

The Death and Burial of Big Elk, the Great Omaha Chief

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Article Summary: The year of Big Elk’s death has long been misreported. New research not only corrects the date, but also provides new details about the circumstances surrounding the powerful chief’s death and burial at Bellevue in 1848.

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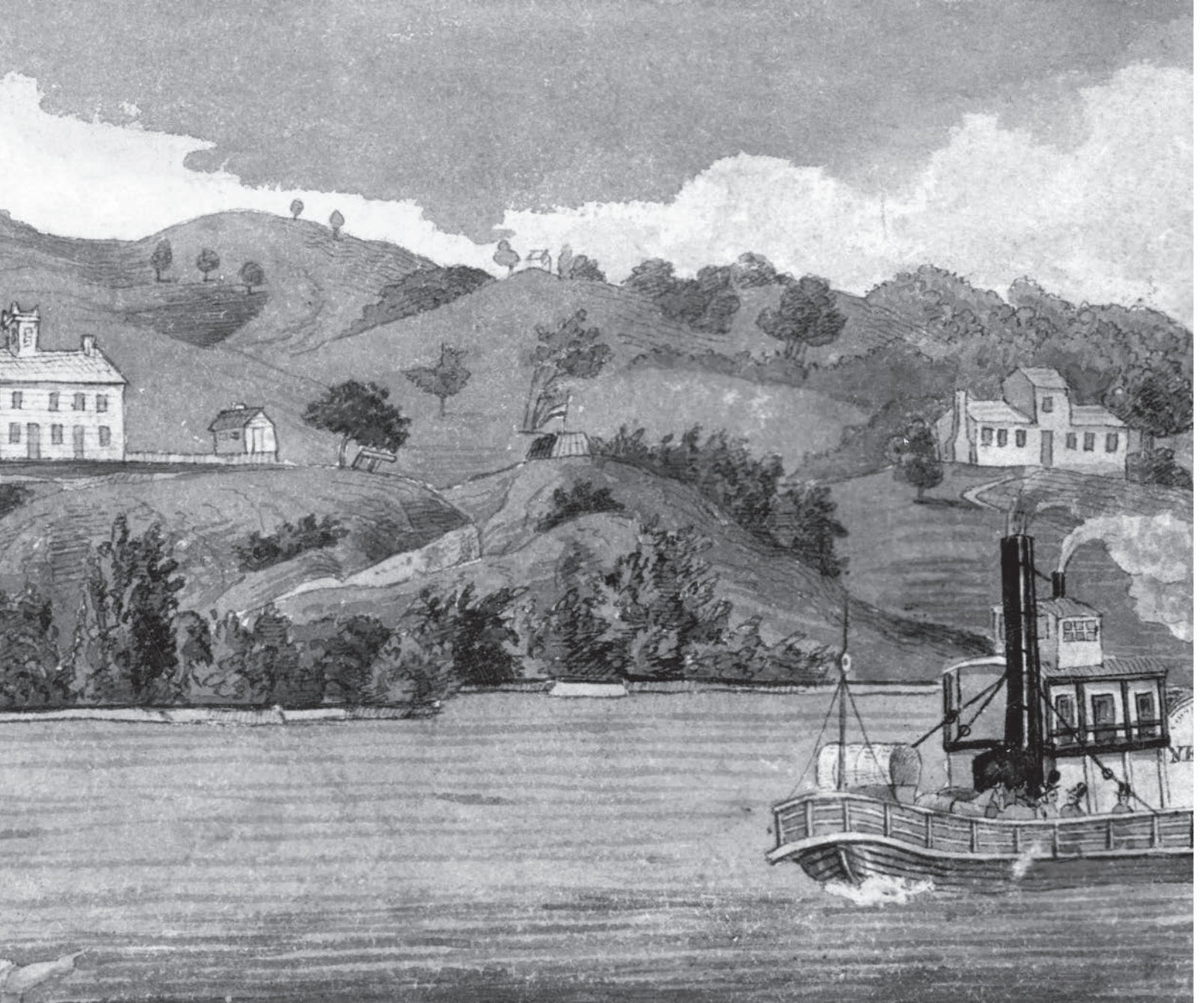
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Photographs / Images: *The Omaha and Otoe Mission at Bellevue, from the East*, by S W Y Schymonsky, c 1885; portrait of Big Elk c 1821-1822, from an original painting by John Neagle; drawing of the Prebyterian mission at Bellevue, 1848



THE DEATH AND BURIAL OF BIG ELK, THE GREAT OMAHA CHIEF

BY JOHN LUDWICKSON



One of Nebraska's small, perplexing historical mysteries is the date of death of the famous Omaha chief Big Elk, *Ong pa tonga* in his native tongue. Born about 1770-75, he died and was buried at Bellevue, Nebraska, and apparently with a Christian service. Since, perhaps, the 1880s a date of 1846 has been used for this event, and since 1911 a particularly confusing date of 1853 has also been used. Neither is correct.

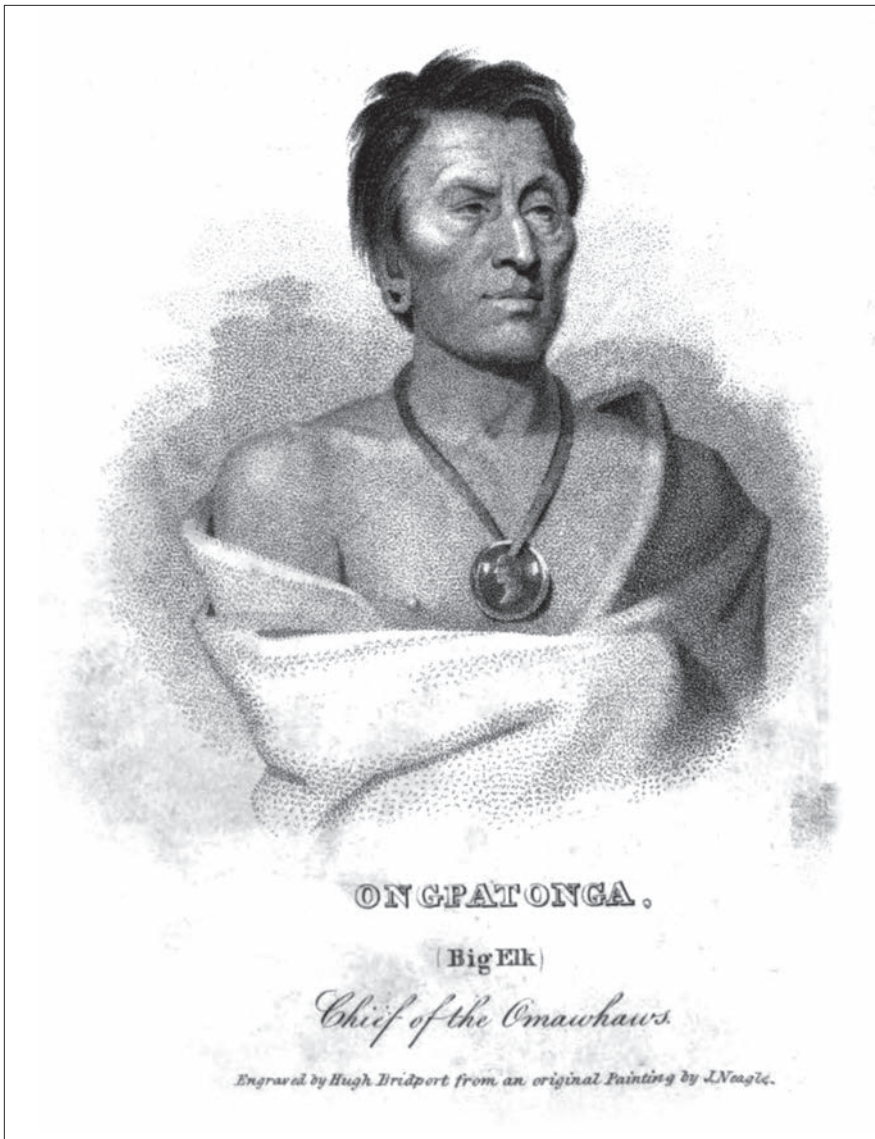
The former date (1846) is based on Henry Fontenelle's "History of the Omaha Indians," published by the Nebraska State Historical Society in 1885:

They [the Omahas] . . . went back again to their former home on the Omaha creek, and lived there until A.D. 1845. Again, on account of their

inveterate foes, the Sioux, making continual wars upon them, they moved down the river to a place four miles west of Bellevue. They lived there one year when their next great chief, Big Elk the First, died, and was given a Christian burial by the missionary at Bellevue, the Rev. Mr. McKinney, who preached the funeral sermon over the remains, and interpreted by Logan Fontenelle, U.S. Interpreter. He was buried on the spot where now stands the Presbyterian College.¹

Thus Fontenelle indicates 1846, and that date has frequently been repeated since the early days.² However, a number of documents prove that Big Elk survived the year 1846, and perhaps 1847.³

The Omaha and Otoe Mission at Bellevue, from the East, by the Polish artist S. W. Y. Schymonsky, circa 1855. Big Elk was buried on the hill directly behind the main building. The shapes atop the hill may be the indication of grave markers. NSHS RG2683-2



Portrait of Big Elk circa 1821-22, from an original painting by John Neagle (now lost). Engraved frontispiece of John D. Godman, *American Natural History, Second Edition* (Philadelphia: Stoddart & Atherton, 1832)

The 1853 date for Big Elk's death is based on "The Omaha Tribe" (1911) by Alice C. Fletcher and Francis LaFlesche.⁴ Other authorities have used this date for some years—for example, Norma Kidd Green's 1969 book *Iron Eye's Family*, page 12: "Sometime during 1853 he [Big Elk] became ill and died."⁵

Henry Fontenelle explained: "His son and successor, 'Big Elk the Second,' was a man of natural abilities, but took to dissipating, and died from the effects of [a] prolonged debauch at the foot of Blackbird hill, and was buried by the grave of Blackbird in 1852."

The Mystery Solved

I have searched for some conclusive indication of Big Elk's death in records of the Council Bluffs Indian Agency, Mormon diary entries, and in missionary records, and recently found a primary

account of Big Elk's death and burial. It was written by the Presbyterian missionary Edmund McKinney, and pins the events surrounding Big Elk's death to the autumn of 1848.⁶

McKinney's journal entries for August 1848 were printed in *The Foreign Missionary Chronicle* of December 1848; his journal for September 1848 appears in the March 1849 issue.⁷

Aug. 10. Two Omaha runners arrived to-day with the news that Ongpatonga was sick, and that he and his band were in a starving condition on the Elkhorn river. I sent the old man some bacon and corn meal.

[August] 13. Ongpatonga's band of Omahas arrived to-day. They have dragged the old chief on a hurdle behind a horse for some days past. He is at present unable to stand up, or in any way to help himself, owing to rheumatic affections, principally his back and hip joints. The old man appears very low-spirited. He says at sometimes he has felt inclined to stab himself, in order to put an end to his misery. . . . I made him acquainted with the life and immortality of the Gospel. But I could not discover that there was in his mind any desire but to be free from pain, and to have his wants supplied.⁸

The Omahas (Big Elk's band) camped within a mile of the mission, not at the village. Several days later:

[Monday, August] 21—Ongpatonga sent a messenger to inform me, that the medicine I gave him, to cure him and procure sleep, was very powerful, the best medicine he had ever seen. He professes to be very grateful.

On Tuesday, August 29, McKinney reported: "Yesterday the main body of Omahas returned to their village from their summer hunt." On Saturday, September 16, 1848:

Sept. 16th— . . . This afternoon, our old and venerable chief, Ongpatonga, or the Big Elk, departed this life. Since his return from the buffalo hunt, he has been in a languishing condition, and for some time past, it was not supposed he would live long. He expressed a strong desire to spend the remnant of his days among his white friends, and when he died, be honored with a white man's burial. Preparations are making for carrying out his wishes.



Sept. 17th— . . . The funeral of Big Elk took place this afternoon, at two o'clock. His body was enclosed in a coffin, and carried to the grave in a cart. The procession was led by the agent and Omaha interpreter. Then followed the corpse. Afterwards the mission family. Then the chief's family. And the whole was closed by a number of Omahas. The whole proceeded to the grave, which was dug on the high bluff west of the mission, with a great deal of order and decorum. After the body was lowered into the grave, the friends of the old chief deposited in it his "medicine chest," his bow-case, quiver, and several articles used as ornaments in Indian dances.

When the grave was ready to be filled up, we formed a circle around it, and opportunity was given to address those present. My remarks were intended principally for the Indians. They related to the condition of the soul after death; the influence of this life upon the future, the light which God has given us to guide us in our preparations for that future; and were closed with an exhortation to lay hold on the hope set before them in the gospel, before it should be forever too late. The Indians listened with great

seriousness and earnest attention. The exercises were closed with a prayer for the Omahas and ourselves, that this death might be the means of leading them to seriousness, and to a choice of God, as their great chief and leader.

McKinney further commented: "In no instance, as far as my knowledge extends, has a Christian burial taken place among the Otoes or Omahas. Even in this case, there was some little hesitation on the part of the friends, that the usual heathenish ceremonies should be dispensed with. Nothing but the fact that the old man died among the whites, and wished to have a white man's funeral, turned the scale in favor of this course. It was an interesting and impressive sight, to see that little band assembled in such a place for such a purpose. . . . We had met to bury the most renowned man among the Omahas, one to whom in times past they had looked up as to an oracle, and one who had wielded a despotic sway over them. What made it more solemn, was the thought that they had no one fit to succeed him, and that now they are left with 'children for their princes.'"

Reverend McKinney also had some words regarding Big Elk's son and successor, and on the

Drawing of the Presbyterian mission at Bellevue, as it appeared in 1848. NSHS RG2683-1

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lack of Big Elk's conversion (despite his affection for white culture):

I had the opportunity frequently of preaching, in his lodge and presence, the precious truths of the Gospel. But I am pained to say that we have no evidence that they produced any abiding impression on his mind. For the last few days of his life, I did not see him. His end, though expected to come soon, took us somewhat by surprise, and was probably somewhat hastened by his refusing to eat, through mortification arising from the bad conduct of his son. It would have been a happy thing to have been able to report that he gave evidence of being a child of God; but God reigns; in his hand are all his creatures; it is not for us to decide on the final destiny of our fellow-creatures.


Exactly what was the mortifying "bad conduct of his son" McKinney does not report. Back on Sunday, September 10, McKinney had gone to the Omaha village to preach. "Riding out of the village, I saw Young Elk with a party of twelve or fifteen sitting down on the ground around a buffalo robe busily engaged playing cards. He saluted me with, 'Hoa! I am busy gambling.' Thus we see the devil's books have got the start of the book of God. And in this incident we see the character of the influence exerted by the vile wretches introduced into the Indian country under cover of a government license. As the result of the same tuition, I have heard Indians use profane and blasphemous language, in English expressions, interlarded with their Indian conversation."

Conclusion

Big Elk first became famous in 1815, due to a funeral oration he spoke for the Teton Sioux chief Black Buffalo, who died at Portage des Sioux, near St. Louis, Missouri. Big Elk speculated on his own death and burial:

What a misfortune for me that I could not have died this day, instead of the chief that lies before us. . . . To me it would have been a most glorious occurrence. Hereafter, when I die at home, instead of a noble grave and a grand procession, the rolling music and the thundering cannon, with a white flag waving at my head—I shall be wrapt in a robe, (an old robe, perhaps) and hoisted on a slender scaffold to the whistling winds, soon to be blown down to the earth—my flesh to be devoured by wolves, and my bones rattled on the plains by the wild beasts.⁹

Big Elk's burial, thirty-three years after he spoke these words, would seem to be at least a partial fulfillment of his earlier wishes.

The elevation in Bellevue on which Big Elk's grave lay came to be called "Elk Hill." In 1883, Big Elk's remains were disinterred to make way for Clark Hall of Bellevue College, and reinterred just in front of that building. Again in 1954 his remains were disinterred, and reburied in the Bellevue Cemetery half a mile north. 

NOTES

¹ Henry Fontenelle, "History of the Omaha Indians," *Transactions and Reports of the Nebraska State Historical Society*, Vol. 1 (Lincoln: State Journal Co., 1885): 76-83; quotes are from p. 79. Henry Fontenelle (Aug. 20, 1831-Mar. 26, 1899) was the youngest of Lucien Fontenelle's four sons. The eldest son was Logan Fontenelle (1825-55).

² John Q. Goss, "Bellevue: Its Past and Present," *Proceedings and Collections of the Nebraska State Historical Society*, Sec. Ser., Vol. 2 (1898): 36-47; see p. 40. Goss read the paper to an NSHS meeting in January 1896; in it he thanks Henry Fontenelle.

³ See discussion in John M. O'Shea and John Ludwickson, "Omaha Chieftainship in the Nineteenth Century," *Ethnohistory* 39, no. 3 (1992): 316-52, and note 5 on p. 347.

⁴ Alice C. Fletcher and Francis LaFlesche, "The Omaha Tribe," *27th Annual Report of the Bureau of American Ethnology* (1911), 83. This is all based on a Jan. 15, 1883, letter from Francis LaFlesche to F. W. Putnam.

⁵ Norma Kidd Green, *Iron Eye's Family: The Children of Joseph La Flesche* (Lincoln, NE: Johnsen Publishing Co., 1969). The book was sponsored by the NSHS.

⁶ Edmund McKinney was born April 21, 1815, in Cumberland County, Pennsylvania. Educated at Harrisburg Academy, he graduated from Washington College in 1835, studied theology at Andover and Princeton seminaries, and was ordained November 13, 1839. He married Teresa F. Davis in 1838. Several years of missionary work followed, and in autumn 1846, he founded the mission among the Otoes and Omahas; he resigned in 1853, taught school, and on November 22, 1861, became the chaplain of the Ninth Pennsylvania Cavalry, with which he served until he resigned July 26, 1864. He served eight years at Clarksville, Tennessee, with the Freedmen's Committee of the Presbyterian General Assembly, and moved to Keyport, New Jersey, where he died March 23, 1878, and where he is buried in Green Grove Cemetery. See George Norcross, *The Centennial Memorial of the Presbytery of Carlisle*, Vol. 2 (Harrisburg, PA: Meyers Print and Pub. House, 1889), 444-46.

⁷ The month of August 1848 is from *The Foreign Missionary Chronicle* of December 1848 (Vol. 16, no. 12, pp. 366-69). The month of September 1848 ("Extracts from the Journal of the Rev. E. M'Kinney") was printed in March 1849 (Vol. 17, no. 3, pp. 68-74). McKinney's journal entries are very full of interesting information, from which I have culled only those items relating to Big Elk.

⁸ I silently corrected the typographical error "Ougpatonga" in the August journal; the name is "correctly" spelled in the September journal.

⁹ *Niles' Weekly Register* (Baltimore), Oct. 14, 1815, 113, copying the St. Louis *Western Journal*, of unknown date. Big Elk's speech was widely reprinted.