



The Fort Kearny Block House

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Note: Superintendent Addison E Sheldon's dedication day remarks follow Franklin's address.

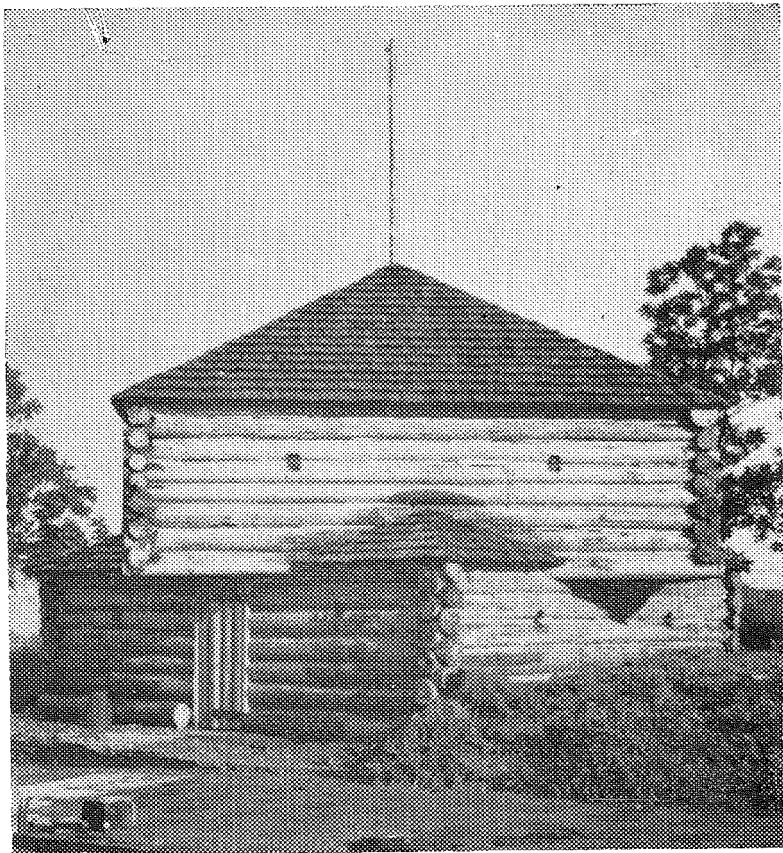
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Courtesy Nebraska City Daily News-Press

Reproduction of Block House at Old Fort Kearny
Dedicated October 13, 1938



THE FORT KEARNY BLOCK HOUSE
Address by Col. John F. Franklin, U. S. A.

Nebraska City now has a historical museum of unique character, itself a monument to the perils of pioneer life. It is a replica of the Fort Kearny Block House built in 1846—the second military fort west of the Missouri. Dedication services witnessed by several thousands opened the Apple Harvest Festival on October 13. High army officials headed the parade, followed by members of Headquarters Company in army uniforms of the period, by the 17th Infantry band and troops, national guardsmen and army trucks.

The address of dedication by Colonel Franklin deserves a secure place in the pages of Nebraska history, and we are glad to record it here.

General Thomas, Fellow Citizens:

The citizens of Nebraska have a right to be proud of their state, and the people of Nebraska are to be congratulated upon the completion of this Block House, intimately connected with the history of the community. The Army had such a leading (if not predominating) part in the development of this country that it is a distinct pleasure for me, as a representative of the modern Army, to participate in the exercises.

The early history of this country goes back to the sixteenth century when the Catholic priests, as explorers, came up from the south; even in those days the Catholic Church was supported by the Spanish Army. Again, a Catholic priest from Michigan, named Marquette, included parts of Nebraska in his maps of the seventeenth century. La Salle took possession of this country in the name of France in 1682, but the country was ceded to Spain in 1763 and again back to France in 1800. It was not until Thomas Jefferson made the Louisiana Purchase that this country came under the jurisdiction of the United States.

It was about this time that Regular Army officers began to explore the country and to lay out trails across it. Such men as Lewis and Clark, John C. Fremont, Captain Long and Lieutenant Pike, all of whom were Regular Army officers, established trails, one being the Oregon Trail which passed through this point. The names of the Regular Army officers were household words in those early days.

The Army then established posts along these trails to control the Indians and protect the immigrants, and finally the settlers began to arrive. The first Army post was Fort Atkinson, established at Council Bluff in 1819, and around it developed the first town in this section of the country.

In this particular community, Lewis and Clark laid out the site for a block house about 1804. This became one of the great shipping points in the country for

supplies going toward the Rocky Mountains. In 1847 the First Dragoons from Fort Leavenworth, under Colonel Kearny, established the post known as Fort Kearny, near Kearney, Nebraska, a treaty having made the post unnecessary here. It was from here that great caravans, sometimes with as many as two hundred wagons, would start west. Steamboats would bring up the supplies to this point.

The Army posts, with their block houses or stockades with troops, were the only protection of settlers from the Indians. To these the settlers hoped to escape if the Indians became unruly or went on the warpath. It is obvious that the Army life was always closely interwoven with the action of the settlers in the early development of this country.

Now let us attempt to visualize some of the conditions under which the early settlers and the Army lived. First, with one sweep of the arm we will wipe out all roads, all cities, all homes, all telephones and telegraphs, all automobiles and other luxuries. We have left only the trackless prairie over which thousands of Indians roam. A few companies of infantry or troops of cavalry, with perhaps a field gun or two—no roads, no system of supply; always harassed, always on the go—were based on these posts. The soldier, with his blanket as a bed and his saddle as a pillow, lived largely on the country. It took real men to stand up under these conditions.

Now imagine the early settlers with their wives and children upon these prairies untouched by plow. The risks, toils and hardships involved could only be met by sturdy manhood and a sturdier womanhood. Some phases of the life of these men who came in as pioneers appeal to one. As a matter of fact, one can get many thrills out of reading about these scouts and their escapades, but I have never been able to experience one vicarious thrill from any part the women played in this early development. It always seemed to me a life of utter drudgery: living under the crudest conditions,

looking after the babies, cooking, washing, making clothes for the whole family, often caring for the livestock; no conveniences, few associates and these not often seen—in sickness and in health a woman was largely alone and on her own resources, always faced with the possibility of attack by renegade Indians.

Can you imagine one of these women established in a sod hut, surrounded by her children in the evening? She has taken care of the livestock (such as the spare horse, the oxen, the cow); she has fed the children, washed the dishes and put their one room to rights, and now begins her "rest" by making clothes for the family while waiting for her husband to return—perhaps from a hunt, or a chase after Indians, or a trip for supplies. She can hear the cry of the wolf pack, the howling of the coyote, perhaps the scream of the bobcat; but these are the least of her troubles, for she has two more powerful fears constantly confronting her: one, that her husband may be killed and never return; the other, what some roving band of Indians may do to her children and to her.

If it be true that qualities of character have tangible form in the sight of the Creator, then it may be said that this nation was fashioned from the hardships and suffering endured by pioneer men and women in the hope that their children might have privileges, comforts and opportunities which had been denied their parents. Only the strong could survive; the weak were eliminated. No wonder a hardy, thinking, self-reliant race was produced.

Therefore, without any authority other than the privilege of participating in these exercises, I suggest that this Block House be dedicated—not to such famous scouts as Buffalo Bill, though books have been and still are being written about them; not to the pioneer men, though their lives were continuous hazards and they

possessed many characteristics which all men admire; not to the Army, though as an officer I am proud of the part the Army took in those days; but, with a feeling of absolute humility, let me suggest that it be dedicated to American Womanhood as represented by the wives of these early settlers, about whom we have heard so little and without whom there would have been no western civilization.

May this memorial be a source of inspiration to the youth of Nebraska to study the history of their own state, thereby increasing their pride in that history; and may it also arouse in the youth of Nebraska a determination to be worthy of their priceless heritage.

Editor's Note: The original Journals of the Lewis and Clark Expedition in the library of the State Historical Society contain the day-by-day record of that expedition up the Missouri River in 1804. Pages 79 to 88 of the Journal describe in detail the river and the voyage from the mouth of the Little Nemaha to the camp above the mouth of the Platte River near the present site of Omaha. In this original narrative no mention is made of any site or location for a trading post near the present location of Nebraska City, site of the block house built in 1846-47.

REMARKS OF SUPERINTENDENT ADDISON E. SHELDON

At Dedication of Replica of the Old Military Block House
at Nebraska City, October 13, 1938

(Addressing General Amos Thomas, chairman of the outdoor
assembly, on the High School Athletic Field.)

Mr. Chairman:

I thank you for your kind introduction and for your reference to those student days in the University of Nebraska when you were my star student in a big class of forty in the course given by me in "Practical Legislation." Those student memories can never be dimmed by the lapse of years, the rush of world events, or the campaign for human rights and progress in which both of us are volunteer soldiers for life.

This military Block House here dedicated today is a reproduction of the earlier one inseparable from the story of frontier Nebraska. It brings back the years when America was marching across the continent, adding in five eventful years the vast areas of Texas, Oregon, California, and all the mountain region from the Great Plains to the Pacific Ocean. That was an heroic period in the life of this nation. A moving frontier of scouts, fur traders, missionaries, migrant home seekers and military pushed the sunset boundary of the American republic fifteen hundred miles westward in five years. It moved the original Fort Kearny (named in honor of General Stephen Watts Kearny), from this Block House, one hundred and fifty miles west to the shores of the great Platte River at the Grand Island. There it remained from 1848 to 1871. There still remains the monumental grove of giant cottonwood trees planted about the old military parade ground. There is, today, a state park dedicated by Governor Weaver in 1929. There, some day, will be a restored New Fort Kearny, and historical tourists will travel in three hours

from the first Fort Kearny Block House here at Nebraska City to the second Fort Kearny, on whose parade ground will be a marker inscribed with this verse which won first prize in a Nebraska state-wide contest in 1930:

Old Cottonwoods of Military Avenue

Let the flag fall,
The bugle no more blow;
The Ox-Drawn Wagon, ponderous and slow,
Pursue no more the ancient honored Trail
Across the Plains to Old Fort Kearny's wall.
But, let the Ancient Forest stand,
Planted by Hope and Faith in a once desert land:
Tall sentinels of the old heroic time,
Keeping before us memories sublime—
Fresh inspirations now when Duty calls.