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Article Summary: The Lewis-Syford House, constructed in 1878, is the only example of French Second Empire architecture in Lincoln and the oldest remaining landmark on the University of Nebraska campus. Only the Lewis family and later the Syfords ever lived in the house.

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Photographs / Images: Constance Syford, Lester Syford, Ethel Syford, DeWitt N Syford



*High school graduation pictures of Constance Syford (left) and Lester Syford.*



*Ethel Syford, about 20 years of age.*

# The Lewis-Syford House of Lincoln

BY PATRICIA GASTER

The Lewis-Syford House, located at 700 North 16th Street on the University of Nebraska-Lincoln campus, was built about 1878, for the Reverend Elisha Moses Lewis, early Presbyterian pastor and missionary. The house is Lincoln's only example (and one of Nebraska's last remaining examples) of the French Second Empire style of architecture, popular in America beginning about 1865, when Lincoln's earliest homes were being built.<sup>1</sup> It is also valuable as a surviving home of a middle income Nebraska family of the 1880s.

Facing west, the dwelling is flanked by the Alpha Chi Omega sorority house and the Wesley House, a Methodist student chapel. It is a story-and-a-half frame structure with partial basement and central fireplace. Its style well illustrates two of the most distinguishing features of the American version of the Second Empire style: elaborate cast-iron cresting and mansard roof. The facade, faced with clapboards, features a veranda adjoining the main entrance on the west and a porch at the side entrance on the north.<sup>2</sup> It was originally painted an olive gold color.

The somewhat low, shingled mansard roof features dormer windows, decorative eave brackets, and a continuous curb around the top of the visible slopes. The first floor exhibits High-Victorian rectangular windows. A small frame carriage barn with a clipped-gable roof, built at the same time as the house, is located in back. It served as a carriage house and stable, and later as a garage.<sup>3</sup> The original doors were destroyed to accommodate automobiles. Near the back door is a small woodshed, common to houses of the period, to store fuel for cooking and heating.<sup>4</sup>

Mr. Lewis, builder of the home, had served churches in Michigan and Wisconsin before coming to Nebraska City in 1863. In November of 1864 he helped organize a Congregational church in Lancaster County near Davey. Shortly thereafter the younger of his two sons died and Lewis returned to Wheatland, Michigan, for 15 years.<sup>5</sup> In 1876 he returned to

Nebraska, spent one year in Falls City, and then came to Lincoln. In November of 1877 he purchased from Samuel W. Little a 300x400-foot tract of land at the southeast corner of Vine and 16th Streets in Lincoln, which included the land on which the North 16th Street house now stands.<sup>6</sup> He served for several years as state synodical evangelist for the Presbyterian Church and in 1881 helped organize a Presbyterian Church at Firth, Lancaster County.<sup>7</sup> He died in Lincoln on July 24, 1891.

The DeWitt N. Syford family acquired the house about 1904. Few interior or exterior alterations were made over the years, besides the addition of electric lights and heating and water pipes.<sup>8</sup> Some of the interior woodwork was given successive coats of white, dark green, red, gray, and ivory paint.<sup>9</sup> The Nebraska State Historical Society has cataloged and stored many of the original furnishings.

DeWitt N. Syford (1847-1926), who lent his surname to the house, was a pioneer Nebraska telegrapher and livestock raiser. He was described by the *Lincoln Star* upon his death in May of 1926 as "typical of the early class of pioneers in Nebraska who built up this state."<sup>10</sup> Born in York County, Pennsylvania, he had worked as a telegrapher and train dispatcher before coming to Omaha in the early 1870s and followed the same calling throughout Nebraska for the next several years.<sup>11</sup> Syford later came to Lincoln, shortly after his marriage to teacher Amanda Bean Syford.<sup>12</sup> In Lincoln he continued his telegraphic work<sup>13</sup> and took up farming and the raising of purebred livestock north of Lincoln, introducing some of the first Aberdeen Angus cattle in Lancaster County.<sup>14</sup> He was organizer and first secretary of the Nebraska Aberdeen Angus Breeders Association.<sup>15</sup>

DeWitt Syford's children—a son and two daughters—distinguished themselves in various fields. None married. Lester Corwin Syford (1885-1952), a University of Nebraska School of Law graduate, practiced law for five years before joining his father in the breeding of Aberdeen Angus cattle in 1915.<sup>16</sup> He continued in this career until his death in February of 1952; he was eulogized by his friend, newspaper editor James E. Lawrence, in the *Lincoln Star* as a "typical Nebraskan, rooted in the soil of this state to his fingertips."<sup>17</sup>

Ethel Corinne Syford (1881-1955)—pianist, author, editor, and researcher—was graduated from the University of Nebraska School of Music. Shortly afterward she moved to the East—first



*DeWitt N. Syford.*

to New York and then to Boston where she served on the editorial staffs of the *New England Magazine*, the *Industrial News Survey*, the *Weekly Independent*,<sup>18</sup> and from 1922 to 1932, *The Trend*, a “national weekly published in New York City, which discusses current events from the standpoint of Republican principles.”<sup>19</sup> Ethel Syford, an ardent Republican, campaigned vigorously for Calvin Coolidge in the 1924 presidential election. The November 9, 1924, *Sunday State Journal* reported her visit to Lincoln after “campaigning for the Republican National Committee in Maine, Pennsylvania, New York, Ohio, and Minnesota. She spoke at Cleveland on a program with Senator [Joseph] McCormick of Illinois and also in Chicago.” After service as an economic research expert with the US Tariff Commission, she returned to Lincoln in 1946 and lived with her brother Lester until his death in 1952. She died in November of 1955.<sup>20</sup>

Constance M. Syford, youngest of the Syford children, received a bachelor’s degree from the University of Nebraska in 1909, with a major in English language and literature and minors in the Romance and Germanic languages; and a master’s degree in 1911. She then attended Bryn Mawr College and subsequently taught at several schools, including Kansas State Agricultural College; Illinois Wesleyan University; Albright College; Millikin University; University of Illinois; and Anderson College. She also served as an English instructor at the University of Nebraska from 1923 to 1928.<sup>21</sup> In 1924, 1928, and 1932 she traveled in Europe, where she did research on her thesis and studied Italian and French. She was enrolled for a time in the Yale University graduate school, class of 1936. She spent most of her remaining years at New Haven, Connecticut, from which she managed

family property in Lincoln after the death of her sister Ethel in 1955.<sup>22</sup>

After Constance Syford's death on May 30, 1965, the house on North 16th Street became the property of the State Historical Society Foundation. She had willed the house to the Foundation along with funds for its upkeep and restoration. The home is now the oldest remaining landmark on the University of Nebraska campus.<sup>23</sup> It was placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1971. A state historical marker has been erected at the site.

### NOTES

1. Lewis-Syford House file, State Historic Preservation Office, Nebraska State Historical Society. Kathy McAuliffe, "16th Street's 'Little Yellow House' Marks 100th Year," *Nebraska Alumnus*, 74 (Lincoln; March/April, 1978), 19-21.

2. *Ibid.*

3. *Ibid.*

4. *Summer Nebraskan*, July 5, 1972. *Daily Nebraskan*, September 24, 1976.

5. *Lincoln Evening News*, July 24, 1891. *Daily Nebraska State Journal*, July 25, 1891.

6. Merriam Constance Syford collection, MS3502, Nebraska State Archives.

7. Alfred T. Andreas, *History of the State of Nebraska* (Chicago: The Western Historical Company, 1882), 1,086.

8. Syford file, Historic Preservation Department, NSHS.

9. *Sunday Omaha World-Herald*, March 10, 1968.

10. *Lincoln Star*, May 17, 1926.

11. *Omaha World-Herald*, March 13, 1925. *Sunday Omaha Bee*, May 3, 1925.

12. *Lincoln Star*, May 17, 1926; May 23, 1930.

13. *Sunday Omaha Bee*, May 23, 1925.

14. Syford collection, State Archives.

15. *Lincoln Star*, May 17, 1926.

16. *Lincoln Star*, February 6, 1952.

17. *Lincoln Star*, February 11, 1952.

18. *Lincoln Star*, November 8, 1955.

19. *Sunday State Journal*, November 9, 1924.

20. Syford collection, State Archives.

21. *Lincoln Evening Journal*, May 31, 1965. McAuliffe, "Little Yellow House." Warren H. Smith, *Constance Miriam Syford, A Memoir With Extracts From Her Letters* (New Haven, Connecticut: Privately Printed, 1966), 14.

22. *Lincoln Sunday Journal and Star*, April 26, 1959. *Lincoln Evening Journal*, May 31, 1965. Syford collection, State Archives, January 26, 1981, letter to author from Reference Archivist Patricia Bodak Stark, Yale University Library.

23. *Daily Nebraskan*, November 29, 1967. Syford file, Historic Preservation.