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Article Summary: Boundary changes or changes in political organization often led to name changes for Nebraska counties, particularly during the territorial days. Sometimes the original name was replaced in order to honor a different person. Today the names that were changed exist only on old maps and legislative documents.

*Scroll down for complete article.*

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Maps: J H Colton's *Kansas and Nebraska*, c. 1959; Asher and Adams' *Nebraska*, c. 1871

## GHOST COUNTIES OF NEBRASKA

BY NORMA KIDD GREEN

GHOST towns have long been the subject of gay or lurid tales—stories of vanished prosperity and glory or descriptions of later decay. The mine was worked out, the railroad went through twenty miles away or the highway was changed and a once lively community became rows of empty houses along weedy streets. Sometimes the optimistic promoters and town planners over-stepped their mark and the cities of their imagination never existed, but for a time as names on the map.

Most ghost counties in Nebraska fit the last category. The early legislatures of the territory and state, often without benefit of settlement or of survey, marked out great stretches of prairie on paper. Frequently the next legislature revised its predecessor's work. In five or twenty years enough settlers appeared to set up a political organization. Then the people often changed boundaries again and wanted another name as the first choice had faded from their knowledge. In other cases politics had

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fluctuated and the first name had become one to be scorned rather than to be honored.

These "paper" counties exist today only on old maps or in the dusty volumes of legislative records. The names of a few remain as names of towns. Nebraskans of today looking at a state map could not find the counties of Jones, Cunningham, Emmett, West, Wilson, Monroe, Morton, Forney, Calhoun, Harrison, Lyon, Wiltsie or L' Eau Qui Court. They would find Clay, Loup, Grant, Saunders and Pierce but not in the location designated by the early legislatures.

Most of these shifts by which names were dropped from the map, and sections of territory were defined, re-defined and defined again came during the territorial days from 1854 to 1867, but changes in county boundaries and names occurred as recently as 1913.

As Nebraska became a territory in 1854 a handful of men living along the Missouri River were to subdivide and administer a largely unknown territory extending from the 40th parallel to the Canadian border and roughly from the Missouri to the Rockies. In all this great territory there were probably not 30,000 persons. Most of it had not been surveyed and some had not even been visited by white men, although explorers and trappers had been crossing it for about fifty years. Acting Governor Cuming, of the Territory of Nebraska, created eight counties by proclamation. These counties were Burt, Cass, Dodge, Douglas, Forney, Pierce, Richardson, and Washington—and with the exception of Dodge, all bordered on the Missouri River.

Cuming showed himself to be an astute politician in the names he chose; Burt was named after the first territorial governor who had recently died, Washington, of course, was for the first President. Those two were certainly to be honored. Douglas was for the senator from Illinois, father of the Kansas-Nebraska bill, Forney for the Clerk in the House of Representatives and Pierce for the President of the United States under whom Cuming held his appointment. He selected the names of Dodge and

Richardson for the men who had steered the Kansas-Nebraska bill through the Senate and the House, while Cass was for Gen. Lewis Cass of Michigan, a strong supporter of Cuming within the Democratic Party.

There were two other counties, "ghost" counties, present at this very first christening of Nebraska counties—Jones and Omaha. Jones County was created because there were white men living on Indian lands in 1854, and the question arose whether this land should be included in voting districts. The commissioner of Indian affairs ruled that if the Indian land had not been formally ceded no territorial authority could be set up, but "in the country west of the half breeds and south of the Platte River west of the Otoe and Missouri cession and bounded on the north by the Platte River as far as 101 degrees west longitude, and from that point in a southwesterly direction to the line dividing Kansas and Nebraska near the 103 degree" election precincts might be established. This stretch of land was designated as Jones county and a deputy marshal was sent to find what voting population there might be. He reported there was none except in Belews precinct in Richardson County and these people could vote in that county.<sup>1</sup>

The number of members of the Council and of the House had already been determined and now Cuming assigned to Douglas county the members who would have been given to Jones if there had been voters in Jones—or if Jones had been declared a county. Cuming's opponents considered this but a part of his plan to favor the North Platte region over the South.

It has been reported that another county was to have been included in the original proclamation—and to have been called Omaha. This county was approximately the present Sarpy county, at least it would have included Bellevue. Omaha County was not created by the proclamation, instead it was included in Douglas County. A. D. Jones of Omaha in after years related that Cuming on learning that

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<sup>1</sup> J. Sterling Morton and Albert Watkins, *Illustrated History of Nebraska*, Vol. I, Lincoln 1907, p. 177.

the Presbyterian Board of Missions would not sell their grounds at Bellevue for less than \$50,000 at midnight before the election "took up the voting place and vacated the order naming the Bellevue District Omaha County."<sup>2</sup> Later there were charges and counter charges against Cuming and for years heated debates over the location of the capital. Whether the proposed Omaha county was only to have been Bellevue district has not been fully established—but we have never had an Omaha County and three years later there came into being Sarpy County, out of the original Douglas county—and Peter Sarpy who had long been a part of the life of the region was given permanent recognition by the state.

This early controversy is illustrative of Arthur Mullen's pungent description of Nebraska, a statement which seems more and more true the more one studies the history of the state.

"Born in battle, cradled in conflict, raised on a rampage, Nebraska has always been a state in a high wind."<sup>3</sup>

Forney and Pierce Counties did not remain long with Nebraska. By 1855 and largely on the insistence of the residents of those communities the names were changed to Nemaha and Otoe, names of more indigenous than political significance. Pierce reappeared as a county name in 1856 when the legislature created a large county which included the area of the present Pierce.

When the territorial legislature met in January of 1855, its members settled to the task of carving political entities out of thousands of square miles of prairies and mountains. They re-defined the original eight counties (Nemaha and Otoe with their Indian names) and established 16 others. In those 16, six have either changed location or have gone out of existence, Greene, McNeale, Izard, Blackbird, Jackson, and Clay.<sup>4</sup> Greene county, having been

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<sup>2</sup> Addison E. Sheldon, *History of Nebraska*, Vol. I, Chicago 1931, p. 251-252.

<sup>3</sup> Arthur E. Mullen, *Western Democrat*, New York 1940, p. 86.

<sup>4</sup> Laws of Nebraska, 1st Session, 1855, p. 335-346.



J. H. Colton's **Kansas and Nebraska**, (ca.) 1859  
(From the Norma Kidd Green Map Collection).



Asher and Adams' **Nebraska** (ca.) 1871  
(From the Norma Kidd Green Map Collection).

credited with 16 inhabitants in 1860 became Seward county in 1862. McNeale seems to have always been a paper county, but it approximated the present Wayne County while Izard became Stanton County.

The act of 1855 left Blackbird county without a definite southern boundary, but it remained Blackbird county on the maps, although legally not a county, until Thurston County was formed from it in 1889. (With its boundaries definitely established it included the Winnebago and Omaha reservations.)

Jackson County has been a traveling ghost; authorized in 1855 it was to have a county-seat named Jacksonville. On a map in Cornell's *High School Geography* of 1860 it is west of Johnson County, but north of Gage. Apparently it was meant to be the west part of the present Otoe. It had no legal existence but the 1870 census said it had a population of nine. The population may have been reported after the county name was moved to the western part of the state, for in 1870 other counties making their own population reports occupied the location of the original authorization. There is no legal basis for a Jackson county in the southwest corner of Nebraska, but two maps show that corner as Jackson County.<sup>5</sup>

Clay County of 1855 was made up of the southern part of Lancaster and the northern part of Gage as they stand today.<sup>6</sup> In 1866 it was officially absorbed by its two neighbors and in 1867 the name was given to present Clay County. The only trace of the "Old Clay" today is in the town of Clatonia in northern Gage County, although the act of 1855 said the county-seat was to be called "Clayton."

The manufacture of counties was an ever present job for the early legislatures and in the session of 1856 work

<sup>5</sup> Samuel Augustus Mitchell, *Map of Kansas, Nebraska and Colorado*, XVI, (1868) and (Samuel Augustus Mitchell) *Nebraska* (1874). All maps cited are in the Norma Kidd Green collections at the Nebraska State Historical Society and many of the identifications and dates of unmarked maps were determined by Mrs. Green on the basis of her research. Such identifications are indicated by parenthesis.

<sup>6</sup> J. H. Colton, *Colton's Kansas and Nebraska*, (1859); (S. A. Mitchell), *Nebraska*, XVII, (1865).

was done on eighteen. Much of this was a matter of re-defining the counties of the year before and re-describing their boundaries. This was a necessary procedure for in the first act, many of the descriptions had been vague, often relying on natural features which might change, and a poorly defined line for one county often served as a boundary for another one. In 1856, for the first time, boundaries were given by legal description using township, range and section designations.

However, the lawmakers occasionally fell back to earlier usages. When Kearney County was defined in 1860 the starting point was given as "in the main channel of the Platte River, fifteen miles east of the flagstaff at Fort Kearney."<sup>7</sup> Anyone who has watched the Platte River for a period of years knows that the main channel is not always in the same place. It would seem, too, that even then someone might have imagined a time when the flagstaff at the fort could be moved.

The principal "ghost" of 1856 was Calhoun County, which was about what we know today as Saunders County. A county organization was never perfected under the name of Calhoun and in 1862, Civil War passions brought the change from the name of the Southern statesman to that of our last territorial governor.

In 1857 work was done on only six counties; boundaries were re-defined by the legislature on Washington, Johnson, and Cuming Counties and those of Cedar, Sarpy and L'eau Qui Court were formed.

L'eau Qui Court we know today as Knox County. The Niobrara River had first been called by the French name L'eau Qui Court, later by its translation The Water Which Runs, or the Running Water. The Omaha and Ponca word, Niobrara, sometimes still spoken of as "running water" is more strictly translated as "spreading water." The name L'eau Qui Court continued to add a continental touch to Nebraska maps even into the days of statehood. In 1867

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<sup>7</sup> Laws of Nebraska, Sixth Session, 1860, p. 141.

the Legislature changed the name to Emmett, provided that the people would ratify the change in an election. Apparently this was not done and the name was not changed officially until the county became Knox in 1873. One rather crudely colored map, purporting to be of 1868, gives the name as Emmett, which carries over today in the town of Emmett in nearby Holt County.<sup>8</sup>

More boundaries were shifted, and several county-seats were changed in 1858, that of Richardson being "permanently" located at Salem. In 1860 county making reached farther to the west with the creation of Kearney, Dawson and Shorter Counties. Dawson had some resemblance to its present self while Kearney extended from the Platte to the Kansas line. Shorter, its neighbor to the west, went from Kansas as far north as the North Platte River. Its name, as can be understood, was changed in 1861 to Lincoln, but it was not until ten years later that Lincoln County settled into anything like its present boundaries. The name Shorter appeared on maps even as late as 1865.<sup>9</sup>

An unusual occurrence in Nebraska county history came in the establishment of Wilson and Morton Counties in 1860. Did it seem urgent to the territorial government, meeting on the Missouri, to assert its authority in the far reaches of the territory? The great overland trails were within the boundaries of Nebraska Territory as far west as South Pass, and the principal route followed the Platte, the North Platte and the Sweetwater toward South Pass. Wilson and Morton Counties were located in the Sweetwater basin.<sup>10</sup> These are truly "ghost" counties for Nebraska, for today the area is in the State of Wyoming. This seems to be the only time when the territorial legislature formed counties outside the present limits of the state, although the territory included parts of five other future states. Another Wilson County appears where we know Hamilton on a map apparently published by S. A. Mitchell in 1865. In 1873 a Wilson County was initiated

<sup>8</sup> S. A. Mitchell, *Map of Kansas, Nebraska and Colorado* (1868).

<sup>9</sup> (Mitchell), *Nebraska* XVII (1865).

<sup>10</sup> *Laws of Nebraska, Sixth Session, 1860*, p. 139-140.

by legislative act, but there is no record of its boundaries or other indication of its existence. An act of January 13, 1860 described a West county located by points on the Running Water and the Keya Paha rivers, in the area later included in Holt County. The Mitchell map (1865) shows a West County farther south where Adams and Webster counties became established.

While the name of Jones had been early applied to that mythical county including almost everything south of the Platte and west of Cass, Otoe, Nemaha and Richardson, by the time it got on maps it was approximately the present Jefferson County. Jefferson County was to the west of Jones in the location of the present Thayer. In 1867 Jefferson County was enlarged to include sixteen townships of Jones County and then in 1871 this, too large, county was divided and Jones became Jefferson County and Jefferson County became Thayer. Jefferson County then still had twenty-four square miles in the southeast corner, which were part of the Otoe Indian Reservation.

Monroe County also had a checkered career before passing off of the Nebraska map. It was described in the act of 1856 more or less as the present Platte County. A map of 1865 shows it to the west of Platte and this same neat little square (not at all the size and shape of the counties of today) is unmarked in 1868. While a large new county north of the Platte and just east of the Panhandle is called Monroe on some maps of 1868 and 1874.<sup>11</sup>

The expansion of the railroads during the '70's and early '80's must have inspired many a promoter and possible map maker. Dozens of people had ideas for new towns and new counties. Names of prominent and influential politicians were put down on many a map with the hope that the person so honored would bring about the desired authorization. During the seventies, Marion, Midland, Napoleon, Valentine, Paddock, Garber and Carnes

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<sup>11</sup> (Mitchell), *Nebraska* XVII (1865) and Mitchell (1868), and 1874.

were a few of the counties proposed which failed to pass the legislature.<sup>12</sup>

A petition was presented to the House of Representatives in March of 1871 for the organization of Harrison County, while Harrison appears on at least one map, dated three years earlier—a tall thin county, north of the Platte and west of Dawson County, a Dawson much larger than it is today.<sup>13</sup> Harrison County reported 631 residents in 1870 but it had no legal existence and the location of those 631 inhabitants remains undetermined.<sup>14</sup>

Although no authority can be found for their existence, the counties of Lyon, Taylor and Grant appear on the Mitchell maps of 1868 and 1874 and in the Federal census tables of 1870. To be sure Taylor appears in two places, more than 200 miles apart; on an 1868 map it occupies a portion of the county of Cheyenne which had been formed a year earlier and a General Land Office map of 1876 places it in the present location of Garfield County. Grant is in the place of the present Hitchcock, Hayes and a part of Lincoln counties—far south of the Grant county which we have today and which was organized in 1887.

An 1874 map has two “ghosts” with suspiciously flattering names. No records are found that any petitions were even presented for the formation of Cunningham and Wiltse counties but Jerome Wiltse and E. E. Cunningham were prominent citizens in the early days of Richardson County. Cunningham was president of the state senate in 1870. Since these apparently projected counties are placed in the northern part of the State the researcher wonders

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<sup>12</sup> Paddock County was located in the northeastern part of the present Holt County on a map published in Edwin A. Curey, *Nebraska Its Advantages, Resources and Drawbacks*, New York 1875, opposite page 1.

<sup>13</sup> Mitchell (1868).

<sup>14</sup> A. T. Andreas, *History of Nebraska*, Chicago, 1882, p. 328.

if here again there may have been plans based on the rivalry between the North and the South Platte sections.<sup>15</sup>

By 1880 counties in about the eastern one-third of the state had settled into their final form, except there still remained Blackbird County or the Omaha Reservation until 1889. The Pawnee reservation had become Nance County in 1879, although the official land map of the Department of the Interior for 1879 marks it both Nance County and "Pawnee Reserve".

Through the '80's and '90's county organization gradually extended westward through the state, often large counties being divided into two. For a time the north-western fourth or fifth of the State was called Sioux County, later Sioux County was the north half of the Panhandle with Cheyenne County the southern half. Little by little as settlement increased other counties were formed out of these until we have eleven counties in the Panhandle alone. Further east in 1885 Wheeler county was divided and its west half called Garfield.

The late eighties saw the last "no man's land" of the state, the last unnamed portion in the most inaccessible portion of the sand hills, made into Thomas, Grant, McPherson and Hooker counties.

The only county added in the '90's was Boyd on the northern border. This piece of land had been a matter of contention for a long time and had been acquired through special agreement with South Dakota only a few years before. For a time the northern boundary of Nebraska had been the 43rd parallel to its junction with the Keya Paha river then following that river until it entered the Missouri. The agreement between the two states established the line as following the 43rd parallel to its intersection with the Missouri. On Cram's map of 1883 this area is marked

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<sup>15</sup> Jerome Wiltse was a prosperous farmer near Falls City and was a local leader in the Democratic party. A. T. Andreas, *op. cit.*, p. 1327. Ebenezer E. Cunningham was elected to the Nebraska Senate in 1868 and 1870. He presided over the impeachment trial of Governor David Butler. He was a Republican National Committeeman in 1872. Morton-Watkins, Vol. I, *op. cit.*, p. 542.

"Military Reservation," on a few maps it is Todd County, South Dakota. In 1891 it became Boyd, our 90th county.

School geography maps of 1898 (Frye's) show the counties as they are today with three exceptions. In 1909 Morrill County was made from the remainder of the once huge Cheyenne; Garden County was carved from the northern part of Deuel in 1910 and Arthur County was formed from the western part of McPherson in 1913.

Arthur County might be called our last "ghost" county—a ghost which came to life. It had come into existence as a geographical unit in 1887, but there were less than the 200 inhabitants required to form a legal county. There were still too few people within its borders in 1890 and it was suggested that it be joined to McPherson County. Conflicting statements and traditions about the election on this matter were in circulation for many years, but the only extant report shows that the petition for uniting the areas lost two to one. Nevertheless, McPherson declared Arthur a part of itself—and so it appeared on the maps although state law made no provision for an organized county annexing an unorganized one. But whatever the legality of the case—Arthur County faded from the maps.

After the passage of the Kinkaid act the population increased and agitation for a real Arthur County was revived. The Arthur county advocates were helped by a county-seat contest between Tryon and Flats, the later being nearer the center of the large inclusive county. The people in eastern McPherson county did not want to lose the county-seat. The opening of the forest reserve for settlement in western Arthur County foreshadowed a still greater increase in population in the western areas and in 1913 the legislature passed an act recognizing the county's right to organize—and Arthur County after twenty-five years of semi-legal existence came back to stay on the map of Nebraska as the 93rd county.

It has been remarked that any further changes would be confusing, since all the county names are cut in stone on the Capitol building.