Nebraska's most problematic historical markers

It was an accepted custom for many early fur traders to marry into Indian tribes. As the Indians attached their lands, the rights of the half-breed descendants were not always identified. This situation was recognized by the government in 1856, by the Treaty of 1850, which set aside a tract of land for the half-breeds of the Oto, Iowa, Omaha, and Santee Sioux tribes.

This tract was located between the Great and Little Nemaha rivers. In 1856, the land was surveyed by John C. McCoy, who placed the western boundary eight miles west of the river instead of ten miles, as specified. This caused problems, as later white settlers were to settle on Indian lands west of McCoy's line. Congress ordered the land resurveyed, and in 1858 the McCoy line was made official. On September 30, 1858, John Neal received the first patent.

The owners were never required to live on their property and many eventually sold their lands to whites. One of the original survey lines is now partly identified by the Half-Breed Road which runs in a northeast direction from here. The descendants of some pioneer fur traders still live in the area.
“Half-Breeds” … “Fierce migratory plains Indians” … “spearhead of white civilization…”

The Nebraska Historical Marker Program is one of History Nebraska’s most popular programs. We’ve placed more than 500 markers across the state over the past 60 years or so. People love the markers and sponsor new ones.

But some markers have not aged well. History is written by people, and people have biases and blind spots. As far as older Nebraska markers go, the worst offenders are those addressing Native American history. We’re reviewing our markers to identify and prioritize the ones that fall short of our standards.

In some cases, the issue is offensive language or loaded words. More often, it’s what the marker insinuates, or what it omits or conceals.

Here are some of our most problematic markers. Keep reading, and learn what you can do to help.

May was Historic Preservation Month. Did you miss it? No worries. Here are five recent posts from our State Historic Preservation Office about some noteworthy historic structures around the state.

Baled Hay Church
Built in 1928, Pilgrim Holiness Church near Arthur is made of baled straw "bricks" that are plastered on the inside and stuccoed on the outside. Keep reading.

The Love-Larson Opera House in Fremont
Wouldn’t it be cool if this old opera house still existed? Well, it does. Learn more and look at photos in this post from the State Historic Preservation Office. Keep reading.

Genoa Indian School
This two-story brick building is part of the former US Indian Industrial School campus in Genoa, Nebraska. The school’s purpose was to assimilate Native Americans into white culture. Today the remaining buildings are listed on the National Register of Historic Places, and they help tell the story of the school and of the era that produced it. Keep reading.

The Berry State Aid Bridge
Located near the Fort Niobrara National Wildlife Refuge, this 1921 bridge is listed on the National Register of Historic Places. Keep reading.

The Mrs. H.J. Bartenbach House
This is actually a Victorian house… or it used to be, before Mrs. Bartenbach remodeled her Grand Island home into the Moderne style in 1937-38. Keep reading.

Standing Bear in the news
Chief Standing Bear has been in the news a lot lately. His statue was unveiled in the US Capitol in September 2019, and now a Lincoln Public Schools committee is proposing to name the capital city's newest high school in his honor, while the Ponca Tribe of Nebraska is asking Harvard University to return the tomahawk shown in this photo.
Excavating the Fort Robinson dump

This past December, three members of the State Archeology Office traveled to Fort Robinson to investigate a site before it becomes part of an expanded RV campground. The location happens to the site of the fort’s old dump. In this post, they share a few of the items they uncovered and tell the stories behind them.

Did you know that Chadron used to have its own Coca Cola Bottling plant? That’s where this bottle was filled sometime between the late 1930s and 1951. Keep reading.

Nebraskan perspectives on slavery after the Civil War
Juneteenth is a holiday celebrating emancipation from slavery. It’s a contraction of June 19, the day in 1865 that emancipation was announced in Texas at the end of the Civil War. The commemoration spread through the African American community to other states.

What did people in Nebraska Territory think about slavery at that time? Keep reading.

Upcoming Events
This month’s History Café will be a June 17 outdoor event on Centennial Mall. Two history presenters will help kick off Lincoln’s Star City Pride Festival by discussing Louis Crompton, who introduced one of the nation’s first gay studies classes at UNL, and the status of “Two-Spirit” in traditional Native American culture. This, plus live music begins at 5:30 p.m. between P and Q Streets. Read more.

History Nebraska Newsletter, David Bristow, Editor, history.nebraska.gov
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Nebraska’s most problematic historical markers

By David L. Bristow, Editor

June 1, 2021

“The Chadron area was once the scene of bitter warfare between the fierce migratory plains Indians and the whites.”

These words appeared on an official Nebraska State Historical Marker at Chadron State Park. Placed many years ago, the marker is being replaced this year with a new version that doesn’t slander Native peoples as “fierce.”
The Nebraska Historical Marker Program is one of History Nebraska’s most popular programs. We’ve placed more than 500 markers across the state over the past 60 years or so. People love the markers and sponsor new ones.

But some markers have not aged well. History is written by people, and people have biases and blind spots. As far as older Nebraska markers go, the worst offenders are those addressing Native American history. We’re reviewing our markers to identify and prioritize the ones that fall short of our standards.

Excluding Chadron State Park, here are the five markers I think are most in need of revision. Together they illustrate the types of problems that exist on about two dozen other markers. (You may have a different top five!) In some cases, the issue is offensive language or loaded words. More often, it’s what the marker insinuates, or what it omits or conceals.

At the end of this post I’ll tell you how you can help and how your voice can be heard.

**Fort Atkinson. Fort Calhoun, Washington County**
I’ve underlined the two most egregious phrases on this marker, but the problems run deeper.

“Civilization came to the west bank of the Missouri with establishment of Fort Atkinson in 1820 about a half mile southeast of here. Named after its founder, General Henry Atkinson, this western-most Fort protected the frontier’s developing commerce. Established as a temporary camp in 1819, Fort Atkinson was the largest and strongest outpost above St. Louis. The permanent post went up a year later on the site of Lewis and Clark's Council with the Oto and Missouri Indians. From Fort Atkinson troops under the command of Col. Henry Leavenworth moved up the Missouri River in 1823 to punish the Arikara Indians after an attack on William H. Ashley's fur trading party. Members of the garrison ascended the river in 1825 on a mission of peace, participating in a series of treaties with the Indians. This spearhead of white civilization was abandoned in 1827. But in seven years Fort Atkinson had brought the first school, the first white family life, a library, a sawmill, a brickyard, a grist mill, and large-scale agriculture of the west bank of the Missouri.”
The most obvious issue is the assumption that Native peoples were uncivilized and that civilization is white. The narrative also distorts the history of the Missouri River fur trade even as it provides some genuine facts.

Native tribes had their own trade networks long before European traders arrived on the scene. The international fur trade provided new trading partners and new trade goods, and various tribes and outside nations (France, Spain, Britain, and eventually the US) attempted to control the trade. Fort Atkinson was built to help US traders gain the advantage over their British counterparts.

While it’s true that the US tried to reduce intertribal warfare, this had more to do with maximizing profits than some altruistic mission of peace and civilization. The Arikara went to war against Ashley’s party to protect their economic interests against an intruder, but the narrative implies that they were disobedient children defying a rightful authority.

Overall, the marker turns an important story of trade and economic rivalry into a triumphal narrative of “white civilization.”

**Ash Hollow. Garden County**
This one mistakes a bit of folklore for history, and then whitewashes a massacre.

First, “The hollow, named for a growth of ash trees, was entered by Windlass Hill to the south. Wagons had to be eased down its steep slope by ropes.” The hill was steep and dangerous, but the story about using windlasses is a tall tale.

More important is this: “In 1855 a significant fight, commonly called the Battle of Ash Hollow, occurred at Blue Water Creek northwest of here. General Harney’s forces sent out to chastise the Indians after the Grattan Massacre of 1854 here attacked Little Thunder’s band of Brule Sioux while the Indians were attempting to parley, killed a large number and captured the rest of the band.” (Full marker text here.)

“Chastise the Indians” is a polite, old-timey way of making a slaughter sound like aspanking. Here it describes an unprovoked massacre in which soldiers fired on men, women, and children, and burned food and supplies so that survivors would face starvation come winter. “Savages must be crushed before they can be completely conquered,” Harney wrote.
The marker also implies that Little Thunder’s band was responsible for the Grattan Massacre (rather, Harney attacked the first band of Lakotas he encountered). It also assumes that Lt. Grattan needed avenging, though the army well knew that he had needlessly instigated the 1854 fight in which he and his men were killed.

A more recent marker in the area, “The Battle of Blue Water,” provides a much better account of this event.

**Half-Breed Tract. Auburn, Nemaha County**

“I hate that word,” Victoria Hoff told the Lincoln Journal Star in 2018. “I’d rather anybody call me anything else, other than that.”

Hoff, of mixed Native and White ancestry, was talking about the controversial name of Half Breed Drive near Auburn. The “Half-Breed Tract” historical marker stands near the intersection of that road and Highway 136.
It begins:

“It was an accepted custom for many early fur traders to marry into Indian tribes. As the Indians ceded their lands, the rights of the half-breed descendants were not always identified. This situation was recognized by the government in 1830, by the Prairie Du Chien Treaty which set aside a tract of land for the half-breeds of the Oto, Iowa, Omaha and Santee Sioux tribes....”

(Full marker text here.)

Accuracy isn't the issue here. “Half-Breed Tract” was the government's official name for this reservation, and no one disputes that the reservation's history is a worthy topic. The problem is that the marker repeatedly uses the pejorative “half-breed” as if it’s currently an acceptable term for people of mixed ancestry. And it doesn’t help to have that term headlining the marker in all caps.

A different approach might be to retitle the marker “A MIXED-RACE RESERVATION.” The first paragraph could read: “The Prairie Du Chien Treaty of 1830 set aside a tract of land for mixed-race people of the Oto, Iowa, Omaha and Santee Sioux tribes. It was known officially as the ‘Half-Breed Tract.’” We can remember the name without appearing to endorse it.

Fort Niobrara. Near Valentine, Cherry County
This marker makes Lakotas sound like intruders in their own country. It begins:

“When a Sioux Indian reservation was established north of here in Dakota Territory in 1878, early settlers in the region grew fearful of attack. They requested military protection, and in 1880 Fort Niobrara was built a few miles east of present-day Valentine. There was no later Indian trouble in the immediate area, and the Ghost Dance religion in the early 1890’s brought the last major Indian scare.”

The narrative is misleading. It's true that settlers requested military protection after the Rosebud Indian Agency was founded in 1878, but the agency stood on what had long been recognized by treaty as Lakota land. The marker omits that part of the story, and that the US Army had been the aggressor in the 1876 Sioux War.

“There was no later Indian trouble,” the marker says. The expression “Indian trouble” appears on multiple markers, along with references to “hostile” and “friendly” Indians. These terms function in the same blame-shifting way as “the Negro problem” did in the Jim Crow-era South.

Likewise, “Indian scare” implies that the Lakotas did the scaring. In fact, the Ghost Dance movement was grossly misrepresented by the government, and political
agendas and newspaper fearmongering led to the massacre of Lakotas by US troops at Wounded Knee in 1890.

The marker ignores Native perspectives, using nearly half its words to namecheck prominent white men tangentially connected to the fort. The entire narrative assumes that the priorities of white soldiers and settlers are the only ones worth mentioning.

**Ponca Tribe. Near entrance to Niobrara State Park, Knox County**

This one has a mixture of good and bad points. It tells the story of the Ponca, how the government forced them from their land, and how Chief Standing Bear successfully sued the US government. Then it says this: “In 1962, at the request of
the Ponca, Congress provided for a termination of the reservation. Today the Ponca can be proud of their fight for justice....”

It reads like a happy ending, but the Ponca Tribe of Nebraska tells a different story:

“Ironically, as late as 1966, the Ponca would, yet again, be considered ‘persona non-grata’ when the United States government, in its infinite wisdom, terminated the Tribe. The policy of terminating tribes began in 1945. This policy affected approximately 109 tribes and bands and almost 1.5 million acres of trust land. In 1962, Congress decided that the Northern Ponca would be one of the tribes terminated. Thus, by 1966, the tribe’s termination was complete. The termination removed 442 Poncas from tribal rolls. In effect, this meant that not only did the Ponca no longer exist but also that their remaining land and holdings were dissolved. It was not until 1990, almost a quarter of a century later, that the Ponca would, once again, gain federal recognition. However, in the interim, much of the Tribe’s cultural heritage would be forever lost.” ([Read more at the Tribe’s official website.](#))

**A few things to keep in mind**

- This is not a final statement about Nebraska Historical Markers! It’s a preliminary acknowledgement that we have some work to do.
- By state statute, History Nebraska manages the Nebraska Historical Markers program, but we don’t control other markers, plaques, or monuments in the state.
- This isn’t about “erasing history.” It’s about unerasing history, making it more accurate as we consider more points of view.
- The State doesn’t pay for markers, which cost about $6,000 each. It’s not practical to alter a sign with cast metallic letters, so editing an old marker means buying a new one.

**How you can help**
• Learn more about the **Historical Marker Program**. Help us identify where the markers fall short, or where we can tell other stories on new markers.
• Provide financial support through the **History Nebraska Foundation**.
Pilgrim Holiness Church or "Baled Hay Church" by Diane Laffin, Architectural Historian/Preservation Associate

The Pilgrim Holiness Church is located in Arthur, the county seat of Arthur County. It is a significant, and rare, representation of vernacular architecture within the Sandhills of west central Nebraska. By using building materials and resources for its wall construction—in this case, prairie grasses and domestic hays—from the area where the church is located, this type of folk architecture ties the building contextually to geographic features and environmental aspects of its surroundings. Planned by a group of Congregationalists in 1927, and built in 1928, the one-and-a-half story, front-gable building has two-feet-thick load-bearing walls comprised of baled rye straw “bricks” clad with plaster on the interior and stucco on the exterior. The rear of the church houses the former pastor’s residence, which includes a kitchen, a parlor, and a stairway leading to two small sleeping rooms. Services
ceased in the mid-1960s. The Arthur County Historical Society owns the building and this organization has overseen restoration work that has occurred periodically since the mid-1970s.

The Pilgrim Holiness Church was listed to the National Register in 1979.

Sources:


Each style of architecture has its merits, but one of my personal favorites is the Richardsonian Romanesque architecture of the late 1800s. Inspired by the work of American architect Henry H. Richardson, the style involved a generous use of rounded arches and turrets, meticulous architectural detailing, and varying textures and colors of brick and stone.

One Nebraska structure that gives a sense of the exuberance and scale of this era of architecture is the Love-Larson Opera House in Fremont, designed by Omaha architect Francis M. Ellis and built in 1888.
Its original purpose hints at the shifts in entertainment as well as architecture that have taken place within the last thirteen decades; while the opera house provided productions of *other performing arts besides just opera*, it is still telling that the name was chosen as such.
With its stained glass windows, checkerboard ornamentation, and four-story scale, the Opera House still remains one of the most commanding buildings in Fremont’s historic central business district.

A non-profit purchased the building in the mid-1970s and has been making steady improvements and repairs to the structure since then, while also bringing events back to the space as well. It is to Fremont and Nebraska’s benefit that edifices such as this are being not only preserved, but brought back into community use once more.
Genoa Indian School

Genoa Indian School
1978
By Ryan Reed

The two story brick building capped with a side gable roof is the last remnant of the extensive US Indian Industrial School campus in Genoa, Nebraska. Once situated on 320 acres, the school consisted of 39 buildings that housed over 600 Native American children. The purpose of the school was to assimilate Native Americans into white culture. Eighteen buildings, which include agricultural, industrial and residential, are the last vestiges of the United States legacy of forced assimilation in Nebraska. This collection of buildings were added on the National Register of Historic Places in 1978.
Exterior School

Looking at a map of Nebraska, Nance County stands out due to its unusual shape. The boundaries almost look like they were cut and paste onto an already existing map of the state. The odd boundaries were actually created in 1857 when the area was established as the Pawnee Reservation.

On September 24, 1857, the Four Confederated Bands of the Pawnee (present day Pawnee Nation of Oklahoma) relinquished a large portion of the Sandhills in Nebraska to the United States Government. Article One of Cession 408, the treaty that relinquished the land, stipulated that the Pawnee must move to a reservation bisected by the Loup River. That reservation today is within the boundaries of present day Nance County. After Nebraska gained statehood in 1867, the state extinguished the Pawnee’s rights to their land, sold it and used proceeds to obtain lands elsewhere for the tribe. In 1876 the tribe was relocated to its present-day location in central Oklahoma.

Article Three of the treaty established a manual labor school to assimilate Pawnee children into white culture. The treaty stated, “The Pawnee, on their part, agree that each and every one of their children, between the ages of seven and eighteen years, shall be kept constantly at these schools for, at least, nine months in each year.” This was the origin of the US Indian Industrial School in Genoa, Nebraska.
After the obligation of Cession 408 was extinguished after the removal of the Pawnee, the United State Office of Indian Affairs converted the site for the
establishment of the fourth non-reservation boarding institution in the country. The existing buildings were removed and substantial brick buildings were constructed. The school formally open in 1884 and continued operating until 1933. Over the years, the campus was demoed and used for farming and subdivided into residential plots. The former agricultural, industrial and residential buildings are the last remnants of the US Indian Industrial School campus in Genoa.

Footnote Cession 408 quote.
The Berry State Aid Bridge

The Berry State Aid Bridge was listed in the National Register in 1992. The original Berry Bridge is now known as Brewer Bridge and was built in 1899. Due to the 1916 floods, the original 1899 bridge was moved to where the present day Brewer Bridge is. The Berry State Aid Bridge was built in 1920-21 to replace the original 1899 bridge and was called the Berry State Aid Bridge due to the state aid used in building it.

The Berry State Aid Bridge also had a mishap with a dynamite blast that was misplaced and damaged the truss when it was being built. Despite this, the Berry State Aid Bridge was completed in June 1921. This bridge was NR Listed in 1992 for being a “regionally important crossing of the Niobrara River and as one of the few remaining state aid trusses in Nebraska.”
Categories:
preservation month, berry state aid bridge
The Mrs. H.J. Bartenbach House

The Mrs. H.J. Bartenbach House by Kelli Bacon, Certified Local Government Coordinator

I have an affinity for Art Deco and Moderne architecture and have traveled out-of-state just to see these styles. Nebraska doesn't have many residential examples of the Moderne style, but we do have a beautiful one in the Mrs. H.J. Bartenbach House in Grand Island. Interestingly, this house did not begin as a Moderne house, but as a 1-story Victorian built by Mrs. Bartenbach's husband, Henry, in 1893. Henry died in 1933, and his wife remodeled the house between 1937 and 1938. It was then that the house became what we see today. The house was listed in the National Register of Historic Places in 1986.
So what exactly do I like about this house? I like the double curved stairs leading to the front door, the rounded corner windows in the sun room, the light fixtures flanking the front door, the vertical indentations in the stucco above the sun room, and the round windows in the garage. As you can see from the photos below, very little has changed on the exterior of the Moderne house, except for the landscaping.
What else is interesting about this house? It was owned by a woman. Mrs. Bartenbach remodeled the Victorian style house into the current Moderne style
house after her husband died. This house is one of only a small percentage of resources in Nebraska that are listed in the National Register of Historic Places and are noted for their association with a woman.

Bartenbach House in April 2021. Photo courtesy of Kelli Bacon.
Standing Bear

Standing Bear was born on Ponca land, near the mouth of the Niobrara, in what is now Nebraska around 1834. (Some sources give his birth year as 1829.) His Indian name was "Ma-chu-nah-zah." Because he showed leadership abilities, he became a chief at an early age.

In 1858 the Ponca relinquished all land they had claimed, except for a small reserve along the Niobrara. They tried to change from nomadic buffalo hunters to farmers. In the Treaty of 1868, the U.S. government mistakenly included the Ponca's land in territory assigned to the Sioux. Following this, the Sioux raided the area claimed by the Ponca and many lives were lost. The government's solution to end the raids was to move the Ponca to Indian Territory (present-day Oklahoma).

After the Ponca were told in 1876 that they were to be moved to Indian Territory, they sent ten chiefs with a U.S. agent to evaluate the land and its prospects. Based on their observations, the tribe voted not to go to Indian Territory. The government then decided to send the Ponca to Indian Territory, with or without their consent and the U.S. Army escorted the reluctant Ponca to their new home.

When they arrived in Indian Territory, the Ponca found that no provision for food or shelter had been made for them. As a result, many of the tribe, including Standing Bear's son, did not survive the first winter. In defiance of the relocation order, Standing Bear and thirty others tried to return to their Nebraska home. They set out on foot, begging along the way for food and shelter. Near Omaha, they stopped to visit their relatives the Omaha Tribe, where they were arrested on orders of the Secretary of the Interior. Standing Bear and the other Ponca were held by General George Crook at Fort Omaha. Although they were ordered back to Indian Territory, a delay was obtained so that they could rest and regain their
health. During this time, their story was told to the public by journalist Thomas H. Tibbles.

With the help of Tibbles and two lawyers, John L. Webster and Andrew J. Poppleton (and probably General Crook), Standing Bear petitioned the court for his right to return home. Judge Elmer S. Dundy had to rule on whether an Indian had the rights of freedom guaranteed by the U.S. Constitution. The government’s lawyer, G.M. Lambertson, tried to prove that an Indian was neither a person nor a citizen and, therefore, did not have the right to bring suit against the government. On April 30, 1879, Judge Dundy stated that an Indian is a person within the law and that the Ponca were being held illegally. Standing Bear and the Ponca were freed. The government arranged for the return of the Ponca from Indian Territory and land along the Niobrara River was allotted to them.

Between 1879 and 1883 Standing Bear traveled in the eastern states and spoke about Indian rights. He was accompanied by Thomas Tibbles, Susette (Bright Eyes) LaFlesche Tibbles, and Francis LaFlesche. After he returned from his travels, Standing Bear resided on his old home on the Niobrara and farmed. He died in 1908.
In December three member of the State Archeology Office braved cold, wind, and snow to complete a project at Ft. Robinson. The Nebraska Game and Parks Commission is expanding an RV campground at the park. The expansion sits on top of the Fort dump. When the contractor began earth moving they encountered an archeological feature from the dump. After the feature was initially investigated by State Archeologist Rob Bozell, a data recovery plan was written and a contract agreed to between NGPC and HN.

This type of Coke bottle was patented in 1937 and was produced until 1951. The bottle was filled at the Chadron Coca Cola Bottling plant which was in operation in 1939 and maybe earlier.
This is a Nesbitt soda bottle. The company based in Los Angeles began make fruit flavored syrups for soda fountains orange flavored soda in 1927. In 1939 the company began bottle Nesbitt’s orange soda more flavors were added later.

This bottle says Fitch on the bottom. Fitch made hair care products and the bottle would have had a paper label so we do not know what manner of hair product was in this particular bottle.

F.W. Fitch began manufacturing shampoo in 1898 in Boone, Iowa, and won many awards in his early years in business that elevated his status in the marketplace. In 1915, he purchased land in Des Moines to build a new plant. The F.W. Fitch Company dominated much of the shampoo industry in the United States from the 1920s to 1940s. The plant included the F.W. Fitch Building (main building), Soap Plant, Soap Plant Annex and Tunnel. The main building was the first constructed in the district in 1917. The main building as included in what was known as the "North Plant" where several non-extant buildings were also located. The Soap Plant was built in 1929 and allowed the firm to produce its own soap. At its peak, the company employed 400 workers prior to a rapid decline due to loss of contracts and investing too much in a Sunday evening radio program on the National
Broadcasting Company called "Fitch's Bandwagon." The F.W. Fitch Company Historic District was added to the National Register of Historic Places in 2013
The coin below traveled a long way to get to Ft. Robinson. It is a Swedish 1 ORE coin. You can see the date of 1883 when it was minted. 1 ORE was equivalent to a penny. The back read “BRODRAFOLKEN'S VAL” which roughly translates to “welfare of the brother nations”. An interesting fact cash transactions in Sweden are all rounded to the nearest Krona and ORE coins are no longer legal currency.

Categories:  
Fort Robinson, archeology, Nebraska State Archeology Office
Nebraskan Perspectives on Slavery After The Civil War

(The Emancipation Proclamation was signed in 1863 by President Abraham Lincoln.)

By Breanna Fanta, Editorial Assistant

At the brink of the Civil War, Nebraska Territory abolished slavery in 1861. As the war proceeded, many Nebraska soldiers fought for the Union while those at home kept up with events in the South. Though the territory prohibited slavery, the matter remained
So what did Nebraskans think about slavery during the war?

One example of conflict happened in early 1863. Two Nebraska City newspaper editors were at each other’s throats after four Black men were reportedly chased out of town at gunpoint. Both The News and The People’s Press shared the story, but had different opinions about it. The News editorialized that Nebraska was no place for African Americans, regardless of status (free or enslaved). The People’s Press fired back, denouncing the mob and calling The News and its editor, Augustus Harvey, “barbarous.” Harvey then circulated a petition justifying the expulsion of Blacks, but few citizens signed it.

Generally speaking, a majority of the state's Democratic population favored slavery. By abolishing it, they feared that problems would arise, particularly regarding
agriculture and labor. J. Sterling Morton, politician and former editor of *The News*, argued that abolition would diminish the market for Nebraska’s crops and livestock. He wrote that “without slavery, the south could no longer raise cotton and would substitute corn, wheat and pork. By abolishing slavery, you abolish industry and prosperity of your own people.” People also worried that many freedmen would move north and compete with White laborers or mingle with White women.

Responding to the Emancipation Proclamation, a Democratic paper in Omaha described the document as “ill-starred, unauthorized and indefensible.” While most Northern Democrats did not support Southern secession, their slogan was “The Constitution as it is, the Union as it was.” Strongly opposing the administration, Democrats called President Lincoln and his supporters “black republicans” who sought to “elevate an inferior race.”

Republicans were predominantly anti-slavery, even though few of them had favored immediate abolition of slavery before the war. Believing that the United States was framed on the basis of slavery, many Republicans felt that the nation’s founders had
“compromised with wrong for the sake of unity,” as one man stated in a *Nebraska Advertising* article.

While most Republicans were against slavery to some degree, many of their reasons were unrelated to justice for African Americans. Republicans emphasized the benefits of “Free Labor” (meaning working for wages but being free to leave your employer and find another). Republicans feared the spread of the plantation system in which a small number of landowners dominated the economy. They feared that small farms and White labors would find themselves competing against the “Slave Power.” They feared plantation farms would monopolize and take away from small farms.

There were others, however, that did feel strongly that slavery was unjust to Black people. One man, whose letter was published in the *Nebraska Advertiser*, expressed his disgust by saying that people needed to pray to God to “pardon the awful crime committed against him” and to pardon the government. He said he was grateful that there were people in government with a “nobler mind and purer heart” that sympathized for slaves, and concluded that “slavery is dead, DEAD, yes dead forever.” Many Republicans that shared these views also labeled Democrats as “disloyal” and “secessionist sympathizers.”

Disagreements continued after the war. When in 1866 the Republican-led Congress voted to establish the Freedmen’s Bureau to aid formerly enslaved people, President Andrew Johnson vetoed the bill. His veto message was published in newspapers across Nebraska Territory. In his message, he explained that freedmen should be “self-sustaining” and that his intention was not to “feed, clothe, educate or shelter” them as implied in the bill.

At the conclusion of The Civil War, Nebraska was on its way to becoming a state. In the original draft of the state’s constitution however, there was a “whites only” voting provision. Congress demanded that the voting restriction be removed and in 1867, Nebraska claimed its statehood. That same year the state’s seal read “Equality before the Law,” symbolizing the extension of voting rights to African American men.
(The Great Seal of Nebraska. For many years this was a skylight window at the US Capitol. History Nebraska 7434-2)

Captions (two middle images):

(1) Advertisement for the organization of a volunteer military company at Brownville, Nebraska Territory. Nebraska Advertiser May 23, 1861.

(2) Morton in 1889. History Nebraska RG1013-20-12

Sources:
James E. Potter (2012) "Standing Firmly by the Flag: Nebraska Territory and the Civil War, 1861 - 1867," University of Nebraska Press

Nebraska Advertiser -- April 6, 1865

Nebraska Advertiser -- March 8, 1866

Nebraska Advertiser -- October 25, 1866

Links:

"Equality Before The Law" : Thoughts on the Origin of Nebraska's State Motto

Categories:

Slavery, Civil War, Statehood, J. Sterling Morton,