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Article Summary: Presbyterian missionary Samuel Allis, Jr., also served as a teacher to the Pawnee. Sioux attacks caused his mission to be abandoned in 1946. In 1861 Allis's daughter, Martha Hollins, created the earliest quilt known to have been made by a Nebraskan.

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Samuel Allis

A Note on the Samuel Allis Family: Missionaries to the Pawnee, 1834-46

By Gail DeBuse Potter

Samuel Allis, Jr., came to the Nebraska country in 1834 as a missionary to the Pawnee. He had grown interested in missionary work after joining the Presbyterian Church of Ithaca, New York. The Presbyterians and other Protestant denominations were increasingly active in support of missionaries after the War of 1812. Pietism along with a growing nationalism stimulated efforts to spread the gospel among Indian tribes in the unsettled regions of North America. The churches saw missionary operations as a way to bring both civilization and Christianity to the "savages."

Allis's desire to undertake religious work found an outlet when his own church in Ithaca decided to raise funds to support a mission. With the sanction of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions of the Presbyterian Church in Boston, Allis was chosen to accompany the Reverend John Dunbar on a mission to the Flathead Indians.¹

Allis and Dunbar left Ithaca with the Reverend Samuel Parker on 5 May 1834. They hoped to travel part way to their destination on an American Fur Company steamboat bound up the Missouri River. However, when the men reached St. Louis late in May, they found that the boat had departed. Too little time remained for an overland journey across the Rocky Mountains that year.²

Rather than see their work delayed until 1835, Dunbar and Allis decided to establish a mission among the Pawnee, then living along the Loup and Platte Rivers. The pair proceeded to Bellevue, site of the Upper Missouri Agency for the Pawnee, Oto, and Omaha. When the Pawnee visited the agency in the fall of 1834 to receive their annuities, Allis departed with the Skidi or Loup Pawnee, while Dunbar accompanied the Grand Pawnee to their village on the Platte near present Clarks, Nebraska. Both men traveled with the Indians on their winter hunt and began to learn the tribal culture and language.³

Before they left New York, both Dunbar and Allis had become engaged to be married. Autograph albums belonging to Samuel Allis

and his fiancée, Emeline Palmer, shed light on their relationship and their expectations for the future. Emeline Palmer's first entry in Allis's book dated 26 March 1834 begins: "Lines addressed to Mr. S. Allis. Since you are soon to leave your native land, permit me to address you as a friend to whom much love and gratitude is due; I write to bid my friend adieu."⁴ Samuel Allis wrote in Emeline Palmer's book on 4 May 1834, the day before he left for the West. His selection from Acts 20:24 reflects the faith that the couple needed to face a future filled with uncertainty.

But none of these things move me
neither count I my life dear unto myself
so that I might finish my course with joy
and the ministry which I have received of the
Lord Jesus to testify the gospel of the grace of God.⁵

While John Dunbar and Samuel Allis were ministering to the Pawnee, the mission board selected Marcus Whitman to establish a mission in the Oregon country. Dr. Whitman traveled to Oregon in 1835 to locate a suitable site. He planned to bring his future wife and other missionaries across the Rockies to Oregon the following year, through many doubted that white women could stand so rigorous a trip.⁶

The Nebraska missionaries met Dr. Whitman near Bellevue in the fall of 1835 as he was returning east. When Dunbar and Allis learned of Whitman's plans for the coming year, they arranged for him to bring their fiancées to Nebraska.⁷ Emeline Palmer had been a member of Allis's church in Ithaca, New York, and their relationship had developed into a mutual desire to join in missionary work. The mission board approved the plan to send Emeline Palmer and Esther Smith west in the spring of 1836, though Miss Smith did not make the trip. John Dunbar returned to New York, where the couple were married in the fall of the year.⁸

In late February 1836 Marcus and Narcissa Whitman embarked for Oregon. With them were Dr. and Mrs. Benjamin Satterlee, Emeline Palmer, Henry and Eliza Spaulding, and two Nez Perce boys returning to their tribe. The party arrived on 7 April at Liberty Landing on the Missouri River, where preparations were made for the upcoming journey across the plains and mountains. Samuel Allis joined them on 21 April, and on 23 April he and Emeline Palmer were married. Eliza Spaulding described the wedding in her diary:

Liberty April 23, 1836. This evening Mr. S. Allis, missionary among the Pawnees and Miss Palmer of Ithaca who journeyed with us to this place were united in the bonds of matrimony. Mr. Spaulding had the pleasure of performing the ceremony. May they live long and labor for the promotion of their master's cause among the benighted Pawnees with whom they expect to spend their days.⁹

On 27 April Henry Spaulding, William Gray (who had joined the party on 17 April), and the Nez Perce boys started for Bellevue with a wagon and all of the camping supplies. The rest of the company, including the women,¹⁰ were to follow on board a fur company boat. Samuel and Emeline Allis planned to remain at Bellevue while the Whitman party continued west with a fur company caravan.

When the steamboat failed to stop for them, the missionary group was forced to make the trip to Bellevue by land. Lacking camp equipment, they slept in the open. Dr. Whitman and his companions pushed ahead in order to catch up with the fur traders, who had already left for the mountains.¹¹ Before their journey ended, Narcissa Whitman and Eliza Spaulding would be the first white women to cross the Rocky Mountains.

Samuel Allis and his new bride stopped with Baptist missionary Moses Merrill at the Oto mission for a few days before moving into the upper room of a house at Lucien Fontenelle's Bellevue trading post. For the next several years Samuel and Emeline Allis lived at Bellevue while the missionary work among the Pawnee continued. Three of their children – Otis, Henry, and Martha Allis – were born there. Otis Allis died in infancy on 5 September 1838.¹²

As long as the Pawnee bands lived in separate villages and depended on hunting for their subsistence, it was not feasible to establish a mission at a fixed location. By 1839, however, Sioux raids on the Pawnee had become so frequent that the Pawnee agreed to congregate at a site on the north side of the Loup. They began to gather there with the expectation that the government would help them learn to farm and provide protection against the marauding Sioux.¹³

In the spring of 1841 Allis and his family began moving to the mission station located near Plum Creek in present Nance County. In a letter to the Reverend David Greene, secretary of the mission board, Allis described the first summer there:

We left Bellevue the 30th of April with our families, two hired men, with three ox teams, our cattle and hogs Our first business was to select our locations . . . plow [plow] and plant our gardens We each of us [Allis, Dunbar and George Gaston, farmer] have a logg cabin 12 x 14 ft. covered with dirt Our shanties were completed about the first of July and until that time our families lived out without any covering except our waggon covers and small tents The Pawnees are comeing into their villages, and have drove the buffalos down so that we have seen them roving about close to our houses which was 'quite' a curiosity to our females.¹⁴

In 1842 Allis was employed by the government as a teacher to the Pawnee, and he built a school house at Willow Creek five miles west of the mission. The couple's fourth child, Otis E. [the second by that name], was born there. Unfortunately Allis's appointment as teacher caused the mission board to question his dedication to religious work

among the Pawnee. The situation was exacerbated by Allis's request to be named mission farmer in 1845. The mission board withdrew its sanction and the salary for Allis to continue as a missionary.

The whole episode seems to have stemmed from misunderstanding, personal conflict among mission personnel, and the lack of communication between the mission board and the missionaries in the field. For his part, Allis saw a pressing need for someone to provide for the secular concerns of the Pawnee. The tribe needed farmers and teachers, which neither the mission board nor the government seemed able to supply. Allis felt that his experience and his knowledge of the Pawnee suited him for these tasks. The mission board, however, was not willing to pay Allis as a missionary when he also was employed by the government.¹⁵

Serious as these problems were, the fate of the mission was sealed by the unrelenting Sioux attacks on the Pawnee, which neither the tribe nor the government could deter. In 1846 the mission was abandoned, and the Allis family moved back to Bellevue where Samuel Allis continued to operate a school for Indians.¹⁶ The family later lived at St. Mary's, Iowa and Fremont, Nebraska, where Samuel Allis died on 12 December 1883.¹⁷

* * * * *

The quilt that appears on the cover of this issue of *Nebraska History* was made by Martha Allis Hollins, the daughter of Samuel and Emeline Palmer Allis. Martha Allis was born at Bellevue on 15 November 1840. She accompanied her parents to the mission at the Pawnee villages and lived later at St. Mary's, Iowa. Martha Allis may have completed the quilt for her wedding to William George Hollins on 4 July 1861 in Omaha, Nebraska Territory. According to the marriage certificate, she was twenty years old, while the groom was twenty-eight years of age, a resident of Pottawattamie County, Iowa.¹⁸

The newlyweds were together only briefly. The Civil War had begun, and thousands of Nebraskans responded to President Abraham Lincoln's call for volunteers. Among them was William Hollins, who organized a company known as the "Nebraska Rangers" on 18 June 1861. The company was mustered-in as Company E of the First Nebraska Infantry and left Omaha for service in the South on 30 July 1861.¹⁹ Hollins resigned his commission as captain of Company E on 26 April 1862²⁰ and returned to Omaha to practice law. He died in Minneapolis, Minnesota on 3 November 1889.²¹ Martha Allis Hollins died on 4 May 1913 in Kenosha, Wisconsin.²²

Martha Hollins's quilt is the earliest quilt known to have been made by a Nebraskan. It was donated to the Nebraska State Historical Society in 1957 by her daughter, Flora Nebraska Robinson, of



Mrs. Martha (Allis) Hollins, daughter of Samuel Allis, with her husband, Judge William G. Hollins, and son Allis.

Kenosha, Wisconsin. The pattern is known as "Wreath of Roses." The border design of a vine of roses begins in a basket of flowers on one side and in a cornucopia on the other. The only parts of the quilt that used printed fabrics are the basket of flowers design and a federal eagle atop the two cornucopias.

The quilt has been executed in turkey red, green, orange, and brown against a white background. The flower basket contains the brown printed fabric. The eagle is cut from a red and yellow print and bears a green shield on its breast. The tail, feet, and wings are edged with a buttonhole stitch using heavy brown thread. Above the eagle are six orange stars, while the eagle sits atop two cornucopias. The maker's signature is below the eagle. It is not clear why the quilt is signed "M.A. Hollins 1860," because Martha Allis's marriage to William Hollins did not occur until 1861.

The entire quilt is seventy-seven and one half inches square. Each block is thirteen and one half inches square and is set on the diagonal. There are eight to nine stitches per inch. A quilting design of plumes is used to form a circle around the blocks, and diagonals are used on the border. The applique is attached with a neat, even buttonhole stitch.

It is likely that Martha Allis began the quilt in the 1850s, for it is much too detailed to have been completed in only one or two years. All of the fabrics match, which suggests that they were acquired at the same time specifically for the quilt. It is possible that the fabric was purchased in Omaha or one of the other fledgling communities that sprang up along the Missouri after Nebraska became a territory in 1854. Or perhaps the material was purchased by Samuel Allis during a trip East in 1857 or sent to the Allis family by relatives. The red and green color scheme was one of the most popular for quilts during the 1850s, and Martha Allis's quilt would have been considered very stylish and up-to-date even though it was made on the western frontier.

It is not known how Martha Allis learned about popular quilt patterns and colors of the day. Having lived in unsettled Indian territory for most of her life, she must have had limited access to such information. Probably she learned sewing and quilting from her mother, Emeline Palmer Allis, one of the first white women in the region west of the Missouri River before 1854.

In addition to the quilt made by his daughter, the Nebraska State Historical Society has several objects collected by Samuel Allis while he lived among the Pawnee. Included are a small piece of beadwork, a quilt handle, a war club, and a gambling basket. The collection also includes a northwest trade gun which supposedly belonged to Samuel Allis.

NOTES

¹“Letters Concerning the Presbyterian Mission in the Pawnee Country Near Bellevue, Neb. 1838-1849,” *Collections of the Kansas State Historical Society 1915-1918*, 14 (1918); reprinted as *The Dunbar-Allis Letters on the Pawnee* with introduction by Waldo R. Wedel (New York and London: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1985), viii.

²*Ibid.*, 691.

³*Ibid.*, 696.

⁴Autograph album of Samuel Allis, Jr., MS2628, Samuel Allis papers, Nebraska State Historical Society.

⁵Autograph album of Emeline Palmer, Allis papers, NSHS.

⁶Clifford M. Drury, *Marcus and Narcissa Whitman and the Opening of Old Oregon*, Vol. 1 (Glendale, California: The Arthur H. Clark Company, 1973), 126.

⁷*Henry Harmon Spaulding, Pioneer of Old Oregon* (Caldwell, Idaho: Caxton Printers, Ltd., 1936), 109.

⁸*Dunbar-Allis Letters*, 629.

⁹Clifford M. Drury, ed., *First White Women Over the Rockies*, Vol. 1 (Glendale, California: The Arthur H. Clark Company, 1963), 188.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, 185. Mrs. Benjamin Satterlee died at Liberty on 30 April 1836.

¹¹*Dunbar-Allis Letters*, 711.

¹²*Ibid.*, 712, 717.

¹³George E. Hyde, *The Pawnee Indians*, New Edition (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1974), 199-203.

¹⁴*Dunbar-Allis Letters*, 724-26.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, 715-41 *passim*.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, 740-41.

¹⁷J. Sterling Morton and Albert Watkins, *Illustrated History of Nebraska*, Vol. 2 (Lincoln: Jacob North and Co., 1907), 486.

¹⁸Marriage Records, Douglas County, Nebraska Territory, Vol. 1, 72, Nebraska State Historical Society.

¹⁹Alfred T. Andreas, comp., *History of Nebraska* (Chicago: Western Publishing Company, 1882), 231.

²⁰*Roster of Nebraska Volunteers for 1861-1869 Compiled from Books, Records, and Documents on File in the Office of the Adjutant General of the State* (Hastings: Wigton and Evans, State Printer, 1888), 52-53.

²¹Morton and Watkins, *Illustrated History of Nebraska*, 486.

²²Letter from Mrs. Jack Drew, 27 September 1985, in Flora Robinson Donor file, Nebraska State Historical Society Museum.