



Columbus, a Territorial Town in the Platte Valley

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COLUMBUS, A TERRITORIAL TOWN IN THE PLATTE VALLEY

BY DONALD F. DANKER

IN the spring of 1856 settlement in Nebraska Territory for the most part still clung to the west bank of the Missouri River. Settlement of Nebraska's vast and fertile inland valleys and uplands was as yet a project for the future. The inland area back not so many miles from the Missouri was a section remote enough to most Nebraskans that news and description of it warranted space in the newspapers. Travelers up the Nemaha Valley, or along the Blue, or up the Platte could and did publish accounts of those travels to entertain and inform the readers of the territorial newspapers.

Such an account was written for the *Omaha Nebraskan* on June 22, 1856. A person who signed himself the "Observer" wrote of a trip that he had made from Omaha to Fort Kearny. When the "Observer" had reached a point some eighty miles west of the Missouri, he observed a most unusual sight for that remote region. He writes:

I crossed Shell Creek and went to the Loup Fork but imagine my surprise when I found myself in Columbus—not Columbus, Ohio, but Columbus, Platte county Nebraska Territory. Here I found the hearty yeomanry working like Trojians during the seige. I learned that they were all Germans. . . They inquired of me if I

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wanted to stay over night . . . and led me to a neat log house twenty by forty. There were several other houses in the course of construction. I admired their energy and industry and prophesied that Columbus would be in two years as large as Omaha now is. ¹

This afternoon I would like to sketch a part of the story of the founding of the town which the "Observer" saw beginning—Columbus, the pioneer town in what we might call the hinterland of territorial Nebraska. I have utilized as my chief source of information the records of the Columbus Town Company and the minute book of the Town Council of Columbus. These unique records are in the custody of the City of Columbus, and the Nebraska State Historical Society has made microfilmed copies of them. These records were found in an old desk of John Rickly, one of the town's founders. Other sources of information have been territorial newspapers, especially the *Omaha Nebraskian*, census records, land office records, and the books on Platte County and Columbus by I. N. Taylor, Martha Turner, Margaret Curry, and G. W. Phillips. These books have told so well the story of the beginning of the town, the names of the pioneers, the hardships endured, and first things in Columbus that I will not attempt to duplicate what they have done but rather try to add information gleaned largely from the Columbus Company records. This information stresses the considerable part played by the company in the building of Columbus and illustrates the intricate and complicated work that goes into the founding of a community.

The locality in which the town was built had advantages that tended to compensate for the distance from the Missouri and from established settlements. It was on the route of the Mormon Trail and the Military Road that led from Omaha to Fort Kearny. In addition, it was located at a point where the convergence of the Loup River with the Platte posed a problem for the traveler but offered opportunity to the enterprising. Some travelers forded the river, but, as one expressed it, the Loup could be a "bad

¹*Omaha Nebraskian*, July 2, 1856, p. 3.

and somewhat dangerous stream". It had claimed the lives of several men who had attempted to ford it. Ferry service of a sort was established here as early as 1850.²

The profit-making possibilities of the ferrying trade at the Loup Fork attracted the attention of James C. Mitchell of Florence. Mitchell was to occupy a controversial position in the formation of Columbus. He was an interesting figure who was described by a contemporary with these words, "He was a fighter and his temper was not remarkable for its amiability . . . [He] was out for all the money there was in any thing that came within the range of his sharp vision."³ Mitchell was instrumental in the creation of the Elkhorn and Loup Fork Bridge and Ferry Company. This company was incorporated by the territorial legislature in March, 1855.⁴ It established a ferry and planned a town to be called Pawnee at the Loup Fork of the Platte.⁵

A second group became active in the early spring of 1856. Men residing in Omaha organized the Columbus Town Company for the purpose of establishing a town near the economically strategic Loup River barrier on the Mormon Trail. In April this company sent out a scouting party to locate a town site. It did so, and upon its return a larger party set out and upon reaching the spot selected by the scouts, decided to push on some eight or nine miles to the Loup River. They there commenced the work that the "Observer" described in such an enthusiastic fashion.⁶

Several of this group had come to Omaha from Columbus, Ohio, and had named their company for that city. Once the site had been located and work commenced,

²Fancher Stimson, "Overland Journey to California by Platte River Route and South Pass in 1850", *Annals of Iowa*, (October, 1922), 3rd. series, XIII, 409.

³J. Sterling Morton and Albert Watkins, *Illustrated History of Nebraska* (Lincoln, 1907), I, 279.

⁴*Laws of Nebraska*, 1st. session, 1855, p. 4.

⁵Minutes of the Columbus Company, July 14, 1856. The minute book of the Columbus Company is one of five volumes of Columbus, Nebraska, records, 1856-1885, microfilmed copies of which are on file in the library of the Nebraska State Historical Society. Hereafter referred to as Minutes.

⁶I. N. Taylor, *History of Platte County, Nebraska* (Columbus, 1876), p. 2.

they wrote to friends in Columbus, Ohio, describing the opportunities to be found at the Loup Fork site and inviting immigration. This invitation was acted upon, and an immigrant party was formed to travel to the new Columbus.⁷

It was at this point that the written records of the Columbus Company began. The initial problem to be dealt with was the rival townsite of Pawnee which adjoined the townsite of Columbus. The records do not indicate which townsite was first on the scene, but it is probable that they were both laid out in the spring of 1856. The first entry in the minute book of the Columbus Company was made on July 14, 1856, and is entitled: "Articles of Consolidation made and entered into by and between the Elkhorn and Loup Fork Bridge and Ferry Company and the Columbus Company." This agreement merged the two groups into one company to be known as the Columbus Company and the united town to be called Columbus. Two hundred shares of stock were created with a paper value of five hundred dollars a share. James Mitchell was made secretary of the consolidated company.⁸

The minutes of the Columbus Company were kept until the last recorded meeting on March 12, 1885. The pages of these records reveal that success is not always dependent upon harmony. Long and bitter conflict within the consolidated company began almost at once, and many of the projects undertaken were accompanied by clashes due to differences in policy and personality of the leaders, and yet the town was begun, and it survived, and grew.

The board of directors, meeting in Omaha and Florence during the first year of the company's existence, took measures designed to develop Columbus and to attract worthwhile enterprises. On July 14 of that year it was resolved to donate ten shares of stock to anyone who would establish a steam mill of at least thirty horsepower and have the machinery in Columbus by October.⁹ John Rickly arrived from Columbus, Ohio, bought four shares of

⁷*Ibid*, p. 3.

⁸Minutes.

⁹*Ibid*.

company stock from James Mitchell, and went to the new town to reconnoiter and to stake out claims. On July 30, 1856, Rickly wrote in his diary that he started back for Omaha and "about that time the Mormons and the grasshoppers came, the latter by the millions."¹⁰ Back in Omaha, Rickly negotiated with the directors of the company concerning the steam mill, and he struck a much better bargain than they had planned on giving. Instead of ten shares of stock he got eighteen, and all the sawing timber to which the company had claim. He agreed to establish a sawmill and shingle machine of thirty-two horse power, to have it in Omaha by the time the river closed to navigation if possible, and to have it running in Columbus by the first of June, 1857.

Rickly acted at once to fill his part of the contract. His diary reveals that he left for St. Louis on the steamer "Genoa" on September 2 in order to buy machinery. Delays must have occurred, however, for we find that the company extended the deadline for opening to August 1, 1857, and then to September 1. This mill was one of Columbus' leading establishments for some years, and the records show that lumber from it went into the construction of most of the public buildings. The census of 1860 lists Rickly's mill as having two thousand dollars invested in it, employing seven men, having an average monthly payroll of \$324, and producing four hundred thousand board feet of lumber a year worth seventy-five hundred dollars.¹¹

Apparently seeking publicity and a friendly press, the Columbus Company resolved to donate two city lots to each of twelve newspapers, eight in Ohio, one in Missouri, and three in Nebraska. Three of the Ohio papers were published in the German language.¹²

The company's shares and lots were used to attract skills and enterprises to Columbus and to stimulate settlers already there to greater effort. Examples are as follows:

¹⁰Martha M. Turner, *Our Own History, Columbus, Nebraska, 1541-1860* (Columbus, 1936), pp. 63-65.

¹¹U.S. Census, 1860, Nebraska, MS.

¹²Minutes, January 8, 1857.

In August, 1856, the company resolved to donate two lots to anyone who would erect a house worth not less than two hundred dollars. However, a year later it was decided "no more lots shall be donated for log houses erected in Columbus except for Martin King and partners who shall have three weeks as they already have their logs hewed."

On Jan. 8, 1857, the company decided to donate three lots for every twenty thousand bricks that Baker and Wolfel produced during the coming season, and at a meeting in August, 1856, it was resolved to donate one share of stock to the first white woman who should locate and reside in Columbus.¹³

In the *Nebraskian* of September 10, 1856, we read, "Several families are on their way from Ohio, bound for Columbus and some are now living in Omaha, making preparations to move as soon as possible."

Two months later we find this news, "Ho for Columbus—We are informed that quite a large party left here on Wednesday last for Columbus to spend the winter and become permanent settlers. Mr. John Wolfel and wife and family among the rest. She is the first white woman who has ventured to spend the winter there, and we understand receives a share in the town for her energy and fortitude."¹⁴

The records of the Columbus Company show that Dorothea Wolfel was assigned Share 182 of company stock. Unfortunately, one-half of this share was later taken away from Mrs. Wolfel because she failed to pay an assessment which the company levied against it.¹⁵

The accord and harmony that were sought in the articles of consolidation between the Elkhorn and Loup Fork Bridge and Ferry Company and the Columbus Company were not destined to be found. In 1857 a committee was appointed to investigate the books of James Mitchell, the secretary-treasurer. The committee report indicated that Mitchell behaved "without semblance of reason" and that he exhibited "some degree of petulance" and that his books

¹³*Ibid*, August 30, 1856; January 8, August 1, 1857.

¹⁴*Omaha Nebraskian*, November 12, 1856.

¹⁵Columbus Company Stockbook, microfilm copy.

were short approximately two thousand dollars. The company immediately passed a resolution "Resolved, that James C. Mitchell is trying to cheat the Columbus Company out of \$2,000." The committee accepted Mitchell's note for the sum missing in order, as they reported, "to draw the unpleasant negotiations to as speedy a close as possible." The affair was not closed, however. The note could not be collected, and the enmity between Mitchell and the leaders of the Columbus Company influenced the affairs of the company for years.¹⁶

Other dissensions plagued the company. On July 12, 1858, the stock holders met and, acting as prosecutor and jury, passed the following:

Resolved that our President John Reck is hereby accused and found guilty of calling parshall meetings. carried.

Resolved that Pres. John Reck is hereby accused and found guilty of striking out lots from a deed . . . carried.

Resolved that Pres. Reck be denounced for betraying the confidence placed in him by the company by receiving a bribe of three Cleveland shares. [Cleveland was a rival town]¹⁷

One of the company projects that was destined to benefit the town and at the same time cause many headaches was the construction of a hotel. The American Hotel became something of a landmark for travelers to Fort Kearny, the gold fields of Colorado, Utah, or beyond. At a meeting held in Omaha on May 30, 1857, the directors agreed to levy an assessment of twenty-five dollars on each share of stock for the purpose of erecting a hotel. Bids were sought, and A. D. Kasserman of Omaha submitted the low bid of \$4,396, which was accepted. The progress of the hotel can be traced in the company's minutes. Construction began in the summer of 1857. In May, 1858, the structure was far enough along so that the directors authorized the company president to build a privy and dig a well. The response to the special assessment was disappointing, and payment of

¹⁶Minutes, November 16, November 21, December 28, 1857.

¹⁷*Ibid*, July 12, 1858.

the builder, Kasserman, became a major problem. On July 1, 1858, he delivered the key to the building in return for a mortgage for one-half its value at three per cent a month and the note the company held against James Mitchell. Had Kasserman known the difficulty in store regarding the collection of that note he probably would have kept the key.

The hotel is reported to have been a two-and-one-half story structure, forty by sixty, built of pine and well-finished.¹⁸ A committee was appointed to lease the hotel, and F. G. Becker was given a contract to run it for one year at two hundred dollars. He soon asked to be released from his contract. The hotel committee was discharged for not attending to business, and John Rickly was appointed a committee of one. He leased the hotel to J. L. Baker, who, a month later, succumbed to a congestive chill, and his widow, Rosina Baker, took over. The terms of the lease she signed are of interest. They indicate that Rosina Baker was a woman of will, and if the gentlemen of the Columbus Company wanted her to run their hotel, they must understand that she would tolerate no foolishness nor meddling. The Company agreed to the following terms:

No advance payment to be asked
 No porch to be built at her own cost.
 [The company] not to superintend any work.
 [The company] to make no mention of the litening
 rods.
 [The company] not to say anything about the well.
 [She] to build the stable at her own option
 [The company] to take any whatever improvements
 she may make at their actual cost.¹⁹

The company was forced to sell the hotel in 1861 in order to settle with Kasserman. Mrs. Baker purchased it for \$1750.²⁰

Another concern of the company was the ferry service across the Loup. The ferry boats were under control of the hated Mitchell. The ferry business was good. In 1859 it was

¹⁸Omaha Times, November 25, 1858, p. 3.

¹⁹Minutes, May 30, 1857; July 1, 1858; March 24, Sept. 30, Dec. 9, 1859.

²⁰Minutes, March 4, 1861.

reported that up to June 25 of that year there crossed on the ferry, 1,807 wagons, 20 hand carts, 5,401 men, 424 women, 480 children, 1,610 horses, 406 mules, 6,010 oxen and 6,000 sheep.²¹ Members of the Columbus Company charged that the ferry rates were too high for the best interests of the town. The company took steps to remedy the situation. In an agreement that aroused so much feeling that the secretary, Speice, refused to enter it into the minute book, the company agreed to give John Rickly rights to a ferry charter and that he should gain all tackle and equipment belonging to the old ferry company. Rickly insisted that the Columbus Company agree to pay all costs and damages resulting from law suits which might be brought against Rickly by Mitchell's ferry boat company for violation of its right.²²

There is no evidence that Rickly was able to establish a ferry, and the company took other means to rid the area of Mitchell's influence. The records of the Nebraska Territorial Supreme Court tell us that the Columbus Company wanted to buy out Mitchell's share of the ferry, but there was "bitter hostility existing between Mitchell and the [Company] . . . Mitchell refused to sell to the Columbus Company at any terms and was willing to injure himself if it might injure them." The company secretly arranged with an Omaha lawyer, O. P. Hurford, that he buy Mitchell's ferry interest with means furnished by the Columbus Company but in his (Hurford's) name so that Mitchell would not know with whom he was dealing. Hurford did this but then proceeded to refuse to recognize the company's interest and operated the ferry and kept the profit for himself and associates. The company brought suit, and the Supreme Court stated that "leaving out of view the question of good morals and fair dealing which might be raised in the case" and considering only law and precedent, it found in favor of the Columbus Company.²³

²¹*Omaha Nebraskian*, July 9, 1859, p. 3.

²²Minutes, February 16, 1859.

²³"The Columbus Company v. Hurford", *Nebraska Reports*, Woolworth, I, 146-167.

In August, 1860, an important step was taken for the future development of the town. The United States government had scheduled a public sale of land, and the Columbus Company wished to purchase some five hundred acres of the townsite of Columbus not already entered with the land office. The company lacked the necessary cash to purchase the land so it authorized John Rickly, as trustee, to go to Omaha and borrow the money at not more than four per cent per month. Rickly did so. He arranged with Francis Smith, an Omaha banker, so that Smith purchased the land in his own name and then gave Rickly a trust deed secured with a mortgage on the same.²⁴ The records of the U. S. land office on file in the Historical Society archives reveal that 552.4 acres of Columbus were entered on August 17, 1860, in the name of Francis Smith of Omaha.²⁵

The town developed in the face of its difficulties and in a period when Nebraska Territory was gripped by a depression. According to the *Nebraskian* of June 17, 1857, less than one year after the town was laid out there were twenty houses there; on September 20 there were thirty-five houses; and the Columbus correspondent to the *Nebraskian* stated that the town included among its citizens engineers, doctors, gunsmiths, bricklayers, blacksmiths, and tailors. We may suspect that several jacks-of-all-trades resided there. That the building continued at perhaps a more rapid rate than the need warranted is indicated by the census of 1860, which lists forty-one uninhabited dwellings for the area calling Columbus its post office. This may be explained in part by a letter from John Reck to the *Nebraskian* explaining that while there had been great progress in Columbus, it was true that many of her citizens had left for the Colorado gold mines.

The economic life of the community during its first years centered around trade with the travelers on the trail and with the military at Fort Kearny. The agricultural products that were concentrated upon were those that could be sold to the emigrants or the soldiers. In 1857 the

²⁴Minutes, August 3, 10, 1860.

²⁵U.S. Land Office Records, CLIX, 7. MS.

farmers of the area put up 513 tons of hay and in 1858 this figure had advanced to one thousand tons. In 1857, fourteen acres of potatoes were planted, and in 1858 there were seventy-one acres. Three hundred head of cattle were wintered in 1858.²⁶

Religion and education were not neglected. The company offered to donate three lots to any denomination which would build a church. The first house built in town, known as the Old Company House, was given by the company for use as a school.²⁷ Educational ambitions were not limited to common schools. An act was passed by the territorial legislature on January 12, 1860, to incorporate the University of Columbus. This institution of higher learning did not advance from this point.²⁸

In the field of municipal government the records show measures passed by the town council. Some have a modern ring, and some illustrate that the problems faced by the city fathers of Columbus have changed in the past ninety years. On December 9, 1861, it was decreed that no Pawnee Indian or halfbreed be permitted to camp in any street, lot, or square of Columbus.²⁹

Other examples of actions of the Council are as follows: horseracing in the streets was forbidden, and dead hogs and cattle must be removed; the street commissioners should have the duty of preventing prairie fires from coming into the improved portion of town; the commissioners could at any time call upon any and all of the male inhabitants to aid in setting backfires, and if the said male inhabitants refused they were subject to a two dollar fine.³⁰

In a special meeting held on May 24, 1867, the council moved that if the state capital should be located in Columbus, the town would donate Columbus Square containing 10 acres for the purpose of erecting the state buildings.

²⁶*Omaha Nebraskian*, September 29, 1858.

²⁷Minutes, December 20, 1859.

²⁸Laws of Nebraska, 6th session, 1860, p. 157.

²⁹Town of Columbus, Minute Book for the Council, December 9, 1861.

³⁰*Ibid*, February 2, August 31, 1862.

Disillusionment soon came, and on June 15 of the same year they took action to donate the Square to Platte County for the building of a court house.

The only record of judicial activity found in the Columbus books concerns a case heard before the mayor on October 19, 1861: "Frederick Lamb versus a tall, red-haired man." The plaintiff, Lamb, swore that a yoke of steers was unlawfully detained by the defendant. The tall red-haired man must have had a good defense, for it is recorded that Lamb withdrew the action and paid court costs amounting to sixty cents.³¹

The Union Pacific Railroad reached Columbus on June 1, 1866. Lots were donated by the Columbus Company to compensate lot holders whose land had been taken for the building of the station. The railroad was destined to affect the life of Columbus, but this effect came for the most part in the period of early statehood, not the territorial period.³²

Life in pioneer Columbus had its attractive and unattractive sides as was true in all frontier communities. The Fourth of July celebration in 1859 was described in purple prose by "Julius," a correspondent to the *Nebraskian*. "As the sun shed its first bright rays across the beautiful Platte Valley the Glorious Fourth was ushered in with the booming of cannon". He goes on to describe the parade of the Columbus Guards—the assembly of the Citizens in front of the American Hotel for the march to the Loup grove. At the grove they listened to a reading of the Declaration of Independence by the mayor and to various other orations. A great dinner was held and finally "the day was handed over to Young America who disposed of it by exploding firecrackers."³³

Members of the same community eight years later lynched a man named Wilson after drawing up a so-called death warrant which read in part, "We the undersigned citizens of Columbus and vicinity . . . knowing the uncertainty of law in this territory; and there being no safe

³¹*Ibid*, October 19, 1861.

³²Columbus Company Record.

³³*Omaha Nebraskian*, July 16, 1859, p. 3.

place of confinement in this county; therefore, for these reasons and others that might be mentioned, are firmly of the opinion that Robert Wilson should be executed without delay," and this they did, disposing of the remains through the ice of the Loup River.³⁴

The diaries of Frank North, a citizen of Columbus and famed leader of the Pawnee Scouts, reveal a much more attractive and much more common side of life in Columbus. They also reveal that the coming of the railroad had shortened distances, and a trip to Omaha no longer warranted a column in the *Nebraskian*. Major North made the following entries in 1869:

Jan. 2. This evening Jim Galley and sister were here and we had vocal and instrumental music.

Jan. 19. We went skating and had a good time.

Jan. 20. Went to the theater in Omaha - Saw Mirian's Crime and L Amour."

Febr. 2. Tonite we all went to reading circle.

April 16. This evening we run the ponies and Kitty's pony beat them all.

Nov. 22. I telegraphed to Schuyler for music for our dance. Had a good time.

On December 19 this fearless leader in plains warfare wrote, "I tended baby while Ma and Mary went to church."

The history of the beginnings of Columbus, Nebraska Territory seems to me to be more than purely local history. The settlement grew up beside a great national highway, and the early history of Columbus is a part of the story of the great trails westward. Columbus was peopled by Germans and other nationalities, many of whom came by way of Columbus, Ohio, and their stories are a part of the history of the great migration from Europe that helped populate Nebraska. The settlement of Columbus was planned in Omaha and financed in part by Omahans. We see in the history of Columbus something of the speculation and hope of profit that played its part in the building of our state.

³⁴A. T. Andreas, *History of the State of Nebraska* (Chicago, 1882), p. 1266.

Bernard De Voto, historian and author, once made a statement concerning the history of the American West that could be applied in a sense to the history of Columbus.

"The history of the West is, to a high degree, national history because the occupation of the West was so fundamentally and intricately a national experience. . . ."³⁵

³⁵Bernard De Voto, "The Easy Chair", *Harper's Magazine*, CCVI (June, 1953), 50.