



Dedication of Washington County Historical Museum

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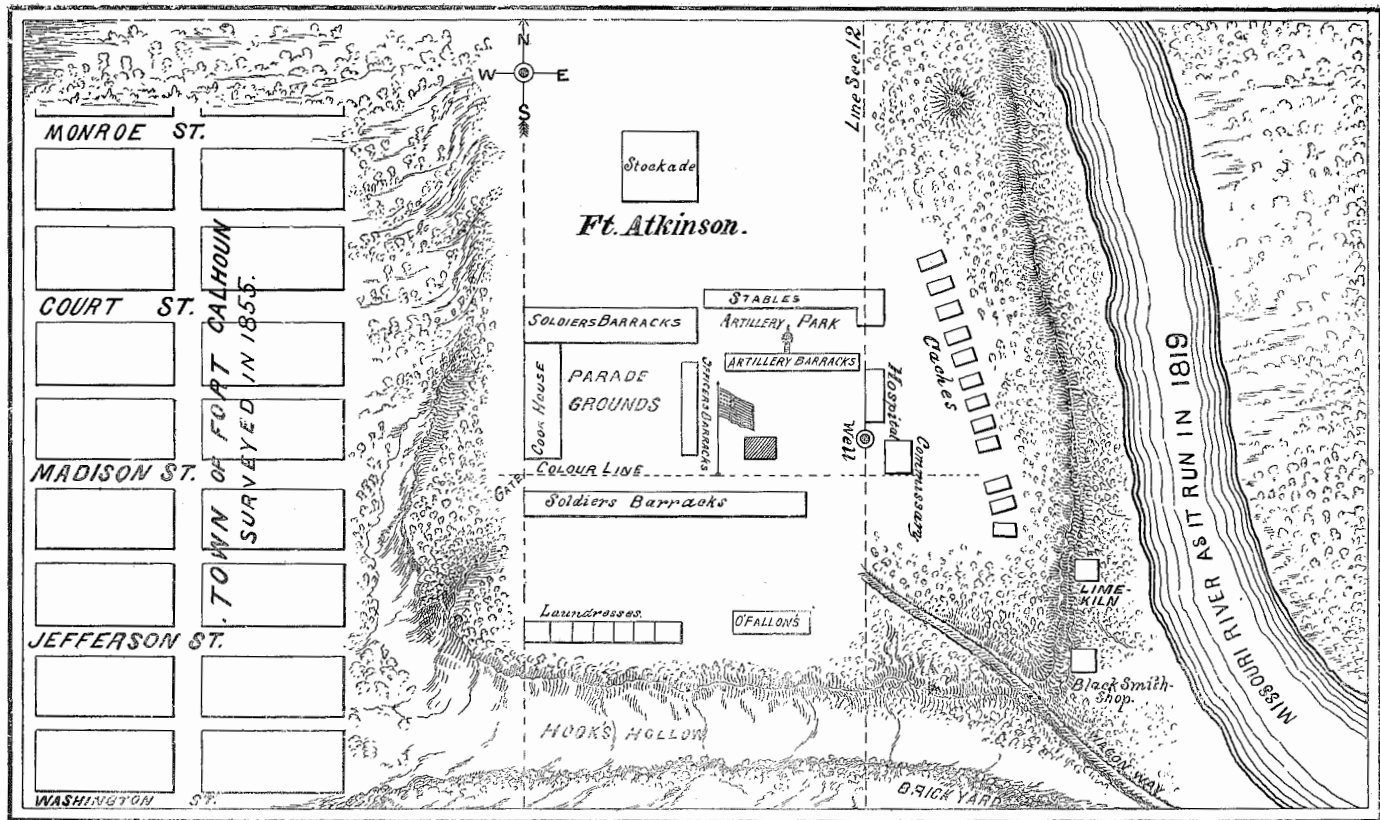
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Article Contents: Dedicatory Program of the Washington County Historical Society

Note: An address by Addison E Sheldon, “The Value of Local Historical Museums,” presented at the dedication of the Fort Calhoun-Fort Atkinson Historical Museum, precedes the program. Descriptions of previous historical celebrations in the area appear after the program.

Cataloging Information:

Photographs / Images: plat of Fort Atkinson, 1819-1827; W. H. Woods; coin celebrating Fort Calhoun-Fort Atkinson centennial, 1919



THE VALUE OF LOCAL HISTORICAL MUSEUMS

Address Given at the Dedication of the Fort Calhoun-Fort Atkinson Historical Museum, February 13, 1938,
by Addison E. Sheldon, Superintendent of the
Nebraska State Historical Society.

Mr. Chairman and Fellow Nebraskans:

On this hilltop, where the first American flag floated over the first American fort in Nebraska and the Trans-Missouri region, is a fitting place for the dedication of an historical museum. A museum here will never lack in that most important aspect of any human monument—a worthy historical back-ground. For on this hilltop, within sound of our voices today, was held the first council of the United States with the Indian tribes beyond the Missouri River. Within a modern rifle-shot of this platform stood the first fort of the United States Government west of the Missouri River, with the American flag flying over it, and the first common meeting-ground of the wild men of the plains with the oncoming waves of American settlement and exploration.

Within the same rifle-shot distance were created by the mind and hand of the soldier-frontiersman, the first farm, the first grist mill, the first saw mill, the first brick-yard, the first factory, the first dairy and livestock ranch, the first school, the first weather bureau (1820), the first brass band, the first library and reading-room, in all the vast region between the Missouri River and the Rocky Mountains. Here the first white child was born, and the first civil marriages made, in the same region. Here came the first ambassadors from the Spanish capital of Santa Fe, New Mexico, to negotiate a peace with their relentless enemies, the Pawnee Indians. Here was born, and put into the written form, the first project for a transcontinental highway from the valley of the Mississippi to the waters of the Pacific, starting

from Fort Atkinson, following the Platte River valley, and crossing the mountains and deserts to the sunlit waters of the great south sea, the Pacific Ocean.

Certainly no museum could ever secure a nobler and more inspiring site for an inspirational landscape, or for more inspiring memories and prophecies, than those which cluster about this first great, famous point in this great Trans-Missouri Empire—the “Council Bluff” of Lewis and Clark, the fortified frontier stronghold of Fort Atkinson, with its regiments of soldiers, its sixteen cannon, its throng of Indians from the thousand-mile distances about it, its first steamboats in the river below, its first highways and postal routes, and all the famous persons and events which adhere to this region and the great domain beyond, of which Nebraska is today a part.

Your committee has invited me today to speak primarily upon the topic, “The Value of Local Historical Museums.” That is a challenge much wider even than the challenge of the heroic frontier military post which gathers about this famous bluff. With a few brief strokes, all that I can hope to do is to set before you what the museum movement means today in America, in Europe, around the world. For we have freshly learned, in the last fifty years, that in an era of printed pages, of countless books and pamphlets that clamor for readers, of motion-picture films which present every night in nearly every village upon this planet the story of human life and human aspirations, in an era when every moment the atmosphere about us throngs with unseen voices which tell today’s news, yesterday’s passion and tomorrow’s forecasts—in such a period the open-door museum has become one of the greatest schoolmasters and guides of the world civilization.

Once a museum, for the most part, was a series of glass cases inhabited by stuffed birds and fossil fragments of the world which had been—mostly unintelligible except to a few special students who found their stuffed studies upon its shelves.

Now, today's museum, wherever you find it, is a speaking intelligence, whose luminous guide-cards tell a series of stories in visible forms whose impress upon the human mind surpasses even that of the printed page. A new genius has found its expression within the museum walls. Here the drama and the actors change from week to week, telling new stories for the children and for the grown-ups, furnishing a fresh fascination for each new calendar period, and keeping before us in concrete, visible demonstration the progress of the human mind through all the ages and all the catastrophes and all the inventions and all the triumphs of all time.

Today, in every great city and in most of the smaller ones, the first question asked by the tourist is the way to the museum. For he knows that there he will find some of the great masterpieces of human achievement and some of the most eloquent instruction upon the local region that he can discover. The great museums are the objective of every traveller—the National Museum at Washington, the American Natural History Museum in Central Park, New York, the Field Columbian Museum in Chicago, the British Museum in London, the great museums of Paris and Rome and the Orient. A new genius, a new imagination, a new master hand and master mind in all lands of the world, have grasped the idea that in a museum may be assembled more of the permanent products of the region and the world than can be displayed and demonstrated in any other way. So, when we wish to see the processes of coal mining we do not need to go to the mine. We can see the actual operations in miniature in the museum. When we wish to realize the enormity of the geologic animals which had inhabited the earth, we look at their skeletons in the great museums, including our own University Museum at Lincoln, ranking among the first in its field.

When we wish to study the story of Nebraska we shall find the most adequate representation of it in the Historical Society Museum in our great State Capitol,

and hither come every year from one to three hundred thousand visitors, with over thirty thousand of them taking the time to write their names on the register kept for that purpose.

When we wish to see some of the great masterpieces of human art and culture set in a noble temple at vast cost, the traveller will visit the Joslyn Memorial on the hilltop at Omaha.

Now, in recent years—the very recent years—chiefly in the last fifteen years—has arisen in Nebraska, as in other regions, a strong growing ambition and desire to assemble in every county the evidences of that county's birth and progress, and struggles, and defeats, and triumphs, in an appropriate, permanent place for the inspiration of the youth of that locality, for the attraction of the traveller from afar, and for the stimulus toward further achievement and deeper recognition of the patriotism which properly springs from a love of one's native soil and locality.

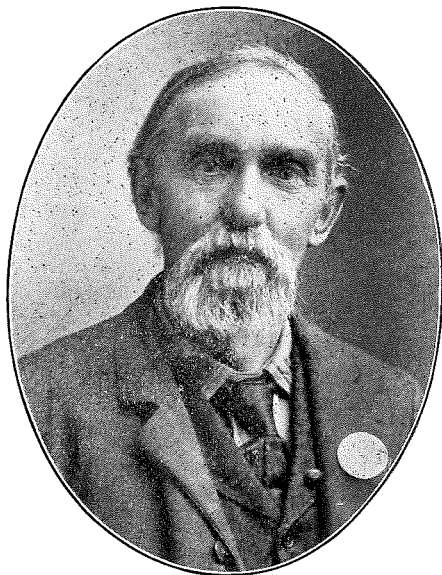
This museum, dedicated this day upon one of the most holy historic places within Nebraska, illustrates and exemplifies the operation of this local patriotic spirit working in the heart of Nebraska. It is the beginning, only, of a great achievement whose future it prophesies. It says to the world near by and passing by: "Behold me! I am the Spirit of the Frontier. I stand for the preservation of the great Past which has inhabited this hilltop. Even as the Acropolis on the hilltop in Athens signified the greatest aspiration of the greatest people of antiquity, so stand I here to challenge the attention of the people through all ages."

And when that long slow-moving movement of the past forty years shall achieve its objective of the historic park on the peak of the bluff—the site of old Fort Atkinson—and there shall arise upon that most historic soil within our commonwealth the reproduction of the old military barracks, the facsimiles of the ancient cannon which looked from its embrasures upon every possible point of Indian attack; when the old flagstaff shall rise

anew upon the heroic parade ground, and the American flag shall fly there once more as it did in the years at Fort Atkinson—we may, I hope, hold another celebration upon this Council Bluff, and that celebration shall include the visible reproductions of the early years in facsimile, with a noble highway-avenue sweeping through them, a noble, inspiring park of world-wide attraction, and noble groups of imperishable granite and marble; and among those groups of figures Meriwether Lewis and William Clark, with the Otoe and trans-Missouri warriors bearing the significant and historic names of Little Thief, Big Horse, Hospitality, and White Horse—or, in Indian parlance, We-ar-ruge-nor, Shon-go-ton-go, We-the-a, and Shon Guss-can.

In the name of the Nebraska State Historical Society I bring you the cordial approval and cooperation of that Society in your achievement of this Historical Museum which we dedicate today. I bring also the pledge of our cooperation in future common efforts to achieve the goal set before us nearly forty years ago—the restoration of old Fort Atkinson upon this plateau and the establishment of a noble historic highway along the Missouri River, named in honor of that great frontier fort.

In my hand I hold a volume which I prepared, with the help of fellow-workers, in the years 1904-1915. This is one of six large bound volumes in the possession of the State Historical Society in the Capitol at Lincoln. These volumes contain the original records of Fort Atkinson, copied in clear typewriting, a total of nearly 1500 pages of manuscript and 100 pages of illustrations. These volumes in our library are awaiting publication. When printed they will constitute one of the most important printed documents of the Trans-Missouri region—the day-by-day record of events in that great military colony and scientific outpost of the white American people in the wilderness of the West. With your cooperation we hope to see these manuscript volumes in their published form before we have the next Fort Atkinson celebration upon this historic hilltop.



W. H. WOODS

First historian of Washington County,
whose devoted work contributed much
to the building of the Historical
Society in that county.

**FORT CALHOUN-FORT ATKINSON HISTORICAL
MUSEUM**

DEDICATORY PROGRAM
of the
Washington County Historical Society

SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 13, 1938
City Hall, Fort Calhoun, Nebraska
2:00 P. M.

Invocation	- - - - -	Rev. R. E. Donaldson
Music	- Boys' Chorus of Fort Calhoun High School	
	Mrs. Ralph Steyer, Director	
Introductory	- Mrs. A. J. Lazure, Program Director	
Greetings	- - - - -	Henry Rohwer, President
Address	- - - - -	A. E. Sheldon
	Superintendent of Nebraska Historical Society	
	"Educational Value of Historical Museums"	
Remarks	- - - - -	E. E. Blackman
Tribute to Our Pioneers	- - - - -	Dr. C. R. Mead
Brief Business and Financial Statement of the Society	-	
	- - - - -	George Rohwer, Treasurer
Dedication and Presentation of the Museum	- - -	
	- - - - -	F. W. Arndt, Vice-President

The Council Bluff of old Fort Atkinson is the oldest, most important, historical site in Nebraska since the first white exploration. No other site of historical events is so definitely known. At no other place were there events of such great human interest. No other point has such a large and fascinating body of historical literature (largely unpublished) telling the story of life on the far frontier over one hundred years ago.

These considerations have made the plateau just east of Fort Calhoun a focus of nation-wide interest among historians and just local pride among the people of Washington County and Nebraska. The pioneer local historian, W. H. Woods, Union soldier and intense historical student, devoted the last twenty years of his life

to the collection and publication of historical material. His work will always be recognized in the community.

On August 3, 1904, the Nebraska D. A. R. and State Historical Society joined in erection of the first historical monument (an inscribed glacial boulder) on the Council Bluff where Lewis and Clark held the first council with Nebraska Indians one hundred years earlier.

In October, 1919, was held a notable historical celebration of the first military post and first steamboat navigation on the Missouri river in 1819. This was one of the greatest historical celebrations in the West, with military parade, flags, music, public speaking and great throngs always remembered.

One of the by-products of the great Centennial Celebration of 1919 was a "surplus fund" saved for future programs of Historical Site purchase and monumentation. This "surplus fund" was added to by subscriptions and other sources. It became the means, in spite of some bank disasters, of purchasing a building for the present Historical Museum. Another by-product of historical effort was the founding and vitalizing of the Washington County Historical Society. This association has become the moving force in establishing the Historical Museum and in developing local historical patriotism.

Thus, after all these years, a packed house of over 300 people filled the Ford Calhoun City Hall on Sunday afternoon, February 13, to dedicate the Fort Calhoun-Fort Atkinson Historical Museum and take part in the historical program which is at the head of this article.

