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Article Summary: Local conditions determined whether pioneer farmers could produce crops, livestock, or a combination. Desirable supplies of wood, grass, productive soil and potable water were available only where wooded river valleys alternated with upland prairies.

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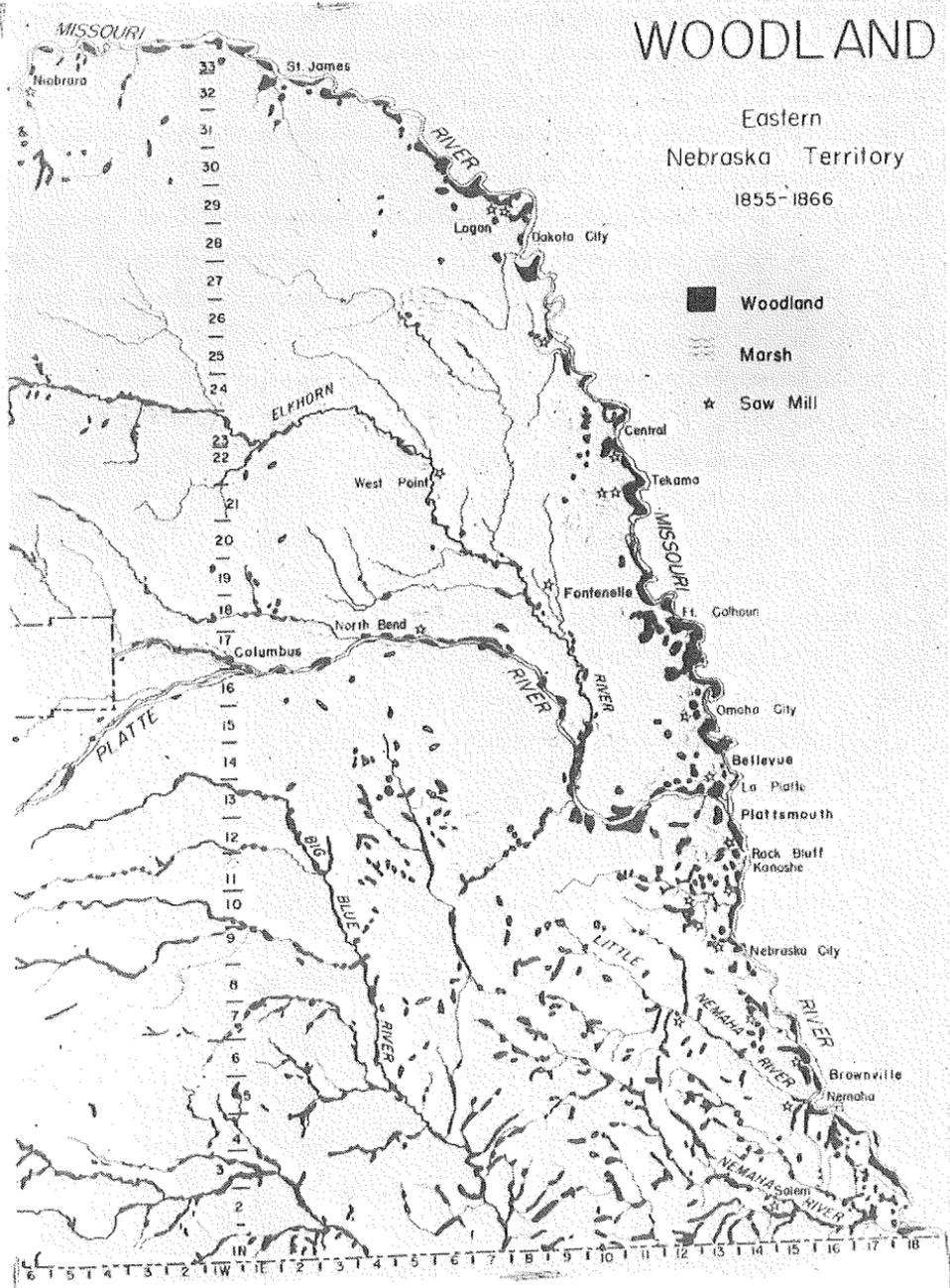
Nebraska Place Names: Missouri Valley, Platte Valley, Great Nemaha River, Little Nemaha River

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Photographs / Images: map showing woodlands in eastern Nebraska Territory, 1855-1866 (township plat of the land survey)

WOODLAND

Eastern
Nebraska Territory
1855-1866



Source: Township plat of the land survey.

THE NEBRASKA PRAIRIES: Dilemma to Early Territorial Farmers

By C. HOWARD RICHARDSON

The aim of this article is to describe the dilemma faced by pioneers who farmed the prairies of eastern Nebraska during the early years of the territorial period, 1855-1856. Also it aims to identify systems of early farming and to interpret how they helped to resolve the problems of farm-making and farm marketing on the prairies of eastern Nebraska.¹

Perceptions of the natural landscape of eastern Nebraska were recorded by the original land surveyors in field notes and on township plats. Field notes provide useful information about how surveyors rated the natural environment for pioneer agriculture. On township plats physical features (prairie, timber, upland, valley) as well as cultural features (house, road, field, fence) are among those whose patterns of distribution were recorded.²

The early territorial farmers were unwilling, and perhaps unable, to settle on open prairies—wide expanses of treeless grassland where wood and water were unavailable. On the prairies of eastern Nebraska, sod farmhouses were not recorded by the original land surveyors. Instead,

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systems of farming that involved the use of wood developed in areas of mixed vegetation where upland prairies and wooded river valleys alternated in the landscape. Survey records of public lands show that the landscape of pioneer farming was localized mainly in the Missouri Valley, its larger tributary valleys, and the Platte Valley. Here pioneer innovations were directed toward ways of farming prairie claims and, wherever possible, utilizing wood and water at the same time. In summarizing advantages of mixed areas of prairie-forest for pioneer settlement farther east, Jordan concluded:

The advantages were recognized by people of varied origins over a long period of time, and to judge from the scattered evidence, the mixed areas may well have been preferred as sites for settlement as long as they were available and accessible. Any anti-grassland prejudice which might have existed was of minor importance in guiding the course of settlement. It was not the grassland as such that was avoided, rather, only the open prairies, for only there did the prairie problem really begin.³

In eastern Nebraska natural vegetation was characterized by dominance of grasses, scarcity of shrubs, and paucity of trees, except for groves along rivers. The natural landscape of settled areas included rolling to hilly prairies with rounded ridge-tops and smooth, well-drained slopes extending to drainage channels. Only a few marshes existed on the floodplains of major rivers. Pound and Clements stated that "wooded-bluff and meadowland" extends westward in Nebraska to include Missouri tributaries like the Great and Little Nemaha rivers:

The 'wooded-bluff and meadow-land region' occupies in our territory a narrow strip about 35 kilometers wide, comprising that portion of the Missouri river valley lying in Nebraska. . . . Its physical characteristics in Nebraska are broad lowlands, abrupt wooded bluffs with numerous ravines, and back of these the higher meadows which form the transition to prairies beyond.⁴

The original land surveyors used the term "prairie" for all grassland. However, Weaver and Bruner distinguished

the nature of true prairies where they appeared south of the Platte River as follows:

On the nearly level land little bluestem usually dominated but it was commonly intermixed with 5 to 15 percent of big bluestem. . . . Where the land was slightly lower and received run-in water the percentage of big bluestem increased accordingly until finally rather pure open stands occurred. . . . Many poorly drained uplands supported big bluestem where small depressions occurred. Conversely, a slight rise in the topography often resulted in nearly pure little bluestem, the bunches becoming more pronounced and more widely spaced. . . . Western wheatgrass often occupied considerable areas of compact soils, especially those with claypans.⁵

In Iowa, Bogue quoted a historian of Cedar County in 1836 and 1837 who remarked, "The prairie land was regarded as worthless for purposes of agriculture and was considered as a useless waste."⁶ In eastern Nebraska, by way of contrast, early farmers considered the prairies excellent for grazing and cultivating. Original land surveyors gave the following assessment of land for agriculture: In T7N, R9E, located south of Palmyra, the surveyor said, "The land is mostly upland, rolling prairie. The soil is first rate. Near the Nemaha Valley, T1N, R14E, he noted, "The land, generally speaking, is first rate. . . . The uplands are usually rolling and very well suited for cultivation." West of DeSoto, T18N, R11E, the surveyor said, "It is well watered with springs and streams. The prairie yields a bountiful supply of grass which would finely adapt it for raising stock." Again for Nemaha County, a newspaper reporter described the rural landscape of 1856 as follows: "There are over 2000 inhabitants, mostly tillers of the soil. Here, our cattle roam at large, and become fat and sleek upon the prairie grass and wild pea, abounding in this region. Butter is of excellent flavor."⁷ Such quotations reveal that, by and large, pioneers assessed the prairies as favorable for agriculture.

For early Nebraska farmers, an important consideration in regard to prairie occupancy was access to timber.

Whether or not an early farmer settled in a particular locality was influenced by the sufficiency of timber for construction, fencing, and firewood. In many prairie townships there was not enough timber to support rural settlement. Examples follow: The surveyor said in T3N, R13E, "The timber is chiefly of an inferior quality of burr oak, walnut, hickory, elm, ash, and hackberry. There is not sufficient timber to supply the wants of farmers excepting in the vicinity of the Long Branch." In T1N, R8E, he said, "Timber is chiefly elm, oak, and hickory, and some walnut. But there is scarcely enough to support a large settlement." Also the surveyor said in T2N, R3E, "The timber is mostly dwarf oaks and of but little use for a settlement."

In a few townships where timber was in short supply, the use of sod for fences and other improvements was recorded. For example, in T18N, R1W, the surveyor said, "There is in Shell Creek a fair proportion of dry, rich bottomland, which is already claimed by numerous pioneers who on the account of the scarcity of timber and the entire absence of stone, have made many of their improvements of sod."

Some townships that had only a few scattered trees did not have enough good quality timber for house construction; yet, timber was adequate for fencing and for firewood. The surveyor said in T9N, R13E, for example, "The township is one of good soil and well adapted for either farming or grazing, being well watered; although it does not have much good timber in it, yet there are several small groves of timber suitable for fuel." Also in T6N, R10W, he said, "There are a few scattered trees along the river and creeks fit only for fuel and fencing."

A major challenge to the early farmers was how to utilize the prairies without actually settling there. In many prairie townships where timber was absent, the land was considered excellent for cultivation and stock grazing. In T17N, R11E, for example, the surveyor said, "The land is high rolling prairie and although destitute of timber or other building materials yet is well watered by springs and

small streams, and having good first and second rate clay loam soil which yields a luxuriant growth of grass is well adapted to stock raising and agricultural purposes."

Where prairie farms bordered the Missouri Valley, some farmers hauled logs from timber claims on the bottomlands to their upland claims several miles away. Timber claims were held by upland farmers in the bottomlands of the following townships: In T13N, R14E, the surveyor said, "I think the whole township is claimed—a large portion of it for timber—by squatters living farther from the river on high prairie." Also he said in T14N, R14E, "This township is nearly all claimed, mostly for its timber."

Where mixed vegetation included a plentiful supply of large timber, original surveyors considered these townships especially desirable for the support of rural settlement. The surveyor said, for example, in T2N, R13E, "The timber is mainly oak, elm, walnut, and hickory and is as good as usually found west of the Missouri. The timber is not very abundant but is sufficient to supply all in the vicinity of streams." In T17N, R12E, he said, "The land is about the common average; the northeast corner embracing a part of sections 1, 2, 12, and 13 is level rich bottom, well timbered with good cottonwood which affords good building material." He said in T18N, R2E, "There is some timber on Shell Creek, sufficient to support a settlement along the Creek. Also in T14N, R10E, the surveyor said, "The timber of the Elkhorn and Platte rivers will supply the upland quite well. Finally in T30N, R6E, the surveyor said, "Sufficient timber adjoins the Iowa Creek and the Missouri River to supply the demand on the prairie."

During the early years of land survey, 1855 and 1856, early farmers developed specialized modes of farming in response to increasing demands for food at growing Missouri River towns and for grains and other agricultural products that were exported by steamboat to St. Louis.⁸ These systems of farming were adapted to a variety of commercial opportunities, to slow means of overland trans-

portation, and to local variations in the environment of wooded valleys and upland prairies.

In the pre-railroad era grain was exported from pioneer farms by slow and cumbersome team and wagon over distances that rarely exceeded 15 miles from the steamboat landings at Missouri River towns where boats docked each week. Steamboats from St. Louis supplied early Nebraska farmers with many manufactured products that were necessary for their rustic life. To reach steamboat landings, many farmers hauled wagon loads of corn or other products from farmsteads across the prairies to the nearest wagon road that led to town. So early farm-related transportation systems, slow and cumbersome, adjusted to a variety of surfaces that included rolling prairies, dirt wagon roads, and the navigable Missouri River.

Except along the Platte Valley, distances beyond 15 miles west of the Missouri River restricted a large part of eastern Nebraska from the possibility of early farm settlement. The plight of back country farmers was expressed succinctly in June 1856:

The settler here has no access to his home nor outlet to the markets abroad, but such as the slow, cumbersome, and expensive facilities that his team and wagon afford him. While such is the case, the interior must settle slowly. The emigrant will be loth [sic] to seek a home distant from the river, if in so doing, he isolates himself from the world abroad and is shut out from all intercourse with his fellow men, save only those who chance to have settled immediately about him.⁹

Regardless of vast potentialities for agriculture within the territorial economy, farming assumed a subordinate role. Urban occupations predominated. The territorial census of 1860 reveals that of the 11,581 pioneers engaged in occupations, only 4,437 workers (38 percent) were employed as farmers and farm laborers. Their agricultural equipment seems very primitive by modern standards. In 1856, for example, reaping and mowing machines were introduced for the first time.¹⁰ And this hand corn-planter was advertised during June 1856:

Wakefield's Hand Corn-Planter is used as a cane or walking-stick—adjust it to plant corn at the desired depth and drop any required number of seeds in a hill. Western Corn Planters Company. Office at 84 Main Street; St. Louis, Missouri.¹¹

Primitive equipment like this limited most early corn fields to about 20 or 30 acres.

Territorial farmers were gregarious, a characteristic which was evident in a number of ways. Early settlement along the Missouri River was highly urbanized and farmhouses were located rarely farther than a mile from one another. High urbanization in Missouri River towns was magnified by large numbers of farmers who lived in town, as the following statement published in a territorial newspaper reveals:

All towns on the western side of the Missouri River flourish and are built more rapidly than on the eastern bank, and for the reason that all produce raised west of the river must find its way to the river for shipment. The Swiss system of farmers living in towns instead of being isolated on their farms exists. This causes more sociability, and accounts for the number and beauty of western towns and villages.¹²

Since there were more men than women in Territorial Nebraska, many single farmers probably remained in town dwellings because they were unwilling to remain alone on their claims in the countryside. Presumably, most farmers who lived on their farmsteads were married and lived with their families. Proximity of rural farmsteads was certainly an advantage to the pioneers in many ways. Socializing was easier; sharing labor and equipment was expedited; and neighbors were reasonably close in case of an emergency.

Township plats reveal features of rural settlement from which have been identified three distinct methods of pioneer farming. They have been classified here according to the major emphasis: crop and livestock production, specialized crop production, and specialized livestock production.

Crop and livestock production was practiced in two different types of localities within the area of mixed vegetation that supported early rural settlement. One locality bordered a river valley and included both timber and prairie vegetation. The other locality was located on the treeless upland prairies, although usually within eyesight of a timbered river valley.

Crop and livestock farms that included prairie and timber on claims were located generally less than 10 or 15 miles from some Missouri River town, like Omaha or Nebraska City, where there existed a growing market for corn and meat animals. A typical crop and livestock farm was linked by wagon road to town. It had about 30 to 60 acres of timbered valley and 70 to 100 acres of upland prairie. Also, a field of about 20 to 30 acres had been plowed from the prairie sod and planted to corn. In some cases, the single corn field was fenced in order to protect the crop from livestock that grazed surrounding prairies. Fences were made generally of poles or split rails but occasionally of sod. To protect their claims from intruders early farmers organized mutual protection societies on a township-wide basis. Often meetings of these societies were announced in the local newspapers.¹³

A typical claim that included mixed vegetation is illustrated by the following advertisement:

Claim for Sale Undersigned will offer for sale a fine improved claim, situated one mile west of Brownville on a main road. The claim is well divided between prairie and timber. Improvements consist of a good double log house and 20 acres of corn under fence. The proprietor is determined to go to California in the spring. J. W. Bennett.¹⁴

The farmhouse, constructed of local timber, usually was situated along a line of contact between prairie and timber. The log or, more often, frame house was small but built to protect the farm family from the rigors of winter that ordinarily included several blizzards. Livestock that were over-wintered fed on wild hay and probably some corn and other grains. When marketed, corn was hauled by team

and wagon, but livestock were driven to large towns along the Missouri River. Some crop and livestock farmers who lived only a few miles from river towns kept dairy cattle because fresh milk and butter were marketed to urban residents. Other livestock included swine, sheep, and poultry.

T2N, R16E, surveyed late in 1855, illustrates the system of crop and livestock farming on claims having mixed vegetation. In the western two-thirds of this township, the public domain held a favorable combination of natural resources for rural settlement, particularly the prairie and timber-fringed valley of Muddy Creek. The environment of mixed vegetation offered little in the way of a dilemma to early farmers. Here the distribution of farms appears to have been representative of those throughout the prairie peninsula* where early settlement, while clinging to the woods, began the rural occupation of the prairies. Typical rural claims held a log house and an unfenced field of corn. Early farmers depended here upon timber from local groves to build log houses, and to supply firewood. Furthermore, Muddy Creek provided a perennial source of potable water for both settlers and their livestock. The small hamlet of Archer functioned primarily as a supply center for pioneer farmers who settled the Muddy Valley. These pioneer farmers marketed primarily beef cattle and corn by driving or hauling them to Brownville, the closest large river town located about 20 miles to the north.

The crop and livestock farmer who located his claim on treeless upland prairies remained commonly within eye-sight of woodland. His system of farming and acreage under corn were very similar to that on claims with mixed vegetation. However, he was often obliged to import timber or lumber for construction, firewood, and in some places, fencing. Often the upland farmer hauled timber to his prairie claim from the Missouri River bottomland

* Prairie peninsula is that triangular region extending from the eastern border of the High Plains to central Ohio.

where he held a timber claim. Earlier, Hewes reported this practice among early farmers in Iowa.¹⁵ Like his counterpart on the prairie-timber claim, the prairie farmer was situated less than 10 or 15 miles from a Missouri River town that served as his market.

Surveyed in June, 1856, T14N, R13E represents a township having crop and livestock farms on sparsely timbered rolling prairies located some three to five miles west of the Missouri River bottomland. Here the problem of finding fuel, fencing, and building material became a genuine dilemma for which there was not a sufficient local supply. In this township, some farmers who built their homes on rural claims hauled timber by team and wagon onto the uplands from the adjacent township to the east that included bottomland timber along the Missouri River. There in T14N, R14E during 1856 the surveyor said:

This township is situated wholly within the Missouri River bottom except a narrow strip along the western side of sections 30 and 31 and the SW quarter of section 19, which strip is hilly, timbered with oak, ash etc. . . . This township is nearly all claimed, mostly for its timber.

Crops and cattle were marketed just beyond the southeast corner of T14N, R13E where Omaha City was located only a few miles from the crop and livestock farmers under discussion.

The crop farming specialization was practiced typically on a prairie claim located on a wagon road only a few miles from a large town along the Missouri River. Commonly, the only sign of improvement on the prairie claim was a small field about 10 to 30 acres in size planted to corn. Usually the field was unfenced and the farmer did not reside on the claim. Instead, this system required that the farmer commute to and from his field from the river town where he lived. His status may have been either that of a part-time farmer or a temporary town-resident who planned to build a home on his rural claim the following year.¹⁶

The crop farming specialization is illustrated near Nebraska City by T8N, R14E surveyed in January 1856. Here, many farmers lived either in Nebraska City, South Nebraska City or Kearny City, adjacent river towns that formed a single urban nucleus. These crop farmers commuted back and forth along wagon roads to the vicinity of their claims which were located less than three miles from town. In the hinterland west of Nebraska City, most fields were fenced in order to protect the growing crops from livestock that roamed at large over the upland prairies. Here, building of farmhouses was delayed by shortage of timber of construction size and quality. At these Nebraska cities, in fact, the lumber shortage was acute, and early house building was accomplished with use of Missouri River steamboat cargoes of imported pine lumber. These crop farmers marketed their corn for local consumption at nearby Nebraska City or exported it down river to St. Louis.

The livestock farming specialization was practiced both at a considerable distance from Missouri River towns and in their immediate hinterland.

Livestock farmers who were distant from Missouri River markets specialized typically in production of meat animals that were marketed by driving them to the nearest large river town, commonly as far as 30 miles away. Livestock farmers located their claims so as to include mixed vegetation along a valley, like the Big Nemaha, a tributary of the Missouri Valley. In many places houses were built of logs since farmers often grazed meat animals in areas where saw mills, necessary for the construction of frame houses, were absent. Usually they plowed only enough ground for a garden. Barns were not recorded by original land surveyors. A hamlet was located nearby where these farmers obtained household needs and some farm equipment.

Surveyed between November 1855 and February 1856, T1N, R15E illustrates a township where rural settlement was located a long way from a Missouri River market, and

where farmers specialized in meat animal production. The central and southern areas of this township were not surveyed since The Sac and Fox Reservation occupied that area. However, the Great Nemaha Valley belonged to the area within the public domain and, therefore, was open to pioneer settlement. Located on the prairie-woodland boundary, frame houses were built from local timber. Logs were sawed at the water-powered mill located at the falls near the small hamlet of Salem. Scarcity of fields of corn or other crops provided primary evidence for the interpretation that these farmers concentrated on grazing meat animals. Probably most of these animals, whether beef cattle, swine, or sheep, were marketed in the fall as yearlings. But at least some breeding stock may have been over-wintered on wild hay. Farm youth were usually involved in herding livestock that were driven to market at Brownville, located about 25 miles to the north. The local hamlet of Salem supplied livestock farmers along the Great Nemaha Valley with a few household supplies and other equipment.

Livestock farmers in immediate hinterlands of Missouri River towns commonly lived in town while herding their livestock in the countryside. Since only fields with crops were fenced, town-based livestock farmers herded their animals on the unfenced prairies.¹⁷ Commonly older children of the family assisted with this task. Probably a considerable variety of livestock including dairy cattle were grazed at distances of three miles or less from large river towns. Fresh milk could be marketed daily without spoilage to urban residents.

Surveyed in January 1856, T8N, R14E included the Nebraska City urban area and illustrates a hinterland where livestock grazing of upland prairies was carried on near a river town. Here most fields were enclosed to protect growing crops from livestock that roamed freely without supervision of herders. In 1856, the problem of free-roaming livestock motivated the Territorial Legislature to pass a herd law especially aimed at preventing sheep and

swine from running at large.¹⁵

A unique finding with regard to farming in the early years of eastern Nebraska's territorial period was the diversity of farm residences—some farmers lived in river towns, others in the countryside. The tendency of pioneer farmers to farm from town residences has not been reported in most studies of pioneer settlement within the prairie peninsula farther east. Many early Nebraska farmers may have been motivated to continue residing in town by a desire to speculate on town property. Generally prices of land inflated rapidly on the Nebraska frontier, and usually town lots inflated more rapidly than rural claims. By farming from town, therefore, a farmer could gain unearned profit from the inflating price of his town lot in addition to that from his 160 acre roadside claim. The latter usually held a small field of corn. As stated previously, farmers who lived in river towns may have been either part-time farmers or those who expected to relocate on rural claims the following year. Additional incentives to remain in large river towns, like Omaha and Nebraska City, could be mentioned. Among them was the rapid increase in job opportunities of many kinds caused by the influx of emigrants who were outfitting themselves for the long trek across the Great Plains.

In this study the major types of farming that have been identified from the 1855 and 1856 township plats include crop and livestock farming, specialized crop farming, and specialized livestock farming. These initial types of commercial farming in eastern Nebraska's pioneer landscape resemble in a general way more modern and highly specialized types of agriculture within the prairie peninsula. Yet, certainly, they differed greatly from their modern counterparts in location, in scale of operation, in degree of commercialization, as well as in other details of production and marketing.

In general, it can be concluded that pioneer systems of farming in eastern Nebraska Territory represented innovative adaptations to highly localized physical, economic,

and social opportunities that existed in the hinterland of the Missouri Valley and along its larger tributary river valleys. The early territorial farming systems reveal the extent of pioneer ingenuity in overcoming the dilemma of prairie occupancy where restrictions were imposed by slow means of overland transportation and heavy dependence on local supplies of wood, grass, productive soil, and potable water. These natural resources were readily available to farmers only in the mixed landscape where wooded river valleys alternated with the upland prairies of eastern Nebraska.

NOTES

¹ This paper evolved from the dissertation of C. Howard Richardson (supervised by Dr. Leslie Hewes) entitled, "Early Settlement of Eastern Nebraska Territory: A Geographical Study Based on the Original Land Survey," University of Nebraska, 1968.

² The basic source of the study was the United States Land Survey, *Field Notes and Township Plats*, Nebraska Territory, State Surveyor's Office, State Capitol Building, Lincoln, Nebraska.

³ Jordan, Terry G., "Between the Forest and the Prairie" *Agricultural History*, 38, (October 1964), 216.

⁴ Pound, Roscoe, and Clements, Frederic E., *Phytogeography of Nebraska*, (Lincoln: 1900), p. 70 and Map II following the Index.

⁵ Weaver, John E., *North American Prairie*, (Lincoln: Johnsen Publishing Co., 1954), p. 207.

⁶ Bogue, Alan G., *From Prairie to Corn Belt*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1963), p. 47.

⁷ *Nebraska Advertiser*, (Brownville), June 7, 1856.

⁸ Graebner, Norman A., "Nebraska's Missouri River Frontier, 1854-1860," *Nebraska History*, 42 (Dec. 1961), 229-230.

⁹ *Nebraska Advertiser*, June 21, 1856.

¹⁰ *The Nebraskian* (Omaha), June 11, 1856.

¹¹ *Nebraska Advertiser*, June 7, 1856.

¹² *The Nebraskian*, August 13, 1856.

¹³ *Nebraska Advertiser*, July 12, 1856.

¹⁴ *Nebraska Advertiser*, November 22, 1856.

¹⁵ Hewes, Leslie, "Some Features of Early Woodland and Prairie Settlement in a Central Iowa Country" *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, XL, (March 1950), 53.

¹⁶ Richardson, *op. cit.* p. 275.

¹⁷ *The Nebraskian*, August 13, 1856.

¹⁸ *Nebraska Advertiser*, January 7, 1856.