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Article Summary: This article presents the history of the creation of the silver service presented to the USS *Nebraska* by the State of Nebraska in 1905, its design, its eventual return to the state in 1922. [The battleship USS *Nebraska* was launched in 1904 and deactivated in 1920.]

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Photographs / Images: The centerpiece featuring the USS *Nebraska* flanked by agricultural and patriotic motifs; details of the punch bowl (2 photos); handle of the punch bowl ladle; Governor John Hopwood Mickey; photograph of the engraving of the USS *Nebraska*; The USS *Nebraska's* silver service as it appeared in 1998.

The centerpiece features the USS Nebraska flanked by agricultural and patriotic motifs. Photo by Roger Bruhn.



THE SILVER SERVICE FOR THE USS NEBRASKA

By Gail DeBuse Potter

The presentation of a silver service at the commissioning of a U.S. naval vessel became a tradition during the nineteenth century. The silver services were donated by individuals, organizations, cities, or states for use on a specific ship. The services varied from those consisting of a single item to the 102-piece set made for the USS *Utah* in 1914. When a ship was decommissioned, the silver service commonly was loaned to the state or city that purchased it and displayed at the statehouse, governor's mansion, or historical society.

The earliest reference to a silver service for the new battleship *Nebraska* appears as a headline in the August 27, 1904, *Lincoln Star*: "Patriotic Nebraskans will be asked to give money with which to buy a silver service for the battleship which bears the name of this state." According to the accompanying

article, a committee would be appointed by Governor John H. Mickey to organize a fund drive. Though some Nebraskans did send their nickels and dimes to the governor, no fund drive materialized, and the money was returned to the contributors in the fall of 1905.¹

Governor Mickey mentioned the USS *Nebraska* in his second inaugural address January 5, 1905. He noted that the ship had been launched October 7, 1904, as "one of the latest and most efficient types of battleships, and our state is highly honored by the national government in being permitted to stand sponsor for her."² Mickey felt that it would be "highly proper" for the state of Nebraska to present to the ship some practical gift such as a silver service or a library. He asked the legislature to make an appropriation or endorse a plan to raise funds by subscription.

On February 28, 1905, the house Committee on Federal Relations introduced a bill for an appropriation to purchase a library for the officers,

crew, and marines of the battleship *Nebraska*. The bill was referred to the Committee on Libraries, where it was amended to provide for a silver service instead of a library. The amended bill, House Roll 413, was signed by Governor Mickey on April 3, 1905. It appropriated \$3,000 in state funds to be spent under the governor's direction.³

Firms who had heard about the new battleship had already contacted the governor about providing a silver service. Shreve and Company, a silver manufacturer from San Francisco, first wrote the governor in May 1904.⁴ In August Reichenberg-Smith and Company, a wholesale jeweler and diamond firm in Omaha, informed Mickey that it was "in a position to furnish something . . . at extremely low prices besides being in touch with the best concerns in the east who are making a specialty of sterling silver."⁵ In April 1905 Mickey told Shreve and Company that "our legislature has just adjourned . . . but nothing has been done looking to placing of an order or the selection of a design . . . I have not had time to give

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Detail of the punch bowl. Photo by Roger Bruhn.



Detail of the punch bowl... (right) The handle of the ladle. Photos by Roger Bruhn.



consideration to matters of this sort."⁶

On June 24, 1905, the governor invited several companies to present proposals for a silver service with designs to be ready by August 1.⁷ The competitors were Shreve and Company of San Francisco and Reichenberg-Smith and Company, T. L. Combs and Company, and Mawhinney and Ryan Company, all of Omaha. Each Company managed to meet the August 1 deadline, though Reichenberg-Smith continually asked for an extension.⁸ Governor Mickey refused to alter the original deadline, remarking:

The other competitors are working with that end in view. I do not feel that it would be fair to the others, nor to the interests of the state that I am trying to serve, to extend the time for the submission of designs beyond August 1, although I would have no reason to be technically exact providing the other competitors did not make complaint.⁹

The governor allowed Reichenberg-Smith's representatives to make their personal presentation on August 2, provided he received their design by the deadline.

On August 3, 1905, the governor signed a contract to purchase a silver service for the USS *Nebraska* from Reichenberg-Smith and Company of Omaha. The *Nebraska State Journal* reported that

the governor recently obtained notoriety for refusing to vote for the appointment of a state employee on the grounds that the man is said to swear and drink. Notwithstanding the governor's well-known position, he selected a service that contains a punch bowl and cups for drinking purposes... while it would be possible for the governor to buy a service for the use of water instead of punch, a silver service is generally assumed to mean punch so such a service will be bought.¹⁰

The silver service was designed for Reichenberg-Smith and Company by the Philadelphia firm of J. E. Caldwell and Company and was made by silversmith Thomas G. Brown of New York City.¹¹ The set included a punch bowl, ladle, tray or waiter, centerpiece with candelabra, loving cup, and eighteen drinking cups.

The completed service was shipped from Philadelphia on October 28, 1905, just eighty-six days after the contract was awarded. The service's twenty-

three pieces contained 106.5 troy pounds or 1,200 troy ounces of sterling silver. The gold lining of the bowls and cups added two pounds. The motifs were chosen to represent Nebraska: corn, wheat, and goldenrod were employed for decorative effect instead of traditional classical designs of acanthus leaves and honeysuckle. Shell and seaweed carried out the marine symbolism.

A representative of A. F. Smith and Company [Reichenberg was no longer with the firm] arrived in Lincoln November 3 to unpack the set. It was exhibited in Governor Mickey's office and then displayed in the window at Rudge and Guenzel's department store in Lincoln November 5-12. The *Nebraska State Journal* noted that the "window has attracted almost a constant crowd during the week. In point of attractiveness no display ever made by this firm [Rudge and Guenzel] has excelled this one with the single exception of the prize university steer."¹² This charming comparison must have reassured Nebraskans that the silver service was of superior quality and design.

After being displayed in Lincoln, the silver service was repacked by an employee of A. F. Smith and Company and returned to Omaha for temporary storage. In December 1905 Governor Mickey asked the company for a supplemental contract to provide for refurbishing and packing the silver service for shipment to the west coast.¹³

Due to delays in commissioning the USS *Nebraska*, the company began to worry. Smith wrote to the new governor, George L. Sheldon, asking permission to deliver the silver service to Lincoln and to be reimbursed for the shipping charges. Sheldon referred to the supplemental contract and noted that the company was bound to continue caring for the service until it was needed. Finally, on April 28, 1908, the silver service was packed and shipped to San Francisco. Governor Sheldon presented it to the officers and crew of



Governor John Hopwood Mickey.
(NSHS-M626-3)

the USS *Nebraska* at an impressive ceremony May 8, 1908.

The history of the silver service did not end with its presentation. After the USS *Nebraska* was deactivated in 1920, the silver service was stored at the U.S. Navy Yard at Mare Island, California. In 1922 Governor Samuel McKelvie requested that the service be returned to Nebraska on loan from the Navy.¹⁴ On August 24, 1922, the punch bowl, ladle, tray, fourteen cups, and the centerpiece arrived. Missing were the loving cup, four cups, and possibly the filigree shades.

In 1936 the Navy asked that the USS *Nebraska* silver service be returned for use on the cruiser *Omaha*.¹⁵ Some people suggested that funds be raised or donations of old silver be sought so that a new service could be made for the *Omaha*. Governor Robert Leroy Cochran protested that the *Nebraska*'s silver service would be inappropriate for the cruiser *Omaha* and convinced the Navy to drop its request for the service's return.¹⁶ The silver service remained in Nebraska, where it is used occasionally for official functions at the Governor's Mansion.

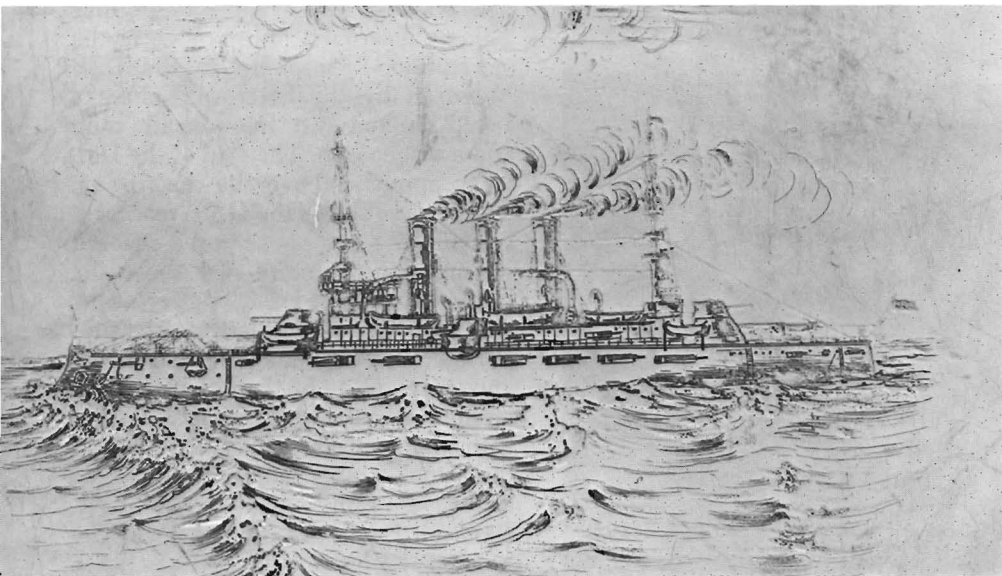
The punch bowl, weighing twenty-

five pounds, has a capacity of four gallons. Engraved on one side is the inscription, "Presented to the USS *Nebraska* by the State of Nebraska 1906," flanked by a Union Pacific train and a stagecoach. The seal of the U.S. Navy appears above the inscription. The reverse shows the USS *Nebraska*, flanked by a sod house and a covered wagon, with the state seal above the battleship. The bowl is supported by the front of a buffalo. Between the supports are relief heads of a bull, sheep, and antelope. The handles are full-molded eagles growing into a border with shell and seaweed. The bottom of the punchbowl is marked, "Made for the A. F. Smith Co. by the J. E. Caldwell Co., Philadelphia, Pa." The bowl of the ladle is shaped like a sea shell with seaweed decoration. The end of the ladle's handle is the bust of an Indian wearing a headdress.

The waiter, or tray made to hold a punch bowl, is three feet long and two and one-half feet wide with the image of the USS *Nebraska* engraved in the center. The handles are entwined dolphins, and the border continues the shell motif. The head and shoulders of a bear also appear in the border.

The cup handles are freely molded figures of sea horses. The Nebraska state seal in relief appears at the bottom of each cup, and each is marked, "USS *Nebraska*, Sterling."

The largest piece in the service is the centerpiece, a combined candelabra and epergne, an ornamental dish used in the center of a dining table. The centerpiece weighs more than forty-one pounds, contains 516 ounces of silver, and is three feet long and thirty-one inches high. On one side appears a picture of the second state capitol flanked by the Omaha stockyards and a cattle ranch. The reverse shows the USS *Nebraska* flanked by the Union Pacific bridge at Omaha and the Platte River. The centerpiece can be used for food or with a wire mesh insert, to hold cut flowers. The most interesting feature of the centerpiece is its attached candelabra, one on each side. The can-



The tray includes an engraving of the USS Nebraska. Photo by Roger Bruhn.

The USS Nebraska's silver service as it appears today. Photo by Roger Bruhn.



delabra were electrified with small electric bulbs replacing candles, a necessary precaution on a naval vessel. Each "candle" originally had a silver filigree shade lined with crimson silk. The Nebraska State Seal was wrought in each shade, but the shades have disappeared.

Since the set was returned to Nebraska in 1922 another cup has disappeared, no gilding remains in the centerpiece or the cups, and the wire mesh is missing from the centerpiece. Unfortunately, the 1922 packing list does not mention the wire mesh or the shades, so it cannot be determined whether these pieces were lost before or after the silver service was returned.

Also missing is the loving cup or flower vase. This vase was twelve inches high with an Indian scene engraved on one side and various Nebraska scenes on the other. The loving cup included the same dolphin handles and shell border as the centerpiece.

During discussions about the return of the silver service to Nebraska, a question arose regarding its original cost. Gordon Smith, who succeeded his

father as president of A. F. Smith and Company, could not believe that the appropriation of \$3,000 had paid for the entire service. He calculated the price of silver in 1905 and the amount used, as well as the labor necessary to produce the set, and estimated that the silver service must have cost nearly \$10,000. Perhaps this explains J. E. Caldwell's letter of November 1905: "I hope that we will get credit for the work done on this service through the press as there is no other way of reaping a benefit from the monetary side. It has proven to be, on the final summing up, a 'labor of love' and it is all glory and no profit."¹⁷

Caldwell must have been mortified if he learned that Lincoln's leading newspaper judged a prize-winning steer more attractive than the silver service. Yet his "labor of love" is now considered one of Nebraska's treasures. No one remembers the steer.

NOTES

¹John H. Mickey to Ed Hostetter, August 25, 1905. RG 1, Office of the Governor, SG 21, John H. Mickey Papers, State Archives, Nebraska

State Historical Society (hereafter Mickey Papers).

²Inaugural Message of Governor John H. Mickey, *Nebraska House Journal*, 29th Session, 1905, 89.

³*Laws of Nebraska*, 1905, 593; and RG 56, Records of the Nebraska Legislature, SG 7, Manuscript Laws, 1905, State Archives, Nebraska State Historical Society.

⁴Shreve and Company to John H. Mickey, May 12, 1904, Mickey Papers; MS725, "Battleship Nebraska" collection, State Archives, Nebraska State Historical Society.

⁵Reichenberg-Smith and Company to John H. Mickey, August 30, 1904, Mickey Papers.

⁶John H. Mickey to Shreve and Company, April 14, 1905, Mickey Papers.

⁷Shreve and Company to John H. Mickey, June 28, 1905, Mickey Papers.

⁸John H. Mickey to A. F. Smith, July 11, 1905, Mickey Papers.

⁹*Ibid.*, July 13, 1905.

¹⁰*Nebraska State Journal*, August 3, 1905.

¹¹A. F. Smith to Mrs. Robert Leroy Cochran, March 25, 1936, "Battleship Nebraska" collection.

¹²*Nebraska State Journal*, November 12, 1905, Section 2.

¹³John H. Mickey to A. F. Smith, December 6, 1905, Mickey Papers.

¹⁴Acting Secretary of the Navy to Samuel R. McKelvie, July 28, 1922, "Battleship Nebraska" collection.

¹⁵Claude S. Swanson to Robert Leroy Cochran, February 3, 1936, "Battleship Nebraska" collection.

¹⁶W. H. Andley to Robert Leroy Cochran, June 27, 1936, "Battleship Nebraska" collection.

¹⁷O. E. Caldwell to A. F. Smith, dated only November 1905, copy in Mickey Papers.