



The Nebraska Winter Quarters Company and Florence

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Article Summary: Florence failed to live up to the optimistic expectations of its founders. A financial depression, the failure of the Florence Bank, the loss of the Mormon trade, and the failure to attract a Pacific railroad to a Florence crossing all combined to leave Florence a quiet backwater.

Cataloging Information:

Names: James C Mitchell, Alexander C Pyper, B R Pegram, J B Stutsman

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Photographs / Images: a share in the Florence Land Company; James C Mitchell house, Florence, 1928; Bank of Florence

Tables: Florence precinct population by sex, age (1854, 1855, 1856); nativity of heads of families of Florence precinct (1854, 1855, 1856); nativity of population of Florence precinct (1860, 1870)

THE NEBRASKA WINTER QUARTERS COMPANY AND FLORENCE

BY DONALD F. DANKER

ENTERPRISING citizens of Iowa had worked diligently through their newspapers and congressional representatives for the organization of Nebraska Territory. When that goal was reached, they lost little time in attempting to realize some of the benefits that they had so confidently predicted would be theirs when Nebraska was opened to white settlement. One such attempt resulted in the town of Florence.

The history of each Nebraska community is unique, as is the history of each individual pioneer. Varied locations, circumstances, and personalities produced individuality in towns as well as in persons. The development of Florence and its social structure were made unique in the history of Nebraska by the use of the site by the Mormon Church for an outfitting point for emigrants. However, Florence shared some common experiences and aspirations with other early Nebraska communities along the Missouri River,

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especially Omaha, Bellevue, and Nebraska City. The founders of these communities, some of whom lived almost directly across the river from their proposed towns, had been interested in the sites in preterritorial days. Each of the four communities was a fairly well known ferry boat crossing. All hoped to be made the location of the territorial capital and the terminus of the Pacific railroad. Indeed, the founders of Florence insisted that Nature had dictated that their town be the terminus by flooring the Missouri River at the site with a rock bottom ideal for bridge building.

In an article entitled "Town sites in Nebraska," the *Omaha Arrow* described the Florence location:

Winter Quarters is also located up the river some ten miles above this city; it is pleasantly situated upon a high bench and inclined plane giving a fair and pretty view of the country for a great distance around and is the old site of the "Winter Quarters" of the first Mormon Pioneers. The town is now being surveyed and improvements and public buildings erected . . . a flat boat ferry is kept in operation for the benefit of settlers.¹

On the ninth day of September 1854, the proprietors of the Nebraska Winters Quarters Claim held a meeting at the store of B. R. Pegram & Company in Council Bluffs City, Iowa. J. B. Stutsman² acted as chairman, and M. H. Clark was appointed secretary. The minutes of that meeting are in part as follows:

This Indenture made and entered into this 9th day of Sept. A. D. 1854 by James C. Mitchell, Thomas Sebring, B. R. Pegram and George Pegram, J. B. Stutsman, M. H. Clark, A. C. Ford, Ansell Briggs, N. Kilborn and Baldwin and Cooper, Witnesseth; that whereas said Parties have become owners of the claim to a certain tract or parcel of Land situate lying and being in the Territory of Nebraska adjoining the Old Mormon and Winter Quarters Claim embracing a section of the country four miles in length on the Missouri River and extending back from three quarters of a mile to a mile and a half as staked and blased [*sic*] by James C. Mitchell in January last . . .

¹ *Omaha Arrow*, July 28, 1854, p. 2.

² J. B. Stutsman was of the firm of Stutsman, Hardin & Company Forwarding and Commission merchants. They were located "at the old Landing known as Hardin's Landing, Council Bluffs, Iowa." They announced that they would attend promptly to the reception and storage of merchandise and produce in their large and commodious warehouse situated at the above landing. (*The Chromotype* [Council Bluffs, Iowa], February 28, 1855.)

TREASURER.

\$100.

No. 7

Florence Land Company.

~~~~~

This is to Certify, that *James C. Mitchell*  
Is the owner of one Share of One Hundred Dollars, in the capital stock  
of said Company, entitling him to share in all dividends, and rendering  
him liable for all assessments.

No transfer will be recognized by the Company until recorded by the  
Secretary thereof.

*J. B. Stebbins* PRESIDENT.

ATTEST, *James C. Mitchell* Secretary.

FLORENCE, Mo. 1366

Share in the Florence Land Company

James C. Mitchell House, Florence  
(Photo taken in 1928)





Bank of Florence

And whereas the said town of Florence having been surveyed and layed off into Lots on aforesaid Claim and it being the object and design of the Parties to this agreement in every reasonable and proper manner to improve and increase the value of such town property and of the claim generally and do all things and acts relative thereto as shall tend to promote their interest and welfare jointly.<sup>3</sup>

The proprietors of the claim agreed to allow the Ferry Company to retain exclusive possession of ferry privileges and the landing area. The ferry company was obliged to provide and maintain, "a good and sufficient Ferry Boat at said point for the accommodation of the inhabitants of the adjacent country and the Public generally." A mill company composed of James C. Mitchell, B. R. Pegram and others was to have exclusive right to the water privileges of a creek which ran through the claim and sufficient ground for mill purposes. It was to erect a good and sufficient mill thereon. Failure to do so meant that the mill company must forfeit its right and title to the privilege.<sup>4</sup>

The proprietors adopted rules and regulations which outlined the methods which would be used to develop and exploit the claim. An organization was formed, and officers were elected. Rules were established for the raising of money, the sale of stock, the division of dividends, and the transfer of stock.<sup>5</sup>

The company appointed a committee to inventory the "tools and other loose property" belonging to the company and to decide what "improvements and expenditures (if any) are necessary to be made or commenced at the present time." The inventory reveals some of the tools that were needed to commence a town in Nebraska in 1854, especially in the relatively well timbered regions near the Missouri River. The committee found the company needed:

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<sup>3</sup> Nebraska Winter Quarters Company, Minutes, September 9, 1854, Ms., hereafter designated as Minutes. All manuscript citations are to be found in the Library of the Nebraska State Historical Society.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> Minutes, September 9, 1854.



|                      |                           |
|----------------------|---------------------------|
| 1 Grain Shovel       | About 50 spikes           |
| 2 Dirt Shovels       | 1 Iron square             |
| 1 Long handle shovel | 1 Try square              |
| 2 Spades             | Brace and Bitts           |
| 1 Cross cut saw      | 2 Brush Scythes           |
| 2 Hand saws          | 1 Grass Scythe            |
| 1 Broad axe          | 1 Whitewash brush         |
| 6 Chopping axes      | 2 Masons Trowels          |
| 2 Indian axes        | 1 Plasters trowels        |
| 1 Adse               | 1 Pick                    |
| 1 Hammer             | 1 Mattock                 |
| 2 Lath Hatchets      | 2 2 inch augers           |
| 2 Hand axes          | 1 ¾ inch auger            |
| 2 Brows <sup>6</sup> | 1 ½ inch auger            |
| 6 Gimblets           | 2 Cooking stoves          |
| 4 Pad Locks          | 1 Drawing knife           |
| 3 Planes             | 2 Caulking irons          |
| 1 Pair compasses     | 4 Chisels                 |
| 1 Lumber Wagon       | 4 Iron weges <sup>7</sup> |

The committee reported that in its opinion the company should finish building a partly constructed house and a warehouse, "fit up the ferryboat in order for running," and build a tavern, to cost six hundred dollars.<sup>8</sup>

The name, "Florence," appeared for the first time in the Company minutes for September 13, 1854. The new town was named after James C. Mitchell's adopted daughter, Florence Kilbourn.<sup>9</sup> The company authorized the Board of Directors to sell one hundred lots in the town of Florence.<sup>10</sup> The announcement of the sale was published in the *St. Mary Gazette*, St. Mary, Iowa; the *Nebraska Palladium*, Bellevue, Nebraska; and the *Omaha Arrow*.

Sale of Lots!! In the town of Florence, formerly Winter Quarters, Nebraska Territory. One hundred choice Lots in said Town have been selected by the proprietors thereof, which will be offered at Public Sale on the fifteenth of October, next, to the highest and best bidder for ready money . . . In the mean time persons wishing to purchase at Private Sale can be accommodated on liberal terms by calling on the undersigned at Council Bluff City at either of whose stores can be seen a map of said town and a list of lots to be sold.

<sup>6</sup> A brow is a type of gang plank fitted with rollers to allow for movement of a vessel.

<sup>7</sup> Minutes, September 13, 1854.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> J. Sterling Morton and Albert Watkins, *Illustrated History of Nebraska* (Lincoln, 1907), I, 279. The editor of the *Omaha Arrow* regretted that "the good old significant name (Winter Quarters) has been changed to Florence." (*Omaha Arrow*, November 10, 1854, p. 2.)

<sup>10</sup> Minutes, September 13, 1854.

Florence is situated on the Missouri River about 6 miles above Council Bluff City at the Old Mormon or Winter Quarters Ferry, directly opposite the Pigeon Valley, the surveyed route of the Davenport Railroad, and on the nearest, best and by far the most traveled route to California, Oregon and Salt Lake. The river here is something less than three hundred yards wide with a solid ROCK BOTTOM!! from shore to shore at a depth of from five to twelve feet, and consequently permanent banks on both sides, which so far as the knowledge of Man extends, or appearances indicate never have changed or overflowed . . . high or low water was never known to stop the ferrying at this point.

The town is situated on a beautiful bluff . . . with a good permanent steamboat landing for at least a mile in length. There are two fine streams running through the town on both sides of which are excellent mill privileges. The Mormons during their sojourn here had a good mill with 2 tun of burs and a saw . . . There are extensive lime stone quarries, excellent clay for brick making and other purposes, plenty of first rate sand, gravel and an abundance of good timber . . .

As it is not our object to deceive, but to give a plain and truthful statement of facts as they will be found to exist, the public can rely upon the correctness of the above description . . .

There will be a first rate steam ferry boat at the above named point early next spring.

J. B. Stutsman  
B. R. Pegram  
J. C. Mitchell<sup>11</sup>

In a signed statement made on January 8, 1855, James C. Mitchell described the Winter Quarters claim and the development there. "To all whom it may concern—Know ye that the Town Plot of Florence Nebraska Territory comprises between eleven and twelve hundred acres of Land, that the outside claims belonging to the Nebraska Winter Quarters Company comprise about three thousand acres on which there is an abundance of good timber, limestone, Rock and good water privileges and there is scarcely a doubt of there being coal . . . There is a good and commodious Hotel and a Large Stable in progress of erection belonging to the Company, at Florence, besides several Log Houses . . ."<sup>12</sup>

The company proceeded to take the necessary steps designed to build and promote their town. The Board of Direc-

<sup>11</sup> *Omaha Arrow*, September 29, 1854, p. 3.

<sup>12</sup> Statement by James C. Mitchell, Secretary, Nebraska Winter Quarters Company, January 8, 1855, Ms.



tors was ordered to procure a newspaper, if possible, to establish a brick yard, and to obtain a number of blank quit-claim deeds.<sup>13</sup> The shares of company stock were assessed to finance the building of a "Tavern House." L. Mallet contracted to build the tavern for one thousand and seventy five dollars.<sup>14</sup>

By November, 1854, the company had obtained a newspaper. The *Rock Bottom*, with W. C. James<sup>15</sup> as editor and publisher, made its appearance. The *Nebraska Palladium* of Bellevue took note of it on November 29, 1854, and reprinted an article from the Florence paper. The *Rock Bottom* claimed that Florence was destined to be *The City* of Nebraska whether or not it was ever made the capital. "We do not need the Capital, we are perfectly willing that it should go to some other place less favored by nature than ourselves. Yet we are opposed to its going to a place which has no natural advantages whatever, but depends entirely upon political resources. Such a place is Omaha City . . ."<sup>16</sup>

The Florence newspaper was described in *Moore's Rural New Yorker* in January 1855: "A paper has been started in Florence, Nebraska Territory called the *Rock Bottom*. The cut on the top of the paper represents a big Indian and under it appears the name of Stephen A. Douglas, Illinois, for President and A. C. Dodge of Iowa as Vice President for 1856."<sup>17</sup> The *Rock Bottom* was printed at Council Bluffs.<sup>18</sup> The paper described by *Moore's Rural New Yorker* must have been one of the last issues of the *Rock Bottom* because the editor, William C. James, sold his share in the company to J. B. Stutsman in January 1855 and took no more part in the affairs of Florence.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Minutes, September 13, 1854.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, September 19, 1854.

<sup>15</sup> William C. James purchased the interests of A. C. Ford in the Nebraska Winter Quarters Company for \$1000. (Minutes, October 21, 1854).

<sup>16</sup> *Nebraska Palladium*, November 19, 1854, p. 2.

<sup>17</sup> *Moore's Rural New Yorker* (Rochester, N. Y.), January 20, 1855, p. 26.

<sup>18</sup> Morton, *op. cit.*, II, 356.

<sup>19</sup> Minutes, January 12, 1855.

The company believed that a newspaper was essential to the starting of a town. It approved of the purchase of a printing press and the other necessary items for publishing a paper at the price of fifteen hundred dollars. The secretary, James C. Mitchell, agreed to take charge of the press and run it at his own expense until it was otherwise disposed of by the company, with the provisions that he pay for the ink and paper used while it was under his charge and that he have the use of the brick building belonging to the company free of charge.<sup>20</sup>

The new newspaper was published as the *Florence Courier*. The proud statement, "We would rather be in the right place, on 'Rock Bottom' than have the capitol of the Territory" appeared upon its masthead. James C. Mitchell was the publisher and L. H. Lathrop, editor. Robert H. See and John M. Mentzer were subsequent editors.<sup>21</sup>

The *Courier* was a severe critic of Omaha and its promoters. In this it probably reflected the opinion and perhaps the words of its publisher, James C. Mitchell.<sup>22</sup>

In the words of the *Courier* the territorial capitol was "that useless pile of rubbish, which for the past two years has been accumulating upon Capitol Square in said city." The *Courier* called for a territorial governor "whose ear has not been attuned to the ring of the Ferry Company's [the proprietors of Omaha City] metal and whose conscience has not been smeared by the dirt of its corner lots."<sup>23</sup>

The Nebraska Winter Quarters Company became the Florence Land Company in April 1855. The territorial legislature had incorporated the members of the Nebraska Win-

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, November 25, 1856.

<sup>21</sup> *Florence Courier*, February 5, 1857 and October 8, 1857 and Morton, *op. cit.*, II, 356.

<sup>22</sup> Mitchell, acting as chairman of an Anti-Omaha, Anti-Governor Cuming meeting at Bellevue in January, 1855, stated that if Thomas Cuming tried to bribe him he would whip him like a dog. (*Nebraska Palladium*, January 10, 1855, p. 2.) Mitchell later, as a committee of one appointed by the Territorial Legislature, selected the site for the capitol in Omaha. He was charged with accepting bribes in deciding upon the location. (*House Journal*, 2d Territorial Session, p. 60; Morton, *op. cit.*, 279-280.)

<sup>23</sup> *Florence Courier*, February 1857, p. 2.

ter Quarters Company under the name Florence Land Company, and the company adopted the latter name by unanimous vote. The Articles of Incorporation of the Florence Land Company were substantially the same as had been the Rules and Regulations of the Nebraska Winter Quarters Company.<sup>24</sup> The town of Florence was incorporated by the same session of the legislature.<sup>25</sup>

The land upon which Florence was located, Sections 21, 28, and 29 of Township 16N, Range 13E, was pre-empted in the name of Levi Harsh, mayor of Florence. This was done on July 1, 1857. Final patent was granted by the government on April 2, 1860.<sup>26</sup>

Seeking to take advantage of the rock bottom and to attract a railroad to their town, some of the proprietors of the Florence Land Company and others founded the Florence Bridge Company in February 1855. Twenty incorporators bought stock with a paper value of \$200,000. For this stock they gave notes which totaled \$100,000. An assessment was made of fifty cents on each one thousand dollars. The records indicate that only \$18.50 were paid on the assessments. There is no record that the notes were ever paid.<sup>27</sup> However, the *Courier* announced that a survey had been made by "Competent Engineers, the bridge located and a number of men are already engaged in fulfilling a contract for excavating a large amount of earth, preparatory to commencing the abutment on this side of the Missouri. Contracts for the mason work and super structure will be let early in the spring, and the whole of the magnificent enterprise will be pushed through to completion by the first day of January 1859 at farthest."<sup>28</sup>

The bridge company was incorporated by the First Territorial Legislature on February 2, 1855. The original members of the corporation were James Grant, John P. Cook,

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<sup>24</sup> Minutes, April 11, 1855, and *Council Journal*, 1st Territorial Session, March 16, 1855, p. 142.

<sup>25</sup> *Council Journal*, 1st Session, March 7, 1855, p. 117.

<sup>26</sup> United States Land Office Records, CLIV, 111-112, Ms.

<sup>27</sup> Florence Bridge Company, Stock Book, Ms.

<sup>28</sup> *Florence Courier*, February 5, 1857, p. 3.

Ansel Briggs, J. B. Stutsman and Platt Smith of Iowa; A. R. Gilmour and Allen Tomlin of Illinois; George Pegram of Missouri; and Peter A. Sarpy, A. W. Hollister, and James C. Mitchell of Nebraska. They were given the right to bridge the Missouri at any point for the space of two and a half miles on either side of Florence. "The aforesaid bridge shall be commenced within two years and completed within ten years after this act takes effect."<sup>29</sup>

The Florence promoters also had hopes that coal would be found in quantity in their region. James C. Mitchell, the company secretary, had reported in January 1855, that coal existed on the claim. He wrote that ". . . it is to be found on the surface of the ground in many places and in some places can be picked up by the bucketfulls, besides, slate, coal blossoms, soil, water and everything indicates the existence of that invaluable article."<sup>30</sup> Two years later it was reported that "several experienced Colliers from the English mines" had taken some coal from a shaft sunk about one half mile north of Florence.<sup>31</sup>

The *Courier* took occasion in May 1857, to publish an article belittling Council Bluffs, Iowa. It predicted that "towns on the eastern bank of the river however favorable their location . . . (will) never attain the prominence of those on the west banks. They may grow and prosper but it is as a country town; not as a great distributing point—not as a great commercial emporium." The vigor with which the *Council Bluffs Nonpareil* replied may reveal the first doubts about the benefits that the new communities across the river would bring to Iowa. The *Nonpareil* asked, "where are

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<sup>29</sup> *Laws of Nebraska*, 1st Territorial Session, pp. 443-444. A bridge was finally completed across the Missouri River at the Florence "Rock Bottom" area in May, 1953, and dedicated June 1, 1953. (*Sunday World Herald*, Omaha, May 31, 1953, 1B.) The Union Pacific Bridge at Omaha, completed on March 14, 1872, was the first to be built across the Missouri River into Nebraska. (Morton, *op. cit.*, II, 119.)

<sup>30</sup> Mitchell, Statement, *op. cit.*

<sup>31</sup> *Florence Courier*, February 5, 1857, p. 3. It seems possible that the "Robbers" or "Jesse James" Cave south of Hummel Park, in Omaha had its origin in the activities of these miners. See the *Nebraska State Journal* (Lincoln), August 19, 1954, and the *Omaha World Herald*, August 19, 1954, for accounts of investigations of this cave.

your whole sale houses such as Tootle and Jackson . . . ? Deny it as you may, Council Bluffs will retain the trade of Western Iowa and Nebraska for many years to come." The aroused Iowa editor went on to observe that anyone who believed otherwise would also believe that the moon was made of green cheese or that the southern states would someday secede from the Union.<sup>32</sup>

The first years of Florence's existence gave the promoters some reason for optimism concerning the future of their town. Florence was a lively place, busy with the activities connected with the establishment of a new community. It also served as a "last chance" for many emigrants to purchase supplies before pushing westward. Florence newspapers give us some idea of these activities and of the services and goods offered for sale.

Alexander C. Pyper established a general store there in 1856. Pyper was a Mormon, and he remained at Florence until 1859 before going on to Salt Lake City. His merchandise was meant for sale to the emigrants as well as to more permanent residents of Florence. His advertisement indicates the variety of his goods and the nature of a general store in Nebraska in 1857.

#### Florence Store

Alexander C. Pyper, would beg leave to call the attention of the citizens of FLORENCE and surrounding country, to his large and well assorted Stock of Winter Goods, which will be sold at Whole-sale and Retail. Comprising every variety of Staple and Fancy DRY-GOODS. Also a full and complete stock of GROCERIES and PROVISIONS; Oils, Wines and pure Liquors, which for price and quality can not be beat west of St. Jo. I have also the largest stock of BOOTS and SHOES in the Territory of Nebraska, of every size.—The best quality and most fashionable to be found in any eastern market. Also LEATHER and Shoe-Maker findings and a large stock of HATS and CAPS for Winter use, which can be purchased at the VERY LOWEST PRICES in the Territory. I also have a fine assortment of READY-MADE CLOTHING: Tailor's findings, cloths, hosiery, etc. NAILS, GLASS, QUEENSWARE, HARDWARE, CUTLERY AND IRON of every size necessary for Blacksmithing, in fact, a THOUSAND and ONE things too numerous to mention. The

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<sup>32</sup> *Council Bluffs Nonpareil*, June 6, 1857, p. 2.

highest market price will be paid for all kinds of COUNTRY PRODUCE. Cash paid for DRY HIDES. Our motto is—Fair Dealings and small profits.

Alex C. Pyper<sup>33</sup>

Mr. Pyper had competition from the Peoples Store, F. M. Bough, proprietor. In an advertisement similar to that of the Florence Store, Mr. Bough offered, in addition to the usual staples, furniture and a medium sized iron safe. He confided to the public that the secret of becoming rich was to buy cheap.<sup>34</sup>

In a more restrained announcement, the Willet House, located at the corner of Main and State Streets and owned by the Florence Land Company, informed the public that "travelers and others will be accommodated with all the convenience and attention that can be procured in newly settled countries."

The *Crescent City Circle*, Crescent City, Iowa, for February 20, 1857, also carried Florence advertisements. A Florence saloon ran the following notice:

Nebraska No. 2, Crystal Spring House at the Florence Landing. Call and take a drink out of the finest spring in the west. All ye drinkers of water—also ye that indulge in the choicest of liquors, such as brandies, whiskeys, wines, rum, gin and other drinks the country affords. There you will find little Jimmy always ready to accomodate you all.

Jas. Bradshaw

"Nebraska No. 2" was also the name of the steam ferry boat operated by James C. Mitchell and James Bradshaw at the Florence Crossing. They advertised:

We do not (like the Omaha Ferry Company) call the attention of the public to a time table; we have none; our charter obliges us to run at all times . . . if a lone footman comes, we cross him without delay. Our rates are 25% less than those of Omaha to-wit:

|                                          |                  |
|------------------------------------------|------------------|
| Wagon and span of horses . . . . .       | 75c              |
| Extra span or yoke of cattle . . . . .   | 20c              |
| Carriage and span of horses . . . . .    | 60c              |
| Horse and buggy . . . . .                | 40c              |
| Footman . . . . .                        | 5c               |
| Cattle, horses, mules per head . . . . . | 10c              |
| Sheep and swine . . . . .                | 3c <sup>35</sup> |

<sup>33</sup> *Florence Courier*, February 5, 1857, p. 2.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4.

<sup>35</sup> *Weekly Council Bluffs Bugle*, May 19, 1858, p. 5.

Also in Florence in 1857 were two physicians, a drug store, two lawyers, two house and sign painters, and a saloon called the Arcade where could be had the choicest liquors and cigars, oysters, sardines, pigs feet, and tripe. There were three firms of land agents, a blacksmith and a shoemaker and Howe and Company announced to the "Dancing Community" that they were prepared to furnish music for private parties or balls on as reasonable terms as could be procured elsewhere. Russell's Steam Mill was located in the timber three miles above Florence and cutting from three to five thousand feet of lumber a day. James C. Mitchell announced that when the river opened for navigation he would be able to supply fruit and ornamental trees at reasonable prices.<sup>36</sup>

A new Missouri River steamboat named the "Florence" had been built and waited the opening of the river to begin the 1857 season. Its owners announced that it would be a regular packet for Kansas City, Leavenworth, Weston, St. Joseph, Savannah, Iowa Point, Nebraska City, Bellevue, Council Bluffs, Omaha, and Florence. Florence and Omaha were also connected by an omnibus line that ran two hacks a day between the towns.<sup>37</sup>

One of the most significant notices in the *Courier* was the following: "Bank of Florence . . . Cook, Sargent and Parker, Bankers and Land Agents, Florence, Nebraska, Buy, Sell and locate land and Land Warrants, and pay particular attention to all business connected with a General Land Agency."<sup>38</sup> This firm had become one of the important factors in the development of Florence.

On January 18, 1856, the Bank of Florence had been chartered by the territorial legislature after a bill to that effect, introduced by James C. Mitchell, had been passed. H. D. Downey, Allan Tomlin, Nathaniel Kilbourn, James C. Mitchell, G. W. Dodge, Levi Marsh, and Ebenezer Cook were named as commissioners with the duty of establishing

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<sup>36</sup> *Florence Courier*, February 5, 1857, pp. 1, 2, 3.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 2-3.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.



a bank at Florence. The bank was to have a capital of \$100,000 to \$500,000 to be divided into shares of \$100 each. The bank was given power to issue bills, notes, and other certificates of indebtedness, to deal in exchange and to carry on the usual activities of an incorporated bank of that period in Nebraska.<sup>39</sup>

The commissioners contacted the Iowa financial firm of Cook, Sargent, and Parker. This well known firm operated banking houses at Davenport, Iowa City, and Fort Des Moines, Iowa, and Rock Island, Illinois. At a meeting in Davenport held on April 30, 1856, Cook and Sargent of Davenport subscribed to five hundred shares of the capital stock of the Florence bank; Cook, Sargent, and Downey of Iowa City subscribed to two hundred shares; Cook, Sargent and Parker of Rock Island to 150 shares; and Cook, Sargent and Cook of Fort Des Moines to 150 shares.<sup>40</sup> Cook and Sargent of Davenport, Iowa, announced in a letter to the editor of the local paper, "The facts are simply these: The charter was procured by the citizens of Florence and a committee sent to Davenport to tender the same to us. We had no information in regard to it till it was so offered." "

Ebenezer Cook, George B. Sargent, John P. Cook, Hugh D. Downey, and James M. Parker were elected as a Board of Directors. The officers of the bank were George B. Sargent, president; John B. Cook, vice-president; and James F. Parker, cashier.<sup>41</sup> John M. Parker was sent to Nebraska to manage the Florence Bank. A very substantial brick building

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<sup>39</sup> *Laws of Nebraska*, 2nd Sess., p. 177. For discussions of banking in Nebraska Territory see Mabel Francis Neale, "The History of Banking in Nebraska, 1854-1859" (Master's thesis, University of Nebraska); and Morton, *op. cit.*, II, chap. I.

<sup>40</sup> Record of the Proceedings of the Board of Directors of the Bank of Florence, Ms.

<sup>41</sup> *Davenport State Democrat* (Davenport, Iowa [July 1856]), clipping in Florence collection. This statement seems open to question in view of the fact that Ebenezer Cook and Hugh D. Downey were members of the commission named in the charter.

<sup>42</sup> Records of the Proceedings of the Board of Directors of the Bank of Florence, Ms.

was erected at the approximate cost of \$4,500.<sup>43</sup> The vault was large and strong. The side walls were constructed of three foot thick masonry, with extra thickness at the ceiling and foundations; concealed air shafts provided ventilation; and the walls were lined with quarter inch steel."

The Bank of Florence became an important factor of the town in 1856 and 1857. Like most of the contemporary banks in Nebraska it issued quantities of "wild cat" currency, and financed land speculation. The minutes of the meeting of the Board of Directors of the Bank of Florence for July 9, 1857, contain the following item:

On motion resolved: that the President and cashier be authorized to procure, fill up and sign one hundred thousand Dollars additional of the circulating notes of the Bank . . .

The prestige of Cook and Sargent inspired confidence in the Bank of Florence. The *Davenport State Democrat* had observed, "The well established character of Cook and Sargent for pecuniary solidity and personal integrity will go a long ways in satisfying the community that they are engaged in no sham concern."<sup>44</sup>

The Florence Land Company transferred eighty shares of stock to Cook, Sargent, and Parker, and J. M. Parker took an active part in company affairs. He was elected as its treasurer and later as secretary. It appears that some friction developed between James C. Mitchell, who had been the most energetic promoter of Florence, and Mr. Parker and other members of the company. J. M. Parker opposed Levi Harsh for the office of mayor of Florence in April 1857. Harsh was backed by Mitchell. The *Omaha Nebraskan* reported the election in a colorful article in which it charged that "The great mogul of rock bottom," Mitchell, had willed that Harsh should be mayor. An opposition ticket headed by Parker was placed on the ballot during the absence of Mitchell from the city. On election day Mitchell

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<sup>43</sup> See photograph of bank on p. 40. For further information see the *Omaha Bee-News* (Omaha, Nebraska), July 20, 1930, 8 A. For itemized accounts of building expenses see Bank of Florence Receipts, Ms.

<sup>44</sup> Specifications of vault, Ms.

<sup>45</sup> *Davenport State Democrat*, as in note 41.

appeared on the scene, "His eyes were not as other's eyes, and beneath his weatherbeaten beaver, beetle browed anger sat in wrathful restfulness . . . Dost thou then—Dare to beard the lion in his den—Mitchell on Rock Bottom?" The *Nebraskian* goes on to describe the language with which Mitchell berated the Parker supporters for the "treasonable and wolfish act of placing in nomination a ticket, after he had spoken and his will was known . . . The dialects of bullies, fish market women, and blackguards of various quarters of the globe, were largely drawn upon to furnish Mitchell with this interesting vocabulary and many wondered at the close study and severe application which he must have undergone to commit it all so accurately to memory. But taste makes all things easy. None of your rough single handed blackguards who have not had the benefit of travel could have flourished here on that morning for a single moment." The article goes on to report that the election judges who were supporters of Mitchell took the ballot boxes home to supper, "where they were fed," and that as a result Harsh was elected by a fifty vote majority."

The rift among the promoters of Florence continued and widened. In April 1858, Mitchell was defeated for reelection as secretary of the Florence Land Company and removed from the Board of Directors. A committee was appointed to settle company business with Mitchell, and it was agreed that his share of the company property be "portioned and set apart to him so as to enable him to retire from the company." Mitchell's name did not appear in the company records for two years. On April 7, 1860, at the last recorded meeting of the Florence Land Company, he was again elected to the Board of Directors."

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<sup>40</sup> *The Nebraskian* (Omaha City), April 1857. Clipping in Florence Collection.

<sup>41</sup> Minutes, April 5, 1860. Mitchell died on August 6, 1860, at the age of fifty. He was a native of Bucks County, Pennsylvania and had spent some time as a sea captain. He moved to Bellevue, Iowa, in 1839 and to Council Bluffs in 1850. He was elected a member of the First and Second Territorial Councils. The *Weekly Council Bluffs Bugle* observed at his death, "To the enterprise and energy of Mr. Mitchell Florence is indebted for all she ever was or now is . . ." (*Bugle*, August 8, 1860, p. 2; the *Nebraska Republican* [Omaha], August 8, 1860, p. 3; Morton, *op. cit.*, I, 279 n.)

An undated list of property belonging to James C. Mitchell indicates the amount of property that one energetic and ambitious promoter and speculator acquired or laid claim to in the beginning years of Nebraska Territory:

City of Florence.

One Block in the center of the city containing 4 acres highly improved with dwelling house, barn and other out houses which cost over \$16,000.

13 Houses and lots improvements costing over \$15,000.

250 vacant lots a large proportion of them the best in the city.

15 out lots containing about 90 acres.

An excellent water privilege with all the lands overflowed by the dam and back water and 2 acres of ground in the heart of the city.

One half of the Ferry Privilege, with Steam Ferry Boat and about 25 acres of land at the Ferry Landing.

4,000 acres of Land lying between Florence and Omaha and between Florence and Ft. Calhoun.

26 Lots in the City of De Soto.

22 Lots in Cuming City.

State of Iowa.

360 acres of Land near Harrison and Crescent City.

60 acres of Land on the Missouri River at the Ferry Landing opposite Florence.

3 of the best Lots in Bellevue, Jackson County with buildings on one of them which cost over \$1,000.<sup>48</sup>

In the fall of 1857 a nation wide financial panic spread to Nebraska, and the banks, so liberally chartered by the Second and Third Territorial Legislatures, began to fail. The Bank of Florence was reported by the *Weekly Bugle* of Council Bluffs of February 17, 1858, to be one of these. "This institution has 'gone up' and failed utterly to redeem its issues. We regard the 'cat' as dead as I quote it at eighty percent discount." The report was premature, and the *Florence Courier* complained, "Babbit of the *Bugle* quotes Florence money at 80 percent discount notwithstanding it passes every where at par. Babbit is one of the most unprincipled, vindictive [*sic*] creatures the world ever produced." Babbit of the *Bugle* answered that the Bank of Florence redeemed its issue only to certain people.<sup>49</sup> The Bank seems to have

<sup>48</sup> Property belonging to James C. Mitchell, Ms., Florence Collection.

<sup>49</sup> *Weekly Council Bluffs Bugle*, April 21, 1858, p. 3.

recovered to some extent because the *Bugle* raised the quotation on Florence currency to 50 percent in April 1858, and to par in June. The newspaper observed in June that Council Bluffs merchants were accepting it at face value in payment for goods or debts. Cook, Sargent, and Parker publicly announced that they would redeem Florence money either at Florence or Davenport.<sup>50</sup>

The Florence Bank's currency remained at par in the Council Bluffs quotations until December 1859, when Cook and Sargent of Davenport, Iowa, failed. Without them the Bank at Florence could not continue, and it closed its doors. Its closing left the Platte Valley Bank of Nebraska City as the only Nebraska Bank with its currency quoted at par.<sup>51</sup>

Florence experienced a few days of notoriety in January 1858 when the majority of the Nebraska Legislature moved there from Omaha. The Fourth Territorial Legislature had engaged in a heated debate over capital removal. Interested citizens of Omaha crowded into the capitol, and the majority of both houses withdrew to Florence, claiming that they did so because of "the disorganizing and turbulent acts of the minority of their own body aided by the violence of the unrestrained mob at Omaha."<sup>52</sup> Two store buildings in Florence served as the "capitol" for the self-exiled legislators. Acting-Governor Thomas Cuming and his successor, Governor William Richardson, refused to recognize the Florence group as the legal legislature. The Fifth Legislature was convened in Omaha on September 21, 1858, and the Florence Secession was ended.<sup>53</sup>

The history of Florence is closely bound to that of the Mormon emigration through Nebraska. The promoters of the town, built upon the site of the Winter Quarters, sought to renew the interest of the Mormon leaders in the area as a staging place for the converts on their way to Utah. As

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<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, May 26, 1858, p. 3; June 23, 1858, p. 3; September 15, 1858, p. 3.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, December 28, 1859.

<sup>52</sup> *Council Journal*, 4th sess., 1858, p. 146.

<sup>53</sup> Morton, *op. cit.*, I, 323-335; Sorensen, *op. cit.*, p. 32; Andreas, *op. cit.*, pp. 117-118; *Council Journal*, 4th sess., 1858, pp. 127-148.

early as September 13, 1854, the company took steps to fence, improve, and beautify the "Old Mormon Cemetery" of Winter Quarters days. Two months later the following resolution was passed: "On motion of A. Briggs it was decided by a unanimous vote that the President be authorized to purchase a half share of company stock and tender it to Elder John Taylor one of the twelve Apostles of the Mormon Church for the purpose of securing his influence in favor of Florence."<sup>54</sup> The records indicate, however, that instead of one-half share of stock John Taylor acquired twenty shares on April 7, 1858.<sup>55</sup>

Florence did become an outfitting point for the Mormon expeditions. The Mormon leaders probably were influenced in their decision by their familiarity with the area and by its historic connection with their movement. Thousands of emigrants were outfitted here for the trip across the plains. They contributed to the prosperity of Florence and also to that of Omaha.<sup>56</sup> Several Mormons conducted business at Florence. Alexander Pyper, one of the town's leading merchants,<sup>57</sup> was a Mormon of some note. A church official, he could baptize children into the faith, in addition to selling their elders the equipment necessary for the crossing of the plains to Utah.<sup>58</sup>

A member of a handcart expedition recalled his arrival at Florence in 1857:

[On] July 3 we were all rejoicing as it was the last morning to pack before we would reach Florence. All were eager to travel and left right after our morning service. We followed the river up to the ferry. We were right in Omaha but traveled seven miles north to Florence which was then only a small village about as big then as now. We reached Florence about noon. The company realized it was now time to get ready for that toilsome journey across the desert.

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<sup>54</sup> Minutes, September 13, 1854; November 4, 1854.

<sup>55</sup> Florence Land Company Stock and Order Register, April 7, 1856. Ms. Taylor was president of the Mormon Church from 1880 until 1887. (Jenson, *op. cit.*, vii.)

<sup>56</sup> Andrew Jenson, *Church Chronology*, pp 55-71; Sorenson, *op. cit.*, p. 33; Andreas, *op. cit.*, pp. 809-810.

<sup>57</sup> See page 36.

<sup>58</sup> Letter, William Deabry Johnson to Andrew Jenson, December 11, 1902 (*Utah Historical Quarterly*, XVI and XVII, 500).

This town of Florence was the last outfitting place this side of Salt Lake City and what they did not get there they went without, so every effort was made to get the necessary supplies.<sup>59</sup>

The ten Mormon handcart expeditions that left Florence in 1856, 1857, 1859 and 1860 were unique exhibitions of human endurance. The church authorities found it financially difficult to furnish the usual transportation to the large number of emigrants. Brigham Young wrote to one of his Elders in Liverpool in September 1855, "We cannot afford to purchase wagons and teams as in times past. I am consequently thrown back upon my old plan to make hand carts and let the emigration foot it. They can come as quick if not quicker, and much cheaper . . . I want to see it fairly tried and tested, at all events . . . and save this enormous expense of buying wagons and teams."<sup>60</sup> The English Elder, F. D. Richards, observed in the *Millennial Star* that the handcart emigrants would be spared the burden of caring for and guarding oxen. The time thus saved would be occupied with "sleep and refreshment, with songs of rejoicing and prayer."<sup>61</sup>

Mrs. Sylvanus Dodge, a pioneer Nebraska housewife, saw a handcart expedition at the crossing of the Elkhorn River west of Florence. She was struck with pity for the children and wrote to her son that the Mormon leaders should be prevented from taking children across the plains under such conditions.<sup>62</sup>

The initial handcart expedition was a success. The heroic men and women "ragged, sunburned and exultant" received a royal welcome at Salt Lake City. The fourth company left Florence on August 18, 1856, in the face of warnings of experienced plainsmen that the season was too

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<sup>59</sup> Frederick Hansen, "The Great Handcart Train from Iowa City to Salt Lake City," *Journal of History*, (Lamoni, Iowa), IX, 415-416.

<sup>60</sup> LeRoy Hafen, "Hand Cart Migration Across the Plains," in James T. Willard and Colin B. Goodykoontz, eds., *The Trans-Mississippi West: Papers Read at a Conference Held at the University of Colorado June 18-June 21, 1929* (Boulder, Colo., 1930), p. 106.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 107.

<sup>62</sup> Letter, Mrs. Sylvanus Dodge to Nathan Dodge, July 23, 1856, Ms. copy in Council Bluffs Public Library, Council Bluffs, Iowa.



far advanced for a safe crossing. A fifth company left two weeks later. Snow caught the fourth and fifth expeditions in Wyoming. Lacking adequate blankets, clothing, and food and physically exhausted from pulling the carts, approximately 217 members of the two ill-fated expeditions, nearly 20 percent of the total number, died on the trail in what was perhaps the worst tragedy of all the great overland movement.<sup>63</sup>

The handcart idea was not abandoned, however. Expeditions crossed the plains in 1857, 1859, and 1860. None of them experienced the hardships of the ill-fated fourth and fifth expeditions. The Mormons reverted to the use of ox teams in 1860. The last handcart company arrived in Salt Lake City on September 24, 1860, with 126 persons and 22 handcarts. It had left Florence on July 6.<sup>64</sup>

The Civil War did not cut off the flow of emigrants to Utah, and the Mormon emigration continued to pass through Florence. The *Nebraska City News* of May 12, 1860, noted the passage of the "Emilie" up the river bound for Florence. Aboard were four hundred Mormons including "a fine lot of girls." In the summer of 1861 Reverend Reuben Gaylord of Omaha reported that at least five thousand Mormons had left Omaha and Florence, "mostly the latter place," for Salt Lake City. He had conversed with many who were from England, and it was his opinion that "their zeal and self sacrifice for their faith was worthy of a better cause."<sup>65</sup> The "Denver City" brought seven hundred Mormons to Florence in June 1863.<sup>66</sup>

The year 1863 was the last year that the Mormons staged at Florence. The next year they chose, in its stead, Wyoming, a village in Otoe County about six miles up the Missouri River from Nebraska City. Joseph W. Young, Church Emigration Agent, was at Wyoming as early as May 14, 1864. He wrote on that date, "Wyoming is a new start-

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<sup>63</sup> Jay Monaghan, "Handcarts on the Overland Trail," *Nebraska History*, XXX (March 1949), 17.

<sup>64</sup> Jenson, *op. cit.*, pp. 55-58, 64.

<sup>65</sup> *Home Missionary*, XXIV, no. 7 (November 1861), 165.

<sup>66</sup> *The Nebraska Republican* (Omaha), June 15, 1863, p. 2.

ing point for our emigration, forty-five miles below Florence . . . It is not much of a town, but so much the better; there are about a dozen houses in the place, but it is beautifully situated on the banks of the Missouri River, and is very well adapted for camping and outfitting purposes. We have two large warehouses of three stories each, storehouse, office and dwelling house, and are well situated for doing business.”<sup>67</sup>

The census records reflect the growth and decline of Florence. They also illustrate to some extent the size of the temporary Mormon population.

TABLE I  
FLORENCE PRECINCT POPULATION BY SEX, AGE  
1854, 1855, 1856<sup>68</sup>

|                               | 1854 | 1855 | 1856 |
|-------------------------------|------|------|------|
| White male 21 and over.....   | 38   | 17   | 171  |
| White male 16 and over.....   | 5    | 1    | 7    |
| White male 16 and under.....  | 15   | 2    | 51   |
| White female 16 and over..... | 13   | 12   | 71   |
| White female 16 and under.... | 14   | 3    | 57   |
| Total .....                   | 85   | 35   | 357  |

<sup>67</sup> Latter Day Saints Emigration from Wyoming, Nebraska, 1864-1866, compilation of correspondence and records by Andrew Jenson, assistant historian, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, Typed Ms.

<sup>68</sup> Nebraska Territory census 1854, 1855, 1856, Mss.

TABLE II  
NATIVITY OF HEADS OF FAMILIES OF FLORENCE  
PRECINCT, 1854, 1855, 1856<sup>69</sup>

|                     | 1854 | 1855 | 1856 |
|---------------------|------|------|------|
| Pennsylvania .....  | 3    | 3    | 3    |
| New York .....      | 5    |      | 3    |
| Vermont .....       | 1    |      | 1    |
| Indiana .....       | 2    | 2    | 1    |
| Minnesota .....     | 1    |      |      |
| Mississippi .....   | 1    |      |      |
| Ohio .....          |      | 5    | 4    |
| New Hampshire ..... |      | 1    |      |
| Illinois .....      |      |      | 4    |
| Kentucky .....      |      |      | 2    |
| Missouri .....      |      |      | 1    |
| Connecticut .....   |      |      | 2    |
| Virginia .....      |      |      | 2    |
| Maine .....         |      |      | 1    |
| Germany .....       | 1    |      | 1    |
| Ireland .....       | 1    |      | 4    |
| England .....       | 1    |      | 2    |
| Wales .....         |      | 5    | 1    |
| France .....        |      | 1    |      |
| Scotland .....      |      |      | 5    |
| Total .....         | 16   | 12   | 37   |

<sup>69</sup> Nebraska Territory census, 1854, 1855, 1856, Mss. The census for 1856 also listed 569 Mormons including 132 males over 21, 26 males over 16, 105 males under 16, 205 females over 16 and 101 females under 16. The census taker noted, "The following names are all Mormons lately arriving in Florence from England and other foreign countries. Some intend on remaining in Florence, others intend on going to Salt Lake this fall or next spring."

TABLE III  
NATIVITY OF POPULATION OF FLORENCE  
PRECINCT 1860 and 1870<sup>70</sup>

|                      | 1860 | 1870 |
|----------------------|------|------|
| Nebraska .....       | 82   | 115  |
| Ohio .....           | 79   | 31   |
| Pennsylvania .....   | 72   | 15   |
| New York .....       | 67   | 20   |
| Indiana .....        | 53   | 26   |
| Illinois .....       | 35   | 24   |
| Iowa .....           | 32   | 18   |
| Virginia .....       | 19   | 2    |
| Michigan .....       | 18   | 1    |
| Kentucky .....       | 15   | 2    |
| Missouri .....       | 13   | 4    |
| Wisconsin .....      | 13   | 4    |
| Maryland .....       | 13   |      |
| New Jersey .....     | 12   | 3    |
| Connecticut .....    | 10   | 2    |
| Vermont .....        | 5    | 3    |
| Massachusetts .....  | 5    |      |
| New Hampshire .....  | 5    | 2    |
| Maine .....          | 5    | 7    |
| Tennessee .....      | 3    | 3    |
| Utah .....           | 3    | 1    |
| North Carolina ..... |      | 1    |
| Rhode Island .....   |      | 1    |
| England .....        | 282  | 24   |
| Switzerland .....    | 61   |      |
| Scotland .....       | 59   | 7    |
| Ireland .....        | 52   | 8    |
| Denmark .....        | 44   | 7    |
| Germany .....        | 36   | 14   |
| Wales .....          | 21   | 2    |
| South Africa .....   | 13   |      |
| Sweden .....         | 12   | 33   |
| Canada .....         | 7    | 4    |
| France .....         | 4    |      |
| Belgium .....        | 4    |      |
| Italy .....          | 2    |      |
| Nova Scotia .....    | 1    |      |
| Atlantic Ocean ..... | 1    |      |
| Norway .....         |      | 2    |
| Total .....          | 1158 | 388  |

<sup>70</sup> United States census, 1860 and 1870, Ms.

Florence failed to realize the expectations of its founders. The financial depression, beginning in 1857, the failure of the Florence Bank, the death of James Mitchell, and the loss of the Mormon trade all contributed to the decline of the town. More important perhaps, than any of the above was the failure of the vaunted rock bottom to attract a Pacific railroad to a Florence crossing. With this prize awarded to Omaha, Florence was no longer a contender for the title of *The City* of Nebraska and, like Bellevue, she settled into a quiet existence, overshadowed by her more vigorous and perhaps more fortunate neighbor, Omaha.