

# HISTORY<sup>50</sup>

## Earliest Records

Nebraska's fossil beds and glacial deposits show that it once was an inland sea bed that later was elevated above water. The area once had a tropical climate, but during a later period, glaciers covered the land. Archaeologists estimate that prehistoric people inhabited the area between 10,000 and 25,000 years ago, based on discoveries of stone tools and weapons. The earliest inhabitants were nomadic hunters, but centuries later, others came to the grasslands to hunt, fish and farm.

People entered and abandoned Nebraska as the climate fluctuated between long periods of drought and times of plentiful moisture. About one thousand years ago, a culture known as the Village Farmers came to the Plains and the population increased. The Village Farmers became more dependent on agriculture and lived in small villages made of square or rectangular earth-covered dwellings. The Plains population dwindled after A.D. 1300, possibly because of climate change, warfare or disease.

## Native American Tribes

Through the centuries, people entered and abandoned the Nebraska area as the climate fluctuated between long periods of drought and times of plentiful moisture. This constant movement created a diverse mixture of Native American languages and cultures.

The Pawnees and their northern relatives, the Arikaras, lived in the area the longest. They came from the south about four or five centuries ago and established villages along the Platte, Loup, Republican and other central Nebraska waterways. The Pawnees hunted buffalo on the plains and farmed beans, corn and squash. In the 18th century, the Omaha, Ponca and Oto tribes entered eastern Nebraska and lived near the Missouri River. Other tribes, such as the Teton Sioux (Lakotas), Arapahoes and Cheyennes, migrated westward from forested areas north and east of the Missouri River. Altogether, the various tribes living in the Nebraska area may have numbered about 40,000 in 1800.

The Native Americans understood the world to have a unity or coherence. The Native Americans made no distinction between practical and religious activities. For example, among the Pawnees, sacred ceremonies were as essential as hoeing was to make corn grow.

In the 17th and 18th centuries, plains Native American cultures were profoundly influenced when Spanish intruders introduced horses. The Pawnees and Omahas quickly adapted horses for use on their long seasonal bison hunts into western Nebraska and central Kansas. Completely nomadic tribes such as the Lakotas developed cultures centered around horses. These tribes lived in tepees year-round and became dependent on bison for food, clothing, tools and other items.

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<sup>50</sup> Information for this section compiled from the following sources: Nebraska State Historical Society; Nebraska Indian Commission; Nebraska Agricultural Statistics Service; *Nebraska: An Illustrated History*, Frederick C. Luebke, 1995.



**Chief Red Cloud,**  
Oglala Sioux

When white explorers and fur traders began to penetrate the area in the 18th century, the Native Americans usually welcomed them and eagerly exchanged furs for guns, blankets, clothing, alcohol and other items. Such contacts also spread diseases such as measles. Epidemics devastated the Native Americans.

Traditional Native American culture thrived in Nebraska until the 1830s. As white penetration of Nebraska increased, the U.S. government began negotiating with various tribes for cessions of Native American lands in Nebraska. These negotiations were not yet completed in the 1850s when Nebraska became a territory and land was made available to whites for ownership.

## Spanish and French Explorers

In 1541, Spanish explorer Francisco Vasquez de Coronado led an expedition across the U.S. Southwest into Kansas. He claimed the entire territory for Spain, although Spaniards never established settlements in Nebraska.

French explorer Rene Robert Cavalier, Sieur de La Salle, traveled down the Mississippi River to its mouth in 1682. He claimed all the land drained by the Mississippi, as well as its tributaries, for France. The land, which included Nebraska, was named “Louisiana” in honor of French King Louis XIV. During the 1690s and early 1700s, French traders and trappers moved into the Louisiana region. In 1714, French explorer Etienne Veniard de Bourgmont traveled up the Missouri River to the mouth of the Platte River.

Spain objected to France’s presence in the regions it claimed. In 1720, a Spanish expedition of 45 soldiers, led by Pedro de Villasur, marched into Nebraska, intending to remove the French. But in a battle by the Platte River, Pawnee Indians attacked and killed most of the Spaniards.

In 1739, two French explorers, Pierre and Paul Mallet, set out from Illinois to Santa Fe, N.M., with a party of six Frenchmen. They named the Platte River and traveled nearly the entire length of present-day Nebraska.

In 1763, at the close of the Seven Years’ War in Europe, France gave up all its claims east of the Mississippi River to England and west of the Mississippi to Spain. However, French fur traders continued to operate in Nebraska. In 1800, French ruler Napoleon Bonaparte forced Spain to return the Louisiana Territory to France. He then sold the entire territory, which included Nebraska, to the United States in 1803. This transaction is commonly known as the Louisiana Purchase.

## U.S. Explorers and Fur Traders

The first U.S. expedition to visit Nebraska in 1804 to 1806 was led by Meriwether Lewis and William Clark, who traveled up the Missouri River and explored the state's eastern edge. In 1806, Lt. Zebulon Pike visited south-central Nebraska as part of a U.S. government program to explore the Louisiana Purchase.

The Spanish-American trader Manuel Lisa established trading posts along the Missouri River between 1807 and 1820. One established in 1812 was near the site where Lewis and Clark held council with the Native Americans, in present-day Washington County.

In 1811, the Hunt party of Astorians skirted Nebraska on its way to Oregon. The following year, fur agent Robert Stuart set out for New York City from the Astoria trading post in Oregon, entering Nebraska early in 1813. Stuart's seven-man party followed the North Platte River to its junction with the South Platte, then along the Platte to the Missouri River. This route later came to be known as the Oregon Trail.

In 1819, the U.S. Army established Nebraska's first military post, Fort Atkinson (near the present town of Fort Calhoun in Washington County), to protect the frontier. The fort, with more than 1,000 people, also became the site of Nebraska's first school, library, grist mill and brickyard before it was abandoned in 1827. The village of Bellevue, founded on the Missouri River in 1823, became Nebraska's first permanent white settlement.

In 1820, Maj. Stephen Long, with a 20-man party, traveled from the Missouri River up the Platte River to the South Platte headwaters near present-day Denver. In his reports, Long described the area including western Nebraska as a "barren and uncongenial district" and "almost wholly unfit for cultivation, and of course uninhabitable by a people depending upon agriculture for their subsistence." A map drawn by the cartographer of Long's expedition labeled the region a "Great Desert."



Family in Covered Wagon

Beginning in 1824 and continuing through the 1840s, fur traders used the Platte River route heavily. In 1830, traders took the first wagons to the Rocky Mountains, showing the way for later emigrant caravans.

## Missionaries

The Rev. Moses Merrill and his wife, Eliza Wilcox Merrill, were the first resident missionaries to Nebraska's Native Americans. They arrived in Bellevue in 1833 and continued their work until Rev. Merrill's death in 1840. Samuel Allis and the Rev. John Dunbar, who arrived in Bellevue in 1834, served as missionaries to the Pawnee Tribe for 12 years. Father De Smet, a Catholic missionary, came to Nebraska in 1835, ministering to Native Americans west of the Missouri River for 35 years.

## The "Great Migration"

In the early 1840s, Nebraska's Platte River valley began to play an important role in the "Great Migration," the westward movement of thousands of pioneers. They followed trails crossing Nebraska, including the Oregon and California trails, which followed the Little Blue and Platte River valleys, and the Mormon Trail (Council Bluffs Road), which started from present-day Omaha and traveled along the north bank of the Platte River.

These trails were traveled extensively until railroad construction reached the Pacific Coast. Between April 3, 1860, and Oct. 24, 1861, Pony Express riders also followed the Platte River valley, carrying mail to the west coast. Fort Kearny was established in 1848 near the present-day city of Kearney to protect travelers crossing Nebraska.



The Pony Express

In 1832, the steamboat *Yellowstone* began the first annual fur-trading voyages up the Missouri River, stopping at points along the Nebraska border. The steamboat was an important form of transportation until the construction of railroads in the 1860s, with 40 to 50 steamboats involved in river trade.

Until the Nebraska Territory was established in 1854, the U.S. government designated the area as Native American country, refusing to allow white families to settle there. Between 1830 and 1854, rugged frontier conditions prevailed. The only two white settlements of any size were Fort Kearny and Bellevue.

## Nebraska Territory

The word “Nebraska” first began to appear in publications in 1842, when Lt. John C. Fremont explored the plains and mountains of the western United States. His report mentions the “Nebraska River,” the Oto Indian name for the Platte River. The term was taken from the Oto word “Nebrathka” meaning “flat water.” U.S. Secretary of War William Wilkins, in his report of Nov. 30, 1844, stated: “The Platte or Nebraska River being the central stream would very properly furnish a name to the (proposed) territory.”

The first bill to organize the new Nebraska Territory, introduced in Congress on Dec. 17, 1844, by Illinois Sen. Stephen Douglas, failed to pass. Douglas and other Midwestern politicians wanted the territory organized so a future transcontinental railroad could be built across the Plains. Another bill, called the Kansas-Nebraska Act, was passed after a long, bitter struggle and signed by President Franklin Pierce on May 30, 1854. The struggle between the slave and free states for control in the Nebraska region gave rise to the Republican Party and caused border conflicts before the Civil War. Slaves were first bought and sold in the 1850s in Nebraska City and, at one time, the Underground Railroad may have operated in Nebraska.

The Kansas-Nebraska Act officially created the Kansas and Nebraska territories, opening the area to settlement west of the Missouri River. The Nebraska Territory’s boundaries extended from the 40th parallel to the Canadian border and from the Missouri River to the Continental Divide, including parts of present-day Montana, North and South Dakota, Wyoming and Colorado, as well as Nebraska. By 1863, Congress created several more new territories from this region, reducing the Nebraska Territory to about the state’s present size.

President Pierce appointed Francis Burt of South Carolina as the first governor of the Nebraska Territory. When Burt died two days after taking the oath of office on Oct. 16, 1854, the territory’s secretary, Thomas Cuming, became acting governor. Cuming organized the territorial government and took a census so that legislative elections could be held.

A struggle between the new town of Omaha and the old town of Bellevue to be the territorial capital was decided in favor of Omaha by Cuming, who called the first session of the Legislature to meet there. However, the issue was not settled until Nebraska achieved statehood in 1867, when the capital was moved to Lancaster, now known as Lincoln.

During Nebraska's early territorial days, settling the countryside, land and currency laws, the proposed transcontinental railroad, the capital's location, the rivalry between regions north and south of the Platte River, the Republican Party formation, and the defeat of the first efforts to make Nebraska a state were the prevalent issues of the time. The territory's population grew from 2,732 in November 1854 to 28,841 in 1860.

## **Effect of the Civil War and Railroad Construction**

The election of Abraham Lincoln as president and the Civil War that followed had a significant effect on Nebraska. The First Nebraska Infantry, led by Col. John M. Thayer, was raised for service in the Union Army. Nebraska's entry into the Union was delayed until after the Civil War ended.

In 1865, the Union Pacific Railroad began building a line extending westward from Omaha. This line stretched across Nebraska two years later. By the mid-1880s, the Burlington Railroad lines crisscrossed the state. Many railroads received land grants from state and federal governments to offset construction costs. These lands were sold to new settlers through extensive advertising campaigns. The railroads sent company representatives and pamphlets, which included glowing descriptions of Nebraska's farmland, to people in the eastern United States and even Europe. These campaigns, plus an influx of Civil War veterans seeking land, swelled Nebraska's population to 122,993 by 1870.

## **Statehood**

In early 1867, Congress passed an act admitting Nebraska to the Union, provided that the Nebraska Legislature remove a clause in its proposed state constitution that limited the right to vote to free white males. President Andrew Johnson, convinced that the imposition of this condition on the state constitution was a violation of the U.S. Constitution, vetoed the act, but Congress overrode his veto. Johnson, a Democrat, also did not want Nebraska admitted to the Union because the territory had a Republican majority.

Nebraska joined the Union as the 37th state on March 1, 1867. The people elected David Butler as the first governor, and Lincoln became the state capital on July 29. A state university and agriculture college were established on Feb. 15, 1869.

## **Hard Times**

Beginning in 1873, a combination of problems slowed the state's growth and development. Between 1874 and 1877, swarms of grasshoppers severely damaged farmers' oat, barley, corn and wheat crops. Discouraged, many settlers left their land and returned to the East. However, another wave of settlers took their place in the 1880s.

Nebraska settlers were tested by falling land prices in the 1890s. Land prices, which had soared during the 1880s, collapsed in 1890 because of drought, overuse of credit and low prices for farmers' products.

Farmers blamed the railroads, banks and other business interests for their problems. Many farmers joined the new Farmers' Alliance organization, which opposed high freight costs imposed by the railroads.

Many Nebraska farmers also joined the Populist Party, which advocated agricultural reforms. The Populists nearly carried the state in the presidential election of 1892, and from 1895 to 1901, they held the governor's office.

Nebraska also supplied national leadership for the Populist movement. William Jennings Bryan of Nebraska won election to Congress and served two terms (1891-95). In 1896, he unsuccessfully ran for president as a Democrat on an essentially Populist platform. He was nominated twice more as the Democratic presidential candidate but was not elected, although he served as U.S. secretary of state.

## **African Americans in Nebraska after the Civil War**

Following the Civil War, African Americans began establishing themselves in Nebraska. In 1860, there were an estimated 82 African Americans in the state. By 1900 that number had risen to 6,269. Most African Americans moved to Omaha, where chances were greater of finding work. Most opportunities for employment were found with the railroads, packing houses or other labor fields. The 1910 census, however, indicates that one physician and surgeon, 25 musicians and teachers of music, and 14 clergymen of African American descent lived in Nebraska.

History books indicate that African Americans contributed to the settlement of Nebraska. In 1870, Robert Anderson was the first African American to homestead in Box Butte County. Other homesteaders included L.B. Mattingly, who resided near David City; David Patrick, who lived in Hamilton County; and the Speece and Shores families, who settled in Custer County.

African American organizations such as the Women's Club in 1895 began to emerge in Omaha, as did newspapers such as *The Progress*, the *Afro-American Sentinel* and *The Enterprise* in the 1880s and 1890s.

Many African Americans distinguished themselves in public life: Dr. Matthew O. Ricketts was the first African American to serve in the Nebraska Legislature in 1892, Silas Robbins was the first African American to be admitted to the Nebraska State Bar Association in 1895, and Clarence W. Wigington was the first African American to design a home in Nebraska.





The Shores Family, 1887, Custer County

## Settlement of Western Nebraska

The development of irrigation and new dryland farming methods during the 1890s and early 1900s greatly contributed to the settlement of western Nebraska. Congress passed the Reclamation Act of 1902, which earmarked federal aid for irrigation projects. New crops, such as winter wheat, alfalfa and sugar beets, also helped make farming viable in western Nebraska.

Settlers wishing to farm in western Nebraska were frequently opposed, often with armed violence, by ranchers who had preceded them. The farmers rejoiced when Congress passed the Kinkaid Act of 1904, which provided for 640-acre homesteads in western Nebraska. The act triggered a new population boom in the Sandhills area. But when the new settlers found much of the land unsuitable for farming, they sold their homesteads to cattle ranchers.

## World War I and the Great Depression

World War I had a notable effect on life in Nebraska. The state furnished 47,801 men for the war, and about 1,000 soldiers were killed in the line of duty. The state also gave about \$300 million to war causes and contributed food to the war effort. Demand for the state's farm products brought new economic prosperity.

But when the war was over, the economic boom collapsed. The 1929 stock market crash caused farm prices to fall even further. The Great Depression that followed, together with a severe drought that hit the Midwest, created economic disaster for farmers. Many faced bankruptcy and loss of their land to banks and insurance companies.



However, some farmers refused to give up their land. By 1932, conditions had become so desperate that groups of farmers began preventing foreclosures by threatening physical violence at public land sales. Sympathetic sheriffs often refused to carry out court orders for the public sale of land marked for foreclosure. In 1933, Gov. Charles Bryan imposed a moratorium on farm foreclosures. Federal aid came to Nebraska farmers through New Deal long-term, low-interest loans and other relief programs.

## Progressive Legislation

Many progressive laws were enacted in Nebraska between 1890 and 1940. Among the measures adopted were provisions for the Australian ballot, direct primary election, and initiative and referendum. (The Australian ballot is an official ballot, on which the names of all candidates and proposals appear, that is distributed only at the polling place and marked in secret.) Nebraska women gained the right to vote when Congress passed the 19th amendment in 1920. The state's educational system was greatly expanded. High school education was made available to all students, and a public-ownership-of-textbooks law was passed. A state highway system was built from money raised by a new gasoline tax and federal aid. During the 1930s, the state enacted Social Security legislation and imposed new liquor and head taxes, along with other gasoline taxes, to furnish funds for state aid. Another significant development during this period was the creation of a unicameral (one-house) legislature, the first of its kind in the nation.<sup>51</sup>

## World War II

With the advent of World War II, which created new demand for farm products, Nebraska's economy began to improve significantly. Farmers increased beef cattle production and produced millions of tons of corn, potatoes, oats and wheat to help meet food shortages. Besides food, the state sent some 128,000 soldiers to the war, 3,655 of whom died in the service. Nebraskans bought more than \$1 billion worth of war supplies and contributed more than \$8 million to the Red Cross and the National War Fund. Manufacturing plants in the state produced more than \$1.2 billion worth of war supplies.

## Developments Since World War II

The end of World War II ushered in prosperity which has, for the most part, continued to the present day. In 1944, Congress passed the Pick-Sloan Missouri Basin Project, which authorized the creation of flood control dams, reservoirs and hydroelectric plants in states drained by the Missouri River, including Nebraska. Spectacular growth in irrigation has occurred across the state and, with the invention of the pivot system, thousands of acres of dry land have been made productive. However, intensive irrigation and water pollution have caused concern about the future of the state's water supply, generating controversy between land developers and environmentalists.

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<sup>51</sup> See Pages 57 and 280-284 for further information about the establishment of Nebraska's unicameral legislature.

Since the 1950s, Nebraska farms have become larger in size and fewer in number. The average farm size has grown from 444 acres in 1950 to 885 acres in 1997, while the total number of farms has dropped from 109,000 to about 51,500. Machinery and modern farming methods have made agriculture more efficient, thereby decreasing the need for farm workers. This trend has caused many rural residents to move to larger communities in search of jobs.

This population shift has generated new efforts to increase industry in Nebraska. During the 1960s, manufacturing employment increased sharply, partly as a result of campaigns to attract new businesses to the state. Service industries also have experienced rapid growth. Expanding and diversifying Nebraska's economy remains a top priority in state government today.

Nebraskans experienced some of the racial unrest more commonly associated with the country's larger urban areas. Civil rights demonstrations in Omaha in 1963 led to the creation of the Omaha Human Rights Commission, and in 1968 and 1969, race riots required intervention by the military and the National Guard.

Many changes in education have occurred in Nebraska since World War II. The University of Nebraska was reorganized to include campuses in Lincoln and Omaha, with central administration in Lincoln. Kearney State College was added to the university system in 1991. A state-supported system of community colleges was created in 1971. Following passage of the Nebraska Educational Television Act in 1963, Nebraska became one of the first states to broadcast educational programming to the entire state. At the elementary and secondary level, many school districts have been consolidated, reflecting the decline in rural Nebraska's population.

In the mid-1970s, many Nebraska farmers borrowed heavily to expand their operations. But with the nationwide recession of the early 1980s, land values collapsed, and many farmers were unable to repay their loans in full. Many people have left farming altogether, thereby weakening the economic base of many rural communities. As a result, these communities have stepped up efforts to attract new industries and expand existing ones. To stimulate economic growth, the 1987 Legislature adopted two measures that authorized tax incentives for businesses intending to create new jobs in Nebraska.