Chimney Rock Museum reopens

After a second Covid-related closure last fall, Chimney Rock Museum has reopened. Off-season hours (through April 30) are Friday and Saturday, 9 to 4.
Starting May 1 the museum will be open daily 9 to 4.

The newly renovated and expanded museum features new exhibits. If you’re starting to think about this year’s travel plans, plan on spending some time at Chimney Rock.

A Dugout Flood

Imagine yourself as a pioneer living in a hole in the ground. Now imagine that floodwater is rising toward the ceiling and you're holding a small child.

John Turner's dugout (not the one shown here) was dug into a creek bank. A neighbor said the spot was high enough even if the creek should rise. But
during a sudden downpour in 1873, Turner's wife and youngest child were trapped inside by rising water. Turner had to act quickly. Keep reading.

Watch the Ford Center's Kenneth Bé work his magic on this 1880s painting

Bé is the paintings conservator at History Nebraska's Gerald R. Ford Conservation Center in Omaha. Recently NET Television talked with him as he restored an 1880s painting of the first homestead. Watch the video at NET.
Nebraska’s first state governor was impeached and removed from office

Happy Statehood Day! Nebraska became a state on March 1, 1867. David Butler was our first state governor, and remains the only Nebraska governor to be removed by impeachment.

Butler had a big influence on early Nebraska. He was part of the three-man committee that selected Lincoln as the new capital city, and as the state’s first governor he was responsible for building the first state capitol and the first building at the newly-charted University of Nebraska.
Butler also helped himself to the state treasury, loaned public money to friends, signed shady contracts for construction projects, and offered implausible excuses when he was caught. Keep reading.

When an object leaves the museum's collection
What does it mean to “deaccession” items from a museum’s collection, and why would we ever do that? Aren’t museums supposed to keep things forever?

There are several good reasons why an organization might remove items from their collections. History Nebraska collections staff explain how they think about the process. Keep reading.

Near-beer and cone-topped cans: The Columbus (Nebraska) Brewing Company

Founded in 1863, Columbus Brewing Company was one of Nebraska’s oldest breweries, and the last outside of Omaha when it ceased production in 1954. This barrel in the Nebraska History Museum collections appears to pre-date the Prohibition era. The company’s brands included Columbus Beer, Pawnee Dark Beer, All-American, and Ronz.

On March 24, 1917, the company announced plans to manufacture “near beer”
in order to stay in business after statewide Prohibition began on May 1.

According to a 1954 *Omaha World-Herald* article, “Near beer, which contained less than a half of one per cent of alcohol, was named, a contemporary wit said, by some one who was ‘a damned poor judge of distance.’” Keep reading.

Who is this man? The Black doorman at the Hotel Yancey, Part 2

Last month we showed you a Grand Island postcard and took a deep look at the history role of Black porters and doormen.
Now, thanks to the Plainsman Museum in Aurora, we can identify the man in the picture and tell his personal story. **Keep reading.**

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**Upcoming Events**

**History Café, March 18.** Hear how Nebraska women fought to obtain equal voting rights 100 years ago, and follow the story of a young Latina’s return to her hometown after college where she helps her community with immigration, education, and jobs.
Moderated by City Councilwoman Sandra Washington, the event will allow participants to make connections between the women of the past and present. Join the conversation and be the first to glimpse an exciting recent acquisition to the Nebraska History Museum collection that brings it all together! Learn more.

Also, our next Virtual Homeschool will be March 3.
Imagine yourself as a pioneer living in a hole in the ground. Now imagine that floodwater is rising toward the ceiling. Welcome to rural Boone County in 1873.

The sod house is iconic of Nebraska’s frontier period, but many pioneers started out in an even simpler form of housing—the dugout. Historian Everett Dick described how to build one in his 1975 book Conquering the Great American Desert. In short: dig a rectangular hole into a hillside or a ravine. The open side should face east to catch the morning light and so that snow will blow...
away from the door. Enclose the open front with a wall of logs or sod. Leave a space for a door; a window is optional. Roof the hole with “poles, brush, hay, and earth.”

Your house will be cheap, quickly built, cool in summer, and warm in winter. It will also be cramped, dark, dirty, and full of every critter in the ground. But it will do until you plant your first crop and have time to build a proper soddy or frame house.

Photo: Near McCook, Nebraska, 1890s. H. W. Cole Collection, History Nebraska RG3464-0-3

Depending on their location, dugouts had a more serious drawback. Many settlers dug them into a high bank beside a creek, where you had a steep slope plus water and timber nearby.

John Turner dug such a house in Boone County. A neighbor told him the spot was high enough even if the creek should rise, and Turner lived there with his wife and three boys while he built a sod house on another part of his claim.
But Turner, a recent immigrant from England, didn’t expect the severity of the thunderstorm that struck one day while he and the two older boys worked on the soddy. He sent 12-year-old Edgar back to the dugout to check on his wife and youngest child. Edgar soon came back hollering and waving his hands.

Turner ran for the dugout and waded through the rising water, struggling to keep his balance against the current. The dugout itself was flooded. Inside, Mrs. Turner sat on one of the wooden doors the family was using as temporary flooring. Balanced on a floating door, she held the youngest boy while holding a frying pan over his head to protect him from the rainwater pouring through the roof like a sieve.

“Higher and higher the two caged birds were lifted till their heads almost touched the roof,” Turner wrote years later.
He had to get them out quickly. He grabbed the little boy, waded across the creek, and left the child on high ground. Then he went back for his wife.

Turner was carrying his wife across when he stepped in a hole, stumbled, and dropped her into the rushing water. Somehow, he stayed on his feet and grabbed hold of her dress.

“We scrambled and struggled through to the other side the best way we could,” he wrote.

The Turners lost most of their supplies, but escaped without loss of life. They stuck it out on their claim, and in 1903 Turner published a memoir, Pioneers of the West, recounting this and many other hardships that the family met with a combination of hopefulness, ignorance, and fortitude.

Photo: Roten Valley, Custer County, Nebraska, 1892. Photo by S.D. Butcher. History Nebraska RG2608-0-1677

Posted 3/1/21. This article first appeared in the April 2020 issue of NEBRASKAland magazine.
The Impeachment of Nebraska’s First Governor: David Butler

By Breanna Fanta, Editorial Assistant

Throughout Nebraska’s history, many figures were credited for shaping the state. Often they are recognized most for their positive influence, but this was not the case for Nebraska’s first governor. David Butler, elected in 1867, served two terms before getting impeached, convicted, and removed from office as a result of fraudulent financial matters. While the public praised him for his accomplishments in office, there were hushed secrets behind his success.

In 1867, the state’s capital was relocated from Omaha to Lincoln, and stakes were high for Butler to establish Lincoln as the capital city. Between political party conflicts, the need for a capitol building for legislative sessions, and the goal to establish Lincoln, Butler made haste. Before long, public buildings appeared—such as the capitol building and state university—and what had been a little town in Lancaster County began to grow into a prospering city.

Sources:


John Turner, Pioneers of the West: A True Narrative (Cincinnati: Jennings and Pye, 1903), 72–79.
At the time, members of legislature were aware that Butler ‘pulled strings' in order to construct Lincoln in a such a short time, but considering his success, many overlooked the issue. The governor used this to his advantage and continued to make problematic decisions. While others turned a blind eye, his political opponents were not as quick to condone his behavior, and though they wanted him out of office, there wasn’t enough evidence to enact a conviction or impeachment.
That was until 1871, after Butler was elected for a third term.

In January of 1871, during a legislative session, Edward Rosewater (an Omaha Republican and publisher for the Omaha Bee) asked Butler to account for the school land funds collected from the federal government. It was noted that there was a certificate of deposit for the fund that Governor Butler signed, but there was no legitimate record of the deposit itself.

Concerned, the legislature began questioning the whereabouts of other funds and it was agreed that an investigation was necessary. However it wasn’t long after the investigation started, that they realized the rabbit hole they fell into.

(The first capitol building in Lincoln (image: circa 1868) was built so poorly that it needed repairs within its first few years. Lincoln’s current capitol building sits on the original building site.)

It was discovered that after the relocation of the capital, Butler entered questionable contracts for the construction of a number of Lincoln’s public buildings. The capitol building was one of the most costly. Not only did its contract exceed the set appropriation, but it was twice the
amount. During that period Butler also accepted bribes from railroads, “private individuals,” and political figures (some of whom he loaned state money to).

Newspapers began sparking public outcry.

Initially, Butler dismissed it all as “rumors” and “gossip,” but eventually he admitted that in certain instances he “exceeded instructions,” but argued that it was in the best interest of the state.

Butler justified his loans by explaining that “bonds [were] depreciating rapidly” and the individuals he lent money to were, “better security.” When asked specifically about the federal school fund, he confessed that he used it for personal endeavors, but that it was “adequately secured by the Pawnee County Land mortgages.”
The school fund, however, was worth approximately $17,000, whereas the value of the Pawnee County Land mortgages was only valued at about $8,000. It was also reported that the mortgages had been written out since May of 1869, but weren’t recorded in official books until 1871 (the year of the investigation). There was also another fund that was valued at about $16,800 and had no deposit record.

These discoveries led people to question the credibility of Butler’s associates: former secretary Thomas Kennard and auditor John Gillespie. There were rumors that Gillespie took money out of the state treasury with the intent to put it towards landscaping around the capitol when instead he distributed it between himself, Kennard, and Butler. This was never confirmed though.

When investigating the record books, it wasn’t clear that any state funds even existed in the bank. Not only were state and private accounts not separated, but they were unidentifiable. According to one source, state funds were also logged under the name of “John Rix.”

As evidence accumulated and the impeachment trials began, the public shared varying opinions.

One reporter wrote that any man who voted to “acquit Governor Butler in the face of testimony,” would “never be heard of in Nebraska, or anywhere else for that matter, in a position of public trust.” Another writer defended Butler by stating that “gratitude is the worst vice of human nature,” and that the state was “un grateful” and “ungenerous.” Continuing to justify Butler’s actions: “In appropriating money at his disposal, he [David Butler] would have done no more than is done in every business firm in the country – men appropriating receipts and leaving a memo of the fact in the safe.”

Regardless of the public’s opinion, David Butler was convicted and removed from office. There were eleven articles, each one voted on separately, but Butler was only convicted of the first: the mishandling of the school land funds. In response to his impeachment, one article discussed Butler and his political career being “dead,” according to the public. The writer disagreed and said that the court “let him escape without killing him,” that Butler couldn’t be “killed” and wouldn’t stay “dead.”

David Butler returned to his Pawnee County Farm where he raised stock. In 1877, his impeachment proceedings were removed from his record and he did make an eventual return to politics. He was elected into the state senate in 1882 and attempted to run for governor one last time in 1888. Despite his attempts, Butler’s reputation would be forever tainted.
While David Butler's time in office involved financial corruption, it encouraged people to be more cautious, hold political figures accountable, and in the end, helped to shape the Nebraska we know today.

Sources:


Dakota City Mail - February 17, 1871

Nebraska Advertiser - March 16, 1871

Nebraska Chronicle - February 11, 1871

Nehama Valley Journal - March 16, 1871

The Nebraska State Journal - January 11, 1871

The Platte Journal - February 1, 1871

The Platte Journal - June 21, 1871

Deaccessioning

What Happens When Items are Removed from History Nebraska's Collections?

Removing items from a museum or historical organization’s collection is necessary for maintaining a strong, healthy, and relevant collection. This process is called deaccessioning. Keep reading to learn more about this process, why we might remove materials from History Nebraska’s collections, and what happens next.

Why Remove Something From the Collections?

There are several reasons why museums and historical organizations remove items from their collections. Some materials may be outside the scope or irrelevant to their mission. Why?
Sometimes the mission of a museum shifts or narrows over time. Many museums collected broadly early in their early years, and accepted objects with little or no history that directly pertained to their missions. A chair from the 1890s with no additional provenance might have at one time served a purpose as a prop in a display, but it takes up valuable storage space and resources. Another object that tells multifaceted and compelling Nebraska stories beyond just being a chair would better serve our mission.

Sometimes items are removed from the collection because they are hazardous or in poor condition. Examples could include old medicines, pesticide containers, and celluloid combs that have disintegrated into dust. The historical significance of the object, however, is also weighed before deaccessioning.

Duplication is another reason that items are deaccessioned. How many spinning wheels or pianos does a museum need? How many copies of the same poster? Digital management of collections has made it much easier for museums to survey the thousands of items they care for, and weed out the duplicates that are lacking compelling histories.

This spinning wheel was transferred to another Nebraska museum for their use collection.
Sometimes an item may be relevant, but it may be more relevant to another repository. Historical organizations should work together instead of being in direct competition or duplicating efforts.

History Nebraska often partners with other Nebraska organizations that can provide the same level or better care for collections. Archival materials that relate to the history of the University of Nebraska for example, might be deaccessioned and transferred to their archives. A researcher would likely go there first looking for University materials, so it better serves the public to consolidate those items. If History Nebraska needs an item for an article or exhibit, we can always reach out to the University if needed.

If an item has unethical or illegal provenance or must be removed to comply with national or state legislation, it also goes through the deaccessioning process. This would include materials that are repatriated through the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA).

An item may also be deaccessioned if the historical evidence that led HN to accept an object has been proven false, it has been lost or stolen for five or more years, if History Nebraska is unable to preserve it properly, if it will be destroyed for the purpose of scientific study, or to comply with current State records retention schedules.

How are Deaccessions Approved?

Deaccession candidates are reviewed by curators and then presented to History Nebraska's Collections Committee, which votes on all acquisitions and deaccessions. This committee includes staff from all curatorial areas as well as representatives from other History Nebraska departments. If approved by the Collections Committee, the recommendation proceeds to the History Nebraska Board of Trustees for approval.

What Happens after Items are Removed from the Collections?

History Nebraska’s deaccession policy allows for various disposal methods. One option is to transfer items that are in good condition to History Nebraska's Education & Use collection. These materials are used for hands-on activities, teaching collections, and exhibit props where they may be used in tactile ways that allow visitors of all ages to directly engage with objects. If you have visited our recent women's suffrage exhibit, the period room space where you can sit and listen to suffrage songs was created with pieces from our Education & Use collection.
Another option for deaccessioned materials is to transfer them to another museum, library, archives or public institution. At History Nebraska, we start with other Nebraska institutions, unless the history of the object directly pertains to another state. We love working with other museums across the state! If we can help fill a gap in their collection, share something relevant to their mission, provide them with a prop for their historic house, or provide an object for their own teaching collection, we are happy to do so. Sharing with other museums often also enables collections to be accessible to new audiences in different parts of the state.

If no other historical institutions are interested and/or the intrinsic or monetary value is low, objects may be offered to local theater groups or charitable organizations. Public sale and auctions are other disposition methods that are permissible. In accordance with museum ethics guidelines, these must be a public sale, and proceeds can only be used for the acquisition of new collections, conservation, or preservation of collections. National organizations like the American Alliance of Museums and the American Association for State and Local History provide guidance for museums on many matters, including deaccessioning and how funds may be used. Our collections funds have been used to purchase significant objects for the collection such as an 1887 photo of the Fort Robinson Officer’s Quarters!
A final option is to destroy the materials. This is primarily done if something is hazardous or severely deteriorated, or all other options have been attempted.

A deaccessioned chandelier from History Nebraska’s collection is on display at the Wildwood Historic Center in Nebraska City.
Near-beer and cone-topped cans: The Columbus (Nebraska) Brewing Company

By David L. Bristow, Editor

Founded in 1863, Columbus Brewing Company was one of Nebraska’s oldest breweries, and the last outside of Omaha when it ceased production in 1954. This barrel in the Nebraska History Museum collections appears to pre-date the Prohibition era. The company’s brands included Columbus Beer, Pawnee Dark Beer, All-American, and Ronz.

On March 24, 1917, the company announced plans to manufacture “near beer” in order to stay in business after statewide Prohibition began on May 1.

According to a 1954 Omaha World-Herald article, “Near beer, which contained less than a half of one per cent of alcohol, was named, a contemporary wit said, by some one who was ‘a damned poor judge of distance.’” Buyers soon learned to improve the product by adding an ounce or two of illegal grain alcohol.

Whatever the limitations of near beer, it helped the brewery survive Prohibition. In the end, industry consolidation squeezed out Columbus and other Nebraska breweries. Under new ownership, in 1954 the company switched to producing cone-topped cans of Mission Soda for a now-defunct Los Angeles company.
Here are some of Columbus Brewing Company’s brands:
Sources:


Categories:
Prohibition; alcohol
Who is this man? The Black doorman at the Hotel Yancey, Part 2

By David L. Bristow, Editor

Shortly after I posted the above photo and wrote about the racial history behind it, I heard from the Plainsman Museum in Aurora, Nebraska. They knew the doorman’s name and his family’s story. In his day, William Thornton Patrick was well known in Grand Island.

Here he is in his hotel uniform in about 1938:
Mr. Patrick was born in 1885 in Hamilton County, Nebraska. His parents, David and Hannah, were the county's first African American farmers. Formerly enslaved, David was said to have been a Pony Express rider as a young man. David became a respected citizen in Hamilton County—for example, in 1886 he was elected president of the Lincoln Valley Cemetery Association Board. Hannah had been a schoolteacher in Missouri before she married.

As a young man, William Patrick farmed, and then worked at the Union Pacific shops in Grand Island before becoming a hotel doorman at the Yancey. He held that job for the last twenty years of his life. His wife died a few years before this photo. They had a daughter who moved to Los Angeles.
“The Yancey hotel won’t seem quite the same without Pat at the door,” reads an unidentified newspaper clipping after Patrick’s death in 1952.

William Patrick was a doorman in the grand manner. Impressive in appearance with his great bulk encased in a royal blue uniform, he made the welcoming of guests to the hotel an occasion of the moment, and he made them feel that they were highly important.

He had a great memory for names and faces, and it is always flattering to be remembered—especially by a functionary of the type of Pat.

For many years he was the hotel’s doorman, and during those years he made hundreds of friends, who will miss his genial presence.

William Patrick was obviously well known and well liked in Grand Island, and he rose about as far in society as he could expect. As I wrote earlier, jobs as doormen or porters were among the best available to Black men at that time.

One wonders what he might have done in a less racist society. Despite his mother’s background, census records indicate that Patrick got no further in school than the fourth grade. That wasn’t unusual when he was a child, but it was usually a mark of economic necessity.

But he developed skills outside of the classroom. When I read about his remarkable memory for names and faces, I was reminded of three-time presidential nominee William Jennings Bryan, who impressed people with the same ability. Patrick was gregarious, understood what business travelers wanted and made them feel important. With white skin, such a man might have had a much different career, might have become mayor of Grand Island for all we know.

As it is, Patrick seems to have made the most of the hand dealt to him. He is buried at his family’s cemetery plot in Aurora.

(Posted 2/4/2021. Read Part 1 here.)
Thank you to Kathryn Larson, social media intern at the Plainsman Museum, for sharing information from the museum’s files.