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Article Summary: The idea that Nebraska should provide living quarters for its governors was slow to catch on. Finally, in 1899, the state purchased a house that became the first of two official residences in which Nebraska governors have lived.

#### Cataloging Information:

Names: Thomas P Kennard, John Gillespie, D E Thompson, Mary Neville Sieman, Mary Cochran Grimes, William Woods, Frank H Woods, Harry F Cunningham, Frank Latenser, Selmer Solheim

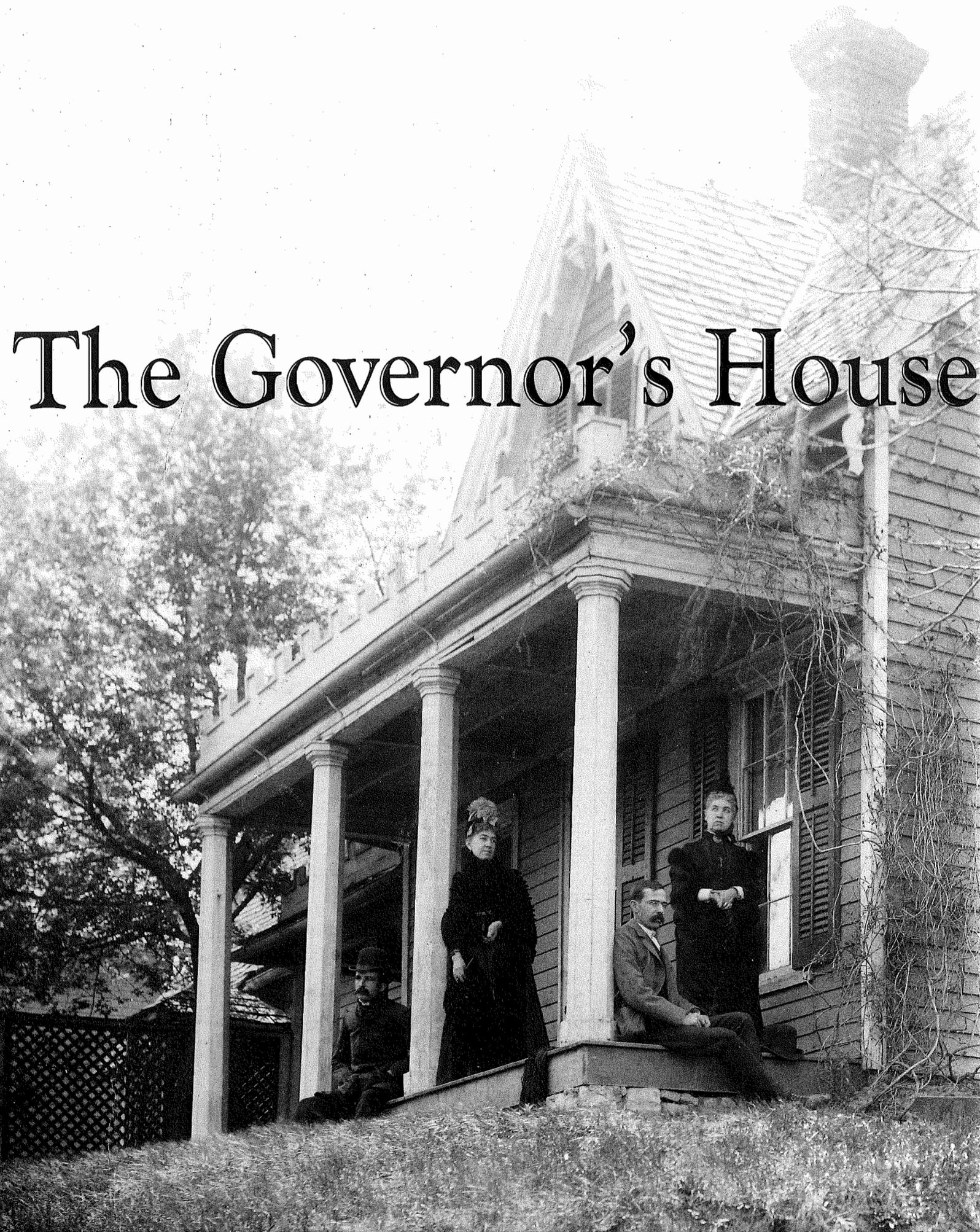
Nebraska Governors and Spouses Mentioned: Francis Burt, Thomas B and Margaretta Cuming, Mark W Izard, William A Richardson, J Sterling Morton, Samuel Black, Alvin Saunders, David Butler, Robert W Furnas, John M Thayer, Lorenzo Crouse, Silas Holcomb, William A Poynter, Charles H Dietrich, George L Sheldon, Samuel R and Martha McKelvie, Robert Leroy and Aileen Cochran, Keith and Mary Neville, Dwight and Erma Griswold, Charles and Elizabeth Bryan, Aston C Shallenberger, Chester A Aldrich, Arthur J Weaver, Val and Elizabeth Peterson, Victor E and Elizabeth Anderson, Ralph G Brooks, Norbert and Lorna Tiemann, Dwight W and Edna Burney, Frank and Maxine Morrison, J James and Pat Exon, J Robert Kerrey, Kay and Bill Orr, E Benjamin and Diane Nelson, Mike and Stephanie Johanns, Dave Heineman and Sally Ganem

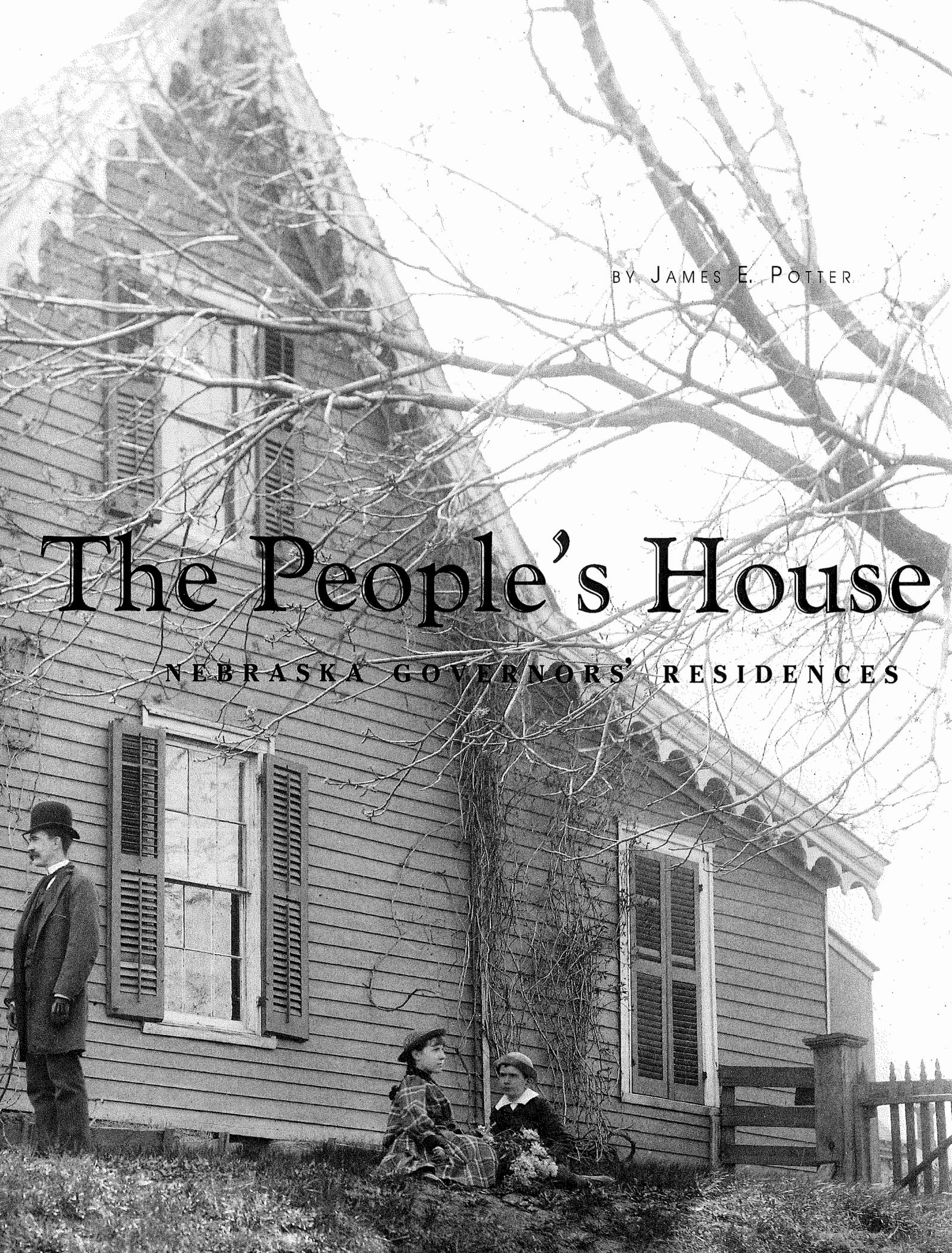
Visitors to Nebraska Governor's Residence: William F (Buffalo Bill) Cody, John J Pershing, William Howard Taft, Alf Landon, John F Kennedy, Hubert H Humphrey, Chuck Connors, Ladybird Johnson, Debra Winger

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Photographs / Images: Omaha home of Territorial Secretary Thomas B Cuming; nighttime view of the Nebraska Governor's Residence in Lincoln; artist's conception of the 1855 executive ball in Omaha; Lincoln house built by David Butler; Lincoln's Tichenor House hotel; D E Thompson House; staircase in the Thompson House; Governor William A Poynter; First Lady Aileen Cochran and daughter Mary in the Residence; view of the dining room; third floor ballroom; first-floor plan of the new Residence, constructed 1956-1958; new Residence state drawing room; William Woods, who worked for governors and their families; Nebraskans standing in line to tour the new Residence in March 1958; Architect Selmer Solheim presenting new Residence keys to Governor Victor Anderson; Governor Norbert Tiemann and his family; staircase in the new Residence

# The Governor's House

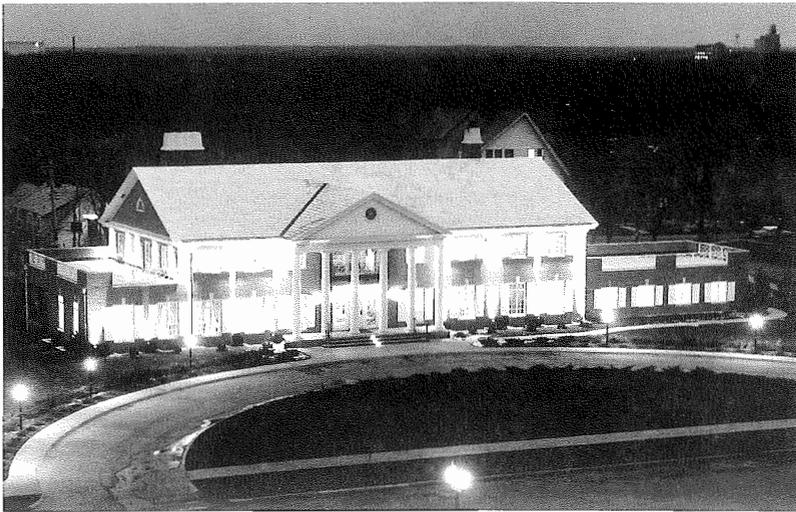




BY JAMES E. POTTER

# The People's House

NEBRASKA GOVERNORS' RESIDENCES



From 1854 to the present, the governor has been Nebraska's chief executive, appointed by the President of the United States during the territorial period, and elected by the people since statehood in 1867.

In performing their leadership role, the governors have had a major impact upon the state's culture, institutions, and traditions. Examining how and where Nebraska governors have lived, along with the evolution of the idea that the state should provide an official residence for its governors, offers insights about the office itself, as well as the men and women who have occupied it.<sup>1</sup>

Nebraska has had two official governors' residences, the first a private home purchased by the state in 1899, and the second constructed specifically for that purpose between 1956 and 1958. Before 1899 Nebraska governors provided their own living quarters. According to an August 30, 1854, newspaper, Francis Burt of South Carolina, the newly appointed first territorial governor of Nebraska, "will start for that territory about the first of next month. . . . The governor, and his followers, will dwell in nomadic style, that is tents, until they can knock-up log houses in the wilderness."<sup>2</sup>

Although Governor Burt was never obliged to adopt such rustic living conditions (he died soon after reaching Nebraska), the report is interesting because its author believed that the highest official

of a U.S. territory might actually have to live in a tent. By the time Burt arrived in Nebraska in the fall of 1854, only a handful of adventurous settlers had moved across the Missouri River into what was formerly Indian territory, and conditions there were primitive indeed. A few small log cabins at places that might one day become towns, along with a mission house, Indian agency, and trading post at Bellevue, were scattered along the river's Nebraska shore. Burt's first and only Nebraska residence was the Bellevue Presbyterian mission, where he died from the hardships of his journey on October 18, 1854, just two days after taking the oath of office as governor.<sup>3</sup>

Territorial Secretary Thomas B. Cuming became acting governor upon Burt's death, and he soon called the legislature into session at Omaha City, which would be Nebraska's capital until after statehood in 1867. Although the federal government paid the salaries of territorial officials and the expenses of the legislature, it did not provide housing for the governors. Governors had to pay their own living expenses out of their salary of \$2,500 per year.<sup>4</sup>

Having the seat of government in Omaha did not mean that the territorial governors always lived there. Acting Governor Cuming, who was in league with Council Bluffs, Iowa, promoters with much to gain from Omaha's growth, stayed at the Pacific House in Council Bluffs until moving across the river to Omaha in December 1854. Cuming and his wife, Margaretta, first lodged with friends and then at the Douglas House, a two-story frame structure serving as a hotel. In the fall of 1855 the couple moved into a Gothic cottage at Eighteenth and Dodge streets that had been shipped up the Missouri River by steamboat from St. Louis. Cuming was living there during the second of his two stints as acting governor, which extended from October 1857 until January 1858. Although Cuming died in March 1858, the cottage stood until 1893.<sup>5</sup>

Governor Mark W. Izard of Arkansas, Cuming's successor in 1855, built a brick house "in the southern style" on Twenty-first Street between Burt and Webster streets, but did not live there long. Izard resigned the governorship October 25, 1857, and returned to Arkansas, replaced in 1858 by William A. Richardson of Illinois. Richardson, who served as Nebraska's governor only a few months, lived at the Hamilton House, located on Douglas Street between Fourteenth and Fifteenth streets.<sup>6</sup>

Territorial secretary J. Sterling Morton became the acting governor on December 5, 1858, after Richardson resigned and left Nebraska. Morton

Above: A nighttime view of the Nebraska Governor's Residence in Lincoln, taken soon after the building's completion in 1958. NSHS RG2869 PH:74

Pages 26-27: The first house to serve as the "governor's residence" was the Omaha home of Territorial Secretary Thomas B. Cuming, who twice assumed the role of acting governor. NSHS RG3654 PH:13

had settled in Nebraska City in April 1855, where he occupied a log cabin while a small frame house (later to evolve into a mansion Morton named Arbor Lodge) was being built. When Morton was at the capital city, however, he and his family lodged at the Herndon House, Omaha's newest and finest hotel, where his son Mark was born on November 11, 1858.<sup>7</sup>

On May 2, 1859, Nebraska Chief Justice Samuel Black assumed the governor's chair. Because Black, a Pennsylvanian, had lived in Nebraska since 1857 while presiding over the judicial district south of the Platte River, he had already built a palatial home on Kearny Heights overlooking Nebraska City. Whenever he was in Omaha on official business as governor, however, Black stayed at the Herndon House, though he was recorded as a resident of Nebraska City in the 1860 federal census.<sup>8</sup>

Alvin Saunders of Iowa, Nebraska's Civil War (and last territorial) governor, took office on May 15, 1861. In 1862 and 1863 Saunders and wife Marathena rented Col. John Patrick's house, located about three blocks from the capitol building in Omaha, near the northeast corner of Seventeenth and Davenport streets. The house was available because Patrick's sons had left home to join the Union army and his two daughters were living with Omaha friends. At war's end the Patricks reclaimed their house and, by May 1865,

Saunders and his family occupied rooms in the Herndon House hotel. At about the time Saunders stepped down from the governor's chair with the coming of Nebraska statehood in 1867, he built a house at Eighteenth and Farnam streets in Omaha.<sup>9</sup>

What of the spirit of the events and people that graced Nebraska's territorial governors' residences? None of the houses remain, but accounts from that era hint at what took place there. The style in which the governors lived and entertained



An artist's conception of the 1855 executive ball in Omaha for Territorial Governor Mark W. Izard (1855-57). NSHS 978.238/So6e

The Lincoln house built by David Butler, Nebraska's first state governor from 1867 to 1871, became the unofficial "executive mansion." NSHS RG2158 PH:809



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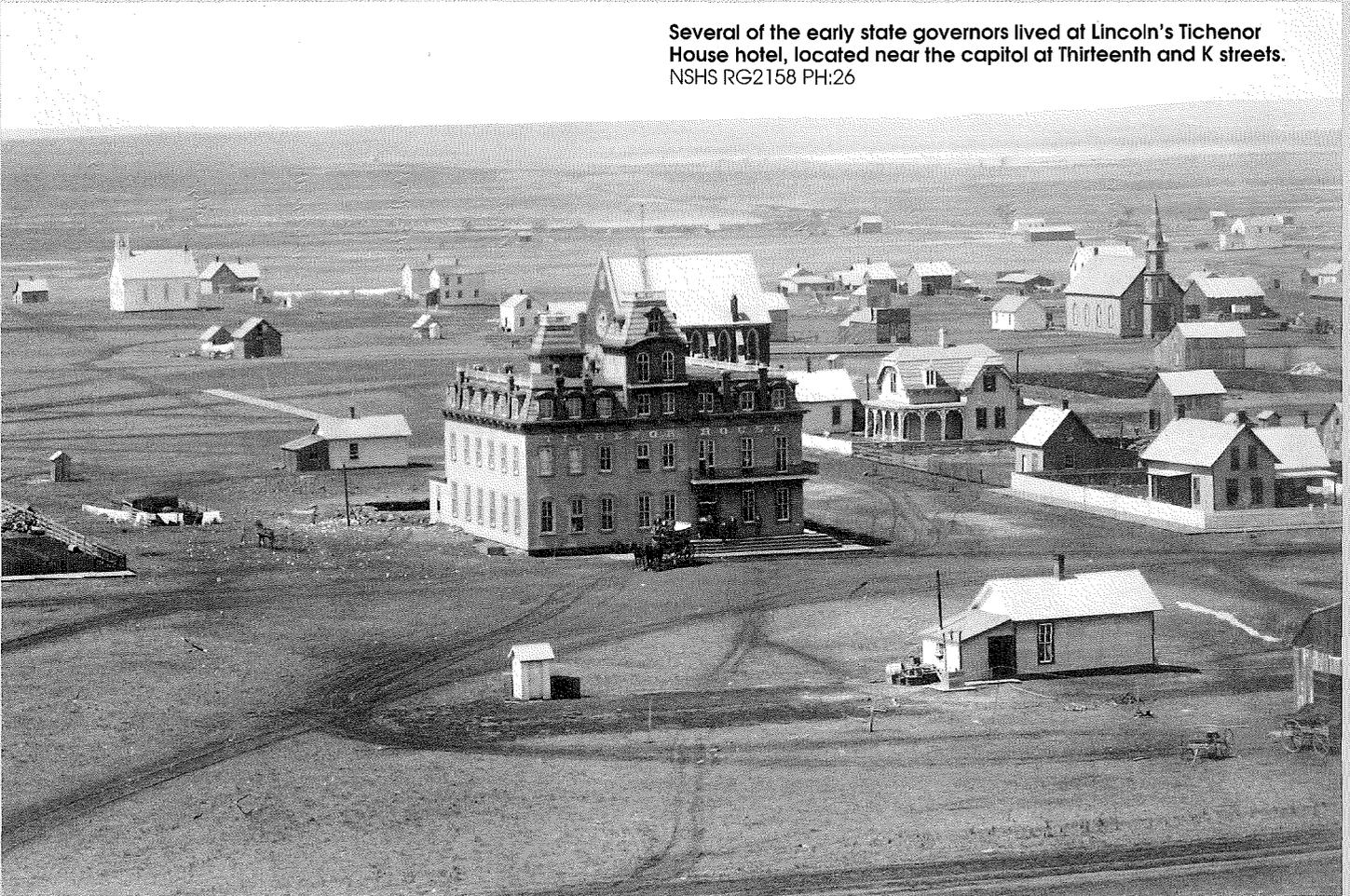
reflected their already prominent political or social status and seemed little altered by their ascension to the governorship. In those days Nebraska's population and her capital city were both so small that official guests were often personal friends. Most who participated in these gatherings had been accustomed to a rich social life back east. Transplanted to the fledgling capital city at the edge of the frontier, "while they laughed at the unavoidable crudenesses of house and banquet table ... they imparted after all an atmosphere of ease and elegance that was noticeable even then."<sup>10</sup>

Acting Governor Thomas B. Cuming's lodgings provide good examples of the atmosphere of those days. When the Cumings lived at the Douglas House, their rooms "were often filled with the elite of this young and growing city. Mrs. Cuming was very popular in the little gatherings which were frequently held."<sup>11</sup> After the couple moved to their Gothic cottage in 1855, the house was sometimes used for Catholic services. Mrs. Cuming recalled the Sunday when someone, not realizing this fact,

saw a large crowd of worshipers heading towards the residence and, assuming the worst, rushed to the governor's office to report his house must be on fire. Mrs. A. J. Poppleton, the wife of an Omaha attorney, recalled a New Year's Day gathering at the Cuming residence in 1856: "Mrs. Murphy, mother of Mrs. Cuming, had made some of her famous old Virginia eggnog. The rooms were filled with people, many members of the first legislature being there, and a jolly time was enjoyed by all."<sup>12</sup>

Some of a governor's entertaining or other official events took place in hotels or in the territorial capitol building. A February 1855 ball for Governor Mark W. Izard was held in Omaha's City Hotel, a tiny, one-story frame building at Eleventh and Harney streets. It was "the theater of a scene perhaps the most ludicrous that was ever witnessed in the history of public receptions."<sup>13</sup> The weather was so cold and the building so drafty that ice formed on the floor after it was scrubbed. The band consisted of a solitary fiddler from Council Bluffs, and only nine ladies could be mustered for the occasion. During the dancing several people

Several of the early state governors lived at Lincoln's Tichenor House hotel, located near the capitol at Thirteenth and K streets. NSHS RG2158 PH:26



*“No citizen, if not blessed with wealth. . . can afford to be governor.”*

With the exception of Governor Butler, nineteenth-century Nebraska governors did not own homes in Lincoln, and most lived in hotels or boarding houses during their terms in office. The Tichenor House, the Capital Hotel, and the Lincoln Hotel (the latter built in 1891) each sheltered governors. Other governors rented houses in the capital city. As when the capital was in Omaha, entertaining or other official events hosted by the governor took place in hotels, private homes, or the capitol building.



**The Nebraska Legislature in 1899 appropriated funds to buy the D. E. Thompson House at Fifteenth and H streets, the first Governor's Residence to be provided by the state. NSHS RG2869 PH:1**

slipped and fell. Supper was served at midnight, including coffee sweetened with brown sugar, thick sandwiches consisting of “bread of radical complexion and bacon,” and dried apple pie. Governor Izard, who was from Arkansas and not used to Nebraska winters, “stood around shivering with the cold, but bore himself with amiable fortitude.”<sup>14</sup> This was said to have been the first and last executive ball ever held in Omaha.

With the coming of Nebraska statehood in 1867, the legislature relocated the capital to Lancaster, a small village that would be renamed Lincoln. The entire infrastructure of state government, including a capitol building, a university, an insane asylum, and a penitentiary, had to be built from scratch on the naked prairie, far from any navigable stream or railroad. Some Nebraskans doubted whether the new capital city would long survive.

Three men who did have faith in Lincoln, and showed it by their actions, were the members of the commission that had selected the site: Governor David Butler, Secretary of State Thomas P. Kennard, and State Auditor John Gillespie. Each built an imposing masonry mansion costing from \$8,000 to \$15,000 to signal Lincoln's permanence and their faith in its future. Butler's private residence on Seventh Street between Washington and Garfield thus served as the first “governor's mansion” in Lincoln. Secretary of State Kennard's house at 1625 H Street, the only one of the three structures still extant, has been restored by the Nebraska State Historical Society and is preserved as the Nebraska Statehood Memorial.<sup>15</sup>

In December 1868 Butler proclaimed that the new capitol building was ready for use and all state government offices would relocate from Omaha to Lincoln. In his January 1869 message to the State Legislature, the governor took the first step in what would be a thirty-year effort to acquire an official residence for Nebraska's governors. Butler recommended that the legislature erect “a suitable residence” within the next two years for use by the state's chief executive. “No citizen, if not blessed with wealth . . . can afford to be governor,” said Butler, because the salary was inadequate to cover his living expenses while at the capital. Unless the state provided living quarters, the governor's office would be closed to many otherwise worthy persons who were unable to make a “pecuniary sacrifice.”<sup>16</sup> As early as 1873, perhaps as a result of Butler's urging, a bill to appropriate funds to purchase a residence for the governor passed the state senate but was indefinitely postponed in the house.<sup>17</sup>

A January 1873 reception for Governor Robert W. Furnas (1873–75) was at the Kennard House, where “through the whole evening fresh guests arrived, while others paid their respects to the governor, who is especially popular with the ladies.”<sup>18</sup> Governor John M. Thayer's inaugural reception in 1889 took place in the capitol building, and William F. (Buffalo Bill) Cody and his wife, Louisa, were among the guests.<sup>19</sup>

During the nineteenth century the job of being Nebraska's chief executive was much less complex than it is today. Some governors served only a single, two-year term and were little more than



The staircase in the Thompson House.  
NSHS RC2869 PH/28

business of the public with the governor does not cease when he closes his office door," Holcomb noted. "At all times, from early in the day until late in the evening, he is required to receive and listen to those who have some matter of public concern to present to him... With the arrangements of the ordinary family residence he is illy prepared to meet these very proper demands upon his time without injustice to himself and his family." Unlike Butler's proposal in 1869, Governor Holcomb's plea brought action. During its 1899 session, the State Legislature passed House Roll 610 "to provide a Governor's Mansion, to purchase, pay for, and furnish same, and to appropriate the sum of \$25,000 or as much thereof as needed."<sup>22</sup>

The house selected was a magnificent two-and-one-

half story, gabled-roof frame structure on the southwest corner of Fifteenth and H streets, immediately east of the site where the current governor's residence stands. Lincoln businessman D. E. Thompson, later U.S. ambassador to Brazil and Mexico, owned the house. The Neo-classical Revival dwelling was gracefully adorned with a two-tiered, wrap-around veranda of Doric columns linked by balustrades.

caretakers. The state treasury was often nearly empty and government services were few. At the same time ordinary citizens frequently struggled to eke out a living in the face of droughts, grasshopper plagues, or nationwide financial panics. In this context, it is not surprising that providing housing for the governor, or a subsidy to cover his living expenses, was not a high priority. Nebraskans of the time probably thought the governor's salary, modest though it may have been, was compensation enough for the responsibilities he was required to assume.<sup>20</sup>

The idea of establishing an official residence for the state's chief executive gained ground in 1889, when \$1,000 annually was appropriated to reimburse the governor for living expenses. During the depression of the mid-1890s, this sum was reduced to \$750 per year. Governor Lorenzo Crouse (1893-95) refused to accept even this modest amount while the state languished in depression.<sup>21</sup>

By 1899 the state's economy had improved and Governor Silas Holcomb (1895-99), in his outgoing message of January 5, urged the legislature to provide an official residence for the governor. "The

The first floor contained a reception hall and stairway finished in oak, a front parlor and sitting room in maple, a sun porch, a dining room, a small lunchroom, the kitchen, and the pantry. The second floor had four bedrooms, two with adjoining baths finished in Mexican onyx, a smoking room, and servants' quarters. The entire third floor was given over to a ballroom, and the basement contained a laundry, wine cellar, and manservant's quarters. The house, heated by six fireplaces, was sold to the state with many of its furnishings intact, including silverware, china, table linen, carpets, curtains, tapestries, rugs, and even a piano.<sup>23</sup>

The new governor's residence almost did not survive its first two years. The legislature had not

*“It seems to me no good reason can be given for requiring the governor to maintain a mansion which is largely for public benefit, at his own expense.”*

appropriated funds for its repair and maintenance and the first two governors to live there, William A. Poynter (1899–1901) and Charles H. Dietrich (1901), objected to this neglect. In his outgoing address to the state legislature Poynter stated, “It seems to me no good reason can be given for requiring the governor to maintain a mansion which is very largely for public benefit, at his own expense.” When he assumed the governor’s chair Dietrich concurred with his predecessor: “The executive mansion should either be sold, or an appropriation made for its proper maintenance.”<sup>24</sup>

These comments signaled that the governors saw the residence as being “the people’s house,” whose upkeep should be paid for with public funds. Following these complaints, a bill to sell the governor’s residence passed the state senate, but died in the house when the legislature adjourned. However, the legislature appropriated \$3,000 a year to maintain and furnish the residence.<sup>25</sup>

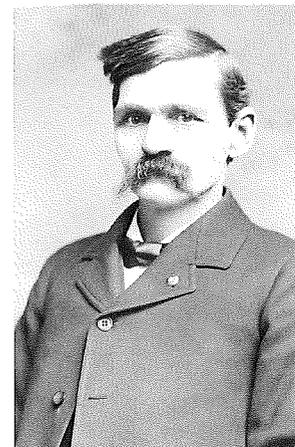
The notion that the state should provide housing for its governor had still not reached full acceptance, however. In 1907 the attorney general tried to make Governor George L. Sheldon (1907–09) pay rent while occupying the residence because the state constitution prohibited elected officials from receiving “perquisites of office or additional compensation” beyond their salaries. The Nebraska Supreme Court ruled that providing rent-free housing for the governor did not violate the constitution because he was required to live in the capital city during his term in office.<sup>26</sup>

Between 1899 and 1956 the first official governor’s residence would be used by eighteen of the nineteen Nebraska governors who held office during this period. Governor Samuel R. McKelvie (1919–23) chose to remain in his own Lincoln home at 140 South Twenty-sixth Street, although he used the official residence for his inaugural ball and for entertaining. During these years the legislature continued to allocate funds for maintenance and improvements to the governor’s residence. Major appropriations were made in 1925–26 (\$10,000), 1933 (\$10,000), and 1941 (\$7,000). Lesser amounts were provided in supplemental appropriations, such as \$1,100 in 1905 for painting and to purchase a boiler.<sup>27</sup>

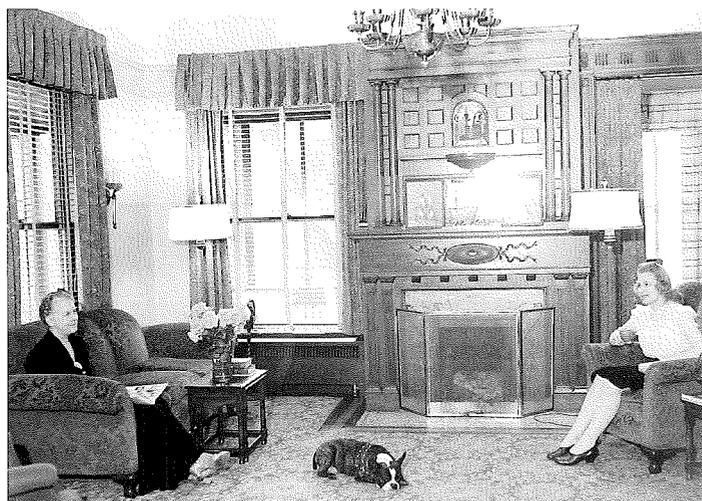
From 1900 through World War II, the governor’s residence was the site of events having local, national, and even international significance. The capital city was not only centrally located for those traveling across the country, but it held an important position in U.S. political life. Prominent figures such as William Jennings Bryan (presidential

candidate in 1896, 1900, and 1908) and Senator George W. Norris (who served in Congress for forty years) helped keep Nebraska in the limelight, and the governor himself was often host to foreign or American dignitaries.<sup>28</sup>

Governor George L. Sheldon is said to have received visitors from India, Russia, France, Germany, and Mexico. Republican presidential candidate William Howard Taft accepted Sheldon’s hospitality at the governor’s residence during a campaign stop in Lincoln in 1908, during which the cook prepared and served several chickens. Taft, who weighed some 300 pounds, was a hearty eater. Mary Cochran Grimes, who lived at the residence when her father, Robert LeRoy (Roy) Cochran was governor from 1935 to 1941, reported that Governor Alf Landon of Kansas, the Republican candidate for president in 1936, held a press conference there during a visit to Lincoln.<sup>29</sup>



**Governor William A. Poynter (1899–1901) was the first Nebraska governor to occupy the official residence.** NSHS RG2413 PH:3



**First Lady Aileen (Ganti) Cochran and daughter Mary relaxing in the Governor’s Residence sometime during the governorship of Robert Leroy (Roy) Cochran, 1935–41.** NSHS RG2869 PH:13

For most Nebraska governors and their families, the residence was also their personal home during their terms in office. Some of their activities were typical of family life elsewhere. Governor Keith Neville (1917–19) and his wife Mary were the only occupants to become parents while living in the residence when their youngest daughter, Irene, was born there on July 1, 1918. Neville’s eldest



View of the dining room, probably taken in the 1930s, showing the silver service from the battleship USS *Nebraska*. NSHS RG2869 PH:32

Although Governor Samuel McKelvie and his wife, Martha, did not live in the governor's residence, McKelvie held his inaugural ball there on February 14, 1919, for which the house was lavishly decorated to celebrate the end of World War I:

The Mansion from the lower rooms where the reception was held to the ballroom on the third floor was beautifully decorated for the occasion with southern simlax from Alabama, which festooned the chandeliers, fireplaces, and the walls, ran up the staircase to the dressing rooms on the second floor, and on up to the ballroom, the walls of which were hung with it. . . . [A]rranged at intervals around the room were large golden spread American eagles bearing flags. The ceiling was done in lattice work and from the central portion, 100 doves of peace fluttered in the air. All the Nebraska colors [flags] some of them but recently returned from the front, appeared on the walls.<sup>31</sup>

During McKelvie's two terms the residence was also used to house visitors, as during Gen. John J. Pershing's visit to Lincoln from December 24, 1919, through January 3, 1920. The general, in the midst of a cross-country tour, stopped in Lincoln to spend the holidays with his sisters. During this time, his aides-de-camp and clerks lived at the governor's residence.<sup>32</sup>

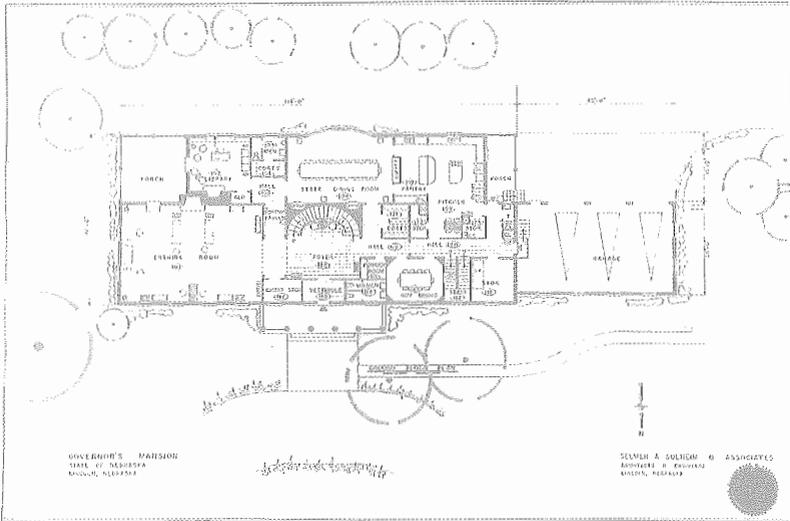
When Governor Cochran and First Lady Aileen Cochran moved into the residence with their children in 1935, daughter Mary was struck by the contrast between two of Nebraska's most noteworthy public buildings. The 1890s governor's residence, she recalled, "sat like a stolid matron across the street from the tall, young, slender, splendid state capitol." Mary and her brother, Robert LeRoy II, called the cavernous house "The Barn." When numerous relatives arrived for Cochran's inauguration, twenty children used the third-floor ballroom as a bedroom. Mary also divulged that during the Cochrans' time in the residence, they crafted a makeshift shooting range in the long basement, with a box of sand at one end to stop the bullets.<sup>33</sup>

During the administration of Governor Dwight Griswold (1941–47) that spanned World War II, the residence was a major center of social activity. Many groups used it for meetings because it was centrally located and travel was discouraged due to gasoline rationing. Food was also rationed. Former First Lady Erma Griswold Bomgardner recounted how she saved food ration stamps to use for entertaining. "Once we were called upon to entertain the Prince Regent of Iraq. It took just



A ballroom occupied the third floor of the 1899 residence. NSHS RG286 PH:21

daughter, Mary (Mrs. Fred W. Sieman), recalled that she and the other Neville children learned to knit from the Red Cross ladies who met at the governor's residence during World War I. The Neville children also raised a lamb, named "Red Cross Mary," which was to be sold to benefit the Red Cross. But poor Mary died, perhaps from fright according to Mrs. Sieman, during the November 11, 1918, Armistice Day celebration that broke out spontaneously in the street in front of the residence. "People sang and danced all night and called for speeches from the governor's family."<sup>30</sup>



The first-floor plan of the new Governor's Residence, constructed between 1956 and 1958. NSHS RG2869 PH:76



The state drawing room of the new residence was decorated with Empire and Regency furnishings. NSHS RG2869 PH: 82

about all my stamps to provide a big beef roast for the guests since we couldn't serve them [Muslims] pork."<sup>34</sup>

The Griswolds also hosted frequent legislative lunches and dinners or teas for visiting dignitaries. These events were not always without incident, but sometimes humor saved the day:

When the Dwight Griswolds [Republicans] moved into the Governor's Mansion in 1941, they brought their Labrador hunting dog, Buster. Being a faithful watchdog, Buster

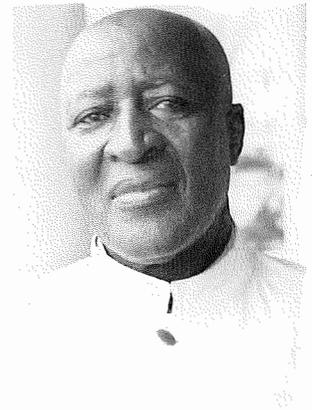
"clamped down" one eventful evening on the foot of former governor Charles Bryan, according to Erma Griswold Bomgardner. "It didn't faze Mr. Bryan at all," said the former First Lady. "He just looked down and said, 'Must have known I was a Democrat!'"<sup>35</sup>

The culinary tastes of Nebraska governors also attracted attention. In a 1931 interview, William Woods, a longtime butler, custodian, and occasional chef at the governor's residence recalled the dietary habits of some of the nine governors under whom he had served. Governor Ashton C. Shallenberger (1909-11) liked steaks, but his successor, Chester H. Aldrich (1911-13), "probably ate more fish than any governor we've ever had." Governor Neville brought wild game to be cooked, including bear meat. Arthur J. Weaver (1929-31) supplied the chef with home-smoked meats from his farm at Falls City, while his wife Maude is said to have canned enough fruits and vegetables to supply the table daily. Although Woods said little about the First Ladies' specific food preferences, he noted, "The governors, they're boss over in their offices, but around here, well, it's the women that have to be pleased."<sup>36</sup>

During Governor Val Peterson's terms (1947-53), Elizabeth Peterson showed that although a governor's wife occupied a unique position, she had much in common with other citizens. When it came her turn to host her monthly bridge club, Mrs. Peterson opened the doors of the governor's residence to her friends "just as any other house on the block would."<sup>37</sup>

By 1953 the procession of club meetings, luncheons, balls, teas, and receptions at the original residence was drawing to a close as support grew

*"The governors, they're boss over in their offices, but around here, well, it's the women that have to be pleased."*



William Woods of Lincoln worked for nine governors and their families as a member of the Governor's Residence staff. NSHS RG3197 PH:138



Thousands of Nebraskans toured the new Governor's Residence in March 1958.  
NSHS RG2869 PH:97

for replacing it with a more modern structure. The old house was beginning to show its age. In the early 1930s some, including Aileen Cochran, had proposed the state purchase a European-style townhouse at 1801 C Street to replace the governor's residence, but the idea came to naught.<sup>38</sup>

By 1945 Mrs. Griswold reported that her feet would freeze during dinner because the windows were loose. None of the house's six fireplaces could be used. The first floor rooms were too small for receptions, and the four upstairs bedrooms could not accommodate both guests and family members. Ten years later the governor's residence was termed "a rookery, drafty, uncomfortable, and in dreadful disrepair," by Elizabeth (Mrs. Victor E.) Anderson. She noted that the ballroom, by then a fire hazard, could not be used, and to reach the second-story veranda, one had to climb through a window.<sup>39</sup>

As early as 1945 a bill had been introduced in the legislature to appropriate \$100,000 to purchase a site and to construct, equip, and furnish a new residence for Nebraska's governors. Wartime shortages of labor and building materials caused the bill to be tabled, but the seed of an idea had been planted. In 1952 another proposal surfaced to substitute an existing house for the crumbling governor's residence. The estate of Frank H. Woods offered to sell the state a twenty-five-room house at 2501 Sheridan Boulevard but by then, the idea of

constructing a completely new governor's residence had gained favor.<sup>40</sup>

In 1955 the legislature passed LB361, which provided \$200,000 from the State Industrial and Military Department Building Fund for planning, construction, landscaping, and furnishing a new residence for the governor. The existing residence was to be demolished, but paneling, one fireplace, bath and plumbing fixtures, kitchen cabinets, and a few pieces of furniture were salvaged for use in the new house.<sup>41</sup>

The Nebraska State Historical Society received a few items and the rest of the old residence's furnishings were sold at public auction on August 9, 1956. Nearly three hundred items were sold, including the governor's oak desk and chair, five fireplaces, all but one lighting fixture and chandelier, settees and chairs, end tables, bookshelves, and so on. Citizens could write Governor Anderson requesting a memento—perhaps a piece of wallpaper or a gavel carved from salvaged wood. Thus the first residence that Nebraska had provided for its governors passed into history.<sup>42</sup>

Its successor was designed by Lincoln architects Selmer Solheim and Associates. The design, termed by Solheim as modified Georgian Colonial, was selected from seven that had been presented to the Nebraska State Building Commission. Solheim believed his concept, based in American history, represented permanency and that a more contemporary style would soon become dated.<sup>43</sup>

Not everyone was pleased with Solheim's design, however. Harry F. Cunningham, one of the leading critics, was a former member of Goodhue and Associates, the firm that had designed the architecturally distinctive Nebraska State Capitol. Cunningham was "shocked and disappointed" by the Solheim design, which he said was "inappropriate for the capitol area." He suggested that Governor Anderson might have dictated the design, and Cunningham claimed widespread support for his views by other Lincoln architects.<sup>44</sup>

At the same time Frank Latenser, president of the Nebraska chapter of the American Institute of Architects, declared that he "lined up with those favoring the [Solheim] design." An intelligent committee and a qualified architect had approved the design and Latenser was "willing to go along with them."<sup>45</sup>

Despite its critics, Solheim's proposal was retained and construction bids were accepted in September 1956. The general contractor for the new governor's residence was the W.J. Broer Construction Company of Lincoln. John B.



**Architect Selmer Solheim (center) presents the keys of the new Governor's Residence to Governor Victor Anderson (1955–59) and First Lady Elizabeth Anderson.**  
NSHS RG2869 PH: 101

Peacock of Omaha's Orchard and Wilhelm Company was the interior designer, and J. G. Welding was the landscape designer.<sup>46</sup>

After the 1899 residence was torn down to make way for construction, and before the new building's completion, another house had a brief fling as the official residence of the governor. Although Governor and Mrs. Anderson lived in their own Lincoln home at 6501 Havelock Avenue during the construction period, a place was needed where the governor could eat lunch and have a bedroom in case he stayed to work late at the capitol. Accordingly the state purchased the frame Charles Tucker house at 718 South Fourteenth Street, just west of where the new governor's residence would rise. The governor's cook and housekeeper lived in the Tucker house during the interim. Official entertaining was at private clubs in Lincoln. Once the new residence was finished, the Tucker house was sold and

moved, and the site was incorporated into the grounds.<sup>47</sup>

Construction of the new residence continued through 1957 and into 1958. By February 1958 the building was nearing completion. Its exterior was clad in pink Norman brick called "Old Virginian," and the house included twenty-seven major rooms, eleven bathrooms, and a three-car garage. The interior was decorated in five complementary styles: French Provincial (1690–1792); Georgian (1715–53); Louis XVI (1760–90); Empire (1804–15); and Regency (1800–30). The furnishings in the first floor rooms were reproductions of original pieces from those eras, which reflected adaptations of motifs that appeared in wall decoration and on furniture in Egyptian and Greco-Roman antiquity.

Off the main foyer were the principal rooms for state functions. The state drawing room was decorated with Empire and Regency furnishings, including an antique sofa from the former residence. The state dining room was reproduction Chippendale with Georgian architectural details carved by Keats Lorenz of Lincoln. The governor's private dining room was themed in French Provincial. The first floor also housed the governor's library (which incorporated paneling and a fireplace from the old residence) and the service wing. An elliptical staircase rose from the foyer to the second floor, which included the governor's private living quarters and three guest rooms, each with a private bath. The basement included a large meeting room and the staff quarters. In March 1958 public tours of the new governor's residence at 1425 H Street were offered on successive weekends. Some 40,000 Nebraskans took advantage of the opportunity to see the house they paid for.<sup>48</sup>

The first governor to live in the new residence was Victor E. Anderson (1955–59), who had also supervised its construction in conjunction with the State Building Commission. After the public tours were over, the governor and Mrs. Anderson conducted private tours, although they had not yet moved in. One day the governor brought thirty guests, only to find his wife atop a ladder, washing the crystal chandelier in the drawing room. Elizabeth Anderson recalled, "I just got down from the ladder and gave them a tour." The Andersons finally occupied the residence in October 1958, where they lived for fewer than three months. They had not moved in earlier due to a delay in finding qualified employees to staff the house. Although Anderson sought reelection in 1958, Ralph G. Brooks was elected and sworn-in as governor in January 1959.<sup>49</sup>

One of Governor Brooks's first acts upon entering office in 1959 was to appoint his wife Darlene as the official receptionist for the governor's residence. Her guest book lists visitors ranging from then Senators John F. Kennedy and Hubert H. Humphrey to Chuck Connors, "The Rifleman" of television fame. Kennedy is said to have remarked that the governor's residence and the capitol building were the equals of any state government buildings he had seen. Connors announced, "This marks the first time I've been in a Governor's Mansion, but it's hard to believe that any state could top this one."<sup>50</sup>

When Governor Brooks died of heart failure on September 9, 1960, Lt. Governor Dwight W. Burney was sworn-in to fill out the last few weeks of Brooks's term. Burney and his wife Edna briefly



**The first children to live in the new residence were those of Governor Norbert Tiemann (1967–71) and First Lady Lorna Tiemann.** NSHS RG2738 PH:17

occupied the governor's residence until Frank B. Morrison, elected in November 1960, was inaugurated in January 1961.<sup>51</sup>

Governor Morrison (1961–67) and his wife Maxine saw their complement of unusual events and people while living at the residence for six years. During the days of student activism in the 1960s, six hundred students once came to call on Morrison in his office. He invited them to return to

the residence that evening and talked with them until midnight. Another visitor during the Morrison years was the nation's First Lady, Mrs. Lyndon B. (Ladybird) Johnson, who attended the first Nebraskaland Days in Lincoln in 1965. Mrs. Johnson had never stayed overnight in any governor's home and hadn't expected to stay with the Morrises. However, the Secret Service requested that Mrs. Johnson be allowed to stay there overnight. "I had sent the cook home on vacation," recalled Maxine Morrison, "so I cooked for her myself. She was one of the most gracious guests I have ever had."<sup>52</sup> The Morrises also oversaw the completion of a formal garden behind the residence in 1962.<sup>53</sup>

Former Nebraska First Ladies who had lived in the original governor's residence were impressed by the new one. Aileen Cochran lunched there in 1974 and, in a thank-you note to then First Lady Pat Exon, remarked, "My memory of the old mansion goes back many years before I lived there, and I can say this to you now—'as Chatelaine of the present mansion, you have come a long, long, way.'"<sup>54</sup>

Some other "firsts" became part of the story of the new governor's residence. The first children to live there were Norbert Jr., Mary, Lorna, and Amy Tiemann when Governor Norbert Tiemann held office from 1967 to 1971. First Lady Lorna Tiemann recalled those years as like living "behind glass walls," particularly for the children. "Being in the spotlight and having everyone know you as the governor's child and not as yourself is a definite disadvantage." The family also had to get used to being protected by the Nebraska State Patrol. According to Mrs. Tiemann, the Lincoln school system treated her children no differently than other children, which helped make their lives seem more normal.<sup>55</sup>

J. James Exon was the first governor to use the residence for eight years, 1971–79, longer than any governor before. Exon served two, four-year terms as governor under a constitutional amendment adopted in 1962. Earlier governors could serve an unlimited number of two-year terms, but none had held the office more than six years.

Governor J. Robert Kerrey (1983–87), who was divorced, was the first unmarried governor to live in the new residence. During his term in office, Kerrey's romance with Hollywood actress Debra Winger drew national attention. The governor met Winger during Lincoln filming for the movie, *Terms of Endearment*, and the couple was often seen together at Lincoln nightspots and even at political



**The staircase in the Governor's Residence.** NSHS RG2869 PH:80

events. Nebraskans generally regarded the relationship matter-of-factly, and seemed more amused than shocked when Winger became a frequent guest at the governor's residence and by the speeding ticket she received while driving the governor's car.<sup>56</sup>

Governor Kay Orr (1987–91) and her husband, Bill, set a new precedent when they became the first woman governor and "First Gentleman" to occupy the residence. The 1986 election that brought Kay Orr to the governor's office was itself unprecedented. For the first time in U.S. history both candidates for a state governorship were women: Republican Kay Orr and Democrat Helen Boosalis. Orr was also the nation's first Republican woman governor.<sup>57</sup>

By the time Governor E. Benjamin Nelson took office in 1991, the "new" residence had been in

use for more than thirty years. Wear and tear had taken their toll on painted walls, drapes, furniture, and floor coverings. A leaking dishwasher had caused damage in the room below. Deteriorated furnishings had been put in storage. The Orrs had used much of their own furniture when they lived in the residence. First Lady Diane Nelson found the private quarters "empty, stark, and cold" when she and the governor moved in.

Mrs. Nelson, along with former First Gentleman Bill Orr, volunteered to coordinate fundraising to renovate the house so it would once again be attractive and inviting to the public, as well providing a comfortable home for the governors and their families. Much of the cost of the renovation was provided through private donations totaling \$1.3 million, which included \$100,000 from sales of Bill Orr's *First Gentleman's Cookbook*. The legislature appropriated just over \$1 million for fire and life safety improvements and to make the building handicapped accessible. Members of the Nebraska/Iowa Chapter of the American Society of Interior Designers donated some \$1.5 million worth of in-kind services. The renovation began in March 1997 and each of the twenty-seven rooms was redone. In August 1998 more than 8,000 Nebraskans, including several former first ladies and children of former governors, filed through the residence to see the results.<sup>58</sup>

At the same time an endowment was established to accept future donations, and the legislature created the Governor's Residence Advisory Commission. The commission is required

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to inspect the residence annually and make recommendations for major maintenance or repairs. It is also empowered to approve all exterior and interior alterations to the residence and its furnishings, except for those involving the governor's private living quarters on the second floor.<sup>59</sup> The most recent project involving the residence was renewal and enhancement of the landscaping, which was initiated in November 2001 by Governor Mike Johanns (1999–2005) and First Lady Stephanie Johanns. The landscaping project was also funded primarily by private donations. In August 2007 the fiftieth anniversary of the present governor's residence was observed with tours and special events hosted by Governor Dave Heineman and First Lady Sally Ganem. In 2008 the Nebraska Governor's Residence was listed in the National Register of Historic Places.

Throughout the years since its construction, the governor's residence (except for the private quarters) has often been open to the public for tours, receptions, and meetings. Special exhibits are sometimes presented there, and the residence houses several collections and objects that help tell both the story of the building and the history of Nebraska. One is the First Ladies' and First Gentleman's Portrait Gallery, along with a collection of dolls representing spouses of Nebraska governors as they were dressed for the governors' inaugural balls.

Elizabeth (Mrs. Charles W.) Bryan initiated the portrait gallery in 1932, which is displayed off the front foyer, and a basement room houses the doll collection, begun in 1964 by the Distaffs, an organization of Omaha doctors' wives and installed at the residence as a 1976 Bicentennial project. The doll collection is incomplete because some governors were widowers or divorcees during their terms in office, and some of the early governors' wives did not come to Nebraska, or arrived here after their husbands were inaugurated. Bill Orr, the state's only First Gentleman to date, is also represented by a doll.

The governor's library contains works by Nebraska authors, Americana, and general references assembled by the Nebraska Committee for National Library Week in 1959. In 1986 seats with needlepoint designs showing historic buildings across the state were added to twenty-four chairs in the dining room. The needlepointers were chosen through a statewide contest.<sup>60</sup>

Also displayed in the residence is the silver service from the battleship USS *Nebraska*, which was commissioned in 1907 and scrapped in 1924.

The silver service was presented to the ship in 1908 as a gift from the people of Nebraska. The navy returned the silver service to the state in 1922 after the battleship was decommissioned. It is still used occasionally during special events.<sup>61</sup>

From the era when Nebraska governors had to arrange for their own living quarters, through the years when the state provided a former private home as a governor's "mansion," to the 1950s construction and 1990s renovation of a modern structure built specifically as a home for the governor, the role of the residences and the experiences of the governors who lived in them provide a window on Nebraska's past. The governor's residence belongs to every Nebraskan. So does the history of the places where the governors have lived. ■

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> A summary history of Nebraska's governors' residences first appeared in *Nebraska History* 61 (Fall 1980) as "Housing Nebraska's Governors, 1854–1980." The idea for such an article was suggested by then First Lady Ruth Raymond Thone. Mrs. Thone realized that the residence was a public institution, as well as the governor's home. She noted, "In order to enjoy it [the residence] properly, one must have a knowledge of its roots." Peg Poeschl, a Nebraska State Historical Society intern from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, and the society staff developed the 1980 article, which was reprinted for distribution, in part, through a grant from the Nebraska Committee for the Humanities (now the Nebraska Humanities Council). Portions of that article have been incorporated here.

Many of the recollections and other data used in this essay can be found in the First Ladies Research File and the Governor's Mansion Research File, both at the Nebraska State Historical Society.

<sup>2</sup> From an unidentified newspaper cited in Albert Watkins, ed., *Nebraska State Historical Society Publications* 20 (1922): 257.

<sup>3</sup> James C. Olson and Ronald C. Naugle, *History of Nebraska*, 3d ed. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press Bison Books, 1997), 81.

<sup>4</sup> Dennis Thavenet, "The Territorial Governorship: Nebraska Territory as Example," *Nebraska History* 51 (Winter 1970): 389.

<sup>5</sup> "Reminiscences of Mrs. Cuming," *The Omaha Excelsior*, March 10, 1906, 4.

<sup>6</sup> "Reminiscences of Early Omaha," in *Nebraska History* 17 (July–Sept. 1936): 209; Arthur C. Wakeley, *Omaha: The Gate City and Douglas County Nebraska*, 2 vol. (Chicago: S. J. Clarke Pub. Co., 1917) 1:428.

<sup>7</sup> James C. Olson, *J. Sterling Morton* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1942), 80.

<sup>8</sup> *Nebraska City News*, April 7, 1860; Ralph M. Wardle, "Territorial Bride," *Nebraska History* 50 (Summer 1969): 214.

<sup>9</sup> Don Snoddy, Barry Combs, Bob Marks, and Del Weber, eds., *Their Man in Omaha: The Barker Letters, Vol. 1, 1860–1868* (Omaha: Douglas County Historical Society: 2004), 38, 53, 644, 658; Charles W. Martin, ed., "Herndon House Register," *Nebraska History* 48 (Spring 1967): 34.

<sup>10</sup> Harriet S. MacMurphy, "Nebraska Women in 1855," *Nebraska State Historical Society Publications* 7 (1898): 171.

<sup>11</sup> Mrs. Charles H. Fiseite, "Pioneer Women of Omaha," in

*Collection of Nebraska Pioneer Reminiscences* (Cedar Rapids, Iowa: Nebraska Society of the Daughters of the American Revolution, 1916), 91.

<sup>12</sup> "Reminiscences of Mrs. Cuming," *The Omaha Excelsior*, March 10, 1906.

<sup>13</sup> George L. Miller recollection in A.T. Andreas, comp., *History of the State of Nebraska*, (Chicago: The Western Historical Co.), 688.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> *The Nebraska Statehood Memorial*, educational leaflet, n.d., Nebraska State Historical Society.

<sup>16</sup> John G.W. Lewis, ed., *Messages and Proclamations of the Governors of Nebraska* (Lincoln: Nebraska State Historical Society, 1942), 1:288–89.

<sup>17</sup> *Nebraska Senate Journal* (1873), 292, 514–15; *Nebraska House Journal* (1873), 578.

<sup>18</sup> Lincoln, *Nebraska State Journal*, January 15, 1873.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, January 3, 1889.

<sup>20</sup> Background on the residences of governors before 1899 is found in "End Near for Governor's Mansion," *Omaha World-Herald Magazine*, April 17, 1955.

<sup>21</sup> *Laws of Nebraska* (1889), 598; (1895), 386.

<sup>22</sup> Lewis, ed., *Messages and Proclamations*, 2:335; *Laws of Nebraska* (1899), 318–20.

<sup>23</sup> Lincoln, *Nebraska State Journal*, June 20, 1899.

<sup>24</sup> *Nebraska Senate Journal* (1901), 111, 123.

<sup>25</sup> *Laws of Nebraska* (1901), 550.

<sup>26</sup> State v. Sheldon, *Nebraska Reports* 78 (1907): 552–58.

<sup>27</sup> *Laws of Nebraska* (1925), 94; (1933), 110; (1941), 716, 723; (1905), 742.

<sup>28</sup> Lincoln, *Sunday Journal-Star*, December 13, 1931.

<sup>29</sup> Mary Cochran Grimes, *Aileen and Roy: Up from the Sand Hills to the State House* (New York: iUniverse, 2008), 150–51.

<sup>30</sup> Letter from Mrs. Keith Neville, 1974, First Ladies Research file, Nebraska State Historical Society; Mrs. Fred Sieman questionnaire, Governor's Mansion Research file, Nebraska State Historical Society.

<sup>31</sup> Lincoln, *Nebraska State Journal*, February 15, 1919.

<sup>32</sup> *Lincoln Daily Star*, December 19, 1919; January 2, 1920.

<sup>33</sup> Grimes, *Aileen and Roy*, 143–44, 147.

<sup>34</sup> *Omaha World-Herald*, May 1, 1974.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> *Lincoln Sunday Journal-Star*, December 13, 1931.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, January 21, 1951.

<sup>38</sup> *Omaha Sunday World-Herald*, March 2, 1980.

<sup>39</sup> *Omaha World-Herald Magazine*, April 17, 1955.

<sup>40</sup> *Nebraska Legislative Journal* (1945), 1452; *Omaha World-Herald Magazine*, April 17, 1955.

<sup>41</sup> *Laws of Nebraska* (1955), 883–84.

<sup>42</sup> *Lincoln Star*, August 10, 1956; RG1, SG35, Victor E. Anderson Gubernatorial Papers, Nebraska State Historical Society. One chandelier is part of the Historical Society's museum collections.

<sup>43</sup> *Lincoln Journal*, August 20, 1956.

<sup>44</sup> Lincoln, *Sunday Journal-Star*, August 25, 1956.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>46</sup> *Lincoln Star*, September 17, 1956; *Lincoln Journal*, August 20, 1956.

<sup>47</sup> *Lincoln Star*, April 11, 1974; *Omaha Sunday World-Herald*, May 6, 1956.

<sup>48</sup> *Lincoln Star*, March 17, 1958.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, April 11, 1974; *Lincoln Sunday Journal-Star*, October 19, 1958.

<sup>50</sup> *Lincoln Star*, October 20, 1959.

<sup>51</sup> *Lincoln Sunday Journal-Star*, October 9, 1960.

<sup>52</sup> *Lincoln Star*, April 3, 1974.

<sup>53</sup> *Lincoln Journal*, September 20, 1962.

<sup>54</sup> Letter from Mrs. Robert LeRoy (Roy) Cochran, 1974, First Ladies Research File, Nebraska State Historical Society.

<sup>55</sup> *Lincoln Star*, May 11, 1970, and May 15, 1974.

<sup>56</sup> Ivy Harper, *Waltzing Matilda: The Life and Times of Nebraska Senator Robert Kerrey* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992), chap. 7.

<sup>57</sup> *Lincoln Star*, November 5, 1986.

<sup>58</sup> *Lincoln Journal-Star*, August 22 and August 29, 1998.

<sup>59</sup> Sec. 72-2101 to 2105, *Reissue, Revised Statutes of Nebraska, 1943*, 2003 supplement.

<sup>60</sup> Governor's Mansion Research File, Nebraska State Historical Society; *Omaha World-Herald*, January 30, 1957.

<sup>61</sup> James A. Hanson, "The USS *Nebraska*," and Gail DeBuse Potter, "The Silver Service for the USS *Nebraska*," *Nebraska History* 69 (Fall 1988): 106–14; 115–19.

