved to Nebraska in the mid-1850s shortly after it was opened up to settlement in 1854. When Miles arrived in Richardson County, Nebraska there were very few people and only a few settlements along the Missouri River. In the summer of 1857, at the age of 35, Miles managed to gain the contract for delivering mail route 8911, the mail from Independence, Missouri to Salt Lake City. Miles’ good fortune was the result of the “Utah War”, when the mail contract was ended with the Brigham Young Express. When the route was contracted out again, Stephen Miles came in with the lowest bid of $32,000 a year for monthly delivery to Salt Lake City, using 4 mule coaches. In comparison, a previous holder of the route, John Hockaday submitted a bid of $62,000 a year for monthly service. For approximately half a year Miles held this route, but his low bid impacted his delivery abilities and subsequently his contract was cancelled. The route was contracted out again with John Hockaday providing weekly service from St. Joseph, Missouri to Salt Lake City for $190,000 a year.

Unfortunately, Stephen Miles’ major mail contract was cancelled by 1858, but that did not deter him from seeking other mail contracts and business ventures. As a mail contractor Miles was able to capitalize on the Congressional Act of March 3, 1855, which allowed any mail contractor to file a claim on land in order to build stage stations for replenishing supplies and getting fresh draft animals for the coaches. Miles filed and purchased several thousand acres of land for his enterprise over the following decade. The land he acquired was centered upon the ranch he established in 1857 south of modern Dawson, Nebraska. The Miles Ranch served as the central hub of Miles’ operation. It was on his ranch that he established a post office named “Miles Ranch” on July 13, 1858, which was later discontinued on March 19, 1867. At his ranch he cared for thousands of mules, horses, and cattle which went toward supplying his coaches and workers. To support his ranching he constructed several barns and ranch hand/coach driver’s quarters that are non-extant. The Miles Ranch slowly became one of the premier ranches in the region and contributed to Miles’ future success as a mail contractor.

Settlement and development of Richardson County progressed during the early territorial days and by 1860 a total of 2,835 people had settled in the county. The following decade would see even more changes for the county. Throughout the 1860s Stephen Miles actively bought and sold land throughout southeastern Nebraska and northeastern Kansas. His acquisitions in real estate were bolstered by his postal contracts and ranching. During
the 1860s Miles held the contracts for carrying mail and freight throughout Nebraska, Iowa, Kansas, Missouri, and Texas. For instance, in 1862, Miles held the contracts to carry post from Iowa Point, KS to Marysville, KS and from Atchison, KS to Randolph, KS. In Nebraska, he carried mail from Falls City to Pawnee City. From Missouri he ran a stage line and mail contract from Westport, Missouri to the Sac and Fox Agency in Kansas Territory. Additionally, he ran a mail line from St. Joseph, Missouri to Council Bluffs, Iowa. Although he accumulated a sizable fortune by engaging in the postal contract business he wisely decided to stop seeking contracts as the railroads slowly expanded. Even though the population of Richardson County had grown to 9,780 by 1870, the larger number of potential customers did not lead to more profits as the freight and mail delivery business was increasingly taken over by the westward progressing railroad network. The Burlington and Southwestern Railroad had constructed a line to Rulo by 1869 and within the next two years, the Atchison and Nebraska Railroad spanned the county. By 1871, Miles was completely out of mail contracting and devoted the remainder of his life to his ranch and local business investments.

The Civil War left large numbers of stray cattle to roam and breed on the southern plains. Large herds were for the taking and were rounded up by ranchers in the 1860s and 1870s. Eastern markets yearned for the cheap and plentiful beef from the plains, yet no direct rail lines were constructed by this time. The rancher’s solution to get their cattle to market resulted in the legendary cattle drives. The establishment of cattle trails running from the southern plains north to rail heads in Kansas and Nebraska was just the first part of the journey for the cattle. The second part involved loading the cattle upon rail cars bound for Chicago and other processing centers in the east where they would be butchered for the dinner plates of the easterners. Although the railroad was making mail contracting less lucrative, Miles saw the opportunity presented in the newly constructed railways and threw himself into the cattle business.

From the 1870s to his death, Stephen Miles focused on expanding his ranch and investing in various banks. By this time Stephen Miles’ son, Joseph Miles, was part of his father’s business. Stephen Miles and his son reportedly made several trips to Texas where he previously held mail contracts and drove cattle back to Nebraska. Once the cattle were in Nebraska, Miles let them fatten on his ranch before loading them on rail cars and selling them in Chicago. Fattening cattle was not Miles’ only business venture during this time.

Stephen Miles began investing in several banks during his later life. In 1872, in cooperation with William Nichols, Stephen Miles invested in and helped organize the Commercial Bank of St. Louis, which in 1899 merged with the State Bank of St. Louis. After gaining some experience in the banking industry Miles organized the First National Bank of Falls City in 1882 and served as its president until his death in 1898. The First National Bank of Falls City was officially opened on July 1, 1882 and continues to operate to this day. In 1884, Miles organized the Bank of Rulo, later re-named the State Bank of Rulo. Stephen Miles served as president of the State Bank of Rulo until his death in 1898. Returning back to his home in Pennsylvania in 1890, Miles organized the Miles National Bank of Delta, in Delta, Pennsylvania, where he was also the president.
SCOPE AND CONTENT NOTE

This collection consists of one folder containing correspondence, receipts, etc. of Stephen B. Miles dating from 1857-1871. The correspondence (photostatic copies only) dates from 1857-1858 and deals with Miles’ mail contract. The other items in the collection include a bill of lading for goods received by Miles via the Steamboat Mountaineer, at Rulo, Nebraska, Oct. 31, 1868; a receipt from Frye, Reed & Kelly, Commission Dealers in Live Stock, Illinois, August 31, 1871; a certificate for one share of stock in the “Central City Company” of Nebraska Territory, June 17, 1857; a certificate for one share of stock in the Rulo Town and Ferry Company, Rulo, Nebraska Territory, July 2, 1859.

INVENTORY

Correspondence, 1857-1858
Certificates and receipts, 1857-1871

Subject headings:

Central City Company (N.T.)
Miles, Stephen Boyd, 1822-1898
Richardson County (Neb.) -- History
Rulo (Neb.) -- History
Rulo Town and Ferry Company (Rulo, N.T.)
Stage coaches and lines