Put on your helmet and join us for a bike tour of The Bottoms in Lincoln. Discover the unique homes, shops, and churches of the area’s early Russian German immigrants with City Historic Preservation Planner Ed Zimmer.

**When:** Saturday, April 28, 2018 - 1:00pm to 3:30pm

**Where:** Meet at the Nebraska History Museum, 15 & P Sts., Lincoln.

**Cost:** $15 ($10 for NSHS members). Refreshments are included. You must be 16 or older to participate. The group is limited to 30 people, so register online now!
A history bike tour ready to depart in 2017.
3 Nebraska Sites Added to National Register of Historic Places

Emerson City Park, Tekamah Auditorium, and Venango Public School are honored. Keep reading.
Is Nebraska a “Desert”? No… and Yes!

Look at the 1822 map linked below. It says it all: ”GREAT DESERT.” But it's not as dumb of a description as you might think. And we're not just talking about droughts. What is a "desert," anyway? View map and story.
Speaking of maps, here’s one of the entire internet in 1973. Each oval represents a single computer. Can you find the lone Nebraska connection? (Hint: This is a schematic. It’s not drawn to scale.) Make your guess and then find the answer here.

Become an NSHS Trustee

Would you like to help lead the NSHS as a member of the Board of Trustees? Board application materials are available at nebraskahistory.org/admin/board. Twelve trustees are elected by the NSHS members; this year seats are up for election in all three congressional districts. To be considered for the board
nominating committee's slate of candidates, submit your application by June 15. Additional candidates may submit applications up to August 19, 2018. Learn more here.

Neihardt Spring
Conference April 28
Held at John G. Neihardt State Historic Site in Bancroft, this year’s theme is “Wounded Knee 1890: Aftermath of a People’s Dream,” with Jerome Greene, author of American Carnage: Wounded Knee 1890, Joe Starita (The Dull Knifes of Pine Ridge), and Joseph Green (“The Meaning of Neihardt’s ‘Messiah’ and Sitanka’s Message”). Learn more.

April Events
Learn about Welsh culture, look at formal gowns in our collection, or hear a Nebraska author consider the question, "Can fiction teach facts?” Learn more.
Full articles

Something is happening... and it's getting closer
March 22, 2018

Three Nebraska Locations Added to National Register of Historic Places
March 20, 2018

The Nebraska State Historical Society is pleased to announce that three Nebraska locations have been listed on the National Register of Historic Places. Emerson City Park, Tekamah Auditorium, and Venango Public School were considered and selected by the National Parks Service for listing.

Emerson City Park is a square block between Main and Logan Streets, and 4th and 5th Streets. The Emerson City Park is eligible for listing in the National Register for its association with
entertainment and recreation in Emerson. The park includes six contributing resources – four arched entrances, a fountain, and the park site itself – and five resources that do not contribute to the park’s historic character and significance. The park is significant at the local level between the years 1901 to 1968. Today, the park continues to serve as a place of recreation and entertainment for the citizens of Emerson.

The Tekamah Auditorium, located at 1315 K Street in Tekamah, Burt County, is eligible for listing in the National Register for its associated with the New Deal make-work programs, specifically, the Works Progress Administration. The Auditorium is significant at the local level between the years 1938 to 1968. Today, the Auditorium continues to host events as a rented space while the addition built in 1950 houses offices for the City of Tekamah.

Venango Public School is located at 201 East Washington Street in Venango, Perkins County. The Venango Public School is eligible for listing in the National Register for its association with the development of education in Nebraska through expansion and consolidation practice common throughout the state in the 1920s and 1950s. It is also listed due to its significance for embodying distinct architectural characteristics of a type of school building. The school is significant at the local level between the years 1921 to 1965, which includes the original construction of the main building and later additions.

The National Register of Historic Places is the nation's inventory of properties deemed worthy of preservation. It is part of a national program to coordinate and support local and private efforts to identify, evaluate, and protect the nation's historic and archeological resources. The National Register was developed to recognize historic places and their role in contributing to our country's heritage. Properties listed in the National Register either individually or as contributing to a historic district are eligible for State and Federal tax incentives.
Emerson City Park
Tekamah Auditorium
Venango Public School

For more information on the National Register program in Nebraska, contact the Nebraska State Historic Preservation Office at the Nebraska State Historical Society at (402) 471-4775 or visit history.nebraska.gov/historic-preservation.

The Nebraska State Historical Society (NSHS) collects, preserves, and opens to all the histories we share. In addition to the Nebraska History Museum in Lincoln and historic sites around the state, NSHS administers the State Archives and Library; the State Historic Preservation Office; the Gerald R. Ford Conservation Center, Omaha; the Office of the State Archeologist; publishes Nebraska History magazine and Nebraska History News; and is responsible for the administration of the Nebraska Hall of Fame Commission.

Is Nebraska a “Desert”? No... and Yes!
March 23, 2018
Ignore the photo above and look at the map below. Is “Great Desert” the dumbest description of Nebraska ever to appear in print? Sure, we’ve all heard “flyover country” and “middle of nowhere”—but desert? We might imagine a mapmaker who hadn’t been within 500 miles of Nebraska.

Take a look at this *Map of Arkansa and other Territories of the United States* (1822):
It’s too small to read, so let’s zoom in:
I marked the present boundaries of Nebraska in blue, and highlighted the words “Great Desert.” They appear just south of the present state line. So we’re in the clear, right? Not so fast. Let’s zoom in some more. To keep our bearings, notice the red dot in southwest Nebraska. That’s the present-day city of North Platte:
Just below the Platte River, we read, “Route of the Exploring Expedition westward from Council Bluff.” Just below the Republican River is the inscription, “The Great Desert is frequented by roving bands of Indians who have no fixed places of residence but roam from place to place in quest of game.”

This map was published by Maj. Stephen Long of the US Army. In 1820 he led an exploring party through the “desert” along the Platte River to the Rocky Mountains, then returned east by a more southerly route. The expedition had set out from St. Louis in 1819. They traveled up the Missouri River in a specially-built steamboat called the Western Engineer and built their winter quarters north of present-day Omaha. They called their camp “Engineer Cantonment.” Archeologists have discovered the site. A special issue of Nebraska History tells the story. (Read highlights and table of contents.)

Long wasn’t kidding about the desert. His geographer wrote that the region:

“is almost wholly unfit for cultivation, and of course uninhabitable by a people depending upon agriculture for their subsistence.”

But what did Long see when he traveled west in 1820, and why did he call it a desert? This is where Long’s map becomes a story about how the meaning of words can change over time.

Consider Robinson Crusoe, the fictional hero of Daniel Defoe’s famous 1719 novel. As Defoe told it, Crusoe was shipwrecked “on a desert island.” But then he tells of Crusoe growing his own food and raising goats in this rather tropical “desert.”
Back then “desert” meant “a wild uninhabited and uncultivated tract.” Today a writer would write of Crusoe being on “a deserted island”—it’s the same root word. But deserted places tend to be so for a reason. People won’t stay where they can’t make a living. By Stephen Long’s time, a “desert” was a place without trees. Long’s countrymen assumed that a land that didn’t grow trees surely wouldn’t grow crops. That’s what past experience told them. (Roger Welsch writes more about this in "The Myth of the Great American Desert" in Nebraska History.)

In other words, Long’s description of the treeless plains wasn’t as crazy as it sounds, but it wasn’t the whole story. A little to the east of the “desert,” Long marked the location of “Pawnee Villages” along the Loup River. The Pawnees had been growing several varieties of corn in central Nebraska for centuries. They planted their crops in spring, hunted bison in summer, and returned to their earth lodge villages for harvest. It was an early version of today’s corn-and-cattle ag economy.

The idea of “The Great American Desert” was the Long Expedition’s most consequential result. It remained on maps for a generation. During that time, political leaders saw the country west of the Missouri River as a permanent home for the Native peoples they were displacing from valuable lands to the east. As Long’s editor, Edwin James, put it:

“Though the soil is in some places fertile, the want of timber, of navigable streams, and of water for the necessities of life, render it an unfit residence for any but a nomad population. The traveler who shall at any time have traversed its desolate sands, will, we think, join us in the wish that this region may forever remain the unmolested haunt of the native hunter, the bison, and the jackal.”

“Forever” lasted about 30 years, but that’s another story.

Oh, and that photo at the top of the page? That’s from the Sandhills in Holt County, Nebraska, during a severe drought in 1936—because sometimes the Great Plains really does behave like a desert in the modern sense of the word.

—David Bristow, Editor
This is a schematic map of the entire internet as it existed in 1973. Each oval represents a single computer. Can you find Nebraska's lone connection? (Remember, a schematic isn't drawn to scale.)

Do you see "Lincoln" near the upper right corner? That's not it. That's Lincoln Laboratory at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. In fact, many of the internet connections back in the 1970s were at universities or laboratories. This was before the personal computer era. The computers were large mainframes, linked together in a primitive network stretching from Hawaii to London.

Was the University of Nebraska-Lincoln on the internet? Not at that time. Here's another clue: the name at the top, "ARPA Network," was the original name of the internet. ARPA stood for
Advanced Research Projects Administration. It was part of the US Department of Defense. So there was a military connection. And what is Nebraska's most important military site?

That's right, Offutt Air Force Base, home of the Strategic Air Command, as the US nuclear command center was then known. But SAC itself wasn't on the internet. Nebraska's connection to the network was through the US Air Force's Global Weather Center (GWC), managed by the USAF's 557th Weather Wing at Offutt. Now can you find it?

Quartz (a site not affiliated with the NSHS) has an article about this map and the early internet.

--David Bristow, Editor, NSHS

*Correction: ARPANET vs. Internet*

A few days after posting this, we heard from Mark Dahmke, a Lincoln photographer with long experience in software development and IT consulting. He checked with others in the computer industry who are knowledgeable about the ARPANET, and offers this clarification:

“The modern Internet has its roots in the ARPANET, but they are very different in concept and technology. Although this could not really be considered Nebraska's first Internet connection, the fact that there was even an ARPANET connection in Nebraska is of itself historically significant. GWC had a dial-up connection into ARPANET but did not at that time have any active hosts or servers, so it could not be considered a host, but was a user of ARPANET. Host to host connections at that time were typically 56 kilobits per second but dial-up connections would have been 300 bits per second.”