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Old Fort Kearny¹

J. H. SWEET

Prior to the year 1844 that part of the trans-Missouri country now known as Otoe county was exclusively in the possession of the Pawnee, Otoe, and Omaha tribes of Indians with the exception of a few adventuresome traders.

It is known, too, from the letters and journals of some of these people, to whom might be applied the name of "itinerant," that among them were men who years before had crossed from the then territory of Iowa, now a state observing its 100th anniversary, and others ascending the Great River from St. Louis, visiting trading posts already established and seeking locations for others.

But there was no regular settlement in the area to which we are now giving our attention, at least not below Bellevue in Sarpy county, then a station for the American Fur Company, and under the charge of that gracious and intrepid pioneer, Peter A. Sarpy.

There is some question as to just when our Otoe county and Nebraska City section of this strange, new and beautiful world was established, and just who it was who decided on the establishment of the original Fort Kearny.

But from the record, I take it that it was Kearny himself who was responsible, for on April 25, 1838, and in conformity with the Act of July 2, 1836, calling for the establishment of a fort somewhere in the region, Colonel Kearny and Captain Nathan Boone, acting as military commissioners, transmitted a letter of suggestion to the War Department in Washington which, to say the least, should be of interest to us who now, 100 years later, live in this same region.

¹ An address delivered at the annual dinner meeting of the Nebraska State Historical Society, Lincoln, October 5, 1946.

Time does not permit inclusion of all parts of this letter in these remarks, but certain parts of it are of interest to us of Nebraska City, and I suspect they will also intrigue those of you who always are eager for more light to be shed on the occurrences of the days of our birth. Let me quote the important parts of Colonel Kearny's letter:

"Having examined the country, your commissioners have agreed upon an eminence near the mouth of Table Creek. [There are two Table Creeks in Nebraska City, each of equal importance today, but Kearny evidently referred to South Table Creek.] Immediately above the mouth of the creek commences a very gradual and beautiful ascent which in about 450 yards reaches to an open level sufficient for any buildings, besides what may be necessary for them to drill in any number of infantry or dragoons, a large quantity of firewood adjoining and within a mile or two a great abundance of fine building timber on the opposite side of the Missouri river, and on the public unsurveyed lands of the State, and the best place for a ferry to be found on the Missouri river—stone in the bluffs 100 yards below the mouth of the creek, fine prairies around to make corn and hay upon, a beautiful, fertile bottom for gardens. From the site, too, is a delightful view of the Missouri river for several miles below and an extensive one of the country in the rear. There are no lowlands near it and the place must be healthy."

With the letter of description went another recommendation, as follows:

"If this site is approved by the Secretary of War, the undersigned recommend that a reserve for military purposes be made of the land in the State opposite to it, and as marked by dotted lines on the map."

And as a sort of clinching argument, the final words of the report go on to say:

"From a careful examination of the country we are prepared to state that there is no place on the Missouri river between the mouth of the Platte and Table Creek that will answer for a military post except the one which we recommend. They are strongly in favor

of the post being below the Platte for many reasons. Amongst them might be mentioned that from such a point troops can more readily afford protection when needed to the frontier inhabitants; that the Pawnees on the Platte are the most powerful and warlike nation in the section and can be more easily reached by a route below than above the Platte river and that as with the exception of about 50 miles next to Wisconsin territory [evidently now a part of Iowa] there is a mass of Indians settled along the whole northern and western boundary of the State of Missouri. . . .

“Therefore in fulfillment of part of the duty devolved upon the undersigned they most respectfully but strongly urge for the effectual protection of this portion of the frontier territory that the site be selected and also that the post of Fort Leavenworth be strengthened as early as practicable to the extent at least of what was last summer contemplated by the present Secretary of war.”

But it took eight years for the War Department to act. As of March 6, 1846, a brief but important notice went out to all military agencies to this effect:

“A new military post will be established on the Missouri river near the mouth of Table Creek as soon as the season for operations will permit. The site will be selected by Colonel Kearny of the First Dragoons.” The order was signed by R. Jones, Adjutant General.

And so Colonel Kearny was selected to establish the post as well as to select the site which in this opinion he did with masterful foresight, with an eye to beauty as well as to the utility of the operation.

A supplemental letter to the Colonel went into considerable detail with respect to what should be done to make the new fort strong, serviceable and capable of withstanding any attacks by marauding Indians, if any there were to be. “The quarters and defenses,” the letter said, “must depend in some degree upon the length of time it may be necessary to maintain this new position, and from your personal acquaintance with our Indian relations in that quarter. Your opinion will have considerable weight in determining whether the work should be regarded as temporary or one

of a more permanent character. It is expected that the greatest economy will be observed in procuring the materials for the new work [something which seems to have been a sort of watchword with the government at that time] as well as in its construction which as far as practicable will be accomplished by the labor of the troops. . . . You will see that a sufficient area around the post will be preserved to supply fuel for the garrison, and you will confer with Brig. Gen. Brooke at St. Louis before you depart from there."

In March of the same year Kearny did confer with Brooke and at the same time he wrote the Adjutant General that he agreed with him that a reserve must be established around the Table Creek buildings but he had to make a correction, he said, in a previous letter with respect to inhabitants other than the Indians.

"I have now to report that I have just learned that there are some Squatters there, dealing in liquor with the Indians and that all timbered land in the region near that point is claimed by the Squatters and whiskey-dealers. A reserve nevertheless is necessary there on account of the timber required for building purposes and to control a ferry."

And so on May 12, 1846, after some preliminary arrangements as to procurement, Kearny again wrote General Jones that, "I have just started Lt. Smith with 30 dragoons of Captain Moore's company, taking 20 public horses, for Table Creek, the remainder of the horses of that company I keep here until they have stables where we can secure them for as the Dragoons will have so much work to perform in building their quarters, the horses will be a great incumbrance. . . . I am hourly looking for a steamboat bringing from St. Louis floors, stores, etc., for the new post, and on their arrival will embark the infantry companies and the remainder of Captain Moore's company, going in her myself, and taking Major Wharton at his request to put him in command of the new post."

"Our mails," he said, "are very irregular as I have heard nothing from Washington since the 22nd, ultimo."

Wharton, writing from his headquarters on the steamer *Amaranth* as of May 16 asks for Washington to send him certain report blanks, enlistment blanks and other matters, and it is of interest to note that he also "avails" himself of the present occasion to ask "what shall be the name of the new post." Fort Nebraska or Fort Macomb had been suggested to his mind, the latter after the late General Macomb, a friend of the Adjutant-General and a military hero of the War of 1812 and subsequently.

But there were delays, though sometime soon after Wharton's letter was received, the War Department acted rather promptly with respect to naming the new post, and "Fort Kearny" it became, either because Major Wharton had recommended it or on account of the War Department itself, Adjutant General Jones having decided that the man who had "spied out" the land naturally should be honored when it came to the selection of a name.

The delays were due to a variety of causes. Wharton wrote Brooke that many of his vanguard of men became ill soon after their arrival. Could it have been the water? The few horses, too, were not in good condition, there was but one man who could be mounted as a sentinel, the distance from Leavenworth, he said, made travel tedious and, he hinted, he thought the latter-named place might be a better place for him to be until actual construction work could be started.

Also, he noted, there were hardly men enough to start out after a trespassing band of Otoes. That tribe, never warlike but given to much thievery, as subsequent settlers noted in their journals and letters, was a constant threat to tranquillity in the new settlement.

On June 22, 1846, the Washington office sent word to Brooke that "as recommended by you, the new work at Table Creek be suspended for the present, and you will accordingly please to order the troops to fall back to Leavenworth, with such instructions as may be necessary."

Pending the arrival of recruits, with a few sharp remarks concerning the dilatory tactics as to enlisting more men, there was a lull in the proceedings until a few weeks later, when construction work began in earnest.

The blockhouse was started near what is now Fifth and Central Avenue in Nebraska City, and a log house was erected on the site later occupied by what came to be known successively as the Seymour, Morton and Frontier Hotel. That structure was razed a few years ago and on part of its site stands the Block House replica now owned by the city.

The log house was used for officers' quarters, other log houses soon were built and eventually the "lay out" spread over Kearny's "eminence" for two or three blocks to the north.

There was a hospital building which subsequently became the residence of William R. Craig whose name darts in and out of our local history like an arrow, for he was a man of great ability, a "pusher" when it came to organization, and one of the men who contrived the Otoe county court house, which still stands as a monument to honesty in building and, I might say, is the oldest public building of its kind in the State.

War having been declared between this country and Mexico early in what Bernard DeVoto so aptly calls this "Year of Decision," the regular forces were all ordered to New Mexico soon after the improvements mentioned above were well under way.

Indeed, some of the buildings, including the block house were not ready for occupancy until several weeks following the withdrawal of the regular troops. In the meantime, Wharton, who seems to have been somewhat of a schemer to get out of the region, as well as complaining that the new post was not on the "line of march" of settlers who already were moving westward, went with the troops. What became of him is a matter for some other historian to say; I have not been able to check on his movements after his brief stay at Table Creek.²

² Since this address was given, Senator Arthur Carmody, of Trenton, has informed the author that according to Francis B. Heitman, *Register and Dictionary of the United States Army*, Wharton was promoted to the rank of lieutenant colonel in June, 1846, and died in July, 1848, perhaps as an aftermath of the Mexican war.

The buildings at Table Creek were left in charge of William Ridgway English of Glenwood, Iowa—that state having been admitted to the Union in that same Year of Decision—with a very good record of accomplishment on his part. He lived to be an old man and some of our people conferred with him in his golden years about his stewardship in Table Creek, later to become Nebraska City.

In the fall of 1847 there arrived at Fort Kearny five companies of U. S. troops raised in Missouri, probably those men whom the Hon. Sterling Price had promised to deliver a year earlier. This command was in charge of Col. L. W. Powell, Kearny, of course, having gone on to the Mexican War to make a name for himself and his men. Powell had with him some other officers named Lambeth, Stewart, and Craig, all men whose names became affiliated with our early history and with great credit to them and to the new territory which was to be evolved from this crude military post.

Upon the arrival of these troops, temporary shelters gave way to more pretentious houses, still made of logs. They were mostly on what we know as First Avenue between Third and Fifth streets, and barracks for the troops near Sixth and Central Avenue. I have been told that in the subsequent years many of these abandoned houses and shelters were surreptitiously taken piece by piece, and mostly at night, to provide the material for civilian homes occupied by families whose names still linger in our local history.

It might be of interest to know that the original Block House or fort proper actually became a cowbarn, having been moved from its original location so that streets could be laid out and the pretentious pioneer Seymour House find itself in a less disadvantageous position. The cows of a well known pioneer family contentedly chewed their cuds in the famed old structure, of which only a few pieces remain here and there to be exhibited on occasion as mementos of Nebraska City's first military occupation. I will digress long enough to say that some 75 years later there was another "occupation" by troops, this time from Ne-

braska, to help an inept city and county administration preserve the lives and property of our citizens during a strike, and at a cost of \$50,000 to the people of the state. We will not go into that.

The actual command remained at Fort Kearny just about a year, doing little more than to prevent encroachment by Indians, most of them, like the Otoes, restricting their depredations to drinking, stealing and begging food. As for the troops, many of them made raids of a mild character on Fremont county, Iowa, and Atchison county, Missouri, two well-established communities, where balls and parties were held and enlivened by the presence not only of the blue-coated soldiers from Fort Kearny but the many Mormon girls then living in those counties.

In the fall of 1848 the military post was abandoned and the garrison moved to new Fort Kearny on the Platte where the immigrants were moving swiftly and in increasing numbers to the Golden West. Wharton's complaint was being translated into swift action. The westward flow was passing up Table Creek, and there was little reason for continuing a fort which, perhaps, never was actually needed in the first place.

After the departure of the military from Table Creek, the government property was left in the care of a Mr. Hardin, no kinsman of the great jurist of that name whose papers recently were published by the Society, and later the buildings and such stores as were left here went into the hands of Col. John Boulware, the intrepid and rather capable Col. John Boulware, the first ferryman in our section of the state.

Col. Hiram Downs, another civilian, took over in 1850 and retained control until 1854 when the passage of the Kansas-Nebraska bill, the Magna Charta of our area, brought in bona fide settlers to augment those squatters of whom Kearny spoke and who, it is apparent, jumped the gun from the Iowa and Missouri sides of the river. Downs assisted in the raising of the famous Nebraska regiment in 1861, and was promoted to the rank of brigadier general in August of that year, removing to Montana Territory after the conclusion of his military exploits.

I have the copy of a letter which Downs wrote to the War Department noting that as of November 13, 1854, "the old Block House is in good state of repair and is worth, and could be sold for \$50.

"It is now used for the office of the Nebraska City News, a Fusion-Abolition press, and the site is claimed by a set of men of the same stripe, of whom N. B. Giddings who is the chosen delegate to Congress is one. If you have the power do retain it as a military reservation until you learn all the facts from a reliable source, this is desired by all here, save the few abolition speculators."

This letter, I might say, was addressed to a gentleman who soon was to be very much in the news—one Jefferson Davis, the Secretary of War.

Downs' complaint concerning the political complexion of the *News* was not to be substantiated for long. Within a very short time after the Civil War came to the land, that newspaper was anything but an Abolition "press."

In 1858 petition was made on behalf of the new settlement of Nebraska City to abandon the reservation, permit the townsite owners to "do their stuff," sell that portion of the original 619 acres which suited their conveniences; and it was done in due course.

Stephen W. Kearny was not only a man of military experience, a spier out of the land for a fort and, apparently, a good leader. He also became a most successful soldier.

One of the most satisfying moments of my life was one morning some 10 years ago when Mrs. Sweet and I, visiting famed, restored Olvera street in Los Angeles walked into that ancient house at the end of the street known as the Avila Adobe. And there above the old Spanish fireplace we saw Kearny's picture.

The significance was this: In that house and in that room, without the presence of the gracious and beautiful hostess of the hacienda—who had fled before the coming of the American troops, Stephen W. Kearny accepted the surrender of the Pueblo of Our Lady the Queen of the Angels—Los Angeles. That was our Kearny—spelled without the final "e" by the way, for whom the fort was

named, for whom our ancient, historic residential hill in Nebraska City is named, and for whom an enterprising city in Nebraska is named.

We with imagination may hear the ring of the axe and the musical notes of the saw as Kearny's men, fulfilling the predictions he made when he and Boone first saw the site, fitted together the first rude structures of his fort.

We, too, may see the broad, awesome aspect of the Missouri as it was then before a latter-day civilization "improved" it by narrowing the stream, changing the course, adding, if possible, more color to it than existed in the days of Kearny, Wharton, and the aborigines.

I can imagine the limpid qualities of a river in repose before the precious top-soil disturbed by the plow began flowing into it, adding to our other agricultural complexities and worries.

Behind me, too, I often see the vast, undulating, flower-bedecked prairies stretching all the way to the Rockies, and sometimes I can hear the wheedling voices of the Otoes as they begged at the doorway of my great-aunt for food and for which they always were unwilling to trade even a minute's labor.

I like to think, too, of the days which followed the building of the fort, as slowly as it progressed; and of its abandonment as its men scurried away to participate in at least one American war for which we cannot take too much credit. I see the arrival of the pioneer families from Virginia, New England and York State, the coming of the vigorous, ambitious, capable Morton, with his bride from Detroit via Bellevue, and whose arrival is set down briefly but importantly on the pages of the first edition of the first newspaper to see the light of day in the territory.

Morton was only 22, don't forget that, and Stephen Friel Nuckolls, he who became the mainspring and spark-plug of the new community of Nebraska City, grandiosely called "The Emporium of the Territory" in the early-day newspaper advertising, was about 25. Dr. Bradford, first mayor, was a stripling, and Jim Sweet, Dr. Hershey and Rollin M. Rolfe, who had married sisters and on the same day, were also in their youth. It was youth who pioneered

then, as youth today ambitiously and fearlessly steps forward where we oldsters fear to tread. There are no more physical frontiers to invade, but the frontiers of the mind still are open, beckoning smilingly to all those who have the will and courage to explore them.

I wish I had time to pursue Nuckolls' career. After Nebraska which he said was becoming too "crowded," as Dan'l Boone said before him of Missouri, Nuckolls went to Wyoming where he aided in the building of that empire, serving in the state legislature. Eventually he found himself in the City of the Saints, Salt Lake, where he died.

I wish, too, it were possible to delve more deeply into Morton's life as pioneer, builder, farmer, statesman and author of America's only home-grown holiday which, as he used to say, "proposes for the future." Morton's name, however, needs no elaboration here. He was the prophet who foresaw greatness provided the people would only work, and he forecast future progress when standing in a wagon box at the first territorial fair in Nebraska City—the year was '59—he urged his neighbors to stop speculating in town lots and stick a spade in the soil which lay around them awaiting only the industry and fortitude of the people. Many took his advice and profited; many others did not, returning to the East whence they came as gamblers and adventurers, reporting to their neighbors back there that this was a land of horror, misery and desert.

Of course, every land is cruel to those who do not become affiliated with it. It is as true now as it was when Kearny and his men came laboriously up the river to establish our old fort. Success in pioneering, I take it, and regardless of the soil into which one sticks a spade, is dependent on the ancient verities. It takes good will, courage, industry, intelligence, thrift, and honor.

No one so far, regardless of the modern tendency to legislate for new tenets and against most of the ancient laws of nature, has been able to prove that without the virtues which were inherent in the ancients, shall it be possible to get along.

There are no substitutes, ladies and gentlemen, for courage, brains, and decency in the tasks of life.