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## Article Title: The Presbyterian Mission to the Omaha Indian Tribe

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Article Summary: The Presbyterian Mission, a government-supported boarding school for children of the Omaha tribe, was constructed near Bluebird Creek in 1856-1857. Not only classes but religious services and community meetings were held there until the government stopped funding church schools. Later the mission reopened as a boarding school for Omaha Indian girls.

### Cataloging Information:

Names: Joseph La Flesche (ōIron Eyeō), William Henry Hamilton, Charles Sturgis, RJ Burt, Margaret C Wade, Alice C Fletcher, Susan La Flesche Picotte, George Beith

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Photographs / Images: Omaha Indian village with earthlodges and tipis, 1860; Joseph La Flesche (ōIron Eyeō), Chief of the Omaha; Reverend William H Hamilton addressing a group on the reservation; Presbyterian Mission for the Omaha

## THE PRESBYTERIAN MISSION TO THE OMAHA INDIAN TRIBE

BY NORMA KIDD GREEN

ONE June day in 1856 two horsemen, an Indian and a white man rode over the rolling hills along the North and South Blackbird creeks in what is now northeastern Nebraska. As they rode, seeking a suitable location for a mission school they talked companionably, both concerned about the future welfare of the Omaha Tribe.<sup>1</sup>

The Indian was Joseph La Flesche, called Iron Eye, an Omaha chief, and the white man was William H. Hamilton, Presbyterian missionary, who had been in charge of a school for Omaha, Oto and Pawnee children at Bellevue, the site of an early fur-trading post. Earlier he had served his church at a mission to the Iowa and had gained a remarkable fluency with that language. As a youth, La

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<sup>1</sup> William Hamilton to Walter Lowrie, December 9, 1856, Letters of Presbyterian Missionaries Among the American Indians, Presbyterian Historical Society, Philadelphia, Pa., which Society has given permission for the author to quote. Hereafter these are referred to as *Missionary Letters*.

*Norma Kidd Green, wife of Dean Emeritus Roy M. Green of the University of Nebraska College of Engineering, is a frequent contributor to NEBRASKA HISTORY.*

Flesche had traveled with his French father, trading with many tribes. He had learned French and several Indian languages, among them that of the Iowa. These two men were able to converse easily with each other, neither using his own language, but speaking in the Iowa tongue. This was a decided advantage over having an interpreter and it made possible a closer relationship than that between most white men and Indian leaders.<sup>2</sup>

The tribes had given up their traditional hunting grounds in exchange for comparatively small reservations; the Oto to go south of the Platte River, while the Omaha tribe was to go some eighty to ninety miles north of Bellevue to an area of approximately 300,000 acres bordered on the east by the Missouri River. This was not as far north as their earlier village where they had been found by Lewis and Clark near the mouth of Omaha Creek, but they felt it was uncomfortably close to their old enemies the Sioux.<sup>3</sup>

New schools were to be established on the new reservations and the Presbyterians had entered into a contract with the government to "care for moral improvement and education of the Omaha Tribe."<sup>4</sup> William Hamilton was to plan and build a school building which would also be the center of efforts toward "moral improvement".

When the tribe had first come to the reservation in 1855, they had decided that their village would be between the two Blackbird creeks, where the steep banks provided a certain natural fortification.<sup>5</sup> They had broken the rich land north of the North Blackbird for a common field,<sup>6</sup> but no lodges had been built. Twenty-nine chiefs held a council on Middle Creek with Rev. Hamilton and Dr. Walter Lowrie of New York, the secretary of the Presbyterian Board of Foreign Missions. The Indians agreed they

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<sup>2</sup> This fact gleaned from several letters. *Missionary Letters*.

<sup>3</sup> *Missionary Letters*, *op. cit.*

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, November 22, 1854.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, December 9, 1856.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

wanted the school but they would not indicate any location for they were afraid of the children falling into the hands of the Sioux.<sup>7</sup>

The tribe left on the summer hunt by July 3,<sup>8</sup> and early in the hunt Logan Fontenelle was killed. He had been the one of their number most fluent in English and most accepted by the white people. Moreover he had been killed by a party of Sioux and their worst fears were confirmed. They refused to return to their new village site but made camp on the Elkhorn River a little north and west of Bellevue.<sup>9</sup> A year later they were trying again to establish themselves on the reservation and the mission site was still undecided.

Joseph La Flesche was one of the few chiefs who saw the need for education and he wanted the school to be fifteen or twenty miles away from the village, making it difficult for the children to run away. While Hamilton may have been less conscious than Joseph of the effect that strange surroundings and separation from their families might have on the children, he felt other factors must be considered. He saw the difficulty of transportation with no roads or bridges, the need of a boat landing, the problems of getting building material.

He also realized that the missionary in charge must maintain supervision over the school but be near enough to the tribe to cultivate the acquaintance of the parents and gain an understanding of family life and tribal customs and when possible to lead adults into the church. To him these considerations outweighed Joseph's emphasis on distance from the village.

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<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> George Hepner, Indian Agent to Alfred Cumming, Superintendent, July 3, 1855. *Letters Received*, Office of Indian Affairs, National Archives. Hereafter reference given as OIA, NA.

<sup>9</sup> Commissioner George Manypenny to Robert McClelland, Secretary of the Interior. *Annual Report of Commissioner of Indian Affairs*, 1855.

William Henry Hamilton was one of those dedicated men and women who put the phrase "missionary zeal" into our language. He let nothing deflect him from what he felt was his duty. He never hesitated, once he was convinced a certain line of action was the best course by which to gain a desired goal. A student of early church leaders characterized him as "sensitive, poetic, idealistic yet practical, he combined the physique of a soldier and the determination of the frontiersman with the energy of a zealot."<sup>10</sup>

After surveying the land, observing the river bank and the woodland, he chose a site near a spring and high on a hill overlooking the Missouri. To Joseph's disappointment this was within three or four miles of the village site. Later Hamilton explained his choice:

... I am the only one thinking of wood and water for stock and elevation enough to be secure and afford a prospect of health; and I want to be near the River and we need timber.<sup>11</sup>

Malaria was ever present along the westward moving frontier where settlements were always on the water front. Heavy rains and flooding brought stagnant pools and produced swampy land, perfect breeding places for mosquitoes. That ubiquitous insect was not yet suspected of a connection with the "shakes" or "ague", but this illness had become associated with low lying ground. Hamilton was sure the low land could be more easily cultivated and could afford the site for a future boat landing. It might be possible to pipe water from the spring to the building but, at first, it could be carried by the Indian schoolboys, bucketful by bucketful.

Since a building was necessary for projects of "education and moral improvement" a building must be built without delay. He had brought a worker with him from

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<sup>10</sup> Harold S. Faust in the *Journal of the Department of History*, v. 20-21, Historical Society of the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A., Philadelphia.

<sup>11</sup> William Hamilton to Walter Lowrie, August 14, 1856. *Missionary Letters*.



Omaha Indian village with earthlodges and tipis, 1860.



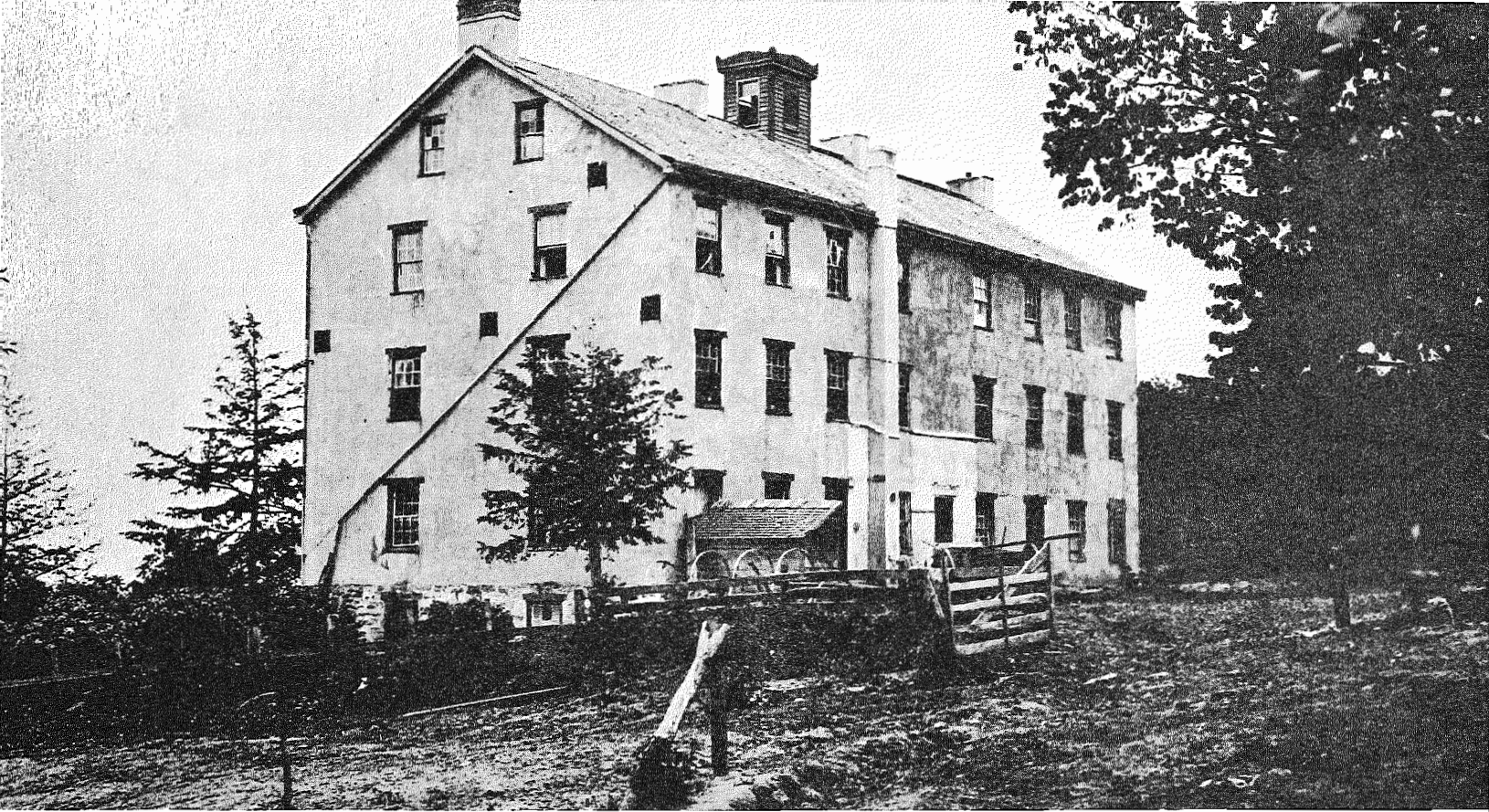


Joseph LaFlesche, (Iron Eye) Chief of the Omaha.



Reverend William H. Hamilton addressing a group on the reservation.





Presbyterian Mission for the Omaha.

Bellevue and had traveled rapidly enough to overtake the tribe as they had journeyed with the extra ponies, the women and children, and all their paraphernalia. Having decided on the spot, he set the man to work, planted a garden and started back to Bellevue. The first night he camped with the tribe on the Blackbird and received Joseph's report that the location for the school was acceptable, except that one man, who was not present, had been heard to say he would like that spot for a farm.

After Hamilton reached Bellevue, he learned that the government had selected that spot for the agency. No one had notified him and he had proceeded on the understanding that the land belonged to the tribe and decisions would be made by the chiefs. He was soon to learn that whatever authority the tribe might have it could be outweighed by government action. Nevertheless, Hamilton felt he would not change unless he were officially informed by the government.<sup>12</sup>

Major Daniel Vanderslice, in charge of the Greater Nemaha Agency, was to care for the details of opening the new reservations and moving the tribes.<sup>13</sup> Hamilton tried to make an appointment with him in order to discuss this dual selection. Vanderslice failed to appear when he had said he would and no matter where Hamilton tried to find him, Vanderslice "had just left". They never came face to face over the matter, nor did Hamilton receive any communication directly from him. J. B. Robertson, later appointed Agent for the Omaha, wrote to Colonel Alfred Cumming of the Central Superintendency for Indian Affairs on July 22 that:

During last spring Rev. William Hamilton selected the same place for the Mission school and is going on to improve, not withstanding I notified him of our prior selection.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> William Hamilton to Walter Lowrie, December 9, 1856. *op. cit.*

<sup>13</sup> *Nebraska Palladium*, March 7, 1855. Bellevue City, Nebr.

<sup>14</sup> J. B. Robertson to Col. Alfred Cumming, July 22, 1856, *Letters Received*. OIA,NA.

Cumming apparently did not care to handle the matter and immediately wrote to Colonel George Manypenny, the Indian Commissioner, saying he "would be glad to have decision of the Department".<sup>15</sup>

This writing back and forth, always reporting through proper channels with several persons passing information on, all the way from the Missouri to Washington was a waste of time to Hamilton. He had done what he could to communicate with the Indian Office, but when at last they talked to him he was too far along to begin again while the government had made no move to build. Hamilton believed the building must be built and under cover before the winter snows. Moreover he had understood from a partner of trader Peter Sarpy, that white men had schemes to control this site and that the mission people were "thrusting themselves in".<sup>16</sup> He felt he should move quickly and told Lowrie ". . . I hope their plans have been frustrated and, as Government moves slowly we may yet be up and so far along with our work operations as to be out of reach".<sup>17</sup>

As far as the church was concerned the selection of a site was the signal for actual construction. The plans had been drawn in New York and Hamilton received them in March. He immediately sent estimates for the material needed advising that local material must be used whenever possible because of high freight rates and the need to haul for some distance from any landing. The nearest one available was at Omadi, at the mouth of Omaha Creek, where there was also a saw mill.

He asked for 1500 feet of flooring "notched to be used in putting up the walls" and gave the measurements for the doorways. He had engaged Mr. Reed of Bellevue<sup>18</sup> to

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<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> William Hamilton to Walter Lowrie, July 21, 1856. *Missionary Letters*.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> Several letters from Hamilton to Lowrie from March to July, 1856. *Missionary Letters*. Omadi no longer exists.

superintend the building of the walls and to put in windows and doorways with the assistance of the carpenter who might make them.<sup>19</sup>

In June the tribe sent a petition to the Indian Office asking for the saw mill which they had been promised two years before.<sup>20</sup> Nothing came of their request so Hamilton found a man with a mill and advanced him the money to buy a team of horses. When installed the mill turned out all the lumber they needed at a cost of \$3.00 for one hundred feet, but it was soft wood and Hamilton wished the church could have sent pine.<sup>21</sup> In the long run they used some walnut and a great deal of cottonwood which was at hand. Frequent letters during the summer were filled with the question of using stone or concrete and the difficulty of hiring and feeding laborers. Laborers "did not blush to ask \$2.00 a day or more" and a few, at one crucial moment, went on a strike.

Correspondence during the fall and into the winter spoke of the growing realization that it would all cost more than they had planned, as they encountered unexpected problems. Built on a hillside the walls must be higher at the south and more grading must be done on the north. But this made it possible to have the kitchen and store rooms at a lower level and give the space on the floor above to other purposes. Stone could be quarried nearby, deciding the question of material for the outer walls, which when built would be covered by a plaster wash. Mr. Reed said it required three men to quarry what one could do at Bellevue. He could get sand only four miles away from Blackbird Creek, but one team could haul only two loads a day.

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<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> Petition signed by ten chiefs. June 24, 1856, *Letters Received*, OIA, NA.

<sup>21</sup> William Hamilton to Walter Lowrie, July 19, 1856, *Missionary Letters*.

They hoped the stone walls would go up a foot a day, and in the middle of August it looked as if the roof might be on before winter. The walls were up, "the first story and joists and sills laid, the kitchen and store rooms completed" early in September.<sup>22</sup> In November they needed only two more days before starting on the roof and the temperature was fifteen degrees above zero. The walls were finished on the 18th and the weather changed for the worse. On November 26, Hamilton left to return to Bellevue, the last of many visits since spring and the roof was not completed. On the evening of that day he wrote to Dr. Lowrie from "Someplace".<sup>23</sup>

I left this evening on a sled with a carriage body lashed on top, meaning to go to Henry Fontenelle's, this side of Wood Creek. I have often had trouble crossing the Blackbird, so took two teams, nearly a dozen Indians to make a road . . . I drove into the creek but the horses could not pull the sled out of the mud. . . finally with the help of a yoke of oxen and the Indians, they succeeded. It became dark, misty, eight inches of snow on the ground and all the hills and ridges looked the same. . . I concluded I was off my course. I stopped by a tree or two to pass the night. . . for three hours I have been melting snow in the coffee-pot to water the horses and get some drink for myself. The trees had some dead branches so I have a fire. I have hay for the horses and bread and meat for myself. . . also a robe and two blankets. . . shall sleep, not under the sled but in it.<sup>24</sup>

Then he closed with a poem of thirty-one lines of which the last three were:

God keeps me safe from all my foes  
Nor does He frown  
But shows e'en here, His smiling face.<sup>25</sup>

A postscript written in Bellevue on December 16 reported his safe arrival but added that "Tuesday we had

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<sup>22</sup> William Hamilton to Walter Lowrie, September 8, 1856. *Missionary Letters*.

<sup>23</sup> William Hamilton to Walter Lowrie, November 26, 1856, *Missionary Letters*.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

the most violent storm we have experienced. I can only attend the cattle."<sup>26</sup>

All through the winter Hamilton was concerned about the few workmen left at the building while he, from Bellevue, dealt with rival ambitions in the tribe and the prickly problem of the government having chosen this same site for the agency. He sent a long, detailed and carefully outlined discussion of his efforts and failure to talk directly to Vanderslice.

He continued to plan, however, insisting there must be heat in each room for he still remembered the bitter experiences of his first frontier winter in Iowa when only a few rooms were heated.<sup>27</sup> This necessitated many wood-burning heating stoves and many stove pipes which led to the chimneys. It also meant vigilance against fire with buckets of sand by every stove, though even this would not prevent a few minor blazes during the years.

Hamilton forged steadily ahead, dwelling more on the fortunate incidents rather than the many unforeseen complications. The roof was finished by January 3, although the Indians could not remember a year of such heavy snow-fall. The elk came into the settlements at times searching for food. But on January 9 Hamilton wrote that Lowrie should go ahead as planned and send on the missionary families, - - - "they will find some kind of shelter and we have flour and meat to last till late summer."

The minister, Dr. Charles Sturgis, evidently accompanied by the teacher, L. R. Rolfe, and their families arrived at Omaha City on the 17th of May. There is a letter from Sturgis speaking of "a party" of workers and within six weeks Rolfe was writing reports, so it is assumed they came together.

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<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> William Hamilton to Walter Lowrie, December 22, 1856. *Missionary Letters.*



On the 20th we left for Blackbird Hills under the direction of Mr. Hamilton, who furnished us with wagons and all things for our comfort . . . yet we are destitute of furniture. Am writing this on a barrell head by a candle stuck in a piece of soap.<sup>28</sup>

On July 3 he wrote that their household goods had arrived and they found the place "very desirable as a residence". Hamilton had accompanied the new workers and he must have felt relieved to see the building near enough completion that it could be lived in and serve as a center for the all important work.

The mission building was a landmark for years and must have been imposing in a country where there were few buildings and most of those only one story in height. Stone walls, covered with a coating of plaster, rose for three stories with an attic over it all. Since the kitchen and store rooms were on a lower level at the south end, it was actually five stories in that portion. Placed near the crest of a hill, it was topped by a cupola which afforded a magnificent view of the river. From it the river steamers could be sighted long before they pushed their way against the current to the dock.

Before Hamilton returned to Bellevue, he spoke to the Indians, who had assisted with the moving, and told them he was going to talk to the Great Spirit. To Sturgis' amazement they prostrated themselves on the floor with their faces hidden in their hands. This was quite in the manner that they entered into the spirit of an occasion or action, taking part as they assumed was proper. Missionaries, agents and military men for many years reported that the Omaha were "tractable and manifest much good feeling"<sup>29</sup> "attentive and quick to learn and anxious to improve themselves."

Pupils began to arrive for the school and other teachers came until, with the household and outside workers,

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<sup>28</sup> Charles Sturgis to Walter Lowrie, May 22, 1857. *Missionary Letters, op. cit.*

<sup>29</sup> Charles Sturgis to Walter Lowrie, July 1, 1857, *Ibid.*

the "family" at times amounted to forty-two persons. In September there were twenty-seven boys in the school but only four girls. Mothers insisted they needed the girls at home, and while they did not say so, they were dubious about sending girls away from the close home chaperonage. By January, 1858 there were thirty-one boys and seven girls.

Each Sunday Sturgis visited the village to talk with the adult members of the tribe, to try and establish the habit of a religious service. Unsure of the interpreter, not knowing whether or not his meaning was conveyed, he always felt baffled and inadequate and almost from the first he asked that a younger man replace him. But he worked on trying to become acquainted with the chiefs and to draw them to the mission as often as possible. He hoped they would support the school if they saw the children well cared for and in pleasant surroundings. At the same time it was a means of acquainting the adults with aspects of the white man's life.

Once a group of chiefs came to confer with the agent and then visited the mission. They were invited to stay to dinner and when Dr. Sturgis explained he would say a short prayer before they ate, all bowed their heads. They recognized that this was the accepted manner among white people, though it was more their own habit to look upward when a prayer was said.

One Christmas all the chiefs were invited to dine—with one wife only. Some came with one wife but several came alone because they said, if they had chosen one, all of them would have quarreled.<sup>30</sup> A "magic lantern" was part of the mission equipment and a source of much pleasure as well as information. It was taken out into the villages that more might see these wonderful pictures.

Sturgis plodded on for three years in spite of many obstacles. Few workers stayed long in such primitive sur-

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<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, January 1857.

roundings and new teachers and farmers and seamstresses constantly needed to be "broken in"; jealousies rose among the native help in the kitchen; the pupils frequently ran away, just as La Flesche had feared they would. In fact many times a boy was brought to school, outfitted in new clothing and then slipped away, with the full knowledge of his parents. The general exodus for the hunts took the boys away; pupils were often taken away for the frequent ceremonial visits between tribes.

Most supplies were ordered from the central office in New York City and too often mistakes were made in packing or in delivering the articles at Blackbird Hills. One fall the missionary worked many days on his order list, getting correct clothing sizes and making every effort to estimate the basic food supplies. In the spring when at last a river boat left boxes and barrels for the mission, none of the suits and coats were the sizes ordered and could not be used. The greatest disappointment, however, was a barrel of sugar that turned out to be a barrel of vinegar. Laboriously the missionary tried to exchange articles with other mission stations along the river, but no one was abundantly enough supplied to risk exchanges. There were many times when food was scanty and the desire to outfit the children in "white" clothing was almost impossible.

The weakest point in all the work lay in the dissensions and jealousies within the mission family itself. One worker would envy the fancied higher position of another; someone listened, without careful thinking, to the inaccurate account of some poorly trained native helper. Basically much misunderstanding resulted because neither race appreciated the fundamental precepts of the other. These misunderstandings, heightened by gossip, at times threatened to disrupt both the mission group and the tribe.

In May of 1860 Sturgis was relieved by Rev. R. J. Burt, although a few months earlier the government had suggested withdrawing support for church schools. Burt stayed for over five years and came to admire, respect and

deeply care for many members of the tribe. He constantly helped them in their affairs and often petitioned the government on their behalf. He protested to Washington when two Indian women, peaceably riding out to pick berries, were attacked by white soldiers who killed one, injured the other and slashed at the horses with their sabers. He tried to help the chiefs present their case about the encroachment of the wandering Winnebago. This tribe had been moved from Wisconsin to an unproductive area some distance up the Missouri River. Unable to exist on these lands they were reduced to the point of starvation or of desperate action.<sup>31</sup> He joined in the chiefs' appeal when the Territorial Legislature suggested that all Indians be removed from the area.<sup>32</sup> Burttt went with Hamilton and several leading citizens of Bellevue to save an Omaha hunting party "from the rage of the whites",<sup>33</sup> after an entirely different tribe had injured a white man. Hamilton said at one time it would be hard to find anyone more deeply and truly concerned for the Indians than Burttt.

But these efforts were forgotten and one of the most serious and troublesome times of disrupted work was built upon gossip about Burttt. The Agent, under pressure to provide more schools, accepted the gossip without investigation and Burttt was asked to leave. S. Orlando Lee came as provisional superintendent since an ordained minister usually held the position. Rev. Hamilton who maintained his home in Bellevue came once a month to conduct a service and perform ministerial duties. After a short time the Church Board asked Hamilton to come on a permanent basis to be the head of the mission and Lee went elsewhere.

Within three years the government policy changed; all support to church schools was withdrawn and the mission

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<sup>31</sup> George B. Graff to William P. Dole, Indian Commissioner, November 6, 1863. *Letters Received OIA,NA.*

<sup>32</sup> R. J. Burttt to Walter Lowrie, February 2, 1866. *Missionary Letters.*

<sup>33</sup> R. J. Burttt to Church Headquarters, August 30, 1864. *Missionary Letters.*

school was closed. Most of the building on the hill was not used and it soon showed signs of neglect, although the small church congregation continued to meet there. William Hamilton remained in the neighborhood with this group and regularly held church services and prayer meetings.

Omaha boys and men had gone into the Union Army in the Civil War. They were fine horsemen and superior scouts. Most of them were in the cavalry and operated as scouts, with a few serving as mechanics. They stood out as products of the Omaha Mission School because of their working knowledge of English.

One Sunday morning a group of six, on furlough, had slipped into the rear of the church room after a service had begun. Rev. Burt was amused at their difficulty in restraining their excitement on again seeing their friends. He wrote to Dr. Lowrie, delighted that the boys called the mission "home" and with fatherly pride he gave an account of each one, their progress in school and in the army.<sup>34</sup>

The closing of the church schools in the late 1860's was part of a change in the educational policy of the Bureau of Indian Affairs. The emphasis was to be placed on day schools rather than boarding schools, with their added expense and the "disruption of family life". Day schools in several locations on the reservation would make it possible for each child to return to the family circle each evening. It was maintained this would reach more children and might make compulsory attendance easier to ask and to achieve. Only later was it proven that progress toward gaining a knowledge of English was lessened, since strange words learned at school could be easily forgotten in a family where no English was spoken. The ways of white living could hardly be introduced into a family where none of the adults had attended school but still clung to tribal customs.

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<sup>34</sup> R. J. Burt to Walter Lowrie, March 6, 1866. *Missionary Letters*.

Five years later the day schools were less highly regarded and the government, itself, was setting up boarding schools and industrial schools and giving some support to the churches. An industrial boarding school was set up at the agency, three miles from the mission in 1881.

In 1880 Rev. Irwin, who had been with the Omaha nearly forty years earlier came from Kansas to open the mission and get it in running order. Homer W. Partch arrived on October 7, 1880 to have charge of the school. He was not an ordained minister and it was expected that he would rely on Rev. Hamilton when ministerial services were required. In less than a year Partch was joined by Mrs. Margaret C. Wade as teacher, matron and general household supervisor. Mrs. Wade and her husband, Matthew, had served a mission in Kansas only a few months when Matthew died; a short time later Mrs. Wade lost an infant. After this double tragedy, she decided to remain in the Indian work to which she and her husband had pledged themselves.

Partch tried nobly to fill his place but he only saw the situation directly in front of him and could not enter into broader plans. He regretted the Indians moving away from the mission to better farm land and was hurt when the most advanced pupils left to go to the bigger schools in the East. This weakened the apparent accomplishment of the mission and Partch could not see what was better for more or for the future; he was only concerned that his work show to the best advantage. He left in 1883 and Mrs. Wade was made superintendent.

Margaret Wade was a dedicated person and an able administrator. She developed close relationships with many of her pupils and with their parents, and maintained these contacts for many years.

With the government school nearby there was a problem of the proper division of work between the schools. Some wished to have them combined but many of the Indians did not want to give up the mission school although



the talk was largely about it being only for girls; the government school to take boys old enough to acquire a working knowledge of tools and crafts as well as studying more academic subjects. Mrs. Wade tried to find some method by which the mission could take the smaller boys. She was touched by the plea of one father. Big Elk said they "liked to feel the mission was their home and that their children should grow up in it."<sup>85</sup> But in 1884 a contract was made between the government and the church board for the mission to be a girls' boarding school. It continued as such until its close in 1894.

Mrs. Wade continued the established tradition of the mission; that it serve as a refuge for travelers or unsettled members of the tribe. Young people returning from school and finding their family situation changed, naturally went to the mission.

The special agent for the allotment of land to the Omaha Tribe in 1883-84 was Alice C. Fletcher, an ethnologist, who had originally come to the reservation to study the life of Indian women. She had lived in the lodges and tipis and had shared everything with the families. She became concerned over the government's neglect of the Indians and had been successful in an appeal for their help. Because of her concern and her knowledge of the tribe she was appointed to make the allotment of land to individuals.

In the summer of 1883, while she was working in the Logan Valley she was suddenly stricken with what proved to be a severe attack of inflammatory rheumatism. She was taken to the mission where she was bedridden for many weeks. During this time she became a close friend of Margaret Wade. They must have had frequent conversations, drawn to each other by their common interest in the Omaha, but finding another tie in the belief there should

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<sup>85</sup> Margaret C. Wade to Dr. J. C. Lowrie, October 22, 1883. *Ibid.* J. C. Lowrie had succeeded his father Walter Lowrie as secretary of the Board of Foreign Missions.

be a record made of the philosophy of these people as it was expressed in their arts and rituals.

Mrs. Wade was a Copley, a family of altruistic and philanthropic inclination. Her "Aunt Mary" was Mrs. William Thaw of Pittsburgh, the wife of one of the city's most successful and influential financiers. This combination of the Copley missionary interest, the Wade religious devotion<sup>36</sup> and the Thaw money proved to be most fortunate for Alice Fletcher and for the Omaha Tribe. Mrs. Thaw established the Thaw fellowship at the Peabody Museum of Harvard, with explicit instructions in the certificate of gift that it was for Alice Fletcher's use, to facilitate her study of the Indians. But if this large gift went to ethnology, many others went to the tribe, their church and their school.

A sister and a brother of Mrs. Wade served at the mission in different capacities and at different times. The sister taught in the school for part of 1882 and the brother John came in 1887 as a lay worker just as the mission was extending its work away from the original building. He was ordained as a minister within a few months and was the director of the mission for some length of time. He raised a family in the area and one of his sons married into an Omaha-related family.

Under Copley a new mission station was established six miles away from the old building on the river, slightly to the southwest of the present Walthill and at almost the center of population. In a straight line, the agency was about half way between and a new chapel was to be built there. The allotment of land had moved the tribe to the west, away from their ancient road—the river. Moreover, the river constantly cut into the banks as the current shifted with each sudden rise in the spring. The new station was a home

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<sup>36</sup> Matthew Wade came from a strong Scotch-Presbyterian neighborhood in southwestern Ohio. This information has come to the author from the Coleraine Historical Society formed in this area since 1964.

as well as mission center. Copley and his family lived there and there was one large room called "the Indian room", where the Indians were always welcomed. It was a room big enough for small group meetings, and books and magazines were available. Evening classes for young men were held here for a time, but were not successful. Night classes did not fit into the Indians' accustomed use of the time after sunset. Indeed the small, sparsely furnished, glaringly new frame houses which were appearing on the individual farms lacked the warmth and companionship of the lodge or tipi with the central fire.

The Thaws contributed largely to the cost of the house and built the chapel at the agency. This stood where the Dutch Reformed Church now stands in the village of Macy. The government grant of land was five acres and included the cemetery above and behind the church. The chapel was finished in 1889 but the matter of furnishing took longer since most of it was done by small gifts from the congregation. In April of 1889 Copley was trying to raise money for a bell, "for few Indians have clocks and do not know how to keep them in running order."<sup>37</sup>

The girls' boarding school closed in 1894 since the government school was taking girls as well as boys in a broader program than had been offered at first. For years this school supplied a base from which many of the tribe went on to Lincoln Institute, Hampton and Carlisle and a few to Haskell Institute in Kansas.

Nearly everyone regretted leaving the old building. The magazine directed to the Dakota tribe, published at the Santee Agency commented on the general sorrow.

Many share the hope that the school may be resumed at some future time, in a more convenient locality. . . the school furnishings have been taken away. . . the old place seems quite deserted and desolate. The carriage and harness were sent to Concord, N. C. and the sewing machines went a longer road to Alaska. Some of furniture was needed at Anadarko, Ind. Terr. A carload went north to the Sis-

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<sup>37</sup> John T. Copley to J. C. Lowrie, April 27, 1889.

seton country, including the horses. . . Some boxes were packed for the needy in the western counties of Nebraska . . . The work of packing up and sending away was a sorrowful one. . . What will be the end of the old house by the river is something quite beyond one's knowledge of the future.<sup>38</sup>

In 1894 Congress recognized the shift in the mission's situation and in exchange for land previously owned by the mission made a grant of land where the work could be continued. In this way the old mission building passed out of the hands of the Presbyterian Church. It was first purchased by an Iowan by the name of Byerly, then bought from him by Walter T. Diddock. Diddock had been the industrial teacher at the agency school and had married Marguerite La Flesche, a daughter of Joseph La Flesche, a prominent chief in the tribe. Marguerite became the "lady of the house" in the building to which Dr. Sturgis had first invited chiefs for Christmas dinner forty years before and where she, herself, had been both pupil and teacher. The old building showed its age but it had served the tribe well in those first puzzling years on the reservation. It still was a landmark and was held in affectionate memory by many.

A few years later Diddock sold the building to Noah La Flesche, who was married to Lucy, another of Joseph La Flesche's daughters. It was a favorite picnic site for a wide area. Noah La Flesche at times used some of its material in structures on other farms, as had the church before him made repairs in newer property with the "bones" of the old. Several times sentiment stirred and discussion rose about a restoration project but no one really carried the idea through and in 1911 Noah had it destroyed by a blast of dynamite. Only the cemetery was left as a witness to those first courageous efforts.

There did remain, however, the mission's "off-spring", the little church congregation which had come to be called the Blackbird Hills Presbyterian Church, housed in the chapel at the agency. In the process of change it was classi-

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<sup>38</sup> *The Word Carrier*, April-May, 1895. Vol. XXIV, No. 4-5.

fied as a "Home" or a "National" mission rather than a "Foreign" mission and at the same time the post office, Omaha Agency, Nebraska became Macy, Nebraska. The new name was a coined word made by George Maryott, the trader, by taking the letters "ma" from Omaha and the letters "cy" from agency.

The Blackbird Hills Presbyterian Church was a flourishing institution for several decades and it was usually represented at the meetings of the Omaha Presbytery. Its Board of Elders was made up of both white men and Indians. A number of times members of this church attended the big annual mission meeting held by the Christian Churches among the Sioux. Since they were not Sioux the tie was the fact they were both Presbyterian. Some of the Sioux churches were Congregational in their government and background, but the difference in denomination did not overcome the fact they were all Sioux and had been started by the same group of missionaries.

Rev. W. A. Galt served the church through most of the nineties and left a group of little sketches based on his experience there. Rev. Henry Stewart took over shortly after 1900. In 1905 Susan La Flesche Picotte, M. D., another daughter of Chief Joseph was appointed as medical missionary, the first member of her race to receive such an appointment under the Presbyterian Church. After her husband's death, she and her two little boys moved from the town of Bancroft to the reservation. She cared for the Indians mentally and spiritually, as well as physically, preaching with a skill and fervor which drew amazed admiration from those who had heard noted orators. After she moved into the new town of Walthill she continued her work, although Rev. George Beith was in residence at Macy. With Dr. Picotte he held religious meetings at different places on the reservation. Often Dr. Sue's small niece, Elizabeth La Flesche, Carey La Flesche's daughter,

accompanied them and would recite portions of the Bible as a part of the devotional meeting.<sup>39</sup>

The combined work of Rev. Beith and Dr. Susan was most apparent and the Walthill newspaper frequently mentioned the activities of this church. But Rev. Beith was forced to seek a less demanding charge and Dr. Susan died in 1915. Still the church continued until the depression of the 1930's jeopardized all the mission efforts and the widely extended work of the Presbyterian Church. In 1932 the church at Macy had over 3000 members. A year later the annual report of the Board of National Missions reported they had worked with 30 tribes in 21 states and maintained 125 churches. Other churches not necessarily classed as mission churches were suddenly confronted with lower incomes and the board had that year given financial assistance to 3000 churches.

This condition became more and more critical in the next two years. There was danger that schools would have to be closed and it was a relief in some areas to transfer stations to other denominations.<sup>40</sup>

In 1934 the church nationally faced an even larger deficit with a much lower income and such a transaction was made in regards to the Blackbird Hills Church. There was no regular minister, but a few services were held and the older members tried to maintain a Sunday School.

Rev. G. Watermulder of the Dutch Reformed Church had built an active community center at Winnebago and the Presbyterian Board of Home Missions transferred all of the Blackbird Hills property to the Reformed Church through Rev. Watermulder.

In its report the Board assured the General Assembly that no loss would be sustained, for the new organization

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<sup>39</sup> Told to the author by Elizabeth La Flesche Fontenelle, niece of Dr. Susan Picotte.

<sup>40</sup> Annual Reports of the Presbyterian Church 1930-1935. Presbyterian Historical Society, Philadelphia.



would continue all activities. This was the case and devoted, dedicated workers of the other denomination have continued to serve up to the present. The Presbyterian Church confined its efforts to the small churches in the neighboring towns. But in 1934 the *Walthill Times* wondered, editorially, if the change in property carried with it a change in membership?<sup>41</sup>

Did the Omaha also wonder? Did it seem strange to them, only second or third, often first generation Presbyterians that suddenly they were something else? Was this another instance of the inexplicable behavior of the white man?

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<sup>41</sup> *Walthill Times*, February 8, 1934.