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Article Summary: In just six years the first settlers established Nebraska's Missouri River towns and began agricultural production. They competed eagerly for railroads that could expand their markets beyond nearby rivers and roads in order to guarantee their long-term economic development.

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Photographs / Images: Council Bluffs Ferry, 1853 (from a sketch by Frederick Piercy); Brownville street scene, 1860; Nebraska City riverfront, 1865 (from a sketch by Alfred E Matthews); Nebraska City main street looking west, 1865 (Matthews)

NEBRASKA'S MISSOURI RIVER FRONTIER 1854-1860

BY NORMAN A. GRAEBNER

ONLY the accident of geography which placed the Missouri River along Nebraska Territory's eastern border obscures the importance of that river to the region's early development. The popular notion of a westward moving frontier renders it inevitable that the settlement of Nebraska should have progressed generally from east to west. Yet except in broadest terms the migration across the Mississippi Valley before the Civil War was not westward at all. Pioneers followed the river valleys and spread out in all directions from the burgeoning river towns. It could not be otherwise, for any region without access to national markets would beckon to agriculture, commerce, and industry in vain. The rich prairies of eastern Illinois, for example, lacking river transportation, were opened for settlement only by the arrival of the Illinois Central Railroad at the precise moment that pioneers first drifted into the rolling prairies of eastern Nebraska. Wherever the Missouri might have crossed Nebraska, the Territory's

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first thriving settlements would have lined its banks. Without the existence of some mighty stream capable of carrying produce to market, Nebraska's economic development, of necessity, would have awaited the arrival of railroads.

Whatever its limitations as an avenue of commerce, the Missouri River in 1854 appeared ample enough to support a flourishing river economy even a thousand miles from its mouth. For three decades St. Louis fur traders had demonstrated its navigability by keelboat and steamboat. By the fifties regular packet lines reached from St. Louis as far as St. Joseph, and steamboats of the largest class employed on the river plied occasionally as far as Council Bluffs.¹ The magnificent passenger vessels designed for the Missouri were merely smaller replicas of the towering steamboats employed on the Ohio and the lower Mississippi. Trim and fast, these vessels often approached 200 feet in length, with a twenty-foot beam and a five-foot hold. They were invariably distinguished by their two tall chimneys, their ornamental tops, their pilot houses and officers quarters on the hurricane deck, their long narrow saloons into which opened dozens of staterooms on either side capable of accommodating a hundred or more passengers in style. Rich carpets and paneling added a touch of elegance; the cuisine was comparable to that of the best hotels.²

St. Louis itself added the remaining element essential for the full and rapid development of Nebraska's early frontier. Along its wharves were the commission and forwarding merchants, wholesale dealers, and shippers who furnished the merchandise, markets, credit, and transportation that sustained a vast river empire that extended northward along the Mississippi, Illinois, and Missouri riv-

¹ The files of the St. Louis *Missouri Republican* after 1848 report the almost continuous movement of steamboats up the Missouri River to St. Joseph and beyond.

² For a description of the popular *Silver Heels* see the Nebraska City *Nebraska News*, March 28, 1857. The exact title of this newspaper varied, but in this article it will be cited as *Nebraska News*. The St. Joseph *Gazette* (quoted in the *Nebraska Advertiser* [Brownville], June 28, 1858) contains a good description of the packet, *Ben Lewis*.

ers. If freight charges on the Missouri exceeded those elsewhere, the *St. Louis Republican* denied that they resulted from any combination between forwarding agents and steamboat companies. The problem, continued the editor, lay rather in the difficulties inherent in Missouri River navigation. The necessity of stopping at night because of snags and bars vastly increased the cost of operation; the huge quantities of sand in the waters of the river produced excessive wear on the engines. So relentless was the river's toll on steamboats that even double charges hardly covered the losses to those engaged in Missouri River shipping.³

If the Nebraska lands bordering the Missouri comprised a remote frontier in 1854, they were not unknown to settlement. For thirty years the American Fur Company had maintained a trading post at Bellevue, ten miles above the mouth of the Platte. Bellevue, in addition, was the site of both the government agency and the only mission which served the four tribes of eastern Nebraska—the Omaha, Oto, Ponca, and Pawnee. During the Mexican War, in 1847, the government established Fort Kearny at the site of Nebraska City, but transferred the name a year later to a new fort located almost 200 miles to the west in the Platte Valley. Lastly, the Mormons, having been forced to flee their homes in Illinois, established their "Winter Quarters" of 1846-1847 on Indian lands a few miles south of the Council Bluff of Lewis and Clark. Because of Indian complaints, the Mormons retreated to the east bank where they founded the village of Kaneshville. This temporary and unstable settlement became, after 1849, a boisterous rendezvous for the gold seekers journeying to California. The continuing flow of Mormons to the Great Salt Lake merely blended with the general migration across the plains. By January, 1853, the vast majority of Saints had left Iowa; Kaneshville, again a quiet village, was renamed Council Bluffs City.⁴

³ *St. Louis Missouri Republican*, April 10, 1839.

⁴ For a brief history of the Mormons in the Missouri Valley see Clyde B. Aitchison, "Mormon Settlements in the Missouri Valley," *Proceedings and Collections of the Nebraska State Historical Society*, XV (Lincoln, 1907), 15-24.

With the passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act in May, 1854, and the cession of Omaha and Oto lands to the United States that spring, increasing numbers of settlers drifted across the Missouri into the newly-organized Nebraska Territory. During the summer of 1854 the remaining Mormon leaders at Council Bluffs sold their interests and returned to their former winter quarters on the west bank where, with others, they founded a town which they named Florence. Simultaneously a Council Bluffs group organized a company to establish a town directly opposite the Iowa village. In May, 1854, these proprietors erected a log claim house on the site of Omaha, selected a ferry landing, and laid out the town into streets, lots, and parks. By September they had a saw mill and brick factory in operation, and in October even the New York *Herald* noted the existence of the tiny village:

Omaha City, Nebraska Territory, promises to be a second edition of Chicago and other flourishing Western cities, the sudden rise and prosperity of which have astonished the civilized world. We have before us a plan of Omaha City, laid out in lots, numbered one up to three hundred and twenty-two. We have here Jefferson Square and Capital Square. . . . The lots will be given to those persons who will improve them. A brick building for the Territorial Legislature is in progress, and various other improvements are under way. Altogether the prospects of Omaha City are good.⁵

Actually Bellevue, the only genuine settlement west of the Missouri in the spring of 1854, seemed destined to become the capital of Nebraska. Governor Francis Burt, the first to hold the office, arrived at Bellevue in October, 1854. The promoters of Bellevue desired the capital, but refused to donate any desirable land for a public building. Meanwhile the citizens of Omaha had begun to erect a two-story brick house on Ninth Street, between Farnham and Douglas, which they offered to the Territory for a court and legislature. Thomas B. Cuming, Secretary of the Territory, who succeeded to the governorship with the untimely death

⁵ Alfred D. Jones, "Omaha's Early Days," *Transactions and Reports of the Nebraska State Historical Society*, IV (Lincoln, 1892), 152-154; Mary B. Newton, *Anecdotes of Omaha* (Omaha, 1891), 40-41.

of Burt, accepted the offer.⁶ The first territorial legislature met at Omaha in January, 1855, and quickly established the almost non-existent city as the capital of Nebraska Territory.

Omaha possessed all the attributes of a promising river town. Its superb landing furnished deep water in all seasons. The city's location on a bluff eliminated the danger of floods and provided a magnificent view of the valley.⁷ The primacy of its location was reflected in its immediate growth. During 1855, reported the *Omaha Times*, the population climbed to 300; by June, 1856, it had reached 800. That summer the town's meager facilities, including its only hotel, the Douglas House, were bursting under the pressure of new arrivals.⁸

Old Fort Kearny south of the Platte, with its rock landing, commanded another attractive town site. When the government abandoned the military post, it placed all the buildings on the reservation in charge of Sergeant Hiram P. Downs. When his term of enlistment expired, Downs pre-empted the 160 acres which appeared most promising for city promotion. In 1854 he transferred his claim to the Nebraska City Town Site Company for \$2000. On May 10, the new proprietors, headed by S. F. Nuckolls, who predicted on the occasion a city of at least twenty thousand within five years, commenced the survey of the city. Soon dwellings and storehouses began to transform Old Fort Kearny into an ambitious village. Downs constructed Nebraska City's first hotel that year, a large frame building of two stories. On November 14, 1854, Henry Bradford produced the first issue of the *Nebraska News*. In 1855, J. Sterling Morton, recently arrived from Detroit,

⁶ *Omaha Arrow*, September 29, 1854; *New York Herald*, October 14, 1854.

⁷ *Omaha Arrow*, July 28, 1854; *Wyoming Post*, April 17, 1858; David M. Johnston, "Nebraska in the Fifties," *Publications of the Nebraska State Historical Society*, XIX (Lincoln, 1919), 190. Wyoming was an early Nebraska town on the Missouri north of Nebraska City).

⁸ Newton, *Anecdotes of Omaha*, 44-48.

assumed the editorship of the paper and constructed his first cottage at Arbor Lodge.⁹

Nebraska City grew slowly. Upon her arrival from St. Louis in 1857, Mollie Dorsey, the diarist, described Kearney City, the tiny settlement at the river front, as a collection of rude cabins and shanties, all quite uninhabitable. Its population, she noted, comprised an assortment of gamblers, toppers, and roughs. Nebraska City itself, located on the bluff back from the river, she wrote, was still more impressive in name than in appearance. Its stores, warehouses, and churches scattered along Main Street gave some promise of future development. But Mollie complained that the village was sadly short of houses and that her father could obtain no furniture and scarcely any provisions in its business establishments.¹⁰

Below Nebraska City, several miles above the mouth of the Little Nemaha River, two settlers from Missouri, Richard Brown and Benjamin Frazier, laid out the town of Brownville in the summer of 1854. Two years later the village's future seemed assured. In August, 1856, a correspondent of the St. Louis *Republican* reported that Brownville had 400 inhabitants, between fifty and a hundred dwellings and business houses, including two large dry goods and grocery stores, two hotels, two blacksmithing, one wagon-making, one cabinet, and one tailoring establishment, as well as three lawyers and three physicians.¹¹ One local merchant, advertising for 800 corn-fed hogs, announced his intention of packing enough pork during the following winter to supply the needs of the community. Its excellent stone landing made Brownville a promising com-

⁹ John W. Pearman, "Early Annals of Nebraska City," *Proceedings and Collections of the Nebraska State Historical Society*, XV (Lincoln, 1907), 133-139; Robert W. Furnas, "J. Sterling Morton," *ibid.*, 148; J. Sterling Morton, "From Nebraska City to Salt Creek in 1855," *Transactions and Reports of the Nebraska State Historical Society*, IV (Lincoln, 1892), 11.

¹⁰ Donald F. Danker (ed.), *Mollie: The Journal of Mollie Dorsey Sanford in Nebraska and Colorado Territories, 1857-1860* (Lincoln, 1959), 12-13.

¹¹ St. Louis *Missouri Republican*, August 3, 1856; *Nebraska Advertiser* (Brownville), June 7, August 23, 1856.

mercial site, the southernmost point of debarkation in Nebraska Territory for emigrants journeying across the plains to California. Already there was talk of a territorial road connecting the village with Fort Kearny on the Platte. In April, 1856, Dr. John McPherson, an Ohioan, established the *Nebraska Advertiser*, which advertised, among other things, the limitless prospects of the river town.¹² "As an evidence of the importance of Brownville," he announced in his first issue, "we mention that the Train for across the Plains, under the command of Capt. Foster, purchased their supplies in this place."¹³ Two more extensive mercantile houses would soon be in operation, the *Advertiser* observed in August, "with capital, enterprise and energy suited to the present large and rapidly increasing demand of this go-ahead country."

Other villages along the Missouri—Wyoming, Platts-mouth, Bellevue, Rock Bluff, and Florence — harbored visions of an unlimited future, but it was quite clear from the beginning that Omaha, Nebraska City, and Brownville would command Nebraska's economic evolution.

From foundations firmly established, Nebraska's river towns were prepared to enter, with the rest of the nation, the great boom of 1857. Underlying the boom, and indeed essential to it, was the unprecedented tide of immigration. Many newcomers merely drifted across the Missouri from the regions to the east—Illinois, Iowa, and Missouri. But a greater migration came by steamboat from Ohio and Indiana. With the opening of river navigation in 1857, reported Brownville's *Nebraska Advertiser* in April, every boat seemed crowded with human freight from stem to stern bound for Nebraska Territory. In July the *Advertiser* observed again: "There have been one hundred and thirty steamboat arrivals at the Brownville wharf since the opening of navigation this Spring, and at every arrival, without

¹² Robert W. Furnas, "Dr. John McPherson," *Proceedings and Collections of the Nebraska State Historical Society*, XV (Lincoln, 1907), 143-144.

¹³ *Nebraska Advertiser*, June 7, November 15, 1856, January 8, 1857.

a single exception, there were passengers or freight or both landed here."¹⁴ That same month the *Omaha Times* reported that two or three steamboats discharged passengers at the Omaha wharf every day.

Building during the spring and summer of 1857 far outstripped that of the previous year. Nebraska City, with its dozens of new dwellings, its new blocks of two and three story brick stores and warehouses, began to lose its former random appearance.¹⁵ Omaha's expansion was even more spectacular. "Improvement, nothing but improvement, meets the eye at every turn," observed the *Omaha Times* in July. "From the summit of Capitol Hill to the bank of the Missouri the work goes bravely on. The Capitol, the Court House, the *big* Hotel, and the new *Post Offices*, are all progressing finely. Besides these, large, handsome and substantial buildings for dwellings, stores, offices, &c., are going up all around as if by magic."¹⁶ Carpenters that summer worked by lamp light at night because the days did not afford sufficient time to meet the demand for good houses.

Land offices at both Nebraska City and Omaha did a thriving business. With the rapid disappearance of vacant urban lots in the river towns and unclaimed farm lands in the immediate countryside, the price of real estate quickly responded to the pressures of speculation. The Douglas House of Omaha was crowded to overflowing with travelers, residents, speculators, land owners, lawyers—all gathered to discuss real estate and assure all new arrivals of the certainty of future values. In April, 1857, with the population reaching 2000, lots brought as much as \$3500. Two months later the population had reached 3000 and the

¹⁴ *Nebraska Advertiser*, June 14, 1856, April 23, July 2, 1857; *Omaha Times*, July 16, 1857.

¹⁵ *Nebraska News*, April 4, September 12, December 19, 1857, February 27, 1858; *Nebraska Advertiser*, October 29, 1857.

¹⁶ *Omaha Times*, July 9, 1857.

price of lots, \$4000, with many on Farnham, Douglas, and Harney streets selling at \$100 per foot.¹⁷

Omaha's astonishing growth during the spring and summer of 1857 merely aggravated the resentment of urban leaders south of the Platte who believed the city's primacy hinged solely on its possession of the capital. Already Omaha's detractors in the legislature had attempted to remove the capital to another location.¹⁸ The editor of the *Nebraska News* of Nebraska City admitted grudgingly in December, 1857, that Omaha had the air of an eastern city. "The buildings are fine, large, elegant, and commodious, and generally built with neatness and good taste," he wrote. "The society we are told is excellent. . . . The site of the town, too, is a beautiful one, while the view from the Capitol is really magnificent." But he added caustically: "Remove the Capitol and Omaha is dead. She has no natural advantages aside from a beautiful *site*; her landing is a poor one; she is a good distance from the river; timber is sparce in the vicinity; she has no such country around and back of her as has Nebraska City. . . ." Any candid observer, he concluded, would admit that Omaha, contrasted to Nebraska City, had no future at all. To compete favorably with Omaha, the other river towns required only the submission of the capital removal question to a vote of the people.¹⁹

Omaha, having enjoyed the greatest speculative boom during 1856 and 1857, was most vulnerable of the river communities of Nebraska to the ensuing panic. The collapse of several large New York and Ohio banks in the early autumn of 1857 set off a chain of bank failures throughout the West. No banking system was less prepared to face a financial crisis than that of Nebraska Territory.

¹⁷ "Reminiscences of William Augustus Gwyer," *Publications of the Nebraska State Historical Society*, XIX (Lincoln, 1919), 169-170; *Omaha Times*, June 11, 1857.

¹⁸ Alfred Sorenson, *History of Omaha from the Pioneer Days to the Present Time* (Omaha, 1889), 88-90.

¹⁹ *Nebraska News*, December 19, 1857. Eventually these efforts of Omaha's rivals succeeded. In 1867 the capital of Nebraska was moved to the prairie village of Lincoln.

The Nebraska banking law, which passed the territorial legislature in July, 1856, authorized banks to issue notes in unlimited amounts, without any form of restriction or any requirement that they maintain a proportion of their assets on hand in specie for the redemption of notes.²⁰ Omaha's largest bank, the Western Exchange Fire and Marine Insurance Company, failed on September 23, 1857. By December every bank in Nebraska, with the exception of two or three, had closed its doors. The financial crash and the sudden tightening of credit broke the speculative mood, checked business expansion, and knocked the bottom out of real estate. "All our bright prospects vanished in one hour," one resident recalled, "and we lost half of our most energetic citizens."²¹ One merchant, William Augustus Gwyer, to meet the demand for lumber, had purchased a large quantity in Chicago and had it transported by steamboat to Omaha. For a brief period he sold lumber at astonishing prices. Then came the collapse. "I was caught," he wrote, "not because I owed money, but because I could not sell anything I owned. . . . I could not sell sufficient to purchase provisions for my family. It was the ruin of all my high ambitions. The question was no longer how I could best promote the state of Nebraska, but how I, personally, could exist at all."²²

Nebraska's financial collapse had been complete. Yet the Missouri River frontier was too undeveloped, the tide of emigration too heavy, the opportunities for economic expansion too limitless to permit any long-term business stagnation. The discovery of gold at Cherry Creek, Colorado, in 1858 provided an immediate stimulus for Omaha's recovery. During the summer miners began to enter the valley in large numbers, largely by steamboat from St. Louis. Omaha merchants and editors encouraged the tendency of prospectors to embark on the long trip to the mines from

²⁰ St. Louis *Missouri Republican*, July 19, 1856.

²¹ Irvine, "Recollections of Omaha, 1855-1861," *Proceedings and Collections of the Nebraska State Historical Society*, V (Lincoln, 1902), 157-158.

²² "Reminiscences of William Augustus Gwyer," 177-178.

Omaha, following the Platte route westward. By September the *Omaha Times* carried a detailed table of distances from Omaha to Cherry Creek. "At Omaha city," declared the editor, "all the stores necessary for an outfit can be furnished at low prices and teams and produce of any description abound in the surrounding country and this place being a rendezvous market the emigrant will have no trouble in obtaining all he wants for the journey without leaving town."²³

During the spring of 1859 Omaha entered another busy time. Now hundreds of wagons arrived from the east every week to replenish their supplies for the long journey to the gold fields. Omaha's first wholesale grocery, established in 1859 by J. H. Lacey and John McCormick, commanded much of the new Pike's Peak trade. "It was a busy time in Omaha in those days," Lacey recalled. "Our first stock was purchased in St. Louis in March, 1859, and reached here by steamboat just at the time everybody was rushing to Pike's Peak." For eight months that year the streets of Omaha were crowded with "teams, bull-wackers, mule-drivers, ranchmen, Mormons, 'pilgrims,' and Indians."²⁴ Freighters pulling in from Colorado with gold and fur added to the color and bustle. Their unending preparations for the return trip to the mountains filled the air with oaths and the cracking of whips. To meet the demands of the cross-country traffic, merchants kept their stores open day and night, seven days a week. During 1860 the emigrant business exceeded that of the previous year. By April between ten and twenty wagons came into Omaha every day, headed for the gold fields.²⁵ By May the migration reached almost a hundred per day. Omaha's future as the great transshipment point on the Missouri was assured.

Nebraska City broke from its lethargy early in 1858 when Alexander Majors of the large freighting firm of Russell, Majors and Waddell selected the river town as a

²³ *Omaha Times*, September 16, 1858.

²⁴ Sorenson, *Omaha*, 156-157.

²⁵ *Omaha Nebraska Republican*, February 29, March 7, April 25, May 9, 1860.

shipping point for its expanding business. The War Department had awarded this company the contract to haul supplies to Albert Sidney Johnston's forces in Utah, dispatched to this distant frontier the previous year to quell a possible Mormon uprising. To Majors Nebraska City appeared a vastly superior shipping point to Leavenworth, his company's headquarters, because it reduced the overland journey to a minimum. That Nebraska City, by Majors' decision, was to become the chief freighting center in Nebraska promised the village at last the prominence that it deserved. Clearly it would now become the dominant commercial city north of Kansas, predicted the *Nebraska News*. "Boats," ran one editorial, "will discharge their thousands upon thousands of freight upon our large and capacious wharf, thousands of wagons will be engaged in hauling the freight westward and on the air line route from this place to Fort Kearney; passengers will take a view of our enterprizing young city and once having examined for themselves we have no fears of their going farther."²⁶ Fraud, added the editor, had located the capital at Omaha, but it was the sagacious and careful decision of businessmen, after a personal examination of all the river landings, that secured for Nebraska City its freighting establishment. Brownville's *Nebraska Advertiser* concluded in March, 1858, that the freighting and military depot was far more valuable than the territorial capital, and the *Omaha Times* that same month expressed the hope that Nebraska City, having received the depot, would stop complaining about the capital.²⁷

By the late spring of 1858 the streets of Nebraska City rang with the creak of heavy wagons and the shouts of bull-wackers. Mollie Dorsey, visiting the village in May, was astonished at the changes wrought in the space of a few months. "Today the streets are full of ox teams loading up to start on a trip to Utah," she recorded in her diary. "All is commotion, the hallowing of the drivers, the

²⁶ *Nebraska News*, February 20, 27, 1858.

²⁷ *Nebraska Advertiser*, March 4, 1858; *Omaha Times*, March 20, 1858.

clanking of chains and wagon-masters giving orders.”²⁸ Russell, Majors and Waddell had established their headquarters in a grove on the west side of town where they constructed their blacksmith shops, wheelwright and wagon shops, stores, warehouses, boarding houses, and even a church. By July hundreds of wagons were strewn along the river bank; thousands of oxen grazed on the meadows below the town. The wagons themselves — either the Murphy, manufactured in St. Louis, or the Studebaker, transported from South Bend, Indiana—were specially designed for plains transportation, constructed of the best lumber, strong and tight, with high double box, wide tracks and heavy tires, and covers of heavy canvas.²⁹

In August the *Nebraska News* recorded the impact of the summer's activities on the city's outlook: “Considering that everything west of the Missouri river is yet in an embryo state, or was up to the present season, the advantages and great results directly and indirectly accruing to Nebraska City from the events of the last four months cannot be correctly estimated by even the most sanguine and far seeing. We consider, and the unprejudiced at once sees, that *several things* are *settled* with regard to the river towns of Nebraska by the results of the present season.”³⁰

But the bustle and noise of oxen and wagons in 1858 was only a prelude to the vastly increased activity along Nebraska City's river front as the Pike's Peakers in 1859 and 1860 joined the freighters to set in motion an almost continuous stream of wagons along the well-worn route across the plains to the mountains and the mines. In May, 1859, the *Nebraska News* noted the rapid influx of emigrants: “The steamboat landing is still crowded with Pike's Peakers' wagons of all styles and sizes, mules, oxen, and many other things that the ardent Pike's Peaker sup-

²⁸ Danker, *Mollie*, 69.

²⁹ *Nebraska News*, April 10, 15, May 22, July 10, 31, 1858; D. P. Rolfe, “Overland Freighting from Nebraska City,” *Proceedings and Collections of the Nebraska State Historical Society*, V (Lincoln, 1902), 281-282.

³⁰ *Nebraska News*, August 21, 1858.

poses to be necessary for the overland journey. . . . The crowds press on. There is no abatement. It is wonderful; it astonishes even the Mississippi and Missouri river steamboat men."³¹ The editor made it clear that Nebraska City offered the best route to the west and that the city's stores were well equipped to supply emigrants with everything needful.

Even more important to Nebraska City's new prosperity was the remarkable expansion of its freighting business. In April, 1859, the firm of Jones and Kerr, long engaged in western freighting from Leavenworth and Atchison, transferred its operation to Nebraska City. Another Leavenworth establishment, Livingston, Bell & Company, sent forty wagons by boat to the Nebraska City landing that month to commence freighting over the central route to the Rockies. By May the hills surrounding the city were covered with cattle to be used in hauling freight, and the constant movement of wagons gave the city an air of excitement. Russell, Majors and Waddell were preparing at that moment to send out forty trains—twenty-five wagons to the train, each wagon drawn by six yoke of oxen and carrying three tons of freight. It would require, observed the *Nebraska News*, 12,000 oxen, 1000 drivers, and 16 million oaths to get these trains to Salt Lake City.³²

By 1860 Nebraska City's pre-eminence as a freighting center was unchallenged. Its new and direct route to the west crossed the Big Blue near the mouth of the West Blue, and struck the Platte forty miles east of Fort Kearny, thus saving forty miles and two days travel over the old route which swung to the north and reached the Platte only thirty miles from its mouth.³³ Each issue of the *Nebraska News* during the spring of 1860 carried a map which sought to prove that the route from Nebraska City was the shortest from the Missouri to Fort Kearny and the Rockies, shorter

³¹ *Nebraska News*, April 2, May 7, 1859.

³² *Nebraska News*, April 30, May 14, 1859.

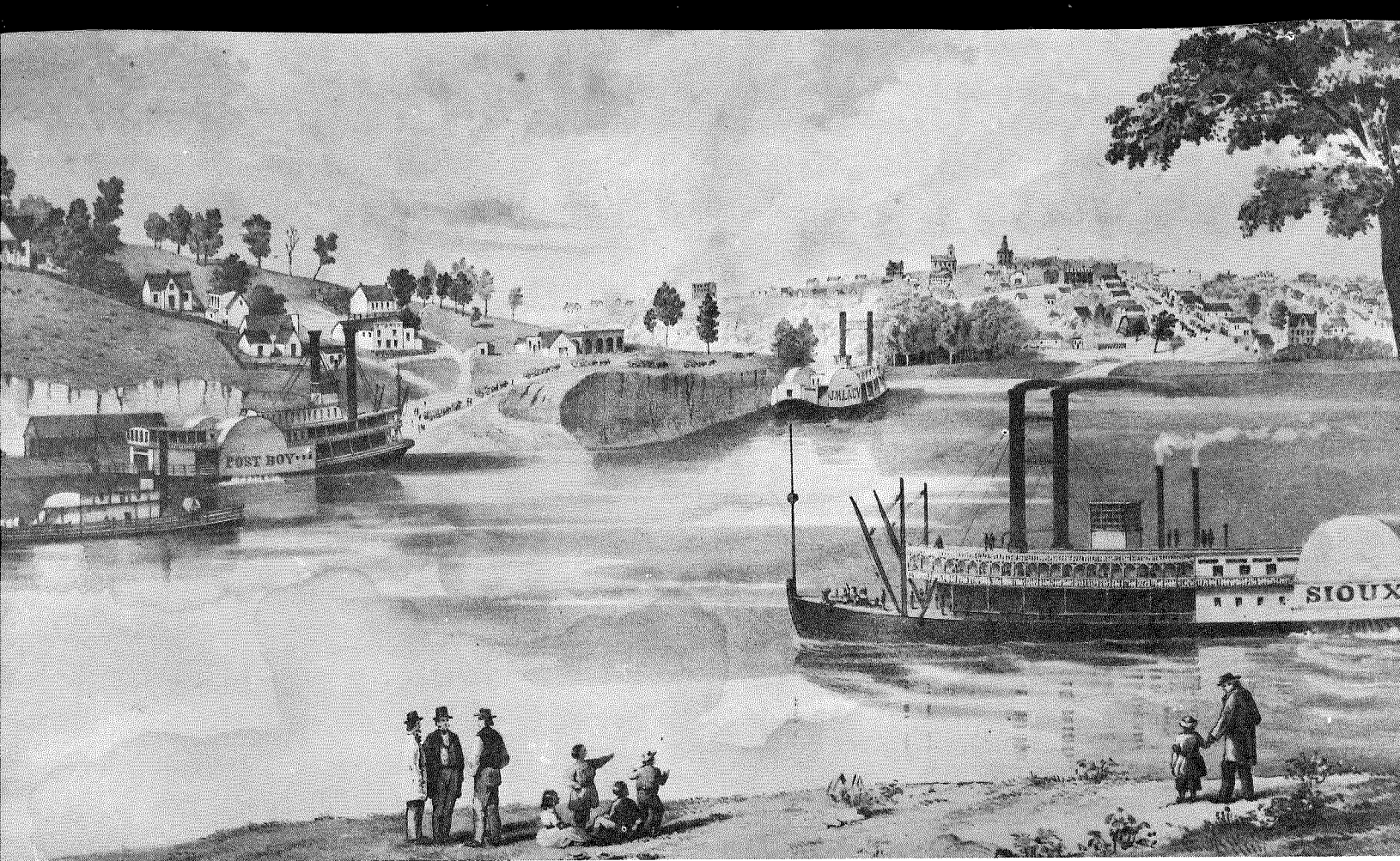
³³ Rolfe, "Overland Freighting from Nebraska City," 280-281; George P. Marvin, "Bullwhacking Days," *Proceedings and Collections of the Nebraska State Historical Society*, V (Lincoln, 1902), 226-227.



Council Bluffs Ferry, 1853
(From a sketch by Frederick Piercy)



Brownville Street Scene, about 1860



Nebraska City River Front, 1865



Nebraska City—Main Street, Looking West, 1865

by twenty miles than that from Omaha.³⁴ During the spring months the city's business establishments were thronged with miners and freighters preparing their outfits for crossing the plains. "Our city is filled up with emigrants to the mines," noted the *Nebraska News* in April. "Their canvass tents and white topped wagons may be seen in the ravines and creeks in and about the city, giving the place much the appearance of a miniature settlement."³⁵ The wharves that month were covered with goods for local merchants and for transshipment to the mines and to Utah. If Nebraska City's expansion seemed anchored to the movement of emigrants and freight across its levee, that movement alone appeared sufficient and endless enough to assure the community a continuing importance as a leading depot on the Missouri.

Brownville, like its competitors to the north, captured a share of the rush to the mountains and turned it into a source of considerable profit. Miners began to drift into Brownville during the summer of 1858, securing their outfits from local merchants for the overland journey to Cherry Creek. The *Nebraska Advertiser* shouted the advantages of Brownville's location and prices over the other river towns. The village, noted the editor, was on the best overland route from the east and had the best crossing on the river.³⁶ In April, 1859, he reported that the movement through Brownville was on the increase, with one or more trains leaving for the mines every day. A year later he observed again: "The Pike's Peak travel through this place is opening up brisk. A great many have already arrived at this point, and out-fitted here, and others are camped on the other side of the river waiting for grass."³⁷ The movement of emigrants across a river landing, whether from steamboat or ferry, headed for distant objectives, might stimulate local business and even the imagination, but for Brownville, as for the other Missouri river towns, it could

³⁴ *Nebraska News*, March 10, 1860.

³⁵ *Nebraska News*, April 14, 28, 1860.

³⁶ *Nebraska Advertiser*, October 28, 1858, February 17, 1859.

³⁷ *Nebraska Advertiser*, April 21, 1859, April 12, 1860.

not be a source of permanent prosperity or internal expansion.

Far less spectacular, but far more essential to the continued growth of Omaha, Nebraska City, or Brownville, was the steady influx of settlers who resisted the temptation to cross the plains and remained instead on the prairies that extended westward from the Missouri. Editors along the river encouraged the gold seekers to reconsider before they embarked for the mines and invest their resources and energy in Nebraska farm land. With good markets available on the Missouri river, predicted the *Omaha Times* in September, 1858, emigrants would experience greater prosperity and satisfaction as farmers along the Platte than as miners in the Rockies.³⁸ The *Nebraska News* attempted in the late fifties to interest emigrants in the vacant lands along the route to Fort Kearny. It termed the prairies south of the Platte the "Great Gold Fields of the Modern Eldorado." "This must inevitably be a great Agricultural country," ran one editorial. "The numerous springs and creeks as well as the character of the soil and general surface of the country point with certainty to such a result."³⁹ The editor suggested impatiently that much of the migration into Kansas would be diverted northward if the region south of the Platte were annexed to Kansas. State organization, he declared, would invite capital and population which a territory could not do.

Indeed, many of those who drifted into the river towns after 1857 came to stay. Hardly a day passed in the spring of 1858 when one or more wagons did not pass through Omaha and Nebraska City on the way to the Platte Valley.⁴⁰ By 1860 there was extensive cultivation for twenty miles west of Nebraska City along the route to Fort Kearny, although much of the land near the river was still unsettled. Farther north there were settlements at Fremont, at Co-

³⁸ *Omaha Times*, September 16, 1858; *Nebraska News*, June 4, 1859.

³⁹ *Nebraska News*, March 6, December 11, 1858.

⁴⁰ *Omaha Times*, May 13, 1858; *Nebraska News*, April 24, 1858; *Wyoming Telescope*, May 7, 1859.

lumbus, and on the Platte as far west as Grand Island. The movement of farmers into the lower tiers of counties was even more rapid. By the fall of 1858, boasted the *Nebraska Advertiser*, the land west of Brownville was settled as fully as that of many older states for a distance of fifty miles. Pioneers had already established the tiny village of Beatrice on the Blue. Falls City, founded in 1857 on the Nemaha nine miles from the Missouri, had become the center of a thriving agricultural community.⁴¹ To secure this expanding internal trade became the major concern of Brownville merchants, for much of it was flowing in other directions. It was essential, declared the *Advertiser* as early as 1856, that Brownville have good roads into Pawnee and Johnson counties. In March, 1858, the editor reported that there were two good bridges across the Nemaha, at Long's Crossing and Hoover's Mill, which furnished easy access to Brownville. He complained, however, that the leading men of the city lacked the vision and enterprise to build the improvements which might permit them to control the trade of the southern counties.⁴²

Nebraska's expanding agricultural economy, brought into being and sustained by the river towns, quickly established that relationship between agriculture and commerce which alone permitted both to flourish. After 1858 it was not only the wagons of freighters and miners that crowded the streets of Omaha, Nebraska City, and Brownville, but the wagons of farmers as well.⁴³ Produce offered for sale in 1858 was still so limited and demands created by freighters and emigrants so extensive that grain and livestock markets were almost entirely local.⁴⁴ But commission merchants from St. Louis appeared in Nebraska that summer, offering a wider market for corn, and the *Omaha Times*

⁴¹ *Nebraska Advertiser*, March 18, September 16, October 28, 1858.

⁴² *Nebraska Advertiser*, July 26, August 2, 1856, March 11, October 21, 1858.

⁴³ *Nebraska News*, June 26, 1858.

⁴⁴ *Nebraska Advertiser*, March 25, August 19, 1858; *Nebraska News*, January 17, 1857, October 23, 1858; *Nebraska City Peoples Press*, November 24, 1859.

reported shipments of potatoes, corn, and oats down the river during the autumn months of 1858.⁴⁵ Finally in 1859 the heavy movement of grain by wagon into the river communities broke the home market completely.

Nemaha County alone produced an estimated 500,000 bushels of surplus corn in 1858; during the following winter much of this poured into the Brownville market. On January 20, 1859, the *Nebraska Advertiser* reported that for three months no day had passed in which thirty to sixty wagon loads of corn had not been delivered to local produce merchants. One day in mid-January the editor counted fifty-two wagons lined up to unload at Crane & Hill's and I. T. Whyte's. With the opening of navigation in the spring of 1859 boat after boat took on 1000-2000 sacks of corn and hundreds of sacks of potatoes at the Brownville wharf. That year large quantities of corn were shipped as well from Omaha and Nebraska City, and in September the first consignment of Nemaha County wheat was loaded at Brownville for the St. Louis market.⁴⁶

Huge quantities of produce were again ready for market along the Missouri when navigation commenced in 1860, but the low stage of the river and the consequent rise in freight charges brought the price of corn down to the point where only those who were compelled by circumstances bothered to sell at all. In April the *Nebraska Advertiser* announced that Brownville commission men had 50,000 bushels of corn in storage.⁴⁷ But in March, 1860, one Nebraska City merchant drove a herd of fat cattle to St. Joseph—perhaps the first shipment of Nebraska livestock to the eastern market.

Under the combined impact of freighting, outfitting, and shipping the Nebraska river towns had experienced by 1860 an amazing internal development. New dwellings could hardly be constructed with sufficient speed to satisfy

⁴⁵ *Nebraska Advertiser*, September 23, 1858; *Omaha Times*, September 16, 1858.

⁴⁶ *Nebraska Advertiser*, January 30, May 12, September 1, 1859.

⁴⁷ *Nebraska Advertiser*, February 2, March 15, April 26, 1860.

the demand of merchants and mechanics. New hotels along the river offered increasingly better accommodations for travelers. Nebraska City's elegant and spacious Nuckolls House, its new four story brick hotel, was the city's chief ornament, but almost equally impressive were the rows of stores and shops along Main Street and the large warehouses that lined the river front. By March, 1860, the *Nebraska News* claimed for its city a population of 4000.⁴⁸ Yet at its moment of apparent triumph disaster struck the city. In May a fire swept through the business district, destroying 46 of its best commercial houses, including the Nuckolls House itself. "All interests were paralyzed," W. W. Cox, an early resident, recalled. "Property depreciated until it apparently had no value. It really seemed that hope and energy had gone up in smoke with the property. Scores of men and women fled the city as if it were a plague spot."⁴⁹

Nebraska's river economy, like all river economies that preceded it, was anchored to two modes of transportation—wagons and steamboats. Both were decided limitations to urban growth, especially for towns whose metropolitan areas were limited to surrounding farm lands and which, unlike St. Louis or Cincinnati, could not command the trade flowing down navigable tributaries. Whatever the prosperity of the Missouri river towns in 1860, it was tied essentially to the activity along their wharves. Only the river commerce permitted the early Nebraska economy to transcend the subsistence stage. The growth of the river communities was matched, of necessity, by the expansion of transportation. In 1854 only two or three steamboats made regular trips above St. Joseph. Two years later there were thirteen boats in the Nebraska trade. In 1857 the *St. Louis Republican* reported 46 steamers, valued at over a million dollars, in use on the Missouri. A year later the *Republican*

⁴⁸ *Nebraska News*, February 27, March 6, 27, June 17, 1858, March 17, 1860.

⁴⁹ W. W. Cox, "Reminiscences of Early Days in Nebraska," *Transactions and Reports of the Nebraska State Historical Society*, V (Lincoln, 1893), 68-69; *Nebraska City Peoples Press*, May 16, 1860.

listed 59. That most of these vessels plied as far upstream as Omaha and Council Bluffs seems clear from the sheer number of arrivals at the Nebraska landings. One day in May, 1857, the *Nebraska Advertiser* reported, five boats discharged freight and passengers at the Brownville wharf simultaneously. Steamboat arrivals, declared the editor, were no longer looked for weekly or daily, but almost hourly. That year a regular packet line was established between St. Joseph and Council Bluffs, with large warehouses at St. Joseph for transshipment to St. Louis.⁵⁰

River transportation, despite its superb historic achievements, limited commerce to those seasons of the year which permitted the free and profitable movement of boats. During the winter months especially business tended to remain dormant, and it required the first arrival of the steamers each spring to inject new life and ambition into communities that relied on the rivers. The *Nebraska News* described the reaction of Nebraska City to the sighting of the first steamboat in March, 1858: "The streets were at once filled with men and boys, running to the wharf to meet the first boat of the season." At Omaha later that week the first sound of the steamboat whistle sent a similar surge of enthusiasm through the populace. "Immediately the bluffs fronting the river were lined with crowds of our citizens," noted the *Omaha Times*, "and a regular stream of people, numbering some four or six hundred, poured down the levee to witness the landing of the boat."⁵¹

To thoughtful and ambitious Nebraskans of the late fifties, railroads alone could break through the economic barriers imposed by both wagon and river transportation. First of all, the absence of navigable rivers which penetrated the interior limited successful settlement to those regions affording access to Missouri River markets by wagon and team. To move beyond such areas would isolate

⁵⁰ *Nebraska Advertiser*, July 26, 1856, May 7, September 3, 1857, April 1, 1858; *Nebraska News*, January 17, 1857.

⁵¹ *Nebraska News*, March 20, 1858; *Omaha Times*, March 24, 1858.

the pioneer from the world abroad and deprive him of all economic intercourse except with those who resided near him. Without the construction of railroads, it was clear, the vast majority of Nebraska lands would remain vacant and contribute little or nothing to the development of the Territory's agriculture and commerce. This, in turn, would set stringent limits to the growth of its urban centers.

Second, to supplant the steamboats with year-around transportation facilities and to reach more lucrative markets, Nebraska's town promoters urged the establishment of rail connections with the East. At times the expense of shipping grain down the Missouri had proved so costly as to render agricultural production above the demand of the local market unprofitable.⁵² By 1860 the problems of transportation made it quite certain that the ultimate economic significance of the Missouri River towns hinged on their success in attracting to their sites one or more of the major railroads then reaching out from Chicago across the Mississippi and into Iowa. Only Omaha of the Nebraska towns was assured a direct rail line to the East, for the important Mississippi and Missouri Railroad charter established Council Bluffs as the western terminus of that road. The extension of the M and M across the Missouri would bring it to Omaha, and to assure the achievement of this purpose the citizens of Omaha in 1859 projected their own line westward across Nebraska along the Platte Valley route.⁵³ The widespread conviction that Omaha would be the railroad capital of Nebraska had given that city its genuine advantage over its down-river rivals almost from the moment of its founding.

In a dawning age of railroads, neither Nebraska City nor Brownville ever enjoyed a comparable prospect. For Nebraska City the great hope of future greatness lay in attracting the Burlington and Missouri to its crossing. At

⁵² *Nebraska News*, June 26, 1858. This problem became clear from the experience of 1860.

⁵³ *Omaha Nebraska Republican*, November 9, 1859; Newton, *Anecdotes of Omaha*, 61-62; Sorenson, *History of Omaha from the Pioneer Days to the Present Time*, 160.

best its spokesmen could suggest the benefits that might accrue to Eastern railroad interests through such a connection. A railroad across Nebraska terminating at Nebraska City, predicted the *Nebraska News*, would transform the prairies west of the city, as well as the valleys of the Nemaha and Blue, into heavily producing agricultural regions. Manufacturers and capitalists, it continued, "will find in Salt Creek and Weeping Water the sites for their salt sheds and flouring mills, and the merchant will find a host of little villages springing up all along the ridge where he may exhibit his wares. . . . This population will all come and make an outgoing traffic, and require a corresponding incoming one, sufficient to supply a heavily equipped railroad."⁵⁴

For Brownville the only prospect of rail connections with the East lay in the projected line through the northern tier of Missouri counties, joining Keokuk on the Mississippi with Brownville on the Missouri. This road, insisted the *Nebraska Advertiser*, would make the river town a gateway between a vast and fertile interior and the cities of the Atlantic coast.⁵⁵

It was as much the realization that the eastern railroads might never reach them as the demand for faster and cheaper transportation that caused the Nebraska towns below Omaha to wax enthusiastic after 1858 at the notion of a St. Joseph and Council Bluffs Railroad. The proposed route of this road, paralleling the Missouri, would pass through western Iowa eight miles from Nebraska City and less than two miles from Brownville. This railroad, unlike those crossing Iowa from the east, appeared feasible because it would traverse settled country and thus could be financed by those who would profit from it. By assuring almost immediate year-around transportation, predicted the *Nebraska News* in May, 1858, the St. Joseph and Council Bluffs line would help to settle the prairies of Nebraska

⁵⁴ *Nebraska News*, January 17, 1857, July 31, 1858.

⁵⁵ *Nebraska Advertiser*, July 19, 1856, September 10, 1857, October 14, 1858.

and vastly increase the cereal production of the entire Missouri Valley. "A railroad would concentrate this trade," continued the editorial, "and, by saving expense to the farmer, keep money with us, and accelerate the rapid progress we are now making toward a distinguished position in agricultural wealth and importance."⁵⁶

Through six short years the Missouri River towns of Nebraska had lived through a complete frontier experience. Around them had clustered the first settlers; their river markets had stimulated the rapid expansion of agricultural production. There was nothing unique in the character of the economy which they established or in the methods by which they achieved it. Even as river communities they had not reached the limits of their significance, either to the Nebraska frontier or to the larger commercial world of the Mississippi Valley. But railroads alone could alter measurably their basic economic structures and give them a broader world to develop and exploit. And the city or cities that could command those railroads would, it seemed inevitable, win the race for commercial and industrial superiority.

⁵⁶ *Nebraska News*, May 29, 1858, June 11, 1859; *Nebraska Advertiser*, May 20, 1858, October 20, 1859.