

Part 1: Before 1867

Willa Cather once wrote of Nebraska, “There was nothing but land; not a country at all, but the material out of which countries are made.”

Such was the perspective of settlers who came from Eastern towns and farms, as Cather’s family did when they arrived from Virginia in 1883, overwhelmed by the vastness of unpopulated, treeless space.

But Nebraska was not new country, even then. Imported diseases had devastated Native populations long before the first settlers arrived; the remaining people were restricted to reservations within decades. By Cather’s time, sun-bleached bones spoke of vast and vanished herds of bison that formerly provided a livelihood for generations of people.

Nebraska still looked rough and barely settled when it became a state in 1867, but the fact that it was now perceived as raw material for nation-building shows that a major transformation had already happened, if only in the minds of the state’s new settlers.



This hide painting is the earliest known illustration of a Nebraska event. In June 1720 a Spanish military force led by Sir Pedro de Villasur marched from Santa Fe to gather information on French activities near the Missouri River. The expedition was part of a larger rivalry between colonial powers seeking to spread their influence and dominate the fur trade. On August 14, south of present-day Columbus, Nebraska, the party was attacked by Pawnee and Oto Indians allied with the French. In minutes, Villasur and forty-two of his men lay dead; the survivors fled to Santa Fe. Villasur’s defeat ended Spanish exploration of the Nebraska country for nearly a century.

Segesser II (detail from center), Courtesy Palace of the Governors Photo Archives (NMHM/ DCA), #158345.



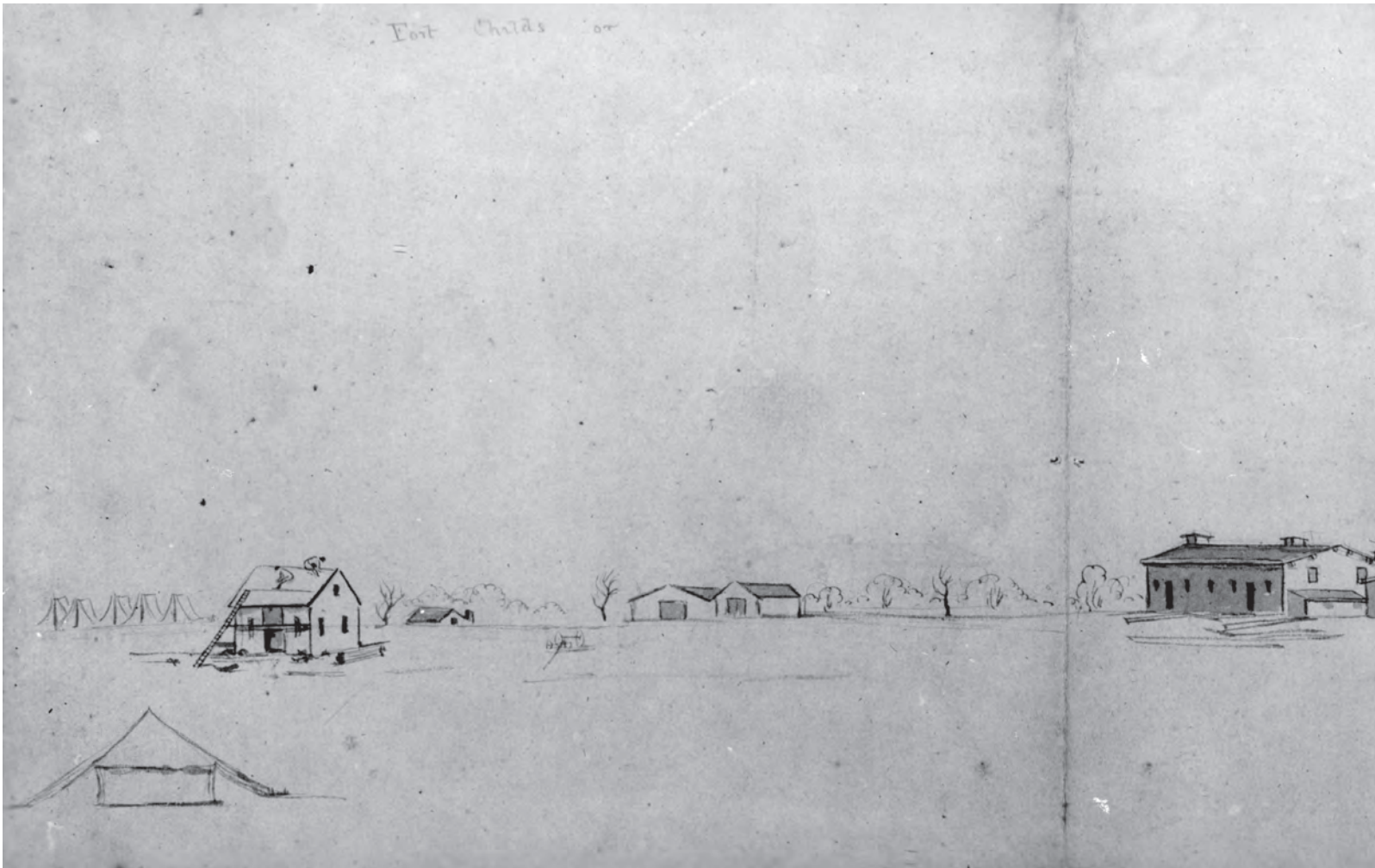
Pawnee men and children stand at the entry of an earth lodge at Loup Fork Village in about 1870. Although the photo is shown here out of chronological sequence, it represents a vast span of time for which we have no images. Earth lodge villages existed in present-day Nebraska for at least 1,000 years, and humans have occupied the region for at least 12,000 years. And while the ancestors of the Pawnees would have thought these people strangely dressed in their manufactured cloth from traders, the earth lodges and tipi poles would look as familiar to them as their own homes. NSHS RG2141-2404a



Engineer Cantonment, along the Missouri River north of present-day Omaha, with the steamboat Western Engineer in the foreground. Watercolor by Tiftian Ramsay Peale, 1820. Lewis and Clark held a meeting with local Indians near this location in 1804. This site was the winter camp or “cantonment” of the U.S. Army’s Yellowstone Expedition. A team of soldiers, scientists, and artists ascended the river in a specially-built steamboat to study the land and reinforce American interests in the fur trade. The Army built Fort Atkinson nearby—the nation’s westernmost military outpost at the time. American Philosophical Society, Philadelphia



The Omaha and Otoe Mission at Bellevue, from the East, by S. W. Y. Shimonsky, ca. 1855.
 Bellevue is the oldest continuous settlement in Nebraska. An Indian agency was established here in 1823; river travelers were welcomed here and at Peter Sarpy's fur trading post nearby.
 NSHS RG2683-2

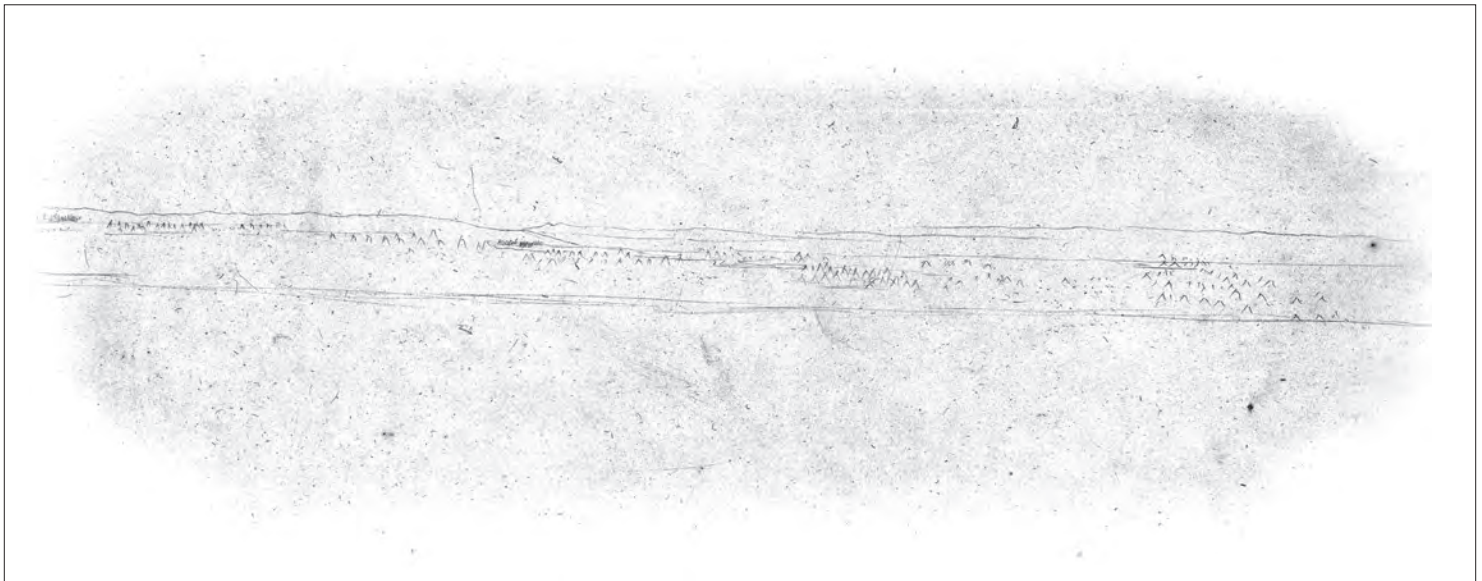




The earliest known photograph of Chimney Rock, taken by Charles Savage in 1866. From the 1840s through the mid-1860s as many as 500,000 travelers followed what the late trail historian Merrill J. Mattes termed "The Great Platte River Road" on their way to Oregon, California, Colorado, Montana, and Utah. Almost everyone who recorded an account of the journey mentioned Chimney Rock as they passed by. Within a few years after this photo was made, the transcontinental railroad supplanted the trail as the preferred method of cross-country travel. NSHS RG2102-1-8



Early sketch of Fort Kearny, established in 1848 south of the present (and misspelled) city of Kearney. Despite its lack of fortifications, the fort served as way station, sentinel post, supply depot, and message center for forty-niners bound for California and home-seekers traveling to Oregon and the Pacific Northwest. By the 1860s the fort had become a significant stage and freighting station and home station of the Pony Express. Although never under attack, the post served as an outfitting depot for several Indian campaigns. NSHS RG2102-1-8



Horse Creek Treaty Encampment, September 19, 1851, sketch by William Quesenbury. This is the only known image of the largest reported gathering of Plains Indians to that date. Also known as the Fort Laramie Treaty, the council actually took place in present-day Scotts Bluff County, Nebraska. The resulting agreement between the United States and eight Indian nations made no territorial claims, but guaranteed safe passage for settlers along the Oregon Trail and allowed the U.S. to build roads and forts in exchange for promised payments. From the Omaha World-Herald William Quesenbury Sketchbook, NSHS RG5495.AM



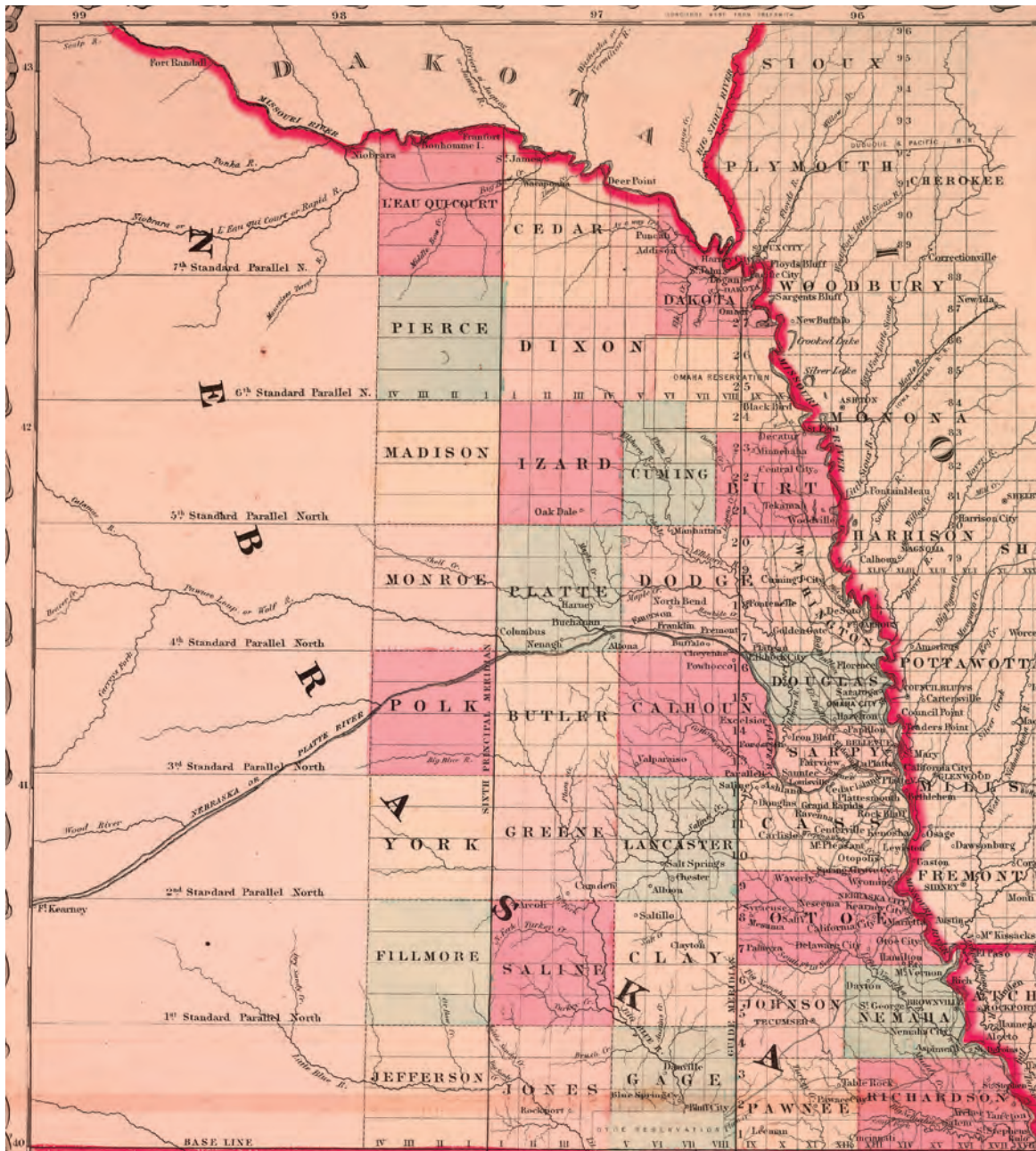
This stereograph, made in Nebraska Territory's North Platte Valley in 1859, is the earliest known photograph of a Lakota village. Peaceful relations between the U.S. and the Lakota broke down by the mid-1850s. In 1854, an army lieutenant named John Grattan led an armed detachment to arrest a Lakota man accused of stealing a cow from Mormon emigrants. Grattan and his men were killed in the ensuing fight. In revenge, the following year Col. William S. Harney attacked a Lakota village near Ash Hollow, killing about half of the band's 250 members. NSHS RG3122-1



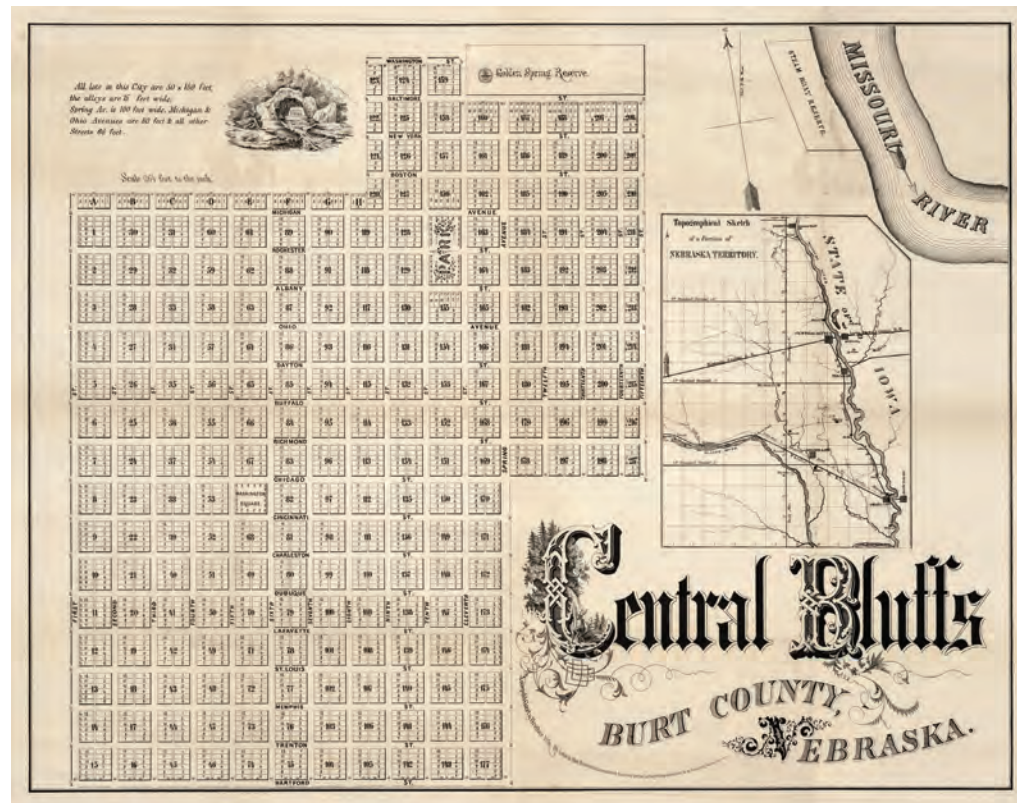
Established under the direction of the Mormon leader, Brigham Young, the site known simply as "Winter Quarters" sheltered more than 3,000 people during the winter of 1846-47. Housed in log cabins, sod houses, and dugouts, the Mormons lacked adequate provisions. When spring arrived more than six hundred of the faithful lay buried in the cemetery on the hill. That spring and for years thereafter, groups of Mormons traveled west to the Great Salt Lake Valley. By 1855, groups of poorer emigrants began using handcarts for transportation. This 1854 sketch by George Simons was made when Nebraska Territory was opened to white settlement and the town of Florence was established at the old Winter Quarters site. NSHS RG2271-1-5



This map shows the new territories of Nebraska and Kansas, along with the location of Native tribes. The Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854 was motivated by the need for a transcontinental railroad and the desire for white settlement along the railroad's route. The act was shaped by sectional politics: in order to secure a northern route for the railroad, Sen. Stephen A. Douglas of Illinois agreed to a "Popular Sovereignty" provision by which voters of the new territories would determine whether or not to allow slavery. This repeal of the Missouri Compromise of 1820 frightened and angered many Northerners. It led to the formation of the Republican Party and, in part, to the Civil War. NSHS Forke Collection #54



This detail of an 1850s map shows the results of Nebraska's first survey, which produced the township grid by which the state was divided into square-mile sections—a pattern still marked by today's rural roads. Later, during the Civil War, the Legislature changed the names of several counties due to the Southern sympathies of their namesakes. (For example, Calhoun County, named for states' rights proponent John C. Calhoun, became Seward County in honor of Abraham Lincoln's Secretary of State, William H. Seward.) Many of the early towns proved short-lived, and some never really existed except on paper. NSHS Forke Collection #38



Town plat of Central Bluffs, Burt County, 1856, showing streets and town lots that existed only on paper. It was normal for a town to begin as a money-making scheme by a group of investors—even Omaha started out this way. Central Bluffs is known as a “paper town” because it never got beyond this stage, though it was the site of a post office from 1857 to 1859. Promoted by a town company in 1856, Central Bluffs was premised on the extension of a railroad that never came through. David Rumsey Historical Map Collection



This 1857 view is the earliest known photo of “Omaha City.” Founded in July 1854, the town began as a speculative scheme by Council Bluffs, Iowa, residents eager to boost their own town. They hoped that having a settlement just across the Missouri River—preferably a territorial capital—would help Council Bluffs become the eastern terminus of the planned transcontinental railroad. NSHS RG2341-3a



Nebraska in the 1850s was a territory full of paper towns and paper money. Hard currency was scarce on the frontier, and unregulated “wildcat” banks stepped in to fill an economic need for cash. This 1857 three-dollar bill was real money as long as people had confidence in the DeSoto, Nebraska, bank that printed it. If the bank was suspect, the bill would trade at well below par; when the bank failed later that year, the bill became worthless. The Panic of 1857 wiped out speculative banks and towns alike. NSHS 2565-2



Like other frontier towns, Omaha City was financially devastated by the Panic of 1857. Most residents moved away, and there was no guarantee that it would survive the lean years that followed. But Omaha held an advantage over its rivals: it was the territorial capital, a distinction it maintained for years through a combination of gerrymandering, bribery, and intimidation. The second territorial capitol, shown here, stood on the present site of Central High School. NSHS RG1234-2-4



Located near the confluence of the North and South Platte Rivers, Cottonwood Springs was a “road ranche” serving travelers along the Oregon Trail. It also served as a station of the Pony Express in 1860-61. Following the Dakota War of 1862 (a.k.a. the Sioux Uprising), the army built Fort McPherson nearby to protect travelers along this important conduit of travel and communication. RG2469-01



Edward Creighton, left, is present for a meeting of the board of the Union Pacific Railroad aboard a private railway car. Seated at the table are Silas Seymour, consulting engineer, and Sidney Dillon, Thomas Durant, and John Duff, directors. Railroad men began to wield great influence over Nebraska settlement, the location of its towns, and the character of its politics. Creighton, an Omaha businessman, surveyed a transcontinental telegraph route from the Missouri River to the Pacific in 1860-61, and then headed the company that built the telegraph line east from Omaha. His name lives on through the university that his widow endowed. Photograph by Andrew Joseph Russell. Union Pacific Museum



Daniel Freeman is credited as one of the first people in the nation to file a Homestead Act claim. Legend has it that Freeman persuaded an official to open the land office at Brownville shortly after midnight on January 1, 1863, the day the law took effect. Freeman, a Union soldier on furlough, claimed land near Beatrice. His homestead is preserved as Homestead National Monument. The Homestead Act was designed to make land available "free" to those who would live on and cultivate a tract for a period of time, usually five years. An individual could claim up to 160 acres of available public land. NSHS RG4376-1



African Americans in Brownville, 1864. Slavery was legal in Nebraska for several years, but the 1860 census recorded only fifteen slaves out of eighty-one black residents in the Territory. Still, the Legislature had to override the governor's veto to abolish Nebraska slavery in January 1861. Nebraska's black population grew during waves of migration from the South following Reconstruction and during World War I. NSHS RG3190-285x



Colonel Robert W. Furnas of the Second Nebraska Cavalry. From a pool of barely nine thousand men of military age, Nebraska Territory sent more than three thousand soldiers to the Civil War. The First Nebraska Infantry Regiment fought at the battles of Fort Donelson and Shiloh. Robert Furnas organized the Second Nebraska Volunteer Cavalry, which saw service against the Lakota on the western frontier. He went on to serve a term as Nebraska's governor and was the first president of the Nebraska State Historical Society. NSHS RG4389-2



Nancy Jane Fletcher Morton was captured by Indians in early August 1864 when her husband, Thomas Morton's, wagon train was attacked by Indians west of Fort Kearny. She was released a few months later. With Nebraska troops away fighting in the east, the Lakota, Cheyenne, and Arapaho made concerted attacks on stage stations and ranches along the Oregon Trail, hitting nearly every stagecoach station and road ranche between Fort Kearny and Julesburg to the west and Fort Kearny to Big Sandy Creek to the east. Travel ceased for two months. The most severe attacks were along the upper Little Blue River where about 100 people were killed. NSHS RG3310-54



Freight wagons on the main street of Nebraska City, circa 1865. The Mormon War and the discovery of gold in the Colorado and Montana Territories brought Nebraska City to prominence as a freighting center between 1858 and 1865. Early freighters used the Ox-Bow Trail, which looped north to the Platte Valley. Nebraska City freighters sought a more direct route. First traveled in 1860, the Nebraska City-Fort Kearny Cutoff was first marked by a plowed furrow. Freighting from Nebraska City peaked in 1865 with more than 44 million pounds shipped. Construction of the Union Pacific Railroad soon marked the end of major freighting on this road. NSHS RG2294-37



Construction of the Union Pacific Railroad in Nebraska, 1860s. Incorporated under the Pacific Railroad Act of 1862, the Union Pacific established its headquarters for railroad operations at Omaha. Following the Civil War it built westward to meet the Central Pacific line coming from California. The two lines joined at Promontory Summit, Utah, on May 10, 1869, becoming North America's first transcontinental railroad. Steam locomotives needed to take on water every ten miles, and the resulting stations became new towns along the route. Union Pacific, which raised capital through the sale of public lands it received from Congress, soon got into the business of promoting settlement and immigration. NSHS RG3761-4