“A Double Mixture”: Equality and Economy in the Integration of Nebraska Schools, 1858-1883

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Article Summary: Segregated schools existed for a time in the late nineteenth century in Omaha and Nebraska City, although Lincoln schools appear to have been integrated. When the separate schools closed, it was not because they were seen as unfair but because the operation of segregated schools was a financial burden.

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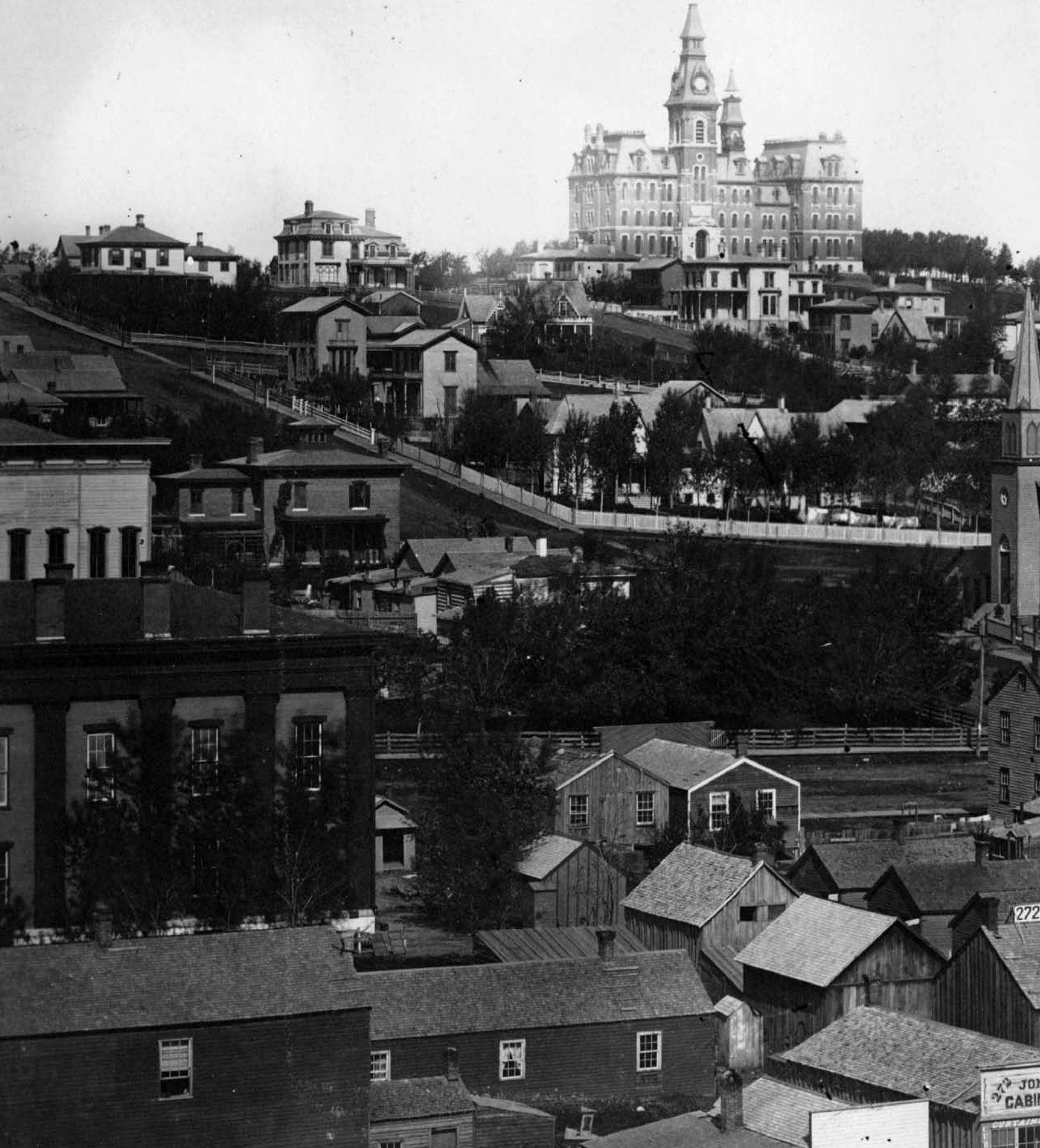
Photographs / Images: two-page view looking toward Omaha High School from Fifteenth and Farnham about 1872; view to the southeast from the high school building about 1876; view to the northwest from Fourteenth and Farnham, 1872; tables showing enrollment of Omaha Public Schools: October 1872, 1877-1878, 1885-1886, 1890-1891; view of Omaha High School from Fifteenth and Farnham, 1875; Albert Ruger’s bird’s-eye view map of Omaha, 1868; Ruger’s bird’s-eye view of Nebraska City, 1868; Nebraska City’s main street, north side; Nebraska City seen from Kearney Heights, 1885; Third Ward teaching staff, Nebraska City, 1887; Nebraska City’s Sixth Street School; “Cornelia Petring, 1880. First High School graduate.”

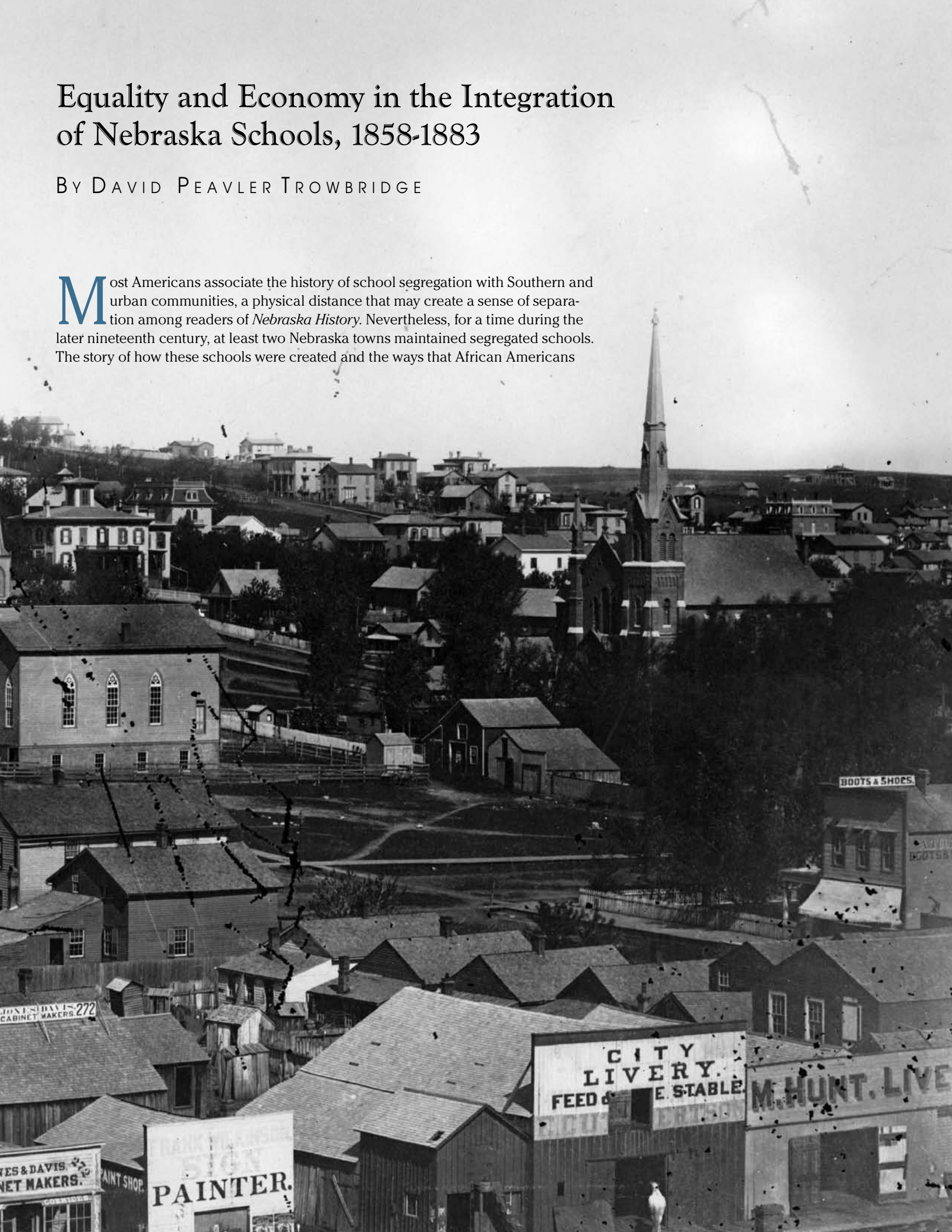
“A Double Mixture”:



Equality and Economy in the Integration of Nebraska Schools, 1858-1883

By David Peavler Trowbridge

Most Americans associate the history of school segregation with Southern and urban communities, a physical distance that may create a sense of separation among readers of *Nebraska History*. Nevertheless, for a time during the later nineteenth century, at least two Nebraska towns maintained segregated schools. The story of how these schools were created and the ways that African Americans



Omaha in about 1876, looking southeast from the high school building. NSHS RG2341-2

Previous page: Looking toward Omaha High School (on the hilltop) from Fifteenth and Farnam in about 1872. NSHS RG2341-2

confronted the color line in Nebraska does more than simply expand the geographic borders of historiography. The story of segregation in the schools of Omaha and Nebraska City challenges existing scholarship by demonstrating that demographic and financial matters played a leading role in the decision to operate separate schools. Legal protest, moral suasion, and the unified efforts of the black communities of Omaha and Nebraska City led to the elimination of Jim Crow in the schools of Nebraska. Of equal importance, however, was the fact that the demographics of these two cities made the operation of separate schools a financial burden.

Separate schools for black children were common throughout Iowa until the 1870s, largely due to an 1868 Iowa Supreme Court decision outlawing separate schools in Muscatine. In neighboring Missouri, school segregation was legally mandated after the Civil War—a move many opposed at that time as being too liberal considering the state's tradition of excluding black pupils and the financial burden of maintaining additional schools. The measure was especially contentious in Kansas, where dozens of legal challenges beginning in 1880 culminated in the most famous civil rights case of the twentieth century, *Brown vs. Board of Education* (1954). The history of school segregation in Nebraska is equally instructive, yet it has been overlooked largely due to the casual assertion that the schools of Nebraska were never segregated.[1]

Nebraska's first school laws were passed in 1855 and mirrored those of Kansas and Iowa with their implied exclusion of black children. These laws directed officials to record the names of white children aged five to twenty-one who resided in their district as a basis for organizing schools. The law was revised in 1858 and included lengthy provisions for the enumeration of scholars that included the word "white" in about half of its clauses, while omitting the word at other times. The omission of the word "white" in some instances suggests that lawmakers did not feel they needed to make explicit what everyone already knew; the schools of antebellum Nebraska were intended for the exclusive use of white children. Only eighty-two African Americans were recorded in Nebraska Territory in the 1860 census, and most white Nebraskans sought to prevent black migration to their communities. Hostility towards the potential for increased black migration led white political leaders to the

Looking northwest from Fourteenth and Farnam in Omaha, 1872. NSHS RG2341-2

amend the school law in 1860, inserting the word "white" wherever lawmakers deemed it was missing but also exempting African Americans from taxes raised for school purposes.[2]

Exclusion may have been the rule until the word "white" was removed from the school law in 1867. However, it is likely that a handful of teachers on the frontier were more impressed by the sincerity of a young scholar at their schoolhouse door than a law that did not explicitly ban black students. In addition, many school officials in this new realm created as a territory in 1854 under the doctrine of Popular Sovereignty were likely content to allow for local control on a potentially divisive issue involving race. Finally, there is little reason to believe that local officials knew about or scrupulously adhered to every provision of the school law. The director of the Eight Mile Grove Township in Cass County complained in 1860 that the "common clod-hopper" could not comprehend these laws and even attorneys disagreed about their provisions. A county superintendent echoed these concerns, stating that few residents understood the law because teachers and parents had little inclination to track down the law or search its lengthy clauses. Regarding the specific issue of black exclusion, even the territorial auditor, who also served as commissioner of common schools, admitted his uncertainty as to whether the law excluded blacks by its use of the word "white."[3]

The Civil War and early years of Reconstruction led to renewed interest in the issue of black education throughout the nation. In 1867 members of Omaha's black community waged a campaign for equal access to public schools. These efforts may have influenced the nearly simultaneous and unanimous resolution of the state's teachers association in favor of black education. The price of this unanimity may have been ambiguity, however, as the resolution made no mention of the crucial issue of whether Nebraska's white and black children should be educated in the same classroom. As a result, the resolution carried little significance as most Northerners agreed that some provision must

Enrollment of Omaha Public Schools, October 1872[13]

School	Total Enrolled	African American
High School	52	1
Central	451	2
North	304	1
South	321	10
West	100	-
Cass St	165	2
Jackson St	86	4
Colored School	25	25
Hascalls	25	2

be made for the education of black children. Most lawmakers in the region were concerned about the potential expense of mandating separate schools. While they typically viewed racial segregation as the most desirable solution to the question of black education, they understood that any requirement of separate schools could be financially burdensome given the demographics of the territory. As a result, during its final session in 1867, the territorial legislature passed a bill that removed the word "white" from the school laws while also striking a clause that would have mandated that separate schools be maintained.

The bill's sponsor, Augustus Harvey responded to the removal of his bill's segregation clause by voting against the bill in committee and offering the following minority report demanding that the bill be passed in its original form:[4]

> The bill as referred to the committee provides for the education of colored youth. It gives them all the privileges and advantages of the common school system, the means of a free education, and lays the foundation of their usefulness to the extent of their ability as humble members of the body politic. To the proposition of the original bill, authorizing the Boards of education to provide separate schools for colored children, the undersigned agree, and will heartily concur in any action of the House which may adopt it.
>
> But the amendment proposed by the majority of the committee contemplates the admission of colored children to our schools on an equal footing with white youth. This is reaching too far in advance of the age. The people of Nebraska are not yet ready to send white boys and white girls to school to sit on the same seats with negroes they are not yet ready to endorse in this tacit manner the dogma of miscegenation; especially are they yet far from ready to degrade their offspring to a level with so inferior a race.
>
> The undersigned do not believe the intention of the majority of the committee can be carried out by the people; and we do not believe that the Legislative Assembly should force upon the people a measure so obnoxious to their wishes and habits and the established principles of political equality.[5]

Despite Harvey's continued objections, the house approved the committee's majority report and removed the segregation clause by a vote of nineteen to thirteen. Following a lengthy and unrecorded debate, Harvey removed his opposition and voted with the twenty-five to ten majority in favor of the bill. Members of the legislature's council mirrored their house colleagues in voting down provisions to amend the bill and require segregation. However, they nearly passed an amendment to rename the bill from "An Act to remove the Distinctions on Account of Race and Color in the School Laws of Nebraska" to "An Act to Amend Sections 18 and 48, of Chapter 48, Part 1, of the Revised Statutes." The angry tone of editorials against a law some Nebraskans feared would lead to social equality likely influenced the council's contemplated camouflage, yet Harvey's amended bill passed the council by a ten to three vote.[6]

Enrollment of Omaha Public Schools, 1877-1878[15]

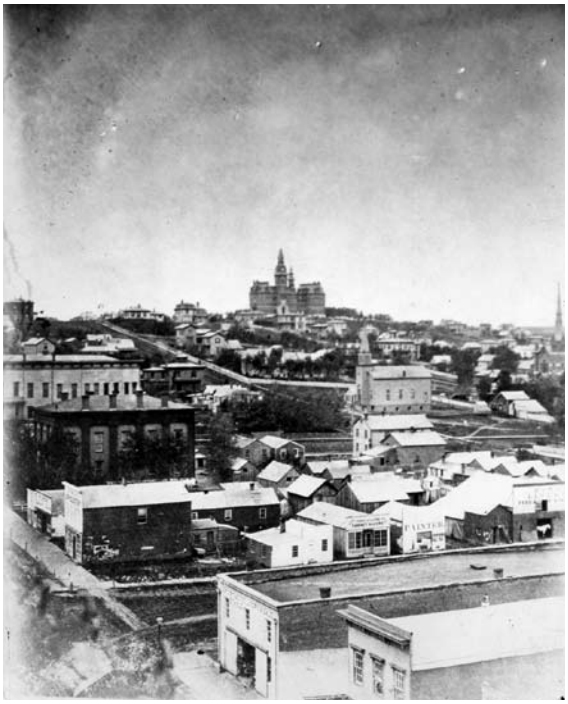
School	Total	Foreign Born	African American	% Foreign	% African American
High School	63	No Data	1	N/A	1.6
Central	839	71	19	8.5	2.3
North	643	72	13	11.2	2
East	604	73	37	12.1	5.8
South	329	71	3	21.6	.9
Cass St	120	7	1	5.8	.8
West	117	3	3	2.6	2.6
Hartman	106	29	0	27.4	0
Jackson St	79	8	1	1.0	1.3
Grammar School Total	2837	334	77	11.2	2.7

Enrollment of Omaha Public Schools, 1885-1886[17]

School	Total	African American	% African American
High School	256	5	2.0
Central	871	19	2.2
Cass	522	43	8.2
Castellar	122	2	1.6
Center	261	3	1.1
Dodge	367	46	12.5
Farnam	438	8	1.8
Hartman	597	8	1.3
Izard	845	27	3.2
Jackson	93	3	3.2
Lake	160	11	6.9
Leavenworth	659	13	2.0
Long	715	34	4.8
Pacific	681	9	1.3
Pleasant	28	0	0
Grammar School Total	6612	220	3.3

Although the bill removed only the word "white" from the current school laws and made no mention of segregation or integration, acting Territorial Governor Algernon S. Paddock chose to veto the bill. The governor accompanied his veto with a rather duplicitous message reminiscent of Governor Pilate's hand washing two millennia prior. Paddock wrote that he feared the bill as written might still lead to the denial of educational opportunities for black children because the bill lacked a positive guarantee of educational opportunities regardless of race. The bulk of his message, however, revealed that his main objection to the bill was its failure to provide for the separation of the races. "Much as we may regret it," Paddock explained, "we cannot close our eyes to the fact that a strong prejudice exists in the public mind against the intimate association of the youths of the two races in the same public schools, which no amount of legislation can eradicate." Paddock suggested that the bill be revised to mandate popular sovereignty on the issue of segregation, with the majority of citizens in any given district voting on the question of funding and operating separate schools.[7]

Shortly after Nebraska's admission as a state on March 1, 1867, Governor David Butler called for a special session of the state legislature. Among the purposes of this session, Butler explained, was to revise the school law and provide educational opportunities that were "second to no other State in the facilities offered to all her children, irrespective of sex or condition." The governor later referred to the pending Fourteenth Amendment to the U. S. Constitution as "the essence of the lesson taught the American people during the terrible agony of civil war." However, neither he nor the legislature addressed the issue of race in the public schools. County superintendents made frequent mention of ethnicity and foreign language in their reports, but were curiously silent on the issue of race. It is clear that school officials throughout the state viewed assimilation of children of European descent as one of the missions of the public school. "The safety and perpetuity of the State must be cared for," the



Looking toward Omaha High School (on the hilltop) from Fifteenth and Farnam in about 1875.
NSHS RG2341-19

Enrollment of Omaha Public Schools, 1890-1891[18]

School	Total	African American	% African American
High School	616	10	1.6
Ambler	55	0	0
Bancroft	312	7	2.2
Cass	446	37	8.3
Castellar	640	20	3.1
Center	371	0	0
Central	408	12	2.9
Central Park	257	1	.4
Davenport	150	0	0
Dodge	382	72	18.9
Dupont	350	6	1.7
Eckerman	32	0	0
Farnam	538	23	4.3
Forest	212	0	0
Fort Omaha	37	0	0
Franklin	212	10	4.7
Gibson	41	0	0
Hartman	686	26	3.8
Hickory	293	0	0
Izard	758	55	6.9
Jackson	112	9	8.0
Lake	990	26	2.6
Leavenworth	509	36	7.1
Long	892	42	4.7
Lothrop	311	1	.3
Mason	562	6	.1
Omaha View	502	9	1.8
Pacific	591	12	2.0
Park	576	12	2.1
Paul	185	0	0
Pleasant	82	3	3.7
Saratoga	288	2	.7
Sherman	89	2	2.2
Vinton	135	0	0
Walnut Hill	580	8	1.3
Webster	595	17	2.9
West Omaha	191	1	.5
West Side	79	0	0
Grammar School Total	13477	455	3.38

State Superintendent counseled, a goal that could best be met by "blend[ing] all nationalities into one." African Americans represented fewer than one percent of all Nebraskans throughout the nineteenth century. Whether their children would be included with or excluded from the other ninety-nine percent, however, was a matter so potentially divisive that it was left to local communities to determine.[8]

The early public schools of Omaha lived a precarious existence, with financial difficulties and the Civil War disrupting what could only be called a school district by the most generous observer. Between 1869 and 1872 the situation improved but was still chaotic as two separate boards ran the city schools, and more children wanted to attend than the overstuffed and understaffed buildings could

A bird's-eye view map of Omaha created in 1868.
NSHS RG2341-13

accommodate. A special act of the state legislature dissolved the two boards and created a board of education in Omaha that sought to resolve these hardships when it first met in 1872. The regulations of this board declared that the schools were "public and free to all children" living in Omaha.[9]

A letter written by Omaha African American resident Charles Burke in 1888 indicates that the Omaha schools were not open to all children equally. Burke explained that the city operated a Jim Crow school in the early 1870s that was vastly inferior to the schools attended by white children. Burke indicted school board members with years of failure to respond to a series of petitions circulated by members of the black community that demanded equal access to the city's schools, indicating that even Republican members of the board who enjoyed the political support of black voters refused to take up the cause of equal education. "Politics is a white man's fight," Burke declared, "the negro is the Jonah, and any time the ship Republican gets in a storm overboard Mr. Negro has to go." It was not until members of the black community threatened to sue the school board, Burke explained, that black children were freely admitted to all ward schools.[10]

Records of the Omaha schools validate Burke's assertion, and show that Jim Crow was part of the existing system of public schools that the new school board of Omaha inherited when it was created in the summer of 1872. Newspapers in Omaha also demonstrate that members of the black community were active in demanding an end to segregation prior to this time, as white editors and white officials responded to charges of discrimination. The Democratic *Omaha Herald* defended the practice of segregation and responded to accusations that it opposed efforts to educate black children with a March 1872 editorial that supported equal but separate accommodations. The *Herald* claimed that it had come to this conclusion, not as a result of racial prejudice, but rather by thoroughly

investigating the issue with school officials. Despite the petitions of African American parents, these whites agreed that separation provided the best advantages for both white and black children. One of the first actions of the new board in the summer of 1872 was a resolution naming the various schools they inherited. "The Colored School" appeared at the end of the list. Continued black protest became increasingly effective in the summer of 1872, however, leading the board to postpone administrative decisions regarding the "Colored School" and prepare for a debate on the issue of racial integration.[11]

Jim Crow was not the leading topic of discussion that summer, however, as financial issues related to school bonds, new facilities, and textbooks took precedence. The board's only actions regarding race were the passage of a measure authorizing the rental of a building to be used as the "Colored School," and moving the location of this school from the corner of Davenport and Fifteenth streets to a room on Tenth Street between Douglas and Dodge. The resolutions convey the impression that the board continued to debate the possibility of eliminating the school, as the phrase "in case it shall be found necessary to do so" was included in one of the measures. A communication from the superintendent indicates that there was also confusion regarding whether white children residing near the school might be allowed to attend if they so desired. In the early fall of 1872 the board declared that they could not bar white children from admission at the school, however extant records indicate that only black children attended the school. Had white parents sent their children to the "Colored School", they would have enjoyed the lowest teacher-to-student ratio in all of Omaha. Compared to most of the classrooms throughout the city, which contained sixty-five to eighty-five pupils, the "Colored School" possessed only twenty-five students. The unique aspect of Jim Crow in early Omaha, however, was that some black children attended otherwise "white" schools throughout the city, even as an explicitly segregated school was being operated. In other words, Omaha school officials attempted to satisfy the desire of white residents to maintain segregation without taking on the massive expense of operating separate schools throughout the city or transporting all black children to one school.[12]

Even this system of "discount discrimination" proved financially inefficient, as the black population was too widespread to maintain both economy and the color line. Shortly into the fall semester, board members voted eight to two in favor of a measure to close the "Colored School" that was part of a series of changes designed to relieve the serious overcrowding of the other schools throughout the city. The students affected were referred to the schools nearest their homes and the measure appears to have aroused little controversy, perhaps owing to previous campaigns of black leaders and the semi-integrated nature of the rest of the Omaha schools. The local press reported positively regarding the decision of school directors in Paterson, New Jersey, which eliminated that city's system of Jim Crow schools at this time. However, extant copies of Omaha newspapers reveal only silence regarding the same decision by local school officials. City newspapers regularly featured editorials regarding the expense of textbooks, overcrowding, and other school matters, yet the decision to expel Jim Crow from Omaha is conspicuous in its absence from the city's newspapers and the Omaha school board minutes.[14]

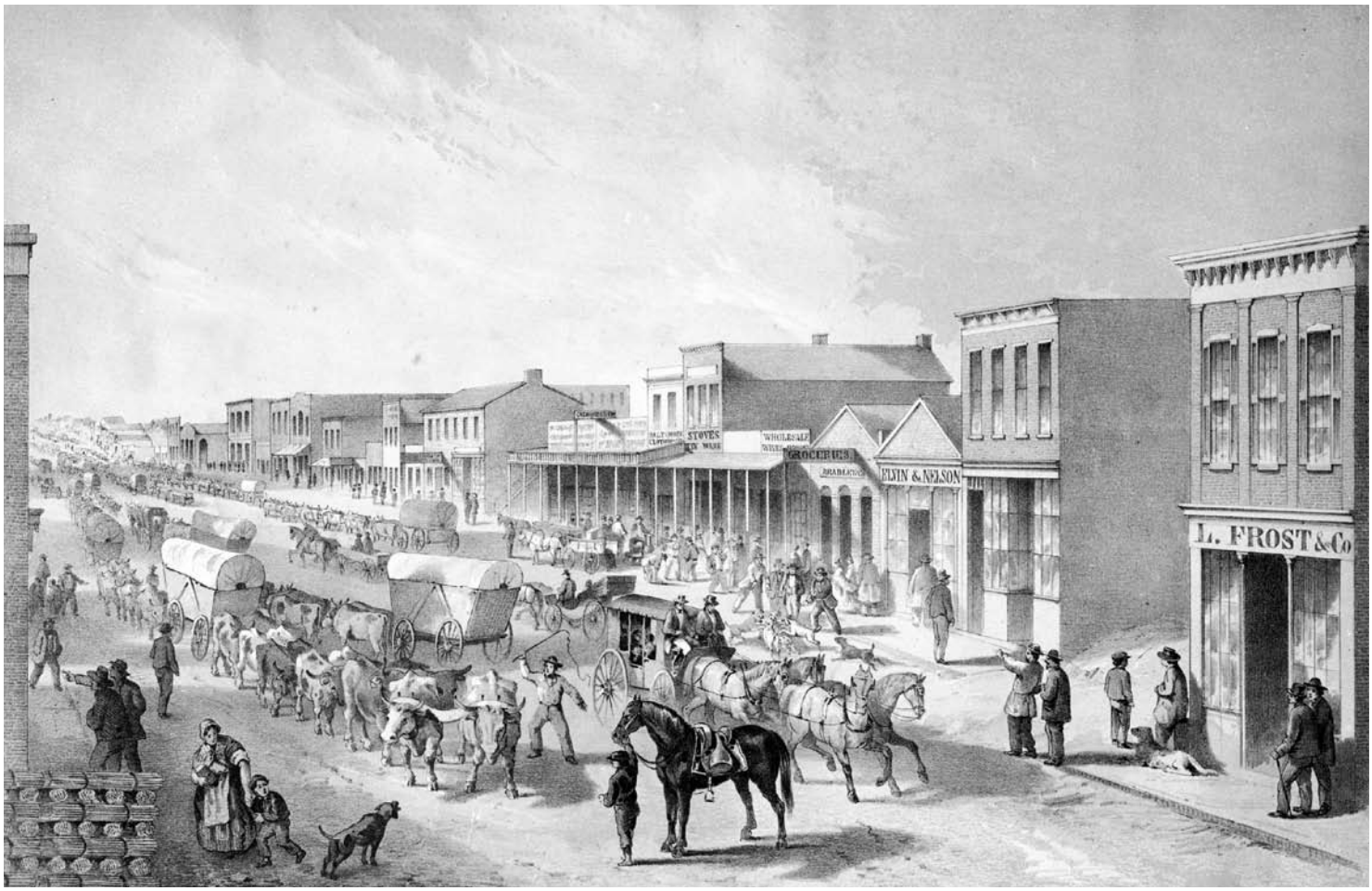
A search of Lincoln newspapers between 1865 and 1890 suggests that the schools of that city were never officially segregated. Prior to 1868 there was only one public school in operation for the whole city, so many children were likely unable to attend regardless of race. Extant school board records dating from the spring of 1871 make no mention of separate schools, and there is also no indication that the issue was ever discussed in any board meeting. It is possible that black students were informally segregated in separate rooms within otherwise integrated schools or relegated to one of the many rented rooms that the board maintained throughout the city in its early years. None of these rented facilities, however, corresponds with the addresses of contemporary black churches—the most common method of operating separate schools in early Iowa, Kansas, and Missouri communities. More important, the board approved several requests from black churches and community groups who requested the use of school facilities for civic, social, and religious functions. African Americans requested the use of several different buildings, a fact that also supports the conclusion that black children attended a number of integrated schools throughout the city.[19]

If Lincoln ever considered operating separate schools, one would expect that this would have occurred in the earliest years of the public schools (when no records are available and only one school was in operation) or during height of the Exoduster migration of 1879-80. Between ten and twenty thousand Southern blacks migrated to Kansas during these years, and hundreds of these

Like the bird's-eye view of Omaha on p. 143, this view of Nebraska City was created by city view artist Albert Ruger in 1868. It is a recent acquisition of the Nebraska State Historical Society.

individuals sought homes in Nebraska. Newspapers in Lincoln and other Nebraska cities were full of news regarding the Exodus, with each city seeking to "protect" itself from people most white residents viewed as members of an undesirable population. However, there is no recorded discussion regarding the creation of separate schools in the Lincoln newspapers or the records of the city's school board. This is particularly striking as the board was in the midst of an ambitious campaign to create several new schools—a factor that often encouraged the creation of separate schools in neighboring Kansas. Although the few dozen Exoduster families who migrated to the city were concentrated in one neighborhood of south Lincoln, there is no record that these students were either formally or informally segregated, or that school officials even considered such a practice. Given a contemporary editorial by the *Daily State Journal* which defended the Exodusters and boasted that Lincoln's public schools were open to all children in contrast to those of the South, it is likely that any significant campaign to explicitly draw the color line in the city's schools would have drawn the attention of the editors of this newspaper.[20]

Given the experiences of the state's two largest cities, one might expect that Omaha's decision to integrate in 1872 settled the issue of separate schools in Nebraska. Nebraska City was the only other community in the state that contained more than a dozen black children, and its first school was operated by abolitionist and Harper's Ferry martyr John H. Kagi. However, in 1872 the Nebraska City School Board hired African American minister W. H. Wilson to operate a school for twenty-three black children. The state abolished the city's board of education later that year and placed the operation of the schools under the direction of the city council. The board was reinstated in 1874 and continued the practice of



Nebraska City's main street, north side.
NSHS RG2294-5

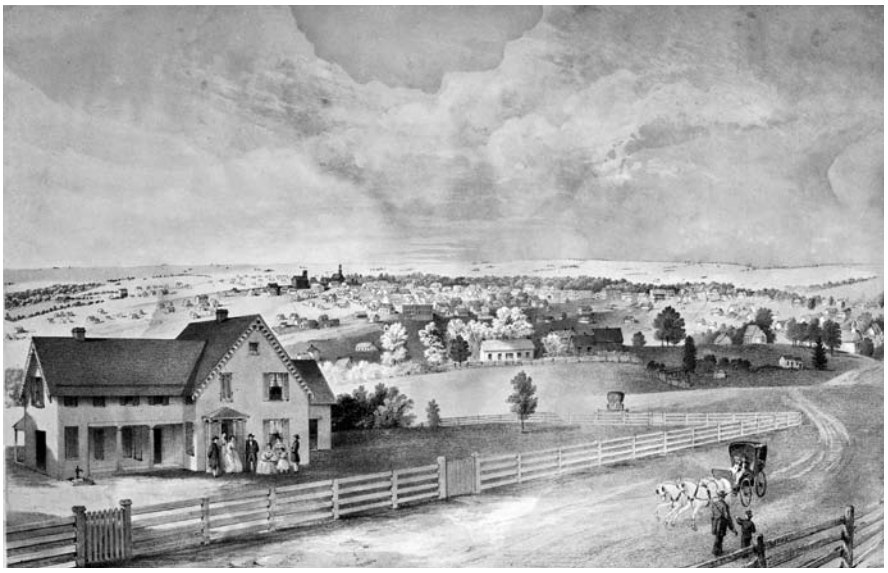
operating a separate school for black children until 1879, when the school was closed as a cost-saving measure. Although this school was generally taught by black ministers during these years, the board hired at least one white woman to run the school. Likely due to her years of experience as a grammar school teacher in the city schools, Mrs. V. M. Dennison received higher pay than her black male counterparts. This practice was unique to Nebraska City, as most black men hired to run one-room schools in Iowa and Kansas were hired as "principals" and paid significantly more than the occasional white female teacher in the same position, regardless of experience or seniority. In Nebraska City, however, black men were paid the same rate as their female counterparts and not referred to as "principals."[21]

School overcrowding and harsh economic times led to a coordinated effort by school officials and the city council to reduce expenses in 1878. The board retained only nine of its sixteen teachers in the white schools and implemented a series of other cost-saving measures. While white children were often assigned to rooms with fifty to seventy students, there were usually less than two dozen children in the "Colored School," which made the board's cost-per-pupil significantly higher. Still, the board attempted to cut costs rather than integrate, but was forced to cancel plans to transfer the city's segregated school from a rented room to a vacant and abandoned church when it was discovered that the building had been condemned. Shortly after this discussion, the board considered the elimination of the school entirely as a cost-saving measure. The *Nebraska City News*, the city's leading Democratic paper, was outspoken against this plan. The editors sarcastically predicted that integration would lead to greater savings than the board anticipated as nearly every white parent would send their children to private schools rather than submit to integration. Similar to the Democratic press of Omaha, Nebraska City editors claimed that their opposition to integration was based on the best interests of both white and black children. Additional editorials that claimed whites had a unique right to frame school policy due to their

financial contributions to the school fund demonstrated that the paper discounted the perspective of the black community.[22]

The schools of Nebraska City remained segregated until the summer of 1879, when the board quietly voted to close its Colored School. Board records are silent on the matter, likely due to the controversial nature of the measure. The Democratic *News* pursued a different strategy, drawing as much attention as possible to the matter by publishing a series of aggressive opinion pieces and editorial comments regarding the board's plan for integration. These editorials were usually accompanied by reports describing how citizens supported the position espoused in the paper's editorials and would not submit to integration. Owing to this hostility, black children stayed home as the fall semester opened rather than presenting themselves for enrollment in the now-integrated schools. The Democratic editors seemed to congratulate themselves and their readers, endorsing the rumors they had helped to circulate about what might happen to black parents and children who defied community sentiment, while acting as if they were merely reporting the news. However, this campaign of fear soon faltered as black children increasingly appeared at their neighborhood schools and were enrolled in the early weeks of the term.[23]

The enrollment of the first African American student led to a second flurry of derogatory editorial comments that may not have been representative of overall white opinion. After all, the city's Republican newspaper, the *Nebraska City Press*, was supportive of the move as a cost-saving measure and an emergency meeting of the school board revealed a variety of opinions. Several board members defended the new policy as consistent with the laws of the state, while others simply considered integration as an economy measure. The apparent division between those who favored integration as a matter of fairness and those who saw it



Nebraska City seen from Kearney Heights in 1885.
NSHS RG2294-27

Third Ward teaching staff, Nebraska City, 1887.
NSHS RG 2294-44

Nebraska City's Sixth Street School, undated.
NSHS RG2294-39

as an effective cost-saving measure prompted the *News* to lampoon the board's "Double Mixture."[24]

> Some members of the school board in trying to inform the people why it was they pushed colored children into the white schools are getting about as badly mixed up in the explanation as the school are [sic] in color. First they tell you it was for economy's sake the colored school was abolished. And then again if their argument doesn't seem to work all right, they will drop at once economy, and take up the legality of the act, and quote to you about the glorious bird of freedom, with one and twenty constitutional amendments, hanging from his tail, and tell you they are forced to push upon the people an act they know is repugnant to them. Well this latter ground they take may appear a little stronger to them, but we can't see where the strength comes in except in the color. We are anxious to have all the colored people in this city receive a good education, but we do think with the plenty of empty rooms we have, and at the cheap price a teacher can be got, the colored people should be placed in a class by themselves.[25]

Although the city contained only thirty-nine African Americans between five and twenty-one years of age among nearly thirteen hundred white children, the eventual enrollment of two dozen black children aroused considerable debate. The Republican *Press* was consistently supportive of the measure, meeting the personal attacks of its Democratic rival with its own indictment of white parents who threatened to boycott the integrated schools. The deficiency of character that would lead parents to rob their own children of school privileges because of the presence of a black face or two, said the *Press*, was rivaled only by their poverty of wealth, intelligence, and breeding. The *News* perceived that its rival had misjudged public sentiment and sought to secure political capital by portraying what ultimately proved to be an unpopular position as a Republican scheme. For example, when Republicans utilized one of the public schools to host a weekday political convention, the *News* presented it as proof of a wide-ranging conspiracy. "The Republicans who are so zealous in having the niggers educated," the *News* stated, "that they thrust them in the white schools, hesitate not in throwing one hundred white children out of one

A Nebraska City photo labeled, "Cornelia Petring 1880. First High School graduate." NSHS RG 2294-43

day's schooling, in order that a political broil might be accommodated." A few weeks later the Democratic convention led to the closure of the same school, yet no mention of the irony of the situation appeared in either newspaper.[26]

Thomas Morton's Democratic organ repeatedly made Superintendent David Hershey the special target of its racist humor. For example, when Hershey spoke about how the low salary paid to teachers was at least partially offset by the honor and esteem of the position, the *News* sarcastically "polled" its readers if the prestige of teaching in Nebraska City had increased since Hershey "forced the nigger" into the city's schools. It also lampooned Hershey by printing a false story claiming that the board secretary had ordered teachers to segregate black children within their classrooms. "Let us have the whole hog or none," the *Daily News* commented, "and for our part we will take the latter." The *News* also used sarcasm and racist humor in its suggestion that school integration be placed upon a voluntary basis. White parents who favored the Republican scheme of social equality, the *News* explained, could choose to send their children to a special integrated school. This arrangement would please all parents, the Democratic daily explained, as the board would be allowed to "carry out their own hobby of mixing up colors," while also displaying "a commendable sanitary spirit," by relieving the overcrowded conditions of the ward schools.[27]

Despite all of the negative rhetoric and predictions of white flight, there was no significant increase in the number of children attending the presumably all-white private schools in 1879. The issue soon faded from Morton's Democratic journal with the exception of occasional jokes lampooning black pupils or denigrating Secretary Hershey. Within a few weeks nearly all of the black students who had attended the "Colored School" were enrolled in the various ward schools of the city with no indication of any racial disturbances. Area schools likewise opened quietly the following semester. The failure of the Greggsport subdivision to offer a free public school, however, led to renewed Democratic editorials about the skewed priorities of the school board. The fact that white children in Greggsport who could not afford the subsidized tuition of its public school, while the black children of Nebraska City enjoyed free schools, revived the *News*'s indignation about what it perceived to be further evidence of Republican villainy. "There has been such a hue and cry raised as regards educating the 'poor colored children,'" the *News* exclaimed, "that we think it is pretty near time to look after the poor, neglected white children, provided the wise functionaries of education of Otoe County think that a poor white child is as good as the 'poor colored child.'"[28]

Despite several years of protest against segregation, four years of peaceful integration, and the support of some white Nebraska City residents who believed that separate schools violated the spirit of public education, events in 1883 demonstrate that it was the financial burden of maintaining a separate school for two dozen children that led to integration. In that year Episcopalian clergyman Robert W. Oliver, a former abolitionist who had moved to the city, approached the board and offered to partially finance a separate school for black children. When Oliver lowered his requested fee to five dollars per month, the board unanimously voted to re-segregate the schools. This second Jim Crow school was in operation until 1893, following five years of protest by black parents. Although members of the black community circulated a number of petitions and even filed a lawsuit against the board, the board closed this second segregated school only after the number of black children dropped to just over a dozen students.[29]

Although possible, it is not likely that any of Nebraska's other cities ever maintained separate public schools.[30] It is also unlikely that any Nebraska school beyond Nebraska City and Omaha employed a black teacher during the nineteenth century. Members of Lincoln's black community presented a petition to the school board in 1886 requesting that they hire African American teachers. Although the matter was referred to the committee on personnel, board records indicate that the matter was never discussed publicly and no black teachers were hired in Lincoln for nearly six decades. Community activism in Omaha led to the hiring of a black teacher during the 1890s, and several more in the following decades. Perhaps most interesting and relevant to modern discussions about race in the Omaha schools are the tables on p. 142, which suggest that Omaha's neighborhoods and schools were more racially integrated in the late nineteenth century than the present day.[31]

David J. Peavler Trowbridge is an assistant professor of history and director of African and African American Studies at Marshall University in Huntington, West Virginia.

Notes

[1] Even the best histories of the African American experience in Nebraska suggest either that the schools were always integrated or make no mention of separate schools. Bertha W. Calloway and Alonzo N. Smith, *Visions of Freedom on the Great Plains: An Illustrated History of African Americans in Nebraska* (Virginia Beach, Va.: Donning Co. Publishers, 1998): 25; Alfred Sorensen, *The Story of Omaha, From The Pioneer Days to the Present Time* (Omaha: National Printing Co., 1923); J. Sterling Morton and Albert Watkins, *School History of Nebraska* (Lincoln, Nebraska: Western Publishing and Engraving Company, 1920); Arvid E. Nelson, "A History of the Policies, Rules and Regulations of the Public Schools of Omaha, Nebraska From 1870 to 1964," (Ph.D. diss., University of Nebraska-Lincoln, 1969); William E. Broadfield, *Stories of Omaha: Historical Sketches of the Midland City* (Omaha: Nichols and Broadfield, 1898); *Omaha City Directory*, 1866, 1868, 1870, 1871, 1872-73; "The Early Educational Facilities in Nebraska City," unpublished manuscript in "Nebraska City Schools," MS 1237, Nebraska State Historical Society, Lincoln (hereafter NSHS); James W. Savage, *History of the City of Omaha Nebraska* (New York: Munsell and Co., 1894), 308-17. A 1965 study commissioned by the Nebraska State Historical Society and published in the *Nebraska City News-Press* is typical of the lack of specific information or primary source research on race in the Nebraska schools. "The negroes attended the public schools," the study contended regarding postbellum race relations, "although some objected to attending with white children who had previously enjoyed more educational opportunities." See *Nebraska City News-Press,* Nov. 29, 1965, clipping in "Black Community in Nebraska City and Surrounding Areas" Vertical File, Nebraska City Public Library.

[2] *Laws of Nebraska Territory*, 1855, 218; *Laws of Nebraska Territory*, 1856, 66; "An Act Providing for the Better Regulation of Schools in Nebraska," *Laws of Nebraska Territory*, 1858, 278-300; *School Laws of the Territory of Nebraska*, 1860, 88-89; *House Journal, Territory of Nebraska*, 1856, 27-29; *House Journal, Territory of Nebraska*, 1857, 31; *House Journal, Territory of Nebraska*, 1859, 212; *Second Annual Report of the Commissioner of Common Schools of the Territory of Nebraska to the Seventh Legislative Assembly*, 1860-61, 4-5; Auditors Report, Office of the Territorial Auditor and School Commissioner, *Journal of the House of Representatives, Territory of Nebraska*, Tenth Session, 1864, 28; Nebraska Board of Education Annual Reports, Vol. 7, 1864; Bertha W. Calloway and Alonzo N. Smith, *Visions of Freedom on the Great Plains,* 25. It is important to remember that fewer than 25 percent of white children attended public school prior to 1860. Moreover, the 1860 census recorded only eighty-two African Americans, fifteen of whom were slaves.

[3] *Nebraska Commonwealth* (Lincoln), Dec. 28, 1867, Jan. 9, 1868; "The Negroes of Nebraska," Omaha Urban League, 1940, 33; *Nebraska City News*, Aug. 26, Sept. 4, 1867; Report of Cass County, Dixon County, *Second Annual Report of the Commissioner of Common Schools of the Territory of Nebraska to the Seventh Legislative Assembly*, 1860-1861; *Tenth Annual Report of the State Superintendent of Public Instruction*, 1878, 8-9.

[4] J. Sterling Morton and Albert Watkins, *Illustrated History of Nebraska*, Vol. 2 (Lincoln: Western Publishing and Engraving Co., 1906), 57-60; *Omaha Weekly Republican*, Jan.18, 1867; *Journal of the House of Representatives of the Legislative Assembly of the Territory of Nebraska, Twelfth Session*, 1867, 71-95.

[5] *Journal of the House of Representatives of the Legislative Assembly of the Territory of Nebraska, Twelfth Session*, 1867, 95.

[6] Ibid., 99-105; *Journal of the Council of the Legislative Assembly of the Territory of Nebraska, Twelfth Session*, 1867, 97, 147-54; *Nebraska City News*, Jan.28, Feb.1, 1867.

[7] *Statutes of Nebraska*, 1866, 354, 372; *Journal of the House of Representatives of the Legislative Assembly of the Territory of Nebraska, Twelfth Session*, 1867, 214, 253-54, 266. Paddock was acting governor due to the temporary absence of Territorial Governor Alvin Saunders.

[8] *Senate Journal of the State Legislature of Nebraska*, 1867, 49-61; *House Journal of the State Legislature of Nebraska*, 1867, 111, 139-144, 153, 164, 176, 195, 199, 229-31, 239; *Laws of the State of Nebraska* 1867, 101-10; *First Annual Report of the State Superintendent of Public Instruction*, 1869; *Fourth Annual Report of the State Superintendent of Public Instruction*, 1872; *Seventh Annual Report of the State Superintendent of Public Instruction*, 1875; *Tenth Annual Report of the State Superintendent of Public Instruction*, 1878, 22; *Twelfth Annual Report of the State Superintendent of Public Instruction*, 1880. Racial distinctions were not recorded in state mandated school reports until 1881, making the documentation of race relations in early Nebraska schools tenuous for historians.

[9] Arvid E. Nelson, "A Brief History of the Methods Used to Elect Members to the Board of Education," Omaha Board of Education Archives, Omaha, Nebraska; *Omaha Weekly Herald*, Aug. 4, 1869; Nelson, "A History of the Policies, Rules and Regulations of the Public Schools of Omaha."

[10] Charles E. Burke to the editor of the *Omaha Herald*, June 2, 1888, in the African American History Clippings File, Douglas County Historical Society, Omaha, Nebraska.

[11] Minutes of the Omaha Board of Education, Apr. 8, 1872, July 22, Aug. 5, 19, 1872, Omaha Board of Education Archives; *Omaha Daily Herald*, Mar. 20, 1872; *Omaha Bee*, July 23, 1872. School board records prior to the summer of 1872 are not extant, and two searches of Omaha newspapers between 1865 and 1872 did not reveal any articles regarding race in the public schools other than those cited above.

[12] Minutes of the Omaha Board of Education, Sept. 2, 7, Oct. 7, 10, 1872; *Omaha Weekly Tribune and Republican*, Oct. 12, 1872; *Omaha Bee*, Nov. 5, 1872; *Omaha Herald*, Sept. 4, 11, Nov. 13, 20, 1872.

[13] Minutes of the Omaha Board of Education, Oct. 10, 1872. The original chart that appears in the minutes has two columns, one entitled "white" and the other "colored." One might reasonably conclude that the secretary meant "total enrolled" for this column, as to believe otherwise would result in the conclusion

that there were twenty-five white and twenty-five black children in the "Colored School."

[14] Minutes of the Omaha Board of Education, Oct. 14, Nov. 4, 1872; *Omaha Weekly Tribune and Republican*, Oct. 19, Nov. 9, 1872, Dec. 7, 1872; *Omaha Bee*, May 8, 1872; *Omaha Herald*, June 2, 1888.

[15] Annual Report of the Omaha Board of Education, 1877-78, Omaha Board of Education Archives.

Charles Burke's 1888 letter indicated that the parents of one African American child threatened a lawsuit on behalf of their son so that he could enjoy an equal education. Burke indicated that the school board disbanded the separate school in response to this campaign and that the young man was admitted to the high school and graduated in the 1880s. See Burke letter, *Omaha Herald*, June 2, 1888.

[17] Annual Report of the Omaha Board of Education, 1885-86.

[18] Annual Report of the Omaha Public Schools, 1890-91.

[19] Minutes of the Lincoln Board of Education, Apr. 3, 1871, Nov. 7, 1881, June 5, 1882, Jan.7, 1884; Carl Yost, "History of the Lincoln Schools'" both in the Lincoln Public Schools Archives; *Daily Nebraska State Journal*, July 2, 3, 23, Sept. 23, 30, 1879; A. B. Hayes and Sam D. Cox, *History of the City of Lincoln* (Lincoln: State Journal Co., 1889), 226-33; A. T. Andreas, *History of the State of Nebraska* (Chicago: Western Historical Co., 1882), 1051-52; *Nebraska Commonwealth* (Lincoln), Feb. 8, 1868; *Daily State Journal,* July 18, Sept. 16, 1879.

[20] David J. Peavler, "Creating the Color Line and Confronting Jim Crow: Civil Rights in Middle America, 1850-1900," (Ph.D. diss., University of Kansas, 2008). The *Daily State Journal* of Sept. 4, 1879, referred to the school board of Lincoln, Illinois, as a "collective ass" for drawing the color line, once again supporting the conclusion that the schools of Lincoln, Nebraska, were not segregated. The only mention of race regarding the schools of Lincoln in the city's newspapers at this time is a complaint regarding black tenants who lived above one of the rooms the board rented.

[21] Andreas, *History of the State of Nebraska*, 1205; Report of Nebraska City Superintendent of Schools, *Second Annual Report of the Commissioner of Common Schools of the Territory of Nebraska to the Seventh Legislative Assembly*, 1860-61; *Fourth Annual Report of the State Superintendent of Public Instruction*, December, 1872, 124-43; Minutes of the Nebraska City Board of Education, Aug. 7, 1876, July 2, 1877, June 10, 11, July 9, 1878, in the archives of the Nebraska City Public Schools; "Early Schools" Vertical File, Nebraska City Public Library; *Morning Chronicle* (Nebraska City) Mar. 28, 1872; *Nebraska City News*, Feb. 16, 1878; *Nebraska City Directory*, 1870, 1881-82; *Nebraska City Weekly News*, Sept. 1, 1922; A search of extant Nebraska City newspapers published prior to 1879 has not revealed the precise origins of the separate school. Articles that describe the city schools rarely mention the existence of a "Colored School." For example, see the *Nebraska City News*, Jan. 15, 1876. The Democratic *News* frequently omitted the existence of the school, including a detailed essay on every public and private school that appeared on Sept. 10, 1877. The Republican *Nebraska City Press* offered more detail on school matters; however the few extant articles of this time period seem deliberately to obscure that the city maintained a separate school. For example, the Sept. 1, 1876, issue includes a list of teachers and schools but fails to mention the existence of the "Colored School."

[22] Minutes of the Nebraska City Board of Education, May 19, June 2, 21, July 7, Aug. 4, 18, 1879; *Nebraska City Daily News*, June 2, July 17, 1879; *Nebraska City News*, May 10, July 12, 1879.

[23] *Nebraska City Daily News*, Aug. 5, Sept. 8, 1879.

[24] W. Jones to James Reed, Oct. 9, 1879; Jones to Reed, Oct. 20, 1879, Jones to J. B. Parmalee, Nov. 13, 1879, Jones to Parmalee, Nov. 27, 1879, Thompson (first name unknown) to Dr. A. Brown, June 3, 1879, Nebraska Board of Education Records, Letterpress Books, RG 11 SG 1, Box 1 Vol. 9, NSHS; *Nebraska City Daily News*, Sept. 8, 9, 10, 15, 1879; *Nebraska City News*, Sept. 13, 1879.

[25] *Nebraska City Daily News*, Sept. 15, 1879.

[26] Minutes of the Nebraska City Board of Education, Apr. 5, 1880; *Nebraska City Daily News*, Sept. 26, 27, 28, Oct. 2, 1879; *Nebraska City News*, Aug. 16, 1879. Extant issues of the *Nebraska City Press* are limited. Although the rival *News* frequently reprinted the Republican journal's columns, it is likely that the editors selected only the most "radical" columns for reproduction.

[27] *Nebraska City News*, Sept. 13, 20, 1879.

[28] Minutes of the Nebraska City Board of Education, Apr. 10, 1883; *Nebraska City Daily News*, Oct. 14, Dec. 6, 1879, Jan. 5, 7, Apr. 10, 17, 1880; *Nebraska City News*, Aug. 16, 23, Sept. 20, Nov. 1, 1879, Sept. 29, 1883. Hershey's stand on the issue of school integration was apparently not a popular one. The former secretary polled only 50 votes (compared with 333 to 187 by the other candidates) during the 1880 election as an independent candidate, despite his overwhelming electoral support in the previous election. In 1883 Hershey received only twenty-six votes for county superintendent.

[29] Minutes of the Nebraska City Board of Education, Oct. 8, Nov. 7, 1883, Jan. 23, Feb. 4, 1889, Oct. 3, 11, Nov. 10, Dec. 5, 9, 29, 1892, Feb. 10, Mar. 22, 1893; *Twelfth Annual Report of the State Superintendent of Public Instruction*, 1880; Report of the Superintendent of the Nebraska City Schools, 57-58; *Nebraska City Daily News*, July 24, 1880, Oct. 16, 1891; *Nebraska City News*, Oct. 13, Nov. 17, 1883, Feb. 1, 1889, Oct. 14, Dec. 9, 1892. There is no indication that city or county officials consulted the Nebraska Board of Education for guidance in this matter as all extant correspondence deals with matters of finance and district boundaries. For example, see Nebraska Board of Education Records, Letterpress Books, Vols.16-18, RG 11 SG 1, Box 2, NSHS.

[30] Race is explicitly designated in the reports of the city and county schools of Nebraska following 1881, providing researchers with the demographic data necessary to determine both school and residential segregation patterns. By 1890, 586 of 743 of the black children reported by city school districts were enrolled in Omaha, Lincoln, and Nebraska City. Although Aurora, Brownville, Beatrice, Falls City, Humboldt, and Seward occasionally reported between ten and twenty black students prior to 1890, city and county reports give no indication that separate schools were ever maintained in these cities. See *Fourteenth Annual Report of the State Superintendent of Public Instruction*, 1882, *Sixteenth Annual Report of the State Superintendent of Public Instruction*, 1884, *Eighteenth Annual Report of the State Superintendent of Public Instruction*, 1886, *Twentieth Annual Report of the State Superintendent of Public Instruction*, 1888, *Twenty-Second Annual Report of the State Superintendent of Public Instruction*, 1890. Many schools did not issue regular reports, however, and further research is needed to explore the possibility that black children were excluded from the schools of these cities, as well as county schools throughout the state.

[31] Minutes of the Lincoln Public Schools, July 5, 1886. Regarding present-day racial distribution of Omaha Public Schools students, see, for example, "Plan for Omaha Schools Raises Segregation Concerns," *PBS NewsHour,* May 31, 2006, www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/education/jan-june06/omaha_05-31.html