Visit Nebraska’s Historic Sites

Celebrate Nebraska’s 150th this year with a visit to our state historic sites! Experience firsthand the landscapes, structures, images, and artifacts that tell part of Nebraska’s many stories.

New this year: Free admission to the Neligh Mill State Historic Site in Neligh and the Senator George W. Norris State Historic Site at McCook. Explore the fascinating nooks and crannies of the last 19th century mill in the state with its original equipment intact at Neligh. And in McCook, learn more about the Nebraska statesman who championed rural electrification and created our unique unicameral legislature.

Salute Old Glory waving from a new reproduction flagpole on Fort Robinson’s original parade ground near Crawford. (And get your card stamped as part of the Nebraska Tourism Commission’s Nebraska passport program—see more at visitnebraska.com) Walk the path of westward-bound pioneers at Chimney Rock Visitor Center south of Bayard. See p. 3 for news about spring conferences at the Cather and Neihardt State Historic Sites.

Sites open Memorial Day-Labor Day. And your NSHS membership gives you free admission to all locations. For more information: www.nebraskahistory.org/sites or 1-800-833-6747.
The NSHS’s Ford Center at Work: Doane Powell Masks

BY KYLIE KINLEY

What’s more ghoulish than a historic mask of a long-dead celebrity? A mask of a long-dead celebrity with wrinkles, tears, missing ears, or discoloration. So say conservators at the NSHS’s Gerald R. Ford Conservation Center in Omaha.

“The large spots of discolored adhesive make it look like he has leprosy or something,” says Rebecca Cashman, objects conservator.

She gestures to a mask of an “unidentified man” whose eyebrows have more hair than his head. His remaining hair is attached to his balding paper skull with large spots of discolored glue.

The Ford Center’s objects lab recently worked on thirty masks now part of the second rotation of The Strange and Wonderful Masks of Doane Powell exhibit at the Nebraska History Museum. The new set of masks replaced the first group in March. This way, the masks aren’t subjected to the rigors of being on display for the entire ten months of the exhibit.

Conservation of the Powell masks has been a group effort. While each conservator usually works on projects related to his or her specialty (paper, paintings or objects), the masks each consist of a three-dimensional layered paper substrate with a painted surface and additional elements composed of fabric, plastic, hair, and feathers (to name a few). This required a team effort.

Age and improper storage methods have left many of the masks in rough shape. Made primarily in the 1940s and 1950s, Powell’s masks were used in theater productions, circus performances, movies and television, advertising campaigns, magazine illustrations, store window displays, and at social functions.

When the Nebraska native created the masks, he joined multiple layers of wood pulp-based kraft paper with glue, molding them over a facial sculpture of modeling clay on a rigid base. Each mask he created is one-of-a-kind. Cleaning and repairing the masks also requires a one-of-a-kind approach.

“There are about seventy masks and they’re not all painted with the same media,” Cashman says. She picks up a mask of early twentieth century entertainer Sophie Tucker and points to Sophie’s lips.

“In some cases we think actual makeup, like lipstick, was used to color some of the lips,” Cashman says. “We have to be very careful.”

Some of the masks had make up on the interiors from their various wearers. Others were just dirty from repeated use, the faces gray from accumulated dirt and grime. Cashman carried out extensive testing on a group of masks to gain a sense of cleaning methods and repair materials that could be safely used to treat them without interfering with the original materials. Additional testing is done on each mask before treatment.

Lab technicians Megan Griffiths and Vonnda Shaw, along with paper conservator Hilary LeFevere, have all helped treat the masks. They have on hand a supply of tested repair materials, such as Japanese tissue papers (which have long, intact fibers), cotton bandages, wax resins, wheat starch paste, and adhesives that are dripped into tears with syringes. Some of these materials are for mending, some are for adhering, and some, like the cotton bandages, are for reshaping the heads during controlled humidification.

“Sometimes you have to put the mask in a humidification chamber in order to make the paper components pliable enough to reshape them,” Cashman says. “But you don’t want the paper turning to mush, and you have to pay close attention to what is happening to the paint layer above, which reacts differently to moisture than the paint. I was really excited when I was able to successfully humidify politician Grover Whalen’s flattened head and reshape it so that it actually resembled him.”

“Sometimes I’ve had little chunks completely fall off,” says Shaw, who has repaired the most masks of the group. “But I can put them back on because I’ve
Handling is a major cause of damage to the masks, so Shaw designed special supports consisting of an inert foam head with a flexible “pillow” to support the internal cavities of the facial features.

A mask in relatively good condition requires two-and-a-half to three hours of labor, including the time to write reports and photograph progress. A mask in poor shape takes longer. “Elsie the Cow took closer to eleven hours because one of her horns was damaged and her horns were partially detached,” Shaw says.

Cashman hovers over the “unidentified man” mask, which is spotted from discolored adhesive.

“The mask is losing its original hair, and the adhesive has discolored over time,” Cashman says. “We need to figure out the best way to re-adhere the hair to head using materials that won’t affect the original paint. There is a particular heat-activated adhesive I think may work, but we need to make sure exposure to low heat from a tacking iron won’t damage the hair.”

With the Powell masks ready for exhibition, Ford Center conservators have moved on to other projects. The center serves the conservation needs of the NSHS and of public and private clients including art and history museums and individuals with family heirlooms in need of treatment.

“We don’t discriminate,” Cashman says. “A lot of clients bring in things that are important to their family that might not have a lot of market value but have a great deal of sentimental value.” nebraskahistory.org/conserve

Come hear Rebecca Cashman’s “First Friday” talk about conserving the Powell masks, April 7, 5-7 p.m., at the Nebraska History Museum. Admission is free. 402-471-4782

Neihardt and Cather Spring Conferences

John G. Neihardt State Historic Site in Bancroft will host its 36th annual Spring Conference on April 29. This year’s theme is “Lakota Lives: Discovery through Biography.” Speakers include authors of biography and autobiography: Dr. Delphine Red Shirt (George Sword’s Warrior Narratives; Bead on an Anthill: A Lakota Childhood; Turtle Lung Woman’s Granddaughter); Chuck Trimble (Iyeska); Jerome Kills Small (Ohiyesa: The Life of Charles Eastman), and Tim Anderson (Lonesome Dreamer: The Life of John G. Neihardt). www.neihardtcenter.org

The 62nd annual Willa Cather Spring Conference, “Picturing the American West: The Railroad and Popular Imagination,” will be held June 1-3 in Red Cloud. The conference is a signature event of the Nebraska Sesquicentennial Commission and will highlight our 150 years of shared Nebraska history and culture.

The conference will include presentations, exhibits, tours, and activities at our historic sites, a vaudeville-inspired variety show, and will conclude with a grand opening and reception at the National Willa Cather Center on June 3 and the unveiling of American Bittersweet: The Life and Writing of Willa Cather, a new permanent exhibit. www.willacather.org

These two historic sites are administered by the Cather and Neihardt foundations under contract with the NSHS. www.nebraskahistory.org/sites
How Long Will a Sod House Stand?

The iconic Nebraska sod house is a vanishing historical resource. It’s not likely that the next generation of Nebraskans will be able to visit more than a handful of these dwellings. While there’s still time, NSHS Historic Preservation and Archeology staff are engaged in a collaborative mini-survey of standing sod houses in Logan, Blaine, Hooker, and Custer counties. After all these years, we’re still learning more about soddies. Here are a few highlights:

**Sod Bungalows?** A group of very large sod houses not previously recorded by NSHS staff were surveyed last September and October. These six-, seven-, and even nine-room houses are best described as sod bungalows. They were designed with the same bungalow-era floor plans that were popular in the 1910s and 1920s. These new finds show that some rural Nebraskans preferred sod wall construction and found it adaptable to modern house styles.

**Second helpings.** We learned there’s value in re-visiting soddies previously recorded, and even in recording rapidly advancing ruins. The circa-1900 sod house shown below had already been recorded in 1984, but a local sod house enthusiast invited senior project architect David Murphy and architectural historian Diane Laffin back to record sod brick dimensions and the way bricks were laid in the walls—characteristics we’ve learned more about since 1984. The passage of time also gave us more information about the longevity of sod buildings.

**How to preserve a soddie.** We still don’t know for sure how long a sod house will last, but we believe that with ordinary maintenance a well-built soddie could last two centuries or longer. We know from the best-preserved examples that they will last for at least 120 years, but we are still counting! It’s crucial to keep livestock from rubbing against the walls, maintain a weather-tight roof, have proper drainage away from the house, and protect the outside walls (traditionally done with stucco) to keep them from eroding.

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**Our New Website**

We’re rolling out a brand-new website for the sesquicentennial! Take a look at [https://history.nebraska.gov](https://history.nebraska.gov). If you’re familiar with our old site, nebraskahistory.org, you know two things about it: one, it’s a goldmine of information; and two, it looks like something you’d browse via Netscape on a big 1990s monitor that takes up half your desk. We get it. The Historical Society’s website is itself a historical artifact.

Over the next several months we’ll be transferring our photos, articles, databases, and finding aids to the new site, which not only looks prettier, but should be easier to navigate as well. The old dot-org site will remain online until everything is transferred. We welcome your feedback as we continue our work in progress.
One conundrum that writers often face is the distinction between capitol (the building) and capital (the seat of government). According to one early Nebraska legislator, confusion over the meaning of the two words threatened to derail efforts to relocate the seat of Nebraska government in 1867.

From 1855 until statehood was achieved in 1867, Omaha was the capital of Nebraska Territory. This reality continually outraged legislators and other Nebraskans from south of the Platte River, who felt political chicanery by Omaha politicians and speculators had deprived the South Platters of their rightful claim to this prize. Although the area south of the Platte had the larger population, Territorial Governor Thomas B. Cuming had drawn the legislative districts to give those living north of the Platte a majority. The North Platters were thus able to turn back all efforts to relocate the capital during the territorial years.

The political balance changed, however, with the ascendancy of the Republican Party during the Civil War and the election of the first state legislature, which had a South Platte majority. The first state governor, David Butler, was also from south of the Platte and could be counted on to support capital relocation.

One of Butler’s first official acts was to call the state legislature into special session on May 16, 1867, to get the new state up and running. Removal of the capital from Omaha was high on the list of things to do. The South Platte majority in both houses of the legislature had the votes to effect removal, but the lack of a dictionary and the idiosyncrasies of the English language had them scratching their heads, according to William M. Hicklin, a representative from Otoe County. He recalled the story in connection with an 1892 reunion of members of the first state legislature, and his tale appeared in volume five of the Nebraska State Historical Society Publications (1893).

According to Hicklin, two days were required to draft the relocation bill because none of the legislators from the South Platte region knew which of the words, capital or capitol, referred to the town and which to the building. Obviously, the bill’s intent was to relocate the seat of government, “the capital,” not merely the building, “the capitol.” Not a single dictionary was to be found among the legislators from south of the Platte and no one in Omaha would lend them one, because Omahans opposed removing the capital.

Some of the South Platte members were adamant that it was the capitol that was going to be removed, but they grew suspicious when Omaha legislators agreed with them. Finally Hicklin telegraphed J. Sterling Morton in Nebraska City, who replied, “Ask the Omaha fellows and then spell it the other way. Keep your eyes open.” With that, Hicklin and the others concluded that, indeed, it was the capital that they wanted to move, and the bill was drafted with the proper spelling to accomplish that goal. It passed June 14, 1867, and capital commissioners Governor David Butler, Secretary of State Thomas P. Kennard, and Auditor John Gillespie proceeded to select the village of Lancaster (renamed Lincoln) as Nebraska’s new state capital. A new capitol building was built and the legislature convened in Lincoln for its 1869 session.

Could this be an apocryphal story? Perhaps, but it certainly fits the tone of the rough and tumble politics that characterized Nebraska’s early years.
No Spitting… Please!

During the late nineteenth century spittoons became a common feature of saloons, hotels, stores, banks, railway carriages, and other places where adult men gathered. Many localities passed laws against public spitting other than into a spittoon, but such laws were seldom enforced. Some people of this era objected to restrictions on where they could spit as an infringement on their individual liberty. Nonetheless, anti-spitting sentiment was growing. The *Norfolk Weekly News-Journal* on September 7, 1906, reported a recent move by the federal government to end spitting on the floors of federal buildings, ostensibly to prevent the spread of disease. The *News-Journal* said:

“In the Norfolk federal building, in several prominent places, there has been recently hung the following sign: ‘Please Do Not Spit on the Floor. To Do So May Spread Disease.’ There is no demand to stop the practice, but a kind request, the government believing that an appeal to the conscience of the general public through kindness will be more effective and will do more toward checking the practice than an ‘official command.’ As a result of the government’s extreme politeness in affixing the word ‘please’ to the notice there is already a noticeable decrease in the number who have unintentionally used the post office lobby for a place to expectorate.

“During the past year the movement to stop the increase of the ‘white plague’ [tuberculosis] has assumed gigantic proportions, but not more so than the increase of the disease. Realizing the deep inroads the plague is making into the ranks of the American people, especially those of the poorer classes, the government has started out to do its share in preventing its further spread, and the first step in this direction, known of in Norfolk is the new sign warning the people of the danger caused by their expectorating on the floors.

“Although there is a city ordinance, which provides a fine of from $1 to $10 for any person caught spitting in public places, halls, etc., it has not been enforced to any great degree, and the practice has become as common as before the passage of the ordinance, which in a measure for the time being, checked it. It has been pointed out that during the past year there has not been one arrest for violating this ordinance.

“Several of the local physicians, who have interested themselves in the disease and made a study of its causes and effects, are contemplating petitioning Mayor [John] Friday to order the chief of police to enforce the ordinance, and by so doing eliminate to a great extent the exposure of Norfolk people to the tubercular germs, which breed in great numbers in the sputum expectorated upon the walks by thoughtless persons.”
NSHS Welcomes New Trustees

SHS members elected two new members to the Board of Trustees. Three-year terms began January 1 for:

THOMAS KRAUS, MADRID (DISTRICT 3)
Kraus farms north of Madrid in Perkins County. As a pioneer of no-till farming, in which he has been involved for forty years, he has served on advisory boards with West Central Research Center in North Platte, and the USDA Advisory Committee in Akron, Colorado. He is a member of Rotary International, serving as district governor in 2008-2009.

EILEEN WIRTH, OMAHA (DISTRICT 2)
Dr. Wirth recently retired from Creighton University after twenty-five years, the last nineteen as a department chair teaching media history and public relations. She is the author of seven books, and a forty-year volunteer for the Omaha Public Library, serving as president of the Friends of the Library, the Omaha Library Board and the Omaha Library Foundation. She is involved in numerous other Omaha volunteer groups and specializes in advising them on public relations and fundraising.

Our governing board includes twelve members elected by NSHS members, and three appointed by the governor. One member was elected to a second three-year term, which began January 1: Cherrie Beam Callaway of Fremont in District 1.

Opening reception for the Painting the Legacy exhibit at the Nebraska History Museum, March 1, 2017.
Every year the NSHS Foundation sponsors a reception for state senators at the beginning of the legislative session. This year’s reception was held January 5 at the Nebraska History Museum. In honor of the Nebraska sesquicentennial, museum staff brought out five special objects which could be handled. (But only with white gloves!)

**Nebraska Centennial Colt Revolver**

Colt Firearms issued this revolver in 1967 to commemorate the Nebraska Centennial. It is a replica of the historic Colt 45; 7,000 copies were produced and sold to collectors.

**Terri Lee Doll**

The Terri Lee doll company was founded in Lincoln in 1946 by artist Maxine Runci and her aunt, Violet Gradwohl. Terri Lee was called the “best dressed doll in the world” because of her elaborate wardrobe. Many local women worked in the Terri Lee factory or worked from home, making wigs and sewing doll clothing. After a fire destroyed the Lincoln factory in 1951, the company moved production to California.

**First Unicameral Gavel**

This gavel opened the first unicameral legislative session on January 5, 1937. It was made by A. L. Gooden and presented to U.S. Senator George W. Norris, who had promoted the concept of a non-partisan, one-house legislature. Nebraska voters approved the idea in 1934, and in 1937 Nebraska became the first and only state with a unicameral legislature.
Football Signed by the 1971 Championship Nebraska Team

Nebraska played Alabama in the Orange Bowl to clinch the national title, but the season is best remembered for the Thanksgiving Day game when No. 1 ranked Nebraska battled No. 2 Oklahoma. The Huskers won the “Game of the Century” 35-31.

First Recorded Brand

7H L was the first brand recorded when Nebraska began registering brands in 1899. The brand is still used by the Milldale Ranch Company headquartered in North Platte. The ranch originated in the mid-1880s when Charles and J. T. Stewart of Council Bluffs, Iowa, and Riley and Dan Haskell of Nebraska began ranging cattle in Logan, Arthur, and McPherson counties.
UPCOMING EVENTS

April 3 ∙ 12 noon
Paralympic medalist Cheri Becerra-Madsen
Noon History Bites
NHM - 402-471-4782

April 7 ∙ 5-7 p.m.
Conservation of Doane Powell Masks
Rebecca Cashman
First Friday
NHM - 402-471-4782

April 20 ∙ 12 noon
Serving in the Nebraska National Guard
Gerald Meyer, National Guard Historian
Brown Bag Lecture Series
NHM - 402-471-4782

April 21 ∙ 12 noon
Fourth Friday Noon History Book Club
Hector’s Bliss by Dennis Vossberg
NHM - 402-471-4757, judy.keetle@nebraska.gov

April 22 ∙ 2-4 p.m.
Free Family Fun Day: Earth Day
NHM - 402-471-4757, judy.keetle@nebraska.gov

May 1 ∙ 12 noon
Mead Ordnance Plant – Rosie McGuire
Noon History Bites
NHM - 402-471-4782

May 7 ∙ 1-4 p.m.
Pan Asian Heritage Month Celebration
NHM - 402-471-4782

May 13 ∙ 2-4 p.m.
Free Family Fun Day: National Train Day
NHM - 402-471-4757, judy.keetle@nebraska.gov

May 18 ∙ 12 noon
19th Century Immigration to Nebraska
John Schleicher, historian
Brown Bag Lecture Series
NHM - 402-471-4782

May 26 ∙ 12 noon
Fourth Friday Noon History Book Club
Eleanor & Park by Rainbow Rowell
NHM - 402-471-4757, judy.keetle@nebraska.gov

May 30 ∙ 10-11 a.m.
Hour at the Museum
Knots on a Counting Rope by Martin and Archambault
NHM - 402-471-4757, judy.keetle@nebraska.gov

June 3 ∙ 1-4 p.m.
African American History Tour
Malone Community Center, Wyuka Cemetery
$20 ($15 for NSHS members)
NHM - 402-471-4445, sharon.kennedy@nebraska.gov

June 5 ∙ 12 noon
Victor Vifquain: Civil War Medal of Honor recipient
Noon History Bites
NHM - 402-471-4782

June 6 ∙ 10-11 a.m.
Hour at the Museum
This is the Bird by George Shannon
NHM - 402-471-4757, judy.keetle@nebraska.gov

June 10 ∙ 2-4 p.m.
Free Family Fun Day: Nebraska Wildflowers
NHM - 402-471-4757, judy.keetle@nebraska.gov

June 13 ∙ 10-11 a.m.
Hour at the Museum
The Mud Pony: Traditional Skidi Pawnee Tale
NHM - 402-471-4757, judy.keetle@nebraska.gov

June 15 ∙ 12 noon
Take All to Nebraska: How They Came
Gail Blankenau, genealogist
Brown Bag Lecture Series
NHM - 402-471-4782

June 20 ∙ 10-11 a.m.
Hour at the Museum
Cowboys by Marie and Douglas Gorsline
NHM - 402-471-4757, judy.keetle@nebraska.gov

June 23 ∙ 12 noon
Fourth Friday Noon History Book Club
TBD
NHM - 402-471-4757, judy.keetle@nebraska.gov

June 27 ∙ 10-11 a.m.
Hour at the Museum
A Prairie Boy’s Summer by William Kurelik
NHM - 402-471-4757, judy.keetle@nebraska.gov

For updated events, see the
NSHS Facebook page, linked from
www.nebraskahistory.org

Unless otherwise noted, all events are free and open to the public.
Summer 2017 Kids’ Classes
Sample 150 Years of Statehood in 150 Minutes

The Nebraska History Museum is hosting classes for students in grades K-8 on a variety of topics. Classes will be held between May 25 and August 10. May and June dates, topics, and prices (general public/NSHS members) are:

- May 25, 9:30-noon: Painting the Legacy. Grades K-8 ($15/$12)
- May 31, 9:30-noon: Native American Art. Grades K-8 ($15/$12)
- June 1, 9:30-noon: It’s Not Your Grandpa’s (or Grandma’s) Apron. Grades 4-8 ($15/$12)
- June 8, 9:30-4:00: A Day in the Life of an 1867 Child. Grades K-8 ($35/$30)

Grandparents are encouraged to take the classes with their grandchildren at no extra charge! All registrations (required) are on a first-come, first-served basis. Registration forms can be picked up at the NHM or found at nebraskahistory.org under the “For Kids” button. If you have questions, contact Museum Educator Judy Keetle, judy.keetle@nebraska.gov or 402-471-4757.

Statehood Day Flag Raising at the Kennard House

Nebraska’s 150th birthday began with a special ceremony at the Thomas P. Kennard House in Lincoln. An honor guard from the Sons of Union Veterans fired a black-powder salute as a thirty-seven-star flag was raised on the flagpole. Nebraska is the thirty-seventh state and the first state to be admitted after the Civil War. The 1869 house is the Nebraska Statehood Memorial. It was built by Kennard, Nebraska’s first secretary of state, partly because he needed a home for his family, and partly because he and a few other elected officials made a point of building fine houses in the village-turned-capital to prove their faith in the city’s future.
S
o called because of its unusual appearance, a grasshopper plow was not used for farming. It was designed for making sod houses. A special plow was needed because a standard turning plow jumbled the soil and broke the tough roots that held the sod together. Instead, a grasshopper plow cut a neat strip of sod and rolled it over with iron rods. The strip was then cut into three-foot sections, and these sod blocks (jokingly called “Nebraska marble”) were carried to the building site and laid like bricks to form walls. This circa-1877 plow belonged to Sakarias Larson of Saline County.